

Fayroll

Book Eight

The Crown and the Key

Chapter One

On a bunch of different things.

“Are you crazy?” Lane looked at me uneasily, clearly worried about something. “You think I’m going to be a king? What am I going to rule, a bunch of dirty underwear? A king who sold his sword? They’ll throw dirt and manure at me the minute they see me. No, you must be out of your mind.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “My head’s fine, though, you’re right, I did get ahead of myself talking about the crown. First, we need to get your ancestors’ lands back. What were they? Fassarlakh, Targot... Maybe we’ll even annex some new territory for you.”

“Listen, Hagen,” Krolina jumped in, “I’m starting to get worried—you’ve never mentioned invasions. And now, annexing? That’s quite the word.”

I winked at her. “Krolina, babycakes, there’s a whole world of words like that out there. You just take our contender for the throne to the house, and I’ll go get Glen. We gelts don’t like being late.”

“Careful how far you push us,” she replied, lips pursed. “By the way, it looks like you picked up an upgrade. That’s nice armor. When did you have time to get it? Just last night, you were wearing something else.”

“I’m fast. One way or another, I’m the clan leader, and I need to protect my hide; I wouldn’t want you all to be orphaned. I should look the part, too.”

Krolina grunted and led Lane into the house, while I pulled out one of my few remaining portal scrolls. *I need to visit a trader, and I’d better make sure that happens today.*

There was time for me to do exactly that, and then even visit the blacksmith. He recognized me and asked pretty respectfully if I wanted to get some more grave iron for him. I even had time to drop by the hotel, where I dropped off my old armor—there were too many memories associated with it to think about selling it. I figured it was entirely feasible that I would log back into the game a few years later, pick it up, and reminisce about all the good times I’d had.

Glen was right on time. A portal flashed at noon in Hexburg’s main square, and he walked out of it, followed by his entourage. They were all big guys outfitted with armor, shields, and swords, and two of them were carrying good-sized kegs made of darkly stained wood under their arms.

“My respects, Master Glen,” I said with a broad smile. “Was it an easy trip?”

“Of course,” he replied gravely, clearly appreciating what I said. “Trips are always easy when they lead to the home of a friend.”

Role players are the best, since you just have to play their game, make it sound sincere, and they’re yours. You know what you’re getting with them, too.

“And hello to you, too, noble Sons of Taranis,” I said, bowing my head.

The noble Sons of Taranis greeted me in reply, the casks gurgling in a way that promised a very enjoyable lunch.

I opened a portal and gestured them through it since there was no point in anything long or drawn-out. There weren’t enough of them for that.

There was a surprise waiting for me in Erinbug: Tissa was there to greet us. She’d somehow even managed to pick up a gelt woman’s outfit, though, to be fair, it didn’t really differ too much from what the men wore. Still, it had a nice-looking brooch holding a cloak with the colors of the clan around her neck.

“Good afternoon, noblemen,” she said to Glen and his people with the smile of a practiced guide. “We’re overjoyed to welcome you to the lands of the MacLynn clan.”

“And hello to you,” Glen replied with a smile. “Beauty like yours is a credit to any clan, and there has not yet been born the man who wouldn’t remain in that clan for the simple joy of seeing it every day.”

It was well said, I had to give him that. Tissa grinned appreciatively.

Glen looked around the square, checking out what was going on, and, more likely, wondered what that could be.

To be fair, I would have had the same look on my face if I didn’t know what was going on. The center of the village, where we were, was packed with everything under the sun: Northerners taking up their posts, knights pulling off armor and building something like a guardhouse—presumably, the beginning of the order’s local mission—with some other men I didn’t recognize, and three bookkeepers standing in the shadows and jotting something down on paper—either a map of the village or a plan for how to capture the gelts’ land with as little bloodshed as possible. The local women, identical throughout Fayroll and looking the same as they might have in Iowa or the center of Russia, were hanging around the well, children were running around, and players, of which there seemed to be more than there had been, walked to and fro.

“It’s nice here,” Glen said tactfully, “if a little chaotic.”

“It’s true.” It occurred to me that having Tissa greet us wearing a sarafan and kokoshnik, rather than her gelt garb, and offering us bread and salt, would have been the cherry on top of everything going on. *That would have been epic.*

“Let’s head in,” Tissa said. She looked like she was about to say something like “milords,” but she held her tongue. “Everything’s all set.”

“Yes, let’s.” I noticed that the players were gradually switching their attention over from the Northerners and knights to us. *Put a camera in their hands, and they’d make perfect tourists.* “It’s the perfect time to try some of our ethnic gelt cuisine.”

“I’m all for that,” Glen said—he didn’t look too keen on the notoriety we were getting. “Are we heading into that house?”

“That we are.” And off we headed, our guests behind us.

I was about to step up onto the porch when someone grabbed my arm.

“Just one minute,” came a lovely feminine voice. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

That was something new, and it put me a bit on edge.

“What about?” I turned toward my unexpected interlocutress and practically whistled.

She was a luxurious elf girl, the dream of any pimpled teenager. Her curves were fabulous, and she had blonde hair and sensitive lips. But what really surprised me was that she didn’t have a single weapon. Not a bow, not a sword, not a crossbow—nothing. There was a tiny dagger strapped to her waist, but it was the kind of thing you didn’t take seriously as a weapon. Still, she was at Level 100. *How? Who is she?*

“Who are you?” I had to ask. “And what do you need from me?”

“My name is Miranda Morell,” she replied, batting her enormous lashes. “At least, that’s my name here in Fayroll. And I need to ask you a few questions.”

I decided not to beat around the bush. “What about? If you’d like to join the clan, you’ll have to talk to Krolina, my deputy in charge of that type of thing. Although we don’t really have any openings—you can see how popular we are.”

I gestured around the square as if to say that half of Fayroll was there waiting for us to let them in.

“I’m not looking to join your clan,” the sexy elf replied, continuing to surprise me. “I’m a journalist. Have you heard of the Fayroll Times? I work for the paper, and I’d like an interview with you.”

That wasn’t what I was expecting at all. I’d been about to nicely tell the busty elf that she could screw herself, but her last phrase just left me with my jaw hanging open. All I could do was close it—there were no words.

“You look so funny,” she said. “I realize how pleasant and unexpected it is when a paper like mine asks for an interview. People always want a story about them.”

“Yes?” I asked hoarsely. “I don’t doubt it. It’s quite the honor, like getting a medal.”

“See? We’re being nice and constructive here, and you were all ready to start us off on the wrong foot.”

I coughed. “I guess, that’s just the kind of person I am. I have a lot on my plate right now, too.”

“Hagen,” Glen called. He and his people were waiting at the door, apparently unwilling to go in without the host.

“Sorry about this, Glen,” I turned and said. “You go ahead, and I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Glen nodded and walked inside, while I turned back to the elf and studied her carefully. *Who are you?* It wasn’t Shelestova—she would’ve dressed like a slob or maybe made herself a goblin girl. *Tasha?* No, she didn’t pull stunts like that one, and it was her day off, too. *Vika’s at home.* She had to be either our pimply go-getter or Vika’s friend.

“This is funny, actually,” the elf girl said, flashing her snow-white teeth once again. “When you heard about the paper, you suddenly looked exactly like my boss. You’re back to normal now, though—he always walks around looking like that.”

Definitely Marietta... Ksenya was smarter, at least, from what I could tell.

“We’re all bosses in our own way,” I muttered. “So, what do you need?”

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about your clan. You’re the first player to take leadership of an NPC clan, after all, even if it is pretty modest so far...”

I had nothing to say, though I really wanted to figure out who’d sent her, why she’d come there, and how she’d gotten such a high-level character. “Hey, how did you get to that level without a weapon?”

“The developer gave me this character,” Miranda replied, her tone very friendly. “I picked the look and name, and they did the rest.”

“Interesting!” *Who’s playing a trick on me over at Raidion?* Although, there wasn’t much to guess. There was only one jokester worth poisoning over there. *But what an idiot, to just blab about all of that the first time she sees someone.* I needed to do something with her. “And they sent you to talk to me?”

“Not only you,” she said as she brushed her hair back. “We have a lot of stories we’re working on.”

“And who told you about me?”

“Wait a second, who’s asking the questions here?”

I realized I wasn’t going to get any more information out of her and called Tren-Bren over. She was clearly peeved that she hadn’t been invited to the banquet, but she flew over, regardless.

“What do you need, nasty Hagen?”

“Don’t talk to your father like that,” I replied involuntarily. “See this elf?”

“Yes?”

“Tell her whatever she wants to know,” I said to the fairy in the same tone my father used to use.

Tren-Bren sighed. “What’s up with her?”

“She’s from a paper called the Fayroll Times. Answer her questions and give the clan a little publicity. Just don’t give too much away—you’ll be our press attaché.”

I didn't respond to the fairy's happy squeal or Miranda's "where are you going?" *Better have Tren-Bren tell her about us.* She was great at spinning utter nonsense, her imagination took regular flights of fancy, and Soloveva's stupidity would all result in an article that wouldn't even make it to my desk. *I wonder what Tren-Bren will say, though.* I needed to talk with Valyaev, too—I understood, but he'd gone too far.

Glen still hadn't even gotten to the main hall. Instead, he was taking in all the weapons and banners hanging on the walls with unconcealed curiosity and chatting with Lennox. The latter was sitting on the stairs watching our guests as he crunched on an apple.

"So, is this a clan banner?" he asked the redhead, feeling a colorful rag decorating one of the walls.

"It is," MacSommers replied. "The DragDillers clan, an old one that used to live on Lake Lokh-Foll, where they traded bad salt. They aren't around anymore, though. That isn't ale in those kegs you have, is it?"

"Good guess. Am I right in concluding that you take the banners of the clans you conquer?"

"Of course," the gelt replied proudly. "What else should we do? And would that happen to be a dark or light ale?"

Glen looked at Lennox appreciatively. "Light. Are you part of Hagen's clan?"

"No," the redhead said as he stood up. "I'm a MacSommers, though I'm a friend of Hagen's, and that's why I'm here. I couldn't just leave him alone to deal with everything that's happened, could I?"

"Oh, yes?" Glen asked guardedly. "What happened?"

"War happened," I cut in. "But we'll talk about that later. Let's sit down and eat first, and then I'll tell you everything. Redhead, you're coming with us."

"Of course," he replied with a grin. "I'm not missing out on four kegs of ale!"

Just then, Flossi came flying out of a corner, already tipsy and looking all kinds of upset. He threw himself on my chest and started wailing about absolutely everything. The mean people I was friends with had burned his clothes, they weren't letting him into the hall where everyone was going to be drinking, they were making him take baths, and it was just too much. I was his jarl, and I needed to kill them all to restore some kind of social justice.

I promised Flossi I'd take care of everyone giving him all those problems and headed toward the hall, hoping that would be good enough. Once we got to the door, I sighed in relief and gave Kale orders not to let anyone in without talking to me first. Glen and his entourage entered, and I followed him.

To be perfectly honest, it wasn't all that cozy in the big room. It was built for large crowds of warriors, for enormous boar carcasses to roast in the fireplace, and for gelt ballades to be roared by hundreds, but it wasn't built for a dozen people sitting at the only table right in the middle.

Annoyed by how we were treating it, the room chilled us with a cold draft, gave us nothing from the fireplace, and sent echoes soaring around in the arches.

Still, we were a simple and seasoned group of people gathered there, and nobody really paid any attention. We ate, drank, and talked the way hillmen do.

"So, you're really the leader of a hill tribe?" Glen asked, a touch of jealousy shading his voice. "That's... I beat my head against a wall trying to build our fortress here, but I couldn't make it happen, and you had everything handed to you on a silver platter."

"Really?" I asked in unfeigned surprise. "What happened? Honestly, I was trying to figure out why you headed north. I thought it would have been perfect for you here."

"There are some limitations," Glen replied as he tossed a piece of haggis into his mouth. "If you want to build a fortress or castle here, or, really if you want to build much of anything, you have to get permission from the local council of elders...or leaders? Anyway, that's beside the point. I tried to talk with them over

and over again, but they just wouldn't give me a reputation quest. All they'd say was that they only trade with or make war on foreigners. After trying a bunch of times, I gave up and headed north."

"Gelts don't like strangers," Lane said. I'd introduced him to Glen as soon as we walked in, though I didn't use his title. "That's true."

Glen took a drink of ale before coming back to me. "And it's a shame. I like it here in the Borderlands. It's tough, and the atmosphere is fantastic. You're local now—what do you think I should do?"

Before I had the chance to answer, the door to the hall banged open, and Abigail walked in. She was as pale and beautiful as ever.

"That's my sister, Abby," I said to Glen, who had immediately gotten up from the table to give her a bow. "Have a seat across from Lane, sweetie."

Abigail's eyes flashed, though she sat down where I told her to without putting up a fight. Lane eyed her with interest—he'd given his word, and she was his future wife.

"So, about patronage," I said as I poured myself some ale, "I'm not the right person to talk to about that; I'm just the leader of a small clan. My friend here can help with that."

Glen looked at Lennox, who had stuck a huge piece of pork in his mouth and was waving as if to tell us that food was the only thing he knew anything about.

I pointed at Lane. "No, no, I'm talking about him. That warrior is none other than Lossarnakh MacMagnus of the MacMagnus clan, Laird of Morigot, Bailiff of Fassarlakh and Targot. He spent some time in exile, but I'm prepared to give him all the support I can, such that he regains control of his familial lands and wins the crown of the Borderlands. If things work out, and I have no doubt they will, he can give you any land that catches your eye. You can pick somewhere next to a lake or, if you prefer, live closer to a city. And when the war starts, not everyone will be on his side so there will be some empty castles looking for owners... They may sustain some damage, but you can put a little elbow grease into them, and they'll be as good as new. You can even go invite some players from the Moldavian server to do it for you."

"You sure have some quests," Glen replied, enviously shaking his head. "Epic?"

"No, just usual." I pushed a dish with something like radishes in honey toward him. "A series, but not epic."

"My brother Hagen is right in much of what he says, though not everything," Lane said. "I would be happy to render a service to a friend of his, though I doubt that anyone will follow me."

"Low self-esteem," Krolina sighed sadly. "But that's fixable."

"Lane, my friend," I replied, smiling at him. He was staring at the table. "If I didn't believe in you, why would I give you my sister as a wife?"

"Ooh!" MacSommers had finally finished work on the meat in his mouth, and his eyes bugged.

"What?" Abigail burst out. "What do you think I am, a horse you can just up and sell?"

"Woman!" I barked. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Me?" Her nostrils flared, she stood up, and her hands felt at her belt for a dagger.

"Yes, you," I replied, quieter. "You're going to be the queen of the Borderlands. Queen! A girl nobody knows from a little clan, someone who would have lived and died without a trace. You're going to marry this man, you're going to sit on a throne in the largest castle around, and your children will be princes and princesses. What more do you want?"

Abigail sat back down, drumming her fingers on the table and turning to Lane.

"I imagine he didn't give you much of a choice, either, Bailiff?"

"I am not opposed to marrying the sister of my friend," Lane replied diplomatically.

“You should know,” she said as she pulled a plate of meat toward her, “that I’ll be expecting my brother’s head on a platter as your wedding present to me. And if I don’t get it, I can assure you, I’ll make your life a living hell.”

“Uh oh,” Kro said. Tissa giggled quietly.

“Don’t eat or drink anything she gives you,” Brother Herts said to me quietly from his seat on my left. “Don’t forget that.”

Yes, that sister of mine... I hadn’t gotten any system messages, though, so I figured I was in the clear.”

“Hagen?” Lane looked at me in confusion.

“Just agree with her,” I said. “We may not even live that long, and we’ll think of something if we do.”

“How are you going to take the throne?” Glen’s eyes were practically glowing—he was loving everything that was going on.

“First, we have to fight,” I replied, raising my cup to those around us. “We have a big battle coming up, with the works—bagpipes, banners, and clashing swords. There are a thousand of them, and just a few hundred of us, so it should be fun. Then, we’ll head toward Lossarnakh’s lands to see if we can talk our way in. If we can’t, fire and the sword.”

Glen looked at me slyly. “Brutal. And where do I figure into all of that?”

“Oh, I’m not going to make any bones about that.” My cup came crashing down on the table. “I’m offering you an alliance between our clans. Join our side, send your warriors to fight with us, help us take power, and you’ll come out the better for it.”

He put his cup down, as well. “What if you don’t win? That could happen, no?”

“What would you lose? You’ll have fun, either way, you’ll be part of an NPC clan war, with all that entails—real hill clans. The worst that could happen is that a few of your warriors would be killed. I haven’t heard of NPCs doing anything really bad to players.”

“What are NPCs?” MacSommers asked.

“That’s what we call the warriors from enemy clans,” Tissa replied. “It’s tradition.”

Glen thought for a second, looking around at his officers. Obviously impressed by it all, they happily smiled at him.

“Sorry, my friend, but you don’t have much time to think about it,” I said a bit audaciously. “We have just a week left until the battle, and that isn’t much time. Really, just a couple days—”

The Sons of Taranis would like to ally with you.

You can learn about the normal rules for allied clans in the Collective Gameplay manual, which is in the Hints and Tips section.

If you ally with the Sons of Taranis, your clan will receive:

A 10% discount with the traders and blacksmiths in all locations under the patronage of their clan.

+5% experience for killing player opponents in all locations under the patronage of their clan.

Note!

You will get experience for killing player enemies of their clan so long as they are at war with them.

Warning!

Your clan can only have alliances with ten player and NPC clans.

I smiled broadly and hit Agree. We were allies.

Your clan unlocked Combat Brotherhood.

To get it, form alliances with 6 more player clans.

Reward for the clan leader:

+2 to wisdom

Reward for clan players:

+1 to stamina

Clan reward:

Banner: The More, the Merrier

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

“Well, there we go.” Glen raised his cup, I followed suit, and we tapped them together, spilling a little ale in the process. “By the way, it’s cool that you get a banner for the action.”

“You’ve never allied with anyone?” I asked in surprise.

Glen took a swallow of ale. “Nope. Why would we? We’re role players—we don’t need to fight anyone.”

“How many people do you have, Master Glen?” Lane asked suddenly.

“I can maybe give you two hundred,” Glen said evasively. “Somewhere around there.”

“What kind?” The gelts definitely didn’t have healers, and I figured we could use a few.

Glen pulled out a pipe. “Warriors. A few healers, two mages... We’re mountain men, so there’s no point in us having thieves or elven archers.”

“I hear you,” I replied. “Regardless, I’m glad we were able to come to an agreement.”

He had something up his sleeve, of course, but that was fine.

“You’re telling me,” he said, clearly satisfied. It made sense, too—we were offering a dream scenario for role players.

As far as I was concerned, I’d achieved my goal and even picked up a bonus. Something I’d caught in the conversation with Glen had me very happy.

Everyone was feeling better, the stiffness had disappeared, jokes were cracked, ale was poured, and lunch continued.

An hour later, when Glen’s officers had gone off to play some game with MacSommers and Gunther, giving Abigail the chance to finally talk with Lane, the leader of the Sons of Taranis came over with a quiet question for me.

“Hey, how did you get all of this? I mean, the quests, the clan...”

After taking a second, I replied with a measure of truth.

“It was by chance. Pure accident.”

Glen took a second to think about that, too, and then he responded without a hint of sarcasm. “That does happen.”

He left soon after, though he chatted with Lane about something beforehand. Their clan needed to hear the news of our alliance. The officers stayed behind, heading off with MacSommers and a few Northerners to toss some logs—the gelts liked that. Whoever could throw one the furthest won, and the only thing I worried

about was that someone could get killed. I sent Tissa and Dorn to keep an eye on them, with Tren-Bren rushing over, as well. She'd been attracted by all the noise.

The portal closed behind Glen, and I sighed contentedly.

"Hagen," Krolina called as she walked over, a warrior named Slav trailing her. "Here's someone for the clan. We've known each other for a while, ever since we went on a raid together, and we've seen each other a few times since. He's a good guy."

"Hi," I said to Slav, as I looked him over. It may not have been polite, but I needed to have some idea of who I was letting into the clan.

He wasn't that tall, though he was stocky and Level 70. A double-edged axe stuck out from behind his back. In a word, he was your typical warrior. He was dressed in solid armor, without too much flair—a brigandine, poleyns, and couters—the usual.

"Hi," Slav replied, grunting when he saw my appraising gaze. "Would you like me to turn around for you?"

"Nice. Has Kro told you about our plans and problems?"

"Sure," he nodded. "Everyone's against you, though world domination is right around the corner."

"Something like that." I sent him an invitation to the clan. Kro wouldn't have given me bad advice, and they'd presumably discussed everything else there was to discuss.

We shook hands, and Krolina immediately dragged him off somewhere. Looking around, I called to my friend the knight. He'd spit on etiquette and joined his men building the guardhouse.

"Gunther!" *Does he not hear me?* "Gunther, can I get you for a second?"

Von Richter walked over, looking awfully strange without his armor.

"Hey, Gunther, you were talking about taking me to see the inquisitors, the ones at...oh, what's it called?"

"Kadrans?"

"Right." I could never remember that name. *Dementia is already setting in...*

Gunther looked at me. "Why not? Let me just put my armor on and grab my sword."

He ran off, leaving me to head over to the mailbox and see what was waiting for me.

Damn it, I'm getting popular—there were thirty messages waiting for me. Some of them were offers, some of them were telling me how they'd be happy to grace the clan with their presence. *Great*. It was a bunch of spam.

I finally got to a letter from the game admin with tips on how to guide the clan, and I made a mental note to read it later.

There was also one from Miurat, who asked unpleasantly what I was thinking about his offer. Giving that some thought, I decided to let him stew without a response for a while.

"Sire Hagen," Brother Herts said, coming up to me. "You're getting ready to go somewhere, correct?"

"Correct. Kadrans, to see the inquisition. I've wanted to go for a while, I just didn't have the time. And now—"

"Excellent. You're going with the junior master, I take it?"

"Yes, I am."

“In that case, I have a request.” Brother Herts was speaking quietly and concisely, though his eyes gazed at me like a sniper through a scope. “Take one of my people with you. What if you need to calculate something or sign an agreement? They know how to write, and they’re certainly good with numbers.”

I was about to decline, but then I had second thoughts. *Why not?* Life is full of surprises, and having one of them with me couldn’t hurt.

“Sounds good,” I nodded. “Which one?”

The bookkeeper pointed at the guy that had done so well fighting off the MacPratts in the big hall a few days before. “Brother Mikh.”

“But wasn’t he wounded?”

“It’s better now. Balms, salves...traditional medicine.”

Ten minutes later, Gunther took a portal scroll from me and opened a portal for us to step through. I was intrigued to see what the residence of the inquisition looked like—they were capable of quite a bit, after all. *Probably another big fortress.*

By the time that thought finished crossing my mind, I was lying on the cobblestones, and I’d gotten very lucky. I had no idea how Brother Mikh noticed the sword aimed at my head and managed to react in time, but he did. He even had time to pull his curved blade out from under his robe and bury it in the ribs of the animal-like guy with distorted facial features.

Von Richter’s sword rang, and I got up to stand next to him, my sword also in my hand.

“What’s going on?” von Richter asked me in surprise.

“I have no idea.”

“It’s a bloodbath,” Brother Mikh said to both of us. “And we should get out of here before—”

His advice came too late—we’d been noticed. And the ones doing the noticing weren’t human at all.

Dear reader! Thank you for reading my book!



[The Fayroll 8 \(The Crown and the Key\)](#) release is expected on March 12!

I hope that you will be carried away by an excerpt from the future book.
And if you've already read Fayroll 7 - please leave a review. I really appreciate every
comment and review on [Amazon](#).

Thanks for the feedback.

Stay tuned and be informed!

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