

## **I Was an Internet Addict**

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Despite what it says on the cover, this is not a true story. I made the whole thing up. If you, or anyone you know, resemble the characters depicted herein, I would strongly advise that you seek professional help. Urgently.

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### **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 the inside, 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. It's 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 chock 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 intense 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 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.

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 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 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've 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. Ever since I had known him - from our years together at high school - he ended everything he said with the word "fucking". 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 looks like 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, chocolaty 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 gonna 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 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 emphasis 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-way 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 she 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, um, 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 - just sweet enough to highlight her femininity and just rough 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 room. 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 of 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 gone and 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, sitting 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 weirdos 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 Raine'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?' he asked. '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, when he saw me shaping to reply.

'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 barely 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 see 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 of food-court-proof Beef Rendang. Even the most lethargic purveyor of suspect food would have trouble ruining a Rendang - 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, Harry,' Patrick exclaimed. 'What world are you living in?'

'I don't know.'

'Just go home, Harry. 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 else must have 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 I'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 Robert's take on the cosmos.

'Oh yeah. The world, Harry. The world. It sucks. Full of stupid. Everywhere you look, there are stupid. Stupid here, stupid there, stupid 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?'

**Also By Hercules Bantas:**

## **Virtually Real**



**Hercules Bantas**

Otto was having trouble relating to people, which is why the virtual world of Sword of Valour was so appealing. Here was a world where excitement replaced tedium, where you could kill annoying individuals, and where the level cap kept you from growing old. It seemed like virtual heaven. Sadly, it wasn't.

In Sword of Valour, you could be whoever you wanted to be. What was puzzling was that everyone seemed to be exactly the same as they were in the real world. The same hang ups, the same egos, the same bloody mindedness. The only real difference, as far as Otto could tell, was that if you killed someone, instead of rotting, he or she complained. It was enough to make a conservative young man unsheathe the virtual daggers and go rogue.

A tale about who we think we are, who everybody else thinks we are, who we really are, and who we wish we were.



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.