

Chapter 2

IN PRAISE OF BEAUTY

Dead again.

Erik sighed aloud and rubbed his ear in exasperation, anticipating the despair in his mum's voice when she found out. Struggling to find a way to challenge Central Allocations, Erik was taking risks in Epic like never before. He was quite prepared to die in pursuit of the revenge and information he needed. But his mother would not understand. Her one hope was that Erik would escape reallocation by doing well in the annual graduation tournament. From that perspective each death was a disaster, wiping out any wealth and equipment Erik's character had obtained. If he was not careful, he would be entering the tournament practically naked, an easy victim to any ten-year-old who had got as far as obtaining a rusty dagger.

Just as Erik reached up to unclip from Epic, the thought struck him that he should at least prepare a new persona. And that was a way to postpone telling his parents the bad news.

gender: female

The selection had been made almost without thought and Erik surprised himself. It was the first time he had ever chosen a woman. Usually people stuck to their own gender; indeed they generally tried

EPIC

to match the character as much as possible to their own figure, possibly because many marriages eventually came about from meetings within the game. In any case, the impulse pleased him. Perhaps he would be luckier as a woman.

He flicked through the enormous database of women and picked a figure. He settled for one that was small, pale-skinned with red hair, green eyes and a few freckles. In build, his character conformed to him, although Erik, like his mother, had dark hair and brown eyes. Then, perversely, he allotted all his start-up points to beauty.

Serious gamers, and the whole world consisted of serious gamers, never wasted a point on beauty that could be spent on more practical attributes, or combat skills, craft skills, weapons, magic items and spells. As a result, Epic's population of players consisted entirely of dull, grey-looking humanoids.

His friends were in for a shock; it would be impossible to explain his choices to them, as there was no rational argument in favour of throwing away every practical advantage in favour of beauty. Perhaps he could just say the creation of an attractive female character was a whim, because he knew she was not long for the world. That would be partly true, but at the same time Erik felt that she was a genuine reflection of the mood that he was in, a mood of nonconformity, of wanting to defy the usual conventions of the game.

Looked at from every angle, she was an impressive creation. She was stunning. Lacking any armour, she stood in tunic and trousers, looking lithe and confident; you could feel the glow of energy from within her.

#smile

She grinned cheekily at Erik and his heart skipped; the vividness of the facial animation was lifelike. A smile command issued to any of his previous characters would have seen the grey polygons of their

in praise of beauty

head shuffle in a gesture indistinguishable from a snarl. He chuckled aloud, the cloud of his recent death lifting. This was fun. She might not last a week – especially given his plan – but he already felt a fondness towards his new alter ego. She would stand out and be the cause of a lot of questioning. She looked more like an NPC – the computer-generated Non-Player Characters – than a player's character.

#wave farewell

She waved goodbye.

Unclipping his headset and gloves from the computer, Erik stood up and stretched. He rubbed his ear again where it was sore from supporting the device for four hours – four precious hours given to him so that he could start catching up with the other Epic characters of his age group.

Dusk had stolen over the land while he had been immersed in Epic. His parents and the neighbours would be in from the fields. They were probably cleaning their iron tools carefully against rust, or preparing their evening meals. A flickering light from the corridor showed that a fire had been lit downstairs. Time to face the music. Erik moved slowly and quietly down the bare wooden staircase.

'Damnation!' it was Erik's mum from the kitchen.

'What is it, Mum?' Erik walked into the room.

'Oh, Erik, I didn't know you were there,' she sighed. 'The stove is not working properly. There is no hot water at all.'

She looked tired, but then her face brightened hopefully. 'Did you make progress today?'

'Well, yes and no.' Hating to disappoint her, Erik moved to the table and took a seat, looking at the straw placemat.

'Yes and no?'

'I died. But I learned ...'

'Oh, no. Not again. Oh, Erik, why can't you get on in the world?'

EPIC

The graduation tournament will come soon and you won't have a chance.' She stopped herself abruptly. They both knew the speech. She sat at the table and looked at him until tears started to form in her eyes. Unable to look at her, Erik stared at his hands, deeply unhappy. He understood her perfectly, but stood by his new, dissenting approach to the game.

'Erik, listen to me for your own sake. Dad and I will be reallocated somewhere soon, but you still have a chance to win some choice over your future. I just don't understand why you are throwing it aside.'

Erik did not respond, not wishing to upset his mum further, but not yet ready to accept her perspective.

'Let's see what your dad has to say,' Freya got up and opened the door onto the yard. 'Harald, can you come in?' she called.

'Dinner already?' Erik's dad brought an armful of logs with him from the woodshed. He smiled at Erik but quickly caught the mood, 'What's the matter?'

'Erik died again.'

'Just a moment.'

They stayed silent while Harald took the logs through. Erik's stomach tightened with anxiety. His dad came back, brushing the chips from his jumper.

'What got you, son?' Harald's voice was non-committal.

'The Red Dragon again.' Erik was reluctant to admit this; it sounded like he was stupid. It was hard to explain.

'Again? That's how many. Three?' Harald sat down opposite him.

'Four.'

Harald nodded slowly. 'How many more before you give up on it?'

'Dunno,' Erik said curtly. 'Look. I'm not giving up on it until I'm convinced that it's impossible. But I have my reasons. It can be done.'

in praise of beauty

'But if that is true, why has no one else killed Inry'aat, the Red Dragon?' His mum was standing beside the table, arms folded.

'Because they've been too busy fighting to see what I saw.'

'Which was?' asked Harald.

Erik glanced up from the mat he was toying with. A note of genuine interest had replaced parental severity in his dad's voice.

'The attack pattern of the dragon,' Erik hurried on. 'See, it doesn't charge for the nearest opponent but the one who is doing the most damage.'

Harald nodded. 'Intelligent creatures usually do that.'

'Yes. But, it turns mid-charge, if it decides a new person is the greater threat.'

'Go on.'

'The timing would have to be precise, and the amount of damage would have to be consistent. But if a group of three or four were in the right places, you could get it to keep on re-targeting without actually reaching anyone.'

Harald shook his head. 'I understand what you are saying. But Epic is too well designed. They would never leave such a loophole on a dragon. Wishful thinking, son.'

'If I showed you, you might believe me.'

His mum banged a cup angrily on the table. 'That's not fair, Erik. You know your dad can't enter Epic.'

'You getting at me again, son?' Harald sighed, but he did not seem angry. He reached over and patted Erik's hand. 'Listen. You are a great player. You have been since you first put on a headset. Your reflexes are excellent and you understand the tricks and games that the world throws at you. But you are so far behind now. Look at Bjorn ...'

Erik interrupted his dad with a snort of derision.

EPIC

Harald scowled. 'Bjorn is very solid. Every group needs someone like him. Hard working. Slow gains, but safe ones. And now a good strong character. The best in the school, perhaps.'

'In a tiny district agricultural school, perhaps. But he is nothing compared to the Mikelgard players. And that means we will never get anything from Central Allocations Bjorn's way. I mean, look, we are going to be reallocated. How can we avoid it? We have to aim high.'

'Well. Erik has a point. When was the last dragon killed?' Harald glanced at his son, then smiled unexpectedly; they both knew the answer.

'Thirty years ago, a group from Mikelgard University killed M'nán Sorth – the Black Dragon of Snowpeak Mountains.'

'And where are they now? Mostly employed by Central Allocations, I shouldn't wonder,' Harald answered his own question.

Clearly exasperated with the turn in the conversation, Erik's mum got up. Soon drawers of cutlery were slamming.

Harald looked at Erik with a steady, blue-eyed gaze that seemed to be taking his measure. He whispered, 'Listen well, Erik. Your mum is ill. She cannot sleep at night.' Then his dad spoke loud enough that Freya could hear too. 'Seriously though, Erik. If you clip up every night after work, you might still get somewhere in time for the graduation competition.'

'We could even give him more time during the day,' added Freya, turning to face the table. 'There's no point even trying to meet our targets now.'

'True,' agreed Harald. 'So how about it, son? No more deaths. No more dragon.'

'Very well.' Erik's heart sank at the thought of the hours and hours of boring accumulation ahead of him, so that he could acquire

in praise of beauty

enough copper bits for his character to have even the minimum of basic equipment.

'Promise?' Freya's eyes narrowed, detecting the reluctance in Erik's voice.

'Promise,' he answered.