0

ARC 4, THE RUINS

\*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

The story picks back up two weeks after the events at the Barony. Since then your gang has been travelling west, all the way to the far edge of $kingdomName. During this time you have been able to practice swordsmanship with $liName some more, and now you are finally confident that you could at least beat a toddler in a duel. Furthermore, $mName has taught you a couple card tricks to keep you entertained. You can’t do any of the fancy tricks he invented using his control word magic, but the sleight of hand he shares with you is more than enough to impress $aName.

The card deck $mName uses for his tricks is very strange. It is a deck of uno playing cards, well worn from years of heavy use and shuffling. You tried at one point to ask him where he found them, but he simply explained his old magic mentor gave them to him as a gift years ago and he never bothered asking where it came from. To him, having such a unique deck of cards is nothing out of the ordinary.

After what felt like ages of traveling, the day finally came when you could see the fuzzy outline of Durango off in the distance. Pulling on $hName’s reins, you stop to strategize with the others.

[$pName] Looks like we finally made it! Let’s review our game plan guys.

[$aName] Right. First, we enter Durango and try to find a guide for getting us to the... uh… rrr…

[$liName] Ruins?

[$aName] Right, the Ruins. Guide for getting to the ruins.

[$liName] Second, we approach the ruins while staying careful not to alert the Cultists.

[$mName] Third, we capture one and figure out what they are after. Is that everything?

[$pName] I think that’s everything. Questions? No? Alright, let’s head in.

The four of you ride towards the town. Around you is predominately forest, but every now and then there is a wide patch grass where an assortment of flowers and large bushes grow. The trees are tall and thin, and their branches only start growing out about 15 feet up so there is a peculiar optical effect whenever you look past the tree trunks while riding. The trees grow close to each other and small monkeys use this to their advantage as they leap from branch to branch. After a bit of this idle observation your crew passes by a small dairy farm nestled between the foliage, and a friendly cow moos a greeting towards you.

[$mName] Hey $pName, what do you get from a pampered cow?

[$pName] I have a feeling you are about to tell me…

[$mName] Spoiled milk!

[$aName, $liName, $pName] UGH.

After a bit more of peaceful riding and sightseeing you arrive at Durango. Here the buildings have a unique look to them which you hadn’t seen in $kingdomName before. Eight logs stacked high made from the local trees are placed in the shape of an octagon, and between these logs are bushels of hay strapped together and tightly packed. These stacks are shoved in the corners between the logs and are covered by thin layers of mud for protection against the wind and rain. In the center of each building is a slightly taller tree log, which acts as a center point for the roof. Thatching connects the center log to the outer vertices, and gives it a nice sloped roof. Overall, the buildings here have a plain aesthetic but they are well built and maintained unlike many of the wooden structures you have seen before.

Durango isn’t very big, and it takes only a minute before your group makes it to the town center. You look around for a tavern or somewhere you could recruit a guide, but find none. Instead, the center of town is dominated by a single much larger version of the other buildings, and it looks like it must act as some kind of community center. Hesitatingly, you venture into an opening and peer inside.

In one corner is a bar of some sort, except instead of a counter there is a table that is maybe only a foot tall. A few people sit with their legs criss-crossed in front of the table, and chat idly with each other and the bartender. Opposite this corner is a communal sleeping area, where a great deal of straw and rough looking blankets are strewn about. Nobody is resting there at the time being. Across the building from you there is a large crowd of people huddled around a shallow stage, where a lone person is performing some kind of song. It is hard to hear over the hubbub of the bar patrons and crowd so you move closer.

The singer finishes their song just as you near, and the audience claps politely. Placing her guitar on the ground, she then picks up a cone made of terracotta and places it to her lips. She holds the cone with one hand while gently ringing what looks like a cowbell with the other. She begins to sing a new song now, which echoes eerily across the room.

2

\*play kulning\*

She looks to be about 15, and is bursting with youthful energy. She wears woven black pants and a too-big purple sweater, which hangs loosely off of one shoulder. At her waist is a long scarf of burlap that wraps around her many times and continues to do so all the way down to her hips before being tied up at the back. She wears no shoes, and her blonde braided hair swings across her back as she sings and leans side to side. The sound of her voice is peaceful but at the same time unsettling.

3

When she finishes her song there is a short lull of silence as the mesmerized crowd finally manages to come to their senses. Immediately after, they break into uproarious applause and you can’t help but join in. The girl concludes her performance with a bow and walks over to the bar area to talk to someone, and everyone goes back to whatever they were doing before she began singing.

[$mName] You know I could get a crowd riled up like that in no time as well, if you’d let me!

[$aName] Stay focused $mName! Now’s not the time for any of your… er…

[$liName] Tricks?

[$pName] mischief?

[$aName] No…

[$liName] Shenanigans?

[$aName] That’s it! Wow I’m impressed you got that one…

[$liName] Who even says ‘Shenanigans’ anymore?

[$aName] It just felt right! Anyways now’s not the time for your shenanigans $mName, we gotta find a guide to get us to those ruins. Anyone here look like the adventurer type to you?

Looking around you, nobody seems to stand out at all. Almost everyone around you looks like either simple dairy farmer or plain townsfolk.

[$pName] I’ll keep an eye out for someone wearing an Indiana Jones hat, but in the meantime maybe we should split up and ask around.

[$liName] What is an ‘Indiana Jones hat’?

[$pName] He’s a… nevermind. Let’s just start looking.

[$liName] Strange as ever, $pName…

The four of you split up and begin asking around. Despite Durango supposedly being close to these ruins, it seems either nobody has heard of them before or nobody is willing to tell you about them. This goes on for some time, until eventually you feel like you have interrogated every person nearby. Wearily, you rejoin the others at the sit down bar.

[$pName] Any luck?

[$liName] None at all. It seems like nobody has heard of these ruins before.

[$mName] Or no one is willing to admit they have…

[???] What’s this about the ruins?

Behind you, someone speaks with a euphonious voice reminiscent of porch chimes daintily ringing. Turning, you find that the speaker is none other than the girl who had been singing at the stage earlier.

[Girl] You mean the old Dragon Temple?

[$aName] So you know where it is!?

[Girl] Of course I do. But I’m not supposed to say that...

[$pName] Why not?

[Girl] Hmm… They say the Cult has eyes and ears everywhere. You don’t look the type though… Why are you looking for the temple?

You glance at the others warily; can she be trusted?

[$pName] We have heard that there is significant Dragon Cult activity around those ruins, and we think they are up to something. We are adventurers hoping to find the Ancient Dragon, and we suspect that the cult may give us some kind of clue as to his whereabouts. It will probably be very dangerous, but we humbly ask that you guide us to these ruins so that we may continue in our quest.

[Girl] How exciting! A real adventure… I could write a song about this you know!

She starts humming to herself while deep in thought, likely already imagining the chord structure of her next release.

[$liName] Do you think you could help us?

[Girl] Hmm… How about you buy me lunch and it’s a deal.

[$aName] Hmph. Alright, seems fair enough.

[Girl] my name is $bardName by the way, nice to meet you.

[$liName] I’m $liName, this is $aName, and these two useless guys are $pName and $mName.

[$pName, $mName] Useless!?

[$bardName] He he, well nice to meet all of you! And I will take oat flapjacks, thank you!

The five of you eat lunch together without saying anything further, remaining careful not to reveal too much while cult spies could be lurking around. Eager to get somewhere more private, $aName suggests everyone meet outside of town after finishing.

Electing to leave her terracotta cone and cowbell behind but bringing along her guitar, $bardName joins the four of you at a cluster of trees on the edge of Durango. She leans against one of the trees casually and absentmindedly strums at her guitar while you briefly explain everything that had brought you here up until this point.

[$bardName] uh huh. And you still don’t know why the Cult is at the temple?

[$pName] Well… Of course not. That’s why we are here.

[$bardName] Well how about this. I will tell you what they are up to AND I’ll lead you to the temple if you pay me 100 Aureus.

[$aName] 100!? What kinda…

[$liName] Shrewd little girl aren’t you?

[$mName] Wait, that’s a great idea! How about you pay me 100 Aureus as well to thank me for all the help I’ve provided as well.

[$pName] You should be paying US for all the terrible jokes you’ve been telling…

[$mName] Hey listen man, it’s called dough for a reason. Everyone kneads it!

Exasperated, $liName marches up to $mName and with a loud thwap flicks him in the forehead with such force he goes flying backwards.

[$mName] Oof! That was a good one…

$liName turns back to $bardName now, who looks thoroughly intimidated by her show of force.

[$bardName] Hey hey hey now! Honestly, 50 would be fine. Let’s do 50 then! A nice discount for my nice new friends…

[$aName] Deal. Tell us everything you know while we head for the temple ruins.

With that, the five of you set off north and $bardName happily began her monologue while pocketing the cash.

[$bardName] The Temple ruins are just a little North of Durango, maybe 30 minutes away. The cult recently moved in here to uncover some sort of ancient artifact; they call it “The Ancient Scripture”. It is some kind of holy document written by the Dragon himself. Apparently, they think it gives the reader absolute understanding of the world and even quasi-omniscience. Infinite knowledge, if you will. They want to uncover the artifact and bring it back for the Arch-Bishop in the capital to read so that he may reveal where the Dragon is hiding.

[$pName] Hmm, do you think such an artifact exists?

[$bardName] No idea, they still haven’t gotten to it yet. Apparently it resides deep in the temple ruins and is guarded by a multitude of diabolical traps. It’s like, super dangerous. So far the Cult has simply thrown bodies at each trap until it gets clogged up and stops working, so by now they have probably gotten pretty close. But it won’t matter in the end anyways.

[$mName] And why’s that?

[$bardName] Everyone in Durango knows about the legend of the Scripture, and its curse. It is said that all who read it are soon filled with existential dread and kill themselves almost immediately, without fail. In fact, the only person to have ever read the Scripture and survived is one of the four evil horseman of the apocalypse, WAR.

[$liName] Then there’s nothing to worry about, the arch-bishop will never be able to read it.

[$pName] Perhaps. If they are fanatical enough, they might have found some way around the curse. Otherwise, why would they try so hard to obtain it?

[$aName] What if we got it and used it to find the dragon instead?

[$bardName] While that would be good for thwarting the Cult’s plan, I doubt any of you could read it…

[$aName] But $pName has his magical device that can help him find the dragon, maybe you could use that to dispel the curse?

Your phone had run out of battery weeks ago, in fact, but you hadn’t found the courage to tell them that yet. Despite this…

[$pName] My perspective on reality is a little… different from yours. I’m confident I could give it a glance and come out ok.

[$bardName] In the end it is your decision, just be careful. Apparently, the knowledge of our reality is so dark and sinister that no mere mortal can handle it…

The five of you continue in silence as you get closer and closer to the Dragon Temple ruins. The path $bardName leads you on zig zags through the trees and over boulders, and everyone remains on high alert in case a cult patrol happens to be near. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of walking, you come to a rest at the top of a rocky outcropping and manage to survey the Temple area.

There is a large swath of trees cut down leaving an empty space about the size of a football field. In the center is a single small pyramid around the size of a truck, surrounded by torches. All around it in the clearing is a gathering of tents of various sizes pitched haphazardly without any planned formation. The area is bustling with activity; at least 100 individuals are moving about the campground performing various chores or going in and out of their tents. One of them approaches the pyramid, and adjusts a pulley system that looks like it is connected to some sort of crane. On further inspection you realize that the pyramid has an enormous door of pure iron that is held open by this crane-pulley system, and this must be how they enter in and out. Other than the unimpressive pyramid and the strange door, there are no other indications of any ruins or temple like structures.

[$mName] A little underwhelming don’t you think?

[$pName] I was expecting something… bigger.

[$mName] Aye, I’ve heard that one before…

[$liName] Would you two morons shut it?

$liName moves to give you a thwack on the forehead but this time you are prepared, and dodge just in time. Not so lucky is $mName, who receives a solid hit and clutches at his forehead.

[$liName] We need to figure out how to get into that temple without alerting the small army camped all around it. Any ideas?

[$pName] hmm…

Everyone goes quiet, and tries their best to think. What should you do?

Fight your way through the cultists 4

Sneak through the camp 4

Use $mName as a sacrifice and run past the guards 4

Abandon your friends and go in by yourself 4

4

[$pName] I think we should…

[$bardName] Ah ha! I’ve got it!

Everyone stops thinking and looks at her in surprise.

[$bardName] I know a couple Church Hymns, I could sing with my lovely voice and captivate the cultists as my audience. Then while they are distracted you guys can sneak past and get inside the Temple. Once you’re in there I’ll sprint to join you, and you can cut the rope holding that door open so that they can’t chase us!

[$aName] Hey that’s a great idea!

[$pName] That’s a pretty good idea… but aren’t you doing a lot for us? Isn’t this whole thing a bit dangerous for someone so young?

[$bardName] As for your first remark, I’ve been looking for a real-life adventure for a loooong time, and if this whole thing works out I’ll have the material for the best ballad made in years. Furthermore, If we can find the Dragon then that means I’ll get a wish too, right?

[$pName] Well yeah…

[$bardName] So its worth it for me in the end then isn’t it? As for the danger part, let me ask you this: Have you ever killed a man, $pName?

Startled, you stare back at her for a moment. She meets your gaze with an air of stoicism.

[$pName] Well… no…

[$bardName] It just so happens that I have. Since you are so comparatively inexperienced, does that mean this operation is a little too dangerous for YOU $pName? Should we leave you behind?

[$liName] Woah $pName, ZING! Honestly she might be right, you are rather useless…

[$pNames] Yikes, harsh! Don’t make me remind you of how if it wasn’t for my efforts back in Kingsbridge we would all have succumbed to DEATH, and I even helped devise the plan against the Baron too didn’t I?

[$liName] I seem to recall in both situations all the fighting being done by $aName and I…

[$aName] $liName, that’s enough! $pName is a valuable member of this group and is always ready to make tough decisions on our behalf. Plus, I bet there will be all kinds of booby traps in that temple and we will need him to help us navigate through them, right?

[$pName] Ri… Right.

[$aName] There it is then, looks like we are all joined by our goal of finding the Dragon and so we will all stick together along this path. $bardName, you don’t have to put yourself in danger but if you still want to help I would be… ah…

[$liName] indebted?

[$pName] Grateful?

[$aName] Yes! I would be very grateful for your help!

[$bardName] Of course! Let’s do it then.

And with that, $bardName leaps down the rocks and loops to the right around the camp, so that she may begin singing on the right side.

[$mName] If she sings on that side to distract them, we better approach from the left.

[$liName] Let’s move.

The four of you carefully make your way down the rocks and sneak along the treeline until you are opposite where $bardName will begin her performance. Next, you wait behind some trees until it seems like a commotion is stirring up inside the camp.

[$mName] That must be our signal, let’s move!

The four of you scamper through the tents, constantly checking over your shoulders to make sure you haven’t been discovered. Luckily, the entire area is devoid of life as every single cultist congregates to the right side of the compound to see what all the fuss is about. Finally, you manage to get within 20 feet of the pyramid and take cover inside of a tent. In the distance, you can hear the powerful resonation of 100 people singing along to some kind of church song. Either she is leading them in the music or she is being sacrificed and they are singing to celebrate, but you can’t tell either way. Hoping for the best, you nod to each of your comrades and prepare to make a break for the temple.

[$pName] Go!

The four of you sprint as hard as you can towards the temple, but with nothing at all to break the line of sight between you and the congregation it is only a matter of time until someone notices the intrusion. Lucky for you, everyone seems to be more concerned with the song and you make it to the huge iron door without a problem. Peering inside the doorway, you see an incredibly long staircase leading down into the ground below, slowly turning away until you can’t even see where the bottom is. Above you, the iron door is held open by a thick rope attached to a crane, and a complicated pulley system strains to hold it open.

[$pName] Alright $aName, prepare to slice this rope. I’ll signal to $bardName that we made it.

You clamber up the pyramid as quickly as you can, but it is surprisingly slick and you struggle to get any good footholds. Nevertheless, you manage to finally reach the summit and look over the compound to where everyone is gathered.

At the far end, a huge circle of cultists have joined hands and lean side to side in unison, creating a strange wavelike effect in the crowd. Each cultist is wearing a fluffy brown robe, with a single strip of burlap acting as a waistband. The collar of these robes are popped out so that the material wraps around and behind their head in an odd way, similar to something you would see Dracula wear except fuzzier. At the center of the concert is none other than $bardName, except somehow she managed to get a hold of one of those fuzzy robes and wears one herself. Thinking she must be one of them, the cultists joyously sing and dance to her song without a second thought as to who she is or why she would perform so suddenly. Even from so far away you can faintly hear her singing, and it lulls you into a state of relaxed melancholy almost immediately. Dazed, you watch for a few seconds before remembering what you are trying to accomplish and snap out of it.

[$pName] $bardName! Get over here!

You wave your arms wildly, and hope that she can see your gesture. Without skipping a beat she moves forwards through the crowd while still singing, as if she was a pop performer. She moves slowly and deliberately so as not to rouse suspicion, and even takes the time to sing directly to a couple of the cultists individually which excites them even more. Then, upon reaching the edge of the crowd, she stops the act and makes a break for it.

[Cultist] Hey, who’s that on the temple!?!?

One of them finally sees you dancing around like a monkey and raises the alarm. Legs pumping and arms flailing, $bardName runs as fast as she can towards you with the crowd in hot pursuit.

[$pName] This is gonna be a close one guys!

You slip down the slope of the pyramid as quick as you can, and grab $mName as you head inside. From just within the doorway you can see $bardName getting closer and closer, but it looks like she isn’t going to be quick enough as one of the cultists is rapidly gaining on her. Just when you think she is caught, $liName flies out with lightning speed towards her and cuts the cultist down with a single Gasp. Now both her and $bardName sprint towards the entrance, and leap over the threshold just as the masses are about to close in.

[$pName] Now $aName!

$aName swipes at the rope connected to the crane and leaps down to join you. With a load groan the Iron door finally allows gravity to take over and slams shut with tremendous momentum.

WHAM

The door comes to a rest, blocking out all light as well as the angry crowd of cultists outside. You made it just in time.

[$mName] Everyone ok?

Everyone catches their breath and nods in affirmation. Looks like you made it in just barely, and there is only one direction left that you can go: Down, down into the ominous temple of the Ancient Dragon.

5

\*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

6

Slowly wandering down the temple steps, you are filled with trepidation. The steps and walls are made of stone, which is cold to the touch. There is hardly any lighting at all, and only when you think there couldn’t possibly be enough light for you to see where you are going does another torch affixed to the wall come into view and save you from the darkness. Down the five of you go, deeper and deeper into the temple for what feels like ages. Somewhere far away you hear distant screams.

Finally, you arrive at the bottom of the staircase. In front of you is a long hallway, littered with what looks like hundreds of dead cultists. The way forward is filled to the brim with devious traps, and It seems that the cultists have triggered every single one in this hellish hallway: spike pits are lined with corpses, deadly pendulums which once swung are caught up in bloody limbs and swing no more, and dart traps have shot every poisonous dart once loaded into them. The stench of rot instantly overwhelms you, and you hear $bardName throwing up a little behind you. It is an unbelievably disturbing scene and it makes you feel utterly sick. A plaque on the wall next to you reads:

KNOW WHAT YOU ARE

And nothing else. The possibility of some of the traps not having been triggered yet remains, but you have no choice but to press forwards as you begin to enter the bloody hallway.

[$liName] be careful $pName…

The spike pits are so clogged with bodies you simply use their flesh as a human bridge and walk over it. The pendulums cannot move anymore so you duck under them and press on. The Darts don’t shoot when you stumble over the pressure plates, and at the far end of the hallway a large boulder rests motionless. It looks like someone set off a trap and was chased by this boulder a while ago, and their flattened remains prove they didn’t succeed in their escape. Finally after holding your nose and inching along the hallway for what feels like ages, you emerge past the other side and make it to another staircase leading downwards. Once your friends finish following your path, they breathe a sigh of relief to have made it and join you in the descent.

After another long journey downwards, you find yourself at the start to the second trial. This one is slightly wider than the other, and has a strange looking grid of stones with letters on them filling much of the hallway floor. A plaque on the wall reads:

KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

You try to inspect the hallway in as much detail as you can. In total, the floor’s grid is 10 spaces long and three spaces wide. The cultists managed to get this far already, and it looks like they have set off a decent amount of the traps before you got here. Many of the grid spaces are missing, and it looks like some kind of vent is underneath these tiles with letters on them. Judging by the bodies laying on the ground, it can be assumed that if you step on the wrong tile then the vent underneath it releases some kind of deadly gas which kills the test taker. Almost all the tiles that are near the starting point have been already triggered, meaning you know which tile is safe to step on until the 7th position. From there, none of them have been triggered which means you will need to decide which 4 tiles to step on after the first six. The only way to get across the hallway is to step on the correct lettered tiles. You draw the grid out in your mind, so that you can better understand it. You represent the exposed/ missing tiles as an X, and all the still intact tiles with the letter that corresponds with them.

Q | X | X | X | X | Y | N | W | C | E

X | W | X | R | T | X | U| I | G | X

X | X | E | X | X | X | Z | L | O | P

The diagram assumes you are looking from the top down at the hallway floor tiles, with you and your friends starting at the left side and wanting to get across to the right.

[$aName] $pName, I’m not gonna lie to you. I have no stinking clue what the heck this puzzle is supposed to be about.

[$mName] Hey, look over here!

You turn to see $mName dusting off a second plaque which could easily go unnoticed in the corner. It reads:

THE ANSWER IS RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE

[$bardName] How exciting! A booby trapped hallway, a fantastical riddle, it’s all so incredible! This will be my finest ballad yet, I can’t wait! $pName, you can hurry up and solve the riddle now so that we can move on.

[$pName] I’m working on it…

The others don’t have a clue what the answer could be, so it must be something only you could know. You have a clue: “The answer is right under your nose”. You also have the introduction: “Know what you have”. And lastly, you have the grid. You know what the first six allowed tiles are, but need to figure out the final four. One wrong guess and it will mean certain death for both you and your friends. You need to figure out what the pattern is and determine the safe path to continue.

Please enter the correct four letters representing the safe tiles to pass the test.

(input field requiring the input uiop)

Incorrect 7

Correct 8

7

[$pName] Here goes nothing…

Boldy, you leap from tile to tile following the first six known safe letters: QWERTY. Hopping from tile to tile, you feel the reassuring solidity of each piece of stone. Finally, it comes time to put your theory to test. You hesitate for a moment, and decide to commit. With a leap you jump towards your guess…

SNAP

The tile beneath your feet cracks instantly, and you lose your balance and fall to the ground.

[$aName] $pName!

Suddenly, a huge gust of wind blows aggressively from underneath the tile you just broke, and a noxious green gas erupts from the newly exposed vent and rapidly fills the air. Your heart sinks; it was an incorrect guess.

[$mName] $pName! \*cough\* get out of there!

You try to hold your breath and get up as quickly as you can. Sprinting back the way you came, everyone runs back to the booby trapped hallway. It is so dark you can hardly see, but even with such little lighting it is clear that the noxious green fumes have rapidly filled the test hallway and even now have completely filled the boobytrap hallway. It’s moving far too quickly to outrun.

[$liName] \*cough\* \*cough\* Cmon!

The five of you sprint across the boobytrap hallway as quickly as you can, lungs burning from holding your breaths. Finally, you get a handful of steps up the staircase before you have no choice but to inhale a great gulp of air.

[$pName] Hurk…

There’s no helping it, the entire room and staircase and everything around you has been toxified by the green fumes. With a single breath your lungs erupt into fire, and your eyes water in pain. Behind you, $mName begins to scream in agony as his lungs are melted inside his chest and $bardName cries incoherently. Your eyes feel like they are on fire now as they react to the fumes, and your vision blurs. The last thing you see before going completely blind is $aName screaming and clawing at her eyes, which are literally melting out of their sockets.

[$pName] uuugghhhh….

You have no oxygen left in your body and even without the ability to see, little flashing lights dart across your mind as you writhe on the ground in pain. Every orifice on your body is burning, and your lungs have completely stopped working. Before long, you can no longer hear the tormented screams of your friends around you as they finally give up on life and one by one gasp their last breath. Just like that, your journey is over.

THE END

8

[$pName] Here goes nothing…

Boldy, you leap from tile to tile following the first six known safe letters: QWERTY. Hopping from tile to tile, you feel the reassuring solidity of each piece of stone. Finally, it comes time to put your theory to test. You hesitate for a moment, and decide to commit. With a leap you jump onto the first letter: U.

[$pName] … ?

Nothing happens. You land on the tile and nothing happens at all, which is surely a sign you are doing the right thing.

[$pName] Everyone ok back there? Nothing happened?

[$bardName] We’re fine!

Reassured, you continue to the next tile. With a grimace, you step onto the I tile and yet again nothing happens.

[$pName] I think I figured it out!

[$mName] Woo! Great job!

Confident now, you step onto the O tile and then the P, finally taking a last step onto the safe ground at the far end of the hallway. You made it!

[$pName] I figured it out guys! You need to step only on the top row of a keyboard, only touch the tiles that are part of the sequence Q W E R T Y U I O P!

[$aName] What the heck is a keyboard!?

[$pName] Never mind that, get over here!

One by one, your companions follow your instructions and manage to cross safely. With a huge sigh of relief, you allow your shoulders to relax and $mName even gives you a big high five.

[$liName] Wow, you actually used your brain for once. Nice one $pName.

Triumphant, the five of you continue along the hallway until you reach another set of stairs. Just like before, they lead a long ways down which gives you time to tone the adrenaline from the last test down and prepare for the next trial. Finally, the five of you make it to the bottom and round another corner.

9

[DOOR CLOSED

You can only take this trial once. If you load and come back, the door will already be open. ]

This hallway is much smaller than the other ones you have traversed thus far. In fact, it is so short it is almost not even a hallway, but rather a small space the size of a living room. At the far end is a huge door made of pure gold with a sculpture of an enormous dragon roaring out from its surface. The design is very intimidating, but you are sure if you can pass this test the door will open and hopefully reveal the path to the Ancient Scripture.

In the middle of the room is a plain wooden chair, and just in front of that chair is yet another plaque. Walking up to it, you find that someone has already brushed the dust off. It reads:

KNOW WHAT YOU BECAME

There is nothing else in the room than the chair. With no other option, you adjust your posture so that you can sit in it.

[$mName] Wait!

You hesitate, and stand upright again to look at $mName.

[$mName] You’ve done an amazing job so far $pName, you really don’t have to lead the way on every puzzle down here. I would feel terrible if you ended up getting hurt…

[$pName] Well someone’s got to do it, might as well be me right? Besides, I feel like this next trial in particular is going to be important…

With that, you turn and sit in the chair. The moment you rest your weight on it, you find that gravity no longer holds you down and you begin to float upwards.

[$pName] Wha!?

You look down to see if you are floating away from the floor, but nothing is there. In fact, nothing is everywhere: you can’t even see your own body, and absolutely everything has taken on the color of an impenetrable black. The final trial has begun.

10 DOOR OPEN

This hallway is much smaller than the other ones you have traversed thus far. In fact, it is so short it is almost not even a hallway, but rather a small space the size of a living room. At the far end is a huge door made of pure gold with a sculpture of an enormous dragon roaring out from it’s surface, and it is… already opened.

[$bardName] Looks like somebody already cleared this trap out for us. Unless it’s a trick?

$bardName bravely strides out into the middle of the room, past the chair and touches the door.

[$bardName] Well I’m not dead yet, so looks like the coast is clear. Bit odd, isn’t it?

[$pName] It has already passed judgement…

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner.

11

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

[???] Intrepid traveler, do you yet know what you have become?

[$pName] Er…

[???] What is morality? Is it something we learned from an ancient book? Is it something others force upon us since birth? Does right and wrong exist?

[$pName] Woah, um…

[???] Do you yet know what you have become?

A light appears far above you, casting a bright light down on a new set of surroundings. Without explanation you find yourself standing in the middle of a large field of short grass. The grass is green, but the sky is an odd combination of purple and pink, as if two buckets of paint were spilt onto a single canvas and mixed together. You look around yourself and find nothing else at all, the ground is perfectly level, without a single variance in height or imperfection. The grass continues on infinitely in all directions, and you feel a little disoriented not being able to tell one way from the other. Then, a huge whoosh of wind blows past you and a new object rushes into the scene: First a set of train tracks, which at lightning speed appears from thin air and lays itself onto the ground as if being built by a million unseen hands. Next, a divergence in the tracks is laid down so that one set is perfectly straight and the new set curves away from the original and takes a second path that runs parallel to the first. A lever materializes next to you, with a wire that runs towards where the two sets of tracks split. Finally a train is constructed out of thin air bolt by bolt at an incredibly fast speed. After watching with your jaw dropped for only a short moment, the train is finished constructing and is gently laid down on the track perhaps 100 feet before where the divergence in the track is.

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

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are five people of completely randomized age, race, gender, and position…

Five people appear on the track ahead of the train just past where the tracks diverge, and the train begins to move forward gaining momentum.

[???] Just before the five tied down people is a divergence in the tracks, which only activates if you pull that lever. On this new divergent track is only a single person of completely randomized age, race, gender, and position…

A single person appears at the parallel track, and just like the others is tied down and helpless to escape.

[???] If you do nothing, the train will run over and kill the five people tied to the track ahead. If you pull the lever, it will take the alternate track and kill the single person tied to the track.

A bead of sweat forms on your temple, and slowly slides down.

[???] Some would say that it is morally correct to sacrifice one to save the many, but others would argue that in a dilemma that is by default morally wrong, participating at all makes you partially responsible for their death. I don’t care what they think, I care what YOU think. So, $pName, which will you choose?

Do nothing 13

Pull the lever 12

12

You reach for the lever, and pull it with all your might. With a loud click the mechanism responds to your action, and the tracks move slightly forcing the train to take the divergent path. The train hurtles down the parallel tracks at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the tied down man…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. Time for the next stage of the trial then.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are five people of completely randomized age, race, gender, and position…

Five people appear on the track ahead of the train just past where the tracks diverge, and the train begins to move forward gaining momentum.

[???] But this time there is no divergence in the tracks. There is only one path, the path towards these five people.

The divergence disappears in a puff of smoke.

[???] In front of you is a fat man that you do not know. He is not aware of your presence or who you are. The only way to save the five people is by pushing him into the tracks, and his mass will block the train from continuing. By doing so, he will certainly die. By doing nothing, the five people will die.

As you mull over the question, a fat man of about your height appears in front of you. He is standing with most of his weight on one leg, so pushing him forward and onto the tracks would be easy.

[???] So, $pName, which will you choose?

Do nothing 15

Push the man in front of the train 14

13

You decide to do nothing, and watch the train gain more and more speed with a feeling of dread. The train hurtles down the parallel tracks at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the five people…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. Time for the next stage of the trial then.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are your close friends $aName, $liName, $mName, and $bardName. Since we need a fifth, let’s add in $merchantName the Merchant from the town of Kingsbridge as well…

All five of them appear on the train tracks, and are tied down unable to move. They struggle mightily to free themselves, but can’t move an inch.

[$aName] $pName! What the hell is going on!?

[$liName] You better have a good reason for this you moron!

[$mName] Well this is no joking matter…

[$bardName] AHHH! Help us!

[$merchantName] What the…?

[$pName] Guys!

[???] Tied to the divergence in the tracks is your old acquaintance, $baronName the Baron.

The Baron appears in a poof similarly tied down, his rolls of fat squeezing between the circles of rope that hold him down.

[$baronName] What the hell is this!?

[???] If you do nothing, the train will run over and kill your friends tied to the track ahead. If you pull the lever, it will take the alternate track and kill the Baron instead.

You glance back and forth between the two options, and you can hear $bardName quietly begin to cry.

[???] So, $pName, which will you choose?

Pull lever 16

Do nothing 17

14

You take a step forward and push the man with all the strength you have in you. With a gasp of surprise he loses his balance and collapses into the middle of the tracks. The train hurtles forwards at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the fat man…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. Pushing the man is no different from pulling the lever of course, but many people shy away from the more direct version of this dilemma. Not you. Time for the final stage of the trial then.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are five people of completely randomized age, race, gender, and position…

Five people appear on the track ahead of the train just past where the tracks diverge, and the train begins to move forward gaining momentum.

[???] There is no divergence, and there is no fat man. Instead, there is only you. The only way to save these five people tied to the tracks is for you to step in front of the train, which will kill you but is also guaranteed to save the five people. Your death is not as trivial as you think either: by sacrificing yourself to stop this train, not only will you die but I will also destroy your save file so that you may not load your progress back and you will be forced to completely restart.

[$pName] What!?

[???] So, $pName, time for the final decision. Which will you choose?

Do nothing 19

Step in front of the train 18

15

You decide to do nothing, and watch the train gain more and more speed with a feeling of dread. The train hurtles down the parallel tracks at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the five people…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. Pushing the man is no different from pulling the lever, yet as soon as you have to physically take responsibility for your decision you shy away from it. Time for the final stage of the trial then.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are five thousand people of completely randomized age, race, gender, and position…

Five thousand people appear on the track ahead of the train, and it begins to move forward gaining momentum. So many people appear on the tracks and squirm in terror that you can’t even see where the line of bodies ends, it just goes on and on…

[???] In front of you is a fat man that you do not know. He is not aware of your presence or who you are. The only way to save the five thousand people is by pushing him into the tracks, and his mass will block the train from continuing. By doing so, he will certainly die. But by doing nothing, the five thousand people will die.

As you mull over the question, a fat man of about your height appears in front of you. He is standing with most of his weight on one leg, so pushing him forward and onto the tracks would be easy.

[???] If you do not push this man an entire cities’ worth of people will die, several generations of growth tossed to the wayside, and a plethora of traditions lost forever. You can save an entire society by merely pushing a single man. So, $pName, which will you choose?

Do nothing 21

Push the man in front of the train 20

16

You reach for the lever, and pull it with all your might. With a loud click the mechanism responds to your action, and the tracks move slightly forcing the train to take the divergent path. The train hurtles down the parallel tracks at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the Baron…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. You do nothing to save the five people until it involves those which you actually know, in which case you immediately take action to save them. I wonder, did you save them because it was the right thing to do, or because of more selfish reasons? Doesn’t matter, time for the final stage of the trial.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are your close friends $aName, $liName, $mName, $bardName, and $merchantName.

All five of them appear on the train tracks, and are tied down unable to move. They struggle mightily to free themselves, but can’t move an inch.

[$aName] $pName! What the hell is going on!?

[$liName] You better have a good reason for this you moron!

[$mName] Well this is no joking matter…

[$bardName] AHHH! Help us!

[$merchantName] What the…?

[$pName] You’re repeating yourselves?

[???] There is no longer a divergence, it is only a single path that leads to your friends.

With a poof the divergent tracks turn into dust and float away.

[???] The only way to save your friends is for you to step in front of the train, which will kill you but is also guaranteed to save them. Your death is not as trivial as you think either: by sacrificing yourself to stop this train, not only will you die but I will also destroy your save file so that you may not load your progress back and you will be forced to completely restart.

[$pName] What!?

[???] So, $pName, time for the final decision. Which will you choose?

Step in front of the train 22

Do nothing 23

17

You decide to do nothing, and watch the train gain more and more speed with a feeling of dread. The train hurtles down the parallel tracks at tremendous speed, but just before it hits your friends…

Poof!

You blink, and the entire situation has reset itself. The train is right back where it had started, and doesn’t move.

[???] Interesting. Even with your friend’s lives on the line, you refuse to participate in the dilemma and count that as a moral victory in of itself. I wonder if you do it out of spite, a sense of moral superiority, or perhaps you just don’t really care that much and are curious what would happen? Let’s find out, time for the final stage of the trial.

You take a deep breath.

[???] A train is hurtling down the tracks at incredible speed, too fast for the train to be able to brake in time. Tied to the track ahead are your close friends $aName, $liName, $mName, $bardName, and $merchantName.

All five of them appear on the train tracks, and are tied down unable to move. They struggle mightily to free themselves, but can’t move an inch.

[$aName] $pName! What the hell is going on!?

[$liName] You better have a good reason for this you moron!

[$mName] Well this is no joking matter…

[$bardName] AHHH! Help us!

[$merchantName] What the…?

[$pName] You’re repeating yourselves?

[???] Let’s put your ethics to the test.

The light above you flashes down brightly, forcing you to cover your eyes with one hand and blink. The split second later that you open your eyes, you see that you have been teleported. Looking around you, you realize that you are now on the train tracks and tied down next to $merchantName. Unlike the others, your arm that you were using to block the light only a moment ago is free from the ropes and you can move it around. The knots are so tight that you cannot move, and cannot untie them with one hand. Held in your free hand is a bright red button, with a wire that leads down to the divergence in the tracks.

[???] The only way to save your friends and yourself is to press that button. By doing so, it will activate the divergence in the tracks and send the train hurtling into a man you do not know with randomized features and background. By doing so, the train will certainly kill him. If you do nothing, then the train will run over both yourself and your friends. Your death is not as trivial as you think either: by sacrificing yourself to stop this train, not only will you die but I will also destroy your save file so that you may not load your progress back and you will be forced to completely restart.

[$pName] What!?

[???] But don’t forget, by pressing that button you are directly responsible for that man’s death. So, $pName, time for the final decision. Which will you choose?

Press the Red Button 24

Do nothing 25

18

You step in front of the train with your arms held out and steel yourself for the savage impact. The sound of the wheels spinning rings in your ears, and just before it smashes into you…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! Stubborn one aren’t you? I was bluffing about deleting your save file, of course, but I wanted to see how you would react with some real consequences mixed in. I must say, I applaud your absolute refusal to stray from your idea of morality all the way to the extreme edges. Perhaps there is hope for you yet…

[$pName] Wait, who are you? What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

With that you fly towards the wooden chair at rapid speed, until finally being placed into it. The moment your legs touch the seat, you jump with a start and find yourself back in the room where it all started.

[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

[$liName] Didn’t look like he did anything except slump in his seat for a moment.

[$mName] Maybe the test is that you have to be comfortable enough with who you are as a person that you can fall asleep in any chair.

[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner.

19

Cowering, you watch in resignation as the train hurtles towards the five people tied to the tracks. Unable to move, they squirm fruitlessly as the train gets closer and closer. Finally the train reaches the point of impact, and just when it is about to tear them apart…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! You are ruthlessly utilitarian right up until when it counts, and then you reveal your hypocrisy. How could you force others to risk and give their lives when you refuse to do so yourself? Are you truly a hero, or do you only fantasize about being one until the time to prove yourself fizzles out? We are done here.

[$pName] Wait, who are you? What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

With that you fly towards the wooden chair at rapid speed, until finally being placed into it. The moment your legs touch the seat, you jump with a start and find yourself back in the room where it all started.

[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

[$liName] Didn’t look like he did anything except slump in his seat for a moment.

[$mName] Maybe the test is that you have to be comfortable enough with who you are as a person that you can fall asleep in any chair.

[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner

20

You take a step forward and push the man with all the strength you have in you. With a gasp of surprise he loses his balance and collapses into the middle of the tracks. The train hurtles forwards at tremendous speed, but just before it hits the fat man…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! You truly have no idea who you are or what you believe in do you? First you are willing to sacrifice the single for the many, but then when it is time to take more direct responsibility for the exact same situation you back down. But then, when told there are more people at the other end, you regain your confidence and push the man anyways! I wonder, how many people would have to be at the other end before you decided it was worth it? Instead of thousands, would it only take a hundred? Perhaps less? At what point do you decide that their lives are worth more than the fat mans? To exist is to think, and you’ve been doing a whole lot of existing but not very much thinking.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

With that you fly towards the wooden chair at rapid speed, until finally being placed into it. The moment your legs touch the seat, you jump with a start and find yourself back in the room where it all started.

[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

[$liName] Didn’t look like he did anything except slump in his seat for a moment.

[$mName] Maybe the test is that you have to be comfortable enough with who you are as a person that you can fall asleep in any chair.

[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner

21

Motionless, you watch in resignation as the train hurtles towards the thousands of people tied to the tracks. Unable to move, they squirm fruitlessly as the train gets closer and closer. Finally the train reaches the point of impact, and just when it is about to tear them apart…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! You pull the lever to save five, but refuse to do so when there are thousands? The only difference here is that you have to push someone rather than pull a lever, but you do realize that they are the exact same thing right? The only difference between the two is that the pushing is a more direct acceptance of responsibility, and clearly you cannot cope with that.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

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[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

[$liName] Didn’t look like he did anything except slump in his seat for a moment.

[$mName] Maybe the test is that you have to be comfortable enough with who you are as a person that you can fall asleep in any chair.

[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner

22

You step in front of the train with your arms held out and steel yourself for the savage impact. The sound of the wheels spinning rings in your ears, and just before it smashes into you…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! First you refuse to participate in the dilemma by doing nothing. But once you see that your friends are in danger, you don’t hesitate to take action to save them. Then when you are told you have to sacrifice everything for them, you stay true to yourself and stand in front of the train anyways. I was bluffing about deleting your save file of course, so don’t worry about that.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

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[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

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[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner

23

Cowering, you watch in resignation as the train hurtles towards your friends tied to the tracks. Unable to move, they squirm fruitlessly as the train gets closer and closer. Finally the train reaches the point of impact, and just when it is about to tear them apart…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! First you refuse to participate in the dilemma by doing nothing. But once you see that your friends are in danger, you don’t hesitate to take action to save them. Then when you are told you have to sacrifice everything for them, you reverse your decision yet again and abandon them completely. You strike me as the kind of person who reads about courageous people and fantasizes about how you would act bravely in the same situation, but then when push comes to shove you slink into the corner and hide. Very Interesting… I was bluffing about deleting your save file by the way, nothing has happened to it.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

With that you fly towards the wooden chair at rapid speed, until finally being placed into it. The moment your legs touch the seat, you jump with a start and find yourself back in the room where it all started.

[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

[$liName] Didn’t look like he did anything except slump in his seat for a moment.

[$mName] Maybe the test is that you have to be comfortable enough with who you are as a person that you can fall asleep in any chair.

[$bardName] $mName, that’s the dumbest theory I’ve ever heard. $pName what happened?

[$pName] It’s hard to describe, honestly. But I know one thing: in the next room we are going to find the Ancient Scripture.

[$liName] Lets get moving then.

The five of you make your way through the door without incident and continue forwards. Yet again, you find yourself peering down a long and dangerous looking staircase, and you begin to travel deeper and deeper into the temple. Finally, you make it to the end of the stairway and turn the corner

24

With a whimper of fear you press the red button, and you see the train swerve to change directions. From your prone posture it is hard to see, but you can just barely see the metal beast as it roars towards the man tied on the other side of the tracks. It is just about to smash him into pieces when…

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! You refuse to participate until left with no other choice. By hitting that button however, you succumbed to the pressure and participated in the test, sealing that other man’s doom. Perhaps you feign moral superiority but falter in the face of personal loss. Perhaps you didn’t care either way and just wanted to make sure I didn’t touch your save file. How very, very interesting… I was bluffing about deleting the save file by the way, I didn’t touch it.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

[???] Congratulations, you passed the trial. From now on you will be disallowed from taking it again, at least in this world. This is because curiosity for different results would tarnish the honesty of your first attempt, and that would render it worthless. No matter what you answered you would have passed but I hope that along the way you learned something about yourself.

With that you fly towards the wooden chair at rapid speed, until finally being placed into it. The moment your legs touch the seat, you jump with a start and find yourself back in the room where it all started.

[$pName] Woah! Wha… Ugh… How long was I out?

[$bardName] What do you mean? You only sat in that chair a second ago…

[$pName] Hmm…

You stand up and brush the dust off your backside. A second later, a great rumbling shakes the room as the golden door swings open to reveal the path ahead.

[$aName] Woah, did you do something to pass the trial $pName?

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25

You toss the button to the side, and resign yourself to your fate. You close your eyes, and you can hear the train as it screams closer and closer to you. $bardName wriggles as hard as she can but cannot escape, and screams.

Poof!

Everything disappears from around you, and once again you find yourself swimming in black nothingness.

[???] Interesting Indeed! You refuse to participate in the Dilemma at all, even at great personal risk to yourself! A most unusual result, one of the most rare and interesting cases I’ve ever seen… I suppose the only thing that can be said is that I applaud your stubbornness, despite how foolhardy it was. Whether you did it because of a moral ideal, or simply because you refused to be a part of my trial, you succeeded in both. I was bluffing about your savefile by the way, I didn’t touch it.

[$pName] What? Wait… What was the point of this trial!?

[???] Then you don’t already know? Or perhaps you already do, but don’t want to say…

A peculiar feeling rises in your stomach, as if you are falling. Looking the direction your instincts tell you is “below” in this featureless world, you see that far away is the wooden chair you sat in when this all started.

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26

At last you have reached it: the final stage in the Temple of the Dragon. You find yourself in an unbelievably huge room, the stones in the wall carved to look like the inside of a cathedral. The arched ceilings are so high up you have to crane your neck to look at them, and the sheer scale of it all takes your breath away. In front of you, three figures are huddled around a golden pedestal with some kind of book on it.

[$liName] The Scripture!

The five of you rush forward to face off against the figures. Once you get closer you recognize the fluffy robes they wear, and realize with a sinking feeling that the cult got there before you.

[???] well, well, well. A couple heretics looking to steal our artifact?

The tallest of the three speaks out in a condescending voice. He is completely bald, and has sharp eyebrows and a beaked nose. He stands confidently behind the altar with the book closed in front of him, and his two accomplices square off against you.

[Robed Man] My name is Bishop Wurian, one of the most devout in all the separatist church. I was told you might be coming, but didn’t expect you to arrive so soon… No matter. You can try to defeat us by force, but your sharp sticks are no match for the power of the Ancient Dragon! With this scripture, I shall know all the realities in which we combat each other, and pick out only the one in which we win!

[Accomplice] Wurian, I’m really not sure you should…

[Bishop Wurian] Silence! Behold the Dragon’s glory!

With a grand gesture, the Bishop whips the book open and greedily begins to read. You feel like you should probably move to stop him, but you are compelled to wait out of curiosity. Will the rumors about the scripture be true?

[$bardName] A truth so terrible, so beyond mortal comprehension, that all who read it take their own lives immediately…

It sounds like $bardName is thinking the same, and everyone waits with bated breath.

The Bishop continues to read. At first his expression is one of triumphant determination, but quickly it turns to curiosity. Next, it transforms into frustration.

[Bishop Wurian] What…?

He reads quicker now, as if the pages pose riddles he does not understand. Confusion, desperation, and grief flash across his features in rapid succession as if he cannot decide how he wants to feel. He clutches both sides of the book now, and turns each page with gusto.

[Bishop Wurian] Imp… Imp… Impossible…

His face turns pale, and he takes a step backwards. His eyes flick between you and your allies, but it is almost as if he is looking past you rather than at you.

[Bishop Wurian] But of course that doesn’t mean…

He rushes back to the book, and re-reads a few pages as fast as he can. His entire head whips side to side as he reads with every bit of concentration he has.

[Accomplice] W… Wurian?

Wurian’s eyes well up with tears, and he begins sobbing onto the book. He doesn’t stop reading, but his knees go week and he struggles to stand. Finally, he cannot take it anymore and collapses onto the ground desperately crying.

[Accomplice] Boss!?

You are frozen, you and your friends have absolutely no idea how to react. All you can do is watch as Wurian cries and cries on the ground, covering the dusty stones with tears and his robe with snot. Finally, the bishop stands unsteadily and looks at each person around him with a remorseful look.

[Bishop Wurian] So be it.

In a rapid motion he reaches for his waist and pulls out a massive dagger with a wicked edge. With the desperation of a starving man grasping for food he plunges the blade straight into his own heart, and sighs in relief before finally collapsing onto the ground.

[Accomplice] BOSS!

[$aName] Holy shit…

[$mName] Tsk…

The Bishop’s accomplices try to wake him up for a few minutes but it is no good, bishop Wurian is dead. Shoulders slumped and completely dejected, the two accomplices turn to face you.

[Accomplice] Honestly… You can have the damn thing. This whole temple has been cursed from the start.

With that the two sluggishly walk past you without saying another word, and exit the way you had come.

[$bardName] So the rumors are true…

You approach the altar, and step over Wurian’s dead body. With a concentrated effort you close your eyes and flip the book closed, disarming it. Relieved, you inspect the cover. It is nothing more than a simple leather bound book, and while the size is much larger than any other book there isn’t anything about it that really stands out. Engraved onto the leather is the word “Script” and below that is a picture of an Oak tree.

[$aName] Now we can finally use it to figure out where the dragon is hiding! Although maybe that’s not a good idea…

[$liName] Normally I’m all for $pName taking one for the team, but I don’t have a good feeling about this. I… I don’t want you to get all messed up $pName…

[$bardName] Well what was the point if we don’t end up reading it? We went through all that trouble for nothing!?

[$aName] Hey $pName what do you think? Should we read the book or no? I’m nervous about it…

[$pName] Well on one hand if we don’t read it, $bardName has a point in that all this will have been for nothing. But I also don’t want any of you to read it in case something bad happens.

[$bardName] If you end up reading it, make sure to at least let us know what it says before you off yourself okay?

[$mName] I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intensely curious as well… But $pName it really could be dangerous. Maybe it’s best to skip this one.

[$pName] I’ve decided…

Read Book… 27

Don’t read Book… 28

27

You open the book and peer inside.

(show windows explorer window of /script/)

28

You run your fingers over the cover of the book, but decide against looking inside. After all, stare into the abyss for too long and the abyss stares back.

29

[$liName] Well? Where do we find the Dragon then?

[$pName] All I can say is… We will find the Dragon eventually, I’m confident about that.

[$bardName] Eh? Well that’s a bit cryptic…

Before you can respond, the walls start to shake and a mighty tremor pulses through the stone walls. Before you know it huge arches of stone that decorated the ceiling only moments before come crashing down, and entire columns and archways crack and then collapse.

[$aName] Woah… This place is falling apart!

Further along and behind the altar a large tapestry of red falls off its hooks and flutters to the floor, revealing the entrance to a secret tunnel.

[$liName] We gotta get out of here, let’s head for that tunnel!

[$bardName] But what about…

[$liName] No time! Let’s move!

You grab the Scripture and awkwardly hold it in your arms as you run side by side with the others. Dashing into the secret tunnel, you follow a rough path that twists and turns time and time again, dust and small rocks spilling out from the ceiling and landing on and all around you. Finally, the tunnel comes to a final turn to reveal that you can go no further.

[$bardName] AGH! Dead end!

[$aName] What about this?

$aName points to a small hole in the ground only about 3 feet wide at the end of the tunnel.

[$mName] Looks like a deathtrap to me…

Peering into it, all you see is inky blackness. The hole could lead anywhere, or to anything.

[$liName] Better than being crushed to death up here!

And with that $liName plunges down and into the hole, disappearing completely.

[$pName] $liName!

$bardName and $mName shrug their shoulders at eachother and follow $liName’s lead, hopping into the hole and disappearing from view.

[$aName] Are we really doing this!? I’m scared…

$aName looks at you paralyzed with fear, her $aEyeColor Eyes brimming with tears.

[$pName] I’m not sure we have a choice.

With that, you leap into the hole and fall, fall, fall down for what feels like an eternity.

30

The hole is perfectly vertical, and never gets any wider or thinner. You expected to hit the bottom within seconds, but instead you continue falling for what feels like ages. If you hit the ground now, your legs would instantly shatter into a million pieces.

[$pName] Gah!

Finally, you see a light below you. Before you even have time to process what that light may mean, the light rushes up to meet you and you emerge from the hole at tremendous speed.

[$pName] Woah!

You pop out of the hole upside down, despite having never changed orientation during the fall. You fly straight up and into the air, and you have just barely enough time to see that the sky is the ground and the ground is the night sky before gravity takes affect and brings you back down, which is up.

[$pName] ???

You smack into the ground completely disoriented, but don’t break anything. Rubbing your head, you sit up. Unbelievably, you have just emerged from a hole in the ground which had somehow appeared at the rocky outcropping where your infiltration of the Cultists campground originally began. Then:

[$aName] AAAGGGHH!!!

$aName shoots up and out of the hole, her feet aimed straight towards the stars. She continues about 4 feet up before slowing down, and makes a baffled expression towards you before gravity takes a hold of her and brings her back to the earth with a loud thump.

[$aName] Owww…

[$pName] Impossible…

The ground trembles a little, and the hole collapses in on itself sealing it shut forever. Simultaneously, you can see that far off in the campground the pyramid begins to crumble and collapse as well. Behind you, $liName, $bardName, and $mName have all gotten to their feet and dusted themselves off.

[$mName] Not gonna lie folks, nothing that has happened so far today has made any sense.

[$pName] You can say that again…

You slowly get to your feet and rub at your head, groaning at the idea of how sore it will be all day tomorrow. $bardName leaves to grab the horses, and $liName picks up the Ancient Scripture which you had dropped during the fall.

[$liName] All that trouble for this stupid thing, and we can’t even read it. What a waste.

Dusting herself off, $aName chimes in.

[$aName] Maybe we could bring it into the royal museum for the artifact bounty? They would probably pay good money for something as important as this.

[$liName] That’s not a bad idea… It’s about time we actually made some Aureus off of our travels rather than burning through it…

[$mName] But what about the Dragon? Now we don’t have any leads… Are you sure you can’t tell us what is in there $pName?

You shake your head.

[$pName] I’m just happy I am still here and have the willpower to press on. All I can say about the dragon is that if we follow our instincts we will meet him soon enough.

[$liName] Just when I thought you were improving, you show your old moronic self…

[$pName] Hey! I heard that!

[$bardName] C’mon everyone, lets get out of here!

$bardName returns with the horses, and everyone begins mounting up. You approach $hName to do the same.

[$pName] It’s been a long day $hName, I’m glad you’re here to help me get home.

You move to give $hName a friendly pet, but freeze when you notice her eyes widen. Before you have time to investigate what is causing her distress, $hName butts her head into you, knocking you over.

[$pName] Wha?

The second you land on the ground you notice the glint of a dagger flying through the air, whizzing just past where you were standing only seconds ago. Turning to look for its source, you see the Cultist who had only just thrown it and two more running towards you.

[$pName] Cultists! Run!

Leaping upwards, you mount $hName and give her a kick to the side. $hName gives a snort of concentration and takes off at top speed, narrowly saving you from several more daggers thrown your way. Frantically all five of you make a hasty retreat, and manage to escape just before the squad of cultists converge on your position.

[$pName] That was a close one… You saved me $hName, thank you!

$hName gives you a self-satisfied whiny and contentedly trots along the path. The moonlight glows gently off her $horsecolor coat, and you allow yourself to finally relax as you continue through the trees and back towards Durango.

It has now been an hour since your great escape, and everyone is gathered around a campfire a mile or two away from Durango. $liName had decided it would be best if everyone avoided the town in case the Cultists came looking for you there, and $aName had snuck in to surreptitiously buy some dinner for everyone. Now, all five of you relax around the fire and plan your next move.

[$aName] I suppose the next step is getting the artifact bounty for this book. If what $pName says is true, then we just need to go with the flow and it won’t be long before we accomplish our goal!

Swallowing her bite of food, $bardName Jumps into the conversation with gusto

[$bardName] I absolutely have to come with you guys! That little temple adventure is going to end up as one of my greatest songs ever, and I need you guys to keep the grade A material coming. Pretty please?

[$aName] I don’t see a problem with that. Does anyone?

$liName says nothing, and you give $bardName a smile of approval. $mName doesn’t even notice the conversation, and is too busy practicing one of his card tricks to offer an opinion.

[$aName] Well that settles it then, welcome to the team!

And so, the five of you celebrated for the rest of the night and fell into a comfortable slumber. The next day everyone packed up to leave, and you began your journey towards the Grand Capital of $kingdomName.

END OF ARC 4, THE RUINS