

Part 1

# DENIAL

It took months. Months of searching, tracking, fighting, and finally, a shot. A shot in the dark, to be certain, but I'd take the words of a drunk ramble over nothing. I almost didn't believe it, not after a certain point, but that didn't matter. I found it.

The thing in front of me rose imposing out of Azaron's sands, a three pronged claw stretching up among painted cliffs, hidden like a demon's fingers pulling the strings of mortal lives. It was a hellgate. I was sure of it.

The books, old stories they were, said these could take a person to the underworld. There, they can make a request of Death himself. I intended to. I knew it would work.

As I stepped toward the wicked, toothy stones, the air grew oppressive and hot, and my skin seemed to boil. A roar deafened me as a red fiery tear split space apart, erupting between the jaws of the hellgate. A creature of horror barreled through the rift, blinding me with a torrent of dust as its feet turned the sands to glass. This was my chance. I needed to pass through the barrier, and that meant getting past that thing.

(Acrobatics: Difficulty 3)- Skip combat encounter and continue reading at  $\alpha$ .

(Enter Combat Encounter: Demon Gate Warden)- continue reading at  $\beta$ .

$\beta$  The thing fell. I felt the rift start to waver with it. I knew I had to cross the rift before it closed, or I would need to find another gate.

$\alpha$ .I dashed without consideration for the flaming eye in front of me. Before I could reconsider, I leapt through the rift, and everything went black. I felt every part of me burning. Unbearable, white hot. I feared that I'd been turned to ashes, but ashes don't think. A blinding flash interrupted my desperation, and the pain was suddenly gone. Sight returned, feeling too, but a horrid nausea overwhelmed me. I could feel myself fall to my hands and knees, but instead of letting the illness overtake me, I was relieved to feel my limbs at all.

My vision cleared. I took my time to recover, and my senses stabilized before long. I stood, and took in my new surroundings. Ashy, fine, gray sand formed the ground below my feet. I was in a basin, of sorts, and the rugged cliffs at its edge stretched up around me. I saw vegetation, sparse and sharp, resembling stone, grasping for the sky. I looked up, expecting to see the ceiling of a cave, but I saw a great blue eye, a burning sun, staining the sky around it a fiery blue that faded to purple near the horizons. Veins of white seemed to run like tangled translucent spider webs beyond it, barely visible.

I was getting distracted, and I couldn't afford to. I looked to the lands I could see outside the basin, and past the ash winds, I made out the shape of a mountain. A river of fire flowed down one side, and a waterfall flowed from the opposite. I knew that had to be my destination.

The red cliffs rose in front of me, taunting walls as an obstacle preventing me from progress. (Difficulty: 4. Fatigue: 2.)

When I reached the top, a new landscape spread out in front of me, a rolling craggy steppe, pockmarked with cliffs of that same red rock, and peppered with stony trees and rusty metallic grasses. Unfamiliar creatures stalked the gaps between the trunks, and I decided I should make my stay here short.

The creatures of the underworld all resembled the demons that inhabit its cities- somewhere between reptiles, amphibians, and mammals, with bony growths, horns, and plates covering their bodies. I expected to see things I didn't like, but these were less of a concern than the others.

Colored mists, sometimes shaped like people, wandered the landscape. They were sparse, but definitely there. I avoided them like the plague, a feeling of utter and complete dread filling me with each glance. Was this what awaited all of us?

No. I reassured myself, then continued to the peak. As I wound up the stone spire, life seemed to slip away. Fewer plants, and fewer creatures still, appeared as I ascended. Finally, at the top, looking down over the landscape, the mountain path gave way to masonry, more ancient than anything I could imagine. The mountain peak was a structure, round, with a high dome ceiling supported by pillars. Inset into the floor, lava and water ran around the outside in streams, meeting at either end of the circle. Where they did, steam and obsidian rose toward the sky. At the center of the floor, in a circle, was the statue of an angel, bent over as in prayer, with his face hidden by his hands. Hewn of gray stone with red veins running through it. When my eyes met those hands, that feeling of dread returned, but I felt compelled to look closer. His fingers were tipped with claws, each completely crafted of the red crystal that marbled the statue.

As I approached it, the feeling of dread grew. I stood in front of it, bowed head at an even level with mine. As I peered through the dark gap between the statue's hands, my heart seemed to skip every other beat. As my sight finally grasped the eye of the statue, I fell back in horror as it burst open with an orange glow.

The statue sounded like it was crumbling, pulling the temple down with it. The sound of breaking stone was all I could make out. It stood, shedding a layer of dust on the floor as it did. Its wings, stiff and stone feathers, shattered, revealing supple limbs like a bat's. The visage of its face crumbled, and I looked into the face of a skull, its lower jaw missing. This was the face of Death.

Where before I felt compelled to see his face, now, I could barely bring myself to look upon him. Every muscle in my body was paralyzed, and when he stepped toward me my stomach rose to my throat, threatening to eradicate my purpose here. I needed to stand.

Stand Up( Robustness Difficulty 4; Fatigue 4):

I pushed myself to my feet. This would work. I knew it. I met the glare of Death, and his voice finally tore into my ears.

“You have come a long way, Jack, and it’s not your time.” Every word seemed to rake my consciousness. “What do you think you’ll get from me?”

My voice did not want to obey me, but I forced words to rasp from my mouth. “I’m here for my Lily. I know you can give her back.” A horrid silence stretched forward into eternity. He stared at me, like I was a child asking for something that would hurt me. As the stillness persisted, anger grew inside me. “I know you can do it!” I demanded. Death knelt, his burning eyes mere inches from my shaking body. Half anger, half fear.

“She’s gone, Jack.” His voice was softer now. No different from before, but the terror was gone. “She has moved on. Once someone passes from here, there’s no going back.”

My heart sunk into unfathomable depths. I was sure he could bring Lily back. I’d read stories, heard testimonials, never let doubt take me, but in the face of Death himself, I knew she was gone. He stepped back to the center of the building, and the world melted around me. I was back in Azaron with nothing but my thoughts and emptiness. I started walking, back toward my home, across the desert. At first, I didn’t care if I even made it, but with every step, my heart pumped fire into my veins. A hatred grew, and an anger unrivaled by anything else. It grew until it was all I had, eclipsing every other desire. I wanted revenge.

Part 2

## ANGER

*I walked into town early in the morning. It was a backwater, like the others I had been through, but this time was different. Nobody walked the streets, no windows glowed, and nothing but the wind moved. It was abandoned, or so they would have me think. I was not that much of a fool. I pulled my gun and checked my armor. One building was different than the others, more maintained. It was obvious if you knew what to look for. I did. I fired at it. Three raiders came barreling into the street, drunk and half awake. I shot the one down before the others knew what happened.*

*Enter combat: Raiders*

*As the last of them fell, I charged into the door of the building. Their leader stood at the back. When he saw me, I could make out the face of terror past his helmet. Two shots missed, and he ran through the back door and into the desert.*

*(Athleticism Difficulty 2: Fatigue 10): I caught him. It didn’t take long. He fell down the top of a dune, rolling to the bottom. When I reached him, I saw two figures. Another*

*hunter, a gun pointed at the head of the raider captain, stood between me and what I deserved.*

Part 3

## BARGAINING

“YOU,” I SPIT, “THAT ONE BELONGS TO ME.” THE FIGURE DIDN’T MOVE, OR EVEN SEEM TO CONSIDER WHAT I SAID TO HIM. HIS GUN, A SILVER REVOLVER WITH PURPLE ENERGY SWIRLING ACROSS ITS CYLINDER AND BARREL, MENACED MY PRIZE. “I SAID, THAT ONE BELONGS TO ME. I OWE HIM.”

“REVENGE, IS IT?” THE FIGURE HAD A STRANGE DRAWL TO THE WAY HE SPOKE, LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF AN OLD STORY. “WHAT DID THE FELLA DO TO YA?”

“HE TOOK MY WIFE.”

“AND YA THINK THIS WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE?”

“NO.”

“IT WON’T BRING HER BACK, SON.”

“I DON’T CARE.”

“...”

PLEAD(PERSONALITY DIFFICULTY 10:)“LET ME TAKE HIM.”

SUCCESS: “FINE,” HE SAYS, AND STEPS BACK. I LET SIX ROUNDS TEAR THROUGH THE PILE OF COWERING FILTH BEFORE ME.

FAILURE: THE FIGURE SHOOTS HIM DOWN WITHOUT TAKING HIS EYES OFF OF ME. WRATH FILLS EVERY PART OF ME. I TURN MY GUN ON HIM.

HE VANISHES, AND BEFORE I CAN REACT, I FEEL A HAND ON MY SHOULDER. HE STANDS IN MY SHADOW, BEHIND ME.

“YA CAN’T RUN FROM YER OWN SHADOW, KID. YA CARRY IT EVERYWHERE, AND AS THE DAY TURNS INTO NIGHT, IT GROWS TIL IT SURROUNDS YA COMPLETELY.” HE PAUSES AND HOLSTERS HIS GUN, BEFORE HE GESTURES TO THE RISING SUN OVER THE BUTTES. “BUT BEFORE LONG, THE SUN COMES UP, N’ THAT SHADOW SHRINKS BACK TO NEAR NOTHIN.” HE VANISHES AGAIN, AND REAPPEARS IN THE SHADOW OF ANOTHER DUNE. WITH A WHISTLE, A DRAKE LANDS BEHIND HIM, AND HE CLIMBS ATOP. “KEEP HOLDING ON FOR MORNIN.”

HIS BEAST TAKES OFF, LEAVING ME STRANDED IN THE DESERT WITH A CORPSE.

Part 4

## DEPRESSION

It’s a long walk back home. I’m alone the whole time. Each day blends into night, and Azaron’s wilderness tries everything to take me. I fight, of course. I make it home in five, six days? I start to rebuild my home, but everything is purposeless. I have no more revenge to pursue, no chance of bringing my wife home, so why? I finish the house. I put away my armor. I put my gun on my

nightstand. Day after day passes, and each day I wake up without Lily is another stab in the heart. Days wear on without change. I stagnate. My friends all moved on with their lives or died while I was away. That stranger's words keep popping up in my mind. Death's words keep interrupting my thoughts. All I'm left with is a choice.

Pick up the gun(Dexterity Difficulty 0)

Carry on(Resolve Difficulty 10, Fatigue 1000)