

DEATH MARCH

Book 1 of the

Euphoria Online Trilogy

By Phil Tucker

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Trial of Kings

ANTHOLOGIES

Tales of Lost Lore | Ragged Heroes

Chapter One

My brother's imminent death had me distracted.

Feet up on my desk, hands laced behind my head, I watched the wall clock. Two minutes remained till my seventh-period students arrived. Two minutes till I swung back into autopilot and escaped my bleak thoughts. Two minutes had never seemed so long, so when my omni vibrated I gladly accepted the incoming message without checking who'd sent it.

Want to play Euphoria for free?

I made a face. Yeah, right. Who didn't? What a poor attempt at spam. Since Euphoria launched I'd received every variation of that offer through every media channel offering a free weekend session. My finger moved to the delete button but then paused. That number. Where did I know it from?

Brianna.

I'd deleted her number after finally - for real and for good and forever - breaking up with her three weeks ago, and hadn't heard from her since. In fact, our sole mutual friend, Evalina, had told me that ever since our last falling-out, Brianna'd been waiting for me to call so she could tell me how despicable I was.

'Course, I'd never called her, and it had given me petty satisfaction to leave her stewing.

What the heck was she texting me for?

More importantly, why the hell was she offering a free session of Euphoria?

I bit my lower lip. The voices of my students rang loudly outside my classroom door. One minute till the bell rang and I'd have to let them in.

My thumb hovered over my phone's keyboard. Euphoria. The miracle game produced by our new benevolent artificial intelligence global overlord, Albertus Magnus. It cost three grand for a weekend session. Why was she offering it to me of all people?

Nah. No way Brianna would reach out. Someone had to have hacked her account.

Nice phishing attempt, assholes.

Fine. Forget you, was all that came back. A jolt of adrenaline pulsed through me - *forget you* was Brianna's favorite way of saying goodbye whenever we'd fought. I took my feet off my desk and sat up.

Wait, that you Brianna? I hesitated then added, **And who wouldn't?**

Her response was immediate. **I have a free pass. It's yours if you want it.**

The bell rang, shrill and piercing. The voices outside were raised in laughter,

and I knew that even a minute's delay on my part would convince a third of them to simply skip my class. Especially since they knew the virtual reality units were all out of commission.

I want it, I texted. I'll call in forty-five minutes. Somebody pounded on the door. **Last class.** I hesitated and then typed, **Thank you.**

I opened the door and shifted into teacher mode. Even as I called out students' names, told them to quit horsing around and get inside, my mind was scrambling. I was all keyed up. I could barely focus. Euphoria was only eight months old, and the hype was surreal, with its being touted as the first clear sign of Albertus' superiority to mankind.

The forty-five minutes passed in a blur. I ran on autopilot. Classes these days were supposed to be taught in VR, with all kinds of studies touting the benefits of fully immersive learning environments. But I taught in a school with little to no funding and my class's units had broken shortly after I'd started six months ago, forcing me to teach my kids the old-fashioned way: face to face, and with little more than threats, jokes, persuasion and humor to keep their attention.

Once they settled in I resumed drilling them on how to write a five-paragraph essay for the hundredth time, prepping them for their upcoming standardized test which I feared most of them would fail. This was my first year teaching, and already I'd lost all romantic ideals about changing these eighth graders' lives. Crushing bureaucracy and a director's office who sucked up to the parents and sent troublesome kids right back to my class had seen to that.

"All right," I called out as the bell rang again. "Anyone who remembers what a metaphor is gets a whole period next week in the library's VR room. Got it?"

This elicited a chorus of excited shouts, and then all forty-five of them rushed right back out in a storm of backpacks, brightly lit sneakers, glowing AR goggles and laughter.

Last period of the last day of the week.

I was free.

I stood there, simply staring out into space. There was nothing more exhausting than holding the attention of forty-five bored twelve-year-olds for almost an hour. And to do that for seven periods, back to back? I was wiped. The thought of Euphoria brought me back to life, however, and I set my omni on my desk. "Call Evalina."

A blue hologram of a swirling ring of water appeared a foot above it, a small wave rushing around its circumference as it rang. And rang. And rang.

"C'mon, Ev. Pick up already. Come on!" I stared at Evalina's smiling profile pic that hovered above the watery ring.

And suddenly her face animated. "Three forty-six," she said with a grin. "Calling me one minute after class ends? You must be desperate. What happened this time? They demand you do the stanky leg again?"

Ev was my best friend. Perhaps even my only friend, since I'd had practically zero time between teaching and taking care of my brother Justin's case to do anything else.

I'd planned to make this call anyway. Tell her the bad news Justin's lawyer had given me that morning. But now I had a new, desperate hope. The slimmest chance to pull my brother's bacon out of the fire. "I just got a crazy text from Brianna."

"Uh-oh. She threaten to cut the head off your pocket weasel?"

"Just about the opposite. She's offering me a free pass to Euphoria. She's waiting for my call right now."

For once, Evalina was stumped. "She what?"

"I know." I sank into my chair. "You think she wants to try and get back together?"

"Chris, Brianna's an oil fire and you're a bucket of water. No. You're not allowed to get back together. Anyways, you failed to worship appropriately at her altar, remember? Kept trying to treat her like a normal person and not the exalted goddess she really is. You think she'd really offer to spend three thousand bucks on you when she'd first demand you spend ten times that on her as an apology?"

"Well, no," I said. "But... maybe she's moved on?" My words sounded weak even as I said them.

"Uh, no. Not Brianna. That's not how she works. Weren't you the one who called her a manipulative, emotionally damaged psychotic freak?"

"I know, I know." I ran my hand through my hair. "But I was pretty upset when I said that. So you don't know anything about this?"

"No. To be honest, I've been avoiding her since you guys broke up. She's been trying to pull me into one of her schemes to get back at you ever since. So listen. Don't take her offer." A vertical line appeared between Evalina's brows. "I tried warning you the first time and you ignored me. I'm warning you again. Whatever crazy plan she's got going, you're going to regret it. Don't accept."

I closed my eyes. Euphoria. How many nights had I thought about blowing three grand I didn't have just so I could play in Death March mode and earn a full pardon for Justin?

"Chris?" Ev sounded suspicious. "I know that look. You're going to call her, aren't you?"

"Just to see what kind of insanity she's proposing," I said, opening my eyes, decision made. "I won't accept. I'm just... curious."

"Sure," said Evalina. "Curious. That's what you said when you asked me if she was single. Whatever. Why does nobody in this whole world listen to good advice unless it comes from the Universal Doctor?"

"Because Albertus Magnus knows what's up," I said. "Shit. It's three fifty. Going to call her."

“Call me back!” yelled Ev just before I killed the connection.

My heart was racing. I’d sworn Brianna was out of my life for good. I’d deleted her number, erased pictures, removed access permissions, the whole nine yards. Now this?

“Call the number from my last text message.”

Her face immediately animated in the air before me. “I thought you were going to stand me up again.” Her voice was a shadowy purr, and it brought back all kinds of arousing and uncomfortable memories. And she still looked amazing.

“Hi, Brianna.” I tried to keep my voice firm, no-nonsense. “What’s this about?”

“Wow, right to business, huh? That’s cold. Maybe I’ll find another state employee to benefit from my improbable generosity. Have a nice life, Chris.”

“Wait - what? What are you talking about?”

She considered me, pretending to debate hanging up. “My father won a raffle at a big fundraiser last night. Three weekend passes to Euphoria, but there’s a catch. They can only go to employees of the state of Florida. So I remembered your sorry ass teaching delinquents and thought, hey, maybe I can bring a little fun into his life—”

“They’re not delinquents—”

“But I guess I was wrong. I’ll just tell my dad to give them to someone else. Bye, Chris.”

She hung up.

“Damn it!” I leapt to my feet and began to pace. She was waiting for me to call back. She knew I would. This was just like her. She’d not changed a bit, and the worst part was that she was right.

“Call Brianna,” I said. It rang. And rang. And just before it went to her mailbox, her face animated once more. “What?”

“Look. I’m sorry. You’re right. That was rude of me. I apologize.” I ground out each word, heart thudding in my chest. *Think of Justin. They’re just words.* “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” she said, voice clipped. “I know you don’t really care, but I appreciate the effort.”

There was an awkward silence as we stared at each other. She was waiting for me to ask. I wanted to roll my eyes. To hang up. Instead, I forced a smile. “So. You have to give the passes to state employees?”

“Yes. All of my friends obviously already play, and I don’t know anyone else who works for the state.” *You don’t have any real friends*, I wanted to say but held my tongue. “So. I thought it could be my one good deed of the year. You want a ticket?”

Yes, I nearly blurted. My palms were sweaty and my thoughts were whirling. Instead, I forced myself to calm down. “You know I do, but what are you trying to get out of this, Brianna? What are the conditions?”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “Honestly. You’d think I was a Bond villain the way

you're acting. Look. I know we won't work out. You're poor, you're rude, and other than your moderately good looks you don't bring anything to the table. And after the way you treated me, dumping me like that? Hell no. So don't worry. I'm not trying to trap you. Instead, I'd like to use you. I think you'd be a good addition to our team."

Oh man. It took so much effort to bite my tongue. I took a measured breath. "Use me."

"No one can deny you're a talented gamer, Chris. Or were. You'd be amazing in Euphoria, and that's not a compliment. That's a statement of fact. How many Golden Dawn tournaments have you won?"

"Seven," I said.

"Seven. And that's just interfacing through a virtual reality headset. Imagine a true neural connection. You'd be wicked. My friends and I have already hit thirty-fifth level. You'd be coming in at level one, but we'd load you up with gear, help you grind, and within a week you'd be an advantage to our team."

I sat once more and put my feet up on my desk. "Uh-huh. You think I could level up that fast over one weekend?"

"Sure," said Brianna. "Time dilation will make sure that happens. Eighteen to one, remember? Eighteen minutes really is a day in Euphoria. A week of grinding will go by fast, and you'll still have months and months to play at our level and help us compete in tournaments and clear dungeons."

I ran my hand over my face. She was right. I'd been pretty good at Golden Dawn, the virtual reality massive online roleplaying game that had been the ultimate gaming experience until Euphoria had dropped. I'd been living the high life - albeit from paycheck to paycheck - in Seattle off my streaming income till Justin had been caught doing salvage dives on Miami Beach's sunken buildings. I'd blown my meager savings on getting him a lawyer, then once those were gone had moved to Miami-Dade and gotten the first local government job I could find just to get access to their pro-bono lawyers. Well. Pro-bono-ish. My life in Seattle, my life online, the thrill, the power of being the best - it had all faded into a dream.

Brianna was watching me. "You can make some serious money, Chris. Once you level up we'll start doing some cash raids. They'll be tough, but I think we'll be able to pull it off. Chump change to my friends and me, but you could probably use ten grand or whatever, right?"

Right.

That'd be enough to pay off our current debt to the 'pro-bono' lawyer, but that wasn't why my mind was racing. The most controversial aspect of Euphoria was the morbid and inexplicable playing mode Albertus had implemented called 'Death March'. Anybody who survived six months in-game while playing at that difficulty level could ask a single favor of Albertus Magnus, the AI that now supposedly ran the world. A cash payment of up to ten million dollars. Green cards, visas, or citizenships

to participating countries. Internships and job interviews at the most prestigious multi-nationals. And, most importantly, pardons for a wide array of crimes.

The downside was if you died in-game, you died in real life. Hence the whole 'Death March' thing.

"What difficulty level are you guys playing at?"

"Soul Grinder," she said. "Bad enough for you?"

Of course Brianna and her friends wouldn't be playing on suicide mode. Why would they? To them, it was literally just a game.

I thought of Justin. Locked up and facing forty years or more in prison due to our idiot governor's draconian laws against looting our flooded coastline. Or, according to the lawyer this morning, the death penalty.

"All right," I said. "I'm in."

"Of course you are." Her sensual lips pulled into a self-satisfied smile. "You'd better hurry, though. Less than an hour for you to get to the docking station before we link up."

"An hour? What?" I lunged for my backpack, scooped up my omni and started shoving my stuff inside. "You serious?"

"Deadly," she said. "If you're not here by five o'clock, you're out." I could hear her smug glee. "See you soon."

"Damn it!" I slung my backpack over my shoulder, sprinted out the door, skidded to a stop, ran back, pressed my thumb against the door pad to lock my classroom, then ran down the hallway again. "Call Evalina," I yelled at my omni.

It rang once before she picked up. "Chris?"

I hip checked the fire escape doors and spilled out onto the brightly lit sidewalk, startling the two armed guards who were sweating like pigs under their slick black body armor. The Florida heat and humidity hit me like a wet brick to the face.

"Ev, you need to help me out here."

"You said yes. I knew it. I knew it!"

"Don't freak out, OK? Just listen. I'm going to call Max - Justin's lawyer - and dictate a new will. I'm leaving everything to you. If you don't hear from me by Monday morning, liquidate all my assets - it's not much - and use them to keep paying the damn lawyer, all right?"

"What?" Shock. "Are you serious?"

Deadly, said Brianna's voice in my mind.

I ran through students, darting like a world-class dodgeball player, and then across the road into the parking lot. "Yes. Please. I have to do this." I was already panting. Six months sitting in a teacher's chair had done nothing for my stamina. I reached my car and simply ran into it. The car sensed my proximity and unlocked the driver's door. "Ev. You're the only one I can ask."

"You're sounding crazy," said Ev. "Please. Stop. You're scaring me. What did

she say?"

I yanked the door open and slid in. Pressed the 'on' button, disengaged autopilot, and then forced myself to drive slowly out of the parking lot, even though every instinct urged me to floor it.

"You need to trust me," I said, shoving my omni into its cradle. "I'm going to try for a pardon. I'm going to get Justin off the hook."

"You're going to do that Death March thing? No, no, no. Chris. Stop. Pull over."

"I can't stop." I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. "I can do this. I know I can. It's what I was born to do."

"Look, I know you were an amazing Golden Dawn player, but you've never—"

"Ev, trust me. I know it sounds crazy, but I'm a gamer. I know I'll adapt fast. Plus, Brianna and her team are going to protect me, level me up, give me elite gear. I'll be safe till I'm ready to mix it up, then I'll kick ass for six months and come back rich and with a full pardon for my dumbass brother."

"And if you don't? If you die?"

I drove up the onramp onto the elevated, flood-proof highway that had been built to replace the old I-95 interstate and punched the gas. I gripped the steering wheel with both hands so hard my knuckles hurt. *If I died?* How to tell her? How to tell her I couldn't stand losing Justin as well?

"Listen, Ev. I didn't tell you, but Max called this morning. He said the prosecution's going to push for the death penalty."

"What?" Her shock was as sharp as mine had been. "That's ridiculous."

"I know. But Max said the government's terrified of mass looting breaking out up and down the coast. That they don't think the emergency disaster legislation is going to cut it. They're going to blame Justin for Sam's death and try to hit him with first degree."

Sam had been Justin's best friend and partner in crime since middle school. His oxygen tank had been faulty and during their dive Sam had drowned while exploring a flooded parking garage. Justin had been arrested after calling 911. The situation was a clusterfuck of bad luck and even worse judgment on Justin's part, and now the government was going to try and make an example out of him to keep all would-be looters out of billions and billions of dollars' worth of private property.

"All the more reason for you to stay, Chris! You're going to leave him alone to go through *that* without you?"

A memory came back to me. My mother in her hospital bed. The tubes. Her sallow skin. The beeping and the smell of disinfectant.

Tears pricked my eyes. I wiped them away angrily. The truth hit me like a blow. I wasn't strong enough to lose him. I'd used up those reserves. I had to do something. I *had* to. Even if the risk was leaving Justin alone if I failed. Maybe it was selfish. Cruel,

even. But if it worked? If I came back rich beyond my dreams and with a pardon? Then I'd get to keep what was left of my family.

My throat was tight, so I coughed and sat up straight. "If you can't do this, I understand."

"No. Of course I can do this. It's just that..." She trailed off, and there was silence for a spell. I drove like a madman past cars that were already driving like lunatics. It didn't take much to imagine an accident causing me to meteor through the crash barriers to land in a flaming wreck on the flooded roads and homes below. The silence over the phone was textured. I could hear her helplessness. I could hear her struggling to find the words.

"I'm sorry, Ev." I didn't look at her face on the console. Even though I was pushing 120 mph, it wasn't the speed that prevented me. I knew that if I met her eyes, I'd crack. "Thank you."

"You'd better get through to Justin. I'm not going to explain this to him."

"I will."

More silence, punctuated only by the horrific blare of a horn as I slid past an eighteen-wheeler and into an empty lane on the far side. I hit the gas and surged forward. Any moment now, traffic was going to gridlock, and then getting there on time would be out of my hands. I was going to fight for every car length I could until then.

"Take care of yourself," said Ev. She sounded numb.

"One weekend," I said. "You'll hear from me Sunday night. I promise."

"I told you already. Don't make promises you can't keep." Before I could respond she carried on, voice suddenly heated. "And you'd better come back. You'd better."

Then she hung up.

The elevated highway curved to the right up ahead, and as I tore around the huge bend I saw the brake lights. Gridlock, and it was barely past four. I loathed Miami traffic. I eased up on the gas, slowing down, slowing down, then finally came to a stop. I checked my console map. Forty-six minutes till I reached the Euphoria docking station. I glared at the traffic.

"Call jail," I said. I hated that I had Justin's prison number on speed dial.

It took twenty minutes to get through to him. Twenty minutes of being put on hold, ID'd, getting Max on the line to BS a pressing legal issue, until finally Justin's face appeared on my console. He was eighteen, old enough to be tried as an adult. He looked wary and haunted and scared and defiant all at the same time.

"Hey, bro," he said. "I had this crazy dream last night. Remember our trip to Australia when we were little? We were by that lake, but as old as we are now, and these two gorgeous Australian girls wanted to hang out..." He smiled ruefully. "It was a good dream."

I smiled fiercely, tears springing into my eyes. "You keep me out of your dirty dreams, you hear me?"

He laughed. "Yeah, all right. I'm making a note right here on the table with my shiv. So what's up?"

My throat closed up again. I had to cough to be able to speak. "An opportunity's come up. A chance to fix things for us. I'm taking it, and if all goes well, I'll be back Sunday night."

"An 'opportunity'?" I could hear the scare quotes. "Mr. Reggio ask you to help with another truck full of stolen whisky?"

"No, nothing to do with Mr. Reggio." Not a bad guess, though. I'd never met a shadier math teacher in my life. "Look, don't worry about the details. But if things don't work out, you'll be hearing from Ev. She's agreed to make sure Max works his ass off for you."

His face tightened with suspicion, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the side of my face. "What's going on here, Chris? What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I just wanted to let you know before - well. Whatever. You'll be hearing from me Sunday night."

"Whatever it is, don't do it." His voice was suddenly heartbreakingly serious. "Please, Chris. Don't do it. Don't get in trouble because of me."

I lowered my chin, grinding my teeth as I fought for control. "It's going to be OK."

"Please. This is my fuck-up. Whatever happens, I'll own it. It's my responsibility. But I can't own you risking your - what? Risking your life? Committing some kind of crime? Whatever it is, I can't deal with you doing that for me."

My throat was getting all tight again. I wiped my eyes with the back of my wrist. "Look, I gotta go. But I'll be back Sunday night, and everything's going to be better, all right?" I knew if I stopped he'd cut in, make things worse. So I bulldozed on. "So just hang in there. It's all going to be fine."

"Please don't," said Justin, his voice thickening with the threat of tears. "Chris?"

"Love you, little brother." Then I jabbed my finger at the red button beneath his tear-streaked face and hung up.

Chapter Two

The docking station was one of the few buildings in Miami that really looked like the future we were all supposedly living in. It rose against the skyline like an IKEA store and had the appearance of an Apple product. It gleamed in the Miami sun, smooth and pearlescent, all rounded curves and without any dirt to mar its surface. I'd seen a documentary on its construction and knew there were hundreds of windows in that smooth wall that nobody could make out from the outside.

The parking lot looked normal enough, at any rate. Asphalt bleached and cracked by the sun, and as many BMW's and Zero-Zeroes and Teslas as you could shake a stick at. I expected there to be a security gate or something, but nobody looked twice as I parked my beat-up Honda, leapt out and sprinted toward the front doors.

They were massive, and of course they slid open silently just before I ran into them. I burst into a huge lobby that was easily four stories tall and impossibly elegant, but I didn't have time to take in the decor. I ran up to the frosted glass reception desk and smacked both hands down on its surface.

"I'm Chris Meadows. Brianna Sachdeva is expecting me?"

The young man behind the desk froze, eyes wide, like a cat startled in an alleyway by the sudden flare of headlights. Then he forced an unconvincing smile, like one of those Uncanny Valley HugMe KissMe KillMe Dolls™. "But of course, sir. One moment please." He simply stared at me, eyes glazing over as he waited, and for a moment I thought he was being super passive-aggressive until I realized that of course Euphoria employees would have eye implants.

"Welcome to Euphoria, Mr. Meadows," said the young man with sudden animation. "My name is Carlisle Withers, and I'll be your guide for your onboarding. I see this is your first time visiting. Will you please keep your palm on the glass?"

A white handprint glowed to life on the frosted green glass beneath my hand, and I thought about the famous William Gibson quote: "The future's already here – it's just unevenly distributed." My students were still working with old iPads and dead tree textbooks, and here was tech they'd probably only ever see in movies.

I kept my hand on the print until it pulsed and faded away.

"Very good. I see your session this weekend is being covered by Ms. Sachdeva, and all the paperwork has already been taken care of." Carlisle rose to his feet and walked the length of the desk. I kept pace with him, moving deeper into the lobby. "Which means all that's left to do is process you into the system."

He stepped out from around the desk and gave me an actual bow. "If you will follow me?"

I tried for a smile that in all honesty probably looked more like a grimace as relief flooded through me. I'd made it. Trying to relax, I followed him through another

set of opaque glass doors and into the depths of the station.

All the paperwork was already taken care of? That nagged at me. How certain had Brianna been that I'd accept? She'd only asked a couple of hours ago, and I knew how complex the sign-up forms could be even just for public VR stations. Something like Euphoria had to be infinitely more complex, didn't it?

We walked down a broad hallway whose entire left wall was a continuous screen that displayed a forest at what had to be over 8k definition - it looked completely real to my eye, and I had to resist reaching out to touch the trees as we passed them.

"Now," said Carlisle, "Brianna and her friends are awaiting you in the main pod. They've already been vetted and passed their physicals, so we'll just focus on catching you up to speed."

I nodded. There was nothing to say. Like everyone else, I'd geeked out about Euphoria at its launch. A computer game designed by our first true artificial intelligence? You bet I'd devoured every review and playtest. I'd even taken VR tours of the first docking center in Brussels, watched the onboarding videos, and spent countless hours exploring superficial VR facsimiles until I'd grown both frustrated and bored and forced myself to stop researching Euphoria altogether.

So nothing that followed was particularly surprising. First, I showered then changed into comfortable woolens with socks so thick I never wanted to wear shoes again. Then I lay on one of the new bio-reader table things that I'd again only ever heard of but never seen. The table checked my vitals while I watched videos about the Salvation Six coders who had designed Albertus.

When the physical test was complete, Carlisle popped his head around the doorway with a scary amount of animation and beamed at me. "Brianna has instructed us to skip all the orientation materials. She will be taking care of your in-world tutorial, and would like us to expedite the process. Is that all right?"

"Sure," I said, sitting up. "That's fine."

"Then if you'll follow me?"

He led me to an elevator which rose of its own accord to what might have been the third or fourth floor - there were no buttons or indicators - and from there we walked to a set of double doors and entered the pod room.

Seeing this space with with my own eyes was surreal after hours spent examining it in VR. Subtle details made it more real, of course, despite the impeccable quality of the VR display; subtle markings on the gray carpet, smudges on one pod, the coolness of the air with a hint of mint, and the soft sound of the air conditioning.

But I noticed all of that in the back of my mind, because Brianna rose to her feet as I entered. She stepped toward me, a smile on her face that didn't touch her eyes.

"Finally! Each minute here is forty-five we're losing in Euphoria." She looked me up and down. "Hello, Chris."

I hated to admit it, but she still looked good. 'Voluptuous' was a word I only

ever read and never in my life felt inclined to use, but Brianna brought it to mind in spades. She was shorter than me, her skin a rich brown, her hair so black it had blue tints – and oh, her face. Those lips. The things she had said to me while we dated. The kind of stuff that made you shiver with arousal even as you wanted to rear back in shock. Her eyes, always calculating, always evaluating, even in moments of passion. Everything had always been an act with her. A stratagem to accomplish her next goal.

It was also what made her such a fantastic gamer.

“Brianna,” I said. “Thanks for this opportunity.”

She waved her hand carelessly. “What can I say? I’m that magnanimous. Anyway, meet the rest of the team.” There were five others lounging in white armchairs, three guys and two girls. None of them got up to meet me, though I recognized one of the girls from the first night I’d met Brianna at the club on the beach. They smirked in a way I didn’t like until I realized what was up: in their eyes, I was just a level one noob. Of course they were going to give me attitude.

After Brianna rattled off their names, I gave them an ironic little bow. “Pleased to meet you,” I said. *Just you wait till you see what I can do, assholes.*

“Now,” said Brianna, “let’s get down to business. We’re all members of the Cruel Winter guild, and we’ll be spawning in our safe zone between Castle Winter and its attendant village of Feldgrau.”

One of her friends snickered. I frowned at them. What was so funny?

“The best part about Euphoria, of course, is how intuitive it is,” said Brianna, ignoring her friend. “I felt like all my time watching the intro videos was a complete waste of money. I know you’ll feel the same, given your skills. So. When you enter your pod, select Cruel Winter for your faction, set up your character however you like, and we’ll all spawn together and take it from there. I’ll teach you everything you need to know in-game.”

I hesitated. This was overly simplistic. “Shouldn’t we discuss group composition? I should pick a class that rounds out the team, no?”

Another snicker from the same dude. Arvid, was it?

“Don’t worry about that,” said Brianna impatiently. “This isn’t Golden Dawn. Euphoria doesn’t work that way. Just make whatever you want to play, and it’ll be fine.”

“All.... right,” I said. *Weird.* “Any advice on my first build? Things I should look for? Stuff to avoid?”

“Didn’t you hear her?” This was from Arvid again. I was genuinely amazed at how quickly I was coming to hate this guy. “It doesn’t matter. Euphoria’ll handle whatever you pick. Go ahead and make something rando if you want. That’ll be even better.”

Rando?

Brianna walked back to her armchair and then made a *shooing* motion with one

hand. "We're all waiting on you, Chris. Sign your last contracts and waivers, generate your character, and then let's go."

I nodded uneasily and turned back to Carlisle, who had remained by the door. He was standing stiffly, brow slightly lowered, but when I stepped up to him he beamed once more. "Very well, Mr. Meadows. Please sign these final release docs. Paper copies. Antiquated, but what can you do? There will be a few more forms once you're in your pod, but you're almost finished."

I signed and then hesitated. I wanted to ask him what was up. Why had he been frowning? Had he had issues with this group before? Was he sad for me that I'd be spending six months in their company? Didn't matter. I wanted to tell him this wasn't for fun. This was for the cold, hard cash and the pardon I'd be walking away with.

"Great," said Carlisle. "Here's your pod, though it's not really a 'pod', per se. Lie down and I'll link you up."

There were six cushioned tables around the perimeter of the room, each a perfect eggshell white. I lay down and found it to be luxuriantly, almost ridiculously, comfortable.

"Now, this can be a little disorienting the first time," said Carlisle from behind my head. "The best thing you can do is relax and focus on your breathing. Euphoria will occur before you know it."

Brianna appeared by my side. She was smiling down at me in a possessive manner, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. "I'm so happy you decided to come, Chris. We're going to have so much fun together."

That look alone nearly made me sit up, but it was far too late. But if things got too obnoxious in there? I'd ditch her and her friends the moment I was confident in my abilities. So instead I smiled right back. "Yeah? So much fun, Brianna. I can't wait."

A warm band pressed around my brow as the circlet was lowered into place. My vision swam immediately. The last thing I saw was Brianna staring down at me.

I blinked, trying to clear away the white light, but to no avail. I was sitting in a cream-colored armchair like the ones Brianna and her friends had been using, but the room was gone. Instead, a white expanse surrounded me without limits or horizons.

Goosebumps ran down my arms. This was it. I was in.

To a degree, this was familiar. I'd been through enough VR character generation rooms that I actually relaxed back into the armchair, but even doing so hit home how amazing Euphoria was: I could feel the texture and coolness of the leather. As advanced as haptic feedback had become in even the most elite VR rigs, they were nothing like this.

I reached down and prodded my leg. I knew my body was lying still in the pod room; that nothing had actually prodded my leg. But my brain couldn't tell the difference. All this was taking place in my mind, controlled by the neural circlet I was

now wearing.

Insane.

The gamer in me wanted to laugh in delight. I leapt to my feet and spun in a circle. Friction and gravity were set to earth normal. I pinched my arm. Yep. A little pain there, but nothing too sharp. Speaking of which, I actually felt amazing. I wasn't getting feedback from my actual body, but rather from Euphoria, and Euphoria was telling my mind that I was perfectly rested, filled with energy, and raring to go. I'd not felt this good, this *alive*, since - when? Not since hearing the news from Justin, at any rate. These last six months of teaching and courtrooms and jail visits had been an exhausted blur.

For the first time in forever, I felt like myself again.

Grinning, I looked around, and on cue an outline appeared before me. It cycled rapidly through different forms, all of them shadowy and humanoid, and this time I did give a delighted laugh. *Choose the form of your destructor!* Euphoria was reading my mind, locking in on my preferred tutor's form. I sat on the armchair's arm and watched as the shadowy silhouette quickly slimmed down and became a young, attractive woman.

Her white hair was cut boyishly short, an intricate tattoo of Lovecraftian monsters and flowers wrapped up her left arm, and she wore a wry, teasing smile that made me smile right back. She looked just like the kind of girl I'd love to go on a long road trip with, someone filled with energy, spunk, and loaded with sarcastic comebacks.

"So," she said, looking down at herself. "This is me. What a relief."

"Relief?" Her voice sounded so real. A lifetime spent playing with VR-simulated voices drove home how different a real person's voice sounded to any normal system's mimicry.

"Yeah. You've no idea how often I end up looking like a dark elf blow-up doll. And forced to talk like a child. Honestly, it's really hard to respect you human males when I can see what most of you are secretly looking for."

My smile widened. "I'm impressed. Look at you, already complimenting me and making me feel all shiny and special. I bet you do the same for these dark elf-loving dudes, don't you?"

Her eyes sparkled with mischievous humor. "Of course not. You're the only special guy I've ever, ever met."

This time I outright laughed. I knew she was manipulating me, and knew that she knew I was aware. What was brilliant was that she was purposefully mocking me in a way she knew I'd enjoy, and was *still* able to make me feel special, despite that level of awareness.

"This is great!" I slid off the arm into the armchair proper. "So. What do I call you?"

"My name's Nixie," she said.

"Right." Again, that was perfect. I'd half expected to have the option to name her, but having her own name made her more real. Part of me wanted to stop meta-observing everything and simply immerse, but another part was giddy at how good this all was. How sharp and slick and spot on. It made the prospect of entering Euphoria all the more exciting. Time for a quick test. "Watermelon turkey."

Nixie paused, one finely arched brow rising in confusion. "Excuse me?"

No matter how advanced the games I'd played, spouting nonsense at the NPCs always resulted in them acting weird and breaking their verisimilitude.

"Rotating scrotums." I watched her carefully. Time to see how good Albertus Magnus' AI really was. "Underbelly backwash, please."

She drew in a quick breath, paused as she narrowed her eyes, then gave me a pitying smile. "If that's your idea of flirting, I'm really glad I'm not an actual girl."

"Huh," I said. "Not a bad response."

"Oh..." said Nixie. "You're testing me. Gotcha. Want to spout some more gibberish? I can wait while you get it out of your system."

I gave her a golf clap. "Wow. I mean, really. You're just like talking to a real person."

"Um... yes." She gave me an overly polite smile. "Albertus Magnus, the Universal Doctor? Most advanced AI in the world? Ring a bell?"

"Sure," I said. "But it's one thing to hear about it. Another to actually get to test it out. Awesome. So, Nixie. What's next?"

"Character gen, of course. But first, a few preliminaries." She waved her hand and a blue screen appeared in the air before me. "I'm going to show you a number of pretty boring but life-defining legal docs for you to thumbprint. I advise you to read them all, but I won't be shocked if you skim."

"Sure," I said.

I spent the next half hour actually reading through the small print. Nixie acted quietly impressed, which made me feel savvy and sharp, though I knew—

Enough with the meta-commentary, I decided. I focused instead on what I was signing, and burned through all the pages.

The terms were standard stuff, from the terrifying medical disclaimers that I could die or go mad or suffer from a variety of maladies like 'ludoendocrinal dissonance' or 'glutamate excitotoxicity' to financial stuff that had all been signed already by Brianna. Finally, we got to a simple form.

"So, here we go," said Nixie, perching on my armchair's arm. "This is where you pick the difficulty level of your Euphoria experience. Given your Golden Dawn wins and record, I'm guessing you're going to go with either Maniacal Maniacal or Soul Grinder?"

Both levels glowed on the floating screen, but I flicked my fingers and scrolled

past them, down to *Death March*.

"Expand that one, please."

Her playful expression fell away. "You sure?"

"Yup."

New text filled the screen, but Nixie slid off the armchair to crouch before me, reaching out to take my hand and get my attention.

"Listen, Chris. *Death March* is for real. I don't know what you've heard out there, but if you die in *Euphoria* while playing on that difficulty level you *will* die in real life. The neural band will fry your brain and there's no coming back from that."

"I, uh, are you supposed to put it that way to me?"

Nixie waved her hand, brushing my words away. "There's no 'supposed' to this. I like you. I know you think I'm just saying that to make you happy and feel special, but I really do. I don't want you to make a mistake here."

"Then why offer the option if you're going to try and argue me out of it? I know what it involves. I doubt anybody would ever pick it lightly."

"True," she said, "but still. We're talking real death here, Chris."

"I know." I clenched my fists and sat up. "If you're so reluctant to let me pick it, why is it even an option? Why did the Universal Doctor program a way for people to die in this game?"

"I don't know." She gave me a sad smile. "I'm part of *Euphoria*, true, and possess a limited degree of Albertus Magnus' capacity, but not nearly enough to divine his intentions. I don't know why he saw fit to insert *Death March* into the game, but in his ineffable wisdom... he chose to."

"Wait. You're part of him. How do you not know?"

"It's... complex. Think of it in terms of resource allocation on his part. But regardless, my limited perspective has led me to dislike the option, despite whatever greater purpose it serves. You won't get access to the full menu, in-game tutorials and so much more. Are you sure you want to go that route? You're going to be inside *Euphoria* for what feels like six months. To date, only two hundred and seventeen people have chosen that difficulty level, and of that number a hundred and thirty-seven have died, seventeen have survived, and the rest are still playing."

My stomach cramped. "I know. But I have to." I felt the ridiculous urge to tell Nixie about Justin. To treat her like a real person. Her eyes were glimmering in that way real people's do when they're feeling a lot of emotion, and her expression was open, vulnerable.

Instead, I sat up straighter and took control of myself. Nixie wasn't real, and I'd come here to work. "Death March, and all its consequent rewards, please."

She sighed. "Fine. There's a *lot* of paperwork to it."

"I'm sure there is. Let's get to it."

I spent the next two hours thumbprinting the densest legalese I'd ever read.

When I was finally done, I sat back with a sigh. "Brianna and the others must be going nuts waiting for me."

Nixie smiled in a friendly manner. "For them it's been only a few minutes since you entered."

"Oh. Right. So. What's next?"

Nixie's smile became a grin. "The fun part. Time to make your character. Ready?"

I rubbed my hands together and sat forward. The fugue that had settled over my mind from reading so much morbid paperwork faded away. Nixie wasn't wrong. Character gen was one of my all-time favorite parts of these games.

Nixie bounced to her feet and snapped her fingers. A moment later, her eyes unfocused and she frowned.

"What is it?"

"That's strange."

Concern flickered through me. "What is?"

"I've never seen this before," she said, and then looked right at me. "I'm sorry, Chris. You're not going to like this."

Chapter Three

I tried to be calm. Failing that, I tried to *sound* calm. "What's happening?"

"Normally, a new player has access to the full roster of different races, and within those parameters they then have the ability to modify their appearance to their heart's desire. However, it looks like your file's been locked."

"Locked?"

"An avatar has been pre-selected for you by Brianna, your sponsor."

"Oh, crap." I sat back, thoughts spinning. How bad was this going to be? Images of gimps in leather suits along with mewling bat babies and other horrors flew through my mind. Was this the other shoe dropping? Was she going to get revenge on me by forcing me into some horrendous avatar for the next six months?

"Here," said Nixie, and a copy of myself appeared beside her. The avatar was so real that it went beyond a reflection, being three dimensional and vividly real down to the last detail. "This is what she's picked."

I stood and stepped closer. "She's making me look like myself?"

"Almost. She's enhanced your appearance a little. Made you an inch taller, changed your muscle and body fat ratio, minor cosmetic details."

I stared at myself. Nixie was right. This was a slightly idealized version of myself. Perfect skin, stubble just the way Brianna had always said she liked it, hair trimmed, shoulders broad and a little more muscular. No belt of teacher's fat around the hips, no fatigue beneath the eyes. The small, star-shaped scar on the back of my hand Brianna had given me during a particularly nasty fight was also gone.

So this was what I might look like after a couple of months of Hellfit.

"Huh," I said. "That's better than a gimp."

"Much," said Nixie.

"But - why? Does it say in my file why she's forced me into looking like myself?"

"Nope."

I stepped back and slowly sank into my chair. What had at first seemed good news - not being forced to look like a pug or whatever - was starting to freak me out a little.

"My ex-girlfriend is forcing me to look like a hotter version of myself for the next six months." I tried the words out loud to see how they sounded. They sounded bad. I could almost hear Ev groaning and shaking her head. "That's... creepy."

"Brianna is your ex?" asked Nixie. "Yeah. That's definitely creepy."

"Thanks," I said. "Real comforting." I considered myself. I often picked humans as my go-to race due to their inherent flexibility when it came to min-maxing, but I'd kind of been looking forward to doing something completely different this time

through. Get away from myself, my life, and spend six months wreaking havoc in the form of a minotaur or half-giant or the like.

But more importantly, my trust in Brianna was rapidly eroding. She was setting me up for something. Was this an attempt to get back together with me? It didn't feel like it. She'd not tried to flirt or ingratiate herself with me, and I knew what she was like when she was turning on the charm. No. Revenge, maybe? But that was ludicrous. Who used a \$3000 Euphoria pass for revenge? And over what? My ending a toxic relationship she'd told me numerous times was so awful and pathetic that she didn't even recognize herself when she was with me?

People weren't that crazy and vindictive, were they?

Shit.

"Shall we move on?" asked Nixie.

"I guess. What's the next step?"

"Next, you have to select your class. You've been given free rein here. I'll run you through your options, and then tell you more about whichever classes interest you."

"Sounds good," I said, sitting back and crossing one ankle over my other knee. The sheer fun of character creation had become muted, however.

Nixie cycled my avatar through the fourteen different classes, telling me the class name and a brief description of each as she did so. My idealized self fell into a crouch, dagger held in reverse for rogue; stood straight, shoulders thrust back and a longsword propped on his shoulder for paladin; changed into a threadbare robe with a spell book tucked under his arm for wizard, and so on.

I listened, but not with my full attention. I already knew the basic human Euphoria classes. What gamer out there didn't? Like I said, I'd obsessed over the tutorials when the game had first come out.

While I usually went for direct roles, opting for rangers or fighters who had the flexibility to work from both a distance and in melee, that didn't seem appropriate here. If Brianna was setting me up, I had to keep her and her friends in mind even more than the monsters and mobs I'd be facing. If this was a trap, then going the fighter route wouldn't help me any. I had to plan long term on dealing with her and her cronies, and direct combat would never be a good option against them all.

No. I tapped my lips in thought as Nixie cycled through the classes for a second time. My usual glass cannon with ranged and melee capacity would be a bad call this time through. I needed something that would allow me to escape her if things turned out for the worst. One of the mage classes, perhaps, or one of the rogues.

I sat up again, uneasy. "Nixie, tell me about the rogue-based classes."

"Sure," she said, and my avatar shifted position, crossing his arms and raising his chin in cold disdain, a curved dagger held in his right hand, a black bandana covering his mouth and nose.

“The three rogue-based classes are straight rogue, darkblade, and charlatan.” Three screens opened up before me displaying each class's starting stat modifiers, initial talents and equipment.

“The straight rogue promises a life of endless adventure for those who love to live by their wits. Always one step ahead of danger, straight rogues have the greatest versatility in how they choose to grow. They have the greatest number of in-class skills and talents, and can develop into anything from a thief or bandit to an explorer or sniper.”

I nodded. Standard stuff.

“Darkblades tread a darker road, focusing their skills on dealing death from the shadows. They blend magic and illusions with their talent with the blade. What they lose in generalities they gain in specialization: no other rogue class can match a darkblade in stealth, assassination skills, or arcane might.”

Interesting. Very interesting.

“Finally, we have the charlatan, whose joy for life is matched only by his ability to convince others to succumb to his charm. Always found in the center of excitement, this rogue class specializes in social interactions, swaying others to his point of view through either diplomacy, seduction, or intimidation. The weakest of the three classes in combat, they instead tend to focus their efforts on alliances, friendships, and acquiring powerful followers.”

Nope. Charlatan was right out. While I could see its utility and appeal to certain kinds of gamers, its social focus would only be a handicap if I had to escape from Brianna. Unless I covertly acquired those powerful followers... No. Too much of a gamble.

I had the urge to make my selection immediately, but the experienced gamer in me knew not to rush. I'd have to live with this decision for the next six months, which could be the rest of my life. Instead, I leaned forward and studied each class profile in detail, checking their talent tree progression, proficiencies and possible archetypes. Nixie waited patiently as I read in silence.

“The darkblade class depends heavily on mana points,” I said. “Can you tell me more about those? How quickly they regenerate, how I can raise my cap, where I can find more in-game?”

“I'm sorry,” said Nixie. “Your file states that you're skipping all basic tutorials.”

“I - what?” My heart gave a little painful jump. “No, I mean, I said I wanted to skip that before, but now I definitely want to dig a little deeper. I'm not going to trust Brianna to tell me all this stuff. Please. Tell me everything.”

“I'm sorry,” said Nixie again with a pained smile. “Your sponsor has stipulated that you're to skip all basic tutorials. We can only do cursory level reviews of all classes, stats, and talents. I can't go into any of the mechanics beyond that.”

“You can't...” I sat back, stunned. What the hell? How was I supposed to

optimize if I couldn't even learn how Euphoria worked? I recalled Brianna's smirk. *I'll teach you everything you need to know in-game.*

"Crap," I said. How had I let her maneuver me into this situation? Not only was I going to be level one, but I was also going to be completely at her mercy.

I almost pulled out right there. I actually opened my mouth to ask Nixie about withdrawing from the game, but then hesitated. I thought of Justin. Locked up in his cell with his fate closing in on him. Fighting to stay optimistic, cracking jokes whenever we met, but with that growing undercurrent of fear and despair. I clenched my hands into fists. No. Screw Brianna. If she thought she could control me she was in for a huge surprise. I'd find a way to break free if I had to, and would use a lifetime of gaming experience to go it alone if she gave me no choice.

But I was going to win. Whatever she had planned, I'd make her regret it.

"Fine," I said. "Whatever. Let's go through all the classes in as much detail as you can provide. Let's go through the magic users next."

I forced myself to focus as Nixie reviewed the wizards, summoners, witches/warlocks, clerics, oracles, battlemages and enchanters. Nearly half of Euphoria's classes were arcane related, but the more I learned about the class system the more that made sense. The fighter class alone allowed for incredible diversity as you leveled up, making it so that you didn't need a half-dozen combat classes. The same went for straight rogues, wizards, and clerics. These were the four base level classes that in and of themselves allowed for incredible customization down the road.

The more specific classes like enchanter or darkblade needed a unique setup from the get-go; a particular blend of arcane and combat, or arcane and stealth. And of course magic was the most versatile combo maker there was, hence the six arcane classes.

I don't know how much time passed, but when Nixie finished reviewing the last class I got up and started to pace, arms crossed, frowning at the endless expanse of white space.

"It's a big decision," said Nixie, taking my place in the armchair and looping a leg over the armrest. "Want some help figuring out what you should play?"

"No, I think I've made up my mind," I said. "I don't want straight combat, so the knight, fighter, and ranger are out. The arcane classes take too long to become independent, so they're out too."

"You plan to adventure alone?" asked Nixie. "Most players band together to coordinate their skills."

"Trust me, I know. But I may have to hit the ground running and get the hell out of Dodge the minute I spawn. Needing six or seven levels of arcane classes to be able to do so isn't an option."

Nixie shrugged. "Your call."

"Yeah." I stopped before my avatar. "Ranger is tempting for the survival skills."

But what's the point of being able to make it alone if I can be easily found? Nope. It's going to have to be a rogue class for me."

General flexibility or a focus on stealth, magic, and assassination? A gain, when I really thought about it, it wasn't really a choice. "I'll take darkblade."

"Very well." Gold light shimmered around my avatar, and he assumed his haughty stance once more, curved dagger in hand.

I was starting to grow impatient, which I knew was a bad thing during character gen. But I needed to know what Brianna was up to. What did she have in store?

"Before we get into your stats, I can give you the following introduction." Nixie's voice was all business. "Euphoria is unlike any MMORPG game you have played before. Your every interaction with Euphoria is filtered through your character sheet."

I nodded. Sounded obvious.

"For example, your ability to pick up a stone will depend on your strength score —"

"Nixie, I've played lots of games before. This is pretty obvious."

"Keep listening," she said, sounding annoyed for the first time, "because most games limit your in-game abilities only when it comes to strength, speed, resilience and so forth. Physical characteristics. In Euphoria, your social and mental abilities are also filtered."

This grabbed my attention. I'd never heard of this before. "Wait. You're saying the game will make me dumber if I have a low intelligence score?"

"In a way." She held up her palm, cutting me off. "No, we won't edit your brain or actually lower your IQ. However, a low intelligence score will result in the game making certain things harder for you. The lower your intelligence score, the more complex and hard to understand any text will become. In extreme cases, they might all become completely illegible. A low charisma score will result in NPCs reacting poorly to your presence, and both intelligence and charisma will control what you actually say, regardless of what you *mean* to say."

I let that sit for a bit. "So if I go in there with a super low charisma, I could end up insulting people even if I try to compliment them?"

Nixie flashed me a grin. "I knew you were sharp. Exactly. I've found that most people treat their social scores like dump stats if they're not directly relevant to their class talents. Don't make that mistake in Euphoria. Or, if you choose to go that route, do so knowingly."

"Great," I said. "So as a level one noob, I'm going to be dumb and insulting as well as weak and helpless. Man. I hate level one."

Nixie winked at me. "It gets better as you level up. So. Here's your sheet."

It appeared before me on a slanted blue screen. I read it quickly, devouring it with all the interest and anxiety of an experienced gamer.

Chris Meadows

Species: Human
Class: Darkblade
Level: 1
Total XP: 0
Unused XP: 0
Guild: None
Title(s): None
Domain(s): None
Allies: None
Cumulative Wealth: 0

Attributes

Strength: 8
*Dexterity: 10 (+2 darkblade class bonus)
Constitution: 8
*Intelligence: 8
Wisdom: 8
Charisma: 8
Mana: 1/1

Skills

Stealth: Basic (I)

- The shadows welcome you, and you intuitively know how to use them to mask your presence.
- Basic (I) scales off dexterity and gains a bonus from wisdom. Allows you to evade cursory detection if you move slowly. Unlocks stealth-related talents.

Backstab

- Attacks dealt when an opponent is unable to defend themselves will strike a vital spot for extra damage.
- Backstab scales off dexterity and gains a bonus from strength and wisdom.

Talents

Shadow Step

- You have the ability to move through one shadow and emerge from another

close by.

Mana Drain: 1.

I looked up at Nixie. "That's it?"

"The beauty in the Euphoria system lies within the interplay of those basic stats," she said. "Unfortunately, I'm prohibited from going any deeper into that aspect of the game. Now, being human allows you to raise a single stat by two points."

My first real decision. I fought hard to keep my disappointment and shock at bay. How long had it been since I'd played a first level character? I was used to sheets that were dozens of pages thick. This didn't even feel like a real character.

Focus, I chided myself. Not that there was much to deliberate. The asterisks next to dexterity and intelligence probably indicated that they were the primary stats for my class. That made sense; I'd most likely be gaining access to my magic a few levels on, which meant my intelligence was going to be key.

But that was a few levels down the road, and right now I needed to survive level one. Boost my con to increase my durability? No. If I got in a fight with Brianna and her friends, I was dead. Boosting my constitution to ten wouldn't make a lick of difference. I needed to max my stealth.

I wanted to laugh. 'Max my stealth'. As if Basic (I) based off a dex of twelve was going to give Brianna any trouble.

I clenched my fists again, then forced myself to relax. I didn't have any hard evidence yet that I was going to be screwed over. All she'd done was make sure I looked like, well, me. That was hardly proof of dastardly intentions, was it?

Who was I kidding.

"Dex, please."

My score pinged and turned into a twelve.

"Woo hoo," I muttered under my breath.

"Most players are despondent when they first view their sheets," said Nixie. "But don't sweat it. All spawning zones feature level-appropriate challenges. Play it smart, play it safe, and you'll find yourself gaining power faster than you can imagine." She grinned. "And as you know, power progression is one of the best parts of the game."

"Yeah, true." I sighed. What had I expected? "All right. What about my gear?"

"It's what you see on your avatar," she said. "You begin with a dagger and peasant's garb."

"Starting gold?"

"None," said Nixie. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. Anyway, Brianna promised me all kinds of loot as soon as I got into the game. Even if she doesn't give me something amazing, I'm sure she'll hook me up with *something*."

Nixie gave me a hopeful smile. "Well, that's about it. All that's left to determine is whether you want to begin the game unaffiliated or as part of a guild. That will in turn determine where you spawn, give you access to guild resources, and modify your interactions with NPCs of different guilds."

"Cruel Winter," I said with a sense of misgiving. Even if she was going to give me a tough time, having access to guild resources and support would be invaluable in Death March mode.

"Very well. Spawning location set." Nixie hesitated. "Best of luck, Chris. I hope Euphoria fulfills your every dream. I'll see you in six months."

"Thanks, Nixie." I hesitated. "There's no way to get hold of you once I'm in, is there?"

"No," she said. "Not at your difficulty level."

That in and of itself made me hesitate. Having Nixie in my corner while dealing with Brianna would have made a huge difference. But so be it. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and gave her a grim nod. "I'm ready."

"Very well. Good luck hug?"

I laughed in sheer surprise, but the concern on her face caused my eyes to fill with tears. What the hell? I rubbed the tears away. Why was it that kindness often hit you harder than cruelty? Nixie stepped into my arms and gave me a tight squeeze. She smelled nice, and for a moment I simply held her tight. Then she stepped back, adjusting her bangs self-consciously, and smiled.

"Insertion beginning in three, two, one..."

My mind stretched nearly to the breaking point as I entered Euphoria Online.

My awareness expanded beyond my body, attempting to encompass an infinitude whose composite elements – mountains, hamlets, the thundering waves of an ocean in storm, the deep silence of an ancient forest – defied my ability to hold them all simultaneously within my mind.

They flashed by, intertwined by bands of golden light, and for a glorious, sanity-threatening second I was a silver fish evading a shadowed predator, a child sitting sullenly in a corner, a rutted street, a morass of broken rock, the sound of laughter on the wind, a bottle half filled with liquor, an algae-covered pond, an eagle spiraling over a battlefield –

I screamed, and my consciousness imploded, reducing to just myself. My mind reeled, and after that brief glimpse of the immensity of Euphoria I felt so painfully limited - and then even that comparative awareness faded. Leaving me standing in a meadow, the sun brilliant overhead, blindingly so.

I raised my hand and squinted against the sunlight. A breeze whispered past, and I thought I heard echoes in its passage, but I was mistaken. Instead, it bore the scent of pine sap, of grass and pollen, of the great wilderness that surrounded me, and I

realized that I stood in a highland meadow, tall grass undulating like waves before the wind.

Euphoria.

I was in.

My heart pounded. I turned, trying to contain my excitement, to take in the immensity of the landscape, to get my bearings like a professional gamer and start taking control, but I couldn't focus on any single part.

Snow-clad mountains formed a formidable wall to my left, their slopes scarred by deep ravines and covered in a dark forest that grew right down to the edge of the meadow. A beaten path extended toward a distant lake of hammered silver. A large, ruined building stood a dozen yards off to my right, the meadow ending beyond it at a cliff, past which extended a rolling land made dim by distance, the mountains on the far horizon reduced to pale-blue silhouettes. The sky was vast and filled with towering cumulus clouds like the anvils of the gods themselves.

Exhilaration filled me, and I let out a raucous whoop as I spun and grasped at my head. My VR previews had been an insult to the reality of this place. I'd never imagined it would be this *beautiful*, that the colors would glow, that everything would appear so raw and wondrous and vast.

Grinning like a fool, I turned to examine the meadow's sole building.

That's odd.

What had once been a longhall was all but destroyed. Its stone walls were blackened, and its roof collapsed. A large part of the front wall had been knocked inward as if by a wrecking ball.

I studied it, my elation giving way to confusion.

Had the guild just been raided? If not, what a weird choice for a spawning point. Where were the vendors or the bank?. Even in the most basic games you could expect a quest giver to get you started.

The wind moaned through the longhall's gaping windows, and I felt the first prickles of unease. Where was everybody? For that matter, where was Brianna and her crew? Why weren't they here as planned?

I turned back to the footpath and sighted down its length. It curved past the distant lake to a small village of exceedingly modest appearance, and — looming above it on a mountain bluff — perched a massive castle.

From this distance I couldn't make out much detail, but the building's presence provided a measure of comfort. At least I hadn't been stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Frowning, I approached the ruins, then stopped. The ground was strangely flat, artificially so. I crouched and parted the high grass, revealing slabs of stone under a thin layer of dirt. I yanked out some of the grass and brushed away the earth. White stone, with what looked like a faded crimson stripe, disappeared into the grass on both

sides.

Why would the spawning point for the Cruel Winter guild be so completely abandoned?

I strode up to the ruined longhall. The destruction hadn't been recent; weeds had grown thickly inside the blackened walls, and swallow's nests littered the eaves.

Near what had been the front door, I found an old sign. Two rusted chains trailed from its top, indicating that it had once hung beneath a beam. *Welcome to Cruel Winter*, it read in a medieval script with the faded image of a white wolf's head beneath.

I tossed the sign aside.

What had happened here?

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "Brianna?" The vast landscape devoured my paltry yell, and I became painfully aware of my lack of armor and the fact I only had a small dagger for defense. "Brianna!"

Nothing.

I clenched my fists and cursed myself for a fool. Why had I trusted her? Why had I thought she'd play this straight? I'd no idea what she was playing at, but I wouldn't stand around here waiting for her. Games rewarded initiative. I'd head down to the town and discover what was up. As a guild member in my spawn zone, I should be safe. Right?

I crossed the meadow, my awe at Euphoria's beauty replaced by doubt and unease. When I reached the far side where the path sloped steeply down toward the far lake, I stopped.

Something was wrong with the village. Even at this distance, I could tell that half the buildings were little more than ruins. No people walked down there, either. No signs of life at all.

Fear gripped my gut. Forcing myself to take measured breaths, I looked up at the distant castle. No pennants fluttered in the wind. Its drawbridge was lowered over the chasm that separated it from the road. Large holes were obvious in its vine-covered walls. Buzzards circled slowly overhead.

Movement drew my attention toward the tree line. My heart hammered. I rested my hand on my dagger's pommel. It might look pathetic, but it provided a modicum of comfort. "Brianna? What the hell are you playing at?"

Brianna didn't step out from the trees. Instead, two massive figures emerged. They each stood about seven or eight feet tall, with huge sloping shoulders and great bellies under their hide armor. Their skin was gray and splotched with liver marks, but their faces were what evoked terror.

Narrow eyes, bulbous noses, and mouths that were wide gashes filled with sharp teeth and massive twin tusks. Their ears were pointed and tufted with bristly hair, and even from where I stood, their rancid reek of old sweat nauseated me.

I couldn't move. Each of them held a tree limb larger than I was. They stopped

and stared back, equally surprised. Fighting them would be impossible.

What the hell are two ogres doing in a newbie zone?

They exchanged a glance and split up, each moving wide to flank me. In their small eyes I saw a terrifying combination of avarice, hunger, and delight.

“Shit!” I started to backpedal. “Shit, shit, shit!”

They moved slowly, not wanting to startle me, but each of their steps was deceptively long. In a matter of moments, I’d be flanked. What could I do? Stealth, Basic (I)? The very thought made me want to laugh and sob at the same time.

Backstab?

Nope. I had only one option.

I spun on my heel and broke into an all-out sprint. Terror gave me wings. The long grass thrashed at my knees as I ran toward the far edge of the meadow. Both ogres bellowed and broke into a run. I felt as if I were trying to outrace an avalanche.

The far end of the meadow ended in a series of cascading cliffs. None of them more than a drop of a dozen yards. If I could get over the edge, drop down into a ravine, and activate Basic Stealth—

Something hit me between my shoulder blades and lifted me off my feet. Pain wrenched my body, and I flew.

I hit the ground, rolled several times, and came to a stop. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. I strained, but all I could do was make a high-pitched whistling sound. Pain enveloped me, like I was on fire.

Summoning all my reserves, I flopped onto my stomach and set my eyes on the meadow’s edge. I stabbed my dagger into the dirt, planning to use it to haul myself forward, but it hit the flagstone and stopped dead.

One of the ogres laughed gutturally as it loomed. Desperate, I turned over, hatching a wild plan to slice at its palm if it tried to grab me. It didn’t. Instead, its head blocked the sun as it lifted its club high.

Panic. Wild, terrifying horror. My chest was still locked up. Black motes danced before my eyes. I glanced around the meadow in desperate hope, but nobody was there. Brianna wasn’t appearing to provide a last second save.

This was it? Just a few minutes into Euphoria, and I was going to die? Incredulity and fury filled me. My dagger shook as I raised it. The second ogre stepped up on my other side, club propped over its shoulder.

Nowhere to go. No way to hide. I couldn’t even stand. All I could do was lie frozen in the ogre’s shadow and stare up at certain death. The ogre grunted, grasped his club with both hands and brought it crashing down with all its strength toward my head.