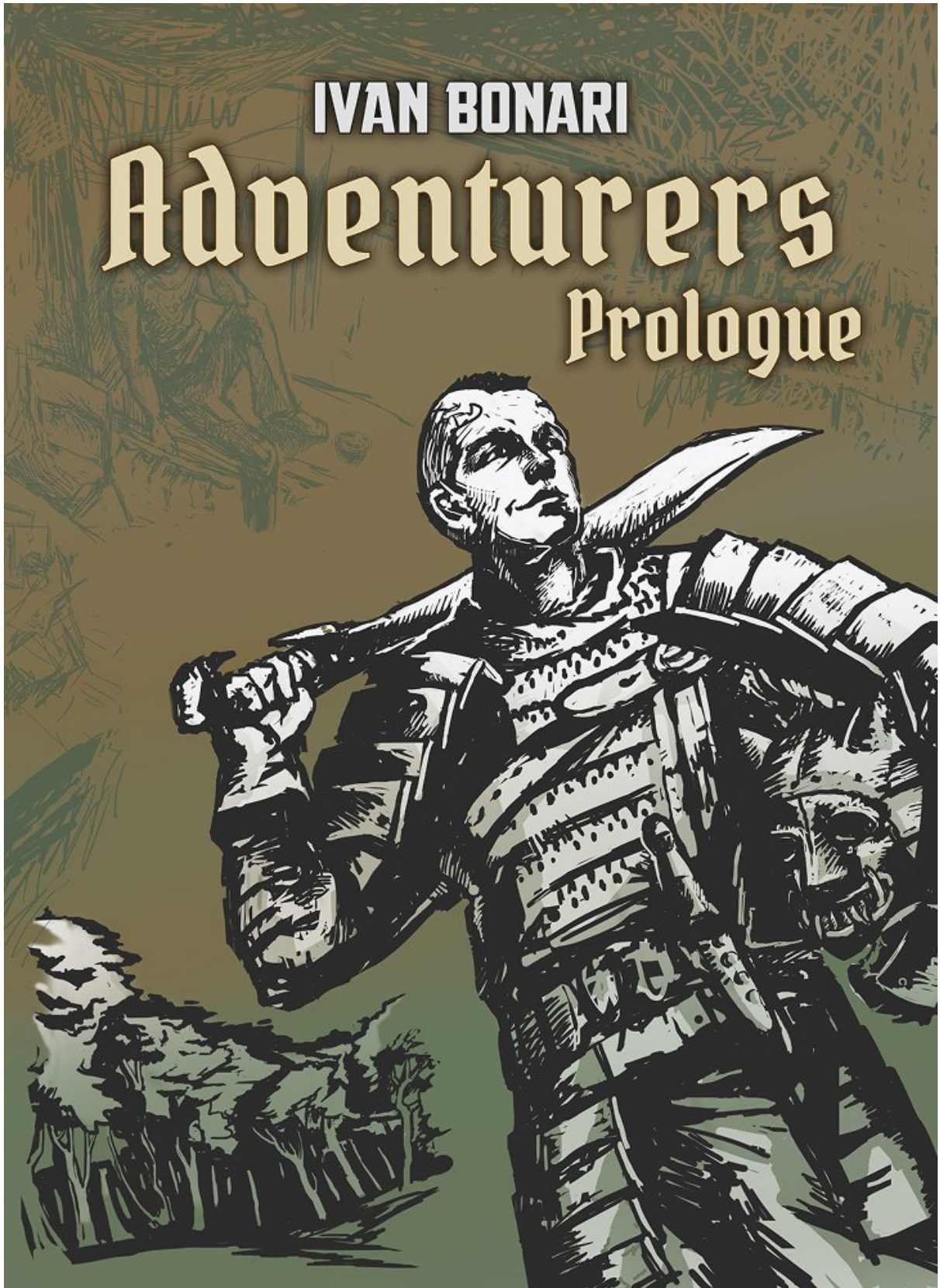


IVAN BONARI

Adventurers

Prologue



Thank you so much for checking out the sample chapter!

It means a lot to me. If you'd like to dive deeper into the story, the full version is available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0D4KCMYWJ>

1. The Tavern

All adventures begin in a tavern.

The main hall of the town tavern was filled with people of all kinds. There were merchants in colorful clothes, and with them mercenaries with fierce eyes, petty thieves and great highway robbers. Despite this, the whole rabble managed to coexist peacefully. If there were fights in the tavern, they were completely frivolous, without stabbing, and certainly no one dared to draw a sword in a 'sacred place' intended only for drinking. Sometimes madmen would interfere with this ancient tradition, but a friendly team of guards, always including a battle mage, would quickly solve the problem. The insolent man would be thrown into the nearest rubbish pit and his property confiscated to compensate for the moral damage done to the tavern. It should be noted that the guards were 'people' too, and would almost always leave a few coins in a poor fellow's pocket for treatment.

The tavern was called The Lucky Donkey. A wooden plaque depicting the head of this animal hung proudly at the entrance. Visitors did not know why the owner had named his establishment this way and only made hypotheses, one more absurd than the other. It was the Lucky Donkey where the meeting was scheduled, and Dhol had already been waiting for an hour and a half for the unknown person who invited him to talk. Of course, the man had not known whether he or she was a human and not, say, an elf, but he was persistently enduring the inaction that tormented him, hiding from the noise and chatter at a table in the darkest corner of the common room. He had long finished his dinner and was sipping a terrible drink, which the owner of the establishment for some reason called wine. After five or two minutes, Dhol finally got tired of hypnotizing the half-empty mug and re-read the anonymous note from his pocket: *On May 7th, an hour before sunset at the Lucky Donkey tavern, located in Southern. I'll be waiting. And yes, I know about your past.* The sun had long since disappeared behind the horizon, the author of the message still hadn't appeared, and the man began to think that the letter was someone's joke. But who could need it?

Dhol was a warrior. He didn't know magic, he didn't know how to sneak quietly and attack from an ambush, he was a pretty bad shooter, and his knowledge of medicine was limited only to the application of bandages. He was young, he was tall, and he did not look like an experienced warrior at all. Nature had deprived him of huge muscles and against the broad-shouldered thugs in heavy armor, he looked downright

ridiculous. He wore medium laminar protection and completely neglected the shield, relying only on his own agility and speed. Next to him was placed a red helmet in the shape of a mask of either a cat or a fox. The bestial muzzle showed its fangs to everyone around, but the face of the warrior himself was more good-natured than frightening. His green eyes sparkled slightly, reflecting the candle flame, short black hair ran in a stripe from the forehead to the base of the skull, and shaved temples were decorated with red barbaric patterns.

The young warrior was about to call the waitress and pay, but something made a sharp noise. He quickly covered his left wrist with his right hand, cursed to himself and set the watch to silent mode. *How could I forget to turn off the signal?* thought Dhol.

"It is my understanding that I have an appointment with You," a familiar voice said nearby.

"What the hell... Vince!"

"Hush hush. Before you, by the way, is none other than the first stage's wizard of the Order of Fire, Sly," recited the one who was called Vince.

Even though he had slightly changed, he was still quite recognizable with the same facial features, blue eyes and hooked nose. Except for the mustache and beard, which looked unusual, for ever since Dhol, or rather Arthur, had known his friend, he had always kept an eye on the smoothness of his chin. Now he was dressed in the black and burgundy fire wizard's robe, over which he wore a dusty gray traveling cloak with a huge hood. In his hands, Vince-Sly held a simple wizard's staff of an incomprehensible dark color with an amber knob at the high. He immediately put it in a corner, then threw a travel bag containing his belongings onto the bench, before landing nearby and taking off his hood. There was no hair on the magician's head, but a web of tattoos completely covered his skull, and in his left ear there was a silver earring with the insignia of his Order – the rune of fire.

"Oh, I'm tired," began Sly. "My legs are buzzing. At least someone would sell me a horse! But no, they ran away scalded, as soon as I had moved in their direction."

For a magician, Vince was pretty well-built: he had big trained muscles and very broad shoulders. Although he was not as tall as Arthur, he had an impressive appearance and looked more like a soldier than a representative of the wizards.

"Hey owner, beer and meat!" echoed throughout the hall.

"And you call yourself a wizard?" Dhol smiled.

"Like you call yourself a warrior," the fireman joked in response.

The delivery girl brought food, received a wink from a new strange customer, and quickly left them alone. Sly attacked the meal like a hungry animal, and Dhol had to wait to ask questions until his friend was satisfied.

"As far as I remember, you were less relaxed in relationships with women?"

"Uh, yeah, but status obliges," Vince grinned. "We should continue the conversation in private. You need to ask the owner if he has any free rooms."

The innkeeper apologized for the fact that the only one unoccupied room was in the attic, and the entire second floor was packed to capacity by the flood of visitors. Friends didn't have to choose, so they decided to be content with what they had. To their surprise, the room turned out to be quite good. There was a warm stove, a basin

with clean water for washing, and even a couple of beds. Dhol and Sly threw off their bags and, since there were no chairs, sat down on the floor.

"If you think that I will answer all your questions, you are mistaken," the magician threw a couple of logs into the fire and stirred them with a poker. "I've been here for two years now, but I still don't understand a damn thing."

"I hoped, you know why, instead of waking up at home in my bed, I found myself lying on the straw in some kind of cowshed. That evening we played until late night, and in the morning I became a character in the game... Well, fortunately we managed to get to know this world better when we were leveling up our heroes and completing quests."

"The same thing happened to me, but it seems I was a bit luckier. It turns out that I was an acolyte of a wizardry school. I had no idea how exactly, but I managed to cast magic. It feels like a program was downloaded right into my brain," the magician shrugged and showed his left hand. "But this watch is definitely not mine, and it is the only thing left of our world."

The warrior looked at friend's hand without any interest. He had exactly the same chronometer, which showed the time, date and month. *But what's the point of a watch if you're the only one in the world who has it?* Arthur always thought.

"I have doubts that it is now the year two thousand and thirteen. Although, only the devil knows for sure," Vince continued.

As the friends were exchanging stories of their adventures in the new world, night fell over the city. The party noise from the first floor had completely died down. Some of the visitors returned home, the rest headed upstairs and went to sleep.

The conversation between Dhol and Sly continued. Of course it did! They had not seen each other for two years and had a lot to talk about. The mage spoke of his training, and the warrior of his adventures as a free mercenary. Suddenly they both fell silent, listening to some noises coming from the corridor. It looked like someone was sneaking up the stairs and trying to do it very quietly. Vince motioned to get ready. At first nothing happened, but then the stranger started poking around in the lock. This had gone on for about thirty seconds, after which the door opened a little and a shadow dived into the room. It was unclear to whom it belonged, as the stove did not provide enough light to see the visitor.

"Ouch," a young woman's voice said. "I thought you were asleep..."

The silhouette turned to jump back into the opening, but Dhol had already closed the door, taking advantage of the intruder's confusion.

"Ouch, you said. Light it, let's see what kind of thief has decided to break in," he turned to the wizard.

Sly snapped his fingers and lit the oil lamp. A young girl, looking deceptively fragile, froze in front of them, having probably confused her naive victims more than once. She had red hair tied back in a bun, delicate features and slightly pointed ears that suggested she was elven-born. But the friends knew that there were no elves with red hair, which meant that they were looking at a half-breed. The thief was dressed in a thick leather suit with handy pockets on both the trousers and the jacket. This type of 'uniform' was worn by professionals; it was comfortable and did not restrict movement.

The girl had a small, light rucksack slung over her shoulders, pressed tightly against her back and probably already was filled with stolen items, and the picture was completed by two thin daggers, about fifteen inches long.

"I'm so sorry for breaking into your room! You'll let me go, won't you?" The half-breed smiled sweetly.

"It won't work," Sly came closer and turned to his friend. "Should we hand her over?"

"We will," Dhol nodded his head in agreement.

"But I haven't taken anything from you!" The girl looked around the room and frowned, "Although there's nothing to steal here..."

As soon as the thief had finished speaking, a noise was heard on the second floor. First the doors slammed, then there was the sound of hurried footsteps and shouts, including something like: "Robbed!" and "Look for the thief!"

"Whoops," the girl whispered.

"Whoops?" the wizard scowled.

"By this moment I should have already left this truly hospitable establishment! It's all your fault!"

"What does that have to do with us?" Dhol smiled broadly, "You got caught yourself."

"Myself..." the girl looked sad now, and it seemed that sudden mood swings happened to her quite often. "Maybe you'll change your mind? It's too early for me to go to prison, I'm still so young."

The noise was getting closer and gradually moved to the stairs leading to the attic. It seemed that the victims were determined to get their 'lost' items back. Someone pounded on the door with a fist:

"Open up! We are looking for a thief!"

Sly glances at Dhol. In his eyes he read the verdict of his quiet life.

"Nooo! Not this!" he whispered, "Why do we need unnecessary trouble? Why could you never pass a sweet woman's face? I hate you!"

"It is just me and my friend here. The owner can confirm that," the warrior said confidently to the man on the other side of the door.

"So we're going to check it out! Come on, open it up, quick! While we're asking nicely!"

Vince put his palm on forehead and began to massage temples. At the same time he was looking very unhappy.

"Get ready, they're going to break in..." he finally said.

While the negotiations were going on, the thief moved deeper into the room and took a look at the only window. Unfortunately, it was a bit far to the ground. Meanwhile, the friends prepared to attack. Dhol stood closer to the door, putting on his fearsome helmet, and the wizard was a little further back, picking up a staff and slinging a bag over his shoulder. Only then did Sly realize that something was wrong...

"Hey, warrior! Where the hell is your sword?"

"I've lost it," Arthur replied calmly.

"Lost? What the heck!"

The first blow from the attackers shook the door. There was no more time to discuss and debate the fate of the sword. The boards cracked, but the bolt held, which didn't help much – on the next attempt, the hinges ripped out with the nails. An angry man with a club in his hand flew into the room and growled at the friends. Perhaps this was his way of sending out curses, or perhaps he was just trying to cheer himself up. *What a shitty door...* flashed through the wizard's mind.

"There's a girl over here!" shouted the invading thug, rushing to attack.

Dhol stopped him with a straight kick, hitting him right in the groin, and the attacker crouched down, grimacing horribly. Then his face connected with the warrior's knee, which was encased in laminar armor, and the poor fellow finally lost and collapsed to the ground with a broken nose and no consciousness.

"Dirty trick," Sly winced.

The doorway was very narrow, so it was not possible for the attackers to burst into the room en masse and crush the defenders by numbers. Only two managed to squeeze through, while the rest had to trample on the stairs, causing the queue to stretch to the second floor. One of the newcomers performed a perfect leg takedown and dragged the warrior to the ground, while his companion, in a completely unsportsmanlike manner, pulled out a knife and went to help. But as soon as the offended tavern visitor bent down, Sly, holding the staff with both hands, struck him in the jaw with all his might. Something crunched loudly and the new baseball player rushed over to Dhol, who calmly and somewhat routinely bumped his opponent with his helmet. The mask was tough, made of steel, but the human head was not, so the enemy fainted and the warrior rose to his feet.

"Vince, I'm tired! How many are left? Give them some hell!"

"Are you mad? The floor is wooden, I'll burn the whole tavern! Do you think we're playing games?" the wizard barked, "Ah, screw it!"

A flame flared at the end of the staff, Sly cast some sort of spell, and the doorway was engulfed in fire. The strikers, seeing the situation, changed their minds about attacking and crowded nervously on the other side of the flame-dancing barrier, not even trying to get inside. At this point, the thief, having seen enough of the fight, approached Dhol and took his hand.

"Let's go, there's a big, wide canopy down there! It looks strong! The one that covers the entrance to the tavern, in case you forgot," she said in a serious tone, pulling the warrior towards the window.

The girl opened the frames and immediately jumped. Friends saw her land on the canopy with the grace of a cat, and Arthur prepared to follow her lead. He grabbed his bag and rushed down, but his attempt was far less sophisticated: to somehow dissipate the excess energy after his feet touched the surface, the warrior had to roll. Now it was Sly's turn. The fall of the wizard, and this is what it was, was more like a bombardment. He crashed into the canopy, and everyone fell to the ground through the resulting hole.

"You, Jumbo..." Dhol moaned.

"Womanizer..." Vince replied.

"No time for cursing," the thief, who had managed to get up and was already rubbing her bruised side, intervened cheerfully.

"Shut up!" The two friends cried in unison as they groaned to their feet.

"It looks like there's a big fire," the girl clearly had no intention of keeping quiet, "let's get out of here."

All three made a hasty escape away from the tavern, checking the integrity of their belongings and bones. After covering several neighborhoods, they stopped to rest and catch their breath.

"Art, do you have a horse?"

"No," Dhol said, breathing heavily, "You don't either, as far as I remember?"

"Yep."

"So let's steal them!" the half-breed suggested, only to be slapped lightly by the warrior.

We've had enough of your thievery.

"Well, okay," she frowned. "I wanted the best. Still, thanks for not handing me over!" The girl smiled again and rushed to hug Arthur.

"I think I've broken a rib," he complained in the thief's arms.

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