

Felix and the Wily Crusaders

By L.X. Wiseman

Felix started the Tuesday shift like he always did, by surveying the day's victims.

The blue-white screens in front of him lit up at his touch and displayed the Islanders, the players roaming the augmented reality landscape. Tuesday meant the FAR Island was sparsely populated, mostly loners hunting for treasure or a few small groups here on vacation.

Felix sighed and wiped his monitors clean. Being the best had its disadvantages: not one group of players on the Island was strong enough to tackle his dungeon, the *Giant's Respite*. Felix radioed his teams on the ground and gave them the news. Today would be boring.

"Island's full of weaklings today, boys," he said. "Nobody has the augments to take us on." The ground teams sighed and groaned and bemoaned the Tuesday shift, then settled in to wait. Felix joined them in spirit.

When the Island opened six years ago, Felix changed his major to advanced augmented computing, studied his particularly large ass off, and managed to snag a job working as a low-level programmer. Back then, augmented reality combat had been a glimmer in the eye of Barton Sven, the Island's creator. The idea that a theme park could be designed around virtual reality helmets and foam swords was preposterous, the investors told him. Too expensive, too many potential lawsuits, not enough demand.

Mr. Sven politely fired the investors and built the Fantasy Augmented Reality Island using his own fortune. He called in every favor, twisted every arm, and bought out every augmented reality competitor he found. He crushed his rivals against the wall of his massive wealth and assembled an army of programmers like Felix to make his dream real. Now anyone could put on a helmet, grab a sword and run through the Island's eleven square miles to fight monsters, delve dungeons and conquer castles. At least, that was what the brochures said.

Felix decided to refill his coffee. His chair protested loudly as he pulled himself out of it, and he made a mental note to oil it. Though the walk tired him, he knew he'd need the caffeine today. The control room was large and ovoid, and it sloped down in the front, providing a view of all the other pit bosses as they worked. There was a massive display on the long wall that offered a live map of the Island and the players within. All the desks in the control room faced that screen, but Felix typically ignored it.

Tuesday was slow for everyone, so only a few of the other pit-bosses were wearing overlay helmets and directing a battle with the Islanders. The helmets provided a 360 degree view of the battle in real-time, and it allowed pit bosses to operate the large animatronic enemies Mr. Sven loved so much. "An island of monsters without dragons is pointless," he once said in an interview. "That's why I'm building dragons."

Felix made it to the coffee bar, caught his breath and filled his mug. The control room was quiet except for the low voices of pit bosses giving orders to their ground teams and the soft clicking of joysticks and keyboards.

Felix noticed Patricia, the newest pit boss, doing battle with a lone islander in the treetop district near the Island's starting town. She was young, attractive, and every time Felix was around her he started sweating. She was plugged in, her overlay helmet covering her raven hair, so Felix stood a respectful distance back and watched her fight with professional detachment.

A *Tree's Treat* was typically the first dungeon new players faced, so it was good proving grounds for fresh pit-bosses. It centered around a particularly peckish druid who desired a fruit guarded by monsters. Basic fantasy fetch quest, any gamer worth their salt would know what to expect.

Felix noticed the Islander in Patricia's dungeon was using the Island's basic equipment package. It came complementary with entry, a plain sword and shield, and it was the mark of a beginner. Doing the quest alone with beginner equipment was possible, but very difficult.

Patricia was using her joysticks to control the islander's opponent: a large, irritated tree that guarded the fruit. Every few seconds she swung a bark-covered fist at him, and he blocked it with his short sword. The player ran forward and stabbed the tree, and it recoiled back in simulated pain. Patricia swore under her breath and swung with both fists. The islander yelped as he blocked one and was knocked down by the other. He reeled backwards, and Patricia grinned, her white teeth shining beneath her helmet. "Gotcha," she said, and triggered the *Tree's Treat* trap. The trap door beneath the player dropped, and he fell to his death.

His simulated death, of course. He fell about ten feet before the nets caught him. His visor would cast a grey pallor over everything and inform him that his hitpoints had dropped to zero, then direct him to the nearest safe area to return to town. An Island assistant leaned out and helped him out of the safety net, patting his back consiliatorilly.

Patricia removed her helmet and brushed the hair off her forehead.

"Excellent move Patricia," he said. "Way to use the environmental trap."

Patricia jumped.

"Oh! Thanks..." she said. "Felix, right?"

He nodded, inwardly pleased that she'd remembered. This was their fourth time meeting. The sweating began.

She sighed and looked back at her monitor. "I always hate dying to evo traps when I'm on-Island, but..." she smiled mischievously. "Noobies gotta learn somehow."

“Oh yeah, that’s the worst,” Felix said. “I totally hate that too.” He felt his face grow red as she glanced at his waistline.

“Mmm,” she said.

Felix had never experienced the Island firsthand; he couldn’t handle the walking, much less the fighting. Most of the pit-bosses knew that, but it was possible no one had mentioned it to Patricia yet. Instead, he’d dedicated himself to running things from the back. While Islanders fought with plastic sword and foam shield, he commanded the ground teams and operated the big boss at the end of the dungeons. He’d lost less than a dozen raids this year. He was about to mention this to her when her leftmost screen blinked orange.

“Gotta get back in, got a group coming through.” She donned her helmet.

“Good talk,” said. If old patterns held true, in a few weeks he’d build up the courage to invite her to lunch. He shuffled away and tried to keep from spilling his coffee. His hands were still sweaty.

He settled back into his chair just in time to get a message from the dungeon guardian.

“Hey, Felix?” the guardian said. “We’ve got some players coming in.”

“What? Say again, guardian?”

“Group of four just entered the *Giant’s Respite*,” he said. “And Felix, you know my name, you can just call me-”

“There’s nobody in-Island that’s strong enough for this dungeon,” Felix protested. “Did you warn them? Did you tell them the-?”

“Of course I did, man. I said the poem and did the stupid dance, warned them about the dangers and the suggested augment requirement, like always. They said they wanted to try anyway, so I let them. You know the rules.”

Felix sighed. If a group of noobies got wiped in his dungeon and complained, he’d have to schedule a meeting with the Islander Experience Team to explain things. What a nightmare.

“Well, close down the dungeon entrance until this group wipes,” he said. “Felix out.”

He radioed the ground teams and told them the ‘good’ news. To their credit they seemed excited; at least they’d get to do something today. Felix pulled up the profiles of the four dungeon delvers. He laughed out loud, and got a few sidelong glances from the other bosses. He couldn’t help himself: the four players in the dungeon were so weak. They only had one augment between the four of them, and two of them still wore beginner gear.

“Ground team one, I’m going to let you handle this. Try to be gentle, I don’t want to get a call from the IET,” he said.

“You got it boss,” said the ground team leader. The matter resolved, Felix perused the chat rooms frequented by Islanders with high-level augments. It seemed that there was a large group, over twenty people planning to enter the Island sometime next week... he’d have to be on his game. It was almost certain they’d try for the *Giant’s Respite*; it was one of the most difficult dungeons on this half of the park, and it yielded terrific rewards for those who could succeed.

Maybe he should talk to the game master, get a third ground team ready, just in case... Felix reclined and sipped his coffee and pondered. A few minutes later he was startled by a grunt of pain from the radio.

“Eugh. Ground team one down. They’re headed to the obstacle course.”

“What?” Felix asked. “You didn’t need to go *that* easy on them ground one. We don’t want people thinking this dungeon is weak.”

“To be honest sir, we didn-”

“Nevermind, ground two will take care of them if they survive the obstacle course. Please re-set the stage in case an actual raid group comes in.”

“Alright. Ground one out.”

Felix set his half-full cup aside and leaned into his monitors, his hands flowing over the keys like water. Somehow all four noobies had survived ground one, which should have been impossible for players with their augments. Ten highly trained performers with heavy hammers and a crossbow should have been more than enough to kill them. Their group was completely wrong for this dungeon: they had three basic melee classes and one mage. To have even a chance of taking down the final boss, most groups needed at least three archers to attack from the relative safety of the walls.

Felix sucked his teeth. He was going to need to talk with ground one about how hard they went in their fights. If this group got past them, anyone could. He tapped the mage’s info to inspect her augment. Perhaps it was more powerful than he realized.

Her name was Ella Wily, she was nineteen and had been coming to the Island once a year on her birthday for the last three years. This party, it seemed, were two other girls from her school and her older brother. They’d created a guild called “The Wily Crusaders.” Ella’s augment was

also unremarkable; a low level helmet augment that let her see an enemy's strongest and weakest attribute. Convenient, but not powerful.

Felix slurped his coffee and tried to look unconcerned. Appearing weak in front of his coworkers wasn't going to do him any favors. He had a reputation to uphold, after all. Losing to noobies wasn't an option. Felix returned to the forums and busied himself preparing an email to the game master requesting a third group of actors for the upcoming raid. A light caught his attention, and he turned back to his main monitor. The four Crusaders made it through the obstacle course and were resting on a rocky outcropping above the magma river. Felix sighed. The obstacle course wasn't very dangerous, it really just existed to give ground two time to prepare for the coming fight.

"Ground two, you've got four coming your way," Felix said.

"Got it control, we're ready for them."

Felix dusted off his overlay helmet and frowned at it. It seemed silly to direct ground two against a group this small. They were even more powerful than ground one. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a shout from across the control bay.

"Mr. Sven is coming!" announced a fleeing intern, running into the large room. Felix felt the sweat bead on his forehead. Mr. Sven *never* visited the control room. Felix had never even met him. Rumor had it he frequently entered the park in disguise to test the pit bosses. If he was not satisfied with their performance, they went back to the coding farm, or vanished completely, never to be heard from again. He'd fired an entire control team less than a month ago, which was why Felix was currently running the Tuesday shift. Normally a pit-boss of his calibre was reserved for the weekend crowds.

Shortly after the intern's warning finished echoing around the control room, Mr. Sven entered. He was extraordinarily thin and unusually tall, and he was smiling. The suit he typically wore for public appearances was abandoned, replaced by plain slacks and a tee-shirt that said "Islander FAR-ever," a popular article available in the Island's many gift shops.

Felix downed the half-empty cup of coffee and tried to fix his appearance, smearing his hair back from his forehead. Mr. Sven might be dressed casually, but his intolerance for "slobbery" was almost as legendary as his temper.

"Good afternoon, everyone!" Mr. Sven said, stepping lightly into the control room. "How fares my Island?"

Patricia and several of the other pit bosses stood, waved, or called out a greeting. "It's a slower day today, sir," Patricia said, boldly stepping towards him. "Tuesday, and all." Relief swept

through the room as Patricia went to address their lord and master. Poor girl, no one had warned her. Mr. Sven eyed her narrowly.

“Is that so?” Mr. Sven asked, tapping his toe. “I was hoping to see something... *interesting* on my visit.”

“Well, Felix has a group in the *Giant’s Respite*, if you’re interested in a fight,” Patricia said, casting a glance towards Felix’s desk. Felix felt the coffee curdle in his stomach. That was why she spoke up first, to aim Mr. Sven at him like a loaded weapon. Felix thought dark thoughts to Patricia and shot her his best glare. She smiled sweetly at him. He was dimly aware of ground two buzzing in his ear, but he could only focus on the soft click of Mr. Sven’s shoes as he approached.

“The *Giant’s Respite*, eh?” Mr. Sven said. “That is a personal favorite of mine. I picked out the decor myself, you know. I’d like to see how you perform it,” he said to Felix. His voice was deadly cold. Felix tried to speak, failed, then settled on a sickly smile and nod.

“Excellent,” Mr. Sven said, clapping his hands for emphasis. “Let us all watch Felix do battle with...” he tapped at the device on his wrist and Felix watched the profiles of Ella and her friends appear. “...The Wily Crusaders. A charming name,” he said. Mr. Sven executed a complicated series of commands on his sleeve and Felix watched with horror as the room’s large display screen switched to a view of his dungeon.

“It looks like they’ve made it to the final room, Felix,” Mr. Sven said. “Impressive for such a small party.” Felix realized the buzzing in his ear was ground two, telling him to prep for battle. They were at the gates. “Well go on, don’t make them wait,” Mr. Sven said. He smiled again, but his eyes were cold.

With shaking hands, Felix pulled his overlay helmet over his ears and grabbed the two joysticks at his desk. He could handle this, he told himself. He could beat them with everyone watching. Dimly, he was aware of Mr. Sven asking Patricia how such a small party made it this far into the dungeon. Felix did his best to ignore that.

As the last lava golem collapsed at her feet, Ella gave a whoop and thrust her staff into the air. Her brother Cal matched her with his axe, and they grinned at each other across the monster’s slowly graying body.

“Excellent job, ladies,” Cal shouted. “Way to use those shields.”

Kendra and Tirza flashed white smiles through the sweat and ash that covered their armor. “I’m so glad you convinced us to do this, Ella,” Tirza said. “I had no clue beating on bad guys would be this fun.”

"I knew you'd love it," Ella said. "How you doing, Kendra?"

Kendra leaned against a rocky outcropping and rubbed her side, wincing. "One of those suckers got me good. My HP isn't doing too hot either. Do we have any healing potions left?"

Ella shook her head. "No," Ella said. "We used them all up after the first fight."

"We don't need no healing potions with archmage Ella in the back!" Cal said. "She'll cover us." He hopped up and down in place, giving his axe a twirl as he did.

"This is even more fun than last year. I love being one of the girls," he said. Ella smiled at him even as Kendra and Tirza rolled their eyes. Cal was always like this, whether they were playing board games or battling magma golems.

"You guys ready to take on the giant?" Ella asked, pulling Kendra to her feet. Kendra looked tired, but Ella saw a gleam in her eyes.

"Sure. Let's show it what we're made of," she said. Tirza looked down at herself and brushed at some of the ash and scorch marks. They weren't really there, of course, but that didn't stop her. "I'm looking forward to getting some food after this," she said. "Fighting is exhausting."

"You're not wrong," Kendra said. "Let's finish up so we can get some grub."

"And some new augments with the gold we get for winning this thing," Cal said. "I'm ready whenever you ladies are."

They walked past the bodies of the magma golems to an enormous stone door, carved out of the rock. Ella was reminded of a sculpture of the gates of hell. Around it was a glowing dark orange inscription.

*Wily Crusaders,
Unto death and fire go.
Giant's Respite looms.*

"Would you look at that. They put our name into haiku!" Tirza said. "That's impressive."

"The tech in this place blows my mind," said Kendra. "I still can't figure out how much of this is real and how much is simulated. When I almost fell into the lava back there, I could *feel* the heat against my leg."

“Don’t ruin the immersion girls!” Cal said. “We’re real adventurers about to fight a real giant, in danger of falling into real lava. No fancy helmet technology involved. Ready?” he asked. Ella strode to the door and wrapped both hands around the huge brass handle. “Let’s go.”

The door groaned as she pulled, and then with a burst of scalding air it exploded open, throwing Ella and her friends on their backs. Beyond the now open door they saw an enormous man-cave. One wall was completely decorated with pinups of giantesses in improbable clothing. There was a bar in the corner well-stocked with the Island’s unique alcoholic brews, a pool table, dart board, a distant treasure chest resting on the pervasive shag carpet and, in the center of it all, a giant. He was ugly, fifteen feet tall, wearing only pink boxers and fluffy bunny slippers, and he was snoring in a recliner.

“Oh my god,” the group chorused. At their voices, the giant’s snores ceased. He smacked his lips, scratched himself gruffly, then rolled over in the chair to continue his nap. Then he shivered, flinched away from the newly opened door and opened his eyes.

“WHO LET IN THIS DRAFT?” he roared. The voice was as large as the creature. The room shook when he spoke, making Ella’s knees feel weak. She glanced at her friends and found a range of emotions from joy and anticipation to bloodlust. Cal readied his axe and Tirza and Kendra formed up on either side of him. Ella stood in the back and warmed up her throwing arm. This was going to be a tough one.

Felix waited anxiously for the intro animation to complete. The Giant’s reaction was pre-programmed, but in a moment Felix would take control and begin the fight. He eyed the group of four, paying special attention to the axe-wielding bro in the middle. He was cocksure, twirling his axe and hopping in place with a cheshire grin. Felix resolved to take him out first. The Giant rolled in the recliner and grabbed a nearby pool cue, his weapon for this part of the fight. Once he had the weapon in hand, Felix gained control.

“WEAK CRUSADERS, COME MEET YOUR DEATHS,” he shouted. His helmet amplified his voice, deepened it. He smiled as the four players flinched back. Distantly he could hear the murmurs of the other pit bosses. Patricia’s voice buzzed near his ear, but he ignored her words. He focused on the fight and raised his pool cue, pointing at the group. “COME, IF YOU DARE.”

“Oh shit!” the cocky guy yelled. His voice sounded far away to Felix. “He talks! Charge?” The two girls nodded, and together they ran forward, leaving the mage near the entrance.

Back in the control room, Felix grinned. The Giant was essentially a large foam puppet confined to a track, but the players couldn’t see that: it was hidden by their overlay helmets. The track restricted his movement greatly, but he never needed to move very far: they always came to him.

As the others charged the monster, Ella reached into her bag and pulled out a spell sphere. It felt like a squishy softball to her, but when she looked at it she saw blue fire. She couldn't help but feel giddy. It was magic, *real magic*. She enchanted it with a word and she threw it square at the giant's chest. It bounced off and she was disappointed to see his hitpoints barely move down. Water had been extremely effective on the magma golems outside.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN COME IN HERE AND DEFEAT ME? *ME?*" the giant bellowed.

Her helmet's augment blinked and informed her that, no surprise, the giant's strongest attacks would be fire based. What was surprising was his weakness: not water as she'd anticipated, but poison. She had no way to deal poison damage, but she might be able to find something in the room to achieve a similar effect. As Ella considered her options, the girls engaged the giant with Cal. The giant swung the pool cue casually with one hand, nearly knocking Tirza off her feet.

"I HAVE CRUSHED INVADERS FOUR TIMES YOUR NUMBER," the giant yelled, punctuating his statement with another swing. "I HAVE VANQUISHED MAGES WITH AUGMENTS TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT."

He switched his pool cue in a two handed grip and swung towards Cal. He blocked it with the haft of his axe, and for a moment they grinned at each other through their crossed weapons.

"Sure you have, buddy," Cal taunted. "That's why this is *so hard*."

Their staring contest was broken by Kendra and Tirza slashing at the giant's exposed hands. He shoved Cal back, swung at Kendra and Tirza and then conjured a fireball. With a casual motion, he tossed it at Ella. She watched it approach with dull fascination, and the part of her mind not fearing for her virtual life wondered how they managed to make a digital fireball feel so hot.

The fireball hit her and she flew back against the bar, the breath whooshing out of her. Apparently it wasn't completely digital after all. The impact hurt her ribs, and she watched her hitpoints drop precipitously low. She wouldn't survive another hit like that. She scrambled up a bar stool and made it on top of the counter in time to see Cal fly back from a second fireball. His health was higher than hers, but he'd still taken a lot of pain from it.

"Holy shit!" he shouted. "Those things hurt! What's the play, Ella?"

"He's weak to poison damage, but I don't have poison magic. I'm working on a solution," she said, ducking behind a bottle as tall as she was. "Buy me time!"

Felix, engaged with the two fighters with beginner gear, felt a slight flash of panic. *No one* ever used poison damage against him. He wasn't aware the giant even *had* a weakness. Fortunately she didn't have a poison augment, and she wasn't going to find one in here. He took a swing at the tall blonde and hit her shield, knocking her flat.

“You got it sis!” the bro replied. He rushed forward and swung his axe into Felix’s pool cue, deflecting it away from the temporarily stunned girl. Felix swore under his breath and swung again, only to be blocked by the axe a second time. The bro grinned at him and Felix’s blood boiled. The gentle buzz of the control room cleared for a moment and he clearly heard Patricia’s voice. “I hope he gets in closer,” she said. “That guy is *gorgeous*. Look at his arms!” she said. Felix and the giant roared as one and swung with renewed fervor.

From her vantage point on top of the bar, Ella could see her friends below were having the time of their lives. The giant was wailing on Cal, trying to get to Tirza and finish her, but Kendra joined in the defense and helped her up. Together they formed up again, and even from this distance she could see they were grinning. Kendra shouted encouragement to the others and they attacked again.

Ella renewed her search for poison at the bar as her friends distracted the giant. Most of the bottles were enormous, with huge labels identifying their contents as the various brews available in the non-combat portions of the Island. Ella ignored these and continued hunting. The sounds of the battle continued, and the other Crusaders held the giant at bay. Ella sprinted along the bar and nearly tripped over a much smaller, human-sized bottle hidden between the larger ones.

“Identify!” she said, and the bottle flashed a toxic green color. It was a vial of rat poison. The cork popped out easily and she poured half of it into her spell bag. An icon popped up and informed her that her spells were temporarily charged with poison magic. She grinned.

Felix had taken a few hits from the Crusaders at this point, but he wasn’t worried. The giant had a massive health pool and in a drawn out battle he was sure to win. He only needed to land a few fireballs to take out the entire group, and toying with them would give Mr. Sven a good fight to watch. He glanced towards the bar to check on the mage and saw her hoist something, a small green bottle. Strange.

“Guys!” Ella shouted, sliding down the bar stool. “Put this on your blades!” She threw it underhand to Kendra, who nearly dropped it. Tirza and Cal covered her, blocking the pool cue while she poured the vial on her blade. She tossed it to Tirza and then Cal, defending them both as they did the same. Ella primed a spell and was satisfied to see her hand glowing a hot white-green. “My turn,” she said.

Felix saw the green glow spread across the weapons of the Crusaders, unsure of what was happening. They had no augments, no way of powering up their weapons like this. For a moment he panicked and wondered if the system was glitching out. And in front of Mr. Sven no less! Then the mage threw her spell. Unlike the previous one, this glowed white hot green and when it smashed into the giant’s head, his health dropped to three quarters.

The giant was programmed to execute agony animations when a critical hit struck him, so control was momentarily wrested away from Felix as the giant recoiled. He yanked fruitlessly on his controls, trying to get away from the others. "They're cheating!" he shouted. The giant didn't repeat his words, it was too busy howling in pain.

"No, they aren't," Mr. Sven's calm voice came from the darkness behind him. "Keep fighting." Was this a test? Did Mr. Sven hire these fighters and give them special powers? Felix fervently wished he had watched the previous two fights to see how the Wily Crusaders had won.

Cal took advantage of the giant's pain-filled roars and leapt forward, his axe glowing bright green. Tirza and Kendra pressed forward too, and Ella primed her spells and threw them as fast as she was able. As the Crusader's attacks landed, bright green streaks appeared across the giant's mottled skin. It screamed and fell back into the recliner, then over the other side. A loud crash echoed through the chamber.

Having completed its animation, Felix was in control once more. He'd rarely been here before, in the giant's second stage. Now that the giant had lost more than half his health, it discarded the pool cue and conjured a fireball in each hand. Felix felt the panic spread through his chest. If this was a test, he couldn't lose. No matter what tricks these four used, Felix would need to outwit them. Distantly he was aware of Patricia talking to the intern who warned them about Mr. Sven's intrusion. They were discussing the hot guy, pondering ways to get his phone number. Did that mean he lived nearby?

Felix felt a flash of anger. They weren't even paying attention to him! He was the one fighting, he was a pit boss and they were supposed to be on *his* side. Felix normally rose and started raining fire onto the archers and mages of the raid groups at this point, but this was different. He decided instead to stay hidden behind the recliner. He needed them to come to him.

"CHEATING, WEAK CRUSADERS," the giant yelled. "POISON WILL NOT SAVE YOU NOW."

"Oh yeah?" Cal asked. "Try me!" He sprinted towards one end of the recliner, giving his axe a twirl for good luck. As he rounded the corner he saw the small, vengeful eyes of the giant. It was crouched, grinning, waiting for him. Two fireballs came at once, and he vanished in a flash of white.

"Cal!" Ella shouted, grabbing at her empty pouch of healing potions. There wasn't anything she could do. He flew backward and landed hard, skidding across the shag carpet. Ella watched him turn a dull gray color. She ran to him.

"It's okay sis," he said, holding up a hand. Ella stopped in place, halfway between Cal and the recliner. His voice took on a ghostly waver, in case his grayed out body hadn't provided enough of a clue about his condition. He got up and backed away from the fight. Ella had only died twice

before, but she remembered the designated safe zones the helmet revealed to her when she greyed out. Cal was probably being directed there now.

“Take him out for me!” he said, flashing a thumbs up to her. She nodded to him, then rejoined the other two. They were standing just on the other side of the recliner, swords at the ready. They could hear the giant’s deep, thready breathing coming from the other side. He seemed content to wait for them. Maybe he knew the poison buff was temporary.

“What do we do?” Tirza asked. The green glow on her sword was fading. Ella noticed her spells would only be poisonous for a few more seconds.

“Surround him?” Kendra suggested. “We need to move fast, before this stuff wears off.”

“Good call!” Ella said. “I’ll give you cover.”

Felix remained crouched down, clutching tightly to a fireball in each hand. The look on the bro’s face as he’d melted was priceless. Felix would need to remember to watch the recording of this fight and screenshot it. Hiding from the three noobie girls didn’t look very impressive, but he wasn’t going to throw away an advantage just to look cool. Not anymore.

Kendra and Tirza ran forward, one on the left of the massive chair and the other on the right. Ella lobbed a few spells over the chair blindly, hoping to distract the creature. An angry roar told her at least one had connected. Satisfied, Ella sprinted towards the lever for the recliner. When she activated it, the giant yelped as the chair folded back and bonked him.

“NO FAIR!” the creature yelled. Ella scrambled up the leg rest of the chair and started climbing. By the time she stood on the headrest, Kendra and Tirza rounded either side of the chair, their swords barely glowing with the poison.

Felix looked left and right and made a split decision. He threw two fireballs at the short, dark haired one. She caught the first one her shield but couldn’t block the second and the fire spread across her body, turning her the same dull-death gray as the bro he had killed. Only two left. Felix felt satisfaction for the first time. What was he worried about anyway? Even with special skills from Mr. Sven, there were only four of them. Then red flashed across his vision, indicating damage from behind. He whirled to see the blonde strike him, a manic laugh echoing from her lips.

Ella saw the giant turn towards Tirza and conjure two more fireballs. He literally clapped them on either side of Tirza before she could get another strike in. She greyed out instantly.

“Finish it!” she shouted, the ghostly warble making it sound like a command from beyond. Ella primed two final spells and leapt off the chair. As she fell with a poison spell held outward in

each hand, time seemed to slow. She watched the giant turn to look at her, its eyes wide in horror.

Felix noticed the leaping mage a half-second after he smashed the blonde noobie. He reacted instinctively, creating two more fireballs, raising the giant's hands. Everything felt sluggish. It was going to be close.

Ella's eyes filled with red as the giant conjured two fireballs of his own and slowly raised his hands to intercept her. She closed her eyes and smiled, and a red-green explosion ripped through the room as their hands met.

"No!" Felix yelled.

He watched helplessly as the giant entered its death animation, collapsing into the shag carpeting. He watched Ella Wily stand over him and jump up and down triumphantly, her three ghostly companions joining her. They opened the treasure chest, *his chest*, and distributed the rewards. Felix realized that back in the control room, the low buzz of voices was completely gone.

A cold sweat broke out across his neck. He pulled the overlay helmet off slowly and he heard his chair squeal as he stood. He should remember to get that oiled. His monitors all displayed the Wily Crusaders as they exulted and equipped their powerful new augments and took joy in one another. Felix turned around.

The entire room was staring at him. No one spoke a word. Felix didn't care about them or traitorous Patricia. He only had eyes for Mr. Sven, an emperor holding his thumb out, ready to pronounce death or mercy. Mr. Sven's arms were crossed and he was chewing on the edge of his mustache, a slight frown darkening his features.

"Did you know the giant was weak to poison damage?" he asked after he was through with his mustache.

"No sir. I... no sir," Felix said. He felt queasy.

"Why did you hide behind the chair?"

Felix struggled to answer. He felt as though the room was tilting very slowly, throwing him off balance. "I- I needed cover. They were stronger than I expected..." Felix glanced up at Mr. Sven. He didn't react.

“The giant can’t leave the track, it’s too dangerous to the players, but it can maneuver around the chair. I knew they’d need to come to me eventually. If she hadn’t come from up top... I didn’t expect that,” he finished lamely.

“Mmm.” Mr. Sven said.

Felix leaned heavily on his chair and it squealed again. “Mr. Sven, I’m sorry. I’ll work on training harder, I’ll...” Mr. Sven wasn’t listening.

“Patricia, I want you to flag those four for potential recruitment. Especially the girl, Ella. She’s the only player to have found that poison since the Island opened,” he said. She nodded and went to her workstation at once. “You and you, make sure those four get a celebration and a commemorative item when they return to Locktown. Something that will mark their victory. Maybe a new poison augment for their weapons?” he suggested.

“Sir!” said two of Felix’s coworkers. The rest of the crowd began to disperse. The emperor had turned his thumb down and the show was over.

Felix sagged back into his chair, barely noticing the squeak. They weren’t working for Mr. Sven? They didn’t have special abilities, or secret training, they were just four noobies who had beaten him. He’d failed utterly, in front of Mr. Sven and everyone else. He was going to be sent back to the cubicle farm to program grass animations for the rest of his career.

“Felix.” Mr. Sven said. “Excellent work. You adapted quickly when the giant’s weakness was exposed.”

Felix felt the room stop tilting. “What?” he asked.

“You did well, son.” Mr. Sven said.

“But I lost. I hid behind a recliner...” Felix said, bemused. “I thought it was a test, like maybe they had special abilities but only *looked* weak. And I needed to win.” He looked up sheepishly. Mr. Sven’s eyes didn’t look so cold anymore. “I lost to four real weaklings with just one augment,” he said.

Mr. Sven laughed out loud. “Son, did you ever wonder why there’s no leveling system for the Island?”

“I... I dunno. I assumed it was because of the cost, or the difficulty.”

“It’s because of the fun!” Mr. Sven said. “No one enjoys being low level. New people wouldn’t come here if they needed to spend weeks working up to the good stuff.” He leaned in close enough that Felix could smell his expensive cologne.

“Just between us, I’ve designed it so that every single dungeon on FAR Island could be beaten by a party of four with minimal augments,” he whispered. “This is the first time I’ve seen anyone do it, though,” he added.

“I don’t understand,” Felix said. “You want them to win?”

“I want them to have fun!” Mr. Sven said, gesturing to the main screen. It still showed the Wily Crusaders celebrating together, grinning and laughing. “I want cleverness and a tight-knit group to be more important than an item or a level.” He clapped his hands together with an air of finality.

“You’ve got to remember, you’re not competing against them. When they win, so do we,” he said. “Don’t ever go easy on them, of course, they need to earn it, but when they finally do…” He pointed a finger at Felix. “You deserve to celebrate with them.”

Felix nodded. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Mr. Sven gave Felix a pat on the arm, turned to leave, then stopped mid step.

“I think I’ll promote you,” Mr. Sven said. “Expect my letter within the week.”

Felix nodded and stammered his way through “thank you.”

Mr. Sven smiled, turned on his heel and left. Felix felt certain he’d get an actual letter, handwritten and sealed in wax. He turned back to his monitors and pinged Ella’s group. They were just now walking into town and, as Mr. Sven had ordered, they were being treated to a heroine’s welcome. Each of them were given a unique item commemorating their defeat of the giant and the date, and the magical displays at the town center were showing a play-by-play of the final fight. A crowd of Islanders gathered to ooh and ahh at the battle, and Felix felt a grin tickle his cheeks. The crowd’s cheer when Ella leapt off of the recliner made his heart swell. He’d helped give the Wily Crusaders one of the best adventures in the history of the Island.

He hopped onto the radio and congratulated the ground teams on their good fight and sent them the recording of the final battle so they could enjoy it too. Then he sat back and surveyed the rest of the players in the Island. Perhaps the Tuesday shift wasn’t so bad after all.