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ARC 3, THE BARON

Safe time to save

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The week after your confrontation with DEATH, $liName and $aName were on constant high alert. Every shadow seemed an enemy, and every traveler a potential threat. In the end however, DEATH never reappeared and the three of you finally felt able to relax. With the immediate threat of DEATH having never materialized, the question of what to do next quickly came up. While all of you knew that you wanted to find the Dragon nobody could figure out how to go about actually doing so. $aName’s strategy was essentially to wander the kingdom until a lead opened up, and since nobody had any better ideas that is exactly what the group did. Having started at the eastern edge of $kingdomName the three of you headed north-west in the hopes of finding some new leads.

After another 5 days of travelling, you finally managed to get the hang of basic horse-riding and could keep up with your two new accomplices just fine. During that time $aName made $liName teach you some swordsmanship basics, and while you could now hold a sword without looking awkward you knew deep down that you were still useless in combat. Your one advantage that you hadn’t been able to explain to anyone properly was your ability to SAVE and LOAD, but how could you? It’s not a concept many could understand, let alone believe. For now, all you could do was adapt to this new world and its rules as best you could.

After a total of two weeks of travelling your trio arrived at a small town called Crowlidge. It wasn’t very big, and unlike Kingsbridge had no stone buildings whatsoever; it was a poor and completely unremarkable place. You thought you would simply pass through, but $liName had other plans.

[$liName] hey $aName isn’t this Crowlidge, home of the famous Crowlidge Porridge?

The three of you are riding on your horses and casually making your way through the town. As the three of you pass by the peasants stop and stare at the colorful procession.

[$aName] ya know… yeah you’re right, Crowlidge! Yeah they do make that porridge here. The really fancy apricot porridge right?

[$liName] That’s the one! Hey we should stop by a porridge place and get some.

$aName excitedly agrees and she leads the group towards a small wooden shop to the side of the path where everyone dismounts. The building is quite small and only has two rooms: the first is the area they take the orders from and the second is a backroom where they presumably cook up the porridge. This back room has a massive chimney rising from the top of it where smoke escapes, and you can hear a cauldron bubbling in the background.

[Man] Heya there travellers! Care fer some of the best porridge around?

[$aName] As long as there aren’t any potatoes in it, I’d love some! Three please.

The man disappears into the back and returns with three bowls balanced on his arm. After $aName exchanges some aureus with him, she takes the bowls and returns to where $liName and you are waiting.

[$aName] Grub’s up!

The three of you dig in. It tastes pleasant, and the apricots add a wonderful tang to the flavor. While eating, your horse neighs and leans into you a little.

[$liName] Looks like your horse wants some. Don’t be greedy $pName, share a little.

You look at the porridge in the bowl and hesitate. Either you can give the whole bowl to your horse or just a spoonful but either way you are going to get horse slobber all over the place.

[$liName] Don’t be stingy!

$liName and $aName snicker at you while you try to figure out what to do. Finally, you take a spoonful and plop it into your other hand after setting the bowl down. Offering your handful of porridge to the horse, she scoops it up eagerly and does a little trot-dance.

[$aName] She’s awfully expressive! Have you named it yet $pName?

You grin and give the horse a friendly pet to her $horseColor coat. What should your horse’s name be?

Enter horse name

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[$pName] I’m thinking she should be named $hName. What do you guys think?

[$liName] Pretty lame to be honest.

[$aName] $liName! I thought the name was fine…

[$liName] mm, fine for a dog maybe…

Your horse doesn’t really respond when you call her by $hName yet but she seems to be enjoying your attention anyways. She nuzzles your arm affectionately for a moment as a means of thanking you for the porridge, then goes back to gossiping with the other two horses.

[$aName] $hName sure likes you $pName!

$aName looks over at $liName with a sly grin on her face as she continues.

[$aName] I didn’t realize there would be so much compet…

With a flash $liName shushes $aName with a finger and glares at her with eyes that say ‘shut it’.

[$pName] So much what?

Without taking her finger off of $aName’s lips, $liName whips her other hand around and flicks you hard in the forehead.

[$pName] OW!

$aName giggles to herself, and the three of you finish your porridge in comfortable silence. You are about to ask $liName what $aName was talking about when you are interrupted by a peasant approaching. He wears a ragged, uncomfortable looking burlap tunic with the same small font covering the sides as usual, is covered in dirt and wears no pants. The tunic is long enough to cover ‘the goods’ but it looks very peculiar all the same. His eyes are brown, but shine with intensity as he introduces himself.

[Man] You must be the royal investigators sent to look into Baron $baronName. The mayor told me to meet you and give his thanks, as well as point you in the right direction. Simply head right up ahead, and continue along the path until you reach a large rock that looks like a thumbs up.

He gives you a thumbs up.

[Man] Once you hit that rock take a left at the fork in the road and you’ll be in $baronName’s territory within a couple hours.

$liName and $aName give eachother a look, then turn back to the man.

[$aName] yes of course, thank you. And just to make sure we are on the same page… and that you are not a spy… er… tell me once more what the mission is.

[Man] Well its really not that secret, the Baron has been preparing for a while so he knows you are coming.

[$aName] Er… Yes, so since it is not a secret tell me yet again why we are going there. You know, just to make sure.

[Man] I don’t get it, you don’t know? Wait, are you not the investigators?

He looks at the three of you in confusion, and then frustration. You stare back awkwardly.

[Man] Well why didn’t you just say so? Messing around in other people’s business…

The man stomps off with a huff and disappears behind the porridge shop. $aName turns back to you with an excited look.

[$aName] Sounds like something interesting is going down! We should go check it out!

[$pName] I mean, It’s not like we have anything better to do…

[$aName] And what great luck, that man coming up to us like that. I tell you what, we get a lot of weird looks for dressing so well but the advantages it brings are always worth it. That man thought we were important, $pName thought we were important… There’s an old saying you know, it goes “fake it until you make it”, and these dresses are great help in that.

[$liName] Are you saying we haven’t “made it” yet?

[$aName] I think we are make-ING it and we are make-ING it more and more the longer we go. It’s ok to be a work in progress $liName. As long as you have… uh…

[$liName] Confidence?

[$aName] No…

[$liName] Faith?

[$aName] Yeah that’s it! As long as you have faith in yourself. You gotta belieeeeeeve in yo self, right $pName?

[$pName] Right…

The three of you head off and walk along the path straight out of town, leading the horses behind as you walk so that they can get a little rest. $aName’s horse is a little restless but $hName behaves herself quite well. Once your trio has walked for a little bit you notice there is a fork in the road, and right where the fork splits is a large clump of rocks. There is a single large boulder at the bottom, with a couple long rocks balanced to one side of it giving it the vague appearance of a thumbs up. As you approach it, you notice a traveler walking from the path to the left towards you dressed in a very peculiar fashion.

He wears brown burlap pants, tied to his waist by a yellow belt. His shirt is dyed green, and he wears an overcoat of black with yellow cuffs. On top of his head is yet another flash of yellow, this time in the form of a top hat. The man himself is mid 30’s with a plain face and features that could easily blend into a crowd. Overall his striking appearance and odd combination of colors make him hard to ignore. He approaches.

[Man] Well well! If it isn’t the only people on this road dressed even stranger than I! Howdya do!

The man walks right up to you with brazen confidence and extends an outstretched hand, and before you know it you find yourself taking part in a solid handshake.

[Man] Now there’s five good fingers for ya! What’s your name pal?

[$pName] Woah, uh… $pName.

[Man] Nice to meet you $pName, I’m $mName! And what’s that you got in your ear?

Confused, you step back and reach for your ear. You finger at it a little but find nothing.

[$mName] A little forward of me I know, but we simply cannot allow this! Let me get it for you…

$mName reaches behind your ear, and brings his hand back with a flourish. Inside his hand is a small rubber ball, which he shows to $aName with a grin.

[$mName] Your friend had this little guy in his ear the whole time and you never said anything! And look, you have one too!

$aName half startled and half laughing reaches for her ear, but of course finds nothing. In a quick motion $mName reaches behind her ear and yet again appears a new rubber ball in his hand.

[$mName] Proper hygiene is important you know, otherwise these little bastards pile up quick! Anyways, nice to meet ya whats your name?

[$aName] $aName!

$mName sticks his arm out and shakes $aName’s hand with vigor.

[$mName] Now there’s five buckaroos for ya, great shake! And lastly, to the lovely lady in lavender, what is your name?

$liName crosses her arms.

[$liName] $liName. Are you some kind of magician?

The man takes his yellow hat off and gives a deep, over the top bow to the three of you.

[$mName] The very best in all of $kingdomName!

[$liName] I’ve heard the very best magician in all of $kingdomName can throw fireballs the size of buildings towards their foes. Can you do that?

$mName looks up with a frown, and resets his posture.

[$mName] I see what you mean, no I’m not that kind of magician. I’m more like a fun type magician, one that brings joy to those around him!

His mood picks right back up and he starts tossing the balls up in the air. One by one, he winks at each of you and makes a clacking sound with his mouth. Each time he winks a new ball is added to the others and before you know it he is juggling five balls in the air. Not bad!

[$liName] Well it’s nice to meet you $mName, you are certainly… friendly. Although mixing in real magic with sleight of hand kind of makes both feel cheaper doesn’t it?

[$mName] on the contrary, it is when you don’t know which part is real and which is trickery that the act is at its best! Can you figure out which is which?

$mName is having a pretty good time riddling at $liName and juggling, but $aName finally puts a stop to it.

[$aName] so Mister $mName, you just came from $baronName’s territory, didn’t you? We are just now heading there ourselves.

$mName stops juggling and puts the balls in his pocket before replying in a relaxed manner.

[$mName] Well yes, but I wouldn’t go there If I were you. I was performing there for about a week before the Baron started his forced conscriptions. Luckily I had a couple good shows and could get out of there in time but most folk weren’t so lucky.

[$pName] Forced conscriptions?

[$mName] Yes the Baron is expecting a royal investigation to arrive soon and they will almost certainly find that the rumors about him are true. After that a squad will be sent to eliminate him, so he’s forcing all the townsfolk to fight for him as a private army.

[$liName] and just what are these rumors?

[$mName] Not a local eh? Well the talk around town is that he has been making a lot of money lately and funneling it towards the Dragon Cult.

[$pName] Dragon Cult? What’s that?

$liName walks over to you in a huff and flicks you in the forehead, leaving a stinging mark.

[$pName] OW!

[$liName] You really did live under a rock before we met you! I’ll tell you later.

$liName turns to $mName and brings her hands together, tilting her head and offering a warm smile.

[$liName] Thank you very much for the information $mName, it has helped us a lot! I wish you luck on your travels.

Before $liName can gather you and $aName together to leave, $mName shouts out in confusion.

[$mName] Wait, you aren’t going straight over there are you!? Are you crazy!?

[$aName] Well of course we are! If the Baron knows something about a Dragon Cult, then he could be just the lead we need to finally find the Ancient Dragon!

[$mName] You… want to find the Ancient Dragon!?

$mName waggles his fingers across his chest, and starts following your trio as you walk along the path. For some reason he tags along right behind you and refuses to give up.

[$mName] Are you really trying to find him?

Starting to get annoyed at the uninvited stranger, $liName turns to face him.

[$liName] Yes of course we are! Whats it to ya?

[$mName] Well… me too!

Everyone’s expressions turn to surprise, except $mName who looks back with a sheepish grin.

[$mName] If I met him, and were granted my wish, I would be able to help so many people that have gone through what I have… Not to mention I could create the greatest act the world has ever seen! Please, let me come along with you!

[$liName] We already have a freeloader thank you, no room for anyone else.

[$pName] Hey are you talking about me!?

[$mName] But I’m not a freeloader! I’ve saved up plenty of money during my travels so you wouldn’t have to pay for my meals or anything. More importantly, I’m well liked in the Baron’s territory so I can convince the townsfolk to let you through without incident. Without me there, they will probably attack you on sight!

$liName pushes her $liHairColor hair behind her ear and furrows her brows in thought.

[$liName] I suppose having someone that could get us through the militia without bloodshed would be convenient… What do you think $aName?

[$aName] I think we let him join us until we get the information we need out of the Baron. Once we are done we can decide if he should join us or not.

[$pName] Yeah I agree, he seems nice enough especially if he… OW!

$liName gives you another solid flick to the forehead, right where the last one landed.

[$liName] I didn’t ask you, $pName!

[$pName] Well maybe you should! Also stop flicking me!

You grapple with her momentarily trying to flick her forehead back, but she must have been trained in some kind of martial arts because she easily transfers your weight around and flings you to your back.

[$liName] Heh heh, $pName you gotta try harder than that to best the queen of $kingdomName, $liName!

[$pName] You’re a queen alright, cause you’re a royal pain in my…

[$aName] OK $mName welcome aboard! Lets all head into the Baron’s territory and see if we can figure out what is going on a bit better.

The four of you join up and walk along the path. The countryside is quite beautiful; small fields of soft grass split up large patches of happy trees, which sway in the gentle summer breeze. Clumps of wild flowers bloom merrily as the sun plays off their petals, and chirping birds sing as they dance through the foliage and air. Overhead, large swaths of clouds laze their way across the sky and you can see their shadows sprinting across the fields. The scene is quite serene, until it is interrupted by $mName.

[$mName] Hey did you know I’m a bit of a comedian as well as a magician? How about this, back in this town I toured through a while ago they were building a large house, and I knew there would be some good material there for me to use.

[$pName] …

[$mName] Wait wait wait, that’s not the joke, this next part is! Would you like to hear a construction joke?

[$pName] …

[$mName] That’s ok, I’m still working on it anyways. Ba dum shh!

[$liName] So $pName, did you still want to learn what the Dragon Cult is?

[$pName] Anything but this!

[$mName] What do you call a deer with no eyes?

[$pName] Here we go again.

[$liName] The…

With a confident shout, $mName interrupts $liName while waving his hat in the air

[$mName] No idear!

$liName stops and spins around, flicking $mName hard in the forehead

[$mName] OW!

Without saying another word to $mName, she turns back to you and continues.

[$liName] As I was saying, the Dragon Cult was started maybe 50 years ago when an entire generation grew up having never seen The Dragon. The church was losing a lot of support and people were doubting their legitimacy now that they didn’t have visual proof of his existence. Eventually an extremist branch of the church separated themselves because they felt the mainstream church wasn’t doing enough to bring the Dragon back, and now here we are. The cult is surprisingly large and powerful, and are rumored to be doing some pretty nasty stuff in an effort to bring the Dragon back. They all rationalize it away as a “the ends justify the means” situation of course, and they must have some politicians in their pocket because they keep sticking around no matter how many people complain.

[$pName] And you think they might know where we can find the Dragon?

[$liName] They take finding the Dragon more seriously than anyone else, and have far more resources at their disposal than small groups like ours. If anyone has a good lead for finding it, its them.

[$mName] Hey do you guys want to play a game? It’s real simple, when a bird flies overhead you get points based on color. One point for black, two points for brown, three points for…

[$liName, $pName, $aName] NO!

[$mName] Yikes, tough crowd!

And so, the four of you continued towards the Barony of $baronName.

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After a few more hours of peaceful travelling your fearsome foursome arrived at the outskirts of $baronName’s Barony. Along the way, several things stuck out to you: the first, was that many of the farms and fields of crops you passed by along the way were in terrible shape. Many of them were only half used and overrun by weeds. A significant amount had people trying to harvest the crops and plow the dirt by hand instead of with animals, and everyone looked tired and hungry. The small shacks you passed by were in disrepair, and it looked like the tools the farmers used hadn’t been fixed or improved in years. Worse, at one point you walked past a farmer who was beaten into a bloody pulp and left lying at the side of the road. After $aName and $liName gave him some water and helped him sit upright, he explained that the Baron’s men had hurt him so bad because he failed to pay his rent.

[Farmer] He asks for rent so high that we couldn’t possibly afford it, and we get stuck in a lose-lose situation. It’s the worst! If we refuse the rent and taxes then his goons come and rough us up badly. If we pay it, then we don’t have enough money to buy more seed, or tools, or animals. Then the next month those losses pile up and it only gets harder to pay! Just a month ago I had to sell our last plowing horse in order to take care of the piling up expenses. In the end it hurts the barony worse because none of the farmers can afford to farm anything anymore and a famine will soon be upon us… but the Baron doesn’t care. He just wants his stinking Aureus…

After bandaging a nasty gash on his head, he thanked you and hobbled back to his farm. With nothing else you could do for him, the four of you pressed on towards the main town. By the time you managed to get within a mile of it, the sky had transformed into a mess of dark grey clouds that threatened to rain. And now…

Ahead of you a crude wall of assorted wooden furniture, wheelbarrows, tables and stakes looms along the outskirts of the town. The barricade wouldn’t be enough to stop a real attacking force, but for small crews such as yours it provides a reasonable advantage to the defenders. Speaking of defenders, there are numerous: peeking over the top of the barricade are dozens and dozens of curious looking townsfolk, gawking at you with guarded expressions. Some even stand on stools, and hold their pointy looking wooden spears menacingly over the barrier. After finally getting within speaking distance, $mName marches ahead of you with confidence and yells out to the guards.

[$mName] Townsfolk! I know you are suspicious, but you know me and that I would never intend harm! These are simply my friends that would like to help visit the town, there is no need for violence!

One of the townsfolk yells back from behind the barrier with a gruff voice.

[man] How do we know you aren’t the royal investigators? If we let them through, $baronName would have our heads for sure!

[$mName] David my friend, is that you? David you know me well enough, you know I have neither the stature nor wit to befriend the likes of a royal investigative party! Furthermore, officials always travel with a huge entourage, but it is merely us four!

[man] $mName, I didn’t recognize you! You old dog, I thought you left because nobody was tipping you for your tricks and you got all huffy about it?

[$mName] Well David you aren’t wrong, but I’ve got more important things to do now. Would you let us in?

[David] yes, yes of course. C’mon Jerry, open ‘er up. $mName is harmless and his friends probably are too.

In the center of the road is an enormous wooden plank blocking the way, which two of the townsfolk grab at either side and move out of the way. With the road cleared, the four of you venture cautiously inside. The guards don’t look good, and most of them wear ragged clothing and no protection. All of them have cheap looking wooden spears and most look like they have been missing meals lately. The overcast sky casts a sallow look upon their features, which only makes them look even more feeble. Despite them technically being an immediate threat to you, you almost pity them.

[David] Well $mName, welcome back. Don’t suppose you can magic in a cartload of potatoes for us now can ya?

[$mName] Unfortunately no, but if you happen to know the control word for potato summoning I would be happy to try!

[David] The day I get my hands on a wonderful control word like that is the day I finally can afford to get my family out of this dump. Not sure why you lot would want to come here at a time like this, but all the same welcome.

After thanking him for entry, you make your way past and the four of you get your bearings in the center of town.

[$liName] So the Baron has forced all of them to act as his soldiers huh?

[$mName] The Baron has a few real and well armed soldiers in his fort, but if a royal party came to stop his dealings with the cult then they wouldn’t stand a chance. I suppose he hopes the townsfolk will be able to slow down any royal force that shows up while he and his men escape.

[$aName] That’s messed up! Sounds like this $baronName is a real dick. I’d like to go up to him and give him a piece of my mind…

[$pName] before we get too far ahead of ourselves, can I get a sword first?

$aName and $mName look at you with surprise, and $liName bursts out into laughter.

[$liName] a Sword!? What on earth would you be able to use a sword for?

[$pName] Well I’d like to be able to defend myself is all.

[$liName] Let me give you a harsh bit of reality. Someone with a cheap, shitty wooden spear like we saw the townsfolk using will defeat a swordsman almost every time if they both have similar training. It takes years to get good with a sword, and even longer to overcome any stupid monkey with a long pointy stick. If anything, you should be asking for a spear!

[$pName] Yeah but spears aren’t as cool…

$liName marches up to you and flicks you squarely in the center of the forehead.

[$pName] OW! Stop doing that!

[$liName] Being cool means nothing when you are dead! You think this is some kind of fantasy land?

[$aName] Stop it you two! How about we get a cheap dagger for $pName that he can use for emergencies and we call it good?

Clutching your forehead, you sheepishly nod in agreement and everyone makes their way to the local weapons shop. Upon entering, you are disappointed to find that there aren’t any weapons here at all other than wooden spears.

[Shopkeeper] Welcome! Another conscript in need of a spear huh?

[$pName] Actually I was hoping to get a dagger…

[Shopkeeper] Wow, an actual customer! I haven’t had one of those in ages. Well I had to sell all my real weapons about a month ago at a discount to a traveling merchant in order to make rent, and I’m forced by the baron to only make spears now. So in the end I guess I don’t have anything for you other than a wooden spear… Unless you want the little wood carver I use to make the spears with? I have an extra lying around if you want.

He fumbles around in a nearby cupboard for a moment before reemerging and placing a small knife on the counter. It is the length of your hand, and has a plain wooden handle. The metal is rusty, and the edge of the blade is sharp near the tip but dull at the rest. The sheath that covers it is made of beat up leather than looks like it was probably made for a different knife a long time ago.

[Shopkeeper] How does 20 Aureus sound?

[$aName] We can do 10.

[Shopkeeper] That’s 10 more aureus than I’ve made all week, sale!

$aName slides the money across the counter to the shopkeeper and you string the sheath into a belt loop on your pants. It is probably the most pitiful weapon anyone has ever wielded, but its better than nothing and you feel a little less helpless than before.

The Four of you approach the Baron’s fortress, which sits inside the town on the eastern edge. While surrounded by small hovels that peasants live inside, there is at least a 50 foot gap between the walls and the houses so that nobody can use the houses as a means to get over easily. The walls themselves are made up of enormous logs sharpened into points, which rest next to each other pointing straight up and are bound together by numerous ropes. Large wooden supports ensure it remains sturdy, but the logs are buried so deep into the ground they probably don’t need it. The entrance is small and has no gate but it likely would be easy to defend with only 10 or so spearmen. Behind the walls is a single huge building, completely round and with a pointed roof. The small area inside and between the fort and the walls is used by the guards for patrolling, storage, and lounging about. As your group heads for the gap in the wall, you feel the eyes of the guards on all of you. It is clear they don’t trust strangers, and your colorful friends certainly attract a lot of attention. Once you reach the gap, a guard approaches.

[Guard] Halt! State your business.

[$aName] We wish to speak with the Baron.

[Guard] Everyone wants to complain these days, tsk. He’s not accepting guests right now, begone!

[$aName] We just want to ask about…

The guard pushes $aName back roughly, and a couple other guards approach with their spears brandished.

[$aName] Why you…

$aName quickly reaches over her shoulder for her blade, but after hesitating for a moment returns her tensed arm to her side. Swallowing her pride, she turns her back on the guards and walks back along the road from the way you came visibly frustrated. You decide to follow, and wordlessly the four of you regroup behind some houses close to the fortress.

[$aName] Grrr…. Well that was a great start, we are never going to get close to him like this. What do we do?

Everyone stares blankly at the ground in thought, until $mName seems to light up with a new idea.

[$mName] You know, the tax collectors return with their ill-gotten wealth this evening. It usually arrives in carts filled with crops, goods, and of course Aureus. We could figure out a way to sneak into one of those wagons…

[$liName] Too risky. If we get found out we will be at a serious disadvantage, and even if we did sneak all the way in and talked to the Baron he might not be intimidated enough to tell us about the cult. I say we just attack from the front since there are only around 30 guards here. We slice through them like it’s nothing, and by the time we get to the Baron he will know we mean business and tell us anything we want.

[$pName] 30 guards is a lot!

[$liName] For a newbie like you maybe. If $aName and I use the entrance to the fort as a chokepoint, their own defenses can be used against them. They won’t be able to have more than five people attack us at a time.

[$mName] I still think sneaking through is better. Fighting that many guards sounds way riskier than getting caught…

[$liName] Right but if we get discovered we can’t use the entrance as a chokepoint, and we could be sitting ducks if found while sitting in that cart. What do you think $aName?

[$aName] I don’t know! Do we really need to resort to violence so soon?

[$pName] If we don’t get to $baronName before the Royal Investigators do, which could happen any day now, we probably never will.

[$aName] Ah, that’s a good point. Alright then $pName, what do YOU think we should do? Choose carefully!

[$pName] I’m thinking the best option is…

Sneak In 4

Attack directly 5

4

Two hours have passed, and the soft light of the evening sun plays gently across the quiet landscape. You are hiding behind a bush next to $liName, and that bush is situated next to a road leading into town. 20 Feet further down the road $mName and $aName hide behind different bushes, waiting for the ambush to begin. After what feels like a lifetime of waiting, the creaky sounds of a cart’s wheels moan past you, until finally reaching $mName who leaps out into the road and blocks the tax cart’s path.

[$mName] Care to see a magic trick?

The guard yells out and yanks on the reins, halting the cart. It is drawn by two healthy looking horses, which anxiously look about after being startled by $mName. On the cart rides two guards, each of which wear luxurious full plate armor. Their faces are concealed by Barbute helmets which give them an intimidating look, and both draw longswords from their hips.

[Guard1] Who goes there!? Out of the way!

One of the guards stands up out of his seat, and leaps down to the road. Bending over, he picks up a baseball sized rock and holds it menacingly towards $mName.

[Guard2] Are you deaf? Move it!

$mName looks a little nervous but he holds his ground.

[$liName] Let’s move.

Following close to $liName, the two of you sneak up behind the cart crouched as low as you can go. In her hand she wields a thick tree branch with the twigs cut off so that it can be used as a club. As you approach, you hear the guard getting more and more frustrated.

[Guard2] I’m serious! Fine, eat this!

The guard throws the stone at $mName as hard as he can, who doesn’t move an inch. Instead, $mName holds his left palm out as if he is going to catch the rock with it.

[$mName] Whoop!

The rock hurtles towards $mName but instead of smashing into his hand, it disappears. The next instant, it reappears where his right palm is pointing, and hurtles with the exact same speed in the opposite direction and back towards the guard.

[Guard2] Wha!?

SMACK

The stone smashes into his helmet, and throws his head backward with great force. Concussed, he falls backwards onto the road, limp.

[Guard1] Frank! You motherfu…

WHAM

$liName, who had snuck up behind him, smashes him in the back of the head with her club and knocks him unconscious. His unresponsive body falls out of the seat and hits the dirt with a loud crash. The horses are panicked by the violence and whinny agitatedly but don’t move.

The next instant, $aName jumps out and straddles the guard $mName took care of. Pulling up on his helmet to expose the neck, she pulls out a dagger sheathed in her boot and slits his throat. Simultaneously, $liName does the same to the man she knocked out mere moments ago.

[$pName] Woah! What’s up with the killing them when they are already knocked out!?

[$liName] Naïve as ever $pName. People are rarely knocked out for more than 30 seconds, and even if they are then they have irreparable brain damage anyways. Do you want them waking up and alerting the others?

[$pName] Well no…

[$liName] Great, then shut it. Phase one is complete, next up is phase two. Time to suit up $pName.

You help $mName painstakingly remove each piece of armor off the two guards and after much effort manage to put it on. The armor is wet with blood in some places, extremely heavy, and even with the gentle evening breeze attempting to soothe you it feels like you could overheat at any moment. Luckily it isn’t all bad; you get to strap on the dead guard’s sword and be properly armed for once. It is a simple longsword with a black leather handle, and the sheath is well worn black leather. The belt wraps around your waist and the weight of the sword is oddly comforting.

[$liName] $pName, do you remember what I said about sword fighting?

[$pName] Don’t bother until I am trained?

[$liName] Exactly. If we get into a scuffle later on, you better be pulling out that dagger instead of that sword.

[$mName] If it makes you feel any better, I won’t use mine either. I’ve never been good with one of these toothpicks anyhow.

$liName heads to the back of the cart, and pushes around some of the crops and bags of money that the collectors had gathered up. The cargo is eventually shaped into a hollow square, which $liName and $aName can hide inside. Meanwhile, $aName had gone to the bush she was hiding in earlier and retrieved a large canvas blanket. She had bought it in town earlier, and now she uses it to cover all the cargo in the cart. Nestling into the empty space along with $liName, the two blend in seamlessly and are completely hidden by the blanket. Anyone pulling up at the blanket would only see crops and cargo, at least until the blanket is completely removed. $mName has finished putting on his set of armor as well, and joins you at the seat located at the front of the cart. Hidden to the side of the road in a bush, two corpses silently rest.

[$mName] This’ll make for a good bar story one day. Let’s head off then.

$mName grabs the reins and gives short rap of the leather against the horses, spurring them into motion. The cart slowly gains speed, and it isn’t long before everyone is travelling back towards town at a decent pace.

[$pName] So what was that little move with the rock earlier?

[$mName] Oh that? Something a mentor of mine taught me years ago. Its kind of like teleportation, but its only for things that can fit in the palm of my hand. It retains it’s speed and appears at the other palm. In the end it is only good for card tricks but every now and then I can send a rock back the way it came from if I’m quick enough. Kind of like an Uno reverse card!

[$pName] Ha, yeah no kidding! Wait, how…

[$liName] Shhhh! We’re getting close to the town.

Your cart approaches the makeshift wooden barrier you saw when you first entered town, and the townsfolk recognize the armor of the tax collectors right away. With a groan they heave at the plank blocking the road and allow you in, without saying a single word. Through the helmet you can barely see them, but you can tell their expressions are of pure hatred and fear.

Groaning wearily, the cart ambles forwards along the road and takes a turn, heading straight for the Baron’s fortress. This is about to be the most important part of the entire operation, and is where you are at your most vulnerable. $mName steers the cart towards the fortress entrance, and only a few feet before entering a guard walks up to greet you.

[Guard] Well if it isn’t Frank and Georgie! Those peasants give you any trouble this evening?

Not wanting to give his disguise away, $mName grunts back neutrally and silently hopes that is enough.

[Guard] That bad huh? Well, it happens man. Hey, don’t forget to pick up little Sarah from my place after you’re done unloading everything, she really misses you!

$mName gives the horses another whip of the reins and the cart lurches forwards. Steering it through the gate and towards the back where a few other carts rest, the cart finally stops and the two of you climb down. You look over your shoulder warily but no one has suspected a thing. You try to forget the comment about Frank’s now fatherless daughter.

[$pName] let’s move.

$mName follows behind you as you stroll around the back of the compound. It is filled with all kinds of boxes and cargo and treasure, likely unsorted spoils of the Baron’s iron fisted rule. No matter how far you explore you can’t see any alternative routes inside however, and with a sinking feeling you surmise it might be necessary to attack head on after all. Then:

[$mName] Look here!

$mName points out a small backdoor leading into the fort with many large piles of crops stacked in front of it, blocking the way. It is likely an emergency escape or some other forgotten doorway, and it is perfect for your infiltration.

[$pName] Ok, you know the plan. We clear this crap out of the way so that $aName and $liName are exposed for as little as possible, and then we all head inside.

[$mName] Right.

The two of you get to work, picking up sack after sack of vegetables and grains of all shapes and sizes. One after another you plop them to the side against the wall, getting closer and closer to clearing the way to the backdoor.

[$mName] Psst, $pName. Question for ya: How do you get a squirrel to like you?

[$pName] What?

[$mName] Act like a nut!

[$pName] … Is this really the time for that!?

[$mName] Sorry I’m just nervous!

Finally, the two of you clear just enough of the assorted vegetables out of the way to be able to open the door. Quickly as you can, you head back to the cart where $liName and $aName are hiding… but it is too late.

[$pName] Shit…

As you round the side of the fortress to be able to view the cart, you see three guards walking up to it chatting casually. Taking cover behind some boxes, you and $mName watch in horror as they grab the blanket and fling it upwards. It’s over.

[$mName] Shit!

You wait for the call to raise the alarm, but it never comes. Instead, the three guards pick through the goods absentmindedly and continue their conversation. Inside of the cart… Is nobody. $aName and $liName aren’t there! Where did they…

[$liName] Aww, were you worried about us?

With a start, you whip around to find $liName and $aName hiding behind another set of boxes and giggling to themselves.

[$aName] Hiding in that cart all night wouldn’t be very comfortable you know, of course we had to get out of there! C’mon now, lets get inside the fort.

Relieved, you follow the pair towards the door you and $mName had just cleared. Overhead, the sky finally begins to get properly dark and the last shreds of light play across the clouds.

[$aName] In we go.

Drawing the dagger she had used earlier from her waist, $aName braces herself and slowly opens the door. Following her, you allow your eyes to get accustomed to the darkness and try to figure out where you are. It appears that you are in some kind of supply closet, and it is filled with brooms, buckets, and cobwebs.

[$aName] Keep up.

Without faltering she heads to the next door, which opens up into a hallway. To the right, the hallway extends for a while before opening up into some kind of huge dining room where dozens of the Baron’s knights are eating and joking around with each other. The ground is covered in lavish rugs and there are golden candle holders lighting up the entire area. On each wall of the dining area, you can see there are tapestries and other fancy looking artworks. This is a truly lavish fortress. To the left is a staircase, which leads to the next floor.

[$liName] I’m thinking up.

[$mName] I don’t trust staircases.

You look at him in confusion.

[$pName] What? Why?

[$mName] They are always up to something.

The smack of $liName flicking $mName in the forehead is so loud you feel certain someone in the dining area would hear, but luckily nobody looks in your direction. Without saying another word, the four of you silently tread up the staircase.

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[$pName] We have two of the greatest Swordswomen in all of $kingdomName. I say we fight them directly like what $liName suggested.

[$liName] For once $pName shows a tiny bit of sense. I’m impressed!

[$pName] Thank… you?

[$aName] If you say so... $liName, let us meditate before the battle. $pName and $mName, try not to get in the way during the fight.

$aName and $liName sit on a couple of boxes next to one of the buildings and close their eyes in preparation. They take deep, purposeful breaths and visualize the battle to come. Meanwhile, $mName fidgets nervously, and after a couple minutes speaks up.

[$mName] Not gonna lie I’m pretty nervous about this... I’ve seen the carnage of battle before; one time I came across a man who had been beheaded and some of his face was even cleaved off.

[$pName] Wow that’s terrible. Sorry man.

[$mName] Do you know what you call someone like him? Someone with no body and no nose?

[$pName] Huh? No, I don’t.

[$mName] Nobody knows.

[$pName] Nobody… wow. WOW.

[$liName] It’s time.

$liName and $aName stride past you, and side by side approach the fortress. Each carries their still sheathed Dragonium alloy blades in their hand instead of their back, and you can see $aName clench and unclench her fist as she walks. You follow behind them in a daze, and realize you can do nothing more than hope for the best. $mName continues to fidget nervously, and fumbles with something in his pocket.

By the time the duo are nearly at the fortress entrance, a guard finally realizes what is going on and rushes up to them.

[Guard] Hey, you again!? Didn’t I tell you to get lost!?

$aName crouches low, and dashes forward without saying a word. In a flash she is upon the guard and the next instant she draws Whisper from her side and slashes horizontally, finally coming to a stop behind the man. He turns to face her and chastise her erratic behavior, but before he can mutter a single a word his torso collapses forwards onto the ground. His disembodied legs stand for a moment longer before finally crumbling backwards, and each half spouts a torrent of blood into the dirt. $liName calmly walks up to rejoin her. $aName shivers almost imperceptibly, and the two advance.

From inside the fort, nobody moves a muscle. At least three other guards that were lounging around were watching the confrontation in boredom, but now after seeing their colleague cleaved into two they don’t move an inch. $liName and $aName have calmly walked to the entrance now, and finally the guards come to their senses.

[Guard] Get… FUCK… DO, Wha… INTRUDER! ATTACKER THE GATES SOMEONE THERES ATTACKERS AT THE GATES!!! SOMEONE STOP THE…

With a whisper of wind $aName’s blade slices clean through the guard’s neck, sending his head flying off to the side.

Finally escaping their stupor, the remaining two guards draw their swords and nervously square off against $aName and $liName. Somewhere in the back of the fortress, a bell rings rapidly.

[Guard] Fuck this!

One of the guards throws his sword down and sprints back towards the fortress as fast as he can. Once he reaches the fortress doors, he is immediately knocked back by a stampede of soldiers rushing out and is completely trampled by their rush. Meanwhile, his friend who held his ground charges $aName with his sword ready for an overhead strike. Without even blinking $aName simply raises Whisper up to point at him at length and he stops in his tracks. $aName’s blade is so long that he can’t get close without exposing himself, and he hesitates. In that moment of hesitation, $liName marches up behind him and with Gasp still sheathed butts the scabbard into the back of the guard’s legs, sending him stumbling forward onto his knees. Spinning, $liName allows the scabbard to propel itself off the blade and she comes to a full circle, taking off the guard’s head with a clean cut. Meanwhile the scabbard flies away sideways and smashes into an approaching guard’s head, instantly concussing him and leaving him sitting on the ground in a daze.

[$pName] Holy shit…

The pair of brightly dressed women stand menacingly at the entrance to the fort and wait patiently for the reinforcements to arrive. The bell rings desperately now, and all the men who were inside the fort moments ago have finally made it to where the swordswomen wait. Most of them had taken off whatever armor they had in order to relax or eat inside the fort and are clearly unprepared, but all are armed with swords or spears and look ready to fight for their lives.

[$aName] Ok… that’s actually a lot of them. Wow there’s a lot of them. I don’t know $liName maybe we shouldn’t…

[$liName] Just remember to use the entrance to your advantage. If we push too far or retreat too much it’s over. Do you understand?

[$aName] Ahhhh… Ok we can do this…. $pName!?

She calls out over her shoulder back towards you, voice wavering.

[$pName] What?

[$aName] Don’t get too scared ok!?

[$pName] Er… Ok!

The men charge.

There are around 26 in all, just like $liName predicted, and all of them look eager for a fight. After terrorizing helpless peasants for so long they probably had forgotten what a fair fight looked like; $liName and $aName were about to remind them.

[$liName] Now!

The men charge forwards until they get to the wall’s entrance, which immediately bottlenecks them. The first five squeeze past just fine but are quickly cut down by the savage horizontal strikes of $liName and $aName. The next wave after them manages to shove past each other with bloodlust in their eyes and also join the battle, but only after some awkward shoving and tripping. The other 15 or so get stuck trying to rush out of the entrance all at once however and start yelling at each other angrily to move. Despite all their screaming their progress doesn’t get any better and they get jammed up at the bottleneck. Meanwhile, the first five all lay in the dirt lifeless and the second group starts to get desperate. Switching from targeting $aName to $liName, one of the guards tries to make an unpredictable attack and swings at $liName’s side. Reading his movements just in time, she reaches back behind her and blocks the swing with Gasp before bringing it forwards again in a downward strike. The guard in front of her attempts to block it with a sideways parry, but at the last second she stops the blades movement and leaps forwards and spartan kicks him in the chest. The guard goes flying backwards and tumbles into the group of guards caught up at the entrance, blocking things for them even further. Turning, $liName slices at the man that tried to flank her who blocks the attack with a vertical parry. The guard attempts to lunge at her but $liName leaps backwards, and uses the enormous length of Gasp to stab at him from safety. The guard puts up a few brave efforts to thwart her attacks, but is finally caught in the arm by three quick jabs in succession. Dropping his sword in pain, $liName moves in for the kill and sends Gasp straight through his mouth and out the back of his head.

Only a few feet away, $aName whips her sword around her head in a circular motion, forcing the three guards trying to attack her to back up. Pretending to focus on the guard on her right, she allows her flank to be exposed and lazily tries for a shallow stab. Seeing the opportunity, the guard on her left goes in for a swing, but $aName is ready. Instead of pressing the original attack she brings Whisper back and around towards the left guard and catches him mid thrust. Because of her range advantage she catches him well before he gets too close, and Whisper glides through his sword arm like butter and sends the appendage flying into the air. The middle guard thinks he has an opportunity now and tries to attack as well, but $aName anticipates this and whips Whisper back to the right yet again to fend off his swing. This guard is much more talented than the others, and is quick to get inside her range of attack so that she can’t use Whisper’s length to it’s full potential. The two exchange a series of rapid blows, each struggling to get an advantage on the other. Finally, her opponent slips on the dismembered arm from the left guard and loses his balance. Seeing the opportunity, $aName slashes at his side but he barely manages to deflect it in time. To her left, the guard missing his arm screams in agony and stands there stupidly, staring and clutching at his stump of an arm as it jets blood out and all over the road. $aName hears his screaming and glances in that direction, so the other guard lunges forwards with his sword. Quick as a flash $aName grabs the “unarmed” guard and twists him in front of her so that the attacker’s blade plunges into his chest, finally killing him. Desperately, the aggressor pulls at his sword but it is planted so firmly in his friend that he can’t get it out.

[Guard] Wait, please!

$aName sprints out from behind the impaled guard and with a flourish sends Whisper cascading into the second guard’s shoulder. It slices cleanly straight through all the way down across his chest until hitting the sternum, where it finally stops. The guard looks up at her in amazement, and gasps. Kicking him in the stomach, $aName sends the guard flying backwards and frees her blade from his chest. The lifeless corpse joins a now growing pile at the entrance to the fort, which a few more guards have finally managed to clamber over to join in on the brawl.

On a staircase leading to a platform at the top of the fortress wall, a single guard nocks an arrow to his bow and takes aim. At first he directs the arrow towards $liName, but her movements are so quick and the chance of friendly fire is too great for him to get a good shot. With a grunt, he adjusts his aim further away… Straight at you.

Twang!

The bow’s string lets out a sharp retort as the arrow is loosed, and it flies with perfect accuracy straight towards your chest. By the time you notice the arrow coming towards you, it is already too late to move. But then:

[$mName] Whoop!

$mName jumps in front of you with both of his palms extended outwards, as if he is going to palm strike at the arrow with his left hand. Then just as the arrow looks like it is about to collide with him, it disappears and reappears out of his right palm while carrying its momentum the other direction. The arrow shoots out at rapid speed right back to the sender, and with a thunk collides into the guard’s thigh. Grasping at the shaft of the arrow, the guard falls backwards off the platform and down onto the dirt below.

[$mName] That’s some good ammo for the brag bank right there!

[$pName] Nice save!

Ahead of the two of you, $liName and $aName continue their battle.

With incredible precision, $aName and $liName flourish and swipe their swords around in perfect unison, warding off any and all attacks. As soon as one attacks the other moves to defend her, and as soon as one goes on the defense the other attacks the opponent’s flank. Before long there is a pile of bodies completely blocking the entrance, and unless the remaining guards clamber over the waist high wall of flesh they aren’t able to pass. Finally, only one guard is left fighting while the rest silently watch from behind the wall of bodies. They don’t move, they don’t make a sound. All the bloodlust and gung ho has drained out of them now, and they sullenly watch as $liName ducks under the last combatants swing and dives forwards past the guard. As she flies low to the ground, she brings Gasp across herself sideways and straight through the guard’s legs, taking off both at the knees. The guard triumphantly raises his sword over his head and turns to finish off his opponent who lays on the ground seemingly helpless, but he hadn’t yet noticed neither of his legs are still attached and instead falls pitifully sideways and into the dirt.

[Guard] Wha? WHAT!? AAAH! AAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!! AAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!

The man screams, screams as hard as he can and drops his sword. Bent over on the ground he clutches at both of his legs and screams over and over again with all his might. His friends watch in silence from behind the wall of bodies as their ally bleeds to death in front of them.

[Guard] AAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!! MOOOM! MOMMY! PLEASE MOM I DON’T WANT TO DIE! MOTHER…

He flips over onto his stomach and begins crawling towards the town, bawling and screaming. Behind him, a trail of gore is left in his wake. Finally, $aName walks up to him to finish the job.

[Guard] Mother?

$aName sends her blade into his skull, ending his miserable life instantly. Finally, she rejoins $liName at the wall of bodies where the ten or so guards that are left stand quivering in fear.

[$liName] The rest of you, out. NOW.

Desperately, they climb over the bodies and push eachother as they try to escape. They hesitate not a moment as they run past the corpses of their comrades and sprint as hard as they can towards the town. Before long they have disappeared into the woodworks, never to be seen again. $aName looks like she is ready to cry, and a guilty grimace dominates her face. $liName walks up to her and hugs her, whispering reassuring words. After a few minutes of this the two finally break apart, and everyone regroups at the door to the fortress building. Along the way you pick up a sword off of one of the dead guards and strap it to your waist. Despite knowing you wouldn’t really be able to use it, the weight of the blade gives you some comfort.

[$liName] I know that was hard for all of us, but what is done is done. The important thing is that now we can finally talk to the Baron and get a solid lead on the Dragon Cult. Let’s see this through until the end, ok?

[$aName, $pName, $mName] Right.

The three of you open the door to the fortress and step inside. You find yourselves in a large room that serves as some sort of dining area, and it has large tables situated in rows throughout the space. There are lavish rugs across the floor, golden candle holders along the walls, and large ornate tapestries and paintings across every open space. It is one of the most lavish areas you have seen thus far. Speaking of lavish, the tables are covered in dish after dish of savory meats, stews, and bread loafs. In all your time in this world thus far, you have never seen such a wealth of food in one place before.

[$mName] The baron is probably further in…

The four of you venture through the dining hall, where there is not a soul in sight. It is extremely quiet and your footsteps echo uncomfortably loud as you proceed forwards. Finally you reach the back, where there is a small hallway. On the left of the hallway is a closed door, and on the right are steps that must lead to a second floor.

[$liName] I’m thinking we will find him by heading up.

[$mName] I don’t trust staircases.

You look at him in confusion.

[$pName] What? Why?

[$mName] They are always up to something.

The smack of $liName flicking $mName in the forehead echoes off the walls of the empty dining hall, and the four of you climb the ominous steps.

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Reaching the top of the steps reveals a new hallway, this one with many doors leading to miscellaneous rooms on either side. Some are open, some are closed, but none of them look like they lead to the Baron. That is, until you reach the end of the hall and see a final door. This one is larger, grander, and more lavishly decorated than all the other doors. With a nod, the four of you move to open it.

The moment the door is shoved open the whistle of a crossbow bolt hisses out and a projectile whizzes past you, barely missing $mName’s head by only a few inches. With a loud thunk it hits the wall behind you and the four of you rush into the room.

Inside, the Baron stands looking dejected with an unloaded crossbow. He is a tall, fat, sweaty man of about his 40’s with long blonde hair and a walrus mustache. He is dressed in a red garment covered in golden buttons and black laces, and a quiver of crossbow bolts lays at his side. He is standing in the center of the room, which appears to be a bedroom. All around are golden luxuries and fancy silk cloths, the room almost looks too gaudy even for a king. Behind him is an enormous bed covered in fancy red lace and golden decorations, and hiding in the corner beside the bed is a woman and a young boy cowering in fear.

The Baron grunts in frustration and moves to grab another crossbow bolt and reload. Before he can even pick the bolt up, $liName rushes forwards and grabs for the crossbow with her left hand. With her right elbow, she plows into the Baron’s arm forcing him to lose his grip, and with a mighty shove she pushes him backwards and onto his butt at the foot of the bed. Casually, $liName grabs another bolt and shoves it into the crossbow, and while everyone walks up to join her she winds the mechanism so that it is armed. She points the crossbow at him; the Baron is completely at your mercy now.

[$liName] We’ve gone through a lot of trouble to speak with you, $baronName. It’s time to start talking.

$liName points the crossbow at $baronName, and he cowers in fear. In the corner, the woman and little boy start sobbing.

[$baronName] So… You’ve… you’ve gotten past the guards then…

[$liName] It’s just you and us here.

[$baronName] I see… and… you must be the Royal Investigators…

[$liName] Not at all, but they will probably be getting here soon enough. We aren’t here to arrest you Baron. We are here to get some answers.

[$baronName] R- Really? Not the Investigators!? Then why the hell have you gone through all this trouble to speak with me!?

[$liName] We want to know about the Dragon Cult. We’ve heard you are connected to them.

The Baron’s face drains all it’s color, and he gasps in fright.

[$baronName] The Dragon Cult!? Oh nononono… noonono… Anything but that… anything really…

[$liName] I’m Serious! Start talking, or you’re a dead man!

[$baronName] I’m a dead man either way! Don’t you get it? If I say nothing then you kill me, but If I tell you what you want then the cult will learn of my betrayal and hunt me down anyways.

[$pName] When the Royal Investigators arrest you, perhaps they could somehow protect you?

[$baronName] Hah! Like that would stop the cult. They have deeper connections than anyone would dare to know…

[???] Don’t hurt daddy!

The little boy crying in the corner speaks out in a sudden show of bravery, and the woman next him quickly covers his mouth with her hand and shushes him.

[$liName] Is that your son?

The Baron looks at her meekly, and nods his head yes.

[$liName] I can’t guarantee your safety from the cult, but if you don’t tell us everything you know about them right now then I will kill you immediately. If you work with us, then you will at least be able to enjoy a little more time with your family. You don’t want your child to see you killed in front of him, would you?

The threat is harsh, but effective. The Baron looks back and forth between the crossbow and his family several times in a fit, but eventually gives a sigh of defeat.

[$baronName] I didn’t mean for all of this to happen you know. It all started last year, the old baron was a nasty man with a love for nepotism. Sure he was a nice guy to the townsfolk, but he gave every position of power to people in his family or whoever offered the best bribes. It wasn’t fair! Not at all! So I made a deal with the cult; give me the manpower necessary to overthrow him and gain control of the Barony, and I’ll send a tribute every month. So that’s what happened: they sent a small army, we took control of the fortress, and the old Baron was taken care of. The problem is that after it was all said and done, they doubled the necessary tribute I had to give them! It was a huge amount of money, more than the barony could sustain! So I had to improvise, and be a little bit harsh to the townsfolk and farmers. Every month we would barely manage to get enough money to appease the cult, and every month they would demand more of my soldiers to help them with some dumb project. In the end, I had no choice but to rule with an iron fist to stay afloat. It’s the cults fault everything is falling apart, not mine!

[$aName] Project? Tell us more about this project they needed your soldiers for.

[$baronName] They didn’t tell me much, but it seemed like it was a big deal… They seemed really excited about it, like they discovered something that would help them find the Dragon. All I know is that the soldiers were sent to some sort of ruins to the west of here, by a town called Durango.

[$aName] Ruins by a town called Durango… Do you have any other information about the cult we should know?

[$baronName] They really don’t tell me anything! I just pay them in Aureus and manpower, that’s it!

$liName turns to you briefly, and whispers.

[$liName] Well we got what we came for. What should we do with this nasty piece of work? Do we kill him right here right now, or leave him for the Royal Investigators to take care of? He really doesn’t deserve our mercy after how he has treated the townsfolk, but I also don’t want to kill him in front of his family…

[$baronName] Please, the cult made me do everything! You promised you wouldn’t kill me if I told you about Durango! Please…

Spare him 7

Kill him 8

7

[$pName] We got what we came for. In the end, the Royal courts will decide his fate.

[$baronName] Th… Thank you…

With that the four of you exit back out the way you came, down the stairs, and then through a storage room entrance in the back of the fortress. Without any incident you made it outside the walls, and regroup just outside of town.

[$aName] Looks like we are all clear. Our next stop is going to be Durango, huh?

[$liName] I believe so. He seemed so scared it didn’t strike me as a lie. Do you think you can handle exploring some ancient ruins, $pName?

[$pName] Only one way find out! You’re coming along with us, right $mName?

[$mName] So I get to stick with you guys! Of course I’m coming along!

Victorious, the four of you set off west for the town of Durango.

After travelling for a few days, you heard the news about what happened in the Barony after you had moved on. Apparently, the Baron was more terrified than ever of additional intruders attacking him so he forcefully conscripted every single man, woman, and child in the entire Barony to act as his temporary soldiers. He even hired some mercenaries to bolster the defenses as well. Only a few days after you had left, the Royal Investigators arrived to question him about his cult connections and found a formidable force awaiting them. Instead of backing down, the Royal forces brought in reinforcements and assaulted the fortress. The mercenaries were in the back, and forced the townsfolk which were only armed with wooden spears to fight in the front. If any of them tried to run away or escape, the mercenaries cut them down without remorse. In the end, the townsfolk couldn’t hold up against the Royal forces and they were all brutally slaughtered in the battle. The mercenaries saw what was happening and tried to escape too, but most were cut down. In the end the Baron was arrested, and brought back to the capital for questioning. With almost every person that lived in the Barony now dead, it quickly deteriorated into a ghost town and was never inhabited again.

END OF ARC 3, THE BARON

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[$pName] A man who acts like a monster deserves to be slain like one. Do it $liName.

Without a moment of hesitation $liName pulls the trigger and sends a bolt straight through the Baron’s head, pinning him to the base of the bed.

[Baron’s Wife] NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!

[Baron’s Son] DADDYYYYYYY!!!!

His family screams and cries in the corner hysterically, but don’t move a muscle. They watch helplessly as the man they love more than anyone else bleeds all over the place they once slept together.

[$pName] Lets go.

With that the four of you exit back out the way you came, down the stairs, and then through a storage room entrance in the back of the fortress. Without any incident you make it outside the walls, and regroup just outside of town. For a long time, nobody says a thing. Then:

[$aName] Looks like we are all clear. Our next stop is going to be Durango, huh?

[$liName] I believe so. He seemed so scared it didn’t strike me as a lie. Do you think you can handle exploring some ancient ruins, $pName?

[$pName] Only one way find out. You’re coming along with us, right $mName?

[$mName] So I get to stick with you guys? Of course I’m coming along!

Victorious, the four of you set off west for the town of Durango.

After travelling for a few days, you heard the news about what happened in the Barony after you had moved on. Apparently, with the Baron dead the townsfolk were able to quickly kick out his remaining forces and take control of the barony for themselves. Eventually the Royal investigators arrived to see that their original target was no longer around, and left without incident. In the end, the townsfolk were able to elect one of their elders as mayor and they tore down all the old rules and tyranny the Baron had established during his short reign. Within only a few months the region managed to get back on track and even prosper. Legend has it they were able to save the town thanks to the efforts of a clever street magician and his eccentric friends, but perhaps that is simply a rumor…

END OF ARC 3, THE BARON