

Soul of Zelda: A Memoir of an Ephemeral Being

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2018

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

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Hybrid document of memoir and fiction concerning fantasy, video games, and the ways in which game design nuance can be found in every day life. Particular attention is put on The Legend of Zelda from 1986, the first 3D Zelda installment, Ocarina of Time in 1998, and Dark Souls from 2011. This is a fictional story heavily inspired by those games and many others, but the story and characters are original, including a queer/gender bending protagonist. The story-line is a creative work that emulates the underlining philosophy of fantasy video games such as Zelda and Dark Souls, re-imagining video game design and personal gaming experiences as prose.

~ Soul of Zelda ~

A Memoir of an Ephemeral Muse

by Mitchell Kopitch

Turn Page!

1 Book Equivalent of “Press Start”.

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Poetics Statement

When I parted ways with one of my roommates in college, he gave me his copy of *Dark Souls* (2011) as a parting gift. This was strange since the two of us had never gotten along. Yet curiously, we had taken a personality exam, as requested by the institution, and had nearly identical results. By all accounts, we should have connected better than we had. I never got the chance to ask him what *Dark Souls* meant to him, for it would come to mean a great deal to me.

At the time, my interest in gaming was reaching an all time low. I started playing *Dark Souls* more from vague curiosity than anything else. I had heard the game was particularly difficult, which proved to be true. Over the weeks that I trekked through Lordran, I was seduced by its evocative world, its reluctance to explain its own deeply intricate mechanics, and despite being set in a fantasy, it was uncompromisingly true to life in a way that games had never been. It is true to life because it does not make concessions so that the player is always victorious, always able to embrace their own power fantasies. In fact the case is the opposite, with favoritism always and firstly given to the zombies and demons; it is their world you are invading, after all.

There was one place called Blighttown, a murky swamp that took days upon days to overcome. I was so deep in the depths, constantly weighing my potion reserves against my skills in combat, my wit against traps and hazards, and so often did I believe I would never see daylight again. But I remember distinctly when I finally arose out of that dark depression, and I came upon a familiar setting, the Firelink Shrine, where the journey had begun. And I felt this enormous sense of relief to be home.

Games represented some of my fondest memories of childhood. I remember late nights with the glow of the TV, the volume at 1 or 2 so as not to wake anyone in the house, and trying to reduce the click-click noise on the controller by being gentle. I remember waking up early and listening to the gentle hum of my CRT TV, the static tickling my fingers when I brush along the rounded glass screen, and the pixels of Hyrule field gradually brightening.

Hyrule is the fantasy landscape in *The Legend of Zelda*. The original *Zelda*, released in 1986 was one of my favorite games as a child. Ten years ago marks the last time I played a new *Zelda* title, for around this time the series, like other games, had lost my interest. What initially drew me in was the thinking space when I'm deep within a dungeon; weighing my combat skills and my potion reserves against my ability to solve the temple's riddles, and survive against the colossal boss monster at the end.

This feeling, that connection with my survival instincts had been gradually snuffed out of future entries, and after playing *Dark Souls*, I realized this sentiment carried over into my depleting interest in gaming as a whole. Yet the two had encapsulated so much of the same essence that it was almost uncanny. It was not a direct mimic, but they were spiritually connected in a way that modern *Zelda* games did not seem to be.

Dark Souls revived in me the same essence I had felt when playing *Zelda*. In fact, if you had shown an image of *Dark Souls* to ten-year-old me alongside an image of the most recent *Zelda*, and asked me which was *Zelda*, I'd like to think I'd have told you *Dark Souls*.

This would become the pillars of a story I had been composing since I was a child, and this thesis is an experimental sampling of that larger concept. If the spirit of old *Zelda* could be reborn in *Dark Souls*, then it stood to reason that it was not *Zelda* I loved per se, but rather an ethereal being that is known by many names. This thesis is an attempt to harness this being, in another form, prose and text.

I wrote my fantasy story, but coinciding with it are other voices that help facilitate the growth of this being. I have references to *Zelda* and *Dark Souls* throughout the text, but a reference is merely a show of admiration, and admiration is nothing like the mental space I'm in whenever I play one of these games. What I feel is far more primal, that fight for survival, that forced dependency on the self, the catharsis that the horrors of one's life are ultimately demons with health bars.

The allegories to depression, in particular with regards to *Dark Souls* has become a common belief and it was certainly true for me. I remember driving to class contemplating the game until I was mentally exhausted. And I would say to myself, "you're obsessed. It's just a damn game. What is it? Why can't I get it out of my head?" And it wasn't until I listened to others speak on the internet about their battle with depression, suicide, and other life burdens that it finally clicked.

I sat on the edge of my bed in the dim glow of the gold lettered titled screen, the soft piano theme playing, waiting for me. And I realized that psychologically, those demons were not fantasy demons. They were my demons. Because I had fought them. And I was enraptured by the fact that I could no longer pity myself, because by now it was evident I could slay my own demons.

But it was difficult. The game was difficult. Thus when you read the thesis, the fantasy aesthetics are something of a red herring. They're there to look warm and inviting, but there is much more happening beneath the surface. The footnotes will identify these threads for you, but even these are limited. That

voice will point out specific references to my gaming experiences. They shed light into the child mind, the one that was formulating the ethereal being.

Then there is the author of the text herself, a thoughtful teenager who, for me, represents those real world contemplations I have while composing the fantasy narrative. Like games, everything about fantasy seems tarnished by either the gullible ingestion of it or the unwillingness to take it seriously. A perception of mine it may be, but fantasy and video games are like peanut butter and jelly; we all like them but we sometimes think there is not much to be said about them.

Of course there is plenty that has been said about both fantasy and games. But it hasn't been said in ink and paper yet.

In other words, rather than make overt references to *Zelda*, I've opted to make references to what *Zelda* inspired in me, as if the text were a game; thus both must play a role. The text is designed with thoughtful navigation on the part of the reader. I make overt references to *Zelda* and the like to establish the subjects of fantasy and gaming motifs in the reader's mind. Like a game, the opening portions are much easier to read; simple diction, generic storytelling. But as we delve further into the text, the difficulty rises, and as a reader of it, you would become like me, weighing where you are with what you know and what you can withstand. The reader does not need to play *Zelda* or *Dark Souls* or even live my life; the text has punctured holes into this space for you. The reader would be forced to become a player, and recognizing this feeling, would become either speechless or a conspiracy theorist.

The thesis is both emulation, reconceptualization, and amalgamation. Or, the fantasy narrative (playing the role of the seductress), the voice of the narrator (the interpersonal author), and the voice of the footnotes (a conspiracy theorist).

The most interesting aspect about games is in how the role of the player is in such contrast with the role of readers or viewers. I have even composed what I call an Attunement Exam, a fictional horoscope/personality questionnaire which not only makes the reader a participant in an overt way, but it also gives them an identity within the text itself. It is in that process of connection that I find artistic practice to be so rewarding. The content in question is merely an aesthetic, a skin. Fantasy, video games, narrative, art, all of these things are merely skins, but more than skins they are portals where we may find relationship with one another through the good ol' power of the imagination.

Introduction

By the Author

As a teenager, I used to wait until sunset so I could take long walks through my neighborhood, and sometimes I would get lost, both in my own thoughts and in the real world. Suburban homes are like labyrinths. Each house represents the people who live there, all different, yet none of them standing out as memorable landmarks. And they're all crunched together, as if deliberately trying to blend in. The only way around that dilemma is if the houses burn, and then they'd be dead, and there wouldn't be much else to say.

Despite my apathetic tone, I consider death, and its intrinsic correlation with life, to be of the utmost concern. But it is not the death part that interests me, rather I am interested in what death does to those who still live. I remember this one time when I came across a roadside memorial. It was on display for weeks, flowers always fresh, and there was a picture of the victim, lit by candles after clouds took over the later afternoon sky. It made me sad that a little girl was killed riding her bike when, somehow or other, she collided with an automobile. I bet the driver feels like shit now. Death, unfortunately, is the only guaranteed way to make people, either by direct or indirect influence, remorseful.

You see what I mean? I say a lot of things that are dark or cold, and people tell me how un-lady-like it is. I'm ceasing to care about those people. All right, so they never say that directly, but that's what they mean. That's why I started walking in the first place, to get away from all the dialogue about how I ought to be and how the world really works and how naïve I am about it all. I was driven to escape.

About this time in my life, I started having these elaborate, uncontainable dreams. This dream-scape is what I've been composing over the last handful of years, and I've decided to share them. Lucky you. The dreams involve ideas that are sort of wild at times, but whenever I walk off the sleep, I realize that there isn't anything about the dream that wasn't actually in the real world. And you can hold me to that. Just like life, dreams sometimes make far more sense, and sometimes far less sense, as a comparison I mean.

My dreams followed me on my walks. Rather, I should say, the space was the same, dreaming and imagining. I never saw anyone outside of their homes, I just always knew they were there. Alive or dead. If

they glanced at their windows (they don't), they might think I was free; but I've never been free in the real world, yet always free in my mind, and I think that's more important. For all everyone's interest in this space, in what we should simply call by its name: magic; no one seemed concerned with practicing it. They'd rather gaze perpetually into the glowing box. That space is, naturally, a way to enslave the mind.

Ah, but magic isn't real, right? I hope you can handle a bit of criticism, because that kind of narrow thinking is often confused with focused thinking. There's a difference between having active interest to understand the world, and strangling it for not being what we want. Magic, as we've been taught, takes quite a bit of focus, and energy. Work? Perhaps. Emotions? Maybe. But constraints? Narrowness? Limitation? That's not magic. And I think you know it too, just have yet to admit it. Or maybe I'm just biased towards fire. That's fine by me, I know what I am now. But the more important question is, do you?

I'm not asking you to pretend, I'm asking you to be vulnerable as I am vulnerable with you. I didn't write this because I believe in magic, I believe in magic because I must, I wrote it because I've met so many people who were dying, and it weighs on me. So much so that I find myself dying too. If you've heard death speak to you, as I have, then you know how unforgiving they are; make no mistake. Death is cold and dark... heard that one before have you? Well, you haven't; you didn't hold those words in your heart. So let's say them again, for as many times as it takes until you become them.

Death is cold and dark.....²

It rains a lot where I live. It's raining right now in fact, against my bedroom window. I don't mind the gloom. You can usually find me at peace with the melancholy. At least it's still, and I can breathe.

My dreams are nothing special. No, it's true. Because if we're being honest, I'm just a stupid seventeen-year-old girl who cries a lot. Where most people absolve their fire because death talked sweetly to them, or they didn't know how to succeed, I was holding on. So tightly. And I believe you are too, somewhere inside. I recognize how melodramatic that is, but melodrama is just another way of feeling, and if people stop pretending to be adults, I believe they'll learn to embrace what they can feel.

I write to the dying so that they may learn to live...

² Oftentimes an extended use of periods is used in games to dictate the length of a pause. Grammatically, language demands a single period or ellipses, but in a game, you have to press a button so the text box can move onto the next set of content. And since the text is typically typed out before the player, the use of multiple periods intuitively conveys an extended pause or hesitation. It happens most notably in Paper Mario.

World 1

I-I: Intro Cinematic³

The World, the Major Players, and Where You Fit In

We watched them die.

As is always the case, standing by the bedside of those we love, those we resent, and those we recognize how little we knew of.

Emperor Vangalt⁴, a man beloved for his deep humanity, was buried in the earth, accusations of necromancy lingering in his wake. For death exists in all of us, and as we age, the more seeped it becomes.

Indeed, we are all cursed, bound between the breath of fire and the despair of death. For the two flow like rivers in the soul, and we traverse the earth as either what we believe or what we covet.

Dranquill, domain of secrets, of magic, and oscillating Realms undefined. Indeed, there will always be pilgrims who unearth dull gems that they hold to the moonlight and call beautiful. And those of us who find no such shine. But of the bonds between them, the kindling must once again reignite.

The end of this age is nigh, and with it, magic stirs under the skin, and in the veils of time and space. This world is not sealed⁵ by the speakers across the fire as it has been heretofore known. It is by the chaotic breath of fire itself, to which we feel the burn of the real. And with fire comes its great shadow, a sentient being who has no mouth, yet the power to break the seal of the spoken.

For through the ages, there have been gods, darkness, lords, and fear... only now may we find rebirth.

-
- 3 Intro Cinematics (Opening Cutscenes), are short mini movies that typically establish a video game's world, major players within it, and how the player character will fit into the scope of the greater context. This could be compared with an Attract Mode, which is what arcade games would play while awaiting someone to take control. Dark Souls uses them to ignite interest, giving the player clues and hints as to the themes and ideas behind the narrative construction. While it does establish some lore and significant characters, the emphasis is put heavily on depicting a rich, evocative setting, a mood, and atmosphere.
 - 4 Usually Dark Souls Cinematics include a handful of characters that are significant to the narrative and encountered by the player at a later point. These are figures who stand out among the rest, and offer as a point of contention, philosophies between parties and with the player themselves.
 - 5 Many fantasy games, especially Zelda, will have some magic seal that is broken. Often the seal is meant to contain either immense power or evil; it is sealed by wise men or maidens and broken by the villains. The world of this composition is not sealed by a storyteller as most books are. Rather it is constructed from fire, the spirit of inspiration, not just the inspiration itself. And the Shadow as a symbol for the breaking of narrative constraints.

Interlude #1

On Psychiatry

My psychiatrist says I should try writing my thoughts down. And they don't mean the lies and the nonsense I usually write. They want me to be more open, more sincere. That's what people want from other people, only they don't act like it when you talk to them, and they do very little in the way of making you feel comfortable doing so.

Sorry, I'll get back to me now. The first step, which took me a few hours to figure out, is to realize that I don't actually need to justify what I'm talking about or why. It's a trivial thing, but it's something I wanted to remember. This is about me after all.

I can remember when a friend visited me and I was cooking a spicy rice dish. They read some of my dreams and we talked... about anything but.

That's where my dilemma comes in. I've been writing my dreams but I've come to realize that other people don't get the same feeling from them that I do; so it isn't really a truism that I'm sharing, as much as dreams are that way to me. I'm still a big secret. A safe secret.

This inevitably means that you don't know me. And, shamefully, I admit that's how I like it. I must like it this way since that's what my behavior dictates. I try to be sincere with everyone, but I have this mental block and I don't know why or where it comes from. I, at least, can be honest about that.

My psychiatrist encourages me to let my guard down more often. I won't bemoan generic things like loneliness or isolation. I'm writing, so that must make me a writer, so that must make me lonely. And now we're both bored because you've heard this trope before.

Isn't it more interesting to read about magic wands and fairies and monsters?

...

You're looking at me in the same way my psychiatrist does; like you know I'm not being honest enough. That's what I thought the look was, but I am recently realizing she is actually looking at me with an understanding that the things I say make it very evident how little value I put on myself.

...

My life will only be interesting if I dramatize it anyways, which is the same thing as putting dragons

in it. Dragons can be dramatic; you just have to have a little imagination is all.

It's usually about this time that I feel a strong disconnect with people my age. They downplay dragons and magic, they act like it was something to enjoy as a child, but now it's no longer interesting. I get that people change, but it doesn't seem like a real reason to me. You clearly enjoyed something about it before, and as if from nowhere, something changed.

Oh you grew up did you. Well here's a newsflash, my body is an adult body now too, so tough luck; you have to see me as an equal in that respect.

Then comes the part where they look at me with this condescending pity. They think I'm naive because I spend my time, you know, walking around, making shit up, imagining myself getting captured by dragons or abducted by aliens on my way to the bus stop. And this somehow means I don't understand the real world. They're wrong. In school, I was always paying closer attention than most people. I actually did very poorly in school as a child because I was made to take notes, and when I take notes I can't remember what's being said, and my notes don't make sense because I'm trying to tune into two different inputs, and it frustrates me. When I got to college, they didn't make me take notes anymore, and then I started to do really well. Honors and everything.

I remember going to a group of "leaders", all of us honors students who ostensibly had goals and passions for doing good in the world. My honors programs had meetings and when I went to one of them, I was basically told to shut up. No one wanted to talk about world saving, I guess. They did share a few empty gags with their screens though. The honors society wanted us to work together, make partners, and hold one another accountable to fulfilling goals related to our aspirations. But everyone there was more concerned about how many zeros they could get at the end of their career path; they knew this meetings was just a formality.

I know I sound like I blame them; I did at the time. Now I understand though. The reason I expected to work so hard, was wanting to invest so much, is due to the fact that they all had lovers they went home to, and I didn't have that special thing. I could either play games or twiddle my thumbs (which for most people are the same), and the later leaves my mind exposed to contemplating how little I matter, quickly dissolving into weeping in the bathroom about my pathetic, lonely life.

So I usually played games because at least then I would be distracted. Except when I was done playing, I got this great idea. I went and shared this idea with someone who thought it was stupid that I got

it while playing a game. And then, and only then, did I sit down and write both ideas: one from the game, one from the asshole who thought lowly of me.

I-II: Opening⁶

The Press “A” Banter

Her burial site was a small patch of dirt with a wooden cross, tucked in beside tombstones and oak trees. It faced the main road, which weaved through Bergon Cemetery. The grave mounds were littered with orange and brown leaves, many of which would blow in from the orchards over the hills. There were so many that it was impossible to keep clean, and thus they lingered, drifting around the wooden crosses and dancing down the path all throughout the year.

On a hill overlooking it all, stood a Divine Chapel, in which the priests made sure that in death everyone was accounted for. Amea was only a child, with no record of rights, wrongs, real loves, or even dreams, so there was not much in the way of a farewell. The ceremony involved mostly singing, done by the church choir. No matter how poor or reluctant family members were, this was a service Divine Servants always provided.

Her mother did not attend, whether from disbelief, unpreparedness, or fear of herself, Ewan didn't know. In fairness, no one knew her outside of the handful of regulars at the pub and none of them were avid church goers either. Apart from Lloyd, whose shock had left him comatose, only one of Amea's teachers was present, and Ewan, who was allowed to go as long as his brother took him.

The funeral took place six months after her disappearance, in her birthday month of Irro. The efforts of the church were more in line with restoration for those still alive, and not in hunting down the body of a missing girl. Detective work is not usually the forte of Divine Servants. Real Police did investigate the event, but Ewan was largely unaware of their efforts. The most he knew was when an officer came to his home and asked him a few questions, most of which concerned mundane information like what kind of personality Amea had? How often did you see her? Who was Lloyd? How close were

6 Before the 2000's, video games were almost always a simple process of inserting a cartridge, turning on the power button, and hitting start. Then you immediately gain control over a character and proceed. Any narrative content would be in the game's Attract Mode or Instruction Manual. Stories were largely reserved for RPG's. But with games entering 3D, the emphasis on a game's story branched into other genres, to the point where a player doesn't have access to everything the player character can perform at the start. Even a game like *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) makes the player acquire their sword and shield over a lengthy sequence; gradually making what should be intuitive knowledge (and it is intuitive since the onscreen display shows a green circle with a sword on it to indicate this is the button you press to swing your sword) a chore to get through. Nevertheless, with more realistic graphics and more complex narratives, much time was spent spoon-feeding players narrative concerns while they slowly learn one button's function after another. Learning narrative backdrop has become an all but mandatory inclusion in modern gaming.

they?

At some point, details concerning the Shadow emerged. At the mention of this, his mother gave Ewan a look of shock, which left him unnerved, but the Officer didn't seem phased. He did, however, abruptly end his visit, saying that an Arbiter would be along to investigate the case further.

That same day, this proved true. The Arbiter wore an oil black suit with a button up vest and a burgundy necktie. He followed the same procedure as the man before him, only he spent less time jotting down notes on a pad and more time observing Ewan and his mother.

Once again, Lloyd came up in the conversation, but Ewan's mother interjected, saying, "Oh Ewan doesn't know anything about what she did outside of school. He goes to school and comes home."

"Right," said the Arbiter, "I still think it's worth going over what we do know. So Ewan, your teachers told the Police that Amea left for the bathroom during presentations, and that you followed shortly after. Is that true?"

Ewan nodded.

"Were you looking for Amea?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Was there a reason for this?"

He gave the Arbiter a confused expression.

"I mean, was she behaving out of the ordinary?"

He nodded.

"And do you have any ideas about that?"

"It was... a shadow." As he spoke, his mother shifted in her seat. The Arbiter paid it no mind. He was quite calm.

"Lloyd's shadow?" he asked.

Ewan nodded, "It was growing. And then it moved on its own. It took her."

"Ewan! That's preposterous. What would make you say such a thing?"

"I saw it happen."

"No, you're mistaken. Shadows don't move on their own and they don't take people."

The Arbiter looked out the window, as if he was contemplating something. "That would be an unusual thing to happen," he said. "But that's why it's good to know what appeared to happen. Ewan,

would you mind describing the shadow in more detail for me?"

"No, he's done."

Despite his mother's disapproval, Ewan was not ready to remain quiet. Amea was in trouble, he had to do all he could. "I want to help," he said.

"Good. Would it be all right for me to record your description?" The Arbiter reached into his jacket and withdrew a dark wooden stick. It was smooth and round, came to a point, and had a glossy shine. There was also a curved groove along what appeared to be the bottom judging by how the Arbiter held it, his forefinger resting on it, and a circular dial, half poking out from the top where his thumb could adjust it. As he withdrew it, Ewan noticed a tattoo on his wrist, a flattened X made from numerous streaks.

"What are you doing?"

"It's just so I can catalog the memory."

"I don't want that thing in my house."

"Ma'am, I assure you, it's perfectly saf-"

"No. I think you've gotten all the information you need. You can go now."

He protested a bit more, but she wouldn't have it, and the Arbiter was ushered out of the house.

"How dare he take out that thing in the house," she said over dinner that evening. "In front of Ewan!"

Ewan's father cut a chunk of his meatloaf, knife scraping the plate all the way, and took a hefty bite. He shook his head, "Glad you sent him out."

"What was he going to do?" asked Ewan.

"Ewan!" said Ewan's sister, Mandy, "Don't you know what that was!? That was a wand. He could have seriously hurt you."

"And where did you hear such a thing?" his mother turned to Mandy.

"At school."

"They're teaching magic at school now?"

"It was brought up in my prep course. Just as a precaution, Mom."

"Well, that's quite alarming. I hope they didn't go too deep."

"They just want us to be prepared."

"For what? It's not like anything magic is going to happen to us. Your father and I moved halfway

across the country for just such a reason.”

Ewan ate a green bean. He looked over at Sue who was opened mouthed at the conversation, though he didn't think she knew what was being discussed all too well. She was a smart five-year-old, but she was still five.

His brother Paul sat across from him, his arms positioned around his plate as if he expected someone to come by and attempt to steal his food. He gave Ewan a wink.

“Some people,” his mother resolved on.

“Oh Mom, you're scared of everyone.”

“Don't you start, Paul.”

“I'm not starting anything. I'm just saying you don't need to let yourself be afraid all the time. He showed you his badge, right?”

“Yes, but-”

“There you go.”

“No, not 'there you go'. For all we know he could have stolen it. Or perhaps it wasn't real in the first place.”

“Mom, we live in Bergon. It's the quietest town in all of Vulgonia.”

“Norman, will you tell your son to watch his tone.”

Ewan's dad was mid-bite when prompted. He held up half a finger while he proceeded to finish the chew cycle. Paul began to speak, but his dad cut him off, the last bits of food caught in the middle.

“Paul, don't disrespect your mother.”

“It's not disrespect, Dad.”

“I don't care. I don't want to hear it. You watch your mouth when you're sitting at this table.”

Paul scrunched his face, “Pifft, whatever.”

“Paul,” his mother began.

Sue leaned over to Ewan and whispered, “Did you really see a shadow come to life?”

Ewan nodded.

“Wow,” she said, eyes wide, chin just inches above her plate.

“Forget it!” said Paul. “I'm not hungry anyways,” and he excused himself from the table.

“No, Paul, you come back and finish.”

Ewan's dad leaned back in his chair, "Let him be, Martha."

Dinner ended in a significantly quieter tone after that.

This was not an unusual evening at the Krook residence. By no means was it a hostile environment, just an ongoing frustration, overcooked into ashes. That point when a family is too tired to think rationally, devolving into saying the same phrases over and over again in a vain attempt to appease other parties. Or sometimes, just stating outright what one wants, but never in the same words one was thinking so the result is insensitive, blunt. That's the shame of it.

Ewan couldn't tell his family about the Shadow, or about Amea and Lloyd. Not in the way he needed. Every time he tried to, he would recount the experience shyly, so his family would take his language with the same gravity as if he was talking about what he learned in school or a worry like how he'll make friends in a new school. Then he would realize this, and stop, knowing that it wasn't a realistic topic to bring up. It was hard to recount authentically. He couldn't give it the weight that it had for him.

And it did weigh on him. The only thing that seemed productive was to visit her grave. The world resolved to accept that a young girl had gone to a better place. Ewan was not convinced. For the first few months, it had only surfaced in his daydreams. The Police were looking into it after all. But that was before she was declared dead.

Who was to look for her now? Or would it all be for nothing? Was she still alive? He didn't want to imagine that she wasn't.

Once a week, Ewan went to Summer school, and on the way back, he would stop by the graveyard. The cross consisted of two thin, fragile planks held together with string. Sometimes, Ewan would pick a small flower and tie it to the cross. And sometimes this made him feel better. She was being thought of. Other times, it made him feel like giving up, but this wasn't true. He was, in fact, very far from giving up.

In mid Arbor, the Summer Festival for the new year had begun and Ewan was meant to hurry home once school let out to join his family for the festivities. He decided it wouldn't hurt to make a quick stop to replace the flower, it was a holiday after all. But after he had done so, he happened to look down the road, deeper in, past the chapel. He spotted a lone figure coming towards him.

Who would be in a graveyard at this time, he thought, especially on a holiday? Out of curiosity, Ewan waited.

It was mildly dark out, a murky cluster of clouds overhead. It almost seemed as though the figure was emerging from the fog, ghostly. And, at the time, for all Ewan knew, it could have been true.

The man wore a simple tunic with a shabby brown tailcoat. On his back was a large sack with various items strapped to it with thin rope: a rolled sleeping cot, a frying pan, bracelets, and a wooden mask with a very downtrodden face on it⁷.

He looked quite young, clean-shaven, and with a high spirited demeanor, though, he did seem a bit confused. The two exchanged a simple wave before they were close enough to speak.

“Why, my dear boy, what brings you to such a dark, dreary place?” he said, “I myself am just passing through, visiting my sister for the Summer. You should be out there, enjoying the festivities!”

“I was visiting a friend.”

“Oh?” He looked to the grave. Her name was etched into the wood, but it was hard to see without getting real close. “I’m very sorry to hear that. Children shouldn’t have to live with such things.”

“She’s not dead though.”

The man cocked his head.

“She was taken... by some monster...” The man remained befuddled so Ewan went on, “It was a shadow. It acted on its own and took her. It disappeared with her.” As he said it, he expected the man to think him crazy. No one else seemed to want to consider the possibility, save for maybe the Arbiter.

“I see,” he said. “I take it the Police know?”

He nodded.

“And have you met with an Arbiter?”

“He came to my house, but my Mom wouldn’t let me say much.”

The man held one elbow with his hand, rubbing his chin with the other. “Very peculiar.”

“She’s usually like that.”

“Oh I didn’t mean her, I meant about the shadow. Do you know whose it was?”

Ewan hesitated. “Her boyfriend’s... I think. It didn’t look like him though.”

This intrigued the man even more. “Really? How do you know that?”

“Well it was much bigger than a person. And it had pointed ears and claws.”

⁷ The first 3D Zelda games introduced a character called the Happy Mask Salesman. In *Zelda: Majora’s Mask* in particular, he has a large pack and a series of masks dangling off of it. The character has a host of theories surrounding them that make him a fun, unpredictable element to reference. The mask mentioned above is similar to the “Spooky” mask he sells in his shop; a mask I’ve always wondered about its mysterious origins.

The man bit his lower lip, “that sounds like quite the thing to see. Are you all right?”

Ewan nodded, without thinking. “I just don’t know what to do. She’s my best friend.”

“Yes... yes... a very strange set of circumstances we have here... hmmm...” He paused. Then he thrust his hand out for Ewan to shake. “Name’s Marvalo. I’m a traveling merchant of sorts.”

Ewan shook hands. “Ewan. I’m just a kid... of sorts, I guess.”

Marvalo chuckled. “Want to have a seat and chat for a bit?”

The two of them crossed the road and sat on a bench.

“I think I may be able to help you, my young friend.”

“Really?”

Marvalo nodded enthusiastically. “Tell me, do you know much about..... magic?”

Ewan paused. “Only that my family doesn’t like it.”

“Why’s that?”

Ewan shrugged. “I don’t know. They say it’s dangerous. Evil.”

Marvalo held back a laugh. “Well, they’re not wrong about dangerous, but what isn’t dangerous? Sailing a boat is dangerous. Even riding a bike can be dangerous.”

“I guess so. I don’t know much about it. I don’t learn it in school.”

“What do you know then?”

Ewan shrugged.

Marvalo tapped his lip. Then he lit up as if an idea had just sparked in him. “It would be like this coin,” and he pulled a rounded coin from his pocket.

“What’s that?”

“Money from Deckmore. One side is the image of the first Emperor. The other is a mountain peak where the silver was mined. There’s a game that goes with it, here—”

He put the coin on the edge of his thumb. “Ready?” then he flicked it, and the small bit of metal went soaring into the air, spinning rapidly. When it came down, Marvalo caught it and slapped it onto his left palm. “Guess which side is facing up?”

“How could I know that? It happened too fast.”

There was a glint in Marvalo’s eyes. “I know. That’s the point. We can only guess. There are only two possibilities though. So it’s a fair chance either way. How ‘bout this, if you guess right, I’ll give you the

coin. The man or the mountain.”

Ewan rubbed his nose, thinking it over. “All right, the mountain.”

“You sure?”

Ewan shrugged.

Marvalo unveiled the coin, on its face was the man. “Ha ha ha ha! I win this one.” He flipped the coin again. “Can you guess it this time?”

“This could go on forever,” complained Ewan.

“Right, very good. You see, magic is something like the flipping of this coin. You can see it twirling in the air, shining its light back and forth, but you can’t know how it will land, or how many times it will turn itself over, no matter how closely you watch it. Perhaps a machine could tell you, but even a machine couldn’t know until the coin has been flicked⁸.”

“I see... sounds confusing.”

“It can be. But then, not every coin is the same.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out another silver coin. He held it out to Ewan, and showed the sides, both of which were the face of the Emperor.

Ewan frowned.

“It’s a trick coin,” Marvalo explained. “Every time I toss this one, I’ll know what the result will be. But I still don’t know how many flips it will perform. And truthfully, since the sides look identical, I don’t actually know which side is which. I just know that I’m going to win the game.”

At this time, a priest exited the chapel on the hill with a candle in one hand and a long pole in the other. He wore brown hooded robes with tassels around the waist and sandals. Walking along the main road, he stopped at each lamppost, carefully unhooking the latch and raising the candle up to light it. Then he closed the lid and went to the next one.

He gave the two of them a warm smile as he passed. Perhaps he felt two people in a graveyard could use all the encouragement they could get.

Marvalo nodded in reply. “Magic,” he continued, “is when the coin is flipping through the air. We can toss it, we might even be able to guess it or control it, but we do not understand it. We do not know it, and yet...” he smiled, “we can tell that it’s something special.”

⁸ Tactics Ogre tends to put a large emphasis on a player conversation with an NPC (non-playable character) at the beginning of the game. It isn’t uncommon to see a small analogy that speaks to a bigger philosophy in the game’s world.

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I used to study it, you know. I went to a Guild. Practiced Pyromancy, that was my discipline.”

“What happened?”

Marvalo gave a smile but this one was weaker. It was clear to Ewan that the man was trying to hide something, something bad probably. He was used to adults doing this kind of thing. The irony is that children are just like any other person, behind in experience, not intuition. This was something Marvalo was not speaking about with the same jovial confidence as before. He was sad.

“Oh I don’t know,” he said. “Guess I just wasn’t cut out for it.”

“What do you mean?”

Marvalo rubbed some sleep from his eye. “One day, I just couldn’t do it anymore. Magic left me. Went on to find someone else to do its bidding, I wager.”

“Can magic do that?”

“I didn’t used to think so.”

Ewan looked on with curiosity and a hint of unease. He may have noticed, but he hadn’t fully thought through the extent to which the subject was meaningful to Marvalo. He was, after all, very new to magic.

“Tell you what, how’s about a gift?⁹ Make up for cheating you on the coin toss.”

That made Ewan wonder... cheated?

Marvalo took off his sack and unzipped a side compartment. “I used to sell books you know, but they are much too heavy without a cart and those can be quite obnoxious to lug around. So now I sell an assortment of lightweight objects.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” he reached into his pack, “this candle,” and he held out a teal colored, medium-thick candle. The wick looked untouched even though the wax had melted the rim.

“Notice anything?”

“It’s green... or blue¹⁰?”

9 In Dark Souls, the player is able to choose a “gift” during the character creator screen. It is an atypical inclusion not seen in other games.

10 In the original Zelda from 1986 (from here on referenced as Zelda 1), the first item you should invest in is the Blue Candle. It opens up numerous secrets. Having the Blue Candle changes the experience from slaying monsters, to exploration and discovery. These two themes are at the heart of the game.

“Turquoise actually. Here,” he took Ewan’s hand and guided him into holding the wick with his thumb and forefinger. “When you’re ready, give it a good twist, and then pull away, real quick-like.”

Ewan gave it a try. The moment his fingers came off the wick, the candle lit itself into a soft turquoise glow. The flame moved slightly in the calm wind, and it seemed to Ewan that it emanated a bright circle around the source of the light.

“It’s a Chrono Candle,” said Marvalo. “It works backwards. When lit, the candle restores its own wax. Leave it unlit for too long though, and the wax dissipates.”

“Huh,” Ewan smiled, feeling warmth seep from the candle.

“It’s best to light it for a few hours every evening. Be a shame for it to go out for good, don’t you think?”

Ewan nodded. “I don’t think I can take this. It must be expensive.”

“Not expensive, just special. You keep it, I insist. I have a feeling you’ll be needing it more than I will.”

“I couldn’t,” said Ewan.

“Nonsense! It’s my gift to you. Now, not another word about it.”

Ewan held the candle close to his chest. It was a pretty thing.

A few stray drops of rain began to fall.

“Now... what was I saying?” began Marvalo. “Oh yes, I remember. Ewan, have you heard of the Guild?”

He shook his head.

“Well it might interest you to know about it. The Guilds are home to magic users of all different kinds. They keep people like your family and school mates safe from bad magic and monsters. But what might be useful to know is that you can request help from them. You live in Bergon, right? So the nearest one would be Guild Lockheart, just past the Gump Woods. They also have a school where they will teach you swords and sorcery.

“If you think Amea is still out there, perhaps you should learn magic yourself. Then you can search the world with bravery, and perhaps one day you’ll find her.”

Ewan’s looked into his eyes. “You mean... me? They’d teach me?”

“I don’t see why not. The situation does seem to involve magic of some kind, that is their forte, and

you won't be learning world saving skills in regular school.”

It was too much for Ewan to take in. To think that there were people who understood magic, who could relate to the situation, and have the resources to do something about it.

“There’s still a chance,” he said, the rain picking up momentum.

“I believe so,” said Marvalo. “I would be more than happy to take you there myself sometime. But I’ve kept you too long, I think. You best run home now. Consider making a trip out to the post sometime.”

“I will,” said Ewan putting out the Chrono Candle and slipping it into his pocket, “and thank you!” he shouted as he took off for home.

“Certainly, and good luck to you!”

Marvalo let out a sigh. “I wonder…”

It took some doing to convince his family to allow Ewan to study magic at Guild Lockheart. As it happened, the school he was originally signed up for inexplicably denied him. With Summer nearing a close, and a warmly written letter from Lockheart, his parents relented.

As autumn approached, Marvalo followed through with his promise as personal escort for Ewan to Lockheart. It was quite a long trek, first an all day train ride, and finally, a long hike through the mountainous Gump Woods.

“Come on Ewan,” said Marvalo, tying his pack securely, exhaling a misty cloud. “It’s practically sundown; we can still make it!”

“Make what?” asked Ewan, taking in the lush scent of pine trees as they climbed a narrow rocky path into the mountain.

“Why, Lockheart of course. The Guild has a draw bridge that closes at dusk, if we hurry, we can still make it.”

“You mean they won't let us in after dark?”

“Of course not! If they left the draw bridge down, hordes of monsters would waltz right into the Guild!”

Ewan swallowed; apparently getting trapped out in the woods was a very bad idea.

“How far is it?” he asked.

“Not far.”

Not far, ended up translating to over an hour and a half of aggressive hiking. Marvalo was not the slightest bit winded, getting further ahead of Ewan with each passing minute.

Ewan dragged himself to the top of a particularly steep rock, wiped the sweat from his brow, and pressed on, in spite of the emerging burn in his legs and feet. Marvalo didn't seem to notice.

On a few occasions, Ewan happened to glance at the trees above, and more than once thought he saw a dark green blob attached to the trunks or some of the thicker branches. “Marvalo,” he panted, “what are those?”

“Gumps, Ewan. Don't stand under them. They'll drop on you and swallow you whole.”

“What?!”

“Not to worry; I'll fend them off if it comes to it.”

Ewan shook his head and tried to keep a closer watch. Despite sweating profusely, the wind was picking up, and it was sharply chill.

The road grew less bumpy, less rocky, and shortly after this, just as Ewan felt his breath and energy revitalize (minus a growing sense of hunger), Marvalo stopped in his tracks; he had finally run out of breath.

“What is it?”

Marvalo shook his head, “We're not going to make it. The stars are out and we're not quite equal altitude with Lockheart. We'll have to sleep through the night and make up the rest tomorrow morning.”

“Sleep here?”

“We could-”

The left side of the road dropped into the rocky, Gump covered trees, but Marvalo was looking at the right side where the fir trees were thickest, and the ground sloped even more.

“This way,” he motioned, taking Ewan into the thicket, “I know a place. Not the most child-friendly, appreciate it if you don't mention it to your mom and pop. But it beats sleeping on a rock.”

Hungry, thirsty, and losing light, to the point where Ewan could only make out black and deep blue shapes in the forest, he wasn't about to complain.

The path started to blur in Ewan's mind, climbing over fallen tree trunks, crossing a wooden bridge over a stream, navigating a sloped terrain, and it went on for a decent while. Eventually, they made

a half loop, arrived at an arch of moss. It looked like the bottom of a tree, the roots all twisted and contorted.

“Hmmm,” said Marvalo. “I’m pretty sure this is it.”

Ewan stared curiously; there was nothing out of the ordinary that he could see. He supposed maybe it was a lot of branches.

“Ewan, you still have that candle I gave you?”

Ewan held out the Chrono Candle. Marvalo flicked the wick and it burst to life. Then he took the flame to the branches and lit one¹¹.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, it’ll repair itself. I don’t want to cast a dispelling jinx.”

Ewan scratched his head as the flame rapidly spread to the mass of brush, but for some reason, the flames were all turquoise, and they seemed to be content to burn nothing except the small wall of bramble. Within moments, the thicket was gone without a trace, not even ashes, and there was a hollow interior, a staircase leading up into the hill bank.

Marvalo handed Ewan the candle, “It’s a secret to everyone¹²,” he said with a wink.

Ewan nodded hesitantly, not sure who it needed to be kept a secret from in particular. He followed Marvalo in, checking back at the hole they’d burned open. For a moment he thought it was going to be plain to see for anyone passing by, but then the branches suddenly reappeared, as if they hadn’t been tampered with at all. Examining it closely, he now noticed that they didn’t move in the wind, just a clever illusion.

They ascended the polished wooden staircase, listening to murmurs of what sounded like a rowdy party in the walls around them.

“What is this place?” Ewan whispered, not sure if he should or not.

“A tavern, mostly,” Marvalo whispered back, “but that’s mostly for show. A friend of mine lives here; she is a particularly gifted Seer. This is her private practice.”

“If this is a tavern, isn’t there a front door?”

11 In Zelda 1, the blue candle allows you to burn various trees (they look like bushes). Most of them do not burn, but those that do, contain a staircase to a secret, often money, occasionally a dungeon, or even a disgruntled old man demanding payment for the “door repair”.

12 “It’s a secret to everyone” is what the character in burned bushes say. Then you can take the money they offer. It is unclear what benefit it is to them (especially given that they have the same design an enemy monster).

They came to a wooden door with no knob and a pretty design of what looked like a constellation on the front. Marvalo turned to Ewan, “Isn’t this more fun?”

With that, Marvalo rapped on the door in a particular pattern that Ewan couldn’t keep up with. There was a long silence. Ewan wanted to prompt Marvalo to knock again, he was cold, tired, and ever so hungry. All he could smell was that rich mahogany, but if this was a tavern, they certainly had food.

There came a sound on the other side, an unlocking maybe. Then the door clicked open, but only a tad.

Marvalo smiled, “After you,” he said.¹³

¹³ Zelda: Ocarina of Time is a prime example for how rising difficulty works in games. You begin as a child, tasked with three dungeons, Each of these are significantly shorter, easier, and don’t require a boss key in order to complete. After this point, you open the door of time and retrieve the master sword which propels you seven years into the future. The narrative device makes not only the player character older, but the dungeons harder and more complex, and the surrounding world is far more hostile and bleak. This leads into the idea of rising difficulty, not just from a gameplay perspective, but a thematic one also.

Interlude #2

A Connection

There was a man lying on his side in the center lane of the freeway. At first I thought there had been an accident, and that I should feel shocked that such a thing had happened moments before my arrival. But then I went a little further, scanned around for more evidence and what I saw was not a smashed car or even a car of any kind, only a guy in his early twenties as he jogged from his parked vehicle and stooped down to pick up a sippy jacket.

It seemed to me that the man in the road must have walked along the side of the freeway, then took something of a deep breath, and made his way out to the line of traffic, hoping for the fog and the rain to conceal him, and also hoping that no one hit him.

There was someone else with me at the time, maybe they saw the scene play out differently. Maybe they know the truth. I haven't asked; they were very troubled by it and I haven't had the heart to bring it back up. At the time, I didn't consider the scene very much. I just reached my hand across and held her's. She griped my hand hard and that should have been enough for me to know this was the right thing to do.

That's not exclusively what I thought though. A few minutes later she released me, and I asked her if what I did was all right.

She said yes.

I asked her if she was sure.

And enthusiastically, she assured me it was.

Even though it would be true of my character to doubt her, I didn't. I was behaving out of character. And yet I was in a character that we could argue is more true of me, someone I'd like to be.

I love this person, you see? And she loves me, in some subverted version of it anyways. And that's how it always is for me; I always love more than I am loved. Most of the time, it's not even because they don't like me, it's simply because of circumstance or fear. My psychiatrist defines it as a lack of capacity or depth; I'm pretty sure it's just fear. And the whole circumstances thing is utter bullshit too, to be honest. I have a life, and circumstances I'm in, and not once, have I ever been in a position where I was not ready for a relationship.

...

You're probably laughing at me over that. Yeah... so am I. Most of the people in my life say that I'm not ready for a romantic relationship. They don't say the real reason, but what they mean is I'm too emotional and I need to fix my shit before anyone would want me. My psychiatrist tells me the opposite. She encourages me to date people, if I feel up to it. She doesn't seem to think I'm insane, she won't even prescribe medication.

I'm not doing a good enough job of listening to what my psychiatrist told me though; I'm blaming people too much. But that's just what you get in the writing. In real life, I dropped my friend off at the airport, then went home and wept. I also did some other bad things to myself but they're none of your business. The truth was I didn't know if my friend was truly happy in the life she had, or if I could have potentially made it better, and fucked it up by not doing what I was supposed to.

And my psychiatrist convinced me (with lots of love and compassion) that it is okay to care for someone so deeply, but to recognize they are living their life now, and I matter too, and that means I need to make sure I am taken care of.

Whatever...

I-III: Character Creator¹⁴

Building the Appearance, History, and Possibility

The dark red hue of mahogany was complimented by the glow of hanging candles around a circular space. The center of the circle held a few more steps, a dip into a ring, and while in the center, you could look up at a glass ceiling. A shower of shimmering starlight poured down through the skylight. In the center of the space was a small table with a crystal ball on it.

On the wall closest to him, there was a fireplace with a rocking chair facing it. On the back wall were long vertical windows to the outside forest, casting a faint blue on a long oval table.

He noticed that the rocking chair was moving, someone was in it.

She stood up. She wore a long magenta gown with a hood over her long curly hair. Her corset was a deeper purple, with flower embroidery, holding up her voluminous breasts. She held her right hand with her left at her navel. She was ever so pretty.

He came into the circle, hands at his sides, unsure where to put them.

Agatha watched him, coming behind the crystal ball. She was standing on ceremony to nothing Ewan could see.

“Good evening,” she said.

“Evening.”

“You are quite some distance from home now; escaped yourself into a great unknown. You are feeling the need to be cared for. What were once prospects of excitement, adventure, hope; now become an inevitable weight, things that could never be recounted in stories. I am not speaking of hardship from trials¹⁵; I am speaking of the very foundation to which you and many like you so desperately cling to:

“Identity.

14 Character Creators are more than a series of sliders to customize a player’s avatar. They represent a calm mental space of creativity, especially in an RPG where story and customization take center stage. I always take great consideration to a character’s back-story and personality in addition to their appearance. I contemplate what sort of build I want to go with. I listen to the background music, consider the feeling I get from the Opening Cutscene, all of this influences what character I become in the game world for this present journey. You are within the world by way of generating someone who exists in it is an enveloped method of connection.

15 Games often seem quite grand when we anticipate play, but beginning can be a somewhat grueling process nowadays. You essentially need to learn a new language either due to the controls, Cutscenes, or in the case of RPG's, Dark Souls especially, in having to make huge, long-term decisions (your appearance, your class, etc.). In games, the character creator is unlike any other part of the experience.

“You cannot proceed without it, nor will it be feasible to undo¹⁶.”

“But I have-”

“Identity, you do not. To me, you are fairly default. You are away from home, away from anyone who would know you. Many new faces will come to know you, and now is the time to decide what face you would like to present.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Touch the globe and you will.”

There was no other way to proceed¹⁷. He stepped forward, feeling sprinkles of dew as he laid his fingers on the globe.

The world went dark¹⁸.

Valley of Chaos

He arose as a white phantom¹⁹. In a never ending abyss of black, he materialized, glowing and colorless. He attempted to feel his body, but found himself intangible and hollow.

He could hear her, a distant memory: “This place exists, perhaps from necessity, as a space between the others²⁰.”

Looking down, he could see his reflection in the water, a reflection that was constantly changing. For a moment he appeared as normal, the next he was older, refined. Then weary and wrinkled. Then he became young again, instantly, but he was softer around the eyes and mouth.

He looked away.

The water around him parted, making way for a winding path of glistening stone. And above, faint

16 A game rarely allows you to change your appearance, class, etc., without undergoing some rigorous process much later.

17 The refusal to create a character is met by sending the player back to the title screen or otherwise prompting them with a notification along the lines of, “We can’t proceed without a character”.

18 Character creators, no matter how simple, are never without their own separate space within the context of the game. You never sit there and answer questions directly; you always navigate a series of menus, and to get to this lobby, the screen will fade to black, maybe require a loading screen, and then begin.

19 In Dark Souls, a white phantom indicates that you are in someone else’s world/universe.

20 Character creators are not spaces that the characters of a game are aware of.

light shone down in a cracked formation following the trail.

“I can make you whatever you want to be. I can make you taller or bigger. Younger or older. I can change the color of your hair, or how it grows. I can change your skin. I can change your eyes. I can change your sex. I can change what moles you have, or scars, and where. I can even alter your attunement.

“None of these changes will be real of course, at least not in the sense that you would get from receiving them in a non-magical way. Receiving a scar comes with memories that you will not possess. Nor will you be able to bear children when you’re older if you become female. These changes only pertain to those who perceive you from a distance, from a glass screen. I cannot, of course, convince you that these changes are real or that they are natural.

“But they may please you, all the same²¹.”

As he walked, on either side of him emerged a character, though semi-transparent. These people, he could see, were not ordinary in the sense that he could meet them. Rather they were possibilities. Initially they seemed numerous, constantly shifting from one extremity to the next, but within a few moments they settled into a few consistent personalities. On the right side of the path, the versions of him were male, gradually aging with each vision. And on the left they were female, also showing varying degrees of age.

The first²² male was tall, with deep red hair. He carried a lance as he walked steadily through flames. A voice spoke of his greatness, and the fear he wrought upon the earth. A king in his homeland, he sought to rule all who might question his authority.

On the left, the ethereal form was female. Her hair was long and in a black braid. She wore a long cloak and an emblem beside her breast, a symbol of her noble family. She would set this aside in favor of silver armor, for she was far from home now, climbing mountain peaks where dragons flew overhead. With nothing but a sword over her shoulder and a body shield, she concealed herself within her helm, and

21 There is a duality of creating a character to represent yourself. It is your creation, therefore authentic. But it is a creation, not the physical state of you.

22 The following descriptions correspond to characters I've created within Dark Souls, or other titles. Highlighted are their descriptions; appearance, back-story, motifs, whatever aspects that were significant during the time of their inception.

vanished into the misty heights.

“What does it mean to be shapeless? Formless? The prospect to be anyone and yet the great limitation this is. As a child, there are many masks you may wear, but the time for this is steadily dwindling. For you cannot be every variation of yourself, one ultimately must suffice. Those you interact with will demand a name, they will want a skin, a sex, and a class by which to orient themselves. The question is thus not how much you can be but what you will be.”

“And if I don’t know?”

“Then you will inevitably cause others to define you in your stead. Their speech, their looks, their very engagement of you will be in response to what they think they should believe you to be.

“So much of the world lies before you. Certainly, there is nothing to hinder you here. Be whatever you like, and never mind the consequences.”

“But you said it would be irreversible.”

“So to speak. You were before this place, irreversible. It is irreversible that you have been born; for even death is not the process of being un-born.”

The next man had curly blonde hair. He wore the brown robes of a Divine Servant, a club and plank shield in his arms. Around him materialized a village in the rain; brief glimpses of fanged boar men flashed above the rooftops. The villagers wrapped their arms around his waist as he prayed for healing, and healing came, in a beam of gold from the sky. But there were those the Cleric did not perceive as holy, and thus his violent tendencies overtook him in his efforts to smite evil.

She hunched over a book, in a towering library, holding one palm from which a bright blue orb illuminated her reading. She was a scholar. In her future, she could see herself wading through a swamp, as if it had spilled into the library, giant pillars of stone on either side, and an enveloping darkness. She did not fear this darkness, for it had been kept from her such that it was now her desperate allure.

“Formless, shapeless, nothing. You come with a curse now, the curse of having no curse.”

“Is that not why you are here? Because you are nothing? Because you did nothing to help your friend?”

Now aged, he strode through the ashes of a forest long forgotten. He wore little more than a loincloth, a single sword in his hands, and his body shaved clean. He was frail, but wise and unswayed, for he had lived long enough to affirm and sustain his pursuits. And into the void he walked, the mysteries of love, righteousness, and forgiveness forever unanswered.

The woman was once a man, but that had been before gods and kings struck the world. In their wake, he buried the bones of his lover, his child, and found himself at the edge of a lake in twilight. There was a coffin and a witch who brewed him a potion that promised to ease the passing. And so he drank and became a woman. She dedicated herself to the art of the sword, and traveled the world, becoming a mystery to some, a model to others, and a legend.

“If only you had the vigor, if only you had the zeal. If only you were not so weak²³.”

And Ewan saw before him a small girl, curled into a ball. On her side, she lay on the black diamond path ahead of him. She was crying.

Ewan’s hands shook; he swallowed a lump in his throat. “What do I have to do to save her?”

“That, I cannot know. But what I can know is how little it would alter your path. For here, it seems at last, we arrive to your core, the part of you that cannot be tampered with. I speak not of the bond you have, but of the blood in your body. Its type, hue, and texture, the beating of your heart responds in ways that others do not, though they may be similar. Here, see-”

The girl vanished. Ewan bent down where she had been, on his knees in the center of the circle. Ash drifted amidst a slanted white light on a patch of gravel. Water drizzled through the grooves within the

²³ Vigor is often a stat determining health or equipment burden.

stone walls, filling the space into a pond. As he gazed into the water²⁴, the form he saw was not himself as he was. It was a disillusioned self for he did not believe it was him even though it looked like he did in mirrors. The harder he concentrated, the closer he came to a self that he knew was not real, and yet did not bring him discomfort. It was an idealized self. A fantasy self.

“Feel your blood. The changes I can provide are a detriment to the blood. We learn with every breath who we are; it is a process of acceptance.

“And yet for you, this process, I sense, is one of resignation. And so I offer my service, to sculpt you into a form that aligns with your beating heart. Will you accept the transposition?²⁵”

Ewan closed his eyes. This wasn't real. It was a trick of some kind. And besides, it would, as she said, not change those who already knew him. His family would consider him monstrous if he were to engage in such magic. In this regard, there was no choice.

But the push, the pull, the tight grip of the heart, pulsating away. Unfathomable. Thus he said nothing; cupping his face in his palms, yielding to all that surrounded him, for it could not be more true, that he was not real. He was incorporeal, a phantom, a projection, a creation. And hopelessly so. To the whims of destiny, luck, and fate. And unto his body, he was confirmed.

“Will you accept the transposition?”

24 Many character creators, and Dark Souls in particular, have deeper customization options buried within the broader menu. Once you spend some space in there, you'll come back to the main menu where you can see your character in full fruition.

25 Press A to Finalize Creation.

Level 1²⁶

Vigor	2
Consonance	14
Endurance	7
Zeal	14
Wisdom	8
Intuition	3
Belief	3
Fortitude	7
Luck	1

He nodded.

“A name is required²⁷.”

And, with a reluctance he had not before, he spoke.

He began to materialize.

He sat up in the bed with a weight of dread shrouding his mind. His heart beat rapidly against his ribcage. It wanted out of its bone prison. And that thought terrified him.

After a few deep breaths, telling himself it was all a horrible nightmare, whatever it was, he laid down, his cheek on a wet spot on his pillow.

²⁶ Players are typically given a confirmation page that shows their stats and equipment of the character they've designed. Among them, Vigor, Endurance, and Luck are all typical stats in Dark Souls and almost any fantasy RPG.

²⁷ Dark Souls 3 prompts this line if you fail to input a name. We can, fictionalized or not, never be nameless.

Interlude #3

Consumption

When I go to the theater nowadays, I sit myself, physically, in the back and off to the side, but in my imagination, I am at the center, the very core. I am here because I am deeply listening, taking everything the creators have to say into my raw heart. My eyes are big, ogling at the screen, how special it is to see someone's creation burst to life before me. The lights dim, the red curtain raises, and for a brief moment we are left with silent darkness. A few of us cough or sneeze, whisper a phrase or two, but then it begins, and it is so loud and booming, so big and vibrant, I am totally absorbed.

And you know something? Everyone around me is eating. They're munching, they're sleeping, they're talking to each other (about doctor visits and retelling jokes that aren't funny). When it ends, they get up, pull up their pants and march out. While they do, I sit there and meditate on what I just witnessed, as if it were real. As if it carried meaning. And it was sad because no one seemed to want to share the experience. I guess the way they saw it is, they got what they came for, clocking out for a spell.

As I age, I find myself becoming less and less interested, though I think for a different reason. I start to see the people in the theater with me for what they really are. The bags under my eyes are solid black from excessive rolling that I honestly can't help since I'm finding the vast majority of viewable content to be not tailored for people like me. Too much time in the craft or exposure to the mirrored image of us all in seats has..... hassssssss fermented me, and I'm something of a snob, apparently. And those things in the theater with me, that used to be people, they're all slugs now, seeping over the backs of the seats and slithering over me. I recoil in disgust, but they ignore me, fixated on the screen they are, their mouths open wide wide wide as the film breaks itself down into palpable particles. Very tiny bites that can be swallowed without realizing they were in your mouth. The slugs collect in a heaping mass by the theater's feet, eating. Eating like they're being fed the vomit from a mother bird. And when it ends, the film goes on repeat because they're never full. Every theater plays the same picture.

I walk out..... and I start formulating words.

Results²⁸

Words Absolved	+10105
Current Word Total	11672
Eggs Discovered	28/28
Grand Egg Total	28/110
Total Completion	24%

Rank **C**

< Reread World I

Proceed to next World >

²⁸ In Fire Emblem and many other RPG's (particular Japanese RPG's) will give the player a score sheet at the end of a completed stage. The information conveyed is usually extremely cryptic and, at least to me, completely arbitrary how the game calculates performance. Fire Emblem is about the only game series that puts in statistical information that makes sense (like if a unit died in battle). The rank is still confusing though, thus my own scores are completely arbitrary.

World II

II-I: Tutorial²⁹

A Needless Test of Patience

The morning of the 1st of Mina came bright, a ray of yellow etching on the ceiling through the nearly closed drapes. Ewan dragged himself up, feeling rested, and for a brief moment disheartened. But the thought of getting to Lockheart, starting school excited him, drove him out of bed. At once he realized that Marvalo was not in bed, having the blanket messy, hanging over the side. Should he go downstairs to the main tavern, but as there was little more than faint snoring, decided to check the central chamber first.

Upon entering, he was immediately greeted by Amelia, who stood at the table by the window, her hands folded in front. “Good morning,” she said, a bright smile on her face.

“Good morning,” he replied. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Oh,” she smiled, “um, yes, thank you.” She gestured toward the table, smiling, which Ewan could see was full of a large breakfast; bacon, poached eggs, fried tomatoes and mushroom, with buttered toast and sausages. “Won’t you come and eat?” she smiled.

“You made all that?”

“Oh, it was nothing. You’ve got a long day ahead, please eat well.” She gestured again, a smile on her face.

“What do you mean?”

Her face went up in surprise, “Oh! Well, it’s the first of Mina, that’s all. School begins today in Lockheart.” She smiled.

Ewan looked outside, though it was daylight, he couldn’t be sure of the exact time. Then he looked around the room, realized there was no one else besides the two of them. “Where’s Marvalo? Agatha?”

Amelia looked at him worryingly. Then she pulled a note from her apron. It read:

²⁹ As someone who grew up playing games from the 80’s and 90’s, tutorials being present in nearly every modern title is particularly annoying. Tutorials used to be conveniently contained in the instruction manual that would come with the game. This meant it was up to the player to decide if they wanted a tutorial or not. But in modern titles, tutorials are linked with yet more story backdrop (because the Opening Cutscene and story setting scenes following aren’t enough) so that their removal would disrupt the narrative. Ideally, you would want the earlier parts of a game to be easier with a gradual increase in difficulty (Donkey Kong Country 2 on SNES is a prime example of this philosophy). Dark Souls 3 however, is a polarizing exception due to the tutorial boss being overwhelmingly difficult.

Sorry to run off like this, but some things come up. Not to worry, you'll be just fine on your own getting to Lockheart. It's only a couple hours walk from Agatha's. Just stay on the path and you'll be there in no time. Amelia will guide you.

-Marvalo

Ewan sat down. There was nothing for it but to eat. The food was delicious. It was going to be a long day and he wasn't sure he could manage getting to Lockheart on his own, but he was sure going to try.

That's all he needed, a big breakfast, and a big spirit. He didn't know how long of a walk it was to lockheart but he didn't have a choice. He had to get there. So he could start school. It was a big deal that he arrive today at the very latest time.

He stepped outside the front of the tavern, noting the sign by the road which read, "The Black Rose Inn". He had all his belongings with him in a big sack over his shoulders, and in particular, the wooden sword Marvalo had left him, which he carried at his side.

"Here," said Amelia. Smiling, she handed him a small silvery marble ball. "It is said to be of great help to those new to adventuring. If you need help with anything at all, just put the ball in your hand and ask for aid."

"Thanks," said Ewan, and he set off down the foresty road.

G u m p W o o d s

The Gump Woods turned out to be much more straightforward than he anticipated. All he had to do was push forward with his feet³⁰, and presto, he would cover lots of ground that way. It was amazing how much ground one could cover just by walking. What useful devices feet were.

After what felt like forever but was actually only an hour, he arrived at a fork in the road. The

³⁰ It's a wonder tutorials have lasted this long when nowadays they explain the most banal information such as "Push forward on the analog stick to move your character".

marble vibrated in his pocket. Curious, he opened it, but before he could touch it, the ball flew out of its own accord, hovering a few inches in the air above him.

“Hello,” said the ball, in a voice that sounded very high and dainty.

“Uh, hi,” said Ewan, surprised to find that the ball was actually sentient.

“My name is Maribelle; the friendly orb! Nice to meet you!³¹ I can assist you on your adventure in various ways. I am known to the world as a modern invention³², developed by the great scientists, the Artificers. Long ago, when the world was filled with many more hideous monsters than there are today, people struggles to find their way, struggled to survive against the elements, and this was before using magic was as common place as it is now, back when there was no foundation to learn from. But alas, that time is long behind us, hardly anyone remembers it now. But since the world is still somewhat dangerous to the ignorant, people felt a friendly companion is warranted. Thus here I am, here to provide you with information about the world, I can tell you about monsters, about people, and about places, tactics or even dating advice. Whatever you need, I am here to help, so just ask!

“Now, did you understand well everything I just told you?”

Ewan stared at her blankly.

“I am known to the world as a modern invention, developed by the great scientists, the Artificers. Long ago, when the world was filled with many more hideous monsters than there are today, people struggles to find their way, struggled to survive against the elements, and this was before using magic was as common place as it is now, back when there was no foundation to learn from. But alas, that time is long behind us, hardly anyone remembers it now. But since the world is still somewhat dangerous to the ignorant, people felt a friendly companion is warranted. Thus here I am, here to provide you with information about the world, I can tell you about monsters, about people, and about places, tactics or even dating advice. Whatever you need, I am here to help, so just ask!

“Now, did you understand well everything I just told you?”³³

31 Many friendly NPC characters will introduce themselves in this manner if they are meant to serve as a guide to the player. And it is not atypical for them to be a shiny floating being. Examples include a small star, Twink, from Paper Mario, or any one of Zelda’s companions. In particular, Navi is a glowing orb, a fairy, in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.

32 Tutorials in games are, in a sense, a modern invention. They were originally instruction manuals, outside of the actual experience.

33 In *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, there is a talking owl named Kaepora Gaebora who interrupts the player to give them yet more exposition. The worst part is if you rapidly tap “A” or “B” to get through the text quicker, at some point the text box will come to this question. Since you’ll be pressing the buttons repeatedly, and thus not paying attention to the text itself, you’ll answer “No”, and prompting Kaepora to repeat himself.

“Yes, I understand, thank you,” he said, exasperated. In truth, he had tried to interrupt her several times, once it became clear to him that the information she was giving was the same, but she had raised her voice and spoken quicker to counter his interjection.

“Good,” she said. Then she drifted towards three signs that were posted, each pointing to a different pathway. “This sign on the left reads, Lockheart, so we should go this way.”

“Thanks,” said Ewan, slightly annoyed. “I can read though.”

Maribelle seemed to ignore this and continued to hover over his shoulder as he trotted along the left path³⁴. It veered slightly, as the trees would become denser.

Maribelle shot in front of Ewan’s face, so quickly he nearly rammed his forehead into her, “Hey, listen!³⁵ There are Gumps hiding in the trees above us. Be on your guard.”

Ewan glanced up, and seeing the thick red and blue blobs curled around the branches, gave Maribelle a curt nod and moved on.

There came a giant splash in front of him, and the liquid bound together to form a red blob³⁶. The blob was only slightly smaller than Ewan himself. It dragged the flat portion of its body over the dirt as it steadily drew near³⁷.

He could fight, he could run, but that was the extent of his options for now³⁸. He had no other items in his possession and he did not yet know any magic. He grabbed the hilt of his sword.

“Watch out!” screamed Maribelle, “Gumps are slimy monsters that will poison you if you aren’t careful. You don’t have any magic right now; can you think of another way to defend yourself?”

Ewan waved the orb away from his face.

The Gump receded, pulling its body back and then lunging forward. The hop it made was easily

34 Navi, the fairy, typically hovers around player's shoulders in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.

35 Despite being given a thematic reason to explain her existence, Navi is really only present as a guidebook in case the player gets confused about the expectations of the game. In particular, she will make an obnoxious ringing sound until the player engages with her. Then she'll say, “Hey, listen!” and proceed to tell the player what they ought to be doing with their time. On subsequent playthroughs, she is increasingly annoying and is a widely critiqued part of the game.

36 In the first two *Zelda*'s, most monsters have two variants, a red for their weaker form, and blue for the slightly more dangerous. A color reskin and stat adjustment is a cost effective strategy for communicating difficulty to the player. Additionally, numerous games from the 80's and 90's would default Player 1 to a red color pallet and Player 2 in blue. Curiously, the items Link receives in *Zelda 1* vary in efficiency with blue being the basic form and red as advanced. *Dragon Warrior* also has slime monsters that use blue as the starting point. In general, red comes first, but it is curious to note instances when this deviates.

37 In *Dragon Warrior* (typically called *Dragon Quest*) upon encountering an enemy, the description reads: “A ____ draws near! Command?”

38 In *Dragon Warrior* and many other turn-based RPG's in the 80's and 90's, the player is usually given the option to Fight or Run in battles, with Items and Magic being added as the game progresses.

avoided though. A part of Ewan felt this was going to be far too easy, but he didn't want to be overconfident. Ewan took a deep breath and—

“You can attack with your sword if you hold it by its handle and swing with your arm.”

I know, thought Ewan.

The Gump proceeded to attack, but Ewan wasn't about to miss his chance—

*Gump*³⁹:

A gelatinous goo that resides in the forest and wet areas across Dranquill. They typically rest in trees and descend upon unsuspecting travelers. While relatively easy to deal with, they can be formidable in numbers, and some of them are known to cause poison. No one knows where these slimes come from or how they make theatrical sense when put next to goblins or knights, but they nevertheless provide a baseline of monster in its most biological form.

Tactical Notes: While they are susceptible to magic, they are particularly weak to thrusting attacks.

Ewan wondered who Maribelle was talking to with all that information, since none of it was particularly useful or interesting to him, but he took the tip about the thrust seriously. He held the sword with both hands and drove it straight into the Gump's belly and it died. It burst, as if it was made of water, wrapped in rubber.

“Good job!” complimented Maribelle⁴⁰.

Ewan tried to grab her.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“I was going to put you back in my pocket; I think I'll be all right on my own for a little while.”

“How rude!” she said, appallingly, “Here I am giving you all this support, and you think you know better. You don't know anything. Now, be a good boy and pay attention to my instructions.”

Ewan waited for Maribelle to proceed down the path before he rolled his eyes.

The truth was, Ewan did have questions, but she talked so much that he was reluctant to ask her

39 Often times RPG or fantasy adventure games will give the player a companion who can pause the game and provide a lengthy analysis/description of an enemy. These are typically not seen unless the player activates them (presumably because they are a novice).

40 The Player is almost always complimented at some point in the tutorial, especially the end. Even Dark Souls does this with a developer message written on the ground at the end of the tutorial area; “Good job, go straight ahead”.

anything, hoping that if he waited long enough she would stop.

Dusk was steadily approaching when Ewan saw a couple walking up the path. They each had large packs on their backs, even their dog had some blankets tied around its torso.

“Hi there,” said the man.

“Are you all right? This place is dangerous for little kids,” said the woman.

Ewan opened his mouth, but Maribelle bolted in front of his face first, “In Dranquill, you can find all sorts of merchants. You can also find people who may need your help from time to time. Try striking up a conversation; you never know what might progress from it!”

To his perplexion, the people seemed not to notice Maribelle, or were otherwise not the slightest bit bothered by her interruption. Perhaps they knew how to control these orbs and he didn’t.

“Thanks,” said Ewan, in part hoping Maribelle would take the comment personally and bugger off, “I think I’ll be all right.”

“Where are you headed?” asked the woman.

“Lockheart.”

“Lockheart?” the man frowned. “This is the long route of getting there. If you saw the Black Rose Inn, shortly beyond that point is a fork, the right road takes you there in less than an hour.”

“Oh...” Ewan glanced at Maribelle, wishing he had ignored her and checked the other sign for himself.

“But you’re quite far in now. We just came from there, you see. Keep following the path and turn right once you can. You’ll see the castle over a river.”

The dog’s eyes followed Maribelle as she floated gracefully up and down.

“Thanks. Do you know how much farther I have to go?”

“You’ll be there before dark for sure. Just don’t dally.”

“Great, thanks!” said Ewan and he gave them a nod before going on ahead.

“You sure we can’t help you more?” they called after him.

“No thank you,” he said, eager to start making some actual progress.

Progress was nearly impossible though. He kept walking, for what felt like hours. Just on and on. The hours must have been going by, only they weren’t because the daylight was only gradually lessening. It felt like forever, it took forever, it was all quite meaningless also...

“What a horrible night to have a curse⁴¹,” said Maribelle, matter-of-factly.

Inside, Ewan rolled his eyes, but he didn’t show it as he couldn’t be sure if she would notice or not. As if upon cue, he noticed that the light had certainly faded, quite dramatically in fact. He didn’t understand what she meant by a curse, but most of what she uttered seemed that way. Completely irrelevant, if not outright belittling.

“If night falls while we are outside of safe zones, we will need to be extra cautious since more deadly monsters are prone to come out after dark⁴².”

Ewan nodded, assuming as much.

Maribelle didn’t stop there though.

Eventually, he came to a high point, a lookout spot where he could observe the forest in more detail. And, wouldn’t you know it, he could see a castle off to the right, drawbridge lowered over a ravine.

“Watch out!” screamed Maribelle, as a bombardment of Gumps lunged at Ewan.

They had taken him by such surprise, that Ewan lost his balance, flailing awkwardly with his sword on the edge of the cliff. Then one of the Gumps tackled Maribelle and she went soaring over the cliff. Another took Ewan’s sword to the stomach (as it were), before the next plowed into him, knocking him over.

Then he fell off the cliff. For a moment he cling to his sword, briefly processing that he was sure to die as the wind hissed and tore at his limbs. The world began to slow, and Ewan thought perhaps he had hit the bottom, but that wasn’t quite it.

He was caught in something, like a web. It slowed his fall dramatically, leaving him suspended in midair. He could not move. Some force, some invisible material was curling around his body, soaking his clothes. He felt wet. Was this water? If so, why was it taking so long to sink? And even so, a fall from that height would kill him, water or otherwise⁴³.

He squeezed the handle of the sword; if the fall wasn’t intending on killing him, he’d surely need a weapon to defend himself.

As he sank lower, the material consumed him. On the sides of his vision, he could see the skylight

41 Castlevania II: Simon’s Quest is known for being one of the most irritating video games from the 80’s. Most notably, it has a day/night cycle, which occurs frequently, pausing the game for ten seconds as it gradually displays this text: “What a horrible night to have a curse”. every time it changes from day to night.

42 This is true of many video games of the genre. Zelda: Ocarina of Time is a good example where Hyrule field is pleasant during the day, but skeletons emerge from the earth during the night.

43 In many NES games, like Zelda 2 and Castlevania II, if you fall in water, you die. Doesn’t matter how far of a fall it is.

blurring, as if it was a painting that had yet to dry and someone was smearing it everywhere. It was darkening too, the process was bringing out the stars and an early dawn of moonlight. Then he shut his eyes for fear it would burn.

The moment his body was completely enveloped by the substance, down to the last fingertip, it let him go, and he dropped, landing in a small puddle of water. The drop took him by surprise, so much so, that he lost the grip on his sword, it slipped out his hand as if something tugged it loose. And his land gave him a bump on the head.

Defiled Pond⁴⁴

At some point, he opened his eyes, somewhat teary and disoriented. It took some doing just to collect his thoughts. Where was he? What had just happened? How long had he been there? Through it all, his head throbbed, every beat of his heart pulsated in his skull.

Looking up, he could see the night sky. It was clear now, perhaps the murky substance had moved on. The sky was dark now, but there were stars and the moon, brightly peering through numerous tree branches. The pine leaves swayed gently in the wind.

He arched into half of a sit and felt his head. No blood, that was good. His front half was damp but reasonably dry, and his back side was soaked wet, making him shiver as the wind collided with it.

Around him were trees and one very small path just barely visible between the pines. The pond was vast, his parent's house could have fit in it with some room to spare. There was an oval shaped rock in the center of it, at least five times his size, and there were fallen tree trunks leaning on it, some broken, but apart from these things, the clearing was relatively even and spacious. And hidden too, he noted. There were many thick trees, and combined with the side of the cliff he fell down, it wouldn't surprise him if no one knew of this place.

The cliff. He stood up and at last registered its proportion. Cataclysmic. The fall should have killed

⁴⁴ Here we enter the tutorial boss, at which time the game typically has taught the player all the baseline mechanics. Sometimes there is a flashy finish, or in the case of Dark Souls, a flashy opening by dropping down on top of the boss for a descending attack. But regardless, there is often much less teaching to be found here.

him. It was at least ten stories high, if not more. He wondered if he truly was dead. The throbbing in his head seemed to confirm otherwise.

Drink...

He turned around fast, but there was no one. It was a girl's voice, a familiar one too. He took a step towards the rock and listened. Nothing more. In fact, there was no noise whatsoever. Just the tree branches being pushed by the wind. Utter stillness. He took a step, watched as the water reacted to his movement, releasing ripples away from him. As he followed them with his eyes, he caught sight of a stick in the water. He went closer and picked it up. His sword.

Drink the water...

Again, that voice. She sounded desperate, scared. He didn't know why, but Ewan gripped his sword. Something was off. He didn't know what he could be missing, but he didn't want it to get the jump on him either.

He spotted a ripple, and it was not made by him. It came from somewhere on the other side of the rock. The rock itself, an engorged pebble, had grooves on the front which gave the impression of a face, a skull if you looked hard enough. Behind it, two tree trunks were bent into arches, like arrow heads aimed at the sky. They weren't exactly broken at the tips either. They looked almost as if the tree was supposed to bend that way.

Ewan backed away.

The branches, of which there were six, were not leaning against the rock, they were attached to it. The rock was its core.

It's the only way...

What was, he wanted to say back.

The rock opened in two halves, it was a shell, like a beetle. They closed immediately, but not before releasing a clicking, snapping noise. And then the creature contracted its legs, and raised itself from the water. The skull face, though not actually its face, looked at him. The real creature was along the underbelly. A hollowed mouth with three rows of teeth. And six tentacles swayed from the edges of both lips.

Ewan's heart raced. He had never seen anything like this, and he was all alone with no idea of what to do. It seemed to know he was there, and it did not appear friendly, so he carefully tried to make his way

to the edge of the pond for the path he had spotted through the trees.

The creature made a move toward him. With six legs, a single move was actually the result of many. It covered ground fast, shell opening and clicking as it neared him. Not taking any chances, Ewan leap for the edge of the water and darted into the forest.

He had yet to go far before he smacked himself into an invisible wall. For a moment, he thought maybe he could push through it, that perhaps it was the same substance he fell through. But he was reaching a hand out, pushing on nothing, and it wouldn't budge.

Perhaps, what this meant was, he was inside of it, and it was easier to get in than it was to get out.

The creature gained on him, too fast for him to dodge it this time. Two legs grabbed him by his arms as it made its way back into the pond.

At the end of the legs, to Ewan's horror, were human-like fingers. Each hand had at least 9 fingers, all of different lengths. Their grip was firm too, if it wanted, it could rip his arms off.

"Help!" He screamed. "Someone help me!"

The monster chattered again. Then it propped itself up high with the two central legs, dragged Ewan under itself as the tentacles began to wrap and curl around his limbs. The mouth, a long vertical slit opened wide, revealing a dark and hollow interior as drool dribbled down the teeth.

From the center, unfurled a long fleshy tube. The tube leaked what looked and felt like a web, it was trying to immobilize him. It was getting on his clothes and his body when his shirt came up from being off balanced.

In a surge of raw panic, Ewan jerked his left arm free, hacking at the tentacles. The central tube immediately retracted; the tentacles were more resilient, but it seemed as though the beast was caught off guard by the sudden resistance. Ewan batted them away until his limbs were free. Then he put some distance from the monster and used the water from the pond to try to get the web off.

The beast snapped and rattled, dropping into the water and splashing around.

It was no use, the web just stuck to his hand. It wasn't a permanent grip, but he had to force his hand free. Before he could come up with a strategy, it was on him again, reaching out with open fingers. Ewan took to the offensive this time, taking the sword with both hands and giving his all with each swipe. He landed the first few hits, but they provided only little annoyance, as the creature made little reaction. It did bring its arms around the tentacles however, protecting them. That was the weak spot, but it was going

to be the point of most danger too. He would have to throw himself into harms way, and strike true if he hoped to kill it or at least injure it into giving up.

And he wasn't ready for that.

His deliberating only worked for so long. The monster must have adapted to the strikes of the wooden sword, it took the beating all the way as went in and grabbed Ewan by the waist. Once it had him, it rotated around and flung him into the air.

Ewan was able to manage a roll so the landing didn't hurt too much, but it did knock the wind out of him.

He felt a hand grab his neck. Then it shoved him into the water. It was a push, and had there not been any water, the force would likely have split his head wide open. Instead, it just blurred his vision, made everything spin, and a moment later, a throbbing pain.

He needed to get some room to catch his breath, but he was so disoriented that he could only manage a crawl.

The creature hit him again, this time his back. Ewan couldn't tell what part of its body did this, its arms, both hands, but regardless, it felt like the flat end of a trunk.

He was hit again.

The pain from this was different. Unlike his head, this hurt immediately and there was no natural numbness.

He wished to be home.

Drink me!...

The hands wrapped around his chest. And then came the squeezing. He couldn't keep himself from letting out grunts and cries. He could hardly move, but he squirmed all he could as the monster crushed his ribcage. He could hear the chirping.

It dropped him.

Then it beat him again.

With the pain worsening, the drive to fight back decreased. But this was not permanent.

He sluggishly rolled to the side. The beast missed, splashing water on him instead. It must have thought Ewan was on the last stretch of his life. But if it did, it no longer thought that. It let out a handful more chirps and grabbed him, turned him over, and then lifted him above itself, and finally throwing him

to the ground.

He coughed out the water. Drink it? It was probably dirty. And what good would it do? For all he knew it was a trick? Then again, what options did he have?

This was not pain that would pass in time. It was not an endurance test.

The tentacles curled around his limbs.

And at this point, he hadn't the strength to weigh the rationale of it. He clenched the sword hilt. Then he scooped up the spring water in his hand, and as he was hefted off the ground, brought it to his lips and drank.

He was facing the ground this time, feeling the web substance drip onto his back. With his right arm, he yanked the tentacle close, and with his left, jabbed the sword into it. Stretching it seemed to help widen it for a piecing blow. And the attack caused the monster to release him at once. The monster backed away in a fit of rapid screeching.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the hard shell, the skull shaped impression on the front.

Put your sword in the water. I can help you.

Her voice came through much clearer and louder than before. For a moment, he mistook her as actually being there.

With no reason to argue, he thrust the sword into the water, just below level. After a brief moment, the sword began to glow a faint soft blue.

It is weak at the joints.

Then the sword flashed bright. The glow was there to stay. As he lifted it from the water, icy blue flames swathed along the blade. They moved much slower than real fire, and as they were magic, they did not burn the sword.

He turned around, held the sword out to the side with both hands. The creature lunged forward, and as it did, Ewan ducked under one arm, brought the blade up and sliced at one of the joints. The sword made a swooshing sound, leaving a trail of blue behind it. The slash left the monster bleeding, and its leg went limp.

Ewan moved under the monster and cut one of the tentacles off. The chirping was loud and hysteric by now, and the creature backed away, but it was only temporary. It lunged forward again. He dodged it, just barely, and went back under. With an arm less to protect its underbelly, the creature could

only back away, making circles through the pond. The pursuit yielded to the slicing of two more tentacles, and Ewan unleashed two slashes at the mouth.

Then it jumped back, braced itself, and lunged forward, intending to crush Ewan with its open mouth.

Though it would not make sense to Ewan after the fact, in the moment, he felt he could see the outcome. He jumped at the mouth when it was still in the air. His own leap surprised him as he felt some unseen force push him forward with a huge burst of momentum. With his sword up front, he plunged the blue flames into the heart of the monster. The impact from the jump was greater than the monster, and it toppled over onto its back with Ewan instinctively letting go of the sword and rolling into the pond.

The monster flailed its legs, splashing and clicking, until it gradually curled in on itself and remained still, the wooden sword stuck in it, the fiery glow starting to wain.

Ewan breathed a sigh of relief.

The remains of the beast darkened, then they burned black, crumbling into ashes. The ashes dissipated the moment they were made. The process of decay lasted less than a minute, and when it was over, there was nothing left of the creature. There was him, his sword, and if he took a moment to listen, a few night owls hooting.

Then came a light in the water. This light seemed to drown out all other sources of light, of sound. At first, Ewan went to investigate, but after a few steps, he dropped to his knees, holding his abdomen. He wanted to cough, but he also had to force it, and when he did, he saw blood on his hand. His entire ribcage ached, visions blurred, and consciousness started to leave him.

The water cleaned itself, revealing the gravel beneath, then it glowed a soothing blue. Rising trickles of water seeped into the air, and ahead of him emerged a small girl from a curled position.

Her body was vibrantly white and softly blue, her garments a butterfly-like tunic, and on her back sprawled two wings.

Mystic Spring⁴⁵

⁴⁵ With the monster destroyed, the area gets a new name and a fairy appears. These are familiar motifs in Zelda, fairy fountains serving as sources of healing for the player, and on occasions being dormant or otherwise incapable of functioning until a vile being is slain.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” she said. Then she stepped beside him, laid her hand on his forehead. A soothing flow of energy spread throughout his body. Within moments, his ribcage soothed and he was healed, breathing a heavy sigh.

“I am a young fairy. This spring is my home, has been for a few hundred years. With the demon slain, I can live and breath easy again. Thank you!”

Ewan got to his feet, “You’re welcome. How long have you been trapped?”

“Almost a month. A strange man had come, wrapped in a long fur coat. At first I thought he was a weary traveler, like yourself, but he soon revealed that he was not. He brought the demon from another realm, sealed this place with subduing magic.”

“Another realm?”

“Yes, a vile place I imagine. He was most certainly a necromancer.”

“What’s a necromancer?”

“A sorcerer who wields the flesh of death and decay. They’re not known for their compassion. It is possible he was using the demon as a surrogate for his own energy reserves.”

“I see... I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Not at all, you’re my hero!” she giggled, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Ewan’s eyes went wide, nearly falling over.

“Hehehe! Silly. Anyway, I’m afraid I can’t do much for you now in the way of rewards so that’ll have to suffice. But do visit me again in the future, and I will prepare something in the meantime.”

Ewan rubbed his cheek, feeling a tickling sensation, and goosebumps on the back of his neck.

“But I’ve kept you long enough.”

“Oh!” said Ewan, collecting his pack by the side of the pond. He slipped it open to check on his belongings, and to his relief, they were undamaged. He slung it over his shoulders. “It’s dark out and I still haven’t made it to Lockheart.”

“It’s up the road that way,” she pointed. “Remember, come back and visit me another time!”

“I will!” said Ewan, turning up the road.

Ewan rushed through the trees, great renewal upon him. Harrowing as it had been, all he could think about was getting to the Guild, getting by a warm fire with some soup after a bath. It was also exhilarating to not be clean or fed or warm. He was running. He was running forward, letting momentum carry him up the hills and over the rocks. It felt good to be active, in control of his body, and having accomplished something; he had done some good in the world, and the world had taken note of it. And this feeling, work and reward, made him very briefly cynical to his life before this. Sitting around, playing tea party with Sue, going with his family on errands, those things didn't pack the same punch, the same weight. They were of a smaller scale.

But this... this was necessary.

The further he went however, the less this feeling stayed with him. In the trees were glistens of sleeping Gumps, not that they posed a threat anymore, but still, there remained more horrors in the dark of night, and he had pushed his luck a great deal already.

There were in fact, figures moving in the darkness of the woods. Ambling skeletons not much bigger than himself, with beady bright eyes. Sometimes they would spot him, shuffle toward him, but Ewan picked up pace when they did, and was out of sight in seconds. And as far as he could tell, their line of vision was not very far.

He climbed the hills until he reached the very top, followed the trail to the right, and observed the steep drop into a ravine. A river was running through it.

By the time he arrived at Lockheart's front gate, the drawbridge had been raised, the full moon lighting the castle's two towered pillars on either side. He cupped his hands to his mouth—

Don't shout. Sorcerers are used to vile people disguising themselves as children. You will have to find another way in.

"How can you see me?" he asked.

There was no answer.

Ewan came to the edge (where the drawbridge would rest) and gazed down. A rushing river poured through the ravine; both sides had a small platform of grass. There was a tree lodged against a wall at the very bottom, some of the roots dipping in the current. He spotted a small log bridge, but there

seemed to be no safe way of getting down; a fall from this height would surely be fatal. He couldn't scale the wall either, and knocking over a tree wouldn't be tall enough to extend all the way down. And even if he crossed, how would he climb the other side? He was stuck⁴⁶.

*Illusion ahead*⁴⁷.

"Where?" said Ewan, turning around and half expecting to see the fairy girl right behind him. But of course, now she was silent. Ewan guessed that meant he had all the information he needed, and still, it made no sense. What illusion?

The problem was such that Ewan sat down and stared at his surroundings for a long moment. Occasionally, he glanced over his shoulders to see if anyone, or anything, was approaching. Apart from the hooting of owls, he seemed to be safe for the time being.

Illusion ahead... that must mean something he is seeing isn't real.

Come to think of it, there was a single tree on the edge of the cliff, the only tree in this position, and it was a bit strange. He tried putting his hand on it⁴⁸.

It felt solid to the touch, rough bark.

He withdrew his sword, gave it a swing.

His arms flew across in a horizontal line, stopping at nothing.

The tree was gone, all of its roots, branches, and leaves. And what's more, there was a ladder where it had been.

The crushing waves grew louder the further down the ladder he went. The current was high enough to be splashing the log planks, sprinkling his ankles as he marched across. He went right, passed a moss covered rock that stuck out from the hillside, had to hug it as he made his way around. The further the path looped around the hill, the less confident he felt it was going to take him into Lockheart. What if this led to a bandit's secret hideout? He already knew the left path went to the half submerged tree and that was all.

46 This is the term my siblings and I would use (and is still said today) anytime this happened. Identifying how to progress in a game was often a main objective in older titles. Zelda was notorious for leaving us scratching our heads for days, sometimes weeks.

47 In Dark Souls, players are able to leave messages on the ground that other players online are able to read. They are limited in that you may only write short phrases from a list of word options. One of the more common phrases is, "Illusion ahead".

48 In lieu of "Illusion head", the message is typically put in front of an illusion, tipping off players of secret/hidden passageways. In Dark Souls 2, these illusory walls, or trees, or what-have-you still existed, but instead of slashing them (like in the other entries), players had to press a button reserved for contextual actions like talking to people or opening doors.

torch light illuminated it. Its eyes were closed, occasionally one ear would twitch as if a gnat was buzzing around it.

The sentry's shield held the gold and green crest of the hydra, which Ewan recognized from his letter of acceptance to the Guild. While it was probably safe to wake them up and explain things; Ewan quietly stepped over the guard and slid through the door; better than risking what the dragon would do if it woke up.

Then he came to a long, narrow, tunnel, but this one was built from stone and wood, like being under a bridge, pillars protruding from the walls at various angles. Eventually he found two doors; he took left.

Another hall, this one with many doors.

Confusion was starting to set in; maybe this wasn't an entrance into Lockheart at all?

He found a door that opened into a staircase, at the top of which was a half circular corridor made of deep red bricks, and lit with hydra chandeliers; each head twisted up, erupting bright green flames. The passage was also much larger than the others instead of the cramped hallways he departed from.

Down one end of the corridor opened to the blue moonlight rays, the other, an end with a roaring fire in a fireplace.

He approached the fireplace, the warmth overwhelming his senses. The kiln was massive; someone twice Ewan's size would have been able to walk into it with barely a hunch needed. Along each side was a winding staircase to a floor above, and at the top stood a figure.

"Well what do we have here? You must be a new arrival. Let me guess; late student? Well, you're not the first⁵¹."

51 In Dark Souls, the first NPC character the player meets after exiting the tutorial is called the Crestfallen Knight, a cynic who gives the player a vague sense of direction. His role is somewhat similar to Kaepora Gaebora but his execution is more dynamic since he doesn't break the forth wall and because he is an NPC who can be killed instead of hovering over the player as some intangible surrogate of the designers. This line here is nearly identical to what he tells the player in Dark Souls, (minus "Let me guess, fate of the undead?") and baring the cliché opening, it has a degree of intrigue and personality that is a step up from any other tutorial NPC. Dark Souls is in many respects the spiritual successor to Zelda, and this is one such example.

Interlude #4

The Universe as Game

I really like games. I love all those moments when you pause to think through something. Some games are about solving a puzzle. Others are about your reflexes, spontaneity. My favorite are the kind where you have to organize a plan of action, a strategy to deal with an obstacle. I like preparing. I like feeling prepared. And I love a good challenge. The idea of someone telling me I can't do something, and then proving the fucker wrong... it's awesome.

What I don't have any tolerance for are situations in which reality supersedes the rules making my efforts superfluous. Only fair games allowed. But as we all know, the universe did not implement fairness into the design process, rather it split our heads open and dumped all these notions like ethics, morality, justice, love. This was apparently the only solution they had, because if there was a way to force fairness onto us it would conflict with the greater concern for us to all be individuals. Either that, or it would deprive us of the challenge to enact fairness in a system of individuals who will not agree on a standard, due to us being individuals. We won't all agree on anything because to do so means there would be nothing to separate me from you and us from anyone else born or dead in this world, nothing that couldn't be refuted anyway. You could strip a person's culture, language, even their body, strip them down to their very core which I envision is a glowing ball of light. And what you'll find is that everyone would be the same color, shape, texture, and so on. The soul, as this could be called, would have nothing to distinguish itself from others, meaning none of us would actually matter at all. If we die, it would be statistical data only, reincarnation. We could come back to life or not. As a new character with different abilities and interests, but it wouldn't be remarkable.

And yet, I am unable to believe this is the case. The human connection is the single, greatest threat to the pursuit of peace, because it is designed to ensure we fail at it, across numerous occasions, consistently, until it stalks us into a dark forest, and murders us. We are, all of us, unique, special if you like, but therein lies the problem; we become alone. We are content with life being the way it is because we assume it has been fair to us in its lack of bias. But this is a lie because it has inadvertently created an inevitable opposite bias in which those who feel alone become destined to be alone, they remain locked

into this reality where they are unable to truly abandon their privacy. There are restrictions on how much we can share and how deep of an understanding we can have of another. And is that not a bias?

It seems to me that the universe is far more moralistic and devious than it would have us believe. And I might have been on board with it all had it not imposed a difficulty curve, superseded my agency over both who and what I am. So much of us is decided for us, so much so that the universe's manipulative outlook on the world is enacted by humans all around me. This twisted view in which we are all meant to follow the conventions established for us, eat food, speak the way we are brought up to, be the race that we are, be the sex that we are, mate, give birth, or don't give birth (and fuck you if you wanted to, and fuck you if you have to), pursue a career that is of interest to us or otherwise follow what is provided before us. And then we are backhanded with the philosophical reality that we are all unique and irreplaceable, but there's nothing exceptional about any of these physical combinations, thus it implies that we should enact some behavior in alignment with who we are on a soulistic level.

So when I'm in class and the teacher asks me to share a little about myself, what am I expected to do? I can either give a bunch of statistical information, like my age, my sex, the kind of sex I like, the food I like, how many hours I sleep (because I invariably sleep), or I could go out on a limb and say something that only I would say, something from my heart. But this effort is pointless because no one in the room will actually know me because I'm going to convey the contents of my soul through language, which is something everyone does. So... it's not actually a unique part of me being communicated, now is it? Especially when essential parts of my data is obvious to everyone around me, and it'll be used against me in a court of interpretation.

Some of us are really deluding themselves with a false sense of satisfaction by way of perpetual distraction and self-lying. But there are, I would hope, those of us who recognize the severity of the situation. As far as I know, I'm the only person who processes reality in this way, and the moment someone believes as I do, we both cease to matter. You could see it as a glass half full, together we'll start a revolution that'll change the world. People will cling to the philosophy, to the dream that we're all important. They'll do this to the point of excess, the point at which none of us are important.

The way I envision this information is in a depiction of an ideal self (as in, a character of my creation). She's laying on her stomach, head buried in the grass. Smoke rises into the night sky, shutting out the stars. One of her hands is outstretched, open palm. You might see this as a begging gesture; she's

hoping for someone to come along and leave some money behind, sympathy (the idea that one can pretend to understand another by way of personal experience or imagination). But that interpretation is incongruent with mine. In my feelings, her hand is so limp that she looks dead, utterly defeated by the world around her (which is why I put fire in the scene, that was suppose to clue you into this idea). And that's basically life; defeat, then someone asks you; CONTINUE? You have to say yes, or else your body will shut down and eventually you'll die, presumably going to a place where the game will be different, optimistically a place where fairness will come into play to make up for all the bullshit it pulled to get there.

I isolate two things humans do that indicate the most compelling argument that our souls are all different and what a tragedy this is; and they are art and suicide, or fire and death, Pyromancy and Necromancy, respectively.

If this wasn't disheartening enough, there are more compelling reasons to jump off a bridge than produce art. At least when we die, we're buried right next to each other, sleeping in the same bed together. When we make art, everyone just goes, "huh?"

II-II: Fast Travel⁵²

Warping, Loading, and the Interconnected World

Mordecai Slavo, with his bushy grey beard and pointed hat, smiled as the students gathered around him. “Good to see you all warmly dressed,” he said.

Ewan pulled the edges of his cloak tighter, huddled together with his fellow classmates.

“Right, off we go then,” and he led them out of the classroom and into the frost kissed grass of Lockheart’s courtyard. They tailed him in one large cluster, stepping on one another’s robes but quickly recovering.

Mordecai led them away from the castle grounds, past the fairy spring, and under the arched sign

Lockheart Graveyard

As they slopped through the wet grass, they looked upon a cluttered field of tombstones shrouded in a misty fog and illuminated by the big orb in the night’s sky, the stars, and something else. The else, were a dozen or more vibrant baby blue ovals, two rounded slits for eyes, and their bottom halves gradually shrinking and eventually dissipating, releasing water particles that nurtured the mist. They had no limbs, but they did open a third hollow point below their eyes, releasing a soft *whhhhooooooooo* each time.

“Ghosts!” Lucas whispered in Ewan’s ear. “Can’t believe they’re making us first years deal with the likes of them. Are they all mental?”

There was a small shack at the graveyard entrance. It was surprisingly well trimmed, with a

⁵² Fast Travel is a common occurrence in games. Sometimes called warping, it refers to instances when the player is able to select an area and then wait through a loading screen, rather than having to make their avatar physically walk there. Curiously, many games will include warping as a concept that the game's characters are aware of and utilize. One of the most significant aspects of Dark Souls is that the vast majority of the game is accessible simply by walking through it. It is called an interconnected world, when the player can traverse the world free of loading screens, as is the case in real life.

chimney pumping smoke.

A man in a rocking chair on the front porch, leapt up at the sight of the class. He was wearing big thick boots that made his toes look double what they probably were, and a brown bandanna among his old, wrinkly beard⁵³.

He rested his arms on a cane, “Ho laddies! Come to get your first romp with the ghosts, eh? Well, bought time. How are ye, Mordecai?”

“Just fine Gilligan. Children, Gilligan is the Gravekeeper here at Lockheart. He’ll be your guide for ghost catching⁵⁴.”

Ewan’s classmates exchanged looks of both shock and elation at the prospect of capturing a ghosts.

“Don’t no one go runnin off now; ghosts are dangerous folk they are. Right, come along now and take a lantern,” he gestured to a table on his front porch where a collection of small, lightly purple tinted lanterns were set up.

Muffled whispers spurred as everyone took one.

Then they followed Gilligan into the graveyard, who with his cane, shakily made his way up a hill. “Now the firs’ thing ye need to know about them ghosts is they’ll flat out kill ye if ye don’t mind your movement. That’s lesson one, right. Now, here,” he gathered the children around him as he opened a small satchel and gave each of them a few seeds. They reminded Ewan of his favorite nut from back home, pistachios.

“All right, now don’t do anything with them yet—” as he spoke, one ghost came out from behind a tombstone and slowly slipped into where Gilligan was hunched over. As Gilligan moved, you could make out where the ghost was trying to keep up with his movements so as to be in the exact position as him. The effect made Gilligan look glowing blue.

But Gilligan shook himself all over, like a wet dog. This startled the ghost, who eventually gave up, floated away cooing in a disappointed tone.

“That!” said Gilligan, “That’s what ye need to watch out for. Them ghosts will try to possess you if you aren’t careful. But you keep moving and they’ll give up. Well, these ones anyway.

53 Similar character as Dampe the gravekeeper in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, though in that game he was mostly hairless and limped around the graveyard digging up odd buried trinkets.

54 You can catch Poes (ghosts) in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and sell them to the Poe Collector (a hooded skeleton who has set himself up in the undead infested Hyrule Castle). Though in *Zelda*, you catch Poes in glass bottles. You can also drink them in *Zelda* though it’s not beneficial.

“Now, as I was saying about them seeds. They called Mofu seeds⁵⁵. You take one in your paw, and hurl it at a hard surface, watch,” he threw a seed at a nearby tree. Upon contact, a vibrant flash of faintly green light appeared, and with it, a loud snap.

Everyone let out a “oooooooooooo”, with wide eyes.

“If you don’t hit a hard surface with enough force, the spark won’t happen. The flash will stun the ghosts if it’s close enough; try the trees or the tombstones—” Gilligan raised a hand and went on, stopping a few eager students from hurling a handful of seeds into a nearby tree, “Hold on now, there’s more to it than that. Let it be known right here and now, ye ain’t allowed to hit each other neither, so mind ye manners. And now, fer them ghosts.”

Gilligan lifted the purple glass tinted lantern for them to see. “Ye can capture them in these. Pull up on the hook here and the ghost’ll get absorbed. Go on, try it out, and be careful not to let them possess you.”

Capturing ghosts turned out to be a fairly simple task. If you hurled a Mofu seed at a hard surface nearby, the flash would startle them, leaving them dazed for a few seconds. All you had to do then was pull the top of the lantern (the metal ring handle) and you could hear a click from inside. The glass would shift, losing much of its sparkle.

“Ye got to put the lantern right in their space to capture em.”

Within a few moments, they would gradually dissipate. The first ghost Ewan tried to capture ended up scuttling away until Ewan realized you had to press the top down in a precise window of opportunity, just before the ghost was completely gone, but not entirely, otherwise they’d manifest together again, and fly off.

He caught one on his second try, proclaimed it was easier than he expected, and then Melissa was quick to point out how these were common graveyard ghosts, who weren't very dangerous. Most other ghosts will do any number of things from putting spells or curses on you. She recited a few different types from what she’d read in books until Ewan was quite convinced it was no miraculous achievement after all.

One boy managed to bite on one of the Mofu seeds, and it left him writhing on the ground in agony.

“What were ye doing putting it in ye mouth?” Gilligan grumbled as he took the boy up to the

55 Similar to Deku Seeds, an item in Zelda which allows you to stun enemies.

infirmary.

Mordecai ended up filling in while he was away, but by that point, most of everyone had their ghost caught. He helped the last few catch theirs. Once he could look everyone over to ensure they were all safe, with blue lights seeping through the purple tinted glass lanterns, he nodded his approval. “Come along then.”

Mordecai led the class out of the graveyard and up a hill along the outskirts of the castle. The trail was quite narrow, especially the further in they went. There was a moss covered brick wall to one side, and this obstructed the view of Lockheart as a whole. The other side of the path was a steep slope with a blanket of dead leaves and dormant trees on the other side, except the pines which were green and lush overhead. The air was icy still, glimmers of frost on the pine cones.

Eventually Mordecai stopped at a relatively open area. The students looked around the forest, half afraid and half curious where they were. The lanterns proved not to be a source of comfort from the dark, eerie woods around them, but considering they only had light because of a ghost that would try to possess them if dropped, it was easy to feel on edge.

There came a rumble. Ewan turned around to see a face in the rocks behind him. Its body was halfway in the ground, as if it was taking a bath in the earth, two enormous rock hands, and in the face, tiny eyes like stars in the night sky.

The Golem leaned forward and gave the children a sniff. “HmMMM,” he spoke, in a deep bellow, “quite a fine dinner you’ve brought me Mordecai.”

Lucas, among others, took a step back, their eyes wide awake in terror.

“I have indeed,” Mordecai calmly replied.

“Then let’s begin!” The Golem put both fists into the ground, lowered his head and opened wide.

Before the group decided to take their chances in the woods, Mordecai instructed, “All right class, open up your lanterns and hold them out.”

With some hesitation, the class complied. As they did so, the Golem took a long inhale with his mouth, sucking up the ghosts as blue wisps in the air. Then he closed his mouth and leaned back. “Not the best, but you’re all new so that’ll suffice for now.”

“Golems⁵⁶,” Mordecai explained, “are able to enact the oldest and rarest form of magic, time.

⁵⁶ In Star Fox Adventures (often cited as a Zelda clone/knockoff), there is what's called a Warp Troll, a Scottish stone Troll that is able to teleport the player to a few key locations in the game. While completely nonsensical (especially when we

They're quite fond of ghosts however, so you may use such as payment whenever you need to travel great distances in a short time frame. Shall we give it a go then?"

The class nodded enthusiastically.

"All right then, pick a location," said the Golem, and he threw his hand out in front of them, open palmed.

"Senta Port, thank you," said Mordecai as he climbed aboard.

The rest of the class followed his example.

"You might want to close your eyes," said the Golem. Naturally, this meant everyone did anything but. The first thing to notice was that the Golem lifted them part ways from the ground, and with its other hand, held it high into the air. Then with those glinting eyes in the moonlight sky, he brought the hand down on top of them, squashing them in a clap.

Instinctively, everyone ducked, except Mordecai, and on the moment of impact, everything became nothing. There was this indescribable pause where Ewan felt he was nowhere, and at some point time would catch up to him, and he would fall down an endless pit. This didn't happen though; there was a reverberating pulse in his chest and ringing in his ears. And then he felt a faint mist on his nose.

S e n t a P o r t

consider the fact that the player character, Fox McCloud, has a damn space ship), it makes for a very creative way of doing a simple task.

Lockheart Graveyard

The Golem lowered the class back onto the ground. It was much later into the night now.

“Come along,” said Mordecai, “we should all get back into our beds as soon as we are able. It has been quite the evening.”

Interlude #5

On Labors of Love

I work in a cubicle.

I'm working isolation.

I work in a crucible.

Sometimes I hear noises, phone quietly ringing, people's muffled voices, the clicking of pens and scribbling of writing. There are ceiling fans above all of us, because it is hot where we live and the air conditioning is broken and the business won't pay anyone to fix it. And, presumably, none of us know how to fix it.

At some point in the weeks of production, someone comes by and says it's time to see the boss, time to show off my work. And I kind of beam a little. I pick up my stack of papers in a cardboard box, eager to show off all the creative imagination I've been employing in my work. It's sort of like a date, much to be excited for and open to seeing what you get.

The board room is one of those wide table rooms, one wall made of windows. The street is a few stories down.

I wait patiently on the opposite end of the table while he reads, a man in a business suit. He flips page after page.

I'm five when this all happens, by the way.

Then he frowns, and before he finishes, he stacks the papers together and clears his throat. He stares at the table. At first I think he is formulating his thoughts but it is pretty clear that he is waiting for me to say a correct thing. I am not sure what the correct thing is so I don't say anything.

"So... what do you think? Can we publish it or not?" I asked, trying to play dumb.

"Come over here," he says, taking me to the window. "You see out there, the city?"

"Yes."

"Now look down."

On the streets to the building, a pack of dogs makes their way to the entrance.

He pushes the window open.

“Take a good look at those people.”

I hesitate, getting the feeling that he only wants me to bend over so he can kick me from the ninth floor. But he doesn't.

The dogs keep coming. There are nearly a hundred of them in the span of a minute. They're vicious too, snapping and snarling, some of their teeth are bloody. And some are easily angered, chomping down on the throats of those they perceive as threats.

Then he drops my work, and the dogs bite into the paper. The paper bleeds. It shreds into bits of torn flesh. In one version of this story the dogs hate the foul taste of the paper. But in another, they lap it up in greed, killing one another so they can consume as much of it as possible.

In version one: “Now you go back to your station and sit down, and no more ranting, no more complaining, no more vulgarities, no more rule breaking, no more convention breaking, no more on the nose, no more tongue and cheek, no more criticism at big corporations or intelligent professional people or highly respectable people. You sit down, you leave your opinions out of it, and you keep things light and fun.”

In the other version: “No more dragons. No more fairies. No more magic. No more anything that asks people to use their imagination. No more anything fun for fun's sake. Nothing childish. Nothing nerdy. Don't copy people. You go back and you write something that actually fucking matters.”

Then as I am leaving, “Oh, and one more thing, throw a little politics in there this time. And don't be wrong about it either.”

I sit down and not feeling very inspired, look at my dog who weighs about thirty pounds. He is curled up in a ball, cold. He looks at me with worried eyes. When he notices I am upset, he licks my hand.

II-III: Mod⁵⁸

“clip_art_mod_diaja”

⁵⁸ Mods are modifications to a game made by players. While this is primarily true of PC gaming, it does appear sparsely on some consoles nowadays. Since the PC version of a game will include the game files, those can be accessed and edited. Typically the purpose of a mod is to make the game more personalized or refreshed. Typical mods for a game like Dark Souls for instance include things like, re-skinned costumes or equipment (either of the modders original design or a design from another character from another game, like being able to role play as Link from Zelda while in Dark Souls), remixing the game (either increasing difficulty by randomizing item or enemy placements, or meticulously moving them to different locations), or enhancements (such as making the UI look nicer or more informative, fixing bugs, redoing textures so that they look nicer/more realistic), and so on. What I’ve done here is given the tutorial section to a friend and allowed them to “mod” the excerpt to their heart’s content.

#3 Tutorial

A Needless Test of Patience

1st of Mina, morning:

A ray of yellow etched on the ceiling through the nearly closed drapes. Ewan dragged himself up, feeling rested, and for a brief moment disheartened. But the thought of getting to Lockheart, starting school excited him, drove him out of bed. At once he realized that Marvalo was not in bed, the blanket messy, hanging over the side. He considered going downstairs to the main tavern, but as he could hear little more than faint snoring, decided to check the central chamber first.

Upon entering, he was immediately greeted by Amelia, who stood at the table by the window, her hands folded in front. “Good morning,” she said, a bright smile on her face.

“Good morning,” he replied. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Oh,” she half covered her mouth, “um, yes, thank you.” She gestured toward the table, which Ewan could see was full of a large breakfast; bacon, poached eggs, fried tomatoes and mushroom, with buttered toast and sausages. “Won’t you come and eat?”

“You made all that?”

“Oh, it was nothing. You’ve got a long day ahead, please eat well.”

“What do you mean?”

Her face went up in surprise, “Oh! Well, it’s the first of Mina, that’s all. School begins today in Lockheart.”

Ewan looked outside, though it was daylight, he couldn’t be sure of the exact time. Then he looked around the room, realized there was no one else besides the two of them. “Where’s Marvalo? Agatha?”

Amelia looked at him worryingly. Then she pulled a note from her apron. It read:

Sorry to run off like this, but some things come up. Not to worry, you'll be just fine on your own getting to Lockheart. It's only a couple hours walk from Agatha's. Just stay on the path and you'll be there in no time. Amelia will guide you.

-Marvalo

Ewan sat down. There was nothing to do but to eat. The food was delicious. It was going to be a long day and he wasn't sure he could manage getting to Lockheart on his own, but he was sure going to try.

He stepped outside the front of the tavern, noting the sign by the road which read,



He had all his belongings with him in a big sack over his shoulders, and in particular, the wooden sword Marvalo had left him, which he carried at his side.

“Here,” said Amelia, and she handed him a small silvery marble ball. “It is said to be of great help to those new to adventuring. If you need help with anything at all, just put the ball in your hand and ask for aid.”

“Thanks,” said Ewan, and he set off down the foresty road.

G u m p W o o d s

The Gump Woods turned out to be much more straightforward than he anticipated. All he had to do was push forward with his feet¹, and presto, he would cover lots of ground that way.

After what felt like forever but was actually only an hour, he arrived at a fork in the road². The marble vibrated in his pocket. Curious, he opened it, but before he could touch it, the ball flew out of its own accord, hovering a few inches in the air above him.

¹“Push forward on the analog stick to move your character”. It’s a wonder tutorials have lasted this long. In the late 80’s and 90’s, games never explained anything (you’d have to check the instruction manual for that), but nowadays, explaining even the most banal of information occurs as overt infection of textual immersion.

²Many genre based works, especially those aimed at children are prone to this kind of lazy writing. Tutorials are of the most un-enjoyable content to engage in with a game, so too is this kind of writing for a book.



“Hello,” said the ball, in a voice that sounded very high and dainty.

“Uh, hi,” said Ewan, surprised to find that the ball was actually sentient.

“My name is Maribelle; the friendly orb! Nice to meet you!³ I can assist you on your adventure in various ways. I am known to the world as a modern invention, developed by the great scientists, the Artificers. Long ago, when the world was filled with many more hideous monsters than there are today, people struggled to find their way, struggled to survive against the elements, and this was before using magic was as common place as it is now, back when there was no foundation to learn from. But alas, that time is long behind us, hardly anyone remembers it now. But since the world is still somewhat dangerous to the ignorant, people felt a friendly companion is warranted. Thus here I am, here to provide you with information about the world, I can tell you about monsters, about people, and about places, tactics or even dating advice. Whatever you need, I am here to help, so just ask!

“Now, did you understand well everything I just told you?”

Ewan stared at her blankly.

“I am known to the world as a modern invention, developed by the great scientists, the Artificers. Long ago, when the world was filled with many more hideous monsters than there are today, people struggles to find their way, struggled to survive against the elements, and this was before using magic was as common place as it is now, back when there was no foundation to learn from. But alas, that time is long behind us, hardly anyone remembers it now. But since the world is still somewhat dangerous to the ignorant, people felt a friendly companion is warranted. Thus here I am, here to provide you with information about the world, I can tell you about monsters, about people, and about places, tactics or even dating advice. Whatever you need, I am here to help, so just ask!

“Now, did you understand well everything I just told you?”⁴

“Yes, I understand, thank you,” he said, exasperated. In truth, he had tried to interrupt her several times, once it became clear to him that the information she was giving was the same, but she had raised her voice and spoken quicker to counter his interjection.

³Many friendly NPC characters will introduce themselves in this manner if they are meant to serve as a guide to the player. And it is not atypical for them to be a shiny floating being. Examples include Twink from Paper Mario, or any one of Zelda’s companions.

⁴In Zelda: Ocarina of Time, there is a talking owl named Kaepora Gaebora who interrupts the player to give them yet more exposition. The worst part is if you rapidly tap “A” or “B” to get through the text quicker, at some point the text box will come to a question a lot like this. And since you’ll be pressing the buttons repeatedly to get it over with, you’ll answer “No”, and you’ll be letting out an exhaustive sigh as you tap the buttons through the text again, this time either agonizely slower or taking your chances with having to “read” through it a third time.

“Good,” she said. Then she drifted towards three signs that were posted, each pointing to a different pathway. “This sign on the left reads, Lockheart, so we should go this way.”

“Thanks,” said Ewan, slightly annoyed. “I can read though.”

Maribelle seemed to ignore this
he trotted along the left path⁵. It veered

Maribelle shot in front of Ewan’s
forehead into her, “Hey, listen!⁶There are
your guard.”



and continued to hover over his shoulder as
slightly, as the trees became denser.

face, so quickly he nearly rammed his
Gumps hiding in the trees above us. Be on

Ewan glanced up, and seeing the thick red and blue blobs curled around the branches, gave Maribelle a curt nod and moved on.

There came a giant splash in from of him, and the liquid bound together to form a red blob⁷. The blob was only slightly smaller than Ewan himself. It dragged the flat portion of its body over the dirt as it steadily drew near⁸.

He could fight, he could run, but that was the extent of his options for now. He had no other items in his possession and he did not yet know any magic. He grabbed the hilt of his sword.

“Watch out!”
you if you aren’t
another way to



screamed Maribelle, “Gumps are slimy monsters that will poison
careful. You don’t have any magic right now; can you think of
defend yourself?”

Ewan waved

the orb away from his face.

The Gump receded, pulling its body back and then lunging forward. The hop it made was easily avoided though. A part of Ewan felt this was going to be far too easy, but he didn’t want to be overconfident. Ewan took a deep breath and—

⁵Navi the fairy typically hovers around the shoulder’s of the player character in Zelda Ocarina of Time. Like most tutorials; they hover over your shoulders, weigh you down, make the whole process a chore.

⁶Despite being given a thematic reason to explain her existence, Navi is really only present as a guidebook in case the player gets confused about the expectations of the game. In particular, she will make an obnoxious ringing sound until the player engages with her. Then she’ll say, “Hey, listen!” and proceed to tell the player what they ought to be doing with their time. On subsequent playthroughs, she is increasingly annoying and it’s a well known critique of the game.

⁷In the first two Zelda’s, most monsters have two variants, a red for their weaker form, and blue for the slightly more dangerous. A color re-skin and stat adjustment is a cost effective strategy for communicating difficulty to the player, but it also means the player can make a minor adjustment when dealing with the new enemy since much will be the same. Additionally, numerous games from the 80’s and 90’s would default player 1 to a red color pallet and player 2 in blue. Curiously, the items Link receives in Zelda 1 vary in efficiency with blue being the basic form and red as advanced. Dragon Warrior also has slime monsters that use blue as the starting point. In general, red comes first, but it is curious to note instances when this deviates (for no discernible reason).

⁸In Dragon Warrior (typically called Dragon Quest) upon encountering an enemy, the description reads: “A ____ draws near! Command?”

“You can attack with your sword if you hold it by its handle and swing with your arm.”

I know, thought Ewan.

The Gump proceeded to attack, but Ewan wasn't about to miss his chance—

*Gump*⁹:

A gelatinous goo that resides in the forest and wet areas across Dranquill. They typically rest in trees and descend upon unsuspecting travelers. While relatively easy to deal with, they can be formidable in numbers, and some of them are known to cause poison. No one knows where these slimes come from or how they make theatrical sense when put next to goblins or knights, but they nevertheless provide a baseline of monster in its most biological form.



Tactical Notes: While they are susceptible to magic, they are particularly weak to thrusting attacks.

Ewan wondered who Maribelle was talking to with all that information, since none of it was particularly useful or interesting to him, but he took the tip about the thrust seriously. He held the sword with both hands and drove it straight into the Gump's belly and it died. It burst, as if it was made of water, wrapped in rubber.

“Good job!” complimented Maribelle.¹⁰

Ewan tried to grab her.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“I was going to put you back in my pocket; I think I'll be all right on my own for a little while.”

“How rude!” she said, appallingly, “Here I am giving you all this support, and you think you know better. You don't know anything. Now, be a good boy and pay attention to my instructions.”

Ewan waited for Maribelle to proceed down the path before he rolled his eyes.

The truth was, Ewan did have questions, but she talked so much that he was reluctant to ask her anything, hoping that if he waited long enough she would stop.



⁹Often times RPG or fantasy adventure games will give the player a companion who can pause the game and provide a lengthy analysis/description of an enemy. These are typically not seen unless the player activates them (presumably because they are a novice), but they interrupt the flow of the experience quite dramatically.

¹⁰When taking a player through a tutorial, you should ensure that you compliment their achievements, apparently. Even Dark Souls does this with a developer message written on the ground at the end of the tutorial area; “Good job, go straight ahead”.

Dusk was steadily approaching when Ewan saw a couple walking up the path. They each had large packs on their backs, even their dog had some blankets tied around their torso.

“Hi there,” said the man.

“Are you all right? This place is dangerous for little kids,” said the woman.

Ewan opened his mouth, but Maribelle bolted in front of his face first, “In Dranquill, you can find all sorts of merchants. You can also find people who may need your help from time to time. Try striking up a conversation; you never know what might progress from it!”

To his perplexion, the people seemed to not notice or not be the slightest bit bothered by Maribelle’s interruption. Perhaps they knew how to control these orbs and he didn’t.

“Thanks,” said Ewan, in part hoping Maribelle would take the comment personally and bugger off, “I think I’ll be all right.”

“Where are you headed?” asked the woman.

“Lockheart.”

“Lockheart?” the man frowned. “This is the long route of getting there. If you saw the Black Rose Inn, shortly beyond that point is a fork, the right road takes you there in less than an hour.”

“Oh...” Ewan glanced at Maribelle, wishing he had ignored her and checked the other sign for himself.

“But you’re quite far in now. We just came from there, you see. Keep following the path and turn right once you can. You’ll see the castle over a river.”

The dog’s eyes followed Maribelle as she floated gracefully up and down.

“Thanks. Do you know how much farther I have to go?”

“You’ll be there before dark for sure. Just don’t dally.”

“Great, thanks!” said Ewan and he gave them a nod before going on ahead.

“You sure we can’t help you more?” they called after him.

“No thank you,” he said, eager to start making some actual progress.

Progress was nearly impossible though. He kept walking, for what felt like hours. Just on and on. The hours must have been going by, only they weren’t because the daylight was only gradually lessening. It felt like forever, it took forever, it was all quite meaningless also...

“What a horrible night to have a curse¹¹,” said Maribelle, matter-of-factly.


¹¹Castlevania II: Simon’s Quest is known for being one of the most irritating video games from the 80’s. Most notably, it has




Inside, Ewan rolled his eyes, but he didn't show it as he couldn't be sure if she would notice or not. As if upon cue, he noticed that the light had certainly faded, quite dramatically in fact. He didn't understand what she meant by a curse, but most of what she uttered seemed that way.

"If night falls while we are outside of safe zones, we will need to be extra cautious since more deadly monsters are prone to come out after dark."¹²

Ewan nodded, assuming as much.

Muribelle didn't stop there though.

Eventually, he came to a high point, a  lookout spot where he could observe the forest in more detail. And, wouldn't you know it, he could see a castle off to the right, drawbridge lowered over a ravine.

"Watch out!" screamed Maribelle,  as a bombardment of Gumps lunged at Ewan. They had taken him by such  surprise, that Ewan lost his balance, flailing awkwardly with his sword on the edge of the  cliff. Then one of the Gumps tackled Maribelle and she went soaring over the cliff too. Another took Ewan's sword to the stomach (as it were), before the next plowed into him, knocking him over.

Then he fell, clinging to his sword, briefly processing that he was sure to die as the wind hissed and tore at his limbs. The world began to slow, and Ewan thought perhaps he had hit the bottom, but that wasn't quite it.

He was caught in something, like a web. It slowed his fall dramatically, leaving him suspended in midair. He could not move. Some force, some invisible material was curling around his body, soaking his clothes. He felt wet. Was this water? If so, why was it taking so long to sink? And even so, a fall from that height would kill him, water or otherwise.¹³

He squeezed the handle of the sword; if the fall wasn't intending on killing him, he'd surely need a weapon to defend himself.

As he sank lower, the material consumed him. On the sides of his vision, he could see the skylight blurring, as if it was a painting that had yet to dry and someone was smearing it everywhere. It was darkening too, the process was bringing out the stars and an early dawn of moonlight. Then he shut his

a day/night cycle, which occurs frequently, and pauses the game for ten seconds as it gradually displays this text: "What a horrible night to have a curse" every time it changes from day to night.

¹²This is true of many video games of the genre. *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* is a good example where Hyrule field is pleasant during the day, but skeletons emerge from the earth during the night.

¹³In many NES games, like *Zelda 2* and *Castlevania II*, if you fall in water, you die. Doesn't matter how far of a fall it is.

eyes for fear it would burn.

The moment his body was completely enveloped by the substance, down to the last fingertip, it let him go, and he dropped, landing in a small puddle of water. The drop took him by surprise, so much so, that he lost the grip on his sword, it slipped out his hand as if something tugged it loose. And his land gave him a bump on the head.

D e f i l e d P o n d 14

At some point, he opened his eyes, somewhat teary and disoriented. It took some doing just to collect his thoughts. Where was he? What had just happened? Had long had he been there? And through it all, his head throbbed, every beat of his heart pulsated in his skull.

Looking up, he could see the night sky. It was clear now, perhaps the murky substance had moved on. The sky was dark now, but there were stars and the moon, brightly peering through numerous tree branches. The pine leaves swayed gently in the wind.

He arched his back into half of a sit and felt his head. No blood, that was good. His front half was damp but reasonably dry, and his back side made him shiver as the wind collided with it.

Around him were trees and one very small path just barely visible between the pines. The pond was actually quite vast, his house could have fit in the pond with a little room to spare. There was an oval shaped rock in the center of it, at least five times his size, and there were fallen tree trunks leaning on it, some broken, but apart from these things, the clearing was relatively even and spacious. And hidden too, he noticed. There were so many thick trees, and the side of the cliff he fell down that it wouldn't surprise him if no one knew of this place.

The cliff. He stood up and at last registered it's proportion, and it was cataclysmic. The fall should have killed him. It was at least ten stories or more high. And for a moment, he wondered if he truly was dead. The throbbing in his head seemed to confirm otherwise.

¹⁴Here we enter the tutorial boss, at which time the game typically has taught the player all the baseline mechanics. Sometimes there is a flashy finish, or in the case of Dark Souls, a flashy opening by dropping down on top of the boss for a descending attack. But regardless, there is often much less teaching to be had here.

Drink...

He turned around fast, but there was no one. It was a girl's voice, a familiar one too. He took a step towards the rock and listened. Nothing more. In fact, there was no noise whatsoever. Just the tree branches being pushed by the wind. Utter stillness. He took a step, watched as the water reacted to his movement, releasing a couple of ripples away from him. As he followed them with his eyes, he caught sight of a stick in the water. He went closer and picked it up. His sword.

Drink the water...

Again, that voice. She sounded desperate, scared. He didn't know why, but Ewan gripped his sword. Something was off. He didn't know what he could be missing, but he didn't want it to get the jump on him either.

He spotted a ripple, and it was not made by him. It came from somewhere on the other side of the rock. The rock itself, an engorged pebble, had groove on the front which gave the impression of a face, something of a skeleton if you looked hard enough. Behind it, two tree trunks were bent into arches, like arrow heads aimed at the sky. They weren't exactly broken at the tips either. They looked almost as if the tree was supposed to bend that way.

Ewan back away.

The branches, of which there were six, were not leaning against the rock, they were attached to it. The rock was it's core.

It's the only way...

What was, he wanted to say back.

The rock opened in two halves, it was a shell, like a beetle. They closed immediately, but not before releasing a clicking, snapping noise. And then the creature contracted it's legs, and raised itself from the water. The skull face, though not actually it's face, looked right at him. The real creature was along the underbelly. A hollowed mouth with three rows of teeth. And six tentacles swayed from the edges of both lips.

Ewan's heart raced. He had never seen anything like this, and he was all alone with no idea of what to do. It seemed to know he was there, and it did not appear friendly, so he carefully tried to make his way to the edge of the pond for the path he had spotted through the trees.

The creature made a move toward him. With six legs, a single move was actually the result of many. It covered ground fast, shell opening and clicking as it neared him. Not taking any chances, Ewan

leap for the edge of the water and darted into the forest.

He had yet to go far before he smacked himself into an invisible wall. For a moment, he thought maybe he could push through it, that perhaps it was the same substance he fell through. But he was reaching a hand out, pushing on nothing, and it wouldn't budge.

Perhaps, what this meant was, he was inside of it, and it was easier to get in than it was to get out.

The creature gained on him, too fast for him to dodge it this time. Two legs grabbed him by his arms as it made it's way back into the pond.

At the end of the legs, to Ewan's horror, were human-like fingers. Each hand had at least 9 fingers, all of different lengths. Their grip was firm too, if it wanted, it could rip his arms off.

"Help!" He screamed. "Someone help me!"

The monster chattered it's shell again. Then it propped itself up high with the two central legs, dragged Ewan under itself as the tentacles began to wrap and curl themselves around his limbs. The mouth, a long vertical slit opened wide, revealing a dark and hollow interior as drool dribbled down the teeth.

From the center, unfurled a long fleshy tube. The tube leaked what looked and felt like a web, it was trying to immobilize him. And it was getting on his cloths and his body when his shirt came up from being off balanced.

In a surge of raw panic, Ewan jerked his left arm free, hacking at the tentacles. The central tube immediately retracted; the tentacles were more resilient, but it seemed as though the beast was caught off guard by the sudden resistance. Ewan batted them away until his limbs were free. Then he put some distance from the monster and used the water from the pond to try to get the web off.

The beast snapped and rattled, dropping into the water and splashing around.

It was no use, the web just stuck to his hand. It wasn't a permanent grip, but he had to force his hand free. Before he could come up with a strategy, it was on him again, reaching out with opened fingers. Ewan took to the offensive this time, taking the sword with both hands and giving his all with each swipe. He landed the first few hits, but they provided only little annoyance, it seemed as the creature made little reaction. It did bring it's arms around the tentacles however, protecting them. That was the weak spot, but it was going to be the point of most danger too. He would have to throw himself into harms way, and the strike true if he hoped to kill it or at least injure it into giving up.

And he wasn't ready for that.

His deliberating only worked for so long. The monster must have adapted to the strikes of the wooden sword, it took the beating all the way as went in and grabbed Ewan by the waist. Once it had him, it rotated around and flung him into the air.

Ewan was able to manage a roll so the landing didn't hurt too much, but it did knock the wind out of him.

He felt a hand grab his neck. Then it shoved him into the water. It was a push, and had there not been any water, the force would likely have split his head wide open. Instead, it just blurred his vision, made everything spin, and a moment later, a throbbing pain.

At this point, he knew he needed to get some room to catch his breath, but he was so disoriented that he could only manage a crawl.

The creature hit him again, this time his back. Ewan couldn't tell what part of it's body did this, it's arms, both hands, but regardless, it felt like the flat end of a trunk.

He was hit again.

The pain from this was different. Unlike his head, this hurt immediately and there was no natural numbness.

He wished to be home.

Drink me!...

The hands wrapped around his chest. And then came the squeezing. He couldn't keep himself from letting out grunts and cries. He could hardly move, but he squirmed all his could as the monster crushed his ribcage. He could hear the chirping.

It dropped him.

Then it beat him again.

With the pain worsening, the drive to fight back decreased. But this was not permanent.

He sluggishly rolled to the side. The beast missed, splashing water on him instead. It must have thought Ewan was on the last stretch of his life. But if it did, it no longer thought that. It let out a handful more chirps and grabbed him, turned him over, and then lifted him above itself, and finally threw him to the ground.

He coughed out the water. Drink it? It was probably dirty. And what good what it do? For all he knew it was a trick? Then again, what options did he have?

This was not pain that would pass in time. It was not an endurance test.

The tentacles curled around his limbs.

And at this point, he hadn't the strength to weigh the rationale of it. He clenched the sword hilt. Then he scooped up the spring water in his hand, and as he was hefted off the ground, brought it to his lips and drank.

He was facing the ground this time, feeling the web substance drip onto his back. With his right arm, he yanked the tentacle close, and with his left, jabbed the sword into it. Stretching it seemed to help widen it for a piecing blow. And the attack caused the monster to release him at once, back away in a fit of rapid screeching.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the hard shell, the skull shaped impression on the front.

Put your sword in the water. I can help you.

Her voice came through much clearer and louder than before. For a moment, he mistook her as actually being there.

With no reason to argue, he thrust the sword into the water, just below level. After a brief moment, the sword began to glow a faint soft blue.

It is weak at the joints.

Then the sword flashed bright, and it seemed as though the blue glow was there to stay. As he lifted it from the water, icy blue flames swayed along the blade. They moved much slower than real fire, and naturally, they did not burn the sword.

He turned around, held the sword out to the side with both hands. The creature lunged forward, and as it did, Ewan ducked under one arm, brought the blade up and sliced at one of the leg's joints. The sword made a swooshing sound, a sound similar to fire in movement, and it left a trail of blue behind it. The slash left the monster bleeding, and its leg went limp.

Ewan moved under the monster and cut one of the tentacles off. The chirping was loud and hysteric by now, and the creature backed away, but as it had before, it was only temporary, and it lunged forward again. He dodged it, just barely, and went back under. With an arm less to protect its underbelly, the creature could only back away, making circles through the pond. The pursuit yielded to the slicing of two more tentacles, and Ewan unleashed two slashes at the mouth.

Then it jumped back, braced itself, and jumped forward, intending to crush Ewan with its open mouth.

Though it would not make sense to Ewan after the fact, in the moment, he felt he could see the

outcome. He jumped at the mouth when it was still in the air. His own jump surprised himself as he felt some unseen force push him forward with a huge burst of momentum. With his sword up front, he plunged the blue flames into the heart of the monster. The impact from the jump was greater than the monster, and it toppled over onto its back with Ewan instinctively letting go of the sword and rolling into the pond.

The monster flailed its legs about, splashing and clicking, until it gradually curled in on itself and remained still, the wooden sword stuck in it, the fiery glow starting to wain.

Ewan breathed a sigh of relief.

The remains of the beast darkened, then they burned black, crumbling into ashes, but the ashes dissipated the moment they were made. The process lasted less than a minute, and when it was over, there was nothing left of the creature. There was him, his sword, and if he took a moment to listen, a few night owls hooting.

Then came a light in the water. This light seemed to drown out all other sources of light, of sound. At first, Ewan went to investigate, but after a few steps, he dropped to his knees, holding his abdomen. He wanted to cough, but he also had to force it, and when it did, he saw blood on his hand. His entire ribcage ached, visions blurred, and consciousness started to leave him.

The water cleaned itself, revealing the gravel beneath, then it glowed a soothing blue. Rising trickles of water seeped into the air, and ahead of him emerged a small girl from a curled position.

Her body was vibrantly white and softly blue, her garments a cloth tunic, and on her back sprawled two dragonfly wings.

M y s t i c S p r i n g 15

“Thank you for rescuing me,” she said. Then she stepped beside him, laid her hand on his forehead.

¹⁵With the monster destroyed, the area gets a new name and a fairy/goddess being appears. This is all very familiar motifs in Zelda, fairy fountains serving as sources of healing for the player, and on occasions being dormant or otherwise incapable of functioning until a vile being is slain.

A soothing flow of energy spread throughout his body, and within moments he was healed, breathing a heavy sigh.

“I am a young fairy. This spring is my home, has been for a few hundred years. With the demon slain, I can live and breath easy again. Thank you!”

Ewan got to his feet, “You’re welcome. How long have you been trapped?”

“Almost a month. A strange man had come, wrapped in a long fur coat. At first I thought he was a weary traveler, like yourself, but he soon revealed that he was not. He brought the demon from another realm, sealed this place with subduing magic.”

“Another realm?”

“Yes, a vile place I imagine. He was most certainly a necromancer.”

“What’s a necromancer?”

“A sorcerer who wields the flesh of death and decay. They’re not known for their compassion. It is possible he was using the demon as a surrogate for his own energy reserves.”

“I see... I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Not at all, you’re my hero!” she giggled, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Ewan’s eyes went wide, nearly falling over.

“Hehehe! Silly. Anyway, I’m afraid I can’t do much for you now in the way of rewards so that’ll have to suffice. But do visit me again in the future, and I will prepare something in the meantime.”

Ewan rubbed his cheek, feeling a tickling sensation, and goosebumps on the back of his neck.

“But I’ve kept you long enough.”

“Oh!” said Ewan, collecting his pack by the side of the pond. He slipped it open to check on his dragon egg, and to his relief, it was in undamaged. He slung it over his shoulders. “It’s dark out and I still haven’t made it to Lockheart.”

“It’s up the road that way,” she pointed. “Remember, come back and visit me another time!”

“I will!” said Ewan, turning up the road.

Ewan rushed through the trees, great renewal upon him. Harrowing as it had been, all he could think about was getting to the Guild, getting by a warm fire with some soup after a bath. There was also a bit of exhilaration to not being clean or fed or warm. He was running. He was running forward, letting

momentum carry him up the hills and over the rocks. It felt good to be active, in control of his body, and having accomplished something; he had done some good in the world, and the world had taken note of it. And this feeling, work and reward, made him very briefly cynical to his life before this. Sitting around, playing tea party with Sue, going with his family on errands, those things didn't pack the same punch, the same weight. They were of a smaller scale.

But this... this was necessary.

The further he went however, the less this feeling stayed with him. In the trees were glistens of sleeping Gumps, not that they posed a threat anymore, but still, there remained more horrors in the dark of night, and he had pushed his luck a great deal already.

There were in fact, figures moving in the darkness of the woods. Ambling skeletons not much bigger than himself, with beady bright eyes. Sometimes they would spot him, shuffle toward him, but Ewan picked up pace when they did, and was out of sight in seconds. And as far as he could tell, their line of vision was not very far.

He climbed the hills until he reached the very top, followed the trail to the right, observing the steep drop into a ravine, a river running through.

By the time he arrived at Lockheart's front gate, the drawbridge had been raised, the full moon lighting the castles two towered pillars on either side. He cupped his hands to his mouth—

Don't shout. Sorcerers are used to vile people disguising themselves as children. You will have to find another way in.

"How can you see me?" he asked.

There was no answer.

Ewan came to the edge (where the drawbridge would rest) and gazed down. A rushing river poured through the ravine; both sides had a small platform of grass. There was a tree lodged against a wall at the very bottom, some of the roots dipping in the current. He spotted a small log bridge, but no seemed to be no safe way of getting down; a fall from this height would surely be fatal. He couldn't scale the wall either, and knocking over a tree wouldn't be tall enough to extend all the way down. And even if he crossed, how would he climb the other side? He was stuck¹⁶.

*Illusion ahead.*¹⁷

¹⁶This is the term my siblings and I would use anytime this happened. Identifying how to progress in a game was often a main objective in older titles. Zelda was notorious for leaving us scratching our heads for days, sometimes weeks.

¹⁷In Dark Souls, players are able to leave messages on the ground that other players online are able to read. They are limited

“Where?” said Ewan, turning around and half expecting to see the fairy girl right behind him. But of course, now she was silent. Ewan guessed that meant he had all the information he needed, and still, it made no sense. What illusion?

The problem was such that Ewan sat down and stared at his surroundings for a long moment. Occasionally, he glanced over his shoulders to see if anyone, or anything, was approaching. Apart from the hooting of owls, he seemed to be safe for the time being.

Illusion ahead... that must mean something he is seeing isn't real.

Come to think of it, there was a single tree on the edge of the cliff, the only tree in this position, and it was a bit strange. He tried putting his hand on it.¹⁸

It felt solid to the touch, rough bark.

He withdrew his sword, gave it a swing.

His arms flew across the horizontal line, stopping at nothing.

The tree was gone, all of its roots, branches, and leaves. And what's more, there was a ladder where it had been.

The crushing waves grew louder the further down the ladder he went. The current was high enough to be splashing the log planks, sprinklings his ankles as he marched across. He went right, passed a moss covered rock that stuck out from the hillside, had to hug it as he made his way around. The further the path looped around the hill, the less confident he felt that it was going to take him into Lockheart at all. What if this led to a bandit's secret hideout? He already knew the left path went to the half submerged tree and that was all.

When he came to the end of the loop, he spent a long time taking in his surroundings, but the only thing to note was a glistening string, like a spiderweb, rising from the river. At the top of the cliff-side was a hooded figure holding a fishing rod, legs dangling over the side.

It was also a skeleton¹⁹, the bony legs swaying back and forth; for a moment, Ewan thought he heard them whistling, but the river was so loud it was hard to tell. How on earth anyone would be able to

in that you may only write short phrases from a list of word options. One of the more common phrases is, “Illusion ahead”,

¹⁸In lieu of “Illusion head”, the message is typically put in front of an illusion, tipping off players of secret/hidden passageways. In Dark Souls 2, these illusory walls or trees or what-have-you still existed, but instead of slashing them, players had to press a button reserved for contextual actions like talking to people or opening doors. By touching the tree now, it gently symbolizes that slashing is the better method since it functions as a response to an action, not an arbitrary “button”.

¹⁹This character reminds me of the Poe Collector from Zelda: Ocarina of Time. It is an intriguing prospect when games establish a particular type of creature as an enemy, only to subvert the expectation with a sentient variation later.

under a bridge, pillars protruding from the walls at various angles. Eventually he found two doors; he took left.

More another hall, this one with many doors.

Confusion was starting to set in; maybe this wasn't an entrance into Lockheart at all?

He found a door that opened into a staircase, at the top of which was a half circular corridor made of deep red bricks, and lit with hydra chandeliers; each head twisted up, erupting bright green flames. The passage was also much larger than the others instead of the cramped hallways he had just departed from.

Down one end of the corridor opened to the blue moonlight rays, the other, an end with a roaring fire in a fireplace.

He approached the fireplace, the warmth overwhelming his senses. The kiln was massive; someone twice Ewan's size would have been able to walk into it with barely a hunch needed. Along the each side was a winding staircase to a floor above, and at the top stood a figure.

“Well what do we have here? You must be a new arrival. Let me guess; late student? Well, you're not the first.”²¹

²¹In Dark Souls, the first NPC character the player meets, neigh, the first character they meet immediately exiting the tutorial, is called the Crestfallen Knight, a cynic who gives the player a vague sense of direction. His execution is much better than Kaepora Gaebora since he doesn't break the forth wall and because he is an NPC who can be killed instead of hovering over the player as some intangible surrogate of the designers. This line here is nearly identical to what he tells the player in Dark Souls, (minus “Let me guess, fate of the undead?”) and baring the cliché opening, it has a degree of intrigue and personality that is a step up from any other tutorial NPC. In closing, we've not only progressed from the choppy, stale writing the Tutorial began with, but also, Dark Souls is in many respects the spiritual successor to Zelda, it's natural evolution.

Interlude #6

*Deprived*⁵⁹

I take a sip of hot chocolate when I notice a deprived man walk in. He takes one step toward the counter, and waits. It's pretty clear he isn't here to order anything. He does this slow pan with his head until his eyes rest upon me, and we make eye contact for a split second before I return to my book.

But it's too late.

Gradually, he makes his way to my table and holds out a begging hand. He shouldn't be here, somehow, I know that this is really just a sham. But because I'm a girl, it tugs on my inherent empathy and I offer my hot chocolate to him.

He drinks it, then shatters the cup on the tile floor. Ordinarily, I would look to others, to see if anyone else thought what he did was too much, but I couldn't because he attacked me. Sort of. He came very close to me so that I could smell his putrid breath. I grabbed my book and thrust myself against the wall, pressing the binding against my breasts and looking away.

But he doesn't touch me. Bending low, he holds both hands out, like before.

"What do you want now?" I say, timidly.

He gestures to his open palms.

"I gave you what I had, I don't know what more I could give you, and your scaring me because I don't know you. I don't want you. I wish you well on your life, and I will help when I can, but I don't know you. And you're scaring me. And my therapist told me I've spent far too much time being scared of people. That's what she said, and I want to trust her because she knows me and she cares about me."

He points to his open mouth, and when I do nothing, he gets angry, slamming his fists on the table and smashing it.

Reluctantly, I give him my book.

He takes it, he eats it, sloppily so that ripped bits of paper flutter into the air and scatter around us. And he does this within a few seconds, at which time, he gestured to me again, open palmed, wanting more.

⁵⁹ The Deprived is a starting class in Dark Souls. They are the only class with an equal distribution of points, making them both balanced and yet definition-less. Able to do a few things, but ultimately nothing significant.

This is when my eyes start to swell, and the bells in my ears scrap metal to metal. “That’s everything,” I said. “I gave you everything.”

More, more.

Finally I shove him aside and proceed to run, but he is faster than me, grabbing my wrist.

I open my mouth to shout for help, but now I realize the other patrons are a mix of pitying and disgruntled faces, while many others ogle the shreds of paper on the floor, going into a crawl, licking, and suckling at what is now just mulch. Just mulch.

The mulch has oriented around me, and I am the core. And they come closer. And the deprived man starts with my hand, his wide jaw filled with yellowing, slimy teeth.

Then I wake up of course and go about my day as if nothing happened. And inside, I am sickeningly glad that I remember this horror.

Results

Words Absolved +18027

Current Word Total 29699

Eggs Discovered 31/31

Grand Egg Total 59/110

Total Completion 62%

Rank D

< Reread World II

Proceed to next World >

World III

III-II: Dungeon Crawl⁶⁰

The Labyrinth

This place was limbo.

Falling.

For a moment he thought he could catch himself, but then everything went dark, and it would be hours later before he awoke, a sore spot on the back of his head.

He felt his way to the floor into a puddle of water, and along the walls, icy cold stone. Gradually, his vision came into focus, seeing rays of light pouring over him from a smashed hole in the ceiling corner⁶¹.

The tops of pine trees swayed gently in the wind.

L e r n a D u n g e o n

The water echoed faintly throughout the dungeon. Past the iron barred wall, there was a hallway and another cell across from him, that like his, had a series of boulders in it, the debris from the ceiling crack, evident by light seeping into that cell as well.

The water level was just above the ankles, even across the cells, the hall, and the interior of the dungeon, as far as he could see from inside his confinement. There was also another sound, a creaking of a metal chain swaying. It grew louder, inconsistent but reasonably slow and deliberate.

It came around the corner as a dark, but bright, blue light; a lantern, dangling from a short chain.

⁶⁰ No fantasy game worth their weight in gold is without a dungeon. Dungeon crawling is widely established as navigating a labyrinth, slaying monsters, and acquiring loot. In contemporary times, it can be used even in reference to games that have designated dungeons within them, namely Zelda. Zelda dungeons are particularly engaging for the way they make you contemplate the environment. Often times in a Zelda dungeon, I find myself wondering how I am supposed to proceed. They're typically dark, ambient, and full of monsters and puzzles. It might be a house of traps (like Sen's Fortress in Dark Souls) or a house of the dead, but in whatever it is, dungeons are best when they are able to get inside your skin, challenge you to start thinking through more of your surroundings.

⁶¹ This cell is reminiscent of a dungeon in Dark Souls. The player is freed by a knight who is later discovered reclining in a cell as light pours on him. He gives the player a dying wish; to make a pilgrimage his family had entrusted him with.

It was carried by a hunched robed figure, their head shaking and bobbing erratically. Below the hood, he could make out the jawline of a sickly looking man, nearly skeleton. It was unclear how large he truly was, the cloak making him seem quite wide when his facial features suggested many weeks, if not months, of starvation⁶².

As it shuffled through the pool, Ewan raised his voice to talk, but stopped short. It was no longer human, whatever it had been. The creature, now that it was close, groaned a raspy, unnatural breathing. The eyes were missing, dark spheres in their place. It went by Ewan's cell, lighting it aglow for only a moment, and leaving him with an empty feeling; as though he had done something very wrong, and no one would forgive him for it.

For a moment he sat on a rock, contemplating the bleakness of his situation, a profound loneliness. Who would find him? Where would they even know to look? The dangers around him suggested an obstacle far beyond his skill level.

Then he saw movement in the other cell.

A figure stood, a girl, holding onto one of the iron bars. She looked his age, though covered in soot. In fact, he recognized her tunic as the same given to Lockheart pupils. He went to the bar, realizing at last who it was.

"Drew! You're alive!"

She turned her head, but not far enough to break eye contact. She was, scowling.

There were others in her cell. They were all there, all the girls who had gone missing at school. They had been swallowed by the Moonwood.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

They stared at him with perplexed faces.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"Ewan-" his voice growing quiet in the end.

"Ewan?"

He gripped the bars.

"What happened to you?"

He could feel the cold merge with the blood in his hand, a sticking friction.

62 The jailers are somewhat similar to a creature that patrols a literal dungeon in Dark Souls 3.

“I... I came to help.”

“How does you being here help anything?”

“I just... I guess I just thought if I was here with you, if I was experiencing the same as you, we could find a way to be free.”

“No one asked you—”

“And a lot of good it's done,” added another.

There was a pause, and in this space, the shuffling came once more, blue shed over the girls in the cell. Some of them were curled up on the rocks, in the arms of others around them. They looked at him from over their shoulders, far too exhausted to be thrilled at what was clearly no escape potential.

The cloak passed in front of Drew, his teeth chattering, bones clipping together.

Ewan could feel icy droplets fall from his hair down the back of his neck.

Vivian was holding Luna in open palms. Yet the fairy was no long brimming with energy. She lay with her arms sprawled out, hyperventilating, only able to emit pink and purple sparks from the tips of her wings.

Ewan felt as if someone forced him to eat something foul, a snake or a raw limb from some animal; leaving him with a sensation of uncertainty of whether the poison in his body was enough to kill him or not.

He did not want to look away for he did not want them to think that it was hopeless, that his arrival meant nothing good could come from it. Yet he was ultimately outmatched, sensing he might burst into tears in front of them, make a fool of himself. Without the strength to hold with their eyes, he turned back around, sat on a stone, out of range from the light.

A few leaves drifted down next to him.

What the fuck was he thinking? He must look like a monster to them. But it was strange, so very peculiar. It was an untraceable reason, he had thought his arrival would have been met with surprise and excitement. They would no longer be alone now; they were in this together. Could have been anyway. But they were getting a very different message from him. They must think he was a trespasser, a traitor. He had no right to pretend he was one of them. Especially when their situation was so much darker than he could have imagined.

It wasn't a fucking game. This was all so foolish, acting like a child when none of them were

children anymore. They were boys and girls now.

A shimmer in the water.

He leaned forward for a closer look, then reached out and took the big golden key.

Drew was sitting down now, but the group of them looked his way as he tried to unlock the cell door.

It wouldn't budge.

Ewan had not given up on it yet, but their eyes on him made his head pound, made all the worse once the deep blue illuminated their distraught faces. He sat down, conceding earlier than he believed.

He imagined himself screaming from the bottom of his lungs, "STOP LOOKING AT ME!", but he held himself back; he did not want to seem insane. Maybe that would be better, maybe they wanted to see him insane; it would have made more sense if he was. Anything would be better than his unequivocal acceptance. He was wrong, in a state of wrong; and how could he not see that? At the very least show a semblance of shame.

Disgust.

Except he knew he didn't feel disgusted by himself, not now, not as he was, only that he should feel that way. And by not feeling that way, he was a kind of unheard of wrong.

He grabbed the back of his hair and squeezed the water out. Then he held his head up with his palms, on the sides of his face. The passing of the blue lanterns every minute or so. And when it was dark, after a long degree of being stationary while his mind bickered with itself, he gazed through the hole above. It was too high a climb, and yet he could faintly hear the wrestling of wind in the trees. And this brought him a sense of comfort that he did not want, unable to keep himself from enjoying it. His smile was brief, very much enjoyed, but cut off once he had amassed all the energy he thought he needed.

There had to be another way out.

Feeling along the creases between each cement block, scooping up mounds of soil, he tried to find one with a grip so that he could pull it out, but it was useless.

He plopped in the water, indifferent to what they thought of him for a small moment, or at least looking that way, and looking like he did not care made it easier to abide by.

The block moved, pushed back⁶³. He spun around, gave it a little shove. Moved again.

⁶³ Getting captured in a cell, only to break out a few moments later is about the oldest trick in the book when it comes to Nintendo games. This movable block is particularly similar to how you escape imprisonment in Star Fox Adventures.

He waited for the jailer to pass again, hoping the full minute would be enough for him to escape undetected long enough for... anything. Giving it a shove, he submerged under the darkened box, water splashing out and in as he moved as fast as he could, keeping the noise at a minimum.

The cell next door was not a cell at all, though it was shaped like one. There was a table with mugs and unlit candles on it, most notably, there were no bars. He could walk right out into the hall.

Carefully, he approached the girl's cell.

"What are you doing?" said Drew. "How did you get out?"

"Never mind that. How do I free you?"

"I don't know, find a key?"

Ewan nodded, "I'll be back."

"Hurry! Before they find you."

From down the hall, which had half a dozen cells on one wall, came the glow of the jailer's light. The opposite way led to a staircase. It wasn't far, but he had to weigh if the jailer's sight or hearing was better. He took a gamble with the sound, splashing through the water, even though the absence of eyes suggested otherwise.

The staircase led to a grand hall, a series of arches ran across the ceiling, though this was not a place for celebration, it was a foyer, with tall rounded pillars on either side, separated by short staircases. A chandelier of turquoise candles illuminated a series of tables, chains and cuffs, chairs with spikes protruding out of them, saw-blades and fire stokers where beside fire places in the walls. The cobblestone floor had a greenish glow, puddles in various dips in the floor level, trickling down metal vents. There were also a few rats crawling over the grates. At the center was a guillotine, and surrounding it was a crowd of at least twenty or more jailers, hyperventilating with their creaking chained lanterns in their blue glow.

Ewan's heart had stopped. But he had no time, the one behind him would not be far behind.

Someone rose to the platform, a dark clad figure, at least ten feet tall, thick armed, a butcher's knife the size of a short sword in one hand, a lifted corpse in the other. On his belt was a sickle, but Ewan also noted the flicker of a key-ring.

The Executioner⁶⁴ laid the corpse onto the chopping block, and Ewan stepped backwards for the

64 In Dark Souls there is a sewer underneath a castle where two "butchers" are busy cutting up corpses. Naturally, they are hostile to the player, like any enemy, but they carry a degree of sentience that the mindless undead tend to be short on. It

stairs. Maybe it was not a corpse quite yet.

He descended the steps as a loud wood bang resounded from the room ahead.

He turned around, standing in front of a jailer.

The dark sockets in the jailer's eyes shined two bright stars. It opened the mouth and screamed.

The effect of seeing it, baring witness to its now unveiled form, made Ewan's heart pulsate uncontrollably, the life force draining out of him. He tried to grip his sword but could only flail for it as his legs gave out and he lost consciousness.

L e r n a D u n g e o n

He awoke on the floor of his cell, shaky and a little sick, but otherwise unharmed. And strangely, he discovered that his equipment had not been taken away. Nor was the block for his escape now impassible, it moved just as it had before. Shockingly, there was little punishment to being caught outside of feeling a little queasy. Whatever these things were, they apparently did not have basic human sense. Nevertheless it was another chance, and Ewan wasn't about to pass it up⁶⁵.

He hid behind the wall as the jailer proceeded on, took a deep breath, and with the tightest grip on his sword hilt he had ever had over anything, moved in from behind. The jailer turned its head to the noise of his feet splashing in the puddle, but Ewan was faster, shoving the sword into its back⁶⁶.

Before he could remove his blade, he found he didn't need to. As the jailer collapsed, the body shriveling into dust particles that vanished in a short burst⁶⁷. The cloak and lantern remained behind, and nothing more.

It was a good strategy; allowing him to defeat a dozen or so more. He wondered if the other jailers

is also noteworthy that the butchers do not respawn upon player death, which associates their life on a similar level with the player, and a similar level of finality.

65 Not only does this happen in Star Fox Adventures, where the player is thrown back in their cell and the escape route still accessible in the same way, but it also happens in many Zelda titles, namely the Wind Waker and Ocarina of Time.

66 The Backstab is often considered a critical hit in many games. When they occur, the game displays a much longer scripted animation. The backstab is notorious in Dark Souls since it is far more viable than it realistically should be, able to be performed from absurd distances away, practically glitching behind an opponent for the strike.

67 This is how enemies perish in Dark Souls 2, Zelda: Twilight Princess, and many other titles as well, dissolving enemies.

would notice their dwindling numbers (he pulled the cloaks and lanterns to the nearby table), but they never did⁶⁸. Eventually, they stopped showing up altogether.

He went up the stairs.

The Executioner stood on the platform with its arms crossed, the many jailers aimlessly meandering the room in somewhat of a circular pattern. These were not circling the cells behind him, it seemed.

A jailer spotted him.

Its eyes alight, it released a horrified scream, a shriek similar to an elk, yet with a human inside, in a state of being discovered, vulnerable and now on the cusp of death. It was the only jailer to hurry toward him, everything else unaware of his presence, not even alerted by the scream.

Ewan's limbs were all giving out, and his vision was blurring, but he managed to drift out of sight of the eyes, and when this happened, the scream abruptly stopped. As his stamina recharged⁶⁹, he stumbled around the corner, hoping that if the jailer pursued him, he might get the jump on him.

It checked the left side first, which gave Ewan an attack window. A swift back blow and that absolved that one.

There were however, too many to dispatch in the foyer. He dawned the cloak and lantern⁷⁰; perhaps with a disguise he could snatch the keys. It was risky, but better than accidentally luring out too many than he could handle. The lantern was out from landing in the water though. That would need to be solved. If only he could light it with fire.

The thing was he hadn't felt he could use magic except for a few fleeting moments; he wasn't sure he could grasp the energy long enough for a cast. Something about this place made him feel as though magic was being subdued, negated. But he needed to relight the spiral designed box.

Holding his hand out, he took his time, focused on the energy, his heartbeat, his breathing. For a few moments this prolonged, but it was on the cusp, he could sense, so he kept with it until the process resolved itself, and a small blue flame burst. Then he took a moment to catch his breath.

Though he was much shorter, none of them considered him as he weaved through the horde⁷¹. The

68 Enemy AI in games can be particularly dense to this kind of awareness, and the zombie excuse can only go so far.

69 Stamina is a **statistic** the player has to manage in more skill based, difficult games. Dark Souls is known for revitalizing its utility.

70 Disguising oneself in enemy garbs is often a tactic the player will need to employ in adventure games like Zelda.

71 These disguises typically have telling signs that the enemies don't notice when they should. It's pretty much extra-diegetic.

hood made it easy to avoid eye contact, which he now knew to be lethal, survival would likely not be possible if the Executioner saw him for his stance and demeanor appeared to be on a level of intelligence higher than the underling jailers.

He came to the platform, spotting the key-ring around his belt. It was tied to it with a thick leather string which would take more than a moment to undo. The choice was decided for him however, when the Executioner noticed him and withdrew the long butcher's knife, now stained with blood⁷².

It took a swipe at Ewan, who ducked under it and ran for the stairs. He heard the lantern chains ring out as the jailers turned at the abrupt noise shift, but perhaps they considered the brute to be enough, as they did not follow either of them down into the hall with the cells⁷³.

Each foot stomped on the stone floors with thundering echoes. Ewan heard it swing at him again, but this merely gave him more time to get away.

The flooded hall between the cells was a disadvantaged place for a duel, but it was better than having to worry about the jailers petrifying him. As he passed the girl's cell, sword and shield raised at something chasing him, they went to the bars.

He wanted to tell them to get back, but couldn't concentrate on anything outside of the grunting behemoth charging him.

Luna zipped up to him, sparkling bright baby blue. Ewan could only glance at her in acknowledgment, continually backing up. Evidently she was feeling better, well enough to cast Mystic Weapon⁷⁴ at least, spinning around his sword until it burst into a cold-blue flame.

The Executioner lunged forward, slamming the blade into the floor as Ewan used his shield for a partial deflection; the blow dented the corner of it. He struck, a vertical slash, which seemed to stun the beast. Ewan hesitated to try anything more, instead backing up, trying to calm his vibrating heart.

It went at him again, and this time with more aggression than Ewan expected. He went for a block, even though this wouldn't be enough. But Luna, being faster, jabbed the back of the shield which caused it

72 Getting spotted in this kind of prison scenario in some games, like *Zelda*, often means the player is thrown back in their cell without a chance to defend themselves. But *Dark Souls* allows the player the freedom of movement. In general, *Dark Souls* will put enemies in a stationary place facing the player, only taking action once the player comes within range.

73 A good, common strategy in *Dark Souls* is to aggro (or get the attention of) one enemy and lead them back to a place you've already secured. This provides you with more freedom to move without worrying too much about accidentally getting the attention of a mob, and the time necessary to learn the enemy's attack pattern.

74 Similar to "Magic Weapon", a spell in *Dark Souls*. It "buffs" your weapon with raw magic damage on top of the physical damage output. It requires the user to run the wand tip along the blade as it ignites in blue flames.

to glow glossy⁷⁵. The blade scrapped across the shield and into the water again as a burst of blue sparked between the two, and the shield returned to normal.

Ewan took the sword with both hands and turned over, using his body for a sweeping slash from below. It sliced up the Executioners neck⁷⁶ as it let out a yielding moan, followed by the same dust evaporation as the jailers, leaving only its key-ring behind.

The girl's cell door opened easily. Gradually, they made their way out, as if they were being freed by a jailer. They tried to avoid looking at him where possible, but when they did, Ewan could only interpret a justified hostility.

They went for the foyer.

“Not yet,” he said. “We’ll need to put these cloaks on. There are more than a handful of jailers up there.”

They didn't protest, and within a few minutes, the group of them were all garbed in the black robes, each carrying a lantern that Ewan lit individually (except Vivian's who had Luna float in the core, curled up in a ball, and mimic a similar deep blue color).

Ewan led the way, Drew near his shoulder, and Vivian, Beth, and Jasmine following behind. The foyer seemed less crowded than before, and to their favor, they crept through the room unnoticed. There were many staircases, the ones on the opposite wall led down into more hallways, which Ewan supposed meant more cells, though the jailers did not appear to be patrolling those.

Vivian grabbed Drew's arm, “Look!” gesturing to Luna who's light was fading fast.

They sped across the room into the other hallway of cells for some respite. Splashing their way in, they did not slow down since there appeared to be no threats. The hall made a sharp turn and they followed it. Then after a ways it turned again, and they could see that it was leading them back to the main foyer.

They waited, as Luna slowly regained her light. Ewan glanced at the cell next to him. Inside of it, was a collection of iron maidens. And in the center there was a pillory with a corpse locked in it.

“Which way do we go?” asked Drew.

⁷⁵ Somewhat similar to “Magic Shield” in Dark Souls. The spell imbues your shield with magic energy, but it only increases magic damage defense, not physical. It does help reduce how much stamina is consumed when blocking a hit however. The spell lasts a measly 15 seconds so its utility is sparse. It isn't worth the effort in the game since you would have to cast the spell ahead of time, which requires a catalyst and a lengthy wait.

⁷⁶ Blood is turned off. Or this enemy simply doesn't have any. It is sometimes uncanny when you're anticipating realistic things like blood or corpses to remain within the present reality.

“I don’t know.”

“You think the other side of the room has a way out?”

“It’s possible, but if the jailers spot us we’re done for.”

A hoarse voice spoke from behind them, “There’s a staircase just head.”

They turned around, realizing that the corpse in the pillory was actually a living man. His black hair was shaggy and mangled, and his beard looked as though it hadn’t been trimmed in weeks. But in his eyes, he did not seem crazy nor delirious, only tired and beaten.

“It’s to the left,” and he cocked his head.

The group did not respond; instead they watched him for a long pause.

“If you happen to have the jailer’s keys, I would greatly appreciate some assistance.”

Ewan spoke first, “How did you end up here?”

His face crunched. “If you’re not going to let me out then be on your way.” He hung his head and a bit of drool seeped to the floor.

Ewan grabbed the keys, but Drew put her hand on his wrist, “What are you doing?” she whispered. “We have no idea who this is. He could be an assassin, or a monster disguised with magic. You can’t just trust some strange man you run into.”

“Name’s Leon. Leon Whisp. I’m a sorcerer from Asteria; that should satisfy you.”

“What kind of sorcerer?” asked Ewan.

“Pyromancy.”

“If that’s true,” said Drew, “then why haven’t you freed yourself?”

“This place is full of suppression, I’m certain you must have noticed. That fairy there, her light goes out when she’s near the lanterns, yes? The closer you are to the jailer’s lights, the more it’ll drain the magic around you. You can’t have been here long to have not figured that out already.”

Ewan felt stupid⁷⁷. It did make sense why it had become so difficult to cast such a simple flame.

“If you let me out, I can show you the way out. Please, you’ve got no reason not to trust me. You’re just a bunch of little girls. Let me get you out of this bad place.”

They looked at one another, but it was clear none of them was going to let him out, even if they

⁷⁷ The gimmick to this dungeon is the ever draining magic energy from the jailers. While they do not pose a huge threat themselves, they can certainly cripple you. They are similar to the jailers in Dark Souls 3 who use their lanterns to temporarily drain your total health bar, rendering healing potions useless.

thought that he should be freed. If he was a sorcerer, he was more powerful than them. Even if they wanted to free him from the decency of their hearts, it would not be safe to do so. Never forget, a man is locked up for a reason. And now that he was already incarcerated, it would be impossible to extract the truth from him. Not that he would be honest with a group of young women anyways.

Yet Ewan was less conscious of the potential threat he posed. He assumed, on pure circumstance, that this place was some degree of evil, and no good person would send anyone here no matter how bad they were. The important thing was to see everyone exit safely; and if this man did prove to be hostile, well, he could always duel him personally.

He opened the cell; then unlatched the pillory.

Leon stood up and rubbed his neck, letting out a long exhaustive groan. He was much taller than Ewan envisioned him being, now that he was standing. And despite being in a shaggy puffed sleeved shirt, neigh, presumably starved for in this dungeon, he was well built and lean. Clearly not recently well fed, but he was used to keeping himself fit.

He looked down at Ewan, “You made the right choice⁷⁸.”

Ewan felt like Leon knew somehow, and that he was going to reprimand Ewan for it. Though it was unlikely that anyone could notice, and yet Ewan wanted to look himself over in the mirror to be sure. Nervously, Ewan took a step back, looked away and fiddled with his hair. It was too late to go back on it now. And yet he was completely exposed. His mere show of nervousness would give him away, and that made him susceptible, vulnerable, able to be hurt.

The man looked at him curiously for a brief moment, but then he nodded toward the hall again. “Just step out and go immediately to your left. Climb the first staircase you see and you’ll be out of the dungeon.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled something out in his palm though he was cupping it so that they couldn’t see. “Thanks again,” he said, and he threw whatever it was on the ground. A swirl of smoke enveloped him, making his body blurry at his feet, gradually moving up, and as it went, erasing him from their presence. Just before his head vanished, he gave Ewan a wink.

Then he was gone, as if he had never been there⁷⁹.

78 All of his lines are heavily inspired by these kinds of interactions. You often come across jailed characters that end up either being a friendly later or a hostile opponent. Dark Souls often has more than one of these scenarios.

79 Rescued prisoners in Dark Souls 3 warp back to the main hub, though it isn’t explained how this makes sense.

Especially given that in the previous two games they would say something like, “I’ll be heading back to Majula soon”

They returned to the main hall and followed his instructions. There were in fact, two staircases immediately to the left since they were a part of different walls. One of them was quite large and likely held the way out, but there were a group of jailers surrounding it so they attempted the much smaller staircase first. This one wound itself around a central pillar and was only dimly lit by open mouthed dragon heads, green flames erupting from them. Since this was similar to Lockheart's torches, they took it as a sign of good faith and proceeded up.

L e r n a C o u r t y a r d

After a decent ways, daylight poured over them as they stepped onto the top of a tower connected with two walls, one of which contained the draw bridge from the forest to the keep. The keep itself had a grassy courtyard with smaller buildings tucked under the outer walls, but proceeding further in, it was possible to see the larger form of the castle. The castle was designed in such a way that it grew in size as it trailed backwards and up along the side of a mountain. It veered in a shape reminiscent of a ? where they were positioned at the tip, looking at how the castle walls stretched into a large ring, gaining altitude with each square foot, and snaking up the side of the mountain. At its top, the castle's bottom floor was a good hundred feet or so above their level from already being on a high tower. It seemed this place could house potentially thousands of people. And there was no knowing what was placed in the garden of enormous pines in the center of the ring, the tree tops reaching above the walls on this side. The architecture of the buildings had carved gargoyles and hydras at the tops of pointed pillairs, green and gold flags, now withered, hung from flagpoles. Indeed the hillside that was not occupied by stone and tower was a dark emerald green, gently swaying in the cool breeze. They could be smelled, the trees, rich, inviting; and an intangible fear, the kind derived from the unknown and the intentions of nature. The castle itself was also, by no means, dominant in this place. The forest had reclaimed most, growing vines along the blocks and between the cracks. The courtyard was a mix of moss and untrimmed blades of grass. Many trees, tall oaks mostly, reached over the castle walls and dropped leaves over. And this must have been going on for some

etc.

time as there were thick patches of leaves nearly everywhere. Among them drifted faint gold lights, like dust, floating and flying in a soothing, irregular pattern.

Ewan took in a deep breath of the fresh air, feeling like he could start casting again.

“Where are we?” said Vivian.

“We should find a way down,” said Beth. Then she went to the edge of the tower and pointed to the ground, “Look there! There’s a lever, that must open the gate. And that tower across the gate has a doorway at the bottom, let’s go!”

They followed her, and Drew gave Ewan a slight smile. At first it seemed she had given it by mistake, but upon his return gesture in kind, she smiled brighter, walked with him as they crossed the stone wall. “Thanks for your help,” she said.

Ewan nodded.

“I’m sorry for how I acted before. It was just scary being there and I didn’t expect you, or anyone to come, really.”

“That’s all right. Are you feeling much better?”

“Much.”

They both noticed two corpses on the bridge. They were dressed in leather armor with metal caps and crossbows in one hand, one slouched, the other on its stomach. No eyes, some flesh, and the horrid smell of rotten meat, but it was only a whiff as they passed.

Drew walked a little closer.

“Hey up there!” came the shout of Lucas. He was on the ground, in the forest just outside the castle gate, Melissa and Owen on either side of him.

“Hey, you’re here too!?” Drew shouted back.

“Thank God you find them, Ewan!” said Lucas.

“Any way you can lower the drawbridge?” Melissa called out.

“We’ll try, hold on!” Ewan called.

Drew yanked Ewan to the side. In time to avoid an arrow zip where he was.

The undead soldier, now on its feet, made a choked inhale⁸⁰. Then it notched another bolt, the same time the other dragged itself up on two feet.

80 Oftentimes undead will play dead for the player in Dark Souls.

Before either of them fired, a beam of blue blasted one in the head, toppling him over. Luna flew back to Vivian's shoulder. Ewan summoned a red fireball and threw. The flames latched onto its body, tearing it down into a charred mess on the leaf covered stone.

There was a loud metal crank, a pause, and the drawbridge lowered.

Ewan and Drew followed the others down the tower, stepped out into the castle courtyard, and then both parties united on the bridge itself.

Lucas went to give Ewan a hug, but held back for a moment, as if it was a rude thing to do. "Uh, sorry."

Ewan laughed, "It's fine, you can give me a hug."

He gave a little nod and then embraced, but it was a bit more reserved than usual.

"Glad to see our plan succeed," said Melissa. "No sightings of the Troll, which means we should make good use of this chance to escape."

There came a low, long grunt from the earth, directly below them. And this made little sense until the moments following, when enormous greyish green hands grabbed the edges of the drawbridge.

Then it heaved.

The drawbridge went up, they toppled over one another, grunting and chirping, stepping on each other's hands before rolling along the bridge back into the courtyard. The bridge slammed shut. And following this, the two hands took two spots on the castle wall as the beast peered over, its face filled with creases, eyes sunk very deep and darkened all around. It snorted like a hog, and the greasy black hair was frizzled on both sides of the head. It rose higher, raising a thick wooden club and plunging it to the ground.

Getting to their feet, the group scattered, ducking under the arches of the outer walls. All of them went to one side except Owen and Jasmine who remained by the gate itself, narrowly missing the blow.

"No, wait!" Owen shouted, but he was not fast enough. Jasmine made a run for Vivian and Beth, but the Troll bent over the wall and swept his palm over her. It brought her to its mouth and sniffed.

A bell chimed.

This bell rang from someplace high in the castle, for it echoed far, over their heads and even out to the surrounding forest. And this bell had an effect on the Troll⁸¹, for it immediately perked up, threw itself

⁸¹ In Dark Souls, after you ring both Bells of Awakening, it wakes a giant in Sen's Fortress who will pull a chain that opens the main gate, and progress into the rest of the game.

over the wall and went stomping off through the castle at a slow pace, but due to its size, it was very hard to keep up with.

“Come on!” Lucas led the charge up an outdoor stairway to the wall, with the others following behind.

Ewan waited for Owen, who after a moment to collect himself, nodded and ran over.

With tree branches brushing their cheeks, they ran along the ramparts, keeping the Troll in view as much as possible. This invariably meant they were less focused on the undead soldiers, who were now awaking to their presence.

The soldiers wielded crossbows, swords, wooden shields, and a few with axes or lances. They quickly became more than twenty, and if not for the interconnected bridge pathways, would have been deadly to fight. As it was, many of them could be knocked off with minimal effort. Though Lucas was taken by surprise by one of them, and had to use his arm to block a slash. Ewan threw a Fireball, then came next to Lucas who was on his knees.

His hand was bleeding profusely, and his eyes were dripping.

“Lucas, potion,” Melissa encouraged, holding out a glass vial.

He hesitated, then took the bottle and drank the red liquid. The bleeding slowed to a stop, and within a few moments, not more than a minute, the scar on his arm sealed, as if it were never there⁸².

“Are you all right?” Drew asked.

“I’m fine, let’s keep going. Hurry!”

“This way,” said Owen, who took the lead. He had stuck with the Troll and marked the last known location which he said was a cathedral up ahead.

They followed him onward, reaching a doorway in a tower, and inside an elevator. Thinking it would take them to the courtyard, they pulled the lever and descended. And along the way, the elevator snapped, dropping them to the earth.

⁸² Healing in games often means total restoration. Fable II gave the player infinite lives but would depict scars along the player's avatar if they died frequently.

Interlude #8

The Male in the Room

My boyfriend makes me stroke his cock when he thinks I'm not looking. He is especially fond of making me do this on the days when I dress myself up all pretty-like. Usually, he's not around, and I take my sweet time, shaving my legs, arm pits, I look at myself in the mirror, curling my eye lashes, trimming my brows, applying foundation, lipstick, eyeshadow; I am all over the place, with very little order or routine. It's always a fresh take on the experience.

I'll lay on my bed and read a book or drum my fingers over my stomach. I might feel my breasts and think about how oh-so feminine I feel today, because it is a rarity, and I value the moments when I can feel sexy about my body. I don't want to be interrupted so I convince myself that I won't be.

There's a knock on my door. I know who it is.

I put on a pretty bra, and sometimes I match my panties with it. Other times I like the look of the mismatch. And then I throw on some clothes, anything generic and bland laying around, but these things are not enough to distract him. He comes in anyways and wants what men want.

I tell him to go away. I just want to be alone for a little while. I wasn't dressing up for him; I just did so because I felt like it, it was brightening up my day and he's ruining that. Just go away. It doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense to you.

He stays, and I can't get him out, so we end up doing things. I do things for him, mostly. I don't hate him or anything. But I always feel gloomy when it's over, always wanting something more from the experience. Nauseous, I wish I hadn't indulged him.

He'll feel my body, look me over, etc., but he's never really looking into me. I feel like I'm being looked at through a screen meant to stop insects from getting inside, or maybe one that is covered in fog and fingerprints.

When you imagine his voice (you'll need to do that), it is best if you come up with the most moronic, apathetic tone you can come up with (and yes, there is a reason I'm telling you exactly what to imagine).

"You feel all right?"

“Ahuh.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“You don’t enjoy it?”

“I enjoy myself fine.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to break up with me.”

He always shrugs off that last part. It doesn’t make him feel good to know that he isn’t good enough for me. It doesn’t make me feel good that I want something so irrational. But that’s life for you.

Now if you’re a human being, my guess is you did not simply breeze through that content without feeling a tug, a spark, a little something somewhere in you. That something you felt (and this may scare you), was actually me rubbing up against you.

I won’t hurt you, I promise. And I shower once a day too, so you have nothing to worry about. Like I told you before, I’m just a seventeen-year-old girl and I’m securely preserved within the pages of this book. I don’t know your precise feelings, but I don’t need to either. All I need to know is what makes me feel things and the ways in which that can be relayed to someone else.

But what you need to do is put your pen down. I’ve invaded your space, I’ve seen you naked, and now you’re hostile because in a way, I did so without asking. And now you feel you might be mistreated. I’m sorry someone hurt you. That’s why I wrote this all down, I know how it feels.

What I do is different though, probably. I do not protect myself. I want to feel it all. And yes, some people hurt me deeply. But I am careful not to blame them. I am a soul vessel⁸³, you see. I want not to live, but to live better, to feel better, deeper, and stronger. And I am in constant process of inventing ways to create access to this.

83 A Soul Vessel is an item in Dark Souls 2. It allows the player to reallocate all the points they’ve acquired through leveling up. To a fairly large extent, you can re-class yourself. Whatever **stats** you had in accordance with the class you choose at the start of the game will be unable to decrease, but even so, you could fundamentally change who you are; give yourself a fresh start.

III-I: Open World⁸⁴

Explore and Discover, the Metroidvania

A Forest⁸⁵.

Weightless, drifting.

Far far below.

It happened as if an hour passed, and yet only a second at the same time, and this left him dizzy and bleary-eyed.

A shiver ran through his body as he gently sat up and rubbed his eyes.

The world came into focus, a small clearing in a cluster of towering trees, leaves so thick, only thin beams of light could descend onto the grass, and these would shift, a tranquil ebb and flow. Nearby plants, four opened emerald leaves emitted tiny yellow particles. The spores would travel up between the branches and vanish above⁸⁶.

Wind rustled the pine. Ewan shook from the chill, getting to his feet.

Behind him was a pathway that went up, verged to the left. It was not far to see that the thick of darkened bark would lessen. Slowly, he made his way out of the dense, footsteps crunching dead leaves,

84 In gaming, an Open World is an experience that allows the player to dictate where and what to do. Instead of designing a linear path for them to follow, it is up to them to engage with as much or as little content as they would like. The most recent Zelda, entitled *Breath of the Wild* (2017) is considered an open world, and a return to form, spiritually like the 1986 original. But the original was far more concerned with dungeon crawling than traverses landscapes. Thus it has also been stated that *Dark Souls* (2011) is the more authentic spiritual successor to *Zelda 1*. The reason being is *Dark Souls* is a metroidvania, a style of gameplay that has an interconnected world rather than an open one. Each area (or dungeon) is self-contained, and typically inaccessible to the player (unless they know an advanced trick or secret shortcut). This means you have an open world, but you won't get caught up in content that has nothing significant to contribute to the game's plot since open worlds are prone to include superfluous side quests. And you won't arrive in areas that are too difficult or too easy, there's a balance.

85 *Zelda: A Link to the Past* (henceforth *Zelda 3*) was the first to introduce themed dungeons, though the first two differentiated them by colors at the very least. *Ocarina of Time*, the first 3D title, would also be the first to solidify a Forest, Fire, Water, progression. But it is also no secret that Forests are a typical starting place in games. This is, for all intent and purposes, *Dungeon #1*.

86 In *Zelda's* debut in the 3D on the N64, the first area the player enters is Kokori Forest. There are visual trails of light (perhaps meant to be bugs or spores) that drift in the air as well as singular orbs that will appear on screen for a brief moment. In a later Cutscene, The Deku Tree tells Link a legend that explains the creation of the world, devised by three goddesses, each bringing a different aspect of the world into existence; the earth, law (and visually, the sky), and life. Farore brings life, and in the Cutscene, these drifting lights appear by her will. They are either as simple as insects, but the hardware limitations of the time give them an ethereal presence. As a child, I thought these were residue of Farore herself, particles of life floating in the air. This detail made the forest seem as though it was favored or simply in touch with the gods.

stepping over pine cones, and passing through the floating specks of pollen. The breath of the wild⁸⁷, as it stroked the trees, was all he could hear outside of the noise he brought with him; a deafening silence.

This breath, as he walked, could be traced to the dispersed oaks, who bore in some sense, a hollowing face, a grieving, dying, open-mouthed being. Their branches were in such twisted, thick contortions, they were like painted glass in a cathedral, drawing attention at the window instead of to what lie beyond. That beyond was indeed accessible, but not knowable.

Ascending a small hill, he came to a dark green slope, over it, or along the backbone, in either direction was possible. Following the path left was dark and hollow, over the hill, more forest, and to the right yielded a narrow road, at the end of which, were jagged stone mountains, clumps of moss or far away trees like shedding skin, buried, tucked between them, in this far distance rose from the green, a steeple.

A castle.

M o o n w o o d F o r e s t⁸⁸

Shuffling from behind.

Turning, he found Shawn and Lucas, bewildered on approach.

“Ewan,” said Lucas, “Thank God you’re alive.”

Shawn gave a curt nod in his direction, “only we should do something about where we are.”

“You think we’re in another realm?” said Ewan.

“Maybe. Let’s have a look around.”

The three came to the top of the hill, following the trail towards the distant castle. Lucas removed his talisman and carried it in one hand, Ewan wished he had his sword on him. It was not long before Shawn whistled to himself, kicking nearby pine cones.

⁸⁷ Breath of the Wild is the title of the most recent Zelda (2017).

⁸⁸ In Dark Souls, whenever you enter a new area, this deep bell chimes, followed by superimposed text with an extended underline, giving the player a name for the location. This emphasis on places, giving them a title with a resounding introduction, grants them a weightiness. A similar thing happens in many N64 games such as Zelda: Ocarina of Time where you enter a new location and the camera flies through the environment, giving the player a brief overview of the vista ahead of them, before slowing to a stop looking at the player character on the threshold.

“If this is another realm,” Lucas began, half watching the trees overhead, “How do we get back to Lockheart?”

“I guess we’ll have to find a Golem.”

“Assuming there is one.”

“Hey, look over there,” Shawn stepped off the path, running down the left side of the hill.

“Don’t go off the path!” Lucas shouted after him.

“Have a look!”

Ewan turned to Lucas who was looking more worried by the second and said, “It’s best we don’t split up.”

Reluctantly, the two followed after Shawn, leaping over fallen tree trunks and kicking up oak leaves.

They found Shawn at the base of an expansive lake, and on their side was a small stone tower at the basin, half in the water, half in the sand. At the other side of the lake, the forest was even steeper, mountains in full green rose skyward. Here, the sky was finally visible, utterly empty, and looking to be about midday.

“Hello!?” Shawn called up the tower.

Lucas pointed down the shore, “There’s nothing. No piers or buildings. This place is deserted. Probably for a good reason, I’d wager.”

Shawn tried the door. He jiggled the knob some, made a face⁸⁹. Dissatisfied, but doubly disinterested, he let it go. He went to the water’s edge and cupped his hands, shouting across the lake, “HELLO! IS ANYONE OUT THERE?!”

Only the wind moved, in the trees, and the small curves in the otherwise flat expanse of the lake.

The sand drifted behind their feet as they went back, veering further along the path towards the castle, in keeping with the turn the road was making. Within moments, the forest swallowed them whole again, leaving the light subdued, split and sporadic as it attempted to plunge down through the web of branches.

Ewan’s heartbeat quickened.

He climbed over a trunk, feeling faint, unsure why. The others seemed to be fine.

⁸⁹ This door was not programed to open.

Slipping on a root, Lucas caught his arm, “Hey, you all right?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Get down,” Shawn said sharply. He took the boys by their shoulders, shoving them behind a fallen tree. “Have a look at that!” he whispered.

Ahead was a small log house; most of the roof had given out already, and the sides were covered in vines. The door was open, hanging limp.

Shawn, with a gleam in his eye, pointed to a rat as it scuttled along the base of the building. “Life,” he said.

They followed from a distance, watching the rat, being careful not to alarm it. The rat stopped at a hole in the wall and greeted a handful of other rats who squeaked quietly to each other.

Ewan felt his stomach convulse, acid rising up his throat.

Then he saw.

At the other end of the house moved a shadow, humanoid, though exceptionally skinny and frail. It had one long tail that flicked back and forth repeatedly. It may have been a monkey if not for its long bat ears.

Ewan’s teeth chattered; the Shadow was here. He wanted to speak, warn his friends, but he could not bring himself to, his teeth clenching.

The shadow half stepped, half hopped towards the rats.

“That thing must be eight feet tall at least,” whispered Shawn. “No... more than that. Hunched like that, it’s eight feet.”

“What is it? What’s casting it?”

The shadow reached down, pet the rats, who squeaked in response, not the slightest bit bothered.

“I don’t know. I’d say gargoyle, vampire maybe. But its only a shadow. By rights, it probably isn’t even real. Just some Illusionist trying to fuck with us.”

“Someone near by?”

“Or left in place to keep people out of the house. Might be something useful in there.” Shawn stood up.

“What are you doing?”

Shawn gave Lucas a shove as he stepped up to the house.

Ewan felt his head pound, pulsate and throb.

The shadow picked up a rat, the shadow of a rat that is, holding it in its palm and cradling it.

Shawn was close enough for it to notice him now, but it made no acknowledgment.

“Yeah, nice try,” said Shawn. He opened his palm, brandishing a tiny knife, the size of his finger, and threw it. The blade stuck into the wood, through the shadow’s head.

The shadow went on enjoying its pet.

Shawn scoffed.

“Shawn, get back here,” Lucas pleaded.

The shadow lifted the rat to its face with both palms. Then it enclosed all fingers around it, repositioned itself so that the entire body could direct all force into a long, intensive, squeeze. The rat squealed and shrieked, in agony. A bone snapped. Then, in an instant, it crushed the rat, spraying the wall in a thick smear of blood, but this was all only a shadow of blood.

Shawn turned around; and on his face was splattered deep red.

The Shadow stood up, facing them, and grew above the cabin, into the trees. The three bolted, heading instinctively to the place for which they came, the clearing.

They ran, stumbling, sliding down the mossy slope. Ewan could hear an elongated moan, the beast was inhaling, its body cast from tree to tree, enclosing the forest around them. The beams of light were gone. The floating pollen was gone. The forest did not look as if it were dark, for that would’ve contained color, but here, it was neutral, black like charcoal. Not even their footsteps or scrambling made noise.

The inhale, he could feel, a force pulling him back, but perhaps he was imagining.

All of this was in fact a dream.

The sweat came off on his hand in a clump of wet. He knew he was speaking, letting out groans of pain, but he could not hear them over the rumbling breath, a stench of burnt flesh, raw in places, and ash in others.

Eventually, he found the clearing, and the trees were now walls, and they were also darkened by the skin of the shadow. He looked back. Descending from the branches it came, and there was no where else to run that was not already infected with nondescript matter.

He dropped to the grass, covered his head, pleading with himself to close his eyes, but couldn’t. He stared at the twisted shape of moss, as the shadow landed on him, or perhaps passed through him; it was

impossible to tell. The moan relinquished some, then much, then it was gone. And very very faintly, light began to appear on the grass. He felt the wind blow into him and remembered to breathe, as he did, he could hear his own breath.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Feet on moss. A speck of pollen drifts by, slow and dim.

Ewan, carefully, brought himself to his feet.

Lucas and Shawn inspected the trees above them mostly, looking everywhere to locate the monster.

“What was that?” said Lucas in shock.

“Scared the shit out of me. That’s some jinx, if it is one.” Shawn spat in his hand and wiped the blood from his face.

“Ewan, are you all right? You look pale.”

Ewan sat down on the grass, “I just need a minute.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.”

“Better hurry it up. If that thing comes back, we need to be ready.”

“How are we suppose to fight a shadow?”

“I don’t know, guess we’ll have to figure it out as we go. Come on, let’s get a move on.”

“Where are you going? You can’t seriously mean we’re going back there.”

“Of course we are. That’s where it will be.”

“Where what will be?”

“Anything worth going for⁹⁰.”

Ewan, feeling a bit more balanced after a few minutes of walking, followed along with Lucas a few steps behind Shawn. They searched the log cabin, but there was nothing to recount, dusty broken furniture, a worn cloth, all rubbish⁹¹, and no rats.

But the shadow of a shadow rat’s bloodstain; that remained.

Shawn took them back over the hill, clinging to the other side near their arrival. The trees on this

90 Monsters routinely guard treasure.

91 Unless it’s Dark Souls, where sometimes you get an item called, “Rubbish”, which sometimes has value in trade, depending on which game in the series you’re playing.

side seemed to be abnormally large, their branches forging a canopy high above them. Occasionally leaves glide. The further they went, the darker it became.

“I don’t like this. Shawn! You think we should try a different way?”

They passed a few stone pillars rising from the ground, each of varying heights, varying degrees of decay, and all of them overcome with moss and vines. Lucas rolled his eyes at not getting an answer.

“Isn’t it strange?” said Ewan as they went through a stone building half buried, “strange that there should be ruins here with a castle not far ahead?”

“Unless they were part of the same castle like Lockheart,” Lucas responded. Shawn ducked under an arch, crawling through the grass as the other two merely angled their heads slightly down to pass.

“Speaking of which,” said Lucas as they came into the light, “when we left it was just after midnight, and yet this place is, well, it looks like we still have a few hours of daylight to burn.”

“This place may not have a day-night cycle⁹²,” Shawn piqued in.

“What makes you say that?”

Shawn shrugged, “Hunch.”

They climbed on top of the roof of a building that was only knee level exposed, but taller the further down the slope it went. Shawn didn’t, but Lucas and Ewan both took a glance down a hole to the grassy interior. Some of the open flower plants were below, pollen particles drifting through the hole. Satisfied, Lucas moved on, but Ewan got on his stomach and lowered his head inside. There were a few barrels and crates in one corner, at the bottom of the room, and two unlit torches on either side of an open arch.

Slumped against the other side was a girl, sleeping.

Ewan blinked.

He dropped down and crawled over to her. Then gently, pulled her hair back behind her ear.

It was Drew.

He shot his head out the door, “Hey! I found Drew!”

She was out cold, her face covered with splotches of dirt. Her mouth hung open, and she breathed

⁹² I remember first experiencing a game’s world transitioning from day to night (a day-night cycle) in *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, though it had been done much earlier. Since the characters are in another Realm, in which the rules of life, day-night cycles included, are not necessarily the same, they are correct to speculate this possibility. In *Zelda*, there is a place called the Sacred Realm, which is a world never fully explained, but it is implied to operate outside of the rules of reality where some will carry over and others will be undone completely.

heavily.

“Is she alive?” asked Lucas from the entrance.

“Yes, just sleeping.”

“See if you can wake her up,” said Shawn.

“I’m not sure I should.”

“We need answers, Ewan.”

Ewan held her shoulder and gave her a little shake.

Drew went limp even more.

“Oh my god.”

“She’s not dead, Lucas. I can hear her breathing.”

“Bring her out into the light, Ewan.”

“Me?”

“You can lift her can’t you?”

Ewan got down on one knee, slipped an arm under her legs and the other on her back, then slowly and gently carried her onto the slope, laying her on her back.

“She’s really out,” said Shawn. “Maybe she was jinxed. Lucas, give her a cure will you.”

Lucas looked stunned. “Oh! Right.” He bent down.

Holding his talisman in one hand, and resting the other on her neckline, he closed his eyes. After a moment with him muttering a few words under his breath, a bright gold light emanated out of Drew’s body. It started small, but burst to peak luminosity in less than a second, it did so with a sound, almost like a bell chime. Once this happened, liquid gold trails curled around her. And finally, a short flash as the light collectively sputtered into dust that drifted into the air and dissipated⁹³.

Drew’s eyes opened; before anything else, she coughed, turning on her side and heaving black spit in the grass.

“You’re all right, Drew,” said Lucas, one hand on her shoulder. “Take your time.”

She took a few deep breathes.

“What happened?” said Shawn.

“Give her a moment,” said Lucas, taken aback. “Let the miracle work.”

⁹³ In Dark Souls, healing spells are called Miracles, require a talisman to cast, and emit a gold light around the player when cast, but it isn’t uncommon for characters in many games to radiate in light when being healed.

Shawn rolled his eyes.

“How do you feel now?” Ewan asked, after Drew seemed to have collected herself. She leaned forward on her knees.

“I’m doing all right. Thank you. How long have I been gone?”

“Few days.”

“That long? I do feel like I’ve been sleeping for a while, but still. I hardly went anywhere before I was attacked.”

Ewan and Lucas exchanged a glance.

“Forest Troll, I think. He knows Sleep⁹⁴. I don’t quite remember how it happened, but I know he cast it and it only barely clipped me. I ducked into here and I guess he couldn’t find me.”

“Couldn’t he?” said Lucas, “Trolls have a good nose on ‘em. More likely something else got his attention.”

“Could’ve been the moss and dirt. I figured he could smell me. It was pretty musty in there.” She sighed. “I’m glad I’m not alone anymore.” And she gave Ewan a hug.

“We’ll add a Forest Troll to our list then,” said Shawn, “We should probably get moving before it gets dark.”

“Are you feeling well enough to walk? Need a Heal?”

Drew shook her head, “I can walk, just some food would be nice.”

The group pressed on. Lucas gave Drew all the mini muffins he had on him, but that was the extent of their rations.

The forest was thickening, the trees narrowing. The amount of pollen in the air growing, in number and variety, being now yellow, red, green, and blue. Lucas spotted a few dragonflies fluttering near some of the mushier patches in the wood. Ahead, the forest merged many types of trees and plants, ponds with frogs, and the multicolored pollen arose from flowers, and the air they breathed was moist.

94 “Sleep” is a spell in Dragon Warrior. While the player character can learn it, many monsters can as well. Dragon Warrior is known for having bridges or other narrow gaps that separate portions of land. The further out the player ventures, the more dangerous the enemies become. Encountering a monster that can put you to sleep (or something else out of the ordinary) is a clear sign that you’ve ventured into a more dangerous territory.

Thicket Grove

“Drew, do you remember how you got here?” asked Ewan.

“Through the Moonwood, right? He opened his mouth up and before I knew what was happening, I was falling. And then... I don’t know.”

“That’s how it happened for us too,” Lucas confirmed. “I still don’t get why it happened though.”

“Could be the time or the people,” said Shawn as they passed a toad half submerged in a puddle. “There’s probably someone behind it, jinxing the Moonwood into a portal. At first I was thinking we were in just a mind game, but it’s too detailed and interactive for that. Unless there are a multitude of jinxes concealing everything we’re engaging with.”

They came to a stone bridge, arching over a quiet stream. Shawn took some of the water, breathed a dispelling jinx of dust into it, and said that it probably wasn’t poisonous. He took some. Drew, who was particularly thirsty had some as well. Lucas didn’t trust it. Neither did Ewan, but he was thirsty.

They climbed through the green and brown brush, passing over fallen trees, some with thick roots poking out in twisted contortions, crunching muddy leaves, and hearing the occasional frog croak. Along the path, where it was most watery, were long stalk plants with flower petals in a tulip form, an occasional soft glowing violet mushroom. And there was one flower that had two blue leaves opening on either side, with a protruding stem that had a glowing red tip, this one, Ewan noted to be rare.

For a little while he kicked himself for not having any when he had the chance, but as they rounded a somewhat high road, Ewan thought he heard the trickling of water once again.

“Still don’t want that water, Ewan?” said Shawn.

He nodded and took a sip.

Looking down the stream, he noticed something. “Hey... that’s the bridge we crossed isn’t it?”

It wasn’t far, a short jogging distance.

The other three looked puzzled.

“We’ve been walking longer than that,” said Lucas.

Shawn shook his head, “Well, shit. Now we’re lost.” He sat on a tree stomp, swatting away a buzzing dragonfly.

“What do we do now?” said Drew.

“It’s not entirely a circle, but it’s taken us a long time to get here,” said Shawn. “We’re not making progress, and it’s been getting darker.”

“So there is a day-night cycle?” Lucas jested.

Shawn ignored him.

Dense as the forest was, seeing the bridge a second time made Ewan wonder. The formation of the hillside ensured there was always a slope, they were heading towards it when they crossed the bridge, and they did a fair amount of climbing. That meant the road must have curved at some point to bring them back down again.

At the time, this wasn’t precisely his thought process, but in the moment, he felt something click into place.

“I’ve been here before,” he said, with an air of mysticism.

“So it was poisoned,” said Lucas.

“I’m serious,” Ewan assured. “I mean, not here exactly, but someplace similar.”

“What do you mean?”

“This way,” said Ewan, trotting down the mush to the bridge. When they arrived, he took the path again, just as they’d done the first time.

“Ewan, we’re just going to go through the loop again,” said Shawn.

“I have an idea,” he said, noting the tree trunks as they began the climb up the slope. Finally they came to the one he was looking for.

He lit his Chrono Candle and held it to the tangled dead roots at the bottom of the trunk.

“Are you insane!” called Lucas.

The turquoise flames caught the branches and burned them away within a few seconds, leaving them without a trace.

“No forest fire?” said Lucas.

Ewan wasn’t convinced. He tried another tree stump, many of them, he now realized had thick entangled roots on their ends, and each burned away, until he found one that held an open stairwell.

“How did you know that was there?” said Lucas in amazement.

“A secret to everyone,” said Ewan, mostly to himself⁹⁵.

“What?”

“I think... well, honestly, I’m not exactly sure I can explain any of it. It’s just something similar to back home.”

Shawn glanced up the stairway, “Know what’s up there?”

Ewan shook his head, “It’s not an exact replica.”

Shawn nodded, not looking like he believed him. But he went up anyway, with the others trailing. They came to a door that was splintered open, ripped apart from the center, hole big enough to step through.

Inside was a circular room, stone walls and flooring, racks for weapons, treasure chests, a table with figurings displayed on a map, and a glassless window where a tree had grown through it. There was also a ladder in the center of the room, leading to an open hole in the roof.

“What a find!” said Lucas. “Think it’s safe?”

“I’d say the entrance is cryptic enough,” said Shawn. Most of the chests were already open, but there were some that contained items of value. They found black leather attire (rouge-like design) which was too big to fit anyone but Shawn. He donned it saying it might come in handy. They also found a blue gemstone ring that was surrounded by a silver metal in a pattern reminiscent of roots. There was some debate among them whether or not this ring might curse someone if worn, but it seemed valuable whatever the case so they took it with them. And lastly was a strange key. It was quite large, gold, with a heart shaped loop at the top. There was no engraving or anything to indicate what it would unlock, but it seemed significant enough to warrant taking for the time being. Lucas kept the ring and Ewan took the key.

Climbing the ladder led to a dome shaped roof. The faded wood panels were chipped and broken, and most of their surroundings were covered in light green leaves twirling and flailing in the wind. Nevertheless, one side was open, leaving a clear view of a familiar path, the one leading out of the thicket.

Boom.

The earth shook, lasting only a pulse, but heavy enough to send them all reeling, grabbing the roof

⁹⁵ Zelda series creator Shigeru Miyamoto has said that part of Zelda 1's design philosophy was in sharing secrets. This would have been before the internet so the only way players could discover the many secrets in Zelda would be through trial and error, strategy guides, and/or sharing discovered secrets with one another. Perhaps what was meant by the “secret to everyone” was not directed to Link himself, but the player.

to regain balance.

“What was that?” said Lucas, annoyed.

Drew looked about to panic. “I... I think that’s it.” She pointed to the trees, and in them, moved a dark green skinned giant. From someplace high, came the face of a scarred Troll, teeth clenched over the lips, drooling. Its eyes were orange like iron from a forgery.

“The Troll,” said Lucas, “so that’s what you meant.”

The Troll let out a low grumble. Then through the thicket, Ewan could see it raise an enormous spiked club over its head.

“Jump!” screamed Shawn.

Without needing the warning, the whole group leapt from the tower, only the moment before the club came down, shredding the building apart. As the party tumbled through vegetation, stone bricks crashed all around them. One hit Ewan in the shoulder, but it burst into dust.

“Come on, run!” Shawn tugged on Ewan’s sleeve, and the rest of them were off.

Great thuds and shakes came from behind as the Troll rummaged through the forest. The long cracking of trees as they were forced over, landing not far behind with a heavy crash.

The group managed to exit the thicket, out into the grassy hillside, but all this did was expose them. And by now the Troll was much too close.

Ewan glanced back to see the Troll raise one hand, propel it forward; then its entire body flashed white⁹⁶. Tiny particles sprang up from the ground around them; then they all exploded like thunder, hurling everyone in various directions.

The Troll stepped forward, throwing out its arm again, and this time tossing a murky, mist cloud into the air.

Lucas had his head buried in the grass, but Shawn and Drew took the full force of it, and instantly the two dozed off, collapsing to the ground.

“Lucas! He put them to sleep!” Ewan shouted.

Lucas raised his head to see, then stood up and faced the Troll. The Troll grabbed him by his ankle and raised him to eye level, which was at least a redwood in height.

The Troll made two thick inhales with its nose. Then frowning, it lowered Lucas and casually tossed

96 In Dragon Warrior, enemies will flash white to indicate they are casting a spell.

him aside, as if this was an item it owned but wasn't interested in at the moment.

It took a massive step forward, bent down and sniffed Shawn. Not pleased with him either, it sniffed Drew. Its ears perked up and it sniffed again. Then it took her in its enormous hand.

"Hey!" Ewan called, standing up. "Put her down!"

The Troll, noticing Ewan, leaned forward. As he stood, an inch under the nose, feeling his clothes go up with the inhales, Ewan cursed himself for not taking some kind of offensive action, but the sudden approach of the monster paralyzed all strategy. He couldn't fight this behemoth.

The Troll sniffed him several times, when the first few weren't enough, it sniffed deeper and longer. But eventually, it wasn't interested in him either, and it got up and marched off toward the castle.

And Ewan's vision went black.

Lockheart Castle Grounds

"Unless you want to waste time scouring every inch of Moonwood forest, this is the best plan of action," Ewan told Lucas as the two made their way across the castle grounds to the Astral Observatory.

"I just don't know what help you expect to find from the class kiss up."

Ewan swallowed. He knew what he was about to ask was unreasonable, but the fact remained that Drew was in trouble and so were other girls at the school. After he had awoken, he found himself back in his own bed, as if the expedition in the Moonwood hadn't happened. Lucas and Shawn reported similarly.

"Guess you can exit by sleeping," Shawn had concluded.

"Then how come Drew and the others haven't returned?"

He shrugged.

"Maybe they're in a place where they can't?" Lucas suggested. "Like a magic barrier preventing them."

From there, the chief concern was to tell the Guild officials, but after numerous attempts to reenter the Moonwood, none of them had been successful.

"Could be just that," said Lucas, as they headed across the overhead bridge. "Maybe we can't go

back.”

“I don't think so. I think the Moonwood has been jinxed, and whoever jinxed it is looking for someone in particular. If you think about it, even the Troll behaved this way. It only took Drew, so she must fit the profile.”

They reached the main doors, heard them creek as they pulled them open.

Astral Observatory

The Astral discipline opened up to a hall filled with books and staircases that rotated around the shelves, spiraled up to various floors, and there were lifts that would take you to telescope rooms. And Ewan knew which room he wanted.

It was circular, a glowing constellation displaying itself above a disk shaped table, with a staircase to an upper floor that had an alchemy table and a large telescope pointing through a crystal dome ceiling.

Melissa was reclined in the telescope chair when they climbed the steps. She was in her black Pupil robes, and all her usual purple; earrings, eyeshadow, nail polish.

“Melissa, we’ve got to talk to you,” said Ewan.

“Hmmm Seracle is being particularly annoying this evening.”

“Melissa!”

“Oh, hello boys,” she said, not looking in their direction. “There must be some reason I can’t find it. It’s been nearly a week now—” she abruptly stopped, looked at them inquisitively. “I don’t get many visitors. And the stars are hiding themselves from me. Which can only mean... my fate is somehow intertwined with yours, isn’t it?”

Lucas rolled his eyes, “well we did come to talk to you. So there’s that.”

“Indeed,” she hopped from the seat, “what ails the two of you?”

“It’s Drew, we’ve found her, and probably the other girls who went missing also,” said Ewan.

“They’re inside the Old Moonwood tree in the library. I was in there studying the other night when the mouth opened and inside was a portal to... well, a forest. We’re not sure where exactly. Lucas and Shawn

came too, and we found Drew inside. Look I know how crazy this—”

“When was it? Was it midnight?”

“When what?”

“When it swallowed you whole?”

“I suppose it could’ve been midnight.”

“We’ll go with that for now. So a mysterious forest, tucked deep inside the bowels of the Moonwood. Vivian had said she was going to lock herself in the library until she finished her essay on proper fairy care, and that was the last anyone ever heard of her. Seems to me we have a rouge Magician in our midst; hoping to ensnare those who linger too long between the pages of books. Now, who could gain from such a plot?”

“What are you going on about?” said Lucas. “Girls in the school are being held captive inside that world within the Moonwood. We tried telling the Guild Masters, but they said it wasn’t jinxed, and they even tested it, set up patrols all through last night.”

“Captured? By what?”

Ewan took a deep breath. “Well, that’s just it. There’s a Troll in the forest, a big one, knows a few spells. I watched him sniff us all, Lucas, Shawn, me, but Drew was the only one that caught his attention. He took her inside the castle there.”

As he spoke, Melissa twirled her short black curls, eyes ambling to the space behind him.

“So I was wondering... well, it’s just that it seems the Troll, and maybe whoever jinxed the Moonwood, is looking for someone in particular. And I think it might be a girl our age. We can’t get back in without one. So, what do you think of coming along?”

“But of course they’re looking for a girl, it’s in the prophecy.”

“Prophecy?”

“Naturally,” Melissa led them downstairs and navigated her way through the books along the shelves. “Some fifty years ago, Emperor Vangalt made a prophecy that said the necromancers would sacrifice a young girl to cast a spell that would birth their freedoms, and that this would all happen at the turn of the century, which is neigh. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it. I can’t be sure of the finer points, but I now suspect necromancers are behind all of this. Perhaps they don’t know who it is yet, or perhaps they already know and are attempting to lure her into the Moonwood for some unseen reason.”

“So you’ll come with us?”

“With you? What for?”

“To help us. Even if we could get into the tree, there’s no way we could defeat that forest Troll.”

“And,” Lucas tapped Ewan’s shoulder, “show her the key we picked up.”

Ewan held out the golden key from the guard tower. “We don’t know what it opens yet, but if one of us could get inside the keep, perhaps we can use it to rescue Drew.”

Melissa stared at them both with one eyebrow raised. “You want me to act as bait at the very least, and as rouge at the very most?”

Ewan half shrugged, “Or at least recommend someone.”

“I’m afraid I must decline. Getting swept up in Troll prisons is not my area of expertise.”

Lucas and Ewan looked to the ground.

“But that doesn’t mean I won’t help you. Fate has brought us together this night, and I will honor that by offering the skills that I do possess.”

“How?”

“Well, assuming your hypothesis is correct, that whatever forces are beyond this want a young woman, and with the Guild in disbelief, the only thing we can do is play into their hand. And gamble on the usefulness of that key,” she pointed to it. Then she pointed to the two of them, “Thus one or both of you should disguise yourselves as young women, and see where that strategy leads.”

“You’re joking!” said Lucas in horror.

“That won’t work. The Troll sniffed all of us boys and ignored us. He even sniffed me multiple times and wasn’t convinced. So unless you’re thinking of a very strong perfume.”

“No, no, no. If you met Drew, that means she escaped, at least partially. And Drew is not particularly fond of perfumes. So that means the Troll is identifying candidates for the prophecy by smell. And besides, the biggest concern is who’s going to be waiting for you inside the castle. If captured by the Troll, you’ll need a disguise that’ll convince absolutely everyone.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Evereace.”

“What?”

“Sex changing potion. We’ll transform one of you into a girl. No one will see that coming! Sound

good?”

Lucas shook his head, “Have you gone completely mental? We can’t do that!”

“Why not? I’ve been waiting for a good excuse to try this brew. It’ll be challenging, but I have the utmost confidence. Hmmm,” she looked the two of them over as if they were the canvas to her paintbrush.

“Yes, Ewan, you should be the one to take it.”

“Me?”

“Certainly. You’ll be at significantly less risk than Lucas.”

Lucas frowned, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well for starters, you gawked at the very idea. But Ewan doesn’t seem to be the least bit bothered, are you Ewan?”

Ewan thought for a moment.

“You see? Besides, Ewan, you said the Troll sniffed you significantly more times than the others. It’s possible you have more estrogen in your blood than the average male. Trust me, I know my potions. We can make this happen. That is of course, if you both can trust me?”

All it took was Ewan to remind Lucas of Drew’s desperate state, and an assurance that this could work, and the team put their heads together.

Brewing the Evereace proved to be a fairly involved process. First Melissa compiled an enormous list of information about Ewan; asking him questions largely concerned with his birth date; the time of day it was, the weather, and then it branched into interests he had; his favorite color, favorite food, what he goes to bed thinking about. She even took his attunement into account; letting out a curt, “huh” upon seeing his averaged scores between Zeal and Consonance.

Then there was the gathering of materials, and for that, Melissa accompanied Ewan and Lucas to the Moonwood one evening. Sure enough, the moon opened at midnight, and the two went in. Reluctantly, Ewan and Lucas made their way back into thicket groove, picked a few flowers, seeds, and berries, then nestled down under a half submerged castle room and drifted off. And like before, they awoke in their beds, and with all the items they had acquired from the trip.

Within a few days, the brew was complete, and Melissa said she would bring it to the Moonwood a half hour before it was time to enter. Though Shawn hadn’t spoken with Ewan much since the return, telling him he had to focus on his school work, he ultimately assured Ewan that when the time came, he’d

be there to aid him.

There was more to prepare beyond the Evereace and some weapons though. Lucas perfected a healing solution and made a dozen or so doses of red potions. He also brought food rations (dried fruits, meats, and nonperishables mostly), and a handful of other adventuring gear; binoculars, rope, hunting traps, cooking pans and utensils, blankets, and holy water. Admittedly, he looked rather silly walking into the school library with a pack the size of which made him seem like he was about to climb a mountain and make camp for a week away from civilization. But he didn't seem to notice the embarrassment. And it wasn't long before the evening set in, and the library was all but emptied.

Ewan, Lucas, and Melissa gathered next to the Moonwood and went through their plan once again.

The Moonwood gave a long yawn.

"Remember, this solution will only last a few hours; by sunrise, you'll be a boy again."

"Right," said Ewan, taking the bottle of a particularly airy violet potion. It was also icy cold, Melissa had mentioned it would need to be chilled.

"I also brought these; you might want to go to the restroom and put them on." Melissa handed Ewan a green Lockheart tunic.

Ewan took it hesitantly, "Is this necessary? They're pretty much the same aren't they?"

"You have to look the part Ewan, so trust me. Besides, you'll be more comfortable this way."

Ewan nodded, took everything and faced the bathroom, but stopped short. "Uh... which one am I supposed to use now?"

"The girl's Ewan. Everyone's either gone or on their way out from the library by now. You may as well change, take the potion and everything; we've only a few minutes before midnight."

"All right, I'm going," said Ewan.

"And Ewan,"

"Yeah?"

"Mind the taste..." said Melissa gravely.

Ewan hesitantly nodded, then went into the girl's bathroom.

Despite it looking neigh identical to the boy's bathroom, Ewan couldn't help but feel like he shouldn't be doing this. He told himself that if someone did come in, the least he could do is apologize and abruptly leave, pretending he was confused. But for the time being, he locked himself in a stall and

undressed.

The potion smelled sweet, like a bouquet of flowers. But potions were often deceiving. He took a deep breath, meaning to drink it in one swish, but the moment the glass touched his lips, he had an abrupt change of heart and settled for a small sip. He swallowed it fast, only vaguely catching a strange juicy taste. It did not last long, nor did it leave an aftertaste either.

Feeling a bit more confident, he took a more reasonable sip. Then he downed the whole thing.

It was absolutely delicious! Tangy, and the icy temperature immediately warmed as it went down his throat.

It reminded him of cotton candy in that it was hard to pin down, warping through the mouth on its own, but at no point did it taste bad. It was not very strong, just distinctly succulent.

With it down, he waited for his body to react. And nothing did. He waited. Still nothing.

He sat down on the closed toilet and wondered if the potion had been prepared correctly. Perhaps he should change into the new clothes... but if he did that and nothing happened, he'd look foolish. He could change into his old clothes, but then, what if the potion merely had a delay.

Propping his head up with his hands, he noticed that his cheeks felt unusually soft.

"Oh!" he said, and his voice surprised him. His voice, much higher now, was quite unique compared to his old one, and it was strange to hear someone you've never met before come out of your own mouth.

With those signs as confirmation, he slipped into the new clothes and stepped out of the stall.

In the mirror, he noticed quite a significant change had occurred, but he was not unrecognizable. His hair was growing out especially so, gradually, but enough for him to notice it gathering length if held in the palm of his hand.

The restroom door opened, and Ewan's heart pounded repeatedly against his ribcage, only vaguely slowing at the sight of Melissa.

"Oh, you scared me," he said.

"Ah, success," said Melissa, "not that I doubted my skills in the slightest. How did it taste? Dreadful?"

For a minute Ewan felt like he should lie. But as he stood there trying to figure out why he felt this way, he changed his mind. "It wasn't bad actually. Very sweet."

“Really?” Melissa seemed very surprised, shocked almost. “That is very odd indeed. I’ll have to add that to my notes. Anyway, you ought to come out now, we’re ready to launch the quest.”

“Right.”

Ewan followed Melissa out of the bathroom to find Lucas talking with a confused Shawn.

When Shawn saw him, he gave Ewan the harshest look he’d ever seen. “What the hell did you do?” he said.

“We,” began Melissa, “changed him into a girl. The Troll is on the hunt for them, it seems. So Ewan will be our surprise attack. Quite ingenious, I know.”

“Shut up.”

Melissa took a step back.

“Ewan, that’s fucked up.”

The next few seconds felt like hours, Ewan awkwardly trying to find a place for his arms that wouldn’t draw attention to the fact that he’d just swapped sexes. But he couldn’t, it was impossible to resume old familiar stances and postures because they now felt like they would look strange, feel strange. He considered doing typical female gestures, but since that wouldn’t make sense with who everyone around him actually knew him to be, he found himself locked in the middle, and an overwhelming urge to be back to normal.

And yet, an unquenchable desire to *not* be back to normal.

Shawn walked out, a cold breeze from outside chilled Ewan’s arms and he rubbed them.

No one said anything for a few minutes. Then Lucas, who was curious to look at Ewan, but trying not to overdo it, said, “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” he said, though it came out so quickly, it was clear to everyone, including himself, that he hadn’t actually considered the question. He was feeling threatened, a kind of threatening to his person that he could not defend. It was terrifying how quickly his friendship with Shawn dissipated before him. And yet, truthfully, he did feel fine. More than fine. Before he stepped out of the restroom, he was feeling a sense of exhilaration. This was it, they were going on a rescue mission, and Ewan hadn’t this whole time stopped to consider how others might perceive his new identity.

“It’s...” Melissa began, “It’s only temporary.”

“Right,” he nodded.

The Moonwood's eyes burst open, filled with glistening stars. It opened its mouth, as wide as it could go and held itself there.

"Well," said Lucas, "we're on."

Ewan took his sword and shield from Lucas and strapped them to his belt. Then he and Lucas faced the image of the forest landscape through the watery glow of the Moonwood's open mouth.

Lucas swallowed, "Ladies first?" he shrugged.

Ewan smiled and stepped through.

M o o n w o o d F o r e s t

Ewan and Lucas didn't go far before two more people fell in behind them to the clearing. One was a confused and annoyed Melissa, and the other was the boy Owen from their Sword and Sorcery class.

Melissa gave Owen a shove, "You brat! You pushed me!"

Owen only glanced her way, taking in the environment.

"You're Owen right?" asked Ewan. "Were you watching us?"

Owen looked guilty, then slowly, he nodded.

"Well now we're in this mess together," said Melissa.

"Oh let it go Melissa," urged Lucas. "You can just wait there and fall asleep if you want. That's how you get back, Owen. But anyway, Ewan and I are on a special mission to save Drew and the other girls who've gone missing."

Owen perked up at this, collected himself and went up to them.

"No, Owen, you can't come along. Sorry, but it's dangerous. You should stay behind and protect Melissa."

"I don't need protection, just general human decency," protested Melissa.

"Right," Lucas rolled his eyes again.

"We should all come," said Ewan. "We're already here. Let's see this through. Besides, Lucas, you could use the help once I'm captured."

Owen nodded along to this idea.

Speaking was going to take some getting used to, Ewan thought. His voice was so... different. Nice sounding.

“Well you’ll fair just fine without me. I made you the potion, that’s what I was supposed to do. Now I’m going back home.”

“Suit yourself,” said Lucas. And the three boys started off; well, the two boys and Ewan who was now, for the foreseeable future, female.

Not more than a minute had passed however, than footsteps showed up behind them. No one said anything as Melissa merged in with the group.

The party went to the edge of thicket groove, found an underpass for the group to hide under, as Ewan milled about. But it didn’t take long before loud thumping footsteps revealed a grey skinned behemoth.

The Troll stomped over to Ewan and bent down.

Ewan took a deep breath. If this didn’t work, he may have to face the monster in combat, and the odds of that going well were... well... slim.

But after a single sniff, the Troll was convinced, swiping Ewan up in his arms and marched off to the castle. As per the plan, the others were meant to remain silent so as not to draw attention back to them, especially now that Melissa was a likely target also.

Ewan held the hilt of his sword and the handle of his shield. He felt his heart burn with both fear and elation. It was dangerous, but he could handle it; in fact, he had never felt more sure of himself than he did now. This was it.

The Troll went up to the castle gate, climbed over and stood in the main courtyard. Then it brought Ewan up to a hole in the roof of a building and released him. The release felt more like a throw however, and Ewan felt the air escape his lungs as he fell into darkness.

Interlude #7

Extremity

I am trapped between authenticity and credibility.

Fantasy and reality.

You'll hear this from me a lot, but it's worth stating ad nauseam. Fantasy has obsessed itself with the simplicity of light and dark, good and evil. One divinely chosen, a special person that the universe revolves around who is morally good. Versus another person who is decidedly evil:

READY?⁹⁷

FIGHT!

This extremist mapping is comforting to us because it requires no effort, a true depiction of something completely un-fucking true.

The story I'm writing, or trying to write, is about fire and death, life and dying.

⁹⁷ Nearly all fighting games have this set up; big bold letters and an announcer voice that says these lines.

#9 Boss Battle⁹⁸

Threshold Guardian, its Aesthetic and Trials

A n c i e n t D e a t h w o o d

The face hung, would have fallen if only the rotting were more than magic. The sculpted face of the Ancient Deathwood leaned open mouthed, four fang teeth scaling the agape mouth. Eyes sealed shut from all, but otherwise uncovered. Her face bore streaking creases, trailing down her neck, down her trunk, even into the many legs of exposed roots. If only water poured in the crevasses, giving life to the form again. As it was, the wood was deeply brown, not dead at all, but long on the path of rotting.

Her hair, as it may be called, rising from the hump of her back, was a canopy of bramble, poking, jabbing sticks, thick nearest the core but reaching far, shivering down the further out they went. The density both hid and confined her. Her arms lay in her lap, open palmed, spiny prickles of un-leafed sticks. And in them lay the long decomposed remains of a corpse, in frailty.

It was dusk, the sky formless yet grey and frost; no light or color punctured, it would have broken, inevitably dispersed by the branches. Dead pines were few but present, reaching above the walls, but not at the face of the larger chapel. The trees strove for an unreachable sky as traces of fog caressed their scalps.

The Ancient Deathwood, bouquet of web woods, sprawled over this left side of the cemetery. The layout was reminiscent of an old church, designed to reflect a cross if one saw it from high above. However, the building that once formed this was now mere portions of cobblestone, destroyed pillars, chunks of walls, and everything succumbing to moss. Thus the environment was unpredictable, erratic; staircases reached platforms of partial destruction, a series of arcades that was irrational now, sectioning

⁹⁸ Boss battles are a particular highlight among fantasy dungeon crawlers, and games in general. There are no hard-fast traditions as to how exactly this is supposed to play out or what it entails, but the general sentiment is to have a climatic moment facing off against a monster or villain with presumably far superior powers than the player. Sometimes bosses are merely an aesthetic, being much easier than everything else. Zelda bosses frequently dip into this. Dark Souls on the other hand, gives them more of a traditional feeling, making them exceptionally difficult, typically with phases, and rewards. It is sometimes said that bosses are meant to serve as testing the player's skills, a check to see if they've mastered the game's mechanics thus far, and while this is often true, the aesthetic principles are always a highly considered point.

off more tombstones, cobble, but the arches at least were connecting the surrounding buildings with the towering steeple.

The cemetery had no foreseeable exit, the few doors in the encompassing buildings were flooded with boulders or boarded up with planks that drove into them from the ground, all providing no foreseeable entrance either. The doors to the main chapel were the only two undamaged and unblocked, two black iron rings for handles.

Black iron bars isolated tombstones that were larger, with sculpted statues of knights, maidens in gowns, or church officials, none of them peasants. The placement of grave sites was also patternless, as if new generations came to bury their dead, not realizing this had already served as this home for centuries. And there were weapons; swords, spears, axes, wooden shields, bows, and arrows, plunged into the ground, driven into the grass, acting like metal-forestry.

The courtyard bore few flowers, small and white.

Ewan picked himself up, the tall blades of grass encompassing his peripherals, and above, the web of hair from the Ancient Deathwood. Near him were the remains of the wooden elevator, shattered, and dilapidated.

He noticed at once the hostility of the air, like breathing the stench of loss; heavy, musty, impossible to reduce. Instinctively recoiling, he graced a tombstone, above which was a stone woman, her hands encompassing her face. The inscription read:

*Saint Matilda*⁹⁹

Olis 437 - Irro 487

Here lies the mother of the shamed.

May god forgive what man could not.

Then arose his companions, from their soft beds of moss. The sight of each other sufficed for words, for all of them were in horrified awe.

Drew came alongside Ewan and read the inscription aloud, "I know who this is; the mother of the

⁹⁹ The proceeding passage is designed to give context/lore to the boss. In Dark Souls, bosses drop a Soul Item that gives the player a description of who the boss was, what became of them, etc.. Typical to Dark Souls, bosses are given only vague hints throughout; item descriptions, characters speaking of them in passing, and the like.

shamed is an old story. Long ago, during the Age of Darkness, a group of newly appointed Knights in service to the house of Lerna were called upon to kill the Darkborn.”

The statues of knights, faces under helms, the grass crawled from the earth, encompassing their bodies. They hung onto long blades, bodies frail from fought.

“The Darkborn had amassed an assault on Castle Dranquill. Their methods were brutal, enslaving some and massacring others. When the time came for the Knights to aid the people; the extent of the devastation left them fearful, and they fled. They were young at the time, barely men. Or so it is said. Others say they fought them, but when they realized the fight would not be won with sheer force, that then they retreated.”

The moss both cradled and consumed them, painting them emerald. Yet these knights were buried long ago, artists crafting their souls in stone, inscribing hollow sentimentality on the pedestals above their decomposed corpses in the soil.

“The Knights fled to a Divine Chapel, and pleaded with the maiden who lived there for forgiveness. She took them all in. This Saint would become known as Mother of the Shamed, by the Vellsaunt family. The same family who pursued these knights and barricaded them within the church boundaries.”

Near the Ancient Deathwood, arose the flesh of men long deceased. Their arms propelled to the skin before resting on the crosses and the brittle blades, heaving themselves from the earth as the soil crumbled away from pale skin, wrapped in hardened vines.

“Eventually, the Darkborn came for them, and the knights and the mother were forced to fight within the confines of the chapel courtyard.”

They crowded around the Ancient Deathwood. Lucas, who was near, had not seen them.

“And as it is told—”

Ewan withdrew his sword and shield. He ran.

“they died, unable to strive enough to save themselves. Forgiven, yet sanctified not.”

Lucas, approached the corpse in the Deathwood’s arms, peering curiously.

Ewan steeled himself.

Lucas reached for the trunk.

“Lucas, don’t!”

The Ancient Deathwood awoke.

Her eyes were hollow, black pits, unmoving, unshakable, unnatural. She raised her head, an echoing creek. Drooling, she unleashed a piercing scream, a wrathful accusation, and as the two backed away, she laid the corpse in her hands aside, anchored them forward.

“I didn’t touch it,” Lucas pleaded.

The corpses engaged them, brandishing the blades from the earth. One of them towered above the others, with two longswords. Though eyes hollow, he gazed upon them, shuffled their way. Around his neck was a chain, a golden key tied to it¹⁰⁰.

Ewan raised his shield as a flurry of sweeping slashes hurled toward him. The cuts drove through his legs, opened his stomach, and he collapsed, searing burns throughout.

Gold burst upon him as his body restored itself, and steadily, forcefully, lifted himself up. Lucas, talisman in one hand, Ewan’s arm in the other, pushed him from the knight. The blue glow of an arrow flew overhead, piercing the skeleton's chest. Drew notched another.

A spitting screech from the Deathwood, a faint cloud of brown swept throughout, a stench of foul decay, impossible to cough.

The skeleton knight lifted both swords again. An arrow delayed him, and the other corpses converged. Vivian lanced them, shielding herself, and the others in a small garden.

Lucas collapsed, his face vile green. Pores split, spouting branches. He cried.

So were the others. Vivian, on her knees, palms open before her, staring at them in horror as they spouted small twigs. Melissa and Owen ambled their way to the ground.

Ewan could feel the disease underneath the softness of his skin, eroding. It was seeking yielding, for a soul it could burrow in, feed off of, a soul in sacrifice. A soul willing death.

Drew, eyes shut, sang to herself, an aura containing her. With the rising of her voice, so the aura, a golden green glow, heart-beating from her core, showing through them. Air filled with drifting glows of pollen, soothed the skin.

He rose, faced the death knight, who was now upon him. He deflected, leaped aside where the swings would have cut too deep to withstand. When the knight drew into himself, so Ewan lunged

¹⁰⁰In *Zelda 1*, there is a group of skeletons in the first dungeon, one of which has a key that is visible on a layer under the enemy sprite. Additionally, the original draft of *Ewan Krook* was called, *Ewan Krook and the Golden Key*, the key being the macogffin for the plot. It being gold is a throwback to my original draft in 2007, now worn by a skeleton leader as was done in *Zelda 1*.

forward, cutting the branches, the skin, spilling a dark violet blood down its side.

The Knight threw himself into Ewan's shield, splitting it in half, driving both blades into him, kicked into a pillar.

Shakily, lips to the glass of a red potion, he drank. Within moments, the wounds receded, he ambled to his feet.

Vivian was under the Knight, thrusting a lance into the ribcage; dark shrouded eyes vanished into true hollowness. The corpse fell to the side.

Ewan came alongside Vivian, the two pushed back the onslaught, as Luna drifted between them, alighting their movements in blue magic.

Ewan birthed a fireball in his palm; slung, the corpse relinquished from auburn flame.

Vivian held her shield before her, Luna swirling round, glowing blue, the blades unable to seize her.

The army fell.

The bell tolled¹⁰¹.

The scream pushed from afar.

This rose the dead once more.

"Ewan," came Melissa's call, "can you burn the Deathwood?"

He nodded amongst the disquiet within.

"Then Drew bless him, and leave us."

The others looked in disbelief, horror of death at their feet.

Then Lucas raised his talisman, while gripping a branch as it burst from his neck. Drew enclosed her palms, encircled in gold.

Owen, holding onto a sword in the earth, extended a hand, flowing a stream of magenta from the Deathwood, into Drew. Melissa held her crystal ball, casting illusions of the corpses, their movements appearing earlier than they would in reality.

And Drew sang; a building triumph. Dew spores enveloped Ewan, flowing with the thump of his heart.

Ewan's body surged, he breathed into his sword, stoked a most brilliant red; whipping, crackling,

¹⁰¹In Dark Souls, there is a bell in the Undead Parish. You have to defeat the Belltower Gargoyles in order to ring it and progress into the rest of the game. Whenever a player rings the bell, and they are online, you are able to hear it being rung in your game, assuming you are online. It is a reminder that others have recently prevailed against what are established to be a make or breaking point for most players in the game.

spitting sparks.

Fire streaked behind the movements of the swings, as he cut into the corpses, setting them ablaze. Were he wounded, auxiliary soon surfaced, healing, if not already withstanding. Vivian drew agro, surviving pursuing corpses, those dead slowly raising again at the whims of the screeching tree.

Ewan faced the Ancient Deathwood who looked upon him in somber melancholy, the wood hardened beyond soothing.

With a semblance of respite, he drove the searing blade in the trunk's core, inside, feeling the pierce of flesh. Withdrawing, flames consumed the decrepit life-giver. The fire burned around her face, into her hair, until the canopy lost support, crumbling, leaving the ceiling open to the murky sky overhead.

They leaned back, gazing into the sky as rain droplets gently grazed their cheeks.

The corpses collapsed, rose no more.

Deathwood held her sculpted face, the face of long disowned malice; unable to refuse the desires of fire.

They gathered themselves; the burning tree behind them.

Surveying the darks of her eyes lose form, the limbs gave.

Owen lifted the key from the corpse; gestured the chapel doors.

The Ancient Deathwood moaned. At the beckoning, the corpses pulled, crawling. They burrowed themselves in the open crevasses, gripped the branches, grasping desperately to be held. All the while, the fire; the fire, sparing none.

The party observed from afar, their postures hung low, bangs leaning forward, everything breathing, hot against the chilled rain.

Their bodies sank; swallowed by fire, water, the wood and the earth.

The trunk split open; and from the interior emerged a deathly corpse, with drooping black hair. Her clammy flesh, leaking. As she slithered free, her body revealed itself; an arthropod; six armed, an underbelly of countless clawed teeth.

She arched herself onto her back and the screech high in pitch, seared their ears¹⁰².

¹⁰²In *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, the bosses typically have a gesture of some kind, while the music ignites with their title superimposed below. This is part of their opening Cutscene.

A r t h r o p o d M o t h e r , A d l i t a m¹⁰³

The party steeled.

Adlitam¹⁰⁴'s legs clopped, wet and slopping toward them.

She hefted her torso up; plunged down, teeth jabbing into Vivian's shield. The inner arms grabbed her by the leg and hurled the girl across the courtyard.

Thunder crack.

She sleeked near, dropping on Owen. Blood splattered her legs. As she rose, the teeth receded, and he slid out, collapsing on the moss, limp.

She gained on the others as Lucas made a run for Owen; gold burst from their direction.

Adlitam rose above Melissa— Ewan lurched, slicing.

He felt a thrust of thorns, propelling him over sippy grass; her tail sliding along the earth behind her.

Ewan slipped, descending an open grave where he lay tranquil. The soil was soft and warm, human in this way. And above he heard, from a far away place, the vicious screeching of an ungoverned, unforgiving being, and those breathing in the space with her, desperately holding to magic for survival.

The roots were all dead here, in this place. The walls were too high to climb without help. He was caged here, the effort to look up exposing him to the ceaseless frosty rain; his back was stronger, his back could handle the downpour.

This was before bone hands shifted away the dirt, clawed toward him. They touched his skin, gently; easing him into one with the earth. And he let them. He did not know why, nor did he expect to ever; merely this was acceptable, happening in the space of the warmth, the absence of eyes, and with an assurance of finality.

Until a force much greater arose within the burn of the human heart. He was human; and this, he began to realize, would be a lonely place.

¹⁰³It is customary for bosses to have multiple phases. Dark Souls 3 uses this quite prominently, even going so far as to drain health bars and then establish new ones in accordance with the new (or second stage) of the boss.

¹⁰⁴Adlitam is Matilda spelled backwards, an ode to Dracula and Alucard.

You don't deserve to be so lonely, he heard himself say, as a herself. In this new voice he had. She was a good soul, she was owed that. And of the souls above, there must be something more to give.

Thus he rose, pushing on the dirt.

The hands squeezed, yanking and jerking his body, but the effort of the dead was short-lived, too frail.

Digging his fingers in the soft crumbs of dirt, the moisture and the grass clinging to him; the drag of his hair, pulling him below the soil. Cradling the fire, he burned the vine, clambered above, the surface cloudy, damp.

From above, the air was cleaner, walls less high. His hand tightened around the handle of his sword.

Vivian speared the flesh.

Adlitam convulsed in agony, leap aside.

Flash of white— Melissa held the glowing ball before her. The offense was strong.

Adlitam spilled, furry of coughs, groans; murk miasma, ripple outpouring, corrupting the muscles to give away. From there, they collapsed, barely breathing, eyes peeled in fear; Adlitam trotting. She feasted on them, gnawing on their helpless bodies until they were bloody. Her shadow cast over Ewan, the teeth sinking in his body, witnessing himself from elevation, bleeding in the grass; then dropped.

Her crinkled hands thumped away; the rain splashing his backside again.

Air reluctantly came, in feeble gasps.

The cold absorbed from every corner of his sweating body.

A darkness enveloped him.

- YOU MISREAD¹⁰⁵ -

¹⁰⁵When you perish in Dark Souls, the game displays dark red text that says; "YOU DIED". This is an evolution of the more common, "Game Over". "YOU DIED" however, makes far more sense in Dark Souls since there is no permanent death. You play an undead, a character who will continually revive. It's been said that Dark Souls' game over state is present only while the player is not actively playing since it leaves us to wonder whether the player avatar has succumbed to being hollow (madness essentially). Thus, "YOU DIED" is not a true statement; it is in fact a prompt, a way of telling the player of where their misstep is and the decision is now there's: to consider whether they should go back in, try again, rethink their strategy, ask for help, or give up entirely.

Valley of Chaos

And did you consider yourself safe in the confines of ink and paper? In the cradling of the goddess,
Narrative?

So it is that none are able to surmount that which hunts us in the darkness.

Yet while we live, we find near us the sparks of a tender flame. Beside us, patiently awaiting our resolve to reignite. And while we live, it may. There are no gods, kings, or judges here, in the inscriptions of beginnings. Even time will stay its forceful hold.

May you go back to the flame, find yourself, hunched over a bed of frailty, and remember the life lived, where once you were mature brave and young curious. And build them again, for Grim is a patient stalker, and is not malicious in his vocation. He will come to ensure that you are safe when the fire finally fades¹⁰⁶.

And do you see, your form rising once more in the incandescent moonlight?¹⁰⁷

106“*The Fire Fades*” is a common phrase in Dark Souls lore. The fire in question is both literal and figurative in the game world, an icon for the Age of Fire in which the Lord of Cynder attempts to keep the flame burning, in spite of the inevitability that fire always, eventually fades. It is also the metaphor for the soul, particularly in Dark Souls 3 where an item called an Ember is used to restore the player’s “Fire”, their natural state.

107In Dark Souls, Knight Solaire warships the sun, calling it incandescent. He is one of the more light-hearted, friendly companions in the game, able to be summoned across dimensions to aid you against a few select bosses. As such, he emerges as any phantom does, glowing brightly, rising from the ground. In truth, this return to the Valley of Chaos (which in this text is the character creator) is the message of bringing the player (in this case the reader), to the character creation screen, contemplating starting over, contemplating their own resolve to see the game through to the end. And this mental state is not unlike those internal battles, when we doubt ourselves, when we feel ourselves wanting to give up, but wishing we could rekindle the fire.

Interlude #9

*On Demons and Memories*¹⁰⁸

I once came to the edge of the world, and the sky was so bright and calm, lovingly hugging the clouds. The ground was a soft powder, and I felt a chill in the air, a warmth from the sun. When I walked, things were in balance.

But this place, I knew, held a horror. Off the cliff, you would fall into hell, and there were demons waiting for you. They were two giant insects, clawing at your body, wanting to rip you from limb to limb. It was at this place I felt the urge to reach across those boundaries that keep us all apart. I allowed myself to be summoned into the worlds and hearts of those who had taken this journey also, who had reached this far. We'd share a moment at the cliff-side, playing in the sand, reclining, sharing stories.

Then we would drop into the pit, and we would battle. And in time, the demons would break us, drive us to our end. The darkness of the cave would breathe into our souls, a booming foreboding. And our fond memories would be tested, forgotten, or ruined as one by one, we perished. Because I was only a phantom, I would be returned to my real body to await the next summon, knowing I would not find the same person again, and the poor sap I was just with was on their own with the demons now.

It was like banging my head against the wall too. Making the long decent where only death and despair await. And I knew this. But that's time and self-imposed responsibility for you; it doesn't care where you are, only that you push on, or else wither and decay. And so I would lay my sign down and wait. And when I was summoned, I would make the plunge again with the rest of them. I was just like everyone else. I guess that's why I was doing it. I was pretending to be human, to be one of the team.

In the space of waiting for someone to find me, to evaluate if I would be a benefit to the task ahead, I would drift in thought. Sometimes I thought about how I could solve my problems, other times I let myself be crippled by them. Occasionally, there was a moment of clarity, when something that had been on my mind finally pieces itself together. Maybe it's something I need to tell someone, a show of gratitude, maybe an apology. Maybe it is something I need to start doing. Or maybe it's an idea I should write down.

¹⁰⁸The demons refers to a boss in Dark Souls 3. The following description recounts my experiences going through it. The memories of the past life as a commander of an army is a memory I recalled of playing Fire Emblem, a tactical strategy game. The landscape in Dark Souls 3 was reminiscent of Fire Emblem: Sacred Stones.

But most often, it's realizing what I've been feeling in light of recent events in my life.

Eventually, I knew, it would be my turn to summon. I summoned someone to fight alongside me, an act I never do (I want to speak proudly that I did it all by myself, that I slay all my demons by myself). We bowed, a show of mutual respect, an understanding that whatever happens, we won't hold it against the other. Or perhaps it was our way of saying, Godspeed. We dropped. The ensuing battle was calculated and thorough; we had mastery over ourselves and the resolve to finish what had been started. We would come alongside to heal our wounds, or we would scream to get the attention of the demons so the other could breathe.

We slew them, driving our blades into the skull of the last monstrosity at the same moment (even though this was an impossibility). As the corpse withered into dust, the two of us bowed once more, and he departed. Back to his world. I went on alone.

I know this isn't a great narrative; I really just wanted to share what happened. My psychiatrist was saying I've been doing better, by the way. I know this, not because she said so, but because we're finding fewer and fewer things to talk about.

I was then made to climb a mountain, scaling the dark grey stone, the clouds coming close that I breathed them into my lungs through the vents in my helm. Ahead, I saw the trees far below, the peaks all around me, and it took me back to a time when I was less alone.

I remember when I was once a commander of a small army, and we traversed a place much like this. I was the lead tactician, and I came to know and love the members of our party. That was years ago. Now I cry, thinking about how far I've been going on my own. Now, the parties I'm with cannot even speak to one another.

It may sound strange to you, but that's what it made me think of.

I didn't know if it was better to go back to those mountains or if I even could, just that I wanted to. Journeys are best when shared. The thing about it was no two people in the party were alike; some were practiced swordsmen, some were scholars of magic, some were devoutly religious, some were dragon people, some were men, and some were women. And whatever the world thought of us, it didn't matter because... well, I assume you know what it's like to be among friends.

But the truth of it is, those people weren't real; they were stock characters, or caricatures if you will. And no one likes that, certainly not in real life. And while we may like it in a fantasy, we also don't

like fantasy. So there's that.

I met someone recently, and they've been very good to me. And I've been looking over this journey my psychiatrist asked me to compose, wondering what to do with it. My partner tells me to do the thing with it that I could not while writing it. And I knew what that meant; that I had to accept my stupid crazy self, warts and all, and not think of myself as something ugly, dismissible, or disposable. If they can do it, so can I, right?

Results

Words Absolved	+18073
Current Word Total	47772
Eggs Discovered	51/51
Grand Egg Total	110/110
Total Completion	100%

Rank S_{109}^{110}

< Reread World III

Return to Title Page >

109 !Secret Egg Discovered! Dark Souls, Fire Emblem, and many Japanese RPG's use a ranking system that goes (from lowest to highest) E, D, C, B, A, S, and on some occasions, SS or X or even S+.

110 !Secret Egg Discovered! Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest had 102% total possible completion. The Donkey Kong Country games are notorious for hiding a few secrets even after the player has received all 100%. I never did get all 102%.

~ How to Run an Attunement Session ~

Welcome Address & Special Thanks:

So you want to host an attunement session. Or maybe you're thinking, "what the hell is an attunement sessions?" You're in the right place.

If you're not familiar, an Attunement Session is a small private party where there is a guide (a DM basically), and test takers (players), the purpose of which being to assess where individuals are and are not in alignment with the 9 disciplines of magic in the Din's Grimoire universe. This is a fun, insightful, and occasionally challenging evening, and no matter who you are, there's value to be had somewhere.

Because we've all heard about magic. Whether this be the magic we see from video games, the supernatural events we encounter (or hear of), or whether we hear the phrase to describe a moment of fantastical enlightenment. We have an idea of magic. You should take this exam if you are interested in a thorough exploration of just what this mysterious anomaly called, magic, is and could be.

In the books, the characters live in a fantasy world; but it shares many similarities with the real world. They have corded telephones and drive automobiles. And they too have an understanding of magic. But for them, they see it and utilize magic in more expressive, tangible ways. Indeed, these can be symbols, metaphors for a character's internal psychology, or political statement, or aesthetic nuance. Even with this greater use of expression, the characters themselves have about the same understanding of magic as we do. It's vague, illusive, and no one can agree on just one definition.

My hope for you is that by taking this exam, and potentially sharing it with others, the conversation surrounding magic is in some way enriched.

I know for myself, I've always been deeply interested in fantastical worlds. Fantasy and sci-fi in particular, but any time I experience a movie, a book, a video game, I ask myself what the rules are for this universe. How does this universe define these ideas. And in some ways, it has been a disappointing endeavor. In college, some friends and I got together, and I took the Harry Potter sorting house quiz. The quiz itself is innocent enough, if not lore breaking since the hat often just announces what you are without your vote. I don't mean this is as a criticism. I bring it up because the whole experience left me unfulfilled. It was too easy to rig, too short to actually have any sense of who I am, and it wasn't really about magic at all. It was about... clubs?

Don't get me wrong, I love Harry Potter, it's the first point of reference I go to when creating my own works, but I'm relating to you a point of difference I felt needed to be made. I commented, "I feel like I could have done this better" and my muse for this project immediately chimed in, "then do it better", to which, I hope you'll applaud her for. To be clear, I don't think my exam is actually better; this is shorthand for saying, it is better suited for what I am interested in exploring. And I hope that by having multiple takes on the exam process, Harry Potter's, this one, and others like it, the conversation is all the better for it.

So you now know where it stemmed from, and have some idea of what it is. But you might be thinking, “that all sounds nice, but why an evening? Why not just take the exam and leave it there?”. My answer is for two reasons. Firstly, I didn’t think a topic such as magic should be dealt with haphazardly. It seems to give off an air of majestic importance. I constructed the session as a means of meeting magic halfway. Indeed, an attunement session is kind of an odd thing. It’s not quite a D&D session, not quite an evening party, not just a dinner, not quite lecture or artistic performance. It’s some of all of them, lot of a few of them, and something else that I hoped would culminate in a moment of zero gravity, where you find yourself opening up... it’s a rather romantic ideal, but I made you ask.

The second reason is that the exam is mostly an assortment of part personality, part value system. And it is quite difficult to devise a strategy for people to be their authentic selves without having them feel emotionally compromised. In fact, it’s difficult to even be honest with ourselves (which is why the group setting is good as it helps people affirm or dissuade where appropriate). And the exam does ask you to be honest with yourself.

This guide is everything you need to get engaged. It has the attunement exam sheet, the answer key, rules on hosting, and it even comes with the Valley of Chaos Expansion (FOR FREE). “Hold on!” you might be wondering, “what do I know about magic? Or Din’s Grimoire for that matter? How will I know what I’m quantifying? What does a result mean?” I’m glad you asked.

The first thing I recommend is to take the exam for yourself, if you haven’t already. This is best done through an official session, but if that’s not possible, there is a section here for you to take it on you’re own time, shame as this will be. It is important for you to have you’re own results so that it prevents you from trying to rig the exam to get the result you want (there’s a Discipline for that by the way, you know who you are).

Once you have you’re own results, you can read through the other results under the “Answer Key” portion. This will give you a sampling for what each Discipline is about, including their values, and how they utilize magic. The important thing to give test takers is not a complete breakdown of all the different spells they would cast if they existed in this fantasy universe (though giving them an idea towards this is often helpful). But ultimately, you only need to give them the philosophical definition of magic that corresponds to their Discipline (which ideally, would be aligned with their values and/or personalities).

So for instance, Pyromancers believe that magic comes from within the self as opposed to an external force like wands or Fairies. And they have a good reason to believe this because, unlike other disciplines, they don’t require a catalyst to perform magic. So let’s take this principle that only applies to the characters in Dranquill to real life: Pyromancers also believe that they are responsible for a great many things. Someone with that attitude is probably a leader, or someone who burdens the suffering of others, cares about big sociological concerns. Those are all often true of the Pyromancer Class as they are likely to be of someone who gets this result. So maybe you can’t cast fireballs out of your hands, but the takeaway is that you are primarily in alignment with the belief that magic comes from within the self and can be used to do great things. This would be completely different than someone who gets the Cleric Discipline. They believe that magic comes from a being much grander than ourselves, and it’s by their will that magic is enacted. Their beliefs also ring true for them because they don’t use Spells; they use Miracles. And Miracles are not known for their reliability.

Miracles are acquired through both a talisman AND prayer. So now we have a discrepancy. Because if it requires prayer, it stands to reason you could argue that magic does indeed come from the self. But it also requires a catalyst which suggests otherwise. Furthermore, if you are a Cleric, it's likely you hold to faith, rather than fate (like a Pyromancer), believing that we do not change the world; we are instead subservient to a greater force that holds everything in place.

Telling someone they could cast fireballs if they didn't live in reality is not rewarding for either of you. But if you tell them there is a philosophy that wants your attention because it thinks you would be proficient in it, then regardless of how we might feel, we've created a dynamic interaction all the same. It is up to the test takers to decide if they would follow the Discipline recommended to them. They could agree with it entirely. They could agree only in part, and thus making their involvement in it all the more relevant to restoring homeostasis to the school (assuming homeostasis is a sought thing). Or they could refuse, follow the path of second or third choice disciplines because they want to see those traits come out of themselves more than the initial projection.

That may have been a little confusing, but hopefully you're starting to grasp a sense of why gaining attunement can be compelling. The fantastically elements are certainly fun, especially for fantasy fans, but I think the core of the exam should focus on the ideologies, and provide people with a sense of place and a challenge to that comfort.

These are some examples of how I envision magic. As you take the exam, read through the guide, and if you're curious to read some of the books, you'll no doubt gain a deeper understanding of where you want to position yourself in relation to magic. And that's a key component to remember. These will be your attunement sessions, not mine. You may come up with your own ideas for how you can bring people closer to your vision of magic. Maybe you'll use part of this guide. Maybe you'll throw mine out and craft one of your own. I encourage you do any you feel driven to do. Magic doesn't belong to me, but I do find it interesting. And I imagine you do as well.

With that said, the next thing you can do following taking the exam is to read through the guide to see if you'd like to host a session. If you're are reading this, I'll assume you do. So that just leaves reading the guide, getting a few people together for an evening, and making all the necessary preparations.

But before we dive into it all, I'd like to take a moment to thank my muse and my apprentice in particular for playing key roles in the development of this project. I'd like to also thank the first group; they had the weakest draft, full of odd phrasing and some bias answers. And I'd like to thank all the future test takers, who contributed by giving me feedback, and sitting through an unusual evening. You're the best!

And to you, new session runners... I wish you the best of luck.

What you should do Before a Session:

I hope you're not new to being a host because running an attunement session is going to come with a handful of challenges. My estimate is that it's not as challenging as orchestrating a wedding, but more difficult than a bachelor/bachelorette party.

You can run a session with virtually any number of people. The most I've done so far is five, and I am confident that I could have had up to eight for that group as only one person was slowing us down. The thing is, the test takers are allowed to pause the exam to ask questions, get feedback, or take their time to figure out their answer. One slow or talkative person can detrimentally impact the pacing of the session, which is, at least for me, the hardest part about running a session. Cutting people off is necessary from a logistical standpoint, but it's completely counterintuitive to the atmosphere that an ideal session should have.

Sometimes you might think you have someone figured out, but you can never account for anomalies. For example, one of my test takers I was sure would get the Summoner result. I had, after all, built the foundation of the discipline off of his personality. I ended up being right, but I had also assumed he would have been particularly quiet during the exam, yet he was anything but quiet. I don't think a single question went by without some comment made to it. He had taken some caffeine before had, and we speculated afterward that perhaps it was a contributing factor.

The point is, you don't know what condition people will be in. Obviously, if someone is drunk, they're going to be a greater disruption than is worth the added truthfulness that may come. Other people, like those who lack imagination or those who are unnecessarily argumentative will probably warrant more caution on your part. You know your friends better than I would. You could do strangers, but I don't recommend it simply because it would hardly benefit anyone. The purpose of having groups is to 1: get people to relax, and 2: be able to converse with someone who knows them for clarity on certain answers. Strangers won't accomplish either.

A note on age. In the session of five I mentioned earlier, I should note that the one individual who extended what would have realistically been 45 minutes to three hours was fifteen years old. The questions are more or less family friendly, but they can be challenging for younger people. They're heavily concerned with pushing people into defining their value system which is something people are often still considering at fifteen. It might be worth mentioning I had a nineteen-year-old present also, and she was only stumped at a half dozen questions. So I do think you should use your judgment when you think about age. Teens are likely to be interested in this kind of thing, but its liable to overwhelm them. That said, the fifteen-year-old did say he enjoyed the exam, and that the questions that were asked were ones he ponders a good deal, so not a total loss. Then again, I've also had another fifteen-year-old just copy someone else's answers down. By the way, if anyone does to this, there's a trump card that can lock them into a discipline (you know who you are).

Now, once you've settled on your party, you'll need to decide on a location. I highly recommend someone's home. Living rooms are nice if you can remove pets and non-magic minded folk from interrupting.

If you're over 18, your options might vary, but I don't recommend them. Reserving a room at a bar or rec center is less comforting and less controllable. They give off more of an air of activity, prompting people to

be alert. Don't get me wrong, you want your test takers to be active, but you also want to maintain their focus. The exam can be quite intensive, you'll exhaust them if you present too many distractions. Believe me, I have plenty of content to exhaust someone. Similar thoughts can be said about alcohol. I've run sessions with alcohol before, I trust my test takers to manage their consumption. Having a smaller group helps with this too. The last thing you want is to have a couple of outfielders getting wasted and talking about "the game" yesterday. Make your expectations for the event VERY CLEAR from the onset. Whether or not you allow alcohol is up to you, but tell the group as much, and let them know that if they want to attend, you will expect to have their undivided attention for a few hours.

I like to include a dinner with the event. The time to eat can vary. I suppose the ideal would be to take the exam, then pause to eat and relax, and once everyone is ready, go through the results (you do this as a group). But sometimes people show up hungry and they prefer to eat right away. This is fine. You could also eat after, but don't plan for this unless you've run a few sessions already. You'd have to ensure you move very very quickly. I've done it all the other ways except this one; I think it's risky and not worth the hassle.

You might however, opt to eat midway through the exam (or during if it's mostly a snack bar). You're the host, it's up to you to catalog the speed of the group and to account for everyone's physical needs. While you're in a position of control and people will likely expect you to make decisions, it doesn't do any harm to ask everyone present how they are feeling. I do this maybe half a dozen times during a session, or perhaps after every 20-30 minutes, but it depends on the group. Some of them are easier to read than others. More so, if I'm noticing people stirring a good amount, repeatedly diverting their attention in various directions, clicking pens, or whispering between each other. They might need to eat, they might just need a small break. Bottom line, take care of your people first.

If you're familiar with tabletop roleplaying, this might all sound a bit tedious, but I wanted to include some etiquette in case the party is new to this kind of thing. I do think the content is accessible to pretty much anyone with some imagination (and there's a result for unimaginative people too, you know who you are).

BEFORE SESSION TIPS:

- Be up front with everyone attending that you will expect to have their undivided attention for a few hours.
- Average number of people per session should be about 4-5, add more at your own risk.
- Average age per person should be 15 and up.
- You should host at a private, cozy location, such as a living room, but as long as you can control the atmosphere, you're good.
- Organize a menu. This could be a dinner, snacks, a potluck; any of these works, but choose one.

Comfortability and the Meta-Game:

Do let people know they may decline to answer any question at any time if they find it insulting or uncomfortable.

However, you should ensure that in doing so, they are likely to disrupt their results. This is an especially important point to execute if you are running with the Valley of Chaos expansion, as those questions are more polarizing. In fact, I recommend you bring up the fact that Valley of Chaos is designed to be more challenging than the rest of the exam when you reach it, and reiterate that if anyone is uncomfortable, they may choose not to answer. Pay attention to the word usage I employed there. Uncomfortable. They should not answer in the event that they are too uncomfortable.

This may sound superfluous, but it's important for those who may be a Summoner; detecting someone in this discipline can more often happen in the meta game. They are the trolls. The people who understand that sometimes it is necessary to enact their own rules over others. As a Summoner, they need this grounded confidence. The contentedness to say, "I don't give a shit about your question, so I'm not going to indulge you with an answer." They're the only ones who gain more accurate results by not participating.

But you can't outright say, "not answering is a viable option" because the moment you do, you undermine the value of selecting this option for Summoners. People will choose not to answer some of the more difficult questions, when they really need to be answering them. The Summoner has to prefer not answering because they want to troll you, or because they think the whole thing is stupid, or because they feel like the question is just trying to get a reaction out of them, and Summoners are active-based not reactive. And yet, they may not let themselves do so because they don't like being a disruption to the social order or disrespectful to the efforts you've gone through, or the interests of others.

The questions will not make them uncomfortable (probably very few things actually offend them), but they may force themselves to give an answer out of their compassion for you or someone else attending. Most likely, people are attending a session because they know and have some kind of bond with someone else there. The Summoner is there for your (or someone else's) benefit, and they maintain social norms because they like to keep the peace.

Your job is to subtly hint, leave clues, that the window to be themselves exists. This is why creating a comfortable atmosphere, having some recognizable faces, and the like are all important aspects to a well composed Attunement Session. You're not simply handing out some paper with questions on it; you're generating a space that soothes people into being sincere with themselves and with others.

They're not the only Discipline that will warrant your attention either. The meta-game is a very real thing in the session. It's been said about tabletop games and board games alike that sometimes it is best for the rule-keeper to deliberately break the rules on the grounds of making the experience more enjoyable for everyone involved.

While enjoyment isn't necessarily my chief concern, it is very much a concern. How I recommend you approach this is to rely heavily on the exam itself to delegate results. But you might notice instances where it would be best for you to tweak a few outcomes.

Welcome Address:

I recommend you print this page (or have the book open to this spot) and read it's contents out to the group immediately before entering the exam. This address outlines the expectations of all parties involved so there is less chance for discrepancies later. You need not read it word for word, but do be sure to cover each of the points briefly, and it wouldn't hurt to have a hard copy for everyone to see.

#1. What is this and why are we here?

-This exam is designed to give you an impression of the types of philosophy surrounding magic in the series of fantasy books, Din's Grimoire.

-It is also meant to be used as a catalyst for discussions on magic. You can learn more about the context in the books as some content will be specifically derivative from it, but you can also choose to tune into magic abstractly. And hopefully, the exam and results make the subject less abstract.

#2. How does it work?

-The exam is 27 multiple choice questions long (40 including the expansion but the last ten are very quick to resolve). They are broken up into sets of 3; each set receiving it's own introduction, of which I will read.

Option A:

-As for the questions themselves, each will be read aloud either by myself or by a volunteer. After a question is read, take a moment to answer it. You are encouraged to speak up at this time to ask other members how they feel, or what they think, about the question. You may keep your answers private or you may share them with each other. Please be respectful of other's decisions on this matter.

Option B:

-After I read the set, you may answer the questions individually, and you may for input or comment on questions as you like. You may keep your answers private or you may share them. Please be respectful of other's decisions on this matter.

-In either case, once we have resolved all three questions on a page, we will turn the page together, and I will read us the next set.

#3. How long will it take?

-In terms of time, it is heavily dependent upon how often you prefer to stop and discuss a topic. Some questions are likely to prompt more discussion than others. Try to prioritize only one question per set to discuss. In general, the exam takes about 3 hours, so it's like watching the first half of the Titanic.

#4. What about results?

-After the exam, I will give a small sampling of each of the results along with a hand gesture that correlates with the discipline. (You may also suggest to have an open dialogue at the end in which you discuss the Disciplines in greater depth, assuming you are well versed with the books. Or you may have an

expanded discussion about magic in general, and how you all feel the same or different based on your results.)

#5. What if I find a question uncomfortable?

-Some questions may be unsettling or uncomfortable. Many are designed to be polarizing. And some are designed to show the “ugly side” of a discipline. Please do let me know either in advance or in the middle of the session if you are experiencing any discomfort.

-You reserve the right to not answer a question if you find it to be truly bothersome, but only do this as a last resort as it will damage your score.

#6. Stray thoughts?

-Is there anything anyone would like to ask before we begin?

-Then let's begin (and cue your ambient music)

Name:

Birth Date:

Date:

Email:

~ Attunement Questionnaire v.5.5 ~

~ The Medium ~

A crystal ball sits between you and a Seer. Her nails are decorated in violet. Tassels hang from the tent ceiling. Gently, she rubs the ball, peering into it, and occasionally glancing your way, grinning to herself when she does. The candles in the room dim into a soft bronze hue. And finally, she speaks.

#1 Identity: Look into the globe. What do you see in your reflection?

- A. I stand on a battlefield with my loved ones around me; they are in despair as I hold them up
- B. I am a woman, holding someone close to my chest
- C. A lone wave in the ocean
- D. I peer through a window; no one realizes I am observing them from up high
- E. On a stage with an audience of people watching me, waiting for me to speak; they know little of me, yet they trust me

#2 Life Outlook: What if I told you, death was fast approaching, what would you do then?

- A. Spend the rest of my time with a lover
- B. Settle my possessions and proceed to live the way I always have; I am content
- C. Attempt to resolve disputes and grievances with others
- D. Compile my life's work so that others may finish it, or have a semblance of me, once I'm gone
- E. Life's greatest journey is yet before me; pack only essentials and set off on paths unexplored

#3 Guesswork: Visions unveil portions of probable futures. They are not guarantees; more than anything, they are a feeling, taking hold of you. One such vision is a long and brutal road of suffering for someone significant to you. The challenges they will face will surely change them, and it is unclear who they will become when the trials end. What of this information do you share?

- A. I tell them everything, at least together, they will not be alone
- B. I tell them only what information would benefit them in the moment, they need not be aware of the full extent of it
- C. I put it from my mind and tell them nothing; it is, after all, not a guarantee
- D. I share this information only with one or two trusted others; I either take their input or we decide as a group how to proceed
- E. I position myself in such a way so that I can alter the course of the events into results I desire/deem acceptable

~ The Storyteller ~

The bonfire crackles in the darkness casting your shadow upon the stalagmites of the cave. The skilled Mentor covers you with a blanket, then sits beside you. They ask:

#4 Self-Described Role: In your travels with other groups, what role do you find yourself falling into most often?

- A. Leader; I take charge (or am given authority) and develop a course of action that is in everyone's best interest via their input
- B. Doer; I am quiet, perhaps apathetic, but I remain attentive and reliable.
- C. Encourager; I come alongside individuals and offer my empathy, it is more important that our bonds are strengthened than achieving goals
- D. Councilor and Arbiter; often I am seen as an impartial agent; I do my part, but I'd rather be focused on my own pursuits
- E. I offer my own unique set of skills and information; our roles are lucrative, and I am more valuable as a wild card; often I look for what the group lacks and fill that void

#5 Methodology for Unity: How would you bring together two disparate groups of people?

- A. With diplomacy; I would trust my ability to maintain equanimity and people's ability to see reason
- B. With compassion; I would draw our attention to our grander role in the universe, appealing to a common sense of humanity/morality
- C. With vulnerability; I would strive to show others how the disparity is harmful to either myself, themselves, or others
- D. With an assurance of strength; I would offer protection from external affairs and law for internal affairs
- E. I wouldn't; division defines us

#6 Perception of Self: Who have people defined you as, or perhaps, what is it that you perceive others to see in you?

- A. Foolish and/or Arrogant
- B. Stubborn and/or Judgmental
- C. Self-Righteous and/or Apathetic
- D. Naive and/or Immature
- E. Callous and/or Controlling

~ The Holy Guide ~

In the high cathedral, you kneel before the Archbishop, who wets his hands in holy water before laying them on both sides of your head. With the clergy watching in the bright glow of candles and multicolored glass windows, he asks:

#7 Gifts: Oh blessed one, thou has served the Divine sincerely, and the Divine is most pleased. Your kindness, vigilance, and devotion will not go unrewarded. What gift would thou ask of the Divine?

- A. To discover my life's purpose
- B. A Friendship/Mate
- C. A Ship and Crew
- D. Whatever thou would see fit to give
- E. I would accept no gift

#8 The Afflicted: In your travels, you come across a figure by the side of the road. Blue clouds surround them, voices echo from the smoke, haunting and torturing. You engage and they turn away, telling you to leave them be. What do you do?

- A. Banish the magic, free them from the suffering; they are in no condition to speak for themselves
- B. The scene is a hoax meant to deceive you. Leave them
- C. Conclude that the magic is self-inflicted, they will not accept your help even if you were to provide it
- D. Kneel near them, and endure together; the magic will subside if allowed to process
- E. They are the only one who can save themselves, call out, remind them that they are strong enough to surmount the ailment

#9 The Journey: The road ahead is dark and full of horrors. What does thou take with thee?

- A. A Journal to Record my Experiences, Research Materials
- B. Companions
- C. Sword and Shield, of the finest craftsmanship
- E. I prepare, then seek council from someone greater than myself
- D. A Treasured Heirloom, something to remind me of who I am and where I belong

~ The Glass Storm ~

In the library, reading, you come across an old book with a design that is new to you. As you read, the snow beating on the windows, and a glowing Aurora in the sky, you stumble to make sense of the archaic language, and questions arise in your mind:

#10 Preservation: If you could only protect one thing, which would you ensure the world does not forget nor forsake?

- A. Beauty of the Natural World and the Gift of Life
- B. Artistic Integrity and Mutual Respect
- C. Independence, Personal Agency, Freedom
- D. Joy and Peace among Families, Countries, Enemies, etc.
- E. Order, Voice, and Restoration for the Afflicted

#11 Memoriam: How would you prefer people remember you by?

- A. as Forgiving/Understanding
- B. as Hospitable/Warm
- C. as Loyal/Faithful
- D. as Courteous/Eloquent
- E. as Discerning/Insightful

#12 Forbearance: That which you wish you could endure?

- A. Loneliness
- B. Losing a Part of Myself
- C. Being Dismissed
- D. Betrayal
- E. I have no specific unendurable hindrance; I strive to endure it all

~ The Dragon ~

A great Dragon lies before you, sprawled across mountain peaks. His body is colossal, rock like the jagged stone towers he rests upon. You are smaller than the slit of his eye. The clouds overhead are grey and tumultuous. The dragon gazes at you with conscious arrogance, peering into your soul, he asks:

#13 Ambition: What is your deepest desire? Think carefully, our inner cores hide even from ourselves. I care not to hear the words of man; I will only believe an answer from the soul.

- A. Unity, prosperity, and equity for my family, friends, and neighbors
- B. To leave the world a better place than when I found it, to rid (or reduce) it of a wrong
- C. Knowledge, finesse, and a creative muse
- D. To love, be loved, and find harmony among people
- E. I only do what I can when it is presented unto me, I make no pretense of seeking anything

#14 Antagonist: And yet, in all of these things you are indeed flawed. Achievements come through struggle, hardship, and confrontation with the insurmountable. If you are to succeed, you must be able to define that which destroys you, and with full knowledge of your inability to conquer it. What is your antagonist?

- A. It is a character flaw of mine that I continually seek to overcome
- B. A person or group of people, whom I have sympathy for, in spite of their mistreatment of me
- C. I do not see myself as a victim. The events in my life have shaped who I am, and I embrace it
- D. The present reality, my physical form is subject to illness, corruption, and hypocrisy
- E. Witnessing human atrocities and being powerless to mitigate them

#15 Evolution: Many have come and died where you stand. You are all the same unto me; the wandering flesh of the pitiful. And yet, here you are, in my domain, having traveled far. You must know that my powers are as vast as the Eastern Ocean. Should you fail at a task most dire, what will you become?

- A. Alone, fearing that the knowledge/gods/beliefs I have dedicated my life to, and to mastering, have forsaken me
- B. Regardless of how I might feel, I return to my loved ones, accepting my role in life as different than I originally thought
- C. My ambition outweighs my self-preservation. I may die, I may inadvertently hurt others, but I cannot betray myself; the legacy to the beliefs I hold is something I must preserve
- D. [Examine points of weakness]
- E. [Remain silent, your title speaks for itself; moreover speaking would yield defeat]

~ The Imagination ~

In Meditation, you drift from your body:

#16 New Worlds: Describe where you are.

- A. At dawn; there is a village on a grassy hillside where children play with animals and couples relax underneath oak trees. I can see and hear them only, but they are unaware of my presence. I see someone I know and love, but they turn to ash before I can be certain
- B. At sunset; in snow, there is a modest cottage. Inside, it is aglow with the warmth of a fire, the shadow of a rocking chair, and the smell of baked rolls. Someone plays a harp quietly. I may either be heading towards the house or departing from it
- C. In a grand hall, designed with an attention to what is both beautiful and reassuring. Along the pillars are hand carved floral and roses. Marble statues reside, some of myths, some depicting human suffering. There is no indication of time here
- D. In a coffin, gently lowering into the earth. Despite all attempts, no one hears you, and no one weeps all the same
- E. Who is speaking to me? Who wishes to know where I am? [I remain grounded in my present reality where others would not, refusing to be encumbered by visions]

#17 Communication: A fox, transparent, emitting a soft white glow, appears before you. It begins to twirl its nine tails. What do you do?

- A. Observe it for a time
- B. Reach out and pet it
- C. Hold out a treat and sweet talk it
- D. Retool yourself so that you engage with it as an equal
- E. Notice, but largely ignore it; there are greater concerns

#18 Secrets: Suppose you guessed correctly, and the kitsune agrees to share it's eyes with you. You reenter the real world. The next day, as you walk into the nearby village, the spirit bestows it's powers unto you. People illuminate in hues and transparency, exuding the very core of themselves as doppelgangers. Among them, which resonates with you?

- A. A child running circles around a well while their body sits at a desk in school
- B. A beggar man who's real body is missing, perhaps already buried in the earth
- C. The man who stabs a shopkeeper to death while their body talks with them in pleasantries
- D. The woman whose form drops to the earth, weeping into her palms as she enters a building
- E. What I witness is indescribable

~ The Watery Illusion ~

The Magician, having performed a host of tricks and displays of wonder, bows to the audience. The water curtains on the outdoor theater lower, blurring the host. And then, comes their voice, clear and sound:

#19 Contentedness: What do you need most in life to be content?

- A. Ambition/Conviction
- B. Romance/Adventure
- C. Self-Mastery/Self-Realization
- D. Belonging/Companionship
- E. [To live contently is to be free of wants]

#20 The Self: What is the self, and what does it need?

- A. A beast that needs to be tamed
- B. A victim that needs to be loved
- C. An innocent that needs to be protected
- D. Part of a larger system, it has no needs beyond acknowledgment
- E. An animal that needs to be un-caged

#21 Forces of Intention: What is god? What are you compelled to tell others concerning god?

- A. A Designer
- B. An Exemplar
- C. A Confidant
- D. A Weapon
- E. An Illusion

~ The Elders ~

In the house of your Forefathers, you stand at the bottom of the staircase to this great mansion. By your side is your immediate family, and at the top of the staircase are your blood elders. They nod their acknowledgment of you, and proceed to ask:

#22 Last Statement: On your deathbed, what do you leave behind for your child or next of kin?

- A. The most important thing I've come to value from my life experiences
- B. All my possessions and responsibilities, they are now theirs to manage and care for, along with an item of significance to me, an heirloom of some kind
- C. All the knowledge and wisdom I have gained
- D. Be present; enough has been said already. Let them devise for themselves what to do with the secrets and questions left unsolved
- E. I will likely have no kin, but if I do, I will leave them little else beyond memories

#23 Provider: An old mansion, run down and decayed through the ineptitude of a drunken fool once belonged to a relative. He was known throughout his community as a self-pitying lowlife. It is now in your possession. What will you do with such an estate?

- A. Restore and re-purpose the estate as a shelter and care center
- B. Turn the estate into a library for any to come and pursue their individual ambitions freely
- C. Create a theater for performances, a place for building relationships in the community
- D. Turn it into a rehabilitation center for any who would seek it or be drawn to it
- E. Establish it as my new permanent residence; let my name be an assurance for the community as I acknowledge and do not excuse the actions of the previous owner

#24 Promises: If you were to be inducted into the House of Vellsaunt, your name would command both respect and authority. Your very life would become a symbol of everything the family has built and strives for. What would you offer the House in return, and what promise would you ask us to hold you to?

- A. A feast with music and activities for the larger community, may it show my acceptance for all people
- B. An artifact (such as a dreamcatcher or a cross), may it protect others from malicious spirits as I do the same
- C. My personal sword, signifying my devotion to personal excellence, and my unwavering commitment to the preservation and enactment of justice
- D. A custom made gemstone with a blue lotus flower in it's core, signifying my unbreakable, unending commitment to the values of honor, respect, and service
- E. Nothing; my actions will speak for themselves

~ The Executioner ~

You stand on a pedestal with an abyss of darkness all around you. Ahead, sit the 5 Judges of Oblivion, their faces scarred and covered in boils and sores, their voices foul and hoarse, their voices echoing in the halls of quiet bliss, their bodies twisted in heaps of bright blue burning flesh. In turn, they ask:

#25 First Judgment: We know what you have done; Reapers bring the souls of those who must answer for their actions. And here, we will decide. Now tell us, when a man with his hands bound, knelled before you, his face apathetic as your subordinates read from a long list of crimes, involving both murder and rape, what did you do?

- A. Sent him to the Black Court for an official trial
- B. Offered him a chance to atone
- C. Gave him over to my subordinates to deal with as they saw fit; what's done is done
- D. Offered him the chance to duel me to the death, and let destiny dictate justice
- E. Behead him with my own sword. [the law will be empathetic with you]

#26 Second Judgment: Your memory fades you, does it not? Let us remind you that the man, regardless of your first action, unleashed a miasma of despair. As your subordinates cowered in fear and disgust, he coughed an eel from his mouth, which in turn killed your most trusted, loyal follower before the others were able to strike it down. By then, you had regained control, his body withering and reeking of putrid madness. What did you do then?

- A. Exorcised the ailment within him
- B. Banish him from the current reality or present community
- C. Imprison and interrogate him; I sought to learn the full extent of his powers and affiliates
- D. Ensured I gave the victim a proper burial so my subordinates knew I did not consider their lives lightly
- E. Behead him

#27 Afterlife: When we die, a spirit takes us into a realm following death. There are many varying beliefs. Reapers come for you if you escape death for too long. So tell us, who did you believe would come for you?

- A. A Reaper of War and Violence (death by malice)
- B. A Reaper of Famine and Disease (death by nature's design)
- C. A Reaper of Sacrifice and Sorrow (death by choice)
- D. A Valkryie will come for me even so; someone will defend the good I've done
- E. Death was always to be a mystery for me

~ The Wall of Deceit ~

(A being Low/Strongly Disagree, C being Neutral, and E being High/Strongly Agree):

#28: You are frequently told that you have an open mind.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#29: Either yourself or your possessions are decorated with your style.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#30: Your willingness to speak up.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#31: Authentic happiness can only be experienced when shared.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#32: We must help ourselves before we can assist others.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#33: It is important for a society to have ranks and hierarchy.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#34: This questionnaire is a waste of time...

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#35: Rank your ability to give birth.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#36: If it is a matter of survival, you are exempt from morality.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#37: If you have to pee, you will temporarily postpone relief because you are deeply interested and engaged with something.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#38: It is important to preserve sexual purity until marriage.

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

#39: You enjoy a regular routine on most days, involving working out, eating on a schedule, etc..

A-----B-----C-----D-----E

~ The Valley of Chaos ~

You walk along a narrow path, a lake of darkness on either side. Dead trees emerge from the still waters. Overhead is an open ravine, it too stretching out into an abyss. Snow drifts from the center, coating your path in white.

This is the place for which you have been told; that demons reside, haunting the self. To reach its end, so they say, will bring the soul into peace at last.

Time passes... you arrive at a tree growing from the road. A human remains tied to the trunk through many thick branches. In one hand they hold a knife stained with blood, either they stuck someone or themselves; in the other, a scroll they hold close to their chest. A branch prevents them from speaking. In their eyes, you see grief, anger, and fear.

Part I

[you may refuse to answer if none of the choices resonate with you]

#40 Of Scrolls and Blood: What do you do?

- A. Free the knife hand only, allowing them to strike or free themselves
- B. Offer them some of your water
- C. Take the scroll, free them, and then throw it into the abyss

You encounter the figure of a man in a dark cloak. He stands with his back to you. Your feet crunch in the snow, and he turns around. Then he manifests a sword, and engaged you in combat:

#41 Shadow Guardian: How do you react?

- A. Illustrate that he is outmatched, then if he continues, disarm, and if necessary, kill him
- B. Evade him until he exhausts himself
- C. Cast a spell that lulls him to sleep

You come to a cliff, black diamond waters flowing over the side. Your feet wet and nothing but darkness below. On a tree stump sits a whistling skeleton. Noticing your predicament, he speaks: "It's a long way down. What you need is a ladder, to which I would be happy to oblige. Of course, my services come at a price. What do you say?" You have only half the amount they request.

#42 Descent: How do you bargain?

- A. Tell them you are good for the rest, that you are known for being true to your word
- B. Explain their poor business model, and to be grateful they will gain any profit at all
- C. Describe your ailment; you have come so far, implore them to sympathize to your situation

You come to a stone slab in the path, a tombstone shaped as a doorway. The inscription desires a password to proceed, and there is no other way through. Nearby is a decrepit log cabin, and a haggard imp living inside. You ask her if she knows the password. She admits that she does, but would never relay it to the likes of you:

#43 Tombstone: How do you convince her?

- A. Tell her you mean no ill will to anyone; you have never met, it would be unjust to hold you accountable to others like you
- B. Tell her that you will discover the password sooner or later, as she is not the only bearer of it
- C. Threaten to burn down her home if she do not comply

The valley begins to wind, twist and turn, and the trees are soon no longer to be found. Finally, the road comes to a halt, the snow falling into the black, and across a gap, the path remains hidden. Indeed, a long walk ahead, if there is even a path to be found.

#44 Lake of Black: How will you cross?

- A. Light a lantern, it will reveal the unseen path above the water, and leave orbs of light so that you can retrace your steps
- B. Cast a corporeal doppelganger to see if it will drown or be attacked by an unseen assailant; then, if proven safe, wade into the water, cross the gap
- C. Turn back; either this is an illusion and thus the end, or you will find an alternate route

At long last, the path ends. You come to an enclosed room, and discover it empty, a faint light pours down from a small crevasse in the ceiling.

#45 The Circle: How do you fill the void?

- A. Light a fire in the center, may it serve as a beacon and warmth for those who would come this far
- B. Inscribe my name and date upon the wall, proof someone has reached the end
- C. Sit in the center, and await thou who would come behind the

Part II

#46 Elemental: Which of the elements appeals to you most?

- A. Boundless Water
- B. Animals
- C. An Aurora
- D. Candlelight

- E. Human Body
- F. Constellations
- G. Ashes
- H. Forest Overgrowth
- I. Blood

#47 Shield: What will you defend?

- A. My Life's Work
- B. My Self-Regard
- C. My Beliefs
- D. My Way of Living
- E. My Body
- F. Mutual Respect
- G. Others from themselves
- H. My Family, Partner, and Friends, their lives and image
- I. Anyone who cannot defend themselves

#48 Sword: You understand best/You desire to understand:

- A. Movement
- B. Spirituality
- C. Ethics
- D. Pragmatism
- E. Fate
- F. People
- G. Sex
- H. The Future
- I. Roles

#49 Sorcery: For you, Magic is...?

- A. an Experience
- B. Supernatural
- C. an Instrument
- D. all in the Mind
- E. Dichotomy with the Self
- G. a Solitary Practice
- H. enacted with Others
- I. the Essence of Life
- F. an Art

~ Answer Key ~

The Medium:

#1 Identity:

A. E/V

B. Z/F

C. W/C

D. I/I

E. B/L

#2 Life Outlook:

A. L/Z

B. B/W

C. V/C

D. F/E

E. I/I

#3 Guesswork:

A. Z/C

B. L/F

C. V/W

D. B/E

E. I/I

The Storyteller:

#4 Self-Described Role:

A. Z/B

B. F/V

C. C/C

D. W/I

E. L/E

#5 Methodology for Unity:

A. F/E

B. B/I

C. C/C

- D. V/Z
- E. L/W

#6 Perception of Self:

- A. L/I
- B. F/Z
- C. B/W
- D. C/C
- E. V/E

The Holy Guide:

#7 Gifts:

- A. I/Z
- B. E/C
- C. V/L
- D. B/B
- E. W/F

#8 The Afflicted:

- A. E/Z
- B. L/F
- C. V/W
- D. C/I
- E. B/B

#9 The Journey:

- B. F/I
- A. C/L
- C. V/Z
- D. B/B
- E. E/W

The Glass Storm:

#10 Preservation:

- A. W/I
- B. F/F
- C. L/Z
- D. C/E
- E. V/B

#11 Memoriam:

- A. B/W
- B. C/L
- C. E/Z
- D. F/F
- E. I/V

#12 Forbearance:

- A. Z/I
- B. W/C
- C. F/F
- D. E/B
- E. L/V

The Dragon:

#13 Ambition:

- A. V/E
- B. Z/Z
- C. I/F
- D. C/B
- E. L/W

#14 Antagonist:

- A. F/B
- B. C/V
- C. E/I
- D. L/W
- E. Z/Z

#15 Evolution:

- A. B/F
- B. C/I
- C. Z/Z
- D. V/L
- E. E/W

The Imagination:

#16 New Worlds:

- A. V/C

- B. E/L
- C. F/B
- D. I/Z
- E. W/W

#17 Communication:

- A. I/B
- B. L/E
- C. F/C
- D. W/W
- E. Z/V

#18 Secrets:

- A. L/B
- B. Z/E
- C. V/I
- D. F/C
- E. W/W

The Watery Illusion:

#19 Contentedness:

- A. Z/B
- B. F/I
- C. L/L
- D. E/C
- E. W/V

#20 The Self:

- A. V/B
- B. Z/C
- C. W/F
- D. E/I
- E. L/L

#21 Forces of Intention:

- A. E/I
- B. B/V
- C. W/C
- D. F/Z
- E. L/L

The Elders:

#22 Last Statement:

- A. C/B
- B. E/E
- C. F/V
- D. W/I
- E. L/Z

#23 Provider:

- A. Z/C
- B. W/F
- C. L/B
- D. V/I
- E. E/E

#24 Promises:

- A. L/C
- B. I/B
- C. F/V
- D. E/E
- E. Z/W

The Executioner:

#25 First Judgment:

- A. C/F
- B. B/Z
- C. E/W
- D. L/I
- E. V/V

#26 Second Judgment:

- A. B/E
- B. I/C
- C. F/L
- D. Z/W
- E. V/V

#27 Afterlife:

- A. V/V
- B. F/E

C. W/Z
D. B/C
E. L/I

Wall of Deceit:

#28: **Belief** (A/B+1), C-0, **Intuition** (D/E+1).

#29: **Vigor** (A/B+1), C-0, **Intuition** (D/E+1)

#30: **Consonance** (A/B+1), C-0, **Vigor** (D/E+1)

#31: **Luck** (A+2, B+1), C-0 **Consonance** (D+1, E+2)

#32: **Zeal** (A+2, B+1), **Luck** (C/D+1, E+2)

#33: **Zeal** (A/B+1), **Endurance** (C/D/E+1)

#34: **Endurance** (A/B+1), C-0, **Wisdom** (D/E+1)

#35: **Luck**+**Endurance**+**Belief** (A/B+1), **Wisdom** (C+1), **Zeal**+**Intuition**+**Consonance** (D+1), **Fortitude** (D+1, E+2)

#36: **Belief** (A+2, B+1), **Fortitude** (C+1), **Luck** (D/E+1)

#37: **Wisdom** (A/B+1), C-0, **Intuition** (D/E+1)

#38: **Intuition**/**Luck** (A/B+1), C-0, **Endurance**/**Belief** (D/E+1)

#39: **Luck**/**Vigor** (A/B+1), C-0, **Wisdom**/**Fortitude** (D/E+1)

~ Valley of Chaos Answer Key ~

#40 Of Scrolls and Blood:

A. Willpower: +1 **Fortitude**

B. Compassion: +1 **Consonance**

C. Perception: +1 **Wisdom**

#41 Shadow Guardian:

- A. Ethos: +1 **Vigor**
- B. Logos: +1 **Wisdom**
- C. Pathos: **Fortitude**

#42 Decent:

- A. Ethos: +1 **Endurance**
- B. Logos: +1 **Intuition**
- C. Pathos: +1 **Consonance**

#43 Tombstone:

- A. Ethos: +1 **Belief**
- B. Logos: +1 **Luck**
- C. Pathos: +1 **Zeal**

#44 Lake of Black:

- A. Past: +1 **Belief**
- B. Present: +1 **Luck**
- C. Future: +1 **Vigor**

#45 The Circle:

- A. Soul: +1 **Zeal**
- B. Body: +1 **Endurance**
- C. Mind: +1 **Intuition**

#46 Elemental:

- A. Luck
- B. **Consonance**
- C. **Fortitude**
- D. **Belief**
- E. Wisdom
- F. **Intuition**
- G. **Zeal**
- H. **Endurance**
- I. **Vigor**

#47 Shield:

- A. Intuition
- B. Wisdom
- C. Zeal
- D. Luck
- E. Fortitude
- F. Belief
- G. Consonance
- H. Endurance
- I. Vigor

#48 Sword:

- A. Consonance
- B. Belief
- C. Vigor
- D. Wisdom
- E. Zeal
- F. Luck
- G. Fortitude
- H. Intuition
- I. Endurance

#49 Sorcery:

- A. Consonance
- B. Belief
- C. Vigor
- D. Wisdom
- E. Zeal
- G. Fortitude
- H. Endurance
- I. Intuition
- F. Luck

----- The 9 Disciplines -----

~ First Mediums ~



Stat: Consonance

Official Titles: Mystic / Medium

Magic: Mysticism

Classification: Humanity

OVERWORLD

Description:

You are well suited to be a First Medium, a Mystic. Keenly aware of emotions, you care deeply about other people and their life experiences. But you are also sensitive of your own feelings in a given moment. You create spaces where people are free to be themselves, simply being around you is often enough for people to let their guard down and be at ease. If you host an event, you take extra care that the attendees are well cared for, fed, listened to, and encouraged. Sometimes you give so much that you can feel overlooked or dismissed, but your adaptability to understand and meet people on a human to human level, means there may be rare occasions when your actions will surprise others.

You hold people together when the world would strive to tear them apart. The relationships we invest in, the ones we build, this is your magic. Your intentions are more in

alignment with the ways in which you use magic to maintain connection, and less concerned with accomplishing goals. You are attentive to magic when you see it, or ignite it, between individuals.

Strengths:

Empathy: You are routinely called a great listener. This is because you create and experience magic through interaction; it excites you to see people restored, happy, and inspired. And it gives you a sense of belonging to know you contribute something of worth to someone you care about.

Personalization: You recognize that not everyone has the same needs. Thus you pay close attention to how people respond to your efforts, searching for ways to accommodate them better. You might ask them to be honest, and check in to see if they are happy with what you do for them or if there are other methods they would appreciate more. You do keep a little bit in reserve, just in case you need to surprise them. The interactions you have with others, particular with that of a significant partner are special to you, and you set your mind to creating meaningful experiences that are meant to be shared.

Innocence: At your core, you believe that the display of compassion helps facilitate the growth of compassion. People mistake you as being childish or naive, but in actuality, you are very aware of the adult world. You intentionally portray a loving, accepting, and perhaps playful demeanor, all in the hopes that others will be brightened. At times, this can be a disheartening place to be, especially when you display such innocence against your own will. It comes so natural to you, that you likely do so without thinking about the decision to be this way. This means you are honest and sincere with others about your feelings, and they can sense this, and your behavior is a reminder to others that they too can participate in a similar childlike joy.

Weaknesses:

Needy: Unfortunately, because you value relationships so highly, you can sometimes judge your self-worth upon how you envision people perceiving you. You are sensitive to glares and comments, even if there is no ill will meant. If you can be honest about what you are feeling when you are feeling it, this can help provide other people the chance to clarify their intent. Nevertheless, not everyone will actually care to rephrase their words. And in this case, you are likely to ruminate on what others have said about you for an extensive amount of time. You will be compelled to go to them in search for an assurance that they do care

about you, even if no such feelings exist on their end.

Too Self-Sacrificing: Because you are so caring about others, you may exhaust yourself in your efforts to support someone. Rest assured, you have much to give, but it can be difficult to identify or communicate personal needs. And, in touched upon above, worrying over the degree to which others value you, can lead you to beating yourself up for not being good enough, even and especially for people who ultimately do not know or care that they've hurt you. Because you can easily learn to care about everyone, it is difficult for you to keep yourself away from people who treat you poorly.

Follower: Your concern for emotions means you often dislike being in a position of command. It is usually an overly daunting place to be managing a project and soothing everyone's emotional needs at the same time. But this does not mean you are not a good leader. In fact, you have the potential to be a great leader; this very concern for how others feel and what they want allows you to shape the progress of the project in ways that include them. It is only a negative in that you may self-doubt your capabilities as a leader, preferring the comfort of being someone's subordinate, someone's assistant, someone's spouse, etc.

Career Paths:

Councilor/Therapist

Caretaker

Psychologist

Social Worker

Mentor

Storyteller

Mystic Romantic Compatibility (+=Good, /=Neutral, -=Poor):

- Seers
- Mystics
- / Clerics
- / Artificers

- + **Pyromancers**
- + Spiriters
- **Magicians**
- / **Druids**
- + **Arbiters**

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Consonance** stat measures your sensitivity to the nature of relationship.

First Mediums cast their magic in communication with their Fairy companions. This relationship is a symbol for the importance of connection. Magic is best understood when it ignites between individuals; the stronger the bond, the more effective the magic. While the rest of the world looks to externalize, and criticize, their surroundings, Mystics are steadfast in their loyalty and empathy, always striving to keep people from harming themselves or others. They cast raw magic energy, and it's believed by many that without them, there would be no other disciplines. In a way, the Mystic is what holds the world together when all else would tear it apart.

If you decide to study Mysticism, you will often be dismissed and undervalued by others, but the reality is that they will not comprehend the gravity of their remorse until you're gone, for the Mystic can never be underestimated.

Ruler: Zuno

Goddess of Mystic energy, an old warrior, and one of the 3 creators of the Universe. Zuno is also the designer of humans, forged after her own image. Ancient texts indicate that her creation was chosen to populate Dranquill.

Hand Gesture:

Put your hands together as if you just clapped or were praying. Then pull them apart and bend your fingers. Some people make a circle, others create a triangle with their thumb and their index finger. Some close their fingers together, others keep them open somewhat. Some prefer their fingers to touch, others do not. This gesture is very open to interpretation.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Calvin Jarrett - Ordinary People

Luke Skywalker - Star Wars

Samwise Gamgee - Lord of the Rings

George - Halo: Reach

What to Expect:

As a Mystic, you can expect to experience a wide range of emotions. You attribute meaning to the events and people in your life, able to feel deeply where others cannot.

In old age, you can expect to be a wise councilor. Children in particular will be drawn to you because through it all, you've preserved the spiritual essence of your childlike self all these years. You clung to the belief that adults are not much different than children at the end of the day.

You are likely to spend your final days cherishing the good memories you've had, and maybe with a tear, accepting the resolution of this journey's end.

~ Divine Servants ~



Stat: Belief

Official Titles: Cleric

Magic: Miracles

Classification: Religion

OVERWORLD

Description:

You share many values with Divine Servants, Clerics. Our world is not random, everything and everyone has a reason for being where they are and a purpose to fulfill. Magic is the great force that has put everything into motion, but it has done so in the hopes that we would be a part of a grand design. We don't have to over-think morality. We can use the unique gifts bestowed upon us to deduce for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. And when we do so, we act in alignment with our grander purpose

You likely have a routine or ritual you are devoted to. This is because you believe that no one is exempt from making mistakes, all of us need to defer to something or someone greater than ourselves for guidance. You experience magic when you behave in accordance with a vision that is made not by man but by divine creation. We need a philosophy to fall back on, and when we enact the truth of that philosophy, bring another into the fold, or humble ourselves, we feel a small taste of magic.

Strengths:

Forgiving: If someone approaches you with a sincere apology, you accept it and don't hold it against them. This is because you recognize that all of us make mistakes; it is a treatment you would want, and so you give what you would want to receive. Additionally, what condition would you let this other person be in if you denied them? You see it as a disservice to outright refuse or retaliate against someone, it is better if you can give them a chance to grow.

Honest Debate: You value when something can be proved, when facts or decisions can be settled. Likely, you enjoy an intellectual challenge, particularly when evidence will be presented. You might enjoy winning, but you will concede when the facts prove you wrong. Understanding the world around us, its purpose and how we ought to use it going forward is what matters most. You hold a balance of using truth and evidence in combination with compassion and acceptance that people can cling to. Things matter in the real and the unseen sense, and you are able to put people at ease by assuring them that even if the truth speaks otherwise, it is normal to feel differently about it. And you are the first person to offer a chance to help shape their perspective for the better.

Acts of Service: You truly value actions, any time someone puts forth effort out of their comfort zone to please another. It is a moral stance of yours, the belief that doing a good deed for someone, gaining nothing in return, will help persuade them to do a good deed for someone else, and the cycle perpetuates itself. This comes naturally to you; people can rely on you for a great many things, and you are happy to meet someone new and find a way to brighten up their day.

Weaknesses:

Judgmental: Because you hold your values so strongly, it can be difficult for you to accept people who exist outside of your value system. You need to see things from a position of right and wrong, otherwise you perceive that you will be liable to make mistakes. You rest your value in what you see before you, and you approach it from a place of moral importance, which means you are concerned both with the truth and a concern for compassion. It is true that this can have a negative impact on your relationships, but the greater, if less often, concern is when your fundamental truths are shifted. Because your reliance on truth exists outside of yourself, it can be brought under scrutiny more easily. You take criticism of a belief you hold as a personal attack. And when someone comes close to proving a truth you hold wrong, you are contentious towards them. For without it, you yourself become a wrong, and that status is often unbearable to navigate.

Overzealous need for Certainty: You do not usually take anything at face value. In fact, so much so, that you frequently hunt down the truth in any given situation and then proclaim this truth to others. From big to small things, if we do not have truth, we have nothing. But this behavior can lead others to believe you are closed minded since you often do not have them follow the same logic you took to get to the answer. Additionally, others may not want the truth or even care about truth at all, but you probably share it all the same which invariably makes them dislike you.

Lacking Genuine Self-Reflection: The way you view the world, from positions of right, wrong, truth, and your reliance on these ideas, means you struggle to perceive yourself and others as multifaceted beings. While you do consider your actions and seek self-improvement, the very perspective of this approach assumes there are such things as improvement, perfection, good, etc. This makes you merely critical of yourself, revising patterns of behavior, instead of acknowledging them as gray elements of a self. You similarly do this to others, holding them responsible for their actions as opposed to allowing them to be “wrong”, and merely standing by for support. Instead, you would engage and point out where they need to revise, and reinforce the point by reminding them of who they want to be or ought to be.

Career Paths:

Priesthood/Pastor

Nurse/Medicine Doctor

Holy Warrior

Your **Belief** stat

Cleric Romantic Compatibility:

- + Seers
- + Mystics
- + Clerics
- + Artificers
- Pyromancers
- Spiriters

- **Magicians**
- + **Druids**
- + **Arbiters**

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Belief** stat suggests your world view is in alignment with a sense of place for everything.

Divine Servants hold to the believe that magic is a gift from the creator of the universe. Who or what this creator is, will ultimately be your decision, but the Divine Doctrine has many theories. They believe magic has a purpose and a place in this world the same as we do. We pray, we receive Miracles, and we follow doctrine that comes from god. Questioning our role in life is only vaguely productive; Clerics believe the answers we do have should be sufficient enough, and that we ought to follow our predestined path rather than deviate onto walks that ultimately will not bring us happiness.

If you study the Divine Doctrine, you will need to reconcile your position with the Church. Some commandments are more clear than others, and eventually you will abandon your calling, or you will see the light.

Ruler: Reno

God of Light and Sand; one of the 3 creators of the universe.

Mythical Being: the Pegasus

Awaiting Data...

Hand Gesture:

Flatten both hands and put them together to that the pinky fingers are touching each other. Then ensure that your palms are open and exposed. Done properly, this should look like you are holding your hands out for someone to put something in them or as if you are offering something to someone.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Captain America - MCU

Anton Chigurh - No Country for Old Men

What to Expect:

As a Cleric...

~ Curator's March ~



Stat: Endurance

Official Titles: Druid

Magic: Chants

Classification: Hereditary Practice

OVERWORLD

Description:

There is a place for you in the Curator's March, home of Druids. There is no stronger bond than that of family. Though you acknowledge people are different, nothing can separate you from the deep, innate connection you will always share with those of your bloodline. Have you ever been away from home for a long time in a far away place? When you returned, recall those familiar smells, how quickly the banter resumes, how you are able to insert yourself into the role carved out for you. You belong. And when you feel belonging among others, together, you are able to create magic.

You are also attentive to hierarchy and respect. There is a time to be the pupil, listen to your elders, and do what they say. And some day, they will bestow the mantle of responsibility onto you. From there, you give back to the world. But always, you remain loyal to family, focusing on the people more than the events as you age, and engaging with

magic best when in the presence of others who are part of the same image.

Strengths:

Producer: You love to see ideas brought to life. You might dabble into creative pursuits yourself, or you may simply manage their production, but in whatever capacity, you enjoy the process of working out the bugs and the kinks until the idea is fully formed. And you do so from a position where you can manage every aspect of it. You account for the people involved, their families and hardships, you account for resources, business cooperation, and public opinion. Even if you are not the one in command, you mesh well in a group of people. From a family setting to a political campaign, you like being a part of something and contributing all that you can give to it.

Home: You likely have a close relationship with your family. Even if you do not, you are at your best when you are around others who know you and who you can be yourself around. You believe in the concept of home, and the role it should function in allowing people to be safe and satisfied.

Appreciation of Tradition: You love the holidays and events of significance; this is likely true because they are designated time set aside to be with family, friends, and to unwind. And because of your busy schedule, it is a way to ensure good things are not forgotten. While even making an appearance is enough, you appreciate when there is thought put behind the decorations and the wedding cake. Sometimes this may be your only means of engaging, but it is by no means a reflection of a lack of caring.

Weaknesses:

Oppressive: Oftentimes the stress of a production, or the upheaval of family drama, causes you to become a middle-man, so to speak. In an attempt to resolve disputes, or fulfill a deadline, you do all that is necessary. This is because you can focus heavily on the stakes at hand, trusting, if not demanding, everyone involved to see things reasonably, if not right away, then at some point down the road. But this approach can sometimes be dogmatic. You trust that others see the objective as important as you do when they may not. You might overlook or appear to ignore other, more emotional and immediate concerns for bigger picture ones.

Tendency to Mask Problems: On some occasions, you will have an overabundance of puzzle pieces in hand that you lose a few. And when this happens, your instinct will be to conceal the mistake from others. Rather than address the problem, you'll minimize it's importance, deal with it yourself, and tell yourself that there are greater stakes at hand or it would be too big a burden on someone. Or perhaps, others will retaliate, fire, or disown you if they knew. This also applies to behavior you yourself do not deem acceptable in relation with the titles you hold.

Overly concerned with Order: You do best when everything in your life is organized, when you can clearly define the role of yourself and those around you. But this can be problematic when you feel that others are not fulfilling their role to your liking. It has a tendency to cause you to enforce rules and regulations, rituals to ensure that the status quo is being maintained. And this does not usually illicit the results you want, unless you are forceful. The iron fisted ruler is a possible place to end up in this discipline.

Career Paths:

Business/Administration

Politician

Strategist

Druid Romantic Compatibility:

- Seers
- / Mystics
- + Clerics
- Artificers
- Pyromancers
- / Spiriters
- + Magicians
- + Druids
- + Arbiters

Description:

Your **Endurance** stat measures how well you synchronize with the Vellsaunt Family.

The Curator's March is home to this very old, very respectable family. They do not get caught up in useless theorizes about what magic is or isn't. Instead, they believe magic to be a communal force that gives individuals identity. Chants can be broken up into two categories; Blessings for one another at significant stages in life, and Curses for enemies who would seek to disrupt social order. By joining other members, you're able to cast greater, more long lasting magic while strengthening the bond with your family. Primal is an all encompassing discipline, concerned with shaping the world.

The closer you are to the Vellsaunt Family bloodline, the greater your Chant potential. To deny your responsibilities in Primal is forbidden as will be a great many other life pursuits, but if you stay true to the family's values, you can be part of something much greater than any one person could accomplish.

Magic: Chants

Awaiting Data...

Ruler: Aya

Goddess of Nature and Anatomical Sex. She is naive, idealistic, and lonely.

Mythical Being: the Hydra

Awaiting Data...

Hand Gesture:

Open your hands as if each hand is about to give the other a high-five. Then close both your pinky and ring fingers and press them together. The rest of the fingers should squish together and point straight up. In proper form, the pinky fingers rest below the ring fingers. This is not a comfortable gesture to hold.

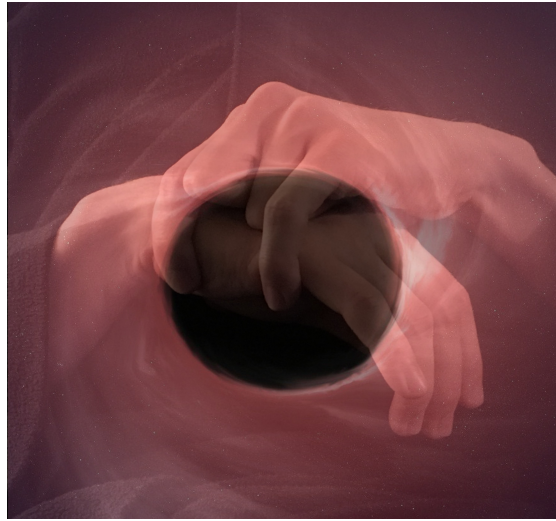
People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Caesar - Planet of the Apes Trilogy

Vito Corelone - The Godfather Part II

~ Dark Arbiter ~



Stat: Vigor

Official Title: Arbiter

Magic: Entropy

Classification: Law/Criminology

OVERWORLD

Description:

You have the strength within you to become a Dark Arbiter. Magic is derived from our experiences. The events that happen to us, that we allow ourselves to endure, become the mold of who we are. The more visceral the experience, the closer it puts us next to cliff of death, and thus the more potent the magic. But this is an amoral view. The world can and should follow justice where possible, but it needs those of us who are willing to make sacrifices to enact it. Magic for you, is not about feelings or people. What you do is brand yourself an exception, hardening your sensitivity to magic. But you have only done this so that you can be an agent that can settle the disputes, protect the innocent, and punish the wicked.

You see people for the vileness that exists within all of us, and you take control of that same magic within yourself to counteract injustice. People call you desensitized, but they simultaneously benefit from a world in which they can feel and live freely. You may not

have an ideal world in mind, but your efforts are meant to level the playing field. Magic is simply an unfeeling tool that accomplishes this. But be forewarned, stoicism is partially a choice, and a choice that may be impossible to undo.

Strengths:

Justice-Oriented: Actions speak louder than words. For all the apologies and sob stories you hear from people, deep down, they are simply prone to commit the same acts throughout their life. Whether they be criminals or just annoying, people show their true colors, and only very rarely do they change. It is better to simply act accordingly, either by distancing yourself from them, or administering some degree of justice. Where this trait becomes a strength is in the instances where you will take action to restore order where others would be too afraid to offend or otherwise too unsure of themselves.

Lie Detector: You are quick to know when someone is trying to conceal something from you or from themselves. This is especially true concerning circumstances. You have an acute perception to how and when things go poorly. If you haven't heard from your partner in a while, it means X. If they respond by saying A or B, it means Y. You cut through superfluous dialogue and gestures, getting at the deeper implications of what someone is communicating.

Straightforward: You are upfront with people about the way you see things. They may not always want to hear that their partner is cheating on them or that a habit of theirs will get them in trouble later, but it doesn't make it any less true. Furthermore, this is information you don't usually volunteer, but if they ask, you have the perspective that they lack, and often times the way you present it makes it abundantly clear what action they should take.

Weaknesses:

Overly Critical: This could either be self-criticism or external judgment. Because of your strengths, some in this discipline come off as highly critical of others, and because you are not often wrong, you may not care that people are offended. In the event that you do though, it is likely that you will curse yourself for being so negative, and yet unlikely that you will wish to take it back. This can be an entrapment.

Overly Controlled Feelings: Many people in this discipline face numerous challenges when it comes to letting their emotions show, particularly softer feeling. Displaying a

vulnerability is to take a chance, a risk you probably don't consider worth it too often. This is also problematic in romantic relationships. Your shrewd, perhaps cynical, perspective never seems to shut down. Despite your ability to detect liars, you likely conceal yourself from everyone, even the self.

Inability to Let Go: Often times you will want to control situations, portraying your world view as the correct one that everyone must follow or else they will face unrivaled suffering. You do not always hold the person responsible, especially if they are someone close to you, a romantic partner perhaps. Sometimes all there is to blame is bad luck and bad people. But it doesn't make bad circumstances justifiable. When your partner invariably dies, or perhaps simply end things with you, you'll be driven to reacquire a status in which you could be honest, could feel. Rarely is this a practical pursuit to follow. More likely, you'll go back to whatever bad habits you had before you met them.

Career Paths:

Detective Work

Law

Military

Police

Arbiter Romantic Compatibility:

- Seers
- + Mystics
- ~ Clerics
- + Artificers
- Pyromancers
- Spiriters
- Magicians
- + Druids
- Arbiters

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Vigor** stat indicates an aptitude to take action where others would not.

The Dark Arbiters are home to the judicial system for all the magic disciplines. To perform magic, they must first receive the Entropy seal, a tattoo imbued from the ink of Brimewood. Branding oneself is a pact, a way of gaining control over our impulses that would otherwise be chaotic. Magic must be governed or it will destroy us. Combined with wands, they *will* magic to happen, with as much thought as blinking. They are indeed, able to shift the balance in any situation for their shrewd and often accurate understanding of people. But this position can sometimes leave them trapped, internalizing a harsh reality where they are seen by society as cruel and uncompromising. But they are so only to protect us from ourselves. They do what others cannot, and bare the burden all the same.

The Entropy seal will permanently brand you a member of the Dark Arbiters. Once it has been carved in, you will be unable to cast any other form of magic, even if the seal is removed. It is a walk reserved only for the deeply committed.

Magic: Entropy

The study of Entropy is a relatively recent art. Since it is a derivative of Necromancy, it is worth noting how Necromancy functions before grappling with its counterpart.

Necromancy is a practice in which aging and injury become fuel for magic. This means that once we reach the age at which our bodies cease to grow and instead deteriorate, we are able to cast Necromancy. But there are ways to encourage this process. Anytime you put yourself through an ordeal or excess, the experience of being in a state of shock, horror, depression, or many others, your body collects that energy and stores it to be used later. Methods to do this are twofold, the first which is known to be more effective are to commit acts of taboo, rape, murder, thievery; the more inventive you are, the greater your perception of your actions will be in horror. The second method is to sedate oneself; overdoes on drugs, violent sex, or even illness. This subjection to wear on both body and mind will be later recast as a foul but powerful form of magic.

During the reign of the Empire, it was discovered that Necromancy did not always have to be cast from someone. The sciences developed a way to enact the same principals to Fairies, creating Runes (a small object that casts unstable magic if opened). The new technology was ultimately outlawed due to the mistreatment of fairies, but it was the first to pave the way for alternative methods to account of Necromancy, the long troubling discipline.

Eventually, the Entropy Seal was invented, a tattoo that branded all magic within someone into a conjoined form. As of now, it makes no concessions, crippling individuals from casting not only Necromancy but all other forms of magic as well. Entropy itself is uncontainable, unregulated within a person. When it appears, it can only be held in place for short bursts, ultimately breaking down or erupting in outbursts and explosions. There is a version of many other magic forms within Entropy, but in all of them, the process is

warped, twisted in some fashion. And in every instance, utterly devastating.

The Prime cast is a hallowed black orb that creates a singularity.

Ruler: Grimfold

God of the dark and justice; he is reserved and often wears cloaks. He is the brother of Medina, and in particular, the only one to be mentioned as deceased after the making of the world. Grimfold is known very little, a collection of secrets and a lack of moral consistency among his actions. It is further unclear by his death. However, there is always Malclypto, Goddess of the dead and cousin of Medina and Grimfold, and Stewart of Argest, Dinthral's planet.

Malclypto is rightfully understood as an invader.

Mythical Being: The Vampire

Awaiting Data...

Hand Gesture:

Hand Gesture: Hold your right hand in front of you, limp, so that you are looking at the top of your palm (the back of your hand). Then with your other hand, collapse it on top of the back ensuring that the middle and ring fingers are folded, pressing into the palm, and the pinky and index fingers are wrapped around the hand (the heart line). If done properly, both pinky fingers should be near each other but not touching.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Lisbeth Salander - The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

Logan (Wolverine) - Logan

Severus Snape - Harry Potter

Emile - Halo: Reach

~ Of Voices Beyond ~



Stat: Wisdom

Official Titles: Spiriter / Summoner

Magic: Spiritual

Classification: Martial Art

OVERWORLD

Description:

The Summoners of Voices Beyond would be willing to accept you, Spiriter. You are intelligent, introverted, and introspective. Abstraction and theorization are dominant modes of thought for you. Perhaps because of this, magic is highly illusive, a subject of fantasy. Or you may have a very small selection of experiences, memories, or places that feel something like magic. Where others say they understand magic and embrace it freely, you remain skeptical, believing it to be much deeper and much less attainable than initial projections. As a result, you spend most of your time developing a regulatory process for yourself. Eliminating things and people you do not find beneficial or enjoyable, often in regards to long-term investments or distractions. You value good health in a holistic way.

This invariably means that the things you do invest in, you invest deeply, honestly, and without compromise, even if your speech frequently implies ambivalence, mockery, or evasion. You may be logical in nearly every situation you come across, but this does not make you emotionless. Your use of humor, be it offensive or otherwise, is one way you

indicate levity and feeling. Though you don't usually see it as a productive line of thought, it is true that you are very aware of the emotional state of those around you, and in subtle gestures, affirm your support to them.

Strengths:

Shrewd Self-Awareness: You could be anyone, so why not be the best version of yourself as often as possible. You've no doubt spent some time considering the things that are a benefit to you and those that prevent you from behaving in accordance with what you wish. More than likely, you spend your time in the pursuit of knowledge, self-refinement, and exploring personal interests.

Conversationalist: Some may consider you stubborn, but you are actually the opposite. You enjoy listening to what others have to say, and acknowledge enthusiastically if they've bested you. The problem is that you are smarter than most people and few people present their arguments respectfully. Nevertheless, you know how to talk casually about serious matters, how to take the time to listen to other party members, and contribute personal, relevant, and humorous information where appropriate.

Loyalist: Among your friends, you are a solid foundation. They know you do not change your values or allegiances lightly. Furthermore, you are true to your word. You do not miss agreed upon plans, and when you must, you do so with a proper apology well in advance. You accept that there are many things that you could be, but since you've isolated the things that you want to be, your friends can sense that you do value the time you spend with them, even if this is little and irregular.

Weaknesses:

Intellectualize Everything: You are the kind of person who will sit and stare when someone pours their heart out to you. It isn't that you do not care, you simply don't immediately become emotional just because they are. Instead, you likely do very little. You listen or you will intellectualize the content, offering practical advice and suggestions, which is not always what people are hoping to glean from you. In many, if not every instance, you provide little room for an outburst of feelings, which can make people frustrated with you, or see you are cold and detached.

Hard to Manage Disruption: So much of your attention is dedicated to maintaining the ebb

and flow of your homeostasis that when you have to deal with confrontation directly, it is a near unbearable frustration. This is not when people are upset with you; rather this kind of disruption is concerned mostly when you are forced to respond to it. It could be excessive uncomfortable weather, it could be governmental procedures, or even customs. Being told what to do and then having to do so in order to maintain survival is pure nausea.

Alloof: You likely have only a small number of close connections. These you invest in easily, but it is likely true that you spend excessive amounts of time on your own, collecting data and contemplating it. This makes you an invaluable conversationalist, but it also means social interactions are much more taxing on you than for others. In particular, you are quite drained from outings, either because you sacrificed too much for the sake of others, or there simply was not enough time to recover your space.

Career Paths:

Philosopher

Monk

Martial Artist

Spiriter Romantic Compatibility:

- Seers
- + Mystics
- Clerics
- Artificers
- + Pyromancers
- Spiriter
- Magicians
- Druids
- Arbiters

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Wisdom** stat shows your aptitude for concentration, nuance, and ambivalence.

The Summoners of Voices Beyond utilize a single magic ability accessed in the mind. Through meditation, they are able to cast themselves into alternate realms where Spirits can be found and conversed with. Doing so requires intensive dedication, so much so, that it often absorbs what could otherwise be an ordinary lifestyle. But true Spiriters are content being seen as hermits or monks. In fact, they often view mundane affairs as trivial, if not the subject of jests. Magic for them is a way of daily living, a continual practice, without an emphasis on end goals or objectives. They rarely get caught up in politics or choosing sides, preferring to remain neutral, and they do so because they have a multifaceted understanding of people.

This is among the more challenging disciplines to pursue. Many find the demands to perform it too high, asking too great a sacrifice from time spent with families, friends, and so on. But those few who do pursue it wouldn't have it any other way.

Ruler: Cal

Goddess of the Spirit, it's realm and beings. Young but wise, she is the daughter of Vulga and Novinyo.

Hand Gesture:

Close your fingers together, pointing out. Now open up your thumbs and interlock them together so that one hand (properly the right) is covered up by the other. Your inner palms should be facing towards you. Be sure you angle your hands into somewhat of an upside down V (so that all fingers outside of the thumb are pointing towards the ground at an angle). Now you may rest both hands at your navel, and if you wish to extend a gesture of acknowledgment to someone you may do a half lean in their direction; the half lean should come from your whole head (not your neck) and your wrists simultaneously. You may instinctively move your shoulders forward at the same time; this is fine.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Ricky Fitts - American Beauty

Donald Darko - Donnie Darko

What to Expect:

Awaiting Data...

~ Soul of Fire ~



Stat: Zeal

Official Titles: Pyromancer

Magic: Fire

Classification: Art

OVERWORLD

Description:

It would seem that you hold some potential in the Soul of Fire discipline, Pyromancer. Magic exists within every person. It is like a fire, waiting to be stoked. For some of us, we feel the burn and it compels us into action. Magic is what we feel, and when we deprive ourselves of it, we put out the fire, making us dreary and unhappy. Most pyromancers are humanitarians, believing stronger that the quality of life, of our fire, is what is most important.

You are likely an ambitious person. You inspire, you lead, and you follow through with what you say. Where others see your ideas are too dramatic, too impossible to accomplish, you recognize that those people likely have a weak flame, and perhaps by accomplishing your goals, you've proved them wrong, and perhaps further still, inspired them to strive for something better. Alternatively, you might be overzealous, expecting

more from people than they are willing to give.

You are an artist with whatever craft you dedicate yourself to. You are also implicated in a dichotomy. All your efforts to make the world a better place are likely to be met with fear, skepticism, and hate. You'll become a martyr. But if you don't follow your fire, will you become like the rest of us? Feeble, settling for less, living the half-life.

Strengths:

Visionary Artist: You feel deeply, attributing meaning with a weightiness that few others do, and then you express it to them through aesthetics. People love hearing about your ideas, because they are wild, imaginative, uncompromising, or simply beautiful. The way you see the world is unique, special, something to admire and be proud of.

Developer and Restorer: You hold a great deal of faith in people, but you do so from a position of love for humanity. What this means is you hold people to a high standard, but you are with them every step of the way, consistently compassionate when they are unable to achieve such heights. This is largely limited to your intimate relationships. Someone who doesn't know you might think you cast broad judgments towards people or groups of people. The point they misinterpret is that you are not actually holding judgment against them, rather you are bringing it up to highlight the tragedy of the situation. By witnessing themselves at their worst, you counteract the judgment with ideas and encouragement to do better and be more authentic. A clear depiction of a problem and the reasons for why it exists is simply the starting place to moving beyond it.

Inspiring: You are a beacon of hope and inspiration to those around you. You have bold, ambitious ideas, and you also have the ability to see them come to fruition. When this happens, others see that you aren't just for show and they either follow you or they treat their pursuits with more seriousness than before. If not from achievement, you create this effect from the hardships of your life. To still stand in the face of adversity speaks volumes to your character, and people are compelled to recognize this.

Weaknesses:

Consumed with Purpose: You hold the world to a moral standard that few others would. Because of your strengths, this world view allows people to see themselves and humanity as something to be valued. But where this goes awry is when you forget to account for the individual before you. You are, by and large, more concerned with the beaten body in the street than the person standing right next to you. Your need to aid humanity in a grand

gesture can leave loved ones feeling dismissed and undervalued.

Can't take Criticism: The standards you hold apply to yourself to a much greater degree than they do to others. Thus when someone criticizes you, tells you you've done something wrong, or worse, that you could have done something better, you are angry. You've set your standard, and you make up the rules, not them. It can sometimes show up in interactions with people, but it is particularly internal. You might extend compassion towards this person, even though they're wrong, and you might take their criticism seriously, but only through clinched teeth.

Letting yourself Fester: When something gets under your skin, especially on a subject that you care deeply about, it has a tendency to boil over inside you long after others would let it go. This is an essential part of the Pyromancer, for you will need to spend that time learning what precisely is the frustration and how to tactfully address it. The problem is that you won't regulate your time spent seething fairly with food, sleep, and relaxation. You trust yourself to think your way through the obstacle when what you need in the realistic sense is a break.

Pyromancer Romantic Compatibility:

- + Seers
- + Mystics
- Clerics
- + Artificers
- Pyromancers
- Spiriters
- Magicians
- Druids
- Arbiters

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Zeal** stat determines your potential of becoming a powerful Pyromancer.

Soul of Fire believes magic comes from within the self, and it's main purpose is to propose new, ambition ideas. They are not satisfied with compromising their vision. Often their views of the world are humanitarian in nature, and they are at their best when they

provide inspiration and encouragement for people; either to strive for a better life for themselves or be compelled into action. The downside is that their visions can be far ahead of their time, or too unrealistic for people to respond to. Magic for them, is this driving force within us; and we have to be willing to sacrifice everything for the beliefs we hold. Or else the fire fades.

If you decide to study Pyromancy, if you can fuel the fire, you run the risk of becoming a martyr. But if you recoil, you may find the itch that you could have done more for the world to be a darker life than the former.

Magic:

The Prime Spell for this art is the Fireball.

Ruler: Vulga

God of fire and rebirth. He is also the lover of Novinyo and father of Cal.

Mythical Beings: The Phoenix and the Dragon

T

Hand Gesture:

Hand Gesture: Interlock your fingers, then close them. With one quick, aggressive move, open up your fingers so that they are pointing upwards. You can imagine fire igniting at their tips (or emerging as a ball between them). Your palms should be pressed together so as to avoid creating an X. Properly, the fingers leave little room so that the V shape they create is not very deep. You may interlock your thumbs or separate them.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Bruce Wayne - The Dark Knight Trilogy

What to Expect:

Awaiting Data...

~ Veiled Waters ~



Stat: Luck

Official Titles: Magician / Illusionist

Magic: Illusory

Classification: Trade Secrets

OVERWORLD

Description:

You are likely to enjoy being a part of Veiled Waters, the place for Illusionists and Magicians.

Magic is not real. Not in the sense that it is actually happening. What you experience is just that and there's nothing mystical about it. But that doesn't mean creativity isn't a subject of intrigue. When someone witnesses something you do, and not know how you did it or where you came up with it, you've highlighted something, created this intrigue, in a way, given them a bit of magic. But it's just a façade, no big deal. You are likely good at entertainment, performance, and manipulation. Morality aside, you navigate the world as if it were a giant game, full of moves and counter-moves. It doesn't make you inauthentic, just self-protective and strategic.

You are individualistic in your beliefs. To each their own, and best regards. Sincerely or otherwise. Sometimes you are seen as cynical, but really, you've accepted this a long time ago. It's everyone else who's behind. You've got your own thing going on, and that's the only way that it can be. So, lighten up, grab a drink, tell a joke, blow off the steam. And if you don't like this description, we're confident you'll alter it to your liking.

Strengths:

Clever and Witty: You are quick to undo negative energy with positive energy. Often people flock to you for the levity you bring to situations. You are also great at giving advice, proposing solutions that others would not have considered on their own.

Easily Excited: You love new ideas, circumstances, and events. Where most people might dismiss something, you let yourself embrace it fully. You might tell people how you'll use this idea for something great, then largely forget about it after a few days, but it's not in vain. At some point, this process of collecting data will formulate together. It may seem miscellaneous to some people, but it makes sense to you, and that's the important part.

Present Minded: You take the world as it comes. It is full of good days and bad days; the best thing to do is focus on how you want to feel. You accept when things happen outside of your control, but quickly, you'll want to retaliate against the negative energy, opting to respond with something fresh and good that you can do in the immediate. This is as much a benefit for yourself as it is to those around you.

Weaknesses:

Manipulative: Your ability to lighten moods and reinvent situations has a downside in which people expose themselves to you, and then they're at your mercy. It may not be inherently malicious. More likely you are not manipulating people simply for your own benefit; it might actually be for their benefit. But it will be from your perspective, and you are likely to persuade from instinct rather than from connection. In a simpler sense, you are very good at sympathy, but you do not always allow yourself to be empathetic.

Care-Free: Your focus on your personal needs is a philosophy that could work all of the time if people were on board with it, but they are not always. And when they deviate, wanting their emotions appeased, you do not follow, instead carrying on as if nothing has changed. It doesn't mean you do not notice, in fact you probably do, but it might strike you as self-pitying or otherwise a situation in which they aren't going to let themselves be helped by you. It is a decision made mostly on your part, in your own mind, which can leave people

dissatisfied with their relationship with you since they are likely to notice that they are not really involved in the decision-making.

Trouble Trusting Others: Your focus on being a free-spirit sometimes means your invented morals are not quite clear to others. It is very likely that you take actions and rigorously defend them if challenged. You might revise your future behaviors, but you are likely to do so from a position of self-benefit. This was bad for me, thus I won't do so again. As opposed to this is a break in my moral code, I am no longer a good person. Often you perceive yourself, neigh everyone, to be alone, making self-regulation an important element to have. But it does have the byproduct of making you distant and distrusting of people.

Career Paths:

Entertainer

Magician

Comedian

Poet

Illusionist

Magician Romantic Compatibility:

- + Seers
- Mystics
- Clerics
- Artificers
- Pyromancers
- Spiriters
- Magicians
- + Druids
- Arbiters

Description:

Your **Luck** stat shows a preference for fluidity and unpredictability.

Magicians are entertainers of this age. Big questions about what magic is, or isn't, are less important than their utility. Can you make someone laugh? Can you distract them? Can you hide yourself from them? These are typical of the Veiled Waters branch of magic. You are likely a free spirit, believing on some level in personal agency/responsibility. The only one we need to be concerned with is ourselves. Magic is found in the quips and idiosyncrasies in life; everything can be a tool. And you use them to illustrate something that you see or that they can't see. Because of this, you may dip into manipulation, but the end result is the point is it not?

To do well here is almost a matter of opinion. You're free to study Illusory and depart from it all you like; it's an open discipline with no prerequisites. Perhaps its one caveat is that it can lack destination where you may wish for something to keep you grounded.

Ruler: Ockorn

God of water, strength, and perception, he is proud and bold.

Mythical Beings: The Giant and the Mermaid

Awaiting Data...

Hand Gesture:

Press your fingers together but keep your palms exposed. Now bend both hands so that they curve into C shapes. Bring your left hand to your chest so that if you look down, you could spit into it. Now take your other hand, placing the wrist of it by the heart line. Done correctly, the C shape of your right hand should create a canopy over your left palm. From here, you can imagine a waterfall pouring from the tips of your right hand, filling your left palm, and spilling over.

People who are likely to excel in this discipline:

Fictional Characters:

Han Solo - Star Wars

The Joker - Batman Series

June - Halo: Reach

~ Ethereal Resolve ~



Stat: Fortitude

Official Titles: Artificer / Knight

Magic: Crystal

Classification: Science

OVERWORLD

Description:

You are rational, showing composure in all aspects of life; you live out the way of Ethereal Resolve, Artificer. Magic is found when we are actively invested in something or someone. This means that we ourselves need to be ready, willing, and at our sharpest in order for the magic to happen. As such, you probably have a semi-formal routine in place that keeps you grounded and content. Odds are good that you manage your needs quite well with desires being an optional musing.

You approach everything with confidence in yourself and an openness for what you may find. When it comes to living things, you know how to subdue and seduce. Outbursts are not necessary if the person or animal can be healed instead. When it comes to non-living things, you are equally gentle, or cautious, as may be your personal approach. In whatever the case, you hold a protective guard with the will to strike back if necessary,

aware of the hostility of the world and unaffected by it all the same.

You also have a connection with the feminine. Where this lies is going to depend on you. It may be gender politics, a general inclination towards feminine identifiers (typically that of softness, gentleness, etc.), or more bound in the physical such as wanting to experience the process of birth. You likely accept and appreciate the world for what it is. You think deeply and often. Members of this discipline are quite varied in their interests and responses. What can be said is this framework, but you'll be the one to inform others of who you are and how you wish to be treated.

Strengths:

Level Headed: You have a rational and balanced view of the world. Where most people succumb under stress, anxiety, and depression, you are able to separate your emotions from the situation at hand. You are able to see how you can behave to alter the course into homeostasis without compromising yourself.

Disciplined: In whatever interest it may be, you are all in. You might be a scientist or a seductress, but in either, you invest wholly; doing every equation by hand, applying every bit of make-up, perfecting the outcomes of your pursuits. You likely do not feel yourself if you skip morning routines or regular meals. And not feeling like yourself is an uncomfortable space.

Seductive: You know who, accept, and love who you are. This means you freely nestle in the lives of those you find attractive. When you are self-complete, you allow yourself to find connections that are meaningful to you and then make yourself appealing so that they want to be around you. This is apparent in your displays of affection, sweet talking, word usage, and physical presence. And these traits include everyone and everything, from potential lovers, friendships, and animals.

Weaknesses:

Self-Absorbed: Your diligence to your craft and/or self care may strike people as being vain or uninterested in others. In truth, all you are doing is ensuring you are the best you can be, and presenting as such, in a holistic sense. Nevertheless, you don't see a need to address your methodology directly, you like to remain a little mysterious. Mystery can of course have the adverse affect of people making assumptions about your character and then acting upon those assumption. This ultimately puts the responsibility of honesty on your

shoulders. And it isn't beyond you to be self-absorbed either.

One-Track Mind: Your focus on a task, especially one you are passionate about can often make you seem disconnected from others. Indeed, you may even favor a single activity to the point of obsession, depriving yourself of other needs of yours. Even though Artificers are highly thought of as being well-rounded, it is not uncommon for them to lose sight of their contentedness in favor of seeing an task resolved or following a pursuit of desire.

Overly Formal: Your natural respect for those who put forth effort into their work, their presentation, and so on, makes it challenging for you to accept some people. It isn't that you don't value the soul; rather, the appearance of laziness strikes you as someone with a poor work ethic, something that you do not share common ground with. This is also apparent in speech; finding yourself leery or displeased with people who don't have a respect for proper etiquette.

Career Paths:

Scientist/Inventor

Historian

Scholar/Record Keeper

Craft-Maker (glassblowing/whittling/blacksmithing/etc.)

Knight

Warden

Artificer Romantic Compatibility:

Seers

Mystics

Clerics

Artificers

+ Pyromancers

+ Spiriters: Spiriters are a particularly good match for Artificers. The Spiriter is in many respects the male counterpart to the Artificer, a routinely thought of feminine

discipline. Both parties are able to maintain a calm, rational view of things. If they bond, they will not change partners easily. These two

- **Magicians**
- **Druids**
- + **Arbiters**

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Fortitude** stat implies a connection with the feminine and the nature of self-actualization.

Ethereal Resolve is the craftsmanship of the magic metal Itillic. The metal contains magic in its veins, but it must be handled gently and with understanding in order to be wielded. It can be made into swords, rings, or used to build air ships. The philosophy involves this process where intelligence and sensitivity converge. Like the metal, we are delicate, yet impenetrable. Global concerns and ethics will largely be up to your discretion, but discipline, and a balance of assertiveness with reservation are instilled upon practitioners.

The science of Itillic work is a study reserved for women. You will also be required to serve a year defending the White Gate from the supernatural forces that would seek to come through it and terrorize the world. This is a path, ultimately, anyone can take, but you will need the resolve to do so.

Magic: Crystal

Itillic is a crystal-like metal, containing magic it's veins. Harnessing this metal is not small feat however.

Ruler: Novinyo

Goddess of the Frost, Lover of Vulga and mother of Cal.

Mythical Being: Basilisk

The Basilisk is a reptilian which various in shape, size, and other features depending upon the habitat. In general, they are snake-like, with two arms and webbed fingers, enabling them to traverse both ground and water.

Hand Gesture:

Hand Gesture: Clap your hands together so that your fingers are closed and tightly held together. Now bend both hands so that you form a diamond shape. Make the lines as sharp as possible. Now take both ring fingers and lay them down in the small space between fingers, properly with the left finger closer towards you. This should create a straight line through the center (more or less) of the diamond. You may keep your thumbs pressed together or, more casually, throw them to the sides.

People who are likely to excel in this Discipline:

Real People:

Fictional Characters:

Maggie - Boogie Nights

Alice Harford - Eyes Wide Shut

Ellen Ripley - Alien Series

What you can expect:

As a ...

~ Star Gazer ~



Stat: Intuition

Official Titles: Seer / Psychic / Fortune Teller

Magic: Astral

Classification: Liberal Art

OVERWORLD

Description:

My, but you have an open mind, now don't you? You are thoughtful, clever, and with a wide range of interests and ideas. Having an interest is a pleasurable space for you. You love to put things, even people, under a microscope to see what makes them tick. And you freely experiment without too much thought to consequences, you trust your judgment. Sometimes your methodology offends others, but as long as they let you know, you'll do your best to ensure the intent was not ill willed, because it certainly isn't. It's just how things happened and we can only move forward.

You find it easy to accept a great many things, your interest in the world is general, not a point of challenge. And magic? That's the ongoing question, isn't it? Magic could be everywhere, in anything, maybe it passes through us, maybe it is in us for a time, all the

answers are welcome. For you, there is no reason to isolate magic into a particular place or person, it is more enjoyable to let it always be present with you. In other words, you accept life for what it is, your questioning of it is a drive to satisfy your curiosity.

Strengths:

Curious: You bask in new ideas, turning over every rock, eagerly anticipating what you may find. It doesn't bother you if what you find does not have purpose or functionality. You embrace it as a part of this world where magic permeates anything and everything. You want life to be interesting, and you have no trouble learning new things.

Investigative: Surface answers aren't enough for you (unless declared ahead of time that that's what they'll be). You want to know more, the full extent of something. You learn this by asking questions, poking it with sticks, and cataloging all of this in a notebook (mental or otherwise).

Expressive: You love things that are decorated, things that make a show of who they are on the inside by what they portray on the outside. And it's also just good fun. You likely enjoy dressing up or creating art, anything that becomes a tangible representation of yourself. It is a therapeutic place when you can take small bits of magic and join them together to create a cohesive whole.

Always Full of Ideas:

Weaknesses:

Forgetful of Time: Distraction is your worst nightmare. Because everything is interesting, you may find yourself spending hours on things that have little or nothing to do with what you need to be working on. But this is also the place where you acquire ideas; sometimes you will need to let yourself be separated from your work so that you can return to it with new materials you've acquired in your absence.

Accidentally Overstepping Bounds: Because everything is subject to your musing, you may uncover details about a person, or press for such information, when they aren't yet ready to share with you. Typically, you won't even notice when you've upset them. It doesn't get you down, but you often do your best to make amends where necessary.

Lacking Certainty: You accept so many things, that it can be difficult for you to know if you actually want these things in your life. You may switch careers or switch romantic partners

after a few years, once your interests have swayed in new directions. It isn't that you do not care about those other things, you simply want to know and experience what else is out there. If the idea isn't new to you, you get bored, often against your will.

Career Paths:

Event Planner

Theorist/Anthropologist

Publisher/Editor/Writer

Astronomer

Fortune Teller

Alchemist

Seer Romantic Compatibility:

- + Seers
- Mystics
- + Clerics
- Artificers
- + Pyromancers
- Spiritors
- Magicians
- Druids
- Arbiters

UNDERWORLD

Description:

Your **Intuition** stat shows an aptitude for noticing patterns and areas of

similarity/disconnect.

Star Gazers are open minded thinkers. Similar to Divine Servants, they believe magic is out of our control, in the hands of some force greater than us. They are supported in this view in part due to the visions they receive of probable futures. But their approach is focused more on a general interest of investigation. They enjoy the process of linking seemingly disparate phenomena together. They like to look at their subject of interest (even sometimes that of people) under a microscope to see what makes it tick. They're also known for being very expressive, aesthetically and in personality. As a Star Gazer, you easily accept new conditions and ideas as valuable, but you may get caught up in you're own style of thinking that you overlook points of interest others are concerned with.

There are many destinations to pursue in Astral magic. Are you a Fortune Teller? An Alchemist? Astronomer? You have the options. You're only condition being, can you live hearing whispers of the future, both true and untrue futures?

Magic: Astral

Ruler: Medina

Goddess of the Stars and the Astral Sky. Young and beautiful, with jet black hair. She is the sister of Grimfold.

Medina is known for being mischievous, always letting her curiosity get the better of her, but she is equally witty, often able to think her way out of dangerous situations. She loves playing tricks on people, but she usually spoils the surprise before putting it into motion. When she does follow through, it's usually a mix of giggling and apology.

You can usually find Medina in a library, reading, or playing dress up. Despite her childlike appearance and demeanor, Medina is extremely knowledgeable, with always something thoughtful to bring to the conversation.

Mythical Being: The Banshee

The Banshee is a form of phantom with foresight abilities. They vary in type depending on when they are born. They raise from the graves of deceased women, though it is unclear as to the precise reasons. Current theories suggest it has something to do with various eclipses.

Banshees have an immense depth of foresight, able to see the future in complete pictures, an advantage unmatched by any other being. This sight appears to be overwhelming, as they are typically hostile towards anything within their vicinity. Their voices, a language of shrieking screams, are able to communicate the future to those who hear it. It doubles as a magic projection, able to injure or even kill those who hear it.

Due to their foresight abilities, they are notoriously difficult to survive against. They are, however, susceptible to Crystal magic, a form that is grounded in both the physical and ethereal. Typically they congregate near the White Gate, where the Knights of Novinyo guard the world from them.

Hand Gesture:

Hand Gesture #1 Proper Form: Close your hands together and lay your fingers over the other hand. Now rotate the ball so that the back of your left hand is facing you. Now slowly, open your four left hand fingers so that they point towards to the sky.

Hand Gesture #2 Modern/Improper Form: Same gesture as OfVoices Beyond. Now instead of angling your fingers toward the ground, raise them so that they are pointing to the sky at an angle. Next ensure that, outside of the thumbs, no two fingers are touching.

People who Exhibit Traits of this Discipline:

Fictional Character:

Cortona - Halo Series

Dr. Emmett Brown - Back to the Future

What you can expect:

Awaiting Data...