

# **The Road East**

**Fayroll**  
*Book Two*

Andrey Vasilyev

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## With special thanks to:

I would like to thank all of my readers. You have decided to join us on the second part of this adventure and I hope you continue to enjoy it.

I would also like to thank Jared Firth for another excellent translation and to Marat Gabdrakhmanov for his wonderful art work.

Finally the team at Litworld. For their hard work and assistance in making this project happen.

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## Chapter One

### **In which the hero realizes that fun little jokes can have serious consequences.**

Spain is incredible. It's warm and sunny, there aren't any mosquitoes, the fruit is cheap, and there's enough wine to drown in—at prices that boggle the mind. And, if you have the wherewithal to leave your SIM card at home, there's nothing stopping you from having the time of your life. Sure, I was a little worried that Elvira would have us risking life and limb, seeing as how she was about as unpredictable as they come, but it turned out fine. All she did was drag me off to go rafting in the Pyrenees once. Naturally, I tipped over and gulped down some stream water, but that was all. It helped that the Pyrenees were nothing like the rushing, twisting rivers we have crashing through the Altai Mountains.

And so, on the whole, everything was fantastic. I was able to relax like I hadn't in a long time, and the only downside was that it had to come to an end. Elvira kicked me out of the taxi by the metro, leaving me standing there with my suitcase.

“Take the train home. I'm so tired after the plane...” Off she sped, leaving me coughing in a cloud of exhaust.

“Okay then,” I replied as I plodded into the station. A quick check of my wallet showed that I didn't have enough money on me for a taxi.

At home, everything was just as I'd left it nine days before, with the exception of some dust here and there. That didn't bother me, though. What am I, a woman? They're the ones who come home and have to whirl around the place getting it just how they want it.

“Dust, dust, dust everywhere. You vacuum; I'll grab a rag. Why are you leaving your suitcase there? Everything needs to be washed. Right now! Okay, the refrigerator's empty, so I need you to hurry over to the store.”

Go to the store? Wash everything? All I wanted to do was throw my old bones down on my favorite couch. We hadn't seen each other in nine days, and I missed lying on it.

Thank God, I wasn't married yet (maybe “still wasn't married” would be more accurate). My lady friend had gone home, and I was

alone. The couch creaked as I eased my 86 kilograms down onto it. I got comfortable, cast my eyes around the room, and stopped when I got to the capsule. To be honest, I'd had such a great time the last week and a half that I hadn't given much thought to my virtual adventures. There hadn't been time in Spain to remember that there was a clan I belonged to off somewhere, or that I had unfinished business and a vila bride waiting for me. What was her name? Ah, right, Elmilora. Incidentally, I appreciated how much less grumpy she was compared to Elvira. On the other hand, Elvira didn't shoot lightning out of her hands.

I should jump in there at some point. The account is paid for, after all, I thought before turning over and falling asleep.

It was the next morning by the time I woke up. The long flight, coupled with the constant buzz I'd had for the past week and a half (Yes, I drank a lot. Have you tried Spanish wine? Or sangria? That costs practically nothing? Then don't judge me.) left me exhausted, and my body took full advantage of being back home in my own country and on my own couch.

I walked out onto the balcony to smoke my first, and therefore best cigarette, and on the way grabbed my SIM card from the shelf. It was time to hook back into the real world. Although, really, who needed me there? Mammoth?

Having plugged the card in, I barely had time to click the back of the phone into place when the ringtone started playing—the theme song from Karpov,[1] a favorite TV show of mine.

“Hi, Kif? Oh, thank God!” It was Zhanna, Mammoth's assistant. “The boss has been screaming and yelling for what feels like a week already!”

“What's he screaming and yelling about?” I figured it had something to do with me, since I was the one she was telling. Maybe I was even the main reason.

“He can't find you. Guess what? He even tried to make me call around to all the hotels in Salou.”

“You're kidding! And did you?”

“Ha, right. I told him that they all speak Spanish, and I don't.”

“But what happened? Do we have an audit coming up?”

“I have no idea. Some people just keep calling and asking to see if you’re back yet.”

“What people?”

“Kif, I’m not a psychic. How should I know? Let me put you through to the boss. Good luck. If worst comes to worst, we’ll buy you a wreath with a nice red ribbon.”

“Thanks, you’re a peach,” I said to Zhanna, wondering if I should call my old friend Seva Verkhovtsev. One time when we were drunk together, he mentioned something about an opening on the Finnish border. If things got really bad, I could go find some fishermen to wait things out with.

Mammoth’s voice thundered through the phone. “Nikiforov!” It hit me that real mammoths probably roared just like that, and for a second, I sympathized with my ancient ancestors who preferred trapping them to jabbing at them with spears. Trapping them at least gave you the chance to run away—and I was considering doing just that. I’d never heard Mammoth so violent. What could I possibly have done?

“Nikiforov! Where—were—you?” The phone jumped in my hand.

“Hi, Semyon Ilyich,” I said, my voice cracking. “I was on vacation. For just a few days.”

“And why didn’t you pick up the phone, you little parasite?”

“How was I supposed to do that?” I had a defense ready. “The money ran out on my phone, and where was I going to top it up in Catalonia? They have terminals, but they don’t work with Beeline.”

“I told you to stay in touch, you bastard, so why didn’t you?”

“I could tell you about the terminals again, but you’d just rip me a new one again,” I said thoughtfully. “What’s the point?”

“You’re right about me ripping you a new one.” Mammoth’s voice dropped a couple decibels. “I’m going to kill you, and then I’m going to resurrect you just so I can kill you again. Ten times!”

“No, that won’t work.”

“And why not?”

“Well, you’re going to be especially violent when you kill me, and after the sixth time, all you’ll have left is all the molecules and atoms. What will you resurrect then?”

“You piece of trash, you can never just let me yell at you. Okay, I’d better see you right here in front of me in an hour. And not a minute later!”

“But what happened? What’s the rush?”

“I’d tell you, but I want to enjoy this a little longer. Just get over here to the office. Oh, and you’d better shave before you do.”

“And put on a clean pair of underwear?”

“That’s up to you. I’m killing you either way.”

And with that, he hung up the phone, the inconsiderate wretch. I stood there for a bit longer lost in thought until the cigarette I was holding burned down to the filter and singed my fingers. With a curse, I hurled it off the balcony and turned around to go shave. There was no sense giving Mammoth yet another reason to murder me.

On the other hand, I mused, it didn’t really matter what Mammoth did. There were plenty of newspapers in Moscow; I had already earned a decent reputation; I had experience; and there were plenty of people I could ask to get me a job if he fired me. But I had no idea who was asking to talk with me. I didn’t owe anyone money, and I wasn’t involved in crime or drug smuggling or anything like that. What could they want?

In some confusion, and with mixed emotions, I arrived at the office and walked into Mammoth’s reception area.

“Oh, Nikiforov,” said Zhanna, with a start. “Did you bring me a magnet?”

“What?” I was too on edge to realize what she meant at first. “Oh, a magnet. Yes, but I don’t have it with me. I’ll give it to you later. Probably.”

“You can go in. Mammoth told me to send you in as soon as you get here. And those men are already there,” Zhanna said in a conspiratorial whisper. “Go, go, go.”

I knocked on the door, pushed it open a little, and stuck my head into the room.

“Semyon Ilyich, can I come in?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

“A-a-ah, and here’s the star of the hour!” He was so happy to see me that I almost believed he was sincere. “We’ve been waiting for you!”

He got up (!), walked over to me, and gave me a quick hug.

I thought I must have already died and gone to visit Alice on the other side of the looking glass. What was happening simply was not possible.

Mammoth gave me a friendly punch in the stomach before turning to the two men in black suits and white shirts sitting on the couch.

“Let me introduce you, gentlemen. This is Harriton Nikiforov himself, ascendant star, I’m not afraid to say, of Russian journalism and one of my most talented writers. He’s the apple of my eye!”

Could they be slave traders? Was he selling me to them?

“Good afternoon, Harriton...” The first white shirt held out his hand and inquisitively waited for me to tell him my patronymic.<sup>[2]</sup>

“Just Harriton. Or call me by my last name, whatever’s easiest for you.” I shook his hand and that of his friend.

“My name is Nikita, Nikita Valyaev. This,” he said, gesturing to the second white shirt, “is Maksim Zimin. We represent the board of directors at Raidion. You recently wrote a series of articles about Fayroll, one of our products.”

*Well, thank the Almighty!* I had already begun to think I was a goner. But, as it turned out, they didn’t want to kill me after all. If they didn’t like the articles, I could just apologize and say—

“Why be modest?” Mammoth melted into an enormous smile. “They’re not just representatives; they’re members of the board of directors. And they’re the new owners of our newspaper.”

*Oh, wow!* Suddenly, I realized why he was acting so strangely. New owners meant a new broom and sweeping out half the staff. So, our fearless leader was afraid of losing his cozy office.

“That information isn’t really being advertised yet,” said Valyaev.

“I’d say not—it isn’t being advertised at all,” added Zimin.

“It must not be if even the secretary doesn’t know about it,” I said. “Can I ask you a couple questions?”

“See? Didn’t I tell you? He’s a professional,” said Mammoth proudly. “Already asking questions. That’s how meticulous he is.”

“Go ahead,” said Valyaev with a nod, having completely ignored Mammoth.

“Why do you need this newspaper? And why are you telling me this? I’m nobody important, really.”

“Good questions,” answered Zimin. “The right questions. And they lead right into what we wanted to discuss with you.”

“I don’t know if you’ve seen,” continued Valyaev, “but your articles went viral. Even we didn’t expect them to be so widely read, but they were. The game’s ratings and traffic jumped by 35 to 40 percent, which is a lot. It’s an incredible number for our industry.”

“And all because of my articles?” I was having a hard time believing it.

“Well, they got things started. You know, like the first little pebble that causes an avalanche—it doesn’t seem like much but, soon, you have a river of rock sweeping away everything in its path. You wrote the articles; someone read them and shared their opinion; someone else disagreed with them; and it took off from there.”

Mammoth jumped in. “And our server keeps getting overloaded. It’s almost like a DoS attack.”<sup>[3]</sup>

I stared at him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I couldn’t believe it at first either. I almost smacked our system administrator when he told me.”

“To be honest, nobody really even remembers the articles anymore, though the buzz is still going strong. Game traffic is still going up, too. And it’s all thanks to the little pebble you kicked off the cliff,” said Zimin complacently.

“Not to detract from the work you did, but we should note that you just happened to be in the right place at the right time, or at least that’s what our analysts think,” said Valyaev. “You aren’t the first person to write about Fayroll, but where did everyone else write?”

“In specialized gaming magazines?” I said, hazarding a guess.

“Exactly. The kind that people only read if they’re interested in the gaming industry. And also on gaming sites, places like that. But here’s a newspaper with a readership that includes everyone of all ages. You hit the nail on the head.”

Zimin chimed back in. “Obviously, we weren’t about to let something like that slip through our fingers. The board of directors decided to push our advantage and squeeze it as hard as we can, so we’re going to release a weekly supplement to your paper called the

Fayroll Times. It will be about six pages long, we'll release it every Thursday."

"Why every Thursday?" I asked.

"Our meetings aren't on Mondays like everyone else's. We have them on Thursdays," explained Valyaev. "So we made the decision on a Thursday and the Fayroll Times will be published on Thursdays."

It was a little odd, but there was some logic to their decision. Really, though, it didn't make any difference to me.

"Plus, we'll publish a monthly magazine. We haven't thought of a name yet—you can do that. It will be based on your—well, our—newspaper as well. We bought the paper or at least 91% of the shares. Raidion prefers to maintain control over everything it does."

"A commendable decision," I said approvingly. "And where will I be in the food chain?"

"What do you mean where?" Zimin and Valyaev both stared at me in surprise.

I felt self-conscious under their gaze and shifted in my chair.

"Harriton, you got all this started, so you're going to keep it going," said Zimin softly.

"And not just this," added Valyaev. "You're going to be the editor of the supplement and the magazine. Semyon Ilyich can't do it, obviously."

Mammoth rustled behind his desk. He obviously wasn't happy with what Valyaev was saying, though he was afraid to object. One wrong word, and his erstwhile favorite Nikiforov would be taking over his office. That's what he got for playing with fire...

"Wow," I said. "That's great, but on my own, I'm not sure I can—"

"Why on your own? Who said that?" Zimin shook his head. "You'll be in charge of four people responsible for collecting and processing information, separating the wheat from the chaff, handling technical issues, and making sure everything is ready for you. Your job will be to approve or polish what they give you and send it off to be printed. You'll have your editorials, too, since you'll be the head editor of the supplement. Once we get to the magazine, you'll get more people. As many as you need."

A muffled noise came from Mammoth's corner. I wasn't sure if he was crying or blowing his nose. Maybe he had just snorted in frustration.

Zimin correctly diagnosed the situation. "The good Semyon Ilyich will remain the newspaper's head editor. You will be a sort of state within a state. A kind of Vatican City, so to speak."

"But I'll report to him?" I asked immediately.

"No, you'll report directly to the Raidion board of directors. Well, if we can reach an agreement, of course."

"That's all very interesting..." I said, drawing my words out meaningfully.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Zimin. "Company management really appreciated what you did to promote the game, so they asked me to give you this bonus."

He pulled a plump envelope out of his coat pocket and handed it to me.

This time Mammoth's "harrumph" was much louder. He was watching money leave his pocket, after all. *Who did all the work pushing me along? And then who got paid?* Zimin and Valyaev paid him no attention.

"Thanks, that's great," I said. "Well, I'll do it. Though with the supplement and the magazine, and only five people..." The squeaky wheel gets the oil.

"I told you, the magazine is separate. And it very well may not have anything to do with you. Or it may not end up happening in the first place. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For right now, focus on the weekly supplement. And hurry, too, since the first release needs to be this coming Thursday. Like I said, a six-page insert with the latest news. Who took which castle, who beat which dungeon, statistics, and a comic. Something like 'Two dwarves walked into a bar.'"

"I could do a couple running pieces," I suggested. "'Fayroll: the History,' for example. Not many people have read the backstory, and it's pretty interesting. You know, the Departed, or whatever you call the Old Gods, the Great Dragon..."

Valyaev and Zimin exchanged a quick glance. Apparently, I'd said something I shouldn't have.

“Or maybe an analysis of the different classes. ‘A Closer Look: Mages.’”

“Not bad. If you’re in charge, you’ll decide what you want to print and where. You’ll get good people, all graduates with honors from the best journalism programs in the country, so work them hard.”

“And who’s paying for the supplement? Where are we getting the financing?” asked Mammoth in his most choir-boy voice.

“We’re the owners, so we’re financing the project,” answered Zimin coldly. “And given that we’re the owners of the whole newspaper, if we say you’re going to finance it, that’s exactly what you’ll do. Nothing personal; it’s just business. Do you have any objections to that?”

“Of course not,” answered Mammoth. “I was just asking.”

Valyaev turned back to me. “On paper, you’ll be employed by the Capital Herald, but you’ll actually work for Raidion. One of our security officers will get in touch with you, just so you know—don’t worry about it. That’s just the procedure we have for all new employees. He’ll come see you and walk through everything you need to know and sign. Then we’ll have someone stop by on the 25th of every month to drop off the money for your salary and your staff’s salary. To start off, you’ll be getting—”

He interrupted himself to glance quickly at Mammoth, who was obviously interested in what he was about to say next, and instead wrote a number on a business card he pulled out of his pocket. I was stunned, to say the least.

“Does that work for you?” Valyaev looked at me. “Incidentally, keep the card—my cell phone is almost always on. Kit, give him your card, too.”

“Phew,” I answered wordlessly.

“That pretty much takes care of the business side of things. We’ll mail you the main documents you need as well as information about your new staff.” Zimin looked over at Mammoth.

“Okay, Semyon Ilyich, let’s talk about what we need from you. Have your people set up an office big enough for four people to work in as well as an adjoining office for Nikiforov. Plus, everything they need: printers, scanners, and the rest. And make sure you streamline

everything for them! Get that all done today so they can be at their desks working tomorrow.”

“But we don’t have enough space—” Mammoth started to respond, but was interrupted by Zimin.

“You know, this office would probably work for Nikiforov.” He looked at the ceiling pointedly.

“Oh, you know, we have three offices in the left wing.” Mammoth clapped his hand to his forehead. “They’ll be perfect—practically mansions. Harriton, buddy, you know what I’m talking about, right? I’ll go get things taken care of right now!”

“Good work, Semyon Ilyich,” said Valyaev. “Let’s do this: go ahead and personally make sure that everything gets done. That should take you ten minutes or so. Just make sure these guys have computers, pens, paper, and everything else they need to start work tomorrow. Okay?”

“Got it,” Mammoth said. “You always have to keep an eye on these things. If you don’t do it yourself, nobody will. Can I go?”

“What are you asking me for?” Zimin said with surprise. “This is your newspaper, your office. We’re just guests. Of course, you can go.”

Mammoth left, gently closing the door behind him.

Zimin walked over and made sure it was closed before pulling some kind of shiny tool out of his pocket. He moved around the room with it and listened to the cheeping sound it made.

“Oh, come on, Max. What, you think he’s CIA or FBI? It’s just a normal building with a normal newspaper,” Valyaev said lazily.

“Kit, you know me—you can never be too careful. Besides, there’s something about that Ilyich that doesn’t sit right with me. Ilyiches are all like that—you have to keep an eye on them. Okay, it’s clean.”

“I didn’t doubt it. So, Harriton, can we talk about a couple other things?”

I realized the real conversation was about to start.

“Why not?” I answered as easily as I could, wondering what I could have done wrong. The only things I could think of were stealing Andrey Mozheyko’s toy car in kindergarten and dumping carbide in the toilet at school.

“Relax, you didn’t do anything,” said Valyaev amiably. “Quite the contrary...”

“Well, sort of,” noted Zimin.

“What are you talking about?” I tried to look as thoughtful as I could.

“You weren’t the one who played the little joke in the gaming community?” asked Zimin.

“What joke?” I asked almost sincerely. It was obvious what they were talking about, though I wouldn’t have called it a joke. I just wanted to see how the community would react to something that sensational. So, I started a rumor that some noob got an epic quest accidentally, you know, just the usual... But the twins obviously knew it was me, and that wasn’t good.

“What joke? I think you know, Mr. Buzdigan,” said Valyaev with a grunt.

Zimin was right there to back him up. “Quite the screen name you picked. Wow.”

“Calm down,” Valyaev said. “You didn’t know it, but you triggered the mechanism for a project Max and I worked on for a year and a half. We’d just spent three months racking our brains trying to figure out how to do just that. Then you came along with your little joke and got it all going. You even got the right quest.”

“The one from the dryad?” I decided not to play dumb anymore, seeing as how they apparently already knew everything.

“Yes. We added the quest and the dryad a year and a half ago, back when there were just the first hints of a global game-wide event that would turn things upside down and rebalance the game world. The quest conditions were impossible, too: save the character right when she was being killed by a player, and the chances of that happening were miniscule. Then there was the choice between the three bonuses... Put it this way, in the entire history of the game, only eight people saved her when they were supposed to. Only two of them got to the second bonus, and you were the only one who got to the third. We didn’t think it was possible that someone would willingly decline the pet and the gold.”

I was taken aback. “But she told me there were a lot of people like me?”

“What did you expect? She told you what she was programmed to say,” answered Valyaev.

Zimin took over from there. “When we realized that someone had gotten the quest to save the dryad, we were shocked. And just imagine how thrilled we were to stop arguing about whether it was worth going through with the whole thing or not. The point of no return was behind us. We decided to keep tabs on you, seeing as how you’d triggered the main mechanism...and then you and your Buzdigan went and played your little joke! We never imagined that it was so simple to take five minutes and do what we’d been gradually pushing toward for so long.”

“We were planning on just having an employee start playing the game and get everything going. You know, play a role, earn some fame, and then activate the project.”

“But what’s the project?” I had to ask. “Activate what?”

“You really don’t know what we’re talking about?” My new employers looked at each other. “Come on!”

“I don’t,” I said with complete sincerity.

“The dryad quest and the dryads themselves are the triggers for another huge quest,” said Zimin slowly.

“What quest?” I had no idea what to think.

“A quest to bring the Old Gods back to the Fayroll world,” Valyaev said calmly. “And you started it, so you have to finish it. That’s the global scenario, and it has to happen one way or another.”

## Chapter Two

### In which the hero is astounded yet again by the variety of life.

“Wow!” was all I could think to say.

“Is that amazement, indignation, or surprise?” Zimin asked in the same friendly tone.

“I have no idea,” I answered truthfully. “To be honest, I wasn’t really planning on jumping back into Fayroll.”

“Why not?” Valyaev was taken aback. “You didn’t like it? Everything’s gone pretty well with you. You got into a good clan, you’re leveling up fairly quickly, and you’ve gotten some fun quests. Even beyond the dryads, you got the quest with the witcher—and not many players do. It isn’t completely unique, of course, but it’s rare. You got a set item from it, too, and all at Level 33.”

Zimin sat up. “Wait, really? I missed that. What did you get?”

“Lichtenshtain’s shield,” I answered.

“Ah, from the Shield and Sword set. Well, you’ll have problems with the sword. Getting it is tricky.”

“Yeah, you have to get all the way to the Skeleton Emperor on the left bank of the Crisna,” I said, carefully watching his face.

“Yeah, we did a good job with that one.” Zimin smiled, shook his head, and stared at me. “You sly dog! Kit, he got me!”

Valyaev laughed. “Nice, Nikiforov. Did you figure it out yourself?”

“Yes, as soon as I heard about the emperor’s sword,” I answered. “It was pretty simple, same as with the witcher. If a normal player who doesn’t have the shield gets it, they walk away with an elite sword. But if the player with the shield is on the raid, and he gets to the emperor, then he gets the set item. There’s a problem with that, though.”

“Oh, yes?” The pair stared at me.

“Whatever happens, the sword will be ticketed for the clan storehouse. The set will never be collected. Either that, or only the best of the best will get it, though they almost certainly won’t have the shield. And if they do, and the clan finds out, they’ll have to give both of them up. I’d say there’s a 99 percent chance of that happening— if

whoever has the shield even gets to the palace. So what happens in the end?”

“We’ll have to think about that. Maybe we can change things around, add the sword as a reward for some kind of hidden quest,” said Valyaev.

“That would be better,” I said. “It would be fair, at least. Just make sure that it really is random, and not like with the landlord’s crown. A friend of mine killed him a hundred times and still never got it. He was pretty torn up about that.”

Valyaev’s eyes narrowed. “The landlord’s crown. Harriton, are you talking about the one by Mettan?”

“Exactly.”

Zimin leaned forward and asked a question of his own. “And who’s your friend?”

“Just another player,” I answered, mentally kicking myself for saying too much. “We killed some PKers together.”

“And he never got the crown?”

“Not as of then. I think he decided to give up.” I decided to cover for Wanderer.

“Got it.”

My interrogators looked at each other, and I decided to quickly change the subject before they could ask me what the player’s name was.

“Anyway, I have a request.” I looked at my new employers.

“Yes?”

“Call me Kif. I’m not a big fan of my first or last name and, this way, we both can forget about them... I think you know what I mean.”

“Kif it is,” said Zimin with a shrug. “In that case, Kif, let’s talk about what you’re going to do, what you aren’t going to do, and what you’ll be getting for all that.”

“Sounds good,” I said, wondering what he meant by “what you’ll be getting.” Was it the carrot or the stick?

“You have two very doable assignments. The first and most important is to play the game. Just imagine—that’s what you’re supposed to do. Sure, you don’t have to go crazy or anything, but still. You need to go east like all the characters have been telling you.”

“Ah-ha, so that was your doing,” I said. “And here everyone’s been telling me that it’s just the program giving me advice...”

“The game does have that functionality. But in your case, we did a little extra pushing,” admitted Valyaev modestly.

“Well, I’m already going in that direction.” I even waved my hand generally eastward.

“Yeah, and you’re off to a good start, what with your discount at the port and your new fiancée.” Valyaev grinned and smoothly switched to a more familiar tone.

Zimin turned to him in surprise. “What fiancée?”

“Seriously, Max, have you read any of the reports on him?” Valyaev was outraged. “He hooked up with a vila!”

Zimin looked at me and shook his head.

“What an idiot. A vila. Ha! A vila!”

When even the developers are telling you you’re an idiot, you start to wonder what exactly you got yourself into. You missed something, and maybe something big.

“Well, he did what he did,” Valyaev said, going back to the topic at hand. “That’s his business. Though, yes, he’s an idiot. Now, you need to go east and make sure you start really moving things along.”

“Give me some money for the boat, and I’ll be there in a couple days. Or just give me a portal,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

“If it was that simple, we’d have just sent one of our employees,” answered Zimin. “When we wrote the whole thing, we made it so that the player has to find his way between the dryads naturally.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, not quite understanding.

“How do I explain this? Okay, let’s say the player has already been to Selgar. In that case, he can port there, go find the dryad, and finish the quest at a standard difficulty level. But if he hasn’t been there, and we port him there all of a sudden outside the normal game flow, then the quest difficulty will jump by a factor of fourteen.”

“Why fourteen?”

“You think I know?” Valyaev obviously had no desire to further discuss the topic.

“Well, I do, anyway,” announced Zimin. “You shouldn’t have been drinking beer after cognac. ‘It can’t be just anyone! It isn’t a quest; it’s a legend! This will go down in the annals of online

gaming!” He was obviously having a little fun at his partner’s expense.

Paying no attention to the crestfallen Valyaev, Zimin continued.

“We had way too much to drink, and Kit wrote a spy program to ensure that the dryad quest is completed honestly. Once he was done, he imported it into the body of the game. The very core. He got it stuck in there so well,” Zimin said in a confiding tone, “that if you try to extract it or write over it, the whole thing will crash and burn. He’s a genius, that’s a fact. But thanks to that fact and our little genius here, you’ll have to march your way across the continent on your own two legs. The game will track you as you try to complete the quest. If we just give you money, the quest could very well become impossible for you to beat. Maybe not, but probably. We can’t have that, so we won’t be helping you trek east. Does that make sense?”

“Well, why don’t you give me money for beating some other quest? Or will the game see that?”

“Of course it will see it. Each quest has its standard rewards. Stop trying to look for options, and don’t try to be clever about it—just get into the capsule and start walking east.”

“So, I won’t get any help at all?”

“Not in the game. Or at least, nothing that will give you an unfair advantage. No items, gold, abilities—nothing.”

“What if I need help that doesn’t give me an unfair advantage?”

Zimin and Valyaev glanced at each other.

“For instance?”

“Well, like what if I need to quickly take care of an argument or report someone? Shouldn’t I have some kind of benefits or advantages?”

“Oh, that’s what you’re talking about. In that case, just call an admin and tell him,” Zimin said, hesitating for a second, “...mm... ‘Code 33.’ We’ll assign it to you today.”

“Any admin?”

“Do you know a lot of them?”

“Some,” I answered with quiet dignity. “Number Nineteen, for example.”

“Then call Number Nineteen.”

If there was almost nothing I could get out of them, the least I could do was get that almost nothing. It was better than absolutely nothing.

“Okay, so, if I understand you correctly,” I said, wrapping up everything I’d heard, “I need to get to the East without any help, deal with the dryad there, and then go wherever she sends me.”

“Correct.” Zimin nodded.

That was that. Off you go, little boy. There’s a dryad out there crying her little eyes out.

“What if my clan ports me there? I could tell them about the quest—”

“Don’t do that,” said Valyaev seriously. “Don’t tell the clan anything. Yet, at least. Don’t tell them about anything we’ve talked about or, by the way, that you edit the Fayroll Times. Nobody needs to know that.”

“Um-m...” I said, shuffling my feet.

“What?”

“Someone already knows... Well, knows I’m associated with the articles.”

Zimin looked at me attentively. “Who?”

“Fat Willie knows. I mean, Wild Willie. In the game, his name is Wild Willie from the Messengers of the Wind clan.”

“Oh, right, you mentioned them in one of your articles. They paid you, I guess?”

“Yes, 100 gold, you know, to get their name out there...”

“I like this guy,” said Zimin. “Kit, take care of Willie.”

My eyes widened, and Zimin was quick to notice.

“We’re not going to kill him! Who do you think we are?” He laughed and glanced at Valyaev. “Kit will talk to him in the game and give him two choices. You know, like Neo. Remember the Matrix?”

“Of course.” I nodded. “It’s a classic.”

“Yup. The first option will be for him and his clan to clear out a brand new dungeon with great bonuses—we’ll take care of that. The second will be for his clan to start having lots of things go wrong for them. We’ll also put him on the blacklist for a good hundred players who used to like him, and we’ll even make sure they’re all high-level. All we’ll ask for is his silence. Which option do you think he’ll pick?”

“I don’t doubt which one he’ll go for.”

“Excellent. And nobody else knows about your job?”

“No, that’s it. But by the way, about travel, what if I just ask someone from the clan to port me over there without telling—”

“There’s an 80 percent chance the result will be the same—the quest will become impossible for you to beat.”

“Then it’s going to take me a while to get there.”

“Just get there when you can. You have six months,” said Valyaev.

“Why six months?”

“First of all, that will give us enough time to get everything ready. Second, in six months, you’re supposed to get married to the vila.”

“Well, the vila isn’t that important,” I said with a chuckle.

The twins looked at each other and shook their heads.

“That’s what you think...”

“Regardless, believe me, six months isn’t that long,” Zimin said with a smile. “When you’re working with Nikita and me, time tends to fly by. Life is one adventure after another. But you’ll see what I mean. Oh, and there’s that other assignment we need to discuss.”

“Right, the newspaper...” I didn’t notice that Zimin was shaking his head quietly.

“No, no,” he said. “The newspaper is your job. Your assignments are your assignments. Don’t mix the two up.”

I looked at him in surprise. “I thought the newspaper and the game were related?”

“Well, in a way, yes,” answered Valyaev evasively. “Still, they’re very much separate. So the second thing—”

“Right,” said Zimin, jumping in. “Since you were nice enough to agree to one service, I imagine you won’t refuse us a second. Maybe a third, too, or however many we need.”

“You want me to be your hitman?” I was clueless.

Zimin and Valyaev looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Of course not,” said Valyaev as he wiped away a tear. “We have other people for that. No, we need you to do something else. Once in a while, we’ll ask you to do things for us in the game. You know, go somewhere, tell someone something, do something... We’ll tell you

when the time comes. Obviously, it won't be anything you can't handle."

"But why me?" That I couldn't figure out. "You probably have tons of people who can go wherever they want."

"Don't worry about that," said Valyaev, a frown flitting across his face. "Is it that hard to meet your employer in the middle?"

"No, of course not. I'm just worried that if you send me somewhere eastward, it'll cause problems. You know, because of everything we just talked about."

"Don't worry, we'll make sure everything is all right," said Zimin with a wave of his hand. "Remember, the program only watches for possible cheating in terms of game progress when it comes to the dryad quest. If you port somewhere up north to have a snowball fight with some yetis, there won't be any consequences. Don't forget that the game tracks brain impulses."

"Wait, so it's in my head?" I didn't like that sound of that.

"It's in everyone's head," said Zimin coldly.

Valyaev backed him up. "What did you think?"

"Whew, boy," I said, exhaling.

"Cutting-edge technology," said Zimin. Valyaev pointed his index finger upward suggestively.

"Wait a second." My inquisitive brain was having a hard time believing that it was impossible to fool the program. "What if I port north now, discover some spot, and then the next dryad happens to be there. Could I port back?"

Zimin and Valyaev exchanged a glance.

"Nice thinking, huh?" said Valyaev.

Zimin nodded.

"Technically, yes. If you've already been to the area due to some other reason, that will work, though it couldn't be part of an effort to visit as many areas as possible."

"Got it. In that case, I'm in—the more places I visit, the better."

"We may not ask you to do anything that often, and we may never actually need you in the first place. Maybe we will. Still, we need you to agree," said Zimin.

"At the same time, we don't want to risk tampering with the program and missing out on the global event, so I'll say this again,

don't expect any in-game help from the corporation. It's all on you," said Valyaev dramatically.

"Understood." I fiddled with the piece of paper in my hand. The number on it was enough to have me happily pouring concrete or removing waste, not to mention playing a game.

"Then let's discuss your compensation," started Zimin again.

My jaw nearly hit the floor as I glanced back at the paper. Some other compensation? Weren't they already giving me plenty?

"In addition to the number I wrote for you, you'll get the same amount every month," said Valyaev. "Why are you looking at me like that? You have two jobs, so you should get two salaries. We're nothing if not fair."

"And once you finish the quest, at least if you finish it successfully, we'll give you a bonus, obviously," added Zimin.

"Of course, that's only if you work with us, do what we ask you to do, and don't compromise the corporation," said Valyaev.

"Phew," I said with a long whistle. "I never thought I'd say this, but isn't that a lot for just one person?"

"Of course not," Zimin said amiably. "You don't know what it's like to be an employee—a mid-level employee, I might add—of a big corporation. These aren't huge sums; you just aren't used to them."

"Sure, if you compare them to today's newspaper salaries, they sound more impressive," noted Valyaev.

"But believe me, if you keep your nose clean and do good work, this is just a starting point," said Zimin, completing my amazement.

"I'm afraid to even think what the bonus could be..." I muttered.

"The bonus?" Zimin said with a smile. "We usually prefer something more meaningful and material than monetary bonuses. In your case...oh, I don't know...maybe this newspaper?" He looked at Valyaev.

"Why not? Good idea," the latter said approvingly.

You could have knocked me over with a feather. It was something like all the movies I'd seen and books I'd read where Satan comes to earth to tempt humans. Though that didn't actually happen. But what would I do with a newspaper? *My friend Yuri's the one who dreamed of having his own media empire. I couldn't have cared less.*

“Well, Kif, what do you think about the newspaper? Or would you rather have something else?” Zimin asked grandly.

“Hmm,” I said, whistling again. “Can I take some time to think about that? You can’t just make decisions like that on a whim.”

“Good call,” agreed Valyaev. “You’re obviously a pragmatic, thoughtful person.”

“But is everything else good with you?” Zimin looked at me inquiringly.

“Deal?” asked Valyaev.

“Deal!” I answered. “You said it yourself—I’m a pragmatic person.”

“Excellent, we were right about you,” Zimin said with a boisterous clap. “In the next couple days, one of our people—the one I mentioned—will come by with some papers to sign. Get everything set up with your staff here, but don’t worry too much about that. We have some smart people, so they’ll pick things up themselves. Make one of them your assistant, since you’ll have more important things to do than hold people’s hands here. For instance, you can have meetings every Tuesday to go through their material and send it off to be printed. Just make sure that there’s a Fayroll Times in all the newsstands, online, and on our desks every Thursday. Again, don’t worry about the details. Your main focus needs to be the game.”

“Oh, and also,” Valyaev said, “I think I already mentioned this, but feel free to fire anyone you’re not happy with. Just call us, and we’ll find replacements. We have people lining up to come work for us, so that’s better than wasting time and energy on people you don’t like. Especially time.”

Zimin walked over to the door and opened it. “Mr. Head Editor, come on in.”

Mammoth walked into the office and flashed a haunted smile. I suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“Yes?” he asked, looking devotedly at Zimin.

“Is everything all set?” asked Zimin.

“Yes, they’ll be ready to go tomorrow,” said Mammoth helpfully (I didn’t even know that was a talent of his.)

“Great. My assistant will send you the information about your four new people. Their passes and papers will all be ready. Let them

get some experience,” he said, looking at me when he added the last line.

I nodded. Sounded good to me.

“Oh, and also,” Zimin continued quietly but distinctly, making sure that every word was heard, “remember that Nikiforov is now untouchable. Not a word, not a glance—got it? He’s under our protection now. He’s with us.”

“Of course, of course,” murmured Mammoth. “Makes sense.”

“Great,” said Valyaev with a wide smile. “Then we’re off.”

They shook our hands and walked out the door.

“Oh, Kif,” said Zimin, looking back through. “What was the name of the player who kept killing the landlord? The one who couldn’t get the crown.”

Sorry, Wanderer. Nothing I can do.

“Wanderer,” I said firmly.

My new masters looked at each other, nodded, and left.

“Ooph,” said Mammoth as he collapsed into his chair, pulled out a checkered handkerchief, and started wiping the sweat off his face. “Thank God they’re gone.”

“Yup,” I said.

““Yup,”” repeated Mammoth. “So they hired you?”

“Yes. It’s good money. I wonder if it’s some kind of trick.”

“No, it’s definitely not a trick, but what do you have to do for them?” asked Mammoth quietly and sadly.

“Good, honest work,” I answered.

“Well, that’s good. Okay, get out of here.”

Mammoth flopped down dejectedly in his chair, and I felt sorry for him. He’d been such a strong person, and the twins went through him in all of ten minutes like he was nothing more than a paper doll.

“Semyon Ilyich, by the way, you knew you weren’t going to yell at me. So, what did you want to enjoy?”

Mammoth grunted. “Did I have you squirming?”

“Yes.”

“Then I enjoyed it.”

I walked out of the office, winked at Zhanna, and started home.

“Don’t forget to bring me a magnet,” she called at my retreating figure.

On the way home, I tried to figure out what had just happened. Either I'd gotten seriously lucky, or I was just as seriously screwed. A couple of less-than-healthy chicken sandwiches at my favorite KFC didn't clarify anything.

"Forget it," I said finally. "We'll see what happens. The money is real, and it's good for my career. Who knows what will happen?"

Once home, I had a smoke before realizing what I had to do next. Let's do this.

And I climbed into the capsule.

I was sitting on the same shore, though this time, it was day and Wanderer was no longer next to me. I hoped I hadn't screwed him over too badly. Judging by how gloomy he was, all he needed was the twins making his life even more miserable.

Something flashed in the corner of my eye and I pulled up the interface to see that my inbox was frantically pulsing. Both of them, in fact.

I opened the internal messaging system and whistled—I had messages coming out my ears, and almost all of them were from Gerv. *Where are you? Let me know as soon as you log in. This is ridiculous.* Like some kind of girl. Maybe he was in love with me? I vowed never to visit any saunas with him just in case.

Anyway, all joking aside, I needed to write back. I opened the form.

Gerv, I'm in the game. Hagen.

My duty to the clan done, I set off for Mettan, where I wanted to count the money in my chest and get started eastward. I figured I would take the boat as far as I could, and then start walking from there. What choice did I have? Beggars can't be choosers.

I didn't even get to the gate before my inbox dinged.

Finally, you bastard. Port to Eiberger, to the Wild Hearts citadel.

I thought he might have been off his rocker, but he was still above me in the clan. I wrote back succinctly.

Where?

The answer was instantaneous.

Oh, right. Where are you now?

In Mettan.

Go to the square and wait for me. I'll be there in five minutes.

Then wait I would. All I did was take a quick jaunt to Spain, and when I got back, I had everyone looking for me in real life and in the game. It was a full and varied life I was leading—everyone needed me. All I needed was someone to just up and drop something in my pocket—you know, mythical chainmail, the Sword of a Thousand Truths, Duke Nukem’s jetpack, or Gordon Freeman’s crowbar—and I’d be really set.

A portal opened up and spat out Gerv, who was obviously fighting mad.

“Where were you, moron?” He started right in on me without bothering to spend time on banalities like saying hi or shaking my hand.

He seemed to have forgotten that I’d already told him where I was and what I was doing.

Like I was going to tell him where I was and what I was doing. “I was at home, but the internet was out. The provider had some sort of glitches so I couldn’t get into the game.”

“That’s no excuse. You could have written from your phone, for example.”

“Written to whom? The man in the moon?”

“No, on our site, in the special topic.”

“Oh, Gerv, that didn’t even cross my mind. Sorry about that.”

“Apparently not. Elina and I have been looking high and low for you for four days.”

“Why?”

Gerv stared daggers at me.

“Didn’t I tell you to read the forum?”

“Yes...”

“Did you?”

“No, I didn’t have time. And then the internet went out.”

“Then that’s why you don’t know that the Hounds of Death declared war on the Wild Hearts.”

“Oh, wow. But what does that have to do with me?”

“Our clan signed an agreement with the Hounds to ally with them in the assault on the Hearts’ citadel.”

“But everyone there is probably level 60 or higher! What good will I do?”

“That’s true, but the Gray Witch had a personal request.”

“What was it?”

“She wanted you to participate in the citadel assault. So that’s what will happen.”

## Chapter Three

### In which the hero spends some time in high society and even benefits from his time there.

What's going on today? I can't catch a break!

"Come on, come on. They're about ready to start the attack!" Gerv had no patience for my musings. "Do you have anything else you have to do here?"

"Yes," I said, disgruntled. "I'm supposed to pack myself onto a boat and sail as far down the river as my money will take me."

"Not funny. Okay, let's go."

Gerv opened a portal, and I stepped in behind him.

We walked out onto a small plain not far from the tree line. All around us were tents and pavilions, over which flew flags and pennants of different shapes and colors. Nearly all of them featured the same figure: a dog with a human skull, symbol of the Hounds of Death, I figured. On a small hill some distance off, was a huge red and brown pavilion that I assumed was the Gray Witch's headquarters. At the other end of the plain, loomed a castle with heavily blackened walls, and behind it, a river ribboned off into the distance.

"The war camp," said Gerv.

*Yes, I got that.* Players stood between the pavilions and scurried around them, and I couldn't help but notice that they were all high-level. Some carried bundles of weapons—swords and bows—somewhere; others discussed some obviously pressing issues. A group of mages was clustered off by themselves, their robes, staffs, and beards blowing in the wind, giving them away. They were animatedly discussing something, as well.

"I figured as much," I answered Gerv. "Where are we going?"

"Where do you think? Over there." He pointed to the big pavilion.

"Are you sure we should? I mean, seriously, what do they need from me?"

"Are you kidding me? We're just following orders. Come on, let's go."

I had the feeling that I was under guard. We were accompanied by the wondering gaze of many on either side who couldn't figure out

what someone with my miserly level could be doing walking into the Gray Witch's pavilion.

"Hey, how did this fight between the Hearts and the Hounds even get started?" I asked Gerv. "What are they fighting over?"

"Formally, they had a disagreement over a dungeon," Gerv said lazily. "Really, it's all about influence."

"What disagreement could you have over a dungeon?"

"It's simple. What kinds of dungeons are there? Well, there are quest-related dungeons. They're available to everyone, so the kids take their girlfriends there to level-up and show off their biceps. Those dungeons never disappear. Then there are territorial or, as I call them, entourage dungeons. You know, every good forest needs a dungeon with a legend. The legends themselves are barely worth the name, but the bosses at the end aren't bad, and the loot is what you'd expect. There are also variable dungeons that appear and disappear whenever the developers want them to. If you find one, you're in for a treat."

"What kind of treat?" I was starting to understand how Zimin and Valyaev would incentivize Fat Willie to keep his mouth closed.

"You usually get something really good there, though only the clan that beats the dungeon first gets it. It isn't just your normal extra level-up bonus, you know, like +20 percent experience or a 'you beat it first' badge. Nothing like that. You go there for the loot."

"Epic or legendary?"

"You get those, too, but they're far from the main attraction in new dungeons. You can get scrolls with new high-level abilities. Not in all of them, not even most of the time, but you can."

"Abilities? Oh, come on. What are the instructors for?"

"The instructors are fine, of course, but they can only teach you so much. After Level 100, there's no point in even going anymore. There are a few quests that let you learn new abilities, too, but you have to get them. Sometimes, set items get you abilities, too, though only when you have the whole set—and that's incredibly hard to do. Plus, the abilities only work when you have the whole set with you."

*That's for sure.* I recalled how getting my hands on the sword for my set would give me three abilities. *What quest will the twins add the sword to?* I wondered.

“Long story short, dungeons are really the only place you can get new abilities. There, you can get them from a monster, a boss, or even a chest—but only the first time through. That’s it. You can beat them as many times as you want and get all kinds of goodies, but you won’t get scrolls. Then a little while later, the dungeon disappears, only to reappear somewhere else. Randomly.”

“Got it. So the Hounds came across a new dungeon. By the way, how do you know they’re new? I mean, besides hearing someone say, ‘Oh, hey, that wasn’t there yesterday.’”

“When you go in, you hear fanfare. That’s all. Once you kill the final boss, the dungeon is beaten, along with everything we just talked about. That’s why you always save the boss for last. First, you make sure you’ve explored every nook and cranny.”

“But what if you just don’t kill the boss? Wait for the respawn and—”

“Oh, aren’t you clever? Nope. Nothing respawns until you beat the boss. But, like I said, he doesn’t always have the scrolls. They could be in chests, barrels, piles of trash in dark corners...anywhere. It’s absolutely random.”

“How do they divvy up the scrolls they find?”

“They don’t. Scrolls belong to the clan and are given to the players the clan leadership deems worthy.”

“So, the scrolls only work once?”

“Of course.”

“I wonder what you’d get for one of them at the auction,” I said thoughtfully.

“Quite a sweet chunk of change,” answered Gerv with a nod.

I abruptly went back to the original topic. “So, what happened with the Hearts and the Hounds?”

“Well, naturally, the Hounds found a dungeon on the edge of the Fettakh Desert, so they set up a pennant and guard just like they’re supposed to,” said Gerv with some enjoyment. “Everything on the up-and-up. But then fifty Hearts showed up and claimed it was their scout who found the dungeon and therefore their right to sweep it. The Hounds’ guards told them they didn’t know what was going on, that they were just told to guard it. But they figured that the pennant flying there meant it belonged to the Hounds.”

“And they were right,” I agreed. “All fair and square.”

“Exactly. And the Hearts really should have just chewed out the scout who left without putting up a pennant.”

“If there was ever a scout, to begin with,” I noted.

“Good job. Maybe there wasn’t one. But they didn’t really appreciate the finer points of the discussion and just took out the guards.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Quite. Then they beat the dungeon and, when the Hounds lodged a complaint in keeping with the rules, they claimed they were in the right all along. And then, they added that they didn’t care who thought otherwise.”

“Almost like they were looking for a fight.”

“Could be true,” Gerv said thoughtfully. “There are a lot of people out there who aren’t comfortable with the Hounds’ growing power. That means everyone else is seeing fewer recruits, too.”

“Like us,” I said, almost in a whisper.

“Like us,” confirmed Gerv. “The days of lone wolves in the game are ending, and the game world is changing. Only idiots and the blind can’t see that. What are you staring at me for? This world is just a copy of the one we actually live in. Could a lone wolf make it in the real world? Doubtful. You have to join the system.”

“...or die?”

“Why die? That’s a bit extreme. It’s more that you’ll stagnate without anything to implement or work toward. No prospects. No money. What do they say? ‘A good artist is a starving artist.’ It’s a great phrase, but how many paintings have you seen that were done by starving artists? I imagine they were all thrown out with the trash when they cleared out the attic closets those starving artists lived in before they died. Lone wolves are yesterday’s phenomenon, really; these days it’s all about corporations and conglomerates.”

“So, the Hearts decided to provoke a fight with the Hounds while they still had a shot at beating them?”

“Yes, I think that was their plan. But things didn’t happen the way they were expecting, or, at least I imagine, according to their intelligence. They underestimated the Hounds, and that has cost them dearly. We’ve had three battles so far, and the Hounds have railroaded

them every time—not without our help, I might add. After the third battle, something like 60 percent of the Wild Hearts deserted. The clans supporting them were gone after the second.”

“They just gave up?”

“Well, fighting for a successful clan, and one of the best in the world, is one thing while fighting for a clan that just keeps getting beaten is quite another. And a lot of people are in the game to beat quests, collect items, even craft things. When they make you go to war, get chopped up in battle, sit there waiting for hours... People just give up and walk away.”

“Understandable,” I said sympathetically.

We had gotten to the commander-in-chief’s pavilion by that point, but we were in no hurry to go in. Gerv obviously wanted to make sure I was up to speed, and I found the whole thing fascinating. It sounded like I would be there for a while, so I needed to know everything.

“Everyone that’s left is locked up in their main citadel.” Gerv jabbed at the castle near the river with his finger. “We hemmed them in there, and soon, the main assault will begin. They’re really good—mostly experienced veterans.”

“How many times have you attacked so far?”

“Twice. The first time was right after we pushed them back in there, and the second was yesterday.”

“Not so successful?”

“Oh, no, it’s not that. It was just a skirmish to feel out their defenses. Today, we’ll take the castle, and they’ll have nowhere else to run. Okay, let’s go inside.”

We walked into the huge pavilion, and my first impression was that it looked even larger from the inside. There were about fifteen people sitting and standing, though I only recognized Elina as I glanced around. She saw us and waved.

“Oh, you’re here. Finally! Come here, we’re about ready to start the attack.”

“Let’s go.” Gerv gave me a shove.

We walked over to Elina, who was at the far end of the pavilion. She was standing next to a modestly, even poorly, dressed woman of short stature.

“Where did you find him?” Elina asked Gerv.

“In Mettan. He just logged into the game—apparently, he didn’t have internet.”

“Oh, come on, leave the poor guy alone,” interrupted the woman I didn’t know. On the other hand, I had a good idea who I was standing next to.

“Still, orders are orders,” muttered Gerv.

“Agreed.” The unfamiliar woman stretched out her palms.

She had slightly graying hair, and she wasn’t particularly attractive though she had a highly expressive face and unusually vivid eyes. There was also a strength to her—or even the magic of power. I’m not a fan of clichés like “inner strength” or “magnetic charisma,” but it was like there was some kind of waves radiating out of her. How can I explain it? Waves of potential energy. Almost like she could have just reached out and crushed the Wild Hearts’ citadel with one sweep of her fist if she needed to.

“Have you figured it out?” She looked at me with irony.

“Your faithful servant,” I said, not without a fair bit of pathos, while getting down on one knee and bowing my head.

“Oh, come on, I don’t like any of that—and we don’t do it here.” She pulled me up onto my feet. “We’re all equals.”

I couldn’t help myself. “It’s just that some are more equal than others.”

“What’s with the attitude?” The woman looked at me reproachfully. “Bad day?”

“Something like that,” I nodded. “I was tired. I logged into the game, and there I was, thrown right into the deep end.”

“Kept you off the deep end of that boat, if nothing else,” chuckled Gerv.

“At least, we’re finally getting the chance to meet. As you no doubt have already guessed, I am the Gray Witch.” One of the most powerful women in Fayroll stretched out her hand. “Allow me to introduce my friends and clanmates. This is Cedric Sekira, battle master and coordinator.”

A knight in shimmering emerald armor nodded to me.

“This is Fredegar, he’s responsible for clan security.” A scout with completely gray hair half-bowed.

“This is Milly Re.” The Gray Witch took me over to a stunningly beautiful girl with two swords strapped to her back. “She’s our instructor.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Hagen,” I repeated to them all, one after another, as I met the upper echelon of a clan that looked to soon join Fayroll’s top three. I could now say I knew all the Hounds of Death elders personally.

“To make sure we’re on the same page, this is the warrior who fought for our clan’s honor with three PKers who were mouthing off about us,” announced the Gray Witch.

“A-a-ah,” everyone said in unison, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Of course, we remember you.”

“I heard about that—respect.”

“Way to be a man.”

“Nice work!”

After having beaten all the dust out of me with their back-slapping, the group quickly forgot the whole thing and went back to discussing the details of the impending attack. I can’t say I was terribly upset, as I don’t particularly enjoy the limelight; you never know what to expect.

“And now you’re famous,” noted the Gray Witch, who had returned to stand next to me. “But don’t let it go to your head. It’s here today and gone tomorrow.”

“I never really cared too much about fame anyway. And don’t forget that I wasn’t the only one there. Two dwarves were with me. Are they here?”

“I remember. They probably aren’t here, since clans only take their top people with them to storm castles.”

“Not even just for the numbers?”

“What numbers? Our high-level players could withstand a few fireballs thrown at them as they charge the walls, but the kids would be toast. Who wants to be cannon fodder?”

“Then why am I here?”

“I wanted to meet you personally. You surprised me, and I enjoy the chance to clap eyes on the people who can conjure up that emotion for me.”

“How did I surprise you?”

“Your audacity, I’d say. No offense, of course, but I didn’t believe for a minute that you’d go out of your way to help our clan out of the goodness of your heart. You just needed to get rid of those three clowns, and you used us to do it for you. But it was the way you did it—cynically, on the one hand, but with grace and prudence on the other. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to get a look at you. Oh, speaking of looking at you—Milly!”

“Yes, mistress?” The beauty with the two swords—the one the Gray Witch said was the instructor—walked over.

“Wouldn’t you agree that our friend is dressed...shall we say...a bit poorly? For his level, of course.”

“That’s for sure. That isn’t even the decent kind of poverty. You’re lazy, my friend,” Milly said with a touch of arrogance in her voice.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked in embarrassment. “I’m not lazy, and I have money. It’s just that I haven’t been in any of the big cities except Aegan, and there aren’t any auctions in the provinces. Just vendors. All they sell is the same kind of junk, if not worse.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Milly said sincerely. “I guess I forgot what it was like down at the lower levels. So, what did you need, mistress?”

“Go find Fiosi, the farrier. Maybe he can think of something for our friend before the attack starts.”

Milly nodded, her light brown hair falling over her sparkling eyes, and ran off.

Beautiful, I thought.

“Beautiful indeed,” confirmed the Gray Witch.

I started at her, perplexed. *Did I say that out loud?*

“Calm down, it was written all over your face,” said the Witch with a laugh.

“It’s like some kind of sentimental novel.” I smiled, too.

“Is this the first time you’ll be storming a castle?”

The Gray Witch sat in her chair and motioned for me to sit next to her.

“Yep. Though I still don’t think I’ll even make it to the walls. I’m too weak.”

“That could be,” the Witch nodded. “This is all about skill, strength, and luck. Maybe luck most of all.”

“Wait a second,” I said, “what happens to my things if I die?”

“Nothing,” answered the Witch. “They’ll collect them along with everyone else’s and mail them to you. Just send your clan leader a message saying what you had. There aren’t any rats here; we’re all in the same boat. And in your case, all you have to do is say your name. You have a ring with your name on it, so they’ll know what’s yours.”

“And where will I go if I die?”

“To the spot you last linked to. Most people link to the clan castle.”

“Why?”

“Well, you kiddies might be used to running around in your underwear, but the veterans...”

“What about the people over there in the castle? If they just respawn there, this could go on forever.”

“True, and that’s why the developers added a special condition. All defenders of a castle that is officially under attack are sent to the nearest big city if they die during the battle.”

“And their things?”

“Either the castle defense is successful and they’re returned, or to the victor go the spoils.” The Gray Witch shrugged her shoulders. “It’s war. Some people like it.”

“That makes sense. But what trophies can you get in castles?”

“Not much,” the mistress replied. “In other games, you’d get the standard magic crystal or the clan emblem. Sometimes, you’d get the castle itself. But here, there’s nothing like that. Just the things you collect from the bodies and whatever’s in the clan storehouse. But there usually isn’t much there, since nobody keeps anything that unusual in their clan storehouses.”

“Wait, really?” I didn’t believe her at first.

“What’s the point of having them there? Okay, so what’s most valuable? Sets, rare scrolls, artifacts. How many sets and artifacts are there in the game? Not that many, I’d say. And clans? Oceans of them. So, let’s say there’s one item for each of them. How many would even the largest have in its storehouse? Not more than would fit in a bag. And that bag was probably sent down the river in the hands of their

most skilled warrior and surrounded by a few other guards a long time ago. Best case scenario: there are a few legendary things in there, though even those were probably given out to their warriors already.”

“Then what’s the point of the attack?” I asked, confused. “Just to say you won?”

“That’s everything!” the Gray Witch said instructively. “It’s goal number one. We can get items ourselves, but twisting the neck of one of the largest clans out there is more than just honorable; it’s hugely beneficial. First of all, we get lots of new recruits. All their veterans—mages, warriors, healers—will be over here looking to talk with me tomorrow. And they’ll ask to join the clan. Then, I can have my pick of them. Plus, everyone will know that the Hounds of Death trounced the Wild Hearts. And there you go!”

“Wow,” I said with surprise. “Tough. What happens to the castle?”

“To the castle? Nothing. I mean, there won’t be a castle left. As soon as we tear the flag down from the tower, the clock will start to tick. Three hours later, the carriage will turn into a pumpkin, and the castle will turn into ruins. If the Hearts want to restore it, they’ll have to start over again. Oh, there’s Fiosi. Hey, there, my friend. Do we have anything we can use to dress up this fine young man?”

Fiosi, a dwarf in glistening chainmail and a bright blue belt with a hammer stuck into it, looked me over.

“Mmkay. I didn’t bring anything with us for his level, but I could whip up a breastplate. It won’t be that fancy, but it’ll be head and shoulders above what he’s wearing now.”

Elina had walked over in the middle of the conversation and blushed at what she heard.

“Forge it, Fiosi,” said the Gray Witch. “Forge it, my dear. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yep,” answered the dwarf. “I grabbed whatever I thought might come in handy.”

He took a few steps away before turning back to me.

“Come see me in about seven minutes. The smithy is to the left of the pavilion. Okay?”

“Sounds good,” I said with a nod.

“Our clan will pay for his work,” said Elina firmly, her face still crimson.

“Forget it,” the Gray Witch answered just as firmly. “Hagen will be fighting under the flags of my clan, and my job is to make sure he fights well. Armor is included in that. I’m sorry, I must insist. And Hagen, if we don’t see each other before the attack, we’ll talk after. Break a leg!”

She walked over to the main group.

“You’re an embarrassment,” hissed Elina. “You disgraced the entire clan!”

“Well, sorry! I didn’t know, I didn’t want to, and I don’t think I even will!” I hissed back. “Who told me that I was coming to see people like those? I just logged into the game, and Gerv grabbed me just like that. Oh, and what’s with all the snobbery? I wear what I have money to buy.”

“Fine, when we get to our castle, I’m going to—”

“Oh, your goon at the storehouse won’t give me anything, believe me,” I informed her.

“I was going to say that I’m going to kill you, you fool,” Elina said, both sadly and threateningly. “Whatever, let’s go see the dwarf.”

“Are there a lot of our guys here?”

“About seventy,” said Elina. “We’re covering the left flank, so head over there. And stay in the back if you don’t want to be killed.”

“Okay, Madam Clan Leader.” I saluted her and left the pavilion. This is all fine and dandy, but I need to keep my distance from the demigods around here.

I headed over to the smithy and saw Fiosi there. He was holding a nice-looking breastplate in his hands, though it was more than just a breastplate. There was even some kind of cuirasses, and it had a reinforced plackart and bevor.

“You’re incredible!” I effused sincerely. “That looks amazing.”

“Put it on,” the dwarf said, all business. “It may need to be altered somewhere.”

*Light Steel Cuirass*

*Light armor*

*Protection: 340*

*+7 to strength*

*+8 to stamina*

*+11% protection from piercing and cutting weapons*

*+7% protection from fire*

*Durability: 310/310*

*Minimum level for use: 30*

*Class limitation: only warriors*

“It fits like a glove!” I spun around again and broke into a satisfied smile. “That’s fantastic armor—and I got it for free!”

“May it serve you well,” the dwarf said with a smile of his own. “Craftsmen enjoy it when people like their work.”

The sound of trumpets suddenly rang out.

“Whoops, here we go,” said the dwarf, who I noticed was staring at the main pavilion. He followed my gaze.

Out walked everyone I’d seen inside, several of whom ran off in the direction of their detachments.

“Hey, do you know where the left flank is?” I asked the dwarf.

He looked back at me, apparently wondering at my thick-headedness. “On the left.”

“Oh, right,” I said before running toward the left half of the plain.

Before I got there, the trumpets blared again. I heard the voice of the Gray Witch, only amplified many times over.

“Atta-a-ack!”

## Chapter Four

### In which the citadel is stormed.

I wonder, I thought—not for the first time at the completely wrong moment—how the hell is she amplifying her voice? Maybe a spell? “Sonorous” or something like that?

“All archers, with the exception of the assault group, stay behind shields and wait for my command,” boomed the Gray Witch’s voice. “Fram, prepare the trebuchets. Mages, protect the battering rams and hit the walls with fireballs from time to time to keep the Hearts on their toes. Swordsmen, assault group, head over to the Mice and Dixon on the left flank. Flekis, head there with three teams of archers from the assault group as well.”

*What mice?* I was impressed by the full-scale siege, complete with trebuchets and battering rams. My musings were interrupted, however, by the swordsmen rushing past in what I assumed was the direction of the left flank. Our Thunderbirds were supposed to be there, too.

I joined the crowd of a hundred or so swordsmen and about sixty archers, tramping off hurriedly behind them.

I’ll get to my guys, and we’ll get this thing started, I thought as we moved along. I can stay in the back and wait everything out.

We ran along for about three minutes before coming to a halt.

“Warriors!” A voice bellowed out.

I looked up to see that it belonged to a barbarian named Dixon. He was covered in an interesting tattoo pattern and held a war hammer in his hands.

“You head into the Mouse on the left. Let’s go, let’s go, move it!”

It turned out we were running into a trench that split into three bays. The barbarian was standing at the fork, and the bays led to...*Sweet mother of all that is holy! They led to siege towers. So that’s what everyone keeps calling Mice. Who came up with that name?*

“But they weren’t there last I saw?” I spluttered in surprise.

“Of course not,” said a panting dwarf who was running along next to me on my left. “‘Curtains of Invisibility.’ Why did you think we have mages here?”

We kept moving forward.

“Okay,” ordered the barbarian, who by that point was right above me, “this group into the middle Mouse. Go, go!”

“Mr. Barbarian,” I said hesitantly. “I wasn’t supposed to...”

He screamed back at me. “Warrior, keep your mouth shut and don’t hold up the flow!”

“Let’s go, slowpokes!” The people behind me weren’t thrilled with me either.

“Damn it,” I hissed and sprinted after the dwarf.

It was my colossally bad luck to find myself at the beginning of the column for the Mouse. That put me on the third and topmost level in the middle of a company of swordsmen and archers. It looked very likely that I would be caught up in the first wave—a great honor, but one that would probably cost me my life.

The saving grace of the situation was that I got to see the whole battlefield laid out right in front of me.

It wasn’t that far to the citadel from our siege tower—about a kilometer. The level we were on looked right onto the fortress walls, so it was easy to see the Wild Heart soldiers running around and the archers crouched behind the battlements. They couldn’t see us, however, as it appeared Curtains of Invisibility was still working.

From the sounds I heard behind me, our tower filled and troops began loading onto the third tower, which was right next to us.

I looked down.

Everyone was hustling and bustling around the camp. The archers were crouched behind enormous wooden shields the size of gates that were covered in what I hoped was animal skin. The shields had small windows cut out of them, presumably to give the archers an opening for unexpectedly shooting at enemy targets. There were about ten of those openings in each shield, guaranteeing the defenders a hard time of things.

Further on, were a cluster of big-headed monsters fussing over an enormous battering ram. They were half-naked and knotted with muscles, while the unbelievably large ram was slung on a wheeled carriage by four huge chains. There was a roof over the carriage to protect the monsters from arrows, and the iron-clad tip of the ram was a fist giving the middle finger. Next to it, were five mages who stopped at regular intervals to cast spells on the ram and the monsters

around it...*probably to protect them from arrows, swords, boiling tar, and other unpleasantries.*

The swordsmen were the least worried of all. They had already split into units and were now just lying on the grass relaxing. Some were checking their weapons, others were smoking pipes, and still others were counting daisy petals to see if they'd be raping and pillaging their way through the Wild Hearts' citadel or not.

The area around the high commander's pavilion was deserted. From what I could tell, all she had with her were a dozen bodyguards and, I thought, a gray scout—her head of intelligence.

I looked around for my own leaders and found them, but not right away. They weren't far off, and I could see them getting my clanmates in line and craning their necks in all directions. *Probably looking for me.*

I really need to tell them I'm here getting ready for my great feat of valor, I thought. Later, I'll never be able to prove that I was a heroic warrior and brave Thunderbird, and not a deserter.

I opened my mailbox to send them a message, but it was locked *during ongoing military actions*, as the message read. The developers thought of everything.

Around me, there wasn't a single stone or anything else I could throw...although...

"Hey, bro," I said to an elf named Kelossa who was sitting next to me. "Would you mind shooting an arrow for me?"

"At who? We haven't even started yet!" His face betrayed his surprise.

"No, not that way," I said, shaking my head. "At her." I pointed at Elina, who was waving her arms in what looked to be a foul-mouthed rage. My clanmates were stubbornly refusing to form up into a column.

"What's your problem with her? Yeah, she's a strange kind of woman, and with her shaking around like that, I'd say she might have a touch of epilepsy. But still, she's with us. If she's such a problem, let's take care of her after the battle. For now, we need every sword, not to mention every staff. She's a mage, right?"

"No, no, no," I gestured with my hands. "That's my clan leader! I'm supposed to be there, but I got sent here completely by accident.

I just need you to shoot near her so she'll look up and I can wave to her."

"You're kidding." He shook his head, apparently having just noticed my level. "How did that happen?"

The elf picked up his bow and let fly an arrow. It landed next to Elina's feet, causing her to jump back a few steps and jerk her head up toward us. I leaned out from behind the side of the tower and waved.

Elina froze when she saw me, then jumped up and down and shook her fists at me. Her language was obviously enraged and profane to the point that three dwarves walking by stopped to listen and shake their heads in enjoyment.

"Now, she's really mad," said Kelossa in surprise. "What's her issue?"

"She's worried about me," I guessed. "She gives her heart and soul for us."

"A real leader," said Kelossa with respect. He waved to her as well. "You're lucky."

Kelossa's wave was the last straw for Elina, who stopped gesturing at me as if to leave me to my fate and went back to getting her column in order.

"The third tower is all set," said a dwarf named Zherrar happily. He was the one I'd been running along the trench with. "We'll probably move out soon. First, they'll shell the walls with some fireballs, then we'll get going."

"Guys, by the way, how are they going to get us to the wall? Is somebody going to be pushing us?" I asked.

"We'll have some mages working their chemistry down below. There's a pulley, a belt connecting it to the axle, you know, the usual. They'll work their magic with the pulley so it gets the wheels moving," explained the dwarf.

"Sounds complicated," I said.

"Seriously. They should just catch a couple trolls," said the elf in agreement.

The dwarf disagreed. "Nah, technology is power. Oh, here we go. They'll start the bombardment, and we'll push out on the flank."

Zherrar was right. He hadn't even finished speaking before the citadel's right wall was shaken by a heavy volley of fireballs. Blue flames licked out from behind the battlements, and someone hurtled down from them with a cry.

A dull roar filled the air as the trebuchets began to work. They rained boulders down on the left part of the citadel, doing their best to take out the battlement and clear the field of vision. *That'll make it easier for us to unload onto the wall and clear shooting lanes for the archers.*

Gigantic stone blocks whistled through the air and smashed into the fortress walls, chunks of which broke off and thumped down onto the grass beneath. The defending mages did their best to shoot the boulders down, but they were largely unsuccessful. And there didn't even appear to be many of them left judging by the fiery strokes leaping up from the besieged citadel.

A discordant "O-o-oh" wafted up to us, and I carefully peeked over the edge of the tower. The shields and the archers behind them were moving toward the citadel gates.

The Wild Hearts didn't seem to take much care to protect their citadel. Having apparently relied on their strength and reputation, they built neither a drawbridge nor a deep moat filled with cold, dirty water. It was just an even field leading up to the gates. Sure, the gates looked to be tall and hefty, but our battering ram was more than a match.

The archers marched forward behind their shields in two columns until they were about three hundred meters from the gate, at which point they split off toward either side to enclose the road to the gate in a pincer movement. They stopped a hundred meters from the wall.

"All right," commented the dwarf, who obviously had quite a bit of experience in similar attacks. "Time for the battering ram."

The bearded fellow was exactly right.

The carriage and ram, its middle finger glinting in the sun, rolled toward the citadel. The beasts responsible for it had hidden their muscles under chainmail and were sheltering under the roof as they pushed the whole contraption forward at a surprisingly brisk pace. They were surrounded on every side by warriors with tall shields

reminiscent of the old Roman legions—the whole thing looked like one big turtle.

As they got closer to the gate, arrows began rattling against the roof and shields, though they failed to do any damage. The shields were strong, the roof was stronger, and there was no stopping the battering ram's relentless forward progress. Someone thought to shoot burning arrows, though they were shrugged off by the covering warriors. Even the roof was none the worse for wear, as it must have been doused in water or protected by some kind of spell. In a word, nothing caught fire.

The enemy mages had no more success against the wiles of our five mages by the battering ram.

Meanwhile, our archers were returning fire by randomly popping out of the aforementioned windows in the shields and sending waves of arrows upward. They didn't seem to be taking much aim, shooting more in the hopes of landing a lucky strike.

The battering ram got to the gate, at which point, a scene I'd witnessed a hundred times in the movies began to play out. It pulled back on its chains and, with a prolonged roar, smashed into the doors. The latter creaked, groaned, and spluttered, but held.

I was so busy watching everything play out in front of me that I jumped when the floor we were standing on jerked forward.

"Yup, this is it," said Zherrar drily. "Well, boys, get ready. Time to spill some Wild Heart blood."

The bloodthirsty dwarf slapped a one-horned helmet on his head.

"Where's the other horn?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he answered. "This is how I got it. It's legendary, though."

"Well, if it's legendary, then it's a keeper," I agreed. "And it looks cool with one horn!"

The tower shuddered and started moving toward the fortress wall. The speed surprised me, given how big it was.

A short warrior wearing a black mantle emblazoned with the Hounds of Death emblem climbed up onto our platform.

"How's everyone?" he asked.

"We're good," answered the dwarf. "Just waiting to get started. That's when it'll get fun."

“That’s for sure,” smiled the warrior. He glanced quickly over the group and stopped when he got to me.

“And who are you?”

“Hagen, from the Thunderbirds, your allies,” I answered frankly. “That’s my group leader waving her fist around over there.”

Elina was looking at the tower as it moved away, and just then she stomped her foot and threatened me with her fist.

“Is she threatening us for taking you or you for getting involved?” The warrior was a bit confused. “And how are you even here? I mean, look at your level. Everyone else is clan elite, the best of the best.”

“That fist is for me, of course,” I assured him. “And I just happened to get here. I was trying to get to her when I got caught up in the crowd, and then that barbarian in the trench didn’t listen to me and sent me along with everyone else. So, now it looks like I’m fighting with you. And about my level, well, it happens.”

“Not really,” answered Kelossa philosophically. “Still, you get a ride in the Mouse, and you can see what it’s like on the walls. You won’t be there for long, of course, but you’ll get a taste.”

“The only Thunderbird to get a taste, as a matter of fact,” said Zherrar.

“I’m just afraid you won’t even have time to catch your breath,” the warrior, whose name was Valent, said reassuringly. “Stay back, keep an eye out, and maybe you’ll get lucky. Maybe, they won’t kill you right away.”

The wall was getting closer, but we obviously were still invisible.

“Okay, listen up. Our shield is going to drop soon—definitely once we get a hundred meters from the wall. Archers, as soon as it does, shoot at anything that moves. We have to jump onto the wall and attach the assault platforms,” Valent said, patting a wall of the tower that was hanging on two hooks and would be used as a bridge. “They’ll still be able to take quite a few of us out before we get across that last distance to the wall.”

“Got it, Master Valent,” answered an older archer who was apparently in charge. “We won’t let you down.”

“Excellent. And now the warriors. As soon as we drop the assault platforms, your job is to make sure they can’t destroy them until the main group unloads. Do what you have to do, but don’t let them set

fire to them or knock them off. That will be about two minutes. Then, if there are any of you left over there, hold the position.”

“Understood, master,” said my one-horned dwarf friend with a nod.

I also nodded, figuring that I didn’t have much to be worried about. They’d take me out in the first clash, and I could go back to Mettan, find the hotel and mailbox that day, and set off by boat along the river the next.

“That’s it, troops. I’ll be down below leading the last group.”

Valent disappeared through a trapdoor.

Zherrar took charge.

“Listen up, you dead men walking. They haven’t given us orders, so we’ll do it like this: I and...you, Ftorin, will take care of the platform latches.” The dwarf across from him nodded.

“Then you five,” he continued, pointing at who he wanted, “and I will be the first defense group. The remaining four are the second line and support for the archers. The archers are the last line. Questions?”

“Of course not. This isn’t our first time,” said Kelossa dismissively.

He was wrong: I had a question. “What can the forty of us here in the tower, or however many there are, do to change things? They’ll take out the last line right away, and everyone on the second and third levels will be slaughtered as soon as they get there.”

“While they’re busy taking out the last line, we’ll get a huge support group in there, and everyone will start pouring out of the towers,” answered Zherrar. “The gates, the battering ram, that’s all a distraction, I think. The left wall is where the main strike will land. At least, that’s what I’d do. Although...who knows what Cedric is thinking? Not to mention the Witch.”

“And we’re the very tip of the spear. Even if they kill all of us, that’s a huge honor,” noted the elf.

“Sucks to be Valent right now,” said the dwarf with feeling.

“Why?” I asked falteringly. My hands were shaking from the adrenaline—not to mention a bit of fear.

“You think he really wants to be sitting down there while we’re all up here dying?” the dwarf answered. “I know him, we were at

Klatornakh together, and we fought a man-eater in Tirgol. He's never one to hide behind other people."

"Oh, that's not what I meant," I said, crossing myself. "I wouldn't even think that!"

"Okay, okay, he wasn't thinking," noted the elf. "Don't worry about it—anyone might have thought that."

"Arche-e-ers!" The old archer's voice rang out. "Twenty seconds!"

Kelossa shuffled his feet, apparently checking to see if his boots would slip, and fiddled with a ring he was wearing on his finger. Unslinging his quiver, he rested it up against the wall before pulling out six arrows and leaning them against the wall next to it.

"Fifteen seconds!"

Zherrar pulled out his axe, breathed on the blade, and polished it with his sleeve. The rest of the warriors unsheathed their weapons as well. I gripped my sword, noticed that my hands were slick with sweat, and hurriedly wiped them on my pants.

"Ten seconds!"

I thought my heart was about to beat out of my chest. Damn the emotions...I was almost ready to believe that killing me right there would end me forever.

"Five seconds!"

The archers strung arrows and crouched down, prepared to unleash a volley. I pressed up against the side of the tower and looked out a crack I'd noticed earlier. The wall, the battlements atop which were pockmarked by the trebuchet fire, were almost on top of us.

"Fi-i-ire!"

The archers leaped up, arrows sizzled through the air, and almost immediately, they cut loose a second volley. The arrow fire continued unrelentingly.

We could hear screams from the wall, and I watched from my crack as a warrior with two arrows sticking out of his chest plummeted to the ground.

"Swords at the ready," barked Zherrar. "Ten seconds!"

I tensed and relaxed my muscles, noting with surprise that the fear and uncertainty were gone. The stress was apparently so intense that I'd given up caring whether I died in battle or not. There was just me

and a very specific goal: hold the assault platform—no matter the odds!

“Ftorin, let it go!” bellowed Zherrar, and there was a creak and a boom, followed by a cloud of stone dust rising and settling. Six pairs of legs beat their way forward.

“Forwa-a-ard!” I recognized the dwarf’s voice. Steel clashed against steel, muffled cries rang out, and I heard snatches of cursing.

My sword drawn, I climbed up onto the platform and looked at the slaughter going on at the other end. One person fell, followed by another, each fading into a cocoon filled with their belongings.

Our archers did their level best to cut down the Heart soldiers before they got close, but there were too many of them. The shock of seeing the siege towers had also worn off, and the Heart archers were taking aim at our archers. Only six were left out of every ten.

“Let’s go, boys, forward!” Ftorin creaked and fell, melting into the assault platform.

My three comrades at the tower exit jumped forward, and there was nothing else for me to do but follow suit. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw motion on the ladder leading up from the second level.

*Ah, there’s the cavalry!* I thought right before my sword clanged up against someone’s saber.

The saber blow was so strong that I was flung back onto the platform, a large chunk of my health gone. My opponent, a warrior in chainmail with a huge and, for some reason, green heart on it, leaped toward me only to catch two arrows in the chest.

“I’ll kill every last one of you,” he said, and appeared to be about ready to continue his story when an arrow thudded into his mouth and nearly killed him. I don’t tend to lose my wits in similar situations, and so I sprang up and sank my sword into his throat. He looked at me with hate in his eyes and collapsed.

“Nice work,” a warrior running by me from the second platform said, “but keep going. There are plenty more of them!”

More warriors rushed by me. I looked back at the platform to see that there were almost no archers left, though Kelossa was still alive.

“A-a-ah!” A cry rang out from the stairs that appeared to lead down to the courtyard inside the walls, and a mob of warriors wielding

swords, axes, and every other weapon you could imagine split into three groups and poured toward us.

So, that was just the prelude, I realized. Let's do this.

## Chapter Five

### In which we discover how victory is achieved and what comes next.

All that was left from the troops in our tower finished off the remainder of the enemy's first line of defense and tried to straggle into a defensive formation. There weren't many of us—around a dozen swordsmen and seven archers, and some of them had perilously low health. The horde sprinting toward us was made up of maybe thirty or thirty-five ugly mugs, and that was just who we could see. All in all, they were poised to smash through our defensive line without breaking a sweat. I ran across the platform to take up position behind Valent, figuring that he would be killed last, if at all.

“Hold the line!” ordered Valent. “To the sword! Live forever!”

“Live forever!” our group shouted back.

I'm not overly given to reflection, and so I had no problem joining in their chorus. But I had to tip my cap to Valent. We were already wavering in fear of the onrushing and sword-brandishing mob, regardless of the fact that there was no such thing as death in the game.

Suddenly, the spell was broken. Two small fireballs slammed into the charging crowd one after another, right when they got within fifteen strides of us. The Heart warriors were thrown in every direction.

It was the mages who, up until that point, had been busy churning the towers forward with their wizardry. They had climbed up the ladders from the lower level and finally joined the battle right when it looked like all was lost. With that said, the damage they did, while substantial, was less than critical. The twenty or so Wild Hearts that were remaining crashed into our line.

Sword against crossed sword.

“Ah, you bitch!”

“Get him!”

“A-A-AH!”

“Mages, heal who you can!” That was Valent.

He was locked in combat with a hefty opponent in a breastplate and didn't notice a small enemy soldier with a glaive sneaking up from his right-hand side—almost from behind him. I wasn't about to get

involved in the main fight, but I saw the little weasel, realized that he was about to break our forces by assassinating our leader, and decided to pull out my trusty trick. Just as he was about to thrust his glaive upward under Valent's armor, I threw myself at his legs and knocked him down. My maneuver worked just as well as it always did, though I didn't do much damage. He crunched down onto the stone and found himself on his back with his legs resting on my stomach. The glaive clattered off to the side out of his reach. I gripped my sword tightly and was more than happy to drive it straight into the opening between his appendages, which was protected by nothing more than his pants. He howled, and it was obvious that the pain was not the only reason. There was some surprise in his scream, and probably some indignation—it wasn't the most honorable spot to be stabbed. Taking advantage of the reprieve his horrified yelling gave me, I quickly crawled out from under him and had time to run my sword into his low back as well. I added injury to insult with Bloodletting.

I should note that the damage I was doing was far from mortal but starting to add up. In comparison with my health, he was a raging bull.

My opponent got up and looked at me with rage in his eyes, leaving me with no doubt in my mind that he was about to finish me with pleasure and ease. And that would probably have happened if new members of our grand alliance hadn't appeared from the Mouse in that instant. The first to come charging across the platform was my old friend Gorotul. He was, at that moment, a god of war, his red-bearded face (*Did he have a beard the last time? I couldn't remember. Maybe he grew one?*) roaring a challenge.

“Who's first to die?”

There was some kind of amulets bouncing around on his chest, his bare arms were covered in tattoos, and his armless chainmail glistened like the sun.

“RA-A-A!” His bellow shook the earth as his hands shook his double-bladed axe. “Time for wa-a-ar!”

The first to feel his wrath was my erstwhile foe, and in the process, his enormous body bowled into me. I flew several steps backward and smacked into the wall. One after another my clanmates popped out of the Mouse's hatch.

*I guess Zherrar was right about this being the target for the main attack*, I thought before leaping to my feet and running over to the little and still-breathing Wild Heart.

“Go ahead, finish me, you dog,” he hissed.

“I’m just a guest in this little citadel of yours, so if that’s what the host wants...” I sliced twice into his head.

And I didn’t feel the slightest compunction about it. I hazarded that, if it hadn’t been for the dull-witted, if immensely brave Gorotul, I would have been a goner. War is dirty. It’s you or the guy across from you, and you leave the chivalry and honor to romance novels.

In the meantime, Gorotul and my clanmates cleared out the rest of the Hearts from around our platform and started toward the stairs leading downward into the courtyard. I looked around to see similar scripts playing out all over the wall. Our assault groups had done their job and held the three platforms until the Hounds’ many brigades could make their way into the citadel.

There were only five of us remaining from our original group. Zherrar and his one-horned helmet had fallen in the very first attack, and the imperturbable Kelossa, who made it all the way to the final assault, was apparently unable to last any longer. The last archer eased his way down to the stones from the platform. One mage was also killed, and the second had been hit: he pulled an arrow out of himself, squeamishly grimacing as he did.

“You did good work,” said Valent with feeling. “Nice job—all of you.”

“And a special thank you to you, little one,” he said to me, walking over. “As far as I’m concerned, you went above and beyond. You didn’t get too involved, which was the right decision for your level, but you still picked off that one guy.”

“Well, I had a little help,” I said modestly.

A friendly laugh broke out, and with it, all spent adrenaline, exhaustion, and acknowledgment of how close we all came to dying. We could have died, but we didn’t. And since we were alive, it was right to laugh, even if we were laughing at a dumb joke, and even if none of it was actually real.

Just then, we heard a crash from below us. Valent cocked his head and held up a finger.

“Ah, sounds like they finally took down the gate. Let’s go, what are we all standing around for? This is the fun part!”

Our small detachment, reinforced by the remnants of the other Mouse groups (they had suffered the same losses we had), rushed down the stairs. I decided my debt of honor had been paid and fell back.

“You guys go on ahead. I’ll cover you from the rear.”

They joined the ongoing battle below while I carefully (I’m afraid of heights) looked over the edge to watch. It was an impressive sight.

The internal courtyard was enormous, as it looked like the same laws of physics I’d noticed at the Thunderbird clan fortress were in effect. Everything was much larger on the inside than it looked on the outside. The courtyard itself, I thought, was at least as big as Palace Square,<sup>[4]</sup> and maybe even as big as Red Square.<sup>[5]</sup> Or maybe, it was the other way around. One way or another, it was massive. All across it, was a mass of cutting, slicing, and chopping, as the general battle disintegrated into hundreds of smaller duels. The gates had indeed fallen. It looked like a dozen defenders had been crushed when it did, and Hound warriors were pouring into the newly opened gateway wielding swords and axes. The Wild Hearts tried to stop them, but their cause was lost.

Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me. “Well, you little Hound louse, want to party?”

I wheeled around to see a Heart warrior covered in stone dust running at me. His mouth was gaping, and a sword was whirling around his head. Judging by the looks of things, he had been knocked senseless at some point in the battle before coming to and seeing me standing there staring at the carnage below. He wasn’t happy.

Obviously, I had no intention of fighting him, and so, I stepped deftly to the side and stuck out my foot. He apparently hadn’t quite regained his senses and, still somewhat uncoordinated, tripped over my leg and flew over the wall without making a sound. I looked over to see how his flight went and was less than surprised to see a cocoon at the bottom. What did you expect? It was at least three stories to the bottom, with five long flights of stairs. And he went over the wall head-first.

“Icarus,” I said in amusement, “sprouted wings!”

The battle in the courtyard intensified. It was a mass of surging flesh and inarticulate cries, with Gorotul taking breaths in between strokes to call out and ask anyone who was listening to immortalize his great feats of valor on their internal cameras. He, I suspected, was either unable to turn his camera on or did not know how.

As I looked around, I saw something I didn't like in the least. Not far from me, and right up against the wall near where the Mouse was parked, were three Hearts. They had pinned Milly Re—who I'd met in the pavilion right before the battle started—into a corner. She was clearly an expert swordsman, at least judging by how her two swords fluttered in and out like butterflies, and she was doing a good job defending herself, but her defeat was a matter of time. She was unable to go on the offensive, as her time was completely monopolized defending herself from the three big soldiers who were going to work on her. Realizing what was going on, I tried to think how I could help her. There was no point joining the battle himself because that wouldn't help in the least—that much was clear. A few strikes and I'd be history. She might have been able to use the twenty or thirty seconds I could buy her, but, then again, she very well might not have been able to. I had to think of something else. But what?

I glanced around the wall until my eyes stopped on a fairly long chunk of the battlement that had been knocked off by our mages' fireball barrage.

*Eureka!* I jabbed a jubilant finger in the air.

I ran over to the boulder and tried to lift it. It was monstrously heavy, but I was able to drag it over, choking on the dust it kicked up.

I swear I did my best to hurry, but by the time I got the monstrosity over to where I needed it and looked over to judge the exact angle I needed, Milly was just about finished. She was on her last leg and, I thought, had already let a couple blows through. There was no time left. I set the rock on the very edge and yelled down at the group below.

“Hey, losers! Yeah, you three picking on the girl!”

I wasn't sure they heard me over the din, but the acoustics were especially good there, or I yelled especially loudly, because two of the three looked up, perhaps based solely on instinct.

“Eat a grenade, you fascists!” I shoved the rock right at the watching and confused Hearts. It tumbled down too fast for them to jump out of the way, though I think their shock had something to do with that as well. They were warriors, and warriors aren’t used to things crashing down on top of them. Whatever the case, I was right on target. Both sides of the rock clipped their targets, flinging them in opposite directions.

Milly made good use of the reprieve that gave her. In seconds, with the last remnants of strength she had left, she attacked the third opponent with a set of impressive maneuvers and finished him off with a sword to the throat. It was a pretty sight. Well, as pretty a sight as death can be.

That done, she ran over to one of the two who had been stunned by the boulder and started hacking away with what sounded like a flurry of curses. His head spun around, and he tried to reach for his sword; he was not about to die quickly.

The last of the trio groggily shook his head and tried to stand up.

*Oh no, she’s distracted, and he’s about to take her down. And I don’t think I can get her attention.* I sprinted down the stairs, crossing my fingers that no one would kill me before I got to where she was.

How no one took me out, I still don’t know. Right at the bottom of the stairs, I nearly fell victim to a wild swing by a barbarian who was simply thrashing his club around right and left. I got on all fours and crawled back to the wall hoping that the barbarian hadn’t noticed me. He hadn’t, apparently. Figuring that, while I cut a less conspicuous figure crawling along the wall, I was much slower that way, I stood up and jogged along toward the sound of a woman’s voice cussing. Happily, I made it in time.

The third Heart had gotten up, though he didn’t look good. The boulder had smacked into his head and had also done a number on his shoulder. Half his body was disfigured, he held his sword tightly in his left hand, and a livid scowl was plastered across his face. He wobbled zombie-like toward Milly, who was almost finished dispatching her victim.

It’s like Chip and Dale around here today—I’m saving everyone, one after another, I thought as I sliced into the back of his knees with Sword of Retribution.

He collapsed, but immediately started to pull himself back up. I saw that his health was already dropping into the red zone. He was far from dead, however.

“Oh, I’ll get you,” I muttered as he stood.

It was insulting how little attention he paid to the strikes I was landing. They had no chance of sending a Level 102 player to Valhalla.

“Don’t even think about running; I’ll catch you regardless,” he said, baring his teeth.

I knew I’d be able to get away from him, but I also knew that he’d be able to turn his attention on Milly if I did. “Why won’t you die, you brute!” The girl was practically foaming at the mouth.

“Why should I run away from dead meat like you?” I asked in an effort to antagonize him still further.

“Dead meat? Dead meat?” The Wild Heart yowled and tried to throw himself at me.

Needless to say, he was in no condition to try a maneuver like that, and I was able to dodge his attempt easily. I was even able to slice into his arm and was surprised to see him drop his sword.

“What? How...?” The Heart stared at me in surprise.

“Just like that,” I answered, no less surprised.

“Ooph.” Some dwarf with a Hound of Death emblazoned on his chest broke into and finished our conversation with one swift stroke of his battle-axe.

“What are you standing there talking for?” he yelled at me. “To wa-a-ar!”

Off he ran back into the thick of the battle, which had gone from covering the entire courtyard to being focused at its very center. It appeared the Wild Hearts had simply ceased to exist.

“Thanks,” I heard from behind me.

I turned around to see a battered Milly Re standing next to the cocoon that had replaced her former adversary.

“Ah, no worries,” I said with a face that made it clear how very ordinary it was for me to go around saving beautiful, battle master women. “You’re alive, so thank God for that. Though, seriously, you were incredible... Right in the Adam’s apple.”

“Yeah, he got me all worked up. Some of the stuff he said when they were pressing me... You guys are horrible sometimes!”

“It’s true,” I said. “Especially, when we’re drunk.”

“Well, we routed them,” said Milly, confirming my own thoughts. “Another five minutes and they’ll be finished.”

The courtyard was littered with innumerable cocoons. That was all that was left of the incredible number of players who’d been slaughtered in the meat grinder.

“The Apotheosis of War,” I said softly.

Milly heard me and nodded.

“It’s always like that after a siege. An eerie sight. Once the last few of them are dead, our people will start collecting everything. They’ll mail our guys’ things to them and then send everything else to the clan storehouse to be appraised.”

“Appraised?”

“Yeah. All the loot from the dead bodies and the castle is counted, then they send the equivalent in gold between everyone involved in the assault and capture.”

“Oh, I thought you could go do some scavenging after the battle,” I said, visibly deflated.

“What’s stopping you?” asked Milly with surprise. “There’ll be time for that. You can’t take anything from the bodies, since that’s against the rules, and you can’t rob the clan storehouse either. But if you can find anything in the rooms or anywhere else, like in the vaults, you’re welcome to it. And they have huge vaults here. Not even vaults; dungeons. That’s how it always is after battles.”

I perked up. Fighting was good, but looting was even better.

“I haven’t seen Gedron. And I only saw Diord at the very beginning,” said Milly.

“Who are they?”

“Gedron the Elder is the Wild Hearts’ clan leader, Diord is their clan master. I’m surprised they aren’t here. Maybe they decided to slink off somewhere?”

“Oh, they probably just took a portal to who knows where,” I supposed.

“Nobody can port anywhere during assaults—it’s against the rules. Not from inside the castle, not from outside it. You have to get

about three miles away before you can. It's a year before anyone can port from citadels, at least, if they fall. If they withstand the attack, of course, you're good. So they're here or somewhere nearby. I need to go tell the Witch." Milly ran toward the citadel exit.

A little ways off, she turned and called back to me.

"Thanks again. I owe you one."

"Oh, don't worry about it," I mumbled as I walked toward the wall, sat down next to it, and looked back to see what was going on in the center of the courtyard.

The battle was no longer a battle; it had turned into a massacre. The best warriors were mercilessly cleaning up the remains of the Hearts without even noticing that the latter were no longer putting up much resistance.

Five minutes later the Wild Hearts formally ceased to exist.

"Well, what have we here?" I heard the Gray Witch's voice and jumped up. The clan leader walked through the gate and looked around. "Thank you, my trusted warriors, and you, valiant allies. This was a glorious battle, and one that will go down in the annals of the Hounds of Death."

A friendly roar broke out and shook the walls of the citadel.

"Cedric, my friend," the Gray Witch said to the clan master. "Take down the flag of the defeated clan."

"Your will is my command, mistress," answered the warrior with a bow. He ran up the stairs toward the entrance to the main tower, above which flew a banner with an enormous green heart.

"Go with him," the Witch ordered three more warriors. "The Hearts may not all be dead. They probably have someone guarding the banner, too."

The trio hurried after Cedric, armor clanging.

"Look at this," said the Gray Witch as she looked around once more. "Theirs not to reason why... Fredegar, sweetie, are you here?"

"Yes, mistress." A scout walked over to her.

"Hurry up and take care of the remains. Quite a few people died, we only have three hours. Oh, and the clan storehouse..."

"Already taken care of, mistress. They've probably broken in already," answered the scout.

“Excellent. Ah, and there goes the flag.” The Witch shaded her eyes from the evening sun setting behind the tower and watched the flag flutter its way down the pole.

Shouts and the clang of sword on shield rang out once more across the courtyard.

The flag slipped lower, and a ringing sound boomed out, almost as if someone had struck a gigantic bell.

“Well, warriors,” said the Witch, “the Wild Hearts have fallen. You have three hours to loot, so I give you this castle to loot and pillage—well, except for what’s forbidden. Don’t touch the remains of the dead or the clan storehouse. And whoever can tell me where the leaders of the Wild Hearts are can have their pick of our clan storehouse. If you can kill them, the same is true.”

“What, did they run?” asked a voice from the crowd.

“Yes,” the Gray Witch said with a wave of her hand. “Anyway, let’s go. Time’s ticking!”

One more shout gripped the courtyard as the crowd poured into the castle, though it was short and sweet. Pillage, and, if they were lucky, violence. Why else had they shed blood?

I watched them go and realized I didn’t stand much chance of getting in. Nobody, on the other hand, seemed that interested in the vaults. They did hold some risk: there could be enemy forces holed up down there, and it would have been embarrassing to die after victory had been secured. It would have been especially bad if nobody happened across my remains before they were entombed. As I stood there lost in thought and trying to figure out what to do, Valent came up to me.

“Good work, Thunderbird,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder. “You were incredible...”

*Valent wants to add you as a friend.*

*Accept?*

“It would be an honor,” I said, bowing to the warrior. “Why aren’t you off looting?”

“Oh, I’m not a fan. And what are you doing standing here?”

“I’m more interested in checking out the vaults since I haven’t spent too much time in castles. I’m thinking about heading down, but I’m a bit nervous about it.”

“Worried there’s someone down there?”

“Yeah.”

“There probably isn’t. They know that everything’s going to collapse in three hours, and they’d be stuck down there forever. No respawns.”

“Why not?”

“Simple. There’s no suicide in the game, so you can’t just fall on your sword. You won’t die of hunger or thirst. And there isn’t anyone down there to kill you. So, it ends up being a prison. You either wait until the citadel is restored or make a new account.”

“Wow.”

“Wow is right. Much better to just die in battle. If you’re still worried, though, let’s do this: I’ll be waiting here anyway, so I’ll come down and find you if you aren’t back in a couple hours. If someone does catch you, I’ll collect your things and mail them to you. Sound good?”

“That’s great!” I was thrilled. “Thanks so much!”

“Which vault are you going into?”

I glanced around and liked the look of an opening on the left side of the courtyard.

“Over there.”

“Okay, just don’t get lost. There are all kinds of passages underground, so be careful.”

“I’ll do my best.”

His words made me think of something—where were we?

I opened my map and looked to see where I’d been dragged off to.

It turned out we were on the northern part of the continent, which was awfully fortunate.

I called after the warrior, who was already walking away. “Hey, Valent?”

“Yes?”

“Are we in the North?”

“Well, not exactly,” he said, coming back over. “We’re a little ways from the North. Look.”

Valent pulled out the same map Reineke Lis had shown me.

“We’re here. There’s that river, the Belyanka, and on the other side, is Kroytsen. Beyond the city, are the Rina Mountains, and beyond the tundra, is the North.”

“Is it far to the city? And can you sail down the river?”

“Sure. There are boatmen, and three or four hours walk that way is one of the wonders of Fayroll—the Three Kings Bridge. Go check it out, it’s pretty incredible. Then it’s another two hours to Kroytsen.”

“Are the mountains passable?”

“The mountains? Why not? In Kroytsen, you can find smugglers to take you through the pass. They’re NPCs, so you don’t have to worry about them betraying you, and there are always enough people looking to go for you to get a group together. It isn’t cheap, though. And it’s dangerous, what with the yetis, the ice devils, and everything else up there. You should probably wait a bit before making the trip. You can go under the mountains, too, through the old mines, but that’s definitely not for everyone.”

“What level should you be to cross the mountains?” That question was key for me.

“Fifty or fifty-five, I’d say,” said Valent with a scratch of his head, “or something like that.”

“Thank you,” I said with complete sincerity.

“You got it.” Valent waved and walked off toward a group of warriors who were standing around discussing the attack. They didn’t look too eager to get in on the plunder either.

Well, that was that. The North was looking even better than the East. At least, it wasn’t that far away.

I walked over to the entrance to the vault and paused to wonder one more time if it was worth going in. *Definitely*. Greed won over, and I started down the steps.

## **End of manuscript**

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## Endnotes

[1] Karpov: A popular Russian crime drama.

[2] Patronymics: Used with first names in Russia and other Slavic countries to convey respect. For instance, Semyon Ilyich is his first name and patronymic, rather than his first and last names like Harriton Nikiforov.

[3] Denial-of-service attack: An attempt to make a machine or network resource unavailable to its intended users, such as to temporarily or indefinitely interrupt or suspend services of a host connected to the Internet.

[4] Palace Square: The main square in St. Petersburg.

[5] Red Square: The very center of Moscow, separating the Kitay Gorod commercial district from the Kremlin walls to the east.