

Suck My Darkness

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Sample Chapter

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Chapter 1: The Virtual and the Real

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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 fulfilment. 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 first year humanities students was, he considers, 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 Otto's thesis supervisor happy because she didn't have to do the lecture, and a happy supervisor was a hell of a lot better than an unhappy supervisor. Otto found it surprising that the only thing the academics he met 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 organisations 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 items that they either find or create 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 favourite monotone the entire time. 'What does this mean? Well, first, it means that the organisations 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 favourite 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?' squeaked Otto.

'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.

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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.

Swivelling his executive chair to face Sybil, Otto beckoned towards the nearest of the many moulded 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,' said Otto, 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,' said Otto, 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,' Sybil replied.

'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 more 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,' said Otto. '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,' said Sybil, 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.

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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 first year 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 opinion, magnificent. Otto was already a high-ranking member of *Enemies of Shadow*, the most exclusive guild in the most popular online game in the world, when its leader, Pamen, retired in order to concentrate on caring for his newly born triplets (an account of Pamen's tragic ascent to the leadership of EoS appears in Appendix I: *A Virtual Life*). It had taken Otto considerable lobbying and string pulling to get himself elected as leader, but it 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' cheques 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 armoured 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 cheques and placed them in the real mail to you all. What this means is that all EoS members can expect two thousand dollars to be landing in his or her snail mail box in the next couple of days, which represents each individual member's 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 cowed 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,' said Frantyk, '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 and 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 Pamen 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,' said Frantyk. '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.

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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 or want her in his presence. 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 realised 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 gothic 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?' screeched Alice 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.'

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 fucking 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 my dick off now

Sybil and Alice both looked to the stage. 'I thought the lead singer was a girl,' said Alice, sounding a little disappointed.

I won't bleed on your clothes

'So what does it matter that he's Frantyk?' said Alice, picking up a cup of beer.

Because my dick 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,' said Alice, 'but there are no onions on the burgers. I'm going home to log in. Wanna meet me at the Ogres 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. It was *tight*. 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, preferring to relax in front of the television and smoke vast quantities of illegal herbage in order to lower their mental capacity enough to enjoy it. It really got on her goat, the 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 she had lived in, she'd had to share her precious bandwidth with the whole household, and there was always some engineering student sucking up the megabytes 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 in a hurry to escape. She could hear the sound of murmured conversation and the ever-present 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 pyjamas. 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 pyjama 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 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 or not he existed.

(v)

Sybil dropped her books into a corner of her bedroom, turned on her computer, donned her combination headphones and microphone headset, and logged into *Sword of Valour*. The loading screen took its customary 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,' said Splyce. 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,' wrote Frantyk. '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 other players wanted to farm some 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,' replied Faantasy. '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,' said DeathsHead in the guild chat channel. 'I've just logged on. 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?' asked DeathsHead. '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,' said DeathsHead, 'we have connections. All respect, Splyce, but your boyfriend and his gang of do-gooders shit me to tears. Like, come on, all that valour 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 jokingly.

'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,' said DeathsHead, '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, sounding upset. '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,' said DeathsHead, 'but Splyce wants to play with Frantyk's toilet bits. Forget it.'

'I do not,' replied Sybil, sounding defensiveness. She found the mental image of a naked Otto disturbingly exciting. 'He's a creep, Head, just like you.'

'Then what the fuck, Splyce,' replied DeathsHead. 'We can even give the stuff back later. Just scare the crap out of their greedy, goody-goody arses.'

'Good thinking Head,' Faantasy said, 'and anyway all this real money for game stuff is getting out of hand. Today it's EoS, tomorrow it'll be someone else, 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.'

'I'll think about it,' said Sybil as she reached the far camp, 'but now 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.'

Releasing her microphone, Sybil slips into virtuality as Splyce slips out of stealth behind a virtual ogre.