ARC 2, THE TOWN

\*A Golden voice of deep Baritone gently reaches out to you at the edge of your consciousness\*

[???] It is now a safe time to save, my child

1

(first time only)

Mere moments ago you were certain you were having some kind of stroke, or at the very least about to get hit by a car. Now, despite making no sense whatsoever, you find yourself in the middle of a large field. Your surroundings have completely changed from before, in fact; where there was concrete there is now wild grass and where there was a street sign just seconds ago there is now a rickety wooden sign. It is as if you have been teleported into another world. Warily, you stand up and look over your body in an effort to discover any injuries, but there are none. Reaching into your pocket, you pull out your phone for more clues. No Signal. The screen reads ‘Location services is unable to find you’ and the time says it is 8pm despite it looking to be sometime in the afternoon.

It's possible you are dead. You haven’t exactly died before so you wouldn’t have any previous experiences to compare it to. It is also possible that you are currently in a coma and as your family eagerly waits for you to wake up you continue to waste time in this imaginary world. The last possibility that immediately comes to mind is that some sort of quantum mechanics mumbo jumbo occurred and you got sucked into a wormhole. Regardless of the true nature of this situation, you are still very much here and very much in need of figuring out what to do next. You study your surroundings more closely;

You are on a dirt path next to a wooden sign. The wooden sign reads in English ‘Kingsbridge’ and there is the number 3 next to it. Below that is another marker that says ‘Dottle’ and the number 14. Backing up, you see that all around this dirt path you are standing on is tall grass about 3 feet high that covers the rather hilly countryside about you. Following the path with your eyes you see it eventually leads past a small brook and to the outline of what appears to be a town. That must be Kingsbridge, and it is rather friendly looking. Following the path the other direction you notice it winds across the hills and past an impressive looking Oak Tree. It continues downhill steeply from there so that you lose sight of it, but by squinting your eyes you can just barely see that the path reemerges further away and straight towards a dense looking forest.

The sun is blazing overhead now across the sapphire sky, and every so often a small tuft of cloud ambles in front of its gaze giving you a brief reprieve from the heat. You are wearing a plain shirt and jeans, and in your pocket is your phone. In your hand you hold the $foodwhich somehow wasn’t lost in the confusion earlier. Your legs begin to sweat from being stifled by the jeans and you will likely need a drink of water soon. It’s time to figure out where you are and what the heck is going on.

Head over the brook towards Kingsbridge

Head the opposite direction along the path

2

You decide to head for Kingsbridge and begin plodding along the dirt road. The layer of dirt on top of the path is very light and thin thanks to the unforgiving sun, which means every time the wind picks up or you take a heavy footstep the dirt rises into clouds and clogs your breath. Luckily you make it to the brook rather quickly and manage to rinse your hands and face in the cool, refreshing water. The brook’s water looks relatively clear and safe to drink so you hazard a few sips to rejuvenate yourself. A long ways away someone dressed in brown gathers water from the brook upstream, but they are too far to notice you and they turn to head back into town. As you lean in for one last sip, you notice your reflection. It’s you, of course, that stares back. But your hair is a little messy and your eyes look a little strained. Technically it should be bedtime by now for you but now you are in different time zone and will have to wait a bit longer than usual. Hmm, bedtime. Where will you sleep when it gets dark? Are there homeless shelters around here? These questions and more will hopefully be answered once you investigate Kingsbridge so you hop back on the trail.

The distance ended up being larger than it looked, but you still manage to approach Kingsbridge in good time. As you near the town you can make out some better details from before, and for starters it has no walls or natural defenses. The path leads straight into the town and a long ways away out the other side, so it is not populous enough to be considered a city. The buildings are certainly the strangest thing that jump out at you, since they look like something straight out of medieval England history books. Many on the outskirts are made of dried mud gathered around a grid of sticks, creating small uneven walls with straw thatched roofing. Further in, the majority of buildings are made of wood, and the not quite evenly spaced planks make for simple walls with little insulation. While these buildings are larger and sturdier, they are also unpainted and plain which makes the majority of the town look simple and uninspired. Towards the center you don’t quite have a perfect view but it looks like there are a handful of large, stone buildings dominating a central space, which is some sort of plaza. These stone buildings have a frame of wood but are lined with stone and are reminiscent of the popular renaissance house architecture styles sometimes seen back home. The path that you had been following splits off into streets seemingly at random and arc throughout the town, and appear muddier thanks to the dung, water, and other unseemly liquids the inhabitants absentmindedly pour across it.

As you enter the outskirts of Kingsbridge you notice the sheer amount of poverty overwhelming the area. The mud structures you had seen before are filled with holes and teeming with rats, and not much further ahead you can see many of the wooden shacks share the same fate. The air is filled with the smell of refuse, forcing you to wrinkle your nose in consternation. As you take a few steps into the town, you see a handful of people lazing about inside their mud shacks eyeing you with curiosity. Whether male or female they all seem to be wearing what appears to be a potato sack, except there is no label of “russets” or “goldens” across the rough sown garb but some sort of scribbling in small font that you can’t read from a distance. They stare at you as you walk past with expressions of curiosity as well as scorn, so you decide it would be best to continue along without asking them anything. At this point you could continue along the path into the central plaza, or take a winding side path that detours to the southern part of the town on your left. Either way is well lit so you don’t feel like you are in any immediate danger, and both directions certainly share the same putrid smell.

Continue along to the Central Plaza

Detour through the outskirts of Kingsbridge

3

You make your way to the central plaza, trying to step around the piles of filth pooling haphazardly around the road. The closer you get, the nicer the buildings become and it looks like someone poured gravel across the pathway so it is at least somewhat sturdier and better kept than before. Finally, you enter the wide-open plaza and soak in everything as best you can. The scene is entirely alien; there are no electrical poles, concrete roads, or even glass windows within sight. The plaza itself is paved with slabs of stone, but there is little to no mortar between them so many jut out callously from the dirt and threaten a twisted ankle. The square is about half the size of a soccer field and surrounded at all sides by stone buildings. From these buildings crude wooden signs stick out like pointing fingers, advertising a variety of goods such as food, clothing, armor, ale, weapons, boots, prostitution, and more. Scattered about the inside of the plaza are a large gathering of rickety stalls where merchants sell assorted wares, snacks, and… Spellbooks? The people you pass along the way wear either clothing similar to the potato sacks you had seen earlier, or a colorful assortment of felt tunics and leather gear. everal of the wealthier looking shoppers look like they wear that same burlap sack the others from the shacks wore underneath their garments or have a patch of burlap sown onto their clothing. Wandering about the plaza, two more buildings catch your eye: One labeled ‘History room’ and another labeled ‘Adventurer’s Gear’. Both have plain entrances but the title is enough to pique your interest.

Go to Spellbook Stall

Enter History Room

Enter Adventurer’s Gear Store

Continue Exploring at random

4

Approaching the stall, the merchant looks at you with that same look of curiosity and scorn as the people from the shacks did.

[$merchantName] Hullo, my name is $merchantName the travelling Merchant and I sell the finest baubles in all of Kingsbridge. From spell-books to secrets, gems to Goodluck charms, I’ve got it all and more. How may I help you?

He speaks with a pompous accent and rushes through his introduction, it is likely he thinks you won’t be an actual customer and is wasting his time. Now that you are closer to him you realize he is wearing that potato sack looking garb as well, but over the top of it he has an expensive looking overcoat colored sage green. The potato sack is tucked into his pants, but because he is standing behind the stall you can’t pick out any details. Across the surface of his stall is a strange assortment of glittery stones and a couple books.

Ask about Spellbooks

Ask where you are

Leave

5

[$pName] Do those books really allow me to cast spells?

If you really have been teleported into a fantasy world, its important that you begin to understand the way it works as soon as possible. Main characters usually are gifted in magic or have some sort of special power, so a spellbook would be a good place to start.

[$merchantName the Merchant] Well, that depends…

His eyes dart around behind you, making sure that he isn’t wasting his time on you while an actual customer waits in line.

[$merchantName the Merchant] As I’m sure you know, not very many people control the power of magic. Perhaps one in a hundred thousand, probably. These people activate their powers by uttering a control word, and these are all closely guarded secrets. Despite this, I have compounded a list of over 7 of these magical utterances, and will begrudgingly share this incredible secret with you for only 14 Aureus! Perhaps you have such power hidden within you now, and all you need is to access my top secret compilation!

[$pName] can I just glance inside it to make sure its legit?

You run your finger under the lip of the book’s cover, but before you can get under it and flip it open $merchantName smacks your hand away.

[$merchantName the Merchant] Absolutely not! To give away a control word for free is doing a disservice to myself and the mystical craft as well!

[$pName] Ah, well, I don’t have any money anyways.

[$merchantName the Merchant] I figured, judging by that abominable clothing you wear. Don’t you have any respect? Begone from mine stall!

$merchantName flicks his hand at you in a shooing motion, and you leave the stall.

6

[$pName] Can you by chance tell me where exactly I am?

[$merchantName the Merchant] Kingsbridge of course. Can’t you read?

[$pName] Can you be more specific? As in, what country, or in what world this is?

[$merchantName the Merchant] Are you high? $kingdomName of course! $worldName! Begone from mine stall!

$merchantName flicks his hand at you in a shooing motion, and realizing you won’t get anything more out of him you leave the stall.

7

You glance around at the plaza and see the same as before; the ‘history room’, ‘Adventurer’s Gear’ store, and a hodgepodge of other random shops and services. There is a decent crowd of people milling about around the plaza, most are dirty and wearing what appear to be burlap potato sacks. $merchantName ‘s stall is still nearby as well but it would be best not to bother with him anymore. What next?

Enter History Room

Enter Adventurer’s Gear Store

Continue Exploring at random

8

The shops don’t seem that important so you continue to explore about the town. Exiting the plaza on a road running perpendicular to the one you entered on, you continue to wander absentmindedly. It isn’t long before a new building catches your eye, a wooden church whose steeple jumps out above the surrounding buildings handsomely. Unlike all the buildings you have seen so far, this one Is painted white, and is in great condition. It is not particularly large and looks exactly like a cliché southern church: It is a simple A frame building without any extensions, and at the front where the roof leans to meet at the top of the triangle a small tower juts upwards another several meters. Normally there would be a cross at the top here but instead there is what appears to be a carving of a lizard. Small, beady windows squint at you suspiciously across the front facade and the door stands ajar somewhat invitingly. You decide to head in.

Once inside, your eyes adjust to the shadow of the interior and you begin to pick out your surroundings. In front of you is an aisle, with large wooden benches of fine quality flanking either side all the way to the back of the building. At the back is a simple podium, presumably where the priest would give his sermons. A few candles are lit along the windowsills but give feeble light. Dominating the entire far wall behind the podium is a large wooden carving of magnificent craftsmanship, depicting an incredible scaled Dragon that is so detailed it almost seems lifelike. It contrasts well against an enormous red tapestry that rests behind it and makes it seem as if it is about to roar to life and jump out at you. To the left of the dragon and in the corner of the building is a large pile of burlap sacks, the same as what everyone outside wears. With a loud clang, a door in the far right corner opens up and a man calmly walks towards you without hesitation, interrupting your inspection. He wears simple sandals and a lavishly soft and comfortable looking fluffy robe. The robe is so cuddly in appearance it is almost comical, and it’s dark brown color makes it a little hard to distinguish in the darkness of the church. As he gets nearer, you notice over his heart and stitched into the robe is a small patch of burlap that matches the sacks in the corner. He speaks with a gentle voice as if he were speaking to a young child:

[Robed Man] Hello Stranger, and welcome to the church of the Ancient Dragon. I see that ya do not wear the mark of the humbled, and instead come dressed in strange foreign clothing. Clearly ya have grown ashamed at yer lack of humility and have come for guidance, no?

The robed man comes to a stop in front of you, and smiles warmly. His wrinkled eyes betray no sign of ill will, and his aged face gives the impression of a man in his late fifties.

[$pName] In a way… yes I have come from a far off land. And I seek guidance as well, in a matter of speaking. Please share some knowledge with me father.

The man chuckles softly for a moment, and gives an answer that sounds as if he’s responded the same way hundreds of times before.

[Robed Man] As ya know, this $worldName was created centuries ago by the Ancient Dragon in all his wisdom…

The priest wiggles his fingers across his chest while saying this in a practiced motion

[Robed Man] … In order to provide shelter for his following. His legendary power is so great he could fly about forever, but being all powerful is worthless without an entourage to impress so with a mighty breath of flame he gave birth to our world of $worldName. With his next breath he fired into existence lifeforms such as you and I, and bestowed the most devout and loyal among them magical powers beyond our comprehension. He also created the great Haven, an enormous warehouse filled to the brim with potatoes in burlap sacks. He gave this as a gift to his people and by eating this stock and learning to plant it, they never hungered. As an act of gratitude, his followers adopted the tradition of wearing these burlap potato sacks in some form or another, and so it has continued for hundreds of years. Even today, the church gives out these excess sacks to the poor so that they may be clothed from the weather and devout in their faith.

[$pName] A great warehouse filled with potatoes in modern burlap sacks…

[Robed Man] You will learn in time that while what the Dragon does is strange and mysterious to us, it is all according to his great and wonderous plan. Perhaps one day ya may finally find him and ask him any question ya like, except he’s been missing for about a hundred years. For now however, it would do ya well to show some appreciation for his gift of life and prove your humility.

The man pulls out a strip of burlap that has been tied end to end so as to make a loop, and he drapes it over your wrist so as to make a bracelet.

[Robed Man] Better already. Ya unfortunately are too late for yer charity potato of the day but if ya return at noon tomorrow ya may join in line. While ya may be an outsider and not understand why entirely, please try not to embarrass yerself around town by taking the bracelet off. While I see ya as simply an ignorant foreigner, some may feel yer openly defying the Dragon’s will, or at the very least ungrateful. Anywho its closing time so get the fuck out of my church.

Before you can even respond to his 'unique’ behavior he has already pushed you back out the door the way you came and into the street. With a loud bang the door is shut and locked behind you, ending the possibility of future discussion with the strange monk. Jumbled up by the fall, you decide to head back to the plaza to get your bearings and decide what to do next. You look up at the sky as you walk, and see a decent amount of time has passed and it won’t be long before it’s time to eat dinner. As if it was waiting for you to finally notice, your stomach rumbles in longing. You aren’t sure how you are going to be able to buy food with no money, but luckily you still have the $food from earlier. You pull it out of your pocket just as you arrive back at the plaza, but before you can move to eat it someone catches your eye. It is a beautiful woman with $aHairColor hair, dressed in a vibrantly yellow dress that makes her completely stand out from the crowd. She is followed by a similarly dressed friend except she is in lavender instead of yellow, and the two make for an extremely odd pair. Your short glimpse of her is enough to make an immediate impression, despite her disappearing in and out of the crowd, and she passes by you towards the church at a quick pace. Despite the tiny amount of time you were able to see her, you understand she must be someone very important.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

9

The History Room is a good place to deepen your understanding of where you are and what is going on. Before you enter you notice a muddy device that looks like a beartrap resting in front of the door, except instead of metal fangs it has thick bristles. You politely run your shoes through it and manage to remove most of the mud that has accumulated then make your way inside.

You are inside an extremely cramped hallway, with another door only a few feet in front of you. To your left is a wall with some small drawings scattered about it that look to have been made by children, and to your right is a counter at about waist height. There is a box with some copper coins behind the counter on the shelf, and there is nobody standing there although it looks like there clearly should be. There is a closed door behind the counter that must lead to some kind of backroom, and you can hear shuffling as if someone was moving things. You glance at the door that surely leads to the history room, and notice it is slightly ajar.

Sneak past counter into the History Room

Wait for the person manning the counter to return

10

You patiently wait for the person in the back to finish moving things. Finally, the door behind the counter is opened and a young man of about 20 with plain black hair greets you with a smile.

[Man] Hello mister, welcome tah the History Room! Learn all about how Kingsbridge came tah be fer only a single Aureus.

[$pName] Nice to meet you, I was actually hoping I could just go in really quick and out again since I have no money. It’s important since I’m quite lost actually and…

The Man immediately changes his posture at hearing ‘no money’ and adopts a cold attitude. He interrupts you with a raised voice

[Man] Hold on there Mister, it took a lotta hard work tah get all this information together and I got tah feed myself somehow. If I let everyone who begged in fer free then I would be right out there in the streets beggin’ as well. Please exit tah way ya came, goodbye!

Upon saying ‘goodbye’ he firmly plants his hands on the counter, in a clear show that he wants you out. Not wanting to cause trouble you listen and make your way outside. Feeling a little stressed, you decide to wind down by spending a few minutes watching the clouds in the sky pass by. Eventually, you notice two very interesting people that catch your eye: The first is a woman that looks very intimidating in an incredible white cloak marching into the ‘Adventurer’s Gear’ Shop. The second is another woman but she is wearing a vivid yellow dress and an extremely long and thin blade is strapped to her back. Both look like main characters out of a fantasy novel. The first lady disappears into the shop rather quickly and you lose sight of her, but you notice the second walking around the plaza browsing the shops. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress you didn’t see before as well, which is comical because she is wearing the exact same dress in almost every way except lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

11

As quietly as you can, you tiptoe to the slightly open door and slip inside before the person manning the counter notices. You thank yourself for cleaning your shoes which avoided any squelching noises, and get a bearing of the room. The area is bigger than expected at about 15 meters across in a square shape. Cleverly, there are little stalls and aisles dividing the room up, giving It the impression of being a tiny maze of sorts, and each stall has pictures and writing inside of it. From the ceiling are intermittent metal candleholders suspended by chains, and the flickering lights inside these give the space a cozy feeling. You hear the steps of one or two other people browsing the stalls but you cannot see them, and the overall air is one of relaxed learning. You approach the first stall, where there is a bit of writing and a drawing of a golden dragon that is rather well done. The writing reads:

*Long ago, our world $worldName was created by the magnificent Ancient Dragon. He breathed fire into the land and gave it life for us to enjoy, and potatoes so that we may not starve.*

Underneath the words is another drawing, except much simpler and is of a simple potato.

Moving to the next stall, there is a map of a continent that isn’t on any modern textbooks you know of. At the top, it is labeled ‘$worldName’. It shows a perfect Rhombus, with strange little waterfalls cascading down the sides. Across this rhombus is a mixture of jungles, deserts, marshes, grasslands, tundra, and more. Near the center is where the most mild climates appear, and there are two colored blobs here: One to the northeast of the center is labeled $kingdomName and to the southwest of the center is another blob labeled $neighborName. The furthest right of the first blob has a dot on it and next to that dot it says “Kingsbridge”. Below this map is another plaque, it reads:

*About 200 years ago, a noble magician by the name of Serius ventured into the countryside of $kingdomName after being forced away by his vile brother. Frustrated, he vowed to create a new town of his own that wouldn’t be tormented by his brother’s harsh rule. Where our lovely plaza now stands, he used his abilities to rise the earth up and out of the ground to create an enormous palace. From here travelers would often pass as they made their way from the capital to his brother’s domain, and it wasn’t long before people of all sorts and backgrounds stopped at his palace to rest. Soon traders created stalls to sell goods to the travelers, and after finding success they created homes of their own as well. It didn’t take long until Kingsbridge flourished into a thriving trade town.*

You make your way to the next stall. There, a drawing showing a town in flames with smoke billowing out from every window greets you.

*After 40 years Serius’ brother grew frustrated and jealous, and decided to launch an attack. Unlike Serius, his brother had allegedly stockpiled a harvest of magical fruit rumored to give everlasting health. Whether this is true or not is still debated, however his brother was undoubtedly more powerful than the aging Serius thanks to either the fruit or some other trickery. The ensuing attack resulted in the destruction of the palace and the town being set on fire, as well as the tragic loss of our founder. With his dying breath however…*

The text is interrupted with a small drawing of a perfect sphere made of stone, resting next to a tree

*… Serius trapped his vengeful brother in a tomb of stone, saving the last of the town. After putting out the fires the townspeople cleared the rubble of the palace and kept the plaza free of further construction in memory of Serius and his love for traders. Even today, traders and peddlers from across the kingdom flock to Kingsbridge in order to sell their eccentric wares! It is from these humble beginnings that Kingsbridge gained its famous motto: ‘All good things start in Kingsbridge’*

After finishing, you take a couple steps back and study the map again. If this map is accurate, then you have undoubtedly been magically transported into an entirely new world.

You browse the rest of the stalls but most of the information isn’t particularly important; it is about the rise and fall of different traders, the cultivation of the great potato fields to the west of the town opposite where you entered, and eventually the life story of the man who created the history room. After spending some more time browsing you notice a new door that must be the exit, and decide to pass through. You find yourself in a thin alleyway that must run behind the history room, and glancing around you see that there are many such alleyways running behind all the buildings in town. The Alleyway is cramped and unnerving so you make your way between two buildings and find yourself back at the plaza. Just as you emerge from the shadows, you notice at the opposite end of the plaza is a peculiarly dressed woman that stands out from the crowd. She is in a dress of vivid yellow, and is marching away confidently towards what looks like a church in the distance. Her $aHairColor hair waves in the wind as she walks away tantalizingly. In the back of your head, you understand that she must be someone important.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

12

You make your way to the ‘Adventurer Gear’ Shop, but before you enter you notice a muddy device that looks like a beartrap resting in front of the door with bristles instead of metal spikes. You politely run your shoes through it and manage to remove most of the mud that has accumulated, and make your way inside. The room is spacious, with 4 tables placed near the middle covered in an assortment of gear and every square inch of the walls advertising swords and shields. In the furthest back right corner is an L shaped counter which the shopkeeper stands behind, who at the moment is haggling animatedly with another customer. Every sword, piece of armor, and thing for sale in the room has a piece of paper stuck to it by some kind of sticky sap, and written on the paper is the price and what local armorer, smithy, or leatherworker crafted it. As you move to admire some of the swords, you notice an armed guard of sorts standing in the close left corner of the store, opposite where the shopkeeper is. The store has a monumental amount of wealth in inventory on display so it makes sense that someone would be hired to keep a close eye on it. The fact that you cannot afford anything around you makes all the shiny merchandize all the more alluring.

You had been browsing the gear for sale for only a few minutes before the door is opened forcefully with a bang and someone new enters. Startled by the noise, you turn around quickly and are stunned at the women striding in. In front of you is a woman in her late 20’s that walks with such confidence you can’t help but shrink a little as she approaches. She has incredible $bHairColor hair, $bSkinColor skin and while her facial features are plain, her face is so perfectly symmetrical that you can’t help but be mesmerized by her unconventional beauty. She wears rugged clothing and a large cloak of pure white with a golden crest of a wolf at the back. The bottom of the cape is stained with dirt and dried blood, probably from years of use and action. The cloak wraps around in front of her and over her chest, secured by a bronze ring that has three thin but long ribbons of burlap hanging from it. At her hip is a longsword in a black sheathe that is almost certainly razor sharp. By the time you have gathered all this information she has noticed you staring, and scoffs as she moves past you. She wordlessly continues to the back of the shop where a large row of daggers hang on the wall, and begins to pick through them.

Beg Shopkeeper for a weapon

Talk to Woman

Leave

13

You exit the Gear shop through the door you came in, and return to the plaza. Window shopping is no fun when you have no money to buy anything, and as time passes more and more you realize you will eventually have to figure out a way to pay for dinner despite being broke. Luckily you still have the $food in your pocket from before but that certainly won’t be a satisfying meal. As you take a couple steps into the plaza to browse around some more your eyes are drawn to yet another very unique looking person; a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

14

You approach the counter where the shopkeeper is haggling, and wait patiently for him to finish. Eventually the customer leaves having purchased a helmet, and you are able to talk.

[$pName] Sir I’m afraid I desperately need a sword, any sword, but don’t have the money for it. It could be a crappy one rusting in the back, or maybe just a small dagger, but…

The Shopkeeper moves quick as a flash, putting his finger up to your lips and silencing you

[Shopkeeper] No money, no nothin. Leave ‘er bucko.

You fumble in your pocket, bringing out the $food you had stored there earlier

[$pName] Sir this is an incredibly rare and valuable delicacy from where I’m from, you have likely never tasted anything like it before. I will gladly trade this for any spare weapon you have lying around!

The shopkeeper takes the $food from your hands, eyes it all over and plays with the plastic wrapping. Raising the $food to his nose, he takes a big whiff and eyes you suspiciously.

[Shopkeeper] ah like alternah-tives other than potate more ‘en most, but ain’t worth a thing ‘er. Now scit scat on outa ‘er ‘fore I sic mah dog on ya.

The guard standing at the far corner of the room starts walking towards you, and it becomes clear it is time to leave. Looks like the $food isn’t exotic enough to be worth much here.

You exit the Gear shop through the door you came in, and return to the plaza. As you take a couple steps into the plaza to browse around some more your eyes are drawn to yet another very unique looking person; a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

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15

You approach the woman, the embroidered image of the wolf on her cloak grimacing at you as you near. You aren’t really sure what to say, but you know saying the wrong thing may end poorly for you. Before you can think of anything to say, she speaks out without turning in a commanding voice:

[Woman] What do you want? Seen a ghost?

She turns around to face you casually, the sheathed dagger she was inspecting in her right hand and her left resting on the pommel of her sword.

[$pName] This sounds kind of crazy, but I was teleported into this world and there’s a lot to explain… I need your help.

She stares at you amusedly for a few seconds, and you hold your breath. She seems to come to some kind of conclusion, and looks down in thought. The next instant, she whips her right hand out launching the small leather scabbard of the dagger at you forcing you to duck. As you lean down, she takes a single stride forward and deftly places a kick straight into your temple, which is easy to aim at with you leaning low. The kick is gentle enough to not injure you seriously, but all the same you go flying backwards into one of the tables and knock into it, sending a dozen tidbits of flasks and amulets tumbling down all over you. Dazed, you try to regain your bearings in anticipation for another attack but it never comes; the woman walks past you without even glancing in your direction and heads to the counter where she begins to purchase the dagger. You wobble to your feet to try and talk to her some more, but before you can get a word out the guard from the far corner grabs your arm and twists it behind your back, forcing you towards the door.

[guard] causin’ trouble fer a paying customer huh? Out with ya runt!

The guard flings you out the door and you land harmlessly in some soft, albeit disgusting mud outside. Standing back up, you wipe what dirt you can off and decide to clear out before the woman exits the shop and gives you a second beating. You don’t get far before noticing that across the plaza is a woman in a yellow dress with a large, slender sword strapped to her back talking to the spell-book shopkeeper. She is animated about something and talks excitedly, but after a few more exchanges looks despondent and leaves the stall. A second woman in a very similar lavender dress follows her. The pair make their way to your left, and it looks like they are heading towards a church in the distance.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

16

You wander around the town for the next several hours, until you feel pretty familiar with the area. Wandering to the north you pass dozens of craftsmen working in their lodges, working leather or pounding metal into numerous shapes. Further on the felters beat bales of wool furiously in an effort to make it workable for weavers to make garments, and cobblers carefully stitch leather together to make fine pairs of boots. After exploring a bit more the sun has set enough for you to know which direction west is, and you realize you haven’t gone to that section of town yet so you head over. The western area is opposite where you started, and has hundreds of shacks filled with potatoes mixed in with the mud huts that people live in. From the edge of the town you gaze towards the sunset, and below that burning orb of light are potato fields stretching away as far as the eye can see. Other than a few dozen people checking on the crops there isn’t much to see, so you start strolling towards the southern end of town. Along the way you can’t resist the hunger pangs anymore and eat the $food you had been saving all this time. At the southern end is mostly nicer residentials, and there are shops propped up against the houses here and there implying the inhabitants sell trinkets out of their front door. There is significantly more road traffic here as many people walk along the main south road and a few carts pulled by horses amble past filled with miscellaneous goods. A little later you happen across a shrine, where a perfectly spherical orb of polished stone rests. The orb is slightly taller than you, and is so perfectly round and polished it can’t possibly be handmade. Below the orb is a plaque reading ‘Serius’ last stand.’ You lean against a tree next to the orb resting for a while, gathering your thoughts. After a while of simply watching the inhabitants of Kingsbridge pass by, the sun begins to set. You will have to either find a place to hunker down in the town for the night or leave before it gets too dark to see where you are going.

Stay in Town

Leave Kingsbridge

17

Wandering around some more, you look desperately for some kind of quiet alleyway or abandoned lean-to shelter to use but even after searching for what feels like forever you simply cannot see anything suitable. Every single alleyway is kept relatively clear of debris and offers little shelter, and every single shack you come across already has so many burlap clad peasants crammed into it there couldn’t possibly be room for you. Eventually you find yourself back at the orb, and despite there being little cover there you resign yourself to sleeping underneath the tree. The leaves will hopefully protect you from rain somewhat if it comes to that, and the orb hides your shameful state from passerby on the road as long as they don’t try very hard to look. Shivering, you fall into an uncomfortable and uneasy sleep.

The next day, you find yourself extremely hungry and in no better a position than the last. You continue to wander the town for the entire day, but never see the women from before again. You don’t find any significant charity either: there isn’t a homeless shelter or any kind of social program to help you at all, and every person you beg for help tells you to simply ‘bug off to the fields’. There is a church towards the North that helps at least; The monk there gives you a single potato each day to eat as well as a burlap sack to wear. Curiously, the burlap sack doesn’t have any logos on it but rather an entire description on how to teach someone to read, as well as a multitude of practice sentences and pictures. It looks like even the poorest here have taught each other to read thanks to these sacks they wear and the result is an impressively literate albeit powerless lower class, which you have now officially joined. The monk doesn’t just give you a potato either, but critical information as well: all the poor people in town work for the church cultivating potatoes in the fields. First you have to save half the potato the monk gives you (which is difficult because you are starving) and plant that anywhere on the North or Western part of town. You keep doing this until you have a decent field going, and can harvest everything in the fall. Then you will have enough potatoes to either double the size of your fields or you can sell them in order to afford materials for a shack. In this way you can slowly grow to feed yourself and escape poverty. With the only other alternative being starvation, you heed his advice and find a cozy field to the North since the west side is already entirely used up. Without any tools you dig with your hands, and under the intense sun it is exhausting work. After a long day of hard work and a constant feeling of wasting away, you take shelter at the tree by the orb and sleep uneasily until the next day. This continues for months, and you can’t help but wonder what strange turn of events led to such a tedious fate. Eventually one day in the middle of the winter, you return to the shack you had built up on the north side of town a month ago with planks of forgotten rotten wood you found laying around. Most of the peasants have large families or gatherings that they use for heat, but after all this time of suffering you are still alone. You curl up on the floor and try to sleep but you are so cold you can’t. The wind is howling outside and it begins to lightly snow. A few more hours of this later and you realize you have to do something soon or you will die. Unfortunately, you are so weak from months of poor eating that you can hardly get up. Crawling, you exit your hut and weakly call for help, but it is too late. A single tear drops out of your eye out of self-pity before you finally succumb to the elements and freeze to death alone in the cold, unforgiving dirt.

THE END

18

You make your way East, past the plaza and back along the road you came into town on. Despite eating the $food earlier you are already hungry again, and your stomach rumbles fitfully. You take a short break once you reach the brook, and watch as the last glimmerings of sunset peak over the horizon before disappearing entirely. Luckily for you, the moon is bright tonight and you don’t have much trouble navigating along the familiar path. The cool breeze of the summer night gently rustles through the tall grass around you, and the peaceful melody of the night ambience keeps you company as you trod along. Before long you find yourself back at the sign where you first woke up, and you continue past it. Further along the path now you enjoy the slight downhill of a slope and make some easier progress, if you can keep this pace up you will be in Dottle before long.

Ahead Looms The Oak Tree.

As you climb the hill leading up to the tree, you think It is possible you could rest there for the night, or continue along the path in hope of better shelter. Still deep in thought, you stumble over something and fall down. You try to take another step to break your fall, but your right leg doesn’t respond and you fall heavily into the dirt. Confused, you push yourself up onto your left knee and inspect the right; There is an arrow sticking out of it and is lodged halfway through your thigh just above the kneecap. You stare at it dumbly for a second before the pain hits you like a truck and your leg feels as if it has erupted into fire. Grimacing, you fall over in disbelief and clutch your leg in agony. You scream.

*It burns, It burns, it burns, It burns, It burns, it burns*

Blood starts to seep out of the wound and into your jeans, and despite it seeming like you have been writhing around in pain for hours it has only been 15 seconds. With a sinking feeling, you realize that arrow had to have come from somewhere and you open your bloodshot eyes to scan for your attacker. It is at that moment the second arrow penetrates your skull, and everything goes black.

THE END

19

Walking along the winding sidepath, you make sure to hop nimbly over the rancid puddles in the mud in an effort to avoid soiling all your shoes. Curiously, almost all of the buildings on your left are rickety wooden shacks, lean-tos, or mud huts, and save for a few exceptions all the buildings on your right are better made wooden houses, some even with additions jutting out or second stories. Most of the people you see as you walk along are peeking out of the holes in their shacks on the left, and without fail they are dirty, sweaty, and wear a burlap potato sack as their only clothing. Many are snacking on raw potatoes, and a couple spit out dirt straight towards your feet as you walk past. Something about you insults them.

Eventually you come across a decrepit house, and this one is stands out from the rest because the flimsy wooden structure juts out three stories tall. From the 3rd floor, a dirty woman with a nasty looking boil on her nose leans out from a window and calls to you

[woman] Ya better come in ‘ere quick mister ‘fore you start a fight!

Without looking to see your response, she ducks back into the window and disappears from view. Glancing around warily, you notice that opposite the 3 story house is a stout looking wooden building that says ‘tavern’ on sign fixed to the front of the roof. It has no windows and a small porch where you can wipe the mud off your shoes. At the far left of the porch and away from the entryway is a lone man with brown felt pants, a black shirt, and a vest worn over the shirt made of brown burlap. He is smoking a long cigar and staring right back at you. Breaking eye contact, you glance back at the 3 story building and figure out your next move.

Enter 3 story building

Enter Tavern

Continue along the path

20

You enter the door of the three story building, and the wooden floor beneath your shoes creak ominously. There is no furniture in this room at all, and since there are no windows on this floor it is a little dark as well. In the corner, several burlap sacks are piled up and filthy with mud. Ahead of you are the stairs leading to the next floor, which has several steps missing and nails jutting out haphazardly. You make your way carefully up the steps, freezing every time one of the wooden planks sounds like it is going to collapse and send you tumbling down. Once you finally manage to make it to the top, you turn to face the interior. There are two windows on this floor, so it is much lighter than the one below. Furthermore, it has a rug made out of stitched together burlap sacks and a table resting on top of it. A flimsy looking stool sits next to the table, and in the corner sits a box filled with potatoes. The woman with the boil at that moments turns a corner that presumably leads to the next flight of stairs, and looks at you with eager intent. She has a plain and dirty face, but unfortunately the boil dominates her features and gives her a sour look. She is wire thin and maybe only 5’4, with long unkempt black hair. She wears a simple burlap sack with holes cut out for the arms, and there is a large burlap pocket sown onto the front.

[Woman] Glad ya took me advice! Ya makin’ a fool ah yerself walkin around blasphememian like ya ‘ave been, ya should know better a that! Take this mister…

She pulls a small loop of burlap out from the pocket and hands it to you.

[Woman] It’s fer wearin like ah bracelet. Round ‘ere not wearin a bit ah burlap somewhere on ya is like sayin you aint a believer. Yer a believer right mister?

She hands you the loop of burlap and you slip your hand through it, wearing it around your wrist.

I’m a believer

I don’t know what you are talking about, I’m not from around here. Where am I and what is going on?

22

[$pName] I’m a believer

The woman wags her finger at you and says with a scolding tone

[woman] devout misters like yerself aughta be more careful ‘bout these kinda things. I ‘ere that the Ancient Dragon’ll come an chew ya up if ya aint careful.

She makes a finger waggling motion across her chest at the word ‘dragon’

[Woman] Then again, he been gone such a long time now I doubt he’d bother with ya. Anyways glad ta ‘ave helped ya, ‘ave a good day mister.

With that she makes her way over to the box, and leans down to grab a couple of potatoes. Spitting on one, she rubs the top and makes her way back to the staircase she had just come down from. Along the way she tosses the second one to you, which you fail to catch and it fumbles to the floor. Upon hitting the ground it splits in half, and you quickly stoop over to shove one of the halves into your pocket just in case you need it later. You hear the munching of her eating the potato she grabbed raw as she ascends the steps of the rickety house, and the creaking of the wooden planks signifies their strain under her insignificant weight. You decide it is time to leave and make your way back down, being just as careful on the descent. Once you get to the bottom you exit through the door and find yourself right back on the dirt road again.

Enter Tavern

Continue along the path

Head back the way you came to the central plaza

23

[$pName] I don’t know what you are talking about, I’m not from around here. Where am I and what is going on?

There is a hint of panic in your voice and you realize you had been holding back your emotions about just how dire your situation is for some time. The woman looks stunned for a moment, then slowly walks to the stool and sits down.

[Woman] I’d give ya a seat to sit yer bum on but I couldn’t ‘ford a second one.

Trying not to embarrass her you move to the wall near to the table and lean against it instead, facing her. You wait patiently, trying to read her expression which is clouded in thought.

[Woman] So yer from $neighborName then? Guess that makes sense considerin’ the weird clothes ya wearin. Well I dunno how ya got this far without knowin yer in $kingdomName but that’s where ya are. If ya wanna go back home ya gonna have to go way down southwest I reckon. Weird part though is even in $neighborName they worship the dragon so I dunno how ya dunno who that is. Tah put it simply, tah dragon is the creator of this world and he’s a nice fella and gave us a whole buncha these potatoes and these sacks tah wear so we don’t shiver too much when it gets colder. He taught us tah read and gave us life an all that too. He disappeared ‘bout a hundred years ago and they think its causa people like you that forget ‘em or insult ‘em that he went off and hid. Anyways a lotta people seen this dragon and we all know hes real so there really aren’t any other religions ‘round ‘ere cause its hard to argue with a three story tall lizard ain’t it?

She chuckles to herself as she gets up, and leans over the box of potatoes. Grabbing two, she comes back to the stool and seats herself, simultaneously throwing one to you. You catch it deftly, and stare at it dumbly while she spits on hers. After rubbing where she had spit on the potato a bit, she bites into it and munches on the raw flesh. You glance at your potato and realize it would be rude to not at least try it, and to be fair you are quite hungry so you follow suit with the spitting and take a big bite. It tastes… Like raw potato. You force the bite down and look back at her. While you were busy she placed a burlap loop onto the table, and through a mouthful continues her speech.

[Woman] Ya can take this ‘ere bracelet fer yerself mister, since the Ancient Dragon…

She wiggles her fingers across her chest

[Woman] gave us these ‘ere potatoes and saved thousands of lives with their nourishment, I guess we all wear tah sacks out of gratitude. Also ‘cause nobody can afford not to really. Those that can afford nicer clothes still show their respect tah the Dragon by wearing little bits of burlap in order to show they too come from humble roots and respect ‘em. Mosta those folk are far from humble but they wear a bit ah burlap all the same. So when ya come trampling round ‘ere wearin no burlap an ogling at all tah townsfolk it really sends tah wrong message. Well, that’s all ah got fer ya, sorry ‘bout ya bein lost an’ all but I’m sure ya gonna figure it all out just fine. Tah church near tah plaza gives out a charity potato every day so if yer hungry or wanna join us other folk to start plantin in tah fields make sure tah stop by there. Oh, an’ one last thing fer yer to consider: if ya see a man with a burlap cap anda looooong beard, stay away from ‘em cause he gonna rob ya. Unlucky mister got a bad harvest and is starvin’ half tah death, and his poor wife already bit tah dust last week… That’s how it is out ‘ere sometimes. Alright Mister, well take care now.

The woman says her goodbyes with a sympathetic look in her eye and gets up from the stool. You dumbly wave back at her in gratitude but don’t quite gesture right since you are waving the hand holding the potato. While munching on her dinner, she heads back to the third floor while you simultaneously exit the way you came and you find yourself back in the first floor room. It isn’t easy, but you manage to force half of the potato down before you give up on the rest and force the remaining chunk into your pocket. Adjusting your new bracelet, you head outside and back onto the road.

Enter Tavern

Continue along path

Head back the way you came to the central plaza

24 (only keep potato part if already visited 3 story house)

You’ve had enough of this route and begin walking back the way you came. By the time you return back to where the road split and you detoured, the chunk of potato in your pocket has become quite painful rubbing against your leg so you decide to cut ties and toss it to the side. The potato hadn’t even stopped rolling yet before a small boy shoots out of a nearby shack and snatches it up, disappearing into the shack once again as quick as he came.

You make your way to the central plaza, trying to step around the piles of filth pooling haphazardly around the road. The closer you get, the nicer the buildings become and it looks like someone poured gravel across the pathway so it is at least somewhat sturdier and better kept than before. Finally, you enter the wide-open plaza and soak in everything as best you can. The scene is entirely alien; there are no electrical poles, concrete roads, or glass windows within sight. The plaza itself is paved with slabs of stone, but there is little to no mortar between them so many jut out callously from the dirt and threaten a twisted ankle. The square is about half the size of a soccer field and surrounded at all sides by stone buildings. From these buildings crude wooden signs jut out like pointing fingers, advertising a variety of goods such as food, clothing, armor, ale, weapons, boots, prostitution, and more. Scattered about the plaza are a large gathering of rickety stalls where merchants sell assorted wares, snacks, and… Spellbooks? The people you pass along the way wear either clothing similar to the potato sacks you had seen earlier, or a colorful assortment of felt tunics and leather gear. Several of the wealthier looking shoppers look like they wear that same burlap sack underneath their garments or have a patch of burlap sown onto their clothing somewhere. Wandering about the plaza, two more buildings catch your eye: One labeled ‘History room’ and another labeled ‘Adventurer’s Gear’. Both have plain entrances but the title is enough to pique your interest. Just when you think everything there is to notice has been noted, another interesting development occurs. You see a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

25

You clamber up the rickety wooden steps to the porch of the tavern and move for the door, all the while cognizant of the smoking man at the end of the porch that stares at you unwaveringly. Pushing the door open, you step into the Tavern which is about the size of any average bar where you are from. There are a few tables and stools at the far side, but the Tavern is mostly empty space where burlap clad peasants munch on potatoes and drink beer out of wooden mugs. Along the left wall is a counter about waist high that sticks out from the wall like the letter U, and behind it a man of about 40 with long hair in a ponytail mans the bar. The inside of the tavern smells like cheap beer and a hint of vomit. After getting your bearings for a few moments everyone stops their conversations and stare at you. After a few uneasy seconds of wordless judgement, they all slowly turn back to each other and continue what they were doing. One person doesn’t seem to notice you, a uniquely dressed man in about his mid thirties standing at the counter with his back turned. Unlike everyone else who wears entirely burlap clothing, this man has a clean pair of grey pants and charcoal undershirt, with a sturdy leather cuirass over the top of that. Over his left shoulder is a large bronze pauldron with a neck guard that sticks up to ear level, securely strapped on by large strips of buckled leather over his chest and torso. Draped over his left arm and attached underneath the pauldron is a small cape of crimson that ends at his waist. A small glint of light reveals he is wearing bronze greaves over his shins, and a larger glint of light off his sweat proves he has a closely shaven bald head. Despite him clearly wearing a significant amount of wealth, he carries no weapon that you can see. Because he looks like someone important, you approach the seat next to him and sit down. Before you can say anything however, he breaks the silence by addressing you without looking your direction.

[Man] It’s too soon, you know.

Upon hearing his deep masculine voice, you look at him inquisitively. He is remarkably handsome, despite most of his face being covered by a thick black beard that extends about 2 inches below his chin. He has piercing light blue eyes that finally turn to your direction, and are so penetrating it feels as if they are boring straight through you. It’s clear by his expression that… He hates you.

[Man] Return one day and I will teach you how to enter the forbidden door. By then you will have learned to detest me, but I will teach you all the same. I will teach you because… I have no free will. None of us do. Regardless, you have gotten ahead of yourself and talked to me too soon. Leave me.

With that he turns back to the counter, indicating it is time to go. You get up slowly, and meander back to the entrance of the tavern. Taking one last look over your shoulder at the man, you open the door and take a step into the refreshing outdoor air. The man that was smoking on the porch earlier is gone.

Continue along the path

(if you haven’t already yet) Enter 3 story building

Head back the way you came to the central plaza

26

You continue along the winding road which continues swerving between buildings until you find yourself in the southwestern part of town. You spend most of this journey soaking up the cheerful sunshine and studying the swarms of curious looking people going about their day. Suddenly, the path stops at the rear entrance to some kind of shop, and you find that you will have to go around the shop through an alleyway to progress. Hearing the hubbub of a busy road up ahead, you start into the alleyway and freeze.

[???] Wah hoh there! Ah strange lookin stranger striding sulkily…

A silhouette emerges from around the corner ahead and hobbles in front of you. The shadow of the buildings on the either side of the alleyway darken the person’s features, giving them a foreboding look. With a short hop, the figure draws within 15 feet of you and points a broken dagger straight at your chest.

[Man] Aureus! Give it tah me! Stop stalling and slip it ovah!

The Man wears a filthy burlap sack which drapes loosely over his wire thin body. An exceptionally long grey beard hangs like spiderwebs from his skeletal looking face, which is wrinkled up like a prune. A burlap cap struggles to keep purchase on his grey hair, which looks like it is falling out in disgusting clumps every so often. His belly sticks out grotesquely as if he was pregnant, and overall his appearance is strikingly disgusting.

(if you have potato) Share potato with old man

Run away

27

[$pName] No need for violence. I heard from a friend that you have been down on your luck lately. I’d like to give you something so that you don’t have to sleep hungry tonight.

Timidly, you reach into your pocket and pull out the half eaten potato. You rest it on your open palm and offer it out to the man, who eyes you warily. Suddenly, he sprints towards you and raises his knife above his head to strike a deadly blow. Before there is time to react he is immediately in front of you, and brings the knife down with great force. The sound of the knife hitting flesh creates a loud squelch.

SSHHHHK!

But the knife is not directed at you. Instead, it penetrates the potato, and the man leaps backwards nimbly with his prize. Completely transfixed, he shoves mouthful after mouthful of raw potato into his mouth and swallows without hardly chewing. He eats the potato with such gusto that there is little doubt he would have starved to death within the next few days or even tonight if it weren’t for you. Finally he finishes, and leans against the wall of the shop with his hand resting on his stomach.

[Man] Not much charity ‘round this town. Was gettin’ desperate. This ain’t me, its not that ah like violence. Just got no choice is ah’ll. Stupid society squelching me in squalor ah say, but… Thank ya mister. Thank ya so much.

His expression is a mixture of satisfaction and intense guilt, and you can see tears streaming down his cheeks. He looks you one last time in the eyes and nods while silently waggling his fingers across his chest, before turning around and running into the busy street. Just as suddenly as he appeared, the strange man was gone.

Furtively, you follow his path and emerge onto the busy road. Around you is mostly nicer residentials, and there are shops propped up against the houses here and there implying the inhabitants sell trinkets out of their front door. There is significantly more road traffic here than any other path you have walked thus far and several carts pulled by horses amble past filled with miscellaneous goods. You make your way North as best as you can judge, towards where you think you saw the central plaza earlier. Before long you happen across a shrine, where a perfectly spherical orb of polished stone rests. The orb is slightly taller than you, and is so perfectly round and polished it can’t possibly be handmade. Below the orb is a plaque reading ‘Serius’ last stand.’

Continuing northward you finally reach the central plaza and look around. The plaza itself is paved with slabs of stone, but there is little to no mortar between them so many jut out callously from the dirt and threaten a twisted ankle. The square is about half the size of a soccer field and surrounded at all sides by stone buildings. From these buildings crude wooden signs jut out like pointing fingers, advertising a variety of goods such as food, clothing, armor, ale, weapons, boots, prostitution, and more. Scattered about the plaza are a large gathering of rickety stalls where merchants sell assorted wares, snacks, and… Spellbooks? The people you pass along the way wear either clothing similar to the potato sacks you had seen earlier, or a colorful assortment of felt tunics and leather gear. Several of the wealthier looking shoppers look like they wear that same burlap sack underneath their garments or have a patch of burlap sown onto their clothing somewhere. Wandering about the plaza, two more buildings catch your eye: One labeled ‘History room’ and another labeled ‘Adventurer’s Gear’. Both have plain entrances but the title is enough to pique your interest. Just when you think everything there is to notice has been noted, another interesting development occurs. You see a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

28

Without a moment of hesitation, you turn on your heels and sprint as hard as you can the way you had come. Behind you, you hear the labored breathing of the old man as he chases you with the shoddy dagger raised. His health is not even comparable to yours however, and you easily outrun him and leave him behind. Checking behind your back every so often, you make your way past the tavern and the three story building yet again. You continue north all the way until you get back to the detour you originally took, and then head for the plaza. You are careful to give wide berth to any area that even remotely resembles the scene of the attempted mugging, and you check every alleyway as you move along.

(only keep potato part if already visited 3 story house)

As you walk along, the chunk of potato in your pocket has become quite painful rubbing against your leg so you decide to cut ties and toss it to the side. The potato hadn’t even stopped rolling yet before a small boy shoots out of a nearby shack and snatches it up, disappearing into the shack once again as quick as he came.

Eventually, you finally approach the plaza and look around. The plaza itself is paved with slabs of stone, but there is little to no mortar between them so many jut out callously from the dirt and threaten a twisted ankle. The square is about half the size of a soccer field and surrounded at all sides by stone buildings. From these buildings crude wooden signs jut out like pointing fingers, advertising a variety of goods such as food, clothing, armor, ale, weapons, boots, prostitution, and more. Scattered about the plaza are a large gathering of rickety stalls where merchants sell assorted wares, snacks, and… Spellbooks? The people you pass along the way wear either clothing similar to the potato sacks you had seen earlier, or a colorful assortment of felt tunics and leather gear. Several of the wealthier looking shoppers look like they wear that same burlap sack underneath their garments or have a patch of burlap sown onto their clothing somewhere. Wandering about the plaza, two more buildings catch your eye: One labeled ‘History room’ and another labeled ‘Adventurer’s Gear’. Both have plain entrances but the title is enough to pique your interest. Just when you think everything there is to notice has been noted, another interesting development occurs. You see a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

29

You run as quick as you can towards the steeple of the church, eventually coming to a halt at the front door. Between gasps of air you scan the surrounding area, looking for a tale tell flash of yellow. Unfortunately you don’t find it, but you do manage to catch a glimpse of lavender going right around a corner up ahead and the chase is back on. As you approach the corner you slow down, and peek left around it so as not to expose yourself if they looked back. Your worries were needless however as the two have slowed down and are now chatting amiably with each other, joking around as they take another road. In this way you follow them, and they wander without any real purpose throughout the town while chatting away. With a pang you remember how you used to talk like that with your friends back home before this all started, but the memory is quickly forgotten. Eventually the cheerful pair make it all the way down to the southern part of town, and start looking for a restaurant to enter while you follow from about 75 feet apart. It doesn’t feel good to stalk like this but there hasn’t really been an opportune moment to introduce yourself yet. Yet again, the duo detour into an alleyway and you wait a second before following suit. This alleyway mazes around in a thin space between buildings, and you lose track of them. Jogging up to where the corners of four buildings meet and thus create a divergence in the alleyway, you glance to your right but see nobody. Turning, you check to see if they went the opposite direction only to see that they are standing right next to you in the alleyway, glaring angrily.

[Woman in Yellow] And just who the fuck do you think you are, stalking us like some kind of creep!?

You back up slowly and try to get a good look at them. The girl in yellow looks to be in her early 20’s and stands at about 5’4. She has gorgeous $aHairColor hair and glistening $aSkinColor skin. She wears a pretty yellow dress that ends just above the knee and underneath that dress is some thin but sturdy leather armor, cleverly hidden behind blue laces and bows. Her brown leather boots don’t quite match the dress since they go up past her knees and have a multitude of black buckles, and it is clear that while the dress is for looks the boots and armor hidden beneath it mean business. On her back is an extremely long and thin blade that hangs slanted across her back, with a sheath that is decorated at the top with a small burlap ribbon. The blade looks so long it must be about her height. Her pretty $aEyeColor eyes spark with anger at you, and her facial features remind you of an old childhood friend you used to have growing up.

Next to her is her partner, the lady in lavender. She looks to be in her early 20’s as well but slightly older. She is about 5’6 and is clearly in peak athletic form. She wears nearly identical apparel except the dress is colored lavender with white laces and bows instead. Her sword is slightly less slanted on her back since she is taller, but it looks comically long all the same. She has silky smooth $liHairColor hair and supple $liSkinColor skin. She is so beautiful that it takes your breath away, and her $liEyeColor eyes glow at you with lurid emotion. The only imperfection on her face is that over and through her right eyebrow is a small scar about two inches long that slices straight down parallel to her nose. Speaking of eyebrows, they are furrowed angrily at you and you remind yourself to stop gawking and start speaking up.

[$pName] Now hold on a second…

You begin to sputter out an excuse to explain yourself but you are almost immediately interrupted by a new voice coming from behind the two women.

[???] Wah hoh there! Three thick thorns in tah throes ‘o passion…

The pair of girls create a space between them so that each can face you and the stranger simultaneously, thus protecting their flank from attack. With a short hop, the figure draws within 15 feet and points a dagger at the three of you, waggling it aggressively.

[Man] Aureus! Give it tah me! Stop stalling and slip it ovah! I can tell by yer gaudy dressin’ yerv’e got some tah spare!

The Man wears a filthy burlap sack which drapes loosely over his wire thin body. An exceptionally long grey beard hangs like spiderwebs from his skeletal looking face, which is wrinkled up like a prune. A burlap cap struggles to keep purchase on his grey hair, which looks like it is falling out in disgusting clumps every so often. His belly sticks out grotesquely as if he was pregnant, and overall his appearance is strikingly disgusting.

[Woman in yellow] How about you wait your turn for a beating like a gentleman!

She roars this threat at the grotesque man while simultaneously stepping back and cowering ever so slightly. Her words are brave but her posture says otherwise, she must have been caught completely by surprise. Unshaken however is her partner, who deftly reaches behind her to the hilt of her blade and with one swift motion propels it up and out of its sheath. Waiting a short moment for gravity to bring the blade back down, she reaches back up and snatches it out of the air, quickly bringing the entire length of the gleaming sword pointing straight at the man.

[Woman in Lavender] Get Lost.

The man freezes, and grimaces of panic and desperation flash across his face. He must not have seen the two women were armed, and thinking the two pretty dresses meant an easy score ended up falling right into a trap. Unlike most traps however there was an easy way out, all he has to do is tuck his tail between his legs and run. To your astonishment however, he raises his dagger back up and at the woman in Lavender while not moving back an inch.

[Man] Ah Wish ah could! Kill me then! Ah dare ya just end it then!

His words wobble with pained emotion. Clutching the dagger with both hands, he closes his eyes shut and begins a blind charge. His feeble, thin body struggles to propel him forward at any threatening speed and he unsteadily attacks. The woman in lavender raises the wickedly sharp blade above her head, ready to bring it down as soon as the man gets within range. It is not to be however.

\*SHHLIIICK\*

[Man] Urk…

The man stumbles, gurgling and coughing up blood from his mouth. Wordlessly, he looks up and stares to his left, where from another alley yet another figure has appeared. He then looks down, where his left arm is completely impaled by a sword. The blade doesn’t stop with his arm however; it has gone completely through and into his chest, likely impaling both lungs. He drops the dagger and turns his head to stare straight into your eyes dumbly as if he can’t believe what is happening. In the blink of an eye, the newcomer pulls the sword back dislodging it from the mugger and spins, bringing the sword around in a graceful arc. Mercifully it slices completely through the muggers neck in one clean slice, instantly decapitating him and painting the building behind him crimson. The body of the putrid mugger hits the ground wordlessly, spilling blood into the dirt.

The killer bends over slightly, wiping the blood off their sword onto the clothing of their slain foe, and with a practiced motion sheathes their blade. Stepping over the puddle of gore, she approaches the three of you with a smile.

IF YOU HAVENT MET HER YET

Her white cloak gleams in the feeble sunlight that slips into the alleyway, and you shrink a little at her intimidating form.

[swordswoman] Sorry about that mess…

IF YOU HAVE ALREADY MET HER

Her white cloak gleams in the feeble sunlight that slips into the alleyway and you recognize her as the woman from the adventurer’s gear shop.

[swordswoman] Ah, you. Hello again.

…

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A bit of time has passed since you came face to face with perhaps the three most unique people in the entire town. Since then the four of you decided to escape the shadows of the alleyway and sit at a table in a nearby tavern. Outside, the sun sets peacefully sending a cascade of alluring orange rays through the clouds and countryside. Inside the tavern, the only orange light to be seen is from the multitude of candles hung along the walls and on every table. The tavern itself is quite cozy, with an open space in the middle for restless drinkers and small booths along each wall where patrons can chat in private. The four of you sit in such a booth, with the yellow and lavender girls sitting next to eachother and you across from them. The wall is on your right, and to your left is the swordswoman in the white cloak, who had pulled up a chair and sits perpendicular to you and the girls. She drinks a mug of beer the pair had bought her as thanks for her help and sits back in her chair relaxed and with her legs crossed.

The woman in White is just as unique as the two sitting across from you; She is in her late 20’s and brims confidence and grace like you’ve never seen. She has $bHairColor hair, $bSkinColor skin and while her facial features are plain, her face is so perfectly symmetrical that you can’t help but be mesmerized by her unconventional beauty. The only thing about her that doesn’t match the perfect symmetry is a small mole on the right side of her chin. She wears a sturdy leather cuirass etched with countless markings of battle, bracers, and greaves with black clothing underneath. All over her limbs are large rings of bronze which wrap around the arm or leg, and probably serve as metal guards against slashing attacks. She wears a large cloak of pure white, with a golden crest of a wolf at the back. The bottom of the cape is stained with dirt and dried blood from years of use and action. The cloak wraps around in front of her and over her chest, secured by a final bronze ring that has three thin but long ribbons of burlap hanging from it. At her hip is a longsword in a black sheathe that is razor sharp, as the late mugger can attest.

Not nearly as relaxed as she however are the two across from you, who are eager to get the questioning started. First up is the one in Lavender, who pushes her hair behind her ear in a fluid motion and leans forward slightly as she talks.

[Woman in Lavender] At first I thought you planned an ambush with that mugger, only you didn’t run away after he was slain. So if you weren’t in cahoots with him to steal from us, what the heck are you playing at?

[First meeting only:

You feel a hint of sweat gathering on your temple and try not to look guilty. What you need is a way to get out of this awkward conversation while simultaneously not ostracizing yourself from the group. This may be your only chance to convince them to help you, and already you are off on the wrong foot. Shifting uncomfortably and feeling the weight of the silence bear down on you, you hear a faint crinkling noise and an idea comes to you. ]

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You pull out the $food from your pocket and hold it out to them. They look at it in confusion as if they have never seen something like it before, and the woman in the white cloak leans forward and pokes it with her finger. You put on a brave face.

[$pName] I have come from a far away land seeking adventure. My clothing and this incredible delicacy from my homeland we call $food are proof of that. After seeing you in the street I knew we were destined to work together, and so I followed you until I could introduce myself properly.

The two women look at eachother incredulously. The swordswoman on your left grabs the $food and holds it near her nose for a second, until biting into the plastic.

[Woman in White] Tastes awful to be honest.

Giving up, she tosses it back onto the table and leans back, sipping on her beer.

[$pName] You aren’t supposed to eat that part, that’s like… the rind of an orange or watermelon except worse. You’ve got to open it up, look…

You reach over and open the wrapper. Reaching in, you grab a little and pop it in your mouth. The instant it hits your tongue your mouth waters tremendously and you remember that despite walking around so much today you have barely had anything to eat. Your stomach rumbles loudly but you pretend not to notice it. You gesture with the $food, offering it to each of your strange companions. All three oblige and hesitatingly pop a bit into their mouths.

[Woman in White] Unlike anything I’ve ever…

[Woman in Yellow] Wooooooooow!

[Woman in Lavender] What?

Mrs. White Cloak sits in quiet fascination, staring at the $food deep in thought while rubbing at the mole on the right of her chin. $aName on the other hand seems quite excited and $liName can’t quite hide her interest at the exotic flavor. It takes all of 30 seconds for the pair to wolf the rest of the $food down.

[Woman in Yellow] Ok, first of all, WOW. Second of all, my name is $aName. My friend next to me in the wonderful lavender dress is $liName, and like you we are adventurers of sorts. What’s your name?

[$pName] $pName, nice to meet you.

$aName looks to her right at the woman in white

[$aName] what about you Miss?

The woman in White looks at her for a second, still deep in thought and rubbing away. Finally, she drops her hand and takes a deep swig of her beer before replying.

[Woman in White] $bName.

$bName abruptly ends her introduction with $aName and turns back to penetrate you with her $bEyeColor eyes.

[$bName] Is $pName your real name? What are you really doing here?

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[First meeting only:

You feel frozen, it is as if she has seen right through you. You shift uncomfortably again, trying to think of a way to get her off your back. But how? The $food worked for a little bit so maybe something similar could get her to back off. You feel in your pocket your wallet and in the other your phone. Your phone! These people seem to come from a time before electricity and surely they will respect you and be amazed by your tiny and seemingly magical device.

]

You pull out your phone with a flourish, and set it solemnly on the table. $aName and $liName look at it with intense curiosity, eager to see what other foreign toy you have brought for them. Allowing the anticipation to build, you slowly move your hand to the screen, and unlock it. With a bright flash the screen wakes up to your wallpaper and completely incorrect time of day, and the three girls all recoil back in wonder.

[$bName] … what?

[$aName] WOOOOOW!

[$liName] hmm…

You quickly turn it back off and return it to your pocket.

[$pName] You ask what I am really doing here? The answer is simple. I want to help you on your adventures to complete a quest. I don’t understand a lot about my situation or what is going on but one thing I do know is that you three are main characters and I need to join forces with you…

[$bName] Main characters?...

[$pName] … And maybe along the way or by getting to the end of the adventure I will know what is going on. So what do you say?

You rushed it a bit more than you would have liked but at least the message got across. $aName and $liName lean towards each other and start whispering, glancing at you every so often. $bName relaxes back in her chair, and starts rubbing her mole again. Uneasily you look back and forth between everyone until finally the lull is broken.

[$aName] $liName and I have decided that we will buy you dinner and get to know you a bit more, as well as tell you what our mission is. While your strange device is interesting and we could definitely use the help of magic on our team, we don’t want to rush into any agreements before getting to know you better.

[$liName] For the record, I don’t trust you and I certainly don’t think you deserve our charity. But you look so pitiful right now that I let $aName convince me.

With that $aName gets up and heads for the bartender, presumably to place an order for food. While she is gone, $bName continues looking you up and down with a look of distrust. It seems it will take a bit more effort to convince her to let her guard down.

[$bName] So then Mr. $pName, where exactly are you from?

[$pName] Far to the east of here, you wouldn’t have heard of it before. It’s a little village where clothing like mine and magical devices such as this are common.

[$bName] You mean Dottle?

[$pName] No, much further than that. I’m talking waaaay out there. Nobody leaves very often because… uh… because we are often judged by our strange clothing and like to keep to ourselves.

[$bName] What is the village called?

You scratch your head. This is a grilling.

[$pName] I’m from…

ENTER WHERE YOU ARE FROM

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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[$pName] I am from the town of $pLocation. Like I said, you’ve probably never heard of it…

$bName stares at you wordlessly, until finally relaxing her expression of doubt.

[$bName] $pName from the town of $pLocation… Never heard of it.

[$liName] Me neither, what kind of bumpkin town are you from anyways? You must be waaaay out in the country.

[$bName] I suppose we cannot all choose our origins… Alright then, well as you now know I’m $bName and I am from the Town of $bLocation, which is pretty far northwest of here. I am on a quest to find the Ancient Dragon.

$liName’s expression turns to shock, and she silently waggles her fingers over her chest while staring at $bName. Despite looking like she wants to say something, she holds back and lets $bName continue.

[$bName] I heard many stories growing up of a magical fruit with incredible properties. It can give instant good health and physical ability to those that eat it’s skin, the curing of any ailment to those that eat it’s flesh, and a drastic improvement of intellect to those that chew on it’s seeds. I hope to one day either find this fruit on my travels or find the dragon, whichever comes first. I will ask him to grant me the wish of owning such a plant, and with it I will change the world. By selling the plant I will become fabulously wealthy, by sharing the plant I will save thousands of lives, and by developing farms for the plant I will bring work, wealth, and prosperity to my declining homeland $bLocation…

She trails off at the end as if distracted by the mention of $bLocation, and becomes lost in thought. During this brief interlude $aName returns to the table, with several hunks of cheese and baked potatoes in her arms. She has a hard time managing the food and lets it all fall onto the table messily, then grabs a potato for herself and sits down. Before she has time to eat, $liName turns to her excitedly.

[$liName] $bName is looking for The Dragon as well!

$aName stops moving her food to her mouth and stops in shock. She glances at $bName, before looking back at $liName in surprise.

[$aName] Really?

[$liName] Yes really! Small world huh? Maybe she should join us?

You reach for a mashed potato hungrily and insert a piece of cheese into it, copying what you see $aName and $liName are doing. While you chow down, $bName rolls her eyes.

[$bName] I’ve been travelling alone for over a year now and the last thing I want to do is suddenly join a big group of people. No thanks.

[$liName] Oh. Suit yourself…

$liName takes a big bite of her food and $aName looks between you and $bName with a neutral expression.

[$aName] So, it turns out we are doing the same thing actually. Looking for the dragon, I mean. Different reason entirely but same outcome in the end I guess. Um, lets see… $liName and I are both from $aLocation which is southwest from Kingsbridge and rests right on the border between $kingdomName and $neighborName. Growing up our town was near battles between the two kingdoms all the time and every now and then rogue mercenaries from either side would attack. As you can guess it got pretty rough sometimes… Anyways I am one of the lucky few blessed children of the Ancient Dragon…

She waggles her fingers across her chest

[$aName] …that can use magic. Like the vast majority of magic users however I only know the control word my family has passed down for generations and don’t have hardly any power. Look!

She points her finger at $bName’s mug and sings a note similar to the sound one would make if they were imitating a car driving by.

[$aName] Yeeeorm!

A small jet of water streams out of her pointed fingertip for about a second, gracefully pouring into $bName’s cup of beer

[$bName] HEY!

[$aName] Do you have any magic users in $pLocation $pName? Magic users aren’t very common, and even amongst those the majority of ‘em have very little power just like me. The very, very few who do have significant power are usually from high nobility and serve in the King’s court as royal mages and advisors. They also don’t like using magic very often because they are afraid other mages will copy their coveted control words, but I don’t really mind because mine only makes a little bit of water. The way magic works is pretty simple: the longer the control word the more powerful the spell. There isn’t a limit to how many times you can cast spells but it tires you out pretty fast, and if you try to use a control word you aren’t powerful enough to handle you will fail the cast and pass out from exhaustion. I’d like to learn a cooler control word one day but even then I probably couldn’t do much with it…

She looks at $liName with a wistful expression, who raises her eyebrows back in expectation.

[$aName] Oh right! Anyways, we left our town so that we could find the Dragon as well. If I find him I will ask him to grant me my wish of becoming the most powerful sorceress in all of $kingdomName. That way I can finally go back home and take care of all those outlaws and rogues that have terrorized my family for so long. I guess I could like, end the war and all that stuff too but my first priority is keeping my people safe for good.

[$liName] That’s right. The problem is figuring out where The Dragon has been hiding all this time. He’s been gone for at least a hundred years you know.

$liName leans forward and looks at you intently, pushing her hair back behind her ear before continuing.

[$liName] Now $pName, you say you want an adventure, but what I don’t see is how you offer any value to us. You wear weird looking clothing, you are completely unarmed, and based on the way you scoffed down that meal you probably don’t have any money either. What do you have to say for yourself?

You gulp the last bite of food down with satisfaction, and admit to yourself that she is right. What would make you a valuable part of the team?

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[ only if first time meeting

You aren’t really sure why but you know you have to join these people on their quest. You also know that everything $liName just said is true, you truly offer little value. The trick then will have to be convincing them to allow you to join, and then prove your worth along the way. But how to convince them? The key to this is probably in this whole ‘Ancient Dragon’ thing… ]

[$pName] Behold… My answer!

You pull your phone out of your pocket a second time and hold it up for everyone to see. After you unlock it, you make sure to swipe around the screen and open some apps so that they gasp at the moving graphics. You lock it yet again, lay it to rest on the table in front of you, and speak as solemnly as you can.

[$pName] You say the Dragon hasn’t been seen in over a hundred years, but that will be no problem for an adventuring team with me included.

You pause for dramatic effect.

[$pName] With this device, I will know when we get close to the Dragon! It has sensors in it that pick up on his mystical signal, and will allow only me to be able to track him down! The only caveat is that we have to be within 10 miles of his location in order for it to work. Thus, we will have to adventure together for a while to locate him but as soon as we figure out what woods or caves he is hiding in I can take care of the rest!

$bName rubs her mole and says nothing. $liName tilts her head a little to the side and hums a little to herself, also thinking. $aName’s $aEyeColor eyes light up however, and she starts bouncing in her seat.

[$aName] Yes its peeeerfeeeeect!

She sings the syllables of ‘perfect’ with vibrato in a singsong voice, clearly enjoying herself.

[$aName] I want you to join us! Right away! We need any little advantage possible, plus worse case scenario we could use you as bait if we run into some bandits or something. What a wonderful… uh…

She appears lost in thought, but $liName quickly chimes in

[$liName] Coincidence?

[$aName] Yes! What a wonderful coincidence, how lucky! Plus maybe you could solve our other problem…

She winks at $liName, who rolls her eyes

[$liName] Ok $aName, you don’t have to…

[$aName] But really though cause it’s not like…

[$liName] $aName!

$liName looks down at her feet and looks flustered. Before you can ask what is going on, $bName interrupts.

[$bName] I think I’d like to use you as well. But there’s a condition. I don’t want everyone joining into one big group, its too slow and clunky and not my style at all. I’ll allow you to join me to find the Dragon but it would only be us. So basically you will have to choose if you want to join me or the two girls.

You glance between the two parties, and realize it’s time to make an important decision. You managed to convince them you were worth taking, but now you have to decide which path to take based on gut feeling alone. Do you follow the intimidating, white cloaked swordswoman $bName? Or do you go along with the colorful and well armed pair of intrepid adventurers, $aName and $liName?

Join $aName and $liName

Join $bName

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The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you two, but I’m going to stick with $bName.

[$aName] WHAT!?!?

$aName slams her hands on the table, immediately standing up and sending $bName’s beer toppling over.

[$aName] BASED ON WHAT!?

[$liName] $aName! Calm down!

$liName roughly grabs $aName’s dress and pulls her back into her seat. A few patrons around the tavern glance over at the commotion, but once they see there isn’t a fight happening they become disinterested and look away.

[$aName] Ok whatever, but how about you sell us the magic Dragon locator? I’ll pay good money for it…

[$bName] Enough. Without that locator $pName is useless to me, and besides only people from $pLocation would be able to us it to locate the dragon anyways. Respect his decision and leave us.

$aName and $liName begrudgingly leave their seats, and looking back over her shoulder $aName gets her last word in:

[$aName] I should never have offered you a spot in our group $bName, you never would have fit in. And as for you $pName… well good luck dealing with *her*. You’ll need it.

The two stunning women gather their things, adjust their swords, and storm out of the door.

[$bName] They aren’t wrong you know. I haven’t travelled with anyone in a long time and I’ve heard I’m not the easiest travel buddy. I guess my biggest advice for you is don’t say or do anything stupid and we can get along fine.

You gulp.

[$bName] … I stopped in Kingsbridge to buy a backup dagger since my old one is falling apart, and before you ask no you cannot have it. I wasn’t intending on staying here for this long however, and want to at least head further east past Dottle where there are less people with prying eyes.

She stands up, gathering herself and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance.

[$bName] They raise horses near Dottle and I was hoping to get one this evening, but looks like it will be dark in only a few moments. I’ll get one tomorrow morning and then we will officially begin our journey together.

[$pName] You mean you will be getting two horses right? It would be a little demeaning walking next to you while you ride along…

$bName stares at you blankly, and says nothing. You take the hint, and shut your mouth. The two of you head for the plaza, and carefully make your way across the uneven stones. Turning right you begin heading east, and in the dim light you can barely recognize some of the buildings you had passed by earlier. Eventually the two of you finally exit the town and stroll along the dirt pathway, saying nothing. $bName walks with her head held high and her chest out, and her excellent posture makes her seem like the most confident person in the world.

[$pName] So… You have been travelling alone for a long time then?

$bName keeps her eye on the path ahead of her, and without turning to look at you replies:

[$bName] It’s a long story, and probably not worth sharing.

[$pName] It isn’t as if we were doing something else more important. I’m all ears.

$bName sighs and looks up at the sky, which is starting to get properly dark now. The first few stars of the night wink down on her, and the moon meagerly begins to light the waving fields of tall grass around the two of you. The sound of the wind caressing the foliage is soothing and familiar.

[$bName] Like I said, I was born in $bLocation. I was an only child, and my mother died giving birth to me so I never knew her. My dad said she looked just like me though and was a gentle spirit.

$bName briefly touches her mole before continuing. At this point she is lost in the memories.

[$bName] My dad was a swordsmith in $bLocation, but not very talented. The job was mostly just so that he could make new swords to practice with, which was his real passion. Ever since I was young he trained me to be a swordswoman, and he insisted that as long as I practiced enough I could beat anyone with a blade. One day when I was about 16 the King requested he join the army in order to make weapons for him, and I never heard or saw him again. Knowing him, he probably got overzealous and tried to join in on a battle. Old fool.

The moonlight plays off her lips, which form into a slight smile. The pair of you make it to the brook, and while you can tell she has more to say she decides to take a break and wordlessly washes her hands and face in the water. You follow suit, and after becoming sufficiently refreshed the two of you continue east along the path.

[$bName] I stayed in town forging weapons, but hated it the whole time. The only thing I ever really enjoyed was my father’s practice drills, but sword fighting doesn’t make much money in a town without conflict. At about 22 I decided I had enough of waiting for my father to return and traveled south to the border. Mercenary gangs were at their peak back then and one of them, the wild wolves…

She juts out her thumb towards her back, pointing at the cloak

[$bName] Took me in eagerly. Their specialty was skirmishing and flanking maneuvers with sword wielding warriors. I fought with them for the next two years, eventually becoming a squad leader and taking part in many battles. I wouldn’t have been able to make it if it weren’t for my mentor, a man named Axel. We survived a lot together, including a run in with Maud… anyways, I’ve fought on the King’s side, and I fought for $neighborName too. As long as they financed my efforts I didn’t care. Eventually some court official of $neighborName noticed my skill and employed me as a personal bodyguard. So that’s what I did for another couple years until we got caught in an ambush and my employer was killed. People don’t particularly like employing bodyguards that had their VIP killed so I had no choice but to return home with all the savings I had accumulated. When I returned, I was shocked: Half the town was starving. The war had taken its toll even on communities as far away from the frontlines as $bLocation, and the King’s heavy taxation bled it dry of funds. I decided then and there I wouldn’t fight as a mercenary ever again.

$bName sighs loudly, and brings her hands together behind her head.

[$bName] Ever since then, which would be around 3 years ago, I have explored around the world looking for the Ancient Dragon and my magical fruit.

You glance at her hands but she doesn’t do the waggle thing.

[$bName] I’m starting to think that neither is real, but seeing the world is nice and I have plenty of money saved up from my old fighting days. It’s better than smithing, that’s for sure.

$bName has probably said more words in the last 10 minutes than she has said in the last 10 months, so you give her a rest and enjoy the ambiance of the moonlit countryside. Soon, you pass the wooden sign where you woke up before, and with a groan realize you still have another 14 miles or kilometers or whatever unit of distance they use here to go.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

Just when you think $bName is going to lapse into silence for the rest of the trip, her face scrunches up in concentration and speaks again, only now with her voice raised.

[$bName] Was it enjoyable to get to know me so quickly? Do you feel like you know me well now?

She turns her head to look over at you and the moonlight reflects off her narrowed eyes. Her left hand rests on the pommel of her sword and her right hand is clenched into a fist.

[$bName] What If I told you that was all a lie? That everything I just told you is a practiced story I have used on countless people so that they would feel like they knew and trusted me? Would you believe me?

She stops walking, and faces you entirely. You freeze, and feel like you can’t move an inch. Not far ahead, the leaves of the oak tree rustle in the wind. $bName’s head perks up slightly, as if she heard or sensed something you couldn’t. She glares at you with a scowl.

[$bName] I know you have been lying about why you are here. I know you are lying about what your motivations are. And worst of all, I know about this little trap you have set up.

In a smooth motion $bName draws her blade and lunges towards you. Before you can react she pierces your foot, sending a stabbing pain shooting through your leg. In disbelief, you fall over helplessly and clutch at your foot which is now oozing blood into your shoe.

[$bName] Stay right there little duckling, after I take care of your associate, I’ll interrogate you next.

Blade drawn, cloak billowing in the wind, $bName marches towards The Oak Tree. From the ground you watch helplessly and in utter confusion. Then, every couple of seconds you start to hear a strange sound.

wheeow, ting!

wheeeeeow, clang!

It’s hard to see in the moonlight, but $bName is marching towards the Oak Tree and swinging her sword wildly every few seconds. Finally, you realize what the noise is coming from: it is the shrill hiss of an arrow being fired and travelling through the air. Every couple of seconds, someone from the branches of the oak tree is launching an arrow towards $bName, and every time the arrow is launched she swiftly deflects it with her sword. But she isn’t able to block them all, and finally she misses one and it hits her armored chest with a loud Thud. She stumbles for a half second, recomposes herself and continues with a grimace.

wheeow, ping!

She deflects another arrow, to have such reaction speed is seemingly unhuman.

wheeow, Shrick!

She is right below the tree now and simply cannot react in time to block the arrow. Shielding her face, the arrow shoots straight through the bracer on her arm and cleanly flies into her chest to join the first. Because it lost so much speed penetrating her arm, it bounces off the armor but in its wake is a trail of blood pouring out of $bName’s arm. Yelling in pain and frustration now, $bName approaches the base of the tree. From above, the attacker continues to rain arrows down but $bName finds herself unable to climb the tree because that would expose herself to more fire. It’s an impossible battle to win, but $bName has a trick up her sleeve.

[$bName] Motherfucker, DIE!

She times a lucky block with her sword, deflecting one last arrow from near point-blank range. Above her is the bowman, but you can’t see him very well because of the branches and leaves in the tree. Winding back, $bName lowers her sword and brings it upwards with all her might as if she was casting a fishing reel. Incredibly, she lets go of the weapon at the moment it gains the most momentum and it goes flying upwards at incredible speed. With a loud crack the sword hits its target, and some kind of wooden structure falls out of the tree along with a hooded figure. He lands on the ground using both feet and deftly tucks into a roll. Coming up, the strange hooded figure brandishes a long dagger, giving up on his bow that dropped with the rest of the platform. Wild eyed and clearly pissed, $bName draws her own dagger from her waist and the two square off.

You try crawling closer to the conflict in order to do something, anything, but your movement is slow as you drag your body across the dirt. With a grimace, you stand on your good leg and try limping towards the tree. By the time you are up and moving, the battle you were watching just moments ago has already evolved into what can only be described as a fencing match between masters. $bName prances forwards and backwards, stabbing with her dagger while the hooded figure leans back and retreats. Every time the strange figure dodges, he does so with a perfectly calculated amount of effort so that $bName’s attacks miss by mere inches. After $bName has lunged, the figure counters, sending his own well aimed attacks at her neck. $bName skillfully dodges these as well, but with less finesse and a hint of desperation. Blood is pouring out the wound on her arm, and it is likely the arrow that hit her armor cracked a rib or worse. With a grimace she fights on however, better than most could even without injury. Watching the duel rage on, you limp as fast as you can but can’t seem to make enough progress quick enough.

[$pName] STOP!!!

The duel progresses into the grass field, where the tall blades tickle at your waist. Ahead of you by only a few feet the pair continue their deadly dance, and behind them the moon outlines their movements. Finally, a patch of grass below the hooded figure’s foot bends awkwardly causing their ankle to twist, and fall to their knee. Triumphantly, $bName charges forward and stabs her dagger at the mysterious stranger’s hooded face. But as quick as she can lunge, the stranger dodges, and he grabs a hold of $bName’s hand that holds the dagger. With a flash, he moves his other arm upwards and slices $bName’s hand clean off, sending it flying into the air. $bName gasps, and stares at her own appendage flying upward, upward, upward towards the moon. Completely dumbfounded, she glances at you one last time with a look of heart wrenching betrayal before the stranger plunges their dagger straight into her neck and slits her throat. $bName collapses, spilling blood across the grass.

Slowly, the stranger places their dagger into the crook of their elbow and draws it across, cleaning off the blood that just stained it. With a deliberate motion the stranger turns to face you, and slowly marches forwards.

The stranger is covered head to toe in midnight black leather and cloth, giving them a rugged and stealthy look. Judging by the height and muscles on the stranger it appears to be a man of a little more than six feet in height. Across the stranger’s chest, waist, legs, arms, and back are countless knives, swords, and weaponry of all kinds. He wears a black hood and Black veil which makes it impossible to see any of his features. As he slowly approaches, you realize he isn’t even breathing hard.

You try to move backwards, but your foot cries out in pain and you stumble to the ground. Wordlessly the stranger approaches, brandishing the dagger until he is right above you. With only one hand he reaches down and grabs you, pulling and twisting until you are forced to your knees. Desperate to stop him, you try to grab at the blade or push him away but it is no use. With a clean swipe he lopes off your outstretched right arm at the elbow, and in the next moment twirls to the other side and takes off the left as well. You are so astonished you feel nothing, and stare dumbly at the stumps where your arms used to be. With a harsh voice that sounds like nails on a chalkboard, he triumphs

[???] I am become DEATH…

The pain from your arms being sliced off finally hits and it burns with such agony you become dizzy. Delirious and exhausted you scream, scream as hard as you can and as long as your lungs allow. The pain is overwhelming, and unlike anything you have ever felt before. Your stumps flail about, sending blood spurting all over the grass. Not a single drop lands on the stranger’s garb as he dodges behind you, and whispers into your ear the last words you ever hear:

[???] …Destroyer of Worlds

The next instant, he sends the dagger into your neck and flicks outwards, completely cutting open your jugular. The last thing you think before bleeding to death is how thankful you are that you don’t have to feel the pain in your arms any longer. Dismembered and defiled, you fall to the ground as a lifeless corpse and gurgle blood across the grass pathetically.

THE END

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The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you, but I’m going to stick with $aName and $liName.

[$bName] ah… Unfortunate. Well, good luck to the three of you then.

With a look of mild bemusement, $bName gets up and chugs down the last of her now watered-down beer. She doesn’t even bother to look back as she heads for the door, and leaves without saying another word.

[$liName] Bit weird, that one…

[$aName] Yay for us! So glad to have someone that can give us a real advantage for once!

$aName is beaming at you with a triumphant smile on her face so genuine you can’t help but grin back.

[$aName] Let’s try and get to Dottle before it gets too dark to see. I was originally planning on waiting until morning to leave but now I’m too excited!

$aName and $liName stand up, gathering their things and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance. $aName leads the way to the plaza with a cheerful bounce in her step, and it isn’t long before the three of you are on the road to exit Kingsbridge out the east side where you had originally come in. Suddenly $aName turns to face you, and without looking walks backwards along the road.

[$aName] So Mr. Mysterious, what is your secret power? I’m sure only the most amazing magicians from $pLocation can use that weird looking device you got there, and you were simply holding back out of humility!

She turns again so that she can look ahead and walks beside you on your left. $liName matches your speed and walks on your right, but is distracted by looking up at the first stars in the sky that are starting to poke out.

[$pName] Actually, I don’t know if I have magic powers or not, I’ve never tried.

[$aName] WHAT!? How can someone not have ever tried to cast a spell by now? Well we have to find out if you’ve got the right stuff right away! You can use my little trickle spell, or maybe another common control word… ah, well everyone knows the one to create a small spark, even the weakest of mages learn that one first so that they can make campfires. Try to cast a spark!

You stare at her blankly

[$aName] You people from $pLocation have the weirdest traditions, are you from some kind of anti-magic cult? If you forgot the control word for spark, it is \*click tsss\*.

She clicks her tongue on the roof of her mouth for the first half, and sounds out the letter ‘s’ for the second. The short, simple combination of sounds is easy enough to remember so you try it out. Is this where you finally learn of your incredible hidden power?

[$pName] \*click tsss \*

[$aName] No dummy, you need to click your tongue harder. If you don’t get the sound just right it doesn’t work.

[$pName] \*click tsss \*

[$aName] I said harder! This one isn’t even difficult! The more advanced ones are like, entire phrases of weird noises that you have to perfectly pronounce. I’m sure you can…

[$pName] \*click tsss!\*

[$aName] … Oh, there we go! Ok so just like that! Now you need to visualize a spark shooting from your finger while you say the control word. The visualization is just as important as the pronunciation. The reason why mages don’t just randomly spout out gibberish all the time in order to discover new control words is that you have to combine it with the visualization or else it doesn’t work. Now go for it!

[$pName] \*click tsss!\* , \*click tsss!\* , \*click tsss!\*

No matter how hard you visualize or how many times you make the sounds, nothing happens. $aName looks a little disappointed.

[$aName] Ah… Guess not then. Too bad…

[$liName] Pitiful. Maybe we should teach you how to use a weapon instead, at least then you would be useful…

With the same flourish you had seen earlier in the alleyway, $liName draws her sword and waves it in the air as if she is fighting an imaginary foe. It is remarkably long at about 5 feet in length, and its hardened steel glows with a unique iridescence similar to that of an opal. It is ever so slightly curved and near the top it flattens out, like a katana. As you gaze longingly at the shimmering colors baked into the metal, the three of you approach the brook that is just outside of town. $aName stops to wash her face in the stream, while $liName sticks her sword into the soft earth at the bank of the water and points at it.

[$liName] Do you know what kind of sword this is?

You turn your head dumbly.

[$liName] It’s an extremely rare kind of sword called a Fisherman’s blade, named so because it is as long as a fishing pole. The reason it is so rare is because swords this long and thin are supposed to break extremely easily…

She runs her finger gently across the side of the blade, up and down.

[$liName] But this one is made with a steel-Dragonium Alloy. Because of this, the blade never dulls and is 100 times stronger than any normal sword. The result is that we get the adaptability of a sword with the range of a spear, without the disadvantage of a wobbly brittle blade. As long as you are properly trained, which we are, a swordswoman who wields a Fisherman’s blade is the most dangerous there is.

$aName stands back up and rubs the water out of her eyes before joining in.

[$aName] My father ordered twin Fisherman blades for $liName and I a few years ago when he found 6 marbles worth of Dragonium on a battlefield. Can you believe how lucky that is? Some rich knight had an entire shield loaded with the stuff, but ended up getting shot in the back by an arrow. Anyways, my father sold two of the six, had one marble made into each of our swords, kept one and gave the last to me.

$aName pulls at a necklace hidden underneath her dress that you couldn’t see before. The chain is made of tiny rings of metal, and the pendant is a large marble of incredibly luminescent Opal. As the moonlight starts to shine on the field around you and dance in the waves of the brook, so too does it give the marble an incredible glow that makes it seem like it is from another world entirely.

[$aName] I don’t know if you had any Dragonium where you are from, but these are crazy rare and valuable. If I were to sell this thing, It would probably be worth like… worth about… ah…

[$liName] You could probably buy everything for sale in Kingsbridge as well as half the shops.

[$aName] Yeah probably! Maybe even the entire town if you found the right buyer. A whole town captured in a single marble, pretty crazy huh?

She rotates the marble so that it catches the light, it really is quite dazzling. The three of you continue along the path after you and $liName take a moment to drink some water from the brook, and $aName hums to herself cheerfully as progress is steadily made.

[$aName] Do you know where Dragonium comes from, $pName?

[$pName] Not at all.

[$aName] Its so fun to be the wise old teacher for once! You guys must have been pretty sheltered in $pLocation to not even know about Dragonium. Anyways, Dragonium is a metal that has been melted down from the Original Hero’s blade from centuries ago. As you SURELY remember, the hero was created by the Ancient Dragon…

$aName and liName waggle their fingers across their chests

[$aName] … to smite evil from the world. Back in those days The Ancient Dragon always fulfilled the wish of any soul brave enough to pass his test, no matter how dastardly the wish would be. So the Hero’s job was to hunt down and defeat these people if they used their wish for bad things. Considering people would often wish for ridiculous things like ultimate power or immortality, that’s a pretty tall order! So the dragon forged a blade of pure Dragonium so that he could level the playing field, and gave it to the Original Hero. So then the hero spent decades going around and kicking ass, there’s like a whole book on it somewhere that tells you all the…

[$liName] A Hero’s ballad.

[$aName] … what?

[$liName] A hero’s ballad, that’s the name of the book with all his stories.

[$aName] Oh, um, ok so the book is called “A Hero’s ballad” and it tells all about his adventures but anyways he’s gotta retire one day and his son takes the sword in his stead, but the son died to some sort of hydra or crazy monster…

[$liName] Chimera! $aName how did you forget this stuff already!?

$aName looks at you with an exasperated look on her face.

[$aName] Ok so it turns out I’m not a wise old teacher after all, but I’m doing my best! Sooooooo, he dies to a chimera which luckily don’t exist anymore and another adventurer randomly finds the sword and realizes the thing is AMAZING. Like, crazy good. It’s so light it feels like an extension of your arm…

[$liName] … So sharp it cuts through anything …

[$aName] … never dulls or breaks either, and I think something about it being able to slice through and deflect magic, plus even cutting through the fabric of reality or something crazy like that.

[$liName] Yeah I’ve heard that too.

[$aName] So basically this sword is crazy awesome, but the guy is clever and melts it down, creating two smaller blades instead of one GIANT blade like it was before. He gives each blade to a son of his, who then become master swordsmen and gain a big following. Before you know it you’ve got $kingdomName and $neighborName, each one founded by a royal son. That was a VERY long time ago now though, and over the centuries the swords were lost and recovered and smelted down and reforged many times. Since smelting an alloy with even a small marble’s worth of Dragonium results in an incredible sword, all the nobles want one and it has become extremely valuable. Aaaaaand that is about it, did I forget anything?

[$liName] Nope, that about covers it. So the moral of the story is don’t mess with us and our blades! Oh, one last note. Dragonium alloy blades are special and because of that are always named. My sword is named Gasp, and $aName’s sword is named Whisper. Not really that important but you seem so amazed by everything I couldn’t help but share, you look like child learning how to read for the first time. Anyways, how did this all start again? It was… ah… oh right, swordsmanship. We are going to teach you how to be the bait… \*ahem\* be a fighter. The basics to a good fighting stance starts with…

And so $liName begins her lecture on swordsmanship, talking so fast you would think her face would turn purple and pop. Luckily her honey-dew voice is so gentle that no matter how long she rambles it pleases your senses, made all the better by the peaceful sound the wind makes as it guides itself through the tall grass around you. In the blink of an eye the three of you pass the rickety wooden sign where you started what feels like ages ago, and you make your way along the hilly countryside.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

Your small party makes excellent progress, and the moonlight makes it easy enough to traverse the dirt path that winds across the hills. About 30 feet ahead is the Oak Tree, and you can hear the gentle rustling of leaves as the boughs wave at you in greeting. To your left trots $aName, who is grinning ear to ear while explaining how to defeat a charging animal. She has both of her hands up to her forehead in the shape of horns, and makes a terrible roaring sound as she charges $liName. $liName dodges around you giggling, using your body to block $aName’s charge as she wheels around for another attack. You can’t help but join in the laughter as $aName lowers her head and starts charging forward once more. But suddenly…

Thwack!

[$aName] …

You freeze. $liName goes silent. Protruding from $aName’s skull is an arrow, which had penetrated through her hand and straight into her brain. For a brief moment $aName looks at you in confusion before her eyes go blank, and she collapses in front of you. You don’t move.

What just happened?

You glance at $liName, but she is frozen as well, staring at $aName in disbelief.

What just happened?

$liName snaps out of it and rushes over to $aName, but it is too late. Blood pours out of her fractured skull where the arrow slipped through, and her limbs are completely limp. $aName is dead.

What. Just. happened?

[$liName] NOOOOO!!!

$liName begins sobbing bitterly, looking around her wildly for the culprit that shot the arrow. Realizing that whoever shot $aName is surely reloading even now, you force your legs into action and run for the nearest cover you can find; the Oak Tree. You make it about 10 feet before you hear a whistling in the air.

wheeow, SHUNK!

you stumble over something and fall down. You try to take another step to break your fall, but your right leg doesn’t respond and you collapse heavily into the dirt. Confused, you push yourself up onto your left knee and inspect the right; There is an arrow sticking out of it and is lodged halfway through your thigh just above the kneecap. You stare at it dumbly for a split second before the pain hits you like a truck and your leg feels as if it has erupted into fire. Grimacing, you fall over in disbelief and clutch your leg in agony. You scream as hard as you can.

[$liName] Out of the way you useless…

Through your tears of anguish you watch as $liName swiftly jumps over you, sword brandished.

[$liName] COME OUT FROM THAT TREE!

With a sinking feeling you realize you weren’t running away from the attacker but rather towards them, and gave them as easy a shot as they could ask for. The only thing distracting you from the nearly unbearable burning sensation in your leg is the morbid curiosity you have for whether or not $liName will overcome the attacker and save your life. You feel more helpless now than ever before.

Sprinting at the trunk of the tree, $liName jumps straight towards the wood and uses her horizontal momentum to kick off it and launch herself several feet into the air. In the same fluid motion, she whips her arm around sending Gasp’s wicked blade slicing through the branches. The brittle wood gives a slight resistance but to your surprise she cuts a huge swath out of the tree and tumbles down along with a multitude of branches and some kind of wooden platform. With a loud crash everything smashes into the dirt below, except for a single hooded figure who lands nimbly on his feet and tucks into a roll.

You are just close enough to get a good look at him. The stranger is covered head to toe in midnight black leather and cloth, giving them a rugged and stealthy look. Judging by the height and muscles on the stranger it appears to be a man of a little more than six feet in height. Across the stranger’s chest, waist, legs, arms, and back are countless knives, swords, and weaponry of all kinds. He wears a black hood and Black veil which makes it impossible to see any of his features. As he rises to his feet and approaches the pile of branches, you realize he isn’t fazed at all by the fact he must have just dropped around 15 feet.

Once he nears the destroyed platform and splintered wood, he slowly bends down and picks up the bow that he must have dropped in the fall. It is a short recurve bow of excellent quality, and he tests the string as he strides closer to where $liName must be trapped under the branches. With slow and deliberate movements, he reaches behind him to where a quiver rests on the small of his back, and draws out an arrow. Nocking it, he begins to look around the pile of leaves and branches for his prey. It doesn’t take long.

[$liName] $pName! Stop laying around and help me out of here! $aName! Help, anybody!

You force yourself up and put as much weight on your left leg as you can before limping wildly towards the sound of her voice.

[$pName] I’m Coming!

[$liName] PLEASE!

The mysterious hooded figure finally finds the source of the yelling, and nooks his arrow.

[$pName] WAIT!

The man doesn’t hesitate for a second. With one motion he raises his arm, and loosens the arrow straight into something hidden behind the mess of branches. The loud squelching noise the arrow makes upon hitting it’s target can only mean one thing.

[$pName] NOOOO!

You limped over as fast as you could, but could not save her. At least now, you can avenge her. Balancing as best you can, you bring your fist back and let loose the strongest punch you can muster. Effortlessly, the hooded figure dodges sideways while simultaneously looping the bow around your arm. With blinding speed he continues backwards and around you and slides the bow over your head, so that the string is towards him against your back and the wood of the bow is across your chest. Planting one foot firmly on your back, he draws the string back and nooks a second arrow to it. Before you can even react, he lets go and the string pulls taught, pushing the arrow straight into your back, through your lung, and poking out the other side. Feebly, you pick at the head of the arrow peeking out of your chest and cough up blood, falling to your knees. The mysterious stranger kneels down, and whispers into your ear.

[???] I am become DEATH…

He stands and spartan kicks you with terrible strength, sending your dying body flying into the mess of branches and leaves. The last thing you see before succumbing to the pain engulfing your body is the lifeless face of $liName who is trapped under a mess of branches next to you, a single tear running down her face. The last thing you hear is the nails on chalkboard voice of the mysterious assailant.

[???] … Destroyer of Worlds.

With one last wheeze sending blood oozing out of your mouth, you gasp your final breath and die with a shudder in the branches.

THE END

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You turn and head the opposite direction of Kingsbridge, which must eventually lead to the place called “Dottle”. With the cheerful sunshine lighting up the countryside around you and the grass dancing merrily in the breeze, you can’t help but feel your spirits lift a little. The path you walk on is slightly uneven, but has been trodden upon enough times throughout the years that there is no mistaking where it leads. Following it mindlessly, you start counting your steps to pass the time. One, two three…

The Oak Tree Looms ahead.

Three hundred and thirty two… and you’ve nearly made it. It is truly a magnificent tree, the trunk must be about 9 feet wide and the entire thing stretches around 70 feet into the sky.

Enjoying a brief reprieve from the sun in the shade, you take a moment to lean against it and listen to the leaves whisper in the wind. You close your eyes.

Wheeeeoooow

A big gust of wind blows through causing the branches to wave about like a dancer swinging their arms and it makes a nostalgically comforting sound. You back away from the trunk, and look up. About ten feet above you is, interestingly, a wooden platform. Nestled over a branch with small planks nailed into the trunk to keep it sturdy, the platform is about 2 feet wide in a square shape. The construction is very fresh and a little bit of sawdust is still collected on the edges of a few planks. Whoever put this up must have finished only an hour ago or less, and then left. With the wind blowing as it is, it might be dangerous to climb up and inspect the platform, but it wouldn’t be impossible for you to attempt.

Climb Tree onto platform

Continue along path

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Backing up so that you can get a good running start, you face the tree trunk and lower yourself into a sprinter’s position. Launching with all your ability, you spring forward and rapidly gain speed until you approach the base of the tree. Jumping as hard as you can you fly into the trunk, and push off it with your other leg to gain even more height. In the end, the effort was pitiful and you hardly gain any height at all, but it is just barely enough to reach the lowest branch. You grasp at it and by channeling your inner spider monkey, barely manage to swing your legs up and grab hold. With an enormous effort you loop your leg around the branch and push up until you finally are sitting on the branch. Following this same pattern and making sure to rest often, you manage to climb several more branches and eventually find yourself at the platform.

The platform is resting on a branch, with two planks on either side nailed into it and connect to the base of the tree to keep it steady. The wood is freshly cut and smells wonderful, and you imagine it would be a comfortable spot for a picnic. Climbing up, you manage to sit on the platform and look around; the leaves obscure much of your vision however you have a perfect view of the path you just travelled down almost all the way up until the rickety wooden sign. Anyone who sits up here would be able to see travelers coming down that path well in advance, and would be completely hidden by the leaves of the tree. Furthermore, the platform is just barely wide enough for someone to kneel on it meaning anyone with exceptional balance would be able to shoot a gun or fire an arrow from here as well. If not for the platform, a tree branch would be too curved and unsteady for that purpose.

There isn’t much more to see here, and after picking at the nails a little bit you realize you won’t be able to do anything that would affect the platform unless you had a hammer. On your way back down you unfortunately manage to give yourself a nasty splinter, which stings your thumb as you lower yourself further. Finally, you get to the bottom and stumble back to the earth. With one last look at the Oak Tree, you pick at the splinter on your thumb and continue along the path east.

When you were by the rickety wooden sign before, you could see the path lead into the forest. Now that you are closer to said forest, you see that there is actually a fork in the road; one path indeed leads into the forest, but another cuts left around the outskirts of the tree line. There isn’t a sign to let you know which path leads to where, and the path that leads left curves around the forest so that you can’t see what it actually leads to. In front of you, the path that goes straight into the trees is shaded by the treetops and surrounded by fauna. Loose branches and trunks covered in moss are scattered across the forest floor, and the chirping of birds adds a lively touch. Despite the serenity you see ahead of you, something at the edge of your subconscious gives you a sinking feeling, as if it was warning you of danger ahead.

Follow path along the outskirts left.

Follow path straight ahead into the forest.

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You ignore the platform in the Oak Tree and stretch your muscles a little bit before continuing along the path. The countryside around you is so vibrant with light and beauty that you can’t help but pull out your phone and take a quick picture. Your phone is getting low on battery so you do it quickly, but the photo still turns out great.

There is a slight downhill a little past the Oak Tree and you find yourself making excellent progress. In a few places you have to hop slightly so that you can keep your balance, and the impact of your shoes on the dirt path sends small puffs of dust clouds wafting into the air.

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Follow path along the outskirts left.

Follow path straight ahead into the forest.

35

You enter the forest carefully, making sure to take your time observing your surroundings. Around you are a multitude of trees covered in moss, with fauna and plant life overflowing across each other and the path ahead. Smaller, younger trees do their best to get their own share of sunlight and stretch for the sky in earnest, while spiders and their well engineered webs hang from the boughs. As you walk, a butterfly playfully flutters ahead of you and disappears behind a bush.

The gentle breeze struggles to gain momentum within the forest because of all the obstacles in the way, but it does a great job refreshing you regardless. It causes the leaves far above you to dance and send gorgeous rays of sunlight flashing across the forest floor. The path winds ahead, and starts taking sharp turns as it dodges small boulders and large fallen trunks from the once mighty kings of the forest. As you follow the path, you take care to avoid hazards along the way and duck under small swarms of insects milling about in the air in front of you. Finally, after having followed the path for several minutes, you step on a small branch by accident and with a loud snap it breaks in half. The snap is loud, too loud. You realize that the birds aren’t singing anymore, in fact it is completely silent around you. You glance around but see nothing; that is, until you notice a boot. There is a boot with the toe pointed up, perhaps 20 feet ahead of you. It is almost hidden behind an enormous log, but the man-made shape stands out clearly against the surrounding nature. You creep towards the boot as quietly as you can, constantly scanning your surroundings but finding nothing. Eventually, you get close enough to the boot to be able to see around the log.

The boot is connected to a foot. The foot is connected to a leg, and that leg is connected to… nothing. Instead, a gnarly mess of disturbed muscle and sinew dangles bloodily out the top of the thigh, spilling into a pool of blood on the forest floor. Stuck into the thigh of the dismembered leg is a single arrow, lodged firmly into the flesh. In shock, you take a step back and look up. You wish you never did.

Tied to a sturdy branch above the leg and dangling by the hands is the body of a man that is clearly missing the leg you just saw. His hands are tied by a rope to the branch above him, and he hangs a few inches above the ground. Blood is still dripping out of the slice where the leg was shorn off, and he isn’t bloated with rot yet. He was killed recently, perhaps as recent as a few hours. Around his waist is a toolbelt with a saw, nails, and a hammer attached. Several of the nails had spilled out of the pouch he kept them in and lay scattered across the forest floor. The man is wearing a maroon shirt with a rough looking vest over it, likely made of burlap. Unable to look at the gruesome sight any longer and feeling nauseous, you backup and close your eyes.

[???] I am Become DEATH…

Someone speaks with a voice like nails on a chalkboard, and they are immediately behind you. Whirling around in a panic, you desperately try to find the speaker but it is too late.

Wheeooow!

The shrill whistle of an arrow rings in your ears and you briefly feel the impact of something small and sharp hitting your head. In the very next instant everything goes black, and your limp body collapses. You never even saw your assailant, and now you lay on the ground dead. Your journey is over before it ever even began.

THE END.

36 (only if you have died in the forest before)

You enter the forest carefully, making sure to take your time observing your surroundings. Around you are a multitude of trees covered in moss, with fauna and plant life overflowing across eachother and the path ahead. Smaller, younger trees do their best to get their own share of sunlight and stretch for the sky in earnest, while spiders and their well engineered webs hang from the boughs. As you walk, a butterfly playfully flutters ahead of you and disappears behind a bush.

The gentle breeze struggles to gain momentum within the forest because of all the obstacles in the way, but it does a great job refreshing you regardless. It causes the leaves far above you to dance and send gorgeous rays of sunlight flashing across the forest floor. The path winds ahead, and starts taking sharp turns as it dodges small boulders and large fallen trunks from the once mighty kings of the forest. As you follow the path, you take care to avoid hazards along the way and duck under small swarms of insects milling about in the air in front of you. Finally, after having followed the path for several minutes, you almost step on a small branch but avoid it just in time, and continue silently forward. You realize that the birds aren’t singing anymore, in fact the forest is completely devoid of sound. You glance around but see nothing; that is, until you notice a boot. There is a boot with the toe pointed up, perhaps 20 feet ahead of you. It is almost hidden behind an enormous log, but the man-made shape stands out clearly against the surrounding nature. You creep towards the shoe as quietly as you can, constantly scanning your surroundings but finding nothing. Eventually, you get close enough to the boot to be able to see around the log.

The boot is connected to a foot. The foot is connected to a leg, and that leg is connected to… nothing. Instead, a gnarly mess of disturbed muscle and sinew dangles bloodily out the top of the thigh, spilling into a pool of blood on the forest floor. Stuck into the thigh of the dismembered leg is a single arrow, lodged firmly into the flesh. In shock, you take a step back and look up.

Tied to a sturdy branch above the leg and dangling by the hands is the body of a man that is clearly missing the leg you just saw. His hands are tied by a rope to the branch above him, and he hangs a few inches above the ground. Blood is still dripping out of the slice where the leg was shorn off, and he isn’t bloated with rot yet. He was killed recently, perhaps as recent as a few hours. Around his waist is a toolbelt with a saw, nails, and a hammer attached. Several of the nails had spilled out of the pouch he kept them in and lay scattered across the forest floor. The man is wearing a maroon shirt with a rough looking vest over it, likely made of burlap. You jump backwards and scan your surroundings. Alert and with every hair on your body standing upright in fear, you desperately jerk your head about as you try to find the killer. Seconds pass, then minutes, and finally you realize the killer is no longer here. Acknowledging that you didn’t end up sharing the same fate as the man bleeding all over the ground, you take a moment to wipe the sweat off your forehead and sigh in relief.

[???] I am Become DEATH…

Someone speaks with a voice like nails on a chalkboard, and they are immediately behind you.

[$pName] FUCK YOU! THAT’S IMPOSS…

Wheeooow!

The shrill whistle of an arrow rings in your ears and you briefly feel the impact of something small and sharp hitting your head. In the very next instant everything goes black, and your limp body collapses. You never even saw your assailant, and now you lay on the ground a lifeless corpse.

THE END.

37

You take the path that follows along the outskirts of the forest, and as you trot along butterflies and birds fly above singing their merry songs. Gentle puffs of clouds laze across the sky sending lonely shadows across the open grass fields to your left, and to your right the sound of multitudes of different insects and animals call out in harmony. Continuing along the path, it hugs the edge of the forest and curves to the right, past where you could see before. It doesn’t take long before you can see the path leads to a small cluster of buildings; a large house, a workshop, an outhouse, and a large shed. Each building is made with well cut and aligned timber, but is unpainted and lacking any glass windows. The roofs are made of a ribcage of timber beams and tightly packed dirt, which has turf growing out of it in thick matts of green. Inside the shed is a large amount of cut timber, but you cannot see into the other three buildings.

You approach the cluster of buildings carefully until you notice a small figure hunched over on the front porch of the house. It is a woman, and she is clutching her face while rapidly bouncing her right leg up and down over and over again. Just watching her fret like that is enough to give you anxiety. Finally you get close enough to see her properly, and before you introduce yourself you take note of her appearance. She is a woman of her mid thirties, and is wearing a simple dress made out of a soft beige cloth. Around her neck and tossed behind her is a thin scarf made out of a rough looking material, likely burlap. The wrinkles around her eyes and lines across her forehead make it clear she is stressed out about something. Upon seeing you, she stands up quickly and walks over.

[woman] Oh please mister, have ya seen my husband around lately? He was supposed tah be home hours ago and ah told him not to take the job but he did!

She holds her hands together like she is praying, and pleads at you with genuine emotion in her eyes.

[$pName] well… what does he look like?

[woman] He is about yer height, and is wearing a maroon shirt and a brown vest. He wears a fancy leather toolbelt, he’s tah best carpenter around fer miles! Ya really can’t miss ‘em, he wears tah toolbelt and tah maroon, ah, he is well built and well fed, ah…

[$pName] Where did you last see him?

[woman] well he took a job from a creepy lookin mister this mornin, and he wouldn’t tah takin it if it weren’t fer tah fact tah mister was payin so much and tah job was so easy. Jus’ a simple treehouse ah sorts he said. Ah tol’ him a mister lookin’ like that could only be trouble but he went and did it anyways and hasn’t come back yet! I think they went into tah forest… He shoulda jus’ ignored ‘em and gone tah Dottle…

(only if you have seen him in the forest before) Your husband is dead. 38

I promise I will find your husband for you. But I need a hammer. 39

I can’t help you. I’m going to continue passing through, good luck. 41

38

[$pName] Don’t ask me how I know this but… Your husband is dead. I’m sorry.

[woman] What!? How!? Where!?

She looks away and breaks into tears, her entire body heaving with grief. Awkwardly you pat her on the back a little to try and comfort her but she doesn’t seem to notice. After several minutes of sobbing, she finally manages to utter a few words in between the waves of emotion.

[woman] Are… ya… sure?

[$pName] I saw him in the forest, he was killed by the stranger you mentioned earlier. I wouldn’t try to go in there and see his body for a while though, it is dangerous. That man is a killer without a doubt.

You rub your forehead at the spot where the arrow pierced it not long ago. It’s a blurry memory, but one you likely will struggle to forget.

The woman leans backwards and sits down on the ground, hugging her knees to her chest and staring blankly towards the forest. Tears stream her cheeks but she stops making any noise other than an occasional sniffle. Finally she looks up at you, and asks

[woman] What do I do?

You stare back at her blankly. What should she do? She just lost her husband and can’t even recover the body. You shudder at the thought of her seeing the carnage in the forest, it would be entirely too much for any person to handle.

[$pName] There is nothing you can do, other than help me. Help me avenge your husband. Help me spring a trap on the killer.

The woman looks up at you in shock.

[woman] what… what do you mean?

[$pName] Give me one of your late husband’s spare hammers. I know where the platform your husband built is and If I could loosen the nails on the structure, the killer might try and use it and take a hard fall. While he is stunned I could defeat him, and avenge his death. In a way, I would avenge myself as well…

[woman] would you really do that for me? Why on earth would you risk your life like that for someone you don’t even know?

You break eye contact with her and stare up into the sky, where a lonely cloud floats along with determination.

[$pName] To be honest, I don’t know why. I guess its just the right thing to do.

Wordlessly, the woman stands back up and walks over to the workshop. She disappears inside for a few moments before finally returning, bringing with her a flimsy looking hammer.

[woman] This is only his backup hammer but It will get the job done. Be careful!

[$pName] I’ll do my best.

You take the hammer from her, and hold it firmly in your hand. With a wave of farewell, you turn around and head back the way you came. The weight of the hammer is oddly comforting, and as you walk along the path you try a few practice swings. The metal component of the hammer is strangely loose where it connects to the wood, making it feel a little flimsy. All the same it is better than trying to fight the killer by smacking him with the $food you have in your pocket, so you feel much safer. It doesn’t take long before you get back to the fork in the road, and yet again you get that eerie feeling of danger coming from the path that leads into the forest. Even though you are better protected with the hammer, you haven’t exactly fought anyone in armed combat before so it will be for the best if you patiently wait for the trap to give you an advantage.

You retrace your steps further, breathing heavily as you laboriously march up the steep hills that eventually lead to the Oak Tree. You feel your throat is a little dry and could definitely use a drink sometime soon. Before long you are back at the Oak Tree and catch your breath while leaning against it in the shade. You peer upwards to make sure the killer isn’t waiting for you, and luckily there isn’t a trace of anyone on the platform or in the branches. After resting for a little while you steel yourself for the effort of climbing the tree, and tuck the hammer into your waistband.

Backing up so that you can get a good running start, you face the tree trunk and lower yourself into a sprinter’s position. Launching with all your ability, you spring forward and rapidly gain speed until you approach the base of the tree. Jumping as hard as you can you fly into the trunk, and push off it with your other leg to gain even more height. In the end, the effort was pitiful and you hardly gain any height at all, but it is just barely enough to reach the lowest branch. You grasp at it and by channeling your inner spider monkey, barely manage to swing your legs up and grab hold. With an enormous effort you loop your leg around the branch and push up until you finally are sitting on the branch. Following this same pattern and making sure to rest often, you manage to climb several more branches and eventually find yourself at the platform.

The platform is resting on a branch, with two planks on either side nailed into it and connect to the base of the tree to keep it steady. The wood is freshly cut and smells wonderful, and you imagine it would be a comfortable albeit small spot for a picnic. Climbing up, you manage to sit on the platform and look around; the leaves obscure much of your vision however you have a perfect view of the path leading to Kingsbridge almost all the way up until the rickety wooden sign. Anyone who sits up here would be able to see travelers coming down that path well in advance, and would be completely hidden by the leaves of the tree. Furthermore, the platform is just barely wide enough for someone to kneel on it meaning anyone with exceptional balance would be able to shoot a gun or fire an arrow from here as well. If not for the platform, a tree branch would be too curved and unsteady for that purpose.

The Killer must have forced the carpenter to build this platform so that he could ambush somebody, and will likely use that bow of his to attack that somebody sometime soon from this very spot. Careful not to send the whole thing crashing down, you lower yourself onto a branch near the platform and lean over so that you can rest your hands on the planks. With one of your hands holding you steady and the other gripping the hammer, you slowly work at the nails until they are almost completely out of the wood. Anyone trying to get on top of this platform now would never notice the loosened nails unless they knew they were messed with in advance, and once they tried to balance on the wooden square it would eventually tip over and send them hurtling down. Satisfied, you drop your hammer and begin to lower yourself down. It is slow going but you manage it without causing any injury to yourself. Dropping the last few feet, you bend you knees to soften the blow and look around you. Still no sign of the killer. Unfortunately, it looks like the effort of prying at the nails and then dropping the hammer to the ground was enough to snap it, and you decide to toss the broken pieces into the tall grass so that it is hidden.

At this point you need to make a decision. There isn’t really anywhere to hide nearby, unless you lay prone in the tall grass which would work but not very well. You could head back towards the forest again but since that is the direction the Killer will be coming from, you don’t want to run into them on the way there and get another bad ending. The only other option then is to head towards the town of Kingsbridge and try to get find some sort of additional advantage there.

Stay and ambush the killer

Head into Kingsbridge

39

[$pName] I promise I will find your husband for you.

[woman] What!? Would you do that for me!?

[$pName] I’m no hero but… I’ll do my best.

The woman sobs with gratitude, hugging you and crying all over your clothing. The relief on her face is plain as day and her smile warms your heart.

[woman] I didn’t know people could be so kind in this world, thank you!

[$pName] Stay vigilant in case whoever abducted your husband tries to attack you as well. I suggest hiding in your house for a while.

[woman] I will! Be careful!

The woman calls out one last time as you walk away, and her words of gratitude give you hope. You retrace your steps along the path and it doesn’t take long before you get back to the fork in the road. Yet again you get that eerie feeling of danger coming from the path that leads into the forest. Based on the woman’s words and your feeling of dread coming from within the trees you have a strong feeling the carpenter’s abductor, and the carpenter, is hiding somewhere within the forest ahead.

Head into the forest

40

You retrace your steps further, breathing heavily as you laboriously march up the steep hills that eventually lead to the Oak Tree. You feel your throat is a little dry and could definitely use a drink sometime soon. Before long you are back at the Oak Tree and catch your breath while leaning against it in the shade. You peer upwards to make sure nobody suspicious is hanging around, and luckily there isn’t a trace of anyone on the platform or in the branches.

The clues are all there, they just need to be pieced together: A mysterious platform resting in the oak tree. A strange man that abducts a carpenter. The only thing that makes sense is that whoever asked the carpenter to make the platform didn’t want any loose ends, and took care of him somewhere else. In that case, surely the suspicious man will return to the platform eventually and you can confront him then. If the stranger is tough enough to capture a fully grown man however, he will probably be able to overpower you. You need all the advantages you can get, and upon that realization you look up at the platform and know what you need to do. After resting for a little while you steel yourself for the effort of climbing the tree, and tuck the hammer into your waistband.

Backing up so that you can get a good running start, you face the tree trunk and lower yourself into a sprinter’s position. Launching with all your ability, you spring forward and rapidly gain speed until you approach the base of the tree. Jumping as hard as you can you fly into the trunk, and push off it with your other leg to gain even more height. In the end, the effort was pitiful and you hardly gain any height at all, but it is just barely enough to reach the lowest branch. You grasp at it and by channeling your inner spider monkey, barely manage to swing your legs up and grab hold. With an enormous effort you loop your leg around the branch and push up until you finally are sitting on the branch. Following this same pattern and making sure to rest often, you manage to climb several more branches and eventually find yourself at the platform.

The platform is resting on a branch, with two planks on either side nailed into it and connect to the base of the tree to keep it steady. The wood is freshly cut and smells wonderful, and you imagine it would be a comfortable albeit small spot for a picnic. Climbing up, you manage to sit on the platform and look around; the leaves obscure much of your vision however you have a perfect view of the path leading to Kingsbridge almost all the way up until the rickety wooden sign. Anyone who sits up here would be able to see travelers coming down that path well in advance, and would be completely hidden by the leaves of the tree. Furthermore, the platform is just barely wide enough for someone to kneel on it meaning anyone with exceptional balance would be able to shoot a gun or fire an arrow from here as well. If not for the platform, a tree branch would be too curved and unsteady for that purpose.

The stranger must have forced the carpenter to build this platform so that he could watch somebody, and who knows if the stranger intends on becoming violent yet again. Careful not to send the whole thing crashing down, you lower yourself onto a branch near the platform and lean over so that you can rest your hands on the planks. With one of your hands holding you steady and the other gripping the hammer, you slowly work at the nails until they are almost completely out of the wood. Anyone trying to get on top of this platform now would never notice the loosened nails unless they knew they were messed with in advance, and once they tried to balance on the wooden square it would tip over and send them hurtling down. Satisfied, you drop your hammer and begin to lower yourself down. It is slow going but you manage it without causing any injury to yourself. Dropping the last few feet, you bend you knees to soften the blow and look around you. Still no sign of the abductor. Unfortunately, it looks like the effort of prying at the nails and then dropping the hammer to the ground was enough to snap it, and you decide to toss the broken pieces into the tall grass so that it is hidden.

At this point you need to make a decision. There isn’t really anywhere to hide nearby, unless you lay prone in the tall grass which would work but not very well. You could head back towards the forest again but since that is the direction the mysterious abductor will likely be coming from, you don’t want to run into him on the way there. The only other option then is to head towards the town of Kingsbridge and try to get find some sort of additional advantage there.

Stay and ambush the abductor

Head into Kingsbridge

41

You look the woman in the eyes, and speak with a steady voice.

[$pName] I can’t help you, but don’t worry I am sure he is fine. I’m going to continue passing through, good luck.

[woman] oh…

You walk past her before she can say anything more and continue on. The path that led to the cluster of buildings passes right through and continues out the other side, eventually leading away from the forest yet again and into an open field of tall grass. Walking along, you feel a hint of guilt. Are you running away from conflict? Did you really give up on her? It’s not like you knew the carpenter’s wife or owed her anything, but still…

You make your way through the open field and walk for a long time, until eventually after cresting a small hill you see a town way off in the distance. You reckon you must have travelled at least ten miles since you last saw the carpenter’s wife, which you spent strolling along in silence. The countryside more or less stayed the same, and so did the heat radiating from the blazing sun above. Now that you finally can see the town, you breathe out with a sigh of relief.

[$pName] Finally made it to Dottle…

You continue down the hill and towards the town, a little faster now that the end is in sight. As you move along, you notice several farms and ranches along the road and surrounding the town. It seems many of the people that live here enjoy raising livestock, with the majority keeping at least four or five different horses. At one point the fence of one of these properties runs along the road, and a horse trots up to say hello.

[$pName] Hey there buddy!

[Horse] Neigh!

You tousle his mane and give him a friendly pet, and continue towards the town. By the time you finally get close, you are quite a bit tired. All said and done it has been at least 4 hours since you started by that rickety wooden sign, most of that spent walking towards here. As you start to enter the town you take a note of your surroundings. The houses are relatively well made, the majority of which are wooden frame buildings with uneven planks slapped across the sides and mud pressed in between. The roofs are almost all thatched, although a few have that same turf design that you saw at the carpenter’s house. Eventually you approach the center of the town, which doesn’t really stand out in any way. You were hoping there would be a town hall or something but instead there is the wooden skeleton of what will eventually become a large building. The construction has clearly just started, and a couple men with tools wander around the foundations as if in a daze. Curious, you walk closer and admire the framing with your hands on your hips. It doesn’t take long before someone notices you.

[Man] Hey you!

Uh oh. You turn to face him, startled.

[$pName] ah sorry didn’t mean to…

[Man] It’s about time ya got here! We’ve been waitin’ for ages, where are yer tools?

[$pName] … tools?

[Man] Wait, yer tah carpenter from Kingsbridge we asked fer right?

Yes

No

42

[$pName] You’ve got the wrong guy, sorry.

[Man] Oh sorry mister, ya were standing there with such authority I thought ya were tah guy judgin’ our work! Aight well have a good one then.

The man turns around and heads back to the site, muttering under his breath about how Kingsbridge workers are always tardy. Without any real direction to head towards, you begin to wander around the town. There are bakers and taverns and all kinds of interesting shops around, and there is an especially large amount of places selling, renting, and buying horses. It seems like the people of Dottle really love their four legged friends. Passing the time some more, you make casual conversation with a friendly weaver who tells you he dreams of one day weaving cloaks for heroes, and before you know it the sun begins to set. With a start, you realize you don’t actually have anywhere to sleep for the night and may have to sleep outside, on the ground.

Wandering around some more, you look desperately for some kind of quiet alleyway or abandoned lean-to shelter to use but even after searching for what feels like forever you simply cannot see anything suitable. Every single alleyway is kept relatively clear of debris and offers little shelter, and every single shack you come across already has so many burlap clad peasants crammed into it there couldn’t possibly be room for you. Eventually you find yourself at the outskirts of Dottle, and despite there being little cover there you resign yourself to sleeping underneath a tree. The leaves will hopefully protect you from rain somewhat if it comes to that, and it doesn’t smell too strongly of horse manure over here. Shivering, you fall into an uncomfortable and uneasy sleep.

The next day, you find yourself extremely hungry and in no better a position than the last. You continue to wander the town for the entire day, but nothing of note happens. You don’t find any significant charity either: there isn’t a homeless shelter or any kind of social program to help you at all, and every person you beg for help tells you to simply ‘bug off to the pastures’. There is a church towards the west end that helps at least; The monk there gives you a single potato each day to eat as well as a burlap sack to wear. Curiously, the burlap sack doesn’t have any logos on it but rather an entire description on how to teach someone to read, as well as a multitude of practice sentences and pictures. It looks like even the poorest here have taught each other to read thanks to these sacks they wear and the result is an impressively literate albeit powerless lower class, which you have now officially joined. The monk doesn’t just give you a potato either, but critical information as well: all the poor people in town work for the church raising horses in the pasture. The work is grueling, he warns, but as long as you keep the horses, stables, and fields clean then you won’t quite starve to death. Taking his advice you join the huge mob of people that care for the ‘holy pastures’, an enormous area to the north of town that raises hundreds and hundreds of horses. After a long day of hard work and a constant feeling of wasting away, you take shelter at the same tree and sleep uneasily until the next day. This continues for months, and you can’t help but wonder what strange turn of events led to such a tedious fate.

Eventually one day in the middle of the winter, you return to the shack you had built up on the west side of town a month ago with planks of forgotten rotten wood you found laying around. Most of the peasants have large families or gatherings that they use for heat, but after all this time and suffering you are still alone, save for the weaver you occasionally talk to during breaks. You curl up on the floor and try to sleep but you are so cold you can’t. The wind is howling outside and it begins to lightly snow. A few more hours of this later and you realize you have to do something soon or you will die. Unfortunately, you are so weak from months of poor eating and hard work that you can hardly get up. Crawling, you exit your hut and weakly call for help, but it is too late. A single tear drops out of your eye out of self-pity before you finally succumb to the elements and freeze to death alone in the cold, unforgiving dirt.

THE END

43

[$pName] Uh, yeah. That’s me.

[Man] Ya Kingsbridge folk may not take the workday seriously, but we do things differently here at Dottle. First thing’s first, you gotta start showin’ up here in tah morning like yer supposed tah instead of randomly in tah evenin’.

[$pName] Got it.

[Man] Secondly, ya get paid at tah end of every week for this project at the agreed amount. As long as ya do yer job right it doesn’t lower, but just ‘cause yer in charge of tah woodworkin’ team doesn’t mean ya can haggle on yer pay halfway through aight?

[$pName] Sure thing.

[man] lastly, where tah heck are yer tools?

[$pName] Well, I’m in charge right? The only tool a good leader needs is right here.

You point at your head as if it is the most obvious thing in the world. The man looks at you like you are truly an idiot for a moment before quickly masking his expression with a cheesy smile.

[Man] Welcome aboard then! We’re just now wrappin’ up but I look forward tah seein’ how ya perform tomorrah.

And just like that, your career as woodworking lead began. The first week of work was the hardest; you slept outside in the cold and knew very little about what the job was supposed to be. Luckily, the carpenters working for you were very kind and shared everything you needed to know as the work progressed. To be honest they probably were just relieved they didn’t get a hard ass in charge and despite knowing you had no idea what you were doing they allowed you to stay anyways. After the first week you got paid, and used the money to pay for renting a tiny but well made cottage. Before long you didn’t have to eat the charity potatoes the church offered each week anymore, and could afford to buy half decent food. In this way you slowly managed to make a decent living for yourself in the peaceful town of Dottle. Eventually a year passes, and by this time you are pretty decent at your job and respected in the community. You get a lot of teasing for having a weird accent, but nobody suspects or questions your true origins.

One day, a woman arrives in town wearing tattered clothing and looking to be on the brink of starvation. She begs around town for a while before you finally come across her, and as soon as your eyes meet you are shocked at the face you find oddly familiar; it is the Carpenter’s old wife. You offer her a temporary place to stay, and in gratitude she starts buying yarn, weaving it into hats, and selling them to the many travelers passing through to buy horses. Eventually she makes enough to pay for her share of the rent, and she even helps keep the cottage tidy. She doesn’t say anything at first, but after a week of silence she finally breaks down into tears and tells her story.

The carpenter’s body was found in the forest a day after she met you, and apparently it was pretty gruesome. She fell into depression for a long time after that, and since she lived by herself she was rarely bothered. After making it through winter, she realized she wouldn’t have enough money to survive for much longer and decided to sell the house, the shed, the tools, everything. People were creeped out about the carpenter’s unsolved death and figured the forest was haunted, so she didn’t get very much for it. She buried most of the money in her husband’s grave, and decided to wander the countryside looking for a new life. Eventually, she found you, and is grateful to be given a second chance.

You swallow your guilt at having stolen her late husband’s identity in order to live the way you do now, and say nothing.

And so the two of you live together as friends for many years, and while you are often criticized for completing projects behind schedule your workers always enjoy your leadership and employment. 3 decades pass, and your dear friend dies. As she lies on her deathbed you finally confess your identity theft, and with a kind smile she forgives you. The next morning, she is gone.

You continue as head of woodworking for many more years, despite your joints getting stiffer and back complaining incessantly. You never marry, but make many dear friends along the way. Eventually you become very sick, and because of your age and lack of any modern medicine you know you have little time left. Surrounded by friends, you thank each of them for the time you have shared together building up the little town of Dottle, which by now has become a small city. Everyone takes their turn to hold your hand and encourage you, until eventually you are left all alone. Coughing violently, you feel very tired. It is time. With a final grin at all you have accomplished, you take your last breath, and pass peacefully in your bed.

THE END.

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It is time to take care of this once and for all. First, you stride through the tall grass away from the tree and rip out handfuls of it until your arms are completely full. Next, you approach the edge of the grass where it meets the path only a few meters away from the Oak Tree. You lie down in the grass, careful to not disturb and bend any blades around you, end ensure that enough foliage is in front of you in order to hide your head properly. Finally, you lean sideways and spread the armful of grass across the top of your body, concealing it completely. In the end, you are hidden much better than you initially suspected and unless someone was specifically looking for you in the grass to begin with, no one would ever notice you. And so you wait, not moving an inch. Several hours pass, and the sun mercilessly beats down on your still body. You sweat constantly, and the salty liquid pools across your body making your position all the more uncomfortable. By the time the sun is setting you become dizzy with dehydration, and crazed with boredom. Only a handful of people pass by you during all this time, and none of them notice you in your hiding spot.

Finally, as the final light of dusk touches upon the gentle countryside, you hear a rustling. From your secret position you manage to spot a mysterious figure clad in black approaching the Oak Tree. He is dressed entirely in midnight black leathers and wears a hood, as well as a black veil underneath. Dozens of handles, probably those of weapons, stick out from his torso and limbs. Just looking at him fills you with fear, and a single bead of sweat runs down your forehead. With uncanny agility, he launches himself up the tree and effortlessly mounts the branches. He is so silent while doing so that you can barely hear him despite only being a few meters away. You begin to steel yourself for a fight; the big moment is approaching.

The boards of the platform creak ominously as the hooded figure puts his weight on them, and adjusts his posture. The leaves of the oak tree rustle, and suddenly a loud crack sounds through the darkening landscape as the nails slip out and the platform collapses.

Whoosh!

SMASH!

The boards of the platform clatter across the branches until eventually falling, and smash into the dirt below. The hooded figure, despite being caught completely by surprise, manages to land on his feet off balance and tries to tuck into a roll. Instead, he lands heavily on his shoulder which hits the ground awkwardly. With a loud grunt of frustration, he continues his momentum until he returns to his feet, rubbing at his shoulder. It’s now or never. Yelling, you charge out of the grass with your fist cocked back and ready for attack. One of the last rays of sunset glints off a small metal piece of his bow, caught underneath the platform, and you triumphantly realize he is unarmed for the time being. This is the best chance you are going to get.

[$pName] Fuck you!

Within seconds you are upon him, and he is caught completely off guard by your attack. Nonetheless, his ability is extraordinary and he manages to duck your punch in the nick of time.

[???] …

[$pName] Fucker…

You keep up the pressure, firing punches as fast as you can. No matter how fast you throw them, the hooded figure dodges them with precision and lightning speed. After only 15 seconds of wildly throwing punches, you start to run out of breath and slow down your flurry of attacks.

[???] …

The mysterious man wordlessly notices you slowing down and moves in for the attack. Afraid of the sudden pressure, you throw a panicked right hook.

Fwish!

The hook misses entirely, and the man ducks under it adeptly. Coming back up, he hooks his right arm around your punching arm so that your forearm is stuck inside the nook of his elbow. In the same fluid motion the man masterfully sweeps left and towards you, planting their left leg inside of your right and their left hand on your right shoulder. The momentum shifts, and you realize too late what is happening. With a great shove, the man pushes your right shoulder with his left while simultaneously pulling back with his right arm, which still holds your trapped forearm. Using his leg as a fulcrum, you are forced forward and tripping over his thigh. Because he still holds your arm you fall with incredible speed straight towards the ground and are unable to shield your face as you smash into the dirt.

WHOMPH

[$pName] Gauugh

[???] …

Your mouth fills with dirt and you see lights flash before your eyes. The figure is on top of you now, and holds your right arm behind you in an armlock. You are on your stomach lying on the ground, and he puts all his weight on top of you stripping you of any ability to move or even struggle. You are helpless. Normally this is where you say ‘uncle’ and are let go, but the man has other plans. Without a moment’s hesitation he snaps your arm upwards.

CRACK!

Blinding pain shoots through your shoulder, he has just dislocated it entirely and forces it even further, threatening to break even more.

[???] …

Screaming, you struggle as best you can to get up or do anything at all, but it is hopeless. In the corner of your eye, you see him let go of your now useless right arm and reaches for your head. He wraps his fingers around your chin and pulls up, painfully forcing you to look ahead and exposing your neck. With his other hand, he reaches for something attached to his leg, and you hear the distinctive sound of a knife being pulled out of a sheath.

A cold shiver runs down your spine. This is the end.

He places the knife’s blade against your throat and for the first time hesitates for a moment as if he is relishing the power he holds over you. And then, just when you think all is lost, you hear a new voice behind you.

[???] Stop!

The voice belongs to a woman, someone has arrived to save you! But just as you are getting your hopes up, the man with one swift motion draws the blade across your throat and slashes it open. Leaping from your back, he turns to face the newcomer and leaves you bleeding in the dirt. You cannot believe it; he’s just killed you and now you have mere seconds left before it all ends. You turn onto your back quickly as you can, clutching at your throat and gurgling blood. Your entire body goes numb, and you can’t even feel your shoulder anymore. All you feel is fear. Blinding lights shoot across your vision, and everything starts getting rapidly darker. Trying to lean up, you attempt to look at what is going on with the newcomer. Impossibly, a woman in a lavender dress and an incredibly long sword is dueling with the hooded figure, who is only barely managing to defend himself against the assailant. In your final moments, you attempt to crawl towards the duel in an effort to help but its too late, you are far too weak to do anything now. Overcome with the desire to sleep, you finally collapse in the dirt and turn to face upwards at the sky. You get one last look before the blood loss overcomes you and your heart stops beating, giving up on the lost cause that is your body. Even now, the stars twinkle gently in the reflection of your lifeless eyes.

The Moon sure is Beautiful Tonight.

THE END.

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Following the path with your eyes you see it eventually leads past a small brook and to the faint outline of what must be Kingsbridge. With quick strides you make your way over there, doing your best to make good time. The layer of dirt on top of the path is very light and thin thanks to the unforgiving sun, which means every time the wind picks up or you take a heavy footstep the dirt rises into clouds and clogs your breath. Luckily you make it to the brook rather quickly and manage to rinse your hands and face in the cool, refreshing water. The brook’s water looks relatively clear and safe to drink so you hazard a few sips to rejuvenate yourself.

The distance between the brook and Kingsbridge ended up being larger than it looked, but you still manage to approach the town in good time. As you near it you can make out some better details from before, and for starters it has no walls or natural defenses. The path leads straight into the town and a long ways away out the other side, so it is not populous enough to be considered a city. The buildings are certainly the strangest thing that jump out at you, since they look like something straight out of medieval England history books. Many on the outskirts are made of dried mud gathered around a grid of sticks, creating small uneven walls with straw thatched roofing. Further in, the majority of buildings are made of wood, and the not quite evenly spaced planks make for simple walls with little insulation. While these buildings are larger and sturdier, they are also unpainted and plain which makes the majority of the town look simple and uninspired. Towards the center you don’t quite have a perfect view but it looks like there are a handful of large, stone buildings dominating a central space, which is some sort of plaza. These stone buildings have a frame of wood but are lined with stone and are reminiscent of the popular renaissance house architecture styles sometimes seen back home. The path that you had been following splits off into streets seemingly at random and arc throughout the town, and appear muddier thanks to the dung, water, and other unseemly liquids the inhabitants absentmindedly pour across it.

As you enter the outskirts of Kingsbridge you notice the sheer amount of poverty overwhelming the area. The mud structures you had seen before are filled with holes and teeming with rats, and not much further ahead you can see many of the wooden shacks share the same fate. The air is filled with the smell of refuse, forcing you to wrinkle your nose in consternation. As you take a few steps into the town, you see a handful of people lazing about inside their mud shacks eyeing you with curiosity. Whether male or female they all seem to be wearing what appears to be a potato sack, except there is no label of “russets” or “goldens” across the rough sown garb but some sort of scribbling in small font that you can’t read from a distance. They stare at you as you walk past with expressions of curiosity as well as scorn, so you decide it would be best to continue along without asking them anything.

You make your way to the central plaza, trying to step around the piles of filth pooling haphazardly around the road. The closer you get, the nicer the buildings become and it looks like someone poured gravel across the pathway so it is at least somewhat sturdier and better kept than before. Finally, you enter the wide-open plaza and soak in everything as best you can. The scene is entirely alien; there are no electrical poles, concrete roads, or glass windows within sight. The plaza itself is paved with slabs of stone, but there is little to no mortar between them so many jut out callously from the dirt and threaten a twisted ankle. The square is about half the size of a soccer field and surrounded at all sides by stone buildings. From these buildings crude wooden signs jut out like pointing fingers, advertising a variety of goods such as food, clothing, armor, ale, weapons, boots, prostitution, and more. Scattered about the plaza are a large gathering of rickety stalls where merchants sell assorted wares, snacks, and… Spellbooks?

The people you pass along the way wear either clothing similar to the potato sacks you had seen earlier, or a colorful assortment of felt tunics and leather gear. Several of the wealthier looking shoppers look like they wear that same burlap sack underneath their garments or have a patch of burlap sown onto their clothing somewhere. Wandering about the plaza, two more buildings catch your eye: One labeled ‘History room’ and another labeled ‘Adventurer’s Gear’. Both have plain entrances but the title is enough to pique your interest. Just when you think everything there is to notice has been noted, another interesting development occurs. You see a confident looking woman in a yellow dress with a large, thin sword strapped to her back. There is a woman escorting the girl in the yellow dress as well, and interestingly she is wearing exactly the same dress in almost every way except it is the color lavender instead of yellow. The pair walk around for a while you stare stupidly, until they happen upon the spell book merchant you noticed earlier. The woman in yellow seems to get excited, and chats about something with the shopkeeper for quite a while. Eventually she hangs her head a little in disappointment, and the pair resume their browsing. Once they have looked at all the stalls they head off the plaza, perpendicular to the road you had come in on. It looks like they will eventually pass some kind of church, and you can barely see the top of the steeple from where you stand.

Follow the woman in yellow

Ignore her and continue exploring

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You run quick as you can towards the steeple of the church, eventually coming to a halt at the front door. Between gasps of air you scan the surrounding area, looking for a tale tell flash of yellow. Unfortunately you don’t find it, but you do manage to catch a glimpse of lavender going right around a corner up ahead and the chase is back on. As you approach the corner you slow down, and peek left around it so as not to expose yourself if they looked back. Your worries were needless however as the two have slowed down and are now chatting amiably with each other, joking around as they take another road. In this way you follow them, and they wander without any real purpose throughout the town while chatting away. With a pang you remember how you used to talk like that with your friends back home before this all started, but the memory is quickly forgotten. Eventually the cheerful pair make it all the way down to the southern part of town, and start looking for a restaurant to enter while you follow from about 75 feet apart. It doesn’t feel good to stalk like this but there hasn’t really been an opportune moment to introduce yourself yet. Yet again, the duo detour into an alleyway and you wait a second before following suit. This alleyway mazes around in a thin space between buildings, and you lose track of them. Jogging up to where the corners of four buildings meet and thus create a divergence in the alleyway, you glance to your right but see nobody. Turning, you check to see if they went the opposite direction only to see that they are standing right next to you in the alleyway, glaring angrily.

[Woman in Yellow] And just who the fuck do you think you are, stalking us like some kind of creep!?

You back up slowly and try to get a good look at them. The girl in yellow looks to be in her early 20’s and stands at about 5’4. She has gorgeous $aHairColor hair and glistening $aSkinColor skin. She wears a pretty yellow dress that ends just above the knee but underneath that dress is some sturdy leather armor, cleverly hidden behind blue laces and bows. Her brown leather boots don’t quite match the dress since they go up past her knees and have a multitude of black buckles, and it is clear that while the dress is for looks the boots mean business. On her back is an extremely long and thin blade that hangs slanted across her back, with a sheath that is decorated at the top with a small burlap ribbon. Her pretty $aEyeColor eyes spark with anger at you, and her facial features remind you of an old childhood friend you used to have growing up.

Next to her is her partner, the lady in lavender. She looks to be in her early 20’s as well but slightly older. She is about 5’6 and is clearly in peak athletic form. She wears nearly identical apparel except the dress is colored lavender with white laces and bows instead. Her sword is slightly less slanted on her back since she is taller, but it looks comically long all the same. She has silky smooth $liHairColor hair and supple $liSkinColor skin. She is so beautiful that it takes your breath away, and her $liEyeColor eyes glow at you with lurid emotion. The only imperfection on her face is that over and through her right eyebrow is a small scar about two inches long that slices straight down parallel to her nose. Speaking of eyebrows, they are furrowed angrily at you and you remind yourself to stop gawking and start speaking up.

[$pName] Now hold on a second…

[Woman in Lavender] How about you hold onto your ear after I slice it off?

She deftly reaches behind her to the hilt of her blade and with one swift motion propels it up and out of its sheath. Waiting a short moment for gravity to bring the blade back down, she reaches back up and snatches it out of the air, flourishing it and quickly bringing the entire length of the gleaming sword down and pointing straight at you.

[$pName] Woah! I’m sorry really! You just looked like interesting characters and I wanted to…

[Woman in Lavender] Characters? Are you high? You some kind of junkie?

[Woman in Yellow] He’s a creep $liName, not even worth our time.

[$liName] honestly. Next time you want to get your rocks off it better not be anywhere near us again, got it?

[$pName] Oh… Okay…

The pair give you one last look of disgust before turning on their heels and exiting back into the street, leaving you standing there speechless. It all happened so fast you didn’t even have time to properly explain yourself, and now the opportunity is lost. But then a blur of movement grabs your attention at the end of the alleyway and you catch a glimpse of something white disappear around the corner. Intrigued, you jog over and peer around the wall but whoever caused it is gone as well. It seems nothing is going your way today.

You wander around the town for the next several hours, until you feel pretty familiar with the area. Wandering to the north you pass dozens of craftsmen working in their lodges, working leather or pounding metal into numerous shapes. Further on the felters beat bales of wool furiously in an effort to make it workable for weavers to make garments, and cobblers carefully stitch leather together to make fine pairs of boots. After exploring a bit more the sun has set enough for you to know which direction west is, and you realize you haven’t gone to that section of town yet so you head over. The western area is opposite where you started, and has hundreds of shacks filled with potatoes mixed in with the mud huts that people live in. From the edge of the town you gaze towards the sunset, and below that burning orb of light are potato fields stretching away as far as the eye can see. Other than a few dozen people checking on the crops there isn’t much to see, so you start strolling towards the southern end of town. Along the way you can’t resist the hunger pangs anymore and eat the $food you had been saving all this time. At the southern end is mostly nicer residentials, and there are shops propped up against the houses here and there implying the inhabitants sell trinkets out of their front door. There is significantly more road traffic here as well as many people walk along the main south road and a few carts pulled by horses amble past filled with miscellaneous goods. A little later you happen across a shrine, where a perfectly spherical orb of polished stone rests. The orb is slightly taller than you, and is so perfectly round and polished it can’t possibly be handmade. Below the orb is a plaque reading ‘Serius’ last stand.’ You lean against a tree next to the orb resting for a while, gathering your thoughts. After a while of simply watching the inhabitants of Kingsbridge pass by, the sun begins to set. You will have to either find a place to hunker down in the town for the night or leave before it gets too dark to see where you are going.

Stay in Town

Leave Kingsbridge

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The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you, but I’m going to stick with $aName and $liName.

[$bName] ah… Unfortunate. Well, good luck to the three of you then.

With a look of mild bemusement, $bName gets up and chugs down the last of her now watered-down beer. She doesn’t even bother to look back as she heads for the door, and leaves without saying another word.

[$liName] Bit weird, that one…

[$aName] Yay for us! So glad to have someone that can give us a real advantage for once!

$aName is beaming at you with a triumphant smile on her face so genuine you can’t help but grin back.

[$aName] Let’s try and get to Dottle before it gets too dark to see. I was originally planning on waiting until morning to leave but now I’m too excited!

[$pName] Hey, are you sure? We could just wait a few days first…

[$aName] Wait a few days stuck in this dump of a town? If you fancy eating nothing but potatoes for a week then go for it, but I simply refuse to waste away here!

$aName and $liName stand up, gathering their things and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance. $aName leads the way to the plaza with a cheerful bounce in her step, and it isn’t long before the three of you are on the road to exit Kingsbridge out the east side where you had originally come in. Suddenly $aName turns to face you, and without looking walks backwards along the road.

[$aName] So Mr. Mysterious, what is your secret power? I’m sure only the most amazing magicians from $pLocation can use that weird looking device you got there, and you were simply holding back out of humility!

She turns again so that she can look ahead and walks beside you on your left. $liName matches your speed and walks on your right, but is distracted by looking up at the first stars in the sky that are starting to poke out.

[$pName] Well, it is kinda hard to describe. I guess you could say I can… see into the future.

[$aName] What!?

[$liName] Pff.

They both stop walking and stare at you expectantly. You wish you could find better words to describe the situation but the most important thing is that you warn them of what lays ahead.

[$pName] It’s not magic though. Not like yours. It’s a… gut feeling you could say. And it only works in specific situations… But listen there’s something important I need to tell you guys.

$liName and $aName look at you with intense concentration. It is a relief they are taking you seriously despite hardly knowing you.

[$pName] Up ahead, there is an Oak Tree. It stands by itself along the path we are taking to Dottle. Inside that Oak Tree is a man that wants to hurt us, probably with a ranged attack. I don’t know why, but he is going to attack us as we approach without even trying to say anything first. Let’s just say in my visions… Things don’t end well for us. We need a plan.

[$aName] ….

[$liName] ….

The pair look at you as if they are still deciding whether or not they want to trust you. After glancing at eachother however, they give a little nod and turn back to ask you:

[$aName] Ok then Mister Fortune teller, if you can see the future what do we need to do in order to defeat him?

[$pName] That’s the problem… in all of my visions… we haven’t beaten him yet. I have no idea.

$liName looks exasperated, and throws her hands into the air.

[$liName] Is this some kind of joke? Why even bother…

[$aName] $liName!

[$liName] … telling … us…

$liName gives up on her rant halfway through, thinks for a moment, and then continues.

[$liName] …What kind of bullshit is this? You can tell the future and we are going to get ambushed? By who? I don’t believe you!

[$pName] You don’t have to trust or believe me yet, just be ready! If I’m right, then you won’t die, and if I’m wrong, no harm done.

[$aName] He’s got a point!

[$liName] It’s been a long time since I practiced arrow deflections and if this guy is some kind of assassin it’s gonna be hard to deal with him...

[$aName] Luckily for you, I brushed up on my deflections only last week while you were spending all day laying around! You remember that?

$liName gives $aName a guilty look before staring down at the ground sheepishly.

[$aName] Oh-Kaaaaay, so here is the plan then. We will march straight towards the Oak tree in a line, with me at the front. As soon as he starts firing we break into a run and rush him down while I deflect for us. We rush him down, disarm him, and ask him what his problem is. Sound good?

You and $liName nod in approval. And with that, the three of you continue on your way. By the time you make it to the brook the silence has become a little uncomfortable, so you break the lull.

[$pName] Can you tell me a little more about magic?

[$aName] I told you the most important stuff earlier already. To cast a spell you just have to visualize the effect and utter the control word. The visualization is just as important as the pronunciation. The reason why mages don’t just randomly spout out gibberish all the time in order to discover new control words is that you have to combine it with the visualization or else it doesn’t work.

[$liName] …

The three of you wash your faces and take a drink from the brook, and you relish in the refreshing taste. Unfortunately it seems like your new friends are pretty tense about the upcoming fight still, so you try to relax their nerves by asking another question.

[$pName] So… Whats up with your swords? They look pretty unique.

$liName and $aName look at each other and grin. Turning back to you, $liName does a little bow, before bending her knees slightly in preparation. With the same flourish you had seen earlier in the alleyway, $liName draws her sword and waves it in the air as if she is fighting an imaginary foe. It is remarkably long at about 5 feet in length, and its hardened steel glows with a unique iridescence similar to that of an opal. It is ever so slightly curved and near the top it flattens out, like a katana.

[$liName] Do you know what kind of sword this is?

You say nothing.

[$liName] It’s an extremely rare kind of sword called a Fisherman’s blade, named so because it is as long as a fishing pole. The reason it is so rare is because swords this long and thin are supposed to break extremely easily…

She runs her finger gently across the side of the blade, up and down.

[$liName] But this one is made with a steel-Dragonium Alloy. Because of this, the blade never dulls and is 100 times stronger than any normal sword. The result is that we get the adaptability of a sword with the range of a spear, without the disadvantage of a wobbly brittle blade. As long as you are properly trained, which we are, a swordswoman who wields a Fisherman’s blade is the most dangerous there is.

[$aName] My father ordered twin Fisherman blades for $liName and I a few years ago when he found 6 marbles worth of Dragonium on a battlefield. Can you believe how lucky that is? Some rich knight had an entire shield loaded with the stuff, but ended up getting shot in the back by an arrow. Anyways, my father sold two of the six, had one marble made into each of our swords, kept one and gave the last to me.

$aName pulls at a necklace hidden underneath her dress that you couldn’t see before. The chain is made of tiny rings of metal, and the pendant is a large marble of incredibly luminescent Opal. As the moonlight starts to shine on the field around you and dance in the waves of the brook, so too does it give the marble an incredible glow that makes it seem like it is from another world entirely.

[$aName] I don’t know if you had any Dragonium where you are from, but these are crazy rare and valuable. If I were to sell this thing, It would probably be worth like… worth about… ah…

[$liName] You could probably buy everything for sale in Kingsbridge as well as half the shops.

[$aName] Yeah probably! Maybe even the entire town if you found the right buyer. A whole town captured in a single marble, pretty crazy huh?

She rotates the marble so that it catches the light, it really is quite dazzling. The three of you continue along the path.

[$aName] Do you know where Dragonium comes from, $pName?

[$pName] Not at all.

[$aName] You guys must have been pretty sheltered in $pLocation to not even know about Dragonium… Anyways, Dragonium is a metal that has been melted down from the Original Hero’s blade from centuries ago. As you SURELY remember, the hero was created by the Ancient Dragon…

$aName and liName waggle their fingers across their chests

[$aName] … to smite evil from the world. Back in those days The Ancient Dragon always fulfilled the wish of any soul brave enough to pass his test, no matter how dastardly the wish would be. So the Hero’s job was to hunt down and defeat these people if they used their wish for bad things. Considering people would often wish for ridiculous things like ultimate power or immortality, that’s a pretty tall order! So the dragon forged a blade of pure Dragonium so that he could level the playing field, and gave it to the Original Hero. So then the hero spent decades going around and kicking ass, there’s like a whole book on it somewhere that tells you all the…

[$liName] A Hero’s ballad.

[$aName] … what?

[$liName] A hero’s ballad, that’s the name of the book with all his stories.

[$aName] Oh, um, ok so the book is called “A Hero’s ballad” and it tells all about his adventures but anyways he’s gotta retire one day and his son takes the sword in his stead, but the son died to some sort of hydra or crazy monster…

[$liName] Chimera! $aName how did you forget this stuff already!?

$aName looks at you with an exasperated look on her face.

[$aName] Ok so it turns out I’m not a professional history genius, but I’m doing my best! Sooooooo, he dies to a chimera which luckily don’t exist anymore and another adventurer randomly finds the sword and realizes the thing is AMAZING. Like, crazy good. It’s so light it feels like an extension of your arm…

[$liName] … So sharp it cuts through anything …

[$aName] … never dulls or breaks either, and I think something about it being able to slice through and deflect magic?

[$liName] Yeah I’ve heard that too.

[$aName] So basically this sword is crazy awesome, but the guy is clever and melts it down, creating two smaller blades instead of one GIANT blade like it was before. He gives each blade to a son of his, who then become master swordsmen and gain a big following. Before you know it you’ve got $kingdomName and $neighborName, each one founded by a royal son. That was a VERY long time ago now though, and over the centuries the swords were lost and recovered and smelted down and reforged many times. Since smelting with even a small marble’s worth of Dragonium results in an incredible sword, all the nobles want one and it has become extremely valuable. Aaaaaand that is about it, did I forget anything?

[$liName] Nope, that about covers it. So the moral of the story is don’t mess with us, something you would do well to remember. Oh, and one last note; my sword is named Gasp, and $aName’s sword is named Whisper. It’s considered bad luck to wear a blade of this caliber and not name it.

And so the three of you continue along the path, the two women scanning their surroundings the entire time. In the blink of an eye the three of you pass the rickety wooden sign where you started what feels like ages ago, and you continue to make your way along the hilly countryside. The tension in the air is so thick you find it hard to breathe.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

Your small party makes excellent progress, and the moonlight makes it easy enough to traverse the dirt path that winds across the hills. Once the Tree is about a 100 feet away, $aName and $liName draw their blades with a flourish, and prepare themselves.

[$aName] It’s important we figure out why this assassin is trying to attack us. This situation where we know where he waits instead of him having the jump on us is the best chance we are going to get. Let’s march forward to victory, and may the Ancient Dragon protect us.

She finishes with a shaky voice, and both she and $liName waggle their fingers across their chests. The three of you line up with $aName in the lead, and march towards the tree. With weapons drawn the assassin will surely realize he’s been outed you think, and start firing the moment you get within range. This prediction comes true shortly afterwards as the whistle of an arrow sounds through the air.

Wheeoow!

Clang!

With an incredible show of coordination $aName swipes her blade across her body, perfectly deflecting the arrow and sending the broken pieces flying into the grass.

[$aName] Here we go! Rush him down!

The three of you charge, and you feel particularly useless and vulnerable sprinting forward without any weapon.

Wheeeow! Ting!

Wheeoow! Clink!

Without breaking her stride, $aName manages to block each projectile as they come rushing forwards in a truly remarkable display of skill. In mere moments the three of you finally arrive at the tree, the most dangerous part of this entire operation. Up in the branches, the assassin is aiming down at nearly point blank range and there is no time to lose.

[$aName] We gotta get him down!

$aName steels herself for the effort, and charges at the tree as fast as she can. Leaping off the ground, she kicks off the trunk sending herself flying upwards with remarkable agility. She brings Whisper behind her, ready to spin the deadly blade around and dislodge the assassin from his perch. But before she can begin her attack;

Woosh! Shtuck!

[$aName] Agghhh!

The assassin’s perch above is too advantageous, hidden as he is and with all the height he needs to aim perfect shots. While she was jumping off the trunk of the Oak Tree he had readied a throwing knife, and let it loose at incredibly speed towards $aName. In midair, she instinctually understood she needed the block the projectile and moved to block it, but expected an arrow instead of a knife and blocked too early. If only his attack wasn’t shrouded by the leaves and darkness of the night!

Whoomph!

$aName hits the ground hard, the throwing knife sticking out of her side. It looks like the blade was somehow perfectly aimed to avoid the protection of the leather armor she wore under her dress and is hilt deep inside of her ribcage. Moaning, she writhes on the ground in pain.

[$liName] $aName!

Sprinting at the trunk of the tree, $liName jumps straight towards the wood and uses her horizontal momentum to kick off it and launch herself several feet into the air. In the same fluid motion, she whips her arm around sending Gasp’s wicked blade slicing through the branches. The brittle wood gives a slight resistance but to your surprise she cuts a huge swath out of the tree and tumbles down along with a multitude of branches and some kind of wooden platform. With a loud crash everything smashes into the dirt below, except for a single hooded figure who lands nimbly on his feet and tucks into a roll.

You are just close enough to get a good look at him. The stranger is covered head to toe in midnight black leather and cloth, giving them a rugged and stealthy look. Judging by the height and muscles on the stranger it appears to be a man of a little more than six feet in height. Across the stranger’s chest, waist, legs, arms, and back are countless knives, swords, and weaponry of all kinds. He wears a black hood and Black veil which makes it impossible to see any of his features. As he rises to his feet and approaches the pile of branches, you realize he isn’t fazed at all by the fact he must have just dropped around 15 feet.

Once he nears the destroyed platform and splintered wood, he slowly bends down and picks up the bow that he must have dropped in the fall. It is a short recurve bow of excellent quality, and he tests the string as he strides closer to where $liName must be trapped under the branches. With slow and deliberate movements, he reaches behind him to where a quiver rests on the small of his back, and draws out an arrow. Nocking it, he begins to look around the pile of leaves and branches for his prey. It doesn’t take long.

[$liName] $pName! PLEASE! I’m trapped! $aName! Help, anybody!

[$pName] I’m Coming!

[$aName] $liName…

[$liName] PLEASE!

You were frozen in fear, but now you finally manage to will your body into action. Charging, you sprint towards the veiled figure and with all your momentum aim a spartan kick at his back. Unfortunately he must have heard you coming because he dodges sideways at the last second, and in the same movement grabs your leg you just kicked at him and lifts upwards. The movement completely catches you off balance and you go flying up, then down and into the ground with a loud thud. It knocks the wind out of you completely, and you see bright lights flash across your vision as you gasp for air.

[$pName] uuuuuck

Correctly identifying you as a non-threat, the man leaves you writhing on the ground and slowly walks to where $aName is writhing in pain. Reaching behind him, he nooks an arrow to his bow and takes aim.

[$liName] fuck…

[$pName] \*cough\* no…

The man doesn’t hesitate for a second. With one motion he raises his arm, and loosens the arrow straight into $aName. Unable to watch you close your eyes, and after the thud of the arrow hitting her sounds out you can no longer hear her cries of pain. $aName is dead. You can barely breathe but you force yourself onto your knees. Your vision is blurred and you can hardly balance despite not even standing up. The masked man doesn’t waste a second, and walks over to the mess of leaves and branches where $liName is trapped. He nooks another arrow.

[$pName] No, Please….

[$liName] $aName? Is that you?

The branches block your view but the unquestionable sound of the bow firing off can mean only one thing. The silence is deafening. Unsteadily, you raise yourself to your feet and steel yourself to fight for your life. The man turns, and wordlessly marches towards you as if killing your two new friends was nothing notable at all. Balancing as best you can, you bring your fist back and let loose the strongest punch you can muster. Effortlessly, the hooded figure dodges sideways while simultaneously looping the bow around your arm. With blinding speed he continues backwards and around you and slides the bow over your head, so that the string is towards him against your back and the wood of the bow is across your chest. Planting one foot firmly on your back, he draws the string back and nooks yet another arrow to it. Before you can even react, he lets go and the string pulls taught, pushing the arrow straight into your back, through your lung, and poking out the other side. Feebly, you pick at the head of the arrow peeking out of your chest and cough up blood, falling to your knees. Your effort was nothing less than pitiful, and with disbelief you realize it’s all over. The mysterious stranger kneels down, and whispers into your ear.

[???] I am become DEATH…

He stands and spartan kicks you with terrible strength, sending your dying body flying into the mess of branches and leaves. The last thing you see before succumbing to the pain engulfing your body is the lifeless face of $liName who is trapped under a mess of branches next to you, a single tear running down her face. The last thing you hear is the nails on chalkboard voice of the mysterious assailant.

[???] … Destroyer of Worlds.

With one last wheeze sending blood oozing out of your mouth, you gasp your final breath and die with a shudder in the branches.

THE END

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The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you two, but I’m going to stick with $bName.

[$aName] WHAT!?!?

$aName slams her hands on the table, immediately standing up and sending $bName’s beer toppling over.

[$aName] BASED ON WHAT!?

[$liName] $aName! Calm down!

$liName roughly grabs $aName’s dress and pulls her back into her seat. A few patrons around the tavern glance over at the commotion, but once they see there isn’t a fight happening they become disinterested and look away.

[$aName] Ok whatever, but how about you sell us the magic Dragon locator? I’ll pay good money for it…

[$bName] Enough. Without that locator $pName is useless to me, and besides only people from $pLocation would be able to us it to locate the dragon anyways. Respect his decision and leave us.

$aName and $liName begrudgingly leave their seats, and looking back over her shoulder $aName gets her last word in:

[$aName] I should never have offered you a spot in our group $bName, you never would have fit in. And as for you $pName… well good luck dealing with *her*. You’ll need it.

The two stunning women gather their things, adjust their swords, and storm out of the door.

[$bName] They aren’t wrong you know. I haven’t travelled with anyone in a long time and I’ve heard I’m not the easiest travel buddy. I guess my biggest advice for you is don’t say or do anything stupid and we can get along fine.

You gulp.

[$bName] I stopped in Kingsbridge to buy a backup dagger since my old one was falling apart, and before you ask no you cannot have it. I wasn’t intending on staying here for this long however, and want to at least head further east past Dottle where there are less people with prying eyes.

She stands up, gathering herself and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance.

[$bName] They raise horses near Dottle and I was hoping to get one this evening, but looks like it will be dark in only a few moments. I’ll get one tomorrow morning and then we will officially begin our journey together.

[$pName] You mean you will be getting two horses right? It would be a little demeaning walking next to you while you ride along…

$bName stares at you blankly, and says nothing. You take the hint, and shut your mouth. The two of you head for the plaza, and carefully make your way across the uneven stones. Turning right you begin heading east, and in the dim light you can barely recognize some of the buildings you had passed by earlier. Eventually the two of you finally exit the town and stroll along the dirt pathway, saying nothing. $bName walks with her head held high and her chest out, and her excellent posture makes her seem like the most confident person in the world.

[$pName] Listen $bName, there is something important I need to tell you.

$bName turns her head to look at you with an expression of surprise.

[$bName] Go ahead.

[$pName] I have an ability of sorts… I guess you could call it a gut feeling… but I can sometimes sorta see the future, in a way. Not exactly, but close enough. And basically, there’s an Oak Tree up ahead past a rickety wooden sign and hiding in that oak tree is an assassin. He is going to attack us.

You look at her face expectantly, waiting to see her reaction. Dropping a bomb like that to someone you barely know isn’t exactly a great way to build a relationship. Despite such grim news however, $bName looks unperturbed and absentmindedly scratches at her mole.

[$bName] Why did you tell me that?

[$pName] … What?

[$bName] You heard me. Why did you tell me that?

[$pName] I’m not sure what you mean. Because I want us to defeat the assassin?

[$bName] Listen. I know you are lying about your background and I know you are lying about your motivations. There is a lot about you that doesn’t add up. I knew the moment I offered to team up with you there was a good chance you were leading me into a trap, but I couldn’t figure out where or why. And now, you tell me all about the trap? As if you are betraying your assassin friend out of guilt?

[$pName] Assassin friend? It’s not like that at all, I don’t know what you mean…

[$bName] I’m not going to pretend to understand what the hell you are playing at, but if what you say is true then I need to take care of this assassin immediately. I’d much rather face them in open combat than wait for them to kill me in my sleep. I have one rule, and you better follow it.

[$pName] What?

[$bName] Stay at least 20 feet away from me while I take care of this guy. I don’t trust you, and I don’t want you messing up the fight either. Stay out of my way.

The two of you wordlessly continue along the road, passing over the brook and heading along the path towards the rickety wooden sign where you started what feels like ages ago. The silence is uncomfortable, and the grim resolve with which $bName marches ahead of you is extremely intimidating. Unable to handle the silence anymore and with a while still to go before the moment of truth, you try to coax her into further conversation to break the ice.

[$pName] So… You have been travelling alone for a long time then?

$bName keeps her eye on the path ahead of her, and without turning to look at you replies:

[$bName] It’s a long story, and probably not worth sharing.

[$pName] It isn’t as if we were doing something else more important. I’m all ears.

$bName sighs and looks up at the sky, which is starting to get properly dark now. The first few stars of the night wink down on her, and the moon meagerly begins to light the waving fields of tall grass around the two of you. The sound of the wind caressing the foliage is soothing and familiar.

[$bName] Like I said, I was born in $bLocation. I was an only child, and my mother died giving birth to me so I never knew her. My dad said she looked just like me though and was a gentle spirit.

$bName briefly touches her mole before continuing. At this point she is lost in the memories.

[$bName] My dad was a swordsmith in $bLocation, but not very talented. The job was mostly just so that he could make new swords to practice with, which was his real passion. Ever since I was young he trained me to be a swordswoman, and he insisted that as long as I practiced enough I could beat anyone with a blade. One day when I was about 16 the King requested he join the army in order to make weapons for him, and I never heard or saw him again. Knowing him, he probably got overzealous and tried to join in on a battle. Old fool.

The moonlight glistens off her white cloak as she marches, and reflects brightly as it glances across the bronze rings she wears. The wolf on the back of her cloak winks at you as it waves in the gentle breeze.

[$bName] I stayed in town forging weapons, but hated it the whole time. The only thing I ever really enjoyed was my father’s practice drills, but sword fighting doesn’t make much money in a town without conflict. At about 22 I decided I had enough of waiting for my father to return and traveled south to the border. Mercenary gangs were at their peak back then and one of them, the Wild Wolves…

She juts out her thumb towards her back, pointing at the cloak

[$bName] Took me in eagerly. Their specialty was skirmishing and flanking maneuvers with sword wielding warriors. I fought with them for the next two years, eventually becoming a squad leader and taking part in many battles. I’ve fought on the King’s side, and I fought for $neighborName too. As long as they financed my efforts I didn’t care. Eventually some court official of $neighborName noticed my skill and employed me as a personal bodyguard. So that’s what I did for another couple years until we got caught in an ambush and my employer was killed. People don’t particularly like employing bodyguards that had their VIP killed so I had no choice but to return home with all the savings I had accumulated. When I returned, I was shocked: Half the town was starving. The war had taken its toll even on communities as far away from the frontlines as $bLocation, and the King’s heavy taxation bled it dry of funds. I decided then and there I wouldn’t fight as a mercenary ever again and instead I would find a way to help them.

$bName sighs loudly, and brings her hands together behind her head.

[$bName] Ever since then, which would be around 3 years ago, I have explored around the world looking for the Ancient Dragon and my magical fruit.

You glance at her hands but she doesn’t do the waggle thing.

[$bName] I’m starting to think that neither is real, but seeing the world is nice and I have plenty of money saved up from my old fighting days. It’s better than smithing, that’s for sure.

$bName has probably said more words in the last 10 minutes than she has said in the last 10 months, so you give her a rest and soak in the ambiance of the moonlit countryside. Next, you pass the wooden sign and realize the time has come.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

You tense up with anticipation, but it seems as if $bName isn’t done with her monologue yet.

[$bName] What If I told you that was all a lie? That everything I just told you is a practiced story I have used on countless people so that they would feel like they knew and trusted me? Would you believe me?

She stops walking, and faces you entirely. You freeze, and feel like you can’t move an inch. Not far ahead, the leaves of the oak tree rustle in the wind. $bName’s head perks up slightly, as if she heard or sensed something you couldn’t.

[$bName] We are going to talk after I take care of this guy, don’t you worry about that.

In a smooth motion $bName draws her blade and looks over her shoulder at you.

[$bName] Stay right there little duckling, it will all be over soon.

Blade drawn, cloak billowing in the wind, $bName marches towards The Oak Tree. Then, every couple of seconds you start to hear a strange sound.

wheeow, ting!

wheeeeeow, clang!

It’s hard to see in the moonlight, but $bName is marching towards the Oak Tree and swinging her sword wildly every few seconds. Finally, you realize what the noise is coming from: it is the shrill hiss of an arrow being fired and travelling through the air. Every couple of seconds, someone from the branches of the oak tree is launching an arrow towards $bName, and every time the arrow is launched she swiftly deflects it with her sword. But she isn’t able to block them all, and finally she misses one and it hits her armored chest with a loud Thud. She stumbles for a half second, recomposes herself and continues with a grimace.

wheeow, ping!

She deflects another arrow, to have such reaction speed is seemingly unhuman.

wheeow, SHUNK!

She is right below the tree now and simply cannot react in time to block the arrow. Shielding her face, the arrow shoots straight through the bracer on her arm and cleanly flies into her chest to join the first. Because it lost so much speed, it bounces off the armor but in its wake is a trail of blood pouring out of $bName’s arm. Yelling in pain and frustration now, $bName approaches the base of the tree. The attacker continues to rain arrows down from above but $bName finds herself unable to climb the tree because that would expose herself to more fire. It’s an impossible battle to win, but $bName has a trick up her sleeve.

[$bName] Motherfucker, DIE!

She times another skillful block with her sword, deflecting one last arrow from near point-blank range. Above her is the bowman, but you can’t see him very well because of the branches and leaves in the tree. Winding back, $bName lowers her sword and brings it upwards with all her might as if she was casting a fishing reel. Incredibly, she lets go of the weapon at the moment it gains the most momentum and it goes flying upwards at incredible speeds. With a loud crack the sword hits the target, and a wooden structure falls out of the tree along with a hooded figure. He lands on the ground using both feet and deftly tucks into a roll. Coming up, the strange hooded figure brandishes a long zig zagged dagger, giving up on his bow that dropped with the rest of the platform. Wild eyed and clearly pissed, $bName draws her own sparkling dagger from her waist and the two square off.

You make your way closer in order to get a better view, careful to give the battle a wide berth. By the time you are within 20 feet, the battle you were watching just moments ago has already evolved into what can only be described as a fencing match between masters. $bName prances forwards and backwards, stabbing with her dagger while the hooded figure leans back and retreats. Every time the strange figure dodges, he does so with a perfectly calculated amount of effort so that $bName’s attacks miss by mere inches. After $bName has lunged, the figure counters, sending his own well aimed attacks at her neck. $bName skillfully dodges these as well, but with less finesse and a hint of desperation. Blood is pouring out the wound on her arm, and it is likely the one that hit her armor cracked a couple ribs or worse. With a grimace she fights on however, better than most could even without injury. Watching the duel rage on, you stare with your jaw dropped in wonder.

The duel progresses into the grass field, where the tall blades tickle at your waist. Ahead of you by only a few feet the pair continue their deadly dance, and behind them the moon outlines their movements. Finally, a patch of grass below the hooded figure’s foot bends strangely causing their ankle to twist, and fall to their knee. Triumphantly $bName charges forward and stabs her dagger at the mysterious stranger’s hooded face. But as quick as she can lunge, the stranger dodges, and he grabs a hold of $bName’s hand still holding the dagger. With a flash, he moves his other arm upwards and slices $bName’s hand clean off, sending it flying into the air. $bName gasps, and stares at her appendage flying upward, upward, upward towards the moon. Completely dumbfounded, she glances at you one last time with a look of utter shock before the stranger plunges their dagger straight into her neck and slits her throat. $bName collapses, spilling blood across the grass.

Slowly, the stranger places their dagger into the crook of their elbow and draws it across, cleaning off the blood that just stained it. With a deliberate motion the stranger turns to face you, and slowly marches forwards.

The stranger is covered head to toe in midnight black leather and cloth, giving them a rugged and stealthy look. Judging by the height and muscles on the stranger it appears to be a man of a little more than six feet in height. Across the stranger’s chest, waist, legs, arms, and back are countless knives, swords, and weaponry of all kinds. He wears a black hood and Black veil which makes it impossible to see any of his features. As he slowly approaches, you realize he isn’t even breathing hard.

You try to move backwards, but you trip on something and you stumble to the ground. Wordlessly the stranger approaches, brandishing the dagger until he is right above you. With only one hand he reaches down and grabs you, pulling and twisting until you are forced to your knees. Desperate to stop him, you try to grab at the blade or push him away but it is no use. With a clean swipe he lopes off your outstretched right arm at the elbow, and in the next moment twirls to the other side and takes off the left as well. You are so astonished you feel nothing, and stare dumbly at the stumps where your arms used to be. With a harsh voice that sounds like nails on a chalkboard, he triumphs:

[???] I am become DEATH…

The pain from your arms being sliced off finally hits and it burns with such agony you become dizzy. Delirious and exhausted you scream, scream as hard as you can and as long as your lungs allow. The pain is overwhelming, and unlike anything you have ever felt before. Your stumps flail about, sending blood spurting all over the grass. Not a single drop lands on the stranger’s garb as he dodges behind you, and whispers into your ear the last words you ever hear:

[???] …Destroyer of Worlds

The next instant, he sends the dagger into your neck and flicks outwards, completely cutting open your jugular. The last thing you think before bleeding to death is how thankful you are that you don’t have to feel the pain in your arms any longer. Dismembered and defiled, you fall to the ground as a lifeless corpse and gurgle blood across the grass pathetically.

THE END

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The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you, but I’m going to stick with $aName and $liName.

[$bName] ah… Unfortunate. Well, good luck to the three of you then.

With a look of mild bemusement, $bName gets up and chugs down the last of her now watered-down beer. She doesn’t even bother to look back as she heads for the door, and leaves without saying another word.

[$liName] Bit weird, that one…

[$aName] Yay for us! So glad to have someone that can give us a real advantage for once!

$aName is beaming at you with a triumphant smile on her face so genuine you can’t help but grin back.

[$aName] Let’s try and get to Dottle before it gets too dark to see. I was originally planning on waiting until morning to leave but now I’m too excited!

[$pName] Hey, are you sure? We could just wait a few days first…

[$aName] Wait a few days stuck in this dump of a town? If you fancy eating nothing but potatoes for a week then go for it, but I simply refuse to waste away here!

$aName and $liName stand up, gathering their things and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance. $aName leads the way to the plaza with a cheerful bounce in her step, and it isn’t long before the three of you are on the road to exit Kingsbridge out the east side where you had originally come in. Suddenly $aName turns to face you, and without looking walks backwards along the road.

[$aName] So Mr. Mysterious, what is your secret power? I’m sure only the most amazing magicians from $pLocation can use that weird looking device you got there, and you were simply holding back out of humility!

She turns again so that she can look ahead and walks beside you on your left. $liName matches your speed and walks on your right, but is distracted by looking up at the first stars in the sky that are starting to poke out.

[$pName] Well, it is kinda hard to describe. I guess you could say I can… see into the future.

[$aName] What!?

[$liName] Pff.

They both stop walking and stare at you expectantly. You wish you could find better words to describe the situation but the most important thing is that you warn them of what lays ahead.

[$pName] It’s not magic though. Not like yours. It’s a… gut feeling you could say. And it only works in specific situations… But listen there’s something important I need to tell you guys.

$liName and $aName look at you with intense concentration. It is a relief they are taking you seriously despite hardly knowing you.

[$pName] Up ahead, there is an Oak Tree. It stands by itself along the path we are taking to Dottle. Inside that Oak Tree is a man that wants to hurt us, probably with a ranged attack. I don’t know why, but he is going to attack us as we approach without even trying to say anything first. Let’s just say in my visions… Things don’t end well for us. We need a plan.

[$aName] ….

[$liName] ….

The pair look at you as if they are still deciding whether or not they want to trust you. After glancing at eachother however, they give a little nod and turn back to ask you:

[$aName] Ok then Mister Fortune teller, if you can see the future what do we need to do in order to defeat him?

[$pName] That’s the problem… in all of my visions… we haven’t beaten him yet. I have no idea.

$liName looks exasperated, and throws her hands into the air.

[$liName] Is this some kind of joke? Why even bother…

[$aName] $liName!

[$liName] … telling … us…

$liName gives up on her rant halfway through, thinks for a moment, and then continues.

[$liName] …What kind of bullshit is this? You can tell the future and we are going to get ambushed? By who? I don’t believe you!

[$pName] You don’t have to trust or believe me yet, just be ready! If I’m right, then you won’t die, and if I’m wrong, no harm done.

[$aName] He’s got a point!

[$liName] It’s been a long time since I practiced arrow deflections and if this guy is some kind of assassin it’s gonna be hard to deal with him...

[$aName] Luckily for you, I brushed up on my deflections only last week while you were spending all day laying around! You remember that?

$liName gives $aName a guilty look before staring down at the ground sheepishly.

[$aName] Oh-Kaaaaay, so here is the plan then. We will march straight towards the Oak tree in a line, with me at the front. As soon as he starts firing we break into a run and rush him down while I deflect for us. We rush him down, disarm him, and ask him what his problem is. Sound good?

You and $liName nod in approval. And with that, the three of you continue on your way. By the time you make it to the brook the silence has become a little uncomfortable, so you break the lull.

[$pName] Can you tell me a little more about magic?

[$aName] I told you the most important stuff earlier already. To cast a spell you just have to visualize the effect and utter the control word. The visualization is just as important as the pronunciation. The reason why mages don’t just randomly spout out gibberish all the time in order to discover new control words is that you have to combine it with the visualization or else it doesn’t work.

[$liName] …

The three of you wash your faces and take a drink from the brook, and you relish in the refreshing taste. Unfortunately it seems like your new friends are pretty tense about the upcoming fight still, so you try to relax their nerves by asking another question.

[$pName] So… Whats up with your swords? They look pretty unique.

$liName rolls her eyes and $aName grins back at you. Turning back to you, $liName does a little bow, before bending her knees slightly in preparation. With the same flourish you had seen earlier in the alleyway, $liName draws her sword and waves it in the air as if she is fighting an imaginary foe. It is remarkably long at about 5 feet in length, and its hardened steel glows with a unique iridescence similar to that of an opal. It is ever so slightly curved and near the top it flattens out, like a katana.

[$liName] Do you know what kind of sword this is?

You say nothing.

[$liName] It’s an extremely rare kind of sword called a Fisherman’s blade, named so because it is as long as a fishing pole. The reason it is so rare is because swords this long and thin are supposed to break extremely easily…

She runs her finger gently across the side of the blade, up and down.

[$liName] But this one is made with a steel-Dragonium Alloy. Because of this, the blade never dulls and is 100 times stronger than any normal sword. The result is that we get the adaptability of a sword with the range of a spear, without the disadvantage of a wobbly brittle blade. As long as you are properly trained, which we are, a swordswoman who wields a Fisherman’s blade is the most dangerous there is.

[$aName] My father ordered twin Fisherman blades for $liName and I a few years ago when he found 6 marbles worth of Dragonium on a battlefield. Can you believe how lucky that is? Some rich knight had an entire shield loaded with the stuff, but ended up getting shot in the back by an arrow. Anyways, my father sold two of the six, had one marble made into each of our swords, kept one and gave the last to me.

$aName pulls at a necklace hidden underneath her dress that you couldn’t see before. The chain is made of tiny rings of metal, and the pendant is a large marble of incredibly luminescent Opal. As the moonlight starts to shine on the field around you and dance in the waves of the brook, so too does it give the marble an incredible glow that makes it seem like it is from another world entirely.

[$aName] I don’t know if you had any Dragonium where you are from, but these are crazy rare and valuable. If I were to sell this thing, It would probably be worth like… worth about… ah…

[$pName] The Town of Kingsbridge?

$aName gives you a surprised look, and smiles.

[$aName] yeah exactly! If you found the right buyer I bet one of these marbles could get you a whole town’s worth of Aureus.

She rotates the marble so that it catches the light, it really is quite dazzling. The three of you continue along the path.

[$aName] Do you know where Dragonium comes from, $pName?

[$pName] I get the feeling you are about to tell me.

[$aName] You’re right about that! Dragonium is a metal that has been melted down from the Original Hero’s blade from centuries ago. As you SURELY remember, the hero was created by the Ancient Dragon…

$aName and liName waggle their fingers across their chests

[$aName] … to smite evil from the world. Back in those days The Ancient Dragon always fulfilled the wish of any soul brave enough to pass his test, no matter how dastardly the wish would be. So the Hero’s job was to hunt down and defeat these people if they used their wish for bad things. Considering people would often wish for ridiculous things like ultimate power or immortality, that’s a pretty tall order! So the dragon forged a blade of pure Dragonium so that he could level the playing field, and gave it to the Original Hero. So then the hero spent decades going around and kicking ass, there’s like a whole book on it somewhere that tells you all the…

[$liName] A Hero’s ballad.

[$aName] … what?

[$liName] A hero’s ballad, that’s the name of the book with all his stories.

[$aName] Oh, um, ok so the book is called “A Hero’s ballad” and it tells all about his adventures but anyways he’s gotta retire one day and his son takes the sword in his stead, but the son died to some sort of hydra or crazy monster…

[$liName] Chimera! $aName how did you forget this stuff already!?

$aName looks at you with an exasperated look on her face.

[$aName] Ok so it turns out I’m not a professional history genius, but I’m doing my best! Sooooooo, he dies to a chimera which luckily don’t exist anymore and another adventurer randomly finds the sword and realizes the thing is AMAZING. Like, crazy good. It’s so light it feels like an extension of your arm…

[$liName] … So sharp it cuts through anything …

[$aName] … never dulls or breaks either, and I think something about it being able to slice through and deflect magic?

[$liName] Yeah I’ve heard that too.

[$aName] So basically this sword is crazy awesome, but the guy is clever and melts it down, creating two smaller blades instead of one GIANT blade like it was before. He gives each blade to a son of his, who then become master swordsmen and gain a big following. Before you know it you’ve got $kingdomName and $neighborName, each one founded by a royal son. That was a VERY long time ago now though, and over the centuries the swords were lost and recovered and smelted down and reforged many times. Since smelting with even a small marble’s worth of Dragonium results in an incredible sword, all the nobles want one and it has become extremely valuable. Aaaaaand that is about it, did I forget anything?

[$liName] Nope, that about covers it. So the moral of the story is don’t mess with us, something you would do well to remember. Oh, and one last note; my sword is named Gasp, and $aName’s sword is named Whisper. It’s considered bad luck to wear a blade of this caliber and not name it.

And so the three of you continue along the path, the two women scanning their surroundings the entire time. In the blink of an eye the three of you pass the rickety wooden sign where you started what feels like ages ago, and you continue to make your way along the hilly countryside. The tension in the air is so thick you find it hard to breathe.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

Your small party makes excellent progress, and the moonlight makes it easy enough to traverse the dirt path that winds across the hills. Once the Tree is about a 100 feet away, $aName and $liName draw their blades with a flourish, and prepare themselves.

[$aName] It’s important we figure out why this assassin is trying to attack us. Taking care of him here instead of waiting for him to ambush us later is the best course of action. Let’s march forward to victory, and may the Ancient Dragon protect us.

She finishes with a shaky voice, and both she and $liName waggle their fingers across their chests. The three of you line up with $aName in the lead, and march towards the tree. With weapons drawn the assassin will surely realize he’s been outed, and start firing the moment you get within range. This prediction comes true shortly afterwards as the whistle of an arrow sounds through the air.

Wheeoow!

Clang!

With an incredible show of coordination $aName swipes her blade across her body, perfectly deflecting the arrow and sending the broken pieces flying into the grass.

[$aName] Here we go! Rush him down!

The three of you charge, and you feel particularly useless and vulnerable sprinting forward without any weapon.

Wheeeow! Ting!

Without breaking her stride, $aName manages to block another projectile as it comes rushing forward in a truly remarkable display of skill. Despite your amazement, her face looks worried; these arrows are shot with such incredible force and speed she can barely keep up. Just when you think the next arrow might be the one to slip past her defenses, something remarkable happens.

Eeerrrrrr… Snap!

The sound of wood groaning and finally breaking rings out like a bell in the night, and you realize the weakened platform can’t handle the strain of the assassin’s weight. With a deafening crash, the platform finally rips free of the tree and falls apart, tumbling and clattering across the branches of the oak tree until finally smashing into the ground below. Along with it goes the hooded assassin, who was caught completely by surprise and smashes into branches and eventually the dirt with a loud thud. Quick as a flash he stands back up, but he is clearly wounded and clutches his right arm with his left as if something broke. His left ankle appears smashed to pieces as well, and as he stumbles forward you see that his left foot appears not only almost backwards, but practically sideways as well.

Despite these traumatic injuries, he looks ready for a fight and deadlier than ever. Letting his right arm hang loosely at his side, he draws a sharp looking shortsword that was sheathed behind his back and points it at your group.

$aName and $liName notice the unexpected advantage, and don’t let it go to waste. With a battle cry each move in to attack on opposite sides of the man, and proceed with a flurry of attacks. What happens next is nearly indescribable; with $aName in front of him and $liName behind, the man proceeds to block every single attack they throw at him in quick succession, even managing to squeeze in a small lunge or two during the split seconds between the onslaught. Sparks fly as the blades meet, and the movement of all three combatants is so quick it seems to blur before your eyes. Next, $liName and $aName hesitate for a second and then perform a perfectly choreographed attack where $liName swings low and $aName swings high. The attack looks like it will be impossible to dodge… but the hooded figure seems to defy the impossible with every turn. Seeing the coordinated attack coming, he leaps up using only his right leg as a spring and twists his body, turning himself completely horizontal. Spinning in the air now, he weaves his body in between the low and high attacks and lands back on the ground upright, crouched low. Wordlessly, the mysterious stranger then brings his short sword back up and throws it at incredible speed straight towards $aName.

[$liName] Watch it!

[$aName] Tsk!

$aName dodges right, and the spinning dagger slices past a hairs width away from the side of her ribcage but doesn’t manage to actually cut her. Catching her breath, $aName looks shaken up by the close call and hesitates to rejoin the battle. Meanwhile, the man has turned to confront $liName, having drawn yet another weapon from his leg. This one is a dagger, and is zig zagged in a wicked looking shape. With a loud clang, he blocks another attack from $liName in the nick of time and stumbles towards her, trying to close the gap.

Seeing him distracted, you take off your shoe and throw it at the back of his head as hard as you can. Without even looking, he whips the dagger around behind his head and slices the shoe in half, sending each piece harmlessly to the ground. This guy is inhuman. And you are… useless.

$liName and the man continue fighting in a dance of death for several minutes longer, and neither side seems to be able to overcome the other. Surely if the masked man wasn’t injured and could get within range of hurting her it would be over rather quickly, but $liName plays it smart and never allows him to even get close. The enormous length of Gasp allows her to attack time and time again without putting herself at risk, and the man is forced to do nothing more than block and hope that she makes a mistake. A few times he throws a hidden knife or tries to distract her, but $liName blocks each attempt and keeps the pressure up. A few meters away, $aName watches frozen. She looks like she desperately wants to join in and help, but something holds her back and she doesn’t move an inch. Finally, the stalemate is broken when the masked man leaps backwards from the two women and with a sickening crunch of his ankle lands several meters away.

[???] rrrrrrrrrrrr…

The man starts making a strange guttural sound that you’ve never heard before. It comes from back of his throat and sounds almost like gravel scraping on pavement.

[???] rrrrrrrrrrr AAAACCCHHH!

He follows the gravely sound with an exaggerated noise that could only be him loudly clearing his throat. Wiithout warning, the man erupts into inky black smoke in an enormous explosion that pours black clouds out of every pore of his body. The shockwave is so strong it knocks you back, and you fall flat on your back. In the corner of your vision, you see $aName go tumbling backwards as well, and $liName being flung back but managing to land on her feet.

On guard, the three of you try to see through the smoke but it expanded rapidly and clouded your entire vision. The man has disappeared, and could attack at any angle.

[$aName] Come to me! Quick!

Joining $liName, the pair of you run over to $aName and stand back to back in the shape of a triangle. For a few tense moments you fear that the man in black could attack at any moment, but the dagger never comes. Eventually, the smoke clears and the three of you find yourselves completely alone.

[$liName] He’s… Gone?

[$aName] …

$aName looks extremely shaken up. Trembling violently, she falls to the ground and covers her face as tears silently pour down.

[$liName] $aName?

$liName makes sure the coast is properly clear first before sitting down next to $aName and hugging her back. You find yourself so relieved to have made it out alive that you join her, and the three of you huddled together look like children in a thunderstorm.

[$aName] I’m… \*sob\*, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I let you \*sob\* down…

$liName gently wipes a tear from her face with the back of her hand, and soothes her.

[$liName] You did your best and that’s all that matters. It’s all ok now.

Abruptly, $aName stands up, still shaking and wiping tears from her eyes. She squares off against you and $liName, who still on your knees look up at her surprised.

[$aName] All ok? ALL OK? Do you know who that was? Do you know what we just survived?

You shoot a questioning look at $liName, who seems just as confused as you.

[$aName] That was DEATH! What the fuck is a horseman doing here? We should be dead! No one has ever survived an encounter with DEATH before, yet here we stand!

She turns to you now, and bends over to grab your shirt. Pulling up, she forces you to your feet, and begins shaking you violently back and forth.

[$aName] WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO MAKE DEATH COME FOR US!?!?

$liName shoves herself between the two of you, causing $aName to let you go. Stumbling back, you look at her with a bewildered look.

[$pName] I have no idea! I’ve never met that guy before in my life! Well, technically it would be more accurate to say he has never met me before in his life…

[$aName] What the fuck are you talking about!?!? What did you do!?!? What did you just drag me and $liName into!?!?

[$liName] That’s enough $aName. I understand that was a close call, but now is not the time to let our emotions get in the way of things.

[$aName] Get in the way of things! Get in the way of things? Don’t you understand? That is DEATH, $liName! DEATH waits for no one, and no one can escape it! We are dead women walking!

[$liName] What are you talking about? Who is DEATH?

$aName stares at $liName incredulously for a second before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. After finally getting herself under control, she opens her eyes again and the $aEyeColor of her iris gleams faintly in the moonlight.

[$aName] There is more to the story of the Ancient Dragon that most people don’t know about. That most don’t want to know about.

You hold your breath.

[a$Name] Take a short break first. I’ll tell you on the way to Dottle.

The three of you rest against the Oak tree for a few minutes, silently reflecting on the battle. Unfortunately, one of your shoes is ruined and you shudder at the thought of having to walk all the way to another town halfway barefoot. After a bit of rest, your small group stands back up and walks along the path, which is thankfully mostly downhill. Having not said a word since she asked for the break, $aName finally breaks the silence and explains the gravity of the situation.

[$aName] Centuries ago, the Dragon created our world and all the people, and all the other things you have heard about. He created the Original Hero, the potatoes, and all those other good things. But there’s one thing people hate to admit more than anything else…

You look over at $aName, who is staring up at the night sky. The stars twinkle behind her as if whispering secrets to eachother.

[$aName] I thought what I am about to say was all just conspiracy but… The Dragon was, and is, selfish. He created the world to keep himself amused, and just as often as he created good things, he would create bad things so that he could entertain himself with the ensuing conflict. Sometimes in order to keep the drama going, he would need henchmen to influence the world in a way an enormous 3 story tall dragon couldn’t, and so he created the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

[$pName] The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

[$aName] Yes. You’ve probably heard rumors about them before, but the church does it’s best to hide and squash the tales of their misdeeds. If people knew of how nefarious the Dragon and his henchmen could be, then of course the church who represents them would be shunned by the community…

[$liName] Yes I suppose I’ve heard some conspiracy theories about them once or twice before. And you are saying DEATH is one of them?

[$aName] Yes, and I believe we just met him. The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are DEATH, FAMINE, WAR, and CONQUEST. These four were granted an unimaginable power by the Dragon, and cause no limit of pain and suffering for the people of this world. To be honest, since the dragon hasn’t been seen for so long I expected the horseman to be missing as well but this is terrible news…

[$liName] Sooooo… You are saying we just defeated one of the most powerful beings in the world!?

[$aName] don’t fool yourself $liName. We couldn’t beat him even when he had a broken ankle and his arm was snapped in half. Do you really think we could have beaten him in a straight up battle? Speaking of which, we would have for sure perished if $pName hadn’t warned about his ambush in advance. $pName, you need to start explaining what the hell is going on.

You take a Deep breath.

[$pName] Like I said, I saw him in a vision and that is the best explanation I have. Just like you I want to find the dragon and have him grant me a wish. I want nothing more than to join you and go on an adventure.

$liName turns to you and points an accusing finger.

[$liName] You are the most suspicious person I have ever met. How do we know you weren’t working with DEATH to kill us? And your plan backfired so now you are trying to cover up…

[$pName] cut me some slack, I warned you about the attack didn’t I?

[$aName] Ok so maybe I buy your story about visions, but the thing I don’t get is why you want to join us to see the dragon. What will you wish for?

[$pName] … I haven’t figured that out yet. I suppose by the time we find him, I will know it in my heart.

[$liName] That’s a stupid answer.

[$pName] Well it’s all I got!

[$aName] Not gonna lie $pName, you have given us a lot more questions than answers lately and I’m not sure if I trust you yet. However, the fact you warned us about the attack and that you don’t strike me as a bad person means I’m gonna let you continue to tag along with us for now. But don’t forget, if we are paying for your meals you better make sure you do everything you can to make yourself worth it!

[$liName] You look pretty stupid tromping around with only one shoe and those weird clothes. We’re gonna have to replace those too…

[$aName] I’m thinking he could be our pack mule as repayment. What do you think?

[$liName] I think considering the danger he just put us in, that sounds perfectly fair.

And so, the three of you continue along draped in moonlight until finally reaching Dottle. The next day, $aName bought you some boots and clothes, as well as horses all three of you could ride on. The riding was a little bumpy at first, but it didn’t take long for you to get the hang of it. After carving a wooden sword out of a stick $liName found, she began giving you some basic fencing lessons so that eventually you could use a sword. But her real intentions during that lesson were to confront you.

[$liName] Listen $pName, $aName is a kind soul but a little naïve and that is the only reason you are still around. If I get even a shred of a suspicion you are plotting something against her, you are going to become very familiar with Gasp’s edge, got it?

You gulp.

[$pName] Got it…

Soon after the training session ended, and after regrouping with $aName three of you trotted off into the sunset. The adventure you so desperately wished for finally began.

END OF ARC 2, THE TOWN

50

The Die has been cast.

[$pName] No offense to you two, but I’m going to stick with $bName.

[$aName] WHAT!?!?

$aName slams her hands on the table, immediately standing up and sending $bName’s beer toppling over.

[$aName] BASED ON WHAT!?

[$liName] $aName! Calm down!

$liName roughly grabs $aName’s dress and pulls her back into her seat. A few patrons around the tavern glance over at the commotion, but once they see there isn’t a fight happening they become disinterested and look away.

[$aName] Ok whatever, but how about you sell us the magic Dragon locator? I’ll pay good money for it…

[$bName] Enough. Without that locator $pName is useless to me, and besides only people from $pLocation would be able to us it to locate the dragon anyways. Respect his decision and leave us.

$aName and $liName begrudgingly leave their seats, and looking back over her shoulder $aName gets her last word in:

[$aName] I should never have offered you a spot in our group $bName, you never would have fit in. And as for you $pName… well good luck dealing with *her*. You’ll need it.

The two stunning women gather their things, adjust their swords, and storm out of the door.

[$bName] They aren’t wrong you know. I haven’t travelled with anyone in a long time and I’ve heard I’m not the easiest travel buddy. I guess my biggest advice for you is don’t say or do anything stupid and we can get along fine.

You gulp.

[$bName] I stopped in Kingsbridge to buy a backup dagger since my old one was falling apart, and before you ask no you cannot have it. I wasn’t intending on staying here for this long however, and want to at least head further east past Dottle where there are less people with prying eyes.

She stands up, gathering herself and preparing to leave. You follow suit, and grab one last piece of cheese off the table to snack on before heading out the front entrance.

[$bName] They raise horses near Dottle and I was hoping to get one this evening, but looks like it will be dark in only a few moments. I’ll get one tomorrow morning and then we will officially begin our journey together.

[$pName] You mean you will be getting two horses right? It would be a little demeaning walking next to you while you ride along…

$bName stares at you blankly, and says nothing. You take the hint, and shut your mouth. The two of you head for the plaza, and carefully make your way across the uneven stones. Turning right you begin heading east, and in the dim light you can barely recognize some of the buildings you had passed by earlier. Eventually the two of you finally exit the town and stroll along the dirt pathway, saying nothing. $bName walks with her head held high and her chest out, and her excellent posture makes her seem like the most confident person in the world.

[$pName] Listen $bName, there is something important I need to tell you.

$bName turns her head to look at you with an expression of surprise.

[$bName] Go ahead.

[$pName] I have an ability of sorts… I guess you could call it a gut feeling… but I can sometimes sorta see the future, in a way. Not exactly, but close enough. And basically, there’s an Oak Tree up ahead past a rickety wooden sign and hiding in that oak tree is an assassin. He is going to attack us.

You look at her face expectantly, waiting to see her reaction. Dropping a bomb like that to someone you barely know isn’t exactly a great way to build a relationship. Despite such grim news however, $bName looks unperturbed and absentmindedly scratches at her mole.

[$bName] Why did you tell me that?

[$pName] … What?

[$bName] You heard me. Why did you tell me that?

[$pName] I’m not sure what you mean. Because I want us to defeat the assassin?

[$bName] Listen. I know you are lying about your background and I know you are lying about your motivations. There is a lot about you that doesn’t add up. I knew the moment I offered to team up with you there was a good chance you were leading me into a trap, but I couldn’t figure out where or why. And now, you tell me all about the trap? As if you are betraying your assassin friend out of guilt?

[$pName] Assassin friend? It’s not like that at all, I don’t know what you mean…

[$bName] I’m not going to pretend to understand what the hell you are playing at, but if what you say is true then I need to take care of this assassin immediately. I’d much rather face them in open combat than wait for them to kill me in my sleep. I have one rule, and you better follow it.

[$pName] What?

[$bName] Stay at least 20 feet away from me while I take care of this guy, but don’t stray too far either. I don’t trust you, and I don’t want you messing up the fight. Rest assured, I will win. Stay out of my way.

The two of you wordlessly continue along the road, passing over the brook and heading along the path towards the rickety wooden sign where you started what feels like ages ago. The silence is uncomfortable, and the grim resolve with which $bName marches ahead of you is extremely intimidating. Unable to handle the silence anymore and with a while still to go before the moment of truth, you try to coax her into further conversation to break the ice.

[$pName] So… You have been travelling alone for a long time then?

$bName keeps her eye on the path ahead of her, and without turning to look at you replies:

[$bName] It’s a long story, and probably not worth sharing.

[$pName] It isn’t as if we were doing something else more important. I’m all ears.

$bName sighs and looks up at the sky, which is starting to get properly dark now. The first few stars of the night wink down on her, and the moon meagerly begins to light the waving fields of tall grass around the two of you. The sound of the wind caressing the foliage is soothing and familiar.

[$bName] Like I said, I was born in $bLocation. I was an only child, and my mother died giving birth to me so I never knew her. My dad said she looked just like me though and was a gentle spirit.

$bName briefly touches her mole before continuing. At this point she is lost in the memories.

[$bName] My dad was a swordsmith in $bLocation, but not very talented. The job was mostly just so that he could make new swords to practice with, which was his real passion. Ever since I was young he trained me to be a swordswoman, and he insisted that as long as I practiced enough I could beat anyone with a blade. One day when I was about 16 the King requested he join the army in order to make weapons for him, and I never heard or saw him again. Knowing him, he probably got overzealous and tried to join in on a battle. Old fool.

The moonlight glistens off her white cloak as she marches, and reflects brightly as it glances across the bronze rings she wears. The wolf on the back of her cloak winks at you as it waves in the gentle breeze.

[$bName] I stayed in town forging weapons, but hated it the whole time. The only thing I ever really enjoyed was my father’s practice drills, but sword fighting doesn’t make much money in a town without conflict. At about 22 I decided I had enough of waiting for my father to return and traveled south to the border. Mercenary gangs were at their peak back then and one of them, the Wild Wolves…

She juts out her thumb towards her back, pointing at the cloak

[$bName] Took me in eagerly. Their specialty was skirmishing and flanking maneuvers with sword wielding warriors. I fought with them for the next two years, eventually becoming a squad leader and taking part in many battles. I’ve fought on the King’s side, and I fought for $neighborName too. As long as they financed my efforts I didn’t care. Eventually some court official of $neighborName noticed my skill and employed me as a personal bodyguard. So that’s what I did for another couple years until we got caught in an ambush and my employer was killed. People don’t particularly like employing bodyguards that had their VIP killed so I had no choice but to return home with all the savings I had accumulated. When I returned, I was shocked: Half the town was starving. The war had taken its toll even on communities as far away from the frontlines as $bLocation, and the King’s heavy taxation bled it dry of funds. I decided then and there I wouldn’t fight as a mercenary ever again and instead I would find a way to help them.

$bName sighs loudly, and brings her hands together behind her head.

[$bName] Ever since then, which would be around 3 years ago, I have explored around the world looking for the Ancient Dragon and my magical fruit.

You glance at her hands but she doesn’t do the waggle thing.

[$bName] I’m starting to think that neither is real, but seeing the world is nice and I have plenty of money saved up from my old fighting days. It’s better than smithing, that’s for sure.

$bName has probably said more words in the last 10 minutes than she has said in the last 10 months, so you give her a rest and soak in the ambiance of the moonlit countryside. Next, you pass the wooden sign and realize the time has come.

Ahead Looms the Oak Tree.

You tense up with anticipation, but it seems as if $bName isn’t done with her monologue yet.

[$bName] What If I told you that was all a lie? That everything I just told you is a practiced story I have used on countless people so that they would feel like they knew and trusted me? Would you believe me?

She stops walking, and faces you entirely. You freeze, and feel like you can’t move an inch. Not far ahead, the leaves of the oak tree rustle in the wind. $bName’s head perks up slightly, as if she heard or sensed something you couldn’t.

[$bName] We are going to talk after I take care of this guy, don’t you worry about that.

In a smooth motion $bName draws her blade and looks over her shoulder at you.

[$bName] Stay right there little duckling, it will all be over soon.

Blade drawn, cloak billowing in the wind, $bName marches towards The Oak Tree. Then, every couple of seconds you start to hear a strange sound.

wheeow, ting!

wheeeeeow, clang!

It’s hard to see at first, but $bName is marching towards the Oak Tree and swinging her sword wildly every few seconds. Finally, you realize what the noise is coming from: it is the shrill hiss of an arrow being fired and travelling through the air. Every couple of seconds, someone from the branches of the oak tree is launching an arrow towards $bName, and every time the arrow is launched she swiftly deflects it with her sword. Her silhouette outlined by the moonlight, her hair waving in the breeze, she strikes you as probably the most impressive person you have ever seen. Then, a groaning noise fills the air.

Eeerrrrrrrr… Snap!

The sound of wood groaning and finally breaking rings out like a bell in the night, and you realize the weakened platform can’t handle the strain of the assassin’s weight. With a deafening crash, the platform finally rips free of the tree and falls apart, tumbling and clattering across the branches of the oak tree until finally smashing into the ground below. Along with it goes the hooded assassin, who was caught completely by surprise and smashes into tree branches and eventually the dirt with a loud thud. Quick as a flash he stands back up, but he is clearly wounded and clutches his right arm with his left as if something broke. His left ankle appears smashed to pieces as well, and as he stumbles forward you see that his left foot appears not only almost backwards, but practically sideways as well.

Despite these traumatic injuries, he looks ready for a fight and deadlier than ever. Letting his right arm hang loosely at his side, he draws a sharp looking shortsword that was sheathed behind his back and points it at $bName. Noticing his injuries and sensing an advantage, $bName doesn’t hesitate for a second and breaks into a sprint. She charges, and leaps at the man, bringing her sword down with all her might.

CLANG!

The sword bounces off the hooded man’s deflection, and continues it’s momentum downwards. Not wanting to let the effort go to waste, $bName follows the momentum and allows it to continue behind her, spinning. Finally she brings it all the way back around and cleaves towards the man’s head, who ducks under in the nick of time. Under her guard now, the man shoves his dagger at $bName’s leg but the blow is deflected by one of the rings that protect her thigh. His attack foiled, $bName presses with an attack of her own and launches the very knee he just tried to slice open at his head and connects solidly, sending him flying backwards. Landing on his back, the hooded man doesn’t even seem phased. He shifts his weight towards his upper body as if he was curling up, then launches with his arms off the ground and lands on his feet as if he were some kind of ninja. Next, he pulls dagger after dagger from the dozens of sheaths hidden across his body and flings them at lightning speed towards $bName. One after another, she parries them to the side while spinning her blade around her in a flourishing dance. At last, the man runs out of daggers and leaps backwards, unarmed.

[$bName] You’re gonna try to run now eh?

[???] rrrrrrrrrrrr…

The man doesn’t run at all but instead starts making a strange guttural sound. It comes from back of his throat and sounds almost like gravel scraping on pavement.

[???] rrrrrrrrrrr AAAACCCHHH!

He follows the gravely sound with an exaggerated noise that sounds like he is loudly clearing his throat. But without warning, the man erupts into inky black smoke in an enormous explosion that pours black clouds out of every pore of his body. The shockwave is so strong it knocks you backwards, and you fall flat on your back. In the corner of your vision you see $bName go flying backwards but she manages to land on her knee, using her sword to stick it into the ground and support herself.

On guard, the two of you try to see through the smoke but it expands rapidly and clouds your entire vision. The man has disappeared, and could attack at any angle.

[$bName] Come here, $pName!

Coughing, you make your way through the thick smoke towards her voice until you practically run into her.

[$bName] Forget what I said earlier, stay close for now.

Her voice is calm, and firm. She glances around warily, waiting for the next attack to come but it never does. After a minute of tension, the smoke finally dissipates and the two of you find yourselves alone on the hill next to the Oak Tree.

With a loud sigh, $bName sheathes her sword and sits down, leaning against the tree. Behind her lay the scattered splinters of the platform, and you feel like a huge weight has been lifted off your shoulders.

[$bName] Do you know who that was?

[$pName] Does it matter? He’s finally defeated.

[$bName] Of course it matters, and he isn’t defeated. That was DEATH, and if there is one thing I know its that you can run away from DEATH, and you can stall DEATH, but In the end DEATH always finds you.

[$pName] That’s a little dark…

[$bName] He’s one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, a secret cult of henchmen that work for the Dragon. I wasn’t entirely convinced the Dragon is real, but I didn’t think the horsemen were either until just now. Now I’m… not too sure about any of it.

[$pName] A cult…

[$bName] I don’t remember the full story, but they are probably the most powerful people in the world save for the Dragon himself. They are DEATH, WAR, CONQUEST, and FAMINE. Apparently, they’ve done some pretty fucked up stuff over the years.

$bName closes her eyes, seemingly satisfied with the explanation. You have some more questions to ask but decide to allow her some rest. Ten minutes pass in silence, until she suddenly opens her eyes again and jumps up to her feet.

[$bName] Well, we got to get those horses from Dottle, and there is no time like the present. Lets move.

[$pName] Horses? Plural? Looks like I got a promotion!

[$bName] That’s right, horses for each warrior that saved our skins back there. What? It was only me doing all the work? Looks like it is two horses for me then, and none for you.

You groan loudly, throwing your hands up into the air. $bName chuckles to herself, softly.

[$bName] How about this, let’s make a deal. You keep telling me your ‘gut feelings’ about danger ahead so that I am always ready, and I’ll let you continue along with me. How’s that sound?

[$pName] Sounds good to me!

[$bName] Alright then Duckling, it’s a deal. Don’t waddle too far off now.

And so, the pair of you continued along the path until you made it to Dottle without incident. From then on, the two of you adventured together and $bName even offered to teach you how to defend yourself with a sword. A week passed, and the two of you decide that next up the best way to…

This is going to be the end for this path for now, and this paragraph is a temporary placeholder. I already have the next sections storyboarded but I likely will not have enough time to finish this before UPT. Bit of a shame because I had some cool stuff coming up, but oh well. For now, Let’s just say you and $bName go on some cool adventures and live happily ever after. The end!

END OF ARC 2, THE TOWN

51

You find yourself in the middle of a large field. It is as if you have been teleported into another world. Warily, you stand up and look over your body in an effort to discover any injuries, but there are none.

You are on a dirt path next to a wooden sign. The wooden sign reads in English ‘Kingsbridge’ and there is the number 3 next to it. Below that is another marker that says ‘Dottle’ and the number 14. Backing up, you see that all around this dirt path you are standing on is tall grass about 3 feet high that covers the rather hilly countryside about you. Following the path with your eyes you see it eventually leads past a small brook and to the faint outline of what appears to be a town. That must be Kingsbridge. Following the path the other direction you notice it winds across the hills and past an impressive looking Oak Tree. It continues downhill steeply from there so that you lose sight of it, but by squinting your eyes you can just barely see that the path reemerges further away and straight towards a rather dense looking forest.

The sun is blazing overhead now across the sapphire sky, and every so often a small tuft of cloud ambles in front of its gaze giving you a brief reprieve from the heat. You are wearing a plain shirt and jeans, and in your pocket is your phone. In your hand you hold the $foodwhich somehow wasn’t lost in the confusion earlier. Your legs begin to sweat from being stifled by the jeans and you will likely need a drink of water soon. It’s time to figure out What to do next.

Head over the brook towards Kingsbridge

Head the opposite direction along the path

52

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 with a start you sit upright. In a panic, you clutch at your stomach but it no longer aches, and in disbelief you realize that your muscles are back and you aren’t skin and bones anymore. You shiver remembering the cold you felt only moments ago, but now it is completely gone. You slowly rise to your feet, and are amazed to find that your old strength has returned to you. It’s as if your lonely days as a peasant have been completely undone! Perhaps this time, you reflect, I will be able to do things differently.

53

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 with a start you sit upright. Desperately you grasp at your chest where mere moments ago an arrow was protruding out of it, but feel nothing. It is as if you had never been hurt at all. You take a big, thankful breath of fresh and appreciate that both of your lungs are in working order before standing up. You still have time, you reflect, time to do things differently.

54

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 with a start you sit upright, screaming.

[$pName] AHHHHHH! AHHHHH! Ahhhh! Ahhh….?

You break into a cold sweat. What felt like seconds ago you didn’t have hands at all, yet now you are able to bend each and every finger and feel the dirt below you. Furthermore, your throat is completely healed and bleeds not a drop. Unsteadily, you rise to your feet. You still have time, you reflect, time to do things differently.

55

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 with a start you sit upright, coughing violently. Wildly you whip your head around looking for the mysterious killer, but there is no one in sight. You force yourself to stand, and still shaking run your finger along your throat. It is no longer gushing blood, and it seems your shoulder no longer cries out in pain either. Knees wobbling, you unsteadily rise to your feet and take a deep breath. You still have time, you reflect, time to do things differently.

56

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 with a start you sit upright. As quickly as you can you feel all over your head, checking for the shaft of an arrow where it must surely protrude from your skull. After several desperate seconds you find nothing, and you take a deep breath. The sound of nails on chalkboard rings in the back of your head as you slowly stand up. Knees wobbling, you unsteadily rise to your feet and try to get a hold of yourself. You still have time, you reflect, time to do things differently.

57

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 with a start you sit upright. After an entire lifetime you had eventually gotten used to your aging body, but now everything is different. Where before there were wrinkles there is now taut skin, where you once had aching joints there is pain free muscle. In disbelief, you slowly rise to your feet and try to get used to your new, youthful body. The feeling of being reborn is revitalizing but at the same time… you lived your life. You finally found peace with your path in this world, and now it has been… robbed from you. And now the memories come flooding back, the memories of how everything changed when you were inexplicably teleported here all those years ago but ran away from the answers. As these memories you hid away for so long overwhelm you, with a sinking feeling it occurs to you that there is truly no escape. No matter how long you run, fate will always catch up to you. Knees wobbling, you unsteadily rise to your feet and try to get a hold of yourself. You still have time, you reflect, more time than you ever imagined possible to do things differently.