Arc 6, The Bandit

0

After leaving the capital life seemed to return to normal again, although your version of normal is now much different from what it used to be before you came to this world. Normal now means practicing swordsmanship every day with $liName, it means traveling for weeks without a real bed, and it also means spending every waking moment with your five closest friends. In many ways this new life is more difficult than your old one, but at the same time you can’t help but admit you feel like you are more alive, more vibrant than ever before.

The Frozen spire is directly north of the capital and extremely far away. $bardName says that the Frozen spire is a famous battleground between two mages that fought with ferocious ancient magic hundreds of years ago, because one thought the other had stolen his horse. The spire is the result of a massive icicle one of the mages conjured from the heavens to skewer the other and is apparently 100 stories tall. Long after the battle finished, the icicle still stood straight out of the ground and some eskimo people moved in and carved an entire city into the ice. In order to get there you would need to journey for almost two entire months, most of which would be spent outside of $kingdomName’s borders.

It took two weeks to reach those borders from the capital, and that time spent traveling was largely uneventful. $hName doesn’t give you any trouble at all as you trot along, and you two have gotten rather close after all the time spent together. You get the feeling that if $hName could speak, you two would be good buddies. Upon reaching the border, $mName gave a wise warning to the crew.

[$mName] Now that we are outside the borders, everyone needs to be on alert at all times. We are no longer protected along the roads from bandits, and mercenary groups jaded from the war between kingdoms often roam these lands looking for easy targets. There are plenty of towns out here but they are rougher and less secure than any we have been to so far. So don’t let your guard down!

Despite this foreboding speech, you find that nothing much changed after leaving $kingdomName. Sure you see bandits peeking from behind the trees every now and then, but they only ever go for easy targets and scamper away as you and your formidable group approach. The towns you venture into in many ways are in better shape than the ones in $kingdomName as well, since most are entirely self sufficient and are often run by wise, rugged leaders.

After a little over a month of traveling, you noticed the weather changing. Nights were colder, skies were bleaker, and the wind often picked up and whipped a chilly breeze across your face. There wasn’t any snow yet, but you and the others had to buy some fur coats from a town along the way in order to combat the new weather. The foliage changed along with the climate, most now being pine trees or scraggly bushes built for surviving harsh winters. Whenever you woke up, the sunrise would glisten brilliantly across the frosted tips of grass which crunched satisfyingly under your feet. Sometimes, you and $bardName would play hacky sack with pinecones to stave off the boredom. These days were peaceful and good, and you cherished them. The sad thing about “the good ol’ days” is that you don’t know you’re in them until its over.

1

It is now a safe time to save

2.

You have been traveling for about a month and a half now. Currently, you are walking along a dirt road leading directly north while leading your horse, $hName. Everyone is doing the same, since you all agreed the horses could use a break from all the recent riding. Like usual, $mName is messing around to stave off the boredom.

[$mName] It’s crazy to think we are so close to finally meeting the Ancient Dragon!

He waggles his fingers across his chest.

[$mName] What are you guys going to wish for? I’ve changed my mind on my wish again.

[$bardName] Oh yeah? What dumb idea do you have for your wish now?

[$mName] I’m going to wish that from now on you can only fart through your mouth $bardName, Muhaha!

[$bardName] WHAT!? Ew, gross $mName! That’s the dumbest wish I’ve ever heard of…

You look behind you to tell $liName a joke about $mName when you notice her stumble and fall forward, crying out in pain.

[$pName] $liName!

You rush over to help her up and see that she has twisted her ankle pretty bad leaving her unable to walk. There was pothole covered in a thin layer of half frozen leaves and ice making it hard to detect, and her foot went right through.

[$liName] Ah… Ahhhh stupid! Dumb… just ignore me lets keep going…

$aName rushes over to help and gasps.

[$aName] $liName! Oh my god you twisted it so bad it almost looks broken! We aren’t going anywhere, the last thing you should be doing is riding or walking on that thing. Chef, $bardName, please help me set up camp. $mName, $pName, there is a town up ahead only a few miles away. Go over there and get some medicine and a splint.

[$mName, $pName] Yes Ma’am!

Without a moment’s hesitation the two of you mount your horses and quickly ride forward along the road.

3

The thunder of hooves as you push $hName to move faster is loud, but you attempt to shout over the noise anyways.

[$pName] WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

[$mName] IT’S A TOWN CALLED GEFANGEN. ITS AN OLD MERCENARY HANGOUT SPOT.

[$pName] WILL THEY HELP US?

[$mName] I HEARD THE MERCENARY LEADER IS RUTHLESS, BUT THE TOWNSPEOPLE THERE ARE FINE. WE SHOULD BE OK.

You save your breath and ride in silence the rest of the way. Luckily, Gefangen is only a couple miles away from where $liName was injured and it hardly takes any time to arrive. You enter the town along the main road next to $mName, scanning for a store where you could buy a splint.

The town is split into two halves, bisected perfectly by the main road. On the left side is a friendly looking area filled with bars, stores, inns, and basic houses. On the right side is an unwalled fortress and several rows of barracks, as well as training yards and supply depots. Next to the fortress is a bronze statue of a woman holding an impressive looking sword triumphantly in the air. It looks like there is supposed to be a second person posing with her as well except someone had smashed up that half of the statue and left the crumpled pieces on the ground next to the base of the piece.

[$pName] Someone got real mad at that statue…

[$mName] Hey $pName, looks like the general store is over here. Bet they’ll have a splint for us.

The two of you turn left and head towards one of the stores and leave your horses outside. Unfortunately, it turns out to be a bar, so the two of you exit and try again at the neighboring store. None of the buildings have signs so it is hard to tell what is what. Finally after several tries you guess correctly and enter the general store. The building is plain but has a convenient selection of food items, Horse care gear, sparse clothing, and medical aid. You make your way to the medical section and start looking for a splint.

[$mName] A couple years ago I tried shoplifting in a store just like this, there was this cool looking watch on a top shelf so I had my two vampire friends help me out by putting me on their shoulders.

[$pName] $mName, this better not be another one of your cringey jokes…

[$mName] The manager caught me in the end. I got charged with shoplifting on two counts.

[$pName] UGH! It hurts you know. It hurts when you tell jokes that bad!

You don’t want to encourage him but you can’t help but grin a little bit while perusing the shelves. $mName notices your amusement and chuckles to himself triumphantly.

[$mName] You hate it, but you love it too! C’mon, admit it!

[$pName] Ah look, the splints…

You grab a splint off the shelf as well as a couple bandages and make your way to the counter. You purchase the items easily then head outside, where $hName happily greets you. While heading back the way you came, $mName strikes up conversation yet again.

[$mName] Have you heard the rumors about this place? Apparently this is the headquarters to one of the largest mercenary gangs ever, the forest fangs or something like that. It used to be run by this power couple that were the greatest fighting team ever seen on a battlefield, but they had some sort of disagreement and broke up. Now the mercenary gang is a shadow of its former self and only the woman remains. Kinda sad huh? I hate when relationships don’t work out… Hey speaking of relationships, what’s up with you and $liName? I’ve noticed a lot of lusty glances between you two…

[$pName] $mName Would you shut it! Its complicated and I’m not in the mood to analyze it… you better relax or I’m gonna hire these funky fangs to take you out…

The two of you speed up again and ride at a gallop back towards where the others are camped, and luckily for you $hName navigates the muddy pathway easily. The wind is cold and you continually have to wipe your nose as you ride along. A dreary fog soon sets in as well which gives the surrounding pine trees an intriguing, mysterious vibe which you are none too eager to ride into. You are certain it hasn’t been longer than an hour since you left by the time you return to where you last saw the group, but for some reason no one is there.

[$pName] Hello? Anyone there?

You look all around you but there is no trace of the others.

[$mName] Looks like they finally did it. They have been talking about ditching you for a long time but I’m surprised they finally did it…

[$pName] Shut up $mName, if they ditched me that means they ditched you too.

[$mName] Not so fast, they told me about a secret location where they are hiding so…

[$pName] Stop messing around $mName, we need to get this splint to $liName as soon as possible. Try looking around for clues or something, I don’t know.

You jog around the road looking for clues for a while but don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

[$mName] Hey $pName, come quick! I found something!

You hear $mName calling out from the foggy woods, and head towards the sound of his voice. You dodge pine trees and hop over boulders until finally catching up and see him pointing at a tree. There is an arrow lodged into the wood, and the bark oozes sap.

[$mName] Someone loosed this arrow, and recently. Do you think they were attacked?

[$pName] Perhaps someone was just practicing, or maybe…

THUNK.

You feel a sharp push from behind, but when you turn around you don’t see anyone there. Looking down, you notice an arrowhead protruding from your chest right where your heart should be. You glance up at $mName, who is frozen in fear and surprise and says nothing as he stares at you sympathetically.

[$pName] Wha…?

Rapidly, the world begins to darken and you lose the strength to stand, and collapse. The last thing you hear is the sound of $mName running away, and a faint voice in the distance;

[???] Ah you idiot, I said not to kill him right away. The client specifically said to….

The world fades to black and you can no longer see nor hear. With a final shudder, your blood stops pumping and your veins run cold. You are dead.

THE END

4

The darkness clouding your mind slowly lifts, and the rushing sound of static overwhelms your senses before suddenly stopping all at once. Your eyes shoot open, and you stumble over yourself while coughing violently.

[$liName] $pName, are you ok? What happened!?

[$pName] Sto… \*cough\* STOP!

You can barely catch your breath but you still manage to halt $liName in the nick of time. Only a couple steps in front of her is the pothole from earlier, that she surely would have twisted her ankle in if not for your intervention.

[$pName] Mind your… step. You could \*cough\* you could hurt yourself.

$liName looks at you with a confused expression, then mildly walks around a pothole while giving it a wide berth.

[$liName] I appreciate your concern $pName but I could see it just fine, thanks. What’s your deal, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.

You start shivering uncontrollably, and grab a blanket off of $hName which you use to warm yourself.

[$pName] Well you aren’t far from the truth, in a way. Hey listen, I don’t think these woods are safe we need to hurry up and get into town.

[$aName] I’m getting the creeps right now too to be honest, I totally agree. Let’s get out of here.

[$bardName] You two are a couple of scaredy cats! Whatever, lets roll.

[Chef] I chef now.

The six of you pick up the pace towards Gefangen and make quick progress. Everyone is relatively spaced out, and the environment is comfortably quiet. You take a deep breath and spend the next ten or so minutes decompressing and recovering from your recent death, if that is even emotionally possible. Whatever danger threatened you and your friends before isn’t around now at least so you feel safe enough to strike up a conversation with someone while you walk along the road. This is a valuable time to get to know one of your closest allies a little better, the only question is who would you like to speak to?

Speak to Chef 8

Speak to $aName 6

Speak to $bardName 7

Speak to $liName 5

Speak to $mName 9

5

You lead $hName over to $liName and strike up a conversation.

[$pName] Hey I know this is kinda out of nowhere but I just want to say I appreciate you, and I appreciate you being a part of this group. You mean a lot to me and I am truly thankful you allowed me to join you back at Kingsbridge.

$liName makes a face like she was just slapped, then stares at you with a weird expression for a few seconds before smiling.

[$liName] That really was out of nowhere, woah! But uh, heh, yeah I appreciate you too $pName. To be honest I don’t know why I let you come with us back then when we barely knew you, but now that I do I sure am glad I did.

[$pName] We’ve come a long way since that day. I didn’t realize it at the time but its pretty crazy we survived a run in with DEATH, huh?

[$liName] Maybe that’s why we ended up keeping you around, you are some sort of good luck charm or something. Nobody has ever escaped DEATH before, it’s a pretty big deal… It’s like you have the power of good fortune or something. We have gone on all these crazy adventures together and somehow we keep coming out ahead, with perfect endings and nobody getting hurt. It feels like we are living in a fairytale. I hope it never ends.

[$pName] Me too $liName, me too. Hey I’ve never asked, how did you get that scar? The one over your eyebrow?

[$liName] Oh, this?

She rubs her finger over a scar above her right eyebrow that is about two inches long and runs straight down towards her eye.

[$liName] I got this in a sparring accident with $aName a long time ago. I remember the day it happened, she was so worried and felt so guilty! She apologized for weeks afterwards. She really is the sweetest… I care a lot about that girl, you know.

$liName adopts a solemn face and gets more serious.

[$liName] $aName was there when no one else was, did you know that? My parents couldn’t afford to raise me since I was an accident and they had no money. They abandoned me. They left me on $aName’s doorstep like a forgotten letter. If it wasn’t for $aName and her family, I wouldn’t be here.

She looks away, towards the pine trees and the fog. You can hear in her voice it is painful to share this.

[$liName] I’m scared to lose her you know. I’m scared to lose her like I lost my parents. Her family had it’s own problems but at least they were there to take care of us… If something were to happen to $aName they would be furious. I would be furious. I would be lost. I don’t know what I would do without her…

She takes a deep breath, and continues.

[$liName] This whole adventure is because $aName needed to get away and live her own life, but I am honestly scared $pName. I am scared I might lose her one day. We may be excellent swordswomen, but even the worst archer or bandit gets in a lucky hit sometimes.

Finally, she looks back at you. Her eyes are full of emotion, and she gives you a halfhearted smile.

[$liName] But you are our good luck charm right? Promise you will protect us, $pName?

You take her hand.

[$pName] I promise.

She smiles, and regains her composure. Her posture goes from vulnerable back to powerful in the span of a second, and before you can react she flicks you gently on the forehead.

[$liName] Good. Now get to the front, we will reach the town soon.

You smile to yourself and follow her orders promptly. Just ahead of you is the town of Gafengen.

6

You lead $hName over to $aName and strike up a conversation.

[$pName] Hey I know this is kinda out of nowhere but I just want to say I appreciate you, and I appreciate you being a part of this group. You mean a lot to me and I am truly thankful you allowed me to join you back at Kingsbridge.

$aName makes a scoffing sound and giggles at you, clearly amused.

[$aName] When did you get all lovey dovey $pName? You should know I’m totally out of your league.

[$pName] Woah! That’s not what I meant, I was just trying to say…

[$aName] Joking! Ha ha, well thanks $pName feels nice to be appreciated like that. You don’t have to get all serious about it though you know. I guess I let you join back then ‘cause I sensed you had as much of a love for adventure as I did. And you know what they say, Adventure loves company! Or is it misery? Wise words aren’t exactly my… uh… ah…

[$pName] Specialty?

[$aName] mmmm, almost…

[$pName] Forte?

[$aName] Yes! Not quite my forte. I’m more of a having fun and kicking butt kinda person than a drinking wine and philosophically speaking kind of person.

[$pName] Ha, you can say that again.

[$aName] Rude! Don’t be a rude dude. Rude dudes ruin moods.

[$pName] You aughta be a rapper. Hey so you and $liName grew up together right? What was that like?

$aName smiles to herself as the memories come flooding in.

[$aName] I could talk for hours about how thankful I am to have $liName in my life. Growing up, my family was pretty strict, and I was trained to become a swordswoman almost everyday for my entire childhood. If it wasn’t swords it was horses, and if it wasn’t horses it was training athletics, all that kind of stuff. If you didn’t train, you didn’t eat, that was the rule. We lived right on the southwestern border between $kingdomName and $neighbor so there was often a lot of violence around us. Sometimes mercenaries that had routed from a battle would roam the countryside looking for people to terrorize and we would have to defend ourselves. It was a harsh and unforgiving place. So in the end my parents were very hard on me, and strict, and maybe even hit me sometimes, but it was all well intentioned. They knew they had to harden me so that I would be prepared for the real world…

$aName stares off towards the grey sky for a few seconds, before returning to the present.

[$aName] Oh right, but what I meant to say was that $liName was there. She was there for me throughout it all and she was my rock. That made it much easier, having a friend to grind out that brutal training with. If it weren’t for her I wouldn’t be the person I am today.

$aName turns and looks back at $liName, giving her a friendly wave.

[$aName] I accidently cut her eyebrow once while sparring, I felt so bad! You can still see the scar, but luckily it healed well and looks pretty badass. The only other time I have ever felt worse than that was when she and I came back to my family’s house to find it had been torched by raiders. Nothing left. Never even got to say goodbye to my parents. But that’s just how it goes sometimes, I guess. Ever since then we have stuck together like Potatoes and Butter. Now that I think about it we have been extraordinarily lucky ever since we met you, actually. Normally when we meet new friends they end up dying pretty quickly, but somehow you have managed to stick around. Everyone else too. This is the largest adventuring group I have ever been a part of!

She looks at you with a glimmer in her $aEyeColor eyes.

[$aName] Maybe that means you are special or something, eh? You’re like our ace in the pocket.

[$pName] Hole you mean. Or sleeve I guess. Like an ace up your sleeve.

[$aName] Ah, right. Yeah you’re like an ace up the sleeve, our secret weapon. So don’t let us down ok? Promise you will look out for us?

[$pName] I promise.

[$aName] Haha, great! Hey look, that town is getting pretty close. You better show $bardName where to go before she leads us straight past it.

[$pName] Ah, good idea.

You smile to yourself and follow her suggestion promptly. Gafengen lies just up ahead.

7

You lead $hName over to $bardName and strike up a conversation.

[$pName] Hey I know this is kinda out of nowhere but I just want to say I appreciate you, and I appreciate you being a part of this group. You mean a lot to me and I am truly thankful we found you back at Durango.

[$bardName] Aww, that’s so sweet of you to say! Thanks $pName.

[$pName] To be honest I don’t really know a whole lot about you $bardName, which is crazy considering how much time we have been spending together recently. I understand if it is something you don’t want to talk about but…

[$bardName] Oh! No it’s ok! I guess I just don’t really like talking about myself so I never really bring it up. Um, what do you want to know?

[$pName] Well Its not an interview or anything…

[$bardName] Of course not! Er, how about how I came to Durango, where we met? Unlike you guys I haven’t been around as long so my story is a bit more condensed, but here goes. Um… So pretty much It all starts in this cute little village I used to live in with my parents. It was a decent ways south of Durango, a bit closer to the capital. It’s called Tillipy, if you’ve ever heard of it…

[$pName] Tillipy? Mmm, nope.

[$bardName] Man $liName wasn’t kidding when she said you lived under a rock. Anyways I used to live in Tillipy with my parents. My mom owned a guitar shop, in fact she made this one here…

$bardName points to her guitar, which is strapped to her horse. Upon further inspection, you realize it is extremely well made and ornately decorated with beautiful little carvings of baby cows and pigs dancing along its sides.

[$bardName] My mom loved music. She taught me how to sing and play and everything. She was a lovely person like that. My father… my father was a political figure. He was in charge of creating propaganda for $kingdomName. He usually worked all week at the capital then came home during weekends to spend time with us. He was a really nice guy too, just as nice and caring as my mom. Except for when he… well…

She looks away, and pushes her braid behind her head. She looks like she is lost in thought for a moment, then continues.

[$bardName] Well he had a drinking problem. My mom always got so mad about how he would drink, and he would go off on her about being too controlling, and all that stuff. He was real stressed. He would come home each week freaking out about how he was going to spin a military loss as a positive, or some war crime as a good thing. He was very good at his job but it really tore him up inside you see. The problem was he got all messed up about his job and then he would be stressed out and drink, and when he drank he would mess us up too. He lost control all the time and hurt mom over and over. It was the worst. I hate $kingdomName for what it did to my dad to be honest, it’s their fault. Their fault for their stupid war…

$bardName stops and looks at you with a morose face.

[$bardName] Look at me yapping away, over something so dumb. Whatever. If you’re getting annoyed just say something and I…

[$pName] No, not at all! I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to tell me all this, I think it’s important. Please continue.

[$bardName] Ah… ok… Well you remember how I told you I had killed a man, way back when at Durango?

[$pName] Sure, I remember.

[$bardName] One day, I came home from a friend’s house to find my dad drunk as a skunk and beating on mom real bad. Except it was worse than usual, he was going way too far. He was barely even conscious he was so drunk, and he kept blaming her for all the wars in the world which of course makes no sense. She was screaming, and bleeding, and it was awful to look at. It looked like he was going to kill her. I begged him to stop, but he just kept yelling and beating her. So I did what I thought was right; I took a frying pan and hit him in the head as hard as I could. Except it turns out it doesn’t just knock people out like in the stories, sometimes it breaks something and they die. And that’s what happened.

[$pName] Oh my god, I’m so sorry.

[$bardName] It’s not your fault. Anyways my mom freaked out and I didn’t want to get arrested for murder so I packed my stuff up and left in a hurry and never went back. I had been wandering around singing and collecting tips to survive for only about a week when I found you guys.

[$pName] Wow, I had no idea.

[$bardName] Honestly, you guys really did save me in more ways than one. Maybe I’m so obsessed with songs and stories ‘cause its some form of escapism or something. I heard a guy talking about escapism once, its when you don’t like your life and pretend its different. So going on this grand adventure with you guys is pretty good for my healing process and all that. I feel pretty guilty to be honest. I’ve never told anyone about this before to be honest. I’m feeling a little scared to be honest…

$bardName breaks into tears, and lunges forward to hug you tightly. You hold her close and don’t let go, trying to comfort her until she feels better. $mName, who was walking behind the two of you, raises his eyebrows but for once has the maturity to keep quiet and not interrupt.

You hold her like that as she sobs into your chest for a while until she finally gets it all out, then takes a step back to wipe her tears.

[$bardName] Ahhhh…. Sorry about that. Sorry, really….

[$pName] You have nothing to be sorry about $bardName. I’m only sorry I can’t do more for you. I think you did what you thought was right at the time and nobody can blame you for that. I think everything is gonna be ok.

[$bardName] Everything is gonna be ok? Do you really mean that? You promise?

[$pName] I promise.

[$bardName] Ha. Haha.

$bardName smiles at you gratefully and nods her head.

[$bardName] hahaha. Well that’s a relief then. If you say so, I’ll believe you. Ah… Now I’m in the mood to play a song. That always helps too. Any requests?

[$pName] You could sing anything and it would sound good.

[$bardName] Ha. You got that right! Alright, I’ll get something going and we can ride the musical wave all the way into town. That’s it right up ahead, right?

You look along the path and notice Gafengen is approaching quickly.

[$pName] You got it. Maybe you’ll be able to score some good tips up here.

$bardName plays a song beautifully all the way towards town, and you can tell by the emotion in her voice a huge weight was lifted off of her shoulders. You smile to yourself – Gafengen lies just up ahead.

8

You lead $hName over to Chef and strike up a conversation.

[$pName] Hey I know this is kinda out of nowhere but I just want to say I appreciate you, and I appreciate you being a part of this group. You mean a lot to me and I am truly thankful we ran into eachother back at the capital. Plus it’s nice to have another man in the group, since $mName doesn’t count.

[$mName] Hey! I heard that!

[$pName] Just kidding!

You chuckle to yourself and turn to Chef, who is laughing heartily.

[Chef] HA HA HA. I Chef Now!

[$pName] So anyways, I’m curious about your background story. You were working with your friend at that butcher shop right? That’s what you used to do?

[Chef] I.

[$pName] Were you pretty good at it?

[Chef] I! I Chef Now!

[$pName] That’s good. It must feel nice to be really good at your job like that. I used to have a job a long, long time ago that I didn’t really like at all, and it was the worst. It sounds like you felt like you belonged there, and you were happy. Such a shame the cult had to ruin that for you, I’m sorry.

[Chef] chef. I chef now.

[$pName] Have you had your speech impediment your whole life? I feel like you can understand me pretty well considering you can’t speak beyond saying ‘I chef now’.

[Chef] I chef now.

[$pName] Ah ha. I see. Well buddy that’s about all I got for ya, I’m just glad you’re around is all. Also when we one day meet the dragon I’ll make sure to help the Dragon understand whatever your wish is, in case he doesn’t speak Chef.

[Chef] I Chef Now!

[$pName] No problem man. Oh, and one last thing.

[Chef] Chef?

[$pName] I promise we will make it to the dragon. Whatever it takes, no matter how many times I have to keep retrying… We are gonna make it together. I promise. Ok?

[Chef] I chef now.

You lead $hName back to your previous spot in the travelling column and continue to walk along the road towards Gafengen. You still have bit of time left, so you idly chat with $hName.

[$pName] Chef really doesn’t get enough credit. Sure it’s hard to speak with him, and sure he doesn’t have an in depth backstory, but I still think he’s a valuable member of this group. Despite having less connection to us than anyone else, he has never hesitated to put himself in harms way on our behalf. He is probably the purest and most giving member of this group; he can’t speak with words but he certainly speaks with actions.

You give $hName a pet.

[$pName] In a way, our relationship is pretty similar to my relationship with Chef, huh $hName?

$hName gives you a whinny of agreement.

[$pName] I’m like 90% sure you can understand English, which isn’t possible but it sure feels like it. Maybe smart animals like you are just really good at reading body language.

And so, you and $hName merrily chatted away until you reached Gafengen.

9

You lead $hName over to $mName and strike up a conversation.

[$pName] Hey I know this is kinda out of nowhere but I just want to say I appreciate you, and I appreciate you being a part of this group. You mean a lot to me and I am truly thankful we ran into each other back at the barony.

$mName looks back at you with an expression of surprise, and smiles faintly.

[$mName] Well thanks man, I appreciate that. You mean a lot to me too. All of you do, really. I haven’t had a group of friends like this since… well I don’t know how long. Forever, probably.

[$pName] You didn’t have very many friends growing up?

[$mName] Well they just weren’t that useful you see. Friends are nice to have around but the only friends I could make were people like me, people that had to beg or perform for a living. With friends like that if you stick together you need to combine acts or else you will be biting into each other’s earnings. I am much more of a solo performer so in the end I couldn’t make many friends. I was friendly with a lot of people, but not many friends.

[$pName] Sounds pretty lonely.

[$mName] I got used to it I guess. My passion is magic so you gotta make sacrifices to follow your dreams.

[$pName] Considering real magic already exists in this world, I’m surprised anyone finds it entertaining.

[$mName] I remember briefly mentioning this back when we first met, but it’s actually quite the opposite. I have met many performers in my life, but never another “fake” magician like myself. People are always blown away when I make magic happen without uttering a single control word and are sometimes even desperate to learn my secrets. The concept of sleight of hand is completely foreign to most of these people, because real magic is already a proven concept. In the end, it is the balance of trying to figure out which tricks are real magic and which ones aren’t that keeps people entranced.

[$pName] So where did you learn about this “fake” magic then, if it is so rare?

[$mName] Not where, but who! My old mentor taught me everything I know. He had a peculiar name, what was it? TheLegend22.

[$pName] TheLegend22!?

[$mName] Right? Strangest name I’ve ever heard of. It’s almost like he just made it up on the spot and kept it for no reason. Kinda like your name, actually.

[$pName] My name isn’t weird!

[$mName] If you say so. He gave me this deck of cards you call “Uno” as well, and told me all these amazing stories of his travels. Apparently he used to travel through this strange land called “California” and do tricks…

[$pName] Woah woah woah, did you just say California? I know that place!

[$mName] What, really? You are the first person I’ve ever met who has heard of it before. That’s even more ironic considering you hardly ever know about any of the places around here. What’s it like?

[$pName] Well it is very big, and has a lot of people that live there of all different backgrounds. They like to hang out on the beach and in big cities. There are lots of performers there like your mentor, and they do all kinds of crazy acts. I can’t believe someone from California has been here before… Does that mean people are teleported here often? Am I not the first? Am I the last?

[$mName] Good heavens my boy, I have no idea what you are going on about now.

[$pName] Agh… forget it.

[$mName] Anyways as I was saying, he taught me everything I know. I grew up an orphan with nothing to my name, and he put magic in pockets. I’m truly blessed to have met him. Then one day, without warning, he vanished. Never heard from him again. Shame, really.

[$pName] yeah… I would have liked to have met him.

[$mName] You two probably would have gotten along really well. You two are kinda similar, in a way.

[$pName] Hmm… So… What will you wish for when we finally meet the dragon?

[$mName] Ah good question, I’ve never gone into detail about it have I? First, a preface; The way this world works, control words are everything. Control words are the most closely guarded secret any magician can have, and the sharing of valuable control words only ever happens in the most secret of societies. Unlike you I was born with a tremendous amount of magical power, however since I’ve lived most of my life alone and as a begging orphan, I have never had the wealth nor status to ever learn a control word matching my abilities. As a result I have to make do with the simplest and most worthless party tricks.

[$pName] So if you were born wealthy, or at least well connected, then you would have been taught valuable control words. But since you weren’t you will never have the chance.

[$mName] Exactly! In this way, the upper classes of the world prop each other up, keep a death grip on society with their power, and gatekeep anyone else who might be more talented from challenging them. It’s completely unfair. For my wish, I would request to instantly know by memory every single control word that has ever existed. Then I would open up a public library, where this knowledge could be shared with everyone who has a passion for learning. With only a few disciples we would be strong enough to challenge any of the nobles who dared to stop us, and we could finally restore the balance of power. Better yet, I could use this newfound power and influence to create a network of orphanages across the kingdom that could help young men from avoiding the same sorry fate as myself.

[$pName] Wow that’s pretty noble of you $mName. I think that’s a great wish to have.

[$mName] Thank you, it has been my dream ever since I was a little boy. Will you support me in my quest?

[$pName] Well of course! $mName, I promise I will do everything I can to help you achieve your wish.

[$mName] Thank you… That means a lot, hearing that.

The two of you chat some more about random topics, until $mName begins a chain of terrible dad jokes and you are forced to retreat. Chuckling, you head back over to your original spot in the traveling column and soothe $hName, who appears to be snorting at $mName’s antics. After a few minutes of hanging with your horse everyone makes excellent progress along the road, and before you know it you are in front of the town of Gafengen.

10

You enter the town cautiously, careful to check down every alleyway and make sure there is nobody suspicious watching. Very few people are walking along the foggy road however, and nobody seems to pay any attention to your group.

[$pName] Let’s rest at the bar for a second.

[$bardName] Tired already?

[$liName] $pName did have that ferocious coughing fit earlier. Maybe it’s a good idea to take a quick breather.

You lead everyone to the bar, which you remember was the first building you entered back when you were only with $mName. Each person pulls up a chair to a large table and sits down, chatting amiably about random topics. The bar owner comes by and takes an order for soup from $bardName and $aName.

You finally have some time to think. The one thing you know for sure is that there is a threat out there, waiting for you. You could figure out what to do on your own, which has the advantage of efficiency and not putting the others in danger. You could also Ask $aName for help, who might have a level headed way of taking care of the problem. Finally there is $liName, who likely has a good aggressive battle plan for defeating the enemy. What will you choose?

Ask $aName for help 15

Attempt to fight on your own 11

Ask $liName for help 12

[Doesn’t unlock until end ] Negotiate with Mercenary Leader By yourself 26

11

You decide to figure this problem out on your own. Worst case scenario you will have to reload a save or two, but it will be a lot easier to handle this without needing to explain everything to everyone.

[$pName] Enjoy your soup guys. I’m gonna take a quick walk so don’t mind me.

[$aName] You want me to come with you? It’s pretty spooky out there.

[$pName] No it’s fine, really. I’ll be right back.

[$aName] Huh, suit yourself.

You make your way out the bar and head towards the forest on the outskirts of the town. The pine needles and half frozen dirt crunch satisfyingly under your feet, and the fog begins to shroud your surroundings. You have never felt this alone before in your life.

You continue along the pine forest floor, picking your way over rocks and fallen branches.

[$pName] This is gonna hurt. I know I’m not going to make it out of this alive, at least not for the first try. Am I really that numb to death already?

You talk to yourself in an attempt to soothe your nerves, but it doesn’t help much. Your surroundings are quiet now, far too quiet.

[$pName] I could load back before they kill me maybe. Maybe I’ll just stick around long enough to gain some new info, then load back really quick before I get hurt. Agh I really don’t want to die again…

Ahead of you is a massive fallen pine tree, with a trunk as wide as you are tall. You approach it expecting to climb it, but before you can a shadowed figure jumps out of the fog and on top of it, looking down at you.

[???] Well well well. If it isn’t $pName, all by his lonesome.

You draw your sword, and hold it in front of you at the ready.

[???] No need to be aggressive, you already know what’s coming don’t you? Why not just lay the sword down and give up nicely, save us both some trouble?

[$pName] Fuck you. Why are you attacking me and my friends?

[???] Nope not your friends, just you. We are only getting paid to kill you, $pName. But you already knew that, didn’t you?

The shadowed figure jumps down from his perch and crosses his arms. He has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars. Slung diagonally across his back are two swords in parallel, one is plain steel and the other is sheathed in an incredible onyx scabbard covered in ornate golden decorations.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again. Now without further ado, get him!

A whistle in the wind announces the arrival of an arrow, which flies from somewhere in the forest to your left straight towards you. You attempt to dodge but it is too late, and it lodges itself into your left leg with a loud Thunk.

[$pName] AAAGHHH!

The arrow sends a searing hot pain throughout your leg, and you can feel the wound begin to bleed. It is in too deep to pull out, but right now that is the least of your concerns. Currently, at least ten other bandits have emerged from the forest and charge towards you, swords drawn. All of them wear red bandanas on their heads and all have a thirst for blood in their eyes. You bring your sword up at the ready and prepare to defend yourself.

The first bandit runs in with his sword pointed straight towards you, attempting to skewer you with his charge. The second he gets within range you bring your blade down and parry his thrust, but before you are able to counter attack he jumps back and is replace by two new bandits. You bring your weapon back up to ward them off when a second arrow whistles through the air and punctures your right shoulder, hitting right on the nerve and sending white hot searing pain throughout your torso and arm.

[$pName] Aaaahhhh shiiiit…

The pain is too overwhelming and you involuntarily drop your sword, leaving you defenseless. One of the closest bandits sees the opening and swings as hard as he can at you from above his head. Instinctually, you raise your left hand in an attempt to grab the sword but it already has too much momentum and slices straight down your forearm, splitting your entire arm all the way down halfway past your elbow. The two halves of your arm dangle pitifully away from eachother like a blooming flower and spout blood across the forest floor. You scream.

[$pName] AAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!

You collapse, the pain is so intense and so overwhelming that you can’t think, can’t speak, can’t do anything. All you can do is convulse on the ground useless, screaming. The bandits watch you in silence.

[$pName] AAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!

It takes only a few seconds for your vocal cords to give out, so you give up on screaming and try to overcome the pain. You grit your teeth and shut your eyes tight, hoping for relief that never comes. You clench your jaw in utter agony, clenching it as hard as you can hoping the pain will go away. The white hot pain that is consuming your body is so unbelievably bad that you soon feel your molars crunching as you clench your jaw harder than the structure of your teeth can handle, and the broken shards of your teeth intermingle with the taste of blood in your mouth. Finally, after what feels like years of pain, you hear a voice. It is Axel.

[Axel] You can try to beat me for the next million years, by yourself or not, but it doesn’t matter. Look at you, laying there so pitifully. Do you wish for death?

Your vocal cords are ruined and your mouth is filled with teeth and blood, so you spit out a mouthful of bile and whisper out a hoarse response.

[$pName] Kill me…

You have lost a lot of blood, and your consciousness is starting to give out. It is remarkable you are even still awake at this point.

[Axel] Sorry $pName, but I can’t do that. I have strict orders from the client to draw out your death no matter what. The client knows about your power, you see, and told me all about it. He wants you to give up, to hide from the pain and never return to this world. I think it’s a load of crap, to be honest, because if you really could see the future you wouldn’t have been beaten this easily. I mean come on, you sucked! You couldn’t even touch one of us, and you can see the future!? Man, that really stinks. Sorry about this kid. Maybe if…

You no longer can hear him as all your senses finally dull and give out. The blood loss is too great for you to handle and you finally die on the forest floor, alone.

THE END

12

You decide to ask $liName for help. Leaning over, you whisper in her ear.

[$pName] Hey I need to talk to you in private. It’s important.

$liName blinks several times in surprise and immediately blushes.

[$liName] In… In… In… Private? Wh.. What do you…?

[$pName] Stop getting all flustered, it’s not like that!

You speak louder, addressing everyone at the table.

[$pName] Hey everyone, real quick just wanted to let you know $liName and I are going on a quick walk while we discuss certain strategies. Please just hang tight for a bit until we come back.

[$aName] Talking strategy huh? Is that what they call it now?

$aName chuckles to herself but the rest of the group doesn’t seem to get her joke. Nobody else says anything so you head out of the bar with $liName and begin strolling around the town.

[$liName] So what’s going on?

[$pName] I didn’t want to tell everybody at the same time, because it might cause a panic. I wanted to get a plan of action established before bringing up this conundrum.

[$liName] Ok…

She pushes her $liHairColor hair back behind her ear, concentrating on what you are about to say.

[$pName] There is a group of bandits just outside of town, waiting in the forest. They want to kill me. We only have an hour or so before they will attack.

Her eyes widen in surprise, but she quickly regains composure and narrows them in thought.

[$liName] So we need to figure out how to defeat them huh? Do they already know we are here?

[$pName] Probably.

[$liName] Are there fewer than 50 of them?

[$pName] I don’t know for sure but I think so.

[$liName] Well it’s simple then, isn’t it? We just need to take them out before they take you out.

[$pName] I was thinking along the same lines, we should bring the fight to them. But I need your help thinking of a good battle plan, and more importantly getting the team ready for the attack.

[$liName] Well we have two good options. The first is a frontal attack, where we kinda do the same strategy as we used back at the Cathedral. You, Chef, and $aName head up the center while I go for a good flank. Do they have any archers?

You rub at your chest, where not long ago an arrowhead used to protrude from of it.

[$pName] Yes. A good one, too.

[$liName] A better flank may be more beneficial then. Another option is we use you as bait. Since they are only after you, you could walk up the center and get their attention while we all come in around the side. Then we spring the trap on them. It puts you at more risk since they obviously are focused on killing you, but it also means we could pull off a better surprise attack. Which do you think is best?

Frontal attack 13

Flank, using yourself as bait 14

13

[$pName] I think a frontal assault is best. Sometimes keeping things simple can end with the best results, you know?

[$liName] The last thing they will be expecting is a full blown confrontation without the element of surprise at their side. Let’s do it then.

$liName leads the way back into the bar and claps her hands together to get everyone’s attention. She explains on your behalf that yet again there is a foe to be defeated, and that she is counting on everyone to do their part to help out.

[$liName] As a final note, keep your wits about you as there may be arrows coming in from unexpected directions. Any questions?

$bardName meekly raises her hand.

[$liName] Yes, $bardName?

[$bardName] Can I sit this one out? This isn’t really a job for a young singer like myself.

[$liName] I suppose…

[$mName] Wait, can I sit this one out too? To be honest I’m more a fan of the adventuring side of things than the violent side, so I don’t really want to…

[$liName] …Ok now hold on…

[$aName] Are you sure a frontal assault is the right choice here? It sounds dangerous! Maybe I’ll stay back and guard these two…

[$liName] Not you too, $aName! C’mon we need you to help for when we…

[Chef] I Chef Now!

[$pName] Thanks Chef, I’m glad at least you are brave enough to join us…

[$bardName] Why not just wait here for them to attack us, why do we have to go to them!?

[$mName] Why do they want to kill $pName anyways? What’s their problem?

[$pName] It’s hard to explain, I think…

[$liName] EVERYONE! Please! Calm down a little bit for a second!

Everyone glances around nervously and quiets down out of respect for $liName. She takes a deep breath, and continues.

[$liName] We are an adventuring team, are we not? An adventuring TEAM. We need to fight these hitmen as a team. If you are scared you can hang back a little but we need every single person as backup just in case things get dicey.

[$pName] Thank you $liName, I couldn’t agree more. These guys are serious, we need everything at our disposal to defeat them.

[$aName] Ah…

[$mName] Hmm…

[$bardName] Eek!

[$pName] I’ll tell you everything I know about them, and share the plan $liName and I came up with. It’s gonna go just as smoothly as our fights with the cult.

$bardName and $mName don’t look like they are entirely convinced, but because they care about you they reluctantly agree to help anyways. You whisper out loud to yourself:

[$pName] Plus If things get bad, I can always load my save before anyone suffers…

Everyone gathers their things and prepares for the fight. You tell them everything you know about the enemy force of assassins while sharpening your sword, and with each stroke of the whetstone you feel yourself getting angrier and angrier at the situation. Half an hour passes, and it is time - The six of you venture into the foreboding fog of the woods.

[$aName] You said they are waiting out here, right?

Everyone is marching through the woods in a flying V formation, weapons drawn. $aName and $liName idly swipe at branches around them as they walk past, which gently fall down and bounce across the pine needles. You scan ahead of you, but see nothing familiar nor any sign of the bandits. Did you take the right path? You glance around you worriedly, when

TING!

Acting on pure instinct, $liName deflects an incoming arrow away that was shot at her from somewhere to the right. The arrow bounces off Gasp and twirls behind a tree, ineffective.

[$liName] There they are! Charge!

$liName crouches low and sprints as fast as she can sideways, moving to a position from where she can loop behind the archer and flank them. Meanwhile, everyone else turns to face the direction of attack and charges together. Out of the foggy gloom, at least ten or so bandits jump out from behind a myriad of trees and charge forward to meet you.

The first to come into contact with the enemy is $aName, who engages two bandits simultaneously and begins her deadly dance with Whisper, whipping the lengthy blade around her rapidly while keeping the enemy out of range for attack. You don’t have long to watch however as you are the second to enter the fight, and you square off against an intimidating looking bandit with a curved sword in each hand. You two test each other out with some safe lunges and swipes without committing, and slowly begin to circle each other. To the side you see Chef engaging three at once, cleaving at them with such awesome strength that his missed swings send his cleaver straight through one of the trees and sends it falling down sideways. Beyond him you see a couple bandits chasing after $mName and $bardName, who yell comically as they scamper away as fast as they can.

The dual wielding bandit notices you are distracted and takes a wild swipe at you with his left hand that you block easily. His right arm quickly follows the left however, so you try to dodge backwards. The curved blade catches you on the thigh as you retreat, but only barely. The cut is shallow, and your leg bleeds a little through your pants. Grimacing, you hold your blade ready for an attack of your own and swing upwards at him, which he blocks. He counterattacks with another horizontal swipe, but this time you are ready and you parry it away. His other arm brings a second blade careening towards you but since your sword is still centered you manage to block that as well, and lunge forwards. With both swords knocked away and caught off balance, the bandit is unprepared and stumbles backwards, exposed. You bring your sword around in a mighty arc and lope one of his arms off, sending his curved blade spinning away with the hand still gripping it tightly. Screaming, the bandit unexpectedly retains his composure and attempts a counter attack with his still attached arm. His attack smashes into your side, but in his haste he forgot to angle the blade correctly and it mostly hits you with the broad side of the blade. It still slices you pretty bad however, and badly bruises you at the impact site. You stagger and bring your sword around to block a second attack, but the bandit has collapsed and can fight no more. You regain your composure, and look around.

$liName has engaged at the flank of the enemy formation and has already taken care of the archers. $aName has defeated the three bandits she started fighting, but looks like she is getting tired quickly as she fights off another pair. Chef is… Chef is dead? 20 feet away, you see Chef’s last moments as he fights off something like 6 bandits at once. He is completely surrounded, and many dissected bodies lay around him. In his last moments he grabs one of the bandits with a single hand and crushes their windpipe effortlessly, but is quickly attacked from the rear and stabbed several times. Enraged, he turns and cleaves the attacker in two, but three more bandits assault his exposed back yet again and lodge several swords into his shoulder and back. Chef roars in pain before finally collapsing to the ground, and doesn’t move again. $mName and $bardName are nowhere in sight.

[$pName] Chef! NO!

You sprint towards Chef’s body, and attack one of the triumphant bandits. He is too busy celebrating to notice your charge, and you shove your sword straight through his back and into his heart killing him instantly. Pushing his dead body forward and away from you, you hold your sword at the ready while the remaining bandits move in to surround you much like they did Chef. You try backing up to stop them, but every time you turn or try to backtrack one of them swings at you and you have to slow down to block the attack. In only a few seconds you find yourself in the exact same situation Chef was only moments ago.

[$pName] This isn’t looking good…

Just when you think its over, $liName comes crashing in from the side and swings Gasp at two of them, decapitating both instantly. The bandit in front of you turns to yell angrily at $liName, so you take advantage of the distraction and stab him through the stomach. The bandit drops his sword and stares at you in complete surprise, then grips your blade as if he could somehow undo the irreparable damage you have just dealt him. With a grunt, you push him backwards and your sword slides out of his belly, making room for his entrails to spill out of his stomach. The bandit stumbles backwards several feet until tripping over the first dual wielding bandit you fought, who is still laying on the ground and weakly attempting to reattach his arm back to his body.

Now there is only one bandit left, and he throws his weapon down in terror and raises his arms.

[Bandit] I surrender! Please! I surrender don’t hurt me!

[$liName] This is for Chef.

Quick as a lightning strike, $liName blasts through the bandit’s skull with an intense burst of violence from her sword and kills him instantly.

[$liName] Where is $aName?

[$pName] I don’t know, she was fighting some bandits back where I was before and… DUCK!

$liName crouches low and barely dodges in time to avoid a sword swing aimed directly at the back of her head. A bandit had snuck up behind her using the trees as cover, but luckily missed his best chance at a free shot at her.

The bandit has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars. Slung diagonally across his back is an incredible sheathed sword of onyx covered in ornate golden decorations. In his hands and now pointed at you is a simple steel blade.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again. Now without further ado…

Axel swings at $liName a second time, and you find yourself in the middle of an intense bout of swordsmanship the likes of which you had never seen before. You are completely outclassed by both $liName and Axel, so while you try to help out as much as possible for the most part you are forced to dodge backwards and watch. The two battle ferociously, and for the first time it looks like $liName has met her match. After the two exchange a flurry of blows, both take a step back to catch their breath.

[Axel] Not bad… \*huff\* not bad at all! It’s been a long time since I met a foe worthy of the Black Blade…

Axel casts his steel sword to the side, and with a flourish draws his second sword from his back. The blade is so black, so incredibly dark, it almost appears to be sucking the light out from the air around it. The gold decorations along the sides gleam brilliantly and you can barely make out a small carving of a dragon on the pommel.

$liName gasps.

[$liName] Dra… Dragonium!?

[Axel] a whopping 40% of the sword, nearly 24 marbles in all. It has the highest concentration of Dragonium in the entire world.

[$liName] Imp… Impossible!

$liName visibly falters, and takes a step back.

[Axel] You’ve been fighting me with your fancy blade all this time without blinking an eye, but the second I use my own special sword you get scared huh? Not very sportsmanlike of you.

Axel wields the blade firmly, and a black energy seems to emanate from within the blade. Some of it expands away from the sword like smoke, and some gets pulled into Axel’s body as if he is absorbing it.

[Axel] Ah, Dragonium in this concentration is truly intoxicating. What do you say we continue our little duel?

[$liName] $pName, RUN!

$liName turns to fight Axel and buy you time to escape, but the fight is over before you even have time to think. Axel’s body disappears in a cloud of black smoke, only to reappear behind $liName in a blink of an eye. Reacting faster than you thought possible, $liName brings Gasp around and behind her and turns to block the strike she instinctually knows is coming. Despite her best efforts, it is all in vain. The Black Blade vibrates rapidly and violently creating a disturbing humming sound, and slices clean through Gasp as if it was made of paper. Defenseless, $liName takes the full force of the attack and is sent flying backwards, a massive gash arcing across her chest. She travels through the air rapidly until finally slamming into a tree and crumbling to the ground, coughing up blood. You can’t even look to see if she is alive yet before Axel turns to you and charges.

[$aName] $pName!

In the nick of time $aName jumps in front of you and pushes you out of the way, and the Black blade slices downwards across thin air. His swing has so much momentum that it continues down and into the earth, and you realize that the sword has cut through the ground just as easily as it cut through $liName’s sword. It looks like it passes through almost any material without any effort whatsoever.

Axel lets out a snarl of frustration, and turns to $aName. She brings Whisper up and at the ready for a strike, and slices down towards Axel with furious speed. Right before impact however, he erupts into another cloud of smoke and reappears behind her.

[Axel] It’s over!

The Hum of the Blake Blade raises in volume to a frenzy as he slices it across $aName’s back, ripping her apart and sending her broken body flying forward. She catapults through the air for a few seconds before finally smashing into the branches of a pine tree and returning to the icy mud below, motionless.

You stare at Axel feeling a mixture of anger and helplessness. He is completely out of your league. With a sad sigh, Axel sheathes the Black Blade on his back and strolls over to you. You point your sword at him like a child holding a stick towards a bear.

[Axel] Well, here we are. I’ve killed all of your friends. Maybe this is the first time I’ve killed all of them, maybe it’s the hundredth, I have no way of knowing. Here’s the thing though: I have strict orders from the client to draw out your death no matter what. The client knows about your power, you see, and told me all about it. He wants you to give up, to hide from the pain and never return to this world. I think it’s a load of crap, to be honest, because if you really could see the future you wouldn’t have been beaten this easily. But since that’s what he wants…

Axel lunges towards you, and before you can react he has a grip on your sword arm. With his free hand he brings it back and wallops you in the stomach so hard you are forced to your knees gasping for air. Circling around you while still holding onto your sword arm, he punches forwards at your elbow and breaks your arm. It makes a loud crunching sound, like footsteps on gravel.

[$pName] Uuuuuughhhh….

Your broken arm drops your sword, and you fall over. Axel casually picks it up and inspects the blade.

[Axel] I told you once, and I’ll tell you again; I am going to torture you. I don’t like torture, but the client very specifically requested I do this. If you really do have the power to go back in time like he said you could, I suggest you do it right away cause this is about to get nasty.

Axel smashes your face with the pommel of your sword and everything goes black.

By the time you wake up, you realize you are tied to a log, laying down on top of it. You can’t move your hands or legs at all, and your sword arm burns savagely where Axel broke it. A cold chill runs across your body and you realize you are naked.

[Axel] Look who is back! Time to begin.

Axel is holding a small, wickedly sharp dagger in his hand and is standing directly over you. He has a look of remorse in his eyes.

[Axel] I really am sorry about this.

Axel brings his dagger down to your chest, and with a quick swipe cuts off your left nipple. You scream.

[Axel] I know, I know, it hurts. Sorry sorry sorry…

Axel cuts off the right nipple as well, then moves to your right side. Your eyes water in pain and you scream into the empty forest for help but there is no one there to hear you. Next, Axel grabs one of your hands, which you desperately try to free from the bindings to no avail.

[Axel] This one’s a doozy…

He stabs the dagger underneath your fingernail, sending searing pain into your hand that is so acute you can’t believe it is real. He digs and digs with it, sending wave after wave of excruciating pain across your body. Finally, after what certainly must have been an entire week of digging, he turns the dagger and twists it to remove the fingernail entirely. The red hot sensation of the nail being cut out is unbearable, but you admittedly feel a sense of relief that since the nail is gone and it will finally be over.

[Axel] It never feels good to have bits of your body taken off. This little guy was my ex’s fault, you know.

Axel taps his black eyepatch.

[Axel] She didn’t take the breakup very well, but I think I got the better end of the deal in the end.

Axel looks off in the distance lost in thought for a moment before finally coming back to reality and gripping your hand again.

[Axel] Anyways, looks like It’s just you and me and a whole lot of time to kill. I’ve got all the other nails on this hand, and then all the other nails on the other. And just when you think it’s over, we’ve got a whole row of toenails to work on too. Buckle up.

What follows is a blurry haze of unbelievable pain that rips at your body over and over again. You are completely helpless to stop it, and every time the pain becomes so overwhelming that you lose consciousness you wake up only a few minutes later to find that Axel has waited for you to come to before continuing once again. One after the other he painstakingly removes every single fingernail and toenail on your body, and by the end of it you have completely lost your mind. As he rips off the last toenail you scream and laugh manically, shuddering violently against your bindings. The receptor in your brain that recognizes pain has at this point been completely shot, and you are numb to all feeling in your body.

[Axel] Well my friend, that’s all I can stomach to be honest. Until next time.

Axel flips the dagger in his hand to point downwards, and he plunges it into your chest. You hear the thud of it slicing into your organs but feel nothing.

[Axel] Goodbye.

Axel gets up and casually strolls into the forest until he is engulfed in fog. tied up and dying, you watch him solemnly as he disappears. You close your eyes.

[Continue to dying scene with person you spent time with]

14

[$pName] I think a flanking maneuver is best. The element of surprise is likely going to be our greatest ally here.

[$liName] I agree, especially since they will be outnumbering us. We need every advantage we can get.

$liName leads the way back into the bar and claps her hands together to get everyone’s attention. She explains on your behalf that yet again there is a foe to be defeated, and that she is counting on everyone to do their part to help out.

[$liName] As a final note, keep your wits about you as there may be arrows coming in from unexpected directions. Any questions?

$bardName meekly raises her hand.

[$liName] Yes, $bardName?

[$bardName] Can I sit this one out? This isn’t really a job for a young singer like myself.

[$liName] I suppose…

[$mName] Wait, can I sit this one out too? To be honest I’m more a fan of the adventuring side of things than the violent side, so I don’t really want to…

[$liName] …Ok now hold on…

[$aName] Hey stop worrying you two, I think a flanking maneuver here is a great way to handle it. Don’t you want to see us emerge victorious so that you can sing about it $bardName?

[Chef] I Chef Now!

[$pName] Thanks Chef, I’m glad you agree with us as well.

[$bardName] Why not just wait here for them to attack us, why do we have to go to them!?

[$mName] Why do they want to kill $pName anyways? What’s their problem?

[$pName] It’s hard to explain, I think…

[$liName] EVERYONE! Please! Calm down a little bit for a second!

Everyone glances around nervously and quiets down out of respect for $liName. She takes a deep breath then continues.

[$liName] We are an adventuring team, are we not? An adventuring TEAM. We need to fight these hitmen as a team. If you are scared you can hang back a little but we need every single person as backup just in case things get dicey.

[$pName] Thank you $liName, I couldn’t agree more. These guys are serious, we need everything at our disposal to defeat them.

[$aName] Absolutely! I’m a little nervous about it but I have full confidence in you guys!

[$mName] Hmm…

[$bardName] Eek!

[$pName] I’ll tell you everything I know about them and share the plan $liName and I came up with. It’s gonna go just as smoothly as our fights with the cult.

$bardName, and $mName don’t look like they are entirely convinced, but because they care about you they reluctantly agree to help anyways. You whisper out loud to yourself:

[$pName] Plus If things get bad, I can always load my save before anyone suffers…

Everyone gathers their things and prepares for the fight. You tell them everything you know about the enemy force of assassins while sharpening your sword, and with each stroke of the whetstone you feel yourself getting angrier and angrier at the situation. Half an hour passes, and it is time - The six of you venture into the foreboding fog of the woods.

You are by yourself, carefully venturing forward through the foggy gloom of the pine forest. Somewhere far to your left is everyone else, careful to keep enough space between you so that they aren’t detected. The plan is basic, but should be effective; You will get the enemies’ attention, while your friends all flank behind them for a sneak attack. Then, when the timing is right, they will jump out and kill as many bandits as quickly as possible so that you have the greatest advantage you can. Once all the minions are taken care of you will all work together to take out the leader.

You pick your way through the forest carefully, ensuring that you don’t make too much noise and give yourself away early. Despite your best efforts, it doesn’t take long before a swarm of figures suddenly appear from out of the forest and surround you. About 12 visible bandits in all encircle you, and all point their weapons out at you menacingly.

[???] Well well well. If it isn’t $pName, all by his lonesome.

A shadowed figure emerges from the fog, and slowly approaches you. You draw your sword and hold it out towards him at the ready.

[???] No need to be aggressive, you already know what’s coming don’t you? Why not just lay the sword down and give up nicely, save us both some trouble?

[$pName] Fuck you. Why are you attacking me and my friends?

[???] Nope not your friends, just you. We are only getting paid to kill you, $pName. But you already knew that, didn’t you?

The shadowed figure strides forward and crosses his arms. He has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and is bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars. Slung diagonally across his back are two swords in parallel, one is plain steel and the other is sheathed in an incredible onyx scabbard covered in ornate golden decorations.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again. Now without further ado…

[$pName] Not so fast, Axel!

Axel freezes in place, and looks at you in surprise.

[$pName] You may only be paid to kill me, but when you mess with me you mess with my friends too. The bond that holds us together is something you could never understand!

[Axel] What!? NO!

With perfect timing, $mName, $bardName, $liName, Chef, and $aName come charging out from the forest behind the bandits with their weapons drawn. All the Bandits are completely caught off guard, and shrink in fear as your fearsome gang closes the gap.

[Axel] How did they get behind us!?!? NOOO!!!

You grin triumphantly. Axel shouldn’t have underestimated how…. You freeze.

You friends are charging valiantly across the forest floor when suddenly the ground gives out from under each of them and a huge cloud of dust and pine needles explodes from underneath their feet. With an expression of shock each of them is caught by the trap and fall into the now revealed pit, which was cleverly disguised as ordinary forest floor. Down, down, down they fall towards a neatly laid row of spikes which line every inch of the bottom of the death trap. With a disgusting squelch, all five of your closest allies are impaled simultaneously, screaming.

[Axel] Oh boy. That’s terrible. Oh dear.

Your jaw drops and you feel like time itself has frozen. One moment you had victory in your grasp, the next it was completely pulled out from under you like a bad joke. From where you stand, you can hear the moans and screams of pain of all five of them as they slowly bleed to death in the spike trap. Their wails of agony echo hauntingly across the forest.

[Axel] My dear friend, I’ve told you this already haven’t I? The client said you had the power of loading, the power to go back in time. Of course I have traps waiting for your friends! Of course I have taken every precaution of making it impossible to ambush us! There is literally a maze of traps and tricks in this forest, hundreds of them, so many it would take you a million tries to ever discover them all. I’m a little insulted at how little you think of me…

You can’t move. You are completely shocked, you barely even register what Axel is saying.

[Axel] Well, let’s get this over with shall we?

Axel strides over to you, and you simply watch as he gets closer and closer. Finally, once he has gotten within only a couple feet of you, you remember your mission and pitifully swing your sword at him. He dodges underneath the swing easily, and in the same motion he reaches behind his back and draws his steel sword. As if it is the most casual thing in the world he brings the blade over his head and towards your overextended sword arm, and slices the hand off at the wrist. Your sword goes flying out across the forest floor, spurting blood across the pine needles with each bounce. In slow motion you watch hopelessly as Axel spins around and thrusts forward, impaling you in the thigh and knocking you backward. You hit the ground hard, and wheeze for breath while crying out in pain.

[Axel] Tie this one up and treat his wounds, I was careful not to hit any arteries. Simpson and Gregory, make sure the rest are all dead inside our little mousetrap. If any of them are still squirming, put them out of their misery.

One of the bandits busily jerks you around trying to stop your bleeding, and your vision fades to black. By the time you wake up, you realize you are tied to a tree stump, sitting in front of it. You can’t move your hands, your feet are tied together, and your injuries scream in pain. A cold chill runs across your body and you realize you are naked.

[Axel] Look who is back, and just in time too. Let’s begin.

Axel is holding a small, wickedly sharp dagger in his hand and is standing directly over you. He has a look of disgust in his eyes.

[Axel] I really am sorry about this. And about your friends too. You really didn’t have to bring them you know, we are only after you. Well, that’s not entirely true because I would capture them in order to bait you out, I suppose. Does it hurt at all knowing you are the reason they died?

Axel brings his dagger down to your chest, and with a quick swipe cuts off your left nipple. You scream.

[Axel] If being the reason your friends died doesn’t hurt, I’m sure that does. How many times have I done this to you by now, I wonder? Is this your first time? 100th?

Axel cuts off the right nipple as well, then moves to your right side. Your eyes water in pain and you scream into the empty forest for help but there is no one there to hear you. Next, Axel grabs one of your hands, which you desperately try to free from the bindings to no avail.

[Axel] This next part is going to hurt, it’s going to hurt a lot. I’m really sorry about this…

He stabs the dagger underneath your fingernail, sending searing pain into your hand that is so acute you can’t believe it is real. He digs and digs with it, sending wave after wave of excruciating pain across your body. Finally, after what certainly must have been an entire week of digging, he turns the dagger and twists it to remove the fingernail entirely. The red hot sensation of the nail being cut out is unbearable, but you admittedly feel a sense of relief that since the nail is gone it will finally be over.

[Axel] I had that done to me when I was captured about a decade ago by another mercenary gang that got the jump on us. Luckily my old ex jumped in and saved me after only one nail was removed, because I wouldn’t have been able to handle another one after that.

Axel looks off in the distance lost in thought for a moment before finally coming back to reality and gripping your hand again.

[Axel] Unfortunately for you, there isn’t anyone left that can save you. It’s just you and me. And I’ve got all the other nails on this hand, and then all the other nails on the other. And just when you think it’s over, we’ve got a whole row of toenails to work on too. Buckle up.

What follows is a blurry haze of unbelievable pain that rips at your body over and over again. You are completely helpless to stop it, and every time the pain becomes so overwhelming that you lose consciousness you wake up only a few minutes later to find that Axel has waited for you to come to before continuing once again. One after the other he painstakingly removes every single fingernail and toenail on your body, and by the end of it you have completely lost your mind. As he rips off the last toenail you scream and laugh manically, shuddering violently against your bindings. The receptor in your brain that recognizes pain has at this point been completely shot, and you are numb to all feeling in your body.

[Axel] I really do hate torturing. I should probably keep going and gouge your eyes out and all that but I really am not in the mood anymore. Oh well, until next time.

Axel flips the dagger in his hand to point downwards, and he plunges it into your chest. You hear the thud of it slicing into your organs but feel nothing.

[Axel] Goodbye.

Axel gets up and casually strolls into the forest until he is engulfed in fog. tied up and dying, you watch him solemnly as he disappears. You close your eyes.

[Continue to dying scene with person you spent time with]

15

You decide to ask $aName for help. Leaning over, you whisper in her ear.

[$pName] Hey I need to talk to you in private. It’s important.

$aName gives you a confused look for a second before nodding. You two have spent enough time together now that she trusts whatever you have to say will be important.

[$aName] alright, outside then.

You speak louder, addressing everyone at the table.

[$pName] Hey everyone, real quick just wanted to let you know $aName and I are going on a quick walk while we discuss certain strategies. Please just hang tight for a bit until we come back.

[$liName] Is there something we should know?

[$pName] No… not yet. I’ll tell everyone in a second, I just wanted to bounce some ideas off of $aName first.

There are some raised eyebrows, but nobody says anything else and they go back to their conversations. In the meantime you head out the door and walk slowly along the road, accompanied by $aName.

[$aName] So what’s so important you had to be all secretive about it?

[$pName] I didn’t want to tell everybody at the same time, because it might cause a panic. I wanted to get a plan of action established before bringing up this conundrum.

[$aName] Ok…

$aName pushes her $aHairColor hair back behind her head and ties it into a bun, concentrating on what you are about to say.

[$pName] There is a group of bandits just outside of town, waiting in the forest. They want to kill me. We only have an hour or so before they will attack.

Her eyes widen in surprise, but she quickly regains composure and narrows them in thought.

[$aName] So we need to figure out how to defeat them huh? Do they already know we are here?

[$pName] Probably.

[$aName] How many are there?

[$pName] I don’t know for sure, but less than 50.

[$aName] Well if they were sent here to kill you, that means they must be prepared for anything by now. We need to think outside of the box.

[$pName] Exactly! That’s why I’m asking you for help!

[$aName] Hmmm… Well the most obvious answer is to simply avoid fighting them altogether. Maybe we could sneak out somehow without them noticing and fight them another day when the odds are more in our favor. Another option is to fight here in town, but if anything that puts us at a disadvantage…

[$pName] Why is that?

[$aName] Well for one there are innocent civilians around here they could threaten. Another thing is if the bandits always attack us within the next hour then that means they likely have planned out every last detail of their attack. Hiding in this town is probably exactly what they want, otherwise they would have attacked us any of the dozens of days we weren’t anywhere near civilization.

[$pName] so that only leaves running away then?

[$aName] Yes. Well, and one other thing…

[$pName] What? Anything, please!

[$aName] Well I’m not exactly excited to suggest it, but the town of Gafengen is famous for being a mercenary gang hangout spot. One of them, Maud of the Forest Fangs, is the town leader of sorts and might be able to help us. I’ve heard she is particularly ruthless however and doesn’t like strangers much. It’s probably a bad idea to pro… ah… pro…?

[$pName] Provoke?

[$aName] Yep! Yep, yep, provoke her. Bad idea. She might end up being worse than the bandits in the forest. At the same time, having some extra helping hands could really turn the tides in the upcoming fight.

[$pName] Hmm…

Sneak out of the Town and avoid conflict 16

Ask Maud for help 17

16

[$pName] Terrible things will happen if these bandits catch us…

You shiver.

[$pName] The safest option is simply to sneak away and escape. We have less than an hour to prepare. Let’s tell the others.

The two of you re enter the bar and get everyone’s attention. They quiet down immediately, sensing that whatever it is you are about to tell them must be very important.

[$aName] Attention you guys! So here is the situation. There is a band of bandits hunting down $pName right now and they are at this very moment hiding out there in the forest, waiting for us.

Surprised looks appear around the table. $bardName fidgets nervously.

[$aName] We can’t stay here or they will kill us in our sleep, or hurt townsfolk, or for a bunch of other different reasons. We have one hour to sneak out as fast as possible and lose them. The plan $pName and I came up with is to sneak out of town in disguises, then once we get far enough away we simply ride as hard and fast as possible so that they can’t catch up. What do you guys think?

[$liName] Why don’t we just attack them before they attack us?

[$pName] Thank you for the suggestion $liName, but right now we are trying something different. Anything else?

[Chef] I chef now.

[$pName] … Thank you Chef. Is that all?

No one says anything else so you take that as a sign of agreement.

[$pName] Ok everyone, here is the strategy for disguises! $mName, go into the general store we went into earlier and grab some bandages, we can use those to cover our faces.

[$mName] What do you mean, we haven’t gone into a general store…?

[$pName] What? Yes we…. Oh right, um, ok I guess I misspoke there. But if you go along this road a little bit there is a store with no sign on it 2 buildings down on the left. That is the general store.

[$mName] And grab some bandages there, alright.

[$pName] $bardName, I need you to get some black cloaks from that same store, I remember seeing them in the clothing section. They are cheap but should alter our appearance pretty well.

[$bardName] Okie dokie.

[$pName] $liName, I want you to wait 20 minutes then try and start a forest fire at the south side of town, where we came in. I’m hoping if we create a distraction big enough the bandits won’t notice us skulking by.

[$liName] It’s gonna be hard to do considering how damp it is out here, but I can try…

[$aName] $pName and I will buy some food for tomorrow and take care of the horses. Meet back here in half an hour!

Everyone mutters in agreement and goes their separate ways while Chef contentedly stays in the bar to eat $aName’s untouched soup. You and $aName head for a small bakery you noticed nearby to buy some bread.

[$aName] So $pName, you really don’t know why they are after you huh? You don’t think maybe they have something to do with the cult?

[$pName] There is a lot I don’t understand about this situation still. All I know for sure is that I want to make sure everyone gets out of this alive.

[$aName] Fair enough. I hope this works…

20 minutes pass and everything is going according to plan. Everyone is stocked up on food, faces covered in bandages, and appearance disguised by the cloaks. The horses are ready, and well rested. South of the town, a small fire was reported and a few townspeople busily hustle past to help put it out. The smoke from the fire billows over the forest tree line behind you as you mount $hName and prepare to ride.

[$pName] We couldn’t ask for the set up to be any better than this, let’s ride!

The gang hollers in agreement and everyone urges their horses to sprint, sending the six of you careening out of the town and North along the road as quickly as possible. The wind whips at your face and eyes as you ride at a breakneck pace, and you pray that this rush of excitement marks your valiant escape from this hellhole.

[$pName] $aName!

You yell sideways at $aName, who is riding beside you.

[$aName] What!?

[$pName] Don’t you think taking the main road North is a little too obvious!?

[$aName] Don’t worry, I thought of that! $mName asked around and found a little side trail we can take that is well hidden!

[$mName] That’s right, follow me!

$mName takes the lead of the formation and steers the group diagonally off the road. Without slowing down the six of you ride in a single column formation along the narrow trail, which zig zags through the pine trees perilously. Pine boughs threaten to knock you off your horse but $mName calls in warning every time a low hanging branch approaches and you duck underneath them deftly. Mud flies, horses snort, and the fog cools you down as you maintain control of $hName’s wild sprint. Then suddenly:

[$mName] WOAH!!!

A mud covered rope was laid across the path completely invisible to the naked eye, and now it is suddenly pulled taught about 2 feet up in the air. On either side of the rope are bandits which had been waiting in ambush behind pine trees, and they lean back with all their might to keep the rope tight. Unable to react in time, $mName’s horse attempts to jump over but is instead caught up in the rope and trips over it terribly, tumbling down and sending $mName flying into the mud. With no room between them and moving far too fast, each one of you proceed to smash into his fallen horse and trip up as well, and within seconds all six of you have been flung off your horses and strewn about the forest floor.

You attempt to catch your fall, but in the corner of your eye you notice a hoof whipping sideways straight for your head and everything goes black.

You wake up to find yourself tied up to a tree and facing your friends who are all similarly tied up to trees across from you. Your head thumps with a ferocious migrane and you are having trouble thinking clearly. Through your blurred vision, you can barely see your friends struggling against the ropes that hold them and Axel strolling towards you.

[$pName] Uuuughhh…. Ahhhh….

Drool drips from your open mouth as you take ragged breaths, fighting to stay awake. Across from you, your friends are all in similarly bad shape. All of them look pretty beat up from the crash, and $bardname is crying bitterly as she leans limply against her tree. Chef appears to be dead already, and is lying a few feet to your right unmoving. He has an arrow sticking out of the back of his neck and is covered in blood. He might have been the only one able to put up a fight after falling off his horse, and paid for it.

[???] Well that didn’t work out so well for you did it? I didn’t expect you to be so cowardly.

A shadowed figure strides forward and crosses his arms. He has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and is bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars. Slung diagonally across his back are two swords in parallel, one is plain steel and the other is sheathed in an incredible onyx scabbard covered in ornate golden decorations.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again.

You strain against the ropes binding you to the tree as hard as you can, but to no avail. Axel chuckles at your struggling and slowly shakes his head disapprovingly.

[Axel] Sorry $pName, but I am going to have to torture you and your friends now. I have strict orders from the client to draw out your death no matter what. The client knows about your power, you see, and told me all about it. He wants you to give up, to hide from the pain and never return to this world. I think it’s a load of crap, to be honest, because if you really could see the future you wouldn’t have been beaten this easily. I mean come on, you really thought you could just run away with your tail tucked between your legs? You think we didn’t think of that?

You look down at your feet, frustrated. It’s over.

[Axel] Like I said, we know all about your ability. That means we prepared EVERYTHING. No matter what you do, we will be waiting for you, always. If you try to stay in town, we have a plan for that. If you try to run away, we have an army of scouts and sentries waiting to catch you because we have a plan for that. No matter what you try to do, you will never defeat me.

Axel scratches his head as he looks between you and your friends, as if he is trying to decide on something.

[Axel] Technically I’m only supposed to torture you, but the client offered a lot of extra bonuses if I tortured your friends first before killing you. Something about the trauma of seeing them in pain will make you be afraid of trying again? I really don’t buy it, but hey if the client is willing to pay for it then I am willing to do it. Not that I like torturing or anything, it grosses me out to be honest. But you got to do what you got to do you know? I have a family to feed. Now who should I start with…

Axel pulls out a dagger and tosses it up in the air and catches it again, thinking.

[Axel] Let’s see… Eenie meany meiny moe, catch a Dragon by it’s toe, if it roars then let him go, eenie meany meiny… Moe!

Axel points the dagger at $aName, who whimpers in fear as she realizes what is going to come next.

[Axel] let me be very clear here $pName. If you have the power to go back in time, then you don’t have to watch this. This is going to be terrible for your friends, you see. If your power is real, which I doubt, but if it is, then you better get going on that. ANYWAYS…

Axel approaches $aName and slices her shirt open with the knife. $aName screams in fear.

[Axel] I’m sorry miss, I really am. Orders are orders.

With two deft flicks of the knife, he slices off both of $aName’s nipples, leaving bloody gouges where they used to be. $aName cries and screams and wails in terror and pain, but no matter how hard she tries she cannot escape. Next Axel moves to her hand, and stabs the knife underneath her fingernails. The pain must be unbearable, and $aName struggles with every bit of strength left in her body fruitlessly. Axel twists the knife around and around, making sure to hit every sensitive nerve in the finger before finally spinning it and slicing the nail completely off. $aName has completely lost her composure now and bangs her head against the tree she is tied to again and again, likely trying to knock herself out so that she doesn’t have to experience the pain for any longer.

[Axel] Hey that’s one down miss. Only 19 more nails to go.

It takes almost an entire hour for Axel to take off every single one of $aName’s nails, and she screams in sheer agony the entire time. At about nail 4 she blew her vocal cords, and the sound of her wheezy groaning filled the forest. At nail 9 she lost consciousness, but Axel had one of his bandits splash water on her face and wake her up again before continuing. About when he took off her third toenail is when she began begging him to kill her, which he ignored. Crying desperately, she promised him everything and anything he wanted if he would only end her life then and there. Finally, after taking the last toenail off, he accepted her request and stabbed her in the chest. He had a bandit cut her down and toss her body to the side before grabbing another dagger and approaching $mName.

[$mName] Please, please, anything but that, anything at all, I will do anything…

[Axel] Sorry mister, but you know what is coming next. This is all your fault, $pName, I hope you know that.

Axel then proceeds to do exactly what he did with $aName to $mName, torturing him just as slowly and deliberately as before. $mName’s voice went out sooner than $aName’s at about nail 3, but the entire time before then he used his vocal cords nonstop. He tried pleading for mercy at first until the nipples were cut off, then he started hurling insults. Everything and anything he could say that had even a tiny chance of hurting Axel’s feelings, $mName threw at him. Axel paid him no mind, almost as if he couldn’t hear him at all.

At nail 8 $mName lost the ability to think creatively and choked out in a hoarse voice his hatred for Axel again and again and again.

[$mName] I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

And every time Axel responded.

[Axel] It’s $pName’s fault. He did this to you.

By his fourth toenail $mName must have started to believe him because from that moment until the very last toenail, $mName never broke eye contact with you. All he could moan out, again and again, were the same two words.

[$mName] Why $pName? Why $pName? Why $pName?

When the last toenail was finally done, he was stabbed in the chest exactly the same as $aName and tossed to the side.

[Axel] Whew, this is tiring. Next.

$liName was unconscious when Axel approached her, but he slapped her around until she groggily woke up again. Incredibly, she didn’t make a single sound as Axel cut her nipples off, and didn’t even scream as he tore off the first two fingernails. She began to crack during the third however, and quickly descended into delirious bouts of screaming and begging. Axel was clearly impressed by her stoicism, but that didn’t stop him from continuing the terrible deed. One by one he twisted and tore at her nails until each one was plucked off like a lover plucking petals off a flower and whispering “She loves me, she loves me not, she loves me…”

Once $liName’s chest was adequately filled with cold hard steel, she was tossed unceremoniously to the side. Skipping over Chef, Axel slowly approaches $bardName. She had been watching in just as much horror as you and hysterically screaming the entire time. Now as Axel gets closer, she breaks down into tears and pleads desperately between sobs.

[$bardName] PLEASE JUST KILL ME YOU DON’T HAVE TO TORTURE ME, ANYTHING BUT THAT PLEASE DON’T DO IT! I’M JUST A LITTLE GIRL YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS JUST LET ME GO JUST KILL ME ANYTHING BUT THAT PLEASE…

Axel hesitates in front of her, and takes a deep breath. His hands start shaking. Unbelievably, he even reaches up with his other hand to wipe a tear from his eye.

[Axel] I’m… so sorry… I really am… Orders are orders...

His voice is choked up as if this is one of the most difficult things he has ever done. $bardName turns and looks desperately at you, crying.

[$bardName] PLEASE! Save me $pName… do something, I don’t know, anything… Please…

Axel then proceeds to torture $bardName in the exact same way as the others, plunges a knife into her chest the exact same way as the others, and tosses her carelessly to the side the exact same way as the others. Her cries of pain echo in your ears and haunt your soul. Axel has been torturing your friends for the past four hours and he looks almost as exhausted as you do.

[Axel] Well well well, looks like you are all that is left, $pName. Since you are still here and looking at me, that means you haven’t gone back in time yet. Now that means one of two things: either the client was wrong about you, or you are truly the most cold, heartless bastard the world has ever known. For that reason alone your torture and death is going to the only one I can perform without any regret.

Axel brings his dagger down to your chest, and with a quick swipe cuts off your left nipple. You scream.

[Axel] I know, I know, it hurts. I’m sure by now you know the next step…

Axel cuts off the right nipple as well, then moves to your right side. Your eyes water in pain and you scream into the empty forest for help but there is no one there to hear you. Next, Axel grabs one of your hands, which you desperately try to free from the bindings to no avail.

[Axel] This one’s a doozy…

He stabs the dagger underneath your fingernail, sending searing pain into your hand that is so acute you can’t believe it is real. He digs and digs with it, sending wave after wave of excruciating pain across your body. Finally, after what certainly must have been an entire week of digging, he turns the dagger and twists it to remove the fingernail entirely. The red hot sensation of the nail being cut out is unbearable, but you admittedly feel a sense of relief that since the nail is gone it will finally be over.

[Axel] It never feels good to have bits of your body taken off. This little guy was my ex’s fault, you know.

Axel taps his black eyepatch.

[Axel] She was a real bitch, I tell ya. I guess I only married her because of her status and power and all that. Never a good idea to do that, take it from me.

Axel looks off in the distance lost in thought for a moment before finally coming back to reality and gripping your hand again.

What follows is a blurry haze of unbelievable pain that rips at your body over and over again. You are completely helpless to stop it, and every time the pain becomes so overwhelming that you lose consciousness you wake up only a few minutes later to find that Axel has waited for you to come to before continuing once again. One after the other he painstakingly removes every single fingernail and toenail on your body, and by the end of it you have completely lost your mind. As he rips off the last toenail you scream and laugh manically, shuddering violently against your bindings. The receptor in your brain that recognizes pain has at this point been completely shot, and you are numb to all feeling in your body.

[Axel] Well my friend, that’s all I can stomach to be honest. Until next time.

Axel flips the dagger in his hand to point downwards, and he plunges it into your chest. You hear the thud of it slicing into your organs but feel nothing.

[Axel] Pack it up boys, we’re done here.

The bandits collect their things and disappear into the fog, leaving you bleeding and dying alone. Not far away, you can see the bodies of your friends piled on top of each other cruelly. You sob quietly to yourself utterly defeated until finally blacking out.

[Continue to dying scene with person you spent time with]

17

[$pName] I will try anything, at this point. Let’s say hello to Maud.

You hate to admit it, but it’s the truth. You need to figure out a way to get out of this situation.

[$aName] Really? If you say so…

You wait outside the bar while $aName explains the situation to everyone, then she meets up with you again outside. The two of you head towards the opposite half of town across the main road. As you walk, loitering members of the Forest Fangs eye you suspiciously and you feel uneasy. $aName opens and closes her fist as she walks, visibly nervous. Finally, you reach the mercenary fortress and speak to the guard posted outside.

[Guard] Halt, who goes there?

[$pName] $pName and $aName, just two travelling adventurers seeking audience with Maud of the Forest Fangs.

[Guard] And what business do you seek with her?

[$aName] We hope to employ her services.

The guard raises his eyebrows as $aName, and speaks in a low voice.

[Guard] What are you doing here, miss? Are you trying to piss Maud off?

[$aName] What? What do you mean?

[Guard] She hates other women, don’t you know that? You really aught to get out of here before she…

Just then, the fortress doors blow open and reveal an impressively dressed woman in her late thirties. She has long silky black hair and jet black eyes, and wears a small tiara on her head decorated with little steel swords dancing along the sides. She is covered head to toe in black clothing, and her back is adorned with a long cape of incredibly vibrant green with golden fringes. Her hands are both gloved in black leather, and her boots don’t have a speck of mud on them. She immediately strikes you as someone of immense power and could easily be mistaken for the queen of $kingdomName. This can only be one person; the leader of the Forest Fangs, Maud.

She glances over you, unimpressed, before turning to $aName. Her face immediately contorts into one of disgust, and you can practically see venom dripping from her eyes.

[Maud] I see the town’s newest visitor and his harlot have finally decided to pay their respects to me. Follow.

She turns on her heels and heads back inside, her emerald cape gleaming as it whips about and chases after her. You glance at $aName, gulp, and head inside.

10 minutes pass, and you find yourself at a small throne room of sorts where Maud sits perched above you on top of a massive throne made of silver. She looks down on both of you with contempt, without saying a word all the while sipping on a glass of wine. You too, have a glass of wine, but you don’t drink from it out of discomfort. $aName was never offered a glass. Both of you stand in front of the throne room without having been offered a chair and are forced to look up at Maud when speaking to her.

[Maud] Well? Get on with it then.

The extreme inhospitality has thrown you off balance, and you wonder in the back of your head if this was a good idea after all.

[$pName] Well… ah… um… We have come here, you see, so that we can… uh…

You trip over your words, feeling the intensity of Maud’s gaze on you as you struggle to speak out.

[$pName] There are Bandits you see, bandits that are just outside your town. And we were…. Uh… we were hoping that uh, that you could help us…

[$aName] What he is trying to say, is that there are…

[Maud] SILENCE!

Maud yells ferociously at $aName with a booming voice, instantly silencing her. You can’t believe the expression of contempt and hatred Maud has adopted, you would think $aName had just killed her family.

[Maud] How dare you speak to me, you bitch? If you talk one more time in front of me I will have you both thrown out and not listen to another word, do you understand?

$aName lets a flash of annoyance cross her face for a brief second before regaining composure, and nodding in agreement. You can tell she wants to put Maud in her place but doesn’t want to ruin things for you. You take a deep breath.

[$pName] There is a gang of bandits that want to kill me, Maud of the Forest Fangs. There are less than 50 of them but likely more than ten. We have decided the best course of action would be to ask for, and purchase, your aid.

[Maud] I see… How many are there, exactly?

[$pName] I do not know.

[Maud] How many archers?

[$pName] I do not know.

[Maud] What is their position?

[$pName] Somewhere in the forest… I do not know exactly where…

[Maud] And what do you offer me for my services?

[$pName] We have about a thousand Aureus altogether that we could use to…

[Maud] HA! One THOUSAND!? Do you think I am some cheap whore you can use for a night and toss to the side the next day? Do you realize who you are speaking with!?

[$pName] I apologize, I didn’t realize it wouldn’t…

[Maud] SHUT UP. You really think you can come in here to waste my time like this? You know nothing of the enemy, you know nothing of their motivations, you offer nothing for my services, you bring this wench into here as an insult… Have you no respect?

[$pName] I truly am sorry, I didn’t know…

[Maud] You are the worst negotiator I have ever met in all my years as a Mercenary. First off, Bringing backup to a one on one negotiation is a major break in protocol. Why didn’t you come alone? Secondly, you have nothing to offer me. Why on earth would I risk my life and the lives of my men for someone I don’t know and that has nothing to pay me with? Lastly, you don’t know anything about these bandits at all! I need exact numbers and positions! How dare you!?

[$pName] Well I could try to share some more details about them, just…

[Maud] I said SHUT UP.

Maud takes a deep breath, and a deep pull from her wine. She looks completely exasperated. She stares at you like a misbehaving child for some time. Then, slowly, a sly grin appears on her face. She glances between you and $aName, and raises a single eyebrow. Then…

[Maud] Maybe there is something you could do to convince me to help you after all…

[$pName] What is it? Please, anything!

[Maud] Well, first let me tell you a little story.

She puts the wine glass down on the armrest of her throne and Looks down at her right hand.

[Maud] A long time ago I used to be married to a roguish man who took me for granted. One day I learned he was cheating on me, of course, with some disgusting whore who looks an awful lot like your nasty friend there.

Maud points at $aName, who narrows her eyes but says nothing. You silently thank her for keeping her composure.

[Maud] I got mad, we got in a fight. Most people just slap each other during domestic disputes, but we were the leaders of a mercenary army so of course our fights were a little more… intense than that. I got him pretty good, but he permanently damaged my perfect body and ran off with my sword. Let me show you something extremely few people in this world know about…

Maud pulls off her right leather glove to reveal her hand, a grotesquely disfigured and poorly healed stump missing all five of her fingers.

[Maud] He tried to take my arm off but missed, and got my fingers instead. Hurt like hell at the time. Anyways the lesson learned is that you can’t trust men, but even more so you can’t trust women because there will always be some sloppy slut that is willing to jump in and ruin your relationship. Your friend here looks remarkably similar to the woman he cheated on me with, and if there is one regret I have in life it is that I never got to take out my revenge out on her. So here is my offer.

She looks at you now, with an intensity that deeply unsettles you. Her expression can only be described as being one of pure wickedness.

[Maud] I want you to do to your friend what my ex husband did to me. I want you to cut off her fingers. If you do that, then I will do everything in my power to save you and your friends.

[$aName] WHAT!? That is the most…

[Maud] Strellooooo!!!

Maud points at $aName while shouting and $aName suddenly falls to the floor fast asleep. A faint sparkle of magic twinkles about her sleeping form before dissipating into the room, and Maud chuckles to herself. You rush over to check on her, but she is appears completely fine other than maybe a small bump on the head. She seems like she is having a nice dream, and grins slightly.

[Maud] I told her to keep quiet, I really did. Well, $pName, she is going to be completely and utterly asleep for the next five minutes and won’t wake up no matter what happens to her. That is the power of my control word. It’s time to choose; will you spare her fingers and accept doom, or be a man and do what needs to be done?

You stare up at her in disbelief.

[$pName] I can’t believe this…

Cut off the fingers on $aName’s right hand 18

Refuse Maud’s offer and leave 19

18

[$pName] I’m sorry…. I’m sorry $aName, I’m so sorry…

You pull out your old knife you have attached to your belt, the same one $aName kindly bought for you so long ago back when you had first arrived at the barony. You slowly bring it closer to $aName’s sleeping form. Can you really do this?

[Maud] Get on with it!

A single tear of regret slides down your face inadvertently as you begin to cut off $aName’s fingers, one by one. It makes a disgusting squelching sound as you rip and tear, and blood spews from $aName all the while. It is a gruesome sight, and Maud watches all the while in delight. Finally, after what feels like ages, you finish.

[Maud] I can’t believe it! You actually did it!

You turn your back on $aName so that you don’t have to look at the result of your nefarious deed. You are too ashamed of yourself.

[$pName] I… I did it. Now help me defeat the bandits.

[Maud] HA! HAHAHA! You are truly the most despicable person I have ever met in my entire life! Atrocious! Without morality! Completely devoid of it!

Maud laughs at you like children laugh at animals meandering around in a zoo.

[Maud] Are you even human? What kind of person betrays their friend like that? I am certainly cruel for suggesting it, I get that, but you must be either the most heartless person in the world or the most desperate, I’m not sure which.

Maud lithely drops down from her throne, and slowly walks up to you. She doesn’t even glance at $aName, who still sleeps on the floor ignorant of her gruesome injuries.

[Maud] Let me make something very clear. You are the most perverted, worthless, abhorrent and gutless human being I have ever met. You can’t negotiate, you can’t protect your friends, and worst of all you betray them as if it is nothing.

[$pName] Like it’s nothing!? I have lost everything! I have lost everything again and again, I’m running out of options! You have no idea how hard that decision was to make!

[Maud] Don’t blame your failures on me, boy. You disgust me. I will never help you, for as long as I live. Strellooooo!!!

The world goes black. You dream.

You dream you are on the beach, riding the waves with your bare feet perfectly balanced on the water. You are laughing, and having the time of your life. You enjoy yourself greatly for a few minutes, and finally ride a wave back to shore where you can feel the luscious warmth of the sand as it snuggles between your toes. You turn around to face the ocean, and wave to your friends who are riding the waves just like you were a second ago. Behind them, the clouds turn dark grey and lightning strikes rapidly as the wind begins to pick up. A massive storm is coming, and your friends have no idea what is coming. You shout, yell, and wave as much as you can but you can’t make any noise. The storm gets closer and closer, and a huge hurricane forms and gets ready to sweep everyone you care about away. You try as hard as you can to get their attention but it is no use, they can’t hear or understand you. You are alone. You weep as the hurricane overwhelms them and sweeps them away into the abyss. Deep down you know it is your fault. You are nothing.

You wake up with tears streaming down your cheeks, alone and in the forest. The fog is thick, and a thin layer of dew covers your body. Maud must have dumped you out here after casting her spell on you. You try gain your bearings, and notice that In front of you is $aName’s lifeless body. An arrow protrudes from her neck, and in her dying moments she must have desperately pawed at it with her fingerless stub fruitlessly before bleeding out. Standing above her is a bandit. He has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars. Slung diagonally across his back are two swords in parallel, one is plain steel and the other is sheathed in an incredible onyx scabbard covered in ornate golden decorations.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again. Now without further ado…

Axel moves forward with a rapid movement and hits you in the side of the head. Everything goes black.

By the time you wake up, you realize you are hogtied face down in the mud, with your arms and feet bound together. You can’t move your hands or legs at all, and your head aches miserably where Axel hit you. A cold chill runs across your body and you realize you are naked.

[Axel] Look who is back! Time to begin.

Axel is holding a small, wickedly sharp dagger in his hand and is standing directly over you. He has a look of remorse in his eyes.

[Axel] I really am sorry about this.

Axel bends over and grabs your head, yanking it to the side. You struggle to escape and fight back but it is no use, you can’t move at all. Axel grabs your ear and presses the dagger against the base of it, then saws at it savagely up and down several times until it is severed from your head. It hurts terribly, and sends waves of excruciating pain throughout your entire body. You scream.

[Axel] I know, I know, it hurts. Just doing my job man…

Axel cuts off the other ear as well, then moves to your right side. Your eyes water in pain and you wail pitifully into the empty forest for help but there is no one there to hear you. Next, Axel grabs one of your hands, which you desperately try to free from the bindings to no avail.

[Axel] This one’s a doozy…

He stabs the dagger underneath your fingernail, sending searing pain into your hand that is so acute you can’t believe it is real. He digs and digs with it, sending wave after wave of excruciating pain across your body. Finally, after what certainly must have been an entire week of digging, he turns the dagger and twists it to remove the fingernail entirely. The red hot sensation of the nail being cut out is unbearable, but you admittedly feel a sense of relief that since the nail is gone it will finally be over.

[Axel] It never feels good to have bits of your body taken off. Especially the important bits

Axel taps his black eyepatch.

[Axel] I was real sad when I lost my eye, that is one of the most important bits on your body. Not as important as your willy of course, but a close second.

Axel looks off in the distance lost in thought for a moment before finally coming back to reality and gripping your hand again.

[Axel] What’s up with your friend there anyways? That girl woke up absolutely freaking out, gripping her hand and screaming like no tomorrow. When we finally arrived to see who was hollering so much, we couldn’t believe how easy you made it for us to kill you! That crazy girl sure was mad at you, but for some reason she just wouldn’t buzz off and tried to protect you anyways. Real touching. We had to kill her of course, but you should have seen the way she fumbled her sword around without any fingers! I almost felt bad for her. Crazy coincidence, my ex wife… Eh, never mind. Speaking of fingers, time to get the nails off of all your other fingers too.

What follows is a blurry haze of unbelievable pain that rips at your body over and over again. You are completely helpless to stop it, and every time the pain becomes so overwhelming that you lose consciousness you wake up only a few minutes later to find that Axel has waited for you to come to before continuing once again. One after the other he painstakingly removes every single fingernail and toenail on your body, and by the end of it you have completely lost your mind. As he rips off the last toenail you scream and laugh manically, shuddering violently against your bindings. The receptor in your brain that recognizes pain has at this point been completely shot, and you are numb to all feeling in your body.

[Axel] Well my friend, that’s all I can stomach to be honest. Until next time.

Axel flips the dagger in his hand to point downwards, and he plunges it into your chest. You hear the thud of it slicing into your organs but feel nothing.

[Axel] Goodbye.

Axel gets up and casually strolls into the forest until he is engulfed in fog. tied up and dying, you watch him solemnly as he disappears. You whisper pitifully into the mud.

[$pName] I’m sorry, $aName. I’m so sorry.

A tear runs down your face as you succumb to your injuries and die. It’s over.

THE END

19

[$pName] You nasty hag, of course I won’t do that to $aName!

You kneel down and scoop up $aName in your arms, who sleeps soundly. She softly snuggles closer to you and you hold her tight.

[Maud] Finally, turns out you have balls after all. You have until the count of thirty before I kill you both then. One, two, three…

You retreat as fast as you can backwards through the fortress, and emerge out the front gate. The guard who was posted their earlier gives you a sympathetic nod but says nothing. You rush across the main street holding $aName tightly in your arms and finally make it back to the bar. To the surprise of everyone, you dump her onto the table they were using and take a heavy seat on one of the chairs, exhausted.

[$lIName] $aName! What the hell happened $pName!?

You force out an explanation through tired breaths.

[$pName] We tried to negotiate with Maud, but she won’t help us. It’s ok, $aName is only asleep and will be fine.

$liName paces worriedly across the wooden floor for several minutes until $aName finally wakes up. With a relieved gasp, $liName hugs her tightly.

[$liName] Oh thank god, I was so worried!

[$aName] $liName? Oh… hello… was I asleep? $pName? Wait what happened?

$aName looks around her in a panic, before jumping as if something scared her. With a terrified expression she brings her right hand up to her face, but breathes a sigh of relief when she sees all the fingers are still attached.

[$aName] Oh thank god. I mean, I didn’t really think you were gonna do it but still…

[$pName] Hey listen everybody, I’ve got some bad news. Maud was our main plan and it didn’t work out, and now I have no idea how to take care of this bandit problem. Does anyone have any ideas?

[Chef] I Chef Now!

[$pName] Thank you for your input Chef, anyone else?

[$bardName] We could hunker down right here you know. Like, not hiding, but like, we just don’t go anywhere. We don’t run away, we don’t attack them, we just stay right here. We could have shifts were one person keeps watch while the others sleep, and be real careful about it.

[$pName] Well... I guess it’s something I haven’t tried yet…

[$liName] I think we would be better off bringing the fight to them, personally. But staying on the defense means we might be able to mitigate any advantage they would have in numbers…

[$mName] We have been on the road for a long time, I see nothing wrong with relaxing for a couple days.

[$pName] Alright then, we will stay here and rent a room. We will fortify it and make sure someone is always keeping watch during the nights. All agreed?

The room is filled with the encouragement of your friends, and the new plan of action is settled.

And so, the six of you began your long stay in the town of Gafengen. It was lovely at first; everyone was in high spirits and diligently kept watch during the night. The bar served excellent food, and all six members greatly appreciated the break from all the traveling that had been going on lately. But soon the days began to drag on, and the days turned to weeks, and the weeks turned to fortnights.

It has been a month and a half since everyone agreed to stay.

[$bardName] Can someone tell me WHY the HECK we are still HERE!?!?

The six of you are gathered in the bar yet again, and everyone is at edge. There weren’t funds available to rent more than one room at once and as a result all six of you are going insane being forced to share the same tiny box every single night.

[$bardName] If I have to listen to Chef snore like a DYING ANIMAL for ONE more night I’m going to go CRAZY!

[$pName] Calm down! I’m sure if…

[$aName] I couldn’t agree more! I’m sorry $pName, we all played nice and behaved on your behalf but this is getting ridiculous. Normally when you say there is some sort of threat you are always proven right but this time there isn’t any evidence at all of this bandit gang! We have been here for like two months and there hasn’t been even a hint of danger!

[Chef] I Chef Now!

[$mName] Yes but $aName, you gotta understand $pName’s best contribution to this group is that his intuition is almost always right. I have never seen him…

[$liName] Guys please calm down…

[$aName] Never seen him what? Guess wrong? I mean, you’re awesome $pName but everyone has to slip up eventually and I would think by now…

[$bardName] GET ME OUT OF HERE!

[$pName] Guys please, one at a time so that we can…

[$bardName] THAT’S IT!

$bardName stands up from the table, sending her chair flying backwards. In a huff she disappears upstairs into the room you are renting.

[$mName] For someone so young it must be hard for her to never get any personal space. To be fair I think we have all been on edge lately…

[Chef] Chef. NOW.

Chef stands up, sending his chair flying backwards even further than $aName did. He looks at everyone at the table for a second, takes a deep breath and solemnly continues.

[Chef] Chef. Chef. I chef, Now. I chef.

It’s a moving speech. Just then, $bardName returns from upstairs with all of her belongings in a rucksack.

[$bardName] I love you guys and loved every moment spent with everyone but this is just too much for me, I’m sorry.

[Chef] I chef now.

[$bardName] Oh, you are coming with me Chef? Good, I could use the protection. Let’s get going.

[$aName] Wait.

The room goes silent.

[$bardName] Listen $aName… I just can’t do this anymore, I’m sorry. Nothing you say will…

[$aName] No, that’s not it. I’m… I’m coming with you.

[$liName] $aName!

[$pName] $aName wait, you can’t…

[$aName] $bardName is right! We can only live here for so long before people start going crazy! If this bandit threat really is out there then I’d rather go out, fight them and lose than stay in this shitty town the rest of my life and “win”.

[$pName] Please $aName, you don’t understand…

[$liName] $aName, don’t make me choose between you and $pName!

[$aName] You don’t have to, $liName. I want you to stay, I think it would be best for you. Goodbye.

$aName, $bardName, and Chef all leave together leaving you speechless, $liName in tears on the ground, and $mName sitting dumbly with his jaw dropped. Suddenly with only the three of you left, the room feels extremely empty.

[$mName] Should we… should we catch up and stop them?

[$pName] No… no they have a point. I’ve put you guys through too much. Now the group is split up and our trust in each other is broken. This attempt is over.

[$mName] What do you mean ‘this attempt is over’!? What the hell does that mean!?

[$pName] It’s OVER $mName!

You shout at him now, all the frustration that has built up over the last several weeks exploding out of you.

[$pName] it’s OVER and it is MY FAULT! I was too much of a coward to face those STUPID bandits head on, and I was too much of a failure to convince that STUPID woman to help us. I might as well just load back now…

[$mName] What the hell are you talking about!?

[$pName] Why don’t you just join them, $mName. Just join them, I don’t deserve a friend like you. I don’t deserve any of you. I have this stupid fantasy of going on this big fun adventure, but what you guys don’t know is that we die ALL THE TIME. I died back at Kingsbridge, we barely got away with our stunts at the Temple of the Ancient Scripture, and we got melted at the cathedral. FUCKING MELTED $mName. That shit HURTS. And guess what? We died just outside of Gafengen too! It was just you and me…

$mName has a nervous expression on his face, as if he is watching you slowly go insane. You ignore it because it feels too good to finally get this off your chest.

[$mName] $pName…

[$pName] … just you and me DICKING around outside of town, and we couldn’t find the others. You know why? Cause those FUCKING bandits probably killed them. An arrow came out of nowhere and IMPALED ME IN THE FUCKING CHEST $mName. Have you ever DIED before!? I have! So many times! THAT SHIT HURTS. And all I want is a FUCKING way out of this but I can’t figure it out! But you guys don’t have to deal with that shit cause once you die, its over for you! But its not over for me, oh no no I have to go through it OVER AND OVER AGAIN LIKE IT’S SOME KIND OF FUCKING VIDEO GAME. Well I’m DONE with this. I’m DONE with…

You are rudely interrupted by the sound of the door smashing open, and a stream of bandits come crashing in. In mere seconds they spread out across the room, blocking all the exits. You aren’t even fully dressed yet, and $liName isn’t wearing her sword either. The only person between the three of you that is currently armed is $mName, and he only has the butterknife from when he ate breakfast.

[???] Well well well, having a little domestic dispute are we? I could hear your little mental breakdown from outside…

In walks a new bandit, who is clearly the leader of them all. He has Fiery red hair, and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He is taller than you by half a foot and bulging with muscles. Despite the cold he only wears pants which leaves his muscular chest exposed, and you notice it is covered in scars and a considerable amount of blood that isn’t his. Slung diagonally across his back are two swords in parallel, one is plain steel and the other is sheathed in an incredible onyx scabbard covered in ornate golden decorations.

[???] Nice to meet you again, $pName. My name is Axel, the greatest bandit chieftain to have ever lived. I am here to kill you yet again, just like I killed your friends outside. Now without further ado…

The bandits all charge at once, and it is over before you even realized it began. $mName is impaled through the chest immediately, and falls over coughing blood all over the table and ground. $liName manages to disarm and even injure one of the bandits before she is similarly overwhelmed and brutally stabbed multiple times in the stomach, sending her collapsing onto the floor. You are tackled backwards by a tough looking bandit wearing three bandanas on his head, and you smash into a table behind you breaking it and getting the wind knocked out of you. Gasping for air, you struggle to escape but the bandit with the bandannas catches and punches you over and over again until you are nothing but a bloody pulp. The bandits carry you outside, where they have already stacked up the bodies of $aName, Chef, and $bardName before adding $liName and $mName to the pile. One of them holds you up next to the corpse pile while his buddy ties your hands and feet together, all the while Axel approaches you with his knife drawn.

[Axel] The client told me you had the power to see through time, and that little speech you did back there really convinced me. I’m surprised though, if you could see through time, how come you were so easily attacked? I’m going to have to ask my client some questions when we next meet, that bald headed bastard… let’s see here, what comes next? Ah that’s right, some torturing. I think first I’ll start with the nipples, then I’ll…

[???] HOW DARE YOU!!!

Somewhere behind you, a somewhat familiar sounding voice shrieks through the air in absolute indignation. In front of you, Axel’s eyes narrow, and he tenses up. Muttering under his breath, you can barely hear him say:

[Axel] Shit, the bitch noticed me. Looks like I’ll have to cut this short.

Axel plunges his dagger into your chest and orders his men to scatter, then runs as fast as he can out of town. Behind him from far away, bolts of lightning arc across the sky towards him and smash into the trees behind the town in a series of incredible explosions, starting a multitude of fires at the points of impact. The shockwave of one of them nearly knocks you over, and the sound is so deafening you can hear hardly anything but a loud ringing in your ears. The electricity in the air is awe inspiring, but you can’t appreciate it much as you stagger to your knees and feel Axel’s blade tickling your heart. You don’t feel thing at first, and it almost seems as if time is moving in slow motion. You notice none other than Maud sprinting past you, chasing after Axel, and chuckle deliriously as she shouts after him.

[Maud] HOW DARE YOU SHOW YOUR FUCKING FACE AROUND HERE AGAIN! COME BACK AT ONCE!

You stop laughing once the pain hits, and it hits hard. Gasping, you fall to the ground and writhe in agony, it feels like someone has stuck a red hot rod of molten steel into your sternum and it is melting away all your organs. You would scream, but you are out of breath from the ragged gasping and can’t make any noise. Or maybe it is because one of your lungs are punctured? You cough up blood, and surmise that is the most likely case. Your vision starts to go dark, and the next second you lose all your senses and pass out. It’s over.

[Continue to dying scene with person you spent time with]

20

Your eyes open. Somehow, against all odds, you are still not dead. In your soul you can feel you are very close however, and only have perhaps a few more moments of lucidity before everything fades away for the last time. You turn your head slowly to the side, towards where you hear a faint shuffling sound. You can’t believe your eyes. It is $liName, dragging her dying body slowly towards you at a snails pace.

She is covered in blood, and leaves a trail of it behind her as she crawls towards you inch by inch. Every tiny movement she makes causes more blood to gush from her body, every ounce of effort visibly ravages her with pain. She makes soft, whispered moans of pain every few seconds, but nonetheless she continues to progress towards you. Considering she might be even closer to death than you are, it leaves you speechless. Finally, she gets close enough to touch you and holds you in her arms. She is crying. Faintly, she whispers in your ear.

[$liName] $pName… you… promised…

She reaches back and pulls out a small knife she keeps sheathed at the small of her back. Bringing it around, she sacrifices the last ounce of energy she has left in her body to cut the ropes binding you.

[$liName] Free…. Now…

[$pName] $liName…

Tears emerge from your eyes. She is tired, so tired.

[$liName] I… Love… You…

She holds onto you tightly, one last fleeting moment in the person she love’s arms before shuddering and passing away. $liName is dead.

[$pName] No…

Her effort was valiant, and the only thing that gave her the strength to free you was the power of her love. Despite this, you are still mortally wounded and have naught but a few seconds left in this world. You use them the best way you know how; you hug her tightly to your chest, and sob.

Seconds later, you die still holding her in your arms.

THE END.

21

Your eyes open. Somehow, against all odds, you are still not dead. In your soul you can feel you are very close however, and only have perhaps a few more moments of lucidity before everything fades away for the last time. You turn your head slowly to the side, towards where you hear a faint shuffling sound. You can’t believe your eyes. It is $aName, dragging her dying body slowly towards you at a snails pace.

She makes her way over to you inch by inch until she is finally close enough to touch you if she reached out far enough, and collapses. You hear a pained whisper escape her lips, so faint it is hardly audible.

[$aName] Looks like… the adventure… is over, huh?

You stare back at her sympathetically. A pool of blood forms around her.

[$pName] It’s over.

[$aName] But we had… a good run… didn’t we?

Despite almost certainly being in excruciating pain, $aName smiles a little to herself and you notice a glimmer in her eyes.

[$aName] I’ll… never… forget you… thank…. You…

You say nothing. Tears are streaming down your face. Tears are streaming down hers. Both of you are dying.

[$aName] Maybe next time… you will keep… your promise…

$aName gives a final shudder, and falls over dead. You cough, and paw feebly at your wounds. Everything goes dark.

[$pName] Next time… Will be different…

You gasp, and your lifeforce exits your body. You are dead.

THE END.

22

Your eyes open. Somehow, against all odds, you are still not dead. In your soul you can feel you are very close however, and only have perhaps a few more moments of lucidity before everything fades away for the last time. You turn your head slowly to the side, towards where you hear a faint shuffling sound. You can’t believe your eyes. It is $bardName, dragging her dying body slowly towards you at a snails pace.

She cries faintly to herself as she slowly forces her small, frail body to push itself towards you. She looks so palid and delicate that a strong wind could pick her up and blow her away, never to be seen again. Finally after what feels like an eternity of struggling she manages to get within a few feet of you and sits criss crossed, blood dripping out of her mouth.

[$bardName] You lied… $pName…

The tears are pouring down her face, intermixing with the gobs of blood covering her chin and torso. She sways back and forth unsteadily, as if she doesn’t have the strength to even sit up straight. She probably doesn’t.

[$bardName] You promised… $pName…

[$pName] $bardName… I’m sorry…

[$bardName] you PROMISED $pName… that everything… would be ok…

[$pName] …

[$bardName] I’m going… to hell now… for killing… my father…

[$pName] No $bardName… no…

[$bardName] I’m going… to suffer…

[$pName] no…

[$bardName] suffer for eternity… Its what… I deserve… I suppose…

[$pName] $bardName… that’s not true…

$bardName is swaying back and forth violently now, hardly conscious enough to hold herself upright at all. Her eyes roll back in her head.

[$bardname] You promised…

She falls over, lifeless. $bardName is dead and you know deep down you will soon follow.

[$pName] …

You want to cry but you don’t have enough strength left in you to muster up the tears. You don’t have enough strength left for anything now. You cough up a wad of blood, but it doesn’t escape your mouth and clogs up your esophagus. You are far too exhausted, far too weak to do anything about it, and you slowly choke to death on your own blood. With a shudder you fail to get enough oxygen to your brain and everything shuts down. You are dead.

THE END

23

Your eyes open. Somehow, against all odds, you are still not dead. In your soul you can feel you are very close however, and only have perhaps a few more moments of lucidity before everything fades away for the last time. You turn your head slowly to the side, towards where you hear a faint shuffling sound. You can’t believe your eyes. It is Chef, dragging his dying body slowly towards you at a snails pace.

[$pName] Chef? I thought… you were… dead…

You cough violently, and blood covers your chin. A few feet away Chef is approaching, and you watch in horror as he struggles towards you on his hands and knees, blood spouting out from him like a torrent. He is a big man with a lot of blood, but it looks like an almost impossible amount of blood is gushing out from him. It looks like all the blood in the world is pouring out, and it just keeps going and going. The sight is so gruesome it makes you shiver.

You hear another noise. To your left, a scuffle of footsteps alerts you and you turn to look. It is one of the bandits, sneaking towards you with a knife drawn. At this point you are too exhausted to be afraid, and sigh. The bandit is coming to finish the job.

You close your eyes. It will soon be over. The footsteps get closer and closer, with the timidity of a coward. Finally, the bandit is right over you, and you can sense he is raising the dagger to finish you off. Then, unbelievably, you feel a weight placed on you and your eyes shoot open to see what happened.

On top of you, protecting you, is Chef. In his final moments, with his last bit of energy, he lays on top of you and puts himself between you and the dagger wielding bandit. Frustrated, the bandit stabs him. Chef doesn’t make a sound.

[bandit] Wha???

The bandit tries to move Chef, but he resists. Frustrated, the bandit stabs chef again, but Chef refuses to move. The bandit attempts to stab at your face around Chef, but at the last second Chef throws his arm over your head and takes yet another blow for you. He grunts in pain.

[$pName] Chef?

[Chef] I… Chef… Now…

The bandit screams in frustration, and thrusts his dagger into Chef’s neck. It severs his spinal cord and his body goes limp, falling off you and laying on the ground uselessly. Your vision begins to go black. The bandit raises his dagger to finally stab at you, but it is too late; you are already dead. With his final moments chef saved you, a dying man, from a killing blow. His gesture was completely pointless, entirely fruitless. Despite this, you couldn’t be more grateful. Chef died a hero.

24

Your eyes open. Somehow, against all odds, you are still not dead. In your soul you can feel you are very close however, and only have perhaps a few more moments of lucidity before everything fades away for the last time. You turn your head slowly to the side, towards where you hear a faint shuffling sound. You can’t believe your eyes. It is $mName, dragging his dying body slowly towards you at a snails pace.

[$pName] … $mName?

$mName feebly crawls towards you, inch by inch, leaving a trail of blood behind him. He struggles tremendously against his own frailty, and after ages of effort finally manages to pull himself up alongside you and rests his head against your leg.

[$mName] I’m sorry… I couldn’t help you more, $pName…

His voice is faint, and pained with emotion. He looks like he really believes it is his fault everything happened.

[$pName] It’s not… your fault…

[$mName] Take… this…

$mName reaches into his coat, and pulls out a scrap of paper and hands it to you. It is faded and wrinkled as if it has been folded and unfolded a million times.

[$mName] My most… valued treasure… a gift… from my mentor…

You turn it, and look at what it says. It reads:

Up Up Down Down Left Right Left Right B A

[$mName] I never learned… what it meant… I want to know… before I die. $pName, do you know?

You fold the paper back up again, and place it back in $mName’s hands serenely.

[$pName] Some kind of… inside joke… from another world… I guess. \*cough\* Insulting… at a time like this…

[$mName] Oh… I see…

$mName sighs, and relaxes. He closes his eyes as if he were taking a nap, and stops moving. This time, he falls asleep for good. $mName is dead. Silently, you wish that the code was able to make a difference, wish that this was all a game. You wish everything was smiles and roses, and that the good guy wins in the end. Right now however, you are feeling pretty discouraged. This doesn’t feel like a happy video game adventure at all. This feels like hell.

You shudder, and take your last breath. You are dead.

THE END

25

The darkness clouding your mind slowly lifts, and the rushing sound of static overwhelms your senses before suddenly stopping all at once. Your eyes shoot open, and you stumble over yourself while coughing violently.

[$liName] $pName, are you ok? What happened!?

You fall to your knees. You have no strength left in them, no will to continue forward. You feel as if you are but a shell of your former self, a sad defeated husk of a human. Seeing this, $liName freezes, and runs towards you. By changing direction she avoids the pothole completely on accident and rushes to your side.

[$liName] $pName, what’s wrong?

You stare at the ground and don’t respond. Here you are, for what feels like the hundredth time, no closer to figuring out how to defeat the bandits than before. You have felt excruciating death after excruciating death and witnessed everyone you care about share the same fate, and for what? You feel completely trapped; this is a dead end with no escape.

[$liName] $pName, talk to me. What just happened to you?

[$aName] Is he alright $liName?

[$liName] Everyone get back, give us a little space. C’mon $pName, let’s sit down over here.

$liName puts your arm around her shoulder and lifts you up. Next, she moves you over to the side of the road and gently sits you down on a tree stump jutting out of the mud. There isn’t room to join you on the stump so she sits on her heels in front of you and hugs her knees.

[$liName] Are you ok $pName? You look… tired. You look exhausted, even. You look like you have witnessed something terrible, and aged like ten years. What is going on? Talk to me…

You look up from the ground at her, and see her caring, beautiful face. She looks so genuinely concerned for you, it breaks your heart. She is a dead woman that doesn’t even know it yet. You burst into tears.

[$liName] pName! It’s ok, there there…

She gets up and hugs you, holding you softly in her arms. You sob uncontrollably, heaving as hard as you can with as much emotion as you can. All this built up stress, all this built up desperation finally comes gushing out and it overwhelms you. You stay like that with $liName for a long time, crying like a baby while she holds you sympathetically. It means nothing, you know, but it still feels good. You feel like a human being for the first time in a long time. Finally, you finish crying and begin to calm down. Every few seconds you whimper gently, which is a little pathetic, but you can’t help it.

[$liName] Hey there mister man, it’s ok. It’s going to be ok…

$liName gently wipes your tears off your cheek and pats you on the head. It feels heavenly.

[$pName] $liName…

[$liName] I’m here for you…

You open your eyes and turn to hug her, and the two of you embrace for a while without saying a word. It feels like for every second you hold her, her love and strength pours into you and reinvigorates you. You start to feel a little better.

[$liName] Hey there, I need to know what’s wrong so that I can make it right. What’s wrong $pName? I’ve never seen you like this before…

You sniffle and clear your throat. Forcing out the emotion clogging up your breath, you finally open up to her.

[$pName] I’m being tested, $liName. I’m being tested, and I don’t know if I’m going to pass. I have seen some things. Some terrible things. Things I want to forget. I feel like every time I get closer to you guys, and love you guys more than ever, I am punished for it and pushed further and further away. It feels like I will never escape. It feels like I am trapped and doomed to replay this horror scene over and over. I don’t know what to do.

$liName takes a deep breath, and looks you in the eyes.

[$liName] I’m going to be honest $pName, I have no idea what you are saying or what you are going through right now. But there is one thing I do know. And it is that you are strong. It is that you are brave, and kind, and loving. Most of all, you never ever give up no matter how bad things look. You just keep on getting stronger and stronger each day I look at you and it fills me with inspiration. You’re like the Black Blade, always growing more powerful and…

[$pName] What? Wait wait wait, stop, what?

$liName is completely caught off guard by your interruption, and blinks in surprise.

[$pName] What did you just say!? What did you just tell me that blade was!?

[$liName] The Black Blade? What do you mean?

[$pName] You know about the Black Blade? You know about Axel!?

[$liName] Who is Axel? I don’t know what you are talking about…

[$pName] Tell me everything you know about the Black Blade, $liName. It’s very important.

[$liName] Woah, um, ok. If it makes you feel better…

$liName regains her composure and stands up. She begins to pace back and forth in front of you trying to remember everything she can, and pushes her hair behind her ear in concentration.

[$liName] Well the legend of the Black Blade is fairly common, I guess. Yet again you surprise me by never having heard of it… Well I guess I’ll start at the beginning then. The Black Blade used to be a normal sword used by a knight of old, who would fight monsters that attacked his village. One day a great fiery beast attacked, and the knight gave his life in the effort of plunging the sword into the monster’s molten heart, scorching it black forever. The village memorialized the knight as a hero for decades after that, proudly displaying the Black Blade at their town hall, until one day a cruel swordsman wanting to achieve great deeds snuck in and stole the blade away.

$liName is starting to really get into the story now, acting it out as she goes along.

[$liName] He then spent the next 30 or so years defeating terrible beasts but also murdering fellow monster slayers. Each time he came across an epic warrior he would challenge and defeat them then melt their swords down looking for Dragonium. At a certain caliber of fighter it is fairly common for them to have at least a marble in their sword, and so the great warrior slowly accrued more and more Dragonium to add into his Black Blade. Before long, he had the highest concentration of Dragonium to have ever been put inside a sword in thousands of years.

$liName pauses to unsheathe Gasp from her back, and runs her finger across the blade. It gleams brilliantly.

[$liName] They say that the purer in Dragonium a sword gets, the more powerful it becomes. It is rumored that the Black blade can slice through any material, absorb magical attacks, and even grant it’s wielder incredible strength and abilities. Some say the concentration of Dragonium in that blade is so great that the wielder is even granted magical abilities of their own. So they say.

[$pName] But what about Axel? How did this random Bandit get his hands on such an incredible sword?

[$liName] I don’t know who this Axel is, but if you think he has it he must be one lucky guy. The tale revolving around the blade ends with a short lesson on greed. The legendary warrior was eventually killed by his own daughter, who interestingly enough lives somewhere close by. Her name is Nod I think?

Your eyes light up in surprise. Maud!?

[$liName] Right, that’s the one. She used the sword to gain power and soon became the leader of a powerful mercenary gang. Later, she fell in love with some guy and got married, but he got jealous of her abilities and tried to steal the sword. Either that or she caught him cheating, depends on who is telling the story. Either way they ended up getting in a big fight. They both injured each other pretty bad and the guy ran away with the Black Blade, never to be seen again. Legend has it that to this day she simmers in hatred for him, and the woman accomplice who helped him conspire to steal it.

[$pName] So you are saying that Maud would do anything, give anything, to get her revenge on that man and get her sword back?

[$liName] Well she is a pretty nasty person from what I’ve heard, but I suppose that is correct.

You jump up, and hug her tightly.

[$pName] $liName! I love you I love you I love you! You are the best!

$liName yelps in surprise, and her face turns a deep crimson red. You can feel the heat of her blushing cheeks as you hold her, and you twirl her around in a silly celebratory dance.

[$pName] You did it! You figured it out! We don’t have any time to lose, let’s get a move on!

You urge everyone to resume their path along the road, and they are heartened by your newfound fiery resolve. For the first time in a long time, you feel hope again.

Ahead lies Gafengen.

26

You arrive in town without incident, and gather at the bar to prepare for the upcoming battle. While arriving you explained to everyone about the bandit gang waiting for you, their cunning leader Axel, and his nefarious intentions. Despite the story seeming almost unbelievable the entire group readily accepts your explanation and supports you fully. You are filled with gratitude to be surrounded by such outstanding allies.

[$mName] So key to victory then is convincing Maud to join our cause?

[$pName] Yes, almost certainly. I don’t think anything else will work to defeat Axel, he and his Black Blade are simply too powerful.

[$liName] What if we used you as a distraction, and we flanked from the side…

[$pName] Thaaaaat’s not gonna work. Believe me. We need Maud and her mercenaries.

[$liName] I just don’t trust an outsider to save us is all…

[$pName] We have no choice but to trust her. I have one shot to convince her to join us, and failure means doom for us all. Wish me luck.

[$liName, $bardName, $aName, Chef, $mName] GOOD LUCK!!!

You wave to them as you exit the bar, and march towards Maud’s fortress. This is it.

27

You stride across the main road to the other side of town, towards the Fortress. As you walk, loitering members of the Forest Fangs eye you suspiciously but when you meet their gaze they look away. Finally, you reach the mercenary fortress and speak to the guard posted outside.

[Guard] Halt, who goes there?

[$pName] $pName, a travelling adventurer seeking audience with Maud of the Forest Fangs.

[Guard] And what business do you seek with her?

[$aName] I have an offer for her that she won’t be able to refuse.

[???] Something I can’t refuse? Then by all means…

The doors are thrown open, and out strides Maud looking as imposing as ever.

[Maud] … Tell me what you have in mind.

Once again you find yourself in the throne room, with Maud perched high above you on her fancy silver chair. You’re not in the mood to break your neck looking up at her, so instead you stand sideways to her with your arms crossed. She takes a sip of her wine, and the negotiations begin.

[Maud] So here you are, $pName, all alone with promises of an offer I will find irresistible. Either you have a lot of money to offer me, or you want to blackmail me. Which is it?

[$pName] Neither.

[Maud] Then we are done here. Goodbye.

[$pName] Not so fast!

Maud raises an eyebrow at you, but doesn’t interrupt.

[$pName] Have you ever heard of a man named… Axel?

Maud’s expression freezes. She is caught completely off guard by the name, and quickly attempts to hide her extreme reaction from you. Squinting her eyes suspiciously, she responds.

[Maud] How do you know that name?

[$pName] Because we have a common enemy, Maud. We both wish for revenge on Axel, no matter what it takes.

Maud scrutinizes you for the longest thirty seconds of your life without saying a word, but you don’t back down from her gaze. Finally, she lithely hops down from her throne and speaks to you at eye level.

[Maud] Are you… the target?

You stare back at her with a blank expression.

[Maud] Yes you are, you must be. Axel is hunting you, isn’t he?

[$pName] Yes.

[Maud] Of course. As much as I hate Axel, he is undoubtedly one of the greatest and most cunning ambushers I have ever known. Not a single person he has been determined to hunt has ever lived to know it was Axel that wanted them dead. Yet here you stand.

[$pName] Axel and I have a strained relationship, that is true. But I hear that your relationship with him is even more strained than mine.

[Maud] Strained is putting it lightly, it wouldn’t be inaccurate to say I hate him more that anyone else in the world. But enough about me, you are truly the target are you not?

[$pName] I don’t know what you mean…

Maud chuckles to herself, and bunches up an armful of her green cape in front of her and hugs it. She slowly strokes it with one hand as if it is some kind of comforting gesture for her.

[Maud] A strangely dressed bald man was here not too long ago trying to hire me and my mercenaries to take you out. He told strange tales of a man that could see into the future, and had all these barbaric requirements about how to kill you. The target is you, isn’t it?

[$pName] Must be. What was his name?

[Maud] Never said. Not that it matters, I would never tell anyone outside of the Forest Fangs that kind of information.

She turns her back to you, and flings her cape out behind her with gusto. It flutters in the air impressively, and she speaks over her shoulder haughtily.

[Maud] Let’s get to the point. What exactly do you want from me?

Your voice fills with determination. This is it.

[$pName] Maud, I humbly request that you help me and my friends defeat Axel in combat. With your abilities and resources, our victory is assured. In return for your help, I offer something that has eluded you in your quest for revenge all these years; the perfect bait.

[Maud] bait?

[$pName] That’s right. If I venture out into the woods, Axel is guaranteed to show up. I know exactly what direction to go as well. He has prepared for every possible attack, every possible trick, except for you. Never in a million years could he expect us to become allies, and he will be unable to escape if we combine forces. Not only will you get your revenge on him, you will also finally be able to reclaim what is rightfully yours; the Black Blade.

Maud’s eyes light up, filled with desire.

[Maud] You speak as if you don’t know our victory is guaranteed. For someone that can travel through time, isn’t that a bit odd?

[$pName] It is hard to explain. I can only ever go backwards, not forwards. I have not experienced a future where we beat him yet. At the same time, I have not experienced a future where you help us yet either. This is the last chance I have to overcome Axel.

[Maud] Hmm…

Maud pauses, deep in thought, before marching up to you and staring into your eyes.

[Maud] And how do I know your ability isn’t a load of crap? How do I know that you aren’t secretly baiting me out of my fortress so that Axel can attack me?? I can’t trust you at all… Unless…

She backs away from you, and hides her hands behind her back. She pulls at something behind her, then with her left hand throws her right leather glove forwards and towards you. It hits the ground, then slides to your feet.

[Maud] If you can rewind time then this should be easy for you. Behind me and hidden from your view is my right hand. Can you tell me how many fingers I am holding up? If you guess wrong, I will instantly vaporize you with a lightning bolt and that will be the end of you, So I wouldn’t mess around if I were you.

Enter How many fingers she is holding up.

28

[Maud] Incorrect. Liar.

Maud points a finger at you, and begins chanting a long phrase of strange sounds and guttural utterances that makes no sense. The air begins to fill with energy, and you notice her hair start to slowly raise up as it is caught in a swirling electrical current around her. Finally, she shouts something and a huge white flash erupts from her finger, obscuring your vision and blinding you. Instantly, you are completely engulfed in the tremendous power of a bolt of lightning and your flesh is vaporized straight off your bones, leaving only your charred skeleton behind. Your remains clatter across the throne room floor, echoing off the walls. You are dead.

THE END

29

[$pName] Zero. You don’t have any fingers on that hand at all.

Maud chuckles to herself, and brings her right arm forwards to reveal the disfigured injury that Axel gave her during their battle.

[Maud] Not many people know about this injury, and some passing traveler like yourself surely wouldn’t. How many times have we talked to each other by now, I wonder… Or maybe you just got a lucky guess? Either way, it doesn’t matter. It is time for us to enact our lovely revenge against my least favorite of all my ex husbands. Meet me on the Main road in the center of town in exactly twenty minutes.

With a dramatic spin, she marches off in the opposite direction and disappears into one of the adjacent rooms. You head back the way you came, and let yourself out. Emerging from the fortress, you take a deep breath, and the entrance guard turns towards you.

[Guard] Did it go well?

[$pName] So far. But it’s only just beginning.

You make your way forwards across the main road, and back to the bar to update your friends on the situation. They greet you with a cheer after hearing of your success.

[$bardName] Yay, you did it!

[$pName] Hold on guys, we haven’t won yet. We may have Maud’s support but Axel is far from defeated. Everyone needs to gear up and prepare themselves for battle, I’ve worked too hard to get this far to lose any of you so be ready and be careful. Let’s go!

[$aName] You got it!

[$liName] Let’s show these bandits what we are made of!

[$bardName] I’ll sing an invigorating pump up song!

[$mName] Good work!

[Chef] I Chef Now!

Everyone straps on their gear and protective clothing. $liName and $aName sharpen their swords and Chef polishes his massive cleaver, he even takes a second to check his reflection on the side of the blade. You adjust your sword belt and, in the background, $bardName is belting out a song that gets everyone eager for battle.

Ten minutes later the six of you meet up with Maud on the main road, who has brought along with her 20 intimidating looking mercenaries. Each one is battle hardened and covered in savage looking scars, trophies from their previous battles. Maud is the most impressive looking of all covered head to toe in black armor with golden edges. Her green cape is draped behind her and her head is covered is an impressive Barbute helmet with a golden lightning bolt engraved across the front. The slit where her eyes peer through is too dark to see into so you can’t tell if she is looking at you or not.

[Maud] Are you ready?

[$pName] Let’s go. Follow my lead. Try to stay at least 50 feet behind until they show themselves, then spring the trap and attack.

You journey into the damp, fog covered woods cautiously, scanning the tree line for any sign of danger. The tension inside you grows and gets worse as the forest falls into silence. The animals, who sense a great conflict approaching, go silent and retreat as fast as they can.

The mist and fog swirl around you as your march forward, one hand resting on the pommel of your sword. Ahead of you is a massive fallen pine tree, with a trunk as wide as you are tall. You approach it but before you can get close a shadowed figure jumps out of the fog and on top of it, looking down at you.

[???] Well well well. If it isn’t $pName, all by his lonesome.

You draw your sword, and hold it in front of you at the ready.

[???] No need to be aggressive, you already know what’s coming don’t you? Why not just lay the sword down and give up nicely, save us both some trouble?

[$pName] Fuck you Axel. Its time we end this.

[Axel] Ah, so we have met before then, $pName? In that case, you know what comes next. Should I start with the nipples like I usually do or jump straight to the toenails?

Axel whistles loudly and the shrill sound rings in your ears as he leaps down from the log. Kneeling, he draws his plain steel sword off of his back and points it at you. The whistle was a signal and his bandits come rushing out from behind a multitude of trees around you and prepare to attack. One of his archers even takes aim at you, preparing to put you down. You smile. What Axel doesn’t realize is that the whistle signaled more than just his men.

[$liName] CHARGE!

[$aName] GET EM!

[Chef] I Chef Now!

Your friends jump in front of you, and $liName swings her sword and deflects an arrow that was incoming towards you.

[Axel] Oh, a frontal attack, how creative. Unfortunately for you, I’ve already planned…

Axel is interrupted by the battle cry of Maud’s mercenaries as they charge forward triumphantly, smashing into Axel’s bandits and engaging them aggressively. The forest erupts into a swarm of brawling and death, weapons swinging wildly and fighters screaming in pain. The chaos quickly surrounds you, but and $liName, $aName, and Chef fight back to back with you and fend off anyone that tries to attack. A bandit holding two swords tries sneaking around, then attacking from the side. You block his first attack, spin to dodge the second, and slash at him leaving a gash across his chest.

[$pName] You haven’t changed a bit you one trick pony.

[Bandit] RAAAAGH!

The bandit raises both swords above his head to swipe at you, but $liName dashes in and stabs him through the heart before he can move and kills him instantly.

[$pName] You ruined my banter!

$liName ignores you and continues fighting, swirling around in a whirlwind of death. With Maud’s mercenaries fighting on your side nobody gets overwhelmed and the fight is still manageable. Victory is within reach, until…

[Axel] DIE!

With a puff of smoke Axel appears suddenly between the four of you, and you hear the familiar hum of the Black Blade as it shreds through the air towards you. In the nick of time, $bardName pulls you backwards and the attack misses your stomach by inches.

Axel stands above you imposingly, holding the Black Blade at the ready. He wasted no time discarding his normal sword, and looks extremely angry. His brows are furrowed in fury, and his eyes are wide in… fear? This is the first time you have ever seen Axel not completely in control of the situation.

[Axel] I will kill every single one of you myself If I have to, even if the Forest Fangs somehow…

Yet again Axel is interrupted, this time by an enormous blue explosion that hits right at his feet and sends him flying backwards. The air crackles with electricity and you feel the hairs on the back of your neck standing straight up as you gaze up at the back of Maud, who rode into battle on the back of a lightning bolt. Small bolts of electricity arc from her armor spontaneously around her and into the ground, and in her hand is a steel sword glowing red hot from the sheer amount of electric energy being run through it. Your jaw drops in wonder; this is the true power of high level control words and magic.

Despite Being blown backwards, Axel manages to land on his feet and brandishes the Black Blade at Maud. Yelling in frustration, he absorbs more power from the dragonium in his hands and grows a few inches in size. The smoke increases around him and you notice his uncovered eye becomes replaced by a smoking black orb of pure hatred. Despite the dozens of people fighting around them, you can’t look away. You get the feeling that no matter which team of mercenaries won, neither would ever come close to being able to fight these two anyways.

[Axel] You stole my control word! How dare you face me like this!

[Maud] You stole MY sword you bastard! I can’t believe you have the gall to lurk within even a hundred miles of my fortress!

[Axel] YOU CUT MY EYE OUT!

[Maud] YOU CUT MY FINGERS OFF!

[Axel] RAAAGH!

[MAUD] YAAAGH!

The two shoot forward at tremendous speeds and smash into each other causing a huge shockwave to blast from them and knock the surrounding pine trees over. You take cover behind one of those uprooted logs and glance carefully over the top at the awe inspiring fight. Axel teleports over and over, slicing his unstoppable sword at Maud in fury. At the same time, Maud dodges his attacks and flings lightning bolts at him, which miss narrowly. The two are dueling at such a high octane pace you can hardly keep track of what is going on. A missed lightning bolt whizzes over your head and explodes somewhere off in the distance behind you, and you duck your head instinctually. By the time you come back up to look over the log you have lost track of them.

[$pName] Where…?

Another explosion catches your attention, and you turn towards the sound to see the two have continued the fight behind you. Somehow Maud had ridden the lightning bolt she threw earlier to get some space, but Axel was quick to pursue with a Black Blade teleportation. The two continue the duel until Axel backflips over one of Maud’s swings, landing several feet away from her. Bringing his sword back horizontally, Axel throws the Black Blade at Maud like a frisbee with tremendous force and it spins rapidly towards her. Just before it cuts her in half, she bends backwards low to the ground and narrowly dodges it. The missed attack flies off into the forest, cutting down trees and leaving a scar in the woods behind it in its wake. With a puff of smoke Axel reappears to intercept it, and catches it handily.

[Axel] Why can’t you just mind you own business!?!?

[Maud] Why can’t you just stay faithful in a marriage!?!?

Axel teleports again and disappears in a whiff of black smoke. Anticipating an appearance behind her, Maud spins and launches another lightning strike but Axel never shows up and the bolt flies off into the woods, exploding.

[Maud] Where…?

The mud shifts underneath her, and Axel reappears from below Maud covered in dirt and grabs her leg.

[Maud] Below!

Maud brings her sword up to stab downwards at Axel, but it is too late. Holding her leg firmly with one hand, Axel swings his other hand across himself and his Black blade follows. The sword arcs across both of Maud’s legs amputating both instantly, and Maud falls forward landing on top of Axel.

[Maud] AAAAAGGGGHHHH FUCK YOUUUUUUAAAAAGHH

[$pName] Maud!

You think it’s over at first, but Maud continues screaming while trapping Axel’s sword arm underneath her legless torso. He struggles to free himself but her weight holds him down.

[Axel] Serves you right, you bitch! Get off of meeeeeeeaaaaghhhhh

Maud’s eyes glow blue from within her helmet as she draws immense power, and she grips Axel’s face beneath her tightly. Electricity flows from her into Axel at a tremendous voltage paralyzing him so that neither can move. Arcs of blue energy blast from Maud’s body and explode into the trees around her, catching them on fire. This is getting dangerous for everyone nearby.

[$pName] We gotta get out of here!

[$liName] RUN!

You and $liName run as fast as you can hand in hand and don’t look back. You make it maybe 20 feet before an enormous explosion rips off behind you, sending both of you flying forwards and crashing into the mud. You look back, and see a huge crater where you were only moments ago and an enormous cloud of acrid smoke whooshing out of it. Black zig zags of molten soil arc artistically from the center and the trees nearby are completely scorched with embers glowing brightly from the inside. The scene of the explosion is one of pure devastation, and there is absolutely nothing left. There is no way anyone could have survived that.

[$pName] I can’t believe it… It’s over…

$liName helps you up and you peer into the center of the crater. At the bottom, sticking out of the dirt straight up, is the Black blade. Next to it is a cracked Barbute helmet with a golden lightning bolt engraved across the front with nothing inside it. These two relics are the last remaining proof of your encounter with the Bandit Leader Axel and the Queen of the Forest Fangs, Maud.

[$pName] Let’s go, $liName.

[$liName] But… What about the sword…

[$pName] It’s cursed. I’ve read enough books to know what a cursed sword looks like. Let’s leave it and find our dragon.

The two of you turn, and walk back to the original site of the battle. There you meet back up with your friends, and a few of the surviving Forest Fang mercenaries.

[Mercenary] Maud… is she…?

[$pName] Dead. I’m sorry.

The mercenary looks down at the ground, disappointed. He tells his friends and they head back to the fortress. Meanwhile, you check in on $aName and Chef and are relived to see both are ok.

[$aName] Look at that $pName, we did it! It’s over! Who knew it would be that easy…

[$pName] Easy? Ha. Hahaha. You have no idea…

The four of you join up with $bardName and $mName and take a well-deserved break back at the bar in the town of Gafengen. After celebrating all day and sleeping all night, everyone feels good enough to pack up and continue along on your journey. The only people to have witnessed the explosion and know where the Black blade is located is you and $liName, but the two of you agree to never tell another soul. In the end, you feel more grateful to be surrounded by the people you journey with than ever, and spirits are at an all-time high for everyone.

Despite being filled with hope, there is also an anxiety growing within you as well. You and you friends have gone on many adventures, defeated many foes, but it all has to end at some point. The Dragon is close, and the finale nears. What will happen when you meet him? Will everyone get a happy ending? Only time will tell.

END OF ARC 6