

The Realms of Remembrance

By

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Prologue

Daniel's vision slowly returns to him as the taste of snow, dirt, and blood fills his mouth. The only thing that he is able to hear as he comes to is the ringing inside of his head. A piercing, high pitched shriek that permeates his ability to process the reality that he finds himself in. His father has, once again, used his giant, hairy, callous-covered hands to strike him down onto the ground in front of their home.

This isn't the courtyard. This isn't the school. Something is different now.

"She would've stayed if it wasn't for your stupid fuckin' ass, kid!" he shouts as he stumbles through the front door and out into the dirt street that connects their home with the rest of town in one direction and southeast towards Helsterton in the other. "If it wasn't for having to keep up with your bullshit, she would still be here, but she isn't."

They've spent the past two years going through this same routine; father begins drinking before midday and by the time Daniel arrives home in the evening, he is completely shitfaced and ready to blame his son for all that's wrong with his life.

Things slowly start to come into focus as Daniel's hearing and vision slowly return. He realizes that he is lying face down in the sloshy, snow-covered area outside of his front door. Their home is located in the outer region of the Black Hill neighborhood. There are approximately a half dozen homes around it, but the neighbors have stopped reacting when Raymond gets into another physical altercation with his son. Daniel begins to pull himself to a standing position by getting onto his knees. When he does this, the ringing begins to fade as the sharp, unrelenting nausea begins to set in. He almost begins to vomit but he is able to keep things down. Everything around

him is in constant motion as he attempts, once again, to stand up and tell his pathetic father to go to sleep.

“Father, why are you doing this to me?! I didn’t do anything! Everything is going to be okay, just go on to bed,” shouts Daniel, as best he can in his weakened state.

He uses the rail along the pen next to his house to bring himself to a standing position. Daniel is able to eventually plant his feet firmly onto the ground while using the pen to help prop his right leg up. He stares at Raymond, who appears to be rotating clockwise through Daniel’s vision as he tries to recover from the open-palmed strike he received from his father. While he waits for his vision to catch up with him, he wonders why he doesn’t just move in with Alex. His parents have already said he could do so. Maybe he thinks that he can “save” him. Maybe he thinks he owes it to his mother to try to keep an eye on him. The image of that bastard continues to rotate inside his mind.

As Daniel struggles to justify his actions that led up to tonight, his sight slowly begins to steady. Before him stands the person who has made his life a living hell for many years. He wonders how he should best handle getting his father to bed.

However, as he stands there, motionless, looking directly into his father’s eyes, he realizes that something isn’t right. A wry grin begins to encompass the face of his father, who has realized that Daniel finally sees it, too. His ability to fight off the head injury-induced nausea fades as the area in front of him is showered with orange vomit. Daniel falls to his knees again, surrounded by snow and discharge as he raises his head to look at his father. He can’t look away. He studies the details of his face, his clothes, his wretched hands.

“You... You’re dead. How are you here?”

The smile across Raymond's face becomes even more sinister. He realizes that he can now drop the facade. Raymond *is* dead, and has been for more than 10 moons at this point, and now whatever this is doesn't have to pretend otherwise.

“Daniel, you used the death of your father as a means of escaping your responsibility in owning your part in this flawed relationship. Instead of coming to terms with what *you* did wrong, you only focused on what *he* did, and when he left this world you laid down all of your faults and never once stopped to examine yourself.”

During this exchange, Daniel tries to keep his composure but is unsuccessful, because once the entity that has taken on the appearance of his father begins to talk, he loses all control. The entity continues to speak, but the deep, distorted voice coming from that body is drowned out by screams. Eventually, the entity stops speaking and waits for a pause in Daniel's shouting.

The entity that has taken on the appearance of Raymond Erikson begins to transform. Within seconds, he grows more than a foot and a half taller than his normal height, his spine cracking and protruding out even further than before. The weathered contouring around his eyes begins to make way for something much more dark. No longer are his eyes the shade of green they once were; in their place are irises that are a deep red. His arms, chest, legs all begin to thicken with muscle, with the sound of more bones continuing to crack.

This is not Daniel's father. This is the thing that has tormented him since he entered this realm. There will be no moving on from this, no filling his time by adventuring with his friend Alex. No, he is going to have to face the literal demon in front of him if he ever wants a chance at a normal life.

Chapter 1

The recorded history of the realm of Low Moor only dates back approximately 1100 years, but these are the facts that are known about the world. There have always been ten states. The most prominent players on the global stage are the Republic of Thatclif, the Ansarian Union, and the Mer Empire. Together those three states are home to more than half of Low Moor's population.

Right now, all states are at peace with one another. The primary struggle facing the world currently is the Chistonese Drought, impacting the daily lives of people in more than five states, from the Kingdom of Hellswest to the Republic of Car. Beyond that, the Republic of Thatclif is facing a severe fever spreading in its central region and a tsunami that has crashed on its easternmost point. The Mer were initially reluctant to provide aid, but ultimately decided an earnest attempt at maintaining the current calm was worth the cost.

North about 200 kilometers from the Ansarian capital of Sudbury is Treford. Treford, a town that is home to fewer than two thousand people, has built up an economy and culture primarily driven by hunting and its thriving marketplace that sits in the neighborhood of Old Treford. Most able-bodied folk end up working directly in the hunting industries or in something that is supported by it. The large farmland and diverse fauna that occupy much of the mountainous, heavily-wooded areas surrounding the community give the townspeople a steady source of income.

Daniel Erikson and Alex Fairhaven begin their day like they do most days, they meet at the old stone building behind Alex's family home in the Upper Ward north of the town square.

"Are you ready to go?" asked Alex.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. Just let me finish packing my stuff,” replied Daniel.

“What stuff? You don’t need much for hunting? I’m the one using a bow and arrow anyway. All you need is your knife and *maybe* some rope,” said Alex.

Daniel responds with “Well, I also need my books and my staff and my…”

“Anything else?” said Alex, in a tone that let Daniel know he was letting himself get swept up again. Daniel smiles and stops talking.

“Where do you want to go today?” said Alex.

Daniel replies with “Let’s go to the Black Hills. We’ve never done a hunt there and I feel like we aren’t making any more progress in the woods around here.”

“Yeah, I think the deer are getting to know us on a first name basis around here,” chuckled Alex.

Alex had some reservations about hunting in an area that he wasn’t familiar with, but he swallowed those reservations a little further down for the moment. Daniel still isn’t okay and he doesn’t want him to worry.

“I’ll take my compass, too!” proclaimed Daniel.

“Why? We know these woods like the back of our hand? We’ve spent years in them,” replied Alex.

“We know *these woods*, yes, but we don’t know the Black Hills all that well. Best we prepare,” said Daniel.

Alex sighs “Ugh, *fine*.”

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Daniel, 16 years old, comes from a family of pig farmers who had operated their farm for years on the outskirts of town. His hair is unkempt; his sandy blonde hair fraying in multiple directions. He wears a thin, long sleeved beige top that is likely not going to be warm enough for the day that lies ahead for them. His brown trousers are tucked into his weathered black boots that come up to almost the halfway point of his calves. At Daniel's hip is a small, four inch knife with a curved blade. The knife was used by his father back when their farm was successful. Fixed to his back is a holster for the quarterstaff that he carries. Last year he saved every coin he could find for six moons to buy the cheapest quarterstaff that was available in Old Treford. He dreams of attending the Hellswest Insitute of the Arcane when he is able to afford to do so. His abilities in the art of magic are still... developing. There are no resources or organizations that teach these skills in this region, so Daniel has resorted to teaching himself using a text that he found at a trading post earlier this year.

Alex, on the other hand, is much more grounded to the here-and-now in his hometown. Eight moons Daniel's senior, Alex is the son of successful merchants in Tafford, which has afforded his family the security of their home that sits on the outskirts of the castle that you find if you follow most streets northward in Treford. Not wealthy by any stretch, but their success in the local trade economy has afforded them stability. Alex has been raised to not rest on his laurels, and plans to work his way up similarly to his mother and father. He wears a clean, long-sleeved white shirt that is tucked into a pair of maroon-colored trousers. Atop this shirt is a tan-colored vest that will serve him in keeping him warm during their hunt today. Around one shoulder is the brown quiver used to carry a small number of arrows. On the other shoulder is Alex's simple bow, being

held in place by his arm between the bow itself and its bowstring. Made of a thin, but strong type of Marlnian wood that hunters across the realm rely on.

“Let’s get out of here, we’re losing sunlight,” said Alex.

Since the death of Daniel’s father nearly two years ago, Alex has allowed him to tag along with him on his daily hunts. Alex and Daniel spend most days hunting the northeastern woods outside of town, past the farmland that has engulfed miles of the countryside, to hunt for deer, rabbits, and the like. Today, however, they will be hunting for deer in the mountains south of town, known to everyone as the Black Hills.

It needs to be clarified that “Black Hills” and “*The Black Hills*” are two different things. “Black Hills” is the name of the “rough” part of town and “The Black Hills” is the name of the mountainous region to the south of town. No one knows why they didn’t give the area its own name and over time people have stopped asking questions as to why. It just is.

Daniel and Alex slowly begin making their way down towards the market in the center of town. The market serves as the dividing line between what’s considered to be the “nice” part of town and the previously mentioned “rough” part of town. Old Treford versus Black Hills. Alex longs for the pastries on display at the baker’s kiosk. Daniel looks at the collections of books on display with one of the merchants and wonders if there’s another spell book that he could find.

“Come on, Daniel. Maybe if we can finish things up early today and get our pay, we can come back before things close up.”

They avoid the large puddles of mud in the center of the square. This is, without question, the most heavily traveled road in town so without regular maintenance and cleaning up things get

muddy quickly. There's always been a small conflict between the town council and the managers of the market as to who should be responsible for maintaining things such as this, which has resulted in no one taking ownership.

Daniel and Alex make their way further south through the town, almost dancing around the crowds to avoid running into people. The further south they go, the more thinner the crowds and the more dilapidated the buildings around them become. Once you get near the edge of town, about three quarters of a mile away from the square, the sound of the boisterous group of merchants and customers begins to fade into sounds of nature. The chirping of birds, the sound of the stream that leads into the lake, some chatter at a nearby barn. The tone shifts suddenly as you travel south, but it isn't entirely unwelcome.

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It's been several hours since they left Alex's home on their daily hunt, however they have not been successful in securing the corpse of an animal to return home with. In that time, they traveled south through the entirety of Treford, walking past the expansive produce farms immediately south of town and the increasingly sparse housing that occupies the rural space as you head further into the Black Hills. The evidence that this not an oft-traveled road becomes more clear, as foliage, high grass, and hardly any signs that a dirt road was even there to begin with become more frequent. There are three roads that exit the town toward the south; one heading southwest to Altfield, one that guides you southeast towards Helsterton and Uxbird, and then there is one that goes more directly south straight into the Black Hills.

It isn't fair to the mountain range to say that it has a bad reputation among the locals, as it is generally believed to be a safe location. But knowing how things work in small villages, rumors

are quick to spread and blossom into fantastical stories about the horrors that lie in wait. Magical beasts that roam the hills, occult rituals that are practiced in the dead of night, that sort of thing. Regardless, no one really seems to take that kind of talk too seriously.

They come to a point in the road where its state worsens. As they walk the path, Daniel notices something to his right.

“Hey, it looks like there’s a trail over there!” he proclaims.

“I’m not too sure it’s such a good idea. I’m starting to think that we made a bad decision coming this way. This whole day is probably going to be a big waste,” said Alex.

“Come on! We’re *hunting*. This isn’t supposed to just be a casual stroll down the street, we need to go into the wilderness to find what we’re looking for.”

Alex still isn’t entirely sure about this. He doesn’t know these woods as well as he knows them to the north, and even though he doesn’t put much stock in those rumors, they still seem to occupy a small space in the forefront of his mind throughout this trip. He wouldn’t dare speak that concern to Daniel, though, as he would never hear the end of it.

“If you say so,” says Alex, who doesn’t realize that his concerns about this place are more than justified.

END OF PREVIEW