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THE  
HALLOWEEN  
RAID

a gamelit short story

# The Halloween Raid

George Saoulidis



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## CHAPTER ONE

*"It's been five years of raiding the Pumpkin, and some patterns have begun to emerge.*

*Appearances seem to alternate between the US and the UK each year, at a random city. Why that is so, nobody knows."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed ran towards the door.

"You better not go anywhere near that Pumpkin, you hear me, Edward James Price?" his mother said, wagging her finger.

"No, mom, I won't. Just going down with the lads, see the raid on the streaming," Ed said, one foot out of the door. He threw his backpack with his gear to the side, next to the trash bin.

"Going to watch your brother raidin'? Good lad. But cheer him on a little bit this time, eh?" she nodded, drying a plate with a towel.

"Bah! He never risks anything, just sticks to the lower levels," Ed waved the comment away.

"Slow and steady wins the raid, that's all it takes," his mother said wisely. "Now come on back and give your ma a kiss, will ya?"

"Of course, mother," Ed said, and lowered his head. He went back inside the house and planted a kiss on her cheek, and a quick hug.



Then he ran off into the night.

Archie was waiting on the corner, all decked up in gear. Arms wide, he complained, "Come on, mate. It's nearly time, we've been waiting on you!"

Ed stopped and put his arms on his knees, panting. "I... Yeah, I needed to get out of the house, sorry." He dropped the backpack on Archie's feet.

Archie rifled through it. "Taser, flashlight. GoPro. Nice. You came through." He added the items to his belt.

"What are you going with?"

Archie grinned, then slid his hands into his pockets. They came out with brass knuckles on them. "These babies."

Ed raised an eyebrow. "Okay, might work. They'll force you to get up close and personal, though."

Archie clenched his fists. "Oh, don't worry. That works for me, I've got a lot of anger to punch through."

Ed sighed. "Charlotte dumped your ass again?"

"Yeah she did, that cunt!" Archie snapped back. "But enough about her, let's get some looting done tonight!" He chuckled like a mad man.

"I... Uh, won't be coming," Ed apologised.

"What the fuck are you on about?"

"I promised my mom."

"Your mom? This is the Halloween Raid, man! Get your head on straight, we won't have another chance for two years," Archie said, incredulous.

"I know... I'm sorry, I can't. I'm gonna watch you at the pub."

Archie looked like he wanted to argue a lot longer, but the Pumpkin was about to open up any minute now. He pointed a finger at Ed, "You're gonna regret this, I'm tellin' ya. Don't you be whining to me about it afterwards."

“Good luck!” Ed said, as his mate ran towards the alien Pumpkin looming over London.

## CHAPTER TWO

*"The raiders have been calling it, 'hardcore mode.' It's a gaming term, it means you only get one chance. If you die in the Pumpkin, you get blinked outside and denied further entry, forever. So many have tried to get back inside, only to fail. But the creepy thing is that one in a thousand deaths is permanent. Or, at least the raider goes missing, never to be seen again. Some say the aliens grab them, some that they fertilise*

*the soil inside. What's certain so far is that one in a thousand raiders that die, never come back. How do we know those numbers? Because millions have already fallen, and the statistics are accurate down to last one."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed went inside the pub. The familiar stench hit him, how people enjoyed these foul establishments was beyond him, with the greasy tables and the aftertaste of beer. Everybody was watching the streaming channels on the monitors.

It had just begun.

The raiders streamed on GoPros, and everybody watched. People bet on raiders, who would fall, who would make it through the night. On one small television were the local boys, his brother's team.

Nobody actually watched that. They were a youth's football team that came of age and decided to go and raid together three years ago. They worked well together and went in as a team, slow and steady, taking on only what they could handle, looting and bringing home a moderate amount of riches to be split evenly among the group.

What a bunch of cowards.

The Halloween Raid started. Beer flowed, chips got munched on, it was all so exciting. Ed watched Henry's stream, they were still at the main entrance, talking it through. He gave instructions to his men and women, all of them athletic seventeen-year-olds, all of them geared up, calm and steady.

The other raiders simply charged the gates that opened up, two-by-two, three-by-three, and some solo nutjobs who thought they could do it better on their own. The gates were massive, with scary gargoyles on top, with a grinning Jack-o'-lantern on each frame. The door creaked and opened slowly, and the raiders rushed inside through the tiny gap, punching each other and rushing to be the first one in.

Ed sighed and looked back at the tiny monitor. Henry was still talking about tactics. "Come on, Henry! People have already gone in, move your ass, you wanker!"

Of course, he couldn't hear him, and nobody inside the pub really paid any attention to a fifteen-year old yelling at a monitor. They were all too busy watching the popular streams. Two raiders had fallen already, and three more were on a ghost.

The ghost rattled his chains and...

Yup, three more down.

Someone groaned and slapped a tenner on his mate's open palm. "You're buying the next round," the sore loser said.

Ed turned his gaze back to his brother's stream. Henry took his team inside, they were the last ones through the door. "Finally," he mumbled, leaning forward.

It was a mess inside. Gear on the floor, blood all over, a raider frozen in fear and very much dead or at least paralysed right at the start of the Raid. It was chaos, it was a massacre. Henry ordered one of his medics to check up on the frozen guy, he was white as a sheet. She checked



his vitals and turned back at Henry. She shook her head side to side. "Okay, watch your flanks! Bobby, eyes up, we don't wanna miss the spiders like last year, alright? Let's move, move, move!"

They marched on like a well-practised team, which they were, actually. Ed had to give them that. They had won a few football trophies, nothing national but enough to get a few mentions on a couple of sports websites.

Their mom was so proud of Henry.

She'd never had let him go raidin' if he hadn't been so careful. And with an entire team covering his ass, nonetheless. Oh, she worried, Ed knew that. But Henry was careful, he was a good lad. Ed should act more like his big-brother Henry, oh, how he hated that saying.

Ed snatched a beer mug from the table next to him. There was a young couple that was all over one another and hadn't touched their drinks, too busy smashing their lips together. They didn't pay no mind to him, so he reached out and snatched

their chips as well. Now, properly equipped to enjoy the Halloween Raid, he focused his attention from his brother's stream to the highlights of the most exciting ones at the big monitors.

### CHAPTER THREE

*"The Ghost with the Rattling chains is a doozy. Goes down pretty fast, but it's almost certain to take at least one raider with it, perhaps more if they're not careful.*

*His loot is always an artifact that serves as anchor, something valuable nearby.*

*That makes it a prime-target for greedy raiders."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

An hour passed, and a good chunk of the raiders had already fallen. Noobs, people who just wanted a thrill, people who were just curious, they all rushed in by the thousands from all over the world.

The American vets were already on the third level of the Pumpkin. They were absolutely tearing through the enemies, looting efficiently, killing monsters with no remorse. Ed followed their progress in awe, both in the streaming and online with his phone. He kept an eye out too on his brother, but they were still on the first floor, mopping up stragglers and looting the spare change.

Don't get him wrong, it was good money. It was the only real money they had ever since their dad died and left them with a ton of debt. Ed wasn't a child, he could appreciate what his brother was doing. It was like a steady job that got you

through the rest of the year, if steady jobs involved going up into an alien Pumpkin on Halloween night and killing monsters till morning.

The real draw wasn't on the first level, nor the second. After those two newbie areas, the difficulty rose so much, that the loot had to make it worth your while. Entire stacks of gold and silver coins, jewels, artifacts, little statues that could be sold for millions on eBay. The loot up there was serious.

It was settle-up-for-life serious.

And dammit, Ed knew so much about the Halloween Raid. Ever since it popped up when he was ten, he read up on everything. He knew everything the raiders had ever discovered.

But the army was strict about the age-limit. Sixteen or nothing.

Dammit!

Next year, his mom said. But next year it would be in America, and there was no way they could spend the cash to fly there, especially with

the surge of travellers from all over the world. They'd need to get a visa six months before that, and..

Well, it wasn't worth the trouble, really. It would be better if he trained up, learnt more, followed the best streams over and over again, and tried in two year's time.

Ed let his head fall on the table. But he wanted to go now! Now! It was right there, the big ol' alien Pumpkin in the skies of London. The blink patch was guarded by the army, sure. But it felt so close..

It wasn't fair. He knew everything, he knew more than Henry. Yet, he was the one sitting back while his big brother looted the leftovers with his loser mates.

And Archie, that lucky bastard. He'd lost a year in school, so he was sixteen. He was raiding right now, Ed had his stream on his phone. Just five people watching, nothing too exciting. But Ed had to admit Archie was doing good, he probably

had made about three thousand pounds already in loot. It wasn't bad at all for a first-timer.

Ed suddenly felt a chill running up his spine. He had a bad feeling all of a sudden, he looked around. Had he been spotted drinking? Nah, everybody was busy. Had something bad happen to his brother? He glanced at the tiny monitor.

Damn, it was too small.

He got up and went in close, right in front of the TV.

"Hey, I'm watching that," a patron said that had way too many pints already.

"I don't think you're watching anything," Ed said and ignored him. He leaned in, squinting at the pixels. Something had caught his attention, something at the corner of his eye...

"Okay, team, we're gonna rest here for five," Henry said, turning his back to the graveyard.

Ed grabbed the monitor. "No! Henry, don't," he shouted at it, but of course, he couldn't hear him.

The team let their guard up and sat down on the cracked marbles.

"The bats, dammit! Henry..." Ed grabbed his phone and called his brother. Of course, it wasn't working. The cellphones were blocked for some weird reason inside the Pumpkin, only the streaming signals went through. "Henry!" Ed screamed, and caught the attention of some of the people in the pub.

"What are you on about, kid?" someone asked, looking at the tiny monitor.

They all saw the undead hands reaching up from the graves and tearing the football team into shreds.



## CHAPTER FOUR

*"The haunted graveyard is a new addition.*

*Previously thought of being a safe place to rest for a bit and regroup, now it has become a death trap.*

*This indicates an intelligence, a Game Master if you will, behind the Pumpkin's layout."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed grabbed his head. He couldn't believe what had just happened. His brother's team, all wiped out. There went their yearly influx of cash. Henry could never raid again, ever.

Ed grabbed his phone and darted off to the blink patch.

Once there, he found the police cordon. An officer stopped him. "You don't look sixteen to me. No entry, sorry."

"I need to see if my brother blinked back," Ed screamed in the poor woman's face.

She pressed her lips together. She knew what he was talking about. She looked back, then nodded him to move it, raising the cordon up.

Ed thanked her and ran inside the quarantined neighbourhood.

Army and police helicopters flew over him so frequently, it simply became a nuisance in the back of his mind. He ran along the empty streets. These had been some of the busiest streets this morning, and now everything was evacuated. You never knew where the Pumpkin would appear exactly, so the authorities couldn't really prepare anything. They simply got everyone ready to mobilise as soon as it showed up.

Ed looked at the fog above him. It was so eerie from up close, he'd only seen it once when he snuck in with his mates. He was so enamoured by the sight that he almost didn't see a tank patrolling the street.

"Oi, watch it!" a soldier said from atop the gunnery.

"Holy shit, man! Those things are faster than I thought," he said to the pissed off soldier.

"Go home or whatever," the soldier ordered and the tank carried on with its patrol.

This exchange would have been weird a few years ago. Now, with the Halloween Raids, everybody just accepted it for a night and moved on with their lives.

He ran to the proper spot, he could see it.

The blink patch, a piece of land full of pumpkins. They simply grew all of a sudden when the Pumpkin appeared. It was a grassy plaza in southern London, a place where people would go for a picnic on a sunny day. Now, it was full of soldiers and guns readied, and it had a glowing patch of orange mist in the middle.

Panting, he ran close to it.

A soldier stopped him, shoving him back with a firm hand on the chest. "Hold on."

"My brother. I need to see if he blinked back," Ed panted, struggling to form words.

The soldier stood to the side, his hand back on his rifle. "Make it quick."

Ed found the football team in the middle of the patch. A group of medics rushed at them, doing

triage. They didn't have any wounds on them, nothing carried over from the raid to the real world, but everybody felt they needed a check up anyway.

He ran up in the middle of the mess. There was Mairy, and John, and that fat goalkeeper, and Daisy.. "Where's Henry?" he asked, shaking her violently by the shoulders.

She looked out of it, in shock. "I-I don't know. They grabbed us. One of them ate my fingers," she stuttered, squealing the words. The medic pushed him away from his patient.

"Henry!" Ed shouted, cupping his mouth. The blink patch wasn't that big. Even with the mist, you could see clearly, the army had a circle of Xenon lights shining straight inside it. "Henry!"

No reply.

"Is he still alive?" Ed asked another footballer.

"No, mate. I saw him going down first, no way," he replied, shaking his head.

"Fuck. Fuck!" Ed said and grabbed his head.  
"Fuck!"

What would he tell his mother? What would happen to them now? Henry was missing. The blink back was instantaneous, thousands had done it, millions basically.

He looked around at the football team. They were all blinked back. Only his brother seemed to be the unlucky one.

Ed looked to his right, at the medics and the boys and girls in shock, gearless, penniless.

Then he looked to his left, at the illuminated blink patch full of alien pumpkins.

He knew everything about the Raids.

He made a choice at that moment.

He ran to the left at full sprint. The soldiers tried to stop him, but he dodged their grasp. "Hey, kid! Don't do it," the soldier said, a black guy with an honest face.

"I have to," Ed said and jumped inside the pumpkin patch.

“You have no gear, you nutjob!” the black soldier said. He unclipped his helmet and threw it at his feet.

Ed experienced the blink up for the first time.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*"Some raiders have described the blink as that feeling in your stomach when the plane hits an air pocket.*

*Others, like a tingling in their loins.*

*A few experience the worst pain imaginable by being dematerialised in ways we have no physics yet to describe."*



*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed found himself inside the Patch. He knew this place by heart, he had studied it, seen it so many times.

“Wow!” he said, then his stomach lurched and he emptied it all to the side. After he felt better, he looked around. He kicked the army helmet at his feet, it was a standard-issue, Kevlar helmet. Heavier than he expected.

Having no gear whatsoever, Ed put it on his head and secured the strap on his chin.

He explored the first level. By now, raiders had wiped it all clean. Even his mate Archie would have moved on to the next level. But, he knew where he would be heading to. They had planned this out together. Second floor, towards the witch's house. Everybody knew that the American vets went straight for the witch, she dropped a lot of valuable loot and they always wanted to kill her first. Then they just left the area, but

it still had a bunch of monsters around and plenty of lower-difficulty traps.

Ed checked his phone for the time. Yeap, Archie would be almost there by now, if it all went as planned. If he hadn't been injured, or killed, that was.

He heard the rattling of the chain, the sound he was so familiar with from all the streams he had studied for years. His body moved out of the way before he had even registered the threat. Dodging to the side, he fell on a broken crate and got wooden splinters in his hand.

*1 damage taken.*

"What the fuck?"

He turned around to see the Rattler Ghost pulling his chain back slowly, preparing for a second attack. He shook himself out of his immobility and grabbed a pointy piece of wood, practically a tent pole. He threw himself forward on the ground towards the retreating chain, and

shoved the pole into the ground, pinning the chain there.

The Rattler kept pulling on the chain but it was anchored on the ground. Ed got up and gave the tent pole another good kick downwards to make sure it didn't budge. Then he ran away, out of his effective range.

"Take that, stupid Rattler!" Ed said, excited.

*Experience gained.*

*Level up!*

*You are now a level 1 Trickster.*

"What the actual fuck?" Ed shouted, shaking the notifications away. "What are these? Nobody ever spoke about this."

## CHAPTER SIX

*"After interviewing hundreds of raiders from all over the world and from all cultural and economic backgrounds over email, telephone, videocall or in person, one is left with a feeling of unease.*

*One thing that you can't put your finger on, but it's certainly there.*

*One always leaves the interview thinking that the raiders are not saying everything they've seen."*

## *The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed stumbled along the newbie path, looking back constantly. The Rattler was pinned there, basically harmless now. It wasn't smart enough to tug himself out, it just kept pulling the chain, the chain didn't budge, so it just roamed the circle that the length of the chain allowed. Any raider could hear it from a mile away, the Rattler was very, very noisy, hence the name.

Then why did Ed didn't hear it coming? Because he needed to get his head out of his ass, that's why. Also, this soldier's helmet seriously decreased his hearing ability. Well, it was better than getting an axe to the head.

He moved on, pinning two more Rattlers on his way. They had begun to respawn. Those were the initial dead monsters that respawned first, since they were killed first on the early rush of raiders. The entire level would respawn completely at midnight. He checked his phone. He still had

one hour, but it wasn't that much. Archie's plan was to loot something from the Witch's House before the respawn, if he waited too long, he was screwed.

And what was this whole thing with the notifications in his field of view? There was a soft ding sound, and the text simply appeared before him, just like a game. He was a level one Trickster? What did that mean?

And, more importantly, why the hell didn't any of the millions of raiders say anything about these things? There were streams, there were recaps, there were after-raid interviews, even fiction shows about the Halloween Raid. How could every single person have kept this a secret?

It had to be the aliens doing it, somehow.

But it didn't really matter right now. Ed needed to either get back to the blink patch and go home to safety where he would be poor and without a big brother, or soldier on and get some

loot. His brother would still be missing, but it would be better if he could find some treats.

Wait! Gear. What about it? He had none.

Ed started to look around for fallen raiders, and there were dozens. He pulled some pads from a big guy but he couldn't use his breast piece. He found a telescopic baton from a woman, that one was handy and very illegal in the UK. And he found a flashlight on a third guy, who had tripped straight into an obvious trap next to a tree.

Okay, he felt marginally better. He had some protection on, a bat and a way to see in the dark levels of the Pumpkin. That was something. Then why was his heart pounding like it wanted to escape his chest cavity?

This was what he wanted. Not his brother missing, but this adventure.

Grinning, he chased another Rattler ghost and pinned it down.

*Experience gained.*

*Level up!*

*You are now a level 2 Trickster.*

Oh, he felt pumped up. All his preparation, all his research, nothing, nothing had prepared him for this.

This was exciting!

Ed went around the graveyard. He could hear whispers in the wind, his eye caught movement at the edge of his vision, the leaves swayed and made shadows on the ground. He gulped. This was where his brother had fallen. Nobody knew what happened to the one-in-a-thousand that died inside the Pumpkin and never blinked back. Some said the aliens kept them, others that they were probed and then dissected for experiments. There were even more outlandish theories online after those popular ones, but the fact was, that nobody knew.

He balled his hands into fists and decided to face the undead. No, the strategic side of his brain said that he didn't have time, and he didn't know much about these newfound undead in the graveyard. But he wanted to measure up to them.



He held the baton in his hand and decided to not turn on the flashlight. He kept the dark spots in his peripheral vision, that part of the eye was better in darkness than the central one that we focused with. He walked slowly between the graves. Some were cracked, a couple were open. All were scary. The mausoleums loomed over and around him.

Okay, he knew that the raiding experience felt real yet it was somehow fake. The aliens made it feel real, he guessed? Like the holodeck. How else could you have monsters and magic and then have them respawn after a while? They weren't robotic like a theme park. They were something else entirely. But, he couldn't help but feel the shiver down his spine as he walked between the graves. He *knew*, nobody was actually buried there. He *knew* this was nothing more than an elaborate and very convincing set for a movie. Even so, he was on edge.

Bone clicked. Dead flesh slapped marble.

The undead.

And it was coming right at him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*"So, why risk it?"*

*Is the question we ask all the raiders we interview.*

*They all say something along the lines of, 'the loot is the excuse, but the thrill is what makes it worth it.'"*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed snapped the telescopic baton open with a flick of his wrist and slammed it on the undead. It was of the zombie variety, slow and smelly. He cracked the skull with a meaty thud that made him wince more than it affected the zombie.

It didn't seem to phase it the slightest. The zombie raised its hands to grab him.

"Shite!" he cursed and dodged the grab of undeath, and he jumped on top of a tomb. Perhaps having the high ground would give him an advantage in this.

*High ground: temporary bonus to attacks*

Really now? This actually worked? Excited, he brought his baton down on the zombie again and again. Bits of bone and rotting flesh flew all over and on him, but he didn't stop. "This isn't real, this isn't real," he kept saying as he pulverised the zombie into pulp.

*Experience gained.*

Panting, he grabbed his right arm as if it still wanted to attack in panic. "Fuck me!" he said aloud. More zombies came out of the ground, their hands pawing through muddy dirt.

Okay, he had faced whatever he had come here to face, his brother's killer and whatnot. Time to leave. He jumped from grave to grave. For some reason, he thought that the zombies could only locate him while he was stepping on the ground.

*Insight gained.*

*Permanent bonus against zombies.*

Wow! Just wow. He was starting to love this raiding thing, even more than he ever expected to. He stepped on a couple more tombstones then jumped back on the ground, as the next ones were too far apart. The zombies shuffled behind him, but they were too slow. Ed was outta there in a mad dash.

The stairway to the second level had gargoyles on it. He tapped his chin, thinking it through. It

was clear that none of the raiders had fought them, since there were no bodies around, no scuff marks on the stone, no signs of struggle. But the gargoyles were clearly perched up at the top of the stairwell, and, this being Halloween Raid, Ed didn't want to risk just rushing up there.

But his stupid stunt with the graveyard had cost him precious time already. It was almost midnight, and he needed to find Archie, fast.

Think, Ed, think. You've gone over weeks of streams from raiders. What about gargoyles? Well, he remembered one where the raiders just teamed up and smashed them up with hammers, only losing two in the process. That was obviously out of the question. What else?

Well, he actually happened to have the right weapon at hand, the baton would deliver proper damage to stone. That was until it broke in his hand or when the gargoyle simply stomped Ed into a puddle of blood.

What did he have?

He had a phone. A phone could vibrate, and that was a distraction. Hmmm...

Ed snuck all the way to the other side of the stairwell, and set up his phone's alarm in five minutes. He placed it on hard enough rock that should carry the noise and the vibrations all the way up the stairs. Then he slid into the shadows and waited at the other side, across the base. He had a clear line to the stairwell.

He held his breath.

The alarm went off.

The gargoyles came to life and flew down the stairs. It was now or never. He sprinted up the stairs as soon as the gargoyle's attention was elsewhere, and he made it halfway up there.

It would seem he was gonna make it!

But... Nope. One of the gargoyles spotted him and strafed in the air, its yellow eyes gleaming as it swooped in for the kill.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*“Some experts believe that the strange behaviour of the veteran raiders is due to PTSD, but if you look closely, it’s more than that.*

*They’re itching for more the next year, planning for it the entire time, training hard, nothing else in their mind.*

*They abandon relationships, personal goals, families.*

*It’s like they are junkies and the only way they can get their fix is during the next*



*Halloween, up on the Pumpkin."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed dodged the stony claw that came for his head. But he wasn't fast enough, and got a nasty gash on his helmet. Thank goodness for that one! He jumped down the stairs to avoid the gargoyle by using gravity, then, as soon as it went for another go at him, he threw himself on the stairs.

That forced the gargoyle to get down pretty low.

It's talons slashed his back and it hurt like a motherfucker. "Ow..." Ed whimpered, chocking his scream. He didn't want to broadcast his location to the rest of the gargoyles. The one that slashed him went straight for the big statue that was decorating the stairs. It went straight through it, smashing it to bits, making the gargoyle scream as it fell.

*Insight gained.*

*Permanent bonus against gargoyles.*

Right on! The other gargoyles made a guttural sound that clearly meant, 'Don't worry buddy, we're coming to help you.'

Time to get outta there. Ed soldiered on, his back hurting, up and up the stairs. He finally got to the top and threw himself inside, away from the sight of the gargoyles. They kept screeching behind him but he was too far away, and it seemed to him that they had a guardian radius that they never left.

Ed groaned, holding his shoulder. That one was hurt too from all that throwing himself around. He unclipped his helmet and held it in his hands. There were three deep gashes along its top. If that was his bare head, he'd be left with half a brain right now. This was way too lucky. He needed to be extra careful now.

He looked around. He knew the layout of course, but still, he took a moment to feel it in his bones. This level was more on the urban side. There were little houses with candles and creepy

windows, streets where people walked, that one was always strange as they were not monsters and didn't drop loot, raiders had checked of course, and atop the hill, the Witch's House.

Ed found a t-shirt from one of the fallen raiders and replaced his own, which was shredded and bloody. The wounds wouldn't carry over when he blinked back, he knew that, but it was still a deep cut and it hurt a lot, degrading his mobility. And mobility was pretty much all he had to go on, plus a bit of knowledge.

But the Raid was nothing like what he thought. He didn't even imagine such a thing as the notifications or the insight bonuses. And the Trickster levels? How awesome was that? It totally fit his mindset, if this was a videogame and he had a choice of class, Trickster was definitely the one he'd pick.

Okay, enough procrastinatin', as his mother liked to say. Ed groaned in pain as he stood up and started walking towards the Witch's House.



## CHAPTER NINE

*"The layout of the challenges is definitely game-like.*

*There are roaming groups of monsters, traps, chests with loot, big bosses in each level.*

*The first raiders to get to them in the limited time available get awarded with the most riches."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed stomped on a laughing pumpkin. Those were irritating. He lifted his leg, bits of sploshy pumpkin dripping from it. At least the pumpkin had finally stopped laughing. He avoided the people that walked around the town, he found them creepy. What were they really? Nobody knew. Some said they were aliens posing as friendlies so they could see us struggle up close and laugh at us. But, of course, some nasty raiders had slain them to test out the theory and there was no retaliation. And they respawned at midnight, so that made no sense. Nope, they seemed to just be NPCs, non-player characters that fleshed out the world.

Whatever they were, Ed gave them a wide berth.

He walked up the winding path. The hill wasn't that large but the whole positioning of it, the house looming over the creepy town beneath it, everything about it made it look like a challenge.

Someone had given a lot of time and effort into making this spooky AF.

He went for his phone to check the time. A tiny bit of panic as he found nothing, then mentally slapped himself. Yeah. No phone no more, chalk that up to Halloween night's losses. He tried to think of how much time he had left. He was certain he still had some if he hurried, but it would be close.

Ed watched the slain spiders along the path. The raiders had gone up here and pretty much wiped everything out on their way to the level's boss, the Witch. She wasn't that hard to beat, but Ed knew that the American vets made it seem like a simple task. In truth, it was quite hard what they did, the speed rush to the boss while ignoring all other enemies, leaving them behind as a speedbump for all the other thousands of raiders.

The ones after that second wave had looted everything, stripping it clean. Ed felt he should be looking for loot too, it would be a shame to go



through all of this and not get anything out of it.

Then he remembered his big brother, and felt a tinge of sorrow. He had relied on him to bring home the bacon. Now that task fell on his shoulders. Mother already worked two jobs and still couldn't make enough money to make it through the month.

He gritted his teeth. He had two goals: Find Archie. Then loot something and bring it back home. Slow and steady wins the raid.

He knew he didn't have time to scope out the place. But a tiny bit was important. The witch's yard was full of 'Keep out' signs and scary-looking dolls that, well, made you wanna keep out. Some of those were trapped, he knew that, so he carefully stepped between them and made sure he didn't disturb anything.

That's when he saw the bat.

That damn bat, the same one that showed up over Henry. He was certain of it. Somehow, it felt like it was out of place. Sure, she fit right in in this Halloween setting, but it wasn't her appearance. She seemed... Intelligent. Too intelligent. Like a security drone that came to check up on an intruder.

Ed considered throwing something at her, then thought better of it. That was certain to attract attention and nobody wanted that right now. He found the courage to through the skeletons in the witch's yard and walk up to the door. It was left open by an inconsiderate raider. If the Witch wasn't pissed about getting slain, she sure would have been pissed about that, if she was anything like his mom.

He peeked inside. The house's walls were at weird angles, bending at the top, making you feel claustrophobic. He gulped and went in.

And then the door creaked and slammed shut behind him.

## CHAPTER TEN

*"The experience of the Halloween Raid is said to have no equal.*

*Some master manipulator of human emotion seems to have set this up, and this fact in itself is very worrisome.*

*How do those aliens know what humans fear the most?*

*Are they fine-tuning their findings, using the raiders as guinea pigs?*

*And for what purpose?"*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed yelped and pulled on the door handle. It came apart in his hand. "Shit, bollocks," he whispered and looked around. It was freakin' dark. His heart pounded for a moment, then he remembered he had a flashlight.

He clicked it on while covering the top. He let just a ray through, just enough for him to see the corridor.

Okay, now he felt claustrophobic, the earlier thing was just a rehearsal.

"Archie?" he whispered.

Nothing.

"Archie?" he whispered again after a few timid paces. "Bloody, fucking..." he muttered. How was he supposed to find him? He was certain his mate couldn't have come here any sooner, he was still a newbie and their plan was tailored to his abilities. Archie was supposed to get inside at

the last minute, grab something worthwhile and get out before the respawn.

Which Ed was certain was any minute now. But they didn't know about the doors slamming them in. What if that's what happened to Archie, and he thought he couldn't get out? What would his mate do at that situation, other than crap his pants?

He'd look for a window.

Ed gulped again and let some light through his flashlight. He walked slowly down the corridor and into the left. Why left? Well, he had to pick one, and left was as good as any.

Then a cackling laughter echoed all over.

He froze. No, it couldn't be. Had she respawned already? The level's boss, the one that took an entire group of American vets to take down?

Damn.

He took one more step. The cackling had stopped for now, but that didn't actually make him feel any better. He looked back where he came

from, there was a smudgy line of something dark. He almost yelped, then realised he had tracked mud inside, it was all over his boots. Trying to avoid those deadly lawn ornaments had forced him to get through a muddy patch.

He turned forward again and went into the first room he found.

He wished he hadn't. The room had a boiling cauldron in the middle, with carcasses of animals hanging up to dry all over the place. Bats, frogs, foxes. Herbs and twigs, jars with viscous liquid inside. He leaned in to see.

An eyeball floated to meet his gaze.

He yelped like a little girl. Then covered his mouth. The broth was still bubbling, but that didn't mean someone had been here a while ago. Broths were left for hours, he knew that. The raider inside him prodded him to check for valuables, but it didn't seem there were none in this room. Only those that could be sold on eBay

for enthusiasts, and his choices ranged from creepy to creepiest.

Nope, he wasn't gonna pocket a cut-up frog.

Oh, a voodoo doll! Okay, that one might be worth something. He reached in and took it. It was crudely made from something like potato-sack cloth, two hands, two feet, one head, just a simulacrum of a person. It didn't have any needles on it, else he'd have left it alone. He pocketed it, and looked around. The rest was either rotting or disgusting.

He left the room and went to the one across from it.

"Psst!" someone made a sound. He probably hid behind those beds. They were small in size, definitely child-like.

Ed let some more of the light shine through his fingers. "Hey, I'm here to help. Who is it?"

"Ed?" a voice older than a child's said. Then Archie stood up. "How in bloody hell did you get

here? Never mind, it's great to see you. Now, please tell me you didn't touch the voodoo doll."

"Uh..." Ed's eyes darted around the place.

"You didn't!" Archie whined. "You bloody didn't, please tell me that..."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*"The traps inside the Pumpkin are elaborate, and they keep changing.*

*Even those who study the streams meticulously never know what to expect.*

*At first some accused the raiders of withholding information or worse, spreading misinformation to thin out the competition.*

*It was quickly proven that the Halloween Raid is simply... Evolving."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

Ed and Archie ran for their lives down the dark corridor. The Witch flew on her broom and threw green bolts of magic at them.

“Strafe!” Ed yelled.

“What?”

“Zig-zag, make it harder for her to hit you!” Ed yelled again.

The two mates did just that, stumbling along the corridor that somehow seemed much, much longer than the one they had initially walked coming in.

“Can’t I just give her the voodoo doll back?” Ed shouted as they ran.

“Nah, she’s pissed now, takes her about five minutes to calm down.

“I thought the vets killed her, how can she be alive?” Ed asked, narrowly dodging a green bolt that smashed in the wall and sent splinters in his face.

"I think they found a way to trick her. The doll serves as aggro for the tank, she chases the guy that picks it up. So, they... I dunno, fought her away from the house while the others looted it?" Archie flinched as another bolt nearly took his leg off.

"Well, crap."

"Craptaculous," Archie agreed.

"What have you done to my house?" the Witch shouted. "All this mud. You bloody mutts! I'll suck the marrow from your bones, you hear me?"

Archie made a run for another room, but Ed stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "What?"

"Shh... Hear that?" Ed asked.

"What's that? Brushing?" Archie whispered.

"Sweeping. She doesn't like a mess."

*Insight gained.*

*Permanent bonus against the Witch.*

Ed made a fist and punched the air. "Right on!" he whispered, feeling good about himself. "I got an insight again."

"What are you on about?"

"The levels. The insights about the monsters?"

Archie looked at him as if he was speaking Chinese. "The what now?"

"The levels. I'm a level two Trickster. What class are you?"

"What levels, mate? Did you hit your head or somethin'?" Archie whispered, checking out his skull under the helmet.

Ed pushed him away. "No, the levels, man! Never mind, I know what we need to do."

"Share it with the rest of us, then!"

"She stopped chasing us and started to sweep the floor, because I tracked mud in."

"So?"

"So, we need to make a mess."

Archie kicked the big cauldron and tipped it over. It took three tries, but he managed it. The

broth spilt all over the room, bubbling through the cracks in the floorboards.

“What have you done, you filthy children?” the Witch screamed from somewhere that was too close for comfort.

“Okay, get ready. As soon as she clears the door, we make a run for it,” Ed said, hiding behind the cupboard.

Archie nodded in agreement, gripping his brass knuckles.

The Witch came flying on her broom. “Ah! My stew!” she said and stepped off it. She started to sweep the little boiling bits from all over the floor.

Ed made a run for it. Archie didn't hesitate to follow. They both ran to the main corridor and towards the door.

It was still shut. Ed tried it, rocked it a bunch of times. It rattled but stayed shut, as if it was enchanted.

"Bollocks. Now what?" Archie said, panting and holding his hair up on his forehead.

"Seen any windows?" Ed shrugged.

"No, mate! If there were any, would I still be in here? Did you think I found the accommodations a bit too cosy or somethin'?"

"All right..." Ed bit his lip. "Let's think. A witch, two beds for children, but they're not here. So, they escaped, perhaps? How?"

"They fit through somewhere small?"

"Right! No, wait." Ed fished out the voodoo doll from his pocket. No, it wasn't a voodoo doll. It was a children's doll. "Archie, the kids are still in the bedroom. I think."

"Nah, I was in there for so long, they weren't."

"But they're small, right? Aren't there places for them to hide?"

"Uh, sure." Archie winced. "No, I don't wanna go back there."

"We have to," Ed shrugged, flailing the doll around.

Ed placed the doll onto the bed and stepped back.

"See, nothing happens, let's move it!" Archie complained, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Wait for it," Ed raised a finger.

Sure enough, a creak came from the closet. A previously unseen panel slid to the side and a little girl came out. She looked scared, then her eyes brightened when she saw the doll. She immediately went for it and hugged it tight.

"Is she an NPC?" Archie asked, eyes wide.

"Seems so."

"Thank you sirs," the girl said, squeezing her doll with her tiny hands.

"Ah!" Archie made a tiny yelp.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Ed smiled at her.

*Insight gained.*

*Permanent bonus against the Witch.*

*Experience gained.*

*Level up!*

*You are now a Level 3 Trickster.*

"Yes!" Ed punched the air.

Archie seemed as if he was reading something in the space in front of him. "What in bloody hell is this?"

Ed smiled. "This, my friend, is what the veteran raiders are doing."

"Which is what?"

"The quests, mate! The quests."

"How does that help us now?" Archie said, his eyes darting at the direction of the pissed off Witch. "She's about to clean up and come for us."

"Hey, girl, can you show us a way out of here?" Ed asked softly.

The girl nodded and walked to a spot on the wall. She pointed at a floor panel.

"Nice!" Ed pushed it aside and it revealed a way out from underneath the house.



"That's a tight squeeze," Archie said.

"We can make it," Ed assured his friend.

They did get out of the Witch's House. Both smiling, they stepped foot into her yard. Then the midnight respawn happened, and the skeletons came back to life.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*"The ones who bring in loot, cash it in for significant amounts of money."*

*The Halloween Raid podcast*

"Ah!" Archie screamed and punched the skull of a skeleton.

"Take that!" Ed joined in his mate and slammed the baton onto another's spine, making it crumble. He took a hit, though.

*2 damage taken.*

*1 damage taken.*

*Experience gained.*

"Let's not try and keep this up," Archie said, punching his way through the skeletons.

"Agreed." Ed followed the path his mate was making with his brass-knuckles.

Very soon, they were out of the witch's yard and back to the downhill path. They didn't stop to rest, they simply let their tired feet take them down, drawn by the gravity.

"Whoo!" Archie said as soon as they reached the bottom. He wiped his sweat off his face.

"That was a good one, yeah," Ed agreed and threw himself on the ground. "Ouch. Everything hurts."

"Yeah, but we need to move, there will be roaming monster packs, and we can't handle them."

Ed sighed. "Okay." He picked himself up, struggling all the way, his joints complaining.

"How come you're here, anyway. Not that I'm complaining."

They started to walk. "Uh... Henry is missing." Saying it out loud made it real.

Archie looked at his mate. "I'm so sorry, man. Are you sure he didn't blink back?"

Ed nodded up and down, biting his lips. "Yeap. The whole team blinked back except him." He felt tears forcing themselves out.

Archie patted him on the back and gave him a quick hug. "I'm so sorry, Eddie."

"Thanks."

They walked in silence for a while, just heading towards the creepy little town.

"All this bother and I didn't even loot anything," Ed realised. "I'm a sucky raider, aren't I?"

"What are you on about?" Archie said and pulled his backpack at the front.

"What, did you loot something?"

Archie's eyes twinkled. "Something? I wager I have about two-hundred thousand quid worth of stuff here."

"Fuck off!" Ed reached in and fished out a bunch of loot. Coins, gems, a few intricate boxes. Ed smiled bitterly, then put them all back.

"It's all right, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Good on you, mate."

"Why the long face, Ed?"

"I didn't get to loot anything," Ed shrugged.

"You stupid twat! This is ours."

"Nah..."

Archie stopped him and eyed him hard. "I said, this is ours. You helped me with the gear, you came and got me out of there. I was definitely

gonna get blinked back leaving the loot behind. Get serious. You and me, we're splitting this, it's more than enough."

Ed opened his mouth and tried to find the words. "I... I don't know how to thank you, Archie."

"Nonsense. You know how. We're gonna get tickets to America for next year and we're gonna come raidin' together, that's how." Archie put an arm around his mate's neck.

Ed chuckled. "Okay. Yeah. We can do that. My mom is gonna kill us both, but we can do it."

Archie pfted. "We just dealt with the Witch. Think we can't handle your mother?"

"No!" Ed replied, frowning. "We can't!"

"I know!" Archie chuckled. "We bloody can't!"

The end.

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