



GAME OF LIFE
AN INTRODUCTION

ESCAPE
FROM THE
PAST



ANNETTE OPPENLANDER

Escape from the Past

Game of Life ...An Introduction

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Other Books by the Author

Escape from the Past: The Duke's Wrath (Book 1)

Escape from the Past: The Kid (Book 2)

Escape from the Past: At Witches' End (Book 3)

A Different Truth

First published by Oppenlander Enterprises LLC, 2016

www.annetteoppenlander.com

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ISBN: 978-0-9977800-2-4

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Cover Design: vikncharlie

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Escape from the Past: Game of Life

The landscape turned blurry, the pressure behind my eyeballs building, as the bus wound through fields and patches of woods toward Heiligenstadt. This had to be the shittiest day of my life. Well, maybe the second shittiest day, but I'll get to that.

In fifteen minutes I'd set foot into my new school. Don't get me wrong. I've been the new kid in plenty of schools, thanks to Dad being in the Army. But this was an entirely different story. Because I was no longer in familiar territory...if you can call the U.S. familiar. Thanks, again to Dad, we'd moved to Germany and I was about to test my less than rudimentary German skills.

As I entered the schoolyard, sweat trickled down my armpits, a disgusting stickiness that glued my T-shirt to my ribs. Gross. Who'd want to meet this stinky new kid? Why hadn't I brought deodorant with me?

"Hey, slow down," some guy with Barbie-blond hair yelled, his mouth an arrogant sneer. Unsure if he'd addressed me or one of the dozens of mulling teens, I nodded, trying to look cool... and failing.

I heard laughing and whistling. Apparently, the guy wasn't finished because next thing I knew his face was two inches from mine.

The guy was a stud. I mean perfect white teeth, thick hair with a natural lock across his oh so perfect forehead and absolutely clear skin. Disgusting!

Envy swept through me, but was quickly overtaken by an intense dislike.

"You in a hurry to get in there?" Mr. Perfect asked.

"No...*nein*," I said, trying to look cool. How does one look cool? A certain swagger in the walk, shoulders relaxed, a slight smirk...well, none of that was a possibility. I probably looked green and I surely wasn't smiling.

"Another lousy immigrant." Laughter broke out among the Mr. Perfect's friends. "I think we've got too many already."

I'm German-American you dog-brain, I wanted to say, but all I could do was stare. At the model of a boy and his admirers.

"Can't speak German, obviously?" he continued, waving a palm in front of his face to indicate I wasn't quite right in the head. His friends snickered.

I could've told him he hadn't really asked a question, but merely stated a fact he obviously hadn't checked because I owned two passports, so was technically not an immigrant at all. With

all his looks his brain was probably pea-sized. But ever since my father left us, I'd lost my will to challenge. It was as if the air had been let out of the football and all that was left was some soft, yielding shell.

Shaking my head I turned and marched rigidly into the school, wishing the doors would swallow me whole.

"May I help you?" The woman behind the desk in the director's office looked up, her expression annoyed. Obviously, I'd interrupted her breakfast, a ham and cheese covered roll she was still chewing.

"I'm Max Anderson," I said in horrible German. No other words came to mind even though my mother, who's German, had taught me plenty.

"Ah, yes." The woman rifled through a stack of papers. "Wait here."

Where else would I go?

She straightened, brushing crumbs off her too tight skirt and disappeared in the next room.

A wave of odors filtered in from the corridor, a smell like all school corridors of wax, a thousand brands of hair spray and lip balm and something darker: stress-induced sweat.

"Welcome to Gymnasium Heiligenstadt." The man's voice was high and grating, his bluish eyes large and glistening behind thick glasses.

"*Danke*," I managed.

"I'm *Herr Direktor Lauterjung*," the man said. "Looks like you'll join ninth grade. Your mother was sure you'd catch up with German quickly."

I nodded. Oh, mom was full of fantastical notions about my language skills. She'd offered to drive me, but I'd rather have my wisdom teeth pulled without anesthesia before I'd show up with her in tow like I were in kindergarten.

"You coming?" Lauterjung held open the door. How long he'd been standing there was anybody's guess. I grabbed my backpack and followed him into the hall.

"We have about six-hundred kids, grades five through twelve," he said. "There are two tenth-grade classes, one with emphasis in languages, one in sciences." He threw me a sideward glance. "You picked sciences."

I nodded. I sure wasn't going to pick languages. I'd limped through a couple of years of Spanish in the States which isn't half as rigorous as studying languages in Germany. My heart hammered louder with every step.

"This is your classroom." Lauterjung opened the door.

The rest of the morning was a whirlwind of smiling or squinting eyes appraising me, my half-hearted attempt at German small talk, and relief when the last bell sounded. I'd understood most of the material, but my active vocab was deeply buried inside my brain.

"Max, wait up."

I stopped. At first I thought it was another taunt, but then something registered that made me swivel around like a dervish.

That voice was as surely American as I was male.

A kid about my age headed my way. He waved again, his greenish eyes full of the relaxed friendliness I'd been craving earlier. With all the confusion of this morning I had no idea if he'd been in my class.

"I'm Jimmy Stuler," he said, slightly breathless. "I wanted to catch you earlier during break, but I had to deliver a report. He nodded toward Mr. Perfect, making a face, the kind that's

combines an eye roll with a frown. I knew it well. "I saw you met our head jerk, Michel Hofmann."

This time my smile came easy. "You're American." All of a sudden I was filled with a hundred questions.

He nodded and grinned back. "Yeah, from San Francisco. I've been here a couple of years. My father runs a gaming company and dragged us to Germany."

My ears perked up. "As in computer gaming?" If there's one thing I love, and I mean LOVE, it's gaming. Computer games, video, phone, you name it, I've probably done it.

"Yep." Jimmy grabbed my arm. "Let's hurry. The bus will be here any sec. I'll fill you in on the way home."

I grinned. Life had a way of throwing punches. But then...it had a way of bringing joy when you least expected it.

A new routine settled in quickly. Mornings I rode the bus with Jimmy. We spent afternoons at his place, a ginormous mansion in the same village, Bornhagen. Even if you visited Germany a thousand times you'd never make your way here because Bornhagen is in the middle of nowhere right on the border of Hesse and Thuringia.

I did my best to stay away from Michel and his admirers, lurking in front of the school gates before and after class. I'd feel this heat rise from the pit of my stomach up to my neck, a helpless anger at my life and the jerks who made it worse.

Classes were the same old boring collection of math, English (my only guaranteed A), sports, geography, history and physics I'd come to loathe in the U.S. and at times I wondered if life could get any worse. Ha. I had no idea.

I kept my mouth shut most of the time, but my math teacher, Herr Heinrich, had the annoying habit of calling on me. He made me sit in the first row and hovered above. I knew the material since I'd attended AP classes, but the words, a mix of English and German gibberish kept sticking in my throat.

Just say something my mind urged, yet my tongue kept refusing and so I felt like an idiot.

"I wish Heinrich wouldn't call me out all the time." I leaned back in Jimmy's gamer chair he'd generously offered, eyes glued to a huge screen where we were playing *Minecraft*.

"He's actually pretty nice, probably thinks he's helping."

I shook my head, my eyes following the play on the monitor. It was probably not the best idea to speak English every chance I got, but I couldn't help loving it. Every afternoon I headed straight to Jimmy's house, past the handful of villas and the ancient *Klausenhof Inn*, a restaurant and hotel, tourists loved for its medieval flair. Bornhagen had less than 350 citizens and I still resented my mother picking this spot for our home.

Actually, it was all we could afford after Dad decided to leave us the moment we stepped foot on German soil.

In hindsight it seems he planned it all. Though he insisted the thought of starting a life without us occurred to him *after* we moved from the U.S.

Fat chance! We'd planned to live in Frankfurt near his base, but instead my mother chose to settle us near her new job and her sister. Now we live in an old spider-infested cottage. The only thing it has going for it is a little garden with some fruit trees and a patio that would make for a decent party spot...if I ever partied.

"Come on," I said, urging my fingers to move faster. Jimmy was two levels ahead and had just scored a bunch of gold. "What sort of games does your father make?"

“Not sure, exactly. It’s top secret. He’s been working on it for years.”

I punched pause. “You must know something.”

Jimmy gave me a look that reminded me of pain and uncertainty, likely the same face I make when asked about my father. “He’s hardly home and when he is, he never talks about stuff.”

At least he does come home. But I kept quiet because it was clear as spring water that Jimmy and his dad had issues.

“All I know is that it has to do with history.”

“You kidding me?”

“Yeah, I know.” Jimmy stepped to the mini fridge where he kept cokes and offered me one. Jimmy’s place felt as if I’d stepped into some first-class hotel with chrome and glass and marble. “Supposedly it’s different. Something outrageous and cool.”

“You think he’d let us try it out?” I sure could use a little distraction.

Jimmy shrugged. By the way he pressed his lips together it was obvious he’d had the same thought.

“How is our immigrant today?” Michel, chest puffed, strutted my way. School was out, another day survived, and we were heading toward the bus. Of course, Michel and his friends drove cars because they were Seniors, but he obviously felt the need to *brighten* my day first. In Germany you couldn’t legally drive until you were eighteen. In my former life I’d be driving now.

“His name is Max,” Jimmy said.

For some reason, Michel ignored Jimmy and kept coming. He looked tired today, a filmy gray veil across his brown eyes as if he hadn’t slept much.

“Why don’t you tell me what you want?” I asked.

“Go home,” Michel said. “Back to crazy America.”

I’d love to.

At home I pleaded my case almost daily, but my mom was adamant. “I’ve got a good job now and we’re making a new start. You’ll get used to it.”

“I won’t,” I’d yell. “Ever.” But my mother was obviously not interested in my wellbeing, only in getting herself settled into her native country.

“Pay attention when I talk to you.” Michel’s perfect face scrunched into a frown.

“What?” I blurted. Lately, I zoned out a lot. Mostly in class, but obviously it had happened again. It was as if someone pulled a black cloak over my head, my mind going inward.

“I *said* I want you to stay out of my way. Stop polluting our space with your presence.”

For a moment I considered popping Michel into his perfect nose. Now, that would’ve been suicide. Michel was several inches taller and had thighs and biceps like a football player.

“Come on, let’s go.” Jimmy tugged at my arm. I hung my head and followed my only friend, wondering why Michel left him alone and if it had anything to do with Jimmy’s father being rich like Michel’s.

As we lined up at the bus stop cars honked, Michel driving past and throwing me a nasty grin and showing a middle finger as if to say... You’re so fucked. I look forward to making your life miserable.

“Just 311 days until school is out.” I swallowed, but the bitter taste in my mouth remained. Soon Michel would use me as a punching bag.

Jimmy poked me in the arm. “Ignore him. He’ll get tired of it.”

Easy for you to say. But I kept my mouth shut, shifting my attention to the highlight of my day, three hours of uninterrupted gaming with Jimmy.

"I wonder if I could get a job with your dad," I said once we settled on the bus. The idea of doing something related to computer games had been growing in my head for months. I knew I'd eventually study informatics or computer sciences, but how could you pass up the fact that your best friend's father owned a gaming company?

I felt Jimmy's gaze on my temple.

"Don't think he talks to students. Besides, his company is in Kassel. Too far."

"Have you ever been to visit?"

"A couple of times."

"And?"

Jimmy grabbed his pack as the bus came to a stop. "Nothing, it's just a big building with lots of people working."

"Oh, come on, you love gaming. How can you not be interested?"

"Father doesn't want me involved."

I almost grabbed his shoulder to see his face, but then we were lining up to leave the bus.

"He surely knows you...we... play stuff every day."

"I guess."

As we entered the driveway to Jimmy's mansion where the black domes of several cameras stared from fences, garages and entry doors I couldn't help but wonder if there were more inside.

Something told me that Dr. Stuler knew a lot more about his son's activities than Jimmy realized.

"I don't like you spending every free minute with that American boy." My mom stood in the door to my room, arms folded across her chest, her eyes tired yet determined. "I'm happy you met a friend, but you need to practice German."

"I do all morning in school and with you."

"You know what I mean."

I didn't answer and returned my gaze to my history book. Stupid boring battles and treaties. Who could keep track of it? Who cared? Why would Jimmy's dad create some yawn-inducing history game?

"Dinner is in ten minutes."

I kept staring at my book, the old anger clogging my throat. A year ago we'd been happily living in the U.S. Then my father had announced his promotion and our move to Germany.

My mother had been super excited because her entire family lives in Germany and she'd finally be back in her home country. Nobody asked what I wanted though I admit at the time I'd been excited. Except our plan fizzled like stale lemonade.

The only cool thing this place had to offer was the old ruin of Castle Hanstein, a medieval burg high above the village. Fused to the rock more than six hundred years ago, it must've been some amazing place. Now people used the restored knight's hall for weddings and anniversaries. That and the Klausenhof were the only cool things around.

"I thought we left all that behind," my mom mumbled after dinner, folding the paper in front of her. We sat in our beach towel sized living room, me trying to pass the necessary half hour before I could sneak off to my room to play the new edition of *World of Warcraft*.

Don't get me wrong. I love my mom. But sitting around like that drives me crazy. Sunday nights are the worst because they remind me how we used to hang out together as a family. Dad

and I playing a game or watching TV. It feels so wrong like this. All I want to do now is disappear and be left alone.

“What?”

“A young man from Heiligenstadt is missing.” My mom retrieved the article. “Says here, they don’t know what happened. He just vanished.”

“Maybe he ran away.” The thought had been on my mind though I hadn’t the faintest idea where I’d go.

“They say there’s no evidence. He didn’t even pack any clothes, just disappeared. Didn’t take his phone... What kid these days does anything without his phone?”

I shrugged. What did it matter? Some guy had had enough and walked out. I knew dozens of kids who hated their lives. Heck, I was one of them.

“Did you hear?” Jimmy said as we made our way through the mass of students in front of the school the next morning.

“What?” My mind was on the Physics test and the certainty I’d fail.

“Michel is missing.”

“Michel who?”

To my surprise Jimmy shot me a look. “They say he went missing from his room.”

My mom’s comment from last night came back to me. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. When?”

“Saturday afternoon. Was in yesterday’s paper. His parents say last time they saw him, he was on the computer playing a game.”

“Half of the school plays games.”

“Where would you go if you wanted to run away?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Back to the States.”

“To do what?”

I shrugged again. I knew there were holes in my plan, but it was a way to dream of escape.

“And you wouldn’t take your phone?”

“Of course I’d take my phone.”

“Something is fishy.”

“Maybe he has enemies or he had an accident.” Maybe I wasn’t the only one hating Michel. Maybe he’d bullied the wrong guy.

Jimmy’s eyes were grave. “Possible.”

Obviously we weren’t the only ones thinking there was foul play because next thing we knew several policemen marched through the crowd and disappeared inside the school. To be honest, I didn’t really care. In fact I was relieved and didn’t pay much attention because all of a sudden I no longer dreaded the end of school.

Michel’s friends were too busy mourning his absence and none of them possessed his malice. While the school went on major alert, I finally felt ready to settle in.

Posters of a smiling Michel appeared around town, on street lanterns and online. The local TV channel ran specials, the paper printed childhood stories and appeals by Michel’s parents. It was widely believed somebody had nabbed Michel, because his parents were rich. Even richer than Jimmy’s family with old money and a family tree dating to the Middle Ages.

And so the police and Michel's parents waited to be contacted. They set up a hotline and daily speculations appeared in the paper. The Russian or Polish mafia, some disgruntled former employee of Michel's parents' empire, a madman...the possibilities were endless.

And yet...

A week went by, then another and nobody claimed responsibility. Nobody wanted money. Michel remained gone.

As school slowly returned to normal, I breathed easier. Afternoons were fun and while my grades weren't perfect, they weren't as bad as I'd feared. Except for German where I teetered on a D-.

The question why Michel would've run off somewhere when he clearly had everything he ever wanted at home kept nagging in the back of my mind.

"Is it normal that people disappear around here?" I asked my mom that night.

"Not really." She looked up from her knitting. The woman never sat still. "These are small communities and people live quiet lives. People don't run away and there's little crime. That's why I like it here...for us."

"Obviously Michel made an exception because he's still positively missing."

"What're they saying in school?"

"Nothing much. The police have interviewed all his friends and teachers. Nobody knows anything. His friends said last month he drove to Kassel a couple of times, but that's nothing outrageous."

"Probably went shopping. I hear his parents are wealthy."

"Very."

My mom sighed. "I guess we're lucky then." I followed her glance around our modest living room, the couch and matching chair, and not much else.

Yeah, I wanted to say, who gives a damn about a poor kid. But I said nothing, my heart shriveled in the memory of our once intact family.

I cleared my throat. "You hear from dad?" As soon as it was out, I regretted it. If there was one way to make us even more miserable than usual, it's talking about dad. But my mom didn't notice.

"Not in a while. I think he's on a training mission in southern Europe."

I jumped up and mumbled, "I guess at least one of us is happy."

"What?"

"Nothing. I've got to study."

I usually don't read the paper, but that morning something caught my eye. It was Saturday and while mom was working a short shift at the bank, I'd slept in and was annihilating four fresh-baked rolls with butter and assorted cold cuts, the last topped with Nutella, the best hazelnut chocolate spread in the world.

"Industrialist Heinrich Hofmann, father of Michel Hofmann who went missing a month ago, has announced his withdrawal from the board of Histech Industries, a gaming company located in Kassel and the brain child of Dr. James Stuler. Hofmann declined to comment whether this step would endanger his private investment in Histech Industries. A replacement has not been announced."

So, Hofmann was in business with Stuler. I wondered if Jimmy knew and what had happened to make Hofmann leave Histech's board.

“Did you ever meet Michel or his parents here?” I asked as soon as I stepped foot in Jimmy’s room that afternoon.

Jimmy looked up from a comic book, his face drawn into a frown. “The old Hofmann has been here. A few months ago he brought Michel along, but as you know I can’t stand the guy and asked Father not to invite him anymore.

“Once they had a dinner party. I wasn’t invited.” Jimmy opened his mouth as if to say more. Instead he jumped up and looked out the window into their park-like garden.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Right. You look like you saw a ghost.”

Jimmy turned, his eyes shiny with uncertainty. “Last week, one of dad’s employees disappeared. You don’t suppose these events are related?”

“You mean the same situation? Just gone?”

Jimmy nodded.

“Did you know the guy?”

“Never met him. He worked in one of the labs.”

Thoughts of Jack the Ripper swept through me. “We may have a serial killer on our hands.”

I had no idea how wrong I was. Hindsight I wonder why we never dug deeper. In my gut I knew something was amiss and I should’ve been more upset.

Maybe I would’ve been more careful then...

The End

If you enjoyed this introduction and are curious what happens to Max and Jimmy, you may want to take a look at the *Escape from the Past* trilogy, chock-full with adventure, time-travel and intriguing plots. Follow in Max Anderson’s footsteps as he braves unthinkable obstacles, falls in love and risks his life to help others.

Midwest Book Review

“Escape from the Past: The Duke’s Wrath” is a science fiction time travel action/adventure novel that will grip the reader’s total attention from beginning to end. Very highly recommended for school and community library YA fiction collections.

Historical Novel Society

Geared to a young adult audience, Escape from the Past is an entertaining and fast-paced read that guarantees to thrill any young reader’s/gamer’s wish to be a hero in a faraway time.

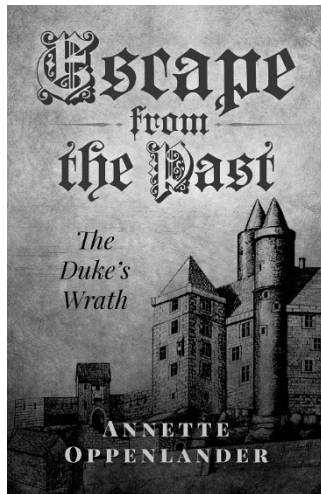
“Fast-paced compelling YA debut” —Giselle Green, #1 Bestselling Author of *A Sister’s Gift*

“A wonderfully crafted romp to the time of lords, ladies, and knights. Cool gaming experience is an understatement as young Max finds himself in the 1400s as he’s beta testing a new video game. History is made, intrigue abounds, and the bonds of friendship are forged as a modern-day boy bravely navigates the past. Are you Max enough to play the game?” —Lee Ann Ward, Author and Former Senior Editor of Champagne Books

“Escape from the Past is chock-full of the tiny details that make a story feel realistic and immersive, from the leather ribbons used to fasten shoes to the slimy gruel that formed the bulk of the peasants’ diet. I particularly enjoyed how Oppenlander shows the dramatic contrast between the way peasants and the aristocrats lived in the middle ages. ...those who love historical fiction or medieval fantasy will certainly enjoy Escape from the Past.” —Mike Mullin, Author of the Ashfall Trilogy, full review at Mikemullin.com

Available online and your favorite bookstore.

More information about the author, background information about books, teaching aids and school visits is available at www.annetteoppenlander.com.



Sneak Preview

Escape from the Past: The Duke's Wrath (Book one)

CHAPTER 1

It was exactly 9:32 p.m. when I settled into my favorite chair, the one with the ripped Mexican blanket that serves as a cushion. Little did I know I'd be gone within the hour. I mean gone as in disappeared.

Powering up my high-speed Cyber Xtreme and 32-inch monitor, a guilt gift from my dad and the only valuable thing I own, I stared at the blank disc in my hand. According to my friend, Jimmy, it contained some secret new game his father had invented. Jimmy said his dad thought the game was faulty and I wondered why his dad would have given it to him.

Most people consider Jimmy the lucky one. He lives in a mansion because his father runs some ginormous tech company. My mom and me share space with a thousand spiders in a two-bedroom cottage with a thatched roof. Who in the twenty-first century lives in a house covered with a bunch of straw?

Anyway, I digress. The tower purred as it swallowed the disc, the best sound in the world. It took a long time to boot which should've given me the first clue something was wrong. If there's one thing that drives me crazy it's slow processors and I knew it wasn't my equipment.

I've been gaming since I was six and consider myself pretty good. Especially when it comes to debugging stuff. I was stoked to figure it out, maybe make a few bucks in the process. I'm still American enough to think of dollars instead of Euros because we've only lived in Germany for two years.

I was scrounging for a candy bar in my desk when a flame shot across the screen, burning yellow, red and blue. Not that I smoke, but it looked real enough to light a cigarette. In slow motion the fire edged letters into the screen. *EarthRider*. Cool name. Of course I didn't get it then. Stupid me.

Below the fire appeared a globe, the kind librarians have on their desks. The thing rotated slowly, zooming closer and closer like Google Earth. Jimmy was right, this was the coolest thing I'd ever seen, the graphics as realistic as if I'd been standing there. Bornhagen, the place we live, was marked with a front door. *Enter here* flashed below.

I was pretty fed up waiting, my fingers twitching to hit the keys. First it took ages to load, then it showed a map? But I didn't have much else to do except review a few algebra problems—unlike Jimmy I've got no trouble with math—so I clicked.

On the screen giant boulders shaped themselves into a gate, opening onto a bunch of hills and a shadowy forest. In the distance, high on the mountain, I saw a castle with two towers, a pale banner fluttering limply on top. It looked vaguely familiar, but at the time I didn't really think much about it. An ox cart moved slowly across a country road toward the castle.

I sniffed. Something reeked like boiled manure. I looked around to find the source when I noticed a man on the screen scurrying along a bumpy trail. He wheezed, dragging his bare feet. He was obviously injured, the filthy rags on his right shoulder dark with blood. The screen zoomed to follow as the man darted into the woods. Giant oaks swallowed the sun, a patchwork of shadows and light in the undergrowth. At the time I remember thinking how lame this game was despite the graphics—no dragons, no monsters, nothing exciting whatsoever.

Besides, I was slightly worried my mom would come in. The whiskey she likes usually puts her to sleep on the couch, but you never know. Luckily, most of the time, she doesn't know when I pull an all-nighter.

Horse gallop thudded out of nowhere. Visibly trembling the grimy-looking man hesitated for a moment before thrashing his way through bushes and undergrowth. At the edge of the forest three riders in chainmail and helmets came into view, their chestnut horses whinnying and covered in sweat. The clang of metal sliced the air as the men drew swords.

At that moment my cell rang. I remember hesitating because I thought maybe Jimmy's dad had found out about me borrowing the game. I'd sort of pushed for it. I should've stopped what I was doing right then, but I was still curious and decided to ignore the phone. On the screen a yellowed scroll, its edges burned and crumbling, unfolded into a menu.

Continue Level One

Expert

Pause

Exit

Upgrade to Expert now? flashed below. Cool. There was an advanced version. I moved the mouse and clicked. Instantly the screen began to pulse and recede. Like looking into a fish tank, the tree trunks, oak leaves and bushes grew larger and three-dimensional, sharper and closer. I heard birds chirping and rustling in the undergrowth. And the foul smell was back.

I leaned forward because all of a sudden my chest was killing me. I was stuck in a truck-sized vise, my ribs squeezing together, body compressing. My lungs throbbed and I couldn't

breathe, not even a little. My arms and legs felt numb. *Do something*, I thought. I pushed myself to stand. *Something is wrong with the game, stop the game*, my mind urged. But I couldn't. Lights exploded behind my eyelids and I had to pay every shred of attention to the task of breathing.

It occurred to me that I was having a heart attack.

My mother's face flashed by. I wanted to shout for her, but my lungs had quit for good, my tongue a rigid piece of meat. She'd find me in the morning dead on the carpet. My sight turned foggy then black. I was passing out. I sucked frantically and drew in a bit of air. Slowly with each breath the crushing heaviness disappeared.

Blinking away the haze, I wiped my sweaty forehead. I should make an appointment with the family doctor.

Something moved ahead. There at the edge of a clearing cowered the man in rags holding his right elbow. He trembled and now that I was closer, I saw blood dripping from his wrist. The three riders had surrounded him, their blades pointing toward the man's neck. One rider dismounted, his face shadowed by a half helmet and curled brownish beard, his hands covered by steel gauntlets like lizard scales. The other two sat motionless, waiting. I tried to get a better view of what the horsemen were doing when I looked down.

And froze.

I stood on the root of an oak tree. Surely I imagined things. But those were definitely *my* Nikes I'd forgotten to take off when I returned home. I moved my foot. Leaves crackled. A twig snapped. Something terrible had happened, something I couldn't wrap my mind around. I blinked and looked to my right. Trees and undergrowth were losing themselves in the gloom. I remembered the mouse in my right hand, but when I lifted my arm, my fingers came up empty—except for the smear of something sticky on my palm. I was *bleeding*.

Wait.

The bush next to me was covered in blood. Not mine, I realized with relief. Disgusted I wiped my shaking hands with a fistful of leaves and turned to look behind me. The woods stretched into darkness—shadows within shadows nearly black.

My room was gone.

CHAPTER 2

I heard more rustling. Louder now. Not from the men, but from the woods behind me. My knees buckled and I was vaguely aware of the thudding sound I'd made. I had to figure out what had just happened, retrace my steps. *Where was my room?* My mind churned as I scanned the ground for some sign of home, something familiar.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the bearded thug turn his head. Ducking behind a hazelnut bush, I squinted through the leaves. The thug had raised his sword and stepped toward my hiding place.

I crouched lower, my ears filled with the pounding of my own heartbeat. Rough laughter came from the other two riders. Despite my panic I caught a glimpse of them poking their swords at the injured man's shoulder. I smelled their stench—and the wounded man's fear.

The bearded thug continued in my direction. Sunlight bounced off the edge of his blade. He took another step, scanning, listening. I forced my shaking body to be absolutely still. This had to be some kind of challenge in the game.

The man kept coming. Twenty feet. Everything about him looked menacing: his eyes the color of mud, his razor-sharp sword wide as a hand. Fifteen feet. I held my breath.

A scream rang out.

"Have mercy, My Lords," the bleeding man cried. He was kneeling now, waiving his good arm in a pleading gesture. "I beg you," he wailed.

I lowered my gaze. Somewhere I'd read that the white of a man's eyes could give you away. Keeping my lids half-closed, I peeked through the leaves once more. The thug was ten feet away.

Close up he looked worse, a brute with arms the size of my thighs, his chest covered in leather and wide as a barrel. Despite his size he had the soundless walk of a stalking animal. I watched with paralyzed fascination. Any second I'd be discovered, but all I managed was to shove my hands into my jeans pockets to keep them from trembling. *It's a computer game*, my brain screamed. *It's real*, my gut argued.

"*Eilet Euch und bindet den Gefangenen*. We've squandered enough time." The rider spoke in some kind of medieval- sounding German, his voice icy and bored, but I was certain he'd said something like make haste and bind the prisoner.

The bearded thug hesitated. He glanced left and right and then abruptly turned. I gulped air, my ears ringing with waning adrenalin.

"I'll pay for the bread," the injured man cried. "I'll find..." the rest of his words turned to incoherent mumble.

The thug now towered over his prisoner, a giant ready to squash an annoying insect. The rider with the cold voice wriggled his sword in front of the man's nose.

"Teach him a lesson first."

"Let's cut off his hands." The bearded thug smacked his lips in anticipation as he lifted his sword above his head.

"No, please," the injured man cried. "I'll pay the Duke, I promise."

"Hold out your arms," the thug said, raising his sword higher. I blinked. I wanted to look away, but my eyes refused to move.

"The right middle finger," the rider with the icy voice said. "He won't use a bow again."

"Put your hand on the ground," the thug barked. "Or I'll cut it off and feed it to you." He sounded disappointed. The injured man leaned forward and stretched out his hand covered with blood.

That's when he saw me.

As the brute aimed the tip of his sword at the man's middle finger, the prisoner turned his head, our eyes meeting for the briefest moment. They were bluish-green like my own and filled with something like recognition.

Had I imagined the man nodding? Before I could work out what I'd seen, I heard a soft crunch. A bloodcurdling scream rang out, the man's head whipping toward his mangled hand. He clutched his palm to apply pressure, his face drained of color. I finally looked away.

"Bind him," the rider said. He still sounded bored but there was an element of urgency in his voice. "We shall leave before we run into Hanstein's guards."

The revolting stink of blood wafted across. I swallowed bile. I kept seeing the blood flowing from the man's hand, the empty spot where the middle finger had been. Do *NOT* puke. I began to

tremble once more as the terror of being discovered turned my stomach. I was sure the prisoner had seen me. What if he told his captors?

I wiped my clammy hands on my jeans to distract myself. The guy had said Hanstein. The Hanstein ruins were just up the street from my house. I'd seen them when my Uncle William visited from the States. Funny how much Americans loved medieval castles. Jimmy's dad had invented a game with his neighborhood castle. Not too creative to use the next best castle you could find. *But how could this feel so real* my mind whirled.

The back of my head stung. An acorn bounced to the ground, followed by a pinecone hitting my neck. I turned.

Less than ten feet away, a boy about my age cowered in a pile of dried oak leaves. He had placed a rather grimy forefinger on his lips, his eyes wide with alarm and fury. I blinked again. Maybe this was all a dream and I'd simply fallen asleep while playing.

The boy gestured for me to come closer. While the thug dragged the prisoner to his feet and kicked leaves across the blood-soaked ground, I turned and crawled. Without a word the boy spun around and, head ducked low, ran into the shadows. I followed. My neck tingled as I imagined the soldier with the evil blade attacking from behind. Still, I never turned, afraid to stumble and crash.

This *had* to be part of the game.

The boy was surprisingly fast and I had trouble keeping up.

At last, he stopped. "What're you doing in Hanstein's forest?" He waved a dismissive hand. "They'll slay us. You're not supposed to be here." The boy rolled the Rs, speaking fast.

I struggled to keep up. "What?"

"Are you daft, too?"

I stared at the filthy face. What was the guy talking about? Maybe it was best to start with the basics.

"Who are you?" I said, digging deep to remember my German. Strangely, it came out easy.

"Bero. Who are you?"

"Max."

"What name is that?" Bero glared. "Are you thick or what, spying on the Duke's men?"

"What duke? What are you talking about, man?"

I gaped at Bero who looked as if he hadn't combed his hair in a year and whose skin was crusted with filth. He was barefoot. The pants, with several holes and shredded at the bottom, barely reached past his knees. His shirt and neck were covered with more grime. A nasty odor surrounded him, attracting flies. They swarmed around his head, but he didn't seem to notice. I stepped backwards. Better to keep my distance in case the flies wanted another meal.

"Duke Schwarzburg's henchmen. They'll destroy us for watching them. So will the Lord."

"Who's Schwarzburg? What lord?"

Bero grunted in an obvious attempt to suppress an insult. "The Lords of Hanstein. They own these woods," he said slowly as if I were a moron.

Just as I formulated a snappy retort, the bushes behind Bero moved, followed by grunts and snorts. I stared in disbelief, a new wave of fear taking over my legs, my mouth too dry to speak. A dozen or so wild pigs with black, coarse bristles were heading my way.

Bero looked behind him and shrugged. "My sows..."

"Your pi...sows?" I stumbled. "Aren't they dangerous?"

Bero looked at me in disbelief. “*Ach*, you’re chicken-hearted, too, and slow to boot.” He clucked with disdain. “Everyone knows they’re farm animals. I thought you were a brave lad, sneaking around the Duke’s men.”

If I hadn’t been so confused I would’ve hurled back an insult. Domestic pigs were supposed to be pink.

“What’re *you* doing in the woods, if nobody is allowed?” I managed.

A slow grin spread across Bero’s face. “Harvest is short and my sows got to eat. Woods have plenty of acorns, beech nuts and roots for all of us.” He shrugged. “The Lords won’t miss them.”

“I see,” I said, though I didn’t, not really. “Where do you live?” I said to change the subject. Maybe I was supposed to ask questions so I could get the heck done with this stupid game. I wasn’t playing to get jerked around by a stinking pig herder.

Bero pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Yonder, the village.”

“What village?”

“Bornhagen. You?”

“Same.” It was out before I had time to think. Bero stepped backwards, shaking his head in apparent alarm.

His face, which had been full of scorn, turned to outright suspicion.

“Nay, impossible. I’d *know* you.” He slowly looked me up and down, his glance ending with my Nikes, shimmering white and silvery in the fading light. “You look nothing like us. Your robes are...” Bero seemed to have run out of words as he stared at my T-shirt and jeans. “Unless...”

“What?” I asked. “I’m playing the game.” What was I saying? I was in the game and telling one of the invented figures of Jimmy’s father that I was playing. *Duh*. “I mean I’m from nearby. I’m not sure.”

Bero kept staring as if he were trying to make up his mind.

“Nearby? Ha!” He spat into the oak leaves. “Nay, you look odd, your boots... Maybe you’re working for Hanstein after all. A spy. You’ll tell the Lord. They’ll seize me and I won’t ever be a squire.”

“Squire?” I had trouble following Bero’s rambling. It sounded like German, but then it didn’t. More like a distant dialect. Even weirder, Bero seemed to understand me. That had to be the game.

With a sigh Bero slumped on the ground. His pigs had settled nearby, grunting and digging with long gray snouts.

“I’m no spy.” I squatted next to the guy who all of a sudden looked forlorn. “I’m sort of...lost.”

Still Bero said nothing while he pulled sticks and leaves from under his grimy feet.

“Would I stay with you if I were a spy? You know I was hiding just like you.” I paused, thinking of the man’s bloody hand. I shuddered and wondered if Bero had seen the whole thing. “Tell me about the squire stuff.”

Bero shook his head. He glimpsed upward into the trees and sniffed. “It’s eventide. *Mutter* will be mad if I’m late for supper. I’ll get a whipping.” He jumped to his feet, light and quick as a squirrel, letting out a low whistle at the same time. New grunts and squeaks erupted as the pigs assembled around their master. He squinted again in obvious distrust. “See you ‘round... perchance.”

To me it sounded like *leave me alone*. I stood up, too. It was growing dark for sure. The shadows of the undergrowth looked inky and I could hardly make out the sky. Maybe this was a good time to take a break and search for a snack. My mom always had ice cream stashed in the freezer.

As Bero disappeared into the gloom, I turned 360 degrees. All I saw was dusk. All I heard was the song of some nauseatingly happy bird above me. I looked at my feet. I still stood in the woods and nowhere near on the carpet of my room. There was no pause button and no mouse.

I shivered. I was somehow *in* the game and clueless what I was supposed to do.

All games had goals like winning points and missions, shooting demons or collecting gold. But every game had a pause button and you could exit any time. What in the heck was I supposed to do standing in the middle of a forest? I remembered the sickening sight of the man's bloody hand, the hole where his finger had been.

Then there was the blood on my own hand. The foul smells. Never before, not even when my father had left, had I felt this alone...and scared. Games were supposed to be virtual *and* fun.

I wondered how much time had passed since I'd punched the *expert* button. It had to be hours. What if I didn't return by morning? My mother would freak out. I shook my head but nothing changed. Nothing except for new rustling that stirred to my right. It was much louder than the sounds of squirrels and birds. Who knew what dangerous animals Jimmy's father had dreamed up? Maybe he'd stuffed the forest with wolves and bears.

Renewed terror seized me. I stood absolutely still, forcing my brain into action. What if I were eaten by a bear? Was that even possible in a game?

Maybe I'd missed some hint. Jimmy would laugh at me in the morning. Okay, I'd skipped level one and gone straight to expert, obviously a huge mistake. Great gamer I was.

Struggling against the rising panic, I remembered Bero. Maybe if I could go with him until I'd find a clue and think things through. At least the guy knew his way around, even if he looked like he'd spent a year in the landfill. He didn't sound exactly stupid, despite the fact he talked weird.

Without another thought, I broke into a run in the general direction Bero had taken which turned into a sprint, something I hadn't done since last year's track season. The twilight turned everything gray, but I noticed the faint signs of broken sticks and upturned leaves the pigs had left.

"Bero?" I yelled. I kept running, my lungs tight, thighs burning. In the vanishing light at the edge of the forest, the land fell in a gentle slope toward...*what?*

Where the neat homes and hedged gardens, the paved roads and street lanterns of Bornhagen had been, shacks and huts squatted in the dusk, crooked and dirty with thatched roofs and muddy paths. This couldn't be right. I'd spent two years in Bornhagen. I knew every street, nearly every house. I had to be in some other place, maybe one of those make-believe medieval villages, some kind of tourist attraction.

Bero's slight figure scampered along two hundred yards ahead.

"Wait for me," I shouted again, breaking into another run. At last I saw Bero stop. His pigs snorted loudly, impatient to get back to their stall.

"Thanks, man," I panted as I drew near. "What is it?" Bero frowned. "I'm late. Sows need water."

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat, a sure sign I was nervous. I thought of what to say, tell the guy some bullshit story about being mugged or losing my parents in a bloody car accident, but somehow it seemed unlikely that Bero would fall for it. I decided truth was best.

“Look, I need a place to stay. Just for tonight. I’m sort of lost. I’m not from here, not exactly. I’ll try to explain, but I know you’re late. I’m not a spy even if I sound strange to you. Fact is you’re my only hope. Otherwise, I’ll...have no place to go.” I opened my mouth, but nothing else seemed right to say.

Bero stared, his gaze lingering on my shoes. A minute passed. Whether it was my explanation or the underlying fear that had made my voice shake, Bero finally nodded.

“You can come. But you must help with the sows. And don’t mouth off to *Mutter*.” Bero punched me in the shoulder, but I didn’t mind. I was strangely relieved.

At the edge of the village a shack stood surrounded by a fence. Blackened timber crisscrossed its whitewashed outer walls, reminding me of a crooked chessboard. On the doorstep a girl of about twelve sat shelling beans by a smoldering light. She didn’t look up until Bero opened the gate and shoed his pigs into an enclosure with a low-roofed barn. I slinked along.

“Mutter is cross with you,” the girl shouted in Bero’s direction. When her eyes fell on me, she began to stare, her mouth forming a perfect O. I nodded. She shrieked and disappeared inside the hut.

Ignoring her, Bero pointed toward a wooden bucket that hung on the fenced-in pen. “Water troughs need filling. You have to go three times. Sows are thirsty after the long day.”

I grabbed the pail and looked for a faucet. Surely it had to be near the house.

“What are you doing? Make haste,” Bero said.

“Looking for the faucet.”

“What’s a faucet?”

“For the water.”

We stared at each other as if we were both fools.

Finally Bero shrugged and pointed down the path. “The well is that way. Make haste, I’m starving.”

I ran past more crooked huts until I saw a circular wall with a crude roof above.

Remembering vaguely what I’d learned in history class, I circled around it. The wooden crank, splintered and silvery from age, was encased in rusted iron. I gave it a shove, breathing a sigh of relief when I heard the sound of trickling water in the depth. It was nearly dark now except for a low shine escaping from the open door of Bero’s hut. In the distance, I saw other lights. They were so dim, they looked more like fireflies than lamps. Jimmy’s father sure had done a good job with this place. It looked pretty authentic, wherever it was.

“You dawdle like a drunken snail,” Bero said after my third trip, snatching the pail from my hand and returning it to the barn wall. “Let’s eat.”

I wiped my damp hands on my jeans and followed Bero into the hut.

End of Sample

A Note from the Author

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I look forward to hearing from you!

Best,

Annette