

Estonia: First Blood

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Introduction

So think of your favourite science-fiction or fantasy epic. You know the story - an ancient evil threatens the People and there are two or three books or films full of the struggle of Good versus Evil. A band of heroes jump from one perilous situation into another, a cycle seemingly without end, and Evil allllmost wins - but towards the end, our plucky underdogs survive against all odds and, eventually, Good triumphs over Evil (even though Good Is Dumb - thank you, Dark Helmet).

Then, there is a party.

The Ewoks party. Everyone in Gondor parties. The humans of Zion have an underground jungle party, where they get sweaty and naked, even though Neo dies because he is rubbish.

Estonia *is* that party. Here is an ancient land - a land home to a people that can *officially* call itself one of the longest settled European peoples - that, besides a time around the 1920s, has been under the thumb of Danes, Swedes, Russians, Germans and Soviet Russians until *finally* - Evil is destroyed and sovereignty is restored, guaranteed and celebrated.

And the people party. Maybe not in an overt sense - although there's plenty of partying going on - but you can *feel* it, just beneath the surface; you can hear it when you listen, you can sense it - that party is everywhere. That national pride and patriotism is *humbling*, and you can't help but get caught up with it.

Chapter 1

Days Nought-Point-Five and One, Tuesday and Wednesday

The story starts in Chippenham, where I spend a day vainly trying to exchange my hard-earned pictures of my ineffectual Queen for some good, hard Estonian currency - only to meet an insurmountable wall of utter stupidity high enough to force me to accelerate my orbital ion-cannon development plans, because there's no way I can suffer Chippenham's existence on my planet for much longer.

Of course, no-one in this town stocks Krooni, but having to put up with hearing things like "is that in the Caribbean?" or "whereabouts in Africa is that?" is enough to make me want to take over the entire world *just* so I can force everyone to use Euros. Here's a tip, you in-breeds: if you don't know what you're talking about, *shut the hell up*.

I take a National Express coach across the country, first to the majestic Heathrow Airport where I spend what's probably the coldest hour of my life - yea, colder even than my house despite the laws of physics forbidding it - waiting for my transfer to Stansted Airport. I was looking forwards to Stansted - after all, it's one of THE big airports, right? When you think of British airports, you think of Heathrow Gatwick Stansted, so it's got to be good, right?

Wrong.

Stansted is a shitty little greenhouse in the middle of a field. It is *not* majestic. It is not a constantly bubbling hub of international transport and commerce.

Today, at eleven PM, it's Land of the Dead.

Every little nook and cranny of the cold, soulless and mostly *closed* building is crammed with passengers trying to get to sleep. To walk from your cubic meter of space to the toilets and back is a trek that only the bravest of adventurers can survive, climbing and weaving across, over and through vast mountains of sleeping tourists - indeed, the journey is so perilous (and the chances of you actually NOT having your cubic meter stolen from you in your absence are so slim) that many choose to relieve themselves where they stand or, at least, that's certainly what it *smells* like.

I link up with our homies - Steve, Robin, Graeme, Paul, Mike and Emma - and we bond, it being nine months or so since our last meeting - and some of us try to get some serious Commanding and Conquering done (someone having brought that compilation DVD with every C&C game ever on it), before we encounter a being of unspeakable evil - *the security guard*. The *jobsworth* Security Guard, who takes his job waaaaay too seriously and doesn't take flak from no travelling band of fashionable, sexy geeks like us. Tonight, his job is to make people hate him. Tonight, his job is to *wake up* every poor soul trying to get an hour of shuteye on the uncomfortable-ass seats, and to ensure that no equipment that hasn't passed Stansted's no-doubt stringent safety checks is plugged into HIS power sockets.

We duly comply and he wanders off, kicking some sleeping children in the face on his way, presumably to slaughter goats and worship the Dark Prince himself.

Everyone in the airport hates Security Guard.

Check-in time rolls around at five AM or so, and we wander off to the easyJet desks in 'Sector D'. I cunningly conceal my crippled cast'ed claw, since I either need a doctor's certificate saying I'm OK to fly (I don't), or they need to saw the thing in half (hell no). The ruse works and we all get our boarding cards - except for Graeme, who looks like a Terrorist and is therefore sent to Sector G to have his 'oversized baggage' checked out. His baggage is no more oversized than mine, but Graeme's beard is highly suspicious. The whole

episode *does* give us a brand new euphemism to wear out, and being Sector G'd becomes our favoured term for 'being fingered by The Man'.

Tallinn's an easy two-and-a-half hours flight in our new but thoroughly uncomfortable Airbus (I'm all about European-made stuff, but you can't beat a Boeing) and no-one gets Sector G'd at passport control, and it's about here that my adrenal gland begins to dump its load into my veins in the way it always does in this 'meeting new people in a strange place' situation - and how better to conceal my shaking hands and nervousness than by charging headlong into the crowd of people waiting at the terminal and giving a giant comedy hug to our welcoming committee - a trio of strikingly handsome people holding giant "SWE?????" signs above their head, paying homage to that most informal of greetings experienced by most European World of Warcraft players - where many Swedes will, instead of delivering your standard getting-to-know-you smalltalk, will simply send you a private message asking if you're "SWE?????", and then ignore you if you're not.

We grab taxis to our hotel, and it's during this journey that I realise something critical - this is the first time I've gone somewhere not knowing a single word of the language (besides *slippers*), and already - greeting and thanking our taxi driver in English - I feel like the rudest sonofabitch every. I vow to learn at least hello, goodbye, please and thankyou before we leave (which, incidentally, I do - although for the life of me I can't say *headaega* properly, so I make up for it with 'I love you', a phrase I'm itching to see will serve as the Master Phrase I can use instead of everything else... Imagine it: "can I help you?" "yes - soup. I love you." "Here is your soup, sir." "I love you." It *could* work...)

We mince around in Robin's hotel room, and try to get to grips with calling Silencia, Sorrowhorn and Laddth by their *actual* names while gifts are exchanged - our Scottish contingent have brought a veritable smorgasbord of 'official' Scottish stuff, including (but not limited to): Whiskey, shortbread, slabs of almost pure sugar or *tablet*, a Royal Flag of Scotland, a book of handy translations for when talking to Scottish folk and a fluffy white stuffed creature labelled as a Wild Haggis in order to confuse naive people. Just for future

reference, any of these things are readily available on any Scottish high street - but it is quite literally impossible to find my beloved Union flag anywhere in Chippenham. You can't even steal one from the top of a flagpole - they just don't exist.

I provided a Union flag (peons may know it as the Union Jack, pah) and our hosts provided us with... Beer. Lots of it; and it is VERY tasty. There were many varieties, but just so you're in no doubt about how awesome our tipple of choice is, it's name is emblazoned across the bottle in massive letters: "ROCK". Its very *name* oozes testosterone.

For reasons still unknown to me - unless the gag is very simple and I'm overlooking it - Kris became the proud owner of the last gift, a bona-fide 'cock-whistle' - which is a whistle in the shape of a... well, you get where I'm going with that.

After refreshing, we head out to Vanalinn - Old Town, which is every bit as breathtaking and fairytaleesque as you'd expect from the heart of an ancient capital city and every bit as *cold* as you'd expect from a Baltic port, cold we immediately defeat with a pleasingly warm, boozed filled, authentic Estonian... Irish bar, utilising weapons such as a giant rack full of beers, much like those piddly little racks of vodka shots you can get in vodka bars, except five times bigger. And filled with beer. We're also *finally* (after months of remote-teasing) introduced also to Estonia's best-kept secret, Vana Tallinn - a sweet, potent, fruity rum-like liqueur.

We start flagging - having been awake for many hours and drank a good amount of booze, it's time to shock ourselves into waking by braving the cold and heading off for tonight's official engagement - dinner at Le Château Posh. Its *real* name eludes me, but if we were in France it would be called Le Château Posh because, well, this is no McDonalds. We're wide awake again when we get there, and link up with Ann - now sporting her pet haggis - and Choclote, a welcome surprise.

At this point it's worth noting something important and keeping it in mind - during the tenure of our visit, we saw absolutely no evidence to debunk our Scientific Theory - indeed, Law - that every person in Estonia is actually phenomenally attractive. Man, woman, one and all - *hot*. I'm forced to record it here since our hosts simply

laughed our hairbrained theories off, but we're unanimous in our belief.

Keep it in mind.

With dinner safely stored away in our stomachs, it's time to head home to the hotel to finally get some sleep - although not before making snow angels in the pristine snow before playing Tekken on the PS2 that Mike had so thoughtfully brought along with him and, of course, making sure none of the Vana Tallinn escapes alive.

Chapter 2

Day Two, Thursday

Some of us are up early and head downstairs to grab some coffee and breakfast. I make a total arse out of myself to the enormously beautiful lady I'm trying to buy food from because I mistake my room keycard for a loyalty card, and fruitlessly demand a ten percent discount, which I don't get. I settle for soup, and we play Tekken while we wait for our countrymen to arise.

Today's agenda starts with - of course - beer in the 'Hell Hunt' (not as Satanic as it sounds, it means 'gentle hound'), followed by a guided tour of Tallinn, narrated by our resident genius, Ann, today helped by her beautiful assistants, fellow Grey Company luminaries Ubilskap and Charena.

We learn wonderful things, like the giant gates that separate the opulent Upper town from the scummy Lower town were built by the Lower Townians to keep the rich people IN rather than the great unwashed OUT. We had a good look around inside one of the guard houses built on the great majestic wall that encircles the town - which is now some dude's flat (I wonder if he knows he had seven tourists rummaging around in there), we checked out the Parliament house (try getting as close as we did to the UK Houses of Parliament, see how far the 'democracy' thing gets you versus our Storm Troopers); an Orthodox cathedral, shiny and glittering and quite spectacular inside and out; some of the best vantage points in the City; oh, and I fell over on the ice a bunch of times.

By this time, it had been a whole hour or so since we'd last

drunk beer, a situation we had to rectify immediately and elected to do at the Beer House, which is probably the best name for a pub ever. Using clever marketing techniques like employing top-heavy waitresses and selling *massive* glasses of beer, they persuaded us to stay and discuss everything and nothing for a while, until it was high time we began tarding ourselves up ready for the evening's entertainment: a 'private' concert with *Leech*, a premier Tallina metal band.

The plan was to link up and take the bus to the venue, but we'd failed to take into account the City's preparations for tomorrow's Independence Day celebrations - one of which was to pretty much scupper anyone's chance of ever getting a bus by shutting down all the roads, so instead we hung around waiting for a bus that never turned up, walking half a mile and then giving up and ringing taxis. At least we got the link-up part right, and found Chocolate and Ele - a friend of Ann's, sharp-tongued in a way I can only describe as alluring - right where we should have.

A wave of dread hits me as our taxi pulls up outside the meanest-looking biker nightclub ever and I fast-forwards suddenly, into an immediate future where I'm dancing shoulder-to-shoulder with men wearing leather and sporting handlebar moustaches. Thankfully, it wasn't meant to be - our target is *behind* the club, and is in fact some crazy abandoned warehouse facility that can perhaps be better described as a truly awesome Counter-Strike map. Eager to impress our female contingent with my sheer machismo, I plow into the building without waiting for backup, all the while watching out for snipersâ€”â€”â€” band members, crew, whatever, before eventually losing my nerve and coming back out with my tail between my legs.

They're set up in a small room in this abandoned building, just us, the band, their crew and girlfriends. After a fairly chilly reception - none of them seem to notice or care that we've arrived - the two parties remain embarrassingly aloof from one another all night, but that doesn't stop the band from rocking out. Being a beat-powered dance machine, I sway along to the first few tracks (which were, incidentally, awesome) before the slightly more graceful ladies demand that we commune together in headbanging thrashiness, front and center - not a position I'd put myself in ordinarily (mostly for the

health and safety of others) but to my own surprise, I acquiesce and we get our grooves on. Thankfully, video evidence of my shameful antics have been destroyed by my team of ninjas.

What follows is an hour of pure rock fury, actual details of which elude me - whether due to rock-out brain damage or alcohol is neither here nor there. *Leech* live up to their reputation, and all I recall is screaming at someone - whose command of English was, so I was told, limited - that 'the language of ROCK is universal, and YOU ROOOOCK'.

Sweaty and tired and most pleased, we make our marks in the perfect snow and walk home, slowly shedding members of our entourage as we go, before eventually reaching the hotel, where we convince people to stay over - much to the annoyance of the hotel's night staff, whose wrath we would feel before long.

The Scotch whiskey is assaulted, many of us foolish enough to swig it 'raw' - that is, *sans* mixer - before I'm somehow convinced (I can't imagine it took much) to do my party trick, which is of course singing Tenacious D as loud as possible, until the neighbours complain, which I did. And they did.

Which is about the last thing I remember that night - or, rather, *second* last thing besides being woken up by an urgent banging at the door at four AM. Having no idea where I was or what was going on and *clearly* forgetting lessons I'd learned in another life about opening my door at Stupid O'clock - the door was summarily opened to reveal the tower of pasty manflesh that was Kris in his underwear, making his intention to hug me and sleep with me loud and clear and known to everyone in the sleeping hotel, while I desperately and confusedly try and shake myself loose of his python-like embrace.

Mercifully, I black out at this point.

Chapter 3

Day Three, Friday

Our agenda for today started with rock-climbing, which was immediately scuppered by our total inability to get out of bed after the previous night's excess. When we eventually rise, it's not a pretty sight, and we unanimously agree - via a serious of primitive burps and clicks - to not bother.

It may be too late to be physical, but it's not too late to drink beer and so, after a quick read of the Guild forum and discussion of the storm *conveniently* brewing in our absence, it's off to the Hell Hunt for coffee, beer and brunch - with the added bonus of seeing Estonia trounce Finland in one of the Winter Olympic games. There couldn't have been a better time - today is Independence Day, and the city is awash with the *sinimustvalge*. Beautiful young people in traditional dress stand in the Town Square and try to sell us sugared almonds and we take a leisurely stroll around town, seeing the parts we missed last time, like the ruined city gate and that most recognisable Icon of Evil, McDonalds, thereby scuppering a bet someone had that Tallinn could be the only capital city in the world without one.

On the homeward leg we find a pool hall, and decide to zone out and have a few games. Naturally, my own game ends in ignominious defeat, something I ordinarily wouldn't mind - except that Robin and I are *dire* pool players, so dire that, despite being the only ball left on the table, neither of us could pot the black for literally twenty minutes of continuous shooting, much to our growing embarrassment and anger of some guys waiting for us to finish, who I'm sure thought we

were taking the piss - surely no-one can be *that* awful? Well... Yes. Yes they can.

My spirit broken, I headed back with a couple of people, leaving the pool wunderkind to their own devices. It was high time we played some computer games.

Mike and Graeme settled into systematic annihilation of every boss in Tekken while I worked my way to mission eight in Command and Conquer, Nod campaign - which, as any gamer worth his salt will tell you, features Seth getting shot by Kane. Power shifts quickly in the Brotherhood.

Evening rolls around and with it, our chariot: Tönis has somehow gotten ahold of a minibus, into which we cram for our trip to the supermarket and, ultimately, his sublimely luxurious hotel. A perk of his job is cheap-to-free usage of the hotel's basement, which sounds lame until you realise that said basement contains a jacuzzi, steam room, sauna, 'smoking room' complete with opulent book-lined walls and sofas and the mysterious 'vault', a meeting room for people so powerful and wealthy, it's set in an old bank vault - and we weren't allowed in *there*.

Stocked up with booze and snacky cakes, we set about the serious business of getting semi-naked and splashing about - and by 'we' I mean everyone but me, stuck with a broken wrist in a cast that will melt off if it gets wet, and me being petrified of breaking anything else or delaying my healing by having an ineffectual cast had to make do walking gingerly around with a camera and my own personal bottle of Vana Tallinn (if I couldn't get wet, I was certainly going to get *drunk*) taking pictures and getting as close to the damp parts as I dared - which was actually a good deal more fun than it sounds. Heck, it was awesome.

Among the highlights of the evening *has* to be fitting *everyone* into the jacuzzi, displacing so much water that when everyone got *out*, we had to wait 20 minutes for it to fill again, as well as me being totally outsmarted by Ele during a serious 'discussion' about how pretty I thought she was - curse my booze-addled brain, even when I'm being deadly serious I still get humiliated, maybe I should just tell lies all the time. Naturally I can't forget about the surprise visit from Urglik, esteemed Grey Company alumnus that he is.

We retire to the smoking room for, well, some smoking, where we talk about everything and nothing until there's no booze left. I totally fail to impress any women and retire, beaten.

Chapter 4

Day Four, Saturday

Again, through a gluttal and wordless primal grunting language, this morning we decide to hit the ice rink. It's a fair way out, so we take the magic electric buses and see some new parts of the city. I have become proficient at saying please and thankyou in Estonian but totally miscalculate what size my feet are in the crazy European size metric and spend the next ten minutes and one lap around the rink in agonizing pain. By the time I'm back on the ice Kris has already done about a thousand laps, backwards, while the rest of Team UK struggle and flap about.

I manage to go an entire session without wiping out, which is a new personal best, although my efforts to 'save' several prominently attractive young women from falling are met with steely stares from a variety of men - next time I'll just let them fall over.

After an hour we tire of such exertion - it's high time we drank some beer, and so off we zip to 'Scotland Yard', a theme restaurant where the toilets are modelled after electric chairs. I got some funny looks taking pictures of *those*.

Tonight's main attraction is a Battle of the Bands-style concert, two Finnish metal bands versus two Estonian bands and, after prettying ourselves up (tonight I'm in 'emo' mode, clad in black) we head out.

Thankfully, tonight we're in a bona-fide rock club rather than a Counter-Strike map, and the beers are on tap and plentiful. Soroth, Laddth and their other halves are around but, with no real room

to sit and chat - the place is jam-packed - there's little for me to do other than drink all the beer I can and rock out.

The first two bands are Finns and the second two are Estonian, but it's the last band that really lights the place up - these guys are real genuine heroes, and the entire crowd worship their 'folk-metal' - this is music by Estonians, for Estonians, and you couldn't help but be awed by the wave of national pride that night.

Even when standing in line for the toilets, a large *mean*-looking dude idled over to me - and I feared for my life while he talked to me. I concentrated hard on him, fearing that if it looked like I didn't understand what he was saying that he'd slay me where I stood - until he beat his chest and screamed 'ESTONIAAAAAARGH', hugged me and walked away, grinning.

Emma gets a special award (or maybe 'speshul') for squealing and flapping in excitement when (after the bands had all finished) *Enter Sandman* came on, dragging me to the dancefloor screaming "It's Metallica! It's Metallica!"... and then promptly passing out.

That's rock and roll, man.

Chapter 5

Day Five, Sunday

We agreed to take the afternoon off, and maybe do some tourist stuff. For some, this meant sleeping - for others, including me, it meant tourist shopping. My trainers - the same ones I went to great lengths to get from San Francisco in a story you don't yet know - were beginning to dissolve from the wet, so we swallowed our pride and hit the local Mall, knowing that doing so is a great faux pas amongst the civilised folk of Tallinn.

Alas, no shoes were to be found, although Mike got Sector G'd while trying to exchange some 'nice, easy, safe' Traveller's Checks.

I checked in on Ele in her shop, which is the kind of shop I wish I had around my town - a sandwich, chocolates and tea shop where your every purchase is accompanied by Ele's acerbic and yet strangely appealing wit - much like the fictional Coffee of Doom shop from that crap webcomic, Questionable Content.

Today's plan was to take the minibus and drive south to Tackendorf - which is a guest house in the middle of the beautiful nowhere - where we would chill, eat, play games, sauna and then hit an ATV track the next morning. After stocking up on cheesy bread - a must for any road trip - we were away, although our quest for ultimate geek nirvana by setting up a peer-to-peer wireless LAN between two moving vehicles was thwarted when it turned out Kris had forgotten his WiFi card. Damn you, Sile, we could have been geek *gods*.

Alas, as sunlight faded, so too did our sense of direction, and it was late when we arrived - although certainly not too late for me to

repeatedly try and beat mission seven and *finally* see Seth's brains getting blow out. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be - and my mojo was ruined when a crowd of people eager to see my uber micro gathered on my bed, which (accompanied by a suitably comedy noise) buckled with the weight into a tangled mess of metal and cloth.

We gave out and headed to the outhouse - wherein lay the sauna and rustic delights of a good fire, and we whiled the night away talking about everything and nothing, but mostly about giant robots. Well, ok, maybe it was just *me* talking about giant robots.

Of course, none of us were mental enough to try the old hanging-out-in-the-sauna-before-running-out-and-jumping-in-the-snow trick. Except for Graeme. And Paul.

Chapter 6

Day Six, Monday

After a good night's sleep (on the floor for me, followed by a swift bit of metalwork and deftly disguising my disfigured dormitory device as a fully-functional bed) and breakfast in the prettiest setting imaginable, it was time to hit the snow-covered and, frankly, scary road and hot-foot it to the ATV ranch - only today, it was Robin and I's turn to drive. Robin got the short straw and had to pilot the minibus while I took Laddth's Ford the short hop up the road to check out the *beasts* of vehicles - we're not talking piddly little quads here, we're talking about one-quarter scale monster trucks *sans* protective covering.

Again, fearing the untold damage I could do to my wrist should I come off or wipe out, I bowed out and smack-talked people into challenging me at Command and Conquer which, I assured everyone, I was good at - once.

Naturally, I got my ass handed to me by everyone, but I got my revenge by making sure all my opponent's laptops would never again be able to connect to the Internet, while Team Hardcore rolled out onto and dominated the 'advanced' course, swiftly followed by Team Noobcore on the normal course.

Since I was such a cripple and everyone felt sorry for me, I was allowed to drive the rest of the way back to Tallinn, which was nice and easy until we ran into a snowstorm the likes of which I've never seen.

"You've driven in the snow before, right?", I was asked.

Well sure, but never in the snow, in a strange car, on the 'wrong'

side of the road, with a broken wrist...

At least everyone got a giggle out of my driver's license, featuring a photo me circa 1998 and bearing an alarming resemblance to our esteemed alumnus, Bruteforce, the Lord of Emo himself. I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

This was our last night, and our hosts had one trick left up their collective sleeves - we'd all enjoyed hanging in the posh hotel's sauna so much that strings were pulled and we were to hang there again, so after heading back to base to collect bathing stuff (while I sat in the bathroom, stroking my deformed wrist and weeping softly) it was back to the basement - after finally seeing the mission eight introduction and cheering when that smarmy git Seth gets intimate with Kane's nine millimetre.

Today, our route took us past the city helipad thing just opposite the hotel - so we scaled it (no mean feat considering the snow that had fallen) in order to command a breathtaking view of the city, as well as something totally unique - the Baltic Sea, frozen over.

Little can be said about the sauna this night, except for the usual string of adjectives like 'awesome' - only this time I didn't fall into Ele's devious traps; I had to be nice because she'd found me a giant Estonian flag, which now hangs on my wall next to the mighty Union Flag - although 'mighty' doesn't work any more seeing as it's dwarfed by it's Estonian counterpart.

We said our goodbyes and parted ways with some of our partners-in-crime before heading back and getting ready to turn in - after a brief flurry of damage control, having finally learned of the Guild coup and the broken hearts that came with it.

Chapter 7

Day Seven, Tuesday

I don't know whether it was the sky and water, the land or the people - the concepts so rightfully immortalised in the flag - or whether it was simply hanging out with some great friends, but when it came time to leave, I'm man enough to admit that I shed *real* tears because I really honestly didn't want to leave. I couldn't even bring myself to buy a bottle of Vana Tallinn from the duty-free shop, because I'd never be able to drink it in Britain without feeling really sad.

We had, of course, all made promises to return and/or host our buddies on these shores - promises I certainly intend to keep, no matter the cost - and the journey home was a quiet affair, each of us sitting in quiet contemplation (or having a nap, I can never tell the difference) - but I did allow myself a faint grin when, on leaving Stansted Airport, we were caught in a snowstorm - I like to think the very same one I'd driven through previously.

It helped me remember that it's not all that far away.