

The forest path looked as though god dragged a finger across the Earth's surface. Trees had been cut in a quick, haphazard manner, leading to awkwardly angled cuts and stumps still in the ground. Sawdust and wood chips created a prominent path. The bright color of the blue sky gave a clear indication of where to go between the more condensed greens and browns of the path's edge. The wandering vagrant had previously been walking through the forest alone, struggling to find a way forward. He had assumed that some local village had cut down the trees in order to form a path, but its structure and suddenness in the dense forest took him by surprise. With appropriate caution, he sauntered down the path towards the hill a few hundred meters away.

At the foothill, he noticed a small tent and fire pit was set up in the brief clearing between the forest and hill. The cinders were no more than a day old, yet the tent looked ragged and as if it had been in place for months. The grass that lay inside was smooshed against the ground and looking more like loose golden hay. A weathered tarp was hung as protection over the tent, looking ragged and as if a vast ocean had been poured down upon it since it had been raised. The vagrant felt enticed by the tent, considering taking a small nap. Turning around and looking deep into the forest from which he just emerged, feelings of dread and paranoia crept through him. Sensing that staying here was a fool's errand, he decided to postpone his midday slumber and forge ahead towards the closest town or village.

Stumbling up the hill, the vagrant noticed that thin, pepper-colored clouds overtook the previously pastel, baby blue sky. The clouds were much closer to the ground, and, looking down to find their origin, the vagrant found a peculiar sight. Large pipes were billowing out the clouds, with oddly shaped buildings dotted and patched up with large sheets of what leather-colored metal. Some buildings stretched high into the air, while others took a more ground-centered approach; as if they were clinging with dear life to the ground. Most buildings had the pipes spitting out those clouds, and the ones that did not, had a more antiquated appearance. The vagrant heard crashes, low hums, and clanging emanate from this town, all from the hilltop no less. Although he wished for the known danger of the forest, the vagrant trudged towards the curious village.

Approaching the village, the low hum that the vagrant heard from the hilltops became a little louder and ever-present, as if it were snaking through the air into his ears, filling his head with its hum. This only added to his feelings of unease. A large wooden sign was set up on the path. It read in painted calligraphy, "WELCOME TO MYSTERE. THE VILLAGE OF –". The sign had a large cut in the bottom, like it was punched by a giant. The vagrant tried to calm himself as he made his way closer. Seeing the buildings up close gave him no respite either. He saw a man hoisted up on some type of pulley system, banging a hammer against a sheet of metal. The man, held up by little more than some rope, began to holler up towards another man on the roof who was in control of his placement on the wall. The man in control pulled out a hand-crank from his back pocket and jammed it into the side of the pulley system. Placing his palm over the end of the crank, it began to whizz to life, pulling the other man back up in a matter of seconds.

The vagrant looked at the side of the building where the construction worker had applied the metal sheet. The masonry next to the sheet metal was cracked and looked as though it had been battered by many storms. Exposed bricks were sheared in half, while others looked as though they had been melted down over time. The metal sheets did not look much better. Some were completely corroded or had one corner disintegrating from rust looking similar to a paper whose corner had been singed by flame. Some were folded in a particular way, others were flat

and smooth across, but none was free of rust. The vagrant shuffled along, looking for a place to rest and get food.

Mystere's size was very deceptive. The vagrant moved quickly through the labyrinthine streets, whose size and shape varied between each twist and turn. Coming across a dead end, the vagrant finally stumbled across a sign hanging above a small tea house. Entering inside, he saw decor and an atmosphere similar to his own home village. Low ceilings, small cushioned stools, with a dark, hard wood counter that separated the bar from the seating area. A small door at the end of the bar was slightly ajar. The vagrant set his bag down next to the door, and took a seat at the nearest seat. A petite woman in a silk gown emerged from the doorway and greeted the vagrant. He ordered some tea and whatever food was prepared for today. She obliged his request and went into the back, coming back after a few minutes with a small pot and cup. She bowed and walked into the back, only after pouring the vagrant his first serving. The vagrant sat and relaxed. He heard the crackling of coals from a stove in the back, as well as the bartender efficiently chopping something in the back. After a few minutes of sitting, his thoughts started to drift back to the forest from before.



He traveled through that forest for a few days without seeing any signs of human life. The only things he saw were the strange flora of the forest: hulking trees with stumps the width of three men, mushrooms that could have easily been mistaken for artistic furniture, and boulders that looked as though they were sleeping under a blanket of moss. One night, he set up camp next to a small babbling creek. Stealing the moss of a rock, he set it on the ground where he put his tent. By the time his fire reduced to smoldering cinders with only streaks of a hot orange glow left, he decided to sleep for the night. Laying his head on the moss, he felt himself warm up and slump down a couple inches into it. He started drifting to sleep immediately with the pungent, almost herbaceous smell of the moss invading his nostrils.

A few hours later he was stirred from his slumber by a loud crash. Shooting up and taking in his surroundings, he noticed that a swarm of fireflies had gathered as well as a thick haze had formed from the creek. Barely able to see in front of himself, the vagrant wandered around, trying to locate his belongings. He stumbled around, accidentally slamming his right foot into the water, almost losing his balance and falling over. Leaving the creek, he took a few more steps and found his bag. Throughout this whole ordeal, a pattern of loud crashes and then silence took place, giving urgency to him finding his bag. Finally coming across his belongings, the vagrant took out a small cloth ball with a wick at the end, and coated his finger tips in an inky black substance. The crashing was becoming louder with shorter periods of silence. Deciding to exit the foggy creek, the vagrant began to run in the direction opposite the crashing. He sprinted, becoming winded in the process. No matter how far the vagrant ran, the fog would not abate. Suddenly, the crashing began to come from in front of him. He decided to go west, but the crashes followed him there. No matter what direction he ran, the crashing came from in front of him. Running in circles at this point, the vagrant came across a felled tree trunk. The size of the tree was so massive that he could not climb over it. With his back against the tree, the crashing came closer and closer until he could make out a vague figure in the fog.

Another tree fell, landing to his right with a loud crash. Terrified of who or what was making these trees fall, the vagrant began thinking of ways to escape. The figure in the fog slowly inched closer. Suddenly, with a sound like the crack of thunder, the tree behind the

vagrant was violently cut, leaving a deep gash in the wood. The vagrant's heart began to race as the figure approached and another deep gash was cut into the wood. The next gash was so close to the vagrant's head, he felt his hair move from the breeze created by the cut. The figure was so close that he could make out part of his appearance. The monster that he feared looked like a swordsman from the east, wearing a robe bound by a cloth cord, wooden sandals with thick cotton socks. On his side held in his belt were two ornately decorated scabbards which held katana. The vagrant was unable to make out the face of his assailant, because it was adorned with a large straw basket with nine square holes where the face would be. The only thing about his head the vagrant could make out were two glowing red lights emanating lights from the basket.

With the speed of lightning, the monster clenched his katana and laid another cut into the tree. The vagrant noticed that the cut was in the same spot as the first cut made by the monster. Seeing that the wood was nearly cut completely in two, the vagrant quickly put an escape plan into action. He coated the wick in the black substance that coated his fingers and held the wick between his thumb and ring finger. He waited until the monster came in close and snapped his fingers between the wick. The wick and his hand burst into flames, and he shoved the cloth ball into the socket created by the monster's cuts in the tree trunk. A few moments later, a brilliant light burst from the tree and the trunk blew apart in two. The vagrant looked back to avert his eyes. When he turned back, he saw the monster swordsman fade and distort when the light and concussive force of the explosion warped the fog.

With the trunk split in two, the vagrant ran as fast as he could between the pieces until he was unable to run anymore. As he ran in the fog, he looked to his right and saw the two beaming eyes of the monster swordsman. Realizing he wasn't out of trouble, he anticipated what the beast might do next. While running, the vagrant saw the swordsman prepare his sword and make a lightning-fast strike. The vagrant almost dodged too late and would have been cut in half, while the strike of the monster split the fog as it traveled through the air. The vagrant, now crouched, came up and looked through the break made by the sword strike. He saw a clear part of the forest and made his way there. Now, outside of the fog, the vagrant sat and caught his breath in a clearing, surrounded by smaller trees. Looking back, the fog stopped in a very unnatural way, as if it was being pressed against a wall, the fog would not cross a certain threshold in the forest. The vagrant practically passed out, but not before peering back into the fog, seeing two glowing red circles peering right back at him.



The vagrant snapped back to reality by the ringing of the bell attached to the tea house door. A small man entered and sat down two stools to his right. The man was short, lean, and athletic in build. The vagrant took note of the drawstring pouch the man held over his shoulder; it was practically bursting open. He sat down with a weak thud and made a soft grunt. The hasty chopping in the kitchen ceased and the woman walked out with a skip in her step. She leaned over the counter and gave the man a peck on his cheek. She leaned back, now blushing, as the man asked for a pot of oolong tea. The barista happily obliged, skipping back into the kitchen and reemerging with a pot and a cup that looked old and well used. With a brief smile, he took the cup and pot and poured his own tea, as she walked back into the kitchen, her chopping becoming rhythmic.

The vagrant sat back still and waited, now hearing the popping and sizzling of food frying in oil spill from the kitchen. A few minutes later, the woman emerged with two plates of

fried vegetables, as well as refilled the leaves and hot water of both men's tea pots. She rested both of her elbows against the counter in front of the man, her cleavage also partially resting, starting to peek out of the top of her gown. The man gave her a stern look and she quickly darted back, now leaning against the back wall. His stern face quickly transfigured into a trickster's smile, giving her a quick wink while biting his tongue. (10/14/23) She blushed and walked back into the kitchen, the man staring at her ass swaying as she walked through the door. Cutting through the silence, the man turned to the vagrant.

"Where'd you come from, stranger? You look weary from travel."

The vagrant stared at him up and down, looking for any sign of a potential enemy.

"Born in the north, but my travels started in the west."

"Oh? Did you start near the ruins of Daldera? Or more north near the capes of Greenhorn? I only ask because I'm a bit of a history buff, I've always wanted to go to the ruins since I was a boy."

"The journey is only a few days in length. If you want to see them, they are close enough."

"There are many things tying me down here. My sick parents, my girl, and that evil spirit in the forest."

The vagrant's ears perked up at the last part. Quick flashbacks to his previous encounters with that beast rang through his mind. A mixture of fear of bloodlust fueled by revenge coursed through his veins. He began rapping his fingers against the counter, questioning the man what he knew about the spirit.

"That old spook? Haunts the woods, kills those who venture through it. Chops them up into bite-size worm food."

"Have you encountered him before?"

The man started telling his story, slowly growing sad at his own tale. As a boy, he ventured into the woods one late afternoon with his father to forage for mushrooms. After picking enough, he begged his father to let them stay in the woods for the night in order to forage for a rare mushroom the next morning, *panecilla amorium*. This mushroom was shaped like a heart and emitted a sweet scent of flowers. It was very small but, in the early morning hours, shone a brilliant pink light, making it much easier to forage. He wanted to give one to his young love at the time. His father, a potter in Mystere, knew nothing of spirits or ghosts that roam the forest. They set up camp and the man woke up in the middle of the night, the campsite filled with fog. The vagrant clenched his fist till it grew pale, the man continued.

Waking up in a haze, the man fumbled around the campsite, eventually finding his trowel and bag. He took it and started looking for his early morning mushroom. Venturing away from the campsite, he eventually saw two glowing red circles in the distance. Thinking it to be the mushrooms he wanted, he excitedly ran towards them. Not noticing a tree root on the ground, the boy tripped and fell. He fell at the same time that the phantom swordsman slashed his sword, narrowly missing the boy. Looking up at the specter before him, the boy scrambled to get up and run away. Sprinting while screaming for his father, eventually the two were reunited. The boy and his father began to run away, trying to escape the fog to find their way home. As they ran, out of the corner of his eye, the boy spotted a faint pink glow. Turning ninety degrees and heading straight towards the glow, he heard his father yell at him to come back as the phantom gained on them. Ignoring his father, the boy's mind was enraptured on giving this mushroom to his crush, even if it cost him his life.

The boy dove into the mushroom, plucking it out of the ground. At his side, two large glowing red discs peered into him. He stumbled back, hearing the slow drawn out sound of the sword being taken from its scabbard. Bracing himself for the fatal cut, he opened his eyes in

order to see his attacker. Instead, seeing his father, he watched as the phantom swordsman came in close to his father, blade drawn. Pressing it horizontally into his father's stomach, the swordsman ripped the blade through the father's stomach, spraying blood and viscera all around, getting on the boy's face and clothes, and newly acquired mushrooms. The boy became paralyzed with fear. The Swordsman swatted the blood from his katana, readying his blade once more. His paralysis ceasing, the boy deftly dodged the sword swipe, and began sprinting away once more, knowing that he would either survive this run or be cut down in the process.

The man, as he was telling his story, slowly lost his grasp on his emotions, letting out tears of anguish and regret stream down his cheek. The barista came from the kitchen and walked around the counter. She consoled the man, giving him an embrace then began stroking his back. "Apologies for him. It's a tough memory for him to bring up. He misses his father so dearly." The vagrant ignored her consolation and the man's weeping, focusing on the details of the story. He felt a warm shame wash over himself for having shown fear and cowardice the previous night. He grew angry hearing the man cry over his dead father, he was the one who got him killed, the idiot. His emotions swirled around and around inside him until they boiled over and welled up. Slamming his fist against the table, the couple looked over at him with shocked expressions.

"What the hell was that for?" The woman shouted, "You're going to smash my counter." Overcome with a tempest of emotion, the vagrant sharply retorted, "Shut up, I can't stand listening to you two right now. It's his fault his father died and you're just going to let him sit there and moan about it? Give me a break."

"How dare you, you mongrel. I will not let you stand here and mock my husband."

"Oh husband, huh? Let me ask, did you receive the blood-soaked mushroom from him before or after the sob story of him getting his father killed?"

The man, whose face was in his hands, slowly pulled them back and looked at the vagrant.

"You are a monster with a wicked heart. I know that I am at fault, it's something that plagues me everyday. You're the one who asked me to relay my story with the spirit and I did so, at great expense."

"Spare me your expense, you sound like a whining child whose ball is stuck in a tree."

The woman walked over and tried to slap the vagrant. He caught her hand before she could hit him and pulled her close to himself. "The last person that tried to hit me like that has one less hand to show for it. You're too pretty to cut down."

He pushed her away and took his bag. Slamming a few coins onto the counter, he got up and walked out, disgusted at the whole situation and the hot tears of shame that pooled at the sides of his eyes.

Storming out of the teahouse, the vagrant made his way back through the snaking streets of the village. Unsure of his current location and unable to recall where he had come from, the vagrant allowed himself to be pulled through the winding roads with no particular goal in mind. All the while, the tempest within himself raged on. A mixture of shame, guilt, wrath, and fear buffeted his psyche. Trudging along the haphazardly constructed cobblestone paths of the city, the vagrant came across a particularly dark alleyway.

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A hand with no flesh grasped the opening of the casket, bone clicking against glossy wood. Yorrick, the bookkeeper, emerged from his slumber, rising from the coffin. Stepping out, bony feet meeting the cold stone of the crypt. Walking over to a large chest adorned in bone and

jewels, Yorrick pulled out a thin, long case, a briefcase, and a large black robe. Setting the briefcase and case on the floor, he flung the robe over his shoulder, becoming cloaked in the deep black fabric of the robe. The robe enveloped him, expending a sparkling black smoke as the robe deflated. Emerging from the smoke, Yorrick stood in the crypt wearing a black and gunmetal gray pinstripe suit. The suit, decorated with a blood red pocket square, and dark bronze buttons, all with a small skull imprinted in them. While being fit on a skeleton, Yorrick's suit did not look loose or ill-fitting, instead, perfectly accentuating his shape. After adjusting the maroon tie, Yorrick gathered his belongings and headed for the stairs leading out of his crypt.

Exiting the crypt, Yorrick stepped into an unfathomable realm. Sky and ground no longer held any distinction, being replaced with a black void whose only distinguishable factor were swirling blue lights that shone in the distance, flowing in one direction. These lights, the souls of those in transit between life and the afterlife, had a regular cadence of frequency. At some periods of time, the void was aglow with souls in quick travel, and at others, the inky blackness of the void outnumbered the lights. At this time, the souls streaked across the void, almost completely covering up the darkness. Yorrick knew the world was enraptured with chaos. Stepping on some floating stones that were just as cold as inside his crypt, Yorrick made his way over to a floating mass within the void. On this grass covered mound, There lay a street lamp, a well with a broken lever, and a peculiar sign. At the top of the sign, there were two wooden discs perpendicular to each other. Floating in the center of these discs was an arrow. Yorrick approached and moved the arrow to be facing straight up. As his finger lifted off from the arrow, it spun slightly. The lamp's top exploded a brilliant green light. Jumping into the well, Yorrick was transported from the mound in the void to a dark alleyway in Mystere.

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The vagrant felt beckoned to the alleyway, pulled by a dark energy emanating from the shadows. His emotional state didn't subside, but was overtaken by a sense of curiosity. Walking down the alleyway, the street behind him seemed to stretch further and further back with each step he took. Turning around, the light of day was nothing more than a speck in the distance. The brick walls of the buildings to his side also were stretched and warped. Continuing forth, he saw a slight glimmer in the distance, some sort of metal piece glimmering in the dark. Emerging from the void like the tree trunks in the haze last night, a huge metal scythe crashed next to the vagrant, sending a shockwave through him. The crash plucked the vagrant's attention away from the teahouse outburst and onto whatever danger lurked around him. Emerging from the haze, a large skull came face to face with the vagrant's own face.

"Greetings, aimless wanderer. You seem in dire straits."

No stranger to the supernatural, the vagrant asked, "Who're you? A lost spirit or possessor ghoul?"

The skeleton stood in front of the vagrant, his body covered by a bespoke pinstripe suit.

"My current task makes me more of a courier than anything. Fetching magical items and ensuring those who need them receive them. You are one of those people. Please, call me Yorrick."

"Yorrick, as in Yorrick the Bookkeeper? Shouldn't you be in the Crypt of Lost Tomes in Synapsos? What brought you to the land of mortals?"

"A little bit of business, perhaps some sightseeing. Every man needs a break from time to time. It can be so dark and stuffy down there, I'm always burning the midnight oil."

“Save your jokes, Bookkeeper. You said you have business with me. Tell me and then leave this village, these pathetic people are too weak and frail to deal with a spirit like you.”

“A curious tale came across my desk as of late. A wanderer in a mystical forest almost being cut down by the ghost of an eastern swordsman. Ring any bells?”

The vagrant tried to save face, but gave himself away after hearing Yorrick describe what happened to him last night.

Yorrick looked right into his soul, “Turns out that I am to deliver a certain weapon to this pitiful wanderer and that wanderer is you.”

“I don’t want your handouts, I can defeat that spirit on my own, without the intervention of you or your ilk.”

Yorrick pulled out a thin, but long case and set it between himself and the vagrant. “Even if you decide not to take this case, pitiful wanderer, its contents will wind up in your hand sooner or later. Thus is written in the flow of life.”

The vagrant thought about leaving the case, but the skeleton’s invocation of fate conjured memories of past brush ups with destiny. Begrudgingly snatching the case, the vagrant turned and began walking out of the alley. Yorrick let out a low raucous howl. In one swift motion, the lanky skeleton spun around and slashed his scythe in the air. Rather than flowing the air with no resistance, the blade ripped through the air as though slicing through a thick velvet curtain. The cut revealed a tear in space, through which a bright light blue glow could be seen. Hearing this tearing, the vagrant spun around and understood exactly where this tear led; it led to the well of souls, the space between life and death. Yorrick spun around and pierced the vagrant with his glare. Stepping back, still howling, the skeleton took his long, bony fingers and made a motion as though he was zipping up the rift. The tear in space slowly pulled itself together, fading into a black line floating in the alleyway. The vagrant turned around again and left, exiting the darkness of the alley.

Reentering the shifting streets of Mystere was just as if not more disorienting for the vagrant. He found a small inn run by an old lady. She offered him a room for the night on the condition that he cooked dinner and cleaned his room. The quaint inn was in the eastern ryokan style: low ceilings, sliding paper doors, wooden decks and walkways next to the rooms. There was a small garden in the middle of the inn with eastern plants and a small faux fountain made of rock. Other small rocks were strewn about, some covered in a thin moss. Sitting atop one of these rocks was an old man with thin, long white hair. He was sitting with his legs crossed, breathing in strange rhythms. The vagrant stepped through the garden and entered his room. The foundational walls of the inn were mud brick, cool to the touch. The floors were smooth wooden boards with minimal scratches. A small mattress was placed in the corner of the room, covered in a comfy looking coffee colored sheet. A small red cylindrical pillow with gold flourishes laid at the top of the bed. Slumping into the bed, the vagrant slowly drifted off to sleep.

A few moments into his slumber, the vagrant was awoken by a loud shrill wail outside his room. Jumping to his feet, he ran outside to find the source of the scream. The garden looked exactly the same as before, except for the fake fountain. The water that was flowing down before, was now rising into the air, floating globs of liquid. All the plants of the garden slowly withered and drooped down. He looked over at the old man, whose face was cherry-red and strained so much his wrinkly skin looked like it was given a brain-like texture. The vagrant looked at him with a puzzled look. The geriatric wailing ceased and the water turned back around and the flora regained their distinct deep green hues.

“How’d you do that?” the vagrant blurted out, still in disbelief.

Chuckling softly to himself, the old man responded, “Oh, everyone has their talents. Even an old codger like me-self.”

The vagrant couldn’t decide whether the screams or hearty chuckles were more annoying.

“Where’d you gain that power? I’ve never seen anyone able to make water float.”

“Nowhere in particular. I’ve been around many places before and I intend on going to many more. Oh, that even rhymed.”, the old man continued giggling to himself. “Enough about me, I’m just an old man, what brings you to Mystere? Romance? Adventure? Revenge? Wait, it couldn’t be that, no one ever comes here for that sappy stuff. Oh! A salesman, are you a salesman? Or perhaps a traveling poet looking for his next muse. How interesting. You must tell me all about it.”

The vagrant looked at him, already exhausted from the initial verbal salvo.

“I started traveling from the west. From an island past the capes of Greenhorn, a land called Afastos.”

“Afastos? I’ve vacationed there before. Beautiful place, amazing vineyards.”

“You must’ve been there a long time ago. Afastos is antithetical to beauty. It’s turned into a fetid, harsh wasteland. Spent sandy soil, gnarled woods stripped of life by locust swarms. Carcasses and rotten flesh and viscera mix with whatever water is left, tainting the land with its red color and metallic odor. Even the once lush rolling hills have –”

“Yeah, well, that’s a shame, used to be pretty. It’s a shame it’s changed. I hope my brother is OK, he used to live there.”

The vagrant was too absorbed in his recollection to hear the old man. Continuing to prattle on about the ruined lands of Afastos, the old man slowly grew annoyed at being ignored.

“Listen here, you haven’t answered a single one of my questions. You come out here and ask me about my abilities but refuse to engage with me. The damn youth today, always wanting the answers but unwilling to ask the questions.”

Still being ignored, the old man’s face started to simmer with anger. Boiling into rage, he let out a powerful wail, louder than before. In an instant, the fountain began to flow up into the air once more. Suddenly, the vagrant felt as though he was grabbed by something, as if some hulking creature grasped him in its fist. The pressure increased, and he was raised into the air, then promptly slammed into the loamy soil of the garden.

Slowly climbing down from his anger, the old man grouched, “Serves you right, damn youngster. I was nice before, but if you want to learn about my strength, I can teach you in a variety of ways.”

Being met with his limitations in such stark fashion shocked the vagrant. Snapping to attention, he cleaned the mud off his clothes and reassessed the situation. He knew that being unarmed put him at a disadvantage and that he should probably play nice with the old man. Giving him a snide apology, the old man seemed to be calmed down and not as frustrated with the vagrant as before.

“Woah there. I really lost my cool there. Hehe, I can’t bite as much as I used to, but my bark is still there.”

“If your weak now as an old guy, I’d like to see what you were like in your prime.”

“My prime? I could throw armies around like marbles in my hands, boy. But battle and fighting isn’t it’s all cracked up to be.” Wrapping two fingers against his temple, “The real opponents are up here.” The old man started to cackle.

The vagrant ignored the banal platitude, still intrigued by what this man could have done in his younger years. “Did you fight for an army under a king? Or sell your services as a mercenary?”



The old man took on a new seriousness in a tone that he didn't have previously, "I didn't have time for the paltry pursuits of your kings and conquerors, with their endless strivings. Just as the mighty stronghold of Daldera has been reduced by the sands of time, so too shall their homes. If you must know what I did in my youth, I protected this world from otherworldly threats.

Demons, rogue spirits, gods. All fell to my side, not entering this realm. You seem to be familiar with their ranks, I believe you met quite an important otherworldly figure."

The vagrant remembered his encounter with Yorrick. "How was he able to get here? There has to be other's who stop them from entering this world."

"There used to be, but now the ramparts have been abandoned. My kinsmen have been thinning for centuries, whether through abandonment, turning to the sides of evil, or death is irrelevant. Now these dark forces have begun using earth as a sort of playground, meddling in human affairs for their own amusement and entertainment. That steel case you have in your possession is proof of that."

"That skeleton said that no matter what I did, fate would bring that weapon into my hand. Is there anything that I can do?"

"Nothing can be done now that you have taken it. Once it was accepted, its fate was bound into your own. All you can do now is hope its fate is not tainted."

"No matter it's fate, I know what I must do, and I won't stop until I've reached that point."

Once this was spoken, the old man noticed something around the vagrant. An abnormal aura. A static of white and dark glowing around the vagrant. Hearing the resolve of the vagrant and seeing his strange aura stirred emotions long dormant within the old man. "Well then, perhaps I could do the same. Let's make a bargain, if you come across me again, I will unlock your inner potential. You have the potential to move mountains, I know it. Train hard, fight with those of corrupted heart and whatever demon spawn tries to mess with humanity, a good place to start would be that spirit in the woods."

"Wait, how do you know about—" The vagrant's question was cut off by the old man's wailing.

The water from the fountain flew through the air, surrounding the old man in a sphere of water. Invading his mind, the vagrant heard the old man's voice while he was still screeching, "Find me in a country to the east. Search for the man named [OLD MAN NAME HERE]. Defeat the spirit by unclogging the fog in your mind, it's quite dusty in here." The vagrant's thoughts filled with the sound of the old man laughing as the sphere of water containing him smashed against the ground. The sphere crashed as though no old man was in there, the vagrant impressed with the stylish exit the old man prepared. Going back into his room, the vagrant slept through the night and decided to prepare for his battle with the spirit.

Waking up early, the vagrant felt energized and ready to go for the day. His shoulder was a little tight from being slammed on the ground by the old man, but he knew that would go away later in the day. He packed up his things, and made his way towards the edge of town to begin preparations for battle. After getting lost multiple times on his way out of town, he walked past the tea house from yesterday. The man he had met inside the previous day was smoking on a small bench outside. His eyes attempted to look through the vagrant like a dagger ripping through flesh, but he could not penetrate the vagrant with his stern, stony gaze. Scoffing at the man, the vagrant continued walking, now with an arrogance in his gait.

"Your legs are shaking, you know that? Afraid of something?" The man jeered.

Upon hearing this insult, the vagrant's focus was broken and he turned towards the man. The vagrant gave that man a stare much sharper than the one given back. The vagrant's legs were

shaking out of pure terror at the spirit, the man was right. Attempting to steel himself and save face, the vagrant walked up and grabbed the man by his shirt collar.

“At least I’m on my legs, not idling around town like some pathetic wimp. Get out of my sight, you’re not worth my time.” The vagrant was dead serious.

Not backing down, the man feebly attempted to show bravado, “This is my home, and truth be told, I am terrified of that spirit. But he will not show up here, so I know that we are all safe. Quit acting so bold and brash when inside you’re just a scared little boy.”

“Say one more thing to me, and I won’t hesitate. Enjoy your comfort inside this village, I don’t care. But you will never know true hardship and struggle. There’s pain in losing a loved one, sure, but the road that comes after is paved in more difficulty and toil, yet you decided to settle, unable to grow or move forward. You’re more worthless than an errant pebble on a road.”

Not allowing his rage to overflow, the vagrant set the man on the ground and walked away. The man crumpled to the ground, the lashing to his ego leaving him without the strength to hold himself up. Not breaking stride on his way out, the vagrant was once again disgusted by the man’s complacency and his own fear and guilt inside.

The vagrant made his way outside of town, past the sign and over the hill. He settled at the ramshackle campsite and laid out his tools and the steel case, thinking of ways that he could attack the spirit. He had in his possession: two more flash bombs and vials of ignition gel, three rapid sprout tangle vine seeds, the blade of his broken sword (the handle still somewhere in Dladera’s underground), rope, and a few assorted medical supplies. Looking over his belongings, his eyes wandered over to the steel case. He didn’t want to open it, didn’t even want to have it with him, but if what the old man said was true, it wasn’t long before the contents of that case would be in his hands. His curiosity slowly crept over him, like fog overtaking a harbor at dawn. He brought the case to his lap and unclasped the buckles. Lifting one side open, the vagrant was shocked by what was inside.

Staring down at the thin blade inside the case, the vagrant’s mind wandered on what mysterious powers this tool might possess. Could it be whipped around like a tentacle? Shoot out like a bullet? Perhaps it was imbued with magic and melted anything it came in contact with. His mind now swirling with ideas on what the blade was capable of, the vagrant’s attention turned to the craftsmanship of the blade. It was an extremely reflective metal with a light red hue, similar to the shell of a crab. The blade’s handle was contained within a ring of metal, making the overall shape of the weapon look like an oversized knitting needle. The vagrant noticed an extremely small gap between the handle and the blade. Taking the blade in hand, the flesh of his hand gripped tightly to the knurling finish of the handle. A pair of gloves was in order so as to not tear open his hands every time he used it. On the top and bottom of the handle, there were two small buttons, covered by the texturing and small in size, they were easily unnoticed. The vagrant took the sword from the case and was immensely disappointed. The sword’s blade flopped and faced down like the vagrant had just pulled a dead fish out by the tail. The vagrant’s face slumped from the let down, the sides of his mouth mimicking the blade’s movement. Swinging his arm in a small circular motion, the blade flung up into the air around the handle as its axis. Just as quickly as it flung up, it quickly sunk back down, facing the earth. The vagrant was at least hoping for a powerful weapon, not a compass to the Earth’s center.

Accidentally pressing one of the buttons, the blade began to spin around at increasingly high speeds. The vagrant inspected the handle closer. He noticed the two buttons and immediately pressed the other one. The blade stuck in place and the handle shifted 90 degrees for a better hold. Ever the curious type around weapons, the vagrant pressed both buttons

simultaneously and the blade flopped back to the ground as it was before. Excited, the vagrant decided to head over to some nearby trees and test out the weapon.

Knowing the basics of how the blade worked, experimental techniques exploded in the vagrant's head like fireworks. Combining the blade's versatility with his dexterity could prove to be a deadly combo. A shred of his fear burned away. His focus turned towards the trees in front of him and the logging that was about to be done.

By sunset, there was a roaring fire and plenty of sheared logs at the humble campsite. The vagrant was sitting by the fire, soaking in as much warmth as he could before entering the foggy damp forest. In a sudden burst, the fire shot up in a column and Yorrick appeared in front of the vagrant.

"Seems you've taken a liking to your new tool, haven't you, wanderer?" Yorrick asked in a snide manner.

"Begone trickster. I still do not understand why you've given me this weapon, but given any reason, I will strike you down using it. I don't need you ruining my focus, leave now."

"Always so stern and serious. You looked like you were trying to relax, I was just making conversation. You know, before your huge brawl."

"I'm already relaxed, now I'm trying to focus. Do you have anything else to say?"

"Nope, not much. I just got bored in the office, thought I'd check up on you, since, you know, it could be the last time we ever chat."

The vagrant was starting to get very annoyed by Yorrick's presence. "I knew of your existence, but never talked to you until earlier today. You are nothing more than a courier to me. Last time I will ask, leave."

"Oh don't say that to me, I get attached easily. If I had tear ducts, I'd be crying right now." Yorrick laughed to himself. "Anyway, you are no fun, guess I'll just go pester my brother or scare some villagers. Be careful while using Gladiolus. It can get a little... unwieldy at times."

"Gladiolus, interesting title for this blade."

Yorrick cackled and stepped back into the flames. The column of fire shrank down into nothing for a moment, then exploded back into the same crackling fire as before. The vagrant quickly went to meditate, hoping to regain his focus before the sun was beyond the horizon. The moon seemed to quickly rise to the center of the sky, as if eager to observe the vagrant's upcoming battle. Beautiful stars dotted the sky like pin pricks in black cloth. Ending his meditation, the vagrant packed up his things and headed into the forest.

The forest's typical mystic look had a more sinister feeling, unnerving the vagrant. He noticed a pack of blood red mushrooms dripping some sort of viscous liquid. Large roots of the humongous trees were twisted and gnarled, peeking above the ground and coming up to about waist height. Looking up, the branches of the trees blocked the night sky, leaving only almond shaped pockets of moonlight to reach the forest floor. The almond cutouts made the vagrant feel like hundreds of heavenly eyes were spectating him, staring daggers into his back. Dissonant squawks and screams from birds filled the vagrant's ears, rattling his head. Venturing deeper and deeper into the forest, the vagrant was able to faintly hear a stream up ahead, he must have been near his camp from the previous night. All the terrifying beauty of the forest slowly fell away as fog enveloped the vagrant's surroundings. The fog was thicker this night, stifling the forest's din. Perhaps the spirit wanted absolute silence before he attacked. Despite the thick fog making it more difficult, the vagrant took a deep breath in and exhaled, the fog swirling about as a result. In an instant, a glint shone through the fog and a blade came rushing towards the vagrant's head. Deftly ducking down, the vagrant dodged the first attack. The fight had just begun.

Striking horizontally then backing away, the vagrant's slice missed its mark. The phantom recoiled and brought the hilt of his blade next to his cheek, his other hand against the pommel. In a flash, the phantom's blade pierced into the vagrant's tunic, only missing his arm by an inch or two. He got up, tearing a chunk from the tunic. Going into his pouch, the vagrant pulled out one of his three tangle vine seeds and threw at the feet of the phantom. A green explosion shot up thick, fibrous stems from the ground. The phantom wasn't encased by the vines, instead he moved around them with the same grace of the fog. He pulled out his sword again and sliced clean through all of the vines, which withered away immediately after being cut. The phantom now slowly walked towards the vagrant. He shambled slowly yet deliberately. The vagrant stepped towards him and pulled out Gladiolus, clicking the bottom button and freezing its position. The phantom did not change his posture at all as the vagrant cut through him with ease. Clearly an illusion, the phantom melted away into the fog.

The tension of battle did not leave the vagrant. Cutting the phantom down so easily filled him with more anxieties. The hum of the forest kept droning in his ear, until he sensed something was behind him. He swung around and held his forearm up, taking a deep gash from the phantom's sword. Choking back screams of pain, he felt the sword dance atop his bone. He held the phantom's blade in position and swung gladiolus. His swing caught the phantom's garments, revealing his body underneath. Plucking a vial of ignition gel and one of his flash bombs from his pouch, the vagrant flicked the bomb's wick and tried throwing it into the open gap of the phantom's robe. He missed, the bomb landing past the phantom, exploding. The flash of light casted the phantom's silhouette into the fog and illuminated him enough for his flesh to be visible. The phantom's skin was mired with purple and yellow splotches, scarlet lesions, and clung to his body like a wet towel flopping off a drying rack. It simultaneously looked loose and stretched too far. Wincing at the phantom's putrid skin and bright light, the vagrant looked away. The phantom howled an ungodly sound, a wallowing cry and shout of anger intermingled. Both combatants were incapacitated for a moment, the vagrant resolving himself first. He swung at the phantom's neck, but the phantom bowed back, disappearing into the fog.

Having grown tired of the fog's obfuscation, the vagrant decided to get rid of it. Putting Gladiolus in front of him, he pressed the bottom button then the top button. The blade began to swing about the handle, picking up speed. Beginning to swirl and shift about, the fog was swept into the current made by Gladiolus. It dissipated, replacing the grays and whites of the fog with the forest's green tones.

Without the fog to keep him cloaked, the phantom was laid bare to the vagrant. His eyes were still two piercing red circles, kept away due to the basket. His pale, sky blue robes looked tattered and aged. The phantom's wailing continued, taking on tones of pain and anguish. The vagrant began to hear crunching, gnashing, and cracking as the phantom morphed into hulking brute. Shedding his human-like proportions, the phantom's arms, neck, and legs extended into long, jagged, bony appendages with thin, clammy flesh covering it. Falling on all fours, his spine contorted into a rather extreme 'S' shape. His wailing turned into the cries of an ancient creature, something beyond this time and place. The vagrant felt tinges of fear creep up his spine and dance around the back of his mind, but he kept his feet firmly planted.

Raising his trunk-like appendage, the phantom swiped at the vagrant with his claw. The vagrant's dodge was a second late, leading to three shallow cuts on his face, with two placed above and one below his left eye. The fear crept forward, wreaking havoc on the vagrant's focus. Beginning to breathe heavily and without rhythm, the vagrant fell and scrambled backwards. The phantom beast swiped again, but the vagrant laid prone, while the wind from the swipe sent a

strong breeze through their arena. The phantom turned around and grabbed the trunk of a large tree. Plucking it from the earth, the phantom's sword now seemed like a children's toy.

Feeling his hands shake and legs grow numb, the vagrant imagined himself being crushed into a red paste by the tree trunk. The roar of the phantom shocked the vagrant out of his fear. His legs seized and began moving on their own. The vagrant got up and ran behind a nearby tree. The phantom beast awkwardly maneuvered the trunk, flailing his body around in the process of swinging. While his screams subsided, the phantom's limbs and joints creaked with each motion. The vagrant caught his breath behind the tree and thought of what his next attack ought to be.

Three trees were knocked down in a single swing, falling to the ground with thunderous shakes. The phantom took some time to pick the trunk back up, needing to heft it off the ground with all its strength. This gave the vagrant an idea. Pulling himself back to his feet, the vagrant waited for the next swing from the phantom beast. The tree he was hiding behind was targeted next, being swatted away just above his head. With nowhere left to hide, the vagrant's plan was do or die.

Running and jumping onto the trunk of the phantom beast, the vagrant quickly plucked out his last two tangle vine seeds, throwing them at the ground below the beast's arms. The vines shot up and encased the phantom beast's arms, making him unable to wield the tree trunk. Next, the vagrant jumped into the air and pulled out his final flash bomb and vial of ignition gel. Taking the tiniest amount of gel, he lit the fuse and jumped onto the shoulders of the phantom beast. Shoving the bomb and rest of the vial into the basket of the beast, the vagrant slid down and braced for whatever came next.

A bright flash of light came shooting out from the basket, overtaking the piercing red circles. The light even could be seen through the thin flesh of the beast. After the flash, a loud bang and fire sprayed around the whole arena. Legs flailing and arms attempting to break the vines, the phantom beast's cries became more strained as his vocal chords charred. Now engulfed in flame, the beast began to writhe in agony and let out repeated shouts and wails. The basket burned away, revealing flowing black hair that was overtaken with flame. After a few minutes of pained screaming, the phantom beast slumped over and stopped moving. The vagrant felt compelled to ensure that the job was done. Walking up with Gladiolus, he plunged the blade into the chest of the phantom beast. The beast's eyes glowed red for a moment then dimmed back into inky black pools. No longer moving, the beast turned to dust, only leaving behind his tattered robe and sword. The vagrant picked up the robe, folded it, and placed it gently on the ground. He then plunged the sword into the ground, between the robe and pile of dust. Resting against the large tree stump, the vagrant fell asleep, exhausted.