



# DRAGON'S DESTINY

A Tale of the Near Future

So, what happens to your game characters after your final logoff? What will happen to the piles of goods, some of which you paid real money to acquire after your fingers stop working the controller? Don't you own them? Even if they are just a collection of electronic impulses, technically they are real property because money changed hands. What happens to the characters you worked so hard to build up? Will the laws be adjusted to allow others to inherit them? Or will something else happen?

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**N**athan Hanna had been in tougher spots, surrounded by hordes of screaming aliens, set upon by roving hordes of monsters, or jumped by fighter groups diving out of the sun. He'd been a game player in virtual reality since he was eleven. In those days, you either played a monthly fee or you could buy the Everlasting Pass and never pay a monthly fee again. Nathan had bugged his parents for months until they finally relented. He got his EP the Christmas after his twelfth birthday. Not long after this, the offer was removed without explanation. Twelve-year-old Nathan imagined the company simply preferred to get a monthly income. At the time, it was off his dad's credit card, so he thought no more about it.

The game had always worked out well for Nathan. He'd been collecting equipment for years. He had a massive stash of unopened drop boxes. Many were the results of cheat codes, but hey... it's game the game, right? All his friends were players he'd met in the game. In fact, his associates were so remote, it took the authorities a week to discover his body.

Yea, Nathan Hanna was dead. But being dead wasn't the unusual part. No, the unusual part was that Nathan hadn't noticed. He'd been aware the implants had been extraordinarily comfortable the past week. Normally if he used them for more than twelve hours at a stretch it tended to give him a headache. Not only had his head felt comfortable, but the smells had gone away. Mrs. Margutian's coffee bean odor had always made him hungry. In fact, he'd always counted on her to remind him to eat. At first, Nathan merely figured she'd gone on vacation or out Christmas shopping. Next, he simply forgot to think about why she wasn't busy brewing her South American blend.

At one point he must have fallen asleep. He didn't remember changing the game, but he found himself in an icy tundra environment surrounded by a horde of three-foot-tall green goblins. They reminded him of pigmies with long, pointed ears. Nathan could smell the ice. The cold aroma made him realize what was going on, he remembered signing up several years ago as a perpetual beta tester. This must be a new beta. The game had never been good at creating smells before. It must be a new feature they were experimenting with. He looked forward to filling out the response card.

Nathan still had his usual human adventurer form, but the goblins didn't seem to care. His avatar was much better built than he was in real life, it was practically musclebound. And, unlike Nathan, didn't need a wheelchair to get around.

He found himself inside a massive enclosure build of rough, poorly constructed, eight-foot-high stone walls. It wasn't very tall for a town wall unless, of course, you were a goblin. Most of the interior was a snow-covered wasteland. At the far northern end, where Nathan was, there was a low rise. It was filled with crudely constructed mud huts and evergreen-branch covered lean-tos. One rickety watchtower stood in the corner, it tall wooden stilts tied together with some type of rawhide. All in all, it seemed sturdy enough, but he wouldn't want to be up there in a heavy breeze.

Outside, Nathan could see a whole band of marauders dressed as Vikings. They were definitely in-game non-player characters. Not only were they riding horses, but they had those stupid horns on their helmets the designers always used to identify NPCs as raiders. Nathan scratched his head. The numbers were about equal, but the Vikings had the advantage of height. The length of the wall also meant the entire parameter would be impossible to defend. Worse still, the walls seemed unfinished, there were no battlements to hide behind. Anyone on top was in the open, exposed. The designers loved to throw

these impossible situations at the players. The goal was to make the players pay money to get improvements or reinforcements. Greedy bastards.

Right now, the Viking marauders seemed content to ride around the southern part of the walls screaming at the top of their lungs. This, of course, was a delay to give the player's credit card time to be approved. What the designers hadn't reckoned with was Nathan Phillip's overly large collection of drop boxes. He'd amassed them from a cheat code on the Uvids and had activated it a few hundred times before the developers found out about it and shut it down.

He glanced at the ridiculous looking ring he wore on his right hand. The impressively large ruby covering the top was bigger than his knuckle. He'd bought it during a special event years ago, so it wasn't one of the subtle ones you got with the current game. He flipped open the stone to reveal a small red button in a hidden compartment. He pressed the button and closed the ring back up. He glanced curiously at the events unfolding. The goblins were still roaming about undirected.

Nathan took charge. He directed himself at a goblin who looked as if he had some importance. "You'd better get your clan armed with bows. Say, what's your name anyway?"

"Braatz," the goblin with the fancy-dress feathered cap of a chief replied. Each of the feathers sprang from a seashell that must have come from miles away as there was no shoreline in sight, let alone a beach. There was only a shallow fast-running river on the walls' east side. The kind you see in the mountains, far from the sea.

"Well don't stand around gawking," Nathan insisted to the goblin ruler, "get to it."

Braatz yelled something in a guttural language right before all hell broke loose. Up in the sky, a dark shape loomed, its shadow crossing the ground passing over the snow-covered walls and heading straight toward them. The goblins started running around in panic. Arms waving, voices screaming, teeth chattering. The last part, with the teeth, turned out to make a truly terrible din.

"That will be for me," Nathan announced. Although he was quite sure no one was listening.

The parachute drifted slowly over the compound, a bulky box at its base. The container drifted casually over the southern end of the town. It landed on a smallish mud hut and flatted it with a crunch as it came to rest on the ground. The black silk parachute drifted down behind it and settled to the earth as the goblins continued screaming mindlessly.

In the center of the metal shipping container, a large red button flashed a light menacingly. Nathan approached it and pressed the control. The container's lid opened, and Nathan reached in and removed the contents. With one hand he grabbed a dark green ammunition box, in the other, he held an old Russian Spetsnaz Dragunov SVD sniper rifle. Once the crate was empty, it disappeared along with the dark parachute.

Braatz approached cautiously. "What in the name of an unholy dragon dropping is that?" he asked. Goblins began to gather around with what seemed like a little less panic in their eyes as Nathan started climbing up to the top of the rickety observation tower.

“This,” Nathan Hanna replied with a sly smile, “is *my* bow.” He stopped and looked down at the assembled crowd about halfway up. “You should be getting your bows. NOW,” he hollered. “I’m not doing this all by myself you know.”

Goblins started scampering in all directions as Nathan returned to ascending the poorly-constructed ladder. He crossed his fingers hoping the dry wood would hold his extra weight. Your average goblin had considerably less mass than he did. Annoyingly, the game played close attention to this type of physics. Chances are it would only break at the top. Designers were such bastards. On the other hand, Nathan corrected himself, it was probably the greedy marketing people.

Gaining the top, Nathan unfolded the weapon’s legs and rested them on the tower’s crude railing. He released the safety and drew a bead on one of the Vikings in the scope. Nathan carefully lined up the crosshairs. The rifle cracked as he pulled the trigger and he could see the Viking in the scope fall from his horse. Several goblins crowded the rail to get a better look.

“Nice stone thrower,” one of them remarked.

“What’s your name, green bean?”

“Putz,” the goblin retorted.

“Nathan Hanna. Nice to meet you. You a player character?”

“A what?”

“Never mind. It’s still nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

“Lead”

“You want some lead?” the small creature queried him.

“No, I mean it’s a lead thrower, not a rock thrower.”

“Oh, I see. Are you going to throw another one?”

“Sounds about right,” Nathan murmured. Looking down the scope he pulled the trigger several more times. With each crack of the rifle, another Viking fell from his horse. For a few of them, their helmets exploded with a satisfying spray of red. One seemed to totter on his mount for a bit before falling to the snow-covered ground.

This seemed to enrage the raiders. They began to throw themselves from their horses, grabbing on to the top of the stone wall and pulling themselves up. Nathan took out several more as they gained the crest of the wall. Finally, the magazine fell from the bottom of the rifle and clattered to the floor empty.

“Hey Putz,” Nathan asked, “Open that box other there and pass me another one of those will ya?”

The goblin put down his bow and fiddled with the box. It took him a moment to figure out how the clasp worked, but he finally got the box open. Reaching inside he pulled out a second magazine and handed it

to Nathan. He slapped it into the rifle until he heard the telltale click and resumed his deadly task. More Vikings gained the walls even as Nathan picked them off.

Putz gave him a mournful look. "What happens when you run out of these things?"

"We start throwing real rocks." Nathan gave the small green creature a wry grin. "Hopefully they get tired of their losses and withdraw before we get to that stage."

"That never happens."

Nathan knew the mythological creature had a point. The game designers had no concept of morale. Opponents kept coming at you to the last man. It was the most unrealistic part of the game. Braatz, on the other hand, seemed thrilled with their refusal to give up.

He grinned, displaying an impossible number of sharply pointed teeth, "Can you get that one? How about that one?" Braatz seemed elated as he directed Nathan's fire and the raiders fell one by one at what seemed like his command.

"You want to pass me another mag while you're over there?"

Braatz looked confused. Putz responded by taking out a magazine and handing it to his chief. Braatz passed it along. "This is better than spell casting," the goblin chief declared enthusiastically. His beady red eyes were practically glowing in excitement.

Several magazines later, a mass of the raiders had rushed to the middle of the compound, inside the walls. Goblin archers let loose a flight of arrows, but they thudded into the snow uselessly, their targets still too far away. A goblin shaman began chanting in the Pig Latin squeals the goblins used as a language. He shook his staff in the air with a great deal of fervor, but the next volley still fell short.

In the meantime, Nathan kept picking off the Vikings as they advanced, their axes raised in ruthless defiance. Although their tracks in the snow trailed a dark red. By now, the ammunition box was half empty. A line of goblins took form at the edge of the ramshackle village holding rusty and nicked swords. To Nathan, they resembled kitchen knives more than actual weapons, but they seemed comfortable in the creature's hands. They stood ready to take on the Viking horde when it finally approached.

Once they got in range of the goblin arrows, they split up so they would make a less collective target. Nathan didn't mind, he was still picking them off regardless. He took a glance at the ammo box and sighed. Doing a quick calculation in his head he came to a disappointing conclusion. Not enough rounds. The line of goblins outside the village might be able to hold them off, but he doubted it. They didn't seem up to the task. Not against a horde of pissed-off Vikings.

By now, the Raiders had caught on to the fact they were doing this the hard way. Riding up the west side of the wall they turned the corner and started throwing themselves over the north wall. The goblin village was surrounded. Nathan couldn't pick them off fast enough, especially now that they were coming in two directions. He flipped a blue sapphire on his left-hand ring to reveal another button. He pressed it.

Braatz tapped him on the shoulder. "Are you calling more dragon droppings?"

"Not exactly. Keep your eyes open."

“For what?”

“Our ride.”

Over the horizon, a round flying saucer-like platform floated towards the tower making an odd hum as it approached. It appeared to have a soup-bowl like structure with a hand railing around the top edge.

The Vikings were now making a rush and serious combat ensued. The Goblins were taking the worst of it. Nathan looked grave. “Get your people up here, this only lasts for three minutes.”

Braatz didn’t understand, but Nathan didn’t have the time to explain. “Just do it,” he yelled.

The goblin chief screamed some command in what seemed like gibberish, but the defenders broke and ran for the ladder. Although the raiders didn’t have bows, they did seem to be armed with javelins and throwing axes. They started picking off the goblin as they raced up the ladder.

“Stupid game,” Nathan spat. “Whoever heard of Vikings using javelins?”

“It’s a standard marauder weapon,” Putz explained with a confused look as the hover platform finally arrived.

“Never mind, get in.” Nathan pushed the goblin aboard as he finished off the last round in the final magazine. He threw the sniper rifle down the ladder. It knocked off the first Viking who was making his way up the rungs. His falling, unconscious form also took out three of the fellows who were following behind him.

Nathan got in the hovercar as a javelin bounced off the railing. The blade sliced into his shoulder.

“Damn, that hurts.” He froze as the goblins continued to pour into the floating platform. Virtual reality wasn’t supposed to hurt. He had never felt damage pain in the game before. Actually, he’d never felt any kind of stabbing pain before in his life and he wasn’t too keen on the idea. He fought to keep from screaming as he took over the controls. “We’re getting out of here now.”

Panic spread over Nathan’s face as the hovercar sped over the dune-like terrain below. If they ran out of time, the car would simply disappear, and they’d all go crashing to the earth in a pitiless descent. He didn’t even want to imagine what the resulting broken bones would feel like. He glanced at his shoulder. There was no blood. A white liquid was leaking slowly down his arm. It was barely a trickle because there was no heart to pump it. Nathan recognized the smell, it was embalming fluid. He hated the pungent odor. Part of him was angry. He accepted his death and even being trapped in the game for all eternity... but being dead... you weren’t supposed to feel any pain. Isn’t that what everyone was always saying? He was going to have to use up a lot of those cheat code drop boxes. Good thing he’d saved so many of them up. Gritting his teeth and pushed the hovercar faster as Viking javelins flew past.

“Damn,” Nathan spat.

“Doesn’t this thing go any faster?” Braatz inquired.

“Sorry, I didn’t order it with a hyperdrive.”

Braatz looked bemused. “What? Is that like a team of horses?”

“Never mind.”

Off in the distance, a long silver cylindrical tube with sweepback wings sat on the ground. As they approached, a sliding door opened in the back of the tube.

Braatz pointed wildly at the shape they were speeding toward. “What in the name of the seven kobold hells is that?” His voice had the sharp tones of concern... and not a little bit of terror as well.

“That, my friend, is the Intelligence One jet,” Nathan explained with a thump of pride. He’d gotten the craft after completing several long, and grueling tasks which took him the better part of six months’ worth of grinding effort. He’d rarely used it before, but right now, he couldn’t think of a better time to call it back into service.

“What’s in the name of all the unholy demons is that?” Braatz asked.

“I’ll explain later.” Nathan had just managed to slip the hovercar into the opening when the time limit expired. They were all dumped on the deck unceremoniously as the door slid closed. Nathan could hear the thuds of iron-tipped javelins impact the door as the roar of the engine grew and the jet took off.

Nathan shook himself off and walked up to the cockpit, followed by the surviving goblins. The compartment door slid open and a tall man with bleached white hair, a red shirt and gray pants stood before them. “Thanks for the pick-up, Alan.” Nathan wiped the sweat off his brow. “Your timing was perfect.”

Alan Roger Phillips was a player character from Australia he met in a tournament a few years ago. They’d been in the same game clan ever since. “Who are your friends?” Alan inquired.

“Just a few NPCs I picked up along the way. They might come in handy.”

“Welcome aboard,” Alan held out his hand, “Name’s Race.”

As Alan greeted the goblins who swarmed over him, Nathan recalled that he always used the name “Race” in-game. You weren’t supposed to use your real moniker in the virtual world, it was bad security. Alan looked over at Nathan while he was still busy shaking hands. Nathan had grabbed the first aid kit off the wall and was wrapping his shoulder. The jet bumped due to some turbulence and several of the goblins fell on their asses. Alan and Nathan giggled at the result. It was a nice developer touch. “Hey,” Alan asked his game clan partner, “I’d heard you were dead.”

“Let me tell you,” Nathan choked back a laugh, “death is not what it is cracked up to be. Not at all.”