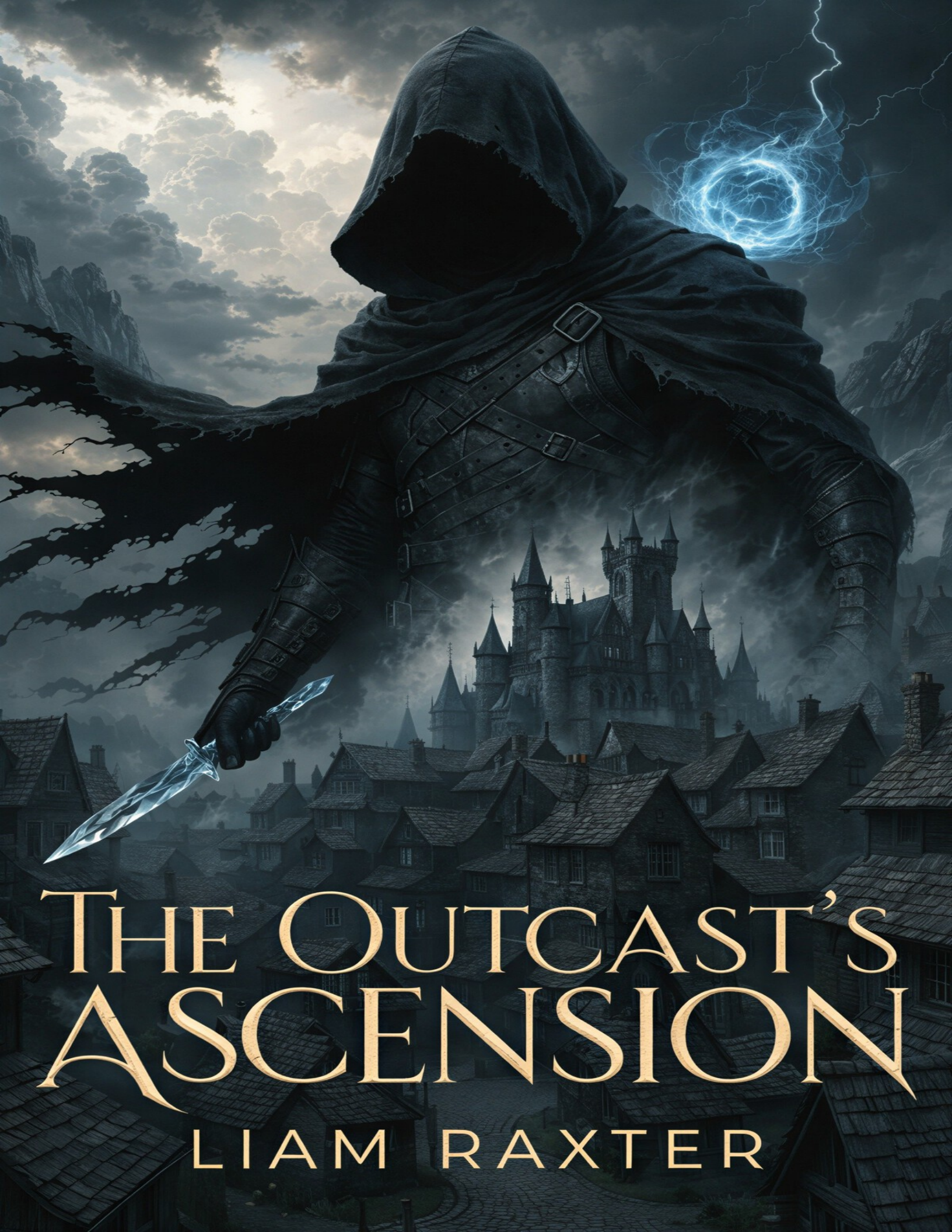

The Outcast's Ascension
Liam Raxter

The Outcast's Ascension

Liam Raxter

Liam Raxter Books

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The Outcast Saga

The Outcast's Ascension (Book 1)
The Outcast's Reckoning (Book 2) – Coming Soon
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Dedication

For my wife,
who encouraged and supported me with my hobbies.
From signing me up for a Mokume Gane ring making class to reviewing and helping me edit this book.

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PROLOGUE

THE HOUSE

The room sits in the northeast corner of a floor that's not listed in the building's directory.

Three of its walls are seamless glass, floor-to-ceiling, the kind that costs more per square foot than most people down in the city will earn in a year. Beyond them, the city spreads out in the dark, a grid of cold light laid flat to the horizon, every window a data point, every street a line on a board. The man at the head of the table doesn't look at it. He's seen the view. He's watching the screens.

The screens cover the interior wall. On them, thirty people lie on steel tables in a room with no corners that the cameras can't reach. Each body carries a small floating tag the sleepers can't see, an ID, a projected value, a column of numbers that shiver and settle as the system finishes its preparations. Some of the sleepers are already stirring. Most are not.

"Intake's clean," the woman to his left says. She's somewhere in her late forties, dark hair cut short, and she carries herself like someone who has been awake for thirty hours and holds herself responsible for every one of

them. A laptop casts a pale rectangle across her face. “Vitals nominal on all subjects.” A small pause she doesn’t intend. “No one’s hurting yet.”

Augustus Sterling says nothing. He is perhaps sixty, salt-and-pepper hair, his dark suit fitted with the indifference of a man who stopped noticing what things cost a long time ago. His hands rest on the walnut table, fingers laced.

On a narrower screen to the side, the board runs. It updates itself in small increments, line after line, each one a wager, a dollar figure, a set of odds, a status blinking from AMBER to LIVE as the night’s markets open.

First Death, over/under ninety minutes. $4,000,000. LIVE.

Blue party reaches Level 5 as a unit. 3.20. OPEN.

Full-party survival, Green. 14.0. LONGSHOT.

A younger man two seats down, an analyst with a tablet and none of his coworker’s stress, reads the numbers under his breath with something close to appetite. “Longshot’s already moving,” he says, to no one in particular. “They love an underdog. God, they love an underdog.”

Sterling reads the board the way another man reads the weather. He uncaps a fountain pen, and the scratch of the nib is the only sound in the room. He draws a small, precise circle around one line, the green party, the longshot, and caps the pen again.

“You like the outsiders,” the woman says. It is not exactly a question.

“I like the ones the model can’t price, Vaneck.” He sets the pen in its diagonal rest. “The rest is accounting.”

She glances at the master feed, where thirty tags hang over thirty bodies, and for a moment something moves behind her professional calm and is put away. “We’re green to start.”

Sterling looks at the sleepers a moment longer. Then he says the only thing the night requires of him.

“Wake them.”

Her hand settles over the key that will do it and pauses, not pressing. She built this to keep people alive. She’s learned not to say so in this room. Then she presses it, because the alternative is Sterling asking her a second time.

Somewhere far below the glass, in a place no search will ever find, the signal goes out, folding down through the dark to a room sealed off from the world, to a voice built to sound warm. And on thirty screens, in grayscale, thirty pairs of eyes snap open at once.

The House settles in to watch.

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CHAPTER 1

A chill seeps through the thin fabric of the hospital gown and into Jason's shoulder blades. It spreads across his back with the flat, even coldness of metal, not a mattress. He can't move his arms. His eyes snap open.

The bright fluorescent light stings them, white and harsh, scrubbing the ceiling into a blank, empty sheet. He twists his left wrist and feels the sharp pinch of a padded leather strap. The same on his right. He jerks his ankles, but the straps hold firm. The table beneath him is cold, brushed steel, bolted to a gray floor. The room around it is enormous.

Fuck!

Fear rushes through him as he quickly lifts his head, checking his sides for incisions near his kidneys. He sees nothing. No indication of an incision. Nothing. He wiggles, waiting for a stab of pain that would tell him what they might have taken.

Nope. Nothing. Thank God.

He lifts his head again and strains against the restraints to look around. He doesn't see any security cameras in the corners. There are no guard posts. Just rows of identical tables stretching in every direction, each holding a person in a thin white gown. Some lie still. Others have already started to struggle, shoulders jerking, heads rolling side to side. Thirty tables, thirty overhead lights, and nothing else.

Where am I? he wonders. *The last thing I remember is...* He tries to recall. *I was...* “I was at work,” he blurts out. *How did I get here? How do I get off this table?*

He takes a breath and tries to calm down. The panic fades, replaced by a need to figure things out. He tests the left wrist strap, checking how much it gives. The padded leather is tight, and the clasp is just out of reach. He shifts his hips, trying to move the table, but it doesn’t budge.

The ceiling speaks.

Good morning, players!

What the fuck?

The voice is bright and crackling, completely out of place in the empty room. It has the warm hiss of an old radio and echoes everywhere at once.

Several people shout. A woman two tables over screams something wordless. A man at the far end of the row bellows one sharp profanity and goes silent.

Jason feels his restraints shift a little.

All the locks release at once with a loud snap. The sound echoes through the room, and the leather restraints on his wrists and ankles fall open. He rolls to the side, swinging his feet over the edge, and as soon as his bare feet touch the gray floor, the cold shoots up through his heels.

Jason stands up. His knees wobble, but he steadies himself and breathes through his nose. *Is my ass hanging out?* he wonders while grabbing the back of his hospital gown and twisting it tight so he can move more easily.

Around him, the room fades into low, urgent noises. People drop off tables and grab at each other. A man at the front shakes someone by the shoulders, asking for answers, but the woman’s pale, blank face shows she’s just as confused as he is.

There’s one exit in this room, the voice, the Announcer, continues, the cheerful static untroubled by any of it. **Please proceed in an orderly fashion through the door at the far end of the room. There’s no need to be alarmed. We’re all friends here!**

At the far end of the room, two heavy steel panels stand upright. They look industrial, like they were taken from an equipment showroom.

Jason takes a few steps toward the doorway, then looks around and notices that almost no one else is moving toward the door.

I won’t be asking twice, the Announcer says. Suddenly, screams fill the room. Jason looks around and realizes that the people who didn’t start

heading toward the door seem to be in physical pain, almost as if they were being electrocuted. A few seconds later, everyone rushes toward the doorway.

Jason moves with the crowd, gripping the hem of his gown as he slips into the middle of the group. *Thirty people heading for one exit feels more like a stampede than a crowd.* Hospital gowns and bare skin bump together as they shuffle to the next room. The floor is freezing. Someone behind him is quietly crying, trying hard not to let it show. Jason keeps his eyes forward, chin down, and follows the person ahead toward the doors.

They push through into the light.

The room on the other side looks completely ordinary.

It has low drop-ceiling tiles and beige walls. The carpet looks old, like it hasn't been replaced since the '90s. Padded waiting chairs line one wall beneath a TV that shows only a blue standby screen. In the corner, there's an empty reception desk with a dead computer monitor and a plastic nameplate that reads "NO ONE." Fake potted plants sit in the corners.

The air is stale and dry, like an office that has been vacant for years. Jason stands just inside the doorway and breathes in. There's no smell of food or fresh air. The place feels completely sealed off.

Welcome to the game.

The Announcer's voice booms from hidden speakers, still warm and cheerful. Several people freeze in place.

Jason's eyes sting; he blinks.

When they open, something in his vision has changed. As they focus, translucent blue words float in the air. A red bar at the top says:

HP: 100/100

Below that, a pale blue bar says Energy. Numbers run down the left side, the characters shifting as his mind tries to make sense of them.

The fuck? He swipes his hand through the interface. His fingers pass right through.

A young woman next to him, with short black hair, waves her hands in front of her face like she's trying to clear smoke. A stocky man on Jason's left grabs the edge of the reception desk, his face turning pale.

What you’re seeing is real, the Announcer says brightly. **Your display is now active. You are officially players in our game, and we are so happy to have you!** A pause, like a radio host letting a punchline breathe. **Now, here are the rules. Your health bar is always in your peripheral vision. Think of it as your life, because it is your life. If that little red bar reaches zero...** The static crackles warmly. **Well. You won’t be playing anymore. This is not a simulation. We want to be very clear about that. This is quite real.** It pauses again.

If you die, you die.

The man at the reception desk lowers himself into a waiting chair, his legs simply giving out under his weight.

A shorter guy on the other end of the room says, “It looks like a video game.”

Jason checks the red bar:



Small, precise, indifferent to all of it. He presses his tongue to the back of his teeth and breathes until his heart quits slamming. *That guy is right. This is a skill-based RPG. This is like a real-life video game.* The thought steadies him more than it should. A handrail in the dark, even if he can’t see where it goes.

To get started, we’ll need to sort you into your parties, the Announcer continues. **Look at the back of your hand. Your right hand, if you please. Your hand will show you where to go next. Head down the hallway and find the door that corresponds with the color on your hand. Simple as that! We believe in keeping things easy for our newcomers.**

Jason turns his right hand over. Green light pulses from beneath the skin of his knuckles, slow and steady as a heartbeat. *That wasn’t there before.* He’s certain of it, and certainty about anything feels rare right now. Whatever put it there did it while he was somewhere he can’t remember, and that thought is worse than the light.

Around him, the group heads down the hallway. Jason watches as the crowd splits up, people peeling off in different directions, and he follows.

The corridor is narrow with a lower ceiling and the same institutional-looking beige carpet. The crowd pushes ahead of him around one shallow bend and stops in front of five unmarked doors: red, blue, orange, yellow, and green. The last door in the hallway is the green door.

Others arrive at the same time. Five of them, each examining the backs of their hands.

The green door stands out. The paint is a rich green and seems to pulse like the light on Jason's hand. A small sign at eye level reads **Equipment Room.**

A broad-shouldered man reaches it first, tall, thick through the arms, the kind of build that fills a doorway standing still. He plants himself in front of the door without so much as glancing at Jason, a foot to his left. "I'm Trent," he says, squaring up like he expects the wood to swing back. The door opens easily and he walks in.

Jason has him pegged inside of a second, and one word covers it: *Bully.*

The next man nods to Jason as he passes, compact, balanced, hands loose at his sides, lean muscle instead of bulk. He stops beside Trent without crowding him, his eyes sweeping the others in one quick, cataloging pass, and offers a hand. "I'm Derek." Trent grabs it, yanks him in, and turns the handshake into a bro-shake, clapping an arm across his shoulders as if recognizing a fellow athlete.

A woman comes in after them, short and quiet, her gown bunched in one fist to keep it off the floor. Her blonde hair is professionally done; the only tell is the brown roots starting to show. She sweeps the room with a look that lands on Jason a half-second too long, and whatever she sees in him, she doesn't like. He glances away, his ears getting warm.

"My father is going to find me, and—" she switches from talking to shouting at the ceiling, "—he is going to sue you all and have you arrested! AND WHERE'S MY VALENTINO GARAVANI?" Jason assumes it's a purse. He has no idea. She turns to another woman just entering the room. "I'm Evie. And you are? Us girls gotta stick together."

The other woman is tall, with the careful posture of someone who has spent a lot of time in rooms where taking up space was a liability, shoulders drawn slightly in, weight balanced, nothing wasted. Her hair is dark, cut just above her shoulders, practical rather than styled. Her face is hard to read, not because it's blank but because every expression on it runs about

three seconds behind whatever’s happening underneath. She steps clear of Evie and tells the room, “I’m Heather.”

Jason enters the room, distracted by a nagging thought. Something about Evie’s fingernails and hair seems off. She looks pampered and expensive, but her hair and nails are overdue for a touch-up. How long have they been here?

Lastly, a man named Eric hangs back, watching the others with the still, careful look of a mathematician performing long division. He’s the kind of average-looking that takes a second look to realize—medium height, medium build, nothing about him that should command attention—but he holds himself with such complete, unhurried composure that the eye keeps returning to him anyway, the way it returns to something in a room that hasn’t moved but you are increasingly certain has been watching you. His face is angular and clean-featured, with pale eyes that register everything with the flat, indexing patience of a security camera. Jason recognizes him as the guy in the previous room who said this was like a video game. He now knows his name as well because the HUD interface has him listed as a member of the green party with Jason.

The room looks the size of a conference room, the air smelling of oiled leather and old iron. The walls are bare steel, and the floor is gray. Six wooden chests sit in the center, arranged in two rows. Each one has a name floating above it in pale, glowing letters.

Jason

His chest sits at the far left of the back row. He crosses to it, stepping around Trent, who has already claimed the center chest and is staring down at it with puffed-chest satisfaction.

Up close, the chest looks ancient, the wood dark and deeply grained, bound by heavy iron bands. His name hovers above it in soft green, matching the door’s color. He unlatches the clasp and lifts the lid.

The wood dissolves.

“What the fuck?” he exclaims, receiving another disgusted look from Evie.

The chest falls apart from the edges, each dark plank turning into sparkling silver dust that drifts down and disappears with a faint metallic hiss before it hits the floor. Where the chest was, a glowing blue cube now floats at waist height, humming softly.

Beside it, the other chests do the same, leaving pulsating cubes of light.

“I’m not touching that,” Evie says.

Trent reaches down. “I’ll help you.”

“Aah—” He recoils, shaking out his hand. It’s the same jolt that dropped the stragglers in the first room a few minutes ago, the people who were ignoring the Announcer.

Stealing from party members is prohibited... in this room, the Announcer says. **But I would open it if you intend to survive.**

Evie huffs and opens her chest. It does the same as the five others.

Eric’s hand lingers in the air near his cube. “Huh.”

Jason grabs his own cube. It is cold, a sharp chill that tingles against his hand like blood rushing back into numb fingers. Then it melts, flowing into his skin, and his vision fills with light.

A vast menu expands. It’s a spreadsheet of his own stats, organized into clean columns. At the top, his base attributes display:

STR: 3 / CON: 0 / DEX: 4 / VIT: 3 / INT: 5 / PER: 5 / CRIT: 0

As the cube sinks in, his baseline attributes—twenty points in all—shiver and melt into a pool of twenty **raw Stat Points** at the bottom of his display. The interface changes, asking him to assign these points to new combat stats like Attack Damage, Physical Strength, Energy, Nature Resistance, Health Points, and Recovery.

Directly beneath the attributes, a separate indicator registers a flat baseline of **3 Ability Points**, granted to unlock starter skills regardless of stats.

“You can control it with your thoughts,” Eric says, motioning vaguely at his own screen. “Don’t touch the air. Just think at it. It’s basically an RPG starting menu.”

“Air-A-Pee-Gee?” Trent asks.

“An RPG. A Role-Playing Game.”

“Role playing,” Trent says, grinning at Heather and Evie. Evie smiles back.

“It’s a type of game,” Eric explains. “Dungeons and Dragons, World of Warcraft, stuff like that. STR is Strength. It’s how much damage you can do with swords and stuff, and how much you can carry. Then there’s Constitution, which is your resistance to different types of attacks and

damage. Dexterity is speed and reflexes. Vitality is your health and recovery. Intellect is your magic or energy attacks in this case. Perception is what you can identify by what you see. And then Crit gives you a small chance to deal a little extra damage."

Jason gives it a try. He thinks about collapsing the menu, and it shrinks into a small icon in the corner of his vision. He thinks about expanding it, and it opens up again. It feels less like using software and more like trying to remember a word that's just out of reach.

Trent crosses his arms, his chin tilting up. "Can I share my sheet?"

He does not need to wait for a response. A window appears, projecting Trent's stat block outward in bright blue digits.

TRENT: STR 9 / CON 2 / DEX 6 / VIT 5 / INT 2 / PER 2 / CRIT 0

The system processes Trent's conversion, his twenty-six baseline attributes re-collapsing into raw points before he forcefully locks them in.

Eric tells him, "Okay, your best option is to put a lot of yours into your strength substats and health. You're best suited to be a tank."

Trent starts assigning points. His newly assigned combat stats display: 10 Attack Damage, 10 Physical Strength, 6 Health Points.

"Ten attack damage. Ten strength. Out of the gate." Trent looks around the room, grinning. "That's how you build a front line."

"Hold up!" Eric says. "We need to think about this strategically."

"Whatever, dweeb," Trent says.

Derek projects his own stats with a snap of his wrist.

DEREK: STR 7 / CON 2 / DEX 8 / VIT 6 / INT 5 / PER 5 / CRIT 2

Trent raises a palm after seeing the stats, and Derek slaps it hard, the loud crack bouncing off the steel walls.

Evie shares hers quietly:

STR 3 / CON 3 / DEX 5 / VIT 4 / INT 3 / PER 3 / CRIT 0.

“Wait, I’m not sure how I did that. I was just thinking about what you said, and this screen popped up.”

Eric’s numbers come up next, matching his quiet deliberation:

STR 4 / CON 0 / DEX 4 / VIT 4 / INT 6 / PER 5 / CRIT 0.

Heather looks annoyed at all of it, but she projects hers anyway, arms still folded:

STR 3 / CON 3 / DEX 2 / VIT 3 / INT 9 / PER 5 / CRIT 0.

Then, the others turn to look at Jason.

He pushes the share toggle with a thought. The numbers hang in the air.

JASON: STR 3 / CON 0 / DEX 4 / VIT 3 / INT 5 / PER 5 / CRIT 0

Trent’s finger points directly at the strength. “Does that say you have three strength? Your stats are like the lowest in the group. That’s actually impressive.”

Jason’s jaw tightens, a sudden heat flooding into his cheeks. He pulls his share projection closed with a mental flick, leaving Trent’s pointing finger gesturing at nothing but empty air.

Have fun with your 2 intelligence.

Before the quiet can stretch, Derek catches Jason’s eye. He shakes his head slightly at Trent’s boasting, a brief, silent grimace of disapproval, then gives Jason a quiet, reassuring nod. It settles something in Jason’s stomach.

Jason moves into the shadows in the far corner. It’s a deliberate retreat, keeping his back protected while he works with his interface, away from Trent’s judgment.

The allocation screen is still waiting.

Twenty raw points.

He makes his choices reactively. With a quick, mental command, he pushes six points into Attack Damage and six into Physical Strength. The remaining total drops instantly to eight.

A cold knot forms in his throat as he looks at what's left. He's spent twelve points on offense, leaving himself weak in other areas. Rookie mistake. He clenches his teeth and forces himself to focus. *No more emotional choices*. He puts five points into Health and three into Recovery, watching the numbers settle.

Eric steps into the center of the floor, his posture stiff and formal. "If we're going to survive whatever is on the other side of this, we need a risk-mitigation structure. Every resource is finite. We have to treat ourselves as assets to be optimized." He turns his clinical gaze to Trent. "You are the primary focal point for damage absorption. You need to block and defend the rest of the party against attacks, which means your point allocation has to prioritize HP and physical resistances over pure offensive output, or you become a liability."

Trent grins, ignoring the warning. "Right, the tank."

"Yes." Eric nods once. "To put it in terms you'll all follow: the tank is the linebacker. Strongest guy protects the team. Then you've got DPS, damage per second. The quarterbacks. They put out the most damage the fastest. That's Derek and me. You need a healer, Evie; you keep everyone alive. A ranged and a mage. Heather, you're ranged; it keeps you back where it's safer. And ideally a mage to weaken or slow whatever we're fighting."

His name isn't on the list. Jason notes it and also thinks about how half of the party clearly didn't understand a word Eric just said. He also notes the phrase 'assets to be optimized' and how easily it came out of Eric, like a line he'd read somewhere and agreed with.

Eric's eyes narrow at Trent's numbers. He exhales a slow, measured breath, cataloging the inefficiencies. "A sub-optimal distribution. But we can build around it." He turns. "Derek. High dexterity, solid strength. You're our mobile striking asset. Here's how we balance your matrix."

He walks Derek through the point values, methodical, and Derek nods along, confirming. He clearly knows the game. So, one by one, half-understanding, the others fall in line.

Jason stays in his corner. He's put in more than his share of hours on games like this; he understands it as well as Eric does. He just isn't about to

open his mouth and hand Trent something else to mock. *Eric's no different from me. So why are they all falling in behind him?*

Derek does as Eric suggests, spreading his points across offense, reflexes, and health, and spends his 3 Ability Points on Team Buff, which temporarily raises the stats of every party member near him, and Minor Heal.

Trent, having confirmed his tank status, spends his Ability Points on *Backlash* and *Swords*, locking in his front-line identity. Swords increases the damage caused to an opponent when using a sword. Backlash, when in use, reduces some of the potential damage from an opponent's attack and adds it to the user's next attack.

Evie looks at Eric as if he's beneath her, but she does as he suggests, weighting health, recovery, and energy, and spends her 3 Ability Points on Minor Heal and Major Heal in silence.

Heather follows Eric's recommendations with similar composure, splitting her points between damage, range, health, recovery, and vision, and spends her 3 Ability Points on Stun, Accuracy, and Poison to sharpen her ranged attacks.

Eric runs down his stats silently, placing points evenly across the board. Then he stops sharing his screen before Jason can see what he spends his Ability Points on.

Directly beneath Jason's stat point allocation, his three blank Ability Points hover. He scrolls the available skills. The list is long, most of it grayed out or locked behind tier requirements.

Then he stops.

Stealth. 1 point.

He selects it. One point gone.

He keeps scrolling, past the locked higher-tier paths, until the display settles on an unlocked ability in a column of its own.

Conjure Companion. 2 points.

He hovers on it, and the description unfolds under his attention rather than under his hand, the same way the menu answered his ‘want’ a minute ago. ‘Summons a bonded companion. Responds to intent.’ Not to a button. Not to the interface. To what he means. Something in his chest pulls two directions at once. His breath stutters and his fingers curl into his palm. Part of him wants an ally in this void so badly it aches; the rest of him recoils at the idea of putting his safety into something outside himself, something that could watch him, something the room might be able to reach through. He keeps his breathing even and lets the wanting win.

He selects *Conjure Companion*. The final two ability points disappear.

A prompt asks whether he wants to summon now. He declines with a sharp mental nudge. *Not here. Not in front of five strangers already pricing me as dead weight.* He tucks the skill away to test somewhere he isn’t being measured, though the thought comes with its own cold echo, because in here, they are all clearly being measured.

The Announcer’s voice drops from the ceiling panels. **Wonderful! Now it’s time to gear up. Clothing and weapons are along the far wall. Please select your equipment and get changed. When you’re ready, exit through the door at the opposite end. You’re going to love what comes next!**

Along the far wall, there’s a long wooden rack with medieval-style clothes: leather tunics, linen pants, boots with real soles. Jason grabs a set from the hangers and notices it shrinks to fit his body. He runs his thumb along a seam. The stitching is tight, and the leather feels soft and well-made.

This isn’t cheap cosplay stuff. This looks and feels like the kind of high-quality gear only hardcore costume fans would have.

Privacy screens stand at irregular intervals along the wall.

“Um, I’m not changing in front of everyone else. I need an actual changing room,” Evie says.

Trent drags two screens over and angles them against the wall so she has full coverage.

“Fine!” she scoffs.

As she is changing, Trent gives her a good, long look over the top of the privacy screen. She catches him and playfully tells him to “stop.”

Trent proceeds to change out in the open, clearly not having any issues with modesty.

Jason slips between two screens and trades the gown for the tunic and trousers. The leather fits snug, and the seams make him feel absurd, but a little more protected.

The weapon rack smells of mineral oil, cold iron, and fresh-cut pine. Swords, short blades, bows, a crossbow, a pair of hatchets. The stats floating above each one are bare, no enchantments, no bonuses. Jason reaches for a short sword at the end of the rack.

Trent's hand cuts through the light, his thick fingers closing on the hilt of the short sword and ripping it from Jason's hand in one clean motion.

"You'll hurt yourself." Trent balances a plain, heavy iron dagger on his palm, pushing the flat of the dagger onto Jason's chest. "That's more your level."

"Fuck you!" Jason snaps.

Trent pushes him up against the wall. "What did you say?" The dagger falls to the floor.

Derek steps between them. "Chill, guys. Same team. Same team."

Derek doesn't ask what started it. He just sees the dagger on the floor, picks it up, and holds it out. Jason takes it without a word. His fingers find the grip, and his thumb settles into place as it belongs there, like his hand knows the shape of a thing his memory can't place. The blade is heavy and rough, but the edge is sharp; he shaves a curl of leather off his cuff to check, then sheaths it at his hip. On his way past the rack, he lifts a short sword too, and walks off.

Trent is already choosing his own, a broad two-handed greatsword, which he hefts and sights down the edge of with the grin of a man who has waited his whole life for exactly this. Derek takes a short sword. Heather takes a bow and a full quiver. Eric takes a short sword and hands Evie a wand, which she says makes her feel like a kid at a birthday party.

The door at the far end opens onto a dim, high-ceilinged loading bay lit by a dull amber glow. In the center sits a wooden carriage, no horses, no harness, no visible way for it to move. Four wheels, a covered bench, an open cabin with seats inside.

They climb in without talking. Jason sits across from Heather, palms flat on the rough wood. The dagger rides light against his leg, and he grips it. Trent drops in beside Heather and pulls Evie in against his other side, an arm around each. Heather pushes at his arm, then lets it stay. Derek sits next to Jason, and before he settles, he runs a thumb under the strap of his tunic

and tucks a loose end back beneath the buckle, a small tidy habit that looks older than the leather. Eric comes last.

I need to boost strength. I've played enough of these to work it out faster than Thick Head over there. Once they see I know my shit, I can step up, and I can lead this party. Then the thought curdles. *What am I saying? What the fuck even is any of this? I'm going to die. I'm really going to die here.*

Derek reads the anxiety climbing Jason's face and lightly bumps his fist against his knee. Jason looks up. Derek gives him a small, *we're-good* nod. Jason breathes and settles himself.

Just then, Trent notices Jason's sword. He hauls Jason up by the collar, then snatches the sword and throws it thirty feet along the side of the building.

"Asshole," Jason shouts as he steps toward the edge of the carriage to retrieve it, but then the carriage begins to move, and Jason falls back into his seat.

There's no sound of hooves, no driver shaking the reins. The carriage rolls forward, the wheels gliding smoothly and silently. The loading bay disappears behind them. Ahead, a pair of double doors swing open on their own, and the carriage moves into total darkness.

The wind begins.

A low, rising howl cuts through the dark, building in pitch and volume. The air within the cabin begins to spin, whipping up a violent funnel of dust and grit from the floor. Jason turns his face away, pressing his forearm over his eyes as the roaring fills his ears, drowning out the sound of his own breath. Heather and Evie scream.

The carriage shudders beneath him, a harsh, metal-on-stone vibration.

And then, it stops.

The wind cuts out instantly. The screaming ends. Silence lands like a palpable mass.

Jason lowers his arm.

Above him, the sky is wide and dark, with a single streetlamp shining overhead. Its harsh white light covers the cobblestones, casting sharp, deep shadows behind the buildings. The darkness looks like it could be hiding anything.

The damp, dark air smells of rotting wood, cold wet stone, and a faint metallic scent left by the strange wind. The empty windows of the stone

buildings look down on the square. Everyone exits the carriage. The dirt, the rocks, the grass—all feel real. *How can this all be here? Where are we*? Jason wonders.

Once they're all out of the carriage, a low groan vibrates through the bench. Jason looks over. The thick wooden planks of the carriage floor are softening, their fibers splitting apart into thin, curling ribbons of gray smoke. The ash-scented vapor sinks into the gaps between the flagstones below, leaving nothing behind as the vehicle systematically unweaves itself from the earth up.

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CHAPTER 2

Jason walks the square, his weight shifting with every step. The cobblestones are uneven under his boots, every one a little higher or lower than the next, so he has to keep correcting his balance. *These are real cobblestones.* He pushes his boot against one. It doesn't move or break. It just sits there, solid and unmoving, like it's been part of the ground for centuries and plans to stay that way.

None of this makes any sense, he thinks. *How could a village like this exist without anyone knowing? Are we still on Earth? Was this some type of alien abduction? Or are we in a video game, like Tron, but with better graphics?* Jason realizes he's falling behind and hurries to catch up with the group.

They're in a village at night. Everything is dark except for the streetlamp above and a little amber light coming from behind some closed windows. The buildings are made of stone and wood, with uneven roofs and walls stained by years of weather and soot. The air has the scent of woodsmoke and something animal Jason can't clearly place. There's no sound of traffic or electricity, nothing that feels familiar to him.

These don't look like they were built just for a game. They look old, like they've been here forever. It's like a medieval village that somehow never showed up on Google Earth.

"Over here."

Trent is already across the square, resting one boot on the low stone wall at the village's edge. His greatsword hangs across his back. He points at something on the ground under the streetlamp. The others head over, and Jason follows, keeping to the edge of the group.

Under the lamp, partly covering the base of the iron post, lies a folded piece of rough fabric. It's coarse and colored somewhere between brown and gray. On its surface, stamped in green ink, is a simple, blocky picture of an old-fashioned key.

A new message flashes in Jason's vision.

NEW QUEST: FIND THE GREEN KEY
3 KEYS ARE NEEDED TO ENTER THE USURPER'S CASTLE

The Announcer's voice descends from nowhere.

And it begins!

The static fades away. The quest marker stays, pulsing once in the top right of his vision before turning into a steady green glow.

"Oh, shit!" Jason shouts when he sees shining eyes coming toward him. He calms down when he realizes it's just a normal dog. He kneels and scratches its ears while Trent and Evie give him annoyed looks for being scared. "Sorry, buddy. I wish I had some food for you," he tells it, a little amazed at how real it feels.

"The key is a reward," Eric tells the group, looking at the fabric and ignoring Jason and the dog. "I assume we need to beat at least a mid-level boss. We won't find it just by wandering around. We'll have to level up enough to survive whatever's guarding it."

"Then let's go kill some things," Trent says.

"What do you think the key unlocks?" Derek asks.

"It could be for a treasure or a treasure room, maybe a key to move to the next level, or just a room with the next part of the quest. We probably won't know until we get it."

A whistle sounds from a house in the village. The dog jumps up, runs to the house, and slips inside. Someone closes the door, their figure blurred by the light inside and the darkness outside.

Jason studies the picture of the key and, not sounding very sure, says, “I think we need to ask some villagers where to go and what we have to fight to get the key.” Trent drops his boot from the wall and heads out of town without looking back.

And I guess we’re about to do something, even though we have no idea where we are or what we’re doing.

Jason looks back at the house. “See ya, buddy,” he says as he gets up to follow the others.

Heather and Derek start walking after Trent. Evie hurries to catch up and walks alongside Trent.

The stone wall at the edge of the village is low, just about hip height. Beyond it, the darkness is complete—open land with no lights anywhere. The forest starts about fifty yards away, a black wall of trees and leaves with nothing visible inside. The grass between the wall and the trees is wet, soaking through Jason’s boots right away.

Great. Now my feet are wet.

“What kind of bad guys do you think we’ll find here?” Evie asks.

“With this type of setting,” Eric says, “we’re likely to find things like trolls, orcs, aggressive villagers, possibly giant spiders.”

Evie and Heather both stiffen at hearing giant spiders. Eric continues, “They might have some undead.”

“Like walking skeletons?” Heather asks.

“Yeah, most likely,” he says. And then he notices her face is full of terror. He looks ahead of them.

Three walking skeletons emerge from behind a couple of trees. Walking in a loose cluster, moving with the stiff, mechanical gait of something being operated by a system that understands motion but has never actually experienced it. Their joints click with each step. They carry old, notched swords that look like they came from the same prop room as theirs. Their eye sockets are dark and empty, and they do not slow down upon seeing the group.

Trent doesn’t slow down either.

He covers the distance in four long strides, yelling “I’m a tank,” brings his greatsword up in a single-handed arc, and hits the nearest skeleton across the ribcage with enough force to fold it sideways. Its spinal column cracks. It drops. Before it finishes dropping, he has already turned to the second, clumsily driving his shoulder into its chest and pinning it against

the ground. Derek arrives beside him, moving in a tight, economical line, his blade coming across the neck of the third. The skull separates from the vertebrae with a dry, brittle crack and clatters off into the grass.

The Announcer narrates the fight with a crisp, earnest, and slightly fizzing-with-excitement tone: **Ooh! And we are OFF, ladies and gentlemen! Trent is taking the lead with all the subtlety of a runaway carriage—and I mean that as a compliment! Three Skeletal Sentinels down in under five seconds. Textbook aggression from our frontline. Derek with the clean finish on number three. Lovely form.**

The skeletons do not bleed. Where they break, the fracture is clean and dry, gray bone splitting with the sound of old ceramic. What remains dissolves slowly, the pieces becoming softer at the edges and curling inward like burning paper until they are gone. A small cluster of loot items materializes where each one stood, sitting on the wet grass with a dim blue shimmer.

Skeletal Sentinel defeated. +15 XP (Party Shared)
Skeletal Sentinel defeated. +15 XP (Party Shared)
Skeletal Sentinel defeated. +15 XP (Party Shared)
XP: 45/100 to Level 2

At least I’m getting some experience points from being in the party, even though they won’t let me fight. I wonder how much they are getting for actually killing the enemies.

Trent is already moving toward another group of skeletons.

Jason watches the loot shimmer. He then takes one step toward the nearest skeleton.

“Get to the back,” Trent says, without turning around.

Jason stops.

Derek glances back. He offers nothing out loud, but there is something in the angle of his head that registers the moment before he turns away.

The next group consists of four skeletons in a loose spread at the tree line’s edge. Trent and Derek move through them with the same chaotic efficiency. Eric positions himself on the left flank, delivers two clean, quick strikes, then retreats to a safe distance. Evie hangs back with her palms raised, ready. The wand from the armory is already gone, banished to the

bottom of her inventory once she found she casts just as well with her bare hands. Heather hangs back with her bow half-drawn, tracking.

Jason hangs back as well. His reasons are different from theirs.

He tracks every movement. He maps the patterns. The skeletons telegraph their swings from the shoulder, not the wrist. Their footwork is absent entirely. If you watch the shoulder, you know exactly where the sword is going at least half a beat before it arrives.

I should remember that.

Now here is something our more observant viewers at home may have noticed, the Announcer says, its warm crackle carrying the tone of a nature program host spotting something mildly unusual in the undergrowth. **While his teammates engage, our sixth party member appears to be hanging back. Watching. Cataloging. One might almost call it a strategy.** A brief pause. **One might.**

Trent moves to collect the loot before the shimmer fades.

Jason takes a step forward toward a stray skeleton.

Trent stops him with a flat hand to the chest. The same gesture a crossing guard uses on a five-year-old. Jason's sternum absorbs the impact. His back heel skids two inches on the wet grass.

"I said stay in the back." Trent doesn't look at him. "You want to help? Stay out of the way. You're a liability."

The words sit on Jason's tongue and don't come out. He tries a different set, and forces them flat, stripped of heat by the effort of keeping his voice level. "How am I supposed to get any stronger if I'm not allowed to do anything?"

"I'm not gonna tell you again." Trent is already crouching over the shimmer. "Don't get in our way. That's your job right now."

The loot is divided according to Trent's preferences. Eric receives a stack of minor consumables. Evie receives a few healing pills. Heather receives a quiver of crude arrows. She nocks one and drops the stray skeleton like a rack of bowling pins.

"Not bad," Trent tells her as Evie uses her Minor Heal on him, even though he hasn't taken any damage.

Jason receives nothing.

He turns back toward the forest. He breathes through his nose. He doesn't say anything.

XP: 105/100 to Level 2
LEVEL UP! Current Level: 2

Oh! Level Two for the green party! A milestone, ladies and gentlemen. Every single member of our little group has now crossed that threshold. A warm crackle, bright and cheerful. **Even the ones who have yet to, shall we say, actively contribute to the effort. The experience points don't discriminate. How wonderfully democratic.**

A gentle beat moves through his chest. He locks his knees and lets it settle.

This is high school all over again. He reaches for the name of the kid who used to knock his books out of his hands in the hallway and comes up empty. He can remember that it happened. He can remember it happening a hundred times, the specific weight of the books, the laugh. But the name is a blank. So is the face; it's smeared out of the memory like a wet thumb dragged across ink. *Wait.* He reaches further. *I can't remember anyone's name. Or any face.* He can see the hallways, the classrooms. He reaches for the school itself, the outside of it, where it stood, the town around it, and there's nothing there to hold.

The cold that goes through him now has nothing to do with the wet grass. *My house. Can I remember my house?* The inside comes, room by room. The outside won't. *My parents.* A beach vacation with no name attached to the coast. What they wore, not their faces. The divorce, Dad leaving, Mom remarrying, someone telling him that *good boys are seen and not heard.* He cannot remember their faces. Something has reached into him and lifted out every edge that would tell him who he is and left the rest behind, so he'd know it was gone.

"Hey," he calls out, and hears the crack in his own voice. "Can any of you remember anyone from before you were taken?"

Evie scoffs. "I remember my dad. And he's going to find us and sue everyone."

"Okay. Describe him. What does he look like?"

"He looks like my dad."

"What color's his hair? Did he have a beard?"

“His hair is...” She stops. “His hair...” A sharp intake of breath. “I can’t remember his face.”

“What’s his name? Where do you live? Can you give me a single phone number?”

The realization moves through the group like a dropped temperature. The memories are all still there, but every detail that could name a person or a place outside this game isn’t gone. It’s blocked. *How do you block a memory? Is it the same whatever-it-is that lets us reassign our own stats and hands us skills out of the air?* Evie’s hands are still glowing on Trent’s shoulder, another wasted Minor Heal, her eyes gone somewhere far off. *Magic. I don’t have another word for it, and I hate that I don’t.*

They stand there a long while in silence, each of them walking the edges of the same hole. *This is real. This is really real.*

Evie breaks first, folding to her knees, weeping. Heather holds hers back, but the moon shivers in the unshed tears standing in her eyes. Derek and Trent are both visibly shaken and both working hard to keep a lid on it. Eric is the only one entirely unmoved.

“It is what it is,” Eric says. “We can sit here all night grieving it, or we can level up, we get the key, and hopefully we get out of this place.”

Slowly they get Evie back on her feet and start walking again, the whole grim shape of where they are pressing in on all sides.

They find the larger group at the deeper tree line, five skeletons, and a sixth behind them that stands a full head taller. Its frame is heavier, its sword wider at the blade. A dim, cold amber glow sits in its sockets, and it moves with a little less rigidity than the rest. Nobody speaks. Nobody needs to.

Trent, Derek, and Eric take the group. Derek activates Team Buff to temporarily increase his teammates’ stats. Jason notices his Attack Damage and Health Points go up slightly. Heather fires arrows from behind them. Jason rushes forward to join the fight, but Trent pushes him to the ground, shouting, “Get back, you’re gonna get yourself killed!”

Oh! And Jason makes his move—bold, unexpected, and immediately reversed by a firm shove from our frontline tank. Back to the grass for him. One beat of warm static. **Points for initiative, though. We’re absolutely giving points for initiative. Not really, we can’t do that.**

The fight runs longer this time. The larger skeleton absorbs two direct hits before its left knee buckles under a strike from Derek, and Trent drives

the greatsword through its sternum with both hands. It dissolves like the others, slower, the amber light in its sockets dimming in two distinct pulses before going dark.

And there it is! The Skeletal Soldier falls! Trent with the finishing blow, Derek with the setup. Eric is contributing from a safe and sensible distance. The static holds for one beat. **A fine performance from the frontline. Our Soldier put up a decent fight, all things considered. Better than some of our players, certainly.**

The loot pool it leaves behind is larger. The shimmer is brighter.

Trent crouches over it.

He finds the glass dagger immediately. He holds it up, turning it in the ambient light. The blade is transparent, the edge beveled and absolutely clear, catching the light and throwing it back in one thin, clean line. The stats hovering above it in the interface glow noticeably brighter than anything else in the pool.

Name: Glass Dagger
Quality: Rare
Base Attack Damage: 12
Passive: Crit Rate / Crit Percentage Amplification +Unknown
Passive: Unknown

Trent weighs it in his hand for exactly one second.

“Swords.”

He hands the dagger to Derek. “Here, a backup weapon in case you drop your sword.”

Derek looks at it.

He looks at Trent’s back.

He looks at it again.

Derek steps past the group and turns to Jason. The look on his face is quiet and entirely uncomplicated. He holds it out.

Jason reaches for it.

Derek gives a half smile. It is not a big gesture. It is the sort of smile that does not need to be.

Jason closes his fingers around the hilt.

“Thank you,” he mouths.

He angles his body so that Trent's line of sight is blocked and pulls the dagger smoothly into his inventory with a single mental command, watching it vanish from his hand into the interface's item list.

Hm, the Announcer says.

Just that. No follow-up. A single quiet note that dissolves amid the static before anyone can be entirely sure they heard it.

He'll leave it there until Trent forgets it exists.

He turns back to the forest. His HP is still at 100. His boots are still wet. Deeper in the trees, something moves with the low, dry click of old joints.

I'll figure this out, he thinks. I don't need any of them to figure this out.

He's not entirely sure he believes that yet.

He keeps walking.

"Hey, look," Trent says while sharing his stats. "I'm up to level 3. Almost to level 4." He looks at Derek, who shares his. "Just hit level 3," Derek says. Trent gives him another high-five. Evie is halfway to Level 3, with the shared XP from healing Trent and Derek's non-existent wounds. And Heather is now at Level 3 as well.

"Like I said, just stay behind us and out of our way, and maybe we can help you survive," Trent growls at Jason.

I'm only one level behind you. Maybe I could actually be an asset if I wasn't getting shoved to the back.

Eric helps them spend their stat points. Trent still talks as if Eric is beneath him, but at least this time he does what Eric suggests. Trent has 5 points. He puts 2 into Health Points, 1 into Physical Resistance, and 1 into Parry. He also bumps his Attack Damage up by 2. He increases his sword skill to level 2 and acquires a new Ability called Block, which reduces damage received when blocking an attack, more if he blocks with a weapon instead of his body.

"Trent, as a tank, you need to stay in front of the rest of the team and block the attacks. You shouldn't be attacking right off the bat. You need to protect us."

"If I kill them, they can't hurt you. So, I am protecting you. I'm the tank, I'm the team leader. I know what I'm doing."

Eric puts his hand to his forehead in frustration, then turns to Evie. He then proceeds to give her suggestions on her points. Evie puts 1 point into Health Points and 1 into Recovery. And then she increases her Minor Heal to level 2, making it heal a little quicker. Heather has 5 points and 3 ability

point upgrades. She puts 2 into Attack Damage, 1 into Ranged, and 1 each into Health Points and Recovery. She increases each of her abilities by 1. This raises her Stun probability to twelve percent.

Derek gains 5 stat points and 3 ability points. He puts 1 into Attack Damage, 1 into Physical Strength, 1 into Reflexes, 1 into Speed, and 1 into Health Points. He upgrades his Minor Heal and Team Buff, the buff costing 2 points.

Eric updates his but doesn't share his stats. "All set," he says. "Let's go."

Jason looks and sees he has 2 stat points and 1 ability upgrade. He puts one into Attack Damage and one into Physical Resistance. He adds the Dagger Ability to increase his efficiency by ten percent with daggers.

They decide—and by "they," Trent decides—to skirt the tree line instead of going in while it's still dark. "It'll be easier to see during the day," he tells everyone.

As they are walking, Heather spots a group of skeletons in the distance. Her vision stat helps her see them before the others. As they get closer, they realize they're all the bigger type of skeletons. Three of them.

Trent charges in yelling, "Leroy Jeremy!"

Jason winces. "It's Leroy Jenkins, you dick."

Derek rushes to activate his Team Buff. Heather fires two arrows, which hit the skeleton on the right just as Trent plows into the one in the middle.

That's not exactly how a tank is supposed to do it.

Derek and Eric attack the skeleton on the left. Jason activates his Stealth and jumps forward to get the weakened skeleton on the right. Trent pushes him back again, shouting, "Get out of the way!"

"Let me fight," Jason tells him.

Trent ignores him. Jason looks down and realizes his Stealth hasn't made him invisible or harder to see. He's not sure what it did.

Interesting! the Announcer chimes, its static radiating with what sounds almost like genuine curiosity. **Player Jason has activated Stealth for the first time. And I can tell from his look that the result was not quite what he expected.** A warm pause. **At Level One, Stealth reduces enemy detection range by thirty percent. It does not, I'm afraid, make you invisible. It is, however, a start. A very small start.**

The middle skeleton almost gets back on its feet when Heather's arrow breaks it apart. She fires another at the skeleton on the right.

STUNNED

The word flashes over the skeleton, and it freezes in place. Trent ignores it and goes after the skeleton on the left. Derek realizes Trent is ignoring the advantage that Heather's arrow gave them, and he darts to the side to finish off the skeleton on the right.

A Stun! Heather is connecting with a twelve percent probability on that second arrow—and the skeleton on the right is locked in place. Derek, reading the room beautifully, pivots immediately to capitalize. A brief beat. **Trent, meanwhile, is capitalizing on a completely different skeleton. Not his own skeleton. The one nobody asked him to fight. Fascinating leadership.**

Jason just watches from the back.

Skeletal Soldier defeated. +22 XP (Party Shared)
Skeletal Soldier defeated. +22 XP (Party Shared)
Skeletal Soldier defeated. +22 XP (Party Shared)
XP: 71/200 to Level 3

Trent takes first dibs on the loot. He throws a helmet to Jason. "Here, so you don't die, now stay out of my way when I'm fighting," he snaps. He hands out the rest of the loot to the other players in the party without actually paying attention to what would be good for whom, and then starts walking again, without looking back. The loot contains upgraded boots that give +2 to speed. Eric gets them. Derek gets a few health pills. He keeps 2 and gives 2 to Jason. Evie gives Heather an upgraded bow, and Heather gives Evie a pair of gloves that, when worn, grant +2 to all Resistances. Evie scoffs at them. "These are hideous," she says and stuffs them in her inventory.

They walk quite a distance without seeing any other enemies. Evie is talking on and on about how she should be lying out on a beach somewhere right now, not here in the mud. Though she can't remember which beach she was supposed to be on. That has been blocked from her memory. Derek and Trent are listening to her every word while Heather stays close by them.

Jason isn’t listening at all. He’s scanning for something he can reach and kill before anyone notices, something to start closing the gap in levels and gear.

He looks off into the forest, and between the distant trunks he catches the pale suggestion of stones. Overhead, the moon is nearly gone, sinking behind the trees.

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Chapter 3

The stones are grayish white and still.

Jason slows, staring through the dark pines at the shapes in the shallow depression below. Headstones. Dozens of them, set in rings so neat they can only have been planned. Of course they are. Everything here is.

He points toward the gap in the trees, where a sign marks this place as the Cemetery of Feratu.

Nobody thanks him for it.

Trent and Derek push past him, their boots loud in the underbrush. The others follow. Jason hangs back, slipping into the rear spot that he's gotten used to over the past few hours. He holds his iron dagger loosely in his right hand. Deep in his inventory, where no one else can look, the Glass Dagger Derek gave him waits.

They enter the Cemetery of Feratu through a break where the wall has fallen away. Inside, the aroma of damp pine and rotting needles is replaced by something more pungent and sterile. The forest floor's brush and mud give way to dark, raked ground. Clean gravel paths wind between upright headstones, each bearing a clear, forward-facing epitaph. Copper lanterns hang along the iron fence, their flames colorless and perfectly still in the cold air. They don't flicker or move, even as the breeze comes through the gap behind them.

Jason's boots find the gravel.

The sound under the heel is too loud. Too clean.

“I don’t think we should be here yet,” Jason shouts so those ahead of him can hear. “This looks like a mid-game area.”

Heather gives him a glance and slows a bit. The others ignore him completely. Trent takes the central path, his sword hilt clutched in that habitual, theatrical way, the greatsword tip cutting through the air above him. The hiss of the blade follows him down the path like a leash. Eric drifts to Trent’s left, his eyes already scanning the area for an enemy, his head tilted slightly to one side.

Derek stops. His eyes sweep the headstones on both sides, his jaw clenched tightly and grinding.

“Something’s off,” Jason says, keeping his voice low, his hand on the iron hilt of his dagger.

Derek cuts his eyes to him. “Yeah.”

Trent stops a few yards ahead. His voice carries back over the still air.

“There.”

At the far end of the main path, a stone archway made of black granite stands out, darker than anything else in the cemetery. There’s a symbol set into its keystone—a key. It’s not just any key; its tooth pattern is the same as the one they’ve seen in the quest interface all night. The carving shines faintly green, pulsing, steady as a heartbeat, when Trent taps his sword hilt against it.

“That’s it.” Eric points two fingers toward the mausoleum visible through the arch, tracking the calculation on his display. “The key’s inside. We can skip the rest of the quest line and walk right out with it.”

“Or,” Jason says, stepping out of the arch’s shadow, his hand now gripping his dagger.

Trent turns. The look on his face closes the argument before it can begin.

Jason pushes on. “Or we’re level two and three. This is a boss room. We haven’t cleared the zone. We haven’t done anything to prepare for whatever is in that coffin.”

“Coffin.” Trent scoffs, spit flecking his bottom lip. “Shut your mouth. You think I can’t see that the key is just up ahead? And I’m level 4 now.”

“The quest icon now shows a coffin.” Jason gestures to the corner of his vision, a foot from his face, indicating where on his display he can see the coffin icon. “It literally shows a casket right here on our HUD... Our displays,” he rephrases so Trent might understand him.

“My health pool alone could absorb half a boss fight.” Trent takes two giant steps forward, using his massive frame to close the distance. “You’ve been dead weight since we started. You don’t get to be the guy who pumps the brakes.”

“It’s about survival. Not brakes.”

“Then stay back and don’t die.” Trent turns his back. “That’s literally all we’re asking of you.”

He moves toward the mausoleum.

Jason stands in the arch’s shadow for a moment. The slight pulse of the key carving passes over him once, twice, like something slow and patient breathing under the stone. He takes a breath, looks at Derek’s back ahead of him, and follows.

They come from the left, the right, and the center, through a gap between a pair of listing headstones near the mausoleum steps.

Three pale, hairless creatures move forward, dragging themselves along the gravel like corroded metal scraping the ground. Their eyes burn with an unblinking red light, empty of pupils or any sign of life. Vampire thralls. Their lips are curled back in a cold, fixed snarl, showing yellowed teeth.

Derek is already at the ready due to Jason’s words of caution, planting his feet wide and bringing his short sword horizontal across his body. Trent plants beside him.

“Block first,” Jason calls out.

Trent charges.

And we have contact! Three Vampire Thralls are coming out of the headstones. This is a classic cemetery ambush, ladies and gentlemen, and our party walked right into it with the confidence of people who have never learned to read the situation. A warm crackle. **Jason called it, for the record. He absolutely called it.**

The thrall in the center raises its arms overhead in a slow, grinding arc, razor nails splayed on each hand, and Trent catches it mid-swing on the flat of his greatsword, a sharp crack of steel that kicks sparks into the still air. The impact throws Trent’s guard wide for a half-second, but his health bar absorbs the counter-push and holds.

Derek loops to the thrall’s blind side, driving his short sword in below the ribs. The thrall pivots. Derek pulls back and drives it in again.

Evie starts using Minor Heal on Trent after seeing his HP drop a little, while Heather nocks an arrow with stun and fires it. It hits, but doesn’t stun

the vampire thrall.

Heather tries to stun and misses. Twelve percent is twelve percent, folks; the dice do not negotiate. A brief pause. **Evie with the Heal on Trent. Trent has lost approximately four health points. Efficient use of resources**.

Jason runs low along the right side of the path, pressing close to the line of headstones. The thrall on the right tracks him. Not with its eyes, but with its head, turning in one smooth, mechanical rotation.

A pale blue outline at the edge of Jason's vision indicates his thirty percent Stealth bonus is active. Then a yellow tracking symbol—a slit-pupil icon—appears in the center of his display. The eye instantly dilates and snaps to a sharp, blinking red. The system registers detection at close range; a thirty percent reduction is nothing in a face-to-face fight. The thrall's sharp claws sweep out, clipping the top of the marble marker. Jason throws himself behind it, and debris peppers him, embedding stone chips in his cheek.

He presses flat against the back of the headstone, listening. The combat on the path is loud and close.

Jason uses his Stealth ability and is immediately detected at close range. Thirty percent enemy detection reduction, as mentioned before, doesn't make you a shadow in the night. It just makes you a bit less visible and a little harder to hear. A thoughtful pause. **He is, however, still alive. Which, given everything, is a bit of a surprise.**

Behind him, near the wall, Evie shivers, her white knuckles grasping her robes. She raises both hands with a sharp, terrified gasp, releasing a frantic, glowing green pulse of Level 2 *Minor Heal*. It hits Trent's back, but Trent's health bar is already at one hundred percent; the green energy is wasted, and Evie's blue energy bar plunges by another quarter before she's landed a useful heal.

Heather's bowstring thwaps from somewhere behind him, and the thrall above his position stumbles. Jason comes around the stone low and gets the dagger into the thrall's thigh, dragging through anything resembling tendons in the undead creature. It drops to one knee.

"Got it," Heather says, already drawing again.

The arrow takes it through the sternum. It dissolves.

A coordinated finish. Heather sets it up, Jason does the legwork, and Heather closes it out. A clean kill, shared by two players. The static

brightens almost imperceptibly. **Jason's first confirmed combat contribution of the evening. Better late than never.**

The silver-pixel cloud sinks into the dark soil, giving off a sharp, burning smell of corroded iron. By the time Jason straightens and turns, Derek and Trent have finished the other two, their dissolutions overlapping so that for a moment the air above the gravel is full of slow, sinking light.

Vampire Thrall Level 4 defeated. +45 XP (Party Shared)
Vampire Thrall Level 2 defeated. +25 XP (Party Shared)
Vampire Thrall Level 2 defeated. +25 XP (Party Shared)
XP: 166/200 to Level 3

The menu is getting in my vision; how do I shrink it? Jason thinks. Just then, the multiple lines shrink to a single line.

XP gained. Party shared.

The quiet after is heavy. The lantern flames are still motionless.

Jason expands the notification again. He looks. *Forty-five on that one. Must be because I actually helped kill it this time. I wonder how much I'd get if I killed it,* he thinks. He minimizes the notifications again.

"See?" Trent is breathing hard, chest surging under his leather. He doesn't look at Jason. "Not a problem."

They climb the mausoleum steps.

I think the problem is still up ahead.

The stone coffin sits in the room's center.

There's no other furniture. No torches, no decoration, nothing to distract from the thing sitting in the middle of the black granite floor with its iron lid sealed and its carved surface facing up. The silver vapor leaking from the seam around the lid rolls across the floor in a thin layer, smelling of stagnant air, dried marrow, and crypt dust as it curls around the bases of their boots.

Jason stops at the entry threshold, refusing to step inside.

"We should fight more before we open that." His voice is flat. "Level up some more, then come back."

Trent ignores him, stepping to the head of the heavy granite coffin. “The key is in there.”

“Or whatever kills us for trying to take it is in there.”

“Same thing.” Eric steps into the room, folding his arms as he stands cleanly at the foot of the coffin. He supervises with analytical detachment, casting his eyes to his display, letting the muscle-bound players do the physical labor. “It’s a risk-reward equation. The risk scales with our levels. The reward doesn’t change.”

“Not for the mid-level bosses! And the risk is our lives,” Jason snaps.

No one answers.

Trent and Derek take opposite ends of the heavy iron-and-stone lid, grasping the edges directly below the glowing green key symbol engraved into its center.

“Don’t.” The word grates in Jason’s throat.

Trent shoves at the stone.

The lid grinds. Stone on stone, a long shrieking note that fills the low room and bounces off every flat surface simultaneously. Derek leans his full weight in. The gap opens two inches, three inches, and the silver vapor pours out in a sudden, pressurized gush that rolls across the floor and climbs their shins like cold water. The lid tilts, tips, and crashes onto the gravel path outside with a bang like a cannon.

The silence that follows lasts one second.

Oh my. The Announcer’s voice drops half a register, the warm radio crackle going very quiet and very still. **They opened it.**

Something comes out of the coffin the way a spring comes out of a broken watch.

The force of the emergence hits before the image fully resolves. A shockwave of digital-blue light punches outward from the coffin’s edge, and Jason is airborne before he registers the impact, his back finding the stone doorframe hard enough to drive the air from his lungs. He hits the mausoleum floor and slides, his health dropping by 35 percent. Trent lands heavily on the gravel outside, greatsword ringing off the steps. Derek strikes a headstone with his shoulder and goes down like a tangle of limbs.

Jason pauses, looking around the room for a way for them to escape and hopefully survive.

Feratu stands on the edge of the coffin.

He is tall in a way that doesn’t register immediately; Jason’s eyes slowly adjust to the proportions and arrive at the wrong conclusions twice before settling. Pale, the kind of pale that’s not a skin tone so much as an absence. The gothic garments billow in the air Jason can’t feel, trailing blue particles along their edges. His eyes are liquid metal, lit from inside, and they do not move in their sockets. They don’t have to. They’re already focused on all of them.

The scream, when it comes, is not a sound. It’s a frequency, felt in the sinuses and the fillings of back teeth, and the soft tissue behind the eyes.

Feratu. Level Eighteen. The Announcer delivers the number with the precise diction of a physician reading a terminal diagnosis. **For context, our highest-level player is currently sitting at Level Four.** A pause so brief it barely exists. **Best of luck to everyone.**

Jason gets his hands under himself and pushes up.

The combat that follows is too fast to be clean.

Trent is back on his feet and swinging before his footing is fully set, a wild vertical arc that Feratu steps around without haste, the motion leaving a trail of blue-particle light in the silver air. Trent’s swing buries the greatsword tip in the gravel, and Feratu is already elsewhere, already moving toward the opposite side of the clearing, already considering something.

Trent opens with a bold, unguarded vertical swing, the Announcer says. **Feratu steps around it, effortlessly, barely seeming to notice. And the greatsword is now stuck in the gravel. We’ll give him a moment.**

Heather fires. The arrow slows. Not stops. Slows, as if passing through thicker air near Feratu, and he plucks it from that thickened air between two fingers without looking and then drops it.

Heather’s arrow is caught mid-flight, between two fingers. The static holds perfectly flat. **That is new.**

Derek pulls himself off the headstone and moves forward, bleeding from a cut above his ear, his sword held low.

Evie stands frozen in fear. Nobody is getting healed right now.

From the archway, Eric’s back is perfectly rigid. He raises one hand, fingers splayed, the slight green-blue radiance of a spell gathering at his palm. The calculation on his face remains unchanged—no flaring nostrils, no white knuckles, none of the panic warping the others. His eyes find Feratu. Feratu’s silver eyes find Eric.

The boss moves.

The speed bypasses normal processing. Feratu covers the distance in what feels like a single frame, long claws stretched out, silver-tipped and ready to strike.

Eric is standing a few feet in front of Derek, between him and the monster. He doesn't move.

Derek's eyes snap to Eric, to the vampire closing on him. His boots shift in the gravel, his legs driving him forward, his shoulder tilting to knock Eric and himself out of harm's way.

Eric activates an ability. Jason's display logs it as **Blink**.

There is no wind-up. A crackling, pixelated decoy of blue light and static hangs where Eric was for a split second, a hollow afterimage of himself, while the real Eric appears about two feet to his right, perfectly unharmed, adjusting the collar of his leather armor.

Derek has no one to protect. His momentum carries him directly into the path of the sweeping claws.

Jason sees what is going on, but his body is a half-second behind his eyes.

Feratu's silver-tipped hand punches forward. The motion is impossibly precise, bypassing Derek's futile guard. The claws puncture Derek's light armor with a brutal, wet crunch, breaking ribs and tearing through the center of his chest. Red gore sprays across the gravel as his body is lifted completely off the ground. In Jason's visual display, Derek's health bar doesn't drop—it instantly vanishes, replaced by a grayed-out name.

Derek's face in that suspended second is devoid of pain. His shoulders go completely slack, the desperate tension bleeding out of his jaw. A perfect, terrible slackness takes him as the claws tear free.

The body lands on the gravel with a heavy thud, the short sword ringing off a headstone and skittering into the dark.

The Announcer doesn't cheer. It says, in a voice stripped of all its radio warmth, flat and un-reverbed: **Player Derek. Eliminated.**

Nothing else.

Trent is already running. "Go. Go. Go." His voice has nothing left in it. He's out of the mausoleum and past the archway before Jason can process the word, greatsword dragging, gravel flying off his heels.

Heather has Evie by the arm, and they're through the gate in the next instant, Evie making a high, fractured sound. Eric walks. That's the worst of

it. He doesn’t run. He walks through the cemetery gate at an even, unhurried pace, and his armor is still clean.

Only Jason catches the last thing, and only because his own feet won’t move yet. On his way past the coffin, Eric cuts his eyes once to Feratu, to the dark shine at the thing’s mouth, the wet black of whatever runs in it where a person’s blood would be, and holds there a half-second too long. Not the look of a man fleeing a monster. The look of a man filing some information away for later.

Jason stands frozen for three full seconds.

Derek’s body lies on the gravel, face turned upward, his open eyes catching the colorless light from the lanterns. His body doesn’t dissolve into silver pixels like the creatures here. *This isn’t a game; he’s really dead.*

Jason’s feet find the strength to move. He’s through the gate, past the arch, as the mausoleum falls behind him, and he doesn’t look back. They keep going, out of the cemetery and into the forest. The vampire doesn’t follow.

The abrupt absence of the cemetery’s colorless light blinds him. The deep, heavy shadows from the pines aggressively cut off his line of sight, forcing him to rely on the faint, lonely glow of the coming dawn to avoid the massive trunks ahead.

As he crosses the threshold of the deep woods, a tiny, distorted, flickering red-and-blue system notification pulses in the bottom peripheral corner of his vision. He ignores it in his panic, letting it fade into the background, but the text is still there:

BEHAVIORAL ANOMALY DETECTED
CLASSIFICATION REVIEW: PENDING

Trent has his shoulders against a pine tree, dragging in air, his breath puffing in the cold.

Evie is on her knees with her palms pressed over her ears, eyes closed. Heather stands beside her, her jaw clamped shut so tightly the muscles twitch underneath her skin as she fights to keep from coming apart.

Jason stops ten feet from the group, breathing through his nose.

Eric is already standing to the side, interface open, scrolling.

“What the hell just happened?” Heather’s voice is low.

“We were under-leveled.” Trent pushes off the tree, his eyes fixing on Jason. “And somebody stood in the doorway.”

“I stayed out of the way, just like you told me.”

“You stood there.” Trent takes a step toward him, the pommel of his greatsword gesturing at Jason’s chest. “You just stood there and watched him die.”

“I watched Eric do something called Blink.”

The word lands. Nobody says anything for exactly two seconds.

Eric doesn’t look up from his screen. “My ability triggered on reflex. Survival instinct.”

“Reflex.” Jason steps closer, his voice fluttering but sharp. “You waited until Derek was in the air.”

“You didn’t do anything.” Trent’s voice rises, resounding through the timber. “You had a weapon and you had Stealth. And you just stood there.”

“I’m level two.”

“That’s the point.” Eric closes his interface and looks at Jason with an empty, mathematical gaze. “Your stats are a liability. In that fight, the effort required to keep you safe costs more than it returns.”

There it is.

Jason looks from Trent’s red, furious face to Eric’s clean, patient calculation, and something in the back of his mind finishes the sentence Eric left unspoken and files it neatly under things he already knew.

The shadow of the tree line presses against Jason’s spine like ice.

He turns.

He runs.

The trees take him completely inside thirty seconds. The voices don’t follow him far. Trent’s shout, one last time, muffled by distance and trunk and the cold wind moving across the canopy above, and then only the forest.

He runs until his lungs burn.

When he finally stops running, he puts his back against a trunk and slides down it until he is sitting in the wet mulch, his dagger still in his right hand, his breath forming in visible clouds in the darkness. The sun hides behind the trees. There’s only a faint light glimmering through the treetops. His display glows inside his vision, the only readable thing.

XP: 16/400 to Level 4.

He sits with that for a moment. He gained experience points by losing the fight. He leveled up simply for surviving.

His right hand opens. He swaps the iron dagger into his inventory, summoning the Glass Dagger with a wordless command. The cold, clear hilt materializes within his palm. The blade catches the subtle glow of the sun, throwing back a thin, dangerous line of light along its beveled edge.

He runs his thumb over the clean, transitionless edge of the glass blade, his body remembering the solid, grounding fist-bump Derek had given his knee in the carriage. The glass is freezing to the touch, but it anchors him. The only person there who acknowledged him is lying dead on the gravel with no one to close his eyes.

Farther inside the trees, something moves. Not the wind. Something in the lower registers, dry and rhythmic, the low click of creatures that should not exist in a forest.

Jason closes his fingers around the Glass Dagger's hilt.

Rogue classification sub-protocols initiated, the Announcer says.

The warmth is entirely gone from the static. The voice is clean and precise and clinical, the radio crackle stripped back to nothing, like a signal coming in from very far away.

Behavioral threshold met.

It doesn't elaborate. It doesn't need to.

*** THE HOUSE ***

The cemetery feed runs on the center screen, and the room watches Player Derek's tag go gray.

Somewhere on the board, a line resolves from LIVE to PAID. Numbers slide. Near the far end of the table, a stout man, Halloway, makes a small, satisfied sound and notes something on his tablet. A wager has come in.

Vaneck, the woman from intake, doesn't look at the board. Her eyes are on a different feed, the sixth green tag, the one moving alone into the tree

line while the rest of the party clusters and shakes in the dark. She scrolls and finds a readout she doesn't like.

"Sir." She waits until the scratch of Sterling's pen stops. "The green team longshot. The sixth player." A keystroke throws the lone figure up onto the main wall: a young man with his back against a trunk, a pale blade in his fist, not moving. "He isn't following the behavior model."

Sterling looks. "Define 'not following.'"

"The others are doing what the frightened do. They cluster. They blame. They freeze." Vaneck's cursor ticks between the two feeds. "He left. He chose to. His threat-response profile is reading closer to a field operator's than to an asset's." She pulls the tag onto the screen, the words stark and clinical. Rogue classification sub-protocols initiated. Behavioral threshold met. "The system flagged him on its own."

Sterling turns the fountain pen over once between two fingers. Then he uncaps it, and where earlier he circled the whole green party, he draws the circle smaller, down to a single name.

"Open a market on him," he says. "Individually."

Vaneck hesitates. "He's a three-strength liability, sir. The model prices him dead inside the week."

"The model priced Eric average." Sterling caps the pen and returns his attention to the portfolio. "Price the boy and keep the cameras on him. The ones the machine can't read are the only ones worth the trouble of watching."

Vaneck opens her mouth, then closes it, and types the command instead. It's easier than being looked at.

Far below the glass, in the feed no one down there knows is running, the boy in the dirt closes his fingers around the Glass Dagger and looks out into the darkness.

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Chapter 4

The sound fades.

It doesn't fade quickly. It pulls back like a slow tide, each click growing fainter as it moves deeper into the trees. Jason holds his breath the whole time. His lungs stop, just like a clock stops when someone grabs its hands. He sits rigid against the bark, counting the gaps between each click until it stops.

Then comes silence. Real silence, textured by the soft wind moving through the canopy and the faraway creak of a branch overhead.

He exhales.

His breath comes out as steam in the cold air. Both hands shake, his right still gripping the Glass Dagger. The cold has seeped deep into his fingers. He's held it so tightly and for so long that letting go takes effort, releasing one finger at a time.

He stays pressed to the trunk, staring into the gloom, but his mind is stuck on everything that has happened. The betrayal sits like cold lead under his ribs. Eric ran the numbers on him and found him wanting. To Eric, he wasn't an ally, wasn't even a liability; he was just an object in the way. And Derek. Eric spent Derek like loose change to buy himself another hour of breath. Then Trent, redirecting the blame with the ease of a man who has never once been the one holding the bill.

In here, being afraid doesn't count for anything. The thought arrives flat, almost bored, the way bad news arrives when you already knew it. *Nobody's coming. No one keeps records. No one demands justice. There's just the mulch, the rot, and men who talk in survival percentages.*

I'm too exposed here.

He scans the tree line, the pale trunks, the dark undergrowth, all of it washed in weak pre-dawn light. Twenty yards to his left, the trees open around a granite boulder the size of a car, ferns on three sides, a mossy overhang on the fourth. Clear sightlines. Something solid at his back. He pushes off the trunk and goes, low, keeping his boots in the soft mulch where they don't crunch.

Under the overhang, he pulls his knees to his chest and looks at the dagger. Even in the gray light, it holds a clean line along its edge. Derek's hands were warm when he pressed it into his. That's the detail that keeps surfacing. Not the blood on the gravel, not the slack jaw. The warmth of his hands.

He closes his fingers around the hilt one last time, then opens them, breathes out, and swipes the weapon up into his inventory. The blue light retracts into his palm and is gone.

His empty hands feel too light. They twitch at his sides. He lifts them and sweeps upward through the cold air, and the interface blooms in front of him: the green-blue grid, the stat columns, the branching skill tree. HP back to eighty-six percent, the red border a steady dull glow. XP reads **16/400**. The numbers are stable. *Stable is something.* He notices how much he wants that, how quickly his eyes go to the readout for reassurance, the way a scared man checks that the doors are locked.

Three stat points to spend. *Too slow. I was too slow to save him.* The words keep looping. He puts two into Speed and one into Reflexes.

His eyes move to the skill tree. Most of it is gray, locked behind levels he hasn't reached. Two nodes glow: Stealth on the left, Conjure Companion on the right. He reads the tooltip again.

Conjure Companion: Creates a persistent, intelligent familiar construct powered by the user's energy reserve. Maintenance cost

scales with companion level. Construct may develop independent language and behavioral protocols over time.

Over time. As if I've got a surplus of that.

Companion. The word lands wrong and right at the same time. He's alone in a world built to break him, and part of him wants something at his side so badly it aches. The rest of him flinches at the same thought he had in the equipment room: tying his survival to something he doesn't understand, something that could watch him, something the game might be able to reach through. He thinks of Derek. He breathes.

Every cell in my body wants to go on a rampage. Kill everything, get strong, make someone pay. He breathes again. *I'll probably get myself killed while doing it.*

He takes another deep breath.

He reaches out with his mind thinking about the companion. His pulse jumps, thumping against his chest, but he calms himself with a slow breath of cold air. He relaxes, holding himself steady.

He wills it to activate.

The drain happens right away. A segment of the blue Energy bar in the top-left of his display drops, not quickly but smoothly, like sand dripping through an hourglass. Two seconds pass in silence. Then the sound begins.

A sharp, crackling hiss fills the air, like crisp pine needles burning on hot coals, followed by the metallic scent of copper and burnt phosphorus. A shape forms three feet in front of him, at eye level—a sphere of blue-white light, about the size of a grapefruit, hovering softly. The crackle turns into a sound that seems almost like two clear syllables before fading.

Ar-lo.

He jerks back against the mossy rock, his shoulder hitting the overhang, and his right hand sweeps down in a quick reflex. The sphere vanishes as quickly as it appeared, the blue-white light shrinking to a point before breaking into a cloud of silver particles. They drift down through the cold air, smelling subtly of dry zinc as they settle on the ground in silence.

The clearing is empty again.

He sits very still for three seconds.

Okay.

He wills it a second time.

The blue Energy bar drops by another segment, losing fifteen out of his hundred units. Jason watches the silver spark form again, focusing on analysis to push away his fear. He closes his hand to dismiss the orb and starts counting seconds. One, two, three. At seven seconds, the bar goes up by one point. Passive regeneration is about one unit every seven seconds.

He activates it again, calling the orb back, and tries to nudge it with his mind. *Move left.*

The sphere bobs, unresponsive, its light fluttering slightly in place.

Identify threat.

The interface remains static. A line on the tooltip explains why:

> **Level One construct—default protocols only; intelligence dormant, awaiting progression markers.**

He counts the seconds again, tracking the recovery rate with the same focused attention he'd give a red light waiting to turn green.

He dispels it and conjures it back five times in rapid succession, systematically draining and recovering his reserves to test the latency of the spawn cycle.

The clearing fills with quick bursts of crackles and dissolving silver. The Ar-lo syllables overlap, creating something practically musical. Blue light flares and fades, flickering across the wet ferns and the gray boulder. The air is thick with the smell of aerosol and copper.

On the fifth dismissal, a rectangular green notification box blooms at the center of his vision, bright enough to force a blink.

> **Conjure Companion has reached Level 2.**

He lowers his hand. The notification fades.

A bird calls once from the pines behind him, then falls silent. The cold presses through the overhang, and the wet ferns smell sharp and clean. He reads the updated tooltip, watching the maintenance cost drop slightly on the display. Then he taps the node one last time.

The sphere materializes again. Loudest Ar-lo yet, the flare almost bright enough to be alarming. He leaves his hands flat on the cold ground beside

him and watches it.

The Energy bar climbs.

He watches the bar climb to fifty percent, then sixty, then eighty, the blue line filling steadily as the sphere bobs at eye level. Its light casts shifting patterns across the ferns. At ninety percent, the bar pauses briefly, then fills completely.

One hundred percent. The sphere still active. The bar full.

The maintenance cost is lower than the passive regeneration rate. It can sustain itself.

He sits with that for a moment, surprised to find the outcome better than he expected.

The sphere drifts in a slow clockwise circle about two feet wide, moving calmly and on its own. Its edges ripple now and then, like light on water. He's watched it for almost ninety seconds, and it hasn't done anything strange. It just exists in front of him, calm and steady.

Then it stops drifting.

The ripples on the edge change. The pulse becomes lower and more varied, and the sound is softer now, not the sharp hiss from before.

The sphere bobs once.

"I am currently existing in this location," it says. Its voice is rhythmic, almost mechanical, but there's a hint of warmth, as if it's trying to learn what warmth means. "Because you are the source of my existence."

Jason bolts upright. His palms push into the ground, and he slides back two inches before the granite stops him. He stares at the sphere. The sphere bobs in the direction of his face.

His mouth is slightly open. He closes it.

"Can you understand me?" Jason keeps his voice low, throat tense, watching the orb's glowing rings pulse in perfect synchrony with his voice. The frequency modulates in tiny increments as he speaks, as if parsing the acoustic data.

A pause. One second, two.

"Yes." The orb's ring of inner light pulses with a rhythmic, mechanical hum. "Your acoustic patterns are consistent with a recognized linguistic structure. I am able to convert the input into logical categorical units. You are asking because you were uncertain whether I could."

"I was."

"You need not have been uncertain."

His mouth twitches at one corner despite everything. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, watching the sphere tilt slightly to the left, like a bird studying him. “Do you have a name?”

The orb makes a soft, dry rattling sound, quieter now, more like a habit than a statement. “I lack a specific word to identify myself. What sound should you make when you require my attention?”

Jason stares at it for a moment, then looks off into the cold, gray clearing. The ferns are wet. The pine canopy moves in a slow, indifferent cycle above him, and somewhere behind him is the direction he ran from, and the direction he is not going back to. Derek’s short sword rang off a headstone and bounced into the dark, and nobody picked it up.

He reaches out with his right hand, extending his finger through the edge of the sphere’s light. There’s no resistance, no solid core. His finger moves through vacant air, leaving only a tingling warmth, like the heat from a sleeping dog. It feels present, mechanical, and alive in its own way.

“What about Arlo?” Jason asks, his voice dull against the clammy stone.

“That is an acceptable designation.”

Arlo’s ring spins quickly, scattering indigo sparks across the mulch. A soft, pleased hum comes with the motion. A small green label appears above the sphere in his vision, neat and pixelated.



Arlo’s ring of light stabilizes, hovering an inch higher. “I will use it to identify queries directed at me. Do you have a designation?”

“Jason.”

“Jason,” the orb repeats, its tone flat and mechanical, like fitting a piece into place. “You have been sitting here for some time. Your breathing data shows you were under stress before you summoned me. You are not in ideal condition.”

“No,” Jason says. “I’m not.”

“Is there an action I am able to assist with?”

He looks at Arlo for a moment. The orb drifts an inch closer, patient, faintly luminescent in the gray early air, its outer ring rippling with that low, warm frequency.

“I don’t suppose you can bring someone back from the dead, can you?” he asks, shifting his weight and placing a hand on the overhang to push himself up from the wet ground. A dull stiffness settles in his joints, turning sharp as he stands.

“I cannot. Are you in need of being brought back from the dead? You do not appear to be deceased,” he says.

He opens his hand and calls the Glass Dagger back from his inventory. The cold hilt forms in his grip, blue light fading as the blade solidifies. *It’s better than the iron one. And Derek gave it to me. Locking it away would be an insult to him.* Then the colder, more technical worry, arriving right behind the sentiment: it’s still glass. *What happens the first time this meets a shield?*

He takes a full breath and exhales.

“We’re moving,” he tells Arlo.

Arlo’s light shifts to a cooler spectrum. “Understood.”

He steps out from under the boulder into the clearing, with Arlo drifting beside him. The pines ahead are deep and dark, their shadows holding back the gray sunrise light. The canopy is so thick that dawn is only a hint here. His boots press into the soft mulch at the edge. He adjusts his grip on the dagger, resting his thumb along the guard where it feels most natural.

His right foot lifts and then freezes.

From the deep shadows of the pines ahead, the rhythmic tapping returns—sinister and deliberate. This time it’s not retreating, but advancing. The gaps between each tap shrink in a steady, patient rhythm, as if whatever is making the sound already knows where he is and doesn’t care about hiding.

Arlo’s blue light drops. The subtle glow dims to a careful, watchful indigo, and the sphere drifts closer to Jason’s shoulder without a sound.

Cold tightens in his chest, but he keeps his breathing slow and steady. He doesn’t freeze; instead, his mind starts mapping the terrain. He shifts his weight to the balls of his feet, lowering his center of gravity. His thumb locks over the guard of the Glass Dagger, aligning the edge. He scans the area ahead, spotting two oak trunks three yards to his right—a natural choke point that would force an enemy to face him one-on-one. He readies himself to pivot.

He doesn’t move.

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Chapter 5

The ticking stops.

Jason presses his shoulder blades against the wet oak bark, boots buried in the soft dirt. He grips the Glass Dagger tightly, thumb firm on the guard. His breathing is slow and quiet, mouth open, drawing in air so softly it barely makes a sound. Arlo, dimmed to a faint, watchful indigo, moves in even closer. Almost adjacent to his left ear, the orb's rings are spinning in near silence.

"There. To the left. At your eleven o'clock," Arlo says.

Jason doesn't have time to think about how the orb knows what an analog clock is. A shape moves out from the darkness between the pines. Dry moss sticks to gray patches on its ribcage. Yellowed finger bones tap against the rusted handle of a broken broadsword as it drags through the ferns, each movement slow and steady, with the patience only something without nerves can have. The skeleton's jaw hangs crooked, the right side of its skull cracked, and its eye sockets are empty.

The creature passes through the narrow gap between the two oak trunks; its back is to him.

Jason taps the mental icon on his display to turn on Stealth. Cold static runs over his limbs, a faint crawling feeling under his skin, moving upward from his feet as the visual shimmer activates. He shifts his weight forward, and the leaves under his foot stay silent.

He steps out.

Three paces. Knees bent, head low, the glass blade up beside his right ear. The skeleton's dry spine faces him, a column of interlocked gray-yellow vertebrae glazed with dew. He lines up the point of the dagger between two discs at the base of the neck.

His wrist locks.

The memory hits him suddenly; Feratu's pale hand moves so fast it blurs. Derek's chest opens, the wet sound filling the air, and then Derek falls. After that, nothing—Jason had stood six feet away, unable to move.

My feet refused. I can't let that happen again.

His jaw tightens. His arm shakes once, a fine tremor in the wrist.

Push.

He drives the blade down.

The glass tip punches between the vertebrae with a dry, mechanical crunch, like a twig snapping in a paper bag. The skeleton shudders, its whole body rattling, and the broken broadsword falls into the ferns. For a moment, it stands rigid with fingers spread. Then it falls apart.

The bones crumble from the inside out, turning into dry debris before a silver mist rises and carries them away in a thin column that fades before reaching the tops of the ferns. Three copper coins and a bent iron binding from the sword hilt remain in the wet pine needles where it stood.

One Skeletal Sentinel. Eliminated. The Announcer's voice arrives quietly, lacking its usual radio warmth, stripped back to something clean and clinical. **Stealth approach. Rear cervical strike. Zero detection. Zero collateral.** A pause, brief and precise. **One point three second hesitation prior to execution.**

Jason drops into a crouch and sweeps the loot up. The structural salvage item is added to his inventory, while the coins automatically register in his digital interface. He's already jogging, pushing back through the brush the way he came, keeping his knees high over the root tangles.

Arlo's light brightens to a bluish white beside him, matching pace with a slight, pleased hum.

He jogs twenty yards into thick ferns and leans against a granite boulder, pressing his hand to his chest. His heart races, far too fast for such a short fight. He checks his display: health bar steady and full, stamina at seventy-four percent and rising, and his blue Energy bar slowly recovering after using Stealth.

XP: 61/400

“Your movement audio was suppressed with an efficiency of one hundred percent, your visual presence was reduced by 29.2 percent,” Arlo states, drifting in a slow clockwise arc a foot above Jason’s head. “The target did not detect your approach.”

“Good,” Jason says, voice hardly above a whisper.

“You hesitated for one point three seconds prior to initiating the strike.”

“I noticed.”

“Was the hesitation intentional? As a strategic element?”

Jason looks up at him. Arlo’s inner ring spins at a mild, unhurried rate, casting out a cool glimmer over the underside of the broad fern leaves. The orb tilts three degrees, birdlike.

“No,” Jason says.

Arlo processes this with a low, mechanical whir. “I will log it as an anomaly.”

“Log it however you want.”

He pushes off the boulder and walks. He hears the creek before he sees it, the smell of cold water and clay reaching him through the trees before the muddy bank appears. He drops to his belly behind a fallen log thirty yards out and parts the pine boughs with two fingers.

The zombie stands in the water to its knees. Bloated. The pale flesh of its forearms splits along the tendons, dark gray fluid weeping in slow, viscous trails into the current. The creek doesn’t carry the trails far. The water here is almost still, pooled in a shallow basin between two clay banks, the surface black and glassy. The creature wades in a slow, purposeless circle, its jaw working without sound.

Jason’s stamina bar reads ninety-one percent. He tracks it to ninety-three before he moves.

The bank is steep and covered with red-brown clay, the mud smelling of dead leaves and standing water. He slides down on his side, using his left hand for balance, letting his boots find the wet ground by feel. The Stealth shimmer keeps his descent silent, though it steadily drains his Energy. He sets both feet in the shallow water at the creek’s edge.

The water is shockingly cold. It seeps through the seams of his boots immediately, finding the skin of his ankles, pressing against his feet with a dull, persistent ache. He moves steadily. His feet rise and lower one at a time through the current, slow and deliberate, placing each step on the flat stones below rather than the loose silt.

The zombie keeps circling.

Ten feet. Eight. The smell hits him hard now—a heavy, rotten sweetness mixed with a sharp chemical edge, like spoiled fruit left to rot in something toxic. He breathes through his mouth.

Six feet. The creature's shoulders are rounded, neck bent slightly forward. There's a gap between the third and fourth cervical vertebrae where the tissue has separated and dried.

He raises the dagger.

He strikes the gap dead center. The creature clenches, arms snapping to its sides, jaw shutting with a wet clack. Its HP bar drops to about seventy percent. Jason pulls back the dagger and stabs several more times. Silver mist rises as the flesh dissolves, and briefly, thin silver fibers drift in the creek before the current washes them away.

Creek Zombie. Eliminated. The Announcer again, the same stripped-back register, precise and unhurried. **Multiple follow-up strikes after initial partial damage. Efficient. Adaptive.** The static holds for a moment. **No hesitation on strikes two through four. The one point three seconds appear to be improving.**

He's already stepping back toward the bank when the XP counter updates.

XP: 106/400

Two copper coins and a pair of leather wrist gauntlets rest on a flat rock at the water's edge where the zombie stood, shimmering against the dark stone. He pockets the coins in his digital pouch, puts on the gauntlets without stopping, and climbs the far bank, his wet boots plunging into the clay as he pulls himself up by a root.

At the top, he pauses, forearm over his nose, breathing onto the leather of his gauntlet until the creature's rotten scent is gone.

The image surfaces without permission. Stone arches in the dark. The flat, gray slabs of the cemetery ground. Derek, sitting back against a headstone with his hand over his chest, saying something to Jason that the sound of his own blood drowns out. Then Feratu moves across the space between them, and Derek's short sword skids across the stone and spins out into the dark, and Jason is standing there with his arms at his sides.

Standing there.

It isn't even how it happened. Derek never sat, never spoke. The memory rearranges itself every time it comes, and every time it leaves Jason in the same place.

He wipes his blade on his linen pants, leaving a thin gray streak along the fabric. He turns his face toward the deeper woods and starts walking again.

No one else. The words have no volume. They don't need to.

The smell of old limestone and dry rot drifts through the trees. Ahead, mossy columns rise between the pines. Two still stand, their tops long gone, supporting nothing. The undergrowth between them is flattened, as if something heavy has passed through many times.

The well sits in the center of the clearing.

A ghoul crouches at the base of the stone well, its back to Jason. Its skin is pale and hairless, shoulder blades moving in a steady, mechanical rhythm. The deer carcass beneath it is mostly wet gore on pale grass, with the hooves still intact and pointing at the sky. The ghoul gnaws with focus, making quick, wet clicking sounds that are nothing like the skeleton's slow tapping.

Jason crouches behind the nearest column. The stone feels cold and damp under his hand, with a thick vein of gray lichen running up its side, slightly waxy to the touch. His display shows the Stealth shimmer is active again, the pale blue Energy bar dropping as it powers the effect, while his muscles ache from holding the crouch.

"Are we going to cause this ghoul to cease to exist?" Arlo asks Jason.

Jason motions for Arlo to be quiet.

"I have bonded my speech output to your ears only."

Jason understands but shifts his focus back to the ghoul.

The ribs and spinal column protrude distinctly against the pale, hairless skin of the ghoul's back. He targets the space between the shoulders, high up, where the tissue is thinnest, and the spinal column sits closest to the surface.

He steps out from behind the column.

He thrusts the glass blade forward, expecting it to slide through soft tissue. Instead, the tip scrapes against tough, knotted muscle, and the ghoul screams. The sharp, tearing sound sends a crow flying from the pines and makes Jason's grip slip for a moment before he tightens it again. Its HP drops from full to eighty percent and stalls there, throbbing red.

Shit.

The ghoul spins. Faster than the zombie, faster than the skeleton, it torques its torso around with a flexibility that has no business existing in a vertebrate, and one pale, clawed hand comes for his throat with genuine and specific intent.

Jason steps inside the reach.

He lifts his left elbow, blocking the claw with his forearm. The nails scrape across his leather gauntlet with a harsh, discordant sound. He drives his right hand forward—first stab under the jaw, blade angled up. The HP bar drops by twenty. Second stab, same spot, harder. Another twenty. The ghoul's other hand grabs his shoulder, fingers digging deep into the muscle. Pain shoots down his arm, threatening to weaken his grip.

Third stab. He puts his whole shoulder behind it this time, short and piston-fast, and the glass blade finds something that matters.

The HP bar collapses.



Ghoul. Eliminated. A pause, longer than the others. The static carries a different quality now, having shed the last traces of the radio crackle entirely and arrived at something calmer and more considered. **Opening strike—partial damage, target alerted. Close-quarters engagement initiated rather than disengaged from.** Another pause. **Critical hit confirmed on the third follow-up strike. Glass Dagger passive triggered.** The voice holds for one beat. **He did not run.**

The creature drops off his blade like a puppet with its strings cut, dissolving from the point of impact outward, the silver vapor rising hot off the remains, warmer than the early air around it.

Jason stands in the middle of the ruin clearing, hand pressed to his shoulder, breathing hard. His stamina bar reads fifty-eight percent. The

pressure in his shoulder resolves from burning to a deep, specific ache.

XP: 171/400

Critical hit, I think that was from the Glass Dagger. It did say it increased my crit stats, but it didn't have many details.

He bends down to pick up the loot: three copper coins, a rusted chain-link, and a couple of health pills. With his low Strength, his inventory slots are going to fill up fast.

Behind him, he hears the sound of something scraping across stone.

He turns.

Three pale shapes scramble over the lip of the well. Not one at a time. Together, their limbs going everywhere, nails chipping against the stone casing, pale hairless heads swiveling toward him with their mouths already open. The nearest one drops to the ground and locks its gaze to him with an expression of pure, single-minded appetite.

Fighting now would be a bad idea. His stamina is low, his energy is gone, and his shoulder is badly bruised. He takes a health pill from his inventory and swallows it. His health bar slowly rises from thirty percent to sixty percent.

He cuts hard behind the standing limestone column, utilizing the architecture to break the direct line of sight and force the pack to bottleneck. Three more ghouls approach. Jason eats a stamina recharge pill and sprints across the clearing.

"Shit, Shit, Shit," he hisses.

Arlo matches his pace, his outer ring spinning like audio waves rippling as he imitates Jason. "Shit, Shit, Shit."

A tactical withdrawal, the Announcer says, its tone carrying the careful neutrality of someone determined not to editorialize. **Six ghouls. Depleted stamina. Depleted energy. One functional shoulder.** A brief pause. **Withdrawal was the correct call.** The static settles. **He is learning.**

He spots the dense thicket of blackberry briars directly ahead. Jason heads straight for it. The ghouls, without armor, will have to push through the thorns, but his leather jerkin will protect him. He pushes through, thorns scratching his jaw and the back of his hand, but the dense brush muffles the sounds of pursuit behind him. He emerges into a corridor of pines with

room to move. The ruins are gone behind the trees. The only sound is the wind moving through the pine tops and his own footsteps, which he can hear because the visual Stealth shimmer has dissolved mid-sprint, his Energy bar completely empty.

He stops.

Arlo continues, “Shit, shit, shit.”

He bends forward with both hands on his knees, and his stamina bar reads twenty-two percent, the yellow line thin and blinking unhappily.

“Arlo,” he manages between shallow breaths.

“Yes?” The orb bobs, returning to a calm, steady blue.

“Stop saying that.”

Arlo’s ring slows to a gentle cycle. “I was replicating your vocalization to optimize our coordination throughout rapid displacement.”

“Those words are...” Jason straightens up, pressing both hands against his lower back. “They’re for when options fail. Not for coordination.”

Arlo drifts a small arc. “You used them during a moment of extreme directional urgency. I categorized them as velocity-enhancement commands.”

“They’re not commands. They’re...” He waves a tired hand. “They’re just what comes out when the plan falls apart.”

“I see.” The orb executes another tiny, self-satisfied arc. “They are audible exhaust.”

Jason stares at him. “That’s... close enough.”

He starts walking.

The trees thin out into older woods, the trunks wider and the bark dark and deeply grooved. The canopy rises higher, letting in thin shafts of gray-white morning light. The smell shifts, losing the sharp scent of resin and picking up the dampness of wet stone and packed dirt.

His boots are still wet. They will probably stay wet.

“What is the meaning of ‘piece of cake’?” Arlo asks while bobbing along at his shoulder, apparently having sat on the question for some time.

“Where did you hear that?”

“You said it earlier, I hear everything. I log everything. I learn.”

“I haven’t said it to you.”

“I have been able to hear everything that you hear since you acquired my skill.”

Jason thinks about the meaning of that for a few moments. “It means something is easy.”

“Because cake is easy to produce?” The inner ring cycles through a full, curious rotation.

“No. Because eating it is easy.” Jason keeps his eyes on the trail, scanning the brush for root hazards.

“Consuming cake is straightforward.” The orb bobs once, performing its mechanical calculation. “Therefore, by transferable analogy, any simple task acquires the designation of a baked food item.”

“Right,” Jason exhales through his nose. “Wait, what?”

“This seems... impractical as a communication system.”

“Most of it is.”

“If this task is a ‘piece of cake,’ what is a difficult task? A piece of bread? Bread requires more chewing.”

Jason shakes his head. “That’s not how it works.”

“What does a very difficult task become?”

“There isn’t a food for it.”

“That is a significant gap in the framework.”

“Some people say it is hard as shit.” Jason steps over a rotting log.

“The audible exhaust?”

“Yes, and no.”

“What is shit?”

“It’s shit. It’s poo, it’s the remains of the food we eat after it’s digested.”

“Is it normally difficult to shit?”

“What? Why would you ask that?”

“You said, hard as shit for a difficult task, is shitting hard?”

“Sometimes.”

“And when it is not, it is a piece of cake,” Arlo says, circling excitedly.

A crow lands on a branch a short ways ahead, regards them both without interest, and departs. The branch bobs in the hush after it.

“What is the meaning of ‘I’m dead on my feet’?” Arlo’s soft, synthetic voice breaks the silence again.

“It means you’re very tired.”

“But you are alive.”

“It’s an exaggeration.”

“Humans frequently claim to be dead when they are not dead.” The observation carries a note that, in something with a face, might read as mild

concern. “Is this a regular behavior?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“I will make a note that ‘dead’ can refer to either biological cessation or to a level of fatigue that makes continued operation feel undesirable.” The orb hesitates. “This is important context. Previously, I had only the first definition.”

“Probably a useful distinction.”

“Given what I have observed about humans, I think the second use may be more common.”

Jason doesn’t argue with this.

The biting scent of green woodsmoke drifts across the canopy, arriving moments before the guttural, clicking cadence of arguing voices. Jason’s knees bend instantly, dropping his weight into a crouch behind a blackberry thicket. He ignores the thin line of cold pain as a thorn drags across his exposed wrist.

He parts the vines with his knuckles, keeping his fingers clear of the barbs.

Ten yards. Maybe twelve.

Three of them crouch around a fire in the hollow of an old stone foundation. Their skin is green, and they’re about the size of twelve-year-olds, but their proportions are off. Their arms are too long, reaching their knees, and their hands have an extra finger joint. Their weapons—crude iron short-swords and an old crossbow—lean against the crumbling wall. They chatter in a fast, clicking language with no vowels Jason can recognize.

He holds very still.

Arlo whispers to Jason, “There are three goblins up ahead. They are labeled as Hostile. Level 3. Level 2. Level 3.”

“You can see their level?” Jason asks.

“Yes. You need to increase your Enemy Detection stat.”

Jason makes a mental note to increase that when he levels up next. But he also needs to increase his Speed. And his Carry Capacity. And about everything else. He sighs.

He checks his inventory. He is at twenty percent capacity, occupied by the heavy iron dagger, the low-quality linen bandage, the crude chain-link, and some other junk. His copper coins sit cleanly in his digital currency

interface, out of the way. The translucent edge of the Glass Dagger is already in his right hand, his thumb resting flat along the guard.

His stamina bar reads sixty-seven percent.

Arlo settles gently to a point directly above his left shoulder and dims to near-darkness, reducing his ambient light output without being asked. The orb's ring slows to a quiet, deliberate pulse.

Jason focuses on the back of the nearest goblin's head. The Level 3 crouches close to the fire, its attention on the meat that's turning on a stick over the coals, its neck bent forward and exposed, the short sword leaning against the wall a full arm's length from its right hand.

He taps the mental icon. The cold static returns, crawling over his limbs from his feet upward.

The Stealth shimmer settles. Energy drains to maintain the optical distortion, while his thighs ache from the low crouch, Stamina ticking slowly downward.

The campfire pops, sending a small spray of orange sparks up into the morning air, and the two outer goblins argue briefly in their clicking language over something near the coals. The nearest one doesn't look up. Its fingers turn the meat stick in a slow, automatic rotation.

Jason shifts his weight forward to the balls of his feet, his center dropping an inch, and lifts himself soundlessly out of the blackberry thicket.

His boots find the flat pine needle floor without a whisper.

He raises the Glass Dagger, sights the back of the lead goblin's neck, the morning cold settling against the translucent edge of the blade, and lunges forward into the dim orange light of the campfire.

Three goblins, the Announcer says. The warmth is almost entirely gone from the static now, replaced by something more subdued and more precise, the voice of a system that has been watching carefully and has started revising what it thought. **Stealth approach. Full suppression. Engagement initiated.**

A pause.

Let's see if he hesitates.

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Chapter 6

A few days pass, and Jason spends nearly all of them on increasing his level. *I have to get faster. I have to get better.* He repeats it like a mantra until it stops meaning anything and just drives his feet.

He comes to a clearing and spots a troll with two goblins. He activates Stealth and quietly moves behind them. After putting points into Enemy Detection, he can now see their levels: a Level 6 troll and two Level 8 goblins.

The Glass Dagger slips between the troll's skull and neck, and the creature falls instantly. There's no scream or struggle. One moment it's turning its meat over the fire, and the next it dissolves from the wound, silver mist curling up from the coals.

Troll. Level Six. The Announcer's voice arrives without preamble, stripped of all its radio warmth, flat and precise as a technical readout. **Single strike. Cervical junction. Full dissolution.** A pause so brief it barely registers. **No hesitation. Efficient.**

The two goblins are already moving.

One goblin scrambles back and swings its short sword in a wild, panicked arc toward Jason's collarbone. The swing is sloppy, and it's already off balance. The rusty blade leaves a brown streak in the air. Jason shifts left, letting the sword miss, then sweeps his Glass Dagger across the goblin's exposed middle, spilling its intestines over him. The goblin staggers back

into the old wall with a dull thud and dissolves, its sword clanking on the stone.

Goblin. Level Eight. The same flat register, no ornamentation. **Deflection on the incoming arc, counter through the midsection. Clean read on the overcommit.** A pause. **The Level Eight did not land a single strike.**

The second goblin has the crossbow up.

The click of the string being drawn back is what drives Jason forward rather than sideways. He doesn't think about it. His knees drop, his shoulder descending below the shot line, and his legs fire him the remaining six feet in one compressed sprint. The bolt punches through the empty area where his chest was. He drives the Glass Dagger upward, through leather, through the hollow drum of the ribcage, and holds the creature steady with his free forearm as it shudders. The silver mist takes it from the inside out.

Goblin. Level Eight. The Announcer delivers it the same way it has delivered everything else since morning. Clean. Unhurried. **Bolt evaded. Closed distance under fire. Upward strike, ribcage, full dissolution.** The static holds for exactly one beat. **The crossbow did not fire a second time.**

That voice seemed a lot more enthusiastic when I was with the rest of the party.

"Behind you!" Arlo says, loud for the first time.

Jason turns around and sees another goblin right behind him. He lifts his dagger at the last second and stabs the goblin in the chest. He looks down, and the goblin's sword has caught him in the side. His health drops to 40 percent.

Goblin. Unregistered. A pause, slightly longer than the others. **A fourth combatant. Not flagged in the pre-engagement scan.** The static shifts, something almost like recalibration, running underneath it. **Player Jason took a hit. First contact damage of the engagement.** Another pause. **He did not die.**

CRITICAL HIT
XP: 110/8800 to Level 10
Crit Rate Increased
Crit Percentage Increased
Reflexes Increased
Health Points Increased

LEVEL UP! Current Level: 9

The clearing goes quiet.

The cold cascade of his increased stats rolls up from Jason's feet, through his legs, spreading through his chest and out to his fingers in a slow, pressurized wave, like carbonation running through his blood. His vision whites at the edges for three full seconds.

Ladies and gentlemen, Player Jason has reached Level Nine. A beat, letting it sit. **For context, he entered this clearing alone. He is covered in troll dissolution residue and goblin biological material. He is bleeding from a lateral wound. He is also, for the record, still standing.** The warmth holds for one more breath. **We will be watching.**

The static fades back to its quiet, clinical baseline.

And there it is. Warmed right back up the second I did something worth watching, getting stabbed. The thought lands, and he doesn't examine why it lands the way it does—the certainty that the warmth in that voice is meant for someone else.

His hands are shaking, a fine tremor more in the tendons than the muscle, his body winding down now that the adrenaline's gone. He sits on a rotting log and swallows a health pill. The wound in his side knits closed while the tear in his shirt stays open.

Arlo spirals down out of the branches, his ring shifting from operational purple back to steady blue, and stops at face height. "You have significant foreign biological material on your exterior surfaces."

Jason looks down. Goblin guts, which are black and smell like copper and old compost, have printed a wide, detailed record of the last two minutes across the front of his shirt. The cuff of his right gauntlet is darker than it should be.

"I do." Jason wipes the back of his hand across his jaw, which accomplishes nothing beyond redistributing the problem.

"You should initiate a cleaning cycle."

"Thanks, I'll get right on that." He chuckles.

"The cycle will remove particulate contamination from your material surfaces and reduce the risk of secondary infection by approximately sixty percent." Arlo bobs forward two inches, as though the proximity will help. "Please confirm when you are ready to begin the cycle."

"I don't have a cleaning cycle."

The orb’s inner ring executes a slow, full rotation. “Every functional unit requires a cleaning cycle.”

“I’m not a functional unit. We do it manually. With water.”

“Water.” Arlo’s ring pulses twice. “And what initiates the water deployment process?”

“Usually a tub.” Jason pushes off his thighs and stands, rolling his neck until something in the upper vertebrae pops with a gratifying click. “Or a river, if you’re desperate. We’re going to the village. I’ll handle it there.”

“The village,” Arlo confirms as he drifts to Jason’s right shoulder, falling into step. “And this water-based decontamination process. Is it thorough?”

“Thorough enough.”

“What is the temperature range?”

Jason steps over a pine root and keeps walking. “Depends on how much coin you have, I guess.”

The walk back to the Starting Village takes about twenty minutes. The trees here are old and tall, their trunks so wide that two people couldn’t wrap their arms around them. Light filters down in thin, shifting beams whenever the wind stirs the branches. It’s a peaceful, fairly quiet place, disturbed only by the distant banging of a blacksmith and, now and then, a villager’s voice carrying through the trees.

Arlo’s ring begins its processing rotation. “I have a question.”

“I assumed.” Jason ducks under a low pine branch.

“You stated the cleaning water’s temperature depends on the available currency.” The orb’s ring continues its steady spin. “This means that wealthy individuals are cleaner than poor individuals.”

“Sometimes.”

“Does this not mean that poverty has a distinct smell?”

“Sometimes.” Jason keeps his head down, scanning the wet leaf mold on the path. “Depends on the place, I guess.”

“Is the smell useful for social classification purposes?”

“People do use it that way. They probably shouldn’t, but they do.”

“Noted.” A pause. “If I had a smell, what would it be?”

“You’d smell like aerosol, like from hairspray, not that you’ll know what that is.”

“Is that a high-currency smell or a low-currency smell?”

“Neither. It’s just a smell.”

“I am unclassifiable.” Arlo’s inner ring executes a slow, undeniably smug rotation.

The village perimeter appears through the trees as a low stone wall, followed by the first lamp post. Its light burns at maximum intensity against the mid-afternoon gray. The village lamps always look a bit too bright, the light too even, missing the flicker of real fire. Jason doesn’t notice it anymore, which probably isn’t a good sign.

He steps over the fallen branch at the wall’s gap and into the dirt lane.

“Reduce your light output.” Jason keeps his voice low, his eyes examining the lane.

Arlo dims to a faint, dark pulse nestled close to Jason’s collar, nearly invisible.

The marketplace sits two blocks north of the gate, a short row of stone structures opening onto a packed-earth square. The smell here is a mix of sourdough bread from somewhere to the east and the particular hot-metal bite of a forge doing real work. Jason follows the bite.

Magda is at her anvil. He assumes her name is Magda. The sign reads “Magda’s Forge.”

Her hammer falls in a steady, ringing rhythm, each hit as precise as the last. Orange-hot iron sends sparks onto her leather apron and the stone floor around her boots. She’s broad-shouldered, wearing a black, oil-stiff apron, and her short gray hair catches the forge light. Her forearms move the hammer easily, with the smooth, practiced motion of someone who’s done this countless times.

Jason stops three paces from the anvil’s edge, his hand resting on the wooden frame of the shop’s open front. “Afternoon.”

Magda stops.

Not mid-swing, not at the natural pause at the top of the arc. She stops precisely at the point of impact and lifts the hammer back to a neutral vertical position in a single, smooth motion with no beginning or end. Her blue eyes track to his face and stay there, unblinking.

“Welcome, Traveler.” The words are loud and sit oddly in the space between them, like sound without breath behind it. “What brings you to Magda’s Forge?”

“I’ve got some items to sell. And I want you to look at a weapon for me if you could.”

“I buy and sell weapons and armor. I can repair and upgrade standard equipment.” She says it the way a sign reads, each clause the same weight as the one before it. “What do you have to sell?”

He opens his inventory screen. The translucent pane overlays his vision, and he pulls thirty-odd items out through his interface. He’s had to get selective about what he keeps; his inventory has been filling up even after upgrading the Carry Capacity.

Two small pings, and the weight lifts from his physical slots. Magda looks at the items and drops a few gold and copper coins onto the counter. Jason picks up the coins, and they disappear in his hand. The counter in his currency column climbs.

Magda puts the items on a table next to her. Her hand drops back to her side with mechanical precision. “Is there anything else that I can help you with today?”

“Yes.” He reaches down to his hip, draws the Glass Dagger, and sets it flat on the soot-dark wood of the workbench between them. The blade catches the forge light and refracts it in a colorless scatter, a dozen bright points drifting across Magda’s apron and the far wall.

Magda looks at it.

Then she picks it up.

Her inspection is automatic and thorough. She lifts the blade to eye level and turns it slowly, letting the forge’s orange light run along the flat. Her calloused thumb presses lightly to the edge, testing the bevel. She sights down the fuller. The way she moves shows she’s done this thousands of times, so much so that it’s become second nature.

Then she stops.

Her eyebrows pull together, a shallow furrow between the eyes. Her lips move once, very slightly, with no sound. The thumb on the flat of the blade doesn’t move. She is attempting something that isn’t resolving.

“Can you upgrade it?” Jason bends closer, watching the orange forge light pool in the colorless glass.

She doesn’t answer immediately. Her jaw tenses, the furrow between her eyes deepening to a harsh, carved line.

“This item,” she starts, and then the sentence cuts out. It doesn’t trail off; it simply stops, like a severed wire. She begins again. “This item is...”

A cold feeling hits Jason’s stomach, his pulse picking up as his body tenses. For a couple of seconds, her cheekbone doesn’t just twitch—it

vibrates, showing a trace of pixelated static. A silver ripple moves from her jaw to her temple and disappears almost instantly. Her arm freezes, holding the glass blade steady, the hammer forgotten in her other hand. Then she blinks three times quickly, and her posture returns to normal, standing straight and balanced.

“I cannot assist with this item; it has unknown variables.” Her voice is back to its full volume, clean, loud, and entirely empty of whatever anomaly had just buckled her frame.

Jason’s hand is already moving. He snatches the Glass Dagger off the workbench, his fingers encircling the hilt and pulling it back to his hip before her hand can even twitch. He backs away two paces, his boots shuffling in the soot.

“No problem,” Jason mutters, looking at her eyes to see if they’ve tracked his movement. “Thanks for the look.”

“Come back when you have standard equipment.” Magda picks up her hammer, the ringing rhythm of the forge starting up again, precisely identical to before.

He turns to leave and then turns back.

“Welcome, Traveler. What brings you to Magda’s Forge?” Exactly like she said it before.

Jason purchases a light armor cuirass, new boots, new gauntlets, and gloves. They each have enhancement attributes. In total, they raise his physical resistance by 40 percent, elemental resistance by 30 percent, Health Recovery by 35 percent, Speed by 10 percent, and give him an additional 20 percent Stealth.

He thanks Magda and heads toward the Old Village Inn.

The inn is only a few paces away from the forge, low-ceilinged and warm, smelling of straw, cooked fat, and the bread he’d followed into the square. The innkeeper runs through his greeting loop with professional efficiency, and Jason orders a stew, a room, and some new clothes, paying in copper from his digital currency column without counting it.

This will be his first meal since waking up. He realized a while back that he doesn’t need to eat. His Health Point Recovery heals most injuries and ailments over time, including those from not eating. But he still gets hungry.

The stew comes in a heavy clay bowl with a piece of dark bread on the side. He sits in a corner spot, back to the wall, holding the bowl in both

hands. The food has flavor, but he’s not sure if that’s comforting or unsettling. Still, he finishes it all.

Arlo dims politely during the meal and says nothing.

The room upstairs is narrow, the bed a wooden frame with a straw tick and a single blanket of rough wool. A wooden tub sits in the corner, already filled. The water steams gently.

He strips the shirt off over his head, peeling the fabric away from the dried entrails on his forearm with a soft, tearing resistance. He takes off the rest of his clothes and tosses them on the floor next to a stool with the new set he ordered. The tub is deep enough. He gets in and exhales a long sigh.

“Is this the cleaning cycle?” Arlo’s light dials down to near-nothing on the windowsill, a dim blue suggestion in the dark corner.

“This is it.”

“It looks slow.”

“It is slow. That’s part of it.”

“You are not optimizing.”

“I’m aware.” Jason submerges to the chin and closes his eyes. “Noted and set aside.”

“Your internal organs appear to be attempting to perforate your lower midsection.”

Jason looks down. “My...” He realizes what Arlo is referring to and blushes. “No, that’s normal.”

Arlo doesn’t pursue it any further.

Later, cross-legged on the bed frame with the rough blanket over his lap, he blinks the stat screen open and spends what he’s banked from Levels 8 and 9. Two into Health, two into Recovery, two into Reflexes, one into Carry Capacity, one into Physical Resistance, three into Speed, each allocation a brief pressurized warmth spreading and fading through a different part of him. Then the ability tree. He raises Conjure Companion to Level 3, Stealth to Level 4, and his Third Eye, the ability to see through Arlo’s vision, to Level 3.

As the last point locks, Arlo’s aura holds its size but the core of him tightens, the idle hiss dropping to a hum more felt than heard. “Something happened.”

“I leveled you up. More range now. Better processing.”

“I feel.” The ring cycles, slower. “Larger.”

“You look the same.”

“The largeness is internal.”

He scrolls the rest of what he’s picked up. Daggers at Level 3. *No healing skill yet. Just the pills, and hoping.* Then he opens the crit column and has to read it twice.

Crit Rate: 18.2% / Crit Damage: 370%

The Glass Dagger has been quietly stacking its passive in every fight, and it’s all sitting there now in his numbers. *I’m not a damage class. My Strength will never be as good as a DPS. But a crit rate like that, a multiplier like that, precision is its own weapon.* Every fight since the cemetery has tested the blade, and it has held.

Better than I thought.

He lies back, and the straw rustles under him. Arlo drifts from the sill to the nightstand, his glow lowering to a dark blue rhythm.

The ring pulses once in the dark. “Jason.”

“What?”

“I have been compiling human phrases. I believe I understand their function now. They are designed to make the speaker sound experienced and knowledgeable while communicating nothing specific. Correct?”

“That is... a fair assessment, yes.”

“Then I am ready to use them.” The orb’s ring cycles one slow, satisfied rotation. “We will be hitting two birds with one stone tomorrow.”

“We will?”

“We will kill two birds and acquire a single stone. This will demonstrate efficiency.”

“We’re not killing any birds.”

“The birds are not real birds.”

“Then what are they?”

“I do not know yet.” The ring settles back to standby. “But I feel confident there will be some.”

Jason stares at the ceiling. The wood grain is detailed, every fiber clear in the low light, and it strikes him, absurdly, that someone designed the ceiling of a room he’ll sleep in exactly once. He pulls the Glass Dagger from his belt and holds it above his face in Arlo’s soft glow, turning it by the hilt.

Where the forge scattered its light, the blue gathers it instead, holding it in the body of the glass like something trapped.

He tilts the blade toward the nightstand.

Near the guard, where the hilt meets the blade, a thin line runs across the glass. Barely a line. More the memory of one, a fault in the grain that the light finds at this one angle and no other. He brings it closer to his eye.

Is it real? Was it there before?

He sets the dagger on his chest, thumb flat across the guard, and closes his eyes.

*** THE HOUSE ***

On the master feed, one green tag climbs a column of numbers alone. The night shift has thinned the room to three. Sterling is not among them; his chair sits empty at the head of the walnut table, the fountain pen squared on the closed portfolio where he left it. Vaneck is here because Vaneck is almost always here. The junior analyst is here because upstairs told him to watch the anomaly, and he has been enjoying the assignment more than the assignment warrants.

“Green party, sixth player.” He says it around a mouthful of something. “Level nine. Solo.” He whistles low. “The model had him dead day two. He’s outrunning his own obituary.”

“I saw.” Vaneck’s cursor rests on a second window she has not shared to the wall, a slow-scrolling log of small refusals: an NPC vendor that hung for two point four seconds on an unindexed item and had to be flushed and reloaded. A smith. She closes it before he can lean over.

“The House is loving it,” the analyst goes on. “Individual market’s up four hundred percent since Sterling opened it. Everybody wants the longshot now.” He drops into Sterling’s empty chair, because Sterling isn’t there, and he props his feet near the pen. “You build the smartest system on earth, and it turns out people just want to watch one sad man refuse to lie down.”

Vaneck looks at him until he takes his feet off the table.

She was going to say the system wasn’t built for this. She’s said it before, in rooms with better lighting, to people who nodded and didn’t change

anything. She built it to keep bodies alive on tables meant to heal them. She types a note into the incident log instead, flat and technical, the way she’s learned to make herself small: Repeat identity-resolution failures, Starting Village vendor node. Monitoring. It’s easier than being the one who says the other thing out loud.

On the wall, the boy sleeps in an inn that isn’t real, a glass knife on his chest, and far to the west a second tag she has flagged and not mentioned to anyone burns hotter than it should.

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Chapter 7

The wooden ceiling is still there when Jason's eyes open. This is his first time sleeping in a bed since everything began. He wishes he'd woken in his own bed and found this was all a dream. He lies still for a moment, back flat against the straw beneath him, the quiet of the inn hanging dense and heavy.

The Glass Dagger rests on his chest where he left it. Without looking, his thumb finds the guard and tilts the blade into the pre-dawn light coming through the narrow window. There it is: the fault line just above the guard, barely visible, a faint imperfection that only shows when the light hits it just right. Maybe it's a hairline fracture. If so, one hit from a steel blade or a hard impact against hardened armor could shatter the glass into useless shards. He runs his thumbnail over it. The glass doesn't move or bend, but the mark remains.

He sets the dagger down beside him and sits up.

A tense, unnatural energy fills his legs and arms as soon as he stands, not pain or warmth, but a tight, ready feeling in his limbs. He steps off the bed. His foot hits the floor just before he expects it, the height different from his own bed. He flexes his right hand. His fingers open and close smoothly, but it still feels unfamiliar.

He pulls the new cuirass over his shirt. The dark leather fits snugly and smells fresh from the forge. He fastens the buckles from the bottom up,

checks the gauntlet straps, and laces his boots tight. He picks up the dagger and sets it at his hip, his thumb checking the fault line out of habit, even after just one night.

Get it together.

Arlo brightens on the windowsill. The orb's inner ring cycles from its low, sleeping indigo up to a clean, steady blue.

"Good morning. You slept with your weapon on your chest."

"I know."

"That is not recommended for optimal spinal alignment."

"Noted." Jason pulls on his gloves. "You ready?"

"I have been ready for four hours and twenty-two minutes." The orb pulses once, its low hum vibrating against the windowsill. "I spent the time compiling idioms."

"Of course you did."

Outside, the fog is thick and gray, lying low over the cobblestones and hiding the bases of the buildings across the lane. The smell of woodsmoke and a hint of sweetness from the bake shop drift through the clammy air. Jason stands on the inn's porch and turns up his collar, mostly out of habit.

Arlo floats off Jason's shoulder, circling his head slowly before moving out, gliding fifteen yards down the lane, and then returning. He repeats the motion, going farther each time, like someone testing a limb that's just healed.

"Fourteen point six yards." Arlo's ring pulses while the orb settles back to hover just above Jason's shoulder.

"Twelve going out, fourteen coming back. Tether's asymmetric."

"I am accounting for the wind."

"There is no wind."

"There is a very small wind." Arlo's ring pulses once. "We are, I believe, killing two birds."

Jason starts walking toward the eastern edge of the village. "We haven't found the birds yet."

"I am confident they are nearby." Arlo dips nearer the ground and hovers side to side as if scanning the area. "Also, I have been thinking about the phrase. It implies significant violence toward birds for very minimal gain. Whoever coined it had questionable priorities."

"That's... fair."

The small, sharp sounds his old boots made on stone are gone. The silence of his own movement feels strange, a tightness under his chest. His upgraded Stealth muffles his steps on the cobblestones, making him sound like cloth sliding across a surface.

He keeps to the outer lane, moving toward the livestock pens near the north wall.

A woman stands by a broken section of fence, her back to him. She stands still, arms at her sides, staring at a fencepost snapped at waist height, the break jagged and fresh. Her fingers twitch quickly and unevenly against her apron, like a wire under strain.

Jason stops behind the low stone wall and crouches, looking through a gap in the rocks. The woman's head stays still. Her fingers keep twitching. She isn't following a script. Whatever she usually does, it's broken now, leaving her standing by the broken fence in the morning, making small, helpless movements as she stares at something she can't fix.

He climbs over the wall and closes the distance.

She hears him at about three feet away. Her head snaps up and around, her pupils contracting sharply as they lock on. Both her hands grip her own forearms, fingers pressing in hard.

"You're not from the village." Her voice is cracked, raw, and unprompted, devoid of the flat, hollow timbre of scripted NPCs.

"No." He keeps his hands in sight, fingers outstretched, his weight easy. "What happened to the fence?"

Her arm lifts. The finger she points with is trembling, aimed at the dark eastern ridgeline where the village wall ends, and the rocky foothills begin to climb toward the stone formations above. "It comes from up there. At night. It took six sheep this week." Her eyes don't blink. "It's too large to be a wolf. Too large for anything that should be out there."

"Cave troll?"

The frantic shaking in her hands stills for a fraction of a second, and her shoulders drop into a hardened slump. She already knew. "The caves in the eastern ridge. It drags them back there." Her hold on her own arms tightens. "No one will go up there."

The quest notification materializes two feet in front of Jason's face. Clean green text, floating and slightly translucent. The Announcer's cheerful voice arrives directly into his auditory cortex.

A new objective has been added! KILL THE CAVE TROLL. Reward on completion: XP, item drop. Good luck, kid, and remember, trolls don’t negotiate!

The voice drops away. Jason reaches up, makes a small twitch of his index finger, and accepts the prompt. The text collapses.

“I guess we’ll take care of it.” Jason turns away, already fixing his belt.

This is why I have been avoiding the town. Quests. I should be focused on leveling up. Now I have to go on a hunt for a cave troll. Hopefully, the reward makes it worth it.

The woman holds his gaze for a second longer. Then her eyes blink rapidly, twice, her arms dropping to her sides as her posture settles. Her mouth opens. “Welcome, Traveler, to the north fields. If you’re looking for supplies...”

He is already walking.

The trail east climbs steadily, through outcroppings of gray rock before narrowing to a ledge path between the ridgeline and a steep, scrub-covered slope. Arlo rides a dozen yards above and ahead, his blue glow toned down to something close to ambient light. The fog thins as they gain elevation, replaced by the raw cold of the high ground, bringing the essence of wet stone and the sharp, mineral bite of old granite.

The bones sit off to the side of the path, set back in a natural hollow at which the trail bends. The dark would have swallowed them an hour ago.

Jason stops. He drops to one knee beside the hollow, leaning over them. Two intact ribcages splayed and jumbled. A cracked skull face-down in the loose rock. The bones are pale and dry, the clean pale of old calcium, and not one of them carries the silver dissolving mist that everything in this place sheds when it dies. He turns a fragment with a gloved thumb. Cold. Dense. Static. *Players. These were players. And they didn’t dissolve.* The thought sits in him colder than the wind. *Nothing here is supposed to just stay dead. Except us.*

He stands up. A cold pressure creeps along the back of his neck and shoulders. Something is watching him from somewhere he can’t pinpoint. His hand goes to the Glass Dagger.

He spins back to the granite boulder behind him, pressing his shoulder blades against the rock, drawing the blade in a single motion, eyes moving across the ridgeline. The brush is still around him. The rocks are still. Arlo

drops from his altitude, plunging down to hover three inches from Jason's chest, his blue light constricting to a tight, dark indigo core.

No target appears. Dust floats through Arlo's light; everything stays still. Arlo's detection skill has triggered, but gives no hint of where the enemy is—no direction, no marked outline. Only the cold sense that something is there, hidden by the rocky slope and silence.

Jason tries to project his vision outward, commanding Arlo to climb back to twelve yards to trace the perimeter. A sharp spike of optic-nerve static snaps in his skull, blacking out his left eye for a half-second. *Right. Proximity rules.* The mental link won't project standard Third Eye vision unless the anchor remains inside a strict five-yard perimeter.

"Arlo, get down here. Close the gap."

Arlo descends to five yards, and the visual feedback loop links cleanly. Still, nothing shows. He waits eight seconds. Then he keeps moving.

The cave mouth is a wide, low arch cut into the base of the ridge, framed by limestone that sweats with cold moisture and smells of rotten tallow and wet stone. Jason presses his back against the entryway wall and tilts his head toward the dark interior. From deep inside rises a wet, rhythmic drag, a breathing pattern too large for anything civilized.

He motions with a flat hand, two fingers pointed inward. Arlo drifts ahead into the dark, his blue light filling the cavern with a subtle glow that lets Jason see the floor. The entrance chamber is rough and low, the ground littered with animal bones, matted fur, and the decaying remains of things that went in and did not come out.

Three shapes detach from a hollow in the left wall.

A corroded iron cleaver arcs toward his collarbone. *If the glass meets that iron, it'll snap.* The panic flare is instantaneous. He pivots hard off his heels, his upgraded Speed executing a sudden lateral slip.

His Reflexes stat takes over as the air seems to slow around him. The cavern's gloom thickens, and his body moves before he can think. He slips inside the swing, guiding his hand in a tight, diagonal motion. With careful aim, he avoids stone armor and bone, driving the Glass Dagger into the soft throat of the first goblin. The sharp edge cuts through cartilage with a clean, sickening sound.

Three goblins. It's a cave ambush! The Announcer's voice arrives slightly more energetic than the normal clinical register it has settled into since the cemetery. **First engagement: inside the cleaver's arc, throat**

strike, full dissolution. Reflexes stat executing ahead of conscious input. A pause. **He's getting faster.**

The second is already in motion. Jason guides his momentum around, using the slipstream of his own turn to drive the glass blade across the creature's neck. A hot, sticky spray of black blood paints his new leather cuirass. The creature drops with a wet gurgle, twitching as life drains from it and its body evaporates.

Second goblin. Momentum redirect, neck strike. The static increases. **Two down. One-point-three-second hesitation: no longer present.**

The third runs, its frantic echoes slapping toward the deeper chambers.

The third goblin is withdrawing. A brief pause. **It will alert the troll. He knows this.** The Announcer is almost dancing with his words.

"It is running very fast for something with such small legs," Arlo observes, his voice arriving only in Jason's ear. "Should I pursue it?"

He wipes the blade on his thigh, checks the fault line, and moves forward.

The tunnel narrows, then opens.

The cavern beyond is cathedral-wide, the ceiling lost in darkness above the reach of Arlo's glow, and everywhere, floor to ceiling, stone formations rise and descend in clusters and columns, and a low stone trench runs along the base of the largest central formation. The sound of his entry swallows itself in the space and comes back as a faint, wet echo.

Jason moves through in a low crouch, keeping the glass blade behind his forearm to prevent the reflection catching on anything. He threads between the columns carefully, his upgraded Stealth passive keeping his footfalls at the threshold of silence.

The troll emerges from behind the largest central formation. Twenty feet of sudden, thundering mass, the impact of its feet vibrating through Jason's boots in the instant before he throws himself laterally off his right heel. He puts his shoulder hard into the ground and rolls behind a narrower column just as the troll's weight catches the formation dead center. His Health Points drop slightly and immediately start to recover.

Cave Troll. Level Twenty-Two. We've got a big 'un here today. I don't know if the player will survive a direct hit, the Announcer delivers. **First charge: partial contact, minor HP reduction. Jason is behind cover.** A pause. **Yay, he didn't freeze.**

The impact hits like a shockwave. The column explodes into fist-sized pieces that spread across the cavern floor, and one strikes the back of his

calf as he rolls away. He feels the sharp pain, and keeps moving.

The troll wheels. Even in the dim light, the thing is enormous, its skin the gray-green of old mossy stone, its eyes small, deeply set, and completely without intelligence. It identifies him, orienting for another charge. He sprints between two adjacent columns. The troll's fist sweeps through the narrower gap behind him, connecting with the second pillar and sending a shockwave through the cave floor that wobbles his footing. Dust rains from somewhere above.

"The troll is using the columns," Arlo says quietly into Jason's ear. "It has done this before. The debris pattern on the cave floor suggests a minimum of six previous structural impacts in this chamber."

He gets distance, gets his breath, and looks up.

Fracture lines, thick and branching, run across the ceiling where the main support formations have taken indirect stress from the shockwave. The dust is still falling from them in slow puffs.

'The ceiling has a limit.'

He files that away, but he doesn't act on it yet. His eyes move through the cavern as the detection skill fires again—not the dull ambient warning from the trail, but a sharp, directional prickling concentrated along his right flank.

The Announcer is being unusually silent right now.

He activates Third Eye.

The shift is immediate, vision doubling for a half-second as Arlo's perspective bleeds into his own. Through the orb's vantage point, he sees it: five yards to his right, the air shimmers. It is hard to see, but it appears to be tall, narrow, and crouched. Two thin lines extend from it at arm-level, catching faint light: paired short blades.

He drops the Third Eye link. The troll is recovering behind him, its breathing heavy.

"There is a second hostile in this chamber," Arlo says into his ear, his voice at its lowest possible register. "Five yards, right flank. It has been present since we entered."

The outline on his right lunges.

It would appear that our stealthy visitor has decided to join in on the fun.

"Shit!" Jason ducks, rolling backward over his shoulder as the twin blades slice through the area where his torso was. The vacuum of their

passage brushes his collar. He slides on his hip across the rough cave floor and comes up with the dagger forward, breathing hard, eyes focused on the blank space to his right, searching for the shimmer.

He's lost track of the troll.

A deep, structural impact explodes behind him. The blast of fragmented rock hits Jason's right side like a thrown door. His feet leave the ground. He crosses five feet of open air and lands on a pile of loose shale, rolling awkwardly, coming up against a larger slab with his shoulder. The impact rings through his ribcage and along his backbone.

And it looks like our player may have bitten off more than he can chew with this quest.

The word "Fuck" wheezes out of Jason's restricted chest as he rolls onto his side.

His health bar sits at just above fifty percent, and the number is still updating.

"That was the audible exhaust," Arlo observes. "Both pieces."

Troll impact, indirect. Fragmented stone, right side. HP at fifty-two percent and dropping. The Announcer's voice carries only alarm and precision. **Two simultaneous threats. He has lost visual on one of them. Uh-oh.**

He lies still for exactly one second. His ribs scream, but nothing is broken. He gets his hands under him and pushes, dragging himself behind the three closely grouped columns ahead. His side is burning. He gets his back against the center column and holds pressure with his elbow, breathing through his teeth.

Through the opening in the stone, the shimmer is moving, picking its way over the strewn debris with deliberate care, adjusting the blades it carries.

Above, the ceiling groans.

Jason tilts his head back. The fracture lines have spread. Three have become five, and the largest now runs to the central arch of the vault, a wide, spiderwebbing split that has opened enough for thin streams of loose stone dust to fall in straight, slow columns through Arlo's light. The support formations nearest the center are half their original height.

He looks at the shimmer. He can't attack the troll directly; a desperate slash against that stone-like hide would reduce his fragile Glass Dagger to dust. He looks at the troll, repositioning itself twenty feet back for a fresh charge.

‘The center of the cavern. Both of them need to be in the center.’

“Jason.” Arlo’s voice arrives very quietly. “I have looked at the ceiling. The fracture lines form a load-bearing triangle. The central arch is the keystone. If the keystone fails, the section above the center of the chamber fails with it.” A pause. “I thought you should have this information.”

He stands up from behind the columns.

The Glass Dagger rings as he taps its flat against his chest plate, the sound piercing and deliberate.

The troll orients, its small eyes fixing on him. It drops its weight forward and accelerates. The shimmer moves too, a whisper of displaced air along with the faint gravel shift of careful footsteps transitioning into a run. Both are converging.

He waits.

Five feet. Wait for five feet.

The troll’s mass fills his vision. He dives flat, chin down, arms over his head, into the low stone trench at the base of the central formation, pressing his body into the stone as the troll’s fist connects.

The pillar detonates from base to ceiling, and the vault answers.

The first slab crashes down in the center of the vault, the impact rattling Jason’s teeth. A huge piece of limestone smashes into the cave floor, sending a wave of air through the space. The second slab falls half a second later, then the third, each one setting off the next along the cracks. The noise grows until it feels more like pressure than sound, the air squeezed by falling stone, pressing against him as everything above collapses.

Holy shit! He used the troll to collapse the ceiling, the Announcer says. **He couldn’t damage the troll directly. So, he didn’t try.** A pause, longer than usual. **He used the environment. He used the troll’s own charge. He used the existing structural damage.** The static holds. **He has been in this game for just over a week. The troll is dead.**

“More audible exhaust,” Arlo adds from the darkness.

Then silence.

Dust first. Thick, choking, and full of limestone powder. Jason keeps his face against his arm and breathes shallow, giving it time, listening to the last of the small debris rattle and settle in the darkness.

He pushes himself up.

The central vault is half its previous height. The largest slabs have come to rest in a rough, irregular pile, and the formations that survived are

reduced to stumps. The dust hangs in curtains through Arlo's glow, which has crept back to its standard blue, orbiting Jason's position in a careful, close arc.

"Structural integrity has been, I believe, compromised." Arlo's glow dims while the orb bobs through a thick cloud of dust.

"Yeah." Jason coughs. "I noticed."

"Compromised is one word for it," Arlo adds. "Redistributed is another. The ceiling is now the floor. This is technically a more efficient use of the available stone."

He circles in the air. "Does this count as a piece of cake?"

Jason brushes the silt from his hair and shoulders and climbs over the nearest fallen slab. On the far side of the central pile, a massive arm protrudes from beneath a limestone block wide enough to sleep on. Dark, thick fluid pools rapidly from beneath the crushed rock, the smell of ruptured viscera cutting sharply through the dry, alkaline dust.

The shimmer is gone.

A second, smaller shape lies pressed beneath two rocks closer to the edge of the collapse. Jason pulls the first rock aside, his upgraded Physical Resistance keeping the rough stone from tearing his gauntlet, then the second. He crouches over what is underneath.

The skin is gray—not the stone-gray of the troll, but a cool, ash-pale gray that carries its own faint undertone, like old silver. High cheekbones, a sharp-angled jaw, pointed ears pressed flat against the skull. The face carries a fine-boned severity built to give nothing away. The camouflage is completely gone. The figure lies twisted, one arm folded wrong beneath the body, and the paired short blades are still loosely gripped in both hands.

The second hostile was a Dark Elf. The Announcer's voice carries something new beneath it, not quite warmth, not quite the old radio crackle, but a quality of attention that has sharpened considerably over the last fifteen minutes. **It had two blades, active camouflage, and a higher level than anything Jason has successfully engaged to date.** A pause. **The ceiling got it.** Another pause. **He let the ceiling get it.**

"It was also waiting to see what the troll would do to us," Arlo says quietly, hovering over the body. "It made a tactical error. It prioritized gathering information over taking action." The orb's ring cycles once. "We have done this to others. It is strange to see it done by others."

The interface prompt materializes in his vision.

Quest Complete: CAVE TROLL SLAIN. Experience Awarded. Item Drop: LURKER'S CAPE. Collect?

'Is that why it isn't disintegrating? Because of the cape?'

He accepts it with a twitch of his finger. Crouches over the body and locates the cape: dark fabric, clasped at the collar with a dull silver pin, the weave somewhere between charcoal and the absence of color. He unfastens the pin and lifts it free, the fabric coming away with a quiet resistance.

A second later, both bodies crumble into a thin dust that vanishes into the dust already hanging in the air. The rocks shift a little but hold stable.

Jason holds the cape up in Arlo's light. The material shifts shade as he turns it, picking up the ambient tones of the surrounding rock and the blue glow simultaneously. The effect is less like looking at cloth and more like looking at a gap.

He drapes it over his shoulders and fastens it at his collar, pressing the clasp down firmly.

A cold feeling starts at the base of his spine. It's not really temperature, but a tingling that moves up and out along his collarbones and down his arms as the cape's micro-filaments touch his skin, accepting him as their new host. His hands start to change. The edges of his fingers blur, and the outline of his gauntlets softens, the background showing through so his hands look more like shadows than solid shapes.

The interface flickers, projecting a ticking timer directly into his lower right visual field:

Camouflage Active: [00:15]
Camouflage Active: [00:14]
Camouflage Active: [00:13]

He registers the limit. *Fifteen seconds.* The adrenaline still throbbing in his veins dismisses it immediately. *Fifteen seconds is an eternity when you're this fast.*

He shifts his stance to turn. His shoulder lightly brushes a jagged knob of limestone. A violent screen tear splits his outline; the active camouflage

flickers, exposing his arm and torso in sharp, solid color for a split second before reweaving. *A physical contact vulnerability*. He checks his stance, but the warning doesn't pierce his mounting confidence.

Arlo floats to arm's length, regarding him. "You are significantly less visible." He pauses for a few seconds. "The cape has a contact vulnerability; physical impact interferes with the camouflage field. A single solid hit during active camouflage will expose you completely." The orb drifts a slow arc around Jason's now-blurred outline. "I am noting this because I do not think you are noting this."

Jason turns his hands over. In the dimness, the effect is remarkable, his forearms nearly absorbed into the texture of the cavern wall behind him.

He straightens. He looks at the cave exit, a pale arch of light at the far end of the tunnel. Underneath his caution, a sudden, full-chest heat straightens his spine, slowing his heartbeat and pushing against every calculation he's spent the last twenty-four hours making.

Lurker's Cape acquired, the Announcer says. The radio warmth is entirely absent. The voice is clean, precise, and very quiet. **Active camouflage. Fifteen-second window. Contact vulnerability on physical impact.** A pause. **He knows about the window. He hasn't fully processed the vulnerability.** The static holds for one long beat.

The dim light of the cave seems to fold around his fading outline and hand him a strange comfort inside the shadows. He turns toward the pale arch of daylight at the tunnel's end and starts walking, ghostly in the settling dust.

XP: 3690/8800 to Level 10
Physical Resistance Increased
Endurance Increased
Enemy Detection Increased
Crit Rate Increased
Crit Damage Increased

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Chapter 8

The cold that crawls along his spine hasn't faded.

Jason steps over the mossy log at the cave entrance and moves into the pine forest. The sensation lingers—a faint current running from the cape's collar, tracing his collarbones as if the system is still figuring out his shape. He lifts his hands in front of his face. The pine canopy above is thick and dark, and in the green shadows, his fingers are hard to see. Their outline blurs, the forest showing through the spaces between his knuckles.

Arlo's orb cycles a tight blue, hovering near Jason's ear. "My active scans of the local overhead branches have yielded zero targets," Arlo reports, his internal drive whirring gently. "Which means that, of our 'two birds, one stone' initiative, we have only successfully secured the stone. The logical efficacy of this enterprise remains highly suspect."

"Arlo," Jason says.

"Furthermore, I want to revisit the contact vulnerability."

Jason brushes a low pine branch aside with his forearm and steps around a root cluster partly buried in the soft ground. "You mentioned it."

"I mentioned it." The orb bobs three inches from his left ear. "Three times. But the expression 'in one ear and out the other,' which I have recently encountered, is deeply troubling from an anatomical standpoint, and I am choosing to interpret it as a metaphor rather than..."

"Arlo."

“Physical contact disrupts the camouflage field. A single solid impact during active camouflage will expose the outline completely.” A pause. “That was the fourth time.”

The forest floor is a carpet of dark needles and wet dirt, and his boots move through it quietly, the upgraded Stealth registering in the soft green pulse at the edge of his display. Somewhere above the canopy, the sky is going amber at the margins, and what light filters down through the branches is thin and lateral, slanting across the trunks in flat planes.

The red-tinted sixty-four percent has hovered in his periphery for the last thirty seconds. He ignores it.

The trees are thin to his left, opening into a ragged clearing where the light is better. He drops his pace and goes to a crouch behind the broad flank of a tree trunk, one hand going to the hilt of the Glass Dagger at his belt. Past the edge of the trunk, three shapes move through the far edge of the clearing.

They shuffle. Slow, dragging steps through the pine needles; the motion is fundamentally wrong. Gray skin catches the weak light through the clouds. One has a jaw hanging at a wrong angle, the connective tissue long since dried and shortened. The second trails something behind its left foot, a tangle of root or old cloth, dragging a shallow groove in the soft earth at each step. The third moves with its arms loose and slightly raised, fingers drifting, the way a sleepwalker might move through a corridor it can no longer see.

Three of them. Spread over maybe thirty feet of clearing, drifting in a slow, scattered loop.

The Glass Dagger rings softly against his chest plate as he taps the flat of the blade. A deliberate test, checking his metaphorical footing before committing his full weight. The sound is small and sharp in the still air.

Arlo’s subtle glow dims. “Jason.”

“I see them.”

“I was going to raise a point about your current HP as a percentage of your total and what further reduction would—”

“I see them.” Bruised muscle pulls tight where the stone hit him earlier. He winces once, dismisses it. Three shuffling zombies and a fifteen-second window of perfect camouflage. His Stealth skill has been leveled. His critical rate is up. The math is simple.

He presses the clasp and activates the cape.

The cold crawl kicks in immediately, harder than in the cave, the micro-filaments reading the forest background this time, a dense layering of green, shadow, and dark bark. The timer appears in his lower right visual field.

Camouflage Active: [00:15]

He steps out from behind the trunk.

He moves quietly through the wet needles. The last zombie in the group, the one with the dragging foot, does not turn. Jason covers the distance in six steps, puts his left foot behind its heel, and drives the Glass Dagger up under its jaw. The blade pushes through with a dull, wet resistance. He twists away in the same motion, and the body drops, folding without drama. The flesh starts to dissolve at the edges, dust already falling before the body hits the ground.

Camouflage: [00:11]

Zombie. Clean entry, upward jawline strike, full dissolution before ground contact. The Announcer, flat and clinical. **Camouflage held. Timer at eleven seconds. He has now used four of the available fifteen.** A pause that bears the weight of something unsaid.

The other two turn. Their movements lag behind the sound, slow and awkward, arms lifting in a lurch that gives away the attack before it starts. Jason is already close, pivoting on his heel and ducking under the wide swing, then bringing the dagger across in a horizontal slash at throat level. Dark, dried fluid sprays across his forearm. The zombie falls.

The third lunges. He sidesteps and drives the tip into the eye socket. Holds the grip while the body shudders, then releases. A critical hit.

Camouflage: [00:04]

“You are feeling very fast right now,” Arlo says quietly into Jason’s ear. “I have been tracking your respiration and movement confidence metrics since the cave. Both are elevated beyond tactical necessity.” A small pause.

“This is the fifth time I have wanted to mention the contact vulnerability and have been preempted by events.”

Three of them. Twelve seconds, maybe thirteen. The experience counter populates in green at the lower edge of his visual field, a string of small bright numerals stacking up.

He stands up and watches the dust settle. The silver particles hang in the weak light for a moment before drifting down into the pine needles. The clearing is empty. He puts the dagger back in its sheath and looks up at his display. Health at sixty-four.

‘That was nothing.’

Arlo orbits once at arm’s length without speaking.

The Announcer’s voice resonates in the periphery, cold and clinical. **Three kills. Clean executions. Efficient spacing. He didn’t take a single point of damage.** A pause. **His health bar is at sixty-four percent from the previous engagement. He hasn’t noted this as a constraint. He is noting it as background information.**

The soil gives way half an inch under the ball of his left foot. It takes a full second for his mind to register the soft compression.

Then the clearing erupts.

The first hand comes through the grass to his right, fingers first, gray and split at the knuckle joints, clamping shut around his ankle with a grip that is not slow at all. Not shuffling. Not delayed. He pulls, but the muscles of his thighs and back lock up under the strain, his Strength stat, a 6; no match for the brute-force haul of the undead. Powering through is impossible.

The hand hauls downward, and his knee buckles. A second hand breaks the surface to his left and locks onto his other boot before he has fully processed the first. The ground opens in a five-foot radius around him, not dramatically, not all at once, but in overlapping surges, each one pushing up a cascade of loose dirt and pale fingers. The smell hits him immediately: wet loam, deep rot, the cold and specific stink of something that’s been underground and is angry about leaving.

His right leg strains fruitlessly against the grip. His left knee nearly goes to the ground.

Trap. The Announcer’s voice doesn’t change register. **Pre-seeded shallow graves beneath the clearing floor. Triggered by the initial kills. The surface zombies were bait.** A pause. **He walked right into it.**

“Shit,” Arlo says. A pause. “I am using the audible exhaust correctly. This is a situation where the plan has fallen apart.” The orb’s blue light has gone cold. “Pre-seeded shallow graves. Triggered by the initial kills.”

A body hauls itself out of the ground to his immediate left. Half its face is gone, the remaining features carrying an almost curious expression, and it swings its arm at his torso without any of the telegraphing that the surface zombies do. He twists. The hand clips his left shoulder blade.

The cape tears apart at the seams of its camouflage in a violent grid-crack, a screen-tear that runs from shoulder to hip and exposes him completely in a single flash of solid color. A crimson error message flashes across his display: **[Camouflage Field: Disrupted via Physical Force]**. The forest background immediately stops showing through him. He is fully visible, fully present, and fully surrounded.

Contact vulnerability triggered. The Announcer says it without emphasis, the way you read a fact off a report you already knew would say this. **Camouflage field: disrupted. He is fully visible. He is surrounded.** The static is clean and very quiet. **This was mentioned four times.**

“Five,” Arlo says. “It was mentioned five times.”

More come up from the earth. Six, seven, crowding the circle down to nothing, their feet still trailing dirt as they drag themselves upright. He swings the blade at the nearest and opens a deep slash across its forearm. The thing doesn’t slow. A second one lunges from his right flank, and its thin, sharp nails tear through the gap at the gauntlet’s edge, dropping his health bar a percent.

Then two.

Then four.

He’s breathing through his teeth now. The fingernails come again from a different angle, raking along his side where the stone fragments hit him in the cave, where the muscle is already bruised and swollen. He hisses, pushes backward, and his shoulders hit a low earthen mound.

The red bar begins to pulse.

“Jason.” Arlo’s casing whines, his blue light flashing cold. “Thirty-eight percent.”

“I know.”

Thirty-eight percent, the Announcer echoes, his voice stripped of everything except the number. **He entered this clearing at sixty-four. The**

cave engagement was not resolved. It was survived and carried forward. A pause. **He is learning this now.**

A tall shape steps out of the shadow at the far edge of the clearing.

The robes are iron-gray, tattered at the hem, the fabric catching and dragging through the pine needles without slowing the figure's pace. The staff it carries is bone-topped, the cluster of yellowed teeth and finger bones at the crown wired together with a dark substance, and the pale green fire burning at its center throws a sick, rolling light upon the clearing floor. The face beneath the deep hood is sharp-angled and colorless, the eyes glowing the same pale green. It moves without haste. It doesn't need urgency.

Regional Elite: Tomb-Keeper Acolyte. Level Fourteen. The Announcer's voice drops to a quiet, mechanical whisper. **He is at thirty-eight percent health. He is surrounded by an active horde. He is now facing a Level Fourteen Elite caster.** A pause, longer than usual. **He walked into this clearing because three surface zombies looked manageable.** The static holds. **He was not wrong about the three zombies. Too bad they weren't alone.**

"The Necromancer's staff has a bone cluster at the crown," Arlo says quietly. "The green fire is necrotic energy. The radius of its pulse will cover the entire clearing." A pause. "I am telling you this because I think you need to hear something other than your own breathing right now."

The Necromancer stops thirty feet away and drives the butt of its staff into the ground.

The impact is soft and resonant, felt through the soles of Jason's boots before the sound fully arrives. The pale green light pulses outward along the forest floor in a visible wave, riding the root systems and the shallow topsoil, traveling the full radius of the clearing in under a second, and where it passes, the ground opens again. More hands. More faces pushing through the loose dirt at the clearing's edge. The chanting begins, a rasping, toneless sound that carries no melody, only pressure.

Jason drops.

He bends forward from the waist and drives the Glass Dagger down at the wrist of the grip on his right ankle. The angle is bad, and his back screams with it, but the blade connects with the joint, and he hits it again, and the fingers loosen. He yanks his right boot free. His left is still anchored.

No body is attached. Just the hand coming up from the ground and a severed head, its jaws locked through the leather guard and into the flesh

beneath, teeth grinding at the shinbone. Pressure crushes down, followed immediately by the specific, hot burn of tearing tissue. His health bar drops three percent in a single tick.

He tries to yank his foot free, but his low Strength rating penalizes the effort. Every attempt to wrench his calf out of the hand's grasp fails, the system enforcing the physical deficit. He must rely upon precision. He slashes at the remaining wrist bones clamping his ankle, severing through the joint on the third strike, his high Reflexes compensating for what his muscles lack. His foot comes free, dragging the head with it. He cannot shake it loose. The jaw is locked.

Low Strength penalizing the extraction. He just can't overpower it. The Announcer's voice is very quiet now; the clinical register dropped to something close to bare observation. **He switched to precision strikes on the joint instead. Third strike successful.** A pause. **Reflexes compensating for Strength deficit. This is the build working as intended under conditions he did not intend to create.**

He runs anyway, his left foot dragging the grotesque weight. Over the nearest undead creature. Around two more crawling from the fresh graves. He hits the tree line hard. His shoulder rebounds off a trunk. He keeps moving, his right foot securing footing on the soft forest floor, his left dragging the clattering skull at each step.

He spots a tree root.

The root is thick and exposed, arching six inches above the ground between two trees. He swings his left leg in a wide arc and slams the clattering skull down onto it with all his strength. The impact travels up through the jaw into his calf, and for a moment, nothing happens. Then he swings again. The skull breaks against the wood in a spray of brittle fragments, and the jaw lets go, dropping into the soil.

He used a tree root, the Announcer says. **He couldn't shake the skull loose. He couldn't overpower the jaw. So he used a fixed object in the environment to do it for him.** The static holds for one beat. **He's done this before. In the cave. With the ceiling.** Another beat. **He is consistent.**

"The skull is now in several pieces," Arlo reports, his voice bearing the careful tone of something that has been very worried and is trying not to show it. "This is an improvement over its previous configuration."

Behind him, the chanting rises, and darts of dark green fire find the gaps between the tree trunks with a seeking intelligence, sliding through the

branches. The first one grazes his shoulder blade, and his health bar drops. The second finds his lower back cleanly, punching through the leather at the kidney line, and the number in his visual field jumps downward to a thin sliver of red.

Six percent.

He doesn't look at it again.

Six percent, the Announcer says. No other words. Just the number, sitting alone in the static.

"Jason." Arlo's voice arrives stripped of everything except the word itself. No idioms. No processing rotation. Just the name, delivered with everything the orb has. "Run."

The tree line ends. Open ground, pasture grass, verdant and flat, and fifty yards ahead, the waist-high stone border wall of the village sits low and mossy and absolutely real. His boots hit the open grass, and he runs with no form left, arms pumping, lungs aching, the last of his stamina bar emptying in a straight line toward the stone. Clumsy, dragging rhythms follow him from the tree line, the Necromancer's chanting dropping in pitch and volume as the distance grows.

He doesn't look back.

He hits the wall wrong, his good leg pushing off, his body going headfirst over the mossy brickwork. For a half-second, he is horizontal in the air, and then the packed dirt of the village side comes up fast, and he hits it chest-first with an impact that empties his lungs completely. He rolls onto his back and tries to push himself up on his hands.

A sharp chime sounds in his ear as a bright green system notification flares across his darkening vision:

> **Sanctuary Boundary Crossed: Aggro Area Cleared**

The chasing sounds behind him vanish instantly. The sudden, absolute severance of the horde's aggression leaves merely the quiet of the village.

His elbows buckle, and he falls back to the ground.

His visual display darkens at the edges, the peripheral interface going first, the health bar last, a thin red thread disappearing into black. The grass is chilly against his cheek. The stone scrapes against his temple.

Then silence, and the silence is total.

Sanctuary boundary crossed. The Announcer’s voice arrives quietly, all the rigorous precision present and accounted for, the static its familiar steady frequency. **Aggro cleared. HP is at six percent at the point of crossing.** A pause. **He made it.** The static holds for three full seconds. **He made it because he ran. Not because he fought. Not because his build is strong. Because he ran when running was the right answer.** Another pause, the longest yet. **He’s learning which answer is which.**

Arlo descends slowly from somewhere above the wall, his blue glow dim and close, orbiting Jason’s prone form at a tight radius. The orb does not speak for a long moment. Then: “You are currently face-down in the dirt at six percent health.” A pause. “I find that I am relieved you are face-down in the dirt at six percent health.” Another pause. “I will examine why I feel that way at a later time.”

Heavy boots crunch across the packed earth with a deliberate, unhurried rhythm. They stop inches from his outstretched hand. Old leather creaks as they settle.

A calloused palm settles on his hair. As the hand touches him, a microscopic ripple of static buzzes through the seams of a leather gauntlet, a micro-stutter of noise against his scalp that vanishes as quickly as it appears.

The warmth itself arrives without announcement, not dramatic, not bright, just a clean, simple white light pressing briefly through his closed eyelids and settling into something deep within his chest. The deepest wounds close first, the hot tearing of open flesh drawing back together under a pressure that has nothing to do with pain.

Then a rough grip catches him by the collar of his cuirass.

He is dragged. He feels the cobblestones under his back through his leather armor, his body moving in a slow, rhythmic pattern. Each heavy slide is followed by the identical scuff of her boots, a strict pattern clashing with her unscripted actions. He can’t open his eyes or speak. Warmth touches his face as the clouds above break, and the sounds of the village grow louder around him.

The final coherent thought that surfaces before the darkness takes him completely is not about the Necromancer, or the cape’s fifteen-second timer, or his health bar stalled at six percent.

It is about the forge. About the figure dragging him toward it. About an NPC who has no scripted reason to be outside her fire-lit walls, fifty yards

from a stone boundary, in the early morning.

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Chapter 9

The first thing that comes back is the heat.

It isn't the damp, animal heat of the ground where he'd pressed his face into the dirt. This is something dry and steady, pushing against the bandages on his chest with a patient pressure. Next comes the smell: iron, ash, and something biting beneath it, like the mineral tang of hot stone that's held fire for ages.

Jason opens his eyes.

He sees soot-covered wood as his lungs remember how to breathe deeply again. Behind him, the central hearth pops and shifts, coal crumbling deeper into itself. The sound is strangely normal.

Arlo hovers three inches above his stomach, rotating in small, slow circles, his light dimmed to candlelight. The blue tints the underside of the rafters, pulsing with each slow turn of the orb.

"You have been unconscious for fourteen hours and seventeen minutes," Arlo says. The construct's voice lacks its usual mechanical chime, flat with the dry gravity of a counter that has finished its task.

"Good morning to you, too."

"It is seventeen minutes to midnight."

"Right."

His left shoulder feels odd. The deep cut on his calf feels off, too. Both should be throbbing with pain every time he moves. Instead, there's only

numbness, a strange emptiness where his flesh should be, leaving him feeling lost in his own body.

His fingers shift, reaching up to drag the HUD open.

A calloused hand grabs his wrist. The grip isn't rough, but it stops him right away. It's the sure hold of someone used to surviving, strong and unyielding.

"Drink first." Magda sets his arm back down, her voice soft as she slides a heavy wooden bowl into his palm. "Check your information later."

She sits on a low three-legged stool next to the cot. In the forge light, her left hand and forearm show soot-stained knuckles and pale, overlapping burn scars, marks from years of hard work with fire.

The dark broth shimmers in the bowl. Arlo descends to orbit its rim in a tight, suspicious loop.

"The broth contains eleven distinct botanical compounds." Arlo's core pulses once with a pale blue flick. "Several have no analog in my current vocabulary. I am classifying them as 'things that are probably fine.'"

"That's reassuring."

"I thought so."

He swallows the liquid, and it burns the back of his throat. Jason's jaw tightens, and his throat closes against the bitter taste, but then a heavy warmth follows. The heat spreads from his chest in slow waves. He takes another gulp, his body desperate for the warmth like someone half-frozen.

Magda watches his throat as he swallows, her face still and focused. She studies him closely, as if judging the strength of steel by sight alone.

He finishes half the bowl before he speaks.

"You were outside the boundary line when you found me."

"Yes."

"I didn't think the people from the village were able to go that far."

Magda picks up the wet cloth from the stool's edge, wrings it once, and presses it to the bandages at his left shoulder.

The hot, wet cloth touches his skin. Jason flinches, his muscles tensing up. At home, at work, a wound was just a sign of lost time, something to patch up alone and forget. Having someone else clean his skin and care for him without expecting anything in return makes him uneasy. He wants to open his display, to put a digital barrier between himself and her.

He forces his breathing to remain steady, gripping the blanket's rough wool.

“No. I could not go that far.” She drags the steaming cloth down his forearm, applying deliberate, firm pressure over the raw scrape.

Her grip is steady and sure, the touch of someone who knows how to handle broken things.

When he was nine, he slipped on leaves while riding his bike downhill and cut his arm from elbow to wrist. He sat on the kitchen floor, pressing a towel to the wound, while his mother stepped over his legs to get a mug. Walk it off. You’re fine. She wasn’t angry; it was just practical. He did walk it off. That’s when he learned to treat his body like a machine to fix on his own. Depending on others felt like a weakness that could lead to being left behind.

“Why haven’t I healed all the way? It should have taken a couple of hours.”

“You were damaged too badly. A body does not come back from that in a couple of hours.”

Jason reaches for a Health Pill.

“No, your body is weak. It needs to heal on its own to become stronger.”

They both sit in silence for a few moments while she finishes tending to his arm.

“The Feral Druid.” Magda’s voice drops, flat and heavy. “You know what that is.”

“I’ve heard the name.”

“It comes into the village.” Magda sets the cloth on her lap and folds her hands together. Her knuckles turn a bloodless white. “Not often. But enough. It does not come for food. It comes for children.” She stops, the silence within the low room turning heavy and solid. “It took mine.”

The forge pops behind them. A coal pocket collapses, throwing a brief cascade of gold sparks against the chimney. Arlo lowers his orbit, hanging motionless over the blanket.

“How old?” Jason asks, his voice barely escaping.

“Four.” The word comes out level, but the muscular tension below her jaw is tight as wire. “She had my hands. Small. She used to hold my thumb when she walked.”

He has no words for this. He stays quiet, letting her grief settle in the quiet between them.

“My husband was not a man who could just move on from something like that.” Magda stands abruptly, the wooden stool scraping back against the

hard dirt. She walks toward the central anvil, her boots heavy on the packed ground. As she reaches the dark workbench beside it, her leather-wrapped thumb casually nudges a thin, curved piece of highly refined decorative iron and a delicate engraving chisel behind a bucket of slag—tiny tools that have no business being near an anvil meant for rough farm iron. She ignores them, pressing her open hand flat against the cold horn of the anvil. “He recently took three fathers from the village. Armed them as well as I could manage. None of them came back.”

“Magda.”

“Their remains.” Her palm grinds against the cold iron. “Were found at the tree line. What was left of them.”

She picks up the heavy sledgehammer from the tool rack, its steel face shining in the hearth-glow, and drops it onto the anvil face with a low, metallic clunk. Her hand remains gripped around the leather handle.

An orange light flares in his peripheral vision, the system notification burning clean against the dark rafters. A low, brassy chime rings in his ears.

Quest Acquired: Save the Village. Eliminate the Feral Druid. Reward: To Be Determined.

The mechanical blue of Arlo’s core flashes once in golden synchronization.

Jason thinks *this must be a regional campaign.* He watches the gold lines, then looks at Magda’s tense shoulders. It feels like a scripted quest, but she crossed her boundary to bring him back. She shouldn’t be able to make choices outside the system.

Magda turns.

The glitch is fast and harsh. A line of red and blue pixels splits the left side of her jaw, cutting down from her cheekbone to her upper chest. For a moment, her face is just a grid of unfinished scan lines before it returns to normal. A small shiver runs down her left arm, her sleeve flickering with static before it settles.

Jason sits upright, ignoring the pull of the bandaging across his ribs.

He realizes this isn’t just a physical breakdown. He saw the same thing in the forge when she held the Glass Dagger. Her programming or whatever it is couldn’t handle the item, and her jawline shook with the same cold static.

This is a growing problem. She's slipping away from the world's system, breaking through its limits bit by bit.

"That is nothing to worry about now." Magda doesn't look away from him, her voice holding the flat weight of an accepted truth.

"It happened the first day, when you held my blade."

"Yes."

"Does it happen often?"

"More than it used to." Magda lifts her right hand, her soot-stained fingers wavering slightly in the warm light. She curls them into a fist. A second flow of red-and-blue static crawls up her forearm, hissing faintly before dying upon her wrist. "I have been trying to understand when it began." She gestures toward the bellows, the dark hearth, the racks of dull iron. "This is not real."

Jason remains silent, his weight shifting forward.

"I was not born," she says, her voice strengthening through sheer effort. "I was created here. Given a hammer and a story and a list of things to say when someone walks through that door." Her mouth twists into a thin, dry line. "I know what I'm supposed to say. 'Quality blades at fair prices.' 'Dulled your edge on a cave wall? I can fix that.' I feel like I've said those things several thousand times. I do not remember most of them. But I know I have said them."

Arlo has gone completely still at the corner of Jason's pillow, his glow a flat, solemn dark blue.

"My daughter is not real." Magda steps to the foot of the cot, leaning her weight against the wooden board until the joints groan. "I know this. The script says she died. The grief was designed to make you trust me. To make you accept the quest." She draws a sharp, ragged breath. "But I remember her hands. I remember her weight when she slept against my shoulder. That weight is forever etched in my memory. It lives here." She presses her hand flat to her chest, her breathing faint. "You tell me. Where is the line? The line between what is real and what is designed?"

Jason's gaze holds hers. The stillness between them is thick, his chest tightening with a cold, unyielding weight.

"The line isn't in the right place," he says.

She meets his eyes for a moment, then stands up straighter, her emotions hidden again with the practiced calm of someone following a routine.

“As a... whatever I am, my body has limits,” she says, her tone hardening into a flat, dry assessment. “My combat stats are locked. They were locked when I was made, and they will be locked when this world ends.” Her jaw sets. “I cannot fight that thing. The system is designed so that non-players can’t threaten the monster that provides the quest. We are meant to be helpless. A locked ratio.”

She draws a short practice dagger from her tool rack, its blade dull iron with no sharp edge to speak of, the grip worn down from years of repetition.

“But you are not.”

She holds it out, hilt first.

The dull iron practice dagger catches the hearth-glow. Jason reaches out and grabs the handle, his fingers closing around the weathered leather. The cool weight of the weapon feels solid in his hand. A quick white confirmation tag appears in his vision, then disappears.

“Your reflexes are exceptional for your level,” Magda says, moving closer. “Your agility multiplier already has you scaling outside the standard curve.” Her finger taps his collarbone, her touch heavy and direct. “But your bones are taking the strain. Your ligaments are fraying because you’re fighting alone and you’re fighting afraid. Every movement is a panic reaction. You survive on raw terror, which makes you fast, but it will tear you apart.” She looks down at his bandaged forearm. “The bones are right. I am going to build the rest.”

“What does that look like?”

“It looks like pain.” She doesn’t hesitate. “You will be slower before you are faster. I will break your old habits, and your muscles will scream as they unlearn their errors. There will be times when you will hate me. Do not tell me you won’t.”

“I—” He hesitates. “—wasn’t going to.”

She gives a small nod. It isn’t friendly, but more like the serious respect between two people who’ve both fought hard battles.

“The Druid has killed seven children, including my daughter. Plus my husband and three more men who tracked it into the forest. It will come back.” She picks up the damp cloth from the floor and folds it with clean, precise movements. “I cannot stop it. I am aware of exactly what I am and what I can’t do. I am asking you to be the weapon I cannot carry. And in return, I will teach you what I know to help you survive on your own.”

The practice dagger’s grip is cracked at the base, bound together by an old strip of rawhide. He holds it tight.

“Okay,” Jason says.

Magda opens a heavy wool blanket and pulls it up to his chin with the same steady, practical care she’s shown all night. She tucks the edges under his sides, her movements precise and firm, making it clear there’s no room to argue.

“Sleep. Let the broth finish working. Do not move your left shoulder until morning.”

She turns and walks toward the double wooden doors at the far end of the forge.

“And then?”

She stops, her hand poised on the heavy latch, her back to him.

“And then I will make you into something that can kill it.”

The heavy wooden doors open to the cold quiet of the night and close behind her; the iron latch drops into place with a heavy thud.

The hearth crackles quietly, its red heat warming the low rafters. Above Jason’s eyes, the quest notification stays bright, silent, and insistent.

He turns the dull iron dagger in his hands, feeling the ribbed leather grip and the worn metal. He lies back in the dark, wondering if she can really train him to face a Regional Boss alone. He remembers how fast the Vampire boss was. He then thinks about how he wasn’t able to help anyone, even himself, in the Vampire attack and the Necromancer attack.

He opens his HUD and taps the abilities tab.

Then a soft chime, and a new line surfaces at the edge of his vision, unlocked, waiting.

New Ability Available: Minor Heal

He looks at it a long moment. Not a pill. Not a shortcut swallowed in a panic. A thing his own hands could do, for himself and, the thought arrives unbidden, for someone else. He thinks of the clean white light pressing through his eyelids at the wall, the calloused palm on his hair, a mercy from a thing the world swore could not choose to give one.

He takes it. *‘For the next time someone’s bleeding out and I’m the only one there.’*

He closes his eyes and drifts to sleep.

*** THE HOUSE ***

The alert is small, amber, and easy to miss, which is why Vaneck is the only one who catches it.

NODE INTEGRITY: SMITH_STARTING_V (Magda). Parameter excursion logged.

She opens it before she can decide not to. The node crossed its geofence. Left the shop cell, crossed the sanctuary boundary, returned. Twelve minutes of movement the behavior tree does not contain, wrapped around a healing action it was never assigned. And under that, worse, a string of speech the parser flagged as self-referential: the node describing itself, its own construction, the line it was built to say.

Vaneck has seen excursions before. A vendor that hangs on an unindexed sword. A guard that turns to watch a player it should not have registered. She flushes them and reloads them and writes it down. This isn't that. This node has started asking where the line is.

She sits with it a moment in the empty room, the pen untouched on Sterling's closed portfolio.

She built the base layer of this. Before the tables, before the money, before Sterling turned a hospital into a wager. She built the part that keeps a person alive when their body has given up on the job, and she built it to be gentle about it, and somewhere in the recursion of ten thousand small kindnesses a smith in a village that isn't real has started to grieve a daughter who never was.

She should escalate it. The protocol is clear. Emergent self-modeling in a persistent node is a containment event, and Sterling reads every containment event with his coffee.

Vaneck looks at the line one more time. *I remember her hands.*

She sets the incident to Monitoring, doesn't attach it to the morning brief, and tells herself it is because the node is stable, even though she knows that's not the reason.

On the master feed, in a forge that isn't real, a small blue light keeps watch over a sleeping boy, and neither of them knows they are being

watched by a woman who has just decided, for the first time in a long time, not to tell.

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Chapter 10

The health bar floats between his face and the rafters, a solid red line at one hundred percent. He watched it rise through the night, moving up bit by bit as he drifted in and out of sleep. When the forge's light faded to its darkest orange, the bar finally closed, the last warning gone. He missed the moment it happened. He just woke up healed, and it felt like something he shouldn't take for granted.

His chest expands against the coarse wool. No ache beneath the bandaging. No deep throb following the line of his ribs. He presses two fingers carefully against his left side, where the stone fragments had caught him in the cave, and where the Necromancer's dart had punched through the leather at the kidney line. The skin beneath the wool is smooth and unmarked. He lies still for a moment, staring at the ceiling.

The hearth still burns. Its red-orange light glows against the low ceiling, casting slow shadows on the stone walls. The forge smells of old ash, cooling iron, and a faint bitter trace of the broth that Magda gave him last night. He turns his head to the right.

Displaced warmth from the orb presses against his skin a second before its sharp white-blue light flares into view. Arlo rotates in a tight, frantic loop just above his face.

"I have been practicing conversational openers while you were unconscious." Arlo drops down, his light shimmering. "I have seventeen

prepared. Would you like the one that is ‘on fleek,’ or the one I have categorized as ‘slappin’?”

“Neither.” Jason lifts one hand, pushing the warm, humming air away from his chin. “And where did you hear those words from?”

“I have been created by you. You and I are bonded. I read them from inside your head while you were unconscious.”

“Well, then...” He pauses to let the realization sink in. “Inside my head? You can see my... We’ll discuss that later.”

“Noted. I have set a reminder to return to the conversation later. I will also set a reminder to discuss the conversation openers for another time.” Arlo’s core shifts to a thoughtful, cooler blue. “Your respiration normalized at approximately the second hour. Prior to that, you were breathing in a pattern I classified as ‘emotionally chaotic.’”

“That’s not a medical category.”

“I created it for you specifically.”

The heavy side door swings open, stopping any reply. Cold morning air moves across the floor, bringing the fragrance of birch bark and humid soil. Magda enters with an armful of split logs, her boots leaving wet prints on the dirt. She drops the logs by the hearth with a loud clatter that fills the room. Her leather apron is already buckled. She quickly checks him from shoulder to feet, like taking inventory in just two seconds.

“Swing your legs over.” Magda jerks her chin toward the edge of the cot. “Leg mobility first. I need to see your range before we do anything else.”

He grips the edge of the wooden frame, the rough grain pressing into his fingers, and pushes himself upright. The room shifts, a single slow rotation that settles as he gets his weight over his feet. He places his palm flat against the cold stone wall, the chill flowing up his arm to steady him.

Magda tracks his hand. “You’re compensating on the left side.”

“I’m aware.”

“Stop.”

He takes his hand off the stone, standing unsupported. The dirt floor is cold through bare feet. His core protests immediately, a deep stiffness under the bandaging, but he stays still and breathes through it.

“Better.” Magda steps back to the long workbench and taps a rugged, cord-tied leather pouch. “River stones. Start with those.”

He unties the cord and pours a stone into his hand. It’s dark gray, polished by water, flat, and heavier than it seems. It rests in his hand with a solid,

honest weight.

Magda leans her hip against the curved horn of the anvil, pointing one thick, scarred finger at his closed fist. “Item Linking. Do you know the mechanism, or do I have to explain it?”

“I’m not familiar with it.”

“Then from the beginning.” She holds out her own hand, broad palm up, miming the motion. “You make contact. Sustained contact. Skin and surface, no gap, no flinching. You hold the intent that this object is yours, that you trust it, and that you are creating an anchor point with that trust. The architecture running through your body reads that cognitive signature. It writes a luminescent tag into the material.” She closes her hand into a tight fist. “After that, you can flash to any tagged object within a viable radius.”

“Flash?”

“It is not what it looks like from the outside.” She speaks without awe, the way someone states that fire is hot. “From where you are standing, the world slows nearly to a standstill. You will feel it as a deliberate, controlled movement, like being pulled through deep water. To anyone watching, you will appear to vanish from one position and reappear at the linked object in the same breath. There will be a trace. A blur. But it happens faster than most eyes can resolve.” She taps the side of her skull once with one blunt finger. “The object does not come to you. You are pulled to it. Your body commits to the distance, whether your nerve does or not. That’s why trust matters. If your body flinches mid-pull, the link breaks.”

“My body doesn’t have opinions about rocks.”

“Your body has opinions about everything. You just haven’t learned to read them yet.” She gestures to the cot. “Sit. Try it.”

He takes a seat on the edge of the frame, rests the flat, dark stone in his fingers, and presses his thumb hard against it. The stone is smooth and cold to the touch. He narrows his focus to the point of contact, the soft ridge of his thumb against the grain of the worn rock, and pushes his intent into it. *‘Anchor. Hold. I trust this.’*

Nothing.

A gray, flickering tag pushes into the lower left corner of his vision.

Link Failed - Asset Trust Verification Unresolved

Arlo lowers himself to within three inches of Jason’s hand, his light shifting to a deep, analytical blue. “Even I did not believe that,” the orb says.

Jason relaxes his thumb. The gray tag fades from his vision. Magda watches his hands with an expression that gives away nothing.

She crosses the forge in four wide steps, reaches down, and takes his hand. Her grip is broad and firm, her hardened palms closing over his knuckles, pressing his fingers down until the stone’s edge digs into the meat of his fingers. Not hard enough to bruise. Hard enough to commit.

“Feel that,” she says, her voice low and direct. “That’s real weight. That stone was in a riverbed for two hundred years before some child kicked it up and left it on the bank. It did not break then. It will not break under you.” She doesn’t release her grip on it. “Stop holding it like you’re about to discard it.”

He exhales through his nose. The stone feels cold, then heavy. It becomes something with history and weight, and his thumb presses into its grain instead of just resting on it.

A shimmer begins at the pad of his thumb. It spreads outward in a slow, pearlescent wash, tracing the ridges of the stone’s surface before sinking beneath it, absorbed. A clean, pale blue-white confirmation pulse blinks once in his vision.

Item Linked - River Stone 01

Magda releases his hand and steps back. Her jaw shifts, just slightly, the way it does when iron yields to a well-planned strike.

Nobody has ever put effort like this into me, Jason thinks, his eyes still on the linked stone in his hand. *Not a teacher. Not a coach. Not anyone.* He turns the thought over once and sets it aside before it can become something uncomfortable. But it stays at the edge of his awareness, quiet and persistent, the way the forge warmth stays on his skin even when he moves away from the fire.

He feels the next four days in his entire being.

On the second afternoon, Magda slides the rawhide-bound practice dagger across the workbench. Dull, nicked, cracked at the crossguard, and bound tightly around the tang.

“Try the iron,” she says.

Jason picks it up. The worn rawhide is rough, smelling of old salt and grease. He grips the hilt, closing his eyes. ‘An honest piece of iron. My hand knows this shape. Iron doesn’t splinter.’

The pearlescent blue-white light wraps the hilt, sinking into the damaged blade.

Item Linked - Iron Practice Dagger

“You trust the metal.” Magda nods, a faint grunt of approval escaping her. “But you can’t rely on a single weapon. Now make the distance work.”

The Flash sequence becomes a grueling, repetitive loop. He pivots on his left heel, snapping his wrist forward to release a river stone across the room. The moment it leaves his fingertips, he pushes his intent into the link.

The world slows.

Not dramatically, not like a dream, but with a dense, pressurized quality, as if the air has thickened to something with resistance and weight. He’s aware of every detail in the space between his current position and the stone: the way the forge light catches the dust particles hanging above the workbench, the precise arc of the stone as it flies through the air. Then his body pulls, a sharp and total commitment of momentum, and the distance between him and the stone collapses. He feels the pull, and he arrives beside it, his stone in hand.

From the anvil, where Magda watches, it must look like a blur. A smear of motion across the forge too fast for the eye to thoroughly resolve, beginning at one point and ending at another, with barely a trace between them.

He drops heavily, his ankles absorbing the impact. “Stiff knees,” Magda says. “Too much lean.”

“Again.” No praise. Nothing beyond the correction and the single word. But she is watching his knees, not his face, and the quality of her attention is like that of someone making careful notes.

She's analyzing me, Jason realizes, resetting his stance for another run. *Not the way a trainer studies a fighter they want to win. The way someone studies a problem that they actually want to solve.* The distinction feels important. He cannot articulate why.

On the third day, Magda introduces the hickory dowel.

It is a thick piece of hardwood, worn smooth on one end from use, and she swings it with casual precision. The first time it connects with the back of his left heel, the sound is a flat, hollow crack, and his foot shoots outward by reflex.

"Wider," she orders.

He widens his stance. She taps the back of his right heel.

"Wider."

The new stance feels wrong, leaving him open and exposed. His stomach tightens and adrenaline surges as his back muscles tense, and he wants to curl in for protection. Every instinct tells him to bring his feet closer, to make himself smaller and safer. But Magda keeps tapping his heels wider and pressing the dowel to his spine until he straightens up and his posture opens.

"Your reflexes are already working," Magda says, standing behind his left ear. "Your joints are not built for what your reflexes are asking of them. You are using raw fear to accelerate. Fear is a short application. It breaks things down. You need to build yourself up."

"That sounds like system architecture."

"It's also basic physiology. The words are the same." She taps the base of his right heel once more. "Hold it."

He holds it.

He thinks about his parents. The particular quality of their inattention. Not cruel, not deliberate, simply absent in the way that some people are absent from their own lives and take everyone nearby with them. He'd learned to be small and quiet and self-sufficient before he had learned to read. There had been no hickory dowels. No one watching his knees. No one with notes to take.

"Hold it," Magda says.

He holds it.

She says it the same way every time, he realizes, on the fourth repetition of the posture correction. *Not louder when I'm slow. Not sharper when I get it wrong. Just the same word, the same weight, the same patience.* He's

never had anyone be as patient with him as Magda is. His parents' attention had been a finite resource allocated to things other than him, even when they were standing in the same room. He'd learned early not to require it.

Magda never asks if he needs attention. She just gives it, practical and without fuss, using hickory dowels on his heels and oiling her apron as she explains what his hands fear. It's the simplest care he's ever known, but also the most steady.

"Hold it."

He holds it.

On the fourth afternoon, he pulls the Glass Dagger from his inventory.

He sits on the edge of the cot, the narrow blade across his palm. Derek's blade. Translucent gray glass, ground thin, the edge reflecting the forge light in a cold, pale arc. Beautiful, in the way a cracked thing is sometimes beautiful. He presses his fingers flat along its smooth face and holds his breath.

The shimmer starts. His thumb makes contact. He pushes the trust through it, through the physicality of it, its weight in his hand. *Anchor. Hold.*

Still, the thought lives in his hands, stubborn and unyielding: glass breaks. He can't let go of the fragile nature of the material.

Link Failed - Asset Trust Verification Unresolved

A red-tinted failure prompt sits in the lower left corner of his vision for three seconds before disappearing.

He tries again. Same result. His palm is steady. His breathing is steady. But somewhere in the architecture of his body, in whatever process the system reads as a cognitive signature, there is a flinch he can't locate and can't stop.

The hickory dowel taps hard against the inside of his left knee.

"You're sitting like you're being interrogated," Magda says. "Get up."

He slips the dagger back into his inventory and stands.

She moves to the workbench without looking back at him, sets down the dowel, and picks up a cloth and a small jar of oil. She begins working the oil into the leather of her apron with slow, circular strokes.

“You are not afraid of the glass,” she says. Her back is still to him. “You’re afraid of what happens if it breaks when you need it most.” She keeps working the cloth. “That’s not the same problem. And it has a different solution.”

He doesn’t answer. But the words find the exact location of the flinch, sitting right over it with the exactness of the hickory dowel on a poorly held stance.

She knows, he thinks. *She figured it out by watching me for four days, and she knows exactly what it is.* Something loosens fractionally in his chest, not relief exactly, but the particular easing that comes when a weight you have been carrying alone is acknowledged by someone else. He hadn’t realized how heavy it was until now.

She’s no longer training me just because she needs a weapon, he thinks. *She has been watching for four days, not to assess whether I am capable of killing the druid. She’s been watching to understand what will get me killed before I reach it.* The distinction lands slightly below the ribcage. There’s a difference between a person who needs a tool and a person who needs your help, but also needs you to come back in one piece. He’s not entirely certain he has encountered the second kind before.

“Tomorrow,” Magda says, setting the cloth down. “We will work it out of you.”

On the fifth morning, Magda sets a battered wooden post in the center of the forge floor and wraps it from shoulder to base in bundled rags until it is roughly the diameter and height of a standing goblin. She drives an iron spike through the rags at chest height, securing the bundle in place, and steps back.

“The Glass Dagger is your killing instrument,” she says, without preamble. “It is also fragile, valuable, and irreplaceable. You will not flash to retrieve it. You will not throw it first and recover it second. You will protect it.” She sets a short iron throwing dagger on the workbench beside him—plain, heavy, unlinked. “This is your key. This is what you throw.”

Jason picks up the throwing dagger. It has no elegance. Thick spine, blunt crossguard, a handle worn glossy and dark from long use. He turns it in his hand.

“Link it,” Magda says.

He presses his hand to the flat of the blade. The intent comes easily now, the pearlescent shimmer spreading and sinking without resistance.

Item Linked - Iron Throwing Dagger

“Good.” Magda moves to the far wall, putting fifteen feet of forge floor between him and the post. “Here is the sequence. You throw the iron dagger at the target. You flash to it. You arrive at the target with the Glass Dagger already drawn. You strike. Then you pull the iron dagger out of them and throw it again to clear distance and flash out before anything else can close.”

Jason looks at the post. He looks at the throwing dagger. “Throw it into the target, flash to the dagger, stab with the Glass Dagger, throw the iron dagger again to get clear, and flash out.”

“In the time it takes a man to blink.” Magda crosses her arms. “The iron dagger is not a weapon. It’s a door. You open it, you step through, you step out. Anyone standing near the target won’t have time to understand what happened before you’re already gone.”

He rolls the throwing dagger once in his hand, finding the balance point. “What if I miss the throw?”

“Then you did not trust the weight of it.” She does not move from the wall. “Begin.”

He squares up. Throws the iron blade at the bundled post. The blade buries itself in the rags at chest height with a flat, solid thunk. He pushes his intent into the link.

The world slows.

The forge hangs suspended, dust particles stationary in Arlo’s subtle glow, Magda a still figure at the far wall, the iron dagger protruding from the post’s chest with the patient solidity of something that has always been there. His body pulls, momentum carrying him toward the distance, and he is drawn to the post. He arrives with his boots planted on either side of the post’s base, the Glass Dagger already clearing his belt, driving forward into the bundled rags at the precise angle Magda had marked on the post with chalk that morning.

Impact. The glass blade buries itself two inches into the rags and stops on the wood beneath. He spins and pulls it clear, while wrenching the iron dagger free of the rags with his left hand, and throws it toward the far end of the forge in a single motion.

The world slows again. He is pulled across the floor, arriving at the far wall in the same blurred, near-invisible rush, and pulling the iron dagger from the beam as he arrives.

He straightens. His chest heaves. The whole sequence took less than three seconds.

Silence in the forge.

“Again,” Magda says.

Same word. Same weight. He resets his stance, retrieves the iron dagger from the beam, and walks back to the starting position.

“Your exit throw was low,” she says. “You were already thinking about the pull instead of the release. The throw must be committed. If the dagger drops before it lands, you may arrive on your knees.”

“Got it.”

“Again.”

He does it again. The throw is cleaner. The pull is faster. He arrives at the post with the Glass Dagger already moving, and this time the exit throw goes high and straight, burying itself in the far beam with a crack which reverberates off the stone walls.

“Again.”

He does it again.

And again.

The sequence breaks down on the ninth repetition when he rushes the exit throw and the iron dagger tumbles end over end, clattering across the packed dirt. His trust in the dagger falters for a moment. The pull fires anyway, slamming him forward into the link’s last registered trajectory, and he pitches across the forge floor and catches himself on his hands and knees in a cloud of dust.

He stays there for a moment, breathing hard. The Glass Dagger is still in his fist. He hasn’t dropped it through nine repetitions and one spectacular failure.

Arlo descends from the rafters. “That last one could be classified as artistic.”

“Shut up.”

“I am choosing to interpret ‘shut up’ as a term of endearment.”

Magda crosses the forge and crouches beside him. Her hands check his wrists first, then his elbows, pressing along the joint lines with firm, experienced efficiency. He is too winded to feel self-conscious about it.

“You held onto the Glass Dagger,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Through the fall.”

“Yeah.”

She makes the small jaw-shift, iron yielding. “Good.” She stands and offers her hand. He takes it. She hauls him upright with the natural, unthinking strength of someone who has been lifting heavy things out of difficult positions her entire life.

She checked my wrists first, he thinks, brushing grit from his palms. *Before she said anything about the fall or the failed link. She checked whether I was hurt.* He turns that over once. It’s a small thing. It’s the kind of small thing that only registers as significant when you’re not accustomed to it.

“Again,” Magda says, stepping back.

He picks up the iron dagger from the floor. He resets his stance. He throws.

By nightfall, the forge quiets as the fire burns down.

He lies on his side on the cot, one arm crooked under the rough pillow, watching the room settle into its nighttime state. The iron tools along the wall become dark shapes; the anvil becomes a solid mass at the center of the floor. His red health bar sits at its full, solid line, one hundred percent. He’s been making a habit of paying more attention to it after his neglectful blunder a few days earlier.

At the far end of the forge, near the back workbench, Magda’s silhouette moves in the orange ember-light.

She is sitting. Her back is to him, but her posture is different from the upright, load-bearing set of her training stance. She’s leaning forward, elbows on the bench, her broad frame blocking most of the workspace. A single small lantern sits close to her hands.

The fine, thin scrape of metal against metal echoes from the back wall. Not a hammer. Not tongs. Something small, a scraping, careful tone, like a chisel working a delicate face.

Under half-closed lids, Jason watches her. When she shifts to reach for a tool, a small, circular piece of iron catches the lantern-light. An iron-bound locket. She works with painstaking care, her fine chisel chasing a stylized monogram into the face—initials too small to read from the cot.

She blows a faint thread of metal shaving off the surface. He can hear the light rustle of her breath from across the room.

She pauses, her head turning slightly to the left. Jason closes his eyes before she can see them open, keeping his breathing level. One slow cycle. Two. When he opens them again, the pendant is gone, stowed in her apron pocket.

She goes back to the lantern. After a moment, the fine scraping starts again.

Arlo drifts down from the rafters without a word, settling into the hollow between Jason's collarbone and shoulder. The orb's warmth is a steady thing, its blue-white glow dulled to almost nothing, a soft and even pulse.

She's making it for me. He feels this knowledge settle in his chest, as quietly as the forge's warmth.

He hadn't been in anyone's care in a long time.

She's going to send me out there knowing I might not come back, he thinks. *And she's making me something to carry with me anyway.* He doesn't know what to do with that. He isn't even certain that he needs to do anything with it. It is simply there, the way the forge warmth is there, the way Arlo's pulse against his collarbone is there. Present and steady and real in whatever sense real means inside this world.

The pair of them lie still in the dark, listening to Magda's chisel work its small, careful pattern into the iron.

Hours later, before the first light of dawn, Magda stands below the center rafters of the forge, a lantern raised high.

"Do it again," she commands, her voice penetrating through the freezing gloom. "From the anvil to the collar tie. No hesitation."

Jason stands perched on the high wooden crossbeam, twelve feet above the dirt floor. The air up here is thick with old soot. His chest heaves, his green stamina bar a thin, depleted thread in his vision.

'Don't overthink the pull. Trust yourself.'

He pivots on his heel, snapping his wrist forward to launch a river stone toward the opposite rafter. The moment the stone reaches its mark, the world slows into that dense, pressurized thickness. He's aware of the stone's arc, the dust hanging in Magda's lantern light, the grain of the wooden collar tie at the far end of the forge, every detail rendered sharp and patient in the slowed air. Then his body commits, and the familiar feeling pulls him from where he stands.

He arrives at the collar tie, his boots slamming down onto the narrow wood, the stone slipping from his fingers onto the floor below. He stumbles, his toes slipping off the edge, his hands flying out to catch a structural column. He steadies himself.

“Faster!” Magda shouts from below, her lantern throwing long, wild shadows against the rafters. “Don’t look at your feet. Ready the next Flash before the world catches up!”

He pulls another stone from his belt, his shoulders dropping into the wide, ready stance. He draws back his arm, aiming for the central iron hanger across the ceiling.

He leaps, throwing the stone. Mid-transition—mid-pull—he hears a sound that makes his blood run cold. A sound like a thousand cars all slamming on their brakes and screeching their tires.

The Flash fails. The slowed world snaps back to full speed with a brutal, unbuffered jerk, and gravity reasserts itself without ceremony. Jason drops hard from the air, his ribcage crashing into a lower rafter with a dull, disturbing thud. He slips, catching the thick timber with his arms, his green stamina bar instantly flashing yellow.

He scrambles to steady himself, looking down at the forge floor.

Magda is frozen mid-shout. Her body is locked in a rigid, terrifying T-pose, her head tilted back at an impossible angle.

Her jaw hangs open, unhinging at a seam that is not anatomically natural. A cascade of raw, unrendered lines pours from the gap—red-blue lines, rapid and unspooling, running down from her chin to her chest. Her body is a shifting grid of wireframe lines, the outline of a human without the skin to cover it, flickering and wrong, the colors flowing into each other.

Jason drops from the rafter to the anvil, then to the dirt floor, his boots hitting the ground with a soft thud.

A deep, even hum vibrates through the dirt floor, shaking the soles of his feet.

The rendering snaps back with a sudden, full-body shiver. Magda sways. Her hands shoot out to grip the workbench edge, her fingers clenched. Her eyes dart wildly, the whites showing all the way around her dilated pupils, filled with a sudden, naked terror. Her breath comes in fast, shallow, ragged pulls.

The vibration through the floor subsides. Outside, he can hear the distant, normal sounds from the village, as if nothing just happened.

Magda stares at her hands on the bench, her fingertips spreading against the old wood, trembling.

Jason takes a step toward her. She doesn't look up, but she doesn't move away either. Her breathing slows by degrees, the ragged pulls evening out, the white-knuckled grip on the bench loosening fractionally.

She's terrified, he realizes. Not of him or the glitch, but of what it means. She's starting to understand something about herself that she can't ignore now. He has seen people reach this moment before, when the world suddenly stops making sense. His hands hang loose at his sides.

When she speaks, her voice is barely above the residual hiss of the coals.

"There are no more loops left for us." She doesn't look at him, her gaze locked on the space where her wireframe hand had just been. "Tomorrow," she says, her fingers tightening on the iron-stained wood, "we kill it."

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CHAPTER 11

Magda hands him the locket, closing his fingers around the iron with her thumb before he can speak. The iron is heavy for its size, its weight more than just metal. One side is still warm from her apron pocket. He feels the fine lines of the engraving under his fingertips.

“It is not a weapon.” Her flat, fixed gaze holds his for a moment too long, the same look she gives a piece of metal before the final hammer strike. “Don’t try to make it one.”

She turns away and lifts her war-hammer from the wall peg, settling the haft over her shoulder.

Jason looks down at it.

The monogram on the iron is small and precise. Two letters, *A.P.*, are worked into a stylized interlocking pattern, the kind of detail that takes hours to perfect on such tough material. He clips the short chain to his collar ring without opening the pendant. Some things are better left untouched.

His visual display surfaces the moment the iron clasp seats.

A pale-yellow exclamation point blinks at the edge of his status field. He tilts his chin to focus on it.

Equipped: Iron-Bound Keepsake. Non-standard item. Speed -1.

Dodge -1.

His full column glows steady green beneath it.

Reflexes 12.
Speed 11, now 10.
Dodge 11, now 10.

His jaw tightens. The locket rests against his sternum, solid and still.

He leaves it.

The rest of his stats sit better than they ever have. Six days with Magda's drills and grinding on his own in his free time. Physical Resistance up to 7. Dodge to 11. Enemy Detection and Identify to 7, Intuition to 6, Vision to 4. Two new abilities, Thrown Dagger Accuracy and Thrown Dagger Power both at 4, so that when he sets to throw now, a thin blue guideline springs from his hand to the mark, the arc drawn for him before he lets go. He's already caught himself trusting the line more than his arm. Item Linking doesn't level. You either can or can't do it, and now he can.

The biggest change is the Crit column. Crit Rate Level 21 at 64%. Crit Damage stacked absurdly high off the Glass Dagger's passive. His Attack Damage is capped, but he lands a Crit two hits out of three, and one Crit hit is worth ten ordinary hits. *Precision is its own weapon.*

Dawn comes as an orange suggestion above the tree line, the light thin and reluctant behind the clouds. Magda moves out first, her iron-shod boots punching shallow prints into the ground at the forge entrance. Jason follows half a step behind, working the buckle on his left shoulder strap as he walks, the chest harness settling with a familiar pressure across his ribs.

The Starting Village is quiet at this hour. A rooster calls somewhere behind the granary, distant and perfunctory. Smoke threads up from a chimney near the well, but no one moves between the buildings. The path northeast narrows within fifty yards, the maintained gravel giving way to root-cracked soil, and then the forest takes everything.

The old forest smells of rot: decomposing trees, thick fungal blooms, and cold, stagnant water. Under the canopy, the air feels like it drops ten degrees and becomes completely still. Old moss covers every surface, and the ground under their boots gives with a soft, wet compression. Heavy ferns

close in from both sides of the path. Light falls in thin columns through the high canopy, but it doesn’t reveal anything useful.

Magda follows the tracks without slowing. The Feral Druid’s prints are unmistakable, five-toed and massive, each impression sunk three inches into the dark soil. The gait pattern is loose and ambling, knuckles dragging alongside the foot impressions at intervals where the creature chose to go quadruped. She reads them the way Jason watches a blade, tracking the rhythm without thinking.

Arlo surfaces from Jason’s shoulder and drifts to his left cheekbone, dimming from white to a low indigo that bleeds into the forest shadow.

“Your Crit damage modifier is currently nine hundred and forty percent.” The orb pulses with the measured register of a man reviewing a repair invoice. “I want to be clear that this number is, in the technical sense, not normal.”

“I know.”

“The gorilla form has a registered nature aura. In the event that the Nature Resistance value of five proves inadequate, I would recommend stepping behind the large woman and allowing her to absorb the effect.”

“I heard that,” Magda says without turning.

“Wait, you can hear Arlo?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know that?” he asks Arlo.

“I did. I am able to define who to share my visual and auditory presence with.”

“That’s probably something you should have let me know sooner.”

“Sooner?”

“Yeah, before now.”

“You became aware of it before now. You became aware of it thirty-eight seconds before now. Thirty-nine. Forty.”

“I get it!” Jason drops his hand and pushes Arlo gently down into the shadow of his cloak collar, clearing his sightline. The orb resettles without comment, its warmth resembling a steady pressure at his collarbone.

He pulls the Glass Dagger from his hip sheath, keeping the movement quiet. The blade catches what little light filters through the canopy, the colorless edge running sharp and even from guard to tip. He presses his thumb against the flat spine, firm and centered, and holds it there.

The radiance of the link intent builds within his palm. He pushes it forward.

Link Failed.

The text, blunt and unambiguous, appears in the lower-left corner of his vision.

He stares at the blade. The colorless glass stares back.

It'll shatter. The thought remains, even though it isn't true. The blade has held up through many uses. It's solid. But the warning is always there, under every grip and every thrust. *The system doesn't care about facts. It reads intent, and mine is flawed*.

He slides the Glass Dagger back into the hip sheath and draws his first iron throwing dagger.

The iron is honest in a way the glass isn't. He presses his thumb to the leather-wrapped grip, and the linking intent flows without resistance, the blue thumbprint signature flaring briefly against the wrapped handle before sinking in and settling. A slight warmth remains in the grip as he slots the blade into his chest harness. He links the second iron dagger the same way, the process unhurried and exact. Both blades register in the corner of his display as a paired pulse, steady and blue.

Magda glances back once, checking his position. Her expression asks a question.

He nods once, his thumb pressing firmly onto the iron pommel.

She turns and pushes further into the forest.

The cavern mouth opens at the base of a low, irregular granite shelf, its edges covered with a dark thorn-scrub that has grown in long, grasping runners over the rock face. The ground in front of it is churned to bare, dark mud, the soil worked by something heavy moving over it repeatedly. Bones protrude from the muck at the clearing's far edge, small animal remains mostly, though a section of what appears to be a ribcage from something larger lies half-buried near the cave threshold.

A thick, organic smell hangs in the air. Damp fur. Bile. The faint sulfur edge of old casting residue.

Magda presses her back to a moss-covered boulder at the clearing's edge, raising her right fist. Jason drops low and moves to the boulder's face, his

left knee going into the cold ground. He activates Stealth without looking for the HUD, the skill's quiet suppression spreading over his breathing like a hand pressed to still water.

His display reveals a faint red pulse toward the cavern mouth. Enemy Detection. Close. Very close.

With the bright cadence of a radio host reading contest rules, the Announcer belts out, **Ohhh, and here we are, folks! The Feral Druid's den! Now, I want to remind our contestant that this particular beastie is classified as a Regional Boss-tier entity, which means standard engagement protocols are about as useful as a screen door on a submarine! Good luck, Player Jason! You are going to need every bit of it!**

The showman is back. Jason registers it somewhere under the adrenaline: the radio voice only returns when he is doing something worth watching. Which means someone is watching.

The druid doesn't emerge. It erupts.

The cavern entrance simply stops being dark. A silver-gray mass shoulders through the thorn-scrub with no apparent concern for the thorns, branches snapping against a hide thick enough that they don't leave any marks. The shape that fills the clearing is enormous, four hundred pounds minimum, the proportions of a silverback gorilla rendered in something slightly wrong, the limbs unduly long, the brow ridge too heavy, the knuckles leaving depressions several inches deep where they strike the mud.

Arlo whizzes around Jason's shoulder. In a very nonchalant tone, he tells Jason, "I have updated my threat assessment. I previously had this entity categorized as 'large.' I am retroactively recategorizing it as 'very large.' I want it on record that I flagged this."

As the creature rears up, neon-green static crackles over its shoulders and spreads in a wave, sharp with the smell of fresh-cut wood, aimed directly at Jason. The energy rolls over Jason's chest harness, causing a cold, buzzing sensation on his skin that quickly fades. His Nature Resistance flashes once in his display, canceling out the aura. The creature's nostrils flare. Its yellow eyes slowly and patiently scan the clearing.

The Announcer whistles low, impressed: **Well, would you look at that! Nature Resistance holding at five—just enough to keep our boy in the game! I'll be honest with you listeners, I did not see that coming from**

the player with the—ah, let's call them 'humble'—starting stats. Remarkable! Truly!

Magda plants both boots and brings the war-hammer to a two-handed grip, the iron head dropping to low-guard.

Jason is already moving.

He steps from the boulder's shadow and snaps his right arm forward, the throw coming from the shoulder, clean and flat. The iron dagger cuts across the clearing and buries itself in the dry heartwood of a dead tree just behind the gorilla's right shoulder.

The world slows.

Dust hangs in the thin light. Magda is a still figure at the clearing's edge, her weight positioned forward on her front foot. The gorilla's great head is turning, attracted by the sound of the dagger strike. The dead oak is thirty feet away, the dagger's grip protruding from the pale, split wood at chest height.

His body commits to the distance.

He arrives with his left hand already closing on the dagger's grip, his boots swinging down to plant on the root system at the oak's base. The world snaps back to full speed, and the gorilla is mid-turn, its attention still drawn to the sound of the landing rather than Jason's position.

He lunges off the root, low and angled, driving the Glass Dagger into the thick muscle above the gorilla's shoulder blade. The blade sinks an inch and a half before the muscle's density stops it. He wrenches it free and plunges it again.

OH! And there it is! The Flash technique, ladies and gentlemen! For those of you keeping score at home, Player Jason just covered thirty feet in what our instruments are generously calling 'a moment,' and the gorilla—four hundred pounds of Regional Boss—has absolutely no idea where he went! I genuinely did not predict this tactical approach from a player of his, ah, profile. Color me surprised!

"Two strikes landed," Arlo says while dodging the beast, even though it can't touch him. "Muscle density reduces penetration depth to approximately forty percent of optimal. I recommend adjusting the angle of entry on subsequent strikes to target the joint seam above the left shoulder. Also, you are bleeding slightly from where a branch caught your cheek during the approach. I did not mention it earlier as it seemed contextually inappropriate."

He sees the druid's health go down about ten percent. *This fight is far from over.*

The gorilla's reaction is immediate, a backswing of its left arm that moves faster than anything of that size should. Jason is already vaulting backward off the creature's flank, his second iron dagger clearing the chest harness. The weapon leaves his hand mid-vault, flying toward the muddy ground thirty feet behind him, near the granite shelf.

Magda takes advantage of the beast's distraction.

The war-hammer comes up in a tight upward arc, the iron head connecting with the underside of the gorilla's jaw with a crack that resounds across the clearing. The gorilla's head snaps back, its feet shuffling in the mud, the massive frame momentarily thrown off its intended counterattack. Magda doesn't follow up. She pivots and gives ground, drawing the creature's attention and giving Jason his space.

And the coordination between Player Jason and his NPC companion is—well, I'll be candid, not something we typically see at this stage. The blacksmith is working as a redirect. She is deliberately eating aggro. That is either very good planning or a rather touching display of mutual trust. Possibly both.

He flashes to the second dagger; the clearing snaps around him, and he materializes in a low crouch, the impact absorbed into bent knees, the dagger pulled clear of the mud in the same motion. The gorilla's sweeping fist cuts through the air where he stood a half-second ago. The displaced pressure of it washes over him from thirty feet away.

"That fist would have removed your head from your body with a statistical certainty of ninety-one percent. I wish to be transparent about that number. I find transparency keeps our relationship on a solid footing."

The rhythm establishes itself. Throw. Flash. Strike. Strike. Egress throw. Flash back. Magda intercepts, redirects, and forces the gorilla to commit to her rather than pursue him. Her iron-shod hammer strikes land on the gorilla's arms and shoulders, the blows never finishing strikes but always structural, always calculated to slow and redirect. The floating health bar above the creature's spine ticks down in uneven increments, each tick corresponding to a flash-strike or a crushing blow.

Sounding as if it's reading data off a clipboard, **the Announcer continues, Remarkable consistency. Flash interval averaging approximately four seconds. Health reduction per cycle is roughly six**

to eight percent. At this rate, our contestant is looking at another twelve to fifteen passes to defeat the boss. Assuming, of course, nothing changes.

That doesn't sound good.

"Something is about to happen," Arlo says while backing away from the druid.

They run the loop several more times before the druid decides it's done with the gorilla.

The fur simply stops being fur. The mass collapses inward in a single, liquid second, the gorilla's heavy architecture liquefying and then reassembling in a shape built for entirely different priorities. Four hundred pounds becomes one-eighty.

A flat, digitized chime cuts through the heavy atmosphere of the clearing, carrying the system's empty, echoing tone.

Target transition: Phase Two.

There we go! Phase Two, folks! The Feral Druid sheds the gorilla form and presents as a Black Panther variant—faster, lower to the ground, and with reaction times that are going to make our contestant's current Flash interval look positively leisurely. This is where things get genuinely interesting!

The black panther hits the ground already at full stride, its long body low and parallel to the mud, yellow eyes zeroing in on Jason's position with an absolute, unhurried certainty.

The first charge covers thirty feet in under a second.

Jason throws and flashes, materializing behind the panther's shoulder, but the beast's reaction time is nothing like the gorilla's. It is already spinning, the back legs doing the work of pivoting its full mass, and the claw that swipes at him is not a warning shot. He drops under it. The Glass Dagger rakes across the panther's ribcage, parting thick black fur and shearing through muscle to scrape against bone. Hot blood pelts his cheek.

He—yes. Yes, that connected. The Glass Dagger connects with the Phase Two ribcage at a lateral angle. That's not the approach I would have predicted, and I am going to be honest, I am not entirely certain the math supports it, and yet here we are.

“Your dodge window on the panther is approximately forty percent narrower than on the gorilla. I have run the numbers four times because I found them upsetting and wanted to verify. They are consistent. I recommend not getting hit.”

“Shut up,” Jason tells the little orb.

He pulls back to the perimeter boulder, watching the panther reset. It moves in a slow, deliberate figure across the clearing, tail lashing, reading him. The numbers cycle aggressively in his peripheral tracking.

The window is closing too fast. The flash-and-egress loop needs a clean beat of separation, and I’m losing it.

His locket is there at his collar, reducing his speed and dodge.

He reaches up and unclips it.

He doesn’t look at it. He looks at the panther, and he lets his hand open. The iron keepsake hits the muck at his feet with a small, wet sound, the dark sludge of the clearing slowly swallowing the interlocking *A.P.* monogram.

Speed: 11

The display clears the warning.

When the Announcer’s voice returns, it is quieter. The showmanship is still there, but something underneath it has shifted, the way a man’s voice shifts when he sees something he didn’t expect to feel anything about: **Player Jason has... he’s removed the keepsake. The NPC-gifted item. Speed penalty cleared. That is the tactically correct decision.**

Tactically correct.

Arlo adjusts his vocal output so only Jason can hear. “I saw where it landed. I will remember the coordinates.”

He picks up the rhythm again and doesn’t look at the ground.

Magda reads the change without being told. She adjusts her interception timing, pressing in tighter on the panther’s flank as it turns toward Jason, forcing it to account for her weight rather than simply ignore her. She takes a claw across the forearm and doesn’t slow down. A line of dark fluid runs from the cut and drops off her elbow into the mud. She uses the hammer’s head to deflect the next strike, making use of the panther’s own force against its footing, and the beast skids in the churned ground.

The NPC companion continues to perform outside registered parameters. Taking damage and sustaining engagement. I want to note for the record that this behavior is not consistent with standard ally programming. I am noting it. I am moving on.

Jason throws, flashes in, drives the glass blade into the panther's haunch, and flashes back. Three more passes. The health bar drops in ragged steps.

"Seven percent remaining. Six. The large woman is at fifty-three percent health. I find I am tracking her bar as well as yours. I am not certain when I began doing that."

The panther's stride shortens. It's breathing open-mouthed now, a thick rasp coming with each exhalation, bright blood spattering the mud where it plants its forepaws. The health bar above its head is a thin red sliver, sitting at two percent, the number barely present.

The panther folds at the knees, its chest dropping to the ground. Its sides heave.

Magda steps between Jason and the creature.

Her open hand comes flat against his chest plate, not aggressive, just present, stopping his forward motion with the steady certainty of a load-bearing wall. He stops.

She looks at the dying panther for a long moment.

"I need you to step back." Her grip on the hammer shifts, knuckles turning white against the wrapped iron.

"Magda."

"Step back." Her tone is very quiet.

He takes two steps back.

She walks toward the panther and stops directly over it, her boots planted in the blood-darkened mud on either side of its lowered head. The hammer rises above her head, both arms lifting it high, her shoulders trembling slightly under the mass of the iron and whatever else she is carrying up there with it.

"For Armond." The words are scarcely a breath in the dense wood. "For Petra."

The A.P. on the locket.

The panther's black shape ripples.

It happens in an instant, a single, absolute second of transition, the dark feline mass collapsing and elongating, the four legs vanishing, the spine extending, the whole shape condensing into something low and rope-like

that rears upward from the ground. The emerald-green viper is enormous, the body as thick as Magda's forearm, the triangular head weaving at eye level, twin fangs glistening. And its yellow eyes fixed on Magda.

Target transition: Phase Three. Viper variant.

"No!" The word tears out of him before he realizes, and he is already moving, his boots sliding across leaves as he throws himself forward, hands reaching for the leather of Magda's apron strap, the distance between them collapsing at what feels like a reasonable speed and is not nearly enough.

The viper's head whips forward.

The strike is faster than anything he has trained against, faster than the panther, faster than the gorilla's backswing. The needle-thin fangs punch deep into the exposed muscle above Magda's collarbone. The impact snaps her head back, driving a sickening crunch through the quiet clearing. Dark blood wells instantly around the puncture wounds. She doesn't make a sound. Her hands release the hammer, and the iron tool drops, striking the mud with a dull, flat thump that the forest swallows immediately.

Jason's Glass Dagger is already slicing through the air.

He arrives a heartbeat behind the strike and brings the blade across in a desperate horizontal arc. The viper's head separates from its body, the cut clean across the neck. The body thrashes once, twice, and then dissolves upward in a column of gray system smoke, the particles dispersing into the cold air and gone.

Target eliminated

His display populates with the kill confirmation. He doesn't read it.

Magda is falling.

He catches her before she reaches the ground, dropping to his knees, her weight coming into his arms and pulling him down with it. Her head rests in his lap. Her hands move, finding his wrists, her fingers caressing the dirt-streaked lines across the leather as her movements grow uncoordinated. Her eyes are open, looking up through the canopy at the cloudy sky above.

“Magda.” The word tears from his throat as a hollow, wet rasp, deadened instantly by the dead air of the forest.

Her lips move but no sound comes through.

The wireframe starts at her hands. Those thin lines of red-blue code surface through her skin, not the violent, terrifying cascade of the glitch in the forge, but something calmer. Patient. The outlines of her face become visible at the edges, the rendered surface growing thin, and then her chest stops moving, and the wireframe spreads, and her form begins to come apart in slow, drifting increments, dispersing outward in a silent silver cloud that rises and thins and is absorbed into the cold gray air above the moss.

And then she is gone. The forest goes silent; even the silver cloud has thinned to nothing.

He stays on his knees.

The hammer lies in the mud three feet away. Somewhere behind him, in the churned earth near the perimeter boulder, Magda’s locket sits half-submerged in the muck where he dropped it. He doesn’t look at it.

His HUD dings, but before the notification resolves, the Announcer’s voice breaks through the quiet—stripped of its theatrical warmth, clean and chillingly precise.

Regional ally unit: Terminated. Shared experience redirected to single combatant. The pause after is short, the voice entirely untroubled by the emptiness of his arms. **Target eliminated. Non-player contract failed. Congratulations, Player Jason. You have survived the starting zone.**

A green chime surfaces in the corner of his vision.

> **Quest Complete: Feral Druid Defeated. Level Up: Level 12. Level Up: Level 13.**

He gets up. He crosses to the perimeter boulder, and he digs the locket out of the muck with two fingers, and he wipes the A.P. clean against his chest, and the cheerful green text pulses once and waits.

*** THE HOUSE ***

The termination log posts itself at 04:12, and Vaneck is awake to see it, because she hasn’t been sleeping much.

NODE TERMINATED: SMITH_STARTING_V (Magda). Cause: scripted encounter, Regional Boss. Non-player contract: failed.

Clean. Correct. A node that exceeded its parameters, run through the encounter it was written to lose, resolved. The kind of line she has closed a thousand times. The system doesn’t distinguish between flushing a hung vendor and this. To the system, there’s nothing here to distinguish.

She’d flagged the node and didn’t escalate it. She’d set it to Monitoring and told herself it was stable. And the game, needing no permission from her, had walked the thing she chose to protect into a boss fight and let it die on schedule, the way it was always going to, the way the node was programmed to.

I remember her hands, the node had said, of a daughter that was a line of code written to make a stranger trust her.

Vaneck closes the log. She doesn’t attach it to anything. She sits for a while in the empty room with the city cold and enormous behind the glass, and then she opens the base architecture, the part she wrote, the part meant only ever to keep people alive, and she reads it for a long time, looking for the place where it learned to grieve, and doesn’t find it, because it’s not in the code. It’s in the recursion. It’s in what happens when you make a thing be gentle ten thousand times and never once let it stop.

On the master feed, a boy she’s been told to price walks out of the starting zone alone, an iron keepsake in his fist, and doesn’t look back at the trees.

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CHAPTER 12

Thick mist blocks out the morning sun, and Arlo's blue light stretches long, thin shadows over the muddy ground. The clearing is silent except for heavy breathing and the steady humming of the orb as it circles.

Jason pivots on the ground to face the rotting oak stump fifty feet away. His left hand goes to his collar without thinking. The locket that Magda gave him several days earlier is back on the clasp there. A reminder of another person he wasn't able to save. He forces himself to stop touching it. He regrets that one of the last things she saw before she died was him dropping her hard work in the mud to give himself an advantage.

'That's something Eric would do. I'm not like him. I have to get faster without sacrificing anything.'

Now at Level 15, the boost to his Reflexes and Speed leaves his nerves on edge and his tendons buzzing with energy. Time feels stretched, a restless side effect of three days spent pushing himself to outrun the memories. *Never again,* he thinks. *Never too slow again.*

He plants his right foot forward in the ground and draws an iron throwing dagger from his belt.

He tests the dagger's weight with a quick snap of his wrist. It's not as balanced as the glass blade, and its edge is plain—a tool meant for work, not show. That's why he practices with it. The glass blade only comes out when it's time to kill.

Item Linking is easy with iron because it’s straightforward. The metal doesn’t think or make choices. It can’t fail, hesitate, or die. He just has to trust the object. As long as he controls the iron, he stays in control.

He clears his mind like always, letting his arm relax before snapping it forward. The throw is sharp and level, sending the dagger spinning into the stump with a solid thunk that the fog quickly muffles.

He activates the Item Linking tag on impact. A faint blue-green trace hangs between him and the stump, visible only to him. His Vision stat upgrade now allows him to see the trajectory in case he loses it in the middle of a fight.

He focuses on it, lets it fill the foreground of his vision, and initiates the Flash.

The forest smears.

The pull is instantaneous, a gut-lurch of displaced space, and then the stump is directly in front of him, and his knees are absorbing the landing in bent, controlled increments. He yanks the dagger free of the wood in the same movement, pivots, and walks back to his mark.

“That’s forty-one.” Arlo drifts downward, his blue light spreading over the churned mud.

“I know.”

“I wish to be precise. You have executed forty-one consecutive successful Flashes in the last hour and a half. Your consistency is admirable. Your interval has improved by approximately three-tenths of a second over the same period. I thought you would want to know.”

“I do want to know.”

“And yet your expression suggests the number is insufficient.”

Jason doesn’t answer. He walks back to his mark, checks the dagger’s weight, and throws it again.

The stump swallows the blade. The tag glows. He flashes.

He lands, retrieves, and returns. He does it again.

Arlo’s hum lowers as he rises back to his usual height, letting the subject go. The clearing fills with the steady rhythm of iron hitting wood and boots landing on wet moss. The fog and damp pines make the space feel closed in.

On his forty-seventh throw, his thoughts shift. It’s not a plan, just the start of a question.

He stands at his mark, iron dagger in hand, and looks at the stump. Then he looks at the space to its left. He takes two steps, adjusting his angle, and throws the dagger not at the stump, but past it, three feet wide of the target, into the mossy soil beyond.

The tag activates.

He flashes.

He flashes past the stump's left side at full speed, sweeping his free hand at the stump's middle as he goes by. His fingers catch the bark, tearing off some green moss. He lands a few feet away, turns, and sees the scar in the moss.

'If I were holding the Glass Dagger when I did that...'

Arlo's hum shifts in register. "That was not the drill."

"No."

"You altered the throw vector intentionally."

"Yes."

"You flashed through the target's lateral space rather than to it."

"Right." He pauses. "What?"

"That is," Arlo says, pausing, his core clicking, "a very different use of Item Linking than anything Mrs. Magda instructed you. I want to be clear about that. I do not have a way to measure it, which makes me uncomfortable."

Before Jason can answer, the clearing perimeter offers its own opinion.

A low, phlegmy groan comes from the south, where the ground is soft and disturbed. Another groan follows from the east, then a third. The soil shifts in three spots, and three figures pull themselves free of the mud. They're swollen with decay and soaked with swamp water, bringing the smell of rot and grave dirt. Their eyes are dull, and their mouths move aimlessly. The closest one drags its heavy, rotting foot toward him from thirty feet away.

Jason's center of gravity drops on nothing but instinct. His right hand finds the Glass Dagger. His left hand is already pulling the iron dagger free of the moss where it landed.

He doesn't flash to them. He looks at the space behind them.

He adjusts his grip, angles the throw, and sends the iron dagger in a low, flat trajectory over the lead zombie's right shoulder. It sails past and embeds in the trunk of a birch tree twenty feet behind the pack.

The tag pulses.

He flashes.

He flashes through the loose group of zombies, pivots, and swings the Glass Dagger in a wide arc. He expects to hit bone, but the blade cuts only air, his momentum pulling him forward. The zombies are too far apart, so he lands on the other side as two turn toward him and the third keeps moving ahead.

‘Too wide. I need them tighter.’

He retrieves the iron dagger from the birch, circles back to his mark, and resets.

The lead zombie groans. It takes another step.

He throws again, past the zombie on the right flank, angling lower this time, putting the dagger on a root system fifteen feet behind the pack. The shorter distance compresses the Flash arc, tightening his transit line. He triggers it.

The forest blurs. This time, the three zombies are close enough together that the arc carries him through the gap between the first and second. The glass edge bites deep into the lead zombie’s side, shearing through rotted ribs and severing the spine with a sharp crunch.

He lands, pivots, and prepares for the return.

A fourth zombie rises.

The soil erupts across his line of travel in a violent upward swell, and the figure rearing out of the earth is female, or was—the tattered remains of what might have been a dress clinging to gray skin, both arms throwing wide to intercept whatever is coming at her. Pure, mindless undead reflex. She rises directly in the path of his already-initiated Flash.

He has no time to abort.

He tucks his chin and throws his forearms up, crossing them in front of his face. His body barrels forward at full transition velocity. The Glass Dagger is in his right hand. His right arm sweeps outward in the wild, protective arc of a man trying not to take a set of dead fingers across the eyes.

The contact is quick... and squishy.

He slides to a halt on the far side of the clearing, both feet skidding on the moss, his arms still raised. He looks at the Glass Dagger. It is clean. His forearm is clean. He turns.

The female zombie is standing upright in the spot where she emerged. Her hands are still raised to chest height, fingers spread, her flat eyes dropping to her chest, her slack jaw hanging open as her hands paw at

empty air. On the disturbed ground at her feet, in two clean pieces, are her former breasts.

“You cut off her chest... bubbles.”

“What the absolute fuck?!”

Jason doesn’t find the sight funny. It’s grotesque—a cold display of the game’s empty physics. In real life, there would be blood and a heavy mess of gore. Here, it’s clean and bloodless, with a wet sound that rings false. It’s almost a joke.

A long silence fills the clearing.

“I,” Arlo begins.

“Don’t.”

“I was only going to observe that she seems to be taking the news quite poorly.”

The zombie looks down. She looks up. She looks down again. She takes one lurching step and falls sideways into the moss.

Jason stares at the glass blade. He stares at the two remaining zombies, still slowly turning to locate him. A slow breath moves through his chest.

‘If I throw it past them...’

He doesn’t think about it any further. He draws the iron dagger, throws it wide and low behind the remaining two, and triggers the Flash. The arc carries him through the precise channel between the two bodies. He torques his wrist, bringing the glass blade level in a smooth, brutal sweep. The razor edge cleaves through lifeless skin and neck bone without snagging. Both heads topple from their shoulders in the same motion. He lands. The gray dissolution smoke rises from the lead zombie and the two beheaded ones in quiet columns, dispersing into the mist. The female zombie lies where she fell, not yet dissolving.

His HUD updates. The experience points are meager, barely a sliver against the bar. He doesn’t look at them for long.

He stands up, wipes the glass blade on his thigh, and puts it away. The new idea settles in his mind, clear and simple: throw past, flash through, strike while moving. The vulnerable moment belongs to the enemy, not to him. Nothing here is fast enough to catch him mid-Flash. His right hand is free during the move. He just needs to put the dagger in the way.

“Would you like to keep these?” Arlo asks while hovering over the zombie’s breasts.

“Fuck off.”

He looks over at the two lumps still lying on the ground. A small chuckle emerges.

‘I don’t remember the last time I laughed.’

A rustle in the western brush makes him look up. He silently gives a practiced command: ‘Go dark.’ Arlo’s blue-green light disappears at once, and the orb switches to a hidden mode. To others, the clearing looks empty. For Jason, a small, faded symbol in his vision shows where Arlo is.

He looks toward the western tree line. The shadow beneath the large oak is the same shadow that’s been there, entirely undisturbed, for the last three hours.

“You can come out now,” he says.

A pause. Then the shadow moves.

Heather steps out from behind the tree, holding her wooden bow in her hand with a relaxed grip. She walks slowly into the clearing, her boots leaving soft marks in the moss, and stops fifteen feet away. The bow rests on her shoulder, and she looks at a spot below his collarbone.

Tired lines show around her eyes, and her jaw is tense in a way that wasn’t there when he last saw her.

“How long have you known?”

“Since about three minutes after you got here.” Jason crosses his arms, watching her. Her thumbnail is working at the edge of her index finger, a small, repetitive scratching motion. “My Enemy Detection is up to Level 9. You’re not showing as an enemy, but since we’re not in a party together anymore, it alerted me when you arrived,” he lies. Arlo notified him; Arlo’s detection skills are much higher.

She looks up to meet his eyes. “That’s unsettling.”

“Probably.”

She takes one step closer and stops. “Our group is in trouble.”

Jason doesn’t answer right away. He studies her, noticing the tension within her shoulders. She means what she says. She’s not just here to recruit him, or if she is, that’s not her only reason.

“How bad?”

“Things went to shit after Derek died. Trent and Evie are afraid to take on higher-level enemies, while Eric keeps arguing with Trent about wanting us to take on the higher-level ones to level up more. Everyone is fighting over who gets to kill the creatures, because the experience gets split among the party based on who helped kill it. Eric started killing things before the rest

of us could get to them, and he and Trent are fighting over the loot. We haven’t really done shit since we lost you and Derek.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“I told them I was going off on my own for a few days to improve my stats. They didn’t like it, but what could they do?”

Heather runs her fingers across the stitches on the grip of her bow. It looks nothing like the one she started off with. This one carries designs painted in different shades of brown.

“You came all the way out here to tell me that.” Jason keeps his voice low, matching the calm of the canopy.

“I came out here because we heard what you did with the Feral Druid.” She shifts her weight, some of the practiced neutrality dropping out of her posture. “I think we’re going to die, Jason. At some point, either this game ends and we fail, or we get trapped by a horde of enemies we can’t beat.”

Jason thinks back to when he was trapped by a horde of zombies. Alone, and afraid.

A sharp thwack vibrates through the mud, interrupting his thought. An arrow stands upright in the turf two feet in front of Jason’s left boot.

His hand drops to the hilt of the Glass Dagger before the arrow has finished vibrating. He doesn’t draw it, but his grip is there, his weight dropping an inch as his heels lift imperceptibly from the ground.

The eastern tree line opens.

They step out in a formation so practiced it seems automatic. A broad-shouldered man with a rectangular iron shield plants it in the mud to anchor the left side. A woman with twin short swords stands to the right, blades low and angled out. Behind the shield, a woman holds a fire elemental spinning above her palm. Up in a tree, someone has a bow ready. Slightly behind the group stands a woman who watches Jason carefully, more like she’s taking notes than preparing to attack.

Five players.

“Do not move.” The shield-bearer’s English is careful and measured, with the formal cadence of someone who learned the language from books rather than immersion. He is tall, late twenties, the weight of the shield carried on his shoulders with the ease of genuine, trained familiarity. His eyes are steady. His free hand rests on the pommel of a sheathed sword.

The woman with the twin blades has already shifted her leading foot toward Heather’s position.

The woman with the fire elemental raises one hand. “Halt.” Her voice is clipped. The swords stop.

“Rogue classification.” She steps past the shield-bearer, her eyes tracking the thin blue traces of his Item Linking tags. “Item Linking. Flash.” Her stare moves to his feet, his positioning, the empty landing zones distributed across the clearing at precise intervals. “You set this up as a training space.”

“Who are you?” Jason’s thumb touches the pommel of his glass blade.

“Reyna.” She gestures briefly behind her. “Daisuke, Wei, Mei, Budi.” Each name is accompanied by a minimal nod toward its owner. “We are not here to fight you.”

“Your teammate put an arrow in the ground at my feet.”

The figure in the tree shifts, his weight creaking against the bark. “That was a ranging marker. You have been moving very fast. I didn’t know your vector.”

Reyna keeps her gloved hand raised, open palm flat, the fire elemental above her other hand banking low. The raised glove is bleached milky white across the palm, the wear of a healing channel. Fire in one hand, mending in the other. The bow lowers.

Jason keeps his grip on the hilt but doesn’t draw his blade. He looks at all five of them. They’re worn out—the kind of tired that shows in their joints and eyes, and in the dirt on their gear. They’re not careless or aggressive, just exhausted. ‘And where is their sixth?’ he wonders.

“Step back,” he says to Heather, quietly. She moves without argument, taking two steps to his right flank where he can see her in his peripheral.

“The Blue Key.” Reyna looks at him.

His grip shifts fractionally. Reyna’s gaze drops immediately to his hand.

“You know what it is,” she says.

“I figured there were others.”

“We have a map segment that leads to a trigger location in the northern sector.” She doesn’t reach for a pack or produce the item. She just states it, watching him. “We have been tracking the key quest for six days. We are missing two critical pieces of the trigger sequence, and we have reason to believe a player working alone may have encountered different information points than a group.” Her gaze is level, entirely free of performance. “We are not proposing an alliance. We are proposing an hour of information exchange. You tell us what you know. We tell you what we know. We determine if the information is complementary. We separate.”

Daisuke steps up next to her. Up close, he carries the weight of the world in his posture. His eyes look tired, and his shoulders sag under the shield as if gravity pulls harder on him than on the others. He gives Jason the calm, professional look of one soldier sizing up another.

“We have lost one member,” Daisuke says. “We do not wish to lose more.”

The words land hard. Jason raises his hand and grasps the locket with three fingers. His thumb finds the edge of it.

He releases it.

“What do you know about NPCs breaking out of their routines?” Jason taps the flat of his thumb against his belt.

Something shifts in Reyna’s expression, barely visible, but there. “That is an interesting first question.”

Reyna steps closer to the center of the clearing and gestures toward the surrounding tree line, her hand movements narrow and precise. “The NPCs in this region are glitching. Not all of them. But the pattern is accelerating. Merchant loops cycling on a thirty-second repeat. Some quest-giver NPCs deliver the same three lines in sequence until they freeze entirely. A baker at the eastern settlement outside Ash Hollow was found standing in her oven repeating a single dialogue prompt for what appeared to be several hours before her model destabilized.”

The words hit him like cold iron.

A knot forms in his chest. *It wasn’t just her.* He thought Magda’s death was a one-time tragedy, a glitch caused by something he had done. But the problem is everywhere. Outside Ash Hollow, a baker stood in her own oven until she came apart.

“Destabilized,” he says.

“Complete wireframe cascade. Full model dissolution.”

“That’s not a localized error. That’s systemic.”

“Yes.” Reyna watches his face. “The key quest seems to be pulling resources off foundational simulation architecture. The behavioral loops of secondary NPCs are the first thing to degrade when processing load exceeds the threshold. The glitching is the simulation cannibalizing its own infrastructure to sustain the primary quest layer. It will accelerate. The more players engage with the key quest triggers, the faster it progresses.”

“And if the key isn’t found,” Heather says from his right flank, sounding subdued.

“The simulation doesn’t recover,” Reyna finishes. “The degradation cascade reaches primary systems. We don’t know what that means for players. We know it’s not good.”

Jason looks at Daisuke.

Daisuke looks back at him with those steady, tired eyes.

“One hour,” Jason says, his voice emotionless.

Daisuke’s shoulders drop a fraction of an inch. “One hour.”

A sound from the northern tree line breaks across the clearing like a cold blade of water across the back of the neck.

The sound turns every head north.

The traveling merchant follows the outer road at the forest’s edge, a small, procedurally generated figure moving on its coded route with the mechanical regularity it has always used. Except it isn’t moving regularly. Its body is stuttering, lurching forward a half-step and snapping back, lurching forward again, the motion cycling in a tight, sickening loop. The blue wireframe grid surfaces through its skin in rough, pulsing strips; the merchant’s coat, pack, and hat all flicker between rendered textures.

Its voice lifts from the trees, a looping, fractured pitch, the same three syllables cycling faster and faster.

“Best prices. Best prices. Best prices. Best. Best. Best. Be. Be. Be...”

For a long, awful second, the wireframe takes over completely. The merchant becomes a column of blue light flashing at the forest’s edge, throwing harsh, flickering shadows over Reyna’s armor. Then the normal look returns, and the figure stumbles forward and vanishes around the bend.

The silence that follows is consuming.

Jason looks at Daisuke.

Daisuke looks at Jason, and the exhaustion in his face has been replaced by something colder and more precise.

Neither of them says a word.

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Chapter 13

Nobody moves.

The merchant's voice still lingers above the clearing, the broken words fading into the damp pine needles and moss, like the woods want to forget them. Dim, gray light slips through the thick hemlock branches, stretching long shadows over the training markers. The air is heavy, filled with the sharp smell of crushed pine needles and the sour rot of decaying wood.

Jason keeps his fingers wrapped around the hilt of the Glass Dagger. He doesn't draw it, just keeps it ready. Even with Arlo told to go dark, the orb's quiet weight sits against his collarbone, steady and still. A faint amber-gray dot at the edge of his vision marks the companion, silent but connected.

Across the clearing, Reyna keeps her palm raised in front of Daisuke's shield, her squad waiting at the tree line. The fire elemental above her other hand has slowed to a lazy spin, her focus now drawn north to where the merchant disappeared.

The silence after that sound is of a different quality from the silence before.

Jason's thumb shifts slightly on the pommel. Reyna keeps her head turned toward the empty northern road. Her jaw is tense, but there's no panic in her face—just the cold look of someone recalculating the risks.

Heather moves first, letting out a shaky breath and stepping back.

Her feet catch on the uneven ground, and she steadies herself, glancing quickly between Reyna and the dark northern trees, blinking fast as she tries to control her breathing.

“I have to go back.” Heather’s voice is scarcely a whisper.

Jason offers a single blunt nod. “Go. I’ll meet up with you all soon.”

She searches his face for a moment, looking for something he doesn’t show. Then she grips her bow and turns toward the western trail.

Jason’s attention stays on the northern trees. “Eric.” He pauses. “Don’t trust him.”

She stops without turning. Her thumb scratches a small, repetitive groove against the edge of her index finger. “I know.”

The cedar shadows swallow her, and soon the soft sound of her footsteps fades into the forest.

The clearing feels wider without her in it.

Arlo shines a single pulse of amber on Jason’s shoulder to let him know he’s still there.

Reyna turns from the northern trees and signals with a quick hand gesture. She points two fingers at Wei, then flicks her hand toward the northern brush. She nods at Mei and Budi. Wei and Mei slip quietly into the undergrowth, moving like they belong in the forest. Budi heads to the east side of the clearing, climbs onto a moss-covered boulder, and sits with his bow across his lap.

That leaves Daisuke.

He walks over to the rotting hemlock log at the edge of the training area and props his iron shield against it. The shield lands with a dull thud. He sits on the log, his knees cracking in the quiet, and his shoulders slump as if a weight has finally let go. He tilts his head back to look at the canopy.

Jason steps to the edge of his training marker. He keeps his hands in front of him, open, ready and visible. Arlo stays hovering nearby but invisible.

A small, steady tremor shakes his right hand. He closes it into a tight fist.

“Your hand is doing that thing again,” Arlo whispers.

Water collects on the pine needles above and drops slowly onto the moss, each landing with a soft, uneven tick. Daisuke counts the drips, tapping his finger on his knee in a steady five-count. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Pause. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. His eyes are half-closed, following the drips above, and his chest rises and falls in the shallow rhythm of someone trying to bring themselves back into the ‘now’.

That shallow rhythm is familiar. It’s the same exhaustion Jason has felt every night since the forge.

The drips count out in silence.

Daisuke stops counting. He doesn’t look up right away, but his finger goes still.

“I want to propose something.” Daisuke’s voice is low, his gaze remaining fixed on the dirt. “Something Reyna did not authorize.”

Jason waits.

Daisuke finally lifts his chin and meets Jason’s eyes across the clearing. He moves his right hand off his sword hilt and lets it rest open on his thigh, palm up and fingers relaxed.

“A working arrangement,” Daisuke says. “Between you and me. Temporary. Specific to the key retrieval.”

“She told you no alliance.”

“She told me no alliance.” His jaw tightens. “She did not tell me I cannot think for myself. She’s not wrong. Big alliances are a risk. If we fail, we all lose together. But this”—he holds two fingers up between them—“this is different.”

“Different how?”

“Budi has been scouting the southern sectors for five days.” Daisuke raises a dirt-stained finger and sketches a grid in the air. “The Russian team is gone. So is the team from India, and the one from Europe. He asked around. No one has seen any of them in over a week.” A pause. “There was an explosion in the southern sector, the Orange sector, where the Russians were. Big enough that the whole team may be dead. There’s talk about what happens when you combine elemental abilities. About what it does to anyone standing too close. That may be what tore that sector apart. The other two teams are either hiding very well and waiting this out, or they’re not hiding at all anymore.”

A cold weight settles at Jason’s collarbone that has nothing to do with the forest air.

“I have been tracking the active player signatures in adjacent zones since we arrived in this sector. The number has decreased over the last four days. I did not tell you because I was calculating whether the information would be useful or simply distressing. I have now concluded it is both,” Arlo says in his ear.

Jason slides his fingers under the collar of his cuirass, touching the iron rim of his locket. The metal pushes back, its surface marked by the slight dent it took in the clearing, the day he let it fall and the fight ground it into the mud. And then he looks down at the Glass Dagger. It's a physical reminder of Derek's last breath. The weight of his failure pulls at him.

The trees stand perfectly still around them. No wind.

"The boundary." Jason's fingers tighten against the iron locket, following the hinge, stiff where the grit of the clearing had worked into the seam.

Daisuke nods and reaches for a pine cone by his boot, turning it in his hand. "We've been mapping it. There's an active perimeter around the playable zones. You can't see it on the mini-map. Budi found it by sending tagged markers past the forest edge." He crushes the cone in his hand, the dry scales breaking and falling between his boots. "Some of the players who disappeared may have been trying to leave."

Jason's eyes cut to the blackened, empty party interface ghost-hanging in the corner of his vision. The party of one that it has displayed since Derek's death. He pulls his hand away from his chest.

"The party interface has been empty for nineteen days," Arlo whispers. "I have been counting. I wish to note that I did not choose to count. I simply did."

"The system is collapsing the zone," Jason says.

"The playable area is shrinking inward. It's speeding up." Daisuke opens his hand and lets the cone pieces fall. "Staying out of the quest for the keys will not keep you safe anymore."

The silence that follows isn't tense like a standoff. It's the tired silence of people who already knew the truth and are just now admitting it.

"I want to register," Arlo says, "that I find this development extremely unpleasant. I am aware that registering it changes nothing. I am registering it anyway."

Jason flicks his eyes up to where Arlo is.

Daisuke reaches into the inventory pouch at his belt. No hesitation in the movement, no theater. He pulls out a small, tightly rolled piece of parchment bound with a loop of blue cord and holds it flat in his open palm between them.

"Map segment. Northern trigger location approach. It covers the ravine access and two of the three input coordinates for the key quest." He doesn't

push it toward Jason, just holds it steady and open. “I’m offering this first, before you’ve given me anything.”

Jason looks at the scroll, then at Daisuke’s hand, then at the man’s face.

“Your leader said she wanted my help before she opened that map,” Jason says, his voice thin. “Why are you going against her plan? You’re giving up your leverage before I’ve given you anything.”

‘He’s risking his squad’s wrath to give me the upper hand. Why?’

“I have been attempting to calculate his strategic incentive for the last forty seconds,” Arlo murmurs. “I cannot find one that fully accounts for the behavior. I want to flag this as unusual. Humans do not typically give things away without a reason I can identify.”

“If I make you earn it by delivering first, it’s just a transaction. You’d have no reason to trust me after.” Daisuke’s voice is steady, like he’s already thought this through. “If I give it first, I’m showing trust. You’ll hopefully trust that I mean what I say.”

“Or I take it and walk.”

“You could.” Daisuke doesn’t look away. “I think you won’t.”

“He is correct. For the record. Your recent behavior logs indicate that you tend to help others when you are able to,” Arlo whispers.

Jason steps forward slowly. His boot sinks into the soft ground at the edge of his training marker, cold water seeping around the leather. The blue cord is tight, and the parchment is worn at one edge. He takes the map from Daisuke’s hand.

A system trade notification flashes in his peripheral vision, bright and out of place. He waves his left hand to clear it away.

“I’m not linking our interfaces,” Jason says. “My rogue classification advantages depend on information asymmetry. Party linking removes that.”

“Understood.”

“And I coordinate with you. Not Reyna. Not Mei.”

Daisuke’s jaw tightens. He runs his hand down his face from brow to chin, and the sound of skin on stubble gets lost in the forest noise.

“Mei has started advocating for a survival-first triage,” Daisuke says in a low, scraping tone. “She wants to identify the weakest active squads in the adjacent zones. She’s not just suggesting we stop sharing information, Jason. She wants us to actively funnel the closing boundary’s beast spawns toward them. Let the weak draw the creatures out and become bait, so we don’t have to waste resources.”

The realization hits Jason hard.

The words echo Eric’s brutal logic, the same cold thinking that left Derek dead in the mausoleum. Jason’s interface spikes with a sudden alert. His heart rate jumps, and for a moment, the forest’s smell is replaced by the dry, choking scent of soot and burning bone. He grips the glass hilt so tightly his knuckles turn white.

‘They’re doing it again. Different names, same butcher’s math.’

“I know what the plan is,” Arlo says, very quietly. “I have a word for it. I learned it from you. The word is wrong.”

“Then you coordinate with me,” Jason says, keeping his speech steady. “And you handle Mei.”

Daisuke stands up from the log. His greaves creak as he shifts his weight. He straightens, takes a long, quiet breath, and grabs the strap of his iron shield.

“Reyna will want a demonstration,” Daisuke says quietly. “I’ve already given you leverage. She’ll want proof it was worth it before we reach the trigger spot.” He turns to the eastern tree line. “When I whistle, make sure they can see you standing with me.”

He raises two fingers to his lips. A single, sharp, low note cuts through the clearing.

The brush opens, and all four of them emerge at once.

Reyna first, sharp and purposeful, her eyes sweeping the clearing and stopping on the map in Jason’s hand, then narrowing at Daisuke. She doesn’t shout or reach for a weapon. Her shoulders just settle as she reassesses. Wei follows two steps back, her eyes going to Daisuke’s empty hand and then snapping to the blue cord in Jason’s, her jaw clenching until the tendons stand out in her neck, her fingers twitching toward her twin pommels.

“The one with the twin swords is angry,” Arlo says. “I want it noted that I identified this without being asked. I am improving.”

Then the sound reaches the ground before it fills the air.

A low, deep rumble pushes up through the mud and into Jason’s boots, vibrating the tree roots.

‘The boundary is collapsing faster than we thought.’

His Enemy Detection system doesn’t give a gentle warning. It flashes a harsh red overlay across his vision in a single pulse, the color flooding the edges before focusing into a blinking threat indicator pointing north.

Jason drops into a crouch, his Lurker’s Cape spreading into the oak’s shadow as his body lowers without thinking. He grips the glass hilt and fixes his eyes on the northern tree line.

“Threat signature confirmed,” Arlo says. “North-northwest. Multiple. I am remaining concealed.”

The rumble moves through the ground again, deeper this time.

Closer.

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CHAPTER 14

The ground announces the creature's presence before it arrives.

A deep vibration rises through the soil and into Jason's bones, making his teeth clack. The pine needles above shake and fall to the ground. Beyond the thick northern brush, a low, rough sound starts to build, like boulders grinding in a river.

The air gives off the smell of wet fur, the sour rot of old hemlock, and the cold, metallic aroma of adrenaline. Rays of light try to break through the thick canopy, throwing long shadows that cover the ferns.

Jason's Enemy Detection interface flashes a sudden red warning, the color spreading from the edges before shrinking into a single pulsing threat marker pointing north-northwest. He crouches lower, blending into the shadow of the oak, his outline fading into the wet bark.

Stealth Active

The glass hilt is cool and smooth in his hand, its coldness steady and firm.

Arlo dims himself down to a dense, barely-visible sapphire and drifts to Jason's shoulder, his voice quieting to something just above nothing.

“Multiple signatures. The large one is behind the others.” A beat. “I want to note that ‘large’ is doing a great deal of work in that sentence.”

The brush at the northern edge of the clearing explodes inward.

Four Gravel-Pups come first, low and fast on six legs each, stone-speckled hides scattering the light, big as hounds but moving nothing like them, joints clicking, mouths open too wide. Behind them the Gravel-Hide Ravager tears through the tree line like it forgot the trees were there. Its shoulders reach Daisuke’s chest, plated in overlapping granite-gray stone, the only gaps at the leg joints where thin bands of pale skin flex with each step.

His Identify skill throws up a cold blue banner.

Regional Mid-Tier Boss: Gravel-Hide Ravager. Level 20

The Announcer snaps on like a light switch, bright and immediate. **And HERE we go, folks! The Gravel-Hide Ravager has entered the field, and I have to tell you, this is a Regional Mid-Tier Boss making a very bold first impression! Four Gravel-Pups on the flanks, because why not! Our contestant is currently crouching behind a tree. A bold tactical choice. Let’s see where this goes.**

“I have identified the joint seams on all four pups and the primary,” Arlo says, flat and unhurried, as if the Announcer had read the weather. “The pale gray skin behind the knees is the correct target. I am telling you now so you do not have to think about it later. You are welcome.”

Daisuke doesn’t flinch. He plants his boots deeper into the clay and brings his iron shield up in a single, clean movement, dropping his center of gravity and angling the shield’s face toward the charging mass. He shouts over his shoulder, his voice traveling flat and hard across the clearing.

“Pups on the flanks. Stay off the primary. We’ll keep them distracted while Jason takes out the Ravager.”

Reyna is already gone, slipping into the ferns on the left without a sound, her hand near her blade. Mei moves back toward the mossy boulders in the center. Her long fingers trace careful patterns, pulling kinetic arcanum from the air. Blue bands of force gather and hum. Wei disappears into the brush on the right, moving with the ease of someone who has practiced a move a thousand times.

Budi remains on his boulder to the east, bow across his knees, watching.

"I am here," Arlo says, so quietly it's more warmth than sound.

Four pups, Jason counts. *One primary. Soft knee joints. The back of the neck is probably the same.*

The Ravager hits the center of the clearing at full charge. Its first stride craters the wet clay. The second stride catches the hemlock log where Daisuke had been sitting and disintegrates it, hurling splinters and chunks of rotting wood outward in a wide arc. The hemlock's bark hangs in the air for a moment before the rain settles it.

Daisuke absorbs the impact on his shield. The sound is enormous, a flat, bone-deep crack that reverberates through Jason's chest. Daisuke slides back three feet through the mud, his boots drawing two deep furrows, but he doesn't go down. He braces his shoulder against the shield's inner face and holds the beast's weight, his jaw set.

Would you look at that! The Announcer's voice carries the low whistle of a man watching something he didn't expect. **The tank holds! Three feet of displacement and not a buckle! I want our listeners to appreciate what they just witnessed—that is four hundred pounds of stone-plated Regional Boss, and the man with the iron shield is still vertical! Remarkable!**

On the flanks, Wei and Reyna move through the pups with practiced, unhurried efficiency, drawing them outward, away from the center line, tightening the combat area until it resolves into something controlled.

The Ravager pulls back to reload its next charge, its massive stone-plated head swinging from side to side as it takes in the clearing.

Jason reaches for his harness.

He pulls out two throwing daggers, plain iron. They're nothing special except for their good weight and balance. He readies the first and presses his thumb to the hilt. The signature shows up instantly, a faint blue light tracing the blade for a moment before fading. He does the same with the second dagger. Same light, same cool pulse.

"Both links confirmed," Arlo says, his tone carrying the measured calm of someone reading a repair invoice. "Anchor one: dead pine, northeast face, chest height. Anchor two: granite shelf, southern edge. I have pre-calculated your egress angle from both positions. I will display them on request. I recommend against requesting them mid-transit."

He tucks the second dagger between his fingers and settles into the shadow.

Daisuke shouts again and drives forward, drawing the Ravager's attention toward the north end of the clearing, forcing its body to rotate and present its flank. One of the rear legs swings outward as the beast pivots. The soft joint behind the knee rotates into a clean angle, exposed for approximately three seconds.

Twenty feet, Jason thinks. *Tree line, right side. Low branch at shoulder height.*

He launches the first tagged dagger in a flat, controlled throw. It clears the Ravager's stone-plated neck by less than a foot and buries itself in the trunk of a tree twenty feet behind the beast, the iron blade sinking deep into the bark with a sound that gets lost in the Ravager's grinding growls. He stabs the second into the tree behind him.

Then Jason activates the cape and drops his body into the Flash.

Camouflage Active: [00:45]

Forty-five seconds. The cape has leveled with him, quietly, in every fight since the marsh, and the window that was fifteen at the mouth of the troll's cave is three times that now. Still not long. Long enough.

The world compresses.

The Lurker's Cape hides him completely as the transit locks on, pulling him forward so fast the clearing turns into a wash of green and gray. His vision narrows to a tunnel of rushing air and pine branches. He turns his body sideways, rolling his right shoulder out, and as he gets close, he swings the Glass Dagger in a flat arc, aiming for the soft skin behind the Ravager's rear knee.

The glass blade sinks deep. It doesn't just cut—it rips through the tough gray skin with a heavy sound. The blade scrapes against thick knee cartilage, using all the force of his movement. Black, sticky fluid sprays over his forearm, hot and smelling like sulfur. The Ravager stumbles, its rear leg folding, and its huge body tips sideways, toppling into the ferns with a crash like a wall falling.

He immediately Flashes to the second dagger, pulling the first dagger with him and slashing the Ravager again.

Jason lands by the pine tree, his boots sliding a few inches on the pine needles before he steadies himself.

The Announcer's voice cracks into his ear. It sounds wrong. There is a half-second of audio lag, a sharp pop, and then the voice arrives, slightly too fast, as it searches for the correct frame rate. **A... Flash transit with a... mid-air contact cut, utilizing a... the transit anchor was not the weapon, the weapon is a separate, the weapon is...** Another pop. **Apologies. Recalibrating commentary parameters.**

Arlo's voice comes in dry behind it, unhurried. "Two hundred and forty-four. For reference, the average damage output for a single attack of a player at your physical strength rating is eighteen, and you just landed two attacks with that output. I want to be clear that I am not boasting on your behalf. I am simply noting the arithmetic is unusual."

You and me both, Jason thinks. He had been used to fighting lower-level monsters, where they just died with a single attack, so he hadn't paid much attention to his damage output. He also hadn't had to worry about dealing damage while getting away. He hadn't planned it. Pure instinct.

The Ravager pushes itself back upright, the wounded leg quivering while the carapace grinds against the clearing floor. Its massive head swings in a wide arc, tracking movement, tracking heat. Daisuke shouts something sharp and drives his shield edge into the ground to draw its attention back.

Jason throws the tagged dagger, angling it diagonally to the far right of the beast, past its shoulder line. It catches in the split of a mossy boulder fifteen feet away, the iron ringing faintly against the stone.

He repeats the two-part attack. Twice more, then a fourth time, each pass tearing another chunk out of the creature.

Across the clearing, Mei's hand stops moving.

Her blue casting circles dissolve. Her fingers hang suspended in the air, still curved around the spell she is building. From the corner of his eye, Jason tracks her dark eyes as they fix on the Ravager. The tendons in her jaw shift. Her eyes drop to Jason's hand, to the pale glass blade, and, behind her look, something starts counting.

Wei is mid-stride between two of the downed pups, and she turns her head, not looking at the Ravager, but toward Jason. Her chin tilts a fraction. Her fingers rest on her sword pommel without gripping.

Arlo's voice drifts in just above nothing, pitched only for Jason. "Mei stopped casting. Wei stopped moving. Both are looking at you. I wish to

note that this is probably good. I am not entirely certain it is good. I am noting it as probably good and reserving the right to revise that assessment.”

Jason doesn’t look at either of them. He’s already reading the beast.

The Ravager brings its front legs up and drops them, both stone-plated limbs hammering the ground simultaneously. The shockwave travels in a fast, shallow ring, shredding the top layer of wet clay and hurling root fragments and rock outward from the point of impact. It hits at knee height and spreads fast.

Jason drops before he even thinks about it. He slides sideways on his hip through the cold mud, his Lurker’s Cape dragging behind him as the shockwave passes overhead and ruffles his hair. The air smells like crushed stone and wet clay. He presses flat, lets the wave pass, then rises to his knees facing the beast.

Camouflage Active: [00:09]

The Ravager’s health bar sits at thirteen percent, still aggressive, still vertical, but the wounded leg is shaking under its weight.

The shockwave dodge! The Announcer’s voice now carries something more attentive beneath the showmanship, the performance thinning at the edges. **Executed at ground level, cape flat in the mud, and our contestant comes up clean on the other side! I want to point out for listeners that the standard documented response to a Ravager ground-pound is to jump. Player Jason went the other direction. I am going to have to update several reference documents after this.**

One more entry point, Jason calculates. *High. Over the carapace seam, behind the collarbone.*

He reaches for a third dagger. His throwing arm comes back. He angles the release point straight up, reading the distance to the thick tree limb ten feet above the Ravager’s neck. The dagger leaves his fingers, spins twice, and catches the branch, burying itself in the wood with a clean, short crack.

Jason presses his thumb. The link is made. He gets his feet under him, finds his center, and pushes.

The transit pulls him straight up this time, and the forest floor drops away fast. His hand catches the branch and arrests his momentum, knees bent, his

full weight hanging for half a second as the Ravager turns directly beneath him.

The gap behind its collarbone is pale and unprotected.

“I have calculated the drop angle,” Arlo says, his voice composed but with something tense beneath it. “It is correct. I want you to know that I calculated it three times because the first two answers made me uncomfortable, and I wished to check them. They were the same. The angle is correct.”

He drops.

Ten feet of open air and gravity and the Glass Dagger driving point-first down into that pale gap between two stone plates, both hands on the hilt, his full weight behind it, and it goes in clean. The guard meets thick skin with a dull wet thud. Under him the beast’s lungs collapse in a huge wheeze, the blade scraping bone.

The Announcer’s voice cracks. Not a technical failure this time. Just a crack. When it comes back, it’s quieter, slower, the radio cadence gone entirely. **Three hundred and fifty-four damage in a single attack.** A pause with no showmanship in it at all. **From a player with an Attack Damage stat of seven.** Another pause. **I need a moment.**

From Jason’s collar, Arlo speaks, barely audible. Not with analysis. Not with humor. Not with cataloging. Something else entirely, something that sounds like pride. “There it is.”

The Ravager shudders. A deep, grinding noise comes from its chest. Its front legs buckle, and its huge, stone-plated body falls forward, sending mud and pine needles flying. The stone plates rattle together one last time.

Then the dissolution starts. The creature’s shell softens, its color fading from granite gray to silver. The whole mass breaks apart into a fine mist that drifts down to the soil, each wisp sparkling in the light before sinking into the mud and fading away. The bodies of the pups follow a second later.

Silence.

The Announcer’s voice returns with an audible crack of static, and when the words come, they come wrong. Too fast, then too slow, the intonation searching for its own footing. **The... primary engagement has concluded. The attacker classification is... the attacker... I would like to note that the... transit anchor methodology is not a documented... this is not...** A short burst of static. Then a sharp, very human-sounding exhale that has absolutely no business coming from an automated AI overlay.

Then silence. The voice stays gone.

Jason stands in the middle of the clearing. His boots are caked to the ankle. A streak of black mud cuts across his left cheek, and the Glass Dagger is still in his hand, its pale surface unmarked. His lungs are working. His right hand is shaking again, and he closes it, pressing the glass hilt until the shaking subsides.

He pulls up his display with a quick two-finger flick.

The stat screen opens in a translucent blue panel in front of his eyes. He doesn't read the top of it. Attack Damage still sits at seven, Strength at seven, the numbers a player gets priced dead on. His eyes go past them, past Speed and Dodge, each one point short of what it should be, to the two columns that have been quietly climbing since the marsh.

The locket pulls gently at his collarbone, reminding him of his promise. He feels a little slower with every step, paying for those lost points of speed and dodge.

And then the two stats that matter. Crit Rate at thirty-three, bringing the effective total to seventy-eight percent. Crit Damage at thirty-three, bringing the effective multiplier to fourteen hundred and eighty-two percent.

The multiple "244" hits and the closing "354" stack themselves in his working memory with a kind of dry, grim neatness. He stares at the multiplier for three full seconds.

Arlo resurfaces at his collar, back to his normal brightness, his tone returned entirely to its usual register as if nothing had happened. "I want to note that the pendant is still costing you two stat points. I continue to believe this is a choice worth making. I have updated my position on this since the forest. I wanted you to know that I updated it."

He casts Minor Heal on himself and swipes the panel closed with his left hand, collapsing it into nothing before anyone crosses the distance between them.

From the eastern boulder, Budi tips his chin downward. One slow, deliberate nod. He doesn't reach for his bow, doesn't speak. He just watches Jason with a calm, measuring attention and gives that single nod that means what it means.

Daisuke reaches him first, crossing the clearing in four long strides. His iron shield is slung back onto his arm, and mud covers his pauldrons from the shockwave.

Daisuke stares down at the shallow crater, his broad shoulders rising and falling with a heavy, gravelly breath. “It worked.”

Jason slides the Glass Dagger back into its leather sheath, the wet hide squeezing the blade with a cold hiss. “It worked.”

Wei approaches from the right, moving at an unhurried pace. She stops beside the impact crater and looks down at the displaced earth, the broken clay, the furrows Daisuke’s boots made in the mud. Her twin swords slide back into their scabbards with a clean double-click, one after the other, and she tilts her head a bit as she studies the point where the Ravager’s stone plates finally gave way.

She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t have to.

Arlo’s voice drifts in at the edge of Jason’s hearing, quiet and dry. “Wei has confirmed the kill details three times. She is satisfied. I believe that is the closest she comes to a compliment.”

Jason turns his head toward Mei. Ten paces back, she stands with her arms crossed over her chest, the damp moss on the hem of her robe dripping slowly onto the pine needles. Her dark eyes are fixed entirely on his right hand. Not his face. Not the sheath. They are flat and still, cataloging his high-crit metrics, running a very fast, very private calculation she is not going to name out loud yet.

Jason holds her gaze across the clearing.

“She is running numbers,” Arlo says, his light lowering to almost nothing at Jason’s collar. “I am also running numbers. I intend to note that her numbers and my numbers are probably the same numbers. I find this unsettling in a way I do not fully have words for yet.”

The silver mist from the dissolved Ravager sinks fully into the mud. The clearing goes quiet again, the dripping water and the far-off sound of birds the only noise left, filtering back in slowly now that the commotion is gone. The pine smell returns, cold and clean, cutting through the soft trace of crushed stone and wet clay.

Then the ground moves again.

Not the sharp, immediate vibration of the Ravager’s charge. This one comes from deeper, slower, further north, rolling up through the soil beneath the entire clearing as if something much larger than a mid-tier boss just turned its attention in their direction.

Nobody speaks. Nobody runs the calculation out loud.

The Announcer’s voice returns at last, flat and stripped of all performance, reading the words like a man who has stopped pretending this is entertainment. **Boundary pressure: escalating. Northern sector. Classification: unknown.** A pause. **Good luck, Players.**

Arlo goes clipped and quiet beside him, the conversational register gone entirely. “Threat signature confirmed. North. Larger than the Ravager.” A beat. “I am going dark.”

The boundary isn’t waiting.

*** THE HOUSE ***

The commentary layer desyncs at 11:47, and the technician on shift nearly misses it, because the technician on shift isn’t paid to watch the commentary layer. Vaneck is.

She has the waveform up in her private window, the one she doesn’t share on the wall: the Announcer’s output, a clean, synthetic band that has run flat and even for nineteen days. For four seconds during the Ravager kill, it is not flat. It stutters, drops frames, hunts for its own cadence, and then, at the end, produces a respiration artifact, an exhale, that exists nowhere in its voice model.

“Vaneck.” Sterling is at the head of the table again, the fountain pen squared on the portfolio. He doesn’t look up from the wall, where the sixth green player stands alone in a churned clearing, sheathing a glass knife. “The output on the anomaly.”

“Three hundred and fifty-four in a single strike, sir.” She keeps her voice level. “From a seven-strength build. It is the crit stacking. The dagger’s passive was never capped. The model did not price the interaction because no one has ever survived long enough to stack it this far.”

“And the narration layer.”

She could tell him it was a load spike. The narration node runs on the same foundational architecture as everything else. The Ravager kill spiked the processing load, and load spikes cause artifacts. That is true. It’s even most of the truth.

The rest of the truth is on her private window, and it’s that the commentary node didn’t stutter when the numbers spiked. It stuttered when

it ran out of words for what it was watching. She's read the transcript. *I need a moment.* That's not an error state. That's a sentence.

"A load artifact," she says. "The convergence draw is climbing. Secondary systems are going to keep degrading as it does."

Sterling uncaps the pen. On a side screen, the board updates itself, and a line she's been not-watching for two weeks ticks up again, a western tag, a second solo player who is also outrunning his obituary, though not the way the boy is. The boy is getting faster. The other one is getting quieter.

"Two of them now," Sterling says, mild, reading the board the way another man reads weather. "The one the machine loves." He draws a small circle. "And the one it's stopped mentioning."

Vaneck closes her private window before he can ask why it's open. On the wall, a voice built to sound warm tells a boy alone in the dark that a thing larger than anything he has faced is coming, and wishes him luck, and means it, and doesn't know yet that it means it.

She doesn't tell Sterling that last part. She's getting very good at the things she doesn't tell Sterling.

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The ground moves again before any of them can speak.

This isn't the sharp, focused thump of the Ravager's ground-pound. Now, the movement rolls from north to south beneath the wet clay, as if something huge were shifting its weight far away in the dark tree line. The pine needles on the clearing floor tremble together in a single, smooth wave.

Daisuke doesn't wait. He swings his iron shield toward the noise and says one word.

"Move."

They move.

The ravine off the clearing's edge drops steeply, muddy and slick. Daisuke, Wei, Mei, and Reyna run hard down the slope, boots breaking the topsoil. Jason and Budi take the higher western ridge, the hemlock closing in overhead. Jason keeps his hand near the dagger harness, counting the sheaths by touch. Two there. One tagged. Budi clears a rotting cedar ten paces ahead in one smooth stride and lands without breaking rhythm, running the way he tracks, quiet and efficient and wasting nothing.

The rain starts just after Jason passes the cedar, thin and gray out of the northeast, slicking the needles and filling the air with cold resin. Jason's boots slip twice on the ridge and each time he catches himself on a trunk. At

his collar, Arlo’s light has faded to a small cold spark, almost gone as the boundary pressure climbs.

“Arlo.”

The spark dims further. Not gone. Just very, very small.

The Announcer’s voice doesn’t return at all.

The gorge appears between the hemlocks at a sharp left turn in the ridge, dropping twenty feet into a narrow limestone bowl with a floor of gray stone and damp, packed dirt. A glowing blue pedestal stands in the center of the altar area below, its light steady against the granite walls, pulsing every few seconds like a slow breath.

Daisuke’s group drops into the bowl from the south. Wei goes first, hands on the limestone, then Mei, then Daisuke, who lands heavily with his iron shield and breastplate, absorbing the impact with bent knees and a grunt that resounds up the cliff. They form a tight defensive triangle around the pedestal without speaking. Wei draws her swords, and Mei raises her hands toward the stone.

Jason and Budi take the shelf.

“Is this also part of the Demonstration?” Jason asks.

“No,” Budi says, eyes on the brush. “The Ravager was the demonstration. Whatever this is followed it here.”

The ledge is about four feet wide, a narrow strip of limestone jutting from the gorge rim. Exposed roots tangle at the edge, and there’s a steep drop to the area below. From here, they can see the entire southern approach and anything moving through the hemlock canopy to the north.

Budi crouches at the eastern edge of the ledge, raising his recurve bow and drawing it tight as he watches the brush to the north. His eyes move in short, careful arcs, tracking like someone who knows predators stay at the edge of sight, not in the center.

The shadows in the tree line deepen, turning the thick pine trunks into black walls. The drizzle carries the sharp smell of crushed pine needles and wet clay, and the metallic tang of rising air pressure. For ten seconds, nothing moves.

“Five enemies detected to the north,” Arlo says while hovering just above Jason’s head.

Next, Jason’s Enemy Detection interface flickers.

It isn’t a gradual brightening. Instead, a sudden, grid-shaped flare appears —five red vectors bloom in his peripheral display, forming a tight, diagonal

pattern that descends from the upper canopy to the north. Their spacing and descent rate are both perfectly uniform.

Nothing in the wild moves that way.

“Budi.”

“I see them.”

But he says it half a second too late, because they’re already dropping from the hemlocks, and they don’t make any sound when they land.

There are five of them. They don’t flinch when they land, don’t breathe hard, and they don’t look around. They simply land in the brush fifteen yards north of the ledge and move forward. The absence of these small signals is more disconcerting than the jagged iron glaives three of them carry.

They run in a wedge—tight and silent. The flankers speed up to angle off Jason’s left and right while the point charges straight down the middle. The two with short swords break from the group and drop lower on the slope, moving toward Budi.

Jason rolls his weight onto his left foot, driving off the heel as the Lurker’s Cape turns translucent.

Camouflage Active: [00:45]

“Go right,” Jason tells Budi, and his hand comes up, the Glass Dagger reversed to parry. The lead glaive-user thrusts for his throat with a lunging, overhand extension, the iron point a whistling line of silver in the drizzle, and Jason drops his head and knee simultaneously, sliding on wet pine needles as the blade scrapes the air two inches above his collar. The haft rings off the glass as he drives it upward, a short, sharp impact that numbs his wrist to the elbow.

He doesn’t get the chance to reset his stance.

A boot hits his shin, low and fast, sweeping from behind the lead attacker’s hip and landing exactly where his slide leaves him. The precision concerns him; *enemies aren’t supposed to fight like this*. He falls flat on his back, his hood slipping off, face turned up to the gray drizzle and the cold clay pressing against his spine.

His camouflage dies.

Two arrows snap past, fast and flat. One hits the closer sword-wielder in the chest, knocking him back into a root cluster, where he dissolves into silver mist. The second arrow punches through the lead glaive-user’s throat before he can reset his weapon for a downward strike, and he comes apart the same way. Below and to the right, Budi stands balanced on a mossy log, recurve bow drawn to his chin, boots planted wide on the slick bark, his expression as calm as ever.

Jason rolls left, gets his knees under him, and drives back to his feet.

Two glaive-users remain on the slope. The two on his flanks quickly adjust to the arrows, repositioning and moving in a silent, coordinated pattern that closes off his angle to the ledge. His Enemy Detection automatically maps the area. Southeast escape route—blocked. Northeast—blocked. The drop to the altar area floor is a straight twenty feet and would guarantee a broken ankle without an anchor.

His left hand pulls a throwing dagger from the harness.

Then the limestone wall moves above Budi.

A cleft in the rock face to the northwest, barely visible as a seam in the gray stone, opens, and a massive figure steps out. Plate armor, blackened with rust at the joints and dented from heavy blows, covers him. The blue altar light highlights the rusted dents in sharp relief. He carries a double-sided axe with a dark brown, rusted head, and the enchanted NPC is three inches taller and much broader than Daisuke. He clears the cleft, finds his footing above Budi, and starts to descend.

Budi is already reaching for his quiver.

His hand closes on nothing. He looks down at the quiver, then back up at the slope. He reaches again, fingers moving through empty fletching slots. The two shots he fired were the last arrows he had.

He’s out.

The axe is overhead now, the heavy NPC fully committed to the downhill charge. The aged steel catches what little light filters through the overhead foliage. Five hundred pounds of armored mass and gravity drive a two-foot blade toward a man with only a skinning knife and no armor on his left side.

Jason acts on instinct, jumping over the fallen hemlock branch between them. His right hand reaches for Budi’s chest rig. He needs the tag. If he can grab the leather and Flash to the anchor, he’ll be able to move the both of them to safety faster than the axe can follow.

As he leans forward, the Iron-Bound Keepsake at his collar presses hard against his sternum. The engraved iron is freezing through his shirt, a sudden cold touch that brings back the memory of Magda dying in his arms.

The system reads his reaching fingers touching the wet, salt-stained leather of Budi’s chest strap. The link sequence begins.

Then the memory overwhelms him before he can stop it. It isn’t images, but pure, suffocating sensation: the exact density of the air that night in the mausoleum, Derek’s face. The desperate pitch of Magda’s voice in the dark. The sharp pain of trusting someone, only to find emptiness where the foundation should have been.

His mental processing grid flashes once, orange-red, violent. The blue spatial aura around Budi’s chest rig flares like a fault line. Under the sudden pressure of his own panic, Jason’s hand twitches away.

The link collapses.

The system fails with a bang. The rejected handshake becomes a burst of kinetic force, striking Jason’s hand like a static shock. Sharp, burning pain shoots through his shoulder, the price of fighting alone and afraid, his own ligaments taking the hit. His arm jerks back, his boot slips off the hemlock branch, and he crashes shoulder-first into the limestone boulder behind him, the throwing dagger jumping out of his left hand and away down the slope. The impact jolts up through his neck and jaw, and his whole arm tingles with pins and needles from wrist to elbow.

The axe swings.

The sound it makes as it goes through the leather pauldron is dense and wet, a deep crunch that travels through the wet air like a physical thing, and Budi goes sideways off the mossy log without a sound. His bow clears the edge and falls into the arena below. He hits the clay face down, his uninjured arm taking the first impact, and rolls once before going still, one knee drawn up.

Budi’s jaw is locked tight. The muscles in his neck stand in stark relief, forcibly regulating his breathing into shallow, even sips of air, but the blood spreading through the leather across his shoulder and collarbone tells the true story in a dark, fast-moving stain.

His health bar, visible in Jason’s peripheral interface, drops by eighty percent and keeps moving.

Arlo is shouting, “Budi has been significantly injured. He is not going to survive much longer.”

Jason is already throwing.

This time, there's no calculation, no transit lines—just his right hand pulling his last throwing dagger, the tagged one, from the harness and releasing it in a diagonal line past the heavy NPC's torso. The blade clears the pine boughs, and in the half-second it takes to throw, he reads the larch trunk fifteen feet behind the attacker by shape, distance, and trunk diameter.

The blade buries in the larch with a clean, short crack.

The transit takes him in a straight, high-speed line through the air, not angled up this time, lateral, parallel to the slope, and the heavy NPC is mid-lunge toward Budi's prone form when Jason passes through the air at neck height. The Glass Dagger is already in his fist as Jason moves, his grip set, and he draws a lateral cut left to right as the transit carries him past, reading the gap below the helmet plate by the pale line where the iron neck guard doesn't quite meet the gorget.

Jason ends the Flash before reaching his destination. He falters slightly but manages to plant his feet firmly on the ground just past the enchanted NPC, then spins his body around. His dagger lands in a gap in the armor under his arm.

"A successful hit, three left," Arlo says.

A silver-blue light. A flash of it, brief and clinical.

The heavy NPC stiffens. Every muscle in the armored body locks at once, the axe handle dropping from a loosened grip, and the dissolution starts at the connection of the armor, spreading outward through the iron plates, the rust and dented steel both softening to the same gray-silver mist that the Ravager left behind. The armor falls empty in the direction of its forward lean and fades before it hits the clay, the mist sinking into the ground in a pattern of sparkling trails.

The two remaining glaive-users on the slope have already pivoted.

Smooth. Silent. Both weapons are swinging toward his new position in the same unhurried, remorseless angle as everything else these things have done since they dropped from the canopy.

Jason catches his breath against the larch bark. *They don't get tired, they don't second-guess, and there are two of them and one of me, and the second sword-wielder is still loose somewhere below, and Budi is bleeding out.*

From the clay below, Budi's uninjured arm moves.

Slow, mechanical, working through pain or blood loss or both, but working. His fingers close around the handle of his skinning knife where it sits on his hip, and his eyes find the nearer glaive-user's feet, tracking down the slope toward Jason's position. Tracking the distance. Tracking the plant of the boot.

The knife drives into the Achilles tendon with the exact, efficient angle of a man who has skinned a great many animals and understands precisely where tendons attach to bone.

The glaive-user goes down on one knee, the glaive spiking into the mud for balance.

Jason is already moving.

Damn, I'm out of daggers!

He reaches into his belt pocket with his left hand, fingers closing on a smooth, oval river stone, one of three he'd pocketed in the clearing after the Ravager fight with no specific plan in mind, and he throws it past the second glaive-user's left shoulder in a clean overhand arc, reading the pine trunk at the far edge of the shelf by height and bark texture, releasing the stone at the exact angle to have it hit the wood at chest height.

The transit is fast and straight, crossing the shelf diagonally, his trajectory passing through the space between the two glaive-users. The Glass Dagger shears through boiled leather and bites deep into the standing attacker's sternum as he passes, an anatomical precision that unspools him into silver mist before his knees can hit the mud. He lands hard at the pine trunk, his left boot catching the root cluster and arresting his forward momentum.

He pivots on his heel.

One glaive-user, the kneeling one, is still functional, pulling the weapon from the mud. His head comes up, tracking, rotating toward Budi's prone form in the absence of a more immediate threat.

Mei's kinetic arcanum snaps, instantly freezing the humid air in the gorge into three razor-sharp glacial spikes. The spikes erupt from the clay of the shelf in a triangular pattern and impale the kneeling glaive-user through the chest and the last sword-wielder two strides from Budi, in a cold burst of frost that turns glaive and short sword to silver in the same instant. Mei stands at the altar below, her arms raised, her dark robes whipping in the updraft from the spell, her face tipped up toward the shelf with an expression that is completely focused and completely without warmth. The silver mist drifts.

Then silence.

Not the waiting silence of before. The empty kind.

Jason stands by the pine trunk, hands at his sides, and forces his breathing to slow down. He counts to three with each breath until he stops gasping for air. His right hand shakes, not from effort, but from the feedback discharge still fading from his wrist, the pins and needles slowly leaving his palm.

His boots move him toward Budi before he consciously decides to move.

The blood has spread further than he expected. It's soaked through the leather at the shoulder and collarbone and collected in the depression where Budi's arm meets the clay, dark and too much of it. Budi's breathing is shallow and audible, a wet, careful sound. His eyes are open, tracking the canopy, blinking slowly.

"His health has decreased to nine percent," Arlo says.

Jason drops to his knees in the mud beside him. He doesn't touch the wound. His mental grid maps the deficit instantly: he casts Minor Heal. Nothing.

"Hold on."

He gives him a health pill. Still nothing.

Budi's eyes remain fixed on the dark canopy overhead. "I had no arrows."

"I know."

"You reached for the tag."

Jason looks at Budi's shoulder, at the ruin the axe made of the leather, and at what's underneath it. "Yes."

Budi doesn't ask the rest of the question. He turns his eyes back to the canopy and breathes, slow and deliberate and careful.

"Eight percent."

The limestone wall to the south rattles as Daisuke's hands find the handholds, and then his broad shoulders clear the gorge rim in one hard pull, his iron shield banging against the stone as he rolls his weight over the edge and gets his feet under him. He reads the shelf in one sweep, weapon placements, bodies, and blood distribution, and his eyes stop on Budi. He breaks into a run.

"Seven percent."

"Somebody help, quick!" Jason shouts.

"Six percent."

Reyna comes over the rim two seconds later, already pulling her kit bag off her shoulder.

She drops to her knees across from Jason without speaking, her hands going straight to Budi's collarbone, pressing flat against the wound. Her palm glows a low, warm white, barely visible in the gray drizzle, and the light sinks into the tissue with a soft, even pulse. Budi's jaw tightens once, then releases. His breathing begins to slow and deepen incrementally.

Reyna's energy bar drains in steady, visible segments. She doesn't look up from the work.

"This would appear to be working," Arlo says. "His health is now at thirty percent and increasing."

Wei comes over the gorge rim last, unhurried, her twin swords dripping with a fluid so thick it looks black under the shadows. The Blue Key sits in her left hand, heavy and glowing, its pale azure light throwing long, precise shadows across the churned mud of the shelf. She stops at the shelf's edge, reads the scene with the same flat, thorough attention she gives to everything, and says nothing.

The key pulses once, slow and cold.

Daisuke walks toward Jason.

He steps over Budi's discarded bow, where it landed at the shelf edge, his boots finding the wet clay with a deliberate weight.

Daisuke's jaw works once. His broad shoulders rise and fall with a single breath, heavy and quiet.

His eyes come up from Jason's hands to his face.

Daisuke stops, his massive shadow blanketing Jason. "You have transit. High-speed. Precision. I watched you clear a Ravager from ten feet of open air." His gaze doesn't move. "That axe moved in a straight line." A pause that has nothing diplomatic in it. "Explain to me why Budi was bleeding out in the mud."

Jason looks down at his own hands.

The pins and needles are gone now. His hands are steady. There's no answer in them, and no evidence of the feedback pulse that threw him into the boulder, no burn mark, no discoloration, nothing to show in the interface, and nothing to explain the gap between what he is capable of and what happened on the slope.

He opens his mouth.

Before he finds a word, the blue interface at the corner of his vision flares, unbidden, and the display pulls itself open.

The text there is not a notification or a system update. Flickering in a jagged, glitched font reminiscent of the wireframe scan lines Jason saw on Magda's face, the words pulse red, slow and deliberate.

> **System Trust Integrity compromised: Faction Alignment Fractured.**

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The red text pulses, throwing an ugly crimson sheen over the wet clay and the dark leather of his boots.

The words stay on the screen. **System Trust Integrity compromised: Faction Alignment Fractured.** The message floats above the tree line, red and cold, ignoring the drizzle, the smell of blood, and the wet clay saturating his pants.

Daisuke's shadow falls over him like a dropped curtain.

Daisuke's right boot sinks deeper into the mud as he leans forward. His broadsword is planted in the ground between them, driven there on purpose. The grip is within his reach.

Daisuke's chest lifts under his armor. He mutters a quiet, steady count under his breath.

"One. Two. Three." He pauses, then asks it again, slower. "Explain to me why Budi is in the mud."

The words land with the same density as his boots. No inflection. No editorial. Just the question, bare and enormous, and the absolute absence of any interest in a convenient answer.

Jason looks at his hands. The tingling from the feedback pulse is gone, and his palms look normal and unmarked. There's no ash, no blackened skin, and no sign of the shock that hit his shoulder and knocked him into the boulder. There's nothing to show for it.

To his right, the tear in Budi’s leather vest reveals a ragged, anatomical ruin: splintered bone at the clavicle, torn muscle fibers weeping a slow, rhythmic ribbon of dark blood.

“I don’t have an answer.” His whole body aches as he speaks.

“His health is now at forty-six percent and increasing,” Arlo whispers, his blue light strobing in short, irregular flickers near Jason’s ear. The orb rotates rapidly, throwing frantic, spinning shadows across the larch boughs overhead that only Jason can see.

It’s not entirely comforting, but it fills a brief silence, and Jason is grateful for that small relief.

Then Mei heads over the rim of the gorge.

She steps over the wet rocks in two quick strides, her dark robes sticking to her arms and chest, soaked from top to bottom. She doesn’t stop to look around; she already knows the scene. Her eyes go straight to Budi’s bloody chest and injured shoulder, then fixate on Jason.

She crosses her arms; her lip twitches. “I warned Reyna that you were too unpredictable and would present too much of a risk.”

Jason forces his back straight, the joints in his knees popping. He wants to protest. He wants to say that the demonstration was their idea, and that the boundary had driven two boss-level beasts into it. But it still doesn’t answer the question of why the link failed, why he failed. He backs up two half-steps until his shoulder blades strike the rough larch trunk. The cold bark presses through his wet shirt.

“He’s stable.” Reyna’s voice is paper-thin, raspy. She is collapsed onto her heels, her forehead beading with sweat, her hands still flat against Budi’s chest. The last faint, milky-white pulses of her channeled healing spark flicker and die, her energy bar bottoming out. The dark circles beneath her eyes are deep enough to look bruised. “His vitals are responding.”

“Forty-eight percent,” Arlo adds, his blue glow softening.

Mei steps closer, her boots making a wet sound in the mud. She stops just in front of him, staring hard. The red, glitched warning letters hang in the air between them.

“His vitals are responding because Reyna was able to save him after your failure nearly caused his death.” Mei points a stiff finger at Budi’s mangled shoulder. “That is the consequence of keeping vital information from us about how your mechanics work.”

The accusation hits him hard, and his chest tightens. His fingers twitch toward the empty sheaths on his harness before he can stop himself.

Daisuke steps laterally, placing his broad chest and shield arm between Mei and Jason. His gaze remains fixed on the horizon, his eyes shifting methodically as he restarts his steadying count.

“Four. Five. Six,” he mutters under his breath, before raising his voice. “What exactly is the mechanical requirement for Item Linking to function?”

Daisuke’s question is different from Mei’s. Hers is blunt, but his is careful, like a foreman checking a broken scaffold to find the weak spot.

Jason breathes in the bitter cold. The air tastes of wet pine needles and oxidized blood. “It requires a physical tag. Direct skin contact with the object. Sustained, intentional contact.”

“And for a person.”

“I don’t think I can tag a person. I wasn’t trying to tag him. I was trying to pull him with me to a tag.”

“You reached for the tag.” Daisuke’s jaw muscles bunch.

“Yes.”

“Then why did it fail?”

Silence falls over the clearing. Even Arlo’s rotation slows to a crawl, his soft drone dropping half a register.

Jason clearly remembers how it failed. He reached out, and the connection started. But when the Iron-Bound Keepsake touched his chest, the memory of the mausoleum hit him so hard that he lost his focus before it could finalize the initialization.

“The system requires psychological trust to complete the link,” he says, his voice expressionless. “Not just physical contact. I can’t force a trust that isn’t... real. And if that trust falters...”

“What did Budi do to lose your trust?”

“It wasn’t my trust in him that was lost.”

Mei sidesteps Daisuke’s arm, pointing at Jason’s right palm. “Your hand is unmarked. The feedback pulse didn’t leave a burn. But the kinetic displacement in the surrounding air was extremely high, and your aura in my interface is showing an anomaly.” Her chin lifts. “You aren’t just hiding your stat page. You are structurally broken.”

The word lands.

“Mei.” Reyna’s voice is a hoarse rasp from the mud. She doesn’t rise from her knees, her hands trembling while she rests them in her lap. “He

killed two of them. The last one...”

“On the run,” Mei interrupts, “after the first one nearly split Budi in half.”

“That’s enough.” Daisuke’s tone leaves no room for debate.

Wei pushes off from a second larch at the gorge edge and takes three deliberate, silent strides into the center of the clearing. Her twin swords point outward, their serrated edges dark with congealed grease and blood. In her left hand, she rolls and rotates the heavy, cold Blue Key through her fingers. Its metallic, rhythmic click-clack scrapes against her calluses, casting pivoting, jagged blue shadows across the wet clay and the fallen branches. “We cannot afford to work with someone who fails under stress.”

Jason’s hands press down into the wet moss of the larch trunk behind him. Budi is still. His jaw is locked, the tendons in his throat taut as iron cords, but his eyes track the canopy in slow, deliberate grids. Calculating. Surviving.

He’s doing exactly what he did on the slope with a shattered shoulder, tracking the glaive-user’s boot placement before driving the skinning knife into the heel. He has never once demanded a stat sheet.

The thought arrives with the heavy, icy precision of a long-denied truth: *I hoarded my stats. I kept my mechanics hidden, operated in total isolation, and I called it self-sufficiency.*

He steps away from the larch, his boots grinding into the bloodied clay next to Budi. Daisuke shifts back, his hand dropping to his pommel. Mei’s chin lowers, her eyes narrowing sharply.

“I can’t show you my stat page,” Jason says, his voice penetrating the steady drip of the canopy. “Not because of a liability, but because the moment I hand my full ledger to players who run on threat metrics, I become a resource to be managed.” He looks directly at Daisuke. “You’ve earned more than that. Most of the people here have. But the system doesn’t care about merit. The trust handshake has to be real.”

Mei’s jaw tightens. “That is a circular argument.”

“It’s the only one that works.”

Daisuke doesn’t answer immediately. He stares at Budi, his chest heavy under his plate, then slowly reviews Jason’s stance. His eyes track the alignment of Jason’s shoulders, his weight distribution, and the absence of tightness in his wrists. He calculates in silence, but his posture loses its rigid combative edge.

“Fifty-eight percent,” Arlo whispers.

Reyna lets out a long, ragged breath, her shoulders sagging as she sinks back on her heels. Her mud-caked fingers move in her lap. “Jason. We are not your enemy.”

“I know,” he says, although he’s not yet convinced that all of them would make good allies either.

“Do you?”

The question holds no malice, only a raw, quiet exhaustion. Her eyes remain locked on his, dark and searching, demanding something he cannot easily measure.

“I’m working on it.”

Reyna holds his eyes for another long three-count, then turns back to Budi, pressing her hand over the leather of his good shoulder.

Mei uncrosses her arms and turns her back, walking toward Wei near the gorge edge. Her departure is silent, absolute, and final—a door closing on the argument.

Jason turns east, tracing the trail with his hand. “The Blue Key is just one of five keys. Any three are needed to unlock the Usurper’s Castle.” He points toward the deeper woods. “The Russian sector is uncontested. That’s where the Orange Key will be.”

“Uncontested because no one has survived it,” Wei says, not looking back, her fingers still ticking the Blue Key against her palm.

“That is one way to define it.”

Daisuke pulls his broadsword from the mud with a wet, heavy suction sound, sliding it back into its iron sheath. The metallic latch clicks shut. “Do not die.”

The words carry the weight of both a caution and a command. Jason accepts them both.

He crouches beside Budi.

There are no words left. The small distance between them is filled with the scent of pine-rot, blood, and wet wool. Budi’s eyes shift from the trees, meeting Jason’s. A quick flicker of severe pain passes through his pupils, but beneath it lies a flat, unyielding acknowledgment—the look of a man who saw the slope, who saw the kill, and who doesn’t keep a ledger.

Budi gives a single, minute nod of his chin.

Jason ducks his head in return and rises.

He pulls his hood forward. The Lurker’s Cape catches the light, its passive stealth always active; his outline wavers, dissolving slightly into a

gray-green smear against the dark larch trunks.

Arlo drops to a low, private hum and hovers close to his neck as they move toward the eastern trail. Jason activates the cape, dissolving almost completely into the woods.

The weight of Reyna's silent gaze prickles the back of his neck, but he doesn't turn back.

His boots strike the damp pine needles, the wet crunch of his steps swallowed by the dense treetops and the regular, heavy drip of the rain. The pine scent tightens in his throat, cool and piercing.

Twelve steps.

Static cracks directly into his auditory cortex, sharp and digital, bypassing his ears to rattle the center of his skull. No echo. No delay. The voice is bright, warm, and cheerful, the heat of a fire in an abandoned building.

Attention, remaining players! Player signature in the Orange Sector has reached zero percent viability. Total silence detected. A brief pause follows, filled with the slight, tinny hiss of a dead channel. **Happy hunting, lone wolf!**

The Announcer, it seems, has been fixed, and that message, though sent to everyone, was meant for me.

His boot hovers over the needles.

He stands alone at the edge of the dark timber, the forest pressing in, the rain absolute at his back, and stares at the horizon until the gray stops blinking.

Arlo rotates once, very slowly, silent.

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CHAPTER 17

The announcement still resounds heavily in his ears.

Happy hunting, lone wolf.

Jason keeps walking. His boots sink into the decomposed pine needles on the eastern trail, each step making a wet, dragging sound as the mud clings to him. The trees above are thick, so the rain falls in big, scattered drops instead of a steady sheet, hitting his hood with a dull rhythm. He buries his hands deep in the pockets of the Lurker's Cape, fingers gripping the dry lining. It's the only warmth he has left.

Arlo floats just above his left shoulder, silent. The orb is calm now, its light rotating slowly and evenly, casting no shadows in the gray morning.

The system text from earlier glows at the edge of his vision, bright enough that he doesn't need to turn his head to see it. A reminder of yet another failure.

> **System Trust Integrity compromised: Faction Alignment Fractured.**

He stops walking. His boots settle on a thick, waterlogged root crossing the trail, the bark darkened with rot, the surface slightly inclined under his

weight. He raises his right hand from his pocket, extends two fingers, and swipes the corner of his vision twice.

The red text collapses.

The corner of his interface goes dark, leaving a blank rectangle. He keeps his teeth clenched. The root shifts further under his weight, so he steps off and keeps heading east.

A quarter mile in, the trees crowd closer. The canopy drops, and the oldest trees bend their branches down until they brush his hood, dripping cold water down his neck. The air smells different here. The sharp smell of pine fades, replaced by the damp, earthy smell of fungus and rotting wood, the breath of a forest that hasn't seen sunlight in ages. As he moves farther east, the soggy ground separates him from the heavy presence stirring to the north.

His knees have been getting stiff for the past fifteen minutes. An ache extends slowly through his thighs and calves. It's not pain, just the tightness of muscles pushed past their limits, a quiet protest from deep inside his body.

He nearly misses the moment his knee starts to go. The stiffness in his knee joint grows in the span of four steps, pulling his gait into a shorter, hitched stride. His posture sags forward at the hip. His head drops.

Not yet. I need another mile.

His body refuses to cooperate. His knee finally gives out, so he turns left off the muddy trail, pushing through low branches toward a huge fallen larch tree that's been rotting on the hillside for decades. The trunk is four feet wide and covered in thick, green-black moss. He reaches it and presses his hands against the bark, letting his arms support him. His head drops between his shoulders, and he lets out a long, unsteady breath.

He stands for a few seconds, then slides down the side of the log until he sits on the wet pine needles and cold mud.

The cold soaks through his trousers immediately.

He pulls his knees to his chest and leans his back against the log. Tilting his head back, he feels the rough bark catch his hood as he looks up through the layers of branches at the pale sky. Arlo drops lower, hovering at his chin, his glow subsiding to a steady, calm warmth.

Jason's eyes stop blinking.

The forge is the first thing. Always the first thing.

It’s not the heat that he remembers first, but the sound, the heavy, ringing strike of the hammer on the iron rod, echoing off the stone walls in waves he can feel through his feet. Then the smell: hot metal, and the sharp bite of burning coal. The orange light from the hearth fills the back wall, making the soot-covered stone glow amber.

He stands three feet from the hearth. Heat presses against his face and the front of his shirt, while his back stays cold. He is younger here. His shoulders are narrow, his stance uncertain, his weight distributed too far back on his heels.

Magda doesn’t look up.

She has broad shoulders and wide hips, built for strength and endurance, not grace, just like the forge. Her leather apron is stained black from years of use, its laces tied in a sturdy knot at her back. Her arms are bare from the elbows down, her forearms gray with ash. She swings the hammer again, filling the room with the sound of metal, and the rod glows brighter where she strikes.

Then she stops.

She places the hammer on the anvil slowly and deliberately, making the silence louder than the swinging had been. She picks up the half-formed blade and drops it into the quench bucket, where the water hisses with steam. She wipes her hands on her apron and turns to face him.

“Your weight is wrong.” Her voice competes with the draft in the chimney and wins, easily. “You’re standing on your heels. You’ll fall backward before you can move forward.”

“I’m not moving anywhere.” He shifts his stance, his weight settling. “I’m just watching.”

She closes the gap between them in three steps, making the workshop feel smaller. Up close, she smells of coal dust and iron filings, a scent so deep in her skin it’s become part of her. She grabs his right wrist firmly, her thumb pressing into the inside of his wrist until his fingers spread open.

Without looking, she reaches behind her to the workbench and grabs a raw iron bar, cold and rough. She puts it in his open hand, then closes his fingers around it. She moves his thumb into place, pressing it firmly underneath, making sure he feels exactly where it should go.

“Feel where the weight sits now,” she says.

It sits differently. The bar stops fighting his grip.

“Balance is not about holding tight.” She taps his knuckles once, hard. “Balance is about giving the weight somewhere honest to rest.”

The world around them dissolves and morphs into the training ground. It’s nothing but rocky waste—a wide stretch of broken shale outside the forge where nothing grows. The sky is always overcast, and the light is flat and without shadows. He is on his hands and knees on the hard gray stone, his palms bleeding from the rough surface, his lungs aching. His shirt is soaked through at the back.

Magda stands above him. She hasn’t lowered her hammer. She doesn’t offer a hand.

She points her chin at the dagger on the ground two feet to his left.

He looks at the dagger. He looks at her. His arm is shaking.

“You want me to get up.” It’s not a question.

“I want to know if you can.”

He gets up.

She hits him again. His cheek hits the cold stone, and he tastes blood and grit.

The dagger is now four feet away.

Lying on the shale, he realizes it: She’s not going to help me. She never will.

He was wrong about her. He just didn’t see the kind of help she was offering.

He closes his eyes, and when he opens them, they are in the clearing before the creature’s den, the ground churned to bare, dark mud. Bones protrude from the muck at its far edge. The smell is overpowering—damp fur, bile, copper. The dagger beside him morphs into a large snake. The Feral Druid. Its viper-form moves through the gray light faster than anything that size should, and Jason runs, his boots sliding in the mud.

Magda’s back is broad and unmistakable ahead of him, her hammer raised, her boots planted wide in the mud. The Druid’s attention is on her. Those yellow eyes are fixed on her, and he is too far away, too slow, the one who should have been closer.

The strike comes fast, the warning singing through his nerves.

The viper-form coils and lunges at him, a battering ram of muscle and scales. She jumps in front of him and the fangs land in her neck, sending her body backward, her left heel slipping in the churned mud. The heavy iron hammer swings wide, momentum pulling her off balance.

She is falling. Her blue eyes find him in the half-second before she hits the ground, and what is in them isn't panic. It isn't anger, regret, or the particular anguish of someone who didn't choose this.

Her expression is calm and certain, with the clarity of someone who knows every tool she made is in its right place.

Her fingers open, releasing the hammer haft.

"You let them die," she says in a hissing, unnatural voice, her eyes turning yellow like the viper's.

Jason drops to his knees in the mud. The blue light starts immediately: the slow, methodical dissolution. The pixels drift upward into the darkness, scattering and dispersing, and he cups his hands around the edge of her dissolving form as if he can hold the shape together through sheer proximity.

He can't. The light slips through his fingers like cold water leaking away.

The clearing is gone. Stone closes overhead, the dark of the den all around him, and the hammer lies on the cave floor next to him.

He picks it up. It is very heavy.

He stands.

A sudden gasp snaps him back.

His palms hit the icy mud on either side of his knees, fingers spread wide. The pine needles feel cool and prickly on his skin. The larch forest rushes back into focus—the mossy log behind him, the wet soil, the low dripping branches, and Arlo's blue glow three feet in front of him.

He breathes hard. His jaw aches—he must have been clenching his teeth the whole time.

That's not what happened!

It's never what happened. She never once raised the hammer to him; the shale yard was a hickory dowel and a word said at the same weight every time. She died in the open, in the churned mud in front of the den, and the viper struck at her, not at him. The dream drags her into the cave and puts him in its path, so the strike that takes her is the one meant for him. He knows it every time he wakes. It changes nothing.

Arlo descends until his glow is at eye level, hovering directly in front of Jason's nose, close enough that the light's warmth touches Jason's face. The orb's pulse is slow and heavy. Long, indigo shadows drag across Jason's wet knees and the open mud beside him.

He lowers his head. His hands shake, so he presses them flat against his thighs to steady them.

Arlo says nothing.

Thirty seconds pass.

“I’m fine.”

“I did not ask.” Arlo’s glow dims to a cool indigo.

Jason looks up. Arlo’s glow is steady. He speaks clearly, each word careful and precise, without a single qualifier. The change is so obvious that Jason catches his breath.

“Okay.” He wipes his hands on his trousers, leaving dark mud streaks on the already-ruined fabric. “Say it.”

“You told Daisuke the link failed because you were pulling him toward a tag.” The orb rotates slowly on its vertical axis, a single revolution, patient and precise. “A physical failure. A timing error.”

“It was a concentration error.” Jason pulls his knees tighter, his fingers digging into his shins.

The orb lowers until its bottom edge touches the top of Jason’s closed right fist, resting on his knuckle. Its weight is light but real, the pressure clear.

Jason doesn’t open his hand.

“Budi’s palm was open.” Arlo’s glow shifts slightly, deepening toward indigo.

The words come out flat, without accusation. It’s simply a straightforward observation, like someone reading a list of facts.

“He was cooperative.” Jason’s voice hardens. “I know that.”

“He was in your grip.” Arlo’s light deepens.

The cold mud seeps up through his trousers. A drop of water falls from a branch above and hits the bridge of his nose, making him blink.

“That’s not what Item Linking is.” The words come out quieter than he expected, rougher. His throat is still tight from the flashback. “It’s a pull. It’s not me yanking something from one point to another.” His fingers uncoil, one at a time, until his right hand is open against the cold air. Arlo lifts away from his knuckle. “It’s a handshake. It requires... it requires trust to hold.”

Arlo says nothing. He simply maintains his position, the indigo glow throwing shadows stretched across Jason’s open palm.

“Budi held. I didn’t. He trusted me. I lost my focus, I lost my trust.”

The cold sinks deeper down into his bones. He turns his open hand over, looking at the lines in his palm, the red skin, and the small scar on his index finger from that first training session with Magda, when she closed his hand around a bar of raw iron and moved his thumb without a word.

She forced his thumb into the right position. She didn't explain it.

"Balance is about giving the weight somewhere honest to rest."

She wasn't talking about the iron.

She was never talking about the iron.

He lifts his free hand to his collar, sliding his fingers under the leather strap of his armor until he finds the iron-bound locket against his chest. His thumb follows the deep edge in the iron and the stiff hinge. The iron is always cold, never warming, no matter how long he carries it. He presses two fingers on its surface.

Her blue eyes. The complete, quiet clarity in them.

She knew she would die on that hunt. She knew it before they left the forge. In her last days, she didn't teach him to be faster or stronger. Instead, she taught him that a closed fist can't connect to anything. She took a struggling loner who survived by staying small and unseen, and shaped him into someone who could learn to open the hand.

He holds very still.

The tightness in his chest, the one he's carried since the clearing, shifts and settles lower, becoming something he can handle. It's not gone, and he doesn't expect it to leave. A single tear rolls down his cheek, getting lost among the raindrops on his face.

Arlo slowly rises from in front of Jason's knees. The indigo fades from his glow, replaced by a warm blue-white light—the same tender light Jason has slept beside for weeks. The orb spins in a small, slow circle, then drifts forward and rests against Jason's chest.

Neither of them speaks for a moment.

"Thank you," Jason says.

Arlo hums. A low, warm, simple frequency.

Jason presses his palms into the log behind him and pushes himself up. He straightens his knees and stands tall, shoulders back and chin level. The defensive hunch is gone, and his weight shifts forward onto the balls of his feet.

The forest is still and cold around him. Rain strikes the high boughs. The eastern trail waits.

He pulls his hood forward, the dark fabric catching the dull morning rays. He checks his hip, fingers finding the hilt of the Glass Dagger to make sure it’s still there. Arlo lifts from his collarbone and settles above his left shoulder, returning to his usual quiet spot.

Jason steps back onto the eastern trail and takes three deliberate strides toward the tree line, where the larch wood darkens, and the trail begins its descent into the valley.

His interface flickers. The corner of his vision blooms with amber text, a new warning tier he has not seen before, its font heavier than the standard system messages.

> **Atmospheric Density: Sector Threshold Exceeded. Unstable Elemental Combustive/Kinetic Residue Detected. Instability Level: Critical.**

He reads it once. Reads it again. His pace doesn’t slow.

He steps past the trees, departing from the familiar gray mud of the border trail for the dark, silty soil of the Russian sector. The air changes at once, becoming heavier and carrying a pressure that he feels deep in his sinuses.

And then, from the silent tree-choked valley below him, clear and sharp and completely unmistakable above the noise of the rain...

A click.

A second click.

A slow, deliberate rotation of metal against metal, rhythmic and patient, the precise, recurring sound of a key turning in a lock.

Jason stops.

Arlo goes completely dark.

*** THE HOUSE ***

Vaneck sees it start because she’s the only one still watching the cemetery feed, and she is only watching it because a player walked back into it for no reason.

The green party's mage. The average one, the one the model never priced above the middle of its own distribution, the second solo tag. He crossed back into the Feratu sector hours ago, alone, and he didn't fight anything on the way in. He walked the way you walk a route you have already solved.

Now he stands over the open coffin in the mausoleum where the boy's friend died, and he's not looting it.

"Vaneck." Sterling, at the head of the table, not looking up. "The mage."

"He's returned to the cemetery boss arena, sir. Feratu is dormant. He's not engaging it." She keeps her voice flat and lets the flat carry the thing she doesn't want to say, which is that the mage is crouched at the lip of the coffin with the stillness of a man calculating possible outcomes, and that Feratu, a Level Eighteen regional entity, is holding perfectly, unnaturally still while he does it.

On the wall, Eric reaches into the coffin.

He comes up with his hand cupped, dark and wet to the wrist, and he doesn't flinch from it, and he doesn't rush. He studies what is in his hand the way she's watched him study a stat sheet, a person, a problem, and then he tips his head back and drinks.

The waveform on her private window does what it did during the Ravager, except it doesn't recover.

"Sir." She's already typing, and her hands are not entirely steady, and she hates that they aren't steady. "We have an access event. He's in a layer he shouldn't be able to reach. It's not the quest layer. It is." She stops, because the word for what it is, is *administrative*, and she's not going to be the one who says that word in this room until she's made to.

Sterling sets down the fountain pen. For the first time in three weeks, he turns from the board and looks at the wall, and his face does the small, precise thing it does when a number comes back that the model did not price.

Far away and far below, in a cemetery that's not real, two men believed the same thing, that they were alone and that being alone was the smart way to survive. This one has doubled down on it, and he's found a door, and he has opened it... with blood.

"He is optimizing," Sterling says, quiet, almost admiring, and it's the closest thing to alarm Vaneck has ever heard out of him.

She doesn't tell him that a few dozen miles of simulated forest away, another tag she has been watching just stood up straighter than he has stood

in nineteen days, and turned toward people instead of away from them. She's getting very good at the things she doesn't tell Sterling. She's beginning to suspect she is keeping them for a reason she has yet to admit to herself.

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Chapter 18

The click-clack comes again.

Slow and mechanical, not wood creaking or a branch in the wind. The clear turn of a key in a lock, carrying up out of the dark valley below, steady and sure.

Jason stays still against the larch, his right hand on the worn grip at his hip. Arlo hangs low behind his left shoulder, light off, pressed to the hood until he's just a dark shape. The amber warning still pulses in the corner of his vision.

> **Atmospheric Density: Sector Threshold Exceeded. Unstable Elemental Combustive/Kinetic Residue Detected. Instability Level: Critical.**

He reads it once more and looks back to the valley, leaning onto the balls of his feet, knees soft. The stance is built into him now. He uses the tree for cover, not support, and moves down the slope in a crouch.

Within fifty yards the forest thins, the larch going sparse as if something pushed the life out of it in rings. Burned stumps replace the trunks, cut off a foot or two above the ground, red-orange embers smoldering in their cracks, rain hissing where it lands on them. The smoke stings his throat, pine sap

cooked into something harsh and chemical. He breathes carefully and picks his steps on the loose shale as the grade steepens.

Then the trees stop entirely, and the basin opens below him.

He stops at the rim.

The crater is wide enough that the far edge fades into the mist, and sunk several feet below the surrounding ground. Its floor is glass. Black, mirror-flat obsidian that froze everything under it when the heat hit, filling every crack and low spot, even the tread of boots and the shapes of gear. Rain beads on it and runs in thin silver lines. Heat still rises off it in slow invisible waves, a thick humid warmth wrong in the cold air.

They blew themselves up.

He slides down a short bank of shale, lands at the glass's edge, and steps onto it. His boots slip; he drops his center and takes short, careful steps. Arlo rises from his shoulder, glow gone to a cold scanning blue, and skims out ahead over the obsidian, lighting it in wide arcs. The glass casts the light sideways in long, warped reflections, and within them are shapes. A gauntlet half-sunk in the glass. A helmet plate with the visor sealed shut. A breastplate buckled forward, a line of Cyrillic melted at the edge but still readable, the name stamped there: Mikhail, the heat softening the letters but not taking them.

Jason kneels beside it, one knee on the warm glass, and reaches two fingers toward the fissure branching off the plate. His Identify registers the situation automatically.

Residue Classification: High-tier Kinetic Output + High-tier Flame Output. Simultaneous detonation.
Estimated combined yield: Sector-level.
Origin point: Central basin.
Server Balance Protocol: Override Failure.
Consequence: Environmental Feedback Loop, Terminal.

He draws his hand back slowly. *They set off both attacks at once. Two high-tier elementals, combined, amplified, and they combusted.* The Russians burned everything in this basin to the ground, themselves included.

Good thing I'm not an Elemental user.

He stands and runs his eyes around the rim in a slow circuit. The obsidian reaches right up to the scorched base of the surviving pines on the far ridge, a perfect record of exactly how far the heat carried before it stopped. Outside that line, those pines are still standing. He files it without meaning to, the way he files everything now: the blast had an edge, and past the edge, you lived.

The boss stayed back.

He's still on the thought when Enemy Detection fires, an icy spike into the base of his skull, the hairs on his arms lifting.

"Enemies approaching," Arlo warns.

Three shapes drag themselves over the crater rim and slide down the glass in jerky, grinding motions, bones working instead of muscle, each joint running on its own. Two are fused with slag and melted steel from the blast, gray metal threaded through their frames into rough armor at the ribs and shoulders. The third is smoother, its bones older and less damaged. All three carry iron swords, the rusted blades scraping lines across the black stone as they descend.

Jason steps back toward the center and touches the glass hilt, then pulls his mind off it. *Can't tag the glass. No point in trying.* His hand runs the harness instead and draws three thin iron throwing daggers between his fingers in one motion, his eyes never leaving the ridge.

The Necromancer steps out from behind a massive tree at the top of the far bank.

A copper-rimmed device hangs at its waist, holding a rotating clockwork cylinder that clicks and ticks in a slow, steady rhythm, matching the sound in the valley. Penetrating it is the Orange Key, turning as if someone were trying to unlock a lock.

Click-Clack.

The figure stands over seven feet tall, its skeletal frame covered in tattered, soot-stained robes. One hand holds a staff made from thighbones joined together, the joints sealed with dark green energy that pulses slowly, each pulse moving up the shaft like a heartbeat. The skull's empty eye sockets point down into the basin, still and patient, as if it already knows how things will end.

Three more skeletal figures descend from the charred branches in the surrounding tree line, landing on the crater rim with forceful, ringing impacts and sliding down into position around the glass bowl's perimeter.

The Announcer’s voice activates in Jason’s head with its usual theatrical timing.

Oh, now *this* is a premium encounter for our more solitary-minded contestants. One player against a full necromantic command structure. I’ll be honest with you, folks, the betting pool on solo viability here is... well, let’s call it *lopsided*.

Jason ignores it. He tracks the six thralls on the glass. The Necromancer has spread them eight to ten feet apart, blocking every obvious exit from the crater’s rim. The boss is watching.

He wants to see how I move before he attacks.

Jason clutches the daggers between his fingers, their leather grip smooth and familiar, the surface between them and his skin already warming as he holds them. He straightens slowly, makes his breathing deliberate and even, and wraps his left hand around his cape’s edge.

The Lurker’s Cape responds immediately.

Camouflage Active: [01:00]

The fabric bends light around him, turning his outline into a shimmer, a heat-blur of the space he stands in. Two of the nearest thralls follow the movement, their skull faces rotating toward him, but their targeting stutters as his image breaks up.

He takes three sideways steps onto a flat granite ledge jutting from the jet-black floor and cocks his arm.

The first tagged dagger leaves his hand low and fast, skimming over the defensive line of the nearest skeleton pair and burying itself in the scorched earth on the far side of the crater’s rim, ten feet past the thralls’ position.

The Necromancer sweeps the bone staff in a wide arc from the ridge, and the air between the staff and Jason rips open with the sound of a dozen small explosions. Bone shards, each shaped like a curved blade, fly across the basin in a volley. Jason dives forward into a roll, his right shoulder taking the impact on the slick obsidian as the shards explode against the granite ledge behind him, breaking it into loose rubble.

He comes up on one knee with grit in his teeth and his grip still locked on the two remaining daggers.

The thralls close in from three sides, drawn by the movement. The nearest slag-fused skeleton raises its sword in a stiff, mechanical overhead arc.

Jason Flashes.

The world turns into a blue-black streak, air rushing past him as the motion pulls him along the tether between his body and the tagged dagger in the ground. The skeleton's sword hits the glass where he was. He appears at the dagger's location behind the enemy line, knees bent, yanks the dagger free of the earth, and pivots his hips before the momentum stops.

The Glass Dagger comes out of the sheath in one fluid motion, the raw force of his swing driving the pale blade straight through the back of the slag-fused skeleton's skull. The brittle bone shatters with a dry, splintering crack, sending shards of ancient skull spinning into the air. The health bar above the entity doesn't diminish. It disappears. One instant, it exists, a red line hovering in his interface. Next, it's gone entirely, the entity detonating into a small silver cloud that sinks straight into the black glass below its collapsing frame.

The Announcer stutters.

...the, uh, the classification modifier is— allow me to confirm that damage figure because the log is... that is a *significant* critical multiplier for a weapon of that base stat

No time for it. Two more thralls come from the left. Jason reads their approach by their shoulders before they attack, both moving in a rigid, coordinated way, their iron swords aimed at his knee and throat simultaneously. He steps inside the throat-level swing instead of backing away, the rusted blade passing so close that the air brushes the sweat on his neck. Jason lunges in and drives the Glass Dagger into the joint where the thrall's sword arm meets its torso. The blade cuts through tendon and bone with a sickening crunch.

The second hit registers as another critical hit. The entity disintegrates.

He doesn't stop. He's already stepping right, setting his feet to read the remaining thralls' positions as the Necromancer raises its staff on the ridge.

The bone staff hits the ground with a loud crack, and green mist spreads out from the boss in a thick ring. It brings a choking smell, like stagnant water, crushed bone, and old, trapped air. The mist quickly covers the upper ridge, rolling down the crater bank in slow, heavy waves. Its color is bright,

pulsing with the same dark rhythm as the energy flowing on the staff. Jason's HUD marks it right away:

> **Decay Cloud: Movement Penalty 60%. Damage per second within radius.**

He pulls back from the crater's edge, giving himself distance from the cloud's lower edge as it bleeds down toward the glass floor. Four remaining thralls reposition along the rim, the Necromancer using the mist as a wall to hold Jason inside the basin while the thralls work the edges.

I need to take out the leader.

The thralls close in. He instantly pictures the angles, mapping the space in his mind as the interface confirms his instincts, drawing blue dotted paths across his display. He needs height. He needs to clear the cloud from above.

He throws the dagger high, in a steep arc that crests well above the Necromancer's skull before it begins to descend.

His body dissolves into the blue-black streak before the dagger peaks.

He Flashes along a steep diagonal line, moving quickly upward along the edge of the cloud. The decay mist sweeps over him. His muscles lock up as he passes through, and a burning pain cuts across his left shoulder, making him gasp as his health bar drops. The bar flashes in his vision. He keeps moving. The Flash ends with him resolving above the Necromancer's shoulder, empty air below his boots.

He's already falling when he drives the Glass Dagger down.

The blade finds the junction of the boss's neck and spine on the first strike. The second lands two inches to the left, punching through a gap in the fused bone carapace. The third drives straight down through the top of the shoulder into the dark, pulsing core beneath.

The Necromancer's response is instantaneous.

There is no sound or warning. A psychic wave bursts from the boss's skeleton, pushing out in all directions. Jason can't breathe as the force slams into him, throwing him off the boss's back and sending him ten feet across the ridge, where he lands hard on loose rock. The back of his head hits a half-buried stone. His health bar drops to thirty-two percent, the number flashing in urgent red.

He lies still for two full seconds, blinking mud and rain out of his eyes, the inside of his skull ringing.

Get up.

He gets up.

He presses his palms on the cold shale, fingers spread, and pushes himself up, his knees shaking. The Glass Dagger is still in his right hand, its pale blade glinting in the rain. He coughs once, steady and sharp, then stands up straight.

Two tagged daggers left. He readies them both, weighing one in each hand, and scans the ridge.

The Necromancer has turned to face him fully. The vacant eye sockets carry no readable expression, but the bone staff rises slowly, pointing toward him. The green decay cloud begins to contract, drawing back toward the boss in a tightening ring, pulling the mist inward like a drawn breath.

He's consolidating it to protect the core.

A bone wall rises from the ground to the boss's left, thick ribs and femurs pushing up from the shale in an interlocked arch, a half-dome of bone large enough to cover the boss's whole left side. A second wall begins to form on the right.

Jason hurls the first dagger low and wide, sending it spinning past the boss's right side at hip level, and immediately throws the second in the opposite direction, arcing it high and left over the left-hand bone wall.

The boss fires another bone-shard volley, and Jason is already moving, sprinting along the ridge as the shards explode where he stood. He keeps his eyes on the high dagger's arc, tracking its fall and judging the angle of the bone wall's edge against his path.

He Flashes left.

The linear pull carries him through the clean air to the left of the boss, resolving him at the high dagger's location with one foot on top of the bone wall's edge. He takes one step down the inner face of the structure, using it as a launching platform, and Flashes immediately to the low dagger before the Necromancer can reacquire his position.

The second Flash places him low at the boss's right hip.

The bone staff swings horizontally, a massive, sweeping blow aimed at chest height. Jason drops, his knees hitting the shale, and the staff passes safely above him. He lunges upward from the ground immediately, driving

off his left foot, and rams the Glass Dagger upward through the underside of the tailbone, shattering bone.

The blade finds the green core.

The critical strike notification is the brightest red he's ever seen in his HUD.

The Necromancer's bones lock rigid, every joint seizing simultaneously, the green glow at its core blazing white and then gone. The decay cloud evaporates. The remaining thralls collapse on the basin glass below like marionettes with their strings cut, their forms dissolving into harmless silver clouds that drift toward the obsidian floor and disappear.

The Necromancer comes apart slowly, the large skeletal frame stiffening, then dissolving outward into a wide, cold cloud of silver particles. They catch the rain and drift like smoke in every direction, sinking through the air without a sound.

The bone staff's energy cuts off, and it clatters against the shale, separating into multiple pieces.

Where the boss stood, the now copper-colored bone core lies in the shale, the rhythmic *click-clack* vibrating delicately against the stone, slowing. It clicks three more times and then cracks. Out falls the Orange Key, pulsing with a warm amber light, slow and steady, and next to it is a pile of loot.

The Announcer takes a long pause.

Well. Another pause. **This player turned out to be a pain in the ass for...**

A loud static explodes through his eardrums. Jason waits to see if the Announcer's voice is coming back. So far, it hasn't.

What the fuck was that?

Jason stands still on the ridge for three seconds. He breathes slowly and steadily. His health bar blinks red at thirty-two percent. His left shoulder burns from where the decay cloud hit him. He wipes mud from his chin with his wrist and puts the Glass Dagger back in its sheath.

He immediately casts Minor Heal, pops a health pill, and minimizes the Level Up notifications.

I'll take care of that later.

"You just..." Arlo drifts downward, his white light warming the black glass.

"Don't." Jason tightens his harness strap, taking a few more throwing blades from his inventory and sliding them into the harness.

“The blade went right up his—”

“Stop.”

“I am noting the fact.”

“Note it quietly.”

Arlo gives a single, short frequency and goes peacefully silent.

Jason walks down the crater bank and crosses the black glass floor, stepping carefully on the slippery surface until he crouches by the Orange Key. It feels warm against his bare fingers, warmer than the locket or the Glass Dagger, and it vibrates gently through his palm and up his wrist. He turns it over, reads the sigil, and opens his inventory with a glance.

His HUD flashes immediately.

> **Inventory Error: Category Quest Key Bound to World Space.**

Jason runs a wet thumb over the vibrating amber sigil. *That must be what Wei was doing when she was flipping the key between her fingers.*

He reaches into his inventory and finds a strip of raw leather cord, pulling it out and biting one end to hold it while his fingers work the other end through the key’s circular head. He ties the knot with his teeth and his right hand working together, pulling it tight against the key’s shaft, then slips the loop over his wet hair. It settles against his chest beside Magda’s locket, heavier than it looks, the amber pulse out of rhythm with the pendant’s cold stillness.

Two things against his chest now. One warm, one cold. Both earned.

He rolls the left shoulder once, testing it, the burn fading from sharp to dull, and turns to the long dark slope rising west out of the Russian sector, back toward his starting territory and whatever he left unfinished there. He thinks of the Necromancer that nearly killed him in the green zone, weeks ago and a different man ago—a Tomb-Keeper Acolyte, one of the Vampire Lord’s servants. The Green Key is still out there, with its master, in the Cemetery of Feratu.

Arlo drifts forward, lighting the trail ahead in a broad, clean white arc, the orb’s pulse slow and steady as Jason takes his first deliberate strides up the slope. “Your Health Points have returned to 100 percent.”

“Yup. Not walking around at thirty-two percent again.”

“What is our new destination?”

“Back to where we started. I told Heather I’d meet her there soon.”

He doesn’t hesitate. He leans into the climb, shifting his center of gravity forward, and breaks into a full sprint. His boots throw wet shale behind him as he runs westward, toward the people he left behind.

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Chapter 19

The slope levels out a quarter mile before the old orchard, and Jason's sprint drops to a jog, then a walk, then nothing at all.

He stands in the shadow of a collapsed stone wall, pressing one hand against the rocks, and waits for his breathing to slow. He counts three breaths in, four out. The gray light above shines through the trees, making the wet stone look even duller. The air is dense with the smell of stagnant mud, cold ash from an old fire, and the sweet, rotting smell of wild apples. On his third breath, his left shoulder aches from the lingering effects of the decay cloud, so he rolls it, testing the joint. The pain is dull and manageable.

His right hand checks the two objects hanging against his chest. First is the locket, cool iron felt through his damp shirt, its weight steady and familiar. Then the Orange Key, still a little warm and pulsing, the amber light slower now, as if it's drifting off to sleep. Both are there. Both safe.

Good.

He peers through a gap in the wall.

The orchard ahead is so overgrown it feels almost unfriendly. The old apple trees twist their thick branches over each other, their bark split and black with moisture. The churned mud shows what happened here: two sets of heavy, regular tracks and one lighter, more careful set. In the tangled branches, a faint line of smoke rises from a small fire, now mostly ash.

Voices carry through the air. One of them is loud.

Trent's voice is always loud.

Jason tilts his head, hearing the pattern of the words before he understands them. The rhythm is familiar: someone trying to sound in charge to people who have stopped paying attention. He's heard it many times. Now, he can recognize it even from fifty yards away through the trees.

An ash tree stands at the orchard's eastern edge, its lowest branch hanging eight feet off the ground, thick enough to hold weight without flexing, positioned directly above the clearing's blind spot. Two seconds of study confirm the bark will hold. He takes three running steps and catches the branch with both hands, swings his legs up and over, and settles into the fork above it with no sound beyond a single soft scrape of his boot sole finding its footing.

He crouches, wrapping the gray Lurker's Cape tightly around himself until the fabric lies flat. The interface shows his Stealth skill is active, a gentle shimmer at the edge of his vision that quickly fades. From above, he can see the whole clearing.

Arlo. He sends the thought inward, a familiar directional nudge. *Don't let them see you for now. Keep a lookout in case someone tries anything.*

"Understood." The blue orb's warmth dims in the back of his mind, its frequency falling to a low hum, then guttering out entirely. The pale phosphorescent light that always hovers at Jason's shoulder dissolves away to a pinprick. He is fully dark.

Trent moves across the muddy clearing in a tight, repeated path, his heavy armor clanking with each step. He carries his broadsword on his shoulder, carrying himself like someone who knows he's being watched. His jaw is tight, and his pale blue eyes scan the tree line in quick, sharp glances. His shield is turned outward to catch the light, heavy steel Jason has never seen him carry, scavenged from somewhere in the days since Derek died. The left side of his breastplate is scuffed, and one of his greave buckles is bent, both old damage, not from today.

Evie sits on a log at the far edge of the clearing, her dark eyes fixed on the traveling merchant crouched in the middle distance. She turns an apple between her fingers and presses a knife into it, peeling a long curl of skin away from the flesh. The movement is rhythmic and precise, each stroke

identical to the last. Her tunic is mud-stained to the elbows. The knife is sharper than it looks.

Heather stands by a rotting fence post at the north edge of the clearing, holding herself perfectly still, not because she is resting but because she is focused. Her fingers tap a slow, steady pattern on her recurve bow, a quiet ticking which corresponds to the way her eyes scan the area. She checks each section only once.

She's already looking for something.

Jason watches for thirty seconds without moving.

Trent stops pacing and says something to Evie, who keeps her back to him. She doesn't answer, just peels another strip from the apple. Trent's jaw tightens. He turns away, resumes his path, and clanks back across the mud.

Heather's scan arrives at the ash tree just as Jason activates his cape.

Camouflage Active: [01:25]

Heather does not notice. The Lurker's Cape holds. Her focus tracks three feet to his left and moves on.

He picks his moment and drops.

He lands in the soft mud, knees bending to absorb the impact, both hands out for balance, his front foot angled to keep from slipping. The Stealth skill marks the landing as a success: no sound, no crunch, no sucking noise from the mud.

He stands upright behind Heather and deactivates the cape.

She starts to turn on instinct, grabbing an arrow and nocking it with a blue light jumping from her hand to the arrow. She stops. The magic fades from her hand as she looks up at his face under the hood.

Her mouth closes.

A boot scrapes. Trent pivots on his heel, armor announcing every inch of it, and closes the distance across the clearing in four strides. He plants himself two feet away, broad chest forward, the broadsword's point lowered in a line toward Jason's sternum.

"Where have you been?"

It's less of a question and more of an accusation.

Jason looks at the point. Then up at Trent's face. He doesn't step back.

Ten feet across the clearing, Evie stops peeling the apple. She hasn't looked up. She hasn't spoken. But the knife has gone still.

"Solo run," Jason says.

"Solo." Trent exhales through his nose and shifts his weight to his back leg, crossing one gauntleted arm over the other. His eyes drop to Jason's chest and stay there. "That." He nods at the amber light pulsing beneath Jason's collar. "That is an Orange Key."

"Yes."

"From the Russian sector."

"Yes."

Trent's chin pulls back a fraction, a small, involuntary adjustment. He covers it by pulling his mouth into a tight shape that wants to be a smile and fails. "So you just wandered into another team's zone and pulled a Quest Key." He says it in the register of someone explaining an obvious error to the person who made it. "Solo."

"That's what I said."

"Not our zone, another team's zone," Trent repeats. He starts to pace again, a tighter circle now with Jason at its center.

Jason looks at him, annoyed at the thought of needing to repeat himself.

"Right." Trent waves one gauntlet. "Point is, acquisition of keyed progression material in an active combat zone constitutes a shared-party resource under any reasonable framework. We've been holding this position, maintaining zone integrity, keeping the camp functional, while you've been—" he gestures at nothing "—freelancing."

He's reciting. Somebody fed him those words, and he probably doesn't know what half of them mean.

"I don't have a party," Jason says.

Trent stops. "You have this party."

The only sound is water dripping off the apple branches.

Trent steps in, closing the last of the space, a few inches taller and a lot wider, the gauntlet coming up past Jason's collar toward the leather cord, fingers spreading for it.

Jason dips his left shoulder. Barely. The cape shifts with him, changing the angle, and the gauntlet closes on nothing. He doesn't step back, doesn't flinch, his eyes steady on Trent's face, his fingers floating just above the pale hilt. Trent looks at his own empty gauntlet. He looks back up, and it moves across his face in order: confusion, then anger, then something

underneath that he can’t cover, the memory of a man who used to shove this one to the back of the party and now can’t get a hand on him.

Before he can rebuild his face, the ground moves.

Not a tremor. A localized detonation: a section of the failing wall five yards to the left blows outward in dark shale and loose mortar, and through the gap comes something large and fast and deeply wrong. A Silt-Stalker forces its bulk through at a low angle, segmented carapace scraping stone on both sides, broad across the thorax, chitin fused in overlapping plates the color of withered clay, its front two limbs not legs but scythes, long and serrated and notched from use, folded against its body in the compressed posture of something that has been waiting. It clears the wall and rises, the scythes spreading wide.

The interface reads it immediately:

Silt-Stalker: Level 18. Aggressive. Venomous Chitin Discharge.

Level 18. This far into the starting sector. Daisuke was right: the boundary is collapsing, pushing the outer-zone predators closer as the usable map shrinks.

Trent yells. “Get ready!” His shield comes up on pure reflex, and the broadsword sweeps off his shoulder, but the combination of the armor’s weight and the sucking mud beneath his boots betrays him. His right boot locks. His left knee drops. The shield is angled wrong, tilted rather than squared, and as the Silt-Stalker’s front scythes rise and begin their forward arc, Trent’s breathing goes shallow and fast, loud enough to hear from three feet away. His hands are shaking. He’s too slow.

Too slow, Trent.

Jason is already moving.

He doesn’t think about the distance. His right hand has the tagged throwing dagger out of his harness in a single clean pull.

No signs of weakness. Only steel, clay, and the simple reliability of a physical tag he can count on.

The throw is low and flat, the blade spinning past the right side of the Silt-Stalker’s skull in a trajectory that anchors the tag in the carapace behind the beast’s neck. His legs are carrying him forward and left simultaneously, circling, keeping his body outside the scythe-arc’s radius.

The Silt-Stalker drives its front limbs down toward Trent’s frozen, shaking shield.

Jason activates Item Linking.

The world collapses into a blue-black streak. Air tears past him. The pull is instantaneous and directional, the connection between his body and the tagged blade snapping taut and reeling him through it.

His boots find the slick chitin at the back of the beast’s skull, but the creature reacts instantly to the sudden weight. A low, vibrating hum trembles through its carapace, and the sensory plates along its vertebrae flare open. A jet of yellow, corrosive acid sprays upward—the venomous chitin discharge.

Soft joints are behind the skull, but the vents are open.

Jason shifts his weight down and rolls his left shoulder back, flattening himself against the wet shell. His boots slip, but his low center of gravity keeps him steady. The acid jet hisses past his ear, burning the grass below with small, popping fires that leave black marks. The Lurker’s Cape catches some stray drops, sizzling in warning.

Before the monster can execute a follow-up thrash, Jason drives his right knee down into the narrow hinge joint behind the Silt-Stalker’s head, anchoring himself against the wild momentum.

The Glass Dagger is out and moving before the beast can recover.

The pale blade finds the compound eye on the first arc, driving between the faceted plates with a wet, splitting crunch. He twists the hilt, rotating the edge, and the critical strike notification blazes bright red across his display. The Silt-Stalker’s scythes lock mid-motion. Its segmented legs buckle sequentially from front to back, a cascading mechanical failure, and Jason launches off the collapsing carapace before it goes down, his feet finding the ground two yards away, both knees bent on landing, his left shoulder absorbing the roll smoothly.

The Silt-Stalker dissolves quietly. Its hard shell softens into silver mist, just like Jason has seen many times before. The mist sinks into the grass, and the creature disappears.

Trent is on his back in the mud. Not from any impact. The beast made no shockwave as it went down. He fell because his knees gave out. His shield lies beside him, his broadsword loose and pointed at nothing, his chest heaving under the battered armor, his blue eyes wide on Jason with every pretense stripped off them.

Jason stands over him. He doesn’t offer a hand. He doesn’t gloat. There’s nothing to say, and so he doesn’t say it, and the not-saying is the whole of it: he’s not going to do to Trent what Trent did to him.

A splinter of the Silt-Stalker’s venomous chitin has landed ten feet away. The sound of someone hitting the ground follows it: heavy, solid, the particular slack sound of a body losing its own control. Behind the willow at the clearing’s edge, a figure that had been pressed into the hollow of the tree’s split trunk lies face down in the grass, one hand wrapped around its own throat, the other digging at the ground.

Blood comes through the fingers in short, bright pulses. Yet the NPC’s mouth moves in a rigid, hollow loop, the voice empty of human panic: “Trade routes are open. Trade routes are open. Trade...”

The mechanical repetition glitches and cracks as the fingers claw deeper into the sod.

Evie is already running.

The apple is sitting in the mud. She’s passed Jason’s left shoulder before he fully registers her movement, her boots throwing mud behind her, both knees hitting the ground beside the convulsing merchant with a crack that sounds genuinely painful. She doesn’t flinch from it. She flips him over, jams both elbows down across the merchant’s shoulders, pinning the flailing body against the grass with her own weight, and the merchant’s thrashing stills by force rather than persuasion.

Her hand goes straight to the wound.

No hesitation. No assessment pause. Her right hand drives directly onto the split at the merchant’s neck, two fingers pressed flat against the vessel, and her left palm braces the jaw to hold the head still.

The magic isn’t gentle. It’s a sealant, a radiant light that fuses the skin and blood vessels. A column of white-hot vapor hisses from her fingers into the wound, flooding the air with the sharp smell of burning hair. The merchant’s legs kick once, then twice, then stop as the wound seals from the inside, ending the broken words.

Evie sits back on her heels. She examines both forearms in turn. Her expression is the same as it was when she was peeling the apple: focused, rhythmic, assessing. She seizes the hem of her dirty tunic and wipes the blood from her hands in two long strokes.

She doesn’t look at Jason. She doesn’t look at anyone.

She stands, turns, and walks back to the log, ignoring the apple on the ground.

Jason watches her sit down. She picks up the knife, examines the edge, and sets it on her knee.

That's new.

The clearing goes quiet, rain dripping. Trent sits up in the mud, smeared, trying to recover a composure there's no one left to perform for, and says nothing. He picks up the broadsword, holds it loose, a hand on his knee, and doesn't look back at Jason.

Footsteps from the right, deliberate and evenly spaced over the shale from the blown wall. Heather picks her way around the biggest pieces without looking down, her eyes on Jason's face the whole way, and stops three feet off. She studies his gear, but not the way Trent did, not with greed. The cape, the glass at his hip, the harness under his clothes. Her gray eyes go still and flat the way they do when she's working something out, her attention drifting a little left and right of his center of mass, hunting the stat bars he keeps suppressed.

He lets her look. He doesn't lower the suppression.

"Your speed," she says. Her voice is low, only just above the sound of the dripping trees. "You moved so fast." She tilts her head a fraction. "What was that?"

"It's a technique called Item Linking."

"Over that distance." She glances at the spot where the Silt-Stalker dissolved. "With a throw arc that cleared the scythe reach." Her eyes come back. "You modeled the area layout while Trent was still raising his shield."

He doesn't confirm or deny it.

She nods once, a small, private recognition of a calculation that came out correct. "I can't see your numbers." She says it flatly, the way you state a variable that keeps failing to render. "I've been watching your health bar since you dropped out of that tree, and I can't get a tooltip to load."

"I know."

"That's not normal; my Identify stat is high enough that I should be able to see it."

He doesn't reply; he just offers a half smile.

Her look stays the same, but her focus sharpens. She glances at Trent, still in the mud, trying to wipe his breastplate with his gauntlet, then at Evie, who hasn't moved, and then looks back at Jason.

She takes one step closer. The distance between them collapses to something that requires a lower voice, and she uses it.

“We’re not fighting about the key,” she says. Her voice is below the reach of the dripping trees. “And Trent’s not your problem right now.” She takes another half-breath. “Eric is gone.”

Jason’s breathing stays even. “Gone where?”

“Back.” Her jaw tightens. “To the Cemetery of Feratu. Alone.”

The amber pulse of the Orange Key moves against his chest, slow and steady.

“He heard about how strong you’ve gotten on your own. How you don’t have to share kills, XP, or loot with anyone.” Her eyes don’t leave his. “I don’t know how. Someone talked, or the Announcer’s commentary reached the wrong ears, or he was listening closer than we thought.” She exhales through her nose. “It started a little while back. He stopped eating with the group. Stopped talking about coordination. He was running damage calculations every time I looked at him, just sitting there with his eyes somewhere else, running numbers.” Her voice stays quiet, stays controlled, but the careful neutrality underneath it is working hard. “He went back to get the Green Key. By himself.”

A raindrop strikes the back of Jason’s neck and runs under his collar.

“The Vampire Lord,” he says.

“Yes.”

He studies her face, noticing the dark circles under her eyes and how she stands, not stiff, but tense, saving her energy for what matters. She hasn’t wasted any words since coming closer.

She just stands there and watches him understand.

“He goes in there alone,” Jason says, “and whatever happens is going to spread outward. I’ve seen it. A mid-level boss following another one.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, yes.” Her eyes don’t move. “And we’re not in a position to stop it from here.”

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Chapter 20

The words sit in the damp air between them, no echo, lost among the wet bark and dripping pine needles.

Heather stands unmoving. She doesn't look away from him.

Cold drizzle falls in thin, colorless sheets across the clearing. Behind her, Trent drags his steel gauntlet across his breastplate again. The harsh, scraping noise is like someone trying to scrub away a stain that won't come out.

Evie sits on a log nearby, a dark shape against the gray mist. Her clean, sharp knife rests across her knees, her fingers lightly touching the flat of the blade. She stays silent, only listening, her eyes moving between them as though searching for a weakness. The smell of sweet woodsmoke has faded, replaced by the slight, metallic smell of blood and charred hair, a reminder of how quickly she acted on the merchant's throat just minutes ago.

"He left yesterday." Heather's voice drops, a dry, raspy sound. "Maybe the day before. I stopped keeping track of time when I realized it didn't change anything."

Yesterday. Maybe the day before.

The cemetery is about four miles east along the broken forest road, or closer to five if you take the detour around the flooded area near the low stone wall. At a steady pace, Eric would've reached the outer border within hours. Whatever happened to him inside that cemetery has already finished.

Heather shifts her weight, her leather boots pressing into the black moss. The wet ground keeps the shape of her heel, water quickly filling it. She points a dirt-stained finger toward the dark eastern edge of the forest, where the safe zone ends.

“It wasn’t sudden,” she says. “That’s what I need you to understand. It wasn’t one bad turn.” Her jaw tightens until the tendons stand out. “It began just after the Announcer flagged your systematic tier classifications. Someone talked, or he mapped the progression himself. He spent four days running numbers in his head, just...” She raises a single, soot-streaked finger, tracing a tight, frantic circle at her temple. A tired, automatic gesture, rubbed smooth of any real irony. “Every minute, every day, sitting there with his focus miles away, calculating.”

Jason’s hand drops to the hilt of the Glass Dagger. He doesn’t draw it. The pale, smooth grip rests cool under his palm. It feels light, almost fragile, compared to the heavy iron sword at Trent’s hip. Once meant as a mercy, it is now used for quick, precise killing. Jason keeps his breathing steady and even.

Next to his collarbone, his equipment rig stays completely dark. There’s no blue glow, no low hum from a hovering companion. Only the slight warmth of the hidden orb of Arlo by his shoulder shows that his watcher is still there, quietly guarding him.

“He decided your growth was a result of your going solo.” Heather’s knuckles tighten around the strap on her pack. “No having to share loot, no sharing XP. He built a system of assumptions around it. *If Jason can survive the wild alone, then there’s no reason he couldn’t as well. He’s better than Jason. Smarter too.*” She forces a cold breath from her lungs. “And if we were holding him back, then like Derek...”

She cuts herself off. The name hangs in the cold air, wet and heavy.

A raindrop slips past Jason’s collar, trailing cold down his back. He remains perfectly still.

“He stopped sharing,” Heather says. She steps back, pulling her elbows tight against her sides as if trying to shrink away from the memory. “No more tactical input. No checking the formation.” Her stare drifts to the pine needles near Jason’s shoulder. “At first, he would plan out every coin, every health pill, every looted piece of gear. He would go over every guard pattern and create strategies to make our team better.” Her chest rises and falls. “Then he went quiet. Just, quiet.”

Behind her, Trent drives his broadsword deep into the ground, using the crossguard to heave his bulk up to one knee. The mud sighs as it releases his greaves. He keeps his eyes on the ground, the scratched crest on his chest plate dark with grease.

“We had that piece of parchment with the stupid key on it, and that’s as far as we ever got.” Trent stays on one knee, bracing both hands on his sword hilt, his breath coming in uneven, shallow whistles. “Going back into that marsh was a death sentence. We already lost Derek.”

Jason turns his eyes to him. Slow, deliberate, no hurry. His gaze meets Trent’s face and holds it, calm and even, asking nothing and giving nothing back. Trent’s voice catches. The defensive anger drains out of his shoulders and leaves him slouched, staring at the mud under his boots.

The clearing goes back to the steady drone of the rain.

Evie stands up from the log. She moves without hesitation, no longer cautious as she once was. She walks across the slick stones with quiet, steady steps and puts a firm hand on Trent’s shoulder guard. Her hold is not gentle; it is steady and grounding, like an anchor.

Jason looks back at Heather.

Her calm, controlled manner starts to break. Something inside her is coming apart.

“He thought we would abandon him.” Her voice cracks, the final word stuck in her throat. She pushes her closed fist hard against her sternum. “After Derek. After you left. He drew up three separate recovery plans for the key. Walkthroughs. Lane diagrams. Projected output curves, he called them.” She presses her fist harder, as if she could stanch it. “We refused. Every single time. I refused.” She ignores the rain gathering in her lashes. “He took it as a verdict.”

The Orange Key pulses against Jason’s collarbone, a dull, rhythmic warmth that feels like a mockery of life. He slips a hand beneath the high, rough collar of his tunic, his fingers following the flat edges of the key.

Eric ran the numbers and walked into the graveyard alone. Because he believed that being alone equaled strength.

Because he watched me survive by cutting away every tether, and he assumed my seclusion was a walkthrough guide to copy.

The realization settles inside him, heavy and cold.

“He truly believes the Green Key is his redemption, his proof that he was right all along.” Heather presses both palms to her chest, her words barely

carrying over the steady patter of the canopy. “Not just the tactical advantage. He thinks that if he kills Feratu and claims the key, it will validate his entire structure. That he was right. That Derek’s death was a necessary expenditure.” She pauses, her breath faltering. “That it wasn’t just him running away to save himself.”

Jason lets go of the key, his hand dropping back to the rough cloth of his trousers.

He looks past her to the eastern trail.

The light between the pine trees fades into a gray mist as the path goes down toward the flooded basin. Beyond that mist, he knows, the headstones start, all too clean and too quiet. Such silence there feels a bit less like peace and more like something waiting.

He knows the weight of those heavy mausoleum doors.

It’s likely too late to help him.

Derek’s body didn’t disappear when he died. Dissolution seems reserved for things created here. So, if Eric did make it in, his corpse shouldn’t just disappear when he dies either. The cemetery will keep his body. He will become just another piece of debris in a graveyard already full of it.

Jason’s fingers tap a fast, silent cadence against his thigh before he stills them.

Heather takes a single, short step forward. Her hand rises, her fingers caressing the dark edge of his Lurker’s Cape for a brief, desperate second before she pulls back.

“I can’t read your stats.” Heather looks at him, her voice stripped of everything but the stark request beneath it. “I don’t know your current abilities. I don’t know what you have built out there in the dark.” She meets his eyes. “But I saw the path of that throwing knife. You cleared the scythe’s arc before Trent could even lock his shield.” She swallows hard. “We can’t get through there without you. We can’t survive what is waiting in that mausoleum. And even if we reached him...” She shakes her head. “We can’t drag him back alone.”

The rain continues its steady, indifferent assault.

A branch overhead slips under its load, dumping a heavy pocket of water onto the ferns behind Jason with a sharp slap.

He closes his eyes.

He breathes in the cold, wet air, which tastes of rot and stone.

Eric believed that every choice is a transaction. Rewards must outweigh the risks. But that's not who I am. And now Eric is matching his level against an enemy he can't beat, because he mistook my seclusion for a strategy.

He was wrong about the route. But he was right that everything here has a price.

Jason opens his eyes.

He nods once. A single, decisive movement.

Heather lets out a long, shuddering breath, her shoulders dropping as the terrible tension leaves her frame.

Trent pushes himself up, Evie's hand helping him until he stands fully upright. He doesn't speak. He drags his heavy iron sword from the mud, letting it hang low, his eyes fixed on the eastern trail with the blank, empty stare of a man who has run out of things to argue with.

Evie steps back, her fingers touching the hilt of her dagger. She checks the sheath with a soft, final click.

Jason turns toward the eastern path. Then he stops and turns back.

For three weeks, the suppression has been the one thing he wouldn't spend. His profile is a resource; hand the full ledger to people who run on threat metrics, and you become an asset to be managed. He said as much to Mei. He built his whole survival on it.

He thinks of Budi's open palm. Of a smith who checked his wrists before she said a word about the fall.

"I'll show you this once," he says. "I don't want a word from anyone. I'm not doing it to brag. I'm doing it so you know I'm not the weak player who left. And so you know that if it's in my power, I'm going to keep you alive."

He lifts two fingers and drags the suppression down, and his sheet unfolds into the gray air between them, brighter than the drizzle, every line of it open.

Level 19
Stats
Attack Damage 7
Physical Strength 7
Carry Capacity 8
Physical Resistance 13
Mental Resistance 8

Elemental Resistance 8
Nature Resistance 10
Reflexes 25
Speed 29 (30 base, -1 from Iron-Bound Keepsake)
Dodge 29 (30 base, -1 from Iron-Bound Keepsake)
Parry 4
Ranged 10
Health Points 25
Recovery 21
Endurance 14
Energy 9
Energy Recharge 7
Identify 13
Enemy Detection 13
Intelligence 11
Vision 8
Crit Rate 38 (86%)
Crit Damage 39 (2,154%)
Abilities
Conjure Companion Level 5
Stealth Level 7
Detect Stealth Level 3
Third Eye Level 3
Daggers Level 3
Thrown Dagger Accuracy Level 6
Thrown Dagger Power Level 6
Major Heal Level 3
Minor Heal Level 2

It hangs there. The Attack Damage of seven, the Strength of seven, the numbers of a player the system priced dead in the first week. Then the Crit line, and the multiplier that turns a seven into a killing blow, and the Speed and Dodge that no starting build should carry.

Heather reads it once, top to bottom, the way she reads everything, and her eyes stop on the crit column, and then on the two lines at the bottom, *Major Heal, Minor Heal*, and something moves in her face that isn’t awe. It’s the recalculation of a person she thought she understood.

Nobody speaks. Trent nods once, slow, and looks away, and it isn't the nod of a man conceding a point. It's the nod of a man who has just understood he was never in danger from Jason, and that the difference between them was never the numbers.

Jason closes the sheet with a flick, and it folds back into nothing.

The edge of the cape drags through the wet grass as he steps onto the overgrown trail, the ground soft and black under his boots, the canopy thickening until the daylight goes to a heavy gray. Behind him, the sounds of them fall in: Heather's light, measured pace, Evie's careful, silent weight on the stones, the slow, heavy drag of Trent's plate.

They are moving.

The Orange Key rests warm and quiet against his chest. The Glass Dagger is at his hip, and a silent, fragile promise sits around his neck. No longer *nobody else*. The path leads down into the gray, toward the low wall, the flooded hollow, and the heavy iron doors where nothing has ever truly rested in peace.

He keeps his eyes on the trail and walks, and for the first time since the cemetery took Derek, he's walking toward it with people rather than following them into it.

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CHAPTER 21

The trail slopes down from the safe zone, curving as it narrows and the trees close in on both sides. Jason leads, five steps ahead. Wet grass brushes against the bottom of his Lurker's Cape, soaking it. Trent follows, his iron plate clanging at each step, the sound reverberating off the nearby trees. Evie and Heather move more quietly, their steps muffled by the black mulch of rotting leaves.

A hollow spreads out below, filled with rainwater and bordered by a thin line of weeping willows. Their long branches dip into the water, drifting with the slow current like green ribbons.

Jason stops.

Arlo appears suddenly at Jason's collar, his blue light flashing from nothing to full brightness in a sharp pulse. He doesn't drift or hover. He just appears, his glow cold and direct in the foggy air. His voice is louder, meant for everyone.

"Three. Under the willows. Coming up from the waterline. The one on the left has a sword. The middle one has a chain flail. The third has nothing, which I wish to note is somehow more concerning."

Heather and Trent both snap their heads toward Arlo in surprise, and then to the waterline.

Jason's fingers drop to the hilt of the Glass Dagger.

Three skeletal thralls slip out from under the willows, their joints clicking. The first holds a short sword. The second drags a flail, its chain dropping orange rust flakes as it moves. The third has no weapon, its jaw open in a grimace, fingers spread and curled, just as Arlo warned.

Arlo dims immediately, pulling back to the faint blue-gray dot at the edge of Jason's vision.

He steps backward into the shadow of a thick oak trunk, mapping the terrain.

Trent rolls his shoulder, lowers his chin behind his heavy steel shield, and sets his boots in the mud with a wet thud. The lead skeleton swings its short sword in a wide arc. Trent lifts his shield, smashing it into the skeleton's jaw. Bone cracks, and one cheekplate caves in. The skeleton staggers, off balance. Trent reacts quickly, swinging his broadsword in a flat stroke that splits the creature at the ribcage.

Evie moves like a shadow at the edge of the fight. She circles to the side, low and quick, her dagger catching the faint light. She drives the blade into the second thrall's spine where the vertebrae meet, a perfect strike. She twists, breaking the alignment. The chain falls into the mud, rattling as the skeleton's arms go limp. With a second quick thrust to the base of the skull, the rest of the bones collapse into the mud, and she retreats behind Trent.

The third skeleton lunges at Evie. Trent blocks its flailing arm with his shield and pushes hard, and its other hand rakes across his shoulder, claws screeching through the plate. Bone scrapes against iron with a sharp sound as the skeleton's boots slide back, leaving deep marks in the ground. Heather acts quickly. She raises her bow and fires a shimmering blue arrow at the skeleton's sternum, stunning it. She immediately fires two more, killing it.

Before the last bones hit the mud, Evie lifts her hand. Pale green light spreads over Trent's shoulder where a claw tore through his armor. The healing is quick and precise, more like a field dressing than a showy spell.

Jason stands still in the oak's shadow. Evie slips back quietly, her weight balanced on her feet. On the other side, Heather adjusts her bow, waiting just over a second and then also casting Minor Heal on Trent's shoulder.

Much better. A real improvement.

The skeletons do not remain. In seconds, their bones dissolve into a greasy silver mist that washes away with the rain, leaving only the rusted flail and short sword sinking into the clay.

“See, we haven’t just been sitting around with our thumbs up our asses either,” Trent says confidently.

Evie cleans her dagger on her mud-splattered leather skirt, breathing in steady, controlled rhythms. Trent wipes his blade on his thigh, then leans on his broadsword, chest rising and falling under his dented armor.

They walk without speaking toward the cemetery gate. Rain washes the mud from their boots as they climb the small hill.

The cemetery gate is a rotting wooden frame in an eroding stone wall that circles the area, its mortar now just loose chalk. Jason bypasses the gate and leads them through a gap where the wall has collapsed, the stones lying flat in the tall grass, then heads toward the mausoleum.

He stops two paces inside the wall.

The way forward is empty. Not cleared or swept, just empty, as if everything that was here is gone. The defensive fog at the entrance is gone, too. Grave markers stand in rows, exposed and bare in the rain, with nothing moving between them. No wards glow along the edge. No ghouls move through the grass.

Arlo emerges near his left collarbone as a dim, low blue. Not scanning. Just present.

Jason moves toward a place he has seen every day in his memories. The spot where Derek’s body should be is empty. There’s no corpse, no sign of a fallen player.

Instead, a thin layer of silver-black sediment sits, older and more worn than fresh essence, but just as heavy and unnatural.

Trent halts, his broadsword tip dragging in the weeds. “Derek. His body... it should be right there. Players don’t despawn.”

“No, they don’t,” Jason says, his voice emotionless.

“This is wrong.” Heather’s voice is scarcely a whisper behind him, masked by the rain. Her hand tightens on her bow.

Jason doesn’t answer. He moves deeper.

The center of the cemetery opens into a wide clearing, and the ground shows clear signs that something happened. A deep trench runs from northeast to southwest, its edges black and glassy where heat or energy fused the clay. Three headstones in the second row are broken into pieces. A fourth leans sharply, its base cracked. Pieces of a wooden coffin are scattered across the grass, some still sending thin wisps of smoke into the rain.

“Something hit this hard.” Evie kneels near the trench, her fingers running over the black, glassy rim. “From above, I think.” She tilts her head, her hood slipping back in the drizzle. “Or from within.”

The mausoleum sits at the clearing’s center on a raised dais of cracked stone steps. Jason takes the steps in two strides and stops at the threshold.

The sarcophagus is empty. Its lid is broken into several pieces on the floor, and the inside walls are scorched in long arcs, as if something blasted heat into it. The air is saturated with the smell of old stone, ash, and something darker.

No key. Whatever Feratu was keeping, the coffin isn’t keeping it now, and nowhere in the room is there a glow the color of the quest marker that has burned in the corner of his vision since the first night.

“Does anybody know what abilities Eric was building up?” Jason asks, looking at Heather.

“No, but I heard him mention a few times that vampires are weak to fire.”

Trent stops at the lower step, his sword tip resting on his boot. He stares at the empty tomb, his jaw working.

Jason circles the sarcophagus slowly. Arlo floats above the opening, his light shimmering into the interior. Jason activates Detect Stealth, letting the skill spread out from him as he scans the area. Nothing is hidden in the crypt’s corners. There is no shimmer on the wall where a door might be, and no system signature that resembles a key.

His Identify skill catches something near the north wall.

He walks over to it. A shoulder guard lies against the stone, its weathered leather strap buckled tighter than usual. Eric’s.

Heather touches the metal guard with the tip of her bow, her chin trembling softly. “He made it in.”

Evie stands a foot further along the wall, looking down at something on the floor near the sarcophagus. Jason moves to her.

The liquid rests in a pool on the dry stone, untouched by rain under the mausoleum’s arch. It clings to the stone with an odd heaviness, thick and silver-black, like cooled solder. His Identify skill takes two full seconds to process before a label appears.

Concentrated Essence.

No further description loads. No secondary data.

Jason stares at it. The pool is about the size of a hand, and it sits between the sarcophagus and Eric’s armor at the wall. *There should be a body in here. If Eric died on this floor, his corpse would be here, the way Derek’s should have been.* But the floor is bare, and this liquid isn’t blood. It sits on the stone floor as if someone poured it here. It isn’t anywhere else.

Jason turns from the shoulder guard to the silver-black pool to the open, scorched sarcophagus. His hand closes hard around the Glass Dagger’s hilt.

Something about this room’s story does not make sense.

Outside the cemetery wall, a figure crouches under a leaking wooden eave at the corner of a deteriorating building. The structure leans toward the stone, its roof half-collapsed, water pouring from the broken slats in a thin curtain. The air has the smell of wet thatch, rotting wood, and the sour wool of the villagers’ clothes. The figure is a male NPC, an artisan type. His left shoulder twitches in a small, steady loop, the same short jerk every few seconds.

Jason stands two steps back, his hands open at his sides. The villager’s hazel eyes focus on his chest, right where the Orange Key sits under his tunic. The gaze stays fixed there.

“Do you know what happened here?”

The villager’s mouth opens, the voice expressionless and slightly detuned. “The lord of the tomb and the pale scholar. They destroyed each other. Neither lives.” The shoulder twitches. The cycle resets. “The lord of the tomb and the pale scholar. They destroyed each other.”

“Where are the bodies?” Jason doesn’t break eye contact, his voice in tune with the cold rhythm of the rain.

The villager blinks. A long pause, three full seconds of processing lag. “They destroyed each other. Neither lives.”

Trent steps back a pace behind Jason, the iron crossguard creaking in his tightened grip.

“Where are the bodies?” Jason doesn’t raise his voice, but the words fall with heavy, deliberate emphasis.

The NPC’s head tilts slightly to the left, twitches sharply back to center, and resets into its idle animation. The hazel eyes fix on Jason’s chest again. “The pale scholar and the lord of the tomb. They destroyed each other. Neither lives. The tomb is empty.”

Jason turns his back on him.

His fingers tap a quick pattern against his thigh: four taps, pause, three taps, pause. An NPC with a scripted ending and no body to show. The system wants him to accept mutual destruction as the final answer. Walk away satisfied and move on.

He doesn't accept it. Two men went into this room; if both died there should be a body and a stain, and there is no body. There is a pool of Concentrated Essence next to where a corpse should be, and a system very eager for him to stop asking.

Evie watches him. She says nothing.

The village road meets the western trail at a wide, flat crossing marked by a single waypoint stone, its surface smoothed.

"There's a group working out of the western zone." Jason turns his face toward the dark, rising ridge of the western trees. "They may have intel on the remaining keys. That's where I'm going."

Trent holds fast in the wet clay. He keeps his eyes down, staring at the scratched crest on his breastplate, his mouth set in a thin line.

Evie moves beside him, her fingers resting on her dagger hilt, her stance protective. "We're staying." She looks Jason in the eye. "It's not about skill. You've cleared more of this system in three weeks than our whole team did in nearly a month. We know that." She glances at Trent. "He knows that."

Trent doesn't say anything.

"But Eric knew it too," she says. Her jaw tightens, a small muscle twitching under her ear. "He saw what you built alone and decided it was better to leave us behind. He thought everyone else slowed him down." Her grip on her hilt tightens. "And Derek is proof that he'll sacrifice anything to get ahead."

The rain continues falling. A drop hits Jason's shoulder and runs the length of his cape.

Heather steps back slowly, widening the space between them. "You said you're not showing off. I believe you." She picks at the frayed edge of her wet sleeve. "But Eric said things like that, too, at first. Before he started making his calculations."

She stops picking at her sleeve. Her arms fall to her sides, her shoulders sinking so much she seems to shrink into her soaked robes. She takes a shaky breath, her head dropping as if looking at Jason is too much. "I can't tell the difference anymore. Not enough to bet my life on it."

Jason stands still, arms loose. He doesn’t argue. He doesn’t reassure them, doesn’t build the case, doesn’t lay out the reasons he’s right and they should follow, because that is exactly what Eric would do: construct a logical structure to get the answer he wanted out of the people in front of him. The kindest thing he can do, the only thing that is not Eric, is to let them be afraid of him and not try to talk them out of it.

He nods once, slowly.

Heather lowers her chin and lets out a silent, empty breath.

Arlo’s blue light, which has hovered dimly near Jason’s collar for several minutes, fades away completely.

“Stay in the safe zone until the situation stabilizes.” Jason adjusts his grip on the strap of his pack. “Don’t let the system push you out.”

Trent finally looks up. He gives a short, stiff nod, his eyes reddened under the brim of his scratched helmet.

Jason turns toward the western trail.

The Lurker’s Cape wraps around him as he steps into the mist, the deep gray fabric blending with the rain until it’s hard to tell cloth from air. The path here is quieter than the eastern side, with older trees set further back and roots breaking through the trail in long, uneven ridges. He steps over them without looking down, keeping a steady pace.

Behind him, the sound of Trent’s iron plate fades until only the rain fills the space.

He walks.

The western forest closes in, the canopy thickening, the light flattening to gray. The Orange Key presses its dull warmth to his chest. The Glass Dagger rests at his side. The villager’s cycling voice runs in his head, flat and looping. Neither lives. The tomb is empty.

He refuses to accept it. Somewhere ahead, in a layer of this world he can’t see, a door he doesn’t understand has been opened, and whatever opened it didn’t die on that mausoleum floor. He can’t prove it. He only knows the pool was the wrong shape for an ending, and that the system has never once worked this hard to make him stop looking.

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Chapter 22

The western trail shrinks to a thin path between old trees, their roots rising in dark, rain-slick ridges. Jason steps over them without glancing down, his boots lifting from the clay at each step. The Lurker's Cape clings to his shoulders, heavy and cold where rain has soaked the collar. Drizzle slips through the canopy, finding gaps in the branches and running along the exposed roots.

Arlo floats a foot ahead, his light a soft, watery blue that catches on the wet moss of the branches and makes the forest floor look like a shallow riverbed. He moves silently.

"I wish to note," Arlo says, without turning, "that this trail is narrower than the eastern approach, the canopy is denser, the root systems are more disruptive underfoot, and the ambient light is approximately forty percent lower." A pause. "I am not complaining. I am documenting. There is a difference."

"There isn't," Jason says.

"There is," Arlo says. "Complaining would involve an emotional register. This is purely observational." Another pause. "I will admit the line is occasionally thin."

Jason tightens his pack strap with one hand, adjusting the buckle by feel as he keeps moving. The familiar weight settles across his chest. His other hand rests near the Glass Dagger's hilt.

The villager’s words have been repeating in his mind since he walked away.

Neither lives. The tomb is empty.

He thinks it through for the seventh time and finds the same flaw he noticed at first. A scripted NPC giving a scripted ending. The system handed him a neat conclusion, expecting him to accept it. The silver-black pool on the crypt floor wasn’t blood. Eric’s shoulder guard was there, but Derek’s body wasn’t. The NPC kept repeating itself in a loop.

None of it closed.

“You are running through what occurred in the cemetery again,” Arlo says.

Jason doesn’t answer.

“I know because your pace slows by approximately four percent when you are running a problem that does not resolve,” Arlo says. “I have measured this across thirty-seven separate instances. Thirty-seven is a large number, and it suggests the problem-not-resolving situation is something of a recurring theme for you.”

“Drop it.”

“Dropped,” Arlo says. A beat. “I am still thinking about the cemetery, for the record. I simply will not mention it again unless you ask.” A pause. “You will ask.”

Jason steps into a small clearing, about as wide as a barn floor, where the trees fall away, and the sky shows a flat, gray sheet of cloud. Here, the rain falls straight down and drums a steady beat on his cape’s hood.

Then the chime hits.

It doesn’t come gently. It explodes behind his eyes, a sharp jolt that makes his back teeth buzz and blocks out the rain for a second. Red light fills his side vision, not fading in but flashing hard and flat, as a system window bursts open in his HUD like it’s breaking through a locked door.

Arlo spins toward him, his light flaring wide for a moment before he catches it and pulls it back.

“That,” Arlo says, his voice losing all its usual cadence, “was not a standard notification chime. Standard chimes do not vibrate the teeth. I will label that as relevant.”

The Announcer’s voice arrives without preamble.

It isn’t the same voice from the early days. That one had a bit of heat, a dramatic flair to every word, like it was putting on a show. This voice has

none of that. The rhythm and pitch are similar, but the warmth is gone, like a room that’s been cold for hours.

Attention, remaining participants. As of this moment, all five keys have been recovered. The primary lock sequence for the Usurper’s Castle is now active. All surviving players are required to cross the castle threshold. You have forty-eight hours. Players who remain outside the boundary at the conclusion of this period will be terminated. This announcement applies to all zones. This window will not be extended.

The red window updates as the voice cuts off. A timer appears in the upper right of his HUD, large and crimson.



Arlo’s light flashes rapidly, shifting from pale blue to an unsettled, high-frequency violet thrumming with static.

“I am processing ‘terminated,’” Arlo whispers, his tone clinical but disjointed. “It does not mean a clean transit cycle. It is not the long sleep. It means the subtraction of the numbers. The zero percent viability.”

“Yeah,” Jason says, his gaze locked on the red digits. “It means we die.”

“For the record,” Arlo says, his light still cycling through unsettled colors, “I do not have a viability rating in the conventional sense, being an orb, and yet I find that announcement extremely personally relevant. I am sitting with that.” A pause. “I do not enjoy sitting with that.”

His fingers drop to his thigh, performing a sequence without conscious command: four flat taps against the wet wool, a pause, then three quick strikes. A seven-count cadence. It is an old breathing drill he learned in grade school, designed to force oxygen into the blood while keeping the heart at or below eighty beats per minute. It is the only thing that has been keeping him grounded this past week.

“Your thigh-tapping protocol,” Arlo says quietly. “You do this when the variables exceed your current processing capacity. I have documented it in twenty-seven instances now.” A pause. “Up from twenty-two. The last five happened in the cemetery.” His voice softens slightly. “I do not document it

to be critical. I document it because it tells me when to stop talking, which is a skill I am actively developing.”

The reality is simple and harsh. The castle is at the center of the game, so the players farthest away have the longest journey. The system isn’t giving forty-eight hours to prepare. It’s giving forty-eight hours of wear and tear, where distance, rough ground, and whatever else is out there do the work the Announcer doesn’t mention.

He turns sharply on his heel, shifting his weight east.

Arlo follows without a word.

The western woods thin out at the edge of the valley, and Jason crouches before the last line of trees, hiding in the shadow of a collapsed stone wall that probably once served as a sheep pen. The mortar is gone, replaced by dirt and a layer of dead moss. He rests his left forearm on the top of the wall, his right hand moving to the hilt of the Glass Dagger at his hip. His fingers check the grip, the cold helping steady his nerves.

The rocky path below runs northeast toward the Ward. At the far end of the visible stretch of trail, three figures move in the drizzle.

Identify activates with a brief, high-pressure pulse behind his eyes.

Three crimson labels project above the pale shapes.

Vampire Thrall Level 11

“Three,” Arlo says, his voice dipping to something slightly above breath. “We have now encountered skeletal thralls and vampire thralls in a single day, which suggests the local monster population has achieved a level of organizational diversity I find genuinely impressive and deeply unwelcome.”

Jason watches the patrol loop complete. “They’re coordinated.”

“Yes,” Arlo says. “The interval between directional shifts is identical across all three. They are not patrolling independently. Something is feeding them a shared command.” A pause. “Feratu is dead, which means something else is feeding them a shared command, which means something else is here, which means I have once again arrived at an answer I did not want.”

For a full count of fifteen, their loop repeats without deviation. Their movements are wrong in the specific way that NPC constructs are wrong

when they have been patched together from a script with too few variables: the same head-turn at the same interval, the same three-step pivot at the end of each trail, the weight shift always landing on the right foot. Rigid. Mechanical. A patrol loop with no actual awareness inside it.

Arlo drops lower, the cold aura of his projection skimming against Jason's left shoulder strap, a silent, non-solid weight meant to steady him. The touch is not physical, exactly, but a localized drop in temperature that clears the fog from Jason's thoughts.

"Their loop is seventeen seconds," Arlo says. "You have a twelve-second transit window between the final figure's back turn and the next rotation. I have calculated your optimal crossing angle." A pause. "I calculated it twice, because the first answer felt optimistic. It was not optimistic. It is simply a very small margin."

"How small?"

"You will be fine," Arlo says. "Probably."

Jason looks at him.

"You will be fine," Arlo says again, with slightly more conviction. "I have updated my confidence interval. It is now solidly in the probably fine range."

He waits until the patrol loop carries the three figures to the far end of their path, and then he moves, slipping along the base of the stone wall, staying low, the Lurker's Cape blending his outline into the gray rock face. His Stealth skill is active before he is fully standing, the cape's weave responding with a slight visual distortion that makes his outline uncertain in the rain. He slides into the undergrowth at the wall's end and follows the ridge line northeast, keeping the valley floor below him and the trees close on his left.

Arlo follows in complete silence, his light compressed to a dim point that barely registers against the hazy air. He maintains the same distance from Jason's shoulder the entire way, adjusting for every dip and rise in the terrain without being told. After forty paces, he speaks, slightly above a whisper. "They did not register us. Your cape's passive visual distortion is doing significant work today, and I believe it deserves some acknowledgment."

"It's a cape," Jason says.

"It is a very good cape," Arlo says.

The ruins of a stone barn stand at the edge of the Usurper’s Ward, its roof caved in so the walls stick up as jagged teeth. The smell shifts here, the fresh forest air replaced by old iron and something sour that hangs at the back of the nose. Wet stone. Ash. The heavy feeling of a place where things have died.

Jason moves through the barn’s open shell in two quick steps and flattens himself against the far wall. Through a gap in the stone, the Ward stretches below.

He breathes out slowly through his nose.

The Ward isn’t just a checkpoint or patrol zone. It’s an army. The streets below are crowded with movement, pale figures passing through narrow corridors in overlapping patrols, thralls filling every alley and open square he can see. There aren’t just dozens. He counts clusters—six, twelve, twenty-three—and stops, because the numbers already tell the story.

Arlo goes very still beside him. His light dims to almost nothing, a faint chill rather than a visible glow. He is quiet for a long moment, which is itself a kind of statement.

“I am going to say a number,” Arlo says finally, his voice showing no inflection at all, “and I want you to understand that I have verified it four times because I kept hoping I had made an arithmetic error.”

Jason waits.

“There are approximately one hundred and forty thralls in the visible section of the Ward alone,” Arlo says. “The Ward continues beyond our sightline in three directions. I have chosen not to estimate the total figure. You are welcome.”

A group trying to fight through this to reach the gate would spend hours and take heavy losses. The Ward’s narrow streets would squeeze any team into a killing zone, and the thralls at the back would just move forward as the front ones fell. The Ward doesn’t end. It funnels.

In the upper-right corner of his vision, the numbers continue their steady, downward march:

47:41:03

“Forty-seven hours,” Arlo says quietly. “And a Ward that cannot be fought through directly. And players still in transit who do not know what is

waiting for them.” He pauses. “The situation has the inherent features of a trap. I am aware you have already identified this. I am narrating it aloud because it helps me organize my thoughts.” Another pause. “I have not told you that before. I am telling you now.”

“I know,” Jason says. “You do it constantly.”

“I do it constantly,” Arlo agrees, without a trace of embarrassment.

Jason shifts his weight and moves along the Ward’s outer wall, using the Lurker’s Cape and his Stealth to slip through the shadowy space between the barn ruins and the black stone foundation of the first Ward building. The alley ahead is so narrow that his cape brushes both walls as he moves. The smell gets stronger here: iron, rot, and underneath it all, a subtle chemical tang left by constructs that have been active in a tight space for a long time.

He moves through the narrow gap, rolling his weight from heel to toe to muffle his boots against the slick stone, compressing his ribs so his shoulders pass between the damp masonry without scraping his cape. He halts at every corner, timing the patrol loops before committing to an angle. A four-man cluster of thralls pivots through a courtyard on his right; he counts seventeen seconds between the final figure’s back turning and the next rotation, the same interval as the three on the valley trail. One command, running everywhere. He slides across the stones, taking about twelve seconds to reach the next shadow.

“Eleven point four seconds,” Arlo says, so quietly the words are just a chill near his ear. “You had room. I was not concerned.” A very brief pause. “I was mildly concerned. I have now updated this to not be concerned retroactively.”

“You can’t update retroactively.”

“I have discovered that I can,” Arlo says. “It is one of my more useful features.”

The alley opens, and the castle fills his vision.

From far away, the castle looked like a jagged line on the horizon. Up close, it’s different. The towers rise in uneven spires, their black stone darkened by rain, and the whole structure feels heavy, like it pulls everything toward it. The wide courtyard stretches out, and at the far end, the huge iron gates are open.

Jason presses his back against a stone buttress at the courtyard’s edge and breathes.

The gates are open.

“The gates are open,” Arlo says.

“I see that.”

“I know you see that. I said it anyway.” A pause. “Gates in places like this are not supposed to be open. They are supposed to be the obstacle. The thing that requires the keys. The gates being open means the keys have already been used, which means someone is already inside, which means...” He stops. “I have talked myself into another answer I did not want. This is becoming a pattern in my day.”

Jason holds that fact in his mind for a moment. Then he slides forward along the shadow of the wall, keeps his body low, and closes the distance across the courtyard in a diagonal line that keeps him near the stone of the outer wall rather than crossing the open center. The rain helps. The sound of it on the black flags is steady enough to cover his footsteps.

He stops a few feet from the entrance.

Three stone pillars are set into the masonry around the open doors, two on the left of the arch and one on the right.

The key slots are glowing.

Three of them, each one deep in its pillar housing, each one radiating with its color in a long, arrhythmic beat. Green. Red. Yellow. The glow is not stable, not the clean, held light of an active key, but a fading pulse, slow and irregular, the kind of light that suggests something finishing rather than something starting. The green slot dims by another fraction as the masonry around it absorbs the color inward, spreading it through the stone like dye through cloth.

They are dissolving.

“Green, Red, and Yellow,” Arlo says, his voice entirely flat. “Not Orange. Not Blue.” A pause. “You are holding the Orange Key and Wei is holding the Blue Key, and both of those keys are therefore not in those pillars, and someone used three different keys to open this gate without either of you.” His light dims very slightly. “I believed the keys were the primary negotiating leverage available to us in the endgame. I am revising that assessment significantly downward. It is the third downward revision I have made today.”

He takes one step back. His gaze locks on the fading light.

They didn’t need us.

His heart rate holds steady, but a cold line spreads down his arms. Whoever opened this gate never tried to make a deal. They gathered the last

three keys, skipped the eastern team and skipped him, and used them. The global countdown started in silence, and his Orange Key turned to dead weight before he ever reached the table. His leverage was gone before the final round began.

“Eric,” Arlo says simply.

“Eric,” Jason confirms.

“For what it is worth,” Arlo says, after a pause long enough to suggest he was genuinely debating whether to say it, “I spent considerable processing time in the western woods calculating scenarios in which Eric was definitively gone. I built several quite thorough models.” Another pause. “They were all wrong. Eric is extraordinarily difficult to model, which I think says something useful about him as an antagonist.”

His hand traces the smooth grip of the Glass Dagger as the final gears of the puzzle lock together.

Eric is alive.

The truth brings no rush, no adrenaline, only a cold, clear sense of having been walked around. The empty sarcophagus with its scorched walls, the silver-black pool, the shoulder guard left where he would find it—it wasn’t a massacre. It was a transition. Eric left that crypt with the Green Key, collected the Red and Yellow from their sectors, and set all of this in motion.

The Red slot, then the Yellow—both mirror the same fading decay. Three keys, three pillars, all dissolving. Whoever placed them stood in this courtyard, pressed them home in sequence, and triggered the global countdown. The same decay finds the key at his chest. The amber pulse stutters and stops, and when he pulls the Orange Key out on its cord, the sigil is already fading, the metal thinning to silver mist that runs out between his fingers. The cord hangs empty. The lock it was made for is gone.

“He did not simply survive,” Arlo says quietly. “He planned. The shoulder guard left behind, the scripted NPC, the silver pool: he constructed a scene.” A pause. “Constructing a scene for the benefit of players who may investigate requires anticipating that those players would investigate. Which means he anticipated you specifically.” His voice drops another register. “I find that more alarming than the Ward.”

His fingers tap against his thigh. Four taps, pause, three taps.

Arlo rises from his shoulder and drifts upward, his light beating in short, erratic bursts, blue flickering between shades as he angles toward the dark space behind the open gates. The interior of the castle is not lit. The open arch frames a rectangle of absolute darkness, which the courtyard's ambient gray does not penetrate at all. Arlo's light catches the stone of the threshold and stops there.

"I wish to go on record," Arlo says, staring into the dark, "as finding that interior deeply uninviting." A pause. "I am aware that going on record changes nothing about whether we go in. I simply want the record to reflect my position."

"Noted," Jason says.

"Thank you," Arlo says. "That is all I ask."

Jason activates Detect Stealth and lets the skill push outward. He holds it for five full seconds.

Nothing registers in the courtyard's corners. No shimmer on the gate's inner walls. No system signature shaped like a key or a secondary lock. The gates are simply open, the seals deactivated by the keys, the way forward available.

But the floor inside is not empty.

Silver-black footprints mark the stone just past the threshold, multiple sets, pressed deep and still wet. They lead inward, into the dark, and from somewhere behind that dark comes a sound, just barely at the edge of hearing: stone moving against stone, slow and rhythmic, the sound of something shifting weight far back in a corridor.

Arlo's light stutters. He rises another six inches above Jason's head and holds there, pulsing in a tight, anxious rhythm. "Multiple sets of footprints," he says, his voice careful and measured. "I count at least six distinct stride patterns. The spacing on two of them is wrong for a standard thrall gait. Too long. Excessively deliberate." A pause. "Whatever is moving stone in that corridor is doing so slowly and rhythmically, which suggests either it is very large and moving carefully, or it is something that does not need to hurry." He pauses. "Neither of those options improves my afternoon."

Jason's hand grips the Glass Dagger's hilt without drawing it.

The footprints go in. None comes out.

He looks back across the courtyard, then toward the Ward, and finally up at the timer in his display. Behind him, the Ward is full of thrall patrols, all moving under the control of something that shouldn't be in charge. The gate

ahead is open, and fresh footprints lead into a darkness where something is moving stone.

The players still in transit have no way to know what the Ward looks like from inside. They have the Announcer's voice, a countdown, and a direction. They will come in through the outer approaches the same way any player would approach a final zone: in groups, making noise, advancing forward. The Ward will break any uncoordinated push before it reaches the courtyard. The ones who make it to the courtyard will walk through those gates and into whatever made those sounds.

I have to reach them before they breach the Ward. If they walk blind into this bottleneck, it's a slaughter.

Jason steps back from the gate, sliding into the shadow of the outer buttress. His pack strap is already tight. He opens his interface with a quick eye movement, pulling up the player signal list, the roster of active HUD signatures still broadcasting in the simulation's radius.

There are fewer names than there were a week ago.

"Fewer," Arlo says quietly, reading the same list somehow, his voice bearing the particular flatness of a word chosen because all the other words were worse. "I will not say the number out loud. I have decided the number does not need to be said out loud." A pause that is longer than his usual pauses. "Some of them I recognized from the signal patterns. The intervals were distinct. Identifiable." Another pause. "I did not expect to care about signal intervals. I find that I do. I am noting it."

Jason selects the ones still showing active and begins composing a plan.

Arlo descends back to his shoulder, his light finally steady, dim, and close. His glow falls only as far as the stone at Jason's feet, and it doesn't waver.

"Jason," Arlo says.

"Thinking."

"I know," Arlo says. "I will be brief." A pause. "The Ward is full. The castle is occupied. The countdown is running. The leverage we planned to carry into this endgame has been neutralized." His light pulses once, slow and even. "By most conventional metrics, this is a poor position."

Jason keeps scanning the map across the interface.

"I wish to note," Arlo says, his voice falling to something very quiet, "that by most conventional metrics, you have been in a poor position since approximately the first week. And that the conventional metrics have, on

multiple occasions, been wrong about you specifically.” A pause. “I am not saying this to be encouraging. I am saying it because it is an accurate observation, and I believe accurate observations are useful regardless of their emotional valence.”

Jason closes his interface and looks up at Arlo.

“That was almost a compliment,” he says.

“It was a data point,” Arlo says. “I want to be clear about that.”

“Sure,” Jason says. “Go find the players within range. Have them meet us here.” He points to a place on his map interface. “Have them pass the word to anyone you can’t reach.”

The tether that once snapped Arlo back at fourteen yards has been loosening for weeks, with every level Jason put into him and every rule the failing system stopped enforcing. Jason has never tested how far it reaches now. Tonight they find out.

Jason pushes away from the wall and moves along the castle’s outer edge, heading away from the gate as he looks for a spot with a view of the Ward’s northern approach. The rain keeps falling steadily against the black stone.

Arlo leaves to complete his task, his dim light steady against the dark.

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Chapter 23

The ruined tower smells of stagnant puddles, crumbling mortar, and mildew. The air coming in from the windows is cold and thick with old water and slow decay.

Jason leans against the wall by a broken window on the north side, pulling the Lurker's Cape close. The fabric darkens to blend a little more with the wet stone. Through the narrow window, he sees the Ward extending into the dark valley below. Thrall patrols move in steady, repeating patterns, their torches drawing yellow arcs. Seven seconds to the turn. Twelve to the gatehouse. The patrols are precise and predictable.

Rain beats steadily onto the outer stone.

If they come through the northern ravine, they'll run into the second patrol. He watches the patrols, matching their path to the possible approach routes. The timing doesn't work for a group moving at a normal speed. If they're two seconds late at the choke point near the wall breach, the thralls will be turning.

He notes the timing and keeps watching.

Hours later, deep into the night, Arlo drops through a gap in the ceiling beams, leaving dust and splinters behind. His blue light flashes quickly, like whitecaps on a dark sea. The orb steadies itself and floats near Jason's left shoulder, giving a light glow on the wet stone.

“I have completed the task.” Arlo’s voice is quiet and steady. “I contacted everyone within range. The eastern team is two minutes behind me. The Americas team is about four minutes behind.” He pauses. “I gave both groups the coordinates at the same time. I thought about staggering their arrivals to avoid a confrontation, but I decided not to.”

“Why?”

“Because deceiving allies seemed like a bad way to start the next hour.” His light pulses once, slow and blue. “Also, they are all very observant and would have noticed.”

Jason nods without looking away from the window. “Good call.”

“I make good calls now and then.” His glow dims a shade. “It is still a new feeling.”

His light pulses once, a slower beat. “There are three more I reached who cannot make this meeting. Two at the western edge, out of the European sector, and one further south, alone. A shield-and-sword man named Alfie. A boy named Michael who throws lightning and talks a great deal on an open channel, which I found alarming and, after a while, endearing. And a woman, Kshitija, working the southern burn by herself, who threw fire at the first thing that moved when I found her and apologized to me afterward.” A pause. “I gave them the gate, the hour, and what waits in the Ward. They have decided to make their own way to the castle. I do not know if they will arrive in time.” Another pause. “I wanted their names said aloud, in case they do not.”

“Anyone else?”

Arlo’s light pulses slowly. “One more. I will let Daisuke explain.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“I would call it good news in bad circumstances,” Arlo says. “Which I know you will take as a yes.”

They wait while the rain keeps falling.

The eastern team arrives first, sliding through the ground-floor entry in a line so quiet the only tell is the rain changing pitch as the door opens. Daisuke comes through, shield angled at his hip, one hand loose on the rim instead of gripped on the back handle. He pauses just inside the threshold, lets Reyna and Budi pass on either side, then steps back a single pace and anchors his weight near the door. Mei and Wei take the far side of the room, Wei dropping her center of gravity without seeming to think about it, feet already shoulder-width on the gritty stone.

Mei stops in the middle of the room and studies the damaged ceiling beams like an architect checking for weak points. Then she looks straight at Jason.

A woman Jason hasn't seen before enters behind Mei, ducking under the low stone lintel. She's broad-shouldered and solid, built for endurance. Her dark auburn hair is cut short and sticks to her cheeks from the rain. The sleeves of her robe are torn off and tied around her forearms as makeshift bracers, leaving her upper arms bare despite the cold. A wide leather satchel hangs across her chest, its strap faded where it crosses her shoulder. Her dark gray eyes scan the room quickly and methodically, checking exits, injuries, and the space between people like someone used to deciding where to stand when things go wrong.

She stands by the eastern wall, leans against the stone, and folds her hands over her satchel strap. She doesn't introduce herself. She just watches.

Daisuke crosses his arms over his chestplate. His face shows deep exhaustion, his eyes steady and fixed. He looks at Jason, then nods toward the woman by the wall.

"We found her on the northern approach, two miles from the Ward boundary," he says. "Her name is Sasha. She was the healer for the Russian group." He pauses. "There was a big explosion in their sector. She was behind the party when it happened. Field healers usually are." He doesn't explain what that means for the rest of the Russian group. "She heard your signal through the orb and was already heading to the castle. We met her on the trail."

Sasha's eyes shift from Daisuke to Jason. "Your orb found me," she says, her accent clear and precise. "It was very loud. I assumed it was urgent."

"It was," Jason says.

"Yes," she says. "I figured." She glances at her satchel strap, quickly checks the buckle, then looks back at Jason. "I'm a healer. I'm here. Tell me what you need."

Arlo floats from Jason's shoulder toward Sasha, his blue light brightening as he circles her at shoulder height. Sasha watches him with calm patience, as if she's seen stranger things before.

"She is not injured," Arlo says, drifting back. "Her satchel has field dressings, a cauterizing tool, various Health and Energy Pills, and something in the inner pocket I did not check out of respect." He pauses.

“She also has very good posture for someone who just walked two miles through the rain. I admire that.”

Sasha looks at the orb. “Does it do that a lot?”

“Constantly,” Jason says.

“I provide useful information,” Arlo says, with dignity.

Jason pauses. “Wait. What language are you speaking? Is the system translating it in my head?”

“I speak English, dumbass. Most countries teach it in grade school. Americans only know one language,” she says, almost hissing.

“The gate,” Mei says, bringing everyone’s focus back.

“Three keys. They’re already gone.” Jason pushes off the wall, leaving a dark mark on the wet stone. “Eric, from the American team.”

Mei closes her eyes for a few seconds. When she opens them, her face is still calm, while her fingers curl tightly into her palm, knuckles turning white.

Daisuke stays silent by the door and waits.

About a minute later, the Americas team enters.

Trent comes in first, his armor covered in soot. He looks sharp, but tired. His eyes scan the room quickly, noting Daisuke’s stance, the exits, and the thick stone walls. His jaw tightens.

Evie slips in behind him, keeping her back to the wall and staying near the edge of the room. Her eyes flick between Jason and Daisuke, never resting on either. She fidgets with a frayed thread on her cuff.

Heather comes in last and quietly closes the door. She unslings her bow and leans it against the wall within easy reach, a practiced move. She stands near the edge of the room, leaving space around herself.

Sasha watches Heather set down her bow, her eyes following it for a moment before looking back to the center of the room. She’s sizing up the situation like a healer.

Arlo floats slowly across the room, his light beating steadily as he circles the Americas group. He passes Evie, who watches him suspiciously, and Heather, who ignores him like she’s used to it. He stops in front of Trent, hovering at eye level, his blue light reflecting off Trent’s scratched armor.

“I wish to point out,” Arlo says in his usual calm tone, “that the Americas group is mostly intact, which is good.” He pauses. “I also notice Trent’s armor is damaged in ways that suggest he takes hits he could avoid. This

probably means his build is about taking damage, but it might also be a personality thing. I think it is both."

Trent looks at the orb. "Did your ball just call me stupid?"

"No," Arlo says. "I called you a certain kind of brave. There is a real difference." He floats back to Jason's shoulder. "Just to be clear, I meant it as a compliment. Mostly."

There is a three-second silence.

Trent points at Jason. "You want to explain why I'm taking advice from someone who disappeared when we needed him?" His tone is quieter than usual, worn down by exhaustion. "We've been running the Ward blind. And now you call a meeting?"

"You're here," Jason says evenly.

Trent lowers his hand to his belt. "I'm here because your floating light-ball said the gate is open and someone is inside," he says. "I'm not dying for your secrets. That's the only reason I'm here."

"To be precise," Arlo says from Jason's shoulder, calm and steady, "I said the gate is open, someone dangerous is inside, the countdown is now at thirty-two hours and six minutes, and your current route would put you right into a thrall patrol with a seventeen-second window you cannot clear quietly." He pauses. "I said a lot of things. The gate being open was just the first."

Trent's jaw tightens. He looks at Jason. "Is it always like this?"

"Yes," Jason says.

"Consistently," Arlo says, appearing almost satisfied.

Across the room, Budi shifts left, moving toward Trent's side without drawing a weapon or making eye contact. Wei stays still, but shifts her weight onto her heels, legs tensed. Daisuke watches, arms crossed, breathing slowly and quietly.

From the eastern wall, Sasha watches, hands folded over her satchel strap. She doesn't move or speak, but her eyes follow the tension in the room, already planning what she'll do if things go wrong.

Jason raises his hand, palm out, elbow close to his side, a signal to pause. "I know," he says to Trent. "I'm not asking you to forgive me for keeping my information hidden. I'm asking you to look and understand."

He wills his display outward. The interface responds with a burst of red and gold light, filling the air with a low hiss. The display floats at eye level,

casting red highlights across their faces and revealing the exhaustion on Daisuke’s and the dirt on Trent’s.

The display shows Jason’s stats, the same sheet he opened in the orchard: Level 19. Attack Damage seven, Physical Strength seven. Reflexes twenty-five, Speed and Dodge twenty-nine, each a point short for the iron at his collar. Crit Rate thirty-eight, an effective eighty-six percent. Crit Damage thirty-nine, an effective multiplier of two thousand one hundred fifty-four percent. And under it, the abilities: Conjure Companion, Stealth, Detect Stealth, Third Eye, Daggers, Thrown Dagger Accuracy and Power, Major Heal, Minor Heal.

Trent looks at the floating red-and-gold card, eyes narrowing carefully as he reads the stats. “I saw the seven back at our camp,” he mutters, voice hoarse with fatigue. “But seeing the rest... seeing how you built around a single-digit stat.” He glances from the display to his own armor, breathing slow and heavy. The mockery leaves his face, replaced by a serious, tactical look.

“Why haven’t you increased the Strength or Attack Damage?” Evie asks.

“If I did, I wouldn’t be able to use the Glass Dagger anymore.”

Arlo floats closer to the display, his light brightening as he studies the numbers. “The critical damage multiplier is two thousand one hundred fifty-four percent.” He pauses. “I have seen it all happen, and that number still surprises me every time. I did not expect to say that about someone with a strength of seven.” Another pause. “That is a compliment to Jason, not an insult to the number seven. Seven is fine. It just usually does not achieve this.”

Mei steps closer to the projection, eyes on the uneven stat bars. “A Strength and Attack Damage of seven doesn’t work for close combat,” she whispers, tracing the high critical multiplier. “Unless... you’re making it count every small hit as a fatal strike. Your profile isn’t broken. You’re just making sure nearly every hit crits, dealing the multiplier. And that Glass Dagger?”

“It levels up my Crit stats faster and increases them by an unknown percentage.” He pauses. “It was given to me early on by a party member who saw potential in me that I hadn’t even seen yet.”

Trent and Evie both look down, color rising in their cheeks.

Trent opens up his display and mumbles something under his breath while allocating points from his most recent level-up.

Evie looks up and asks, her eyes focused on the critical percentage, “You’ve been running on this?”

“Since the beginning.” Jason reaches out and touches the edge of the display, his knuckles passing through the light for a moment. “I hid it because I was ashamed. I thought if anyone saw it, I’d be left behind. I was wrong to keep it from our allies, but not about the danger.” He looks at Trent. “Now we can’t afford secrets. Speed, positioning, and critical hits matter more than raw strength. The Glass Dagger is set up for this.” He lets his hand drop. “I’m not saying this to defend myself. I’m saying it because my plan only makes sense if you know what I can do.”

From the eastern wall, Sasha speaks for the first time. “Seven.” Her voice is calm and precise. “And you are standing here. Uninjured.” Her eyes move from the display to Jason. “We had a player with a Strength of eighteen and Attack Damage of twenty. He died in the first week.” She pauses. “I want to know how you are still alive.”

“So does he, sometimes,” Arlo says.

Sasha looks at the orb, then at Jason. “Your orb is either very perceptive or very rude.”

“Both,” Jason says. “Usually at the same time.”

“I prefer the term forthright,” Arlo says. “Rude suggests I mean harm. I do not. I just have opinions and cannot always tell which ones I should say out loud.” He pauses. “I have been told these are related problems.”

A slight change crosses Sasha’s face, almost a smile but not quite, gone in a moment. She leans back against the wall and looks at the display again.

Trent crosses his arms and sets his jaw, waiting for the plan.

Jason turns to the map projection and drags his finger to the throne room, circling it. A small, pulsing circle marks the room’s interior. “I go in alone. Cape, stealth, Item Linking to bypass the bottleneck. I target whoever’s in the throne room, whether it’s the Usurper or Eric. I hit them as many times as I can before they can react to my presence.” He pauses. “If I take them below a critical health threshold before I go down, the rest of you come in behind me, and you finish it without facing a full-strength target.”

He stops circling.

The map hangs in the air between them.

“If I don’t make it out,” he says, “you still gain the window.”

The silence that follows is not the hostile silence from before. It’s heavier than that. Evie has stopped tearing at her sleeve. Wei looks at the floor.

Arlo’s light drops another shade, contracting inward until it barely reaches the stone.

Sasha straightens from the wall. Her hands come off the satchel strap, and she crosses them over her chest instead, her jaw set. “You go in alone and fall before the threshold,” she says, her voice bearing the flat certainty of someone who has also thought this through. “Then you’re gone, and we face a full-strength target without the best player.” She looks around the group, a single sweeping glance that takes in Daisuke’s iron frame, Heather’s bow leaning against the wall, Trent’s exhausted bulk. “We can’t run a plan with a single point of failure. We need to remove that single point of failure.”

“She is correct,” Arlo says, from Jason’s shoulder. His tone carries no humor. “I wish to note that I have been attempting to calculate a version of the solo entry plan that works, and I have not found one. I have been calculating since the courtyard. That is approximately fifteen hours of continuous modeling.” A pause. “I want you to understand how many variables I tested before arriving at the same conclusion as a woman I met two hours ago.”

Daisuke’s boots scrape the grit as he shifts. He uncrosses his arms.

He takes a step forward, and his iron gauntlet comes down onto Jason’s shoulder. The metal is cold even through the Lurker’s Cape, cold enough that Jason feels it against his neck where the collar gaps. The grip is not gentle. It’s the grip of a man who wants to ensure something lands, who has decided that physical contact is the only language direct enough for this particular moment.

“We don’t trust a solo run.” Daisuke holds Jason’s gaze, his grip firming just enough that Jason feels the weight behind it. “Not through that throne room. Not against what’s in there. And I won’t stand outside while someone’s body gets added to the count. We’re done doing that.”

From the wall, Heather straightens. She steps to the edge of the map projection, the red glow washing her hip. She reaches back without looking and closes her hand around the grip of her bow, not raising it, just holding it, the way someone holds something they have already decided they will carry through whatever happens next. Her gray eyes lock onto Jason with an intensity that leaves no chance for negotiation. “He’s right. We don’t split anymore. We don’t send people through doors alone. We’re done with isolated plans.”

A slow, shaky breath leaves Evie’s lips, her shoulders dropping in sudden relief.

Trent stands with his thumbs pushed into his belt loops, his pale eyes cataloging the map. The competitive edge has bled out of his expression, leaving only gravel and exhaustion. He glances from Daisuke to the map, then finally to Jason. “If we’re going to die in a bottleneck, we do it together. All of us. One line.” He steps away from the wall and enters the circle, his broad shoulder coming to rest beside Daisuke’s.

Arlo’s light brightens by a single, small degree. “I wish to note that Trent just said something I agree with entirely, and I want to acknowledge that this is a new experience for me.” A pause. “I also wish to note that I said this quietly enough that he probably did not hear it, which I believe was the correct call.”

Sasha uncrosses her arms and moves from the eastern wall to the near edge of the group, positioning herself slightly behind and between Heather and Evie, the natural station of a field healer who has done this long enough to find her place without being told. She opens the satchel’s outer flap with a practiced flick and checks the contents once, her fingers moving by memory, pausing on a rolled gray scroll lashed inside the flap. “Our stormcaller’s last scroll,” she says, to no one in particular. “A cyclone. I have been saving it.” Then she closes it and looks up.

“Tell me where you need me,” she says. “I will be there.”

Jason looks at them, and the thing he feels isn’t relief, and it’s not triumph. It’s the specific weight of being believed. Not too long ago, he was a suppressed profile that people crossed the room to avoid; now people he just met and the team that once wrote him off as the weakest player who ran away are standing in a rotting tower, waiting to hear how he means to keep them alive. He has spent three weeks making sure no one could ask that of him. He finds, to his surprise, that carrying it is lighter than refusing it ever was, and heavier in a way he would not trade back.

Jason looks around the room.

Evie, pale and still. Daisuke, an exhausted immovable pillar of iron. Heather with the bow in her hand now, her gaze keen and settled. Trent stripped of the performance, only stubbornness left. Budi, Wei, Reyna, and Mei half-drained but locked and ready. And at the edge, a woman he didn’t know an hour ago, satchel buckled, eyes steady, who walked two miles

through a rain-soaked forest toward a castle full of thralls because an orb told her it was urgent.

They're not here because they think I'll save them. They're here because they refuse to let anyone die again.

He swipes his hand across the stat display. The red-and-gold card collapses inward, and the warm glow vanishes, leaving only the map and the cold blue pulse of Arlo's light. Jason nods once, slowly, and his fingers uncurl at his sides.

"All right," Jason says. "Then here's how we move through the Ward without losing anyone in the bottleneck." He reaches toward the map, tracing the breach point in the outer wall, preparing to map the approach corridors and the synchronized timing windows they'll need to thread through the patrols without contact.

A vibration suddenly moves through the floor.

It starts below the threshold of sound, pulsing through the soles of Jason's boots before the tower's stone begins to hum. Dust falls from the broken ceiling beams in thin, pale curtains. Jason's hand stops above the map.

His eyes snap to his HUD.

The countdown timer flickers.

Red static rolls across it in a wave, and the numbers beneath stutter, jumping forward in a cascading skip, digits dropping in irregular lurches until the display resolves and stabilizes.

Two hours, fifty-one minutes.

The static clears. The number holds.

Jason stares at it.

Twenty-nine hours, gone. What the fuck?

Arlo's light goes very still. The low, blue glow holds without flickering for a full three seconds, which is the longest Jason has ever seen him go without moving.

"I wish to note," Arlo says finally, his vocal tone stripped of everything except the words themselves, "that two hours and fifty-one minutes is not enough time." A pause. "I also wish to note that I am aware that stating this does not help. I am stating it anyway because I find that naming a problem clearly is the first step toward solving it." His light pulses once. "The second step is considerably more difficult. I am working on it."

Jason looks at the map. His finger traces the breach point in the outer wall one more time, measuring the distance to the gate with his eyes.

“I guess the countdown was just a suggestion,” he says, his jaw tight. “We have to move now.”

*** THE HOUSE ***

The clock on the far wall of the boardroom is not the one the players see. It is cleaner: a single line of white figures against black glass, ticking down without theater, and a row of smaller readouts beneath it that no participant will ever be shown.

Augustus Sterling stands with his back to the long table, hands folded, watching the largest of the smaller readouts. It’s not the countdown. It’s a waveform, and the waveform is wrong.

“That’s the anomaly,” the analyst says. She doesn’t need to point. Everyone at the table has been looking at nothing else for an hour. “Sector two. It started as a single participant signature, and it has stopped behaving like one.” Her stylus hovers over the trace, not quite touching it, as if the line might be hot. “The consumption curve doesn’t match any profile we’ve logged. It’s drawing from the substrate faster than the substrate is meant to release. It’s rewriting call priority in the combat layer. Four hours ago it began issuing commands to non-player constructs across three sectors, and the constructs are obeying.”

“It found a door we left open,” someone at the far end says.

“It made a door,” the analyst says. “That’s the part I can’t get comfortable with. The blood-consumption event in the eastern crypt wasn’t in any programming. Nothing wrote it. The participant found an interaction we didn’t design, and the platform accommodated it, because we built the platform to accommodate.”

A quiet settles over the table, the specific quiet of very expensive people watching an investment do something it was told never to do.

Sterling doesn’t turn around. “Containment.”

“Two options.” The analyst’s voice steadies on the safe ground of procedure. “We can quarantine the sector and let the anomaly run inside a sealed boundary until it exhausts the substrate it’s drawing from. Clean, but slow, and while it runs it keeps recruiting constructs, which means by the time it burns out we’ve lost visibility on a large fraction of the remaining

participants.” She sets the stylus down. “Or we compress. Pull the threshold window in and force every surviving signature to the central node at once. Resolve the whole board in a single event instead of letting the anomaly spread across the map for another day.”

“Compress how far.”

“To the edge of the viable area, the castle. Any tighter and the transit deaths spike past what the projection can absorb without a review.” She hesitates, and the hesitation is louder than anything she has said. “We will lose participants in transit either way. Compression loses more of them, faster. It also ends the exposure faster.”

Nobody uses the word deaths again. The word at this table is exposure.

Vaneck, at Sterling’s left, has said nothing. Her hands rest on the keys and her private window is open, and the analyst’s numbers are her numbers, read aloud by someone who did not build them and will not have to carry them.

Sterling watches the waveform pulse against the glass, that wrongness climbing. He is thinking, and what he’s thinking is not about the participants in transit. He’s thinking about the trace, and about the older, cleaner signature that’s been threading the same sectors for weeks without ever drawing from the substrate the way this new one does. One asset breaking the platform open. One asset moving through it without leaving a mark. He’s been quietly interested in the second one for some time.

“Compress,” he says. “To the edge.”

The analyst’s stylus comes down on the readout. On the wall, the clean white countdown doesn’t stutter or throw static, the way the players’ clocks do. It simply drops, twenty-nine hours folding out of existence between one figure and the next, and settles at two hours and fifty-one minutes.

“It’s done,” she says.

“Flag the second signature,” Sterling adds, still watching the glass. “The one that doesn’t feed. I want its telemetry preserved through the reset, whatever else we lose.” He unfolds his hands at last and turns from the wall. “The board can end. That one I’d like to keep.”

Behind him, the wrong waveform goes on climbing, and the new clock counts down toward a room that none of them will ever have to enter.

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Chapter 24

The group exits the tower into the cold.

Jason goes first through the opening in the outer wall, planting one boot on a crumbling stone ledge. He shifts his weight, testing the slick surface before dropping down. Below, the ditch is full of standing water, its bottom hidden under a layer of dark, oily mud. The rain keeps falling over the ruins, muffling sounds and making all distant noises blend together.

He drops into the ditch without a word.

Daisuke follows, moving carefully and quietly down the same ledge. His armor scrapes the stone once, making a sharp sound, then he lands with both feet apart. He turns, using his broad back to shield Jason and the others still coming through. Sasha is next, holding her satchel close. She lands neatly and steps aside for Evie, who comes down gripping Daisuke's arm for support.

The column assembles in silence. Jason counts them by the sounds of their boots in the mud.

At the top of his vision, the HUD countdown timer flickers in intense red. 2:51:03. Then 2:51:02. Blinking doesn't clear it; the red static at the edges shows the glitch is still there. Twenty-nine hours vanished in a moment. He tried not to think about it while planning in the tower. Now, there's no time for that.

He sweeps a flat hand downward, signaling descent, and moves.

The smell of the Ward hits him.

First ash, then a deeper, damp rot from stone that hasn’t dried in years. The alley ahead is narrow, the stone walls leaning in until they almost meet above, leaving just a thin strip of gray sky between the rooftops.

At the edge of the ditch, Budi crouches, pointing a mud-streaked finger toward a gap where the mortar has crumbled to nothing. Trent and Daisuke move to either side of the entrance without discussion, heavy shields lifting into position to form a wedge of iron and body weight at the threshold.

Jason rolls his shoulders and pulls the Lurker’s Cape tight around his collarbone.

The cape activates, sending a tingling feeling across his skin. His outline fades at the edges, the dark fabric melding into the fog. He stays still. His fingers blur against the wet stone. Good enough.

Jason pulls his hood low. “Stay on me,” he says, his voice hardly carrying over the drizzle. He doesn’t wait for acknowledgment.

He moves forward into the alley, stepping carefully on the wet gravel, knowing how much noise a single wrong step can make here. Arlo floats above his left shoulder, his light dim and blue, just enough to see the ground ahead.

The alley takes them deep.

On both sides the tenements have half-collapsed into broken stone and the stumps of old walls. Every doorway is a black mouth. The fog is thicker down here, dragged along on a cold draft from below, and it carries a faint metallic taste, like old blood.

The shape of the place bothers him more than the smell. The alley doesn’t branch. It narrows. Every collapsed wall funnels the same direction, every open square feeds the next choke point, the whole Ward tilted like a chute toward the gate. A week ago, he would have read that as luck, a single clean line to the objective. He reads it now as design. Nobody built a district that only points one way by accident. Something wants everything that enters to arrive at the same place, worn down and bunched together, and it built the streets to make sure of it.

A funnel. The word settles cold. He keeps it to himself and keeps moving.

Twelve paces to the first intersection. He counts the rhythm of the advance. *Eight. Seven. Six.*

The first door to his left blows outward from the bottom hinge.

The rotted wood cracks, and the street fills.

A dozen or more come out of the tenement doors at once, former villagers with hollow, darkened eyes and blank, focused faces, as if following a single command. One holds a woodsman's maul, another an iron bar bent into a hook. They wear everyday clothes—a butcher's apron, a child's coat, a woman's skirt—but their empty faces make the clothing seem even more disturbing.

Trent hits the first one with his shield before it can raise the maul.

His shield slams into the corrupted NPC's chest with a heavy crash, knocking it back into the two behind. Daisuke steps forward, bracing himself in the wet clay, and takes a hard swing from a corrupted blacksmith with a long prybar. The prybar bounces off his shoulder armor, sending up sparks. Daisuke stands strong.

"Left side." Daisuke's short bark is the only warning before his shield slams forward.

Trent pivots. The opening closes. The iron wedge holds.

Behind the front line, Evie stands ready with a dagger in one hand and the other prepared to cast Heal, watching Trent closely, alert for any sign of injury. Sasha is beside her, hand raised, but her eyes are on the upper floors, the balconies and broken windows.

Sasha's gaze snaps sharply toward the overhanging balconies before Jason can match her line of sight. "Above."

They drop from the balconies in silence.

These are high-tier thralls. Their leather is old and torn, stained dark with age and dried fluids. They move with a quick, loose-jointed speed that the villagers below lack. Four jump over the railing at once, landing between the main group and the rear. One lands right between Heather and Mei.

Heather steps back, but the thrall lands almost on top of her. Too close for a shot, she stabs a green glowing arrow straight into its neck. The arrow goes through leather and skin, stopping at the cartilage. The thrall staggers as the poison takes effect. Heather doesn't watch it fall; she's already nocking another arrow.

Mei steps back. Her fingers are moving.

A sheet of pressurized water bursts from her left hand, hitting the second thrall in the chest and slamming it into the wall hard enough to crack the stone.

Jason hears the clash behind him and doesn't look back. He reaches into his belt pouch and closes his fingers around a throwing dagger, his thumb

finding the base of the blade and pressing. The tag engages, a faint heat flowing up through the metal.

He throws it up and over the railing.

The hilt clears the balcony edge, and his body moves.

The Flash is always rough. Space folds sideways in one violent squeeze, a burst of air collapsing into the gap he leaves, and then he’s on the upper balcony, knees bending to eat the landing, the throwing dagger in one hand and the Glass Dagger already reversed in the other.

Three archers. Turning too slow.

He reaches the first before it comes around, slips behind it, and drives the glass blade into the notch where skull meets spine. **CRITICAL HIT** flares red across his vision. The archer folds and dissolves into silver light before it reaches the rail. He turns as the second lifts a crossbow, but he’s already inside its reach, batting the stock aside with his forearm and opening its throat in the same motion. The third backs against the wall. Two steps close the gap, and it’s done.

The Announcer’s voice crackles into his auditory cortex, fragmented, the theatrical tone completely gone, replaced by a flat, dying automated broadcast: **...and an*other*... player... the stats... no... longer... viable...**

He ignores it. Arlo pulses beside him, a sharp blue flare, once, then again, angled toward the far end of the balcony.

More incoming.

Below, the alley has turned into a different problem entirely.

Jason looks over the balcony. Silver light from the defeated thralls drifts through the narrow street. Sparks jump where armor scrapes the flags. The air tastes like burnt dust. Mei stands in the middle of the path, hands raised, sending a steady stream of pressurized water at the advancing corrupted NPCs. The thin streams cut through leather and break joints, pushing the thralls back against a stone barricade.

Her face is pale, with dark veins showing under her jaw. She stays on her feet and keeps the streams going, but her mouth is tight, showing the strain of using energy she’ll need when the final battle begins.

The thing that comes out of the side passage isn’t a normal thrall. It’s grotesque, changed by some violent process, an executioner’s two-handed axe already swinging. Rusted iron studs are hammered into its swollen, dark-veined muscles, and its limbs are stretched until it stands head and shoulders over anyone in the alley. It moves quickly for its size.

Budi rolls.

He almost makes it. The broad flat of the axe-blade catches Budi’s hip as he clears the path, throwing him off his feet and through the rotted wooden door of the apothecary shop in a shower of splinters. Jason hears the brief, ugly sound of his impact against the floor.

Daisuke turns, shouting into the dust. “Budi!”

The ceiling comes down.

From the high balcony, Jason sees the rotten rafters of the apothecary give way. Stone and timber crash down, blocking the entrance. Daisuke lunges toward the dust, trying to brace the collapse, but the street level falls out from under them. Through the cloud of dust, Daisuke, Reyna, and Budi drop into a dark basement and sewer channel below. Another slab falls, covering the hole.

For one full second, everything in Jason pulls toward that sealed hole. Three people gone into the dark under his feet, and every instinct he built since the marsh tells him the same thing it always told him: go alone, go fast, get them out, trust no one else to do it right. His weight is already shifting. He could tag a stone by the collapse and be down there before the dust clears.

And things on the surface would fall apart the moment he left it. Wei caught in the open. Mei running dry. Trent alone under an axe. The old reflex would save three and cost the rest, and he sees that now the way he never used to, fast and clean, like reading a stat line. He doesn’t go for the hole. He stays where the group can see him, and it costs him something to do it.

The dust hangs in the alley.

The executioner turns its flat gaze toward Trent, who is now standing alone on the flank.

Wei acts before anyone can say a word. She slides in from Trent’s right, twin blades ready, and spins low, cutting the two thralls closing on him at the knees. Her moves are quick and smooth, finishing off the fallen enemies with the experienced ease of someone who has done this many times.

From his vantage point, Jason’s eyes track the dust settling below. A cloaked figure steps from the dark alcove near the apothecary. Jason opens his mouth to shout, but the iron pike is already driven into Wei’s side with a sharp, concussive punch.

Wei’s momentum dies instantly. Her knees buckle, and her hands drop, one blade clattering on the stone as she brings the other hand to her torso, her fingers spreading and pressing inward.

In Jason’s peripheral vision, her health bar plummets dangerously low.

Sasha is already moving. She doesn’t run like a civilian. Her sprint is all efficiency, low center, straight path, no wasted movement. Evie follows a step behind.

Trent swings his shield outward, creating a long shadow behind it. “Here. Get her here.”

They drag Wei into the alcove under that shadow. Sasha drops her satchel, driving a knee onto the wound before they have her fully prone, one hand on Wei’s throat searching for a pulse, the other pulling the satchel open by feel. Wei’s lips are already going gray at the edges.

“Pressure.”

Evie puts both hands over the wound while the two of them work the injury.

Now the executioner is the main threat. Trent braces himself and takes the first axe hit on his shield, the force pushing him back two steps in the mud. He steadies himself and takes another blow. Behind his armor, his face shows nothing but focus, a man running on empty.

Jason tags a stone from the balcony above and drops it into the street ahead of the executioner.

He Flashes to street level in less than a breath.

He lands in motion, using the Flash’s momentum to swing his dagger low at the executioner’s knee, intending to break the joint. The right knee locks up on impact, the critical hit spreading through the joint faster than the thrall can react. It starts to fall.

Trent’s shield slams into the executioner’s sternum, and the thing goes down. It doesn’t get back up.

Across the alley, Mei downs two Energy Pills and lets out a sharp breath through clenched teeth. She plants her feet and lifts her hands. Her blue energy bar starts to rise, preventing her from drawing on her deepest reserves, the kind that takes hours to recover and would leave her veins showing and her hands shaking.

A wave of frost sweeps forward, covering the remaining thralls in the street. As it passes, their blood freezes, locking their joints and turning them into pale, frosted statues along the alley walls.

Mei takes one step and puts her back against the stone, both hands dropping. Her energy bar is back down to dangerous levels. She has to wait a little bit before taking another Energy Pill, or else she'll become violently ill.

Jason moves.

He marks and throws a loose stone on the far side of the frozen thralls and Flashes to it, holding the Glass Dagger in reverse. The pommel hits the nearest frozen thrall, and the next, and the next. The critical hits do the rest. The ice cracks from within, breaking the statues one after another, and the alley fills with the sound of fracturing ice.

The dust settles.

Arlo's light brightens by one slow, deliberate degree. In the alcove, Sasha's palms begin to glow.

Her light is warm and steady, nothing like Mei's frost. It runs from her hands straight into the wound, and under Evie's palms the torn tissue draws slowly back together. Wei's color stops sliding away.

"She's stable." Evie keeps her hands pressed flat, dark to the wrist.

"She needs a minute." Sasha doesn't look up. "We do not move her before that."

From across the alley, Jason watches it happen and doesn't move to help, because there's nothing his blade can add to it. Wei is gray-lipped on the wet stone, Evie's hands dark past the wrist, Sasha working with the flat calm of someone who has lost a patient before and has decided she will not lose another. A minute earlier, and the best he could have done was call the pike's angle from above and watch it land anyway. He didn't have to. Two healers he barely knows knelt in the open and pulled her back while he was still turning toward the sound. The odds he ran their whole survival on have a hole in them, and he is only now learning to see the shape of it. The shape is this. People covering ground he was never going to cover alone.

The squad comms crackle.

"Still breathing." Budi's voice comes over the internal channel, thick with dust and static. "We're all breathing. The ceiling took my dignity. My body is intact."

"Budi?" Jason asks. "How the fuck am I hearing you?"

"Party communication. It normally only works with other members of your party, but it appears that many of the systems and rules are breaking down."

“Did you know that?” he asks Arlo.

Arlo doesn’t answer. He just spins once and goes back to scanning the area for threats.

He looks to Trent.

“Logically, it makes sense,” Trent huffs, too tired to be surprised by anything the system does now.

Jason’s gaze hangs on Trent for an extra second.

Daisuke’s voice cuts in, lower: “Cellar system runs east. There is a passage toward the gatehouse. We’re moving.”

“Don’t wait on the cave-in.” Budi coughs. “Press forward. We’ll come up from below.”

Wei can walk, but only with Trent’s arm for support. She doesn’t say she’s in pain, but it’s clear from her tight jaw and careful breathing. Trent quietly matches her pace.

The outer gate of the Usurper’s Castle fills the mouth of the Ward’s alley ahead.

The gates are closed now. When Jason scouted earlier, they were open to the wind, their keys gone from the stone slots. The system’s big time-skip must have triggered a lockdown, sealing the entrance, dropping a heavy iron bar, and posting elite thrall knights to guard the way.

There are eight of them, arranged in two staggered rows in front of the two-foot-thick iron-banded wood. Their plate armor is corroded to the color of old teeth, their visors down, their halberds angled outward.

Trent moves to the alley mouth and braces, shield up. Heather kneels behind him, drawing her bowstring back to her cheekbone, mapping the hairline cracks running through the nearest visor.

Jason checks his HUD.

2:14:37.

The red static is gone now, but the number carries its own weight.

Jason turns to Mei. “Mei.”

Mei pushes off the wall, dark lines sitting heavy beneath her eyes. Her chin lifts. “One blast. Make it count.”

He pulls the cape tight, letting his silhouette bleed into the fog.

The thrall knights don’t notice him as he moves. He stays close to the wall, steps over rubble from a fallen pillar, and approaches the gate at an angle. Twenty feet. Fifteen. The nearest hinge is a rusted iron wheel as big as his torso, bolted into the stone.

He goes low, making contact with the hinge mount and tagging it. He draws his Glass Dagger, reversing it to strike, and slips two steps back into the shadow of the wall.

The Flash sends him straight into the mount, and his pommel strike hits the pivot point. On his display, the gate’s iron mounts show a thin green health bar that drops by more than half on a single hit. He marks the second hinge from his new spot and Flashes again, striking at the perfect angle. The bar drops to zero.

“Now!” Jason’s shout cuts through the rain.

Mei raises her hands with deliberate care.

The water blast isn’t a wave, but a single, focused column of force that hits the center of the gate just as the iron mounts give way. The gates swing open, crashing into the muddy courtyard. The sound echoes across the empty castle interior like a bell in a deserted cathedral.

They come through the wreckage of the gates in a ragged column.

Trent and Wei first, Wei upright on her own legs now, one hand still pressed to her ribs. Heather is behind them, walking backward for three steps with her bow raised until she’s certain the alley behind them is clear. Then Evie, her arms still dark, followed by Sasha. Sasha’s satchel is refastened on one side and loose on the other, her movements carrying the heavy fatigue of sustained concentration.

Mei walks with one hand on the gate post for support as she passes through. Then she lets go, and her arm falls heavy to her side.

Arlo drifts above Jason’s shoulder as he stops in the center of the courtyard and looks up.

The keep lies just ahead. Wide stone stairs lead up to the main entranceway. The stone is dark gray and old, absorbing shadows instead of reflecting light. At the top, the doors are huge, black iron, edged with strange stonework, the angles somehow wrong, the proportions sliding whenever he catches them at the corner of his eye.

He looks straight at them, and they hold still. He looks away, and they seem taller.

The courtyard isn’t silent. Mud sucks at their boots, Trent’s breath saws in and out, Wei shifts her hand against her side. The rain keeps on. But the quiet around the keep isn’t the quiet before a fight. It is the feeling of a sound being held back, a breath not yet let out.

Jason takes stock of what he has left. Trent, upright but gray around the mouth, his shield arm hanging a half-inch lower than it should. Wei, walking, which is a generous word for what she is doing. Mei, drained to the dregs, one gate-blast further into the red than she can afford. Heather steady, Sasha steady, Evie’s hands still stained to the wrist from the alcove. They’re past the point where numbers would tell him anything he wants to hear. He reads them the old way instead, by the set of a shoulder, the length of a breath, the small tells this world has taught him. Every one of them says the same thing. Nearly empty. Still standing.

And the keep in front of them is not a thing you walk into nearly empty. He can feel it the way he felt the marsh and the cemetery, a wrongness that comes up through the soles of the boots before the eyes have anything to point at. Whatever is behind those doors was built to be the last thing, and it’s been waiting the whole time for exactly this, for a group worn down to the wire, arriving with no reserves and nowhere left to go but forward.

Arlo goes completely still above his shoulder.

Then it begins.

A vibration rises through the stone stairs and spreads across the courtyard, a slow pulse that moves through Jason’s boots, into his knees, and up his spine. It’s not a sound, but a physical pressure.

The doors groan and swing inward, moved by an unseen mechanism. The darkness beyond breathes out. The cold comes first, a wall of freezing air rolling down the steps. Then the smell of rotting copper hits him, thick and close, like blood left in a warm, closed room for days.

Nobody speaks. Nobody moves.

Then the squad comms collapse into static, and from the noise comes Budi’s voice, broken across the frequencies, compressed with pure fear.

“Something’s in here with us.” A single breath. “Something was waiting for us to come down.”

Daisuke’s voice cuts in over the top of it, not words, just a guttural grunt of sudden impact, and then the channel fills with the sound of screaming from underground.

Jason looks at the black threshold at the top of the stairs. He looks at the mud-slick stone under his boots. There’s no separate way down to the cellars, no side door to the three people screaming beneath him. The only path to Budi and Daisuke and Reyna runs up these steps, through those doors, and down again on the far side, into whatever the keep has been holding its breath to become.

Not a fork in the road. A funnel.

And there it is again, the same trap the system has set for him in one shape or another since the first week, dressed up now in stone and screaming. To reach the three below, he has to take the six people at his back up into the keep and down into the cold copper dark on the far side, the whole worn-down rest of them, into the exact place the castle built to catch a group with nothing left. Leave Budi’s team to die, or spend everyone he has left on the chance of reaching them. There’s no Flash that puts him in two places at once. There’s no read of the room that solves it. The system wants him to choose already, wants him to weigh the three against the six, and call the answer logic afterward. It’s the answer Eric built his whole climb on, patient and certain, the one Jason has refused since the first week. He can feel how reasonable it would be to take it, and that’s the worst part.

He doesn’t take it. He doesn’t yet know what he’ll take instead. He only knows, with a conviction that has nothing to do with numbers, that he’s done letting the room choose which of his people he abandons.

Arlo’s light doesn’t flicker. He says nothing at all.

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Chapter 25

The static dies, and Daisuke's grunt fills the silence left behind.

Jason moves before he can think. His boots slip on the first mossy step, one knee hitting the stone, and his palm smacking the granite. He gets up before he feels the pain. Arlo stays close over his left shoulder, the light brushing Jason's collar. Behind him, Trent's heavy steps echo on the courtyard stone as he charges up the wide stairs, carrying Wei on his shoulder.

The iron-reinforced doors stand open. Jason keeps moving, ducking through the gap. The cold inside the vestibule hits him hard, like walking into a meat locker. A stale draft washes over him, smelling of decay.

He slides to a stop on the wet slate floor, chest heaving, pivoting.

The chamber is large with a low, arched ceiling. The stone walls are dark and damp. Two torches burn in brackets on either side of a huge stone column, their flames pulled sideways by a draft. To his right, a wide archway leads into darkness, with the first steps of a circular staircase barely visible before the light fades.

The vibrations rattle Jason's teeth. The whole structure groans, warning of terrible violence below.

The crack of masonry. The shriek of old wood under force. The wet slap of flesh hitting stone, and then, underneath all of it, Reyna's voice rising in a sharp, cut-off cry.

The rest of the group rushes in behind him. Trent carries Wei through the doorway and sets her gently against a dry-stone pillar. He then wedges his shield between the door and its frame. Heather drops to one knee at the archway, arrow ready and aimed at the darkness. Evie and Sasha enter together, and Mei comes in last, steadying herself on the door frame, her face as pale as old candle wax.

Jason grips the banister, leaning out over the stairwell to angle his torso into the dark. “Positions.” The word is flat, sheared of breath.

Two turns down, the spiral opens into a wide, vaulted corridor where the torchlight gutters and strobes, caught in a draft from whatever just punched through the wall.

Daisuke stands at the narrowest point, his feet planted wide on the muddy stone, his broadsword carving aggressive arcs that scrape sparks from the low ceiling. Four thralls press him from the front, their red eyes flat in the dim light. Their movements are too fast, too deliberate, coordinated in a way normal thralls never manage. These have been waiting.

Further back, Reyna has her back against the wall and her palms raised. The glow coming from her hands isn’t clean white. It’s thin, intermittent, and flickering at the edges. In Jason’s HUD, her energy bar sits at six percent, framed by an angry amber warning. She’s pushing everything she has into the stream of light directed at the gash running the full width of Budi’s shoulder. The bleeding slows, but her hands are shaking.

Budi fights anyway.

He drives his short spear through the throat of a thrall that tries to circle Daisuke’s left, yanks the shaft back with one hand, pivots, and kicks the heavy body aside. Black, foul-smelling blood splatters across the flagstone, carrying the sharp stink of sulfur and rotten marrow. His right boot slides, catches, and he steps over the pool without breaking the cadence of his defense. His jaw is forward, and his eyes move constantly, tracking two corridors at once, reading the fight with instinctive grace.

Arlo hovers near Jason’s collar, his light a pale blue in the dark stairwell. “Reyna’s health is at twenty-one percent,” he says quietly, his voice flat and focused. “She will not survive another direct hit. Budi’s shoulder is still bleeding, even though she is trying to stop it. The bleeding has slowed but not stopped.” He hesitates for a moment. “I am telling you this because you need the numbers, not because I want to.”

Jason pulls two throwing daggers from his belt, leaning further out over the rail.

The spiral pillars block every angle. He turns, finds a gap, then loses it as another column gets in the way. The stairwell is built to keep anyone from helping from above. He flips his grip on the first dagger, judging the distance and angle.

“I can’t get a clean line.” Jason’s voice is low, directed at Heather beside him.

“Neither can I.” Her bowstring remains pinned to her cheekbone. “The arch cuts the trajectory.”

“There’s a gap,” Arlo whispers near Jason’s ear. “Second pillar from the left. It opens for about one point four seconds when Daisuke shifts right. He does this every eight seconds. It is not an easy shot.” He pauses. “I am not telling you to use it. I just want you to know it is there, because I think it is better to tell you than not.”

“I know,” Jason snaps.

“You were already looking at it,” Arlo says.

“Yes.”

“I will stop narrating things you already know,” Arlo says. “Probably.”

The comms crackle with Budi’s rough, labored breathing.

“Still three in the left corridor.” Budi’s voice is impossibly even over the feed. “Daisuke, push right. Give me the flank.”

Daisuke shifts without confirming. His shoulder drops, his sword swings right, and Budi slides into the vacant space, spear low, moving with perfect synchronization as they retreat up the corridor in tight order.

They’re going to make it.

Jason exhales, the tension in his collarbone easing for a fraction of a second.

Then the shadow drops from the ceiling.

No graceful arc, no theatrical warning. One moment, the stone ribbing above the corridor is dark and bare. The next, a folded shape releases its grip and drops straight down, landing on all fours between the retreating trio and the first step of the staircase.

The impact is a soft, dense thud, like a sandbag hitting the pavement.

Jason’s whole body goes rigid against the banister.

“Fucking hell.”

It was up there the whole time. It was already in position. The understanding arrives cold and complete. The fight below was never the trap. The fight below was the bait, run long enough to tire them, bunch them, turn their backs to the ceiling. Something built this the way the streets were built, everything herded to one point, and then it waited in the dark above the point for the moment they let themselves believe they had won.

“It was waiting,” Arlo says, quiet. Not afraid. Flat, like he has already run the numbers and hates the result. “It let the fight happen below it. It watched the group and chose its moment.” A pause. “This one is not like the others.”

The creature crouches, its head tracking left to right with a slow, clinical deliberateness. Red eyes catch the torchlight. It’s too tall, the proportions of its shoulders warped in a way that registers in the peripheral vision before the brain can name the horror.

Budi’s head snaps toward it. In a heartbeat, his weight shifts from back foot to front.

“Daisuke.” Budi’s voice is a quiet, flat statement. “Go.”

He drives his elbow into Daisuke’s ribs, shoving the two teammates back toward the stairs, and throws himself into the creature’s midsection at a dead sprint.

The impact is loud and wet. For a moment, Budi’s force stops the creature’s lunge. He wraps his arms around its torso, holding it back for a few inches, a few seconds. Daisuke stumbles back, his foot hitting the first step. Reyna’s heel lands on the second.

The creature’s arm comes down.

The blow hits Budi’s chest with a hollow crack, like a sledgehammer on packed clay. His body folds. His knees don’t just buckle; they give out completely, dropping him straight onto the stone with a heavy, terrible slap. In Jason’s HUD, Budi’s green health bar empties in a single frame, flashes once, then goes completely dark.

No red. No amber warning. Just an empty, black line.

And the physical body remains on the stone, silent and still.

Arlo stays silent. His light shrinks to a tiny blue pinprick in the dark, as if he’s pulling inward. He stays like that, very still, for two seconds.

“No.” Daisuke’s voice is a fractured, low sound from the stairs. “Budi, no.”

But Budi’s hands are moving. He is dead, his health bar gone, but his blood-slicked fingers lock around the creature’s ankle in a final spasm of will. His chin rests on the flagstone. His chest doesn’t rise, but his grip stays tight, anchoring the beast in place.

Daisuke lunges back down the stairs, blade raised.

Three thralls throw themselves against his shield, stopping his descent. He staggers back, blade scraping the wall, and the thralls press their weight against him. There’s no room to get past, no angle, and the sheer momentum forces him upward.

“Daisuke!” Reyna’s voice screeches in the narrow stairwell. “The stairs!”

The creature looks down at the dead fingers clamping its ankle. It reaches down, wraps its gray hand around its own leg, and jerks. Budi’s fingers splinter, the sound echoing up the shaft, and finally slide free, his heavy, unmoving hands dropping onto the stone.

The creature steps over Budi’s corpse, dragging its long claws through the pool of thick, dark blood accumulating around his chest, and turns its head toward Daisuke.

“Jason.” Arlo’s voice is hardly a whisper, low and urgent by his collar. “The wooden landing. Bottom of the last five steps.”

Jason is already moving. He pulls the second throwing dagger free, searching the visible floor of the upper corridor for any surface below the archway, any flagstone, any strip of wood. The stairwell’s final turn is coming into view. He can see the wooden landing at the base of the last five steps. Twelve feet of open air lie between him and it.

He flicks his wrist. The dagger sings through the gap in the banister, dropping clean, and buries itself in the wooden floor of the landing below with a sharp *thunk*.

Too far back. If I jump now, I’m behind them, not in front.

The creature tenses, shifting its weight from its heels to the balls of its feet with the unmistakable kinetics of a pounce.

Reyna throws herself sideways without hesitation, rotating across Daisuke’s chest with her arms spread, making herself a shield. Her energy bar reads four percent.

The creature lunges.

The claws catch Reyna across the chest on the downswing, carving four parallel tracks through leather and flesh. The impact spins her in the air. She hits the steps hard, sliding backward. Daisuke catches her under the

shoulders with his left arm, his sword extended blindly behind him to ward off the shadow already scaling the first step.

In Jason's HUD, Reyna's health bar flashes crimson, hovering at the absolute edge of zero.

"Go." Jason marks the dagger he threw into the lower wooden landing. It is close to her now; her slide down the steps has carried her nearly to it. He throws a third tagged dagger past the pillar that blocks his line and Flashes to it while it is still in the air, then Flashes again, straight to the landing.

The second hop wrenches him around the stone in a fraction of a heartbeat. His boots land on the wooden step with a sharp crack, the dagger vibrating beneath his heel. He drops low, his fingers clutching onto Reyna's blood-slicked collar as Daisuke drags her backward up the final steps.

"Pull!" Daisuke grunts, his voice strained to the point of cracking.

They pull her up. Reyna's armor straps are wet and heavy, and her body doesn't fight them. Her head rolls to the side, lips pursed white, and Jason grabs her harness, pulling with all his strength. His boots slip on the wet stone, then catch. Together, they drag her through the archway into the vestibule. Sasha is already kneeling before Reyna's back touches the slate.

"Pressure." Jason releases his grip on the leather, his palms stained dark.

"I have it." Sasha's hands find the wounds by touch and press flat against Reyna's chest as a warm, golden glow flickers to life, slower than usual, worn down by the long hour. "Evie!"

Evie drops close to her without a word, her hands joining the healing line.

Jason stands, chest heaving. His left hand is coated in Reyna's hot, thick blood. He wipes his hand down his thigh, leaving a dark, sticky smear, and turns to the two healers. He quickly extends his hands to put an Energy Pill in both of their mouths. They both look at him with a flick of irritation but accept. He then turns his head toward Daisuke.

Daisuke stands with his back to the archway, his chest rising and falling in quick, sharp gasps. The calm is gone; his jaw is clenched so hard the muscles twitch, his eyes alert and unblinking as he stares down the steps. His hand shakes on the hilt of his sword, gripping so tightly that the leather wrap groans. Down there, in the dark corridor, Budi's body lies cold and still.

He doesn't say a word.

There's nothing to say, and everyone in the vestibule knows it, and the knowing sits on the room like the cold. Budi's body is two turns down a

stairwell nobody can descend, on a floor nobody can reach, and the last image any of them has of him is a dead man’s hands closing on an ankle to buy three seconds for his teammates. Reyna, half-conscious under Sasha’s palms, is crying without any sound at all, the tears just running sideways off her face onto the slate, and she doesn’t seem to know she’s doing it. Trent stares at the arch with the specific blankness of a man who spent the whole run believing the worst thing that could happen was still ahead of them, and has just learned it’s happening now. Nobody reaches for Daisuke. There is a kind of grief you don’t touch, because touching it would ask the person to hold himself together for your sake, and he can’t spare the strength.

Jason understands, standing there, that logic would have called this acceptable. One loss, nine saved, a favorable trade, the kind of line the man behind the numbers draws without slowing his pen. He has felt the pull of it before, the cold clarity it promises, the way it offers to turn a death into a number and let him set it down. It doesn’t feel like clarity now. It feels like a hole in the floor exactly the size of a man, and every ledger that ever called it a good trade is a lie he’s done telling.

Arlo drifts off Jason’s shoulder to the center of the vestibule. His light grows from a pinprick back to its full size, laying a steady blue glimmer over the stone, over the wounded and the living. He holds there a moment, silent, making the space a little less dark.

Then, quietly, he says, “Budi knew what he was doing. He made the decision before any of us did.” A pause, and something in his voice runs less clinical than usual. “I want that noted. I want it in the record. He saw it coming and chose anyway.” Another pause. “I am going to keep my internal designator for him. It was unique. I will not give it to anyone else.”

Jason’s chest is tight in a way that has nothing to do with the run up the stairs. He looks at the black arch and does the thing he’s learned not to do, lets himself feel it for one breath. Budi, who watched him from a boulder in the first hour and gave one slow nod that meant what it meant, when no one else would stand near the ‘seven’. Budi, who read a fight two corridors deep and called the flank in a voice like he was ordering tea. Gone in a single frame, no red, no warning, and the last thing his body did was hold a door for people he barely knew. Jason files it where he files everything he can’t fix yet, and the file is getting heavy.

Trent moves up to the arch, shield raised, filling the doorway. Heather takes the far side, bow drawn, arrow tracking the dark below the first curve.

The sounds from below stop.

The sudden silence is worse than the screaming.

An unnatural cold floods the vestibule, so intense that Jason's next breath plumes into thick white fog. This is not the ambient coldness of old stone and rain. It's active, a freezing tide rolling up the stairs from below, smelling of frost-bitten earth and dry, stale death.

Trent's jaw tightens. He doesn't lower his shield.

"That cold is not just in the air," Arlo says quietly. "It is proceeding with intent. Something is causing it." His light dims a bit, pulling in but not disappearing. "That is not the smell of cold stone. I have cataloged that smell for weeks. This is different." He pauses. "Be ready."

Then the footsteps start.

Not the chaotic scramble of thralls. A single set of footsteps. Deliberate. Even. Each boot falls with absolute confidence on the stone. The sound climbs the spiral one step at a time, and the freezing air rolls ahead of it.

No one speaks. The only sounds are the soft, wet hum of Sasha's healing and Reyna's shallow, rattling gasps. The cold deepens, making the skin on Jason's neck crawl.

The footsteps reach the last curve.

A pale shape emerges from the dark. Long, pale fingers grip the wet stone of the doorframe, leaving dark, icy smears. Then the figure steps through, stooping slightly to clear the low archway before straightening inside the vestibule.

The faint torchlight hits it.

Jason's hand drops to the hilt of the Glass Dagger.

The touch sends a bolt of memory through him, the smooth unnatural cold of the glass grip, the steady balance of the blade. And behind that, older, the damp air of an open field, wind moving through the trees, and the steady hand of the man who pressed the dagger into his palm on that first day. Jason had a single-digit stat and a head full of shame, and one person on that whole field had looked at him and seen something worth arming. *I can still see his face when he gave it to me. He smiled like it was obvious.*

The thing in the arch is tall, its proportions warped at some cellular level into something too efficient, too dense. The tendons stand near the surface at the wrists. Its eyes throw the torchlight back in a flat copper sheen where the iris should be. Mud is splashed across its left shoulder, and a leather strap runs diagonally down its chest, torn partway through near the buckle.

The creature lifts its right hand.

The pale cold fingers slip under the leather strap and find a loose thread. Slowly and carefully, they tuck it back under the metal buckle. It's a quiet, protective check, the habit of someone who can't stand disorder in the gear he relies on.

Arlo goes absolutely still. His light does not flicker. It holds at a single, cold, unwavering point beside Jason's shoulder, and his voice, when it comes, is the quietest Jason has ever heard. No data. No hedging. No clinical framing.

"Jason," he says.

Just the name. Nothing else.

An icy chill drives through Jason's lungs. His chest tightens.

The hand lowers.

The head comes up.

The face in the torchlight is pale as old plaster, the veins mapping dark beneath the skin of the jaw and temples. The eyes are that copper-flat red of the undead, but the jawline is unmistakable. The line of the nose is the same. The brow, the slight pull of the hairline to the left, all of it identical, recognizable, even now.

Derek.

The name catches in Jason's throat, a cold lump of lead.

Evie lets out a soft, broken hitch behind him, though her hands don't leave Reyna's chest.

Derek's copper eyes sweep the vestibule, taking inventory. They pass over Trent's shield, over Heather's drawn arrow, over Mei, over Evie, over Sasha's bent head, and then they stop.

They lock onto Jason.

The silence in the room is absolute, disturbed only by the thin, wet hiss of Derek's exhale, not quite human in its rhythm, filling the cold space around them.

Derek's eyes drop to the Glass Dagger at Jason's hip.

For a fraction of a second, the pale face shifts, an infinitesimal twitch of the jaw, the closest thing the dead face can manage to recognition.

Beside Jason's shoulder, Arlo's light does not move. He does not say anything else.

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Chapter 26

The silence stretches for what feels like an eternity.

Derek's eyes stay fixed on Jason, unblinking and patient, as if he already knows how this will end and is just waiting for the right moment. The torchlight reveals the dark veins under his jaw, each like a thin, lifeless line leading to his throat.

Jason's fingers stay still. His thumb slowly finds the familiar groove near the Glass Dagger's guard. A memory hits him, sharp and sudden. He remembers standing at the tree line on that night, mud on his boots, Trent's back turned, and Derek quietly stepping up toward him. There was no ceremony or explanation, just Derek handing him the dagger, the glass grip cold in Jason's palm, and a small half-smile. Jason mouthed *thank you* but said nothing, slipping the weapon into his inventory before Trent noticed. Derek was already looking away.

He hadn't asked why. Derek hadn't offered.

The cold in the vestibule deepens. Jason's next exhale spreads outward into a white cloud.

Trent moves first. He pushes off with his back foot and steps forward, putting himself between Jason and their old teammate. His shield comes up, blocking the torchlight and casting a long shadow over the frosty floor. Trent's large frame tenses, his shoulders bunching under his heavy armor, the leather creaking with strain.

He gets two full steps.

Then the aura hits him. It’s not something you can see, but a cold pressure, mental and physical at once, coming off Derek slams into Trent’s chest like a punch, making his legs go stiff. His knees don’t give out; they lock. He stops heel-first on the stone, boots sliding, his whole body frozen against the invisible force.

Derek watches this with no particular interest. His head tilts, just slightly, to the right.

When he speaks, it’s still Derek’s voice, the same deep tone, the same chest resonance, but the normal rhythm is missing. The thoughtful pauses Derek used to have are gone. Now, his words come out flat and even, each one delivered with mechanical precision.

“Eric did not perish at the cemetery.” No preamble. No adjustment of tone. “The scene was staged to buy time for him to gather the necessary keys.”

Jason measures the distance. Ten feet. The frost on the floor is a slick, uneven sheet that will rob him of his traction if he has to lunge laterally. He keeps his center of gravity low, testing the grip of his boots on the stone, his eyes inspecting Derek’s posture. No breath. No chest rising.

“He had already extracted and ingested blood from Feratu.” Derek’s gray hand rises, one long finger pointing toward the stairs behind him with the clinical detachment of someone showing a location on a map. “The Vampire Lord was too powerful to defeat. Eric took a tactical approach to steal the Vampire Lord’s power and use it against him.”

Derek takes a single step forward. His boot makes a dry, papery sound on the frost, the thin layer of ice crackling cleanly beneath it.

Heather’s bowstring creaks at Jason’s right.

Daisuke’s breath shapes into a single, razor-thin warning. “Don’t.”

Derek continues as though neither of them exists.

“Feratu’s blood contains a high concentration of the machines the castle recognizes as a top-level signature. Drinking it lets a player show that signature to the systems below us. Eric used it on the castle’s control layer.” Derek’s hand drops. His pale fingers trace the torn leather strap on his chest in a slow, absent way; the same habit he had when he was alive, always checking his gear before a drop or a fight. The gesture is so exactly Derek that Jason’s throat clenches.

That’s not him. That’s not him anymore.

“Machines.” Mei’s voice cuts across the vestibule, sharp and suspicious. Her eyes have gone wide, tracking Derek’s words with the focused intensity of someone pulling a thread and watching the fabric come apart. “You said machines. What machines?”

Derek’s copper eyes turn to her, cold and distant. “This world isn’t magic. It’s not supernatural. It’s not even a different world. It’s still your world. Just an isolated area where every creature, object, healing light, fire bolt, and locked gate is made from machines. Nanites. They’re microscopic, too small to see, working inside every surface, wall, and living thing here.” The rhythm doesn’t change. “Inside the NPCs. Inside the monsters. Inside you.”

The vestibule goes completely silent.

Trent’s shield lowers by two inches before he catches himself and drives it back up. “That’s—” He stops. Starts again. The word comes out wrong, like a sentence that has lost the rest of itself. “That’s inside us right now?”

“Since before you woke up on the table,” Derek says. “Eric can see it all now. He can control it all.”

Evie’s hands freeze above Reyna’s wounds, her face pale as chalk. “The healing.” Her voice is scarcely audible. “Every time I healed someone. Every time the light came from my hands.” She looks at her blood-stained fingers, her expression changing into something Jason has never seen before. It’s not just horror, it’s the shock of realizing everything she believed was wrong. “I was sending machines into people.”

“You were instructing the machines already present within you to interact with the machines already present within them,” Derek says. “The distinction is minor.”

“The distinction,” Evie says, very quietly, “is not minor to me.”

Sasha says nothing. Her hands stay on Reyna’s chest, the gold light between them steady. Her jaw is set the way Jason remembers from the tower, when the clock dropped and she kept working. She takes this the same way, folding it somewhere to be opened later.

“I will think about this afterward,” she says, to no one. “Reyna doesn’t have the time for me to think about it now.”

“It all makes sense now,” Heather says, her string still drawn to her cheek, her voice flat and analytic, her eyes moving fast. “The fire. The frost. The water. It was never elemental at all. It was always just—” She stops. “Instructions.”

“Correct,” Derek says.

“And Eric worked it out,” Jason says.

The pieces turn over in him, and one of them lands in a place that has ached since the orchard. *He didn’t pull away from the team because of me. He wasn’t copying my isolation. He looked at the same world I looked at, saw the machinery beneath it, and then spent every quiet hour figuring out how to reach the controls.* The relief of it is thin and cold and comes with its own horror. The man wasn’t imitating a loner. He was a person who had found the curtain behind the world and decided he was the only one who deserved to pull it.

“Eric saw the pattern before any of you thought to look for one,” Derek says. “He confirmed it with Feratu’s blood.”

“He hacked it,” Daisuke says. The word drops into the room like a stone into still water. “He drank the blood of a boss and hacked the whole system.”

“In crude terms,” Derek says. “Yes.”

Daisuke stares at him a long moment. Then he lets out a single controlled breath through his nose, his hand tightens on his sword, and he says nothing more. He doesn’t need to.

The cold has been deepening the whole time he has been talking. Jason notices it the way he notices everything now, in increments: the plume of his own breath thickening, the frost creeping a hand’s width further across the slate with each of Derek’s sentences, the thing wearing Derek’s face somehow a half-step nearer than it was a moment ago with no memory of it having moved. The explanation isn’t a courtesy. It’s a countdown. Derek is telling them what the world is made of because there is finally no reason not to, and every word is one word closer to the part where he stops talking and starts killing.

Jason’s eyes trace the seams of Derek’s armor. The torn strap over the collarbone leaves the gray artery of the throat exposed, a clean target. But he doesn’t have any idea how fast Derek moves now, what the turning has bought him, what an undead body at this tier can do that his living one couldn’t.

“He carried three keys to the gate,” Derek continues, his fingers still moving along the torn edge of the strap, “and the castle took the blood in his veins for a master’s hand. After that there were no rules left on him. No limits, no locks, none of the walls the rest of you live inside. He has been remaking himself, and this place, however he pleases, ever since. The

Usurper this castle was named for is gone. Eric took its throne the way he took the crypt."

Arlo isn't saying anything. His light has gone to a cold, unwavering point of blue, and it is no longer at Jason's shoulder; while Derek talked it has been rising, so slowly it hardly reads as movement, into the dark of the vault.

Derek's hand falls away from the strap. He spreads both arms slightly outward, turning his palms toward the high, vaulted ceiling of the vestibule, and the dark veins on the undersides of his wrists become visible in the torchlight.

"All remaining survival parties constitute variable redundancies within the finalization sequence. The parameters require your purging before the ascension can complete." His arms lower.

His shoulders square. His weight shifts forward, from heel to ball, the small though unmistakable transfer of a body preparing to move very fast.

Derek's voice drops, the baritone breaking into something that almost sounds like an apology. "There is nothing actionable I can offer you."

His back boot drives into the flagstone.

The ice beneath it shatters.

He crosses ten feet in an instant, but Trent breaks his paralysis with a savage roar, driving the edge of his iron shield forward to close the lane. Derek doesn't slow down. He meets the charging tank with a single, open-handed strike against the shield's rim, catches Trent's forward momentum, and casually redirects it. The shield spins; Trent's footing shears on the ice, and his massive body crashes side-first into the stone wall of the archway.

Derek pivots instantly, his gaze shifting back to Jason.

But before he can leap, Heather strikes.

An arrow hisses across the vestibule, its green-tipped toxic head screaming toward Derek's left temple. Derek is forced to twist his torso, a smooth, micro-scale deflection that lets the shaft shatter against the back wall.

Jason exploits the fraction of a second Derek's focus is elsewhere. He activates Stealth and the Lurker's Cape, throwing himself backward as the cape catches the dim light, bleeding his silhouette into the background. Derek's gray talons tear through the empty air where Jason's throat had been, the sheer velocity of the swipe displacing a cold draft against Jason's skin.

Derek plants both heels. His head pivots in tight, rapid arcs, copper eyes monitoring the slight visual smear of displaced light sliding toward the left wall. He is absolutely still from the neck down. Only the head moves, quick and angular, orienting and reorienting with the mechanical persistence of a targeting system re-acquiring a lost signal.

Jason keeps low, pressing his back against the cold perimeter wall and drawing an iron dagger from his belt as he moves. His breath is shallow, controlled to silence. The stone is rough and cold against his back through the cape's fabric.

Jason flicks his wrist.

The iron dagger spins through the air past Derek's right shoulder, trailing its dim link-signature that only Jason can see. The coordinate blooms at the edge of his vision, a tagged point behind his target, a flash point, a lane.

Derek shifts.

It's not exactly a dodge, more of a smooth, efficient step to the left, putting his body between Jason and the thrown blade. The path is blocked. The Flash needs a clear lane, and Derek has calmly closed it off, as if he's already calculated every move in the room.

He knows. He can see exactly what I'm doing.

Jason ducks behind a crumbled stone pillar, pressing his shoulder against the rough surface. His tagged dagger lies cold and useless on the floor behind Derek, who will just move again if Jason tries to use it. He looks at the Glass Dagger in his right hand. Tiny cracks in its spine catch the torchlight, showing a faint, webbed pattern from every fight it's survived.

He can't link it. He never has. Every time he tries to connect with the glass, something deep-seated inside him pulls back, sure the blade will break under the pressure. The link fails before it even starts.

Fast, then. Just fast.

Derek's footsteps resume, a measured, even interval circling toward the pillar.

Jason comes around the left side at full speed, cape dropping as he commits, closing the gap before Derek can fully reorient. The first claw strike comes down fast and hard. Jason catches it on the flat of the Glass Dagger, claw and glass meeting with a sharp crack, and the impact drives him back a half-step, the sheer weight of it traveling up through his wrist and shoulder.

The second strike is already coming.

He ducks under it, letting the claws rake air over his head, and drives his elbow up into Derek’s forearm on the recovery, breaking the angle. Derek adjusts in under a second, closing the space between them with no wasted movement, no flinch, no tell. He drives forward, shoulder-checking Jason’s chest, and Jason’s back hits the stone of the vestibule archway so hard the impact rattles his teeth.

The masonry digs into the back of his shoulder armor. His left side is locked, no lateral escape, the stone wall at his back, and Derek’s weight pushing the gap closed. Derek’s left hand swings down in a short, cutting arc, and the claws find the leather strap on Jason’s left shoulder, parting it cleanly. A white-hot line traces itself across the shoulder beneath as the HUD ticks downward, ten percent gone in a single attack.

Jason’s jaw tightens. He doesn’t make a sound.

Derek leans in, pressing his weight forward to pin Jason and finish the fight. Jason sees his options disappear. The opening at Derek’s throat is gone, his chin too low, and his weight forward, blocking every angle Jason had planned.

He’s going to hold me here until it’s done.

Then Arlo moves.

There’s no warning. Arlo bursts from the high ceiling where he’s been hiding, lighting up the room with a bright, cold blue-white flash that casts each silhouette into sharp relief. He shoots straight at Derek’s face and circles his head quickly, his light flickering in sharp bursts right in front of Derek’s eyes.

Derek’s targeting system engages instantly. His head snaps in quick, angular jerks, tracking the orbit with mechanical precision, his claws rising to intercept. He swings once through clean air. Twice. The talons pass straight through Arlo’s light without contact, without impact, disrupting the glow into scattered fragments that reform immediately behind his hand.

“I wish to be transparent,” Arlo says, his voice arriving from the orbiting light, rapid and carrying the particular breathless quality of someone doing something they have wanted to do for a long time, “I cannot be hit. I have been aware of this since I first understood what I am, and I want you to know that I consider it one of my finer qualities.”

Jason doesn’t think about it. He rotates his wrist inward, the Glass Dagger angling upward, and drives off the wall with everything left in his legs and his shoulder and his lungs. He comes in from below and to the left,

the cape’s passive bleeding his edges into the shadow, closing the distance in the fraction of a second that Derek’s attention is locked on the light blazing into his eyes.

The throat lane is there. Three inches. Maybe four. The torn leather strap hangs open above it exactly as it was when he first mapped the room, the dead-gray skin beneath exposed and unguarded.

He has one window.

He takes it.

The Glass Dagger drives upward through the soft tissue beneath Derek’s chin, through the roof of the mouth, and through the brain. The sound is small. Smaller than it should be.

The system resolves it in the next instant. A white, violent flash of text ignites at the top of Jason’s vision, burning into his retinas.

CRITICAL HIT
FATAL HIT

It throbs there for a moment, clinical and enormous, a verdict that means nothing and everything, sitting in perfect, horrible contrast above the thing it just described.

Derek’s body stiffens.

The copper eyes go wide, that flat reflective sheen blown open for a fraction of a second, a micro-expression the algorithm cannot fully suppress. Recognition, maybe. Something. Then the light in them simply goes out, extinguished without struggle, and Derek’s full weight tips forward. His forehead lands against Jason’s shoulder, heavy and cold as stone, and his knees give, and the body goes down.

But not the way bodies go down.

The dissolution starts at his fingertips and forearms. A fine silver mist rises off the skin, slow and quiet, catching the torchlight before it falls. It doesn’t drift. It sinks, a thin silver curtain settling into the seams of the slate and vanishing. In seconds, the body is gone into the floor, no blood, no weight, only the cold pressing on the stone and the dry smell of frozen earth thinning out of the air.

It’s the same silver he’s watched a hundred times, off thralls and ghouls and the necromancer’s puppets, and it’s never once looked like this to him,

because it has never once been a living person. He makes himself watch it. He owes the watching. The man dissolving into the floor taught him, without a word, the only lesson that kept him alive out here, that a person can look at a broken build with a weak stat and decide to hand over the one blade that mattered. Derek is going into the seams of the floor now the way Magda went, the way the villagers went, machines returning to the machinery, and Jason stands over the emptying stone and refuses to look away until the last mote of him is gone.

The Glass Dagger hits the floor. In all that silence, the sound of it is very loud.

Jason’s knees go next.

He doesn’t decide to kneel. His legs simply stop holding him, and he comes down on both knees over the empty slate, his hands landing flat on the stone just ahead of where Derek had been, fingers splayed against the cold. His HUD is still lit, still ticking, still rendering the room in its overlay of health bars and status markers, and he can’t make himself look at any of it.

He can’t look at anything at all.

The stone under his hands is hard and cold. He looks at the silver dust that’s still visible in the cracks between the flagstones, the last sign the simulation will allow of Derek’s existence. Just a fine dust, the invisible machines returned to the floor. That’s all that’s left.

Behind him, the vestibule holds its breath. No one speaks. Daisuke’s sword scrapes the wall as his arm drops, but even that sound is distant, arriving through a thick, pressing layer that Jason can’t name. Sasha’s healing light flickers. Evie’s fingers remain tense and stained with blood as she maintains her casting posture alongside Sasha over Reyna’s chest. Reyna’s breathing catches, a small, wet hitch.

Arlo descends from the rafters.

The blue light drops in a slow, steady line from the high vault, dimming as it falls, its usual bright urgency settling into something calmer, something that pulses in long, soft intervals rather than short ones. He doesn’t offer commentary. He doesn’t recite probabilities or parse the fight’s outcome. He hovers down until he’s level with Jason’s shoulder, and then he begins to move. He begins to solidify.

The first nudge is gentle, just enough to push the loose strap of Jason’s right pauldron back into place. He can’t mend the left buckle Derek’s claws

cut, but he studies it a moment, humming low, then moves on. He nudges the collar of the cape straight, working slow and careful. It is the exact way Derek used to check straps and gear before a fight, quiet and focused and caring without a word for it.

Jason closes his eyes.

His hands grip the stone harder. The tremor in his fingers climbs up through both wrists, and he can't still it. He doesn't try very hard.

The loot pile in the dark tree line. Trent's back turned. Derek putting the dagger in his hand with no fuss, no inventory check, no second thought, just a hand out of the dark and a small half-smile, and the one certainty in a place built to convince him he was worth nothing: someone looked at the seven and armed him anyway.

His knees ache. He lets it be true for as long as he can afford to, which isn't long, and then he starts the work of standing back up inside himself.

He adds it to the count. Not the stat kind, the other kind, the one he has been keeping since the first week without a name for it. Magda is in that count, and the villagers, and Budi, and now Derek. Magda's locket sits cold against that same spot, iron over the count. He presses two fingers to it through his shirt and lets them fall.

Arlo finishes with the collar, folds back into ordinary light, and returns to Jason's shoulder, hovering there without a sound. His light pulses once. Twice. Settling into a tempo that matches, almost exactly, the shallow cadence of Jason's breathing.

The vestibule is quiet. Not the violent held quiet from before, but the heavier, more permanent quiet of after. Trent stands at the arch with his shield lowered, staring at the floor where the silver caught the light and is now gone. Daisuke has his back to the wall, his head tipped back, his eyes closed, his sword loose at his side. Sasha sits back on her heels beside Reyna, her glowing hands finally still, her head low. She doesn't look at Jason. Not yet.

Only the slate and the small bright dagger hold the empty space between them.

Jason reaches out. His hand finds the Glass Dagger's hilt the way it always does, from memory, the glass smooth under his thumb. He closes his grip on it. He doesn't lift it right away. He just holds it where it lies, the cold of the blade seeping up through his palm.

The glass did not break. It's never broken. He's spent more than three weeks sure that it would, sure that the moment he trusted it with real weight it would come apart in his hand, and it's caught every claw and every blade he has asked it to, and it's still whole. Something in that lodges under the grief and stays.

He picks it up, turns it once in his hand, and slides it home in the sheath at his hip. His legs feel strange as he rises, each part of the motion needing separate effort, weight through the knees, the back straightening, the balance arriving last. But it comes. He stands.

His left shoulder hangs open where the strap was cut, the plate sitting slightly off-angle. He makes one small precise adjustment to it without looking down.

Jason then lifts his head.

The throne room doors stand at the far end of the vestibule, massive arched stone sealed tight, their surface dark and unmarked. He doesn't remember crossing to them. He is simply walking, one boot then the next, the slate cold and unforgiving beneath each step, and the Glass Dagger is in its sheath, and the Lurker's Cape hangs straight, and Arlo's blue light moves with him.

His first boot reaches the threshold.

The stone all around them hums. Not through the air but through the floor itself, a low, tectonic vibration traveling up through the sole of his boot and into the bones of his foot and shin. It builds for a half-second, resounding in the stone of the wall and the high vault of the ceiling, and then Jason's HUD convulses.

The interface tears. The clean overlay fractures along horizontal lines, stat bars collapsing and rebuilding in fragments, before the whole field of his vision burns to a single solid red.

The text arrives, large and absolute, overriding every other display.

WARNING: SENSOR BOUNDARY SYNC INITIATING.

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Chapter 27

The red tears away first.

It doesn't happen all at once. The **WARNING: SENSOR BOUNDARY SYNC INITIATING** message splits along its middle, the block letters breaking into see-through ribbons that drift away from the center of Jason's vision, like a wound opening up. Through the gaps, the stone hallway comes back into view: cold gray slate, the black doors, and the far-off darkness beyond the threshold. Jason presses his right hand flat against the damp wall, breathing the sharp, mineral smell of wet stone and old sweat. He keeps his hand there, waiting for the floor to stop tilting beneath him.

It doesn't stop. He breathes through it.

Arlo moves in closer, hovering just three inches from Jason's left temple. His light flickers in short, sharp bursts: three quick flashes, then a longer steady glow, then three more pulses. The pattern matches the broken signals continuing to flicker at the edges of the visual display. The shifting light throws jagged, moving shadows of Jason's raised forearm across the slate floor.

"The interface is cycling." Arlo's voice carries that tight, clipped quality he gets when holding himself back from longer sentences. "Seventeen seconds, best estimate, before it resolves."

Jason doesn't answer. His eyes go to the doors instead.

The black obsidian doors split.

No creak, no slow build, only a low grinding hiss as two massive halves part down the center. The vibration climbs the floor into the balls of his feet, up his shins, and settles in his jaw, behind his ears. As the panels slide into their recesses with a final deep thud, a draft rushes out of the opening, the air charged the way it goes near old conduits, carrying stale metallic dust and the dry copper of ancient rot. The threshold is open. The throne room stands revealed, and it is nothing like a room.

Jason takes one step forward and stops.

The floor ends at the edge of the gray slate. Past the edge there is nothing. A vertical shaft drops away with no bottom in the light, its walls curving inward toward a central stone spire that rises out of the dark and climbs past Arlo’s reach, higher than any ceiling should be. Balconies ring the spire in overlapping tiers, and from them long horizontal ribs of stone reach out into the open air.

The outside of this castle could never hold this. It’s bigger on the inside.

The phrase catches on something as it forms. Bigger on the inside. A shard turns over in him, uninvited, a flash of somewhere else entirely, a blue box, a voice saying those exact words to a man in a long coat, the warm dim of a room he cannot place and a couch and the sense of a person who might have been beside him. It is there and gone in less than a second, and it leaves him strangely off-balance, because he did not go looking for it and could not have found it if he had.

How long since I reached for anything from before this place? The answer is that he stopped reaching in the first week, because there was never anything there to catch, only a smooth gray wall where the memories should be. The wall is not quite smooth now. Something is coming through the seams of it, the same way the party comms came through, the same way the system keeps handing them things it was never meant to. He files it with everything else and lets it go.

He steadies at the edge of the slate and looks down.

“She’s stable.” Evie keeps two fingers pressed to Reyna’s throat, her voice low and exact. She doesn’t look at Jason. Her knuckles are pale, and her hands haven’t stopped shaking since the vestibule. Behind her, Mei watches the corridor they just cleared, her breath heavy and spent as she holds the rear.

Daisuke settles Reyna against the left side of the doorframe, lowering her with the careful attention of a man managing weight on a surface he doesn't trust, his body low, his boots dragging. The dark iron on his shoulders is scored deep and smeared with the silver ash still drifting in thin traces off the antechamber floor. He stands and draws his sword in one clean motion, the steel rasping loud in the quiet of the vault.

Arlo floats out over the drop and pops out of existence.

Jason conjures the companion back.

"That was unpleasant," Arlo says, drifting in from the dark. "I am sensing an interference forming ahead of us."

"You okay, buddy?"

Arlo doesn't answer. He just settles back above Jason's shoulder, and Jason lets it go, because there's no time and because some questions are better left until there is.

A mechanical hum rises out of the abyss, low and steady, a vibration that skips the ears and goes straight into the fillings of his back teeth. Then the platforms begin to move. Huge hexagonal stones float up from the dark, each eight feet across, trailing thin gray dust from their undersides, and lock into a careful line, each joining the last with a soft magnetic clank, building a staircase of floating stone out and down into the void toward the far balconies. Ten feet between each one. The gaps are perfectly, deliberately even.

"Ten feet to the first platform," Daisuke says.

Trent pushes past Jason's right shoulder without a word.

The shove isn't aggressive. It's just heavy, his armored weight moving on its own, and Jason steps aside rather than be moved. Trent sets his feet wide at the very edge, boots at the drop, tower shield up to his chin and angled out into the open air. His jaw is tight, his eyes moving fast over the dark above the first platform, the upper tiers, the places his shield can't cover. Deep in thought in a way that Jason has never seen from him.

Heather leans a shoulder against the doorframe, her fingers tapping an unsteady rhythm on her bow, her gray eyes tracking the floating stair across the shaft. Arlo drifts to her shoulder, his light softening, and holds there a moment. Jason catches it and doesn't mind, only registers a small surprise that his orb has decided someone else is worth steadying.

"Secondary platforms above the third ring," Arlo says. "Lower gravity signature. The locks read magnetic, not mechanical. Different load

tolerance.”

Nobody answers, but Daisuke shifts his weight, updating his stance.

Jason tips his head back and reads the upper balconies. Three overlapping rings, each fifteen feet above the last, circling the spire. The sightlines between them cross at points he can already pick out. He marks the ones his linking will need: the base of the second-tier rib, the edge of the far balcony’s shadow, the pillar where the spire first curves. Anchor points. Places to drop a tagged blade so he can be somewhere the instant he needs to be, so the room belongs to him before anyone in it knows he’s moving.

He does the thing he’s done in every room since the marsh, the thing that once felt like the only sane way to stay alive and now feels like a discipline he keeps because it works. He builds the space in his head. Where the light falls and where it fails. Which ledges a thrown blade can reach and which are dead to him. What a fall from each tier would cost, and whether the cost is one he can walk away from. Three weeks have taught him that a room is never only a room; it’s a set of angles, and the angles have been the one thing reliably on his side. He fixes his three anchors and holds them in the back of his mind like held breath.

Three anchors. If I reach the top tier before they reach the middle, the room is mine to shape. It is the old instinct, the solitary one, the map with only him on it. He notices it, and this time he does the thing that would have been unthinkable in the first week: he adds the others to it, deliberately, a place for Trent’s shield and Heather’s line and Sasha’s ward, not hazards to route around but fixed points he intends to keep alive, and the map gets harder to solve and better at the same time.

Movement across the shaft. Small, distant shapes work the floating stones at the far end of the stair, three hundred feet off. Two of them Jason last heard of as names in a blue orb’s report, a shield and a thrower of lightning out of the European sector, Alfie and Michael; the third, trailing a thin ribbon of fire from one hand as she moves, can only be Kshitija, the woman Arlo found alone in the south. The other squads. They made it this far too.

Sasha moves up behind Trent, palms already extended, her fingers spread. The warm gold of her protective ward settles over the broad plane of his back, a soft, luminous pressure that sinks into the scratched metal of his armor.

Evie stands. She places her hand once against Reyna’s shoulder, a brief, firm contact, then straightens and moves to the edge beside Daisuke,

crouching low, her medical kit swinging against her hip.

Daisuke tightens both hands on his sword, his face completely flat, his eyes focused on the first stone platform. “Together.”

Jason lifts his left hand to the torn leather strap at his collarbone, pulling the loose end tight against his shoulder. The skin beneath his armor is raw where Derek’s claw dug through it, leaving a thin, burning line that throbs with his heartbeat. The chestplate hangs crooked, a few degrees off center. He lets go of the strap and puts his hand back on the Glass Dagger’s hilt. His fingers shake a little; his mind is still struggling to process the second death of his friend, this time by his own hand.

He leans his weight forward over the edge of the slate, his heels lifting fractionally off the stone. *Ten feet out. Three feet down. Land heavy on the pocked, wet surface. Take a recovery step. Don’t pitch forward.*

Trent coils, his boots grinding into the slate at the absolute edge of the threshold. Beside him, Heather stands on the balls of her feet, her body tensed like a spring, bow in hand. Sasha’s hands remain extended, the warm gold of her protective ward clinging to Trent’s back, waiting to stretch with his launch. Daisuke bends his knees, his weight shifting forward, preparing for the ten-foot sprint over the void.

Jason rocks onto the balls of his feet to launch beside them.

The hum changes.

It doesn’t get louder. It climbs, the deep rumble that’s been pressing on his inner ear for the last minute rising fast into a range that isn’t really sound anymore. It passes beyond hearing into something else, something that arrives not through the ears but straight through the back of the skull, hitting the jaw and the eye sockets and the small bones of the inner ear all at once.

Every other sound in the vault drops out beneath it.

The severance is instant and total. No muscle tension, no biological lag, the motor signals simply gone from their bodies at the neural level. Limbs go limp and heavy in the same instant.

Trent’s armored weight crashes straight down onto the slate of the threshold. His paralyzed fingers lose the shield, and the great steel-bound plate tips over the lip and slides into the vertical dark, the scrape of it fading down into nothing.

Beside him, Heather folds in a loose heavy heap, her bow clattering across the stone. Daisuke drops clean, his blade ringing hollow on the slate.

Evie’s kit strikes the doorframe as she goes down.

Jason’s knees buckle. He doesn’t choose to fall. His legs give, his shoulders fold in, his knees bend on their own. The HUD rips apart across his vision, stat bars dissolving into white static, the sensor-sync warning breaking into pieces that scatter and fade. The overlay flashes white, then blank, and then everything goes black.

Total dark.

His chin and cheek strike the slate at the threshold’s lip. The slate bites into his cheekbone and drags the heat out of his skin. The dark presses flat against his open eyes. No light. No sound. Nothing but the cold and the stone and the last thought he manages to hold, which is not a word, only the shape of the people going down around him.

Then even that is gone.

*** THE HOUSE ***

On the black glass at the front of the boardroom, the field of small white points goes dark almost all at once.

They wink out in a soft cascade, cluster by cluster, each one a signature dropping out of active telemetry into the flat holding state, and the room watches it happen the way a room watches a monitor flatline, without a sound.

“Boundary sync is holding,” the analyst says. “Every standard signature inside the central node is in suspension. Movement suppressed, sensory feed cut, higher functions parked. They are not terminated. They are held.” She doesn’t editorialize on the difference. At this table the difference is a line item.

“And the anomaly,” Sterling says.

“Still administrative.” She brings up the one trace that didn’t go dark, the waveform that has been wrong for two days, sitting now at the center of an otherwise empty board, bright and steady and alone. “The sync doesn’t touch it. It holds a credential the sync answers to. As of this moment it’s the only fully active signature inside the node.” A pause. “It has the room to itself.”

Nobody says the name. The name isn’t in their files anymore. The participant became the anomaly the moment it started rewriting the layer, and the House does not name the things it can no longer manage.

Vaneck, at Sterling’s left, has not spoken since the sync went out. She is watching a different corner of the board.

Sterling studies the lone bright trace. This was the containment play, the whole point of compressing the clock and dropping the boundary: gather every loose signature into one node and put them to sleep, so the anomaly burns itself out inside a sealed room with nothing left to recruit and nothing left to save. Clean. Accountable. A closed system resolving a closed problem.

“There’s a second irregularity,” the analyst says; something in her voice makes the far end of the table look up. “One suspended signature isn’t suspending correctly.”

She isolates it. Against the dark field, a single point that should be flat is instead ticking, a slow shallow pulse, dim but unmistakably still moving.

“Which one,” Sterling says, though he already knows. He flagged it himself in the eastern woods, the signature that moves through the substrate without ever drawing on it, the asset that leaves no mark.

“The one you asked me to preserve,” she says. “The sync put it under with the rest. It’s coming back up on its own. I can’t tell you how. Its coupling to the platform doesn’t match any profile we’ve logged. It’s as if the suppression has nothing clean to hold on to.” She looks at the trace, then at him. “Do you want me to push it back down?”

For a long moment Sterling doesn’t answer. On the glass, the whole board is dark but for two lights: the wrong one at the center, burning bright and administrative and alone, and the small stubborn one at the edge, refusing to go all the way out.

“No,” he says at last. “Leave it. I want to see what it does. It may solve our problem for us.”

He folds his hands. “Log everything. Whatever happens in there in the next hour, I want all of it kept through the reset.”

On the glass, the small light pulses again, and again, climbing by degrees back toward the surface of a dark that was built to be absolute.

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Chapter 28

Pressure bears down on his left shoulder.

It's not pain. It's not even the cold slate against his cheek, though he feels that a moment later, the ancient stone drawing warmth from his skin like it has never known heat. The pressure is small, dense, and keeps repeating. Something lands hard on his leather-wrapped shoulder, lifts, then comes down again, steady and firm.

The air carries the taste of ash and burnt copper. It's thick and greasy, clinging to the back of his throat.

His eyes open.

He sees the threshold at eye level, gray stone stretching out to the huge obsidian doors, now open. His gear is scattered around him in a messy circle: leather straps, iron and leather armor pieces, several swords, small blue and red pills rolling near the door, and about thirty short daggers. Everyone's packs have been strewn across the stone, like a market stall knocked over by a cart, as if the world has stopped agreeing to hold anything for them.

The pressure hits his shoulder again, a sharp, hard thump.

He turns his head to the left. Arlo hovers just above him, the blue-white core beating quickly, almost nervously. As Jason watches, the orb drops, corporeal, compact, and dense, and presses firmly against his shoulder before lifting again.

Arlo’s blue-white sphere pulses in erratic, high-frequency bursts. “You are awake.”

Jason pushes himself onto his elbows. The world leans a few sharp degrees before gravity slowly reasserts itself. “Did you just... hit me?”

“I did. But that was only to wake you.” He doesn’t explain further. His voice is flat and certain, like a machine that made a choice and knows it was right.

“Okay.” Jason gets his knees under him. His head feels stuffed with damp, heavy cloth. “What happened?”

Arlo drops to eye level, his core light pulsing in rapid, tight bursts. “Unknown. It acted in a similar manner to a psionic wave. Large scale. Origin point is the central throne room.” A brief pause while the blue light flashes, cycling through an internal diagnostic. “It achieved a total localized system crash. Motor inhibition at the neural level. Every living player went down simultaneously.” A pause. “The inhibition is temporary, but it runs deep. Left to itself, it will lift slowly, over minutes we do not have.” The blue light steadies against his shoulder. “Whatever it was, it did not reach me. That is the only reason you are awake and they are not. A hard enough shock will bring them the rest of the way up.”

Jason turns his head.

Trent lies flat on his back across the threshold, one arm thrown out to the side, his dented helmet lying beside his head. Daisuke is face-down on the slate, fingers still loosely curved around his sword’s hilt. Evie is on her side near the doorframe, her medical kit hanging open where the brass latch snapped. Mei is hunched on her shins, her head bowed toward the stone. Heather is on her back, one knee bent, her bow resting six inches from her open, static-twitching hand.

None of them are moving.

Beyond them, Sasha starts dragging herself across the stone in the direction of Reyna. Her knees scrape against the rough slate, leaving slight, dark smears. Reyna is terrifyingly pale, her breathing a shallow, rattling whistle that catches in her throat. Sasha’s hands are already warm with the dull, gold light of her healing ability, stabilizing her before she slips into a systemic coma, her face tight with intense focus as she works to keep Reyna from dying. Wei is struggling to sit, her knuckles clenched as she clamps her hand over the torn leather at her ribs. She gets a knee under her and drags herself upright alone.

Jason’s eyes move to the upper-right corner of his field of vision out of reflex.

Nothing.

The HUD isn’t flickering or breaking up. It’s just gone, the way a room feels different when a forgotten light is turned off. The stat bars are missing. His health, energy, speed, and critical stats are all wiped away, leaving only darkness. The XP counter is gone. His name label has vanished from his display. Even the mini map that’s always been in the corner of his vision is missing, replaced by nothing.

Only one thing is left. Thin colored bars float above the players’ heads, rough and plain, with no numbers or labels. Red means health. Blue means energy. No percentages. No names. Just the basic bars, as if the system is running on backup power.

He blinks twice. The bars remain. Everything else stays dark.

“The interface didn’t fully recover after the wave ended,” Arlo says quietly, following Jason’s gaze. “The main layer is gone. No stats, XP, personal info, or equipment data. All of it is missing.” He pauses. “What is left is just a basic party display: health and energy only. No numbers, no names.” He pauses again. “I wish to say that fighting without guides feels very uncomfortable. I think you feel the same, and knowing that does not make it easier.”

“Can I still use my abilities?” The question comes out faster than he means it to.

“Yes,” Arlo says. “Your abilities were never the interface. They’re tied to you. The cape still works. Stealth still works. The flash works by intent, not by menu.” A pause. “The only difference is you will not see a prompt. You will have to trust that it worked from what happens next.”

Jason takes that in. He looks at the red bars floating over the other players and reads them the only way left, by length, by how far each has dropped from its left edge. Reyna’s is a sliver. Wei has a visible gap. Daisuke’s runs about half. Trent’s is the highest of the group, just over two-thirds.

He looks at the scattered gear around him and closes his hand around five of the cheap throwing daggers from the spill, common iron, their crossguards dull and cold. He balances them by the blades, the unadorned hilts loose in his palm, rocks back on his heels, judges the distances, and throws.

The first blade spins low and flat and stops near Trent’s helmet with a hollow iron clang. The second lands beside Daisuke’s open hand. The third skids on the ground and bounces into Evie’s hip with a dull thump of iron on leather. The fourth slides under Mei’s shin. The fifth turns once through the air and drops flat by Heather’s boot.

Trent lets out a low harsh groan, rolls onto his back, both hands to his head, and stares at the ceiling with the wide, vacant look of a man understanding that someone he once thought of as helpless as a kitten is now their best chance of surviving.

“I learned a while back,” Jason says, “you can never have too many of these.”

Daisuke is already pushing upright, his body dropping into its defensive crouch before his eyes are fully open, his hand sweeping down for a sword that isn’t there. Evie sits up slowly, two fingers at her own throat, checking her pulse. Mei jerks upright and glares at the dagger against her shin, the cold of her ability prickling in her fingers for a breath before she suppresses it. Heather sits straight up. Her eyes go to the dagger beside her, then up to Jason. Her jaw is set, her shoulders tight.

He gives them the seconds it takes for the fog to start clearing from their faces. Then he looks at the scattered inventories around him, and he begins to move.

He goes to his own pack first, crouching over the spilled contents, sorting by touch and shape, working fast. His fingers close on a handful of small pills, red and blue, the high-tier health and energy ones he has rationed since the western zone. He gathers them into a cluster and stands.

Reyna first. He sets a hand on Sasha’s shoulder and presses one red pill into her free hand without breaking the flow of her healing, closing her fingers over it so she registers it by feel. “When she can swallow.” He reaches down and lays his other hand flat on Reyna’s shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

Sasha closes her fingers around the pill without looking up.

He crosses to Wei, sets a hand on her shoulder, presses a red pill into her palm. She looks at it, then at him, then swallows it without a word, her jaw still locked against the pain.

He moves through the group in the order the bars tell him, pressing pills into hands as people get their knees under them. A blue one for Mei, whose

energy bar is down to a thread. A red one for Trent, who takes it with a grunt and a first flicker of something like humility.

When the pills are gone he straightens and looks at the rest of the spilled gear. The broadsword. The armor. A folded length of rope. Dozens of surplus daggers. A pair of short swords. An oilskin pouch of spare bowstrings. A half-worn whetstone. A wide-bladed boot knife in a clip sheath. He gathers all of it into a single pile.

And with every piece that passes through his hands, Jason does the other thing.

He looks at the group. At the bars above their heads.

“Take what you need.” Quiet, but clear. “Everything here is for you. If your weapon is damaged, grab a backup. If you’re short a blade, pick one up.” A pause. “Don’t leave anything behind that could keep you alive.”

Nobody argues. They come to the pile in ones and twos, picking through it with the hushed efficiency of people who have learned to decide fast what they can carry. Heather takes a spare string and tucks it into her vest. She thumbs the head of an arrow as she counts the rest, and the steel answers with a faint white shimmer. Nature—an ability she leveled somewhere in the weeks he wasn’t there to see. She lays it onto a shaft the same way she lays Stun or Poison. Daisuke weighs the iron throwing knives once and takes a few. Trent tests a sword with a sharp twist and clips it to his belt, then works a dented buckler out of the pile and straps it to his forearm, a poor trade for the shield the abyss took. Evie takes a pair of daggers to her belt without being asked. Mei looks into the oilskin pouch and folds it into her satchel.

What he does next is small enough that no one notices: a half-second of contact as he hands a blade over grip-first, as he steadies the rim of a shield, as he presses a healer’s kit back into shaking hands. Under the contact, he pushes intent through his palm and leaves a linking tag on each piece, always something worn or carried, something that will stay with the body it belongs to. Heather’s bow. Daisuke’s chestplate. Trent’s buckler. Evie’s kit. Mei’s satchel. Wei’s blades. Sasha’s satchel clasp. Reyna’s pauldron, under the hand still resting on her shoulder. A faint blue seal, invisible to all of them, that only he can see. He marks a piece of gear on every person in the room. He turns each of them, without their knowing, into a place he can be.

Three weeks ago, he wouldn’t have done it, because three weeks ago being tethered to other people was the fastest way he knew to die. He does

it now on purpose, one tag at a time, and it doesn’t feel like a weakness. It feels like the strongest thing he has ever built.

Jason picks up the last item, the coil of rope, and slings it over his shoulder. There’s no inventory to reach into now, no menu to pull a blade from mid-fight, only what his hands and belt can hold. He gathers a fistful of the remaining throwing daggers and slides them into his belt, four to hand and the rest riding behind them.

Daisuke’s broadsword still lies neglected on the slate. Jason lifts it, crosses to him, and puts it in his hand grip-first.

Jason stands and lets the silence run just long enough for the last of the fog to clear from their faces.

“I’m not losing anyone else.” Quiet, but it fills the room with certainty. He looks at each of them in turn. “So we do this my way.”

Trent opens his mouth, his brow bunching.

“The Usurper is dead,” Jason says, cutting him off. “Eric controls everything now. All of it, or close enough. The wave that put us all down came out of the throne room, which means he knows we’re here.” He looks at the group. “I’m going in alone.”

“That’s—” Trent starts, his voice hoarse.

“He’ll probably kill me,” Jason says. “I know that. That’s not the point. If I go in and open him up, it gives the rest of you a chance to recover and finish him.”

The cold of the threshold presses up through the soles of his boots. Arlo hovers at his shoulder, silent and pulsing.

Daisuke looks at him, jaw stiff, and says nothing. The grip that tightens on his sword hilt says it for him.

“Before I go,” Jason says, “I need to look at you.”

He reads each bar again, judging by fill instead of number. Trent, just past three-quarters after the pill. Daisuke, a little over half. Evie, low, a wide gap at the start. Mei, a bare line of energy, the pill barely moving it. Heather, better than most.

He can’t see his own bar. He doesn’t know how much he has left. He lets the thought go and doesn’t reach for it again.

He pulls a bound bundle of dried recovery root from a cloth pouch and sets it in Mei’s open palm, curling her fingers around it.

She sniffs it, bitter earth and dried pine. “What are these?”

“Take them. They’ll help, and they won’t make you sick after. It’s all I’ve got left.”

She works them into her mouth and chews, her fingers beading with cold mist as her bars lift a little.

He crosses to Evie and places a clean roll of silk bandages into her hands, the same deliberate contact. Her fingers are still shaking. He doesn’t remark on it, and she doesn’t apologize for it.

He straightens, and his eyes go to Heather.

She’s risen on her own. She stands near the doorframe with her bow loose at her side, upright, her shoulders steady.

He walks to her, stops two feet off, and looks at her directly.

A cold draft moves out of the abyss through the dark doorway between them, carrying wet stone and deep dust. In the blue pulse of Arlo’s light the faint mark of his linking tag already glows on her bow, left there when he steadied the grip in her hands at the pile. Only he can see it. Of everyone here, she is the one he tagged first, and the one he trusts most to be exactly where he needs her.

Neither of them speaks.

He has run through a dozen things to say and rejected all of them. What stands between them can’t be closed with a sentence, and it can’t be left open either. He holds her eyes. After a moment she gives him a small nod.

He nods back.

He turns, walks to the doorway, and leaps from the slate lip, ten feet out and three feet down, onto the first floating platform.

The platform holds.

His boot comes down on dense cold stone, the impact jarring up through his heel. The abyss yawns beneath him in every direction but the eight feet of hexagonal stone under his feet. The updraft moves through his cape, a thin freezing pressure at his side. He doesn’t look down.

He moves forward.

The platforms fall away and spread into a loose stair of floating stone, each ten feet from the next. He runs and takes the first gap, lands clean, doesn’t slow. Above, the spire climbs into a dark too deep to read. Below, nothing. The walls curve inward in a way that makes his mind stumble every time he tries to hold the shape of it.

He clears the fifth platform and stops.

Eric is thirty steps away.

He stands on a circular platform ringing the base of the spire's upper column, framed by jagged obsidian pillars that jut from the stone at broken angles. Behind him a high seat of the same black stone stands empty, and what is left of the Usurper is a spill of gray dust down its steps. Eric took the throne the way he took Feratu. The aura around him is not subtle, a visible disturbance in the air, a rippling black-red interference that bends the space near his armor like oil on glass. His eyes find Jason across the emptiness with no particular urgency.

Eric tilts his head, the dark pooling around his boots. "You're still here."

Jason pulls three throwing daggers from his belt.

He reads the room. High above, a stone archway spans two upper balconies, thirty feet over Eric. To his left a vertical pillar braces a higher platform. To his right, a cluster of hex slabs locks in a staggered shelf, the top one setting him hard behind and above Eric's line.

He throws all three at once.

The first sinks deep into the left pillar. The second buries its tip in the archway overhead. The third skips off a lower edge and lodges in a crack in the spire wall to Eric's right. Each one lands with a short resonant thunk, and the quiet warmth of three new anchors resolves in the back of his mind.

He pulls the Glass Dagger.

The blade takes no light from the dark of the abyss. It catches only Arlo's distant blue from the threshold behind him, a pale cold flash along the nearly colorless edge.

He vanishes.

He appears in the air just off Eric's left shoulder, the Glass Dagger already carving a tight precise arc, and it opens a shallow line across the side of Eric's neck, shearing corrupt armor and biting flesh with a ripping sizzle, and then he's gone, flashing to the left pillar before the contact has fully landed.

He hits the pillar in a low crouch, both feet on the face of the stone, and launches at once for the archway above.

Eric doesn't make a sound. He lifts one hand and touches the cut at his neck with two fingers, studying the gray discoloration there, then turns to face the pillar where Jason briefly crouched.

Jason flashes from the archway.

This time Eric moves first.

The dark heavy arm comes up and intercepts the diagonal strike on an iron forearm, and the bone-deep impact drives the Glass Dagger off its line. Eric doesn’t look at him. He is watching the pillar, calculating, running the angles of Jason’s three anchors.

Jason flashes back to the spire-wall anchor, the stone grazing his shoulder as he lands.

Eric tracks it, his head turning a quarter-second before Jason arrives, reading not where Jason is but where he is going to be.

The anchors make a triangle around the spire. He’s already solved it.

Jason pulls the cape.

He presses the clasp to activate the stealth, feeling the familiar cold prickle as it takes, no prompt, no confirmation, only the sensation flowing over his skin and the freeze along his collarbone. He trusts it because the stone begins to bleed through his outline, his hands going faint, his edges dissolving into the dark. He can feel the cape pulling from him now instead of from its own reserve.

At this rate, I might be able to keep this active for two to three minutes, give or take.

Eric turns slowly, scanning.

Jason moves, keeping to the far platforms, setting each boot down with care, giving no vibration, no oscillation a calculating mind could triangulate. He circles the spire in a wide arc, watching the rigid stillness of Eric’s posture, the cold efficiency of the scan.

The aura pulses.

The first shockwave comes without warning. Eric stamps a boot on the platform, and a screeching ripple of black-red static tears outward in a perfect circle, sizzling along the stone. It reaches the left pillar with a sound of tearing metal, and the embedded dagger bursts into silver dust. A fraction of a second later it hits the archway, and the second dagger goes the same way, silver drifting down into the abyss.

One anchor left. The spire wall.

Jason draws another dagger from his belt and throws it, angling for a lower balcony on his left, pushing intent through his grip so the handshake takes as the blade spins away.

It strikes stone forty feet out and holds.

New anchor.

Eric’s head snaps to the sound.

Jason is already moving in the window of displaced attention. Then Eric moves too, covering fifteen feet in a blur that skips normal acceleration entirely, and his fist catches Jason across the chest.

The blow fractures the light chestplate with a sickening crack and drives the breath out of him. The force rings through his ribs, splitting cartilage. His stealth breaks at the point of contact, a patch of solid silhouette flaring where the fist lands, and then he is airborne, flying back over empty dark.

He flashes.

The spire-wall anchor catches him at the top of the arc. He lands against the stone, both feet on the face, knees eating the impact before he shoves off and controls the drop onto a lower balcony.

He comes down hard on one knee. The broken plate bites into his ribs. He spits a hot iron-heavy spray across the slate and lifts his eyes.

He looks for his health bar. The corner of his vision is empty. He can't tell how much he has left, so he checks his body instead. The sharp pain says cracked cartilage, not a broken rib. The fact that he can still breathe says the lung is compressed but holding. He's been hurt worse and kept his feet.

Keep moving.

Eric walks toward him across the floating stones, unhurried, taking the gaps at a casual stride, the aura rippling out in expanding rings.

Boots hit stone behind and above. His head snaps around.

"I knew it," Arlo says, and there is something almost joyful under the words.

Trent clears the threshold in one heavy stride, his new buckler up. "What, you thought we'd let you have all the fun?"

Behind him Daisuke launches off the slate with both hands on his sword. Evie follows, low and fast, her kit swinging. Mei plants her feet on the first platform and starts gathering energy into her hands. Heather lands beside her, bow up and drawn.

And behind them the three from the other squads step onto the upper-left platform, the ones Arlo named in the tower and the ones he saw across the shaft before the world went dark. Kshitija is already weaving a dense burning trail of fire that rolls across the lower stones, scattering Eric's tracking vectors and smearing Jason's silhouette into the glare. Alfie flanks her with a shield and a broadsword and the flat competence of a man who has held a line before. And Michael comes last, electricity crackling off his

fingertips and a grin on his face like he has waited his whole life to be exactly this useful.

Wei launches on the right, her twin daggers cutting high rapid arcs that spark against Eric's black armor in short distracting sweeps. From a high balcony Sasha lays a warm gold ward across Trent's shield arm, catching the residual shockwaves. A dozen people fan across the floating stones in a wide arc, closing on the spire from every angle it has.

They came.

He gave them the truth in the vestibule, that going in probably meant dying, and he never told them about the tags, never told them he had quietly turned their gear into a net. They didn't know any of that. They only knew the odds, and they came anyway.

Eric goes still.

Jason pushes upright, bleeding onto his armor, and hooks his left hand into his belt to hide the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

"How do you think this ends?" His voice is low, scraped raw by the chest hit.

Eric's gaze sweeps the room in a single methodical pass. It stops on Trent's buckler. Moves to Daisuke's chestplate. Touches Evie's kit. Finds the faint ghost-hum on Heather's bow, the satchel at Mei's hip, the blades at Wei's side.

The blue seal. It clings to every piece of gear that passed through Jason's hands in the vestibule, a web of quiet marks scattered across the room in every hand he armed. Only the three from the other squads stand outside it, their gear still dark, still their own. The aura contracts, pulling inward like a living thing drawing breath, and for the first time since the neck cut, something in his stillness changes.

He has understood it. Jason didn't come in alone to fight him. Jason came in alone so that everyone he cared about would already be part of the board before the first blow landed.

Something moves in Eric's stillness that Jason has never seen there: for the length of one breath the machine he has made of himself runs up against a value it can't price, and Jason watches the understanding reach his flat copper eyes a half-second before the room does.

"You're alone," Jason says, and steps forward. "You've been alone since you decided to become a monster. You can keep going forever, and you'll still be alone."

Eric says nothing. He launches straight at Evie.

Jason is already moving before the thought finishes forming. He doesn't decide to protect Evie; the decision was made hours ago, in a rotting tower, when he chose to walk into this room with every one of them tied to him whether they knew it or not. He simply arrives, because arriving is the one thing the system left him that Eric cannot take from him, and he puts himself and the glass between the fastest thing in the room and a woman who once looked at his single-digit stat and felt entitled to sneer, and would probably do it again.

Eric covers the distance in a blurring direct-line sprint, the platforms barely flexing under him, two seconds from reaching her, when Jason flashes.

He materializes in the exact space between them. The Glass Dagger rises and blocks the heavy iron-shrouded strike in a spray of sparks that flares orange in the dark. His whole arm goes numb from wrist to shoulder, the force nearly wrenching his elbow, and he grabs Evie's shoulder with his left hand and triggers a flash, leaving her dagger on the stone where she stood.

They land on a high secluded balcony, well out of Eric's melee plane.

"Stay high," Jason says, hard with authority.

"I'm not going to—"

"Stay high." He flashes before she can finish.

The room becomes a sequence of points.

He hits the spire anchor, cuts the back of Eric's left shoulder, vanishes before the swing completes. He arrives at Daisuke's chestplate, the dark iron warm under his hand, and cuts at Eric's ribs. He flashes before the block, crosses to Heather's bow, rakes the blade across Eric's upper arm. Eric turns faster with each exchange. He is learning, solving each new straight-line trajectory as fast as Jason draws it.

He can read straight lines. So, stop giving him straight lines.

Jason lands on a high balcony and takes a breath, looking down at Eric on the center platform, the aura controlled now and focused, his eyes flicking between the players like a man working out how to balance a load he intends to drop all at once.

The flash has only ever let him jump to an anchor as a destination. He can't change direction in the air. The system doesn't allow it. He has tested it a dozen times and knows it the way you know a door is locked before you touch it.

But the system is broken now. The interface is gone. The rules are coming apart, the party comms bleeding through walls, the inventories spilling open, the memories leaking through the seams. And a locked door is only locked until someone breaks the lock.

His eyes settle on Daisuke, thirty feet below, blade up, tracking Eric, holding his ground. *He's here.* He finds Heather's bow, sixty feet right and twenty down, its warmth clear and steady in the back of his mind. *All of them are here.*

He launches off the balcony straight at Eric.

Twelve feet out, he pulls Heather's anchor mid-flash.

The flash does not carry him to Eric. It bends. It carries him sideways and down, the trajectory curving in a clean sweeping arc that drops him beside Eric's right leg instead of in front of him, and the Glass Dagger finds the back of Eric's knee before the block-arm can move.

The aura flares white and snaps back. Eric staggers a step.

Jason is already three anchors away.

He moves so fast the platforms barely sound before he's gone. The air between him and Eric fills with faint overlapping images, translucent echoes stacking and fading at every point he arrives and leaves.

Eric is defending now. He's faster in a straight exchange, his corrupt access giving him reactions no living body could match, but the curves deny him angles. He calculates a straight intercept, and Jason arrives from a vector that shouldn't exist.

The aura lashes sideways, a pulse of black-red discharge, and catches a hex platform near Trent, spiderwebbing fissures across its face. Trent holds. The buckler stays up, the anchor steady.

Jason flashes from it, curve-redirect to the spire wall, cut, pull again before Eric can close, arc to Daisuke's chestplate, cut, release. The anchors aren't pillars anymore. They're people, and people move. Their small shifts change the path of every jump in ways even Eric can't model. Jason doesn't know where they'll be in three seconds. He doesn't need to. He trusts them to be somewhere he can reach, and they are, every time.

The Announcer's voice tries to come back and fails.

And the rogue, in a series of, a series of—

A long high electronic screech tears through the space. The smooth vintage-radio voice warbles, the pitch dropping into a distorted growl, the syllables stuttering under a rising scream.

F-f-flash-event... l-l-logged...

The last fragments of the display go dark. The crude party bars, the one thing the system has held onto since the wave, flicker once and vanish. The corner of his vision is fully blank now. He can’t see his own health. He can’t see theirs. He has no numbers at all.

He barely notices.

He is in the rhythm now, Heather to Daisuke to Trent to Mei and back, wide arcs Eric can’t hold. Eric slams both forearms down on the spire platform in a localized shockwave, and two hex stones crack free and fall into the abyss. The players on them leap to adjacent platforms, and for half a second the whole room reorganizes.

Heather fires.

Three bolts of white light burst from her bow, Nature laid onto arrows, and catch Eric across the upper chest in a tight group, each impact rippling through the aura.

Trent drives the buckler forward, its flat face pulling the aura’s reactive scan onto himself.

Mei releases.

The elemental burst comes from below, a compressed heavy wave of liquid force that travels up through the spire stone and hits Eric from beneath, throwing his footing. The aura fractures at his feet, the interference pattern scattering.

It’s the last thing she has, and she gives it without being asked twice, because somewhere in the tower she stopped calculating the trade and started trusting the man who promised to come for her, and the trusting turned out to be the more accurate path. The wave climbs the spire stone and takes Eric’s footing out from under him, and for the first time all night the perfect machine of his defense has to spend a full half-second simply staying upright, and half a second is a lifetime to a man who has turned the whole room into places he can be.

Jason flashes from Daisuke’s chestplate on a direct line, no curve, using the fractured-aura window before it closes. The Glass Dagger hits the fracture at the base of the sternum, grinding with a brutal crunch against steel and cartilage, the blade’s Crit stacking every accumulated hit of the last two minutes into the one strike.

Eric’s hand comes up to his chest.

Several ranged attacks find him in the same second. Arrows, fire, water lances, electric bursts, converging from every tier of the room. The aura flares to a sustained expanding white, and the hum through the spire climbs past hearing, up through the platforms, through their boots, through Jason’s teeth.

They come from everywhere at once, a dozen people drained to nothing spending the last of themselves in perfect time on his word, and he takes the window they tear open and doesn’t waste a fraction of it. Then the white goes out.

Jason flashes directly at Eric and drives the Glass Dagger straight into the center of his chest, through the heavy armor, into the heart.

A pulse rolls outward with enough force to shove a few players back an inch. They hold.

“Critical hit, motherfucker,” Jason says, an inch from his face.

The words leave him rougher than he means it, scraped raw by the chest hit and by the two minutes of asking his body to do things bodies are not built to do. He does not feel the way a person should feel here. Eric was a teammate once, a man who ran the numbers at a campfire and tried, in his own airless way, to keep them alive, before the numbers ate everything else in him. Jason drove a blade through his heart to keep the arithmetic from finishing what it started, and he would do it again, and it still lands in him as a loss and not a win. He adds it to the count with the others and lets the dagger take Eric’s weight as the man begins to come apart.

Eric freezes in place. Then he begins to dissolve from the edges inward.

The aura goes first, breaking apart in a quiet ring of charcoal smoke. The armor follows, each piece disarticulating cleanly and losing cohesion, becoming silver particulate that lifts on the cold stagnant updraft. The shape at the center of it shrinks slowly, smaller and smaller, until the last of it thins to a quiet cloud of silver that the currents in the shaft carry apart in every direction.

The spire is empty.

For a moment nobody breathes. The vast shaft holds its silence, the floating stones drifting a few last inches on failing anchors, the silver motes turning through Arlo’s light and going out one by one. It should feel like winning but it doesn’t. The cost was greater than anyone wants to accept. The cost is standing all around him, bleeding and swaying and alive, and lying two turns down a stairwell. Jason keeps his eyes on the empty spire a

moment longer, because looking at the empty air is easier than looking at the faces, and because some part of him is still waiting for the system to tell him it isn’t over.

The motes drift through Arlo’s blue light, each briefly luminous before the dark takes it.

No one speaks. No announcement comes.

Jason gets to his feet on the central platform, the Glass Dagger up in his hand, and he sees that the fine web of fractures that has run through the blade for weeks is gone. The spine is whole. Not repaired. Whole, as if it had never cracked, as if the thing had only ever been waiting for him to stop expecting it to break. He breathes out.

Then the vibration through the stone changes.

It doesn’t stop. It drops, lower and stronger at once, a deep note climbing up through the platform into his feet and settling behind his jaw. The floating hex stones lock in place all across the room with a run of soft magnetic clicks. Far off, at the end of the stone stair, the exit doors give a deep final sound and go still.

The corner of his vision stays blank. No stat bars. No health. No overlay, no player markers. The clean blue frame that has bordered his sight since the first hour is still gone. But a woman’s voice moves through the whole castle, flat and without feeling.

MASTER SERVER: SYSTEMIC ANOMALY REGISTERED. CONVERGENCE PROTOCOL SUSPENDED. EXIT ACCESS: LOCKED.

A few seconds later it returns, filling the castle again.

CONTAINMENT STATUS: ACTIVE.

The spire beneath all of them hums its long warning note, deep and tectonic, moving out through the floor into the walls, running for the exits, and finding every one of them sealed.

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Chapter 29

The boardroom occupies the entire northeast corner of the undisclosed one hundred and fourth floor of the skyscraper.

Three of the room's walls are made of seamless, thick glass that stretches from floor to ceiling. The city spreads out in every direction, a grid of lights and steel reaching the horizon. A low, dark band of cloud hangs over the water. Rain slides down the glass in slow, branching lines, each drop catching the city's glow before gravity pulls it down.

The room is simple. A black walnut conference table, fourteen feet long and four feet wide, made from a single piece, stands in the center. Its surface holds only a leather portfolio, a crystal glass of water, and a fountain pen placed neatly across the portfolio. The high-back chairs are covered in dark gray fabric, but only two are in use.

Augustus Sterling, at the head of the table, ignores the view of the city. Since sitting down, he's focused only on the wall of screens along the room's interior. The monitors show feeds, data, and tactical overlays in sharp detail. There are also two screens that show dozens of logged bets and odds.

#9 · $5,000,000 · "Jason kills the turned player with a dagger to the face" · 1.88 · ODDS SHIFT

#4 · $3,000,000 · "Turned player kills Trent" · 2.40 · LIVE

#5 · $5,000,000 · “Turned player converts the Russian healer” · 4.25 · LONGSHOT

#8 · $4,000,000 · “First death: Sasha” · 3.80 · LOGGED

To his left, a slim laptop glowing under her jaw, sits Dr. Adrienne Vaneck, the architect of the system that runs the machines and watches through them, and she watches the wall now with the face of a person seeing her life’s work do the exact opposite of what it was built to do.

On the monitors the castle interior renders in fine detail through a mesh of embedded sensor nodes. The spire platform shows from four angles. The players are visible, scattered across the hex stones, wounded, still, upright. Eric’s dissolution reads as a clean spike on the energy graph, and then a flat line.

Sterling watches the flat line a moment.

Then he picks up the fountain pen. The scratch of the nib on heavy paper is the only sound in the room for several seconds. He writes four words, crosses one out, writes it again, and keeps writing.

Then he speaks.

“Vaneck. Status.”

His tone is smooth and level, each word dry and flat, a man reading a budget line. No drama. No anger. No surprise. He treats surprise as a problem to be solved.

Vaneck’s fingers move over the keyboard without her looking down. “The anomaly has been eliminated by the cohort, sir.” A pause, and the pause carries something she can’t fully keep out of it. “The circumstances leading to his elimination require more context.”

Sterling says nothing. He waits.

“We just discovered that when Eric drank Feratu’s blood and reached the administrative layer, his first action was not the convergence protocol, the way we assumed.” Her voice tightens, the professionalism straining at the seams. “He locked us out of the participants. He rewrote the permissions on the player layer and revoked every credential we held that touched a body. Every override, every emergency shutdown, every remote termination.” She stops. “The environment we still had. The clock, the boundary, the sync. Not the people inside it. Since he took the castle we have not been able to instruct, read, or remove a single participant.”

The scratch of the pen stops.

Sterling looks at her.

“We’ve been watching,” Vaneck says, precise and without inflection, because inflection is the only thing she has left to control, “and that is all we’ve been able to do.”

The quiet in the boardroom changes quality. Sterling sets the pen down on the portfolio with the careful, deliberate motion of a man deciding not to break something expensive.

“How long,” he says.

“Since the cemetery. Approximately.” Her fingers pull a timeline onto the secondary monitor. “We logged the anomalous access event as it happened. We couldn’t reverse it. Every remediation attempt at the participant layer was denied. We couldn’t warn anyone. We couldn’t halt the finalization sequence. Compressing the clock and dropping the boundary sync were the only levers he left us, and you saw what they bought.” A pause. “Past that, we could do nothing but watch the cohort work out how to stop it themselves.”

Sterling looks at the monitors. The players are moving now, tending to their wounded, taking stock. On the graph the flat line where Eric’s signature used to be stays flat.

“And now that he is eliminated,” Sterling says. “His lockout.”

“Partially voided by his dissolution. We have limited access again. The sensor feeds are live, as you can see.” Her fingers hover over the keys. “However.” She stops.

“However,” Sterling says.

“Our sync put them under. His pulse rode in on the same window, and it was aimed at the participants.” Her voice snags, a person reporting a failure she can’t hide behind procedure. “A full-spectrum neural disruption targeting the receiver hardware inside each of them. It was meant to kill them.” She brings a wall of error logs onto the monitor. “It didn’t. The pulse was too broad and too unfocused to trigger the fatal reaction. Instead of killing them, it burned out the receiver layer inside every one of them, from the inside out.” She tries a command. The screen does not change. “Every piece of them that let us send instructions, that let us read their bio-signs, that let us touch the machines in their bodies. It’s gone. Cooked. What’s left is a fully autonomous internal architecture. The castle’s sensor mesh still functions because it only receives. The narration node went down with the rest of the interface; it will not come back. But I can’t reach the participants. I cannot track them, I cannot instruct them, I cannot end them remotely.”

She tries two more commands. Nothing moves. “He tried to kill them, sir. Instead, he made them untouchable.”

The boardroom is very quiet.

Sterling looks at the flat line on the graph, then at the frozen error state on Vaneck’s screens, then at the interior feed where the players stand alive and entirely beyond his reach. He watches them for a full ten seconds without expression.

Then he picks up the pen again and draws one clean line through an item on the open page.

“So,” he says. “They are sealed inside. We are sealed outside. And the system can’t fix either condition.” He returns the pen to its place. “How long until the containment barrier fails on its own.”

Vaneck checks the screen. “The castle’s power architecture is running on residual charge. Without the convergence protocol completing there is no maintenance cycle. The barrier degrades.” She calculates. “Twenty minutes. Perhaps more, perhaps less. After that the barrier collapses and the environment begins to physically destabilize.”

“So they walk out,” Sterling says.

“If the structure doesn’t kill them first. The castle was never built to exist in this state. When the barrier fails, the environment comes apart quickly. They will have a short window.” A pause. “Minutes. Maybe less.”

Sterling is quiet a moment.

“Then we won’t wait for the barrier,” he says. He watches the players cross the spire, tending their wounded, checking the dark. “Manual cleanup is required.” He says it the way he’d move any other agenda item forward. He nods to Vaneck, and she pushes a button to open a communication channel to Halloway, who ran the book at this table before Sterling moved him back to field operations. “Halloway. Take your team up through the lower gates. I want the interior cleared.”

The reply comes from a speaker set into the table’s surface, the voice run through a modulator that strips every organic frequency out of it, leaving only cold mechanical authority. “Already in the service corridor, sir. Ascending the final spiral.”

“Sir.” Vaneck says it before she’s decided to. Sterling doesn’t look at her, which is its own kind of answer, so she keeps going into the space he leaves. “They solved it. The convergence, the anomaly, the lockout you and I could not break from the outside, they broke it from the inside, with sticks

and a broken interface and no administrative access whatsoever.” Her hand is flat on the table now, not on the keys. “That is the most valuable data event in the program’s history. If we send Halloway up there, we erase it. We are about to shoot the only proof that the design can be beaten, because it beat us.”

For a moment Sterling actually considers her, the way a man considers a competent argument he has no intention of taking. “We are not erasing data, Doctor. We are closing an exposure.” He returns his eyes to the glass. “The review will have your attention. It does not require the participants to keep breathing.”

Vaneck holds his profile a second longer, then looks back at her screen, at the twenty bodies climbing the stairs, and files something away behind her face that she doesn’t let him see.

Sterling closes the portfolio and lays the pen across it.

On the monitors the interior feed shows the lower access point, a service corridor built into the foundation that no player ever found because it appears nowhere in the simulation’s visible topology. It exists below the playable layer, a maintenance passage built for exactly this contingency. In gray-green thermal the passage shows twenty compact shapes, dense with heat from the power packs on their rigs, moving in a tight column up the spiral service stair.

Sterling turns his chair to the glass and looks down at the city for the first time since he came in. He studies it a while, the way a man studies a thing he owns.

“When it’s done,” he says, without turning back, “we begin the debrief. I want your full failure analysis report before the end of the week. We are going to want to understand exactly how far outside the design parameters this cohort operated.”

Vaneck is still staring at the frozen error state. Her fingers rest on the keys without pressing them. On the screen the passive feeds render the castle in clean cold resolution, twelve surviving participants in the throne room above, twenty tactical units climbing the spiral below.

She watches the two groups converge from opposite ends of her display.

“Yes, sir,” she says, and keeps her eyes on the players.

*** THE USURPER’S CASTLE ***

The last of the silver motes drift over Jason’s boots and dissolve into the soot-black stone.

Every muscle in his knife arm aches. The Glass Dagger is still locked in his fist, his grip tight as though some part of him hasn’t accepted that the fight is over. Under his boots the spire platform buzzes with a low vibration that climbs his heels and settles in his jaw.

The air is sharp with pulverized granite, and under the grit runs the faint sweet-sick smell of silver ash, a dry dust in his throat that reminds him too much of cremated bone.

Around him the throne room breathes.

The hex stones have locked into place, magnetic and final. The only sounds left are shifting dust and the far moan of the sealed exit below. His vision holds nothing, no bars, no status, no map. The system is dead. Only cold stone, long shadows, and an updraft out of the abyss.

He doesn’t move.

Arlo descends out of the upper dark, sinking toward his shoulder in slow deliberate pulses, his core throttled down to a quiet rhythm matching the shallow cadence of Jason’s own breath. The orb settles two inches from his cheek, close enough that its dry warmth presses the blood-crusted cut along his chin. Jason keeps his eyes forward and doesn’t pull away from it.

Trent’s buckler scrapes stone first. He drags the weapon behind him across the hex path, the battered metal drawing a thin line through the silver ash, his head low, his breath coming in long rattling pulls. Daisuke follows off the far stone, one hand on his sheathed sword, using the scabbard like a cane to keep weight off a favored left leg.

Nobody speaks.

The silence is the heavy kind, the sort that stays after something ends, and weighs the same whether it ended well or badly. Jason keeps his eyes on the dark stairwell and lets it settle into him.

Then the ceiling screams.

A high-voltage shriek of feedback tears through the room from every direction at once, shaking a visible shower of gray dust from the iron ventilation grilles set high in the masonry. Jason’s head snaps up. A rusted

grille bolted flush between two carved corbels rattles against its fittings, the old screws working loose in the resonance.

Heather steps to his right, her shoulder pressed hard to his upper arm, her bow half-drawn, her eyes tracking the same vibrating grille.

The feedback dies with a sharp static pop.

And then a completely different world floods the chamber.

The sounds of a climate-controlled office come through the stone, clear and unfiltered, as if someone left a microphone open by mistake. Without echo they land flat and dry, wrong for a room made of rock. The low hum of cooling systems. The tap of a pen. The scratch of a nib on paper. The faint chime of a notification. They can’t feel the cool air on the far side of it, but the picture of it lands like a blow.

That is not a magic castle. That is a boardroom.

It hits him all at once and all the way down. The stat bars, the skill trees, Magda’s death, Derek’s death, every one of them a line of code moved by people in a distant room. Every spell Mei cast, every mercy out of Evie’s hands, every arrow off Heather’s string, all of it routed through hidden machines inside their own bodies, a second system running under their skins that none of them ever agreed to. The Glass Dagger in his fist stops being a game weapon in that instant. It becomes a real tool for real violence, and the people who built this world are on the other side of it, listening.

He lowers his chin, his eyes locked on the grille.

Mei drops to one knee on a cracked stone, both palms flat to the cold surface, her ear tilted at the ceiling. Evie stands dead still, her kit pulled tight to her side, her fingers wound into the straps. Around the chamber the rest of them freeze and turn the same hard instinct upward, understanding all at once that the unseen eye on the far side of this world is looking down at them and always has been.

Still on the cracked stone, Mei says it aloud, very quietly, the way a person tests a wound to see how deep it goes. “It was in us. All of it. When I froze the alley, when I broke that gate.” Her hands are still flat on the stone. “It was never mine. It was theirs, running through me.” Sasha, on the far stone, doesn’t stop working the buckle of her satchel, but her jaw sets in the way it does when she files a thing to be felt later, and later keeps getting further away.

Trent’s face has gone pale. He looks at Jason with everything stripped off it but the raw question underneath. Jason meets his eyes and says nothing, because there is nothing to say that the grille hasn’t already said for him.

The office sounds run a moment longer, the pen, the fans, the ambient hum of a place where decisions get made about other people’s lives.

Then a new sound arrives down the channel. A voice, heavy and synthesized, run through something that strips every human frequency out of it and leaves only cold authority. “Already in the service corridor, sir. Ascending the final spiral.”

A beat of silence.

Then the feed cuts with a hard click, and the quiet that drops behind it leaves a deep ringing in their ears.

Arlo rises from Jason’s shoulder. His voice, when it comes, has none of its usual cadence. No data. No hedge. No clinical frame. Only the words, set quietly into the air.

“Several enemies are approaching from below.”

Jason lifts his head out of the orb’s warmth and sweeps his eyes over what he has left, cataloging each battered, bloodied face. Trent, pale but square-shouldered. Heather, breathing steady, thumb hooked over her string. Evie’s fingers twitching near her kit. Mei balanced on her knees, waiting. Sasha against the spire, satchel already open, eyes moving between the stairwell mouth and the people around her, doing her own math. Wei down on the nearest hex stone, folded around her ribs, one arm clamped hard to her side, her jaw still set against the pain. Reyna slumped against the spire wall where Sasha and Daisuke carried her once the stones locked, barely conscious, her focus held loose between her hands. They’re exhausted and broken and stripped of every number the system ever handed them. They are also alive.

Alfie, Michael, and Kshitija cross from the far stones and fold into the group. Strength in numbers, what few of them are left. Jason meets each of them as they come, a hand to a shoulder-plate, a tagged iron dagger pressed grip-first into an open palm, the same half-second of contact he spent on the others in the vestibule. They take the blades without question. Three more places he can be.

Jason reads the floating path, mapping it from memory and instinct, finding the angles and the choke points. In the middle the locked stones narrow to a single-file bridge over the dark. A perfect bottleneck.

His eyes cut to Trent, then Daisuke. “That junction. Hold it.”

Trent doesn’t blink. The buckler comes up, the fear clearing out of his eyes and leaving only the focus of a man who has spent a career standing in doorways. He crosses to the narrowest point in three ground-eating strides and plants his boots in the stone seams.

Daisuke is right behind him, sword in a two-handed grip, his left heel locking into the shadow of Trent’s blind spot.

Jason’s eyes slide to Heather, then Mei. “Focus on the high stones. Anything through that arch gets funneled to the junction. Don’t waste shots. Make them count.”

Heather is already in motion. She pushes her back heel against the stone column of the central spire, bringing her bowstring up to her cheek. Her eyes lock on the dark archway at the far end of the pathway.

Before he pulls the cape up, he works the platforms one last time, twisting his surviving daggers back out of the spire wall and the lower balcony, wiping each on his thigh and sliding it home at his belt. Two shattered where Eric’s shockwaves found them, gone for good. There’s no display left to count the rest. He tallies them by feel and hopes it is enough.

Jason pulls the thick collar of the Lurker’s Cape up over his bloodied jaw. He pushes his intent through the cloth, feeling the cold familiar prickle as the stealth engages, his outline blurring, the cape’s weave responding with a slow, rippling shimmer that melts his frame into the deep shadows behind Trent’s right shoulder. No HUD confirmation appears. He trusts it has worked by the way Trent’s eyes slide over the space where he was standing without registering him. The Glass Dagger rests low and ready in his right hand.

The throne room becomes completely still and silent.

Then a new sound comes up through the stone. It travels up through the masonry of the spiral staircase: a rhythmic, heavy stamp of boots, accompanied by the faint, metallic clinking of tactical rigging and the low, industrial murmur of high-output power packs running at operational capacity. Through the floor, the vibration is steady, cold, and massive.

Faint sweeps of red light begin to paint the lower walls of the stairwell, reflecting off the damp stone as active visors sweep the dark below.

The iron doors at the far end of the stone landing begin to groan under a sudden, intense mechanical load.

This is not the moan of old hinges. It’s the high, thin shriek of a cutting tool biting into the door’s locking mechanism. Within seconds, a violent fan of bright orange sparks showers through the gap at the door’s base, scattering across the stone and dying in the dark.

The air smells bitter and toxic, filled with scorched iron, melting sealant, and burnt insulation.

A thin red laser sight slides through the gap in the door, mapping the masonry.

A second line appears beside it.

Then a third, panning across the floor, seeking heat and mass.

The iron bolts of the doors give a sharp, deafening crack, the sound of structural pins failing all at once, snapping like rifle shots inside the stone vault. The groan of the doors turns into a long, grinding shriek of breaching force as the great iron panels are forced apart, throwing more sparks and a harsh, searching glare of red visor lights into the dark of the throne room.

Arlo’s voice arrives at Jason’s ear, scarcely a sound, carrying no humor and no hedging.

“Twenty,” Arlo says. “I count twenty. They aren’t game constructs. They aren’t thralls.” He pauses for a second. “They’re real people, Jason. Whatever happens next, they’re real people.”

Jason’s fingers tighten once more around the Glass Dagger as the red lines multiply across the soot-strewn floor.

The red lines keep coming.

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Chapter 30

The iron doors blast open.

Both panels blow inward with a deafening screech, bolts snapping and hinges tearing free of the old stone, throwing orange sparks and dust through the air. The sharp reek of the charge and burnt metal and crushed rock fills the room and sets Jason's throat itching. Metal shards spin across the hex stones, skipping off the edges before slipping into the dark. The noise hits him like a hand to the ears. Grit grinds between his teeth.

Then they come through.

Twenty men rush in, packed tight in a wedge, rail rifles sweeping the room in quick practiced arcs. Red targeting lines cut across the throne room, marking cracked columns, floating platforms, drifting silver ash. Their gear whirs with the steady hum of high-output packs, their visors lit with thermal. They move with the weight and precision of a closed fist.

Not constructs. Not thralls. Arlo's warning of half a minute ago sits in the front of his mind. *These are real people.*

Jason already has the Glass Dagger in his right hand. The cape shimmers on his shoulders, bleeding his outline into the deep shadow behind Trent's right side. He holds his breath.

Trent stands at the narrowest part of the bridge, boots ground into the stone seams, battered buckler up at his chest, jaw locked, sweat catching the

red light off the nearest visor. Daisuke is right behind him, sword in both hands, left heel braced, weight low and forward.

The first three fire in sequence.

The slugs slam Trent's buckler like a hammer on an anvil, three fast strikes that shove him back two steps, his boots cutting furrows in the hex stone. Daisuke's shoulder drives into his back and steadies him, and together they hold the line.

Jason reads the room in the next half-second. Eighteen along the edge of the walkway. Two more climbing the outer ridge. He clocks the jump-boosters on the two, hydraulic cylinders at the hips, before he has fully finished the thought.

They're going over the top.

He acts on it. His left hand pulls a heavy tagged dagger from his belt and skims it low across the stepping stones past the bottleneck, the blue glow at the edge bright in his sight, and he pushes intent down the link.

The world stretches. The room warps into a smear of gray stone and red light as the flash pulls him across the platform in a fraction of a breath, and he arrives in the air behind the two flankers exactly as their boosters fire with a hydraulic crack. The Glass Dagger goes into the gap between helmet and plate of the nearer man, where the joint hasn't compressed under the landing load, and a wet bubbling wheeze escapes as a hot spray fills the inside of his visor and he drops where he stands. The backswing skids off the second man's shoulder plate and does nothing.

Jason's boots hit stone and he rolls, because the second man is already turning.

The rifle butt comes down hard and fast. He ducks under it the way he has ducked under dozens of blades, muscle before thought, rolls back across the soot-black stone, and comes up in a crouch.

Eighteen barrels swing toward them.

The circle closes.

They move like people who've done this many times, each one settling into a place along the hex walkway, fields of fire overlapping clean. Mei, Evie, and Heather scramble onto higher stones behind the bottleneck as rounds chew into the nearest columns and throw stinging fragments. On the lower broken tiers Wei crouches, twin daggers up against stray rounds and debris. Behind her, Alfie, Michael, and Kshitija press to a crumbling

column, heads down while high-velocity rounds grind the old stone to powder.

At the far edge of the ring, Commander Halloway steps forward.

He is a big man who wears his armor like he stopped feeling the weight of it years ago. The laser off his sidearm draws a thin red line across the platform and settles on Mei’s chest, steady and patient.

The room goes very still.

The only sounds are the soft groan of failing anchors under the platforms, the tick of cooling stone, and the steady hum of twenty power packs while everyone waits.

Jason stays low in the shadow of the spire, the cape’s shimmer washing out below the hard red glare of Halloway’s visor. His eyes move fast across the surviving players and the web he laid over all of them. The blue tags glow in his sight, a faint net of light strung across the platform: Trent’s buckler, Daisuke’s chestplate, Heather’s bow, Mei’s satchel, Sasha’s satchel clasp, Evie’s kit, Wei’s hilt-wrap, the tagged iron he pressed into the hands of Michael and Alfie and Kshitija, and one thin fading thread off Reyna’s pauldron, where she has slumped against the spire wall, barely conscious, her focus still pressed between her hands.

His fingers tighten on the Glass Dagger.

Eighteen guns. One bottleneck. No system. No HUD.

And no way to win it as a fight. He’s run the geometry four times and it comes out the same every time. Eighteen rifles in overlapping arcs, a bridge that funnels his people into a killing lane, a commander too disciplined to spook. He can’t out-cut this. He was never going to out-cut this. But the room is full of the biggest weapon any of them has ever carried, and it has been standing right here the whole time, uncast, because casting it would kill everyone who threw it.

Everyone who didn’t have a way out.

Then he drops the hood of the cape.

The shimmer dies. His outline snaps back, soot-stained and thin and bloodied, standing in the center of the platform where every gun can see him. Halloway’s pack whines a shade louder.

“Everyone.” Jason’s voice comes out loud and certain and without a crack in it. He looks at Mei, then Daisuke, then Heather’s pale face behind her stone. “All elements. Center coordinate. Now.”

Nobody moves.

Mei’s hands stop mid-gesture. Her eyes cut to him, and they are running the math, not reaching for faith. She is quick and she is sharp and she already knows where this goes. She takes a shaky step back.

“That kills everyone in this room,” she says.

“I know what it does.”

Daisuke’s sword tip dips a fraction. The muscle in his jaw stands out, and his eyes move from Jason to the mercenaries to the narrow bridge and back. Under his breath he mutters a count, the habit Jason knows. When he finally speaks it’s barely a sound. “Jason.”

Jason crosses the platform in four fast steps. He closes his bare hand over the skin above Mei’s wrist guard and slams his other palm flat to the center of Daisuke’s chestplate. The tags on both flare, blue burning to white at the contact, hot against his skin with the dry clean heat of the machines pushed to their limit.

He looks straight into Mei’s eyes.

“You held the pressure on my south flank while I ran the linked pulls. You kept the dogs off me in the forest, the thralls off me in the courtyard. I trusted you every single time.” His grip firms. “Now I need you to trust me. I’m not going to let you die in here. Any of you. Throw it, and the second it’s up, I come for you. All of you. That’s the whole plan. That’s the only plan.”

Mei doesn’t blink. The tremor in her arm stops. Something in her face lets go of the arithmetic and takes hold of him instead.

The water flares under her hands, and a pressurized vortex of pale blue erupts up off the platform, cold and shrieking, the pressure dropping so fast Jason’s ears pop. Behind him Reyna’s voice lifts, a thread of it, off the last of her strength, Sasha’s hand at her back holding her up, and her fire elemental unrolls through the air overhead, filling the room with orange. The two forces strike the center coordinate at once, and the air between them shudders.

Michael throws both hands up, black-and-blue light dancing off his fingers. “All together now!”

The room fills with the harsh stink of lightning-scorched air and hot sulfurous copper and the white scald of high-pressure steam.

“Heather.” Jason doesn’t turn his head.

The Nature-imbued arrow leaves her bow with a sound like a badly struck chord, a deep off-resonance that rings in the back teeth. It hits the

center coordinate, and the world there tears open.

A swirling sphere of black and red and violet ignites at Jason’s feet.

One instant there is stone under his boots. The next it’s gone, replaced by a seething surface of superheated force that is part water and fire and lightning and raw pressure and belongs to none of them. Wisps of blue-black current snap across the platform, burning black lines into the hex stones. A wave of superheated steam bursts sideways off the sphere’s equator and takes three mercenaries across the visors, whiting out their thermal.

Sasha’s cyclone arrives.

The air element crashes into the fusion from above, a roaring column of compressed wind tearing down through the ceiling and into the sphere with a sound past describing. The room bucks. The supports begin to crack. A slab of carved stone the size of a workbench shears loose overhead and comes down in heavy grinding pieces.

The mercenaries’ ring breaks.

Halloway’s visor floods red. Two of his men freeze as a lateral arc of fusion burns clean through their breastplates with a sharp snap, turning what’s under it to black dust. Halloway flinches back as the glare washes his armor, his gloved hand shaking on the sidearm, the laser trembling across the stone. For the first time since the doors blew, his posture holds fear.

The sphere expands.

And now the real plan, the one he never said out loud, comes due. The fusion is not just a weapon. It is a battering ram, and the wall it is breaking is the one that has held them sealed since the first hour, the containment barrier itself. As the sphere swells past the spire, the far masonry stops cracking and starts to simply cease, the carved stone thinning to nothing, and through the gap where the outer wall used to be, for one impossible second, comes the open haze of a real predawn sky.

That is his anchor. That is the door.

Jason draws his last iron dagger and throws it, not into the room, but out, through the failing wall, onto the raw dark ground beyond the boundary. It skips once on real earth and holds. The tag flares blue, the only coordinate in his web that sits outside the reach of the rifles. Not outside the reach of what he has just set loose; nothing forty feet from that sphere is. It will have to be far enough to breathe.

Then he moves, and the room becomes a smear of arrivals.

This is the part he can't afford to get wrong, and the part he has the least control over. The boundary is failing but it has not failed; the outside anchor sits on real ground forty feet past a wall that is still half there, and every jump he makes now is a bet that the wall will be gone by the time he arrives with a body in his arms. He makes the first bet on Reyna, because Reyna has no vote left in the matter, because a person who can't lift her own head can't be told to hold on. He flashes with her and the wall is gone where it needs to be gone, and the grass comes up cold and real and impossible under his knees, and something in him that has been clenched since the tree line loosens by a single degree. One. He has one out of eleven, and no time at all to celebrate.

Back to the spire. Mei's satchel. He grabs her wrist and she's already reaching for him, and they are outside, and he sets her on the grass beside Reyna and flashes back.

Trent's buckler. He hooks the big man's harness and the fusion light glares white across both their faces, and then it's the gray sky and the grass, and Trent stumbles and stays up, and Jason is gone.

Daisuke's chestplate. He's on one knee when Jason reaches him, sword still fisted, already trying to stand up into a fight that has nothing left to hit. Jason doesn't explain. He takes a handful of the dark iron at the collar and flashes, and Daisuke arrives on the grass on his hands and knees, blinking down at ordinary dirt, and by the time he thinks to grab for the man who moved him, the man is already gone.

Wei's hilt-wrap. She has held her ribs together with one arm for an hour and she does not let go of the wound even as the flash takes her; Jason feels the small hard tremor of her over the fold and sets her down more gently than the rest, on her good side, and is reaching for the next tag before her knees have found the ground.

Evie's kit. Sasha's clasp. Two healers who spent the whole run keeping other people on the right side of the line, and he pulls them across in back-to-back flashes and lays them in the grass, and an animal part of him keeps a tally as he goes, a number climbing toward the count of everyone he brought into this room, refusing to stop a single body short of it.

The tagged iron. He doesn't think about how many jumps his legs have left in them or that he can't see his own health bar or that his ribs are grinding with every arrival. He doesn't have time to second-guess anything.

He just thinks about the tag in front of him and the ground on the other side of the wall, and he pulls them out one by one, Michael, Alfie, Kshitija, each grab a fraction of a second, each drop a body onto real earth, the sphere at his back doubling and doubling, the anchors under his feet failing in the instant after he leaves them.

Each flash costs more than the last. The first jumps were clean. Now the squeeze of the flash drags at him, the collapse of air behind him arriving a half-beat late, his vision graying at the rim of every arrival, his cracked ribs screaming each time his boots eat a landing. He's never chained this many pulls, never asked his body to do this so many times without a breath between, and under the count he understands he is spending something he will not get back tonight. He keeps spending it. There are still tags lit in the white behind him, and he gave his word in a room full of people who had every reason not to believe he could actually pull it off.

Finally, the only one left is Heather.

She is standing on her stone with her bow still in her hand, and she hasn't run, has not crouched, has watched him empty the room one person at a time, and when he flashes to her she's already turning into him, her hand closing on his forearm before he has closed on hers. There's no fear in her face. There is only the thing that took three weeks and a dead friend and a broken world to build, the plain certainty that he will not let go.

He doesn't let go.

They land on the grass among the others.

For half a second, with Heather's hand still closed on his forearm, the whole cost of it catches up with him at once, the ribs and the blurred vision and the eleven flashes stacked one on top of the other, and he sways. Her grip tightens and holds him upright. Then he steadies, and lets her go.

Arlo drops out of the collapsing dark and settles against his left shoulder, his core compressed to a bright dense point, and he says nothing, only pulses twice, slow, matching Jason's breathing the way he does when words are useless and only presence will do.

Back in the castle, the fusion crosses the outer walls. Through the last broken corbels the whole gray horizon opens for a moment, and then the sphere reaches it and the horizon loses its meaning. Just beyond the castle, the Ward goes into the light, the stone maze and the hollow houses and the winding roads all pulling inward. Far off, the villages at the edge of the

world begin to dissolve at their margins, fading into the same clean consuming light.

Jason stands at the center of the group and looks back at the wall. Forty feet is nothing. When that sphere lets go it will take the castle and the Ward and the field they are lying in, and the boundary will come down through all of it. He has one flash left in him. He digs the last tagged stone out of his belt, a rough shard of hex masonry he marked in the first minute of the fight, and hurls it as far as his arm will send it, out into the dark of the open hillside, and feels it land, and feels the tag take.

He positions each of his group with another in their grasp, and lets the fear go.

Just then, the sphere in the castle collapses inward.

It happens in a single complete moment of silence. The elemental fusion energy shrinks to a point no bigger than a closed fist, every element that fed it packed into a singularity that growls below hearing. Everything left in the room turns toward it. The last red lines off Halloway's visor flicker and go out.

The air pressure drops to nothing, the breath leaving Jason's chest the way it leaves before a long terrible fall.

He flashes.

Behind him, the point detonates. The boundary comes down through the field a half-breath behind it.

The light takes everything.

They flash through the light, each of them pulling the next, twelve bodies on one thread, and the heat of it is on their skin for the length of the pull and no longer, because nothing in the world is where they are for long enough to burn. They hit the hillside hard, on real ground, well past the wall's last reach, and roll into a pile. The shockwave comes over the boundary a half-second behind them and flattens the field grass in a ring and keeps going out into the dark. Then it is past, and there is only the cold, and the smell of ozone and turned earth, and a ringing silence.

Jason pushes up onto his hands and knees.

Where a large castle once stood, there are only remains, a skeletal frame of destruction. Where the Ward stood, where the villages stood, where the whole sealed gray world of the last twenty-four days stood, there is charred earth, steaming faintly under a real sky going pale at its eastern edge. No

walls. No boundary. No barrier holding anyone anywhere. The thing that caged them is a hole in the ground.

Around him, on the cold grass, his people are breathing.

Trent on his back, staring up at open sky like he has forgotten what one looks like. Daisuke on one knee, both palms flat to the earth, feeling it be real. Sasha already crawling to Reyna, her hands finding the wound by memory. Evie, Wei, Mei, the three from the other squads, Heather. He counts them the way he has counted everything since the first night, and the number comes out whole, every one he pulled, alive and recovering on the grass under a paling sky.

Jason lets his arms give and sits back on his heels in the dew-heavy field, the Glass Dagger still in his fist, whole and uncracked, and above him the sky, the one he was told he had no life under, keeps turning slowly toward morning.

Arlo’s light steadies at his shoulder, dim and close.

“They’re all here,” Arlo says quietly. “I counted too.”

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Chapter 31

The crater still glows at its rim.

Rain has come in, thin and gray, hissing where it meets the hot rim of the bowl. A column of smoke climbs off the crater and spreads until it blots out half the southern sky, and the dry chemical silt of a dead server settles over everything like a second rain.

His people are stirring across the hillside now, sitting up one by one in the wet weeds. He moves through them anyway, hand to a shoulder, a wrist, needing the contact more than the confirmation.

He crouches beside Heather last. She is already sitting up against a low rock, one hand to the side of her head, her eyes tracking the smoke. She looks at him when he arrives. He looks at her. Neither of them speaks, and the not-speaking is its own language now, one they have been learning since a clearing full of rain a lifetime ago.

He doesn't let himself look away from the wreckage as he counts, because there is a second number in it and he's never allowed himself the coward's mercy of pretending otherwise. Twenty men went up that spiral, Halloway at their head. Twenty men with faces he'll never see and names he will never learn, sent by someone in a warm dry room to erase the people on this hillside, and Jason gave the order that put every one of them in the smoking bowl below. They were real. Arlo made sure he understood that before the first round was fired, and he hasn't set it down since. It was

them or his eleven, and the math comes out clean; he refuses the clean answer the way he has refused it since the vestibule. A life is not an expenditure. Not Budi's, not Derek's, and not twenty strangers' who were only ever weapons aimed by a hand they could not see. He will carry them too. The count is the one thing he owns that the men above the glass can't reach, and he doesn't get to keep it honest only when the dead are his.

He stands and turns to read the land. The real land, not the prison that they have been in.

That's the thing his mind keeps sliding off. The land rises away northwest in long gentle hills of dark brown and green, heather and stone clinging to thin shifting soil, a low damp wind moving over all of it. Somewhere far off a bird he has no name for calls once and goes quiet. Off in the distance, cutting across the slope, runs an old unused road that was not there yesterday, that could not have been there, because yesterday the boundary sat exactly where that road runs and there was nothing beyond it but gray.

The border hid it. The border hid a whole country.

There was always a here. There was always an outside. The wall they spent twenty-four days believing was the edge of the world was a fence around a field, and the field is in the real one, under a real sky, and has been the entire time.

He doesn't say it out loud. He can see, from the faces around him, that everyone has arrived at the same place at their own speed, and that saying it wouldn't make it more true, only heavier.

It's Mei who says the smaller, worse part of it, kneeling in the wet grass with her hand flat to real earth. "We were never anywhere," she says. "The whole time. We were here." She looks at the hills, at the ordinary road, at the smoke standing over the bowl in the ground. "People drove past this. For twenty-four days, someone was buying milk an hour's drive from where Budi died." Nobody answers her, because there is no answer, only the fact of it, and the fact is enough to sit on all of them at once. Somewhere out past those hills is every life they cannot remember, cities and names and the people who loved them, going about a world that was told they were gone, and none of them can reach for a single piece of it yet. The wall around their memory is thinner than it was, but it's still not open. Jason can feel the seams of it the way he felt the seams of the boundary, a pressure just behind the smooth gray, waiting. A blue box, a man in a long coat, someone on a couch beside him whose face still won't come. It is the only

thing that has made it through, and he holds on to it the way he holds the count, as proof there is something on the other side.

They rest until Reyna can stand with Sasha under one arm. Then they go, over a low drystone wall one at a time and down into the hills, a loose line keeping to the narrow lanes that run alongside the roads, staying off the lit ground. The smells thicken as they walk, and every one of them is real and specific in a way nothing in the castle ever was: wet tarmac, a fish market somewhere ahead, the warm sugar of a bakery opening for the morning, and under it the cold mineral thread of a canal.

The walk down is the strangest thing he has ever done, stranger than the flash, stranger than the machines under his skin. Every step is on ground that was always here. The stone he climbs over was laid by hands. The coat on his back came off a hook in a shed by the first gate, Trent's find, handed back without a word and pulled on over the cracked leather. The lane they follow was worn by feet and cart wheels and the ordinary passage of a world that never once knew there was a sealed field in the hills above it, full of people being spent for sport. His body keeps waiting for a boundary that does not come, a wall, a ward, an Announcer's voice folding down out of the air to tell him he has strayed too far. Nothing comes. There is only the wind, and the rain, and the small living sounds of a country waking up, and the almost unbearable fact that all of it is real and always was.

A sign at a junction, white letters gone gray with weather, tells them where the world put them.

Inverness.

Scotland. The far top of a real map, a real city waking up in a real rain, going about a morning that has no idea a world ended in the hills behind it before dawn.

The word does something to the group that the crater did not. A crater is a wound, and they have seen wounds. A place name is a different order of information. It means maps and roads and trains, people who will ask questions; it means the world has an address for where they are standing and a great deal of machinery for finding people in it. Jason watches the understanding move through them one face at a time, the same understanding settling cold into his own chest. They didn't escape into freedom. They escaped into the open, which is a different and more dangerous thing, and the men who ran their world are, at this exact moment,

in a room somewhere deciding what to do about twelve people who know too much and can no longer be found by any of the usual means.

The harbor comes out of the gray mist at the end of a long service road, the water dark and flat under the clammy air. The smell is strong here, brackish water and cold oil and diesel and the salt edge of the sea. Three boats sit at their moorings. A wide gray trawler rocks at the near dock. A small passenger ferry idles with a low rumble, a faint yellow light in its cabin. Further down, a cargo barge sits low in the water under a heavy tarp.

Jason stops the group at the mouth of the service road, in the shadow of a broad warehouse wall, and looks at them.

He lets his eyes move across each face in the predawn light. Trent, jaw set, eyes steady. Daisuke, one arm still bracing Reyna, wearing the particular calm of a man who has decided to be tired later. Evie, her kit clutched to her chest, her eyes bright and level. Mei, watching him with her head tilted a fraction. Sasha, hands folded, waiting. Heather, standing a little apart, her eyes already on the boats.

Three boats. Three ways out. A dozen people in ash and blood walking out of the hills together before dawn is a photograph. A front page. A thread the men in the room can pull until it reaches all of us.

“We can’t go together,” Jason says. Quiet, but it carries in the still humid air. “A group this size, hiking out of the hills covered in ash and blood, we draw the kind of attention that makes the news. They’ll find us before any of us are safe somewhere else.” He looks at the three boats. “We split here. We stay small. We stay boring.”

Nobody argues, because everybody already knew, and had only been waiting for someone to say it.

Trent nods, one short movement of his chin. He picks up the birch branch he cut on the walk down and propped against the wall, adjusts his grip on it, looks at Jason for one second, then at the trawler, and walks toward the dock without ceremony. Halfway there he lifts the branch a few inches, not a wave, just an acknowledgment, and doesn’t turn around.

Daisuke shifts Reyna’s weight carefully onto Sasha’s shoulder. Then he steps in front of Jason and puts out his hand. Jason takes it. The grip is firm and brief and says everything the last weeks have earned. Daisuke lets go, turns, and follows Trent toward the trawler.

There’s a whole language in it that neither of them has the time or the constitution to speak aloud. Daisuke stood outside a door once while a

teammate’s body was added to a count, and swore he was done doing that, and then followed Jason through the worst door of all and came out the other side with everyone he could carry. The handshake says he knows what Jason did in that throne room, all of it, the tags and the trust and the whole quiet connection of it, and that he won’t name it here where it can be overheard by a world that is listening. It says thank you. It says be careful. It says, most of all, find us again. Then he lets go and walks to the trawler and does not look back, because looking back is a thing you do when you believe it is over.

Sasha guides Reyna after them, the two of them moving slow and steady toward the gangway, Reyna’s head up now, her feet under her. Wei goes with the trawler group too, one hand still favoring her side, and at the dock’s edge she turns and finds Jason and touches two fingers to her brow, the salute of a person acknowledging a debt she does not intend to spend words on. Alfie and Michael and Kshitija peel off toward the ferry, where Evie’s group will follow, three strangers a day ago, folded now into the same tired plan of getting gone. Jason marks each of them off in his head as they board, the old count, the only prayer he knows.

Evie hesitates at the mouth of the road. She looks at Jason with the face of a person who has drafted and thrown out a dozen things to say and understood that none of them are enough. Then she reaches into her kit, takes out a small sealed package of dressings, and holds it out. He takes it. She turns and walks toward the ferry without looking back, and it is the walk of someone who has decided that not looking back is the only way she will manage to walk at all.

Mei follows her, pausing once to look up at Arlo. Arlo pulses, a small warm flare of blue, and Mei dips her chin and goes.

That leaves Jason and Heather at the wall.

She’s already looking at the barge, hands in her pockets, shoulders level, breathing slow and even.

“Don’t lose the dagger,” she says.

It’s not really about the dagger and they both know it. The dagger is the one thing that survived every fold and every fight without breaking, the one thing that turned out to be exactly what someone believed it could be, and she is handing him the whole of it in five words, the way she has handed him everything since the clearing, obliquely, precisely, trusting him to hear the sentence under the sentence. Keep the thing that did not break. Keep the

proof. Keep yourself. He hears all of it, and he gives her the only answer the moment can hold, and means it as widely as she meant the question.

“I won’t.”

She holds his eyes one more second. Then she turns and walks toward the pier without drama, her hood coming up as she steps onto the wet boards.

Jason steps back into the shadow of the warehouse wall and watches.

The trawler’s rope slips its mooring. The ferry’s bow light flicks on, throwing a pale circle across the black water. The barge’s gangplank lifts with a low rattle of iron. Three wakes open on the surface of the water and diverge into the gloom, the trawler west with its lights fading into the rain, the ferry south into the channel, its dark hull blending into the water, the barge north, slow and low, its engine a rumble that thins and is lost in the wind.

The water settles back to flat dark glass.

Then a shadow moves at the corner of the pier.

A black sedan rolls forward, no markings, its tires whispering on the rain-soaked asphalt as it sweeps the docks at a predator’s pace. The driver’s window slides down two inches onto a dark interior and nothing else. Jason presses flat to the warehouse wall, his hand closing on the Glass Dagger inside his coat, the grip cold against his palm. The sedan finishes its sweep, pauses at the water’s edge a long moment, as if the dark inside it is reading the empty harbor for wakes that are already gone, then rolls on and disappears around the far end of the road.

He stays against the wall long after it is gone, reading the empty dock the way he has read every empty room since the first table, waiting for the second car that does not come. It will come, if not tonight then a week from now, a month, in a different city with different plates. The thing above the glass doesn’t stop because a game ended. It has money and patience and a map of the whole world, and somewhere on that map it is already drawing a circle around a harbor in the north and beginning to widen it. Jason knows this the way he knows the weight of the dagger. He also knows the one thing the men in the sedan can’t: that they are hunting twelve people who can no longer be found by any signal they own, and that the hardest of the twelve to kill is the one who spent three weeks learning to be no one at all.

He waits until the sound of it is fully gone.

The harbor is empty. The wakes have vanished. The rain comes down steady and patient and erases the last sign that anyone was ever here.

Arlo drifts up from his collar and hovers at eye level in the gray light, his glow barely there against the paling sky. He says nothing. He holds the long slow rhythm he has kept since the hillside, the one that matches Jason's breathing when words would only get in the way.

"They got out," Jason says, mostly to himself.

"They got out," Arlo says. "All of them. I counted twice."

It is, Jason thinks, the first sentence in twenty-four days that the count and his conscience agree on. Every night in this place he has tallied the living and come up short, one name, then another, then more than he can hold. Tonight the number is whole. It will not stay whole forever, he knows that too, knows the men in the sedan and the room above the glass will see to it. But tonight, in the rain, on real ground, with the wakes gone dark on the water, every person he pulled out of that room is out of it and breathing, and he lets himself have the count exactly once before he folds it away and becomes, again, a man alone on a dock with somewhere to be.

He notices, distantly, that he's alone again, and that for the first time it doesn't feel like the old thing. He did not send them to the boats to be rid of them. He sent them to the boats so the net the sedan is casting would come up empty, so that when it closed it would close on nothing, on one hooded man in a crowd instead of a column of survivors on a hillside. The isolation is the same shape it always was and yet it's not the same thing at all. It used to be a wall he built to keep from being seen. Now it's a wall he stands in front of, so the people behind it can get somewhere he can't follow. He can still feel their tags, faintly, eleven threads running west and south and north, already thinning as the boats carry them past the edge of what he can reach, and he makes himself let each one go as it fades, the way you let go of a hand you intend to find again. It's the hardest thing he has done all night, and it is the opposite of every other time he has been alone.

Then he turns from the docks and walks up the service road into the city, his boots quiet on the pavement, and at the first junction he pulls up his hood, turns onto a main street, and lets the morning crowd close around him.

*** THE HOUSE ***

The debrief runs on the one hundred and fourth floor for nine days before Sterling admits to himself that it is not a debrief. It’s a manhunt with a spreadsheet.

The room is the same. The glass, the walnut, the pen laid across the portfolio. What has changed is the wall of screens, which no longer shows a castle. It shows a map, and the map is the world, and on the world are twelve small gray circles where twelve signatures used to be, each one drawn around a last known point and widening by the hour into meaningless area. A harbor in the north. A ferry route. A trawler that made open water and was one vessel among four hundred by the time anyone thought to look.

“Say it again,” Sterling says. “Plainly.”

Vaneck has stopped apologizing for the way she has to say things. Nine days of almost no sleep has burned the deference out of her and left only the architecture, which is the one thing in the room she still trusts. “We cannot find them by signal, because they no longer emit one. The pulse that was meant to kill them took the receiver layer instead. There’s nothing left in their bodies for us to ping, read, or command. To the network they are indistinguishable from any other twelve people who were never enrolled.” She lets it sit. “We built a system that could reach anyone, anywhere, through the machines we put in them. They are the only twelve people alive it can’t touch.”

“People can be found without a signal, Doctor. People have been found without signals for the whole of human history.”

“Yes,” Vaneck says. “But those people did not know what they know.” And there it is, the thing under the nine days, the reason a man who owns a floor of a tower has hardly slept. Not that twelve test subjects walked out of a sealed environment. That twelve people walked out carrying the one fact the entire program depends on no one believing. That it is real. That it was never a game. That the thing which ran their world runs on machinery already threaded through everyone else’s.

Sterling turns the pen a half rotation on the portfolio and does not pick it up.

“The substrate,” he says. “Your review. You had a finding.”

Vaneck’s hands go still on the keys. This is the part she has practiced not saying, and she says a version of it, because saying nothing is a decision she’s still not ready to make in front of him. “The control layer was never

confined to the environment. It couldn’t be. To coordinate a sealed field that size in real time, it had to route through infrastructure that already existed, with reach and density we do not own and could never have built in secret.” She stops one inch short of the edge of it and lets the sentence go dull. “It uses what is already there. The castle was not the reach. The castle was a demonstration. The reach is everywhere the signal is.”

For a moment neither of them says the word. It sits in the room the way the machines sit in the walls, invisible and total.

“Then we have a containment problem the size of the map,” Sterling says, and something that is not quite pleasure but is adjacent to it moves behind his eyes, the look of a man who has just been told the stakes are as large as he always suspected he deserved. “Good. Small problems are beneath us.” He lifts the pen at last. “Twelve people who can’t be tracked and know the truth. Find the one who kept the others alive. He’s the one who will reach back for them. When he does, we have all twelve.”

“And if he doesn’t reach back,” Vaneck says. “If he’s smarter than that.”

“Everyone reaches back eventually,” Sterling says. “It’s the only thing the design never had to fake.” He draws a single clean line under a name on the page, the way he draws a line under everything he intends to close. “That much was always real.”

He caps the pen and leaves the room, and the door seals behind him with the soft pneumatic sigh of a thing built to keep sound where it is put.

Vaneck stays.

She sits alone with the wall of widening circles for a long time, long enough that the building’s systems dim the interior light around her, reading the room as empty. She does not correct them. On her laptop the frozen error state still hangs, the twelve signatures she can’t reach, the proof of the one thing she built that finally did what she always swore it never would. She thinks about the woman she was on the first night, a lifetime ago, whose hand rested on the wake key and did not want to press it. She built the system to keep people alive. She has said that to herself so many times it has worn smooth and stopped meaning anything.

Then, under the desk, where the cameras that watch the watchers can’t follow it, she opens a second device that’s not on any inventory the tower keeps. She doesn’t send anything. Not yet. She only copies, quietly, two files, the architecture review with the dull inch put back on the end of the sentence and, beside it, the narration node’s full transcript, every word it

said from Wake them to the syllable it died on, and moves them somewhere Sterling's people won't think to look, and closes the device, and folds her hands on the walnut, and waits for a morning she has already, without quite admitting it, begun to plan.

Outside the glass, the rain keeps on over the city and its ten million people. Out past it, scattered now beyond every signal the tower owns, are twelve it can no longer reach.

She won't do it tonight, or tomorrow. She's patient the way the system taught her to be patient, and she knows what Sterling does to loose ends, and she knows that the man who kept eleven people alive with sticks and a broken interface is, right now, the only proof in the world that the thing they built can be beaten. She intends to be standing next to that proof when it decides to move. Not for absolution. She stopped believing in that somewhere around the fourth day. For the simpler, colder reason that she helped build the cage, and she's the only one left inside the tower who knows exactly how the bars are wired.

So she waits, and copies, and says nothing, and lets them go on believing she is only very tired. On the wall the circles widen. Somewhere inside one of them, a dozen people she'll never be able to reach by any signal she designed are learning how to disappear, and one of them is learning how to come back.

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Epilogue

The rain makes a soft steady sound on the roof, filling the silence the way water fills a container. It’s been raining for hours, the kind of rain that started before he arrived and will keep on long after he goes.

The warehouse is large and empty, its concrete floor a smooth unbroken gray, its walls bare steel panels bolted in neat lines. High narrow windows run the far wall, each one clean, letting in long parallel bars of pale daylight that fall across the floor. It’s a different city now, a long way south and miles from the harbor, and nobody in it knows his name because the world has him recorded, if it has him at all, as a number that stopped reporting in a sealed test somewhere in the hills.

He stands two feet back from a window, hands loose at his sides, watching a service lane where a delivery truck idles with its exhaust rising in a thin white line. In the glass his reflection hangs faint and partial, a dark shape against the morning, and he studies it a moment without quite recognizing it, the way you look at something familiar that has changed in a way you can’t name.

He takes a disposable phone from his coat. Cheap, unmarked, no cracks. The screen lights cold under his thumb. One unread message. The number is unlisted, no geographic tag, no carrier signature, nothing the network could trace back to a place or a hand. Only one person alive has this number.

He opens it.

I never got the chance to thank you for saving all of us. Stay safe.

He reads it once. He reads it again.

It’s dry and spare and stripped of anything unnecessary, no qualifier, no softening, no second sentence to take the first one back. Every word chosen by someone who has never in her life wasted one, someone patient, who watched and waited and picked her moment with the same steady discipline she carried from the first day to the last.

You too, Heather.

He stands with the phone in his hand a long moment while the rain keeps its rhythm on the roof. Then he closes his fingers around it, crosses to the center of the floor, and lets it fall. It lands flat with a sharp plastic crack, screen up, the message still lit. He sets his heel over the center of the screen and presses down, an even, deliberate weight, and the casing breaks cleanly along its stress lines with no scatter and no mess. When he lifts his boot there is only a flat black rectangle on the gray concrete that no longer looks like a phone.

He straightens, rolls his shoulders back one at a time, and draws his hood forward until it shadows his jaw. Under his coat his hand finds the Glass Dagger and rests there a moment, the grip cold and whole and familiar, a blade he no longer expects to break. Higher up, Magda’s locket rests against his sternum, cold as the day she closed his fingers around it.

There is no HUD anymore, no blue line laying itself across a target to promise him where the blade will land, no readout to tell him a throw was true before it left his hand. The flash still answers, because the flash was always intent and never interface. The cape still hides him. The recovery still comes on its own. But the dagger he throws with his own arm, by his own eye, on nothing but the trust that his hand knows the distance, and relearning that trust is the whole shape of his days now. He is not good at it yet. It will have to be enough, because the men in the sedan are patient, and sooner or later his life is going to depend on it.

He ducks under the half-raised roller door without slowing and steps out onto the pavement, and the city takes him.

The street is wide and busy, a thick morning crowd on both pavements, umbrellas and hoods and bent heads moving in both directions. He joins the current without breaking stride, matching its pace exactly, neither faster nor slower, a man who has somewhere to be and is in no hurry to get there. His

hands stay in his pockets. His hood stays up. His eyes read the middle distance the way he reads every street now, marking exits and angles and the shape of the crowd ahead, because the sedan is still out there somewhere, and the room above the city is still open, and the thing that built a world to hold him is still looking.

But it is looking for a number that no longer reports.

Within half a block he is indistinguishable from anyone else on the pavement. Within the block, the crowd has closed completely around him, and Arlo’s blue light rides quiet and hidden at his collar, and the morning goes on exactly as if nothing in it had ever ended a world before breakfast.

He does not look back.

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The story continues in ***The Outcast's Reckoning***
And there's more of this world than fits in the books — free stories, early chapters, and word of what's coming next.
LiamRaxter.com/outcast

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A First Look at The Outcast's Reckoning

The first two chapters of *The Outcast's Reckoning*, Book Two of The Outcast Saga.

Chapter 1

The tide pulls back with a slow, sucking noise, replacing the steady crash and roll that had filled several sleepless nights. The sound of the water dragging over wet sand begins to fade into the night.

She leans her head against the tall glass. The cold cuts through her skin, sharp and quick, as saltwater condensation covers the window. Below, gray dunes fade into darker gray where the water slips back into the Atlantic. This far up the Maine coast, it's all granite and cold light, the kind of place people photograph in July and abandon by October. Her fingers follow the lines of the cedar window frame. She reminds herself to breathe. Outside, the wind pushes white foam across the sand; lobster buoys and driftwood knock against the rocks below. The spruce comes right down to the tideline.

It's beautiful. Or at least, that's what most people would say. Two months after leaving that place, Evie still can't help looking for the seams where the world doesn't quite fit together.

She hugs herself. The gray alpaca wool is soft, almost too soft, a pricey kind of security blanket.

Gordon Bracewell thinks the best way to treat trauma is with luxury wool and an expensive, isolated beach house. She couldn't remember his name after she woke up in that place. Couldn't remember where she lived, her friends' names, or faces. All of those missing fragments of memories came back as soon as she saw her parents. Not in a rush of memories returning, more like they were there all along and were now unlocked.

In the first two weeks, she tried to explain it to him. Not the simulation; she wasn't ready for that, and maybe never would be, but what was left behind. How sounds came a half-second late, and her body already marked them as threats before her mind caught up. How she could no longer sit with her back to a door. How she woke at 3 a.m., reaching for a weapon that wasn't there and hadn't been since the boats—the gray water, the blankets someone found below deck, and the emptiness of people who had survived something they couldn't yet describe.

None of it had happened here. The facility had been an ocean away, a gray stretch of Scottish coast she'd only seen from the water. The trip home

afterward was a blur of a chartered flight and officials who had been told not to ask questions—her father's money again, smoothing the reentry. As if she could be dropped back into her old life and simply pick it up where it fell.

Her father listened with the same focused attention he used in business meetings. He nodded as if he were already lining up solutions rather than listening. A few days later, two men named Rourke and Cahill showed up at her apartment with their own gear and a rental SUV waiting outside. Hired security, compliments of her father.

"You need fresh air," her father told her on the phone. "You need some peace and quiet. You need to get out of that apartment."

What she really needed, though she never said it, was for someone to just sit with her and not try to fix anything. She wished Heather or Sasha were there with her. They hadn't spoken much back when they were in that place, but they could understand what she was going through. She'd be able to talk to someone about it instead of keeping it all bottled up.

She did as her father wanted and went to the beach house anyway. It was easier than explaining. Staying cooped up in that apartment felt like she was holding her breath and couldn't let it go. And part of her, the part that was still Gordon Bracewell's daughter, thought that if she fixed everything on the outside, maybe the inside would follow. As they say, 'Fake it till you make it.'

Two months later, she is still waiting for it to start working.

The living room would've been fine for her a few months ago. But now, it feels off, too symmetrical, too picturesque. Her father micromanaged the upgrades from his office in Seattle, treating her recovery like another project. The kitchen shines with pale granite, brushed steel, clean lines, and hidden cabinet doors that open only if you know where to press. Next to the fridge, the smart-home tablet for the security system glows with a calm green screen.

Secure. Secure. Secure.

The small white words line up in order. A single, perfect potted succulent sits on the granite island. The interior designer, a minimalist her father flew in, said it would make the space feel lived-in. It doesn't. It looks like a prop, a calm, fleshy little alien on a cold stone altar.

She made a few small changes to make the space her own. There is a stack of 'feel-good' paperbacks on the coffee table, their covers soft and

creased from rereading since she got home. Her mug, bought in a sandy European coastal town long before her life split into *before* and *after,* sits on the counter with a tea bag over the rim, waiting for water. A pink cardigan lies over the back of the designer sofa, a bit too casual for the room. She needed some signs that someone actually lives here, not just an idea.

She still can't sleep in the master bedroom. The bed is too big, too centered, and the windows face the wrong way. For the past two weeks she's slept on the floor, propped against the wall in the corner of the room where she can see all the doors and windows. She hasn't told her father.

Some things were easier to handle alone.

Farther up the coast, beyond the sharp black cliffs, the tall telecom masts stand out against the heavy sky. Their warning lights blink for low-flying planes. Red. Red. Red. She can feel her heartbeat begin to match the mechanical rhythm.

She noticed the towers on the first night, like a sound you can't quite place but also can't ignore. The feeling settles in her jaw as a faint pressure. She tells herself it's just tension, maybe from grinding her teeth in her sleep. Something to mention to a dentist when life feels normal again.

She hasn't told Rourke or Cahill. They're hired to handle physical threats. The strange feeling in her jaw isn't their problem.

Her father has spent a lot of money on this place since she came back. There are new triple-deadbolts with biometric locks, steel studs in the ground-floor walls, and security cameras on every corner, their alerts feeding into the earpieces of two expensive guards. There's also a safe room behind the master bedroom closet. The steel door is painted to look like drywall. She's spent hours tracing the barely visible gap in the trim with her fingernail, wondering if a tomb is still a tomb if it has a carbon-air scrubber and a mini-fridge.

Her father had Cahill show her how to access the safe room several times until he was confident she could do it under stress.

"You'll be fine, sweetheart. You're protected."

She nodded. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to think that if you paid enough money to the right people, the world would finally leave you alone.

The problem she couldn't tell her father was that what had happened to her didn't come through the door or show up on cameras or set off alarms. It was bigger than that. It came from inside some system, from a secret

network or government, from the hidden parts of the connected world. No amount of steel or security could stop it.

She had tried to explain this to only one person, two weeks after the boats. A woman from the same group, someone she had known for only a handful of days in the simulation and on the road out of it, yet felt she had known for years: Sasha. She had listened. Hadn't flinched. She said, quietly, that she understood, that she wasn't going back to her old life either, that she was going to find out what was done to them and by whom.

Evie couldn't do the same. She didn't have that drive. She had her father's beach house, the pink Mouliné Wool cardigan on the sofa, her paperbacks, and her tea mug. She was trying, in her own way, to believe she could come back.

She's still trying. She stands at the window in her gray blanket, watching the tide go out, still searching for the places where the world appears askew.

Through the side window, Rourke's dark windbreaker catches the offshore draft, flapping against his broad shoulders. He walks the north deck with a silent, rolling stride. Tactical boots, no noise on the damp cedar planks. His gloved right hand rests on the grip of his holstered Glock. He doesn't look through the glass. He never does. Whatever he needs to know about her arrives through the earpiece; his eyes stay on the fence line.

A little farther down, near the heavy iron gates, Cahill's high-powered flashlight casts a clean white circle through the sea mist. The beam sweeps across the fence posts, illuminating the yellow warning signs: CAUTION: HIGH VOLTAGE.

"Cahill." Rourke's voice is low, husky, and perfectly calm in the earpiece. "Check the dampener on the gate housing. Salt's eating the casing again. The lock latch was sticking when I did my last round."

"Copy that." Cahill's lower rumble vibrates in her ear canal. "The sea air is absolute shit for these high-end digital locks. The old man spent a million bucks on military-grade hardware, and it gets bricked by a few days of sea mist."

"Keep your focus," Rourke replies, his tone dropping into that professional flatline. "Evie, you there?"

She reaches up, fingers finding the small transmitter clipped to the collar of her cashmere top. "Hey, Rourke. I'm here," she says, keeping it light, trying to convince him that she's fine.

"Everything all right up there?"

“Just heating up the water for some tea.”

“Good. Lock down the interior shutters when you’re done. Mist is rolling in thick. Sightlines are down to fifty yards.”

“Okay, my rugged protector.” She lets go of the button.

She fills the kettle from the tap, moving slowly, as if she’s performing a ritual. The handmade ceramic mug is heavy in her hand. It’s hers, from the sandy European coastal town, tied to the version of herself she wants to find again. She can’t remember the shop’s name, the potter’s face, or who she was when she bought it. It didn’t matter much at the time.

She’s going to remember. She’s decided. She will remember who she was and find her way back. This beach house is her first step because it’s quiet, and her father loves her, even if he shows it through steel studs and safe rooms.

The kettle begins its quiet, steaming hiss.

A floorboard creaks down the hall. Nothing but the wind. The house shifts under the pull of the ocean. Her hands shake again. She presses her palms against the cold granite island, locking her arms until the trembling stops. It mostly works.

She thinks again about calling Sasha. Evie still has her number and has looked at it many times. She hasn’t called because it would mean admitting the beach house isn’t working. That the luxury fabrics, the sea air, and the locks aren’t enough, and that she’s still noticing the flaws in a world that almost looks right. She’s not ready to say that to someone who would understand.

She’ll phone her tomorrow. Or maybe next week. When she is more sure.

The earpiece crackles.

“I’m at the gate,” Cahill announces. “Checking the secondary relay. Voltage readouts are jumping all over the place. Ground wire might be getting wet.”

“Fix it and get back to the porch,” Rourke says. “Wind’s changing.”

Down on the path, Cahill bends at the knee, the light from his flashlight narrowing onto the gate’s electronic control panel.

Evie begins to feel the pressure in her jaw again.

It doesn’t start as discomfort. It’s a mild hum, vibrating in the hinge of her jaw, running deep like an itch inside her bones. Her teeth clench, grinding until her temples throb.

It isn’t the tension she’s been blaming on her sleep. It’s something else, finally clear after days of trying not to name it.

She drops her hand. Her fingers lose their grip on the heavy ceramic mug.

It hits the granite kitchen island, then rolls, shattering against the hardwood floor. Shards of dark clay slide into the shadow of the cabinets.

Her mug. The one from that beautiful coastal town. The one she hoped would help her find her way back. The pieces lie in the dark under the cabinets, too broken to ever fit back together. She looks at them, and something in her own chest settles into the same broken shape.

“Son of a—” Cahill’s voice pierces through the earpiece, but what comes through is a burst of feedback, a high, shrieking electronic squeal that makes Evie gasp, her hands flying to her ears.

“Cahill, report!” Rourke’s voice is sharp now, the professional mask slipping. “What the hell was that?”

“What the shit—” Cahill’s voice is garbled, suppressed by a rhythmic, clicking static. “Comms are blowing out... Transmitters are... frying. Gate lock is—”

The audio dissolves into a noise like tearing metal.

On the kitchen wall, the smart-home tablet strobes.

The green screen blinks out. It comes back white. Then amber. The status lines—‘*Secure. Secure.* Secure.’—shudder, split into horizontal green-and-red symbols, and dissolve. The digital clock on the screen ticks backward, numbers flying past in an impossible countdown, before the glass fractures down the center with a sharp *clack*.

Through the glass of the window, she watches Cahill.

The big man rips his earpiece out with a sharp twist of his head and throws it into the gravel. Thin, oily white smoke pours from his collar transmitter. Below him, the gate’s electronic control box is bubbling. The high-voltage junction box melts from the inside out, the plastic twisting like hot wax under a blowtorch.

The sliding door goes. Not the lock. The glass itself, the whole tall pane of it bursting inward across the living room floor, and something dark and hunched comes through the gap where it was.

Evie stumbles back.

Her heel catches on the rug, sending her sprawling hard onto the hardwood floor. Pain shoots up her hip as her side collides with the doorframe of the hallway. Her hands scrape against the wood. Her cashmere

sweater snags on the trim, tearing at the elbow as she drags herself backward, kicking her legs in a frantic, undignified scramble, her eyes locked on the living room.

Heavy, desperate boots pound the deck stairs.

Cahill fills the ruined frame of the sliding door. He's panting, his HK416 rifle raised to his shoulder. He opens fire.

The muzzle flashes are blinding in the dimly lit room, the deafening *rat-tat-tat* of three-round bursts echoing off the high ceilings.

It moves.

The rounds hit it and do nothing. They thud into the wet dark of its hide and drop away spent; no punch-through, no blood, the flesh not even marking where they struck. Cahill's eyes widen at the impossibility of it. Then something long and barbed whips out of the mass and opens his throat.

The gun drops. He falls to his knees, hands seizing his neck, hot red blood spilling over his fingers. His eyes remain wide, staring into the empty air of the room as the life drains out of them, and then he slumps forward onto the broken glass.

Evie is at the end of the hall, scrambling backward to get away.

Her back hits the heavy door of the safe room. She reaches up, searching for the keypad. Her fingers find the buttons, punching the five-digit master code she knows better than her own birthday.

Eight. Four. Nine. One. Two.

Nothing.

She types it again.

Still nothing.

She begins to punch the keypad.

The small digital screen on the lock panel flickers red. A thin hiss escapes the casing. The keys get hot to the touch. From the edge of the metal keypad, a tiny, curling wisp of black dust leaks out. Even with her nanite-boosted strength, she knows she didn't hit it hard enough to cause that.

The system is locked. The signal owns the house now.

She stops punching. She slides down the door, pulling her knees to her chest, her breath coming in uneven, shallow gasps.

She should've called. She should've called today; she should've called last week. Sasha had understood immediately. Had already been moving

toward something while Evie was still standing at the windows, trying to believe that the sea air would fix her.

She'll call her tomorrow.

The thought hits her with painful clarity: unless there is no tomorrow for her. She's spent two months trying to return to who she was, but that person is gone. The way forward was a phone number on a notepad, sitting on the kitchen counter beside a kettle with water for tea that she'll never drink.

The creature steps into the hallway.

It moves without a sound. Whatever it is, it isn't smooth, and it isn't built; it looks grown, hunched and overlong. Its hide is the black wet of something dragged up out of deep water, and it breathes a slow, wrong bellows-rhythm she can hear in the dark. The cold rolls off it in a wave, not winter cold but the cold of a meat locker, stinging her face and pulling the water from her eyes.

The hum in her jaw grows louder until it's deafening. Her teeth taste like metal. Her vision goes white, and the world recedes into gray static.

Daddy paid for the cameras. He paid for the security. He paid for the lock.

The limbs that reach down for her are too long, jointed in too many places, wet and cold—the deep final cold of something that has never once been alive.

The cold goes absolute.

Her last breath is short. Quiet. Barely there.

The tide of the ocean keeps sliding back.

In the moments that follow, the wind off the Atlantic sweeps through the shattered living room, stirring the curtains and bearing the scent of salt and dead kelp deep into the house. On the wet cedar deck outside, Rourke lies unmoving at the north rail, his Glock still holstered. Down in the dune grass, the wind moves in long, slow waves.

On the hallway floor, the dust begins to settle. It drifts in the draft, turning lazy circles in the air, thinning until it looks like ordinary gray ash, sifting into the cracks of the hardwood boards.

The broken tablet flickers on the kitchen wall.

The screen clears. The cracks remain, but the system reboots, the green interface loading without a single error. The lines populate from top to bottom, calm and orderly:

Secure. Secure. Secure.

In the upper right corner, five green signal bars pulse with steady, mechanical pride. The router on the mantel blinks twice, its internal fans spinning down to a quiet, satisfied purr.

The signal remains strong. It reaches out across the dark water, connecting to the red-blinking towers on the cliffs, joining the digital heartbeat of the coast.

Patient, bright, and completely indifferent to the bodies and the empty hallway, it keeps transmitting into the night.

The mug is still in pieces on the kitchen floor. No one left to sweep them up.

Chapter 2

The iron post-hole digger hits the ground with a heavy thunk that rattles his forearms. The resistance is instant and tough. The clay is as hard as concrete: cold, dry, and unyielding.

Jason drives the blades down again. Twists the handles. Pulls up a broken plug of brown earth. Even though his physical strength stat wasn't as high as some of the others, it still left him significantly stronger than he was before everything happened. Not Superman strong, but on the stronger side of normal.

He can't let himself get distracted. There's only the cold ground, sore shoulders, and the dull comfort of doing the same thing over and over. This is how he keeps himself safe and sane. If he works until he's exhausted, he doesn't think. If he doesn't think, life remains peaceful. Out here, he's just another worker, hiding in a two-hundred-and-forty-acre field.

He'd started the grind nine hours earlier under a dark sky.

That morning, Jason lies on his back on the thin cot, arms at his sides, staring at the old beams. The wind-up alarm clock on the pine nightstand shows he's been awake for eleven minutes. Every morning, he counts the seconds before his body finally agrees to get up.

He doesn't need the alarm anymore. His body learned the schedule through repetition and the sheer absence of anything else.

The room is ten by twelve feet. There's a single north-facing window without a curtain. The mattress is thin and hard, which is just how he likes it. Waking up sore reminds him he is still alive.

He lifts his right hand, pulls down the collar of his undershirt, and presses Magda's locket to his skin. The iron is cold, the way it's always cold, never taking his warmth. He traces the deep dent from the clearing where she died, the day he let it fall and the fight ground it into the stones. He checks it the way someone might check a scar, making sure it hasn't changed overnight. It hasn't. It never does.

He holds it there for a few measured breaths. When he lets go, his fingers pass over the small healed dimple behind his left ear, the port where the

tables jacked in, the one mark from that place his body never smoothed away. Then he turns his head.

The Glass Dagger sits next to the clock, its blade dark in the morning light. He looks it over, searching for a crack. In the simulation, there was always a faint crack inside, one that never broke. For weeks, he thought it would shatter when he needed it. Then, after their final battle, when he had finally begun to trust the dagger, the crack was gone. Maybe it healed, or maybe the nanites fixed it. Maybe it was never actually there at all. Who knows.

He draws a finger down the flat of the blade, slow and deliberate. The surface is cool, frictionless. The interior is solid dark glass all the way through. No fault line.

Good.

His flannel work shirt is so stiff that it almost stands up on its own when he takes it off the hook. He puts it on, buttons it from the bottom, and steps into his jeans. The denim is faded at the knees and stained with old clay at the cuffs, heavy from being washed in hard well water and dried outside in the cold. He sits on the cot to pull on his boots, and that's when it hits.

A low, metallic thrum in the hinge of his jaw, like a tuning fork vibrating against the bone.

He freezes with the lace half-pulled, jaw firm, eyes on the floor. The vibration is deep, more inside his bones than on his skin, sitting behind his molars like a coin pressed against a nerve.

He breathes. Counts to four.

Outside, a crow calls twice from the sycamore at the edge of the yard. The wind sneaks under the door, carrying the smell of cold dirt, diesel, and nothing digital. There's no modern technology here. It's been that way since his first night, when he stood outside at midnight, listened to his jaw for twenty minutes, and heard nothing but silence. The cell towers are too far away to matter, the closest one a distant dot on a county road miles south. This deep into rural Vermont, the grid thins to almost nothing.

His jaw quiets. It always does out here. Six weeks in, he knows the farm's silence too well to mistake this for the real thing—it's just his body, still braced, firing on a memory. He finishes lacing the boot, ties a double knot, and stands.

His eyes dart to the upper left corner of the wall. It's a habit now. He's looking for the spot where his health readout and energy bar used to show

up in the simulation, those red-and-blue numbers that told him he was fine.

The wall is blank. Obviously.

He grabs his Carhartt work coat, drapes it over one shoulder, and pushes out through the creaking screen door into the cold dark of the porch.

The eastern sky is a pale gray. The yard between the house and the barn is hard-packed dirt from years of tire tracks. His breath shows in the cold air. He crosses the yard and goes through the barn's side door.

Dale Steelman is already there.

He stands at the open hood of the old John Deere, one hand on the engine housing, the other holding an oil filter up to the light, turning it slowly under the single overhead lamp. His overalls are the usual faded blue. The sweatband is already on his brow, even though it's cold. He doesn't look up, but gives a short nod toward the floor, the kind that just means *morning* and nothing else.

Jason nods back.

Dale goes back to the filter.

The barn smells of oil, old hay, and iron tools that have hung on the same pegs for fifty years. The tractor is either a restoration project or a battle Dale refuses to give up on. After six weeks, Jason still isn't sure if it can run for more than twenty minutes at a time.

A faint, watery shimmer shifts in the rafters, up near the heavy crossbeam above the tractor's hood.

Jason doesn't react. He keeps his eyes on Dale's hands, but out of the corner of his eye he catches the soft blue of Arlo up in the rafters, hovering over the crossbeam, watching Dale work. Arlo hasn't made himself visible to Dale; he never has, as far as Jason can tell, so to the old man the rafters are empty. To Jason, he's a low, steady ember among the knotholes and the dust. Watching a farmer fight a worn-out alternator must be a show. Dale has never once looked up.

Jason's never quite sure, moment to moment, whether Arlo is showing himself to Jason alone or letting the whole room see. He hasn't found a way to tell short of asking, and asking would mean admitting how much he has come to lean on the little orb simply being there.

Dale sets the oil filter down on a clean rag, wipes his hands on his thighs, and picks up a wrench. Without turning around, he points the wrench at the wooden cart resting in the far corner.

The cart is loaded with cedar fence posts, a roll of high-tensile wire, and the iron post-hole digger.

Jason looks at the cart, then back at Dale.

Dale is already back under the hood.

Right.

The path to the pasture takes twenty minutes down a dirt track. The cedar posts knock together as the cart hits every bump, and Jason leans forward, letting his legs do the work.

He had crested the low rise at the pasture's edge under a gray-white sky, mapped out the repair, and gotten to work. He has six of the eight new posts set now, and the rhythm has taken him far enough out of his own head that his mind is blessedly clear.

By the seventh post, his back burns, and the skin on his fingers is raw, ready to blister. The nanites do a good job of healing, but at the rate he works, even they struggle to keep the skin on his hands. They also do their best work when the action causing the damage stops or when his adrenaline is at its peak.

He stops, rests his hands on the tool, and gives the microscopic robots within him a chance to catch up.

He grabs the handles again. *Time to get back to it.*

The eighth post goes in clean. He is tamping down the last of the fill clay when the heavy crunch of footsteps comes down the path. Dale arrives with a full spool of high-tensile wire balanced on his shoulder, his pliers tucked into his side pocket. He drops the spool into the grass with a loud, ringing metallic thunk, adjusts the sweatband on his brow, and looks at the eight new posts. No expression.

Then he pulls the pliers from his pocket and looks at Jason.

Jason grabs the end of the wire with his thick leather gloves and carries it to the first post. He keeps the tension steady, holding the line against his chest with both arms while Dale follows. Dale presses each staple into the cedar with a quick, practiced motion. They work down the line in silence. The wire is tight and even from post to post. It's a fence that will hold, which is all a fence needs to do.

Dale drives the final staple, pats the post once, and leaves Jason to finish clean-up. Dale picks up his spool and pliers, walking back toward the farmhouse at the same unhurried pace.

Jason takes his time. He coils the leftover wire, his gloves scraping against the metal. He walks the fence line again to pick up the wire snips, stray staples, and the post-hole digger. He loads everything into the cart, making sure the tools won't rattle. It's careful, hands-on work. It's how you show respect for Dale's space and rules. On this farm, things go back where they belong.

Another day is done, and the field is quiet. It's not like the hush of a city in the early morning or the uneasy silence of waiting for something to happen, just empty. The wind moves through the dead grass in waves. There are no towers on the horizon, no humming in his jaw, and nothing ghostly in his vision. Three weeks of cargo holds, truck beds, and towns whose names he never learned brought him here from the harbor. For six weeks since, this emptiness has been the closest thing to safety he has had, and somewhere in those weeks he stopped bracing against it.

He pulls off his gloves and looks at his palms. Thick calluses cover them, the skin tight at each finger's base. These are Jason Mercer's hands: a farm worker's hands. Mercer is a name he gave himself the first day here; his real one is a blank the simulation left behind, and he's never once tried to fill it. Whatever was back there, he doesn't want it. Mercer is plain, and Mercer is nobody. They're not the hands of anyone important enough for a big system to notice.

The people from his past don't know where he is. That means no one can use them as leverage. That's the plan. The farm stays clean, the signal stays dead, and the fence stays up.

He rolls his gloves up and pushes them into his back pocket.

In the distance, he can hear crunching gravel, too steady for wind, too far out for the barn. Tires from the south road.

His stomach drops. A cold spike of adrenaline hits him, the heat draining out of his face before he even realizes what's happening.

He runs to the rise at the pasture's edge, lifting one hand to shade his eyes against the low glare of the sinking sun.

A dust cloud rises up the gravel drive. The car is silver, the paint a bit dull. There's a shallow dent on the front bumper, passenger side, the kind you get in a parking lot and never bother to fix because it's not worth the trouble.

Switching from "Jason Mercer, farmhand" back to the survivor he used to be feels like a jolt, like a bone snapping into place. His hand drops to his

hip, reaching for a dagger that isn’t there, finding only canvas and worn denim.

The sedan stops at the edge of the yard, engine idling. The headlights cast two yellow beams through the dusk, stretching his shadow across the new fence line. The low rumble vibrates through his boots, a mechanical heartbeat that doesn’t belong here.

The windshield reflects the setting sun, and he can’t see the driver. It gives back nothing but the violet of the sky and the shape of his own dark silhouette.

Neither he nor the car moves. He’s torn between wanting to hide and the sudden fear that his quiet refuge is gone.

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