

**Fayroll**

*Book Four*

Andrey Vasilyev

## Chapter One

### In which the hero makes two decisions.

“What’s on your mind, friend?”

An older half-orc looked at me through one of the building’s windows. He was wearing a brightly colored coat and had a short sword hanging at his side.

“Just wondering if it would be a good idea to join the Free Companies,” I replied. “I’m just not sure if I’m a good fit.”

“What are we talking through the window for?” The half-orc gestured me toward the door. “Come on in, son, and we can talk it out together.”

I walked in. *If it has to do with the military, it really is all the same.* The only difference between the building I was in and my old enlistment office was that there were large paintings on the walls in place of posters. But the idea was the same: faster, farther, higher.

“Welcome to the Wild Brigade Recruitment Center,” the half-orc said, walking out into the corridor. “It’s a great spot to find something worthwhile and interesting to keep you busy for a year, two, or even more, depending on the contract we sign. Fond memories and fascinating adventures are guaranteed.”

The half-orc walked over to me, his right foot dragging a little, and held out his hand.

“Sergeant Rourk, son. Free Company veteran. What’s your name?”

“Laird Hagen of Tronje, third son of my father.” I shook his hand.

“Third son.” The sergeant shook his head knowingly. “A blade, some clothes, and an old nag is all you got when your old man kicked the bucket, am I right? I’ve heard that story before. You were made for us, my friend—consider yourself at home. A little service under your belt, and your oldest brother will have nothing on you. You’ll march back to your Tronje with money and loot, and all he’ll be able to do is gnaw his toenails in envy!”

He was overselling his case, I thought. Sure, his job was to get volunteers signed up, but the whole thing sounded too good to be true.

“That’s all well and good,” I replied, smiling at the sergeant, “but I still have some questions. I’d like to know what the conditions are: how much you pay, how it works, when I’d start, what I get besides the pay, and where I’d be serving.”

A hint of disappointment flashed across the sergeant’s eyes, presumably when he realized I wasn’t as easy a prospect as he first thought. *Come on, his eyes said, why do these rednecks have to be so picky these days? Things aren’t the way they used to be, now that you have to explain the whole thing, show them, let them try it out...*

“That is your legal right, son,” the orc said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Let’s head over to my office.”

Rourk walked toward the door he'd stepped out of into the corridor. I heard his right leg scrape with each stride—a prosthetic limb. *What a great advertisement for the Free Companies he is...*

Once in the office, which was scantily furnished with a table, two chairs, and a lone wardrobe, Sergeant Rourk motioned toward a chair and jumped into his spiel about life in the Free Companies.

He was obviously painting a picture with brighter colors than he may have had license to use, but his story was interesting enough to see why the Free Companies weren't such a bad place to be.

The Wild Brigade formed almost immediately after the gods left Fayroll. The problem was that many gods, in their feuding over the hearts and souls of their flocks, threw caution, morals, and ethics to the wind, creating and unleashing a variety of undead and other evil spirits into the world in order to weaken the forces commanded by their opponents.

The gods left Fayroll, though their malicious creations did not. And, given the fact that some of the gods both erroneously and presumptuously considered themselves more demiurges than gods, their creatures began to multiply. Some of them attained such numbers that the threat of genocide began to loom over the humanoid races.

That's when the Fayroll rulers realized how bad things were, and they rallied all the heroes of Rattermark to come save them. However, the War of Magic and the Second War of Hatred had left the continent largely bereft of those heroes. The ones who remained were tired of wandering the lands saving people, and simply dreamed of having their own little kingdom they could rule in peace.

As time went on, the situation only worsened. Roads become more and more dangerous. Villages and even small cities were subject to contact attacks by bloodthirsty beasts. But that's when something unexpected happened.

Richard the Fifth, also called Richard the Spiritual, the ruler of the West, had an advisor by the name of Arman Plessy, and Arman came up with a plan. He drew up a decree, had it signed by the king, and then implemented it: even the most hardened criminals had the right to lenience on the part of the law, including a reprieve from the executioner's noose or axe, if they spent three years fighting to protect peaceful people by clearing the roads, forests, and swamps of the departed gods' evil spawn. If they did their jobs well and honestly, they had a royal pardon, a plot of land, and a loan to develop it waiting for them on the other side. Professional soldiers and royal veterans were put in charge of the rabble.

Strange as this may seem, the decree turned out to be hugely popular. Plenty of murderers and other societal cancers signed up for the adjustment squad, as the Wild Brigade were first called, and they fought fervently and diligently. Small groups of them traveled the West looking for and destroying the magic scourge born in the inhuman minds of NPCs and the imagination of the developers. They even dealt a blow to the vermin native to Fayroll, figuring sensibly that they'd have to take care of them sooner or later—so what did it matter?

Ten or fifteen years later, all the more exotic creatures living in the West had been dispatched to the next world, though the Wild Brigade stuck around. They were growing, and even swelling their ranks with people who had no criminal past. The sultan of the East and the prince of the South (the northerners, who all knew how to handle a weapon, took care of their problems themselves) happily paid the former thugs in gold to take care of their problems. Adventurers,

former soldiers, and even romantics signed on to serve in the Wild Brigade, as they had come to be known. The pay was good, recruits were taught how to fight well, and retirement meant honor and respect, since city guards all around Rattermark hired veterans whose service time was up. Plus, while land was no longer part of the offer, the royal pardon was. The Wild Brigade remained under the jurisdiction of the king of the West, though it became in practice an independent unit paying 10% of all contracts to the king. Recruits also began to be divided by how they signed up: new volunteers from the prisons were assigned to the Wild Brigade as usual, while civilians made their way to the Free Companies. The latter were still part of the Wild Brigade; they just enjoyed more privileges and a somewhat different status. There were ten Free Companies with one hundred troops in each.

It was the Free Companies Sergeant Rourk was trying to get me to sign up for. He scraped his wooden leg around, waved his arms, and described all the tempting prospects I had to look forward to: in a year, not to mention three, the Free Companies would make me more a superhero than a man. He skipped over what their casualty rates were, obviously, but I couldn't help but note that the companies always had slots open regardless of the fact that there were only one thousand of them in total.

"I have a question." The sergeant looked at me, amazed that I wasn't racing to sign the contract after all the information he'd dumped on me. "How do I sign on with a company heading down to fight in the South?"

"Why the South?" His look turned to confusion.

"Just a dream I've always had—seeing the South," I said, rolling my eyes wistfully. "It's warm, there are plenty of exotic fruits, and they say the girls are stunning."

"All true," the sergeant grunted. "Also, the beasts are poisonous, the jungles are impassable, there are lots of cursed areas, and the diseases are nasty. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Absolutely," I replied resolutely. "It's either the South, or I won't be signing anything. I have plenty of other things to do, needless to say. But let's go back to those conditions, too: what are they?"

"We can send you south, that's easy enough. The Seventh Company is heading to Dinjir the day after tomorrow, and I think they have slots open. But about the conditions... You get fifty gold per week, food and a uniform, a weapon if you don't have one, and medicine or a funeral if you need it. One day off a week. If you sign a three-year contract, we pay out 500 gold as a bonus each year."

"Sounds good. And what are the requirements?"

The half-orc glanced at me approvingly.

"Simple: follow orders quickly, exactly, and on time, do the work, and don't be a coward in battle. That's it."

"Right, soldiers should think too much—they have to fight," I agreed. "So everyone's heading south the day after tomorrow."

Rourk nodded.

“One more question,” I said, having just about forgotten to ask it. “What about terminating contracts with the Free Companies? You know, if it just isn’t working out—can you do that?”

“That doesn’t happen very often,” the sergeant said with a shrug, “though it does happen. The only way out of the Wild Brigade, of course, is to get dumped back in prison. You can buy your way out of the Free Companies, on the other hand, though it isn’t cheap: there’s a one-time fee of 50,000 gold.”

*Fifty thousand gold? Well, that’s serious money, and it means I’d better give this some serious thought.*

“What time are you rolling out the day after tomorrow?”

“Ten in the morning. But we’d have to sign the contract first, so come at least half an hour earlier.”

“Rourk, let’s say this,” I responded, pounding the table with my open palm. “If I decide to join, I’ll be here at nine the day after tomorrow. If I’m not here, that means I decided against it. Does that work for you?”

The half-orc nodded.

“You’re obviously an experienced warrior,” he said flatteringly. “Of course, you need to think. This is the army, not a walk in the park.”

We got up and shook hands.

The smell of pies and something else delicious met me at home.

“What’s this for?” I asked Vika in surprise, finding her running around the kitchen covered in flour.

“Did you forget?” She stared at me reproachfully. “I told you on Tuesday that Elina would be coming today. You’re the one who wanted to do this, after all.”

I searched my memory, but couldn’t come up with anything. She probably had told me, and I just hadn’t paid much attention. I did remember my suggestion to invite her over. *But whatever, it doesn’t matter.*

“Oh, right!” I smacked my forehead, not wanting to upset Vika. “I should probably go pick her up, right?”

“She’ll find her own way,” Vika responded peremptorily. “She’s a big girl.”

“Whatever you say, sweetie.” I had no desire to get in the middle of what was clearly a complex relationship. “What do you need me to do?”

“Stay out of my way. Here, grab a few pies and go relax in the other room.”

That was more than good enough for me, so I obeyed happily.

To be honest, I’m not a big fan of family get-togethers. Sure, it looks great in the movies when you have a huge family all drinking tea together, shooting the breeze, and sharing all their joys and sorrows with each other. That may have happened twenty or thirty years ago. It may still go on in some patriarchal corner of smaller cities. But this was the capital, with its high-speed way

of life, disconnection, and drive to earn as much sweet moolah as you could while leaving as little as possible for everyone else. In that context, even family ties can hold you back. Hunting alone, or at least in pairs, made survival a much better proposition. That's why even small families only get together for major holidays, and it's why family clans have all but disappeared. There are some families that stick together, but that's just for Timur Kizyakov and his umpteen years of dropping by strange homes. They only agree to let him in because it's their one brief moment of televised fame. In my case, while I sort of know my cousins, I have no idea who there is beyond them... It's nothing to be proud of—just a sign of the times.

Vika's sister turned out to be an excellent young woman. She was attractive, had a decent sense of humor, and wasn't nearly as obsessed with the game as I'd heard, at least judging by the fact that she didn't mention it once. Fayroll didn't even come up once in our conversation, save for a mention of where Vika and I worked. Elina was happy to talk about her career as a teacher, and she enjoyed listening to and laughing at our journalism stories (they were mostly mine, as Vika hadn't been in the field long enough to build up a supply of her own, though I knew another year or two working with our three stooges, and especially Yushkov, would more than do the trick). The only thing that surprised me was that she turned down all the alcohol I offered, and even quite sharply. Vika just nodded slightly when I looked at her in surprise. *Am I missing something?* Anyway, if she didn't want any, she didn't have to drink it.

"All right, I'm going to run," Elina said a few hours later. "My sister's in good hands, so I can relax."

"Oh, because you were so incredibly worried!" Vika clapped her hands to her face. "You probably even stayed awake at nights thinking about me."

Elina rolled her eyes in appreciation of her little sister's attitude.

"You poor guy, Harriton. I put in my time, and now it's your turn to live with her. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind before it's too late? You could still tell her to take a hike," she said to me.

"Oh, come on," I smiled. "I've seen it all, you can't scare me."

"Are you sure?" Elina squinted. "There's always something."

"Elina, stop it," Vika scowled. "You've been on me since we were kids."

"Let me drive you home," I said to Elina, catching a note of frustration in Vika's voice. It had looked like she'd been on pins and needles all evening, and I'd caught her frowning once when her sister laughed uproariously at one of my stories. I had a sneaking suspicion that she was regretting taking me up on my offer to invite Elina over.

"That would be great, especially since it looks like it's raining," Elina replied, giving in without a fight.

Vika pursed her lips, though she didn't say anything.

Elina sat down in the back seat of the car, which did surprise me a little. I was about to go open the front door for her when she opened the back one and plopped herself down.

"I don't like sitting up front," she explained. "Ever since I was a kid."

Fall that year was cold, with just a hint of an Indian summer: a few sunny days before we jumped back into the constant wind and rain. Sometimes it was a drizzle; others it was a downpour, but it felt like there was always something coming down. There were also the gray storm clouds hanging low over the earth and blocking out the sun.

“I’m so tired of those clouds,” Elina said suddenly. “They’re the worst.”

“Agreed,” I responded. “I can’t remember the last time we saw the sun.”

“It isn’t just that there’s no sun. They’re always there hanging over you, it’s so depressing. And there aren’t any stars. Do you like looking at the stars?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “It’s been a while. Too much to do, I guess.”

“Well, why don’t we go to the planetarium and check them out? It’s so romantic, taking a girl to the planetarium. Unusual. I mean, we could go to the movies, or maybe a museum—we could go see a mammoth tusk. But going to the planetarium is much more unusual.” There was a bitter irony in Elina’s voice, though it morphed quickly into sarcasm.

The army taught me to be ready for anything, my job taught me to think on my feet, and the previous few months had left me incapable of surprise—and it was a good thing. If things had been different, the steering wheel might have slipped out of my hands. I heard my own words thrown back at me largely unchanged from the way I’d said them to a certain neurotic woman a week before. *And they say Moscow’s a big city...*

I probably should have said something like, “Wait, that’s you?!” or “Oh, my God, what a coincidence!” But that type of thing just happens in cheap romance novels.

“Mammoths definitely have their charms. The food at museums is better, too—they sell sodas and eclairs. I still remember that from school field trips.”

“Um, so the most important thing at museums is the food? That I did not know.”

“The good is always most important,” I noted instructively. “At museums, at the theater—especially if they’re showing a tragedy—and even at the circus. Not to mention the ballet and opera, since the food is the only thing that gets you through them.”

Elina was silent for a second. I figured she probably wasn’t musing to herself about the finer points of food within the context of modern art; she was more likely working through what had just happened. She’d probably been expecting a different reaction and was trying to decide if she was wrong or if I was just stupid.

I thought to myself as well. Really, the whole thing was funny: I was sleeping with my clanleader’s sister. Though if I’d tried to explain the situation to a normal person who didn’t really know anything about life online, the only answer I’d probably have gotten would have been, *so what?*

That was a pretty reasonable response, too. However, the fact that my clanleader had been going off the deep end meant that I had no idea what to expect, up to and including a pair of cuticle scissors in my neck. From the back seat.

“We’re here.” I rolled to a stop next to Elina’s apartment building. “Vika told me how to get here.”

Her two hands snaked their way onto my shoulders.

“You know what’s going on, Hagen,” she hissed in my ear. “You know who I am. Why, why do you need that kid? What does she have that I don’t? What do you want that I can’t give you? You’re lucky, you have the paper, and you have your connections—oh, I know you have connections. That idiot told me plenty without even realizing it. And I have my clan, my persistence... Just imagine what we could do together!”

“Elina, you’re way too involved in the game.” I tried to pull her hands off me. “Look out the window: there’s a life out there, a real one, even if it is dark and gray right now. It’s not made out of code—people build it themselves. What do you want to do? Where?”

“This is life,” she continued, her hands reaching toward my throat and her lips touching my ear. She smelled like cherries. “You and me. We’ll be together in both worlds—forever. Do you really think all I’m good for is teaching nonsense to kids who don’t need it? No, I can do more, but I need someone to give me the strength for the leap, someone I can do it all for.”

“So what’s the problem?” I was starting to get worried. She wasn’t hysterical, but there was a fanaticism in her hiss. “Look at all the nice guys walking around out there. Pick any one of them.”

“Don’t you get it? Don’t you understand?” A power suddenly filled her arms. “What did you see in that idiot Vika? Why her? Sure, she’s my sister, and I probably even loved her at some point. But she’s trash. You just don’t know that yet, or haven’t noticed, maybe you don’t even want to see that she’s trash. All she has is her ambition and that pretty little face. But you’re not stupid—that I know for sure.”

I was finally able to wrench myself away from her, so I turned around in my seat. Elina jumped back to the other side of the back seat, where she looked at me narrowly.

She really was beautiful in the twilight. Her eyes were blue and flashing with emotion, her face was delicate and pale, and her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She looked at me and waited for a response.

“We’re here,” I smiled. “I don’t think I’ll walk you up to your apartment—I wouldn’t want to give the neighbors a reason to gossip.”

It was quiet in the car. She was waiting for me to say something else, and I’d already decided that there was nothing else to talk about.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come up with me? Positive? I’m offering myself: you’re welcome to come up right now,” she said calmly a minute later. “But I’ll never open the door to you again no matter what you say—that much I’ll tell you right now.”

“I’m sure that I have someone waiting for me at home,” I explained gently. “My girlfriend.”

The car door closed, and Elina’s heels clacked away toward the building.

“Did you get her there alright?” Vika smiled, though it was a nervous smile.

“Of course, I dropped her off at the door. She asked me not to walk her up. Hey, I don’t know what you were going on about with her—she’s great.”

Vika’s lower lip trembled.

“Honestly, she was completely unlike herself today, really fun. I didn’t recognize her. But all’s well that ends well. Don’t forget that we’re going to meet your parents next week.”

I sighed, already exhausted by the obstacle course. My parents were great people, though Vika had no idea what was waiting for her...

It was a normal, sunny morning in Fayroll. The breeze blew clouds across the sky, and the sun shone, as it always did in the North, somewhat weakly—almost as if it was forcing its way through some kind of fabric.

Rourk was smoking a pipe on the recruitment center porch. He waved when he saw me.

“So you decided to go for it?” I bellowed grandly.

“Looks like it,” I replied. “But only if you guarantee me that I’ll be sent south.”

“A sergeant is only as good as his word,” the half-orc replied proudly. “You’ll be heading south all right. A few people will be coming over from the Seventh Company, actually, so let’s go sign that contract.”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied firmly. “For a year.”

He pulled a scroll out of the wardrobe and slid it toward me.

“Just stick your finger here.” He pointed to a spot on the paper.

“Yeah, right,” I laughed. “Not without reading it first.”

The half-orc sniffed indignantly, though I ignored him and leisurely read through the document to make sure I would definitely be heading south. My old man always told me to read everything before I signed it to make sure I wasn’t signing a death warrant or a marriage certificate. And my old man wouldn’t lead me wrong.

“Everything looks good,” I told Rourk.

He snorted. *What did you expect?*

I imprinted my finger on the document.

*Congratulations! You signed a contract with the Wild Brigade.*

*From this moment on, you serve in the Seventh Free Company of the Wild Brigade.*

*Your service will last one game year.*

*Service in the Free Companies can be terminated before the end of your service without penalties if you pay the Wild Brigade 50,000 gold coins.*

*If you desert (are absent from your company without good reason for more than seven calendar days in the game), you will be added to the brigade’s death list, with trackers sent to find and kill you throughout the rest of your term of service.*

*You must:*

*Participate in combat operations fought by the Free Companies*

*Submit to the commanders of the Free Companies and Wild Brigade*

*Take good care of the uniform and equipment given to you*

*Quickly and unquestioningly follow orders*

*You have the right to:*

*A portion of all trophies collected*

*Timely payment in the amount listed in your agreement*

*One day off per week*

*Die on the battlefield and be buried at the expense of the Wild Brigade*

*When you log into the game, you will find yourself with your company or with its commander and the majority of its troops.*

*Joining the Wild Brigade earns you the following bonuses:*

*+3% experience earned*

*+7% ability to use edged weapons*

*+7% ability to use ranged weapons*

*+2% protection from cold*

*+2% protection from fire*

*+3% ability development speed*

*Title: Free Company Warrior*

*Successful service may result in additional bonuses being granted.*

*Growing prestige in the eyes of your comrades and commanders, as well as successful service, gives you a good chance of getting both usual and hidden quests. Strong prestige in the Free Companies also lets you call on comrades for help completing quests unrelated to the Wild Brigade.*

So I was back in the army.

“What are you just standing there for, soldier?” Rourk yelled at me. “Get out there on the porch, your fellow soldiers are already waiting!”

The expression I saw in the sergeant’s eyes was one I hadn’t missed in all my years away from the army, and it made my want to log out of the game—forever. But...

“Yes, sir, sergeant,” I answered before hurrying out of the recruitment center.

## **Chapter Two**

### **In which the hero remembers that all coins have two sides.**

There were six of my future comrades tramping around the porch. Five of them were NPCs, though the sixth was just as much a player as I was. He was a Level 64 elf archer named Fattah, and I was surprised to see that he wasn’t in any of the clans.

“Hi, everyone!” I waved. “My name’s Hagen.”

The group answered discordantly as we greeted each other, sizing up the people we’d be slaughtering enemies with at the orders of our commanders.

“What brings you here?” Fattah walked over.

“Oh, just curious,” I replied nonchalantly. “I read on the forums about how you can get some nice hidden quests if you do the work.”

“It’s true,” he nodded. “There’s that, though I’m here for the abilities.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you serve for a year using your profile weapon, follow the rules, don’t get marked down, and fight well, the Wild Brigade commanders give you a class ability. You can’t learn it anywhere else, no matter how much you’re willing to pay—it’s completely unique. And if you serve two years, they give you another one.”

“But a year, that’s a long time.” I shook my head.

“How long is your contract for?”

“A year.”

“So what’s the problem? You can’t jump ship before then anyway. Well, as long as you don’t get kicked out. Almost everyone does, since a year really is a long time—very few people make it all the way to the ability. But I will, I’m stubborn like that.”

“Respect,” I replied without a hint of a joke. “I’m just going to see what it’s like, and if I don’t like it, I’ll get out.”

Fattah looked at me in surprise.

“What do you mean, get out? How? Are you some kind of underground millionaire or a politician’s kid? You have an extra fifty thousand lying around?”

“If I have to, I can find it,” I assured him. “Or maybe I’ll just run off so I don’t have to pay anything.”

“You can, but get used to dying,” Fattah said seriously. “The Wild Brigade don’t send rookie trackers after deserters; you’ll get professionals at Level 100 or higher. They’ll chase you down wherever you are, and you won’t get a warning before they finish you off. That’s it. They do that until you can buy them off, but that costs even more money.”

*Sounds tricky, but what else is new?* I decided to wait until I got to the South and go from there.

Soon Rourk walked out onto the porch with an intense look on his face, and looked us over.

“Everyone here? The list says there should be seven of you.”

We glanced around and confirmed that yes, naturally, there were seven of us.

“Then fall into line and jump into the portal I’m about to open one by one. And look at me—if you’re going to fight honorably, you can’t be hiding behind someone else’s back like a coward.”

The portal flashed, and we trooped our way through it. The North was behind me.

*Wow, this is muggy*, was my first thought when I walked out of the portal. After the crisp, cool northern air, the oppressive humidity and smell of decaying plants in the Southern atmosphere sent my mood spiraling downward in a hurry.

“Damn, it’s like a sauna,” muttered one of my companions, a big guy named Silv.

“What were you expecting?” Fattah noted philosophically. “This is the South, the subtropics.”

Silv didn’t look like he knew what the subtropics were, though he nodded his head in agreement.

“There are probably a ton of snakes around here,” a halfling named Moldo said warily. I wasn’t sure what could have brought him to the North, not to mention the recruitment center.

Nobody had the chance to respond.

“Welcome to the heroic, legendary Seventh Free Company. Attention!” came a shrill, squeaky voice.

I and two of my new comrades reacted instantly, our reflexes kicking in. The rest looked at each other, clearly not sure what to do.

The order had come from a small goblin, probably of the mountain variety. That deduction was a matter of simple logic: he spoke coherently and didn’t lick his lips when he looked at us. He was dressed in a sleeveless camouflaged shirt and matching hat. His mug, needless to say, was exactly as nasty-looking as one might expect, and he was standing next to a large orc in a large jacket. The latter looked at us appraisingly, his hands clasped behind his back.

“My gods, Falk,” the orc said a minute later to the goblin. “Look at the rabble joining the Free Companies these days. Sure, we had our bags of manure in the old days, but not like this.”

“Agreed wholeheartedly, Master Grokkh,” the goblin replied subserviently. “Now all we have are these wineskins with, you know, the liquid.”

“And I have to fight with this crap. How? Do you know how I’m going to do that, Falk?”

“No idea, Master Grokkh. I don’t know what you can do with this mob, and I’m not sure how you’ll fight with them.”

None of us was stupid enough to open our mouths. We waited for the pair, of which the orc was clearly the commander, to make up their minds and determine our fate.

“Well, we’ll work with what they sent us,” concluded the orc with a final glance in our direction. His voice jumped a few decibels.

“Listen up, warriors. I’m Lieutenant Grokkh of the Seventh Free Company. From this day on, I’m your commander, king, god, father, mother, grandfather, and everything else. You will

address me using my rank: master lieutenant. And now listen carefully to what I'm about to say, as I won't be repeating it."

The lieutenant didn't tell us anything I didn't already know. Everything he described over the next ten minutes I'd already heard back in my first week of service in the glorious and invincible Russian army. The only different was that we had a sergeant yelling at us then, since our lieutenant didn't bother with newcomers until they'd been there a couple weeks already. He was busy singing and dancing on a stage somewhere.

Everything was exactly the same: *orders aren't to be questioned, and I'll have both eyes on you. If something happens, well, you know.* They were different realities, but the hemorrhoids they gave you were identical. *At least I don't have to think anymore—they'll take care of that.*

"Well, isn't that a nice little sword." The goblin stopped his self-important march directly in front of me. "You don't want to give it to me, your best friend, do you?"

"Nope," I said, pasting an enormous smile on my face. "It was a gift, and regifting isn't polite."

"Listen up, kid. I can make your life miserable around here," he replied with a snarl.

"Then I'll kill you." I shrugged. "You'll die, and I'll just switch over from the Free Companies to the Wild Brigade."

The orc caught a glimpse of the goblin's narrowing eyes. "What's going on over there, Falk?"

"Nothing, master lieutenant," the latter replied, his glance following me. "Just having a word with this warrior over here. We're going to be friends to the end—I can already tell."

"You don't have anything better to do?" The orc went back to yelling at us. "Any questions?"

"Yes, sir," I said, taking two steps forward before yelling back. "Private Hagen, heroic and invincible Seventh Free Company."

"Well done, very good," the orc grinned. "You haven't served before, have you?"

"I have indeed, master lieutenant. In the equally valiant and fearless royal companies of Fladridge."

*Wait a second, he might have been to Fladridge. And if he has, he might know that there's no such thing.*

"I haven't heard of them, but their sergeants certainly know what they're doing." There was a note of approval in the master lieutenant's bellow. "What's your question, private?"

"When do we find out what the schedule for training and campaigns is, master lieutenant?" I yelled, my eyes popping out. "Just so we make sure we're always on time. And avoid any other problems."

"Good question. I'll remember your name, son."

"Thank you, master lieutenant," I barked, spinning on my heel and marching back to my position in line.

“Remember, you beasts,” Grokkh said, his hands on his sides, “we launch campaigns at all hours of the day and night, and we rarely know where the next danger to civilians will appear. Your job is to remain always ready for anything.”

“Hey, the captain is coming,” squeaked Falk.

“Warriors, salute Captain Singkh!” snapped Grokkh, who also thrust out his barrel-like chest and came to attention.

“Forget it, no time for that right now,” a small and older warrior wearing silver chainmail replied with a wave of his hand. “What’s going on?”

Grokkh motioned at us with his chin, and the captain glanced in our direction.

“Ah, fresh meat. Good timing, too. There was a breakout from the jungle near Lanook—some treewalkers. Take fifty of your men along with these kids. If they live, they live. And if they don’t, well...the good villagers will take care of their graves. Much better than what we can offer. We’ll port out in five.”

Grokkh watched the captain walk away before going back to yelling at us.

“That was Captain Singkh, he’s the only one who decides who lives and who dies around here. And his orders are God’s honest truth as far as you’re concerned. Our company got the order to prepare for battle, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do. Everyone to that building over there...march!”

“Seventh Company, form up!” the goblin’s squeaky voice piped up near a squat shanty humans, elves, dwarves, and even a few cave people (I assumed that’s what they were, given their size and the lack of a better description) were pouring out of.

The whole mob lined up next to the building and looked at the lieutenant devotedly.

“Okay, troops,” the orc started, hands behind his back. “We’re heading out for Lanook, they’re having problems with a treewalker outbreak. Corporals Raikh, Milkus, Troot, Naig, and Dro, your squads will be taking this one.”

“Master lieutenant, I’m four short of my ten,” boomed a barbarian named Dro.

“I’m short as well,” an elf named Troot added.

“Agreed,” nodded Grokkh, “which is why the first four of this bodies will be joining you, Dro, and the rest you and your ears can take, Troot. By the way, there’s one who looks like he knows a thing or two, so use him well.”

The orc pointed at me, and I immediately assumed a valiant, oafish look to make sure I fit the part.

“Okay, so that’s one, but the rest are just sword grease,” the elf muttered in annoyance. “I only have one veteran left as it is, and with these...”

“Don’t argue with the master lieutenant,” snapped the goblin. “You’ll take what your given—we don’t have crap else.”

I was convinced the elf should have boxed the goblin’s ears for that, but, to my surprise, he just sighed deeply and held his tongue.

“You have five minutes gather, and then we’re porting out,” Grokkh said, holding up his hand before leaving.

“By three with me, let’s go,” ordered the elf.

Fattah, who was also assigned the the elf, the halfling Moldo, and I ran after him.

“Stay away from the front, do your best to survive. If you live through your first battle, you might make it to the end of your contact. If not, well, you’re out of luck. Does everyone have a weapon? Excellent.”

Our corporal perked up at that last bit of news.

While the group got busy putting their cuirasses, pauldrons and other equipment on, I quickly pulled up my map to see how close I was to my main target.

The map showed me that I was smack dab in the middle of an enormous expanses titled the South. The red spot I was looking for was much farther east of where I was, and I had no shot at trekking my way through the jungle and savanna that laid in between it and me. Putting away my map, I started to think, and even rubbed my chin, when I got a hefty kick from the corporal.

“Warrior, you should have thought before you signed the contract. You don’t get to think now; your job is to fight.”

Five minutes later fifty soldiers were standing on the parade ground ready for battle.

“Go through the portal with your squad,” the goblin yelled. “Raikh’s squad, march!”

We tramped across the girm ground, equipment jangling, and the first squad dove into the blue portal. They were followed by the second and third squads, and then by us.

On the other side of the portal was a small village made up of straw houses. I’d seen something like them in Vietnam, where a group of us journalists had been sent three years before. Vietnam is no Ireland, and the diseases and snakes left most of my colleagues with no desire to make the trip. I, as usual, drew the short straw. Anyway, the huts there looked like what was right in front of me. The same could not be said of the locals themselves.

Some kind of shaggy creatures lived in the village. They had monkey-like faces, and they only came up to my waist. The little things were being slaughtered by black monsters reminiscent of short, gnarled trees with long arms and firey eyes. *The Raidion developers have to be smoking something. They just have to.* There was no way a healthy person could have imagined what I saw there. It was just a good thing the monsters were only Level 50...

“Raikh’s squad, you take the southern flank. We may push them that way, so have your troops ready,” we heard Grokkh call loudly. *Oh, hey, he came with us?* The respect I had for the lieutenant jumped. “Dro, you take the northern flank since you have all the new kids. Make sure they don’t circle around behind us—that’s a favorite trick of theirs. The rest of you, attack from the center in three wedges. Remember, take out their legs, since that’s their weakest part. And stay away from their fingers—if they latch onto you, they won’t be letting go.”

*Now that’s a good commander right there.* It was exactly what we needed to hear.

“Archers, drop back and cover us,” our corporal ordered. “Swordsman, weapons at the ready. Move!”

All three squads started their advance at the same time, encircling the slaughter in front of us in a pincer movement. Leading the attack was Raikkh's squad, which didn't have any archers. It did, however, have unusually strong, well-armed troops representing the humanoid races.

It suddenly crossed my mind that I'd stopped differentiating between players and NPCs. We were in the middle of actual war—not a raid, not a dungeon, and not your usual sword fight. As far as I could tell, the mission we were on was nothing unusual for the Free Companies, just another day on the job. And that's exactly how everyone around me approached it.

Our squad spot got to where the villagers were under attack, and our corporal, who was at the head of our wedge of seven warriors, quickly dove in and sliced the legs out from under the first treewalker in our path. It wobbled and fell, where Ur, a northerner following behind Troot, buried his sword in its head.

"Stay on your toes," yelled Troot, though he was just a tad late with his order.

A treewalker dashed over from the side, hooking his long fingers into Moldo's shoulder and yanking him out of the formation.

Moldo screamed from fear just as much as from pain, and I dashed after him. An arrow, probably fired by Fattah, thudded into the treewalker, who was carrying Moldo along through the air, but there was nothing we could do: another of the black monsters came over and helped its friend tear the poor halfling's body apart.

*And this is supposed to be a game?* I said to myself. *How did they possibly get a license for something like that?*

But I had no more time to think, as yet another arm snaked toward me. I threw up my shield, the wooden fingers sliding along it like fingernails on a chalkboard. Crouching slightly, I swung parallel to the ground and felt my blade meet and cut its way through my target.

The beast, its eyes flashing, toppled over, though its fingers reached for me as it did. A few jabs at its head finished it off.

The battle raged all around, though I could tell that we were winning. The remaining treewalkers turned tailed and hopped their way in the direction of the forest. Happy to see them go, the furry villagers let out a cry of relief, and a few minutes later the whole thing was over.

*You unlocked Mercenary, Level 1.*

*To get it, participate in 49 more battles as a member of the Free Companies or Wild Brigade.*

*Reward:*

*+3% ability to use your main weapon*

*+10% respect in the eyes of your commander (isn't lost if your commander is replaced)*

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

I didn't expect an action, but they were always nice to have.

"Got it?" Fattah walked over.

I glanced up at him. "Yep. Hey, you know what I was wondering? If we were to die right here in this village as part of a mission, where would we respawn, and where would our things go?"

“You should really read a guide once in a while,” replied Fattah indignantly. “That’s one of the benefits you get with the Free Companies: when you die, you take your things back with you to the respawn, which is—”

“That much I know,” I interrupted him. “Where your unit is. So if everyone’s here, I’d respawn right back here?”

“Exactly. They put that in as compensation for all the downsides there are to joining the Free Companies—you may have come of your own free will, but this still really narrows what you can do in the game. Just remember that only works for battles you’re fighting as part of and at the order of the Free Companies. If you just go jumping into something on your own, you’ll respawn back with your unit but without your things.”

*Interesting. Still, not bad.*

“Yeah, it’s pretty rough here.” Fattah slung his bow over his shoulder. “War.”

“Agreed,” I replied with a nod. “Apocalypse now.”

“Well, warriors, everyone still alive?” Troot came over. “That little guy, they ripped him in half, right? That’s a shame—we’re back to being a man short.”

The elf walked quickly back to Grokkh and the other corporals.

“So this is our life now, day after day,” Fattah said thoughtfully. “For a year.”

“No, I definitely won’t make it that long,” I replied honestly. “I’ll get out sooner.”

“If you have the money, you might as well. I don’t, and I want that ability, so I’m going to put in my time.”

“What happens if I can’t log into the game? My clock will still keep ticking, right?”

“Yes, though there are lots of limitations. You’re fine if you miss a day, but two in a row means disciplinary measures and kissing the ability goodbye. You take a pay cut if you miss three to seven, and you get experience and ability penalties as well as the death list if you miss more than ten.”

There wasn’t much room to squeeze around that. If I’d read what people were writing, I might not have enlisted in the first place. Of course, I could find the money if I needed to—I had more than 20,000 as it was, and I could borrow the rest. The Witch wouldn’t turn me down, I figured, and I could ask Gedron as well. If worst came to worst, I could borrow from the Tearful Goddess Order at interest. Gunther, I knew, would introduce me to that Brother Yur. But there was no hurry. *And that’s a lot of money to spend...*

*Battle results*

*Your participation amounted to 3.84% of the total.*

*Performance: 1 opponent killed*

*Reward:*

76 gold

520 experience, of which:

200 is for the opponent you killed

320 is your bonus for the battle and victory

Points collected toward the hidden bonus: 2 of 1000

“Cool!” I blurted out.

“How much did you get?” Fattah asked.

“Not much gold, 520 experience. What’s the hidden bonus?”

“Oh, bro,” Fattah said, his eyes squinting, “you have no idea! Once you collect a thousand points, you can head to the Wild Brigade headquarters and open the trunk in the banner room for free. And there could be anything in there. I saw a guy once who pulled out a complete set—it wasn’t for his class, but it had all the four items for the set together. True, you can get crap like a potion or hair coloring, but you’re more likely to get something good.”

*Well, that’s a plus.* I was getting double the usual experience, and if I really worked at it—

“Hey, just one thing: if you die in battle, the experience you got doesn’t count,” broke in Fattah.

I sighed. “That’s a shame.”

“I hear you. Okay, I’m going to go over and make an appearance with the commanders.”

Fattah walked away, leaving me to open my map and see where we were.

I’d gotten lucky: we were halfway across the South. I wasn’t any closer to my goal, but I could tell that a couple weeks of battles and campaigns would give me a decent shot at somewhere close to where I was going. *Yeah, I think I’ll stick around to do some fighting.* The experience was good, and things were lively enough. Of course, there was another thing I could tell would come in handy. Whatever the local green runt had planned for me, I didn’t think it would be that simple. *To be more precise, it would probably be brutal.*

Not everyone lived to see the end of the battle. Besides the poor halfling, another three warriors found their way to the afterlife, and I realized why Rourk made sure he sealed the deal with anyone who walked into the recruitment center. At the rate we were losing bodies, he had to—and I could only imagine he was getting some kick-backs as well.

“Okay, warriors!” yelled Falk’s shrill voice. “Let’s get ready to head back.”

The squads lined up next to each other, and I found myself behind a tall beanpole named Ur. Behind me was Fattah. We all stared at the lieutenant, who was discussing something with the local leader. He was just as shaggy as the rest of them, just with feathers around his head. While the leader was waving his arms around, he soon stopped, sighed deeply, and stabbed a finger at the parchment Grokkh was holding.

“What are they doing?” I asked Ur, gently poking him in the back.

Ur turned his head. “Ah, one of the newcomers. Their guy marked the paper to prove that we provided military aid. Now their prince owes us money to compensate for our losses and expenditures. We wouldn’t be able to do this if it weren’t for that.”

*So they even keep track of the money.*

“You did good work, by the way—I saw you,” continued Ur. “That wasn’t the first time you’ve used a sword, I imagine?”

“I’ve been around the block.” There was no sense hiding the truth. “You’re from the North?”

“Yep. I was born near a burg named Foyrin.”

“I know it, I was just there recently.”

“Seriously?” Ur perked up. “I haven’t been back in ten years, ever since I left to wander Fayroll. How are things there? Mind telling me when we get back?”

“Why not?”

“I’ll introduce you to the rest of the guys,” Ur promised. “And I can tell you what to do around here to make sure things aren’t harder than they have to be.”

“Company, squad by squad into the portal, march!” Grokkh yelled.

And off we walked into the portal.

## **Chapter Three**

### **In which we find that some decisions are made for us.**

Our ten-man squad—well, nine-man already, since Moldo had been sent on to NPC heaven without even a taste of all the benefits that come with military service—turned out to be a good one. Besides me, Fattah, and big Ur, we had Garron, a talkative southerner; Ping and Pong, two happy-go-lucky brothers from the East; Lane, the latest in a long line of trackers from the Borderlands—an area that split East and West, it was, judging by the one native I’d met, a fun place; and two westerners, Mikos and Torn. Fattah and I were the only players in our motley band.

The guys showed us the barracks, which is what the squat buildings near the parade ground turned out to be. Inside, everything was Spartan: double bunk beds and a few tables with bowlegged chairs around them.

“The main thing to remember, gentlemen,” Garron said from his bunk, “is to hold your sword tightly, keep a close eye on your friends’ backs, and follow the commander’s orders without question. If you do that, you’ll be fine. I’ve already been here more than a year, and I’m alive, my stomach is full, there’s money in my pocket, and I get drunk once a week. That’s all they allow.”

“Oh, and stay away from the louse with the ears,” Lane interjected slowly.

“Right, that’s important. Don’t get involved with Falk,” Garron responded with a nod. “He’s a rat the likes of which you’d have to do some searching to fine.”

I tensed up a little. “I already got involved with him.”

“Your first mistake,” Torn said from one of the top bunks. “Watch your back now. What did you guys talk about?”

“He liked the look of my sword,” I answered honestly. “Well, that and I just don’t like him.”

Ping whistled; Pong grinned.

“Should’ve just given it to him,” said Mikos, who was busy digging in a chest he’d pulled out from under his bed. “Your life’s going to be miserable until you do, and he might just try to kill you.”

“What’s wrong with him?” I was really starting to get nervous. A goblin-faced terror haunting my dreams was the last thing I needed.

The group jostled to tell me the story of the unusually interesting and infamous life of the vile creature named Falk. He was, in fact, a mountain goblin. They were a quirky breed of villains that weren’t as easily distracted by shiny nothings or their empty stomachs. Of course, eating and thieving were also part of who they were, but they also made for decent strategists, excellent spies, and the dirtiest operators in Fayroll. Somehow, and probably through some sort of misunderstanding this particular example saved Grokkh’s life ten years before, back when Grokkh was just a sergeant serving in the Ripa Mountains. The then-sergeant’s entire squad had been killed in an unsuccessful raid, and he was forced to drag himself through the snow to the nearest outpost. Why Falk decided to save him rather than bury him in an avalanche nobody knew. Ever since then, the two had been inseparable, with the little green beast forgiven for any trouble he got into—and he got into a good bit of trouble.

“That’s why we try to keep our distance,” Mikos concluded sadly.

“If only he would keep his distance from us,” Ping chimed in with a smile.

“That he doesn’t want to do. Never has,” confirmed Pong.

It was a shame, but I was having a hard time picturing what the goblin could actually do to me, even if Grokkh had his back. He could spit at me, but I figured I could deal with that.

The group then informed us that there were three companies in Dinjir: the Third, our Seventh, and the Ninth. The Ninth was going through a rough patch, as they’d had their rears handed to them by nomads from the Sinrin Plains. Something spooked them, or maybe they’d had too much to drink—everyone knows how much the tribes like their fermented milk—either way, they’d climbed down of their camels and cornered the Ninth Company in a ravine. The battle was fierce, only about a seventh of ours survived, and the company was waiting for reinforcements. It was strange we’d been sent to the Seventh rather than to the Ninth.

Regardless, Garron was right: the service wasn’t bad, so long as you followed the rules and kept your head down. We were paid once every two weeks, there was one day off a week, and you could even use the squad’s stationary portal if you wanted to.

“What do you mean, stationary?” Fattah’s eyebrows shot up.

“Each area has a portal that’s always open and pointed toward the nearest capital,” explained Torn as he hung down from his bunk. “In our case, that’s Maykong, the capital of the South, stronghold of the principalities, and the residence of High Prince Svet Mustail the Second and the Beautiful.”

“I’ve seen him,” giggled Ping. “He’d make for a great boogeyman!”

“He really would!” his brother chimed in, laughing like someone was tickling him.

“Yeah, the prince really is, well, you know…” Mikos agreed more tactfully.

“And he’s just a nasty guy,” Lane said. “A real brute. There’s a snake out in the jungle called a reinghals—it’s beautiful, but if it bites you, just order yourself a casket right then and there. The prince is even worse.”

“Lane’s had his problems with with Mustail,” Ping whispered loudly to us. Pong nodded as if to say that yes, Lane obviously had plenty of problems with the ruler of the South, but the brothers weren’t going to say a word about them.

“And really just anyone can use the portal?” Fattah couldn’t care less what disagreements a hired sword might have with Prince Svet.

“What do you mean, ‘just anybody’?” Torn replied. “Only if you’re serving in the Free Companies, and you have to show your pass to the portal guard.”

I made a mental note—going to see the capital sounded like a good idea.

“Seventh Company, form up!” we heard the goblin squeal, and all of us ran toward the parade ground.

“You don’t get much peace and quiet in the Free Companies,” I said to Fattah once we’d gotten back from a small town besieged by repulsive crab-like creatures that walked on two legs for some reason. We and the Third Company had been sent to push them back into the jungle, and it hadn’t been easy.

“That’s for sure,” he agreed, pulling out a pipe and packing some tobacco into it. “On the other hand, we’re piling up experience—I leveled up.”

“Nice.” I winked at him wearily. “Okay, I’m headed home.”

“Yeah, our five hours is up.” The elf checked the timer on his interface before catching my questioning glance and rolling his eyes. *Why does nobody ever read the guides?* I could hear him thinking.

“If you don’t want reprimands and want to keep up your reputation with the commanders, you can’t just log into the game every day,” he explained. “You have to spend at least five hours in it. It doesn’t matter if you’re fighting or not, though you should serve out the five hours.”

*You’re kidding me.* I waved at him and the other warriors, who were getting ready to go to sleep, and logged out of the game.

The next three days were a blur of continuous fighting. We went back to the barracks, took half an hour to recover, and went right back out to save peaceable civilians under attack. There

were new villages, towns, and even one new mine. Life was the clash of blades, yelled orders, and monsters, monsters, monsters—toothy, fanged, poisonous, scaled, in shells, with and without horns, gray and raspberry, and pink polka dots. Bosch and his imagination had nothing on the game artists.

I fought and attacked, advanced and fell back, my feet slipped on the slime left by crawling little nasties, and I tripped over the dead bodies of muscular gibbons wearing helmets.

My level jumped to fifty-five, and one of my abilities leveled-up as well.

I died a couple times as well, one of my deaths coming at the worst possible time: a blade wielded by a one-eyed, bowlegged marauder found a crack in my armor right at the end of a battle I'd fought well in. The bonus I was looking for slipped through my fingers as Lane, who was everywhere, finished off the marauder.

Despite the loss, I was heartened by the fact that I didn't lose any of the experience I'd previously built up when I died. That was a small compensation the developers had put in place to placate frustrated players. Also, dying on the field of battle meant you could have the company's armorers fix everything up for you free of charge. So there was a little balance, at least.

A message popped up when I polished off a large turtle that came at us with surprising speed and agility for its kind. It and a few of its friends were trying to make off with a village's children, though I couldn't pronounce the name of the village.

*You reached Bloodletting, Level 2  
Gives you a 60% chance of causing bleeding  
Bleeding damage done: 11 health per second for 1 minute  
Activation cost: 50 mana  
Recharge time: 1 minute*

*Good thing I didn't go to work today.* It was Wednesday, and I was supposed to have been working at the office, though I didn't want to kick off my service in the company with a reprimand. The bosses wouldn't mind, I figured, since I was getting a lot out of it—not the least of which was that I was unlocked all kinds of place on my map. Who knew which of them I might need later?

With that in mind, Vika was given complete authority and instructions to email me everything. That morning I dug around in the material my team had gathered, approving some things, discarding others, and offering plenty of sage wisdom. Then I dashed off to the barracks.

A quick check of my map told me that I was right on the money. The village we were at was just a two- or three-hour walk from the copse at the center of the red spot. The only problem was that I doubted I'd make it there alone, judging by everything I'd been in the middle of the past four days.

“What are you standing there for, beanpole?” Falk said, interrupting my reverie with his screeching voice. “There's a general gathering everyone's supposed to be at.”

The little bastard was doing his best to ruin my life, though most of his efforts were surreptitious. He was constantly telling Grokkh what a terrible soldier I was, he threw sharp jokes my way when we were at attention, and he even shoved me in the back once when our formation was advancing on a mop of fanged creatures with boar heads and crescent-shaped sabers. It was a miracle I was able to dodge one of those sabers aimed at my chest.

“I’m on my way, you don’t have to yell,” I muttered back, ignoring his whining about how disrespectful I was being to a Free Company veteran, and heading over to my squad. We hadn’t gotten any replacements, though, thank God, we hadn’t lost anyone, and so there were still nine of us.

“Thank Tekhosh, tomorrow’s our day off,” Lane said in his perpetually meandering voice as he pulled on his chainmail (from what I could tell, that was the only kind of armor anyone wore in the Borderlands).

“Hey, be careful talking about the Departed Gods like that,” Torn responded softly. “Especially the dark ones. It’s not forbidden, of course, but you should still watch it.”

“Only you all in the West think Tekhosh was a dark god,” Lane replied evenly. “In the Borderlands, we remember him differently—he taught us a lot, and showed many of us the way. And what am I supposed to be afraid of? I don’t have anything left to lose. Everything I ever cared about burned up and scattered in the wind.”

Ping and Pong looked at him sympathetically and sniffed. The brothers were incredibly sentimental, though they worked wonders with the pair of curved sabers they each fought with.

I made a mental note to chat with Lane later, both about Tekhosh and to figure out why the warrior was so gloomy all the time. But that was for another time, and in the meantime I had a different question.

“Day off? For everyone? Do I get one, too? I still haven’t served a full week.”

“Of course,” Torn replied patiently, only too happy to change the subject. “It doesn’t matter how long you’ve served. The company gets the day off, so you do, too.”

That put me in a great mood.

“Lane, where are you going to go?” Pong asked him.

“Yeah, going anywhere interesting?” Ping chimed in.

“Nowhere,” the tracker replied, his bed squeaking. “I don’t feel like dragging myself anywhere, and I don’t have money anyway.”

*No money? That’s good.*

“We’re headed to the capital,” Ping said proudly. “Time for some girls!”

“Exactly!” Pong followed suit. “Girls it is.”

Torn looked at them skeptically.

“Just don’t take all your gold with you this time, otherwise you’ll come back complaining about how someone got you drunk and robbed you blind again.”

“Nah, we won’t take all of it. Just a little, and that’s it,” Ping responded quickly. Pong nodded.

“I’m not going anywhere either,” boomed Ur. “I want some time to mope around here.”

The northerner had spent the last three days squeezing me for all the information I had about his homeland, and I told him everything I could remember. His estimation of me had climbed steeply when he heard that I knew Konig Harald himself. True, when Ur left, Harald's father was still in charge, though that didn't change anything. When I told him how I saved the konig's daughter, Ur stared at me with deep respect.

Afterward, I wished I hadn't told him so much. It wasn't even that I'd told Ur, who was a simple, direct fellow; toward the end I realized that Fattah had been listening carefully the whole time. And I didn't like curious, shrewd players—maybe because that's the kind of player I was? I hadn't spilled the beans on any secrets, but still...

"What about you?" I asked Torn.

"I'm heading to Maykong as well, with Mikos and Garron. I need to drop by the bank to drop off my gold, and I could go for some beer, too."

Fattah stretched.

"I'll come with you then," he said to Torn. "I haven't been to Maykong, and they say it's beautiful. Are you coming?"

He looked at me.

"No," I replied, waving them off. "I need a break from all these battles. Plus, you'll probably be taking off in the morning, and I want to sleep in."

"True," confirmed Torn. "We're leaving around nine."

The right thing to do would have been to go with the company on Thursday, but I couldn't completely give up on the paper. I was also tired of all the slaughter, and Vika had told me that Zimin called. When she told him I was in the game, he gave her a quick "all righty then" and hung up.

That had me a little nervous, and I went back and forth between calling him and pretending Vika hadn't said anything. I decided to go with the latter option, since Zimin hadn't actually given Vika any instructions. My mind more or less at ease, I went to sleep.

The next day, when I walked into our wing of the office, the smell of alcohol was nearly overpowering. I carefully studied Yushkov's face to noticed that his normally pale pink nose had turned a burgundy scarlet color. It had nothing to do with embarrassment, either; he'd been hitting the bottle pretty hard.

"Vadim," I told him, "you need to stop that. You can't outdrink them over there in the sports section—they're the best in Moscow and the entire region, with years of practice and competition behind them. You can't keep up."

"Yes, I can," he muttered guiltily. "I certainly did yesterday. The vodka probably wasn't good, that's all."

He took a tuft of black hair hanging over his forehead in his fingers and started playing with it.

"That's not an argument. I'm serious, if you don't stop drinking, I'll have to fire you. Vika!" I barked.

Vika ran over and stood there blinking, doing her best to seem dumber than she actually was.

“This is on you, Vika,” I said to her harshly, a finger jabbing in Yushkov’s direction. “The guy’s turning into a hardcore alcoholic, and you’re letting it go without telling me anything. Why is that?”

“I’ve told him,” Vika replied, her eyes on the floor, “probably a hundred times.”

“She has,” Yushkov confirmed magnanimously. “At least a hundred times.”

“It’s like Ping and Pong in here,” I exclaimed, started to get frustrated.

“What ping-pong? Again with the ping-pong!” Yushkov looked at me worriedly. “We weren’t the ones who broke the table in the rec room, I told Mammoth that. We were hanging out at Bavaria that night!”

*This is ridiculous. He’s even breaking company property now.*

“Zimin is here!” Zhanna, Mammoth’s secretary flew in. “He’s on his way here!”

“Damn it!” I blurted out. “Just what we need. Gennady,” I continued, looking at Stroynikov.

He ran over.

“Open the windows, stuff this one in the far corner, cover the table in folders, and stick some gum in his mouth. Vika, Samoshnikov, look busy. I’ll go buy us a couple minutes.”

It was a good thing we worked in an old building, as the corridors were long and wide. I met Zimin as far away from our space as I dared.

“Maxim, what are you doing here?” I tried to look as pleasantly surprised as I could. “Don’t you have meetings every Thursday morning?”

“The old man is away, and we don’t have meetings without him,” Zimin informed me glumly. “And Kit went with him.”

*Ah-ha, so that’s why he’s in a lousy mood.* Kit was off with the top dog, and he was left alone. It looked like I was screwed.

“Some tea maybe?” I asked, as sincerely as I possibly could. “Like my grandfather always said, there’s no end to the good a nice cup of tea will do you.”

“Your grandfather?” Zimin looked at me, a thought flashing across his face. “That’s good. But I’ll do without the tea—we have to talk.”

“Your call.” I quickly switched to a more business-like tone. “Shall we step into my office?”

I really should have just kicked everyone out. It was chilly in the office, though the smell of alcohol was almost gone at least. We could see the crown of Yushkov’s head, and everyone else scurried around in a buzz of feigned activity.

Zimin greeted everyone with a nod as he walked into my office. I winked at Vika and followed him.

“Okay, Kif,” he said, sitting down at my desk and staring at me. “You disappointed me, and pretty seriously, too.”

I was taken aback. *Wait, I did? I’m doing the quest, we’re publishing the paper... Could it be that I wasn’t in the office yesterday? No, that shouldn’t be it, since the dryad quest is more important than the paper. The Free Companies? Doubtful...*

“Not sure what I’m talking about?” Zimin narrowed his eyes, which remained fixed on me.

“Nope.” I sat up and met his gaze.

“Why didn’t you tell me who was with you in the Great Fomor’s palace? You didn’t think I should know that another player took part in the event?”

*Oh, damn.* It was true—the whole thing had slipped my mind, and I’d neglected to tell the boss who’d helped me take out the witch.

“I forgot,” I told Zimin in all honest. “I really did. Well, it’s more that I didn’t even think about it, I’ll admit.”

“He forgot,” muttered Zimin. “You know, I can’t just follow you everywhere you go. You forget, and I didn’t find out right away...”

“But what’s the problem? He doesn’t have anything to do with Fomor,” I said in surprise. “All he wanted was the witch. He was there with a pair of NPCs, Gorrddy, and I don’t remember the name of the second one.”

“Grim Gram.” Zimin’s fingers drummed on the table. “One more character unaccounted for.”

*Well, that’s interesting. I never would have thought an NPC could be unaccounted for.*

“Ah,” Zimin sighed. “I should smack you upside the head so you start thinking, but I won’t. For some reason, I really like you. And you can think when you want to—nice work figuring out how to get to the South. But you’d better keep me in the loop from now on, got it?”

“You can be sure I will,” I assured him. “It won’t happen again. You can count on me.”

“I know you didn’t do it on purpose. If I thought you had, I wouldn’t be the one having this conversation with you, and it wouldn’t be happening here.” Zimin’s face curved into a smile.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know where his colleagues would have been having that nice little chat with me.

“There is one thing you should know,” I said confidentially. “Someone else found out what I do. I mean, here at the paper. Someone in the game.”

“What a day,” Zimin complained. “Who? And how?”

“You won’t believe it, but my clanleader, Elina the Wise. It’s crazy, but she’s actually Vika’s sister in real life.” My eyes bulged. “She recognized me when we had her over for dinner—

I didn't change how I look for the game. Coincidences happen, I guess, not much you can do there."

"Not like that they don't," Zimin replied, his eyes squinting. "I know that much for sure. It shouldn't be a problem, though we'll have to visit her and see if she actually is as wise as her name says. In the game, obviously."

He's apparently seen the concern I had for Elina's health and well-being flash across my face.

"It would have been nice if you'd changed the way you look in the game, but it's too late for that. You are who you are."

"Agreed," I nodded. "The knights know me, I have my reputation in the North...plus, I'm used to how I look."

"Okay," Zimin said, standing up. "I'm off. You can let your team know they're getting paid today—I'm sure they'll be happy to hear that."

"That's great!" I rubbed my hands together.

"Oh, come on," Zimin grunted. "You just got enough from our bet to last you to winter. Ah, that reminds me: Marina asks me about you all the time."

"What Marina?"

"Vezhleva. Come on, Kif!" He shook a finger at me. "All these girls are going to be the death of you. But you know what I was thinking, you should invite her to dinner. Next Wednesday would be perfect."

"Wait, but..." I held out my arms as if to remind him that I had Vika, the paper...

"I'm not saying you should sleep with her; just have dinner," Zimin explained gently. "Today I'll tell her... Wait, why me? Just call her and invite her to dinner on Wednesday around seven at Bacchus' Barrel. We have our own area there already paid for, so you can sit, eat, talk... Wednesday morning I'll tell you what you should talk about. Sound good? Here, I just so happen to have her card in my pocket."

"Spend time with a beautiful woman in an expensive restaurant on the company's dime?" I grinned, taking the gold-colored rectangle with its attractive font from him. "Why not?"

"Excellent." Zimin patted my shoulder. "Okay, I'm off—no need to walk me to the door."

From the fifth edition of the Fayroll Times:

*From the editor.*

*...and that's exactly what we'll strive to do. We want reading the paper to be as useful as it is interesting, since...*

*Alchemy: Tough, But Worth It*

*...but the hardest part isn't getting the recipe, boosting skills, or locating an instructor. The hardest part is finding the chemical agents, and in particular complex potions and powders...*

*Excerpts from the Fayroll Chronicle.*

*The Eyes of the Beast clan was disbanded. Its unsuccessful attempts to destroy Klatornakh led to a crisis of confidence in clan leadership on the part of its membership.*

*The You Respect Me, Right? and Children of the Caucasus clans will be holding their third annual young wine festival. As usual, it is being held in autumn, as the leaders claim it to be a sad time of year when people need a little cheering up.*

*Some new players visited a forest in Noobland, though their trip ended in mass panic. Their efforts to cut themselves clubs were met by an incredibly aggressive NPC. According to one witness, "Damn, he just went crazy on us. But that's not the worst part. He wasn't just a forester; it was Leo Tolstoy himself!" The game admin is reviewing the safeguards in place to keep players from logging into the game with alcohol or narcotics in their blood.*

*In the next edition:*

*Personal Transport: Expensive, but Oh, so Convenient*

## **Chapter Four**

### **In which the hero realizes that time is running short.**

Some people hate making calls to anyone they don't know or don't know very well. They tense up, going over what they want to say in their head a hundred times, putting off making the call, and completely forgetting that on the other end of the line will most likely be someone just as sane and friendly as they are. At least, that's often the case.

Thank God, that doesn't describe me in the least—it would be strange if it did, given my profession. When it comes to chatting with women on the phone, I'm with the unforgettable Ostap Bender in that I prefer improvisation and inspiration. What's the point of preparing for a talk with women? They're too unpredictable and incomprehensible for that.

"Hi, Marina?" I didn't want my tone to be too forward, though it needed to have some play to it. We weren't good enough friends to add an intimate flair, though one of us owed the other, and, I hoped, that person hadn't forgotten.

"Ah, my knight in shining armor, with the lance that brought me good luck," she replied, her voice more than playful and, yes, letting me know that she remembered. "My" knight. *That's a good sign.*

"I don't know about a knight." It was time to break out the jokes. "More Sancho Panza with the valiant von Richter."

She giggled again. "Oh, aren't you modest." Однако следишь ты за мной, имя фон Рихерта тебе известно. Хотя, с другой стороны Гунтер участвовал в той мясорубке на берегу, поди такое, забудь – "So how can this shy little virgin help the favorite of the gods?"

I had the feeling that if she and I ever got together, God forbid, I'd have to keep a close eye on all my body parts. Vika would have to take a trip somewhere on the other side of the Urals, too, since Marina would chew her up and spit her out if she sensed the least bit of competition. Marina was too smart by half, and dangerous.

"Well, here's the thing, I can't eat or sleep," I replied, my voice aged and cracked like Baba Yaga from any of the old movies.

"I didn't offend you, did I?" Her crystal laughter floated into my ear once more.

"Not yet," I said, this time respectfully and in my normal voice. "But you will if you turn down my dinner invitation."

"That would bother you?"

"I'd never get over it."

"Well, we can't have that. Where are we going? You can forget about chebureki." She sounded prissy and spoiled, and hearing her say the word "chebureki" in that voice made me chuckle. Vezhleva was obviously testing me.

"Chebureki? You think I have that kind of money? No, we're going out for pelmeni—much cheaper than chebureki."

"Ah, then my stomach should be fine. And if you buy me a cup of coffee with condensed milk, it'll really make my week."

"Coffee? Hm..." I sat silently for a second before jingling a few coins I hurriedly pulled out of my pocket. "Well, I guess we can do that. Next Wednesday I'll pick you up in front of your office. Let's say, around seven."

"I hope you have a strong bike. Will it hold both of us?" The concern in Marina's voice was so sincere that it took me aback.

"I'll pump up the tires and check the frame," I assured her.

"Then I'll see you next Wednesday. Are you sure I'll recognize you?"

"I'll be the one wearing felt boots and holding a flower."

She hung up. *Ah, that's no woman. She's suicide, an extreme sport, and the fondest dream of any pimply high school senior all wrapped up in one.* Smart, beautiful, experienced, successful, and dangerous—though she was dangerous first and foremost.

"I'm not a big fan of pelmeni; they wreak havoc on your figure. And I haven't seen any felt boots at home, so you should probably go buy some," I heard a voice behind me say. Turning, I saw a pale Vika with resolutely pursed lips.

"I don't like them either—for a while now, in fact," I assured her. "I've had more than enough in the past few years to never touch them again."

"But you're going out for some with somebody next Wednesday, no?"

"Come on, we were teasing each other. There won't be any pelmeni, obviously."

“And dinner? You were setting something up.”

“Of course there will be a dinner,” I replied openly. “Vika, let’s say this: I’m not going to hide the fact that I may go out from time to time with different people, including women. But you need to understand that there’s a difference between going out for a business dinner and living together—a big difference, in fact. Yes, Vezhleva and I are having dinner together, but it’s just a dinner. Let’s agree right now that we’re always going to trust each other, otherwise things will turn ugly. And I definitely don’t need that. I’m surprised I have to explain this to you, in fact, seeing as how you’re a grown woman.”

Vika nodded and walked out of my office.

Her self-control was on point, I should add. Not a word was said the whole way home, and nothing else was added at home either. *Maybe she really doesn’t care about the whole thing? Or maybe she understood me and we’re done with it?*

I couldn’t help but note that logging into the game always meant leaving real-world problems behind me. The whole thing was intriguing—was it the developers playing with my psyche, or was it my reflexes automatically switching over to whichever problems were most relevant to where I currently was?

There was no way of knowing for sure, but one thing was true: as soon as I found myself on the parade ground, all thoughts of glum Vika, who’d run off to work before the break of dawn with suspiciously beautiful eye makeup; Vezhliva, a woman with grace, beauty, and the habits of a viper; and Zimin, complete with his set of problems, flew out of my head. Instead, all I could think about was that I’d be finding out what my last quest was that day. *At least, I hope it’s the last one.*

The barracks were just as empty as I’d hoped. Lane laid on his cot, and Ur sharpened his large battle axe, but there was no one else there.

“Hi, guys,” I said with a wave. “Bored?”

“Hey!” Ur looked at me with his child-like smile. “What’s there to do? I don’t have any money, since I spent it all on girls last time. I even had to borrow from Torn, so I’ll be paying him back in two weeks.”

Lane didn’t say anything.

“Well, guys, I have a way for you to make some money,” I said insinuatingly.

“What’s up?” Lane asked. Ur put his axe down.

“Nothing much, although there’s definitely some risk. But before I tell you, this needs to stay between us.”

“You’re in luck.” Lane jumped down from his bunk. “We’re the two least-talkative people in the squad. Out with it.”

“Remember that village we protected from the turtles yesterday? The ones that ran like horses?”

“Of course,” replied Lane.

“Two or three hours from there is a grove with incredibly beautiful flowers. I want to pick some.”

Ur blinked, trying to figure out what use I could possibly have for flowers, and especially flowers from that particular grove. Lane squinted at me thoughtfully.

“Flowers, you say,” he replied slowly. “And why from there?”

“Just on a whim. The flowers there are completely unique, and I want to give some to this one girl I like.”

Lane didn’t believe a word I was saying, though I could see him trying to figure out if he should tell me to screw myself or hear me out. I, obviously, knew the whole thing was nonsense, though I also knew the pair needed a formal reason to take money from me. And why not that one?

“I’ll give you 600 gold each,” I said quickly.

“Six hundred?” boomed Ur. “Lane, who cares why he needs the flowers? It’s only ten, and we’ll have time to get to Maykong for drinks and girls after we get back.”

“I’ll even give you a portal scroll,” I said, pushing them hard. “Once we get to the grove, you can use it to get to Maykong.”

“You’re not telling the whole story, my friend,” Lane said with a crooked smile. “But we don’t pry into other people’s secrets in the Borderlands, especially when those people pay well, do I don’t really care. If you’re really willing to pay us that much, I’m in.”

“Me, too.” Ur got up from his chair. “No questions asked.”

“Speaking of questions, I have a big favor to ask,” I continued, taking them by the shoulders. “Nobody can know where we’re going or why we’re going there. Let’s just say that we never went anywhere in the first place. If people ask about the money, just say you borrowed it from me. And tell me if anyone starts asking questions, please. Okay?”

Lane nodded; Ur grunted. The pair started hurriedly getting ready, pulling on equipment and tightening belts.

“Do you know how to get there?” Lane asked me incidentally.

“I know the direction. Have you been in that area?”

“It’s all the same around here. Jungles, savanna, snakes, crocodiles,” Lane observed complacently as he made sure his sword was in its sheath. “Don’t worry, we’ll get there.”

“If there’s anyone who can get you there, it’s him,” Ur assured me. “Lane’s a tracker, one of the best. He can sense enemies and danger from a mile away. They’re all like that in the Borderlands, but even there he’s special. And that makes sense, since—”

“Ur, do you have your knife?” Lane interrupted him.

Ur stopped short, looking at Lane guiltily before going back to checking the weapons in his belt.

*Hm, who is Lane?*

“We’re ready.” Lane wasn’t about to comment on what the northerner said, preferring to pretend that he hadn’t said anything at all. “But I’d prefer to see the money up front. If you’re killed—and death in the jungle is lightning-fast and unpredictable—we won’t get anything, which wouldn’t be fair. If we’re killed, you can just take it back, and I don’t imagine we’ll mind.”

I nodded and pulled the gold out of my bag.

Life was peaceful in the village, and nobody paid us any attention. When they were in trouble, certainly, they were the first to ask us for help, but they couldn’t be bothered to give us so much as a drink of water when everything was calm.

“Where to?” asked Lane, all business.

I pulled up my map and pointed west.

“Follow me. You don’t have to be right on top of me, but don’t fall too far behind. If I put my hand up, stop; when I drop it, we move on.” Lane gave his orders with the voice of someone used to being obeyed without question or complaint. Ur and I listened and nodded. “Every ten minutes we’ll check to make sure we’re going in the right direction—I don’t want to waste any time. And if we have to cross swords with someone, well, that’s what we’ll do. All right, let’s move.”

Lane slipped into the wall of leaves.

“There’s a tracker for you,” Ur boomed in respect before following him in. I took a deep breath and quickly jumped in behind them—it looked incredibly easy to lose the nimble Lane in the web of vines and bushes.

To be honest, I didn’t like the South. As I walked behind Ur’s broad shoulders, I wistfully recalled the hills and plains of the North, its grayish-blue skies, and the waves washing in from the cold sea. I got so lost in my thoughts that I missed Lane raising his hand and walked smack into Ur, banging my nose on his cuirass.

“Sh-h.” Lane glared at me, motioning me closer.

Treading as silently as I could, I sidled up to him and whispered cautiously.

“What?”

Lane nodded to the left without saying a word. I looked in that direction.

There was a path a dozen steps away from us, and along it walked a squad of terrifying-looking people. They were dressed in ragged clothing, their bodies were a swarthy gray color, they were holding an assortment of weapons, and their faces were painted with white skulls. Not a sound, word, joke, or song came from them as they walked, and they swayed oddly on their way. They were just walking—that was all. Ahead was who I assumed to be their commander, and he looked to be a fighter. His head was hidden under a dirty gray bandage, and blood was smeared all along his sleeve. I couldn’t tell if the blood was his or not, though the trail of drops he left told me there was an open wound somewhere.

One of them turned toward us, and I shuddered: his eyes were cloudy, pupil-less, and terrifying, his nostrils were torn and shredded, and the teeth in his mouth were rotted to needle-sharp points. His ravaged nose sniffed, and I could feel Lane tense.

The gray-skinned person stood there for a second swaying back and forth before continuing on his way. Ur exhaled, and Lane relaxed his grip on his sword.

I'll be honest, I was more scared there than when we saw the dark dwarves in the caves. The gray creatures did it for me.

A minute or two later the terrifying squad had disappeared behind a bend, leaving me with a whispered question for Lane.

“Who was that?”

“That? Maybe sumesi, maybe canaani. I can't really tell the difference,” he replied laconically.

“Lane, that's a good answer, but I still don't understand anything. I just got to the South.” I could tell the tracker was putting me on, giving me the shortest answer he considered good enough.

“There are a lot of different tribes in this part of the South. Almost all of them are peaceful, tillers and herdsman, people and otherwise, but they don't enjoy fighting. They don't care about war, blood, fire, and all the rest of the fun stuff we men like. But there are, or, rather, were, a few tribes that did always have a penchant for fighting—they never liked working the soil. Instead, they fought with anyone they could find, no matter the cause. Once, a very long time ago, they hacked apart yet another peaceful tribe, though that time one of the peace-loving local gods had enough. It could have been kind Narat or maybe compassionate Felosteya. Whoever it was, the god cursed all the warlike tribes in the South, even going so far as to strip them of their souls. Now everyone who's left wanders around the trails of the South somewhere between dead and alive, with little to no chance of finding shelter or deliverance from the curse. The walk and walk, day and night, with no rest. And if you come across them, you're a dead man—living creatures are like a red flag to their bull.”

“I heard they eat you and then take your soul,” hissed Ur cautiously.

“Lies,” Lane shot back. “What do they need your soul for when they don't even have one of their own? Sure, they'll eat you—I've heard that, too. Okay, let's go before something else happens along.”

“So they only walk the paths? Or do they wander the jungle, too?” I asked Lane.

“I've only seen them on the jungle paths,” he answered after taking a second to think. “But there's no end to what you can find around here. It's an ancient land with very old terrors.”

My estimate of two or three hours was mistaken. The sun had already started to ease toward the west when we saw the copse we were looking for. It wasn't exactly a copse; just a few dozen palms and a bunch of grass. But that was definitely it, unless the map was lying, of course.

Thank the heavens, we hadn't had to pull out our swords once. The jungle was dead quiet, and all we'd come across was the natural environment. It was strange, I thought, though I didn't really have any reason to think it should be otherwise.

“Okay, here we are,” I said to Lane. “Here's the scroll I promised you. You know how to use it, right?”

Lane smiled skeptically and quickly unrolled the scroll.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything else?” he asked, nodding to show his support for the question.

“I’m sure,” I replied. “Just remember, we never went anywhere together, and you didn’t even see me today.”

The portal flashed and disappeared. I looked around cautiously—the jungle had me spooked, if just a little. I was out of my element, looking around at the leaves a few steps away, and wondering if they were hiding anything.

I ran over to the palm grove and called out softly.

“Idrissa, are you here? Come on, I don’t want to be here when it gets dark. These places are nasty.”

Something rustled above me, some dirt floated down, and then I was surprised to see a dried banana peel and a large palm frond hit the ground.

“Who are you?” a squeaky voice asked from above me.

I looked up to see a face that appeared more monkey than human. The monkey dryad was eying me through the large palm branches. *This one certainly got the worst of it.* Her sisters had at least some remnant of their old beauty, or at least their old humanity, but this one...

“Who?” I took a deep breath. “I’m a long-suffering martyr here to save you. Your sisters sent me.”

“Really?” The face broke into a smile. “You’re *the one*?”

“I don’t know about that, though I did help all three of your sisters already. And I’m going to help you, too. Probably.”

Seeing as how the Fomor quest had been something less than a walk in the park, I was no longer sure of anything.

The little figure scampered down the trunk of the palm tree with incredible agility, running over to give me a hug. She was tiny, and so her nose ended up smashed against my thigh.

*You completed a quest: Find Idrissa the South  
This is the fifth in the Children of the Goddess series of hidden quests.  
Reward:  
8500 experience  
Your choice of elite items  
Single-use spell: random  
Ability to unlock the sixth quest in the Children of the Goddess series.*

But that wasn’t all.

*You unlocked Level 56!  
Points ready to be distributed: 5*

Things were looking up.

“I’m fo happy!” the dryad exclaimed into my leg, not letting go. “I’d already loft hope.”

“Shouldn’t have done that. Well, you shouldn’t have given up hope, and you shouldn’t be blowing your nose in my pants—I’ve been wandering the jungle all day in them,” I said tactfully to Idrissa. “Don’t cry, everything will be okay.”

“Ah, warrior!” The dryad unhitched herself from my pants, wiped her face, and thought for a second before raising a hand in the air. “I need to give you something in honor of our meeting and to thank you for coming.”

She leaped over to her palm tree and started digging around in a hole at the base of it.

“I hid something somewhere around here,” she said, spitting out the sand that kept getting in her mouth. “Ah, here they are!”

She ran back over to show me a signet ring and an earring in her palm.

“They’re nice and magical. One of them belonged to a great king and helped him perform feats of valor, while the other belonged to a great mage. What she did with it...the whole jungle couldn’t stop talking about it for a hundred years. I know you’re a warrior, so you’d rather have the king’s item, but I don’t remember which is which. Just pick which one you want. If you’re lucky, you’ll guess right; if not, you won’t.”

*Fifty-fifty, in other words.* Either way, I figured, I’d come out ahead: either I could wear it or I could sell it at the auction. Getting an elite item never hurt anyone.

“I’ll take the ring,” I said to the dryad.

She grabbed it with her other hand, and held it out to me.

*Sleeping Reason Signet Ring*

*+35 to intellect*

*+29 to wisdom*

*+12% chance of restoring your mana after casting a spell*

*+3% ability improvement speed*

*+7% chance of spells cast at you being rendered harmless*

*Durability: 580/600*

*Class limitation: only mages*

*Minimum level for use: 75*

It wasn’t a bad ring; it was just a shame it wasn’t for me. Anyway, it was the type of thing I could sell for good money.

“Nope, I guessed wrong,” Idrissa squeaked. “Don’t worry, though, you can have this, too.”

She handed me a scroll.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely to the little keeper, dumping the ring and the scroll in my bag. *I wish I had an apple.* Those dryads sure liked them. “Okay, so what can I do for you?”

“You can free me,” she replied, sitting down on a root. “And when you do that, I’ll tell you what’s next.”

“Next?” I knew freeing the dryads wouldn’t be the whole story, and the first one had told me the same, but still—I really wanted to believe that I was close to the finish line.

“Of course,” Idrissa said, scrunching up her face. “It’ll be easy though.”

*Oh, I know your “easy,” all right. Everything seems easy when your job is to sit on roots and climb palm trees. Meanwhile, all I have to do is wear my feet down to the bone and drive myself crazy...*

“Okay, we’ll deal with that later.” I held up my hands. “You just tell me what I need to do for you.”

“I need a gong,” she responded, batting her eyelashes. “The Gong of the Goddess.”

*You unlocked Gong of the Goddess.*

*This is the sixth in the Children of the Goddess series of hidden quests.*

*Task for the first part of the quest: collect three keys (the Key of Bravery, the Key of Guile, and the Key of Intellect) hidden in three abandoned temples back in ancient times.*

*Task for the second part of the quest: find and bring the Gong of the Goddess, a unique item hidden in the cursed Monkey King Temple, to Idrissa the South. The location of the temple will only be shown on your map once the first part of the quest is complete.*

*Additional task:*

*The first part of the quest must be completed alone. You may have assistance getting to each of the temples, but you are the only one who can go inside. If you bring help with you into any of the temples, you will fail the quest.*

*You can have help completing the second part of the quest, though beating it on your own will earn you an additional bonus.*

*Reward:*

*20000 experience*

*Your choice of set items matching your class*

*A random and unique active ability matching your class*

*A random and unique passive ability matching your class*

*+10% to mana*

*Ability to unlock the seventh quest in the Children of the Goddess series.*

*Accept?*

“Do I get a little helper?” I asked Idrissa wearily.

“What do you mean?” The dryad stared at me in surprise.

“You know, a little one,” I answered, “in a sailor’s uniform. So he can work his fingers while I’m getting the keys. We’re in a famous TV show, it sounds like.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the dryad said frankly. “But I don’t have anyone like that. Can you do it without a helper?”

“Well, it’ll be hard, but I’ll do my best.” I sighed.

I accepted the quest and pulled up my map. One of the temples was available, as we’d fought a battle to protect some village or other nearby. *Looks like that’s where I’m going first.* I didn’t have access to the second or third temples yet, and they were a good distance away from anywhere I’d been, but it was just a matter of time with the number of missions we were taking on. On the other hand, time was starting to be a factor. I had a date in some marshes in the West, and the date was catching up to me.

The dryad spun off some kind of wild, happy dance, squealing and clapping her hands. I had to smile at her unbridled enthusiasm—at least one of us was having a good time.

“Okay, Idrissa, I’m headed off,” I said with a wink. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” the little monkey said, suddenly serious again. “It’s not just my life and that of my sisters that’s riding on you completing this quest; it’s much bigger than that.”

“It is?” I had an idea what her answer would be.

“You’ll find out when you bring the gong back,” Idrissa replied, disappointing me. “No sooner than that, and probably even later.”

I waved before opening a portal to the company headquarters. *I’ll drop by Maykong, see what the local beauties are like, and get a chance to try out the stationary portal while I’m at it. Ah, I do have to make sure I pick up a pass though...*

## Chapter Five

### In which the hero visits Maykong

When I heard the words “stationary portal,” I assumed it was something big and impressive, a blue abyss with white flashes inlaid with marble and standing on an enormous pedestal. It had white steps leading up to it, and glistening brass figurines on the sides. The guards were four of the Wild Brigade’s best, all wearing polished armor and brandishing swords.

Well, not exactly.

A visit to the Free Company office netted me a small scrap of paper. It read, *Hagen, warrior, Seventh Free Company—not lying*, and it was stamped with the date: 13 Crimson, 9583<sup>rd</sup> year after the Creation of Fayroll. *Interesting*. I headed in the direction the clerk pointed me in, though all I found was a small stool, a rusty metal circle with flapping doors and something sticking out of the side, and a sleepy warrior standing nearby the whole contraption.

“Mr. Warrior,” I called over to him, “where’s the portal? Please don’t tell me this is it.”

“You’re looking at it.” He yawned, his entire face splitting in half. “I know you sneaky bastards, though—show me your paper.”

“Here.” I handed him my pass before posing another question. “Will it definitely get me to Maykong?”

“Where else would you want to go?” he asked me lazily. “Old Fild’s salon in Aegan?”

“Well, here’s the thing,” he faltered slightly. “I’ve never been there, to Maykong, and the places you haven’t been to—”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll get to Maykong like you’re supposed to. The portal is constant, so you go where the owner wants you to go as long as you have permission. Here, take your paper back and get going. Climb up on that stool and dive in as soon as I press the lever.”

I clambered up, the soldier pressed some gadget that was apparently the lever, the flaps opened with a creak, and I traipsed into the blue portal. One strange thing was that it had some red streaks. Although... *It’s an official, stationary portal. Maybe that’s just how they are?*

*Welcome to Maykong, the capital of the Southern reaches. Maykong, a pearl of the South, is known for its beauty, hospitality, and safety. It was founded back when—*

When I'd just started playing, I thoroughly enjoyed reading all the stories behind local sites, well, so long as I had the time. Then time past, and I found that I'd lost the desire—everything is good in moderation. *Yup, it's old, it's legendary...what else is new?*

But the city really was beautiful. White buildings reached toward the clear blue sky with long, slender towers. The cries of seagulls and a light, pungent breeze told me that the sea was somewhere nearby. People shouted and talked, the noise typical for a large city, though it was soft, far-off, and muted enough to keep from being annoying. The odd part was that I was sure the portal would take me to some square, or, maybe, a bar. Perhaps even a fun kind of building with large-chested women of all shapes and sizes. Instead, I walked out onto the dust of an absolutely deserted alley. There was nobody to be seen, and all the buildings around me were closed. Some were even boarded up.

“Sahib, would you like a tame snake?” I heard a girlish voice behind me ask.

“What kind of snake?” I spun around as I answered, jumping to the side and instinctively gripping my sword.

On the porch of a boarded-up house sat a girl who looked to be around the age of eight. She had black braids, lively green eyes, and a heavily freckled nose. A fine little girl, in other words, if it hadn't been for the company she kept: an incredibly large and, judging by the greenish liquid oozing from its fangs, poisonous snake wrapped around her slender arm and part of her body. The creature was longer than my entire apartment. *How is she not collapsing under its weight?*

“This is Apofss,” the girl explained with a smile. “He's smart, and he won't just bite you for no reason. We've been waiting here for a long time—I brought him for you. If you take him, he'll serve you faithfully.”

The snake hissed, almost as if to second what she was saying.

“Sure,” I mumbled, wiping the sweat from my forehead. “But how am I supposed to know what he thinks is a good reason to bite someone?”

“Your command, sahib. Just point him in the direction of an enemy, and Apofss will go kill him.”

It sounded like a nice creature to have, though the thought of dragging the thing all the way around Fayroll with me had me in a cold sweat. I pulled out a gold coin and tossed it at the girl.

“Here's some money, go buy something for yourself. Just keep Apofss—I don't really need him. What's your name?”

“Pawny.” The girl smiled, showing off where she'd lost a tooth. “Are you sure you won't take him? He's great, and I'm sure he'll come in handy.”

“No, sweetie, I don’t think so,” I replied, waving my hand resolutely and earning yet another hiss from the great and useful snake. *You forgot the part about how terrifying he is.*

“I live over there,” Pawny said, her tone telling me that she’d warmed up to me. She pointed at a small house at the end of the alley. “If you change your mind, come on it. Just don’t be afraid when you come in: Apofss isn’t the only snake I’m training. None of them will bite you, though.”

*I’d rather chew my right arm off than walk into that house,* I thought to myself. I said nothing of the sort, however, just smiling at the girl sitting on the step and playing with her snake. It was like she had no idea how dangerous it was.

“Hey, traveler,” she called again once I’d taken several steps away from her. “Hold on.”

I turned around.

“You were kind to me, and I can’t let you go without a gift. Good, like evil, is always repaid in kind,” she said, rolling off an unexpectedly deep line for someone her age. Our looks met once again, and I started—*what happened to the emerald-green eyes?* Instead, there was a darkness in them, one with neither a beginning nor an end. “If you don’t need a devoted servant, you can at least take this talisman with you. I’d like you to have it.”

Apofss slipped off the arm of the girl, if she could still be called a girl with those eyes.

He carried an object in his fangs, and, a split-second before he got to me, he reared up on his tail to look me look me in the eye.

“Go ahead, warrior, take it. I think it’s a trinket you’ll really need sooner or later.” She laughed, but her laugh was anything but girlish. Something about it told me she was happy with and confident in a job well done.

I held out my hand, spellbound, and Apofss dropped a little, surprisingly heavy, and incredibly life-like figure of a snake into in.

When I looked up, the alley was deserted. Tracks in the dust were the only proof I had that an enormous snake had been right in front of me just a second before. There were also plumes of dust kicked up in the wind—he had really been there, and I wasn’t going crazy.

*True Servant of the God*

*A unique item, it is the only one of its kind.*

*Allows the holder to summon a true servant of the goddess Tiamat.*

*Limitation: the summoner cannot be in conflict with servants of the Dark Gods or the Dark Gods themselves. If that is the case, the summoned servant of Tiamat may poison the summoner, and rumors say the bites inflicted by the servants of the goddess are so poisonous that they can kill any creature in Fayroll. That, of course, is still nothing more than rumor, as nobody has ever tried to kill the gods or the world’s creators.*

*Usage.*

*To summon a servant of Tiamat, clasp the talisman in your palm, and say, “Servant, appear.” Then point to anyone in front of you, and say, “Kill.”*

*Cannot be stolen, lost, broken, or sold.  
Does not disappear from the holder's inventory after dying*

I stood there, stunned and wondering who I'd just been talking to. And why me? The only thing that made sense was that fact that I had one more headache on my hands. The dark side was beckoning yet again.

I stuck the statuette in my bag and walked away from the strange alley, which was still deserted save for the wind.

The city really was beautiful. I counted several types of architecture, with round Hindu motifs next door to strict Victorian buildings. There was no logic to it whatsoever, though it turned out surprisingly well.

The next half hour was spent ambling from square to street to alley, and finally I found myself on the port promenade.

"Hagen, what are you doing here?" Someone smacked into me and happily kissed my cheek.

"I'm just walking," I answered cautiously, wondering why, in the innumerable throngs of players in the game, I had to get all the odd girls and strange, random meetings.

"I thought you were in the North," Milly Re continued, her mood unusually light. "Weren't you going to be up there for a while?"

"It's cold, and there's nothing to do without a reputation," I replied casually. "Why are you here?"

"What do you mean?" Milly asked in surprise. "The shipyards are here, and we're building the Great Armada. I'm here at least once a week, sometimes more often than that. Today is a particularly exciting day: we have a ship we're launching down the slipway. All the leadership of the clan is here."

*Uh oh...then I have to go. If the clan leadership is here, then their guests probably are, too. And I can just guess who the first guest they'd invite would be. They may not have even had to invite her—she'd figure out a way to get here.*

"No, this is clan-only, so she won't be here," Milly said, correctly interpreting the darkening expression on my face. "No one's seen her in a few days anyway. By the way, if you're so fed up with your clan, why are you still there? Just kiss them all goodbye and be done with them. We'd be happy to have you."

"If only it were that simple," I responded sadly.

"Oh, come on, don't complicate things." Milly threw her hands up in the air. "Whatever, it doesn't matter—let's go."

"Go where?"

"Hurry up! The ship is about to hit the water, and we'll miss the best part."

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me through a thick crowd of onlookers. Players and NPCs alike had gathered to watch the ship be launched.

Milly moved quickly, and I had no choice but to keep up—she held onto my hand the whole time. As a result, when we got to the Gray Witch and her entourage, all of whom were standing on a small wooden platform raised a good bit off the ground, I was panting and bedraggled.

“Well, what do we have here?” The witch smiled when she saw us. “Where did you find such a good-looking young man?”

“Hi there,” I said, returning her smile.

“He was over on the pier,” Milly Re said loudly. “I figured he could come watch us launch the Arminstrad from close up, since it isn’t every day that we launch ships.”

“Nobody here minds, certainly,” the Witch replied, gesturing with her arms.

Something screeched, there was a rumble, and a minute later we heard a splash. The crowd on the pier cheered wildly.

“What just happened?” The Gray Witch looked around at the group.

Cedric Sekira laughed suddenly, clapping his hands on his thighs. A few other Hound officials joined him. Meanwhile, the Witch continued glancing from one to another with an expression of confusion on her face.

“Did you wave your arms?” Cedric asked when he caught his breath again.

“Yes?” the Witch replied, irritation creeping into her voice.

“Well, there you go. What kind of signal do you think the shipbuilders were waiting for?”

The Gray Witch looked down, then at us, and then back at Cedric before quietly giggling.

Even I had to smile.

“Damn it, Hagen,” shrieked Milly. “You made me miss it! I missed it! The whole thing!”

“Milly, come on,” I said, trying to reason with her. “You dragged me up here yourself—how is it my fault?”

She snorted in frustration.

Once the Hounds stopped laughing, they started climbing down off the platform. The Gray Witch walked over to me.

“So, how’s life?” she asked, her voice sincere. “Everything good?”

“Oh, you know,” I answered her in kind. “The usual.”

“They’re saying something big just went down in the North. You were up there, right? Did you hear anything?”

I sighed heavily.

“I don’t know that I’ve heard anything, but I did see the whole thing.” There was no point lying. Perhaps better said, it was worth telling at least part of the truth. “The admin set up a game event with a bunch of NPCs killing other NPCs. It was something to see!”

“Ah, it’s a shame I didn’t get up there then.” The Gray Witch shook her head, as if letting me know that there was a no great tragedy in her life.

“But weren’t there some of yours there?” I asked. “I think I saw Romuil, and he might have been with Miurat—at least, the two of them hang out.”

“You saw Romuil there?” Fredegar, Hounds’ security chief, asked from behind me. “Are you sure?”

“Only the gods don’t make mistakes, and even that’s not exactly true,” I replied, turning in his direction. “But I’m sure—it was him.”

“And did you see Miurat himself?” Fredegar’s face was dead serious. “Or anyone else from our clan?”

“No, I didn’t see Miurat. And I don’t know if anyone else from your clan was there. I’ve only met you all, Milly, and another five or six of you.”

“That makes sense. I’ll be honest with you, my friend,” the Gray witch said, taking me by the arm and whispering to me mysteriously, “even I don’t know the names of everyone in the clan. I’m fine with faces, but names, and especially the names of the people we’ve had join lately... It’s terrible, but what can you do? That one, Romuil, he joined recently as well, right, Fredegar?”

“Yes.” Fredegar grimaced, as if biting down on a handful of cranberries. “A political refugee. So he and Miurat are friends?”

“I don’t know about friends,” I said evasively. “It’s just that when I was at the mistress’s birthday party, they came over to me together. I thought the two of them had something going on—at least, that’s what it looked like to me.”

“Got it,” Fredegar said slowly.

“What happened?” I was intrigued. They were both players I’d spent some time with.

“By the way, Hagen,” the Gray Witch said, smiling radiantly, “look over at that ship.”

She pointed toward a majestic, white frigate moored to one of the docks.

“That’s our flagship, the one I sent you the ticket for. What did you decide about that, by the way? Are you going to sail with us or not? I don’t think there’s too much time left before we’re ready to embark.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I said frankly. “I’ll see how things look when we get closer, but I don’t want to plan anything yet. It’s not tomorrow or something like that, is it?”

“No, definitely not tomorrow,” the Witch assured me. “We have other plans for tomorrow: we’re going to be playing mafia.”

I looked around at the clan leadership in respect. It doesn’t get much more meta than a game within a game, and not just anyone can pull that off.

“Where are you headed off to now?” the Gray Witch asked, apparently in a tactful attempt to let me know that the show was over and I was free to go.

“Back to the Free Companies,” I sighed. “I’m a soldier now.”

“Whoa,” Fredegar said with surprise. “Why’s that?”

“The experience, a way to explore the South relatively quickly, and a few other things,” I said, counting them off on my fingers. “You have to try everything in the game.”

“So you’ll be in the South for a while now, I guess,” the Witch said thoughtfully. “Excellent.”

“If that’s it, I’ll head off.” I waited for the Witch to nod her approval, said goodbye to everyone, and waved to Milly, who still had a look of annoyance on her face, and walked off in the direction of the city center. I needed to visit the hotel and drop off the extra money I was carrying around. It would have been interesting to find out how much the NPCs were making with each raid, as I had a nice stream of cash coming in. At least, by my standards.

Maykong was a tricky city, and what I thought was a main road narrowed gradually until it turned into an alley that dumped me into a shadowy park.

“Stop him!” somebody shouted, and I heard footsteps and the clash of weapons.

A short player dashed toward me down the alley, and behind him were three mustachioed characters with nasty-looking faces that were scowling savagely. What surprised me was that they were all NPCs, and all of them were aggressive. *But they’re wearing the city guard uniform?*

I’d barely had time to register that surprise when the fugitive stopped next to me and croaked out a request, puffing heavily.

“Hey, give me a hand here?”

I dubiously watched the whole scene unfolding, the mustaches closing in on the scout, whose name was Joker. There was no time to give him an answer before the first mustache made my mind up for me. All I could do was pull out my sword and parry his blow—my shield had to remain on my back for the time being.

After summoning my wolf, I had him go after the second killer, leaving the third for Joker. He wasn’t in a hurry to take on his opponent, however, preferring to circle him warily.

The trio weren’t very high-level, and so I was able to polish mine off quickly and land a critical hit to the back of the one paying attention to Joker. The third, however, got lucky. He killed my wolf and took to his heels, yelling back at us in parting.

“You’re dead men! The whole city is going to hear about this, and the guards will all know your names! I’m going to tell everyone in the guild, too!”

His promise made, the surviving mustache spat in our direction and sprinted off.

“That’s not good,” Joker said with a shake of his head, leaning over and collecting what should have been my loot. “This is a problem.”

“Well, yes,” I agreed, collecting the loot from the first body and deciding to forget about the second—that’s what you get when you’re dealing with the Joker. “But could you explain to

me, my good man, why your problems are now mine? I'm just wondering why that guy is going to tell the city guard and some guild something. What guild, by the way? And what do I have to look forward to?"

"How do I put this?" Joker started, obviously winding up. "It's just that—"

"I can tell my own stories, thank you very much," I said, cutting in. "Are you a thief?"

"That's my class, yes," he replied with a nod.

"And in real life?" I asked directly.

"No, not like that. Though I'm not one to pass up a good opportunity." He looked me in the eye. "The problem is that I have a stake in the game."

"Hm?" I looked at him inquisitively, letting him know that I wasn't sure if I should ask him what his stake in the game actually was. I wasn't sure I'd get an answer.

Joker made a motion in the air as if he was screwing in a light bulb, in turn letting me know that I might one day get the truth—but not right then.

"Okay, Hagen, we need to get out of here." Joker was looking around apprehensively, especially scanning the alley and the shadows starting to fall across it in the twilight. "They wouldn't come at us all at once, and I'm not sure we can fight them off when they do come. That bastard could get the thieves' guild after us—that's who he was talking about. Well, and the city guard, obviously."

"Wait, why do I have to fight them off? You're the one they're after," I muttered sullenly, realizing full well that I was already in too deep.

"You and I both have to deal with the thieves and the city guards now. The former want us dead, and the latter will be after our money—and they may want us dead, too. I have to get out of this city, but how? Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

"What do you mean, how? Just jump in a portal and be done with it," I replied, surprised, as I matched his fast pace out of the alley.

"I can't. There's an important deal I have coming up, so I have to make sure I'm here every now and then."

*He has a deal...what kind of scout is he?* Anyway, I wanted to get him back for screwing me over.

"Why don't you join us?" I asked amiably.

The scout squinted at me. "Who is 'us'?"

"The Free Companies," I replied with a wink. "Ever heard of them?"

"Oh, please," he exclaimed incredulously. "Life's miserable there, isn't it?"

"I'm standing right here, aren't I?" I spun around and assuming a heroic stance. "That's all there is to it! I'm full, I go out and get drunk, and I have all the tobacco I could want. That's the 'army.' Every week we get a day off, and I'm practically drowning in experience. The army?"

Yeah, right, the army. Every few days we go out on a mission, but other than that we just lounge around. No marches, no drill. And plenty of money.”

“Sure sounds great.” Joker looked at me, his suspicion still not allayed. “Are you serious?”

“Fine, forget it,” I replied, waving him off. “You’re a big boy; you can do what you want.”

We left the alley, which had led me to the park.

“Do you know where the central square is? I need to go drag a few mates out of the bar,” I asked the scout. I’d decided not to visit the hotel, figuring that going off to find it would be just asking for more problems. The scout pointed me in the right direction, his thoughts obviously elsewhere.

“See you,” I called with a wave. He waved back, his eyes reflecting his unwillingness.

“Thanks—I owe you.” He nodded and walked off.

Nothing else happened on my way to the main square, and the first thing I saw there was the hulking figure of Ur. He was happily running around in the fountain, lifting his legs up high and splashing a few guards who were obviously leery of trying to stop him.

The rest of my group was relaxing around the fountain, egging the northerner on with advice and shouts of encouragement.

“Splash that one—he looks like he needs to relax!”

“You’re dancing, but why aren’t you singing? Everything’s better when you sing!”

“Yeah, exactly! Songs are what get you through life, and...they just help with everything!”

“You dog, you!”

“Free Companies, yee-ee-ha-a-aw!”

The guards were hesitantly threatening to bash Ur’s face in, though they clearly wanted nothing to do with the crazy mercenaries. Past experience had taught them well.

“Oh, Hagen,” Ur yelled when he saw me. “Come on over here, let’s go for a swim!”

“Come on, let’s go,” I said. “It’s getting dark, and we need to head back to the barracks.”

“Really?” He stopped, the guards also falling silent and staring at him hopefully.

“Really,” Lane responded strongly. “It’s time to go. Are we all here?”

“Fattah’s missing,” Torn said. “He went to see a friend at the Lodestar, and ended up staying.”

“We should get him.” Lane looked at Ping. “Otherwise he’ll think we forgot about him.”

“There’s he is,” Pong answered instead of Ping. “He’s coming.”

I followed the brothers' glance and saw Fattah leaving a pub with a large figure I thought was vaguely familiar. Unfortunately, I couldn't see his name in the gathering dusk, and he opened a portal and jumped in before I could go over to get a better look.

"Hagen, you're here? I didn't think you were going to be playing today." Fattah smiled at me amiably as he walked over.

"Ah, I decided to jump in for a while and see the city. Hey, who was that? I feel like I know him," I said, deciding to ask the question before I forgot.

"Just a friend. We went on a raid together a while back, and just happened to see each other here." The elf waved off the question. "Time to head back?"

I wanted to ask him what his friend's name was, but that thought left my mind the second I realized that the portal back to the base was there on the main square—not back in the alley where it dumped me.

"Lane," I said, tugging on the sleeve of the group's most sober member. "When you're coming here to Maykong from the company, does the portal drop you here or something else?"

"Here, of course," the tracker replied, adjusting his belt. "This is where all the fun houses are, not to mention the Lodestar. We always drink there—it's tradition. The portal takes you here, and we port back from here. Really, the Maykong authorities don't like it when we go off around the city. They don't mind if we get into trouble here, so we stay out of the residential areas."

*What's going on?* There was a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. *Pawny, who are you?*

## Chapter Six

### In which the hero is rented out.

"Hey, babe, you remember that we have to go to the pastry store first, right? I know a really good one near Park Kultury." That was how Vika greeted me when I stepped out of the capsule and into the real world.

"First, and then where?" I asked apprehensively.

She pulled herself away from the glossy magazine she was paging through from her cross-legged position on the couch, her eyes widening.

"So you forgot. Sweetie, we're going to see your parents tomorrow."

*Oh, boy.* I really had forgotten. We'd scheduled a trip, but the only problem was that my parents had no idea. *Oh, no, and mom might have dragged dad to the dacha "one last time."* She had a habit of shutting things open, reopening them, and shutting them again, all under the guise of "one last time." The "last time" often coincided with the "first time" of the next year, in fact. The only things that got in the way of all her "last times" were heavy snowfalls or other good reasons: catching a cold, big sales, or visits from possible future daughter-in-laws. That, at least, was how my mom always evaluated my girlfriends. My opinion didn't matter in the least, and that's why I rarely let her meet anyone.

However, I could tell by the way Vika was looking at me that uttering a single word about how we weren't going would mean... Well, I wasn't sure what it would mean, but I had no desire to find out. The previous few days had been difficult for both of us as it was. And you can't constantly be tearing down budding relationships like the one we had.

"Of course, we need to head over," I said, obediently nodding. "Just you go ahead and take charge, figure out where to go and pick out the cake. I think they're all good."

"Pies, not a cake," Vika replied. "We can get a mix, the kind with lots of little pies in a big box..."

My stomach heard her say "pies," and responded with a loud, clearly audible gurgle.

"Got it. I'll go heat up the meat patties." She got up from the couch and walked toward the kitchen.

"Meat patties," I said to myself as I pulled out a cigarette and watched her walk away. "That sounds good."

Out on the balcony, I finished my cigarette and called my parents' house, hoping against hope that they hadn't left for the dacha.

I was in luck—they were just about to leave. My mom had spent the whole evening trying to decide if they should go or not, and it was only when she'd driven my dad good and crazy that she thought up an iron-clad argument: "I was just waiting so we wouldn't have to deal with traffic." Then she started pushing in the direction of the car. My dad put up a feeble resistance, but he'd already lost by the time I called.

It took him all of a minute to tell me the story. It was mostly interjections and conjunctions, but I knew mom well enough to fill in the blanks.

"Don't worry, dad, everything's fine. Hand mom the phone," I said to my upset parent.

"Mom, hi, I'm coming to see you tomorrow," I said quickly as soon as I heard her voice. "I'm bringing my girlfriend, too."

Her "meet us at..." was cut short before it ever had a chance to get started. "Bringing my girlfriend" meant we could only get together in Moscow, as the dacha was cordoned off for anyone not part of the immediate family. Even my ex-wife had taken a while to be allowed into the holy of holies, and that was only because she'd made a good impression on my mom right from the get-go.

"Really?" my mom answered thoughtfully. "Is she a good one?"

"You'll like her," I said reassuringly. "She has a good head on her shoulders, and hair on her head. Plus, she's a good cook, and she likes to keep things clean."

My poor mom had a hard time forgetting Irma, who she'd met accidentally two years before when the two of us were walking down the street. I have no idea why Irma, who wasn't into the punk scene at all, shaved her gorgeous chestnut locks, but my mom was shocked by the light reflecting off her polished head into the windows of the buildings around us.

"Oh, you're living together?" Mom didn't care about that kind of thing, and she had no qualms calling it like it was. "That was fast."

“Well, what do you expect? That’s how life is now,” I replied diplomatically. “We’ll be there tomorrow by two, and we’ll bring something for tea.”

“Sure, sure,” she responded, clearly thinking about something. “We can forget the dacha—I read online that it’s supposed to rain tomorrow anyway.”

My mom stayed up with the times. She’d mastered the internet quickly, and enjoyed spending time reading the news, gossip about TV and movie stars, reviews of tours to spots around the Golden Ring, and other fun nonsense.

“See you tomorrow,” I said. She started saying something to my dad as I hung up.

“Okay, fine, we’re not going anywhere. What are you…”

It sounded like the old man was in for round two.

How did Vika know about all the little pastry shops? I’d spent my entire life in Moscow, and had no idea that somewhere in the web of streets in the historical center there were small shops owned by local bakers. The pastries were fresh, they smelled fantastic, and the prices were excellent. Not long before that I’d seen a bakery in the center with a sign that read, “Pies cheaper than ever today: just 110 rubles apiece.” I’d stopped there in shock. How could a cabbage pie cost that much? Did they use diamond flour? Was the cabbage encrusted in gold? I had no idea who would be willing to dish out that much.

Contrary to my expectations, the introduction went off without a hitch. My mom had to ask a few clever questions, of course, that made me roll my eyes and my dad play with his mustache, but Vika was brilliant. She felt her way around the traps my mom laid with flawless dexterity.

The two separated as friends, and, judging by the looks I was getting from my mom, she was already putting together a plan to get me married to the “very nice girl from a good family” and put us to work making her grandbabies. At least, as she walked us to the elevator, she whispered in my ear, “That’s the right kind of girl, you know…” She was in her element.

“I don’t know what you were talking about,” Vika said, thinking back to the spiel I’d given her on the way there about how to meet my parents and stay sane in the process. “They’re very nice, I enjoyed meeting them. And your mom is a great cook.”

I could only agree with her there. My mom really was good.

“I think you’ll like my parents, too,” Vika continued. “Maybe we can visit them for a few days this New Year’s? Winter is great in Kasimov—snow, nice and cold. And there are plenty of hills, so we can go skiing.”

I don’t know if it was funny or said, but, either way, I was probably a heartless bastard: I’d never even thought to ask where she was from. Not even once. *That’s not good.*

Kasimov. It was a familiar name, but the only thing I could remember was that Balakirev the Buffoon was from there, and that they had big burdocks.

“Why not? The paper will be closed, anyway,” I replied genially. “At least, our part will be. We just need to make sure someone checks in on Yushkov to make sure he doesn’t drink for ten days straight.”

Vika smiled happily, and then laced a good bit of poison in her voice to ask her next question.

“And how will you get by for four days without your game?”

My answer was completely sincere—I believed it, at least.

“It’ll be great. We can ski, we’ll have some good food, and I’ll be too busy loving you.”

She smiled again, this time even, I thought, purring a little. It made me feel good.

“Maybe Elina will go with us. She could use a break from Fayroll, too.”

I twitched. The good feeling was gone, and I was already worried about spending four days with... *I don't think I'll live to see day two, not to mention day four!*

“Although, probably not,” Vika said, quickly lifting my spirits. “She and my mom have been at each other for the past few years.”

*Has she been able to get along with anyone recently? I mean, besides the Iron Doofus.*

Of course, I didn't say that out loud—there was no point spoiling Vika's good mood. She was sitting there smiling, humming some tune or other, and the headlights whipping by in the other direction flashed in her eyes. *Screw it. Let her sister go. I'll go, too, even if I don't want to—I've seen worse...*

It was still summer in Fayroll. Either winter never came to the South, or there was no such thing in the game to begin with. Either way, it was just as hot and muggy as ever, even as Moscow grew colder by the day. The morning breeze smelled less like my first cigarette of the day, and more like imminent snow and bad weather.

Everyone was bustling around the parade grounds when I got there. They ran, yelled, and hustled in every direction, and I couldn't find my company. Noticing a player running in my direction, I stopped in front of him.

“Hey,” I said to him. “What's going on? Are we under attack? Or are we attacking someone else?”

“All three of the companies are being sent somewhere, though nobody knows where exactly. I've never seen anything like this, and I've been here for two months,” he answered. “Who knows what it is? Maybe some kind of big event. Sorry, I have to go—my squad is already lined up.”

“Wow,” I said as he ran off. “And where's my company?”

I dashed along the grounds, scanning each of the ranks of mercenaries. I'd gotten there just in time—another half hour and I'd have been greeted by guards and the dust stirred up by the large formation.

“Hagen,” I heard Lane call. “Let's go.”

I looked around, finally catching a glimpse of a hand waving to me from the second row of what looked to be my company. Running over, I squeezed through the front row and got in line between Lane and Fattah.

“Where have you been?” hissed Fattah. “We would have all been punished if you’d missed the general assembly.”

“How was I supposed to know that this was going on?” I answered just as quietly. “It’s not like I got a letter or something—I just happened to log in. Today’s Sunday, by the way.”

“What do the Free Companies care what day it is?” replied Lane philosophically. “It doesn’t matter if it’s Wednesday or Saturday; our job is to fight and die.”

“Hush!” Troot ordered under his breath. “Bunch of gossiping old ladies.”

“It’s all Hagen’s fault,” Falk said from the first row, jumping into the conversation. “We were all quiet until he got here. And that’s not to mention the fact that he was late!”

“Down boy,” I shot back at him. “Fetch!”

Troot snarled so loudly that Lieutenant Grokkh swore he’d start chopping off everyone’s manhood—our squad, his squad... The goblin grinned evilly at us, though right then the lieutenant promised to cut off his ears personally.

“That makes sense,” I said, realizing that I was going too far but not caring enough to stop. “Goblins don’t have anything between their legs to chop off. Sometimes you can find it if you have a big enough magnifying glass, though not always.”

Everyone around me shook with laughter, while the goblin shot daggers at me with his eyes. We were at war, with everything that had happened up until that point being just a fun prelude. Grokkh’s look told me I was in trouble with him, too.

“Shouldn’t have said that,” whispered Lane. “You have no idea what a bastard he is.”

“Oh, I do. I just couldn’t help myself,” I said contritely.

“Warriors!” Captain Singkh’s voice rang out across the parade grounds and hushed our formation. “Today is an unusual day with an unusual mission. Not only will you fight spawn of magic; today you will do battle with Death itself. Stand tall in battle, and remember that your job is to both finish victorious and survive. I believe in you! Lieutenants, take your companies through the portal in numerical order.”

He was inspiring, if uninformative. All I learned was that we wouldn’t have to wait much longer.

The Third Company tramped through the large portal the captain opened.

“Seventh Company, to the portal, march!” Grokkh barked out five minutes later.

We started by marching in place, then continued across the parade grounds. I couldn’t help but pause before I walked through the portal—*where is it going to take me?* I wasn’t sure if I’d find myself with my company or somewhere off by myself.

In the end, I came out the other side of the portal with everyone else. But when we did walk out, I wasn’t just surprised; I nearly plopped right down on the ground in amazement. *I know this place! Not far off there’s a bride waiting for me in a marsh.* Of, course, if a normal person had heard me say that, he’d have had me committed. But still—we were in Mettan. *What’s there to do here?*

“Mettan,” Fattah said from next to me. “If we’re here for the reason I think we are, I need to make a quick trip to the hotel.”

I followed his gaze, and realized what he was thinking. *No, that can’t be! Isn’t that against the rules?*

There were more than just our three companies there. Portals flashed right and left, and the First, Fourth, and Eighth Companies marched out onto the Mettan square. The players that joined them, I couldn’t help but notice, were all from the same clan: Fortune’s Favorites. *That’s strange, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of them.* That said, there were certainly enough clans in Fayroll for me to miss a few...

“Fattah, they’re all from the same clan. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“You’re probably right, though there’s something else that has me surprised. I’ve never heard or read of the Free Companies being hired to storm Mirastia—at least, not this many of them. But no, I’ve never heard of that clan either,” Fattah noted.

“There’s a first for everything.”

“Then I definitely need to get over to the hotel. Mirastia is a special location, and your things stay there if you die while you’re there on a raid, though we’ll respawn here. There’ll be no getting back to them. I don’t think the normal Free Company respawn rules hold true on that side of the river.”

“Are you sure?” I was having a hard time believing him.

“Not completely, but I’ve read a lot about Mirastia.”

I thought for a second. The mercenaries were all there, and it was getting crowded in the square. It didn’t look like there was much time left until we set off.

“Forget it,” I said, winking at Fattah and heading over to the lieutenant.

“Master Lieutenant, could I have leave for a few minutes? My stomach is tight, and I don’t want to shame the company while we’re crossing the river.”

“The mission hasn’t been handed down, and he already crapped himself,” the goblin laughed deliberately.

I decided that discretion was the better part of valor when it came to not making the lieutenant mad, and was rewarded with a nod of his head and three fingers—I had three minutes, I understood.

Dashing into the hotel, I got the key and shot up the stairs with Fattah hot on my heels.

I left everything I had with me there, dumping my gold and valuables, with the exception of what would stay with me if I died, in the chest. Then I pulled on one of the sets of armor Fat Willie had given me way back when, picked out the Skorpion Mace Reineke gave me—I didn’t want to lose it, but I had to have something to fight with—checked my bag one more time, and only then noticed the scroll Idrissa had given me.

I looked at it and grunted, almost putting it back in my bag, but at the last moment tossing it into the trunk where I wouldn’t be tempted to use it.

*Gift Scroll*

*Wall of Fire*

*For use in enclosed spaces.*

*Summons a flame that fills the space in which it is used, destroying all living things with the exception of the one casting the spell.*

*Spell active for: 45 seconds*

*Effective area: 20 square meters*

*Usage: one-time, does not need to be learned*

*Additional information: this scroll can only be used by the player to whom it was gifted or given. It does not disappear from the holder's inventory after death.*

It was a fun little toy, in a word. I just wished it had my name engraved on it.

That last thought came as I clattered down the stairs. Running out onto the porch, I slowed down and decided to wait for Fattah. If the master lieutenant reprimanded us for being late, it would be easier to push back if there were two of us.

He appeared the same minute behind me, and we looked each other over before grunting amicably. Fattah was wearing obviously low-level leather trappings, and there was a mangy-looking bow slung over his shoulder that could have been made by a child. He had leather slippers on his feet.

“We should head over to Kursky Railway Station looking like this—we’re dressed perfectly to walk through the train cars singing something sad,” Fattah said to me. “We’d probably be more successful and make more money.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. “At the least, we look like refugees running after a train.”

A fairly high-level player from the Fortune’s Favorites snorted when he saw us.

“What are you two outcasts doing here?” he asked me, as I apparently looked better than Fattah. “At your level, you should still be in the starting locations—definitely not coming with us.”

“Right, tell us where to go,” huffed the archer. “Take a closer look.”

“Oh, I got it,” the player, whose name was Chang, responded in surprise. “Then what are you doing looking like that? Trouble with PKers?”

“No, damn it,” I said, jumping into the conversation. “It’s just that a few clans have enough money on their hands that they can hire the Free Companies to clear out undead locations, and now the players serving in the companies have to go along with them. We’ll probably end up just dying there for you all.”

“A-ah!” Chang smacked himself in the forehead. “You’re mercenaries! I couldn’t figure out what was going on—a couple normal guys, decent levels, and wearing a bunch of rags. As far as Mirastia goes, yeah, we decided to just jump in and make a big splash. Show off a bit, you know?”

I was starting to feel like I was talking to a deaf person—we were creating more questions for each other than we were answering.

“Who is ‘we’?” I asked.

“Hey, would you mind coming with us and explaining the whole thing if you have a few minutes?” Fattah jumped in. “We have to head over to our company, but it would be great to hear what’s going on.”

“Why not?” Chang’s smile was easygoing. “We won’t be leaving before you guys, so I’m not in a hurry.”

“Okay, so who is ‘we’?” I asked again.

“We’re Fortune’s Favorites. It’s a new clan alliance that just formed up yesterday when six clans joined forces.”

The pieces fell into place, and I realized who “we” was, why they wanted to take on Mirastia, and where they’d gotten the money. Hiring almost the entire Free Companies was very expensive—prohibitively so, even. But if six clans got together...

“So which clans merged?” Fattah asked, digging into the details.

“The Chimney Sweeps, the Fun Surprises, the Triple Strike,” Chang replied, ticking them off on his fingers, “my clan—the Three Bears, the Sword and the Cross, and Fayroll Power.”

“Oh, wow,” Fattah said, his brows raised. “Fayroll Power—that’s news.”

“You’re telling me. So we decided to jump right into the deep end, and the clan heads got together. A quick jaunt through Mirastia to see the Emperor is what they came up with. By the way, you’re from the Thunderbirds? I don’t remember you—are you new?” Chang squinted at me.

“Yep,” I replied with a nod. “I’m new, really a nobody in the clan.”

“Then we’ll be seeing each other again. Okay, good luck on the other side of the river.” He winked at me, giving me an unsettled impression, and waved. Then he walked over toward the already-large group of players standing by the gate.

“What was that about?” I asked Fattah.

“I’ll tell you, but first we should let the lieutenant know that we’re back.”

Our lieutenant was standing with the other commanders near Captain Singh and another officer wearing the Free Company uniform, and all of them were listening attentively to the latter. When he saw us waving to him, he made a face and gestured us toward our squad.

As we headed over, Fattah sighed.

“We have some fun in front of us. I haven’t heard of the Bears or the Fun Surprises, I’ll be honest, so they’re probably just little clans. But the other ones are pretty well known—especially

Fayroll Power, one of the oldest clans around. They may not be the strongest clan out there, though they're definitely a force to be reckoned with. And there's only one thing they have in common."

"What's that?" I asked, correctly interpreting the pause Fattah took.

"None of them like the Hounds of Death. And that's putting it lightly."

"Huh," I grunted.

"Yup. So here's what's going to happen: six clans, four of whom hate a certain other clan, formed an alliance, and now they're going to easily and almost without losing anyone take Mirastia, a location just about nobody else has been able to beat—and the others suffered heavy losses."

"And nobody will ever hear about us," I said, continuing his thought. "Nobody writes or talks about the cannon fodder; they only write and talk about the cannon. And those guys over there are going to climb right over our dead bodies straight to Skull Palace."

Fattah took over from there. "They'll record the whole thing, too. Then they'll open up the clan to recruits, say, at Level 15 and higher. They'll get a river of noobs joining them, and Fortune's Favorites will have all the fodder they need."

"That'll make them one of the largest clans on the continent," I replied.

"But just imagine how much money they have! Our swords aren't cheap, and all the Free Companies are here. All of them!"

"Yep. And then they'll scoop up another two or three clans, and..."

"And?" Fattah looked at me pointedly.

"Now I see why he mentioned the Thunderbirds," I responded darkly. "We're friends with the Hounds."

"He was letting you know that you'll have to answer for that friendship," Fattah said with a smile.

*Those may be the clans our leaders split away from,* I thought. If that was true, finding my way onto the Thunderbirds' black list by deserting might be a better option than finding myself on the same list for those other six clans.

"You should leave," Fattah said. "It may not look good, but you'll be able to play in peace, at least."

"Yeah," I replied with a sigh. "Looks like a clan war is in the offing."

"Not yet, though..." Fattah looked over at my crestfallen face. "Come on, don't worry about it. Maybe nothing will happen. They'll get started, their leaders will have an argument, they won't be able to come to an agreement, and the whole thing will fall apart—that happens all the time. Remember, we're just mercenaries. We don't follow the crowds, nobody really sees us, and nobody kills each other in cities anyway. Relax. Nobody will touch you as long as you're in the Free Companies."

"Companies, line up by number, and board in that order to head across the Crisna. Move out," we heard a booming voice call.

“Yeah, nobody will touch me,” I replied. “On the other hand, we’re going to die over on the other bank.”

Twenty minutes later, our company clambered aboard one of the enormous rafts ferrying the Free Companies across the Great River. Lights glimmered on the opposite shore, and the clash of steel echoed back to us. The first companies had already joined the battle.

Dear reader thank you for reading my book!  
Fayroll 4 will be released on 15 August. Stay tuned and be informed!

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