

# **Fayroll**

Book Five

*Andrey Vasilyev*

## Chapter One

### In which we meet some new characters.

Needless to say, I was less than cheery-eyed and bushy-tailed that morning. I'd started with the palace coup, moved on to the shrewish cheapskate of a goddess, and finished with an hour and a half spent walking alone with my thoughts. There wasn't much point logging out of the game—it was a great place to think. Soon dawn broke, which it did in the real world, too, if with a sun that was in no hurry to come up. Winter was closing in, the days were growing shorter, and the nights were extending their reach, though that didn't really change anything for me. It was too late to go to sleep, since you can't sleep less than three hours at night. A doctor I knew had drummed that into me: you don't wake up feeling refreshed, and it actually leaves you with less physical and mental energy than you started with. Plus, you're irritable and more impatient than ever. In that case, it's better to just go without sleeping. You'll get absolutely knocked off your feet at around 2 p.m., but that's only if you live that long, so...

By the time I climbed out of the capsule, Vika had already gotten up and taking a shower. She was sitting in the kitchen blowing on her tea. Wrapped in colorful robe, she was as cheerful and freshly washed as a carrot.

“Yeah...” she said, looking at me. “You gamers really are weird. Honestly, I've never gotten why you enjoy spending the whole night like that. It doesn't mean anything, and you can't wake up the next morning.”

I didn't say anything in reply, primarily because I didn't have a good come-back. She was right on the money.

“Coffee?” Vika asked, correctly diagnosing my silence. “You go take a contrast shower in the meantime. That's what Elmira always did when she climbed out of that bathtub with the wires looking like you do now.”

My body didn't stop yelling at me the whole time I subjected it to the hot and cold sprays of water. *You bastard! First you don't sleep, then you keep bothering me, and now you're torturing me. A pox on you and your kind!*

Still, the radical (I don't generally bother with things like contrast showers, and so it was a fairly exotic way for me to spend a few minutes) therapy turned out to work pretty well. I perked up a little, didn't feel quite so tired, and found myself ravenously hungry.

Vika watched me greedily sucking down coffee and eyeing the door of the refrigerator, sighed, tussled my wet hair, and started rattling some pots and pans around.

“Maybe we should take the metro,” she said with a touch of caution in her voice when we walked out the lobby door. “Are you sure you won’t fall asleep while you’re driving?”

The food in my stomach had slowed me down, though not enough to fall asleep behind the wheel. I told Vika as much while I smoked a cigarette.

“Well, if you say so. It’ll be so romantic to die in the flower of my youth next to my lover in his car. My parents will be thrilled when they hear the news.” Vika adjusted the collar of my fall jacket, which I’d worn to ward off the chill in the air. “We need to buy you a good coat, or maybe an overcoat. You’re a serious person now, and you make good money, though you still dress like this. Like some kind of student.”

I decided against arguing that point, knowing very well that I’d lose. But I couldn’t help but note her use of the word “lover.” *Well, the siege is going strong, complete with trebuchets, sappers, and cut water lines. The besieged are going to need a miracle if they’re going to withstand this one.* I was a ways away from eating horse meat, however. We still had New Year’s in front of us, and that sister of Vika’s would have the perfect opportunity to stick a knife in my back. She had it in her.

Vika spent the drive silently lost in her thoughts—that much I could tell by the wrinkle on her forehead. I’d long since noted that it only appeared when she was trying to work out the big problems in life. There was no point asking what she was thinking about, though I figured it was either our future or the new people we had waiting for us at the office.

My mind was a complete blank as I started to come down from the previous night’s high. I’d really hit a home run by finishing off that quest. *What will Zimin and Valyaev say about that? And what kind of bonus are they going to give me this time? An island? Maybe my own rocket?*

My ancestral and lawful home in the parking lot was occupied by someone’s silver Mercedes, which was enough to knock me a bit akilter and anger Vika to her very core.

“Visitors are unbelievable sometimes,” she said loudly, her heels clacking down the tile in the hall. “It says right there: ‘For newspaper employees only.’ What do we even have security for?”

One guard was watching her legs, another was working on a crossword puzzle, and both were excellent representatives of the private security system in Russia: they were

checking out everyone and everything except what they should have and were supposed to be watching.”

Just as we got to the doors to our office we were hit by peals of laughter coming from inside. Vika stopped and looked at me.

“Wow,” she said, her faced tightening and her expression taking on a predatory hue. “They’re having fun. Too much fun.”

I shook my head and pushed open the door.

It was crowded inside the room. The three usual suspects, who were nonchalantly laughing when we walked in, had been joined by another four. Three of the newcomers were girls, which disheartened me. Judging by the threatening sniff I heard behind me, Vika tensed up.

The only guy there would have been better termed a man. He was large and lithe, with short-cropped hair and broad shoulders, and he walked over to me with his hand outstretched.

“Good morning. Sergey Zhilin, just letting you know I’m here.”

I shook his hand, noted how firm it was, and grunted.

“Did you serve?”

“I did,” the burly guy responded. “It was my fault I got sent to the army, though I don’t regret it. It sure was hard getting back into university, though.”

“I think we’re going to get along fine.” I liked that Zhilin from the first glance. He was obviously the solid kind of person you can rely on.

There are people like that, the ones you can get a read on with a single look: the idiots, the good guys, the snitches... The person in front of me was like a Casio G-Shock. He wouldn’t let me down, he wouldn’t break if I dumped too much on his plate, and he’d keep plowing forward no matter the conditions.

Suddenly he was shouldered aside by a girl with enormous eyes, a fiery red pimple on her forehead, and hair that was either styled to look like the last day in Pompeii or just hadn’t been combed. Her clavicles, I couldn’t help but notice, also stuck out noticeably. There were no pleasing mounds down around the chest area either. After bowling me over with whatever flowery perfume she was wearing, she stuck out a sweaty palm.

“I’m Marietta, Marietta Soloveva. Graduated with honors, six publications, six-month internship abroad.”

Muffled laughter came from somewhere behind her. It was a long-legged blonde with an incredible figure and gorgeous face. *What’s she doing here?* She should have been off shopping with some toy terrier under her arm. *Where are the Uggs and the fur vest? Why isn’t she in a tanning salon or getting some guy to give her money?*

“What’s so funny?” I asked with a shrug. “These days a lot of people get internships abroad, though there isn’t much point in that—we work by our own rules here, and journalism in other countries is different. They have fewer headaches and more money.”

“But this isn’t quite what you think it is,” the blonde said, no longer disguising her laughter. “Pimp, tell them where your internship was.”

“Abroad,” Soloveva replied through clenched teeth. “And I have a name.”

“But where?” I was intrigued to know where she’d worked by that point. *Maybe in Holland, somewhere with plenty of good pharmaceuticals?*

“In Mongolia,” Soloveva muttered reluctantly. Then she continued, shooting a nasty glance at the blonde. “It’s a good country, in case you didn’t know. And I got there myself, because I earned it, and not because...”

“Go ahead, finish your thought.” The blonde’s tone was friendly, and she took a couple of steps that left her next to me and Soloveva. She smelled like some kind of astringent perfume and raspberries. *I get the perfume, but why raspberries?* “What’s wrong? You tell me how you think I landed my internship in Germany, and I’ll tell you if you’re right.”

“I hope working here will be the start I need to become a journalist,” Soloveva said, giving me a speech she’d obviously rehearsed, looking at me devotedly, and paying no attention to the ironically smiling blonde who was still standing there. The pimple on Marietta’s forehead turned a shade redder, her hollow chest rose and fell as she breathed, and locks of hair jutted out in every direction.

“I’m sure that’s exactly what will happen,” Vika said behind me before stepping past and patting Soloveva on the shoulder. “I know a good employee when I see one. By the way, let me introduce myself: I’m Vika Travnikova, Harriton’s assistant. When he’s away, I’m in charge of the publishing house.”

My little lady was fluffing her tail a bit. I couldn’t quite agree that we were a “publishing house,” incidentally. A “publication” was more or less okay, but a “publishing

house” was pushing it. I was just glad Mammoth hadn’t heard her, otherwise he’d have convinced himself that we were making a play behind his back and about to leave him in the street collecting bottles. *She’s in charge...* I hadn’t really noticed that. *Or maybe it isn’t vanity?* Given the amount of time I was spending out of the office and in Fayroll, she could very well have taken charge.

Vika stood there, her gaze fixed on the blonde. The latter was just enjoying the situation.

“Travnikova, Travnikova,” the beauty said, wrinkling her nose. “Wait a second, are you the Travnikova who spent all five years at school getting straight-As and boring everyone to death until you just about blew the state exams when you had a nervous breakdown? You still got a diploma with honors, but then, when we were on the ship, you got so drunk you threw yourself at the provost telling him you had to do something to thank him for all the knowledge he gave you. But you fell overboard, and we had to pull you along in a life preserver behind the boat for half a kilometer. Was that you? Or do you just have the same last name?”

The crimson spots flashing across Vika’s face and the smiles she got from our three original doofuses told me two things: first, my little treasure was enraged, and she looked a lot like her sister when she got that way. Second, that really was her. And there I’d thought she’d been a heartbreaker at school, even if she had studied well. But no, she was a nerd. I’ll be honest, that caught me off guard.

I didn’t need to see Vika’s face to figure out the third thing. Until one of the sides was dead, our office was going to be a battlefield set between the tight-lipped and pink-cheeked Vika and the as-yet nameless blonde bombshell, who was looking at Vika mockingly as she twirled a lock of hair.

*Maybe it would be better to avoid the whole thing and just show Miss Who-Knows-Why-She-Needs-Work-Here-Anyway the door? No, that won’t work.* The bosses had an interest in one of the four, and I had to keep them all there until I figured out who that was. It was a shame, really, because I’d have just as soon replaced them all—except for the guy, of course.

But I did need to put the blonde beast in her place, otherwise she’d rally the rest of the group behind her and spend her time ridiculing my Vika for fun. I knew her type. And that wasn’t going to happen—Vika was mine. You can avoid a lot of diseases if you just get out in front of them.

I glanced at the clock and shook my head worriedly.

“Ay-ay-ay, how could you?” I looked at the blonde sadly. “Do you not have a conscience at all?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked innocently, eyes blinking in the picture of confusion and integrity.

“But how?” I clutched my cheeks. “Unbelievable! You missed your second morning bath, and you’re about to be late to the tanning salon. You probably came with one of my boys—maybe with Gennady? By the way, Gennady, we pay you too much if you can afford this kind of...um...girl.”

I stuck out my lower lip as I looked mockingly and a bit greasily at the now-uneasy blonde. Of course, I knew I wouldn’t be able to throw her with just one trick—she had to be used to hints like that. She’d probably heard much worse in her five years at school, in fact. I wouldn’t have been able to say something like that to pimply Soloveva, though the blonde would have heard more than her share of jokes, curious offers, and drunk lines—“come on, it’ll be fun!” I was putting her in her place without hurting any feelings.

“Where would I get that much money?” Stroynikov didn’t let me down, as he picked up on the situation and jumped in with what I needed from him. “My girls are simpler—they’re all I can afford.”

The blonde clearly didn’t expect Gennady, who’d just been eating her up with his eyes, to turn on her that quickly.

“That’s for sure,” I agreed, letting my eyes wander quickly over what the beauty had to offer. “You can’t have that much fun with the money they pay us...”

“Okay, stop it,” the blonde said, jumping in and offering me her hand. “I get it, and I agreed: I stepped over a line, and I was wrong. You’re right, you’re in charge around here, and I understand now. Elena Shelestova, you can call me Lena, Lenka, anything you want, just not Helen. I can’t stand when people call me that.”

“You still haven’t understood everything.” I stared at her, ignoring the hand she was holding out. There was more respect in my voice, however, as she’d broken the stereotype by giving in that quickly. Still, I needed to press my advantage. “There’s something you forgot to do.”

“What else?” This time Shelestova was actually surprised. “Peace, love, and all that. You’re the boss, and you’re always and unquestionably right. I made a mistake, I apologized and tonight before I go to bed I’m going to cry in shame and pull out some hair. I can start with a few locks right now if you want.”

“No, nobody needs your hair. This young woman is my assistant, and therefore also your boss,” I replied, pointing at Vika. “And you weren’t exactly tactful with her. If I were you, I’d apologize to her, and I’d make it sound sincere. I’m no Stanislavski, but I’ll be the first to yell ‘I don’t believe you.’ Well, we’re waiting.”

A shadow of satisfaction flitted across Vika’s face. Shelestova looked as serene as ever.

“Vika, I’m sorry,” she said, clasping her hands. “My big mouth gets carried away sometimes. I’ll be more careful—really, I will. I promise.”

Her blue eyes flashed with some sort of deviltry, her lashes batted at twice their usual speed, and her whole face breathed sincere repentance. *Screw Zimin and Valyaev for sending the devil to come work with me.*

“So what do you want me to do?” Elena smiled happily, and I could understand why. She’d gotten herself out of a sticky situation pretty much unscathed. “I can do quite a bit, and I have some experience already.”

Vika grunted, and the boys grinned.

“Oh, I’ll bet you do,” I assured her.

“No, not that kind of experience,” replied an absolutely unperturbed Shelestova. “As far as that goes, I’m sure you all have a leg up on me. But I’m talking about publishing—how does a year and a half working at Entrepreneur sound?”

Entrepreneur was serious business: a business magazine published by a major holding company called the White Sign. They didn’t just take attractive women in to “show them the ropes” like many other publishers did; you either worked as hard as you could or you didn’t work at all. All that mattered was what you could do—nobody cared about your connections or friendships. In a word, working there stamped you as a professional at the top of Russian business journalism. But the fact that she only stuck there for a year and a half meant that she didn’t have what it took or there was something else going on...

“Impressive,” I said without the least bit of irony. “But this isn’t Entrepreneur, and everyone starts with a clean slate. You aren’t there; you’re here. I’ll tell you what you’re going to be doing, and in the meantime, it’s nice to meet you.”

I shook the hand she was offering, the gesture straightforward and free of any double meaning.

“Okay, can we cut the crap?” I heard yet another unfamiliar voice ask. It belonged to a short—tiny, really—girl with a pale face, fragile body, and freckled nose.

“I’m the one who’s supposed to say that,” I couldn’t help but note.

She was pleasantly reminiscent of the dryads I’d saved, and she really was short and thin. Her hair was pulled back, her eyes were intelligent, and she was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of some kind of creature on it. She was wearing sneakers, her laces different colors, and she was standing there looking back at me. *Tiny*.

“Welcome to my life,” she announced. “Everyone’s always busy with their weird conversations about nothing at all, and they can’t actually be bothered to do anything. Boring.”

“Agreed. Okay, I have two questions for you: what’s your name? And who is that?” I pointed at her t-shirt.

“This?” she replied, stretching it out. “This is a Korean singer named Ming Nat—I’m a huge fan. And my name is Tasha. It’s Natalya Zvyagintseva, but just call me Tasha. I’m bored out of my mind, so could you give me something to do?”

So it turned out they have their own pop scene in Korea, complete with hairy, wide-eyed singers pulled straight from comic books. I never would have thought that he was a singer. But for the time being, I had bigger problems: my odd band of rascallions was turning into a regular Noah’s Ark. *What did I do to deserve this?*

“Okay,” I said with a clap, “everyone listen up—especially the new arrivals.”

And with that, I briefly went over who was doing what, who answered to who, and who was responsible for what. I also included some notes on who would get what if they didn’t do their job right. Sergey listened with interest, making sure he had a good grasp of the situation, though the rest gave it half an ear at best. Marietta (*I’m going to need to shorten that to Mary*) did her best to look like she was hanging on my every word, and jotted notes down in a notebook as she did, though her eyes were glassed-over. Shelestova smiled to herself, shaking her head every once in a while, and Tasha did her best not to look bored—the occasional yawn gave her away, however.

“That’s pretty much it,” I said ten minutes later.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Tasha asked, arms spread wide.

“I’m bored,” Shelestova said from behind Tasha, doing a perfect imitation of her.

“It’s true,” Tasha agreed. “Seriously.”

“Gennady,” I said, starting to give out orders. “You get the women’s battalion and Sergey—they’re all yours. Give them a quick overview of Fayroll history and where we’ve been so far, and then tell them about the news, where to get it, where to look for it, what it should be about, and why we need it. I want a selection on my desk tomorrow—I’ll go through it myself. Also, keep in mind that you’re grooming your own replacement. As soon as I see that they can handle it, I’m promoting you to articles. Oh, and figure out which one we should introduce to Di to get her materials.”

“Got it, boss,” Stroynikov replied, perking up—he was long-since tired of digging through the news. While he’d recently dumped the job on Yushkov after a heavy bout of drinking, the latter had bloodied his nose and restored the status quo. Stroynikov was also smart enough to realize that I was holding out an olive branch and a chance to rejoin society.

“As far as you kids go,” I continued, casting a gaze over the four new people, “the news section is important, and we need it be even bigger now that we’re expanding the publication. But three people will still be fine, so one of you will move up to writing articles as well—the one who does the best work. Your future is in your hands. Elena, don’t look at Sergey like that—I’m just talking about work. Obviously, I’ll be keeping tabs on you, but you’ll report directly to Vika. She’ll be watching you like a hawk, and you should know that her opinion carries a lot of weight with me.”

The newcomers glanced at each other quickly. I could tell that the solidarity they’d walked in with, the agreement they’d probably come to about sticking together, had gone out the window. They’d been brothers in arms; now they were competitors. *Welcome to real life.*

“A-ah,” Elena said, waving a hand. “I don’t have a shot, so I should probably just learn to live with the news.”

“You could just quit. Actually, you don’t have to quit: you’re in the middle of your trial period, so you’re free as a bird,” Vika replied, her voice angelic. “Are you sure you want to deal with the news?”

“Thanks for the advice, good lady,” Elena said, bowing at the waist, “though I think I can decide for myself when, where, and how I’ll do things. And with whom, incidentally. I apologize, Miss Assistant, if that came out harsh.”

“Okay, you two can hash that out later—your little circus is the last thing I need right now. But I’m telling you right now, Shelestova, that if you take things too far, I will show you the door. Anyone have any questions?” I asked.

“I do,” Shelestova piped up immediately. “When’s our first work party? You don’t skimp out on those, do you?”

“That type of thing usually happens when you’re paid for the first time, though you all can decide how you want to do that. All I ask is that you keep everything like that out of working hours, and not on Tuesdays or Wednesdays—we’re too busy getting ready for print then,” I replied.

“But you’ll be there, right? What’s the point otherwise?”

“Of course, I’ll be there. I don’t drink with employees, though I’m supposed to come. I didn’t think up the tradition, so it’s not mine to break,” I said with a nod. “Work parties are important—they tell you what kind of people you have around you. By the way, have any of you played *Fayroll*?”

Tasha and Sergey raised their hands. I wanted to ask them when and what their names were, though my phone rang right then.

“Hi, Maxim,” I said. Vika looked scarily at the group and held a finger to her lips, softly hissing *Zimin* to them. They practically came to attention, with the exception of Shelestova. She pulled a file out of the miniature purse slung over her shoulder and started working on her nails.

“Well, Kif, congratulations on wrapping up the first part of the quest,” Zimin said as complacently as ever. “Also, I want you to drop by. The Old Man isn’t in Moscow today, but I still want you to come over. First, I want to congratulate you in person, and second, there are a few things we need to talk about. Did the new kids show up?”

“Yes, they’re here,” I replied, throwing an unblinking stare in the direction of the frozen group. “Nothing to report yet—I need to get a better look at how they work. Time will tell what they’re worth.”

Marietta nodded reflexively as she watched me loyally, and Shelestova glanced over, shook her head, and sighed.

“You already have your first impression, and that’s good,” Zimin noted.

“Should I bring Vika with me?” I asked as though in passing, though I made sure everyone in the office heard me. “All right.”

“Ah, lending her a bit of authority?” Zimin said knowingly and approvingly. “Good work. Just don’t take her upstairs with you, since there’s nothing for her to do up here. There’s a cafeteria downstairs, so she can grab a coffee and a few pastries there. Okay, I’m

sending a car for you. And don't even think about arguing—I have some cognac I want to drink with you.”

“Vika, there's a car on the way for us, so go ahead and make sure everyone knows what they need to be doing.”

Vika glanced at Shelestova victoriously. The latter scrunched up her nose, though she certainly didn't look beaten.

*I wonder which one is the mole.*

## Chapter Two

### In which the hero goes up and comes right back down.

As soon as we got into the car, Vika cuddled up to me and gave me a kiss on the nose.

“Thanks, I appreciated everything.” My companion was clearly pleased.

“Hey, why did you jump overboard?” I asked. The story had intrigued me: from what I could tell, the only reason girls ever jump overboard is when they’re unlucky in love. Guys are different, as they could have any of a number of reasons—from *you don’t think I’ll do it?* to *of course I won’t drown*. But girls?

“It was an accident, an accident,” Vika replied with a frown. “You’re going to listen to her? I already called a friend of mine who works in our school administration, and she told me all about that Shelestova. She’s a whore, an animal, and that’s putting it lightly.”

*If Vika’s friend told her that right off the bat, there isn’t anything wrong with Shelestova.*

Simply cute girls can’t stand really beautiful ones. They just can’t. Beautiful women, to take another example, feel sorry for ugly girls. Plain girls aren’t big fans of their beautiful friends either, though they respect them. They can sidle up to them like those fish that stick close to sharks: from there, they can grab their chance at some party or other and snatch a drunk guy. If they’re lucky, they can even build a life with the guys they scavenge. Sure, anything can happen when the guy wakes up the next morning, but that’s a very different story. Cute girls, however, despise beautiful girls. I’ve never been quite sure why, though I think it has something to do with the fact that there are far more cute girls than actually beautiful ones. The cute girls are always on the losing end, too. And if the beautiful girl is smart as well, something that was clearly true of Shelestova, that just sealed the deal. That’s why cute girls call smart, beautiful girls...well, what Vika’s friend called Shelestova.

Incidentally, that doesn’t mean that the cute girls don’t use their usual “she’s such an airhead!” when their talking about their beautiful friends, too. What people don’t realize, however, is that really beautiful women don’t actually have it as easy as everyone thinks. Lots of guys give them a wide berth, figuring that so much as a smile at a dazzling beauty like that would be enough to have some creature made out of muscles, a wallet, and a pistol jump out of a big, dark car and bash their brains in. Either that or they figure she’s some

kind of pricey call girl, and where are they going to find that kind of money? And so on, and so forth. It's hard to believe, but there are women out there whose beauty gets in the way of their personal lives. I knew one such girl named Alla, and she was so lonely she went on some kind of TV program to see if she could find true love. The guys all stayed away from her and the criminal consort they assumed she had, and all she wanted was some domestic bliss with a man she could love.

Guys are simpler in this area. We don't really care who's good-looking and who isn't; we just want friends who aren't jerks and who can make it past their third shot. Some people can't drink to save their lives, and what's the fun in that?

"Vika, I couldn't care less, really," I replied, realizing that I needed to calm her down. Her chest was rising and falling faster than the sea in a storm, and she looked worried. "It's not like I'm trying to have kids with her."

"Don't you even try," Vika said threateningly. "I'll poison you!"

"By the way, can you drive?" I asked, figuring it was the right time to change the subject.

"I can, but I don't have a license. My dad taught me. Why do you ask?"

"You should get your license. Zimin and I are going to have some cognac, and you'd be able to drive us home if you had one. This way we're going to have to take one of their cars home or call a taxi, and tomorrow we have to get to work without a car since it's still there. I don't mind, but you..."

"Do you have to drink?" Vika asked, squinting up at me. "Why don't you just skip it?"

"That could work," I agreed. "It'll be simple: you go tell Zimin that I don't drink anymore since you don't like it."

Vika was silent for a moment before circling back to where we started.

"We have a driving school close to our building, so I'll go sign up tomorrow. What car will I drive? Our BMW?"

"Probably," I replied. "Get your license first and we'll see."

The Raidion building was as modern and imposing as ever, and it was starting to really grow on me. I was practically a regular—the girls at reception all smiled as soon as they saw me.

“Good afternoon, Harriton,” one of them said affably, the one who had taken me to see Zimin the first time I was there. “Are you here to see Maxim?”

“Yes. The Big Boss actually wanted to see me, but he’s away, right?” I replied casually, deciding to boost my standing still further with the beauty wearing the company scarf while also showing off a little for Vika. Who doesn’t like a little attention? The only problem was that I didn’t know what the Big Boss’s name was, and I didn’t feel right calling him the Old Man. There wasn’t a single word about him on the company site.

But the effect was more than I expected. The girls seemed to be struck dumb, and nobody said anything until the one I was talking to swallowed.

“As far as I know, Valerian isn’t on any of his properties right now. I may not know something, however, so please forgive me for that.”

She contritely and sincerely bowed her head, which astonished me. I even felt a bit embarrassed.

“Oh, come on, if you don’t, you don’t. Zimin’s here, right?”

“Maxim is in his office,” she replied without looking up. “Would you allow me to take you up there?”

“You’d be doing me a favor,” I said, perplexed.

“What about me?” Vika asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“You go have some coffee,” I replied, though I continued when I saw the dissatisfied look in her eyes. “I told you, us guys are going to be drinking cognac. I mean, if you want to join us, then let’s go...”

“You know I don’t like cognac.” Vika shook her head. “Fine, I’ll go have some coffee. Do they have pastries, too?”

“Of course,” one of the girls replied quickly. “With custard, with almonds, and with pistachios, and we also have natural Bénédictine for your coffee if you want it. Can I show you the way?”

“Kif, give me some money—I forgot my wallet in my desk,” Vika said to me, her hand outstretched.

“You can put it on your tab, so don’t worry about paying,” the girl rattled off with a smile.

Still, I handed Vika my wallet, since I wasn't going to put bills in her hand, and headed off to see Zimin.

The girl said nothing in the elevator, and I thought when she looked at me there was a hidden and powerful fear somewhere deep in her eyes. *What kind of guy is the boss? All it took was one mention of him for her to start treating me like this?* I just hoped my comment couldn't come back to bite me later.

When we got to the right floor, she walked me to the familiar doors and immediately hurried back to jump into the same elevator we'd just left.

Everything in the waiting room was how it always was. At the center sat the beautiful, well-groomed, and forbidding Eliza, her fingernails their usual blood-red color, her hair piled high on her head, and a look of oppressive implacability on her face.

"Oh, Nikiforov," she said, seeing me and even perking up a little. "Maxim was already asking about you. Where have you been?"

"It's Moscow, the traffic is horrible," I replied laconically.

"Well, and how are things with you, young man?" Eliza turned her royal head in my direction for the first time that I could remember. "How are things at home? Everything good?"

"Yes, everything's great, thank you." I couldn't help wondering if everyone at Raidion had come to work that day thinking about what they could do to throw me for a loop.

Eliza smiled sarcastically, though her reply was amiable.

"It's great when things are great. Life's the way it should be."

"Eliza," I said, deciding to capitalize on her good mood. "I was told you have some kind of packet for me, something for new employees. Medical insurance and a bunch of other stuff."

"Did Maxim tell you?" she asked.

"No, I read about it on the site, and a few people mentioned it." I wasn't about to give Zimin up to the fury in front of me. From what I could tell, he was just as afraid of her as I was.

"Yeah, a few people," Eliza replied with a snort. "That old rogue hates to see other people win. Let me get your packet."

She dipped behind her desk, pulled a huge envelope out of somewhere, and held it out to me. The “packet” I’d heard so much about was exactly that. Inside the plump envelope I felt something plastic moving around. That had to be the goodies I was supposed to collect.

I really wanted to pull it open and see what was inside, but Eliza was an experienced woman who nipped that in the bud.

“Don’t even think about digging through that here. You’ll have time at home, or you can look through it in the car—pull it apart in that sinner’s office for all I care. In the meantime, sign here.”

She spun a dog-eared notebook around on her desk, and I couldn’t help but notice how it contrasted with the luxurious decoations surrounding it in the office. A pen was thrust into my hand, and I filled in my signature in dark-purple ink next to the checkmark she’d left.

“Good work.” Eliza closed the book with a fluid motion and slid it off into a safe that was behind her. “Go ahead in to see Zimin.”

“Thanks,” I replied timidly as I stepped toward the door.

“Oh, one more thing. Send your assistant over here at some point...what’s her name?” Eliza snapped her manicured fingers. “Travnikova. I have something for her, too—Zimin had me put it together.”

“She’s already here,” I replied, pointing in the direction of the elevators. “She’s down in the cafeteria eating pastries and drinking coffee with Bénédictine. She’s a big fan of both of those.”

“Well, us girls have to be careful about overdoing it with the pastries.” Eliza got up and laid a hand on her flawless waist. To be fair, everything about her was flawless, which was exactly why I looked away. “But once in a while it’s okay. She’s not allowed to come up to this floor, so I’ll head down to see her myself. Otherwise, I’ll have her envelope lying around here getting in the way. I wouldn’t mind some coffee, either. Young girls like her are fun, what with how sensitive and naïve they are. Delightful!”

Zimin’s office door opened, and Valyaev’s head popped out.

“Kif, let’s go. We’ve been waiting so long we already polished off half the bottle.”

I glanced at Eliza, who was fixing her hair, to show why I hadn’t joined them immediately.

Valyaev looked at her, then back at me, and then again at her.

His eyes widened. “Seriously? You and her? Right in the waiting room? I don’t believe you!”

“Are you crazy?” I hissed at him, hoping Eliza hadn’t heard what he said and forgetting for a second that he was my boss. “She was giving me my benefits packet!”

“A-ah,” Valyaev replied with a wink. “And here I thought…”

“You’ve never thought before, so why start now?” Eliza said without turning toward him, her heels clacking on their way to the elevator. “Give it up—it’s a lost cause.”

Valyaev made a face at her receding figure before dragging me into Zimin’s office.

“Kif, my friend,” Zimin said, getting up from behind his desk, coming over, and throwing an arm around my shoulders. “I knew we made the right move talking you up to the Old Man.”

“What a guy.” Valyaev went over to a small table, on which were a plate with lemon slices, a large dish loaded with black caviar, sliced bread, some kind of fish, and something in a small pot. He pulled a fat bottle of cognac and a strange-looking glass out of it. Really, it was more of a cup without a base, instead of which was something that looked like a fish tail made out of copper.

“What’s that?” I shook my head as I checked out the oddity.

“Never seen one of these?” Valyaev replied, pouring the cognac into the glass and holding it out to me. “When it’s empty, it’ll sit upright on the table, but it tips over as soon as you put anything in it. You’re going to be drinking out of it so you don’t lag behind. You earned it!”

Zimin waved a finger under his nose.

“Wait a second, Kit. We can have one now, but then we have to talk before we keep going. Work is work.”

“Agreed.” Valyaev’s face instantly switched from clown to businessman the way it always did. “I already poured him a drink though, so…prosit!”

“Prosit,” Zimin and I replied, holding our glasses up.

*Why “prosit”? Although, I guess it’s no worse than “l’chaim” or “budmo.”*

“Okay, Kif, so about what we wanted to discuss.” Zimin put an arm around my shoulders. “First, you did a great job. You did push the goddess a little, but you didn’t go too far.”

“I didn’t realize she’d be so arrogant,” I said, grabbing a lemon wedge and tossing it into my mouth. “She was driving me crazy.”

“She’s a goddess.” Valyaev sank back into his chair. “What did you expect? The gods are all nasty characters, believe me. This one’s a walk in the park compared to Gera or Freya, not to mention Kal. Mesmerta might as well be a delightful, white-winged angel next to them.”

“Gera!” Zimin snorted. “As vengeful and vindictive as a cobra, with plenty of complexes and nothing to hold her back. And she’s as loyal as a dog to her idiot of a husband, who sleeps with everything that moves. An explosive mix!”

Then he glanced at me.

“At least, that’s what the legends say.”

Valyaev nodded.

“So yeah, this one is more or less okay. But you can forget about her regardless, since you won’t see her again until you finish the quest. And it’s long and hard...brutal!”

“Thanks a lot,” I replied sullenly. “Sounds perfect! Fun for me...”

Valyaev hopped up, stuck my head under his arm, and started rubbing my scalp with his knuckles.

“Oh, stop it, my friend, it’s not all bad. After enemies always come friends.”

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies,” Zimin cut in, “but I’d like to finish what I was saying if you don’t mind.”

We both stared at him.

“Anyway, you did some good work finishing up the first part of the quest. And we’re sure you’ll have equal success with the second and harder part.”

“I’ll do my best to justify the confidence you have in me,” I muttered.

“Would you mind not interrupting me?” an indignant Zimin asked. “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s true,” Valyaev said. “The more you interrupt him, the more he talks. And the more he talks, the later we finish—and the later we drink!”

Zimin growled angrily. “I’m going to kill you both!”

Valyaev and I instantly sat down in our chairs, clasped our hands in our laps, and gave the snarling Zimin our full attention.

“Okay!” Zimin said, looking at us from beneath lowered brows. “We believe that you’re going to finish the second half of your mission successfully, and in so doing usher in a new global update for the Fayroll universe. There, I’m done.”

We applauded him, and Zimin gave us a bow with his hands against his heart.

“All right, that was the official part—the Old Man asked me to say that. And when he asks you to do something, you make sure you do it. He also asked me to show you something, so let’s go.”

“Really?” Valyaev replied with a pout. “Congrats, Kif, you’re going places.”

Zimin had already stepped outside the office, and he turned back to us as he held the door open.

“What are you waiting for? Come on!”

We took the elevator down six floors and walked out into a foyer that had a “Floor 22” sign on the wall as well as two doors with magnetic locks. One was to our right, the other opposite it.

“Right or left?” Valyaev asked.

Zimin grunted and walked toward the door on the right. Valyaev clapped me on the back. Once we walked through, Zimin gave me a tour of the floor, not paying the slightest attention when the people working there hopped up out of their seats with ingratiating smiles on their faces as soon as they saw him and Valyaev. Finally, we got to a darkened and shuttered office, the largest on the floor.

“Have you guessed yet?” Zimin asked as we stepped into the huge office.

“I have a good shot at getting this office, as well as the entire floor and, I assume, the whole department?” I replied. “That much I got, though I’m not sure about what comes after that.”

Zimin looked at me in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Well, ‘this will all be yours if you...’ I have no idea what comes after the ‘if you,’ and that’s the most important part.”

“Oh, that’s what you’re getting at.” Zimin nodded. “Yes, you’re not far off. Let’s head back to my office and I’ll explain. Do you like this space?”

“Gorgeous, spacious, senseless,” I shrugged. “I’ve never really gone for things like this. But what about the twenty-second floor—is it a good place to be?”

Valyaev clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“You always do ask the right questions. It’s the threshold to power in Raidion. The twenty-third, twenty-fourth, and twenty-fifth floors don’t count because that’s where the programmers work, and the twenty-sixth floor is for security, so it’s basically the floor below us. The boss on the twenty-second floor doesn’t have to say hello to pretty much anyone, and just about everyone has to say hello to him.”

“That last part reflects more on a person’s upbringing,” Zimin said as he pushed the button for the elevator, “though it’s pretty much right on the money. The Old Man is offering you a seat at his table, even if it is at the far end—and that doesn’t happen very often.”

“What does he want in return? I still haven’t heard that part.”

“The usual.” The elevator doors opened in front of us, and Zimin stepped in. “Loyalty, integrity, intelligence. Soul and body, like always.”

“That’s all?” It didn’t sound like much to me, especially given what was at stake. I was no idiot, and I knew that half a decade working as a middle manager in a company like Raidion would at the very least have me on my feet for the rest of my life. *If I live long enough to enjoy it...*

“You don’t think that’s all that much?” Zimin smiled thinly. “Believe me, it’s more than enough.”

“All I’m hearing so far are generalities,” I said, deciding not to beat around the bush. There was a business offer on the table, and I needed to get the details.

“That’s true. You’ll get what you’re looking for when the time is right,” Valyaev said. His interjection didn’t have any of his usual jokes attached. “Right now you have two jobs to do: get the gods back in the game and figure out who got into the paper. I’m not even sure which one is more important.”

“And I have several questions about both. But before that, let me ask this: what would my job be on the twenty-second floor? Not just some figurehead, I hope?”

Zimin looked at me approvingly.

“Good question. No, you’re be more than a figurehead. The Raidion board of shareholders looked at how well the Fayroll Times is doing and decided to split it off into a separate business: a department housing our printed publications, movies, and internet information services. Guess who could manage the whole thing as a company shareholder with a vote in the board if they keep doing excellent work?”

“Ta-da!” blared Valyaev.

Now that really was a chance in a thousand. But I still didn’t know what I’d have to give up for it. My soul wasn’t a big loss, and I wasn’t even too worried about my body—at least they weren’t the kind to want me that way. But what did they need? It wasn’t heroics in the game—I couldn’t believe that. I was already getting more than I’d dreamed from them for that, so much so that I was practically drowning in their gifts. But the payoff was worth it. It had to be.

“So what do you say, my friend?” Zimin stood in front of me. “Do we have a deal?”

He smiled and held out his hand.

“Yes, we do,” I replied as I shook it.

“Excellent. In that case, go ahead with your questions.” Zimin sat down, very pleased with himself. “Then we’ll get back to the drinks. How are you for time?”

“Fine, though I have Vika downstairs drinking coffee. I should let her know if I’m going to be up here much longer.”

“Not a problem,” Valyaev responded, going over to Zimin’s desk, picking up the phone, and dialing a three-digit extension. “We’ll give her a tour of the premises in the meantime.”

His fingers drummed on the table.

“Hello, who is this? Svetlana? Well, Svetlana, why did you forget to tell me your name when you answered the phone? Who is this? Nikita Valyaev. Hey, don’t go fainting on me. You just be happy I’m the one on the line, seeing as how I’m such a good-natured guy. If it had been Zimin calling, he’d have read you the riot act. He wouldn’t have killed you outright, though he very well might have bored you to death.”

“Kit!” Zimin cried.

“Fine. Anyway, Svetlana, listen carefully. There’s a woman sitting in the cafeteria, the wife of a friend of mine. And not just a friend, either—someone who could very soon be one of us. Let me say that again: one of us, not one of you, and so he’ll be working in our company, too. I very much hope that lovely lady...” Valyaev looked at me, and I whispered her name to him. “Vika. I very much hope Vika won’t be bored. Give her a tour of the building, show her to the beauty salon, really just make sure she feels anything but sad and abandoned. If she’s happy, I’ll forget about your little oversight, Svetlana. Maybe I’ll even reward you. Okay, anyway, off you go to the cafeteria.”

“Eliza is with her there,” I said to Valyaev.

“Svetlana, hold on,” he said quickly into the phone. “Wait for Eliza to leave before going in. You sound young and beautiful, and I’d hate to attend your funeral already. What do I mean? How long have you been working with us? Two weeks? Ah, that it explains it. Ask your more experienced colleagues why you shouldn’t get in Eliza’s way. And as soon as you see her get on an elevator, go find Vika. Got it? Excellent.”

Valyaev hung up the phone, obviously pleased with himself.

“I should introduce myself to her,” he said to us. “Sounds like a blonde, and she’s still pretty innocent and demure. A sweet morsel for old Nikita.”

“Kit, if you send another of our receptionists off to get an abortion, Jadwiga will have you castrated,” Zimin said seriously. “Don’t forget that they’re illegal, and we pay good money to fly them to Europe.”

Abortions had been made illegal about five years before when the country’s statisticians realized that ethnic Russians were starting to go extinct. Oddly enough, considering how impotent the legal and executive systems were, the new law was actually followed. Underground abortion clinics were closed down faster than they could be opened, and doctors stayed away from the practice once a few of them were sentenced to long prison sentences. Normal people went ahead with their pregnancies; rich girls flew to Europe to get their abortions done.

“Whatever,” Valyaev replied with a wave of his hand. “If it happens again, I’ll pay for it myself.”

While their conversation didn’t really interest me on its own merits, the fact that they were having it told me that I’d broken into the inner circle.

“Kif, so what did you want to ask?” Zimin looked at me. “Anything in particular?”

“What should I start with? The game or our HR problem?”

“Start with the HR problem,” Valyaev said, jumping in. “We can talk about the game over cognac, but we should get that out of the way first.”

“HR trumps everything,” Zimin said instructively. “So what’s the problem?”

“Well, still just about the mole,” I replied with a shrug. “And questions about him.”

Zimin glanced at Valyaev and picked up the phone.

“Ilya, could you come up to my office?”

Zimin hung up, pulled a cigar out of a box, lit it, and sent a ring of aromatic smoke drifting up toward the ceiling.

“Tell me something, Kif, my friend. Have you ever heard of the Consortium?”

## Chapter Three

**In which the hero finds out all kinds of new and interesting information.**

“Well, I know that’s a term from economics, something about how someone joins with someone else to form a consortium,” I said to Zimin.

“Okay,” Zimin agreed, “you’re partially right. In this case, however ‘Consortium’ is a name.”

“Then no, I haven’t heard of it.” I shook my head. “If I had, I would’ve remembered.”

“Anyway, there’s such a thing as the Consortium, and it’s quite the serious organization,” Zimin replied, extinguishing his cigar in an ashtray. “Most important, they aren’t awfully loyal to Raidion.”

“Max, you’re always idealizing and softening things.” Valyaev spun in his chair. “Kif, all major companies have their enemies. The bigger the company, in fact, the more enemies it has. We’re a huge company, and so we have our fair share of them—with the Consortium being the largest. They’re a powerful organization and a very dangerous opponent.”

“And?” I asked warily.

“And whoever you have working in your paper belongs to them,” Valyaev said, finally getting to the meat of the issue.

*Great...that’s just what I need.* Everything had been fine and dandy at the paper, and then suddenly I was saddled with three quiet, predictable devils and one smart sexpot—one of which was a spy with an assignment I didn’t know. *Lovely...* For a second I thought about solving the problem with the drastic solution of shutting down the paper entirely. If there wasn’t any work to do, there wasn’t a problem in the first place, after all. But then that office on the twenty-second floor would disappear along with the fat salary and juicy bonuses. I can be an altruistic guy, and I’ll even work toward ideas for their own say, though I’d only had one idea for a good while: buying a nice island in the Caribbean. *Okay, just kidding...pew, this is bad.*

“So this is more than just a harmless, idiot insider; it’s a walking recording device,” I said in a doomed voice. “An experienced foe, a foreign intelligence officer.”

“Pretty much,” Valyaev confirmed. “Azov will explain a few things to you when he gets here.”

As if on cue, Raidion’s head of security walked in with an uncharacteristically pleasant expression on his face. When someone in his line of work tries to make himself look like a Christmas cookie, something inside me starts to panic...

“Ah, there’s our journalist,” he said, patting me on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you, Kif—you don’t stop by enough.”

“Too much to do,” I explained. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another; if it’s not diarrhea, it’s dermatitis. And now this...”

“Yup, yup,” Azov said sympathetically. “Everything’s wrong over here. Sometimes there’s no wood, others there’s no coal, and when there is, someone steals the pot.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “I have the enemy infiltrating the paper over there. Ilya, why aren’t your people protecting us? How are they getting through the front lines?”

“I guess they already told you about the Consortium?” Azov started off secretively. “And you still need to ask why? Well, my dear friend Kif, it’s because they don’t just have some rabble over there; the people on that side are just as good as I am. They’re the last remnants of the empire, taught in the belly of a superpower. You really think I’m just asleep at the wheel or something?”

Azov’s voice took just a few sentences to change in timbre and intonation, and by the end he sounded like a silenced pistol snapping off word after word. I started to get nervous.

“Sure, I didn’t mean it like that. We’ll get the bad guy together,” I replied, holding my palms out in front of me. “But we have to know something, right?”

“Of course.” Azov’s words lost their smell of gun oil. “It’s a person.”

*Very funny. I’m about to pee myself laughing.*

“Oh, in that case, I’ll have him tied up and brought here with a nice bow on top in an hour or two,” I reassured Azov. “Why didn’t you say that at the beginning? With intel like that—”

“Okay, stop it with the back-and-forth,” Zimin cut in. “Ilya, give us the details; Kif, listen, don’t interrupt, and remember what he tells you.”

Azov didn’t get into how Raidion had crossed paths with the Consortium, though I picked up from a few small tidbits that the root of the conflict stretched back into ancient history. The company bosses hated each other with the kind of undying passion you only see in school girlfriends and businessmen. The kind of feeling where you shake someone’s hand and picture a bullseye drawn on their face.

The two mega corporations were formally neutral toward each other, though that was just the smooth surface under which bubbled corporate espionage, HR departments poaching employees, and hackers hired to hit the other side with fun adventures like system fails. The previous year had seen some lower-ranking employees roughed up to show how serious the demands were for some sort of unperformed or intercepted tenders and contracts (“That’s what happens to pawns,” Valyaev said with a shrug. “Lose one here, take one out there.”). In short, it was all the usual corporate arguments that come with doing business in Russia.

“So where do the two of you intersect? I wouldn’t think it’s in the gaming business, since I would have heard of them,” I said with surprise. “I did quite a bit of digging this past summer.”

“Games aren’t all Raidion does—we have other areas of interest, too,” Zimin said, clasping his hands. “Fayroll is our main project, far and away, really, though we are involved in some tangentially related areas. Everything in this life is related, after all. Anyway, we make a lot of money in those areas, too, and that’s where our interests cross. They really aren’t big fans of Fayroll, either, though they don’t quite have the chops to try and swallow it. Their principles keep them from coming at us head-on, as well.”

“So what’s the Consortium’s problem then? They aren’t into online games, so they can’t squeeze you out of your main business, and everything else is negotiable—this isn’t the good, old 90s. What’s the deal?” I really didn’t understand what was going on.

Zimin exchanged glances with Valyaev, and caught a glimpse of him subtly shaking his head.

“Kif, the more you know...well, you get the picture.” Zimin snapped his fingers. “You don’t need to know the whole picture, or even part of the picture of our great war with the Consortium. I can assure you, you’d be better off never finding out, though I’m personally sure you’ll have to one day.”

I was intrigued to hear what was going on, but the issue wasn't worth pushing back on. "Whatever you say. But is there anything you can tell me about the four at the paper? What worries me most is how you guys don't even know who the rat is."

Azov shook his head in frustration.

"That was my oversight. Well, not even oversight, really—it was my mistake, plain and simple. I got caught up in the circumstances, and Urentsev had an excellent plan in place."

"Who?" It was a day of discoveries for me.

"Peter Urentsev, the head of security and active operations at the Consortium. And that title isn't just him giving himself airs; they actually have a position like that. He has an enormous amount of experience. The things he did way back when in Egypt, they still remember him there. And in the rest of Africa..."

Azov shook his head again, this time showing me that you can and should respect your adversaries. Then he went back to the story.

"Everything came down to one point. We sent out a request to the university for three people, though, when we got the papers back for the specialists they recommended, there were four of them. And nobody could say where that fourth candidate came from. We went back through our correspondence and interrogated everyone involved, but all we could come up with was that we'd requested three people—but they'd gotten a request for four. Nobody was lying, either. I talked with all of them myself, and I can see when people are lying."

"If Azov says they aren't lying, it means they aren't lying," Valyaev said, clearly with some knowledge of the man I didn't have.

"Obviously, it wasn't an accident that the fourth person showed up," Azov continued. "At the time, I knew two things. First, the Consortium had tried to shove one of their own people into the paper back at the start, but they were in a big hurry and muffed the operation. Plus, back in those days, we weren't even sure it would work, not to mention them. Remember?"

Zimin and Valyaev nodded in synchrony.

"The second thing was that Peter himself got involved and picked out the spy, which shows how seriously they took round two—I know that much, as well. Kif, I'm not sure if their target is the paper and the information that comes with it or you. My source isn't that high up over there, so he doesn't have a view of what's going on."

“Not a lot to go on,” I replied. “We can’t do much with that. Did you dig into the four people, at least?”

“Obviously.” It looked like Azov was a bit offended that I even thought he might not have. “Straight through to their very last dimple and mole.”

“Nothing?” I asked quickly.

“Whatsoever,” Azov replied. “They were born, they studied, they drank, they had fun, they got together with the opposite sex...they’ve lived normal lives, in other words. And none of them have had any contact with the Consortium. None whatsoever. We even went through all their partners and everyone they’ve ever lived with—nothing. Parents, schoolmates, university mates, army friends—nothing again.”

“The cute one, Shelestova, she worked at the White Sign for a while,” I noted.

“I’m aware.” Azov nodded, letting me know he appreciated my efforts. “She was the first person I looked at, and we went through everything about her with a fine-tooth comb. Nothing. She was a junior assistant to the senior caretaker over there, tasked with gofer jobs. She picked up some smarts, did really good work, and could have had herself a nice career, but the CEO’s right-hand man tried to get her to sleep with him. They only care about what you can do on the business side there, but people are still just animals when it comes down to it. And she’s enough to drive any man crazy. She turned him down, gave him up to the board of directors, and left. On her own. They offered her a job regardless of who she slept with, and they even kicked that guy out immediately, but she turned out to be quite the principled little lady. You may not think it to look at her, but she is. Believe it or not, she doesn’t even have a boyfriend right now. She’s no nun, though—you should hear about some of her escapades several years back. She could have married somebody high up a hundred times over, and her dad is a little more than well-off himself. When she left Entrepreneur, he offered to buy her a paper or magazine to have fun with, but she refused. I’m not sure if she’s trying to prove something to herself or impress him or what. She even bought herself a car, a Mercedes, and a used one. She didn’t have to—all she had to do was say the word and her dad would’ve had a new car driven round to the house.”

“A Mercedes?” I asked, thinking back to that morning in the parking lot. “Silver?”

Azov nodded. “Yep. An older model.”

I decided there was no sense sharing that piece of information with Vika.

“And what about the rest?” I continued.

“The rest? The rest are as transparent as you could ask for, which makes things tricky.” Azov cracked his knuckles. “Zhilin, for example, is a former marine who recruited when he got unlucky in love...”

“What’s that about?” asked Valyaev.

“Simple. He was with a girl, she left him for his friend, he left for the army. The usual.”

“Idiots.” Valyaev circled a finger around his temple. “Trading a year and a half of your life for a girl, with plenty more of those out there. And there isn’t much difference between them: girls differ, but they all feel the same.”

“We all have our idiosyncracies,” Azov replied diplomatically before continuing. “He got back from the army, went back to school, studied hard, and caught the eye of our headhunters. That’s it. He doesn’t have many hobbies, really just working out, airsoft, and scuba diving. Oh, and he specialized in forest survival and hand-to-hand combat, even participating in and winning some competitions. No debts, no obligations, completely clean. He lives alone, hasn’t touched a girl since that whole story.”

“Hm,” I said, scratching my head. “I’ll have to be careful I don’t call him an idiot or just a body like the rest of them. Working out, survival...geez, he’s some kind of commando!”

“That’s the first thing I thought about him. But it turns out that he’s as gentle as a lamb—everyone says that about him,” Azov replied quickly. “He avoids conflicts like plague, always stays in his lane.”

“And the other two?” Zimin was all business.

“Marietta Soloveva is from Kimry, she won a gold medal at school, she earned a diploma with honors at university, and she climbs the ladder like a sailor up a rope—without a backward glance. No complexes, no principles, and no talent, though she’ll outwork anyone, and that’s what everybody says first about her. Everything she has, she bets on her career. She practically lived at the university office trying to make sure our headhunter saw her, and ever since then she’s been gunning for a job in Raidion’s press department.”

“No principles, no complexes, anxious for a job in Raidion,” I said thoughtfully. “Why couldn’t it be her?”

“Impossible,” Valyaev replied with a furrowed brow. “Nobody’d have anything to do with her—she isn’t reliable. The minute she thought the other side was offering a better deal, she’d hop the fence without a second thought.”

“Quite. Plus, three years ago we had a very different relationship with the Consortium.” Azov swung a leg back and forth. “And finally, Natasha Zvyagintseva, or just Tasha. She prefers Tasha to Natasha. Born and raised in Moscow. She’s original and extravagant, she can’t stand mediocrity, she’s incredibly talented, and she’s completely unstable.”

“What do you mean?” Valyaev asked. “Unstable?”

“Just that. She only does things as long as she’s interested in them. Once she loses interest, she either gives up or makes a huge fuss about it. But the key is that when she’s engaged, she comes up with all kinds of ideas that are just about always fantastic. When she’s not, you won’t be getting anything from her.”

“Anything else on her?” Zimin rubbed his chin.

“She likes Korea, even speaks the language, she’s analytical, and her personal life... Well, it’s what you’d expect from a girl her age, even if she does dress oddly. Although, kids these days wear anything and everything as it is. The picture of sophistication, all of them.”

“And one of them’s a rat,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But who? They’re all dark horses, and we already know everything there is to know about them.”

The Raidion trio looked at me amiable. I wiggled in my chair and looked away.

“Well, I mean, you have your methods, tools, and ways of doing things. Drugs, even...”

“Sure,” Azov said evenly. “Of course, we do. Methods, tools, the whole nine yards. Psychotropic toys, the works. We’d find the truth, though maybe not right away—not in five minutes, but certainly in a couple hours. But here’s the thing: we don’t really need that. We’ll only find out part of the mole’s assignment. Sure, we’d find out, for example, that he was supposed to get close to you, but we still won’t know why—and that part is much more important. We wouldn’t know what the Consortium wants from you, either. Of course, that’s if you’re the mole’s target.”

“What if I’m not?”

“That’s absolutely a possibility,” Azov replied. “They could have him in there as a sleeper agent, for example. In a year or two he’d migrate over to the second floor here in the main building, and then he’d just keep climbing. We don’t know, and we have to find out.”

“Or rather, you need to find out,” Zimin said, looking me in the eye. “Keep an eye out, think, evaluate, compare, draw your conclusions. And wait. I’m sure the mole will approach you eventually—he needs you. Sooner or later someone from the Consortium will come after you, probably someone meaningless, and then we’ll see where to go and who to drown. Metaphorically, I mean, obviously. So we’ll be waiting for the moment of truth.”

“What truth?” I asked, my voice betraying the doom I felt.

“The final truth,” Valyaev answered placidly. “They’ll try to pull you over, and they’ll try to get you there of your own free will—that’s how they do things, and they have just as much to offer as we do. That’s when we’ll see how loyal you really are.”

“I still don’t understand why they need me. What, do they think I’m some analyst or your secret-keeper? I’m just another employee, and even outside the circle since I don’t work in the main building,” I replied, feeling sorry for myself.

“Oh, sure.” Valyaev matched my tone. “I mean, every once in a while you throw back some cognac with the two people closest to the Old Man, you go visit their dachas, and they come visit you. What would you call that?”

“They know a lot over there. Not everything, of course, but a lot. And they know that you’re a favorite of ours, and that’s already enough to start working you over,” Zimin said sharply. “That’s a simple fact.”

“I wish I knew more about them,” I squirmed in concern. “Forewarned is forearmed. And that’s assuming there’s just one mole. What if it’s like one of those Asian action movies, and there are two or three of them? They’d all pull out pistols and we’d have ourselves a nice Mexican standoff.”

“When they move on you, then you’ll find out—there’s no point imagining what might happen before that,” Zimin said to shut me down. “You don’t need to know too much—I thought we already discussed that. And if they don’t make a move on you, then there’s no point in you knowing anything to begin with.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t help but think that I really should do a little digging. It wasn’t worth going overboard or making anything public, but it was worth some extra effort. *What if they use more stick than carrot?*

“Okay, let’s drink.” Valyaev rubbed his hands and started smearing some caviar on a slice of bread. Ilya, are you having some? Treat yourself to a little fun.”

Azov checked his watch, pulled out a small walkie-talkie from his pocket, and pressed a button on it.

“Seven, you’re in charge. I’ll be in Zimin’s office.”

Then he waved at me, his way of telling me to pour him a glass.

We all had a shot, with me drinking from the same oddly shaped glass, and then we had another one. A fiery wave ran through my veins, and I could feel the blood pumping in my temples. *Ah, that’s good.*

“So what did you want to ask about the game?” Zimin said, turning to me as he snipped the tip off another cigar.

“Oh, right.” I rolled my glass around the table. “Is there any way you can make life a little easier with this quest? We couldn’t with the last one, but maybe with this one...”

“No, my hurried friend.” Valyaev grabbed the bottle, glanced at the liquid inside, and deftly poured exact quantities into our glasses before putting the empty bottle under the table. “Nope, it’s all you. The rules are the same: you go, beat all odds, fight all enemies. What are you so gloomy for?”

“You’d know if you were in my shoes,” I replied, not even bothering to hide my disappointment. “You’re going to have me running all over the entire continent.”

“And that’s not all,” Valyaev said with an evil grin. “You’ll even...eh, I won’t spoil the surprise.”

“Kif, Kif, Kif,” Zimin said from inside his cloud of cigar smoke. “What are you whining about? Just a few months ago you were naked and barefoot noob wielding a wooden stick. You were like Pithecanthropus, a caveman. And now you’re an experience warrior, you have great connections both with players and in the NPC world, you’re in with a couple royal families, and you have ties with a bunch of clans. Plus, you have money.”

I feigned confusion.

“Oh, come on, don’t make that face. You think we don’t know you sold off your set shield to...what was his name? The bug. So chin up, don’t complain, and march on. You have something to work for, and you have brains, so per aspera ad astra.”

“Yes, something like that.” I exhaled and emptied my glass without waiting for a toast.

“Ilya, have any of those four played Fayroll? Do they play now?” Valyaev asked unexpectedly.

“I’m not sure about right now,” Azov replied, biting into a lemon slice with relish. “Officially, Zvyagintseva and Zhilin bought capsules for themselves, though that was a few years ago. They registered accounts and logged into the system then, as well. Zvyagintseva played for a few months, and then her account went dead; Zhilin played for about half a year, and then he stopped playing, too. I don’t know if they sold their capsules, though I doubt it—like I said, nobody’s used them to log into the game. Shelestova’s dad bought her a capsule, though she didn’t register an account and nobody’s logged into the system from that capsule. And Soloveva’s never had a capsule or an account.”

“I love the people we have working at a paper about a game,” Valyaev said as he stood up, reached into a cabinet built into the wall, and started rummaging through some bottles. “They’re out there talking about the game, and they’ve barely played it themselves.”

“That’s the official version,” Azov continued, ignoring the interruption. “I may find out what’s actually the case in time. Plenty of people use fake accounts and capsules. We don’t read biometrics, though I’ve been saying we should for a long time now.”

“That’s illegal,” Zimin frowned. “We’d have no end of problems. Ilya, keep digging—that’s a good thread to follow.”

“I know.” Azov settled back into his chair. “Kif, if I find anything out, I’ll let you know.”

“Those two already told me they played,” I said, throwing my two cents on the table. “I asked them right before I left.”

Zimin snapped his fingers. “One point for them.”

“Maybe not,” Azov replied. “So far we’re just playing the game with what’s out in the open, and they know that. This part doesn’t mean anything; it only gets more interesting from here.”

We drank for another three hours at least, until it started to get dark outside the windows. Zimin finally decided it was time to wrap things up.

“All right, let’s end our grand welcome there. Kif, how are you feeling?”

I felt fantastic, though my head was buzzing. The cognac was fantastic, and I hadn't slept the night before.

"Well, I guess," I started off with exaggerated gestures, "you know!"

"Ilya," Zimin said, looking over at Azov. The latter didn't look the least bit drunk—the only change I noticed was that his face was a slightly different color. "Take our friend downstairs, please. That'll be easier, first of all, and that vixen of his won't give him too much trouble if you're there. She'll be afraid of you."

"No, no, no," Valyaev said with a wave. "I'll be taking old Kif downstairs. I have an errand to run down there anyway."

Zimin rolled his eyes, though he didn't say anything.

The girls at the reception desk looked at us oddly when we staggered out of the elevator arm-in-arm. We were even singing an old student song.

*If I don't die of intoxicated revelry* (Valyaev gave the finger to the world and large and quickly added, "like that's going to happen")

*Then I'll come back to you one day!*

"The goliards really were fantastic people, Kif," Valyaev said. "They drank and they stole, but they were fantastic."

Just then he saw the girls and let go of my shoulder in astonishment. A wavered noticeably, though I stayed on my feet and headed in their direction.

"Excuse me, you naughty little girls," I said, for some reason in an Eastern mood after the songs we were singing. "Would any of you happen to know where I could find the sultry rose of my heart, the illustrious Vika ibn Travnikova?"

"That was well done," Valyaev said approvingly. "Just like some Khorasan sheik. Respect."

The rose of my heart appeared five minutes later led by a pretty blonde with a large braid.

"And there's my malika al jamal," Valyaev said, purring like a cat.

“What language is that?” I asked.

“Arabic.” Valyaev, unlike me, walked steadily over to the girls. “And how did we come to have two beauties like yourselves in our wretched building? Vika, you’re as lovely as ever—allow me to kiss your hand.”

With one loud “muah,” her standing in the eyes of the girls at the reception desk went through the roof.

Vika, who had only ever seen Valyaev once, and in a rather delicate situation at that, kept her wits about her and chatted with him politely.

I stood there watching as Valyaev confidently set his trap for the light-haired beauty. With a hiccup, I told Vika it was time to head home. She looked me over, shook her head, and glanced back at Valyaev.

“Kif,” Valyaev said, coming over and giving me a hug. “You’re a good man! Go get some sleep.”

Letting me go, he turned back to the girls.

“Have you already ordered a car for him?” They had, and he nodded in satisfaction.

We hugged again, after which he went back to working Svetlana over. Vika took me by the arm and led me toward the car.

“No sense heading to the office for you,” she decided, settling me into the back seat, looking at my smiling face, and pulling out her phone. I’m not sure who she called—I was already fast asleep.

## Chapter Four

**In which the hero mostly takes care of a bunch of little things.**

I slept as soundly as a baby. Vika somehow woke me up when we got home, though I walked up to the apartment on autopilot, crashed into bed almost immediately, and fell right back asleep. There were no dreams, the shades of harmless Federik left me alone, and the work I had ahead of my receded for a time. In short, my exhaustion and the cognac did their job—I was gone for almost twelve hours.

The next morning, I woke up a few minutes before my alarm as fresh and cheery as a garden cucumber. That's when the hunger hit me.

"Mm, you're awake," Vika mumbled sleepily, some sixth sense telling her that I'd crossed over from the dream world. "I'll go make you some breakfast. You could probably eat a horse, right?"

"You got that right," I replied. I was pleasantly surprised at how intuitive she was. "How did you know?"

Vika opened her eyes, snorted, put on a robe, and headed in the direction of the bathroom.

I watched her go, realized she was again a step ahead of me—I wasn't just hungry—and went to have a smoke.

"Are you staying at home today?" Vika asked, happily watching me growl as I shoveled chopped steak and buckwheat into my mouth.

"No, I'm coming to the office," I said to her satisfaction. "I can't just leave the new kids by themselves, or just with you. We have to keep track of them, make sure they don't get out of hand with all their newfound energy and enthusiasm."

"Excellent." Vika sighed in relief. "You know how it can be..."

"Of course I know," I replied reassuringly. "Better than anyone."

Only a few months before, I'd been an underling just like them. I may have had an independent streak, but I had no idea I'd soon have my own team to guide—not to mention a team as colorful as ours.

“Vika, call and order a car for us.” The previous day I’d decided that I needed to start taking everything Raidion offered given how comfortable they were getting drunk with me. Even if I had to pay for it afterwards, the receipt would be so long that little things like ordering a car or having dinner at the company’s expense wouldn’t make a difference. I’d be bankrupt one way or another.

Vika nodded approvingly and went to find her phone.

“They’ll be here in an hour,” she yelled a few minutes later from the other room.

I finished eating, washed the dishes, and headed over to where she was, intending to dig through what I’d gotten in the plump packet. Needless to say, I’d grabbed it when I left Zimin’s office. That plan turned to naught, however, when Vika decided that an hour was plenty of time to have some fun. She and all her charms were waiting for me when I got to the bedroom, and there was no sense trying to put her off with arguments like how I’d just eaten.

Once in the car, Vika went into vivid detail describing how she spent the day before at Raidion, how fantastic it was there, and how they had everything you could ask for. The building was designed with the employees at the heart of the company in mind: there was a gym, a very nice cafeteria, a variety of services, and, to my surprise, even a small theater. The fifth floor was also a living area, with apartments for a number of the middle managers. They often spent the night there, and the higher-ups, Vika learned, were pretty much permanent residents. Capsule rooms were set up for lower-level employees.

“I wouldn’t mind working there,” she said sadly in closing. “Everything there is designed with people in mind.”

Vika looked at me meaningfully, expecting a response. I knew exactly what she wanted to hear, though I was in no hurry to say it—I wasn’t sure if the driver was one of Azov’s people or if he was working for someone else. I was sure he was working for someone, that much was so, and so my answer was vague and evasive.

“We’ll do good work, and that will be enough to get us places.”

Judging by her face, she was looking for something different, though a second later she nodded in agreement.

The silver Mercedes was in my spot yet again. Vika grimaced.

“I’m going to find whoever that rat trap belongs to and kill them. And if I don’t figure it out, I’ll slash the tires. That’s our space!”

Vika had very clear ideas of what belonged to her and what didn't. It wasn't that she was a cheapskate or greedy; it was just that she was highly scrupulous when it came to purchasing, expanding, and protecting her material assets. I once happened to glance into her clutch, where I noticed that she had charts detailing all our income and expenses. There was even a graph, complete with wavy lines, notes, and reference points.

As soon as she settled in with me and our relationship stabilized, she found the stack of bills I usually only paid once they started to build up, I had money, and I was facing something like getting my electricity turned off. It actually had been turned off once, leaving me to bang my knees on all the furniture until they turned it back on. The people who work with utilities can be the worst bureaucrats... The "one window" idea was a good one, but the problem was that it was taken too literally: only one window at the office was ever left open...

Anyway, back to Vika. She's worked on my bills all that evening, and the next evening went to see the housing commission (or maybe the building operations office). She spent her time there telling them off, letting them know she was a journalist, and promising to expose them and have them all fired. Finally, the recalculated things and left us without anything to pay for half a year. At least, it was something like that—I didn't really bother getting involved.

I'm not sure how she lived before we met, or what she was like then, but the idea of "mine" was sacred to her. The idea that someone might take what was lawfully hers ("mine" and "his," from what I could tell, and long since melted into "ours," which then circled back to "mine") enraged her.

"Oh, come on," I said quietly, earning myself an indignant glance (*That's our spot! And that's what you think of it?*) that told me how important it was to talk with Shelestova. It didn't really bother me that she was in my parking space, though I wasn't sure Shelestova would make it through the day if Vika figured out that the Mercedes was hers. And she was stubborn—she'd figure it out sooner or later.

Things were bustling at the office, even in our old area. The new offices were looking great from what I could see through the open doors. The newcomers even had their own desks, though everything was going on back where I was used to it happening.

They were crowded around a table burdened with four piles of paper and looking at Gennady, who was pulling pages from each pile and reading them aloud. Then he gave his commentary. *There's a mentor for you...*

"Well, humans, everything going well?" I asked the group.

“Yep,” Gennady replied. “Hey, boss.”

Everybody greeted me individually, with Soloveva coming over to shake my hand and then Vika’s. That got an ironic smile from Shelestova, who curtsied.

“Everyone all set?” I asked the new blood. “Office supplies, cups and spoons, all of that?”

“We should buy some heaters before it gets cold,” Zhilin said unexpectedly. “This isn’t a great building, probably built in the 70s, so it’ll be way too cold for the girls. We need a new cooler, too. I checked ours: it’s ancient, and nobody’s ever replaced the filter.”

*Well, look at you.*

“Vika, take Sergey to see the building superintendent on Friday,” I said. “Those are some good ideas. Sergey, you take over the process since it sounds like you’re familiar with it.”

“Yes, sir,” Zhilin replied. “Can I push them if I have to? I’ve known a superintendent or two in my day—they wouldn’t give you snow in the winter.”

“Go ahead. Just make sure you don’t leave anything permanent,” I responded.

I couldn’t care less about the superintendent.

Back in my office, I spent a couple hours hammering out some nonsense for the From the Editor column. I was very well aware that nobody besides me, the typist, and now, probably, Soloveva would read it. Nobody cared about it, though it was my job and I had to do it. It was tradition: good publications always had the head editor write something smart or boring.

I finished the job, went for a smoke, and didn’t close my door when I got back. That gave me an excellent view of my arguing team: they were discussing the different sides of quality and quantity when it came to filling up the news column.

“I’m telling you, we need to go hard on quantity,” Soloveva asserted a bit shrilly. “That way there’ll be something for everyone.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Shelestova parried imposingly. “Readers will skip the first part, skip the second, and not bother reading any further. A few weeks later, we won’t have any subscribers left. Then we’ll get fired in six months and they’ll hire someone else to take our places.”

“If not sooner,” Vika called over from her corner.

“Agreed,” Shelestova replied. “If not sooner.”

“We need more free stuff,” Tasha chimed in suddenly. “People love free stuff. We have one competition, but it’s basic and cumbersome. We need a bunch of small, easier ones, something about game knowledge with unexpected surprises. An uber-sword, for example, items nobody else has, unusual potions. Maybe even a tour of Raidion as a prize, letting players see where the game is made and chat with the programmers and scriptwriters. Everyone loves things like that.”

“True,” agreed Zhilin. “Not a bad idea.”

“I’m with you,” Yushkov said. “Good thoughts—both the prizes and the competitions. Something like *Where can you find this boss?* or *Where is this location?*”

“But do you think the higher-ups will really go for that?” Soloveva asked, jealous in her doubt. That made sense: the idea was right there, and she wasn’t the one who saw it. Frustrating!

“We can ask Vika,” Shelestova crowed. “Vi-i-ika, we had an interesting idea, and we thought you might want to discuss it with your boss. It’s easier for you, since you have access to his person whenever you want it, right?”

*Oh, great.* She had to know I could hear her.

“Okay, Elena, if it comes up, I’ll let him know,” Vika replied implacably. “It’s just a shame you didn’t think of it yesterday—I could have discussed it with Max or Nikita personally.”

“With who?” Soloveva asked.

“Zimin or Valyaev,” said Vika, her voice calm. “We keep things simple—they don’t like formalities between friends.”

Soloveva practically jumped out of her shoes from envy, Tasha didn’t appear to have been paying Vika the slightest attention as she picked through some papers, Zhilin mouthed an impressed *wow*, and even Shelestova narrowed her eyes. Her barb had missed the target.

*So which of them is it?*

I grabbed four small pieces of paper and drew the newcomers’s outlines on them, one per page. I’m a terrible artist, so they were more caricatures with exaggerated personal details: one had a pimple, another had a very nice figure.

Spreading them out in front of me, I sat back in my chair and started to think. There wasn't much to think about, though the invaluable sources themselves were nearby and starting to argue again.

Each of them had reasons why they might or might not be the mole. Zhilin was a marine, easy-going, and smart, but completely laid-back. I could tell Shelestova was wrapping him around her little finger, and he didn't have a problem with that. Shelestova, sure, she was beautiful and smart—practically a modern-day Mata Hari. But she came with a rich dad, and he probably kept tabs on her every move. I had to imagine he'd veto a dangerous tryst with the Consortium. *I wonder what happened to that guy at the White Sign. Probably nothing good.* Still, she clearly liked her adventures, preferring shots of adrenaline to praise and adoration. A life without adventure was like soup without salt for her. The rest of the group was the same: everything and nothing.

I purred an old song under my breath and tried to make a hedgehog out of paperclips. It didn't work. Then I unbent a few of them and tried to stand them on end. I came up with something, though definitely not a hedgehog.

“Oh, you got yourself a porcupine,” Vika said with a soft giggle as she walked into the office. “Bored? Did you write your article?”

“Yes, I wrote it, I'll send it to you in a minute,” I replied with a nod. “Bored? No, not really. Just thinking.”

“Did you hear what Tasha said?” Vika sat down on the edge of the desk. “It was really my idea—I wanted to mention it to you yesterday.”

“Sounds good, I'll talk with Zimin. I don't think he'll have a problem. He won't give us uber-swords and tours of Raidion, I don't think, but we'll figure something out.”

Vika bent over and kissed me. “I don't doubt it. Go home—I can tell you want to play your game. I'm going to start being jealous soon, to be perfectly honest.”

“No sense in that,” I said, taking her hand. “That's part of my job description, too. And I have to do good work there if we want one of those apartments on the fifth floor.”

“I'd like one.” She squeezed my cheeks between her hands, her eyes staring unblinkingly into mine from a few centimeters away. “I hope you understand that this is our chance, the kind you don't get every day. If we blow it, we'll spend the rest of our lives regretting it.”

*And she's only 25?* I was looking up into the eyes of a wise, experienced woman. The trap sprang shut...

“Okay, get out of here. I’m going to go find out who that Mercedes belongs to.” Vika walked out of the office.

*Yeah, about that...*

“Elena!” I yelled as soon as Vika was out in the corridor. “Come in here.”

“Yes, my general!” A second later Shelestova was standing in front of me. She was at attention, her perfect breasts sticking out at me without any visible support underneath her alpaca sweater.

“At ease,” I ordered. “I’m getting army flashbacks.”

“Was it really that bad?” Even the most innocent questions sounded like double entendre when she asks them.

“Oh, it was fun and exciting,” I quipped. “Actually, the food was terrible, and they hit us a lot at the beginning. I learned how to be a good orderly, too. Anyway, none of that matters.”

“What does?” Elena had started twirling a lock of hair with her finger, a leg playfully shuffling around the floor.

“A certain silver Mercedes that is in my parking space for the second day in a row.”

“That one right there?” Shelestova asked, going over to the window. One arm pointed at the car; the other rested on my shoulder.

“That’s the one,” I confirmed. “There’s something written on the asphalt right there in clear English. Did you read it?”

“Oh, it was all there.” Shelestova put her other arm on my shoulder. “‘My spot, I’ll kill anyone who parks here.’ Exactly right.”

“Bingo,” I said. “But that was me who wrote that. Did you see Vika running off with her eyes bulging? She’s on the hunt to see who exactly she’s going to kill—I’d just tell you off, but that’s not her. She’s a woman of action.”

“Yes?” Shelestova thought for a second. “Well, she’ll probably find me, but that’s fine. I’m good at taekwondo, so it’s a toss-up to see who will take out who.”

“No need for fights here,” I sighed. “Sure, it would be fun, and we could all bet, but I think that would make Soloveva a bit too happy... Anyway, we’re here to do our jobs, not start a civil war, got it? If things with the car get out of hand, I’ll have to get rid of the

source of the problem. You're great, but I've known Vika longer. Plus, she's my assistant, and you..."

"Understood, my general." Shelestova tapped out some sort of march on my shoulders and headed toward the door. "She's your assistant, and I'm...you know, I think I'll go move my car. No need to put the boss lady on to boil. She isn't borscht, after all!"

"Good call," I replied. "Very constructive of you."

Shelestova stopped at the threshold. "What do you drink, field marshal? We're going to have a small party on Thursday, and we need to know what our dear leader would like."

"I drink everything. Well, except windshield wiper fluid and varnish. You can bring moonshine for all I care, and I'll drink it."

"Not too picky," Shelestova noted. "That's good. Glad to hear it. And here I thought you were up there getting used to life with the elites, and here you're still all simple and democratic."

"I'm a simple guy, the people's guy," I explained. "That life up there is here today and gone tomorrow, so there's no sense getting used to it—weaning yourself off later takes forever."

"Yep, that's boring, but it's true." Shelestova winked at me. "Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring, right?"

I certainly didn't know what the next day would bring, but I was too busy focused on the present to worry about that. Logging in, I found myself in the middle of the plain I'd been walking across a few days before. The sun was shining, a breeze played with my face, the grass whispered, and a goblin with a snake's tail sticking out of his mouth dashed off in shock at my appearance.

Mocking him as he ran, I pulled out a portal scroll. I had no desire to walk, and didn't see much point in it either: why spend a few hours and put myself at risk of the worst happening just to save a scroll? I could have, of course, but the valuables in my bag and the fact that I now had more enemies than friends meant that I needed to play it safe. No, I needed a straight shot to the hotel in Fladridge. There were messages I needed to read, also, judging by the icon I had blinking in front of me.

I unloaded back in my room, leaving some things in my bag and dumping the rest in my chest. Then I did a little experimenting with my runes, though I got that *psh* much more than I would have liked to. Actually, the *psh* sound was all I got. Five runes aren't

three—you have a much lower chance of coming up with something. Once I'd gotten tired of playing around with five-rune combinations, I have four-rune combinations a try, though I didn't have much success there either. It was only when I was about to drop down to three runes that the table puffed out a golden cloud.

*Notice.*

*Because you were able to successfully fuse Veird, Dagaz, Eivaz, and Jera, you get an additional bonus:*

*+7% damage done to undead*

*+4% to equipment durability*

*+2% chance of doing cold damage*

As usual, it wasn't all that much, but I appreciated the freebie. I just wasn't really in the mood to carry them around, as I wouldn't get them returned for a second time if I was killed. On the other hand, I couldn't leave everything I owned in the trunk, so I dropped the runes I'd fused back into my bag. The last two, I decided, could join my rainy-day fund in the trunk.

I left the hotel and headed toward the mailbox. My plan was to knock out all the little things on my to-do list, and then get to work figuring out how I was going to get to the Sumaki Mountains.

There was a bit of a surprise waiting for me in the mailbox. I wasn't sure if it was a good surprise or a bad one, but it was a surprise nonetheless. One letter was from my already former clan letting me know that I was no longer their friend. I hadn't treated them as a friend, and because of that they'd given up on me and would kill me on sight. *Nothing new there.*

The second letter was from Gedron the Elder, who had somehow already gotten word that I'd been killed out. He was only too happy to invite "the venerable Hagen" to join his clan. If I'd been in Elina's shoes, I'd have had to wonder how news could get into strange hands that quickly. She certainly couldn't have been putting signs up. Although, that was her problem, and the worse her problems got, the better it was for me. I would have been only too happy to see her and her clan vanish entirely.

The third message was also an invitation to join a clan, though this time it was from one I'd never heard of: the Crimson Arrows. I scratched my head trying to remember if I might have come across them at some point, but I couldn't come up with anything. Still, they promised protection and support, easy gameplay, and all the hospitality they could muster. It wasn't a high-level clan, somewhere close to 200 on the rankings, and it wasn't anything to take that seriously. I wasn't a snob; I'd just gotten in with the top clans right off the bat and didn't plan on changing that habit. Really, I didn't want to go anywhere right then—not to a top clan, and not to a newly-formed one, either.

I'm a polite person, and so I sent nearly identical replies to each other them. There was something thanking them, letting them know I was flattered and how it was all beyond my wildest dreams, but telling them that, unfortunately, I was going to play on my own for a while. But as soon as I changed my mind, I assured them, they were the clan for me. I wasn't even lying, interestingly.

But the fourth letter...yeah. That one was interesting.

*Hey, Hagen.*

*You know, I think everything got a little out of hand. There was no point in us getting into a fight like that, I'll admit: I wasn't right to let you be killed, and it was a mistake to take what we took. With that in mind, I'd like to sit down in some tavern and talk everything out. I'm sure two intelligent people like ourselves can work out our differences.*

*I can assure you that I have something to tell you and something to offer, and you'll want to hear both.*

*Think about it. Don't be in a hurry. If you decide you'd like to meet, just let me know when and where. Drinks are on me.*

*Your friend, and I say that as more than a platitude,*

*Miurat*

## Chapter Five

### In which the hero decides to pay off an old debt.

“Friend.” With friends like him, who needs enemies? Also, I couldn’t quite tell if he wanted a drink with me in the game or in real life. If he meant real life, well, that wasn’t happening—all I needed were my game problems spilling over into reality. But in the game? Well, there was no point avoiding a meeting, since cities were safe. He might have had something interesting to say, anyway.

*Good afternoon,*

*I can’t say our latest meetings have left me with the warmest of memories, so I’ll skip the usual courtesies.*

*But if you think there’s something we should discuss, that’s fine. Tomorrow, 10 p.m., one-eyed Ibrahim’s duhan in Selgar.*

*Hagen*

And why not Selgar? I thought I might be able to grab my things at the auction before they disappeared—they weren’t worth much, but there was no sense losing them if I could avoid it. It wasn’t that I was particularly stingy; there was just no point losing things I didn’t have to lose.

At the last second I decided against sending him the message. Your first impulse is almost always the right one, though it’s still worth taking your time in some instances.

My mail taken care of, I looked around and was about to head over to the instructor for a couple abilities I’d earned when I caught sight of the downcast and shabby figure of a dwarf. He was dejectedly ambling his way toward the tavern. Once I recognized him, I remembered how I was still in his debt. It wasn’t much—just deep respect and my life.

“Dorn, is that you?” I called at him. “Hey, there! Why the long face?”

The dwarf looked up, saw me, and didn’t recognize me at first. Then it clicked, and he waved.

“What happened?” I really did want to know how such a fun, confident dwarf could have been knocked down to those depths. I remembered how he and his friend Rone had saved my hide from being shredded by a nasty orc by the name of Euiikh. *Ah, those were the days. Now Euiikh’s like those gremlins you’re so afraid of as a kid but laugh at when you grow up.*

“Oh, you know, Hagen,” Dorn said. “The game isn’t what it used to be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my ears perking up.

I was all about the changes happening in the game. All breaks with past patterns, and anything out of the ordinary could have represented anything from useless fun-facts to an informational atom bomb.

“People are different these days. The clans are different. Nothing’s the same. Players are busy doing everything besides playing the game.” Dorn ruffled his beard and sat down on a bench next to the mailbox. “We used to have a clan, maybe not the best in the game, but a solid one: well within the top fifty. Our leader was a tough woman, but she had a good head on her shoulders, she was an excellent strategist, and she was just a nice person. And how did it all end?”

“How?” I asked politely.

*As if I don’t know.*

“She went off the deep end,” Dorn said, spitting for emphasis. “All her clan problems, her percentages, her off-the-wall intrigues...they all went to her head. I left, Rone left, Zorg left, and so did another thirty of the veterans. And that was fine, it happens. We wanted to join another clan, and they told us they wanted a security deposit up front as guarantee that we wouldn’t just leave them, too. Tell me, my young friend, would you say that security deposits are normal for games?”

“Honestly, no,” I replied with surprise. It sounded pretty crazy to me, too.

“That’s what I’m saying.” Dorn spat again. “But Rone says it’s fine, and he handed over the gold. I wasn’t about to join him, though I certainly had the gold to spare. And I still do. But I don’t think that’s right. So they said Rone can stay, and they showed me the door. What would you have done?”

“I’m not sure, but I probably would have told them to screw themselves,” I replied with a shrug. “What else can you say?”

“Exactly.” Dorn’s face darkened still further. “But Rone disagreed, and he stayed. We’d played the game for two years side by side. We even studied together, out in real life—we’ve been through so much together.”

I felt bad for the guy and understood why he was so sad. And the dwarf was right: people were changing... The whole world was changing.

“Well, I gave him a few choice words, turned around, and left. Then I got a quest near Trottir for some blind worms, and got a pickup group of kids together. We went off to kill them, but there was no teamwork to speak of, they herded in without listening me, three died, and the other three ran off. I didn’t see that right away, since I was busy fighting, and the worms all ganged up on me. So I told them we should go back to get our things. But no, it’s too dark and scary for them—they’d rather just go buy new things at the auction. What’s going on in Fayroll? It’s easier to buy things than it is to win them in battle! Where’s the game going?”

It was an unfortunate story. Although Dorn did kind of get what was coming to him: he’d run off underground with a group of random, inexperienced, and unpredictable players. Actually, he’d gotten off easy.

“And so all my things are below ground in the Neilozh Mines close to Trottir. But here I am.”

“Where are the Neilozh Mines?” I asked. “Are they far?”

“A good forty or fifty leagues toward the head of the Crisna,” the dwarf replied, gesturing toward the west.

Well, that direction certainly worked for me. *Fifty leagues? I’ll take it.*

“So what do you need here if your things are there?” I squinted my left eye.

The dwarf looked back at me, chewed on his beard, and sighed.

“I’m now about to head back into the mines with a pickup group—they’re useless. But it’s impossible without a group of some kind. Here in Fladridge there’s a solo quest you can get, a series of seven quests, and the finale is a one-man raid into the mines right around where my things are. It’s a long series, and it’s no fun, but still...”

“By the time you finish the series, somebody will have long since grabbed your cocoon,” I snorted. “If they haven’t already.”

“Oh, I know,” the dwarf replied with a wave. “But I’m just tired of everything, I want to have some fun. What’s going on, huh? It was a great game—that’s why I started playing.”

“What are you whining like an old maid for?” I barked. “You just got unlucky, and that happens. I’ve seen worse coincidences, believe me. One guy I knew had three lovers, and they all told him on the same day that they were pregnant.”

“And what happened?”

“Oh, nothing,” I grinned. “He left the city—there wasn’t anything left for him there. One of the three was Azeri, and she had five brothers who would have loved to chop off a certain body part.”

“Brutal.” Dorn yanked on his beard. “What a nightmare!”

“Yup,” I said reproachfully. “Your little problems don’t seem so bad anymore, do they?”

“‘Little’?” the dwarf sniffed, a bit offended. “I had one set item, two elite items, and an axe with two gems set in it. All the result of some good, hard work.”

“Oh, come on, why are you snuffling like some kind of hedgehog?” I clapped Dorn on the shoulder. “We’ll get your stuff back, so long as nobody else has gotten there first.”

“We can’t do it with just the two of us,” Dorn glowered. “There’s no way. We need at least another three if they’re experienced, four if they’re not.”

*Yes, that’s the issue.* A pickup group was out of the question, and I didn’t want to go knocking on the Hounds’s door, although, to be fair, the Gray Witch would have been only too happy to send me a group that would sweep right through the Neilozh Mines. NPCs? I had Lane, though all our friends were lying dead in the jungles and temples. He was a good mercenary, but there was no one besides him. The knights of the order were also an option, although they were a last resort: I couldn’t keep going back to that well, especially since my last adventure had cost them the lives of twenty young knights and an experienced officer. Sure, I’d had Brother Yur’s blessing, but I was still the driver.

“You’re having a hard time thinking of someone, too,” Dorn said as he scratched his head. “Why is life this way now? Before, everything was the way it’s supposed to be: quests, raids, enemies, friends...”

*Wait a second—enemies, friends...what about Miurat? Seriously, why not?* That move would certainly be an unexpected one. He wanted to talk, and we’d have the chance

to while we battled away. At the end of the day, if he wanted to kill me, he'd find a way to kill me. But if he really wanted to talk, I didn't have a problem letting him think I owed him one. I'm a simple guy: you always owe someone something, and you can always forgive people for their past crimes. Giving him pause to think wasn't a bad idea: I could create the illusion that I was out just doing your normal, everyday quests. I'd wrapped up that big quest, and I was back to the life of an ordinary player. I could help the dwarf in the process—I owed him one already.

“Hey, is Trotter far from the Sumaki Mountains?” I asked Dorn.

“Well, I wouldn't say it's that close, though it isn't too far either.” Dorn blew his nose in some grass. “It's maybe a ten-day journey from there to the mountains, at least if you walk. If you take the underground streams, it's much faster.”

“Underground streams?” I hadn't heard of them, not even on the forums.

“Yeah. What do you think the Neilozh Mines are?” he asked, looking at me searchingly. “They're old works abandoned by dwarves, not too deep—right up against the surface, actually. But you can go deeper, and that's where the dwarves lived. The remains of what used to be a big NPC clan called the Hammers of the West are still down there. They're called the Neirus Mines. You can find a few quests, some of them really good ones, and players venture down there. Not too many, of course, since there's a ton of space. For ever quest you do down there, you could do five above ground. Some people get claustrophobic, too—it's dark, empty, creepy, and sunless. But there's also an underground river that you can take right to the Sumaki Mountains. There's a steamboat that goes up and down it.”

“A steamboat?” I had a hard time believing that.

“Yep,” Dorn replied with a nod. “There's no wind under the mountains, so the dwarves rigged up a steam engine. They won't sell anyone the secret though. Which makes sense: this is a sword and magic game, not some steampunk nonsense.”

“Crazy.”

“Pretty much,” Dorn responded.

“But the steamboat costs money, and you need a good reputation to get on board, right?” I was starting to feel some *déjà vu*. That was a road I'd been down before.

“No, it's just a steamboat. There's even a quest for it if you make it to the Sumaki Mountains. It's tough, though, something about protecting the passengers and cargo from underground bandits.”

*Well, Mr. Hagen, there's your path to the Sumaki Mountains. One of them, at least. What's your problem?*

“What’s with that face?” Dorn asked the same question my subconscious was wondering about. “Is something wrong?”

“Ah, you know, I just don’t like those deep, underground spots after the Rina Mountains.”

“Wait, you went into the mines there?” Dorn asked, eyes wide. “Even Gorotul was in no hurry to go down there, and he’s crazy in the head—I think they forgot to give him a sense of self-preservation when he was born.”

“Well, I went in.” I rolled my eyes. “Just thinking back to it…”

“I’ve heard what it’s like,” Dorn replied with a frown. “But it’s nothing like that here. Sure, it’s dangerous, nobody would tell you otherwise, but it’s just the same danger you have anywhere else. Orcs in the old works; the underground flora and fauna, all ravenous, blood-sucking, and flesh-eating; cave trolls; maybe some dark dwarves. Oh, and the drogters.”

“Dark dwarves?” I asked, alarmed. “They had those in the Rina Mountains.”

“No, these are smaller and still alive,” Dorn reassured me. “They all served the Dark Lord once upon a time, and nobody’s seen any of them for quite a while, actually. But just a month or two ago the drogters popped up out of nowhere—that was a nasty surprise. After that there was a big uproar on the forum about how someone had found the dragon quest, and then some idiot threw out something about the Departed Gods. Oh, how everyone yelled and howled! You probably remember that, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied, not about to argue that point. How could I not remember? The whole thing had been my creation.

“Right. Everything quieted down, though the drogters didn’t go anywhere. People even say there are quite a few of them. But that’s just around the edges of the mines—nobody knows what’s down in the depths.”

“Hold on a second,” I cut in. “What’s the tavern in Trotter called?”

“The Hanged Man’s Shelter,” he replied quickly. “Why?”

“Nothing, just wait a minute.” I went over to the mailbox, rewrote my letter, changed the address and name of the tavern as well as the date and time, and added one more line.

*If you want to meet today, send me an answer in half an hour.*

“Okay, Dorn, it’s like this,” I said, walking over to the dwarf. “There’s a guy I know who’s a bit complicated. We don’t really trust each other, though he needs something from me and will therefore do his best to stay on my good side. We can use that to get your things, though you need to understand that he’s dangerous, and just not a very great person.”

“What’s his name? There are plenty of bastards out playing this game, though you can always tell who they are,” Dorn replied calmly.

“Miurat. He used to be with the Gray Witch in the Hounds, now he’s with the Double Shields.”

“I’ve heard of him. And yes, people told me the same things you mention, though I heard he’s also an excellent warrior.” Dorn rubbed his hands together. “And who cares what kind of person he is? All that matters to me is whose side he’s on. Down in the mines it’s fine, since there’s no sense betraying anything. And can I ask what you’re getting out of this?”

*And who said that dwarves were stupid?* Dorn had picked up on the situation completely, and he’d asked a direct question—well done by him.

“I can’t tell you, though I do have a favor to ask.”

“Go for it,” Dorn replied, all ears. “I’ll go what I can.”

“If anyone from our old clan asks if we hang out, tell them we do, either that I was with you or that I went into the mines by myself. Just say that we see each other all the time.”

“What, you didn’t part on the best of terms?” Dorn laughed.

“That’s not the half of it,” I replied, also laughing. “Blacklisted, cursed, the works.”

“You’re kidding,” Dorn said, throwing up his arms. “What did you do?”

“Oh, just a quest, but then I wouldn’t turn over anything I’d gotten to Elina. There were some other little things, too. At the end she went crazy, kicked me out in disgrace, and blacklisted me.”

“Screw her. I’ve never seen any of ours down in the mines, and nobody gets involved in all of that crap down there. You only go if you’re serious about it.”

*Ding!* There was my reply.

*No problem, the time and place work for me. I’m on my way to Trottir. See you at the tavern. Miurat.*

“Excellent, he confirmed the meeting,” I said, looking over at Dorn. “Don’t worry, my friend, we’ll get this taken care of. Maybe.”

“We’ll see.” The dwarf was in much better spirits already, his eyes having lost the look of a puppy kicked out onto the street. Even strong warriors break when partners who have been with them through thick and thin, who are more than brothers, suddenly up and leave you just so the game gets a little easier—especially when they don’t care what that does to you. That would knock anyone for a loop. And the guy in front of me, to add insult to injury, had then gotten killed in the mines. The world had gotten him down. But there was something else that had caught my attention.

“Hey, how is it,” I asked, “that you’ve been playing so long, and your level isn’t much higher? How’d that happen?”

The dwarf had picked up a couple dozen levels since our last meeting, though that still left him short of Level 90.

“Rone and I had to start over with new profiles after something happened,” he said, his glance falling. “Things happen.”

I nodded. Things certainly did happen, and I wasn’t going to pry. Dron could tell me if he wanted to.

“Here’s a scroll.” I held out the parchment, and a second later we were stepping into the familiar blue film.

Trottir was reminiscent of old Dutch or German cities. It was the European Middle Ages, only without the witch-burning and a drunk Peter the Great with a planer strapped to

his back. *Wait a second, about those witches...what's that pile of ash in the main square? Something had been burned just recently. Or someone?*

“Probably a witch,” Dorn cut in, noticing what had caught my eye. “There are plenty here—old Gretken, that demon, is good at what she does. You can find them in the mines, too, burning cats and conducting their rituals.”

“Gretken?” I had a suspicion about what was going on. “Who’s Gretken?”

“I don’t really know that much about her,” Dorn said, spreading his arms. “Just that she’s in charge of all the local witches, and that she’s as old as the mammoths. Maybe older, in fact. Oh, and I heard that she rides an enormous wolf. They say NPCs and players alike should stay away from her. She’d shred you like a dog with a toy. There are plenty of quests tied to her, though they’re long and incredibly difficult. I don’t plan on ever touching them.”

Well, that had to be old Gedran, just known in that area as Gretken. That was odd, though. *There’s just one West, but she has two pseudonyms here?*

“Ah, there’s the tavern,” Dorn said, licking his lips. “Want to go grab a beer? It’s really good here, and I’m buying.”

“Hagen,” I heard a painfully familiar voice say. “You made it. I didn’t think you were going to show up!”

“Why wouldn’t I?” came my surprised reply. “There are plenty of people here, it’s the city—nothing for me to be afraid of. Anyway, allow me to introduce you.”

“Dorn,” the dwarf said, extending a shovel-like hand.

“Miurat,” the Double Shield replied. “Let’s head over to the tavern.”

Dorn sat with us for five minutes, after which he realized we needed to talk, and left with very undwarf-like delicacy.

Miurat sat back in his oak chair (the furniture in the tavern was enormous and well-made—I would’ve happily taken a chair like that home with me), took a pull of his beer, and gave me his trademark smile, almost as if we were old friends.

“So you have business?” I decided not to drag things out.

“What business could a couple of old brothers-in-arms have?” Miurat replied, still playing the role he loved. “I just wanted to sit down with you, throw back a few, and listen to the singers. They should be coming out to reel off some ballads soon.”

“The arts are always great, but I have things to do. My friend over there left his things underground in the Neilozh Mines, and he’s upset about that.”

“Maybe I can help?” Miurat’s eyes narrowed. “You know, just because we’re friends?”

“I never turn down the help of a good person,” I replied with a nod. “Especially when it’s offered with no strings attached. ‘Just because we’re friends’ means you wouldn’t be looking for anything in return, right?”

“Of course. We’ll go, find his things, take care of his quest, everything the way it should be,” Miurat said, nodded in turn. “Just tell me, since we’re friends, obviously, what kind of quest did you have that sent that pillar of light shooting into the sky? Tell me about it, and we’ll head into the mines.”

“That’s it?” I smiled. “You don’t need anything else from me? It’ll be just because we’re friends?”

“Well, you were the one who asked. I’d like to see you join our clan, too, but that’s a conversation for a different time. It won’t be one you’ll have with me, either. You should drop by for some tea at our citadel—our leader would very much like to meet you. What about tomorrow?”

*Ah-ha, so their leader is curious to see what I’m about. That’s interesting.*

“Why not? I’d be happy to stop by. Not tomorrow, of course, but I think I could make that happen next week. Just make sure you let me know how to get there.”

“But why not tomorrow?” Miurat asked, slightly crestfallen. “Why put it off?”

“Dorn and I will be busy tomorrow, the next day, and really through the end of the week in the mines—I already told him I could, and I don’t like going back on my word. I’ll probably spend a good bit of time down there.”

“Next week then?” Miurat had been smiling so long that I wondered why his lip wasn’t quivering from exhaustion.

“Great,” I nodded. “And now the mines?”

“Wait a second,” Miurat replied, the smile fading. “What about the column of light? What was the quest?”

“It was a hidden quest about the Departed Gods,” I muttered unhappily. “I was supposed to look for some of their heritage and get it back. Have you heard of the vilas?”

“Who hasn’t?” Miurat snorted. “They’re out there just trying to catch any passer-by they can and make a family. Wings, good looks, cursed.”

“Right. And did you know that they were created by the Departed Gods? Created as a result of their nice little divine activity?” I was getting carried away, but it sounded believable. It was half-true, also. “Well, I got engaged to one of them. Everybody laughed at me and called me an idiot, but in the end I got a hidden quest that I don’t think anyone had ever gotten before. At least, I didn’t see anything about it on the forums. I found the goddess’s signet ring and gave it back to them, they put on a fire show for me, and then they gave me a rare ability, a pet scroll, and some other little stuff. Oh, and they called off my engagement.”

“Yes, that was a bit of an oversight.” Miurat stroked his chin. “Who would have thought it? Everyone was convinced it was a trap, and it turns out it was just the trigger for a quest. Can you show me the scroll?”

“Sure, if you wait five minutes. It’s in my chest.”

“Go for it, I’ll wait here.” Miurat nodded, already without a smile on his face.

The fun times were over; we’d gotten down to business.

“In the meantime, find us a few warriors, at least two or three. Oh, and not Ronin, please—I don’t like him.”

Miurat grinned.

“Does Fattah work?”

“Why not? He’s a smart guy,” I replied.

I really didn’t have anything against Fattah. He’d done his job, and there wasn’t any point holding a grudge against him. He hadn’t betrayed me—there hadn’t been any promise to break. Plus, he was a good soldier, and I knew I could trust him with my back.

“Okay, wait here, I’ll be right back,” I said to Miurat with a nod and left the tavern.

Dear reader thank you for reading my book!  
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