

Return to Duspit

The road was long gone, taken by sand and time. The old sign that hung at its main road was now just two posts with a limp broken chain hanging like a dead snake. The ramshackle buildings that had made the town, crumpled where they once stood, and more were just heaping piles of dried dead wood. It brought me some joy to see Duspit in such a condition. What still stood was sandblasted and scraped raw. Any of the very few signs that still hung were rubbed smooth. The mountain looming over the town: red, rocky, and dominating.

My first stop was at Harry's. The windows to the shop were boarded, and the massive door had another three boards nailed across it lengthwise. I hopped off and tied Pearl to the hitch out front and strapped her feedbag to give her some oats. "Stay here, girl," I say with a pat. I first try to pry at the boards, but they would not budge. Maybe, just maybe.

I went around back through the alley to the backdoor and perhaps you could call it luck, it was left unboarded. Perhaps when Harry had left for the final time, he figured no one would come back this way. But why board it at all in the first place? I put my foot on the step up towards the door, it creaks and complains, slowly I put more weight on it, half-expecting to crash through the boards. It manages to not kill me, thank God. Reaching for the knob, the door would not budge, locked.

An idea hits me. There's no way it could still be there. I look for the cutout in the doorframe, and there it was! I slip my finger into the small groove Harry carved and entrusted me with the knowledge of its existence. I pull it loose and there it is, a dingy-looking key. It had been sitting in that hollow board for decades. I twist and spin the thing between my fingers, just like when I was a boy. I take the ancient key and put it in the keyhole and with a twist and a click I hear the lock turn over. I'm back.

The door moans and groans as I push it open. I slip the key into my pocket. I'm not expecting to find anything here, I just want to reminisce. There is a faint smell of old rot in the air, the smell of meat long since decomposed. It's all still there, the meat

grinder where I had spent many an hour grinding beef and making sausages. Hooks still hang about the ceiling, with bones still scattered on the floor below. And I can't believe my eyes, Harry's Cleaver! As a boy, it naturally was big to me, but even now it is a mighty sight to behold. Why would he leave this behind? It was one of his greatest treasures. It was stuck blade-first in the counter; I saw him do it thousands of times whenever he was needed elsewhere. The counter was nicked and held marks from all the stabbings it had taken. The blade was still in fine condition considering its age. I grabbed at the handle and attempted to yank it free. That cleaver must have weighed at least 30 pounds if not more. The blade stood firmly, I pulled, I shook, and I did everything in my power to move it. When Harry clomped it down all those years ago, he meant for it to stay here. Was it even right for me to take it? I decided to leave it be for now and finish with my memories. I could go downstairs, where Harry had once lived. Harry forbade me from going down there without express permission, but what harm could it do now?

Harry's butchery as far as I knew was the only place in town with a basement. He had dug it out of the sand himself and was proud to say so. The door leading downward much to my surprise was also locked. I pulled the key from my pocket and try to fit it in the lock, once again I am surprised to see that it turns, Harry must have skimped on the locks whenever he installed them. I try to pull the door open, but KERCHUNK. A chain holds the door partially closed, and of course, it's a big heavy chain, half-giant perks. I don't have anything that can cut a chain such as this one. I think for a moment, a half-giant solution to a half-giant problem. I go back to the cleaver stuck in the meat counter. I look at the blade and then at the hooks above. I take a rope from my pack and tie one end to the handle, then I throw the rope over one of the meat hooks attached to the ceiling, then I say a short prayer hoping the old ceiling holds. I put all my weight into it, I pull and strain at the rope, and with a sudden WHOOSH I am flat on my back looking up at a massive blade hanging just over me, my own sword of Damocles.

I carefully maneuver out from under the blade and lower it onto the floor. I lift it with help from both hands and realize, I am not going to cut the chain with this. With a great amount of care, I take the sacred blade and wrap it ever so carefully in a spare blanket from my bag. I decided to leave it on the ground for now and return to the door. I sit by it and ponder for a moment, an idea struck! I reach back into my bag and find my notebook; I pull out a piece of scrap scroll I had picked up many years ago. I open the door very slightly, not letting the chain catch all the way. I hold the scrap just inside and speak its command. A ghostly hand reaches out from the paper and grabs ahold of the chain. I feel it give a mighty heave and the chain falls to the doorframe. The hand vanishes and the paper falls apart to dust, a one-time use. I pull the door open and peer into the room before me, and it is at this moment that I realize. How could Harry have chained the door from the inside before he left?

He was on the bed. Or should I say, what was left of him? Harry was lying on his bed, a few grey hairs still hanging from his gaunt head. His eyes were deep and sunken, lips slightly retracted revealing the teeth within. I failed to consider that he had never left at all. Harry was one of few if not the only person to have pride in Duspit. It was that pride that gave me strength in a time when I had none. It should come as no surprise that he would be the last resident of his town. A wave of guilt and shame washed over me, I had not only broken into his tomb but plundered it by taking his cleaver. I felt terrible, no better than those rotten knights, stealing from the dead. "I'm sorry."

He has a blanket drawn up just above his stomach. For being decades dead, I can still see Harry through the years of decomposition. The lines of laughter below his eyes, the bulbous nose that could smell when meat was at its best. His once mitt-like hands, rest at his sides, uncharacteristically thin and skeletal. He looked as if he had locked up one night and drifted off to meet his end. Truly the best way anyone could wish to go. I bow my head at my first master's bedside and give him all I can. I prayed his end was peaceful and he left this life with no regrets, but more importantly, I beg for his forgiveness. This intrusion is a sin I can't forget. After my prayer, I returned his blade

from upstairs and laid it before him. A butcher should never be without his knife. Excusing myself, I left Harry to his rest.

I closed the door behind me and cast an arcane lock upon it. Now no one can ever open this door again, not without my say-so at least. Which I shall never allow, it is the very least I can do. I crept out the backdoor and relocked that door as well, but I took the key with me. Harry is safe from fools such as me. I return to the main street. And look about, I see the bar. The place where I shot and killed the filth who took my mother from me. I thought about going in, but this was not supposed to be a trip about anger, I'm here to remember. I strode by the bar without another glance and turned towards the shacks, home.

#10, the rusted iron numbers still hung above the door. I wondered if someone ever moved in after I had fled. Unlikely, this town was dead the moment the mine collapsed. The door practically fell off its hinges and I entered with no hassle. Much too quickly my suspicions are confirmed as I saw a large rust-colored stain on the wood, mama. The breath is ripped from my chest, I turn away and press myself to the frame outside the shack, the only thing holding me up. Why the hell did I come in here? Why am I torturing myself into reliving some of the worst days of my life? A sound escaped from me somewhere between a welp and a cry. I could feel my stomach churning and I fell to my knees to vomit into the dust. I'm trying to breathe, but I am consumed by anguish. Mama should not have ended up that way. If I had been better or worked harder she never would have had to do the things she did just to get us through. That stain is my fault, her blood stains my soul as much as it does that floor.

I do my best to get my wits back together, but like this town, it is lost in the dust. I rinse my mouth out with my water skin and chase it down with a slug from my flask. Alas, the last of my flask. I take a few deep breaths and am finally able to collect myself. "I'm not here to get angry," I tell myself repeatedly. But I still see the stain in my mind, I know I need to go in again. I need to remember, to move on, I need to remember, everything.

I stand up and brush the dust off my coat. Slowly, I turned back toward the door. I kept my eyes upward towards the ceiling, my body not quite ready to look anywhere else. I fight all my instincts and force myself to look back down. The stain is still there, where else would it go? It disturbs me so deeply to see the spot where she died. To see evidence of her murder, decades later. The rest of the room looks the same as the day I left. Only with a fine layer of dust over everything. Cups still sat in the cabinet, and a plate rested on the table, empty. Tears welled up as I saw our cots. The blankets were stripped and moth-eaten to threads. The pillows were moth-eaten and ragged by time. But this is where we slept, all three of us. Would any of us be where we are today? One lost in iron and coal, another buried beneath a dead tree, and then me, a lost boy still weeping over his parents, decades after their deaths. I stand over my old cot, and that's when I see them. Still standing in their row, waiting for my orders, the little wooden figures Bucket had carved on The Dragon. I pick one up and examine it. His plain face looks back at me, and I feel a smile take over me. My first toys, I remember the trip, Bucket and Buckle, steering the vessel, and the pride on my parents' faces when they saw me at the helm. A bead of hope fills my heart and I know I'm ready for the last part of my visit, it's time to go see them.

I decide to take a few mementos from my old home, at least this time they are unarguably mine to take. Firstly, my soldiers. Then I find my father's favorite mug, the bluebird still visible if not a bit faded. And a picture on the wall I had drawn many years ago that my mother had framed. It was of the three of us on The Dragon, represented by crude figures of ourselves, with me steering us to a better place. I take a final look at the stain, the last remnants of her. I slowly drop to one knee and lay my hand on the stained board, "I love you, mama. And I'm sorry." I stood to leave and closed the door behind me for the final time and struck a match.

The dry timbers took the flame quickly, I watched with satisfaction as the flame from the match grows, first across the front steps, then up the walls, and then to the neighboring shacks. The flames engulfed all the shacks, and I watched as our home was consumed in flame. No one will miss it.

I made my way down the road to the cemetery just outside the main village, a couple of stones still stood. Although the names were long worn away from years of sandstorms. I looked around for the tree but could not find it. I was on my third lap around when I noticed a stump. A lonely, gnarled, and completely overlookable stump. This is the spot where I had buried my mother, and all there was to mark it was a pathetic stump. The handmade wood marker I made was long gone. The only other evidence of her existence currently burning to the ground. "Hey, mama. I've been thinking about you and father. And our lives together. There's so much I wish I could tell you, I was married for a time, and if a woman named Amelia tells you stories about me, they're probably true. We had a daughter, Anna. She's safe. Heck, I even died once myself, long story. I'm sorry I haven't visited sooner; it's just been a mess. I wish you were here to tell me what I'm doing wrong and how I could be doing it right. I wish you were all here, I just feel, so alone." The tears poured, the feelings overwhelm me, and years of loss and failure rush to the surface. I dig my hands into the dust, trying to feel her presence. But the fact is I was and still am, alone.

After letting all the trapped emotions I had out of my system. I decide to finally give my parents the proper tombstone that they deserved. I look and see a short clifflike mound just over yonder, I go and find a flatter piece of Redstone and set to work carving their names.

Tobias and Mary

Burrows

Loving Parents and a Testament to Bravery

Ne Obliviscaris

I stand the makeshift stone up and plant it firmly in the dusk, I use other stones to help keep it in place; it ain't exactly pretty, but it's the best I can do. "I'm going to go see dad now, I won't ever forget. Never." I kissed the tips of my fingers and pressed them to the stone.

I approach the mountain, the mouth-like tunnel harboring doom from within. I enter the tunnel, it only goes in 20 meters or so before it is blocked off by the cave-in. And somewhere deep beyond, is my father. "Hey, dad. Just went and saw ma. I'm sure she'll be bragging that I went to see her first, just how it worked out. I miss you, there's so much I wish I could tell you. Or, I guess that you could tell me. I feel lost. Like my purpose is just gone. I want to keep fighting, but I'm just so tired. I wish I had woken up earlier that day, I wish I had gotten the chance to say goodbye in person, and not just to a rock. I made a stone for you and mama. I hope you like it." I take out my flask and raise it to my lips, somehow even emptier than before. "And I didn't even bring any to share." I chuckle at the tragedy. "I gotta go, dad. Take care of mama." I turn away from the rock wall and feel a desperate need to get a drink, and maybe I know just the place.

The bar was strangely in decent shape. Cloths cloaked the tables and chairs, ridden with holes, but undoubtedly still standing. I swung the doors open, and to my surprise, they did not fall off their hinges. Of course, this is the only building that kept up despite no souls tending to it for decades. I am also disappointed to see no mark or stain marking the spot I had shot Tom. Nobody wants to drown their sorrows over blood stains.

I help myself to behind the bar and I'm both unsurprised and disappointed to not find a drop to drink. I check the stores, but nothing. James claimed Beltrand kept his own personal store in the back, up inside the ceiling. I go through the passage that leads into the backside of the bar. It is cleaned out, Beltrand must have abandoned ship too.

I grab a chair from upfront and use it to peek up into the rafters above. Tucked back all the way rolled up against the wall, shining like the sun, a lone bottle. I can just barely touch it with my fingertips, slowly, little by little I can pull it forward. I finally

can get fingers on top and then over. I pull the treasure out. A brown bottle of fine barrel-aged whiskey, jackpot! I take the bottle and snag one of the remaining glasses from behind the bar. I set myself down on the patron side of the bar and have myself a drink.

Sometime later, in a much better mood. I decided to mark my crime myself. Pulling my own knife from my belt, I carve in the wall just behind where Tom had stood his last.

**HERE IN GLORY DID ARLO BURROWS SHOOT AND
KILL THE MURDEROUS COWARD, TOM BERKLAND.**

I wondered if Tom was buried in the cemetery too. And whether I should pay him a special visit now that I've had my fill of drink and sorrow. I meandered my way out of the bar, and back over to Pearl. "There's my girl!" I removed the now empty feedbag and climbed back into the saddle. My pickled brain decided it had enough of this place and I rode back through the sad gates of Duspit. Decidedly and truly, for the final time.