

# Darkbane

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**M**ING HWEE HAD NOT STEPPED out of his house in seven years. But tonight he would because someone had killed him. It happened at eight that morning. He had been logged on to Darkbane for 18 hours straight, when another player cut him into pieces with a glowing purple sword. Rarely had a life evaporated so quickly. Rarely had a life meant so little.

When his mother saw him dressed and outside his room, all she could do was stare. Then asked if he was hungry or needed anything. The last time she had seen him in the flesh was three weeks ago when she saw him leaving the toilet at four in the morning. Ming Hwee said he was leaving the house. She followed him speechlessly down the stairs of the apartment, and to the door, before she found the words to ask where he was going.

“Out. Come back soon,” he mumbled, and grabbed his white track shoes. The rubber soles were cracked from lack of use. They creaked as he pulled the shoes on.

“Okay, be careful,” she said.

Ming Hwee nearly lost his footing as he stepped into the corridor. He heard voices coming from the foot of the apartment block. There were people below. The thought of walking past them was dizzying. He focused on the numb rage in his chest –the reason he was leaving the house. He felt the folded paper in his breast pocket. Written on it was the name and address of the person who

had killed him. Ming Hwee pictured the things he would do to him. He could use a knife, or he could grab him by the neck and bash his head into a wall.

Only his parents called him Ming Hwee. In game he was known as Tyrandelle Godslasher, the leader of “Collector of Souls”. They were one of the most powerful and hated player clans in Darkbane. Tyrandelle wore a golden, ornate suit of magic plate armor, and was as skilled with swords as he was with sorcery. He tamed dragons, sailed ships, and scaled the walls of cities under siege. In real life, Ming Hwee was a 25 year-old man who left his room on occasion to use the toilet.

As a teenager, Ming Hwee had been shy and soft spoken. He often felt he didn’t fit in his tall and bulky body. He was both big-boned and fat. His mother bought all his clothes. He wore shirts that stretched around the buttons; and shorts that managed to be tight enough to push his belly up and out, yet loose enough to reveal his butt crack. He had a head which was large and blockish even for his body, a messy mop of hair, thick black, plastic-framed glasses, and acne that left pits in his ample cheeks. Ming Hwee had no friends. All he wanted was to slip into the background and not be noticed. However, his build and appearance ensured that he was always the first one the other kids thought of when they were bored, and needed someone to poke fun of; or just poke. He spent his free time alone in his room watching anime and playing video games. When he started skipping classes, the school made him see their counselor, who told Ming Hwee that he needed exercise and Jesus in his life. After the A Levels, he came home one day with a game called Darkbane and locked himself in his room for the next seven years.

Ming Hwee kept the curtains drawn and the lights off in his room. The only light he got was the glow of his monitor; it left his skin pale and pasty. He looked like a filthy marshmallow. With him gone, there was a hole in his room’s landscape of McDonald’s takeout bags, empty instant noodle cups, used tissues, dirty serviettes, and food stains, that bore his distinct shape.

Ming Hwee gazed out the window of a cab as it sped down the highway. Shining buildings towered on each side, like pillars that held up the sky. Yellow ovals made by spotlights swept across

the grey clouds. He didn't remember a Singapore this big or intimidating. Ming Hwee sank into the back seat and shut his eyes.

At eight the previous morning, Tyrandelle and Zumo, a trusted friend and one of Collector of Souls' lieutenants, were alone in Soul's Edge—a virtual town built and owned by the clan. They were sorting treasure in the vaults, when Ming Hwee left the keyboard for the bathroom. He returned to the sound of a sword cleaving through flesh, followed by a death cry. The monitor displayed everything in shades of grey, indicating that his character was dead. His avatar was now a ghost standing over Tyrandelle's corpse. Zumo had his weapon drawn—a magical sword smoldering with dull purple energy, and dripping with Tyrandelle's blood. Ming Hwee thought it was a gag and waited for Zumo to return him to life with a resurrection spell. Instead, Zumo began moving through the town and disabling its defenses. Then he opened the city gates where three players were already waiting. The invaders swept through the town, destroying the shops, the tavern, the guildhall, and raiding the vaults. Soul's Edge represented years of the clan's hard work. When the members logged on in the evening, there was yelling, crying, and death-threats. Within an hour, all 54 members of the clan left, and everything Ming Hwee had lived for was gone.

The cab pulled into the grounds of Nanyang Technological University and stopped in front of one of its many dormitory buildings. Ming Hwee had gained some technical wizardry over the seven years he'd spent in front of a computer. He had tracked Zumo's internet protocol to a name and address at the university.

It was 3am and nearly all the lights in the rooms were out. Ming Hwee walked slowly past the black plastic numbers stuck on each door. Moist articles of clothing hung off clothes racks, and pairs of slippers and shoes lay scattered everywhere. The smell of sweat, feet, and wet clothes lingered. He heard the soft sounds of scratching, snores, and coughs as he passed by. Through the windows, dark shapes shifted about in the darkness. The dorm pulsed with the thickness of life. It both terrified and intoxicated Ming Hwee.

He got to the door he was looking for —Hall C, room 14, occupant: John Tan. Zumo. His heart was thudding in his ears. Ming Hwee paused and stared at the number on the door, not in hesitation, but anticipation, then gave the door three hard knocks. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he was doing it. There was no answer. The handle turned when he tried it, and he entered gently. Light from the corridor revealed a single bed. Behind the bed was the dark outline of a desk with an unlit lamp on it, and a chair with someone in it.

“John?”

There was no answer or movement. Ming Hwee walked to the lamp and flicked it on. The man in the chair was slumped on the desk. His hands were placed on each side, with the palms downward. The left hand made a slightly opened fist. Fingers on the right hand were crooked and frozen. He wore a thin, white t shirt that was now almost completely red with blood that oozed out of numerous stab wounds on his back. There were more wounds on the right side of his neck, from which blood leaked into a pool on the table, and hung in thin strings off the edge. A black laptop sat near his head. It had a scarlet mouse with a metallic sheen attached. Apart from a speck of blood on the dark screen, the laptop was untouched. He reached for the power button-

“John? Oei, John ah”

Ming Hwee turned, a lanky man wearing t-shirt and shorts was standing at the door, mouth agape. Without a thought, he grabbed the laptop off the table and barreled toward the door. The man ducked out of his way. Ming Hwee ran out of the corridor and past the car park. He got to the road where he dropped from the cab. There was a grassy area with trees on the other side, where light from the dim, widely spaced street lamps couldn't pierce. He ran across, into the trees, pounding blindly till his legs turned to jelly and gave out. Ming Hwee fell forwards, tumbling on the grass, and landed on his back. But the laptop stayed safely tucked in his chest. His legs twitched from exertion and his chest felt like exploding. A chuckle escaped from him as he got to his feet, feeling both exhilarated and nauseous. The main road was just ahead. He had been spotted at Zumo's room, now he needed to find out what had happened to him. Ming Hwee got to the main road and flagged

a cab. He was heading for a 24 hour McDonald's outlet in the city where there would be a wireless internet connection.

It was 4.15am at the McDonald's across the road from Raffles Hotel. People leaving clubs and bars were streaming in to eat what could be supper or breakfast. Heavily made up girls in slinky black dresses, and rowdy, inebriated men crowded the counter. Ming Hwee sat in a corner on the second floor and sipped on a large coke as he turned Zumo's laptop on. The desktop wallpaper was a high resolution map of Darkbane's in-game world. He found comfort in the familiar image, but it faded quickly. The previous morning felt like a dream. Zumo's desk top provided no clues, only the programs one would find on a student's computer. Instinctively, he double-clicked the Darkbane icon. The log-in screen appeared with both user-name and password filled in. Ming Hwee logged on, and Zumo's character appeared on the screen. The chat interface announced that four players on his friend's list were online. One of them sent him a private message,

Kargan: wtf, get off the account

The name was familiar. It was one of Zumo's three accomplices who raided Soul's Edge.

Zumo: y?

Kargan: You fucking stupid? Want to get caught? Log off now!

Zumo: caught for what?

As he waited for a reply, the interface informed him that Kargan had logged out. He was in a city, so Ming Hwee walked the avatar to the bank and accessed Zumo's vault. The vault was stripped, there was no gold left in it, and all his valuable magical items were gone. It didn't make any sense. Zumo's bank should have been loaded with riches stolen from the guild's vaults. Could the person who killed him have also robbed his avatar? Ming Hwee did some rough calculations –if the gold and items stolen from the guild vaults were sold for real money, it would have easily fetched up to \$10,000. Was it enough to kill over?

Out of the corner of his eye, Ming Hwee saw the words "Newsflash" appear on the television overhead. The sound was mute, but he could see a reporter standing at a scene crowded with police.

There was blue-and-white crime-scene tape stretched in the background. A scrolling headline at the bottom of the screen read: Nanyang Technological Student found stabbed to death in dormitory room. It suddenly occurred to Ming Hwee that holding on to Zumo's laptop was madly incriminating. He tried hard to remember Kargan's two companions, but he had been too distraught to pay attention at the time. No names came to mind. Another message showed up on the interface.

Gwenyvere Archon: Hey baby, where are you? ;)

He didn't recognize this name, but replied with his avatar's location. A minute later, Gwenyvere walked into the bank. She had milky, light skin and hair an indigo shade of midnight that was tied in a ponytail. A simple black dress with a low neckline revealed the top of her white breasts. The glinting red katana she held in her hand showed that she was skilled in the use of blades. Ming Hwee's chest grew tight –this was an avatar that had had a lot of thought put into it.

She told him to follow her to a tavern, then took him into a private room upstairs and started to emote. There were things their electronic avatars could not do which would have to be represented by text.

*Gwenyvere Archon pulls her dress down, off her left shoulder, then her right. She holds the dress to her breasts, squeezing them together, before letting it fall.*

The message appeared in the interface, then the black dress disappeared and Gwenyvere was in her underwear. Ming Hwee felt himself growing hard. He looked around the McDonald's, self-consciously.

Zumo: stop. im not zumo

Gwenyvere Archon: What?

Zumo: im just using his account

Gwenyvere Archon: wtf, who are you?

Zumo: zumo's dead. sum1 killed him... but not me.



over his desk now and then to keep track of where Kargan was. He found him in an empty tavern. As a ghost Tyrdandelle was invisible to other players, and could stand close to Kargan without being detected. Another player entered the tavern and approached Kargan. Ming Hwee could tell from his armor and appearance that it was a new character. He stood to get a look at Kargan's screen, a trade window was open. The young character was transferring 100 million gold pieces to Kargan. Ming Hwee sank into his seat, stunned. 100 million was more gold than he and the entire clan had combined. What was a new player doing with that much money? The other player left after making the transfer, Kargan remained. Soon another player named Malison entered, the name sounded familiar to Ming Hwee. He stood again to look at their screens. Kargan and the man next to him had their trade windows open. The man in the black shirt was Malison, and one of Zumo's accomplices. Kargan passed him the 100 million gold and left the tavern. Minutes later, another character entered and took the money from Malison. He recognized this player instantly –her name was Gwenyvere Archon.

Never trust a 'cross-dresser', Ming Hwee thought. Zumo, you poor bastard, what did you get yourself into? They were transferring obscene amounts of money and making efforts to hide it. He did a rough estimate, 100 million gold pieces was worth over half a million American dollars. Murder made a lot of sense now. Zumo had been working with these money launderers. If he had stolen from them, robbing the clan and killing him was expected. Malison started heading for the door. Ming Hwee got up and followed as quickly as he could without drawing any attention. The clock above the counter said 5.50am. He pushed the door open. Malison had a lit cigarette in his mouth and was dialing a number into his phone. His sleeve was still slightly damp. Ming Hwee felt certain that he had killed Zumo. With his phone to his ear, Malison turned around, catching Ming Hwee's gaze squarely. He froze without looking away. The eye contact lingered dangerously.

"Uh... can sell me a cigarette?" Ming Hwee blurted, hoping he wouldn't hear the panic in his voice. Malison frowned impatiently, then reached in his pocket for his cigarettes and lighter.

"Na, just take lah," he said, extending the cigarette pack and lighter to Ming Hwee.

The smoke irritated his throat as he breathed in. Ming Hwee covered his mouth to throttle the coughing. His eyes watered as he blew smoke out his nose; it was a first for him. Smoking gave Ming Hwee an excuse to stand outside. Malison was making no effort to speak softly.

"Huh? I didn't see leh. Don't have!" Ming Hwee guessed they were talking about him, "Okay, okay, bye". Malison turned around to take the cigarettes back. He ignored Ming Hwee as he said thanks and went back in.

By his fifth breath, Ming Hwee had grown more accustomed to the smoke. He took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled a thick cloud. A girl got out of a cab by the road and walked towards the cyber-café. She was pale; wore black, plastic framed glasses; and had hair that was spiky at the back, with two long, pink-streaked tresses in front that grew to her collar-bone. Ming Hwee smiled as she passed by, and wondered if the cigarette made him look cool. He smoked it to the filter before tossing it into a drain.

When he entered, the girl and Malison were standing at the counter.

"Where is he?" She asked

"Don't know," Malison said, "Can check?" He asked the clerk.

"I need to know the number," the clerk said. Zumo's laptop was on the counter. Kargan stood over at Ming Hwee's terminal, announcing the number. The clerk started rummaging through the drawer where he kept the customers' IDs.

Ming Hwee looked at the laptop –the girl and Malison stood between him and it. He saw an exit at the back, next to the toilet. Casually, he took a few steps towards the laptop. When he was close enough, he grabbed it and launched himself towards the rear exit.

“Oei!” Kargan yelled, as he looked up. But it was too late to stop him. Ming Hwee ran past and ripped the back door open. He could hear their voices and footsteps behind him. His legs burned and his chest ached with each breath. He ran around the back of the shop house building, and to the main road. There were cabs at a stand across from him. Ming Hwee sprinted across, ignoring the lights coming down the road. Car horns were singing as he got to the other side and threw himself into a cab. Through the rear window, Ming Hwee watched the vague shapes of his pursuers growing smaller.

“Ah Hwee, where you go?” his mother asked when he got home. She had stayed up all night.

“See friends.” He said, and went to his room. The room was pristine –his mother had cleared out the trash, wiped the stains from his desk, and left a fresh bag in the bin. The curtains were drawn and the windows fully opened. It smelled clean and freshly aired. Ming Hwee set Zumo’s laptop down; he would pass it to the police later. A flick of the mouse brought his monitor to life. The desktop clock said 6.45am. He started Darkbane. When the character selection screen appeared, it was empty. He was confused, then remembered he had left his account logged on at the cyber-café and at the mercy of the money launderers. They had deleted Tyrandelle Godslasher.

Ming Hwee stared at the screen; it took a moment for what had happened to set in. Then he realized he didn’t care. He looked out the window; the sun was up and some light was coming in. He had been up for the last 28 hours but didn’t feel sleepy. Maybe he would go out.