

ONE

I am definitely going to die.

The darkness pressed in on me from all sides, blocking any possible escape routes. A sliver of sunlight peeked out through the thick canopy of Chinese elm trees surrounding me. Fireflies wove in and out of the leaves. The little creatures provided the only light illuminating who—or maybe *what*—I was fighting.

The WeiXian Forest hid both demon and human enemies alike. I'd taken down two nine-tailed foxes, or *hú li jīng*, and three human enemies using my trusty weapon: a red-and-gold-banded staff named the Ruyi Jingu Bang that could shrink or stretch to any size. In this forest, it wasn't uncommon to also run into *è guǐ*, or hungry ghosts, and *guǐ pó*, or demons disguised like old women.

At the moment, there were no demons nearby. Only two of us

were left. Once I took down the last enemy, I'd be home free.

Unfortunately, this last guy was good. I'd spent an hour exchanging blows with him, but we were pretty evenly matched. My Ruyi Jingu Bang alone wasn't enough to take down my opponent, so I'd been trying to construct a new weapon from the materials in my messenger bag. If I didn't make something powerful, and *quick*, I'd be in big trouble.

"All right, Proslayer," I hissed to myself. My breath fogged up the inside of my Codex, the VR helmet I always used in a match. I spun around in circles and held my weapon at the ready, the golden tip pointing into the dark forest. "Come out and face me, and let's end this."

The sound of wind rustling bushes answered me. At least, I hoped that was the wind, and not another *hú li jīng* or *è guǐ* waiting to pounce on me. The thrum of a steady rhythm in the distance grew faster and more frantic. Danger was near.

I clenched my teeth against the sudden chill. This showdown needed to end as quickly as possible. We'd been battling a little over an hour, and most matches were usually finished by now. While the suit softened the blow of in-game hits, my limbs were quaking from the exhaustion of combat. The sun had set, so it was

getting harder to see through the thick growth of trees. I was running dangerously low on energy.

Something shiny on the ground caught my eye.

A bronze wire.

I snatched it up and placed it in my messenger bag. *Think, think, think.* I rummaged through the contents in there.

A wire—I could make something with that. A device to destroy the enemy. All I needed was a fuse and gunpowder.

I was *sure* I had those materials in here somewhere. My frustration grew as I continued digging through my bag, with no luck.

Then another glowing item emerged in a nearby bush. A peach. Energy. My avatar had taken on some damage, and I needed to restore my health bar. I reached down to pick it up, but before I could, a glint of silver slashed toward me from the left. I dodged in the nick of time and then sidestepped another flash from the right. Double swords.

Proslayer!

Finally, he was showing himself.

I ducked behind a giant elm tree. A flash of navy-blue armor disappeared behind a cluster of Chinese snowball bushes.

My target.

I reached into the contents of my bag to pull out some materials—wooden planks and a pickax. “A-ha!” I quickly piled the planks on top of each other, constructing a red-and-black pagoda-shaped house.

Not a moment too soon, either. Right as I disappeared into the protection of the house, Proslayer’s sword slashed the spot where I’d been standing.

Ping!

That noise indicated a player had opened a new chat bubble. A message in neon-green lettering appeared in the left corner of my Codex’s screen.

Proslayer: U gonna hide in there like a girl or are we gonna end this?

Fury spiked through me. Gamers like Proslayer liked to use “girl” as an insult in the most misogynistic way.

If there was one thing gaming had taught me, it was that nothing got on these players’ nerves like returning their half-baked insults with smiley faces and proper grammar. They *hated* that.

I gritted my teeth. This was no time to let insults get the best of me. My gaming session, the first round of qualifiers for the Junior Dayhold Tournament, was currently being livestreamed on the Dayhold official eSports Live channel. Thousands of unnamed, faceless gamers and fans watched this final showdown between TheRuiNar and Proslayer from the comfort of their homes. They probably expected me to lose, since in last year's Junior Dayhold Tournament, Proslayer had not only qualified—he'd finished in the top ten. He was *really* good.

Of course, the last Junior Dayhold Tournament hadn't seen the likes of TheRuiNar. It was time to crank up my gaming and turn the tables on Proslayer. Nobody was getting between me and the grand prize.

Wire. Fuse. Gunpowder. Frantically, I sorted through tree leaves and flowers—the useless items in my bag. I vowed to organize the contents of what I'd collected as soon as this round concluded.

Time to get him tilted.

"Reply to chat with Proslayer," I commanded Codex.

TheRuiNar: I'm right here! Come and get me! :):):)

Proslayer: Get ready to cry for Mama, punk!!!

Proslayer's rage was practically palpable through the screen. I'm telling you, it was the smiley-face thing.

"Come to Papa," I growled under my breath. I didn't know if I was talking to Proslayer or to the items I was still frantically searching for. Probably both. I glanced at the screen on the right side of my helmet. My armor and health bars glowed an angry red. Practically empty. My virtual energy drained every time I took a hit, and I'd taken several already in this battle. I needed to replenish it—or else it was game over.

I could picture the peach from earlier still on the bush near Proslayer's boots, taunting me.

Seconds. I had seconds to destroy Proslayer—or he'd destroy me.

Then—*there*—the fuse and gunpowder showed up in my bag, side by side. I pulled them out and combined them with the bronze wire. The items glowed as they fused to form an explosive. Not a moment too soon.

Proslayer charged forward into the pagoda. He slashed with both swords toward me.

Unfortunately for Proslayer, I'd exited the house. I dove for the peach and devoured it in two chomps. Seconds later, my health level went up.