

### **Near, Far, Wherever You Are...**

“Jordan,” a voice strained from behind him, eventually trailing off. He froze. Picking up again, the voice continued, “you must stop this.”

“Stop what?” His lips silently mouthed these words with some difficulty. He looked towards his hands for some clue. One informed him that he held a pack. The other suggested that he retain his composure, lest he stick himself with one of his own arrows. Jordan carefully released the final arrow, allowing it to slide down and join the rest of his provisions as he hoisted the bag to his back. Although his legs attempted to continue moving forward, Jordan would not allow them to do so until they brought him to face the familiar voice of the woman behind him. She still looked stunning, even in this moment. Mortal men would have difficulty ignoring such a radiant creature, but Jordan could only look past her face with his own distressed expression.

“Surely you have done enough. How could it not be enough?” She pleaded, trying to avoid sounding desperate, “So you don’t have to—”

“I’m sorry,” he cut her off, attempting to ease some suffering. “You should know better than anyone that there comes a time when we all must wrestle with our demons. Hope as we may, there is no other way out.” Any confidence he displayed was for show, but it offered something to have faith in. The woman pondered this a moment, apparently affected.

“Please, come back to me,” she replied, feigning some relief after Jordan’s weak display of courage. It was clear to her that any attempts to stop him would only cause more strife. The only option was to support him with all of her might. If he could not believe in himself, he could at least believe in the one who believes in him.

“Stacia, if even an ounce of me remains in control out there, know that I will return to you unharmed,” Jordan replied with conviction, suddenly full of vigor. With resolve, he turned to continue his way out of the encampment.

“I will not marry a corpse,” Stacia said to herself, relieved that her words were not a lie.

Jordan continued travelling across the land, searching far and wide for the objective whose completion might finally give him peace. In the distance, he spotted a small and unassuming settlement. Containing a single building and only modest garden,

it was likely the home of a hermit. The area was completely surrounded by sharpened logs that were driven into the ground, providing a powerful barrier to repel those with ill intentions. Curiously though, despite the two entrances to the compound being blocked with multiple heavy gates, all were left open. Was this an oversight? Jordan dismissed this idea rather quickly, for no man would be foolish enough to take such an effort building a wall and a life for himself only to leave it at the mercy of some unreliable higher power. An invitation perhaps? Jordan considered this possibility a bit longer. Far more likely however, was that it was a trap – simply the means to enable the terrible machinations of some unseen villain. Rarely would the Hearthlands offer any sort of hospitality to a traveler. As Jordan considered the nature of this settlement, he came to realize that regardless of its owner's intention, he was about to make an enemy. Jordan's body was already standing just outside the open gates with bow drawn and arrow nocked, waiting to pierce deep into the flesh of any unfortunate soul who happened by. As unsettling as his body's actions were, they could not compare to whatever demon currently plagued his thoughts.

"You have to stay back, fair?" The words suddenly entered Jordan's mind as if he were reading them off of some script, "I'll come out and one verse one, deal?" Jordan only grew more disturbed as a myriad of additional and unrecognized voices suddenly erupted in his head, speaking all manner of incomprehensible nonsense.

"I'm gonna actually one verse one someone, but—" one of the voices began to say before being cut off by another.

"I mean, I could port through one of these ports, get waylaid, and then we all just port back through them and one of you guys fight 'em, or like, pretend to fight 'em."

"Eric could fight 'em," piped up another, "would probably be your best, uh, bet."

"I could fight 'em," said even another, presumably an unproven minor demon known as Eric.

"Eric will die, I can feel it," replied the one who clearly relished in the morbidity of death.

"I don't think so," Eric protested. Jordan's expression was locked in a state of utter confusion and bewilderment as these alien thoughts permeated every corner of his consciousness. But the barrage would not cease.

“Eyes you suspiciously,” proclaimed one, eliciting a slight chuckle from another.

“I didn’t even click it before,” queried a confused sounding demon.

“Was it aggro?” Came a reply using Jordan’s own voice, though Jordan could no longer determine if these were real thoughts or just some demon capable of mimicking the voice of his inner speech.

“No whu I do no may whu whatiya may one a you guys did it,” one or maybe multiple beasts began speaking incoherently, overlapping one another. Jordan saw the flash of a man before him.

“Fucking Bob Dole,” a demon commanded, and an arrow flew from Jordan’s bow at nearly point blank range. The man identified as Bob Dole was easily penetrated by Jordan’s shaft, whipping Jordan into a frenzy as bodily fluids gushed out and covered the pair.

“Oh fuck I shot him,” Jordan thought, at first horrified by his actions, but quickly turning to wild glee, “I shot him! Yo come out, come out. He’s out, he’s out. Yeah,” he continued, now encouraging these demonic energies to control his body and act without inhibition.

“Is he really out?” One of the entities asked, unclear whether it meant to ask if Bob has left the protection of his stronghold’s walls, or to imply that the Jordan that just began to surface was the true nature of the man’s character.

“Did you do any damage?” One of them demanded to know.

“Sixty-one,” Jordan proclaimed proudly.

“Oh my God, Coles, you better watch your asshole,” it replied, clearly pleased by that response. Jordan wiped the blood from his face and retreated as Bob gave chase, but Bob’s speed could not match Jordan’s lithe and nimble frame. Laughter continued in Jordan’s mind as he toyed with Dole further. “Oh dude, come here, he’s coming for me,” Jordan taunted while emitting maniacal laughter, “that’s so funny.” Realizing the futility of the pursuit, Bob retreated back within his walls.

“Is he actua – tell me if comes out,” requested one of the voices.

“He’s trying to–,” a quiet voice in the background began to say, perhaps trying to empathize with Bob’s situation, before it was cut off by Jordan’s own thoughts.

“He’s like ‘ow!’,” Jordan thought sarcastically, mocking the suffering of his victim.

“He’s trying to fucking hurt Coles is what he’s trying to do,” one of Jordan’s demons suggested, attempting to rationalize Jordan’s aggression as something like preemptive self-defense to keep the now suppressed compassion and morality from reawakening.

“Coles!” A voice tried to speak again.

“Oh well,” Jordan dismissed it.

“You just completely—,” another jumped in.

“I’m mute again. I hit him for seventy-three armor and sixty-one health,” Coles cut this one off too, still clearly enamored with his previous exploit.

“Oh my God. You’re killing me. You’re killing me Coles,” it continued after Jordan finished, causing Jordan to laugh drunkenly.

“Ok, so we’re down to about three hundred,” a third began to say.

“Uh, it was heat of the moment man, you know?” Jordan replied, and then paused for a while. The entity known as Eric materialized its corporeal form on the other side of Bob Dole’s hideout.

“Alright, he’s outside talking to Eric,” Jordan began to inform the voices still in his head, “Eric’s like ‘you two time stat me, come.’”

“He wants me to come right next to his door!” Eric exclaimed with excessive enthusiasm as he considered the absurdity of such a request.

“No, Eric, don’t even go near the dey – don’t,” another demon warns Eric.

“Yo, if you have a move queued and he runs in, you might like run in, so,” Jordan joins the conversation supporting the one demon’s hesitation. Multiple voices come together to agree with the pair.

“Just say ‘no door,’ just say that, just say it again,” Eric is advised by a fan of Robert Cox and David Cantor.

“Alright, he’s out a bit. He aggroed,” Jordan advised Eric.

“Ok, he’s aggroed you guys,” the Cox and Cantor fan reiterates with some authority.

“W-w-w-w-wait, he’s pulling back towards the door, like immediate,” Coles warns, “be careful Eric.”

“Alright, Eric, he’s not, he’s not going to come away from that,” the Cox and Cantor fan agrees again.

“Just get your defenses up Eric and stay back,” suggests one of the wiser entities.

“Holy shit it’s five fucking points for fucking–,” Eric begins to speak, but trails off.

“Yeah, that’s why you need to get your defenses and stay back,” the wise demon replied, unaware of the fate that befell his companion as Bob Dole surged forward to exact his vengeance. Jordan’s eyes grow wide as he is forced to witness the slaughter.

“Eric’s down dude!” Jordan alerts the other voices, “woah, what?” He continues in disbelief that one of the monsters that formerly plagued his brain could be struck down so effortlessly.

“Did you just die now?” One of the remaining creatures asks, but there would be no Eric to answer.

“Yeah, he did,” Jordan is forced to reply in Eric’s stead.

“No! What the fffffff,” the creature continues, clearly affected by the situation as it floods Jordan’s being with a whirlwind of emotions, “Coles, take his body and Hearth it back,” it demands. But Coles would be unable to carry out this order.

“You people,” a voice laments.

“Alright, he’s coming for me,” Jordan interrupts, as Dole charges out at him, spirits bolstered from the recent victory over his terrible foe.

“Just run Coles, run Coles, run,” suggests a demon, fearing for the life of his host. There is no doubt that Eric can be resurrected later using some horrible ritual, which would certainly be made easier if his corporeal form could be recovered, but it would be rendered completely impossible if the host body of Jordan Coles is also slain.

“We need, we need the other body,” the one insists.

“He’s back at his gate now. He ran inside. Bob Dole’s friend is out, oh shit,” Jordan confirms the futility of the rescue.

“Just run Coles, Coles just run, we can’t save his body now,” the other continues.

“That was fucking retarded though,” Coles concludes, dissatisfied that he could not again experience the pleasure of taking a man’s life.

“That was funny,” a particularly sadistic creature speaks up while holding back laughter, but eventually gives in and many others join in his merriment.

“Like took a shot at him and I don’t even, I think it missed, and then he just went like instadown,” Jordan stumbles over his words, attempting to make some sense of the situation. The cheers and bickering of the demons disappear as quickly as they began, and Coles slowly becomes riddled with guilt from the events he was forced to witness and participate in. He takes off into the forest, running as quickly as he can to find a stream to wash away the evidence of his sin. He cleans the blood from his clothes and presses the memories to the back of his mind before starting the long journey back to his betrothed.