

Try

I'm writing a story.

Or at least, I'm *trying* to write a story.

Characters and Ideas flock to my page. They stand at attention, ready to enter the scene—but for the life of me, I can't think of anything for them to do. It should be simple, really, to give them a purpose, and yet, for all I believe myself capable of doing, I am unable to write anything interesting.

A group of Characters stride forward, eager for me to choose them for the first scene in my story. I remember a few of the Characters in the group—there's Karsa, reading an old spellbook; Vic, leaning on an axe, chipped and bloody; and Yerizon, staring off the side, their gaze as blank as the paper in front of me—but the rest are new creations. Each is a strange mix of inspiration and intention, born from my imagination. A flicker of magic here; a spark of dialogue there; a name mentioned in passing.

None of them are quite what I need them to be.

They grow tired of my silence. The Characters fade away. The Ideas slip into the shadows. Their whispers carry as they leave. "Even a side act would've been nice. I can't believe he just sat there. I mean, did he really have *nothing* to say to us?"

I scratch at the corner of my page for a while, shading white into gray, gray into black, black into—

The paper tears.

Sighing, I grab another sheet. A story will be written today. A story must be written today.

With the new page, I'm brought face-to-face with a new Character. A young, armoured fellow carrying a battered shield in one hand, and a shattered blade in the other. He stares up at me, revealing youthful features, and sadness in his eyes. It's the look of someone who's failed. Pure defeat. There's something else in his gaze too. Maybe it's the way he shifts his gaze from me to the paper. Maybe it's the way he holds the sword hilt, squeezing, like it's all he has left. Whatever the hint is, I recognize it. Hope. I haven't seen this from a Character in a long time; they almost never seek redemption from me.

"Please," the man says, "will you help me?" He speaks like a knight, but falteringly. It's as though he's questioning every word.

"I—" I hesitate. Is this the Character I'm looking for? Is this man the answer to my story? What reasons does someone so young have for redemption? Dozens of questions, and nothing to offer an answer. Nothing except offering to help. Nothing except finishing this man's story. "Yes," I say.

And I try.

I take the knight—who calls himself Sero—and impress him onto the page, and he teaches me the tale of his broken oath. As he speaks, I pluck from beneath my page several small, squirming Ideas, thwarting their attempts at sneaking into the cracks of my desk. I examine the Ideas. One whispers about magic enchanting the mind. Another about a dark forest. The third imitates a village. Each of them are added to Sero's tale, guiding the passage from Knighthood to Oathbroken. It is a tragic,

sorrowful story. One that begins with glorious celebration, enters a conflict of blades, sorcery and words, and ends with Sero cursed and shamed by his own treachery.

While I write, several new Characters form and take their places within the page. A wicked sorcerer, Failoen, and his cruel minions. The lord of Sero's village and a wanderer who spoke only lies. Each of them play their roles well, coaxing Sero towards inevitability. Caught between two paths, he chooses the wrong one. Sero rises, he fights, he breaks. The eventual defeat of Failoen does nothing to redeem Sero, for his path to victory was blackened and bloody, marred by the same deception that brought him to breaking his oath in the first place.

With the conclusion of the passage, Sero's voice slips into my mind, and I can see him watching from between lines on the page. *Help me*, he says. *Please*. I have introduced Sero and his woes, but I have yet to offer what was asked. But how does one achieve redemption for breaking an oath—clearly swearing anew does nothing, and the sorcerer is dead by Sero's own blade. The deed is done. An unbreakable promise, left broken like the sword Sero now carries.

Help me.

Staring at the page, my mind wanders, but no Characters come to my aid. The Ideas are wary of me now, and they keep their distance, bobbing in the air. How can I bring Sero's story to an end? He must find a path to redemption. He must right his wrongs, and be renewed. While I ponder, an Idea breaks away from the group, and floats in my direction. Ideas all carry the same general form: a spark of light surrounded by an aura of wobbly lines. This one moves slowly, slow enough to see that its spark is very, *very* faint.

"I know the way forward," the Idea says. "I am the Doomwalk. I am the path to redemption."

I glance to the page, sifting black and white for Sero's opinion. The lines arrange themselves in a shrug. *I have nothing left to lose*, Sero says from the page. *Let it speak*.

The Doomwalk describes itself to me. Its origin, its necessity, its ups and downs, and its final test. In essence, if he took the Doomwalk, the path to redemption would be painful for Sero. It would be harder even than the treachery that broke his oath. It would bring challenges greater than Failoen, and more frightening than the sorcery they commanded.

"The Doomwalk will cost everything," the Doomwalk says. "It is the only path forward. Sero *must* take the Doomwalk. Redemption will be found. An oath will be renewed. Your story will be made."

Sero nods from the page, convinced. *This is my path. Whatever it takes*.

"Then on the Doomwalk we shall go," I say, drawing the Doomwalk into myself and then casting it onto the page like a spill of rust-colored paint. It seeps into the words, coaxing my pen to continue the tale. "Sero, I hope you're ready to ache."

The path to redemption begins slowly—far slower than Sero's original call to adventure—and it takes many pages before the Idea begins to shine through the words. The Doomwalk sees Sero

leaving his home behind, accepting a dangerous journey to distant lands. Through the forest and hills he travels, meeting friends and foes along the way. He is met with contests and battle, but Sero uses his training to bypass them. They are not difficult for someone who was once a knight.

While Sero progresses, I am left to consider the next part of his journey. The Doomwalk will grant redemption through a final test: an acceptance of self and truth that will heal Sero's oath. However, the test is nothing without the preparation, and I strain my mind for what lessons must be learned before Sero is ready for the end. Thankfully, the Doomwalk whispers hints in my mind as we draw out the journey.

He must go farther than he ever could before, it says. Sero must see why his oath was broken, and how it can be resworn. He will need to learn. He will need to be broken again and again and again. And from his fractured remains we will forge Sero anew. A shining redemption, aglow with victory. This is the only way.

Sero enters a cracked wasteland. He leaves his allies behind, going alone, as he begins the true Doomwalk. He has only begun to realize what being Oathbroken means, and what requirements he must fulfill to achieve redemption. He carries these shards of knowledge as he faces the first of many challenges.

It nearly breaks him.

Sero's battered form struggles against my page. He wants to be free and speak, I know it—but the Doomwalk holds him fast in the paper.

Sero! Cease this tantrum! the Doomwalk says while grappling the Oathbroken knight. *The Doomwalk must be finished! You know this truth.*

I cannot bear this weight, he says, frantic. *It is too much! Please, make the pain stop.*

I continue writing. I promised to help, and help I shall.

"You knew it would take pain and sacrifice to finish this journey," I say, scratching new lines on the page, drawing Sero closer to his next challenge. "You asked me to bring you redemption. I can't stop now. *You can't stop now, Sero. You must try.*"

You must try, the Doomwalk echoes.

*I—*Sero clutches himself, alone in the wasteland of his own story, and begins to cry. *I do not believe I can do this.*

You can; you will.

"This is who you are," I say, and the next challenge begins.

He faces his obstacles with less confidence than before—but what matters most is that he does try to face them. He stands and takes a step forward. He moves beyond who he was, who he could be, and enters the stage of who he *is*. And he survives the challenge. And the next. And the next.

He battles both the wasteland and his mind as he progresses along the Doomwalk, wrestling against past, present, and future all at once. Slowly, ever so slowly, he realizes what he was missing and

the purpose of the journey. Sero is almost ready for the ultimate test when he finally breaks, falling amidst the rocks and sand.

Let me out! He cries, tearing at the page. *I am done. I will walk no further!* It's all the Doomwalk and I can do to hold him still. The lines around Sero's writhing form shift and blur. I'll lose him and everything we've worked for if I do not act quickly.

"Sero! Be calm, talk to me—why would you abandon your quest? Why throw everything away? You asked for redemption, and you have nearly found it."

You've asked too much of me. The Doomwalk is insane, he says, still fighting against us. *No one can endure this pain! I will not seek redemption if this is what it costs—please, let me go.*

I do not know what to do. The Doomwalk and I have done what we can for Sero. Perhaps—perhaps it really is time to abandon the story . . .

No.

We've come too far. Echoing, reverberating in my mind is Sero's plea for help. I said I would try and I have. But it's high time that I actually *do* what he asked. That means no more trying.

It's time for one of us to actually succeed.

There is a burst of light, gold and warm, surprising enough to quiet Sero. Radiant and clad in soft robes, a Character emerges from the light, born instantly from my imagination.

"I AM SHALANDROL, BRINGER OF MEMORIES," the Character says. Their voice is deep and loud—but soothing—like rolling thunder. Shalandrol turns to my page, looking directly at Sero. "YOU, ONE OF OATHS, TELL ME OF YOUR PAIN, SO I MAY HELP YOU."

The Doomwalk lets Sero rise out of the page, dust and hair plastered to his face by blood and sweat, tears at the corners of his eyes.

"My oath is broken," he says, voice quivering. *"I am broken. I failed my people, and I will fail this quest. I do not deserve redemption, as my friends did not deserve my treachery."*

Shalandrol floats down in front of Sero, golden light mixing into the black ink from my pen as I continue Sero's story. "ALL CAN DESERVE," Shalandrol says as he places a blazing finger to Sero's forehead. "WATCH!"

Shalandrol and I draw forth a memory from Sero, and play it back to him in full. It is a memory of his knighting ceremony, of protecting those who need it most. Sero's grip on the paper lessens, and he sinks further back into the ink.

"THIS IS WHO YOU WERE. BUT THAT IS NOT ALL. WATCH AGAIN, AND UNDERSTAND."

Now we watch as Past Sero, believing in the words of the sorcerer and his minions, betrayed the trust of his fellow knights, slaying them in the dead of night.

"Why are you showing me this!" Sero shouts, again struggling against our bonds.

“I HAVE TOLD YOU TO WATCH, AND TO UNDERSTAND. OBSERVE YOURSELF. OBSERVE WHO YOU WERE.”

The vision progresses to when the sorcerer raids the town, no longer defended by its knights. Past Sero, watching from afar, realizes what he has done in betraying his friends—realizing that the evil sorcerer Failoen had been using trickery against Sero himself. Present Sero places a hand on his sword at the same time Past Sero does, and for a moment, I know that Sero has remembered how he felt.

“I will right my wrongs,” both Seros say in unison, and Past Sero charges back into town to fight Failoen.

The vision ends with victory, moments before the shame of Past Sero’s banishment and exile. Exaltation is still ripe on Sero’s face as he turns to face Shalandrol and I.

“That—what was that?” he says. “You show me betrayal, then victory, but we both know I broke my oath. My friends suffered at my own hands. I cannot excuse my actions because of tricks.”

“YOUR ACTIONS ARE NOT EXCUSED, SERO. THAT IS NOT WHY I SHOWED YOU THIS MEMORY,” Shalandrol says. “NOW—THE DOOMWALK SAYS YOU HAVE ONLY THE FINAL TEST REMAINING. ARE YOU READY?”

Sero hesitates.

I know he wants to say no. The word is caught on the edge of his tongue. And yet he hesitates. Perhaps my plan has worked, and Shalandrol has indeed brought him to the end of the Doomwalk. But it’s no longer in my hands. I wait, pen poised above the page, ready for Sero’s answer.

“I am ready,” he says. “I will face the final challenge.”

“VERY WELL,” Shalandrol says as the two melt into the story, arriving at the last location on the Doomwalk. It is a little village on the edge of the wasteland, beset by grim shadows and lurking vultures. The townsfolk hide in their homes, afraid of the darkness threatening their lives. It is clear to all of us—Sero, Shalandrol, the Doomwalk, and I—that evil has walked here. An evil which, had we been any different, we wouldn’t be prepared to face.

A knight stands in the center of the village. He wears plate armour, the color of poison, rippled like water. He turns to face Sero and Shalandrol as they approach. The man’s face is wisened by age and hardened by cruelty. A scar runs from his right eye to the left corner of his mouth, crossing the nose. Something about those eyes is familiar . . .

“You carry the sorcerer’s mark, child,” the man says, “Failoen has sent you to me. I will train you as my own. You are Oathbroken. Prepare to become *Oathbreaker*.”

Sero clutches his shield. “No,” he says. “I am not Oathbroken. I never was.”

A burst of light explodes from Sero, banishing the shadows between buildings and sending up waves of dust in all directions. The knight staggers, shocked.

“PEOPLE ARE DEFINED BY THEIR CHOICES IN THE PRESENT. NOT THEIR PAST. NOT THEIR FUTURE,” Shalandrol booms, his power flooding into Sero, coating the young

man in golden armor and reforging his sword and shield with white crystal. “YOU, OATHBREAKER, HAVE FAILED THE FINAL TEST! BEGONE!”

Together, Sero and Shalandrol banished the dark knight and his evil presence, like the sun dawning a new day.

I tried to write a story today.

And I succeeded.