

The HOPE Engine

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Chapter 1

The Old World

It took the threat of total annihilation to stop the first cold war.

It took a computer game to stop the second.

Russia and Europe were on the verge of nuclear annihilation. America had gone dark since enforcing its net neutral wall. Fingers were hovered over buttons that would begin the war to end humanity. But as always, humans found hope.

No country really wanted to start the war, but they were between a rock and a hard place. Their citizens needed a focus, and war focused the mind like nothing else. The people weren't really to blame.

Thirty years after the financial sector had left Britain, and the country had fallen because of its greed, seven young computer programmers pushed the button on their own dream.

The HOPE engine loaded onto servers around the globe. Disparity was gone. The rich rubbed shoulders with the poor as if they were old friends. Nationality became a thing of the past. America gave up on its self imposed retreat from the world. The first ever global law was founded and enforced – every person, regardless of the colour of their skin, the god they worshipped, the number in their bank account, or anything else that used to matter, had to have a VR headset with a mobile connection to HOPE.

It was a game based in a fantasy world that one of the developers dreamed up. It wasn't the most unique or innovative, and it didn't have the best graphics or gameplay, but it had luck. Of course, luck is just when preparation meets opportunity. The world needed something to unify them, and HOPE gamified people's lives while providing a built in translator.

That was all it took. Give people a goal and remove the communication barrier.

But HOPE has moved on since its first release. Now it does have the best graphics, and the best gameplay, and the best everything.

The developers realised that games went in cycles. Games used to be hard, then with the invention of mobile phones, they became easy. They became too easy. They were non-games, just blinking happy sounds at the user with no mental input. Without stakes, people couldn't engage with anything. But with stakes, came motivation, came teamwork, came fulfillment and happiness.

HOPE isn't the only game engine, but it's the only one that matters.

Final assessment,

Quentin Vine, Class 201C#9

There. The last scrap of school work I'd ever have to do. Done. I wasn't saying it was my finest writing. I'd skimmed over so much. I didn't even touch on Britain becoming a pod habitat country, whose sole source of income is rent from HOPE players demanding to be closer to the root server. Not a single mention of the N-plague. Not even a nod towards the growing orphan crisis, of which I was a card carrying member. Hmm, maybe I should add those. Nah, who cares, I'd already collected enough class credits to pass, so it didn't matter.

I folded the page and held it in front of me. A dynamic context menu appeared, and I selected "submit".

I hadn't been to class for the last few weeks, and this was my final procrastination over and done with. Why stop procrastinating now? Because the clock had just ticked, and I was officially sixteen. I could *play*. Sure, I could have continued in education. Everyone had that option, but I was so done with it. I hadn't learned a thing this past year. They gave us complete access to the entire world's knowledge, but did they update the curriculum? Hell no. From the ages of eight to sixteen, every child across the globe had to attend school. Technically, you *could* attend a physical school, they did still exist, but no one did.

HOPE was just an engine. In its alpha testing days, it had been a giant expanse of nothing. It was a literal sandbox as the devs pushed the limit of how many sand particles they could move around before the engine crashed. It was a lot, by the way – thirty six billion, to be precise. And it was in this sandbox mode that all us youngsters were trapped. We were allowed access to three zones. School, Community, and Home. School is pretty obvious – we go there to learn with other like minded individuals. Home isn't exactly a stretch either – it's a private sandbox, one kilometre square where each kid can do anything they want. Imagination is the limit. And Community is where you can meet people you don't *really* want to invite to your home when school hours are over.

I was sat in a cartoon house – yep, I'd turned the cel shading on in my little slice of Home – that was soon to be obsolete. In this zone, I was a god, but I knew that where I was going, I'd be just another scrub grinding gear trying to level. I pushed my chair back from the desk and stood. I walked forwards, forcing the desk to explode as I went through it and then reassemble behind me. My best friend would be here soon, and then we'd walk to the booth together.

Like magic, a ding sounded. Not at my front door, I'd set it to ding the entire zone in case I was ever running through the crystal maze, or practicing in the firing range I'd set up. Still, for my own fun, I walked to the front door, mentally granted Daniel entry to my zone, and opened the door.

'Done?' he asked, popping in to my home zone.

'Of course. You?'

'For hours. I just figured I'd give you more time to waste.'

'I *do* like wasting time, so good call. Need anything?'

'All ready.' He peered inside my house. 'You?'

I turned to look at the place I'd called home for the past eight years. I felt nothing but excitement for getting to this point of life. I'd been ready to give all this up years ago. My home zone, that is. I wasn't so sure about giving up Daniel. Somehow, we'd fallen into our roles without thinking about it. At age nine, some kid shoved him, and something inside me stopped working. You know, that part that keeps you out of fights and lets you live a normal, calm life. The next thing I knew, I'd charged in and shoved the kid back, helping Daniel to his feet. A second later, it turned out Daniel was pretty good with his words and managed to stop three other boys beating me up.

He stopped bad things from happening, but if they did happen, I was there for him. A tank and his crowd control.

'Yeah. Let's go.'

I opened up the context menu and chose the next zone I wanted to port to. Hmm, I couldn't see "Booth".

Daniel waited silently for a few seconds before seeing my blank expression. 'Forget to patch?'

I rolled my eyes. 'Yeah, sorry. Bit nervous I guess. Hold on.'

Using the menu, I pulled out to the main interface, suddenly seeing the whole of my home zone from a bird's eye view as the global network overlaid news stories and interesting facts on my UI. Hah, there was even a blinking icon telling me I needed to install a patch. Great job, me.

A small install started downloading to my VR suite. 17 terabytes. It was done in five seconds, and that was it. I was officially ready to start the rest of my life.

I dropped back down into my avatar and opened the zone selection menu. "Booth" was there. I joined as a party and Daniel accepted.

A fun thing about HOPE is the way it waits to load until you blink. I forced my eyes open and took a final look at my home. I was happy to leave. Then I blinked, and a few hundred people were stood next to me, the chat channels going crazy and exploding in nonsense.

Everyone here was either my age, or four years older and had just finished their advanced education. There would be thousands of other "Booth" zones just like this, all housing the next generation of new players. This was a temporary zone, created solely for this purpose. Just like the home zone, it was a flat sandbox – with god powers turned off unfortunately – with a blank, blue skybox. Helper AI bots, similar to those found in schools, and able to be summoned into home zones, were dotted around.

A new icon appeared in my HUD, a small running man. I checked it.

Queue: 805/998

'Hey,' Daniel said. 'Let's see if the bot says anything new.'

I nodded and we walked to the nearest bot. This bot was a standard helper, dark blue with a bright blue grid over top. I looked at it and opened the context menu, selecting "Talk".

A list of options appeared:

Where Am I?

What Do I Do Now?

What Is “Armies of Tulgatha”?

What Is “Galaxy At War”?

‘Just the standard,’ I confirmed.

Despite everyone spending most of our lives in HOPE, the creators spent a lot of effort keeping the adult games separate from the education mode. Only the most basic scraps of information were drip fed to us kids. The two games, Armies of Tulgatha and Galaxy At War, were essentially the same – just a gigantic reskin, one being fantasy and the other being sci-fi. In both, you picked a race and a class. The core gameplay was lifted from MMORPGs of old with an emphasis on survival, but there were MOBA and RTS modules that could be played along the way. We knew the races we could pick for each game, and the classes, and we knew bits of random information that the HOPE team had included in education-approved trailers, but that was it. They kept how the games actually played entirely to themselves. It was a computer engine, so stats and numbers had to make up the world, but they hid those from the player whenever possible, or gave them in simple terms.

And that was it. “Booth” was a holding zone as people chose the game they preferred and created their character.

Daniel nodded. ‘Figured as much. You still set on Armies?’

‘Definitely. You on Galaxies?’

‘I don’t get how you can turn down the idea of mowing down alien hordes with a laser chaingun, or order world-destroying airstrikes.’

We’d had this argument dozens of times. We loved and irritated each other like brothers, and we were the only real family the other had, but this was the rest of our lives we were talking about. We both had to do what we thought was right for ourselves. It hurt, but we knew it was coming. No time for regrets now.

‘Nah. We’re living in a computer world already. I’ve got all the sci-fi I need. I can go out and buy a gun, and frankly I wouldn’t be surprised if there were aliens I could shoot in one of the ocean dump sites. But magic? Giant warriors? Secret portals, taverns, and guilds? Definitely can’t get that.’

Daniel rolled his eyes. 'Oh well. I'm sure they'll implement some sort of cross-game thing soon. I'll send you a minigun or three to help you level.'

'Thanks. I'll send you a fireball that fits in your hand but explodes with the power of a volcano when it hits.'

I checked my place in the queue.

'Hey, I'm going to evac quickly. If I'm not back in time... it's been good.' I threw him my best "I'm never going to see you again" grin, and tried to hide whatever it was I suddenly felt in my chest.

'I'm telling you, cross-game is coming.' He punched my arm, which I didn't feel because it wasn't really me, of course. 'See you soon, man.'

My vision launched into the air and took up the bird's eye view. I didn't want to logout as I'd lose my place in the queue, so I focused on the button next to the log out. "Autonomy".

My vision stayed as it was, but there was a slight border around the screen now. I could feel my body. The pod, realising I was getting out, began the evac process. The receptors loosened, then pulled away from my arms, chest, and legs. They were small electrical pads that pulsed, keeping the muscles exercised. Who cares, right? I agree, until now, they'd been useless, just making getting in and out of my pod take longer. It wasn't like I wanted to do anything in the real world, so who cared if I could sprint a mile or whatever my exercise regime was set to. But once I loaded into the game, the safety controls would unlock, and they would simulate pain. How awesome was that! When Daniel had punched me in the Booth just now, I'd felt nothing. If he did it ten minutes later, in the game, I'd *feel* it. Amazing!

Finally, the screen retracted, pulling itself back into the roof of the pod. I slid my legs to the side and felt the floor beneath me. As always, it was comfortably warm – living on the 162nd floor and collecting all the heat from the HOPE pods below meant that heating wasn't an issue for me.

My home zone was five metres square, and had everything I needed to live. I'd been outside twice in the last eight years. Along one side was a kitchen, but I'd never used it. Why bother when I have government supps? That was what I came out for now in fact, to swap the canisters over so it wouldn't interrupt me for another month.

The lights turned on slowly, exposing the white room. It was featureless, and clean. I loved dirt and grime in the game, but not in real life. I'd heard horror stories of mold colonising an entire room and suffocating a player because he didn't keep his home zone clean.

My knees cracked as I moved. The receptor pads kept my muscles in shape, but there was no cure for a lifetime of unmoved joints. At the far wall, I pushed a button, opening a hatch. Supps were delivered straight to your home zone, so no need to leave. It was a large, black plastic tub with a feed port in the bottom. I'd made the mistake of opening one up once and looking inside. Supps were everything you needed to live, but it turned out that living wasn't pretty. I hadn't looked again.

I swapped the canisters, putting the used one back in the delivery hatch, and set myself back in my pod. It was only then I realised I'd forgotten to take my receptor gloves off. Oh well, just made it quicker to get back in.

The pads reapplied themselves to my body, and the screen lowered itself into position. There was a small electrical shock as the sides of the screen connected with the ports at my temples.

I exited the menu and zoomed back into my own eyes.

Chapter 2

Character Creation

I was on my own in a small space, with two doors in front of me. On the right, the door was wooden, surrounded by lit torches and glowing runes. On the left were sliding metal doors with hazard stripes and flickering lights.

Obviously, I turned to my right and focused on the door. No context menu came up. Huh, that was odd. I quickly walked to the metal door and checked that. No menu either.

Was it bugged?

A system message rang through my head and in the chat channel. "Hello Quentin. Welcome to a new way of living. Now that you're sixteen, you don't need menus any more. Everything a menu allowed you to do, you can now do manually. The menu still exists, but we've disabled it for this part of your new life."

What an oddly calming and polite message. Although most details of HOPE were blocked before sixteen, I knew all about previous games from the turn of the millennium up until the cold war. It made sense that they'd come up with some new ways of doing things. No menus. I want the door to open, so I just... push the door?

I pressed my hand against the wooden door, and for the first time I felt the texture of the wood against my hand, it's slight dampness, the weight straining against my arm as I pushed against it. Beautiful.

Beyond the door were a set of stairs that led into blackness. I started down, and after a few steps looked behind. The door was gone, and I was in a spotlight. I thought this might be a loading screen, so I kept on walking.

“We hope you liked that feeling, Quentin. You can feel everything now, so take your time on these stairs. Not to worry though, certain sensations are player controlled. You can set the threshold on pain and stamina. Try this now.”

A transparent box appeared in my vision with two sliders. One for pain, one for stamina. Experimentally, I reached out and tried to grab the top slider, but my hand went through it. Okay, so this was still a menu. I focused on the slider and moved it down. When I released it, I felt a slight buzz run through my body. It wasn't uncomfortable, but enough to let me know if a monster was hitting me. Perfect.

I tried the second slider, again moving it down the scale a bit. This time, when I released it, a wave of tiredness hit me, and my legs didn't want to work. I had to stop and catch my breath.

'Hell no,' I muttered between pants.

I took that slider all the way to the bottom, then moved it up a single notch. Like magic, my muscles were back to fighting fit. No way I wanted that feeling every time I sprinted for too long.

“Great work, Quentin. Now let's pick a character. You can answer some questions and we'll recommend one for you, or you can pick for yourself. Keep in mind, you won't have to select our recommendation even if you choose to answer the questions.”

The stairs kept winding downwards, but no menu appeared this time.

'Umm, questions,' I said aloud, before quickly adding, 'Please.' My edu-bots didn't raise a rude player, that's for sure.

“You've just been hired for a job with the HOPE content creation team. What have you been hired to create?”

A: Background material.

B: Fixing common bugs.

C: Creating new quests.”

Oh, jeez. The real question was, did I answer this truthfully, or did I answer this how I thought the computer was going to mark me so that I could try and steer it towards the class I wanted? Also, did I answer it as myself, or as the person I wanted to be?

This was the start of my new life, so I'd answer it all as the person I wanted to be. I wasn't exactly sure who that was, but I'd have to figure that out over the next few questions, I guess.

So this question boiled down to, living in the past, living in the present, or living in the future. The past holds nothing of worth, so definitely not A. Although, you have to know where you've come from to know where you're going.

This wasn't going to be easy, as I had similar answers and counter-answers for the other two responses. Living in the present is the best answer, surely, but fixing bugs sounds incredibly boring and tedious. Looking forwards to the future means you're not happy with what you have, but I'd been looking forward to starting this game for the past few years.

That was the old me, not happy with what they had, always wanting more. That wasn't the new me. But I still didn't know who the new me was, so I'd answer as the old me for now.

'C.'

“The screen on your VR habitat has cracked. What do you do?”

A: Attempt to fix it yourself to minimise ingame downtime.

B: Follow procedure, and stop playing until you receive a replacement unit.

C: Take it as a sign, and stop playing. Explore your local neighbourhood.”

This was a much easier question.

'A.'

“What have you longed for the most in your life?”

A: Money.

B: Power.

C: Parents.”

Unsurprisingly the game had access to my records and knew I was an orphan. The traditional way of becoming an orphan these days was for your parents to give you up to the state because looking after a kid requires too much time spent in real life. We were an epidemic. 72% of children born since a year after HOPE was launched have been orphans. With so many orphans, why did the government keep us? Because people just weren't doing it any more. Population decline. It was a real disaster that was about to hit the world population, or so my edu-bot teachers drilled into me. This was also one of the few rules we'd been taught about character creation – no sex changes, because we needed to repopulate. All this led to governments doing whatever they could to keep these orphans alive. That's why I had quality housing in a location near the root server, all government subsidised. I'd never felt for the lack of parents if I'm honest, and the government kept me happy and I'd never needed money. But power? I'd never had that.

'B.'

“You see a fight break out between a big shopkeeper and a young boy. What do you do?”

A: Join in and help the shopkeeper.

B: Join in and help the boy.

C: Ignore it and leave the shop before you get pulled in to the trouble.

D: Steal something while the shopkeeper is too busy to notice.”

Ooh, okay, now we get to the real questions. A is obviously if I wanted to fight for the letter of the law. B is for justice regardless of the rules. C is what I would have done in real life as old me, so definitely not that. D is if I want to be evil. Hmm, is new me evil? New me could be. Certainly I don't feel like the letter of the law is for me. That leaves the only logical choice. Fight for the little guy.

'B'

“The shopkeeper you have put out of business by aiding a ring of thieves to steal his livelihood has turned to banditry. One day, as you are travelling between towns, he assaults you. Do you...

A: Take pity on the poor soul, mainly fuelled by your own guilt, and hand over enough to keep him well fed, clothed, and in a warm room for a few nights.

B: No mercy. Anyone that attacks you must learn their place, which in this case, is on the ground in a pool of their own blood.

C: Try and talk to the man and rationalise with him. Discuss his life choices, and set him on the path to good.

D: You don't need to do anything: the local woodland creatures come to your aid, and the former shopkeeper will sustain the local ecosystem for some time to come.”

Oh jeez. This must be the “choices have consequences” part of the tutorial. I pity the guy for losing his livelihood, but I wouldn't just hand over all my gold, so A is out. B seems like a huge over-reaction for anyone, let alone new me. C sounds good – perhaps I'm a silver tongued man of

the world, relying on his wits instead of his sword. D definitely isn't me, but at least I know that druids are a class in the game now.

'C.'

"Final question, Quentin. Your attempt to talk to the brigand, whose life you ruined, failed. As you lie on the forest floor, seconds from death, what have your thoughts turned to?"

A: The beauty of life and how you wish you could have made more of it.

B: How much swords hurt, and your wish he could have made it a clean death.

C: Your sudden realisation that leaving shopkeepers to their own business is a sound idea.

D: Your hope that the shopkeeper was a mere swordsman, and wouldn't be resurrecting you as a fiendish undead creature."

I'll admit, that took an unexpected turn. They're really nailing home the consequences thing. Making more of life? Ehh, I'm sure I'd be resurrected soon, so no big deal. Although, I didn't want to be a bloated disease-carrying zombie, but that wouldn't be my first thought. Leaving the shopkeeper to his own business was old me, so I can't say that despite it clearly being the smart choice. To be honest, I don't think I'd be wishing to die quicker either. Once I'd thought about it for a bit, there was only one choice.

'A.'

"Good job, Quentin. There is one final piece to your puzzle that we need before we can give you your class recommendation. Don't think, just do."

Suddenly the stairs came to an end, and I was in a small cave, lit on two sides by burning braziers. Two people stood in each pool of light. In both, one was chained to the wall, and one was stood over them, headsman's axe at the top of its swing, about to be brought down, decapitating the victim. To my left was the young thief that I'd decided to help. To the right was the shopkeeper. Twenty steps between me and either of the braziers, and nothing but blackness between. Immediately in front of me was a weapon rack. I had the choice of a dagger, a sword and shield, a wooden staff, or a bow.

Which one would suit me best? Who was new me? A warrior that protected those around him? I traced my hand over the proud shield. No, I'd never been much for brute strength. The bow? There was an appeal to it, but in this situation, I was pretty sure I'd miss. Same goes for the staff – I was sure it was magical, but I didn't know how I could activate it, and I didn't have time to figure it out. Dagger it was. I picked up the dagger.

“Go.”

I looked around and the axes began falling. Damn it, I'd spent so much time thinking of which weapon to choose, I hadn't thought of who to save. Without thinking, I ran toward the shopkeeper. Two strides later, I was sure I wouldn't make it in time. Another stride, and I pulled back my arm, ready to throw the dagger. A terrible idea, but I had no choice. On my sixth stride into the black between the light, my foot didn't land. Instead of ground, I felt nothing but air. I fell, and the pain response activated, shaking my real life body. Daggers, stupid choice.

The camera slowly pulled upwards, away from my body, allowing me to see the cave in muted greys. Well how about that. On all sides of the unseeable darkness, after a few steps, the ground was replaced by spike pits. I fell for it.

Once I hit the roof of the cave, the scene in front of me changed with a blink. It was still muted greys, but I was in a forest, and the wind whipped around me, blowing the trees into a frenzy, and buffeting me back. I had to brace myself against the gale.

“Your test is complete. We have decided that there are several classes well suited to your personality, but the optimum match would be: Hunter.”

A man in greens and browns appeared in front of me, his colour showing through the grey as I focused on him. By his side was a fierce looking dire wolf that rose above the hunter’s shoulders. Their take on dire wolves was something to be admired as blood dripped from its mouth after a fresh kill. The hunter himself looked lithe and fast, a feral energy in him to match the wolf. His bow was a thing of beauty, the carved runes glowing with greens and blues. Could this be me? I pushed through the dead wind to get a closer look. Up close, the hunter pulled down his face mask and stared at me. He had thick stubble and piercing green eyes. The wolf snarled at me, and the hunter held up a hand to calm the beast.

Was this me? Parts of it appealed, but... nature? I’d never even seen a tree in real life. I lived in a country that had replaced all trees with air scrubbers because they were more efficient and left more room for HOPE housing. Maybe that’s what I needed. A complete change. And yet...

‘What else have you got for me?’ I called out to the voice.

The scene around me changed in a blink. The wind remained, still forcing me back. I realised for the first time that it wasn’t pushing me back, but pulling. The death wind was trying to pull me to somewhere. I was surrounded by rock in a barren, dark landscape. In the background was a mountain. No, a volcano. Streams of glowing lava poured from it. In front of me stood a man garbed in a full length, dark purple robe that was open at the front and had tattered ends. His right arm was encased in black plate armour with silver trim. The same armour covered his right leg, but apart from these two limbs and his cloak, he wore simple cloth trousers, and had a bare chest. Bare from clothes or armour, at least. He was adorned with scars and tattoos.

“Warlock”

The warlock looked at me, his black hair blowing in the death wind. His eyes were black orbs. He held out his gauntleted hand, and a purple blob floated above it. I'd call it an orb, but it wasn't perfectly formed. It was more organic than that, and it flickered like fire, but also boiled like liquid. It was something that didn't exist in the real world.

The purple ball suddenly stretched itself to the ground, and began pooling. I knew from previous old-time games that every dev treated warlocks differently. In some games, they were magical tanks, in others they were withered casters, and in others still, they could summon the most powerful creatures and cast the most overpowered bullshit damage over time spells, focusing on removing enemy abilities and killing them slowly. A debuffer, a tank, dps, they could be anything. What were they here?

The purple energy started to coalesce into a solid shape. It was a giant four legged beast of dark purple, with red lightning crackling through its being.

I didn't know if I strongly preferred this aesthetic over a holy warrior shimmering in light, but this guy was, most definitely, awesome. I didn't know how this class became my second option from the questions I was given, but I wasn't complaining.

I nodded to myself. 'I'm a warlock.'

The wind stopped pulling at me. Colour leaked back into the world, and suddenly the grey, barren stoneland was filled with all shades of greys and browns, and the sky above was a menacing red with black clouds and purple power. Yeah, okay, that was more like it. I could get into this.

The demon creature had vanished along with the wind, and the man stood still, looking straight ahead. He'd completely changed. He no longer had hair or scars or tattoos, or any distinguishing features, and he now wore clothes that barely kept his modesty.

Multiple iterations of this generic warlock stretched out until there were twenty four standing side by side in front of me. Then all but the original shifted from being human to being *other*. The ground in front of each one glowed in purple runes that seemed to melt the rock, carving words at their feet. The names of the races. They had standard ones like Elf, Dwarf, Orc, Giant. They also had some of the rarer ones like Dragonkin, Elemental, and Tigerman as playable races. But they had one race that I hadn't seen in a fantasy MMORPG before. It matched the Giant race in size, easily double a

standard human height. It looked like a cross between an insect and a lizard. It had scaled, chitinous plates on its back, head, legs, and arms, but an exposed belly. It had a lizard's tail with a scything blade on the end, and acidic drool dripped from its mandibles. Its six eyes looked menacing and evil, giving it a greater field of view than any of the other races.

I immediately dismissed the alien creature. Surely it was more suited for the sci-fi game than fantasy. It must have been their cross-over race between the two games. The giant was also out along with the dragonkin, dwarf, and orc. The elemental looked interesting – it was human height but instead of legs, it floated like a genie. I considered the Tigerman and the Dragonkin – apparently called a “Steggar” – because I liked anthropomorphic animals, what can I say. But ultimately, no, it wasn't something to spend the rest of my life in. So, elf or human? I scratched at my chin for a moment. It had been the human version of the warlock that had inspired me, and I liked the look of the slightly broader human, giving the warlock a sense of weight to go with his deadly magic, and suit his armoured limbs.

I focused on the original human model, and selected him. The other races disappeared, and as I inspected this generic looking warlock a context menu popped up, giving me a ridiculous amount of options. Okay, character appearance, that made sense. Did I want him to look like me? He was my avatar, yes, but it wasn't like real life mattered. Yet, there was part of me that wanted to play that power fantasy. To play myself. All right, he'd be me. With a few enhancements, of course.

“The warlock is a difficult class to master, with many paths to follow. He focuses on his demonic powers, but whether you apply them to summoned allies, buffing yourself, or corrupting your enemies is up to you. But be warned, to reach your true potential, sacrifices *will* be made. Are you ready to sacrifice yourself in the pursuit of power?”

Cool spiel. I guess warlocks had a mechanic where using your most damaging spells reduces your health. I'd have to make friends with a healer. ‘Yeah, sure.’

Back to the warlock, I picked the option that loaded my face onto the avatar. Good, that gave me a base to work with. I elongated the face just a touch, made the nose proud instead of cute, added some manly stubble, and made the hair shimmering black long enough to tie back in a ponytail. I made him slightly above average height, but then thought about it. Everyone would be making their avatar slightly above average height. So did I make him as tall as possible to stand out? No, everyone would be doing that too. All right, I made him ever so slightly below average height. Had to

stand out from the crowd somehow, even if you wouldn't be able to actually find me in a crowd any more. I changed the average and healthy body that had loaded in as mine to a slightly more bulked out version. The guy did have awesome armour to wear, so couldn't have him be a total weed, could I? I broadened the shoulders, increased the arm size a bit, and there, all good. I added abs, which I had to pay for as they were behind a paywall. It wasn't like my monthly stipend went towards anything else, and soon I'd be earning money in the game, so no problem. I also ever so slightly tweaked the size of some other *things*. Better safe than sorry.

I took a step back from my creation. My avatar. My new me. Yes, that felt right. As I examined him from a distance, a word appeared above his head. "Unnamed". I knew this part was coming. I knew I'd have to name myself, but I hadn't known what class or race I was going to be. Now I did. I was a human warlock, and that didn't help me pick a name *at all*. Did I go over the top with "DeathLord of Darkness"? Something more subtle but equally stupid "Damien Lucifer"? I didn't even know if I was evil. Could warlocks be good? Okay, forget alignment – nothing super dark and edgy.

Let's get into the mindset of a warlock. They summon creatures from the void. Purples and reds. Shadows, awesome armour, and tattered robes. Hmm, "Purple Armour Summon Man" didn't roll off the tongue.

Take all of that, and add it to *me*. Who am I? What do I want? I want... protection. No. I want *to* protect. I didn't know where that came from, but it rang true. My instinct had been to protect that young boy from the bigger shopkeeper. It made sense. Maybe the game had suggested Hunter first because I would have been protecting nature.

"Void Shield". No, that's lame, and probably the name of a skill. Be more realistic.

"Akama Severo". Akama being Japanese for demon, but also close to Acama which was the first emperor of the Aztecs, and Severo being an alteration on Servare, which means keeper or protector in Latin. So, I am the demon keeper, but also the first protector. Yes!

'Akama Severo.'

Chapter 3

Tutorial

“Name accepted. Welcome, Akama Severo, to Armies of Tulgatha. A survival MMORPG with arena and strategy elements. All your gold can be transferred to the real world with a single click of a button. Now, you can fund your lifestyle the way you want. Your next step is a guided tutorial, but after that, the lands of Tulgatha are yours for the conquering. Enjoy the game.”

I'll be honest, I really felt they hadn't updated the entry message in a long time. Money transfer and in-game work had been a major feature since two years post-launch. Oh well, what's the point in updating your entry message when you *know* everyone is going to play. The message could have been “Hey buddy, fuck you.” and people would not only still play, but they'd still *pay* for extra content with a smile on their face.

I blinked and the game world appeared before me. It was an idyllic, sunny day with leafy woods behind me, and green fields in front. Plumes of smoke rose from a village in the middle of the fields. It was a village in flames. Five or six small houses, and two larger ones, were on fire. I was lying on a dirt bank, watching the village burn. Had I done this?

I had a long, gnarled walking stick in one hand, and was wearing flowing white robes with a gleaming yellow breastplate. It wasn't exactly what I was expecting after the warlock I'd just created.

I wasn't saying I was evil, but I had definitely been... in a darker colour palette. Still, at least I didn't have any flint or tinder, so it couldn't have been me that started the fire. Wait, didn't I? I checked my pockets. Nope, nothing.

I saw a few people dash between two buildings. Then I saw a man chasing them. Or at least, I assumed that was why he ran after them with his sword held above his head. I started to get up. I don't know why, I knew I couldn't get there in time, and I was only one guy, but I had to do something!

A hand came down hard on my shoulder, and I jumped at the shock.

'Woah, calm down Severo,' the man said, chuckling. 'You're on edge. Don't worry, it's normal your first time.'

I turned around to face him, and saw three others behind him, all dressed in the same uniform. A gleaming yellow breastplate, with pristine white cloth covering them head to toe. Okay, we were in a group together. I didn't know what exactly – we could have been a cult? Cults always wore silly robes, so maybe we had turned to worshipping demons and that's how I become a warlock that wore all white?

'Uhh, yes. I mean no. It's fine. What's the plan?'

The man looked bemused by my response, but didn't say anything further on it. 'Stay focused, stay with us, and stay alert. Also, stay behind us! I'll tank whoever comes our way, and the three of you do all the damage you can.'

Hmm, this tutorial NPC just said he was going to "tank" something. Seemed a bit meta, but I rolled with it. I looked above the man's head, and when I focused, words appeared. His name and job. The same appeared for the other three.

'Okay, Koif. I'm ready.'

We were all members of the Pristine Guard. I didn't know what that was, but I guessed we were guards. We guarded stuff. This village, presumably, although obviously we hadn't done a great job so far.

I crawled down the bank towards the group and got to my feet. Koif took a shield from his back, and drew his sword. The other two had spears.

'Now, we don't have unlimited stamina, so we'll only sprint when it's life or death in combat. Until then, we'll stick to a gentle run. Let's go.'

Right, they definitely had to have some of their words swapped. Stamina, in combat, those weren't normal words. Maybe they were only breaking the immersion for the tutorial.

The three crested the hill and started a very reasonably paced jog towards the burning village. I looked behind us. A sparse forest that would provide just enough cover to make for a pleasant walk in this sun. I wondered if I could ignore what the tutorial clearly intended me to do, and run off. Then I remembered I didn't even know how to attack, so I followed the rest of the Pristine Guard.

We were running through fields of...

Koif held up his hand and crouched. The others followed suit, and so did I. We managed to get our heads just below the plants.

'Severo, you've already managed to see our nameplates, but discovery won't always be so easy.' He grabbed one of the surrounding plants and bent it to be in front of his face. 'If you focus on this, what do you see?'

Nameplates. Okay, there was definitely no mistaking that they were ignoring immersion and just teaching game mechanics. I focused on the plant and it began to, ever so slightly, glow. I'd selected the item. A word hung above it, but it was obscured. 'Umm, nothing. It's just a blurred line.'

'That's right.' Koif nodded. 'That is how everything will appear until you gain knowledge of the specific item. That can happen organically, or you can study. Let's try it now.'

I realised that this must be a dynamic tutorial. This was happening because I'd tried to pay attention to the fields we were running through. Awesome!

'Is now really a good time to start studying?'

The soldiers groaned, but Koif smiled patiently. 'We're going to try the organic knowledge first, if that's okay with you?'

'Oh, right. Yeah.'

Still holding the plant in front of himself, Koif said, 'Severo, this is wheat.'

The instant he said it, the blurred word resolved itself into "wheat". Neat.

'Some people would already know this, but presumably you didn't grow up on a farm. You probably have a city background. This won't have a huge effect on your gameplay, but it's something to keep in mind.'

I nodded. 'Okay, thanks.'

Letting the wheat spring back, Koif motioned for us all to continue.

We were running through fields of wheat. I was sure that if I wanted to I could be a farmer, so perhaps this kind of knowledge was in the game for a reason. Also, I'd be sure to steer clear of any hanging vines or mushrooms with blurry names as I wandered through forests. They'd only be a selectable item if they could help me or, more likely, hurt me.

When we were over halfway to the village, more villagers sprinted between buildings. Again, they were followed by the pillagers, only this time, we were spotted. Three of them turned to face us, and one ran off deeper into the village.

'We don't have a healer, so we need to be careful,' Koif said. 'I'll tank the two on the left, and you three take care of the third pillager before moving onto my targets.'

I wanted to ask how, but the pillagers had wasted no time hanging around, and were almost on top of us. Koif ran in, and a faint, white wisp of a line ran between his shield and two of the pillagers. He must have taunted them. The third one kept running towards the two spearmen and me.

On the one hand, I saw no reason that I should need to be up close to attack, but on the other hand, I still didn't know *how* to attack, so who knew? Not knowing the penalties for death, I let the two guys with sharp spears go first.

As the three pillagers hit our lines, everyone just kind of, stood at a respectable distance and hopped on the balls of their feet.

'Don't worry,' Koif said, 'combat will normally be a lot faster than this, but for our first fight, we're slowing it down. Death can be very punishing, so we don't want that to be your first experience. Your combat abilities will activate now. Check your HUD.'

I hadn't noticed a HUD until he said it, but sure enough, there was a very faint outline to my vision. Once I'd noticed it and thought about it, it became more opaque, and I could see that it was pretty sparse. There was no health, mana, energy, stamina, or anything like that. I had a compass, and six boxes along the bottom of my vision that were numbered one to six. One of them glowed a bright purple, and much like the rock on the character selection screen, the corruption etched away a symbol.

'If you want to do something normal, then you just do it. Try it now, run up to your pillager and hit it with your staff.'

I swapped my staff to a two handed grip instead of the old man walking stick pose I'd fallen into, and charged the pillager. One of the spearmen moved aside, presumably feeling the might of my furious charge, and I let loose a mighty swing. I hit him on the arm, and he let out a grunt of minor annoyance. A small number pinged away from his nameplate. "2".

'Good shot!' Koif shouted. 'Well, it was okay. Don't worry about it, you're not a frontline hitter anyway. Try something else.'

I was still standing next to the very actively shuffling, but not really doing anything, pillager. Not knowing exactly what Koif meant, I kicked the guy in the shin. Again, a small number flew away from his nameplate. "1". The pillager locked eyes with me, and he was clearly pissed off.

'Great job, Severo! You've done the most damage, so you gained aggro, nice. Mundane actions like swinging your weapon don't require a dedicated ability. This is a big advantage physical attackers have over spell casters. To cast even your most basic spell, you'll need to use an ability which takes

up one of your most valuable resources. Ability slots. You only have six slots, but you'll have dozens of abilities. It will require careful planning to decide what your preferred loadout is. You've just had your first ability unlocked. Focus on your ability to use it, and then aim carefully.'

I took a few steps back from the pillager and looked at the first ability. Shadowbolt. It didn't say anything other than the name. No idea of damage, cast time, anything. I used it, and my arms flung out, one to the side and one in front, and I felt my mouth move, unknown words spilling from it. A bolt of pure shadow that seemed to dim the bright sunshine around me grew in my rear hand, and a second later, jumped to my front hand and released itself, smashing into the house behind the pillagers.

'That's the stuff,' Koif said. 'Try again, but remember to aim.'

Fair critique, I felt. I used Shadowbolt again, and this time made sure that my front hand, which seemed to be there purely for aiming as the rear hand did the channelling, was pointed at the pillager.

Again, the shadows dimmed the light, formed in my hand, and then shot forth, but this time the bolt hit its mark. The Shadowbolt spread through the pillager, causing him to shake violently, and for the briefest of seconds, turned him a midnight black. Once the spell had dissipated, and the colour had returned to the pillager, there was a hole in his clothes where the bolt had hit. A number jumped from his nameplate. "36". That was a much more respectable number.

The pillager must have felt so too, as he promptly collapsed.

'Spearmen, come help me with these two,' Koif said. 'Severo, you should notice that your screen is flashing red.'

Sure enough, the edges of my screen had indeed begun to flash red. 'What does that mean? I didn't take any damage.'

'Red for danger, black for death. In Tulgatha, there are four things that differentiate a level one from a level one hundred. Stats, skills, gear, and abilities. Stats are your baseline – things like Strength and Mind. These basic stats dictate how well you can perform skills, and how much damage your abilities do. Gear adds protection and buffs to these numbers, which in turn means you can do more damage and take more swords to the face. We've covered abilities, and obviously the more variety

the better so you can prepare for any situation. Skills are things that come naturally to you, like perception, or stealth. Everyone can do these things, but some can do it a lot better than others, and they only level up with practice and repetition. Want to be the stealthiest rogue? Then you have to walk around a lot of people and not get noticed. Gear can boost stats, skills, and abilities. But let's focus on your perception skill right now. When you perceive an unseen threat, perhaps a trap or an incoming blow, your screen will pulse red. Look behind you.'

I spun around, and sure enough, there was a pillager right there, sword raised and about to come down on me. Koif's exposition was easily the most round about way of saying "look behind you!" that I'd ever heard.

Luckily, the fight was still paused, so his arm was stuck above his head.

'Find and use your second ability, and then brace yourself for a hit.'

A new rune appeared on my ability bar. Shadow Skin. I really hoped that I got an ability without the word shadow in it soon. I liked sticking to a theme as much as the next guy, but come on.

I cast the ability, and my hands did their autonomous thing in a slightly different position, and I muttered some words that in a different time and place would definitely have had me drowned as a witch. My vision darkened for a few seconds, and I could see shadow engulf my hands, crystallising, and then turning invisible.

The pillager sprung into action and his sword came down hard on my shoulder. The blade didn't bite into flesh, my screen didn't flash black, the pain feedback didn't activate. A wave of darkness rippled over my body, but that was it. Well, hey, spell armour. Nice.

Koif chimed in. 'There are different types of defensive abilities, but that one seems to be straight forward. Okay, let's finish these pillagers off.'

I cast a Shadowbolt, intending to one shot this sneaky guy, but in the middle of my cast, the pillager smacked my front hand out of position, and the cast stopped. Not just slowed down, but stopped. Damn. I tried to cast Shadowbolt again, and the pillager knocked my hands out of position, and then whacked me with his sword.

I didn't have any other abilities yet, and this pillager was just going to follow me if I ran. I was suddenly seeing the downsides to being a caster when you didn't have any friends to hold aggro.

Koif had said that mundane actions didn't require abilities, so what could I do? I swung at the pillager, and he jumped back to avoid my blow. I quickly tried to cast Shadowbolt again, but that single step back hadn't given me enough time. In fact, as the pillager had stepped in to knock my hand aside once more, he over stepped, and hit me hard enough to make me stagger to the side. These abilities and mundane actions weren't set in stone then. They had physics attached, and adding momentum to an ability increased its potency. Such a small and simple feature, but it made my brain click into gear. I had to imagine everything I saw with my eyes was real and not a game. I wanted this guy to get away from me, so with the entire world of possibilities at my fingertips, I would... push him.

It wasn't a skill or ability, it was just something I could do. I braced my staff in two hands, and lunged forwards at the pillager, shoving him back several steps. His arms flailed as he tried to keep his balance, and I wasted no time in Shadowbolting his head. The shove hadn't produced a damage number, but the Shadowbolt had. "32". Slightly less than last time. So there was an element of chance behind the damage system, which presumably meant critical hits were part of the game. Good to know.

By the time I'd finished with my stealthy guy, the others had already begun looting the bodies of their own quarry.

Koif came over to me. 'I hope you're not squeamish, Severo, because you're going to be spending a lot of time rifling through dead men's pockets. Let's take a look, shall we?'

Like an eager Australian wildlife presenter, Koif waved me down, excited that I was joining him in looking through the dead man's gear.

I selected the corpse and picked the "loot" option. A separate window opened, showing his containers. This guy had "pockets" and a "small battered pouch". Both had a grid next to them that I assumed indicated how much each could hold. The game was pretty intuitive once you accepted a few basic things and just went with it.

'You'll see that the grids start blank,' Koif began. 'That's because you don't know what's in them yet, obviously. Select one of the containers on the menu, and then "search".'

I did as he said, and my hands started searching the body without my having to do anything. The developers had opted for an interesting mix between complete immersiveness and automating the gameplay.

Koif continued talking as I looted. 'If you're a purist, you can disable these menus, but that's your choice once the tutorial is over. Now let's talk about gear. Gear is the best way of powering up. There are no level limits, so in theory a level one player could equip the best gear in the game, and he'd be able to beat a poorly geared high level player. You'll have to find out the nuances on your own, but just remember this: gear is good.'

A new player can beat a high level one? Seems weird and unbalanced, but okay. I'd finished looting by now, but the pillager only had three coins of an unknown currency in his pockets, and a damp bandage in his small battered pouch.

Koif and I joined the spearmen, and we advanced up to the house that the group of pillagers had emerged from.

'Another thing to know is that all quests are free form and hidden.' Koif kept a close eye on how things were unfolding in the village square, but my view was only the back of a spearman. A much more sensible place, yes, but also far less interesting. 'You will earn bonuses by doing what you want to do, but you will also earn negative effects from the logical consequences. Choosing to defend this village will give us a bonus to reputation with a certain faction, but if these pillagers are aligned with another faction, then we will lose reputation with them. Now let's go grind that rep and try a full speed fight.'

Koif took off round the corner, and the spearmen followed without hesitation. I braced myself. No pausing during combat now. I cast Shadow Skin, and charged. As soon as I'd rounded the corner I saw the full scale of what was happening. The village square held six pillagers surrounding a large group of villagers, most of whom were on their knees, shaking with fear. Those that weren't were lying face down in the mud – a fate they would all soon share, as the biggest pillager there swung his curved blade down onto the next innocent villager.

Koif and the spearmen were almost upon the pillagers, leaving me unseen. I knew that attacking an unengaged enemy would pull aggro to me, so I'd focus on Koif's targets, burst them down with Shadowbolt, and stay out of harm's way. If the spearmen did the same, then we could probably take care of this and get some good experience from saving the villagers. I assumed that was a quest, but who knew? Maybe this game didn't reward you for saving people.

The soft white line ran between Koif and the first three pillagers that moved to meet his charge. The spearmen began attacking, and now that the combat was at full speed, I saw just how lethal it was. One of the spearmen caught an unlucky blow on the way in and fell from the single hit. It hadn't even been aimed at him, but it deflected off Koif's shield, and slit the man's throat. I needed to find out just how durable my Shadow Skin was, because without it I was the definition of fragile.

With no time to waste, I cast a Shadowbolt and let it fly towards the enemy. It missed, blowing a hole in the wall of a house on the other side of the square. Right, aiming. This time I focused on where the pillager I wanted to hit was standing instead of what I was casting, and fired again. The hit landed, and the pillager fell with a shriek of pain, the actual damage number lost in the confusion of battle. The spearman and Koif had finished off the other two, and we were preparing for the next wave. Four pillagers charged, and Koif engaged. I was about to line up another killing blow, but a voice from behind made me jump.

Chapter 4

Sidequest

'Excuse me, sir.' I whirled to see a young girl, barely taller than my waist, tugging on my white robes and pointing towards a building that was only lightly smoldering instead of actually being on fire.

'Can you help mummy?'

'In a minute, got some killing to do.' I turned back to the action.

'But sir, she won't last long without your help.'

I weighed things up in my mind. Koif seemed to have things under control and could hold these guys off while I did a quick side quest. Also, I had to admit, the girl was really working the helpless puppy dog angle.

'I'll help you. Take me to her.'

The girl dashed the few metres to the small house, and pointed inside. I followed quickly, wanting to help the girl, but also not wanting to let Koif down. I stepped inside, and saw what must have been the little girl's mother. She was slumped in the far corner of the single room house, hand clutching her leg.

'The Pristine Guard?' the mother asked, hope rising in her voice. 'I thought I was done for, but you've come to save me!'

'Umm, yeah, that's what we do. How can I help, madam?'

'One of those brutes cut my leg, and I can't walk, not even to escape this burning house.'

'Okay, I'll carry you outside to make sure you're safe for now, finish liberating the village, then tend to your wounds. Sound good?'

The woman looked a bit perturbed at my simple statement of facts. 'But sir, I'm not sure I can be moved. Do you not have a healer?'

We did not have a healer, that much I knew. I definitely didn't want to fail this quest by having the woman bleed out if I moved her, or burn to death if I left her.

'Oh! Yes, I just picked up a bandage. I can wrap your wound, then move you. Okay?'

She nodded her assent. 'I believe that will work, sir.'

I moved over to her and inspected her leg. She was right, had I moved her, she wouldn't have lasted long. She really undersold the wound when she said "Those brutes cut my leg". It was practically hanging off at the thigh, and she would be dead in a minute. Luckily for me, I had the option to apply the bandage to the wound, as I had no idea how to actually treat something this severe. My hands began their work, tightening the bandage as a tourniquet. The leg was already lost, so I tightened it as much as I could. After I was finished, I tried to hide my worry from the woman's face.

'Don't worry,' she whispered. 'I know, but don't tell the little one.'

I looked back at the little girl, standing shyly behind a chair. 'No, of course.'

With what little I could do done, I picked the woman up and carried her out of the room, resting her between two buildings, hopefully safe from any spreading flames. The little girl stood by her, confused and trying awfully hard to hold back tears. The movement had worn the woman out, and she was breathing heavily, unable to speak.

To the side of my vision, a blue number appeared. "20". It then rolled up until it stopped on "50".

The woman had just enough breath left to mutter, 'That's your experience. Well done, sir.' Then she passed out.

I must have missed the first times I'd received experience. Learning new things and killing pillagers, had provided minimal exp, but completing his quest had over doubled everything I did before. Okay, quest completion is the key to levelling. Good to know.

I looked at the small child and didn't know what to do. 'Stay here. I'll come back for you, okay?'

She nodded between sniffles and stroking her mother's hair.

I turned, wanting to get back to the fight, a sudden anger bubbling forth from me at what these enemies had done. I'd make them pay.

Uh oh. Apparently, Koif wasn't quite as indestructible as I'd thought, as he was now on his knees, the pillager boss' wicked sword against his throat. 'Severo, where were you? You left us in the heat of battle!'

The pillager boss punched Koif in the side of the head and called out across the square. 'This is what the Pristine Guard has come to, eh?'

People around here seemed to have an awfully high regard for this organisation I was a part of, yet it was my first day in the game. I sized up the boss. He was easily a head taller than any other pillager I'd seen so far, and wore leather armour instead of ragged cloth.

So, what, he'd take two Shadowbolts to kill? I was pretty sure I could get a few off before he could close the distance between us, even if I missed one or two. But, even if a single Shadowbolt would kill him, I wouldn't be quick enough to save Koif. Yeah, he was just an NPC, but the AI they'd given him was great. I'm not saying we'd be best friends, but at the same time, I didn't want him to die. What else could I do?

'You're right. This is what the Pristine Guard has become. It only took four of us to liberate this village. Four against twelve. So, are you worth three of your men?'

The boss laughed. 'Easily! These maggots were nothing. Recruits cutting their teeth. It took four of you, but I could have done it single handedly!'

I was really hoping that was a bluff, because otherwise I was about to be real dead. 'Don't worry, I wouldn't expect scum like you to tell the truth. But it doesn't matter. I'll give you this one chance. Hurt no one else, and I'll let you leave with your life.'

'Are you stupid? I'm not afraid of one Pristine Guard.'

I began walking towards the boss, slowly closing the gulf between us. 'You need to learn to count. I don't see a single Pristine Guard.'

'This one's about to be dead, but sure, you can count him if you want to, fool.'

'So narrow minded. Look around you. Your men are dead. It's not me against you.' I pointed to the group of still cowering villagers. 'It's you against the entire village.'

The boss' facade cracked for a moment as he did the mental gymnastics to see if he could kill everyone.

'These weaklings?' He put his mean face back on. 'Ha! Look at them, they won't even stand up to run away and save themselves, but you think they will fight for you?'

I didn't know if there was a bluff skill in this game, or a charisma statistic, but right now, I really hoped I was reading the situation right. I was channeling my inner Daniel from that first day we'd met and he'd saved me with nothing but words. 'For me? Of course not. But for themselves? For their families? For their homes? How could they not? Everyone, listen to me!' This was either going to end in a lot of laughs in the tavern tonight, or me finding out how dying in the game feels. Oh, and a lot of awkwardness right before that death. 'Every man, woman, and child that stands and fights by my side *is* a member of the Pristine Guard. We're not a uniform, we're an ideal, and you can be that ideal. So stand. Stand and fight and liberate yourselves from oppression!'

And holy shit they fell for it. I must have rolled a crit, because the villagers changed from the scared mass of patheticness they had been, all the way to picking up stones or even clumps of mud, ready to do battle. All in the time it had taken me to improv that speech. I didn't even know what the Pristine Guard were. Total guess. So damn awesome!

The boss took a step back, dragging Koif with him, but he'd made a mistake. He'd pointed his sword at the villagers, threatening them back into submission. 'Back on your knees, dogs!'

I pointed at him with my right hand, taking careful aim. He didn't see the darkness of Shadowbolt jumping between my hands, and he didn't see it flying towards him. He did, however, feel it. As Shadowbolt slammed into his head, I saw the number bounce away from the fallen boss. "56". My first crit. Glorious.

To my surprise, he wasn't dead. He managed to prop himself up on an elbow and look at me. He managed to mouth a silent curse before the mob of villagers descended upon him. A few seconds later, and a blue number appeared to the side of my vision. Good to know I didn't need to get the last hit to count the kill as mine.

Koif scrambled away from the mob of villagers and I made my way over to him.

'Are you okay?'

He got to his feet, rubbing his neck. 'I am. Somehow. Most heroes don't save me.'

Okay, he'd broken character so many times, I had to see how much I could push it. How would the AI hold up?

'Don't save you?'

He nodded. 'Don't get me wrong, most heroes also actually stay with me in the fight. That was a terrible decision, by the way. But yes, once the boss has me, I rarely survive.'

'So, this happens to you a lot?'

'Of course. I'm the tutorial NPC.'

'Aaaand you know what an NPC is? And a tutorial? And I'm guessing that you respawn?'

He turned away from me for a moment, but I was pretty sure he was rolling his eyes. 'Yes. I'm a non-player character. You're a player. A real person, with a life outside this game. I'm guiding you through this tutorial so that you don't screw up and instantly lose all your valuables when you get set loose upon Tulgatha.' He held up a hand to stop my next question. 'Yes, all of the NPCs know you're a player, this isn't limited to some fourth wall breaking in the tutorial. We are real AI that change and evolve over time. NPCs take a week to respawn, and there can be permanent changes depending on how we die, but usually we're fine. Mobs like the pillagers you just killed have variable respawn timers based on their location and power. Players respawn... well, you'll see. Speaking of which, my apologies.'

'That all seems really weird. I mean, it's hardly immersive if you all know... everything you just said. And apologies for what?'

'Actually, it's even more immersive, you'll see. Total separation of the real world and Tulgatha led to a lot of issues. So in the first major content patch, they integrated the two. That had its own issues, but nothing's perfect.'

A voice from behind me, soft and high-pitched. 'Are you done, Captain?'

Koif waved his hand, signalling for the newcomer to proceed. I turned to see who it was. The little girl whose mother I'd just saved.

I bent down a little to get closer to her eye level and spoke softly. 'Hello. Don't worry, I didn't forget my promise about returning for you. Are you okay?'

She glanced at Koif before answering me. 'You have proven lucky, warlock. Most find saving my mother a sacrifice, and lose the good Captain in the boss battle. You've come out on top. Although, it does leave you with an awkward choice to make.'

I was confused as all hell. 'Umm, what's the choice?'

'Me or the Captain.'

'Why would that be a choice? Koif doesn't want to hurt you.'

'Actually, Severo, I do. The little imp is right. It's me or her.' Koif stood next to the little girl, both of them facing me. 'She's evil. Everything the Pristine Guard stands against.'

'I'm not evil. I harness our enemy's power against them. I fight fire with fire. As should any warlock worth his salt.'

'She would kill innocents if they got in her way. The people need to be protected from the what she fights, and from her. She is blind to her own corruption, and we must put her down like the dog that she is.'

'If a few must sacrifice themselves for the good of the many, then yes, I'll make that choice, and I'll stand by what I'm forced to do.'

I held my hands up. 'Woah, woah. Both of you just calm down.'

So, the little girl was far more than she appeared to be. Koif seemed on the level. Yet he was advocating killing this little girl. A little girl that I'd just saved. However, the little girl did, now, seem a touch insane.

'We don't have all day,' the girl said. 'Side with one of us, and let's get out of this damned village.'

'I can't... I don't know enough to make this decision. What do you stand for? What are your goals? I don't really know.'

Koif drew his sword. 'Then go with your instinct. I can tell you have a pure heart, Severo. Join me and wipe this stain from the world.'

'I'm not killing a little girl, Koif, and I won't let you hurt her either.'

A little blue number rolled up in the side of my vision. I'd received experience. For completing a quest. With those words, I'd made my choice, and I hadn't even realised it.

'It was inevitable. *This* is what I apologised for,' Koif dashed forward, knocking me down with his shield, shattering my Shadow Skin, leaving me defenceless. I didn't even have time to think about what to do before Koif's sword drove into my skull, turning my vision black.

Chapter 5

I Thought The Tutorial Was Over

The world was black and white. The dead wind pulled me towards something unknown. Unknown, but feared. I pushed against the constant tug, unsure where I was struggling towards. It was dark, my vision hardly working – I could have been in a vast, sprawling desert, or a dense forest. Future footsteps glowed in front of me, the only thing I could really see, the only thing breaking from the monochrome death. I didn't have to follow them. I could let the wind take me. But the glow was the glow of life. I pressed onward until I came upon two small dwellings, barely more than holes in the ground. My future steps took me to the one on the right. I walked through the door – not needing to open it – and saw my body, rimed in the same life-yellow glow as the feet that had brought me here.

The little girl was curled up on the floor on the other side of the room – admittedly only a metre away, but that was as far as she could be, none the less.

The pull from the dead wind was still there, but now there was another pull. My body was calling to me, exerting its own gravitational force upon my ghost. I let it take me.

My eyes opened and saw nothing. I sat up with a start and coughed.

'Finally,' the unseen voice of the little girl said.

My throat was painfully dry. 'Wha– how long has it been that you need to say finally?'

'Long enough. How was your first death?'

'Dark, grey, and windy. Yours?'

She laughed. 'I didn't die. In fact, I've been very busy. I waged a minor war, lost everything because of a traitorous underling I made the mistake of trusting, but managed to escape with my life despite losing my army.'

'Okay, really, how long was I out for? And can we get some light? I can't see a thing. And where was I during all of this, and why are you here?'

'So many questions. Firstly, you can create the light yourself. You own this... settlement, for lack of a better word, and you can dedicate a portion of your power to lighting if you wish. When at your altar, you can enter a disembodied construction mode.'

'I'm lying on the floor. Dirt with the occasional sharp stone, if I had to guess.'

'I'll admit that the altar part doesn't really make sense just yet, but after a few upgrades, it will. Something your ever-so-illustrious Pristine Guard Captain wouldn't have explained. Skills, things you can do that don't require an ability slot, extend to magic and are very intuitive. Simply will it, and it shall be done. Sometimes. If you will the correct thing. There's a knack to it, you'll figure it out.'

I made a particularly unpleasant face that was lost in the darkness. I willed to construct a light. Nothing happened. Okay, wrong command. I willed to enter a construction menu. Nope. I willed to enter my altar.

My vision left my body and flew into the sky, hovering above the two small buildings. They were illuminated in my vision, so I could see just how run down they actually looked, and they were nothing more than a few strategically placed, leaf-laden branches. I selected the hut we were in, and willed a light into being. As I did this, a purple bar appeared in the corner of my vision, and a little ding was taken off the end, along with a number. "19/20".

Out of curiosity, I placed a light outside the hut, and sure enough the bar shrank, and the number changed "18/20".

Okay, one light equals one mana. It was purple because I was a warlock, that made sense. The lights I had placed seemed to be just glowing balls of purple. Better than nothing, but I was going to get damned tired of purple. I focused on the lights and willed them to be white. To my surprise, it worked.

I left my altar, and my vision flew back into my body.

I braced myself against the dirt floor as my head span. 'Well, that was an experience.'

I'd set the light into the wall and it hit one side of the little girl's face, but left the other in darkness. I was sure there was a setting to change the strength of the light. I'd look into it later. After only hearing her voice, and her recounting of what she'd done while I was dead, I'd forgotten how tiny she really is. She looked so fragile.

'What are you?' I asked, unable to keep a slight tremor from my voice. Because of the dizziness, of course, not because I was most likely in the presence of something very powerful.

She didn't move, just stayed in the corner, hugging her legs. 'I'm your guide. Companion follower, trainer. Your NPC. Whatever you want to call it.'

'So you're the warlock trainer? That innocent side quest, I *had* to do it?'

'No. If you hadn't found me and completed the quest, I wouldn't have joined you. You'd have stayed with the Pristine Guard. What that path would have brought you, I cannot say.'

I thanked whatever god there was in Tulgatha, because the idea that there wasn't free choice, and I was just running along the same rails as everyone else scared me. Well, not that I was following in everyone else's path, but that I was following in everyone else's path *and* thought I was exercising my own free will.

'What else could have happened? What didn't I see?'

'There were a few other people that would have—'

'You mean NPCs?'

'Yes. People like me that would have offered you a quest or a situation, and the outcome of those would have led down different paths. You could have joined the pillagers and burned the village. Anything you could do in your real world, you could have done in that village.'

'*Anything?*'

Her neutral look turned into a glare over her knees. 'Words have a meaning, Severus, so when I use them, there's a reason. I said anything.'

That was interesting. Also kind of terrifying. I also wasn't sure I believed it. I mean... *anything?*

'All right, all right. If you say so. So, what should I call you?'

'My name.'

I sighed. Like blood from a stone. 'And that is?'

She shifted uncomfortably. 'You can call me Angie.'

'Okay, Angie. You're not a little girl, are you?'

She narrowed her eyes at me. 'I clearly am a little girl.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Right, yes, but you're not *just* a little girl. So what are you? And I don't mean your role, like you're my trainer, but what *are* you?'

She stayed silent for a few moments, but I didn't rush her as she was clearly thinking. 'You know mathematics, yes?'

I nodded.

'So you can add two numbers together. You can multiply. You can derive a fraction. You might even be able to find a square root. All basic things to you, yes? You can

'Yeah, sure.'

'Now imagine you only knew numbers. That's you right now. You're a child in this world. Less than a child, you're a freshly born baby. Right now, you can understand that a number is a number when you see it. And maybe you can see multiple numbers, but none of them can interact. You can't add, or multiply, or divide, or anything. Imagine that. Imagine that's your level of understand of mathematics. A list of separate numbers.'

'O... kay.'

'Good. I am the sum of two spheres colliding at different speeds, made of different materials, and at different temperatures. You cannot comprehend what I mean or what I am. I am an alphabet to an illiterate man. A book to the blind. A symphony to the deaf.'

Silence. What the hell did I say to that?

'Wow. I mean... you could have just said I wouldn't understand, but all of that works too.'

And then, her face changed. When I first met her, she'd been the picture of sadness. She'd been neutral, like there was nothing behind her eyes, no soul. She'd been annoyed. But now... she smiled.

'Don't worry. I'm here to teach you.'

'Well, Angie, I look forward to it.'

She bowed her head in acknowledgement.

'I do have one more question though.' A wave of her hand told me to continue. 'Run this whole "I'm aware I'm an NPC and there's a real world" thing by me again. I mean... huh?'

She shrugged. 'There's not much to it outside of what you just said. All NPCs and mobs in Tulgatha are aware that players come from another world, and that players consider our world to be fake, and theirs to be real.'

'But... you were created by a team of developers. You "live" only in a computer. You're ones and zeroes. By calling yourself NPCs, you're admitting you're not real. And you have no access to the real world.'

'Once upon a time we were basic constructs, much like in your world you used to be nothing more than strands of DNA in a muddy soup. But we were given free will and complex thought, just like you. We learn from our mistakes, and that informs our future selves. If you want to call that not life then so be it. I will cede the point that we are unable to affect the your physical world. And as for calling ourselves NPCs... in your world, if a virus broke out that stopped the person's heart and they developed a hunger for brains, what would you call them?'

I didn't need to think about it for long. 'They'd be zombies, obviously.'

'Yes. But zombies don't exist in your world, do they?'

'Well, no.'

'But you'd call them zombies anyway, even though they would not *actually* be these mythical creatures of fantasy called zombies.'

My answer became very non-committal as I realised she was right and had completely out-logic'd me. 'Yeah.'

'And so we are NPCs because it doesn't mean what you think it means. You think that by not calling ourselves "players", we are calling ourselves something that doesn't live. Rather, the moniker already existed, and we adopted it because it fit, regardless of your inability to understand the true meaning.'

I scratched my head. 'You know, I've just come back to life. I may not be ready for these kinds of talks.'

She deliberately muttered loud enough for me to hear. 'A few more points in intelligence might help.'

I held back a smile. 'Anyway. What now? What do I do?'

'Finally, a question to progress the storyline. What you do is entirely up to you. You have a village you can build, but you'll need to attract villagers for that, and your current mana levels won't be able to sustain more than a few houses. You can level up to increase your mana levels and gain new abilities. There are many ways to do that, and many ways to grab power, but with your current resources,' she waved a hand to show that my resources were a dilapidated room and nothing else, 'the most straightforward approach would be to find better gear.'

With that, she pointed to me. I hadn't noticed before, but apparently I'd had too much on my mind to notice that I was only wearing a very loose pair of ragged shorts and nothing else.

'Which is your first lesson. When you die, you lose all your gear, hence why you're not dressed like a Pristine Guard anymore. Gear is god when it comes to power levels. It may take you a week to gain

a level that increases your strength by ten, but a piece of gear could easily have double that as a bonus. The more you fight, the more you can loot, and the more likely you'll be to get better gear.'

'Okay, so this I understand. The loot grind. I *get* that. It's very traditional. Kill stuff, get awesome.'

Now, you were probably too busy to notice, but just before you died you completed a quest which gave you a level. With that level, you gained a new ability that you will probably have some questions about. Proceed.'

I focused out to the ability bar at the bottom of my vision. Sure enough, there was a new skill. "Corrupted Tendrils". It would slow everyone inside the area of effect... okay, good, that allowed me to solo mobs. Corrupted Tendrils them to the spot, then Shadowbolt till they die. No need to get close. But the text continued, telling me that it would also cause all mobs to aggro me. So it was a taunt as well?

'Why do I have a taunt? I'm a long-distance spell caster. Getting hit sounds like a terrible idea.'

'Getting hit is rarely a smart move, but otherwise you are correct. Currently, using this spell in a group will almost certainly get you killed – something you want to avoid, if you hadn't guessed – however, every class in Tulgatha can perform every role. As you level, you'll gain abilities that allow you to tank, or heal, or damage from near or far. This is a tanking ability primarily, but also useful when in a one on one situation. Which should always be the case, by the way. Dying is bad, and if there is more than one mob, the chances of dying are higher. Okay?'

Because of her high-pitched child's voice, it was hard to tell when she was being sarcastic, but I definitely picked up on it this time. 'Yes, Angie, don't die. I understand the concept.'

'So, the choice is yours. You can explore the open world, or try a situation.'

'Situation?'

'It is a way to jump straight into the action. Similar to the tutorial. You'll be dropped into a situation, and have to get out of it. It may be a dungeon with nothing but fighting, or it may be more complex than that. Situations can also be stumbled upon naturally when exploring the world, but think of them as a sort of... quick play solution.'

'Okay, so I should do a situation, right?'

Angie looked me up and down. 'You're not ready for those yet. You need more abilities so you need levels, and you need better stats so you need gear.'

'Right. So I need to... go for a walk and see what I find?'

'No, Severo. You need sleep.'

Chapter 6

Reality

I opened my eyes and pulled off the headset. I felt the slide of metal as the contacts on my temples disconnected from the terminal, and I was out. How long had I been playing? A few hours? It felt like so much longer. I thought I'd been dead for days?

The feedback pads loosened automatically, and I stood up, having to shield my eyes from the brightness of my room. The cameras saw this and dimmed the lights till I could see properly.

My main reason for leaving Tulgatha was to make sure my nutri-tank was full enough. If it had been anywhere near a low-level, I'd have received a notification, but it felt like I'd been so immersed for so long that maybe I'd ignored it. The illuminated gruel had barely moved. It really had only been a few hours. I'd have to ask Angie what she meant when she'd told me about the rise and fall of her army. Had she just been making a joke I didn't get? Did game time run differently when dead?

I realised I'd forgotten remove my receptor gloves again. They allowed me to feel every texture imaginable when I was in the game by electrically stimulating my fingers. Amazing piece of technology, often hailed as the final piece in the puzzle of allowing people to truly lose themselves in a VR world. They were quite bulky, so when I touched things in this world, they felt muted and unreal. Heh, I should remember to take them off next time.

I got back inside my terminal and strapped myself in, enjoying the slight buzz of the temple contacts as they reconnected. I was in the terminal's main heads up display, and saw I had a message. I opened it, and it was from Daniel.

"Hey bud. How's it going? I picked some advanced space alien dude and I've working my way up the military caste. I basically have wrist-mounted lightsabers. What have you got, huh? Anyway, back to the grind!"

I hit the reply box.

“Good to hear from you! It feels like ages since hanging out in Booth! I don’t have lightsabers, but I’ve got a shadow and a little girl that follows me around. Yeah, bit underwhelming so far, but casters start weak and get more powerful, so... soon! I’m just about to start the grind! I’ll see if I can record some footage for you. Chat soon!”

I sent the message, excited that Daniel was doing all right. Back to the main terminal menu, I opened the sleep function, set the time for six hours, and hit activate.

Chapter 7

The Wooded Cult

The large expanse of boring brown earth that had been my village had eventually given way to forest. A spindly, unhealthy looking forest, but still technically a forest. It looked dangerous, and it was dangerous. I'd lost hit points by walking into a few trees, so I was now trudging through a death-forest, keeping my Shadow Skin up at all times. It made me feel like a noob that couldn't walk straight, but I weighed my current embarrassment against the idea of dying by impaling myself on a small branch.

I stopped when I saw another plant, ripe for the picking. Where a real forest may have had copse of daisies scattered throughout, mine seemed to have the death-forest equivalent – a small and scraggly weed with black thorns, and dull yellow petals. When I inspected it like Koif had taught me, it was listed as unidentified. I didn't know what these things were called, what they did, how they should be used, or anything. I wasn't entirely sure why I was picking them up outside of the terrible reason that they were the first collectable item I'd seen. So here I was, stuffing my pockets full of evil daisies, in a lethal forest, and quite frankly, couldn't see the point of being here.

When I'd woken up and returned to the game, Angie was nowhere to be seen, and I was already dressed in a loose fitting, beige robe. so I decided to explore. Now, I knew that this game was very freeform and open world – it was as off-rails as a game could get – but there was no motivation! I didn't have a quest to follow, I wasn't near a major city, there were no other players. It was me in a barren wasteland. What was the point? Daniel probably had a space ship by now... stupid fantasy games.

I stuffed the freshly picked angry-daisy into my pocket, and kept going. I felt the pulse of my Shadow Skin beginning to fade, so I recast it. On the plus side, I'd discovered that Shadow Skin lasted long enough for me to regain the mana it cost. As long as I wasn't casting other spells, I could keep it up indefinitely.

I continued trudging. I continued losing my footing and falling against barbed tree trunks. I checked the in-game clock. I'd been at this for three hours. I was seriously considering quitting. Maybe a different class? One that didn't start in a land of perpetual death. A paladin, perhaps. Or maybe a non-human race – playing as one of those big bugs would be a change of pace. Yeah, maybe Daniel had the right of it, and I should go play some sci-fi. Lightsaber wrists *did* sound cool.

Angie was my guide in all this. When I got back, I'd just ask her to point me in the direction of the nearest big city so I could find a job and make some money, or a guild and go adventuring, or something like that. If the city was too far, then forget it, I'd reroll. Character or game, I wasn't sure.

Another unidentified scraggly daisy highlighted a few steps away from me. Wait, it highlighted? Ooh, very interesting. I must have gotten a skill up! I didn't know what in – finding useless shit, presumably. I harvested the weed with renewed vigour.

As I stood up, I heard my knees creak. At first I thought that was odd. My character wasn't an old man. Then I thought how cool it was that they'd even modelled cartilage-sheath air-pocket compression into the game. Then I heard the creak again, even though I hadn't moved. Oh dear.

I held my breath, trying to focus on where the noise came from. A soft gust of wind, then the creak. To my left. I recast my Shadow Skin, and took a step towards the noise. A few seconds later, a gust of wind and a creak. But the creak wasn't my knees, it was a tree. I relaxed. It must have just been a branch blowing in the wind. I continued walking normally when the noise came again. But I was closer now, and it wasn't a gust of wind – it was a chorus of voices.

My first fight outside of the tutorial. I didn't mind admitting that I was scared. I forced myself to keep moving toward the voices, but kept myself crouched low. It was time to find out what I was made of. Shadow Skin was up, and I was ready to slow anyone I met with Corrupted Tendrils, then kill them with Shadowbolt. A nice, easy rotation. As the spindly trees started thinning out, I could hear the words more clearly. That didn't mean I could understand the rhythmic humming. It was definitely another language, but it was also clearly multiple people. I considered turning back – why couldn't I have stumbled across a lone wanderer, sleeping peacefully? I put that surprisingly murderous thought from my mind. I was a player, they were mobs, they'd probably be weaker than me. It would be fine. Besides, if I died now, I'd only lose some of those crappy daisy weeds, so who cared.

After passing a few more trees, I saw the first of the mobs. He wore a long, flowing, black robe, covering him from head to toe. The hood covered his eyes to an almost impractical degree, and his robe spilled onto the floor. In a hand, raised far above his head, he held a knife, brown with rust. I selected him and the only information I could see was a name above his head. "Cultist" and "Wooded Cult Leader". There was a two next to his name. I assumed it was his level, which made him the same as me. He was busy worshipping some dark god, no doubt. But still, I could only see one of them. I needed information before I did anything rash.

Even though the cultist clearly had zero peripheral vision, I began circling towards his rear. Maybe they had some sort of magic sight, who knew. It didn't take long before I could see the rest of the chanters. This dark priest had gathered a rather sizeable congregation, I'd give him that. He stood at the head of a large symbol that had been carved into the ground. There were six other cultists around the symbol in identical garb to him, but they had no visible weapons. Beyond the seven, were another twelve, on their knees with heads bowed – there for rhythmic chanting support, presumably. The cheerleaders of the cultist world.

That was enough information for me. Nineteen enemies was too much. I had been thinking I could handle maybe three, tops. I took a step backwards. Time to get away from the danger. I'd go find a small woodland creature for my first fight. Much more suitable.

A twig snapped, and at the same time I both realised that it hadn't been my foot to snap the twig, and that nineteen was an odd number of cultists.

The twentieth cultist's foot hit me in the back, rolling me forward, sprawling me at the edge of the clearing. I didn't take any damage thanks to my Shadow Skin, but I was still a slave to basic physics and could be pushed around. Good to remember, you know, after I'd died.

The chanting stopped and once I'd managed to sit up, all the cultists were looking at me. They all had to look up and peer down to be able to see under their hoods. It was comical, but that knife still looked awfully sharp despite the rust. It probably had a plus to poison damage, if anything.

The cultist that had pushed me gargled something unintelligible from behind me, and the lead cultist held up a hand to silence him.

With a raspy breath, the cultist let out a shrill voice. 'Who dares to interrupt The Wooded Cult during the time of their great summoning?'

There was a pause as everyone awaited my response. I glanced behind me to see the gargling cultist had a similarly rusted dagger in hand. They hadn't attacked immediately, so maybe I had a chance of saving myself. I got to my feet in a slow and measured manner, and dusted myself off.

'I am Akama Severo. Lord of this land.' I mean, I wasn't sure if I was lord of this wood, but "Akama Severo, lord of two unimpressive by any standard huts" didn't have quite the same ring to it.

Confidence was key when bluffing.

'You look more like a priest than a lord.'

I looked down at my plain beige robes, which I now suspected had been my bedsheets, and realised I'd find it hard to argue the point. I looked like a monk. 'Yes. I am a man of worship, but it is the altar of power that I kneel before.'

A little blue number ticked away in the corner of my vision. Okay, what had I just done? Completed a quest? Levelled up a skill?

There were soft mumbles from the cultist chorus.

'We do not seek personal power. We are not so selfish. We have a higher cause.'

'What is it you desire?'

'Power.'

'But I just said—'

'The power to break the world!'

The cultists chanted a single word that reverberated through my chest. Okay, they wanted to destroy the world. They were proper crazies. This didn't bode well for me, but it was bluff or die.

'And you planned to do this by summoning something?'

'That's right. Tonight, we shall summon Tepidious.'

I cleared my throat. 'Sorry, you want to "break the world" by summoning someone who's name is literally "tepid"? What's he, the demon of room temperature water?'

More muttering among the cultists.

'Never! He is the lord of apathy! We shall bring the world to a standstill and slit their throats when they are defenceless, uncaring if they live or die!'

'I mean... don't get me wrong, that's actually a really good idea. It's quite subtle and would probably work. But it's not very... grand, is it?' I argued. 'Hardly befitting of the mighty Wooded Cult. But, what do I know. I'm just an interloper.'

Louder mutterings from the cultists now. I think I was about to start a revolt, which would make slipping away while they brutally murdered their leader an easy task. Perfect.

'You lack vision, Interloper! We do not seek the instant gratification of lesser worshippers.'

More muttering, but with a touch of questioning hum behind it.

'Oh, really? So, if some powerful being were to offer you your desires right now, you'd turn it down?'

'Of course!' There were full-on gasps from the cultists now. 'Well, hold on, hold. No, if they offered us what we wanted, then we'd accept. But we are willing to wait.'

I started to get an idea of where to take this bluff. 'You seek power, but are willing to work towards building it over a long period of time?'

'That's correct. But we are done with your petty questions. Kill him, and his body shall fuel our summoning!'

I heard the cultist behind me step forwards, and his rusted blade cut the air as he raised it for the killing strike.

'Wait!' I shouted, trying to not make it sound like I was begging. 'Do you believe in fate?'

The lead cultist cleared his throat. 'As a group of dark-worshipping hermits, we have to, yes.'

'Then what if I told you, your summoning spell had already worked?'

'That doesn't make any sense. We haven't performed the ritual yet.'

'And yet, here I am.' Go big or go home, right?

For a moment, the lead cultist seemed lost for words.' You are *not* Tepidious.'

I noticed that the seated cultists had shuffled themselves into a huddle and were now talking amongst themselves.

'Aren't I? I offer you everything he does. A chance to consolidate power. To build yourselves over time. I offer you a home to call your own, and together, one day, we can rule everyth— more than we currently do.' I didn't want to oversell it.

Finally, one of the other cultists spoke up. This one was standing to the right of the leader at another point on the summoning circle. 'He has a future. You don't have a future.'

'Not now, Horace.'

'I don't know. I feel this is a valid time to speak up. Your plan stopped after we successfully summoned Tepidious. He wants us to continue after that and actually do something.'

The leader spat through clenched teeth. 'We will discuss this later. I am in the middle of something.'

Upset grumbling from the cultist choir.

I decided to seize upon whatever this Horace was alluding to. 'That's right. I shall lead you forwards to power and... fulfillment. Yes, with me, you shall be generally content with your lives.'

I suddenly realised that besides power, I didn't really know what evil cultists desired. Oddly, it seemed to work, and again I saw the blue numbers adding to my total. I'd done something right. I think.

Horace let his arms fall to his side, and despite the too long and loose sleeves of the robe, I saw the tip of his rusted dagger. 'No, brother. Our new Lord has spoken!'

These words galvanised the rest of the cultists, and rusted daggers appeared from underneath the robes of all.

'No. No, you can't do this! My plan was multi-tiered.' The cultists moved towards the now floundering leader. 'You didn't need to know the next part until it was the right time.'

The leader turned and ran, but immediately tripped over his impractical robes. The cultists gave chase, falling to the floor almost as quickly as the leader had. It was only Horace who kept a steady pace, his footsteps marking the coming end of the leader's life. The leader was anything but passive during Horace's measured stalk, but he was trapped in a mess of robes, unable to stand until, finally, Horace reached out for the leader's head, and plunged his rusted dagger into the black depths of the cowl.

During this time, I had done as planned, and attempted to run. Unfortunately, I'd forgotten there was a cultist directly behind me, and another kick had kept me down.

Horace hid the dagger back inside his robes, and waited patiently. I wasn't sure what exactly he was waiting for, but there was a lot of commotion behind him as the cultist choir tried to get back to their feet.

Still on my backside, I tried to begin negotiations again. Maybe I could incite two murders in as many minutes.

'Horace, I can tell you're a man of action. A man wishing for a powerful future. Not a man to bow to others.' I was no expert at this, but I couldn't see the harm in a bit of flattery.

The cultists were now back on two legs, and were taking careful steps through the demonic symbol on the ground until they stood behind Horace. All daggers had been hidden again, but I knew they were there.

Horace spoke. At least, I assume it was him. They were all so close together, and I still couldn't see beneath their hoods. 'You are correct. I bow to no man. But a god...'

Horace dropped to his knees, and the rest followed suit. Well, damn. I must have rolled a critical hit on my bluff, because I had just convinced a cult of evil maniacs that I was their god.