

DEM MIKHAILOV



**Heroes
of the Final
Frontier #1**

The World of Waldyra LitRPG Cycle

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Heroes of the Final Frontier :

by Dem Mikhailov

Book #1

New Lands

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Heroes of the Final Frontier: The World of Waldyra Cycle

Book #1: New Lands

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Prologue

THEY WERE WAITING FOR ME on top of a tall hill drenched in the warm crimson and magenta hues of the setting sun.

Their figures looked like black cardboard cutouts in the surreal lighting—cutouts that had come to life in this world of magic and were now waving at me joyously.

“We’ve butchered a ma-a-a-a-a-a-attress!” a young girl jumping up and down with excitement was yelling gleefully—my daughter and a goddess-to-be. A twofer offer, if you will.

Actually, whether or not she would eventually become a goddess was still an open question. But we would do everything within our power to help her walk the thorny path of ascension to her celestial throne unhindered.

Nearby stood Kyrea the Protectress, resting her elbow on the edge of a thick tower shield driven deep into the ground. She was a paladin of the Light and a defender of the weak—nothing short of an armored Robin Hood, in other words. On Roskie’s other side stood a tall spindly figure resembling an awkward wooden saltimbanco puppet moving in a weirdly spasmodic way. Another character with an incredibly ambiguous appearance. He may have looked harmless and goofy, but I’d rather be at odds with the entire clan of the Sleepless Ones than cross this bald elf with his drawl and his completely idiosyncratic behavior.

“Why are you still here?” I shouted as I began to climb the slope covered with a thick carpet of soft grass. “Why aren’t you up to any mischief yet? And where’s everybody else?”

“Why, we’re waiting for you!” Kyrea the Protectress replied. “The famous trailblazer and whatnot. Have they fired you yet?”

“I think so,” I grunted. “But I got my severance pay! I’m officially done with working for the Sleepless Ones.”

“Thank goodness for that!” Kyrea said resolutely. “It’s better to be unemployed than remain in their employment all the time.”

“My dad’s unemplo-o-o-o-o-o-o-oyed!” Roskie’s voice sounded even more delighted than before as she twirled through the cloud of feathers raised by the wind after the mattress’s untimely demise. “My dad’s unemplo-o-o-o-o-o-o-oyed!”

“We-e-e-e-ell?” The elf drawled with a look of great impatience on his face, popping his fingers and wriggling his shoulders. “We-e-e-e-ell?”

“We’ve got to get ourselves embroiled in an adventure or two of the most exciting sort before nightfall,” I nodded, feeling just as impatient as the rest of them. “Absolutely!”

“Yee-haw!”

“Yee-haw!”

“Yee-haw!” Everybody voiced their agreement in unison.

“Oof!” The black and white wolf, nuzzling me with his snout, chimed in, too.

“Still though, where’s everybody else?” I asked again as I took a look at the hill where we were standing.

“There’s no point in waiting for Callen or Kray,” Kyre warned me at once. “The journalist follows the Black Baroness, and Kray follows Callen. She’ll stay there for as long as that’s where the hottest news is coming from.”

“How about Doc?”

“The field hospital’s right he-e-ere!” A shout came from below as the doctor started climbing the hill, using a long staff with a live snake coiled around it for support.

“Bom?”

“Over there,” Kyrea pointed in front of us. “He’s chopped down two trees and is now in the process of gathering fruit. He’s already waved to us a couple of times. But the hunting of the Snark... uh, the captain’s mattress, I mean, came first. And you know how careful those beasts are. The hunters had to sneak through the grass, and then pounce on it from both sides at once, grab it, and stab it... the prey had nearly escaped their clutches before I came over and helped them finish it off. The cunning mattress turned out to have

been still alive and was trying to escape by flight. And then you arrived.”

“I see,” I nodded my understanding as I looked at the remains of the ill-starred mattress slaughtered perfidiously in its prime. “I say, a good hunt needs to be crowned with a good meal. I’ll light the fire. Roskie, will you help your dad with the firewood?”

“On my way!”

“Then we can gather our wits and establish a course of action,” I continued, reaching for a hefty piece of dry wood lying on the ground just near me. “And act on it. Kyre, how strongly are you attached to your home clan of the Albatrosses? Sorry for asking you out of the blue just like that.”

“Hey... So you’ve made up your mind at last?” She could see where I was going with it at once.

“Yup. I think it’s high time we stopped working for well-heeled maharajas and oil sheikhs. It’s time to start building a citadel of our own. Sorry it has to sound so pompous. But it’s about time we founded a clan of our own. It may be lazy, chaotic, and not overly professional, but it’s all ours.”

“And Roskie will need a steady support that we’ll be able to trust completely,” Kyre agreed.

“So, a clan like this could really do with a crazy mind singed by reckless fun and containing no artificial additives such as boredom or orderliness,” I glanced at the elf. “And there’s no way we’re in for any boredom!”

“O-o-o-o-o-oh,” Orbit drawled hopefully. “I’m in. A-a-a-all the wa-a-a-ay in. The cla-a-a-an is just the begi-i-i-i-inning. And there’s a lo-o-o-ot in sto-o-ock for u-u-u-u-us...”

“I’ll have to tell you something right away,” I got right up to Orbit and lowered my voice. “Our future clan’s business might take us somewhere real deep. As deep as hell itself, as a matter of fact—the divine inferno of Tanrariall, to be precise.”

“You’re off to an awesome start,” Ross, Kyrea the Protectress snorted. “That’s just the way clan leaders usually begin their pitch—by promising you the moon and the stars. Although I must say hell is one step beyond madness...”

“I just feel it in the water,” I bobbed my head. “Or was it ‘in my water’?”

“Hey, finally something!” The roar was so powerful and guttural I started back, stepping right into a nearby bush and starting a blossom petal snowfall inadvertently. “Boss! I must say! We had so much time during the voyage! We could have already discussed all the details! But you just had to wait for the very moment when there’s no time at all left for chatting, didn’t you? Anyway, I’m all for it! But why are you so impetuous all of a sudden? Was it the swim that gave you a jolt?”

“It was the information received from Baroness,” I replied. “Here are a few screenshots, friends. Make sure you peruse them thoroughly. Doc, what do you say?”

“I’m in! I’ve been dreaming of it all along! What shall we call our clan?”

“No idea whatsoever. We’ll come up with some name, I’m sure.”

“There are new options available,” Bom added. “New types of clans and so on. I just got the news.”

“Interesting. We have to make sure we choose right. Here, take a look at the files. Let’s all shut up for a few minutes so that you can all read everything through thoroughly.”

I sent my friends all the data I’d had on Zar’Graad’s first clan as well as the so-called temporary camp I could choose a place for—the place where the first old continent faction would arrive.

“Read and listen,” I continued, having distributed the documents. “I’m planning to start sailing along the coast and arrange everything in such a way that no one learns of our departure or manages to track us. I’ll break camp in a place of my own choosing, and we’ll instantly become saddled with a million responsibilities. We’ll be unable to catch even the briefest of respites for a while. Or get offline. We’ll help with every quest we can handle. Once we realize the location won’t stay secret for that much longer, we’ll show some amicability and call the Sleepless Ones over. But they won’t be the first.

The Sleepless Ones will only come second—the first time in a long, long, while. Right after us.”

“Ye-e-e-e-es!” A bony elven palm rested on my shoulder. “It’s re-e-e-e-ally i-i-i-i-interesting!”

“Great plan, boss!” Bom said with conviction.

“Super!”

“But will we manage to stay unnoticed?” Kyre said with a lot of doubt in her voice as she took the firewood from Roskie, who’d just approached her, and started to throw it into the fire. “Doc, do you always carry a pot with you?”

“He’s not the only one—I carry one with me, too,” Bom rumbled, producing an enormous pot that could easily hold two bucketfuls of water from his famous black sack. “We’ll need to take a lot of stuff with us to pull this off. Judging by the documents, they’ll require a large amount of ready-to-use materials. We won’t be able to chop down, saw, or cure several tons of construction timber. Not with the kind of resources we have at our disposal. We’ll need a ready supply. Otherwise, everything will grind to a halt, and our reputation will plummet.”

“That much is true. This is why I suggest we brainstorm now. In the meantime, we can cook up some supper.”

“The darkness is in our favor,” Kyrea pointed out. Doc nodded his agreement as he stared into the blue sky.

“Orb, do you know any methods of keeping us unnoticed? Also, I suggest that we take a catamaran along,” I added. “Before leaving the Ring of Peace, I’d managed to buy the magical water propeller spell and level it up a little. It has a long and fancy name, but that’s unimportant for the time being. I’ll be able to complement the sails with power of my own—I have a mind-boggling reserve of mana, after all, and there’s not much else I can do with it. The reserve won’t remain this big forever, but I’ll be chock full of mana for a while.”

“That’s great!” Kyrea perked up. “Then you’ll also be able to charge two empty defense artifacts I picked up after we’d completed the GOB obstacle race. And we’ll need them—I’m sure that our temporary camp will require good defenses. Ros, it’s a very complex plan. A real stunt that we’ll need to pull off. We might fail. We’re but a handful, after all.”

“It’s worth the risk,” I shrugged. “At any rate, we’ll call the Sleepless Ones to assist us later. But we’ll be the ones to complete the first quests!”

“It will be i-i-i-i-i-interesting,” Orbit grinned. “We’ll disappe-e-e-e-ear unno-o-o-o-oticed! I’ll see-ee-ee to it!”

“I’ll try to find a large twin-hulled boat,” I added. “A few of those bought by the Sleepless Ones managed to reach the coast. I don’t think they’ll be heavily guarded. But we’ll have to check them for tracker marks. I’ll also procure a part of our supplies—comestibles and so on.”

“I’ll be responsible for defense,” Kyrea raised her hand. “The camp and the catamaran both. Roskie and Tyrant will

help me. Ros, don't forget that Orbit will definitely take Callowan along."

"I wi-i-i-i-ill!"

"So we'll need a large boat," I summed up. "Right on."

"I'll take care of medicine," Doc said. "I'll bring the necessary supplies."

"I'll provide the construction materials and so on," Bom sighed heavily. "I'll have to make use of my contacts. And I also know a narrow let-out that I can use to procure some of the stuff we'll need. What about Callen and Kray?"

"They'll get here together with the Sleepless Ones," I spread my hands. "No one's supposed to be aware of our location until H hour. Otherwise, we'll instantly cease to function as independent individuals and transform into overweight babies unable to take a single step without permission in a matter of seconds. So, my brave pirates and adventurers, are we ready for the mission that's almost guaranteed to fail?"

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e-eah!"

"Great! In that case, the interests of our future clan demand that we get down to some serious theft, deceit, and robbery—immediately after supper!"

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e-eah!"

“Roskie, dear, and you’ll act like a good girl and avoid any mischief!”

“No-o-o-o-o-o! It’s not fair! There’s already innocent blood on my hands, dad—look how I slaughtered the mattress in cold blood!”

“No! This is not up for discussion!”

“Can I at least steal something?”

“I said no!”

“Let her steal, boss! It’s all for the common good!”

“Bom!”

“And I’ll also fish! All the time!”

“That’s more like it! All right, let’s start cooking. That robbery won’t commit itself, you know...”

Chapter 1

Sailing Alone. The Problems of Navigating Close to Coast. Foundation and Construction.

Attention! The Terrifying Squeak watercraft is overloaded!

Mana expenditure for maintaining the craft in motion at the chosen speed triples!

Attention! The Terrifying Squeak watercraft is overloaded!

Mana expenditure for maintaining the craft in motion at the chosen speed triples!

“TRIPE AND ONIONS!” I grumbled, sitting at the tiny and somewhat ridiculous wheel.

“Come again?” Roskie inquired with genuine curiosity, sitting one pace away from me while gazing at the float dancing in the stern wake.

“It’s just a folk expression, dear,” I reassured my daughter. “Folklore and nothing else.”

“You must be really fond of folklore, dad,” she said. “It’s the fifth time you’re using a folk expression.”

“Well...”

“Oh, a bite!”

Some stupid voracious fish had been tempted by the bait and bitten, granting me some reprieve from being grilled on the subject of folklore by a restless young pirate girl of divine extraction.

Attention! The Terrifying Squeak watercraft is overloaded!

Mana expenditure for maintaining the craft in motion at the chosen speed triples!

“Bom! That’s too much!” I barked loudly, watching in horror as a muscled green fellow dressed in nothing but a pair of long shorts dragged a sizeable piece of timber aboard.

It must have come from one of the first vessels that had been smashed or destroyed by the amber veil engulfing the continent. We kept coming across barrels and kegs, planks and logs, and fragments of decks and masts floating by. Bom the self-appointed storekeeper couldn’t bear to see so much valuable stuff drift right past us and dragged everything he could reach aboard. We’d already been overloaded at departure. Now the hapless watercraft creaked at the joints and it felt like it might come apart right underneath us any moment.

The name Terrifying Squeak must have been chosen for a reason. It was a large twin-hulled boat with a sturdy net stretched between its two hulls, each of which had a cargo hold and a cabin with two bunks. The tall mast bore the weight of the sails easily. The vessel itself was well-cared-for, with hardly a scratch on it. The Terrifying Squeak had somehow managed to avoid any participation in military action, having originally served as a fast courier ship delivering small but valuable packages from one vessel of the armada to another, and subsequently towed rafts with players who'd lost their ships. As soon as Squeak had reached the shore, the entire crew simply teleported away with the aid of an artifact enabling one to make local jumps. Time had been at a premium with so many players eager to reach the continent in time, so the catamaran had been abandoned, drifting slowly towards the reefs near the shore. The vessel was saved from certain death in the nick of time. Given that its owners had abandoned the ship and that it would have gotten destroyed without our interference, we decided it was our property now by rights. Bom, ever the practical one, must have been speaking from experience when he suggested repainting it and changing the vessel's name and the color of her sails, but the rest of us objected to his idea—we'd all fallen in love with the ship's bright red and yellow livery and funny name already.

Unfortunately for us, the Squeak was no freighter. We'd overloaded the unfortunate catamaran mercilessly—she sat in the water so deeply that the net between her hulls was touching the water. If I hadn't raised my new spell to the second tier, even tailwind wouldn't have made Squeak travel at this speed, obeying the helm to boot. Still, it was no longer an impish flyer dancing on the waves, but a heavy tub reacting to the helmsman's actions with substantial delay. I was therefore on edge constantly, and Bom did nothing to spare my nerves.

The rest of the crew and the passengers remained oblivious to my plight. Kyrea was reading a fisherman's reference book, casting glances at the scarlet-colored fish in the pail next to her trying to identify it. I chuckled. The reference book had come from the old continent, and the fish was already caught here. Still, no one said that Zar'Graad's flora and fauna would all be completely different. Firs and pines looking just like their "old world" counterparts that we'd seen countless times back there were growing all over this place, too, after all.

It was a bright moonlit night—I'd have normally enjoyed it, but right now I was looking at the moon wistfully, hoping it would disappear behind some cloud before too long.

Attention! The Terrifying Squeak watercraft is overloaded!

Mana expenditure for maintaining the craft in motion at the chosen speed quadruples!

I was really happy about my mana supply being so ample that even I couldn't help being impressed. I didn't have to worry about "fuel" running out at the least opportune moment. Besides, I'd brought a couple of vials with me that would replenish my energy if I really needed it.

Reckless adventures always started easily, this one being no exception. The first steps came off without a hitch. We'd managed to lay our hands on the catamaran without any trouble, and getting it to the starting point on our itinerary was no problem, either. Bom and Kyrea had loaded a vast number of crates, bales, and planks aboard; I didn't feel like asking the half-orc about their provenance. I doubted that he'd bought

any of them. Then Doc had come over, barely managing to carry his supply of healing alchemy on his back. Orbit had arrived last, followed by Callowan, huffing and puffing, dragging a huge balsa wood raft behind him—the very raft that the mammoth was sitting on now, banging some strange fruit on the wood that resembled a coconut but must have had a much harder shell. I found the rhythmic thudding soothing since I didn't have to turn around and check on the mammoth all the time. The shaggy beast would be all right while he was making that noise. If he suddenly went silent, on the other hand—why, that would be the time to get nervous.

Orbit had also made us invisible—we owed it to a cricket chirping a melodious tune in a tiny golden cage hanging from a nail driven into the mast. I had no idea what kind of cricket it was. Nor did I feel anything like a veil of invisibility concealing us from prying eyes. I wouldn't be surprised if the elf had subsequently confessed to the whole thing being an elaborate prank. However, Roskie had told me she felt a divine power of some sort coming from the cricket, and her words planted a seed of hope in my soul. I therefore refrained from throwing the elf overboard, followed by the caged cricket.

The Terrifying Squeak crawled along the moonlit coastline, getting over one wave after another with some considerable difficulty as it moved farther and farther away. The waves splashed, hissing, as if murmuring indecipherable threats as they threatened us with salty spray. Dim lamps swayed above our heads, illuminating the piled-up cargo; we were accompanied by the dull thuds made by the new continent coconut and the chirping of the divine cricket. We kept on approaching our goal, even though we knew nothing of where it might be or what it might look like. The only thing we knew was that we'd stop at dawn and not any earlier.

But before that, just as the horizon would lighten a little, we'd send forth an emerald swift that would fly in a straight line for a whopping twenty-two minutes and twenty-two seconds, and then drop a tiny pearl from its beak. As soon as it fell into the water, a powerful cargo teleport would activate and transport the catamaran and the raft to the place where the pearl touched the surface of the water. Swifts were renowned as very fast fliers, and one of them could cover a considerable distance in slightly over twenty-two minutes. Orbit had only managed to find one such teleport, but it was enough already. It would enable us to get as far away from the place where the first overseas arrivals had disembarked onto the shore of the new continent.

Or, rather, a particular overseas arrival and the place of her first landing.

The Black Baroness, to be precise.

The Romani half-blood's dream of being the one to take the first step on the soil of the newly-discovered continent had come true. No one had any idea of what achievement she'd received for it, but, according to the news from the old continent, there was already a picture of her in every inn.

"She can surely make her wishes come true," I said, shaking my head silently as I pushed the rudder to make the ship veer away from a rock jutting out of the water. "She sure can..."

* * *

The emerald flash had gone out, and the Terrifying Squeak, having survived magical transportation successfully, continued to slice through the waves, making splashes and driven forth by momentum alone. The sails were hanging limp—there was a dead calm. I'd also stopped the effect of my spell in advance so as not to crash into a reef suddenly right after teleporting.

“Dad! Look!” Roskie was pointing towards the shore.

The shoreline made a sharp curve there, forming a small but deep bay. A narrow strip of sand lay between the water and a wall of somber-looking ancient trees. There were numerous birds' nests on the boughs, and a multitude of feathered insect-hunters zigzagged across the sky. The water teemed with fish—you could see it with the naked eye, near the surface and at the bottom. A couple of hundred feet away there was a narrow river flowing into the ocean right at the edge of the bay.

“This has a predestined feel to it,” I said, shrugging in surprise.

“You might be right,” Bom concurred. “It may well be. So, here, is it?”

“Here,” I nodded. “Get ashore, pirates! Time to break camp!”

My voice was loud and solemn. I wondered if my words made an impression on those who'd heard them. I thought of real-world discoverers standing tall and proud as their ships finally cast anchor after a grueling journey. Yet our arrival was a low-key affair. There was no army of boats

jumping across the waves to approach the shore, nor was I standing at the prow looking forward with a momentous look on my face, peering forward. Nothing of the sort.

The catamaran sailed on for a few yards, then stopped right in the quiet shallows near the sandy shore. Before I managed to give any further orders, the entire crew joined the mammoth on the balsa raft and rowed to land, using paddles, poles, palms of their hands, and a trunk for said purpose. Soon there was no one but me left on the Terrifying Squeak, muttering something about the vagaries of life under my nose and using the rudder to bring the vessel closer to the beach.

My actions provoked the curiosity of two gray-furred squirrels occupying a thick bough hanging over the water and staring at us with eyes emitting red laser beams, which stopped on each member of our small party of adventurers for a moment, one after another. The impression was that of having a bead drawn on you by a high-caliber sniper's rifle. I wondered whether the squirrel's eyes would work as laser sights if you gouged them out and attached them to a bow, then checked myself. Was I becoming a collector of gouged-out eyeballs, too?

“Hey, squirrels! Please! Don't shoot!” I implored the local fauna with some hysterical notes in my voice, smiling affably while they sat there boring my chest with their biological lasers.

The lasers blinked a few times, shifted to my forehead for a second, and then moved aside, focusing on a pinecone that uttered a terrified high-pitched squeal and darted away. It didn't get too far, though—the beams blinked twice more, and the pinecone exploded with a soft bang. The nuts ricocheted off the branches, hitting the leaves like buckshot and falling

down like hail. The squirrels descended, putting out their lasers, and started on their peaceful vegetarian meal... on the other hand, the pinecone could squeal and run, so I wasn't sure whether it should be classified as flora or fauna. It was possible that the squirrels weren't feasting on mere nuts, but devouring the creature's spleen and kidneys instead...

“This place sure looks interesting,” I concluded.

“Oh ye-e-es,” Kyrea drawled as she placed a sturdy steel helmet on her head, looking at me through a T-shaped visor hole. “This place is incredibly interesting. If those are squirrels, I wonder what bears look like.”

“I'm afraid that we'll soon run into bears, too—as well as those who eat bears for breakfast,” I said, without sounding too grim, though, as I pointed towards a gigantic larch falling to the ground slowly some six hundred feet away from us. “As well as those who can fell huge trees with a single hit.”

“There can't be any players here—it's too early for that. But we have a whole day at our disposal until they appear. Or less, perhaps. More is unlikely. The territory may be huge, but teleportation and long forced marches in a random direction are still very much on the menu. Once again, we're on the shore and right next to a conveniently-situated bay... so we can count on the rest of today, the morning, and, hopefully, part of the early afternoon...”

“So we won't be sleeping IRL,” I shrugged, once again feeling calm and not even remotely lugubrious.

On the contrary, I felt like a bird that had just managed to escape a golden cage. I may have left my supply of food and drink behind, as well as security, but I'd also escaped the attention of overly caring owners skillfully posing as loyal friends. Did I blame the Sleepless Ones for any of that? I didn't. They'd made it perfectly clear from the start that the clan's wellbeing was the only thing they really cared about. Yet I felt very much like taking a break from all that relentless care and constant predatory curiosity.

"I suggest that Kyrea and myself be made responsible for preparing the site of the future camp," Bom rumbled, looking most unusual to me at the moment.

The matter was that I'd customarily address the half-orc's green behind emerging from the grass while its owner would be concentrated on collecting something from the ground rather than talk to him while looking him in the face. In the best-case scenario it would be Bom's tense back while his face, animated by healthy avarice, would be turned towards a tree covered in juicy fruit, a pile of earth with something glistening inside, or a fat boar passing by in the distance. In other words, he'd normally look in any direction but me. Right now, though, the half-orc was solemn, standing up straight with his hands behind his back, and looking around in a matter that showed skill and experience, calculating something inside his head already.

"We'll make the site square. Those twenty-three trees need to be chopped the hell down. I'll deal with that while Kyrea deals with the squirrels. There's something about those laser-eyed pine cone destroyers that I just don't like... Doc will keep an eye on me and Kyre from a distance. Orbit... well, him and Roskie are already making something... looks like a crayfish trap."

“I rely on you,” I replied shortly, and added, unable to resist, “And what should I do?”

“Well, you’re the leader. So lead... from some safe place in the distance so I don’t drop a fir tree on your head accidentally.”

“Threats once again,” I sighed. “All right. I’ll head to that knoll over there to gather my wits. Away from the squirrels—lest those gray furry pests mistake me for a pinecone and decide to blow me up.”

“Little chance of that,” Kyrea laughed. “But if a pantry *whann* turned up here all of a sudden, it would have a hard time.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I replied, recollecting the appearance of the creature in question. “It would be a goner in less than a minute.”

“That mound will have to go, too. The layout has to be simple and unencumbered, and may pantry *whanns* gobble up all the intricacies. Simple intersections, short and wide passages between the tents and the constructions. Four watchtowers for the immediate future. A palisade is necessary. But we’ll resort to magic in the meantime. Damn!” The half-orc roared like a bear. He took a two-handed axe out of his sack; the weapon’s blade glistened dangerously. “Not enough hands! Callowan! Come over here! We’ll use you as muscle—like they use elephants in India! You’ll work so hard your wool will fall out! Get ready to carry logs!”

The mammoth replied with a plaintive moan, looking towards his shiny-headed owner hopefully. But the elf was busy—they were making some strange cage, and they'd already tied a long rope to it. Weren't they satisfied with all the fish they were catching? Zar'Graad crayfish were next? At any rate... we had lots of lemon and garlic in magical stasis, and a few bottles of excellent Chardonnay, already chilled by the same magic. A perfect pairing for crayfish.

“We'll need about two bucketfuls of crayfish at the very least!” I said aloud, and my daughter nodded understandingly.

“Crayfish?” Orbit looked surprised for some reason. “What crayfish?”

“Oh, forget it,” I said gruffly. “I won't be asking you about the cage, then.”

“Boss! See that hill over there? Drive a pole into it and use it as a support for a ballista!”

“All right. If I manage to lift one.”

“They don't weigh much. And we could do with some temporary protection.”

“Then I'll put up three—and plant tree guardian seeds. How densely do they need to be planted?”

“Every four paces, Ros!” Kyrea shouted, looking just like a steel statue. “And don't forget to water them from the golden can.”

“I’ll remember.”

Tree guardian seeds were expensive—mind-bogglingly so. You couldn’t find them on your own no matter where you went. You could only receive them from the King of Elves himself or one of his closest advisers. They were creatures of an elite class—rooted to a single place, but that didn’t make them any less deadly. They offered near-ideal protection for such places as a camp in an unexplored area, especially when the number of available soldiers was limited and there were lots of unpleasant creatures around. But the price was so high that you might as well have buried bags of gold in the ground four paces apart. It was a good job that they’d been stolen. Well, I didn’t steal them myself—the elf had brought them, grinning slyly, and I really doubted he’d received them as a present.

I drove a long **and** sturdy pole into the top of the hill and wiped the imaginary sweat off my brow with relief. I had to pretend I was working hard, after all, or Bom would make me participate in chopping down trees as well.

It was finally time for the tree guardian seeds. I took a look at one of the future camp’s sides as devised by the half-orc and headed in that direction, taking a pouch with seeds and the golden watering can out of my pack. The process was perfectly simple—you didn’t even have to read any of those long-winded and hard-to-pronounce spells favored by the elves. They were a touch too fond of howling something like “Av Allora Mukasa Duolla! Aruna! Duoletos!” underneath the lush canopies of ancient forests. I was sure true role-playing game aficionados enjoyed that a lot, but I was of a simpler disposition. I preferred to do my farming in blissful silence.

“Ros! Hi! Where are you?”

I looked at this completely innocuous message from the Black Baroness, sighed, and poured a warm artificial shower over the seed that was tossing and turning inside a shallow pit. A few minutes passed by, spent in peaceful labor. There was no new message yet, but a preliminary shot had already been fired. And since I'd failed to answer, something must have been off, since I was still in Waldyra, and the message wasn't from some unidentified swamp-dweller, but the leader of the legendary clan of the Sleepless Ones.

According to every trope of the genre, that was my cue to start evasive maneuvering. For instance, I could write a neutral and excited reply—something along the lines of “I'm everywhere! It's so cool over here! I'll send you a message later—real busy at the moment!”

And that wouldn't even be a lie. I was indeed “everywhere”—in other words, roaming wherever my fancy took me. I was incredibly busy. And it was unimaginably cool—even the heart of an experienced fanatical player like me who'd seen it all would sometimes skip a beat, reacting to Zar'Graad's stern beauty, or beat faster in anticipation of something extraordinary that could be anywhere—hiding behind the gigantic larch standing nearby, for example.

But I didn't want to exchange any words or phrases with BB. All she needed was a ghost of a chance to get you with the tip of her claw—the full set of claws and fangs would follow shortly, you'd find yourself in her relentless grip, and you'd be done for, becoming part of a homogeneous militant mass known as the Sleepless Ones—a single body with a collective mind. That's what had happened to me closer to the end of the Great Expedition. I was so glad that it had ended at

last that my hands still shook with joy. I'd started to feel like a pseudopodium in a navigator's hat. And just to think that it had all started with me rolling over the railing of an enormous ship placed over a fountain as an advertisement and a huge trap for a single player, naïve and not particularly bright.

Incidentally, that ship had reached the finish line. I saw it when we were saving the Terrifying Squeak catamaran, anchored near the shore and looking like a pale shadow of its former resplendent self. But the Merry Man had survived, at least—other ships had been less lucky. Its mast was decorated by a huge red and gold flag in recognition of the ship having had shown enough valor in sea battles to merit a special award.

BB had received no answer from me, yet she remained silent. I was sure, though, that she'd already counted my crew and realized that the motley wolf pack had been a few members short—namely, Orbit, Kyrea, Doc, Bom, Roskie, and yours truly. That was sufficient cause for alarm. Baroness was no fool, and her analysts got their rewards and whippings for a reason. They were kept for their ability to make precise predictions and arrive at the right conclusions, so they must have told her already that it was an escape. No one cared that I no longer owed the Sleepless Ones anything—the contrary was true, in fact. They'd still look for us, and the first winged patrols were already roaming Zar'Graad's airspace scrutinizing the earth below with the clan's trademark gaze... Besides, I had to remember that other clans might be looking for me as well. Even though I was a navigator no longer, the temporary camp and the arrival of the "old world faction" were important, as well as my unique teleportation ability. They must have been mentioned in the vast arrays of data I'd received from the system and never bothered to read, being too busy for something like that.

Once I finished watering the guardian seeds, I put the watering can away into my pack—I'd need to water them again in an hour. This was the only vessel I could use for watering—a regular can or a jar would have some effect, too, but the guardian trees would be much weaker in this case. I decided against going to the river that flowed into the ocean. It could be dangerous—I'd use the water we'd brought along instead, hoping that Callowan hadn't drunk it all already.

In the meantime, I could look around and think of our course of action for the next couple of hours. That was the most critical time. Night would fall soon, and the wall of trees was beginning to look more and more sinister. Something terrifying might appear from over there—bad enough to make all the old continent's Darkwood horrors seem like child's play. We didn't know what to expect, so we would expect the worst.

Kyrea had finished off the gray squirrels and was now mopping up the hapless pinecones, staying on the lookout all the while to spot the respawn locations of the local fauna. We didn't need any squirrels to appear right on the territory of our camp, did we? Therefore, the borders would have to be drawn in such a way that no living thing would spawn inside it, including pine cones. They may have been harmless, but they could attract squirrels, which, in turn, could attract potential predators including bears. It was therefore better for all the critters to appear outside the camp-to-be.

Thus, even the tiniest details had to be accounted for. I realized that the so-called “old world faction” wouldn't come here empty-handed—they'd have ways and means of defending themselves; possibly, something that hadn't been seen before. It was a huge event, after all, and the game's administration wouldn't allow all the wizards, sages, politicians, clerics, and experienced warriors who'd arrive here

as a result of the former Great Navigator's whim to get eaten by bears or squirrels. Some of the VIP arrivals would share roles; the death of one or two of them was possible and wouldn't affect anything—others would assume their responsibilities. But the extermination of the entire old continent delegation by squirrels due to the absence of a reliable army of players in the vicinity would be out of the question.

Sure, the old continent faction would be able to defend itself. But there was always a catch. Even the mightiest warriors and mages sent here wouldn't be immortal. Therefore, in order to avoid everyone suddenly finding themselves as protagonists and extras in an unsophisticated action movie called 300 Old Continent Heroes Vs. Zar'Graad the very same Sleepless Ones would tip one of the nearby clans off about our location the instant they realized Rosgard was being unreasonably stubborn once again. The clan heroes would arrive in the nick of time and save everybody from certain death. Then Rosgard and his crew would be dismissed without much hassle. They might offer us to switch to something else—studying squirrels, for example, suggesting that there was an ulterior motive in their presence and that maybe they were trying to communicate something, so why didn't we study their droppings as a possible medium used by the wise and ancient squirrel race to send secret messages in odorous cipher.

In order to avoid that and eschew the fate of becoming specialists in squirrel droppings against our will, we'd need to avoid any major goof-ups at the very least, making sure we'd get enough time to be assigned a few important tasks, complete some of them, and get a few more. The other players could arrive by that point and do whatever they pleased—it would no longer be as catastrophic for my first ever plan of such magnitude and daring.

BB stayed silent for the time being, but she'd surely make another attempt before too long, and try to send private messages to my companions as well, instantly realizing Ros was being stubborn again.

Damn, I was certainly spending too much time thinking about stubbornness. And squirrels...

I sighed, took out the watering can once again, filled it with warm water and went for a second round of watering the wood guardian seeds, which had already sprouted. The future killers were growing, sucking up nutrients from the soil voraciously.

"The area is clear!" Bom reported. And it must have taken him quite an effort to complete the task. "Even the stumps have been rooted out!"

"I've destroyed the monsters, found the respawn locations, and marked them on the map," Kyrea reported, too.

"The Insatiable Cage, our ghostly underwater guard, is ready! Yo-ho-ho and may a tornado fly into my pocket!" Roskie gave me a summary of her activity as well. The elf was standing next to her, grinning and looking pleased. There was a rope glowing in an otherworldly way in his hands; its other end disappeared underwater.

So those weren't crayfish, after all...

“I’ve checked some of the flora,” Doc wheezed, his skin suddenly blue for some reason. “You should avoid eating the black-capped mushrooms!”

“Break camp, boss!” the half-orc boomed. “Why wait? It’s still quiet, and night hasn’t fallen yet. I’ve prepared the lamps. If the arrivals fail to account for this aspect, I’ll put up such an illumination that we’ll have to wear sunglasses all the time, even as we sleep. But I’ll present them with a bill for each and every magical light bulb!”

“All right,” I sighed, bowing to the inevitable and opening all the information pages I’d ignored until then in my interface. “We’ve sure started something huge here. It’s time to see it through, a cherry on my head and a pineapple in my face. Get ready, my valiant fighters. I’m about to begin...”

Chapter 2

The Arrival

A FURIOUS FLAME erupted from a deep crack in the ground, consuming me.

I was hovering in midair some thirty feet above the surface engulfed in a bright roaring blaze with my arms stretched out wide, acting as a homing beacon. There was a bright beam coming out of my chest again, reaching into infinity. However, its color wasn't pure amber this time. Now it was tinged with hues of sinister crimson shackling the transparent amber like chains and subjugating the ancient magic.

The magic of the Ancient Ones became entwined with its modern counterpart wielded by the mighty warlocks of Algora's Mages' Guild. Once again I was showing them the way—a straight line between Point A and Point B. No zigzags or stops; no acceleration or slowing down. Everything would happen nearly instantly. It was an extremely powerful magical means of transportation, after all.

I spent fifty thousand points of mana just for starters. I kept guzzling one potion after another, pouring tens of thousands of mana points into the primitive pentagram I'd drawn on the ground. Once the drawing started glowing an even red, I stepped inside and started to pour mana into the air above my head, where a pattern identical to the one below me had appeared. Another fifty thousand points of mana spent. Now we had a direct verbal and visual link with the old continent. A magical link-up had been created.

A multitude of stern and solemn faces stared at us from the other side, their expressions reflecting the gravitas of the moment. Most of them were bearded, but one's eye also occasionally caught delicate female features in their midst. We must have been a disappointing sight—it was the middle of the night, all of us were muddy, there was an enormous wolf scratching behind his ear with one of his rear paws, and a mammoth popping up in the background every now and then, wrestling a grey-furred squirrel for the last pineapple we had in our supplies. There was also a teenage girl who kept saying things like, “Will you look at those, may a shark poke them with a mast in the underbelly! Smash a cherry if I've ever seen such a ragtag collection of mangy pirates!” I was certain that the wise and important old-timers were quite unimpressed by our demeanor.

However, it didn't take them long to come to their senses—they must have realized that the appearance of someone capable of getting them to the new continent in the blink of an eye was of secondary importance to said ability. Once I'd received a brief set of instructions from them, I instantly applied them without thinking twice. Bom kept barking, “Less solemnity! More action! Bend the temporal lines to the north, and put some elbow grease into it!” The half-orc's words made Orbit dash back and forth, adding to the nervousness of our observers, whose gazes followed the spindly bald eccentric's jerks of agony with actual compassion.

And then there was a loud rumble as I poured in the last portion of mana.

The shore shook so hard that the catamaran jumped right out of the ocean and plowed a groove in the beach sand. I hovered, ascending ever higher and looking at the crack in the ground with volcanic magma pulsating deep down below me. I

sincerely hoped we hadn't caused a Herculaneum-like eruption here—the squirrels would never forgive us...

Once the angry roaring pillar of flame wearied of rending the body of the hapless ex-navigator, flames burst out of my wide-spread arms, and an enormous scarlet cross of fire lit up over the coast of Zar'Graad. The heat was strong enough for the nearest shrubs to smolder. Fortunately, they didn't start speaking to us, although I wouldn't have been surprised if they had.

The beam coming out of my chest became brighter for a moment, and then contracted quickly, like a piece of taut elastic spring, one end of which had just been released. Something slapped me in the chest; I gave a kick and yelled, thrown into the dark of the night while landing at the feet of a surprised squirrel that had just sat down to a meal of pine nuts next to my aching head. The rodent dropped the moaning nuts onto my noggin, looking startled. So the pine cones were alive, after all... and, just as usual, no one had stood there waiting to catch me.

"It is done!" The solemn voice made me go down on all fours and turn around. I raised my face to behold a tall and majestic old man in a luxurious mauve mantle, holding his staff for support with one hand and offering me the other one for a shake. "Rosgard! You did it!"

"Nice to see you, Archmage Tarnius," I smiled wanly at my old acquaintance, reaching for his hand. However, instead of shaking, he picked one of the pine nuts from my sleeve, took a good look at it, grunted in surprise, and said, "It surely is something extraordinary... But why are you lying around, Rosgard? Get up and let's go! There are still lots of things for us to do, and look at you stealing nuts from a squirrel in the

middle of the night... as if you couldn't think of a more dignified way to find sustenance..."

Having said these words, the mighty sorcerer retreated.

"God," I moaned. "Why am I punished like this?"

I wasn't lamenting my sorry state. Things were a lot more complicated.

Tarnius. They just had to send him. I was certain the archmage would play his part in the drama that was about to unfold, and it behooved me to start feeling guilty already. I wasn't one of the players customarily rubbing shoulders with the movers and shakers of this world. I never had tea and biscuits with them in an informal setting. Still, I knew Tarnius a little—enough to have formed an opinion about him based on my personal experience.

He was a powerful, imperious, resolute, and adamant man who preferred to slice through knots instead of unraveling them. I remembered how he'd declared that the madman Grym had to be dispatched and that it would be pointless to talk to him and try to make the crazed werewolf see reason. Death would be the best solution. I was told to kill the beast and bring back a bloodied head to claim my reward. This computer-generated personality was like an unsheathed sword that never idled much.

Thus, if Tarnius had been sent here, the larger and the more powerful part of the "old continent faction" must have decided that any arising problem was to be solved quickly and decisively.

Apparently, the Crown had sent him there to study and subjugate these lands at any cost.

“I knew there was something special about you the first time I laid my eyes on you,” Tarnius said, subjecting the environs to a thorough scrutiny. “And so you’ve done a great deed again. The first time you saved the common people from a hideous monster, and now you bring us a gift from the gods.”

“I am most grateful to you for such kind words, Archmage Tarnius...” I could barely keep up with the long-striding old-timer.

It was as if he hadn’t heard me at all, though.

“The king himself wishes to see you, Rosgard. Here’s the royal decree and your invitation. It’s valid for six persons. There’ll be a special feast at the Royal Palace in Algora tomorrow evening where His Majesty will inform the nobility of all the new opportunities arising before us—new lands and goods, new sea lanes, and so on. He would also like to pay his respects to the heroes who’d managed the impossible.”

“Uh, right,” I blurted, accepting a bunch of vellum envelopes decorated with baroque monograms and coats-of-arms from him. “We’ll be there if we have to.”

“You have the ability to return with magical teleportation,” the mage said as he stopped abruptly. “Don’t even dream of scorning the royal welcome, Rosgard! The monarch might want to entrust you with something... special.

I recommended you to him personally as someone reliable and trustworthy to a fault.

“You have my sincerest gratitude,” I hastened to bow again.

I was exhilarated. The venerable Archmage Tarnius had recommended me to none other than the king personally... That could swell anyone’s head.

“I remember you were interested in collecting an old set of armor that had once belonged to that frenzied and bloodthirsty madman... The Silver Legend, if memory serves...”

“Oh, indeed I was!”

“Well, that’s an extra reason for you not to miss the evening ceremony at the Royal Palace.”

“I see... Could it be?”

“You’ll find out once you get there. But the king’s gifts are never the ordinary kind.”

“Understood! I’ll be at the palace tomorrow evening!”

“The company will be handpicked, and there won’t be many guests, Rosgard. It would behoove you to think well of just whom you plan to invite along. This is no regular beau monde party. The leaders of many kingdoms and counties will

sit at that table. Eagles gliding very high in the sky, if you will—beyond the reach of lesser birds. For many of them it will be the first occasion in ages to come out of their seclusion and leave their castles and citadels on the invitation of the King of Algora. So it won't do to take just anyone along.”

“Once again, I thank you for the wisdom you share with me.”

“Pay the Mages’ Guild a visit, too,” Tarnius said, a little less sternly this time. “There’s a small gift of gratitude from us as well, and it’ll be waiting for you there. Then head over to the Cartographers’ Guild—they’ll also be happy to give you a token of their appreciation. You have, after all, given them the opportunity to map new lands...”

“Of course, thanks!”

“Well, what else can I say... The site for the camp has been chosen well. And our forces here might be small in number, but they lack nothing in strength. We’ll deal with the local dangers, one way or another.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” I said, looking around me at what Tarnius referred to a “small force lacking nothing in strength.”

The cross of fire had long disappeared, leaving behind a fading veil of an incredibly powerful teleport. There were dozens of warriors and workers hurrying through, eager to cross the mind-bogglingly long distance between the two continents. There were warriors, mages, herbalists, archers, and crossbowmen, followed by knights in heavy cuirasses

carrying two-handed axes. Folks in regular clothes scurried through like mice, with enormous lidded baskets filled to the brim strapped to their backs. There were various tools and implements hanging from their belts, giving away their profession at once—there were woodworkers, smiths, lumberjacks, diggers, stonemasons, and construction workers, followed by more warriors and mages. All races were represented, and everyone mingled. Some were carried in huge barrels or aquariums; others rolled inside large bubbles of water. Achylotes came alongside landlubbers in large numbers, instantly diving into a wide rivulet that flowed straight into the ocean, created by one of the mages. The achylotes traveled along this artificial river to get to their customary habitat, quickly filling the small bay. The only place they avoided was the part of the bottom with the crayfish trap, or whatever it was, that Orbit and my daughter had made.

Animals kept coming, too, carrying an impressive amount of cargo. The settlers had thought of everything—there were assorted crates, barrels, bales, bunches, and stacks of weapons, supplies, and construction materials.

These were followed by more warriors and mages.

Apparently, Tarnius excelled in the art of the understatement. By the time the magical bridge disintegrated with a loud pop, about three hundred locals had already passed to this side of the teleport. Two thirds of them were fighters; the rest were workers. But this was no island where such a group would have looked like a large force. Three hundred locals on a huge continent was a negligible number, even if compared to the thousands of players who had come here before them.

Many mages scattered and started on implementing protective measures to turn the camp-to-be into an impregnable fortress. Dozens of magical auras and force fields formed a reliable barrier between us and Zaar'Graad's nature. Golems took their first heavy steps as they went forth to patrol the environs and fell some of the ancient timber. Elven mages saw to the guardian trees we'd planted. The guardians started growing at an amazing rate as the glistening waves of emerald-colored magic poured into them. They soon grew into a spiky wall of vegetation surrounding the camp, with green lights flickering inside. The boughs moved, and one could feel the trees' heavy scrutiny almost physically, focusing on every passerby. It would be a fatally bad idea for strangers to venture into that arboreal wall lest they wanted to be turned into organic fertilizer—bones, muscles, and internal organs chopped finely, with trace amounts of second-rate cerebral matter added.

Bom the half-orc dashed from one of the new arrivals to another, quickly establishing a common ground and accepting quests by the dozen. He was followed by Kyrea, and the two of them would often complete a given task immediately, in a matter of seconds. Physical strength was needed the most at this point, and that pair was ideal in this scenario. They dug pits, smashed rocks, raised pillars and held them up, set up tents, opened crates, unloaded barrels from carts, helped moving anvils about, and so on. They completed over fifty tasks in about ten minutes, no less—right before my eyes as I was listening to Tarnius and then just standing there waiting to be given some special assignment.

Bom had warned Kyre at once that she shouldn't accept any tasks on her own behalf. She was still an Albatross, and the reward for many quests included points to one's reputation with the old continent faction. Having another clan improve their reputation at our expense was more charitable than we'd planned to get.

So Kyre had left the Albatrosses, quickly and decisively, using the options provided by the game's interface. We barely managed to voice our surprise. But I was really thrilled—it felt like a huge load off my chest.

All of us were in a group. Therefore, every quest we'd complete was credited to us all. The same would concern failed quests, but, fortunately, there were none as of yet. Bom chose assignments very aptly, accepting the ones that should be completed immediately first and saving the more complex tasks for later.

I was just standing next to Tarnius doing nothing, while my reputation grew of its own accord. I was receiving XP, too. Bom took all the material components of the reward—elixirs, equipment, weapons, armor, scrolls, money, and so on. It would all be transported to a special tent subsequently—our own, set up at the very center of the site and therefore guarded better than Fort Knox at the moment. It was Bom's idea, too, wholeheartedly approved and supported by Kyre.

Everything around us was in a frenzy of anthill-like activity. The din was unimaginable. The camp was coming into existence before our very eyes. A couple of large tents of different colors had already been set up. The first five-fighter groups had already started patrolling the inside of the camp, accompanied by giant dogs capable of making one's bladder weak with just one baleful look. Barely visible winged silhouettes of three dragons hovered over us—you could still tell where they were, though, since they obscured the stars occasionally. Yet another patrol. Outside the camp, trees were being felled in every direction. One heard the roars and the howls of beasts slain ruthlessly by the dozen. The old continent faction was creating a buffer zone around the camp

where no worms were allowed to crawl and no saplings grew. They were sure taking things seriously. No one knew what to expect of Zar'Graad, so they tried to prepare for everything at once. I was sure that something similar was happening in the ocean. The bay would soon be isolated securely from the open waters. No ship would be able to sail in uninvited. Not even a fish would get through.

While I kept looking around me—not as an idle gawker, but like someone trying to get the full scope of the events—Tarnius disappeared. The archmage had thus let me know our brief conversation was over. I was grateful for his sage and apt advice. But now it was time to deal with matters less lofty—I'd literally need to do some dirty work.

Ten minutes later I'd already completed three tasks. Three in ten minutes, no less—and I wasn't even working all that quickly. Besides, I'd already been given four urgent assignments I didn't even stop to accept as I scurried from one place to another. They came from yelling fighters, priests, workers, and craftsmen. I assessed my abilities realistically, and only accepted the tasks I could complete without leaving the camp. Distance was working against us. No one could afford to waste an hour roaming some remote grove in search of a scarlet flower and complete just a single quest over that amount of time, even though the reward would be substantial. It made a lot more sense to take care of twenty short quests in the meantime—extremely primitive ones, but really easy to complete. Carry water, dig a shallow pit, bring some rocks for a hearth, hold a rope, hold three ropes at once, hold a thick pole vertically, cut a hole in a gigantic piece of canvas, bring over a cow, take away a dog...

The quests were laughable, and the rewards puny.

But by our hundredth quest we'd earned a point to our reputation with the old continent faction.

Two hours later we were breathing heavily and looked like pigs covered in black mud, but we'd already completed 250 quests, earning another point to our reputation with the old continent faction. That was a serious achievement. Roskie helped us with everything, demonstrating incredible strength and agility. Divine genes... combined with her father's temperament.

Four hours later, really late at night, we got yet another point to our reputation with the old faction. We were just as overjoyed as before, even though everything in front of my eyes was a blur. It wasn't even the fact that I was tired—there was simply too much chatter and running around, too many faces and voices, and the noise made by a multitude of tools all used at the same time was too loud...

There were virtually no small and easy tasks left by that point, and new ones didn't appear often. The ones available led to the open ocean, faraway forests, or the starlit sky. We could also go underground if we so wished—the old continent dwarves had already started digging a tunnel under the hill, submerging as fast as a mechanical drill. They needed logs and stones to prop up the tunnel walls, as well as workers with strong backs and arms.

Just in a little over six hours my team had managed to accomplish the impossible, having completed a multitude of tasks, earned a substantial amount of gold, received a variety of different items, some experience, and three points to our reputation with the old continent faction. This was pretty much the limit of our capacity.

That was when I told Kyre to go home and get some sleep to rest from Waldyra. I didn't know why I had to insist—the paladin looked as tough as nails and ready for more action, but I still insisted on her logging off, reminding her of the huge bowl of delicious salad standing in the fridge. It didn't take her long to make up her mind after that.

Doc gave up next. He got the Fading. We talked, and then his thin shaky figure leaned against a keg of oil and went still. His character vanished into the air shortly afterwards. Our doctor was resting.

Roskie crawled into her sleeping bag—once she'd made sure that her enormous bale of personal possessions was safe and sound. It included the chest with the fishing gear, rods, mementos, clothes, weapons, money, and books... An enormous hodgepodge of all sorts of objects.

That left two of us—myself and Bom.

I was held by responsibility—after all, I'd started all this. Bom's motivator was greed. He simply couldn't go to sleep with the realization he could still accept many assignments for which he'd receive a handsome reward.

He ended up taking three quests at once and leaving the camp, promising to return shortly in a hoarse voice. I wished him luck just as hoarsely, and then turned off the complete block on messages, allowing selected contacts to get in touch with me.

As I was preparing to send a brief message, I eyed the campsite that had undergone a radical change.

There were even rows of tents of all colors everywhere—dozens of them, with poles at the entrance flying flags and banners fluttering in the wind. Wooden watchtowers had been built in the corners of the camp, each one manned by several archers. The tree guardian defense perimeter was complemented by a palisade, still unfinished. The workers stood near the final gap holding a log that was being driven in by a magical rock hammer with loud bangs. The golems were finishing clearing the defense perimeter in the distance, felling large trees and pulling out smaller ones, roots and all. A small rock landing appeared in the center of the camp, a short rock pillar in its middle, covered in runes, three of which were glowing red—the activation combination, apparently.

A low wall was spanning the shore built of rocks and gravel fused into a monolithic substance with magical fire. Several gigantic rafts were rocking on the waves, still in the process of construction, while two dozen workers on a nearby beach were busy with their axes and planes, making dugouts out of three fat tree trunks. Those were to become the first vessels of the old continent faction's Zar'Graad fleet.

The Terrifying Squeak set off for her first voyage from the new place—without me. Tarnius borrowed the catamaran for a while.

I had no idea what was going on underwater. But that part of the camp lagged behind the others. There weren't that many achylotes. We couldn't help them, since there were no achylote players among us. Therefore, they proceeded slower than the rest.

Realizing that our time was up, I talked to Bom shortly, and we decided that if any evil forces were to be summoned, it

would be best to summon the devil we knew.

I sent a message to the Black Baroness. It didn't contain any words at all—there was just a screenshot of the glowing column serving as the local teleportation “anchor.” The camp's magical address, if you will. Mages possessing specific spells could home in on it. However, unless the “anchor's” owners added you to their white list, your first arrival would have to be to a point outside the fenced-off territory. It was a safety measure—otherwise any enemy capable of teleportation would be able to appear right on the central square. I'd already informed Tarnius of whom I'd intended to summon. Unsurprisingly, he already knew the Black Baroness well and considered her someone worthy of respect. The archmage had added her name and a couple more to the list, and gave me the go-ahead.

So I sent that message and prepared to wait. It took a while—no less than ninety seconds.

A bright light filled the column and it started to ring softly. That was it.

There was a flash.

The magical glow next to the column disappeared quickly, leaving familiar figures behind.

I saw Baroness, Lynx, Malice, Whisper, and Goldie. They all struck rather tense poses, assuming a battle formation.

There were voices from outside the palisade—that was where the transportation magic had taken the players whose names I didn't mention to Tarnius. We allowed the core members of the clan to make a dignified arrival. The rest could come in through the gate, although it hadn't been finished yet.

“Ros!” BB's voice was filled with emotion. A wide gamut of different emotions, in fact.

I shrugged, and pressed the exit button as I sat down next to Roskie's sleeping bag with the snoring young goddess inside it.

Nothing personal, dear Baroness. Just business.

If we'd had any strength left, I'd have summoned the Sleepless Ones later, but we had no more strength or easy assignments. We'd squeezed the situation dry. What we needed to do now was sleep, recharge our batteries, and take care of a really serious matter first thing in the morning—the foundation of the first Zar'Graad clan. I'd already discussed my plans with Archmage Tarnius, and received his surly approval. However, he instantly demanded that the new clan serve the old continent faction for the first three days after its foundation. I gave him my word and we shook on it.

So we'd have a special ceremony to participate in at noon tomorrow.

Unfortunately, I still hadn't thought of a name for the new clan. But I could do it tomorrow. Names were never a problem for me. I wouldn't want to boast, but I somehow

always managed to find befitting names when the need arose.
So there was nothing at all to worry about...

Chapter 3

The Clan

“I FEEL CHILLY,” I complained, twitching my shoulders and shuffling my feet. “I feel just like a rickety old ladder that’s been climbed by a particularly heavy horse. How about we cancel the damn thing, eh?”

“Ros!” Kyre huffed indignantly, effortlessly pushing me forward with her delicate hand. I dug in my heels, and my unbending legs plowed deep grooves in the ground.

“I kept tossing and turning all night! I couldn’t sleep! So I’ve pondered it all... and changed my mind.”

“Liar! You slept like a baby!”

“I do have a right to change my mind, don’t I? We’re still a democracy! We have freedom of choice. How did the Prince of Denmark put it? To clan or not to clan! And not to clan it is! You see? Even such seminal works of literature as Hamlet support me!”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire! The Dane’s soliloquy never said anything like that! Stop horsing around, Ros! Adjust that scarlet cape of yours and get out of the tent!”

“I don’t want a cape, either! It looks horrible! Scarlet, of all the colors! With gold embroidery! I look like a showoff of the worst kind!”

“The cape looks great on you, dear. You’re an absolute charmer! We just need to curl your hair a little, and you’ll be so hot you’ll have flames coming out of your nostrils! Square your shoulders, look proudly and firmly, but with deep understanding, and let your eyes reflect your endless inner reservoir of kindness. Look above people’s heads, but not condescendingly. Don’t lower your gaze, but look approachable.”

“What’s that now? Come again?”

“Also put on a warm and friendly smile—neutral, but promising. Don’t stride too broadly, but don’t mince your steps, either. Hold on to your cape, but let it hang off your shoulder to be fluttered by the winds of portent.”

“You’ve lost me completely!”

“Let’s go! A-a-a-a-and... One!”

The tent flap opened, letting in the rays of the bright midday sun.

“Well, get to it,” Kyrea the Protectress whispered, standing behind my right shoulder in a full suit of plate armor. “Say whatever comes to your mind...”

“Hell’s bells and damnation!”

“Ros! Not like that!”

“Well, you told me to say whatever came to my mind.”

“Then say nothing. Just keep smiling...”

I took the first step. Then another one. After my third step the massive half-orc Bom appeared behind my left shoulder, looking like a mighty tower capable of withstanding the onslaught of any dragon. We stepped onto the red carpet rolled out over the grass and moved forward. I tried to pay no attention to the faces of hundreds of strangers surrounding us. Everybody was saying something—either to cheer me up or to egg me on.

And there were lots of people.

Multitudes.

I couldn't even count them. But even by an approximate estimate there were over two thousand players representing at least thirty different clans. They had capes of all colors on their shoulders, with impressively complex clan symbols containing shapes, runes, hieroglyphs, and completely inscrutable markings that only meant something to whoever had come up with them while the rest saw strange blotches against a motley background.

I only saw the front rows, barely holding under the pressure from behind. But that was enough. The woeful camp could barely contain so many players.

I felt jittery. Not scared—just jittery and out of sorts. There were too many people, and they were all staring at me. I'd hoped everything would be done quietly and without any fuss. Perhaps I'd just step into a dimly-lit old tent filled with the whispers of many chilling droughts to talk briefly to some curmudgeonly old man sitting proudly on a white sheepskin or a black lion's hide. He'd hear me out, nod to the rest of us, and provide a set of clear and laconic instructions along the lines of "form a circle, stand shoulder to shoulder, and stomp your right foot thrice."

But no one had allowed me to complete this operation in a low-key fashion. Far from it. The instant I mentioned doing it quietly and without fanfare everyone stared at me in surprise. Even Kyrea looked at me with rueful pity, the way one looked at a small piglet, the runt of the litter, who could never reach the teat filled with tasty and nutritious milk.

Then it was explained to me in no uncertain terms that every task required a specific uniform and setting. Rent and grimy clothes suited rooting out tree stumps and fighting monsters in the woods perfectly, but neither the garments in question, nor a forest thicket were right for the procedure of founding Zar'Graad's first clan, so could I please shut up about "keeping it quiet," "low-key affairs," "doing it in silence at midnight," and other silly stuff like that? All my suggestions were shot down in flames, and I was told to leave organizational tasks to those whose feet were firmly planted on the ground and who had a sober view of reality.

As a result, I'd spent most of the morning silent, pouting at the sight of a large-scale public event being organized around me hastily. Bom started with announcing the exact time the ceremony would begin by standing at the center of the camp and yelling loudly. I hunkered down in our private tent, armed myself with a quill, placed a stack of paper on my

knees and started to jot out a brief outline of what we'd have to do in the nearest future.

Kyre had warmed me at once that my days were over. My schedule would be as tight as that of the busiest high-ranking executive. I decided not to get too candid with my girlfriend, or I'd have told her that I'd never exchange field work for an office filled with boring papers and even more boring conversation—for the time being, at least.

To spare no effort trying to reach the top, rolling over on people, breaking my fingernails scaling some icy slope, pushing the less fortunate off cliffs, betraying friends, saving every penny tirelessly, and then finally making it all come true and becoming a legendary clan, respected and hated by almost everyone... Why would I want any of that?

My father had a friend who'd often come over for a cup of dad's strong black tea—a professional alpinist who'd conquered many proud and forbidding peaks. I remembered him sitting in one of our armchairs, sipping his tea and saying something to my father with a strange lopsided grin—words that stuck in my memory forever. He said that once you'd reach a tall summit, you found yourself standing on a tiny plot of land, completely lifeless, with nothing there but a roaring icy wind. What you felt as you stood on that mountaintop was indescribable. It could only be experienced, and the memory would stay with you forever. Yet you couldn't stay on that mountaintop. You could no more live there than you could live on the moon without a spacesuit. So you'd stand there for a short while and be forced to descend, leaving behind the place you'd spent all your effort and willpower getting to... moreover, you left it without even looking back. And you didn't leave feeling victorious since no peak can truly be conquered—or, rather, stay conquered. This friend of my father's had died trying to scale yet another icy peak, and his

body had stayed up there forever—on the slope of yet another mountain he'd tried to climb and failed.

Perhaps I wasn't particularly bright, but I did realize one thing. There was no point trying to strive for this strange domination and become the richest, the strongest, and the most famous clan in Waldyra. Even if we managed to reach that distant summit, we'd get toppled before we'd so much as managed to take in the view. And the closer to the summit, the fiercer the snapping at our heels would get. The time spent with the Sleepless Ones had taught me as much, confirming everything I'd suspected before. So I would probably disappoint the more ambitious of my friends by refusing to set my course for the faraway mountain range. We'd be a different clan. A weird one.

I'd already gotten sick of great ambition and impossible goals. I was no longer the Great Nav. I was a simple player in Waldyra and an affluent enough person in the real world. Therefore, the days and weeks to follow would not be spent sitting in an office at the top of my clan's tower and pushing sheets of paper around, but adventuring for the sake of adventure and traveling for the sake of traveling. Perhaps I'd settle down at some point in the distant future and find merit in paperwork. But it wouldn't be any time soon.

I decided against saying anything of the sort to Kyre or Bom. I wasn't a complete idiot, after all—I realized I'd have been strangled like a mutinous saboteur before the ceremony would even begin. But I did spill the beans to the bald mischief-maker—the resident H-bomb on spindly elven legs. Oh, how he grinned! That grin would make any shark green with envy! The teenage girl next to him started to grin in a similar fashion, and so did the enormous black and white wolf next to them—his grin was the most impressive one due to the sheer size and number of his fangs. The enormous mammoth

looming over us tried to follow suit, but his mouth wouldn't let him, so he got grumpy and slapped me with his trunk. I survived. So I told the gang about my plan to skedaddle—not from the “wedding ceremony” itself, but definitely the wedding night. Would that be a disgraceful attempt to eschew responsibility? By no means. Just a long-overdue breather. It was just that I'd gotten so straight-laced as of late I was getting sick of myself.

As we took a few more steps, Kray and Callen joined us. We were now walking across the carpet through a tense and solemn crowd. Thousands of flower petals swirled in the air above us. Soft string music poured into our ears so naturally I hadn't even noticed it beginning, and, lo, the saxophone joined in just then. The whole thing was too saccharine. The impression was of a wedding ceremony rather than the foundation of Zar'Graad's first clan. The groom was sweaty and jittery, and the bride was wearing a full suit of armor—fortunately, with the visor open. One might have wondered about the groom's willingness under the circumstances.

Orbit, Doc, and Roskie were the next ones to step onto the carpet. Roskie was riding Tyrant, who was measuring his steps with great dignity. We proceeded together. That was something we'd really gotten used to—stepping in stride. We were happy to be together. And, since I really enjoyed having my friends next to me, I didn't mind making it legal clan-wise one bit.

The carpet had led us to an exquisite elf-made pavilion. It had been grown—not constructed or carved. Someone must have said to the bush, “Thou wilt become a blossoming pavilion!” And the bush must have creaked and cracked, and replied, “Khun run kerroghul,” which translated from the Elvish as... something or another.

The pavilion was crowded. The only free space was near the entrance, right underneath the sumptuous flower garlands redolent of honey. There were birds and butterflies fluttering around the flowers, glowing so bright you could even see it in the daylight. Under the birds stood Tarnius dressed in a ceremonial robe. There were golden threads woven into his well-combed beard and a thin smile of welcome on his lips. That was the very kind of smile Kyre had asked me to display, but a political newbie like me could never hope to compete with someone as wily and experienced as Tarnius in that area—he wasn't one of Algora's Mages' Guild's head honchos for nothing. And now that he'd arrived on the new continent, he was in for a serious career leap, the hoar-headed old buffalo...

I came closer. Tarnius was standing near the entrance, looking at me with fatherly affection. I heard an incoming message notification. It was a signal from Kyre. I opened my mouth and made a brief speech reading it from my personal digital teleprompter. It wasn't too long, and every nuance had been gone over a hundred times before it was okayed. I'd had no part in its authorship.

Tarnius the Archmage heard me out benevolently, nodded, spread out his arms and launched into a speech that was much louder and longer than mine, addressed to everyone present—not just me and my friends. Only about two dozen words were said about the new clan. The bigwig grandpa was primarily stoking the players' motivation to keep on burning and pillaging in Zar'Graad, gathering loot and bringing it back to be studied, and claiming as many plots of land as they could as their property or the property of the crown.

Draw boundaries all over Zar'Graad!

Build roads and make trails everywhere! Build log paths in the swamps and bore tunnels through mountain ranges!

Chop down trees, gather plants, crush stones, hunt birds and beasts, catch aquatic creatures using nets and exploding potions, and find ancient treasure caches! Most importantly, spare no effort searching for any sentient beings that may have lived here or visited this continent before our arrival!

That was surely an impassioned speech, and it lasted around forty minutes.

The speech found a rapt audience. Players were recording sound and video; some of them wrote things down. All two thousand of them were listening to the majestic old sorcerer's instructions delivered from the blossoming pavilion. Judging by their behavior, they were intending to follow said instructions diligently immediately after the speech, even though they'd already managed to do a lot on the new continent. But now the address delivered in a jittery dictatorial manner really made their ardor flare up—you could see it immediately.

The speech was wordy and flowery, but it could be condensed to just three things: burn, pillage, and kill, rest for an hour, rinse and repeat. Burn. Pillage. Kill. Burn! Pillage! Kill!

As for us, we'd barely gotten a mention... but our merit got recognized with a warm smile.

Having fulfilled his political obligations, Tarnius took a sip of wine and got back to the topic of Zar’Graad’s first clan. We got exposed to another couple of hundred words, pompous and filled with motivational rhetoric and praise for the young adventurers who’d decided to settle down and form a respectable brotherhood of fighters. I thought that ours was more of a sisterhood with a few brothers, and “respectable” didn’t even enter the equation—freaky and weird would be closer to reality. I could barely keep from an incongruous chuckle—it took much effort to make sure my face remained deadpan. However, I sent Orbit a message about the brotherly sisterhood of freaks and weirdoes. A second later I heard a muffled giggle from the bald elf. Kyre, who’d been standing by my side all along, punched backwards with her steel-gauntleted fist without even looking, and a stunned Orbit slumped onto the ground with a mirthful expression on his face. I transformed into a pillar of attention lest the paladin maiden would decide that I, too, needed a sobering rap on the noggin.

“Uncle Orbit’s gotten a wallop!” Roskie yelled, falling on her knees next to the elf stretched out on the red carpet. “No-o-o-o-o-o!”

Tarnius coughed, irritated by the interruption, and ran his hands over his beard as he scrutinized the theatrically wailing girl—our young goddess in the making. The wise oldster must have realized that if he’d carried on with his speech the ceremony would turn into a burlesque. Therefore, he decided to wrap up the part concerning the role of great importance that young clans would play in colonizing the wild Zar’Graad territories and get down to business.

“So, what shall be the name of the first clan to be founded in these parts, o Rosgard?” The old man asked, giving

me a stern look. “What did you and your companions think of?”

“I’d rather you didn’t know all the versions,” I thought to myself.

In general, Tarnius was right. There were so many names we’d filled dozens of pages with different suggestions.

“The Madmen of Proud Realities.”

“The Gods, the Heroes, and the Jesters.”

“The Mammoth Wolves.”

“The Universal Fishers.”

“The Fishermen of Dawn.”

“The Legendary Trailblazers.”

“The Openers of Seals.”

“The Breakers of Realities.”

“The Suddenly Rich.”

“The Curious Tricksters.”

“The Colvass Rhombus Rooks.”

That was but a tiny part that I’d remembered from our brainstorming session.

I cleared my throat, stepped closer, opened my mouth, closed it, moved my lips around, spat out a squeaking luminous bird, opened it wide again, and said,

“The Heroes of the Final Frontier.”

“Duh…” the elf, who’d been lying on the carpet, grunted disappointedly.

Kyre raised her steel boot, and Orbit shut up at once.

It stood to reason. The elf had naturally hoped that I would choose a crazier name for the clan.

“The Heroes of the Final Frontier,” Tarnius echoed. His words resounded over the entire camp, reaching every ear and ringing inside every head.

A soft golden glow appeared above us—those standing on the carpet shoulder to shoulder, about to found a clan. The soft sound of bells set our hearts and souls aflutter—something was about to happen. Thin glowing threads came out of our bodies and joined together.

The roar of invisible brass trumpets with silver engraving was loud, but not deafening. Even though I couldn't see the musical instruments themselves, the sound—mellifluous and clearly “expensive” made me sure that the trumpets were pure brass of the highest quality, adorned with beautiful silver ornaments that killed every germ exhaled by the trumpeter.

“So must it be!” Tarnius the Archmage concluded, bringing the palms of his hands together. I managed to notice a tiny golden sheet or plaque that had flashed with a bright light for the briefest of moments and disappeared. Was it a special seal, I wondered? It must have been something interesting for sure—but irrelevant at the moment.

The Heroes of the Final Frontier.

It was done.

The first clan on Zar'Graad, a continent discovered just recently, had been founded successfully.

All our names would be part of Waldyra's history forever now.

There were few of us.

Myself, Rosgard. A human.

Kyrea the Protectress, another human.

Orbit Crystaliano, an elf.

Bom-Bom Carrier-Roller, a half-orc.

Doctor Boo-Little, also a human.

Kraven the Gray, a dwarf.

Callen the Seeker. A human.

Roskie, Rosgard's daughter, who looked just like a regular human teenager.

My daughter also became part of the new family and the “sisterhood of brothers” officially. And Tarnius didn't even try to object to our decision. He did look taken aback, frowning and raising his bushy gray eyebrows, but the instant his eyes met those of Roskie, who'd been standing next to me, he relented instantly, nodding peacefully and presenting no objections.

The locals—special, important, trusted, or even loved inhabitants of the world of Waldyra could be given membership in player clans. This became possible relatively recently—a little over a year ago. Most players had local girlfriends or boyfriends. Humans were like that—they'd find friends and lovers anywhere, game or no game. Therefore, to emphasize a local's affiliation with a certain clan, players would make them official members, supply them with clan cloaks and regalia, and allow them access to buildings and spaces that no one but clan members could enter. That made it easy for clan leaders and their trusted associates to monitor the

condition of their local allies. The clan symbol made it possible to see whether they were healthy or not and whether they could have journeyed to dark lands without asking anyone. However, this function was only accessible once the clan got its symbol, which wasn't that easy. Those were usually the privilege of powerful old clans, similarly to CLASPs. Some clans were de facto Waldyra's equivalents of nuclear superpowers.

However, the locals could not be among a clan's co-founders. You could only include them in an existing clan—you couldn't found one with them. None of the officials who'd ever conducted the foundation ceremony ever agreed to it. I hadn't really been all that hopeful—all I could count on were my personal services to Tarnius and Roskie's true nature and potential. And it did work out, after all. I didn't think my services had decided anything, to be honest—it must have been Roskie's potential. Tarnius was a special kind of character, after all, with incredible skill development, intelligence, and a self-preservation instinct. I'd already witnessed it firsthand that he feared no one but gods. I'd found out as much by mentioning Snessa's name during our first encounter. That was how I'd received part of the Silver Legend long before I'd completed an important quest.

Roskie wasn't a goddess yet. No one knew what this girl with her quick smile and energy of a true adolescent would grow into. However, if she became a powerful goddess, she'd remember a puny archmage's attempt to thwart her becoming closer to her father.

So Tarnius gave in, his furious gaze and twitching eyebrows notwithstanding.

“The Heroes of the Final Frontier are now a clan!” Tarnius proclaimed, holding his right fist up in the air. “Al-an-kar! Al-an-kar! Al-an-kar!”

Everyone who’d gathered for the ceremony—or most of them, at the very least—instantly answered in unison, roaring loudly,

“Al-an-kar! Al-an-kar! Al-an-kar!”

It was some ancient expression, and I had no idea what it could have meant. Still, it must have been an important vestige of the murky and convoluted past. Waldyra’s past, not ours. And it must have meant something.

The trumpets wailed once again. The sheer amount of data that appeared before my eyes was like a blizzard—I’d never seen so much system text before. Only a small part of it was of a congratulatory nature. The rest was so dry I’d need a bottle of rum to process it.

I froze involuntarily like a blind chicken, spending a whole second lost in contemplation wondering whether I should wait or start processing all this enormous amount of information at once. However, Tarnius decided for me, the restless old coot that he was. He raised his left fist to the sky as well, twitched his eyebrow, and a crimson lightning bolt flashed between his fists. The yell of an old shepherd urging a sleepy herd to move faster rent the air.

“So you’ve founded your clan, have you? Excellent. You’ve been congratulated, right? Perfect. I’m sure you’d like to celebrate, but there’s no time for that! The lands that stretch

before us haven't seen a living soul in ages, and they're nearly boundless! Who knows what awaits us and what dangers lurk in the wilderness? What creatures wait for us in the darkness of the dungeons and on the hoary mountaintops? Who's hiding at the bottom of rivers and in dark ravines? Is there anything remarkable in that faraway and still-nameless swamp? And what are those ancient ruins on the horizon? Now is not the time to celebrate! This isn't the hour! I urge everyone to begin the conquest! These lands will be made ours! Only then shall we celebrate! Dun Dun Ghrall! Dun Dun Ghrall! Dun Dun Ghrall! I bestow the Supreme Search Aura upon all those gathered in front of me now! It won't last for long, but its power is formidable! And I will reward everyone who comes back with valuable knowledge or spoils justly—to the fullest extent of my generosity!”

“HURRA-A-A-A-A-A-AH!” The audience clad in all kinds of finery responded with great enthusiasm and started to scatter.

I forgot all about the information I'd received and stared at what had looked like a panicked mass exodus. It was as if I hadn't been given the laurels of a clan leader, but rather some particularly nasty and contagious disease, judging by the haste of the venerable congregation. That gave me a jarring feeling, and I looked at the backs of those running away and the faces of those vanishing in teleportation flashes with the kind of melancholy I couldn't explain to myself.

The camp emptied in about a minute—an incredible result for such a number of people. The reason for this hurry was clear enough—some incredibly powerful super-uber-megacool search aura, coupled with the promise of a reward. After all, everybody present knew that the stern old-timer had keys to the many vaults of Algora's Mages' Guild. I had seen one of them personally, and the sheer number of assorted

boxes, chests, parcels, vessels, and so on blew my mind. Tarnius had been wise enough to assume he might not get as lucky to address so many players at once who would be as eager to search and conquer and as covetous for loot and awards as this lot again anytime soon, so the archmage girded his loins and cast a spell to bestow an incredibly powerful aura upon the entire congregation. As for the clan foundation ceremony that had mattered so much to us, it was apparently deemed unimportant, much to my chagrin. I'd remember that. Fancy standing there like a leper clad in a scarlet cape with golden embroidery. How was that for a paradox? Just about a minute ago I'd craved for the ceremony to finish as soon as possible. And my wish was fulfilled with a magical speed, suddenly leaving me disgruntled.

I'd started pulling the cape off, but Tarnius suddenly stepped up in front of me and placed his right hand on my shoulder, stopping me. He gave me a steely look and burst into another speech—a short one this time, but dealing exclusively with the newly-founded clan, the Heroes of the Final Frontier, and its set of founding members, including a girl of divine origin. The speech took a couple of minutes, and was really intense. It concerned such things as the necessity to keep believing in a better tomorrow, the ability to keep a bright outlook and never lose hope, as well as fearlessness, curiosity, the strength of clan ties, and loyalty to the clan's banner. The rest, with the exception of Orbit and Roskie, listened just as attentively, hanging on to the archmage's every word. No one else could overhear anything—Tarnius had covered us with a magic dome isolating us from any third-party attention. He added something meant for my ears only as he looked so deep into my eyes he might have seen my brain. According to the system notification, I and I alone could hear his words.

“As early as the first time I saw you, I instantly knew that you would grow into someone spectacular. You stride broadly and you keep going forward, looking in front of you

and never turning aside. Keep going like that, and you will soon realize that the summit you reached today is just a tiny foothill of the real mountain whose summit is above everything else. That should be your goal, Rosgard. You might never reach it, but you won't know until you try. So just keep going."

"Thank you for your kind words, Archmage Tarnius," I replied after a pause, completely earnestly, looking with some surprise at the wise local who'd just demonstrated to me a side of him I hadn't seen before. "I have taken your every word to heart."

"And don't be afraid of the mighty giants that will stand in your path," Tarnius added with a mischievous squint. "They aren't almighty or immortal."

"I thank you for your advice..."

I was born without the gene of acumen and foresight, but if I understood correctly, the archmage had directed me to the summit that was also the goal of many other clans, much older and mightier than ours, telling me not to fear their considerable military and economic power. What was the squinting old-timer getting me into, I wondered?

"Find me later, Rosgard, clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, once the clouds of conquest's dust settle. I request this of you."

"I hear and understand you, Archmage Tarnius," I bowed my head to hide the unexpected smile of pleasure on my lips at being called "leader," reminding myself that titles

were unimportant, unlike modesty, and that people called clan leaders all sorts of rather unwholesome names one might not end up too delighted to hear. It was a pleasant feeling nevertheless, though.

Congratulations!

You were given the quest: Future Conversation with Archmage Tarnius!

Find Archmage Tarnius in a couple of days and converse with him.

Minimum quest completion requirements: talk to Archmage Tarnius.

Your reward: none.

Note: this quest can be completed by any founding member of the HFF clan.

I instantly noticed the condition. This clearly implied that Tarnius's business wasn't with me personally, but with our entire clan. He must have intended to give us some interesting assignment, and, in case I'd be too busy, any other founding member of our clan could step in and help. I thought he should never deal with Orbit or Roskie, or his mind would sustain damage of the scale that would require long therapy at some sanatorium for wizard VIPs.

I obviously accepted the assignment and nodded gratefully. Tarnius returned the nod and ran his hand over us. I

blinked in surprise again—we'd received the same Supreme Search Aura. However, ours was a few points stronger and would remain active for twenty-four hours of game time. That was certainly a generous gift on the part of the old archmage.

Tarnius flashed us a somewhat dry parting smile and teleported away, leaving the couple of laggard players running toward him empty-handed. The magic dome that had been hanging over him dispelled.

“I say!”

“What an oaf you are,” Kyre said with a strange mixture of irritation of pride. “Or is that your strong suit, my dear? You look so fresh with your parochial enthusiasm of a true country bumpkin among all those dashing knights and refined ladies...”

“I’ll box your ears, that’s what I’ll do,” I promised, and instantly corrected myself. “In the real world... Not here...”

Right on. If I so much as reached for one of the mighty paladin’s maidens dainty ears, I’d get a kick so strong I’d fly all the way back to the Old Continent.

“We’ve got to act!” The giant half-orc Bom came out of his stupor. “And stay active while the aura’s still on!”

“Duh,” Callen winced, every inch the reporter of the renowned Waldyra’s Herald. “You’ve just used ‘act’ and ‘active’ together in what amounts to a single sentence. Stuff like that just kills me. As for acting actively, I’m off to write

my article about the foundation of Waldyra's first Zar'Graad clan. Since I trod the same carpet as the rest of the founders, not to mention having seen and heard everything myself, I have exclusive rights on that piece! The editor-in-chief of the Herald, Bushynose of Arc, confirmed it himself! So I'll be busy for the next couple of hours. In fact, I'll begin right here..."

The mage in her gala wear did just as she'd promised. She found a nearby bench half-hidden by a blooming Zar'Graad lilac bush with flowers of an incredibly saturated purple hue and a stunning aroma, sat down, shut her eyes, and, apparently, started to write her piece, silent as a mouse. Our ranks were thinning quickly...

"Let's go," Kyre supported the half-orc.

"There's a lot of stuff to do," Kray concurred.

"Hurrah!" Doc came to life at last.

"We'll go out there and grab everything we can reach!" Bom roared furiously, checking himself as he saw my raised palm.

"No," I shook my head. "We do things differently. Apart from me and Bom, everybody stays here. You complete all the quests you can handle and rake up all the loot you can find. Ask one of the free journeymen craftsmen to whip up as many wooden crates and trunks as they can. Everybody reports to Kyrea."

I looked at each of my now-silent companions, took off the cloak I'd already been sick of, and continued,

“Me and Bom will head to the Old Continent using my new and temporary extreme-long-distance teleportation skills. We'll take every local item we can carry with us—plants, minerals, live beasts, weird fish, yummy stuff, and yucky stuff. Once we get there, Bom will hold an auction, selling everything not even for three times its worth, but... uh...” I got stuck at finding a suitable exaggeration, but the half-orc caught my drift quickly, and came to my assistance, saying resolutely,

“A hundred times its worth. Alchemists will be fighting each other for all the plants and other ingredients they'll be able to use in new recipes! Well done, boss! Well done! Let's be off!”

“Right... While Bom's busy trading, I'll head for the city of Tranqueville. Something odd is happening there, the whole place is war-torn, but we have important business there, so I'll have to look around a bit. So, while the leader runs around and wastes his time gratuitously, everybody else will labor for the greater good of the clan. Even Callen, once her article for the Herald is finished. Right, Callen?”

“Urgh...” The girl grunted something incomprehensible.

“Prepare the place, Bom, and build the pyramid. If the stuff we have in our tents is insufficient, chop down trees and drag them over. We'll bring them over, too. Make sure they're new trees, though! Unfamiliar species only!”

“Only the ones that haven’t been scratched!” Doc chimed in happily, and got a cuff on the neck from Kyrea. Our resident medic nearly kicked the bucket there and then. I continued.

“The rest of you help us with carrying the stuff. And keep your mouths shut! Hey, I have an idea! Our tent will be at the center of the teleportation platform! It’s normal for hamsters and squirrels to carry all the stuff they find into their holes. All clans are like that. And if our hole disappears all of a sudden, it’s nobody’s business but ours. Not a word to anyone—our departure must be a surprise for all. We’ll just take a few chosen folks together, but without any private possessions!”

“Let’s get to it!” Bom roared hoarsely, and started walking towards our tent, treading widely. I turned to the elf and said to him,

“Please look after Roskie.”

“Sure,” Orbit agreed instantly.

“I’ll be back soon. Then we’ll start our infernal plotting against all the other clans... Or just go somewhere no one had gone before.”

“I-i-i-i-interesting!” The spindly elf looked encouraged as his tattered ears twitched. “I’ll be waiting!”

“And from you I’ll expect a fantastic catch,” I smiled at my pouting daughter. “And I’ll be back soon.”

“Promise? Promise it on your tooth? Left canine?”

I was rather worried by that request, wondering whether my daughter was indeed going to knock out the very tooth she'd named, and nodded.

“Promise. Try catching some legendary fish! To get one up on a certain famed clan...”

“Oh, I will!”

Roskie jumped onto Tyrant, whom I'd ordered to follow and protect her. Orbit barely managed to crawl onto the mammoth, yawning lazily, and the two of them rode away, ululating happily, waving around fishing rods and somebody's bright yellow pants. I could only hope they wouldn't present them as our clan's banner.

Speaking of the clan, the system messages were really interesting...

CONGRATULATIONS!

You have founded the Heroes of the Final Frontier clan!

You're the clan leader! You carry a heavy burden of responsibility!

Attention!

The clan type has not been selected!

Attention!

There are options that have never been available before!

Attention!

We strongly encourage you to follow these links and get some important information concerning the creation and regulation of specific clan-related settings...

A unique achievement!

You have received an achievement: The Trailblazers of Zar'Graad

(This achievement has no tiers and cannot be upgraded).

A commemorative achievement for all the founders!

Congratulations!

Your reward:

A fragment of Zar'Graad oak leaf made of cast adamantine.

Item class: unique.

Item status: Part of the Trailblazers of Zar'Graad collection!

Items: 1/8.

Attention!

The Heroes of the Final Frontier clan receives bonuses!

Permanent bonuses:

+5% to rewards received for quests received in Zar'Graad.

+5% to the chance of finding the Al-An Path.

25% to the chance of being notified when you voluntarily or involuntarily enter the Al-An Path.

+10% to the chance of being notified when you voluntarily or involuntarily leave the Al-An Path.

Temporary bonuses (for the duration of 30 days since the clan's foundation):

+10% to walking and running speed for the founding members.

+5% to running speed for all the clan members.

+20% to cargo capacity for the founding members.

+10% to cargo capacity for all the clan members.

+5% to the speed of gathering any basic resources by the founding members.

+3% to the speed of gathering any basic resources by all the clan members.

+5% to all the stats of the founding members.

+5% to all the stats of all the clan members.

A 10% chance of being notified of approaching undiscovered territories by more than 50 paces for the founding members.

A 5% chance of escaping death when characters' health falls to zero and instantly restoring 10% of health for all the founding members.

+15% to priority in assignment distribution by the First Camp.

+2% to general goodwill from the First Camp.

And that was only the first notification—the one in brightest letters and blinking the most insistently.

As soon as I read it, I realized I'd made a mistake, and set out after the mammoth as fast as I could run. I didn't quite manage to catch up with it, but the mischievous pair had heard my yelling and stopped. The bonuses were indeed good—I was moving much faster than before.

“Oak leaf fragments!” I demanded in a voice bearing no gainsaying. They gave in to my sternness and flintiness, reluctantly handing over the gaming system's unique gifts. I clenched the fragments in my fist and exhaled with relief. Orbit cared so little about an item's uniqueness and value that he could easily try using the unique stone fragment to hit a predatory Zar'Graad squirrel sitting on a branch or exchange it for something completely worthless. Roskie cared just as little about material possessions—she must have picked it up from Uncle Orbit.

Then I reminded everyone of how dangerous it was to move away from the Camp. They told me no one would venture beyond the small pond next to some ancient pine trees where there was a hunters' bivouac—they'd stay there and fish. I felt relieved. Having said my goodbyes once again, I headed to the camp in just as firm a gait, waited for everyone at once to glance in my direction, and thrust my palm forward demandingly, with the fragments of the Zar'Graad oak tree I'd already had at my disposal already laid out upon it.

Bom grunted his understanding and tried to take the fragments from my palm, muttering something about someone so silly they didn't know how to store valuable things. I had to close my fingers over the unique fragments and express my demand verbally. It was the turn of everybody else to mutter something irritatedly, but I remained adamant and all but wrested the unique leaf fragments from everyone. I smiled broadly as I counted them—all eight were present.

The unique Trailblazers of Zar'Graad collection is complete!

All I had to do was join all the pieces together. I really wanted to, but I'd need a special plaque or piece of wood to mount them on. According to the description, a simple piece of wood of a specific size would do, adorned with a simple carved vegetative pattern. And it had to be Zar'Graad oak and not just any wood. I muttered something angrily as I rummaged through the clan's possessions strewn right underneath my feet in great abundance, found a suitable piece of wood and put it away in my backpack in the hopes of finding a master woodcarver on the Old Continent who'd be able to carve it in just the right manner. I wanted a complete collection of something for once!

I'd wanted to boss everyone around a little more, but everybody was working diligently, and I had to join them. We were building a right pyramid inside the tent. There were crates, bundles of hides, barrels, rocks, logs... There were all kinds of assorted stuff, and Bom grunted hoarsely, carrying stuff himself and making everybody else load on more, more, more, more, more, and more! Soon enough it was no longer possible to enter the tent, and it hardly even qualified as one anymore—it was just a piece of multicolor canvas covering a

mound of stuff. The half-orc dumped some logs on top, and then started picking tufts of grass from underneath our feet and throwing them on top.

I stopped him as I gathered everyone around me, thanked them awkwardly, feeling almost embarrassed. Kyre smiled at me encouragingly with a sly mischievous twinkle in her eye. She'd have managed it a lot better. She was a real leader and a master tactician—a paladin with lots of experience. And I was just learning the ropes, but applying myself to it diligently. Then I handed everyone some money and told them to run through the camp and buy all sorts of Zar'Graad bric-a-brac from the locals who were working or resting here, be it dry twigs of an unusual shape, strange pebbles, beautiful shells of mollusks and turtles, corals, and other items, some of them unidentifiable such as congealed pieces of colored resin with question marks instead of a name. Here it was just memorabilia or random objects picked up at the beach, whereas “over there” it might actually turn out to be something valuable. We'd just have to find out for ourselves. All the high-level specialists capable of identifying and evaluating such objects were on the Old Continent. All of that should give Bom even more opportunities for bargaining.

A tent raid took about another half hour. We begged for all kinds of weird objects to be given to us or sold for a symbolic price. Bom dragged a few more full boxes over, as well as two logs. Then he removed a tiny panther from the moaning Doc's neck—the beast was spotted like a Dalmatian. The panther instantly calmed down and started purring. Once it was returned to Doc, it growled furiously again. Soon we discovered that the panther favored half-orcs and hated all the other races. That damn spotted racist... We put it in a cage and covered the cage with a piece of cloth so that it saw no one lest it choke on its own spittle in its rage.

We were done.

Bom sat down to guard our stuff looking menacing. As for me, I didn't even bother to write any messages. I just went to a completely ordinary-looking tent. I knocked on the pole next to the entrance, waited for a response, opened the tent flap and peeked inside. The Black Baroness was lying facedown on a blanket.

I didn't need to ask her why she was lying there. It was clear that the leader of a very powerful clan had overseen so many operations where any error could lead the clan to ruin she no longer had any strength left in her. Her very posture implied detached indifference, when any imitation of her former contagious enthusiasm and focus took an incredible amount of effort. BB had dragged the Sleepless Ones all the way to Zar'Graad and spread herself too thin. Dray horses had a short life expectancy.

Besides, none of her special skills were required now—the epoch of conquest and pillaging had begun. There were very experienced players to handle that—Malice, Whisper, Crimson Lynx and her other trusted assistants and companions. The leader's main job was done, so she just... collapsed.

“BB,” I called softly.

“What is it? Money?”

“That won't hurt, either,” I confessed. “I really want to become a real millionaire at last. But I came here about something else—I'm off to the Old Continent. I have some

business there. I can take you along if you want. No cargo. Just personal belongings—with a luggage check and thorough frisking...”

“I’ll tell your girlfriend about thorough frisking for sure,” Baroness replied as she raised herself a little, clearly lost in thought. “Right now?”

“Nah, I’ve changed my mind,” I said, turning around and leaving the tent. “I don’t like threats...”

“Ros!”

“Yes?” I lifted the tent flap again and peeked inside.

“I’m interested... Really interested.”

“You get a free ticket for old times’ sake. The rest pay a million in gold each,” I said resolutely.

“Come again?!”

“Why get so excited? It’s free for you.”

“Those are some prices!”

“Rosgard Airlines offer a unique service. If anyone doesn’t like our prices, they’re free to go look for a cheaper offer.”

“Ri-i-i-ight,” Baroness looked revived as she placed her hands behind her head and stretched her body like a panther. “To the Old Continent free of charge, you say? Sounds enticing... But is the ticket back free as well, kind sir?”

“We’ll negotiate,” I shrugged. “It might be free, after all...”

“Right on... So that’s how people end up as sex slaves. I’ll mention this most despicable offer of yours to your girlfriend as well...”

“What?! Which part of what I’ve said remotely implied anything of the sort?”

“Who are the rest? The million-in-gold crowd...”

“Leaders of the old clans,” I replied immediately. “And their closest companions. The closest companions offer extends to you as well. I’m sure you’re even better aware than me of what’s going on back on the old continent. It might be time to start fixing things. Would you message those guys? I’ll announce the price to them myself. It’s just that they’ll most likely respond to you faster, and I don’t want to wait too long—we head off in ten minutes.”

“When? Ros, make it an hour!”

“We have a busy schedule! We’re a young clan, so we have no time to lounge around in dusty tents with our rears up in the air! We leave in ten minutes! The payment’s due in

advance. If anyone's late, it's their loss. No boarding pass is required.”

Having said that, I left the tent. And then the tent exploded—BB tore right through the fabric as she left it from the other side, bringing the whole affair down. The wooden posts fell down with a muffled knock. BB had definitely recovered her old pep...

Chapter 4

A Mundane Departure and a Routine Arrival. Rinse and Repeat...

“ARE YOU SURE you’ve got nothing else left in your pockets?” Bom asked a mighty knight of a whopping Level 266, leader of one of the old-timer clans, without even trying to hide the grimace of suspicion writ large upon his green face. “And what happens if I find something?”

“Do you even realize who you’re talking to?” The knight asked back, looking surprised and even somewhat hurt by the question as he eyed the impudent half-orc.

“A passenger,” Bom replied. “Will you hand your pack over for inspection willingly, or do you want us to throw you out?”

“Urk-k-k-k-h,” the knight groaned. His nonchalance seemed to be evaporating like a drop of water in a desert, but there was nothing he could do about it—we’d already been in position, standing shoulder to shoulder. Leaving the circle would be tantamount to getting ejected; any aggression from the part of the passengers towards one of the HFF clan members would inflict punitive measures (namely, barring them from traveling), and they could choke on their million while we would lose nothing. Plenty of would-be travelers had turned up, and they were all eager to go back to the old continent—some of them, to save what hadn’t been looted yet; others, to give the pillagers a good what-for.

“Hey, and what’s that bulge in your pants?” Bom wouldn’t calm down, and now he was looking at the knight’s riveted steel “pants” with even greater suspicion.

“We’re off!” I prudently decided to speed things up.

Bom instantly assumed the role of a huge muscled flight attendant.

“Attention! Unfasten your belts and dump them overboard, as well as your packs! To minimize your chance of a slow and unpleasant death, we advise you to turn out your pockets and present their contents for inspection.”

“Those are some rules...” a slender and rather unassuming-looking mage said with feigned terror in her voice. Judging by her level, it would only take her a snap of the fingers to incinerate a mountain—or a hill, at the very least.

“Any vial or glass shall be considered a Schedule 1 substance, and, according to the regulations of HFF Intercontinental Airlines, its owners will be thrown overboard. To avoid that, you must hand them over to the flight attendant for safekeeping for the entire duration of the voyage. Those who fail to do so will be searched by the flight attendant personally, and I have to warn you that the search will be thorough...”

There was a flash.

It wasn't that bright, but it was enormous—the whole camp became swallowed in a ripple of light as soon as I completed the procedure. The flash had reached the sky and blown away the clouds like a gigantic hair-dryer, propelling us into the cerulean blue, now cleared of any white, at such a speed that everything became a blur in a split second—the camp, the trees, and the coast.

At that very moment something quite terrifying appeared before our eyes, just as blurry as everything else—a gigantic shadow approaching us at supersonic speed, making a dash and trying to grab us. And said shadow looked disturbingly like a taloned claw with an indefinite number of fingers. Everybody gasped simultaneously as the shadow fell behind. We heard something in the distance that sounded like a roar or a screech, and then everything finally disappeared into the familiar rainbow vortex.

I'd specified the destination in advance—where else would we go but the very center?

Once the ghostly whirlpool had disappeared and the mist cleared away, we found ourselves just where I'd intended to get us.

Good old Algora. Such a familiar place. We were back! We were home!

I wasn't the only one to smile happily at the sight of the familiar buildings and paving stones. Everybody was happy to be back. Adventure was all well and good, but home was always closer to one's heart due to its very familiarity.

However, I was the only one to remain immobile. The rest smiled... and scattered at a mind-boggling speed. It would be unflattering to compare clan leaders and their closest associates to cockroaches, but that was the impression I'd gotten from them clearing off. I barely managed to blink. It was just myself and Bom left. Even BB had disappeared—beating the rest of them to it, in fact. I only heard Bessie squeak her goodbye as she peeked out of the clan leader's sleeve.

On the other hand... the disgruntled knight was still there, looking at his expensive armor in astonishment. A deep groove ran across the chest part—it looked as if someone had dragged a rock drill across wet clay. It was uneven and almost deep enough to go all the way through the metal. I shivered.

“No refunds given for lost or damaged items!” Bom got his bearings at once. “It must have been smoking in the cabin that did that!”

The knight looked very ponderous as he ran his hand over the scratch and disappeared in the flash of a teleport. But he clearly thought of the strange clawed shadow that had nearly gotten us during our departure from Zar'Graad.

“I request protection, o guard!” I decided not to waste any time as my eye caught a guard passing by and addressed him with a request of assistance—for a fee.

“How many guards do you need, fair Rosgard?” The reply came instantly.

“So this is what being famous is like,” I thought to myself with some unexpected chagrin as I held up six fingers. The guard nodded instantly and started running. It may have seemed like a slow jog, but he disappeared from sight immediately.

My fame was easy to explain. I was the one who'd led everybody to the Lost Continent and broken the magical seal that had been keeping it hidden. A deed like that became known to everyone quickly enough—locals and players alike. I didn't look particularly legendary now, though—appearance-wise, at least. I was wearing a simple but well-made gray doublet with silver buttons, gray trousers, and black boots, with a light oak staff in my hand and a black peaked cap on my head. I ditched the scarlet cloak as soon as I could, and returned the cursed garments to the Sleepless Ones, just to be on the safe side. Some of the auras and potions were still boosting me; the effects of the others had already worn off. This was all for the better. The Rosgard who returned to Algora looked almost the same as the one who had left it a while earlier. However, a lot had been learned in the course of the voyage and some of the events that had preceded it. A whole lot.

The six guards arrived very quickly, instantly assuming their positions around our tent. Having formed a circle around the cargo, they started monitoring the surroundings. I went back to the first guard, who'd also come back, and told him,

“We need four more guards and two mages for escort and security. As well as twenty porters. There's a lot of cargo, and it's heavy. But they won't have to carry it far.” I pointed at the majestic building standing nearby, known to virtually every player. “And three more guards as my personal security detail, please, to accompany me to the bank.”

“But just what kind of cargo do you have there?” The guard asked with some surprise.

“It all came directly from Zar’Graad,” I replied in a whisper.

“I say!” The local’s jaw dropped to the floor. It was indeed something. No one had expected any cargo from the new continent to arrive so quickly. Even the ships that had turned back from the Ring of Peace would take a while before they reached their home ports. And here we were, traders with Zar’Graad goods, right in the center of Algora, which didn’t have any sea ports anywhere close. That sure counted for something.

The guard would doubtlessly relay the news to his superiors—and, most likely, players he was friendly with. The news would spread like wildfire on a showerless summer. But our arrival would not have remained secret, anyway—after all, we’d brought in passengers who weren’t our friends and wouldn’t have any reason to keep silent. That didn’t bother me at all—on the contrary, it would all be grist for my mill. I would only benefit from the news about goods from overseas—literally overseas—spreading faster. I didn’t know how many of the items we’d brought over had survived and how many had spoiled or fallen apart due to teleportation. Some part of them must have survived, at any rate.

I chose a special site for landing. We were near the auction building—the very one where I’d tried to sell some of my former character Khrushchot’s gear and alchemy once. Back then I’d come here as a beggar down on his luck, trying to haggle for every cent desperately and ineptly to extend my “wooden” Waldyra subscription. Now I was standing firmly

on my feet, with large sums of money and intelligent people at my disposal. The metamorphosis felt uncanny. Could it be just a dream? Would I wake up in my one-room apartment to the sound of the permanently disgruntled voice of the old lady next door, pull on old sweatpants and a filthy T-shirt and head off to take away the garbage, already giving off a nasty whiff, and buy some cheap cup ramen smelling only slightly better?

“Boss!”

Bom’s roar broke my reverie. I gave my head, ever so prone to wild fancies, a good shake and concentrated.

“I’m off to the bank. Will you manage on your own here?”

“Sure thing. We’ll stash everything in the building. I’ll rent a warehouse there and start on the lots. I’ll scribble three words on each and it’ll be one slogan to sell them all, one slogan to punt them, right? ‘Fresh from Zar’Graad!’”

“With three exclamation points,” I suggested, receiving two hefty purses from Bom and starting towards the bank accompanied by three guards.

“I get it. I have a feeling I’ll be stuck here for a long time. I’ll drop you a line if anything happens.”

“All right. Good luck to us both,” I replied, quickening my steps.

The guards got me to the door and left me there, receiving a decent compensation for such a short service. It was worth it, though—I was paying the very organization that had been protecting Algora and enormous territories around it since times immemorial. There were guards everywhere—at sentry outposts, guarding the kingdom’s borders, inside cities, and so on. You could even encounter them in the wilderness occasionally. And they’d proved their efficiency time and again, year after year, against all kinds of foes, be they crazed PKs, unknown monsters crawling out of murky swamps, or whole enemy armies. They were strong and fearless, and I was paying for just that—if I got attacked by robbers or some party wishing me ill, they’d be there to bear the brunt of the attack, giving me the opportunity to evade even the strongest foe.

My security detail did not come inside the bank with me—it was perfectly safe there, anyway. As I approached the lavish marble reception desk, I greeted the clerk politely. It was a frail elderly elf, and I tried hard not to stare at the wrinkly ears sticking out of his impeccable snow-white hairdo.

“How can we assist you, Outlander Rosgard?”

“I’d like to open a clan bank account.”

“And you would be?”

“The clan leader.”

“Excellent, and very commendable,” the elderly elf inclined his head forward by no more than two degrees. “And the clan’s name would be?”

“Heroes of the Final Frontier.”

“Excellent... Please place the palm of your hand on this sheet.

I promptly did just that. Suddenly, the tips of the old gent’s ears started to twitch with excitement.

“Outlander Rosgard, Sir. You haven’t mentioned the fact that the clan Heroes of the Final Frontier was founded on Zar’Graad, of all places!”

“That’s true. Our clan was founded on the new continent.” I decided to fess up and not strike any silly poses.

“Woods... Are there pristine ancient woods there? With luscious trees and meadows?” The elf inquired in a hankering voice, resting his arms heavily on the reception desk and leaning forward.

“Oh, there are indeed,” I replied. “There are woodlands that reach as far as the eye can see right from the coastline, and nobody knows where they end. There are new trees there, too—the kind we don’t have over here. Please accept this trifle as a present, sir elf...”

Elves sure loved their woods. Longears have gone totally bonkers over their meadows. So I decided to give him a large piece of dried bark of a gray and white tree with long, narrow leaves.

“Thank you!” The piece of bark disappeared in the blink of an eye. “I thank you for this wonderful gift!”

Congratulations!

+1 to reputation with Liolylius Bucus Thornleaf, an employee of the Bank of Waldyra.

“Oh, but it’s nothing, really.” Once again, I was speaking the whole truth and nothing but. It was an absolute trifle for me—you could get a piece of bark anywhere on the new continent. However, it had not been identified yet. The name was just a row of question marks. Who knew what effect the bark might have if eaten, for example? I hoped the elf wouldn’t use this bark for some tincture, or, if he did, that I wouldn’t have to give any sad speeches at his funeral.

“But let us get back to business,” the elf with the mouthful of a name managed to get back to his professional manner. “A clan account has been opened... congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

“Now let us proceed with certain minor yet important formalities.”

“Definitely,” I agreed. Having waited for an opportune moment when the employer bent his head over his magic register, I added cautiously. “There’ll be a large sale of items from Zar’Graad later today—perhaps, as early as in a few hours—at Algora’s Auction House.”

“I thank you once again, Rosgard,” Liolylius Bucus Thornleaf replied as he produced a sheet of excellent-quality embossed paper and after writing a few short words on it. The paper blinked and disappeared. The message had been sent to some party whose identity didn’t really interest me much. I didn’t know whether the elven movers and shakers could take part in such sales, but if they could, it was all to our advantage. The more participants, the higher the bids, and the harder the bidding. That would all translate to more money to the sellers. Ye gods, I thought to myself, whatever was I turning into?

And then we got to the ‘minor yet important formalities’ that I’d always hated.

We started by establishing the identities of the parties with access to the funds and the treasures stored in the vaults belonging to the HFF clan. Only I had full access. And it wasn’t out of greed. Kyre had insisted upon me being the only one with full access, and Bom had supported her. We’d discussed it between the three of us. The leader would be the only one to manage the newfangled clan’s funds for the first couple of weeks at least, and months optimally. Why was that?

The reason was simple and sad—a lot of money could change a person. A trusted comrade-in-arms you’d spent many hours with on the battlefield, in a tavern, and by the campfire, someone who’d always share his last with you, could turn into a traitor and a thief making off with all the clan’s money and treasure. Many more would stay loyal to the clan, but start to spend their money extravagantly on craft equipment, alchemy, and generally take to the lifestyle of the rich and the famous—at the expense of fellow clan members. After all, the influx of funds and treasures into a clan’s account and vaults was never like a large and mighty river. It was usually a trickle here and a trickle there. When accused of spending too much, they’d

claim it was for the greater good of the clan, since with them stronger, the whole clan was allegedly stronger, too.

It would therefore be expedient to altogether avoid the very possibility of this scenario.

Anybody could deposit the funds, but I was the only one with the right to withdraw them. This was temporary. I trusted Kyre more than everybody else for obvious reasons. Which implied I trusted the rest of them less. Having thought about it, I cringed and felt sad. So that was me beginning to think of whom I trusted more, and whom I only trusted on rainy Fridays.

Kyre and Bom were the other two members capable of monitoring the financial health of the clan. I'd already assigned them their roles—Kyre would be my right hand; an experienced companion who knew a lot about clans and clan business. Bom was an ideal treasurer and business representative. So if I withdrew more than a thousand in gold, they'd receive a warning. If the two of them vetoed the transaction, I wouldn't get any money. The entire system needed to be under control. The leader of a modern clan wasn't an absolute monarch with the exclusive right to condemn or pardon, and free to do as they willed with the treasury. One's role was more like that of a president of a large company whose position was less about privilege, and more about a mountain of obligations and responsibility. I wasn't the king of HFF—merely the senior executive.

The clan vault was a disappointment. You could store items if you wished to. The bank had nothing against it. But the weekly fee for renting a safe deposit box was exorbitant. Everything had been done to encourage the clans to store valuable items in other places than an impregnable bank that

guaranteed complete safety. You had to store them in clan citadels—forbidding fortresses built around a clan's treasury. The citadels could, however, be attacked by other clans—or even locals, which happened regularly, too.

Most often the bank refused clans the right to store more than a hundred items. The bank never disclosed their reason. You just couldn't. But the real reason was obvious to all. Items had to be stored in places less safe. Somewhere they could be stolen or taken. Was that silly? Of course it was. But it gave way so many i-i-i-i-i-interesting possibilities.

Therefore, Waldyra's clans did everything for their citadels never to be broken into or pillaged. They invested all their financial and intellectual assets into the construction of completely unique structures. But no matter how powerful their defenses, there was just a single citadel in the world of Waldyra that hadn't been conquered to date—Barad Gadur, the stronghold of the Sleepless Ones. There may have been a few freshly-built castles with banners waving proudly sharing the same status, but those would be too recent to take into account. This concerned us as well. Even if I purchased a small castle, worse for the wear from centuries of exposure to the harsh elements somewhere far in the snows of the North, I wouldn't be able to claim proudly that our citadel had never fallen. It would be stupid and unnecessary bravado, anyway. As soon as I'd utter those words, a couple of disgruntled dinosaur clans would knock gently on my castle's gate with a burning battering-ram and render it a pile of rubble in a matter of minutes.

A clan wouldn't be able to store all of its possessions in a bank, anyway, since a large part of a clan's property was comprised of such things as logs counted by the hundred, stacks of bricks, piles of coal, ingots of various metals, bags of wheat and other grains, fruit and vegetables, hundreds of types

of weapons and armor, thousands of consumable items, tons of alchemy, scores of scrolls, recipes, and so on, and so forth. When Kyre listed just a part of what I'd need just to *launch* the endless routine of clan-related activities, I nearly lost my mind. The scope defied imagination.

I'd had to interrupt Kyre that time, or she'd wax too long on describing all the nuts and bolts of what made a clan run. It was just before the clan's founding ceremony. Had she gone on like that, I'd have changed my mind and refused to sign up for voluntary slavery at the end of the day.

I finished by making a deposit to the clan's account—a little more than one million, and handed over a few pouches with top-quality pearls, rubies, and diamonds for safekeeping. Not bad for starters, considering how young our clan was, and that it was only the beginning. A lot more would be added subsequently. My next move was to inform every passenger of the new clan account where they'd have to transfer the promised funds immediately. We'd brought everybody here on an IOU, after all. None of the powerful clan leaders who'd arrived on the new continent had large sums of money at their immediate disposal—the fat cats had spent nearly everything during the Great Expedition. They'd suggested paying back in magic scrolls, artifacts, weapons, alchemy, and other items that hadn't been used during the Great Expedition. I conferred with my friends and agreed to allow them to pay a certain percentage of a million in valuable items. We'd need such stuff in Zar'Graad. But there weren't too many of us so far. What would we do with 500,000 gold coins' worth of medium health potions? Store them in vats? And where would we get enough vats? From another clan as part of their debt? And then what? We didn't have a clan warehouse yet—not even a tiny one. All we'd brought with us was a single tent.

I was always in a hurry, so I didn't linger in the bank for too long. I said my goodbyes politely and left the stately institution, stepping out into the sun-drenched street. I squinted and looked around, standing between massive columns and trying not to attract too much attention. Algora was the most popular city in the world of Waldyra. Nothing about it had changed during my absence. I didn't mean the exquisite buildings and wide streets. I was looking for signs of something else—after all, I'd taken thousands of people away to the Lost Continent. Many of them had reached their destination and were right there busy grabbing new lands and gathering loot. However, the number of people on the streets of Algora didn't show the merest sign of reducing. Was it that Algorans weren't fond of traveling? Were they homebodies? And who was considered an Algoran, anyway? Yours truly was born in Algora, too, for example...

There was an abundance of players on the streets. The multihued mass of people ran in every direction, merging at some crossroads and diverging again on others. Trickle of people poured into the gates of guilds or shops. Some treaded confidently toward the faraway gates towards wide meadows and green groves. Others were returning, barely managing to move under the heavy load on their shoulders.

Having pondered the perseverance of players, I finally spotted the right stall and headed towards it, hugging the wall on my way. I bought an inconspicuous wide gray scarf of smooth silk with near-invisible white embroidery. It was perfect for hiding my personal information by removing everything normally displayed above my head.

Anonymity was doubly important to me now. And it wasn't just because of my name Rosgard, which had become way too popular for comfort, but the golden crown displayed right next to it. I was a clan leader now, and everybody could

read as much from my legend. There were lots of novice players obsessed with the idea of joining a clan—any clan, as long as they could do it right away. Others dreamed of robbing a clan leader and recollecting said incident with pride for the rest of their lives. After all, it would be a clan leader that they'd rob, not any mere mortal. Others still wished for nothing more fondly than to challenge a clan leader to a fair fight, defeat them in front of a large audience, and then pat them on the shoulder patronizingly, saying they were lone wolves, but strong ones, and their defeated opponent was a weakling, albeit a leader, but, hey, no worries, it takes all kinds. There would be more—for example, folks neither wishing to join a clan, rob you, or defeat you, but eager to make you a top secret business offer under exclusive conditions. Locals were just as bad—most could tell a clan leader from a regular player, and would instantly throw themselves at your feet, begging you to gather a great army and protect their home hamlet of Far Neckwoods from some accursed pest.

I didn't want any of it. It never rained, so I'd most likely get disoriented by questions, requests, and offers, and then robbed; finally, someone would turn up and beat the living daylights out of me for the cherry on this cake of misery. So a gray scarf was a much safer option—it would look nice on my neck and protect it at the same time. With such thoughts, I continued onward.

Incidentally, the scarf had cost twenty gold pieces, and was only effective for six hours. Information about a golden crown was much harder to hide than one's name and levels. The more elevated your position, the more difficult it was for you to stay incognito.

I could teleport further, but decided to take a little walk instead to clear my head, spend some time on my own, enjoy

the tranquility, and read a fresh copy of Waldyra's Herald, looking really lugubrious this time—the paper was dark yellow, the font, bold, black, and angular, and the headlines were in red and black, in a runny font resembling the cover of some death metal album. WH did all they could for every reader to get the shakes and jitters before they so much as took the newspaper into their hands with a feeling of grim resignation to reading some dire news.

That turned out to be the very case. I turned the pages as I went, quickly assuring myself that the fires of war were still ablaze. The newcomers grabbed the old-timers by the throat, hoping to rip out their throats if they could or at least maim them if they couldn't. The blitzkrieg didn't work out, and local skirmishes blew up into a world war. It had a centerfold with the world of Waldyra in its current condition, the colors of zones updated since the previous time. There were fewer red zones. Many of them had been brought to order and were now once again a peaceful green or a slightly alarmed light yellow. However, there were parts of the world that had become pitch black. It was as if the cartographer had knocked the inkwell over the map accidentally and made a number of ugly blotches.

There was a detailed explanation below, making it clear that the black spots covering formerly peaceful lands were in a state of primordial chaos with so many twists and complications in the way the forces were aligned that nothing was clear anymore. Those were zones of total war—players and locals had run amok killing each other on sight, without making any distinction between their targets. What was worse, there seemed to be no battle plan or goal anymore—everybody was fighting for the sake of fighting with no one left to protect and nothing left to conquer—everything had become a charred wasteland. The fires of war had left nothing standing. Unfortunately, those engaged in war for the sake of war couldn't stop. There were strange guerillas hunkered down in

incinerated woods, and even stranger locals protected the soot-covered ruins of towns and villages that had been destroyed completely. Anyone ending up there would voluntarily or involuntarily have to dive into the churning cauldron of mutual destruction. There were no options other than kill or die. Pleas and promises would fall on deaf ears.

I shook my head feeling saddened—it was so unlike Waldyra the way it had once been, filled with light and adventure, which may have gotten violent occasionally, but never this grim.

Upon hearing the sound of beating hooves on one of Algora's main streets, I automatically backed into a wall, standing flat against it first, and then looked around me. There was a squad of riders in red and yellow striped cloaks galloping ahead, with flags and banners flying over them, and battle eagles hovering above, squawking ferociously. A fog spread on the ground in front of the riders—a near-invisible magic that cleared the way by pushing pedestrians and traffic away very gently. Like an icebreaker with a plush-covered bow pushing large floe fields aside so delicately they hardly even noticed. It would be impossible to use such magic or ride as fast within the city limits of Algora without special dispensation. The squad darted past in a second. Judging by the direction, it was headed for a small square with a teleport installed there operated by stern Mages' Guild wizards and capable of delivering a heavy load anywhere in Waldyra for a fee.

It wasn't the squad itself that had drawn my attention—it was their two-tone livery. One of the passengers I'd delivered here from Zar'Graad had a cloak just like that, yellow and scarlet, and he was the right hand of the leader of a large battle clan. And the way he'd galloped past me leading a large squad of warriors implied they weren't hurrying to a

picnic in celebration of his return. The clan veterans wasted no time since their arrival before starting to bring things into order.

It was time for me to get down to business, too—I'd been woolgathering for too long. I checked the contents of my pockets and traveler's pack to make sure I'd had everything necessary for traveling through dangerous places, made sure everything was all right, and looked at the map of Waldyra once again, my sight falling on a small dot located right on the shore of the cerulean blue lake. The city of Tranqueville. That was where I'd been meaning to go. Unfortunately, one of the black zones of chaos was right nearby, covering some of the shore and the water.

Oh well... I had to try my luck.

I pulled out a teleportation scroll, brought it to my mouth, and said softly, "Tranqueville."

There was a flash...

The lazy whirlpool grabbed me expertly, shook me casually, and took me away.

Another flash...

"Oh, damn!" I cursed when I saw the magic ripples clear away. I was some sixty feet above an unquiet and foamy expanse of water reaching as far as eye could see. "Yowza!"

The water wasn't gentle to me. Waves swallowed me up, a piece of a branch hit me over the head, knocking me over and tried to drag me to the bottom. I barely managed to paddle out, bobbing on the waves like a crazy float, looking around me frenziedly and trying to cough up what felt like a gallon of water. The water was sweet, and there was a dark silhouette of a shoreline in the distance. It was clearly Naikal. For some reason, the teleportation spell had gone wide of the mark, but had still delivered me to the area I'd needed, dropping me right over the enormous lake.

"Friend Rosgard!" The yell was as sudden as a cramp. It came from behind my back, and I nearly leaped right out of the water. A wet webbed hand grabbed me by the shoulder, and the same voice offered eagerly, "Some fish?"

"Th-thank you," I said with a slight stutter, jerking my head away from the dead fish with a frozen stare of accusation in its eyes that was being shoved into my mouth. "A chuvver, eh?"

"That's right, I'm a chuvver!" The bug-eyed, jug-eared head confirmed, paying no attention to the waves. "And you're friend Rosgard! The one who's helped us return the sacred islands! We'd feasted for so many days and nights then—I can't even remember for how long! We sang, and we danced, and we drank, and we sang, and we danced, and we drank, and we got up to all kinds of stuff... We're so grateful! How can I help you, friend Rosgard?"

"Don't tell anyone about it," I asked with timid hope.

I was proud of the role I'd played in getting the islands back, but the way the chuvver was telling that story might

have made someone who hadn't been there think that Rosgard had organized a mass orgy for the chuvvers on one of their islands.

“Say what?”

“Where's the nearest land?” I asked loudly. “Over there?” I pointed to the faraway shore.

“By no means! It's war over there! Really bad! No fish that way!” The chuvver started bulging out his eyes and shaking his head. “Don't go there, friend Rosgard! Evil strangers kill everyone on sight! Come with me! I'll take you to a quiet place where everybody else is...”

“Everybody else? Uh... Okay. Where is it?”

“Over there,” the chuvver pointed to the side opposite from the shore. “I'll help you swim.”

“There's no need,” I said with a smile, pulling out a new scroll and activating it.

The catamaran splashed down almost silently a few feet away. The old continent faction had used the Terrifying Squeak a few times, handling it so roughly I'd taken it away from them, a lot worse for the wear. A couple of shipwrights had helped me fix it, then I outfitted it and cajoled one of the mages to “pack” the twin-hulled ship into a magic scroll. I had dibs on it. For everybody else it was just a boat, and they'd make a wreck out of it in no time at all, but it had sentimental value to us. And I was the captain and the engine all at once.

I got to the Squeak in a few strokes, grabbed onto the net hanging over one of its boards and climbed up. As I got to the stern, I shouted to the chuvver, staring in bewilderment.

“Show me the way, friend chuvver! I’ll follow you!”

Soon the Terrifying Squeak followed the chuvver securely—and creatures of his race were fast swimmers. I was heading for somewhere across a vast body of water, on my own once again, about to begin a new solitary adventure that had every chance of turning into something truly fascinating.

Chapter 5

Naikal the Ferocious

I FOLLOWED THE CHUVVER, nearly tireless in his element. He would catch small fish every now and then, and gobble it up hastily, holding on to the twin-hull's net with his other hand; then we'd continue. Given the uneven intervals between the chuvver's snacks, I surmised he simply must have been fond of dangling his feet in the water, holding on to the catamaran, exposing his face to the wind and the spray, and enjoying fresh fish. I totally got him...

Naikal was enormous—a proud majestic lake filling a large basin. A true marvel of nature that one never tired of admiring. I'd already been here before on a long tour of Naikal's coast, having visited many places, and observed the cold waters from pebble-strewn and sandy beaches, as well as rock summits. I'd seen Naikal in different weather and in different moods, but it had never revealed itself to me in its current form. The waves roared angrily as they hit and rocked the catamaran, their foamy crests rumbling threateningly as they dealt me one blow after another. The water had gone gray—there was hardly any blue left at all. The inclement weather and the drizzle wrapped up the picture—one that could only be called Naikal the Ferocious. Or Naikal the Enraged, perhaps.

A lot had transpired here while I was away, sailing across the vastness of the ocean on the flagship of the Sleepless Ones. Naikal had somehow lost its benevolent and slightly lazy demeanor. The chubby good-natured giant had transformed into a fierce lean warrior ready to take on any enemy and win. But why would it have become like this? All right, so there was a war on the shores. But what was happening in the water that had made Naikal so wrathful?

I'd been thinking it would take me weeks or even months to find the answer, as usual—if indeed ever. But this time I was wrong. The tireless fish-loving swimmer was taking me directly to the answer I sought.

First I realized—somewhat belatedly, as usual—that we'd been moving through a strange aquatic corridor of relative calm. There were large waves here, too, rocking my watercraft and making me jump every now and then, as if I was driving along rugged terrain in a buggy. But it was a tarmac highway compared to the storm-ravaged chaos around us. The waves I saw passing me by were tall enough to make a medium-sized oceanic vessel capsize. And our trajectory was anything but a straight line. We kept on veering from side to side, skirting clumps of jagged rocks barely jutting out of the water, and passing through them in a strange way. I had to apply all my skill so as not to damage the catamaran, taking it through passages so narrow that I could hear a scraping sound coming from the boards, and would invariably react with a sound of my own that sounded like the call of an alarmed sea cow with a penchant for invective. While I was enriching the vocabulary of my guide the chuvver, we kept on moving forward into the same bluish-gray endlessness.

So I was really surprised to see the twin-hull's prow suddenly awash in flashes of a strange bright light that quickly spread to the rest of the craft. Before I could ask anything, the mysterious light went out, and an incredible panorama opened before my eyes—it was as if someone had removed a veil that had covered everything. I looked around me in astonishment, having turned off the magic for a while and made the Terrifying Squeak stop. There was a whole vista to behold.

There were several sizeable islands ahead of me. Gray and white smoke plumes rose to the sky—the peaceful variety. Those most certainly didn't come from structure fires—more likely, cooking and heating. There were no waves—just your regular ripples with all kinds of watercraft rocking on them. There were fishing boats of all sizes, rafts made of logs, planks, and barrels, and a number of utterly indescribable contraptions that could only have stayed afloat by some miracle. There was, for example, a raft made of thin planks reinforced by whole garlands of sealed clay jugs along the perimeter. There was a forest of masts, some of them quite outlandish, with sails so motley that only someone with a really good imagination could have come up with some of the designs. I thought of starving artists—the kind that used any medium they could scrape up. There were logs and poles bearing patched sails, patterned sheets and blankets sewn together, and even such bizarre items as skirts and, in one case, a few dozen red harem trousers joined into a single sail. I wondered what sort of village dandy could have had twenty red harem pants stashed away in his closet. That sure spoke of true dedication.

The boats, rafts, and the rest of it were held together by cables, chains, ropes, fishnets and strands of vegetation. This sprawling floating mess was encircling the islands, forming a bona fide line of defense. And there were warriors manning the defenses—I saw women as well, but they, too, were dressed as warriors and had weapons in their hands. Hundreds of bows and crossbows were aimed at me, as well as harpoons, hunting poles, and sharp axes. A single scream—or an untimely sneeze—would result in a few hundred axes, knives, and sharpened sticks driven into my chest all at once... oh, and there was someone holding a pitchfork in the distance...

Therefore, I tried to avoid sneezing and just muttered the perennial “Here we go again.”

“We have to go further still!” The chuvver guide said in a puzzled voice as he finished yet another fish, pointing at the islands in the distance with his fingers. “That’s where we need to go! Over there! To the hidden land of peace! The Shrinelands lie that way!”

CONGRATULATIONS!

You are the first heroes to have reached The Shrinelands: a mysterious location.

You’ve had bad luck!

And yet, resilience and courage may help you get over all the obstacles.

You’re a trailblazer!

Being a trailblazer is always hard. Those following in your footsteps will have it easier.

Penalties:

Physical damage dealt to those populating these lands is lowered by 25%.

Magical damage dealt to those populating these lands is lowered by 25%.

Chance of getting loot from the monsters you destroy is lowered by 25%.

The chance of dealing critical physical or magical damage is lowered by 15%.

The chance of collecting resources successfully is lowered by 25%.

The physical damage dealt by monsters is up by 25%.

The magical damage dealt by monsters is up by 25%.

The cartography quality is lowered by 25%.

The speed of travel by any means is lowered by 10%.

HP and mana regeneration speed is lowered by 10%.

The penalties will be valid for: 23:59:59.

Bonuses:

Ancient artifacts: None.

Current condition and quantity: 5/5.

Availability of ancient non-magical skills and recipes: No.

Availability of ancient magical knowledge: No.

Unique monsters not encountered previously: No.

The chuvver kept waving his arm, urging me to follow him. But I dallied, taking in the situation and the terrain attentively—something I hadn't been too accustomed to.

It was impossible for a previously-undiscovered location to be concealed at the very heart of the lake. Naikal had been explored many times. Hundreds of cartographers had charted its shores and its depths. Countless fishing, rowing, and sailing competitions had been held here. Many fishermen, including players, resided here constantly. Therefore, the very existence of the Shrinelands was quite impossible.

The function of the location was clear from the chuvver's words—to protect and to conceal. And judging by what the game system had told me about the absence of any ancient artifacts or unidentified monsters, treasure hunters had nothing to do here. The location was most likely a recent one, having come into existence in order to protect the very folks who were now aiming a variety of weapons at me. Someone was whirling two pumpkins on a piece of rope around. Pumpkin-flavored bolas, no less. Fancy getting one in your teeth, I thought, and then wondered whether you could force-feed someone that way. You feed them a little, you stun them a little... self-defense with a side order of the famed Naikal hospitality. I wished for a t-shirt saying "Allergic to Pumpkins!" or maybe "I (heart) Naikal."

“Rosgard...” Another chuvver, holding a harpoon with a jagged bone head, put his weapon down and relaxed visibly. “It’s our friend Rosgard! He’s not a foe!”

“That’s right!” I hurried to grin as widely as I could. “I’m not your foe!”

The rest started to lower their weapons too. Chuvver heads popped out of the water around my watercraft, snorting to clear their throats, and a few menacing-looking shadows passed under the surface. One of them emerged with a splash and looked at me with unblinking eyes, opening its mouth in a silent greeting.

“Needletooth!” I was delighted to see an old acquaintance. “Good to see your predatory mug. Yup, I’m the guy you’ve tried to dine on. Remember how you swallowed me?”

The pike submerged dispassionately. The burly peasant woman stopped swinging her pumpkin bolas with some reluctance. My guide waved his paw; I activated the magic again and headed for the islands slowly, cautiously maneuvering in narrow twisted passages between the boats and the rafts, all bound together. It was a total dog’s breakfast—a real labyrinth. I wagered there were nets underwater, too. The defenses must have taken a lot of labor, not to mention imagination...

“Rosgard? Who’s he?”

“He’s helped us! He got our holy islands back! And he saved us from a hungry pike!”

“He’s helped many here!”

“Wasn’t he the one who’d led the Great Expedition?”

“Yes! The very one!”

“Hey! I know him, too! He bought some supplies at my store once! And he didn’t even haggle! He’s real wealthy, you know!”

“Yeah! He came in that strange-looking carriage, with rumbling wheels and snapping reins! And he had some broad by his side, all wrapped in silks she was! Sure smiled a lot... Not quite princess material, but easy on the eyes!”

“He’d passed through our village, too! He kept asking about all manner of weird things!”

“Hey, Rosgard! Come on over! We have some excellent brew here!”

I couldn’t help squinting and muttering a few choice words. I realized they were just trying to show their respect—all they knew about me was good or neutral stuff. I’d never hurt or swindled anyone in these parts, so they were offering me a drink. However, all that yelling made me feel like a notorious and gregarious booze head. A strange combination... I also hoped Kyre wouldn’t find out about someone calling her “a smiling broad easy on the eyes.”

“What’s it like on the shore?” The cracking voice of the frail ancient local who’d asked sounded grim and filled with pain. “Are the green meadows still aflame? Do the houses still burn?”

“Oh, ease off it, Miclas! We’ll rebuild, and the meadows will grow back and be green again!” His companion, just as long in the tooth and also clad in a fisherman’s oilcloth cloak, tried to calm him down. “Have some tea! Nice and hot!”

I couldn’t help myself and recklessly made a promise to the old folks who’d found themselves homeless.

“It’ll all be fine soon. No wars last forever.”

“Oh, woe and more woe...” was their reply. There was a heavy weight on my heart as my twin-hull sailed on. Was this Waldyra? A world ablaze, a casualty of a horrible war, with just a few small islets still relatively peaceful—but that peace was clearly precarious.

I’d gotten used to the locals being optimistic and full of cheer. Normally, any problems they’d had would be minor and easy to solve. Well, all right, I might have exaggerated—I did see raging, sad, depressed, and downright miserable locals. But so many of them gathered in one place? I saw a bunch of kids rocking on the waves, having apparently claimed an entire raft whose buoyancy had been reinforced by barrels tied to it along its entire perimeter. Not a single one of them was smiling—they were all staying put and rigid. One could almost mistake them for a child tailor’s dummies, small and filthy. That was horrible. Was it the Island of Lost Ships? Or, rather,

the Island of Lost Fishermen's Boats and Rafts? Where had I ended up?

While I kept looking around, nodding reassuringly to the sad faces passing by, Terrifying Squeak kept inching onwards slowly, and I soon found myself a few steps away from the rocky coast. There was hardly any place for one to stand—there were people, dwarves, half-orcs, the odd occasional elf, and some truly odd creatures huddling next to them—weird, varied, and shivering from the cold, all packed close together. It was indeed damp here, but the damp wasn't my main concern. I had come to two throngs of people occupying two islands that were too small for them. There were so many of them that I realized why so many refugees lived on boats and rafts, never setting foot on dry land. There was simply no space. The chuvvers couldn't stay in the water forever, either, even though they were excellent swimmers. The bug-eyed fish-lovers occupied the very shoreline, sitting waist-deep and even chest-deep in water, waves hitting them in the face.

“There's no fish here,” the chuvver who'd brought me here sighed dejectedly. “It ran out. There's nothing to eat... So we make forays to get some. There's plenty of it outside...”

Little wonder there was no fish left. So many people to feed... All the aquatic fauna had already been caught and eaten. And I didn't have any food with me at all. If some hapless child had approached me and asked me for some bread, I'd feel so embarrassed the water would probably swallow me out of mercy. Or I'd head off to fight the accursed PKs and keep at it until I'd died a few hundred times. Then I noticed a limping child in a tattered old shirt hurrying towards me, careful not to step on any sharp rocks while skirting the grown-ups in the crowd, looking at me with such hope that my

eyes filled with tears and my heart fell all the way to my stomach. What could I possibly say to a hungry kid?

As I awaited the inevitable, I raised my face, looked at the skies angrily, obscured as they were by billows of gray smoke. What were the angels waiting for? Why weren't they saving the refugees? Apparently, the locals could not be trusted, since the majority of them had gone insane with greed and an urge to destroy.

So what was I supposed to do? A few loaves of bread wouldn't solve anything. This called for tons of provisions. There were options, though. My head was thinking clearly again, and I started to make estimates. I should get out of here, pack the Squeak into another scroll, and teleport to Algora—the city was at peace, so I'd get there without fail. Then I'd buy plenty of food, pack it into scrolls, come back here, splash down, get the catamaran out of the scroll, return to the Shrinelands, and distribute the food. I would also release a few scrolls of live fish into the water—the chuvvers would catch it soon enough. I'd also need firewood, blankets, and medicines—many of the refugees had runny noses, red as any tomato. Unfortunately, I was on my own here. Bom was busy, and the rest had remained in Zar'Graad. I could trust no one else. With the possible exception of the alchemist Braver Lightey. He would know a thing or two about medicines, too. But where was he? We hadn't communicated in a while. He could be here—or on the new continent. Still, Braver might help.

I wouldn't hurry, though. I didn't know what kind of offer I'd get or what would be demanded of me. The chuvver could have brought me here for no particular reason—my reputation with his tribe was stellar, and they trusted me, so he could have taken me to a closed location obscured from everybody else's site just on the strength of that. I still didn't know what the whole situation could hold in stock for me. I

might just get a greeting and a request to shove off for good coupled with a poignant request not to blab about the whereabouts of the Shrinelands to anyone.

The cold waters parted with a splash. A column woven of willow shrubs emerged some seven feet away from me, topped by something resembling a long woven bed, with a young woman of a most peculiar appearance reclining upon it. I knew her well.

“Greetings, Kind Sister. Greetings, Salley.”

“Greetings, kind friend Rosgard,” Salley replied in a voice I could barely hear, not even attempting to get up—just moving her hand a little. “I cannot greet you properly, alas. I cannot stand up—or even sit up. All the power I have goes into the protective magic. But it’s so good to see you back! I rejoice at seeing you alive and filled with strength, Rosgard.” The wicker face addressing me seemed passionless, but the eyes in it were like nests of fevered fireflies. Salley looked worse than sick—she was dying. No healing auras that the Willow Sisters would usually be wrapped in were detectable. The magic battery must have run out of juice almost completely.

This was surely the dark side of Waldyra.

“Rosgard... Please greet my sisters...”

The waters around my watercraft parted in six more places. More willow shrub pillars appeared, with a near-comatose young woman reclining on top of each.

Now it became clear to me how the Shrinelands had come into existence and who was keeping them alive and safe. All seven Willow Sisters at once. But they weren't deities, and they didn't have enough strength for something like that, which meant Shrineland's days were numbered.

"I greet all the Kind Sisters, children of Wyllowe," I pressed my hands to my chest. "I am honored. I can see how dire the situation is. I see that the refugees suffer from hunger and diseases. I'll sail off, but I'll return shortly with supplies and medicines. I'll deliver blankets and warm clothes. I promise. I swear. And I require no reward. How can I help the Kind Sisters to keep these blessed lands alive? What can I do?"

"Soil!"

"Soil?"

"We need soil, soft and loamy. The more, the better. We've exhausted everything here. Waking up our mother Wyllowe would also change things for the better, but it is beyond your power, kind Rosgard. Nothing but the death of one of her children can wake Wyllowe up—that, or the voice of our only brother Twigg. I wouldn't mind dying, but the protection of the Shrinelands..."

"Hold on, hold on!" I held my palms up. "Let's not hurry. Did I understand you right? I need to deliver as much loamy soil here as possible, and, ideally, find your brother Twigg as well, although the latter won't be an easy task."

“You have understood us just right, kind Rosgard. That’s exactly how it is... But hurry... It must have been fate itself that had brought you here when everything was hanging by a thread. I have faith in you. Find Twigg. Once mother Wyllowe wakes peacefully, our powers will increase tenfold! And we’ll hold our ground!”

“I’ll do my best. Anything else?”

“Aphrosius!” Salley spat the name out furiously.”

“Aphrosius?” I was taken aback. “Hold on... Aphrosius the fisherman who’d committed a sacrilege, laid waste to the temple on an island, and killed and devoured the spawn of Needletooth... But didn’t we punish him already?”

“Aphrosius has sold his soul to Grakharg, the god of war, whose troops already occupy part of the fair Naikal’s shores! The dark creatures are hunting for Wyllowe’s Daughters, wishing to capture one of us and have her tortured to death by Grakharg himself so that our mother Wyllowe would awaken! But she cannot be roused like that! She’ll rush into battle immediately as soon as she wakes up—and she’ll lose!”

“And what does Aphrosius have to do with it?”

“He knows the lake well! He’s the only fisherman to have betrayed the Light! And upon receiving a part of Grakharg’s power, he’s changed terribly! There is a dark power in him now—a power driven by malice and envy! He sails a black boat with a sail as crimson as blood, steering it with a sure hand, scanning the water tirelessly in search of the

Shrinelands! Grakharg told him that Willow's Sisters were in hiding somewhere on Naikal, which he'd spent his entire life sailing! Every little islet is known to him—every deep place, and every rock, too! He has already passed us by twice... The third time he'll find us for sure—and that will be our undoing!”

“Aphrosius...” I said, completely flabbergasted. “How fate has twisted you, thieving covetous drunkard that you are... I probably should have killed you back then...”

“Rosgard! There's no time! It won't wait! It passes by and cannot be regained! Will you help us?”

“I'm on it already,” I replied, turning the catamaran around. “Wait for me and have faith.”

“We'll wait, Rosgard! And we have faith in you! Please hurry, old friend! If Grakharg finds our hiding place, he'll spare neither the young, nor the old. He'll slaughter everyone...”

“I'll be back real soon. Promise.”

“Henceforth you shall be the only outsider to be able to see the direct way to the Shrinelands, Rosgard. You and you alone.”

“Thank you for your trust, Salley. I won't betray it,” I watched a green ball tossed wearily by the Kind Sister, disappear into my chest as her pillar sank into Naikal's waters. The rest of them were gone, too.

And so I had a compass in my chest again. Could that really be my fate? To remain a guide forever, knowing no rest?

I was one of those who'd led the way to the Land Beyond.

Then it was the Great Expedition to Zar'Graad.

Now I was the only one who knew the way to the Shrinelands.

What would Grakharg give me if I opened the way for him?

What if I demanded a piece of the Silver Legend in exchange for the information?

I'd never do that, of course. I wasn't a cold calculating bastard who'd betray anyone if it paid well. And the quests I'd accepted proved it:

You have received a quest: Find Twigg!

Try to find Twigg, and, if should you succeed, tell him about Salley's request to rouse their mother, Wyllowe, Goddess of the Light.

Minimum requirements for completing the quest: Find Twigg before the Shrinelands are found and destroyed.

Your reward: none.

I was sure I wasn't the only one to have received such a quest—many other players must have been approached, too. There'd be dozens or even hundreds of them trying to complete this task. Many of the locals were eager to wake up Wyllowe, so everybody who'd wanted the quest must have already received it from Salley. And theirs would all come with a reward. I must have been the only one who would get nothing but the satisfaction of having helped a just cause.

You have received a quest: Find Aphrosius!

Find Aphrosius, who is prowling Naikal in his search for the Shrinelands.

Minimum requirements for completing the quest: Make Aphrosius stop looking for the Shrinelands by any means necessary.

Your reward: none.

Another impressive reward. Isn't that the kind every player's dreaming of getting for every quest?

You have received a quest: Find Loamy Soil!

Find as much loamy soil as you can and bring it to the Shrinelands.

*Minimum requirements for completing the quest:
Deliver at least seven large barrels of loamy soil to
Shrineland!*

Your reward: unknown.

That was better! “Unknown” looked a little bit more promising than the dry and categorical “none.” My life had just become a little brighter.

All I had to do now was avoid wasting time. I had lots of things to do until the evening, when I’d have to get dressed in fancy clothes and attend a social function at the royal palace. Given how enraged I felt about the situation in the world of Waldyra, I’d give them a piece of my mind if they allowed me to speak for sure!

I poured more power into the magical engine, and Terrifying Squeak accelerated obligingly, taking me to the dark expanses of the enraged Naikal. I cursed as I thought of Aphrosius—I certainly hadn’t expected him to stoop that low.

Chapter 6

Evading the Prey. A Market of War and a Market of Peace. The Real Big Fish.

AS SOON AS I'D LEFT the Shrinelands and put some distance between my craft and the invisible border, I sped up, in a hurry to conceal myself behind the forbidding black rock. I had every reason for haste—I'd noticed a tiny speck of scarlet cloth fluttering in the wind far on the horizon.

Once I'd reached the rock, I stopped the catamaran and climbed onto its wobbly mast barely rising above the formation that had given me shelter, peering into the distance from a more elevated position. My eyes hadn't lied to me—the piece of scarlet cloth was there all right, looking harmless and incongruous, yet filling my soul with an ominous dread. It wasn't myself that I worried about, but rather the Shrinelands, full as they were of peaceful locals.

What did Salley say earlier on?

He'd already passed by twice without noticing. The third time he'd spot them for sure, and everyone would be done for.

If the accursed red rag of the faraway sail started approaching, I'd have to act in some way. I didn't know what exactly that would be, but I wouldn't just sit on my hands and do nothing. We could play tag with Aphrosius, perhaps, although I really doubted I'd be able to lose the black boat with the red sail imbued with divine powers, even with my magic-propelled twin-hull. Aphrosius would catch up with me

and kill me. I was ready for that sacrifice, provided I'd be able to have Aphrosius chase me far enough away. I couldn't think of another option—a duel was out of the question. I wasn't strong enough to fight someone who'd been given divine powers by Grakharg, the god of war, a plague upon him and his near-unpronounceable name.

In general, I didn't have the foggiest about how to deal with the traitorous fisherman Aphrosius. I'd most likely have to kill him—it had been a mistake to have spared his life in the first place. But I'd need allies to handle this enemy, and all my comrades-in-arms, excepting Bom, were really far away from me now, unable to help. As for Bom, I had a hunch about what the half-orc, busy making money as always, would tell me. “Aphrosius? Screw Aphrosius, boss! I don't care if he drinks the entire Naikal and devours every living thing there! We have bigger fish to fry! There's money to be made!” No, I wouldn't bother Bom, even though, apart from being a mule and our treasurer, he was also a decent warrior.

The red piece of cloth on the horizon had changed direction and was now moving the opposite way. I gnashed my teeth, swaying with the top of the mast. Aphrosius was on the prow, damn and blast him.

I recalled a book popular in Russia entitled *Scarlet Sails*—a romantic novel where a beautiful girl had waited years for a white ship with scarlet sails to arrive, steered by a handsome young captain, who'd conquer her heart and take her away from the village she'd felt confined in. A love novel with a happy ending. But how did one define the genre of a novel where a guy, drenched to the skin, held on to the top of a wildly-swaying mast watching a scarlet sail on the horizon and dreading the approach of a hideous black boat? The title could be *A Chump*, *a Psycho*, and *Two Boats*, and as for the genre... anything, really. I could only hope it wouldn't be erotica.

The red rag froze for a few seconds, in spite of the wind and the waves, and then started to move away, becoming smaller and smaller. Grakharg's dark hound Aphrosius was taking his boat to the far shore. Therefore, I'd need to move in the opposite direction and make it quick.

I dropped down into the net between the hulls, crawled to the stern, fired up the propelling magic, dipped the sails with some trepidation, and proceeded in the opposite direction at full speed.

The distance between myself and Aphrosius kept growing, the hidden Shrinelands lying between the two of us.

I stopped upon reaching a pillar of light. The clouds had parted here—with extreme reluctance, it seemed—and there was a bright pillar of sunlight illuminating a spot on the surface, placating Naikal's wrathful darkness a little. The waves didn't rage as wildly here, and their foamy tops didn't rise as high as elsewhere to fall heavily on the long-suffering catamaran. Teleportation worked here; besides, this area had a name of its own—The Light Spot of Tranquility. That was as good as an address. I'd just have to say, "Naikal, The Light Spot of Tranquility," and I'd end up right here. I made a mental note and used the last scroll of magical packaging to pack up the Squeak as I fell into the water. I'd have to stock up on those pronto, and the scrolls were costly—kindness was an expensive hobby...

I used a teleportation scroll next, whispering the name of a city spanning two hills—Alfalfa Hill. That's where I found myself next, accompanied by a few gallons of cold water from the lake. As I stepped off the wet patch on the cobblestones, I nearly bumped into a gun-carriage with a huge

catapult mounted on it being drawn up the steep slope of one of the hills by eight oxen bellowing loudly their disgruntlement. There were more of such carts in front and behind that one, and it didn't look like a Lake District military parade with extra horns and hooves. Judging by the drivers' grim faces, it was a military maneuver—they were taking their artillery to the hilltops. But why would they?

I took advantage of my elevated position and the proximity of a mighty fir tree. I easily climbed the prickly branches almost to the top. I looked around and gave a whistle.

The city was under siege—encircled by enemy forces completely, with nothing around it but blackness. There was nothing familiar left around like the endless green fields or blue skies. Just scorched earth, gray smoke, and ash in the air, blowing in the light wind, uncommonly chilly for these places, a light drizzle, and sunshine barely seeping through the numerous obstacles to pour what little light it could over the agonizing land without a single stalk of alfalfa left growing. The numerous clear brooks and rivers that had once run through the meadows and the valleys around the city were as black as the sky—the murky liquid flowing through them was most likely unfit for drinking.

And on the ground there were military encampments with many blazing fires using the last of the trees and the destroyed peasants' houses for fuel. The enemy forces formed several large circles around the fair city of Alfalfa Hill, and they were like an army of ravenous locusts that had devoured everything else and were now gathered around the only green hill left standing.

There was another circle right next to the city walls—a small but wide one, facing the enemy. The remaining

defenders of the perimeter were manning their positions there. There were far fewer of them than the enemies, but the city kept them covered and provided them with all the support it could muster. There was a rainbow of auras coming from the direction of the city covering the defenders like a multitude of shimmering veils. There were groups of catapults in different areas and powerful magical bolt-throwers installed at various heights capable of incinerating an averagely-sized squad with a single blast.

Attention!

The location's peaceful status has been compromised!

There is an ongoing armed conflict in the area!

Warning!

Alfalfa Hill is under attack!

Alfalfa Hill is under siege!

Defend the city with everything you have!

Current situation:

The seventeenth assault has been fought off!

The last southern outpost has been lost...

Attention!

Alfalfa Hill requests assistance!

The city needs you to defend it!

If you know how to hold a sword or a bow, can do healing or battle magic, have a healer's skills or knowledge of alchemy—if you're a capable smith who can fix a suit of armor or a sword's blade—if you're a builder who knows his masonry well, or if you're a craftsman who can make a catapult, a ballista, or a trebuchet, Alfalfa Hill needs you!

If you want to defend the city as a fighter or help it bolster its defenses in another way, get in touch with any guard.

They will immediately direct you to the place where you can be of use.

Alfalfa Hill has faith in you!

Two players and four locals clad in lavishly-decorated armor passed underneath the fir tree branch I'd been occupying, followed by ten guards in full combat gear, looking around with suspicion. The guards had instantly noticed me, the proud fir eagle that I was, and their crossbows twitched, but never rose—they'd either recognized me or decided I wasn't a danger. Just a plump duck sitting in the tree... or, as I'd said, a fir eagle.

The rest didn't pay any attention to me with the exception of a curt nod on the part of one of the players, whom I'd only recognized then—he'd been among my passengers. The leader of the overdressed and amateurishly-equipped locals was addressing him with begging intonations in his voice, pressing his plump hands to his chest and simpering almost tearfully, barely keeping up with the widely-striding player.

“Only your military genius can save us! That's all we can count on. This siege is wearisome and will bring us to ruination! The enemy isn't giving us a break! Lead our troops! Aim our catapults! May your genius be our salvation!”

I shook my head so hard I nearly fell off the tree.

“May your genius be our salvation” indeed. Speak of laying it on thick. I didn't remember anyone ever saying anything of the sort to me.

As I crawled off the prickly tree and brushed off the needles, I proceeded towards one of the squares, having noticed people milling about in a very typical manner there. That was definitely where I'd find what I'd come here for. I'd message Braver en route—time was at a premium. I apologized to the city mentally for being unable to help in defending it today, since I'd had to help those in even greater need. Besides, I couldn't fix armor, make a catapult, or wield a truly heavy sword. Nor had nature endowed me with any military genius.

An army surplus market? That seemed to be the case, judging by the hawker's cries. Those were deafening—I walked quickly between the stalls and the rugs with wares

displayed on them that had been set up all across the square in a completely chaotic manner. I felt like stopping my ears or starting to shout something nonsensical back at the vendors.

“Single-handed swords, forged and tempered by the dwarves! Spears and axes!”

“Extended-range explosive potions!”

“The Last Breath potion—ideal for those intending to die facing an overwhelming enemy force!”

“Jerky and smoked fish! Meat and fish smoked with special herbs! Elven bread available!”

“To all the thieves—this location is no longer peaceful. We’ll slice up anyone we catch! And if we catch someone trying to sell battlefield plunder, we’ll make them regret it for a long, long time!”

“Mud pots giving +10 Disguise at once! Just pour one over your head and you’re done!”

“Health potions at a discount! Buy ten, get two free! Medium and higher-level health potions!”

“Swords from the arsenals of Algora! The very kind the guards use! Shields and spears as well! Everything for Level 200 and higher!”

“Maps with monsters for sale! All kinds! There are rhinoceroses and bullrats!”

“Armor, chain mail, and helmets for sale! Dwarf-forged! There’s the hallmark of the Clan of Duquas on every item!”

“Potions of Agility and Strength! Battle Rage Potions!”

“Mass magic scrolls! Second-strongest rank! On sale!”

“Pay attention to these battle chariots! There are blades on the wheels, armored boards, and ironwood poles! There’s space for a ballista or a magical bolt-thrower! Capacity, six plus the driver! Two more can fit on the monkey-board! You won’t regret buying one of these!”

I’d popped into the bank before coming here, having withdrawn a hefty sum from my personal account. Silly as it might have seemed, I’d felt too embarrassed to use the freshly-established clan treasury for that purpose. However, I’d checked it and found out, to my satisfaction, that most of the passengers had already transferred the money we’d agreed upon. The Heroes of the Final Frontier had just become a lot richer. The normally-neutral teller’s manner had also become notably warmer.

Next I paid a visit to the magic shop and spent a lot of money on cargo teleport and magical packaging scrolls. Then I headed to the market to take a look at the wares and check the prices—only to harrumph, shake my head, and teleport myself elsewhere.

Alfalfa Hill didn't suit my purposes—the food there was ridiculously expensive. It would have been a good choice if I'd needed to equip a party of fighters. Players didn't need food, whereas the locals had been accustomed to eating every day, being the primary consumers of the foodstuffs produced in the world of Waldyra. Players used food to restore health and mana, or to boost their stats, which happened irregularly. Alcohol was the only thing in constant demand, as well as sweets. There weren't too many players overly fond of digital cooking. Given that the city had been under siege for a while, the prices had skyrocketed. Some people had started making good money selling food. In case cargo teleportation got shut down, which was very likely, a real blockade would begin, and the city would starve. Should anyone manage to establish a line of delivery, they'd hit the mother lode.

Braver had postponed the appointment—he'd be running late, as he'd told me, since he'd needed to tidy up the lab in his house's basement—his last experiment had resulted in an explosion. Besides, he'd still needed to collect the surviving jars and bottles for my order.

Another flash, and I found myself in Lagenbrock. I'd been there before. First I'd wanted to head towards a certain sleepy village where a very beautiful and most dangerous young woman with the traits of a killer had lived, but then decided not to tempt fate and head for Lagenbrock with its incredibly German-looking houses and streets.

Nothing there bore any sign of the war raging far away apart from the ads calling for volunteers to join the army and fight the perfidious orcs, mountain and wood ogres, gikhlas, and other spawn of the dark that were disturbing the peace again. My favorite was the advert where a burly village lad was holding a strangled gray orc with large fangs by the throat, the fiend's tongue lolling and its eyes bulging out,

while driving a pitchfork into an ogre lying prostrate on the ground with his other hand. There were backs of retreating monsters in the distance, and another pitchfork sticking out of the last one's back. There was also an admonishing slogan at the top of the advert—"Those who burn fields come to no good!" I made a mental note never to trample any crops again lest I bump into a village lad like this one, equipped with four pitchforks. A legend at the bottom said, "Everyday Life of Ivlus the Young." With everyday life like that, I wonder what constituted a heroic act in his case.

I went into a large bakery and shocked the vendor by buying everything up to the very last bun, paying instantly, and packing a huge pile of fresh, hot bread and pastry into a magical scroll. Then I dived into the next one and repeated the same trick, leaving the next customer disgruntled by picking up all the buns before she managed to open her mouth.

I visited two more bakeries and two more grocers' shops, estimated how much food I'd bought and how many hungry mouths I'd have to feed, and made another raid, sweeping the shelves of three more shops clean. My next destination had been the magic shop, where I bought a dusty magical sword of a dark blue color that everybody had ignored. Then I noticed something similar nearby, asked about the price, grunted in amazement, yet bought it, since I'd been on a spending spree, anyway.

I also decided to check the shops that sold blankets, tents, and the like. Then I went to the firewood store, and then the apothecary, where I purchased about a cartload of vials with cold remedies.

Finally, I talked to an old gardener living at the outskirts of town and looking after an enormous apple orchard.

He'd heard me out, then taken me to the furthest and most unkempt corner of the garden, and showed me a small plot of land covered in a thick carpet of flowers. Then he'd handed me a shovel, and we'd dug up a formidable amount of fat loamy black soil. I paid him, packed up the soil, and said my goodbyes.

I must have missed something, but time was at a premium, so I'd make do with what I'd managed to get. Besides, Braver had already arrived and was waiting for me by the bench of an alchemy shop called Three Drops and You're Done! An ambiguous name if I'd ever seen one. Apparently, Braver had been of a different opinion, being in the process of buying a bunch of dried lizards and a jar of lagoon tadpole paste when I arrived. The label had drawn my attention at once; then my eyes caught the alchemist himself and I grunted in surprise. Braver's appearance had changed drastically—the fair-haired guy with a quick smile had turned into a chimneysweep whose grin struck me as even wider. It was as if his hair had exploded.

“The trick didn't work,” he spread his arms, seeing my surprise. “And I'd had such high hopes for it... So, how goes it, Great Navigator and leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, the first clan in Zar'Graad?”

“The former navigator,” I corrected him. “Hold on. How did you find out about the HFF?”

“Waldyra's Herald's already told the story in great detail—they'd just released an extra issue with a huge article by their staff writer Callen the Seeker. Folks can't get enough of it. I've only scanned the headlines and the first paragraph. Well done!”

“It wasn’t just me,” I said with a smile, accepting the compliment. “Can we do it en route? Are you free the next couple of hours?”

“For you, I sure am!”

“Great. I’d like to talk to you about some future affairs. Hold on to me. The Light Spot of Tranquility is where we’re going.

“Come again?”

“You’ll see. Don’t be afraid of the roaring waves—Naikal is in a foul mood these days. Let’s go...”

There was a flash.

The rainbow whirlwind swallowed us, rumbling like thunder, and pulled us away into its sparkling vortex.

I’d been worried up until the next moment, and then the feeling of relief hit me, even though I found myself falling into the stormy waves from the height of a six-story building. Even though we’d made it to the patch of relative stability, the emergence point was pretty far above the waves. Braver was falling next to me saying nothing, ready to face the future in a laudably resolute way. Although, perhaps, he’d become inured to trifles like falling into a storm-ravaged lake after the explosion at his lab....

He was, however, impressed by my faithful weather-beaten catamaran—or, rather, my uncanny manner of handling

the tropical craft. I spent the entire journey to the Shrinelands doing three things—steering, looking out for potential foes or pursuit, and talking to Braver. Our conversation was lively and engaged as we yelled over the rumble of foamy waves, the flapping of the sail, and the sound of the wind. Basically, I'd made Braver an offer to join our clan, the Heroes of the Final Frontier. Our respect and assistance were guaranteed, and we'd be paying without delay. I'd managed to surprise myself by the cunning mention of access to all the special ingredients for new and completely unknown potions and the kind of resources required for furnishing a state-of-the-art laboratory, hiring skilled personnel, and securing a steady supply of consumables. I didn't mind him making potions for himself and selling them, provided he'd buy the ingredients with his own money.

Right before that I'd let him know we were heading to a really secret place. Braver would be the only other person who'd know its location. It was a serious gesture of trust—after all, our acquaintance with the alchemist hadn't been that close. But I needed to save time. There were situations where you could have a relaxed conversation in a restaurant over roast beef and a bottle of good red, making a business offer unhurriedly and receiving just as measured a response. On other occasions you didn't have that luxury and needed to discuss prospects for the future jumping from one angry dark wave to another, listening to the creaking sounds made by the catamaran and hoping the person you were talking to didn't get washed the hell overboard.

Braver had heard out my generous offer and asked me to give him some time to think about it and decide, letting me know he'd been given enough food for thought. That was an excellent idea, and I agreed. Then it was time to stop talking—all the while I'd been following a green spark running across the water. Once it had disappeared, it became clear we'd reached the entrance to the Shrinelands.

I exhaled with relief as we sailed through the “bubble” and came inside. There were hardly any waves here, and no aggressor had visited during the brief time I’d been away. It was the same chaotic agglomeration of boats and rafts tied together and bobbing up and down in water, with throngs of cold and hungry people sitting on them. It was time for action.

I set the Terrifying Squeak in slow motion and steered it towards the island as I pulled one of the scrolls out of my belt pouch, placing it in the water and saying the activation command. There was a light bluish-green flash, and at least a thousand sparks leaped from my fingers, disappearing underwater and exploding there as miniature depth charges. Each explosion made a sizable pike perch appear in the water—large as life and twice as confused.

The chuvvers howled in delight.

“There’s fish here!” I must have heard their favorite exclamation about thirty times in just a few seconds. They started diving just like seals from their rookeries—by rolling over into their element, where they’d transform into ravenous bolts of lightning and start chasing the swift fish reluctant to become somebody’s dinner. But the pike perches didn’t have a chance.

Chuvvers and fishermen armed with harpoons kept jumping into the water, while someone had already unfurled a fishnet and started beating on the water with oars, or shooting the fish with bows and crossbows. Enormous pikes dashed in every direction close to the bottom, so hungry it was a miracle they hadn’t made a meal out of a chuvver or two yet. The water looked like soup boiling over a strong flame. Braver kept staring at the clear water below, where the hunters and the

hunted danced their eternal dance that gave life to one and took it from the other.

“So that’s how you usually spend your days?” Braver Lightey asked me, looking me straight in the eye.

“Yeah,” I said perfectly truthfully. “That’s my routine. Adventures are a lot wilder. And there’s no way you can stop. You might feel like taking a break, but you never manage to.”

Braver nodded and fell silent. The catamaran kept on moving towards the approaching coast. I got as close as I’d intended to, and then made the Squeak turn sharply and follow a long narrowing spiral trajectory around the islands. Women and children kept yelling in delight from the rafts and the boats, hurrying to take the fish from the fishermen and the chuvvers. Chuvver kids chomped down the catch raw. The rest were waiting for the pots and kettles to boil. The smell of cooking food filled the air, and dejection gave way to the anticipation of a meal—always a lot more pleasant feeling.

I used three scrolls passing by a large raft, manifesting a great big pile of firewood, fresh bread still warm from the oven, jerky, sausages, hams, butter, and a few barrels of fermented berries. I didn’t stay to wait for thanks as I steered the ship in a different direction, crossing the strip of water separating the “islands,” and activated three similar scrolls on the other side. That was the best way to do it. Making a single big pile would be unadvisable for a number of reasons—it made sense to drop off smaller amounts so that all the refugees scattered around the shoreline could have access to the food. Braver sat on the prow of the vessel in silence, nodding in response to words of gratitude and allowing himself to get patted on the shoulder as he kept distributing health potions and medicines. The potions were his own, which I’d bought

wholesale, and the medicines had been unloaded right onto the catamaran from the scroll. We'd need to make sure everybody got some. My reputation with the population of the Shrinelands had already grown by one point.

The catamaran had been moving in circles slowly as I used one scroll after another, leaving food and firewood on boats and rafts. Braver would add the potions and the medicines. I ran out of scrolls shortly. The food wouldn't last long, but it would last a short while.

This was funny, but there must have been no rich or influential locals here. I didn't profit from feeding them, healing them, nor keeping them warm in any way. Their gratitude didn't translate to much in material terms—I could count on free meals and gifts of smoked fish whenever I'd visit a fishing village on the shore of the Naikal, and that would be that. And how often did I visit, after all? Most importantly, since when did I start thinking of selfless help as an investment and trying to estimate possible profits?

I shook my head to rid it from all the incomprehensible thoughts so alien to me—for a while, at least. I took the catamaran to a deep place, rose, pointed to another scroll in front of everyone, and warned them,

“I've a big fish here! Really big! It can cause some trouble! Should I release it?”

“YE-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-EAH!” The roar was so loud that the entire Shrinelands bubble shook.

I wasn't wholly convinced.

“Are you sure? It’s a real big fish! You haven’t seen its like yet!”

“YE-E-E-E-E-E-EAH!” Even the pikes, whose snouts were sticking out of the water, seemed to join in unison, opening their enormous long maws.

All right, I thought to myself.

“Whale! Fish whale!”

An incredibly bright magic flash blinded me for a split second. Once I got my vision back, I saw a colossus of a whale hovering a few feet above the surface. The creature twitched and splashed down into the sweet water—it must have been used to having it salty. But that would be the least of its worries—an army of chuvvers and pikes, followed by players with long harpoons, rushed towards the whale like a black wave. I barely managed to turn around the catamaran on the crest of the wave raised by the whale, taking it to the shore. Braver turned his head around, handing a muddy chuvver kid who’d just emerged from the water a large candy.

I got the Squeak to a shallow place, jumped over to the shore, and used the scroll with the soil as soon as I saw the Willow Sisters reveal themselves. There were many worms in the soil, making me wonder about the advisability of giving young ladies a treat with worms in it. But when I saw just how frenziedly the Sisters planted their feet into the pile of dirt that had appeared before them, I decided it was irrelevant. The worms could be like raisins in a pudding to them, after all.

I took care of the rest, distributing food, firewood, potions, and medicines. We'd given away everything we'd had and then returned to the catamaran trying not to bother the starved crowd. I turned my craft around and steered away from the Shrinelands—I couldn't afford to waste any time. There was still a lot of stuff to do.

A wet hand grabbed the wet board. I saw a smiling face, and a small green sapling was given to me.

“The Sisters' gratitude for the soil!”

The reward for the quest I'd forgotten everything about. I'd need to bring them more soil. But at least one task had been completed successfully.

“You should plant it near your home.”

“Thanks,” I replied. I put the sapling away, but not before studying it attentively.

The Sapling of a Magic Weeping Willow.

It was an interesting reward. I didn't have a home yet, so I'd have nowhere to plant it... Or did I? Dang... I hadn't made it to Tranqueville yet.

“Tell your priestesses to pass a message to Snessa. Rosgard is back, and Rosgard is on the shores of Lake Naikal. I have some news.”

“I will! Good luck on your journey!”

The chuvver fell back as we gained momentum and hit the invisible borderline, coming right through and returning into the darkness of the storm. The veil had been closing behind us. You could still see the water bubble and the denizens of the Shrinelands as they fought their enormous prey. The fish whale wouldn't go down easily, but it hadn't stood a chance—everybody had been so hungry they would tear the beast to pieces with their bare hands.

Aphrosius. What was I to do with Aphrosius?

He was my main problem. I still had a few hours in reserve, but then I'd have to get ready for the royal reception. What could I do to the evil traitor on his terrible boat with so little time at my disposal?

“Will you tag along? Or shall I take you to the place from which you can leave by teleport?”

“I'll tag along,” a contemplative-looking Braver smiled, and said, “But those routine affairs of yours sure are something. You dish out the bread and the mean, comfort the disturbed...”

“And disturb the comfortable,” I smiled in response. “All right, let's try to find Aphrosius on his black boat with its red sail. We might spot him on the horizon sooner or later...”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Chapter 7

The Mail and the Search

I DIDN'T HAVE to look long for Aphrosius.

It was as if he'd been drawn to the Shrinelands by a magnet. He kept circling round, parting the waves, looking around constantly. I'd managed to second-guess his maneuver before we saw a crimson sail in the distance as it circled the foam-sprayed rocks. I took the catamaran behind one of the rocks located a little further, moored it on the leeward side, and we climbed atop the rock together. Once we'd gotten up, we stretched out on the ground and started waiting. Now I was watching Aphrosius passing us by. His very presence was a danger to what little had still remained of the old peaceful Naikal.

So what did I have to say? Grakharg, the god of war, may have imbued the treacherous fisherman with his power and given him a few gifts. But he'd given them so casually he might as well have spat. The result testified to that. The fisherman looked so preposterous I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The boat had remained the same. It may have become completely black, been decorated with a few spikes, and fitted with a sharp ram bow, but its general size and appearance hadn't changed—it was still a nondescript fisherman's boat able to hold two people at best. A squalid dory that had been given a sloppy custom job with a splendorous sail attached to it, big enough for any schooner—the incredibly and impossibly thin and overly long mast could barely hold the enormous sail filled tight by the wind as the boat was jumping

over the waves and rending them apart as it pierced them with its bow. Particularly strong gusts of wind would make it jump and virtually fly over the waves, barely touching them with its jet black bottom. It was a riveting sight, scary and pitiful at the same time when one realized how tiny the vessel was and saw its captain, helmsman and scout, all in one.

He was sitting on the stern—proudly, his shoulders squared, reclining slightly and holding the rudder firmly. His legs were spread wide and he wore tall shiny boots. There was a red cloak fluttering in the wind on his back, and his head was uncovered. That must have been why he'd had such a look on his face. The wind had torn the hood off his head, and it was lowered to his chest as he looked around with suspicion, frowning and never resting his eyes on any single point—they kept shifting as if they'd been afraid of meeting a scornful look. Aphrosius kept on wiping his wet face with the sleeve of a simple fisherman's jacket, and doing it with such haste as if the moisture in question didn't come from the rain and the lake, but rather someone spitting right in his visage.

Aphrosius looked anything but happy. One could have thought that a fisherman in fancy clothes sailing under a fancy red sail would have been a lot more cheerful. Although, come to think of it, how much of it was fancy? The deity didn't give anything more to the traitor than the cloak and the boots. That, the sail, and a little power... Was that really that great a reward for betraying Naikal? He should have bargained harder. Then again, if he'd manage to find the Shrinelands, he might get vouchsafed a t-shirt saying “#1 Traitor!”

“What should we do about him?” Braver asked, taking the spyglass from me. “Have you seen those flashes?”

“Which ones?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh, you didn’t imbibe any. Have some of this potion, my good lad. All will be revealed to you...” The alchemist gave me a tiny green vial—so tiny I could hold four of them in my hand. I pulled out the long stopper and poured a couple of bright drops of a viscous raspberry-red liquid onto my tongue. This whole day was spent in hues of red.

I drank it and waited, watching the faraway sail hop from one wave to another. Nothing had changed.

“Take a better look,” the spyglass was returned to me.

I brought the eyepiece to my eye and saw an amazing sight—Aphrosius and his boat were engulfed in a grayish-red flame. The sail, the mast, and the rest were burning—I wondered why the fisherman wasn’t making any sound as he stood in that blazing inferno.”

“Well I’ll be... What is it?”

“It has different names, depending on the race. But, mostly, it’s a divine eye. The game deities are supposed to see the world in this very manner.

“That’s one neat discovery!”

“Oh, it is. So, that’s why it’s so hard to sneak up on a god or hide something from one—they see through you better than any X-ray. Literally. This concerns auras, buffs, and a bunch of other stuff,” Braver was clearly in his element. I was waiting for him to pull a textbook out of his sack and open it

for me to read. “You can alter the formula for various specific vision ranges—add a different herb, see divine infrared instead of divine ultraviolet, and so on. It can get stronger—or weaker. There are persistent rumors among the members of our profession that a great many Divine Eye potions are yet to be discovered. A lot of recipes are out there waiting for someone to mix them up for the first time. One has to experiment and replace certain ingredients of the potions. But it costs a hell of a lot. Each one of these teeny things,” Braver pointed at the tiny bottle, “requires a whole drop of Divine Fury! And that’s expensive as hell! I got lucky once—I’d managed to find a whole sphere covered by leaves in a forest. It was just lying there, and I’d never have found it if I hadn’t stumbled over the damn thing. And as soon as I got it, things became really hairy. A tragicomedy of chases, shootouts, and animated tree stumps—you wouldn’t believe half of it if I told you. I’d only managed to get seven divine essence drops from that sphere, but that was still better than nothing,”

“You’re living quite the life,” I grunted, even more surprised now as I watched the “blazing” Aphrosius.

“Don’t I just... I sometimes feel like Indiana freaking Jones. I mean it. If you want to create a potion, you need to get outfitted, explore the jungle, fight monsters, dig soil, and run away from competitors and other baddies... on your own, for the most part. I’m sick of it. Some of the folks I’d started studying the basics of alchemy with are way ahead of me now, and they keep on growing. They’ve joined clans, and now have everything handed to them on a silver dish.”

“Well, you’ve got your reason to join us right there. It’s just that the HFF aren’t exactly the silver dish type.”

“And what type are you? The golden plate type?”

“Sometimes it’s a plate. Sometimes it’s a whole tub full of wriggly stuff no one can identify. Sometimes it’s a hundred-gallon canister of fluorescent goo. And sometimes it’s nothing. We’re not the most stable bunch of folks, you know...”

“Well, that ain’t too bad, either.”

“However, we do have spheres filled with divine emanations,” I said casually. “And, being a leader, I’d really appreciate some research conducted in our labs... We haven’t got any of those yet, but I’ve been thinking of seeing to it immediately.”

“That’s a whole bunch of perks, to be sure... I’m still thinking, Ros. What’s the situation with Aphrosius? Did you spot anything?”

“I did,” I replied. “He’s only on fire on the top and on the sides. There’s no glow at all underwater. The boat’s bottom is black. Ghakharg isn’t too fond of water, is he?”

“It’s more that Naikal isn’t too fond of Grakharg, I think,” Braver ventured. “Have you read about the ancient fight between Light and Shadow? It’s about two gods who’d had such a showdown they’d almost destroyed half the world. Then someone even more powerful had made the two hotheads fall asleep. No one’s kept tabs on the evil one, but the good one had fallen asleep in a huge crater they’d made during their last battle, and this crater later became Lake Naikal.”

“I’ve never read about any of that,” I said slowly, no longer observing the traitor. “I-i-i-i-interesting...”

“It’s not even a legend. It’s a children’s tale. Every bookshop sells them. Illustrated Waldyran Children’s Tales. Give them a read sometime.”

“I definitely will,” I replied. “I mean it. So... I’m not sure why, but judging by what your potion’s telling me, Aphrosius has no protection from the bottom. There’s a chance for us to drive the stake of our indignation into his behind and give it a good twist. The question is how? Braver, do you see any pikes near?”

“Pikes? Uh...” The alchemist leaned over the rock and stared into the water. “I don’t see any in the water. But there’s some chuvver who’s hanging on to your watercraft and munching on some.”

“Call the chuvver!”

It had taken the chuvver about a minute to finish his meal. Then he deigned to grant me some of his attention, waving his hand happily.

“Friend Rosgard! It’s you!”

“Didn’t we just see each other?” I grunted, climbing down the rock only for an angry wave to wash over me instantly.

There was a splash while the valiant leader of the HFF clan got pinned to a hard rock to the mirthful laughter of the chuvver. As I was spitting out the foam and the water, I felt

like a licked stamp that someone had just stuck to an envelope. “The postage has been paid, wipe off the residual drool” kind of scenario.

I wiped my face, coughed, and gave the chuvver a rude gesture resembling a one-eyed fish. Then I grabbed the live slapstick comedy enthusiast by the three hairs on his chest, and asked him in an oily voice, trying to avoid any sharp tugs.

“And where would your goddess Snessa be?”

“The Great One?” The chuvver looked at my hand grabbing him by the chest hair with no small amount of terror, gulped nervously, and painted a bright smile on his face, trying to placate me with a minnow he’d just caught. I let the minnow go and nodded.

“Her and none other.”

“Who could know that, friend Rosgard? Not us for sure! She’s a goddess!” The chuvver, not the sharpest pencil in the box by the look of him, spread his arms helplessly.

“Don’t you have any priestesses in the Shrinelands?” I tried to nudge him in the right direction.

“Sure we do! Two of them! From either side of the floating village! They don’t hang out together—both too quarrelsome, you see. But those old ladies sure are strong! Both of them will gulp down three bowls of moronid liquor, one after another, and stay stone cold sober! They just pummel their husbands for two days straight afterwards...”

“Pay them a visit, please, and tell them to pass on a message to the goddess Snessa. May her divine ears hear that Rosgard is back from the faraway shores and is currently trying to thwart the evil plans of the fisherman Aphrosius, who’s looking for a secret place on Lake Naikal where many of her hapless children the chuvvers dwell.”

“Uh...” The chuvver froze, unable to process my speech. I was clearly dealing with a dim one.

“Tell Snessa. Rosgard’s on the Naikal. Stop Aphrosius. Danger to the chuvvers. It’s urgent,” I repeated patiently, got a nod in reply, and let go of the pitiful bodily hair of the creature, which must have had some water-repellent quality. Come to think of it, that was odd. Chuvvers were usually hairless. Could that be a new chuvver subspecies? *Imbecilius swampicus*?

I never got to gauge the full extent of the chuvver’s stupidity—he’d disappeared quickly, in the blink of an eye. I’d only managed to see a torpedo-like shape getting lost in the distance quickly. Time was ticking; what could I do, I wondered?

Aphrosius had been boosted by a god. I remembered how a god had blown into Callowan’s trunk once, and the mammoth had remained incredibly superior to all his other kin for a long while. He’d been with us everywhere and taken part in the wildest adventures, always surviving—with a single tragic exception. But even that time he’d proved himself miraculously resilient.

I didn't know just how Aphrosius had received his divine gifts—my imagination gave in and ran away screaming as soon as that thought entered my mind. I didn't care much, either. All I knew was that he'd transformed into a formidable enemy with a special ax to grind with me. Our last meeting hadn't ended that well, either. I didn't give a damn about his grudges. But I still couldn't disregard his power. He'd make fish feed out of us both quickly enough, and so I needed allies. And not the kind that would stay behind my back, but rather those who'd rush into battle and be dealt the first strike themselves. Aphrosius was no god, after all, and he'd lose his power before too long.

The only such entity I could think of—one strong enough and with a direct interest vested in the process—was the goddess Snessa.

She was an ideal candidate—another bit of clanspeak I'd picked up like a nasty rash that wouldn't go away during the Great Expedition. BB's advisors kept using it all the time. "She's an ideal candidate for this position." "He's an ideal candidate for *khruzb* feed." "She fits the forecast for the events to follow that should lead to the outcome we're interested in the most." And so on, and so forth.

Snessa was interested in preserving not only the lives of her worshippers, but their way of life as well. I'd realized as much a while ago, judging by what had transpired in the past when Needlemouth had been terrorizing the shore and the poor *chuvvers* couldn't carry on with their drunken revelry and dancing—just this side of an orgy—which, in their case, amounted to praying. I harrumphed, imagining this happening elsewhere. "I say, dear, why are you blind drunk and in bed with two women, and what is this blaring music?" "Pay no attention, darling, those are just tonight's vespers."

A significant part of Snessa's worshippers had stopped praying at once, and she wasn't getting any powers. Besides, she was being harangued by weeping priestesses asking for protection constantly. It must have felt like living with your power line cut off and someone knocking on the door incessantly. Snessa was therefore an ideal candidate. I could do with some help—any help. Participation in battle, some advice, a weapon, a boost of my abilities—I wasn't about to get picky. All I'd needed was for it to happen quickly.

There were also Willow's Sisters with their army of sharp-toothed and really strong pikes. I knew them well—one such fish had swallowed me whole once. That one had been boosted, to be sure, but even the ordinary kind were still a power to be reckoned with. However, I felt reluctant about calling them. Firstly, they were now a major defense force in the Shrinelands, which was why I didn't want to call any here. My death would be one thing, and the defenses of the concealed place weakening, quite another. Besides, Aphrosius was a fisherman sailing a fisherman's boat. Divine boosts usually affected the existing stats and skills. Callowan hadn't learnt to fly after receiving the god's breath... come to think of it, certain occasions did come to mind. Sure, he had become faster, stronger, more resilient, more voracious, and more intelligent. But he hadn't learnt any new skills—or, perhaps, Orbit had told me nothing of them.

What would get boosted in the case of a drunk fisherman?

Strength, his ability to steer the boat, and stamina—he might become brighter, too. And any of his existing fishing skills would be enhanced greatly—something like +200 damage against any fish, just to think of an example. But my

brain started overheating when I tried to consider every possible option. Besides, Grakharg was a god of war. The traitor's attack power must have gone up, and he might have received a weapon, too. What kind of a weapon could a fisherman get? A sword? An ax? A bow? A magic wand? Or a necromancer's bone wand? Unlikely. It would probably be the weapons he'd already been familiar with—a harpoon or a net. Or both, which would be a deadly combination. That version was the most plausible. One might hope that he hadn't been given anything, but one would have to prepare for the worst. Sending fish to hunt a fisherman sounded... fishy. This wouldn't be a freshwater reconstruction battle between Captain Ahab and Moby Dick.

Incidentally... what if I got another whale and dropped his bulk onto Aphrosius? He wouldn't even know what had hit him. He could, perhaps, let lose a single squeak of terror before getting squashed. In which case, why not drop a huge rock on him? I'd had battle magic scrolls on me, too, after all.

"Have you managed to think of anything?" Braver had climbed down to join me. "The red sail is getting lost in the distance. Shall we follow it?"

"We shall. Am I keeping you from anything?"

"Oh hell no. There's no way I'm missing any of this. I've never even heard of such magic as the spell that you're using—I mean the one that propels the twin-hull."

"It's from the Ring of Peace," I explained as I took my place and sought out the red spot on the horizon. "Let's go and observe the dastardly villain for a little longer. We might hear a response from Snessa."

And so we did. Apparently, Snessa had decided I wasn't important enough for her to put in a personal appearance. One of her priestesses came instead—and it hadn't taken her long. We'd barely managed to follow Aphrosius for some two nautical miles by my estimates. A nice old lady with a disposition as sunny as Doom Rock caught up with us, just turning up there casually and appearing from out of nowhere right in front of Braver, who'd been sitting near the bow. He bleated something as he jumped backwards some ten feet away barely managing to keep himself from falling overboard. He then spun around, spat behind his left shoulder three times, slapped his cheeks with his hands, took a few deep breaths, raised his shirt collar by pulling it with a shaky hand, and then went limp. Throwing a quick glance at me, he suddenly started rifling through his pack, clearly either having suddenly decided to do an inventory of his supplies or looking for a tranquilizer. For the old lady, of course.

“Your tribe sure has a fine greeting ritual,” the old lady nodded towards Braver approvingly as he buried his head in his sack and started moaning. Then she looked at me and asked, “And why are you so poorly-mannered?”

I tried to recollect the sequence of Braver's recent actions, but gave up instantly and bowed in a sitting half-bow, holding my hands to my chest. Lackluster, of course, compared to the brilliance of Braver's spontaneous greeting rite. He surely knew how to impress an old woman. Few would be able to outperform him.

“The Great One can't make it,” the lanky priestess said as she pulled a live fish from her robe's sleeve and popped it into her mouth. “I'll help in any way I can.”

“I see,” I decided not to argue. “Uh, your highness...”

“Just call me Kikshu.”

“Take a look behind you, Kikshu. There’s a red sail there, which we’re following with some trepidation. And the boat in question is steered by none other than the fisherman Aphrosius, who’s cast his lot with the black god Grakharg.

“An abomination,” Kikshu said, sucking her lips.

The tiny fish flew out of her mouth and swam away with relief, clearly paying no attention to the fact that it had been enveloped in a glowing aura. The priestess had already pulled another creature out of her sleeve. It was a small wriggly snake—a baby adder, most likely. She’d sucked it in with a whistling sound like a strand of spaghetti. Only then did Kikshu turn around—her head revolved 180 degrees easily. She peered at the red rag for no less than a minute. I sped up a little, catching up with the black boat slowly but surely.

There was a warble, and I got a message from Kyre.

“Will you be able to get offline in an hour? It’s important, I mean it.”

“I’ll try. I’m on Lake Naikal now. I’ve found a concealed location called the Shrinelands here, as well as a bunch of cold wet refugees sitting in a bubble and expecting trouble. I’m trying to do something about them and to hunt someone who’s made them his prey.”

The reply came at once.

“You must help the refugees by all means!”

Kyre’s inner paladin was immortal. In a second, though, I got another message.

“But please try to make it. The matter’s an important one.”

“I get you.”

“A dark evil abomination with a grudge against the whole world,” the priestess sighed. “So sad... People are to blame for this, too, you know.”

“In what way?” I asked, eager to get another piece of the Aphrosius puzzle. Braver nodded, too, having raised his head from his pack. He was now putting together two sets of multicolor vials.

“The rumor of the mean drunk, perfidious thief, and temple-defiler Aphrosius had spread fast. No one wanted to deal with him. Even the innkeepers had stopped greeting him, and all his acquaintances had turned away. He’d tried to beg for forgiveness, but none had been given, and his drunkard’s soul had grown even bitterer, so he didn’t think long when the opportunity to have his revenge on everyone had presented itself. And thus does the stupid Aphrosius prowl the rough waves, having sold his soul for a red sail, a cloak, and a pair of tall boots... Yet his shame is consuming him, and he cannot

take his eye off the bottom of the boat, which must be why he hadn't found the Shrinelands yet."

The old lady hadn't told me anything new. That was the most obvious scenario—exactly what I'd imagined. I should have killed Aphrosius instantly. Waldyra sure was opportunistic this way—it had noticed a bitter lonely fisherman and assigned him the role of the villain.

"A real Ephialtes," Braver said softly, shaking his head. "If you think your friend isn't good enough for you, he might grow into an excellent enemy."

"It's all the booze sloshing around in his head," I disagreed. "You should have seen him after one or two drinks. He gets violent and mean."

The priestess sucked her lips and spat the glowing baby adder overboard. The snake disappeared among the waves instantly. A new minnow appeared out of Kikshu's sleeve and went straight into her mouth. She looked as if she was eating popcorn—however, she didn't actually consume the creatures...

"I see that Grakharg has given Aphrosius some of his power, although it seems that the god of war didn't try too hard. But my vision's far from clear..."

"You need clearer vision?" Braver instantly felt in his element. He rummaged in his pack and produced two vials. "This should make you see clearer and sharper."

One of the vials had already been familiar to me—the divine fury tincture. The other one looked less fancy and was bigger—it must have been of a different rank.

“Let me see...” The old woman didn’t refuse the gift and took both vials, but prudently refrained from drinking them at once. She opened both and smelled them, instantly returning the fury potion to Braver with the words “I don’t need anything that comes from another god.”

“I see,” Braver looked put out for a moment, then perked up, rummaged through his supplies once again, and offered Kikshu five more vials. She started to open them one by one, smelling the contents, and then replacing the stoppers before she returned them. But the next-to-last vial worked. The priestess inhaled the aroma and smiled.

“Great Snessa’s fury... that’s just the thing...” She proceeded to drink the content in a single gulp, returning the vial to the alchemist.

Then the old woman proceeded with the larger bottle. She removed the cap with a loud pop, sniffed it, grunted patronizingly, cupped her hand and scooped up some Naikal water, adding three or four drops to the potion, then put it into two algae leaves—there was an abundance of them on the surface of the water. She gave the vial a few shakes and drank the liquid inside.

“This is a lot better. My vision is much clearer now.”

“The old lady knows her potions,” I bobbed my head, throwing a sideways glance at Braver, who’d been furiously

writing something in his notebookaa, and it must have been related to Naikal water and the algae. My guess was confirmed when he leaned forward and collected some of the same algae as had been used by Snessa's priestess.

The old woman gave a surprised exclamation and hurried to spit something overboard. We observed the disproportionately large wake trail left by the minnow that had hurried off into the distance. I remembered that the little fish had been in the priestess's mouth as she'd drunk both potions. Since it hadn't been swallowed, it must have gotten a full dose of both. I wondered what would happen to the minnow next. It was already piercing the waves like a bullet—if its tiny body wouldn't burst from all that power, the fish had a grand future in front of it.

The priestess herself didn't change much after drinking the magic medicines. There were just spiky little sparks that flashed in her rheumy eyes for a second.

“Let's take a look now.”

The old lady turned her head again in that owl-like manner that looked so out of place on a human-like creature, peering straight at the conspicuous speck of red ahead of us. I sped up the Terrifying Squeek obligingly. Aphrosius might have been more powerful than us, but he was in no hurry—he kept on scouring the lake in search of his quarry. And he kept sailing around the Shrinelands in circles like a bee around a drop of honey.

Then I had a brainwave.

I jerked up and spent some time just staring at the sky, counting the clouds mechanically and watching the odd occasional bird fly over me in the mist, looking lost. I didn't know how long I kept steering the boat like that—it may have been a minute or more. Everybody was minding their own business and keeping silent. However, Braver tore me out of my reverie as he shouted and shook me by the shoulder.

“Ros! Rosgard!”

“Yeah?...” I came to, and grabbed the alchemist by the shoulder in turn. “Aphrosius has a vulnerability!”

“Have you seen as much in the sky?” Braver looked surprised.

“No... Hold on, I have to think it over... But I know of a vulnerability! Several of them, in fact! And each one is like a huge breach in his armor... Damn! I know!”

“Really? Why did we bother the old lady, then?” The alchemist inquired. “By the way, she has news for us.”

“Eh? Mistress Kikshu?”

“That boat is powerful and utterly vile,” the old lady said, looking at a tadpole that was wriggling in the palm of her hand with some skepticism. “Yet it's rotten and weak from the bottom, and its boards aren't that strong, either. The mast is bent and thin, and the sail is a darned old shirt that had been red once. Grakharg must have just poured his power into what

Aphrosius had on him during their ill-omened meeting without thinking much about it.”

“The Naikal Cinderella,” Braver said, staring at the approaching sail.

“Yeah... More like Cindereller,” I replied. “I hope he hadn’t lost any of his stinking boots anywhere. But I don’t think we can count on midnight to save us. Is this magic likely to disappear with time, or...?”

“It will disappear,” Kikshu nodded. “But such things don’t happen fast. It will take time, and then even more time. And the Shrinelands have none—they won’t survive such a long wait.”

“All right,” I interrupted the old lady tactfully. “We’ll turn this thing around ourselves. It will be a blast. Kikshu, could you please gather a force of a dozen warrior pikes and three young chuvvers, strong and intelligent ones, and then have them all follow my watercraft at some distance?”

“That surely is a strange boat that you have there,” the old lady interjected.

“I won’t argue with that,” I said with a smile. “My watercraft comes from overseas. But let’s get back to business—follow me at some distance, around a hundred paces,” I was observing the priestess attentively while giving her the instructions. She couldn’t have been controlled by a weak AI, after all, and she seemed to understand me well. Even if there were glitches in our dialog, they were negligible. Braver was also listening attentively, looking at the page from his

notebook on which I'd been hastily scribbling the names of the items I'd need.

The explanations took about ten minutes. Then Kikshu softly fell on her back into the water, which covered her instantly like a warm blanket, dragging her away. In the meantime, I changed course and headed towards a wide pillar of light in the distance, falling over the troubled water at a slight angle. Another island of teleportation stability.

"I know where you could get these things as a discount, but we'd have to jump to Shieldstown in the Darkwood area. They have large-scale manufacturing facilities over there," Braver rubbed his chin, making two marks on the list. "You won't get it cheaper anywhere else."

"Great," I nodded. "And what about this stuff?"

"We can ask around in the local taverns. It's a busy place—there's always a war on, and you can't find a regular person for all the heroes and villains milling about. And neither heroes, nor villains are known for drinking any old swill. We'll find it."

"OK, Shieldstown it is, then," I concluded. "For half an hour; then we'll dash right back. I'll pop into my private room en route. I have something for the other type of bait."

"Do you think it will work?"

"I sure hope so. The gods enhance one's strong suits and cover one's vulnerabilities. A tree buffed by a god will

survive a fire in the woods. But what if the vulnerable places are one's character traits? I used to know Aphrosius before his 'divine reincarnation.' He's one hell of a Cinderella... even the sisters and the evil mother-in-law seem like Sunday school girls in comparison. At any rate, we'll never find out unless we try. Let's go..."

While I'd been giving my first and not exactly confident speech as a newfangled clan leader to my rapt audience of one, the first potential new member of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, the twin-hull had reached the pillar of sunlight, and happy green lights lit up on my virtual interface. Everything was stable; I could use teleportation and return here when I'd need to—right to the Pool of Security. I loved those names.

As I used the scroll, I felt somewhat jittery wondering how the events would unfurl. Braver Lightey was an independent guy, capable of taking care of his problems and troubles on his own, even if that meant struggling. So if someone like that had decided to join the clan and become another clan cogwheel, shiny and in constant motion, they'd have to be certain that the leader of the clan was intelligent and reliable—that the freedom they'd have to sacrifice was worth it.

The cargo teleport's flash carried me and the catamaran away. I'd have to get the watercraft fixed up as it had been damaged a little by the rough waves, as well as load it up with everything necessary for our operation. I sincerely hoped we'd succeed.

* * *

“It’s working!” Braver slammed his fist into the wet rock enthusiastically.

I concurred with a deep sigh of relief.

It was indeed working.

The formidable red-sailed vessel changed its course sharply, went on for a few hundred feet, stopped for a moment, and then continued to move towards us. A few hundred feet on it made another stop. And then another.

“A breadcrumb trail, as I live and breathe! Just like the one in Hansel and Gretel.”

“That’s right,” I nodded. “Not quite one of breadcrumbs, but something along those lines. And it seems to be working. His old malady hadn’t gone anywhere—if anything, his thirst seemed to have grown.”

The enemy sail had approached by another thousand feet or so. Now we could see the black prow of the ship in a white frame of wave crests. Aphrosius’ vessel was coming nearer, making regular stops along the way. We were observing the boat’s approach through our spyglasses, seeing more and more details as it came closer to us.

Gold and alcohol—and the feeling of power.

That was the monster's Achilles' heel. It may have been an unorthodox approach, but it worked.

I remembered about Aphrosius' passion for gold and gemstones. I remembered his obsession about all kinds of expensive shiny things—he'd collect anything he could get his hands on and stash it away in his secret hiding place. Once he'd get there, he'd fancy himself a king, sitting on his rotten stump of a throne wearing a golden circular crown and taking long pulls from his bottle of cheap hooch.

Gold, alcohol, and the feeling of power.

So that's what his breadcrumb trail had consisted of.

I'd applied all my creativity to the task, and me and Braver had managed to make several ingenuous and rather expensive floats. My imagination had gone into overdrive, and I'd created an entire progressive floating sequence of alcohol and jewelry as a result.

And it worked.

The boat with the oversized sail stopped for the first time when the traitor saw a half-full bottle of beer, with a cheap but shiny thin silver chain wrapped around its neck. That was the moment of clarity—the tension was palpable. Aphrosius didn't disappoint me—he picked up the bottle, removed the chain nimbly, flipped the cap off, inhaled the smell and downed the fresh beer at once. No surprises there—it was Able and Gaber's dark brew straight from the tap, and it wasn't spiked with any poison. I couldn't risk—what if the

divinely boosted fisherman could feel or see it somehow? Better safe than sorry.

As soon as Aphrosius was done with his beer, a few smashed-up boards appeared in the distance carrying another bottle—also with a chain wrapped around it and containing beer. The boards were there as decoration mostly—to make the stuff look like it was coming from the wreck of some rich folks’ party ship. It may have been extraneous, but I’d decided that a few extra props wouldn’t hurt.

With every new bottle Aphrosius got closer to the place I needed him to be. Each new bottle contained a stronger spirit than before. We’d started with beer, proceeded with wine, and then graduated to rum. Right now each bottle that the fisherman was pulling out of the water contained some absolutely infernal dwarfish moonshine. Every new bottle had an even more expensive trinket wrapped around it than the previous one. Gold had followed silver, and was now bedizened with small gems as well. That was one expensive breadcrumb trail—a far cry from dropping pieces of a dry loaf on the ground. This was literally throwing jewelry into water. But I’d been given no choice. I had to wrap this up quickly, and that always implied paying a premium price.

Aphrosius picked up another bottle.

They seemed to appear before him almost on their own accord, as if carried by random waves. Aphrosius’ route started to meander, which had all been part of my plan. Leading him in a direct line would be too suspicious, so I’d added as many curves and turns as I could. The planks and bottles were delivered with the assistance of the “intelligent and nimble young chuvvers” whose presence I’d requested. The battle pikes were providing backup, as well as the old

priestess sitting next to us and “chewing” yet another minnow. One of the chuvvers had given in to temptation and tried to sample the elven wine, but the priestess clenched her spindly fist and the liquor-loving web-handed miscreant’s body got twisted by such a strong spasm that he’d instantly lost all his interest in wine.

The bottles kept emerging next to the boat, leading the fisherman to our ambush. We were lying on top of a tall, narrow rock with a bunch of old pines and some bushes on top. Those provided excellent disguise—and the priestess had also added some of her magic. The catamaran had been moored on the other side of the rock, with a low rocky crescent whose horns were facing the approaching Aphrosius. And he was approaching us obediently...

The fisherman had fished out the last solitary bottle, wincing in advance—I’d been observing him through the spyglass all along—and poured the content down the hatch. His gullet must have been completely inured to hard liquor—he may as well have drunk a glass of water. He grabbed the golden brooch with an emerald set into it, hid his treasure under his shirt, looked around himself impatiently, and froze. I went rigid as well—the critical phase of the plan was upon us.

Inside the crescent-shaped bay formed by the rock there were broken planks and logs, with the odd occasional barrel or shiny bottle dancing on the waves. There was also something affixed to the largest barrel—a large golden crown with rubies. It was a children’s crown for fancy dress parties and masquerades made out of magic golden cardboard. The spikes were wide and tall, and it looked more like a bear trap than a monarch’s headgear... and it had been selected to play that very purpose, also doubling as bait.

Aphrosius muttered something, twitched his neck, jerked the rudder, stamped his foot in a tall boot impatiently, and the boat dashed forward. There was a frozen grimace of greed on the contorted face. There was water running down the stubbly cheeks—sea spray, most likely, but I got the feeling that the traitor was crying.

Gold. Alcohol. And power, even if it had to be imaginary.

The black boat with the red sail entered the crescent bay.

Aphrosius leaned overboard, grabbed the nearest bottle, opened it, and started to guzzle the impossibly strong liquor, reaching for the crown with his other hand. We could hear him laughing merrily.

There was a dry pop.

That was me snapping a thin stick that resembled the ones found inside popsicles in two, only this one was colored red and decorated with mysterious carvings. The stick was the source of the sound.

There was an explosion.

A tremendous, humongous explosion—the like of which few players ever get to see. To me, with all the experience I'd received in the course of the Great Expedition, it was just your average run-of-the-mill bang.

To someone who'd heard the volleys fired by the Black Queen, the monstrous flagship of the Sleepless Ones, this explosion was a mere firecracker.

We'd stocked up on the most potent explosive potions as well as a remote detonator in Shieldsville, a well-protected town that would often find itself under siege. Upon our return we'd found a fitting place near the area scoured by Aphrosius. We placed a huge pile of magical explosives at the bottom of the lake. The pikes and the chuyvers had covered it all with mud, and the priestess had applied her magic. That had taken a lot out of her, and she'd asked Braver for another potion containing some of Snessa's divine fury, although I'd formed the impression that the old lady treated them like pralines filled with rum. The old woman's cheeks became rosy, and she squinted blissfully like a well-fed cat.

The blast lifted upwards, the walls not letting the explosive power scatter to the sides. The tattered red rag shot up into the sky and fell down like a wounded bird, circling and fluttering. As it flew closer, it kept shrinking; eventually, it got caught on a branch of one of the pine trees behind us. I shook my head in surprise—instead of the enormous red sail we were looking at a long-faded tattered shirt with only a hint of red left in it. Bits and pieces of the old fishing boat still kept falling into the water, accompanied by fragments of fishing nets.

“The traitor of Naikal has been vanquished,” the priestess summed up, watching the column of water fall.

I exhaled with even more relief—I'd felt the first surge of exhilaration when I'd realized that even if I hadn't done Aphrosius in for good, I'd destroyed his magic boat. But the

priestess had been right. Aphrosius was no more. I felt slightly sad for some reason.

Congratulations!

You have completed the quest: Find Aphrosius!

Your reward: none.

I sighed and got up. I was feeling even sadder and more frustrated with myself for having chosen the easiest way. Surely Aphrosius could have been stopped differently—reasoned with, bribed, and cured from his greed and his thirst for liquor. I could have sent him to a temple of some deity of the light as a novice. But instead I'd bought a huge bundle of powerful explosives, place the traitor on top, and lit the fuse. And to think it was my first independent action as a clan leader.

Then I wondered if I was seeing things. Could the clouds have parted a little? Was the atmosphere less menacing now?

The old priestess Kikshu bowed her head in a silent gesture of gratitude and entered the water without a splash after gliding most gracefully through the air. The chuvvers waved us goodbye and followed the pikes. Our assistants were returning to the Shrinelands. As for me, I'd just had my reputation with all the inhabitants of the Shrinelands go up a notch. If they survived, they'd eventually return to their roles as the peaceful population of the Lake District.

“Think about my offer, Braver,” I suggested as I climbed down to the catamaran. “Don’t hurry—but don’t let it take too long, either. I need to get offline real quick. There are people waiting for me. But I’ll be back later this evening. I’ll be delighted to get a message from you.”

“It’s a deal,” Braver flashed me a brief smile. “Shall we check the crash site of Cinderella’s carriage? There might be something left there.”

“Sure. Ten minutes for the search, and then we head for the pillar of light. Time is at a premium.”

“It’s always at a premium,” the alchemist snorted, sitting down and placing his hands on the oar. “I’ll help with the rowing.”

This wasn’t necessary, but it was the thought that counted. Braver’s gesture was pleasant and suggested further cooperation on his part. So let him row, I thought.

We’d search the “crash site,” reach an area with accessible teleportation, and part ways. I’d go to Algora—to the inn nearest to the royal palace. By the time I’d log back on, I’d have to attend a party thrown by the king. What a bizarre career twist for a guy who’d deleted his old character just to make some money...

Chapter 8

A Surprise

THAT WAS SOME SURPRISE for sure.

I'd expected everything but my mother's arrival.

Hers was the voice I heard once I'd gotten out of my cocoon, reeking as it was of stale sweat.

Mom was being cross with my father in earnest. I knew her voice perfectly well—like any child who'd had their fair share of parental love and scolding. And I remained a child to her. That was quite a paradox. My father had considered me a grown man who was expected to be responsible for his actions from the tender age of seven, whereas mother still believed me to be too young and unfit for independent life in the hostile outside world. I'd have preferred their opinions to meet halfway, really.

I might not have been a particularly wise person, but I was no fool, either. I had an excellent self-preservation instinct, so I didn't venture out into the corridor, focusing instead on my workout routine starting with squats. I couldn't remember when I'd last enjoyed doing squats that much—I could hear father being subjected to a momentous tongue-lashing while keeping a stoic silence. I was ready to do squats forever.

My mother had sure been on a roll. By the time she started to wind down, I'd already done lots of squats, push-

ups, and pelvic circles, as well as several attempts to push the wall sideways, scratch the back of my head with the method used by our grade's number one slacker Mikhlevin, use my lip instead of a kazoo to play a few somber northern melodies, grimace at myself in the mirror, and fold all the recently-washed clothes so neatly that if Kyre opened the wardrobe she'd be stupefied by my impeccable neatness score.

“And where would my son be?”

“I'm here, mommy,” I beamed her a radiant smile as I got out of my room and opened my arms for an embrace. An experienced politician couldn't have done it any better. Still, I was genuinely happy to see mom. I'd been missing her.

“So how are you going?” I carried on with the banter, without giving her a chance to make her prodigal son the next target for a grilling. “Been worried about dad, have you? Fancy him leaving you like that...”

“I didn't leave anyone!” Father's angry roar after receiving a full broadside volley of mother's artillery was full of envy. He was no fool, either, realizing full well he'd be the only male member of the family to be lectured tonight. I'd be the recipient of mother's love in its entirety—and she'd been missing both of us. Dad wasn't too happy about it—for a good reason, since this was hardly fair to him.

“When did you arrive?”

“About an hour ago.”

So father had been castigated for a whole hour. I suppressed an evil cackle.

“Oh, but you should have told me,” I said aloud admonishingly. I wasn’t lying, though—I would have met her at the airport with pleasure.

“I’d already had a welcome committee! A sailor with a quick smile that your dad had sent! I wonder whether I should have gone on a seaside holiday with him, perhaps.”

“Oh!” I was surprised. “You mean he didn’t meet you? Dad!” I turned to father with a practiced look of reproach, but he gave me a stare so icy I hastily looked away. It was arctic grade—I felt like I would have caught a cold even after a brief exposure.

“Yes, I was surprised, too,” mother concurred, holding me by the elbow and giving me a full motherly scrutiny, trying to find injuries, symptoms of ailments, incipient or those I’d recovered from, hairstyle changes, and so on, and also checking whether I still had a full set of teeth and whether there was any snot in my nostrils. She’d also assessed the condition of my clothes, the oiliness of my skin, and the hue of my aura. She was a pro. I could have concealed my participation in a school fight from my dad, but never from my mom.

“They say love fades as people age...” I sighed, showing mom to the living room.

“Son, would you mind stepping out to the anteroom for a moment?” A glacial wind rasped behind my back.

“Ahem...” I almost choked on my spittle and shivered from the chill. “Some tea?”

“I expect some answers! You’ve been up to something, and I have no idea what! It’s like a thick fog by the shore when you can’t see any clear water at all! You’re just like your father, Rostislav! Just as stubborn, antisocial, and secretive! And what is there left for me to do? Sit by the window and wonder what fate may have befallen you—with absolutely nothing of substance to go on? The neighbors used to ask me whether my son was still alive, and now they wonder whether my husband may have left me! To think I should be exposed to that at my age!”

“Well, we did get up to a few things,” I confessed, helping mom make herself comfortable on the sofa with such care as though she was a precious vase of fine porcelain. I’d also made the sad observation that she had a few more lines around her eyes I hadn’t seen before, and another small one near her mouth. Mom wasn’t getting any younger.

“Have some cake,” Kyre appeared out of thin air like a shadow and placed a plate with a piece of cake on the table, as well as a teapot with pleasantly-smelling steam rising above its lid.

“Oh, thanks so much, dear. Just the thing you need after a journey like mine. What’s wrong with the airplanes these days? You get shaken so hard it’s like riding in a cart down some village road.”

“It’s because of turbulence,” father rumbled, sitting down next to mom gingerly.

“Tu-u-u-urbulence!” Mother said mockingly. “You’re the one who’s got turbulence, Aleksei! In your head!”

“I had to attend an important meeting,” father said penitently. “Couldn’t make it at all.”

Just what kind of meeting could that have been? I pricked up my ears, knowing full well that father had gotten into his cocoon even earlier than me this morning.

“So who did you meet? Some young, pretty thing?”

“Perish the thought, dear! I’ve only got eyes for you!”

“Oh, how cute is that!” Kyre pressed her palms to her cheeks, interrupting the tea ceremony for a moment. “Ross, will you get more cups? You don’t need any sweets, we’ll have dinner soon. You weren’t traveling, after all, so your glucose levels should be all right.”

“Right on,” I grunted under my voice, noticing a little leftover custard on my girlfriend’s chin and wondering about her glucose levels—they must have dropped drastically, since she’d clearly felt obliged to help herself to an extra portion of cake. I wondered whether I should make a show of male solidarity together with my father.

“Auntie Lena will be here soon,” Kyre said matter-of-factly.

I instantly revised my decision about making a stand. When the great white shark would sail in, I'd much rather attract as little occasion as possible—best of all, pretend to be a very stinky skunk pelt hanging on a faraway wall, avoided by everyone. It would have to be hanging on a wall and not lying on the floor, mind you, for fear of getting stepped on. Auntie Lena's opinion of me had improved a little, but the key word here was "little" rather than "improve."

We'd spent about an hour over tea, and the time had passed quickly. Auntie Lena had come, greeted everyone, and made herself comfy on the sofa—my father had to move to the armchair, and I ended up sitting on a tall stool, since the other armchair had already been occupied by Kyre. There was no one else—apparently, a collective decision had been made to keep it all in the family.

The conversation was nothing but small talk so far, but really pleasant. I suddenly realized that I'd been missing mom a lot and that I'd been a rather crappy son all along.

We soon moved to the table laid by myself and my father somewhat hastily to have our fill of the takeaways we'd just warmed up. No one had had any time to cook—most of it was spent holed up inside cocoons in a mummy-like fashion. But the takeaways had tasted good.

In another half an hour I got up, pecked mom on the cheek and Kyre on the nose, nodded to father, waved to Auntie Lena from a safe distance, and withdrew. I didn't owe anyone any further explanations—I'd managed to tell them enough over tea and dinner, mentioning the recent Great Expedition, my newly-earned wealth, and the foundation of a new clan, as well as the fact that Waldyra had become my job rather than a game, so I hadn't been planning on finding any "real-world"

employment. Virtual space was lucrative enough, and I wasn't the only person making money in that manner by far. If you weren't lazy, you'd manage to earn your keep just as a player.

Kyre supported me and talked about all the perks and how much she'd earn personally on a monthly basis as a member of the Albatrosses clan. I managed to overhear that bit, ending up more than a little surprised and barely keeping from whistling. She'd been paid a lot more than I could have imagined. I lingered in the doorway for a moment as she kept going on about paid vacations, medical insurance, and extra money you'd be paid if you stayed online overtime and worked for the clan's benefit. If you replaced "clan" with "corporation," one might have gotten the impression that Kyre was talking about work for a multinational mining company. And such things were normal for our time. I stopped eavesdropping, albeit with some effort, and left as the conversation shifted towards those who'd decided to relocate to the virtual world on a near-permanent basis aided by complex technology installed in the Embassies of Waldyra scattered all around the world, whose number kept growing with every month.

Having shut the door behind me, I grunted softly, recollecting my father's look—he'd also been in a hurry to get somewhere fast, possibly running late already. If it had something to do with Waldyra, I couldn't help wondering where the battle admiral might hurry so much. So my early departure must have helped him—it would now be easier for him to leave in about an hour or so, especially given that he'd now be the only man in an otherwise all-female company, and would soon be told to let the ladies have a woman's talk. Therefore, I'd just heroically saved my father. That's how I rolled, always ready for self-sacrifice...

I logged in.

There was a flash.

The warm rainbow wrapped itself around me like a multicolor blanket and carried me away.

* * *

Simple, practical, and black. Those were the main qualities of the clothes I'd chosen hastily in the clothes shop nearest to the hotel. I could have gotten +2 to Appearance if I'd ordered my attire from a fancy tailor who'd take his measurements in advance, or, perhaps, even more. But I didn't have the time for measurements, fitting sessions, or a discussion on the choice of buttons. I'd heard that it took some tailors a month to finish a single outfit. A whole real-world month, no less.

So it made sense for me to settle for ready-made clothes. A pair of not-too-tight black trousers made of excellent sturdy fabric, a shirt to match with simple sleeves and simple white lacing on the front, a light cloak of dense black silk with the shimmer removed, short deerskin boots, and an empty black carrier bag on a long belt. I had nothing at all with me apart from the tickets and some pocket change—just a few old coins. I'd never been to the palace before, but was aware that there had been so many attempts on the king's life the security measures were nothing short of draconian. Therefore, I'd done my best not to venture beyond the barest essential minimum. I'd have skipped the cloak, but it was allegedly necessary for a clan leader. However, we hadn't devised any clan cloak designs yet, so I'd opted for a neutral black one. White would be too in-your-face. Black was sober

and relatively inconspicuous. And I'd have need of the empty bag later.

I also visited a hairdresser—or a barber—or a toupee-maker? There were assorted toupees available as well, clearly made by the same guy. I didn't have time for a haircut, so I'd just been combed six ways to Sunday like a rabid poodle, with the hair fixed in place so tight my eyes had bulged out. I'd had some goo applied to the hair, and then been sprayed with cologne from an immense bottle, charged a small fortune and wished good luck.

Apart from pocket money, I also took with me sealed envelopes with the much-coveted passes to Algora's sanctum sanctorum.

Rosgard was fully ready for the royal reception now.

Getting to my destination was no problem at all—it would have been hard to miss this tall and majestic behemoth of a building sprawling over the entire center of Algora even if you tried. The outer walls were some sixty feet tall, and the towers well over five hundred feet—elegant skyscrapers with lots of loopholes and sharp-peaked roofs lost way up in the clouds. The attic must have been a damp place with all those vapors constantly coming in through the open windows.

There was an interesting myth known to every player regardless of age.

According to legends, there was a magic ballista in one of those tall towers that could find its mark anywhere in the vicinity of Algora, even if they were hiding out in a charmed

bunker with thick steel walls. The bolt would find them and kill them. The weapon's power was incredible. The deadly projectile could not be evaded in any way. You didn't even need to aim the ballista—rumor had it that it would work even if you just whispered the name of your foe into a special receiver. If they were within the kingdom of Algora, the shot would be fired. However, if you didn't know the name, you could still aim the weapon—it had some outlandish aiming system that wouldn't let you miss.

However, the problem was that the ballista and the bolts had been created by the Ancient Ones in times immemorial. No one knew whether it would be possible to repair the ballista if it broke. At any rate, the ammunition was known to be irreplaceable. There were only two bolts left. Two more shots would render the ballista useless. No other projectile would do—and there'd been plenty of attempts to find replacements.

Another rumor claimed there used to be three bolts just recently, but someone had gotten killed by one of them a couple of years ago. Just who it was remained a mystery to this day, even though thousands of players and locals alike had seen the incandescent trail that had led from the royal palace to one of Algora's streets where it had left a spot of soot on the ground—and nothing else. Just who had been killed was anybody's guess.

The legendary weapon was referred to simply as the Ballista of the Ancient Ones. The eponymous forum topic had been going strong for years. Some wished to take a shot out of the unique weapon, others doubted its existence, others still claimed they'd seen the ballista personally, and a few more said they'd buy it for any amount of money.

I didn't know whether any such thing actually existed, but I had every reason to be wary of the mythical weapon—it was said to be capable of killing a young deity that hadn't reached their full power yet, severing the ties between its avatars. The insane thing of divine origin that would be replace the deity after its demise would automatically go to Tantariall forever.

My daughter was a goddess—a potential one. No one in the palace could have had any reason to shoot her. However, you could never be too sure.

I'd wondered about something once, and even wanted to ask that question on the forum, but I never got round to it for lack of time—besides, I didn't want to be the instigator of that discussion, and couldn't be bothered to run a search on whether someone had asked a similar question before. The question was as follows: what would happen if you used the ballista to fire at the ancient star-shaped Guardian? Would it be able to kill the ancient five-pointed star?

I sighed, adjusted my cloak, and started to move forward towards several stone structures located by the sides of a wide road leading right to the palace's tall golden gate. They formed a roadblock of sorts where the first screening took place. There was always a multitude of people trying to get inside the palace. Few managed it. Some wouldn't stop at anything and offered everything they had to get inside, and many of them had good reasons for it. As I was walking to the gate, I was also reading the forum posts. There were lots of pleas and requests there. I tried not to miss anything related to getting inside the royal palace, reading as fast as I could—time was short. I hadn't even showered in the real world—I'd only managed a brief visit to the bathroom for a call of nature. The conversation had eaten up all of my time, and I was trying to make up for it now. It appeared I'd developed a Samaritan

complex, vying to act not merely of self-interest, but with the good of others in mind as well. Besides, I thought it would improve our new clan's reputation significantly.

I didn't have any scarf on that would hide my name and the crown icon next to it. Rosgard, clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, was walking towards the palace resolutely, looking nonchalant and somewhat withdrawn. That was how people went to the library—or the market.

I spotted one of the names I'd needed and started looking around.

I walked past a squad of guards that seemed relaxed, but were armed and equipped really well. This was elite troops territory. They didn't stop me—they only scanned me with their eyes, letting me through without saying a word.

Any player, local, or group could get past these guards if they weren't criminals and didn't present a threat. The X-Ray artifact was nowhere to be seen, but it was here somewhere, and one could even turn it off with enough luck and skill—everything in Waldyra was for real. Even the miscreants wishing to smuggle something dangerous into the palace or its immediate environs were given a chance.

I entered the shade of the majestic old oaks framing the wide road. There were tall streetlights between them, which had already been lighting the way with a soft even light. There were about fifty paces left until the next roadblock along the oak alley. There were players and locals sitting on the grass and the gnarly old roots protruding from the ground underneath the trees. There were at least a hundred of them sitting there and looking hopefully at the rare visitors walking

towards the palace. Those were the ones who'd been spending days here trying to get inside the palace for one reason or another. And not all of them had been there to see the king—apart from the monarch, there were many locals living there permanently, performing different roles and vested with various capabilities. The players were here because of their quests. Locals had reasons of their own. They may have been unable to access the forum, but players would normally question them, find out the details, and post them under various forum topics. They would also write to the forum themselves pleading to help them get past those confounded roadblocks and through the golden gate in the white walls. And everybody had urgent business there.

I was about to make a choice. And no one would stop me—no one was allowed to block your path in the royal oak alley. Beyond the first roadblock that I'd left behind lay the zone where no one could get robbed.

“Kogwar the Mumbler,” I called, and a myopic old man sitting on a thick root looking weary and bereft of hope jerked and started to get up. “Come with me! I'll take you inside, good man. You'll get to the captain of the palace guards and ask him about your son Kogwal, who had gone missing on his majesty's service.”

“Oh... Gods of Light...” The old man swooned and almost fell. I took him by the elbow and led him on.

“Korti Highlander,” I looked at a half-naked player with a physique that could land him a lead role in a Conan movie. “Come with me. I'll take you inside the palace.”

Those were two tickets out of six. I didn't count, having been invited officially. I'd get in even without an invitation—at least, that was my theory. If the king had really wanted to see me, he would.

“Avenging Angel,” I pointed at an elven girl dressed in textbook mage attire. She was a player, and a high-level one at that—over 200. “Follow me. I'll take you to the palace.”

There were four of us now, walking down the alley. My companions' faces expressed a deep disbelief. I took the envelopes out of my trouser pockets and handed one to each. Everyone opened theirs quickly, with the exception of the poor-sighted old-timer. There were gasps and yelps of surprise. Now they believed me at last, without any doubts left.

“My god...” The girl said as she wiped her eyes. “My god... Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Thanks!” Korti roared. “Thank you, brother! Thanks a million! What do I owe you?”

“No one owes me anything,” I shook my head, looking around me. “I just happened to have extra passes, so I've passed them on.”

“Thank you!”

“How can it be... Just as easily as that...”

“Thank you, kind friend! What is your name?”

“Rosgard,” I replied to the old man, giving him a couple of gold coins. “Once you find out what you need, I urge you to get a good meal and some rest, grandpa.”

“Oh, goodness gracious...”

The old man had spent almost an entire year here, underneath the oak, hoping against hope that fortune would smile on him eventually and that he’d manage to find out something—anything—about his vanished son. Many waited like that—the residents of the palace would very occasionally walk through the oak alley, and you’d get a chance to ask them a question if you were there. But I felt the most sorry for the old man—a destitute local with barely a chance at all.

As for Korti, he’d kept writing the same thing at the forum—his local girl had been kidnapped and was being held on some roaming island whose coordinates could only be established by the Royal Astronomer. But getting an audience with him was a near-impossible feat. And, at any rate, a player madly in love with a local was considered a lunatic. Helping someone like him wasn’t anyone’s priority, and he was often mocked mercilessly at the forum. But now Korti had a chance of making it past the gates. And then we’d see whether luck was on his side.

Avenging Angel was trying to reopen a case tried by the Royal Court that had resulted in the imprisonment of a certain old lady suspected of practicing the black arts. Only the king himself could order a court of law to reopen a case that had already been tried. So the girl needed an audience with His Majesty—and would now get one.

That was when the folks underneath the oak trees realized what was happening, having seen the envelopes and heard the gasps, and I found myself buffeted by voices.

“Rosgard! Take me, too! I really need to get through! I only need to get three signatures! Or could you please take the papers? This isn’t about money!”

“Give me the papers,” I collected a thick pile of official paperwork. The guy who’d handed them to me wasn’t lying—he wasn’t doing it for his own benefit.

“Take me with you, Ros! I’ll join your clan, too! There’s money to be made at the palace! We’ll share the profits!”

“Rosgard! How about an unforgettable evening—just you, me, and my special skills? I’m all yours if you get me past those golden gates!”

“Bro, I need help! There’s this special skill that I’m after, and I already meet all the requirements, but the teacher lives in the palace and never comes out!”

“Rosgard...”

“Rosgard...”

“Rosgard...”

“I’ve already made my choice!” I announced. “Folks, don’t strain it! The choice has already been made. If you have anything you’d like passed on, give it to me or to those coming with me. Ellie the Jar Maid,” I pointed at a girl in shabby darned clothes. Another local. “Come with me. I’ll take you to the palace.”

“Groom the Acerbic. Come with me. I’ll take you to the palace.”

The former was looking for justice. The latter wanted to request royal funding for the restoration of a destroyed mountain village whose inhabitants had been left homeless and destitute.

I was approaching the post accompanied by two more companions-to-be. As we proceeded, we were all taking papers and objects to be given to someone inside the palace. Guards never did it—unless, perhaps, one’s reputation with them was through the roof. Today I and my companions would be able to solve the problems of two dozen players and a couple of locals, and their number kept growing. There’d be fewer people in the oak alley tonight. If only everyone who’d luck out would do the same as me, there’d never be such a great commotion. Yet everyone was looking to make a profit and demanding exorbitant amounts of money for their help—never guaranteeing anything.

Once I’d collected everything I could and the number of my companions grew to its allowed maximum, I approached the next roadblock situated between two of the ubiquitous oaks. I’d had no invitation left for myself. Speak of ridiculous. But even if they didn’t let me in, I wouldn’t lose much. Honestly, I didn’t have much to say to the king other than a very tense, “Hello, how’s it going?”

“Rosgard, clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier,” a burly guard who’d come out to meet us said in a rumbling voice. “And his good companions.”

“Good evening,” I smiled, gesturing for everybody else whom I’d “picked up” along the way to get in, only leaving Angel by my side. We’d agreed that if I didn’t manage to get in, she’d get the bag with the papers and items from me and take it inside. I’d hate to thwart the hopeful. When I explained the situation to the elf, she gave me a surprised stare—the kind given to a fool who may have just denied himself entrance to the palace.

One by one, the players, still unable to believe their luck, showed their invitations, went through a search that seemed completely perfunctory, and moved on. The old man turned on the waterworks again. Understandable—fancy sitting under an oak for a year with no one giving a damn.

Everybody was let inside, with the precious envelopes collected from them—those had only been meant for single use. The lucky chosen proceeded along the oak alley that had narrowed a little, gilded by the tall baroque streetlights whose saturated glow looked like the quintessence of magic. The golden gate at its end seemed to shimmer in this light, looking like an impossibly beautiful finish line—the archetypal representation of an important goal of a lifetime. If you saw it in front of you, you’d gather up all of your will and reach it no matter what. Such goals were never meant to be rejected.

I got let in matter-of-factly. They asked me about the invitation, and I made a helpless gesture with my hands, holding my tongue at just the right moment—I was about to blurt out that I’d lost it, and they might have gotten offended

by such cavalier treatment of an important invitation. However, apart from the envelopes, I also had a paper with a whole collection of stamps and seals on it, which said, in a very fancy handwriting, that His Majesty the King of Algora wished to meet the valiant outlander Rosgard at his evening reception on such-and-such date. Despite the paper's cool and polite tone, it felt more like a direct expression of the monarch's will, demanding that the scoundrel Rosgard should present himself at the palace without fail. Therefore, no guard said a word. I was soon treading over the golden sand that rustled softly, following the small group of lucky folks who'd gotten access to the palace.

I slowed down deliberately, maintaining a distance between myself and the others. We had no reason to communicate further. I'd just managed to clear the sad blockage of petitioners waiting outside the royal palace a little. Why did I do it? For a lark. I'd been pondering whom I could take along with me. None of my fellow clan members could join with the exception of Bom, but he'd been too busy selling perishable goods from overseas. He had better things to do than mingle with the king's court. The rest of them were on another continent. I could have auctioned the invitations to well-heeled players, which would have been a lucrative business, but I wouldn't be able to know just who might use such an invitation. What if it fell into the hands of some evil plotter banished from the palace for engaging in shady political activities and sowing dissent, or just an evildoer intent on killing someone who lived inside—not the king himself, perhaps, but another high-ranking official? After all, they weren't all protected as securely as the king. And all the invitations were linked to me and mentioned "the esteemed companions of the valiant outlander Rosgard." It didn't seem like a worthy risk to take.

Instead, I'd decided to boost the reputation of the newfangled clan, which was still at zero. The locals were

always grateful, and word of the HFF clan whose leader had helped those in need would spread. The players would learn of this incident involving free invitations, too, and it would get them thinking about the clan that was handing out incredibly rare and prohibitively expensive invitations just like that, free of charge.

I had, however, been forced to catch up with the rest.

Keep together! No one is going to open the golden gate for a single ordinary visitor! This is no shop door!

None of that had been said aloud, but it was writ large on the impeccably-shaven mug of the servant clutching a hefty bunch of keys in manicured hands folded on a respectable-looking belly. There were lots of keys there, all of them different—some simple, some very intricate with convoluted ridges and notches, and some curved strangely and almost boomerang-like. There was also a thick key of dark metal with jet black ridges that had a copper tag with the word PRISON written on it in large letters. I wondered if it was a veiled threat. Take a wrong step, do not pass go, go straight to jail. Not the kind of key anyone would risk stealing, I thought, unless one was a special kind of a masochistic kleptomaniac eager to go to the slammer right after the theft.

The pot-bellied shaved servant twitched his eyebrow in a barely noticeable yet pompous gesture. There was a loud fanfare as the golden gate started to open, majestically and soundlessly. A new hue of gold illuminated our faces—the light coming from the opening gate was an even deeper and more saturated hue of gold. The gate didn't open all the way, but the official gestured us in, and we obeyed, entering a “lobby” the size of a large stadium. It was surrounded by walls, and there were ancient trees with artfully-sheared

canopies and blossoming shrubs growing all over the place. There were benches, fountains, and spacious tents of silk in between, and flocks of birds with stunningly colorful plumage chirping as they flew from tree to tree. Strange lazy creatures rolled around in the grass, looking like furry bowling balls with long tails sticking up provocatively, tipped with large fluffy pompoms.

There were players and locals—lots of them everywhere, sitting on benches, walking in the park, observing the strange creatures, reading books, sleeping on the grass or inside tents, talking, and taking glasses of rosé wine from nimble girls in masterfully-tailored uniforms of green and gold. More petitioners, but of a higher rank, and waiting in more favorable conditions.

I was impressed. If that's what the lobby looked like...

There was another golden gate in the opposite wall of the “lobby”—however, that one was also studded with gems, if my eyes didn't fail me at this distance. The same golden path framed by the glow of magic lights led towards what must have been our destination.

We didn't even have to walk. A wizard in a luxurious mantle approached us softly, smiled briefly, and clapped his hands. There was a flash, a momentary feeling of weightlessness, and we found ourselves right across the majestic lobby to be surprised a little by the sight of the same cleanly-shaven potbellied guy with the keys standing at the gate and waiting for us patiently. He'd apparently arrived by teleport. I wondered whether that might have been the reason for him being overweight—he probably didn't get to walk much.

There were so many gems adorning the gate any thief would choke on their drool. However, the number of vigilant and stern-looking guards of both sexes was not to be scoffed at. Speaking of female guards—there were many of them, and they were all clad in loose white robes with green trimming on the sleeves and the collars. Their hair was loose or braided—those were the only styles they wore. I identified them as the priestesses of Wyllowe, the eternally-sleeping goddess whose son I'd had to find soon without the slightest idea of how to do it. I didn't know much about the divine magic of Wyllowe's priestesses, but seeing them here had made me respect them even more—they wouldn't have been in the Royal Guard if they hadn't wielded some serious power. So the king was a worshipper of Wyllowe? And if she protected him, he must have protected her in return—or not? All of it was way over my head.

The music entered an even more solemn and melodious cadence as the second gate cracked open. It was about five foot thick—no bank vault door could ever compete. We stepped into a ceilinged space for the first time. An enfilade of luxurious halls opened itself to us, all their doors held open as a gesture of welcome, with a gilded carpet stretching into infinity. There was a multitude of smaller doors of either side. I had no idea where they might lead, but some had plaques on them, and there was no shortage of guards who could give advice or chase us away if needed.

“Follow me,” the ritzy servant said, making a follow-me gesture with his hand as he turned his back to us, straight as any pole.

We did follow—but not all of us. The old man had instantly addressed one of the important-looking guards, and they soon disappeared behind one of the side doors. The same was beginning to happen to the rest of my companions—they

fell back and disappeared one by one, whispering a few words of gratitude to me as they left. It felt gratifying, to tell the truth. Then it was my turn for a blatant breach of etiquette—having noticed a plaque I'd needed on one of the doors, I left the carpet unceremoniously, the servant still standing behind me and mumbling something concerning a large tapestry with a battle scene hanging on the wall.

I knocked, waited for the door to open, gave a few papers to an elderly half-orc lady with regal bearing, told her the matter was urgent, and bade my goodbyes, eager to catch up with the official. It went on like that. I would dash from side to side like a squirrel hiding its nuts in various places as I gave paper after paper away to whomever they'd been addressed to. The official proceeded unhurriedly, going on and on about the palace's decorations. Each time I managed to get a fragment of a new story. I'd listen to it for a while, and then run off again in a hurry.

It was all rather amusing, actually...

"...This majestic painting by Olzus the Inspired depicts the decapitation of Burmarr the Bristly, a notorious criminal of his day..."

"This is the golden vase bedizened by first water diamonds was where His Majesty's mother had put a bunch of sun violets, which had stood there without wilting for four years until..."

"The walls are tiled with stone from the famed deep mines in the foothills of the hoary peaks of..."

“This suit of armor once belonged to Rorcus the Third, whose dynasty had been famed for its feats in battle. You can see the hole in the armor made by the spear that had taken the brave warrior’s life. All the smiths responsible for the forging of the armor had been executed—with a single exception, since that craftsman had...”

By the time we had gotten to another closed gate, our apparent destination, I’d given away all the papers, my clothes had gotten somewhat dusty (I wondered where the dust could have come from), my hair had become matted, and I’d started to slouch.

“Would you like some refreshment, sir?” The official asked me after having given me a good scrutiny, nodding towards a tray laden with glasses of what had looked like a fine rosé.

“Don’t you have any beer?” I asked hoarsely, scratching my throat nervously.

The official’s face had already been stony. Now it was cold and hard as blue steel.

“This wine comes from a new vineyard planted relatively recently to the north of Alcaroum. Only a few barrels of this delicious young rosé with its incredible fruity body have been delivered to the palace with great caution. Trust me, the wine is incredible—it bears the proud name of De Lare Uquae for a good reason...”

“But what’s with beer?”

“We... have none.”

The conversation ended there. The local had an expression of incomprehension frozen on his face—most likely, no one had ever declined the elite rosé. I could have continued the fun game of requesting beer, but the clock was ticking and I’d rather not waste anybody’s time. The servant was doing his job, after all, and doing it well. The tour of the palace alone testified to his ability. So I decided to shut up and accept the glass I’d been offered.

The servant perked up and said good-naturedly,

“The crystal glass with the royal monogram has been made by master craftsmen exclusively for the royal court at the personal behest of the king. You can keep it as a permanent reminder of the honor that you were given today, sir.”

“Thank you,” I bowed my head. “I’ll put it on my mantelpiece.”

Satisfied by the fact that the ceremony had gotten back on track, the servant gave a sign, and the gate opened. I cursed silently—there was another enfilade of lavishly-decorated halls stretching out into infinity. By my rough estimate, I’d already walked about a mile over palace carpets, and would have to walk even more—which was all to be expected.

It had been proven many times over that the higher a local’s place in the hierarchy of power, the more difficult it was to reach him or her in every sense of the word. Even if you’d been deigned an audience, you couldn’t just walk in and start talking. You couldn’t just drop in to see the king like that.

After all, he wasn't your average Joe. The visitor was supposed to become thoroughly impressed by the palatial glamour and experience awe at the enormous abundance of assorted finery and artifacts put up on display so casually, as well as the historical scenes recorded on various paintings and tapestries. The funniest thing was that I had nothing I'd want to tell the king personally—my only reason for being here was to avoid provoking royal anger by snubbing his invitation.

I walked past one hall after another, no longer looking left and right as I became lost in thought, my gaze riveted to the back of the tireless servant who'd been drawing my attention to more and more items up on display. It was like having entered a zoo—we were walking past the halls decorated with hunting trophies. There were rhinoceroses, bulls, tigers, lions, elephants, giant snakes, enormous birds, and utterly unrecognizable creatures, all of them done in by kings, queens, princes, and princesses. The royal family was sure a bloodthirsty bunch...

We kept walking for another half hour. Half an hour, no less! And we'd been walking pretty quickly, too!

I relaxed completely and just walked on, contemplating my future actions aimed at achieving important goals. I was surprising myself—fancy Ros thinking of his future actions. At this rate I'd soon find myself the proud owner of a personal organizer and start making to-do lists in neat handwriting.

I was so relaxed I was caught by surprise—although, to be fair, it was a pleasant one. The servant opened yet another door, raised his head, tensed, and announced with a surprisingly loud and sonorous voice that could be heard by everyone,

“Rosgard! The Great Navigator! The remover of the ancient magic’s veil! One of the discoverers of the continent of Zar’Graad! The clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier!”

“One of.” I wasn’t THE discoverer—that title had been claimed by the Black Baroness. Still, at least I’d gotten mentioned as “one of,” and also “remover of the ancient magic’s veil.” That sounded cool, and I squared my shoulders for a moment. However, I deflated quickly and scurried towards a dark corner like a gray (or, rather, black) mouse, having grabbed two glasses of wine off some tray on my way—this time it was a red.

My reaction was easy to explain—behind the door opened by the servant as he’d made his loud announcement lay a gigantic well-lit hall with an incredibly high ceiling bearing a myriad of chandeliers. The hall itself was packed—a lot of folks must have been invited. If this was the “inner circle,” a wider circle would probably include the entire population of Algora. There were about three hundred people here or more, and I wasn’t only referring to humans—the entire range of sentient races was represented, with the exception of the “dark ones.” One of the walls was an aquarium with magic playing the part of glass, and the vibrating veil of water was clear enough for me to see the achylote revelers inside. There were even chuvvers wearing motley hats with bells. Just a moment... I realized I knew the wide-lipped chuvver who’d been running towards me, looking joyous and radiant.

“Rosgard! My swamp friend, old leech feed! Savior!”

Familiar arms wrapped around my leg tight, and a familiar face stared up at me. Then the chuvver started to

shake me as hard as someone not particularly bright would shake a young coconut palm in hopes of it yielding a few nuts. My fist nearly fell on the chuvver's noggin in lieu of a coconut—I barely managed to check myself. It was just that the jester grabbed me the very moment I'd entered the hall, making me shake like an aspen in a hurricane. And everybody was staring at me in amazement... so much for me joining the ranks of the local aristocracy inconspicuously.

I limped to the nearest corner, barely managing to move the leg with the chuvver attached to it, downed both glasses, unable to feel the taste of the wine for my utter irritation, and barked, having barely managed to tear the chuvver off.

“Stump Bugeye! What the hell are you doing here?”

“Hey, yeah, it's me, Stump Bugeye!” The jester grinned merrily, pulling a piece of raw fish out of his pocket and offering it to me. “Help yourself, friend!”

“How did you become a jester?!”

“Oh, I'm the King's fool now, friend Rosgard! And it's a long story! Such a long story!”

“Hold on. Wasn't my friend Kyrea the Protectress taking care of you?”

“Oh, it's hard to be a friend of hers, dear Rosgard! She's so straight-laced! You can't catch fish in an aquarium, you can't drink water from the gutter, you cannot bathe in fountains, you can't take off your shirt, you can't dance, you

can't look at fish vendors with big wet eyes, you can't sing sad songs, and you can't sing happy ones, either! But she's kind!"

"So... What happened?"

"Oh, but it's a long story! Such a horribly long story! I've been everywhere. Such horrible places... Hot, stuffy, dark, and without any fish there... But it's all fine now! I'm a royal jester! Would you like some fish? There's a lot of it! Oh! It's time for me to go! Time to irritate stuck-up bigwigs... I'm off!"

And the royal jester skedaddled, the bells on his hat ringing, having managed to press a piece of fish into my palm as he was leaving. I marveled at the amazing twists of his fate. I'd first met Stump in the Ravendark swamp, where he'd almost gotten himself killed by Lady Rot for stealing her fish, and kept bumping into him since in all sorts of places. Now the chuffer misfit was living the easy life of a King's fool in the royal palace, gorging himself on fish, playing all sorts of antics, and mocking whomever he wanted to.

As I contemplated this in bewilderment, everybody turned away from me, the hubbub in the hall became louder, and music started playing somewhere in the distance. I'd noticed a couple of unfamiliar players trying to approach me, but they got intercepted by local officials who must have had important business to discuss with them, as was customary for such gatherings. I placed myself in a nearby armchair and waited, observing the slowly-churning mass of people in the hall. I wished to be done with the whole business as soon as I could and get away from here. There was just too much to do.

The Silver Legend was what had interested me first and foremost. I might not gather the full set anytime soon, but making some progress—any progress—with that would already be good enough. Where would I even begin? Everything was a lot more complicated now because of the flames of war that had engulfed a substantial part of the continent.

Then I yelped and tried to make myself invisible, covering myself with one of my cape's flaps.

An incredibly beautiful woman had just entered the hall—slender, with a full bosom, and long flowing hair that looked ruffled by wind (only, of course, there couldn't be any wind here). She had a radiant smile, polite and lascivious at the same time, her eyes were half-closed, and her steps were so elegant she was almost sliding across the ideally-polished floor. Her pink and iridescent attire barely covered anything.

Lysanne the Magnificent had arrived. I dreaded the thought of her grabbing my leg, too.

However, the threat passed me by soon enough. A throng of people wove itself around the celebrity who was just as famous in the real world as in Waldyra—a veritable cocoon of people, with her husky laughter coming from the center. The tumbleweed of bodies “rolled” into the hall, and I sighed with relief. Some day this was turning out to be. Still, I didn't have any divine love magic emanations coming from me this time. Lysanne might not even remember me—or she might give me the cold shoulder, assuming me to be a mystery swindler endowed with a great magical power rooted in darkness. Still, I'd hate to cause a scene—or star in a new movie entitled *Rosgard the Dark Mage and the Loyal King's Fool Against the World*.

Some ten minutes later a gong rang—only once, but the sound was loud and sonorous. Everybody froze for a moment, and then hurried to leave the center of the hall. Those sitting had started to rise, and those talking went silent. I got up as well and adjusted my cloak, remaining in the corner.

“His Royal Majesty the King!”

That was short and to the point—I’d been expecting a long and flowery list of titles, but what I’d heard sounded almost businesslike.

A tall broad-shouldered man in a cape of red and gold over a sober but immaculate black outfit entered the hall. He had a golden crown on his head, a sheathed sword in one hand, and a golden scroll tied with a red ribbon in the other. Those were ceremonial objects—the Sword and the Scroll. No one had ever seen that sword unsheathed. The Scroll looked like a gilded tube with a piece of red cloth. It might have been precisely that; on the other hand, it was possible that the scroll could be opened to reveal some secret knowledge. No one knew for sure, since these items had never fallen into the hands of any player.

The king had arrived, greeted by a chaotic din of voices. His Majesty responded by giving the public a wide smile, nodded curtly, waited for a few seconds, then took off the cape and the crown, and turned around. A gilded suit of armor approached him, opening a door in its stomach, and the king placed all the ceremonial items inside—the Sword, the Scroll, the cape, and the crown. Then he took out a simple golden circlet and placed it on his head in lieu of the crown. The walking strongbox closed, turned around, and left the hall. It was followed by the statues of stone with golden bands on

their legs, arms, necks, and torsos that had been lining the walls and had now suddenly came alive, revealing themselves as golems.

The king mingled with the crowd. A whirlpool of chattering courtiers and guests formed around him. Everybody was trying to tell the king something, ask for some favor, or tell him a joke he'd remember. It was just like the real world—it was hard to believe all of it was happening in a computer game. If one wanted to emphasize the illusory nature of what was going on, one might have assumed a historical drama was being filmed there with a substantial budget and a pleiade of excellent actors. No one was out of character, including the many players present here. Their smiles were just as wide and obliging as those of the high-ranking locals. This amounted to fine acting, in fact—it must have taken some skill to behave so obsequiously around a virtual persona. Some managed to venture nothing but a reserved smile and a short nod, sending a more dignified message, but those were few and far between. Everybody else preferred to bow as deep and smile as wide as they could. I was just standing in the corner and waiting for the moment I could finally pay my respects and go away. I had no intention of making any requests. I was reading the forum topic dedicated to the King of Algora at that very moment, and he was plainly characterized as a most extraordinary person. He couldn't be treated like a regular NPC. The king was unpredictable, extremely ambitious, warlike, and amorous. He ruled the kingdom just as he wanted to, without relying on his army of advisors. It would be suicidally foolish not to take him seriously or to make an enemy of him—an enemy that would be impossible to kill and able to ruin one's gaming experience for life. .

Everything went silent all of a sudden.

I managed to react to the strange silence—which was pretty relative, since the music had kept playing. So I didn't keep the king waiting. I bowed deeply and pressed both my hands to my heart. Then I straightened my back again.

The king stepped towards me—there was less than a single pace between us now. I noticed a few locals tensing—most likely, bodyguards in the crowd. One of the stone giants supporting a corner of the roof lowered its head and stared at me with eyes that had lit up like lasers. If I so much as sneezed...

The king placed his hand on my shoulder, wasting no time on greetings. We just stood there in silence for a few seconds, and I couldn't help but marvel at the similarities between us. The dark-haired king was dressed in black, and I wore similar clothes, well-made but simple. The king was a little taller than me. Even our faces had looked similar in a way. The main difference was the ancient symbol of power in his hair—a special gold circlet with sophisticated and intricate ornamentation.

“Rosgard,” the king said softly. “You have done a lot for me. Not only did you discover a new continent offering new opportunities for so many enterprising travelers, traders, scientists, and the like, but you'd also transported my envoys there, assisting them with getting a secure beachhead and setting up their defenses. And now we have commenced a successful colonization of those lands.” His eyes looked at me attentively with a slight glimmer of gratitude in them. “I never forget favors done to me, especially important ones like that. Think about what you might want to ask of the King of Algora, Rosgard. And once you're done thinking, come back to the palace and relay your request to me. It shall be granted.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty,” I lowered my head again. “I am most grateful for your kindness.”

The king nodded, took his hand away from my shoulder, and became part of the crowd again with the grace of a natural born politician, having already managed to wrap his arm around the waist of a violet-eyed beauty, who started giggling softly. Her deep cleavage started to move up and down excitedly, and her golden hair fell freely onto her naked shoulders. I could wager I knew who his majesty would be spending the night with.

About a dozen people started moving in my direction. I turned around and made my way to the door hastily. It cracked open, and I squeezed myself through. The door closed behind me, and I was in the enfilade of halls again. Teleportation didn't work here, so I started running, resolved to leave the gigantic golden trap as soon as I could. I passed one hall after another under the guards' intense scrutiny. However, none of them said anything. Soon I was back at the “lobby.” Teleportation worked here—only outbound, but that was exactly what I needed.

There was a flash.

The teleport delivered me right next to an inn entrance half a mile away from the palace. I entered and was taken aback by the astonished look on the face of the sweet girl at the reception desk. She was staring at me—but it wasn't my face that had drawn her attention. It was my shoulder. I glanced there as well, and grunted in surprise—there was a clearly-visible print of a firm manly hand on it, golden and glowing gently in the twilit hall.

“Th... The King of Algora has touched you personally...”

“He did,” I smiled wearily, still gazing at the print.

“And he did so with a feeling of profound gratitude and benevolence...” The receptionist said slowly. She looked like she was in a deep trance.

I looked around me and exhaled with relief. The hall was empty. Still, I had to hurry.

“My best wishes to you, dear lady.”

“If there’s anything you need... Anything at all... If you find the night too cold, and if sleep doesn’t come easy...” The green eyes looked at me with such passion and the hands placed on her hips emphasized her slender waist so eloquently that the message could not be misread, and, for a second, I saw Kyre’s furious face as she swung for her ninth strike with a bloodied skillet in my mind’s eye.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said with a smile, running swiftly up the carpeted ladder.

As it turned out, the golden palm print of the King of Algora affected local women as an aphrodisiac. I wondered if it worked in the same way as the divine aura from before. Then I recollected all the legends told about the king’s prowess as a lover and his numerous conquests. Could it be that the king was steeped in pure libido? Was such a thing even possible?

At any rate, I found myself in possession of a Casanova's shirt that one could put on before heading out to mingle with the local women, all of them loyal subjects of the Kingdom of Algora. I thought it would be best to leave it in my private room forever. I'd put it in the deepest corner of my wardrobe as a memento to be shown in my old age to my numerous grandchildren—or, perhaps, my peers, just as hoary and frail as me. I'd chuckle suggestively, throwing furtive glances towards the kitchen where Granny Kyre would be making porridge, and whisper about my numerous conquests made possible by the magic shirt. The hoary peers would tell me in no uncertain terms just how sick they'd gotten of my magical rag story, and suggest we played a game of poker instead.

At any rate, I'd accomplished something important by complying with the king's insistent request and wasting almost no time in the process. I'd log out and sleep in the meantime, only to return to Waldyra tomorrow. I didn't manage to get to Tranqueville yet—it would have to wait until the next day.

There was a flash.

Logout.

Chapter 9

Tranqueville Aflame. Trial by Fire. The Mage with the Scarf.

I REMEMBERED that lovely and cozy city from a different time, back when it had still been a peaceful place—jolly, festive, and tidy, with a certain quaint gravitas. I remembered the mayor, looking solemn and a little pompous as he inspected the tents and the stalls during the festival, wolfing down frogs' legs and guzzling wine whenever he'd thought there was no one looking. The townsfolk had been doing the same thing, but without trying to be discreet about their drinking.

I didn't know why, but I'd instantly felt a bond with this place—a strong one. A tidy town like that—almost a village, but with neat buildings of stone—was somewhere I'd wanted to settle in my old age. In the real world, obviously.

However, I had no such wishes now. The city had become a battlefield, and it was shrinking rapidly under the pressure of encroaching enemy forces, even though the enemies were nothing to write home about.

As I peeked out of a corner singed by magic fire, I shot out a String at ground level and instantly planted five Thorn Thickets in front of a burly half-orc running and yelling loudly. The opponent had jumped over the humming String clumsily, bleated something triumphant, and instantly become stuck in the thorny bushes, which started to tear into his flesh in earnest. I changed spells and gave Deathclaw Anxus two Explosive Ice Spears as a bonus. A lone Red Wasp approached the half-orc, stinging his green cheek, and then flickered out, to be followed at once by three Explosive Fireballs. The

Incandescent Arrow flew right above the ground, but only because I'd wanted to make sure—I'd seen the silvery blob of mist with crimson sparkles inside settle on the dirty street.

I turned around, placed my palm on the forehead of the tank girl who'd taken her armor off, and used Serious Healing to restore her health.

“Thank you! Just in time, too!” Her voice was happy and weary at the same time as she cast aside a sword with a jagged edge and picked another.

“Thanks!” The archer said, checking his quiver. “Got any auras? Something to enhance precision and range? They've hemmed us in here...”

“I can see as much,” I snorted as I drank a medium portion of mana and handed three health potions to the girl and three more to the archer. “Be thrifty with these. I have no auras. Damn... I need to roll back my specialization by any means I can find. Those battle spells are like firecrackers...”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“For Christ's sake, don't sir me. I'm talking about my magic. Folks, don't go looking for trouble. Find them one by one and dispatch them, and then return to your shelter at once. Guerilla tactics, not trench warfare. Oh, will you look at that! Another winged red-named bandit at 3 o'clock...”

The elven girl in a black dress and black cape with a red vampire style collar was limping (after an encounter with a

trap, most likely) towards a half-destroyed house with empty dark eyelids for windows, clearly hoping to find shelter there. She couldn't see us at all, her destination being some ten paces away. I'd waited for the limping PK to get to a long stretch of a wall without a single opening in it, and then jumped out, planting Thorn Thickets around her with my one hand and pelting her with Explosive Fireballs with my other. She started thrashing from side to side as I hit her with another Thorn Thicket—right after the fireballs had reached their mark. A lone Red Wasp hovered over the smoking bushes, humming disappointedly, and soon disappeared for want of a target. It was a homing spell, which made it really useful. The damage it did was still rather light, but so far I'd been using it as a life detector. If it stung, it meant that the enemy was still alive and another attack spell was called for.

Having waited for another minute, I nodded to all the fighters I'd met in the cul-de-sac side streets; then I went out and collected loot off the “corpses” first and foremost. Two blobs of mist shot through with dark red yielded nineteen potions of varying potency, shabby weapons and armor, a few scrolls of teleportation, and a few more scrolls with weak battle spells. Apart from that, there was money—around five gold coins all in all, and valuable household items, clearly taken from looted houses. Those despicable scavengers...

An arrow whooshed through the air and hit the ground with a loud thud a few inches away from my foot. I dashed along the back wall of the same building where the limping looter had met her fate, planting Thorn Thickets as I went—they gave good cover and protected from regular arrows. I heard a few crackles when arrows bounced off the thorny branches. By the time the magic had dispelled, I was no longer near the wall—I'd dived into a small window, only managing to squeeze through by virtue of having a really minimal battle outfit on—cloth with a little bit of leather. A heavy suit of armor wouldn't have let me budge.

I reclined against a wall and decided to get a breather. My Weariness was up, and its bar glimmered a warning yellow. I could make another dash, but I'd go down like a felled tree immediately afterwards. This was also where I'd been planning to dump the PKs' heavy weapons and armor, covering them with soil to make sure the looters wouldn't find them. Dragging all that stuff along would be too strenuous. I used a cracked tabletop for cover, with Explosive Fireballs at the ready—a formidable weapon when used inside, as I'd witnessed—threw a few rags over the tabletop, and sprayed some dust over the whole affair, going perfectly quiet and still. I got a reassuring message from the system, which then dissolved into thin air.

+35 to Disguise

I heard rough irritated voices outside the window. Several players were arguing, stomping loudly over the smashed rocks without even trying to stay inconspicuous or lower their voices.

“Where’s that goddamn wizard in the scarf? No one’s even managed to read his nickname!”

“It’s concealed! But this guy sure rocks! He’d already offed six of us! Nicely done there!”

“Would you like to catch up with him and lick his boots?”

“Hey, pipe down! You have to acknowledge superior power!”

“But I know his face!” Another voice, a higher-pitched one, chimed in. “It’s really very familiar! It feels like I’ve seen it many times!”

“What face? It’s just a blob of mud. He must have done it on purpose. There’s also the scarf on his mug. Imagine that! A single player interfering with our whole operation! He’s done in six of our folks already!”

“Eight.”

“What?!”

“Anxus has just come in. He’s been snuffed by magic and thorns.”

“That’s him all right. Who’s the other one?”

“Sundering Ambra. And she’s left.”

“Where did she go?”

“How the hell should I know? She just left. Must be sick of it all by now. It’s the third time she’s gotten killed today.”

“Oh, screw this! All our plans are going south! Are we going to take the damn City Council today or are we not?”

“Hey, boss, you’re the one who should know.”

“Are you testing my patience?!”

“Why would I? Anxus says he’d gotten offed right here. But his cloudy corpse is nowhere to be seen. Someone must have picked it up.”

“There were two wounded members of the ‘Light’ group we’d surprised on that street. Fancy them having a whole house dropped on their heads. Only two have survived. That’ll teach those smartass do-gooders. Remember how loud it was?”

“So that was the noise I’d heard,” I concluded as I recollected the loud rumble coming from a nearby street that I’d heard while running away from a knight in charmed green armor, wielding a sturdy shield that he’d been using skillfully. I’d instantly suspected the sound had come from a collapsing building—and I turned out to be right.

“The higher-ups are already jittery! Who the hell is he? We’ve gotta capture the council house at once! Get everybody back to their positions!”

The voices started to move away quickly. One of them reported haltingly,

“We’re closing in. Two of our long-distance guys are in position on the clock tower, keeping their pieces trained on the council house’s doors and windows. Once we blow up the doors with explosive potions, we’ll let two tanks in. Then

we'll pretend we're falling back, lure the frog-lovers into the street, and have our archers surprise them with a couple of sharp and poisonous presents.

“I knew as much, duh! It was my plan, after all! Tell me about our positions!”

“We'll be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“Well, I'll be snookered! A whole clan unable to capture a single council house. And then there's this vigilante on top of everything! I hope he chokes on his rancid scarf!”

“You bastard!” I thought to myself, and started burying the enemy cuirass, chain mail, helmets, vambraces, and other heavy stuff with the pep and enthusiasm of a dog stashing a juicy bone for later.

The clock tower was a smoking structure I'd already seen. It was two streets away from me, according to the singed map I'd taken off the corpse of the first PK I'd encountered. So that's where I would go. I only hoped there'd be no armored thugs guarding the approaches.

I braced up, climbed over the windowsill, and ran to the tower, hugging the walls and looking around me carefully. Braver was running late, and I needed to get rid of some unnecessary potions in exchange for a couple of useful ones. I'd need many—the situation in Tranqueville was dire. As soon as I'd arrived (and I'd prefer not to recollect my journey here, which had involved murder, fleeing, and lots of cursing), I was hit by the realization that I'd jumped out of the frying

pan into the fire. A very malicious kind of fire, in fact, even though it was rather inept.

Tranqueville was being sacked by a small PK clan conspicuously named the Evil Flame, a bunch of greenhorn baddies. And they'd never have risked attacking the town if it hadn't been weakened by a recent fight against "chaos," a term coined to describe players killing and looting without any purpose. Two powerful clans following the Light had chased the "chaotes" away, routing and killing many of them in the process. The rest were now being driven northwards across the blackened meadows, where the survivors would most likely be surrounded and exterminated. Oddly enough, all of them were local—cynical mercenaries and groups of criminals.

A large force of guards would reach the town soon. However, they'd still been far away, and the small town, already damaged substantially by the war, was endangered again—the Evil Flame were enterprising fellows who'd recruited as many "red" players as they could find and were now trying to wipe out what opposition had remained in the city and pillage everything they could.

There were a few protected bastions that hadn't given up yet, and the council house was one of those. The pot-bellied mayor must have holed up inside.

I adjusted my scarf, staying close to the ground, and started to observe from underneath the broken vines. The stone clock tower stood proud some forty paces away from me—a proud and majestic structure. It could also tell time—so many purposes served by a single building. It was guarded by two fighters leaning against the wall absorbed in a game of cards. A textbook scenario. If I were a sneak, this would be just the time to cut their throats on the sly. However, I was no silent

killer—just a clumsy battle mage with artificially-lowered magical damage.

The card-players' ridiculous levels were good news—one was Level 70, and the other, Level 67. Such weaklings had nothing to do anywhere near the front line. To assign them to guard an object of great strategic importance pivotal to their council house attack plan was utter idiocy.

I felt cheered up a little—it may not have been the most wholesome feeling, but it rubbed my ego the right way and made it purr nevertheless. The leader of the Evil Flame clan was stupider than me and apparently even more ignorant of battle tactics. My seafarer's salty soul rejoiced, but resting on my laurels was out of the question. I wondered what to do about the two idiots guarding the tower entrance.

I got slowed down by my unbridled imagination again, unfurling the tableau of two enormous goblin warriors guarding a tall tower and a brave hero of rugged appearance contemplating getting rid of this nasty impediment before my mind's eye.

Then I had a sudden brainwave—my imagination also came up with a hint. Time was short, and the accursed Operation Council House could begin any moment. However, there was no need to actually engage the “goblins” in battle—for the time being, anyway. I decided to try a classical trope featured in so many books and movies. I raised my head towards a bunch of grapes and made a flicking motion with my hand as I picked two of the sweet juicy grapes with my lips and started chewing them. The gold coin whooshed through the air, falling just where I'd intended it to, making a short clinking noise as it glinted in the sun. I didn't really think it would work, but you never knew...

One of the fighters headed towards the dropped object with interest. The other one remained where he was and started to look around in alarm. Unfortunately, one of them was bound to be a little brighter than the other. I ate two more grapes, took aim, and hit the player who'd bent over the coin with a Thorn Thicket. I hoped he appreciated the care—after all, he'd had no gold and been sitting in the open sun only a few seconds ago, and now he was rich and resting in a shady park.

The second player jumped up, pulled out his sword, and started to hack away at the thorns. The thicket's captive was aiding him from the inside, tearing himself free from the thorns' embrace with some difficulty. In the meantime, I entered the tower easily behind their backs, I stepped over barely noticeable taut rope strung at floor level, which was the same color as the floor. It was as primitive a trap as they go—you were supposed to trip and advertise your presence to everyone. There were bells on the rope, and behind it lay a mechanism resembling a bear trap. I evaded the trap and found myself in the shadow of the tower, at the beginning of a spiral staircase, which was, much to my delight, made of stone, so it wouldn't creak. I swapped one of my spells for another and ran up, trying to move as fast as I could—there were cries of alarm and curses, some of them rather inventive, coming from below. Someone was furiously yelling something about the plans he'd made involving a gardener wizard in a scarf. The details were graphic enough for me to promise myself that I'd stay out of the perverts' clutches.

However, I was more concerned with the foes above me than the ones below. The latter would have to get to me first, whereas the long-range fighters holed up at the top of the tower only needed to lean over the side of the stairwell and fire a few shots using a weapon or a spell of their choice. I'd

be in hot water then. So I made a sprinter's dash for it, listening to the yells attentively. I was enjoying what I'd heard so far—they'd wound down a little, but still didn't divulge anything useful. Had the fighters been a little brighter, they'd already have announced it to all and sundry—"Tower guards attacked! Tower guards attacked! It's a magic attack! We can't see the enemy yet!"

Instead, all I could hear was copious invective coupled with ghastly threats that they would drive the impudent mage to hysterical character deletion and make his life an utter nightmare until that very day. I wasn't impressed by their swearing skills much.

Such yelling attracted attention without warning others or giving them a signal to get ready. That much became clear to me as I reached the ladder's top step, finding myself on a wooden platform resting on two thick oak beams supporting the stopped clock mechanism and two archer players leaning halfway over the platform and observing the commotion at the bottom of the tower with interest. They didn't see me—or hear my approach. Even though the hands on the clock had fallen still, something kept knocking somewhere deep inside that mass of cogwheels, as if trying to set itself free and revive the mechanism.

What utter idiots.

I re-shuffled my spells, approached them softly, jumped onto the table and hurled two explosive potions right at them, aiming at their lower backs. I'd initially wanted to have them take a magic icicle in their behinds, but decided against it. The Ice Spears hit their spines first, and then the backs of their heads, which had jerked up in surprise. Crushed ice flew everywhere, disappearing quickly. As soon as the wounded

archers started to move backwards, I planted a Thorn Thicket, automatically cast the Red Wasp mistakenly, and then threw two more Ice Spears with just one hand. The Thorn Thicket slowed the hapless PKs down, prickling them mercilessly and getting them stuck. I kept on hammering away with ice spears, occasionally also refreshing the Thicket to keep my enemies immobile. I was going through mana very quickly, but I didn't mind—I had good supplies.

I added some fire at the end. Two fireballs hit the howling archers viciously. One of them tried to jump away, apparently hoping for some miracle to save him. The magic plasma hit him in midair, puffing and hissing furiously. A silver and crimson blob of mist fell to the ground. The second enemy had still been alive—he'd managed to drink a potion and take a pot shot at me from his crossbow, hitting me in the stomach. The bastard had been aiming for my throat originally—possibly, hoping to mute me. I didn't even slow down, finishing him off with raging fire.

“Hold on... Don't touch the cross...”

With those words, the PK disappeared.

Keep my hands off his favorite crossbow? Didn't I hear something similar recently—only it wasn't a crossbow in that case? I obviously ignored his ridiculous request. I jumped off the table and collected the loot, wincing at the thick billows of gray and white smoke. The use of fire had been my mistake. I did manage to inflict burns on my targets and make their HP dwindle faster, but I'd also set fire to the clock tower. The fire spread fast—a third of the internal platform was already enveloped in flames. As I reached the ladder, I peeked down and jumped away at once as a throwing ax flew through the air with a loud buzz and made a loud clangor ricocheting off the

ceiling. The many footsteps I heard told me that the enemy was sending reinforcements up the stairs. I threw a quick glance at them—there were about a dozen of them. I wouldn't be able to pass.

I got to one of the square windows, jumping over the flames below and dodging the ones that came from the sides. I opened the blinds, turned around, and filled the room with the clock mechanism with as much fire as I could—fierce and voracious fire. When the heat touched my face, taking some HP off me as it did so, I got up onto the windowsill and then onto the external cornice through the window, wiping the soot off my face and looking around me.

There was a group of PKs on the roof of one of the buildings below. They'd seen me and were now yelling and pointing their fingers. Someone had drawn a small crossbow and was taking aim at me now. I saw the warrior in green armor among them—the one who'd managed to fight me off. Was it their leadership gathered there? I couldn't help myself and sent them about a dozen fiery greetings from the top of the tower. Some scattered in fright, including the one with the crossbow. The warrior in green stepped forward angrily, covering one of the players and raising his shield, which had borne the brunt of the magical attack. He shook the residual flames off his shield just as lazily and looked up. All right, so this one was a notch above the rest. A tough fighter. But the ally he'd covered must have been the leader, and I would recognize him now, even at a distance.

I heard a few mocking cries. The PKs, embarrassed by their flight, were returning and shouting their best wishes at me now.

“Get roasted like the turkey you are!”

“Show us your face, hero! Why hide your heroic mug?”

“Spread your wings and fly!”

“Burn in hell!”

This last shout was full of malice. Was it one of my earlier victims, I wondered?

A loud rumble behind my back scared me half to death, announcing the beginning of a local Armageddon. There was clangor, moans of mutilated metal, and the blood-curdling creaking of the half-burnt wooden beams. The wooden platform loaded with tons of clockwork plummeted down like an elevator cab with its wires cut. The terrified screams coming from the “shaft” were music to my ears. I had no warm feelings towards whoever had tried to make a hole in my scarf with their ax. It wasn’t exactly something that I’d planned, but I was happy with the result.

There was a loud crash, and the tower started to wobble. I slipped off the cornice and started falling like a screaming superhero in a black cape. A vine shot out of my hand and found purchase on the side of the agonizing clock tower. Momentum took me sideways; I slammed into the tower wall. An arrow hit the brick as an enemy fireball splashed across the masonry in the distance—not even remotely a high-ranking one, much to my relief.

A moment later I rounded the corner of the monumental structure. Having caught the tall and slightly familiar spire, I dived in that direction, got a hold on the wall

of the nearby building with Sticky Vine, made an unexpected somersault and fell onto the flat roof of a nearby three-story building. I didn't allow myself to slow down and ran further across the roof, hoping I wouldn't get an enemy arrow in my back. Then I jumped again, throwing a glance behind me as I was in midair just in time to see the clock tower begin to collapse like a house of cards. The loud crash and the clouds of dust and smoke announced the incident to everyone within sight and earshot.

I loosed off a few more vines, quickly moving from one to another, and jumped into a small inner yard behind tall towers. I instantly saw six swords and one sausage-like finger stained with some yellow sauce pointing at my chest. The mayor licked the fingers of his other hand and said sternly with his mouth full, dropping pieces of food onto the yellow silk napkin tucked underneath his collar,

“The clock tower was one of the truly elegant landmarks of our glorious town, Rosgard. Who could have committed such a despicable act?”

“Enemies!” I replied in a gruff voice, filled with the kind of hatred only a true aficionado of local architecture could have displayed.

The game system warbled its agreement, sending me a couple of messages. There must have been an achievement there—or even two.

“Enemies!” The mayor's cheek twitched, making him look like some dignified military leader gone to seed. “Do you know who they are, friend Rosgard?”

“The Evil Flame, an outlander clan,” I replied at once. “They wish to force their way through our city’s defenses, kill all the locals, and pillage all their property.”

“The Evil Flame, an outlander clan,” the mayor echoed, and the soldiers around me muttered the same, putting their weapons away.

“The very same. They’re an inexperienced enemy, but they are incredibly covetous. And they will remain here until we chase them away. I have killed many, but you know that outlanders can resurrect—they will come back to life and return, a little weaker, perhaps, but just as cruel and vicious.

There was a system sound notifying me that the entire population of Tranqueville had become one point friendlier towards me. My reputation was growing already.

“Oh yes, the outlanders resurrect... What an irritating trait,” the mayor sighed, offering me his hand, licked clean as it was. “I salute you, Rosgard. Once again you prove yourself a worthy friend. And a generous one... Let’s go and have a snack. You can’t expect the full range of delicacies fitting for the occasion, of course. There’s a war going on, after all. But we do have a few things, including wine!”

“How about bee...” I started blurting, shaking the hand with some reluctance, but then checked myself and said in a grateful tone, “I’ll be delighted to wet my throat with some wine.”

“Sure, sure... Now, where are our humble leftovers?” The mayor rubbed his hands, entering the wide doors to the

council city hall. I followed him.

The “leftovers” in question amounted to dozens of tables standing inside the spacious hall, laden with an enormous amount and variety of dishes. I’d call that a feast, but the mayor must have opined differently—he looked positively somber as he grabbed a gilded dish lid the size of a manhole cover and started to load up his plate with roast quail, pieces of ham, frogs marinated in sweet mustard, tantalizingly-smelling pickled mushroom, and boiled eggs, muttering dejectedly,

“These wartime restrictions are so troublesome...” He raised a jug and poured at least two pints of wine into his goblet, followed by a few fresh grapes and a slice of lemon. Then he grabbed a few cubes of ice off a magic hoarfrost-covered tray and dropped them into the wine as well, turned towards me, and said in a lugubrious voice, “So this is how we make do, you see. Just barely...”

“I’d say,” I feigned agreement with extreme reluctance, looking away from the two-foot pile of crispy roast quails and partridges. “Rationing must be hard...”

“Oh, we barely manage to stay nourished. The accursed war! Oh, I’ve heard of worse places where honest folks have to drink water perforce. Water! Gods of the Light! May we never know such destitution... anything but water...”

“Sure,” I nodded with even greater reluctance. I took a plate and started to fill it with “leftovers” so as not to look out of place among the poor starving officials. I started with a plump quail, and chose a tangerine sauce with large chunks of pulp to go with it. Then I filled my goblet with some fine

seventeen-year-old vintage. Nothing fancy indeed. The besieged council house had clearly been suffering from wartime privations.

“Friend Rosgard! Would you, perhaps, like to help our glorious town a little more?” The mayor’s stuffed mouth made his normally stentorian voice muffled and unclear, but I got his emphasis on “our” perfectly well.

“I’ll do everything I can to protect *our* town,” I promptly replied, and we clinked our goblets happily.

“Captain Lerouche Blancheur is in charge of the military operations,” the mayor pointed to the officer and reached for the marmalade with a sigh of a starved man.

“Captain!” I introduced myself to the officer, having surreptitiously put the dish away and brushing the crumbs off my cloak.

The man who turned around when I called had an incredibly-groomed curly mustache, shaggy eyebrow, eyes bulging and cheeks puffed out furiously.

“Rosgard! Delighted! I’ve heard so much about you. So, the Evil Flame clan, eh?”

“Yes, captain! Them and none other! We need to join forces and fight them back! Together we’ll be able to wipe out the enemy, sending them a clear message that this town’s too tough a nut to crack! Our brave townsfolk have no fear for anyone!”

The captain heard me out benevolently, looking so touched he'd had to wipe his eyes with a monogrammed silk handkerchief, then took the knife and fork into his hands again and shook his head in dejection.

“There's no way I can help you, friend Rosgard. All our forces are busy defending the council house and its deep cellars. Oh, you have no idea what's in those cellars!”

“Oh...” I bleated in absolute disbelief as I realized there would be no help from them.

“There are hams, barrels of pickles, as well as amazing fruit and vegetables with droplets of the morning dew still on them! The provisions are of excellent quality! We cannot risk the food... or the lives of the warriors that we're responsible for. We need each and every one of them!”

“I see,” I grunted, without asking about the provenance of morning dew in a deep cellar and whether it might be the result of one of the guards relieving himself in the immediate vicinity of the provisions in question.

“But we have faith in your strength, friend Rosgard! Do something! In the name of freedom! And the fire that burns in our hearts!”

You have received a quest: Do Something!

Try to do anything you can to protect the citizens of Tranqueville from the attackers!

*Minimum requirements for completing the quest:
Destroy at least five of the town's attackers.*

Your reward: A large prosciutto. Unknown.

I wished I knew what a prosciutto was. Some magical weapon? I'd find out about it later. It was pointless to reach for a pie in the sky. Five pies. My brain was still trying to come to terms with what I'd just heard, since it just wouldn't sink in. How could something like this be possible in the first place? I'd fought my way through countless enemies, found my way inside the citadel, met the leaders, and offered my help, hoping for assistance of powerful fighters that would help me exterminate the despicable PKs that had overrun the city. That's what I'd hoped for as I performed my Tarzan-like acrobatics on the vines—only to have my hopes thwarted and stare morosely at a pile of roast quail and fresh vegetables with morning dew still sparkling on them. No one would come with me—they'd all stay here, gorging themselves on the fine food, and fighting to the death for the remnants of their precious provisions.

I wondered whether it might have made sense for me to stay, too. Sit down at the table, have a fine dinner, get to know the suicidal locals stuffing their guts and completely oblivious to what was going on outside their council house shelter. When the killers and pillagers would burst in, yelling loudly, I'd have a front row ticket to the sight of naïve marinated frog lovers slaughtered summarily without mercy.

I cursed, turned around, and headed for the exit. I really missed Tyrant, my faithful black and white wolf. It would have been a lot easier with him by my side, not to mention my friends...

Yet it was pointless to think of those who were literally half the world away from the war-torn shores of Lake Naikal. I'd have to wing it. I'd had some idea of what to do next, but the details remained as unclear as a reflection in a mist-covered lake at the break of dawn so far. I'd need to wait for word from Braver, whom I had warned not to enter the besieged city. I'd need to get to a certain mansion guarded by elite warriors. If I managed to sneak in, I'd have the company of experienced warriors—I doubted that the Evil Flame would be able to do anything against elite elf archers.

I looked around and realized no one had really cared about my departure. The besieged members of the city council were too deeply engrossed in their meal and small talk. I sighed as I took a step onto the rickety scaffolding that led to the second-story window, guarded by crossbowmen and a mage. The guards didn't interfere, and I slid over the windowsill easily, descending down a thick rattling chain that ended about six feet above the ground. Then I jumped down and found myself in a small room of what once had been someone's residence. There was a shattered geranium pot on the windowsill, the ceiling was blackened, the internal doors smashed into kindling by axes, and all the furniture broken. I instantly saw a picture of bandits barging in with loud yells, bearing torches and axes and destroying everything around them.

“I'm near Tranqueville. It's sure been an adventure and a half getting here...”

Some good news at last. I chuckled understandingly at his description of the voyage—reaching Tranqueville was far from easy in these days. You couldn't teleport here—the scroll would make you emerge about a mile to the south of the town,

and you'd have to walk the rest of the way. I'd had a few really close shaves myself, and I'd warned Braver about the most dangerous of places. There were highwaymen, fortunately rather lazy, and two harpies afflicted by some strange disease occupying a fir copse. The bridge across a nearby ravine was really the maw of a bridge-chewer—a monster that looked like a filthy potato sack of Gargantuan proportions with a multitude of legs and jaws that would make any crocodile green with envy. These faced upwards and could open incredibly wide, turning into a straight long platform with some semblance of a railing. Any traveler who'd step on such a bridge was a goner. The monster had received its name since its modus operandi was to consume an existing bridge and then replace it with its jaws, using its incredible mimicry skill to make them resemble the old construction.

“Approach the town from the west, but don't go inside just yet. I'll send you the exact coordinates.”

“Roger that. I'll be moving to the western outskirts and hide out there.”

A calm and businesslike guy. I wondered what decision he'd make about joining our clan.

I checked the magic scarf to see how much longer it would remain active and keep concealing the legend displayed above my head. Then I opened the interface and went over the latest system messages.

Achievement unlocked!

You receive the achievement: PK Killer, Tier 1!

You can see the table of achievements in your character's menu.

Your reward: +1% to any damage you deal.

+1% to Defense from any damage dealt by PKs.

Achievement unlocked!

You receive the achievement: Anonymous Killer, Tier 1!

You can see the table of achievements in your character's menu.

Your reward: +1% to any damage you deal.

+5% to the effect duration of any item, skill, or magic concealing your character's personal data.

I received the first achievement for finishing off all ten PKs without logging out. The second was for killing them all without revealing my actual identity, remaining simply a “mage in a scarf.”

The system had also informed me that what I'd done for the city's greater good had been noticed—many surviving residents of Tranqueville had seen me fighting the town's enemies. Now they would come to my assistance or call me if

they got into trouble. Apparently, it only concerned those hiding out in the cellars and ruins—not those holed up in the city council’s building. Well, let them gorge themselves to death, I thought to myself. I’d really appreciate it if one of the townsfolk would support me in a critical moment by dropping a potted plant onto a PK’s head from their balcony, for example.

I shuffled my spells and was about to step outside when I noticed something dark in the middle of a sunny street. I felt a chill run down my neck—it felt similar to Fading, but was clearly something different. I stepped back and threw a quick glance at the dark thing. A split second sufficed—I jerked backwards, turning around already upon reaching the center of the room. A few leaps got me to the window and over the windowsill. The next second I was already scaling the stone wall covered in lush ivy. I didn’t even need the Vine—I climbed it with an acrobat’s ease and scurried away across the tiled rooftops.

There was a loud bang and a heavy rumble. I turned around and saw the house I’d just left collapse—the roof caved in and the walls came tumbling down. A pillar of dust rose to the sky. It had some strange black mist inside. There was a loud horse’s whinny that sounded so furious I accelerated like someone wearing a jetpack, going all out to escape the monster—for it was definitely a monster, and scary enough for me to abandon all notions of remaining unnoticed and start hopping across roofs like a crazy chimneysweep.

I jumped. Then I jumped again, hopping from roof to roof. I slipped a few times, rolling and causing dozens of tiles to fall to the cobbled street, sounding like broken glass as they smashed. I kept grabbing at whatever supports were available, getting up, and running on. The whinny sounded again—it seemed to be coming from somewhere very near this time. I

turned my head around as I ran to see a dark horror gallop through the street, about to catch up with me, its enormous spiked hooves smashing makeshift barricades to kindling, toppling trees, crushing abandoned carts, and pulverizing terracotta flowerpots. Its evil eyes blazed like fire and followed my every move. There was red lettering over its ugly head, but I couldn't make it out while I was running, and I couldn't risk stopping. I turned sharply instead, accelerating even more and jumping over a narrow street, landing on a partially-destroyed nearby roof. I barely managed to keep my balance on the charred beam, squatted, having filled my lungs with air by force of real-world habit, rifled through the looted alchemy and grabbed two of the potions that had looked promising—Bull Stamina and Rye Wind. I chugged down both, looked at the system messages, and winced. It wasn't good. My Agility and Stamina went up, but my Weariness didn't slow down one bit. I also started smelling like a wheat field—or, perhaps, a rye field. The smell was actually real nice, bringing to mind thoughts of happy peasants during some village celebration, only I wasn't in the mood for celebrating.

“Is he mocking us or what?” A yell of surprise from below made me jump, nearly falling off the beam.

A Level 100 axe fighter was standing in the street. He'd just hung his weapon on his back, kneeling for a stone. A stone, no less! Did he think I was a crow or a sparrow?

The misty black death that had jumped from around the corner slammed hard into the bent player with the nickname Arvil the Nimble, who did justice to his alias by flying off at breakneck speed, slamming his head into the wall of a house, and then falling to the ground stunned, grunting with malice,

“Freaking scarf-wearing magician!”

“Uh...” I bleated as I popped the Swift’s Dew vial open and drank the content. It gave me +10% to Motion Speed and slowed down my Weariness onset. At last.

I jumped over to the roof ridge and looked down. The steed that must have come straight out of hell reared and crushed the stunned player with its forelegs, finishing him off. But I hardly even noticed the silver and crimson blob of mist. My eyes were riveted to the hideous creature.

It was indeed a horse—only a deformed and overgrown one, moving in a cloud of churning black mist and dropping blobs of darkness onto the ground where they would twitch repulsively like caterpillars. It gnashed its teeth, flashed its eyes, and stomped with its hooves in impatient fury. The infernal horse jerked its head up and gave me a withering stare. A forked tongue flickered out from a mouth full of fangs. What the hell was this thing?

Sist the Abandoned, Level 253.

Sist? The name sounded familiar, for some reason.

The creature let out a piercing whinny and dashed forward. I jumped away to land on another rooftop. The structure had been weakened by the fire and came crashing down, burying the hell steed under the rubble.

Sist...

I legged it as hard as I could, aiming for a low but sturdy three-story tower between two houses, hoping it wouldn't collapse as easily and that I'd get enough time to catch a breather and gather my thoughts. Sist the Abandoned sound incredibly familiar for some reason.

I saw movement on the third story of the tower and fell down flat, sliding down the roof's gable like a loose tile. A long, vicious-looking lightning bolt hit the spot that I'd just left, followed by three arrows in rapid succession. A low-level mage with a standard set of spells and an archer who'd opted for rapid fire rate, I thought. I slid off the roof and grabbed the gutter. I looked down, and, o joy, there was a cart full of hay underneath. I let go of the gutter, which was quicker than using the Vine, fell into the cart, and cursed as a two-pronged pitchfork pierced my back. Fortunately, the implement didn't deal that much damage. I got out, broke into the door of the building opposite, dashed upstairs, jumped over two artistically-arranged skeletons in the second-story room, and climbed out onto a long balcony connecting several buildings. I started running along the balcony, kicking down flowerpots that exploded like bombs as they hit the ground. Only two buildings and the street between them lay between myself and the monster. I still heard the crackle of lightning bolts and the yells of players calling for reinforcements. They were cursing the gardener mage in his moth-eaten scarf and the rabid horse he'd summoned from some pit of hell. Summoned it? It was more like the rabid horse had come to get me, not to assist. Assist...

Assistant! Sist for short!

How could I have forgotten something like that? Sist had been the horse I'd received from Algora's Mages' Guild ages ago. I remember tying it to a bronze ring in a horse shelter once and never returning. I'd abandoned my steed.

Hence Sist the Abandoned.

The feeling of guilt felt like molten lead inside me. I'd completely forgotten about the horse. It was a really nondescript one—there were tens or maybe hundreds of thousands of them in Waldyra, and you could rent or buy one just like Sist almost anywhere—in a village stable, or maybe even in a rundown remote hamlet. They were hardy and obedient. It made no sense to feel regrets about a low-level virtual creature. But in my gut I perceived Sist as a living thing—and one that I'd abandoned.

But where did the power and that shroud of black mist come from? How had the poor thing been transformed into something so terrible? It was a real monster now, and it had definitely come to get me.

Did it come of its own accord, or did someone set it upon me? And, if so, who could it be?

There were more questions than answers again.

I saw a flash in the window below. I crashed through the window on my floor, all the way through the glass and the flimsy frame, falling inside the room and followed by a roaring fireball that splashed over the ceiling and exploded a moment later as I was already hiding under an elegant double bed. There was another roar and a flash. I could see flames and feel the heat rise.

“I got him! I did! He's toast!”

“Bastard,” I muttered angrily, crawling out from under the bed and dashing towards the door, already aflame. The temperature was rising so quickly I had every chance of becoming a Sunday roast.

“Got him?”

“Yeah! He jumped into a window followed by a little present from me! It went bang! Look at all the fire coming out! The scarf mage is all roasted and crispy by now!”

By that time I’d already gotten out of the room and was running along the passage. A loud rumble and new yells announced that the Evil Flame players had encountered something truly evil—an infernal steed bent on killing a certain ungrateful halfwit.

“Get the horse!”

“Damn! Kluthe has been trampled to death!”

“Get your spears out! Mages! Have you fallen asleep? Freeze the thing! Hit it with ice! Everybody else, surround it! From every direction! Use shields for protection! Let the heavy pets go first!” The man with the commanding voice sounded like he meant business, and the rest of them apparently listened to him.

The furious neighing, the thuds, the crackling of the shields, and the shouts merged into a horrible din, and I was leaving it behind me as fast as I could go. Then I slowed down

to a walk, climbed over another windowsill, and listened. Sist was still neighing back there. The horse's level may have been high, but it didn't stand a chance against a whole clan, even an upstart one like the Evil Flame. If their respawn location had been somewhere close by, their numbers would stay the same even in case they kept dying, odd as it might sound.

That suited me fine. I'd rather they killed the crazed horse than me. I'd be able to buy some time and get to my intended location. Everything worked in my favor.

I massaged my temples, took a deep breath, cursed, turned around, got to the roof with the aid of the Sticky Vine spell and started running back to where the PKs were still trying to kill the horse that had once been mine. I was doing something patently idiotic—worse than idiotic, in fact. Suicidal!

Two ice spears hit the archers standing at the edge of the roof, followed by two more. The archers, who'd barely reached Level 70, weak and inexperienced, their high Agility notwithstanding, screamed and tried to flee, but two fireballs exploded right between them, throwing them off the roof and onto the street. I jumped down, using the Vine to break my fall, and cast a bunch of Incandescent Strings at varying heights, followed by more Ice Spears, before I turned a corner and ran into a doorway.

There were loud yells, screams, and neighing.

I used the windowsill for cover and fired several fireballs in a sequence at a small group consisting of a tank and three swordsmen. I turned around and planted some thorns in the room that had given me shelter. The rather dim mage in

a crimson robe emblazoned with silver stars who'd followed me there got stuck at once.

“No!” He screamed as I raised my hands, sparkling with a cold blue fire.

I didn't deign to answer. Spears of ice exploded as they pierced his breast, the icy shards flying through the thorns. I hit him with a Red Wasp just for kicks and giggles, and followed up with two fireballs. I didn't know which of my attacks had killed the mage, but he was dead as a doornail. I collected the loot and dashed out through the other door, adding more fire to the conflagration that had just begun. After all, I was an Arsonist, according to my papers—or, rather, the achievement I'd gotten a while earlier.

“The gardener's back! Crap! The gardener's back! And he's pissed off!” A halting high-pitched voice came from behind the buildings in the distance. “He burns and he stings! Stings and burns!”

“He's here to get his nag back!”

I ran up the staircase, climbed to the roof, lay down flat and went silent, listening in attentively.

There was a neigh and a thud. A screaming knight went up like a Roman candle while his shield flew sideways like a Frisbee.

“Binding spells! Come on! Mages! Don't just stand there!”

The enemy was really close, and so was Sist. The smoke from a new fire obscured me from sight completely as I was lying behind the chimney. I couldn't see a thing, but I heard everything perfectly. My Weariness was quickly rolling back to normal. I was impatient for it to get to zero. I'd need some staying power—if I stopped and fell halfway, that'd be the end of me.

“Kloz has been killed! Darko, too! They're hurrying back already!”

“Freeze the goddamn thing! Try poison!”

“The gardener's killed one of the archers and Ragamuffin! Another one had gotten himself stunned, but Stepmother's patched him up!”

“Strike force! You all know the formation! V!”

I'd thought Vee was one of the group members, but when I stood up and looked at the street, I realized that the Evil Flame fighters had assumed a V-formation and were slowly approaching the cocoon of frost chains made by a spell unfamiliar to me, ropes, and fetters, which were holding back Sist. The horse was thrashing about wildly.

The group got their spears out and accelerated. Were they attempting a collective ram strike, I wondered?

“Hey, you!” I barked, giving the running enemies fair warning of my presence. However, I'd already launched two

fireballs at them, and was continuing in the same vein, firing at the street indiscriminately to cover as large an area as I could. The scarf around my neck twitched like a snake coming to life, then went limp again. I got a system message informing me that my information was no longer hidden from anyone.

“The gardener!” The knight in green spat.

“Rosgard!” Another one shouted. “Clan leader of...”

The exploding fireballs drowned out their cries. The enemies became engulfed in a dark red flame. Someone inside it shrieked maliciously. The clan was living up to its name. I ran along the edge of the roof, letting loose as much roaring fire as I could. I jumped down to the cornice and saw two mages inside a small building, throwing near-invisible threads of vibrating air at Sist. That must have been a frost spell.

The enemy wouldn't stay confused for much longer. I needed to hurry. I hurled a couple of Strings towards the formation, gulped down a mana potion, and crashed into the building's window with a looted ax in my hand. I used it to hit a flabbergasted blue-haired mage on the head.

“But you're a mage!” He screamed in protest, hitting me with his glowing palm. I flew back and crashed into a window, breaking yet another glass. There was hoarfrost on my chest. The other enemy was beginning to turn around.

“I am,” I conceded, throwing the ax at him, followed by two fireballs.

The room was a tiny one. The shockwave from the explosion made me flip over the windowsill and fall crashing to the ground. A third of my health was gone in an instant. I rose and flung two more fireballs into the smoking window.

“I’m here, Ros!” Braver’s voice came from above.

Several glass spheres fell down on the ground, filled with a sickening angry glow, and exploding instantly. The broken formation howled so loud my ears started ringing. A few silvery blobs of mist fell to the ground. I launched a few Ice Spears with the one hand and more thorns with the other. Then I did it again. And again.

“Hit them with everything you’ve got, Braver!” I yelled hoarsely, going backwards up a small outside staircase.

The hellish horse was turning around in the center of the street, staring at me with its fierce fiery eyes, black fumes coming from its nostrils.

“I’m sorry, Sist! Really sorry!” I shouted. “Forgive me! I didn’t mean to abandon you! I swear! I’m really sorry, old pal!”

The malicious neighing stopped. There was a soft grunt as the horse jumped up and hit the cobblestones with all of its four hooves at once, breaking the last of its shackles. It dashed forward and kicked the green knight hard, sending him flying. Then the horse looked at me again.

“I’m sorry!” I repeated. “Please forgive me! Please!”

“Hey, you!” A furious voice came out of the billows of poisonous smoke. “Are you trying to kill us, or are you trying to say you’re sorry? These mixed signals are the pits!”

“Shut up!” I screamed, casting another Thorn Thicket. “I have personal business here!”

“Rock Hail!” Braver, who was standing right above me, shouted merrily.

Huge boulders started falling from the sky that had already been blackened by the blaze.

“Get off the roof!” I shouted. “The archers will snap out of it any second now!”

“I get it!”

“Sist, I’m sorry! I’m really very sorry I’ve let you down! Forgive me!”

The horse neighed, threw back its smoking head, kicked the wall of the nearest building with its rear hooves, turned around, and dashed away like a meteor.

“We hate you, Rosgard! We declare war on your clan! Total war! Until the end!” A fierce howl filled the street, breaking into a myriad of angry echoes. “Total war!”

“I’ll join your clan, Ros,” Braver said matter-of-factly as he followed me across a narrow passage we’d found ourselves in as we entered the balcony door.

“This is great news,” I replied just as matter-of-factly. “Really is. Let’s hurry. We’ve got to get home.”

“Whose home?”

“Mine. Or, rather, ours. The clan residence. If it’s still intact amidst all this chaos, that is...”

Chapter 10

Home Sweet Home

I WAS OF THE OPINION that the home of any adventurer worth his salt, with enough experience, taste for excitement, and a certain capital to show for it, should have looked like this manor house.

The walls were of gray and yellow stone. There was lush vegetation all around the structure, and the house was crowned by a tall chimney with a large bird's nest on it. The glass in the tall arched windows glistened; the narrow bars covering them were almost inconspicuous. The iron fence around the grounds was tall and sturdy, providing good protection, and the garden, almost gone wild in certain places, protected the homeowners' privacy perfectly—no prying eye could see through the trees and the bushes. The gate was shut tight, meeting anyone approaching it with an almost mocking politeness, set off by the peaceful plume of smoke coming out of the chimney and the crane in the nest, sleeping peacefully with its head resting on its breast.

All the mystic and terrifying elements that clashed with the bucolic view came from the buildings around the manor house, which were in terrible condition, with their doors and their windows busted out, their doorframes lacerated by swords and axes, their walls singed, their roofs caved in, the gardens around them burnt to ashes, and the grapevines strewn dry and lifeless across the ground. There were also dead bodies—lots of them. There was a whole pile of desiccated skeletons on the ground accompanied by a large number of silver and red blobs of mist. Many players and locals had been slain here. Judging by the color of the mist and the weapons next to the bones, the guests had not come in peace. They'd

been trying to fight their way to the house, but hadn't succeeded.

I'd have stayed well away myself if I hadn't known the house was mine, even though I'd never visited it myself. Kyre had taken care of all the paperwork, and she also gave orders about the security detail—two teams of guards, in fact. Tranqueville's guards had been protecting the empty manor from the outside—before the onset of the war and the chaos that had ensued, when all the prior arrangements had gotten canceled. Inside the manor grounds were guarded by a crack team of elven archers and the prim and proper majordomo Strictus. I remembered us looking at the house from the outside when we had first come here with Kyre, but I had no idea of what would await me inside.

I also wondered about the welcome I'd get there. I didn't have any papers—they'd all been given to Kyre for safekeeping, and she was currently hunting big game in Zar'Graad. If I approached the gate and got shot, it wouldn't reflect well on whatever authority I may have had in Braver's eyes.

However, I didn't need to worry.

“Good afternoon, sir. I hope your journey wasn't too strenuous.”

The tall gate clinked softly as it opened. I was genuinely pleased to see the stern old man. I noticed that his current outfit differed from what he'd usually wear. He had a leather vest with bronze plates attached to it over his regular dark doublet. There was a short bow and a quiver full of arrows on his back. He had a long dagger in a sheath on the

left side of his belt, and a bag with its flap open on the right, with scrolls of different colors inside it.

“I am glad to see that you’re in good health, Strictus,” I said as I took a step forward.

“As am I, sir. And this young man would be?”

“Braver. My friend and comrade-in-arms,” I said, introducing the alchemist. “He’s someone who can be trusted in any situation.”

“A rare quality in our troubled times,” the majordomo said with a ghost of a smile on his lips as he pointed towards the house standing in the middle of the garden. “Welcome home, sir.” Then he turned to Braver and added, “Welcome, and I hope you enjoy what hospitality we can offer.”

I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t enjoy hearing the words “welcome home.”

The sturdy-looking lock clicked as the gate shut of its own accord. The old man headed for the front door in a light gate, and we followed. I craved information, and wasn’t afraid to ask questions.

“I see you’ve had quite a battle here. How’s the defenders’ health and morale? Is everything all right?”

“I’m perfectly fine, sir. Thank you for asking.”

“Hold on...” I was in shock. “You’re on your own?”

“I am, as of late, sir. The events have unfurled in a predictable fashion. There’s a war on, after all. Would you like to know more about what had transpired here?”

“I sure would!” I coughed as I saw the skeleton of a gigantic snake crushing down another skeleton. The latter had belonged to some large biped—an orc, most likely. A few long broken arrows were lying on the ground nearby. Braver was staring at a transparent spiked wing caught in a tree canopy. It resembled a dragonfly’s—but how big should the insect itself have been if its wing was at least ten feet long, I wondered?

“Mind the demonic porcupine quills,” Strictus warned us, pointing at black spiky things you could barely see quivering in the grass. “I haven’t managed to take the trash out yet. I have to admit your arrival has been very timely, sir. It is a miracle indeed that we held our ground yesterday and this morning. We were attacked by the undead as well as a number of minor demons. If your fiancée hadn’t been provident enough to leave us enough scrolls and special potions, things would indeed have been dire. Why, the house would have been getting pillaged by now. But, fortunately, you have arrived at last.”

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart, my good Strictus, for your loyal service,” I coughed, feeling embarrassed.

So while we’d been fighting and traveling, the old majordomo had been holding the fort. How I wished I could accommodate absolutely everything in my sieve of a head—I’d completely forgotten about Tranqueville and the house I’d

bought rather wantonly after that business with Needlemouth and Aphrosius when I'd found the Silver Legend gauntlet. Another great oversight on my part.

"Well," Strictus trotted up the stairs with spryness that belied his age, made the massive front door close with a gesture of his hand, and stood at the entrance, letting myself and Braver in with the elegance of a natural born butler. "I have clear drinking water and a little wine left. I most regretfully cannot offer you any food.

"I have bread! And sausage!" Braver was the first to realize the old man must have been starving. "I'll get them out in a moment. I also have yoghurt, baked potatoes, and some roast pork ribs that, unfortunately, have a couple of days on them."

"You need to eat something," I nodded, calling myself the worst names under the sun in my mind. What if we'd only come tomorrow—or later? We'd have found the dead body of my loyal majordomo who'd had fallen manning his post to the last. I shuddered.

"I'd be delighted to partake in the meal," Strictus bowed his head. "Come to the dining room, please. I'll lay the table in a moment."

By the time the old man returned, we'd already taken all the food out of Braver's inventory and placed it on the table. I was still cringing from utter shame, and feeling a surge of animosity towards the gourmands holed up in the council house stuffing themselves like there was no tomorrow. Strictus wasn't the only starving person in the city—dozens of locals must have been severely malnourished. Outlanders like us

didn't need to eat. Locals, on the other hand, required regular nutrition. The last vestiges of any warm feelings I may have had towards the mayor and his coterie left me all at once. I was now seeing the Ivory Tower Dining Club for what they had always been—good-for-nothing idlers and parasites thinking only of their stomachs while the poorer townsfolk were falling prey to hunger, fires, bloodthirsty brigands, and deadly creatures of various kinds. Something had to be done about it.

“Let's sit and dine,” I said in a commanding voice. “We'll eat and talk.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The old man was the last to sit down—and the last to fill his plates. Myself and Braver were chewing in silence, looking at the piles of weapons and stacks of armor lining the walls. It was unlikely that the house had been sold with an arsenal, so these must have been battle spoils. We'd waited patiently for Strictus to finish eating and start talking. He didn't take too long, making quick work of two sizeable sandwiches and drinking a glass of wine diluted with water. Having restored his strength somewhat, he started describing the events that had transpired at the manor.

Kyre was wise and had great foresight, which is why after buying the manor and making Strictus a member of the staff, she'd left a substantial sum of money here, as well as some weapons, medicines, and other useful supplies. Five of the townsfolk had been taken on the payroll, too, to serve under the old majordomo's command. The grim-faced elite elven snipers had spent a while in the garden of their own volition, then left, and then returned to stay—for a break, they'd said. They weren't the kind to divulge their reasons to

anyone. There had been no orders to chase them away. The elves lived in the garden and found food in their mysterious ways, demanding no room and board or remuneration, so they'd been allowed to stay.

The first days had passed in blissful yet industrious peace. The sleepy house had been thoroughly cleaned. Dusty gray cobwebs had disappeared from the ceiling corners, fireplaces had gotten cleaned of soot and smudges, and all the floors had been waxed to a fine shimmer. The majordomo was a pro. Then the troubles had begun—first there had been rumors of skirmishes somewhere far away, and shortly afterwards the war had reached Tranqueville. It had happened on a dark and windless night. The blaze of a burning house had heralded the nightmare to come. The buildings had been set aflame, destroyed, and pillaged one by one. Ululating outlanders and the locals that had joined them had been running wild through the city streets, eager to loot anything they could, bickering over every kerchief and candlestick, and killing everyone indiscriminately. Rare pockets of resistance had been snuffed out one by one, although many of those who had tried to fight back had managed to escape. Apart from that, the sky had become as hostile as the ground.

The city had been saved from complete eradication only by virtue of the attackers being disorganized and constantly at odds with each other. The small manor house of gray and yellow stone hidden in a garden behind a tall fence had also survived for the same reason. The first ones who'd tried to scale the fence had stayed right there on the fence—the crack archers' arrows always hit their mark. Their magic had made the garden come alive, and the plants themselves had attacked the intruders. Many of them had remained in the garden forever—the creaking bows, the bending trunks, the roots coming out of the earth, the rending rain of leaves and the hail of sharp branches had seen to their demise, intimidating the others into a retreat. They'd scattered, looking

for safer places to attack. They wouldn't return—the whirlwinds of war would carry them away. Others would come in their place, also tempted by the sight of a house still intact. Those would die as well. That streak of luck couldn't have lasted long, but the killers and pillagers had suddenly started running away, chased out of the town that had suffered so much by the forces of outlander clans serving the Light.

The elves had left right after that. They had been staying in the garden day after day, and then suddenly packed up and left without warning anyone. By that time, three servants had remained with Strictus. The other two had died heroically in the line of duty fighting a screaming harpy that had managed to get into the attic. The servants had served for two more days, but then two of them had left a courier had come to tell them their families in a faraway village had needed help. Family ties had proved stronger than their obligation. The last of the servants had held out the longest and died only recently, when a zombie orc that had managed to infiltrate the perimeter rose from the garden soil.

After a short lull, a new vicious outlander clan had turned up. They had tried to storm the manor, but had been fought back, even though two powerful spells had been required for it. Strictus had heard someone drive them away shouting that they'd need to capture the council house first before they wasted their efforts on some isolated manor.

Then we came.

“Once again, loyal Strictus, I thank you for your exemplary service and devotion to duty!” I said, rising. “Please forgive me for having taken so long.”

“No need to apologize, sir. We may have been under siege, but we did get news of such importance. I am well aware of the Great Expedition and your role in it as the Great Navigator, who had removed the magic seal for an ancient continent. How could I possibly begrudge you your absence? On the contrary, I am proud to serve someone like you!”

“Thank you so much,” I said, feeling surprised and touched at the same time. “Well, now I’m here. If you’re in need of a rest, you have a perfect opportunity for it. We’ll keep an eye on what’s happening here.”

“Thank you, sir. I could indeed do with a short break,” the weary majordomo conceded, wiping his lips with a handkerchief. “I’ll be in the small bedroom on the first floor of the eastern wing, where the servants’ quarters are. Wake me up anytime.”

“Thank you. Rest well.”

The majordomo nodded and retired. I waited for his footsteps to disappear in the distance, slapped myself on the head, and confessed,

“I’m beginning to take everything very seriously. As if it all was real.”

“This is Waldyra,” Braver shrugged. “Didn’t you mention having a bunch of alchemy you’ve taken as spoils? There’s no teleportation here, and the enemy is likely to get here any moment. Let me take a look at all the vials you’d grabbed and see how I can combine them—or, maybe, mix

them up into something useful. I have my makeshift setup with me.”

“That’s a great thought,” I agreed as I opened my bag and emptied it onto the table.

There were dozens of vials, rustling scrolls, empty jars, and packets of medicines. All of them had been taken from the enemy. I’d only kept the smallest and the lightest items. Braver sorted out the chaos on the table with amazing speed. He’d already placed a test jar stand on the table, lit up a burner with a green flame, put on large goggles with massive glistening lenses, put on a fine leather apron and a pair of gloves emblazoned with a couple of iridescent stones placed in no discernible order. It took him a minute to inspect the first bunch of vials, and about as long again to arrange them in some order. He opened two of them, poured them into a large test jar, mixed the content with a glass stick, added some gray powder and started muttering something meditatively, clearly attempting to recollect some recipe. He couldn’t, by the look of him, so he cursed, pulled out a large book, opened it with a loud crackling noise and pointed his finger at the page he needed. His muttering became jollier as he added three drops of viscous yellowish liquid to the mix and stirred it again, grunting, “Let it sit like this for a while.” Then he switched his attention to two black vials with skulls and red crossbones daubed on them, thinking aloud, “Should I make a bomb or mix up a red cuckoo? So many factors to consider... Now, where did I put my mummy bone dust?”

I came out of my reverie—any professional doing their job was a riveting sight—and got to business myself. First I needed to sort through the scrolls and give Braver whatever roots and mushrooms I had among my loot. Then I’d check the piles near the walls and the other rooms. I’d give all the scrolls and the alchemy to Braver in the dining room. Then I’d have

to consider changing the manor's status—if we couldn't build a clan citadel for the time being, we'd have to start with a clan hall. I wouldn't make any immediate changes, though—it would have been too bitterly ironic if I gave the building clan hall status and it would instantly fall to the Evil Flame. Still, I'd need to be prepared and assess the situation soberly.

I'd needed half an hour for a quick and more or less perfunctory inspection of the house and the outlying territory. I was in a hurry to gather all the empty vials and whole potions I could and to pick up arrows and crossbow bolts. I'd discovered many mushrooms in the garden. Some of them had been of such strange shape and coloring that I'd decided not to approach them at all, gathering regular mushrooms and certain simple plants instead. I took it all to Braver, informing him that there were lots of things in the garden that looked like mushrooms and nightmarish swamp spawn at the same time. Braver found the news very encouraging, and headed to the garden immediately, having interrupting his mixing and stirring for a while. Soon I heard the hoarse cries of strange creatures and Braver's loud swearing from outside. I observed him fight a gigantic moving mushroom, which was holding on to a tree with two muscled hands while trying to reach an ax lying in the grass nearby with its third limb. All I could do was shake my head and congratulate myself on having prudently left this fungal maniac alone. Fancy a mushroom trying to get at you with an ax.

Braver didn't seem to need any help, so I continued my inspection, searching for rare loot in the corners and checking the defenses of the rooms. The shutters on the first floor had been shut tight and were held in place by impressive-looking bars. Some of the glasses were broken, and some of the shutters damaged—the attackers had clearly tried to smash them in from the outside, but without any success. Many of the second-story shutters were open. There were crossbows on tables which I loaded with the bolts I'd collected from the

garden immediately, leaving some more ammo next to each. I placed regular arrows there as well—Strictus would make use of them. I counted the remaining magic scrolls, and concluded there weren't that many. So I turned into a squirrel preparing for nuclear winter and hid a scroll or two in a number of places, having assessed where they might potentially be of use. I'd picked up the habit from one of the players who'd been a sailor on the now-sunk flagship of the Sleepless Ones—the Black Queen. This guy had been responsible for defending a segment of the ship's decks, so whenever he'd get assaulted, he'd fall to the ground, and then get up again, dodging the enemy attacks. Each time he'd move his hands, some of the enemies would die. No matter what his inventory may have looked like, he'd always have a magic scroll in his hands. I'd hoped we wouldn't have to fight inside the house, but I preferred to stay on the safe side. You never knew.

There were three of us against a few dozen enemies. Overwhelming numbers didn't always guarantee a victory. However, I was a mage with curtailed damage, and Braver, albeit every bit as brave as his name suggested, wasn't a warrior who'd be able to withstand several enemy attacks. Strictus was an archer. So what we had in our arsenal was magic, explosive and likewise harmful potions, arrows, and crossbow bolts. Apart from that, there was the house's own magic—after all, something must have enabled Strictus to open and close doors with just a snap of the fingers. I'd definitely be able to take control of it—but I wouldn't just yet. It was one thing to have an advanced piece of battle tech under your control, and quite another to actually control it with casual skill and deadly efficacy. I wondered what could have made me so sober and cautious. My father's influence? BB's? Or was it age creeping up on me that had started to affect my behavior in the virtual world as well? I wondered when I'd turn into a wizened old man sitting on a bench in some quiet village and muttering admonishments at players passing me

by, grumbling about how all young people were too rash and precipitous for their own good.

In another quarter of an hour I'd studied the house well enough from the inside not to get lost within the doors and the passages—the manor wasn't exactly a compact building. I made a round of the house trying not to approach the fence, since the Evil Flame members must have already been looking high and low for the wizard in a scarf, aka Rosgard, the thorn in their side. They'd already declared war on me, after all —“total war,” if memory served. So it behooved me not to attract any unnecessary attention. Besides, I couldn't help hoping that a team of superheroes would make an appearance any moment now and chase away all the bad guys. Or, maybe, a team of kung fu fighters... All the way from Shaolin... And there I was woolgathering again...

“Mister...”

“Uh!” I leaped by about five feet. “Ni hao!”

A few children were standing right outside the fence, with two women behind them looking weary to the bone. They had bundles on their backs. The children were clutching their toys. Their clothes were dusty, their faces grubby, and they looked at me with great hope.

“Please give us shelter,” one of the women asked, looking back at the smokes from the fires that had kept on burning all the while in abject terror.

So this was the litmus test of my character and my overall stance. What would a hero do?

“Come on in,” I hurried, pointing towards the gates and checking my battle spells just in case—not because I suspected the women or children to be enemy agents, but to be able to fight back anyone or anything that might come after them. The spells had been fine—and would come in handy very shortly, as it turned out.

I opened the gate by hand—the bar looked simple and yielded to my efforts easily, although the metal had been suspiciously cold to the touch, and the barely noticeable blue shimmer was rather suggestive, too. As soon as the destitute mothers and their children slipped through the gate I’d cracked open, two grimy individuals in rags jumped out of the smoke-covered ruins and legged it for the gate as fast as they could go. Quashing the impulse to close the gate had taken me some effort. I gestured the first refugees to follow along the garden path and focused my attention on the two locals. Soon it became clear why they’d decided to sprint at breakneck pace—two beasts jumped out of the ruins and followed them. You couldn’t mistake them for anything but the battle hounds they were. They were technically dogs, but didn’t resemble a man’s (or another sentient creature’s) best friend one bit. They had powerful torsos, long paws, massive heads, stubby tails, impressive sets of fangs, and incredibly thick grayish-black fur that protected them well from arrows and edged weapons. Each creature must have weighed over two hundred pounds, and they were tall enough for their necks to reach a grown man’s chest. They had a very keen sense of smell, excellent eyesight capable of detecting the slightest movement, wrinkly skin, and deep-set eyes. My Tyrant looked a lot friendlier than these infernal creatures, whose only purpose was to track, chase, bring down, and immobilize or kill their prey before their master would arrive. I remembered reading about them being able to climb trees if they had the necessary skill somewhere.

I really doubted that the battle hounds were hunting here on their own. Someone must have sent them to seek out survivors, and I knew who it was—the Evil Flame. I could see the information flickering over the animals’ heads, but I couldn’t read any of it. Those pets were on the cusp of light and darkness. Push them a quarter inch, and you’d have creatures of the dark. Puppies could only be found by powerful clans that didn’t mind hunting in challenging locations. But how would a young clan come by one of those? Of course, they could have bought them... a whole litter of nightmare pups...

A malicious roar resounded through the street. The fleeing locals shuddered and nearly tripped. A hoarse howl came from afar, turning into abrupt barking. There were more than two hellhounds.

“Hurry!” I barked, noticing that the second runner was trying to look around.

Green flashes left my palms, and a wall of thorny vegetation appeared in the hounds’ path. The beasts leaped up simultaneously, covering the distance of about six feet, and fell down into the poisonous thicket heavily. The bushes cracked. I could see waves of breaking branches marking the path of the hounds rushing forward. Their fur was indeed like armor. I wondered about the creatures’ level as I planted more Thorn Thickets. They may have failed to stop the beasts, but they were slowing them down all the same.

Two gray bulks launched themselves through the air again, roaring furiously, like hideous orcas jumping out of the waves only to “submerge” again in half a dozen feet. The two guys, panting heavily, ran past me. I planted two more Thorn Thickets right next to the fence, shut the gate, and stepped

back, watching the bar slipping into place automatically with some relief.

The green wall of thorns opened up suddenly. Two wrinkly snouts with open jaws full of fangs emerged, looking at me with mad fury in their eyes. The loud roar hit my face like a hot wind.

“Scram!” I said as I raised my hands, my palms charged with ice spells.

I was answered by another roar. A dog’s paw thrust itself between the bars of the fence and tried to feel for the bar. The bar responded with a blue lightning bolt. The damaged paw jerked back, covered in hoarfrost. The attempt did not succeed, but the very fact that it had been made spoke volumes.

“Hell’s bells!” I gasped. “What the hell are those skills that you have? Think you can get anyone anywhere? Eat this!”

Ice Spears pierced the beasts, whose levels were in the hundreds—one was Level 117, and the other, 114. Their necks, heads, torsos, and paws were protected by thick studded leather armor of dark gray, and the beasts also sported a number of gems and runes of different colors. Those pets were outfitted excellently. One had a ruby amulet on its neck that started flashing urgently, restoring the dog’s health.

The hounds got thrown back by the ice spears plunging into them and exploding. I got hit by ice crumbs, and cursed as I took a few steps back. I hit the beasts again with ice, aiming between the bars. Fire would have been better, but it would

damage the gate. The metal may have been resilient and magically hardened, but it still could take damage.

A Red Wasp flew outside, buzzing angrily. A dog barked. The thorns were disappearing slowly, and I saw shadows of the beasts that were moving away as the green haze dispersed. They retreated, and, judging by the loud whistle I'd heard a moment before they started off, their retreat had been ordered by their master.

I also stepped back, making my way through the shrubs near the gate and concealing myself next to the trunk of a mighty oak. As soon as I'd gotten away, the green haze got blown away by a mighty gust of wind that clearly hadn't been of a natural origin. The still-burning house came down with a loud crash, the roof shattered, sending myriads of tile shards flying, and I heard the sound of steel boots on cobblestones. Three fighters in heavy armor came out onto the street one by one. They all looked identical—gray and black armor, horned helmets, and gray cloaks decorated with the drawing of a large flame consuming some poor guy with his screaming mouth open wide. The hounds sat by the horned guys' feet. They were also equipped identically. I wondered about the source of this wealth. I was no heavy armor expert, but even I could tell that their equipment must have been expensive.

A few more players followed the first ones, coming out of the ruins. A mage girl followed by a guy in green pants and a blue doublet, another girl with a bow, and someone in a hooded black robe with oversized sleeves that were covering the owner's hands completely. A large gray banner with the same flame logo upon it followed the figure in black. There were eight bony legs in rusty iron boots underneath the banner, and the procession drew a wagon with large wheels, as wide as an adult human was tall. The wagon resembled those used by the settlers. The flag clearly hid a team of skeletons from the

sun—there was nothing mysterious about it. I wondered whether the rag was flammable or whether it had been charmed against fire, and what could be in the wagon.

Could the wagon contain a necromancer whose power waned in the sunlight?

Or was the guy in the black robe the necromancer?

In that case, what could be inside the wagon?

Of course, it could be used simply for collecting loot. Some items wouldn't fit into one's inventory—such as a full-height mirror, for example, although you could fit in a seven-foot plank. Waldyra's laws of physics were quirky that way. However, I had other things on my mind—namely, the unexpected arrivals. When you saw suspicious-looking armed folks at your doorstep, your first reaction was to look for the nearest phone and call 911. I could try calling, "Guards! Guards!" Perhaps, a guard would yell back to say all was quiet in the council house...

I realized no one else was coming—the rest must have been busy pillaging whatever had remained. So I made a few screenshots, moved away from the tree and hurried home. My guests were still standing there in the middle of the hall, and I almost had to shove them in the direction of a large room down the corridor, healing one of the women and both guys with magic as I went about it. The refugees thanked me, but I was already running away, having seen to their accommodation. I ran into the dining room and blurted, not even attempting to seem nonchalant.

“We have problems—and the problems have horns. The stinky flaming goats are right at our doorstep, and they’re already beating their hooves.”

“Flaming goats? Are they a new clan?” Braver inquired, mixing the reagents carefully. “Or are you talking about animals?”

“Both. Although it’s the same clan—the Evil Flame. If you only saw their coat of arms... Although I’ll show you, anyway.”

I’d made a good screenshot—it lit up in the air, flickering and showing the foes that had gathered outside. You could see their gray cloaks ruffled by the wind, decorated by the clan’s coat of arms, the snarling snouts of three hounds and a black fox, the grim creature in the black robe, and the mystery wagon. All of it looked impressive—and bode no good.

“So, what do you think about our situation?”

“We’re up Guano Creek sans paddle, boss. The guys with the horns are tanks; they also have two mages, archers, and a sunhater class necromancer. We’ll have to take out the guy in the blue doublet and green pants first.”

“Oh?” I was surprised by him being so categorical. “I’d paid the least attention to this guy.”

“He’s a weather mage. See the cloth belt with clouds on it and the thunderheads on his doublet? He’ll summon a storm

cloud over the house. And then the sunhater will leave their wagon. Which is the last thing we want.”

“Hold on... The necromancer’s in the wagon? In that case, who’s that in the black cloak, then?” I asked curiously, preferring to find out as much as I could about the situation to posing as a know-it-all.

“Their pet, most likely. See how it stays close to the wagon?” Braver shrugged, putting a glass stopper into a large vial and sealing it with red wax and his fingerprint. It was only then that I saw a bona fide seal drawn on his right thumb—although, perhaps, “drawn” would be the wrong word to use here. Engraved? But could anyone have put an engraving on his thumb? It was magic, obviously. So, a personal stamp—and he’d had none back when I’d been buying elixirs off him last.

“I’ll need about ten more minutes,” the alchemist said.

I nodded and rushed out of the dining room, heading for the back yard, muttering under my nose like a testy brownie filling in for Strictus.

“The pet’s wearing a cloak, so it doesn’t like the sun, either. And it must be an animal—but a biped. Or is it? I didn’t see any legs... or arms, for that matter... but it can’t be a ghost, so it’s some material creature...”

The yard turned out to be empty and quiet. I tore through the wild grapes growing between the trees, reached the fence, and looked around. My tense face and ruffled hair must have made me look like some loony bin escapee rather

than the distinguished owner of a manor house. The loony was noticed—a bearded old dude, his bald head shining like a beacon in the sun, popped up and waved to me with his arms happily, clearly calling for help.

“Duh,” I said in a doomed voice, and waved in return, pointing to the well-concealed back door of the garden.

No less than a dozen locals followed the old-timer, rolling in like peas from a pod. They crossed the distance between us in several seconds, burst into the gate stomping heavily, and ran further into the garden. Eight were children and frail old folks. Four looked like they could fight, but I wasn't sure—not every local could wield weapons or magic. And a lot of them refused to as a matter of principle—it all depended on their general stance and their character. But I would try to enroll them into my defense force at any cost—they could, at the very least, defend themselves.

I locked the back door and made a round of the garden, picking up a few roots and vials I hadn't noticed the previous time. I got an ax that someone had covered with some soil out of the ground and threw it onto an open balcony overhanging the back door. I sat down on the stairs and opened the forum.

The necromancer was my main concern. Other foes weren't pushovers, either, but in their case I knew what to expect, at least. I knew quite a few things about archers, and had gained knowledge of mages, healers, tanks, mules, and crazy elves recently—oh, how I missed them all now! But I knew next to nothing about necromancers. There were lots of such classes and specializations in Waldyra, and their battle tactics varied widely.

So what was the sunhater class?

The forum didn't disappoint. It was a necromancer battle class—the first and most basic specialization. Anyone who chose it became completely intolerant to sunlight, reacting to it the way a vampire would—smoke, burns, and eventual transformation into a smoking pile of ashes to the accompaniment of desperate screams. What sunhaters received instead was a substantial bonus to their powers in complete darkness or at night. It was one of the best classes for exploring dungeons. Such players couldn't enter any town or city worshipping the Light—guards hated them and attacked them on sight.

Sunhaters were also known as “wraith fosterers”—unlike many other necromancers, this class treated the undead like favorite pets, making sure they got fed on time and had a healthy stool... When sunhaters logged out, they would place their undead pets into black graveyard dirt, usually abundant in their private rooms. Their habitations must have really had a fun ambience. Such care made sunhaters' wraiths a lot stronger than any other undead of the same class and level.

But I needed more information.

Sunhater pets. The players on the forum recommended reading the book entitled *The Beasts and the Necros*. I didn't have the time for that, so I read on in hope someone might divulge more specific information.

There was a brief list of optimal pets.

Hollow-shelled tortoise. A dark creature—the remnants of a living thing inhabited by a demonic entity. That one didn't fit. The one I'd seen had looked like a human being wearing a loose robe.

The Abominable Swamper. That one didn't fit either—judging by the picture, it looked like a gigantic water bug's corpse half-eaten by termites.

Dark Gnats. Those were out, too—the dark gnats were, as the name suggested, a swarm of bloodsucking insects living in dark swamps on certain faraway islands.

Claydark. A human-like creature made of dark clay oozing from underneath the ruins of Gurdrox, the destroyed ancient castle of dark-worshippers located at the bottom of a cold dark multilevel dungeon. Claydarks were creatures of the darkness through and through. They hated sunlight and couldn't appear in the sun. Basically, the pet in question was a golem. Apart from carrying heavy equipment and cargo, a claydark could swallow special gems with complex charms on them, which would increase its power substantially. The forum topic contained a link to an old heated dispute with the administration because of the “unfair advantage” claydarks had—they were capable of consuming prodigious amounts of such gems, and rich players could boost their pets tremendously by investing enough into that method.

The claydark fit.

There was more in that forum topic on the subject of optimal sunhater pets, but I didn't read any further. It may have been my intuition, but I was fairly certain I'd found the right answer. The necro was accompanied by a claydark pet. A

dark golem—most likely, well-equipped, and possibly filled to the brim with booster gems.

I returned to the manor house and told Braver about my version instantly. The alchemist listened to me with interest, and placed yet another book on the already-overloaded table. He opened the tome and started leafing through it, muttering “Claydark, claydark, claydark...” His other hand seemed to have a life of its own like a separate sentient creature. It scooped up small amounts of various powders with a measuring spoon and put them into a wide-necked test jar. There were many other jars like that on the table, and above it all was a small cloud of smog constantly fed by the vapors coming from the jars and the test tubes arranged on the table. What lay on the burner looked like a regular stone, but I didn’t think regular stones sweated drops of viscous blue liquid, which Braver collected with a pipette and dropped into a test tube with several coils of red copper and silver wrapped around it. There was a large blue blob inside that moved around like a living thing. In between the jars, the tubes, and the crucibles stood vials of potions and elixirs ready to be used.

I was once again enthralled by the sight of Braver’s quick and professional movements. I felt like grabbing a chair and watching him for a while. I’d promised myself to interview the alchemist about his past adventures and professional achievements. He was bound to have had many “i-i-i-i-i-nteresting” stories to tell.

I came to my senses and ran on. I visited the “Refugee Hall”—my name for that spacious room I’d given to the newcomers. I checked how everybody was doing, and was delighted to see that someone had some food with them and was sharing it with everyone. No one appeared sick—I worried about diseases. Digital germs could act as a major

wrench thrown into anyone's plans. I knew as much from experience—and I wasn't the only one.

I gave my cloak to one of the girls and tried to cheer everybody up. Then I got down to business and inquired whether anyone could handle a weapon, and, if so, what kind of weapon. Two young men rose timidly. One had trained in Glop the Fierce's provincial berserk school, but he hadn't finished his education yet—entering the trancelike state of battle fury wasn't easy.

Jumping Snessa on a stick!

It sure sounded impressive!

A provincial berserk school, no less!

In that case, I'd graduated from Algora's Crèche Naval Academy...

The freshman berserker had assured me that he knew how to hold an ax. Besides, he was a lumberjack by profession, and had wielded an ax since childhood, helping his father to fell trees. They'd occasionally have to defend themselves against forest beasts, but rarely—this had always been a peaceful area.

Peaceful. Yeah, right.

The second one told me he was no warrior, no mage, no warlock, and no ghoul—he didn't know how to kill, and didn't like to hurt folks in general. Weapons gave him blisters, and

scrolls made him sneeze. Besides, armor was heavy, and robes hid his figure.

At least, that's what I'd managed to glean from his shy mumbling directed at the floor. When I reasonably asked him why the hell he'd have to get up and waste my time in the first place, the mumbling connoisseur of finer things in life showed me two playing cards and said he was really good at cards with many victories under his belt. Apart from that, he was a middling Card Master—in other words, a specialist in summoning various monsters. However, right before the chaos had broken out he'd visited Algora, and chanced upon an outlander cheater accompanied by a fair maiden playing the lute. He'd lost nearly all his cards to the said cheater after they'd played a few games, and now only had the two gems of his rather pitiful collection at his disposal—a wild boar and a cobra. But at least he still had those two creatures, and he could send them wherever he'd be told to so that they'd bolster our defenses.

That sounded much better. We made arrangements concerning the signal that would tell the dodgy-looking fellow to release the monsters out of their cardboard prisons, and ran towards the servants' wing. It was time to interrupt the sleep of my loyal majordomo. However, it turned out I didn't need to wake Strictus—he'd already gotten up and come out to meet me, giving a curt bow and reporting being ready for service—he could make scrambled eggs or scramble the innards of anyone impertinent enough to invade my property with a well-aimed arrow.

The old man asked me in passing about how my fiancée Kyrea the Protectress fared. She'd accompanied me the previous time, making an excellent impression. Had I, by any chance, abandoned that paragon of beauty and common sense? I assured Strictus that rejecting this destiny's gift was the

furthest thing from my mind and that our relationship had stood the test of time. However, my fiancée was in Zar'Graad now. Strictus nodded and observed wisely that one occasionally needed to rest from paragons of beauty and common sense, too. I chuckled.

The majordomo suggested that he should man his position in the attic—it had a good view of the environs, and he'd long been using it to practice archery on stupid evildoers. He'd gotten into the habit already, and honed his skill well. I concurred, knowing from experience that the attic would be the perfect spot for an archer. I told him everything about the foes at our doorstep and their perfidious plans to wipe us out. I mentioned that the enemies had a sharpshooter who might have had a long firing range, and asked Strictus not to make himself visible to the enemy. I gave him ten medium health potions, a sure aim elixir for archers, a few antidotes, and a lightning scroll. I also advised him not to take any unnecessary risks. Finally, I told him about the Refugee Hall and its new inhabitants. The majordomo set off at once to check on them. The old lion was in his domain. I doubted any younger newcomer would dare to utter a single squeak in his company.

I stopped in the corridor for a moment to recap, and came to the conclusion that I'd already taken all the preliminary measures and given all the warnings. It was time to start observing the enemy forces. I didn't know how long it would take them to begin the assault, but it wouldn't be long now. And I'd rather know of it before someone's heavy steel boot started kicking down our gate. Strictus had mentioned the attic as the best observation position, so that's where I headed next.

The majordomo was absolutely right. The wide window comprised of many narrow casements, and it offered an

outstanding panorama of a large part of Tranqueville, with my spyglass providing all the details I'd needed.

I saw a street aflame. In another hour, all the houses standing on it, once so elegant and fair, would turn into charred rubble covered by a pale shroud of ashes—just like the nearby street that had once been just as quaint.

I saw the mutilated park without a single tree left standing. It looked like a tank had been maneuvering there. The fire that had been approaching the felled trunks looked like a promise of merciful release.

Dozens of houses were watching the empty streets with their hollow eyes—all the windows had been busted out. Tiles were falling off the roofs, and a dog was howling plaintively in one of the yards, its snout raised to the sky, blackened with the smoke. There were scurrying silhouettes here and there—either the hunters, or the hunted. A horse galloped by, dragging a simple village cart behind it. A man was holding the reins and urging the nag to go as fast as it could. Several women were sitting in the cart. They were all heading out towards the nearest street leading out of town. I wished them luck to escape the nightmarish conflagration. There were no PKs in sight, so they might make it, after all.

The rooftops of the council house stood in the distance. There was no smoke coming from that direction, and all the windows had still remained intact. The gourmands holed up in there were still alive. Theoretically, my quest stipulated that I should kill a few PKs and report to them, but they weren't the kind of people whose reward I was tempted to take. They could take their prosciutto—I still had no idea what that was—and stick it all the way up their... Oh, yes, and if that

prosciutto could shoot, I'd hoped it would get set off at that very moment.

The sight of the wasteland left of the city was like a heavy weight on my disposition. I'd chosen Tranqueville because it was peaceful, kind, and unhurried, and it felt as though it would stay that way for as long as the goddess Wyllowe's eternal slumber.

A light staccato sound took my attention away from contemplating the smoking ruins. Drops of rain started falling on the windowsill. The sky, darkened by the smoke, turned a lighter color because of the white clouds that had appeared above the city. Another paradox. Some of the clouds were gray, and a light rain was falling from them. It wouldn't put out the fires, but if it spread, the flames would soon abate a little. The PKs would benefit from it—the ruins would be left intact, so they'd be able to gather whatever had been left behind by stronger and braver clans. The fires, on the other hand, could destroy what loot had still remained intact.

"There were no signs of rain this morning," Strictus said in a creaky voice.

"The weather mage has summoned it," I replied, looking down at another gray cloud hovering right above the ground a few dozen feet away from the fence, hiding the entire party intending to assault my home from sight. It was standard cover used when there was time for preparations. The weather mage was strong, but slow, which was why he might have opted for that particular specialization.

Several horned figures emerged from the thick fog that had seemed reluctant to release them as it stuck to their armor.

They approached the recently-collapsed building and took their positions there, accompanied by the now-docile battle hounds. One of the tanks gave a short whistle and walked away, disappearing in a narrow side street followed by all three dogs. The remaining two sat down, reclining against the only wall still standing, and prepared to watch the assault. The third one had left. It didn't seem like my house was that high on their list of priorities.

There was something else that I couldn't help noticing and found peculiar—the spyglass made it easy to read the legends above their heads. Their names were concealed, which already spoke volumes. And the weirdest part was that they were the Evil Flame clan's recruits. So, while Level 70 greenhorns were fully-fledged clan members, skilled fighters with elite pets and serious equipment were mere recruits, even though they behaved like leaders, looking around them languidly and paying little attention to their bustling comrades-in-arms. And I really didn't think they'd removed themselves from the battlefield at the request of the Evil Flame's leader. No one in their right mind would decide they didn't need powerful tanks with plenty of HP when they were planning to storm a house with an unknown number and type of enemies inside. The horned guys had decided to give this one a miss, but they didn't forget to send another one to reconnoiter something in the dead streets accompanied by dogs.

The clouds darkened, looking heavier and more opaque, and the storm clouds became pitch black. Most of them were pulling towards the house. It became darker still—almost twilight, even though the odd occasional bright sunbeam still made it through the breaks in the clouds. But the breaks kept getting smaller.

It appeared that the assault would begin any moment
now...

Chapter 11

Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting...

AS SOON AS THE SKY had become covered by the leaden shroud of clouds, the drizzle turned into a downpour. The weather mage had really gone all-out—he must have been resting on his well-deserved laurels now, completely spent. Not a single wisp of smoke remained anywhere—the rain had put everything out with the zeal of a fanatical fireman.

The gray cloud was clinging close to the ground, looking like a nebulous herald of dire things to come. It quivered under the raindrops, but it wouldn't dispel. And given that it had remained intact for a long time, it must have been held in place by one of the players' magic. It clearly wasn't the result of using a magic scroll—a legendary one may have been as effective, but who'd spend a legendary scroll on some house in the middle of nowhere?

The enemy would go from preparations to action very shortly. The raiding party must have already assumed formation, and the necromancer was most likely outside already—their wagon had disappeared, obscured from sight by the cloud. I hoped all of our foes were standing close to each other. I sincerely wished they would. And I hated them all with a passion.

My initial fright and discomfort had given way to fury and incandescent loathing.

I'd had enough of these cretins! And that was the mildest term I could think of!

Besides, they'd managed to push more than enough of my buttons by playing cruel games with the locals. Absolute cretins—and cruel ones to boot!

It had rained twice—the weather mage would make mistakes, and the gray clouds would become white again. Daylight would return, the rain would stop, and rays of sunshine would light up the windows once more. The player would restore his powers, get a few wallops on the head from his companions in the process, and fire up his “cloud magic.” The clouds would grow gray again. They were almost black now—it would start pouring any moment. Then everything would go dark again, and the drizzle would resume, but five minutes later it would be sunny again. This had made me chuckle and gave me faith in our victory—time was on our side. There were many players in Waldyra, and not all of them were evil by far. So every passing hour increased the probability of the arrival of valiant shield-maidens and brave knights that would help us deal with the bandits. I'd also hoped for teleportation to resume—if the area became open for magical traveling, I could visit a couple of places that I knew where I could hire strong warriors, sharpshooting archers, experienced healers, and sage mages. Therefore, I greeted the enemy's every delay with a soft ululating squeal. On the other hand, all this constant celestial back-and-forth was extremely irritating, with the clouds coming and going all the time. It felt like tripping and falling in the middle of a motorway with a truck approaching you at near-supersonic speed, and someone pulling you off the tarmac at the very last moment—several times in a row.

The reason I really hated those bastards now was all the atrociously cruel games they'd played. The enemies that hadn't been participating in the preparations had decided to taunt us a little. They'd called a few of their friends and sought

out a couple of locals hiding in the ruins, then chased them towards us, terrified and screaming, only to kill them when they'd almost reach the gate. And those weren't merciful deaths—they made sure the townsfolk died slowly and painfully. Just to think this was a young clan! Relatively inexperienced players had quickly transformed into malicious little vermin. Only no vermin ever hunted for fun. Was that how all PKs came into being, I wondered?

My rage reached its peak when they killed their fifth victim, shooting five arrows into an unarmed girl's back. Strictus managed to dispatch an enemy mage, sending him into respawn, giving another girl a chance to reach the gate, which she'd used successfully. I killed a scimitar-wielding warrior who'd gotten too careless chasing a limping dwarf with a large black beard in the tatters of a striped uniform dragging four balls and chains behind him. He'd also managed to reach the gate. So Strictus had saved a maiden in distress, and I'd given a shackled convict another chance. The girl instantly inquired about the identity of her savior, and looked ready to fall into the majordomo's arms when she found out it was him. I feared the convict would try the same number on me, so I assumed a gruff look and asked him in a hoarse voice what he'd been put in chains for and who he was in general.

It turned out the dwarf wasn't from Tranqueville. They'd been taking him to a court in Hradalroum for a trial in a prison wagon made of wood clad with iron. However, the convoy had been attacked, and the dwarf had been wandering through the area for a couple of days since. Hunger had driven him to Tranqueville, where he'd caught and killed a goose, but before he could eat the fowl, he was attacked by outlanders whom he assumed to be the goose's owners, so he'd had to escape through the rubble-filled streets past the ruined houses. That was how he'd gotten here. His name was Bruppie. What had he done? Taken part in some violent inter-dwarf dispute. But he'd fight alongside us if someone removed the weights

from his feet. Those on his wrists could stay—they were just what he needed. He sounded enigmatic, but when one was short of fighters, one didn't run karma checkups on suspicious dwarves if they volunteered for the fight. Strictus started taking care of the shackles, while I returned to the attic and continued to grit my teeth in rage and frustration. Sometimes I'd run back and hurry to the gate or the back door. With a little luck here and there, I managed to save a few more of the fleeing townsfolk.

Now that the clouds were dark for the third time and the rain began again, the hunt for civilians had finished at last, and two dozen refugees had gathered in the Refugee Hall. I'd healed them all with Serious Healing, and many had also required Purification to remove the poison from the PKs' arrows from their bodies. My reputation among them went through the roof. Whenever I'd enter the hall, the men and women would rise and smile to me happily, and everyone tried to hug me or pat me on the shoulder. I was their hero now.

I remembered a story from the Arabian Nights called Caliph for a Day that I'd read near the snow-covered window of my Arctic abode during my holiday in the snow and subzero temperatures. It was about a poor man who'd become king for a day, only to return to his poor man's life afterwards.

I wondered for how long I might remain a hero. Once the storm began, there was a chance everything here would be destroyed, and all the civilians killed. This could not be allowed to happen.

I was no longer contemplative or indecisive, but full of wrath and resolve. Braver had felt the same way—he'd seen bits and pieces of what had transpired and nearly trembled with hatred—he even had to put his alchemical work on hold

for a moment to make sure he didn't spill any of his elixirs. The locals must have been real to him, too, just as they were to me.

And, finally, we heard the rain beat out its regimental tattoo on our roof. Visibility had diminished, but you could still see. The enemies were warming up and getting into formation. It was our cue.

“Have all the potions been consumed, Strictus?”

“Yes, sir. Everyone's had theirs—us and the fighters waiting downstairs. Braver the alchemist knows his business—he'd made three potions for each of us, tailored perfectly to our needs and skills.”

“That's great! All right, I hope the gods of the Light are on our side. Make sure you don't miss, dear Strictus,” I muttered, looking at the arrow with a nondescript-looking sooty glass vial tied to its thick shaft in lieu of an arrowhead.

“Neither rain, nor wind are a hindrance to me,” the majordomo replied, standing rigid with his bow drawn. “And the target is large—and a most deserving one. I await your command, sir.”

“Go!” I exhaled.

The bowstring twanged. I handed him the next arrow, and the bowstring twanged again. Another present had just been sent to the enemy.

We'd decided not to wait for the siege to begin and show some initiative instead—I'd always been allergic to sieges. Therefore, they'd get our calling card first. The liquid in the vials had been one of Braver's creations—he said the name of the concoction was Sun's Hatred. What I knew for sure was that the ingredients included tears of a woman crying onto a mirror directed at the sun, which had still been visible. The tears would pour down the mirror into a goblet decorated with alchemical symbols set in silver. I'd held the mirror personally—and there was no shortage of local women's tears in the Refugee Hall.

All three shots had hit the cloud obscuring the ground precisely in the center. Three blindingly bright and near-simultaneous flashes had made the cloud look like a particularly ugly tent with a stack of floodlights installed inside. It was as if a lightning had hit it. The black silhouettes of players frozen in positions betraying their surprise appeared for a moment. Strictus hit them with his next arrows, with two young women following suit—twins from Tranqueville whose families had gone missing in the war. More armor-piercing arrows stung the enemy inside the cloud that had no longer provided any camouflage.

I was relishing in the howling of many throats. It wasn't the players howling—it was the undead, although I could also hear loud and irate profanity from the necromancer whose "kiddos" had just been hit by concentrated sunshine and were now smoking and howling. I saw the ugly silhouettes of skeletal warriors, bipeds and quadrupeds alike, falling to the ground in convulsions, but their howls wouldn't abate. Some massive figure, also twitching periodically, covered the player with some rag or blanket, then grabbed the necromancer and stuffed him into the wagon, proceeding with doing the same to the howling undead.

“Fire,” I barked, running down from the attic.
“Followed by everything you have!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Yes, milord!”

“Of course, milord!”

The two ‘milords’ were said in mellifluous female voices, and I felt an irrational guilt before Kyre as I dashed down skipping five stairs with every step. I didn’t even get any untoward thoughts! Why would I feel guilty?

“Follow me!” I commanded, kicking the doors of the hall open. “We leg it like we’d agreed to!”

And leg it we did—myself, Braver, and six locals. Eight fighters altogether accompanied by a taiga lynx and two card monsters, a boar and a cobra. The card master had been holding the latter at arm’s length and grimacing wildly—he appeared to have a fear of stakes. The clangor coming from nearby was reassuring on the one hand and somewhat alarming on the other—the sound of heavy iron chains dragged over the ground right next to me was somewhat grating, even though I knew it was made by an ally.

We had gone right through the gate and advanced by another few dozen steps, getting as close to the enemy as I’d deemed necessary. I didn’t stop running as I started pelting their ranks with Ice Spears and Explosive Fireballs. The dying cloud got shot through with fire and ice shards. The arrows

fired from the attic of my house started hitting the roofs of nearby structures where the enemy's long-range fighters had positioned themselves. It had taken the archers and the mages a while to get out of their state of shock, the young idiots that they were, and then they started hiding using the easiest method—namely, falling from the roofs to the ground. I wished those PK wannabes to try hiding like that in the real world someday.

The potions hurled by Braver exploded among the foes, and he was already throwing two more. Those hit the rooftops, exploding as two smoky blazing flowers and engulfing two archers, who suddenly went into a crazed dance, in their fiery embrace.

“For Tranqueville! For the town!” I yelled at the top of my voice. “Kill the invader scum! Down with the murderers! For Tranqueville!”

The others shouted even louder.

“For Tranqueville!”

“Kill the killers!”

“Punish the bandits!”

“For our town!”

I decided against using the Thorn Thicket, and only let loose Red Wasp and the String. Then I switched to healing spells as I slowed down. The allies had attacked even earlier,

which was great, since some of our enemies had come to their senses already and were now hurling all sorts of unpleasant stuff at us. I got hit in the stomach and the hip with two arrows. One poisoned me, and the other cut my Speed, but it didn't stop me. I caught up with the dwarf, who was swinging his chains and had just been hit by a thrown ax, healed him, then dashed to Braver, who'd been shot with a crossbow, and healed him, too, shooting an Ice Spear at the crossbowman, destroying the window sill that had supported him and making the player fall to the ground heavily. Then I realized why the dwarf had wanted to keep the weights on his arms—a ball on a chain drew a parabola in the air, and the weight came down with great momentum, smashing into the head of the crossbowman who'd been trying to get up. I shuddered and wondered what the dwarf could have done to get shackled in the first place.

I'd been hiding behind my allies' backs and healing them. Then I found myself right next to the crossbowman, still alive but just lying there stunned. I gave him a fireball in the face and picked up a smoking crossbow requiring high Strength and Agility. I wouldn't have been able to use it, but now the enemies wouldn't get it, either. Then I realized I'd come right to the rear end of the wagon. I heard the sunhater scream with malice as the cart emitted billows of putrid black smoke—it was probably uses to heal the undead scalded by the Sun's Hatred. I'd need to interfere.

I took a step forward silently.

“What the hell! My entire crew's levels have fallen because of your stupidity! Who promised protection, eh?” The necromancer was seething with rage, and the black smoke intensified. “Everybody's burned! Including me! I won't be able to use top-tier spells for a day now! You screwed up!

You've all screwed up! What the hell am I doing in your clan of morons? Where's the leader?"

"Good evening," I decided to be polite as I raised the tent flaps on the wagon and filled it with as many fireballs as I could muster. They were followed by the String fired by the other hand, and then an Ice Spear and another Explosive Fireball.

The reply was almost tearful.

"Don't! Don't! Don't kill the pack! Don't! I'll leave! I'm already leaving! Leaving! Clay! Kill him!"

But there was no mercy in me. A smoky flame erupted from the wagon. Then I got a heavy kick in the chest, flying backwards, crashing into a roof fragment, and slumping down motionless. The collision between my back and the stone had left me unable to move for three seconds. Then my opponent jumped up, covered in flames just like the wagon behind him, landing heavily. The claydark started towards me silently, throwing its burning robe aside. There he was, the golem made of cursed clay.

The figure was black, glistening slightly, and looking like a human—a knight, to be precise. It had been made in the shape of a walking suit of armor complete with a helmet with two gray fires burning maliciously inside. The claydark was approaching.

"Kill him, Clay! Kill Rosgard!" The necromancer's desperate cry came from the blazing wagon. Howling skeletons tumbled outside, covered in flames, followed by a

gigantic necrorat, and, finally, the necromancer himself, burning like his undead minions, spinning around himself, and trying to beat off the flames as he shot black smoke from his palms.

Two vials exploded at the feet of the sunhater and his pack. An explosive potion and an acid potion. The fighter and his skeletal pets were thrown back in a cloud of noxious green spray as a shower of sparks flew in every direction. The clouds were dispelling. A gigantic weight slammed into the chest of the claydark, smoking from the fire and the sunlight, and the golem was bowled over. The dwarf covered me with his broad back. I jumped up at last, removed five arrows from his back, and applied Healing and Purification. I waited for a few seconds, patted the dwarf on the shoulder, and ran on.

I healed Braver, who was throwing his potions at the enemy, and then the provincial berserker, hacking at the weather mage with his ax and shouting in timid rage. Then I dashed towards two more allies, who'd been pierced by arrows and singed by magic.

“Cuckoo!” Braver’s voice drowned out the crackle of the smoky fires. I saw all his body become a spring before he took a throw with the strength and grace of an athlete. A glistening vial flew some fifty paces then smashed right in front of a dozen new enemies running towards us along the street, led by the familiar knight in charmed green armor. A blurry orange flash soared into the sky—it was as if a ginger-feathered bird had flown up from the cobblestones. Nothing else was happening.

“I’ll be damned,” a calm voice came from the wall. “A Red Cuckoo, no less.”

The armored guy in the horned helmet was just sitting there in a relaxed posture, observing the battle with deep interest. The Evil Flame's recruit didn't seem to give a damn about the clan's inglorious demise. He may as well have had a bucket of popcorn next to him.

I was perfectly right. I kept looking at the fighter with his name concealed by magic while he was looking at me. Then he rose, leaped backwards, somersaulted over the ruins landing in the nearby street, then retreated in silence to where the irate barking had been coming from—far away from where we'd been.

“Got them!” Braver shouted ecstatically.

I barely managed to turn around in time to see something of the shape and size of an ostrich egg flashing underneath the feet of the enemy's reinforcements. The egg spun and drilled itself into the street. The paving cracked at once. The cracks ran in every direction, and then a whole segment of the street simply fell through together with our enemies. There was a low rumble as the players yelled, and the dwarf grunted, still engaged in his duel with the claydark. The golem was becoming covered in cracks, too.

I froze in bewilderment, watching Braver rip the last of the explosive potions off his belt and throw them into the pit, yelling,

“Choke on this! I'm happy I've saved all this stuff! It sure has come in handy!”

I used the healing magic on the dwarf on my way, ran over to Braver, and, having just shuffled my spells, hit the dark hole in the ground with fire and ice. The alchemist was full of surprises—I'd been thinking of him as a brave and businesslike professor, but Braver had turned out to be a fighter, too, and an obstinate one as well, bringing back memories of Indiana Jones movies. As I approached him, he'd already been pushing a huge chunk of dirt and rock balancing on the very edge of the pit with his shoulder. I helped, and the both of us dropped the present down. The voices of the trapped players could be heard no longer.

“I'll make sure you'll have enough of whatever's needed for such cuckoos and the other stuff,” I promised in a hoarse voice, putting my hand on his shoulder. It may have looked pompous—a clan leader thanking a fighter for showing bravery and acumen in battle, but in reality I wasn't only giving him thanks, but also healing him with my magic.

“What about the knights with horns?”

“The one I saw has gone away.”

“Such helpful recruits.”

“You can say that again,” I grunted, wiping my face and walking away from the pit.

The battle seemed to be over. The claydark had fallen as well—there was no sign of the golem anywhere, and the dwarf with his chains was sitting on a charred beam wearily. The necromancer's upturned wagon was quickly turning to ash as it burned—jars or vials of some sort were exploding inside,

and a pillar of black smoke with streaks of different colors was rising into the sky. The stench of an old crypt was overpowering, compounded by the smell of wet dirt, incandescent rocks, and dry flowers. No Evil Flame members were in sight—we'd killed most of them, and the rest had scattered. The ground was strewn with loot. A couple of enormous sacks were visible near the far wall. The four mules standing nearby kept throwing worried glances at the cargo, clearly assessing its weight. My fighters shuffled around amidst the blobs of silver mist shot through with red, looking triumphant and shouting triumphantly. It was the first victory of the forces of good in a long time. I'd seen them all take many serious hits—they'd only survived because of Braver's sets of potions tailored for each of them individually and my somewhat clumsy healer's work. The archers that had pelted the enemy with arrows from the attic had also contributed greatly to our victory, dispatching many of our foes.

We did have reason to celebrate—but I'd much rather we celebrated at home.

“Gather the loot! And then we'll go inside at once!” I shouted over the triumphant hubbub. My job description included being a wet blanket for people and other sentient beings around me.

I had to shout a few more times before the fighters heard me and started collecting the spoils. It had to be done quickly—dead players had always had a reason to return to the place of their demise for their equipment and their inventory in the hopes of beating their killers to it. In the real world it would be the killer returning to the scene of the crime, and over here it would be the victim returning and pestering the killers by requests to give back their possessions.

I sent Braver, the berserk, and the card master to take care of the mules and the sacks. These must have contained what our enemies had looted in Tranqueville. In the meantime, I was picking up everything I could find on the street. New players would have been ecstatic about my catch—there were weapons, armor, scrolls, potions, tools, some food, money, and assorted bric-a-brac. All of it would amount to a substantial sum of money. However, I remained indifferent—my attitude to material possessions must have changed during the Great Expedition. I'd seen enormous ships with their cargo holds full sinking after suffering relentless enemy attacks, after all. This indifference had helped me a lot—I didn't slow down to consider every find. I just kept on collecting everything within my reach, only minding my cargo carrying capacity.

Mules passed me by, looking like snails from the side because of the gigantic sacks placed on their strong backs. The locals and Braver followed them, urging them on and also carrying some of the loot inside on their own backs. The dwarf with his jangling chains entered the gate, followed by the other heroes of the brief but memorable skirmish. I entered last, my legs wobbly from the overload, but I wouldn't leave so much as a single vial to the PKs.

I dumped everything in the hall, smiled to Strictus, who'd just come down from the attic, pointed at the pile of loot and asked him to take care of it. All the food was to be shared between the refugees and the fighters. If anyone knew how to cook, they could see to the supper. Braver was to get all the potions and their components. He'd just gotten back to the dining room and was once again fiddling around with his bubbling and fuming jars and test tubes. I couldn't help admiring his stamina and nonchalance—he'd just buried a bunch of enemies in a pit, giving them the last rites of earth, fire, and poison, and there he was again, practicing his art.

Then I visited the alchemist again to tell him we'd make a foray as a small party shortly. We couldn't afford to give the PKs time to regroup. Now that I knew that the guys with the horns on their helmets didn't give a damn about the Evil Flame and had some dodgy business of their own to attend to, I felt a lot more confident—especially after having seen the ineptitude of our enemies. They acted like greenhorns... and it was best to mow down weeds while they were still fresh and green.

Before I proceeded to assign fighters their roles in the raiding party, I opened the clan settings section of the interface, clumsily choosing two menus. I studied them for a while, found the icon with two crossed swords of different colors, pressed it, and entered "Evil Flame" in the search bar that had just popped up. The system reacted with a confirmation request.

Attention!

Rosgard, clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, declares war on the Evil Flame clan!

Are you sure?

Yes/No

Inasmuch as I knew, every member of our clan would see this request, but I wasn't completely sure that the request would reach the faraway Zar'Graad. I waited for a few seconds to make sure, taking a screenshot of the request, then confirmed and started the first war in our clan's history.

The war has been declared!

It's on!

Heroes of the Final Frontier against the Evil Flame!

The guards will not interfere in the hostile actions between the clans for as long as said actions present no threat to neutral participants as well as private or public property.

The war can only be called off by mutual agreement of the warring clans' leaders!

The war will end once one of the clans captures the enemy's flag, clan symbol, or clan citadel (a hall, a fort, or a fortress).

The dissolution of one of the clans will end the war automatically.

Attention!

No one will be able to declare war on you within the next ten days unless the clan leader explicitly agrees to accept the challenge!

Attention!

Your clan duel score is 0:0.

(see the comments for more details)

Heroes of the Final Frontier against the Evil Flame. The war has begun. And it would indeed be a “total war,” just like that guy from earlier had boasted—until the complete defeat of one of the parties.

Attention!

You have declared war on the Evil Flame clan!

Any clan that declares war on another clan must possess a clan citadel (a hall, a fort, or a fortress).

The Heroes of the Final Frontier have 09:57 minutes to assign any building the status of the Clan Hall, Clan Fort, or Clan Citadel.

Should the clan fail to have this accomplished on time, the HFF clan will lose the war.

I cursed. So I had made a mistake, after all. I’d needed to conduct a more thorough research.

I didn’t have much time, so I went through all the virtual icons in search of the menu I needed. I found it, read the description, nodded, and grunted. Then I pressed the highlighted arrow that only I could see, and a glowing track flashed at my feet. I followed it, and soon found myself in a spacious room with a tall ceiling, a large crystal chandelier,

walls with wood paneling, and not a single window anywhere. The room was at the very center of the manor house. The track of light became a glowing circle in the middle of the room that started pulsating. I stood in the circle, chose a name almost randomly, raised my right hand to the ceiling, and pressed the button of white and gold that had appeared in front of me with my other hand. There was a click.

I heard a fanfare, the familiar sounds of a harp, and an impish angel's giggle coming from above. My right hand sent forth a flash of gold and white, followed by another one, sending hundreds of bright sparks flying everywhere—they hit the walls, the floor, and the ceiling, disappearing inside them instantly. It felt as though the entire building had started to vibrate, from the foundations to the roof. The harp and the giggles grew louder, there was a final flash, and then everything went back to the way it had been. Then I saw a system message.

Congratulations!

Rosgard, clan leader of the Heroes of the Final Frontier, has founded the clan hall, which will henceforth be known as HEFF!

Attention!

From now on, the clan hall will be the main asset and treasure of the Heroes of the Final Frontier!

Attention!

No one has laid siege to the HEFF to date!

The HEFF has never been captured by the enemy to date!

Bear in mind that the HEFF is your home!

Clan members located on HEFF territory will restore their strength and heal quicker!

Many of the clan members' skills, professional and otherwise, are boosted when they're on HEFF territory!

See the comments section for more details.

Achievement unlocked!

You receive the achievement: Aggressor, Tier One.

You can see the table of achievements in your character's menu.

Your reward: +1% to any damage dealt by clan warriors during the storming of enemy strongholds.

Achievement unlocked!

You receive the achievement: Clan Hall, Tier One.

You can see the table of achievements in your character's menu.

Your reward: +1% to any damage dealt by clan warriors during a battle on Clan Hall's territory.

+1% to clan warriors' defense during a battle on Clan Hall's territory.

+2% to HP, mana, and Vigor regeneration on Clan Hall's territory.

“I'll have to read all this information in full eventually,” I sighed, closing the bunch of announcements for the time being.

I got back to the dining room and told Braver the news. Then I sent him an invitation, instantly getting my reply.

From this moment on, Braver Lightey is a clan member of the Heroes of the Final Frontier!

“Is it time?” Braver asked gravely as he packed the potions in his belt pouch.

“It is,” I nodded. “We'll gather at the gate in five minutes and take a walk around our new hall to assess the situation. Then we'll look for surviving civilians and ruffle the Evil Flambé's feathers while we're at it.”

“The Evil Flame's,” the alchemist corrected me.

“They can be called a flambé by this point,” I chortled, remembering all the enemy clan members’ yelling and posturing. “If we get lucky, we’ll pay a visit to the council house, too. It’s time to shake up the place a little. Restoration is long overdue, and I really want to hear what the local mayor has to say to all this.”

“Well, we have founded a clan hall here, and we’re the only clan in these parts. I know what the mayor will say—he’ll ask you to bring order to the town. Even though we haven’t made any pledges yet.”

I was really happy to hear Braver say “we.”

“We haven’t,” I agreed. “But we will. And we’ll demand assistance. First of all, I’ll request that the provisions be taken out of storage and shared with the starving populace. And I’d really like to see that bloated toad in a mayor’s costume say no to that! I’ll stuff his gullet full of roast quail until he bursts! We gather in four minutes, buddy. We’ve got a council house to take on.”

“Affirmative. Bring the dwarf with his chains along. I’ve brewed a double Strong Ox potion. Once he drinks it, he’ll swing those weights around like feathers. He’ll be more powerful than any bulldozer.”

“All right. So let’s gather a party and give the Evil Flambé and the gluttonous authorities a good trashing!”

“It’s Evil Flame.”

“Who cares? Once we hang them all, their name will be irrelevant!”

Chapter 12

Time for Action!

MY LAST TWO DAYS had been spent in the Lake District, and I had nothing to show for it yet but problems and reputation.

The reputation was positive, and therefore a pleasant thing. As for problems—well, they were a pain by definition.

But nothing else was working in my favor other than Braver joining me. Most importantly, I'd gotten used to answering to no one but myself and acting on my own behalf exclusively. All of that had changed drastically—everything I did now was also done on the behalf of the clan. If I did nothing, the HFF did nothing, either, and would therefore earn a reputation as an idler clan.

It's not that anyone had told me anything of that sort. I spent the last mile and a half that we'd walked across the war-ravaged town adding serious momentum to my anxiety whirlwind, interrupted only by the skirmishes we'd get into along the way.

Every newfangled clan leader must have experienced this anxiety. While I'd still been overwhelmed by the things I'd needed to do, there'd be no space left in my head for anxiety and overthinking. Now that we were on our way, dispatching everyone associated with the Evil Flame clan still plaguing the town, be they individuals or small groups, I was thinking again, having worked myself into a state close to a full-blown panic attack. I shook my head and tried to clear it from all those pesky thoughts buzzing like bumblebees,

reclaiming an inner peace for a while. But the thoughts would return.

“You’re not doing anything useful. You need to establish trade connections and alliances, get to know everyone you can, write polite letters, and reply to polite letters sent by others. How are you planning to benefit from this guerilla warfare? Big cities await! Visit a few guilds, take a look at the smarter new players, and start recruiting after a rigorous screening procedure. The clan must grow! And what about trade? We should start trading. Black furs for white furs, for example. Anything. As long as it’s trade.”

I was happy about one thing—no other clan had so far been in a hurry to write me any long letters with hints, whether encouraging or threatening. None of the traders had seemed interested in me, either. Bom had been running his sale since yesterday—I dreaded to ask him how much we’d earned by now.

I was also waiting for the half-orc to give the signal that we’d have to go to Zar’Graad in five hours. I would start preparing for my other “one-million-in-gold leap”—as soon as I’d visit Algora’s Mages’ Guild. Oh, and the Warriors’ Guild as well, of course. I’d grant my acquiescence to transport two members from each of these venerable institutions to Zar’Graad free of charge along with their possessions. Then I’d see what I’d get in return—I was sure I would get something.

Once we’d get to the new continent, we would once again load up on all the cargo that was so commonplace there and so rare over here, and jump back to Algora. Bom would start on another round of trade, while I’d return to solitary

roaming and killing PKs. That was our short-term general plan.

I was the transportation device, Bom was the trader, and everybody else was a hunter and a gatherer. The young clan was hastily making money—and we'd need a lot of it if we intended to get a firm toehold in the clan hierarchy and slowly move upwards. It was inevitable—Kyre had explained to me that no clan was allowed to stagnate—the more enterprising ones would trample over it or altogether destroy it. Stagnation equaled death. Only motion brought life. And it had to be upward motion.

I hadn't asked Braver for his opinion yet, but I'd take the alchemist to the new continent if he so desired. However, I had a different offer for him—namely, to hole up in HEFF with a bunch of new herbs, roots, drops, mushrooms, cobwebs, teeth, eyes, strange glands and other revolting but useful stuff. I had a hunch he might be interested.

That's how I kept reassuring myself—by thinking of all the important elements of my plan. However, the plan didn't say a single thing about founding the clan hall right now—or declaring war on anyone, for that matter. Kyre was probably livid, and Bom must have been gnashing his fangs, too, sitting on an enormous pile of gold. But I was a leader, so it behooved me to take decisions—and I'd just taken two that I intended to be responsible for in full. I wasn't going to be the head of the clan in name only, either. I only hoped my friends would understand me, since any decision I'd take would affect them as well.

My strike force consisted of myself, Braver, Bruppie the dwarf, one of the archer girls, the card master, and the provincial berserk. I'd left the manor defended by a skeleton

crew, but I'd assumed no one would try to assault it again. Did I say "again?" It's not as though the foe's first attempt even amounted to a real assault.

As we marched across Tranqueville, we played a funny game of Hit the Diaper—I'd found a respawn location that had very clearly been camouflaged by fallen trees and rocks for a purpose. All the killed players would come back here. And since it had been camouflaged, it made sense to do a search, which resulted in us discovering four small and two large caches—in the soil, in hollow trees, and underneath rocks. Each contained weapons, equipment, supplies of potions, and clan cloaks with the flame-and-yelling-victim design. Larger caches contained loot—carpets, copperware and silverware, paintings, tapestries, animal heads mounted on plaques, chandeliers, heavily-ornamented empty chests, and rare books of different sorts.

We'd also stumbled upon three traps—only one of them had worked, pelting me and Braver with a swarm of poisoned needles. The poison had been a strong one, but it had worn off quickly. I'd had enough mana to keep healing myself and Braver as we kept taking stock of our findings. Having robbed the PKs, we sent the mule we'd taken with us home, accompanied by the card master who'd become near-useless—the cobra had been killed, which left only the boar, since he hadn't obtained any new cards. So I decided he could well be sent away together with the mule and the cargo he carried on his back. We'd scouted out the road already, and it wasn't far. The local reached the manor in no time at all and gave us a sign to that effect by waving a red piece of cloth from the attic window as we'd agreed.

We'd left the dwarf with his weights and the archer girl next to the respawn location and conducted a brief inspection of the nearby area. We'd found two PKs, killed them, returned

to the respawn location and watched them get killed a few times more—as soon as the naked players wound up on the rock slab, they'd get knocked off their feet by the heavy weight on a chain and slammed into the nearest wall. If they dodged, they'd still get a few arrows in their unprotected legs. Having died a few times and lost a few levels, the PKs had prudently logged off, and we continued onward. Then we found two more PKs and made sure they'd go offline, too. We'd found another cache and called for the mule again, then loaded the beast up, and sent it back.

Finally, we came to the council house. It was a mighty and majestic building—the pride of the town. There used to be a clock tower, too—another spectacular landmark that had sadly been destroyed. Those PKs were the worst.

The town reeked of smoke, and the fire continued to consume houses with impunity, roaring like a wild animal. The council house was redolent of fresh pastry and roast quails, while the long plumes of smoke coming from the three long chimneys on the council house roof meant that the ovens downstairs had just consumed a good portion of firewood and would soon be used to cook more soups, roasts, ragouts and other delicacies.

I was standing at the end of the street leading to the council house. I had my hands behind my back and was giving the building's closed gates a grim look. The council house's defenders were standing behind the narrow windows of the second floor, between the stone statues decorating the façade. Unlike me, they were in a merry mood and welcomed me with jolly voices. Why wouldn't they? I was the one who'd taken it upon himself to run around in the ruins, doing their work free of charge, after all, leaving them to indulge their gluttony.

“Use the back door, Rosgard! You know that passage!”

“Open the gates!” I shouted, not moving an inch.

“Perish the thought, good Rosgard! There’s a war on! We cannot weaken our defenses! And who’s that with you?”

“My friends—and the people of the good city of Tranqueville, who had stood shoulder to shoulder with me to defend the city from killers and pillagers!”

“It’s true!” Braver yelled. An avalanche of shouts followed—all the locals standing behind our backs started yelling in confirmation.

I raised a hand, and all the shouting stopped at once, so I could continue. I raised my head and found myself staring right in the face of the guy with the mustache in charge of the defense, Captain Lerouche Blancheur. He looked like a frog that had eaten a bee instead of a fly, and was now swollen to twice its original size. The red puffy cheeks, the stern frown, the bushy eyebrows, and the waxed mustache made him the very image of a dauntless warrior—the terror of partridges and prosciuttos. I’d found out what the latter was—the generous rulers of Tranqueville had offered me a whole smoked ham prepared made according to some particularly fancy recipe. Not that I’d normally have objected to prosciutto as such, but this was hardly the situation for me to be accepting such gifts—or indeed anything from their ilk. The memory galvanized me, and I raised my voice.

“So, while the civilians fight in the smoke-filled streets, sparing no effort and risking their lives, why are the brave

warriors holed up behind the walls of the council house, guarding their cellars stuffed with meat and wine? Why do cobblers and seamstresses fight while soldiers and officers hide? Why are they afraid to open the gates? Soldiers! I'm Rosgard! And the fate of the city matters as much to me as it does to everyone here! I'm an outlander—but still I fight! Have you seen us kill the looters from the windows of the council house? Have you seen us delivering just punishment upon the Evil Flame's bloodsuckers that had been amusing themselves by cruelly hunting your women and your old folk? Have you seen it?! Have you?!"

There was no reply. The mustached captain puffed his cheeks out even more, and even opened his mouth, but I continued, without letting him get a word in edgeways.

"We have already cleared five streets! Five! We have defended our Clan Hall, where many locals had found shelter! Now our path has led us here. And what do we see? Warriors? Hiding behind wine barrels and hams? Warriors who watch their neighbors, friends, and relatives slaughtered? Who do we see here? Cowards who've betrayed their town, perhaps? Answer me, warriors of Tranqueville! Are you cowards? Say yes, and we'll leave right away! We have a war to fight!"

The council house exploded with yells. Locals of this rank were creatures of instinct, and patriotism was one of the traits hardwired into most of them.

"There are no cowards here, Rosgard!"

"We're no cowards! We're ready to fight!"

“Not a single coward here!”

“You’re wrong, Rosgard! Wrong!”

“Stop the shouting!” The captain’s roar drowned out the din like a train horn. “Rosgard! How dare you say such things when you have dined with us like an honored guest? There are no cowards among us! And our hearts bleed profusely, skipping a beat every time under the weight of all our sadness! It hurts us to see our city in death throes! But our hands are tied! We’ve been given orders!”

“Orders,” I repeated, barely managing to suppress a triumphant smile of someone who’d gotten just what he’d wanted. “So who’d give such inhumane orders to brave soldiers? Who’s ordered them to stop protecting the city and protect the council house instead? Who values barrels of wine and roast chickens more than the lives of the townsfolk? Who’s given orders to defend their private kitchen and not the city?”

My words had fallen on fertile soil. I was watching the defenders of the council house as their faces darkened and they exchanged glances, muttering something to each other and looking more and more incensed with every passing moment. Even Captain Lerouche Blancheur had fallen silent, attempting to gather his wits. The answer to my question had been known to all, but no one dared to voice it yet.

“Who’s given orders to abandon us?” I suddenly heard a woman’s voice, resonant and filled with grief.

“Whose order was it for us to be left to fend for ourselves? I know all of you! Pierrot, Lisson, Tomice,” the girl’s finger pointed at one soldier after another. “Mourvier the greengrocer. Lourde the clockmaker. Who ordered you to abandon us?”

The soldiers looked down, unable to face the sight of the slender girl with a longbow behind her back. She’d fought on the streets of the war-torn town while they’d been in hiding.

“Do I hear a mutiny brewing?” A new voice roared from behind. But this sound was a parody of a roar—it was as if a kitten had been trying to sound like a big and dangerous lion. So the main character had finally decided to join the conversation.

“Why, if it isn’t the mayor of the glorious and almost completely destroyed town of Tranqueville,” I pointed my finger right at the forehead of the fat man wearing a frilled shirt under his multiple chins. Heavens almighty—he was holding a chicken leg in his hand as he towered above the half-starved crowd. How incredibly illustrative.

“Rosgard! Our friend!” The mayor’s face cracked in a wide smile.

“I am no friend of yours!” I chopped the air with my hand. “I am no friend of cowards who abandon their town to enemies! No friend of those who hide behind sturdy walls and gorge themselves on delicacies while the townsfolk are dying of hunger and thirst among the ruins! Is that how a city ruler is supposed to behave? Mayor!” My finger, trembling with fury, was still pointing at the fat official. “I am Rosgard, and I declare that you’re unworthy of being our mayor! You are the

worst mayor ever! You have to resign right now and transfer the power to someone worthy of the title!”

I spoke with as much passion, ire, and power as I could muster, remembering how the Black Baroness used to give pep talks to her clan. And I appear to have done my homework well. My words did have quite an effect.

“How dare you!” The mayor nearly choked on his breath, throwing away the drumstick and turning crimson before my very eyes. “I have given you a warm welcome and invited you to our table! I have charged you with an important task! The one you received from the brave captain Le...”

“I have completed the task!” I spread my hands mockingly. “We’ve vanquished a great many enemies! But I need no reward from one like you! I don’t want the traitor of his own people to throw me any sops! A coward! A yellow-bellied glutton! Mayor! Resign! You’ve got to go! Mayor! Resign!”

“Mayor! Resign!” Braver joined in, followed by the rest of my companions. We had bonded fighting together, and my reputation among them was impeccable. The townsfolk may have been inept fighters, but they were loyal, and ready to support my every initiative—even the craziest one like a revolt.

“Mayor! Resign! Mayor! Resign!”

“Silence! Everybody be quiet! It’s an order! I’m the mayor, and you have to obey! Rosgard! You have betrayed my trust!”

The message that had just flashed red before my eyes informed me that my reputation with the mayor had fallen drastically. We were enemies now. We wouldn't attack each other on sight, but he hated me with a passion.

"You are the one who betrayed the town that had entrusted itself to you!" I yelled back, raising my hand. "Mayor! Resign!"

"Mayor! Resign!"

"MAYOR! RESIGN! MAYOR! RESIGN!"

The crowd standing before the locked gate of the council house kept on yelling and didn't look like it was about to disperse. There were many warriors standing in the second-story windows, armed and strong, but no one feared them, and we kept on chanting. It wasn't just our group anymore—more people were shouting from every direction, standing on their own or gathered in small groups. The grimy Tranqueville survivors were coming out of their hiding places where they'd sat out the pillaging, hoping for the attackers' sharp swords and heavy axes to pass them by. There were old people, women with children, and wounded men with bandaged heads, limping heavily—at least a dozen of them, and they all stood next to me, their hands raised, and their voices angry.

"MAYOR! RESIGN! MAYOR! RESIGN!"

The short fatso had his back against the armor of the mustached Captain Blancheur, who was towering over him.

“MAYOR! RESIGN!”

“You despicable coward!”

“You’ve been watching them kill us!”

“You were supposed to be defending us!”

“MAYOR! RESIGN!”

I no longer stood in front—I was right in the middle of the crowd, ragged and wounded, milling about me like the waves of the irate Lake Naikal, roaring its wrath at the council house. I felt like a rock standing in the middle of a lake in a storm. More locals arrived every minute. They had thrown caution to the wind and overcome their fear to come here and express their pain and their outrage. I spoke truly, after all—the mayor had betrayed them.

“My entire family has been killed!”

“Why are you hiding? Why aren’t you defending us!”

“You have betrayed us, mayor! All these deaths are your doing!”

“Where’s my wife? What has become of my children? Answer me, mayor!”

“Why are you guarded by soldiers and we have to fend for ourselves out here?”

“MAYOR! RESIGN!”

I waited a little longer, and then raised both my hands, glowing red, to the sky. The outraged hubbub stopped for a while. My voice was loud and heard by everyone.

“I offer you to be tried by the gods, mayor! Let’s summon any deity of the Light! You get to choose! And let the deity judge us! Which one of us will they deem righteous? You, who had hid behind your soldiers’ backs and betrayed your town? Or me? Someone who had come to this town and decided to stay—and then defended it as the need arose? A trial by the gods, I say!”

“I’ll help to call upon the heavens,” the old lady that had volunteered was as gnarly as a root of an ancient tree and was barely managing to stay upright. Her unkempt grey hair fell over her shoulders chaotically, but her pale blue eyes had a look of calm wisdom. “I used to serve in our temple. I know how it’s done.”

“I’ll help, too!” An old man chimed in, coughing and wheezing, his eyes rheumy and his nose red. He’d obviously caught a cold, and I thought I’d have to heal him at once lest he shuffled off this mortal coil right there and then.

The mayor didn’t answer me—he just pressed his back closer to the captain’s chest and maintained a harried silence like some animal guarding the entrance to its lair. He was the spitting image of an irate hamster, I thought to myself.

“So, trial by the gods?! What say you?! No?!” I made a frustrated gesture. “All right. How about a duel? One on one! Right now! I challenge you, the mayor of Tranqueville! Come out and fight me! Prove that truth and the power are on your side!”

“A duel? Rosgard the outlander, you have gone too far this time!” The mayor’s cry resonated over the town like a bell, directed outward as if he’d been summoning the PKs. But they must have heard us yelling, at any rate. “Guards! Draw your bows! Aim them at Rosgard and his rabble! He’s had the audacity to threaten the mayor! Oh, I have misjudged you, Rosgard! I made a terrible mistake when I first met you on that accursed day!”

“I have misjudged you, too, mayor!” I answered right away. “I never would have guessed you were a coward and a traitor! Come out and fight fairly! I’ll beat you to death with your prosciutto, you overfed scum! Fight me! And don’t waste my time! We have enemies to kill! The town hasn’t been freed yet! Soldiers! Help me! I’m fighting for the lives of your children!”

Despite the mayor’s explicit order, not a single archer in the council house had raised his weapon by an inch. Not a single arrow had left its quiver. As I saw it, I felt as though victory was very near. I couldn’t wait—this verbal exchange was exhausting. A good wallop on the head would be a lot more effective than a long dialog. I wondered whether that might have been the reason of the prehistoric courting ritual’s popularity.

“It would be a prudent decision to accept the challenge or to agree to be tried by the gods, your lordship,” Captain

Blancheur declared in a loud voice, all of a sudden.

“What?!” The mayor gasped, starting away from the captain and bulging his eyes out at him, his shaking hand grabbing a window for support. “Do I see betrayal here as well?”

“The soldiers are complaining, your lordship. They have doubts. Prove your righteousness to them not by words alone, but by your actions as well. Defeat Rosgard in a fair fight. Or agree to be tried by the gods, and may the higher will strike down the unrighteous. Remember this symbol of the town’s trust that you’re wearing. The townsfolk have entrusted their lives to you, and it’s time to prove your competence, your lordship,” the mustached captain held up the thin silver chain on the mayor’s chest with a heavy key hanging from it.

“No!” The mayor didn’t even consider the offer for a second. “I owe nothing to anyone! I’m the mayor! And you’re here to protect me! Fire at will!”

The soldiers remained standing. The milling crowd around me had grown. I reshuffled my spells, stretching my arms out and placing my palms, pulsating with healing magic, on the shoulders of those who’d been injured the most, in a hurry to replenish their health. I could help quite a few of the injured citizens while the mayor kept bickering with the captain. My arms moved like the hands on a clock gone crazy and telling time randomly and chaotically as I kept on healing the wounded.

“Fire!”

“Mayor! Resign!” I answered at once, and the crowd started chanting again.

“MAYOR! RESIGN! MAYOR! RESIGN!”

“Traitors! You’ve all been prospering with me as your mayor!”

“A mayor’s mettle is tested in battle—not at a feast!” I snorted. “Resign, mayor! Or fight!”

I healed three more citizens, then leaned over a little, reaching the elderly lady and the old man. The dude looked like his cold would get the best of him any moment. I could only hope whatever he’d been afflicted with wasn’t catching—I doubted that I’d be able to call Doctor Placebo here.

“Mayor! It’s time to make up your mind!” The captain’s roar was the last straw—the camel had been swaying under its heavy load for too long, and its back snapped in two at last. The short fat man in his frilled shirt shrieked revoltingly, pierced me with a hateful glance, and suddenly made an incredibly long leap, disappearing inside the council house. We heard a howl coming from the inside—it was full of anger, fear, and utter hatred. I’d just made another enemy. It would be prudent to catch the mayor and slice his throat with no witnesses—just in case. It was Waldyra, after all. Even an abandoned horse could turn into a monster...

“Open the gate!” Captain Lerouche Blancher commanded in a sonorous voice. He jumped down from the second story easily, landing on the cobblestones, took two steps forward and handed me the key with the broken chain

attached to it. When the mayor had leaped away, he'd left his symbol of power behind, and it was now being offered to me. "Friend Rosgard! Time and again you have proved your wisdom, strength, friendship, and loyalty to our town and its people. Since you've already done so much for us, who else can we entrust our city to in such a dire hour, when the fires of war are upon us? As the highest-ranking military officer, I have full authority to make this decision. Accept the key, Rosgard! Take command and lead us forth, mayor Rosgard!"

I didn't hesitate. All I'd wanted was to get some reinforcements. This was overkill. But I had no choice. I went through the crowd, automatically healing everyone I could touch with my hands, reached out, and took the key into my hand, which was glowing green and blue. I shuffled the spells again, and my hand was now glowing crimson, ready to throw balls of flame.

"I'm Mayor Rosgard, and I'll lead you into battle!" I shouted. "Together we'll drive the invaders away from the city! We'll put out the fires and clean up the rubble! We'll save everyone who's still alive! Our city will live again! And it will live peacefully and prosper! We deserve it!"

"Hurra-a-a-a-a-a-ah!"

"Lead on, Mayor Rosgard! Lead us into battle!"

"For Tranqueville!"

Attention!

You have become the Mayor of Tranqueville!

(this title is only valid under martial law)

Your current position equals that of a military leader!

All the town's military forces are now under your command and will follow your every order!

Bear in mind that you've been entrusted with an enormous responsibility!

Make sure your every decision is prudent and well-thought-through.

Many lives depend on your actions—as well as the very future of the town that has entrusted itself to you!

“Right,” I said, clutching the key while watching the soldiers come out of the council house one by one as the gate started to open. “Let’s bring order to this place at last!”

Chapter 13

All in a Day's Work for the Mayor— Which Includes Fighting. Clan Leader Business. Let's Get Ready to Go!

THE FIRST ORDER I'D GIVEN as a mayor was nothing new—on the contrary, it was old as history itself, just like the orders you read about in every dusty and musty chronicle.

It was simple—all the hungry mouths were to be fed!

I'd invited everyone inside the formerly off-bounds council house, and in less than a minute I relished the sight of a starving crowd being fed. Dirty and haggard folks stormed the tables covered by pristine white tablecloths with a roar, grabbing grilled fowl, freshly-baked loaves of soft bread, as well as sorts of fruit and vegetables, with their grubby hands, and poured anything they could lay their hands on into their goblets. The supplies were dwindling rapidly.

That took care of the bread part. The circuses had already been prepared, so my duties as a newfangled official were almost done. I'd already asked my questions and picked six of the strongest fighters with varied techniques, assigning them as guards of the council house that had been transformed into a soup kitchen. I was now leading a much larger party than I'd been with originally into a raid following a widening spiral trajectory starting from the council house, going through one street after another, mercilessly catching and killing everyone with a red nickname—including locals, of which there were many. The local miscreants must have been joined by fellow bandits from all over the Lake District.

You could indeed disarm the local brigands, give in to their pleas for mercy, lock them up in the local prison, and then try them, eventually sentencing them to a sentence in Al Dra Drass. But instead I opted for exterminating all the brigands without listening to a single word they might say. The long-suffering locals were only pleased to see their torturers brought to quick justice, and helped us round up all the remaining bandits.

It had taken us an hour to clear up the town. Evil Flame could do nothing against us. There were still a few of their fighters on the outskirts of town—the most resilient ones, apparently, as well as those who had, for some strange reason, decided not to abandon a clan as young and already as unlucky as theirs. Or, perhaps, they'd had nowhere left to go—not everyone could fall back for the very same reason they couldn't fight anymore. It was all about equipment—something that mattered a lot to every player. It became even more precious for someone who had to go around in a diaper or a bikini. We'd found and emptied many of Evil Flame's caches and kept finding new ones, killing their guards and taking their equipment as we went along. Many of the PK clan's fighters no longer had any alchemy, scrolls, armor, or weapons left. A few decently-equipped players still remained, and they'd share some of their stuff with their friends, but we'd been lucky to run into all the well-equipped ones—apparently, fate willed for them to be killed and deprived of all their possessions. The slain players respawned, and many of their respawn locations had already been staked out by the locals with all manner of improvised weapons in their hands. They'd mercilessly kill the screaming immortal outlanders time and again, lowering their levels and wiping out their skills.

I may have not acted as an experienced leader would, but I'd taken drastic measures and followed through on them, making the Evil Flame scatter like rats or cockroaches. The agonizing PK clan had no options left but flight, but where would they go? There were all kinds of monsters roaming outside the city—such combinations were never found in peaceful times. There were harpies, lions, saber-toothed tigers, fierce battle-trained bulls and elephants, as well as orcs, goblins, deserters and regular brigands killing everyone regardless of their affiliation. A large zone with Tranqueville at its center was still closed for teleportation—only the most powerful and prohibitively expensive teleports would be able to break through. Divine teleportation would work as well, but I doubted that any deity would deign any attention to these loincloth-clad characters only capable of dying repeatedly and dancing barefoot on broken glass. The Evil Flame got stuck in the outskirts of Tranqueville like the burnt ends of a pie crust. A few well-aimed cuts with a knife would make all the charred pieces fall off.

As we freed one house after another, we left more and more people patrolling the territory behind us—the city center had already been freed from every sentient invader. As I caught the fugitives with Thorn Thickets and pelted them with Explosive Fireballs and Ice Spears, I had an excellent opportunity to witness firsthand—for the first time ever—what happened when a clan leader gave up or proved too dim to be able to deal with an inevitable threat.

I saw at least a dozen half-dressed and strangely-equipped PKs leave town in tight formation, crossing a meadow that had burned recently, but had new shoots of grass sprouting already, moving towards a small copse visible on the horizon. One had nothing on but a cuirass; another was clad in strange pajama bottoms and slippers, one more sported diapers and a horned helmet, another one looked like a bikini model with a majestic mane of hair and not much else on her, and yet

another one had an extra-long skirt on, and a bow with a single arrow in her hands. They had very few weapons, even less in the way of armor and equipment, and, most likely, no alchemy at all. But at least they were prudent enough to flee. I'd allowed them to escape—they'd get a chance to wait things out in a safer place. Many had their nicknames turn green again, too—multiple deaths must have cleansed them of redness. I sincerely hoped they'd learn their lesson and that they'd stay away from Tranqueville—I wouldn't be so merciful the next time.

Funnily enough, they couldn't log off, either, since nobody knew what the situation in Tranqueville would be like by the time of their return. The whole city might be occupied by a brigade of paladins, or simply return to its peacetime routine, so any PK to turn up shivering on one of the town's streets would instantly be walloped by six heavy ladles and pierced by seven forks, while a sewing needle with green thread would embroider the words "You Deserved It" on their diapers.

Much to my chagrin, another group of players didn't leave the city or ascend into heaven, but opted for a downward route and tried to escape through the sewers. Every town and city in Waldyra had a system of crypts and catacombs. This wasn't Algora, of course, but you could still expect a few underground levels. I'd have to send a raiding party to get the sewage guerillas.

Most went offline, disregarding the dangers associated with returning. They must have lost their nerve, and it had stopped being exciting for them a long while ago. Instead of finding a bonanza of loot and entertainment, they got a bunch of problems and suffered substantial losses. Some of them were likely to call it quits for good, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that a number of low-level Evil Flame

greenhorns had already given in to their frustration and pressed the well-familiar red button on the gaming cocoon that would wipe the unfortunate character.

Some scattered on their own or in twos. More often than not, they'd get shot. But they'd try to escape again after respawning. Some succeeded; others didn't.

In another hour Tranqueville was free—or almost free. We'd also found no less than two hundred locals in hiding under the ruins of a house that had an enormous underground hall built with a purpose I'd failed to fathom. A PK shelter, perhaps? The townsfolk had been told to come out and sent to the council house. Those in good physical shape were quickly given some lunch and asked to patrol the city and help with the eradication of all the undressed weirdoes running all over the place yelling and cursing, making the crossbow-wielding girls blush as they peppered the backs of the impertinent nudists with bolts. Fancy becoming a mayor at a time like this. I'd only been given the key to the town, and it was already filled with naked people screaming. I didn't want to become associated with that phenomena—I'd intended to live in this town, after all.

Tranqueville was free. Almost.

Behind our backs you could already hear the hammers banging, the saws buzzing, and the water hissing as it doused the last of the fires. The town was being rebuilt. There were almost no plumes of smoke left, much of the rubble had been cleared up, the streets were made fit for walking and riding again, and the townsfolk returned to their homes if they were still intact, or milled about dejected among the charred ruins. This would be a perfect place for players fond of completing peacetime quests in prodigious amounts—there'd be over a

thousand of those left. However, that was no longer my main concern. I still had things to do.

About two hundred feet away from me stood a tall dilapidated square building with a top that looked as if someone had sliced it off with a knife at a steep angle. It was all that had remained of an ancient legend—it used to be a watchtower that had once been connected to three more like it by a tall wall of stone, all of them part of a shield directed towards Naikal. It was said that in days of old, horrendous monsters wielding strange powers would come out of the lake and attack everything and everyone in their sight, so the charmed Four Towers had been protecting the town for many years. However, fewer and fewer monsters came out of the monsters as time went by, and they were getting weaker, too. Eventually, the time came when no monsters had appeared for a decade, so the guards left first, and then the towers were taken apart. The tower bricks were then used to build the council house, the clock tower, a temple, and a manor house. The council house was still intact, the temple had been destroyed a long time ago, and the beautiful clock tower had been... destroyed by the evil PKs who would soon pay for their vandalism! Why, I'd personally roast their leader over a slow flame for such vandalism! Only a single three-story fragment of a single tower had survived—locals had somehow failed to take it apart for construction material. It was used for storing all kinds of junk. Children would play there sometimes; itinerant salesmen and musicians, and, occasionally, also circus folk passing through the town, would spend their nights there, too.

That story was mumbled to me by a toothless old guy as he held me by the elbow and pointed his walking-stick at the tower waving a large gray flag with a black flame devouring some poor yelling guy upon it.

The remaining Evil Flame fighters were hiding there—they'd barricaded the entrances, unfurled their banner, and prepared to fight back. They must have been planning to hold out until teleportation would start working again, which was bound to happen sometime soon—the lugubrious and infernal-looking clouds were leaving the city slowly, heading southwards. They were being replaced by the regular kind of heavy rainclouds—the cleansing rain would pour down soon, and the PKs would escape. Did I mind? Not much. I'd already told them all I'd wanted to, and vented my frustration in battle. The only thing I didn't manage to avenge was the clock tower.

“Hey!” My shout echoed from the walls of the tower. “Evildoers! The forces of good are talking!”

“Rosgard! You bastard! I used to be a fan of yours! You're a legend, after all! And you've turned out to be such a bastard!”

“Don't blame me, blame Waldyra! Hey, Flame! Is your leader there? Let him show his ugly mug. The forces of good have a few things to say to him.”

“I'm here,” the voice's owner tried to sound confident, but didn't really succeed.

“We seem to have a war on, so let me come clear. I'm this close to burning the lot of you to cinders, tower, and all. And you'll respawn surrounded by a few dozen locals who have every reason to be very angry at you, armed with everything they can lay their hands on. They'll be delighted to send you on a long and debilitating reincarnation trip.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’d like to see you risk your legendary health and try!”

I cringed, feeling embarrassed on the Evil Flame leader’s behalf.

What a crybaby. His voice faltered—and he didn’t sound angry or afraid, he sounded hurt! He’d hold a grudge now—a grown-up had come to their sandbox and put an end to their innocent game of pulling legs off ants and beetles.

“I really don’t feel like attacking you,” I admitted. “So let me make you an offer. But I’ll only offer once. If you decline, I’ll start demolishing the tower—with you in it. So, we have a war on... And it’s been going on too long for my liking already.”

“You started it!”

“But you were the ones who’d threatened me with a ‘total war,’ if memory serves.”

“And it’s only been a few hours!”

“I’m tired of it already. Besides, I won. So that’s what we’ll do: you admit defeat and capitulate, message your friends in the sewers who are diluting its delicate aroma with their repugnant stench, tell them to come out, and then head for the outskirts of town and leave, never to return, without waiting for them to join you. I won’t give anything back to you and you’ll get no presents from me. I’ll leave you a

minimum of your equipment—minus the loot. So you come out without your backpacks.”

“Why, you...”

“You heard me. You have ten seconds to decide. Then you can prepare for a resurrection slaughterhouse.”

“Hey! Wait!”

“Two!”

“What guarantees do we have?”

“You’ll be leaving in threes, you cretins! If the first three get snuffed, they’ll tell you as much in writing!” I was getting wound up, realizing they were wasting my time. There were lots of old problems and new problems to take care of, and a whole ocean of goals I hadn’t reached yet, and I had to spend my precious time on the evildoers holed up in the tower.
“Three!”

“All right! One condition! Let’s call it a draw! A fair draw!”

“HFF won! EF lost! Five! Six! Seven! Eight!”

“Stop for a moment!”

“Nine!”

“All right! We accept your terms!”

Congratulations!

The Evil Flame clan admits complete defeat and capitulates!

The clan war is over!

The Evil Flame loses.

The Heroes of the Final Frontier win!

The complete information concerning the battle has been stored in the Clan Archives, available to any interested party.

Achievement unlocked!

You receive the achievement: PK Scourge!

This achievement has no ranks and cannot be upgraded.

It is a clan leader's memorable achievement.

+1% to Defense from any damage dealt by PKs.

Congratulations!

Your reward: a notched wooden sword on a polished bog-wood stand.

Item class: rare.

Congratulations!

Clan reward: a notched wooden sword on a polished bog-wood stand.

(a commemorative wall-mounted decoration)

The rest of it was pretty routine—but quick, much to my delight.

Half-undressed players started tumbling out of the tower, looking in any direction but ours. A large military force blocking the way to the city must have indeed looked formidable. The PKs were leaving one after another—and, if my observations were correct, the leader had been one of the first to leave. I wondered how much longer the clan would keep going.

The PKs and the local bandits that had joined them were leaving. Not all of them had hidden inside the tower—some crawled out of holes in the ground like rats and galloped away heavily across the meadow, which kept getting greener. Some would run in zigzags and drop to the ground

occasionally until they realized that no one was shooting them in the back and that the town had indeed allowed them to leave.

A minute passed by, followed by another—and another. The tower was already empty. I saw a local half-orc limping on a makeshift crutch wearing a big bandana, a large woman's shawl around his waist, and a large wine barrel hiding his torso. A violent green version of Diogenes, I thought to myself.

Attention!

The town of Tranqueville has been freed from brigands!

Hostilities in the area are over!

The location's peaceful status has been restored!

“Yes!” I barked excitedly.

“We did it!” Braver's yell supported me as he tossed a giggling boy with a grimy face into the air.

The crowd all yelled in unison. The locals may not have received a message about the end of hostilities, but they must have sensed that the war had ceased—temporarily, perhaps, but it had ceased nevertheless. The town was no longer under siege. The evildoers had been punished and driven away. The good guys had won, and there was peace on the war-torn streets again.

We'd fought for Tranqueville, and we'd won the town back.

There was a downpour—the rain was sudden, warm, transparent, and fresh. The jets of water beat down on our heads and the cobblestones, washing away the grime and the soot off the remaining walls, roofs, and fences, and the blackened water disappeared into drains. The surviving trees and bushes started to rustle, becoming green again, their branches moving happily as they started coming back to life.

There's no such thing as bad weather!

Every herbalist has a reason to rejoice today! All the plants grow twice as fast when it rains! You have a chance of finding rare medicinal herbs! It's also the perfect day for mushroom gatherers! But don't forget that such unpleasant creatures as Singing Worms, Spiky Snails, Spitting Slugs and Web-Footed Sporenoses are very fond of frolicking in such weather, so stay vigilant!

Travelers whose route takes them close to rivers, swamps, lakes, and rivulets should be wary lest they get caught in a flood.

Make sure you dress for the weather—it's easy to catch a cold in the rain...

Attention!

The town of Tranqueville is no longer under martial law!

You are no longer Mayor of Tranqueville!

That was unexpected.

I even felt hurt for a moment, suddenly finding myself irrelevant. I'd taken reins of a town that no one had cared about into my hand, chased away brigands, put out fires, fed and healed the locals, and just as I had killed or driven away the last of the attackers, the mayor's title had been stripped off me.

I'd expected something like that to happen, but didn't think it would all happen so fast. I wondered what would happen if I hadn't hurried with ending the martial law. What if I'd allowed the PKs to hole up in some small part of the city and fought them lazily, developing Tranqueville in other ways in the meantime? The martial law would have lasted, and I'd have spent a longer time as a mayor, most likely managing to pull a few strings that would be of benefit to my clan—cheap construction materials and workforce, increased patrolling of the clan hall, collection of alchemical ingredients for Braver's laboratory by the locals... Yeah, and having the local sculptors make a standing statue of me. Sure. Why not?

But, really, was it a mistake on my part to clear things up so quickly? Or did I do the right thing—for the townsfolk had indeed suffered? This was confusing. What was my character supposed to behave like in this world, anyway? A proud do-gooder walking in the Light? A chaotic shifty trickster? The leader of a virtuous new clan—or a calculating

clan placing its own development and prosperity above everything else?

I wondered if I should emulate some other famous clan—there was no shortage of those. The Sleepless Ones, the Architects, the Chaos Lemmings, and the Diamond Hammer trader clan. Each path led to prosperity. However, one had to think one's every action through, make sure nothing happened of its own accord, control every single detail, suspect absolutely everybody, look for enemy agents even in one's inner circle, and treat gods as valuable big game to be hunted zealously. With all those conditions met, a day would come in the distant future when the HFF would become the new Sleepless Ones. Only was it what I wanted?

I really wasn't sure of that. I'd always preferred to follow my own path. If anyone followed me, it would still be the same path leading to an unknown destination. Should I change my ways? I really didn't think so. Given how many heavyweights our fledging clan had included, I'd have more than enough in terms of checks and balances that would keep me from the fate of a certain young man who'd made wings out of candle wax and birds' feathers and jumped off the roof of a lunatic asylum, scaring the chief physician half to death. The poor guy went splat, and then the sun melted the wings lying there on the tarmac. Or at least that's how I remembered a certain book I'd once read.

“Hurrah to Rosgard, a mayor among mayors, hero among heroes, and leader among leaders!” The hoarse voice coming from the crowd of locals sounded so weary I didn't even realize I was hearing words of praise.

“Hurrah to Rosgard!” Everybody else joined in, roaring in unison. The rain seemed to have waited for that very

moment to intensify, pouring tons of water onto the blackened ground. The first green shoots shot up like crazy—it was as if the rainwater had contained some extra-powerful fertilizer.

“Hurrah to Rosgard!” Braver voiced his support as well, clapping me on the shoulder. “Well done!”

“Our city’s gratitude has no limits!” Captain Lerouche Blancheur boomed, coming over.

Congratulations!

Your reputation with the town of Tranqueville grows by 2!

+1 to clan reputation.

Congratulations!

Your reputation with the city of Alfalfa hill grows by 2!

Congratulations!

Your reputation with the entire Lake District grows by 1!

+1 to clan reputation.

Attention!

Your reputation with the antisocial elements in Lake District drops by 3!

-3 to clan reputation.

Attention!

All the clan members of the Heroes of the Final Frontier have become sworn enemies for all of Lake District's criminals and disturbers of peace—brigands, killers, deserters, robbers, and so on.

That information was unexpected—and important. It instantly opened a multitude of opportunities. My intuition must have been right to choose the vastness of Lake Naikal's environs as a fitting place for my daughter Roskie to grow up in. The area was big enough to accommodate our clan easily. And the locals were nice people. We did manage to make enemies out of all the local bandits, though—they were never fond of heroes who came to fix, rebuild, and defend.

“I am also grateful to you for your immense help,” I replied, no longer feeling mildly hurt about having my mayor's title revoked. Wars were wars, but peacetime needed elections.

“What will you say to the following offer, friend Rosgard? Apart from you, there are two citizens of Tranqueville whom the townsfolk have always trusted and

whom they trust still. Those are myself, Captain Lerouche Blancheur, and the baker Motreau Strudel.”

Attention!

You have led the resistance against the invaders and rid the town of danger.

The townsfolk know and trust you.

Your voice is decisive now that the future of the town is at stake. Where will the road that begins in charred ruins and new hopes take Tranqueville?

Think everything through and make your choice!

That sure was nice.

But the whole thing was a no-brainer, really—even a first-grade student would be able to put two and two together.

If I supported the captain, the town would be rebuilt as a fortified settlement. The first structures to be built would not be bakeries or furniture shops, but barracks and training facilities—possibly, a watchtower or two as well. The locals may be given an arms training course; the craftsmen would start making weapons as well as household items. The former splendor would take longer to return this way, but the town would grow talons and fangs.

If I chose the baker, it would be quite the contrary. The bakeries, shops, and restaurants would be prioritized. The people would get back to their usual merry selves sooner, and they would start making money earlier. The residential buildings would probably get rebuilt quicker, too.

I'd heard of such limited-option elections. The system required order; the city needed to be rebuilt. Therefore, every candidate would be competent, but they'd all have different approaches. I hadn't been given that wide a choice, either—there'd normally be three or five of them, each with a specific vision of how the town would develop. For example, that was how the town of Krom had established itself as the impregnable citadel it was today. The town had been ravaged time and again by hordes of monsters, brigands, rebel elves, and aggressive orcs. After one such raid when the town had literally been razed to the ground, a player who'd done the most to protect the ruins and the surviving townsfolk, earning their trust as a result, was asked to choose the next mayor, so he chose an extremely antisocial and grumpy local—someone who'd survived each raid and managed to protect his family, too. The antisocial guy became mayor. And Krom had never been captured since. There had been attempts—all of them unsuccessful and extremely humiliating for the attackers, since the city had become a giant trap. It was a well-known story.

Therefore, I didn't think for too long. Freshly-baked buns were nice, but...

“I choose Captain Lerouche Blancheur!”

The game system didn't show me any message, but the locals didn't stay silent.

“Hurrah to Captain Blancheur!”

“Lerouche will lead us!”

“Captain Lerouche Blancheur is the new mayor! Hurrah!”

The baker was shouting again—he might have looked a little deflated, but he didn’t get offended by my choice. Even my reputation with him had remained the same. So he was either a genuinely good person, or so well-versed in the art of intrigue that he could conceal his emotions completely. Somehow, the latter version didn’t sound too plausible to me.

“Rosgard! Friend and brother!” I got a bone-crushing hug and a firm pat on the shoulder. “Thank you again! Thank you so much! I will not betray your trust! The town will be rebuilt! And it will not fall prey to perfidious bandits so easily the next time!” The mustached man looked so warlike and strong-willed that one trusted him to be earnest. And thus my choice had changed the fate of the sleepy town.

Tranqueville would soon have its defenses bolstered.

“Accept this and wear this proudly, Captain,” I handed him the key that I had worn on my own chest for just a short while.

“I thank you, Mayor Rosgard! I shall continue in your footsteps!” Blancheur lowered his head solemnly.

“I believe you, Mayor Blancheur!” I smiled.

“Do you have any special requests concerning the city? Trust me—I’ll do everything for them to be granted.”

“Just two. If a horse shrouded in demonic smoke appears on city streets, do not harm it if it doesn’t endanger the townsfolk’s lives. And call me at once. It is the legacy of my trespass, and I am the one to deal with its consequences.”

“Your request has been heeded,” Captain promised firmly. “And the other?”

“I am planning to make this lovely town my clan’s residence. Call us if you need for anything. It concerns money, weapons, alchemy, soldiers to defend the city, and workers to rebuild and expand it. The Heroes of the Final Frontier will help you in any way we can!”

“Thank you! Thank you, friend Rosgard!” The corner of the captain’s eye glistened with moisture for a moment; then he angrily wiped it with his enormous handkerchief. “I won’t forget your words—or your promises.”

“And I’ll stand by them, of course.”

“Would you happen to have any advice for me? It will be taken to heart!”

“Find the old mayor,” I replied at once. “Make sure that you do! Arrest him and send him to Alfalfa Hill to be tried. Or you can just quickly... ah... try him here until he stops being trying, if you catch my drift. The mayor’s a traitor and a

coward, but I saw the look in his eyes—he'll definitely try to return and have his revenge.”

“I have heard your advice, Rosgard, and I will act upon it. But pray forgive me—I've got a lot to do. A lot!” The new mayor hung the key on his chest, turned around, and walked towards the center of the rain-drenched city, giving orders in a booming voice as he went. “You three soldiers, man the tower! Mark everything that happens around! Don't let any foe approach unnoticed! You, you, you, and you—climb the roof of that building over there and have your bows ready! No enemy will walk the streets of our town with impunity anymore! And keep your arrows and bowstrings dry! Motreau! We need provisions! Please organize meals for the soldiers—five times a day at least. Soldiers need strength!”

“It will be done, Mayor Blancheur!”

“Aye aye, Mayor Blancheur!”

“On it, Mayor Blancheur!”

“So, ex-mayor Rosgard,” Braver snorted, opening a large chinoiserie-style umbrella of waxed paper with a dragon painted on it. “Shall we go home to HEFF?”

“Yeah, let's,” I agreed, placing a well-stuffed pack on my shoulder. I didn't forget about loot—I was certain that as soon as Bom would be done with trading and get to the bottom of what was going on at last, his first question would be about the amount of loot gathered in the clan hall. Heaven forbid we told him we'd collected nothing.

“Right...” Braver stopped all of a sudden and handed me his pack. “You go on, leader, and I’ll linger here for a while.”

“What for?” I was surprised at first, but then saw where he was looking and understood what he’d meant to do. “Sure, but stay vigilant. And please don’t leave town. There are evil things lurking in those bushes near the outskirts...”

“I have enough stuff to keep me busy right here. Just the varieties of flowers and mushrooms that are growing now can be used for about fifty different recipes. And there’s no competition—in Algora the players would already have gone over all of it with a magical combine harvester. And look at all the stuff here. You can really stock up on ingredients if you aren’t lazy—and whatever I am, lazy isn’t one of those things!”

“Sure, gather all you can,” I grunted, placing the other pack on my shoulders. “I’ll... ouch... carry the loot in the meantime.”

“I’ll be quick! I’ll just pick a bunch of leaves! Although the roots here are also very promising...”

The alchemist fell to his knees like a zealous worshipper of some mighty deity and plunged his hands into the rapidly-growing vegetation. I marveled at the speed with which he picked tiny scarlet mushrooms, yellow flowers, and lime-colored berries, and pulled purple roots and orange tubers out of the ground. Were they carrots? With vampire fangs? Verily, herbalists saw plenty of nightmares in their line of work, too.

I walked away and looked behind me again. Braver looked like a strange oversized mushroom himself under his idiosyncratic umbrella. A living mushroom with a dragon tattoo, rummaging in wet grass, casually throwing rocks and pieces of charred wood aside as he kept on filling his bag with alchemical ingredients.

Clan hall greeted me with a peaceful and blissful silence as well as a somewhat tense atmosphere of anticipation. Six locals with Strictus standing right next to them were waiting for me right at the front gate, converged on the central path. Strictus was the only one covering his head with an umbrella—I admired its massive ivory handle. He'd given it to me as soon as I stepped through the gate and opened another one for himself. The rest had umbrellas, too, but they hadn't opened them—apparently, out of respect.

“Why don't you open your umbrellas?” I asked. There was the sound of six umbrellas opening at once—a whole bunch of multicolored “mushroom heads” sprang up, and rain started to beat a happy rhythm upon them. It was surely an umbrella day, I thought to myself.

“Sir, these six inexperienced but diligent young lads and lasses have lost their homes and families in the tragic events that have transpired,” the majordomo started speaking in a dry voice without trying to color it with emotion. “They have nowhere to go. Three of them used to work in the gardens of this town's affluent citizens, and three more, in their houses. They'll be delighted to enter your service, sir, should you so desire. They do have shortcomings, but I promise to deal with those quickly and decisively.”

“Uh...” I said, looking at the tense but smiling faces of the locals. “If Strictus the majordomo authorizes it, he has my

full support.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence, sir.” The old man lowered his head a little. “They’ll get to work at once. The house is filthy, and the garden’s unkempt. I don’t even want to mention the doorknobs... They have been neglected to such an extent that could compare them to the heels of mountain trolls that have not been washed once over their entire lifetime.”

“We need all the servants to be present,” I added. “Hire as many workers as you think we’ll need, and buy the necessary tools. I’ll provide you with petty cash for expenses and the money to pay them. Our house has got to be clean and neat. And it shouldn’t have anything in common with mountain trolls’ unwashed heels for sure!”

“That’s a very prudent decision, sir! Now, the lot of you, get to it!”

The six bowed curtly and headed towards the house, chattering under their voices excitedly, apparently eager to begin their employment here. I nearly followed suit, since the “Get to it!” was said very emphatically. However, I checked myself and started walking slowly and gravely, listening to the majordomo.

“Which rooms are to be out of the workers’ reach, sir?”

“Let no one enter the second floor or the attic without your supervision,” I replied.

“Yes, sir. When should we expect your fiancée? I’d have to get your master bedroom ready, and there’s a distinct shortage of furniture there, even though the bed is big enough to get up to any kind of acrobatics there...”

“I don’t know anything about the exact time frame now,” I hastily interrupted the old man, unsure of how far he’d let his imagination carry him, “but rest assured she’ll arrive.”

“Yes, sir. Should I carry all the spoils of war to the second floor?”

“Immediately,” I nodded. “But don’t touch the table with Braver’s alchemy.”

“The young man’s labors should not be tampered with.”

“His lab will subsequently be transferred to the second floor. The ideal location would be a corner room with large windows—spacious, and with a large storage room nearby.

“I know just the room that fits the bill. I’ll give orders for it to be aired and cleaned. Do we need to make any purchases? I’m not sure the shops will open today, but you never know.”

“We need food first of all,” I said. “Every mouth has got to be fed.”

“Thank you for your input, sir. That will be all.”

“I’ll leave the bag with the money for expenses on Braver’s table, Strictus. Spend as much as you have to—there’s no need to be frugal. We’ve got to fix things up and have the place spick and span pronto. Oh, and one more thing...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Prepare one of the rooms on the second floor for my daughter—close to the master bedroom, but not too close.”

“Daughter? So your fiancée must be...”

“Nothing to do with her.”

“I see. The young lady’s age?”

“The most mischievous one. A rebellious teenager. How do I put it...”

“Oh, I get you, sir. A headache with pigtails?”

“Quite! She loves to read, is crazy about fishing, rides wolves, and is always game for an adventure.”

“Uh... In that case, I’ll reserve the largest second-story room for her.”

“Thank you, Strictus.”

Having seen the majordomo off, I paid a visit to the dining room and left the bag of gold coins I'd promised on the table there. Then I dragged two bags of loot upstairs and left them in a faraway corner. I made myself take another trip downstairs for two more bags, and I hastily sorted the loot. There were weapons, armor, cloth garments, and vials with alchemy. I didn't notice how I'd gotten embroiled in the storeroom keeper business—I kept going back and forth and sorting through the stuff. There were paintings—some of them good, and some of them worthless daubery. Statues and statuettes, more weapons and equipment, and books—lots of them. I made several stacks of literature. There was a fisherman's chest that I put aside. I strummed the strings of a harp that was so big it wouldn't fit into one's inventory—well over seven foot tall. Did one of the PKs play the harp in his spare time? A bard, perhaps?

Routine mechanical activities normally considered unfit for a clan leader turned out to be just what I'd needed towards the end of an extremely strenuous day that hadn't only written a few glorious deeds into the pristine clan chronicle, and given us an alchemist and a bunch of friends and enemies among the locals, but had also squeezed me dry. The unending sequence of momentous events was making me sick. It was always something—things to do, problems to solve, people to talk to, smile, and give encouragement to, a lot of them wounded and bone weary themselves, so that they would take another step, move another boulder, roll over another log, or kill another enemy. As a result, my legs were about to give out, and my brain had become a muddy puddle—I wouldn't be surprised to find out it now emitted marsh gas and was full of languidly croaking frogs. Rosgard had reached his limit. However, for some bizarre reason, I had enjoyed it all, both the wearying work and the satisfying ending.

While I sorted through the spoils, calculating our profits, I thought of what tomorrow would bring, realizing

dejectedly that I'd have to get up really early. As I stacked up copper and silver jugs, I scratched my head thinking of what to do about the townspeople's possessions that had been taken by the looters. I'd love to return all the objects that would be missed to their rightful owners—this silver jug with an enameled pattern, for example. But what if its owner had died clutching this very jug during the sack of Tranqueville? Should I just submit it to the town's treasury? I decided I'd appoint a clan commission to study this issue. We'd keep some of the stuff and return the rest. I would refrain from making Bom a member of the commission, though, since otherwise the fate of all the loot would be decided in advance.

I'd sent messages to all the interested parties, informing them of the point of rally and reminding them of the price of the tickets to Zar'Graad. I'd told everyone to limit their cargo to two hundred and fifty pounds, but also gave them some good news—they could invite ten more well-heeled friends eager to hunt exotic game in Zar'Graad.

As I descended, I saw Braver dashing between around fifty bottles and bowls frantically, mixing something, mumbling, singing snatches of songs, and occasionally shaking his head with a disappointed look. There was a huge wet mound of herbs, snails, languishing tadpoles, slugs, suspiciously mobile roots, and all sorts of other things on a piece of cloth spread over the floor. The pile had been trying to sprawl and scatter, clearly reluctant to end up as components in magical elixirs. Braver was of a different mind, and watched over the gathered materials zealously, occasionally grabbing a slug or two that would get too lively for their own good and do unspeakable things to them afterwards—I shuddered at the sight. Alchemists were cruel people.

“How about an aquarium?” I offered him a huge reservoir found in one of the larger boxes. I had no idea who

could have needed a regular aquarium, and an empty one at that—possibly, someone who'd wanted one for their private room.

“Oh, splendid! Hand it over!” The alchemist looked genuinely pleased, pointing towards the place he'd wanted it installed. He grabbed as many tadpoles and slugs as he could hold, kicking snails and angrily stomping on a root that had tried to crawl away. “Got any more jars like this one?”

“I've seen two more,” I nodded and went out of the room to fetch two gigantic glass jars that I'd noticed earlier. Each had a capacity of about three gallons. They had wide necks, were made of thick glass, and smelled of jam.

“Thanks! Some here, some here, and some here... More fire over here, less over here, two of each species, and into the pot they go! This leaf ark will have to drown, tough luck for you, slugs—you won't see Mount Ararat...” The alchemist, who was bent over his bubbling tubes and jars, laughed suddenly, took a snail out of the pot dancing over a flame with a stick, dumped it into a nearby jar, added a pinch of some white powder, and started singing out of tune to the melody of Ode to Joy,

“Pickled snails and slugs and lizards,

All the worms belong in jam!

Sprigs of thyme and swamp duck's gizzards,

Blackleaf extract, just a dram!

*We shall smile to all the leeches 'fore we pierce them
with a pin,*

*Wild boar's blood and elven peaches, let the alchemy
begin!"*

I retreated quietly. Before I managed to get to the upper story, Braver was already stomping downstairs singing the same song—ostensibly, to pick some thyme.

I was done for the day. The night was covering the city, the downpour was nowhere near abating, and I could see patrolmen with bright oil lamps in their hands doing the round of the town's streets. The new mayor was in a mood for action—he must have felt the burden of responsibility that came with the symbol of authority that had been placed on his neck.

I sat down, reclined on the chair, and closed my eyes.

There was a flash.

The rainbow whirlpool looked a little dimmer than usual, yellow being the dominant color. It seemed to have required an effort to take me away and carry me into the multihued abyss.

Logout.

Chapter 14

A Hero's Rewards. Honors and Tribulations

I'D BARELY MANAGED to crawl out of my cocoon and stretch wearily when a typhoon of pure joy crashed right into me, squeaking with excitement, spinning me around, covering me in kisses, and dragging me out into the living room. I got my feet tangled in the carpet and we fell right onto the sofa, where the squeezing and the osculating continued.

“Kyre, what’s the matter with you? Did you get to sample any strange Zar’Graad mushrooms?”

“You... You’re such a nice guy!” My girlfriend wasn’t just being her usual hyperactive self—I could feel her tremble with excitement. And she was looking at me in a special way. I could swear there were actual stars in her eyes, twinkling and entrancing.

“So what is it with you?” I asked in a softer voice, trying to remember where the first aid kit was and wondering whether the Fading may have followed Kyre into the real world. Could those heart drops for old folks do anything about digital insanity, I wondered? On the other hand, she wasn’t biting me yet, but you never knew.

“You totally rock! You’re kind, intelligent, splendid, cool, and great! You’re a real hero! You are...” This was followed by another avalanche of passionate kisses.

Not that I objected in the least, but I still wanted to know where the first aid kit was.

I couldn't remember, so I asked again.

“Kyre, what is it?”

“You've saved so many people in the Lake District! You've freed the town! You've chased out the bandits! Killed the PKs! Protected women and children! You're so... really so... Ros! I love you!”

“Oof. You mean it?”

“I do! I love you!”

“Hold on! You love and adore me because I saved the locals?”

“Yes! You're the best! And fancy you pretending to be an indifferent potato!”

“Uh... I mean... It grates a little... I don't remember you ever looking at me like that, with amber stars in your eyes. So all I had to do was save a few hundred digital folks for my girlfriend to finally express her love and adoration, right?!”

“Yep! You're my hero! You know, I waited and waited for you, and you were still in there, so I've made you something! It's a famous oriental dish! It didn't really turn out

the way I'd planned it to, although I was following the recipe. Well, almost."

"An oriental dish?" I started to rise. Kyre wouldn't let go of me, so I dragged her along to the kitchen, too. Just what one needed in terms of exercise—my body had gotten rather stiff. "Is this it?"

The dish in question was found on the dining table and not on the cooker as I'd expected. It had been laid out on a large dish. There was a pile of grains with streaks of color from the spices in it, surrounded by a funereal wreath of pale meat and carrots that looked undercooked. The smell made me think of paleness, too.

"That's it," Kyre pointed at the dish with her chin, still holding my neck in an embrace. "It's couscous."

"I'm afraid you're wrong there, dear. This is *cuckoose* at best."

"What?!" The indignation in her eyes was so strong that I felt embarrassed instantly, hugged my troublesome treasure stronger, and tried to right the situation.

"Tremendous."

"What do you mean by 'tremendous'?"

"Tremendous *cuckoose*. I haven't tried it yet, but I can see it.

“Ros!”

“I’m only joking, my dear. Let me give it a try.” I freed one of my hands with some effort, took a spoon, filled it with some of the results of her culinary experiment, brought the spoon to my mouth, and froze.

I felt many things at that moment. The intoxicating fumes of vinegar, the howling stench of burnt carrots, a singed tomato laughing hysterically, the miasma of meat that had gone through many tribulations but remained alive, against all odds, and was now moaning for someone to put it out of its misery—over the deadly silence of semolina that had drowned in some suspicious oil. All of it was offset by a strong note of black pepper—as if the criminal had used it to conceal the smell of the victim’s corpse. The presence of lemon was merely inferred—it must have shared the fate of the semolina and gone to a better world.

Kyre had really put an effort into it. I could only hope that her cruelty to comestibles wouldn’t tarnish her unblemished reputation of a paladin in both worlds.

I gulped nervously—the third time in just two seconds—and tried to recollect the best events in our life to gather my resolve and try the food. But no matter what I recollected, I still didn’t feel like trying the *cuckoose*.

“I followed a recipe,” Kyre reminded me as she noticed my hesitation, and then hid her eyes.

“All right,” I agreed and brought the spoon to her mouth. “Let the prettiest girl have the first bite! How about a bit of couscous? Here!”

The prettiest girl pursed her lips, gave me a withering look, and turned away with outrage writ large upon her face.

So that was it, then. Kyre was always hungry, and she wasn't a picky eater. If it was anywhere near edible, she'd eat it. But she wouldn't even sample her own couscous. Therefore, it must have been completely unfit for human consumption.

“How about some tuna and corn salad, and by the time you're done with it, I'll already have some pork chops with rice on the side? What would you say to that?”

“Yes and a thousand times yes!”

“What about couscous?”

“Well, you know, our northern mentality and preferences prevent us from giving an oriental dish its due, although I'm sure it's delicious,” Kyre said brightly. “Pork is better!”

“I concur!” I said with relief, banishing the idea of trying to treat my old man to some *cuckoose*. He'd weathered all the privations of a sailor's life and survived many roaring storms, but the exotic dish might end his career and earthly existence prematurely. “Let's do it like this, dear—I'll cook

and you'll give me the scoop on Zar'Graad. What's been happening over there?"

"A lot!"

"That's great," I said, placing Trouble on the sofa gently. "Begin your tale, o beautiful and wise raconteur. Tell me the tales of the faraway world that is so alien to us, and yet so dear to our hearts."

"Wow!"

"Wow indeed," I agreed, taking a can of tuna out of the pantry, followed by a can of corn.

"Everything's fine!"

"I'm not asking about Roskie—you'd have told me if anything happened."

"Eh? Oh, she's been up to a lot! She's managed to give Tarnius the what for!"

"Come again?" I nearly dropped the can. "Did I hear you right?"

"You did! We didn't see it ourselves, but we've been told about it in great detail. Basically, Tarnius had decided to take a walk around the camp, and he came to a deep pond. The pond is called a Sleepy Hippo Yawn because of its shape and depth—it's like the maw of an enormous hippopotamus buried

in the ground. So Tarnius came to the pond, and saw a teenage girl and a spindly bald elf fishing peacefully, and also making some weird thing that looked like a tower of bone with multicolor ribbons and ghosts flying around it in circles. The huge black and white wolf was sleeping right next to the tower. The grass was green, the sun was shining, and the wind made the bluebells shake, driving clouds across the sky...”

“Kyre!”

“I’m merely describing the background for the tragedy to come... But it had a happy ending! Everyone survived!”

“The salad has just been canceled...”

“Hey, I’m telling you the story! So Tarnius went for a walk...”

“Oh, come on...”

“And chanced upon a teenage girl, telling her, ‘Go back to the camp, child, where you will be guarded safely, and don’t you dare show your nose outside. These are foreign lands where no man has gone before, fraught with unknown dangers. So get going at once!’ It is reported that the archmage stomped his foot right afterwards, and the young fisherwoman’s arm witched, and a large fish got off the hook. That was when the young lady gave Tarnius a stern look, and then turned away. The smoking dude stood still for a while, and then continued his walk in peace. That was it, if you disregard the evil cackling of the bald elf tearing a bone out of a *turnokrall* skeleton to add it to the tower.”

“Damn!”

“No biggie. Tarnius didn’t hold a grudge.”

“Are you sure? Quite sure? The last thing I need is trouble with Algora’s Mages’ Guild... Or the Zar’Graad Mages’ Guild, for that matter.”

“I am sure. Open that tuna already. Don’t worry about Tarnius—the very same day we received a huge basket of fruit from him. Old Continent fruit, too—very rare and precious here. A fruitarian would probably kill someone for a basket like that.”

“Whew. I hope he’d realized Roskie doesn’t respect any authority. She’s an audacious one and she has quite a temper on her. Are the rest of our folks OK?”

“Oh, they are! Callen is ecstatic about being a war correspondent. Kray is perfecting his personal bodyguard skills. Doc has become a military medic specializing in saving journalists and their bodyguards from certain death in the line of duty. I work as a defender of minor fortifications, and it pays pretty well. All I get to kill is small stuff, but it sure is juicy when I hack at it with my sword. The clients get impressed and pay me more. I’m happy. Orbit and Roskie wander around the Camp. What I don’t like is them getting further and further away from it. If they find a large enough body of water, it holds their attention for a few hours. If they discover no new fish behaving in any peculiar way, they walk on. And when they get to the Camp, they always bring with them tons of dusty old bones, bone plates, horns, and gigantic fangs. Still, there’s nothing to fear—they stay in the territory that gets cleared from any aggressive creature that might

wander there on a daily basis. If they decided to cross the First Defended Perimeter, though, they'd get into trouble—it's a warzone out there where the fighting is for real. So we'd like you back, dear. They'll take care of the war without you, but it's about time for someone to take Roskie and Orbit back home. Or Orbit, at least. It might be safer for Roskie in Zar'Graad—no active local deities are mentioned in any sources.

“Separate the two of them?” I winced. “Uh... I don't think it's a good idea, really. Orbit protects Roskie and teaches her.”

“He does. And he also goes along with any crazy idea she might get and will follow her everywhere, even though, being an adult, he'd do better to stop the child from getting into all sorts of trouble!” Kyre said with unexpected vehemence. “What will become of her? Lara Croft? Mata Hari? So that they could execute her by firing squad?”

“Tie a knot in your tongue! Touch wood! Lara Croft, perhaps. But definitely not Mata Hari.” I shrugged. “Let her grow. Why do you have a bee in your bonnet all of a sudden?”

“Because! Children must be guarded from danger! And what about that salad?”

“The eggs are ready. But I need to chill them first.”

“No you don't!”

“All right. So, keep on talking. All of ours are alive and well, and I’ll see them soon. But I’m not getting any of this stuff about minor fortifications, defense perimeters, and constant references to warfare. War correspondent, military medic, frontline, and all that. What’s happening in Zar’Graad?”

“War,” Kyre replied curtly, looking intently at my hands, peeling the still-warm eggs. The pot was chilling out in the sink—it had handled the egg-boiling excellently.

“What do you mean, war? Are they still burning and pillaging?”

“Nothing of the sort! Ros! Don’t you ever read the Herald?”

“Where would I get the time for that?” I retorted. “I’ve been too busy saving civilians!”

“Oh, you’re such a good guy!”

“Tell me about this war. Who’s the enemy? Did the clans finally get to the end of their tether and start to lash out at each other? It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“I wish it was as easy as that! It’s a war against Zar’Graad itself! The entire continent has rebelled! The first two days were more or less okay, but as soon as you left for home, this whole land appears to have gone insane! Could these events be connected? Could your teleport have activated

anything? Probably not, but it's still a strange coincidence. Did anyone message you about it?"

"I've blocked all incoming messages. I'm too caught up in the stuff I need to do. I've also been getting tons of fan mail—someone always wants a group screenshot, my old pants, or the key to the secret of being legendary. It's either them, or my enemies wishing to see a screenshot of me kneeling and begging for my life. You won't believe it—one of the messages was written by a brain-addled girl with a near-unpronounceable nickname promising to kill me for the greater glory of the dark side and Dorth Viderr! I get messages from businesspeople promising guaranteed income as well. Clans want to see me or use me as a mascot, too—I don't need to do anything, just stand there and smile. So I've blocked everyone. And as for Zar'Graad going insane, I had nothing to do with it! I don't even know what you mean when you say it's gone insane! I've been away!"

"That's just it! Could it be that you're like a stopper in a bottle? While you're there, the neck is blocked and nothing comes out. And as soon as you leave, the continent becomes furious and gets really inventive about showing us its fury! When it started, a bunch of players got dragged across the woodland for more than a mile! It was all bristling and rising! It was as if someone had given a tablecloth a good tug to get rid of flies and crumbs! And it all started around the departure time of your intercontinental express!"

"It's got to be coincidence," I shook my head stubbornly, slicing up the eggs casually. "I'm the crux of everything again, is that what you're trying to say? I've had enough! I'm the Great Nav no longer. Still, I'm going back to the new continent tomorrow. If everything quiets down, it will mean I am somehow connected to what's going on, and if it doesn't, it proves that I was right all along. And I am right. A

single player cannot affect a whole continent like that, even if he's the former Navigator!"

"I think so, too," Kyre nodded benevolently, snuggling up under the blanket. "It was either a global timer with the countdown of the last minutes of peace, or Zar'Graad waiting for your intercontinental teleportation."

That got me thinking. I remembered the horrible roar, the giant shadow, and the claw mark on the armored passenger's cuirass. Someone malicious and very powerful had tried hard to get at us, failing only by a hair. And then the entire continent had gone loco. Could that be a coincidence, or did my activation of the teleport release or awaken something?

"Hold on," I said with a sigh, peeling an onion. "Listen to this."

I tried to recollect every single detail. The roar, the shadow, the claw mark, and even our collective gasp. Kyre heard me out attentively, and asked pensively,

"Didn't you film a video?"

"A video of what? That bright flash? Maybe someone did record us. The first intercontinental flight and all that... But it all really happened very quickly."

"I wonder just what this roaring black critter with claws might be. Mysterious and really interesting. And you know who's interested in all kinds of i-i-i-i-i-interesting stuff..."

“I am. I’ll task him with this problem tomorrow. Although it remains to be seen whether he decides it’s an interesting enough riddle. And what about you?”

“I have a war to fight tomorrow morning. My shift begins at 7:30 AM. There’s a small but well-defended fort in the woods where we made a stand against all sorts of hideous beasts. Our lines get tested hard, but they hold. Not a step back—we have civilians behind us!” Trouble dangled her feet, sighed, and wrapped the blanket around herself even tighter. “It’s good for the clan, too! The Old Continent Faction has already given me three marks of valor for my service. My level keeps growing, too, and I’ve been developing my skills nicely. So it’s worth it. Which means I must turn in early tonight. What’s happening with that salad? And why don’t I hear the pork chops sizzling on the skillet yet?”

“You’re such a responsible adult!” I said with amazement, pecking the girl on the nose and placing a large bowl of salad in front of her. “There you go!”

“Yum yum!”

“And tell me about the war, soldier, while I’m cutting the meat. I hope you won’t eat too noisily.”

“I never eat noisily!”

“Begin from the beginning!”

“I could! But I won’t!”

“Kyre! Come on!”

“Here’s the tablet. The news tab is already open. Just tap the first window with the video, and you’ll find out all you need to know. And there’s a whole bunch of news. You can even see Callen with a gnarly piece of wood for a mic and Kray behind her back. It’s really very informative.”

“All right.”

Kyre fell silent as she dug into her salad. The tablet came to life and started babbling. I turned up the volume and got on with my cooking, listening carefully to the anchor’s account of everything that had transpired on the freshly-discovered and near-unexplored new continent of Zar’Graad.

The players had already been finding it hard enough to inch their way deeper and deeper into the unexplored territory, moving away from the shore step by step and mile by mile. The progress was slow, since they kept coming across various unknown monsters, plants, and minerals, as well as deep caves with more monsters, plants, and minerals inside. But the players were happy without that, and they were gnawing their “pie” eagerly, pushing back against the continent’s resistance.

That was when the trouble started. And a whole lot of trouble it was.

The ground itself reared up like a horse, sending a wave from the center of the continent towards the shores. A rumbling tidal wave of rock, miles wide and interrupted only in a couple of places, sped for the ocean at a breakneck pace, carrying yelling players, locals, pets, wild animals, trees,

rocks, and everything else on it. The wave stopped just short of the beach. The First Camp had survived—the one I'd founded. Not even a twig had trembled there—the place had turned out to be lucky. Many other forts and camps got dumped from the rocks into the water. And it wasn't any better underwater—waves of sand and rock had rolled across the ocean floor, too, smashing right into the achylores, destroying nearly everything they'd built, and tossing them out of the depths into the murky shallows that had transformed into patches of mud and salty swamps where players floundered about, understanding nothing, and watching their possessions and their loot drown in the mud.

But that was far from all—monsters joined the fray next. They hadn't been overly friendly before, either, always proving to be fearsome adversaries. Now the wild animals grouped into packs and herds, starting a full-scale military campaign against the intruders. The coastal zone was in utter chaos. There were pockets of resistance scattered along the shore. Some of the players had managed to regroup, listen to their leaders and tacticians, and hold on to some of the camps, forming defense perimeters and fighting back one assault after another, while the engineers hastily erected walls of clay and wood. Many forts had been set up in well-explored caves; in their case, blocking the entrance was enough.

There were currently dozens of forts and eight fortresses in different stages of completion. Not a single fortress had been complete, and it would indeed be impossible to accomplish that in such short a time, but the walls kept on growing, stone by stone, and the players held their own against the rebelling nature.

The trailblazers and the discoverers were feeling chipper. If Zar'Graad resisted their efforts so hard, it must have been hiding something really precious! It only whetted

their interest in penetrating deeper and digging deeper. What ancient mysteries did the lost continent conceal closer to its heart?

Besides, no one had to be wary of other clans anymore—the players had long stopped feuding in the new lands, focusing fully on defense. The clans stood shoulder to shoulder defending the shore, and the achylotes held their underwater positions just as firmly, peering into the dark depths that kept disgorging all kinds of monsters like enormous spiked squids, fish looking more like the omnivorous *langoliers*, and incredibly quick underwater ant lions making deadly vortices on the sea bottom. Fortifications were being erected hurriedly underwater, too—on rocky parts and among algae forests.

Achylotes wouldn't let anyone drive them out of the water like trash. They would fight back against any foe. That was the declaration made by the leaders of the biggest underwater clans with everyone's support. They would not relinquish their oceanic conquests under any circumstances.

So that was how things stood.

According to one of the reporters, who was clearly quoting someone more intelligent, the situation called for an island of stability and safety. A real city with a guaranteed peaceful status could become one. And the famous clan of the Sleepless Ones declared loudly that a city like that would be made reality. And there would be a teleport there, too. The isolation would end, and there would be fewer dangers. Regardless of the continent's horrific resistance and its crazed nature, the Sleepless Ones were still building their gigantic artifact, applying all their effort to the construction. If it hadn't been for the demise of the Black Queen, their monstrous

flagship whose holds had been transporting many treasures, some of which would really come in handy now, the construction work would have proceeded at a much faster rate. They were indeed behind schedule—but they were working on it nevertheless. Moreover, the process had already begun—the first stone of the future teleport’s platform had been laid right before the departure of the Black Baroness to the old continent, where she’d already held a press conference and told the journalists that Zar’Graad would be pacified, and the first city built no matter what. The charming leader of the Sleepless Ones then demonstrated her pet Bessie to the public—a legendary beast as good as any other and even better. The legendary leader, fighter, and discoverer of Zar’Graad, who had taken the first step on the soil of the new continent, then called upon all the young clans whose representatives had made it to Zar’Graad to help the Sleepless Ones in their commendable endeavor—the construction of a gigantic teleport capable of establishing a reliable bridge between the two continents that would allow new fighters to come to Zar’Graad. The Zar’Graad conquests would not be lost, and a teleport would be built—with Zar’Graad’s first city being built around it.

“What was BB’s initiative all about? What’s all this business about the first stone of the future teleport platform? Could that be why the continent had gone spare? I have a hunch that the theory about poor old Ros being the scapegoat is false!” I said. Then I blinked in surprise. Kyre was asleep. The empty bowl stood on the coffee table next to the sofa, and she’d snuggled up in her warm blanket and fallen asleep.

“Fancy that! Missing out on pork chops!” I expressed my amazement aloud. The brave paladin maiden must have been bone weary.

I wiped my hands, picked up Kyre and carried her to bed. I let her keep the blanket and covered her with another one. I straightened my back, looked down at her, and sighed—I'd gotten so used to Kyre being there near me that my earlier life seemed a pale shadow. It was as if that constantly empty and bleak one-room apartment had never existed.

I decided to cut the pork into cubes and fry it like that. I could warm it up in the microwave tomorrow—it may have been too heavy for breakfast, but it would do with eggs and a lot of salad. I decided on a light supper for my self—my stomach had been expressing its displeasure with my diet recently. Wolfing down a few sandwiches and either falling asleep or crawling into the cocoon immediately afterwards wasn't the healthiest of habits, and I hoped I wouldn't get any unpleasant ailments because of my diet.

As I returned to the living room, I turned down the volume on the tablet before turning it on again. The apartment was empty, and every sound was amplified tenfold. There was no one home but myself and Kyre. I didn't know where my parents were, but I could assume that father, having been accused of indifference and willfulness, was doing everything he could to placate mom. So they were either in a restaurant or strolling through the evening city. I was happy about it—mom hadn't been getting the attention she deserved lately, what with both of us away minding our own business. So now father would have to entertain her for the two of us.

And I had to get busy in the virtual world.

After supper I took the tablet and went to the bathroom. Kyre was redolent of shampoo while I stank of sweat like a gorilla that had found out it was an endangered species. I didn't hurry—I scrubbed myself well with a sponge, then

filled the tub and immersed myself into it up to my upper lip, leaving nothing above the water but my nose, two curious eyes, and a pair of hands to hold the tablet.

As soon as I opened my inbox, the tablet went crazy with the sound of notifications. Most were in red—from parties I had no wish to hear from. I grouped all the messages by color, and opened the yellow list to read the confirming messages from everyone I'd brought to the Old Continent. They were ready to head back around 10AM, Algora Standard Time, tomorrow. Some would stay and send others in their stead—the clan business must have proved more important. BB was in the list. She'd also sent me a short message with a request to transport some important extra cargo for a separate fee. She also mentioned that the remaining payment for the Great Expedition would be transferred to my account by midday tomorrow. That was great. I thought about her request and gave her my agreement. I wondered if the cargo in question was spare parts for the gigantic teleport. I knew how businesslike and quick the Sleepless Ones could be, and made a mental note to use up my leaps while they still were unique. Everybody but BB requested extra passengers. I answered negatively. Having spent some more time relaxing in hot water, I checked the clan's account to confirm that everyone had paid for the previous journey. The clan was richer now, and I felt more secure.

I crawled out of the bath, wiped myself dry, and went to bed, steaming and red as a freshly-cooked lobster. I'd be able to get a good night's sleep—I'd only need to teleport to Zar'Graad closer to ten. I'd log in around eight, check on the situation in Tranqueville and the clan hall, talk to Braver, and run a few minor errands. All the major stuff could wait for later. I snuggled up against the sleeping Kyre and nodded off myself. My fading imagination showed me the smoking ruins of Tranqueville, the waters of Lake Naikal, roaring furiously,

and the magical wall of the Shrinelands fluttering under gusts of divine wrath.

...I saw the shimmering wall cave in slowly, torn like a sail in a storm by a strange dark wind. A gigantic malevolent shadow fell over the waves, already dark from the storm, and thin black lines ran along the water like cracks in dry soil, trying to reach the only defense of the Shrinelands. I heard a hoarse voice barking commands. A multitude of warriors dragged long black boats into the lake and set forth across Naikal's waves. Many of the boats capsized, and the warriors inside them sank with the indifference of statues, while others continued on their journey, paying no attention to the deaths of their comrades. The blades of the swords they held in their hands parted the water and sliced through the red maple leaves dancing on the waves with an ominous rustling sound heralding a great woe to come...

I woke up with a jolt. I stared at the ceiling and came to my senses a little. I looked sideways at the bedside table. It was half past five in the morning. I shut my eyes in relief, trying to go back to sleep. I gave up after about five minutes, realizing I didn't feel remotely sleepy, so trying to rest for longer would be futile.

"Crap!" I hissed, softly but emphatically as I carefully disentangled myself from Kyre's embrace and crawled out from underneath my blanket.

I went to the bathroom, took a bath, and had a large mug of sweet tea with milk and two crispy digestive biscuits. Then I did some warm-up exercises and lay down on the cocoon's elastic bedding. The helmet reeked of sweat. I should have wiped it a long time ago.

Login.

A flash.

Hello again, Waldyra.

Did you call?

* * *

It was a sleepy morning—even Algora was still asleep. The center of the enormous city bustled with life around the clock, but it was still quiet on the outskirts. Cleaners were sweeping the streets diligently. A player was standing in a bakery's doorway and polishing the glass in the door enthusiastically while a smiling local woman with flour on her cheeks was resting her hand on his shoulder. There were hot buns in the shop window—today's first batch. I couldn't help myself and bought two of them, paying the player, smiling to the woman in passing, and hurrying on as I bit into the warm fragrant bread.

I kept getting sent from one shop to another, having spent about half an hour talking to various shopkeepers who insisted on sending me on my way even though I'd been promising a hefty remuneration. However, they didn't just send me on my way without any pointers—I would visit the next shopkeeper who would hear me out and tell me to visit another colleague. I visited one magic shop after another. Some shopkeepers were friendly, others cold, but each one looked a little sleepy—after all, they'd only just gotten up and weren't very pleased by an outlander being so persistent about

his needs, which had exceeded what they'd been prepared to provide.

And I was asking for just that—something more powerful than a simple mass teleport. It wasn't even a teleport that I needed, but a stationary portal that could keep working long enough for all the refugees from the Shrinelands to pass through it and find themselves in the relative safety of Tranqueville.

I didn't go insane and wasn't thinking that the dream I'd had about the wall caving in and the warriors in long black predatory rowing boats was prophetic or anything of the sort. My tired mind was simply seeing a hodgepodge of everything I'd had to face during the day. It was a regular nightmare—and not even a real nightmare, come to think of it. Just an unpleasant dream. But given that it had woken me up, I might as well use my time prudently and not let the fate of the Shrinelands hang by a thread for too long. Who knew how long I would stay in Zar'Graad for, after all?

I stopped at the address I'd needed and stared at the building, which looked truly extraordinary. If you took a cube, dunked it in bubbling volcanic lava, pulled it out, drew the outlines of doors, windows, and a few cornices with a chisel, then chill it and place it on the street, you'd end up with something like what I was admiring now. Even the bars on the windows were made of rock. They had an intricate shape and were most likely charmed against thieves. The door was truly formidable—a slab of rock covered in carvings was blocking the wide opening in the façade of the four-story building.

This was the home, the workshop, and the store of a certain Mistraille Mythrell, if I remembered the name correctly—a prim and proper elderly dwarf lady. She was the owner of

the magic store, and a prodigiously competent specialist to say the least, but she was also reputed to have a very acerbic personality. Besides, there was a rumor that she had once dabbled in dark magic—namely, necromancy. It was also said that she had once been visited by priests sent by the king himself, whom she knew personally. She was said to be an important, wealthy, and private woman with certain eccentricities.

I got all my information from other magic shop owners, all of whom knew who I was—the Great Nav and so on. It had made them trust me more, so they divulged more than they normally would to a stranger. Each of them told me the same thing in different words about the lady—not the person you'd want to be friends with, but one of the few people in Waldyra who could help you if you were looking for something really powerful.

I pulled softly on a short cord made of woven copper wire, yellow and red. A melodious chime rang shortly somewhere inside. One of the many unpleasant stone faces carved on the building's doors came to life and looked at me with narrow eyes glowing with scorn.

“My name is Rosgard, and I have something important to discuss with Mistress Mistraille Mythrell,” I blurted, realizing that the stone face was a rather spooky-looking intercom.

“We're closed!” A dry woman's voice answered, and the stone face froze again.

I rang again without thinking twice about it. As soon as the face started to move, I provided some further details, not

really expecting a positive reaction anymore.

“I need to save refugees fleeing a war zone! There are women, children, and frail old people. They are starving, and many of them are ill or wounded. They are also in danger of being put to a horrible death by the soldiers of Grakharg, the god of war! Please help me!”

The silence lasted a little longer this time. After a few excruciatingly long seconds, the same voice replied, sounding not an iota friendlier.

“Come in.”

The stone slab blocking the entrance shook a little and crawled upwards. That was giving me some optimism. I hoped I wouldn't get squashed like certain other irritating early birds like the milkman or the postman before me.

I didn't have to worry. The morning was too peaceful and too sleepy for a proper tragic death. I found myself in a posh-looking shop decorated with expensive curtains. The glistening shop windows glowed respectably in the soft light coming from the ceiling, and my feet sank into a thick carpet of raspberry red and coal black.

“I've heard of you, Rosgard the Restless, Rosgard the Pathfinder, Rosgard Legendary, Rosgard who Talks to Gods,” a dwarf lady stepped out of a door that opened in one of the walls. This must have been the owner.

She was of a short stature typical of her race, but her hairdo was so tall that it made our respective heights almost equal. The fountain of hair rose impossibly high, straightened out and curled, and looking a lot like the building we were in. Chains of silver and gold peeked out from between her curls, and gems glistened in her locks. It took me an effort not to stare at the hairdo and lower my eyes to look at a stern face with a long regal nose supporting massive glasses in an extremely fancy-looking golden frame bedizened with pink gems. Thick pink-tinted crystal lenses were aimed at me, magnifying the owner's attentive eyes. Compared to the hairdo and the glasses, the long black dress had looked perfectly ordinary, although I was certain it had been sewn by a master tailor from some expensive fabric. She made the impression of being in mourning. There was but a single ring on her hand—a wedding ring.

“I'm happy to meet you, Mistress Mistraille Mythrell,” I half-bowed politely, keeping my hands where they could be seen. “I have come to your establishment in peace, and with hopes for help, which I will gladly provide ample remuneration for.”

“I've heard a lot about you. Can't say I'm either happy or unhappy to meet you. I've seen many heroes in my life. Some became legendary. Others had gone out like dying stars. You have opened new roads and shown people a new way. And you've done it properly, seeing it through. You've done your job well. I have been on many expeditions. I studied ruined buildings in the jungle and in deserts. I've visited ancient crypts and been to mountaintops. One of the main things I've learned was never to set out without a reliable guide. I've stayed true to this rule, which has helped me come back in one piece every time. You have proven yourself to be a reliable guide, Rosgard—one who truly sees the way. I respect people like you.”

“Thank you, Mistress.”

“And you’ve mentioned old people, women, and children. The sick and the wounded. Tell me. I’ll hear you out and grant you a reply. But I can make no promises.”

I agreed. It took me just ten minutes to explain the situation to her. As I talked, I would occasionally move away from the door to let in the locals who’d come to open the place for business—they started to inspect the shop windows, wipe imaginary stains off the glass, and adjust the wares typical for such shops—scrolls, artifacts, battle wands, and charmed jewelry. The dwarf lady greeted her subordinates curtly, listening to me attentively all the time. I divulged all the details to her. It was a little risky, of course—who knew whether or not she was a secret priestess of Grakharg? Yet somehow that didn’t seem plausible at all. One thing was certain, though—I’d encountered a most peculiar local to say the very least.

“I get it,” the dwarf lady raised her hand with the lone gold ring. “I have everything for creating two artifacts with an invisible connection between them, which allow you to open a portal that will stay open for a while. If I use a certain amplification artifact that I found in a desert pyramid half-buried in sand in the process, I can speed up the ritual considerably. However, I’ll need many full moons to recharge the artifact with magical energy afterwards. There will be other expenses, too. But since you want to do a good deed, I’ll help you. My price is ten thousand gold pieces. What do you say, Rosgard the Kind-Hearted? Does your generosity equal your kindness?”

“I need to go to the bank and come right back,” I said, impressed by the price but keeping a nonchalant face.

“The bank is just around the corner.”

“I won’t be a minute.”

I was telling the truth. The owner of the magic shop was still standing where she’d been before my departure when I came back. The sleepy bank clerk wasn’t pleased with me being in such a hurry, but I compensated him for his troubles handsomely. Fortunately, I didn’t have to drag any heavy bags anywhere—I’d just brought back a bearer check, handing it to Mistress Mythrell with a fumbling flourish.

“M’lady... Ten thousand in gold.”

“So you are indeed generous. Well, Rosgard,” Mistress Mythrell adjusted her unique glasses that must have weighed around five pounds by my calculations, “Follow me. Since you’ve managed to surprise me by being so kind to the wounded and the destitute first thing in the morning, I’ll treat you to some really flavorful coffee. And I’ll do what’s necessary while you’ll be drinking it.

“Thank you. I’ve always wanted to watch how a professional of your level works.”

“You flatter me, Rosgard Honeytongue,” there wasn’t much mirth in the woman’s dry voice. In fact, there wasn’t any mirth there at all.

“The pink gems in your glasses,” I blurted unexpectedly as I saw a few empty sockets on the frame. It appears that a few are missing. Pray pardon my impertinence.”

“Pink diamonds. And not any regular kind. With black specks.”

“Precisely,” I nodded. “With black specks inside. I’ve seen them before. I’m almost certain I have a few, although I’d need to check my safe deposit box to be sure.”

“You have them?” Fingers that turned out to be surprisingly strong grabbed my hand and I almost got a face full of hair. “Pink diamonds with black specks?”

“I do, as far as I remember. It’s easy to check—the bank’s right around the corner, after all.”

“Check it, Rosgard, Bringer of Hope to a Weary Heart. Make sure you do!”

“On my way...”

It didn’t take me long. I nearly stumbled in surprise upon my return—the owner of the shop had been waiting for me in the doorway. I saw a short figure with a funny hairdo in massive glasses throwing hundreds of pink rays in every direction first thing.

I was ushered inside. I held out the pink gems on my palm. They were indeed pink with spots of black. Six altogether, four of them cut. I couldn’t even remember where

I'd come by them—I'd received piles of assorted jewelry a few times since the beginning of my gaming career. The Naikal cache? Crabber gifts? Somewhere else? They were simple pink gems, not the largest or the prettiest in Waldyra for sure.

“It's them,” the dwarf lady said with a cough. “Allow me?”

“Please,” I didn't use any titles this time. I could see that Mistraille Mythrell was so excited her hands trembled. Did she really want to make the eyeglass display complete?

“Will you sell me the gems, Rosgard? They're rather hard to come by. There are plenty of pink diamonds around, but this kind with black specks can hardly be found anywhere at all these days. I'd pay you three hundred gold pieces for each.”

“It's a deal,” I said with a smile, without even thinking of haggling.

Congratulations!

+1 to reputation with Mistraille Mythrell, the dwarf owner of Weary Heart, a magic shop in the Great City of Algora.

I thought the name sounded uncanny for a magic shop. It would be more befitting for an inn where spurned lovers go to drown their sorrows in wine.

“Come with me,” the pink gems disappeared inside Mistraille Mythrell’s hair. She’d just raised her hand to her hair, and then lowered it already empty. “I’ll give you the money and start the ritual, Rosgard the Generous. Over here. Careful, the lintel is low here. And this is a bear trap door. Don’t mind the fangs. It’s safe to step on them.”

The corridor formed a square spiral, if such a thing existed, around the salesroom. It looked perfectly ordinary. There was a carpet on the floor, a few paintings on the walls, and no windows. There were a few doors as well—and powerful defense systems masked as statures, doorsteps, lintels, ceilings, lamps, and even the carpet itself, which reacted to my every step by hugging my feet and holding them for a split second before releasing them. It felt like crossing a very shallow swamp. If the defense systems got activated, there’d hardly be a handful of ash left of me. However, the future didn’t seem to have anything in stock other than a fragrant cup of coffee, even though I couldn’t help thinking about master thieves who manage to get inside houses such as this one not only surviving, but managing not to trigger the advanced magical alarms.

We came to Mistraille Mythrell’s workplace. You could hardly call it cozy—the term didn’t quite apply to a space the size of some castle’s dining hall. It felt as though we had somehow come up to the second floor as we went down the corridor—the room was simply enormous, even though the large number of bulky objects hidden underneath covers of silk inside belied its actual size. There were countless tables—none of them empty. There were statues with broken-off heads and limbs, pillars with mysterious carvings, carved pieces of walls with some ancient script upon them, gigantic bones and fanged skulls, as well as enormous spheres of glass filled with pulsating energies of different colors. The blue one must have been used for mana storage. The one near it had some viscous liquid inside, thick as porridge and scarlet as arterial blood.

There were many such “tanks” all over the hall. There were tubes of glass connected to the spheres, with steel shafts running through them in certain places—these were connected to the tall ceiling where lightning flashed constantly. The place gave me mixed feelings—it felt like a cross between a history museum’s storage depot and an alchemist’s laboratory. There was an island of calm at the center of the room—two sofas, a few armchairs, a large desk for work with many locked drawers, covered by a white piece of cloth with papers piled on top of it. There was also a small cabinet nearby with items that looked out of place here—a teapot, a sugar pot, spoons, and a jar of cherry jam. You could see that the cups were expensive, but came from different sets. One was yellow, another one red, and there was also a white one with a drawing of a deer on it nearby. It appeared that the owner of the place didn’t care much about the outside world or anyone’s opinion.

“I also have tea. Good tea. It used to be grown on a plantation owned by some outlander, but who knows whether there’ll ever be more? The man has gone to the new continent.”

“I’d prefer coffee,” I smiled, standing next to the largest chair with a tall back that looked rather old.

“Sit down. You don’t need to wait for a special dispensation.”

“Thank you.”

The chair creaked as it enfolded me in its embrace with good-natured sleepiness. In a minute there was a cup of coffee on the wide armrest. It proved to be most flavorful indeed—as well as strong, as I found out once I tried it. The dwarf lady

got down to business—her every movement was quick and graceful.

One of the workbenches was cleared of all unnecessary objects. One half of a shiny clam shell was placed at its one end, and the other right opposite the first. The dwarf lady muttered something about the inevitability of the separated parts' desire to be reunited, and then pulled out a seemingly endless shed snakeskin of a deep golden hue from a minuscule box like a magician. She hacked the skin in two with a heavy green-bladed knife, muttering something about the binding and crawling perseverance of the head in its wish to rejoin the tail. The two parts of the snakeskin were wound around the two halves of the clam. A long silver tube was laid on the table, put down in such a way that it touched the clam halves with its both sides, placed there as if to prevent them from getting magnetically pulled together. The rods that came down to the bench from the ceiling started to disgorge lightning bolts, quickly heating up the silver tube. A bird skull covered in cracks was taken from the next box. The same heavy green knife made short work of the bone, slicing it in two, passing between the empty eye sockets and right through the center of the beak. Mistress Mistraille Mythrell waved both her hands as she whispered something I didn't hear, and threw the fragments of the skull into the clams. I'd expected to hear and see them ricochet, nearly dropping my coffee cup in surprise, but the bones simply flew into the shells and dissolved there as if the clams were black holes. The rustling snakeskin disappeared inside, too. Two threads of golden wire descended from the ceiling, answering the dwarf lady's gesture, and started to weave themselves around the clams, turning them into something resembling two induction coils. The wire heated up instantly, and the coils stuck permanently to the hissing mother-of-pearl, slowly descending as they covered the shells. Mistraille Mythrell threw two handfuls of some yellow powder onto the gold. Two clouds of yellow smoke appeared. The smoke smelled of sulfur. Glass pipes were thrust into the

tops of the clams with a crackling sound, and some blue liquid started to pour inside. I shivered involuntarily, feeling like someone who'd visited Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, getting offered a cup of coffee, and being told to wait a few minutes while the doctor finished his experiment. I didn't know where the blue liquid was going, either, but not a drop of it ended up on the workbench, while a glass sphere with a capacity of about a thousand gallons was emptying itself very quickly, and the dwarf lady made gestures with her hands and kept muttering. Her precious glasses threw thousands of pink light spots onto every surface around her, and her diminutive figure moved quickly as she circled the table, constantly adding something from numerous parcels and boxes to the mix. Finally, two sapphires covered in baroque carvings were placed on the tops of the clams, now wrapped up completely in golden wire and humming tensely. The incandescent silver tube fell onto the workbench, and the clams stopped humming and vibrating. The tubes and the rods disappeared into the ceiling. I finished the coffee and managed to release the cup that my fingers had been grabbing with some force.

The assembly of a powerful artifact turned out to be a fantastic and intimidating process. I realized why it had cost so much, too. The shells, the skull, and the golden snakeskin were unlikely to be available from any shop. There was also golden wire and what I assume had amounted to about a thousand gallons of mana, if I understood the nature of the liquid correctly. I wondered whether I should have recorded the entire process on video. I'd had this thought before, but rejected it offhand—I was too entranced by what I saw, and didn't want to spoil the magic atmosphere of what had looked like a mediaeval alchemical ritual. I didn't see things like these every day.

While I was lost in contemplation, the dwarf lady sat down in the nearby armchair, holding her coffee cup matter-of-factly and knocking on the porcelain with her gold ring

automatically. She kept looking at the two strange artifacts as if fearing they might jump off the workbench and run away.

“You’ll have to wait a little. They need to cool off and calm down. They cannot be touched right now.”

“I see.”

“Listen up, Rosgard. This is important. The artifacts cannot be knocked or dropped. If they break, they’ll release so much energy at once that everyone in the area will be toast. I’ll place them in special boxes, but you’ll need to be careful, at any rate. The energy is trying to release itself right now, and the divided parts of three things—from the sea, from the earth, and from the air—are yearning to become one again. So don’t take too long with the portal. You have a day at the most.”

“Thanks for warning me, Mistress Mythrell. I’ll use the artifacts within the next hour.”

“I see that your actions follow your intents, Rosgard the Decisive. That’s a good trait. More coffee?”

“With pleasure.”

The dwarf lady rose to pour me another cup. I used the pause, and inquired with all the tact I could muster, hoping not to touch any sensitive topics.

“The pink gems with black specks.”

“Oh, that’s right. I owe you for them.”

She opened a drawer underneath the tea set, took out four large cloth bags, and tossed them to me.

“Two thousand in gold.”

“We’ve agreed on less.”

“I’ve decided not to skimp on it. You might come across more gems like this. And I’ll be happy to buy them.”

“Thank you, Mistress Mythrell. So you need more of these gems?”

“Do you have more?” The dwarf lady looked at me inquisitively through her strange glasses.

“I really don’t know,” I spread my hands. “I’m a leader of a rather unusual clan of outlanders. I don’t know what we have in our vaults and what we don’t have. But I’ll find out. And if it turns out we do have these gems, I’ll bring them to you. But allow me to ask you a question first.”

“Yes?”

“What makes these gems so important to you? I see a few empty sockets in your glasses’ frame. But you already have enough stones to fill them. What will happen then? Will your glasses become a real... piece of jewelry? An expensive accessory?”

“The glasses are not an accessory. They’re an instrument—a special one, and it’s really important to me. Sometimes, after a long and expensive ritual, they allow me to look into a window filled with gray and white steam and see something invisible to mortal eyes,” the dwarf lady threw a quick glance on her gold ring and lifted her eyes to meet mine again.

I asked even more circumspectly, realizing I was on thin ice here,

“See what exactly? I’m sorry if it’s a painful topic, Mistress Mythrell. I might be curious, but I’m not prying, and I wouldn’t want to get on your bad side.”

“Oh, you’re polite, too, Rosgard the Curious. It’s not that much of a secret, really. A mere fancy of an old dwarf woman who’d lost her family on one of her expeditions. My husband and my daughter. They were gnawed to death by an ancient monster. That was a black day—and it’s a day that never ends. The only joy I have in this blackness is the time when I can see my loved ones again.”

“Your daughter and your husband, you mean. I’m sorry, but didn’t you say they had died?”

“They have—died, but not disappeared. They have gone to Angora, the City of the Dead. And I’ll meet them there someday. And yet my life drags on and on. I’ve lived through a thousand dangers without a single hair falling from my head. It’s as if I’ve lived a charmed life ever since the day I lost my loved ones.”

“So your glasses...”

“They allow me to see Angora after my ritual. For a short time. A very short time. And I don’t get to see the faces of my loved ones every time. But after every use at least one of the diamonds burns out and crumbles. If one is missing, it’s tolerable. If it’s two or more, I can hardly see anything. And if it’s five, which is the case now, they become nothing but a precious accessory, like you said.”

“Thank you so much for being so frank with me, Mistress Mythrell. I’m sorry for having raised a painful topic.”

“Everybody does it! You, at least, are only asking. And others meddle in my affairs and try to stop me! Gods in heavens! Since when has longing become a crime? All I want to do is to see my loved ones. And they interfere with my affairs so maliciously you could have thought I was trying to destroy the city. There was a breakthrough, granted, but a perfectly harmless one! There was nothing but a few ghostly reflections flickering above my house. And that was why the king had taken my Spirit Mask away—something I held so dear...” The dwarf lady sighed, pressed her hand to her chest, coughed, and gave me an embarrassed look, her eyes enlarged by the glasses. “I must have overdone it with the coffee this morning.”

“Oh, no!” I shook my head, putting my cup to the side and rising. “Excuse me, but did you say the King of Algora had taken your Spirit Mask away?”

“He ordered for it to be taken from me, yes. The Spirit Mask is in the palace now, and there’s no way for me to

reclaim it. I cannot make one, either—it's an ancient artifact. A relic of epochs long gone.”

“How long will the portal artifacts be cooling?”

“For another quarter of an hour.”

“Pray excuse me. I need to go somewhere for a quarter of an hour. Please wait for my return, Mistress Mythrell, if you don't find my request excessive.”

“Sure...” The shop owner looked a little taken aback. “Let it be so. You will check whether your clan has any more pink diamonds? What's it called, by the way?”

“Heroes of the Final Frontier. That's our name. And, yes, later on I will definitely check whether we have any pink diamonds with black specks left. But please excuse me for the time being. I'll do my best to return really soon.”

I walked out of the workshop with haste to return very shortly. The king would probably be surprised by my request—which he had de facto promised to grant...

* * *

“O Gods of Light!” Mistress Mythrell's eyes had already been magnified by her glasses. Now they were so huge I felt uneasy. In her hands she had a golden artifact all covered in pink diamonds with black specks inside.

Even though it was called the Spirit Mask, I'd never have used the word "mask" for something like that. It was more of a helmet—a lot like the one I used inside my gaming cocoon myself. Or like the ones that came with suits of armor. There was an opening instead of a visor whose shape ideally corresponded to that of Mistress Mythrell's glasses. The helmet didn't have a top, so the old woman's hairdo would not be endangered. It opened and closed with a click—I'd checked as much as I rode here from the Royal Palace in a hired cab. The king had granted my request without moving a muscle of his purebred aristocrat face. I was amazed by the speed of his reaction. I'd hoped to see him in person, but had been prepared for the procedure to take a while. And he just came out to see me like that. I told him what my two requests would be. He thought about them and asked me whether I was sure. I said yes; he nodded, squeezed my shoulder for a moment, and left. Three minutes later I was handed what I'd asked for in my first request—the precious pink helmet known as the Spirit Mask.

"Gods of Light!"

"I need nothing in return," I hastened to tell her. "This item was yours to begin with. But I'll be happy if our acquaintance grows into friendship and mutual respect, Mistress Mythrell."

"Gods of Light!"

Congratulations!

+2 to reputation with Mistraille Mythrell, the dwarf owner of Weary Heart, a magic shop in the Great City of

Algora.

“My friend Rosgard the Glorious! The long-suffering heart of a lonely dwarf woman has no words to express my deepest gratitude to you.”

“I’m the one who should be grateful to you for your help,” I smiled. “May I collect the artifacts? I can see that you’ve packed them up already.”

There were two wooden boxes with metal locks on the workbench. Above them lay a sheet covered in different symbols—I recognized it as a magical packing scroll. The dwarf woman had foreseen everything. And I’d made a great investment in the future. All I needed to do now was hurry to Shrinelands.

“Everything’s ready,” the dwarf lady kept nodding automatically. “You can collect it. Truly, I never could have foretold that we would meet like this. You are my friend henceforth, Rosgard.”

“And you are mine, Mistress Mythrell.”

“Just call me Mistraille. Or Mistry.”

“And I’d rather just be called Ros, if you don’t mind.”

“I know you’re in a hurry, Ros. But if you ever get a minute, I’d like to treat you to some coffee again and talk. It’s about a secret plan that I have. It’s complex and would involve

a lot of preparation. But someone who's excited by long and dangerous voyages like you might be interested."

"I'll visit you as soon as I can!" I promised. I couldn't help myself again. "But could you at least hint at where we might be going, Mist... My good Mistry?"

"No one should find out about it!"

"You'll find your trust well-placed."

"I'm looking for a way to Angora! And I've made considerable progress! If we join forces, solve all the riddles, and find the missing keys, we might be able to launch a most unusual expedition—to Angora. To the City of the Dead. What would you say to that, Rosgard the Guide, Rosgard the Kind, Rosgard the Traveler? Would you be interested in joining me on my journey to the city that's no place for the living?"

"Would I? All I can say is this: as soon as I get done with the smaller business of saving a few hundred innocent souls and making a routine teleport jump to Zar'Graad, I'll return at once! Don't set out without me!"

"Your words have been heard! So we'll travel together! Once we put all the clues and the keys together, the way shall open before us! I've been working on the solution for a very long time, and I'll show you all the disjointed notes I'd made in the course of long arduous voyages. A lot remains unclear to me. But I believe that the way will open someday!"

“I won’t be long!” I nodded, activating the packaging spell and pulling out a teleportation scroll. “I also know someone who’d find a riddle like this one really i-i-i-interesting.”

“Really i-i-i-i-interesting?”

“That’s right. I’ll be back soon, my good Mistry. Once again, I’m happy we’ve met! Very happy indeed!”

The flash of a teleport carried me away. I’d left the house of Mistraille Mythrell, but I was certain I’d come back here soon. The ghost of another exciting adventure had revealed itself—and I wouldn’t let it slip away.

Chapter 15

Lake District Heroes

“PLEASE MOVE FASTER. A little faster. Please hurry up,” Braver was pale from all the tension, but his voice remained calm as he stood near the portal’s buzzing mirror to make sure the refugees moved in a steady procession. Sometimes he would dash over to an old man or woman that had just slipped to help them get back to their feet and cheer them up a little.

“Don’t worry, just watch your step. Easy now...”

“Sit down here for a moment. Nothing to be afraid of. You’ve done it.”

“Drink this potion, sir. It will give you some energy. And here’s some cold medicine. Please take it right now.”

“This way, please. Someone will help you over there.”

Bom wasn’t as patient or polite. The burly green guy shuttled hither and thither at near-supersonic speed, taking along up to five grownups or ten kids each time. His angry roar would make everyone speed up, including a family of bears in nearby brambles that suddenly decided to return to the faraway ravine from whence they had come, even though the ursines had been completely uninvolved. He was even more effective with the fugitives—one bark from the half-orc made a fighter with injuries to both legs run like an Olympic sprinter, and an old guy barely managing to shuffle his feet would catch up with his grandkids in just a couple of wide

leaps. This would suffice to deal with the congestion right before the portal and push another group through. No one seemed to object to such lines from the half-orc as,

“Move, you wilted celery! Move, you limp noodle!”

“Oldster, you’ll croak soon, anyway, so don’t be in such a hurry!”

“What gives, moron, you nearly trampled granny over there!”

“Hey, chuvver! You’re a real chuvver, aren’t you!”

“Hey boy! If you poke the portal with your stick, I’ll poke your daddy’s face with my boot!”

“Hey, lady! Your kids have scattered! Scream a little! Not hysterically, mind you! The way you usually scream to get their attention!”

I was one of the people who’d needed no extra speeding-up. We didn’t have any backup portal. If this one would have stopped working, that would have been the end. So I dashed back and forth like greased lightning, going through the portal and back again, handing a new group of refugees over to fellow clan members, then returning to the island and the flotsam fleet around it to gather others.

The Shrinelands were emptying of people right before my eyes. The locals were leaving their former hiding place family by family and group by group. They left without

looking back—the Shrinelands had indeed saved their lives and offered them safety amidst the chaos of war, but at least now they wouldn't have to exist in constant fear of the shimmering magical veil bursting—they had constantly felt exposed, after all. Even without the enemy getting to them, they would have eventually expired of hunger and diseases.

We did run into problems from time to time, but those were few and far between. There was an old man who didn't want to leave his fishing boat behind—it had carried him all over Naikal for decades without ever letting him down. I could have tried to explain to the fisherman that his memory had been false, and he was a stubborn pile of bytes himself. “Everything's imaginary, oldster—you, me, and especially your leaky old boat!” I didn't say it aloud, though, calling half a dozen chuvvers to help me drag the old man and his boat to the portal instead. Another old lady stubbornly refused to leave her enormous cast iron pot behind—the one that she'd used to make chowders and porridges in for decades. “Porridges and chowders for the whole family for as long as I remember myself, my lad, and it's been passed down from one generation to another! It's charmed, and I don't want any other one!” She'd do well advertising kitchenware, I thought to myself. The charmed pot turned out to be incredibly heavy—two strong villagers barely managed to lift it from the ground.

Five kids had gotten lost, as they always did. I roared just like Bom as I ran from one edge of the island to another, jumping from boats to rafts, and from rafts to barrels. I fell into the water twice as I went, but I did get all the children. Two were playing fishermen on a faraway raft. Two more were freeing a pike that had gotten caught in a fishnet. The last one had proved a problem—the little rascal had decided to go on a voyage to fight Grakharg himself, armed himself with a piece of wood, used a blanket as a sail for his small boat, and had already set out towards the shimmering magical veil by

the time I found him. The hero-to-be ended up rejoining his mother, who'd been wailing like a fire alarm all along.

The chuvver priestess and Willow Sisters were the last of the locals to leave. The very last one was yours truly. I could see the magical wall getting torn apart and falling into fading shreds. The Shrinelands ceased to exist before my very eyes. I stood near the portal, which had already started to fade and shrink, watching a soft contained apocalypse. I didn't feel any regret—only relief. The refugees had all been transported to safety. Some of the abandoned rafts and boats started to drift away from the land, jumping and rocking on the waves. The islets and rocks on the horizon would soon become their last haven—or destruction, if they slammed hard into the jagged rocks. I looked around me attentively, expecting at some level to see long black boats accompanied by a god's dark shadow. All I saw was the beginning of another sunny day on Lake Naikal. The weather was definitely changing for the better.

A huge green arm came out of the portal, grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and pulling me in unceremoniously. I kicked out as I got pulled into the portal and came out of its other side. Just in time, too. The mirror shimmered, waves started running across its surface, the humming became replaced by the sound of stone grinding against stone, and then a high-pitched mosquito buzz. There was a pop, and the portal closed.

“We're done here, boss,” Bom, who'd pulled me out, said gruffly. “The clan hall is that way, right?”

“It is.”

“OK, I’ll be on my way. I’ll take a look at what we’ve got.”

“Hold on! Plant this in the garden somewhere close to the house. It’s a gift from the Willow Sisters. And, according to the timer, it hasn’t got much time left unless you plant it.”

“That’s a piece of cake. Both my thumbs are green, anyway. Tell me to get ready once we’re about to leave. We’ll be jumping from Algora, right?”

“Yep. I don’t want to drag any of those dinosaurs over here.”

“Prudent. All right, I’m off.”

The mule set off like a racecar. All I managed to do was to yell to him,

“Strictus is in charge of the place!”

“I got you!”

“I’ll join him there,” Braver had approached me quietly and scurried off without making a sound. “There’s still work to do.”

“Hold on! So you’re not coming to Zar’Graad with us?”

“I don’t really see the point. There’s plenty for me to do here. I’ll be happy as long as you bring back enough roots, leaves, and slimy things. I might create a few new potions if I trust my intuition.”

“It’s a deal. Will you look after the clan hall while we’re away?”

“Sure thing.”

“Oh, and I don’t intend to interfere with your personal business. You can sell everything you make using your own stash in your own time and make some independent income that way—and you’re perfectly free to use the clan’s laboratory facilities, which don’t exist as of yet.”

“Thanks. That’s fair—pretty generous, in fact.”

“You’ll be getting a decent salary, too,” I promised with a smile. “And anything you might need to develop your skill and increase our production capacity. In the meantime, here’s a check for three thousand in gold. You can cash it at the bank. Start setting up the lab, Braver. Buy everything you need without hesitation. If you need anything else, we’ll get it. And make sure you don’t want for ingredients.”

“What should I prioritize in terms of ingredients and products?”

“First aid kits and boosters to be used in battle. So that we’ll always be well-stocked. Explosive potions, too—

powerful and super-powerful. Here's a check for another thousand for the ingredients."

"Got you. Will do. Expect a receipt for everything. Who do I give the receipts to, by the way? You?"

"Our treasurer. The green guy who's just run off screaming. Be warned—Bom really values money a lot, so he'll want to know about every copper. If you feel overwhelmed, drop me a line."

"Won't be a problem. I also think you should count every penny. I have about six thick folders of receipts and invoices, each one seven hundred pages thick. When I came into this world for the first time to become an alchemist and a businessman, I started to write down all my income and expenses—way back at the Crèche. I'd spent an unbelievable amount of time there, and even earned my first money from the potions I'd made myself."

"But there aren't any teachers there!"

"I found a few old books, though. Besides, no one ever said you couldn't experiment. I'm actually proud of what I did back there. I can show you my journals and records someday and tell you about my past. It would be interesting to hear about yours, too."

"It's a promise, then! I've been missing that myself—a few skins of zesty wine, not too strong, and a few packs of marshmallows to be roasted and shared around a fire."

“Sounds perfect! We can do that right in the clan hall’s garden.”

“Right on. All right, my good alchemist, I won’t keep you any longer. Happy fermentation and condensation. Warn Bom in advance that you’re planning to cash a clan check so that he doesn’t block the transaction. And make sure you cash it before too long.”

“All right, I’ll be off, then.”

Braver set off, and I had to stay since I simply couldn’t leave.

By the time our conversation had ended, a great crowd gathered around me—everyone took turns to pat me on the shoulder, hug me, or kiss me. I noticed that the refugees, who’d finally managed to come to their senses after such a precipitous rescue, also managed to catch the fleet-footed Braver. Only Bom had managed to slither away like the green slime he was. I was left there to receive thanks, although I have to confess it felt pleasant and rubbed my ego just the right way.

“We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, friend Rosgard!”

“Thanks for saving us, good Rosgard!”

“You’re a true hero! We’ll remember your name! And your outlander clan!”

“You’ve saved my children!”

“Our most profound gratitude goes out to you, friend Rosgard!”

“We’ll never forget you!”

“We’ll never forget what you’ve done!”

The gaming system also woke up and unloaded a pile of information on me. First of all, the Shrinelands had ceased to exist, so I no longer had any reputation there, but it had all been converted into personal gratitude on the part of the people I’d saved. In addition to that, yours truly and the clan had their reputation with the entire peaceful population of the Lake District go up by a point. That also included all the guards who were now slowly returning to man their positions and rebuild the trade and defense outposts. All the soldiers whose service took them to the Lake District would be particularly well-disposed towards me and the HFF clan. And that was just the beginning.

The clan’s and my own personal reputation with the temples and priestesses of Wyllowe had improved, as well as our reputation with the chuvvers and Snessa’s clergy.

I’d also received a grim warning that as soon as the deities Grakharg and Guorra learned of the part I played in the rescue of the refugees and the Willow Sisters from their trap on Lake Naikal, they’d take it as a personal affront from Rosgard and his clan. That was unpleasant news, emphasized by red lettering for a good reason.

Before I could finish reading, the new mayor Lerouche pushed through the crowd and gave me a strong hug and his thanks, telling me that many local residents had gotten to reunite with their families as a result of my portal operation, and that he'd already sent three fast homing pigeons and a hawk to Alfalfa Hill with the same message wherein he wrote of the glorious deeds of the Heroes of the Final Frontier. To make sure I didn't get too overjoyed, he reported that many of the refugees had fallen ill. I sent him to HEFF, informing him that Braver, the clan's alchemist, would do everything he could, and that he'd also try to find and bring over a skilled doctor. The HFF clan would obviously do this favor to the town of Tranqueville free of charge, and our swords were still at the town's disposal. The ecstatic mayor galloped away, accompanied by his coterie.

I took advantage of him having pushed aside many of the refugees to get to me and found my way to the tower—the one that had been standing alone by the shore. There had been no one there, so I got to the very top of the ancient structure with the aid of a ladder. That's where I sat down, looking at the vast expanse of Lake Naikal, which had already calmed considerably, and went over every stage of the recent operation in retrospect to reassure myself that I'd done everything I'd needed to do.

All the sentient inhabitants of these parts had been saved. They had been taken to a town with a peaceful status. Statuses were prone to changing, but the town still offered more safety than the Shrinelands—at least there was somewhere to retreat to. If the enemies had found and pierced the magic bubble, everybody would have been slaughtered very quickly.

Not everybody came over to Tranqueville. Some of the chuvvers and all the temple's battle pikes had stayed behind.

They could always find shelter in the mud at the bottom of the lake. It wasn't my idea—the Sisters and the priestess had requested as much. I obeyed them without trying to argue. Naikal wasn't that far away, either, and it wouldn't take the pikes or the chuvvers long to get here. The boats and the rafts had been abandoned, but those losses had been inevitable, and I wasn't going to worry about all that old junk being left behind. Now my conscience was clean and I felt much more at ease—all the civilians had been rounded up and brought to safety, where it would be a lot easier for me to make sure they were all right and defend them if needed. I had another hour left, which I planned to spend visiting two places in Algora, then making a short trip to Alfalfa Hill, return to Tranqueville, and, finally, jump back to Algora to go to Zar'Graad, which wasn't quite the place I wanted to be right now. I had business with the mystery dwarf lady with a weary heart and far-reaching plans.

So, Algora...

The virtual screen flared up furiously.

Attention!

Dorth Viderrr, leader of the Darkest Force clan, declares war upon the Heroes of the Final Frontier!

No one will be able to declare war on you within the next ten days unless the clan leader explicitly agrees to accept the challenge!

Do you wish to accept the challenge of the Darkest Force clan?

Yes/No?

“Curse you!” I barked in surprise. “What hole did you crawl out of, and since when are you a clan leader? Also, I’m sure there already is a Dark Force clan, so you’ve had to improvise, haven’t you?”

No one was there to hear my outburst, and the challenge was still mocking me as it hung in the air right before my eyes. What was I to do? I saw a scene from days long gone in my mind’s eye—the shaking shed door and the voice of the Sith lord dying of rat bites behind it, also shaking. All right, why not? He’d been a major irritation all along, so I felt tempted to accept the challenge. My hands were tied, though—there were a whole bunch of urgent things to do and a mountain of new responsibilities. Declining would be the prudent thing to do. So of course I chose “Yes.”

The war has been declared!

It’s on!

Heroes of the Final Frontier against Darkest Force!

The guards will not interfere in the hostile actions between the clans for as long as said actions present no threat to neutral participants as well as private or public property.

The war can only be called off by mutual agreement of the warring clans’ leaders!

The war will end once one of the clans captures the enemy's flag, clan symbol, or clan citadel (a hall, a fort, or a fortress).

The dissolution of one of the clans will end the war automatically.

Attention!

No one will be able to declare war on you within the next ten days unless the clan leader explicitly agrees to accept the challenge!

Attention!

Your clan duel score is 1:0.

(see the comments for more details)

“We’ll grind you to dust!” I said resolutely, striking the air with my fist.

“Such grandstanding.”

I gave a start, nearly dropping off the tower’s wall. I turned my head around at once and stared at the stranger who’d just appeared behind my back. It was a man without any information displayed above his head. His appearance was completely ordinary—nothing about him stood out except for

his eyes. They were filled with bitter irony and glowed with feverish curiosity. His face was but angular frame for those eyes with a mop of unruly black hair crowning it all. A loose gray shirt clashed with bright yellow trousers with white patches all over and the red pointy-nosed boots on his feet.

“My son keeps talking about you all the time. Rosgard this, Rosgard that, Rosgard here, and Rosgard there. Weren’t you the one who’d told my son to kick me, by the way? And now you’re sending me messages via kings? Didn’t your head get too big for you, the brat that you are? I might lose my temper.”

“Hello,” I said as I got up and stared at the half-expected guest. “So you must be Orbit’s and BB’s father. Well, you suck as a father, no matter how you look at it. That kick was well-deserved.”

There was a flash—the only thing I saw. A gray and emerald flash of some magic.

There was darkness, followed by a roaring vortex tinged with scarlet.

My back slammed into the stone of the ash-covered resurrection slab located in the middle of a small park that had burnt to the ground.

“Oof...”

“You sure have a mouth on you. It’s a pity it isn’t connected to your brain in any way,” my opponent, who’d just

stepped out of a grey teleportation flash, was looking at me from above as I lay on the ground. “How would you like it if I killed you a dozen times? And then did the same tomorrow? And paid you a visit the day after, too?”

“I don’t give a damn,” I said through my teeth as I got up. “I’m not changing my opinion. You’ve given your son so much psychological trauma I can’t even find the right words to describe it. My own father might be a harsh parent who often goes overboard, but you’re so much worse I can’t even compare the two of you. You’re a freaking self-righteous tyrant who lives in his own fantasies and uses his nearest family members as clay for his bizarre statues. You stink!”

There was a flash, followed by the same scarlet-tinted vortex.

I was sitting on the resurrection slab. The black-haired man was running his hand through his hair pensively.

“You might be right about a few things there. That kick from my son had set me thinking. So why did you use the King of Algora as your messenger? He wasn’t too pleased about me turning up in his bedroom. Poor Lysanne was screaming so funny. What did you want, Rosgard?”

“Where’s Twigg, that wayward son of the sleepyhead goddess?”

“Whatever gives you the idea I’m gonna tell you?” The mockery in his squint went up by a few orders of magnitude. “Haven’t you heard that ancient saying? Only boredom comes for free! But everybody’s got enough of their own!”

“Angora.”

“Come again? I’m not sure I heard you right,” the angular face froze right next to mine, and the emerald-colored eyes became a steel gray. “Would you repeat that?”

“The City of the Dead. Right next door to Tantariall. I’m planning to visit the place—you son’s tagging along, by the way. I’m not inviting you, but I’ll share the map.”

“You think you can mock me like that?”

“I’d never stoop to mocking the likes of you. I do have my standards, you know. So, what do you say?”

“One does not simply walk into Angora, you know. Even I have failed. Me!”

“*You* have failed, that’s right. I hear you’ve failed spectacularly in a number of ways. Your daughter hasn’t even got a boyfriend, so you’ve had to go and make things easier for her by declaring war that will keep her online even longer than usual, thereby making sure she never goes out on any date with anyone. Your son’s future is nebulous as well, since you’ve traumatized him in a way I wouldn’t want my worst enemy to be traumatized. Your family life’s in ruins, you’re unemployed, and your health is bad. So, pray tell me, where did you succeed? Your list of failures is almost endless.”

A flash.

“OK, screw this,” I exhaled as I rose from the slab once again. “If you kill me again, I’ll ask Orbit to do something really nasty to your gaming cocoon. I mean it. I have a long road ahead of me—Angora is no walk in the park, and I could sure do with some levels. And you keep rolling me back. I’ve changed my mind. Piss off. You bore me. You got me once, you got me twice, okay, I get it, there’s a lot of frustration to vent. But this is going over the top. No deal. I’ll manage on my own.”

I got no reply. He had turned his back on me and was breathing noisily, clearly trying to calm down. It was too good a chance to miss. So I gave him a kick.

There was a flash.

I respawned with a wide smile on my face. Then I got up, dusted off my diaper and went towards the tower where I’d left my possessions and equipment. After about twenty paces I heard someone catch up with me. The pointy-nosed man grabbed me by the shoulder tenaciously and looked me in the eye again.

“Take this. It’s the Post Mortem elixir. A very rare thing. Drink it. You’ll restore your experience and recover the lost skills. Twigg is sleeping at the bottom of the Blood Causeway, which is to the north of Algora. He doesn’t hear anyone’s calls since he’s nearly dead—a morass had swallowed him up. He’s under the cover of black mud some sixty or seventy feet deep. You won’t be able to get him out just like that. You’ll need a willow twig charmed by one of his sisters. I’ve given you your answer, and I’ll be waiting for your response. Remember—you’ll regret it if you try to swindle me.”

“Didn’t I tell you I wouldn’t deal with you?” I said gruffly.

“We all aspire to something, Rosgard. I see you know a lot about me. And it isn’t something I aspire to—it is to be with someone! And my yearning is so great that...”

“I get it. I can’t relate, but I respect your yearning. As soon as I find something out, you’ll get the news when either your son or your daughter gives you a kick.”

“Why, you...”

“Goodbye. Expect a kick soon. The news, I mean.”

I turned away and walked on with the potion in my hand. I didn’t intend to drink it before I’d showed it to Braver.

There was a Willow Sister waiting for me at the tower—she was literally growing out of the ground. Next to her stood the chuvver priestess, chewing on something as usual. I sincerely hoped that these ladies wouldn’t kill me with any mystery flashes—I was still coming to my senses after my conversation with Orbit’s father. I darted into the tower to get dressed, having greeted them with a nod, self-conscious about my diaper. I knew it was a game, but I still didn’t feel like parading my diaper in front of an old lady whose eyes had been accustomed to a wise and judging look. I didn’t mind the Willow Sister—I didn’t feel embarrassed in the presence of vegetation, even if it was sentient.

“You have done a great deed, friend Rosgard.”

“I thank you, my good ladies. But I wasn’t on my own—the Heroes of the Final Frontier clan has been helping me all along.”

“This is true, and our gratitude extends towards them as well. Tell us, friend Rosgard, are you in any trouble?”

They were indeed treating me with genuine care—it might have been the diaper, or, perhaps they’d seen that I’d become weaker. I wondered whether I might ask them for assistance in my fight against one of my enemies. The shadowy demiurge who’d killed me a few times in a row would pulverize them both, and that wasn’t something I’d wish on them. But what if I pointed them towards Dorth Viderrr? The more I thought about this, the more I liked the idea. No matter where the Sith lord and his army might be now, they’d show their ugly faces here in Tranqueville eventually. Apart from the refugees, there were many strong warriors here, and the Sisters were excellent healers. I also had an inkling of what an old chuvver lady who was also a temple priestess of Snessa could do. I’d have to let them know who Dorth Viderrr was and why he was no friend of anyone’s. I never had what it took to properly malign people, so I wouldn’t be able to make Viderrr any worst than he really was, but I’d try something, at any rate.

“Trouble never ends,” I said with a smile. “Even now as we speak my clan is facing a new foe in the face of the Darkest Force clan. Those evil plotters have found out about our ceaseless battle against evil and about how we never tolerate cruel deeds, pillaging, or the slaughter of innocents. And Dorth Viderrr is truly evil, rest assured of that! He’s covered in innocent blood up to his elbows, but it’s never enough for him—he kills and loots daily, sacking temples,

desecrating holy relics, mocking the suffering of others and snuffing out the hopes of those who walk in the Light! He's a villain among villains! A hideous, revolting, and thoroughly dark demon in human shape, a bloodsucker and a mercenary who dreams of razing every single settlement that worships the Light! And now he has his sight set on Tranqueville. He'd told me to go my own way and abandon everyone! He said to me, 'Leave them, for they are doomed—I have made up my mind, and, Dorth Viderrr, will destroy them all—people and chuvvers, fishermen and tailors alike. They will not be rescued! Their hopes will be dust, and their homes will burn! I'LL KILL THEM ALL!!!'" I shouted suddenly, and both ladies flinched, listening to me raptly. "That's what he said! 'I'll drown them IN THEIR OWN BLOOD!!!' And as I saw his face, contorted in murderous rage, I felt fear for the lives of innocents grip my heart. 'They're DEAD! THEY'RE ALL AS GOOD AS DEAD!!!' That was what he screamed at me at the very end, demanding my clan to flee and abandon Tranqueville to them so that they could burn and pillage with impunity. But I remained, and I replied modestly, but firmly, 'We're not going anywhere! The Heroes of the Final Frontier never give up! WE SHALL NOT ABANDON TRANQUEVILLE!!!' That was what I told that spawn of darkness pretending to be human. And I spoke the truth! We won't go away! We shall fight for every street! For every house! We know that victory will be ours! Dorth Viderrr shall not pass! He'll never be allowed to harm this peaceful town!"

The Sister trembled in silence, looking at me with her firefly eyes open wide, and the old lady said something in a mixture of human and chuvver that sounded a little like,

"Tumble me sideways!"

"Oh, yes!" I was on a roll. "He's also promised to cut everybody's throat with his own hands! He swore he'd

desecrate the temples and make a soup of magic fish on a fire of magic willow twigs! Imagine the magnitude of his depravity! Imagine getting into a fight with that scum!”

“So, where is this... Dorth Viderrrrr?” The chuvver lady inquired in a blood-curdling guttural roar.

“He’s on his way here,” I squeaked dejectedly. “He said he’d waste no time getting here to wreak havoc upon the land...”

“Well, let him come. Thank you for your warning, friend Rosgard. We’ll be watching over this entire area. My assistants the snakes will crawl in every direction and lie in wait! Their fangs will be sharp, and their venom fresh and potent! We’ll be ready for Dorth Viderrr and his accursed clan, the Darkest Force! We’ll fight him by your side!”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” I was overjoyed and bowed to them deeply.

“I’ll scatter spiky seeds around—they’ll go right through the feet of any evildoer!” The Sister added. “I’ll wrap up all the defenders in special auras and create many obstacles in the enemies’ path! We’ll help you, friend Rosgard!”

“Thank you so much! My gratitude to you knows no bounds!” I folded my hands on my chest and bowed again. “Oh, by the way, Dorth Viderrr has claimed snakes were abominable vermin that had to be exterminated! He threatened to kill every snake he meets with his special shining saber for their agony to be unbearable!”

“Tumble me sideways!” The old lady said once again.

“That’s right! He’d also promised to cut down all the willows with that same sword of his.”

“Mm-hmm,” the kind willow girl said as her eyes started to glow red and her long twiggy fingers cracked ominously.

“So I’ll be off, then?” I asked, believing my business to be over. Then I cursed mentally—I’d forgotten to ask about the charmed twig, what an idiot! However, they didn’t let me go just yet.

“Hold on a little, friend Rosgard. We’ve waited for you here to thank you for all your great help—to us and to our land.”

“I didn’t do it expecting a reward.”

“We know as much. And that makes your help much more valuable and cherished—our hearts rejoice after all the weariness of the wartime privations. Rosgard, we’re aware that you’re looking for the Silver Legend.”

“This is true,” my feet found themselves glued to the spot.

“So listen. This knowledge isn’t much, but please accept it as a token of gratitude from me and the Willow Sister. Firstly, there is an island in the north, its shores washed by the cold waters of the northern ocean. It is called Al Dra

Drass, and it's an impregnable prison—the worst evildoers of our world are held there under lock and key. This evil spawn Dorth Viderrr belongs there, too. The prison's warden is a mighty warrior whose countenance inflicts terror on his foes—Berlor the Firestarter. The large silver hammer that had once belonged to the temple warrior Grym is in his custody.”

“Thank you!” I exhaled.

“There is another piece of knowledge. There's a special silver cuirass that's part of the Silver Legend. It had spent many years in the dirt underneath a dark totem pole in the village of the wood ogres. But it has been pulled out of the dirt and has ended up in the hands of the mounted knight Phagnir Necrosis from the outlander clan known as the Golden Knights Templar. We know not what he may have done to it since, but the Golden Knights Templar are a lead. But beware, o Rosgard—that outlander clan is dangerous! It is home to something of great power and great danger!”

“Right...” I said, having suddenly received a whole load of information that was very important to me personally. “Thank you ever so much! I don't even know how to express my gratitude to you.”

“You already have, friend Rosgard. And we'll be watching over the approaches to the town that has given us shelter for the time being. If we notice any enemy forces, we'll warn you—provided you're within reach of our magic.”

Zar'Graad was out, then.

“Is there anything else you’d like to ask, friend Rosgard? Time won’t wait—we need to make sure all the refugees are settling down and want for nothing.”

“I have some important business with the Sister,” I remembered at last. “I might know where Twigg is.”

“My brother? O, where is he? He hasn’t heeded our calls for so long!”

“Twigg is in trouble—he’s sunk to the bottom of a deep morass. I’ll need a willow twig imbued with your magic—it’s the only thing that can point to the bottom of Twigg’s sinister trap.”

“Take it! And bring back our brother Twigg! We need him desperately!”

There was a crack.

Willow Sisters never dallied when fast action was required—she’d just broken off two of her fingers. I took the forked twig from her with some trepidation. A dowsing rod the like of which were used to find water springs deep underground. I put the precious object away into my pack, pressed my hands to my chest again, and promised,

“I’ll do everything to get him back as soon as possible!”

“May our mother Wyllowe guide you well!”

“May Snessa bless you with a snake’s sense of danger!”

The ladies nodded their goodbyes and departed. One went away, and the other disappeared into the ground. I stood there for a while, hoping for some miracle rather naively, but I didn’t find any auras upon me, even though the parting words had sounded promising. Oh well.

I penned a short message to Braver, asking him to do everything within his power to help the mayor of Tranqueville and the townsfolk, and also to take a look at the potion I’d send his way in a moment. I called over two boys, gave them two silvers and told them to take the elixir to Braver the alchemist. They nodded their understanding and scurried away under the watchful eyes of citizens on patrol. Then I used a scroll to teleport to Algora. As I was on my way to the nearest inn, I also wrote Bom, telling him to come to the place we’d agreed on—time was already getting short. All our passengers were VIPs, and it didn’t seem reasonable to keep them waiting.

I’d left all my possessions and all my money in my private room—the last thing I wanted was to lose the dowsing rod on the new continent. I came out unencumbered, with a backpack on my back once again—a welcome change from the bag with the long strap. I’d stayed in the same clothes—they were already getting a well-worn look and needed darning. I thought I might as well wear them to rags and then buy some decent equipment befitting a battle mage.

The Mages’ Guild gave me a loud welcome—before I’d managed to cross the yard I saw a gray-haired old-timer who’d differed from Tarnius the way a low hill differs from a snow-peaked mountain. He was short and plump, with a red

nose and dimples on his rosy cheeks, quick with his smile, and with a bowl haircut crowning his head. I wondered if he'd been a villager by birth.

“Welcome, Rosgard! We're happy to see you!”

His way of greeting me was definitely a villager's—that's how you greeted your cousin in a nearby field. The shout drew everyone's attention to me—I'd been able to remain unnoticed right before that, but now everybody was staring at my nickname all of a sudden. Everybody in the yard froze in place. Before they could start calling my name, I walked into the building, grunted a hello to the nameless oldster, grabbed him by his wide sleeve, and pulled him behind myself as I headed towards the room I remembered from my encounter with Tarnius. He had dragged me in back then, and now I was dragging someone else. The old man was quick on the uptake—he waved the hand that wasn't in my grip, and the heavy door shut behind us, nearly catching the nose of the fastest player who'd set out after me, yelling,

“Stop! Ros, let me join your...”

Once in the room, I let gramps go, stared at him inquisitively, and asked,

“Would the Mages' Guild require any deliveries to be made to Zar'Graad? Do you have any important cargo that you'd like to transport there urgently?”

“Oh, but we do, we do! Will you deliver it?”

“It is doable. Why not help the venerable wizards? I know you’re generous with your rewards.”

“That is the truth, Rosgard! That is just as you say. Uh... And what reward would you have in mind, pray?”

“Oh, not much. But let me inquire first. Do you have any pink diamonds with black specks inside them? I really need them for something important.”

“And how many of those do you need, Rosgard?” The old-timer squinted warily.

“How many do you have?” I asked bluntly.

“Well... two...”

“...dozen?” I made a happy face. “Excellent!”

“Oh, no, you have misheard me! Misheard me, I say!” The wizard emphasized the word “misheard” as much as he could. “How would we come by so many? We have four at the most. But would you accept something else, perhaps? Such as gold, for example?”

“Four diamonds, gold, and vault access—the Copper Vault will do. With the right to take any two objects stored there.”

“Oh, dear, my lad. Aren’t you letting your covetousness get the better of you?”

“Who, me? Oh, by no means! But if you want covetousness, I can call Bom.”

“Who would that be?”

“My treasurer. He has a real passion for money, diamonds, and vaults. I’m sure he’ll demand three times as much—at least.”

“Oh, bother...”

“So, should I call Bom?”

“We’ll do without Bom,” the old man said, drawing the “o” in the half-orc’s name. “Where should we deliver the cargo?”

“I’ll show you,” I smiled widely. “Shall we go get the payment?”

“You’ll get half of it now. We’ll visit the vault once the cargo is delivered.”

“It’s a deal.”

“Follow me, young man. Verily, you drive a hard bargain...”

“I’d like to see a few magic teachers on my way,” I said. “I need to upgrade a few spells. But I have most unfortunately left all my money at home.”

“We’ll visit the teachers, lad. Worry not about the payment. We can work something out.”

“Thank you so much,” I said with real feeling in my voice. “Thank you...”

Chapter 16

A Shot in the Wing. Falling Towards an Uncertain Fate

“YOU’RE ALL CAUGHT UP in warfare, Ros,” BB said as she greeted me. She was wearing her trademark leather outfit, looking optimistic. She scrutinized my face in contemplation. “And not just warfare, by the look of it.”

“Come again?”

“Well done with the fighting there, by the way. My congratulations. But there’s something I’d like to know—is there any chance that you may have run into my father just recently?”

“Say what?”

Baroness looked at me with obvious suspicion.

“I’m not blaming you for anything. But my father’s latest antics have been so unexpected that it must have been the Ros factor—I have no other explanation.”

“What are you talking about? I’m fresh from Tranqueville, and it’s in ruins. And before that I’d been sailing on Lake Naikal and blowing up drunken fishermen with magical dynamite. What’s this about your father?”

“Ros, fess up. I won’t get angry at you.”

“But what exactly do you mean? Can you provide a brief explanation, at least?”

“Half an hour ago he requested that me and Orbit log off, so we got out of our cocoons. He told us to sit in the kitchen. He even treated us to some raisin cake he’d bought somewhere at some point, long past its sell-by date. Then he told Orbit, ‘It’s time you stopped wasting your time on online games, found a job IRL, and got a girlfriend if you can.’ Orbit was all like, ‘A girlfriend? What’s that?’ But by that point our dear old dad had already turned towards his daughter, looking at me like Dracula with a bad case of the piles, and declared, ‘As for you, I want you to go on a date in a week! Also, I want a grandchild from each of you within a year from now. We’re a family, aren’t we?’ Having wrapped up this weird pitch, he’d moved the warranty-expired raisin cake closer to us and headed upstairs in the gait of a tortured strand of cold spaghetti. We sat there for a while, trying to cope with the shock, and then followed him upstairs in the same gait, heading towards our rooms and our cocoons. I did nibble on a piece of the raisin cake, though, and Orbit finished the rest of it happily. Having done that, he asked father what he’d wanted grandchildren for, and whether I could give birth to twins so that he wouldn’t have to waste his time, since one more kid wouldn’t make a difference to me. I couldn’t find a proper answer to that, so I stepped over my brother, moaning plaintively after his collision with a large metal dish that had hung on the wall and somehow jumped off to greet him. Then I got back to my room, and here I am back in Waldyra. So, to recap—I can’t think of any good reason for such strange behavior on the part of my old man, but I have a gut feeling you’ve had something to do with it.”

“I’m shocked,” I said perfectly earnestly. “Do you really think I could have told your father that he urgently needed grandchildren, even if I did meet him?”

“Well...”

“Trust me—nothing of the sort ever took place. And stop blaming your mythical Ros factor for everything! Get to your place—our airplane will depart shortly.”

“Do you remember my cargo request?”

“Sure do. Always happy to help out an old friend. Oh, and I don’t want money this time—I’m after a plot of land where I can build a large house right in the center of the town that you’re building.”

“Your own idea?”

“A hint from Bom.”

“I need to make a few more voyages like this one,” BB confessed. “It’s a deal. You’ll get your plot of land. Will you trust me on my word?”

“I will, but Bom won’t. He’s already prepared a contract, and he’s waiting for you by that poplar tree over there.”

“It used to be a lot easier to deal with you. So, Ros, what about my father?”

“If we go on like this, you’ll accuse me of Zar’Graad turning against everyone next!”

“Oh, indeed! Who’s to say it wasn’t you?”

“It wasn’t! It may have been you, though!”

“Well, there *is* a possibility of that...”

“Will you look at what’s over yonder? Bom’s waving to you. Get going already, m’lady—it’s time to sign the contract. See you before takeoff.”

“My specialists have to look at it first!”

“Send them a screenshot. See you later.”

I headed towards a knight who was walking proudly and carrying a large sack on his shoulder. I hoped he wouldn’t claim the contents were personal possessions such as armored briefs and vests. I drew a sigh of relief as I saw BB move away. Got lucky there...

A few brief fights and trade negotiations later, everyone was finally satisfied, and we formed a tight group sitting on top of a bunch of cargo. Bom said loudly and clearly that we’d deliver everyone to Zar’Graad—deliver being the key word. We wouldn’t be held responsible for the safety of the passengers or the cargo—nearly all of them had accompanied us on our previous journey and remembered the predatory

shadow and the claw mark left on the armor of one of the knights. The risk was inevitable. The passengers stayed calm and silent—there were no greenhorns here. Everybody had earned their reputation as a veteran. Not that I'd expected any hysterical reactions or last-moment cancellations, but we'd felt obliged to give fair warning all the same.

I recollected the procedure and hastened to raise my hand and get us out of here—we'd chosen some small inner yard with no one else present but us. However, some rather able-bodied lady had stepped out onto her balcony with a pot of geraniums right at that moment, and started to inquire testily what so many outlanders were doing there, standing like statues, and why the redhead over there had such an exalted face—was it gas, perhaps?

There was a flash.

A whole cloud of light had appeared around us, making the grumpy woman gasp and retreat to her room. Then we heard her half-complain, half-demand in a nasal voice,

“Ficklebert! Ficklebert! Will you look into our yard! The outlanders are up to something weird! And that redhead takes the biscuit!”

“Why me?” The redhead (who was a leader of a respected clan) squeaked, having lost all her gravitas after being called out like that unexpectedly.

We felt a jolt and flipped over. The air around us was roaring loudly, as though we were flying somewhere at the speed of sound rather than teleporting. The air darkened

instantly, and then everything around us turned a foreboding shade of purple. When the purple veil was removed from our eyes, we found ourselves on the new continent—or, rather, above the new continent, well over a mile high. A soft shimmer enveloped us, and it felt as though someone had started to pull at our feet, trying to drag us to the ground. It may have been where we'd intended to go originally, but we were being dragged sideways, away from the shore and towards the distant horizon that lay towards the center of Zar'Graad. Echoes of a loud resonating roar had reached us, and we gasped as we saw a pitch black shadow, dozens of miles long, moving towards us over the fields, the woods, the hills, and the rivers.

There was another lunge, and we started to plummet to the ground. The faraway shadow gave a start, and there was that strange noise again—this time I thought I was hearing a mortally-wounded whale singing its final song as it was sinking head first towards the faraway ocean floor. We stopped for a moment, and then started spinning. Three passengers lost their grip and were carried away by the wind, falling topsy-turvy to the ground below. I grabbed BB by the waist—my feet had left the pile of cargo, and I was being dragged away by some force other than gravity. Baroness got a jolt, too. Bom barked something and grabbed both of us, as though he was engaged in a tug of war with an invisible opponent. We were spinning again, but descending slowly, even though we'd been losing bags and crates along the way.

“Damn this roundabout!” I yelled, holding Baroness tight and paying no attention to Bessie's wet nose nuzzling my cheek.

“Hold tight, Ros!” Baroness yelled.

Everybody else was yelling, too. However, there was no panic—only calls for action. Everybody was holding on to each other and the most important cargo, prepared to keep on fighting until the end. A piercing cry from below announced the prospect of salvation—dragons were hurrying towards us, beating the air with their wings as fast as they could, their snouts open in a long cry. The riders were clinging to their scaly backs, looking at the gigantic shadow approaching from below tensely.

“Jump!” BB commanded. “Ros, give me a shove!”

I bent sideways and sent the girl flying all the way down. She landed on the neck of a crimson dragon that had grabbed a net with a couple of large crates and bales inside with its mouth.

“Everybody leave!” I shouted, realizing the magic had targeted me personally. “Bom! Get down, all of you!”

“No way, boss! We’re a clan!”

“That’s right, and I’m giving orders!”

“Just a second! The rope!”

I never saw anyone tie knots as quickly. A silk rope was woven around my waist, and the half-orc fell on the back of a green dragon, holding me on a somewhat loose “leash.” The crates and the passengers got distributed between the dragons quickly. Two people fell onto a gigantic bird. A black and red flash turned the bird and its riders into a cloud of feathers and

fluff, all of a sudden. The furious roar started to abate—apparently, the creature that had been making it realized its time had run out. The enormous shadow fell back, and sunlight touched the rivers and the valleys once again.

The teleportation magic had kicked into action again, suddenly jerking me up with considerable force. Bom, who'd been clinging to the rope, yelled as he got jerked up right after me. It felt like a ride on a rocket—almost up to the stars. Not for long, though. I looked down at the continent from an incredible height for what must have been a few seconds—as if I was seeing everything from space. I was hanging there in the sky, suddenly dark, with a ridiculous rope tied around my waist, and what I saw nearly froze the blood in my veins.

The pristine new continent stretched out below me for hundreds of miles in every direction. There were long valleys, mind-bogglingly tall mountains that no one had climbed yet, astoundingly beautiful lakes and wide rivers. It lacked for nothing—Waldyra had truly given us access to a stupendous mass of land. But it wasn't land that I saw when I looked right down at Zar'Graad. All of it had become transparent, and I managed to look deeper—under the hills and the valleys, the rivers and the lakes—deeper than any dungeon or any mine. And there I saw a colossal guardian star lying flat under billions of tons of soil and rock, held down by something resembling a black weight, circular and flat, and just as colossal as the star itself, squashed almost to death underneath it, but still alive. One of its appendages twitched in a barely noticeable motion, but it sufficed for a wave to run across the surface of the continent, losing its momentum eventually but still tossing up forests and mountains wherever it went. Once again I heard the cry of a mortally wounded whale.

I lacked adjectives to describe the size of this creature.

How would you describe something the size of a whole continent? Moreover, all of Zar'Graad was in fact nothing but a pile of dirt heaped on top of something monstrous in an attempt to hide what no one was ever supposed to see from any prying eye.

There was another flash.

When the light had dispersed, I found myself standing on First Camp's ground. Bom fell next to me, still gripping the rope tight.

"We're a clan..." he grumbled, raising his mud-stained green mug. "I'll be damned. That's some turbulence!"

"Ros! Are you all right?" Baroness jumped down from her dragon, looked me in the face and froze as she gave me another look—a closer one this time. "Ros! You've seen something, haven't you? Something extraordinary? What did you see? What was that shadow? And that roar?"

"Welcome to Zar'Graad," I blurted. "We have landed successfully. And now the pilot leaves for his union-sanctioned walk, effective immediately."

"Ross! Spill the beans!"

I waved my hand wanly in a dismissive gesture and plodded on, shaking as I went. Then I noticed that my life and mana had been drained almost completely. I'd sure gotten a

good shake, but where did the mana go? Not a drop of it remained.

I was planning to meet up with Kyre, Orbit, Roskie, and Tyrant. I'd fish with them for a little while, and then bask in the warm Zar'Graad sun. Not for too long, mind you—just long enough to get the astonishing sight I'd just seen off my mind. I still had no words to describe it.

Fishing was just what I needed. Ros was going fishing. For just a little while.

“Daddy!” Roskie was running towards me, overjoyed to see my face at last. She was followed by the awkward spindly frame of the bald elf, tumbling out of the shade towards me, smiling mischievously. A wolf had jumped out of the bushes with a loud noise, followed by the huge bulk of the mammoth, which was tearing right through the shrubs. A paladin girl came out, too, stepping heavily in her armor.

This was perfect—I couldn't have wished for a better company. We'd go fishing together. All of us. I smiled as I quickened my pace, eager to be with my friends and my family at last.

End of Book One

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Till next time!

About The Author

Dem Mikhailov was born on November 23 1979 in the ex-Soviet city of Zarafshan (the Republic of Uzbekistan). His natural aptitude for science and technology decided his initial career choice, prompting him to enter the local industrial college. Upon graduation, he worked in the mining industry specializing in separation and beneficiation of metals. Still, he didn't find much joy in the admittedly boring job. Fed up with the daily grind, Dem finally decided to radically change his lifestyle and moved to Turkey where he spent the next twelve years working in the leisure industry, rising through the ranks from a regular entertainer to an animation team manager. Although leisure-time animation is admittedly a vocation for the young, it allowed Dem to mix with all kinds of people and later use his knowledge of human types and characters in his books.

In 2012, Dem Mikhailov returned to his home town, which marked the beginning of his stellar writing career. He's rightly considered one of the founding fathers of LitRPG, and his legendary saga *The Sleepless Ones (The World of Waldyra*, sometimes spelled as "*Valdira*") became one of the cult LitRPG series serving as an inspiration for such bestselling LitRPG authors as Vasily Mahanenko, Dan Sugralinov and Michael Atamanov.