

Dopplegamer

Christopher V. Davis

© 2020

I pretended to be somebody I wanted to be until finally I became that person. Or he became me.

Cary Grant

1

Game time: 24 min 38 sec.

Health: 55%

Mana: 37%

The waning health bar punctuated each blow. Every one sent a shock through his body as a reminder. So to the intense red flashes surrounding his vision. Jägerdon got himself in trouble, and he knew it. His shield helped, but the arrows from behind were beginning to hurt.

Two Champions sought revenge for the death of their fellow clan mates he dispatched moments before. The hulking Warrior rolled up and hurled a blow or two with his war hammer while a Hunter popped up now and then to lose a few arrows. A yellow flash radiated away from him with each strike. Both health and mana bars ticked downward. Time to teach these last two a lesson.

Jägerdon broke open an Elixir of Force. A greenish light surrounded him. Attack damage went up two-fold. Next a healing potion. The health bar shot up to near full. That'll last about thirty seconds. First the Hunter. They can drain you from afar with a ranged weapon. Get them first. He drew a deep breath then raced towards the Hunter.

Fleeing, long blue hair trailed out from under their gilded helmet. A Thunder Bow gripped in the left hand. Granite, vine covered monoliths stood in the way, but he bolted around them to keep the Hunter in view. Closing the gap, his foe turned and got off a few shots, every

one Jägerdon blocked with his shield. He never stopped moving forward. Each hit gave off a dull clang. That was the archer's mistake. They should have bolted into cover. The Warrior was no doubt coming up from behind. Slow but powerful, they would have caught up as he searched for the Hunter. Closing the gap at full speed, the range indicators lit up. Red lines shot past at an angle as a red box surrounded the Hunter. A rectangular bull's eye. Close enough.

Jägerdon lifted his right arm. Casting it forward he summoned the Iron Leash. A silver chain reached out and hit the Hunter as a brilliant blue light engulfed the two of them. Pulling the helpless foe in, Jägerdon wailed away with his broadsword. Each blow sent off a red flash from the doomed victim. Five strikes did the trick. The words Jägerdon kills Jeweler sprang up into view, confirm his victory.

No time to gloat. Spinning around the Warrior's menacing, boar like fangs and glowing eyes were all but upon him. Shield up, sword at the ready, Jägerdon met the Warrior. Swinging the large hammer down, he didn't let the weapon hit him or shield. Instead, he jogged right, letting the hammer hit nothing but the ground. The thunder of the strike filled the air. Stepping close, he thrust with the broadsword. One... Two... Three quick stabs then a dance backwards. Step to the left as the hammer came down on the right. Step in. Full swings this time. A red flash meant he struck home each time. One more hack and the rival fell. Added attack damage done the trick. The ponderous Warrior fell back as Jägerdon kills Dormantis appeared over the fallen giant who disappeared into the ground in a flash of macabre brilliance.

Victorious, adrenaline drowned out the pain of his lungs taking in deep breaths and beating heart catching up. The health and mana bars staring back at him diminished, but glowed a healthy green. Looking up and around, he electronic noise of battle rattled around his head, but the Realm of Sanquest lay quiet.

“Play ‘genst the best,” he hissed, “get ganked like the rest—”

“*Good game there... a...*” The pale voice coming through the earpiece brought reality back.

“Jason,” he hissed as the words SESSION OVER appeared in his vision. One by one, the multicolored figures in the visor covering his eyes faded away: health and mana bars, his avatar, score, experience points, playing field map, game alerts. The augmented reality images now gone, only the darkened playing field covered with artificial stone and vines lay visible. With one hand, he undid the chin clasp. Next, each thumb slid under the helmet, pulling it out and off, exposing a dark skull cap. His free hand yanked loose the hook and loop strap, then peeled the cap off his wavy hair.

“*Jason. Right,*” came the pale voice again through the wireless buds tucked into each ear. A thin but sturdy wire reached down from the left one, following the contours of his young face to his mouth where a tiny but sensitive mic sat. “*We’ll send your score and complete game session to your account. If you could please, exit out the home hearth. We have others waiting for their session.*”

“Sure thing,” Jason said as overhead lights sprang to life, illuminating the single lane practice field. Pacing back to where he started half an hour before, he reached for the monitor on the right forearm –weapons cache, consumables and wards– and powered it off. The conductive tips of his gloves as sensitive as a human finger. His helmet dangled from the hand. Next to the left forearm –suit control and status all still glowing green– and powered off the skintight, blue-black spandex gamesuit hugging him like a glove. It moved with his body as if another layer of skin. The hundred some micro sensors dotting the fabric, covering every joint and limb, were

seen not felt. Nor the hair width fiber optic lines connecting each. Didn't want to run the micro batteries any longer than normal. Cost a lot of coin to replace.

Passing through the round entrance from the hearth and into the staging area, he took in the large image on promo screen next to the door leading out. The images of the Heroes changed from minute to minute –Praxis in her goddess Athena suit, Asaurus Rex garbed as a dark knight, Seung wrapped in an assassin's robe– each stretched their weapon of choice straight out at anyone approaching. The words never changed:

Are you a *GEEK*? Gamer of Extraordinary and Exceptional **Kapeability**! Then try out for Heroes and add your name to the Pantheon!

Catching his breath, he pulled down on the angled zipper running across his chest. Cool air replaced the trapped body heat. He didn't know when the word *capability* got morphed into *kape-ability*. Must a been from the old days when the early live action game players wore capes with their outfits. Now, in the arena, they're a safety hazard. The name stuck though. Even after all these years. Decades maybe. And they looked a bit tacky, at least to him. Must a been real different back then.

He was done for another day. At least till he got back to the apartment and online. After his shift. Pfft! Got a make a living somehow. And for now, the name Jägerdon didn't grace the promo screen, or any other.

A normal workday awaited most coming to the large, multistory building downtown, one beginning with a commute via the trams and rail system crisscrossing the greater metropolitan area, or by autocar if they wished to pay the extra parking and transit fees for such a convenience. Felix Van Zant chose this. He even shunned the underground garage used

exclusively by those who spent the cash to buy an actual car now days and high enough on the corporate food chain to get a parking stall in their federally mandated employment contract. No. Entering the building via clandestine elevators wasn't his style. He let the autocar drop him off out front. He did so not because it was less economical, but because he *was* Felix Van Zant, and his days here were never normal.

Those noticing him striding through the immaculate, reception area saw an imposing figure of a man: tall, squared jawed, short light brown, unmoving hair as it cut through the air, tailored suit sans a vest so popular with both sexes. He walked with purpose. Head held high. Innocuous smile below stern, forward looking eyes.

A reception desk spanned the first floor beyond and opposite the main doors, surrounded by clean, gilded, well-lit paneling and squeaky clean marble floors. Above and behind those seated there, ensconced in front of embedded monitors and keyboards, sat a large light blue logo upon raised letters:

Terrasoft/**Terragram?**

Improving the World One Byte at a Time

He approached a young man and woman standing near attention among the crowd in the cavernous reception area.

The young man started. "Morning, Mr. Van Zant—"

"Good morning, Mr. Van Zant," the young lady chimed in.

Felix raised his eyebrows and broadened his smile, towering over the two interns. "Tina. Joe. How we today? What's first?"

Always on the go, he strode towards the main elevators. The two followed behind, all weaving through countless others coming and going.

“Trust Quarterlies are due next week, Mr. Van Zant,” the young man said.

His counterpart tapped away on the tablet in her hands. She chimed in. “They really want to have firm figures on anticipated payroll expenditures...”

Felix listened to the young woman rattle off the do and don't talking points from the finance department, smiling and nodding at passers-by doing the same to him. Halfway to the elevators, a familiar face approach.

“Hey there Felix!” the older, equally well-dressed man said, stopping the trio.

“Hey there Yosef,” Felix shot back. “How the programming side of Terasoft doing this week?”

“Great! Got some great stuff coming. That silicon manufactured in our lunar lab does wonders for our molecular processors.” Yosef said, patting Felix's arm. “Great game this week. Knew you guys could pull it off. Got a feeling this is going to be a great season. Better than last year.”

Felix looked him in the eye and smiled. “You bet. Keep watching. You'll see.”

The elevator door opening caught his attention. Twisting back at Yosef, “You take care there. Catch you around.”

He and his small entourage headed into the elevator. A half dozen others also crowded in. The doors hadn't even closed when his truncated name shot through the air.

“Morning Mr. V,” sprang from a cheery female to his right.

He glanced down at her. “Well hello there, Azin. You get those tickets I sent you and your family?”

“Sure did Mr. V. Look forward to catching that game against the Cowboys in a few weeks!”

“Look forward to seeing you and the whole family there to cheer us on,” Felix added with a broadened smile. “And it’s half price fudog night too.”

“We’ll be in team colors and all!”

“That’s the... *Spirit!*”

Both let out a laugh, his interns looking on.

Once on the tenth floor, Felix said his goodbyes as he and two followers strode out. The reception area opposite was as pristine in appearance as that on the main level. But here, behind the desk hung the red, white and blue team logo for the Spirit Express. Off to one side blazed the words— Home of the Glory of Heroes World Champions, Global Community Cyberlete Games (GCCG) and Professional Cyberlete League (PCL).

Those remaining in the elevator watched the doors close, then the gentle upward motion of the lift.

“You think they even have a chance against the Smoking Cowboys,” a man asked Azin.

Narrowed eyes zeroed onto his. “Pffft! Hell no. The way they’re playing they’ll get aced. They might do good against the Widowmakers next week. But...” A shrug. “Might as well enjoy some free tickets and a night away from the kids before VeeZee there gets booted.”

#

Felix went around the reception desk, smiling, maintaining eye contact with the receptionist. The interns headed into the back office area. “And how are we today, Jewel?”

Her sunny disposition shot back. “Great Mr. Van Zant—”

“Hey,” he cut in. “Need you to hold any incoming this morning.” Leaning in, a devious smile. “Got a chat with the big man.” A wink followed.

“Of course.”

With a pat on her shoulder he left. Zooming into hall leading to a catacomb of offices, his sat in the corner of the floor. Windows covered two of the four walls. Outside these loomed the modern metropolis he and a million others called home. Shiny, eco-friendly high-rise buildings gleamed in the sunlight, soaking up the sunlight with the garden laced terraces dotting the roofs and various ledges stretching out over the city below. Fresh brewed coffee filled the air. Striding into the roomy office, Tina approached with cup in hand. Joseph leaned over the long, glass like desk near the window. He brought up the computer embedded into the top. A thin screen folded up from the desk.

Felix sipped the java and glided towards the desk. Halfway there, he spoke. “Got a make some calls before we get down to the grind.” Another sip. “Tina... great cup. Get working on those budget numbers per corporate directives.”

“You bet Mr. Z.”

One more sip, glancing towards the desk. “And Joe... you... a... get the latest bids on commercial time for next match.”

“Sure thing.”

The two made their way through another door out of the office. Gone, Felix strode to a large hutch embedded into the wall adjacent. Placing the cup on the lowest shelf, he reached for one of the immaculate crystal glasses above, then an equally ornate bottle filled with the finest bourbon next to them. He poured a drink. Raising glass to mouth, it didn't leave till drained.

He trudged to the desk and plopped into the blue, imitation leather chair. With little enthusiasm, he brought up the phone program. First came on a receptionist. Then awkward silence. Then a low, stern voice.

“We good this morning Felix?”

He drew a breath and leaned back. “So far so good, Gene.” Might as well get to the hard part. “Guess you wanted to chat about the team.”

“Not gonna beat a dead horse...” Felix cringed. People still use that phrase? “But the board’s reminding me of how bad we’re doing this season.” By *we’re* he meant me. “And you don’t got a remind me of all the championships we’ve won.” Next will come something about the past. “And what happened last year don’t mean a hill a beans.” Figures.

Felix began. “I know you’ve gone to bat for me and the team there, Gene. And I’m not going to sugar coat the fact we’re in a funk. **But Gustav’s still a hot Hero and we got some Champions that show a lot of promise.**”

“Yeah. So’s the Dame. She’s still a hot Hero and winning. A lot. Blond hair and Nordic looks may get Gus the girls but it ain’t gonna win games. Jeeze. The Swede! What a pompous name for a guy from Orlando. But got a admit he’s made us a ton of coin. That business with his... what... umpteenth GF causing us a distraction?”

He keeps saying ‘we’ and ‘us’ like it’s him out there. Felix kept the observation to himself. “No, Gene.” Might as well be honest. “He’s slipping. I’ll admit that.” Now he had to weave some white lies. “Got him on extra simgames... the team’s running extra practice sessions. Coach Marchenko going to ride till they gank other champs like nubbies.”

“So I’ve heard.” The older voice paused. “Maybe she’s got a toughen them up. I ‘member back in my soph year in college. Coach brought in a bunch of wannabe cast offs as a practice team. We got two things out a it. An ego boost *and* lesson: you can be replaced.”

Felix got the point. “Too bad the last of those football teams shut down later.” Might as well give him an ego boost.

“Well, we figured collegiate sports was goin’ the way of the dodo. Then the pros. But damn! It was fun! Who’d a thought a bunch of kids getting dressed up in an old department store with augmented reality gear would take over the world.” A manly giggle. “But we’re gonna leave the past where it is. We got a get on with the future. This world ain’t gonna stop turning.”

Nostalgia aside, he had a point. “Got a bye week coming up after the next match. End of the first quarter.”

“Yeah. The Widowmakers. A rather high falootin’ name for a team near the bottom of the division.”

Guess he, like others, forgot the Widomakers dominated the game last decade. We’re about even on the point totals. “We still got three quarters to go this season. And we’ll sure as hell going to work hard to get to the playoffs. Get the company another trophy.”

“That’s the *spirit* Felix! You just think about what I said. If anyone right now can do it, it’s you.”

All those *suggestions* rattled around his head. So too the words *right now*. What about next season? “Thank you Gene. I’ll keep you posted.”