

Chapter One: The Fate of the Accursed

Most things were difficult to remember. Some things were even harder to forget. Images burnt into my mind with no context to follow. Just dreams of nightmares of more dreams. I felt as if I was dying, but it was simply untrue. There, in my thoughts, I experienced the concept of mortality in its most absolute form: a perpetual state of melancholy existence to which I credit my partial loss of cognition. The grey, dim mirage that I knew to be my existence was naught but a churning, unending confusion in the form of a vague question that words do not justify. I suppose that it doesn't make much sense, but for the sake of simplification it's best to say that I did not live, nor did I die. Dying life became living death, and all of which I was comprised felt like a fleeting, familiar daydream that bled from the stigma painted across my tired heart. These things, however, were not yet known to me. Or perhaps they were simply forgotten. However, let us not dwell on my damnation, but of the enlightenment that sparked the inquisitional flame which nudged my empty thoughts.

My salvation came in the form of a sound: a creaking, metal whisper to which I turned my attention. Before I knew what had happened, in front of me landed a corpse. The still body that now lay on the floor of my cage was a prime example of the

defilement upon our fragile being. His skin had taken on a leathery, otherworldly appearance and his eyes were as hollowed as the mind that surely once belonged in the stilled brain behind them.

More importantly, however, was the one seemingly responsible for my meeting with this corpse. Staring down at me from the grate above my cell was a man, a knight perhaps, in familiar heavy armor and an armet helmet that hid his face. The crest on his blue surcoat manifested a ghost of faint recognition within me, and soon thereafter, the memory abandoned me. For a moment or two, our eyes met and I felt a rare, profound stir in the root of my mind. I desperately wanted to speak but could not draw strength. I wished that I could have said something, anything at all; it was like trying to speak your mind in a deep dream. His gaze upon me was loosened as he turned and swept away from the portal of light above my head. The feeling of our encounter immediately faded, but in its vacancy was born a disparity that cracked – but did not shatter – my mind's pandemonium.

More than anything, I wanted to go after him; I wanted to see again this agent of odd fortune. If the mind is like a fire, then mine had been rekindled from ash into a hungry, but still lethargic ember. Like never before, the entropy in my mind

sharpened into a dagger of focus that was now set upon the pitiful remnant which lay face-down before me in stagnant water. All at once, a gleam of light hit my eye. Just behind the left leg of the body was a small, plain key. I stood upright, but for the first time in what was seemingly an eternity, I stood with purpose. I took the key and clutched it in my hand, fingering the petite, uneven iron ring that served as its handle.

"Freedom," I thought. But that fantasy was quickly dispelled by an admonishing realization. Even if I escaped, even if I warred against the odds and triumphed over the asylum and all of its opposition, where would I go? My mind was ill and I was abandoned, cast away by all of mankind. I was marked a pest and forsaken by all that I've ever known. An intimidating thought indeed, but something was askew in my mind. The horrid epiphany was trumped by one of greater value, one of nobler intent. It was at that very moment that I decided against my rationality and molted my fear. I may have been doomed, but I would not lie in wait for the end of my days, should it ever come. I stepped forward with bold ambition, a trait common to those with addled brains akin to mine.

Drawing my rusted key, I penetrated the lock-hole of the cell door and heard the mechanism click. The hinged wall that had so long separated me from my sovereignty groaned open with

protest. Again my hesitance returned. I could simply close the door, sit back down and resign myself to fate. Little did I know, my godless providence was calling me far beyond the grey bars of this prison. Mustering all of the strength that I could collect, my legs journeyed a step beyond the doorway. Then soon after, another step. I began creeping down a long hallway scarcely lit by torches hanging to the left and right. Scattered along the walls of the dark corridor were more cells filled with other prisoners, mumbling words and uttering incoherent curses.

Nearly halfway down the hall, a noise provoked my attention. It sounded akin to the tread of a giant, for the ground below trembled with every tremor. Peeking from behind a large, partially broken metal grate in the right wall, I spotted the source of the unearthly footsteps. In the room beyond, a gargantuan, bloated figure stepped into dim light and began to patrol the room. I ducked below the metal bars and began to crawl past when I heard the footsteps nearing me. I stilled and silenced myself. When I peeked upward, I saw a corpse impaled on the jutted out bars of the grate. Around its head was a sack and flies swarmed its flesh. The quakes ceased and I heard an inhumanly deep rumble above me. Suddenly, an enormous hand grabbed the corpse, and in one swift motion, tore the dead body

from the bars, spilling gore upon me. I shuddered and was still until the steps dissipated and the mammoth shadow was no more.

I retched and vomited onto the floor where I remained for moment or so. Nauseated, I found my feet planted once more as I climbed the steps at the end of the hall. After making my way into a room flooded with water to my ankles, I decided to rinse the blood and torn flesh from my bare body. On the other side, I noticed a body lying still in the water. I approached it cautiously and determined it to be dead. In my new-found, or perhaps regained, but dim sense of comprehension, my heart ached for the demise of those cursed. "Am I no different?" I thought. I, however, rejected my emotions and pressed on.

As I entered a small room, in front of me was a long ladder with a faint light at the top. I began my ascension and found my strength to be lacking as I could barely reach the top. Clambering off of the final wooden rung, I lifted my face to a sight the likes of which I had long forgotten. The stone archway in front of me opened up into a large courtyard with beautiful, green grass and a large blue door. Upon my entrance into the breath-taking scene, I felt the humble warmth of the sun on my naked back, striking me with feelings that I had forgotten existed. I fell to my knees and wept, and tore a patch of grass from the ground. A moment later, to my surprise, the blades of

grass in my hand were lit ablaze and smoldered into the ash. My attention fell to the bare spot from whence I pulled the grass and I noticed that it, too, was alight. The flame grew to a controlled but powerful fire, about an arm's length wide and it began to spread. My initial, foolish reasoning was to obliterate it, lest it destroy the beautiful sanctuary that I had suddenly found so dear. I began my attempt to stomp out the flame, even though there was nothing to smother. This flame had no wood, no tinder; not a single thing was causing it to burn. A moment or so into my wild dance, I felt a small burning sensation across my chest. The scar that haunted my breast was glowing with a white-hot aura and the minor pain escalated to an intense discomfort, then evolved into excruciating pain. I found myself writhing in the dirt, envisioning myself shrouded in fiery tendrils.

I must have lost consciousness for only a moment, but I came to, alive and well. I sat up and looked at the oddly calm flame, spiraling into the air, and in its center was a pile of scorched bones. It was oddly comforting. I grew weary and lied down at the side of the tame, warm fire. My eyes seemed to close by themselves, and I drifted off into an admittedly peaceful rest.

I wish that I could claim to have dreamed, but the claim would be vacant of all truth. However, I supposed that I had dreamed enough in my lifetime; I was tired of dreaming, whether it was while awake or asleep. My eyes creaked open and my irises were assaulted with nearly-blinding sunlight. I stretched my arms and legs and my bones creaked; I could have jested about having tired, old bones, but the truth was simply that I had no idea how old I was in the least. My time in the asylum was either stretched as thin as butter or compressed unimaginably tight, and I had no frame of reference upon which to base my assumptions. I hesitantly stood to my feet, worried that I may not have the strength to forge on, especially after resting. Though, it quickly became known to me that I had been blessed with a new vigor. I no longer felt tired or weak, but my mind remained heavy-laden. I looked down at the spiraling tentacles of the fire and entertained the thought that it could be the source of my new-found vitality. The idea was quickly rejected and I scoffed to think that a mere blaze could have given me solace against my withering. "A fine rest it was," I thought. Like many things, I had forgotten that only fools denounce the flame.

I stretched my flesh once more and began my investigation of the area. My attention was brought away from the large metal

door opposite from me and now shone on a small metal door with iron bars. In my regained state of strength, I sprinted to the other side of the courtyard and looked upon the door, peering through the metal bars, ones like I had spent so much time with. On the other side was a flight of stairs ascending to my right, but where they led was hidden from me. The door was locked tight but I could see mechanism for the deadbolt just beyond the bars too narrowly gapped to fit my hands between them.

My gaze was once again turned upon the large, ominous metallic-blue door placed upon a tall staunch of stone. Deciding that I would waste no time or blessed energy, I ran the length of the small trek. Upon approaching the giant passage, I realized that it wasn't quite as large as I had previously reckoned. Make no mistake, it was quite big and looked thoroughly rusted. I don't suppose many undead had often come this way to open it. I planted one foot behind me and the other beneath me and thrust my weight upon it. To my surprise, it slowly and reluctantly rumbled open with a loud metal protest. Beyond the giant passage was an open room with stone pillars, some beckoning to a portion of ceiling that was long gone. On the other side of the room and below a second-floor archway was a door, just like the one I had come through. What lay on the other side of it, I intended to discover.

Seemingly from nowhere, I was stricken by a feeling of jarring dread and I could feel malicious eyes upon me. My steps forward were cautious and I was very wary, but not enough so. I stilled myself and looked up to the large hole above the high-up archway, and what I beheld, I could not tell to be my fate or my destiny; but for certain, I was afraid. High above me stood the challenge that prohibited my personal triumph. It was enormous and its ill-proportioned bottom half appeared as two tumors with which it tread upon the hopes of the asylum's dwellers. Its eyes were filled with fire and its teeth gnashed between its fearful maw. I promptly remembered this aberration and all of its purpose, and I shuddered. My dreaded jailor.

I wanted to shout, but not in fear. I wanted to proclaim utter hatred for that which kept me bound in chains and isolated in my thoughts, but I had forgotten how to speak. I took a step back, trying to formulate a plot of action, but it was far too late, as the beast knew I was here. It had already known of my arrival. From high and afar, it fluttered down on tiny, abominable wings and slammed onto the floor, causing the ground to shiver. I unwillingly forfeited my balance and fell to the floor. At this point, my cognizance still failed me, encompassing me within a surreal blanket of nightmarish fear. After a moment, I regained my footing and stared into the eyes

of the giant, desperately trying to find something within myself that I could use against it. But all I could find was blind rage.

From behind its back, the inhuman jailor drew a weapon: a hammer that outweighed me by ten-fold. It lunged itself at me with great haste and I leapt to the side, barely avoiding its wrath. It was a great beast but its size inhibited its ability to turn about. I took a moment, one that seemed to last forever, to scan my surroundings. On the other side of the room was an open door just beyond a cluster of vase-like jars. Without a thought, I bolted toward the door without a glance at the beast. It was a blunder that would seem cost me dearly. I was nearly to salvation when I felt as though I was stricken with the fury of a storm. I was flung forward against the wall, and I lie broken and withered in a pile of shattered porcelain.

The previous sense of chivalry had now abandoned me and all that was left was pain and misery. "I was a fool," I thought to myself. "How did I ever think that it was possible?" I knew that I was no hero of old. I was no brave knight with a noble cause. I was just an insect to be crushed by things of higher purpose. The stones beneath me shook as I looked to the sky, wondering if a single soul had ever known that I existed. The storm's wrath struck me once again, and then I was nothing.

Death was swift upon me and it was a feeling of chaotic, yet calm nothing. But there is one thing to be said and it is that I did, in fact, dream. From the dark, if you could call nothing dark, a whisper softly roared to my soul.

"You died."

The words, oddly enough, came as a surprise. They were gentle, yet they admonished my mistake. It was like a half-audible revelation in the night that shook the foundation of my churning sleep. My mind was clearer than it had ever been and I did not dream of images, but of concepts. The value of haughty pride came to mind. I saw flickers of different principles revealing themselves to my mind's eye; the most notable of which was persistence. The spectral shadows of voices quietened in my mind and, upon their departure, disquieted my heart. The whispers in my dreams caused, yet again, another strike of disparity. Upon death, it is doubtful that one ever realizes that they have died. I, however, realized it for what seemed like an eternity in that nexus betwixt. Immediately, it felt as if my mind was being pushed skyward, hurled through the never. Then I awoke.

My eyes burst open to find myself on the ground in a shroud of familiarity. Looking around me, I discovered that I was in the middle of the courtyard. To my disbelief, I found myself in no pain, but harshly confused and my thoughts in disarray. I moved my left leg and felt no pain. I tested my right leg and found no discomfort. I quickly found the strength to rise for the purpose of making sure that what I was experiencing was true. I stretched my arms and breathed in the cool breeze that drifted across my skin. It *seemed* real, but my reasoning refused it. My line of focus was turned to a sight that I recognized. Beside of where I was lying was the peculiar flame, rising from a pile of ashen bones at its center. The spirals of fire flickered, as if winking at me, and I felt the brand on my chest tingle warmly. I felt rejuvenated, as if it was all just some nightmare; and I would have thought so had I not looked at the large blue door beyond which I met my supposed end. It was open. I could not, however, see through the opening, but it was eclipsed it an ethereal shroud. It was like my eyes were looking through the spectral mist, but my mind would not allow me to see. The sight of it filled me with refined dread, but it beckoned me nonetheless.

I approached the door and touched the fog through which my hand then entered the doorway. I felt a chilling breath across

my entire body and the fog disappeared. There above, in the same hole in the wall above the archway, stood my oppressor. His head twitched and his jaws flickered. I reckoned that he was as surprised to see me again as I was he. The demon let loose a great howl and leapt from the wall, smashing its hammer on the ground. Though my mind was as thick as mud, I braced myself, and this time lost no footing. My nerves felt shaky, yet strong, like brittle steel and I heard another ghost of a whisper in the ears of my mind.

"Persistence."

Like before, the beast lunged at me with great strength, but it was no match for my expectation. I rolled far beyond his strike and ran to the opposite side of the room. Slowly, it turned looking annoyed and readied another lunge at me. He smashed his great hammer down, but I evaded him once more. His long recovery allowed for a break between his mammoth, grotesque legs. Seizing the moment, I sprinted for the door with the beast marching behind. I dove inside of the doorway, and behind me was a great sound like that of mighty thunder. The door and the entire wall surrounding it collapsed and knocked me to the ground. As I lay on the steps just inside of the doorway, an abominable hand reached through to grasp me; but I was already

gone. From up the stairs, I could hear a gruesome roar, angry at the defiant insect that would not be swatted.

At the bottom of my stairs, I found myself in another chamber flooded up to my ankles. Just outside was a narrow corridor that led upward toward another turn. The ceiling there was ruined as well and as I stepped once more into the cloudy sunlight, I felt admittedly confident. Perhaps not confident that I would escape my captivity and fly myself into a new, perfect life, but confident in that at least I have challenged my damned future to suppress me. I wanted to consider what had happened, but could draw nothing from my wellspring of dark divided thoughts.

I closed my eyes for a brief time and breathed fresh air, but my peace of mind was soon to be uprooted. Standing there, I felt something whiz by my head and dart behind me. I turned to discover a naked man at the end of the corridor with patchy, wild white hair, holding a bow with a quiver upon his back. He showed signs of the creeping sickness that plagued us both. His skin was discolored and appeared leathery, and upon his chest, I could see the insignia that drained one's mind. I heard him mumbling to himself hard and sharp. After only a short moment of eye contact, he began to shout and then quickly knocked another arrow. I cursed and stumbled into an abandoned cell to my

immediate left, evading the projectile that whistled past the ruined door. I heard him outside howling and crying out, or perhaps it was merely a laugh.

Upon examining the cell, I faintly discerned a hunk of metal in the far corner reflecting a bit of light. Closely examining the object revealed it to be a proper metal kite shield decorated with a silver tower. It was old and dented, but I deemed it better than bare skin. I took up my new defense, braced myself for opposition, and peeked around the corner. At the top of the ascending path, he remained standing, twitching and muttering to himself. I took a deep breath and burst out of the doorway, making my way up the path. I must have caught him by surprise, for every limb on his body flinched when he saw me. He quickly knocked an arrow and I raised my shield and pressed on up the path. There was an insignificant ping against my shield which barely jolted my defenses and left him as wide-open as could be. As I neared him, I lowered my shield and scanned ahead. He had now drawn a blade that, unknowingly to me, must have been strapped to his side. He lunged at me with the sword and I met him with a fine block followed by a hard-planted kick to the stomach. Instantly, he dropped his weapon and crumbled to the ground. I grabbed the blade, a fine broadsword, and held it to his windpipe. I had never before used a weapon, but it felt

natural in my hands. Something that I had not previously noticed was that he had only one eye, a pitiful sight. The fear that flickered across his scrunched, dry face is a hard thing to describe. It was like a wild animal caught in a hunter's crafty trap, panicking in silent anxiety. Looking into his empty features, I saw a reflection of myself. He was merely a sick man being eroded by a dementing disability. Then there was a tingle in my ear.

"Mercy."

I stayed my hand and allowed him to rise. My assumption was that he would scurry away into the shadows to be seen no more. However, this was not a knight's tale. The depraved husk locked his eyes with mine and snarled. I steadied my blade for a quick strike in the case that he attempted something malicious, but in one swift motion, he snatched at my breast and tore something away from me, and then made haste.

I pursued him through a short hallway that opened up into labyrinthine room filled with sets of stone steps, some of them ruined beyond use. I gained on him past several flights of stairs, one of which our chase led us upon. By the time I had reached the base of the steps, he had moved just beyond the horizon of the top. When I reached what was nearly halfway, I heard a sound and stopped my pursuit, listening for a

reoccurrence; but what I was met with was the sight of a massive, semi-rounded object peeking from atop the final step. The object came crashing down the stairs with a great fury and barely missed me as I dove off of the staircase and onto another flight of descending stairs to my right. The fall knocked the breath from my lungs and I found it hard to do anything but gasp for a short moment. From along the ascending stairs, I heard the maniacal howling from before. It most certainly was a laugh. I then realized that this wretched fiend was lying in wait for an unsuspecting person to trot along with the intent of smashing them to bits. I had the epiphany that he was not like me at all; he was a jackal that needed to put to rest.

I crouched on the descending steps behind the rising stones of the stairs that were going upward. I readied my blade, and when he approached, I spun around and cleaved his leg, bone and all. I saw a familiar fear make itself apparent in his face's features, but this time, I had no mercy to give. I plunged my sword deep within his chest and he let loose a sharp cry, and then he died.

In his hands, he was clutching an item that I did not remember but knew that I should. It was a small, ordinary pendant on an old metal chain. It had no remarkable designs, but it gave me comfort, a feeling like I was home. To be truthful, I

wasn't sure that I had ever had a home; but if I had, then this trinket was part of it and by way of home and heart, part of me. The chain was broken and unable to fasten around my neck, but I stored it in the pocket of my ripped sackcloth pants. I removed the slotted belt and sheathe from his body and fastened it to my waste. His bow and arrow was a foul makeshift, crafted from rotting wood and a cord of sinew. I shuddered to consider its origins. From where his other items came never became clear.

I began to climb up the stone steps when something caught my peripheral attention. The large object with which the hollow had attempted my undoing had smashed into the wall where the rising and falling steps met. Even though I knew that there was nothing in there, except perhaps more manic prisoners that were eager to leave their cells, something beckoned me unto the hole in the wall. I stopped at its entrance and listened. From within, I heard a breathy groan and moved cautiously into the confines of a dark room. Lying in a pile of rubble beneath a hole in the ceiling was a man in armor. Upon further scrutiny, I recognized the familiar insignia upon his familiar blue surcoat. It was the kind knight.

It was a moment after I entered that he turned his notice upon me. He must have recognized me, for he managed a throaty chuckle. "Ah, you," he said weakly. He had a soft, kind voice;

one like you would imagine being possessed by a brave knight who triumphed over all. But again, this was no fable. "You're no hollow, eh?" He stifled another small laugh and looked at the ceiling. His helmet hid his face, but I could hear the pain in his voice. "Thank goodness. I'm done for, I'm afraid. I'll die soon and lose my sanity." I thought I must have mistaken him. He said that he would lose his sanity after he died. A fraction of an hour ago, I would have thought that statement ludicrous. I would have reckoned that he had obviously already lost his sanity. But now, I was not certain.

"I wish to ask something of you," he continued. "You and I, we're both undead," he said as he looked at me again. Frankly, I had not the faintest idea of what he was talking about. I supposed that one way or another he was speaking of my sickness, the one that must have afflicted him as well. There were many things that escaped me in my dim state. "Hear me out, will you?" he requested. To my grief, my tongue was as hard as stone and I could do nothing but silently oblige his request. After a time of silence, he returned his gaze to the ceiling.

"Regrettably, I have failed in my mission," he stated. There was a certain wistfulness in the words that passed through his lips. "But perhaps you can keep the torch lit." I guessed that once more he expected a reply, an auditory acknowledgment,

but I was simply unable to comply. I removed the shield from my back, laid down my sword, and sat down on the floor looking at him with the intent of hearing what he had to say. "There's an old saying in my family." I clutched tightly at my pendant as that last word rang in my mind. "Thou who art undead art chosen. In thine exodus from the Undead Asylum, maketh pilgrimage to the land of ancient lords." It occurred to me that it was difficult for him to speak. His words were coherent, but weak and punctuated by pitiful coughs. "When thou ringeth the Bell of Awakening," he choked followed by a short, thoughtful pause, "the fate of the undead thou shalt know."

The silence that followed the haunting words became nearly tangible, and I dwelled on a few thoughts of my own. I wanted to know who this man was and why he released me from my captivity. I wanted to understand why he was telling me these things and what they meant; these stories of un-dead. I wished for the ability to cry out in inquiry and find answers to the questions that eluded my understanding. But alas, the words to do so abandoned me long ago.

"Well," he finally said, fixing his line of sight upon me once more. "Now you know. And now I can die with hope in my heart." I was unsure of what I would have said even if I could have spoken. A man whom I have never met was entrusting me,

someone that he knew not one thing about, with some manner of mission. No, I had not the slightest idea of what he was saying. Un-dead? A land of ancient lords? I was still unconvinced that this wasn't some hallucination and not so sure that I was even still alive.

"Oh, and one more thing," he added. He beckoned for me to come to him, and so I did. "Take this." From behind his back, he revealed a dull-green bottle filled with a glowing, yellow substance. "An Estus Flask," he clarified. "An undead favourite." I reached out and took the bottle from his frail hand. It was warm to the touch and light as a feather. I looked into the eyes beyond the battered metal helmet and I nodded to him. I believe with all of my heart that he knew of my intention to carry on his purpose, but truthfully, at the time, I did not intend to do so at all.

"Now, I must bid you farewell," he stated. "I would hate to harm you after death." There was a gentle, but serious edge to those last words; like being cut with a blade of grass. My mind twitched and I knew that he meant what he said. As I made my exit, I paused my stride as I heard his voice, now weaker than ever, from behind me one last time. "And thank you." A long, vacant pause hung in the air and I did not turn to face him, for I knew that he was already gone.

Chapter Two: In Thine Exodus

My exploration of the many staircases led me downward into another corridor lit by one torch, which I removed from its fixation to serve my own cause. Creeping down the black hallway, my eyes scanned the empty cells on either side of me. In one of them, I managed to find a small sallet helmet and some metal pauldrons covered in dirt and mold. I strapped on my new, flimsy armor and trudged on down the hall.

Turning to my left at the hall's end took me into another flooded chamber with more downward steps, which upon traversing led me to a familiar iron-barred door. Through the gaps, I saw a field of grass that I believed myself to recognize. After the deadbolt reluctantly slid to the side, the door groaned open with relative ease. My suspicions were validated when, upon entering, I beheld a giant blue door; one fit for the goliath that dwelled within. But like before, it was open yet shrouded in a churning mist.

I felt a sensation like spiders across my chest and saw a flicker of light in the corner of my eye. The mysterious fire had returned there before me, an ominous skull sitting at its

center. Like a moth, my entire being was drawn to the flame, and so I approached it. It felt warm; not like how a fire normally radiates heat, but akin to how a warm breeze feels when it washes over you on a sunlit day. I studied the flame like I had never before seen it and began to feel slightly weary. My ever-present, confused state of mind was starting to weigh heavy upon me, and so I removed my sword, shield, and belt and I sat down. Being in the presence of the flame rested me, and for some reason, I felt like it made me whole.

I pondered on many things that I had not had time to question before. I wondered what had happened in hours past. I had died, crushed to death by my demon prison guard. Yet I had appeared from a dream in this very spot next to this very blaze that crackled with delighted interest. If the truth must be told, I believed myself to still be lying in my cell, hollowed and dreaming. I considered what the knight had told me, though it perplexed me further beyond my norm. Be it as it may, if I was dreaming, it was a good dream. If I was hollow, then it was so, for I was attempting a journey, whether I was awake or asleep. Though, I suppose that I wasn't tired of dreaming quite yet.

In the name of my own curiosity, I removed from my belt the glass bottle that the knight had given me and I examined it. I

had forgotten how light it was, but I remembered that it was faintly warm. I removed the cork from its neck and examined the clear liquid inside. "An undead favourite," I remembered. I put the bottle to my lips and took a small swig and held it in my mouth. It tasted like bitter-sweet honey, yet its viscosity measured a bit thicker than water. I swallowed it and when it slithered down my throat, it was cool. The drink refreshed me more than I had ever remembered being. I could not recall the last time that I had eaten. I did not have to. I never hungered in my cell, nor did I thirst, and I had not the slightest idea of why it was so. After my second drink, I felt as if I had just eaten a hot meal and washed it down with a cup of cold, fine wine. I didn't doubt this substance to be a favourite of anyone.

I corked the bottle and picked up my belt to place it back in its pouch, but I decided to gauge how much of the drink that I had left. I uncorked it once more and peered inside of the neck. To my astonishment, the liquid spilled from the top of the bottle and onto the ground; it was full. The phenomenon struck me as quite odd indeed. To test either my competence or the strange power of this bottle – and it was unclear to me which – I poured a good bit of its contents onto the ground and looked once again into the bottleneck. Certain enough, it was still running over the top of its container. I did not question it

for, in this short time, I had become quite fond of it. It was an odd thing indeed.

I armed myself and made haste from the courtyard, but not before taking one last look at the ghostly dance of the flame behind me, which winked at me once again. I made my way back from whence I came and wound up at the staircase where I laid to rest the nameless hollowed man. There, I studied the hole in the wall where the knight lay dead. I wondered what his last thoughts were. I merely hoped that they were ones of happiness and that he was comforted in his crossing of the great river that now separated us. He spoke of his family, and I thought him lucky to remember his home. I pulled the small pendant from my pocket and kissed it, thinking that perhaps I would cross that river one day as well.

When I turned to face the ascending staircase, a sudden realization kicked me in the gut. I quickly took a knee to examine the floor, running my fingers over the ground looking for traces of blood and finding none. The silence was broken by the sound of a long, creaking stretch. I slowly lifted my head upward and met the eye of a very familiar hollow. Before I could react, he let loose an arrow that penetrated the pauldron on my left shoulder and entered my flesh. The strike sent me backward from my knee and onto my backend. He hastily knocked and let fly

another arrow, which I shifted onto my side to evade. I replanted my feet and drew my weapon, but realized that I was at a heavy disadvantage. I could not move my left arm and, in turn, could not utilize my shield.

In merely a few moments, the pain had grown nearly unbearable. Once more, he began to knock an arrow, but he was met with a rush followed by furious kick. My attack sent him falling onto the descending staircase while his vile bow remained at the origin. Reluctantly but quickly, I removed the arrow from my shoulder and again readied my sword. From the shadows, he leapt at me and grabbed my belt, tearing it from my waist and throwing it backward where it landed just beyond his disarmed weapon. With all of my weight, I shoved him into a wall and lunged with my blade. He crumpled to the floor, escaping my blow and making his escape up the stairway. With the same hand with which I held my sword, I grabbed my belt from the floor and gave chase.

I tailed him atop a ruined upper floor that was missing an entire wall, bringing into view a great overlook far below me that stood above a deep valley. It then occurred to me that the asylum, in which I have resided as long as I can remember, was atop a great mountain. An unbalancing change of perspective, it was. I gained on him as I saw him stumble and fall, quickly

recovering. He made a left onto a small balcony and I pinned him there. I dropped my belt and pointed my weapon at him, and he began to weep and sob. It was a pitiful sight, truly, and I am slightly ashamed to say that I considered letting him live. However, it was much too late for him.

I felt a tingle of recognition in my mind and a sinister suspicion arose in my stomach. I studied the archway above the balcony and determined that I had seen it before. I felt the rumbles of a familiar pattern of tremors and was pitted against a horrible epiphany. Suddenly, the balcony on which the hollow stood exploded into oblivion and sent me tumbling backward. I crawled away from the wreckage and regained myself against the wall of the staircase from whence I ascended, though my rest was short. The wall upon which I leaned burst open and I was knocked against the other wall. Deafened and disoriented, I ran out of the stairway with nowhere to go. Once more, a wall exploded, now revealing my abominable aggressor.

In that brief moment, I felt as if the passage of time had slowed. I did not despair nor did I hope; I simply felt nothing. I wondered that, if should I die again, would I be so lucky to wake once more. Would kismet be so kind once again? Then, the slow-burning ember in my mind was washed over by a wind whose name was serendipity, and given tinder in the form of my now-

revealed purpose. In the long, stretched nexus that separated me from my triumph, it would be dishonest to say that I was not afraid. Despite this, I held my sword in the only arm that served me and I steeled my nerves; I was prepared to die once again.

The demon readied another assault against the wall stood between us, but he was now visible to me. I rolled to my right away from the thunder that demolished the stones below my feet and in front of me. My wounded arm burned with great pain, but I met it with stubborn disregard and regained my footing. The floor to the left of the archway was completely destroyed, revealing the earth far below me and leaving me no choice but to run to the other side. The beast wasted no time, as it leapt up and smashed the wall to my right. I was left with nowhere to go and as the demon readied its final attack, I leapt from archway, narrowly escaping its hammer. It was not a long way down but it felt like falling into a canyon. I landed upon the creature and planted my blade between its eyes. It loosed a piercing shriek, the likes of which I could have never imagined, nor can I describe.

I released the sword, which remained where it was, and jumped to the floor, drawing my shield in my good arm on the way down. I raised my defense and the demon struck me and sent me

airborne. Shaken but determined, I recovered and circled my opponent, searching for an opening. The pain in my shoulder clouded my already opaque mind, but I sharpened my sight with determination. He attempted a downward strike upon me, but I refused him and, to the misery of my wound, rolled to evade it. With no weapon with which to attack, I gripped the metal side of my shield and hurled at the great ugly head above me and struck it in the face. The impact disoriented him for only a moment, but by the time it regained its bearings; I was already clambering up its back. He reached for me with his disproportionate arms, but could not find me. With all of my strength, I pulled my sword from its head and hacked at the shoulder on its armed side, revealing bone and flesh and severing sinew. Another cry tore loose from its maw and it dropped its weapon with a great thud, leaving naught but a large, wild animal. I slid down its backside and sliced open the back of its bulbous ankles, thus rendering him on his knees. I circled around to face my grounded foe, to look into his otherworldly eyes, and in them I saw failure. I felt the fire within my third eye burn stronger than ever, and I shouted and sent my sword through its throat.

The foul beast tried to scream, but it could not. The inhuman glow of his eyes faded and he began to return to the

earth before my eyes. He wisped away in billows of dust and sand and disappeared before my eyes; and like that, I was left alone once more. The flame faded and left me with a feeling of tired misdirection, and once more, only embers remained. I fell onto one knee, closing my eyes and feeling all but accomplished. The large metal door on the far side of the room rumbled open, and from it came a sweet smelling breeze that embraced me with intimacy. In the ears of my mind, I felt a shadow of a whisper.

"You conquered."

I had indeed triumphed, but what was left to do? I had nowhere to go, no one to return to. Whoever had been responsible for me had grown tired of me in my withering and sent me far away. I was truly alone. I raised my head and through the open door, I saw a path leading upward into the wide horizon. I arose and found the strength to stumble through the door, and I looked at the sun. I had not realized it, but there was something amiss. These hours that I had been free from my cell, the sun's position had not changed at all. I had wondered what this could mean and it furthered my suspicions that made me question reality. I sought answers, and if anything kept me forging on, it was that I would not find them here.

On the ground was a familiar object that I had nearly forgotten: it was my belt. This granted me the realization that

this was the path leading to the overlook that I had seen from the balcony above the demon. In it was the Estus Flask, as the knight had called it, but to my stupefaction, and even more so to my dismay, the bottle was empty and the cork was nowhere to be found. I, however, would not abandon this strange thing, but take it as a keepsake. I tied the loose ends of my belt diagonally around my injured left shoulder and my right hip, and followed the old ruined path.

As I traveled up the path, I wanted more than anything to let my mind wander. I wanted to ponder on things that I did not understand, but only one thing occupied my mind. The words that the knight had said to me echoed behind my eyes: "*Perhaps you could keep the torch lit.*" I did not understand what he wanted from me. Why did he aid me in my escape? Again, so many questions with the answers so distant and unknown. I looked into the deep valley guarded by great mountains in every direction and I felt comforted.

Standing at the pointed edge, I found a small patch of flowers below my feet. They were exceedingly beautiful, brandishing colors of red, blue, yellow, and violet; not much color was to be seen within the walls of the prison. I picked them and held them to my nose, inhaling their soft, earthen scent and for a moment, I had forgotten my pain. From the

overlook, I threw them into the wind, hoping that one day someone may enjoy seeing them as I did while they flutter by like a departing daydream.

Then, a momentary silence shrouded even the sound of the breeze above the valley, and then I heard it. It was the punctual sound like bursts of wind tearing forth into the air. From the edge of the summit rose a winged shadow as black as the starless night. The dark avian deity hovered in place on flapping wings and studied me, its eyes twinkling with righteous judgement. One's first thought would be to draw their sword, but I knew that its purpose was not to harm me. I sensed that the answers I sought were the secrets that it kept. I took a knee and bowed to the majestic thing, and on this gesture, it placed me in its talons and whisked me away into the open sky.

I had grieved because I had conquered. I found purpose in my triumph over the asylum, but after that, there was nothing. Now, in the sky high above my prison, it mattered not. My purpose now lied in wherever I was to go. I preferred to be a rodent in the talons of my destiny than a bird in a fateful cage.

"In thine exodus from the Undead Asylum," I remembered.

Before, I had thought about the good knight and wondered about the things he had said. In this moment, I felt as if his words, whether he meant it to be so or not, were made to guide me. I did not know what he meant by un-dead, nor did I know anything about a land of ancient lords and bells. However, I learned something that I wished he could have known for himself: there is freedom in courage for those who oppose their fate, and in persistence, even freedom from death.