

# **Cold Winds of Fate**

**Fayroll**

*Book Three*

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## Chapter One

### In which accounts are settled.

“Well, what can you do, babe?” I gave Vika a quick peck on the cheek. “It’s always the good, smart ones that die young; lazy idiots live forever. That’s just the way life is.”

“I don’t want you to die.” Vika’s lip quivered. “You and I are good together.”

“You think I have any say in it?” I responded sadly. “Some old guy with a scythe will walk up one day, knock on the door, ask for me, and that’ll be it. But I appreciate the compliment.”

“Moron.” Vika pulled her chin off my shoulder. “You’ll jinx yourself talking like that. Are you going to write the obituary?”

“What, you want it?” I asked with surprise.

“Not in the least. I’m afraid of things like that…” Vika shivered. “You go ahead and write it, okay?”

“Sounds good,” I answered amiably. “I just have to go somewhere first.”

“Where?” Vika frowned and put her hands on her hips teasingly. “Where are you running off to, hmm?”

“Hey now, it’s all for you. Look out the window—do you see the car near the entrance?” I pointed at the Impala.

“Yeah, nice. Retro.”

“‘Retro’!” I laughed. “Ah, you kids all grew up on your little Jeeps. That’s a Chevy Impala, a four-wheeled legend. And as of right now, it’s our trusty steed that will take us to and from work. Well, and anywhere else we want to go.”

“A-a-ah,” Vika squeaked. “You bought a car!”

“What do you mean, ‘bought’?” I said, momentarily taken aback. “It was a gift. For a job well done!”

“From them?” Vika jabbed her index finger upward.

I nodded.

“Nice. How much did it cost?”

“A boatload of zeros,” I said for lack of a better reply. “Handmade, one of a kind. I can’t imagine how much it cost.”

“What did you do for them?” asked Vika, her eyes wide. “Kill someone?”

“You bet,” I answered ironically. “A whole crowd of someones.”

“Boss,” said Yushkov, unceremoniously barging into our conversation. The guys no longer had any problem with how close Vika and I were—they understood our relationship and had made their peace with the fact that Vika was irrevocably my assistant. “What should we do with the lead article? The obituary is going to take up page one now, right?”

“Let’s save it for the next issue. They’re going to be sending us pictures, so pick one where the dead guy is smiling. All right, I have to go. I’ll be back in a couple hours.” I threw my coat over my shoulders and started down the stairs.

The man in the car turned out to know just about everything. He gave me an express tour through all the different stops we had to make, from the traffic police to the insurance company, occasionally asking me questions.

“Do you want a special license plate number? Or just whatever? Which insurance company do you want? Do you have a preference?”

I languidly responded that I didn’t care about the number. *Sure, it would be nice to have the kind of license plate that tells people not to play games with the driver, but those are expensive, no?* I wasn’t sure if that was included in the deal. Insurance didn’t really matter to me either, given that there wasn’t an insurance company out there who would compensate for the full value of the car if something happened to it.

Once everything was set, we turned around and headed back toward the office. The guy next to me was quiet and left me to my thoughts.

Needless to say, they swirled around the news I’d gotten that day about poor Stavros. *Okay, maybe not “poor” Stavros. He was a rat, God rest his soul, and he got his just—if harsh—deserts.* I figured it highly unlikely that the company paid him so little that he had to sell secrets on the side. If I—nobody that I was—made the kind of money they were paying me, then someone important like him must have been on par with the annual budget of your average African country. *Or maybe even the budget of a former Soviet Union country like Moldova.*

It may not do me much credit, but I didn’t feel the least pangs of conscience about the part I played in writing his death sentence. I wasn’t even the reason for his demise; I was more a minor catalyst. That is not to say that I’m some kind of soulless monster who couldn’t care less about human life. It’s just that my profession had taught me the value of moderating my responses, not to mention the fact that we all pay for what we do in this life. Stavros had paid in full.

The car I’d been given was there to put me in my place. *Do a good job and keep your nose clean, Nikiforov, and you can have it all—money, your job, and a new car. Have your eye on a pretty girl? No problem; make her your assistant.* I figured they’d give me a chalet somewhere in the Alps if that’s what I wanted.

On the other hand, it was perfectly clear that if I tried to play games with them, I’d get a heart attack of my own, if not a much simpler solution. I wasn’t the same kind of person, and so a bullet to the head or a rope around my neck would probably work. *The possibilities are endless.*

There wasn’t much of a choice. Being fed and healthy is always better than being poor and hungry, especially since they weren’t asking me to do anything illegal. They just wanted honest work from me, so I made up my mind to give them exactly that.

By the time we got back to the office, I’d almost completely convinced myself that everything was okay and going according to plan.

I walked in to find one more surprise: a woman from Raidion who’d been waiting patiently for almost an hour. It turned out that it was payday, and she was there with our money. The feel of the fat envelope she handed me was enough to push me over the edge; my decision was the right one.

“Why are they giving us our salary in envelopes? Why can’t they just transfer it to our cards?” mused Samoshnikov in surprise.

I was about to open my mouth when Vika stepped in.

“Samoshnikov, you’re crazy. Where do we officially work?”

“At the Capital Herald,” answered Samoshnikov.

“Exactly,” said Vika. “And we’re paid here, where we sign for the money we get. So, how is Raidion going to send us money? I mean, sure, if you’re not happy about getting a wad of money in an envelope, you’re welcome to call them up—”

“And we’ll have a second obituary on our hands,” said Yushkov, finishing her sentence.

“Can you hear yourself?” I jumped in, happy that the woman who’d brought us our money had left before she could hear the idiot in front of me. “Words have consequences, and sometimes serious ones.”

“Oh, come on!” Yushkov blanched. “I was just kidding.”

“Next time, think about who and what you’re kidding about,” said Vika pointedly, with a glance in my direction.

“Exactly,” I said. “Use your brain every once in a while—and that goes for all of you. Okay, get back to work.”

I quickly threw together the obituary using the text I’d been sent and all the usual clichés, checked my team’s work, saw that they were slowly starting to round into form, and left for home in my new car.

*What is there to say about the Chevy Impala? It’s a Chevy Impala.* I was just afraid that some daring car thieves might think the same; their kind didn’t care about fancy alarms, special license plate numbers, or the law. With that in mind, I dropped Vika off at my building before driving to a new parking building and paying for the 101 spot. It may not have been the cheapest option, but it was good enough.

Autumn was in full swing, though the street lights hadn’t yet been adjusted, and so it was dark near the entrance to my building by the time I got there. That may have been why I didn’t see the three young men standing by the entrance until I walked up to them.

“Are you Nikiforov?” asked one of them.

“Yes, and...?” I answered, receiving a shot to the solar plexus in reply. There was barely enough time for me to gasp for air before I saw stars. As I doubled over in pain, one of them smashed his knee into my face.

From there it was simple; they worked me over with all the due diligence and effort they could muster. They started by kicking my legs, two of them picking me up while the third, who had asked who I was, reared back and put his weight behind a shot to my crotch. Thank God, he wasn’t exactly on target. *I’ll have to have Mom light a candle for that.* Any farther to the left, and she wouldn’t have seen any grandchildren. After that ordeal, the barrage of punches to the face they wrapped up with felt like a light tickling. Two last kicks to the kidneys, and they were done.

“That’s for my sister, bastard. I told her to stay away from Russians, but she didn’t listen.”

“Hey, Raville, look what fell out of his pocket!”

I was interested to hear what had fallen out as well, but I was in no hurry to open my eyes. One of them had a ring on his finger that had left a gash on my forehead. The blood dripping down my face left me effectively blind.

“Money, Raville,” chattered one of the attackers in excitement. “Seriously, money—and a lot of it.”

“Take it. We’ll call it compensation for my sister,” announced Raville imposingly. He had apparently leaned over me, as I heard his voice right next to my ear. “And you remember, this is just the beginning.”

“Hold on,” said the third member of their posse. “Beating people up is one thing, but robbing them is another. That’ll definitely have the cops after us. Do we really want that?”

“Oh, come on. He won’t tell anyone,” said Raville soothingly, bending over once again and pulling my head up by the hair. “You won’t, will you? You get it, right?”

I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“What did I tell you? He’s a smart little coward. What did my sister see in you?”

He let my suffering head down, leaving me lying on the asphalt once more.

“We’ll be back once this is spent,” Raville said with a laugh. “Let’s go, guys.”

His sister’s honor avenged, he ran off with his friends, laughing and cackling about a job well done.

I lay there a little while before trying to get up. It took some time, but I was finally on my feet. I worked my way to the elevator, blood dripping and legs buzzing as I went, and pressed the button for my floor.

Vika surprised me once again. Her first reaction at seeing my bruised and bloodied face wasn't to pace around the apartment, screaming about how we needed to call the police or ask what happened. Instead, she quickly gave me a shoulder to hold onto and walked me over to the bathroom. She turned on the cold water and dipped my suffering head under it.

"Wash off, but be careful, and don't rub anything too hard with your hands or you'll get an infection. Where's your first aid kit?"

"There was an old one from my car in the pantry, but I don't usually keep much at home," I mumbled.

My mouth was nearly swollen shut, making it difficult and painful to talk.

Vika made a noise, similar to how Marge Simpson sounds when she's frustrated, and walked out of the bathroom. By the time she got back, I'd washed myself off and apparently stopped looking like the end was near.

"This is going to hurt," Vika warned me. "I found some hydrogen peroxide, so you're going to have to get through this. Sit on the stool there, so it's easier for me."

I did my best, though I spent most of the time squealing as the liquid seared its way through my many scrapes and cuts.

"They really did a number on you," Vika noted when she was finished. "Did you at least see who it was? We need to call the cops."

"No cops," I responded. "I know exactly who it was, which is why we won't be calling anybody."

"What are you talking about?" asked Vika. "You know who beat you to within an inch of your life, and you're not going to do anything?"

"They took my money, too," I said, filling her in on the details.

"So, they robbed you, too. What are you, a little Jesus going around forgiving everyone? Why don't you just hand over your apartment the next time they drop by?" The undisguised anger in Vika's voice mixed with sarcasm.

"Calm down," I said with a grimace. "I told you—no police. But I didn't say we weren't going to do anything. Give me a couple days, and we'll see who comes out on top."

I tried to get up, my failed attempt accompanied by a gasp of pain. My muscles spasmed, and I felt my kidneys begin to ache.

"Damn, they just had to go for the kidneys." I grabbed my low back. "They're screwed up as it is..."

"What do you mean?" Vika crouched down in front of me.

"It's normal after the Army," I said. "The water was awful there, and it screws up your kidneys when you don't always have the chance to boil it. Those bastards out there gave me a nice one-two right there as a parting gift."

"Unbelievable," Vika said, her eyes narrowing. "So who was it?"

"El's brother and his friends, which is why I'm not going to call the police. If they throw him in jail, all I'll get is a bullet to the head. Elvira was a Candidate for Master of Sport in shooting, and she's Tatar—family is everything to them. I'll have to do something, though, since kids like that won't leave you alone once they get a taste for your wallet. They're young and crazy; life still hasn't gotten through to them. But that's for later. I need to go lie down."

“Of course,” answered Vika, turning something over in her mind. “I’ll make an iodine grid for you. And wake me up tonight if you need anything, though I doubt I’ll get any sleep.”

The next morning, things hurt that I didn’t even know I had. I had been particularly worried about two parts of my body, but things turned out okay. One worked fine and, as far as the other was concerned, I didn’t see any blood when I, well, you know. My kidneys were all right, as well. I wasn’t about to leave the house looking like that for fear of everyone who saw me calling the police. There was also no point in scaring (or, in some cases, making the day of) the people at the office. I hadn’t looked in the mirror, but I had a feeling I looked like some kind of hideous sea monster—or maybe like dead Captain Flint, my face all blue and puffy.

“So have you decided to call the police?” Vika asked as she was getting dressed. “Or, even better, there’s someone else you can talk to. I’ve seen little bastards like that, too, and you’re right; they always come back. I kind of like you, and I’d rather not be carrying flowers to your grave.”

“Come on, Vika, give it a rest. I’ll figure it out,” I answered, grimacing from the pain in my lips.

“Oh, sure. If you only saw yourself...” A shadow crossed her face. “You relax here and don’t go anywhere.”

“Very funny. Where am I going to go looking like this?”

“Exactly. And if those animals start doing this every week...”

“Okay, okay, get out of here. I could use some sleep.”

Vika frowned as she left the room, and a second later, I heard the front door close.

I was obviously not planning to let the little idiots get away with beating me up or taking my money. But I had to figure out who I would start hunting them with—old friends from school or the newer, well-placed ones I’d made in the past few years. You can’t help but pick up a wide range of contacts when you spend your professional life hanging around clubs. I slipped off to sleep without even noticing it, my mind swirling with thoughts of revenge.

A phone call woke me up. My phone had survived the events of the previous day and was lying on my desk. I set off on the arduous journey to retrieve it, moaning and groaning as I did. The screen read “Zimin.”

“Hey, Kif, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me.” He was the last person I was expecting to hear from.

“Kif, do you remember our conversation in your boss’s office? When we first met?” There was nothing promising in his voice.

“More or less,” I mumbled, trying to figure out what he was hinting at.

“Maybe that ‘more’ includes what I said about you being under the protection of the company?”

“Well, I didn’t think...” *I wonder how he found out. Although, I guess it’s obvious...*

“That sounds pretty clear to me. Very clear, in fact.” There was steel in his voice, and I didn’t like how formal his tone was. “If you’d have thought about it, you would have called me yesterday or at least today. You would have called me yourself since that would have been faster and easier. It’s just a good thing your girlfriend turned out to be smarter than you are. She called our security, and they filled me in. So, I had to hear from them how you were beat up and robbed—from them; not from you.”

“Who was smarter?” I thought I must have misheard him.

“Well, that’s what she said. They told me that’s how she introduced herself.”

*Oh, that Vika. Although...maybe that was a good move.* She’d at least proved that she could make decisions and follow through with them.

“She gave us all the information we need, so our people are already on it. They may stop by your place, so don’t be afraid to let them in.”

“Of course.” His tone had relaxed, which I found immensely reassuring. “I’m sorry I didn’t call; my brain is a little scrambled.”

“Oh, about that.” I could hear through the phone how he snapped his fingers. “Our doctor will be coming to check you over in a couple hours.”

“I’m fine.” I tried to brush him off.

“And that’s what he’s there to make sure of.” Zimin was barely listening to me anymore. “You’ll feel better; we’ll all feel better.”

“Thanks.” I really was touched. *Sure, you have to take care of the pig before you chop it up for bacon, but it was still nice of him.*

“And remember, you’re under our protection. Vika, too, by the way, so give her my phone number. I already trust her more than I trust you when it comes to your safety. Just don’t forget to invite me to the wedding.”

“Ah, it hurts to laugh,” I said. Zimin chuckled and hung up.

The doctor came by and impressed me. He was much better than your everyday clinician, and he made sure I was okay. My ribs weren’t broken, all my cuts and scrapes were taken care of, and no abscesses would be showing up. I was supposed to sleep and take some vitamins, though you can never get enough of either, as it is. He declined 1,000 rubles and left.

An hour later, the security officers stopped by. They weren’t alone. With them, were the trio who’d attacked me the day before, and they dropped them—already not in the best shape—on my floor.

“Here they are,” said a hefty gentleman by the name of Evgeny, nodding in their direction. “They’re the ones who beat you up yesterday.”

“Wow, they really are young. Even younger than I thought,” I replied. “It was dark, so I didn’t get a good look at them, and then once they started, I had other things to worry about.”

They looked to all be between 18 and 20.

“It’s the kids that are the most dangerous,” said the second security guy, who was short, equally hefty, and didn’t introduce himself. “They wouldn’t think twice about slipping a knife between your ribs. That’s just what gets them going in the mornings.”

“So, what do you want us to do with them?” asked Evgeny.

“What do you mean?” I shrugged reflexively before gasping from the pain. “Take them to the forest, dig a hole, bullet to the brain, call it a day. Just make sure they give my money back first.”

“Got it. We already got the money, by the way.” Evgeny held out an envelope that was greasy and seemed to have lost some weight. “Well, what was left, at least. That’s it then?”

He kicked one of the three.

“Up, you trash, it’s time for a quick trip out of the city,” he said to them, as they sat meekly on the floor. “Although, you only have a one-way ticket.”

That’s when I realized that they were actually planning on killing them. I’d been joking, but they weren’t. *Raidion gets points for discipline, at least!*

“Hold on,” I said to Evgeny. He stopped and turned around with a look on his face that wondered if I’d changed my mind.

“There was a lot more money than this,” I said angrily. “Three times as much.”

I had to save the trio from their appointment with the firing squad. It wasn’t that I felt bad for them. My conscience wasn’t the cleanest as it was, but I had no desire to add three lives to it.

“We’ll give it back,” one of the three suddenly said in a passionate tone. “We’ll give back the money. We’ll give you more. Just don’t kill us.”

“I don’t need more,” I replied. “Just mine.”

“So, you’re just going to let them go?” asked Evgeny sharply.

“Of course not,” I answered, squatting down with a slight grimace in front of the one with the all-too-familiar features. “Why would we do that? We need to teach them a lesson. Hi there, Raville.”

He cast an appraising glance at me but kept his mouth shut.

“Oh, come on, this is all your fault. If you had just offered to fight me one-on-one for your sister’s honor instead of all jumping me at once, I would have let it go, if you hadn’t threatened me, mocked me, stolen from me. But now you have to answer for it. Are you a man?”

His mouth remained shut.

“Don’t want to say anything? Good choice; there’s nothing to say.”

“Don’t kill the guys,” Raville said. “They’ll give you the money—I swear.”

The security guys laughed.

“Of course they will. What choice do they have?” asked one of them.

*This one’s not as rotten as he seems. He said not to kill the other two, but he didn’t say anything about himself,* I thought.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Evgeny.

“Well, they’ll give me back the money, and we’ll call it a day.”

“No punishment?” asked the nameless hulk, all business.

“Of course!” I grunted and assumed the dark voice of a Very Serious Villain to make it perfectly clear I wasn’t joking. “Break a limb, whichever one you want, for those two and snap Raville’s fingers. But, please, leave their spines alone; I don’t want them invalids.”

“Got it,” said the hulk with a laugh. “Let’s go, you clowns.”

I closed the door and noticed that what I was feeling wasn’t fear. It was an unpleasantly sticky feeling that told me I’d gotten involved in something I couldn’t understand or handle on my own.

It was very clear that if I made a single wrong move or bad decision, I’d have that same Evgeny dropping by to pay me a visit and put a bullet in my head. He’d made it clear how willing he was. It was his job, and that was that. Sure, I was under their protection for the time being, but that was because they needed me. *What will happen when they don’t need me anymore?* They’d probably give me some reward and cut me loose, or maybe give me some cushy job in the company. *Here, you just keep editing the paper.* But that would be only if I didn’t make a mistake. So, I had to be ten, twenty times as careful about everything I did. My best interests were at stake.

There was only one problem; how does one never make a mistake?

## Chapter Two

### In which the hero finally heads north.

There was no time for me to catch my breath. No sooner had the group tramped out the door than Vika called, clearly worried that I might start yelling at her for taking matters into her own hands. Once she figured out that there would be no reprisal, she filled me in on what was going on at work and sent me the draft issue. I gave her a few pointers.

Next, my underlings called to express their sympathy. Certainly, they had no idea what had actually happened. Instead, Vika had thought up and told them an “official” version, that I had sprained an ankle. Their social calls were well done; they were starting to figure out how the world works.

A few hours later, Evgeny showed up yet again—this time alone—to give me a stack of money. He asked me to count it and give him a call immediately if any was missing. I promised I would.

That night, a tired Vika returned, spent a good while looking me over, clucked, and nodded in satisfaction. I told her about the doctor and assured her that he cut quite the impressive figure.

“Hey, so you don’t mind that I called Raidion?” she asked a couple of hours later, obviously making up her mind to just ask me if I was mad about what she did. It clearly weighed on her.

“Vika, you did what you thought needed to be done. Why should I be mad about that?” I said in a neutral tone. “Zimin asked me to thank you and give you his direct number. That way you can call him if anything else happens to me.”

“Give me Zimin’s number?” said Vika in surprise. “Wow.”

“Yup. You picked up your 100 reputation points today,” I continued. “It sounds like they trust you more than they trust me. Women are always more level-headed than us men, so there you go.”

“I think you’re still judging me,” muttered Vika, a touch insulted.

“Sweetie, let’s leave the romance novels at home, ok?” I asked. “You did what you did. I would have taken care of the problem a bit differently, but that’s water under the bridge at this point. And, honestly, Raidion was more effective than I would have been. Regardless, let’s call that issue settled.”

Vika sighed in relief, and I decided to change the subject.

“By the way, does your sister wonder where you are? I mean, sure, you’re an adult, but still...”

“My sister?” Vika’s brows arched. “No, she’s fine. I told her that I moved in with my boyfriend.”

*Well, isn’t she the decisive one? As usual, nobody asked for my opinion.* It was the hallmark of our emancipated times—if you get tired of waiting for something to happen, do it yourself.

“What did she have to say about that?”

“Nothing, really. ‘But you just met! You barely know each other!’” Vika’s hands flew to her cheeks as she mimicked her sister.

“There’s something to that, to be fair,” I noted loyally. “What did you say?”

“Me?” Vika giggled. “I told her that I live and sleep with a normal, live man, while all she has is her digital creations in the game. And she’s thirty!”

“That was kind of harsh...”

“It’s fine. She told me she has someone now, too, though she made it sound like they met in the game.”

“That happens. You meet online and then take your relationship out into the real world.”

“Oh, who needs her?” Vika snorted. “She’s been like that her entire life—a quiet, boring nerd.”

“Sounds like you guys have a great relationship.”

“Oh, forget her. Instead, why don’t you tell me—”

Vika was interrupted by our landline ringing. I was about to get up when she stopped me and got up herself. Half a minute later, she glanced in from the hall, which was where my grandfather’s old fossil of a rotary phone was (I certainly didn’t need a city number in the digital age, so I’d just let it sit there). She had a strange look on her face.

“It’s for you.”

I walked over, picked up the phone, and almost went deaf.

“Nikiforov, you bastard! You know what I’m going to do to you for what you did to Raville? You’re going to be sorry you were ever born! You—”

“El, why don’t you be quiet for a second and listen to me?” I had to interrupt her stream of consciousness with a sharp shout. A more delicate and refined approach would have been steamrolled into oblivion.

“So, now you’re going to shut me up?” The shriek was deafening. “You loser deadbeat—”

“Listen to me!” I could feel my blood starting to boil. I’d had enough of the whole Gizmatullin clan over the past couple days. “If you don’t shut your hole right now, I swear to God that I will make you regret your words, and oh, how sincere that regret will be.”

“What are you going to do?” Her tone was the same, though her voice had dropped a couple decibels. “Sic your dogs on me like you did with Raville?”

“You think I just did that to Raville?” *I guess he’s more of a rat than I thought.* “Right. What did he tell you happened? Just so we’re on the same page.”

“He hasn’t said anything. But I imagine he went over to talk to you man to man, like normal people. I don’t know why; I didn’t ask him to do anything. But you didn’t want to talk, so you had some of your jailbird friends break his arm. They even took a hammer to his fingers!”

“Oh, wow.” I nearly sat down on the floor in surprise. First, because I was stunned by her version. She’d always had a vivid imagination, but that was pretty far out there even for her... Second, I was sure that Evgeny realized I was joking about the second point. *Apparently not.* They took me seriously, and the unlucky trio paid the price. “Really? So that’s how it happened?”

“I’m sure of it,” announced El grandly. “I know you, you bastard.”

“You shouldn’t have trusted your intuition this time,” I answered. “It was pretty much exactly the opposite of that. He met me at the entrance to my building yesterday with two of his friends and lit into me. Then, as if that weren’t enough, they stole my money right out of my pocket and promised they’d be back soon for more. I wasn’t a big fan of that idea, so I asked my new employer for help. Their security, as you can see, explained to your brother and his friends that stealing isn’t right, and beating people up isn’t great either. Believe me; they got off lightly. Though I didn’t think they were going to break anything. Apparently, people like that don’t have a sense of humor.”

“You’re lying like you always do,” said El with conviction.

“Oh, God. Hey, babe, hand me my phone,” I said to Vika.

“Oh, she’s already ‘babe’?” El said mockingly. “You aren’t married yet?”

“Not yet,” I answered, glancing at Vika as she gave me my phone. “So far, we’re just living together, but I think we’ll be stopping by the ZAGS<sup>1</sup> soon. You’d be surprised, but it turns out there are women in this world who do more than yell and fool around. They cook, clean, and iron, too. Incredible, right? How

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian agency responsible for documenting the main events that happen over the course of one’s life: birth, marriage, and death.

can you not marry someone like that? As it turns out, being full and clean is better than being hungry and dirty.”

Vika’s eyes gleamed triumphantly. *Hearing something like that and humiliating my ex at the same time? What a day!*

El said nothing.

“Babe, take a picture of me from the waist up. Hold on, let me take off my shirt.” I put the phone down on the shelf. Vika pressed a button, and I saw the flash go off.

“I’m sending you the proof,” I said into the phone as I sent her the picture. “Take a look and see how much fun your brother had.”

“I don’t think I need to see any nude shots from you.”

“I’m telling you, just look,” I added a cold edge to my voice. “You may not need to see the picture, but I could check with the police. Maybe they need to see it.”

There was silence on the other end of the line until I heard El’s voice cut back in. She was, of course, a bitch through and through, but she wasn’t an idiot. I knew that much.

“Raville really did this?”

“Naturally,” I confirmed. “And he really did take my money.”

El was skeptical. “How do you have money? Is there something I don’t know?”

“It just so happens that there is,” I answered, “since, just recently, I’ve been doing more than just work at the paper. I’m now involved with a much larger corporation, though I won’t say which, and they’re paying me quite a bit. You know how it is, big company, big pay...”

“Sounds like you’re telling the truth,” El said slowly. “They got Raville good, and Uncle Anas said we should leave you alone.”

“I’m telling you; he got off easy,” I assured her. “You should be thanking me that he’s there with you right now.”

“Oh, you just wait!” announced El sharply. “Tomorrow, I’m going to make sure everyone knows what you did. I’m—”

“A landmine ready to go off—that’s what you are. Your Uncle Anas was right. Do you realize that I could have your brother thrown in prison right now for stealing? It would even be aggravated since he was with a group and planned it in advance. And just look at what he did to me. We’ll find witnesses, so you don’t have to worry about that. That should be enough to give him five to seven, easy. But I have a different idea. I want to put this behind us, and I’ll even forget about the money your brother still owes me. I’ll forget the whole thing. But you have to promise me that I’ll never again see or hear anything from you or your brother. You have your life, and I have mine. Let’s just leave each other alone.”

“You really are a bastard,” I heard from the other end of the line. “I had no idea.”

“You reap what you sow,” I answered. “Or did you think I was just going to kiss your ass while I’m getting yelled at, beat up, and robbed? You still didn’t answer me, woman. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes,” El answered before hanging up.

I breathed a sigh of relief, leaned up against the wall, and complained to Vika. “That family will be the death of me.”

She was standing there with a satisfied smile on her face and winked at me. “So, we’re heading to the ZAGS soon?”

I decided not to take the bait. “I’m hungry. Want to order a pizza? Maybe with ham and pepperoni, something nice and filling?”

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The excitement of the week's beginning faded into the past, and I had a great Thursday. I couldn't play yet since my body still ached, but I watched more TV than I had the previous few years combined. As it turned out, there's plenty to watch during the day—who needs evening or weekend TV? I got the feeling that “prime time” is just a concept thought up by TV bosses to get more people watching their shows.

That evening, I read through the third release of the Fayroll Times and was very happy with my team's work. A recognizable face and style were emerging with each subsequent issue.

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On Friday, I saw Vika off on her way to work and closed the door behind her with a quietly happy feeling, ready to jump back into the capsule—life in Fayroll was pretty good. It was certainly quieter and more welcoming. Although to be fair, you never knew where to look for the next arrow flying at you... Maybe it was the fact that you could rely on yourself more in the game, rather than being so dependent on the people around you? Who knows...?

Nothing had changed in the game. The sun was shining, birds were chirping, and NPCs shared the streets with the occasional player.

Kroytsen certainly didn't appear to be the game's most popular city, even considering the fact that it was a weekday. That didn't matter to me, however; I had a meeting with the group to get to. There was half an hour left before the deadline. *That should be plenty even though I have to get some things done first.*

The first thing was to head to the nearest mailbox since the little envelope in the interface showed me that I had mail. I figured it was money from the auction.

There was money for me, but I was surprised to see that there were also two very unexpected letters. One was from Elina, my favorite clan leader; the other was from Milly Re.

I was even more surprised by the fact that the two letters were nearly identical. Both ladies needed to see me right away to talk about something highly important. I was supposed to—or rather absolutely had to—get in touch as soon as I logged in. They would both be waiting impatiently. *What in heaven's name do they need from me?* I mused back to how good life was when I first started playing. Nobody knew me, I didn't owe anyone anything, all I had to do was avoid Euiikh, and I was golden. *I could just give all this up and go live in the swamp with my dearly beloved.*

Life pressed on, however, and I, well-mannered and cultured that I was, needed to answer. I sent them identical replies.

*Dear recipient,*

*I would be happy to meet with you, although I am unable to do so at present. Today, Friday, at 10 a.m., I am leaving for a trip through the mountains that will take me to the northern part of the continent.*

*As soon as I arrive, I will get in touch to set up a meeting.*

*Yours truly,*

*Hagen*

*A well-written letter, I thought, that politely and clearly said I was too busy wandering through tunnels and dodging rock slides to think about them. Very romantic.*

My secretarial duties done, I visited a trader to buy some dried meat. Food in Fayroll was simpler than in other games. All you got from eating it was a faster regeneration time for your life energy. Some games offered an attribute boost for chowing down on some roast pig, but we didn't have anything like that. Nothing even happened if you decided to go without eating completely. You could just indulge after a tough battle to get back on your feet.

After dropping by my hotel room to drop off the money, I set off for the gate at a brisk trot. Time was ticking, and it was just about time to leave.

There were already five people at the gate, and all of them had the Hounds' symbol over their heads. *That has to be the group of kiddies I'm supposed to join.* "Kiddies" may not have been the right word, though; none of them were below Level 50.

I recognized Fitz from the Gray Witch's office. He was yelling some kind of lesson at one of my future companions.

"Oh, you 'thought'? You mean to tell me that the head of cabbage sitting on your shoulders is what you use to think with? The decomposition going on up there is actually some kind of cognitive process? I'm going to have to disappoint you; you have no business anywhere near the word 'cognitive.'"

I walked over to the red-faced warrior and announced my presence. "Hagen, participant in the Northern Campaign. Present and accounted for."

Fitz turned to me, rolled his eyes when he remembered who I was, and growled at me. "Fall in with the rest. Yes, that bunch of no-good animals. At least, they'll have one real person in the group."

"Fitz, do you ever get tired of yelling?" I heard a lazily imperious voice call out.

Turning, I found the owner of the voice was a Level 98 elf warrior named Miurat. *So he's the reinforcements they sent.*

"Well, we all know how you can get out of anything, but I have to make sure these idiots get to the other side of the mountains—all of them, preferably," roared Fitz. I was getting the impression that he was the kind of person who spoke in a bellow.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Miurat replied impressively. "I'm coming with you and sharing the responsibility for everyone, so I'll be right there with you if anything goes wrong."

"Like in Mirron?" growled Fitz spitefully.

"You watch your tongue!" answered Miurat, losing for a second his gentility in favor of a flash of anger. "You weren't there, so you don't get to have an opinion on what happened."

"You're right; I went too far," answered Fitz quickly. "Okay, is everyone here?"

"Yep," answered a Level 51 archer girl with the hard-to-pronounce name of Tirnuvinuel. "Weren't there supposed to be just five of us though?"

"Correct," confirmed Miurat. "Six with our Thunderbird friend, eight with the two of us. We should be fine."

"Why is a Thunderbird coming with us?" asked a warrior dwarf named Frag.

"Because," Fitz said, glowering, "we're allied with the Thunderbirds, so they're friends of the clan. You're all too green to see how they fought on the walls of the Wild Heart citadel. This one may not look like much, but he made a name for himself there." Fitz jabbed a finger in my direction. "He was in the middle Mouse, right on the top level, and he was one of only a few to survive. So there you go."

"Oh, really?" Miurat's eyebrows shot up. "That was you? Valent told me how you saved his life."

My companions turned respect-filled faces toward me. Fitz and Miurat certainly were talking me up.

"Well, not exactly. I just backed him up a little," I said modestly.

"We'll talk when we stop for breaks," said Miurat before going to stand next to Fitz.

"All right, fighters!" screamed Fitz at the top of his lungs. "Check one more time to make sure you have everything you need. Potions, good; weapons, equipment all repaired? You have exactly ten minutes before we leave. If you need more time, you can spend it sitting here picking your nose."

*Oh, no! I haven't repaired my equipment in forever!*

I quickly looked around and located the blacksmith. Happily, he was nearby, and so I moved in that direction as casually as I could (I had a reputation to uphold, after all).

Thankfully, equipment repair in Fayroll was fast, if pricey. I was done by the time our ten minutes were up, and we heard our “Everyone ready?” We left peaceful, calm Kroytsen behind us. In front of us, loomed the mountains.

Once out of the city, I started to get the jitters. I was setting out on one of my most risky endeavors to that point in Fayroll. My life certainly hadn’t been smooth sailing before that point, though I had always stuck to areas I could handle or where I had powerful backup to make sure everything would be okay. This time, we’d be going through an infamous location I was a good seven levels short of being ready for. The group was made up of similarly low-level players, a brave soldier with the manners of a drill sergeant, and an unflappable elf I couldn’t get a read on. I had good reason to be nervous.

Lost in my thoughts, I gradually fell back to the rear of the column and realized I was last in line. *Oh, no, there’s Miurat catching up to us.*

“Don’t worry,” he said as he came up to me. “We’ll be fine. The mines are bad, of course, but I’ve been through them three times—both directions. Fitz has been there, too. We wouldn’t let anything happen to the Gray Witch’s personal friend, would we?”

He winked at me and headed up the column to catch up with Fitz.

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From the third edition of the Fayroll Times:

*...his colleagues all referred to him as a great person and a highly competent professional.*

*Fayroll as we know it was, in many ways, his baby, and it is hard to believe that he has left, for good, a world he knew so intimately.*

### ***Classes: which one is right for you?***

#### ***Mages, Part 3.***

*...and other spells. At the beginning levels, mages also face a critical decision: which school they will practice. The choices are the schools of air, fire, water, and earth, and they are what determine how effective a mage’s spells will be in those and other areas...*

#### ***History and Creation of the World***

*Nobody expected the advent of the gods in Fayroll. The dragons assumed the gods’ arrival marked a challenge to their power; the light races looked to them as protectors and patrons; and the dark races regarded them as worthy of adoration. The true reason the gods came was to achieve absolute dominion over the Fayroll world.*

#### ***Announcements***

*Dear readers,*

*As you no doubt understand, we are in no position to keep track of everything going on in Fayroll, no matter how much we would like to do so. With that in mind, please send us short overviews of the events you think are worth publishing.*

#### ***Excerpts from the Fayroll Chronicle***

*The yearly Silver Arrow competition was held in the Borderlands. Hundreds of Fayroll’s best archers gathered in Nottsburg for two days and three rounds of shooting. The winner was Ellan of the Plain from the Leviathans clan. He was given the traditional silver arrow and the 20,000 gold purse.*

*The Eyes of the Beast clan visited Ouk Cave in search of Klatornakh, an epic monster. The entire clan went in, but not a soul returned to tell the tale. Unfortunately, that is how some raids end...*

*An attempt to descend Nabia Falls in the southern reaches ended in the death of a well-known adventurer. TurDal, a famous traveler and adrenaline junkie, decided to conquer the enormous and nearly vertical waterfall by locking himself in a barrel and throwing himself into the river just upstream of the falls. When the barrel reached the bottom and was plucked out of the water, the players waiting there found only the brave dwarf's possessions. TurDal remains optimistic and is looking for other ways to master the watery beast.*

### ***Fun Times in Fayroll***

*Today, we learned, yet again, that just about anything is possible in Fayroll. Just recently, three alchemists in Anselm, a town on the southern coast, made a bet about which of them—in three weeks—could make the most realistic grenade they could using nothing but alchemical ingredients. The results have been explosive: a burned-down building, a partially melted road, and ten scalded people living in what had, until the bet, been a very quiet town. The local government evacuated part of the population. We will keep an eye on events and fill you in as they develop further.*

### ***Coming up in the next edition:***

*An interview with Harry the Eye, head of Rivenholm's strongest clan.*

## Chapter Three

### **In which the hero finds himself crawling around underground, yet again.**

The mountains towered high above us. I'll be honest, they were the biggest I'd ever seen—the Pyrenees and the American Cordillera had nothing on what was right in front of me. You couldn't help but realize how small and insignificant you were standing there.

It was as if the mountains were saying, "Well, hello there, you little bug. Oh, you're going to climb around on us? Be our guest. Your whole life is an instant to us, a gust of wind in our peaks."

We noobs were the only ones staring up at the mountains, by the way. Our veterans had been around the block a few times and remained untouched by their beauty. Still, Fitz and Miurat knew how we felt, so they gave us a few minutes to gaze at the majestic splendor. Once they saw our glances shift from the snow caps to the snarled mess of stones around the foreboding entrance to the infamous mines, they started in on their first and, presumably, only briefing.

"Listen, kids. We're about to enter the Rina Mines, a rotten, unpleasant, and evil place," said Fitz, laconic to a fault.

I shifted my stance and was about to ask a question when I saw Miurat motion me to keep quiet—there would be time for questions later. Fitz continued his speech.

"Your job is simple: stay alive. But for that to happen in the mines, we're going to have to be a well-oiled, precise, and steady machine. If we aren't, Miurat and I will be the only two walking out the other side—and maybe just me. So, you can check your ambitions at the door, forget your high opinion of yourselves and leave what you have to do in the North alone for now. That's it. Questions?"

Fitz bristled his mustache, coughed, spat, and looked us over with a threatening glance that told us he'd be jamming any questions we asked right back down our throats. The young Hounds obviously had questions, though the timid way they were looking back at our leader made it clear to me that none of them wanted to risk it. I raised my hand. *Who cares what Fitz thinks of me?*

"I have a couple questions."

"Yes?" The warrior's brows creased menacingly.

"What do you mean, it's an 'evil' place? God-forsaken like Snakeville or something else?"

"Nobody knows what's in Snakeville, and the people who do, don't talk about it," answered Miurat before Fitz had a chance. "Here, it's simple. The mines are an alternate route to the North. It's shorter, faster, easier, and not as cold as the pass, but it comes with a price. It's incredibly dangerous and hard on you mentally."

"Mentally?" I asked.

"Yes." Miurat tucked his hands behind his back like a professor beginning his lecture. "Nobody likes being down there in the mines, even—you'd be surprised—dwarves. The whole time, you feel a relentless psychological pressure bearing down on you. You see the souls of burned miners; you hear footfalls and cries; and the darkness whispers in your ears. You may even see fragments of a battle. Also, don't be surprised if someone who just died appears to you. A guy I know was shocked to see a girl from his clan he'd been chatting with not an hour before."

"Why are there burned miners?" I asked with interest.

"Oh, that's a fascinating story," answered Miurat, perking up. "Back when—"

"Enough!" barked Fitz. His whiskers stood on end. "You can chat later. We have to get to the Ninth Hall, which is about eight hours away including breaks, and we may have to fight our way there."

“Okay,” Miurat said to me softly, “I’ll tell you on the way. And stay close to me, by the way. Do you like to play the hero?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that.” Miurat smiled. “You know, ‘one for all and all for one,’ ‘go out in a blaze of glory,’ all that. Do you have a thing for heroics?”

“Me? No, I don’t care about all that,” I answered honestly. “I mean, I won’t run from a fight or abandon the group, and I’ll do my level best, but I try to stay away from the middle of things.”

“Excellent,” said Miurat. “I think we’ll get along fine.”

I nodded. “Agreed. Two smart people can always find common ground.”

“Okay, fighters, let me remind you one more time,” said Fitz, who was finding his stride as an orator. “The key in the mines is discipline. Relax, get cut off from the group, and you’re a goner. Nobody makes it alone in the mines. That’s a theory that’s been tested on many an occasion and by players much more advanced than you. Oh, and if you die, you can kiss your belongings goodbye—portal scrolls don’t work in the mines. Not even the messaging system does. Everything clear?”

“Got it,” we answered discordantly.

“We’ll go like this.” Fitz waved at us. “I’m up front, behind me are Frag and Moris.”

The dwarf and human, both warriors, nodded. Fitz noted their assent and kept going.

“Then Tirnuvinuel…” He shook his whiskered head as if brushing off a fly. “That’s too much of a mouthful—you’re going to be Trina from now on. Flores will be next to you.”

The elf archer and mage girl also nodded, stepping into position.

“Okay, next is you, Hagen, and Engis.” The healer standing next to me glanced quickly in my direction. “Miurat will bring up the rear. Questions?”

Nobody said a word.

“Excellent. Flores, go ahead and buff us with whatever you can, and let’s go. We should’ve been in the mines an hour ago.”

Flores waved his staff, blurted out something unintelligible, and I got +25% to my life energy restoration speed for two hours.

“Great,” growled Fitz happily. “Well done. Oh, I almost forgot; there’ll be all kinds of armor, weapons, and whatnot lying around just begging to be picked up. Don’t even think about it! I won’t lift a finger to help you since there’s no chance you’ll get back to the group alive. You don’t make it far in the mines by being greedy.”

“A-a-ah, that’s a shame,” said Frag. Dwarves are a rapacious bunch even when they have yet to see what’s going to be out there for the taking.

Fitz looked at him fiercely before giving one final order. “Move out!”

Our column tramped into the looming chasm that served as the entrance to the mines.

*You entered the abandoned mines under the Rina Mountain. Long ago, hardworking dwarves worked veins of rich gold and precious gems until a fight broke out in the Last War between...*

I would have liked to read what happened, but I closed the message to make sure I kept up with Fitz.

Everything inside was gloomy. To be fair, nothing is ever much fun underground, I don’t think, either in the game or in real life. There’s no space, the air is stale...it’s just unpleasant, in a word. But in the mines, it wasn’t just the walls and ceiling closing in on us; the very atmosphere was depressing. It was like somebody had started sucking the life out of us drop by drop.

“Well, has it started to get to you?” asked Fitz quietly.

Everyone except Miurat nodded in unison.

“This is nothing,” the veteran said. “It’ll get worse. You just pray to all the gods that we don’t meet a marching band of dark dwarves—that’s when it’ll get really bad awfully quick! Okay, let’s go.”

The column moved forward. We must have looked positively infernal in the dim light illuminating the way forward. The light came from the many mushrooms covering the walls. It looked like they were there to match the glowing moss I’d seen in the citadel dungeons.

“What was that about a band of dark dwarves?” I quietly asked Miurat, who was walking behind me.

“Dark dwarves?” he responded. “Ah, that’s a long story.”

Miurat dove into the whole history of the mines. Engis listened in next to me, although he didn’t catch the whole thing.

It turned out that, at one point, the mines were the biggest supplier of gold and diamonds for the entire continent, and they kept up a steady supply of other jewels as well. Master dwarves lived there picking away at the rock, cutting the stones they found and setting them in jewelry pieces they also created. Wars waxed and waned around them, but the dwarves in the mines, in contrast to many of their kin above ground, had no interest in the combat raging outside. However, the peace and quiet they enjoyed came to an end in the dying moments of the Second War of Hatred. The remnants of the dark army were corralled near the mines, driven like wolves before the oath-breaking light side, whose only guiding principle was to unite all good races and destroy the bad.

Two regiments of dark dwarves, a sparse race of incredibly strong fanatics devoted to the dark side, made it into the mines. Unlike regular dwarves—with whom they mingled between wars by necessity and who generally made fine art—the dark dwarves were always ready for a fight. They often hired themselves out as mercenaries and only ever made weapons and armor. Darkness was their only allegiance, as they were said to have been created by Tekhosh, the God of Darkness, himself.

Those pleasant fellows were the ones who were swept into the mines we now walked through. They quickly slaughtered most of the locals, took up positions, built defenses, and prepared to repulse the attack of the light forces.

At the same time, some regular dwarves managed to escape the mines through secret passages and got word to the light side that their evil kinsmen were killing their way through the mountains. The dark dwarves needed to be destroyed, they said.

The light side had no desire to get caught in the narrow spaces underground, where all the advantages would be on the side of the defenders. They discussed the problem and decided on a simple solution—a Fireworm born in the fires of light magic. It took an unbelievable amount of magical energy, but it was a plan as sure not to backfire as a Winchester rifle. The enormous worm wouldn’t leave the mines until it scorched to death everyone inside.

To hasten the process and offer a more humane end to those in the mine (burning them alive was cruel and painful), the light mages also released a pair of Poison Flowers in the mines—another incantation used for mass destruction. It was like mustard gas, only it smelled better.

As a result, everyone inside burned or was poisoned to death, including all of the dark dwarves, the remainder of their regular dwarf kin, and all the rest of the intelligent and unintelligent creatures living in the caves. The latter included ice devils, fellings, and yetis, not to mention the remains of a tribe of swimmers—strange creatures that live on the banks of underground lakes. They were a quiet, harmless, and peaceful group of fish-eaters that would never hurt a fly and lived for their two innocent pleasures: collecting jewelry and telling riddles.

Nobody knows who cast the dying curse, though somebody did cast one. The souls of all those who met their end at the hands of the light races in the mines stayed there to roam the tunnels restlessly. While

death certainly made them no tamer, most of those doomed to remain preferred only to scare those they came across. Just a few of the races became the blood-letters that gave the mines their fearsome reputation.

Dwarves tried on multiple occasions to push their way back into the mines, putting together forces that marched resolutely underground, but only tens of the thousands who went in actually returned. Veterans of those attempts did their best to forget what happened inside. None of them would say a word about what they'd seen.

The dwarves eventually gave up on the mines, figuring that the wealth they held came at too high a price. Centuries passed without the evil in the mines disappearing, and nobody paid much attention to them. Nothing ever came out, day or night. All you had to do was take one step out an entrance or exit, and you were free. The inside was another matter entirely...

Things had only gotten worse by the time we arrived. New tunnels had been dug, goodness knows when and by whom. There were a multitude of traps; bloodthirsty ghosts were everywhere; and the local fauna had spread throughout the caves: ice devils, malicious and fanged creatures that posed no threat alone but were incredibly dangerous in packs. The walls and ceiling could also cave in at any moment. The worst part, however, was the fear that ate away at your soul and sapped the attention you needed to survive.

That was why most travelers preferred to spend several days climbing through snow and ice in the pass rather than risk the short but ghastly paths through the abandoned mines.

"And that's how it is," said Miurat, wrapping up his story.

"Wow." I shook my head respectfully. "Impressive."

"Did you think it would be anything else?" asked Miurat. "Okay, we'll talk later. That's the entrance to the First Hall up ahead."

Fitz raised a hand from the front of the column, letting us know in no uncertain terms that we needed to halt. Even in the dim light, I could see that he was right at the exit of the tunnel we'd been walking through.

I couldn't tell what was going on since there were too many people in between me and the hall to see in. It wasn't good; that much was certain.

Fitz waved us all closer. We crowded in and carefully peeked into the opening. I don't know how it affected everyone else, but I felt sick to my stomach. If I hadn't known that I would die and irretrievably lose everything I had with me before I ever made it out of the mines, I would have turned around and happily joined forces with the smugglers to get through the pass.

It was a medium-sized room that featured half a dozen dwarves swinging tools at a vein of gold in the middle of the room. Their beards bristled, they chatted with each other, and every once in a while they bent over to pick something up and put it in purses on their belts. It would have been just a few of the little guys going about their daily life if it hadn't been for one fact: all of them were ghosts. They were blue, semi-transparent, and absolutely repulsive. And even though nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary with their clothes, the dwarves themselves appeared to be in exactly the state in which they died. Discolored, badly burned faces were covered in singed beards, and burns ate away at their arms. "Repulsive" didn't begin to describe them.

"Listen," said Fitz in a whisper. "We'll walk single file along the right-hand wall until we get to the next passageway. See it over there on that side of the room?"

We nodded.

“Keep the noise down and watch your step. If we’re quiet, there’s a chance they won’t attack us or even notice we’re here. If you make noise, we’ll have to kill them. Forget that there aren’t that many of them; they’re nasty, and they’ll give us some nice debuffs.”

“And they can call for help,” added Miurat.

“I’m going first, then everyone behind me in order,” hissed Fitz. “Stay five strides behind the person in front of you. We’re safe once we get to that passage.”

Fitz slipped ahead with a light tread. I was surprised to see how cat-like he could make his gigantic figure.

Miurat poked Frag, who was staring at the undead.

“Wake up, let’s go. Be quiet.”

Finally, it was my turn. I took up position next to the wall, nervous about tripping over some small stone and therefore keeping a close eye on where I was stepping. The ghosts in the middle of the room were far too terrifying to look at as it was.

Right then, Trina, who had almost gotten to the far passageway to the next tunnel, scraped her bow up against the wall. We heard the grinding sound and immediately following a hissed order from Fitz.

“Halt! Freeze!”

We froze all right. Against my will, I turned my eyes toward the middle of the room. The ghostly dwarves had forgotten their work and were looking in our direction.

I swear, one of them glanced directly at me. Our eyes met for a second, and I found myself staring into the abyss. Raging madness danced in his eyes.

Time stood still as I waited for the six dwarves to hurl themselves at us. If any of us had moved, that’s probably what would have happened, but not a single muscle fiber twitched. One of the dwarves, apparently the one in charge, looked over at us one more time, shook his finger at us threateningly, and motioned for his friends to get back to work.

“Let’s go,” we heard Fitz whisper.

If we had been doing our best to follow orders and be quiet before then, I don’t think anyone’s feet actually touched the ground after that. We realized that we wouldn’t get off with just a finger-shaking the second time around.

Fitz’s whispered voice was on its third minute laying into Trina when Miurat walked through the passageway. She stood there somewhere between living and dead, her eyes on the floor and her nose quivering.

Finally, Fitz had his fill. “We’ll keep going in the same order. And this time listen to me!”

We were ready to do anything he said so long as he got us out of there.

I should note that the mines were nothing if not uniform. The wall and the tunnels that from time to time opened out of them, the mushrooms on the walls, the standard rooms we went through and, happily, didn’t find any more of the locals in—everything was identical. An hour later we were forced to draw our weapons for the first time when we came across two yetis in one of the tunnels. They were big and aggressive, though they made up for it with their stupidity. We may not have been able to take them out alone or in pairs, but the group together made short work of them.

In another three hours, Fitz raised his hand. “Welcome to the first attraction: the Fifth Hall. Keep an eye out—it’s enormous, and there are plenty of surprises. Sometimes groups can get through without meeting anyone, other times, you have to fight for every inch. We’re going to see what kind of luck you all have. Stay close, but don’t get in each other’s way.”

We carefully walked into the huge room, the other side of which was hidden somewhere far off in the darkness. I was expecting hordes to rush us like some kind of Moria. Nothing. It was just a room with piles of trash here and there. I saw a cocoon on one of them where some poor traveler had met his end and poked Engis.

“Look, some stuff over there.”

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “Can you imagine how much there is?”

“Quite a bit,” said Miurat from behind us. He was turning his head so quickly from side to side that it looked like it was on a swivel. “And everything’s just waiting for you to pick it up.”

Engis and I glanced at each other with the same thought in our minds—leave well enough alone; it wasn’t worth the risk.

The room was gigantic. We walked past some kind of dark patches, and some had fires flashing out every once in a while. The sudden flames unexpectedly rushing out of the ground and walls were terrifying. The darkness along the walls wavered back and forth, looking just about ready to attack us.

Here and there, were cocoons left by previous adventure-seekers. Even we could hear Frag cluck his tongue when we saw the ornate handle of a halberd poking up from between two slabs in the floor.

“We’re almost there,” I heard Miurat say, and started to feel better. The narrow tunnel was much better than the vast room, where I felt bare and defenseless.

“Hey!” Frag said just as Fritz walked through the passageway between the Fifth Hall and the next tunnel. “That’s a set hammer!”

The dwarf’s figure leaped away from the passage, ignoring Fitz’s cry. “Stop, you fool!”

I saw his hand close around the hammer’s handle and pull it away from the pile of trash it was lying on.

*Maybe he’ll get away with it.*

He didn’t. The handle evaporated as we watched, after which a whitish shroud appeared out of nowhere and enveloped Frag. He disappeared beneath it before anybody had time to react.

“A-a-ah!” came his scream. “Help!”

The only sound we heard after that was Fitz’s roar. “Stand where you are. Not a step!”

He didn’t have to say anything. None of us was going anywhere since we could all see that the dwarf was a goner.

The white shroud shuddered a few times as if breathing in and out, hung there for a minute, and floated down to the ground.

The very same handle belonging to the hammer stared back at us, though this time there was a cocoon next to it. That was all that was left of Frag.

“It’s his own fault,” said Miurat from behind us. “Greed killed the dwarf. Let’s keep going.”

Everything thereafter was the same—tunnels, halls, passageways. We walked along through the monotony, realizing more and more how hopeless they were, how foreign we were, and how we were probably doomed to wander on until we found peace as part of the local scenery. There was a constant feeling of someone whispering in our ears.

*You won’t get out of here. Stop torturing yourself and let death come. It’s easier that way. Simpler.*

But we kept going. There were more tunnels shooting off in every direction, and the light coming from the mushrooms grew fainter.

“Ah, there we are, almost done for today,” Miurat said to me a short while later. He picked up his pace and caught up to Fitz, telling him something when he got there. Fitz nodded and held up a hand. We followed his direction to the right.

We turned again and again, soon seeing some kind of bright gleams far off. Five minutes later, we walked into a small room with a hillock in the middle. A fire burned at the top of it.

“Time for a halt,” Miurat said without bothering to lower his voice. “There are five of these spots in the mines. They’re in all the big dungeons. Monsters and ghosts don’t come here, you get a break from the mental effects, and there aren’t any traps. We’ll spend the night here.”

It was true; the weight of the past several hours fell off our shoulders, and it became easier to breathe.

“Engis,” I said, turning to my partner. He didn’t answer. I spun around and saw that he was nowhere to be found.

“Fitz,” I said quietly to our leader, sensing that something was wrong. “Engis is missing.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” asked Fitz.

“When you waved. I followed you and didn’t look around for him as we went.”

“How many turns did we make? More than five, wouldn’t you say?” Fitz asked Miurat.

The latter nodded.

“Then Engis is dead,” said Fitz calmly. “Let’s get some sleep.”

I looked back at the darkness of the tunnel we’d just come from before lying down on my side.

## Chapter Four

### In which the hero sees the light at the end of the tunnel.

Once we'd all clambered up onto the hill, Fitz addressed us.

"All right, everyone, that's all for today. Tomorrow, be here at 9 a.m. You won't want to be late because we won't wait for anyone. Otherwise, you can just spend the rest of your lives here."

That made sense to us all, given that the day's events had put us all past kidding around. He was serious, and we all took him at his word.

I got comfortable next to the fire, stared thoughtfully into the flames for a minute, and logged out of the game.

Being above ground was unsettling. I hadn't been in the mines for too long, but my brain was obviously having a hard time with the incredible contrast between my real-life apartment and the bluish gloom underground. It was something like how divers who come up too fast have their blood boil. In my case, it was my brain boiling.

I threw a shot of tequila down the hatch to ease my nerves, not bothering with all the salt and lemon you see in the movies, and earned myself a reproachful glance from Vika. She had apparently gotten back from the office a while before I stepped out of the capsule.

"What?" I asked disgruntledly.

"Nothing," she answered in a calm voice. "Just wondering why you went straight for the tequila. I made some borscht<sup>2</sup>, and it would make the tequila go down easier. Liquor is always better with something spicy. Plus, it's exotic: tequila and borscht."

I felt bad. She'd been looking out for me, and I very nearly jumped down her throat for it. *I'll have to watch that.*

"Sure," I said with a smile, "only Professor Preobrazhensky<sup>3</sup> doesn't recommend soup with alcohol."

"Oh, forget all them," said Vika with a wave of her hand. "Anyway, don't worry; it doesn't bother me. You should see Elmira sometimes when she logs out of the game. She recently captured some kind of fortress, and when she got out of the capsule, she was spitting mad. I woke up when I heard her. Then, the next morning, something got on her nerves, and she started yelling all over again. I don't know what happened, but I just left her alone. She was crazy!"

*Interesting. Elmira. Vika's sister. Captured a fortress recently. Could I know her?*

I quickly forgot about all that, however, and focused on the borscht. My mind had cleared, and I needed something hot and spicy with potatoes. Not to mention a couple...well, okay, three more shots. I felt better and went to sleep.

Vika was still asleep when I got up the next morning to smoke two cigarettes. *Yes, two. You think I'm itching to crawl back into those mines?* The dreams I had that night were enough to make a grown man cry. Anyway, my two cigarettes smoked, I took a deep breath and lay back in the capsule. I'd come that far; might as well go the rest of the way.

As it turned out, I was one of the first there. Fitz and Miurat were already standing by the fire arguing about something, though Fitz smiled and waved when he saw me.

"Well done. The Thunderbirds are disciplined, I see—not like our crap."

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<sup>2</sup> A national Russian soup made from cabbage and beets.

<sup>3</sup> A physician and philosopher from a story by Mikhail Bulgakov, a famous Russian author.

His clan mates weren't too bad, though, and everyone showed up over the next five minutes with the exception of Trina. She was nowhere to be found.

"All right, time to go. Form up, column!" barked Fitz.

"We're definitely not going to wait?" Miurat asked him quietly.

"No, I warned everyone that we wouldn't be waiting. She can find her own way out."

Miurat wanted to say something, though he contented himself with shaking his head. It was obvious that the only way out was a quick trip to her last headstone.

"There are only about half of us left, so here's the new order." Fitz looked us over. "I'm at the front, Flores is behind me, Hagen and Moris are behind her, and Miurat brings up the rear. If we have to fight, we make a circle around Flores. Questions?"

"What do you think?" asked the mage girl dejectedly. "Is there any chance of us getting out of here alive?"

"I'm not sure," Fitz answered frankly. "We'll see. We should be okay, though only the gods know what's waiting for us. Okay, buff us like you did yesterday and let's get started."

We walked out of the cave, and I looked back to see that nobody had appeared by the fire. Trina, it appeared, had made a serious mistake she'd be paying dearly for—both when she logged in and later. But that was her problem. I was more worried about how I was going to get out.

The tunnels and branches were the same as the ones I'd gotten so tired of the day before. A feeling of hopelessness and despair seeped through my bones and muscles. There's a lot you can get used to in this life, but what we were dealing with there was different. It would have been simpler to die than keep going. *That's not the worst idea, actually. A quick jab with my sword, and I would be free.* Suddenly, I heard a voice whispering in my head. *Exactly. Stop torturing yourself—death is quick, just like life.*

My hand crept down to the hilt of my sword, a movement Miurat caught immediately. "Hey, none of that," he said as he knocked my palm away.

"Fitz, we were trying to figure out who'd be the suicider, and it looks like our friend here drew the short straw."

"And here I thought it would be Flores!" boomed Fitz through his whiskers.

"What are you talking about?" I stared at Miurat.

"The mines always pick someone in the group to start thinking about killing himself," he explained. "It's more interesting that way, I guess, though the person always commits suicide sooner or later if you don't stop them. I'm just glad you're a swordsman, and I saw you go for your sword. It's harder with thieves or mages since they can slip a dagger into their throat before you notice and can stop them."

"On the other hand, it sure does help everyone else when that happens," noted Fitz. "For two hours afterward, you don't have to worry about anything else happening. It's like a sacrifice to the mines."

"Sure," said Flores with exasperation. "Give them blood, and they'll leave you alone."

"What can you do?" asked Miurat, shrugging ruefully. "Well, what do you think? Do you still want to kill yourself?"

As they'd been talking, a second voice joined the one telling me to end it all and enter the land of the endless hunt. It was harsh and raspy, and it didn't waste time before starting to yell at me. *What the hell is this? Are you a warrior or not? Don't give me any of this "easy death" stuff. The only way warriors die is on the field of battle at the blades of their enemies—and that's it!*

Miurat looked at me.

"No," I mumbled. "The feeling passed."

The voices in my head had indeed disappeared along with the desire to put an end to myself. I certainly wasn't about to say anything about the squabble that had just gone on in my mind, so I simply took my hand off my sword and looked at the Hound veterans in a way that assured them I was firmly planted on their side of the grave.

"In that case, let's keep going," ordered Fitz. "We're close to the Ninth Hall, and once we're through it, we'll be halfway there. Everything will be simpler after the Ninth Hall."

"What happens there?" I asked Miurat quietly.

"You never know, just like everywhere else down here. Assuming you know that something will happen in the mines is the worst mistake you can make. As far as the Ninth Hall is concerned, I've been there twice. The first time, we got through it in ten minutes without coming across anything. Just silence, dust, and the usual twilight."

"And the second?"

"I didn't make it out the second time, and neither did half our group. A herd of ice devils attacked us out of nowhere when we got to the middle and slaughtered a good number of us. We didn't stand a chance."

"Quiet," said Fitz, hushing us. "We're here."

We stood at the entrance to a gigantic room. All it took was what little we could see through the passageway to tell us how big it was.

"Okay, we go like usual—quietly and trying to avoid being seen," Fitz said. "Just remember, the worst of the mines always happens to whoever is noisiest and whoever decides not to follow orders."

He walked out of the passageway, battle ax at the ready. His head swiveled side to side, as he made sure there weren't any clear or direct threats. A gesture with his chin let us know that it was time to follow him in.

*You unlocked In the Depths.*

*To get it, enter 9 more large caves located in different Fayroll dungeons.*

*Reward:*

*Title: Veteran of the Darkness*

*+2 to wisdom*

*To see similar messages, go to the Action section of the attribute window.*

I was happy to get at least some sort of benefit from the mines, though the chances of me getting the action were slim to none. *I'll probably be staying away from holes in the ground for a while.*

The room really was enormous. The sickly mushroom light mixed with flairs of sunlight leaking in through cracks in the ceiling high above us. We were apparently inside one of the Rina Mountain peaks. The mix of lighting made for whimsical shadow play that I found enchanting. It was obvious that the dwarves had kept their tools away from that particular area, loath to spoil the room's natural beauty.

We made our way through the Ninth Hall without making a sound. I wasn't sure what my companions felt, but I couldn't help once again noticing my insignificance in the face of the grandeur around me.

There wasn't anyone else in the room, but Fitz's constantly quickening pace told me he found the emptiness unnerving.

The daylight was starting to fade as we approached the exit, giving way to the usual blue before disappearing altogether. The blue color, however, grew stronger until we could see some kind of ultraviolet light raging its way through the corridor.

“What is—” I opened my mouth to ask the question, but Fitz, eyes bulging, yelled back at us in a voice no louder than a whisper (I had never realized such a thing was possible), “Into the corner! Everyone into the corner! Go!”

“Didn’t you say...?” Moris was about to object when Fitz ignored him and sprinted away from the passageway into a corner of the room.

I had no idea what was going on, but I figured I should follow suit if even Fitz, who wasn’t prone to being jumpy or panicking, decided it was time to run.

Once in the corner, we found Fitz waving us over from his prone position behind a pile of trash. He motioned for us to get down next to him, which we did just in time.

The blue glow coming from the corridor burst into the Ninth Hall accompanied by dwarf ghosts. They were no ordinary dwarves, however, and the difference wasn’t so much that they were taller and had shorter beards; it was their spectral faces. Even the faces of the burned dwarves I’d found so terrifying had retained some of their race’s former peacefulness. But the faces marching by me were twisted with hatred and anger toward all things living. They tramped by in a steady march, the column equipped with identical armor and battle axes resting on their shoulders.

Row after row poured out of the passageway, their radiance illuminating the hall and instilling yet another wave of horror in us. *Is there anything in the mines that doesn’t project fear like that?* I missed the yetis we’d fought the day before; they, at least, were warm-blooded.

The column of dark dwarves (*Who else could they be?*) finally finished filing out of the tunnel and wound its way into the heart of the Ninth Hall. Fitz peeked over the trash and watched them carefully, checking to make sure that they’d left without leaving any patrols behind.

When the glow from the dark dwarves finally disappeared, Fitz got up and brushed himself off. “Aren’t you a bunch of lucky ducks? Most people have never seen them on parade, and here you got to see them your first time.”

“On parade?” asked Moris in surprise.

“Yes, that’s what it’s called,” explained Fitz. “Those were dark dwarf ghosts marching, the ones they burned and poisoned here. They’re still here, and they parade around like that with their weapons drawn—let them find you, and you’re dead. They’ll hunt you down if you try to run away, too. The worst, though, is that they’re the only ones in the mines—and maybe in all of Fayroll—who don’t kill players right away. They torture them first.”

“Really?” I was having a hard time believing that. “But what about the game rules? And censorship?”

“I don’t know; it’s just something I’ve heard from people who have been around the block a few times.” Fitz frowned. “I haven’t tested the theory out myself.” He spat over his shoulder.

“I’ve heard that, too,” said Miurat, who joined the conversation. “They even say the dark dwarves here in the mines are waiting for the rebirth of the Dark Lord, and that they’ll be his personal guard when he takes his throne. That’s why they kill everyone they meet; they don’t want anyone to know where they are.”

“Well, that’s just ridiculous,” Fitz said with a grunt. “Where is the Dark Lord going to come from? Just a bunch of nonsense. Okay, let’s get out of here. The way will be clear for another hour now that the dwarves have cleared it. Even the scum down here are afraid of them.”

We headed toward the exit, brushing trash from the filthy floor off of us as we went. Next to me, Flores shook off her mantle.

“I don’t even sweep at home, but here—”

I was about to mention that having a mess at home is nothing to be proud of when a large, black shadow bounded across the hall and raked Flores with its claws. The latter dropped with a cry, and I grabbed my sword, only to hear Fitz roar back at us. “A cavewight, damn it! You’ve got to be kidding me! It was hiding from the dwarves the same as we were.”

He whipped out his ax and tried to leap forward to sink it into the shadow, but he was too slow.

At the same time, the rest of us were trying to catch it with our blades, but it dodged them all and leaped away down the hall in the direction the dark dwarves had gone.

When we turned to look back for Flores, all that was left was a cocoon. Fitz picked it up. “I’ll give it to her, don’t worry. Okay, in pairs now, Moris with me, let’s go.”

I turned toward Miurat, who was next to me, as we walked away. “What was that thing?”

“The cavewight? Oh, they’re nasty all right—partially intelligent, incredibly strong and agile, and with incredible hearing and vision. There are only a handful of players that would even think about taking them on by themselves. Cavewights can always figure out which side is stronger in a fight. If Fitz weren’t here, believe me, that monster would have ripped into us and sent us all to an early grave.”

“Wow,” I said, looking back over my shoulder. “Are there a lot of them?”

“One, maybe two. This set of caves belong to that one, and they don’t share food or territory with each other. Thank God, there aren’t many of them. I just hope it’s not following us.”

We kept moving forward, one foot after another, hour after hour, halls following passages. At one point, we had to climb over a cave-in that Fitz nervously said looked fresh.

Nothing happened in the Tenth or Eleventh Halls, but just as we were about to enter the Twelfth Hall, which was the last in our journey, Fitz turned to us. “Well, everyone, we’re almost there. On the other side of the room is a tunnel, then one more tunnel, then a tiny little room, a small passageway, a turn, and we can breathe fresh air again. Moris, well done—you’ve impressed me down here. Hagen, I’ll be writing the same to your leader.”

“Fitz, let’s not count our chickens before they hatch. That’s a bad omen,” said Miurat quickly.

“Oh, come on, don’t be superstitious.” Fitz laughed gruffly. “Okay, let’s go.”

We walked into the hall, which was pretty large, if nothing like the Ninth Hall. Our barely noticeable path took us straight down the middle as usual, and everything was so normal that I didn’t even notice what happened at first. Something white flashed, and Moris disappeared from my field of vision with a cry. A second later, we heard his yell receding into the distance.

“Run!” roared Fitz, apparently no longer caring who or what might notice us. “Run for the tunnel! Ice devils!”

Miurat shoved me forward as he took off headlong toward the exit, and I sprinted after him, looking back as I did. All I could see in the middle of the path was some kind of black hole that poor Moris had fallen—or been shoved—into, as well as something white that was far off but approaching quickly. I realized it was less “something” and more a heaving mass of ice devils. That did nothing for my hopes of getting out alive, though the idea of dying so close to the exit after surviving so much spurred me to run even faster. Getting hacked to pieces there, of all places, would have been more than frustrating; it would have been some kind of epic fail.

Ice devils poured out of cracks in the walls and holes in the ceiling to merge with the crowd already hot on our heels and thirsty for our blood. The air was thick with their howls, the ground shook under the onslaught of their pounding feet.

We flew into the tunnel.

“Fitz, you jinxed us, you bastard!” shouted Miurat.

I ran into Fitz—who had stopped—and yelled at him, “What are you waiting for?”

“Run!” he ordered me briefly. “It’s true; I jinxed us. I can hold them for a minute or two while you make a break for it. Wait for me outside!”

He took up a defensive position right outside the entrance to the hall. Miurat dragged me off through the tunnel before I could see what happened. “Go, go, go! There’s no time!”

We had sprinted through that tunnel and almost all of the next before we again heard the hammering of their myriad feet.

“Too late!” Miurat gasped. “Unbelievable. So close!”

We dashed into a room that really was small; maybe twenty strides in diameter.

“You go on alone!” barked Miurat, whipping out his blade. “You’re almost there—go! Go! I’ll meet you outside.”

“I’ll wait there!” I yelled as I ran for the passageway.

I’m not sure if Miurat heard me because the last passageway muffled all the sound traveling back and forth. *A small passageway and a turn*, I remembered Fitz saying a few minutes before. I made it through the passageway, rounded the corner, and saw soft evening light pouring through the exit in front of me. The sun must have been on its way down.

But that’s when I was knocked off my feet and sent sprawling on the floor. I jumped up, spun around, and brandished my sword.

A couple dozen of the abominable beasts were three steps away from me. They were covered in matted white fur, had twisted horns atop their heads (where they, presumably, got their name), and fangs that jutted out of their mouths. The narrow tunnel meant that only three of them could attack me at a time, but it was enough to keep me from making it out alive. There was no chance of me covering the remaining ground no matter how fast I ran. All that was left was for me to die a hero’s death in battle and ask Miurat to collect my cocoon afterward. Then I’d go take the pass with the smugglers if Fitz and Miurat had already left Kroytsen. *Why didn’t I buy any potions? Me and my damn stinginess...*

The devil standing in front of the group roared and prepared to leap at me. I held up my sword and crouched behind my shield. *Wait a second, what about that thing Wanderer gave me? What did he say? Break it if things are really bad, right?* Things, to be fair, were about as bad as they get.

I ducked left, quickly flipped my shield over my shoulder, and dug my hand into my pocket to retrieve the glass figurine that had been there since Wanderer gave it to me. It broke just as the devil finally launched itself at me. I caught him with my sword, threw him to the side, met the second with another strike, slashed one more time, and found myself flung backward. The momentum flipped me around, leaving me on my stomach protected by the shield I still had on my back.

I tensed, anticipating the strike from behind, but instead, I heard the crunching sound of axes biting into flesh.

Turning around, I saw something I never would have thought possible. The ice devils were being hacked to pieces by the dark dwarves. Five of them blocked the passageway, aided by the fact that they were smaller than the devils, and deftly wielded single-handed battleaxes. Behind them, were another five ready to join the battle if need be, as well as some kind of commander further behind them. I blinked, thinking I might be seeing things. *The worst of the creatures we’ve seen down here are fighting for me?* The ice devils were just as perplexed as I was, judging by how they faltered and started to run off into the darkness.

The dwarf commander turned and looked at me, gesturing with his hand for me to leave. He turned back to his troops.

I decided not to test my luck and figured I could think things through out in the fresh air, so I sprinted toward the exit and found myself on a small stone platform. It was cut out of the mountain and ended in a narrow path leading downward.

A large red sun greeted me as it set behind a cloud and lit the vast green expanses stretching out in front of me. The towers of a city were visible on the horizon.

*I made it! And I don't care what all the employers in the world have to say about it—I'm never going back in with those ice devils.*

Sitting down on the platform, I gazed up at the sun and let my mind start to work. I had some things to think about before Miurat and Fitz got there.

## Chapter Five

### **In which all the action takes place on the small stone platform.**

I had many more questions in my head than answers. *What was that with the dark dwarves? Where did they even come from?* I figured they must have just materialized out of the walls, but why did they decide to save me? Even Fitz, fearless as he was, preferred hiding in trash to being seen by them, and they hunted the light races wherever they found them. *Who is Wanderer? Sure, he's an odd duck, but not that odd. Most importantly, how did he get the dark dwarves to help me? Why did Miurat play on Fitz's honor to get him to cover our retreat? Did he have something in mind, or did he just want to save me? And why did he sacrifice himself? He didn't seem like that type of person at all.*

A few minutes later, I gave up on the whole thing. I knew I wouldn't be able to come up with any answers, and my brain was about to explode. All in good time. I figured the information I was missing would come later.

I sat on the edge of the platform and dangled my feet over the edge. It was quite a ways down, but there was no scaring me with little things like that after the mines. I figured Fitz and Miurat would show up soon after dropping by a hotel, changing, and porting there. *Can you port right here to the platform, or do you have to climb up the mountain?* I could have experimented, but I really didn't want to waste a scroll.

Just when I was about to get to work on something useful like going through my quests and declining a few of them, I heard voices working their way up the stairs. I got up, figuring they belonged to my companions, but a second later, I found they were nothing of the sort. In front of me, were two human warriors named Damian and Mirro. *Did they forget something here?* They looked like normal players, and neither of them had a PK badge.

"Hi," I said, waving to them.

"Hey," answered Mirro. Damian waved back. "Did you just come out of there, by any chance?" He nodded toward the dark mouth of the mines.

"Yep," I said. "Scared myself half to death, to be honest. Not a great place. Believe me, the two of you have no business going in there. Of the eight of us who went in, I'm the only one who made it out alive."

"You're lucky," said Damian. "If you were the only one who made it. The rest probably died somewhere in the middle, no?"

He asked the question in a neutral, sympathetic tone, but there was something about it I didn't like.

"Oh, all over," I answered evasively. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering. And why are you waiting here? Shouldn't you be on your way to the city?" asked Mirro.

"I needed some time," I answered with conviction, "to calm my nerves down after everything that happened down there."

"You have to take care of your nerves; you need them to stay healthy," said Mirro with a nod. "You're probably waiting for your friends, too, right?"

"What if I am?" I liked the pair less and less. "What's wrong with that? It's a team game, after all."

"So, they probably died near the entrance." The smile on Damian's face was unnerving. "High level?"

“That’s none of your business,” I replied sharply with steel in my voice. “They are what they are. Would you mind telling me why you’re asking?”

“It’s simple,” Damian responded, still smiling. “This is our business. Every once in a while, we drop by and check the areas close to the entrance. The players who get this far are usually pretty high-level, so we often get lucky with abandoned cocoons just inside the mines. They let down their guard when they’re this close, and that’s what the mine monsters are waiting for. And then they run off back to the depths when the deed is done. They don’t like the light, so they leave the cocoons here for us.”

There was logic to what he was saying, though letting our guard down wasn’t what did our group in. The ice devils would have slaughtered us either way. *Well, okay, Fitz may have relaxed a bit prematurely. Moris, too.*

“Well, not this time, gentlemen.” I was doing my best not to exacerbate the situation. “My friends will be coming soon to pick up their things, so I wouldn’t call them abandoned.”

“Why not?” asked Mirro in surprise. “Are they yours? If so, go get them. But if you’re not going in, then we will. You snooze, you lose.”

“Guys, do you really need this?” I had no desire whatsoever to fight them. Each was past Level 60. I may have had an outside shot at killing one of them, but I had no chance against them both. “They’re Hounds of Death veterans, both good friends of the Gray Witch. Is that really something you want to get involved in?”

“Oh, please,” snorted Mirro, having finally decided to throw off the façade of good manners. “Why would Hound veterans take a noob from—what is it?—the Thunderbirds with them? Listen to yourself; veterans from a top clan died, while some nobody survived. Does that sound reasonable to you? Next, you’ll say they died protecting you! How can you say that with a straight face?”

I smiled involuntarily; he was right. The truth, the honest-to-goodness truth, sounded like complete nonsense.

“Believe it or not, that’s up to you. What I told you is 100% true.” Just in case, I pulled out my sword, unslung my shield, and stood with my back to the mine exit. “As long as I’m alive and my friends haven’t come back, I won’t let you in there. You can decide how much you want a PKer badge and a spot on two clan blacklists.”

The pair glanced at each other and pulled their swords out of their sheaths. Damian wielded a gladius with a pretentiously decorated hilt, while the enormous two-handed sword Mirro fought with made me feel a bit better. That type of weapon takes skill to use, and you need more space than was available on the platform the three of us were standing on.

“Somehow, I think we’ll be okay,” answered Damian. “Maybe you’d be better off wondering why two clans would blacklist us for your sake. Even if they do, we’ll be fine. Our clan is much stronger than your Thunderbirds, so your clan leader will think twice before trying anything.”

Judging by the badges over their heads, the raiders belonged to the Sons of Taranis clan. I had heard of it. The Sons of Taranis was a strong, ambitious clan that focused on filling their ranks with powerful warriors, and they were the kind of players who, as they say in the movies, believed in an even “nine grams of lead for everyone.” Damian was probably right that Elina wouldn’t stand up for me, though the same could hardly be said of the Gray Witch. *And when Miurat hears who made off with his stuff... Not to mention Fitz!*

I wasn’t that worried. Even if they killed and robbed me—something I figured would probably happen—they wouldn’t be able to sell everything I had very quickly. Even if they made it to the town,

they'd have to auction it all off; vendors didn't take things like mine. The cavalry would be along any minute. It was just a shame I'd have to part with the experience I'd gained...

"Let me warn you one more time. Get out of the way," said Mirro slowly and threateningly.

"And I'll give you one more chance. Walk away," I answered.

"You made your choice," said Damian idly as he stepped toward me.

*Well, that didn't work.* I was in for a fight, and I was probably going to die. *What if they can't port directly here?*

"Wolf Soul!" I shouted. It was as good a chance as any to see what I was able to summon.

From nowhere, appeared a hulking gray wolf. He took up position in front of me and bared his teeth at my opponents.

*So how do I tell him what to do?* There was only one way to find out.

"Bite the one with the short sword," I said, pointing at Damian with my blade.

The wolf quickly leaped, traversing the platform with a snarl. *It's just a shame he won't last long.* Damian was a tough nut to crack, and an animal like that would barely put a dent in him. I figured I'd bought myself thirty seconds. To be fair, that's an eternity in a fight, so I hoped something might swing my way.

Mirro whirled his two-handed sword around dexterously, making his way toward me. If I had been fool enough to get in its way, he probably would have finished me off in just one or two swings. You can't even take hits from a sword like that on your shield. Happily, I was able to dodge his swipes, and the third time I ducked, jumped forward, and smoothly ran my sword through his back. The Memory of the God, which I shouted as I did, worked—about 20% of his health slipped away.

A plaintive cry from my wolf told me that I was about to die and that the damage I'd been able to do to Mirro would probably be my only success in the duel. I raised my sword and—

"Well, what do we have here?" I heard Miurat's jolly voice ask. "Who are you, my friends? You don't look like you're from our neighborhood."

"Not even our county," continued a voice I didn't recognize.

"I certainly didn't die down there just so you could die out here!" Miurat shoved Damian and Mirro aside before coming over to me. "So, what are you and these fine young men fighting about?"

I sheathed my sword and tossed my shield behind my back. "Oh, nothing. They wanted to go pick up Fitz's and your things," I said without an ounce of pity for the two marauders. "I told them it was a bad idea, that they belong to some strong players from the Hounds of Death, and that you wouldn't be happy if they did. They didn't believe me, and they said they didn't care who the cocoons belonged to or what clan they were from—this is their business, and nobody's going to get in their way. That's when we started fighting."

"Oh, come on, it wasn't exactly like that," said Mirro sullenly.

"Miurat, you figure this all out!" barked Fitz. "They didn't get my things, which is good news for them, so I'm going to pick them up. Just make sure they understand what we think of rats. I'll grab your stuff, too; you died in the hall, right?"

Miurat nodded.

"Let's go!" ordered Fitz, who dove into the darkness followed by another eight veterans covered in iron. I thought I recognized one of them—especially when he waved before he jumped in after Fitz. *Was that Turok? Maybe Nox.*

“Well, well, well.” Miurat stretched like a cat, stepped closer to the marauders, and continued in a smooth tone. “So, which part was my friend lying about? Did he tell you those things belonged to someone? Answer me!” His voice changed, adding sudden aggression.

Damian and Mirro nodded together.

“So, he told you.” Miurat was clearly in his element. “And that they belonged to someone from an important clan—did he tell you that?”

They nodded again.

“Did you listen to him? Ah, I can tell from your faces that you didn’t. Your swords are still out of their sheaths, which is also a bit of a giveaway.”

The unlucky grave robbers hurried to sheath their weapons.

“It’s a little late for that,” Miurat said sympathetically. “You’re already in up to your necks. Attacking an ally of the Hounds of Death—not to mention a personal friend of its leader—trying to pull a trick like that, what you said about the clan and its leader... Not good. I’m afraid to even think what Glen will do to you when he hears that he has rats like you in his clan... Given his principles, I don’t think we Hounds will need to lift a finger.”

“Maybe we don’t have to do that?” asked Mirro tentatively.

“Do what?” Miurat responded, half inquisitively and half mockingly.

“Tell Glen.”

“If it were only Hagen and me, that might be possible. You could give us something for our trouble, and we’d call it a day. But Fitz is involved, too, and he won’t stop until you’ve paid in blood. That’s just the kind of stubborn mule he is. Yes?” Miurat looked at me.

I pursed my lips and nodded as if to agree that, yes, he was stubborn to a fault; he wouldn’t be happy until he got what was coming to him. They didn’t need to know that old Fitz had probably forgotten about them already.

The pair stood there dejected, but they jumped when they heard steps coming up the stairs and a voice I didn’t know.

“Miurat, you old rascal. If you yanked me all the way out here for nothing, I’ll have your head on a pike. And I’m not getting in on one of your scams!”

A man walked up onto the platform, and I couldn’t help but notice his green cloak, claymore (it must have cost a fortune in real money, as it was an exact replica), and carefully trimmed beard. I looked at his name and saw that it was Glen, the head of the Sons of Taranis.

He hugged Miurat, apparently an old friend, amiably, nodded to me cordially, then looked at his clan mates in some confusion.

“Miurat, my friend,” he said thoughtfully, “is there something I don’t know?”

“I think so,” answered Miurat in a friendly tone. “Allow me to tell you about a small venture your underlings here thought up.”

With that, Miurat told Glen a story that bore only passing resemblance to the one I told him and was even further from the actual truth. It was, however, witty to the point where I could barely keep from laughing at points. Miurat was a fantastic storyteller, something I’d noted already in the mines.

“Well, you made half of that up, though the other half is the truth,” summed up Glen. “And that half is enough for me to chase these animals so fast around Rattermark for the next six months that the ground starts to get hot under their feet.”

He stared fiercely at Damian and Mirro. “You just wait. We’ll head to the clan fortress, and the Large Council will decide what to do with you.”

Glen looked them over hotly one more time before coming over to me. “You did excellent work—taking them both on and keeping your cool, not going crazy or trying to play the hero. Respect.” The leader of the Sons of Taranis held out his hand. “Glen.”

“Hagen,” I replied, taking it. “Warrior, Thunderbirds.”

“Elina is lucky to have someone like you in her clan. But what are you doing with this character?” Glen motioned in the direction of Miurat with his chin. “You keep your distance from that spider.”

Miurat crossed his arms over his chest and looked back with mock indignation written all over his face.

“Okay, what kind of compensation would you like for these two fools?” Glen asked with a broad smile. “If you want gold, just tell me how much.”

“Oh, I don’t want anything.” I shrugged. “Everything ended well, thank God. And I gather you’re going to be giving them a hedgehog birthday today anyway.”

Glen’s eyebrows shot up. “A hedgehog birthday?”

“Well, I imagine they’ll be giving birth, spines-first.” I winked at him.

He roared with laughter.

“I like this one,” he said to Miurat. “He’s our kind of guy.”

“For sure,” answered Miurat with a nod.

“Still, I don’t like letting something like that go without an apology from the clan,” said Glen, turning back to me. “Ah-ha! Got it!”

He pulled off his cloak and held it out to me.

“Here, take this. It’s just a gift from a friend, I don’t mean it to be an insult, a brush-off, or compensation. Just one warrior to another.”

I took it and looked it over.

*Sir Berj’s Cloak*

*Belonged to a great warrior and poet who gave up everything for the sake of his true love’s happiness.*

*Protection: 280-346*

*+22 to strength*

*+16% chance of parrying opponents’ blows*

*+12% to dodge ability*

*+7% protection from cold*

*+3% chance of getting hidden quests*

*Boosts Worthy Reward to Level 2 (if that passive ability is learned; this happens once, while the ability’s effect is permanent)*

*Class limitation: only warriors*

*Durability: 378/440*

*Minimum level for use: 48*

“Wow,” was all I could say. “That’s such an expensive gift!”

“Not too expensive,” answered Glen with a shrug. “It’s fair. Oh, and here’s one more thing.”

He pulled a ring out of his bag and handed it to me.

*Sons of Taranis Friendship Ring*

*+22 to stamina*

*+18 to agility*

*+18% protection from fire*

*+9% defense against all weapon types*

*Durability: 232/260*

*Minimum level for use: 45*

*Cannot be stolen, lost, or given to anyone else.*

*If the owner dies, does not remain at the location of their death.*

“I always keep a ring like that on me, but I very rarely give them out,” added Glen. “In this case, I think it’s well-deserved. I hope there’s no bad blood left between you and our clan?”

“There wasn’t any to begin with,” I answered sincerely, stuffing the cloak into my bag and slipping the ring onto my finger. “Why would there be? Clans all have their idiots. You don’t even have to do anything; they appear on their own.”

Glen smiled. “Isn’t that the truth? Our clan fortress is here in the North not far from Holfstrig. If you’re in the area, stop by and say hello. Just flash the ring at the gate, and you’ll be our honored guest.”

“I definitely will. It looks like I’ll be staying in the North for a while anyway.” There was no point being coquettish about it.

*Who knows? Maybe I really will drop by.*

Glen shook my hand, nodded, and turned to Damian and Mirro, who were standing in a corner staring at their feet. “Well, you little parasites, let’s see where you’ll be flying off to.” He jabbed a finger in the direction of the stairs. “See you, Miurat.”

Just then, a happy Fitz, wearing his usual armor, pulled himself out of the mines.

“Here, Miurat, take your stuff!” he bellowed. “Oh, hey, Glen. Did they complain about your little pipsqueaks? You need to push your people harder. They’re over here robbing honest warriors and digging up graves, the creeps.”

“Hey, you old bear.” Glen waved. “Yeah, I know, I’m thinking about what to do with them. So, you’re still dragging the kids through the mines? Careful or you’ll kill them off before they can grow into the clan. You should think of something easier.”

“Never!” roared Fitz. “Better have them learn up front that being a Hound of Death is about surviving, not playing games. This way they’ll be ready for anything—especially after the mines. Right, Hagen?”

I stood to attention. “Yes, sir!”

“There you go.” Fitz waved a plated hand in my direction. “See what we’re turning them into?”

Glen coughed to hide a smile.

“And I’m sure Elina appreciates it,” answered Miurat with a voice as smooth as silk.

“Ahem.” Fitz made a noise in his throat. “Today he’s Elina’s, tomorrow he’s ours! Here, take your junk.”

Miurat walked over to Fitz, Glen waved to everyone and took the pair of robbers down the stairs, and Damian turned to give me a look of hate that told me I’d definitely gained an enemy that day.

“Excellent.” Miurat was dressed in his usual clothes and perked up noticeably. “All’s well that ends well.”

“Hey there, Hagen.” Something smashed into my shoulder and took off 5% of my health. It was Nox—I was right.

“Hi, Nox.” My hand bounced off his iron-encased shoulder. “How is it in there? Are the devils gone?”

I didn’t actually care about the devils; I was more interested in hearing if the dark dwarves were still there. The giant would definitely tell me if they were.

“Yeah, they always run back into the depths after they kill everyone or push them out of the mines.” Nox laughed for some reason. “We did have to take out the cavewight, though; he was right by Fitz’s things—tough son of a gun. Look, eight of us, all nice and hefty, and it still took us five minutes to finish him off. I have no idea why he left you all alone. Fitz said that you met him near the passageway. He killed a mage?”

“Yes,” I said, sadly thinking back to Flores’ pointless death. “Screw him.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” said the giant with a laugh. “We avenged her! And Fitz got her things, he said.”

“Still.” I really felt bad for the young mage girl. “She got so close. It’s a shame.”

“It happens.”

“So, how do you two know each other?” asked Miurat, who had come over. “I thought you only knew our leadership, and it turns out you know half the clan!”

His question—or rather how curious he was—took me aback for a second, but Nox went ahead and spilled the beans. “Hagen, Milly, and a couple of our other guys killed Sviss the other day, on extra.”

“Really?” said Miurat, surprised. “On extra? Who had the quest?”

“This one over here.” Nox poked me. “What a guy!”

“That he is.” Miurat nodded and quickly asked a follow-up question. “Why didn’t you go with your people?”

“I didn’t even have time to ask them,” I answered right away. “No sooner did I get the quest than I came across Milly Re. One thing led to another, and we decided to go together. Plus, she’s cute.”

“That’s for sure.” Nox smacked his lips.

“You’re telling me,” said Miurat slowly. “Anyway, sounds good. It’s always great when clans can be friends!”

“Are you guys almost done talking?” we heard Fitz shout. “We’re leaving for the fortress. Who’s coming with us?”

“Fitz, go ahead,” Miurat replied. “I’ll take Hagen to the city, seeing as how he has a talent for getting himself into trouble. Let me take Nox, too, just in case.”

“What do you need him for?” asked Fitz threateningly.

“You may have forgotten that there are plenty of bandits around here, and he’ll scare them off before they ever get close. If he doesn’t come, we’ll have to fight, and I’m not in the mood.”

“Lazy bum,” answered Fitz with a shake of his head. “Nox, you take them wherever they want to go. Come here, Hagen.”

I walked over to the mustachioed warrior.

“You did good work today, young man.” He wiggled his facial hair. “And you’re going to make waves. If you want, feel free to join us; there’s always room for you.”

He clapped me on the shoulder and unexpectedly leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Don’t believe everything Miurat says. There are a lot of stories going around about him. Okay?”

I nodded. Fitz turned around and tramped down the stairs, his warriors climbing down noisily behind him.

Miurat walked over, glanced at the receding figures, and checked the setting sun.

“We need to get going, too. It’s going to get dark soon, and we have an hour or more to go. Nox, let’s roll.”

I looked back one more time at the entrance to the mines before heading down the stairs

## Chapter Six

### In which the hero realizes that things aren't so simple in the North.

The sun was just clinging to life before sinking beyond the horizon as we walked down. From the stairs, we saw two portals flash. One sent Fitz and his rapid response team back to the Hounds' castle, while Glen dragged his two unlucky marauders into the other.

"Nox, you walk up ahead of us," ordered Miurat. The armored giant trundled off. "If you need anything, just give us a call."

Nox rattled and clanged his way forward; we followed him at a distance of about ten paces.

"Miurat," I said to the happily whistling fellow, "can I ask you something?"

"Go for it," he answered. "I even have a good idea of what you'll be asking. Your first question is about what happens to the players who died during the trip, right?"

"Yep," I lied.

I was actually interested in learning about the North, caring next to nothing about the fate of my fellow travelers. What did that have to do with me? The whole thing was pretty clear, but I figured it was worth giving Miurat the satisfaction of thinking he knew what was going on in my head.

"Before I tell you that, I should start with the reason why we went into the mines in the first place. Any guesses?"

Appearing unsophisticated and guileless is one thing, but looking like an idiot is quite another. That could have some very negative consequences.

"That's not exactly rocket science," I replied. "It was a trial by fire—not the first one I've seen. I mean, sure, that was the toughest I've been through, but the Thunderbirds like to thin the herd as well."

"Lots of clans put new members through something like that, though not all of them have Fitz," admitted Miurat. "Well, none of them have Fitz, to be perfectly honest. He only takes the most promising recruits into the mines."

"They were promising?" My surprise was completely genuine. None of the players in our group had struck me as all that talented.

"If they were with him in the mines, he saw something in them." My companion grunted. "Believe me, four out of five of our newcomers wouldn't last to the halfway point, and we had two get to the Ninth Hall. But you, my friend, were a revelation!"

"What do you mean?"

"The way you stood up to the mental pressure you were under, especially given that none of your items give you any protection against it. How were you able to fight back against the desire to commit suicide, not to mention, get rid of it that quickly? I'm still trying to figure that out."

"I have no idea." I shrugged. "Honestly, if I knew, I'd tell you."

Suddenly, we heard a bellow from Nox up ahead, the clash of metal, and some cries. I was about to run forward to help when Miurat grabbed my sleeve.

"Don't worry about it," he said lazily. "Nox is a big boy, he has a steel head and steel fists, and he'll take out whoever's up there, believe me. Oh, there you go—they're already dead. Nox, my friend, what was that? Or maybe who?"

"Oh, just a bunch of robbers. I killed them all!" roared Nox proudly.

"Well, you shouldn't have. Why did you have to kill them so fast?" asked Miurat. "Did they target you?"

“No...” Nox rubbed his head under his helmet in confusion. “What’s the problem?”

“If you were a little smarter, you’d have come over and invited Hagen to join a group,” said Miurat instructively. “Then you could have gone back, wiped them out, and given our mutual friend a little experience to boot. You have your fun, and he gets a little something out of it.”

“A-ah,” replied Nox. “I didn’t think about that. Good idea!”

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

I accepted without a second thought—it was like entering a cheat code.

“Where were we?” Miurat asked me.

“You were talking about how I impressed you.” My answer was honest, though I wasn’t a big fan of the topic. I’d gotten mental protection as a bonus for the ability I got when I joined the Legion of Vitar, though I certainly wasn’t about to tell Miurat that. I trusted him less and less by the minute, though my distrust was based more on intuition than anything concrete. Nobody was supposed to know that I was in the Legion, after all.

“Oh, right. Everyone else had something that made them stand out among the other clan newcomers, though I can’t tell you what. It’s not that I don’t want to; I don’t know any more than you do. But you’re right that the mines were a test to see who would progress further in the clan. I imagine Flores and Moris will be moving on despite the fact that they died, though the other three won’t be. The dwarf couldn’t control himself and his greed, plus, he didn’t follow orders. Fitz told him not to pick anything up, and that’s exactly what he tried to do. He’ll never be anything more than a low-level member of the clan.”

“What about the other two?”

“They’ll let the one that got lost try the mines again if he wants. The archer they’ll probably kick out of the clan.”

“Really?”

“Why not?” Miurat looked at me. “It wasn’t just that she didn’t show up. She knowingly weakened the group when we were in a tough spot, and we take that kind of thing seriously. You let the clan down, and you get a demotion, kicked out, the blacklist—the whole nine yards. We had something like that recently when a player got a secret quest and didn’t tell the clan leader or the council about it. You should’ve seen how we flogged him up one side of Fayroll and down the other.”

Miurat squinted dreamily as he thought back to the experience.

“He tried to hide in the Al-Karakh Jungle, almost in the Monkey Temple. Believe me, you’d think the mines were some kind of resort if you’d been in or anywhere near that god-forsaken temple. But we still found him there. And, obviously...”

Miurat made a gesture demonstrating how they’d broken the neck of my fellow secret-quest-hider. Or maybe he was showing how they just bent him over...

“If you have something to tell your clan, it’s always better to tell them right away and on your own initiative,” said Miurat seriously. “That’s just a piece of advice for the future. That archer is going to be kicked out now, too, though that’ll be all in her case.”

“And good riddance,” I said in agreement. “You can’t have that!”

We heard some sounds from up ahead again, including yelps and a guttural cry from Nox.

“Oh, I’ll bite you right back, you little toad!”

*You unlocked Wolfman, Level 1.*

*To get it, destroy 99 more Northern wolves.*

*Reward:*

*+4% orientation in forests*

*Title: Wolfsbane*

*To see similar messages, go to the Action section of the attribute window.*

“What’s up?” Miurat noticed that I froze.

“I unlocked an action,” I answered happily. “Something about wolves.”

“Ah, yes.” Miurat nodded. “The wolves. The third level gives you a nice bonus—not epic, but a good one. You can summon a wolf, and that action is the only possible way to do that in the game. Still, you’ll have to kill 1,000 wolves before you get there. Not everyone has that kind of time and patience.”

I had been about to say that I could already summon a wolf, but for some reason, I stopped myself. Miurat finished, and I mentally patted myself on the back.

“Wow!” I answered. “I’ll have to look into that—I could use a wolf.”

We walked past the dead predators, and I collected their skins and a few fangs.

“Nox, you don’t need anything from the bodies?” I called up to our tank.

“Screw it,” came his laconic answer from out of the darkness.

“So, did you get an answer to your first question?” asked Miurat.

“Quite. And for my second, too.”

“Excellent. But it sounds like there’s a third, am I right?” He squinted sideways at me.

“And a fourth.”

“Go for it,” Miurat said complacently. “But let’s say this: I’ll answer all your questions, and then you have to answer one of mine...but you have to be honest. Okay?”

“You can ask two for all I care,” I answered cheerfully, mentally preparing for what the smart operator next to me could be getting ready to ask. It was already 1 a.m., so I knew I was in for a zinger.

“Go ahead; fire away.” Miurat bent over to pick a weed (I had no idea how he saw it in the gathering darkness) and stuck it into his mouth.

That darkness, incidentally, had fallen like a bag over the head as soon as the sun sank below the horizon. That type of thing happens more in the South than the North in my experience, though Fayroll had its own quirks. At least, it wasn’t the kind of dark where you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face; the moonlight made sure we could at least see the hulking figure of Nox meandering ahead of us. But to see a weed on the ground...

I really wanted to ask what it was about him that put me on my guard, but I went with a different question.

“Miurat, tell me about the North—what I need to know, where I should go...the basics.”

“What about reading the guide?” Miurat said with a grunt. “Ah, you’re a lazy one, all right.”

“Well, the guide is one thing, but a pro who’s seen it all is something else,” I said, throwing in a little flattery.

“Fine, buckle up.” And with that, Miurat dove into life in the North.

The North, as it turned out, stood alone among the four great areas in Rattermark. While the other three were more or less similar to each other, the North offered players something different.

In the East, West, and South, the reputation players earned with NPCs held only relative value. Sure, there were some benefits to a strong reputation, like quests and information you could pick up, but there wasn’t anything terribly important.

“Hold on a second,” I said, stopping Miurat right there. “What about sailing down the Crisna? It’s so expensive without a good reputation!”

“So what?” retorted Miurat. “You can always earn the money or, if worst comes to worst, walk. But here in the North, you can’t even get into any of the burgs; the guards won’t let you in. They don’t need

you, so you can just take a hike. And don't interrupt me. Listen and take notes; write it on your forehead if you don't have anything to take notes on."

Just then, Nox took out three more wolves, earning himself a reproach from Miurat. "Hey, watch it up there! I don't want Greenpeace coming after us!"

Then he went back to his story.

It wasn't easy earning a reputation among the Northerners, but it was certainly possible. One way was to go with the old tried and true: do quests and master quests. The other way, however—one that was both more difficult and more time-consuming—was to enlist in the army of one of the local rixes.

Miurat interrupted his story about the importance of a good reputation there and switched over to social structures and geopolitics.

The far-reaching expanses of the North turned out to include a total of eight cities and one capital. The cities were called burgs, despite having their own names. The capital was the only city that went by its name: Holmstag. It enjoyed nominal authority over the burgs. The problem there was that the burg rulers, who were called rixes, didn't care much for the central government and tended to stray further and further away from it. That, of course, included not bothering to pay their taxes.

The könig, the high king of the North, didn't like that at all from his throne in Holmstag, and so, he periodically went off on short campaigns to lay siege to especially wayward burgs and threaten to slice his way through everyone inside. Things never got that far, since the rixes always took just a few days to flex their muscles before opening their gates and throwing themselves on the mercy of their conqueror.

A little richer from some looting and having proven his might and power, the könig would return to the capital. "Remember this day, you sons of bitches, and make sure I don't have to come back here," he'd say.

The rixes waited until he was gone before spitting at his receding shadow and muttering to themselves, "Oh, we'll remember all right. We'll remember when you're bathing in tears of blood, you bastard aristocrat."

But joining forces to overthrow the könig was apparently beyond the eight rixes. They weren't smart enough, they were all too ambitious, or their programming didn't allow it—nobody knew the true reason.

That was the lay of the land, but the North had water, too—saltwater.

Its shores were bathed by the Northern Sea and the Frozen Ocean. How the sea and the ocean existed side by side without being merged into a single geographical entity, well, nobody knew that either. It's just the way it was.

The Northern Sea was ruled by the Sea Kings. They were a fun and somewhat crazy people dressed in shiny chainmail and horned helmets, and they had no home on dry ground. Instead, they made do with the decks of their drakkar-class ships, all of which were made out of wood and capped with the heads of dragons and serpents. The crews called themselves hirds.

They sailed the seas, surfing the waves and leading a standard vagrant life. Sometimes, they pillaged; others, they hired themselves out to the rixes, and some claimed they even performed services for the könig on occasion.

As they recognized no authority, the only leader they had was a jarl they selected themselves. Elections were generally spontaneous and were held for any reason under the sun. Sometimes, they were because the current jarl died; others, because he'd done something unseemly or there just wasn't enough ale to go around.

The Sea Kings always kept their word, serving faithfully for as long as they said they would even if whole hirds died in the process. Neither money nor anything else was ever enough to persuade them to

switch sides in a conflict. On the other hand, they were perfectly fine with walking away from an employer when their contract was up or, at that point and only at that point, switching sides if their erstwhile employer's opponent offered them a better deal.

While there were plenty of small villages and homesteads scattered across the North, they were, as a rule, under the protection of one or another of the burgs.

Besides all those human factions, there was one more creature who wielded immense power.

At the very edge of the North, where the land ended and the Frozen Ocean began, was a place where the crazy Sea Kings' drakkars never sailed—the enormous Ice Wall and Great Fomor's palace, which was stood within it. Nobody knew what race Fomor belonged to, but he was a strange and incredibly dangerous creature. Nobody knew where he came from, and nobody had ever tried to kill him. There was a very simple reason for that; he was an NPC rather than some kind of epic or other monster. Killing NPCs, as everyone knew, only earned you problems. Sure, there were hotheads out there who were curious enough to find their way to his door in search of hidden quests. Some of them were taken out by Fomor's guards, while others managed to make it all the way into his throne room and have a chat with him. Nobody got any quests; all they got was a recommendation never to visit again. The creature didn't like people and did no business with them. He cherished plans to enslave the entire North, and visitors kept him from planning his conquests. The guards then unceremoniously tossed them out of the ice castle with a kick in the pants to make sure they got the message.

That convinced the gaming community that the Great Fomor was a lost cause and not worth the trouble it took to walk away with nothing.

Fomor did pull some of the strings of power in the North, with some people claiming that a few of the rixes answered to him.

Miurat paused there and glanced up at Nox, who was walking back toward us.

"What's up?" he asked the giant.

"I need to go to sleep! Have to stick to my routine!" he boomed, embarrassed like a schoolchild.

"Hmm." Miurat scratched his head. "Ah, don't worry about it, we're twenty minutes away. Get us to the walls, and you can go nighty-night. Look, you can see the burg from here."

Nox nodded and headed back toward his post in the vanguard. Miurat went back to his story.

"Okay, so back to reputations. You can bump yours up with quests, of course, and you can get pretty far that way, especially since all the burgs have quest chains that give you all kinds of goodies. You won't be able to max out your reputation that way, though. Most players who want to keep going sign up to serve one of the rixes. Later, if you work hard enough, you can even enlist with the könig."

"Can you just go straight to the könig?" I asked.

Miurat grinned.

As it turned out, reputation in the North was just as local as it was important. First of all, there wasn't any "friendship" or "respect." There was just a scale from zero to 100. If a burg had no idea who you were, your reputation was zero. Once you got to 100, you could kick open the door of the rix's house, and they'd pour you a glass and even give you something nice and salty to eat while you drank it.

However, the only thing building a maximum reputation in one burg meant in the others was that they'd let you in the gates. There was a chance the locals would even talk to you, but that was about it. You started from scratch, doing quests or showing your skill with a blade as a hirdman serving the local rix.

As if that weren't enough, your reputation in the eight burgs barely touched your reputation meter in the capital. He might deign to talk to you, though that was only if you'd built up a good reputation in at

least six of the burgs. At least, you could always enter the capital, which made sense—the auction and everything else were there.

But, otherwise, the könig threw a wrench into the whole system. He had his own scale you had to climb, but 100 points weren't enough for him. You had to collect a whole 300. His scale was called Respect among the peoples of the North, and everything you did fed into it. Build up your reputation in one city and the könig's scale would jump a few points. Finish a series of quests—that was a few dozen points. Maxing out that scale gave you respect and honor throughout the Northern lands, as well as a chance to unlock hidden and even epic quests. That last part was random, but the precedent was there. It just took you forever to get there.

Long story short, my job was to build up my reputation in the burg we'd almost arrived at; there was no way around that.

"But will they let me in?" I looked up at the looming walls apprehensively.

"In Hexburg?" Miurat jabbed a finger in the direction of the walls. "Of course, it's the city closest to the pass, so it's sort of a starter city. Everything's simpler here. You very well may not be let into the next city, however, unless you build a reputation here."

"So complicated," I said, shaking my head. "In the West, it's simple: you just go wherever you want and do whatever you feel like..."

"You thought it would be like that up here?" Miurat's eyes narrowed. "Down there, the people don't really want to stress too much. In the North, everyone is more serious about the game. There are a lot of role-players, for example—I know a guy who likes to pretend he's a Viking, so he's been off sailing around in a drakkar with the Sea Kings for half a year now. He grew out his beard, he drinks ale by the barrel, and he even curses in Swedish. Fun times!"

"Cool," I said, appreciating his devotion to the role.

"A lot of people are pretty hardcore. There are half a dozen really tough locations. There's the World Snake, the jotunn caves... I wouldn't even touch them on the hard level. Nox probably did though. None of that matters to you, on the other hand, since you need to be Level 100 to even think about all that."

"Agreed, though I wouldn't mind seeing the World Snake," I said, drawing out my words.

"Just look up a video online," replied Miurat. "So, is that it? Have I answered all your questions?"

"Pretty much." I nodded. "What's yours?"

"Did the Gray Witch give you a ticket for a trip to Rivenholm on the flagship?" Miurat squinted at me again.

"Yes," I answered, surprised at the absurdity of the question. *I thought—*

Miurat threw a handful of powder into my face, getting a sneeze out of me. The smell was familiar; it was truth powder.

"Why did you do that?" I whined. "I have an allergy to that stuff! And why would I lie to you?"

"Trust, but verify," answered Miurat. "We're both adults, so I'm not going to apologize. I think you understand."

I had to agree that we were both adults, though I didn't understand anything. *What did that question have to do with anything?*

We walked up to the burg gate to find Nox there shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"What's with the dance?" asked Miurat. "Need to go pee-pee?"

"Can I go? My coach is going to kill me!" answered Nox plaintively.

"Yes, go, go," said Miurat with a wave. "Well done; you did your job."

“Thanks, Nox,” I managed to say before the giant waved and disappeared.

Miurat pounded on the closed gate and roared to make himself heard.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

From above us, presumably from the platform above the gate, popped the sleepy head of a guard.

“What do you need?”

“We need to get inside,” answered Miurat. “Just a couple travelers looking for a place to sleep in the common house.”

He looked over at me, so I nodded and confirmed Miurat’s story.

“Yep, just two pilgrims.”

“Who’s out there? A messenger?” we heard someone say from behind the wall.

“No,” answered the guard, looking us over carefully. “Travelers, apparently foreigners. I can barely understand them.”

“Then let them in. We can’t leave foreigners waiting outside the gate this late at night.”

The guard disappeared, and a couple minutes later, the gate swung wide. I walked into Hexburg.

*You unlocked Cities of the North.*

*To get it, visit all eight of the burgs in the North (visited so far: 1) and then visit Holmstag.*

*Reward:*

*Title: Connoisseur of the North*

*+5% protection from cold*

*+1 respect among the peoples of the North*

*To see similar messages, go to the Action section of the attribute window.*

“Got the burg action?” Miurat nodded knowingly.

“Yup.”

“It’s easy enough. Okay, head over to the common house over there; that’s what they call the hotels up here. I’m off. If you need anything, call or write. If you have money, send it; if you have news, send that, too.”

*Miurat wants to add you as a friend.*

*Accept?*

“It would be an honor,” I responded.

“Oh, and one more thing I almost forgot,” Miurat said, snapping his fingers. “Your reputation doesn’t just go up. If you do something to compromise yourself in the eyes of the Northerners...oh, I don’t know...like getting caught stealing, hitting a woman, or betraying someone with somebody there to catch you in the act, your reputation will drop. So, think before you speak and definitely think before you act. Although to be fair, the North isn’t the only place you should do that.”

Miurat playfully saluted before stepping into a portal he opened.

I was exhausted, but I took the time to walk over to a headstone I’d noticed and then dragged myself to the common house. Once there, I woke up a glowering gentleman named Holm, who was asleep behind the concierge desk.

“Why are you still awake?” grumbled Holm. “Normal people are long since asleep, and this one’s still up and about. Your room isn’t even paid for.”

“It isn’t?”

“Nope! Pay or get out!” he barked.

I figured the money I’d paid in...*Oh, what was that city’s name? Oh, well, doesn’t matter.* Anyway, it had apparently run out.

“Here’s 100 gold. Can I have the key?” I asked Holm wearily.

He grumbled something under his breath, but he grabbed the money, gave me a key so big it would have made Pinocchio hang himself in envy, and went back to sleep.

I walked up to the room, collapsed on the bed, and logged out of the game.

It was night in Moscow, too, and Vika was quietly snoring as she slept peacefully. I lay on the couch, convinced I’d be out before my head hit the pillow.

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