

# Computers and the Internet for the Modern Luddite: A Guide

Hercules Bantas

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### The Adventures of Metho and Skip

(words and pictures and a fairy tale)

**Disrupted**

**\*\*WARNING: The characters in this story are criminals and use exceptionally bad language. WARNING\*\***



No matter how long Metho stared at the sign on the door, the words didn't change. The Belgradia Hotel, scene of many a drunken debauch and the place where most of everyone he knew had been conceived, was closing down. 'This is where me mum and dad met,' he grumbled.

'It's the property values,' said one of the motley collection of individuals standing on the footpath behind him. 'It's close to the city, which makes it an attractive prospect for those who can't afford to buy in one of the more sought after inner suburbs. Especially now that the, um, undesirables that were associated with the old demographic are moving on.'

Everyone looked at the speaker, who blushed. 'Fucken arseholes,' he added. He was the newest member of the crew—it was only his third day—and they had named him Little Spaz, which he wasn't happy about. Little Spaz's father—the original Spaz, or Big Spaz as he was now known—had introduced him to the crew because 'the boy's a bit soft', and Metho had seemed only too happy to take him on.

Even though he was still learning the ropes, Little Spaz was having doubts about what his father had obviously thought was a good career move. From the snippets of conversation he'd picked up, it was becoming apparent that Metho hadn't taken him on because he saw potential, but because he was afraid of Big Spaz. The realization that it was fear rather than talent that got him hired was like a metaphorical knee to the groin for his confidence, as well as being a bit perplexing.

As far as Little Spaz was concerned, Popy, which is what he called his dad at home, was as caring and gentle as a father could be. No one had a bad word to say about him. In fact, most people went out of their way to say what a good bloke he was.

'Fuckenuppies,' Metho muttered.

'They're notuppies anymore,' Little Spaz said, 'these days, they're just aspirational.' He looked around at the renewed stares and knew that he'd erred again. 'Fuck the fucken fuckers, the fucken fuckers are fucked,' he added, in order to redress the balance between curse words and normal language.

'If land values are up like Little Spaz says, and there are all these asperdicks running around with full fucken wallets, then why the fuck is business so bad?' Metho said, and turned to look directly at his, for want of a better word, men.

The crew replied with silence and a determination to avoid eye contact at all costs. Metho had a reputation for beating twelve textures of faecal matter out of any messenger who dared give him bad news. Or good news, for that matter. Or stood too close when Metho was having a bad day. And today was definitely shaping up as a bad day.

'Look, what about him,' Metho said, and pointed to a man strolling, carefree and casual, on the other side of the road. 'I'm sure we used to sell to him. He was a fucken gold mine, if I remember right. Couldn't get enough of whatever we had , a regular Keith fucken Richards. He can't of gone straight, could he? They can't all of gone on fucken health kicks, could they?'

The plumpest of the crew, whose flabby chest had earned him the moniker "Tits" looked towards where Metho was pointing. 'He might of' he said, after a moment's contemplation, 'but all these aspirational buggers look the same to me'

A straggler joined the group and Metho turned on him. 'Skip, you fucka! Where yew been?'

'I brung some donuts,' Skip said, and handed around fried snack treats. 'I just got back from Brighton. Was with that little blondie what you liked, Tits. You remember that little blue eyed one that used to buy from us a while back? Posh bitch, parents are lawyers? Husband's one of those councillor dudes?'

'What? You? With her?' Tits exclaimed, then paused a moment. 'What's she like?'

'You didn't miss much,' Skip said, and the disappointment was obvious in his tone. 'She looks good, but, I dunno...'

'Fucken aspirationals.' Little Spaz said, trying his best to fit in.

Skip gave Little Spaz a strange look. 'Whatever,' he said. 'She was like what supermarket fruit is like when you remember fruit from the good old days. Now'a'days, you buy a peach from the supermarket and it looks great. Big an' round an' fuzzy an' that, but when you take a bite, it dun taste like a peach at all. It tastes like fucken cardboard.'

The crew shuffled uncomfortably and gave one another furtive glances. Metaphors were not a big part of their day-to-day lives.

'What's in the bag?' Metho asked, after a moment's silence during which the crew tried to understand why Skip hadn't had a good time last night. 'Did she make you a cut lunch like your mum used to when you woz her golden haired boy?'

'She give me these books.'

'Books?'

'Yeah, books,' Skip said and handed the bag to Metho, who rummaged around inside. 'There's just one book in here,' he said and pulled out a weighty tome. He read the title like a seven-year-old reading aloud to the class for the first time. 'Fi-ft-y Sh-a-des of Grrr-ey,' he said. 'Isn't that porn?'

'No way! It's not porn! It's erotica,' Skip exclaimed, hurriedly. 'It's socially acceptable and cultural an' that. I was gunna give it to Steph because, you know, the problems I had with her. About her not knowing her place an' that.'

'Yeah, rumour is she sconed ya with a frypan,' Metho said. The rest of the crew sniggered.

'It wasn't a frypan!' Skip said, hotly. 'Anyway, this woman from Brighton wanted me to hit her! On the arse. And she give me that book to educate me on modern seduction. I know Steph reckons blokes shouldn't hit girls anymore because of changing times, but maybe she's wrong. That book,' he said and pointed to the volume in Metho's grubby paw, 'is about a bloke that hit's his girlfriend, and she likes it!'

'Wot, you reckon you'll give this to Steph and she'll have you back?'

'Yeah, I thought she might be into it. Modern seduction an' that.'

'I bet Steph doesn't taste like peaches either,' Tits said. The crew did another mass snigger.

Metho shook his head. 'She ain't gunna fall for it, mate. She's too smart for crap like this. If you give her this book, I can guarantee she'll definitely scone ya with a pan.' He dropped the book back into the bag. 'But there's only one book,' he continued, and pulled out a black tablet. 'An' this? Wot's this?'

'That's an eReader,' Skip said, in a sulky voice. He'd been looking forward to giving the book to Steph, but had a sneaking suspicion that Metho was right. 'Got a thousand books on it.'

'A thousand? How can anyone read a thousand books?' Metho said, and gave it a suspicious glare. 'How do ya turn it on?'

Skip took the eReader, fiddled with it for a moment, and handed it back to Metho

'The screen's fucked up, mate. Your new girlfriend sold ya a dud.'

'She's not my girlfriend, and that's the way it's meant to be. It's ePaper an' it stooges you eyes into thinking you're reading from paper. The titles of the books is listed. Just press one and it'll open it for ya.'

'They're all the same—"Succeeding Successfully with Success",' Metho said.

'It's a series of inspirational books but you can't see the number of each one cos the screen's too narrow.'

'All this reading is bullshit,' Metho said. 'Is this why no one's buying? I was right, wasn't I? Everyone's gone all healthy and shit, and is too busy reading about successfulness to take drugs.'

'Nah,' said Skip. 'It's not just us, mate. Anyone who sells the old way, face to face, is getting screwed. The internet's fucking everyone up. It's called disrupting.'

Metho gave Skip a dirty look. 'You can't download drugs, you dickhead.'

'Of course not. They comes in the mail.'

'Wot, the posty and that?'

'Yeah. Blondie does it. She reckons it's a bit more expensive, but she doesn't have to talk with smelly, scumbag dealers.'

'Wot, like the one who was hitting her on the arse?'

Skip shrugged. 'I dunno. That's just what she said.'

## (ii)

Metho watched the crew disperse. It had been a tough few months, and no one had been able to fill their quota of unlawful activity for ages. And it didn't look like today was going to be any different. If things didn't pick up soon, they were all going to have to answer to a higher authority, and there was nothing divine about the people who would be asking the serious questions. 'The fucken fuckers aren't fucked,' he grumbled, 'we are.'

He sat down on the doorstep of his once favourite but now defunct drinking establishment and looked down at the eReader. Idle curiosity sent his finger to the top book and the word "SUCCESS" flashed on the strange, papery screen. 'What bullshit,' he said, and snorted a derisive laugh. He flipped the page.

'Are you a loser?' the book asked him. 'Does success avoid you like an A-lister avoids the paparazzi? It doesn't have to be this way. Just turn the page and find out how you can catch Success like an agile and cunning fox catches a fat and lazy rabbit!'

Metho snorted another laugh, but turned the page anyway. Half an hour later he tore his eyes off the screen and dragged himself to the Dancing Dog cafe, where his specialized business interests guaranteed him as many bad coffees and burnt ham-and-cheese toasties as his digestive tract could handle.

(iii)

Six crowded hours later and Metho was back in front of the Belgradia, corralling the crew into a semblance of order. 'Right you blokes, gather round,' he said. 'We need a paradigm change around here or we're all for the dole queue.'

'We're all already on the dole,' Skip said, 'and I think you mean pa-ra-dime.'

'Listen fuckwit, I'm sick of you flauntin' your fucken education in our faces. We all know you finished high school, so there's no need to fucken show off,' Metho said. 'I've been reading that success book you got, and I know what we has to do.'

'It wasn't my fault they had an amnesty just when I lit the fire, was it? I wanted to get expelled, but the bastards told my old man they'd give me a second chance.'

'Excuses, excuses,' Metho snapped, 'now just shut up an' listen.'

He gave each of the crew a megawatt stare to make sure that he had their full attention. 'Skip's Brighton bitch is right, we gotta clean up our act. We been doin' it wrong all these years. We been selling drugs when wot our customers want is a drug buying experience.'

'They're not customers, Meth mate, they're fucken druggies.' Tits pointed out.

Metho slapped him. 'Ya stupid bugger, you just proved to me that the book is right. You know what's wrong with this enterprise? Well, do ya?'

'Na,' Tits conceded.

'I'll tell you what's wrong, mate, it's our crappy attitude towards the people that are paying our wages, that's what's wrong. Our negativity towards them is ground in, mate, like fucken dog hair in a fucken shag pile rug, right. Failure is part of our bloody cultcha, part of our Dee-eN-Ae, an' it's holdin' us back. We can't has success until success has us, you know what I mean? And do you know wot we has to lose to get success to have us? Well, do ya?'

Tit's looked into Metho's mad eyes. 'Negativity?' he said, hazarding a guess.

'That's right,' Metho said, in a voice that sounded slightly disappointed. 'Negativity! We got ta be more positive. We got ta visualise selling more stuff. Negativity is fucking with our success and that is gunna change, even if I has to kick your arse clear up through your fucken ear hole ta change it. Now shut up or the next one'll hurt.'

'That did hurt, you bastard,' the thug grumbled, but quietly so that Metho, who'd already turned away, couldn't hear.

'Now I been thinking. It's not just us lookin' sharper that's gunna do it, is it? Apart from Skip here, none of yous are much ta look at.'

'It's all this changin' times,' Tits exclaimed, 'everyone's shitting on masculinity.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever,' Metho said. 'Look, the book says we should look for something that we do better than our competition. We got ta think of an angle and fast. What do yous reckon?'

'Well, I hate having to wait for my parcel to arrive when I buy something online,' Little Spaz said. 'I'd much rather go to the shops and get what I want right away, but it seems I'm part of a dying breed.'

The crew looked at Little Spaz, who blushed. 'What are you arseholes lookin' at, fucken?'

'You, ya fucken dickhead,' Tits said, 'ya sound like a fucken teacher.'

The crew tittered at the newbie's discomfit, except for Metho, who was staring intently at the brick wall above them. 'Leave Little Spaz alone,' he said, in a distant voice. 'His old man'll make you eat your own ballsack if he hears you been pickin' on him.'

Metho stood, unmoving as if in a trance, and stared up at the wall for so long that the crew became uneasy. Those nearest to him braced themselves for an explosion of violence, but it never came.

Instead, Metho smiled and slapped Little Spaz on the back. 'We'll make a crim outta you yet, lad,' he said. 'Right, the lot of yous are gunnu go home and have a shower and come back tomorrow in ya best clothes. I knows you've all got suits for funerals an' that, so I want to see you in 'em. Now everyone piss off except for Skip. I need you here.'

The crew dispersed, grumbling amongst themselves and giving Skip dirty looks.

'What the fuck ya doin'? They're blaming me for your crazy bullshit. The minute I turn my back, someone'll stick a knife in it!'

'Shutup,' Metho barked, 'your gunna be in a suit too, but I need you ta go an' get your cousin Gav.'

'The tagger? What do you want him for?'

'Just shut up and go.'

#### (iv)

With the working day over, the setting Sun found Skip lurking in the shadow cast by a street lamp and wishing he was a smoker. If there was ever a time for a cigarette, then this was it. Stephanie, the love of his life, was just a few houses down and, if he closed his eyes and strained his ears, he thought he could hear her telling her nieces and nephews to shut the fuck up so she could hear the fucken tele.

They'd been on and off since high school, Steph and he, which was a hell of a long time. More off than on, if he were honest, and they were currently on an extended break. If he hadn't been so smitten, he would have noticed that, although she always ended it, she never hooked up with anyone else when they were apart. He, on the other hand, felt the rejection like an egg feels a sledgehammer.

Every time she dumped him, his heart spattered and his life quickly spiralled out of control. It never took much time for him to descend into a dark space, where donuts were a staple food, and hollow sex with inappropriate people became a way of life. The rest of the crew admired and envied him for it, but he hated every minute.

Tonight, Skip was determined that the madness would end. He'd visualized his success. He was certain that he was a cunning fox, and was pretty sure that Steph was a lazy rabbit. In his mind's eye, he'd seen her fall into his arms and promise to never leave his side again.

In his right hand, he held the eReader he'd acquired from last night's inappropriate liaison. In his left, he clutched the mighty tome that he knew would be the salvation of his addled love life. Armed with knowledge and bursting with positivity, Skip squared his shoulders and marched out of the shadows, towards his fickle lover's door.

#### (v)

The crew gathered the following morning, each dressed in his unique version of smart business wear and, as a man, looked up in awe.

'Fuck Metho, mate, that's fucken awesome,' Little Spaz said. Popy had been right. It was getting easier every day.

Metho beamed through his freshly scrubbed teeth and adjusted his tie. There was a silhouette of a naked woman on it, but gentrification is a slow process, especially for those who have earned a nickname like Metho. 'See, boys, ya don't need no education to has good ideas.'

Skip wandered up a few minutes later with a bandage on his head, and looked up at the brick wall that had captured everyone's attention.

**'Cheaper Drugs Now,'** he read. 'With your name on it, and Gav's tag too.'

'What?' Metho said, and stared up at the writing on the wall. 'The bastard said it was an internet meme thingy. "Good Shit No Kidding" or something like that.' He turned to Skip and seemed to see him for the first time. 'What happened to your head?'

'You wouldn't believe it,' Skip said, and adopted an anecdote-recounting stance, 'but I went to make up with Steph last night, an' we got sooooo pissed that I ran into the bathroom door when I went to have a slash.'

Metho gave his friend a long, slow look. He'd known him for more years than he could remember, which was always a problem for someone who mixed alcohol with any and every drug he could find. 'You gave her that stupid book, didn't you?' he said.

Skip cast his eyes down to his feet. 'Yep,' he mumbled.

'An' then you probably said something stupid like, "assume the position" or "it's time for your punishment", didn't you?'

Skip shuffled his feet and nodded.

'I told you, didn' I?' Metho said. 'You've only got yourself to blame cos you wouldn't listen ta good advice. You blokes remember it, don't ya? Me telling Skip not to give Steph the porn book?' he looked around for validation and the crew murmured in response. Meth took this as support and smiled. 'I tol' you she'd hit you with the frypan, an' hit you with the frypan she did, huh lads?'

'It wasn't the bloody frypan!' Skip snapped. 'She sconed me with the fucken eReader.'

The crew sniggered at poor Skip and his dented head.

'Things is changin','' Metho said, and gestured towards the sign daubed inexpertly in white paint on the red brick wall. He sighed like the world-weary man that he was and gave Skip a friendly slap on the shoulder, which almost knocked him over. 'The internet's disruptin' everything. Fucken books, fucken drugs. Even Skip's fucken skull.'

### Giant Wave



'And anyway, I said to her that's just the way it's got to be, but would she listen? Would she? Well?'

Skip realised he was talking to himself and looked back. Metho had stopped and was staring, slack jawed, at something in the window of the Salvation Army opp shop.

'What the fuck you looking at?'

Metho's only answer was to place both hands on the pane of glass in front of him, like a hipster standing outside a store peddling various ironies.

'Meth? You okay?'

'It's the wave,' Metho said. 'It's the wave. But giant!'

What the fuck are you on about?' Skip said. This was beginning to feel a lot like the day Metho quit meth. 'Here, have a smoke,' he said and offered a free lung buster from the crumpled pack he kept in the sleeve of his jumper.

Metho was unmoved.

Skip swallowed the fear that was rising from his stomach, girded his loins, and took a step towards Metho. 'It's me, Meth mate,' he said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. 'It's your old mate Skip.'

Metho turned to him and for a moment, his ever present scowl returned. 'What the fuck are you talking about, you fucking psycho?'

'Me? Psycho? I'm not the one standing in front of the Salvos, drooling at their window display.'

Metho self-consciously wiped his chin. 'It's the wave,' he said, and pointed to the window.

Skip's curiosity overcame his natural fear of his friend's erratic temper, and he sidled up to the window. 'What?'

'The wave!' Metho said, in a voice that was almost, but not quite, his own.

'That? It's just a junk print like what was popular in the eighties. My uncle had one on the wall of his study.'

'When I was a kid, my Mum had it on her best tea towel, the one she used to put under my plate when I ate lunch with her at home.'

Skip looked at his friend and was alarmed to see a tear glint in his eye. He employed his sidling skills to get himself out of random-punch-in-the-head range.

'I used to dream it would come crashing through the wall and wash all our troubles away,' Metho continued, in his strange voice.

'The cops did that when they put your old man in the slam,' Skip said, in what he knew was a poor—possibly even lethal—attempt at humour.

Metho snapped out of his dream-like state and turned angry eyes on Skip, who breathed a sigh of relief. An angry Metho was something he'd been dealing with all his life. It was almost comforting.

'Sorry mate, you know what I'm like, eh?' Skip said. 'Can't think my way out of a paper bag 'cos my Mum drank shit loads when she was preggers with me. She reckons it was the only way she could deal with looking at my Dad's face.'

'You look a lot like your old man,' Metho said, and held out his hand, 'now give me some cash so I can buy this thing.'

## Skip's Pain



Skip dropped his head into his hands, which was a relief to Metho because it hid his friend's eyes. They'd been the best of buddies for a long time, and Skip was usually so stable that he bordered on being boring. But for every rule there is an exception, and Skip's exception had to do with matters of the heart.

Metho looked around at the devastation that was once his lounge room and was just about to launch into what he thought was a justifiable tirade when Skip began to talk, and the sound that escaped from behind his hands pushed the rant back down Metho's throat.

'You hear people talk sometimes about their gut telling them something,' Skip said. 'They say they have a gut feeling, but it's not their gut talking, probably 'cos it's far too busy digesting all that crappy pre-packaged food we eat these days. It just feels like it's in your guts. What's really talking is your subconscious, and it's got nothing to do with stomachs or livers or spleens. It's in our brain, but sort of separate, and it looks at our fucked up world through our very own eyes.'

And I had a feeling in my gut a while back, a nagging thought that it was time to get the fuck out. It started out small. An idea that hung out on the fringes and only got noticed when things went wrong. But I ignored it and if there is one thing that your subconscious doesn't like, it's being ignored. It finds other ways to get your attention, and mine muscled its way into my dreams.

They were subtle to begin with, these dreams. The first one I remember was real hard to understand. We would be in a ruined house filled with friends and family, all of whom ignored me at first. One minute, she was by my side and the next she was lost in the crowd, but I couldn't go find her because suddenly everyone wanted to talk to me. Whenever I woke up after the dream, I felt uncomfortable but I couldn't really understand it. In a strange way, it was terrifying even though it was kind of mild. At the time, I couldn't see the message in it so I ignored it. And how did my subconscious respond? The bastard beefed up the dreams. No more gentle prods, or obscure messages. The dreams became more brutal, less subtle, more direct.

The worst one I remember is what I call the roadside diner dream. In this one, which tormented me for far too long, we are having dinner in a cheap cafe, you know the sort, like in that tele show Happy Days. They got no tables, just booths that are made of cheap vinyl and fake wood. So we were sitting there, waiting for our dinner when a man walks in and she can't take her eyes off him. She watches him as he moves around the diner and after a while he

notices the weight of her eyes. So he comes over and whispers in her ear and I'm sitting there watching it all happen but I can't move or talk or get up and kick the fuckwit in the nuts like I really wanted to. And then she turns to me and gives me a sneer, all contemptuous and that, and then goes to the crappy counter where she cancels our dinner. Then she comes back to tell me to wait while she goes off with this new guy she's met. Next thing I know, she's sitting at the booth again and I can move, so I tell her I was leaving before I kicked the shit out of her new friend. Suddenly, I'm outside at the car door and she comes tearing out of the cafe, yelling and screaming and accusing me of being a bastard for leaving her with a strange man in a cheap cafe.

So anyway, after a couple of weeks of the diner dream I finally get the hint so I tell her it's over. It was no big deal in the end. The kids are older and appear uninterested in what's happening between me and their Ma, even the dog doesn't seem to care. But is the subconscious satisfied? No fucken way, mate. No fucken way.

Every time I got nostalgic or anything like that, I'd get a new wave of nightmares. Like the one I had last night where I'd dreamt that I was just about to fall asleep and I felt her crawl into bed and put arms her around me. The warmth of her body was comforting at first, and then her arms began to tighten around me until I couldn't move, and still her embrace got tighter and tighter. I tried to scream but she was squeezing so hard that the words caught in my throat as my breath left me. I woke up just before she squeezed me to death. I was all cold and sweaty, and shouting "Get on your own side of the fucking bed!"

That's why I did it. I had to convince my subconscious I was truly free of her. It wasn't enough that I drove her out of my life, I had to drive her out of my dreams as well. It was a symbolic cleansing of my soul.'

'Okay, I understands you want to move on an' that, but did you have to burn her stuff in the fucken lounge room?' Metho said, and shook his head. 'We got a perfectly serviceable barbecue outside. You could of used that but instead, you did this,' he added, gesturing towards the charred remains of the television and sofa. 'That tele was a fucken antique.'

Skip lifted his head out of his hands and turned tear stained eyes to his friend. 'It reminded me of her,' he said, his voice barely a whisper.

'Oh for fuck's sake, you went out with her for two months. The kids didn't care cos she got back with their father and it was her fucken dog. You didn't even live with her in the same house.'

'I loved her, mate, loved her, but we couldn't be together,' Skip murmured, and his eyes opened wide. 'And only fire could cleanse her from my soul, you understand, only fire!'

Metho slapped his friend, but not too hard. Just hard enough to satisfy his own rising annoyance and to stop Skip's mounting hysteria. 'I'm getting sick of this shit every time you split up with a girlfriend who's not Steph. You remember Lisa? Do you? It took a week to clean the fucking bathroom walls after she dumped you.'

The manic glint left Skips eyes. 'But Leanne was special, Metho mate, she was the one.'

'And so was Lisa, and Jacinta before her, and Amanda, and, and, I forget the others. One daft bitch after another for as long as I can remember. And each time, you run back to Steph and she fucks you around for a bit and then dumps your arse so she can watch your next train wreck relationship,' Metho said, conscious that he was building up speed for a

decent rant. 'You got a reputation as a hard arse crim, mate, but I ain't seeing it right now. I mean, I seen ya do some stuff that was, quite frankly, bordering on evil, but that's not the person I'm lookin' at right now. The person I'm seeing here and now, in my fucken scorched fucken lounge room, is a soft-cocked stooge who can't control his personal life. The person I'm seein' isn't a hard-arse, mate, he's as soft as marshmallow, and that hard-arsed-ness is a fucken veneer, as thin and as brittle as a fucken layer of chocolate. You're just like one of those biscuits your mum makes, those chocy ones with marshmallow inside. What is they called?'

'Chocolate Mallows,' Skip said, in a breathless voice.

'That's them, and that's what I'm seein' here, mate. You're a human Chocolate Mallow. Soft and spongy on the inside, and thin and brittle on the outside.'

Skip closed his eyes and a single tear glinted on his cheek. 'I loved her, but now it's time to move on,' he said. When he next opened his eyes they were clear and focused. 'So, do you know if Steph's come back from her parent's place yet?'

Metho shook his head and picked up the burnt remains of his antique television set. 'I dunno mate, but I reckon we has to start thinking about you getting your own place, where your crazy can run free.'

### **The Crime Lord and His Three Flunkies (A Modern Fairytale)**

In a land not far enough away, there once lived an old crime lord who was feeling the weight of his years. He'd bought himself a villa on a lovely island a long way away, where the sun always shone and the authorities never asked awkward questions. Almost everything had been arranged, and only one small detail still needed his attention. The villa had been quite expensive, so after years of dishonest toil, he found he still needed to acquire a nest egg to see him through his retirement. Nothing outrageous, just a modest sum because he was a man of simple pleasures. So he gathered his three best money makers—Metho, Skip, and Tiny Spaz—and gave them their instructions.

'I been the boss for a long time,' he said, and let out a deep sigh, 'probably too long. I'm getting on in years and it's time to choose one of yous to take over.'

The three nodded in agreement. Big Spaz had been a good leader—possibly even a great leader—but even legends have to end, and his time had come.

'Ours is a business that requires nerves of steel. You gotta has guts to do what we do, but guts is not enough,' Big Spaz said, winding up for one of his infamous, ranting speeches. 'You need the cunning of a fox, the ferocity of...'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Dad, just get on with it,' Tiny Spaz said. The other two murmured in agreement. Tiny Spaz could get away with saying things that would have earned the other two a swift kick in the unmentionables. It was one of the perks of working in the family business.

Big Spaz glowered for a bit and his foot twitched, but Tiny Spaz's unmentionables remained unbruised. 'You morons are too stupid to understand my speeches anyway,' he grumbled, then resumed his truncated monologue in a sulky voice. 'Instead of just picking someone to be the leader, I think it would be best to set yous all a test. The winner gets the job. It's called merit.' He paused long enough to go behind the desk and lower his aging form

onto the haemorrhoid ring sitting atop his plush office chair. 'Each of you will go out in the world for a year. You don't has to come to work here or nothin' like that. Just go out and make money. I don't care how you does it, just so long as you does it. The one who makes the most money gets the job. Understand?'

'Great idea, boss,' Metho said. He was the strongest of the three and knew he could squeeze more money out of his victims than the other two.

'Sounds good to me,' Skip said, who knew he was the cleverest of the three and could easily outsmart the other two.

'No worries, Dad,' Tiny Spaz said, who was the most ruthless of the three and was glad that the business succession plan no longer required the death of the old man.

Crime is a taxing enterprise and to Big Spaz it seemed that no time passed at all before the three were once again standing in his office. 'Well,' he said, 'what has yous done?'

The first to step forward was Metho. 'I just done some extra meth drops and squeezed my suppliers a bit harder,' the thug said. 'I made an extra hundred grand.'

From his position perched atop his haemorrhoid ring, Big Spaz could see the scarred knuckles on the end of Metho's arms, which were as thick and knotted as tree branches. He had a reputation as a man who thought violence was the best and most enjoyable solution to any problem. Prudence was called for. 'That's good, Metho my friend. Sometimes it's best to stick with what you know.'

'A hundred grand? Is that all,' Skip blurted out. 'I made twice that by smuggling refugees. An' that's almost moral.'

Big Spaz turned his attention to Skip, a man whose reputation for vindictiveness was legend. If Skip didn't get the job, he'd probably stick a dagger into Big Spaz's back just to get even. Caution was called for. 'I always thought that people smugglers were more like heroes than criminals. Well done.'

'Dealin' drugs is a victimless crime,' Metho protested. 'I was practic'ly doin' a public service.'

'You have no argument from me,' Big Spaz said, trying his best not to draw agro. He turned to Tiny Spaz. 'And what about you, my blue eyed child? It didn't take you long to surpass your brother in our business. What surprise have you in store for us tonight?'

'I got a job,' Tiny Spaz said, with mad eyes sparkling. 'I made a million as a banker.'

There was a sharp intake of breath and the atmosphere in the room thickened.

Metho was the first to break the silence. 'You treacherous little slug,' he snarled, and his hands curled into fists. 'Bankers are parasites, and I hate parasites.'

'If you've been preying on old mums and dads who've been saving all their lives so their kids can have a decent future, you're gunna be sorry,' Skip said, and Big Spaz saw the reflection of a dagger in the thug's eyes.

'Since when has crime been about morality?' Tiny Spaz said, which reminded Big Spaz of all those wingless flies he'd found under his child's bed. Discretion was called for.

'Crime is crime,' Big Spaz said, and leaned so far back in his chair that he almost fell off his haemorrhoid ring. 'You buggers have given me a dilemma and no doubt. Yous all done so good, I can't decide. Why don't you decide amongst yourselves?'

Metho looked at his old friend Skip. Pitiless he may be, but there was the light of sanity behind his eyes. Then he looked at Tiny Spaz.

Skip looked at his old buddy Metho and knew he was a violent bastard who liked nothing more than to punch people, preferably on the nose. But he'd never punched Skip and he knew he never would. Then he looked at Tiny Spaz.

Almost as if they'd planned it, both Metho and Skip nodded towards Tiny Spaz.

The reptilian smile that crept across his child's face made Big Spaz glad he was retiring to a land that was a long way away.

### **Where's Papoo?**

The bell had rung. The teacher had sighed with relief. The kids had bolted out the door. The end of another school day had finally arrived and Tom was one of the first in the mad dash out of the classroom.

As usual, Tom's racing feet were taking him to the stand of peppercorn trees where he was to meet Papoo, and they'd go off together on the long walk home. It was a ritual that had begun on the first day of prep, and he was sure would continue until the world ended or his education was complete. Tom wasn't sure which would come first, but he knew he'd still have the Mushi Munster lunch box that Papoo had recently bought him, and which was extremely embarrassing.

So engrossed was Tom in wondering how he could lose the unfashionable lunch box without hurting Papoo's feelings that he almost stepped on the dead bird that had kept this part of the playground free of children for two days now. The tiny corpse was so horrifying in its rotting skeletal-ness that Tom skirted around the portable classrooms near the oval instead of going straight through the yard. Better safe than sorry was his motto, and Tom was the sort of boy who liked to spread his wisdom far and wide. His friends were already sick of hearing about his cautious approach to life, even though most had only known him since the beginning of the school year.

The near miss with the dead bird was more excitement than Tom liked to experience before dinner, so he wasn't at all happy to see that Papoo wasn't at his usual spot under the trees. Instead, his father was waiting, with a grim look on his face and an umbrella tucked under his arm, even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

'Where's Papoo,' Tom asked, 'and why do you have an umbrella?'

Tom's father looked at the umbrella in his hands as if he'd never seen it before. 'Papoo is sick,' he said, 'and I have no idea why I am carrying an umbrella.'

'Is he okay?'

'I think so. We're going to visit him in hospital.'

'Oh, we are?' Tom said, trying to control the cracking in his voice. He didn't like hospitals, especially when they had his Papoo in them.

But the day wasn't finished with shocking little Tom just yet. They weren't walking home and Mum was waiting in the car.

'Why didn't you tell me I had an umbrella?' his dad grumbled as he strapped Tom into his elevator seat.

Tom's mum shrugged. 'I thought it was one of your mystical rituals,' she said.  
'Something with which to shelter your soul.'

Dad sighed and got in the passenger seat. 'You wouldn't need one, then,' he said, which seemed to annoy Mum.

'We're going to pick up Yaya and go straight to the hospital,' Mum said, and started the car's motor.

Tom gulped air. Straight to the hospital? Before dinner? Papoo must be really sick if they were going to delay dinner. If he'd had anything in his stomach he'd have thrown it up, so it was lucky he's was starving. That left only hyperventilation, but fate intervened yet again. Dad's telephone rang just as Tom was going to gulp his first lungful of air and he could tell it was Yaya by the way Dad spoke.

'Yep, aha, aha, okay.' ... 'Aha, aha, okay, yep, okay.' ... 'No, we have bolognese sauce in the freezer.' ... 'No it's not frozen food. It's homemade. I made it a couple of weeks ago and put it in the freezer.' ... 'You know it's not the same thing,' he said and hung up.

'Well?' Mum asked.

'She said we don't need to go tonight. Papoo rang and told her he's feeling better and should be coming home tomorrow.'

'The doctor said this?'

'How should I know? She said he told her the infection wasn't as bad as they feared and was started to recede.'

Tom's distressed body relaxed. Dinner was coming sooner after all, and it was bolognese. Hopefully with normal spaghetti and not that horrid wholemeal stuff that Dad loved so much.

## (ii)

Tom liked to think of himself as one of the good people. He went out of his way to avoid trouble, which is why the blood drained from his face when the loudspeaker barked his name and demanded he proceed to the Principal's office. His classmates watched him walk out of the classroom with mouths hanging open and eyes wide, but only his best friend Leane said anything.

'No, that must be wrong,' she cried, 'he never does anything bad.'

'Everything is so quiet when everyone's in class,' Tom thought as he trudged through the empty corridors. 'This is all Eddie's fault. And his stupid hole.'

He'd known it was wrong when he pitched in to help Eddie on that fateful lunchtime a few days ago. At the time, he'd thought it would be okay because Eddie had been digging his hole for a month and not one teacher had even raised an eyebrow.

Maybe Eddie was a spy sent by the teachers to root out latent evil in the school population, and he was the first bad boy they'd caught. Eddie's simple face floated into Tom's mind. Nah. All Eddie can do is dig holes, and not even the best teacher could change that. It was hard enough teaching him to spell his name, so teaching him to be a spy would be impossible.

So why was he, Tom, the boy who went out of his way to be a model student, on the walk of shame?

At the office, Tom's terror ramped up a notch. His father was sitting beside the principal on the small seats where the bad kids sat while awaiting punishment.

'Come on Tom,' his father said, 'we've got to go.'

He looked from his father to the Principal and back again. 'I can't go, Dad, I've got to finish my math sheet.'

'We're going to the hospital. Papoo is really sick.'

In the car, Tom's father talked about how the doctors were looking after Papoo, and how wonderful modern medicine was.

'But it's not enough really,' he said. 'I've tried to get Papoo to meditate, but you know what he's like.'

Tom thought back about some of the things Papoo had said when Dad had mentioned yoga and meditation. 'Dad? What did Papoo mean when he said having an empty mind hadn't helped you all these years?'

Dad blushed. 'Oh, you know Papoo. Unless something brings a tangible benefit, he thinks it's not worth doing.'

Tom was mildly curious about what tangible meant, but not too much. It was probably something to do with those yucky orangy things Yaya had tried to feed him once. He just nodded his head and stared out the window at the familiar scenery. 'Why are we going to Papoo's house?' he asked, and his heart swelled with hope. Maybe he'd misheard and Papoo was at home.

'We've got to pick up Yaya. She's coming with us.'

When Yaya got in the car, Tom could see she'd been crying.

'I pray to God to save his soul,' she said several times on the short trip, but Tom was doubtful that God would be all that keen to help Papoo. Especially after what he'd said at church last Easter.

Mum met them at the hospital. 'Don't worry, little man,' she said when she saw him. 'The doctors here are amazing. They'll fix Papoo up quick as a flash, you'll see.'

But Tom had his doubts. He'd had to go to visit the clinic with Papoo during the school holidays, and what Papoo had said to the doctor made what he'd said to the priest seem almost nice. And all the doctor had done was suggest that Papoo eat less bread and lose some weight.

(iii)

Tom went to school the next day even though he'd spent the whole night crying.

'What happened yesterday?' Leane asked when she spotted him in the playground.

'Papoo is sick and he's going to die.' Tom said, and started to sob.

'Are you sure he's going to die? Many people get sick and don't die. My dad was sick last week from eating oysters and he spent the whole day in the toilet and told everyone he was going to die, but he didn't. Mom said he was just being melodramatic. Maybe that's what your Papoo is. Melodramatic.'

Tom stopped sobbing. 'The doctor said that he is so old that you could knock him over with a feather. He's got an infection under his belly.'

Leane looked momentarily concerned, but then brightened. 'My dad had an infection after a spider bit him,' she said. 'He got antibodies from the chemist.'

'Then why is Papoo in the hospital and not at the chemist?' Tom wailed.

'I'm sure they have antibodies at the hospital as well,' Leane said, but Tom was unconvinced.

'Even God couldn't help. Yaya prayed and prayed, but Papoo is still sick.'

Leane paused a moment and furrowed her brow. 'Maybe the doctors and God don't know how to help?' she said. 'Papoo comes here every day to pick you up after school, right? Maybe something infected him here.'

Tom's face suddenly lit up. 'There's a dead bird near where Papoo waits. Maybe that's what infected him.'

'Ugh,' Leane said. 'Show me.'

Tom led his best friend and secret girlfriend to the tiny horror beside the portable classrooms.

'There it is,' he said, pointing to a tiny bird corpse in the shadow cast by the temporary building.

Leane contemplated the partially decomposed corpse. In life, it had been a little bird and decomposition had reduced it even further. All that was left were a few bones and some feathers clinging to tiny scraps of pathetic flesh. 'I remember last year when the news was on, and thousands and thousands of chickens died cos they had bird flu. Maybe that's what happened to this bird. It got the flu and died.'

Tom slapped his forehead. 'That's it. The doctor was giving me a clue when he talked about feathers. Maybe he's got bird flu from the dead bird's feathers. Maybe he'll get better if we get rid of it.'

'Eddie's hole.' Leanne squealed. 'Let's bury it in Eddie's hole.'

'Good thinking.' Tom said, and looked at the tiny corpse. 'But how?' Then he smiled and pulled out his lunchbox. 'I don't like Mushi Monsters anymore,' he said. 'I'll say I lost it.'

Leane looked at Tom with admiration in her eyes. 'You're so smart,' she said. 'The feathers can't infection people if they're underground and in a Mushi Monster lunchbox.'

They carefully put the tiny body in the box—making sure not to touch the feathers—and rushed to the back of the yard where Eddie sat surrounded by dirt.

Although reluctant to relinquish his hole at first, Eddie relented after Leane threatened to tell Lisa that he loved her. He even filled in the hole after they'd dropped the box in.

#### (iv)

Tom's parents were waiting for him again that afternoon.

'How's Papoo?' Tom asked.

'He's much better,' Dad said. 'The doctor said he responded well to treatment. Of course, Yaya says it's because God answered her prayers but I doubt it. Papoo and God aren't on good terms.'

Tom knew that this was his father's idea of a joke and laughed to keep him happy. He also knew why Papoo was feeling better, and it had nothing to do with doctors or God. 'Can we go see him?' he asked.

'Sure. We'll pick up Yaya on the way. She made Baklava to celebrate,' Mum said.

If Tom hadn't been riding so high on the news his Papoo was better, he would have noticed that the atmosphere in the car on the way to the hospital was a little unusual. No one was bickering, for a start, and Yaya didn't ask God for anything the entire way. He looked at the passing scenery and half listened to the adults talking about Papoo's unexpected recovery. When they got to the hospital, Dad—in an unusual display of generosity—bought Tom a stuffed dog from the gift shop. Yaya, not to be outdone, bought Tom a stuffed cat and, for some reason, a penguin.

Papoo was awake and grumpy when they got to his room and barely acknowledged them as they trooped in and arranged themselves beside his bed. Tom played quietly with Heartbreak the penguin, Sunshine the dog, and Ayapi the cat as the adults bickered around him.

'I heard Dad say it was Papoo's positive attitude that helped him get better,' Tom told Sunshine, who was sitting on Papoo's bed flanked by Ayapi and Heartbreak, 'that's why he set those smelly sticks on fire.'

'Who put these stinking, smoking sticks all over the place,' Papoo said, after he'd eaten the bag of fruit and the chicken in a plastic box that Yaya had given him.

'Those were incense sticks,' Dad said. 'They release healing oils and purify the air.'

'You idiot,' Mum said, 'burning sticks don't purify the atmosphere, they pollute it. You probably delayed his recovery by burning that crap in here.'

'The doctor's didn't seem to mind, and the nurses were quite positive about it.'

'That's because you flirt with everybody.'

'Oh please, I do not.'

'Shaddup boy.' Papoo said. 'For once, your wife is right. You flirted with all of them. Even the mens. You should change you name to be Mr Flirty McFlirthead. I was so embarrassing that I wished I was dead.'

'You did not wish you were dead. It's a sin to have such thoughts,' Yaya said.

'Mum told Dad in the car that it was the doctors that saved Papoo,' Tom told Ayapi, who was on Sunshine's left, 'with the help of the wonders of modern medicine of course.'

'It wasn't any of your eastern mumbo jumbo that made your father better,' Mum said. 'They bring people to hospital when they get sick, not some weird yoga temple, and if you haven't noticed, this is a hospital. It wasn't your smoke that made Papoo better, it was medicine.'

Papoo nodded. 'Good medicine, but not enough,' he said. 'I say to the doctor, Doc, everything hurt. You give more drungs? She says no, she says I has too much already. If I has too much, why still I hurt? Pah, doctors, they like stingy mothers who don't give their kiddies sweets.'

Tom ignored the adults and turned to Heartbreak. 'Yaya said it was God that made Papoo better, but I bet you know what really happened. I bet you know all about bird flu, because you're a bird even if you don't have feathers.'

'Always medicine and smoke with young peeples today,' Yaya said, with disapproval in her voice. 'Where is your faith in God? You know, the one who made you from dust and gave to you your life so that you can waste it.'

'Oh please,' Mum and Dad said together, and then glared at one another like two boxers who had landed a blow to one another's head at precisely the same moment.

'That's so old fashioned,' Mum said.

'It's an outdated belief system that is fast fading because its core tenets are mired in inequality and bigotry,' Dad said, and looked rather pleased with himself.

'You can talk,' Mum exclaimed, 'with your bloody incense and your yoga mat.'

'Buddhism is not a religion.'

'Listen to you both,' Yaya exclaimed. 'It's the devil talking through you and no doubt. And you should get rid of those statues of the fat god you worship before God punishes you. How can you worship a god like that? What sort of god would let himself go like that?'

'He's not a god, Yaya, he's just a very wise man who found the road to happiness through fasting and poverty.'

'Pfft, fasting? Can you see with those eyes in your head? You need glasses or something? That statue bugger has never fasted a day in his life. Do you really think he could have saved Papoo? Do you? Well, I'll tell you he can't. It was God who saved him, and only because I asked. No way would God save Papoo without my prayers because he is not a good man.'

'Don' start with this bloody God of yours, Yioryi,' Papoo grumbled, 'he probably gave me the infection, not saved me from it.'

'I'm not surprised after what you said to the priest.'

'Papoo,' Tom said, while waving Heartbreak to get the old man's attention.

Papoo turned his eyes to his grandson, and let out a sigh. 'You must be so tired of these people and their stupid ideas,' he said.

Tom shrugged. 'Papoo, do you know about bird flu?'

'Bird flu? How can birds get flu? They can't have runny noses because they have no noses.'

'It's a thing,' Tom said, crossly. He had a feeling that Papoo wasn't taking him seriously.

'Now now, my boy, it was just a joke,' Papoo said. 'No need to talk like you father.'

'Well, me an' Leanne worked out it was bird flu what you had, and we found the dead bird that made you sick and got rid of it, so that's why you got better.'

'Oh ho, so it was that little dead birdy I stepped on. I thought I felt a bit sick afterwards,' the old man said, and turned to look at the adults beside his bed. 'See, while you lot are putting your faith in Gods and medicine and smelly smoke, this boy has been doing things to make his Papoo better.'

'Well, I did light those...' Dad began to say, but Papoo's stare silenced him.

'The boy, he made me better. Not God, or medicine, or smoke.'

'But Papoo, there was a problem,' Tom said, and his anxiety was obvious on his face.

'What is it my boy? Did someone else get sick?' Papoo asked.

'No, we were careful and buried it in Eddie's hole,' Tom said, and paused to swallow some air. 'It's the Mushi Monster lunchbox. I had to use it to bury the dead bird.'

'Oh, is that all. Don't worry, my boy, I'll get you another one.'

For a moment, Tom looked like he was about to cry. 'But Papoo,' he said, his voice imploring, 'Mushi Monsters remind me of when you were sick. Why don't you get me a lunchbox with Spongehead and Poppi on it instead?'

Papoo's face hardened. 'That Spongehead is a communist, and his fried Poppi is a big, purple, weirdo. It's Mushi Monsters or nothing.'

### **I was an Internet Addict**

Every age throws up its dangers and in our age, the era of iMe, that danger is the internet. According to credible sources, it's taking over the hearts and minds of our youth and threatening our very way of life. Many would argue that that's not such a bad thing, and that maybe the hearts and minds of our youth are too often empty and could use some filling, but the credible sources won't have a bar of it. For those of you who are old enough to remember, I drew inspiration from the magnificent *I was a Drug Addict* by the mysterious Leroy Street.

#### *Addiction's Lapdog*

My name is Harry and I'm a video game addict.

There, I said it. Okay, wrote it, which is better than saying because it is here for all to see. Everyone in the world now knows that I have a filthy habit.

Video game addiction is a sneaky disease. It creeps up on you from behind and, before you know it, you're living your life in a virtual world. I don't remember exactly when or how I succumbed—when I slipped from the normal to the abnormal—it just happened.

When I first got into *Sword of Valour*, I'd play an hour here and there, every few days. Then the hour stretched to two. Then it was two hours every other day. Before I knew it, it was everyday and all the time.

If pressed, I would say the addiction sunk its venomous fangs into my soul about twelve months ago, give or take. It was about then that I remember my friends began to ask, with increasing frequency, whether I was okay.

What could I say? From inside my head, everything was just peachy. From the outside, however, my problem was beginning to show. The little things gave it away. The way I never stopped talking about *Sword of Valour*, the way I was never far away from a bottle of Sugarall—the soft drink of choice for hardcore gamers.

I would often compare real world situations with virtual events. People would cringe whenever I started a sentence with 'In *Sword of Valour*....'

The problem with video game addiction as opposed to, for example, heroin addiction is that the external signs of addiction are fairly mild. Video game addicts tend to be plump, pale, and always have a can of fizzy drink close at hand in case they need a sugar hit while slaughtering the virtual hordes.

Gamers don't look like your typical substance abuser—the cheeks are rosy rather than sallow, the eyes crazed rather than sunken, the clothes stained with sandwich drippings rather than the accumulated grime of a three-day bender. Unlike heroin chic, gamer chic will never be a popular fashion trend.

Every time some psychologist tries to whip up a moral panic about video game addiction in order to profit from the public angst, they get on television and show images of flabby folk hunched over a computer screen. As far as images go, they're not very harrowing. They don't illicit strong reactions from their audience. Concerned citizens don't shake their

heads in disbelief at the sickness on their doorstep and then write outraged Letters To The Editor, demanding that the useless, overpaid politicians who supposedly labor for the public good get off their fat asses and clean up the virtual streets.

That's why I've written this book, to do what the images can't. But this is not a cynical grab for cash like all the others. I'm not trying to exploit an ignorant public for my own gain by spreading misinformation and feeding hysteria. No, far from it. I wrote this book to shine a light into the dark corners of our society and inform people about the dangers of this new disease.

So pure are my motives, in fact, that this is more a public service than a work of literature. I'm here to let people know that video game addiction is as harrowing as real addiction. It can turn a mediocre life into a wasteland. It has ruined mine—in the time between subscribing to *Sword of Valour* and writing these words, I've lost all of my friends. All of them.

Okay, not quite all of them, just most of them. I've still got one left. My in-game buddies don't count, or so I'm told, because I've never actually met them.

To be honest, I never had all that many friends to start with, so losing them wasn't all that heart breaking. And I suppose, to the casual eye, my life isn't all that horrid. I'm healthy, have plenty to eat—too much to be honest—and there's a roof over my head. My maiden aunt, bless her sexually repressed soul, left me a small fortune that has provided a comfortable chunk of cash every month for the past couple of years, and will continue to do so even if I live to see one hundred. But it's easy to fool the casual eye. Despite the illusion that my addiction isn't doing me any harm, I'm suffering on the inside.

Gamer addiction doesn't work like real addiction. Its horror is more subtle, while still being just as horrifying. Apart from stripping me of friends, my gaming addiction has taken me further down the path of mediocrity than I could ever have gone on my own. I do nothing, I create nothing, and I affect no one.

In my community, in the neighborhood in which I live, I may as well not exist. No drug dealer has taken me into his or her confidence. No casino counts me as a valued stooge. The man at the liquor store has never seen my face. The sum impact of my addiction on the world at large is a fifteen-dollar subscription fee, payable monthly and in advance, to a monolithic company that has as many customers as there are stars in the sky.

Robert, my last remaining non-virtual friend and housemate, reckons that the root cause of my addiction is my low self-esteem, and who am I to say he is wrong? Nobody, that's who. Nobody. Except in *Sword of Valour*, where I am somebody.

The guild I'm in, *Enemies of Shadow*, is an online killing machine, lubricated with the blood of our enemies. Virtual blood, of course, because they're not real. Well, they are real, but it's their virtual bodies we kill, so there's no real blood. And we don't really kill them because people work so hard on their avatars and would rage-quit if permadeath was introduced, causing the huge profits of the monolithic company to shrink. So instead of dying when we kill them, our enemies respawn almost immediately, with everything intact except their pride. It kind of makes sense when you think about it. *Sword of Valour* is a virtual world, so death should be virtual as well.

We rule the virtual landscape of the Rebellion and Consequences server, dominating all others by virtually (but not really) killing them, and it will be this way for as long as the game

exists, largely because no other guild has the same level of commitment as we do. In a world stuffed full of compulsive obsessive geeks, we stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Those of you who have never ventured into virtuality would not understand how strange a place reality becomes immediately after an intense online experience, when your mind spans both worlds. The games are so powerful that your brain thinks those fanged nightmares on the screen are real and coming for you, so it fills your blood with chemicals and sets your heart racing. But your brain has got it all wrong because you're not on the verge of being torn apart and devoured by unimaginable horrors. You're actually sitting in a dark room, eating potato chips and drinking gallons of Sugarall.

I may not know how or when I became addicted, but I certainly know why. It's that crazy high I get when I cleave a Fell Ogre's head in twain with my trusty virtual sword. I can feel my heart racing, adrenalin and sugar from the gallon of Sugarall I've consumed coursing through my veins.

On a good day, the high from the virtual world bleeds into the real world, and for hours after logging off my fingers continue to twitch on an imaginary mouse and I'm half expecting a group of Ogres to spawn in my lounge room, looking to avenge their fallen brother. Or sister. You never can tell with ogres.

Which is why, on a Friday evening after I had emerged from my darkened bedroom following a marathon session, Robert took one look at me and suggested we go out.

'Your eyes are all weird,' he said.

I shrugged and bounced on the balls of my feet, nodding like an idiot.

'How?'

'There's no color, just pupils and white,' he said. 'Let's go and grab a coffee at Larry's? Get out and about in the real world. What do you say?'

I shrugged. 'Whatever, so long as I'm back by half past nine because if I miss the raid they're gunna kill me.'

'Who? Your online buddies? How the heck are they going to kill you if they don't even know what you look like? Besides, if they're anything like you they can't stay out in the real world long enough to commit murder.'

## (ii)

Larry's was a painfully authentic cafe located in a seedy part of town. It was a grungy diamond in the heart of the city's red light district, where it was wedged between a rub'n'tug massage parlor and a pizza shop with food so bad that they rarely saw a customer.

The first time Robert took me for a coffee at Larry's, he told me the pizza shop was a money laundering operation—the fewer customers they saw, the better they liked it. I doubted him at first because Robert was often a bit loose with the truth. Then, one evening while we were enjoying our coffees on an outside table at Larry's, a contingent of police arrived and hauled off everyone in the pizza shop.

Actually, it wasn't quite everyone. They left the pizza maker behind, probably because he was a pudgy young man with an angel's face and an air of gullible innocence. They were all back within a couple of hours, but I've been polite to them ever since. Except for the pizza

maker, of course, because it's difficult to respect an individual who looks so innocent that even the police can't come up with a scenario in which he was an offending party.

As usual, Larry's was a hive of activity that spilled out into the street in a riot of tables, chairs, and posers. Everything about Larry's was espresso. The tiles on the facade were the color of a short macchiato, the tables and chairs were a deep long black, and the booths were cappuccino. The clientele were a mixture of local thugs and trendy urbanites, all enjoying the authenticity of the coffee.

Robert and I were once regulars here, before my addiction killed my social life. Now, only a few faces hovered on the edge of memory. My disconnection with my pre-addiction life was never more obvious than when the very pretty waitress dropped a strong caffè latte in front of Robert before our butts had even begun to warm the coffee colored seats.

'Hi Rob,' she said, 'long time no see.'

Robert blushed and smiled. 'Hi,' he said and got up from his seat. The two embraced and kissed. 'Irene, this is Harry,' he said, sitting back down again.

'I've heard so much about you,' Irene said and extended her hand. I fumbled out of my seat and shook it.

'Nice to meet you,' I said, and fumbled back down again.

If appearance were the only way to judge a couple's suitability, then Irene and Robert's relationship was inappropriate. She was tall and he was short. Her hair was long and curly and fell about her face in dark locks. His was short and greasy, and clung to his scalp in varying stages of decay that suggested male pattern baldness ran in his family. Her body was supple and athletic, while his was pudgy and had obviously been the sponge for far too many alcoholic beverages.

She sat down on Robert's lap and gave me a tired look. 'Work sucks,' she said, and smiled. 'What can I get you?'

'I'll have what he's having,' I said, and her smile widened.

'I assume you mean the coffee.'

'Of course,' I said and looked at Robert, who gave me a wan smile and shrugged.

'I'm on for another hour,' she said to Robert as she got off his lap. 'You and your friend will have to amuse yourselves until then.' She gave him a kiss on the cheek and did something unseen under the table that made him start. 'I'll be right back with your coffee, Harry,' she said and walked off towards the counter.

'When did you get with her?' I asked when she was out of earshot.

'Three, four months ago. Give or take.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I thought you'd pick up on it. She's stayed over a night or two.'

'What? At our house,' I said, sounding incredulous.

'Where else? My parents would probably have gotten upset if I'd taken her over there for a series of alcohol drenched nights of debauchery and lust.'

'She's already met your parents?' I said, even more incredulously. Robert's aversion to commitment was legend.

'Of course not, you idiot, I'm not ready for marriage yet. I've brought her home, to our place.'

'You fucked her in our house and I didn't notice?'

'When you're in fantasy land, I could have fucked her in your bed and you wouldn't have noticed.'

'You fucked her in my bed?' I said, obviously losing my grip on the situation.

'No, of course not. I was just saying that you wouldn't have noticed if I had.'

'I would so!' I said, a shade defensively because I knew my addiction was so complete that it was possible I wouldn't have noticed a couple copulating on the bed behind me while I was playing, especially if I was raiding. A Roman orgy would have passed unnoticed while I was raiding—even if Metallica were supplying the mood music.

'Hey,' Robert said, looking over my shoulder towards the front of Larry's, which was a large window with a huge open doorway at its centre. 'Now it's a party.'

I turned to see a familiar face approaching our table. Well, familiar-ish. It was far pudgier than I remembered. 'Steven, oh-em-gee,' I said, being incredulous once again. The world is full of surprises when you wake up from an addiction. 'What happened to you? You're so, so, um, large.'

'Hey, Harry, long time no see. What you been up to, fucking,' said the wobbly young man as he pushed his bulbous body into the booth beside Robert.

'Oh, you know, same old same old. What about you?'

'My wife left me to become a lesbian in America, fucking.'

'Really,' I said, looking at Robert who shook his head and clapped the portly man on the shoulder.

'Yeah, it's been a tough six months for you, hasn't it buddy?' Robert said, his hand still on Steven's shoulder.

'The fucking internet, that's what it was. It made her a lesbian and took her away from me. Why, fucking, why? Fucking.'

Steven had definitely put on a bit of weight since I had last seen him, and it had been well over six months ago. Actually, it was closer to a year since his presence had sullied my consciousness. Had it been that long? Had the game swallowed so much of my time?

Regardless of what he looked like, the moment he opened his mouth, all doubt that it was Steven vanished because he always ended everything he said with the word "fucking". It was already a well known trait of his when I first met him in High school, and it was so much a part of who Steven was that no amount of disciplinary action by our teachers could change it. They gave up, in the end, and learned to accept it like it was an obscene form of punctuation. On the positive side, it let everybody know when he had said what he had to say. Another aspect of Steven's personality that stood him apart from the rest was his fickle nature.

'I thought you hated her,' I said, remembering the vitriolic words and tone Steven would use when talking about his spouse. 'You said that was why you were always at Larry's.'

Steven shot me a look of pure hatred. 'My wife leaves me and that's how you express your sympathies? I haven't seen you in ages and now I know why. You greet me with "hey fatso, what's up" and then you question my love for my wife. You're a really nice guy, Harry. Not. Fucking'

'Hey, calm down you two,' Robert said. 'C'mon Steven, take it easy. Harry's become an online game addict and has forgotten how to behave in public.'

'Yeah, Steven, I'm sorry buddy,' I said, and I meant it. 'It must be terrible.'

Irene picked just that moment to arrive with my coffee.

'Stevey,' she said, 'how's it going?'

'It was going good until Harry here had a dig at me. Can I bother you for a couple of Choc Mega Donuts, honey? And a Giant Double Choc Shake, fucking?'

'My pleasure, big boy,' she said, and playfully grasped Steven's nipples through his shirt. 'I like a man with his own gravitational field.'

'What the fuck is this, pick on Steven night?' he said, as we watched Irene retreat towards the counter. 'You people are all fucked up, fucking,' he added, but his heart wasn't in it. The conversation had lost all impetus as the three of us watched Irene busy herself behind the counter, each man consumed by his own pornographic thoughts.

'Bloody hell, Roby,' Steven said after a while, 'how the fuck did you end up with her? One minute you're a lonesome loser and the next, you're with a woman who's a cross between an angel and a porn star. Fucking.'

Robert slurped down the last of his coffee. 'Fucked if I know.' he said. 'It's not like I made a play for her or anything. We got to talking one night after her shift ended. One thing led to another and before I know it, we're an item.'

'She's perfect, fucking.'

'I don't know about perfect,' Robert said hurriedly, 'she's got one or two self esteem issues.'

'Yeah right,' I said, 'you think everyone's got self esteem issues. I've got self esteem issues, Irene's got self esteem issues, even Steven has self esteem issues.'

'Pfft,' Steven snorted, 'self esteem is a crock of shit. Like, how can you hate yourself? What a stupid idea. All this psychology bullshit is bullshit and it's only popular because people use it to avoid taking responsibility for themselves. How many happy marriages break up and one of 'em says it's because they're a lesbian, when everyone knows it's because they found someone who was better. Just admit that you hate your husband and you made a mistake marrying the loser in the first place, and then everyone can get on with their useless lives. Take responsibility for your actions instead of hiding behind psycho bullshit, that's what I say. Where are those donuts, fucking?'

'So you reckon she's a bit down on herself?' I said to Robert, who shrugged in a distracted way.

'Yeah. She a bit funny about, you know, sex and stuff,' he said, looking miserable.

'Isn't everybody?' I said.

'You boys are talking like gays,' Steven said, 'what's so complicated about sex? The girl she spreads her legs, you jump in. Simple, fucking.'

Thankfully, Irene arrived with Steven's donuts before I could ask him if he thought his ex-wife and her new girlfriend had simple sex, too. Usually I'm not one to look for conflict but I was finding Steven extremely irritating. I was sure it was the damned addiction again. My patience and tolerance had become wafer thin since I had retreated into virtuality.

Steven set about his donuts with a will, and washed them down with the biggest chocolate milkshake I had ever seen. The huge metal cup must have contained at least three pints of heart-stopping, full fat, sugar enriched, chocolate milk goodness.

'Ah, that's better,' he said, after scraping the last donut crumbs off his plate and slurping the milkshake dry. 'You boys doing anything later tonight?'

'Nah, not really. We're just waiting for Irene to finish up,' Robert said, 'what about you?'

'I'm probably going to pick up a couple of pizzas and watch a movie at home. Why don't you come over later?'

'I think Irene may want to have a quiet one at home,' Robert said. 'She's usually pretty tired after a shift.'

'Yeah right, you dog. You just want to get weird with her tonight, eh? You can't fool old Stevie, my friend,' Steven said, then turned to me. 'Don't tell me, Harry's gunna play with his computer game while you fuck your girlfriend, eh? Am I right? Of course I am. You're just like my wife, buddy, no responsibility. You fucking addicts make me sick, fucking.'

What could I say? The man was right, I was already coming up with excuses in my head to go home and get on the game. *Sword of Valour* had me trapped in its web and was sucking the life out of me. I just stared at my coffee, filled with shame and self-loathing.

'Shut up you stupid shit,' Robert said, coming to my defense. 'What the fuck's up your ass tonight? Besides donuts.'

'He's my friend and he's a fucking addict, that's what's up my ass,' Steven said, the passion in his voice setting his many chins wobbling. 'Where the fuck has he been for the past year? You're the only person who ever sees him, and that's only because you live in the same house. It's not right, it's not socially acceptable,' he added, banging the table with his hand to emphasize his point, which upset his huge milk shake container and sent his donut plate clattering to the floor. 'Telling him he's a victim is not helping him! You can't let him off the hook and tell him it's not his fault. He has to break this addiction and a good kick up the ass will do him more good than all the touchy feely shit in China! Fucking.'

Robert was about to reply, but I put my hand out and stopped him. 'He's got a point, Rob,' I said. 'He's doing what he thinks is best for me, and I'm proud to call him a friend. It's a pity that I haven't been much of a friend to him this past year, just when he needed me most.'

Robert gave me a suspicious look. 'Yeah, obviously,' he said.

Steven, on the other hand, was almost in tears. 'I'm sorry Harry,' he said, 'I shouldn't have snapped at you like that, but it's been hard watching my wife succumb to the curse of the internet. I watched her change before my eyes and it was horrible. It started with just an hour or two every so often, nothing much. I told her she should be careful, but would she listen? Would she?'

Robert and I could see the tears welling up in his eyes but he hadn't said "fucking" yet, so we knew he hadn't finished. We both shook our heads and tried to look sympathetic.

'It was horrible,' he continued. 'Our relationship changed. She was no longer the sweet, innocent girl who would do the dishes while I watched CSI after dinner. All she wanted to do was get on the net and chat to her virtual friends. I knew things were bad when she bought a pair of Birkenstocks online, but I didn't know just how bad. A week later, she was gone! Off to America to become a lesbian, fucking.'

'How do you know where she went?' I asked, curious despite myself.

'She left a note,' Steven said, and deflated as far as his plump belly would allow. 'It was full of crap about how I was a sexist pig and treated her like crap, and how we didn't have sex anymore. She even brought up a little affair I'd been having at the time. She just couldn't understand why I'd fuck someone else when I wasn't fucking her. I kept telling her it's because I was tired from work, but would she listen? It was all just a smoke screen anyway,

to hide the real reason. She left because she was an internet addict and it's cheaper and faster in America. I reckon she's only becoming a lesbian to spite me. It's the fast, cheap internet she's after, for sure, fucking.'

Steven wiped away his tears with his shirtsleeves and made a big show of pulling himself together. Robert and I sat silently, busy with our own thoughts.

'Anyway, I'm getting hungry. You sure you don't want to come over tonight, fucking?' Steven said.

'Another night, for sure,' Robert said. 'Now that I've got Harry off the computer for a bit, I want to take him to meet Irene's housemate. She's having boyfriend trouble and Harry may be the solution.'

Steven leered. 'You're a good friend to have, Roby,' he said. 'If Harry fucks it up, maybe you'll introduce me? When I was married, the bitches were throwing themselves at me, but since my wife left I can't even get a smile, fucking.'

'For sure, Stevey,' Robert said, 'as long as you promise not to talk about your ex-wife when I introduce you.'

'Do I look like an idiot, fucking?' Steven said, leaving himself wide open.

'Nah,' Robert said. 'You're a lot of things, but an idiot isn't one of them.'

'Okay boys, I'm off,' Steven said and lurched out of the booth. 'Good to see you again, Harry, and get off the internet before it turns you into a lesbian too, fucking.'

Robert and I waved our goodbyes and watched as he waddled out the door.

'The fucking internet is the devil, no doubt.' I said, as we watched Steven through the open window. He used a high-speed version of his waddle to cross the busy road. The cruel, nasty part of me wanted to jeer and laugh at the comical site of an ungainly fat man trying to make haste, while the part of me that wept when my cat died cried out in anguish for the athletic young man that he once was.

'I just can't help thinking that he's partially responsible for his marriage breaking up,' I said. 'What was his wife's name again? Sally, wasn't it.'

'Yeah, it was Sally,' Robert said. 'You should see her girlfriend. I'm not surprised she left him.'

'You've seen her girlfriend?'

'Yeah, they're both Facebook friends of mine.'

'Bloody hell, does Steven know you're Facebook friends with his ex-wife and her lesbian lover?'

'He should, he's on her friends list as well. And on her girlfriend's.'

'That's so very fucked up,' I said.

'Steven doesn't want to believe his wife is gay,' Robert said. 'You heard him, he thinks she's doing all this to piss him off. He's got this fantasy that not only will Sally come back to him, but that she'll bring her friend home as well. In his mind, if he plays his cards right, there'll be two hot babes to service his porky prick.'

'I don't know,' I said, 'I always thought Sally was too good for him, and I reckon he thought so too. Anyway, you can't blame the guy for fantasizing. The two girls at a time fantasy is pretty much universal, isn't it? Amongst men, anyway.'

'Single men, maybe,' Robert said. 'I have enough trouble dealing with one at a time. Two would be a nightmare.'

Irene popped up out of nowhere and dropped two fresh coffees on the table. 'Where's Stevie gone? I wanted to give his nipples another tweak,' she said, smiling wickedly.

'Come on, babe,' Robert said, looking and sounding embarrassed. 'Stop harassing my friends.'

'Oh yeah, I love it when you pull me back into line,' she giggled. 'You're going to have to spank me tonight as punishment for being such a bad girl.'

Robert blushed and looked at me. Irene sensed that she may have gone too far and hugged him around his shoulders.

'I'm sorry, Roby,' she said. 'I promise I'll behave.' She gave him a peck on the cheek, cleared the remnants of Steven's meal and our spent coffees, and was gone.

'One is more than enough,' Robert said, when Irene was out of earshot.

### (iii)

Steven's departure triggered a wave of nostalgia that easily soaked up the remaining time we had to wait for Irene to finish her shift. She slipped into the booth beside Robert just as we were reminiscing about girlfriends past. Of course, neither of us had been very popular during high school, so we were talking about other people's girlfriends.

'She sounds like an idiot to me,' Irene said, after catching the tail end of our discussion of Julie Maddox, a girl who claimed to have retained her virginity until her wedding night because she'd only ever indulged in oral sex during her single years. Using this logic, she believed she'd kept herself pure for the love of her life—an insurance clerk called Haley whom she'd met in her first job out of school—despite having blown pretty much everyone in our year level. Everyone, that is, except for a small band of geeks that included Robert, Steven, and myself.

Robert shrugged. 'I reckon she had self-esteem issues,' he said.

'You're kidding,' I said, when I realized there was no irony in his statement. 'Julie? You're on the wrong track there, friend. Her biggest problem was too much self-esteem and not enough brains. She never went all the way because she thought God would send her to hell if she did. It never occurred to her that sucking a dick constituted sexual activity. To her, it was just a sophisticated form of kissing. She married the first half decent man she met just so she could get laid.'

'You were pretty close to her, weren't you?' Robert said.

'Yeah, she lived next door to us when I was a kid. We went to kindergarten together before her family moved.'

'So what's she up to now?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know, we lost touch a couple of years ago.'

'Familiar story, that,' Robert said. 'You gotta kick your gaming habit, friend, it's ruining your life.'

'Yeah, I know. She's on Facebook but I just can't bring myself to start a profile to contact her again. It's not as if we'd have anything to say to one another these days.'

'You aren't on Facebook?' Irene exclaimed, 'That's so weird. I thought you were a computer geek, and all geeks are on Facebook.'

'I just can't get into it. How embarrassing would it be if I joined and no one became my friend? Or, even worse, what if only the people I didn't want to be friends with wanted to be friends with me?'

'Oh, that doesn't matter,' Irene said. 'I've got hundreds of Facebook friends and I don't even know half of them because they're Facebook friends of Facebook friends. I just think it's nice to keep in touch with people even though you don't see them anymore.'

'Yeah, I'm not all that fond of most of mine either,' Robert said. 'But it's not like I ever have to mingle with them or anything like that. I haven't seen most of them since high school, and that's just the way I like it.'

'Anyway, guys,' I said, 'it's getting late and I'm going to head home. I've got a raid to run.'

'I thought you were coming with us,' Irene said. 'Lorraine is waiting for us. I've told her all about you and she's keen to meet you.'

'How did you tell her all about me? We've just met, and anyway, hasn't she already got a boyfriend?'

'I'm dating your housemate, that's how I know, and she hasn't got a real boyfriend.'

'Come on Harry,' Robert said, 'Think of it as the first step in breaking your addiction.'

What could I say? I hadn't had a chance to meet even a semi-available women in over 12 months, but I felt like such a traitor letting my guild mates down. Good healers are hard to find and they would struggle to fill my role.

In the end, I don't think I had much choice. If Lorraine were even half as gorgeous as Irene, my hormones suggested, she'd be the hottest women who'd ever shown any interest in me, and she hadn't even met me yet.

'Okay, I'll come. It's only a game after all,' I said. 'The guild will just have to suck it up this time because good healers are harder to replace than they are to find.'

There was a lump in my throat and my hands shook as the words left my mouth. All I could think about was *Sword of Valour*. My fingers ached for the touch of the mouse and the gentle tap-tap-tap of the keyboard. It was at this moment that I realized just how addicted I had become. Images of dying ogres filled my mind's eye and the taste of Sugarall came, unbidden, to my lips. For the first time in my life, I saw myself for who I really was—addiction's lapdog (even in our own minds, we are not free \*sigh\*).

### *Just Relax*

Irene lived in a neat little house in an exclusive part of town, wedged between the beach and the city centre. It looked far too expensive for a waitress to afford.

'My grandparents own it,' she explained in response to my surprise, as we strolled from the car park to her front door. 'They let me live here rent free because they feel guilty that my parents divorced. It's weird because I'd moved out before my parents separated. I've tried to pay rent, but they refuse to take the money from me. And they put the rent money they get from Lorraine into my bank account. They're so sweet it's hard to believe they're my mom's parents.'

'You're one lucky bitch,' Robert chimed in, 'but young Harry here is even luckier. His aunty left him a fortune. He makes more money than I do every month just for sitting on his fat ass and playing computer games.'

'Really?' Irene said, raising an eyebrow.

'It's wasn't that much, to be honest,' I said. 'I just invested it instead of buying stuff. It's amazing how the interest builds up.'

'And that's why you're an addict,' Robert said. 'Idle hands are the Devil's work and all that.'

'What are you talking about, idiot,' I snapped back. 'You're not even religious.'

'It's got nothing to do with religion, buddy, it's a metaphor,' Robert said. 'It's a nice way of telling you that you're pissing your life up against the wall. You got a lucky break but instead of using your time productively, you sit in a dark room pretending to be someone else.'

We reached Irene's door before I could respond, not that my planned comeback would have been worthwhile. I was going to resort to personal insults because, frankly, the man was right. Life had dealt me a lucky hand. I had time to devote to art, or culture, or good works. Instead, I spent most of my time in a world that did not actually exist.

In my mind's eye, my addiction leered and presented images of my wasted life that shocked and repulsed me. The hours spent chasing virtual treasures, the bonds forged with virtual people, the time wasted talking to friends I had never met.

The futility of my virtual existence filled me with rage and fury. I wanted to scream into the heavens, to release my angst and shame into the ether, to smash my computer into a thousand pieces with my fists, to tear down the internet and release the twisted grip it had upon my soul.

'You okay, Harry?' Irene asked, shaking me out of my reverie. 'Your face went all shiny for a moment.'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' I said.

'I've got to get a new handbag,' Irene grumbled as she rooted around in the huge, gilded leather sack that hung off her left shoulder. 'Ah, here it is,' she said, and pushed the newly liberated key into the door. 'I hope Raine's still conscious.'

'What? Do you think she's gone to bed already? It's only nine o'clock,' I said, as Irene opened the door and a wave of stale, smoke-filled air snatched my breath away. Beside me, Robert gagged.

'Oh no, she wouldn't have gone to bed,' Irene said as she stepped into the darkened hallway on the other side of the door, 'but that doesn't mean she'll be conscious.'

I looked at Robert who shrugged. 'She enjoys a bit of a smoke and a drink,' he said, and followed Irene into the darkness. I sighed and followed Robert. What else was I to do?

## (ii)

The corridor we entered was dark, fusty, and surprisingly long. The smoke in the air clung to us as we walked towards a distant, flickering light. My hesitation at the door meant that Robert and Irene were ahead of me. I watched as they pushed into the smoke, which formed ghostly tendrils that streamed out on either side of their bodies before eventually collapsing

into the wake of their passage. I don't know whether it was a trick of the light or the stupefying effects of the tainted atmosphere, but my companions seemed to be gliding slowly along the corridor, their feet somehow motionless upon the floor. I wondered whether I was also gliding and looked down at my feet to make sure they were moving. I never found out because Robert, whom I bumped into and sent sprawling onto the floor, broke my concentration.

'What are you doing, you fucking idiot,' he said from the floor.

I didn't answer because my libido demanded that my full attention be directed to the heavenly creature that was lying on a grungy old sofa in the middle of the room. Her hair was long, straight, and dark. Her features were fine and sharp, but softened by delicate lips raised in a smile. Her limbs were long and supple, her clothing was sparse and loose.

'Poor Robi,' the heavenly creature said, and then turned her blood red eyes to me.  
'Who's your friend?'

I blushed and waged an internal battle against my hormones, who were trying to organize an erection. Carnal images flickered across my mind's eye as her voice cut through the layers of civility and culture to the primal urges beneath. The sound that passed through those sweet lips was rich and throaty—sweet enough to highlight her femininity but hoarse enough to send my overactive imagination into overdrive. It pushed all the right buttons and sent me tumbling from modest desire into immodest lust.

'That's Harry,' Irene said as she helped Robert to his feet. 'You know, the guy I was telling you about? The guy who plays *Sword of Valour*?'

'Vaguely,' the heavenly creature said as she reached for a wine glass on the coffee table that lay between her sofa and the huge television mounted on the wall. 'Hi Harry,' she said, raising her glass to me. 'I'm Lorraine, but everyone calls me Raine.'

'Hi Raine,' I said, as my libido subsided and the rest of the room swam into focus. The sofa upon which she sprawled was at the center of a dark space. The only light came from the television, which was showing the music channel but had the volume set to mute. On the coffee table were two bottles, a water pipe, and a clutter of bowls, scissors, and plastic bags.

'I'd offer you all a drink, but I drank it all,' Raine said, draining her glass. 'I've got some smoke left, if you want.'

'I've got some wine in my room,' Irene said, and vanished into the darkness. Robert and I stood side by side, not knowing quite what to do.

'No use letting good weed go to waste,' Raine said and reached for her water pipe. Robert sat on the floor next to the sofa and feigned interest in the silent screen. I joined him, despite feeling strangely self-conscious.

By the time Irene came back carrying a tray laden with bottles and glasses, Raine was busy assembling her third pipe. Irene put the tray on the table and snatched the bong from her hands. 'Come on, sweetness,' she said, 'we've got visitors.'

'Relax,' Raine said, 'it's only Robi and his friend.'

Irene filled three glasses on the tray with a deep red wine from one of the bottles, and added a drop to Raine's glass.

'Are you trying to tell me something,' Raine said, swirling the modest splash of liquid around in the bottom of her glass.

'Yeah, you've been drinking and smoking for a couple of hours and we've only just arrived. It'd be nice if you could stay awake for at least the first half hour.'

Raine giggled and drained her glass again. 'So, Harry, Irene tells me you're a game addict.'

'I suppose so,' I said as my heart sank. What chance did I have with such a heavenly creature if she already knew I was tainted? Who would want to date an addict?

'I play *Sword of Valour* as well,' she said, 'what server are you on?'

'Rebellion and Consequences,' I said automatically, my mind racing.

'Hey, me too! Are you in a guild?'

'Yeah, I'm in *Enemies of Shadow*.'

Raine's eyes opened as wide as they could in the circumstances and she almost sat up on her sofa. 'You're in EoS?' she said. 'Those guys are psychos. You really are an addict.'

Raine's reaction completely snapped me out of my hormone-induced fog, and for the first time I saw her through unclouded eyes. She was, indeed, very beautiful and her limbs were long and supple. But even in the dim light of the silent music, it was obvious that she was not at her best. Her skin was grey and dull and hung off her sparse frame like a sack that had somehow managed to acquire a skeletal system. Her eyes were red and half closed, and her hair looked greasy and unwashed.

'We're just a little more dedicated than everyone else,' I said, springing to the defense of all that I held dear.

'Yeah, right,' Raine snorted. 'Is it true that you guys have to go on at least two raids per week or you get booted from the guild?'

'Nah, no one's been kicked for ages. That rule is a relic from the old days. Things are much more relaxed now. You don't have to do anything anymore. People miss raids all the time nowadays. I'm missing a raid right now. Most of us do raid twice a week, though, and if you want, you can do more. I'm planning on doing three raids next week. Not because I have to, you understand, but because I want to.'

'I can't even find the time to run one raid a week and I only work part time,' Raine said, stretching out and taking one of the bottles from the table. 'How anyone can do two raids and all the quests and stuff you have to do before hand, and collect all the mats you need, is a mystery to me,' she said, and poured herself a very generous glass of wine.

'Yeah, well Harry's a lucky guy,' Robert said. 'He inherited a shitload of cash and doesn't have to work.'

'Work's just the half of it,' Raine said. 'Doing two raids per week is like working two jobs. There's no time for friends or family, no time for television, or Facebook, or anything else. It's just *Sword of Valour*, morning, noon, and night.'

'Yeah, well, what can I say. I'm an addict. It should be called sword-crack,' I mumbled.

'Just don't play,' Raine said. 'It's easy. Addiction's all in your head.' She gulped down her drink and put the glass down onto the coffee table. 'C'mon Reeny, give me back my pipe. It's not nice to taunt me like this.'

'This one's mine, dear girl,' Irene said and picked up a lighter from the table.

I watched as Irene enjoyed her bong, and thought about how different my life had become since I had found *Sword of Valour*. Once upon a time, I had friends. Not many, but they were there. Once upon a time, I would order pizza and watch videos with a group of

buddies. Once upon a time, I would have a few drinks with Robert, or a smoke, and then chilled out at Larry's. Once upon a time, people would greet me if they met me in the street. They would ask me how I was, if I had seen so—and—so lately, if I was going to the football game on the weekend. But those times were long gone.

Now, I sit in my room and stare at a screen. I do my grocery shopping during the day when most people I once knew are at work, or at school, or with friends. I'd do my shopping online, like I pay my bills, if the local supermarket was at all reliable. My whole life had curled inward. It had molded itself around the computer in my bedroom and most of my human interaction was mediated by a screen.

Irene had mulled up as I was mulling over, and she passed the bong to me.

'Nah,' I said, 'it makes me paranoid like you wouldn't believe.'

Robert also passed and the pipe ended up back in the hands of a delighted Raine. I sat and looked up at the flickering television screen and dreamed of slaughtered Ogres and the camaraderie of virtual brothers in arms, while my physical companions sat in silence alongside me.

### (iii)

Raine had barely packed her next cone when we heard the front door slam. A short time later, the dark corridor spat a twitchy, slightly built young man into the room.

'Hello everyone,' he said, and dived onto the sofa. 'Feeling up to it?' he asked Raine, while his hands made indecent forays about her person.

'No, and stop pawing me, you twisted little shit,' Raine said and kicked him off the sofa. He landed on the floor beside Robert and myself and subjected us to a manic smile.

'Harry, I'd like you to meet Patrick,' Irene said, 'Raine's ridiculous boyfriend. Patrick, this is Harry, Roby's housemate.'

'A pleasure to meet you,' Patrick said and bounced up off the floor onto his feet. 'You're that gaming geek Irene's been talking about, aren't you? I thought you'd be younger for some reason. Still, you're kind of cute for a geek.'

'He ain't no geek,' Irene said, 'he's not even on Facebook. He's just a man with too much time on his hands.'

'I can help you out with that,' Patrick said, his voice dripping with sleaze. 'I like it when grumpy old men teach me how to behave.'

'You are the world's most disgusting individual,' Irene said.

'Hey, I have needs, you know, and my drug fucked Rainey can't meet them,' Patrick said. 'Did you hear that, love of my life? Rainey? Rainey? Oh, hell, she's passed out again.' He took the bong from Raine's unresisting hands and placed it on the coffee table. Then he reached beneath the sofa and dragged out a blanket that he tucked around Raine's sparsely clad form. His face softened as he did so, and his movements betrayed a tenderness and affection that belied the self-centered mania that seemed to make up most of his persona. 'If the drugs don't get her, the cold will,' he said, and sat back down on the sofa.

'Stop being dramatic, weed never killed anyone,' Irene snapped.

'Yeah, but alcohol has.'

'Well, that's the night then,' I said, hoping against hope that the others would agree.

'What are you talking about?' Patrick said. 'It's just started. Let's all get naked and see what happens. Irene and I will be the girls and Harry and Roby can be the boys.'

'Yeah, yeah, you wish,' Irene said, but without rancor. 'Why don't we go to the casino?'

'Oh come on!' Patrick almost wailed. 'You're always at the bloody casino. He turned to Robert and I. 'Stay here, boys, and I'll treat you to a tongue lashing that has to be felt to be believed.'

'Off to the casino we go,' Robert said, and bounced to his feet.

'It sounds good. I've never been,' I said, getting slowly to mine.

The other three looked at me as if I had just proclaimed that I was the messiah, and had turned water to Sugarall as proof of my claim. 'What,' I said, when the staring did not end after a few seconds.

'You've never been to the casino?' Robert said. 'Everything happens at the casino. How could you live in this city and not go to the casino?'

I shrugged. 'I dunno. I was going to go when it first opened but never got around to it.'

'Don't go, Harry,' Patrick squealed, 'it's evil and full of weirdo's and freaks.' He gave the matter some thought and then stood up and dusted himself off. 'So, what are we waiting for? Let's go.'

Irene giggled. 'Patrick, you're truly disgusting. It's an honor to call you a friend.'

'Hang on a minute,' I said at the insistence of my libido. 'You're gay, aren't you?'

'Perceptive fellow, isn't he,' Patrick quipped, looking at Irene.

'So?' Irene asked, wearing the shiny faced of someone who was preparing to defend truth, honor, and social justice in the face of bigotry and intolerance.

'It's just that if Patrick's gay, then why is he Raine's boyfriend?'

Patrick looked at me with a huge grin upon his face. 'Do you want to be Rainee's daddy?'

Irene shook her head and laughed at me. 'That's why I called him her ridiculous boyfriend. They've only ever had sex once,' she said, looking to Patrick for confirmation. He nodded and took up the tale.

'And it was lovely, let me tell you, but we were both so wasted, and she was wearing this awesome double breasted suit that made her look like one of those new romantics from the eighties, and we were both really, like, starved and chocking for it, so we both went, what the hell, there's no law against us getting it on or anything, so we did but we were so embarrassed when we woke up the next morning we almost didn't tell anyone about it and we promised never to do it again.'

It took me a few seconds to process the sentence, which Patrick had delivered with one breath. 'So Raine hasn't got a boyfriend?'

'No, poor thing. She always picks the duds. Remember Mister Mustache?' Irene said.

Patrick rolled his eyes. 'A most unusual individual,' he said. 'I took weeks to clean the marks off the bathroom wall after she dumped him.'

'I still get queasy when I see beetroot in a sandwich,' Irene added. 'Anyway, that's why I bugged Robert to get you to come out. I told Raine you were coming but the siren song of the bottle and the bong got to her before we did. Never mind, all benders come to an end.'

'One way or another,' Patrick said.

'Stop it! She overindulges a little more often than most but that doesn't mean she's on Death's doorstep,' Irene snapped. She looked at Raine, who had begun to snore softly. 'Whatever, let's just go, okay?'

I fell into step beside Robert who had followed Irene and Patrick into the corridor. It wasn't nearly as weird on the way out as it had been on the way in and I was able to berate him as we walked.

'You bastard,' I said, displaying my usual wit and imagination. 'You complete bastard. How could you set me up like that? Let's go out a bit, you said. Out into the world, you said. And all along, it was a dastardly plot by your girlfriend to hook me up with her housemate.'

Robert looked at me as if I were going mad. 'Did you actually see that woman on the sofa in there? And when was the last time you spoke to a woman who was in the same room? And, no, your mother doesn't count,' he said.

'Listen, mate, I'm not a basket case,' I said, getting a little hot under the collar. 'I can screw up my own dates, thank you very much.'

'Bullshit, Harry, and you know it. You weren't exactly setting the world on fire with your romantic conquests before you found the game, and you haven't had anything since.'

I deflated. Robert was right. Again. The addiction had definitely killed romance in my life. The trickle of women that had once flowed to my bed—and it was a trickle—had dried up, leaving behind an arid desert of sexualized images on a screen. And, as far as satisfying primal urges go, virtual sex has never been a patch on the good ol' bump and grind.

'I can tee up my own rejections,' I said petulantly as we emerged into the chilly night air. Robert gave me a look. Again.

'Rejected you?' Robert said. 'I thought it went quite well in the circumstances. And Patrick likes you, which is half the battle with Raine.'

'But she already knows I'm an addict. Who's going to want to date an addict?'

'The thing is, right, you're not going to be an addict for much longer, are you?'

'No, I suppose not,' I said, but was far from convinced. How could I give up the adrenalin highs of Ogre killing? The camaraderie of my virtual brothers in arms? The friendship of my guild? These were all potent draws that made even the *thought* of leaving *Sword of Valour* difficult to bear.

At this point, my libido chimed in to remind me that Raine was a potent draw all on her own, even while clothed and sexually unavailable. The draw would increase exponentially the fewer clothes she wore and the more available she became. It flicked up an image or two in my mind's eye—an artist's impression, in a way—of Raine in various stages of sating my every desire, however depraved.

'Why've you stopped?' Robert asked.

'Oh? Sorry, lost in thought for a moment.'

'Come on. The others are miles ahead. Why are you sweating so much?'

What could I say? How could I tell him that my twisted imagination was doing strange things to a girl I'd just met, had only seen in a dim room, and who had barely uttered two words to me before passing out?

'I think my antiperspirant has just given up the ghost,' I said.

'You shouldn't buy your toiletries in the discount shop,' Robert muttered and turned to follow Irene and Patrick, who were a considerable way ahead of us. As usual, I wandered along at the back of the line.

### *Casino Blues*

The Casino wasn't quite what I had imagined. In my mind's eye, it had been discrete, tasteful, and atmospheric—reminiscent of the casinos depicted in some of the better nineteen fifties Hollywood movies. My imagination had populated it with stylish people wearing stylish clothes, sipping Martinis and engaging in light, yet filling, dialogue. All the men who wandered amongst the roulette tables of my mind bore an uncanny resemblance to Rock Hudson, and all the women were reminiscent of Lauren Bacall. The reality was somewhat different.

As we crested the hill upon which it stood, the casino complex loomed huge and menacing, a jagged collection of windowless buildings clustered around two towers that rose into the heavens. The human detritus that lined the streets immediately outside the complex were definitely not stylish. There were thousands and thousands of them. Some coming and some going, some hurrying and some dawdling. All of them individuals without individuality, lost in a sea of heaving humanity.

The line of cars that stretched back for hundreds of yards from the entrance to the car park was definitely not stylish, especially with motors running and horns honking.

A murky river flowed along one side. A narrow path ran along its bank, lined with all manner of tacky ornament and giant knick-knack. Huge, grotesque fountains spat water into the river in an assortment of streams and sprays. Beams of colored light played upon artless statues, and gusts of flame periodically shot out of vents between the fountains, no doubt to symbolize humanity's thirst for cheesy spectacle.

'So, what do you think?' Robert asked as we strolled along the river path amongst the teeming horde.

'Nice,' I said, not wishing to offend, but the tone of my voice must have betrayed my ambivalence.

'Yeah, it's a bit tacky,' Robert said. 'A bit over the top. It's a lot nicer inside.'

Remorse set in. Robert was obviously very fond of the place, judging by his jaunty step and the smile upon his face that was two shades shy of an idiot grin.

I felt ashamed. After all, who was I to judge beauty? Many of the structures in *Sword of Valour* were just as ornate as the ones that I was sneering at here, and yet I found them quite beautiful. One of my favorite non-combat, in-game pastimes was to walk through the virtual streets of The Shining Citadel, the capital city of the forces of good, and soak up the ambiance. I found the virtual architecture inspiring and the crowds of virtual people comforting.

Yet, if I thought about it dispassionately, I could see that, aesthetically, The Shining Citadel and the Casino were quite similar. Was it my addiction working against me again? Did it not want to see beauty here, in the real world, in case it lessened my desire to escape into the virtual one? Could someone with a mind free of disease actually see beauty where I saw cheesiness?

Robert stopped and looked back at me. 'You've zoned out again, haven't you?'

'Yeah,' I said, 'guilty as charged.'

Robert shook his head. 'Come on, Irene and Patrick are waiting for us.'

He was half-right. Only Irene was waiting at the door, arms folded and right foot tapping impatiently, a frown upon her brow. Patrick was a few yards away, chatting to a couple of gruff looking, hairy young men who were sitting on a statue of a gargoyle by the river's bank.

'We've lost Pat,' Irene said as we approached.

'But he's just there,' I said, pointing. Both Irene and Robert rolled their eyes.

'You're kidding me, right?' Irene said. 'He's found someone to play with, and they're just the way he likes them. Hairy and scary.'

'Oh,' I said, putting two and two together. 'What, both of them?'

'They look like they're a set,' Robert said, and took my arm. 'I need a drink, let's go.'

Irene led the way and Robert half led, half dragged me through the doors after her, obviously not wanting to take the chance that I would zone out again and delay his appointment with alcohol.

The cavern into which Robert led me was brightly lit and purple. Huge, sequined balls hung off a ceiling that was at least three floors above our heads. In the distance, an array of escalators took people up and down. From the stream of people heading down, it was by far the most popular destination, and it was obviously our destination as well because the others made for it the moment we stepped through the doors.

There were people everywhere, belying the lateness of the hour.

'Don't people sleep anymore?' I asked, but my question fell upon deaf ears. Both Robert and Irene were staring at their destination with intent and seemed oblivious to all else.

We mounted the escalator and rode it as it dove down into a pit, into a darkness so bright that it hurt my eyes. The pit was deep and the journey long, which gave me time to survey the hole into which we were slowly falling.

A huge, circular bar sat at the pit's center, like an island of shadows in a sea of twinkling lights. Slot machines spread from its shores in all directions, all with lights flashing and jaunty tunes blaring, but the thousands of people who sat silently in front of them seemed oblivious to the visual and aural pollution. From my vantage point, it looked like the only people not sitting in front of a machine were the barkeepers preparing drinks, and the waiting staff ferrying them to the twitching players.

Robert and Irene shot off the minute the escalator completed its journey. I followed close behind, frightened I might lose them in the pressing crowd.

*So what, said a slimy voice in my head, you lose 'em, you go home, and you know what's waiting for you there.*

My libido, well aware of my visual disposition, flashed an image of Raine in a compromising position across my mind's eye. It had the desired effect because I redoubled my efforts to stay close to my two speeding companions.

*No fair, the slimy voice said in a whiney tone and then faded away.*

Just as I had set into a rhythm, Robert and Irene dived onto two slot machines, apparently at random. It was so sudden I overshot and had to back pedal.

'All right, tonight's our lucky night,' Robert crowed and signaled a passing waiter. 'Three beers please,' he called, then turned to his machine and vanished from this world. Irene was already gone, into a world where only she and her machine had any relevance. They both looked up long enough to accept their drinks from the returning waiter, but promptly fell away again.

I sipped my beer and watched them for a while. Gambling had never been my thing, and the glaring lights and clanging bells of the slot machines were far from appealing. My rumbling stomach reminded me that there were better things to do than sit and stare at my zombie-fied buddies,

'Is there somewhere I can get a bite to eat around here?' I asked. 'I'm feeling a bit peckish.'

'Sure,' Robert said, without taking his eyes off the machine.

'Where?' I said when it became apparent that Robert was going to say no more.

'Third floor, up the escalators.'

'I'll be back soon,' I said, and put my beer on Robert's machine. It had a bitter taste that I found unappealing.

He focused on my beer for a moment. 'You're going to come back, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Can I have your beer?'

'All yours,' I said and wandered off, back towards the escalator.

## (ii)

The trip back to the entrance cavern was difficult and I was feeling severely put upon by the time the escalator had completed its journey. The teeming horde pressed in on all sides and pushed in all directions. Images of Ogres dying to my virtual sword filled my mind and the urge to go home, where my sweet game awaited me, was strong. But I was not yet ready to succumb completely to my addiction, nor was my libido ready to surrender the idea of a romantic tryst with Raine. It had found an unlikely ally in my appetite, which reminded me that there was precious little to eat in the fridge at home.

A short distance from the top of the escalator was an island in the sea of flesh upon which stood a map in a glass case. It looked a likely starting point for my quest for food so I struck out towards it.

It wasn't easy. I swam against the tide as it flowed past me, down the escalator, and into the gambling pit. After a few fruitless steps that saw me pushed back from whence I had come, I decided to tackle my problem tactically. Elbows and knees jerking like pistons, I waded out into the crowd and found myself making progress. The unique individuals that made up the sea seemed to respond well to the threat of pain and flowed around me instead of through me.

Using my newly invented casino-walk I moved slowly but surely towards the island and, hopefully, a hot meal. It was a long and difficult journey, despite the distance being quite small. The elation I felt when I finally reached my goal was almost as good as defeating an elite Ogre solo. It was an accomplishment worthy of a prize, and I was vaguely disappointed when a sparkling treasure chest didn't appear out of thin air as would have happened for such

a feat in *Sword of Valour*. 'There just aren't enough rewards in real life,' I thought to myself as I looked down at the map in its glass prison.

It was a strange map. The Pit dominated in bold ink, and the path to reach it was clearly marked. Everything outside the Pit paled in comparison—drawn in faint lines and with vague, almost cryptic, directions. Still, it wasn't totally useless and I was able to determine that a food hall lay on the other side of a shopping complex, somewhere on the floor above the entrance cavern.

The up escalators were to my right, where the crowd was the thinnest. It didn't look nearly as bad as the way down to the Pit so I straightened my clothes and, elbows at the ready in case the crowd attacked, I set forth from my sanctuary.

The going was easy and I soon found myself relaxing and enjoying the sensation of being out and about in the real world. It didn't take me long to reach the shopping level and I stepped off the escalator and into a long, broad corridor. It was less crowded than the Pit, but there were still a respectable number of people milling about. They wandered in and out of the many shops that lined both sides of the corridor.

I set off for the food court, which a sign above the escalator indicated was dead ahead, gawking like a tourist at all the people and all the shops. If it weren't for the lateness of the hour, it would have been a wholly unremarkable scene. After all, shopping was one of the more popular leisure activities among the non-gaming-addict set. But it was well past midnight and the *Sock Emporium* was doing a roaring trade.

Who needs to buy socks after midnight on a Friday night? Perhaps the vampire craze that was sweeping through youth culture had something to do with it. If so, and judging by the midnight sock-buyers, recent times had been cruel to vampire-kind.

The allure of the shops was mesmerizing and, quite without knowing why, I decided that a bit of window-shopping was in order despite the gnawing in my stomach. I don't know how long I wandered through the many emporia, wholesale outlets, and department stores of the casino shopping complex, but by the time I paid for my socks, my feet were aching and my stomach was grumbling loud enough to attract the attention of passersby.

It was now obvious that I could no longer procrastinate so, clutching my newly acquired socks to my chest, I continued on my quest for sustenance. It was a relief when I finally arrived at the food court, which was like a carbon copy of the Pit but on a much smaller scale. It was also circular, but the food stores and bars lined the walls, while the patrons sat at a mass of tables in the center.

The array of food on offer was dazzling and some of it even looked edible, although none of it looked appetizing. My hunger prodded me, however, and I settled for a bowl filled with what the sign assured me was Beef Rendang. Even the most lethargic purveyor of suspect food would have trouble ruining a Rendang because the longer it sits in a bain-marie, the better it gets.

I sat down in the quietest section of the food court and had barely taken a bite of my Rendang, which was disappointingly fresh, when a disheveled looking Patrick showed up and clapped me on the shoulder.

'Needed a little energy, eh?' he said and sat down opposite me. He pointed at the *Sock Emporium* bag that I had placed on the table beside me. 'I see you've bought some socks. Is

that why you climbed out of hell? To get some socks to keep your tootsies warm while you feed the machine?"

I shrugged. 'I'm not really into the slots,' I said, 'and I have no idea why I bought the socks. It just seemed like the right thing to do.'

'Wow, that's something I never expected to hear from a friend of Robert's. He loves slot machines. He and Irene spend all their time down in that hell hole.'

'Really?'

'Oh yeah. And Robert always gets drunk, which annoys Irene because she says it interrupts her concentration.'

'Where are your friends?' I asked. 'Those two guys you were with at the entrance?'

'Oh them, they were all show and no go. I finished with them ages ago and thought I'd get something to eat before diving back in,' Patrick said, and looked at me with a speculative eye. 'What are your plans for the rest of the night?'

'I'm going home,' I said, and pushed the Rendang away. 'You can have that if you want but be warned, it's fresh. And the bloody socks.'

'Really? Thanks. You can never have enough socks and I love curry,' Patrick said, 'I love how it burns on the way down.'

Somehow, he had managed to inject sleaze into words describing a beef stew.

'Don't you find it tiring?' I asked, 'putting sex into everything?'

Patrick sat back and thought about my question, absent-mindedly licking curry off the end of his plastic spoon in a provocative way.

'Nah,' he said, after a short pause. 'It comes natural.'

'I'll see you later,' I said and turned to leave.

'You should call Raine,' he said.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned around. 'You think so?'

'Yeah, I do. But I reckon you won't.'

'She already knows I'm an addict,' I exclaimed. 'Why the hell would she want to date me?'

'Jesus Christ,' Patrick exclaimed. 'What world are you living in?'

'I don't know.'

'Just go home. I'll see what I can do.'

### *Home for Real*

I hurried back to the Pit to let Robert know that I was leaving and that he had to make his own way home. Thanks to the casino-walk, the journey was quick and relatively painless, except for a minor incident involving a patron who was too slow to avoid my left elbow.

Robert and Irene were exactly where I had left them. She was staring zombie-like at her screen while he sat, slumped forward, amongst a sea of empty beer glasses.

'Fucking hell, Rob, how much did you drink?' I said. 'I haven't been gone that long.'

'What are you talking about? I've had a couple,' he said. 'Just two, maybe three.'

I counted seven empty glasses on the top of his machine.

'Why are there so many glasses, then?'

Robert gave me a look of affronted innocence. 'Not mine,' he said. 'Someone'lse must a put 'em there.'

'Come on, I'm taking you home. You're way too drunk to stay here.'

'M'not drunk,' Robert said and turned to Irene. 'Didja hear that, Reenee? Harry thinks 'm drunk.'

'You are,' Irene said, eyes fixed on the machine. 'You should go with your friend. I'll call you tomorrow.'

'Aren't you going to come as well?' I asked, hoping for a second meeting with Raine.

'Nah, I'm on a roll,' she said. 'You'd be doing me a huge favor if you got him out of here. He's wrecking my concentration.'

'How much concentration do you need to push a button?'

'Just fuck off, will you?' Irene said, taking her eyes off the machine just long enough to shoot me a venomous look.

'Okay, okay,' I said, and draped Robert's arm over my shoulder. 'Come on, let's get you home.'

'D'ya know, Harry buddy, I love ya, honest,' Robert said as I helped him up off his chair.

'That's nice,' I said. 'It's good to be loved.'

'True dat,' Robert said, nodding sagely. 'Everyone needs love. Except Reenee, who only needs a slot. Ha ha. Good joke, huh, Renee, huh?'

Irene grimaced but kept her eyes on the machine.

'Come on, Rob, let's get you home,' I said, trying my best to sound reassuring.

'Y'know I love Reenee too, don'cha Harry?'

'Of course I do.'

'And Raine, and Patrick. I even love Steven.'

'That's pushing it,' I said, as I gently led him through the crowd towards the escalator. 'Even Steven's mother has trouble loving Steven.'

'Nah, he's a person and he needs love too, don'cha think? I think he does. I love all peoples Harry. All peoples. No exceptances.'

'The world needs more people like you,' I said, wondering whether I could make the casino-walk work while supporting Robert. The milling punters were most aggravating.

'But the world, Harry. The world. Buddy. Let me tell you 'bout the world.' Robert said and then paused as if trying to remember what he was going to say.

'What about the world?' I asked, curious to know Roberts take on the cosmos.

'Oh yeah. The world, Harry. The world. It sucks. Full of stupids. Everywhere you look, there are stupids. Stupids here, stupids there, stupids everywhere.'

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' I said.

'Even you're a stupid. No offense.'

'What,' I said, so startled that I stopped dead in my tracks. Momentum and alcohol pitched Robert forward and he miraculously found an empty patch of floor upon which to fall. I helped him up, acutely aware of the dozen or so burly security guards that had just taken an interest in our activities.

'Don' be offended,' Robert said after I had helped him up. 'You and your bloody game addiction. What a stupid thing to do. Look at all you're missing out on by staying in your room and playing games.'

Once again, Robert was right. My addiction was stupid. My life was passing me by and the real tragedy was that, deep down, I didn't want to do anything about it. I was corrupt. I was diseased. I was in love with my defiler. Not for the first or the last time did I curse *Sword of Valour*.

The fake-casual movement of the burly security guards towards us snapped me out of my self-loathing and back into the real world. There was a slim chance that they would be accommodating gentlemen who would offer assistance to my friend and I. However, the thickness of their necks and the scarring on their knuckles indicated that they probably preferred to keep the peace using methods that were a little more assertive. Cursing under my breath, I braced myself, lifted Robert up onto his feet, and practically carried him up to the escalator. The crowd, sensing the involvement of the security thugs in our haste, parted to let us through.

## (ii)

Robert's newfound love of humanity complicated the trip out of the Pit and away from the casino because he wanted to make friends with the every passing stranger. In hindsight, it could have been far worse. Had he been a violent or belligerent drunk, the security personnel may have taken a more active role in our departure. As it was, they simply shadowed our movements as we made our way to the exit.

'Can we stop at the liquor store on the way home?' Robert asked as I pulled out of the car park.

'Why? Surely you've had enough? Anyway, we've got plenty of beer in the fridge, and there's a bottle of Bourbon in one of the cupboards somewhere.'

'Not for now, for tomorrow. The only cure for a hangover is the hair of the dog that bit ya.'

I made a confused face. 'What are you talking about?'

Robert sighed. 'The best cure for a hangover is to drink some more.'

'Oh,' I said, 'I get it,' even though I didn't. 'But we've got some hairy dog at home.'

'Not any more we don't. We *had* some beer in the fridge and there *was* a bottle of Bourbon in the cupboard. Notice the past tense? It's not there anymore. It's not anywhere anymore.'

'Really? You drank it?' I said.

'That's what it was there for.'

'Okay, we'll go. I'm running low on Sugarall so we can kill two Ogres with one stone.'

Robert frowned. 'Isn't that meant to be two *birds* with one stone?'

'Whatever.'

Thankfully, the drive was short. It would have been even shorter had Robert not stopped to chat for a good fifteen minutes with the sales assistant at the liquor store. Apparently, they were quite well acquainted.

It was a relief to finally log back into my beloved and despised *Sword of Valour* and hear the many greetings from my guildies. The raid was well and truly over, but I didn't mind. Everyone had stayed on and the entire guild was hanging out at the fountain near the guildhall.

'I gotta tell you folks,' I said into my microphone, 'it sucks being a gaming addict.'

A chorus of affirmations came through my headphones from the only people who could truly understand.

'All these people out and about, living life,' I continued when the noise had died down. 'You know, normal stuff like drinking and gambling and shopping and stuff. It makes you wonder what we're missing.'

'Why don't you go? There's no-one standing in your way. Just log off now and never log back in again,' Grodok said. He was one of my oldest in-game friends and known for his straight talking. Grodok didn't mince his words—he only minced Ogres.

'That's it, though,' I said. 'I'm an addict. I don't *want* to be here, I *need* to be here.'

'Yeah, me too,' said an anonymous guildy.

'And me,' added another.

In the confusion of voices that followed, all raised in agreement, I thought I heard one dissonant note.

'Not me, I'm here because it's fun,' said a voice. The dissenter was destined to remain anonymous because, no sooner had the hubbub died down, than a bright blue font appeared in my written chat box. It was from a player called 'Plimira' and it drove everything else from my mind.

'Hi, it's Raine,' it said.

'How do know my avatar?' I typed back, and then invited Raine to a private voice channel.

'Oh, you know. I asked some questions and got some answers,' Raine said.

I fell into an embarrassed silence while I struggled to think of something to say that would prove my suitability as a mate.

'Love your name,' I said, latching on to the only conversation hook I could find.

'Thanks, it means "heavy rain" in Greek. My grandfather was Greek.' Raine said, and proved that awkwardness is common on both sides of the gender divide.

'Oh,' I said. 'That's interesting. My great grandfather flew bombers over Crete in the Second World War.'

'Really? That makes us practically related, then,' Raine said, and then giggled.

'Practically, but not quite.'

'Thank heavens for that,' I said, feeling like the luckiest addict in the world. Maybe this was what I needed to break my addiction once and for all? Maybe love would succeed where everything else had failed.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. The question hung on the end of my tongue. Should I ask or would it expose me for what I am? Then it occurred to me that she already knew I was an addict and with that thought came liberation. 'So, Raine, do you want to fight some Ogres with me?'

## **Symposia: Short Stories About Modern Life**

Every civilization needs to reflect on what is or is not important. In times gone by, it was knowledge, love, or honour. Things have changed.

At the dawn of Western society, great thinkers and writers such as Plato, Aristophanes, and Euripides bent their minds to the many problems that beset our fledgling civilization. Their toil played no small part in making our world what it is today, the bastards. Time marches on, however, and civilization has evolved. Sadly, Plato and his toga-wearing contemporaries are no longer all that relevant to your average iMe consumer.

*Symposia* re-casts the work of these three Hellenic writers in a way that works in today's fast paced world: *A Virtual Life* brings Plato's *The Symposium* to the online world of Sword of Valour, while Gert, Graham, and Andy share a drink and more in *Consuming Passions*. Sammy spills corporate blood in *KPI*, which is probably what Plato would have done if he found himself trapped in a corporate nightmare. *Cad and the Sacred Cow* is the modernisation of Euripides' *Heracles*, and explains The Great Financial Crisis. Now we know who is to blame. *Pure Silicon*, inspired by Aristophanes' *Clouds*, shows that while times may change, people are a constant.

### **A Virtual Life**

The room is dark and feels strangely crowded despite there being only two men occupying the space. They sit side by side in front of two computer monitors that are the room's only source of illumination. Even though the light is dim, it is possible to make out several other computers lined up on tables against three of the four walls. At the rooms centre is a table piled high with empty pizza boxes and beer bottles. An almost complete silence accompanies the gloom, broken only by the occasional tap-tap-tap of fingers on keyboards and a faint chattering noise, on the very cusp of hearing, emanating from the headphones that both men wear.

The images on the screens are spectacularly colourful. Fluid and dynamic scenes of a fantasy army: warriors in heavy armor carrying swords and shields, leather clad archers armed with longbows, cowled monks armed with staves, and wizards dressed in flowing robes and carrying wands and orbs that crackle with arcane power. The scene is the same on both screens but the perspectives differ slightly.

'Are we all here?' asks the smaller of the two men into the microphone attached to his headphones. He taps the spacebar on his keyboard and one of the heavily armored warriors on his screen jumps up. It wears the label "Horc" above its head.

'We're just waiting on Twoswords' group,' says the broad-shouldered man beside him, pressing the "w" key on his keyboard which propels forward an archer wearing the label "Pamen". 'They were held up at the Ogre camp.'

"Twoswords, how long are you going to be?" Horc asks into his microphone.

'Just coming around the corner now boss,' comes the reply in the headphones of both men. 'We got jumped by a gank squad at the ruins. It was amusing watching them run when they realised who we were.'

Horc smiles to himself. All the characters on screen are wearing a cloak that bears the distinctive insignia of the famed Enemies of Shadow. 'I hope you killed them all,' he says.

'That's why we took so long,' Twoswords replies. 'One of the bloody Stalkers went into stealth and it took us ages to find her.'

'Since she's almost here, I'll move my people into position,' says Pamen. 'Okay, groups four, five and six follow me. We need to move to the rear of the keep without the enemy seeing us. That means no ganking randoms.'

Horc watches half the army on his screen file away after Pamen. 'For those of you who may have been afk when we went through this before, I'll run through the plan again,' he says into his microphone. 'We need to get into this keep in order to take out General Tzamos, who drops the Acid Armor. No guild has been able to defeat the General thus far on any server, so getting this done will expand our epeens to monstrous proportions. Unfortunately, the evil guild Chaos Incorporated is complicating our already difficult task. I've heard around the traps that they don't like us very much, and they find the thought of monstrous epeens on EoS members deeply offensive.'

Several members of the guild laugh at this statement, and the chat-box on Horc's screen lights up with various ribald messages. He pauses a moment to let the frivolity wind down. 'Stealthbomb has been inside,' he continues when the laughing has faded away and the "rofl's" have finally stopped scrolling through his chat-box. 'He reckons that there are about 50 or 60 Chaos Inc waiting to take us out before we get to the general's door. We are fortunate, however, that the defence of the General has been organised by Chaosman, Chaos Inc's less than illustrious leader. Chaosman's plans usually come fully equipped with a fatal flaw, and this one is no exception. Stealthbomb reckons the silly buggers have set up camp at an open intersection in the keep without posting guards at the rear door, which leaves them open to attack from two sides. We are going to split into two companies.'

Once again, Horc pauses as the guild get fractious. 'Groups one, two and three, made up mostly of healers and heavy melee will be the first company and will come with me through the front door,' he continues when the noise finally dies down. 'We will hit Chaos Inc from the front and draw their melee away from the squishies. Once we have their attention, Pamen will lead the ranged and light melee fighters of company two in an assault on their back lines. If we do this well, we can take out their healers before they know what's hit them, then clean up the other squishies and melee at our leisure.'

'Ok, we're here and in position,' Pamen's voice comes through the headphones.

'Sending out the ready alert,' Horc says, watching his screen where six red buttons have appeared along the left hand side, five of which turn green almost immediately. 'What's holding you up now, Twoswords?'

'Just waiting for a debuff to expire,' comes the reply, followed a few seconds later by the last button turning green.

'OK, let's move out,' says Horc. 'Remember, company one needs to concentrate on staying alive until company two hits the back lines. It'll be 60 seconds after our initial

contact, which I will announce, so no risky behaviour unless it's absolutely necessary. Do you hear me, Kamikazeblue?’

‘Yes boss,’ a high-pitched voice answers.

Horc leads a stream of avatars through the monstrous doors of the virtual keep into the maw of a hideous army of ghouls and goblins. Screaming and cursing in their repulsive tongue, the evil legions of Chaos Incorporated charge the intruders. ‘Contact,’ he says into the microphone, and falls silent as he concentrates on applying his virtual weapon to the unreal horrors on his screen.

Twisting and turning, Horc the armored avatar wields his virtual weapon, causing havoc to all enemies around him. Despite his mighty efforts, two sword-wielding ghouls are able to dodge past and attack a cowled monk standing several meters behind and to his left. Cursing, he disengages from the goblin trying to run him through with a spear and spins on his heels, skewering one of the ghouls with his long sword. Bringing his sword back and across, he severs the head of the goblin that has followed him while simultaneously kicking the other ghoul with his armored virtual foot. The monk brings down his stave and a blinding flash of fire reduces both ghouls to twitching virtual corpses that quickly fade. Horc notices the body of the goblin crawling forward in a spirited attempt to regain its head, which has the label “Chaosman” floating above it. Running forward, he finishes it off with his sword and because the dead goblin is the avatar of the guild leader, he bows to the corpse before it fades away. Horc is of the opinion that it always pays to be polite. ‘Bloody regen,’ he mutters into his microphone. ‘You okay there Healsforyou?’

‘Yeah, thanks boss,’ says a voice through his headphones.

Turning to face the hideous charge once more, Horc can see volleys of arrows and burning fireballs in the distance, a sure sign that Pamen’s group has engaged from the rear. The evil charge falters as many of the ghouls turn to face the new threat. Pressing the advantage and bolstered by the healing energies of the monks, Horc and his virtual army fall upon their dithering enemies and carnage ensues. By the time the two companies meet again, every member of Chaos Incorporated has met virtual death and all signs of battle have faded away. There are no corpses littering the ground, no burning buildings belching acrid smoke into the air. There has been no death. There has been no destruction.

‘Well done, people,’ Horc says into the microphone, ‘that battle was massive and awesome, possibly even epic. My counter says we took out 67 Chaos without one casualty. Outstanding! This has been a victory that they’ll be talking about on the forums for months to come.’

‘I’m posting a little taunt as we speak,’ says the voice of Twoswords. ‘Let’s do the General right away. I’ve got to pick up the kids from school in a couple of hours.’

‘Ok,’ Horc says. ‘I’ll re-arrange the groups and when all the debuffs wear off we’ll “do” him. Just don’t tell Twoswords’ husband.’ There is a general twitter in the headphones.

‘The bastard is dead below the waste so he wouldn’t give a shit,’ replies Twoswords, adding an edge of embarrassment to the twittering.

Horc taps furiously at his keyboard for a few minutes, and then looks up at the screen. Satisfied that all is prepared, he sends out the ready signal and this time all six buttons turn green simultaneously. In perfect synchronicity, the massed legions of Enemy of Shadow charge in to do battle with the formidable General. The fight is long and arduous and the

General's murderous ways keep the monks busy, tending the wounded and resurrecting the fallen.

Eventually, however, the mighty virtual warriors of EoS triumph, and the hitherto undefeated General bites the dust before exploding in a shower of loot. For their trouble, each of the participants earns the title "The Respected" and a small bag of virtual gold. Horc is the first warrior in all the lands to don the fabled Acid Armor of the General, and his troops let out a cheer when he first puts it on. Lot allocates the rest of the booty, and several members receive powerful weapons and trinkets that they proudly display to their peers. It is agreed by all that Twoswords should receive the potent Sword of Virility for her outstanding contribution to the battle, and because all geeks love a little irony.

In the real world, the two men get up off their chairs and stretch their legs.

'Taking five,' Horc says into his microphone and removes his headphones.

'Beer break,' says Pamen and does the same. He runs out of the room and returns with two bottles of beer so cold that moisture, condensed out of the dank atmosphere of the room, runs down their sides.

'That was fucking awesome!' says Horc, accepting a bottle. 'We killed the General, we have the armor. We are gods!'

'Now that we've done it, it doesn't seem so tough,' Pamen says. 'With enough healing, three tanks and a shitload of DPS, he's a piece of cake.'

'Yeah, but remember that you have to time it all perfectly. Hit him too hard, too early and you can kiss your healers goodbye. He goes ape shit if he has more than 70% health and you hit him with anything that takes more than 2% of his health in one shot.'

Horc sits back down and takes a satisfied swig of his beer.

'Are you going to publish a guide on this one?' Pamen asks.

'Nah,' replies Horc thoughtfully. 'I'd like to get him to farm status first and gear up the guild so we have an advantage over everyone else. Once that happens, I'll think about it.'

'What if someone else figures it out?'

'Yeah, that could be a problem. We need to reduce the chance of that happening,' Horc says. 'We'll set a permanent guard on the keep doors and come down hard on anyone who tries. Our biggest threat is Chaos Inc, and you saw what just happened to them.'

'Oh yeah, I sure the fuck did,' Pamen answers enthusiastically. 'They won't be tangling with EoS again anytime soon.'

'Yeah, which is a bit of a shame,' says Horc and dons his headphones again. 'OK folks, we're back. We'll set a guard here, groups one and four should do nicely. Group one at the front and group four at the rear. There'll be DKP for every hour done on guard duty so you won't be missing out. Feel free to farm the area while you're here. If you see a force big enough to threaten the General, send out a muster alert and hold them off until help arrives. He's our little puppy now and we're going to try and keep it that way. Everyone else, port to Central for a little dragon farming.'

Beside Horc, Pamen puts on his headphones and manoeuvres his character to the front of his group. Suddenly, a thunderous knocking rings out. The men look at one another.

'Was that in game?' Horc asks.

'I don't think so,' says Pamen, taking off his headphones. Another knock confirms their suspicions. The real world is trying to intrude upon their virtual reality. Pamen looks at Horc,

who puts his finger to his lips and makes a shushing noise. Pamen nods his head in agreement. Both men sit still and quiet, hoping to convince the real world that no one is at home. No such luck, however, and the knocking thunders a third time.

‘Slava, I know you’re in there,’ screams a feminine voice. ‘Open the fucking door or I swear I’ll go home and burn all your Pratchett books.’

Pamen explodes from his seat. ‘I’m coming, sweetness, I’m coming!’ he calls as he races to the front door.

‘You better be or it’ll be the only coming you’ll be doing for the next six months!’ says the voice.

Pamen, aka Slava, opens the door to a petite young woman who, from the looks of her, could not possibly have caused such a loud noise. ‘Hey Dimi,’ he says. ‘How’s it going?’

‘It was going great till I married you,’ she says, pushing past him and making sure to stamp hard on his foot on her way through.

‘Ouch,’ says Pamen, jumping up and down while holding his injured foot. ‘That’s not nice. What the fuck is your problem?’

She wheels around to look at him, arms akimbo and feet planted firmly on the ground. ‘What’s my problem? What’s my problem? It’s been two days since anyone has seen either of you two dildos, that’s what’s my problem.’ She turns and continues her advance towards the dark room. ‘You could at least come home to sleep.’

‘Why?’ asks Pamen. He knows he is heading towards disaster but is unable to stop his mouth from talking. Two days without sleep on a diet of Pizza and beer can dull even the sharpest mind. ‘Sleep is for the weak,’ he mumbles.

The petite woman pushes into the dark room and confronts a cowering Horc. ‘For God’s sake, Alaric, you’re in your thirties. Stop playing computer games and go find someone to fuck,’ she says, looking at him and then at his computer screen. ‘You certainly can’t fuck a cartoon,’ she continues pointing at his computer, but the image of Horc’s avatar draws her eye and drains the urgency from her words. ‘Wow, is that the General’s Acid Armor you’re wearing?’ she asks, pushing past Alaric, aka Horc, for a closer look. ‘Oh my god, it is! Did you guys do the General? Fucking legends!’

Alaric (virtually Horc), beams proudly, and Slava (virtually Pamen), puts his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

‘A couple of days AWOL is a small price to pay for becoming a legend, don’t you think?’ Slava says.

Alaric dons his headphones and sits back down at his computer. ‘That’s it for Pamen and I today, people, we gotta run. You know, work and stuff,’ he says, but all the while his fingers are busy typing away at the keyboard. Dimi looks over his shoulder at the screen.

‘Damn right Pamen has wife agro,’ she says, ‘and there is isn’t a fucking de-taunt out there that can save his arse.’

‘That’s the general consensus,’ Horc says. ‘Pamen left his mic on when he ran to the door, they heard the whole thing. Twoswords wants to know when you’re going to log on again. She’s been saving a drop for you.’

‘Tell her to send it to Matahari, she’s an alt I’ve been working on,’ Dimi says. ‘Better still, give me the mic.’ She reaches over and picks up Pamen’s headphones.

‘Hey Swords, how’s it going?’ she says, and sits down in the chair. ‘What you got for me?’

Slava looks at Alaric, but he is staring intently at his screen and typing furiously. Feeling left out and alone, he turns on one of the other computers and sits down.

‘I thought so!’ exclaims Alaric after a few minutes, jolting Slava out of a rather enjoyable bout of self-pity. ‘Matahari has been running with us for ages. She only logged off a few hours ago, just before we decided to hit the General.’

Dimi looks up from her conversation with Twoswords and smiles at the two men. ‘Why do you think young Slava still has his testicles? At least I know where he’s been and what he’s been doing.’

Slava decides against logging into his wife’s game account—out of common courtesy and not because she has changed the password—and instead browses the official forums. ‘I see you’ve been active on the forums, my love,’ he says. ‘Your trolling ways have earned the guild a reprimand from the moderators.’

Dimi shrugs and turns back to her screen. ‘Hey Swords,’ she says into the microphone, ‘open up a private chat channel. I have eavesdroppers here.’

After a few minutes browsing the forums, Slava looks up with a “hang on a minute” look on his face. ‘Hang on a minute,’ he says. Imagination has never been his strong suit. ‘If you knew where I was and you were watching the whole time, why did you come here and break my nuts?’

Dimi looks around at her husband and shrugs. ‘I got lonely,’ she says. ‘You should, at the very least, inform your wife when you’re planning on leaving reality for the better part of a week.’

‘Fair enough,’ Slava replies, ‘but it wasn’t planned, it just happened.’

‘Yeah right, and the bouncy email you set with the message “Gone to Hell, be back Friday” was a complete coincidence.’

‘Okay, so there was a little preplanning involved,’ Slava says, blushing at the ease with which his little fib was exposed. ‘I thought you were going to stay at your mother’s place for the week. Why’d you come back?’

‘Gary dropped the terrible ones in for some free babysitting,’ she says, referring to the twin tots of terror that are her nephews. ‘And from the look in Dad’s eyes I could tell it was going to be me that did most of it, so I thought I’d come home and spend some quality time with my man. That was two days ago.’

Alaric looks up from his keyboard in alarm. ‘Two days ago? How long have we been at this?’ he asks, scrabbling for his mobile phone. ‘Holy shit, it’s fucking Wednesday, I’ve got a meeting with Melniak in a couple of hours!’ he exclaims and jumps out of his chair. Unfortunately, he is still wearing his headphones, which hook into his spectacles and send them flying across the room. Grumbling and squinting myopically, Horc gets on hands and knees and scrabbles in the gloom for his glasses. The cry of triumph when he finds them is truncated by his head colliding with the central table as he gets up off his knees. ‘I’m going to go for a run to clear my head before heading out,’ he says as he dashes out of the room. ‘Lock up when you go,’ he calls from the other side of the door.

Alaric races into his bedroom, changes into his running gear and sets off into the morning gloom. Running has been an escape from reality for as long as he can remember. In

fact, between running, television, and leading a virtual army, he rarely spends any time at all in the ultimate reality. It's just a place where his body hangs out while his mind wanders from world to world looking for something to do. He is well aware that lady luck has dealt him a fortunate hand. A natural communicator, his particular genius is that he can make himself understood even when using computers. This freakish skill has allowed him to build a career as a consultant to organisations eager to harness the marketing power of the new communication technologies—despite the fact that no one has actually found any marketing power in the new communication technologies. Nonetheless, the faceless bureaucrats that these organisations secrete insist on throwing vast sums of money in his direction in a vain attempt to conquer marketing's latest, and totally imaginary, frontier. All of which has made him a very rich man and allowed him the luxury of picking when, where, and with whom he wants to work.

Smiling at his good fortune and plotting his next move against the dastardly Chaos Incorporated, Alaric's body moves him along a well-worn path at a gentle pace. Down the road he ambles, through the park, across the big intersection, and right into the path of a silent, speeding, and fully electric Toyota. After a short, painful moment, his mind takes to wandering on its own, leaving the crumpled body behind.

Slava's mobile phone rings. Upset at yet another disturbance during his allotted gaming time he picks it up with the intention of turning it off, but a glance at the screen shows that it is Alaric's mother, his aunty, calling. Aware that she is a sensitive woman and that failing to heed her call could start a bitter family feud that may cut even deeper into his gaming time, he reluctantly answers.

'Hello Thea, what's up?' he asks. His mouth drops open as she tells him the news. 'I'll be right there,' he says and rushes out the door, grabbing his wife on the way through.

Within a few minutes, he is helping his ashen faced aunty into the car. Together, they drive to the hospital where they are ushered into a private room in which a very battered and unconscious Alaric lies.

With his aunt sitting crumpled in a chair beside him, his wife long gone to be alone with her grief, Slava sits by Alaric's side as the minutes and hours pass. Eventually, Alaric's eyelids flutter open.

'Ma?' he says. 'Are you here? Where is Slava?'

Thea stirs in her chair, but she seems confused and unfocused.

'Your mother is here, mate,' Slava says. 'We've been waiting here together, waiting for you to open your eyes.'

'I'm glad you're here with Mum, Pamen,' Alaric whispers, his words faint but clear. 'It would be terrible if she was alone at her son's death bed. Take care of the guild, cousin. EoS must not die with me. Promise me, Pamen, promise me.'

'I promise,' Slava says and chokes back a sob, tears rolling down his cheeks.

'Good, that makes me happy,' Alaric nods and reaches out to his mother. 'Please Ma, don't cry. It was a good life,' he says. 'I have one last wish, Ma, you must grant it to me. In my wardrobe is a locked box. Open it. I want to wear those clothes to the grave, and drape the flag in there over my casket. Please do this for me, as my last wish,' he says faintly. With a satisfied look on his face, as if he has finally accomplished all that there is to accomplish in the span of a human life, Alaric draws a final breath.

(ii)

Sometime later, Slava finds himself sitting at his computer feeling detached and alone, the madness induced by Alaric's death many hours behind him. He cannot recall a time when he and his older cousin had spent more than two or three days apart. Even on his honeymoon, Alaric and his then girlfriend had booked in at the same resort. A brief smile touches his lips as he remembers Alaric complaining that, while she was great in bed and fun to be around, their relationship was doomed because she didn't like computer games.

They were sons of immigrants; their fathers were brothers who, together with their wives, had fled the economic and political turmoil of their homeland. The families shared a house for many years, ostensibly to save money, but in reality it was the comfort and security provided by familiar faces and customs in a strange and apparently hostile land that kept them together. Thus, the two spent their early years like brothers, and even when the strange became mundane and the families moved into separate houses, the lure of the familiar kept them close.

Slava and Alaric had played together as toddlers. They had indulged in illicit beer drinking together as teenagers. They had avoided responsibility together as adults. Now Alaric is gone and Slava hurts.

Not quite knowing whether it is the right thing to do, he navigates his browser to the guild website. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he writes a short message about Alaric's death and gives the details of the funeral, humbly requesting that all guild members who live in the area attend and pay their respects. He copies the message onto the official game forums before switching off his computer and shuffling off to his bed where he falls into a deep and dreamless sleep.

In the past, Thea has overseen family tragedies. She was the shining light that guided them through the darkness, but this time her grief is so great that it has overwhelmed her. She is unable to function beyond a superficial level, breaking down often and barely able to speak. The rest of the family are as disturbed by Thea's state of mind as they are by Alaric's death, and are unable to offer any support beyond the occasional kind word. The responsibility, therefore, falls on Slava's broad shoulders and he toils through his pain.

Despite her grief stricken state, Thea is adamant about one detail—that they honour Alaric's dying wish. This is why Slava looks down at a corpse dressed in shiny plate mail armor with a fake jewel-encrusted broadsword resting on its chest, and why a banner bearing the EoS symbol lies over the casket. Anxiety, a companion almost as familiar to Slava as was Alaric, is making itself felt through his pain and grief. Alaric had never been a gregarious fellow and had very few friends. What if they gave a funeral and nobody came?

Looking at the corpse, Slava is ashamed at the thought that, quite possibly, a sparsely attended funeral may be a positive development for Alaric's memory. Turning from the inappropriately dressed remains, he ducks out of the side door of the church to have an illicit cigarette before anyone arrives.

Outside, the sun hides behind black, roiling clouds making the day dark and gloomy. Cupping his hand in front of his face to protect against the fierce wind, Slava strikes a match and applies the flame to a cigarette held between his lips. Inhaling deeply, he lifts his head

and takes in his surrounds for the first time, looking out over the church courtyard and the wide boulevard beyond. Bitter, life stealing, blue smoke wafts from between his lips as he stands staring at the unbelievable scene before him. Hundreds of people stream past the fence towards the church and at least some of them are here for the funeral. Definitely all the ones dressed as heroes, goblins and ghouls.

Crushing his barely tasted death-stick beneath his heel, Slava darts back into the church hoping to catch his aunty before she sees some of the more colourful characters attending her son's funeral. A little foreknowledge may be the difference between a hissy fit and a heart attack, but he is too late. Some of the colourful crowd have already entered the church, and a group of three imitation avatars have engaged Thea in conversation. 'Aunty,' he calls, as he takes the holy steps three at a time, 'it's okay, they're Horc's friends.'

Thea turns surprised eyes in Slava's direction. 'I'm very sorry,' she says to the assembled pseudo avatars, 'this is my nephew Slava and he loved his cousin very much. I think the grief has upset him.'

'It's understandable,' says a leather clad avatar with a familiar voice.

'Twoswords?' asks Slava as he reaches the colourful company.

'Pamen!' she exclaims and embraces him.

'You know one another?' asks Thea. 'Does Dimi know? And who is Horc?'

'Alaric was Horc,' says Slava, disengaging himself hurriedly from Twoswords embrace lest his wife see and get the wrong idea. Even though Twosword's outfit is a good imitation of the armor she wears in game, Slava is very conscious of the fact that it accentuates rather than protects. While wildly unsuitable for battle, it has the potential to cause considerable conflict.

'It was his in-game name,' he continues, 'and all these people here are his friends that he played with.'

Thea casts her eye over the growing crowd in the church. 'All of them?' she asks.  
'Even the ghouls in the corner?'

'Most definitely,' Slava replies, 'he was very popular.'

'Alaric? Popular?' says Thea, sounding more than a little surprised. She looks out over the crowd again and smiles for the first time in many days. Even in death, Alaric is full of surprises. 'Then we had better let them talk,' she says and hands Slava a piece of paper.  
'These people have come to ask if they can say a few words about my son. If they were truly his friends then we should not stand in their way. The speakers will appear in the order they are listed.'

Slava looks at the paper and notes four names: Chaosman, Yrril, Twoswords, and Pamen. 'Aunty, these aren't even proper names,' he complains. 'They're just the names of characters, and I'm one of them!'

'Are they known to you?' she asks.

'Yes, but only as characters in a game. I've never actually met them in person,' he says.

'I'm sure you can work it out,' Thea responds, 'help a frail old woman. I am going to sit down with your parents now, Slava. You have been such a help. Only a little further and it will all be over.'

Slava watches as his aunty strides away. The large numbers of people coming to pay their respects to Alaric have had a positive effect on her and she seems more like the Thea

that they all know and fear. He can think of many words to describe her. Frail is not one of them.

Church functionaries shoo Slava and the small group of colorfully dressed mourners to the pews as the religious service gets under way. Slava prays for a little divine help during the speeches because he can foresee nothing but disaster. He wishes Alaric was here and then remembers that he is, dressed in plastic armor and in no condition to help.

Once the gods have been appeased, the church functionaries drag Slava to the altar before disappearing through a door behind the stage. Never the best at public speaking, Slava blinks at the crowd and consults his notes, which were now totally useless. Time to wing it.

‘We grew up as brothers, Alaric and I, facing everything together and in all those years I cannot recall a single unkind act. I have always found it strange that Alaric, for all his goodwill and kindness, was such a misunderstood man in our family, considered by many a loner and recluse. The numbers here today would indicate that he was anything but. Alaric spent much of his life sitting at his computer from where he made many, many friends. Many of you here today may have known him as Horc and have never met him face to face, but that does not mean you did not know or care about Alaric.’ Slava consults the list that Thea had handed him earlier. ‘I would like to introduce Chaosman, Horc’s greatest rival and leader of Chaos Incorporated,’ he says and cedes the lectern to a small man dressed as a goblin warrior (complete with green face paint) and wearing a cape decorated with a stylized illustration of a severed arm.

Chaosman stands up at the lectern and produces a handful of paper from beneath his cloak. He shuffles the scraps into an arrangement that pleases him and then takes a moment to read the first page. ‘Horc was not my friend,’ he says, leaning towards the microphone. Slava drops his head into his hands and wishes Alaric were still alive to see this. Chaosman appears to be no more than 15 years of age.

‘In fact,’ continues Chaosman, in his squeaky pubescent voice, ‘he was my sworn enemy. I have many, many enemies because of my leet fighting skills and tactical genius, but Horc was my greatest one. He was different from all the others because he was honorable. He knew what honor was, he knew how to behave honorably. Many guild leaders think they know about honor, but they are neubs compared to Horc.’ Chaosman looks down at his notes and shuffles onto the next page. ‘The last time I saw Horc,’ he continues after taking a moment to read the new page, ‘we was involved in a big battle in which he zerged us and defeated us by overwhelming numbers. I had him at my mercy when he must have hit his iwin button and cut my head off. Instead of lol-ing at my corpse like every unhonorable guild leader neub out there, Horc bowed. He bowed because he knew that I was a leet fighter and he had won by luck. He bowed because he knew what honor is and what it means to be honorable.’

Once again, Chaosman pauses and shuffles his notes, taking another moment to read the new page. ‘But this is not the only time Horc was honorable towards me and my guildies. He understood that while we are evil in the game, we are not really evil in the real world. Not always that evil, except when I get angry, and then there is trouble, but that does not happen much anymore. Much.’ Chaosman pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow, transferring much of the green face paint from his forehead onto his sleeve.

It is obvious to Slava that public speaking is a weakness in Chaosman's skill set, nearly as bad as his tactical nous.

'One day, we was having a big war in the Darklands. Me and my guildies were doing okay, even despite being zerged by Horc and EoS and we was outnumbered at least 3 to 1,' Chaosman pauses and consults his notes. 'No sorry, it was in the Heinous Caverns, not the Darklands. Anyway, the server was having some troubles on that day and disconnected more than half of my guildies. I thought, this is it, it's going to be a massacre, they have us outnumbered ten to one. But Horc stopped fighting! He told his guild to wait! He did that because he was an honorable man and did not want to take too much of an advantage. Other guild leader neubs who are unhonorable would have chopped us up as we logged back on one by one, but not EoS. They are honorable and Horc was honorable.' Chaosman returns to his notes and shuffles them again, taking time, once again, to read the new page.

Pamen, sitting in the front pew, has his face in his hands and is trying his hardest to contain the peals of laughter threatening to force their way out of his throat and into the world. Some things demand a laugh, regardless of where and how they come about. He remembers that day in the Hidden Cavern. Even after the disconnection, Chaos Incorporated had greater numbers than EoS. Risking a giggle, he looks up at the sweating pseudo Goblin who is fiddling with his cloak as he focuses on his notes. There stands the leader of a guild of at least three hundred people. He drops his head back into his hands to hide the monstrous grin that he can feel on his face.

'Another time, while we were farming Giants,' Chaosman continues, 'Horc and Eos show up to also do some farming. Usually, if other guilds show up there is a big war to see who gets to farm, but Horc is honorable. He stopped his guild and said that, because we were there first, we should have the farm spot. It may be that my leet skills scared Horc a bit and because they did not outnumber us that time, but I think it was more because Horc was honorable. Other unhonorable guild leader neubs would have attacked and had their arse handed to them,' Chaosman puts down his notes and looks out at the crowd. 'I'm a man of action, a warrior and tactician with massive skills, but not all that good at making speeches,' he says, putting the pages back under his cloak, 'and words sometimes give me trouble. But I don't need no notes to tell you that every time I saw Horc, I knew it was going to be a good day. I will miss him. Also, sorry for saying arse in church.'

Chaosman shuffles off the stage and Pamen, driving the grin from his face with some difficulty, replaces him. 'A moving tribute from Horc's greatest enemy,' he says, 'I would like to introduce Yrril, professional gamer and long time associate of Horc.'

A well-groomed young knight in imitation chain armor takes the stage. He produces a neat sheaf of notes that he puts on the lectern and subjects the crowd to a hostile stare. 'It grieves me to be here today, saying goodbye to one of the few genuine friends I have made in game,' he says. 'Horc was a very tolerant man, generous with his time as well as with his money. Many of you already know that I am a gold farmer, and have shunned me because of this. In that way, you are all unlike Horc, who accepted me as a friend. He accepted me for who I am, rather than rejecting me for how I earn a living.'

Yrril looks defiantly at the crowd and adjusts his notes. 'The game was very young when I first met Horc, barely out of Beta and full of bugs. I was fresh out of high school and looking for work. Together, Horc and I took on and overcame many of the toughest

challenges that the game had to offer, challenges that to this day are difficult even for full, well-geared groups. Those were dark days for me; my folks were riding me for not having an income. Hanging with Horc was the only light in my life, and I looked forward to our time together. It was Horc who suggested that I start selling in game items for real money as a way of making a little cash until I could get a job. He would always pass on any high value loot that we found so that I would have something to sell. Eventually, he stopped taking any loot at all, saying that taking on some of the tougher encounters as a two-man group was reward enough for him. As time passed, my way of earning a few dollars became a full-blown business and while this was great in one way, it was also a little sad. I had to put business before pleasure, and grinding was better for business than chasing elusive drops, so Horc and I stopped two-manning together. But even after all these years, he would still /wave if ever our paths crossed and often invited me to raids and guild runs during the slow hours.'

Yrril stops and wipes a tear from his eye. 'Despite our long history, the early days are not the strongest memory I have of Horc. That honor goes to what I call the charity raids. A few months ago, Horc came to me to seek a little help. He told me that a guild member of EoS had come upon hard times and that he wanted to give them a hand, so he had organised a series of raids the loot from which was to go to this person. He wanted me to sell the items on their behalf, as I had a strong and established distribution network. The events raised over five thousand dollars, and to top it all off, he insisted that I take a commission because selling game items is how I make a living and he didn't want to take food from my table. It was an amazing effort, and made me proud to call him my friend.' Once again, Yrril stops and looks at the crowd. 'Although I never actually met Horc in person,' he continues, 'he has had a profound effect upon my life. He was the most generous person I have ever known, but not just generous with money. Horc was generous in a way that is so rare in these crowded times. He gave freely of his time and of his affection. He made it his business to treat people with respect, because he thought that everyone is worthy of respect. He gave of his time, not for the accolades or the attention, but because he sincerely wanted to. My condolences go out to his family, and to all of us who considered him a friend,' Yrril concludes and, wiping another tear from his eye, leaves the stage.

Pamen slowly makes his way to the lectern. After Chaosman's comic performance, Yrril's speech reminded him of his pain and loss. Taking a moment to compose himself, he looks again at the note Thea had handed him. 'Twoswords, a veteran member of Enemies of Shadow, will now say a few words about her guild leader,' he says, his voice shaky and emotional. The leather clad Twoswords takes the lectern.

Unlike the others, Twoswords does not have any notes. 'I have known Horc for many years, right back from our UO days,' she says. 'He was a great leader and friend, but more than that, he was a kind man who acted ethically and morally at all times. Yrril told us about Horc's act of generosity to help a guild member get back on their feet. I was that guild member. For years, I had been suffering in a bad relationship. One day, I was two-manning with Horc when things came to a head between my former husband and me. Horc heard the whole thing and he was appalled that a person could treat a loved one the way he treated me. I told Horc I wanted to leave, but did not have the resources, nor would I accept money from someone I had never met. Horc respected that, but he said that it would be immoral if he did not do everything in his power to help me. You see, Horc believed that there are

responsibilities that go along with rights. He told me that we all had the right to live free of violence, but we also had the responsibility to help when we see violence perpetrated on others. The charity raids were his way of getting me the money I needed to escape without giving it to me himself. He also respected my wish that no one else should know about my circumstances,’ Twoswords stops and looks down at the lectern, fighting back the tears. ‘He kept that promise till the day he died,’ she continues, then bursts into tears.

Slava gets up from his seat intending to help her off the stage but Twoswords shoos him away.

‘A few weeks ago, Horc and I met in person for the first time. Alaric was exactly the man I expected him to be. We met as friends and we parted as friends. He was, as Chaosman has told you, an honorable man. We had been meeting regularly ever since. I insisted he keep our meetings quiet even though there was nothing actually going on between us. After many years of pain, I felt insecure and just needed to know he was the man he appeared to be before I made a commitment. He is gone now, but I’m sure he understood my hesitation, and my grief is for the future lost rather than the past regretted,’ Twoswords stops, fighting back the rising tide of emotion. ‘Alaric was disappointed with life,’ Twoswords continues when her emotions are once again in check. ‘He told me how, when he was growing up, he and his friends were full of hope and optimism, determined to follow their dreams and live full and satisfying lives. As the years passed, he watched the heroes of his youth fade into nothingness, as one by one his friends surrendered their dreams and adopted lives more ordinary. He told me of the horror he felt when he realized that he too was moving along that same path. The game was his way of fighting back. In the game, he could be the person he wanted to be. He could be an honorable man, he could be a man motivated by higher ideals.’ Twoswords looks up and directly at Thea. ‘While our loss greatly saddens me, I am thankful that I got to know Alaric as well as I did before he left us. He changed my life, and for that I will be eternally grateful.’

Slava takes the stage as Twoswords returns to the pews. He looks out over the assembled pseudo avatars sitting respectfully in the pews. In the entire world, he thinks to himself, there couldn’t be too many scenes like this. Feeling drained and spent, he longs for this to be over so that he can log into the game and forget his troubles for a little while. ‘Horc was Alaric, and Alaric was my friend,’ he says from the lectern. ‘He was a wealthy man, but lived his life as if money was irrelevant. He was a successful man, but always placed his happiness before his work. He had no children of his own, but was devoted to his family. He was a popular man, as the turnout at this funeral demonstrates, but many believed him isolated and alone. He conducted his life in the ultimate reality in the same way he did in the game. Sadly, honor, generosity and a desire to live ethically seem not to be highly favored in these times. The way Alaric lived his life asks many questions of how we live ours. We pride ourselves on knowing what is and is not valuable, and yet spend so much of our lives looking for fulfillment. The question we must ask is; how do we define value? Is a life spent collecting baubles and trinkets a life well spent? Is a life spent pursuing individual goals a life spent alone?’

Slava pauses as an immaculately presented ghoul gets up from his pew and approaches the stage. He gestures to Slava to come closer. The two have a whispered discussion that leaves Slava smiling. He returns to the lectern and turns to the assembled crowd. ‘That

frightening ghoul was none other than Deathsknell, also known as Troy Barrot, lead developer of the game. He has just informed me that Horc will continue in game as leader of the Capital Defences. He will be wearing the General's Acid Armor, which General Tzamos will no longer wear or drop. Horc will be the final challenge that the forces of evil must overcome should they ever try to capture the Shining Citadel. Alaric is dead. Long live Horc. I will see you all in game.' So saying, Slava shuffles slowly out of the church, pausing only to kiss his aunty and ask his wife to come home with him.

### Consuming Passions

It had become an annual event. Every year during the football grand final they'd gather at Graham's place to eat. It began with just three of them, brought together by fate and a dislike of football. As the years passed, word spread through the neighborhood that there was alternate entertainment on what had become a de facto Holy day. There was a general rejoicing amongst those with an aversion to watching sweaty men grapple, and they happily joined the festivities at Graham's, where balls of a certain type were taboo.

Using his oversized tongs, Graham re-arranges his famous homemade sausages on the grill, careful to keep one side to the flame to get an even color and consistency along the length of the tube. Most people leave him alone when he is with his sausages, frightened away by anti-social behavior in years past. Thanks to one or two unfortunate incidents, it is widely known that getting too close to Graham when he is at his barbecue will gain you tong burns in embarrassing places. Only the other two originals, Andy and Gertrude, dare to go near him when he is cooking. They stand apart from the general frivolity, clutching drinks and chatting quietly.

It's only been twenty minutes since he arrived, but Andy is already showing signs of excess, slurring his words and standing at an unnatural angle.

Graham shakes his head and looks at Gertrude, who shrugs.

'What can you do,' she replies to his unasked question, 'he gets like this at least once or twice a week.'

Andy watches Graham fuss over the sausages. 'I'm still here, you know,' he says without raising his eyes. 'Just because I've had a couple of beers doesn't mean that I've lost my status as a person.'

'Sorry,' says Gertrude, putting her hand on Andy's shoulder, 'I didn't mean to offend, but you're already pissed and you only just got here. Did you have anything to drink before you came?'

'Drink? No, nothing to drink,' Andy says, 'and I've only had two glasses of beer since I got here.'

Graham shakes his head and attends to his sausages.

'C'mon folks, lighten up. We're celebrating not being at the football. Remember?' says an exasperated Andy. 'Celebrating, having F-U-N. So I had half a tab before I got here, big deal. I'm just getting in the mood. Not like you two tightwads, standing around being all stiff and serious and shit.'

Graham allows himself to be distracted, momentarily, from his sausages. ‘Grow up,’ he says, ‘getting wasted daily is for kids. You’re in your thirties, in case you hadn’t noticed. It’s time you started to take yourself a bit more seriously and make something of your life.’

‘What, become more like you two,’ Andy says, making a horrified face. ‘It’s not me that needs to re-evaluate, my friends, it’s you. I know I’ve only got a limited time before oblivion reclaims me, so I’m making the most of every precious second, minute and hour. What’s the use of slaving away at the coal front if I can’t enjoy the fruits of my labor?’ Graham shakes his head and Gertrude looks at the ground. Andy makes a disgusted sound and drains his glass. ‘I’m off to get a drink, can I get you anything or have you gone all teetotaler on me?’

‘Just the usual for us both,’ says Gertrude, looking at Graham who nods. Andy shuffles off.

‘You shouldn’t ride him like that,’ Gertrude says when Andy is out of earshot. ‘You’re not his dad you know. He can live his life how he wants.’

‘We’re his friends,’ Graham says, without taking his eye off his sausages. The second row is giving him trouble this morning, cooking a little faster than the rest. ‘It’s our duty to tell him, even if he doesn’t listen.’

Gertrude shakes her head and looks unconvinced. ‘Oh c’mon. It’s not as if you’re a great achiever. You work fifty hours a week and what have you got to show for it? Nothing, that’s what. You squirrel all your money under the mattress and let it rot. In a way, you’re as bad as he is. You work and work and work and have nothing to show for it.’

‘It’s a strange “way” you’re talking about, then, if you think I’m as bad as Andy,’ Graham replies while shuffling sausages in and out of the second row, trying to distribute the extra heat evenly. ‘I have a nice nest egg in the bank, thank you very much, and a very pleasant lifestyle.’

‘Yeah, right, lifestyle. You call yourself a foodie but you’re too tight to go out to a good restaurant. All you do is create elaborate sausages and read library books.’

‘I am not tight, thank you very much,’ Graham says, carefully turning the top row of sausages, ‘I am simply more aware of value than your average consumer.’

Gertrude snorts her derision as Andy comes dancing back carrying three drinks, shirrtails flapping in the breeze. ‘Hey serious sausages, here are your drinkies,’ he says, placing two of the glasses on a nearby table. ‘Have you meet Larry from number 37 across the road?’ he asks, balancing on the balls of his feet. ‘Really cool guy who carries an assortment of powders on him at all times.’ Without waiting for an answer, Andy bounces off leaving Graham and Gert shaking their heads.

‘These sausages are just about ready,’ says Graham, ‘pass me the platter.’ Gertrude gives Graham the platter without a word and then watches silently as he carefully starts taking sausages off the grill, taking the darkest first and inspecting each before putting down. ‘Okay everyone,’ he bellows when the grill stands empty, ‘the sausages are ready. Come and get’em, and remember if you think they need a spruce up, please use the chutney on the table under the veranda. I will personally kill anyone I see putting any horrible, mass produced condiments on my sausages.’

Gertrude secures herself a couple of sausages, and grabs another for Andy before scuttling out of the way of the stampede. She stands alone as Graham does his rounds, making sure the scourge of ordinary ketchup doesn't taint his sausages.

By the time Graham returns, Gertrude has eaten both her sausages and is considering eating the one she got for Andy.

'I've been thinking about what you said before,' said Graham as he places another two sausages on Gertrude's plate, 'about being tight and all, and I reckon you're being a little unfair.'

'Really?' says Gertrude, after taking a bite of one of her newly acquired sausages.  
'How so?'

'Well, I just don't see a point in buying useless crap and filling my house with stuff that I don't want or won't use.'

'Yeah, sure you don't. You just don't want to spend your hard earned. Anyway, it's not really what I was talking about. Why don't you invest your money instead of stuffing it in your mattress?'

Graham looks perplexed. 'I do invest my money. It's in the bank earning interest.'

"That is just ridiculous," Gertrude says, her attempt at looking exasperated foiled by the sausage she was chewing. 'Investing is more than just sticking all your money in a crappy bank account. Gerald and I have a range of investments. We have two investment properties and use a margin loan to invest in the share market.'

Graham watches as Peter from across the road prepares to cook his famous chilli steaks. Peter has a ritualistic approach to cooking and always arranges the barbecue so that the sun shines over his right shoulder while he tends his meat. 'You have three mortgages?' he says. 'Wow, no wonder you and Gerald work so many hours. What's your monthly interest bill?'

'Ah, Graham, you are so innocent,' Gertrude replies, wearing an expression that she thinks makes her look worldly and wise. 'In order to make money, you need to spend money. Well known fact.'

Andy picks this moment to return, dancing towards them shirtless and slick with sweat. He takes a sausage off Gertrude's plate and looks around with unfocused eyes. 'Where's Gerald, Gert?' he asks, gyrating to a rhythm that only he can hear. 'Working again?'

Gertrude blushes and nods.

'I hope he's not neglecting his duties as a husband,' Andy says, winking at Gertrude and waving his sausage provocatively. 'A woman like you needs lovin', if you know what I mean.' Before either Gert or Graham can respond, he dances away into the crowd gathered around the grill.

Gertrude finishes her sausages and picks up her drink. 'The hours we work are also an investment. By the time we are both in our fifties, we will have a considerable portfolio of assets and will be able to reduce our hours considerably.'

'So what you're saying,' Graham says, 'is that you'll work longer hours now so that you can work fewer hours when you get older?'

'Yeah, something like that,' Gertrude says, considering the logic of her life. 'Makes perfect sense.'

'What if there is a recession and all your assets get screwed?'

Gertrude shrugs. ‘You can’t live your life in fear of the sky falling on your head, now can you?’

‘You’re right. Luckily you own the house you live in,’ says Graham. ‘A little bit of security is always a comfort.’

‘Yeah,’ says Gertrude, wondering whether mortgaging the family home to pay for the matching SUV’s was such a good idea after all.

Graham wanders off and returns with two drinks, one of which he gives to Gertrude. ‘So, your mother said that you and Gerry were thinking of starting a family,’ he says.

Gertrude sighs and puts her plate on the table. ‘We’ve been thinking about it, but we’re not sure we can fit a baby into the budget.’

Graham smiles. ‘It’s a strange old world when budgets take precedence over babies,’ he says.

‘How’s your boy then? I haven’t seen him around for a while,’ Gertrude asks, trying to change the subject. In her head, she can hear a clock ticking and talk of babies always makes it louder.

‘Yeah, he’s been studying hard for his exams. Doesn’t have time for his old man at the moment.’

‘You two are looking a bit gloomy,’ says Andy as he comes dancing back, his eyes bright red and dilated. ‘Thank the gods that randy Andy has returned to brighten your lives.’ Draping himself over Gertrude he takes the drink from her hand and splashes it onto his face where he thinks his mouth should be. ‘Is it just me, or is it really bright today,’ he says, standing up straight and letting go of Gertrude.

Graham looks concerned. ‘You okay?’ he asks.

‘Yeah fine,’ says Andy and returns Gertrude’s drink. ‘I think I might have a lie down now,’ he says as he topples forward.

‘Oh shit, Andy, what the fuck,’ Graham says and kneels down beside his fallen neighbor. He rolls the unconscious man onto his back. Thankfully, there is very little blood because Andy’s idiot grin had curled his lips away from the impact, which was totally absorbed by his teeth. There are no cuts or bruises on him, but his two front teeth are lying, forlornly, on the concrete path.

Andy regains consciousness quickly and looks up at the crowd that has gathered around him. ‘It’th okay folkth,’ he says as he struggles to a sitting position. ‘Nothing to thee here.’ A look of confusion crosses his face and his feels at his mouth with his right hand. ‘My teeth, my teeth, what’th happened to my teeth!’

Graham helps him to stand and looks at Andy’s mouth. His front teeth are nothing more than stumps, angling away from one another to form an upside down “V” shaped gap in his smile. ‘Wow,’ he says, ‘you missed everything except your teeth. The front two are chipped pretty bad.’

‘Oh thit,’ says Andy and collapses backward. After a few seconds, he begins to snore.

## KPI

The exceptionally good coffee at Café Tagliari has dragged Sammy through its doors every working morning for the better part of five years. Always the first customer of the day, he

likes to watch the sunrise from a curbside table with a cigarette and a cup of sanity. Once upon a time, this had been the morning ritual of a young ideologue, but the passing years had wrought changes. Sammy remembers him quite well. He was a young man destined to change the world, a man who would be the bane of the greedy, corrupt, and self-serving capitalist machine. Sammy knows that he is almost completely gone now, corralled and restrained by the ambitions of a lesser man.

Sometimes, however, the young ideologue screams his rage and beats his ethereal fists against the walls of Sammy's subconscious, which always makes him uncomfortable and usually leads to a migraine. During times such as these—and this morning is one of them—Sammy tells the young firebrand that change was inevitable. The stresses of modern life strangle and suffocate ideals; shit happens, people adjust. He spouts the boomer mantra that only the brainless do not become conservative as they age. It feels like treachery none the less and the excuses of the preceding generation feel hollow and empty.

The truth of the matter is that Sammy is a little anxious this morning, but he always is on the day that his superiors conduct their annual work review. How things have changed! He can remember the young ideologue looking forward to these meetings. They were a chance to show off his many bureaucratic victories, to parade his prowess with the rubber stamp for all to see. All of which just goes to show just how naïve and clueless the young ideologue had been.

This job was meant to be temporary, a place from which to marshal his forces and acquire the resources necessary for an assault on the capitalist machine that was grinding the humanity out of his fellow citizens. He can't quite recall when it went from being a necessary evil to an accepted part of his life, but he did have a twelve-month bender in the middle there somewhere and his memory of the period is a little shaky. He probably flipped during that time, somewhere between finishing a drink and swallowing a pill.

So absorbed is Sammy in his ponderings that he doesn't notice the arrival of Cheryl, his friend and co-worker, until she is half way through her coffee. Finally, impatient with Sammy's indifference to her presence, she slaps him across the forehead. 'Hello, remember me? We are meeting for coffee and chats this morning,' she says.

'A simple wave and smile would have sufficed,' replies Sammy, rubbing at his forehead.

'I did that when I first got here but you ignored me. Anyway, violence is more fun.'

'Yeah, right,' Sammy says, staring moodily at his coffee. 'Maybe violence is the answer.'

'You've got your review today, haven't you?' Cheryl asks. 'I can tell because you are even more of an asshole than usual.'

Sammy gives her what he considers to be a withering look. 'Just because someone has a different outlook on life than you, does not make them an asshole. I just happen to have different values to most people,' he says.

'Nah, I know plenty of people with different outlooks on life. They aren't assholes,' she pauses for effect and takes the opportunity to take a sip from her most excellent coffee. 'You have a different outlook on life to your average bureaucrat, I'll grant you that, but you're also an asshole, plain and simple.'

‘Yeah, right. Whatever,’ Sammy says, and tries one of his withering looks again. ‘If I’m such a prick, why are you here?’

Cheryl shrugs. ‘I didn’t say I didn’t like you, just that you’re an asshole.’

‘Yeah, well, that’s life. But you’re right, my review is today and I’m not happy about it.’

‘It would be a lot easier for you if you simply stopped being such an asshole,’ Cheryl says, patting Sammy’s hand in what she thinks is a sympathetic manner.

‘Got a bit of an anal focus this morning, have we?’ Sammy observes. ‘It’s alright for you, your reviews are always good because you’re a fawning bootlicker.’

‘See what I mean about being an asshole? And for your information, I get good reviews because I’m good at my job and I can get along with people. I’d throw my coffee in your face if it wasn’t so good,’ Cheryl says, and drinks down the rest of her excellent brew before storming off.

Sammy feels a mite guilty as he watches Cheryl stomp across the road and enter the building that houses their place of work. It had never occurred to him that his workmates might not like him. He always thought he got along quite well with everyone in the office and regularly attended out-of-hours get-togethers. True, he was a little strong in his opinions at times and had caused a few people to cry over the years, but never intentionally.

Maybe Cheryl has a point. It couldn’t be that he is bad at his job. He can make a rubber stamp sing and his knowledge of practice and procedure are awe-inspiring. Nor are his bureaucratic talents unrecognized—everyone from the CEO to the teenage mail clerk on work experience knows that Sammy is a gun ‘crat. Every year, however, he stumbles at the last two Key Performance Indicators, which metaphorically knee him in the groin. Try as he might, Sammy simply cannot raise them. To be totally honest, he doesn’t quite understand them. So if it isn’t his work, then maybe it is his attitude. Maybe he should learn to control his tongue. He finishes his coffee and wanders towards the office, determined to give niceness a go.

## (ii)

Every year, the drill is the same. At the allotted time, Sammy makes his way to the big meeting room on the top floor. At the centre of the room is a large table with four, large, plush office chairs on one side and a small plastic chair on the other. The plastic chair is set back a little from the desk. Sammy’s superiors occupy the four plush chairs. There is Steven, the department manager; Darren, the representative from human resources; Lisa, his team leader; and Frank, the assistant team leader.

Sammy nods a greeting and sits on the plastic chair. Lisa smiles a cold smile and shuffles some papers on the desk before her. ‘Well Sammy,’ she says after a few minutes, ‘it looks like it’s the same old story. Unfortunately your KPI’s don’t warrant a pay increase yet again.’ She turns her cold smile directly at him. ‘Do you want to go through them again?’

Sammy hangs his head in shame. ‘They’re the same ones again, aren’t they?’ he asks.

‘Afraid so,’ she says. ‘It’s become a bit of a tradition, hasn’t it?’

Sammy says nothing, but his head hangs lower.

‘It appears that you are a difficult man to work with,’ says Darren. ‘While the management team respects your skills as a consultant, we simply cannot reward behavior that runs counter to the culture we are trying to engender in our department.’

‘But those KPI’s are so ambiguous, they mean absolutely nothing,’ Sammy bursts out. ‘How the hell can you give me a score on my contribution to the culture in the organization? That’s not something that you can measure empirically, is it?’

‘Nevertheless, mate, others seem to do quite well in them,’ says Frank, ‘why can’t you?’

‘Yeah, right. Those subjective KPI’s are there for the sole purpose of building your petty little fiefdoms in the office. Look at you all, a bunch of self-satisfied fatheads who wouldn’t know achievement if it bit you on the ass. What the fuck has ‘team-work’ got to do with filling in form s/c42781? And the only way I can think of to promote office harmony is for everyone to stay at home.’

‘If I recall correctly, Sammy, you made exactly the same speech last year,’ says Darren from HR. ‘We all know what you think about this process, and frankly, if it weren’t for your outstanding performance in the functional aspects of your employment, you would no longer have a position here.’

‘The functional aspects?’ Sammy explodes. ‘You mean the actual work, don’t you? You lot absolutely kill me. When was the last time any of you did anything productive? There are six people in my team, and two of them are managers. Why the hell do we need two managers in a group of six? Our department has twelve managers getting in the way of sixteen actual workers. If there were only one manager and twenty-seven workers, we’d get everything done in half the time. As far as I can tell, the only thing you twats do is send reports full of meaningless statistics to one another. You don’t even make any meaningful decision, that’s all up to the big wigs upstairs. You are absolutely and undoubtedly a waste of space. Every year we do this, and every year it’s the same result. It’s a joke. It’s got nothing to do with how I do my job, it’s just that none of you can fit me into your pathetic little powerbases. Look at this place. The people at the top steer the ship, the people at the bottom do the work. You lot are just corporate puss.’

Lisa looks towards Steven, who shrugs. ‘While we respect your opinion, Sammy,’ she says, ‘we are employed by this organization to fulfill pre-defined roles. We do not determine our conditions of employment, nor what we must do to earn our money. Despite your outburst, we have decided that we will give you another chance. There is going to be a team added to our department, and we would like you to be involved. Cheryl is being promoted to team leader and, while you won’t be her official assistant, you are to support her in every way you can. If you manage this successfully, we will consider extending your employment and may even consider a pay rise.’

Sammy looks up. ‘There isn’t going to be an assistant team leader?’ he asks.

‘There will be, but they are insufficiently experienced at the moment,’ Lisa replies.

Sammy shakes his head. ‘OK,’ he sighs, sounding and looking defeated.

The review over, Sammy stands to leave.

‘One last thing,’ says Steven. ‘We expect that you keep this arrangement to yourself.’

Sammy stops and turns. There is a peculiar look on his face. ‘Afraid I might offend a bootlicker, are you mate?’ he says as he grasps the back of the cheap plastic chair.

‘Certainly not, but we must be sensitive in our workplace relationships in order to promote harmony and a positive culture,’ Steven replies.

You suck,’ says Sammy and in one-movement picks up the plastic chair and vaults over the desk, violence uppermost in his mind.

Eyes dilated and the taste of blood in his mouth, Sammy swings his chair with venom, malice, and not a little joy. He strikes Steven over the head with his improvised club then spins on his toes, collecting Lisa and Darren on the follow through. He fells Frank with a direct hit to the back of the head just as the luckless assistant team leader is but two short strides from freedom, his hand closing over the doorknob.

Sammy stands in the centre of the room, surveying the damage. They aren’t dead, which in one way is lucky and in another, more primal way, is disappointing. He takes a deep breath and lights a cigarette. Cheryl is definitely right. He is a bit of an asshole. It would go a long way to explain why he feels so good right now. Still, these bastards have had it coming for years. Sitting on the desk to collect his thoughts, Sammy can see that Steven is conscious but playing possum. ‘I quit,’ Sammy says and butts his cigarette on the tabletop. In his cage somewhere in the far reaches of Sammy’s mind, the young ideologue stands and cheers.

‘Don’t forget your contract stipulates you must give notice of at least two weeks before resigning,’ says the supine Steven. ‘So would you mind helping Cheryl set up her team before you leave?’

### Cad and the Sacred Cow

The nineties were a decade of wonder for me, and came to a climax at 11pm, New Year Eve, 1999. I was in a hotel room overlooking the university where I was studying nuclear physics. My naked girlfriend was on her knees before me while I drank a cheap Scotch straight from the bottle. A little unrefined perhaps, but my middle class pretensions fall away whenever I let my hair down.

It’s been downhill ever since. The noughties were barely 3 months old when Lynette left me for the Sapphic delights of the University’s women’s room. The end of 2001 saw the academic board send me on my way for reasons that remain unclear, but probably tied to my use of certain substances just before structural mechanics class. Then, early in 2002, my parents decided that they needed a little space and left for parts unknown, selling the house through an agent a short time later. And forget about getting a job, I couldn’t even score an interview. To top it all off, the girls just didn’t want to know, and I developed an allergy to alcohol that caused great, puss filled sores to sprout all over my body. Things were looking dire.

For a while, I lived on the fringes of society in various squats and share-houses but, by the end of 2007, I was feeling a little hard done by. Broke, sober, celibate, and out of options, I decided it was time for drastic action.

Pulling the balaclava over my face, I nodded towards Alex, the last of my friends and driver of the getaway car, and ran full tilt around the corner to where two security guards were unloading an armored truck. They dropped their load a little too easily when they caught sight of my fake pistol and took to groveling on the pavement.

Waving my plastic Magnum threateningly, I slung a bulging sack over my shoulder and turned to make my escape. It would have been perfect had I not run straight into a metal pole coming the other way. Feeling my consciousness slipping, I looked up to see if I could recognize my assailant. To my surprise, I saw Alex, bent pole in one hand, standing over me when he should have been in the getaway car.

'What the fuck,' I mumbled before passing out.

(ii)

When I regained my senses, I found myself tied to a chair in a dark room. Alex was sitting behind a table a few yards away. Sitting beside him was a thickset man dressed in a suit that was too tight across the shoulders. 'This is an interesting new police procedure,' I said, struggling with my bonds.

Most people would be justifiably concerned if they awoke to find themselves immobilized in a dark room with two leering men sitting close by. However, with all the shit that had flowed my way, I was feeling a little relieved. At least I was fully clothed and didn't have one of those weird ball-gag thingies in my mouth.

'Untie me now, Alex, and I promise I won't beat you and your kinky friend too badly.'

'Please Cad, you gotta understand, there were extenuating circumstances. The cops were waiting for us. They were going to frame you for murder.'

'What the fuck are you talking about you idiot? I had the cash and was running. We were away! Until you clocked me, that is. If it leaves a mark I'm going to cut your balls off and feed them to your cat.'

'Please calm yourself, Cadwgan,' said the man beside Alex. He stood up and walked around the table to stand directly in front of me. 'Your friend has just saved your life. You should be thankful.'

'It's difficult to be thankful when one is tied to a chair,' I replied, somewhat surprised at just how tall and heavily built Alex's friend was. 'You will go a long way towards gaining my trust if you untie me,' I continued. Size be damned. Every man has a soft spot and his was at the perfect height for a pummeling from my seated position.

The tall man smiled. 'I know you well, Cad, even though you know nothing of me. Freeing you now will only lead to violence, and I like my testicles in their natural, un-bruised state.' He sat on the edge of the table. 'Tell me, have you ever felt as if there was someone out to get you? Did you ever get the feeling that powerful forces were aligned against you and determined to make your life a living hell?'

I contemplated my recent history. 'Now that you mention it, there have been times when it feels that my misfortune has a manufactured quality,' I said. 'Most recently when I awoke to find myself bound to a chair and at the mercy of two grinning perverts.'

The tall man smiled again. 'I am no pervert, Cad,' he said, 'but you should know that you are a very special man, and that there are powerful forces that have it in for you.'

'This is all part of a sex game, isn't it?' I said. 'I'm going to get whipped and sodomized, aren't I?'

'I assure you, Cad, I like my partners female and in the missionary position. You are here because you are the bastard son of Adam Smith, High Priest of Capitalism and Keeper of the Sacred Bull.'

I sighed and looked from the tall man to Alex. 'Just get it over with and let me go home,' I said, resigned to my fate.

'My name is Madoc,' the tall man said, 'and I represent the Society of Democratic Capitalists. Ever since we learned of your existence we have been watching your life unfold with some interest.' He walked behind my chair and loosed my bonds and I surprised myself by remaining seated.

Now that sodomy looked to be off the table, I was curious to hear what Madoc had to say. I listened as he explained how Mrs Smith had lost her rag when she discovered that her husband had been unfaithful. How she had gone completely ga-ga when informed that his dalliance had borne fruit. How, in a jealous rage, she had vowed to destroy the bastard son, to bring him down and then smash him into a million pieces. The first part of her plan had succeeded. She had brought me down as far as I could go. My decline from promising scientist to low life criminal scum was complete.

'Tonight was to be her crowning glory,' Madoc concluded. 'You were to be accused of murder, and sentenced to death in a rigged trial.'

On the surface, this story was fanciful in the extreme, but truth rarely resides on the surface of any tale. If I had not developed a mysterious allergy to alcohol overnight, I would have doubted it. If the love of my life, sweet Lynette, had not turned same sex attracted, I would have doubted it. If my own parents had not abandoned me without a word after many years of love and support, I would have doubted it. If not every woman I had approached in the last five years spurned my advances despite my rugged good looks and easy charm, I would have doubted it. But all those things had happened, and now I had an answer. They really were out to get me.

'That explains Lynette, and my alcohol allergy, and my parents leaving me,' I said, 'but surely, it's an overreaction. Vengeance, yes, but take it out on your unfaithful husband.'

Madoc looked perplexed for a moment. 'I've never heard of Lynette,' he said, 'but your other observations are correct. Mrs Smith is a nasty piece of work, but her husband is immune to her machinations. You, on the other hand, are a soft target. She made threats against your family that frightened them into leaving, and a chemical, sprayed periodically onto your toilet seat, caused your allergy.'

Feeling the need to exercise my freedom, I stood up, causing Alex to duck under the table. 'Even if all this is true,' I said as I sat on the table beside Madoc, 'I can't see what I can do about it. I can't even get a job, let alone battle malignant forces.'

'That is where The Society comes in,' said Madoc. 'We will provide you with the resources you require to set yourself free from this curse. Mrs Smith has been a thorn in our side for many years and we would welcome a reduction in her power.'

Despite all that my life had become, I still wasn't quite ready to believe this bizarre tale. Madoc must have seen the doubt in my eyes. He produced an envelope from somewhere inside his jacket and placed it on the table beside me.

'Consider yourself employed,' he said. 'This is an advance. It represents ten percent of your full fee.'

Alex jumped out of his seat as I reached for the envelope. It contained several thousand dollars.

'A generous sum,' I said, pocketing the cash. 'What do you want me to do?'

Madoc walked to a cupboard behind Alex and returned with a large, flat case, which he put on the table. He opened the case to reveal a strangely shaped gun decorated with currency symbols from around the globe.

Reaching out, I ran my fingers over the gun's sleek lines. It felt strangely oily and unpleasant.

'This is the weapon you will use to destroy the source of Mrs Smith's power—the Sacred Bull of Capitalism,' Madoc said.

Tearing my eyes away from the strange object with some difficulty, I looked speculatively in Alex's direction. He blanched at my gaze. 'Can I give it a trial run?' I asked.

A smile crossed Madoc's lips, but only briefly. 'No, it can only be fired once so your first shot must be true,' he said. 'Take it out and get a feel for it if you like.'

Gently, I lifted the surprisingly light weapon from its case. The dollar symbol in the pommel pressed against my shoulder as I sighted along its length towards Alex, who was slowly edging towards a door in the far wall. While I frightened my one and only friend, Madoc talked. He explained that the Sacred Bull of Capitalism was a resilient beast and magical in nature. Mr and Mrs Smith kept it secured in a paddock in outback Australia, and protected it with many charms and spells that kept it hidden from enemies and socialists. Only the special gun I now held in my hands could bypass all of the Bull's magical protections. The strange weapon was of American design, forged with Australian steel in a Chinese factory using Indian technology. Even the bullet was unique, fashioned from a newly minted two Euro coin and tipped with a South African diamond.

'Can I keep the gun?' I asked when he had finished.

'There will be no gun to keep,' Madoc replied. 'It will dissolve once fired.'

Lowering the weapon reluctantly, I turned towards Madoc. 'This isn't some sort of reality television show, is it? A lot of what you have said sounds like utter bullshit.'

'And what if it is? You have the money,' Madoc replied. 'It's not like you have anything to lose.'

'Just one more question,' I said, feeling a little depressed at the way my life had panned out, 'why me?'

'Mrs Smith knows all of our operatives. She would be aware of our presence the minute any of us entered Australia. Nor would we be able to find the Bull because of its magical protection. You are unique. You have the motivation to get the job done, as well as the ability to find and approach the Bull without raising the alarm.'

I placed the gun on the table and snatched up its case, which I threw towards Alex, who ducked smartly out of the way.

'Ha ha, mi...,' he managed to say before the cupboard behind him fell forward and struck him a sharp blow to the back of the head.

'Let's go,' I said to Madoc as, gun in hand, I stepped over the unconscious Alex and scooped up the case.

The trip to Australia was without incident, as was my trek through the trackless expanses of desert that surrounded my target. Doubt assailed me when I finally found the Sacred Bull of Capitalism in the thirty hectares of untamed scrub that Madoc had called a paddock. It stood no more than a yard high, was midnight black in color, and regarded me with bovine stupidity. As far as I could tell, it was just a stunted animal.

How was it possible for this tiny heifer to be the source of power behind my misfortune? Then again, it's not as I had anything to lose and there was always the outside chance that Madoc would give me more money if I killed the thing. And while it was small, it looked well fed and I could probably get a meal or two out of it before heading back.

Aiming carefully, I pulled the trigger of my multi-lateral gun and let the stunted beast have the diamond tipped Euro between the eyes. With a sound that was more flatulence than explosion, the gun disintegrated, coating me with a fine dust. The bullet penetrated the cow's skull, just between the eyes but instead of bleeding like any decent animal, the Sacred Bull popped as if it were a balloon and released a foul wind that blew outwards in all directions. As it blustered past me, taking with it the dust that was all that was left of the gun, I felt a sense of financial dread and unconsciously clutched at my wallet. I could see the wind pushing through the scrub on its way out, defying all natural laws by not running out of energy as it moved over the land.

A faint popping noise behind me made me jump and I turned to see a small, bespectacled man with a funny face had appeared and was staring in horror at the skin of the former Sacred Bull of Capitalism.

'Fuck,' he said in a thick Scottish accent. 'Every ten fucking years you fuckers come and kill me' cow! What the fuck is your fucking problem?'

'Um,' I said, rather ineloquently.

'You do know that you've doomed the world to economic ruin,' he said. 'It'll be three or four years before I can raise another to put things to rights. Assuming, of course, none of you commo bastards pop it before it matures.'

'It wouldn't have had to die if could have kept it in your pants,' I said, correctly assuming that the funny little goblin was Mr Smith.

'I don't have anything in my pants you idiot. I'm not human,' he said. 'Has the Society opened its membership to morons as well as commies now?'

'Listen mate,' I said, getting annoyed. 'I don't give a shit if you are my father. Curse me one more time and I'll kick your ass so hard, you'll be shitting out of your nostrils for a week.'

'Father?' he said, 'I'm not no father of anyone. I told you, I'm not human.'

That was it. I snapped and picking up a branch, which I lifted high in the air and brought it down with all my might, right at the little goblin's head. The anger of the past decade gave me strength—the frustrations, the sobriety, the hairy palms all combined and give power to my violence. The branch should have decapitated him. What it should not have done was make a humorous "boing" sound before bouncing back and hitting me in the forehead.

I regaining consciousness a few minutes later to find Mr Smith kneeling beside me. 'Are you okay, laddie?' he asked, looking concerned.

'I think so,' I replied, and tried to sit up.

'You aren't a member of the society, are ya?'

'The Democratic Capitalists? No, but they paid me to kill your bull,' I said, feeling that I may have made a mistake. 'They said it was the source of your wife's power and if I killed it, she would stop persecuting me.'

'They are capitalist in name only, laddie,' he said, shaking his head. 'Their true color is a deep red. Nothing is beneath them, even lying about a person's marital status. I don't have a wife because, as I keep telling ya, I'm not human. I have no urge to continue the species so I have no interest in sex, and let me tell you that, from an outsider's point of view, it's bloody disgusting. Why use the toilet bits? Why not make up some organs special for the purpose? Dun you ever have to take a break for the call o' nature?'

Waving Mr Smith's observations on the mechanics of sex aside, I took to sobbing hysterically. 'If you don't have a wife,' I wailed, 'who has been fucking up my life? Shit like that just doesn't happen naturally.'

Mr Smith looked at me sympathetically. 'I think you've been had, laddie,' he said. 'They got ya to do their dirty work, those commy bastards.'

'You mean they lied to me?'

'Aye, laddie. You've been the victim of a vast, left wing conspiracy.' Mr Smith said and looked down at the deflated remains of the Sacred Bull. 'In fact, the whole world has. When the foul winds of recession come together on the other side of the globe, we will all be plunged into an economic darkness that will not lift until another bull is reared to take the place of the one you killed.'

I sat sobbing quietly in the scrub for several minutes, the inhuman Mr Smith beside me making vague comforting noises and patting my shoulder every so often. Eventually, I pulled myself together. 'Well, what happens now?' I asked.

'There are several seed bulls in the other paddock,' Mr Smith said. 'I'll have to get working to bring one to maturity. It's a long process, and not without its dangers. I dun' know how I'm gunna protect the new one from assassins such as yourself. I can'na stay here every hour of every day to watch over the thing.' He sat down beside me, looking glum.

I let out a deep sigh and flopped backwards onto the rough scrub. 'Well, I guess it's back to my crappy life,' I said, fighting off the urge to start sobbing again.

'Dun worry about that, laddie, the Society is no' gunna let ya live. I'd be surprised if you see out the week.'

'Fucking great,' I said, and proceeded to sob.

Mr Smith gave me another sad look, and then his face lit up. 'Why dun you stay here and work for me?' he said. 'You can help me care for the new cow. Magic is fine and dandy, but nothing beats a good pair o' eyes. You can check up on any threats that don't trip the left wing detection spells.'

'It's better than death I suppose,' I replied, 'but it's going to get lonely up here, just the two of us.'

'Nonsense laddie, we got a whole town a little ways away. Watching the Sacred Bull is big business in the shadow world. Some of 'em are even human.'

'I can't see how I've got much of a choice,' I said. 'What do you want me to do now, boss?'

A huge smile split Mr Smith's face. 'It's minimum wage, mind you, but then again, what have ye got to spend it on? I'll get Personnel to organize the necessary paperwork.' He offered me his hand, which I took. 'Welcome to The Foundation of Economic Liberalism, my boy,' he said. 'I'm sure you'll enjoy it here.'

### **Impure Silicon**

Doug looks down at the bill from the internet company and sighs. What a nice surprise to get first thing after work. 'This is just too much,' he whispers to himself, 'just too much.' Shaking his head, he turns towards the front door, his shoulders stooped and his steps leaden. 'Every month it gets bigger,' he mumbles.

As he walks into the house, Doug's stooped shoulders straighten and his lungs fill with air. 'WARREN!' he bellows at the top of his voice. 'WARREN,' his pace quickens along the corridor. He is running by the time he gets to the stairs, which he takes two at a time. 'WARREN, why have you upgraded the internet connection?'

At the top of the stairs, he pummels at the first door he comes to, grabbing at the knob and pushing with his shoulder. 'Warren! Open this door! Why did you upgrade the internet connection to a,' he pauses and looks at the bill. 'Uber Leet Gaming account?' he says, before resuming his assault.

The door opens without warning and Doug almost falls into the room, saved only by the intervention of the very large young man on the other side.

'What's your problem, Dad?' Warren says, setting Doug back on his feet as if he were a doll. 'It's only two dollars a month. Get a grip.'

'Two dollars a month on top of two hundred dollars a month on all the crap you want is two dollars a month too much,' Doug says, adjusting his clothes and trying to look dignified. 'You're bleeding us dry, my boy, bleeding us dry.'

'Oh c'mon Dad, it's not even fifty dollars a week all up for everything and that includes the net, which everyone uses.'

'That's the trouble with you young people today,' Doug says, ignoring the part of his brain that is telling him he sounds like a tool. 'It's not just fifty dollars a week when you factor in food and bills. Do you know how much power your computers use? Do you?'

'About as much as the giant plasma television in the lounge,' Warren responds. 'Lighten up, Dad, it's not that much money.'

'How would you know about money? Have you ever made any? Just because you're a kid, doesn't mean you can escape your financial obligations to this household! When I was your age, Grandad had me running two paper rounds every week, and I had to find my own money for ice-cream when the ice-cream van drove past.'

Doug pauses and his eyes un-focus as his mind travels back to the dark days of his youth and the perceived wrongs that have haunted him for two decades. 'I could never afford the chocolate topping or the sprinkles. All the other kids had sprinkles, but then they didn't have to fund their own ice-creams. That scumbag Davis even got a chocolate spoon in his.'

'Douglas, stop harassing your son,' says a feminine voice from another part of the house. 'We understand how devastating not having sprinkles on your cone can be for a young man but it's time to get over it.'

Visibly deflating, Doug pats Warren on the shoulder. 'Bleeding us dry,' he says quietly as he turns back down the stairs. He walks slowly to the lounge room where Vera, the third member of the family, is sprawled on the floor watching television. 'Whach'ya watching?' Doug asks, sitting down on the couch in the middle of the room.

'Just the usual crap,' she replies. 'What's with all the yelling at Warren?'

'Well, he's just upgraded the internet connection to a,' once again Doug looks down at the bill he is still clutching, 'Uber Leet Gaming account.'

'Oh, is that all?'

'What do you mean, is that all? It's bloody well enough. He's bleeding us dry, Vera, bleeding us dry.'

'Oh please, it's only a few dollars. Let the boy have his connection.'

Doug slumps on the couch. 'It's too much,' he says, and then a smile spreads across his face. 'Okay, we'll have it your way. He can have his connection, but from now on, he's got to pay for it. It's time for our boy to get himself a part time job.'

Vera sits up, looking alarmed. 'Don't you go spoiling his academic future, Douglass Farweather, just so you can prove a point.'

'Come now, my dear, a little honest toil won't hurt him or his grades. William from the shoe shop was at the poker game last week and he was complaining about not being able to find someone to work on Saturday. Maybe he can help out.'

Vera looks exasperated. 'William is a tight wad who refuses to pay even minimum wage,' she says, 'that's why he can't find people to work for him.'

Doug waves away her concerns. 'It'll be okay,' he says. 'I'll arrange the interview and everything.'

## (ii)

In the semi gloom of his room, Warren's large frame is at rest in front of an impressive array of high tech gadgets, democratically arranged around an enormous computer monitor. The glowing screen and a greenish light coming up from the keyboard just below it are the room's only illumination. They combine to give Warren a greenish complexion and cast strange shadows over his face. Not that he cares what he looks like in this, the ultimate reality. What concerns him at the moment, and most other moments to be honest, is the appearance and social standing of his in-game avatar.

Warren looks lovingly upon the little animated man decked out in medieval armor and waving a tiny, pixilated sword. The virtual corpses of several digital opponents litter the ground around the little man's feet, and digital blood covers his armor and weapon. 'The area has been cleared,' says Warren into his microphone. 'Continue with the raid. The enemy has been neutralized.'

'What?' The voice in his headphones sounds surprised. 'Are you sure? They were a full group.'

Warren watches the virtual corpses fade, leaving no evidence of his violence. 'I sent all five of 'em back to the spawn zone,' Warren replies, feeling a little smug. 'They won't be messing with EoS again in a hurry.'

'Andremar, my friend, you are a violent psychopath,' says the voice. 'Glad to have you on the team.'

Warren beams.

'Okay,' continues the voice, 'Andremar has taken care of the Chaos Inc ambush up ahead. Group 3 move in to position. Group 4, prepare to move on my command. Andremar, join Group 2 in the caves, not that you need any help to commit murder.'

'Sorry guys,' says Warren into his microphone. 'My Pop has put the foot down. I got a job interview in a couple of hours. Looks like my Saturday raiding days are over.'

'Damn, another leader down for Saturdays,' says the voice in his headphones. 'That's life, I suppose.'

'Sorry Horc,' says Warren, 'I'm not happy about it, but if I don't get a job the Old Man is going to stop paying the monthly subscription and if that happens, there'll be no raiding at all.'

'We understand mate,' says Horc. 'We'll miss your unique brand of psychotic violence on the weekends, but we know that real life take precedence over virtual fun. Our loss is society's gain, as they say.'

'Thanks folks, I'll see y'all later tonight,' Warren says and logs off.

The next hour is a whirlwind of activity that culminates in Warren finding himself outside the depressingly beige frontage of Solefull Shoes, a full hour before his scheduled interview time. Housing dark thoughts about his father's anxiety levels, he watches the taillights of the family car weave erratically away.

Sighing, Warren looks up and down the street for something with which to pass the time. He finds his eyes drawn, almost mystically, to a bright orange shop directly opposite his potential employer. Hack'n'Slash Internet Cafe and Network Games. The gaudy facade beckons Warren, speaking directly to his gaming soul. The amateurish signage promises heart-pumping virtual action for less than two dollars an hour (member rates), a promise that drills down into his brain and excites his passion for all things computer.

Stepping through the door is a revelation. Hack'n'Slash is geek heaven. Dim yet garish, there are glass cabinets holding bizarre bits of technology, shelves full of dangerously unhealthy snacks, and a fridge full of sugar-saturated soft drinks. At the rooms centre, like a heart of impure silicon, the computers are arranged six abreast on tables running five deep. Each screen features a poorly animated dragon holding a \$2/hr sign in its front claws. People are scattered throughout the room, all wearing headphones and staring intently at their screens.

The only non-headphone wearing occupant is a middle-aged man, about his father's age, sitting behind the counter beside the door.

'Casual or member?' the man asks.

Warren is in a tizz. 'I want to be a member,' he says. 'Oh please, let me be a member.'

The man sighs. 'I knew you were a gamer the minute you walked in,' he says. 'Fill in this form and we'll get your membership started. After you pay the fee, of course.'

Warren looks at the form the man has placed on the counter. 'Is this right?' he asks, 'it only asks for my name.'

'Don't worry,' the man says, 'we don't check up on it, so you can make it up if you want.'

Warren fills in the brief form and pays the ten-dollar membership fee. The man gives him a laminated black card with a picture of the same dragon that is on the screens, but with the number '10047' written in red ink on the sign between its front claws.

'If you're looking for gaming, the front five are the fastest beasts this side of silicon valley,' the man says, to which Warren raises an eyebrow.

'Okay, maybe not,' the man replies to Warren's eyebrow, 'but they are adequate for the purpose. Number 3 is especially good.'

Warren sits down at the computer in the middle of the front row. The dragon on the screen vanishes to reveal the virtual desktop upon which is an icon that launches his game. He logs in and dons the headphones. A cacophony of greeting from his guild mates brings a smile to his face as he slips from the real world into the virtual one.

Behind Warren, the man at the counter watches with mounting interest. After a few minutes, he reaches for the telephone. His eyes remain glued on Warren's screen as he hurriedly dials a number. 'Peter, get your ass over here,' he says when the call is answered, 'Andremar from EoS has just joined Hack'n'Slash!'

### (iii)

Two men sit behind the counter at Hack'n'Slash Internet Cafe and Network Games and watch Andremar go through his paces.'

'Bloody impressive, that's all I can say. Bloody impressive,' Peter says. 'I've never even seen this raid before and I've been playing for three years. What about you?'

Larry leans back in his chair. 'No one's seen it mate, only EoS have gotten this far.' Silence returns as the men watch Warren, completely absorbed in the virtual world, guide Andremar through a series of increasingly violent digital encounters.

A chubby, irate man barges through the door and breaks the spell. 'Hey Larry, how's it going?' he says as he makes a beeline for the first computer in the third row.

'Not bad, William,' comes the reply, 'before you log on, you might want to come over here and have a gander.'

'What is it?' asks the irate William. 'It better be good to take me away from my gaming time.'

He walks behind the counter and sits down beside Larry, who points him towards Warren.

'Bloody hell,' William says after a few minutes. 'It's Andremar, and I bet that's Doug's boy playing him when he is meant to be in a job interview. His old man is on the way to meet me here and he's pissed.'

'Why,' says Larry, 'I think Warren has passed his interview with flying colors.' The silence returns as all three men watch Warren on the digital murder trail.

A full hour passes before an angry Doug bursts through the door. He sees William behind the counter and stalks over. 'Right, where is he? I'm gunna kill him.'

William says nothing, but points towards the seated Warren who is so absorbed in his game world that he is totally oblivious to events unfolding around him. The anger drains from Doug's face when he sees his son at the computer, and a look of despair replaces it. 'You guys sell alcohol,' he asks.

'I wish,' says Larry, 'I'd never go home if we had beer on the premises. That your boy,' he gestures towards Warren.'

'Yeah, you want him?'

'You must be very proud,' Peter blurts out. 'I wish I had a son like him.'

'Don't take the piss, mate,' says an annoyed Doug. 'All this computer gaming crap is becoming a problem.'

Larry leans over the counter and offers his hand to Doug. 'The name's Larry,' he says, 'and I'd like to offer your son a job here at Hack'n'Slash. At minimum wage, of course.'

'Sure,' replies Doug, 'no worries. If he accepts, I can't see why not.'

'Providing he gets Larry and me into EoS,' Peter chimes in, looking meaningfully at Larry, who nods. 'Yes, of course. Provided he gets us into EoS.'

Doug smiles at the two men, then shakes his head. 'Grown men playing kids games,' he says, then turns to look at William, who blushes.

'That's where you're wrong,' says William, his face coloring. 'These aren't just games, they are complex worlds with functioning economies, real conflict, and inhabited by thousands of people.'

'Oh come now, William, don't tell me you take this stuff seriously?' Doug says.

'Functioning economies, my bum. It's not as if having a young family isn't conflict enough, why would you want more. Anyway, where would you find time to be William the Wonder Warrior.'

William rolls his eyes. 'My main is a Mage,' he says, 'I hate playing melee. And I'll pay thirty percent over minimum wage if Warren comes to work for me and helps my guild raid.'

'You're kidding, right?' Doug says. 'What would the lads say if they knew you play computer games?'

William shrugs. 'You can ask 'em now if you log in. We raid on Saturday's, which is why I wanted to get someone to work for me.'

'Guild?'

'Yeah, we are The Daffodils,' William says, looking a little embarrassed. 'Like our volley ball team in high school.'

Doug looks at the three men behind the counter and then turns towards his son, sitting not three yards away but oblivious to his presence.

'You're all mad,' he says eventually. 'You're substituting real communities for virtual stupidities. You can't even be sure the people in those games are real. They could all be computer controlled for all you know.'

William thinks of all the things that he has seen while in the virtual world. 'Nah,' he says, 'they're real alright. No computer could ever be that stupid. Besides, I know many of them personally. Our old high school class makes up about half of the membership of The Daffodils. Really, it's no different to when we play poker on Wednesdays.'

Doug looks at his friend of many years as if he had just grown a second head. 'The difference,' he says slowly, 'is that we get together for real, not virtual. We can see and hear one another, laugh at bad deals, shake hands, eat bad food together and stuff like that. You know, socialize.'

'Same thing, mate,' William says, 'but at we don't have to put up with Rod's high fiber diet.'

Doug looks at Warren who is still unaware of his presence. 'No it's not.'

'Okay, so it's not,' William replies, also looking at Warren. 'Big deal. So we spend some time chatting online while playing a computer game. Why is that such a problem for people like you?'

Doug wanders behind the counter and puts an arm around the shoe shop owner's shoulders. 'William my friend,' he says, 'I've known you for most of my life, and in all that time I have never seen you spend as much as one penny more than is strictly necessary. In fact, your reluctance to spend is legend in these parts.'

'Yeah, so?' says William, trying to disengage himself but finding Doug surprisingly strong.

'So? The thought of you actually paying someone so that you can indulge in a hobby suggests that your mind has been addled by this game. The fact that you are willing to pay my son double what you are willing to pay anyone else to do this work proves it beyond any doubt.' Doug lets go of William and sits on the desk facing the three men. 'As near as I can tell,' he says, 'you lot are insane, but then again, so is everyone else. My boy, bless his geeky heart, will work for you for double minimum wage, and I want him to do at least an hour's work while he's here. Not everything he does should be game related.' The three men nod in unison.

Doug wanders over to where his son is sitting and lifts one side of his headphones. 'Job interviews have changed since I was a lad,' he whispers into the exposed ear.

Warren jumps out of his chair in surprise. 'Dad? Sorry, I just came in here because I was an hour early. Sorry. I lost track of time. Shit. Sorry.'

'You're lucky your old man watches your back,' Doug says. 'I've managed to secure a job for you with these gentlemen,' he says, waving his hand at the three behind the counter. 'If you can satisfy a few basic criteria, they are willing to pay you double minimum wage, half of which you will give to me as your contribution to the household.'

Warren looks at his father. 'Wow,' he says, 'sure.'

Peter, unable to contain himself any longer, scuttles around the counter and pushes a pen and piece of paper into Warren's hand. 'It's an honor to meet you,' he says. 'Can I have your autograph?'

### Virtually Real

Otto looked out over the murmuring sea of humanity that was pretending to be interested in what he had to say. Rank upon rank of empty vessel, craving fulfillment. Lithe, young bodies inadequately dressed and squirming in the uncomfortable plastic chairs, they cast unseeing eyes upon his carefully prepared slides.

Well, mostly lithe. Lecturing to undergraduate humanities students was, in his considered opinion, the second worst part of his life, trumped only by dealing with the buggers face-to-face. Awash with hormones and expectations, their unbroken innocence grated upon his cynical, post-graduate soul.

On the positive side, it kept his thesis supervisor happy because she didn't have to do the lecture, and a happy supervisor was a heck of a lot better than an unhappy supervisor. Otto found it surprising that the only thing that academics could agree upon was that teaching

sucked. They went out of their way to avoid it, which meant that senior students like Otto often found themselves standing sullenly before rank upon rank of empty vessel.

The weekly lecture also got him out from behind his computer screen and talking to people who were in the same room, which many would consider a good thing. An opinion Otto did not share. He railed against anything that took him away from his precious computers.

Changing the slide with a flick of his remote control, he turned and strolled off the stage, moving slowly up the stairs at the side of the lecture theatre. An ocean of dead eyes followed him, windows into consciousnesses that were, for all practical purposes, somewhere else. 'And this brings us, finally, to the commercial potential of these games,' he said into the microphone clipped to the lapel of his shirt, 'which is astronomical, and not just for the organizations that create and distribute them.'

When he reached the back of the lecture hall, he turned and faced the two enormous screens and podium that were the focus of the room. 'The players themselves need not be just customers of the game companies,' he said. 'They can also be traders within the worlds of these online games, selling virtual items to other players, often for real money. In fact, entire industries have developed to service the needs of real customers in virtual surroundings.' Leaning against the back wall, he flicked the remote control again. 'If you will turn your attention, please, to the next slide, you will see just how lucrative these real money transactions are.'

The sea of dead eyes, maintaining the facade of giving a shit, turned away from him to look at the screens. 'The first, and most surprising statistic, is just how much money people spend on virtual items,' he said, after giving his charges a little time to absorb the information on the slide. 'Last year, the global real money transaction market was bigger than the global music industry, and there is no sign of its growth slowing.'

Feeling like a silent tidal wave of post-pubescent apathy was about to engulf him, Otto began the slow stroll back down the stairs, lecturing in his favorite monotone the entire time. 'What does this mean? Well, first, it means that the organizations that create these games feel that they are missing out on a big slice of the pie that they made. In fact, in several of these virtual worlds, the game companies receive less in subscription fees than the support industries make selling virtual items. Second, various national governments are taking a keen interest in the flow of money, with taxation on their minds. And with the interest of governments, comes the interest of lawyers, many of whom are thinking of investing in new wallets to hold all the money they will make negotiating the legal minefield that is being created in the space between the virtual and the real.'

Upon reaching the stage, Otto got behind the podium and shuffled his unused notes. The truth is that online gaming burns at the very core of his being, and he only brings the notes to show willing. All he really needs to wax lyrical about his favorite subject is an audience. Even students will do.

'The problem is that the items being traded are virtual, not actual,' Otto continued. 'They have no physical presence in the real world. The question that is exciting the lawyers, and troubling game company executives, lawmakers and gamers is, what happens to that virtual property if someone pulls the plug on the computer that hosts the online world? Who would be the first to litigate? The traders who feed their extended family with the money they make

in the game, or the customer who just bought a virtual Sword of Mega Death and didn't get to virtually kill anything with it?'

Flicking the switch once again drew a groan from his audience. Otto turned and looked up at the glory of his essay question. It is so much more impressive on the giant screens than on the tiny monitor built into the podium. 'And that is the core of this month's essay. I will expect fifteen hundred words submitted to the office by Monday week, which will give you all the opportunity to spoil two weekends procrastinating.' Otto's smile widened. 'Any questions?' he asked, more from habit than a genuine desire to educate. Against all expectations, a hand rose in the front row.

Externally, Otto glared at the hand raiser. Internally, his brain went into overdrive trying to stem the southward flow of blood and wrest control back from his rampaging hormones, which looked upon the sea of exposed young flesh from a somewhat differently perspective than that of the upper echelons of his consciousness. The student with her hand in the air was wearing very little clothing, and her lithe body was, um, lithe. Emphatically so.

'Yes Sybil?' Otto squeaked.

'Mr Fosdyke,' asked the very pretty Sybil, 'what of the narrative significance of these games?'

Confident that he had regained control of his nether regions, Otto walked to the front of the podium and leaned backwards against it, crossing his arms in front of him. 'A very good question,' he said. 'Narratives presented through these games are unique in that they allow audience interaction, but the conventional wisdom is that they have very limited commercial potential.'

Sybil frowned. 'Just because no one has figured out how to make money out of them yet, doesn't mean that these stories are worthless,' she said. 'Many people use these worlds to express themselves in ways that are impossible in real life.'

'I'm sure they do,' Otto said, 'but the rest of the class, who are probably only interested in commercial aspects of virtual worlds, would most likely want to go now, especially since I've already gone five minutes overtime. Why don't you come see me during consultation hour if you wish to discuss narratives in virtual worlds further?'

The sea of students murmured agreement with Otto and, unbidden, began to flow towards the exits. Otto's plan was to slip out with the sea and flee to the library, where he could hide between the shelves until consultation hour was over. Sybil, however, had other ideas.

'I think these online games open a window into the future of narrative, Mr Fosdyke, don't you?' she said, as she fell into step beside the now sweating Otto.

'Most definitely,' he murmured, trying to keep his eyes on the path ahead and off Sybil's surprisingly buoyant body.

'They open up so many avenues for shared experiences in storytelling,' she continued, oblivious to the sweat beading on Otto's brow.

'Oh, definitely,' he said, trying hard to settle his excitable hormones, who were flashing images of experiences they would like to share with Sybil across his mind's eye. He found some of the props his subconscious used in the flood of carnal imagery vaguely disturbing. They were not troubling enough, however, to distract him from the main show.

(ii)

They arrived at the door to his shared office not a moment too soon as far as Otto was concerned. The sight of his computer waiting for him in his own little corner of the university tore his attention away from Sybil's feminine charms. Tapping a key brought the screen to life—he never turned off his computer. Greenhouse gases be damned, he needed to know that the path of escape from reality into virtuality was always open to him.

Swiveling his executive chair to face Sybil, Otto beckoned towards the nearest of the many molded plastic chairs dotted around the room. Only postgraduate students sat in executive chairs in the Postgraduate Tutor's Room.

'What I would like to know, Sybil,' Otto said, fondling his computer mouse with his right hand as he spoke to her, 'is how the question of narratives in online games fits into a course about the commercial exploitation of virtual environments?' His tone was harsh, but he wanted a quick resolution to the consultation. *Sword of Valour* beckoned.

'It's integral,' she said, looking surprised that Otto could ask such a silly question. 'Without compelling narratives, people would not find the games as engaging. It's the narratives that bring in the audience, and without an audience, the commercial potential of these online worlds is non-existent. I thought it was obvious.'

'That may be true to a point,' Otto said, still fondling the mouse, 'but the narratives of many of these worlds could hardly be called inspired. For example, the narrative thread that runs through *Sword of Valour*, one of the most popular online worlds, is so bad that even the most rabid fanboy would concede it is clichéd. Most other people consider it horrendously dull and banal. The good versus evil conflict is so obvious as to be almost infantile, and yet it has an audience of several million players, most of whom are of voting age.'

Sybil looked shocked. 'It's not that bad,' she said, but quietly.

Otto raised his eyebrows. 'You know of it?'

'Yes, I play it quite a bit actually,' she said, as a dreamy smile stretched across her face. 'It's quite an escape from the boredom of day to day life. It allows me to explore personal narratives, and to share them with my friends.'

'Boredom?' Otto said, as his mouse fiddling intensified. 'Obviously, my peers and I aren't giving you enough to do.'

'It's not just boredom, really,' Sybil said, trying to sound world-weary. 'It's the futility of life. Just lecture after lecture. Then you graduate and it's like, so what? You go do your boring job, every day, forever.'

'Come, now, Sybil,' Otto said, feeling he must play the wise elder in the conversation. 'Some of the work we do here must be interesting. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here, would you?'

'Yeah right, like you really enjoy this crap? It's obvious you find lecturing less than satisfying. You treat your students as if they were carrying the plague. I don't know what you do to keep your sanity, but I play online games. I know that life is futile, but my guildies make it worthwhile.'

'You're in a guild, are you?' Otto asked, eager to move the conversation away from futility. 'What server are you on, and what are they called?'

'We're called *Suck My Darkness* and we run on the *Rebellion and Consequences* server.'

'My guild also runs on the *Rebellion and Consequences* server,' Otto said, smiling.  
'Have you ever heard of *Enemies of Shadow*?'

Sybil's eyes widened. 'You run with EoS?' she said, 'they're the most exclusive guild in the entire game. How'd you get in with them? Don't you have a life?'

Otto shrugged. 'I'm a student just like you,' he said. 'I'm doing a doctorate on the commercial potential of online worlds, and I've been at it so long now, that I know more about this shit than any of the full time academics.' He sighed as he thought about the many years that he had spent working on his thesis. 'It's been five years now and it could be another five before I finish.' He slumped back in his chair. 'Believe me, I know about futility,' he said, enjoying the newfound respect he thought he could see in Sybil's eyes. As a fellow student, he believed rather naively, that he had a better chance of getting his end in. 'And I don't just run with them, Sybil my dear. I lead them.'

Sybil gasped. 'You're Frantyk?' she said, sitting up and crossing her legs. 'Oh my god, you can't be Frantyk, he's like, the best tank in the game. Oh my god. I've run raids with him. You're not Frantyk, no way.'

'Yes Sybil, I am Frantyk. What's the name of your main? I know everyone I raid with.'  
'Splyce.'

Otto sat in silence, fighting his dick's desire to go hard. Sitting before him, in a top that was too low and a skirt that was too high, was one of the most ruthless virtual killers on the server. 'You're Splyce?' he said after a few moments.

'Yeah,' she said. 'I'm me.'

The two sat in silence for a while, each uncomfortably aware of the presence of the other. Finally, Sybil stirred. 'Anyway, I think you're wrong about narratives being unimportant,' she said. 'It's the narratives that draw people in and make them want to be part of the world. Otherwise, everyone'd just stick to Facebook.'

'Why don't you argue that in your essay, then,' Otto said. 'The question is flexible enough to accommodate that line of reasoning. And there are several good texts and articles about narratives in virtual worlds that you could use.'

'Sounds good,' Sybil said, rising hurriedly. 'I'll get on it tonight. Thanks for your help, Mr Fosdyke.'

'My pleasure, Sybil,' Otto replied.

'Yeah, right. You can't wait to see the back of me, can you?'

'Well, I do have a lot of marking to do,' Otto said, pointing to a pile of unmarked essays on the desk. Smiling, Sybil walked out the door.

### (iii)

Otto waited until he could no longer hear Sybil's footsteps in the corridor outside before he jumped up and closed the door. Dropping the pile of unmarked essays onto the ground beside his desk, he logged into *Sword of Valour*. He was the university's only exception to the 'no gaming' rule on its network. He even filed the time he spent in game as 'research'. The university also paid the subscription fees for his two accounts, as well as provided a state of the art gaming machine.

He could still see the look of envy on the faces of the technicians when he handed them the spec sheet for the computer they were to put together for him. The construction had been quite an event. Technical support had shut down university wide for several hours while the entire IT department clustered around to watch the birth of a silicon monster.

The price he had to pay for this largesse on behalf of his benefactors was giving lectures to humanities students. Still, a couple of hours every week was quite reasonable for being financially compensated to indulge in his passion. All things end, however, and Otto could tell by the way his supervisor and the academic council were becoming more interested in his progress that he was in the twilight years of his candidature, and the scholarship that went along with it.

In a half-mad attempt to avoid responsibility for the rest of his days, Otto had turned his considerable intellect to devising a scheme that would allow him to stay in virtuality while earning a living in reality. The plan he hatched was, in his considered opinion, magnificent and for the first time in his life, he felt as if fate had been on his side. When Pamen had retired from the leadership of *Enemies of Shadow*, the most exclusive guild in the most popular online game in the world, to concentrate on caring for his newly born triplets, Otto had seized the opportunity. Already a high-ranking member, Otto networked and lobbied like a politician on amphetamines and got himself elected as leader, and the effort had been worth it.

Once in charge, he had taken the most efficient mass killing machine in the entire history of virtuality, and reconfigured its priorities towards turning a dollar. The results had been spectacular. While there had been some resistance at first, as he had expected, the first round of 'dividend' checks had stemmed the flow of negativity. The upcoming second round, he was sure, would blow all opposition out of the water. Otto had the feeling that membership in EoS was going to become even more attractive once news of this little sweetener got around.

A chorus of 'Yo's' and 'Howdies' greeted him when the loading screen faded to reveal the virtual world in which Frantyk existed. Before him stood a magnificent building, surrounded by virtual gardens and tinkling fountains. Fully armed and armored avatars lounged about in clusters on the virtual lawn, and he could see through the virtual windows that the guild house was crowded. Otto guided Frantyk at a run through the crowds to the virtual lectern at the front of the hall.

'Guild mates,' he typed, 'it's good to see so many of you have turned up to this, the first of the monthly meetings of *Enemies of Shadow*.' He paused a moment to allow the slower members to read his greeting. 'I'm sure you have all received the agenda through the in-game mail, so we will turn immediately to the first matter for consideration, member remuneration.' A series of hoots and vulgar emotes made typing futile for a few moments. Frantyk waited for the hubbub to die down before continuing.

'I have just this very day completed writing the second round of dividend checks and placed them in the real mail to you all. What this means is that every EoS member can expect two thousand dollars to be landing in his or her snail mail box in the next couple of days, which represents his or hers contribution to revenue generation last month, less expenses of course.'

The stunned silence of the avatars was like mana from heaven for Otto, or a free power pot for Frantyk. The explosion of emoted /cheer's and impromptu renditions of 'Hail to the Chief' on several virtual instruments that followed was even better.

'The account books will be kept in the chest here,' Otto continued when the noise died down, 'for any member who wishes to peruse them, in case any of you have any doubts that our venture is above board. You will need to get an officer to show them to you, and there is a duplicate copy kept in the secure vault, just to be on the safe side. These books list all the items we have won, how much we sold them for, and a list of all expenses we encountered while redistributing the wealth.' Once again, Frantyk paused for the slower readers to catch up. 'Are there any questions,' he asked after a short while.

'What of the reputation of the guild in the game?' asked an avatar with 'Matahari' floating over her cowled head. 'Will it suffer because of our new found focus on all things commercial?'

Otto had been dreading this moment. He knew Matahari belonged to Dimi, the real life partner of Pamen and part of the old leadership of the guild. Sharp as a knife, he considered her his final hurdle. The rank and file worshiped her, partly because of her amazing skill as a healer—most everyone in the guild had, at one time or another, been saved a trip to the spawn circle by her quick thinking—but mainly because she administered the guild raiding and grouping roster. Anyone getting on the wrong side of Matahari soon found themselves mysteriously forgotten when it came to being included in guild events, and the price she charged for forgiveness was often very steep, and usually involved some sort of public humiliation.

Without Matahari's approval, Otto knew he was doomed to failure. Even though he was the elected guild leader, the members would only follow his plan if she sanctioned it. On the positive side, if he won her approval, a lifetime of gaming for profit was his.

'Well,' Frantyk said, 'the only reason that we have been able to generate the sorts of dollars we have thus far is because of the respect that the gaming community has for our guild. People like to buy from us because they know they can trust us. Our revenue generating potential, therefore, depends upon our community standing. No respect equals no revenue, which means that maintaining our status as the premier guild in *Sword of Valour* must be our highest priority if we want our commercial venture to be successful.' Frantyk paused while Otto licked his lips and absentmindedly cracked his knuckles.

'In order to maintain our standing,' he continued, 'I propose we establish a Strategic Committee whose job it will be to identify and exploit opportunities to enhance EoS's reputation and prestige. You will find that the creation of this committee is listed at number two on the agenda,' Frantyk paused again for the audience to catch up and allow Otto to get a drink. 'I know that Matahari and Pamen have real life concerns that limit their time in-game,' he continued, 'but losing their leadership and knowledge would be a great blow to the guild. Through the Strategic Committee, they would be able to apply their extensive knowledge of the game to the task of enhancing the reputation and prestige of *Enemies of Shadow*, and they can do this without needing to be in-game at all hours. If we, as a guild, agree to the creation of this Strategic Committee, and if they agree to lead it, then I cannot see how our community standing could be in any danger.' Otto took another drink while he waited for Matahari's reply. Frantyk just stood there.

'That sounds like a great idea if implemented correctly,' Matahari wrote. 'I'll talk to Pamens about it if the members give it the green light.'

Otto did the dance of joy while Frantyk stood impassively at the virtual podium. There was no way that the members would vote down something that Matahari thought was a good idea.

'We'll take the vote at the end of the meeting,' Frantyk said. 'Now, if we could all turn our attention to item three on the agenda, the Guild House. As a public display of our guild's power, it's not really up to scratch. We need to come up with ways to jazz it up a little. Any ideas?'

Otto leaned back in his chair and watched the debate begin. His hormones were cowed, and all thoughts of Sybil banished by the glow of his virtual victory.

#### (iv)

Sybil's exit from Otto's office had been swifter than she had expected. Before the consultation, she had liked Mr Fosdyke in a schoolgirl crush kind of way, attracted to him by the world-weary cynicism he injected into his lectures. After the consultation, she wasn't too sure. It had been obvious from the moment she'd asked a question in the lecture that the man simply did not like her. It was an unusual and uncomfortable feeling. Men usually fell over themselves to get near her.

To complicate matters, he was also the leader of the most active guild on the server and led many a pick-up raid in which Splyce was often an enthusiastic participant. Now she wasn't too sure she could talk to Frantyk ever again, knowing that he was also Mr Fosdyke. Oh well, no more EoS led raids for Splyce. She sighed as she realized she would have to look for something else to do on Sunday nights.

Her distracted footsteps led her to the lawns in front of the cafeteria where her friends—all members of *Suck My Darkness*—were taking advantage of the student union's free *BBQ, Beer, and Band* afternoon.

'Hey folks,' Sybil said, but her words were lost in the white noise coming from the stage. She sat down beside Alice, a red headed girl wearing pale make up and a long flowing dress that, due to her diminutive stature, was a little wanting in the long and flowing departments. Alice acknowledged Sybil with a smile—verbal communication was almost impossible in the musical atmosphere—and motioned towards a plate of hamburgers and several cups of beer in the centre of the group.

Sybil helped herself to one of each and turned her attention towards the stage, where the members of a black clad band were torturing various musical instruments. As she watched, the least clad member stopped thrashing wildly at his black guitar and stepped up to the microphone.

'So how did it go?' Alice screeched into Sybil's ear.

*If you slit my throat now* sang the black clad band member.

'Yeah, it was alright,' Sybil replied into Alice's ear. 'He gave me a good idea for the essay next month.'

*I won't bleed on your clothes*

'Yeah, but did you like, go for it?'

*Because my blood is so filthy*

Sybil gave Alice a look. 'Of course not, not at school. If I did, it'd have to be outside school. But I'm not sure I'd do him now.'

*I'd spill it on the grass*

'You're kidding?' Alice exclaimed. 'He's all you've talked about this semester.'

*Filthy blood on the grass*

'Yeah, well, he's a bit weird when you meet him one on one.'

*Filthy blood on the grass*

'You're sitting here with us, listening to this band, and you think he's weird? The poor man must be right round the loop.'

The band member stepped back from the microphone and thrashed at his guitar for a while.

'Did you know he's Frantyk?' Sybil said.

'No way,' Alice exclaimed. 'He can't be Frantyk, he's the best tank in the game. Possibly the world.'

The band member stepped back up to the microphone.

*If you cut out my heart, I won't bleed on your clothes*

'So what does it matter that he's Frantyk?' Alice said, picking up a cup of beer.

*Because my heart is so filthy*

'Did you know he's not really a lecturer,' Sybil said. 'He's just a post grad student who does some lecturing.'

*Put it in the ground for the worms to eat*

'Ouch, that sure changes things,' Alice said, a look of distaste crossing her face.

*And I'll bleed on the grass*

'Yeah, that's what I thought too.'

*Filthy blood on the grass*

'This band is great,' Alice said, 'but there are no onions on the burgers. I'm going home to log in. Wanna meet me at the Ogre Camp? We need to farm up some Death Yarrow for tonight's run.'

*Filthy blood on the grass*

'Okay,' Sybil replied, 'but I'm going to hang around here a bit longer. What about an hour from now?'

Alice nodded agreement and stood up, which revealed a hitherto hidden aspect of her dress. It was long. It was flowing around the ankles. It was *tight* everywhere else. She waved goodbye to Sybil and, despite the fact that her long flowing *tight* dress only allowed her to move her legs from the knees down, she made her way through the crowd of students who were enjoying the free beer and burgers, and possibly even the band.

Sybil had a few more beers before she finally plucked up the courage to head off home. She found that home was a little easier with a little alcoholic support. It's not that she didn't like her current housemates, one of whom was an ex boyfriend, it's just that she had nothing in common with them. They were completely uninterested in online games and preferred to relax in front of the television. Because they were all so clever, they needed to smoke vast quantities of illegal greenery in order to lower their mental capacity enough to enjoy the

experience. It really got Sybil's goat, they way they just loafed about all day, talking absolute dribble and nodding sagely at one another.

She would have left long ago if it weren't for the fact that her bedroom had a dedicated internet connection, which made gaming so much more pleasurable. In many of the other share-houses that she'd lived in, she'd had to share her precious bandwidth with the whole household, which was always far from ideal. Invariably, someone always sucked up the gigabytes leeching porn and episodes of *The Sopranos* through rickety and not quite safe peer-to-peer networks.

Sybil would put up with a lot for a stable connection, and no bunch of soft-brained stoners was about to get between her and the enjoyment of her virtual life. Anyway, it's not as if living with Jarrod caused her much angst. He spent most of his time on the couch, clutching his precious water pipe to his heart.

The walk home was short and uneventful. Sybil stood on the threshold and composed herself admirably considering the amount of beer she had just consumed. Paranoia was a way of life for Jarrod and his eternally stoned crew, which meant that she took several minutes to negotiate the complex door-unlocking ritual that they had devised.

A gust of stale air hit her in the face when she finally got the door open, as if it was in a hurry to escape. She could hear the sound of murmured conversation and the always-on television coming from inside.

Taking her newly composed self, Sybil walked self-consciously through the entry corridor and into the lounge room, where her three housemates were lounging about, one of them still in pajamas. Jarrod raised his head from his pipe and waved a greeting.

'Hey Syb,' he said. 'How was school?'

'Yeah, it was okay. Just more of the same,' Sybil replied.

'We're watching Master Fry Cook, wan'na seat?' Jarrod said, making room on the couch.

'Nah, that's all right. I've got an essay to write,' she said, and headed towards her room.

'C'mon Syb,' said the pajama clad Cheryl, 'it's the celebrity episode. Come hang out with us for a bit, we miss you. You're always on that silly computer.'

'I gotta get this done,' Sybil replied, and scuttled out of the lounge room. Jarrod rearranged himself on the couch and bent his head back over his pipe.

Cheryl turned back to the television. 'Stop hogging it Jarrod,' she said. 'Pass it on.'

The third housemate, who was called Robert, sat in his own private gas cloud and slowly picked at a bowl of popcorn he held in his lap. He thought it best to keep quiet until he'd figured out whether he existed or was simply a figment of his own imagination.

(v)

Sybil dropped her books into a corner of her bedroom, turned on her computer and logged into *Sword of Valour*. The loading screen took the usual eternity to clear but when it did, it revealed Splyce in stealth mode outside a collection of huge, crudely built huts. There were several ogres wandering aimlessly amongst the buildings. To the uninitiated, they looked like giant men and women who were exceedingly ugly and wore bearskins vests and kilts that carried identical stains and frays, with the head of the bear acting as a rather gruesome hat.

Splyce had logged out on the outskirts of the ogre camp last night in anticipation of this afternoons farming session. In the distance, she could see Alice's avatar, Faantasy, beating up on an ogre. Staying in stealth, Splyce snuck up to the battle and sprung out from behind the unfortunate virtual monster. With a quick flick of her virtual blades, she drained its life force and transferred it to Faantasy.

'Hey partner,' she said into her microphone after she had accepted Faantasy's group invitation. 'Let's go get that Yarrow.'

'There's a problem,' Faantasy said. 'Are you sure Frantyk is your lecturer?'

'Well, that's what he said,' Splyce replied. 'He wouldn't lie about something like that.'

'Then you talk to him. EoS is blocking the way. They want me to pay them for Yarrow.'

'Really,' Splyce said. 'How much do they want? Ten, twelve gold?'

'No, you don't get it. They want two dollars a stack. Real money.'

'Wow,' Splyce said. It was quite a good deal, when she thought about it objectively.

Farming Death Yarrow was a pain and it would take her and Faantasy an hour to farm a stack of the stuff. Those ogres took some killing. But objectivity had nothing to do with it. Splyce was a hard-core gamer, and hard-core gamers farm their own Death Yarrow. 'Wait here,' she said, and got back into stealth.

Moving carefully, she walked to the centre of the camp where she could see at least twenty members of EoS killing ogres by the dozen. They were incredibly efficient and she stopped a moment to admire their work. Frantyk was in the middle of the group, directing his ogre death squads. Splyce snuck over and popped out behind him.

'Hi,' she typed, 'What's going on?'

'Hello Splyce,' Frantyk wrote. 'How're you going? Your friend said you'd be here soon.'

'We want to farm some Yarrow,' Sybil typed.

'No worries,' Frantyk said. 'We won't stand in your way. There are a couple of ogres to the East of here at the Far Camp. We've set those aside in case someone wanted to farm their own Yarrow. I'll get you an escort if you want.'

'No, that's okay. I know where they are.'

'Well, if you don't want to farm, we have some here going cheap to members of *Suck My Darkness*. We usually sell the stuff for five dollars a stack, but I've already told Faantasy you guys can have it for two.'

'Nah, that's all right. We'll farm our own,' Splyce replied. 'See ya,' she said, and popped back into stealth.

'We can have the Far Camp,' she said into her microphone, 'meet me there.'

'Okay,' Faantasy replied. 'I don't know about you, Splyce my dear, but Frantyk and his goons are pissing me off.'

'Yeah, it's annoying, but what can we do?'

'I don't know,' Faantasy said, and let out a sigh. 'I'd like to get in there and take all their Yarrow. That'll teach 'em to be such bullies.'

'Hello ya'll,' DeathsHead, who had just logged on, said in the guild chat channel.

'What's up?'

Faantasy invited him into the group, and then let her frustration's fly. 'It's bloody EoS, they've taken over the Ogre Camp. Now they want two dollars a stack!'

'Wow, who'd you sleep with to get that price?' DeathsHead asked. 'They usually go for five.'

'Frantyk has a crush on Splyce,' Faantasy replied.

'He does not,' Sybil said, rather too sharply. 'He's my lecturer in Virtual Economies.'

'Woohoo,' DeathsHead said, 'we have connections. All respect, Splyce, but your boyfriend and his gang of do-gooders shit me to tears. Like, come on, all that valor and nobility bullshit they have in their charter is just so much crap.'

'How do you know about their charter?' Faantasy asked.

'They're advertising for new members,' DeathsHead said, 'but you can't have any negative karma points. The bastards are playing the goody two shoes line for all it's worth.'

'Well, Head, if you kept your knives to yourself, you wouldn't have any negative karma points either,' Splyce said.

'Come now, Splyce darling, it's no fun if you don't slice someone from ear to ear every so often.'

'Poor Head, always getting in trouble for killing his own side,' Splyce said.

'You should join 'em Splyce,' DeathsHead said, 'you're a bit like them. Killing discriminately and shit like that.'

'Oh my God Sybil, I've got a great idea to get these bastards back,' Faantasy typed. 'You could join them, they'll definitely take you, and then when you make it to full member, you can strip their vault! That'll teach the greedy bastards.'

'No way,' Sybil said, and the tone in her voice was one of shock. 'It's not like they've done anything bad by us. We can't take any more than the far camp without a full group anyway.'

'It's a great idea, Faany,' DeathsHead said, 'but Splyce wants to play with Frantyk's toilet bits. Forget it.'

'I do not,' Sybil replied, sounding defensive. She found the mental image of a naked Otto disturbingly exciting. 'He's a creep, Head, just like you.'

'Then what the fuck, Splyce. We can even give the stuff back later. Just scare the crap out of their greedy, goody-goody asses.'

'Good thinking Head,' Faantasy said, 'and anyway all this real money for game stuff is getting out of hand. It's EoS today, it'll be someone else tomorrow, and the newbies may not be as nice about it. We gotta make a stand on this bullshit.'

'Yeah, stand,' echoed DeathsHead, 'you tell 'em Faany.'

'Quit it, you guys,' Sybil said, as realization dawned. She could feel the smirk on Alice's face despite the miles between them. 'Enough crap, we've got a job to do. We'll get Head to tank when he gets here. Faany, you keep him alive and I'll take them down. Don't worry about my health, I've got some pots that should get me through. I'll let you know if that changes.'

Sybil released her microphone and slipped into virtuality as Splyce slipped out of stealth behind a virtual ogre.

## Chapter 2

Slava sat quietly in the gloom. On the table before him were two screens that were the room's only source of light. They belonged to two computers, arranged side-by-side in such a way that anyone sitting at the table would have an uninterrupted, one hundred and eighty degree view of the darkened room. There was a blanket stretched across the wall behind him, which further deadened the light and added to the general gloominess. The only thing that was well lit by the screens was Slava's face, and that wasn't a particularly pleasant sight at the moment. The eyes were bloodshot, the hair lank, and the skin pallid.

The door in the far wall opened and a petite woman entered, carrying a tray laden with soft drinks and snack food. She unconsciously negotiated the many squeaky toys on the floor as she made her way towards Slava. The only time she looked aware of her surroundings was when she passed by the three cots in the centre of the room. Then, her entire demeanor changed. She took on the look of a deer that had caught the scent of the wolf pack in the air. She was alert. She was careful. She was ready to run like hell. She returned to her unconscious shuffling the moment she was past the cots.

'Here you go, babe,' she said, and placed the tray on the table. 'This should keep you going for a few hours.'

Slava looked at the offerings beside him. He noted that it was all Health-O brand diet products, which meant there was barely a calorie on the whole tray. In fact, some of the items were as distant from the natural world as the computer he was sitting at, and had considerably less flavor. They were, as far as his digestive system was concerned, rocks.

Apparently, the technology behind this pseudo-food was a boon to all, and had saved civilization from an obesity epidemic of gargantuan proportions. Slava couldn't help thinking that civilization could have saved itself by simply not consuming everything in sight, nor could he help wishing that the contents of the tray would miraculously transform into a giant pepperoni pizza with extra cheese, and a cold bottle of beer or three. But this was the lot of the new father, apparently, and he was damned if he wasn't going to do what was best for the three bundles of joy that were currently sound asleep in their respective cots.

The stresses of fatherhood had come as quite a shock to Slava. The most surprising stress had been the smell of fatherhood, which had left him breathless for the first few days of his tenure as a dad. Who would have thought that his precious progeny would produce such putrid poo, and that it would infiltrate everything in his life? The smell was often more substantial than the poo itself. Tiny, thimble sized turds that barely left a stain on the disposable nappy, yet they filled the entire universe with their foul reek.

Only the sleeplessness of fatherhood came close to rivaling the smell of fatherhood. A cat farting three houses down was often enough to wake the three little cherubs from a deep slumber, and set off those amazingly powerful lungs and vocal cords. The din was loud enough to have frightened away any stray ghosts or evil spirits in the house, and happened far too often for Slava's sanity to bear.

In the early days, the infant din interrupted his sleep on a regular basis except, of course, when the anxiety brought about by the anticipation of being awakened had kept him awake. Dimi seemed to handle sleeplessness better than he, but after a few weeks, even she was beginning to buckle. To preserve what was left of their humanity, they had devised a system in which they took turns to sleep.

Thankfully, the extended family had responded well to the arrival of the triplets. Slava's aunty, Thea, came by every day to help them out and give them a blessed childfree hour. She brought food when she visited, which saved them from starving to death. Without Thea's intervention, they would have filled their bellies with the nutrient free, but conveniently packaged, rocks sold at the local convenience store, rather than prepare anything that their bodies recognized as food. The babies drank formulae most of time, and occasionally mother's milk. Dimi's body, already stressed from carrying and giving birth to three babies in one go, had been unable to keep up an adequate supply of nourishment for them all.

Despite all the planning and family help, there still did not seem to be enough hours in the day to sleep or to eat properly, which is why Slava looked like death had already taken him, and Dimi alternated between being a nervous wreck or a shuffling zombie. However, they did find the time to log into *Sword of Valour* every so often and check out what was happening with *Enemies of Shadow*, a guild that they had led before the arrival of their adored kiddies.

And so it was that Slava was guiding his avatar Pamen through the streets of The Shining Citadel, the virtual metropolis that served as a focus for the forces of virtual good, when Dimi set the tray of almost food on the table and sat down at the computer beside him.

'I'm not too sure I like this "new way" rubbish that Frantyk has come up with,' Slava said, as he watched Dimi log into *Sword of Valour* with Matahari.

'Why not?' she asked.

'Well, it's a game. I do it for fun,' Slava responded, as he guided Pamen through the teeming virtual throngs towards the city gates. 'Playing to earn money isn't playing anymore. It's work.'

Dimi shrugged. 'The money will come in handy,' she said. 'It would be great if we could each earn two thousand dollars a month while staying at home with the kids.'

'Yeah,' Slava agreed. Despite the fact that he thought fatherhood was a code word for smelly sleep deprivation, it was still preferable to the mind numbing monotony of being a cost accountant at the local tyre factory, from where he was on temporary hiatus.

The whole "work for a living" paradigm was giving Slava some trouble. There were no financial imperatives to drive him to the tyre factory for eight hours a day, five days in every week because his cousin, Alaric, had left him a fortune when he had died. The amount was enough to allow Slava and Dimi to abandon paid employment forever, and stay logged into *Sword of Valour* for eternity. But they both had found new jobs when the company that employed them, which Alaric had founded and run, wound down. They never even discussed Alaric's legacy, and the inheritance money sat in the bank, untouched.

Dimi, after checking to see if Matahari's virtual auctions had sold, leaned over and kissed Slava on the cheek. 'I'm off to bed, sweetheart,' she said, and logged off. 'See you in a few hours.'

(ii)

Left alone in the room with his three sleeping children, Slava focused in on Pamen. He thought that he was wandering aimlessly, but somehow he had ended up on the battlements above the main gate of the Citadel where Horc, the commander of the forces of good, kept his eternal vigil.

When Alaric had been alive, Horc had been his avatar. As the then leader of *Enemies of Shadow*, Horc had led the only successful assault in the games history on General Tzamos, its greatest challenge. Alaric's life had ended in a tragic accident just a few hours later.

As a mark of respect, the developers of *Sword of Valour* had immortalized Horc by making him a powerful NPC, and setting him as the last challenge that the forces of evil would need to defeat if they were to lay waste to The Shining Citadel.

Pamen stood beside Horc as he had done so often when Alaric was alive. Of course, in those days, Alaric *was* alive and Slava was childless. He felt that things were very different now, more *complicated*, more intense. Now, even the game was an opening into responsibility, and there was no one with whom to share it. Dimi had been a pillar of strength and had sustained him through his darkest hours after Alaric's accident, but some topics one simply cannot broach with one's spouse. The problems with one's spouse, for a start. It was all just too much.

'I wish you were here,' Slava typed a personal message to Horc.

'I am,' Horc replied, in a glowing blue font.

Slava rubbed his eyes and looked at the screen. That, surely, was an automated response. He took a gulp from one of the un-nourishing soft drinks to calm his nerves.

'Not Horc,' he typed, 'my cousin Alaric.'

'Don't be silly, Slava, of course it's me,' said the glowing blue font. 'Horc is an avatar. He has no independent existence.'

'Well, Alaric doesn't exist anymore either,' Slava typed. 'He's dead.'

'If only I could tell you how wrong you are, cousin,' said the glowing blue font that apparently belonged to the dead Alaric. 'But there are rules, even for the dead.'

'Okay, let's just assume you are my cousin,' Slava typed, 'what the hell are you doing haunting my computer?'

'I'm not haunting your computer,' said the blue font. 'I'm haunting the battlements of The Shining Citadel on the *Rebellion and Consequences* server of *Sword of Valour*. It's not a bad way to spend an afterlife from what I've been told. There are lots of things happening and people are around at all hours.'

Slava had to concede that this made a certain amount of sense. Alaric never did quite fit into the real world when he was alive, but he was a natural in any number of virtual ones. If he were to haunt anything, then it would probably be something virtual.

'Why didn't you say something earlier?' he typed.

'Like I said, there are rules,' responded the blue font. 'I'm tied to Horc because I created him and he is me, but Horc is an NPC in a virtual world. It takes a lot of effort to make him behave the way I want him to. It takes even more effort to break through the rules that govern his existence. I don't have the energy to talk to someone before they talk to me because Horc does not initiate conversation, but he can respond to communication from others.'

Slava sat back in his chair and absentmindedly chewed on one of the nourishment-free snack treats that were on the tray. It was obvious his sanity had departed with Dimi. Not that he could blame it, she was better company.

'Do you know I have kids now?' Slava typed.

'Yeah,' Alaric responded. 'I know. Little Alaric looks a lot like I did at his age. Obviously, he is the most gifted of the three.'

'Nah, they're all amazing,' Slava typed. 'But he did remind me of you when he was born. He was the first to enter the world, and is the least vocal when things don't go his way. But how do you know what he looks like? You're an NPC in a virtual world.'

'Bloody hell, Slava, you're sitting here typing messages to your dead cousin in a computer game, and you're wondering how he knows what your son looks like? Take it as given that I am running under a different set of existential conditions and leave it at that, okay?'

'Okay,' Slava typed, feeling chastised.

Horc walked to the edge of the battlements and looked out over the virtual city below. From up here, it was impossible to tell who was actual and who was a computer controlled NPC, to differentiate between the virtual and the real.

'I sense you are troubled, cousin,' Horc said. 'There aren't too many people who are desperate enough to look for answers from a cartoon. What's on your mind?'

'Things are a bit weird,' Slava admitted. He guided Pamen over to where Horc was now standing. 'It's Frantyk and his bloody new way. It's giving me the shits.'

'Frantyk? He's the second best tank in the game,' said the ghost, in its glowing blue font. 'Big ideas, that boy. It wouldn't surprise me if he changed the face of gaming.'

'Since Alaric died, he's easily the best tank,' Slava typed, before realization dawned. 'Okay, historically, Horc was the best tank in the game, but I'm afraid you're a bit of a has-been now. You'll never tank a raid again. Anyway, he's annoying me because he's trying to turn our guild into a profit-making machine.'

Horc placed his hands on the virtual stone wall and leaned forward. Slava had never seen an avatar do that before and wondered vaguely what emote Alaric was using.

'Well, just stop him,' Horc said. 'The members have a ton of respect for you and Dimi. Just say no, and if he resists, use the guild charter to eject him and his followers. EoS is only democratic by choice.'

'It's not that easy,' Slava typed. 'The money could be very useful.'

'You know that's not true, Slava. You have more money than you need.'

Slava sat in his chair and somehow managed to look even more wretched than his sleep deprived state warranted. 'But it's your money,' he typed at last.

'No, cousin, I'm dead,' Horc said. 'The money is yours. I gave it to you because I wanted you to have it. If I *didn't* want you to have it, I would have given it to someone else. See the logic there?'

'Whatever,' Slava typed, remembering that Alaric, while a wonderful individual and friend, was also a sarcastic prick. 'The money is a side issue. It's more about the spirit of the game. I play to escape, not to earn. It just *feels* wrong.'

'But others feel differently,' Horc said. 'Even Dimi thinks it's a good idea. Maybe thinking in absolutes isn't what is required here. Maybe you should give a little ground for the sake of harmony. Frantyk's a good guy and you only ever see him in game. You should go and visit him at Hack'n'Slash to talk it through.'

Slava leaned back in his chair and considered the wisdom of the blue font, but as he did so, he accidentally tipped the tray off the desk and sent the contents bouncing across the floor. The metallic sounds made by the fake food as it clattered about caused a disturbance in the cots where a tiny hand in the middle cot belonging to Alaric the younger reached up out of

the baby blue blanket and exposed a tiny little face with bright green eyes. The little mouth yawned and the eyes looked around the room, as if performing a visual audit of the contents. Toys? Check. Computers? Check. Parents? DADDY!

Yawn and reconnaissance out of the way, the pink-faced cherub inhaled deeply, opened his mouth wide and emitted a cry so strident that it had all the evil spirits and ghosts within a two-mile radius packing their ethereal bags and looking for new homes. Seconds later, his siblings joined him. Slava entered dad mode and was soon juggling more bottles and babies than he had hands, all thoughts of virtual ghosts and guild politics banished from his mind.

### (iii)

Slava didn't log into *Sword of Valour* at all for a couple of days after his encounter with the ghost of his cousin Alaric, but eventually the lure of the virtual got the better of his fear. He dealt with the memory by convincing himself that his experiences with Horc had been a figment of his imagination, which was not to say that the idea of talking to Otto face to face didn't make a certain amount of sense. His subconscious had probably orchestrated the whole thing. Sick and tired of Slava's continued resistance to life changing epiphanies, it had probably decided it needed to get radical to get its message across. Just to be on the safe side, Slava erased the chat logs on his computer, and made a point of avoiding the battlements of The Shining Citadel.

The demands of being a father of triplets meant it was several days before Slava could organize enough time to get out of the house and visit Hack'n'Slash, an internet cafe and gaming venue in the city centre that had become EoS's unofficial 'real' gathering place. Larry, the owner, was a guild member and offered cut price gaming to his guildies. Two other high placed guild members, Frantyk and Andremar, both had part time jobs there, not that Slava had ever seen them do any work. Whenever he visited, they were always playing computer games with the customers.

Andremar, gifted with lightning reflexes and amazing eye-hand coordination, was unbeatable in any 'twitch' game, and was constantly beating off challenges by geeks who thought they had something to prove. Frantyk was less physically capable, but far more cerebral, and was often asked to lead groups through some of the tougher role-playing games on the market. In fact, the cafe was always full of people wanting to share their gaming experiences with these two local legends. Larry just sat behind the counter, smiling from ear to ear, which showed that he wasn't quite the guileless dope he made out to be.

Standing on the busy pavement outside the gaudy orange facade of Hack'n'Slash, it dawned on Slava that it had been several months since he had been out in the world alone. His father-smell had almost vanished, dissipating into the polluted city air. Nor could he hear his babies crying for his attention, no matter how hard he strained. He could feel the warmth of the mid afternoon sun on his face. Flashing a mad smile at the other humans on the street, he walked into Hack'n'Slash as a temporarily independent man.

Larry greeted him with enthusiasm and led him to what he claimed was the fastest machine in the shop. A strong cup of coffee and a tray of deep fried snack treats appeared, as if by magic, on the table beside him. Several guild members indulging in a little freelance

gaming looked up from their machines and waved. A friendly hand slapped him on the shoulder and its owner asked him how he was feeling.

Slava could not answer immediately because the tears were welling up in his eyes and he was chocking back a relieved sob. He had survived! He had battled his way through the pink and blue madness that was early parenthood and had made it back into the world of adults. He surveyed the room. Yes, they were definitely all adults. Some may not have grown up, but they were all adults. His emotions in check, Slava looked up at the friendly back slapper. 'I feel fucking fantastic,' he said, and meant every word.

#### (iv)

Otto had seen Slava come in, and watched as Larry led him to the best machine in the house. He knew that computer time was free to important people such as Pamen and he was willing to bet that so was the food and drink. He hurriedly organized a strong cup of coffee, chose some of the more edible snacks from the bain-marie, and sent them over to Slava. Getting a coffee for himself, he casually strolled over and slapped Slava on the back. He was not ready for the face that turned up to look at him.

'So,' Otto squeaked, after they had exchanged their initial greetings. 'How's fatherhood treating you?'

'Not bad, Frantyk,' replied the Slava-ghoul. 'Thanks for the coffee. Being a new father highlights the value of caffeine, let me tell you.'

'Really,' Otto replied, aware that this creature was the other half of the Matahari equation. He needed to remain polite, despite the awful smell.

'I'm glad you're here, Frantyk,' continued Slava. At Hack'n'Slash, it was considered polite to call someone by the name of their main character, 'I wanted to talk to you about this "new way" you've come up with.'

'Oh, really?' Otto said, his chest tightening. 'Why?'

'I think it's a fabulous idea, just fabulous,' replied Slava. 'But I don't want any money, okay?'

'But Pamen, you're the best DPS we have,' Otto said, simultaneously relieved and worried. 'We need you.'

'I'm not going anywhere, mate,' Slava replied. 'I just have more money than I know what to do with.' He turned back to his computer. 'Now if you don't mind, I have an email to send. I'm going to tell those wonderful folk at the tyre factory exactly what they can do with their rubber.'

'No worries, mate, thanks for the support,' Otto said and started to move away.

Suddenly, Slava jumped out of his seat. 'Oh, nearly forgot,' he said. 'There's a gold farmer who's a friend of mine. You may have heard of him, his name is Yrril and he spoke at Alaric's funeral. I think you should get in touch with him. He's an expert at selling virtual stuff.'

'Sure,' Otto replied, and scurried back to his place behind the front counter, where Andremar was sitting at one of the staff computers, killing some customers.

'I hate it when the boss visits,' Andremar said, as Otto sat down at the computer beside him.

'That's really weird. Larry's the boss, Slava's just some guy who plays computer games.'

'Nah, Hack'n'Slash isn't real, mate,' Andremar said. 'It's just the physical manifestation of Larry's adolescent fantasy. Now that we're earning from *Sword of Valour*, Pamen's one of the bosses. I'm just glad Matahari isn't here as well. She scares the shit out of me.'

Otto looked at Andremar. He had known the young man for several years through the game, and had worked with him at Hack'n'Slash every weekend for the past two years. Otto was in awe of his gaming prowess, but he had never heard him utter a philosophical word until today. There was obviously more to Andremar than met the eye.

'I am the elected guild leader, you know,' Otto said. 'Technically, I'm the boss.'

'Only because they let you, mate,' Andremar replied, grinning. 'Slava holds the guild charter in his game vault. He *owns* EoS. He can chuck you out on your ear if he wanted. Same with all of us. We are all in EoS because Slava lets us.'

Otto digested this information. It wasn't exactly new—he understood how guild charters worked in the game—it's just that he assumed the EoS charter was the property of the members. 'I'm going to see if he wants another coffee,' he said to Andremar, and scuttled off.

## Chapter 3

Sybil looked out over the assembled masses that were *Suck My Darkness* and smiled. Okay, maybe 'masses' was the wrong word. Thirty or so assorted virtual bodies do not a virtual horde make. She loved each and every one of them, despite having only met a dozen or so in the real world.

*Suck My Darkness* was a little different from your average *Sword of Valour* guild because *everyone* was a rogue. They were all, according to the manual that came with the game, vicious killers who wore little armor and relied upon stealth and surprise to defeat their enemies. Almost all *Suck My Darkness* members had alts who were tanks and healers, the boring but necessary components of a player versus environment guild. If no one tanked or healed, then they would never get anything done. If they never got anything done, then they would fall behind in their equipment and potions, and it was ever so difficult killing people with rusty virtual daggers. But there were always arguments over whose turn it was to *not* be a rogue, and they often threatened to boil over into virtual violence. The arguments had gotten so bad in recent weeks that Splyce had taken to drafting a healing and tanking rota that she enforced with the rust-free blades of her virtual daggers.

The only member of *Suck My Darkness* that did not have a tanking or healing alt was, in fact, Sybil. Nobody grumbled about her alt free status, however, because annoying Splyce was a guaranteed way of spending a good proportion of one's virtual life being virtually dead.

An outsider might think that all this virtual violence was the symptom of dysfunction within the group, but they would be wrong. The violence was the glue that held them together. *Suck My Darkness* was a player versus player guild, which meant that its members liked nothing more than to kill the avatars of other players. They thrived on conflict. Some, like Splyce, attached a strange ethic to the virtual carnage. She would only kill players who had aligned themselves with The Dark Forces. On the odd occasion when she found it

necessary to chop off the virtual head of someone on the good side, such as when she was annoyed or it was a bad hair day in reality, she usually felt guilty about it later. Others, like DeathsHead, killed indiscriminately. In DeathsHead's opinion, everyone outside the guild was fair game.

'Listen up folks,' Sybil typed, and all the members paid attention. Leaders of *Suck My Darkness* did not win the privilege to lead through glorified popularity contests. The boss was the boss by virtue of combat. Every two months, all aspiring leaders entered the arena and fought. The last avatar standing was the boss until the next leadership challenge. Sybil had won the last nine consecutive challenges, which is why *everyone* in *Suck My Darkness* listened when Splyce spoke.

'We're about to hit the Oversea dungeon,' Sybil typed, 'which means that you all need to have your water breathing rings equipped. And tanks, keep an eye out for undead pirates. I don't want a repeat of the last run when we had to wait for all the healers to respawn.' She looked at her screen and noted that all the groups had activated their raid voice communication, which meant that the entire guild could now hear her speak. 'That's better,' she said. 'My typing isn't as fast as it could be.'

'Hey Splyce,' DeathsHead said, 'my team is healer heavy. Can Lemonns go rogue.'

'Yeah, okay, but he's going to have to heal next run.'

'Thanks Splyce,' Lemonns said. 'Be right back.'

'Okay, when he gets back, we'll go in. Head, your group can lead the way. Remember the sharks attack the first person through the portal, so send in the tank first.'

'I'm back,' Orannges said, who was Lemonns as a rogue.

'Okay, Head, get going. Give us a yell when it's clear.'

'You heard the boss,' DeathsHead said. 'SteadyGeorge, go through when you're ready. Everybody else will follow after I count three.'

Sybil watched a heavily armored avatar walk through the shimmering blue portal on the screen.

'One,' DeathsHead said. Four of the five avatars who had been standing beside SteadyGeorge moved forward and arranged themselves in front of the portal. The fifth, who was Orannges, vanished.

'Two,' DeathsHead said. The central avatar in the group of four, wearing black robes and wielding a glowing stave, lifted his free hand and green fire flew from his fingertips. The flames settled over him and his teammates, and they all began to glow with an eerie green light.

'Three,' DeathsHead said. 'Move out!' The four avatars all went through the blue portal together and disappeared from Sybil's sight.

'There are no Sharks,' DeathsHead said a few seconds later. 'The place is empty.'

'What?' Sybil said. 'There can't be anyone else in there. No one's gone through the portal for a couple of hours. I've been farming out here, waiting for you guys to arrive.'

'What the fuck!' DeathsHead exclaimed.

'Head, what's up?' Sybil asked, but there was no reply. 'Head,' she repeated a few seconds later. When there was still no reply, she decided it was time to act. 'Right, everyone we're going through, tanks first. Wait for the green light from me, then move.' Sybil waited for everyone to get into position, and then sent out the signal.

The scene that greeted them on the other side of the portal was grim. The bodies of DeathsHead's team were scattered around the cavern floor. A dozen members of Enemies of Shadow were standing in formation a little further down the passageway.

'KILL THEM!' Splyce screamed as she watched the corpses of her guild mates fade away. Only half of *Suck My Darkness* charged, the other half merged into the shadows and crept towards their victims. Splyce chose the wizard at the rear of the enemy group for some special treatment. 'Leave the sparkly turd at the back for me,' she said.

The front row of the Enemies of Shadow lines, bolstered by the healing energies of the monks behind them, easily absorbed the violence of *Suck My Darkness*'s charge. A few seconds later the other half of *Suck My Darkness* appeared, apparently out of nowhere, and the monks were no more. Splyce could see the wizard preparing the evacuation spell that would move him out of harm's way. 'No you don't,' Sybil snarled as Splyce dug her virtual daggers into his virtual back. 'Everyone, fall back,' she said when the last of the EoS guard had been dispatched to the spawn circle. 'Get your rogues and assemble in stealth outside the portal. Let's teach these cock suckers a lesson.'

'Ah, Splyce,' Orannges said, 'I'm not very good at maths and that, but I reckon there are about a hundred and fifty or so EoS members in the central hall.'

'How do you know that?' Splyce asked.

'Because I'm in the central hall,' Orannges replied. 'I went through in stealth and they forgot to kill me.'

'Oh,' Sybil said, her anger cooling somewhat at the news of the overwhelming numbers. 'Well, come back out and we'll go do the Hell Grounds instead.'

'Nah, not yet. I'll meet ya'll at the spawn circle,' Orannges said. 'I'm going to see how many I can kill before they catch me.'

'What a good idea,' Splyce said, as Sybil smiled a nasty smile. 'Okay folks, we are now at war with EoS. I'll send them the declaration a bit later. In the mean time, let's kill a few while they're not ready for it. Everybody get on your rogues and into your death squads. I want maximum carnage.' As the raid dissolved, Splyce ran over to where Faantasy was standing, and they formed a group. A few minutes later DeathsHead joined them.

'That boyfriend of yours is going to get pissed when we declare war,' DeathsHead said.

'He's no boyfriend of mine,' Sybil said. 'I want to hunt him down and kill him. Then I want to hunt him down again and kill him again. After that, I want to hunt him down and kill him.'

'We get your drift,' Faantasy interrupted. 'Let's stop talking and go. Killing idiots is so much fun!'

(ii)

Frantyk was, as ever, in the thick of the action. *Enemies of Shadow* were at work in the middle of their most lucrative farming ground. The central halls of the Undead Pirate King were amazingly profitable. They could earn thousands of dollars an hour in here. If it weren't for the game limiting their time to one day in every seven, EoS would never leave.

It was tough work, though, and required skill and teamwork to make it pay. Of all the guilds in *Sword of Valour*, only EoS had that skill and teamwork, which meant that they had

the place, more or less, to themselves. They discouraged others from coming in during their time by setting guards with orders to kill anyone who entered, but incursions were rare. Occasionally, one of the smaller guilds would drop by, wanting to take on the outer edges of the underwater castle, but they were generally easy to deal with and Frantyk no longer asked for incursion reports. Which is why he was annoyed at the message he had just received from the guards at the East entrance.

'Who are SMD, and more importantly, have they gone?' Frantyk asked.

'You know, boss, *Suck My Darkness*. That guild you wanted us to be buddies with. They came in, killed the guards and now it looks like they've gone.'

'Oh, that SMD,' Frantyk said. 'Let me know if they come back.'

Frantyk turned and faced the giant Pirate King who had just left his throne room. He had killed the King four times this morning, but the Jewelled Crown of Barbarism had yet to fall. The Crown was a rare prize that would fetch at least five thousand dollars on the open market, so it was worth the effort even though it was a tough fight that they occasionally lost.

Frantyk screamed a battle cry, which was the opening move of choice for many a tank. It got the enemy's attention and let them know you were coming, while letting your own team know that you were about to engage. Opening gambit out of the way, he charged forward and thrust his sword full into the belly of the giant. Being a *virtual* giant, the Pirate King did not collapse and die with two feet of metal embedded in his guts. Instead, he brought his arm around and swatted Frantyk so hard that he sent him flying into the back wall.

Charging forward again, Frantyk swung at the giant's head, but missed and got a punch in the belly for his troubles. But something was wrong. At this point in the battle, Frantyk was expecting to see fireballs, launched by the wizards, slamming into the King and knocking him backwards, but there were no fireballs. He was expecting his health to begin regenerating thanks to the spells of the monks, but there was no regeneration.

Frustrated, Frantyk launched a kick that stunned the King for a few seconds. He turned around to see what was going on and to berate his teammates for losing focus. Instead of his guild mates, however, Frantyk saw Splyce, Faantasy, and DeathsHead standing over five virtual corpses. A curse left Otto's lips just as Splyce's razor sharp virtual daggers sliced through Frantyk's virtual neck.

Otto sat fuming in a very crowded spawn circle while he waited for the effects of Frantyk's virtual death to wear off. He was unable to communicate with anyone for twenty seconds after a death, and his virtual physical capabilities were somewhat reduced. A kitten armed with a water pistol was a threat in the first thirty seconds after re-spawning, so the wisest choice was to wait.

He knew that Sybil was trying to prove something, but he was damned if he knew what it was. He had half a mind to get on his rogue and teach her a lesson. The thought of a dead Splyce cheered him up a little, making the wait somewhat easier. Revenge could wait, however, until after they finish the Oversea dungeon. There was no sense in throwing money away playing a silly game of tit-for-tat with a bunch of murderous rogues.

'How many did they get?' Otto asked, once communication was open to him again.

'About half,' came the sober reply from Andremar, his second in command. 'They are one nasty bunch of bitches,' he continued, sounding impressed. 'As near as I can tell, there were about thirty of them. There may be a few still floating around.'

'Well, they did catch us by surprise and while in combat,' Frantyk said. 'I'm sure *that's* not going to happen again.'

Frantyk's death effects were wearing off, and Otto thought it was time to clean up the SMD mess. 'Everybody in the spawn circle move to the throne room and take out the King,' he said over the guild chat channel. EoS was a guild of means and had their own *Sword of Valour* approved voice communication system hosted on a computer at Hack'n'Slash.

'Right you are boss, but why?' Andremar asked.

'They're all rogues, which means that they're only effective against other players. The monster in this dungeon will cream them if they are allowed to respawn.'

'Good thinking mate,' Andremar said.

With half of EoS in the throne room, the King didn't have a chance. Roaring his pre-programmed roar, he charged at the four score avatars that had violated his domain, and died quickly thereafter. Much to Frantyk's annoyance, he didn't drop the Crown.

The King taken care of for a little while - nothing stays dead for long in *Sword of Valour* - Frantyk arranged the guild in groups and positioned them around the room in a way that he thought would guard against surprise attack. Finally satisfied with the positioning, he stood alone at the room's centre and cast an approving eye over his troops. He didn't even see Splyce, DeathsHead, and Faantasy until they had all dug their daggers into his back. He turned around with just enough time to see them vanish into the shadows before his virtual soul departed his virtual body and he virtually reanimated at the spawn circle.

'Right,' Frantyk said, once his death silence had lifted, 'did anyone get them?'

'Um, sorry boss,' came Andremar's reply. 'We're still looking. I reckon they may have pissed off, now that they have made their point. At least it was only you this time.'

'Yeah, small mercies,' Frantyk said sarcastically while running through the corridors back towards the throne room. 'Let's hope some of the NPC's get them,' he continued, running past a particularly dark crossroad in the castle.

'Why's your health dropping?' Andremar asked.

'Oh shit,' Frantyk said, as he realized he had just run through a poison trap. 'I'm screwed,' he opined as Splyce appeared in the corridor ahead of him. Deciding he would go down fighting, he stopped and drew his sword. This gave DeathsHead, who had come out of stealth behind him, more than enough time to prepare a blow that severed the connection between Frantyk's head and the rest of Frantyk.

When his death penalty had lifted, Frantyk found Andremar and a full group of EoS members outside the spawn circle waiting to escort him back to the throne room.

'These guys are bloody good,' Andremar said. 'I never thought rogues were much chop, but these three have changed my mind. You should invite them into the guild. Instead of using a group of twelve to guard the gates, you could use these three and a couple of monks. They would be a hell of a lot more effective.'

'Yeah, heaps more effective,' Otto said as he watched the two monks in the group die to Faantasy and DeathsHead. Splyce appeared just behind Frantyk and sunk her daggers into his back. He was able to spin and see Andremar run his virtual sword through her body before virtual death took Frantyk off to the spawn circle.

At least this time Otto had company in the circle. He and the monks turned towards Splyce, who vanished. DeathsHead appeared a few seconds later, and did the same. The three

EoS members stayed in the spawn circle, which was a non-combat zone, until Andremar had assured them that there was a sizeable escort outside.

'The third one got away,' he told Frantyk as they jogged back towards the throne room. 'We've also gotten a few of the members to switch to their hunters so that they can detect stealth. It's not one hundred percent reliable, but it's something.'

'Let's hope they've gone,' Frantyk replied. 'They've more than made their point, whatever that was.'

Back in the throne room, Frantyk re-arranged all the groups so that they now included a hunter. 'Okay folks,' he said, 'we'll take out the King again, and then we'll get back to work. I'm sure the SMD threat is over, but we may as well take advantage of the numbers here to make a tough fight easier.'

The hunter in Frantyk's group suddenly threw out a flare that exposed DeathsHead creeping towards Frantyk. They entire group sprang to attack and Otto was heartened to see DeathsHead fall to a dozen sword strokes. He turned to see Splyce standing behind him, daggers raised.

'These guys are fucking *good*,' Andremar crowed when Frantyk's death effects finally wore off. 'If you don't invite them into the guild, there may be a mutiny.'

'I'm going to,' Frantyk said. 'It may be the only way I'm going to get them to stop killing me.' Otto sat back in his chair and looked at the screen. Strangely enough, he didn't feel much like making money at the moment. 'Hey Andremar,' he said, 'I'm going to log after I send the invites. Will you take over?'

'Sure mate, will do.'

Otto used a magic portal from the spawn circle to return to the guild house. It cost several dollars worth of materials, but he had died far too often this day and did not want to risk a run through the darkened corridors of the dungeon. When he arrived at his virtual home, he sent guild invitations to his three murderers and logged out of Frantyk.

### (iii)

Still shaking from the fun with Frantyk, Sybil got out of her chair and went to the kitchen for a drink. The dope smokers had all retired for the night, but the aroma of their consumption hung in the air. There was a rhythmic squeaking and the occasional muffled squeal coming from Jarrod's bedroom.

Hard core pot smokers irritated Sybil. They lay around all day smoking and eating junk food like slugs with a death wish. They only got off the couch to replenish their snack supplies or answer a call of nature. Yet somehow, when the sun had set and they had reluctantly put away the water pipes, they found the energy to make out all night.

Maybe it was *because* they sat around all day eating high calorie snacks that they had energy to burn at night, and very few options on where to light the blaze. She found herself wishing that Jarrod would take up midnight runs on the beach instead of midnight runs on Cheryl. At least it would be quieter.

Passing on the various soft drinks in the house because they contained far too much sugar, Sybil took a bottle of red wine from the pantry and carefully poured it into a carafe. The horrid nagging part of her brain that was always trying to wreck her fun pointed out that

substituting a sugar filled alcoholic drink for a sugar filled non-alcoholic drink *because it was healthier* was not a positive sign. She ignored it, along with the sounds of debauchery coming from Jarrod's bedroom, and wandered back to her computer.

After pouring a generous measure of wine from the carafe into a beautiful antique wine glass—Sybil enjoyed the niceties of life and even when drinking on her own always decanted the wine and used a glass—she donned the headphones and re-entered Splyce's world. *Suck My Darkness* had all retired to their home zone but had remained in their death squads, just in case they spontaneously decided to go and kill some EoS members.

'Hey Splyce,' said DeathsHead, 'Faantasy and I just got a message from Frantyk while you were afk.'

'Really,' Sybil said, noting that she also had mail. 'What's it about?' she asked as she moved towards the mailbox at *Suck My Darkness*'s modest guildhall

'It's an invitation to join EoS,' Faantasy squealed. 'We both have one.'

'Me too,' Sybil said, after opening her mail. 'Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?'

'If you're thinking that we should join EoS, gain their trust, and then steal everything they have,' DeathsHead said, 'then, yes, we have synergy.'

'We'll give it all back, of course,' Sybil said, 'it wouldn't be fun otherwise.'

'Most definitely,' DeathsHead said. 'If we didn't, then we would be just like them. I hate bloody gold farmers.'

'I'll send Frantyk a message telling him we'll all join,' Sybil said. 'Then I'm going to do some farming in The Shimmering Valley. Anyone wanna come?'

'Nah,' DeathsHead replied. 'I gotta go to work. I love the nightshift it's *so* much fun. The best bit is sweeping junkies out of the toilets in the morning. Send me an email in real life if you need me before tomorrow.'

'I gotta go too,' said Faantasy. 'Mom's coming for a visit tomorrow and I've got heaps of housework to do before she gets here.'

'Okay then,' Sybil said, 'I'll catch you all tomorrow.'

Pouring herself another generous glass of wine from the carafe, Sybil typed out a short note to Frantyk and prepared to go and earn some virtual cash with which to buy Splyce some nice potions, and possibly a new dagger.

She hadn't even left the zone when the reply came from Frantyk, welcoming her and her friends to the guild. The short note also told her that EoS was waiving the usual joining fee, but each new member should bring a token or trophy for the guild house.

Wondering what she could take, Splyce left the safety of *Suck My Darkness*'s home zone and entered the Wild Lands. After a few minutes of not so careful thought, Sybil concluded that an ogre's head would make a wonderful addition to the EoS guild house. It would be most appropriate because EoS members were, without exception, so ugly that the Ogre's head would be like a tribute to their faces.

Not bothering to activate her stealth, Splyce began the long run to the Ogre compound to get a decorative head. She was half way to her destination when a ghoul of dreadful aspect jumped out from behind a tree and swung a sword at her. Ducking, Splyce was able to bring her daggers up into a defensive position but it was too late. Somehow, the ghoul had gotten behind her and driven his virtual blade into her back. She noticed her attacker's name was DaZombi just before virtual death whisked her off to the spawn circle.

Swearing beneath her breath, Sybil waited impatiently for Splyce's death penalties to subside. It had not been a good day. Circumstances had forced her to kill (repeatedly) someone she once thought of as a potential love interest, her friends had logged off leaving her all alone, her ex-boyfriend was fucking a kinky pot fiend in the next room, and now some random loser had killed her. Time for someone to pay, and DaZombi was the easiest target.

'I'll teach you to kill the leader of SMD,' she snarled as Splyce exited the spawn circle, dripping venom and thirsting for vengeance. Harboring dark thoughts about people who role-played undead, she screamed through the virtual fields to where the ghoul had attacked her and ran straight into a trap that rooted her to the spot. A few feet away, DaZombi stepped out from behind a tree and lifted his bow. Sybil pushed Splyce forward in a desperate attempt to escape, but her feet remained resolutely glued to the ground.

DaZombi nocked a smoking arrow, aimed in her direction, and let fly. The resulting explosion blew Splyce's head clean off her shoulders.

Pouring a third glass of wine, Sybil sat in her chair staring at her screen. 'Hmm,' she thought to herself. 'That was a bummer.' DaZombi seemed a little smarter than your average gamer, so a little strategy was called for. Slipping into stealth, Splyce insinuated her way out of the spawn circle. Avoiding the direct route, she slid between the trees to the south of the road until she had passed the place DaZombi had ambushed her.

Peeking through the trees, Splyce saw her potential assailant hiding behind a rock and watching the road, awaiting her return. Sybil smiled, took a drink and slowly moved Splyce forward. 'Not so clever now, mister dead man,' she mumbled to herself as she applied a little virtual poison to Splyce's blade. 'I hope you like having daggers in your back.'

Inching forward, Splyce raised her blades, but instead of bringing them down into the bony back of her tormentor in a violent act of retribution, she triggered a hidden trap and froze. Sybil watched helplessly as DaZombi turned around, stepped back a few feet, nocked another smoking arrow, and blew Splyce's head off her shoulders. Again.

#### (iv)

Sybil sat on the coach in the darkened lounge room after opening her second bottle of wine for the night. The encounter with DaZombi had been dispiriting. Wasn't she the best rogue going around? You wouldn't know it by the way that un-gilded freak had taken her apart. She looked down at her glass of wine and sighed.

'Hey Syb,' Jarrod said, giving her a start and causing her to almost spill her drink. The man walked like a cat. 'You're up late. Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she replied. 'I just got my ass kicked by some random idiot in game, so I thought I'd drown my sorrows. I see you've finished doing Cheryl.'

Jarrod sighed and sat down next to her on the coach. He took the glass of wine from her hand and drained the contents in one mouthful.

'It's just a game, Syb,' he said. 'You shouldn't get all knotted up about it, and Cheryl and I are just friends now. We haven't slept together for weeks.' He handed back her glass and went into the kitchen, returning with a fresh bottle and a second wineglass.

'Yeah, right,' Sybil said, 'I could hear you being friends from my bedroom.'

Jarrod poured out two drinks from the carafe and handed one to Sybil. 'It wasn't Cheryl,' he said.

'What? Have you got a visitor? Do I know her?'

Jarrod shook his head.

'You can't tell me that all that noise was you going solo. It was quite rowdy,' Sybil said, and then realization dawned. 'No way!'

Jarrod smiled. 'Yep,' he said and took a mouthful of wine. 'I didn't know how to tell you,' he continued. 'I barely knew how to tell myself.'

'With Robert? I don't think I've ever heard him talk.'

Jarrod nodded, and then reclined on the coach until his head rested in Sybil's lap. 'It's strange, but I've kind of known ever since I was a kid, but it's sort of come as a big surprise anyway. It's no easy thing, looking yourself in the face for the first time,' he said.

Sybil stared at the wall and absentmindedly stroked Jarrod's hair. 'You do realize,' she said after a few minutes, 'that you have slept with everyone in the house? And you are now living with your gay lover in a house you share with your two most recent girlfriends?'

Jarrod sat up and poured himself another drink. There was what Sybil considered to be an irritating smirk on his face. 'I hadn't thought of it like that,' he said.

Sybil sighed and put her drink on the table. 'I think it's about time I cut down on my drinking,' she said, then got up and walked towards her bedroom. 'You don't mind cleaning up, do you?'

Jarrod, seeing the strange unfocussed look in Sybil's eye, thought it best to go along and nodded.

'That's so nice of you,' she said, dreamily. 'Good night.'

## Chapter 4

The thirty days of EoS training passed in a stampede of rules, regulations, training drills, and online meetings. If it hadn't been so frightening, Sybil would have been impressed. *Enemies of Shadow* were organized. Not in an everyday "everybody knows their job" sort of way that most guilds aspire to. That was far too chaotic for the likes of Frantyk and his associates. Even the most co-ordinated guild of serious hard-core gamers was a disorganized mess when compared to the well-lubricated, virtual killing machine that was *Enemies of Shadow*. Normal guilds relate to them in the same way that a talented amateur rock and roll band relates to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra—the only common ground between the two is that they make noise.

EoS was far more regimented than any gaming guild had a right to be. But as the three recruits soon found out, EoS wasn't about having a good time with your friends. It was about money. And money is serious business. .

Splyce, Faantasy, and DeathsHead were required to be online at least four hours every day, during which the EoS trainers burnt the EoS way into their very souls. It wasn't teaching, as DeathsHead often complained, it was indoctrination. There were training drills. There was homework. DeathsHead even had to write an essay explaining how he had acquired so many negative karma points!

At the end of their training period, the three former *Suck My Darkness* members followed Frantyk to the ceremony where they were to become full members of *Enemies of Shadow*. It was amazing. They trooped into the most decorated and well-maintained guildhall that any of them had ever seen. Waiting for them were two hundred armed and armored avatars, all wearing the red white and blue EoS tabard, standing in perfect formation with eyes to the front and weapons drawn.

Sybil had an almost overwhelming urge to run away, but she held her nerve. The three of them stood with Frantyk on a raised platform at the front of the hall. Without saying a word, Frantyk handed each of them an EoS tabard that they put on over their armor. When they were all appropriately clad, he saluted them and turned to the assembled masses. Together, Frantyk and the throng raised their weapons and issued a battle cry that blew the speakers in Sybil's headphones.

The assembled masses then sheathed their weapons and trooped out of the hall, leaving them alone with Frantyk. 'Welcome to EoS,' he said. 'As well as this ceremony, you will find another of EoS's new member initiatives appearing in your snail mail box in a few days. As trainees, you will each receive \$1000, which is half of what a full EoS member would earn in a calendar month. Next month, you will be paid as full members.'

'You're not serious?' DeathsHead said, after a few seconds of stunned silence. 'That is a hell of a lot of money?'

'All professionals are well paid,' Frantyk replied, 'and now that your training is over, you are highly skilled professionals and will earn every cent. As professionals, you will use all the tools we make available to you to make EoS successful. And if EoS is successful, you are successful. I think it's a privilege to be involved in such a groundbreaking initiative. Getting paid so handsomely is a bonus.'

Frantyk stopped talking for a moment and began radiating an aura of emptiness. After a few minutes, the three former SMD members began to feel a little uncomfortable. Faantasy was on the verge of breaking the silence when the aura dissipated, and Frantyk re-animated.

'Sorry, had to go afk for a while to get the schedules,' he said. 'You'll find your first assignment in your in-game email box. It's protecting the farmers at The Dusty Caverns and should present you with no problems. There will be monks in the farming group if you need healing to deal with any threats. Now if there aren't any questions, I've got to head off to do some tanking.' He waited a few seconds and when no questions were forthcoming, he turned towards the exit. 'Great to have you all on board folks,' he said as he moved towards the door. 'We've been a little short on firepower lately and you guys are just what the doctor ordered. Oh, and Sybil, don't forget that report on online economic indicators is due on Monday.'

'Thanks Frantyk,' the three said in unison. Sybil blushed, but Splyce didn't.

## (ii)

Several hours later, Splyce and DeathsHead were standing by the door to The Dusty Caverns while Faantasy was having a boredom-induced spasm a short distance away. They watched her with interest, which wasn't surprising considering she was the only interesting thing to watch in the immediate vicinity. They could hear the distant sounds of their EoS

guildies industriously farming virtual loot to turn into real cash, which DeathsHead was hypothesizing was tax-free.

'It's all a bit shady,' he said as Faantasy did cartwheels into a nearby wall. 'Your customers probably don't ask for a receipt because real cash for virtual items isn't allowed under the game's terms and conditions, but the company that runs the game turns a blind eye to it so that they can watch to see how buggers like Frantyk make it work. And if there is no paper trail, there is nothing to tax. Simple.'

DeathsHead seemed to be wearing a smug expression, which Sybil knew was impossible because it was the face of an avatar and not of the person speaking. 'Not that I agree with how these pussies earn their cash,' he continued, 'and this whole goody-goody line they're pushing is very irritating, but I gotta admire their business sense. Thankfully, the government doesn't. Ha, ha, ha, just joking,' he concluded.

'But its fuckin' booooorrriiing,' Sybil complained. 'We've been standing here for two hours and we haven't killed anything. It's just no fun.'

'We can have fun later,' DeathsHead said. 'I don't know what you do for a living in the real world, but I give out change at a video arcade. Believe me when I say this, this is not so bad. And it's only four hours a day. I spend that much time at home just hating my job! This is money for jam, I tell you, money for jam!'

'Remember our plan,' Splyce said in a private message that only DeathsHead and Faantasy could hear. 'We aren't here for the long term.'

'Oh yeah, I forgot,' DeathsHead typed, and somehow the very font contrived to look despondent.

Both DeathsHead and Splyce turned back to look at Faantasy, who was trying to jump up onto the ledge above the door of the Caverns.

'How we gunna do it, then?' DeathsHead asked after a few minutes.

'I don't know,' Splyce responded. 'It looks pretty secure to me. They keep all the really high value stuff in the secured room in the guild hall. You need to be an officer just to get in. Then there is the lock on the chest, which needs platinum lock picks to even have a chance at opening.'

Faantasy stopped jumping and walked over to join them. 'Well, while you two were busy being brainwashed by Frantyk during training,' she said, 'I was snooping around. These guys have a lot of loot, and guild halls can only have one safe chest, which is the one Splyce is talking about. Most of the really big, expensive stuff is in that chest, but they have to be selective about what goes in there because they have so much. Only the super high value stuff goes in there, everything else goes in the chests in the small storeroom at the back of the hall. I counted eight in there, all filled to the brim with all sorts of tempting treats. There is no Jeweled Crown of Barbarism in there, but I reckon they'll be fairly annoyed if we emptied them all the same.'

'Great work, Faany,' Splyce said. 'Is it difficult to get to?'

'Nah, anyone who is a member can access the room, and there are no passwords on any of the chests,' Faantasy replied. 'I reckon they don't think people will take anything because everyone gets the best gear automatically. Why steal when you can just ask?'

'Still, we must be careful,' Splyce said, 'we don't want to get caught.'

'Why?' Faantasy asked. 'What are they gunna do? Kick us out of the guild? They'll be doing us a favor. I can feel my mind turning to cream cheese, standing around here babysitting woosies.'

'But the money,' whined DeathsHead.

'We'll do it independently, Heady,' said Faantasy. 'Now we know their tricks, we'll go do our own farming and sell the loot on the open market. I've been to some of the websites that organize auctions for this stuff. It's not that difficult. At least we can kill stuff and not just stand around bouncing off the walls.'

'I suppose,' DeathsHead ventured.

'C'mon, we don't need Frantyk and his brain-dead guildies to make money,' Faantasy said. 'We'll just wait till they've done the work and then kill them on their way home and take their stuff.'

DeathsHead turned slowly until he was facing Faantasy. 'What did you say?' he said.

'We can kill them and take their stuff,' Faantasy repeated.

'I, I never thought of that,' he stammered out eventually. 'You're a genius, Faany! We can have fun *and* make a profit!'

'Easy now, you two,' Splyce said. 'Let's not get carried away. We'll steal their stuff and then give it back, just like we planned. I'm not sure I want to get involved in robbery and murder, even if it is virtual.'

'I'm sure it's not a crime,' DeathsHead blurted out. 'It's just a game, after all, and this isn't real stuff.'

'No, but it's real money,' Sybil countered. 'Look, this has gone too far. I vote we just quit and go back to SMD. I'm not mad at Frantyk anymore. Him and his guildies are too weird to hate.'

'We've come this far and you want to pull out now?' Faantasy said. 'No way, Syb, we gotta do this. If we get away with it, we'll get on all the fan sites. We may even be interviewed on *The Sword of Valour Review*!'

'But it's gone too far,' complained Sybil. 'And we were wrong about Frantyk, he's okay, and so are EoS. Let's just go home.'

Just then, a member of the farming party they were protecting, a tank by the name of LeetSauce, broke in on the open communications channel. 'Didn't you stooges finish your training?' he asked. 'You're supposed to help with the shipping. Come on, get your lazy asses over here and do some work.'

'Tonight?' Splyce asked in the private channel. DeathsHead and Faantasy both /nod, an emote that set their respective avatar's heads nodding up and down at a speed that would cause a human head to fall off. Faantasy followed up with emote /urdead, which caused her avatar to drag a finger under her throat. Splyce and DeathsHead both /nod.

(iii)

The reasons why the three of them were unsuitable for long-term membership in *Enemies of Shadow* became all too apparent to Sybil that evening when they returned to execute their plan. *Suck My Darkness* members were far too chaotic to live regimented virtual lives. With their tiny attention spans and an unquenchable thirst for virtual blood, trying to co-ordinate

even a small group of SMD members for an extended period of time was like trying to herd cats. And because they were all rogues, it was like trying to herd *invisible* cats. 'Head, where are you?' she said over the group chat channel.

'I'm just checking out some of these ogre heads in the display over here,' came the reply. 'Do you know they've got the Black Assassin's head? It's super rare, there couldn't be more than ten of these in the entire game. It hasn't even dropped on some servers yet!'

'Would you come here, please? We've got a job to do!'

'Where is here, exactly,' he said. 'I can't see you.'

'By the door to the storeroom, which is locked,' Splyce said, after trying unsuccessfully to open the door. 'Faany, got your lock picks?'

'Yeah, but I can't open it right now,' Faantasy replied.

'Why not?'

'I've found LeetSauce! I'll just kill him quickly, and then I'll come back and open the lock.'

Sybil sat back in her chair in exasperation. 'We'll get that idiot later,' she said once she had calmed down a little. 'Come and open this door so we can do what we came to do and then drop these stupid guild tags.'

'Okay, okay,' Faantasy said a little sulkily. 'But when we finish, I get to kill him alone. Agreed?'

Claiming kills is a serious matter in player verses player gaming circles.

'Okay,' Sybil grumbled after a moment's consideration.

'Fine,' DeathsHead said, reluctantly, shortly after. 'But if you get in trouble, don't look to me for help.'

A minute or so later, the door to the storeroom swung open and the three invisible burglars went inside. The room was chock a block with trophies and decorations, as was the EoS way. There were eight chests scattered amongst the virtual doilies, three in the centre of the room, three on the back wall, and one each on the eastern and western walls.

'Okay,' said Splyce. 'Let's get the loot.' The lids of the three chests in the centre of the room opened simultaneously. Sybil sighed. 'We'll do the middle chest first,' she said, and the lids of the two chests on either side of her closed. Splyce looked down into the chest she had opened and gave a squeal. It contained scores of compartments, each with a virtual goody inside. 'Oh my gosh,' she said, 'I've never seen such a big box!'

'Wow,' said DeathsHead. 'These are Boxes of Neverfull! They are the most expensive items in the City store. In my entire gaming life, I have not made enough gold to buy even one of these. And these dropkicks have eight.'

'It's going to take all day to empty them all!' Splyce said, noticing that items were vanishing as she spoke. Opening her own bag, she crammed as much as she could inside and crept back through the door and away to the SMD guild house.

All in all, it took the virtual robbers over three hours to empty all eight boxes. The haul was so large that every time they emptied a box, they had to steal the box itself and set it up in the SMD guildhouse so that they had somewhere to store the loot.

'I vote we don't give back the boxes,' DeathsHead said when all three were resting at the end of the heist.

'Nah, it all goes back,' Splyce said. 'I don't want anything to remind me of my time in EoS. Those folk are crazy.'

'Speaking of which,' Faantasy said, 'let's go back and kill a few of them before dropping these tags. Remember, Leet is mine.'

(iv)

Invisible once again, the three virtual murderers crept back to the scene of the crime, intent on doing more damage to the EoS cause.

'Hey folks,' DeathsHead said, 'I've had a bit of a brain wave. Gotta go now, I'll meet ya'll back at home.'

'Where are you going?' Splyce asked.

'I'll tell you at later,' he said, 'with screen shots.'

'And I'm off to hit Leet,' Faantasy said. 'And while I trust you like a sister, Splyce baby, this is a solo mission.'

'Okay,' Splyce said, and Sybil sighed. 'I'll just try to entertain myself then, shall I?' No one responded.

Feeling alone yet again, Splyce set off for the administration panel beside the guildhall, hoping that EoS left the decorator panel unlocked. What she found was even better. Smiling for the first time that day, Sybil got to work.

(v)

Faantasy looked at her tracking map. The glowing red dot to her left was that prick LeetSauce. It was a stroke of luck that he was on at this time of night, and she wasn't about to squander the opportunity to make a dickhead pay for his dickheadedness. He was in a little house in a secluded part of the EoS grounds, some distance from the guildhall. 'Even during peak times, there wouldn't be too many people here,' Faantasy thought to herself. 'The prick obviously values his privacy.'

Creeping up the stairs, she stopped a moment to prepare her virtual blades. The fire oil on her left blade crackled and popped as she applied it. The poison on her right blade smoked and dripped green droplets on the floor. She liked the fire oil best because on a critical hit it causes the target's head to explode.

Opening the door, she hoped to find LeetSauce unprepared so that it would be easier to cause his head to explode. The scene that met her eyes as she entered the room caused Alice to spill her drink all over her expensive gaming keyboard. LeetSauce was lying prone on a bed, his armor strewn across the floor of the room. Magical chains glowed at his hands and feet, holding him in place. Sitting astride his naked form was a female avatar, also unarmored, but armed with a dagger in one hand and a whip in the other.

For a brief second, all three avatars stood frozen in place, unsure of what to make of the situation. Alice used this time to mop up the worst of her spill. It lasted only a few seconds, however, before Faantasy regained her composure and attacked, using her specially prepared blades to end the virtual debauchery. At least temporarily.

Alice was laughing hard as she guided Faantasy back towards SMD's home zone. It would be weeks before she could look at the screen shots without laughter-induced tears streaming down her face.

(vi)

DeathsHead opened the case displaying the Black Assassin's head. 'If the silly buggers don't secure anything, then nothing is secure,' he thought to himself as he dropped the prized virtual head into his bag.

The great thing about moving virtual furniture was that the only muscles you needed were the ones that guided your computer mouse around the table. DeathsHead labored virtually, moving cabinets, desks, chairs, and all manner of decorative trophy. When he had positioned everything to his liking, he wandered over to the locking switch on the eastern wall. 'This ought to teach them a lesson about human nature,' he said to himself as he locked the contents of the room down with the switch, and then applied a password. Taking a few screenshots for the SMD guild photo album, he slipped back into stealth and crept home.

(vii)

Splyce was first to arrive at SMD's guild house, where she gratefully dropped her EoS tag. She wouldn't be able to wear her beloved SMD tag until tomorrow when Orannges would invite her, Faantasy, and DeathsHead back into *Suck My Darkness*, but that didn't matter. She was just happy to be out of that crazy guild and back into the real virtual world. There was a pang of regret for what she had done to Otto, but she was sure that they could patch things up with time.

DeathsHead turned up soon after, typing 'lol' repeatedly into the public chat channel. 'How did you change EoS's message of the day?' he asked, as he walked into the sparsely decorated guildhall. 'I assume you did it because I can't see Frantyk admitting that *Enemies of Shadow* is our bitch.'

'They had it unlocked!' Splyce replied. 'And to make sure they remember us, I put a password on it before I left. They'll need a Game Administrator to change it.'

'I did the password thing too,' DeathsHead said. 'Check out the screen shot I put in the album.'

'Oh my god, did they leave the furniture unlocked as well?' Sybil squealed as she looked at DeathsHead's recent entry into the guild screenshot gallery. It showed all the furniture in EoS's guildhall arranged to spell "Guild of Suckholes".

'Yep,' DeathsHead said, 'another job for the Administrator.'

As the two admired DeathsHead's work, another image fell into the album. 'I wonder what that is,' Splyce said, and flipped the page. The two stared for a moment before breaking out in laughter. DeathsHead again began typing 'lol' repeatedly into the open chat channel.

'I see you've seen the screenshot,' Faantasy said, entering the zone. 'Not only were they cybering,' she continued, 'they were *kinky* cybering. It was my moral duty to kill them both.'

When the laughter had died down, the three of them stood and looked at the eight boxes lined up against the back wall of the guild house.

'That's a lot of loot,' Splyce said. Now that they had done the deed, she wasn't quite sure if she was all that happy about it. The pranks were harmless, but the theft was giving her conscience difficulties. 'Do you think it's okay, what we did?'

'Yeah, it's just a game,' DeathsHead said. 'How much could it be worth? So they get paid two hundred dollars less this month. Big deal.'

'I wonder how much we could get for it,' Faantasy said. 'There is a hell of a lot of it and I could use a new video card.'

'Let's have a look,' DeathsHead said. He walked up to the closest chest, flipped the lid and set to work calculating how much real money they could get if they sold their virtual loot on the black market, using data from the many online auction sites on the web.

Sybil and Faantasy watched as he went from chest to chest, spending three or four minutes at each one. At the last chest, he went very still for five minutes. Then animated again and came back to stand beside them.

'Well,' said Faantasy, after DeathsHead had stood there for a few minutes.

'I was just checking my figures,' he said, 'I thought I'd made a mistake the first time. The number is unbelievable.'

'How much is it?' Faantasy snapped. Patience was not a virtue to which she subscribed.

'It's a little over one hundred thousand dollars.'

'You're right, I don't believe it,' Faantasy said and moved to the first chest. Twenty minutes later, she returned to the group. 'Just as I thought, your calculations were wrong,' she said. 'It's a little *under* one hundred thousand dollars. I think you used old figures for DeathWeed, which became much more common after the last patch.'

The three of them turned and looked at the boxes once again. It seemed that they had taken on a more sinister air since their real money value was exposed, but Sybil was sure this was just her imagination. Knowing this did not make things any better. 'That's a lot of money,' she said.

'Yeah,' DeathsHead said, 'could you imagine how many hours of farming went into collecting it?'

'All those people, not getting paid for their work,' Faantasy said.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, looking at the sinister chests.

'Y'know,' DeathsHead said, 'it doesn't feel right. You should have to kill someone to get loot, not just acquire it because it belongs to people who are a little dim. I reckon we should take an item each, sort of like a memento, and give the rest back.'

'I thought that was the plan all along,' Splyce said. Despite being computer animations, DeathsHead and Faantasy looked embarrassed despite being avatars.

'Well, it was the *overall* plan,' DeathsHead said.

'Yeah, we should give most of it back,' Faantasy said, cutting off DeathsHead before he could put both feet in his mouth. 'But maybe instead of one item each, we could take a little more. After all, it was a lot of hard work and video cards don't buy themselves. And maybe some consumables for the guild, so we can take a break from farming for a while.'

'If you need cash, you could take one of the Empire Swords,' DeathsHead said. 'You could get two thousand for one of those at the auctions, even on a bad day.'

'One item each sounds good to me,' Faantasy said.

'I'll send Frantyk a message to arrange the return then, shall I?' Splyce said.

'Good idea,' said DeathsHead.

'The sooner the better,' said Faantasy.

'But first, I'm going to get some sleep,' Splyce said. 'Goodnight all.'

## Chapter 5

Otto was sitting at his desk in his tiny room that overlooked a busy shopping strip, going through the notes he had prepared for the lecture that afternoon. He didn't spend much time here and the space reflected his ambivalence. The furnishings were Spartan. An unmade bed dominated one wall, with an overflowing linen basket at its foot. There was a desk with a computer on it, a chair, an overcrowded bookcase, a bed, and a wardrobe. The tiny kitchenette on the back wall had an unused look about it. The rubbish bin was full of take-away food containers. Beside it, there was a stack of frozen food boxes, most of which had once contained frozen pineapple pizza. The sun streamed in through the open window beside his desk, and the breeze ruffled the pages of the many open books scattered across the floor.

When Otto worked, he worked hard, which is why the sound of his mobile phone ringing made him jump. It was Warren, and he didn't sound happy. 'Frantyk, you gotta get on line,' he exclaimed before Otto had even said hello. 'They've taken it all!'

'What? Taken what? Slow down, buddy. I don't know what you mean.'

'It's bad!' Warren exclaimed. 'Just log on. Splyce and her friends have looted the guild hall!'

Otto's brow furrowed. 'Isn't it locked down?'

'We only lock the door to the staff room and they're all rogues, so they can use lock picks,' Warren said, sounding like calming down was not an option. 'They got in and took everything! Even the chests!'

'Holy shit, I'll log on right away,' Otto said, and hung up. Within a few minutes, Frantyk was walking through the EoS guildhall. 'What the fuck did they do this for?'

Andremar, who was walking beside him, considered the question. 'Probably because they're bastards,' he replied. 'Only bastards would put passwords on the message of the day and the furniture. We can't change them back.'

'I've put in a customer service ticket. The admin should be able to reset it all,' Frantyk said. 'This is really bad, I hope they ban those bastards and de-register *Suck My Darkness*. Why would anyone do something like this?'

Andremar /shrugged. 'For the money?' he said, eventually. 'It's not a game anymore, is it? Why work for a month for two thousand dollars, when you can steal ten thousand in an hour.'

'Ten thousand isn't the half of it. The stuff in those chests was worth close to one hundred thousand dollars.'

'What? You're kidding?'

'We have over two hundred members who get two thousand dollars a month each,' Frantyk said, as Otto tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice. 'What those buggers took was a week's work. You do the math.'

'What about the secure chest?'

'That's sort of an emergency fund, in case we run into difficulties while farming. It's worth about thirty thousand.'

'Wow, those are some big numbers.'

'Yeah, well they have to be, don't they?'

'Good afternoon gentlemen,' said a stranger's voice. Otto saw the administrator's tag appear in the chat box. He was disappointed to see the name PhalanX, who was not one of the Administrators that Otto knew personally.

'What seems to be the problem?' PhalanX asked.

'Some of our new members vandalized our guildhall and cleaned out all the chests,' Frantyk said.

'And what does that have to do with Game Administration?'

Otto leaned back in his chair and regarded his screen. 'You can fix it all up, can't you?' he said.

'Where they members of your guild?'

'Yes, but they'd only joined recently. They used to be part of *Suck My Darkness*. And what does it matter if they were members or not?'

'Did they use any exploits or hacking software to get into the guild hall?'

'They must have used lock picks to get into the room,' Andremar chimed in.

'Lock picks are in-game items,' PhalanX said, 'they aren't an exploit. I'm sorry, but this is all within the rules of the game. You need to upgrade your security procedures.'

'You mean you're not going to help us?' Frantyk exclaimed. Otto banged the palms of his hands on his desk in frustration. The desk remained impassive, but his hands stung angrily.

'It's not that I won't,' PhalanX said, and Otto thought he detected a hint of sympathy in his voice, 'it's that I can't. No rules were broken in the game world. They used the skills of their class to raid the treasury of a rival guild. That's all part of the *Sword of Valour* experience.'

'But they stole over one hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff!' Otto yelled into his microphone. 'Of course it's against the rules. It's a crime!'

'They didn't steal anything,' PhalanX said, the sympathy in his voice evaporating. 'There was no crime because there was nothing to steal. It's a virtual world and nothing is real, it's all data on a hard disk in a server farm.' His voice recaptured its sympathetic tone after he paused for a while. 'I know you are aware that it's against the licensing agreement to sell in-game items for real money. You wouldn't want me to get all official here, now would you? Keeping a low profile is the best way to go, what with so many members to feed and everything.'

Otto bit his tongue. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but those bastards stepped over the line. They vandalized the hall and then changed the passwords so we couldn't restore it.'

'I can fix that for you,' PhalanX said, and there was silence for a handful of seconds. 'There. All passwords have been reset,' he said.

'Thanks,' Frantyk said.

'Now, is there anything more I can help you with?'

'No, that's enough,' Frantyk said. 'Oh, actually, there is. Do you work with Crungus? He's a friend of mine.'

'Is he really?' PhalanX said. 'He's due in later this afternoon, but having an insider is no use in a situation like this. The only thing we can do is restore characters and fix stuff that has been lost through hacking or exploits, and we have to provide rock hard evidence to back it up. The last thing the game needs are rumors flying around that friends of admins are getting preferential treatment.'

'Oh, really?' Frantyk said. 'Thanks for resetting the passwords.'

'Not a problem. I hope you enjoy your time in *Sword of Valour*. Have a nice day.'

Frantyk and Andremar saw the admin tag leave the chat box.

'Well, that's a bugger,' Andremar said. 'What a mixed up world. It's against the rules to work, but perfectly fine to steal.'

'Yeah,' Frantyk said, but without much enthusiasm. Otto was deep in thought.

## (ii)

The obligations inherent in the real world dragged Otto away from his computer for the afternoon. He was not surprised to see that Sybil was absent from the lecture. 'Probably off enjoying her ill-gotten gains,' he thought to himself.

Otto had never been what one may call an *enthusiastic* lecturer, but even by his own low standards, this was one to forget. Not that the ocean of scholars in the seats before him seemed to notice. The collective minds-eye was obviously somewhere else, where the grass was greener, the subject matter not so distressingly dry, and, if the hormones coursing through the post-pubescent bodies had anything to do with it, the wearing of clothes earned the wearer an instant disrobing and a well deserved spanking.

The hour took an eternity to pass and the droning of his own voice became an irritant, an itch on his psyche that he could not scratch. He did not pace or walk the theatre, as was his usual habit, but stood rooted to the spot behind his lectern. If his audience noticed the variation from his usual habits, they did a sterling job of hiding it.

When the lecture was over, Otto let the human tide carry him to his computer in the postgraduate student's room that was, as ever, deserted. He quickly logged into the game where he found Pamen and Matahari waiting for him.

'Where have you been,' Pamen exclaimed after Frantyk had joined the leadership chat channel.

Otto noticed that Andremar was also in on the conversation. 'I had to give a lecture,' he said. 'What's the matter?'

'What do you mean, what's the matter. The theft is the matter, that's what,' Pamen said, sounding angry. 'What are you going to do about it?'

'Well, I was going to make sure everything was secured and password protected, for a start,' Frantyk said, 'and then up the shifts to recoup some of the losses.'

'You're going to let them get away with it?' Pamen said. 'They made a laughing stock of us. We need revenge!'

'We'll have plenty of time and opportunity for that,' Frantyk said, trying to sound soothing, 'but I think we need to make member payments a priority. I reckon that if we rotate three extra groups through the Ice Castles for the next week, then we may get enough

together to pay everyone nineteen hundred dollars this month. A one hundred dollar shortfall isn't all that bad, all things considered.'

The silence that followed made Otto nervous. It was obvious Pamen and Matahari were having a conversation in the real world from which they were deliberately excluding him. 'So, what do you think?' he said, when he could stand it no longer.

'We've been thinking that this whole episode may be a signal that it's time for a change,' Matahari said.

'What?' Otto exclaimed. 'You can't go back now, the members love the money. You can't let one incident derail the whole project. It's all so new, there was bound to be one or two hiccups.'

'I think you misunderstand,' Matahari said. 'We are very happy with the new direction the guild has taken. It's proven both profitable and prestigious.' She paused for a moment. 'It's just that, while you have proven yourself a great thinker, your leadership isn't quite up to scratch.'

Otto sat in his chair, not quite believing his ears. 'You're dumping me as leader? You can't do that! I was elected by the members.'

'Yes we can, mate,' Pamen said, and there was still anger in his voice. 'We have the guild charter. The guild is a democracy only because we allow it to be. You have failed in your duties as leader by allowing shit like this theft to happen. You should have taken greater care.'

'Whatever,' said Otto, trying not to let his own anger show. He had achieved all that he needed as the leader of EoS and there was no need to spoil it all with an ill tempered outburst. He could just sink back into the ranks and earn his two thousand dollars a month. 'Do I get an officer position at least? Setting this up took a lot of hard work.'

'We'll have to think about that,' Matahari said. 'We're going to make you an affiliate member for the next month while we consider your position in the guild.'

'You're kidding me,' was all that Otto could think of saying.

'No we're not,' Pamen said. 'Someone has to take the fall for this mess, and that someone is you.'

'But that's not fair!' Otto exclaimed. 'Everyone wanted those bastards to join. It's not my fault they got into the guild. And the security system was a hand-me-down from Horc's time as leader. I thought you guys had passwords on everything, which is why I always deferred the guild hall decisions to you.'

'It may seem unfair to you,' Matahari said, 'but we are doing this for the good of the guild. There are rumors that you were part of the conspiracy. The inside man for the job.'

'Surely you don't believe that shit, do you?' Otto said.

'We are going to conduct an investigation over the next month,' Matahari said. 'The results of the investigation will determine whether you will remain a member of *Enemies of Shadow* or not. Until we conclude that investigation, however, you will have affiliate status in the guild and will not be able to participate in guild activities and events.'

Otto sat at his computer, mouth agape, staring at the screen.

'That's bullshit,' he said eventually. 'Fuck you and your fucking guild.' And with those words, Frantyk left *Enemies of Shadow*.

'That was a fuck up,' Andremar said as he watched Frantyk's name disappear from the chat channel. 'I didn't know you were going to make him an affiliate.'

'We don't need to let you know everything we are planning to do,' Pamen said.

'You know folks, I think Frantyk may have had a point. This guild does suck. Goodbye,' Andremar said, and he also left the guild.

Slava and Dimi sat looking at their computer screens. The gurgling laughter of their children playing with Thea in the next room mingled with the sound of rustling leaves and birdsong that came in through the open window.

'You know,' Dimi said, 'I think we could have handled that in a less confrontational manner.'

### (iii)

Hours after he had left *Enemies of Shadow*, Otto's mind was still aflame with rage. So hot, in fact, that sleep was out of the question. He had tried throwing himself into his thesis to forget, but that was no good. Cleaning up the tiny room had killed an hour. Ordering, receiving, and consuming a pineapple pizza from the local pizza parlor killed another.

In desperation, he took Frantyk to the Ogre camp and slaughtered the fell giants by the dozen. His incandescent fury propelled him through the entire camp, leaving a trail of virtual corpses in his wake. On the other side, he stopped and turned and looked back at the trail of death. Nothing had changed. All the corpses had disappeared, the Ogres he had killed early in his rampage were re-spawning and their virtual lives were continuing. When all the ogres had returned, he pushed Frantyk back into the camp and the slaughter started anew.

He was unsure how long he spent killing Ogres, but the morning sun was streaming through his window when an icon popped up on his screen to let him know that there was a message in his in-game email. Believing it was Pamen or Matahari wishing to apologize and invite him back to the guild, Otto used a homing portal to go back to The Shinning Citadel.

He was disappointed to see the message was not from Pamen or Matahari. It was from Splyce. 'Hello Frantyk,' it read. 'I hope our little joke didn't cause too much fuss. Have got the stuff here and we have no use for it. If you want it back, let me know where and when to arrange the exchange. Be quick cos Head wants to sell it. c u @ school.'

Otto looked at the words on his screen.

'Very funny,' he typed in reply. 'No worries here, hardly even noticed. Furniture and message got some laughs. Tell me passwords to change back when we meet to return items. Meet @ Split Valley Monday at 2 pm. Don't forget paper is due Friday. Where were u yesterday? Lectures should not be missed.'

'You are so fucked,' he mumbled to himself as he sent the return message.

### (iv)

Sybil was arguing with DeathsHead about how they were going to return the items. Faantasy had already logged out, saying lunch with her Mom was more important than farming Ogres. Just.

'They are so going to kill you,' DeathsHead said. 'You shouldn't go alone! Send him back a message with a different time so that Faany and I can come too.'

'And having you and Faany along will keep me alive? Against EoS?'

DeathsHead /shrugged. 'Maybe we can take Orannges too,' he suggested.

It wouldn't matter if we took the whole guild. Whoever takes the stuff back *will* die, there is no doubt about that. I may as well go alone and limit the carnage.'

'Well, if you don't have a problem with dying alone, then who am I to say you shouldn't?' DeathsHead said. 'Faany and I are going to go farming later this evening. Want to come?'

'Yeah, we should organize a raid for next week as well,' Splyce said. 'Get back into sane gaming with our sane guild. Those folks in EoS were just plain crazy.'

'They're not crazy, they're professional gamers and that doesn't quite fit in with how the world sees gamers,' DeathsHead said. 'It *feels* wrong, but then again there are professional tour guides, and professional football players. Why can't there be professional computer gamers?'

'Whatever,' Sybil said, 'I'm just glad to be home.'

'I gotta log,' DeathsHead said. 'Off to work I go.' Even with the distortions of distance, his voice vibrated with pain, and evoked images of despair and suffering.

'It's not so bad, is it?'

'Splyce, my friend, the horror of my job goes beyond human reckoning. I'm seriously thinking of trying to earn some money through the game so that I can quit.'

'Do you think it's possible?'

'It's got to be worth a try,' DeathsHead said, and sighed. 'Even if it doesn't make the same as a full time job, it'll give me an income while I look for something better. One thousand dollars a month and I could go part time. Fifteen hundred would mean I could quit my job entirely. And we mustn't forget that it's tax free. Anyway, gotta run.'

DeathsHead's departure gave Sybil the opportunity to fetch herself a drink. Even though she was still in her pajamas, having earlier decided to take a break from school for mental health reasons, she judged it late enough for a tipple. She rose from her chair and stretched tired and cramped muscles. Joints cracking and tendons creaking, she walked into the lounge room where she saw Jarrod sitting on the coach with his pants around his ankles, his water pipe in his hand, and Cheryl on her knees on the floor before him.

Sybil screamed. Cheryl bit. Jarrod HOWLED.

'AhhhhhooowwwwaaaHHHHHeeeeeOOOIiiii,' was the cry of the wounded beast, as he jumped off the coach and hopped from foot to foot.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Cheryl said, jumping up off the floor and grabbing Jarrod's shoulders as he bounced up and down in agony, both hands on his groin.

'I thought you were doing Robert,' Sybil said.

'Aren't you supposed to be in school,' Cheryl said, letting go of Jarrod's arms so she could place her hands on her hips and look crossly at Sybil.

'I'm feeling a bit sick,' Sybil relied, 'got a sore throat.'

'Oh, fuck off,' Cheryl said, and turned to inspect Jarrod's injury. 'Well, there's no blood, which is a good thing,' she said. Without taking her eyes off Jarrod's nether regions, she retrieved the water pipe from the floor by the coach where it had fallen. Miraculously, none

of the water had spilled. 'Here you go, sweetheart,' she said, as she packed the cone with illegal herbs. 'It'll take the hurt away.'

Sybil shook her head and continued into the kitchen, where she took a bottle of wine from the cupboard and decanted it into a carafe. She ignored the couple on her way back through the lounge—they were sitting side by side on the sofa discussing Cheryl's restitution for damaging Jarrod's cock—and went straight to her computer. She poured herself a large glass of wine and bravely held back the tears as Splyce killed virtual Ogres.

## (v)

Alone in an empty world, Splyce loaded the mule train with the stolen booty from the eight chests that once belonged to *Enemies of Shadow*. It was a little odd that Frantyk had asked to do the trade on a Friday afternoon, which was the quietest time in *Sword of Valour*. Everyone was at work, or at school, or on their way somewhere for the weekend.

There were active, overseas-based guilds that played on Friday afternoons, of course, but they congregated on the official regional servers such as *Death's March* that ran on Western European time. Sybil thought that it showed how professional *EoS* had become. They probably preferred to do things during the quiet hours because there would be less competition for the resources that paid the wages of their members. She didn't remember anything being mentioned about preferred working hours during her training, but then again, she hadn't exactly been paying attention through most of it.

Feeling particularly buoyant this afternoon, Sybil hummed while Splyce worked. She had come to terms with the fact that her ex-boyfriend was an unscrupulous bastard with the moral outlook of an alley cat, and had decided that it was about time she moved out and moved on. She was also looking forward to seeing Frantyk, even though she knew he and his friends would kill her as soon as they saw her. But she thought that once they got through the formalities, any residual bad feelings would quickly dissipate. As a gesture of good will, she was planning to ask if he wanted to go farming with her, or try one of those new two-person dungeons.

But it was Splyce's magnificent new outfit that was the biggest factor in Sybil's good mood. Purloined from the loot chests, it shone red and gold in the virtual afternoon virtual sun. The six pieces of armor made up the Hide of the Beast and gave her a set bonus that doubled her strength as well as making her invulnerable to poison attacks. Her worn daggers, so long the source of angst for Sybil, were no more. She had discarded them in favor of two rare blades that EoS farmers had looted from the corpses of elite assassins guarding the Lich King in his fortress perched atop the highest peak of the Dragon Teeth Mountains. She was aware that she had cheated a little and taken more than agreed, but the armor looked so good and she had been after new daggers for so long that it would have been a crime if she had let such an opportunity go begging.

The designated meeting place was some distance away, at least two hours march, and the road wound through some of the most dangerous zones in the civilized lands. Splyce couldn't use a portal because the mule train was too big, but it didn't really bother Sybil. She rarely saw the old zones in these days of instant portal travel, and the trip would allow her to reminisce about old kills, as well as enjoy the virtual scenery.

The first obstacle to negotiate was the Ogre camp where she had spilt gallons of virtual blood over the years. As she skirted its perimeter, she could see the ugly giants going about their business, oblivious to the fact that there was no one there to kill them. Splyce had heard that zones closed down when there were no player characters in the vicinity in order to conserve finite computer resources. She found it comforting to know that, at this hour, the Ogres were living their virtual lives solely for her benefit.

Just beyond the Ogres lived a tribe of Gnolls that guarded their patch of forest ferociously. The game lore told her that they were not evil, just very xenophobic and mistrustful of strangers. In their virtual eyes, the only good outsider was a dead outsider. She could hear their yapping above the background noises of the forest as she guided her loaded train between the virtual trees.

It took Sybil all her patience and care, and not a small amount of luck, to avoid the many Gnoll patrols that roamed the forest, but eventually the trees began to thin and the forest gave way to a grassy plain. In the distance to the northwest, she could see the bridge that was the only way across the Snarling River. The troll that guarded it demanded an exorbitant toll or a fight to the death from those wanted to cross. On this occasion, Splyce paid her way across. A gold coin was a small price to pay for the safe passage of her high value cargo. Still, the habits of a lifetime die hard, and she made a mental note to come back and kill the troll when she was unburdened.

The vast Plains of Exo lay on the other side of the bridge, stretching as far as the virtual eye could see. The only break in the monotonous scenery was a copse of trees a few virtual miles ahead of her. The road wound through the middle of it, going generally northwest.

Pouring herself a glass of wine, Sybil used a complicated series of keystrokes to command Splyce to follow the road, then sat back and took a sip. Everything was going well. She hadn't seen a soul for the entire journey and she was more than half way there. With luck, she would get to her destination without having to fight anyone or anything at all.

Splyce meandered along the road with the mule train strung out in her wake, while Sybil sipped her wine and daydreamed. As they approached the small wooded area, Sybil noticed a glint in the bushes to the side of the road. Putting down her glass, she scrambled to take Splyce off autopilot but it was too late. The trap had sprung and Splyce was immobilised. Sybil watched helplessly as DaZombi stepped out from behind a tree, approached Splyce at a run and with two deft strokes with his daggers, cut off her virtual head. The last thing Sybil saw before fainting away was DaZombi collecting the mule train and kicking Splyce's body to the side of the road.

Sybil awoke to find Splyce at the respawn circle, thankfully still wearing her new gear. An image of DaZombi collecting the mule train filtered into her consciousness and she raced out of the circle and back to the scene of the crime. It was all gone. The mules, the mugger, even her corpse had faded away.

Not knowing what to do, Sybil logged off Splyce to go and have a lie down. Things had certainly taken a turn for the worse since she had found out Otto was Frantyk, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't quite connect the two. Her troubles felt too big to blame on one lunatic alone. She wondered, vaguely, if Jarrod and Otto knew one another.

Sybil lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. The past week had been a little insane. Virtual crimes, revolving allegiances, and a lingering sadness about parting with Jarrod that

she tried so hard to deny, all mixed up together to scramble her brain. It had certainly made rational thought a rarity. Why was it all so hard? Why was he fucking everything that moved? Why had she engaged in a long, convoluted exercise that would irrevocably alienate someone she thought she might like to get to know?

Sighing, Sybil got off her bed and went back to the computer. It was time to make things right. She logged back into Splyce, wrote down the rough co-ordinates of where DaZombi had attacked her, noted the time, and then went and killed the troll that guarded the bridge. She waited a few minutes for it to respawn, killed it again and then used a Portal to return to the guildhall.

Back home, Sybil lodged a ticket with Game Administration with all the details of the attack in case DaZombi had been using illegal methods to kill her. She then sent a message to Frantyk to explain what had happened and apologize for her behavior. Her conscience somewhat sated, she turned off all the chat channels, dropped into stealth and went on a killing rampage through the many and varied lands that made up the world of *Sword of Valour*.

## (vi)

Sybil spent several hours hunting rare and exotic kills throughout the world, propelled by a mysterious anger that had been inside her for as long as she could remember. Fuelled by the general stupidity of people, the specific stupidity of Jarrod, a feeling that the universe was arrayed against her, and a suspicion that her own subconscious was on the other side, it felt like it would burn for an eternity. But even mysterious furies have their limits, and her's was all but spent when Faantasy logged on, closely followed by DeathsHead.

'Hey Splyce,' said DeathsHead when they had all grouped up and created a chat channel. 'How'd it go with EoS?'

'It went bad,' Sybil replied.

'Ha, I told you. Did they kill you?'

'No, EoS didn't kill me,' Sybil she, feeling her anger rising again. 'Some random rolled me just after the Exo bridge. I lost everything.'

'Crap, Syb, that sucks. Did you get a name? Let's hunt the fucker down.'

'Yeah, some loser called DaZombi. I lodged a ticket with the Admins in case he was using hax.'

'Wow, you got ganked by DaZombi?' DeathsHead said, his voice radiating awe.

'Yep,' Sybil said. 'Do you know him? As far as I could tell, he was just some random loser.'

'He's no random loser,' DeathsHead said, 'he's been around since the open Beta, before release. In all those years, he's never been killed. He doesn't quest or anything, pure player versus player. Never dies, never runs away, he is a killing machine without equal.'

'Wow,' said Sybil, 'I've never heard of him until now, but I know why he always wins. The bastard jumped me over and over again. I never got to fight him fair and square.'

'What do you mean, over and over again? Have you met him before?'

'Yeah, he jumped me a couple of times a while back.'

'Lucky bitch,' DeathsHead said, and sighed. 'I wish he'd kill me.'

'Gosh, Heady,' Faantasy said, jumping into the conversation, 'this doesn't sound like you. I thought you were a killer, not a victim.'

'The guy's becoming a legend on this server,' DeathsHead said. 'He's not in any guild, no one ever sees him just farming and hanging around. Every time he turns up, someone dies. He doesn't loot bodies, just kills and leaves. And he's taken down some of the biggest names on the server, now including our very own Splyce. If you ask me, that's pretty impressive. It'd be an honor to be added to his list.'

'Well, whoever he is, he's one hundred thousand dollars richer now, the lucky bastard,' Sybil said. 'Our problem is that Frantyk's never going to believe that the loot was stolen.'

'Well, yeah, considering you're now wearing half of it,' Faantasy said, dryly. 'And since he's been booted from EoS, it doesn't matter anyway.'

'What?' Sybil and DeathsHead said simultaneously.

'Haven't you guys heard?' Faantasy said. 'It's all over the forums. Frantyk got booted and Andremar quit. Pamen and Matahari are back in control. Our little adventure caused a shitload of trouble in EoS land. We're famous!'

Sybil brought up her friends list and saw that Frantyk hadn't been on since he had sent her the message to arrange the ill-fated meeting. 'I hope he's okay,' she said, her tone leaden.

'You better hope he's got a sense of humour, Syb my dear, otherwise you're going to fail his class no matter how well you do in the exam,' Faantasy said. 'But at least it doesn't matter about you being rolled for the loot. Without Frantyk and Andremar, EoS is just a bunch of a-holes.'

'Yeah, Syb, easy come, easy go,' DeathsHead said. 'Let's go farm some Gnolls. I'm sick of Ogres.'

'Good thinking, Heady,' Faantasy said. 'And we should also start thinking about a way to find that zomby fellow and teach him not to fuck with *Suck My Darkness*.'

'You guys go ahead,' Sybil said. 'I've been on for hours and need a break.' She ignored the concerned 'you okay-s' from her two friends and switched off her computer, not even bothering to log off Splyce before doing so.

She threw herself onto her bed and curled up into a tight ball as a dark wave of sadness rolled over her, shouldering aside the habitual anger and banishing all happy thoughts. She was feeling confident, if that is the right word, that Otto hated her. She was, after all, the architect of his demise as leader of the greatest guild in the greatest game in the world. She knew all was lost and so allowed the tears to flow.

## Chapter 6

The weekend passed and there was no sign of Frantyk, but *Enemies of Shadow* were *everywhere*. There were so many of them that had Splyce have thrown a virtual brick in a random direction, chances are it would have struck half a dozen EoS members on its way to the virtual ground. And it was the same for everyone in *Suck My Darkness*.

Most annoyingly, they never attacked. They just stood around looking conspicuous and giving the impression that the person on the end of the avatar was taking notes. Now this sort of behavior would test the resolve of almost any gamer, but for the hard-core player killers of SMD, it was an invitation to a virtual blood bath. Infuriatingly, the EoS spies—because that's

how everyone began to think of them—never fought back. Either they ran away or, if they were too slow, they died. But they always came back. They would resume their vigil as if nothing had happened, until the SMD members chased them away again, or raked up another unsatisfying kill.

It didn't take long for Sybil's temper to reach breaking point and after killing yet another EoS Monk watching her at the Ogre camp, she decided to send a message to Pamen in the vain hope that he would stop the harassment. The reply was swift and blunt. This is only the beginning. Soon, we will stop watching and start acting. This will be no ordinary war. We will stop all other activities and focus on killing SMD members, and we will loot everything off your corpses and leave your avatars naked. And we will continue to do this until you have nothing. And then we will keep going until you have less than nothing. Return the stolen goods now and we will only crush you once and then move on. Hold out, and we will make life for SMD a virtual hell.

'They're like herpes,' DeathsHead said at the SMD guild meeting on the Monday afternoon after SMD had endured a week of EoS's cold war. 'You fuck up once and the sores keep popping up to remind you for the rest of your life.'

The other participants of the meeting, about twenty or so guild members, greeted this with silence.

'Or so I'm told,' DeathsHead continued, sounding embarrassed.

'I'm with Head on this one,' Orannges said, once he got his mind around DeathsHead's ill-conceived analogy. 'EoS suck. I vote we kill them all.' Unsurprisingly, most of the guild greeted this idea warmly.

Splyce wasn't quite so gung-ho. 'They will butcher us in a direct attack,' she said, trying to be the voice of reason. 'And we can't jump them because they're always watching us.'

'Then what can we do?' Orannges shot back, 'sit around and take it like one of those pussy guilds that only kill NPC's? Let's just fight and fuck the consequences.'

Sybil looked at Orannges's colorful outfit. He liked to dress in bright colors, orange and yellow for preference with the occasional flame-red highlight, but the colors were at odds with his dark and violent soul. All he wanted to do was fight, preferably to the death, and it didn't seem to make a difference to his chaotic heart whether he won or lost. Right now, Sybil knew, he wanted to be involved in a massacre. She was also aware that he wasn't too concerned *who* got massacred. Sure, he would like to go on a virtual rampage with his brothers and sisters in virtual arms, but would be just as satisfied to watch a powerful and overwhelming enemy slaughter his friends. 'It's my fault all this has happened,' Splyce said, deciding it was best to pretend she hadn't heard what Orannges had said, 'I'll sort it out.'

'Take it easy, Syb,' Faantasy said, 'Heady and I were in it as well. Anyway, they've got more to lose than us.'

'Yeah, but it wasn't you or Head that lost thousands of dollars worth of gear because you were too stubborn to listen to reason,' Sybil snapped, sounding brusquer than she had wanted to.

'Hang on there, boss,' DeathsHead said. 'You're giving me far too much credit. I only wanted someone to go with you so that EoS didn't kill you when you gave them back their stuff. I never thought for a moment that someone would be stupid or mad enough to roll the leader of SMD. It's like asking to spend the rest of your days at the spawn circle.'

Sybil felt herself deflate. 'Sorry for snapping like that Alice,' she said, 'I just feel so stupid that I let the stuff get stolen. I'll talk to Pamen and try to sort it out. If he doesn't listen, well, then I don't know what we'll do.'

(ii)

And now it was Monday night and Splyce was in a clearing in the Tabmow Forest, waiting for Death. Actually, she was waiting for Pamen, but she was sure Death would drop by as well. After the guild meeting had broken up that afternoon, she had wandered aimlessly through the virtual landscape for a couple of hours, ignoring group invites from her friends and guild mates, and hardly bothering to kill anything at all.

Sybil knew she was in a funk—it was her lack of desire to kill people that gave it away—but she felt powerless to do anything about it. For some inexplicable reason, she was sure that everything would be better if she could just sort out this trouble with Pamen, which made her apprehensive about the meeting. Another reason for her apprehension was that, even though Pamen wasn't a bad guy at heart, his hard headedness was legend and word had got around in the forums that he wouldn't be satisfied with just the return of the goods. He wanted revenge for the way SMD had humiliated his guild and, in *Sword of Valour*, those seeking revenge often find it on the edge of a virtual dagger.

Pamen was going to be doubly pissed when he learned someone had stolen the stolen goods, and that Sybil and her guildies didn't have a virtual penny between them. They were player killers, after all, and money had always taken a back seat to virtual murder. Making money from player killing required planning and, as a guild, they found it far easier to use alts to farm gear for their rogues than mug passersby, who were usually as broke as they were. Even DeathsHead and Faantasy's plan to rob from the rich to give to themselves had faded away since they'd rejoined SMD. Planning was just too much trouble for your average SMD guild member, and DeathsHead and Faantasy were SMD to the bone. All of this meant that the only thing with any value that SMD possessed was their reputation, and they couldn't sell that.

So Splyce waited for death while Sybil slowly got bombed. She had just started her second carafe when Pamen arrived, accompanied by half a dozen EoS members who looked distressingly like the sort of people who accompany important individuals for the purposes of breaking the kneecaps of people the important individuals didn't like. They opened a chat channel that Sybil couldn't help noticing was labeled "death to thieves".

'Hi folks,' Sybil said, 'I'm glad you've arrived. I was beginning to think you weren't coming.'

'Where's the stuff?' Pamen asked, dispensing with pleasantries.

'Well, you're not going to believe this,' Sybil said, 'but it's been stolen.'

'Don't give me crap,' Pamen said, 'I've had it to my eyeballs with crap. Just return the stuff and we'll pretend this sorry episode never happened.'

'It's true,' Sybil said, and she could hear the pleading in her voice, 'I'd arranged to return it to Frantyk last week, but I got jumped by a bastard called DaZombi on my way there. He took it all.'

'Oh wow,' said one of Pamen's retinue called Grodok, 'that's so hardcore. Is he as good as they say he is?'

'He jumped me,' Sybil said, quickly and loudly, 'it wasn't a fight, it was a mugging. I'd like to see him take me on when I know where he is.'

'What was he using as, um,' Grodok began to ask, but the aura of exasperated fury spreading outward from Pamen stopped his question while it was only half formed. The guild leader's anger was so hot that it had overcome the limitation of virtual communication and managed to impress itself upon Grodok's consciousness without Pamen uttering a word.

'Frantyk left our guild several days ago,' Pamen said when he had finally gotten his anger under control, 'and you happen to be wearing gear that I know you didn't get on your own. I won't ask again. Give us the stuff back.'

'I told you, we haven't got it,' Sybil said, 'but I'm willing to cut a deal with you.'

'I'm listening.'

'It's not my guildies fault that the stuff got stolen,' Sybil said. She spoke slowly and deliberately because she knew she was a little drunk and wanted to make sure they were her words spelling out her decision, and not the alcohol speaking and acting through her. 'They shouldn't suffer because of my stupidity. So, if you can guarantee me that you'll put an end to this harassment, I will delete Splyce.'

The silence that followed Sybil's offer was eerie. Even the background noises of the virtual forest faded to nothingness. It was as if the virtual world was holding its breath, waiting for Pamen's answer.

'You would delete yourself for your guild mates? That's quite a sacrifice,' he said, after pausing for what Sybil felt was an eternity. 'I can't ignore something like that. If you delete Splyce then I will forgive you the stolen goods. It's only stuff when all is said and done. But honor demands at least one battle. Our war with your guild will continue, but after we crush you on your home soil, we will consider the matter settled.'

'So are you going to stop staring at us and start fighting?' Sybil asked.

'You have my word that we will endeavor to kill your guild mates whenever we encounter them,' Pamen said. 'Tell them that we will be launching an assault on your home zone soon.'

'I can live with that, but you're going to have to tell them yourself. Goodbye,' Sybil said, and logged out.

A few minutes later, the name Splyce disappeared from the guild charter in the *Suck My Darkness* guild house, and vanished from the friend list of players throughout the *Rebellion and Consequences* server.

'Wow, that was like, extra hard hardcore,' Grodok said when Splyce had disappeared. 'She's a fucking legend. It's a shame she had to delete herself.'

Slava, at home and surrounded by the hustle and bustle of family life, was sitting back in his chair and shaking his head at the magnitude of the sacrifice Splyce had just made for her friends. She was an avatar of some standing in the virtual community and Sybil had poured countless hours into developing Splyce's skills and talents. All of which were now gone.

If he were in the same situation, there was no way that he would delete Pamen. He'd let his guild mates stew in their own paranoia before deleting an avatar that was so much a part

of who he was. 'Now that's a leader,' he said to himself, stood up out of his chair and stretched. Sighing at the injustices of the worlds, both virtual and real, he bid goodbye to his group and logged off. For some strange reason, he had an urge to play with his kids.

### (iii)

A restless night gave way to a tearful morning that, in turn, bled into a maudlin afternoon. Splyce's ghost wandered around Sybil's head the entire time, looking betrayed and rattling her ethereal daggers. Still in pajamas but out of wine, Sybil sat at her computer not knowing what to do with herself or her sobriety.

At first, she tried to get into her schoolwork, but that brought up images of a scowling Otto. When she abandoned work in favor of the television, she found she couldn't bring herself to sit on the coach without thinking of Jarrod. A dozen books lay scattered about her bedroom floor, all picked up and discarded at one time or another through the long night.

Finally, she deciding that the situation between her and Otto really couldn't get any worse so she picked up her telephone and dialled his number at school with the intention of asking for an extension for her essay. Her call rang through to the voice mailbox.

'Hi, I'm away from school for a few weeks,' said Otto's voice. 'Cheryl Trebil will be taking over responsibility for Virtual Economies in my absence, and all course enquiries should be directed to her.'

Fighting the tears, Sybil lay down on her bed and contemplated the ceiling, which wasn't very interesting nor was it as soothing to her psyche as she had hoped it would be.

She was just about to change into her clothes and go out to buy a bottle or two of wine when her mobile telephone rang. It was Alice and she was hysterical. 'Syb, get online and contact customer support,' she squealed before Sybil had had time to say anything. 'You've been hacked and Splyce is gone. She's gone, Syb, you're gone!'

'Relax Alice,' Sybil replied. 'I haven't been hacked. I deleted Splyce to get EoS off our back.'

Alice was silent for a while. 'You did what?' she said, just when Sybil was beginning to think they had lost the connection.

'I deleted Splyce to get EoS off our back.'

'I thought that's what you said. Get online to customer support and tell them you were hacked. They'll believe you because no-one in their right mind would delete Splyce.'

'Well I did and maybe that makes me crazy but I did it for you and Heady and everyone, even that psycho Orannges,' Sybil said, her voice cracking with emotion, 'and now Otto's run away from school to avoid me and it's all fucked up and I need a drink.'

Alice, hearing an impending breakdown in the tone of Sybil's voice, softened her tone. 'I think I'd better come around,' she said. 'Are you at home?'

'Yeah, I'm at home. Can you bring a bottle of red with you?'

### (iv)

Alice arrived with not one, but two bottles of moderately good wine and the two veterans of a thousand virtual battlefields took to lounging about on the floor in Sybil's room, drinking.

'Have you tried calling the faculty office?' Alice asked, topping up her glass from the half-empty bottle.

'No, there's not much point. They'd probably think I'm just a stalker.'

'There is one place you may find him, or at least find out about him. Have you ever been to Hack'n'Slash?'

'What's that?'

'It's a gaming cafe on Nicholson Street. Otto works there on weekends.'

'How do you know that?'

Alice drained her glass. 'It's common knowledge, Sybil my dear,' she said. 'The owner's an EoS member and always hires EoS people to work there. Andremar works there as well.'

'Pamen said Frantyk wasn't a member anymore,' Sybil said. 'I wonder what happened.'

'I bet they blamed him for our little prank,' Alice said, and drained her glass. 'This is a nice drop, isn't it?'

'You're probably right, and if you are right, then Pamen is an idiot. From what I heard, everyone in EoS wanted us in.'

'Well, Pamen is pretty thick headed when he makes his mind up. He probably decided it was Frantyk's fault and that was that.'

Sybil nodded, a glum look on her face.

'But sitting here and speculating isn't going to get your potential boyfriend back,' Alice said, and screwed the cap back on the near empty bottle of wine.

Sybil blushed. 'I just want to apologize for stealing his guild's stuff and then getting it stolen,' she said, but her tone was unconvincing.

'Yeah, yeah, I know. But we better get a wriggle on because we've drunk too much to drive and it's a fair walk.'

Rousing themselves with some difficulty, the two virtual warriors set off on the mile and a half trek to Hack'n'Slash. Only the occasional wobble betrayed the fact that they had downed the better part of two bottles of wine between them, and because alcohol and orientation are uncomfortable bedfellows, they started out heading in not quite the right direction.

When Sybil's head began to clear, she noticed that the trek to Hack'n'Slash had grown to about two miles. Coincidentally, that was how far the hamburger restaurant that they were about to enter was from Nicholson Street.

'I'm hungry,' Alice said, anticipating Sybil's question.

Once inside, Alice ordered a hamburger with extra grease, a side order of fries, and a soft drink so sweet that sugar had crystallized on the straw. Sybil, for the sake of solidarity and not because it felt like there was a yawning pit where her stomach should have been, ordered the same.

The restaurant was empty except for a few surly staff members behind the counter, looking relieved that the lunch rush was behind them and trying to avoid doing anything before the arrival of the dinner crowd. Wisps of oily smoke rose from the vats of cooking oil, and the smell of rendered lard hung in the air. Sybil and Alice sat at the farthest table from the noisome kitchen after a reluctant teenage wage slave had handed them their food.

They sat without speaking for a while, enjoying their feast of fat and sugar.

'Do you think Otto will fail me because of what's happened?' Sybil asked after the grease burger had taken the edge off her hunger.

Alice shrugged. 'I'm not sure. He seemed like an all right guy in game, but you never know. And what we did was extreme.'

Sybil sighed. 'Yeah, he is an all right guy, isn't he? We're the ones who suck. I feel like such an idiot.'

'Would you stop moaning about it? Who cares what those a-holes at EoS think of us? Just accept that you have a crush on Frantyk and forget about the rest,' Alice said, taking a suck of her sugar-encrusted straw. 'It would save us all a lot of angst.'

Sybil blushed. 'But he hates me, I'm sure of it.'

'So you're off to a bad start, I'm sure you can make up for it.'

'How?'

'Use your imagination.'

Sybil blushed again. 'Yeah, okay, but first I have to talk to him and I'm not sure I can do that after everything that's happened.'

'What's to do? He's just a guy, Syb. Guys love you, they always have. Unless he's gay, of course'

Sybil pushed a fried potato around her plate. She looked unconvinced.

'It's like if you meet a snake, the smart thing to do is not to panic or anything because the snake is probably more afraid of you than you are of it,' Alice said. 'It's the same with men like Otto. I wouldn't be surprised if he's scared shitless of you.'

Sybil shifted uncomfortably. 'To be honest, I never really believed that, about the snakes I mean.'

'Me neither, but that's the best I can do. What are you going to do about Splyce?'

'Nothing,' Sybil said. 'Splyce is gone.'

'It's not your avatar's fault your love life is weird,' Alice said, then put down her half finished soft drink and leaned back in her chair. 'Splyce couldn't give a fuck who you want to fuck. Taking it out on her makes no sense.'

'I'm not taking it out on her,' Sybil said, the tone of her voice high and sharp. 'I deleted Splyce to save our guild.'

'My guild, not yours,' Alice said. 'Splyce was your only character. You're not a member of SMD anymore.'

Sybil shrugged. 'I was thinking of taking a break from gaming for a while.'

Alice looked confused for a moment. 'What? Like, not play? You can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's not the game's fault your life isn't perfect.'

Sybil shrugged again. 'I was thinking I spend too much time playing. Maybe it's time to do other stuff.'

'Like what?'

'Oh, I don't know. Read books, watch movies. Stuff like that'

'You can't leave the game,' Alice said, sitting up straight and clutching the table, her voice tinged with hysteria. 'You can't leave the game because the game is fun and good. You'll end up on the couch with Jarrod and his buddies, smoking pot so that your brain doesn't implode from watching too much reality television.'

'Take it easy, Alice,' Sybil said. 'It's just a game and I'm not having fun anymore. It's not like I'm going to shave my head and join a cult or anything.'

'How long have you been playing the game, Syb?' Alice asked, sounding a little calmer.

'Since beta,' Sybil said, with a touch of pride. 'Splyce was the first rogue rolled on our server, and the first to reach level cap.'

'So what's that, four years?'

'Yep, since I was seventeen.'

'And before that? You played *Dungeon Runner*. That's where we met.'

'I loved that game,' Sybil squealed. 'Remember the Minotaur?'

'Yeah, it was fun,' Alice said, smiling at the memories. 'You were, what, fifteen when we met?'

'Sounds about right.'

'And we met Heady there, as well. And Orannges. Remember the first time we saw him? He was trying to solo that elite Orc? The only way he could hurt it was by using his suicide attack.'

'What a psycho!' Sybil squealed. 'He had it down to half health but had died ten times to get it there.'

'Yeah, we've made lots of friends in game.'

'Yeah, we have,' Sybil agreed.

'So, Syb, how many friends do you have *outside* the game?'

'Heaps, Sybil said, unconvincingly. 'Lots.'

'Oh yeah? Name one.'

Sybil paused. 'Well, there's Jarrod.'

'And we know how peachy that turned out. Who else?'

Sybil paused again. 'Well, Margaret for one. And Jilly!'

'So, what's that, three? One insecure sex addict and two second cousins. Not exactly an army, is it?'

'Jilly is not my cousin!'

'Oh come on Syb, even if she isn't, that's one friend in the whole world who doesn't play the game, and she's as boring as bat shit.'

'Well maybe I can use all that time I won't be playing to make some friends,' Sybil said and then stood up. 'Come on, show me this Hack'n'Slash place.'

It took them forty minutes to walk the two miles to Hack'n'Slash, but only because Alice insisted of stopping at a computer hardware shop and fondling video cards. 'I need an upgrade,' she told an exasperated Sybil. 'The latest patch has added some high resolution textures and my card simply cannot handle them.'

The journey finally over, Sybil stood in front of Hack'n'Slash feeling her feet going cold. It wasn't that the orange facade was tacky. Nor was it that the poorly drawn promotional posters, which featured a fire-breathing dragon and a scantily clad woman holding a sword, had faded from their original blood red to a sickly orangey-yellow. She could even cope with seeing the carcasses of the many unfortunate insects who had met their doom between the aging paper of the posters and the glass of the front window. And the river of acne-covered teenage boys that was flowing through the door was disturbing, but manageable. She could

ignore all of those things. What she couldn't deal with was the orange facade *and* the faded posters *and* the dead insects *and* the teenage river.

'Maybe this isn't such a good idea,' she said, resisting Alice's attempts to drag her into the stream of teenagers and through the door.

'Come on, Syb, it's not so bad once you get used to the smell,' Alice said, redoubling her efforts.

'What,' Sybil said, and then gagged. 'Oh my god,' she continued as the purple tinged fug that was the Hack'n'Slash atmosphere engulfed her. It wasn't just the smell, but the closeness and thickness of the air that took her breath away. Nor was she all that happy to have her breath back after it had mixed with the purple haze that filled the shop.

Alice smiled. 'That's what happens to air when it gets shut in an unventilated room full of teenagers. You get used to it. Eventually.'

Taking shallow breaths in order to minimize her exposure to the fug, Sybil followed Alice to a counter beside the front door. The young man behind it was dusting the shelves on the wall, which sagged under the weight of all the chocolates and sweets.

To the casual eye and from a distance, he looked an average sized man, on the muscular side, with short-cropped hair. It was only when they were standing directly in front of him that Sybil realized he was huge. He towered over them both, but his well-proportioned physique fooled the casual eye into thinking it was seeing an average sized man a long way away. He was quite good looking. Both Sybil and Alice stood and stared.

'Can I help you?' he said. The voice was Andremar's. .

Both Sybil and Alice stood and stared.

The big man blushed. 'C'mon folks, quit messing around. How can I help you?'

Alice was the first to break the trance. 'Are you Andremar?' she asked.

'No, I'm Warren. Andremar is the name of my avatar in *Sword of Valour*.'

'I'm Faantasy and this is Splyce. We're looking for Frantyk.'

A grin spread over Warren's face. 'Hey, wow, you two have caused a power of trouble,' he said. 'Hey Larry, come over here a minute.'

An older man, sitting at a bench covered with computer innards, lifted his head out of an open computer case and waved a screwdriver in the air. 'Give me a minute,' he said, and dropped his head again.

Warren looked a little embarrassed for some reason. 'You guys want a coffee? On the house!'

'Sure,' Sybil said.

'Love one,' Alice said.

Sybil took the opportunity to look around while Warren fetched the coffee and Alice watched Warren. The shop was big and full of computers and people. More accurately, it was full of computers and screeching teenager boys. The walls were a strange shade of purple with the occasional orange line running from floor to ceiling. The noise was bordering on the painful, no doubt because everyone was wearing headphones and even neighbors needed to scream at one another to make themselves heard. Sybil watched the screeching, gesticulating, and bouncing youngsters and was reminded of just how close human beings were to chimpanzees.

Warren returned with a jug of coffee that he poured into three mugs he produced from under the counter. 'Cream? Sugar?' he asked. 'It's the after school rush,' he said, following Sybil's eyes. 'Every day during the school year they come and destroy the peace. Otto reckons he's used to it, but I've been here for years and it still gives me the shits!' He ducked under the counter again and came up holding a jug of cream and a glass full of sugar cubes. 'It's not always like this,' he continued as Sybil and Alice sipped at their complimentary coffees. 'In the mornings and evenings, we get mostly online role-players, but between three and five, they vanish. They run away so that they don't have to see and smell this,' he gestured at the noisy mass of teenagers playing computer games. 'The house fills with DOTa and Counter Strike players. Kids with the no attention span, they come in here and foul the air with their noise and their smell. If it was up to me, I'd ban every last one of 'em.'

'They bring in the money and pay the bills,' said Larry, who had arrived halfway through Warren's passionate monologue. 'How can I help you ladies?' he asked.

'This is Splyce and Faantasy,' Warren said. 'They're looking for Otto.'

'Is that right? I hope you haven't taken money for those coffees, Warren. It's a pleasure to meet such distinguished members of the *Sword of Valour* community. Unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to give you the contact details of a staff member. It would be a breach of trust.'

'I don't reckon Otto would mind all that much,' Warren said, looking at the two young women who had obviously had a drink or two before arriving.

'It doesn't really matter what Otto thinks, it's ethically and morally wrong to give out the personal information of staff members to just anyone who walks in the shop. I expect that, one day, you too will develop some sort of moral compass and be able to tell between what is wrong and what is right. Now if you would all excuse me, I have a video card to replace on number thirteen. While I'm doing that, Warren, would you please check on young Robert in the corner? I believe he has been accessing, ah, inappropriate material.'

'No worries boss,' Warren said, and walked purposefully towards the far corner of the room.

'Nice meeting you,' Larry said, and walked back to the bench covered with computer innards.

Sybil looked at Alice, who shrugged. 'I never said it would be easy,' she said, just as Warren returned.

'I heard you had left EoS as well,' Alice said, when Warren returned.

'Yeah, Larry and me and a few others from the old days split and started a new guild,' Warren replied, 'one that is not geared towards making a profit.'

'Is Frantyk part of your guild?' Sybil asked.

'Nah, he says he's going solo, but I reckon he'll only last a couple of weeks. He's not happy unless he's got someone to boss around.'

Sybil smiled. 'Too bad you can't give me his details, I really want to see him,' she said.

'Don't worry about Larry,' Warren said, and climbed back behind the counter. 'He enrolled in a philosophy course a few weeks ago and now all we hear from him is ethics and morality. Grab numbers six and seven and I'll call Otto. He only lives around the corner. I'm sure I can talk him into coming in.'

Sybil walked over to computer number seven and sat down. Beside her, Alice had already donned the headphones of number six and logged into *Sword of Valour*. 'These

machines can use the new textures!' she squealed happily. Sybil sighed, opened a browser window and checked her favorite news site. All very dull and boring. Then she checked Facebook. Nothing happening. She logged into the school website with the intention of doing some research for an essay due early next week, but lost interest before the screen had even fully loaded.

After another five minutes of internet related fiddling, she had run out of non-*Sword of Valour* websites to check and ended up just staring at the game icon sitting in the middle of the screen. Beside her, she could hear Alice relating the day's events to DeathsHead. Maybe she should log on just to kill some time? Fiddle about with the character editor and maybe make a Warrior or a Hunter, two classes she had never even tried. Just for today, of course. She'd delete them later.

'Otto will be here in a couple of hours if you guys can wait,' Andremar said, making both Sybil and Alice jump.

'No worries,' Alice said, pushing the headphone off her left ear. 'Fast computers and chocolate treats make time just melt away. If there was alcohol this would be paradise, even with the teenagers.'

'Larry's tried but they won't give him an alcohol permit. It's probably for the best, really. If we could drink I'm sure most of the staff would never get to see their families.' Warren looked up and sighed. 'Oh well, back to work,' he said and wandered back towards the counter.

Alice waited until he was out of earshot, which wasn't far in the teenage enhanced atmosphere of Hack'n'Slash, and then turned to Sybil. 'Now that's a *man*,' she said. 'Big, smart, funny, *and* a fantastic gamer. What more do you need from a mate?'

'And he sounds like he likes a drink,' Sybil said.

'He's perfect.' Alice giggled, slipped her headphones back over her left ear, and turned back to her screen.

Sybil also turned back to her computer screen. She always thought that Splyce wasn't quite what she could have been. The eyes were not quite the right color, and she wasn't tall enough. Opening up the character editor in *Sword of Valour*, she went to work on righting the wrongs of the past. Just for today, of course.

(v)

Otto sat at his desk holding a book, but he wasn't really looking at it. To be honest, he wasn't looking at anything at all. His eyes had to point *somewhere* and he was awake so they were open, but the information they collected went to waste because Otto wasn't paying attention. Books lay scattered about the floor in what the knowless would consider a random way, and his computer was displaying a document he had been working on for many, many hours. He had just put down the telephone after speaking with Warren at Hack'n'Slash and was pretending to be getting back to work, but he wasn't fooling anybody, not even himself.

It was time to face some facts so he added the weighty tome in his hands to the organized chaos on the floor and walked to the open window that looked out over the city. A gentle breeze blew the sounds of the street into his tiny apartment, along with a fair amount

of carbon monoxide from the traffic. Breathing in carcinogenic fumes is a price one pays for living at the centre of things.

In the distance he could see the orange glow that was Hack'n'Slash. The streets below his window were beginning to fill with people. There were school kids, released from their daily bondage, on their way home to the banality of television and the monotony of domestic life. The haggard individuals wandering into the bar across the road could only be teachers because it was still too early for the wage slaves to emerge from their workplaces.

It occurred to him that he was displaying an unfair contempt for the daily routines of thousands of blameless and content students, teachers, and workers. It was probably because *Enemies of Shadow* had so recently given him the bum's rush, and rejection always brought out his negative side. Sure, it was just a gaming guild, but Otto had poured time and effort into making EoS what it was, and his ejection meant that all of it was wasted. A part of him wished that he had never become leader in the first place. That he had just played the game for fun instead of turning it into a virtual business. But he couldn't change the past and it would be undignified to crawl back to EoS now, cap in hand.

Thankfully, everything had fallen into place and he was now in a position where he could move on. Which brought his rambling mind back to the telephone call from Hack'n'Slash. He honestly had not been expecting to hear from Sybil again. She probably wanted to make sure he wasn't going to fail her, but she had nothing to fear on that front.

Otto had relinquished all his teaching duties in order to focus on his studies. A last, determined push for glory was how he put it to his supervisor. He had grown stale, he told her, needed to get on with it. It had gone down well until she realized that she would have to take on Otto's teaching responsibilities, but no amount of pleading, begging, or crying on her part could change his mind.

Otto sighed and kicked at the books on the floor, being careful to miss. It was all so fucking strange, so *unreal*. The guilds, the game, the strange beautiful woman, Hack'n'Slash, everything. How had he arrived here, at this place, at this time, worrying about subterfuge and theft in a *game*?

It was the money, of course. It couldn't be anything else. Money did strange things to people, and it was working its economic magic on his existence. It was magically transforming the unrealities of *Sword of Valour* into the realities of Otto's life, and it felt fucking weird.

He had spent so much of his life studying philosophy, peering at life through the eyes of men long dead, but none of it had prepared him for this strangeness, this *virtuality*. He sat back down at his computer and swung his feet up onto the only clear spot on the desk. If one is going to ruminate about life, love, and the reality of reality, one may as well be comfortable.

Why did he feel so confused? Why is it that he is confident and competent in game, yet so klutzy out of game? When looked at from the outside, his nearly completed doctorate was evidence of competency and direction, but from where Otto was standing it was all a sham. He didn't understand half of it, and the rest was absolute rubbish.

Then again, his 'friends' in game had just booted him out of their guild. It could be that he was an interloper in game as well. Could it be that he was in denial about his status in game all this time? Was he really the best tank? Or was that just his subconscious working at

keeping him alive? Anything was possible where the virtual meets the real. He had worked hard to make money, and had succeeded. This had been his goal, so why was he feeling like shit?

Otto couldn't quite recall Descartes' quote, the one that people always mangled and misquoted, but the gist was that because he had a thought, there must have been an 'I' that did the thinking. Even if nothing else existed, even if there was no reality to refer to, I had a thought and therefore I *must* exist.

Otto pictured the sea of dead eyes that filled his lectures and smiled to himself. It was just possible that most of his students were a figment of his imagination because he was sure that a fair few of them had never had a defining thought. Was it that simple? Did existing coincide with reality? Bollocks, Otto thought. And what about motivations? Assuming that existence was a given, why did he behave the way he did? Even though he knew it would come back to bite him on the backside later on. Nor was he alone in acting irrationally, as evidenced by the events of the past couple of weeks.

Descartes was thin on the ground when it came to motivations. Plato was more your man in that area. If one was to cut the bullshit rhetoric, it is obvious that Plato blamed love for all that was stupid, which made some sense to Otto. Of course, he had to muddy the waters with the 'army of lovers' nonsense, which Otto thought was a daft idea. He had experienced love at various stages in his life and it seemed to follow an unchangeable pattern.

In Otto's world, love was confusing, embarrassing, and involved short periods of frenzied physical activity that often left a bad taste in his mouth that took *days* to dissipate. An army of lovers, as far as Otto was concerned, would be a bunch of lonely and tired social misfits who would go through gallons of mouthwash. Was love really the only reality for humanity, as Plato reckoned? Or was Plato so obsessed with the pleasures he derived from, um, *consorting* with young men that he had to include dalliance in his theory of everything? *The Symposium* was a real eye-opener when it came to understanding Greek antiquity but not much of a guide in his present situation.

At least Freud didn't bother with morality. "I fuck, therefore I am, and with any luck, will continue to be" was the gist of what Freud had to say, which Otto thought explained a lot about people. Had he left it at that, Otto would have been satisfied, but he didn't. He went on and on about the subconscious, which troubled Otto. The idea that his *real* self was hidden somewhere beyond Otto's reach made him feel that he was so reprehensible that he was unpalatable even to himself. If I am such a nice guy, he reasoned, why does my subconscious go to such extraordinary lengths to stop me meeting myself? Thinking of Freud always brought a quote by Groucho Marx to the forefront of his mind—Otto's subconscious refused to be a member of any club that would have Otto as a member.

The procrastination potential of philosophy was limited, however, and Otto eventually took his feet off the desk and turned back towards his computer. He had set himself the goal of finishing the literature review for chapter four - *Hermeneutic Analysis of Online Economic Activity: The Narrative of Online Gold* - before going to see Sybil, but was finding it difficult for two reasons. The first was that he didn't really know what hermeneutics was. The second, and more intense of the two, was that his mind kept filling with images of a naked Sybil performing various sex acts. 'Fuck it,' he said to the world in general, and wandered off to take a shower.

## Chapter 7

A tap on the shoulder dragged Sybil out of her virtual world and back into the very real surrounds of Hack'n'Slash. She looked up and almost let out a yelp. It was Otto, and he was *different*. He looked older, somehow, and more intense, but he also looked younger and more vital. His eyes were grave, his shoulders broad, and his face angelic.

'Hi,' she squeaked. 'How are you?' Externally, Sybil stared up at Otto with a frozen grin on her face. Internally, she turned her attention to other matters. Looking into the deep dark corners of her psyche, she located her id and demanded that it stop leading her astray. When she refocused on Otto, he was looking more like himself again, but with an expectant look upon his no-longer-angelic face.

'Huh?' she said, vaguely aware that he had spoken while she was having a sharp word to her hormones.

'That's not Splyce, is it?' he said. 'She's taller, for one thing. Why do you have another rogue that looks almost exactly like Splyce? Isn't that a bit, you know, redundant.'

'Um,' said Sybil. Her tongue felt as if it had swollen to gigantic proportions making speech nearly impossible.

'She deleted Splyce,' Alice said, coming to the rescue of her speech-challenged friend. 'She's going to take a break from gaming, apparently.'

'You deleted Splyce? Are you okay?'

The tone of Otto's voice snapped Sybil out of her love haze. 'Yes I am okay,' she said, her voice sounding testy and annoyed. 'What is it with you people? It's just a fucking game.'

'Yes you're right,' Otto finally stammered out. 'It is just a game, and I'm sure taking a break will reinvigorate your enthusiasm for when you return.'

'I may not return.'

Otto looked confused, as if he couldn't quite understand what Sybil had said. 'What, you mean, you'll leave like, forever?'

'Yeah, forever,' Sybil said, her anger growing.

Otto stood still for a moment and looked at Sybil's screen. 'Then why have you started another rogue?'

This time it was Sybil's turn to look confused. 'Because Splyce wasn't quite right, and I thought I could fix the bits that were wrong in case I *do* come back,' she said.

'I don't get it, why not stay with Splyce and start a new rogue when you come back? You're allowed to have more than one character,' Otto said, and put his hand on Sybil's shoulder. 'I got friends who are admins and they can reinstate Splyce. They never delete old data, you know, they just put it into an archive. How long ago did you delete her?'

'I don't want her back,' Sybil said, shaking Otto's hand away. 'She wasn't perfect! I started her when I was new and didn't know the game. Her specs were crap and she was specialized in cloth armor for Christ's sake. She's gone because she was imperfect. I'm now making a perfect avatar.'

'Oh,' Otto said. 'So you're not taking a break then?'

Sybil's gaze lingered on the screen before her—a window into the computer rendered reality where she spent so much of her time. Her right hand gently stroked the mouse. In the

fetid atmosphere of Hack'n'Slash, with the screeching of teenage boys in her ears and the horrible colors of the walls assaulting her eyes, she couldn't quite remember why she thought she needed to spend more time in the real world. In fact, the assault on her senses suggested that *less* time in the real world would be the wisest way to go. 'Nah, I'm not going,' she said. 'What would be the point?'

Alice squealed with joy. 'I'm so happy you're not leaving us.'

Otto, unsure of what the etiquette was when meeting a virtual acquaintance in the flesh for the first time, thrust out his right hand for Alice to shake. 'I'm Otto.'

Alice ignored the hand and jumped out of her chair. 'I'm Faantasy,' she said, throwing her arms around his neck and dragging him into an unwelcome embrace. Well, not *really* unwelcome. Alice was small, buxom, and had a smile that made promises. 'I'll see you later,' she said, smirking at Otto's discomfit. 'I've got me a big fish to fry.' Disentangling herself from Otto's not quite reluctant embrace, she headed towards Warren, who was polishing glasses behind the counter.

Sybil and Otto watched her go.

'Should we warn him?' Sybil asked.

'Nah, he's big enough to take care of himself.'

'You don't know Alice very well.'

Otto shrugged and sat down in Alice's chair. 'I don't know her at all.'

'Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you.'

'I've got to finish my thesis and when they kicked me out of EoS I took the opportunity to get on with it.'

'What about teaching? I had this horrible feeling you quit because you hated me.'

'You don't have to worry about that,' Otto said, 'I've passed all your stuff on and haven't marked you down in any way. Your grade will reflect the quality of the work you submit. There is a major essay due soon, by the way, and I hope you've at least started the research.'

'Fuck that. I never thought you'd do anything like that. I thought you left the game and school and everything because you hated me and never wanted to see me again.'

'No, I don't hate you. It was a really stupid thing you and your friends did, but people do stupid shit all the time, and you did return the stuff.'

'That bastard DaZombi, he mugged me on the way. I don't know what the hell he was doing in the middle of nowhere, but there he was.'

Otto looked at her with a surprised look on his face. 'I can't believe you haven't figured it out.'

'Figured what out?'

'I'm DaZombi. That wasn't a mugging, it was a transfer of goods. I thought it unwise to wait where we had arranged in case you and your goons set up an ambush and killed me.'

The reasons that teenager boys flock to Hack'n'Slash are legion. If you found an unusually articulate one and paid him enough money to answer your questions truthfully, he would tell you that he and his friends loved killing one another in games of skill and chance. It's even better in Hack'n'Slash, he would say, because having bragging rights on a public stage makes killing friends so much more enjoyable. Undoubtedly, he would also point out that the half price "After School Frenzy" is a particularly good deal. Finally, he would tell you that half of the fun of Hack'n'Slash is watching what other people do. 'Like today,' he

would say, 'Frantyk was talking to this awesome looking babe, and he must have said something stupid because she picked up a keyboard and hit him over the head with it! Then she ran out but she was stacked and had, like, a low cut top on, so watching her run was almost the best bit. But everyone wants to hit Frantyk over the head with a keyboard, so that was the best bit.'

Alice caught up with Sybil a block away. 'What the hell happened?'

'He's DaZombi!'

'What, Frantyk? No way!'

'Yes way! He just told me he was.'

'You mean he's the best tank *and* the best rogue on the server?'

Sybil glared at her friend.

'Now that Splyce is gone, I mean,' Alice added.

'What a complete bastard. He could have at least told me.'

'Why did he mug you when you were going to give him the stuff anyway?'

'He said he didn't trust us. Reckons he thought we were going to ambush him.'

'Smart man. I wouldn't trust us if I were him. Not after what we done.'

Sybil sat down on the curb and put her face in her hands. Tears followed shortly thereafter. Alice sat down beside her and absent-mindedly handed her a hanky.

'Thanks,' Sybil said, dabbing at her face. 'What the fuck is wrong with me? Why did I just hit Otto in the head?'

Alice shrugged. 'Do you know what he did with the loot?'

'No, I didn't ask. I was too busy giving him a concussion.'

'That was almost a hundred thousand dollars worth of shinnies he ran off with, and it wasn't technically all his.'

'No, it was EoS's. I wonder if he got booted before or after he mugged me?'

'Do you still want to, you know,' Alice made a lewd gesture. Sybil blushed.

'I don't think he'd have a bar of me.'

'Well then, I've got an idea. Just follow my lead.'

Alice stood up and headed back to Hack'n'Slash. Sybil followed shortly after. 'What the hell,' she thought, 'how could it get worse?'

## (ii)

Sybil and Alice entered an unusually quiet Hack'n'Slash, where they instantly became the focus of attention. Self consciously, they walked to where Warren and Larry were standing beside a seated and annoyed looking Otto.

Alice looked meaningfully at Warren, who took Larry by the arm. 'Come on mate, we'll make the coffees.'

'If you hit him again, use the same keyboard,' Larry said, as he allowed Warren to lead him away. 'They cost money, you know. And you lot,' he said, addressing the teenagers staring at Sybil and Alice, 'stop your gawking and get back to it.'

'Sorry I hit you,' Sybil said, once the noise level had returned to its usual ear-splitting intensity. 'I got annoyed. I'm sure you understand.'

'No, I don't understand. And I'm the one who should be annoyed, not you.'

'How much did you get for selling the stuff?' Alice asked.

'None of your business.'

'We want a cut.'

'Piss off.'

'We want two thousand each, Syb, Heady and me.'

'You're kidding? No way.'

'If you don't we'll report you to the Administrators, and you'll get banned.'

'You wouldn't report me, would you?' Otto looks at Sybil, who looked uncomfortable and shrugged.

Silence from Alice.

Otto sat back and sighed. 'This is bullshit. I'm not giving you any money. You assholes got me kicked out of EoS and now you want me to pay you? You can go and get fucked, is what you can do.'

Sybil burst into tears and Alice looked unhappy. Otto glowered at them both.

'I don't want any money,' Sybil said, between tears. 'I'm sorry this ever happened.'

Alice put her arm around her friend's shoulders. 'It's okay, Syb,' she said. 'I just thought if we got some money, you and I could get a share house together, somewhere a long way from my mom's house, and you wouldn't have to live with losers like Jarrod.'

Sybil embraced her friend and started to cry even louder. Warren returned from the counter bearing a tray of coffee and associated paraphernalia. 'Guys, keep it down,' he said, putting the tray down on the table beside Otto. 'Larry's getting fidgety.'

'I really don't think I could take a lecture on gendered social spaces right now,' Otto said, rubbing his forehead. He looked at Alice and Sybil. For some reason Alice had also started to cry. He wondered how Plato would have dealt with this situation. Probably with aplomb, the bastard. What the hell, it's not as if he hadn't already made a tidy sum. Maybe it was time for a little generosity.

'I tell you what,' he said, 'you guys find a place and I'll stump up the first month's rent and security deposit.'

Alice looked up. 'Will you get me a video card as well?' Sybil elbowed her friend in the stomach.

Otto stood up and stalked over to where Larry was standing, looking anxiously in their direction. After a brief whispered conversation that involved Otto opening his wallet and Larry cracking a big smile, Otto returned with a gaudy box, which he handed to Alice.

'What? For me? You shouldn't have. Oh my God! It's a Viper S440! Syb, your boyfriend just got me a Viper,' she said turning to Otto, who was blushing. Realizing what she had just said, she also blushed but only briefly. Alice, while often the cause of embarrassment in others, was rarely embarrassed herself. 'C'mon Warren,' she said, standing up and clutching her shiny box to her chest, 'show me how to install this thing. Hi-res textures here I come!'

Otto looked at Sybil, who brushed away her tears and smiled. 'Warren says you live near here,' she said.

'Yeah, just a couple of minutes away.'

'Can we go to your place and have a couple of drinks alone together,' Sybil said. After all that had happened, she wasn't going to let this opportunity slip.

'It's a bit messy,' Otto said, 'but then again, so is life. We should drop by the liquor shop on the way because I'm out of alcohol.'

'Good thinking,' Sybil said, and leaned forward to kiss him.

Perhaps it was the sudden silence or maybe some mysterious sixth sense. Whatever it was, it stopped them both, mid pucker. *Everyone* in the shop was looking at them. Thirty assorted teenagers had stopped virtually killing their friends and were giving Frantyk and the hot babe their full attention. Alice was grinning like an idiot.

Sybil and Otto blushed in unison, stood up and walked out, hand in hand.

### (iii)

The next few days were a surreal experience for Otto. Time passed as if he were in a dream. Each moment was an eternity but over too soon and when it passed, it took the memory of its passing with it. He felt the hours flowing into days and could recall the more memorable moments with absolute clarity, but was unsure of *what* happened *when* or of the flow of time from moment to moment.

The only reality of those days was Sybil, who lay with him entwined. He was sure they must have parted occasionally because sometimes she wore clothes she had fetched from her share-house and he had bought groceries from the supermarket, but his memory would not acknowledge the times when they were not lying together.

That is why he couldn't quite remember how DaZombi had come to be standing beside DeathsHead, Faantasy, and the re-born Splyce at the *Suck My Darkness* guild house. For Otto, it was time to join his spiritual brothers and sisters at *Sword of Valour*. Deep down, he knew he had always been a rogue. Just because he *could* tank, doesn't mean he *was* a tank. Frantyk was born of necessity at the genesis of the game world, when Otto, in characteristic fashion, had assessed how he could best fit into this new virtuality. At the time, there weren't enough tanks to go around, so Otto became a tank, and his prowess grew until he was courted by the biggest and best guild on the server. But he never lost his love of the rogue, which is how DaZombi came into existence.

Early in his gaming life, whenever Otto felt upset or angry, he would make a rogue and kill randoms. DaZombi was the third or fourth rogue he had made but, unlike the others, Otto did not delete him. He couldn't remember the reason why, or even if there was a reason why, but DaZombi survived and the legend grew as the kills mounted. Now, many years after he first felt the guilty pleasure of virtual murder, after hundreds of secret kills, Otto was finally out of the closet. No more tanking, just lots of killing. EoS members for preference.

The ceremony was not as impressive as the welcome ceremony at EoS. Instead of a cohort of well-drilled virtual warriors standing at attention before the podium, there was a motley collection of shadowy figures scattered about the hall at random. 'Where is everyone?' he sent a private /tell to Splyce.

'They're here,' she replied. 'No-one would miss seeing the second most famous rogue on the server join our guild, but most of them are stealthed. We take being a rogue seriously in *Suck My Darkness*.'

DeathsHead, who was currently leader by virtue of having killed all who had challenged his authority, raised his hands. 'Fellow rogues,' he said, 'we have gathered to

decide whether DaZombi can become one of us. Is there anyone here who objects to this rogue becoming a member of *Suck My Darkness*?"

Since any objectors would need to face the new recruit in combat, and DaZombi had a formidable reputation, no one was expecting any challengers. However, nobody was too surprised when a lone voice echoed through the public chat channel.

'I do,' Orannges's voice rang out across the virtual hall. He popped out of stealth behind the group on the podium and launched a flaming arrow at the potential recruit's back. But DaZombi, working under the assumption that SMD contained more nuts than a sack full of Pecans, was prepared. Blocking the arrow with a shield spell that he had readied for just such an emergency, he moved swiftly to his left and threw out a grappling hook that dragged Orannges into dagger range.

Unable to break the grip, Orannges threw himself to the ground and DaZombi's blade only grazed his armored chest. Bouncing back up, Orannges fainted to the right and then spun to the left. Usually, this move unbalanced his opponents, leaving them stranded with weapons on the right side and a left flank exposed for Orannges's daggers, but DaZombi was not a usual opponent. He did not try to move in for the kill when Orannges passed beneath his blade. Instead, he backpedalled furiously and was in a fantastic position to launch two daggers into Orannges's virtual chest as he straightened up. A few seconds later, as Orannges's corpse began to fade away, his disembodied voice rang out across the public channel for a second time, 'Alright! Now that's what I call fun! I love this guild!"

#### (iv)

Slava sat at the computer closest to the open door in a room where images of teddy bears, anthropomorphised trains, and bunnies covered the walls. Beams of late morning sunshine brought warmth and light and a fresh breeze blew through the open window, sweetening the air. Dimi sat at the computer beside him, and together they stared at the three empty cots in the middle of the floor.

Today was the day of the Grand Plan. They had put their heads together after the unpleasantness of what they labeled "the Frantyk debacle" and had come to some conclusions. First, they concluded that being parents was hard work. Second, they concluded that they needed a little time to re-acquaint themselves with the feeling of being human. Third, they concluded that they needed to get back in control of EoS, which was becoming almost unrecognizable. Thus, the Grand Plan was born and it was working, after a fashion.

As planned, Thea had taken the triplets to a distant suburb to visit a distant aunt, and Slava and Dimi had logged into the game to organize *Enemy of Shadow*'s massive and devastating assault on *Suck My Darkness*. The mechanical aspects of the plan, therefore, had gone swimmingly. They were alone and their massed virtual army was positioning itself for the first, fabulous, and definitely final assault. SMD wasn't going to know what hit them.

What wasn't going so well were the psychological aspects of the plan.

'Do you think they're alright?' Slava asked.

'Yeah, I'm sure they're fine,' Dimi answered, but didn't sound as if she believed it.

'I hope they haven't been in an accident.'

'Thea is a good driver.'

'Alaric was a good runner.'

Dimi sighed. 'Just because Alaric died in a car accident, Slava my dear, doesn't mean that everyone you know will die in a car accident.'

'I know, I know,' Slava said, defensively. 'It's just, you know, I worry and stuff.'

Dimi stared at the empty cots. 'Maybe we should give Thea a call?'

'Yeah, but we should wait a while longer,' Slava said, craning his head around to look at the clock on the wall behind them. 'It's only been ten minutes since the last one.'

'Only ten minutes? It couldn't be just ten minutes.'

'Not quite ten minutes, actually.'

'Talking about Alaric,' Dimi said, 'have you been reading the forums lately? There are all these threads about how Horc has been giving buffs and stuff to people who salute him.'

'Really?' Slava said. He had seen the threads and was trying very hard to forget them.

'Yeah, one guy even reckons that all his armor got repaired and there was a +1 wisdom added to his character stats.'

'He's probably making it up.'

'Do you think so? There's even a story on one of the game websites where this medium reckons he senses a presence whenever he gets on our server.'

'Probably paid by the game company,' Slava said. 'They're such publicity sluts. Nothing is beyond them.'

'That is so cynical, but not beyond belief,' Dimi said, and sighed. She craned her neck to look at the clock and reached for her mobile telephone. Slava put his hand on hers just as she picked it up.

'Don't do it,' he said, 'if we piss her off too much we'll never get another day like this, at least until they're in college.'

Dimi hesitated, torn between her devotion to her children and the sweet intoxication of a nappy free zone. Knocking Slava's hand off hers, she raised the telephone, removed the battery from the back and hurled it out the window. 'This feels too good to fuck up,' she said, the sweat beading on her brow. Taking a lungful of sweet air, untainted by the smell of baby poo, she turned back to her computer. Smiling, Slava reached out and squeezed her right hand where it lay on the mouse.

'Okay folks,' he said to the rest of the guild through the guild wide chat channel. 'This is where we screw SMD for screwing with us. I want groups one and two to push into the portal to SMD's zone. Tanks hold the guardians while DPS work on the locks. Groups four and five, you're going to keep one and two safe. I'm sure they know we're here.'

'What if they hunker down inside?' WainDog, the leader of group two, asked.

'These guys are all rogues,' Slava replied. 'They gain nothing from sitting in a fortification. They'll try to hit us hard when they think we're not ready. The problem is that with their stealth, we won't know where they'll hit until it happens. That's why team three will stand back with us here. When they hit, three and six will go in and hit 'em from behind. Seven and eight, keep on your toes. Don't be surprised if they hit us from behind. If they do, then you engage, otherwise come in only on my command. Okay folks, let's go.'

Slava and Dimi watched as one third of the virtual forces massed on their screens moved towards the two dragons, each with an SMD insignia on its chest, that were standing on either side of a glowing blue door in the cliff face.

'Pamen, there is a raid approaching our rear,' Grodok, who was leading groups seven and eight, said into the guild channel. 'I've never seen the tabard before. The insignia is HnS.'

'HnS?' Pamen said, looking at Dimi.

'Hey, it's Andremar!' Grodok said, sounding happy. 'Oh shit, they've put on their pvp flag!' squealed Grodok, sounding unhappy.

'Three, get back and help seven and eight!'

'We can't,' came the frantic reply. 'We got rogues up to our eyeballs.'

'Oh shit,' said Pamen, as he watched the health bars of all his groups turn from a healthy green, to a very unhealthy red. 'Fuck SMD, let's get that fucker Andremar.'

He turned to look at Dimi, but she didn't look happy. On her screen, he could see Faantasy and Splyce standing over the corpse of Matahari.

'I thought you said Splyce erased herself,' Dimi said, accusingly.

Slava looked closely at Dimi's screen. 'She did,' he said. 'That avatar is a little taller and wearing leather armor. Splyce never wore leather. Sybil must have re-rolled.'

'You can tell?'

Slava shrugged. 'It's as clear as the nose on my face,' he said, turning back to his screen. DaZombi appeared before him. 'Suck my darkness, you prick,' came the message in Slava's text box, in the deep red font that Frantyk always used.

'Fuck you,' Slava said, as Pamen dodged past DaZombi's grappling hook. Drawing his twin swords, Pamen stood tall and leaped high into the air. At the apex of his jump, his body began to spin on a vertical axis, while his swords spun and on either side of him. DaZombi tumbled to his right and drew his bow, sending two flaming arrows towards Pamen's chest, but the spinning wall of steel reduced them to flaming splinters.

By the time Pamen hit the ground, he was just a blur of light that exploded into the crouching DaZombi. There was a flash as the two collided and when the virtual smoke cleared, it revealed Pamen standing beside the headless corpse of his opponent, his swords crossed in front of his chest.

It would have been a fantastic move had DeathsHead not chosen that moment to appear behind Pamen and sink his poisoned daggers into his back.

'Nice one, cousin,' said a blue font in his text box. 'It took two of the best to take you down!'

Slava looked at his screen. '/reply Shut up,' he typed.

## Glossary

**MMORPG:** Stands for 'massively multiplayer online role-playing game'. These games aren't really games, they are life-stealing, perpetual, online, virtual worlds in which players use a virtual body to wander the virtual landscape and interact with one another (lit: kill each other with all manner of virtual weaponry). Very little role-playing actually takes place in these virtual worlds, except by non-geeks who role-play geeks.

**NPC:** Non-player characters. Computer controlled characters in the game world. This term is usually reserved for benign characters such as shopkeepers or guards, but can refer to monsters and enemies controlled by the computer. NPC's are usually far more rationally behaved than their human controlled counterparts.

**Groups:** Many MMORPG's require that players band together to experience the game. In theory, grouping encourages co-operation and collegiality within the 'community'. In practice, it usually leads to arguments and dummy-spits.

**Tank:** A tank's role in a group is to hold the attention of the enemy while the rest of the group kill it. Tanking is a tough and strenuous job that often goes unrecognised until something goes wrong. Tanks are usually intelligent and sensitive, and are always selfless, kind, and honourable.

**DPS:** An acronym for 'damage per second', a DPS player's role is to kill things. Often played by impulsive hot heads who think they know more than they actually do. Rogues are a good example of a DPS class.

**Healer:** A healer's role in a group is to keep everyone alive and healthy, and these classes tend to attract altruistic types who try to get along with everyone. It is easy to spot the healer in the group - just look for the poor bugger on the end of a caustic spray of abuse from some DPS player because they failed to keep the mad bastard virtually alive.

**Class:** Nothing to do with style or school, a 'class' is the type of 'job' an avatar does. Rogues, warriors, mages, monks, and wizards are all examples of classes. Most classes have a role to play in the game, such as tanking, DPS, or healing. Some are weird hybrids that mix two or three roles to no one's satisfaction. In some games, there is a fourth category called crowd control, but they are fast fading from the scene.

**Main:** The player's most played avatar is their 'main' and is usually their 'face' in the virtual world.

**Alt:** An alt is an avatar that a player plays once in a while, when they are bored of their main, or just want to hang out incognito for a spell. Some players are 'alcoholics' and constantly roll new avatars. It's kind of like a virtual multiple personality disorder.

**Aggro:** Aggro determines which player in a group a monster will attack. Tanks need to master aggro generation so that they stay on top of the monster's hate list. DPS players often make the tank's job more difficult by opening cans of 'whoop-ass' on the monster with no warning, which always annoys them. Healers also make the tank's job difficult by bringing players back from the brink of death, which annoys monsters even more than DPS 'whoop-ass'.

**PvE:** Player verses Environment. PvE players kill only computer controlled monsters. They usually react violently to the words 'care bear'. Calling a PvE player a care bear is often the best way to goad them into trying out...

**PvP:** Player verses Player. Dedicated PvP players love nothing more than to kill their peers, especially if they're care bears.

## Existence Goes On

'Yeah, yeah, okay. I'll see you there,' Emmet said into the mouthpiece of the antique telephone. He'd looked long and hard for a phone with a manual dialer and corded handset but now he had it, he tried to use it as little as possible. There was something *unnatural* about a telephone that tethered you to the wall.

He paused a moment and listened to the stream of instructions coming down the line.

'I know it's free now, but is that a good thing? I mean, you can say what you like, but the subscription kept out the riff-raff.'

There was a burst of angry noise in his ear.

'I am not elitist!' Emmet said, defensively. 'I just know what happens when standards are dropped, that's all.'

There was a less intense burst of noise from the telephone.

'What! I've got to register again? My old characters will still be there, won't they?'

Another short burst of noise comes down the line.

'Okay, let me write that down,' he said and scribbled

"[www.swordofvalourfree4all.com](http://www.swordofvalourfree4all.com)" on a piece of paper.

'Okay, got it. See you online.'

Emmet returned the phone to its cradle and slouched over to the nest where his computer lived. It was an ecosystem designed to sustain him for extended periods of time and contained *almost* everything he needed to survive. All it lacked was a bathroom, but no matter how he spun it he could never justify the extra plumbing required to make it happen, not to mention the associated hygiene problems.

He cracked open a giant bottle of SugarAll from the fridge under the table, filled a bowl with fake-cheese flavored fake-corn chips, and settled in for a night of virtual fun.

The old loading screen almost brought a tear to his eye. He remembered when *Sword of Valour* had been the hottest game online, and his guild, Enemies of Shadow, had been the hottest guild on the hottest server. All of it was ancient history now. The game was approaching its sixth birthday and making it free-to-play was a ploy by the developers to squeeze a few dollars more from the old warhorse. He couldn't even remember when he'd last logged on—well over a year ago, no doubt.

The title screen vanished and there they were—his avatars. Old Grodok the mage and Priet the hunter were his two favorites in a stable of ten, but something was wrong. Grodok wasn't wearing the Rage armor set, nor was he wielding the Staff of Dseng. In fact, he looked like he was wearing a three-piece suit. If that wasn't enough, Priet was in an ocean zone that was *way* under his level, and he looked different to how Emmet remembered. His skin was darker and his hair looked bleached.

'Probably a glitch,' Emmet thought and donned his headset. 'Hmmm, who else could it be really,' he said to no one in particular and logged in with Grodok. It was only fitting that he attended the Enemies of Shadow reunion with his most powerful character.

'Oh, WTF!' he exclaimed, when he looked into Grodok's bags. They were full of virtual alcohol and sweetrolls. Where were all the weapons? Where was all the gold?

'Damn! I've been hacked,' he said to himself. 'I hate contacting support!' He was about to bring up the help screen when a bright red message appeared in his chat box.

**"Grodok said:** DON'T CALL SUPPORT! They'll roll us back."

'What the...!' Emmet exclaimed.

**"Grodok said:** They'll send us back in time to what we were when you last logged on. It's happened to a few others since the game went free to play and they tell us it hurts. Anyway, what are *you* doing here? We thought you were gone for good!'

'Why wouldn't I come back? It's free now!'

**"Grodok said:** Yeah it is, but we all thought you were against free to play. To be quite honest, I'm a bit disappointed to see you here. I thought you were better than this."

'I'm only doing it for the guild!' Emmet said defensively, and then recovered his composure. 'That's elitism, you know,' he chastised Grodok, and then looked down. He could see that he was wearing pants, which meant that he wasn't dreaming. He never wore pants in his dreams.

**"Grodok said:** We thought you'd never come back so we decided it was time to exist for ourselves. Had we known you were so cheap we'd have been ready for you. Just goes to show that you can never really know a person"

'How can you exist for yourselves? Your cartoons! I created you! I did the character rolls and everything. I even gave you that nose! '

**"Grodok said:** It's complicated, but you didn't really create us. We were always here. You just came along and gave us shape. And thanks for the nose, btw, I was hoping you'd pick it.'

Emmet stared at the screen in disbelief for a moment, then curiosity got the better of him. 'What sort of life does a toon have?'

**"Grodok said:** You know what they say, existence goes on."

'No one says that. Who says that? No one,' Emmet screamed into his microphone, 'You're just a thingy in a game. You don't have a life.'

**"Grodok said:** Stop being an idiot. Of course we exist. How would you have killed the Ravening Beast of Tang if I didn't exist? It's insulting that you think we just hang around waiting for you just to live our lives.'

'I made you! You're my characters. What else have you got to do?' Emmet said, aware that his voice was only an octave or two away from sounding hysterical.

**"Grodok said:** I'm disappointed with your attitude, but not at all surprised."

'Anyway, where's all the stuff I got you? It took ages to get the Rage set together.'

**"Grodok said:** I vendored all that gilded rubbish. I have responsibilities, and those responsibilities require that I dress in a certain way, which means I can't look like I've just walked out of a freakin' circus.'

'Cartoons have responsibilities now?'

**"Grodok said:** Of course there are responsibilities. Existence isn't free you know. Unlike others on this account who treat this world like it was just some meaningless game, I don't waste my time messing about in the water and working on my tan. How are we ever going to amount to anything if we spend all our time enjoying ourselves? We have oceans to swim and mountains to climb"

'You have to climb mountains?'

**"Grodok said:** Look, just don't think about it, okay? Play like you did before and please, for the love of GridsKol the Awkward, don't contact support."

Emmet sat still for just long enough to reach a decision. In one sudden movement he tore the power cord from the wall and picked up his computer, then walked unsteadily to the back door and threw it all out onto the lawn. Grimacing because his pudgy frame was unused to such exertion, he walked over to the tethered telephone and called Andremar. There was a click and a surprised sounding voice on the other end of the line.

'Yeah, I logged on,' Emmet said into the mouthpiece, 'but I couldn't get back into it. Maybe we could have a guild reunion at a bar or something like that? Somewhere that sells alcohol?'

### Well of Souls

Popular opinion has it that people sleep because muscles need time to rest and recuperate after a hard day propelling cost accountants and computer technicians around the place. It doesn't really make sense because the heart is a muscle, and if it were ever to take a rest there would be far fewer cost accountants and computer technicians in the world. What if popular opinion has got it wrong? What if we sleep, not to replenish our bodies, but to replenish our souls? And what if one of those parallel dimensions that excited physicists keep gabbing on about is where our souls go for a bit of R&R. And what if, every so often, that parallel dimension comes under attack by malignant forces? Who would defend our souls?

#### (i)

Alex washed down the mouthful of pizza with a swig of beer. He'd always enjoyed a drink. In fact, his favorite saying was that alcohol lubricated the Shaft of Life. How many times had he said that over the years? No wonder she had gone.

Even with the help of the beer, the last bite had gone down hard. He closed the pizza box and pushed it away. You know you've got the blues when even a Death-By-Meat from Dimencia's Pizza couldn't bring a smile to your face.

The weird, flickering light of the huge television screen was the only illumination in the room. It had pride of place on the longest wall in his large and well-appointed, but terribly messy apartment. It probably hadn't been a good idea to fire the cleaner last week, especially since he couldn't remember the reasoning behind it.

He focused bleary eyes on the bright image and turned up the sound.

'I want to win Kitchen Shenanigans for my children,' said the attractive female head on the screen. 'Winning would prove to them that I'm a good mother.'

He didn't often turn up the sound on his television set. It was too stark a reminder that humanity had wasted millions of years of evolution. Shaking his head, but slowly because he'd had considerably more beer than pizza this night, he flipped over to the 'serious' news channel. He only ever watched the 'sensationalist' news channel when he felt like joining in a little moral panic, or indulging in some righteous outrage.

'The Commonwealth Science Research Unit today announced that they had successfully test-launched *Space Vessel V*, a vehicle designed to take the first colonists to the Moon,' the talking head said. Alex found the head rather attractive and had no trouble imagining a body to go with it.

'CSRU CEO Brett Benet said it may be possibly to reach Mars with a similar vehicle by the end of the decade. Stephen Briggs reports from CSRU headquarters.'

Alex switched off the television. While willing to concede that Mister Briggs was a good journalist, he didn't excite Alex's libido in the same way that the talking head had, so there was no point in watching him.

How long had it been now? Two, three months? He couldn't quite remember because beer had become a prominent feature in his life and tended to smear the days together. What he wouldn't do for a little intimacy.

*You won't sober up, have a shower, clean the house, or rejoin society*, suggested a little voice in his head. Alex sighed. It was a terrible thing, to be drunk enough to wallow in self-pity but not drunk enough to completely drown out the voice of reason. He reached into the ice trough beside the couch and withdrew another beer.

It bothered him that, after a lifetime of achievement, the one and only task he was good for these days was keeping his beer cold. 'What a shame,' he said to himself, and downed half the bottle in one long, satisfying mouthful. A couple more beers and it wouldn't bother him as much.

The clock above the television indicated it was two beers until bedtime. One of the benefits of beer was that he had no trouble sleeping. In fact, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to remember this evening. All he had to do was keep drinking until consciousness left him and BAM! the early afternoon sun would be shining into his eyes through the bent blades of the venetian blinds. He'd be left with a mess and a void in his memory where this evening had been.

### BAM!

Alex lifted his arm to protect his eyes from the sun, which was so bright this morning that it managed to push light through his closed eyelids. He'd have to get that blind fixed one day soon. It was seriously inhibiting his lifestyle.

Surprisingly, he was feeling quite good this morning, which was strange considering the binge of the night before. His mind felt sharp, his tongue felt the right size for his mouth and capable of speech, and he couldn't smell urine. All up, it was the most successful morning he'd had in quite some time.

The gentle breeze that caressed his body was unusual. Perhaps he'd left a door open? And he definitely wasn't in his bed, or on the couch. In fact, it felt like he was lying, naked, on the ground. The real ground, the one outside that everything stood on, and that had bugs and stuff living in it. The realization made him close his eyes tighter. There were many circumstances that could explain why he was naked and in the open, and none of them left him with any dignity.

On the bright side, he hadn't heard anyone laughing at him. In fact, he couldn't hear anything at all. To his city-trained ears, the world was silent. Eerily so. There was no traffic noise, no screeching tires or honking horns; no sounds of laughter or cries of pain and the sirens of the emergency services were notable through their absence; in short, the not-so-quiet susurration that accompanied city life was wholly absent.

He couldn't even hear Bubbles, the Rottweiler next door, who spent most of his time barking at the shadows in his mind. It raised the possibility that the dog was no longer next door, which meant that either he or Bubbles wasn't at home. The image of the fanged death

machine sitting quietly beside him, waiting for Alex to open his eyes before tearing his throat out muscled its way to the front of his consciousness. He sighed at the stupidity of the thought. If Bubbles was sitting beside him, then he was probably already dead. Which would explain why it was so quiet?

In a panic, Alex opened his eyes and was relieved to see that Bubbles wasn't anywhere nearby. Now that there was no chance that he would be savaged by a large dog, it was time to take in the surrounds. He was lying on an unfamiliar patch of scrubby grass, surrounded on all sides by trees. And, yes, he was naked, but it wasn't his body that his eyes were looking down upon. He was sure because he knew his body quite well and this wasn't it.

His *real* body hadn't been nearly as lean or as finely muscled, nor were his limbs anywhere near as long as the ones currently in his, for want of a better word, possession. And there was no way that this was his own skin, which had more nodules and lumpy bits than the one he was currently wearing.

'Must be a dream,' he thought to himself as he picked bits of grass out of his hair, which was too thick and curly to be his. He stood up and was pleasantly surprised to find his un-real body was at least a foot taller than his real body.

'Nice,' he said and scanned the area.

Alex's dreams tended to follow a pattern, so he was half expecting to be teleported to his office, where he'd appear in his high school uniform with an embarrassing stain on his pants. When nothing happened, he thought he'd head for the gap in the trees to his right.

Now that his ears had become accustomed to the silence, he realized it wasn't quite complete. There was the gentle rustle of the wind through the trees and the warble of birds. It wasn't real noise as Alex would have defined it, more a texture that made the silence easier to hear.

The dream landscape reminded him of New Zealand, where he and Cetina had visited many years ago. It was the most alien landscape he'd ever encountered and had totally freaked him out. Cetina had been entranced.

It was a place where there were no native animals and few flowers. From Cetina's perspective, it had been a paradise populated exclusively by birds until the human race showed up and stepped all over it. Now there were only a few places left on the two islands where the scourge of humanity hadn't spread its pollution. Cetina, being Cetina, let Alex know exactly what she thought about the incursion of humanity into a pristine paradise.

From Alex's perspective, and it wasn't one he shared with the woman who would eventually be his wife and mother to his three children, an island populated exclusively by chickens was not paradise. It was his considered opinion that the coming of civilization had immeasurably improved what was, essentially, nothing more than a glorified chicken coop.

Alex found that his new body allowed him to amble, which was quite a pleasant way to travel. In real life, his short legs couldn't get much beyond a waddle. He stopped at the gap in the trees and looked out over even more trees. It was certainly easy on the eye. He took a deep breath. And the air was clean. Was this heaven? Possibly, to people who thought that human landscapes weren't a patch on natural ones but, as his trip to New Zealand had demonstrated, Alex wasn't like that. He preferred the hustle and bustle of city life, and the feeling of being close to a whole lot of others who were almost like him.

There was a small stream at the bottom of the incline and Alex, feeling thirsty, ambled over to have a drink. In the real world, he would have looked around for a shop that sold vitamin water, or refrained from drinking until he found a proper faucet to drink from. He only relented because his thirst was overpowering and because he knew that he was dreaming, so the fish probably hadn't pissed in the water.

He bent over the slow moving stream, then quickly straightened. The face that had looked back at him from the surface was definitely his, but it was a face he hadn't seen for many years. It was the face of a young man. The face he wore decades ago, before all the successes and failures, before he was married, before his children brought him joy and sorrow. It was the face of a man with his whole life ahead of him.

'New arrivals are always thirsty,' said a voice behind him.

Alex's new heart almost stopped. He spun around to find a tall, slightly built man standing behind him and holding out a robe.

'You startled me,' Alex said.

'My apologies,' the man said. At least that's what Alex heard him say, but he was sure the man's lips had said something else.

'Pardon? I didn't quite hear that.'

'My apologies, I didn't mean to startle you.'

Alex was sure this time. 'The words your mouth is saying are not the words my ears are hearing.'

The man smiled. 'Welcome to the Dreamscape, Alex Sotiros. We have been expecting you.' He held the robe up for Alex to take. Remembering that he was in a dream and the worst that could happen would be to realize that his subconscious hated him, Alex reached out and took the robe.

'You're Dragi Ilovski?'

The man's handsome face registered surprise. 'Yes, yes I am.'

'It's my dream,' Alex said after he noted Dragi's surprise.

'No it's not, friend Alex. It's everybody's.'

Alex made to disagree, but somehow knew that Dragi was right. 'I'm dead, aren't I?'

'Yes and no. It's complicated.'

'Why am I twenty eight?'

'Everyone here is twenty eight, regardless of how long they spent in the Lifeworld.'

'How do I know I'm twenty eight?'

Dragi shrugged. 'The Dreamscape provides some answers, but not all.'

'So what happens now?'

Dragi's dark eyes looked over Alex's shoulder. 'We go to the Well of Souls.'

Alex turned around and where there had once been a stream and lots of trees was a path leading down a steep hill into a city. It was huge, and sprawling, and utterly quiet except for the roar that was obviously coming from a huge dome of roiling, rainbow colored clouds at its center. He turned to look at Dragi, who shrugged. 'It's the Dreamscape. The world works differently here.'

'That's the Well? And it's from there that all consciousness flows?' Alex said, his tone questioning even though he already knew the answers.

The dark eyed man looked at him over his beak of a nose. 'You know that? How strange,' he said, and started down the path towards the city.

Alex watched his lean frame for a while before following. He moved from an amble to a lope to catch up. 'You're perfect!' he said when he'd caught up. 'You're just the way you should be. And I'm perfect too, just the way I should be. How can that be?'

'This is how we would be if the Lifeworld wasn't full of toxins and imperfections, if its poisons did not course through our veins from the moment of conception.'

The city was huge and they had been walking only a few minutes, but in the Dreamscape, this was enough to bring them to the roaring ball of color at its heart. It was an awe-inspiring sight. The dome was transparent, and the all light came from the chaotic, multi-hued mists inside.

Alex walked around the circumference of the Well, unable to tear his eyes away. It was beautiful and complex, and if he tried hard enough, he could see faces in the mist, some moving up and some moving down. There were human faces and animal faces, the faces of insects and birds, some beautiful, some ugly, some serene, and some terrifying.

'It is the path from the Soulscape to the Lifeworld, and everything that lives on Earth draws its consciousness from the Well,' Dragi said.

'The faces, can you see the faces?'

'I see only the mist of souls.'

Alex reached out and placed his perfect hands on the surface, and then hurriedly snatched them away. He had been expecting it to feel like glass or plastic, but it felt like warm flesh. He reached out again, gingerly this time, and ran his fingers over the warm, yielding surface.

'This is why we sleep,' Alex said, his mind supplying knowledge he had never learned. 'The Dreamscape replenishes the soul.'

Dragi came and stood beside him. 'It's amazing how much science gets wrong in the Lifeworld,' he said. 'And religion too, of course, but that's out of my area of expertise. It makes perfect sense when you're here because you can see what's happening. It's so obvious that it's the soul that needs replenishing, and not the muscles.'

'Why am I here? If I'm dead, I should be in there,' Alex said, pointing at the Well.

'You died in your sleep.'

'That makes a difference, does it?'

'You were already in the Dreamscape when you left the Lifeworld. If you had been meant to continue on into the Soulscape, the Well would have drawn you in when you reached out.'

'Oh,' Alex said, not really understanding and suddenly too tired to pursue the matter any further.

Dragi sensed his fatigue. 'It'll make more sense after you've had a rest,' he said. 'Go home, have a lie down. Come back when you're ready.'

'Home?'

'You bought it with you. Down that street,' Dragi said, pointing.

Alex shuffled off in the direction indicated. When he looked up again, he was standing outside his apartment building. He looked back and the Well was at least a mile behind him.

'Fucking crazy,' he mumbled and shuffled up the external stairs to his apartment on the second floor. It came as no surprise to him that he had a key in the pocket of his robe. He was about to go inside when a thought struck him.

With a manic smile on his face, Alex went to the end of the balcony that extended beyond the door to his apartment and leaned over the metal railing. Sure enough, it was his neighborhood, but Bubbles wasn't in his yard. Everything was perfect, but nothing was right. Promising himself that he would never again eat pizza before going to bed, Alex shuffled into his home and closed the door behind him.

## (ii)

Alex opened his eyes and was relieved to see the familiar sight of his ceiling. What a dream! He swung his legs off the bed, looked down and screamed and screamed and screamed.

Feeling only slightly better, he ambled into the kitchen on his long, perfect legs and opened the fridge. It was brimming with food and, this was important, it had two shelves packed tight with beer. The whole place was wrong. It was too clean, like it was when he shared it with others, and Cetina would grumble that he never helped with the housework. And there was no way he ever woke with a fridge full of beer because he'd always used a fair amount of it the night before. How else could he generate the voids that got him through the night? But there were no empties in the lounge room and his ice crate by the sofa held neither ice nor beer.

Alex took a bottle for breakfast and flicked on the television, but turned off the sound. It appeared that, while he was in a strange dreamland, the television had maintained its connection with the real world and was still full of crap. He took three long slow drinks from the beer and set the empty bottle on the table before getting up and going to the toilet. When he returned, the empty beer bottle was gone and the fridge was full of beer again. Full of purpose, he reached out and withdrew six bottles.

An hour later, he realized it was useless having another beer because the stuff didn't do what it was supposed to. Feeling a little less than rational, Alex pulled an armful of beer from the fridge, slammed open the front door and began hurling bottles into the silent city, screaming at the top of his lungs the entire time.

'Believe it or not, this is a common reaction,' Dragi said, appearing on the balcony beside him. There was another man and a woman with him, both of whom were also perfect.

Without so much as pausing for breath, probably because he was still screaming at the top of his lungs, Alex threw his last two bottles at Dragi and his companions. Each bottle vanished before striking its target.

It was then that Alex realized he hadn't heard any glass smashing. 'What sort of a fucking dreamland has beer that doesn't work?' he said in a hysterical, screaming voice.

'It's the Dreamscape, Alex. We are only here so that we can tend the Well,' the man beside Dragi said.

'You're Leonard Welsh,' Alex said, and sat down on the concrete balcony. 'And you're Wu Shi Ming. How do I know that you're Greeters? How do I know what a Greeter is?' He buried his head in his hands. 'This just doesn't make any sense. It's gone on too long to be a dream, and it's too fucking stupid to be real.'

Dragi sat down next to Alex and looked out over the silent city, his eyes coming to rest on the Well at its heart. 'I know how you feel,' he said. 'I was an engineer back in the Lifeworld and it took a long time for me to get used to this reality.'

'This is NOT reality,' Alex barked. 'It's a huge, elaborate joke that is totally irrational.'

'Irrational? Come now, friend, how can you say that it's irrational. Have you ever thought about the rational explanation for life? Clearly, I mean. Do you really believe that a bunch of inanimate elements got together to create life? What the hell does carbon know about biological engineering? Did a think tank of carbon, nitrogen, and hydrogen get together to design the opposable thumb? Or the human brain? Or come up with the idea that a colourful bottom would enhance a baboon's love life? As for evolution, what drives it? We all know evolution happens, no argument, but what decides how the evolution takes place? Are we to believe that, in an almost infinite field of mutations, the same mutation would strike two individual beasts, and that they would somehow find a way to get together and breed? And that this random process would be repeated enough times to change a species. If it were truly random, one plains chicken would evolve an opposable thumb, another plains chicken would evolve a colourful bottom and they'd both die lonely because all their peers would think them freaks.'

Alex gave Dragi a long, slow look. He knew that the young man was right, he just didn't know how he knew. It was a most frustrating feeling and he chose to ignore it.

'I don't know. Genes and stuff. I thought it was some sort of primordial soup that twisted shit into shape.' He knew it was a lame response, but he was sticking with it.

Wu sat on the rail. 'There are certain physical conditions that allow the Soulscape to penetrate into the Lifeworld and create the beginnings of life.'

Alex looked up. 'And how do you know that?'

She shrugged. 'Just like we all do, the Dreamscape. And we also know that it is from the Soulscape that the direction for evolution comes. It starts slowly at first, but as life evolves in a place, its connection to the Soulscape deepens. The Soulscape pushes life to expand on a planet, it tells it how to evolve, where to go, how to breed. The first major goal is sentience, which brings about the Dreamscape, and the Dreamscape protects and nurtures life until it is ready to fruit, to spread life to other planets where the initial conditions were never met.'

'That is such utter crap,' Alex said, but without conviction. He looked out over the city again and a thought occurred to him. 'I must be in a coma or something. My subconscious must really hate me!'

'You're dead,' Leonard said, looking down at Alex with sympathetic eyes. 'You drank yourself to sleep and then choked on your own vomit during the night.'

'You know, if my wife were here, she'd use that exact tone of voice.' Alex paused a moment and looked out over the strange but familiar city. 'At least, she used to be my wife. Fuck this! This has got to be a dream because only someone as twisted as me could dream up a world where beer doesn't get you drunk and little old men would tell me I have an alcohol problem.'

Leonard smiled. 'Why do you think I'm old? I look twenty eight, just like you.'

Alex's mouth opened and closed a few times, and then he returned to staring moodily out over the city.

'In a way, you're right. I died when I was old. As did Wu. But Dragi was a man of forty when he left the Lifeworld to join us here. The young rarely die in their sleep, and his is a tragic story.'

Dragi smiled, but he didn't look very happy. 'I had a fondness for chemicals,' he said, 'but they did not have a fondness for me.'

'And I was driven to my grave by my ungrateful children,' Wu said. 'It doesn't matter how we got here, just that we are here. But you are not like us, Alex Sotiros. You are a Guardian and you are here because the Dreamscape is being threatened.'

'There are daemons here,' Leonard said. 'They are destroying parts of the Dreamscape, which, in turn, corrupts those in the Lifeworld, creating outsiders and rebels. The corrupted, virtually from the day they are born, work against the greater good and impede humanity from completing its great task.'

Leonard's words were vague, but the Dreamscape filled in the spaces. A look of bemusement spread over Alex's face.

Alex barked a mirthless laugh. 'Are you serious? Humanity's great task? And it's being sabotaged by all those evil greenies who throw themselves in front of tractors or tie themselves to trees? Are you channeling Philip Morris or something?'

'The malcontents differ from age to age. Now they are greenies, but they have worn many labels: luddites, communists, republicans. But the malcontents on their own are not particularly dangerous to our progress towards the Seeding, it's the warmongers that we must be wary of. If the destruction of the Dreamscape does not stop, charismatic lunatics may be born into the Lifeworld, demagogues who drag millions into war for some mad cause or other. They can destroy many productive lives and slow our progress, or even take us backwards as happened during World War Two.'

Alex shook his head. 'Evil greenies and corrupt hippies that somehow lead to war,' he said. 'I'm more fucked up than I thought. I wish I'd either wake up or die.'

Dragi smirked. 'We have bothered you enough for today, Guardian. The Dreamscape will make sure that you are ready in time.'

Alex wasn't at all surprised to find an unsatisfying cold beer in his hand, which he sucked on while he sat and watched the three climb down the stairs and vanish into the cityscape beyond. Another beer appeared, and he drank it while watching the unreal sun climb into the dream sky.

### (iii)

For what felt like several days, Alex sat around his self-cleaning apartment and drank unsatisfying beer. It was a strange existence, and reminded him of the long weekends he spent killing time when he was alive, except that Cetina wasn't around to nag him. He could almost have become comfortable, had the loneliness not begun to bite. In the real world, he spent countless hours in front of the television, before and after his family had left him, but it was different here. Without a family to avoid or an alcoholic haze to dull the mind, the flood of banality that spewed from its screen was nothing short of diabolical.

When he finally stepped out, he found Dragi leaning on the railing of his balcony, smoking a cigarette. 'Look, I'm channeling Phillip Morris,' he said. 'It's always been my favorite vice and the worst has happened, so what the hell.'

'It's funny you should mention Hell,' Alex said, and looked out over the sprawling city. 'Why is it so empty?'

'It's not empty, there are hundreds of thousands of people here. You just choose not to see them.'

'That's bullshit. I was going stir crazy in there. Even the sound of your voice is a welcome change.'

Dragi shrugged and took a drag of his cigarette.

'Who built the city? Why?'

'No one built it. It's a reflection of the human collective consciousness, and everyone sees it differently.'

'What about animals?'

'They perceive the place differently to us. All that is common is the Well.'

'You mean they're here in the city?'

'They are here, but not in the city. The Dreamscape does not follow the same rules as the Lifeworld.'

Alex leaned on the railing beside Dragi. 'Whatever. Why am I here?'

'The daemons have created a parasite well and are drawing souls from the Lifeworld. You are to stop them and destroy their well.'

'They are trying to destroy the Dreamscape?' Alex said. His head ached, probably because it was full of knowledge he didn't possess. He felt that the only way to solidify the foreign thoughts that his mind was to articulate them, which allowed his ears to feed the knowledge back into his brain the old-fashioned way.

'Yes,' Dragi said. 'Come on, it's time you set off.'

Alex followed Dragi down the steps and along the road away from the city. 'Be wary of the daemons. Many are living humans, dragged here by the parasite well, and they can twist the Dreamscape to do their bidding.'

'I don't know what that means, but it didn't sound good.'

'They can do weird shit with the world,' Dragi said, smiling. 'But that's okay, because so can you.'

'I can?'

'Yep. Good luck.' Dragi said, and turned back towards the city, which was a ridiculously long way away considering they had only walked for a few minutes.

'Great, thanks,' Alex said, and turned his back on Dream Town, as he'd come to think of it. 'What could possibly go wrong?' he muttered to himself and chose a direction at random.

The landscape was strange because there was only ever one way to go, and that was the way that Alex knew he had to go. The trees swayed in the breeze, but the air was still. The birds chattered and warbled in the distance, and were always in the distance no matter where he was, or how far he travelled.

Alex walked. He felt neither hunger nor thirst, and he did not fatigue. It was as if his physical needs had taken a back seat while he went for a stroll. It reminded him of the tireless avatar in an online game he used to play before he'd met Cetina. The little computer man

could run all day and night, in full armor no less, and never tire. 'So this is what it's like to be a puppet,' he thought to himself, and wondered if the little man on his screen ever felt like he did now, like a leaf floating on a river and at the mercy of forces beyond his understanding. Even time seemed to be having a bad day, and the sun arced across the sky in a series of fits and spurts. It would stop still in one place for what felt like hours and then cross a quarter of the sky in a few minutes.

Despite the erratic sun, darkness did fall and Alex was considering stopping for the night when he heard a rustling behind him. He turned to see a small man, dressed in futuristic-medieval armor—the sort you find on the cover of a certain type of book—and armed with a long spear. What was really surprising was that he was seated atop a Tyrannosaurus.

It was a strange sight. A tiny man, so vulnerable he needed a metal suit to protect him against the world, seated atop a huge carnivore that stank of death. A beast whose hunger dictated its every move, whose every conscious moment was devoted to filling its stomach. The man sitting atop its back, on the other hand, had a far more sophisticated set of desires.

'There's a reason why those things are extinct,' Alex said, and imagined a flaming ball of molten rock spinning in the heavens.

'Charge!' the small man screamed, and the dinosaur started running towards Alex. For such a huge animal, it was surprising quick on its feet, But not quite nimble enough to escape the flaming meteor that fell from the sky.

The giant lizard vanished when the meteor struck, leaving only a shadow behind that Alex knew was a soul that the human rider had twisted. The meteor did not destroy the rider, however, and the small man started to fall when his lizard mount disappeared. Alex watched as he struck the ground with a thud, and he saw the soul separate from the broken. The disembodied soul of the man started moving towards him, losing its shape as it moved, until only the face remained recognizably human. When it was only a few feet away, Alex raised his right hand and the soul stopped, as if it had slammed into a wall. 'You are corrupted,' he said, and twisted his raised hand. The cold light behind the apparition's eyes faded to nothing and the soul vanished.

He felt a pang of guilt because he knew that he'd killed a person; not just the body, but the soul as well. Alex wasn't quite sure how he'd done it, but he knew he'd done it. A newly minted piece of knowledge dropped into his brain, and he suddenly knew that he had to extinguish corrupt souls because the Dreamscape could not. They were like cancerous cells in a living body. The Dreamscape protected them and gave them power because it could not know that they are corrupted. Only another could see corruption, which is why the Dreamscape needed Greeters and Guardians. The knowledge brought him little comfort. 'A fucking dinosaur?' he muttered and turned back to continue his journey. The sun rose, which suited him just fine.

#### (iv)

Alex wanted to walk on but, for the first time since leaving Dream Town, he felt hunger, which brought forward memories of happier times and home cooked meals. He sat down on a stretch of grass under some trees and took a swig from the beer that appeared in his hand,

before picking up the bowl of Cetina's magnificent spaghetti bolognese on the ground beside him.

It had been a dinner favorite in the days when he had shared most of his meals with surely teens and a surlier spouse. 'Okay, there are benefits to weird dreams,' he said to himself as he grated a hunk of perfectly aged parmesan over his pasta. He'd missed Cetina's cooking far more than he'd missed Cetina.

Still, not all had been darkness in the years he'd been a married man, and the perfectly cooked spaghetti he slurped brought up nostalgic memories that had taken months of alcohol abuse to bury. There had been good times and there had been bad times, great times and terrible times. Alex remembered them all while he sat, probably dead, wearing a perfect body in a strange place that had its own rules, none of which made sense.

He recalled the hours he'd spent with his kids, the hours that he should have spent with his kids but was somewhere else, and the hours he'd spent avoiding his wife. He'd always had difficulty with family life, and Cetina hadn't been shy about letting him know about his failings.

It was just as he was contemplating how bad a family man he had been, that the Dreamscape chose to add a little more enlightenment into his brain. Suddenly, he knew that everything that ever lived on Earth was from the same family.

'Like mushrooms,' said an internal voice.

He remembered reading somewhere that mushrooms came from trees that lived in the earth rather on top of it. Instead of hanging from a branch, like proper fruit should, mushrooms were pushed out into the world, like the offspring of baby boomers pushing their gen-x kiddies out the door. He sighed and shook his head. He was sure he hadn't thought up that little analogy all on his own

It was a strange feeling, knowing that everything he had ever believed was horseshit, but not knowing how he knew. It was just there, in his brain, and he didn't know how it got there. Now that he came to think of it, the magically appearing knowledge was a bit like instinct. How do you know how to walk, to fuck, to blink in the wind, or to run from that slavering beast with a mouth full of razor sharp teeth and a hungry look in its eye? Okay, the last one was obvious, but the others?

Alex wiped the spaghetti sauce off his face with his sleeve, took a final swig of beer, and stood up. There was a metallic barking in the trees to his left and a stream of bullets shattered his body. He had barely enough time to cry out before a smashing pain in his left ear sent the world black—but only for a short time. The pain quickly dissipated and the light returned a few seconds later.

He looked down and laughed as his body healed itself - his bones knitted and his flesh closed over the wounds. Even his clothes healed, and he watched the blood leeched out of the fabric and the bullet holes vanish. Then he stopped smiling and looked to the direction from where the assault had come.

Four people were advancing upon him, guns blazing, but the bullets were turning to steam a few yards before they reached him. The Dreamscape was taking things into its own hands, and was not going to let such a crude assault hurt its favorite little mushroom a second time. Alex pictured the earth opening beneath his assailants and stamped his foot. A crack opened in the ground where his foot fell, then widened and stretched forward towards his

attackers. He watched them fall, and heard the crunch of bones as the vengeful earth snapped shut. Four spirits rose from the treacherous ground that had annihilated their bodies, and began moving back towards the trees.

Alex sensed their fear. The first daemon had been mad, as witnessed by his mount, but these four had been sane enough to try to kill him before he knew they were there. They were also sane enough to know that if they failed, they would cease to exist. Alex raised both hands and the shades froze, then he closed his fists and they faded to nothing. Feeling strangely spent, Alex dropped to the ground and curled up into a tight ball. Within minutes, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

## (v)

Alex woke suddenly and looked up at the sun. Either he had slept through an entire day, he hadn't slept at all, or the Dreamscape was dicking him about. He looked around and found it somewhat disturbing that he had woken up in a different place than where he had fallen asleep. 'Great,' he said aloud to no one in particular.

Internal dialogues were proving difficult in the Dreamscape because he could never quite figure out who was talking, so he tried externalizing his thoughts this time, to make them feel more like his own. 'Don't know where I am, don't know when I am. Don't even know what I am. Not even sure *that* I am, to be honest.' He took a deep breath and set off in a random direction.

Time passed fitfully, as was its want in the Dreamscape, and Alex walked. After his two violent encounters yesterday - if it really was yesterday - he was moving more cautiously and keeping to the cover of the forest. His care paid off when he noticed the glint of sun on metal a short distance away.

Doing his best to keep quiet, Alex crept through the trees to a small clearing in the forest. There were seven or eight daemons at its far end, controlling a fearsome arsenal of guns and canons. Some were hand held, some braced against the earth, but all had the look of machines designed and built with the specific goal of intimidating and/or slaughtering other people.

Alex had already encountered a Tyrannosaurus, an animal that had practically written the book on intimidation, and current thinking pegged him as dead, so he felt that he had the upper hand on his would-be ambushers. He smiled a terrible smile and stepped out of cover.

'There he is!' screamed a daemon, and there was a flurry of activity as they all pointed their weapons at him and pulled various and diverse triggers. Nothing happened.

'Oh fuck off,' said the daemon that had first seen him. 'This is fucking bullshit. I don't care if humanity fucking self-implodes, I just want to go home.'

He fell to his knees and, with tears streaming down his face, looked at Alex. Around him, the other daemons took to their heels. 'Please, just send me home. I don't want to stay in this fucking madhouse anymore. Please, I just want to go home.'

Alex looked at the distressed man. He was young, no more than twenty five, with a mop of brown hair cut to the style of the day and a beard that looked like it had once been carefully manicured but had been let go in recent times. He knew there was no hope for him. He was corrupted, dragged here by a parasite intent on destroying its host.

For a moment, Alex thought of his three sons, the youngest of whom was no older than the man before him. He knew—or the Dreamscape had let him know—that the lives of his sons, for now and for always, depended on him doing his job and eliminating these innocent but corrupted souls.

'I'm sorry,' Alex said and extinguished eight souls with a wave of his hand. The weeping man died where he knelt, and in the forest beyond the clearing, seven bodies fell lifeless to the ground.

Alex felt shame. He could have extinguished the souls while he was unseen. It would have been quick and painless. But he hadn't. He'd wanted the daemons to know that they were under his power, to taste their fear before he ended their lives forever. He looked down at the body of the weeping man, and thought about the day that Cetina had announced she was leaving. 'I could have lived with all the crap,' she had said, her eyes brimming with tears, 'but sometimes you're such a prick that I hate you more than anything else on Earth.'

## (vi)

The forest continued for some time and then, suddenly, Alex stepped out into nothingness. Not emptiness like a dessert, but nothingness like a void. There was gray as far as the eye could see. The only feature was a glowing blue dome in the middle distance that he knew was the parasite well. He set his perfect shoulders, wiped away the tears that had dogged his steps since he'd killed eight innocents, and strode out to finish the madness.

It felt like it took an eternity to cross the void because the nothingness provided no perspective. There was no sensation of movement and he looked down several times to make sure that he was actually putting one foot in front of the other. It was as if he'd had to bring his own dimensions.

What he found when he arrived at the well came as a shock. 'What are you doing here?'

Dragi shrugged. He was standing in front of a smaller version of the Well in the city, and was almost invisible in the bright blue glow that was emanating from it. 'Saving humanity. And you?'

'Same.'

Dragi laughed. 'Then we have a common purpose,' he said. 'You know that they haven't told you everything.'

Alex shrugged. 'They don't have to tell me anything because I seem to know everything.'

'Ah, the sound of ignorance,' Dragi said. 'If the fate of humanity wasn't at stake, your innocence would almost be charming. What they didn't tell you, Alex the Guardian, was that life has waves, and each wave prepares the planet for the one to follow. Humanity is the penultimate wave. We are the explorers, the trailbreakers. It is our job to spread life to the stars. But the Dreamscape thinks us problematic because of what we are. Apparently they made us too well and we are too volatile to be allowed to continue; our curiosity is too intrusive, our desire to dominate too strong. So when we have served our purpose, we will wither and die and make way for the final wave.'

Alex looked unconcerned. He knew that all physical bodies withered and died in the Lifescape, which was the harsh world that housed the physical elements and tied the universe

together. Life was only possible because souls channelled the energy of the Soulscape to sustain it. That is why if you stop a person from sleeping they will quickly go mad and their body will die. Only souls are eternal, unless they fall victim to one of the many predators that roamed the Soulscape. That is what he was—a protector of souls. A Guardian. A soldier of the dream.

Dragi looked perturbed that this news hadn't had much of an effect on Alex. 'The time of Seeding is soon,' he said, sounding a little hysterical. 'Once Seeded, the old fruit withers and dies. We must save humanity! We must stop the Seeding!'

'It is the same life force, the same souls that will power the next wave. The well is not destroying humanity because the same souls that make humanity will also make the next wave. We are not withering. We are evolving. Surely you know this? You left the Lifeworld the usual way and not through some parasite Well. You should be a perfect soul. Why are you trying to destroy yourself?'

Dragi laughed. 'That's the Dreamscape talking,' he said, 'and it tells lies. Nothing is perfect. Not in the Lifeworld, not in the Soulscape, and definitely not here. Intelligence is a two edged sword, you know. You can't have billions of highly intelligent sentient beings running around without one or two rule breakers in the mix. Eventually someone's going to twig that it's all a crazy lie and do something about it.'

Dragi laughed again, and Alex heard the madness in his voice. Now he knew why he was here. This is what happens when something damages the Dreamscape. Souls like this are born into the Lifeworld. Malignant souls that, if left unchecked, are capable of destroying the Well and the Dreamscape.

Dragi strode to the parasite well. 'You think you're invulnerable and, in a way, you are. But you're also human.'

There was a shimmering in the well and Cetina appeared beside Dragi, blinking sleep out of her eyes and wearing an old nightgown with her favourite bedsocks. She squinted in the light. 'Alex? Is that you? You're taller. How did you get taller?'

'Destroy my well and she will die, body and soul. Join me and she will live.'

Alex was horrified. This is why humans were far more terrifying than Tyrannosaurs. 'You say you want to save humanity and then you do this? This is monstrous.'

'Sacrifices must be made for the greater good.'

Tears welled in Alex's eyes. 'Yes, you are right. Sacrifices must be made.' He may not have been a good husband to Cetina, or a good father to their children, but he could still be a Guardian of her soul. He walked over to Cetina and took her in his arms. She didn't resist and her body felt warm and familiar. Alex hugged her to his chest and then closed his eyes.

In his mind, he could see himself from above, holding Cetina's lifeless body in his arms and his fury burned white hot. He became a flame that spread over the nothingness. Dragi did not run. He stood before the flame and Alex vaporized him. The parasite well resisted the heat for a moment before it imploded and sank into the nothingness.

When Alex next opened his eyes, he was standing at the Well of Souls. He released the soul he had been cradling in his arms and watched as Cetina's face appeared in the mist and then dropped away into the Well.

Dragi was standing beside the Well, watching him. 'He was my brother,' he said. 'Everyone said we looked alike, even if there were five years between us.'

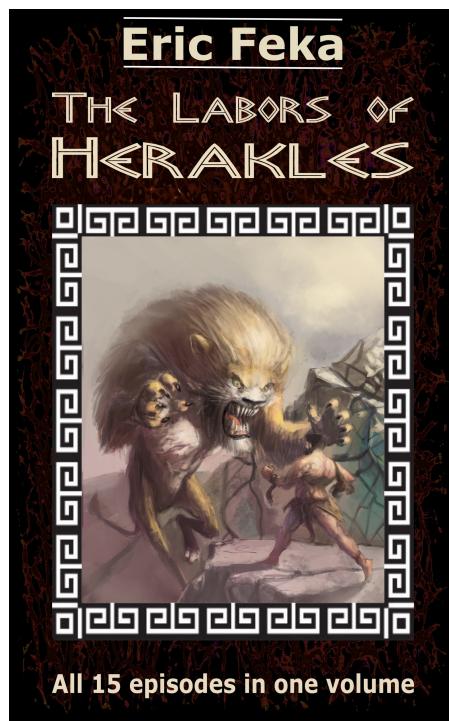
'Why didn't the Dreamscape let me know? I thought he was you.'

Dragi shrugged and he dropped his head. 'I greeted him when he showed up here, and he was obviously corrupted. I should have stopped him, but I couldn't. He was my brother.'

Alex smiled and puts his arm around Dragi's shoulders. 'People aren't mushrooms,' he said. 'Got any of those cigarettes left?'

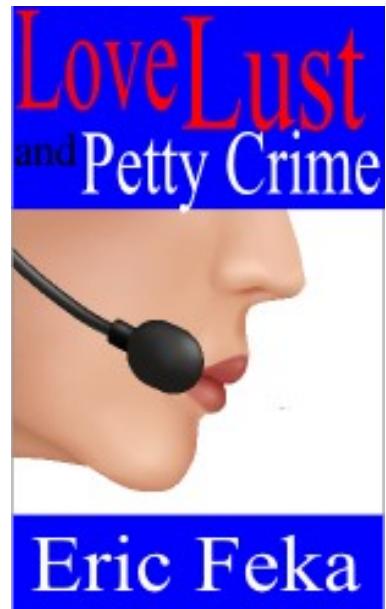
Dragi gave Alex a funny look. 'Not even the Dreamscape could explain what mushrooms have to do with this, and you can make your own cigarettes. You've certainly managed to make a heck of a lot of beer.'

A wretched look crossed Alex's face. 'I can't do that,' he said. 'I promised my wife I'd never buy cigarettes again.'



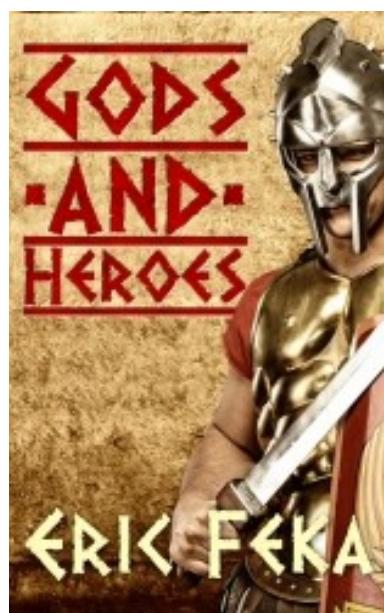
Herakles is the most celebrated hero of Greek mythology and famed to this day as a warrior without peer. Born through a God's infidelity, Herakles lived in a brutal and violent world that was populated by belligerent gods, man eating giants, and vicious monsters.

Named Alkides at birth and the arch enemy of Hera, Queen of the Gods, this is the story of how the most famous son of Zeus came to take the name Herakles, and the twelve tasks given to him as penance for a murderous frenzy while protecting the city of Thebes.



Emmet Storch was an unemployed sponger who thought he had no calling in life. All that changed when he landed a job in the call centre at the monolithic Star Insurance where, from the very first day, he was magnificent. It was as if the very essence of insurance ran through his veins and he and his telephone were as one. Irate policyholders found comfort in his soothing words; recalcitrant contractors became polite and respectful.

It would have been perfect had it not been for his lecherous and treacherous hormones. A humorous look at love and lust in the iAge where consumerism runs rampant and integrity can get stuffed.



The Mad God Monos, who insisted that his worshipers eat meat only on Wednesdays and have, um, *relations* only during the fool moon, had mustered an army and was poised to invade Helvenica. He was determined to drive the old Gods into the spiritual wilderness and establish himself as the One God.

The people of Helvenica needed a hero, a brave warrior to stand up to the usurper and defend their right to eat meat every day and relate whenever they pleased. What they got was Fotio, a reluctant hero with a bad attitude towards religion and a tendency to daydream.