College is a time of change, of finding oneself. It’s not only a matter of who sinks and who swims from orientation to graduation, but life is more than just sinking or swimming. After all, one could swim in a lake with no trouble whatsoever but emerge covered in leeches or suffer a nasty bacterial infection. Or even one could be tossed about by the turbulent waves and currents of the financial aid office being closed at inopportune times and late bus schedules, but nevertheless develop into a stronger person, beloved by those that once scorned them, like a film becoming an underground classic after being neglected for generations. Edgeworth University, located in the idyllic college city of Aldersburg, Texas, is no stranger to this mentality.

However, as the spinning, unkempt fan blades fling dust every which way above the ceiling of a modest apartment, an equally modern television plays the soothing sounds of a YouTube playlist that had been let play throughout the night at low volume. The low-level commotion slowly rises the occupant of a singular queen-sized bed, who brushes his hair out of his eyes and groans. This was Ace Flinders, a 24-year-old senior who only up until last month was rather aimless in what he wanted to do when finished his studies. When he first enrolled at Edgeworth, he seemed to be all set with inheriting his father’s work, but had recently taking an interest in writing, and often found his inspirations in a soothing contemplation of the dream he had last night, or at least what he could remember from it; something about Scarlett Johansson being his roommate? Whatever it was, he spent five minutes in vain trying to remember the details of the dream for his next piece when he looked at the clock.

11:45.

Shit.

Professor Martin’s class was starting in fifteen minutes! Haphazardly he packed his belongings into his backpack: laptop, spare charger, mouse, pens, and plastic water bottle, before rushing for the door. Normally this wasn’t an issue since he had an apartment right across the street from Edgeworth University, but it was still a fair walk, and there was the issue of both crosswalks and pedestrian traffic to consider. However, before he could reach the door, a light shone through the bottom of the door, stronger than the hall light normally did. Ace paused for a few seconds, before slowly reaching for the doorknob. Thankfully it didn’t burn him, ruling out an apartment fire, and slowly he turned the doorknob. Upon opening, the door, the light shone brighter, completely engulfing the door and briefly blinding him.

Despite the blinding light in the doorway consuming his vision, Ace pressed on through the doorway, only for the ground to give way into a sea of colors that Ace normally only saw when he closed his eyes and rubbed them. As he fell deeper and deeper into the seemingly endless technicolor abyss that painted his unorthodox adventure like if Vincent van Gogh went through an emo phase in high school, his final thoughts before blacking out drifted towards whether Professor Martin would give him an extension on the essay due on Friday or not.

When Ace awoke, he stood up, unsure what had just happened to him. Initially he wondered if he had gone back to sleep and to the dreamworld with Scarlett Johansson, but he didn’t recall her front lawn having blue grass. His next thought was that he was now in a nightmare where he had an assignment due in a class that he had not actually taking, or even worse still, back in high school. But neither Edgeworth University nor his old high school were in proximity to a column of green, blue, and purple lights shooting into the sky as far as the eye could see, like the Empire State Building was concentrated into a pillar of lights. Adding to the confusion, the distant lights illuminated a building that looked almost a century old; in fact, it bore an uncanny resemblance to the Administration Building’s bell tower on Edgeworth’s campus, one that Ace had passed by dozens and dozens of times before for years but had never ventured into himself. He thought that he had simply fallen into a dream-version of Edgeworth University, but no students walked about, nor even any religious protesters holding derogatory signs and preaching anything.

“What the hell is going on?” Ace asked to no one in particular. Despite not speaking to anyone, he would quickly find that he was not alone. A Kobold with glowing purple eyes that had been watching him had a knife drawn and was ready to throw down.

“Oi! Drop the bag and the goods!” He demanded.

“Oh, shit!”  
 Before Ace could drop his backpack, the door to the old building swung open, followed by a flash of fire knocking the kobold away, turning it into dust that faded away as a hooded figure stood before the opened door.

“After so many years, the Warrior has arrived…” The hooded figure spoke.

“…okay, I’m still processing the last ten seconds. Did you just called me a Warrior.” Ace asked, catching his breath after thankfully not catching any hands.

“I did. You are the Great Warrior Ace, the hero prophesied to save the Kingdom of Shorenth from Queen Racheauman’s dastardly reign.” The hooded man pointed to the pillar of light.

“There is her castle.” He said, pointing to the archaic structure in the distance. A spire rose dramatically into a purple mist that shrouded the top. “But, before you venture forth, allow me to tell you the tale of our people. My name is Horatio Racheauman, the brother of the queen. For the last two centuries, my wicked sister has ruled Shorenth with an iron fist. Swindling the then-current ruler off his throne with her charm and guile, she then tapped into the kingdom’s life essence, the Shora. She has used this energy to draw it into herself, retaining her youth and beauty all the while. When she started, only one vial of Shora brought her age from eighty-five to twenty-five, but as she used more and more, Racheauman required more and more Shora to get that same effect, ingesting it more and more often, never satisfied. She has even resorted to draining the Shora from political prisoners, leaving them nothing more than dust. If she were to leave her condition unchecked, she will also turn to dust. I too have used Shora to extend my own lifespan, but nowhere near as often. I fear that the very fountain may be her way to conjure a seemingly infinite reservoir of Shora to prevent that, ensuring her rule for as long as she sees fit. Or even worse, it could very well bring about not only the end of our world, but yours as well. But you…your Shora…you may use that to stop her.”

Once Horatio’s story finished, Ace took a moment to process everything that he heard before responding the only way he knew how.

“Cool story bro.” Despite trying to keep a calm demeanor, his heart was pounding in sync with his head.” Now look, I have to get back to my world as soon as possible, I have class in-” Ace took a look at his watch, only to find that there was no watch. “Uh…where’s my watch? I still don’t know how to get back!”  
 “My boy, the only way to return from whence ye came is to quell Queen Racheauman once and for all.”

“…okay, at least it’s not out of the way.” Ace grimaced. “But you don’t expect me to travel without my stuff, right? And with someone I just met?!”

“Relax.”

“RELAX?! HOW THE HELL AM I-“

Horatio handed Ace a sword that, to him, felt as light to hold as if it had been made from Ye Olde Styrofoam.

“…am I gonna say no to a pretty sweet looking sword?” Ace replied as he took a few swings with his newfound weapon. His short-lived glee soon gave rise to a darker implication. “Though I hope whatever deity runs this place doesn’t *force* me to use it.”

Ace then felt a current running through his arm, causing the sword to glow like the magic fountain, albeit much smaller.

“What the-?!” Ace exclaimed. “What the hell is this?!”  
 “Your Shora has awakened.” Horatio replied. “It channels the will of the user, within reason. For instance, while you are capable of lower tiers of attacking magic-”

Ace could feel something else dwell inside his free hand, before he shot a burst of fire magic from it, catching Horatio’s robe aflame.

“…it would be wise if you used supportive Shora magic, and your wits.” Horatio remarked, almost unfazed as he doused the flames.

“I dunno if I’ll be ready to throw hands or talk the Queen to death, but hopefully I won’t have to actually kill anyone…”

“I am sure you know by now, but you are not holding what you were carrying when you entered our domain.” Horatio stated as Ace checked his backpack, which had a handful of potions and elixirs, spare armor, and a piece of vaguely edible meat inside. Once Ace was settled, he and Horatio headed towards a massive thicket of trees that expanded as far as the eye could see, the castle towering over them.

As they traveled further and further, the air became thicker and thicker, as they traveled through a series of hills and valleys. The thick air gave Ace a flashback to his Spring Break and summer vacations in Florida. To him, this kind of air felt almost like breathing in gaseous gelatin. This kind of muggy heat couldn’t compare to the heat of his home state by a longshot, he remembered sweating in as much as 80-degree heat, while his home’s 100 degree heat could rarely get a drop of sweat out of him. Regardless, he didn’t mind those trips, always looking forward to them. His first time trying a specialty drink at a bar and getting plastered at 2 pm, his first time cutting, beer-battering, and deep-frying his own fish, the first time hearing the roars of a dragon stuck in quicksand…

…wait what?

Ace froze upon hearing the roars, and looked down into the valley that led down the path towards the castle. Unfortunately for him and Horatio, the path was blocked by a ruby-scaled dragoness the size of a horse with her front right claw submerged in a pit of black mud, struggling in vain to free it. Her eyes glowed a bright purple, just like the kobold Ace had encountered earlier. Ace stood speechless. The forest on each side of the valley was impenetrable, the only way being through the valley.

“Ohhhh god that is a dragon that’s an actual honest to god dragon what do we do what the HELL do we do”

“That’s one of Queen Racheauman’s dragons. I can tell by that glow in her eyes. We’ll have to outwit her somehow” replied Horatio.

Ace once more felt his heart pounding in his chest like he had just run a marathon in nothing but his underpants.

“Outwit?! More like out***run***! There’s no way I can kill that thing! We can’t even move her out of the way with her claw in that muck! She’s a sitting duck!” As Ace spoke, another idea came to him. The pirate’s punch, being hammered at 2 pm…that’s it! “Okay, I have an idea! We’ll…we’ll get her drunk on the potions! I’m sure I could make something that could do the trick…”

“Ace, the potions-”

“Relax, I think I have some idea what I’m doing! My sister went to a sorority in college and my dad owns a huge bar. Mixology is in the blood!” Grinning at his newfound idea, he took out three of the potions and began to haphazardly mix the potions together. “Then when she’s knocked out, we’ll pry her claw out, drag her out of the way, and we make a break for it for the castle! Then…maybe she’ll bust in at the last second and save us?” Once the potions were mixed, Ace headed down into the valley towards the dragon.

“Ace, wait!” Horatio called out in vain, trying to keep up. “The potions are not suitable libations! Oh, maybe we should have heeded his initial plan…”

“Urrrrgh, curse this damned swamp!” The dragoness growled, oblivious to the approaching Ace. “And damn the queen’s troops for leavin’ me for dead! When I get out of here, I’ll crush her *bones*…!”

Slowly Ace slinked forward, having gone too far into his plan to give up now. He didn’t want the concoction to go to waste, so he had to give it to the beast.

“Err…hey! Are you okay?” Ace asked, which he immediately recognized to be a rather stupid question to ask.

“Grrrgh, what’s it to *you*?” She snarled, agreeing with Ace’s subconscious. “I’m *supposed* to be protecting Queen Racheauman’s castle. But the troops were called back to her castle just in time to leave me behind. I oughta skin the flesh off their daft arses. But…also can’t blame anyone other than myself for gettin’ in this mess.” Her tone had a hint of regret, even with the barely contained snarl.

“Well…why not forget about the Queen? What have they done for you?” Ace asked as he handed the potion to her free claw.

“Hmph…I’d be inclined to agree, but even if I wanted to break off, the Queen controls my Shora so I’d likely snap and kill the lot of ye.”

“I mean…hopefully the drink will let you reconsider.”

The dragoness exhaled smoke from her nostrils and rolled her eyes before gulping down the concoction in one swig. Ace hoped that whatever he made, it would work its magic and knock her out right about now…

…right about now…

…right about ***now***?

“Nothing…” Ace was still not in the mood to try and kill a dragon, both having to kill and the risk of dying being rather low on his list of wants, at least four or five places below eating raw chicken, with the same chance of death in fact. However, before Ace could get the hell out of dodge, Horatio had caught up to him.

“Ace, I was trying to tell you! The potions-…have done something, look!”

Horatio turned Ace towards the dragoness, who was covering her eyes. When she had uncovered them, the Shora around her eyes had faded, thus breaking the control from the Queen to the dragon.

“The aura around her eyes is gone! Now’s our chance!” Ace reached for a thin log and dug it under the dragoness’ claw, attempting to pry it from the muck. Horatio pitched in, and in a matter of seconds, her claw came unstuck. The force caused Horatio to drop to the ground, exhausted, and the imbalance caused Ace to cut his hand on the stick.

“Aah, watch it!” He yelled.

“Ngh…forgive me, Ace. With the watchful eye of the gods as my witness, I declare…that I am too old for this shit.” Horatio huffed, dropping to his knee and clutching his staff.

The dragoness shook the mud off her claw as she exited the valley as Ace tended to his cut hand. Thankfully it wasn’t anything too serious, and he was able to help Horatio up the valley beside the beast.

“Well, thank you both for freeing me, and for severing the Queen’s brainwashing. My name is Byrsaynth, Byrsa for short. What about you?”

“Ace Flinders.” Ace replied, huffing as he got his nerves under control. “I’m a student at Edgeworth University, about to graduate. You can probably tell, but I’m not from this world, but the old guy says I’m some legendary warrior?”

“I did hear about a legendary warrior having arrived, but I didn’t expect a scrawny kid like you, but I underestimated your wits. Well, as thanks I could get us to the castle.”

“If I may be frank,” Horatio replied, “I thought the tactic was suicidal, but it seems I too must admit my misgivings about your skill, Ace.” The old wizard leaned against a rock. “And…yes, that would be nice, I don’t think I’ll make the journey on foot after that.”

Ace climbed onto Byrsa’s back, pulling Horatio on with him, like they were about to ride upon a mighty stallion if a stallion was leathery and had the ability to fly. And fly Byrsa did, over the expansive forests towards the castle.

“So how do *you* know the queen?” Ace asked Byrsa. “And…what do you think of her?”

“Can’t stand the bitch.” She snarled.

“Is she cruel to even her most loyal minions?”

Byrsa’s tone shifted immensely, from a snarl of hatred to that of a coworker that had just had the last of the really good coffee creamer swindled from them by a vengeful coworker.

“Well, yes. But *that* isn’t why I hate her. She’s…just bizarre.”

“Oh, maybe the Shora tampering is warping her mind?” Ace asked Horatio. “You know more about the stuff than I do. Hell, you both know more about this world than I do, right?”

“Yes, all of that is true…but the Queen, my sister, she…” Horatio paused and sighed. “…other than her tyranny there’s nothing actually *wrong* with her, she’s just annoying.” Byrsa huffed, as the castle loomed closer.

“So is this whole thing just sibling rivalry?”  
 “No, we’re not putting a stop to her reign only because she’s annoying.” Replied Byrsa. “The world is at stake. Have you *seen* what she has conjured with her Shora?”  
 “You mean the freaky lizard thing that tried to jump me? That was her creation too?”

“Yes.” Horatio replied. “As I said, if left unchecked, she could destroy everything! Not just in this world, but in yours!”  
 “Right. But are you SURE I’ll be able to get home once we’re done, Horatio?” Ace asked.

“I believe so, yes.”

Frankly…that did not inspire a lot of confidence in Ace, but he didn’t want to argue. He looked over the horizon at the woods below. Looking down made everything seem small, insignificant, like Ace was missing out on anything that could be below, and a conflict arose in his soul. For all he knew, everything down there could be just an unexciting swamp filled with unexciting mud, and unexciting monsters that would bite his face off, nothing different from his Florida vacation.

“We’re here.” Byrsa replied, letting Ace and Horatio get of her back before she pried open the door. Two kobolds had heard the commotion and went to investigate, only for one to be knocked away by a swing of Byrsa’s tail, the other by Ace’s sword. The second kobold fell into a stature and knocked it over before crumbling to dust, uncovering a door that led to a massive elevator, the size of a cargo elevator. “This should take us to the roof.”

Ace went into the elevator first, followed by Horatio and Byrsa. As they ascended, Ace looked out the window, seeing more and more of the kingdom. Not only did he see the bell tower, but another castle in the distance, as well as what appeared to be an expansive city skyline even further in the distance, side-by-side with centuries-old ruins of a civilization long-gone. What kinds of people were there, if any? He’d probably have to live never knowing…

“…guess the journey’s almost over.” He said, with a slight grimace.

“Ace? Are you okay?” Horatio turned to Ace.

“What’s eatin’ you?”

“Well…do I really have to go? I feel like I just got here, but I wanna see more of this place!” He gestured to the window.

“But just a few minutes ago you were clamoring to get home. What…oh my GODS I’m exhausted…but what brought on this change of heart?” Horatio exhaustedly leaned on Byrsa for support.

“I mean I still wanna go home, but…Shorenth has so much untapped potential to be explored, you think I’d be ready to leave it all right now? But…I’ve also got an essay due Friday, and I’m so close to graduating, I can’t throw it all away to run in some fantasy land!...wait, that’s another thing! It *isn’t* fantasy, not for me! Here I stand, in a magic friggin cargo elevator, spilling my guts to an actual wizard and a dragon! I…I dunno if I’m *ready* to go home. And…wait, speaking of which, you said you *believe* that it could send me home. What if it doesn’t? What if I’m either still here, or I *do* end up in my own world, but in Saskatchewan?! What about my future, my last semester at Edgeworth University? I can’t throw that away.”

“Shora depends on-”

“On the will of the user, I get it! I…sorry for snapping, all I ask, at the end of this, is that I have the option to return home.”

“I…hope so.” Replied Horatio.

“Works for me.” Ace said with a slight smile. Was he really reassured? Who could say?

The elevator stopped, opening up with a sickening metallic groan, and the three stepped out of the elevator, right in front of the throne room.

“Well well well, look who decided to mosey on in…”

The group’s eyes centered on the throne. On the throne sat a supernaturally beautiful woman, with a glass of glowing wine in her hands. As she sipped her skin glowed purple and green, erasing her wrinkles like drinkable Botox. “Mighty nice of all y’all to drop in! Ever since I heard this legendary hero had arrived, I’ve just been itchin’ to meet’em. Might I interest you in a sweet tea? Maybe a couple years in the dungeon? Or the dungeon with sweet tea?”

“You’re…Queen Racheauman?” Ace asked.

“Right on the money, honey.”

“…think I know why Byrsa said you annoying.” Ace tried to process what was going on as the Queen continued her speech, half expecting her to serve him sweet tea.

“Well, I just didn’t expect my only remainin’ minion to turn heel on me,” Queen shot Byrsa a look of contempt that someone like her would only reserve for the words ‘bless your heart’, “nor for my little brother to waltz on in like he’s walkin’ on a slant, yet here we are. Or are you my older brother? Don’t matter now. Cause y’all gonna meet your match right quick.”

Ace drew his sword, causing it to glow as Horatio readied his staff and Byrsa bore her claws. With a slash, Ace aimed a beam of purple lightning that hit the queen, knocking her back towards the throne.

“ACK! Okay, not bad, now, what’ll y’all make of this?!” Queen Racheauman clapped her hands, conjuring a sphere of lightning. As she charged her magic, her youth slowly drained away by the second, only to be restored by the fountain just as quickly. Queen yelled as she fired a trio of blindingly bright bursts at the group. Ace drew his sword and deflected the first bolt, firing back at the Queen while Byrsa used her tail to deflect the flash directed at her. They struck Queen Racheauman clean in the chest as she fired the third attack, knocking her towards the back wall. Before they could celebrate, the blast hit Byrsa on the side with the force of a hundred of her, not only knocking her back, but causing the dragon to slam into poor Ace.

“Oh, for fu-!”

It knocked the wind out of him, and he feared the blood would pop out of the bandaged cut on his hand like yogurt in a tube, when Horatio spoke up.

“Look! The Queen is down!”

Ace couldn’t see much past Byrsa’s head, but Byrsa had a direct line of sight.

“He’s right!” Byrsa stood up, allowing Ace several precious seconds of freedom to catch his breath before the dragon caught his attention.

“Seal the fountain! Hurry!” Byrsa yelled.

Gripping his blade, he plunged his blade into the middle of the fountain, sealing the excess Shora back into the earth of the Shorenth kingdom. By this time, Queen Racheauman had stood up, her youth replenished by the last of her wine.

“H-Hah! T-That ain’t nothin’ b-but a bit of August heat! Now, where was I…” Queen Racheauman charged an electric blast, but her quickly diminishing Shora drained her life as she charged it up, and only amounted to a weaker blast that Byrsa took to the stomach like a weak punch.”

“Your reign’s over, Queen.” Byrsa snarled.

“I’ll take the reins of the reign from here.” Horatio removed the crown from the queen’s head.

Queen Racheauman meanwhile she looked barely apologetic. In fact, she seemed more annoyed at the fact her days, or rather her minutes, were in single digits.

“Y’all may have stopped me…but y’all ain’t stopped my work. More fountains will come. I’m just the beginnin’ you’ll see.” She cackled, before gagging mid-laugh and succumbing to her age, crumbling into dust and unceremoniously being blown away by the wind, just like the kobold minions. As she crumbled away, Ace saw a portal of lights emerge from where the fountain once stood.

“That’s…”

“Your way home, right?” Byrsa asked. “That what you wanted?”

“Well, yeah…but I still can’t believe it’s over already.”

“Not so.” Horatio replied. “Like she said, this one fountain was just the beginning. We may need you quite soon, sooner than you could expect.”

“Well, you have NO idea how thankful I am that you ended up right, Horatio. I never got the chance to say thanks for saving my ass earlier, but…thanks! In case you’re wrong and I don’t see you two…I’ll never forget you. I’ll miss you both.”

Byrsa smiled a bit. “So, if Horatio does find a way to bring ya back, maybe I could make *you* a drink?”

Ace began to laugh at her remark. “I mean whatever dragons drink would either melt my insides or give me a hangover from Hell, so I think I’ll pass. But maybe I’ll change my mind.” Ace held out his hand to Byrsa, who gripped it in her claws and shook it.

“Farewell, Ace. Good luck with everything at Edgeworth. And when I do find a way to bring you back here, you’ll know it, hoho!”

“…see y’all.” Ace nodded, and walked through the portal, once more falling for what felt like minutes upon minutes. Not only did he wonder if he would see the kingdom or his newfound friends again, but he wondered if he would end up somewhere he recognized for once.

Ace got his wish when, as if from sleep, he had awoken on the toilet in the men’s room at Edgeworth University’s Maya Hall, the very place Professor Martin’s class was in, and with everything he had packed away in fact, but no sign of Horatio or Byrsa, likely for the best. However, his body felt sore, like he had just run a marathon after doing ten Olympic deadlifts. Thankfully, the cut on his hand was less severe than when he had gotten it, and he could still check his watch.

11:56.

Phew.

He still had four minutes to spare to shamble into class, get settled, and find only one student leaving the room?

“Wait, what’s going on?” Ace asked the student. “Where is everyone?”

“Oh I just checked the announcements” replied the other student. “Class was cancelled today, and the essay’s due date was moved to next Friday. But…are you okay? You’re kind of a mess.”

“Uhhh…hangover.”

“Oh…” She replied sympathetically. “Hopefully it gets taken care of.”

Well, that was convenient. All that remained was to grab some lunch, head back to his apartment and then…

And then what? Had his life peaked already? He overthrew an evil southern-accented queen in a fantasy land that he barely scratched the surface of in the span of twenty minutes, but that wouldn’t look great on a job resume, and it’s not like Horatio or Byrsa could be his job references. Ace grabbed some Chick-Fil-A and walked back to his apartment, testing his room door a few times. It was as if the portal to Shorenth had never been there. Ace sighed and lay on his bed…but then he noticed one of his closet doors looked strange.

He went over and opened it, finding that it opened to that very same light portal as this morning, with a note on it.

*Ace,*

*Just as you left, more trouble has started brewing, as a band of thieves have taken residence in the neighboring kingdom of Grusha. However, I’m sure with you and Byrsa we could make short work of them. When we are finished, I have something that I would like to show you that may very well peak your interest.*

*-Horatio Racheauman*

As Ace put the note down, he looked down into the newly created portal, he cracked his knuckles…and got to work on his essay. Once the words stopped flowing like his Shora, he’d be ready for whatever Shorenth and Grusha had ready for him.