

More Than a Game

Fayroll
Book One

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Chapter One

A Frolicking Mammoth

Our head editor, Mammoth, knew how to surprise everyone in the office. His real name was Semyon Ilyich, of course, but behind his back, the only thing anyone ever called him was Mammoth. He was imposingly tall, had a powerful build, was hairy as a bush, and spoke with a booming voice. Sometimes, he'd curse up such a storm that even correspondents accustomed to war zones and other hot spots were impressed by the variety and intricacy of his language. At others, you'd find him in the editorial office chatting with the Koreans in their native tongue. Once in a while, he'd even drop some breakdance moves at corporate parties.

And every time, the wide-eyed expressions of everyone else in the office (and we'd seen just about everything there was to see) would elicit the same response, "What are you so surprised about? Back in the day, I..." That would be followed by, "...served on a submarine," "...acted in a movie," "...spent a year in Seoul." The list goes on. And it didn't matter when it looked like there might be a discrepancy in his timeline; if Mammoth said it, it was true.

And that brings us to this particular day, as I picked up my phone to hear his voice, "Nikiforov, is that you? Sober?" *You've got to be kidding me.* Only once had I ever shown up to work drunk, and that was after a long party more than a year before. Needless to say, it was an occasion he refused to forget, enjoying every chance he had to throw it in my face.

"Come over to my office."

When the boss asked you to come to his office, it meant somebody needed something—and I was never that somebody. I could do without those little taunts, but what could I do? I stepped through the door to see that something was wrong; he was sitting at his desk with a thundercloud expression on his face that Genghis Khan, himself, would have been proud of.

This can't be good.

"Nikiforov, it's about time you did some work around here."

I was right; it looked like I was the day's sacrifice to our fearless leader. He really was a vampire—couldn't go to sleep until he'd gorged himself on someone's blood.

"You call this journalism? I call it crap. And everyone else does fabulous work! Take Petrova. She got a job as a bank teller, worked for a month, and got an inside scoop on their HR problems. They hire country bumpkins, leave them on probation, and pay them so little they're jealous of bums on the street outside. They enjoy these young little bodies and then fire them the day before their contract is up."

He waved his hand. "Hell, Sevastyanov worked with the police to uncover an underground casino. So maybe he just wanted to write an article about a casino he had found, and maybe he got drunk and blabbed to an old friend, and maybe that friend worked for the police. But they figured it out. He got an official award from the cops, and that same night, the casino cracked his skull with a pipe—a bonus, I guess. That may have landed him in the hospital, but our numbers are up, and that's the important thing. And what about you?"

“What about me?” *The defense is ready, your honor.* “Petrova has her ‘Give it a Try’ column, and Sevastyanov is on the crime beat. If you care to remember, all I have is the society column. It’s one long string of nothing. What is there to write about? Who’s fighting with whom; who cursed who; which men are sleeping with which other men; how we’re all just drinking our lives away? It’s the same people traipsing from one club to another, doing the same thing day after day.” I paused as if a thought struck me. “Well, sometimes they throw in a little cocaine or heroin for good measure, to spice things up a bit.”

Mammoth grunted and said, “I’ll give you that. People aren’t who they used to be... Just take you, for instance, showing up for work straight off a bender.” He saw the glare on my face and waved it away. “Okay, okay, I’m just kidding. But really, your articles lately have been rough. No, let’s call a spade a spade; they’re terrible, and that’s why I’m giving you a story.”

I wilted on the spot. Mammoth had decided to give me a story? Himself? Of his own free will? Up was down, black was white, and hell had frozen over. After all, he might as well have had a sign over his door that read, “Let your imagination run wild, you parasites, and don’t forget to liven up the facts. And if that’s not what you’re about, then don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.” And here he was giving me a story? I looked at him warily...

“Okay,” Mammoth said unfazed. “Do you happen to know what the most popular form of entertainment is right now?” Again, he waved any answer away. “Eh, don’t answer that—you’ll just mutter something about booze. Virtual worlds are currently at the top of the list—the latest generation, I mean, with full immersion. You know, where there’s a capsule you get into, and they attach some kind of electrodes to your skull. Then voilà, you’re transported into another reality where you’re covered in iron with a club in your hand...or a sword. Whatever.

“They say your real life is *there*, and you come back here just to wolf down some food and go to the bathroom. It’s ridiculous, obviously, but there must be something to it if so many people are doing it. I want you to try it, see what it’s like, do some fighting, and write an article..., actually, six or seven feature-length stories with follow-ups.”

“Semyon,” I quickly whined. “I don’t play games! You should really have Petrova do it; she’s the one who should ‘Give it a Try.’ But no, she gets to be an animator in Turkey or work for someone on Rublevka^[1]. I’m the one stuck climbing into capsules. And you know what—”

“Oh, stop it!” roared Mammoth, shaking his disheveled, uncut, gray mane. “All Petrova knows are the letters on her computer, and sometimes she has problems with those. Just recently, she was looking for the ‘any’ key on her keyboard. She couldn’t find it and spent the whole morning crying. And don’t give me that crap about how you don’t play games. Do you think I don’t know about those office LAN battles you started a few years back? You obviously know something about games.”

“Where would I even get a capsule?” I broke out the big guns, playing on his stinginess. “I know how much they cost. And subscriptions cost an arm and a leg. You think I’m paying for all that myself?”

“You don’t have to pay for it.” Mammoth grunted. “Remember the people in suits who came by the other week? No? It doesn’t matter. They were from Raidion, the company that designs the capsules—and the game, of course. Naturally, they gave me a

capsule and a game certificate. And that got me thinking about how I don't do any of that stuff..."

Then, it all made sense, the old fart. Jeans—it had to be jeans—advertisements, usually paid for in cash, that masquerade as part of an article or movie. So he was getting a cut under the table. *What do you know?*

"...and a VIP account for a whole six months. I don't think people like that would give us just any old crap, and whatever they made, can't be that bad. So, I want you to walk around in there, check it out, and write an objective, good—let me emphasize, GOOD—article. And if it isn't good, we'll have another talk about your alcohol problems. Or maybe I'll just fire you for betraying the level of trust we've placed in you. Anyway, tomorrow the capsule will be delivered, so make sure you're at home starting at around two. As soon as they set it up, get in there. You have two weeks...no, make that a month. Just so long as I have a six- or seven-part series on my desk at the end of it. And write something about Raidion—the capsule is comfortable; your back doesn't hurt afterward; it's easy on the ass; something like that..."

If I was logical about it, Mammoth's stream of consciousness should have sent me off to drink my sorrows away with a drooping head—if only to maintain my reputation. *Hey, if you say I'm an alcoholic, that's what I'll be.* But I wasn't in the mood for booze. Instead, I quickly gathered the papers on my desk, stuffed them into a drawer, and announced to my officemates, "Ciao, suckers. Mammoth sent me on a work trip for a month, so you all are welcome to turn green with envy."

"I hope you're on your way to Chechnya or Antarctica," Kaleria Georgievna chimed in sarcastically. She wrote the "Our Little Friends" column about pets. We all called her the Rat, thanks to her toothy face, gray hair, and gnawing personality.

"The perfect place for you!" she declared.

"Nope." I shook my head. "It's Sochi for a month to write about life on the beach. The velvet season^[2] is coming up, so everyone who's anyone is there!"

"Son of a bi-i-itch!" groaned half the office, and I ran out with a wave of my briefcase. Everyone was about to go jump down Mammoth's throat about how he paid the annoying kid to spend the month of June in Sochi instead of someone better or more decorated, and I wasn't about to stick around for him to make life miserable for me. *But really, what business did he have bringing up my drunken adventure or giving me jeans assignments? And without offering me even a tiny cut!*

On my way out of the building, I contemplated my profession. The work of a journalist is something like that of a detective. First, you collect information, then you mull it over for a while, and then... Well, then you finish the job. Detectives use the information they gain secretly against a specific person or group of people, so long as they had an agreement ahead of time. For journalists, the opposite is true. We put the information before the public, and in so doing, earn ourselves a reputation and enough money to put food on the table.

Although, hold on a second, I thought, maybe "reputation" wasn't the right word. From then on, I'd talk about the "experience" or "XP" I got from beating quests, killing monsters, or going through whatever else there was to do in the game.

I'm a gamer now. Phew boy! Although, maybe you have a reputation in the game, too? That doesn't matter now. Time to collect information.

On my way home, my mind wandered back to the RPGs and MMORPGs I'd played umpteen years before. I hadn't been hardcore or anything. I had been a normal kid growing up in the age of computers, so I spent plenty of time browsing social networks, paging through forums, and sometimes even looking up porn. (And don't give me that "only perverts look up porn" nonsense—everyone does...it's just that not everyone admits it.) And, of course, I played games. Shooters had taken up most of my time, though I played enough RPGs to know my way around them. Everything was different now: capsules and virtual reality that felt, well, real.

Incidentally, let me take a moment to introduce myself. I haven't told you anything, which isn't right, though there isn't much to tell... I'm 36 years old from Moscow. I'm divorced and don't have any kids. I live alone, and I've spent my 36 years much as anyone else my age has. I'm a typical big-city guy, who grew up in a typical home, and I have a typical life ahead of me. I was born, went to school, went to college, and enlisted in the army. (Okay, so it's a little out of the ordinary to enroll in the army after getting a degree...) I served out my contract, found a job, got married, got divorced, and here we are.

I joined the army because I had nothing better to do. You know, sometimes that's how it goes. You're living a full, satisfying life, and then one day, something happens, and you're left with nothing. That's how it was for me. I had a degree, a girl, KVN^[3], a sweet ride (it may not have been new, but at least it was a Chrysler), and a best friend. Then I graduated, my KVN fell apart, the chassis broke on the Chrysler, and it would have been cheaper just to buy a new car. Then I caught my girlfriend with the guy I thought was my best friend. So that's how it went, almost like in a movie—one minute I was on top of the world, and the next I had nothing.

Then I did something I'd never done before: I unloaded the whole mess to my dad, who downed a shot of rum and said, "Go join the army. That'll clear your head. When you spend all your time hungry, people yell at you all day long, and you wonder if you'll be given a rag or your toothbrush when it comes time to clean the toilet, you stop caring about everything else. It's just in the movies that soldiers think about their girlfriend back home. There, you just care about finding more food and getting out of extra work. Well, and you try to get hit as little as possible. Or you could join the navy—they'll make your life look like a fairytale. It's brutal."

So, I headed over to our local recruiting office, where the shocked blockhead of a recruiter almost signed me up for the psychology division. *From Moscow? With a degree? Wants to join the army? Came and volunteered because he wanted to learn something useful?* The poor guy's head almost exploded.

Off I went for a year and a half. Marines? Paratroopers? Nope. I went for the military engineers. And wouldn't you know, my old man was right; when you're always hungry, your most valued possession is a roll of toilet paper (newspapers make your butt itch), and your ribs are sore from the punch Sergeant Poletaev gave you the day before (those hillbillies sure do love city people, and especially Muscovites...they love them straight into the hospital sometimes), everything else takes on a different perspective. My KVN fell apart—no problem, we were never all that close to begin with. The car broke down—no worries, the subway was built to weather a nuclear war, so it would be there until the end of days. Your girl ran off with your ex-friend—is that really that big a loss? Ah, though a helping of mom's borscht and a few of her tiny cupcakes...

Still, six months in, it got a lot easier, and nothing lasts forever; everyone's contract is up sooner or later. Eventually, I was back home, bedecked in ribbons, commendations, and a shiny service record. My dad took one look at me, told me I was a man now, and handed me the key to the apartment he had gotten from my grandfather. I celebrated with a healthy helping of vodka, made the night better for a healthy helping of girls, and heard the good news that my ex-friend had already had time to both marry and divorce my ex-girlfriend three months after the wedding when he caught her under a neighbor.

I spent some time wondering if she was then passed on to the neighbor like just another hand-me-down. Then, I dug up my old journalism diploma, blew the dust off it, looked for a job, and found one at a newspaper called the Capital Herald. And so, there I was, waiting for the capsule. Actually, I did more than just sit there; I also collected information. The day before, after I left work, I had decided to just grab some food and hit the sack, but today, I dove into the game forums.

So there it was: Fayroll. It had a ton of players, swords, magic, and a bunch of races, specializations, and crafting. There were four enormous—absolutely gigantic—player zones with lots of locations on a single-player continent. A newly discovered second continent was still being developed and wasn't as densely populated. There were extensive quests, a fully nonlinear process, and myriad NPCs (non-player characters) built into the game to give players quests, help them, hurt them, or simply create a fully immersive atmosphere and ambiance. The main thing that had changed since my gaming days was that, instead of a monitor (and later a neuro-helmet) and third-person view (or sometimes first-person), the game featured 100 percent immersion. In other words, the only difference between it and the real world was that it wasn't real.

I glanced at the clock and shook my head. Already three o'clock, and still nobody. *Maybe they won't come?* I thought. *What then? Maybe everything had changed, the certificate had been canceled, and I was off the hook?* And, of course, just when I started to hope for the best, the doorbell rang. I opened the door, and two glowering, uniformed men tramped into my apartment, one older than the other.

"Is something wrong?" I asked gloomily. They didn't cheer me up.

"Of course there is," answered the older one. "You live on the seventh floor, and your elevator doesn't work. We had to carry this monster up here ourselves, and it's a beast."

And with that, they carried in a box about five feet tall in which, it appeared, a fairy-tale steed waited to rush me off into a magical world of swords, magic, fatal beauties, and daring adventure. My only comfort was that it wouldn't be for long.

An hour later, the furniture had been moved around (it turns out that the capsule had to be set up just so in a certain area), swear words had flowed freely, and the capsule was in place. My new friends left, and I circled the novel object that had taken over my apartment.

A few turns, and I had a grasp of what, from the outside, looked something like a bathtub and something like a small boat with wires and other attachments sticking out of it.

"Well, waiting won't change anything. Let's see what this guy can do."

And I sat down at my computer.

Before the installers left, they explained what I needed to do and press. According to them, during the first launch, the machine read your subcortex, aligning the equipment to

maximize player comfort. I asked them if it was possible to get overly engrossed in the game, and they told me it had a feature that disabled player activity when the system detected that the player's brain was at its limit. The player was forced into a dream state where his vision was blurry and he lacked coordination. Basically, it made it impossible to play the game. I thought that was a smart way to do things. I remembered friends back when I used to play games who would get so involved that they went for 12 to 16 hours without eating or drinking. I've seen junkies who looked better...

The whole monstrosity (the installers called it a "neural bath," though I stuck with "capsule") was hooked up to my computer, where I first registered and created an account. My first surprise was that I could only play one character. Back in the good old days, I could have five accounts per server, and many more characters, and there were almost unlimited servers.

But not here. *Pick something and play. Level-up; develop skills; and accumulate things, friends, and enemies.* And if I didn't like the result or got tired of it, I could delete it—with everything I had accumulated and my entire backstory—and get a new one. Those were my only choices.

Here we go.

The first thing the program asked was if I wanted to select a name. I could either pick one from the list or think up a new one myself, though I was too lazy for the latter.

I knew finding a good name was important. It's something I needed to be smart about. And what was funny was that, while you could take all the time you needed for the game, when you were born, you had no choice but to accept what you were given. Sometimes, as in my case, that left you with a less than ideal moniker. I have no idea if it was alcohol, atmospheric pressure, shock and happiness that I was born, or what, but my father named me Harriton. He named me and never gave it a second thought; I was the one who had to live with it. All through school, college, and especially the army, I was just happy when people called me Harry (which means ugly enforcer in Russian). The alternatives were much worse.

I entered the first letter of my real name, and the program pulled up a list of prepared usernames. One, in particular, caught my eye: Hagen. There was something about it that I liked, and as someone who tends to trust his intuition, I decided to go with it. Much better than my real name, anyway.

Race: human. I had decided that back when I was a young gamer before anyone had ever heard of Fayroll. Elves were too watery, dwarves were ugly, and halflings had hairy legs. And forget about orcs, trolls, and goblins—they were just evil. I mean, sure, lots of people enjoyed playing them, and that's fine; some people like lollipops and others prefer pickles. But I stuck with humans, seeing as how that's what I was most used to.

And that was pretty much it. Fayroll was different from the games I'd played since you picked your class and specialization after the tutorial—a starting location without aggressive monsters, where players can't kill each other. This area was called Noobland (some developers have a sense of humor).

Now, I had to decide who I wanted to be by choosing an instructor and getting a class quest from him. For instance, if I wanted to be a mage, I had to find the mage instructor and get a quest. If I wanted to be a thief, I would have gotten my assignment, and head off to steal something, grab a drink, and land in prison. *Want to be a hero? Go for it!*

Attribute points were assigned more or less how they always were: players distributed them themselves with each new level. One important difference was that Fayroll didn't have any multiclassed; everyone picked a specialization for themselves, and that was it. That specialization would be the only one you'd work on. No archetypes like mage/thieves or warrior/clerics.

I agreed to let the program base my physical appearance on my actual appearance and decided not to read all the digital garbage they threw at me. And with that, I was treated to solemnly drawn-out music reminiscent of a drunken bagpipe band. I grunted. On the screen, a message let me know that the character Hagen had been created.

"Thank God. We'll start with a prayer," I said as I lay down in the bathtub/capsule, manipulated what the installers told me to manipulate, and saw a light at the end of a tunnel that led my new character into a whole new world.

Chapter Two

A Brave New World

“Ha! It’s Beloomut!”

That was my first reaction to the Fayroll world. The light spat me out onto a fairly narrow street lined with stumpy wooden houses that reminded me of Beloomut, a small provincial town where I spent many happy summer vacations as a child. Even the newest buildings there looked exactly like what was on either side of me. For a split second, I could smell the fields of my childhood, the bonfires we lit in the evenings, baked potatoes, and the dust under my bike tires.

Turning around, I looked at where I had come from. It was a carved arch surrounding a pearly film. The childhood aromas wafting around in my head were quickly blown away when some guy dressed in something markedly exotic tumbled out of the arch, glared at me ferociously, and announced, “Geez, dude, why are you standing in the way like that?”

And off he ran. I turned to look down at myself and realized I wasn’t dressed any better. Thinking about it now, the word “dressed” doesn’t begin to describe the picturesque rags I wore. *Maybe you’ve seen those old kalikas^[4] in movies set in Vladimirian Rus? It’s the same thing, only I don’t have a harp.* A tattered shirt made out of canvas...or hemp, I have no idea, pants made out of the same thing, and a bag fit for a beggar, with a wooden cup and a few clumps of bread inside. Oh, and the smell—again, fit for a beggar.

And that brought up an interesting point: the Fayroll press release said players could play as anyone. What about a bum on the street? What skills would they have to develop? “Begging,” “tin-can scavenging,” and “stink,” a passive ability that weakens opponents for five minutes? I’m kidding, of course. Although to be fair, one popular internet portal I read mentioned that beggars made the best RPG players because they were used to poking around all the nooks and crannies they could find in a relentless search for anything people left lying around.

And that’s exactly what the game was about—picking up the loot you got from monsters, crates, pitchers, and anywhere else some sick developer dreamed up. Ultimately, bums on the street spend their time looking for anything interesting lying around, trying it on, and eventually just keeping the best trash they can find. *So what’s the difference between a gamer and a bum? Okay, forget it. None of that matters. We don’t need a beggar; I am a warrior, a powerfully built tank of a man; a pillar of the band; and the hope of orphans, the wretched, and the destitute. A barbarian or a paladin, although it doesn’t look like there are any paladins here.*

So, I started walking down the street.

“Hey, man, want to join our group? We’re going to take a look around Noobland, do some quests, jump up a few levels.”

I turned to see a stocky dwarf with a ragged beard and leather clothes that were actually kind of decent. Next to him, was a pair dressed the same as I was.

“Come on,” said the little guy, whose name, judging by the label above him, was Frori. “We’ll find one more and get going. I know where to find some good quests, so it’ll be great. Then we’ll head over to Aegan.”

Aegan, Aegan. I mentally paged through the guides I'd read briefly. *A-a-ah, Aegan—the city players go to after Noobland. The gate to the big world.*

"Sounds good," I told the little guy. "Send me the group. Though I should tell you ahead of time that I'm going to be a warrior."

"No problem," he answered. "Be whoever you want. Here's the group."

A window popped up that read:

**Frori is inviting you to join his group.
Accept?**

Needless to say, I clicked "Accept."

You joined a group! Leader: Frori.

"So, Frori, can we go now, or what?" I asked my new leader.

"No, we're going to find one more first," the dwarf answered as he attentively scanned the players walking and running by. And the stream of players entering the game was still going strong, lending credence to the traffic numbers I hadn't really believed.

"All right, cool. Then I'll be over in that corner looking through the settings."

I walked over to a fence in front of a building, crouched down to lean against it, and pulled up the attribute menu.

Basic attributes:

Strength: 1

Intellect: 1

Agility: 1

Stamina: 1

Wisdom: 1

Well, I thought. Not great. Whatever. I'll go do some fighting with that dwarf, unlock a few levels, and that will help. He obviously isn't just trying to help people—there's something in it for him, too. Every operator has his weak spot, though. You just have to find it.

While I was there mulling things over and waxing eloquent on the meaning of life, life wasn't just standing there waiting for me. The same misfits kept marching by like a rag parade, though the rags differed in color, the number of holes they had, and how they were patched. Admin certainly spared no expense when it came to design. Oh, and one of the tramps had been snagged by our fearless leader Frori. Noticing me watching him, he beckoned me over with his shovel-like hand:

"Hey, warrior, get over here. The group's ready, so let's head off to see Auntie Doris and start our first quest. Some lake goblins are bothering her during the day and keeping her up all night with their noise. And you know Auntie Doris—she's the kind of woman you respect and appreciate. So let's go find those goblins their own little corner of hell."

"That sounds fine," I started. "But what are we going to use to kill them? Our bare hands?"

"Oh, right." Frori seemed taken aback. "You don't have anything. No money either. Right? Nobody has anything? Yep, thought so. Okay, let's do this: I'll buy you each a

club from the NPC in the store over there. He'll give me a good deal. And in return, you'll give me all the loot you collect today."

And there we have it! A smooth talker, that one. So, that's how they did business around there. Let's see: five shmucks, 6-7 hours of fighting to get through 2-3 levels...that was a lot of marketable loot, even if it was cheap. Farm that for a couple weeks by plowing money back into gear that costs next to nothing, and you had your start-up capital. And you even got some experience to boot. Plus, there was no risk whatsoever, and it wasn't as if we had a choice. If we said no, there was always someone else lining up to take our places.

But I wagered, later, right before it was time to leave Noobland, he would say, "Sorry, guys, there's something I really, really have to go take care of." And he would go create a new group. If someone he helped along ever made it big, he could even sidle up to them later with a small reminder, "Hey, you don't remember when I bought you your first club, do you...?"

And wipe away a tear...

Two of our groupmates gleefully shouted that they were in, even if the little man was a dwarf, while an elf named Oygolinn (the one Frori recruited last) stood there weighing the decision. Soon, he too acquiesced and nodded. Well, as long as everyone else was down for it, so was I. *Life's more interesting in a group.*

After we all decided to make a go of it together, giving up our loot to the entrepreneuring dwarf in the process, he quickly took us to the local supermarket and bought us the simplest clubs he could find. There was a lot in the store, though it was all kind of plain. On the other hand, I wasn't expecting anything special at that point.

Simple Club

Single-handed weapon

Damage: 6-10

Damage type: bludgeoning

Durability: 80/80

The dwarf then grandly announced, "And now that you hold in your hands your very first weapon in the Fayroll world, remember this moment and never forget it!" That served only to confirm my suspicion that if any of us ever became a serious player in the game, sooner or later he'd come knocking like the ghost of Christmas past.

Auntie Doris lived in an adorable little house seven or so minutes' walk from a beautiful lake. Frori thumped on the carved walnut door and, as we entered, whispered a quick command in our direction, "Wipe your feet. If you track dirt into the house, we'll never see the quest. She's a huge clean freak."

Inside, the house wasn't just clean; it was as sterile as an operating room. Auntie Doris herself turned out to be a little old lady with gray curls, a clean apron, and a white bonnet. She looked exhausted.

"How are things?" asked Frori. "How are you feeling, Auntie Doris?"

"Ah, what a polite dwarf! Not great," replied Auntie Doris sadly. "I can barely sleep with all the noise and uproar every night."

Frori jabbed me in the side and hissed, "Ask why. I already did this quest, so they won't give it to me."

Of course, you did. I imagine this isn't your first time here either...

"Where's the noise coming from, ma'am?" I joined the conversation. "Who won't let you sleep?"

"It's those lake goblins," the old lady threw her hands in the air. "Who knows where those cursed beasts came from, but now they live in my little lake. Every night, they're off rabble-raising so loudly that I can't go to sleep. They tap on the windows, they make faces, one even climbed up onto the roof recently and ran around up there until the rest joined him. And then they dragged some old trough up and slid down it screaming, 'It's a bobsled, baby, yeah!' What's a bobsled? Probably some kind of goblin curse. It's awful. I barely have any shingles left on the roof!"

The old lady began to weep silently, wiping away her tears with a snow-white handkerchief she pulled out of her sleeve.

"Okay, Auntie Doris, what if we go scare those goblin monsters so badly they never again come anywhere near your house?" I suggested.

"Oh, you dears, please do help," the sweet old lady looked at me hopefully. "I don't know how I could thank you, though. I don't have anything to give!"

"Don't worry about it," I smiled. "We're pioneers out to help people, so we don't ask for anything in return."

You have a new quest offer: Rein in some Hooligans.

Task: Kill 10 lake goblins, so the rest leave the lake near Auntie Doris' house.

Reward:

200 experience

3 pieces of cheesecake from Auntie Doris

3 apples from Auntie Doris' orchard

Accept?

Once everyone had gotten the quest, we once again assured the old lady that the goblins were about to meet their maker and left.

"There are other quests here, but they suck," observed Frori. "Go here, go there. Deliver a letter, fill a barrel of water, make a spit handle. Nothing you need a club for, and certainly nothing that will get a good shot of adrenaline running through your veins. Beating up goblins, though—much better. Experience and some fun at the same time!"

"And the loot isn't bad," I said, taking his thought to its logical conclusion.

By the time we finished chatting, we had gotten to the edge of the lake infested with antsy goblins. A few other players scurried around the shore waving weapons.

"Listen up!" Frori waved his stubby shovel of a hand. "This is the lake with the goblins. We'll lure them over here one by one and take them down together."

"Why one by one?" asked Oygolinn. "Why don't we just get a group up here and be done with it?"

"That won't work," Frori disagreed. "They only come up out of the lake one at a time, first of all, and once they do, they're a lot for you to handle. You're still just Level 1, and they're Level 3. We have to gang up on them, so we'll need a kill queue."

"Well, isn't that a nice way of putting it," I said to myself. "A kill queue. That would be a great title for a detective story."

“Hey, guys!” yelled Frori to the other players who, like us, were anxious to kill some of the watery interlopers. “Who’s last in line for the goblins?”

“I am,” answered an elf with the proud and hard-to-pronounce name of Euardenalil. “Wait, the five of you are all going to kill just one of them?”

“Yup,” answered Frori. “Though not just one. There are five of us, and we want to take out five of the goblins one by one. Fair’s fair. Then we’ll get back in line to complete the rest of the challenge.”

“Ha! Fair!” a dwarf named Forin was outraged. He had arrived after us looking for goblin blood. “And how long do the rest of us have to wait while you five have your fun?”

“No longer than it will take you to kill one of them,” Frori said. “We’re sitting here yammering on and on, and that moron over there still isn’t done.”

The whole time we’d been talking, a human named Zubiloff had been trying unsuccessfully to finish off one of Auntie Doris’ whiskered and toothy antagonists. Zubiloff wielded a knotty stick that he used to occasionally run up to the goblin and take off some of his hit points. The goblin, in turn, spun like a whirligig, grimaced, and tried to sink his needle-sharp teeth into Zubiloff. A couple times, he landed a bite.

“Anyone want to bet on the winner?” grunted Oygolinn.

Frori looked at him thoughtfully, coins glinting in his eyes. Our enterprising dwarf seemed to have taken what I thought was Oygolinn’s joke seriously. Oygolinn was equally thoughtful as he watched the ongoing battle, explaining that there were three types of goblins: lake, forest, and mountain.

Lake goblins posed the least danger to players. They were the least aggressive, so they’d stick to harmless tricks like throwing dirt at you and spitting on your back as long as you left them alone. They ate leaves, snails, and anything else found in a lake, and they only lived in settled bodies of water. Shiny things were irresistible to them, and that’s exactly how we planned to lure them over to where we were.

Forest goblins were different. They were much more dangerous and evil, especially in groups, and they were even insatiable cannibals. Humans and dwarves taste equally good to them. Some people said they’d eat anything they could get their hands on—even rocks. They lived in the woods, and you could find them everywhere in Fayroll.

Mountain goblins were the rarest and smartest of all. They preferred to stay away from humans, though they loved sending avalanches of rocks or snow down on anyone they saw walking anywhere near a slope.

“How do you know so much?” I asked Oygolinn with respect in my voice.

“I read through a lot of forums before I joined the game,” was his dignified reply. “You need to understand the game if you want to get anywhere.”

Just then, Zubiloff made one last valiant lunge, hacked at the goblin, and landed a fatal blow. The goblin squealed, twitched a few times, and gave up the ghost. His body splayed over the grass.

“Let’s go, ear boy, cast away.” Frori pointed Euardenalil toward a fishing pole lying on the shore. A large coin was tied to it. “Come on, you’re holding up the line.”

“And next it’s your turn,” said Frori, glancing at us. “Remember that we’re not using the last strike rule, so experience is distributed evenly between us no matter who gets the kill. I’ll rile up the goblins, so they only attack me. I have a higher level and more combat experience, so the rest of you need to wait for me and then jump in with everything

you've got. With five clubs, we'll crack them like nuts. And remember, I get the loot we collect from them.

A message popped up:

The group leader set a new loot distribution rule: Only the group leader.

Five minutes later, it was our turn to dirty the lake with goblin blood. Frori picked up the fishing pole and cast the lure. At first, nothing more than a few bubbles came to the surface, though they were soon followed by a small whirlpool. A slimy goblin head surfaced, half ears and all wrinkles. His eyes roamed the shore looking for the coin he'd spotted underwater.

Frori grabbed the coin and waved it around to attract the goblin's attention.

"Give it here! Mine!" squawked the goblin, leaping in the direction of the dwarf.

Our leader nodded his head and, once the goblin was close enough, landed a blow with his club.

"Ooph!" the goblin howled, trying to sink his teeth into the dwarf's shoulder.

Four more clubs rained down on him from all sides. The goblin's health bar quickly turned red, and a few seconds later, he whined his life away.

"One down," noted Frori. "Back to work, gentlemen."

The coin flashed off and sank beneath the water.

And so we took a few turns, waiting in line each time. But the third was almost immediately followed by an announcement:

You unlocked Level 2!

Points ready to be distributed: 5

Judging by the satisfied faces of my compatriots, they had also leveled-up. Frori took one look at our faces and shouted, "We're not done yet! There's a goblin coming out of the water!" So we fought on.

About three hours later, we'd leveled-up one more time, at which point Frori announced, "All right, let's be done. They don't give us too much experience, and you're already a few levels in. We could stay here forever, but let's go finish the quest, and we'll do some moose hunting."

We headed for the house, where Auntie Doris stood on the porch. She looked at us with her hand on her head.

"Well, Auntie," Frori happily proclaimed, "those goblins won't bother you anymore. We took care of them."

"Oh, you're wonderful!" The old lady looked like she was about to break into a happy dance. "And I made you something delicious!"

You finished a quest: Rein in the Hooligans.

Reward:

200 experience

3 pieces of cheesecake from Auntie Doris

3 apples from Auntie Doris' orchard

We thanked the kind woman and crunched away at our apples as we walked away from her home toward the town center.

“Okay, sit here for a minute and distribute your points.” Frori brought us to the nameless town’s central square before heading over to the store, presumably to sell the goodies we got him.

Okay, so what do we have? Ten points. Here goes:

Basic attributes:

Strength: 6

Intellect: 1

Agility: 2

Stamina: 5

Wisdom: 1

I decided not to worry too much about it and invested most of my points in strength and stamina, seeing as how those are most important for swordsmen. One point for agility and that was it. I’ll make it somehow without a brain. Brawn—check... Well, future check... Presumably.

The only difference between the moose hunt and the goblin battle, to be honest, was that the moose were much better looking than the slimy goblins with all their teeth and ears. I almost felt bad killing them. Oh, and we had to run after them sometimes, though we could avoid that by strategically assigning positions to everyone in the group. Also, there was no quest. But it was fun hearing everyone yelling and screaming:

“He’s running, grab him!”

“By the legs! Grab his legs!”

“Don’t let the moose go!!!”

“Yea-a-a-ah!”

The day drew to a close, and it was almost dark when the four of us nearly simultaneously unlocked Level 4. With that, Frori said, “Well, that’s that, my children. You’re Level 4 now. You got what you wanted, and I did what I said I’d do. It’s time you headed over to the big world, so I’ll show you the road. I wish I could go with you, but I have some things to do here first. As soon as I finish with them, I’ll come find you.”

We walked through the trees as nightfall set in, finally reaching a yellow brick road.

“There it is—the road to the city,” said Frori. “Just go straight, and you can’t miss it. Good luck!” The dwarf melted off into the gathering darkness.

“It’s been fun, guys,” I said to my soon-to-be former group and left it. “Aegan sounds great, but I think I’ll wait until tomorrow. Time to call it a day.” I glanced at my groupmates as they walked away to try to get to Aegan the same day. Then I hid behind a tree not far from the road, added three strength points and two stamina points, and clicked the exit button.

Chapter Three

In the Big World

Everything looks better in the morning. You know how it goes: a problem comes up during the day, and by the time you go to sleep, your brain turns to mush trying to figure it out. Thoughts start popping up in your head that no sane person would deem healthy, “Why me?” or “What did I ever do to deserve this?” Then you decide to screw it all and head to bed—tomorrow is another day. Out of the whole cluster of smart, acceptable, and just plain crazy options, one or two start to crystalize into something you can act on. At least, that’s how it goes with me.

And on this day, the situation was even simpler. With no problems whatsoever to deal with, I woke up and thought back on my first day in the game. *All things considered...not bad!* Though I still wasn’t sure why the Fayroll world was so popular. It may have been great for kids and handicapped people. The former could blow off all the angst puberty threw at them—excessive ego and a frustrated sex drive. The latter enjoyed what they couldn’t in this life—people without limbs experienced life with them, mute people talked, and, really, they just got the chance to be treated as equals. Nobody looked at them sideways, and they didn’t have to deal with fake attention being lavished on them. They were just a few more players on par with everyone else. I had to give Raidion some props for that.

All that made sense, but what about everyone else? What about all the fully functional and often well-off adults? Sure, the game looked great. It was realistic. The atmosphere was interesting. But games like that were a dime a dozen. Why was Fayroll the one everyone stuck with? That was something I needed to figure out.

I grabbed some food and climbed into the capsule. *Time to throw off the shackles of noobhood and take my first steps in the big world.*

I found myself sitting under the same tree I had exited by the day before. The only difference was the daylight I was bathed in. *Good morning!* Not far away, the same forest crawled with wildlife, and a bit farther away, a pair of elves happily shot their bows and arrows at a beaver that, for some reason, had left its dam and trundled toward me. The elves seemed not to care how wildly they were missing.

“Hey! I thought elves were all about protecting nature? What are you doing to that poor animal?” I yelled.

“Oh, stop it!” yelled back one of the elves. “Who do you think we are, Greenpeace?”

“We’re dark elves, so we’re allowed to,” his friend added more politely.

“You’re monsters,” I answered. “Torturing animals like that... Just put him out of his misery!”

The poor beaver by this time was stuck full of arrows, though the fact that none of them had landed a critical hit meant that he couldn’t give up his digital ghost. There was no blood, of course—humanism in action. The little guy kept trundling along without any dying groans for the same reason.

“Oh, screw you!” the less polite elf announced. “He isn’t hurting, and we’re getting experience.”

I realized there was no changing their minds, gave up, and started off along the yellow brick road to adventure.

I should note that the Fayroll world was seamless, so you never had to wait for new levels to load. Noobland, that safe cradle where players were never bothered and almost never threatened, was, therefore, indistinguishable from the big world. The border between the two worlds, as far as I could tell, was where the forest opened onto a field from which the walls of Aegan were visible.

The walk along the road was anything but boring; there was too much going on. First, a sobbing girl, about six or seven years old and wearing a pink dress, stopped me and plaintively cried, “Sir, would you help me?”

“What happened, sweetie?” I assumed the pose of the Brave and Valiant Protector of Little Girls.

“My name is Mary, and my little lamb is lo-o-o-ost! We’re always together, and now I can’t fi-i-ind him!” Tears poured from her eyes.

“No worries, let’s go see what we can do!” I responded.

You have a new quest offer: Find Mary’s Little Lamb.

Task: Find and save Sean, Mary Sue’s lamb.

Reward:

300 experience

Accept?

That word “save” had me a bit worried, but I didn’t have much choice. The hopeful look Mary gave me saw to that...

The snow-white lamb wasn’t far away. Far from it. It was in the next field over—though it wasn’t alone. The lamb was there with five or so rabbits, if you could even call those creatures rabbits. They had red eyes, long ears, and nasty, whiskered faces, and they were Level 7. They kicked the lamb from one to the other.

I watched the spectacle and wondered what the developers must have been smoking to come up with that kind of surrealism.

“Sir, please help Sean!” The little girl pulled on my sleeve.

“Right,” I responded. “And if I go help him, who will help me? Your little friend’s a goner, and we’d better get out of here before they see us.”

Mary burst into tears, which attracted the attention of the rabbits. They stared over at us, obviously deciding if they should give us the same treatment as the lamb. Without waiting to see what they concluded, I grabbed Mary and took off in a headlong dash for the road. There, I quickly declined the quest, handed the sobbing girl an apple, and walked away without a backward glance. I felt a little bad, but those rabbits looked nasty. *Level 7—are you kidding me?* Good thing they didn’t try to hunt me down.

Suddenly, I heard branches snap to the left of the road. My club in hand, I quickly jumped off to the side. Out of the bushes, leaped five players who then crossed the road and dove into the underbrush on the other side. Behind them, ran a gray-haired old man in the strangest boots I’d ever seen. His enormous beard fluttered in the wind, and he brandished a club in his hands. He, too, crossed the road and followed the sound of branches breaking into the forest.

“Well, hello...” I shook my head and continued on.

Three minutes later, the entire scene played out once more, this time, with everyone dashing from right to left.

Here I am just walking along, and they have someone chasing them up one side and down the other. There's an interesting life for you, I thought wistfully to myself and kept walking.

When the group dashed by for the third time, I grabbed one of them by the sleeve.

"Hey, man," I said. "Where are you running? Is it a quest? Can I come with you?"

"Seriously, you idiot?" I found myself stared at incredulously by a fidgety player named Mastik. "That guy with the beard is trying to get us. We went into the forest to cut some clubs, and he came out of nowhere. 'What are you ruffians doing here?' And bam—he started hitting us with his stick. 'You little good-for-nothings! Coming around here ruining the forest. Get out before I kill every last one of you!' A-a-a-ah!" Mastik caught a glimpse of his pursuer bursting out of the forest and dashed off.

The old man stopped when he got to me and looked suspiciously at my weapon.

"Factory-made," I quickly assured him. "I love the forest. When I was little, all I cared about was protecting wildlife."

"Better be." The old man, who was labeled "Forester," looked at me darkly and melted into the woods.

"Crazy," was all I could say.

Soon, I got to the edge of the forest, the point that marked the end of the starting location. A dwarf had been planted there to make sure everything was clear, and he had a lazy warning for me, "Friend, this road will take you to Aegan, after which who knows where you'll follow it? But you won't be able to come back. If there's anything you still have left to do here, do it before you leave."

"I don't have anything here. I already did it all."

"If you say so," said the indifferent dwarf. "Good luck in Aegan."

The city had me speechless from the moment I entered. In fact, I stood stock-still after my first steps through the gate. I've already mentioned the backwater town in Noobland and how quiet and quaint it was—old people going about their business, children playing pranks on the cats...or beavers, I guess. Hushed tones, soft colors...

But Aegan was a big city that never sleeps—noise, hubbub, everyone running, everyone in a hurry.

Welcome to Aegan!

It is a city shrouded in centuries of legend, renowned for the power of its mighty kings, made famous by its great craftsmen, and built on the bravery of its warriors. The name "Aegan" reaches far back into the oldest annals of the Seven Kingdoms...

I was only too happy to read more about the city's fascinating history. It was built somewhere way back in the forgotten reaches of time, after which it became a fortress city. Later, it was a stronghold of the monarchy, and it was now a hero city.

"They have some good writers," I noted to myself. "A well-written text, easy to read, good presentation."

"Don't just stand there!" A voice behind me boomed, and I was shoved to the side. The voice happened to belong to a hefty dwarf by the name of Gnorin, and he had a following of six other dwarves behind him.

"Hurrying to find Snow White?" I asked in a needling tone.

"What, you need some teeth loosened?" Gnorin responded in the same bass voice.

“No, I’m good,” I responded honestly. “I need them all.”

“Then don’t be a douchebag. Sorry if I shoved you too hard—I’m a dwarf, after all.”

“I see that,” I noted. “I’m not blind.”

“Is there a tavern around here? Or a pub? Really, anywhere they sell beer,” asked Gnorin. “Do you know of any?”

“How should I know? I just got here.”

“All right, we’ll follow our noses. Cheers.”

And with that, the gang of dwarves headed down the central avenue leading away from the gate, one after another. Never fear, off to find beer.

“What’s with everyone here?” I wondered. “Sadistic elves, alcoholic dwarves... It’s like a bad fantasy novel.”

I started down the same street, looking around me as I went. The city, of course, was beautifully drawn. The buildings, trees, monuments, inhabitants...everything looked real. If I hadn’t known it was a bunch of code, I would have thought I was in some European city from the Middle Ages. And it was obviously huge. I came across empty corners, found alleys packed with players, saw a few squares littered with tents of some kind, noticed some temples, and even walked by a theater—or maybe a courthouse.

And so my wandering and wondering led me finally to a place whose name I could have guessed even without the marker: Market Square. It was pretty simple, really. What else could you call a place packed to the gills with everything you could think to buy? People milled around, noise filled the air, and I was jostled from side to side. Somebody was selling something, somebody was buying something, and everyone was talking, screaming, and bustling around all at once.

“I need a bow, Level 35 to 37! Rare or epic! I can pay!”

“I’m selling elixirs—health and mana! Concentration potions! Poisons discounted when you buy in bulk! Manufacturer warranty!”

“I cook with your ingredients! For free! Pay for me to eat the food with you!”

“Buy a sword, get a sheath free!”

“An eastern dagger, from Sind, sharp as a razor and as long as...your life, eh!”

“Spider eyes, fresh and gray! For crafting!”

“Fish! Fresh, still alive! Dead and dried as well! Fish!”

And stands, stands, and more stands all around, with flags, signs, and even banners. In short, it was a nice place, even a great place, though there was one problem—I had no money. And, judging by the cries I heard from the crowd packing the square, I wasn’t the only one.

Just then, as if on cue, a little halfling scooted up to me, “Hey, man, give me 10 gold; I need them for a jacket,” he gushed at me in one breath. “Everyone knows me; I’m good for it—I swear. I’ll buy the jacket, go farm some loot, and give it back to you...with five extra!”

With that out of the way, he stood gazing at me and even urgently tugged on my hand.

I’ll admit, it isn’t easy to surprise me. I’m a journalist, and I even served in the army, so anyone or thing that can actually surprise me is worth at least my respect. “Ha!” I coughed. “Well, look at you. You’re way too amateurish about this. Use your brain! Write a sign, ‘Help needed for mental development, give money for logic tests.’ There aren’t any around here, so you can cut to the chase.”

“Are you going to give me the money?” he asked impatiently, apparently without hearing a word I said.

“No,” I answered simply, and he was off like the wind.

“Wow,” was all I had to say.

I started to feel left out, as it was very clear I had no business in a place like that with empty pockets. And that meant I had to get out into the world and somehow make some money. I just had clothes—sort of—and a club, so I had nothing to lose and nothing to keep me there. I pulled up the map, found the city exit, and set off in that direction.

A forest began directly outside the city gates. Well, not so much a forest; more a grove of trees. *Huh*, I thought as I walked into the shadows. *I wonder if cities in the Middle Ages had woods right outside them, too. From the movies and TV shows I’ve seen, they definitely didn’t. When invaders (or liberators, depending on the plot) laid siege, they ran screaming across an open plain before the camera swept to their hordes scrambling up the walls and putting the city to fire and the sword. Well, or to free it from the clutches of a tyrant. I wouldn’t think they made all that up just for the movies. They probably had some kind of villages right outside the walls and needed grazing land for all their cattle and horses. I guess nothing needs to graze in the game, and there’s no point in making players walk forever, so they put the woods right next to the walls.*

The forest was beautiful, both reminiscent of a real forest and, at the same time, different. It was similar in how picturesque it was, with all the grass and clean air. A great spot, and completely unrealistic. In a real forest, you trip over dead wood, mosquitos eat you alive, and there’s litter everywhere. I found myself liking the virtual forest better—it was clean, neat, and cozy. And it was full of things I could use to get experience and money. A rabbit ran by with all its experience, fur, and meat. A hardworking badger rustled away while a wiggly snake slunk off. Well, fauna, meet Man, your destroyer. I felt bad for them, but I felt worse for myself. All I had was ragged pants, and I needed to level-up. *Well, if Man is the king of nature, it is time for nature to pay its dues...or tribute, or whatever it is...*

I valiantly ravaged the animal world for four hours or so, twice leveling-up. My bag was packed with all my dead trophies, though by the end, I was pickier about what I kept. At first, I harvested everything I could from my unlucky victims. During the last hour, I only kept the skin, which I knew I could sell. Badger meat wasn’t exactly in high demand.

Once I leveled-up the second time, I decided to stop and spend the points.

Basic attributes:

Strength: 10

Intellect: 1

Agility: 2

Stamina: 7

Wisdom: 1

Available points: 10

I decided to go with the obvious. As long as I was going for a tank, I’d go for a *tank*. Six points for strength, three for stamina, and one for agility.

“Well, that was a nice little break. Time to get back to work,” I said, pulling out my club and dashing off after a rabbit that ran by me. Having expected more from life than what I gave him, he moaned almost sadly and died.

I bent down to skin him and heard a villainous voice behind me, “That happened to be my pet rabbit. I remember when he was just a bunny—he even ate grass right out of my hands. And now you killed him. What to do, what to do...”

Not only was the voice villainous, but it also had a mocking undertone. I slowly straightened up and turned around. A few steps away stood three goblins. Not just your ordinary ruffians; these were honest-to-goodness goblins, although, judging by their demeanor, they were ruffians, too. They were nasty-looking, with ugly green faces and teeth that stuck out at odd angles.

Wait a second, maybe they were actually orcs? I wasn’t really sure what the whole difference was, but that didn’t matter. The first thing I noticed was their strange names (“Euiikh”...excuse me?) that glowed red above them. I had the unbelievable luck to meet people who killed other players, most often for fun and loot. That fact and their level (25-27) made it clear to me that there was no way I was getting out of the situation with what I had in my bag. And so it turned out that all I would get for the whole four hours I spent hunting was a little experience. How frustrating.

“Would you look at this, boys? He doesn’t even care. But I think he should pay for killing my little fluffykins,” the one with the green mug spat mockingly. “My little bunny.”

“M-m-m...bestiality. Aren’t you the little creeps?” I understood that my imminent death might be fairly unpleasant, as the orcs/goblins appeared to be looking for some fun. At least, I wouldn’t feel pain in the game, and I wouldn’t get any fountains of blood. Still, it wouldn’t be an enjoyable experience. I needed to rile them up and get everything over with, so I could respawn and start over. Although as I thought about it, I had no idea where I’d respawn.

“I heard your kind...” I said with a contemptuous grin. “Wait, who are you? Orcs? Goblins? Either way, I heard all of you and your ugly green mugs are into that animal-loving. The good stuff. Although, wait a second, are you using the animals or are they using you? I guess it makes more sense if they’re using you, just judging by your bulging eyes and the way your teeth stick out like that. Yeah, I can see how that could happen after some bison took a good run at you...”

I got them, for sure. Their leader’s face turned ash gray, and his eyes narrowed. Honestly, I might have overdone it a bit, though that was when a short (by their standards) orc screamed, “You little fart!”

He swung the morning star he held in his stubby hand. My world shattered into something like a photo album. I saw stars...the angry, frustrated face of their leader...a spinning sky. A familiar haze settled in, and I found myself standing in an area near the city wall. No pants, no club—just in my underwear (Apparently, the game’s developers didn’t want to traumatize the young generation by making them look at naked bodies.) They sent freshly killed players to the nearest respawn point or to the last place they saved, and all cities and villages had respawn points. So the good news was that death wasn’t the end. On the other hand, I was resurrected without any of my belongings, which go to whoever killed you. They left me in my underwear, but other than that, nothing. At least until Level 10, you didn’t lose any experience, although, after that, you

were screwed. If you croaked, you lost everything you had, as well as the experience you were working on.

Just then, I heard my inbox ping. I looked around to see a mailbox that, thank God, wasn't far away from where I respawned and went over. To my surprise, I saw that Euiikh, the green-faced leader, had written me.

“You displeased me, my little white-faced friend. You killed my rabbit, said some unpleasant things, and died too easily. That last thing I find especially frustrating. And so, I just want you to know that this was only the first of many meetings, all of which will end in your death. However, you will not die so quickly in the future. See you soon.”

Like a villain pulled straight from some opera, if the email had had audio to go with it, the last words would have been followed by an evil, booming “Wa-ha-ha-ha!” Although I had the urge to respond and suggest that he find a nice little donkey to make love to instead of his rabbit, I decided it wasn't worth it. Those idiots would be trolling me as it was, and a reply like that would start World War III. Much better to keep building my character and get even with them later. I could find a big old mace and wreak havoc on them, though I needed to remember their names—at least in the blacklist. It was like in the old joke: I don't remember evil, so I have to write it down. At least the game had a feature that let me know when they were nearby. I figured that would give me enough time to get away while my level was still low and I hadn't found a super-mega-giga mace.

“This sucks,” I complained as I sat down on a bench next to the respawn point. “I don't have anything, no clothes, no weapons, no money. All I have now is a bunch of enemies and my underwear, and that won't get me any further than a virtual church to beg for some change.” At one point, I even thought, “Maybe I can just forget the game? I've already seen enough to write an article, and players themselves won't read it. They don't subscribe to our newspaper, and nobody else really cares whether the article is written well from the perspective of the players or not. I can just add some filler, throw in a plug for Raidion, and call it a day.”

On the other hand, what was I going to do for a whole month? There wasn't any leaving the city since Mammoth could check to see if I ran off somewhere. And really, was I going to get chased off by a few ugly orc assholes? That wouldn't do. But ramming their heads up where the sun doesn't shine—that would make for a great story.

And, it's not bad here. Before everything happened, the game had been like a free and easy excursion. You know, it's like winning a tour of somewhere in Rostov—it's a nice city, and it's free, so why not go? Although it's not like you'd spend money on it. The city isn't bad, it's just that it doesn't really matter to you. But if it's free, why not? It was the same thing for me; I played because it was free, sort of my job, and not too stressful. But now, everything was different...and I still needed material for my series.

But if the game was going from “Why not?” to “Let's see who gets the last laugh,” I needed a plan. Right away, I needed two things: clothes and a weapon. Oh, and I desperately needed someone who knew the game inside and out to teach me the ropes.

That was when I remembered Fat Willie.

Fat Willie was a classmate of mine who cut a rather remarkable figure. Willie was short for William, and I have no idea why his parents gave him a name like that. Maybe

they adored Shakespeare, or maybe they enjoyed Tokarev's work and extravagance. Or maybe they'd had one too many drinks after he was born and before they took him to the passport office (that last one seemed most believable to me). Whatever the case, that was his name, and until he was about 12, everyone called him Wilka. It was around that time that he started to put on weight, and by the time he was 14, he weighed around 80 kilograms. That September 1, when we all got to school for the first day of ninth grade, Pashka Kapitanov, one of our class leaders, saw him and said, "Forget Wilka. You're Willie now."

"He's 'Fat,' not 'Willie,'" contradicted Pashka Velikanov, another of our authorities.

The two Pashkas sniffed and looked each other over (the two had vied for the role of top dog ever since first grade).

"Come on, guys, lay off it. You're fine," I intruded, knowing they would soon mix it up if no one stepped in. "We'll just call him Fat Willie."

And so it was decided.

The only one who couldn't care less about the whole situation was Fat Willie himself. The guy never let anything ruffle his feathers. He was as phlegmatic as it gets.

But what he loved more than anything was computer games. When the conversation turned to them, he'd come alive and could chatter on for five or even ten minutes straight. He also had a kind of strange sense of humor. To be honest, I wasn't always sure when exactly he was joking.

So if there was anyone who could get me started, it was him—and I couldn't imagine him missing out on a game like Fayroll. I left my alter ego sitting on the bench and exited the game.

Chapter Four

Fat Willie and His Joke

For whatever reason, my life up to that point had taught me to follow through immediately on the decisions I made. That had something to do with KVN, then the army, and certainly my experience in journalism. After all, putting something off meant giving yourself the opportunity to change your mind, let laziness creep in, or have someone else beat you to the punch. *That's how we humans are: put something off once, and we'll think of a thousand reasons why we shouldn't do it at all.*

And so I immediately decided to get started on both of my ideas. I put some hot dogs on to boil and headed to the attic to look for the box I kept all my old papers, phone numbers, notebooks, and diaries in.

"Where did it go?" I asked myself as I looked for Fat Willie's phone number. "I know I wrote it down in a notebook. Nadya Mamedova was there, we were drinking, and she laughed so hard at me for using a notebook when we have phones, tablets, and virtual diaries. I remember telling her, 'If the electricity ever goes out, and you lose all your gadgets, I'll still have Fat Willie's phone number.' She said, 'Why would you need his number when there isn't any electricity?' And I answered, 'I'll use the paper to light a fire.' Then, while we were chattering at each other, Willie up and walked out without saying a word. He couldn't care less, and I was drunk off my rocker. Ah-ha!"

I found Willie's number and prayed that:

1. Willie hadn't changed his number
2. Willie hadn't gotten rid of his phone altogether
3. Willie was in the real world
4. Willie hadn't found his way (we hadn't seen each other for two years...maybe three) into the loony bin (for excessive gaming) or an obesity clinic (fast food is fast food, after all)
5. Willie was still in the land of the living

So imagine how happy I was when his phone rang three times and was picked up. That same old voice drawled into the line, "Hello?"

"Willie!" I happily shouted into the phone. "You're in the real world! What happened?"

"Oh, Nikifor," Willie responded in his usual hum-drum voice. (At school and even afterward, people called me Nikifor or just Kif.) "I'm at work, who's going to let me play here?"

"You got a job? But you're a nonconformist, fight the system, all of that. Passive, sure. But what happened? Did you switch sides?"

"I still fight the system, and it still fights me. I fight it online; it fights me in real life. I use programming, and it keeps me hungry, cold, and without tobacco. If you're hungry, you'd better go find a job. And hey, go easy on the 'passive' thing. It's a good word, but 'passive warrior'...sounds kind of insulting. Anyway, what's up? You must need something, it's been three years since we last saw each other."

"Have you played Fayroll?" I cut to the chase.

“I play now. I mean, not right now, of course, but every night.” He didn’t say anything for ten seconds or so, then continued. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m writing an article about it, so I’m in your gamer universe now, too. I played for a day or so, got to Level 5, and someone killed me. Willie, I don’t think there’s anyone in the world that could show me the ropes better than you can.”

It might have just been me, but I thought I heard Willie exhale in relief.

“Sure thing. Where are you now? I mean, in the game.”

“In Aegan. At the respawn point.”

“Okay, so by the western gate. Go into the city, and you’ll see a tavern called the Lonely Troll about three hundred meters on your left. It’s cheap, not a bad place. And they have rooms you can go into to chat quietly. Let’s meet at 7 tonight, Moscow time—I’ll come home from work, grab some food, and head there.”

I agreed immediately.

“How many times have you respawned?” Willie asked.

“Once.”

“That’s it? Phew boy! In the beginning, I practically never left—I must have respawned a hundred times. Okay, see you tonight!”

Fat Willie hung up the phone. I did the same and jumped over to the cooktop, where my hot dogs were past ready. The game’s the game, but I was hungry.

Sure, it’s humiliating, I thought to myself, though half the people out there are running around in their underwear. Plus, at least it isn’t the real world. I tried to make myself walk to the Lonely Troll. After all, it was just three hundred meters. But it wasn’t just any old city where you might have twenty players milling around. This was Aegan, the capital, and each meter there is like three in most of the places in Fayroll. And then I had to deal with the tavern, where I was sure to be the butt of any number of jokes.

Still, I managed to walk through the gate to the city. Though when I did, the reaction I got was anything but the one I expected.

“Hey bro, they got you, too?” asked a bearded archer walking by.

“I’d give you some pants, but I don’t wear any,” a mage standing by a bookshelf remarked sympathetically.

“Those damn idiots,” muttered a gloomy dwarf. “Open your exchange window.”

I opened it and received 10 gold.

“Buy some pants. And a shirt. Can’t be looking like that,” said the dwarf, who hopped away quickly on his short legs without even waiting to hear me thank him.

“Wow,” I said with surprise. “It looks like most people are sympathetic around here.”

I had almost gotten to the pub when I heard a laugh that was barely human.

“Get your naked butt over here,” yelled a hefty barbarian dressed in iron with an enormous battle hammer strapped to his back. “I’ll sing you a lullaby!”

I mentioned that Fat Willie had a very odd sense of humor. Well, there it was.

“You got bigger,” I told him when I got closer. “I imagine you have to be careful where you sit down.”

“You have to be realistic,” roared Willie. “It would be weird if my 140 kilograms decided to play some skinny elf, no? Open your exchange window.”

He sent me five pairs of pants, the same number of shirts and coats, a sword, a club, a mace, and a shield. All very cheap, without any upgrades.

“Here’s a little handout for you. You’ll be killed again, and this way you’ll at least have something to wear when you respawn. Put one set on now, and leave the rest in a room.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Did you even read the manual?” Willie blinked in puzzlement.

“Well, I read the guides about leveling-up and the history of the world.”

“Wasn’t that clever of you?” My friend even let out a slow whistle. “Okay, look. You can go into any hotel, and they’ll give you a room. Not for free, of course, but you won’t go broke. That’s your personal space, so the only people who can go in are the ones you invite—and only when you’re there, too. The things you leave there never go missing, and you’re the only one who can go get them. Leave everything important and valuable there that you don’t need to keep on you.”

“Live and learn,” I said in an ingratiating tone.

With pants and everything else on, I felt much surer of myself.

“Willie, can I ask you some more questions?”

“Let’s go find a room, and we’ll get you your answers. Or not, depending on the questions.”

We walked into one of the separate rooms in the pub.

“So what’s your question?” Willie started off, at the same time ordering from a pretty waitress. “Meat and beer. A lot of meat, and five times more beer than meat.”

“Not ‘question,’ questions. The first is what I need to do to get those PKers off my back.”

“Level past them, get some serious equipment and a weapon,” Willie answered amiably.

“That’ll take forever.”

“Then buy a character that’s already there.”

“You can do that?”

“You can do anything you want in Fayroll.” There Willie stopped, quickly glancing at me. “A lot of people level-up characters to sell. It isn’t exactly legal, but the admins generally look the other way. Still, they’re not big fans of it.”

“Do they really go after you for buying players?”

“No, they can’t prove it, so they don’t do anything. Well, as long as you don’t make the sale in the game itself. I haven’t heard of anyone being dumb enough to do that, though.”

“How much does a character like that cost?” I was really intrigued to hear how much you could make providing that kind of service.

“It depends,” Willie laughed. “Let’s say you decide to sell yours—you wouldn’t get a single kopeck. Who needs it? But if I decided to sell mine and threw in all the armor and everything in my room, I could buy an apartment. Maybe not in the center, maybe a one-room apartment on the first floor somewhere in Degunino,^[5] but still—an apartment. And if one of the top players decided to sell their character...”

“An apartment for a chunk of code?” My surprise was genuine.

“What did you think?” Willie grinned ironically. “It’s a business. A big one. The money pouring through here...damn. I mean, that’s true for all the top games. In Korea, some guy sold an account for a game that’s been around for a while. Sure, it was an ace

account with all the sets collected, all the dungeons beaten, a personal dragon, all the quests, and everything, but still—walked away with 10 million.”

“Dollars?”

“I don’t remember what they have in Korea, but in dollars, it was 10 million.” It was obvious that Willie envied the Korean.

“So what did he do?”

“You’re asking me? Maybe he opened a car dealership. Maybe he makes coffee machines or paid off his debts. Maybe he hacks away at a mannequin with a wooden sword day and night. How should I know?”

“You’re kidding me,” I scratched my head. “I can’t believe it. Here I thought it was just a game...”

“Ha!” Willie’s considerable girth jiggled with laughter. “People live in the game, and the people on top, live pretty well. Don’t forget that you can exchange gold for real money—so there’s an underground market and an aboveground market. Okay, tell me this, why do you think people kill other players? I mean, sure, there are some crazies running around, and plenty of assholes. But a lot of people PK to make money. You take out a player, and you get his clothes and everything else. Sure, there isn’t much there, but hey, it’s like Raskolnikov: ‘Ten old ladies make a ruble.’ You can sell it all for gold, and then exchange the gold for real money.”

“So how many players do you have to kill?”

“PKers aren’t really in any hurry. They get something from you, something from the next guy. And they hunt in groups of two or three, and, say, a group of three at Level 23-25 with normal gear can easily take out a Level 40 tank. And it isn’t just the money; they get stuff they can auction off, too. So yeah, but that isn’t all. You have no idea how much money changes hands in the clans...damn. And the better the clan, the more money there is going around, and the more you get from the clan, obviously.”

“What do you get?”

“That you’ll have to figure out on your own, my friend. Some things I won’t even talk about with old schoolmates, not to mention in the game. Politics, you know? Drink your beer.”

While we were talking, the NPC waitress brought over our beer and meat. Willie began pounding the bitter-smelling liquid by the liter, though I just sipped mine.

“Really, if you don’t want to keep respawning, you’ll need to join a clan,” Willie continued through a full mouth. “Just make sure it’s a good, strong clan. That way, PKers will know that killing you will bring the wrath of God down on them. The whole clan will blacklist them and hunt them across the entire continent. The only problem is that you can’t get into a clan like that.”

“Why not?”

“Why the heck would they need you? A Level 6 tank. You’re a dime a dozen in Fayroll. Only a noob clan would take you.”

“A noob clan?”

“Yeah. Losers nobody needs make their own clan and stick around the starting locations or the Noobland exit to farm and attract more players. They say they’re going to take the game by storm, everything’s going to be great, they have a solid reputation and steel balls... Though really, they’re just stroking their ego. ‘Look at me, I’m a clan leader.’ There’s this one guy, Amendak, who runs a clan called the Great Fayroll Army.

He's a clown. Gets a group together to build some kind of army. People last a day or two until they start wondering why they're paying to spend time with him, and then he goes back to Noobland to start over. Clown..."

"Can I join your clan? What's it called, by the way?"

"Messengers of the Wind, but you can't join. I'm getting up there in the clan, but we only take Level 45s and higher. Sometimes, we make exceptions, but only after a group vote or if the clan leader okays it personally. Oh, and only if you have something we need. That's even easy-going, though—the Gray Witch in Hounds of Death, for example, only accepts Level 60 and higher, and even then they're picky about who they let in. Drink!"

I downed a glass and saw the world around me grow a little fuzzier at the edges.

"So what should I do?"

"Keep leveling-up. Work on your abilities. Then, see what you can do. Oh, by the way, I have an offer for you. You're writing an article, right?"

"Yep."

"Mention my clan, say something about how friendly we are, how great it is."

"Why do you care?"

"First of all, a little PR never hurt anyone. Second, I'll give you 100 gold for your trouble. And third, once you get to Level 45, you'll have an ace up your sleeve that we won't forget. So what do you say?"

"Sounds good. And I have a request for you, too."

"Go for it."

"Don't tell anyone that I'm a journalist." I'm not sure why I asked that. Some kind of instinct deep inside me, and I trust my gut.

"Nobody here knows you anyway, but sure."

Fat Willie sent me 100 gold and raised his glass, "Let's drink to working together, and I'll teach you one last lesson!"

I drained my glass in one gulp and realized that I'd lost control of myself. I was a wooden doll, limited to the shortest of thoughts and seeing out of button eyes.

"And there's your last lesson," said Willie as he stepped toward my carcass on the floor. "Stay in control of yourself no matter what. This isn't the real world, where you can just go throw up and feel better. Now you won't be able to move for half an hour."

As if in confirmation of his words, a message appeared:

You're drunk as a sailor. Movement and articulate speech are limited for 10 to 30 minutes.

He rolled me up in a rug lying on the floor and stuck me under a bench near the window.

"Ah," he smiled cheerily as he walked out. "A fine joke! If you need anything, send me a message."

Hilarious, I thought, wrapped up and left in the corner. *He was trying to get me drunk the whole time. I guess he's spent time boosting his alcohol tolerance!*

As I mentioned, Fat Willie's jokes were always unpredictable. I remembered how, one time at school, a classmate of ours tattled on him to our teacher. Willie managed to slip both a laxative and an emetic into the snitch's coffee, after which he stood in the bathroom and watched the poor guy try to figure out which end he should point at the

toilet. An unusual sense of humor, to say the least. Still, I was happy with our meeting. I'd gotten some clothes, some information, and 100 gold...better than nothing. Life was looking up! Sure, I ended up on the ground wrapped in a rug, but that I could live with.

Just then, the door creaked and, judging by the sound of their feet, three people walked in.

"Who was that big guy?" asked a female voice.

"Wild Willie from the Messengers," a deep and heavy male voice answered. "Forget about him. Gerv, what do you think?"

"I'm not really thrilled about what you did, Elina, but what's done is done. The decision is made, and the Hounds of Death have our assurance," said the third voice. It was also masculine, though, in contrast to his friend's, it was quieter and ingratiating.

I had no idea what was going on, but the message I got from my intuition was clear, "You're screwed now..."

Chapter Five

Clan Volunteer

“Hey, why are we talking here instead of in the fortress?” the woman asked with some nervousness in her voice.

“They have great beer here,” the bass answered. “Maybe the best in Fayroll. Also, it’s cheaper—those portal scrolls cost money.”

“Penny wise and dollar foolish.”

“Oh, sure, look at everyone spying on us. Hey, miss, bring us some beer,” he barked.

“Why do you have to be so rude, Gorotul?” The question came from the one they called Gerv.

“It’s just who I am. Get used to it!”

“That’s a shame,” the woman sadly added. “Definitely not good.”

“And what you did is good?” Gorotul suddenly asked her. “You betrayed our partners, and that’s putting it nicely.”

“Betrayal at the right time isn’t betrayal. It’s foresight,” noted Gerv.

“Come on. Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this here. Let’s go to the fortress. People will find out sooner or later, but I’d rather it be later,” the woman said cautiously.

“Oh, stop it,” Gorotul brush her off carelessly. “Why worry so much? Ah, our beer!”

I heard some gurgling as the owner of the bass slurped his beer into what sounded like a large stomach.

“Okay,” said the woman. “What do we have right now?”

“That’s a rhetorical question,” Gerv answered positively. “We don’t have anything right now, though if things play out right, that might change.”

“Exactly,” noted the woman. “If we don’t support the Plains Eagles and the clans they’re allied with, or even if we just announce our loyalty to the Hounds of Death, our reputations will take a beating...”

“Basically, they’ll call us traitors and rats,” clarified the bass, taking a deep breath after downing his beer.

“It’s a risk for our reputations,” the woman pushed on, “but that’s all since they won’t go as far as to openly fight us. And really, sticks and stones... On the other hand, however, we earn the friendship of the Hounds of Death, and maybe even a partnership with them.”

“And what do we get from that?” the bass chimed in again.

“Oh, come on, Gorotul... Gerv, I can’t do this anymore, explain it to him.” Light, feminine steps came toward me, and the bench I was laying under creaked.

“Look, my dear barbarian,” came the soft voice of the one she called Gerv. “The Hounds of Death are a powerful clan. An influential clan. A clan with a long memory. And they always remember who their friends and their enemies are. We can’t do anything to hurt them since they could crush us without breaking a sweat. But we could help them... Leaving would significantly weaken the clan alliance the Hounds are focusing on more and more. It would be a moral and literal blow to the alliance, and things like that aren’t easily forgotten.”

“Well, okay. And just like that, we’d look like rats—and we wouldn’t even get anything out of it.”

“We’d get something out of it,” Gerv quietly chuckled. “Our reputation would suffer, but our horizons would brighten. Sure, we would violate our agreement. Yes, we would pull a bit of a dirty trick. Okay, so we would have to grovel a bit... What’s that face for?”

“Grovel? Why?!” roared Gorotul.

“Do you want to get to Rivenholm? New lands, new quests, get the clans over there to bend over for us?” the woman chimed in.

“Of course,” answered Gorotul. “Why even ask? Everyone does.”

“How many ships does our clan have?”

“Two. And we’re building two more.”

“Is that enough for a full convoy? Enough to get there, considering the competition will be trying to sink us every step of the way? Kraken and his tentacles? Jolly pirates flying the no less Jolly Roger trying to run a jihad on us landlubbers? Whatever else might happen?”

“Of course not,” admitted Gorotul. “Although nobody’s ever gotten there, as far as I know.”

“Exactly. So what’s wrong with asking the Gray Witch to let us join their flotilla? As attendants. If we help them and show that we’re loyal, she probably won’t mind. And if we can prove ourselves to be a reliable, friendly, and useful clan for the Hounds of Death once we’re in the flotilla, they’ll help us when we get to Rivenholm. And you can’t put a price on that. So, my dear, we will do all the groveling it takes. Happily. And it wouldn’t hurt to do something else for them, something unusual...”

The woman started rocking back and forth on the bench, which made me rock in my rug. The beer inside me began complaining about the treatment it was getting.

“I heard,” Gerv continued insinuatingly, “that the Gray Witch was interested in someone...”

“Yes? What kind of interest?” Gorotul laughed at his double entendre.

“Not what you’re thinking,” Gerv answered coldly. “Not personal.”

“How do you know?” the woman asked with interest and stopped rocking, which made me feel better.

“I just do,” Gerv answered evasively. “How... Well, what does it matter to you, Elina?” It’s secret information that isn’t meant to leave the clan. They call him Wanderer, and he hasn’t reached the last level yet. The Witch is trying to find out everything she can about him, and especially wants to know where he’s located in the game.”

“Unbelievable!” shouted Gorotul. “You have ears in the Hounds?”

“Dear God!” the other two exclaimed at once, obviously shocked at their companion’s stupidity.

“Do you know why she’s so interested in Wanderer?” the woman asked.

“All I have are rumors,” Gerv answered. “They say Wanderer got the Great Dragon quest.”

“Oh, come on, that’s nothing,” announced the bass. “Just one more of who knows how many who have the Great Dragon quest.”

“Sure,” agreed Gerv. “But why would the Gray Witch be so interested in him? Just for the hell of it? That I doubt.”

Okay, Gerv,” the woman clapped. “Let’s check with our contacts and see what we can find about Wanderer. Maybe someone knows something. That could be a nice bonus for us—we’ll just have to do it quietly.”

“Well, obviously,” Gerv huffed. “If anyone learns that we found out, they’ll make life miserable for us—if they don’t just destroy us outright. It’s no joke sticking your nose in the Gray Witch’s business.”

“You’re telling me,” said the woman. “Phew, what a day...”

She stood up quickly, the bench rocked back, and that knocked the rug with me rolled up in it out from under the bench.

What happened next could have been pulled directly from some old comedy. The rug unraveled, leaving me to thud out onto the floor, and I looked up to see the group of three staring down at me in mute surprise. There was a hefty half-orc in armor and wielding an enormous battle axe. At least, I imagined that’s how half-orcs look—light-green skin, big teeth that don’t stick out of their mouth like my friend Euiikh’s, with a well-built, powerful body knotted up and down with muscles. Next to him was Gerv, a small human with a forgettable face dressed in unassuming clothes with a set of metal knives and a small sword strapped to his back. I guessed he was a scout. I wasn’t exactly sure what a scout was. Though, judging by what he was saying, it was apparently something like an intelligence agent...or spy. Finally, there was a tall, staggeringly beautiful elf woman. She had almond-shaped blue eyes, textbook-sharp ears, golden hair, and white clothes—probably a mage. Also, she was probably more a girl than a woman.

She crouched down next to my carcass and, in her melodious voice, asked me with some bewilderment “Who are you?”

I don’t know what got into me. The time may have expired for my intoxication, or maybe it was the elf’s beauty. It could have been the thought that I was royally screwed, or that real life doesn’t happen like in books or movies. Whatever the reason, the gift of speech returned.

“Hagen,” I answered.

“Well, that’s very informative,” the elf observed. “How did you get here, Hagen?”

“I came here with Fat Willie for some beer. He got me drunk, rolled me up in the carpet, and stuck me under the bench,” I answered truthfully.

“That’s probably Wild Willie,” the half-orc said, “the one who left when we got here. It’s Wild Willie, though, not Fat Willie.”

“Who cares which Willie he is?” the elf sadly exclaimed. “What are we going to do with this one now? He heard everything! You heard everything, right?” She turned to me.

“I heard everything.” There was no point in denying the obvious. “Though I didn’t understand it all.”

“Well, at least he isn’t lying,” said Gerv. “Still, this is a problem.”

“Seriously, Gorotul,” the elf turned to him and said, “We have a clan fortress with spell protection, comfortable rooms, and everything else you could want. But no, you had to drag us to this squalid pub. I told you! ‘The beer is good.’ You’re kidding me!”

She crossed her arms over her chest and nervously paced the room.

“But it is!” answered the half-orc. “And we shouldn’t use the scrolls so often. We need to save money!”

“Yeah, save money. Look at what we saved,” the elf responded and squatted down in front of me. “Do you understand how much you’ve screwed everything up by being here and hearing all of that?”

“Of course. I could tell right away.” I wasn’t about to argue.

“What’s the point of going over everything with him?” roared Gorotul. “We’ll add him to the clan’s blacklist and smash him if we ever see him again. He won’t even leave the city.”

“Gorotul, do you even know why you’re still in the clan council?” the elf turned on him.

“Because I’m cool!” The half-orc proudly stuck out his chest.

“Because you’re one of the founders. And that’s the only reason.”

“What did I say this time?”

“Gerv?” The elf looked at the scout.

“Look, Gorotul,” the scout started just as gently as before. “If a serious clan gets all up in arms about a Level 6 noob, everyone will notice. Their analysts will all wonder what we’re doing, and soon enough, they’ll guess that the noob knows or saw something he shouldn’t. And they’ll be right. Then, whoever figures that out first will promise to protect him, help him develop, and give him things (which is both easy and cheap), and the noob will tell them everything—and willingly. We’re screwed, and someone else has hit it big. That will get the Hounds of Death breathing down our necks if they don’t just kill us outright. And to top it all off, once the information gets to our old friends, they’ll make life interesting for us as well.”

“But aren’t they going to anyway?”

“Of course not. If our plan works, we’ll have the Hounds of Death behind us,” the elf explained to her dim-witted friend.

“So what are we going to do with you?” She looked at me thoughtfully.

“Stalemate,” I muttered.

“What?” asked Gorotul.

“Stalemate. You can’t do anything much with me holding you back, but you could ruin everything for yourselves. I can’t stand up to you, though I’m going to be a threat to your clan for the foreseeable future. Stalemate.”

“Good job. You’re smart,” the elf announced.

“What’s wrong with you?” Gorotul snarled. “A threat! I’ll eat you right now! A threat...”

“Shh!” The elf suddenly hushed him. “I made up my mind.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Gerv looked at her sideways.

“It’s the best option,” she nodded.

Elina the Wise, leader of the Thunderbirds, invited you to join her clan.

If you accept, you will become a member and receive the following bonuses:

+5% experience received

-7% damage done by opponents

+4% ability to see objects’ hidden attributes

+4% damage done by all weapon types

+5% protection from cold

+5% protection from fire

+15% healing received (25% when healed by another clan member)

+3% chance of receiving rare and hidden quests

You can fix two items each day using money taken from the clan account.

20% cheaper prices for vehicle rentals in areas that respect your clan

Additional bonus: Because you are joining the clan at the invitation of its leader, you get +10% items in dungeons (when playing with a group made up of clan members).

Your bonuses can be modified or increased by fostering respect within the clan.

I shook my head and said, “Wow!”

“Does shaking your head mean no?” Elina was surprised once again.

“No. I mean, it doesn’t mean that. It just means I’m taken off guard. It wouldn’t have surprised me if you decided to cut me up and scatter my pieces around Aegan. This is much more surprising.”

“If that were possible, we’d have cut you up five minutes ago,” said Gerv. “But you’d just respawn.”

“So are you going to accept the invitation?” asked Elina, who was starting to get nervous.

“Hey, hey, hey,” I cautioned. “Like Spartacus said, let’s figure things out before we get into the arena.”

“Who said what?” asked Gorotul.

“He was a famous tank,” summarized Gerv, giving an answer obviously informed by bitter experience talking with the half-orc.

“Why ‘was’?” continued Gorotul.

“They weren’t able to buff him fast enough before he got into a fight, and he was killed. They even got his account!”

“Oh, come on, that doesn’t happen.” Gorotul pressed on, “What server did he play on?”

I couldn’t help myself. “I heard of him, too. He played on the Italian server. The Roman server, to be exact.”

“See who we have to work with?” Elina said sadly and gloomily.

“It’s okay.” I tried not to smile as I looked at a perplexed Gorotul. “But back to the matter at hand. I’d like to know what you expect from me and what I get out of it. Who will I owe what?”

Gorotul shook his head in annoyance at the sting of a Level 6 noob rolling out with a bunch of questions. Still, he stayed quiet.

“What do we want? We want you to keep your mouth shut about everything you heard here. Really, that’s in your interests too. If that information gets out, we’ll be well within our rights to do what Gorotul suggested. We’ll name you a Clan Enemy, and you’ll die wherever you are in Fayroll—even in the Gray Lands. If nothing leaves this room, you’ll have the support and protection of the clan. You can level-up in the areas we control, and you can get clothes and weapons from the clan storehouse. Not epic, of course, but better than the crap you have. Basically, your standard agreement.”

“But what if the information gets out, and I have nothing to do with it?”

“There’s a spell called True Word. Ridiculously rare and expensive. But if we have a leak and you say it isn’t you, I’ll shell out for it to make sure.”

“There’s also Truth Powder, and it’s cheaper,” noted Gerv.

“Sure, it’s cheaper, though it has a 10% margin of error,” Elina nodded. “That’s fine for little stuff, but not something as important as this.”

“Got it,” agreed Gerv.

“Well, you obviously wouldn’t be buying it for my sake. You’d want to find the rat,” I noted reasonably.

“Of course.” Elina wasn’t going to argue. “I won’t spend a copper coin on you. No offense.”

“And one more condition,” the scout butted in. “You can only leave the clan in two cases. Either you have Elina’s permission (and only hers), or you’re our sworn enemy. If you leave the clan on your own, we’ll hunt you down wherever you are.”

“Do I have to sign something? And will I have any responsibilities? As a member of the clan?”

“You don’t have to sign anything,” confirmed Elina.

“The fortress sergeant will explain your rights and responsibilities to you,” Gerv said with a wink that spoke volumes.

“And if anything happens, you’ll have me to answer to!” Gorotul was roaring again.

I looked at them thoughtfully, remembering how Willie said that clans are good, and strong clans especially good, and asked my last question, “And what if there are three orcs promising to put me on a conveyor belt to the respawn point?”

“Don’t worry about it, warrior,” said Gorotul. “We’ll make mincemeat of them. PKers don’t get a long leash with us. Touch our noobs, and we’ll hunt you down. It’s a good deed, and we have some fun while we’re doing it. We’re the only ones who can smack our noobs around.” And with that, he guffawed loudly.

“Then I’m in!” I said and tapped the button to accept.

**Congratulations! You joined the Thunderbirds.
You are currently a volunteer in the clan.**

“Will I be a volunteer for long?” I asked Gerv.

“You start as a volunteer; that’s how our clan works. Then, a month or two later (or earlier if you prove yourself), you become a kinsman. That’s when you’re a full clan member.”

“What then?”

“What then? When you get to Level 120, you earn respect in the clan and, if the clan council deems it necessary and possible, you can become an officer. Then, you can invite new members, you get new bonuses, and you get a nice badge next to your name. After that, it’s deputy leader and, well...”

“I’m not going anywhere yet,” announced Elina. “Though we could skip the volunteer stage. Maybe we should make him a kinsman?”

“Why skip it?” Gerv asked. “First, that’s giving him too much. Second, we can’t put the spotlight on him like that. People will start asking why he gets special treatment, and we can’t have that. Let him run around with everyone else.”

“Agreed,” Elina nodded her head. “Okay, get over to the fortress.”

“Me?” I sheepishly asked.

“Who else?” the elf sarcastically responded.

“How? I have no idea where it is!” I was taken aback.

“As if I didn’t know that.” I was starting to think the young lady wasn’t quite the pleasant person I thought. I was going to have an interesting time of it.

“Gerv, take him there.”

Gerv took me by the hand and read from some kind of scroll. The last thing I heard in the room was Elina, “Well, how much money did we save?”

Another blue rainbow spun out in front of me, and I found myself standing on a cobblestone square.

When I imagined their “clan fortress,” I thought of something from my distant childhood: Walter Scott, Dumas, or, especially, something from *Ivanhoe*—some kind of forbidding castle built out of enormous blocks, a drawbridge, turrets, dungeons, and a courtyard in the middle.

There was a courtyard, but that was it. I mean, yes, it was all there, but not how I imagined. It was more like an overgrown country house belonging to some oilman or mid-level delegate somewhere in Nikolina Gora^[6].

“Not impressed?” Gerv asked ironically.

“Nope,” I honestly replied.

“Well, good.”

“Why?” I didn’t understand at first, though the truth began to dawn on me. “Ah-ha! I get it! The more unassuming it looks from the outside, the fewer people you’ll have trying to figure out what’s inside?”

“Exactly. Well done!” Gerv nodded.

“But other people could figure that out, too.”

“Not everyone. Gorotul still has no idea why we like to keep things on the down-low.”

“Draw it for him,” I suggested. “Maybe he understands pictures better than he understands words.”

“You’re just a volunteer, and don’t forget that,” the scout turned serious. “We’re talking about a deputy clan leader here. Oh, and the clan master for combat. He’s no genius, but there’s no one better when it comes to planning raids. If he ever invites you to go with him into a dungeon or on a raid, you’ll see for yourself. Anyway, let’s go find Sergeant. I’ll turn you over to him for training, and then I have some things I need to do. Quite a few, in fact...”

As I had imagined, the fortress was much bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside. Either the Thunderbirds were well acquainted with the fifth dimension, or there was an extra paid option I didn’t know about when you buy a clan fortress. (I was much more inclined to believe the latter option.) One way or another, there were rooms, twists, passages, and balustrades everywhere.

Gerv quickly ran through the whole maze, from time to time, pointing things out. “That’s the training hall,” “That’s the small clan storehouse. You aren’t allowed in there yet,” “And that’s the big clan storehouse. You’ll never be allowed in there,” “That’s the main hall.” After seven minutes or so of that, he stopped at the entrance to a small room.

“We’re here. What’s with the long face?”

“I’m trying to figure out how I’ll find my way out of here. You’re about to take off, and I have no idea where the exit is. I’ll wander around until I die of starvation.”

“Don’t worry, someone will show you where to go. Sergeant, are you here?”

“Come in,” rang out a deep bass voice. The echo boomed around and across the room.

Once we walked in, I saw that the owner of the voice was a bearded (as if there’s any other kind) dwarf with powerfully built arms and a potato of a nose. From the label above his head, I saw that his name was, in fact, Sergeant.

“Huh, so Sergeant is your name,” I said, voicing my surprise. “I thought that was just your rank.”

“It’s both, and it’s a way of life,” bellowed Sergeant. “Gerv, you’ve got to be kidding me. What, are we going to be like that Arnedakil and start recruiting right in front of Noobland? Why not? We have plenty of leaders, we have so much money to spend on training that we don’t know what to do with it, and we have good players coming out our ears...”

“Okay, okay, I hear you,” the scout responded, waving his arms in a conciliatory gesture. “This is a one-time thing. Don’t worry about the details, but it’s true. Elina invited him herself, actually.”

“And what now?” the dwarf muttered. “Level 6! We only take Level 25 and higher. We decided that at the council, and Elina agreed. And now you bring me this Level 6 loser.”

“How am I a loser?” I was rightly outraged. “Yes, I’m a noob. Yes, I’m dressed like an idiot. But how the hell am I a loser?”

“Volunteer! Nobody said you could talk!” The dwarf turned on me. “Your job is to stand there and shut up!”

“Oh, screw you!” I quickly responded. “What is this, the army? And who are you to tell me to shut up? My parent? My boss? You think I signed a contract to come here so I could have a bunch of beards start telling me off?”

“Wha-a-a-at?” The gnome’s hand started toward his belt, obviously going for his battle axe.

“Ye-e-e-es?” I mocked him. “You can’t kill clanmates, that’s one of the main rules of the game. And if you do, you’ll be kicked out of the clan in disgrace.”

“He’s right,” interrupted Gerv, who obviously watched the conflict with interest. “You can’t kill him. I mean, you can, but then...”

“I won’t train him,” the dwarf said in a completely calm voice. “I won’t, and that’s final.”

“It’s your job,” Gerv replied very quietly and, I thought, with a hint of a threat. “You’ve been stepping out of line quite a bit recently. Not happy with this, frustrated with that. And twice this month, you disobeyed direct orders from the council. Maybe you’re starting to think a bit much of yourself?”

“If you think I’m out of line, why don’t I just leave the clan?” The dwarf was getting himself worked up again. “You can train these puppies yourself.”

“You think we couldn’t find another trainer? Of course, we could. But do you think you’ll find another clan that’s been as loyal to you as we’ve been? I’m not so sure. Really, we need to have a serious conversation, and Elina shares that sentiment. We’ll revisit this topic when she gets to the fortress. In the meantime, put this volunteer through basic training, so he isn’t just standing there doing nothing.”

“Though let’s stay away from all that military nonsense. I had just about enough of that in the army. Did you serve, by the way?” I asked the dwarf.

“No,” he answered shortly.

“I thought so. Paid your way out of it, and now you go around throwing commands at everyone else.”

“Nope, didn’t pay a thing. I just wasn’t right for it, and that’s all you need to know. Have a seat.”

I sat down in a chair in front of the table while he settled into the one behind it. Gerv looked at us.

“Well, it doesn’t look like anyone’s killing anybody today, so I’m going to head off.”

He pulled out a scroll, I heard a “psh-sh-sh” sound, and he disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

“All right, so the basics,” the dwarf began in a slow droning voice.

Covering those basics ended up taking two hours. I heard what I was allowed to do, what I wasn’t allowed to do, what I was required to do, and what I had the right to do. To be fair, what I was required to do turned out to be a bit longer list than what I had the right to do. The dwarf went through his spiel confidently, as this obviously wasn’t his first rodeo, but without feeling or interest—and obviously thinking about something else.

Honestly, I didn’t accept Elina’s proposal just because I didn’t have a choice. You always have a choice in life. For example, I could have hit the log-out button. Thank God, that was still an option. It’s just that I always thought life in a clan was easier, and Fat Willie confirmed that. But life as a Thunderbird was ridiculously complex. Things were simpler back when I played games; a bunch of people got together to make it easier to get through raids or dungeons. Having proven players that you could trust with your back was way better than just going with whoever and whatever you came across. That also gave you resources you could check with when you were in the middle of a quest, saving you the time it takes to get out of the game and crawl through forums. In some situations, you could even borrow in-game money. And, again, clans gave you pretty good attribute bonuses in a bunch of games.

This was much stricter. I mean, sure, all of that was still true, but at the same time, everyone now had their job to do. Every member, for example, gave the clan 5 percent of the money they earned. Once a week, all members Level 180 and above had to take the clan’s newest members through some dungeon or cave, help them beat it, and protect them throughout the process. And there was a strict rule about spending time online—anyone who didn’t log into the game for two weeks in a row without letting the game masters know ahead of time was summarily kicked out with no chance of appeal. Everything that happened in the clan had to stay in the clan. The punishment for leaking any secret information was also getting kicked out, and the leak could be named an enemy of the clan if that information was used against it. The reverse was also true: all members were required to report any interesting or useful information they came across.

Then there was information about quests, since all MMORPGs on some level, are based on fighting, beating quests, and how the world is designed. PKs, social life, crafting, and roleplaying all come out of those three pillars, and without them, you simply can’t have an MMORPG. If the world isn’t well-designed or is imbalanced, the players can’t buy into it and go find something else. If the quests are all easy and uniform, players get bored. Sure, you can do a quest like “Kill ten foxes,” or “Collect five hip joints from jumping skeletons,” or “Take the letter to the old goblin” once, twice, even five times. But who needs a game where that’s all you do? And MMORPGs are about

everyone fighting everyone else, but nobody would want to play anything that amounted to some kind of meat grinder. You need simple quests to help you level-up and have fun along the way, but the heart of the game has to be storyline quests traced across the canvas of the game. And the Fayroll world had superquests—both epic and hidden. Epic quests let you go through tough, multilevel tasks and get commensurate rewards: the respect and friendship of non-player factions and epic and rare items that were hard or even impossible to get during normal gameplay. Hidden quests were strings of tasks you performed to get something incredibly valuable: the support (including military support) of a whole group of NPCs, items from sets, or unique abilities. They were very hard to find, and players generally came across them randomly by doing something completely unrelated or because someone from the game admin told them about them, which happened very rarely and was frowned on by that same admin. And there weren't any quest guides for hidden quests, which made them unique. Lone players who found hidden quests preferred to keep quiet about them and clans who learned about them immediately classified that information. That last part made sense, seeing as how every clan had its analysts and spies trying to dig up any scrap of information they could find, and they were willing to pay good money to get it—even real-life money. Keeping information about epic and hidden questions from your clan was high treason.

Some things were straight-up forbidden. Clan members couldn't (or, at least, that's what I guessed) kill each other. You could kill other players, but only in self-defense, and each instance was looked at on an individual basis by the clan council. The clan policy toward PKers was simple: they were not tolerated. You couldn't disobey decisions handed down by the clan council, something I imagined was based on imperial policy. Obviously, you couldn't steal from clanmates or the clan storehouse. Giving clan information to anyone on the outside was strictly forbidden. You couldn't ignore a clanmate who needed help if you happened to be walking by (although that went without saying, as that's presumably how any normal person would react).

So, life in the clan wasn't a walk in the park, to say the least, as they had everything pretty locked down. On the other hand, there were quite a few advantages. The clan offered full and complete protection from everyone and everything, unless, of course, it was your own fault you were in trouble. As we had discussed in the pub, any PKers that tried to pick off a member of the clan were as good as dead. They were hunted down by many clan veterans who were only too happy to get in on the chase. They didn't have anything better to do, after all (or at least that's what they said), since they'd already beaten all the quests and explored all the locations, so it was a fun diversion. Actually, there weren't many of those veterans, and that story wasn't exactly true. The Fayroll world was so big—even limitless, I think—that getting around to all the locations and going through all the quests was impossible, not to mention the regular updates... Still, most important was that PKers knew not to touch anyone from the clan if they didn't want problems. And that wasn't just a Thunderbird policy; it was true of all the responsible, respected clans. Although you could still find people out there itching for a suicide who didn't listen to the voice of reason.

The clan had information, weapons, clothes, components, everything one could need to craft things... within reason, of course. Anyone who wanted to learn how to do that could study with the clan master. The clan also had its own hunting lands or a few areas

with different levels that newer players could use to level-up, safe from PKers. I would head to one of them the next day with the latest batch of volunteers.

And that was basically it for the rights and responsibilities.

“Got it?” Sergeant looked at me.

“Yup,” I nodded.

“Then be on the square in front of the fortress at 9 a.m. Moscow time tomorrow. We’ll head to Gringvort to beat up some skeletons and zombies. That’s it for now—get out of here.”

“Um...Master Sergeant, I can’t.”

“What? You know, you’re really starting to get to me! Stop with your jokes! Why can’t you?” The dwarf sprouted red spots, and even his beard turned pinkish.

“I don’t know the way out of the fortress...”

I knew better than to hope that a dwarf who was about to crush my skull would walk me to the exit. Still, he had some brain cells left, as he called to a Level 114 mage walking by, “Eilinn, are you on your way out?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Gerv threw this volunteer at me, and he has no idea how to leave. I don’t have time, you know how it is—ambushes to plan, betrayals to hunt down.”

“Got it. Sure, I’ll show him,” the mage replied amiably. He seemed nice, with a frank face, middling height, and intriguing staff: four clawed paws holding a crown with broken-off tines.

“Unusual, isn’t it?” Eilinn smiled when he saw what I was looking at.

“Yes,” I answered. “Epic?”

“Epic. Let me introduce myself, and we’ll get going. Sergeant always has a ton to do, and as far as I know, he’s leading an excursion to Gringvort tomorrow. It isn’t an easy location, takes a lot of prep work. Anyway, my name is Master Eilinn. And yours, my young padawan?”

“Hagen.”

“How did you know about our outing?” Sergeant jumped back into the conversation.

“No need to ask, since it isn’t polite to interrupt,” the mage said to the dwarf reproachfully. The latter was quiet, which I found very surprising. “But I wouldn’t expect anything different from you. I’ll be coming with you tomorrow to cover the volunteers.”

“Oh, you’ll be there tomorrow.” Sergeant lightened up. “That’s great. Who else is coming?”

“Rango, Reineke Lis, and Krolina.”

“Wow. It’s been a while since we had such a veteran group. What’s the occasion?”

“It just worked out that way,” laughed Eilinn. “Hagen, follow me. See you tomorrow, Sergeant.”

“See you tomorrow,” I said to my first boss in parting.

The stubborn dwarf ignored us and walked back into his room, pulling so hard on his beard that it almost grazed the lintel.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked Eilinn immediately.

“Well, two things. First, I’ve never seen a dwarf who wasn’t in a bad mood. Not even once. They’re all incredibly feisty and standoffish. And, to be honest, they’re all just plain greedy.”

“Well, not all of them,” I said, remembering the dwarf who gave me 10 gold when I was running around Aegan in my underwear.

“If you saw any other kind of dwarf, you’re lucky. All the ones I know are stingy bastards. Anyway, second, Sergeant does have it tough. He can’t walk.”

“What do you mean he can’t walk?”

“He just can’t. When he was 16, he got into a car accident. The car rolled, he was sitting in the back, and when it landed, something bent too far and snapped his spine. That’s why he started playing Fayroll. He’s almost always here, in fact.”

I felt terrible. Of course, he’d never served in the army. On the other hand, I couldn’t have known. Still, I started to get that gnawing feeling...

“Obviously, it hasn’t made him all that humble or pleasant to be around. But believe me, he’s a good person. And a true friend. Just believe me. You’ll see for yourself at some point.”

“What about everyone else who’s going with us?”

“You’re lucky. You got all three of the clan’s best players. Good fighters. Rango and Krolina have been in the clan from the beginning, and Lis joined a bit later. Rango and Krolina are hunters, Lis is a swordsman. So tomorrow, you can just relax and focus on leveling-up.

“Is there something to worry about?”

“Well, put it this way... The location is tricky, and it’s designed for Levels 29-32. You would never make it there on your own. The other volunteers are generally between Level 26 and Level 29, so they’ll get a good chunk of experience, too, especially at the beginning. That’s why they’re sending you there. You should get a bunch of goodies tomorrow, so your hamster will be happy. I imagine you’ll get some good achievements and 10 or 12 levels. As far as what makes it tricky, well, there are sometimes a few bosses among the skeletons and zombies. There’s a Level 46 lich and a Level 48 zombie king. They’re tough since they’re strong and they cast all kinds of crap. Theoretically, you could take them out, but you’d still die a bunch of times in the process. And you’d lose all the experience you got, so what’s the point? Anyway, if they show their heads, we’ll take them out.”

“That sounds interesting. Oh, and what did you say about a hamster?”

Eilinn smiled, “All gamers have a hamster sitting inside of them. When they get something free, it’s happy and sings. When they have to give something up, it whines and complains. Yours is definitely going to come out to play tomorrow. Just don’t be late; we’ll be porting at 9:05. And we won’t wait around for anyone.”

We’d gotten to the exit by the time we finished talking.

“It was nice meeting you,” said Eilinn. “I have to run, but I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Me, too,” I responded with complete sincerity. “See you then.”

I watched Eilinn walk away and clicked the button to log out.

End of manuscript

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Endnotes

- [1] An elite, upper-class region outside of Moscow.
- [2] A Russian term referring to the high season.
- [3] “Club of the Funny and Inventive People,” an incredibly popular youth movement in Russia that combined team games with theatrical elements.
- [4] A kind of beggar.
- [5] A working-class neighborhood in Moscow.
- [6] A prestigious suburb of Moscow.
- [7] Imperial imposters in Russian history.
- [8] A city car produced by Daewoo, a Korean car manufacturer.
- [9] A street in Moscow.
- [10] Russian parliament.
- [11] A famous False Dmitry.
- [12] A short German sword from the 14th—16th centuries.
- [13] A small home in the countryside.
- [14] A visa offered by a Schengen Area country that is good for travel throughout the entire area.
- [15] A traditional Russian folk instrument similar to the banjo.