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World of Shawn

by Jordan M Ehrlich

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WORLD OF SHAWN

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Thanks most of all to my King, Jesus Christ.

“What’s past is prologue.”

William Shakespeare

The Tempest

“I am a success today because I had a friend who believed in me and I didn't have the heart to let him down.”

Abraham Lincoln

“Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never -- in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

Sir Winston Churchill

October 29, 1941

Chapter 1

Shawn sleepily checked the time on his laptop: 4:00 A.M.

“Hoo,” he sighed, tossing the gigantic Quantum Physics Primer on the floor. He had lost track of time again. Shutting his laptop lid, he took off his headphones, peeled off his Radiohead t-shirt and got into bed; the lights were already off. If he didn't start getting more sleep, his grades would start suffering.

Shawn loved his laptop. He had received it as a gift from his father the previous summer, before he had started his Freshman year at Centennial High School, largely as a way to buy his affection and favor. That was just before the divorce; his parents had told him not to blame himself, that this wasn't his fault, and that they still loved him; but he didn't care about any of that. He had just sunk deeper into his computer chair and kept exploring the dungeon in the game he was playing; he was looking for the Iron Key, and the dungeon was pitch-dark. He had turned up the contrast on his screen to the highest, but he still had to squint into the blackness.

“I still get to keep my laptop, right?” Shawn had said, after his mother, in tears, had told him that he would be spending every other weekend with her in her apartment in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, about 30 minutes from his father's house, in Overland Park, Kansas.

“Shawn, don't you get it?! We're getting divorced; you act like you don't even care!” his mother had told him.

“I do care Mom, really,” Shawn said, turning up the volume of his music as he kept scanning the dungeon. “Ugh, this is pointless!”

Shawn was not exactly what you would call a “happy” child, and he had not been very close to his parents since becoming a teenager. Once Shawn started at Happy Valley Middle School in small-town Lawrence, Kansas, he started to get picked on by his fellow students; there were the obvious taunts over his large, square glasses, and his lankiness (which had just gotten painfully worse). The chants of “four-eyes” and the mimicry over his still-high-pitched voice had just pushed Shawn further and further into his shell, in which he played with his only remaining friends: his video games and his best friend Victor.

Victor was much shorter than Shawn, and didn't wear glasses, but was just as unhappy and cynical. He lived in his parents' large, two-story red-brick house just around the corner from Shawn, so Shawn was always over at Victor's, playing games and talking about girls.

“What about Amanda?” Victor asked once. They were discussing girls they liked and imagining what it would be like to actually talk to them.

“Oh, she's alright, but she's no Sarah,” Shawn replied.

“Sarah Fox?” That's what they called her; her real name was Sarah Lyon, but they joked that she was a fox, so that became her codename. “Come on Shawn, she's out of your league! And you've been talking about her ever since First Grade. You're really a pedophile, you know; you're in love with a First Grader.”

“A pedophile? Does that make any sense? We're the same age, doofus.”

They both laughed. “Yeah, but come on Shawn, you've got to meet other girls.”

Shawn didn't care. In his head, Sarah would always be his princess. He couldn't imagine dating any other girl. Not that he had ever been on a date with her, hung out with her, or said more than five words at the same time to her, but that was okay; he was going for more the silent, hard-to-get angle.

“I'm just waiting for a good opportunity to ask her out; don't wanna sound too pushy or eager, you know.”

“Well, you're doing a good job so far,” Victor snorted.

Mostly because of their shared love for all things electronic, Shawn and Victor had quickly become inseparable at Happy Valley Elementary School. Through video game marathons, pizza parties, and constant trips to the video rental store, the electronics store, and the arcade, the pair had had the time of their lives.

However, the taunts started to become worse in the spring of the boys' Sixth Grade year at Happy Valley Middle School; no longer were the bullies simply calling Shawn names. Now they had moved on to stealing things from his locker. One boy had downloaded the locker combination list from the secretary's computer after reporting to the office. One day this boy, a troubled young ginger named Steven, who had already swiped some pot from his mom's boyfriend, placed the drugs in Shawn's locker, and gone and told the school counselor.

Randy, the counselor, who had always been skeptical of Steven, nevertheless, fulfilled his duty of reporting the incident; without any way of proving his innocence, Shawn was expelled. Shawn's parents, who both worked in Kansas City and commuted every day, had no choice but to pack up and move the family the 40 miles to Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, where Shawn could finish up Middle School and enroll at Centennial High.

Shawn hated the move. He had loved Lawrence: the small-town feel, the electronics shops downtown, and of course his best friend Victor. Shawn and Victor still got to see each other once in a while, on a weekend here and there, but it was nothing like having class and walking to school together every day. In Lawrence Shawn had had one *human* friend; here Shawn had no friends besides his games and, once he had graduated middle school, his laptop. He sunk even deeper into his shell.

That's when Shawn had started working on *World of Shawn*. This was going to be the epic game to end all epic games. The idea was that one could simply import a map into this game, and then the user would immediately be able to interact with other players online using this very map. The imported map could be of anything: a player's house, the Grand Canyon; the data parsing was ingenious, and the map could be in virtually any format.

Unfortunately, the map parser was so complex that that's virtually all that Shawn had had time to create, after he had taught himself the basics of game design. He was on the verge of giving up, because of how long this process was taking.

The night that Shawn had stayed up until 4 A.M., he had actually been messing around with *World of Shawn (WoS)*. He had spent the entire night importing a map of Sarah Fox's house, two doors down from his dad's house. Shawn was able to find the blueprints for her house on the website for the realty company that had recently sold Sarah's parents the house. The fact that Sarah had recently moved to Overland Park and back into Shawn's world, and started at his very high school when they were both sophomores only reassured Shawn that it was "meant to be." So as his second test map for *WoS* after his dad's house, he had chosen Sarah's two-story town-house. It had taken him most of the night to program the map from the blueprints, and the ingenious map parser was able to predict the textures automatically. He was soon standing in Sarah's bedroom.

Chapter 2

Sarah, in all her five feet, nine inches of glory, was getting ready for bed on Shawn's laptop, in surprisingly lifelike rendering. Shawn couldn't believe this had turned out so well. He had included definitions for the main characters in the map of Sarah's house that he had imported, but this was beyond his wildest hopes. He hit Ctrl-R to start recording; he wanted to save this for later.

Shawn left this player where he was and hit Ctrl-N to spawn a new player so Shawn could explore the rest of the map. From his new perspective, Shawn saw a small shadow on Sarah's floor. He sighed. This was the now motionless player which was doing the last thing it was told to do, recording Sarah. He still had to program the character creation module in his game so players could have bodies and could actually see each other.

On his screen, Shawn watched from a first-person perspective; in other words, from the viewpoint of the player. The bottom of the screen also showed a heads-up display (HUD) with his health, as a percentage, in the middle, the amount of available ammunition on the right, and any selected inventory items on the left. Using the keys W, S, A, and D to move forward, back, left and right, and his mouse to look around, he explored the rest of Sarah's room. In the northwest corner was a twin-sized bed, which had to be too short for a tall girl's frame. On top of the bed was a bedspread featuring the princess from the movie *Aladdin*, Jasmine. Shawn chuckled. Why would the map importer have predicted that she would have this? He would have to examine the logic again. Across from the bed were French doors that opened up onto a balcony, overlooking the backyard, where Shawn saw a beautiful Golden Retriever sleeping. There was also an above-ground pool and a seven-foot pine privacy fence. Beyond this, he saw nothing but blackness. This was the edge of the map.

When he had more time, Shawn was going to add a background predictor to the map importer, so that something like the horizon with the appropriate position of the sun would show up at the map's boundaries, rather than nothingness as there was now. He was also going to add the ability for adjacent maps to be loaded when leaving a map, to avoid the strange behavior that happens when a player falls off the edge of a map!

Walking over to the French doors, Shawn hit Ctrl to open the doors, walked out onto the balcony, and stared out into the yard. As he pressed Space Bar to jump onto the banister so he could explore the yard, he heard the doors close behind him. Spinning around, he saw Sarah fiddling with the doorknobs and locking the doors. Shawn shook his head; he couldn't believe how great the Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) was in this game -- this was going to be such a hit...if he could ever finish it, that is.

"Bloop!" the annoying alert was telling Shawn that someone was messaging him on FaceWorld, the social media site that everybody was on. Shawn sighed and looked over to the external

monitor he had set up as an extended desktop to his laptop's already large screen. He loved having a "command center" from which he was able to monitor everything at once.

"Did you ever get that algorithm figured out for the map parser?" It was Victor.

"Ah, yeah, I did man. I'm actually really psyched about it!" Shawn typed back.

"Awesome man, when am I gonna get to see it?!" Victor exclaimed.

"Well, it's not a finished product. Still have a lot of work to do."

"Come on, let me see what you got. Can't you just share your desktop or something?"

"I don't have WebShare installed yet. Here, I pulled this video off the game tonight. I'll send it to you; I haven't even watched it yet," Shawn replied, sending Victor the video he had just captured.

"Sure, what's it of?" Victor asked, waiting for the video to download.

"Uh," Shawn just realized he wasn't sure what was on the video. "Surprise," he continued, as they both opened up and started the video at the same time.

What they saw was Sarah, getting ready for bed, peeling off her clothing in stunning high-definition. She was now half-naked.

"WHAT THE HELL!!!" Victor shouted in all caps.

"WOW," was all Shawn could reply. His mouth was hanging open. "I did not design this."

"Sure you didn't, you perv! You've spent hours up there, I'm sure you've done thousands of renderings of Sarah!"

"I didn't render her at all," Shawn stated incredulously. "This was all done by the map importer."

"How would it know what she looks like naked??" Victor cried.

Shawn thought about it for a minute. He shook his head. "It can't know, there's no way. It must be the map parser, predicting it like it does for everything else. And then the A.I. of the character just realizes it's time for bed, and has to get ready. That has to be it."

"IDK man. You're a good programmer, but no one's this good. This looks like real life, and you made this on your laptop? You gonna show this to your physics teacher tomorrow?" Shawn had been getting help on writing his map parser from Mr. Fitzgerald, the physics teacher at Centennial High.

“NO!! No one can see this. They’ll think this is porn, and what happens when they realize it’s a fellow student?”

“Ugh you’re right. Man, I’m goin’ to bed, we still on for this weekend?” Victor asked.

“This weekend...oh right! You bet!” It was Halloween weekend, and Victor and Shawn for as long they could remember had spent it together, either trick-or-treating as video game and movie characters when they were younger or going to spook houses and watching scary movies. “I’m just gonna stay up a bit longer and try and figure this out.”

“Okay, do you know what time it is?” Victor asked.

Shawn looked at the clock on his laptop: 1:00 A.M. “Yeah, I know, thanks *Dad*. I’ll be done in a sec,” he said, signing off. Shawn looked at the paused image on his screen of Sarah, with an over-sized Princess Peach T-Shirt pulled on. He couldn’t pull his eyes off his princess. He imagined fighting his way through dragons and dungeons in order to rescue her.

Shawn shook his eyes off the image and pored himself into the quantum physics book. He turned to one of the many sticky notes that were stuck in the pages, and started reading a page full of equations; the heading read, “Quantum Computing.” He brought up the source code for his map parser, and compared his algorithm to what was in the pages; it all seemed to match up.

Shawn read some notes that Mr. Fitzgerald had made in the margins of the book: “Shawn, pay close attention to the highlighted lines. These have been tested. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE UN-HIGHLIGHTED EQUATIONS. UNKNOWN CONSEQUENCES.” Shawn of course had ignored this warning. His map parser had not really been working with simply the highlighted lines, so he had put in every equation he could find, until he got results. It had taken him all summer and over two months into his sophomore year, but he had finally got it working. He would talk to Mr. Fitzgerald again tomorrow and casually mention that he was mildly impressed with the results. He couldn’t mention that he had experimented with some of the “un-highlighted” equations, or show him the game, and he definitely wouldn’t show him this video, he thought, as he clicked play and repeat on the video. He just sat there, lost in Sarah’s gaze for what seemed like hours. As it turned out, it really was hours, because when he finally shook himself away from the laptop and checked the clock next to it, he saw that it was 4:00 A.M.

Chapter 3

“Shawn...you’re too late, you fool!” Shawn looked up and saw Sarah in front of him, dressed in an evening gown that had been ripped and torn all over, smudged with dirt. She was being held hostage by a dark figure who had his back turned to Shawn. Drums were pounding in the background. Shawn looked down at his own hands, and saw that he was holding a broadsword, glowing from the light of a blue flame. Looking up, he saw the dark figure, still holding Sarah, stop and turn around slowly. When he could recognize the figure’s face, he saw that it had his face. The figure who was carrying Sarah yelled out, “Shawn! Too late! Too LATE, YOU FOOL!!!”

Shawn jerked out of bed, and realized that his father was pounding on his bedroom door. “Shawn, you’re LATE FOR SCHOOL!!!”

Shawn jumped out of bed, yelling, “Coming!” and pulling on a sweater and some jeans, as he noticed the bedside clock: Thurs. 8:45 A.M. Shawn yanked open the door to see his 6’4” father, Mr. Mitchell, towering over him, with his graying black hair, cool blue eyes and hard jaw.

“School starts at nine, Shawn. You were up all night on your computer again, weren’t you? Ugh, come on; no time, let’s go.”

In the car, Shawn’s mind went back to the dream he had been awakened from; the recurring dream he had had since middle school. In those days, Shawn liked nothing better than playing his favorite video game, *World of One*, which was an overhead-view adventure game on the Super Nintendo console, in which a common peasant, who becomes known as The One, rescues a princess from an evil king. He would spend hours upon hours trying to beat that game with Victor. In his dream, the princess took the form of Sarah, and Shawn was the Hero who must rescue her. That is why Shawn had always referred to Sarah as his princess.

“Wake up, we’re here,” Mr. Mitchell scowled as he parked the car in front of Centennial High. “Don’t miss your bus tonight, and *stay out of trouble!*” He smirked.

“I will, *gosh!*” Shawn did his impression of the geeky *Napoleon Dynamite*, one of his greatest heroes; comedic movies were one of Shawn and his father’s few ways of connecting. Shawn ran out of the car toward the school doors and inside, just as the bell started ringing. He hurried to his first class, World History with Mr. Kruschev, a real hard-ass with a Russian accent.

Mr. Kruschev liked his students to call him Kruise; he had an image built up of himself in his mind as someone like Tom Cruise from the movie *Top Gun*, and usually came to class wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses. Luckily, Kruise was late to class as usual, and as Shawn strolled up to the classroom, he slowed up and tried to play it cool as he walked in. Every desk was taken

except for three in the front row, so he took a seat in one near the middle of the row, set up his laptop and signed in.

“Your divorced mom take you to class again, Mitchell?” Evan snickered from the back row. “I see she was late again, maybe I shouldn’t have kept her up so late last night!” Evan was a skinny, weaselly-looking kid with bleached-blond highlights, who had kindly taken over the bullies’ taunts of Shawn once he had come to Centennial High. Shawn couldn’t deal with this without his morning caffeine, so he just got up and walked down the hall to the vending machines. Behind him, he heard Evan snickering, “Whoa, I guess he’s jealous!” followed by his weasel-laugh. Shawn turned the corner and came to the vending machine-bank by the cafeteria. He took out some bills and, without hesitating, chose an energy drink and some Peanut Butter M&M’s. Walking back to class Shawn took a long hard swig and popped some M&M’s. As he rounded the corner, he heard some commotion from down the hall.

Shawn suddenly remembered something: he wondered if he had closed down the video of Sarah undressing before he had suspended his laptop last night. He quickened his pace, but as he got closer to the classroom, he saw Kruise turning another corner, carrying a small stack of photocopied papers. When he saw Shawn walking down the hall, Kruise stopped, ripped off his sunglasses, cocked his head and eyed him, his hard jaw with the closely-trimmed half-beard jutting out. “Vut do you fink you’re doing?”

“Sorry Mr. Kruschev--”

“Kruise!” Mr. Kruschev interrupted.

“Sorry Kruise, sir, I got here on time, I was just getting a little breakfast--”

“I don’t vant to hear excuses! Get inside, ve begin!”

As they walked into the classroom, they saw a funny sight: all the students crowded around Shawn’s desk, except of course Shawn wasn’t in the desk; Evan was. Everybody was staring at Shawn’s laptop. Evan looked up and saw Kruise and Shawn walking in, and yelled triumphantly, “Mr. Kruise, look at what was on Shawn’s computer! It’s porn!!”

Kruise lumbered over to where Evan was, brought his face close to Shawn’s laptop, and drew in a little gasp of air. Turning his head to Shawn, he whispered, incredulously, “Ees yours??”

“Mr. Kruise, I can explain--” Shawn started.

“I *don’t* vant to hear *excuses*, Mitchell! You can explain to judge!”

“Principal,” Evan offered helpfully.

“To Principal, sank you!” Kruise corrected. “Let’s go, all of you!”

“All of us sir?” the very studious Kala asked.

Kruise sighed, "You, and you, come with me," he motioned to Shawn and Evan. "The vest of you, examine see handouts."

Kala, a short, skinny cheerleader with brown hair and glasses that she only wore when taking notes, which she did exhaustively, offered, "I'll pass them out!"

Kruise rolled his eyes, muttering something in Russian as he escorted Shawn and Evan out of the classroom and down the hall towards the Principal's office.

"Mr. Mitchell," said Ed Connors, walking around his rather small office, lined with awards and photos of himself receiving awards from state senators and governors. He was speaking to Shawn's father, who was seated in front of Ed's large desk. Evan had given his side of the story and had been allowed to return to class, allowing everyone to view the video. Luckily, all the men were too preoccupied to recognize the face of Shawn's fellow classmate. That was not a discussion that Shawn wanted to have. Mr. Mitchell was not happy to have been called in immediately after he had sat down at his desk at work.

"Need I remind you of the dire straights that the boy is in," continued Connors, "of how we had so graciously rescued him from his drug-dealing friends at that hippie school?"

"Listen Ed, I realize all of this, and I know that you don't care for KU," Mr. Mitchell retorted -- the Mitchells' hometown of Lawrence was the hometown of the University of Kansas. "But I hardly think it's fair--"

"Fair? You wanna talk about fair, Mitchell?" Ed fumed, his face growing redder. Mr. Mitchell could've sworn he saw his sparse hairline recede even further. "What about all the kids in Kruschev's class--"

"Da," Kruise affirmed, eyeing Ed. He was a little intimidated by the principal, to be honest, and he was not likely to insist on him using his nickname, as he did with his students.

"--eh?" Ed continued. "What about the images in their minds that they can't erase? Traumatized by this smut that your son brought in; it makes me sick!"

"It isn't smut." Shawn broke in.

"What?" Ed stared at Shawn.

"It isn't smut. It's a project I've been working on."

"What project would that be? Building up your porn collection?" Ed blurted out.

"That's not not appropriate Ed." Everyone looked up as Mr. Fitzgerald walked in. He had poked his head in just in time to hear the last few seconds of the grilling.

“Eh...Fritz, what are you doing here?” Ed sighed as he straightened up out of Shawn’s face.

“I was just concerned about my star pupil. He is supposed to be in my class right now, and some of my students informed me about the little incident this morning. He was going to be giving me an update on his independent study project today as well.”

“Project?” Ed nervously cocked his head.

“That’s what everybody was looking at this morning.” Shawn replied, his eyes on the floor.

“Given the circumstances, I think we should just allow Shawn to return to class, *Mister* Connors.” Mr. Fitzgerald offered.

“Listen *Mister* Fitzgerald,” Ed replied, as Mr. Fitzgerald winked at Shawn. Ed never got his name right. “I am the principal--”

“--for now,” Fitzgerald interjected.

“--and *this* boy had pornography on school property. Now I don’t know what kind of projects you’re advocating--” Ed retorted strongly.

“--purely incidental, I can assure you--” replied Fitzgerald.

“--but the policy manual plainly advocates *expulsion* for this gross offense!” Ed threw his hands in the air.

“Since you are familiar with the rules, you are surely aware that that penalty is for the viewing or possession of materials with an explicitly sexual content. Now, as the images in question obviously had nothing sexual in them--” Fitzgerald said.

“--you would know all about these rules, wouldn’t you?” Ed retorted, obviously getting desperate.

“I think a dismissal of the charges is appropriate,” Fitzgerald said, ignoring him.

“A week’s suspension,” Ed retorted, beginning to move towards the door.

“Now wait a second; how’s he going to keep up with his classes?” Mr. Mitchell, who had been listening patiently this whole time, and was just trying to avoid making things worse, broke in.

“I’m inclined to agree with Mr. Mitchell,” Fitzgerald added.

“Three days,” Ed sighed, as he began pushing everybody out of the office.

“One day, in-school,” Fitzgerald persisted.

“Two days, out-of-school,” Ed said finally, slamming the door on them all. “And that’s FINAL!”

Mr. Fitzgerald nodded and smiled at Shawn and Mr. Mitchell, who thanked him heartily.

“Just doing my job!” Mr. Fitzgerald yelled behind his back as he headed back to class. “Chat with you on FaceWorld tonight, Shawn! I’ll have Sarah Lyon bring by your homework.”

As Shawn and his dad walked down the hall and outside, Shawn wasn’t so sure about that last part. He just hoped none of this got back to Sarah.

Chapter 4

“So what are you going to do with your days off?” Mr. Mitchell asked Shawn, turning his head to briefly look into his son’s hazel eyes, which were showing their brownish hues in the tannish interior of Mr. Mitchell’s 80’s-era wood-panel station wagon. Shawn’s eyes reminded Mr. Mitchell of Shawn’s mother, who had brown eyes.

Shawn was dumbfounded. “Huh?” He thought for sure his dad would be furious with him after this latest incident.

“Do you want to rent some games?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be mad at me?” Shawn asked incredulously.

“What for? That you were doing your homework, or that Connors is an idiot?” Mr. Mitchell asked. He and Ed Connors had their own history that dated back to childhood. “Or that you’re in love with Sarah?” He smirked at Shawn as he turned his head back to the road.

“What?” Shawn didn’t know what to say.

“I see the way you lock up every time you see her at the store, or at football games,” Mr. Mitchell said, winking at his son. “And I recognized her in that video.”

“Dad, I can explain--”

“You don’t have to explain anything. The Lyons are good people, and I would be proud to have Sarah as my daughter-in-law.”

Shawn rolled his eyes. He felt uncomfortable going to his dad to talk about relationships. “Okay Dad,” he said. It also suddenly hit him: this was his mom’s weekend for custody of Shawn. Was that why his dad was being so nice to him?

“So, do you have any plans this weekend?” Mr. Mitchell asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe celebrate Halloween...with Mom...”

Shawn’s dad shot him a look. “Oh, I thought maybe you’d want to have Victor over to the house, like you usually do on Halloween?” Mr. Mitchell started to look a little worried. Despite what he would say to anyone’s face, Mr. Mitchell still loved his ex-wife - Shawn’s mother. He was just too proud to admit it, and he secretly hoped that if he proved he was a good, loving father to Shawn, maybe he could somehow win her back.

Shawn couldn't help it, as he let a smile crack in his deadpan face. "I knew it!" Mr. Mitchell cried, a smile of relief coming across his face. "Good joke, ya wiseguy!"

"I may like Sarah, but you love Mom!"

"Why, did she say anything about me?" Mr. Mitchell asked, jokingly smoothing his hair in the rear-view mirror.

"Gross, you're pathetic!" Shawn said, shaking his head and looking out the window, laughing.

Back at the house, Shawn was typing furiously on his laptop, on a coding tear. He was working on *WoS*, busily adding new features that he had been wanting to work on, but hadn't had time until now. These two days off were going to be a Godsend, Shawn thought, as he wrapped up the character creation screens. Nodding his head, Shawn completed the `fetchPlayerModel` method of the Character class, which was what was encapsulating his Character creation methods and data.

He compiled and ran his code. "Fatal Error: Division by Zero," the compiler said. Shawn found the line in the Character class to which the error was referring. "Ah," said Shawn, realizing his mistake: the character creation screen was calculating the character's height dimensions, and when no character had been created, the height was zero. Shawn copied in some code from the map parser, compiled, and ran again.

This time, it worked. Sort of.

"Loading....1%," the character screen stated, as the ellipses kept ticking. Shawn was about to shut the process down, when he saw it move to 2%.

"Ugh," said Shawn. This was going to take a while. He opened up FaceWorld on his other monitor. He checked the time: 11:00 A.M. "Huh," thought Shawn; he was making amazing time on his coding - just under an hour to get the entire character screen (hopefully) complete!

He checked his Friend News, and saw that everyone was commenting on a certain link. This was strange, as most of his friends were in class. A chill came over Shawn as he realized that the link was a video. Could this be...? Shawn shook the chill off as he read the comments:

WTF Shawn!

Where'd u get this?!

U Perv!

She looks better than this in real life, I would know ;-)

386 Other Comments...

Why was his name mentioned? Shawn scrolled back up to the video; Sarah Lyon was tagged, and it said it was uploaded by Shawn Mitchell. He couldn't move. Thoughts raced through his mind. Finally, after five minutes, he was able to click Play.

What appeared on his screen was Sarah, unbuttoning her shirt. Shawn hit stop. This was the video he had captured with his game, the one that had gotten him suspended from school! What was it doing on FaceWorld??

Shawn noticed his Inbox: 68 messages! Scrolling through the messages, he saw:

Shawn. What is this doing online? U gotta take this down! -- Victor Endicott

LOL! Tell ur mom hi 4 me! -- Evan Harper

Shawn shook his head. Evan. He must've posted the video to FaceWorld while Shawn was getting breakfast this morning!

Shawn quickly deleted the video from his profile. Hopefully Sarah hadn't seen this. Turning back to his laptop, he saw the character screen read, "50%." He looked back at his Inbox. Scrolling through all his messages, he saw what he had dreaded....

From: Sarah Lyon

Shawn sighed, as he opened Sarah's message; just four words:

You are a coward

Shawn was cut to the heart. Whatever else happened in his life, he knew he always had Sarah, or at least the hope of Sarah. That's why he never engaged her in conversation, or spent time with her, or asked her out: he knew that if he did she might not like him, or, worse, he might not like her, and he didn't want to ruin the fantasy he had built up of her in his mind. No matter what else happened, he knew he had Sarah Fox to count on.

Well, not anymore, he thought, as he quickly hit Reply to type out an explanation:

Sarah

i know this looks horrible, but it's not at all how it seems. it's from this stupid game i've been working on, and i didn't mean for it to show u like that. evan harper got on my laptop and uploaded it. i've taken it down, i'm so so so sorry! i hope u know that i would never want u disgraced like that.

shawn

Shawn didn't know what else to say, so he clicked Send. He sat there, staring at the screen for a full 10 minutes, just thinking about the situation, playing out various scenarios and anticipating her response. Much to Shawn's surprise, when he shook himself back to reality, Sarah had sent a response already:

a game? u spied on me and put it in a game?!?

Shawn typed out a reply:

i didn't spy on u! i wrote this map parser that predicts how the textures of the map will look, including people. i was using ur house as a test map.

Shawn stopped. He thought this last part sounded a little creepy, so he rewrote it as:

i didn't spy on u! i wrote this map parser that predicts how the textures of the map will look, including people. come over tomorrow night and i will show u.

Shawn stared at what he had written. This would work. Sarah would come over tomorrow when he and Victor were playing around with *WoS*, and she would see. And then, maybe she would be impressed with what he had done. Maybe he would be able to show her his prowess at *World of One*, and even use that as a segue into telling her about how he thought of her as a princess...just maybe...

That gave Shawn a very interesting idea: what if he could somehow combine *WoS* with *World of One*? He examined his code, looking for some way of doing this. Switching back to the game, he saw that the character build process was complete. He clicked OK, and his heart skipped a beat. On the screen was a character wearing a black sweater and jeans, with large, squarish glasses, brown hair parted on the left side, and hazel eyes. This didn't just look like Shawn, this *was* Shawn! No way, he breathed, smiling. This was going better than he could have possibly imagined. Selecting this character, he started up the game with Sarah's backyard as the spawn point.

Looking around the yard, he spotted the black sky just beyond the east fence. Shawn walked toward it, and stopped at the golden retriever, who had awoke when he had come close, and was sniffing his hand. Shawn was about to get out his sword to get rid of this nuisance but decided to try talking to it. Pressing V to speak, Shawn leaned in towards the microphone above his laptop's screen, and said calmly, "Good boy, aw, nice dog!" But what he heard come out from his speakers were his words in an extremely obnoxious, metallic, robot voice, "GOOD BOY! AW..NICE DOG!" The dog went crazy. The seemingly good-natured golden retriever began barking ferociously and running around the yard in circles. Shawn took out his sword and ran

after the dog. The dog was so scared by this sight that he ran off towards the south fence, and jumped over it, into the void. Shawn literally laughed out loud when he saw this.

Stepping over to the fence, he got an idea. He quit to the main menu of the game, and brought up the map importer. On the screen were the following options:

Create...

Load...

Delete...

<- Back.

Shawn clicked on Load..., navigated out of the *WoS* directory, and into the folder of the computer version of *World of One*. "Let's see..." Shawn said thoughtfully, as he studied the directory structure. "Ah," he said as he opened up the Data folder, seeing a Maps subdirectory. Double-clicking on this, he saw just one file: "Kingdom.wol."

Shawn realized that the entire game took place in one map file. This made sense, as there was a lot of interaction between the different parts of the map, and it would be tiresome to have to sit through a loading screen every time the user backtracked to a previously visited part of the game.

When Shawn double-clicked on this map, the game crashed. Shawn would have to add a little more graceful error handling, so the game wouldn't just blow up like this. As he had been running his program in debug mode, he was able to view the cause of the error:

Error converting type binary to type string

"Hm...." Shawn said to himself. He thought he had programmed his map parser to handle *any* map. He opened up the *World of One* map in a text editor. All he saw were random characters all over the screen. Shawn sighed. This was a binary file; compiled code. His map parser needed a *text* file.

To get his code to be able to read these binary map files, it would take days, if not weeks, in order to write a binary-reading mode for his parser, that would convert the binary byte-by-byte to letters, and then parse that...if that would even work. He had no idea what the format of the map files were; most likely, they were not simply text, defining the placement of map items converted to ones and zeroes...it probably contained game code as well, otherwise why wouldn't this just be a text file?

Shawn's head was swimming. He wanted to have this done in time to show Victor. And Sarah, of course....Shawn had to clear his head. He grabbed a pen and searched for some paper. Paper, paper...He searched his messy desktop and pulled open a couple drawers. Reaching into the bottom desk drawer, and feeling around for loose paper, he felt a page stuck in between this drawer and the one above it. Tugging and prying this page free, what he held in his hands was a

wide-ruled, crumpled paper with words scribbled with an unpracticed hand. Reading what was on the page, Shawn lost his breath.

Chapter 5

The paper Shawn held in his hands read:

I watch you from afar,

You don't know who I am,

But I care for you,

And would die to defend you.

You are my Princess,

And I am here to save you.

I am Always,

Your Hero

Shawn Mitchell

The room began spinning, and as Shawn slid out of his chair, his head hit the edge of his desk. He was walking home from school with Victor. They were younger, around 11.

“No, Victor, the king sends the dragon to get the princess, you have to fight off the dragon, and then the king flies *back* on the dragon in the middle of the night and kidnaps her--”

“Cool!” said Victor, awestruck. He had a black eye he claimed he got from playing four-square at recess. They were discussing the game Shawn had just bought last night, *World of One*. “But why is he trying to kidnap the princess if she’s already in the castle?”

“You’re not listening, Victor! The princess ran away, and she’s hiding out in the church.”

“AH, okay--”

“Hey, you two dorks.” Steven, a tall, weaselly-looking redhead with freckles, had stepped out in front of the boys from behind an elm tree, causing Shawn, who wasn’t looking where he was going, to walk right into him. “Watch it! This jacket cost more than your life,” Steven said, referring to his new black leather jacket. Rumor had it that his mother’s new boyfriend, who was

involved in a number of questionable “business” ventures, had given it to Steven as a way to buy his favor.

Steven snickered, looking over his shoulder at his buddies, who came out from behind bushes and trees. They were in the field that the boys would cut through on their way home. Here at the edge of the field, tall trees and bushes hid them from onlookers. Shawn fell to the ground, with a slight push from Steven.

“Hey four-eyes, I hear you’ve got a crush on my girl,” Steven said, pushing Shawn back down as he began getting to his feet.

“No I don’t,” Shawn retorted, as he began getting back on his feet.

“That’s not what Dicker here says,” Steven said, turning to Victor, who quickly looked down, backing away. Shawn now realized where he had gotten his black eye.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Shawn asked as he got back to his feet. Pulling himself up to his full height, without hunching, he was actually taller than Steven.

Steven punched him in the stomach. “Shut up loser.”

Shawn doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. Steven’s friends laughed again.

“What was that? My own size? You’re pathetic,” Steven snorted, as he pushed Shawn back down on the ground. He began walking away.

“You--don’t deserve her,” Shawn stammered, still clutching his stomach and struggling to regain his breath.

“Shut up Shawn!” Victor cried, eyeing Steven.

Steven stopped in his tracks, and turned around. “What’d you say?” A small, devilish grin started playing across his face.

“You don’t--deserve her, and you’ll never have her. Sarah hates cowards,” Shawn said as he got back on his feet, shaking off his scrapes and bruises, staring down Steven defiantly.

Steven took three steps toward Shawn, and raised his fist. Victor, regretting his betrayal, and previous inaction, jumped up and grabbed hold of Steven’s upraised fist and bit into it.

“Argh! Dicker, you little bitch!” Steven yelled, as he swung his arm back towards the elm tree, thrusting Victor hurtling towards it, which he hit with a sickening thud. Shawn stared at Victor, who didn’t move.

“You son of a--” Shawn muttered contemptuously as he took a step towards Steven, intending to push him. He didn’t get that far, however, for Steven had connected an angry punch with

Shawn's left eye, sending him to the ground yet again. Dropping to his knees, Steven began pummeling Shawn with lefts and rights. Soon Shawn couldn't hear, see, or feel anything, as Steven mercilessly beat him.

After what seemed like hours, Shawn finally heard something: "Hey! HEY!! Get AWAY from him!!"

"Ow! Ow!! Let's beat it! Ow!!"

"Go get Dad!"

After a few seconds, Shawn finally began to see something: blurry and red-tinted through the haze, he saw what could only be an angel: the most beautiful face he had ever seen, with caring brown eyes, which were dripping tears.

"Oh, please be alive, please be okay. Jesus, please let him be okay, please save him..."

"Shawn...you're too late, you fool!" Shawn looked up and saw the same angel who had saved him, wearing a torn dress. Holding her with a sword to her throat was a dark figure, with his face hidden. Shawn looked down, and saw in his own hands a sword that was reflecting blue light. The dark figure and the girl were standing at the brink of what appeared to be an endless pit of darkness, which was all around them. Shawn looked up and saw that the dark figure had begun to slowly turn around, revealing that he had the same face as Shawn.

"Help me! Oh save me, Shawn!" screamed the girl, desperately reaching out to the *real* Shawn.

"I am saving you Princess," bellowed the dark figure, pulling his sword away from the throat of the girl, "from him!" And as the dark figure said this, he stepped forward, stabbing Shawn in the stomach. Shawn fell to his knees, blood gushing into his mouth. The girl brushed past the dark figure, falling to her knees, her dark hair mixing with her tears and Shawn's blood on his face. As he looked up into the face of this angel, this princess, she held his hands. Suddenly she looked up and turned around to look at the dark figure, a smile on her face. "He grabbed my hands! I felt it!"

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP. Shawn opened his eyes. Was it time to get up for school already? Someone was holding his hands. He squinted at the figure sitting in front of him, who was blurred from the combination of sleep and nearsightedness without his glasses. He could tell that it was a dark-haired girl who was turned away from him. Turning around, the same angel, the princess from his dream, smiled at him.

“He opened his eyes!” she gushed, as Shawn’s parents and nurses came rushing over; the angel got up, fading out of view.

At the breakfast table, Shawn was enjoying a nice big bowl of his favorite sugary cereal, along with eggs, bacon, toast, waffles; anything he could stuff into his mouth.

“Would you like anything else dear?” asked Shawn’s mother, who was busy putting s’mores-flavored pastries into the toaster.

“Honey, you’re gonna kill him!” Shawn’s father said with affection and jest, as he winked across the table at Shawn.

“Oooh, he’s got to get his strength back! A week’s worth of nothing but shakes isn’t enough for a growing boy!” his mother replied, smiling.

“Was I really in the hospital for a week?” asked Shawn.

“No, you were in a coma for a week,” his mother said. “You were in the hospital for two weeks. We thought you were getting better, but then you started getting sick...” She choked back tears as she looked at Shawn’s dad, who reached over and grabbed her hands.

“We’re okay now, it’s going to be okay,” comforted Shawn’s dad, as he looked back at Shawn. Just then the phone rang.

“Did you see the angel?” Shawn asked.

“Wha??” Shawn’s dad replied. The phone rang again, and Shawn’s parents turned to look at the phone.

“An angel saved me, and was sitting on my bed when I woke up.”

“That wasn’t an angel--” Shawn’s dad said, cut off by the ringing of the phone again.

“What?” asked Shawn impatiently.

Turning back to Shawn, his dad continued, “That was Sarah Lyon.”

Chapter 6

Shawn blinked his eyes. He heard the ringing again, but his parents were nowhere in sight. As he propped himself up on his elbows, he looked around. He was on the floor of his room, and it was beginning to get dark out.

“RRRIIIINGG!” came the sound again. Finally coming to his senses, he discovered that the sound was coming from his laptop. Getting into the chair at his desk, he saw that he was getting a call on FaceWorld. Shawn saw Victor’s picture on his screen with a big Answer button underneath it in red. Clicking on the button, he saw Victor come to life.

“Geez, finally!” Victor said, exasperated. “Where’ve you been? I’ve been trying your cell phone, your house phone, everything--” Victor broke off as he saw Shawn rubbing a big welt on his forehead, still trying to shake the lingering effects of dreams and sleep from his head. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I think so. I think I fell out of my chair, hit my head on my desk,” Shawn replied, still rubbing his forehead, and looking around.

“What? How’d that happen??” Victor asked, incredulous.

“Agh, I dunno, I’ve been pretty tired--”

“Well, you haven’t been getting enough sleep--” Victor replied, concerned.

“--anyway...” Shawn interrupted, annoyed.

“Hey, what’s that?” Victor was staring at the paper in front of the webcam on Shawn’s desk with the scrawled, untrained writing of a child on it.

“Nothing,” Shawn said, a little too quickly, as he snatched the paper off the desk.

Victor, a little suspicious, asked, “Shawn, you didn’t black out, did you?” Victor’s mother, who was a nurse, had always been the one to take care of Victor and Shawn when they had gotten into mischief as children, and she had attempted to impart just a bit of her extensive knowledge of the human body to Victor.

Shawn looked down, not saying anything.

“You don’t have anything to be ashamed of,” Victor said, compassion in his voice.

“Guys don’t faint,” Shawn said quietly.

“Guys who undergo trauma *black out*, Shawn, and there’s nothing wrong with that,” Victor said. Shawn didn’t reply, taking a deep breath. “You should know that by now. You shouldn’t be alone, where’s your dad?”

“You don’t have to baby me, Victor.”

“I’m not *babying* you Shawn, I’m just--I’ve got your back, bro.”

Shawn stopped rubbing his forehead, and smiled. “I know, bro.” He checked the clock: 6:03 P.M. Whew, so much for getting to work on his game all day. “Dad should be on his way home.”

Shawn looked at the Action Feed on FaceWorld. Stories of what his friends were up to were scrolling by faster than he had ever seen them. He glanced at a couple of them:

Sarah Lyon, marry me! Rick

That Sarah Lyon is one stone cold Fox. Hey, Sarah Fox, that has a ring to it, huh Shawn? ;-) -- Evan Harper

Shawn cast his eyes away from the screen.

“Don’t listen to them, Shawn,” Victor said. He could tell he had been looking at FaceWorld. “Hey, look at it this way, at least now you got her attention.” Victor suppressed a chuckle as he smirked.

“Thanks Vic,” Shawn muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Shawn! You home?” Shawn heard the front door close.

“I gotta go, my dad’s home,” Shawn said to Victor.

“Okay, see ya tomorrow after school, my mom’ll drop me off!”

“Alright, happy Halloween!” Shawn replied enthusiastically.

“Hmph HUH HA HA HA HA!!” Victor mimicked the vampire Dracula. “My name is Count Foxula” -- clearly a reference to Sarah -- “and I vant--to suck--your--”

Shawn shut down the video, rolling his eyes, as he yelled down to his father, “Yeah, here Dad!”

“You eaten yet son?”

Shawn heard the grumbling in his stomach. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Mmmph, mmph,” grumbled Shawn, his mouth full of pepperoni pizza, as he pointed towards one of the movies that his dad was holding up.

“Don Knotts? Or Three Stooges?” Shawn’s dad asked, holding up two separate videos.

“Three-GULP-Stooges!” Shawn stammered, forcing down his pizza.

“Alright! Sounds good, we can watch the other one later.” Shawn’s dad exchanged smiles with Shawn, putting the video in and falling down next to Shawn on the couch. They hadn’t sat down and watched a movie together in a long time; it reminded Shawn of the good ol’ days, when Shawn and his parents were a family.

As the movie was starting up, Shawn’s dad asked, “So, what’d you do today?”

“Oh, I slept some,” Shawn said smugly, “and worked on my school project.” He didn’t want to alarm his dad with tales of passing out.

Shawn greatly enjoyed hanging out with his father, and both of them laughed uncontrollably at the antics of the Three Stooges, who were scared out of their wits by a flying bird with a bedsheet pulled over it, thinking it was a ghost. After the movie, Shawn’s dad went in the kitchen to make some cookies.

“I’ll be right back Dad. Gotta pee,” Shawn said, heading upstairs to use his bathroom, and to check his FaceWorld. When he had finished in the bathroom and was checking his laptop, he got a FaceWorld call. Checking the screen, he saw that it was from Mr. Fitzgerald. He hit Answer.

“Hey,” Shawn greeted his Physics teacher, remembering that he was supposed to talk to him tonight.

“Hello Shawn. How are you?” Mr. Fitzgerald asked concernedly, looking down at Shawn over his reading glasses.

“Uh, good, listen, I can’t talk long, but I just wanted to tell you things are going great with my project! I should be done before too long.”

“That’s great, Shawn. So the equations I highlighted for you are working for the map parser; you haven’t ventured outside of the specs, have you? None of the theorems regarding the Higgs boson, or the Higgs field, for instance?” Mr. Fitzgerald asked, his eyes growing large.

“The what?” asked Shawn.

“The Higgs boson. The particle proposed back in the 60’s that, by interacting with the Higgs field, supposedly explains how all matter in the universe got its mass after the Big Bang. There’s been a lot about it in the news lately,” Mr. Fitzgerald said, sending Shawn a link.

Clicking on the link, Shawn read the title:

Does the ‘God Particle’ Exist?

Underneath was a picture of thousands of tiny blue dots, enclosing yellow and orange particles bursting apart in the shape of a cross. “The ‘God Particle.’ I’ve heard of that,” said Shawn.

“Yes, the colloquial term for the Higgs boson particle,” said Mr. Fitzgerald, dryly, as he removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Of course, it has *nothing* to do with God. *Ridiculous* term. Anyway, surely you didn’t mess around with any equations in that section of the book?”

“Ah...” Shawn carefully considered how to mention that he had been randomly inserting every equation outside of the “specs” that his teacher had laid out for him in the textbook. “Why would I do that? Ha ha?” Shawn laughed nervously.

“Good,” Mr. Fitzgerald appeared relieved. “Because all this stuff I’m seeing on FaceWorld about Sarah...”

“Don’t worry, I have it all under control,” Shawn reassured his teacher.

“Quantum physics, especially quantum computing, is much an unknown branch of science, Shawn...It turns existing physics and science on its head; the possibilities are exciting - extremely efficient computing...teleportation, even time travel; we really don’t know what all this can or can’t do. If someone just--plays around with this stuff, using untested theories and computations--”

“I know, Mr. Fitzgerald; how could a computer program *predict* that Sarah’s bedspread has Jasmine on it?” Shawn regretted he had said this.

Mr. Fitzgerald gave Shawn a quizzical look, and opened his mouth to speak.

“Shawn, cookies are in the oven! Let’s start the next movie, I have work tomorrow!”

“Okay Dad!” Shawn was eager to avoid any more uncomfortable questions from Mr. Fitzgerald. “Sorry, I have to go now. Good to talk to you, and thanks again!”

Mr. Fitzgerald’s mouth was still open, as Shawn shut the lid to his laptop. Heading back downstairs to start the movie with his dad, Shawn’s thoughts went back to Sarah’s bedroom, wondering what she was up to at this moment. Watching the cowardly Don Knotts’ character spend the night in a not-so-haunted house, Shawn wished he could do something to prove to

Sarah that he was not, in fact, a coward. After all Sarah had done for Shawn, he wondered if demonstrating his game would be enough.

Chapter 7

Shawn slept well that night, and didn't awake until 11:00 in the morning.

"Mmm, tsk, tsk." Shawn arose with satisfaction. He didn't remember anything he had dreamt, for once in quite a while. Sitting up in bed, Shawn looked around: his clothes, strewn across the floor; books, mostly computer and fantasy books, were clumsily placed on his bookshelf and desk. "Sigh," Shawn muttered. He really should clean his room, but he really didn't feel like it. Plus, he really should get to work on his schoolwork, although he still hadn't received his latest homework from Sarah yet.

After a shower and breakfast, Shawn got to work on his quantum physics project. Loading up his IDE, he opened the source code for *WoS*. Shawn shook his head; this was very different, examining the code after a full night's rest. He saw the code as if it were pictures; scanning the many lines, Shawn found the part that dealt with the boundaries of the currently loaded map.

"Let's see...." Shawn easily found the part of the code that would need to be amended to allow for maps to be added to the environment. If a map was currently loaded, the program would now simply attach the loaded map onto the selected coordinates, if chosen from the context menu. If I wanted to add a map from *World of One*...Shawn wondered. He couldn't just import the binary files from *World of One* without modification. This requires...processing...This gave Shawn an idea. Rather than add all of the processing and parsing needed to load in proprietary binary files from a game like *World of One*, what if the program could make use of the actual game, thus offloading the work of the additional coding that would be required?

Scouring the Web for information regarding the Exec command, Shawn began reading:

The Exec command replaces the current program thread with that of the executable program passed in as the first parameter (in order to *split off* a new thread to run this program, use the **Fork** command).

"A new thread," Shawn said to himself, frowning, as he read further on Forks:

When program code is executed, a thread of control is created, which runs through the code. At any one time in a program, only one thread exists, unless another thread is split off using Fork.

Shawn's mind was humming: Fork, fork, so if I fork off a thread to run *World of One*, it could load a map...how do I translate that to my game? He didn't know of any way to get the program output to translate into a map that was recognizable by *WoS*.

Well, thought Shawn to himself, I'm not sure what all's in my map parser code...maybe if I just pass the output of *World of One* into the parser...

It was worth a shot. Appending to the section of code he just wrote, Shawn added a “World of One” option to the context menu, and typed:

```
if(option == 'World of One'){  
  
    // loads the main map from World of One into the map parser  
  
    this->mapParser.load(fork('../../worldOfOne/worldOfOne.exe -map Kingdom.wol'));  
  
}
```

Telling his IDE to run the code, Shawn loaded the most recent map (Sarah’s house). Heading out to the back fence, he right-clicked on the massive expanse of blackness, scrolled down to Import, and moused over to the new *World of One* option. Shawn hesitated, then clicked on it.

The whirl of the laptop’s hard drive let Shawn know that his program was loading *World of One*, and reading the map data. He hoped that it wouldn’t error out. Nothing else he ever wrote worked on the first try; he always had to wind up going back and making tweaks. To his surprise, Shawn soon saw in front of him, onscreen, where there once was a fence and mere blackness, a scene being drawn.

As Shawn stared, breathless, what appeared to be a medieval village was being rendered. Cottages, blacksmith shops, homes, and other buildings were being drawn in concentric circles, and in the middle was a gigantic castle. These buildings were all familiar to Shawn, but normally from a bird’s-eye view, in two dimensions. His heart beating quickly, Shawn took control of his laptop keys, and began sprinting towards the newly built kingdom.

However, when Shawn was about 100 feet from the nearest cottage, a wall was drawn right in his face, and he fell straight down. Confused, Shawn saw on his screen nothing but green and brown. Holding the Jump button, Shawn eventually saw brown dirt and grass in front of him. Turning around while continuing to hold Jump, he realized he had fallen into some dirty water. This must be the moat that surrounds the Kingdom, he thought.

Shawn moved around the moat, all along the Kingdom walls, looking for a way out. There would be no way out; it was a moat, that was the whole point. Suddenly Shawn’s mind went back to his game-playing days of World of One, back to his childhood, the happier days of marathons with Victor:

“I found it, Shawn,” stated Victor, matter-of-factly.

“Found what?” asked Shawn, his mouth full of pizza, coming out of the kitchen of his parents’ house in Lawrence.

“The way in!” screamed Victor, as he dove into the moat surrounding the Kingdom from a point of the ground at which rested a rather ordinary-looking stone, the 16-bit graphics doing their best to show his change in elevation. Rather than popping back up, as he and Shawn had been doing for the past hour, Victor’s character remained submerged, broke through a fragile part of ground, and emerged on the other side, popping up through the ground. Shawn and Victor high-fived.

Shawn shook his head. Swimming around to the back side of the seemingly endless Kingdom walls, he finally spied the stone on-shore that stood as a marker for the diving point, and turned back towards the wall. Diving down, he scrolled his mouse to the Unarmed weapon, and hit the left mouse button. He saw his hands swipe at the ground in front of him; bits of ground fell off.

Still breathless, Shawn continued to tap the left mouse button, as the ground began to give way, and light began to shine through. The screen flashed red, signaling that his character was starting to run out of oxygen, and was suffering loss to his health. Tapping the left mouse button faster, he finally broke through, and sprinted forward, as his character’s feet hit solid ground and took a deep breath of fresh air.

Shawn looked around, as if seeing this all for the first time, and yet a feeling came over him, as of a world long forgotten, to which he was returning.

“Halt, halt!!” Shawn was shaken from his thoughts by someone calling out to him. Turning, Shawn saw a guard in full knight’s regalia, including sword and armor, running towards him. As he saw Shawn turn, he stopped dead, falling to his knees.

“Sir Shawn, the One! Forgive your servant Carac!” and the guard drooped his head and planted his sword into the ground.

Something came back to Shawn. Carac had quite the part to play in *The One’s Quest*. “Up, up. I am but a common man.”

Raising his head and getting to his feet, the soldier came closer to Shawn, his pale blue eyes penetrating through his face-mask. “We thought you were dead,” he whispered. “When the Mad King ordered your execution...we saw you hung, sir.” The guard looked confused. But Shawn was confused too. This wasn’t the beginning of the game; Carac was mentioning things Shawn had accomplished the last time he had played *World of One* on his laptop; his map parser must have somehow loaded his saved game too!

Holding V, Shawn leaned in to his laptop’s microphone, above the screen. Still remembering the story of *World of One*, he whispered, “That was the Mad King’s son. I used a potion to disguise him as myself.”

To his amazement, the soldier understood his speech. “Blacktounge, the heir to the throne--” the guard began, loudly.

“Shh!” Shawn interrupted, looking around warily. He remembered countless times before when he was caught by other guards patrolling the grounds after he and Victor had broken through.

“He is dead then?” the guard whispered, excitedly.

“Yes, and I, Shawn, am back for those who are still loyal to the true King Athalos, to rescue the princess and expel the Mad King!” Shawn recited from heart. He and Victor had quoted this line to each other countless times in middle school. The old game had allowed players to enter their own names, or whatever they wished to be called, for characters within the story.

“Then I know you are truly The One, Sir Shawn,” said the guard, looking around. “Listen, Princess Sarah is safe. She is in,” he looked behind him, and turned back, whispering even more quietly, “the place where the cock crows at midnight.” Shawn’s heart stopped when Carac mentioned Sarah. It started again when he realized he had entered “Sarah” for the princess’ name.

At that moment, Shawn heard footsteps and the sound of clanking armor coming from just around the corner. Carac looked behind him, and turned back, saying, with his eyebrows twisted into a troubled expression, “The others, they have heard us. I’m afraid they are not all faithful to King Athalos!”

As Shawn braced for a fight, switching to his broad sword, soldier after soldier turned the corner. This doesn’t happen when I talk to Carac, only if I do something stupid like...make a loud noise--, thought Shawn, and as he began battling the endless swarm of soldiers, he remembered how his character’s cold, metallic, *loud* voice had scared Sarah’s dog!

Shawn hit the left mouse button repeatedly to swing the sword, dodging in and out of sword thrusts. As one came at his neck, Shawn ducked, and thought, I--need--, thrusting his sword upwards into that soldier’s throat, setting forth gushes of blood, pouring out with every pump of the man’s heart. Jumping over a sword swing at his feet, Shawn came down with his sword into this man’s skull.

--to get a new voice! Given a brief reprieve from the onslaught, Shawn held down the left mouse button, charging up his Power Meter; his sword glowed with a blue light, as a hopeless amount of soldiers began pouring in at all sides, grabbing at him. Shawn noticed his health meter depleting fast, as swords, hands, and feet began raining in on him. Just as they were about to rip Shawn’s body apart, he released the left mouse button, sending his character leaping and spinning his sword around him, in an upward spiral, crescendoing in a burst of light with his sword vertical in his hands, his feet a meter above the ground.

Shawn fell to the ground, collapsing to his knees with the impact. Placing one foot on the ground in front of him, he looked up, scanning the situation around him: what appeared to be a hundred soldiers were lying dead. Carac looked over at him, his mouth open in horror, as Carac removed the end of his sword from the entrails of some poor fellow soldier.

Carac let his sword fall to the ground. “These were my comrades. I fear my brother may be amongst the dead.”

Shawn didn’t remember Carac ever saying anything like this, nor Victor or himself ever being able to fight off this many men in *World of One*. It was as if his map interpreter was adapting to his behavior, interpolating the differences from the original game’s programmed responses and his own actions. Further, the three-dimensional aspect of his game engine gave him a much finer degree of control over his actions than the crude, overhead, two-dimensional 16-bit game *World of One* ever could. His heart racing, and imagining the possibilities of his invention, Shawn hit Esc, quitting the game in order to tone down his character’s big mouth.

Chapter 8

“There,” said Shawn, “that should just about--do it,” putting the finishing touches on the new voice settings he had created for his game. He had been able to download free code libraries for use in most of the transformations used in this module. He had also been able to get the map parser to predict the background textures, simply by messing around with the dimensions defined in the map of Sarah’s house. Changing the amounts to very large numbers, he was able to get the sky and sun to display.

Running the game, he went to the Character screen, chose his player, and entered the new Voice settings. Leaving the “Modulation” setting checked, which would change the tone, level, pitch, and volume of the voice based on the words that were spoken through the microphone, he entered the “Effects” submenu.

Scrolling through the options, he read the following choices:

Hero

High-Pitched

Low-Pitched

Princess

Sign-Language (Beta)

Selecting “Hero,” Shawn loaded up the last played map, placing his player in Sarah’s backyard, intending to try out his new voice on the dog that he had once scared off. When the map loaded, in the place where he would have normally seen the south fence, he found himself staring straight into the *World of One Kingdom*, where he saw the massive village walls, in which was a raised drawbridge. In front of these walls was the murky, greenish-brown moat in which he had fallen on his earlier attempt to enter the Kingdom.

Turning to his left, Shawn walked towards the doghouse. “Here, doggy!” Shawn exclaimed, hopefully and loudly. His voice came out of his speakers as that of a strong, tall, macho hero that Shawn had heard in various cartoons growing up. Turning up the volume of the speakers, Shawn whispered, “Come ‘ere boy! Daddy’s home! Where’s Mommy?” The words came out, as expected, at the same low-level whisper that they had been uttered.

However, when the dog didn't emerge, Shawn walked closer, speaking, "Oh yeah, Sarah's at school. But where are you?" Checking the time on his laptop, he realized she should be home by now. As Shawn looked inside the doghouse, he saw that it was empty. Remembering that the dog had jumped out into the black void before he had attached the *World of One* map to the yard, Shawn wondered why the dog wouldn't have respawned when he had reloaded the game.

Lost in thought, Shawn was shaken back to reality by the sound of the doorbell. The normally standard-issue bell-sound had been replaced, for Halloween, by creepy-sounding organ music, getting louder and louder, ending in a maniacal laugh. As Shawn hurried out into the hallway and down the steps to answer the door, this gave him an idea.

Pulling open the door, his idea was confounded by what he saw: Sarah, the last person he would ordinarily expect to see on his front porch. Shawn smiled, and began to say, "Hello," as he noticed the sour look on her face. Once he had gotten over the shock of seeing Sarah, Shawn turned his head to his left and saw another figure, with red hair. With his back turned, pivoting to face Shawn with a look of utter boredom giving way to a devilish grin revealing shiny metal braces, the figure resembled some kind of ginger shark to Shawn.

Shawn turned back quizzically to Sarah, stopping mid-word; all that came out was "Hell."

"Shawn, you know my boyfriend Steven. We came to talk to you--"

At that, Shawn slammed the door in their faces. Spinning around, he fell back against the door.

"Shawn! Let us in! We're just hear to talk!" Steven said, attempting to sound innocent.

Reaching up over his shoulder, Shawn locked the door.

Steven and Sarah continued their attempts to get Shawn to open the door, as Shawn's head began to spin. Standing up and sprinting back for the staircase, he heard Sarah yell out, "You're a coward! I brought your homework, you COWARD!" as Steven dragged her away back off the porch. At the top of the stairs, Shawn looked back, and could see papers flying everywhere through the windows above and beside the front door.

"SARAH! Sarah, come ON! The pussy ain't gonna open up," Shawn could hear Steven grunt as he pulled Sarah away from the house, towards the street.

"Where's my do-" Sarah's voice trailed off as Shawn climbed the stairs.

When Shawn arrived in his room, he slammed the door, and sat down at his computer. The Halloween doorbell had given Shawn an idea to add time-of-day sensitivity to his game, so that the position and location of the sun would reflect that of the actual sun in real life. Since he had never before been able to include a sun horizon element to the game, he had never been able to do this; there was no way to tell what the time was. The lighting model in his game was one thing that he had had trouble with, and hadn't honestly spent much time on. As a result, every area of the game was equally-well lit, as if it were 12:00 noon and all the lights were on, even

when playing at midnight. He wanted to fix this. However, his anger with Sarah for treating him how she had, had pushed this from his mind. How could she date Steven, after all he had done to Shawn?? Remembering the scene of Sarah undressing for bed, Shawn wanted to get back at her; he didn't care if it were all just virtual, it looked real...

Shawn opened up his code to the map parser section, and scrolled through the many lines of code. Frustrated, Shawn hit Ctrl-F and typed in "time," hitting Enter to search. Shawn frowned: no results. He tried searching for "date," and this time it brought him to a line which was, in fact, making reference to the system time, using both the system time and date.

"So," thought Shawn, "it should be doing this already." He didn't remember typing anything to do with the time or date in his code, though he had copied a lot of code from the physics book without really understanding it.

To test and see what currently happened when being run for a later time, Shawn set his computer's time to 3:00 A.M. of the next day, November 1st, and restarted *WoS*. Choosing his character and his Spawn Point as inside of Sarah's closet, he started the game. In what should've been complete darkness even if it had *not* been three in the morning, Shawn looked around him and saw the insides of the closet, fully-lit: fuzzy clothes, bunny slippers, and what seemed like hundreds of other shoes, were all in distinct, well-lit detail. Frowning, Shawn hit Ctrl to open the closet door, and saw, to his dismay, a well-lit room, with what appeared to be a backyard at midday.

In the bed, however, slept his little princess, Sarah, apparently oblivious to the bright light. Moving to the French doors, Shawn looked out at the kingdom beyond the south fence. It, too, was bright as day, yet under a dark, starry sky with a full moon. Turning back to Sarah, Shawn noticed the clock by her bed: 3:04 A.M.; the same as his system time!

So the time functions really were working; he would just have to work on adding proper lighting, if he could ever figure those out. But for now, Shawn was going to make Sarah pay. Creeping forward, and switching to his dagger, he pressed his right pointer finger down hard on the left mouse button.

Nothing happened to Sarah, however, for just before he had pressed the button, an error message popped up:

Error L107 : Address Space Overflow

"Huh?" Shawn wondered aloud. Another error! He dismissed the error, and the game abruptly shut down. Setting his laptop's clock back to "Internet Time," Shawn began searching the Web for Error L107, when he heard something coming from outside.

Jumping up from his laptop and running into the hallway, Shawn looked over the banister, through the windows that overlooked the street. What he saw took his breath away: Sarah, screaming; Steven, running down the street; and in front of Sarah, a dragon; a real-life dragon. This dragon was hovering in midair, about 20 feet from the ground, its enormous wings keeping it level, as it glowered down at Sarah.

The dragon was the length of a football field, its large body wrapped in green skin and forelegs and hind legs equipped with razor-sharp, foot long talons. The dragon's head, about 20 feet long, was snorting fire through its nose. As the dragon hovered in front of Sarah, it appeared to size her up, taking in the situation around her. It observed Steven, running away down the street.

Realizing that there was going to be no threat posed by Steven, the dragon lowered its head, raised its wings, and swooped down upon Sarah, grabbing her with its left foreleg. Raising its head, the dragon began to fly up, and turned its head away to the south, towards the Kingdom. At about 200 feet above the street, the dragon's left foreleg released Sarah, an arrow stuck in its claw.

As Sarah fell from the sky, she screamed, although she was relieved to be released from the horrible beast. Looking down, she saw the ground rapidly approaching. Just before she felt impact, she closed her eyes. Despite her fears, she didn't feel a hard impact, but a soft one. Opening her eyes, she looked up into caring, hazel eyes, behind square glasses, as Shawn placed her securely back on his parents' lawn.

The Real Shawn, after seeing the scene unfold in his street, had run back to his laptop. Surprised to see that he could now select a spawn point outside of Sarah's house in *WoS*, he had navigated to the street and spawned a character. Seeing the exact scene he had just witnessed through the window, Shawn had realized that something very strange was going on.

Without devoting more time to confusion, Shawn had sprung into action, switching to his compound bow, and shooting an arrow into the foreleg of the dragon that was holding his princess. As Sarah fell to the ground, Shawn had run over to where her shadow was and held Ctrl. Just as Sarah was about to hit the ground, Shawn had closed his eyes.

Was she going to hit the ground? Was "catching" even an available option in his game? He had never done it before, although so many things that he had been witnessing had never happened before. When Shawn had opened his eyes, his character was holding Sarah in his arms.

"Wha-huh??" Sarah asked, as she stared desperately up into the hazel eyes of her savior.

Pressing Ctrl again, Shawn's character placed Sarah gingerly on the ground. Staring into Shawn's face, her eyes wide, Sarah was dumbfounded. Her eyes narrowing and then opening wider than ever, she whispered, "SHAWN?"

"CAW!!" Sarah and Shawn's avatar were interrupted, however, by the swooping dragon, who had regained its bearings, and was now zeroing in on its new target. From his room, safe in his dad's house, the real Shawn sprang to action. Manning the mouse, he cycled through his

weapons: dagger, short sword, compound bow, broad sword, Zweihänder, battle axe, Hammer of War. This would do.

Still facing Sarah, the dragon was swooping in from Shawn's right. Strafing right, Shawn held the left mouse button. As his character sidestepped, he began swinging his Hammer from the ground up, in a 180° arc. It connected with the dragon's lower jaw, as Shawn's avatar bent his knees and turned, sinking the Hammer in front of him, just as the dragon's gaping mouth was about to snatch its prey. An enormous shockwave erupted from the site of the Hammer's impact with the ground as it pounded the dragon's mouth down.

The momentum of the dragon sent its body hurtling over its immobile jaw, which became the axis of the enormous rotating monster. As the dragon's back fell towards the earth to Shawn's left, he let go of the Hammer, grabbing Sarah and pulling her back, just as the body of the beast connected with the ground, sending up a torrent of dust.

The gargantuan mass that had just hurtled to the ground had left in its wake leveled trees and cars, thankfully missing any houses, including Shawn's dad's comfortable two-story. Car alarms and barking dogs could now be heard from Shawn's speakers as well as coming through the windows from the street below. Turning from the fallen dragon to face Shawn, she whispered, "What--is--HAPPENING?"

Just as Shawn was about to admit his own confusion, and try and console Sarah through the laptop, a microphone was thrust in front of his character's face. Spinning around to see where this had come from, Shawn observed a news van in the street, police cars in front of it, and finally, holding the microphone, a local news reporter.

"What happened here? Did you see who did this? Are you okay? Were there any other witnesses?" asked the pretty, young, dark-haired female reporter, in a flurry of questions.

"Back up, back up, this is a crime scene!" bellowed a police officer. "Get outta here!" Men with yellow POLICE tape were cordoning off the area, surrounding Shawn, Sarah, the police officer, and the dragon.

"No, no, it's--okay," said Sarah, stammering, as she looked up into Shawn's unchanging, unwavering, confident face, which just stared back at her. "Tell them Shawn, tell us all what's going on."

As Shawn stared through his laptop at the scene unfolding, he scanned the room, just as confused as the police officer, the reporter, and Sarah, all of whom were looking at him hopefully, attempting to paint brave faces on their internal absolute horror. Suddenly Shawn's eyes fell upon the crumpled paper which had caused him so much torment and shock earlier.

Picking it up, Shawn stared back at his screen. "Sir, are you okay? What is the meaning behind all this?" the reporter questioned, placing the microphone back in front of Shawn's face.

Shawn looked down.

“Alright, nothing else to see here. Let’s get these kids to the hospital and get a statement later,” said the officer.

As the police began ushering the reporter out of the police barrier, Shawn held V, and began speaking, “I-excuse me,” as the reporter continued to argue with the officers. “I-I have something to say.”

The officer turned to face him, releasing the reporter, who ran back to place her mike in front of Shawn and motioned for the cameraman to zero in on Shawn’s face. Shawn read the text in front of him:

I watch you from afar,

You don't know who I am,

But I care for you,

And would die to defend you.

You are my Princess,

And I am here to save you.

I am Always,

Your Hero

And with that, Shawn vanished.

Chapter 9

In the commotion that ensued, with the police officers searching the area for their detainee who appeared to have vanished into thin air, Sarah scanned the area, attempting to get a grip on the situation: there to her left, two houses down, was her house; in front of her was her neighbor Shawn's house - the same house she had just left, where Shawn had slammed the door in her face.

To her right, in the street, was a dragon. Shawn had appeared out of nowhere to catch her when said dragon was carrying her away. This same Shawn hit the dragon with a hammer - which was why the dragon was lying in the street - just before Shawn recited her boyfriend's childhood poem.

Wait...the dragon, lying in the street; was Steven okay? He had been running off down the street when the dragon had fallen. Sarah glanced down the street; she didn't see any sign of her boyfriend. Ah, who even cared? She was sure the coward could run fast enough.

As she was staring down the street, a car approached from the west and stopped at the edge of the cloud of dust that was still hanging over the entire street. Emerging from the car, a short teen with a black backpack began walking the length of the street on sidewalks and, when necessary, front yards, climbing fences with ease and grace. He kept looking up at the destruction in the street as he made his way towards Sarah, the press, and police.

When the figure reached Shawn's yard, he cut across the front yard, straight for the front door, sneaking around the commotion and ringing the doorbell. Sarah thought she recognized this boy as an old classmate of hers, and headed towards the door as well, hopeful to find an answer for what was going on.

"Hey, where do you think you're going, Missy?" asked the young officer, as he grabbed Sarah's arm, stopping her short and causing her to nearly take a bad fall. "You can't go just yet. We need to check you out, and we still have a lot of questions--"

Just then, another commotion caused the officer to let go of Sarah, as he and the other officers and reporter all moved away from the scene of destruction. As Sarah turned around, she saw from what everyone was scurrying: the dragon appeared to be getting back up, as thrashing limbs and wings knocked over crushed vehicles and sent up a new plume of dirt.

Sarah saw her chance and took it, as she sprinted towards the door at which the boy was still waiting. As she got closer, the door opened and the boy walked in. When Sarah was 10 feet from the door, it began closing again, and Sarah charged it in a mad dash.

Inside Shawn's entryway, he and Victor were both knocked off their feet by the swinging door, which hit Shawn directly in the face.

"Argh, what the *hell*," Shawn cried as he held his nose, which was now bleeding all over the floor.

"Oh you're fine, don't give me that," Sarah retorted, as she slammed the door shut after her. "After what you just did?!"

"Ugh, why couldn't you have just knocked?" Shawn asked pathetically.

"Well, you slammed the door in my face last time; I figured I'd return the favor!"

Shawn stifled a laugh as he pulled his hands away from his face, struggling to remain angry at Sarah. As he removed his hands, he turned to Victor, asking, "Is it broken?"

"Let me see," Victor muttered, as he examined Shawn's bloody nose. "It's not broken. Here, tilt your head back and squeeze here," he directed, as he headed off to the medicine cabinet in the main bathroom for some supplies to clean Shawn's face.

"Wow, he really knows his stuff," Sarah said to Shawn, awkwardly, as they waited for Victor to come back. "I think I recognize him from school. That's, Vi--"

"Victor," Shawn finished the name for her, "right. You saved him and me from--"

"What are you guys talking about?" Victor interjected loudly, as he re-emerged from the bathroom, pouring witch hazel on a cloth and wiping Shawn's face, a little harder than necessary.

"Just-AH-talking about your delicate bedside manner," Shawn replied, rolled his eyes.

"Good. We don't want to talk about anything we ought not then, do we Shawn?" Victor spoke, his eyes narrowing as he finished up Shawn's face. "You can lower your head now."

"Thanks, ahem," Shawn said, looking at Victor out of the corners of his eyes.

"What are you two talking about?" Sarah asked uncomfortably. "This is weird."

Shawn realized how their conversation may have sounded. "It's not like that, Sarah," Shawn smirked. "We just, we were asked not to talk about the details of the fight--"

Victor stamped Shawn's foot, widening his eyes at him.

"Victor, it really doesn't matter anymore, does it? We go to different schools and..." he chanced a glance out the window. "I doubt he'll be coming around here anytime soon..."

In the wake of the now-missing dragon, through the smoke, half-way down the block to the west, Shawn saw a forensics lab setting up at a certain spot in the street, where Shawn was pretty sure he had seen Steven headed just moments before the dragon had landed. He gave Victor a knowing glance.

“What do you mean? Who are you talking about?” Sarah asked, trying to push Shawn aside to get a view out the window, but he pulled her away.

“Look, Sarah, remember when you came around, and you scared off that gang that was fighting us--” Shawn began.

“You mean, *killing* you,” Sarah interrupted, her eyes beginning to tear up, her voice full of emotion and passion. She reached up to brush a stray hair off of Shawn’s glasses. “Are your glasses okay?”

“Uh-they’re fine,” Shawn muttered, brushing her hand aside and blushing, looking sideways at Victor. “Anyway, yes. They almost killed me. Well,” at this he looked over at Victor uneasily, “we told you we didn’t know who did it, but...we did.”

“What?? Who was it then? Why didn’t you tell anyone??” Sarah asked, incredulously.

“They told us if we ever told anyone, they’d come and finish the job. And they followed us home everyday after school, just so we knew they were serious.”

“Well, who was it? You can’t seriously be afraid--” Sarah cried, getting exasperated.

“He said he’d hurt you, too,” Shawn replied, eyeing Sarah with concern.

“Wha...who?” Sarah tried to pretend like she didn’t know who Shawn was talking about.

“You know who,” Shawn replied sagely.

“Not...*Steven*?” Sarah whispered.

Shawn and Victor both nodded the affirmative, as Sarah gasped, covering her mouth. “He’s always been so *passionate*--”

Shawn rolled his eyes at Victor.

“--but, that poem you read just now...Steven wrote that for me...how’d you...?” Sarah continued.

Shawn shot Sarah a reproving look. “Steven didn’t write that, Sarah. I’d been writing you ever since that day you saved my--our--lives.”

“But, no one ever signed them. And then, this last one...Steven signed it and told me they were all from him, that he had admired me from afar for years, and that he was my hero...I saw him put it in my locker.” Sarah shook her head.

Shawn shook his head too. “He intercepted that last poem of *mine*, when I was slipping it in your locker, told me to steer clear of you--”

“--and told you to beat it. That’s why I saw you running down the hall--” Sarah began piecing it together.

“--and looking back over my shoulder,” Shawn nodded.

“So, all this time...it was *you*...you’re the Hero, you’re the--” Sarah continued.

“One,” Shawn blushed and looked at Victor, who was sighing and rolling his eyes.

“Are we quite done here?” Victor said, with his hands on his hips, checking his watch.

“Sarah,” Shawn straightened up. He had nearly forgotten about Victor and Halloween. “What are you doing for Halloween?”

“Um well, I told my parents I’d be spending it with Steven, but now...” Sarah raised her eyebrows, signaling that she was up for suggestions.

Victor threw up his hands. “Um, I’m sorry to be the voice of reason around here, but were you planning on asking her out on a date? Maybe go get a pumpkin spice latte? There’s kind of some weird *shit* going on, literally right outside your window.”

Shawn blushed. “No, I wasn’t going to--ask--out...I think we need to figure out what’s going on. I think, somehow, I’m responsible for that,” he pointed out the window.

Sarah nodded.

“I think Sarah is now somewhat involved in this,” he nodded back at Sarah, “and I just thought maybe we--the three of us could bounce some ideas off each other. Anyway, I don’t think anyone should leave until we figure out what’s going on.”

“Okay,” Victor seemed to breathe a little easier. “So, what’d I miss?”

Up in Shawn’s room, he, Victor, and Sarah were all gathered around Shawn’s “command center.” He had been attempting to explain his program in non-programming terms, and it was not working.

“Look, why don’t you just show us, Shawn?” Victor asked impatiently.

“Okay, I was just trying to give Sarah a little background,” Shawn replied, hurt.

“I know, but it’s not working,” Victor said, eyeing the glazed look on Sarah’s face.

“All right, all right,” said Shawn, “so: I’ve already loaded my house into the game. And, if I-- start a game in that map, and choose a character...” Shawn selected his own character, left the “Hero” voice selected, and chose the spawn point as the middle of his room.

As the game loaded into memory, Shawn sat back and spun around in his chair, placing his fingertips together, as he gave his two friends a look of smugness. “And now, ve wait.”

“So, you said something about quantum physics...” Sarah tried to wrap her head around Shawn’s explanation, “I don’t get what that has to do with a game. I mean, it’s all fake, right? You’re not trying to say that dragon came out of your laptop--”

Victor snorted.

“I don’t understand it either, Sarah,” Shawn looked reprovably at Victor, “except that, I mean, it’s *quantum physics*. This isn’t your grandpa’s physics--”

“My grandpa’s dead, Shawn,” Sarah corrected Shawn.

“My point exactly. I don’t know how, except that maybe the electrons in the computer can travel through space using the formulae in the compiled code--” Shawn was cut off.

“Whoa, you’re losing me with your geek-speak again, Zuck,” Sarah raised her hands resignedly.

But Shawn didn’t need to explain any further for, as Victor had advised, showing her brought his point across much better than his words could. At that moment, the game level finished loading, and there, in the middle of the real room in which Sarah and Victor were standing, popped a second incarnation of Shawn.

Sarah gasped, as she and Victor encircled Second Shawn.

“WHAT??!” Victor exclaimed, as he kept looking back and forth between the two Shawns.

“What does this *mean*??!”

“So, this is what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Shawn replied patiently. “If I load a real map, into my game,” he continued slowly, “my actions in the game echo in real life.”

Shawn let this sink into Sarah and Victor’s brains. “So, but why are there two of you,” said Victor.

Shawn rolled his eyes but replied patiently, “That’s not really me. I created a character, which made a copy of myself,” and motioned to Second Shawn.

“...aaaand a Second Shawn got echoed to real life!” Victor replied enthusiastically.

“Yes!” Shawn affirmed. “Do you understand, Sarah?”

“I think so...I don’t get why, but I think I understand the basics. So where’d the dragon come from?” Sarah questioned. “Did he get ‘echoed’ too?”

“Aha. That’s where it gets really interesting,” Shawn sat up in his chair, excited. “I loaded a map from *World of One* into my game--”

“WHAT?? We can’t leave you alone for two seconds,” Victor replied in a high-pitched voice. “See what happens when he’s left at home for two days??”

“WHAT is *World of One*?” Sarah asked, staring at each of the boys in turn.

“It’s our favorite game,” Victor began enthusiastically. “There’s knights, and princesses, and dragons--”

“You know what, on second thought--don’t--tell me. So the dragon got put into our world too. Great. So we just shut down your game, and he disappears,” Sarah said, looking for reassurance as she looked from Shawn, to Victor, to Second Shawn, and back to Shawn.

“Yeah, can’t you just shut it down?” Victor asked, walking over to Shawn’s laptop. Just before Victor reached the keys, however, movement came from behind him.

“Halt! Who goes there? Are you hurt, milady?” came a very manly, macho, self-assure voice. Sarah, Shawn, and Victor jerked around to stare at what was happening in the middle of the room. There, Second Shawn was talking and moving of his own accord, staring around him and becoming familiar with his new surroundings, waving a sword in the air.

Victor shook his head quickly, and, even more quickly, resolutely shut down Shawn’s game. Second Shawn immediately disappeared, as Victor replied with a great sigh of relief, “*WHEW*.....One Shawn’s...enough!”

Chapter 10

“Okay, so I programmed in an automatic timeout for five minutes....where the A.I. takes over if the user is idle. It’s in case people are playing some kind of cooperative mission online, and someone gets drawn away from their computer for awhile...the computer takes over,” Shawn explained.

“That way, when you leave to go get some Peanut Butter M&M’s, nothing bad happens,” Sarah suggested, sarcastically.

“Um, yeah, exactly,” Shawn replied skeptically.

“Alright, alright, but...how would the A.I. take over the *echo* of yourself? I thought all it could do is spawn it--how would the computer get control of it?” Sarah asked, her hand on her head.

“Ohh...but I haven’t shown you the best part!” Shawn exclaimed, launching his character in Sarah’s room. “See, it’s my estimation that, through the Higgs Field, the game establishes some kind of *connection* through space, to the map that’s loaded, as long as there’s some way of identifying the actual location in real life, such as...coordinates, location names, anything that the parser is able to locate, and if some other map is attached, then the game attaches that location in real life. Then, anything that happens on the computer, happens in real life, and the other way around.” Shawn was speaking very quickly and excitedly at this point.

“So, what happens to the places in real life that you’ve just replaced with the new map? Does it replace them? Overwrite them??” Victor asked.

“I’m, not sure,” Shawn replied monotonously, peeking out the window towards Sarah’s backyard, which was now bathed in the eerie bluish-orange tints of twilight and a large harvest moon. He checked the time: 6:19 P.M. His dad should be home by now. “*Voilà...*” Shawn said, as he moved his player towards Sarah’s French doors, pressing Ctrl to open them.

“Wait, that’s my room...and my bedspread...” Sarah said, deep in thought.

“Yeah,” Shawn said, “Look out this window.” Shawn pointed east towards the Lyons’ house, across the yard that lay between the two houses. As Sarah and Victor both looked out the window, Shawn moved his avatar over to the light switch, and hit Ctrl. The now-dark yard below Sarah’s window was lit up with a rectangle of light emanating from the second-story room.

Sarah gasped, “You were telling the truth!”

“Of course I was, but, look, Sarah...I can def--” Shawn began.

“No, Shawn, you don’t have to be so understanding all the time. I was a bitch, and I’m sorry,” Sarah replied apologetically.

Victor raised his eyebrows at Shawn, who said, “It’s okay, let’s just move on for now,” as he walked his player out onto the balcony and jumped off. Sarah continued to watch out the window in real life. As this Second Shawn got further away from the house, he became hidden from view by darkness and the privacy fence, so she turned back to Shawn’s laptop screen, which was showing her backyard as if in broad daylight.

“There’s the doghouse,” Shawn began.

“Where’s my dog?” Sarah looked as if she had wanted to ask this question for some time, and finally got it out.

Shawn looked between Victor and Sarah, and hesitated. “I’m, not sure,” he replied honestly. “He jumped over the fence before I attached anything to the map.” As he said this, Victor’s eyes widened as he exchanged a knowing look with Shawn. In their minds played out the familiar scene of the “falling off the map” glitch that was common when developing 3-D map levels or using cheat codes.

As Sarah looked between the two boys, trying to figure out what they were thinking, Shawn said, “We’ll keep an eye out for him. Now, if you’ll direct your attention over here...” he said, as he turned to face the south fence. Much to Sarah and Victor’s amazement, in front of them stood an enormous castle, surrounded by a village and circular walls that spread out several miles in diameter.

Getting up to press her face to the window, Sarah asked, “Is that thing in my backyard??”

“I’m, almost sure of it,” Shawn replied. “That’s gotta be where the dragon came from.”

Sarah slowly turned around. “That thing came from there??” she asked, incredulous. Shawn merely nodded his head. “What *else* is gonna come out of there??”

Shawn didn’t say anything, but steered his player towards the opening in the fence. Entering the *World of One* Kingdom, he was preparing to start the long trek to the back, hidden entrance. However, as he began to head to the left, Victor cleared his throat, muttering, “Where are you going?”

Shawn stopped. “What do you mean?” he asked, as he looked around. He stopped when he noticed the lowered drawbridge.

“Headed into the Kingdom? Remember, Shawn, after you fight off the dragon the first time, the drawbridge is lowered,” Victor replied, sagely.

“Well that’s convenient...” Sarah replied, sarcastically.

“Well,” said Shawn, recollecting this bit of knowledge, “the dragon is badly hurt, and he can’t make it all the way back up to the top of the castle, where the Mad King keeps him. So he collapses here, they lower the bridge and carry him in. We just don’t have much time.”

No sooner had these words left Shawn’s mouth than clanking could be heard. “Look! They’re raising it!” Sarah exclaimed.

Sure enough, the drawbridge was raising. Shawn reacted immediately, holding Shift to run towards the bridge, which was now angled at two feet above the shore.

“Jump!” Victor screamed.

“Not...yet,” Shawn replied patiently, as he held down the Space Bar. At his last step on solid ground, he released, sending his player hurtling up and forward in the air, just barely clearing the bridge, as he came to a soft landing. “Perfect,” Shawn replied smugly, as he looked around at Victor and Sarah.

“Wow, you’re pretty good, I’m impressed. You jumped,” Sarah replied sarcastically. “Now react!!” Sarah pointed at the screen emphatically.

Shawn spun his head around. On the screen in front of him were four guards, who had just raised the bridge. The four soldiers muttered amongst themselves, twisting swords in their hands, looking eager for some excitement.

One of them was staring at Shawn, attempting to work something out. The man to his left stepped forward, brandishing his sword in front of him vertically. Placing his arm in front of this man, the first guard warned, “Stay yourself, Cedric,” and, turning to Shawn, said, “Darkness falls, the Kingdom is fractured, and this is no world for wide-eyed peasant children.”

Looking at Victor, Shawn took a breath, held V, and recited the words by heart, with quickening pulse, “This is a Kingdom of light, a land of one king; a World of One.”

Cedric’s expression softened, as the soldier who had held him back released him, thrusting his hand forward to grasp Shawn’s forearm, dropping his sword and embracing him with his free arm. “Sir Shawn! I’m sorry, we had to be sure. Times are strange, and one cannot be too sure of anything in this dark.”

“Carac, good to see you. I see your brother Cedric is still as ambitious as ever,” Shawn replied with a smirk.

“Yes, mother and father did not wish to see another child enter the Guard, but Cedric has run away from home, and stays in the barracks without their knowledge,” Carac replied, turning to Cedric. “Our eldest brother is dead, but I vowed to protect Cedric, who is faithful to the true king.”

Victor tapped Shawn on the shoulder, looking quizzically at the screen. “I, uh, don’t remember him saying that, about brothers...Is this some kind of lost episode?”

“That’s what I wanted to show you,” Shawn replied, spinning around to face Sarah and Victor. “When I came here the first time, I was spotted, and I had to fight a bunch of guards. Carac helped me, and he told me that he was afraid that his *brother* may have been among the dead. It’s like this A.I. responds specifically to everything you do; not just the linear logic that was programmed.”

“So wait, you created A.I.?” Victor replied excitedly.

“*What* is A.I.?” Sarah asked.

“Uh, *Artificial Intelligence*, hello?” Victor replied impatiently. “Do you live under a rock?” he asked, as he laughed, turning to Shawn, who did not appear to share his sense of humor.

“It’s okay, she’s not a nerd like us,” Shawn replied, coming to Sarah’s defense. Turning to face her, he said delicately, “It’s like the holy grail of programming, to emulate human intelligence. The problem is that you can add line after line of code, responding to every possible action, but you’re always going to fall short.”

“And why is that?” Sarah asked, her brown eyes boring into Shawn’s hazel eyes, which also appeared brown at the moment, reflecting her own hues.

“Because the goal of *A.I.*, is to fool the user to where they can’t tell the *difference* between the program and a human being. Programmers have come close, but the user is always going to do things they haven’t anticipated,” Shawn explained.

“And then there’s the idea of *proactive* versus *reactive* intelligence,” Victor added. “Programs, no matter how much programming you do, are ultimately responding to events performed by the user. You can’t program spontaneity.”

“But Shawn has?” Sarah asked, sounding hopeful and a little scared.

Behind Shawn, the soldiers were poking Second Shawn and encircling him, attempting to find out what was wrong with him, why he was not respondent. Restarting the game, Shawn examined the map selection/import screen, looking for any way of *removing* an area of the map.

“I...can’t think of any way to get rid of a map once I attach it. This isn’t a map editor, just a map *selector*....” Shawn thought for a moment. “That will definitely be an area for future research.”

“I would say so!” Victor replied, incredulously.

Ignoring him, Shawn loaded his player at the last location, and waited for the game to load, anxiously. When it came up, the guards who were previously talking to and poking Second Shawn jumped back, muttering something about black magic.

“I think I may have, without really knowing what I was doing,” Shawn finally replied to Sarah’s question, adding, “As you can see, restarting the game has no effect on the imported computer characters. I think it has something to do with the Fork....”

Sarah and Victor exchanged looks, their eyebrows cocked. “But don’t worry, we’ll make sure everything’s safe. And if anything happens to us, we can always just spawn a new character and try again.” Shawn flashed a reassuring smile at Sarah. “In fact,” Shawn continued, a thought occurring to him, “I think the more players we have, the easier it’ll be...” Shawn looked over at Victor, adding, “...if we encounter a little resistance.”

“Right,” Victor said, as he dug in his backpack for his laptop.

“Sarah, we need you too,” Shawn said, facing her.

“What?? Me? I’ve never played this game, I have no idea what I’m doing, I don’t even have a laptop. I can’t,” Sarah said, shaking her head.

“We can move my dad’s desktop computer up here, and we can get you trained. We’re going to need all the help we can get, to get this done as quickly as possible. If everything was faithfully recreated...there are dark beings in there, and we don’t want them getting out.”

Sarah looked out the window towards her parents’ house, covering her mouth and a gasp.

“It’s going to be okay, Sarah,” Victor said, compassion falling over him. “You can do this; you’re brave, I know you are. You’re braver than me,” he said, his head falling.

“You know that wasn’t your fault, Vic,” Shawn said, “and that was a long time ago. I’ve seen how brave you can be; you’re always the first to the scene whenever anyone’s hurt.”

Victor seemed to perk up at this, his ears turning a bit red. “Okay, let’s get Sarah’s station set up and get her trained,” Shawn said, getting up from his seat.

Chapter 11

“Okay, that should just about--do it,” Shawn said, setting down his Dad’s massive CRT monitor onto his desk beside him, connecting it, and pressing the power button on the tower case. Nothing happened.

“You forgot the power cord, genius,” Victor replied, grinning and pointing at the back of the case, which had three prongs where the A/C cord should be coming out of the power supply.

“D’oh, alright,” Shawn replied, heading out into the hall and bounding back down the steps to his dad’s office. Rummaging around in the mess of wires he had left behind under the desk, he found the power cord and emerged from the office, heading towards the stairs.

At that moment, the front door opened. “Shawn? Are you alright? I’ve been talking with the police and the news...what’s going on?”

“Oh, hey Dad. N-nothin’ much.”

“Nothin’ much?” Mr. Mitchell inquired quizzically. He looked frazzled. “In case you haven’t noticed, half the yard’s missing, and the street’s been blown to Kingdom Come. Did you just get out of bed??”

Shawn thought fast. “Ah, no Dad, I’ve been very productive today. I think that’s just some harmless pranks. It’s Halloween, you see.”

“Ha, harmless pranks huh? Well, I just pray to God you didn’t have anything to do with them!”

Shawn looked up toward his room, where Sarah was poking her head out of the doorway. “Uh...” he stalled.

“Is Victor over here?” Mr. Mitchell turned towards the stairs as well, craning his neck to see. “Wait, is that? A girl?” He hushed his voice to a whisper, “Was that Sarah Lyon??”

“Uh, yeah Dad, Victor and Sarah are just over to spend Halloween with me.”

“AH!” Mr. Mitchell exclaimed, then whispered, “*Very nice, I like!*” and winked at his son approvingly. “What do you need with that cord?”

“Ah, we’re uh, having a bit of a LAN party; I hope you don’t mind, we had to borrow your dinosaur of a computer,” Shawn improvised.

“Dinosaur!” Mr. Mitchell laughed. “Sure, you can use it, just hope it doesn’t eat you! Strange things happen on Halloween!!”

Rolling his eyes, Shawn headed back up to his room, shutting the door. “Don’t ask,” Shawn muttered, as he plugged the cord into the tower, the current arced and the screen jumped to life. Getting on his laptop, he set his compiler to build an executable installation file, then connected Victor’s laptop and his Dad’s desktop to his network.

“So, what are you doing now?” Sarah asked, genuinely interested.

“Getting your-ah-battlestations ready,” Shawn said, grinning. “Putting us all on the same network and getting the game installed.

“So, a brief primer on *World of One...* and *World of Shawn...*” Shawn continued, rubbing his hands together, as his laptop continued to build the install file. “The entire game takes place inside the kingdom walls. Hold on.”

Digging around the pile of papers on his cluttered desk, Shawn picked up a well-worn map. Unfolding it and placing it on the floor, he got down on all fours, as Sarah did the same, placing her head dangerously close to his.

Glancing at Sarah out of the corner of his eye, and smelling the faint scent of vanilla, Shawn continued, tracing the walls of the Kingdom. “Within the walls is the Village,” Shawn explained, as he dragged his finger around the area near the exterior of the circular walls, comprising about half of the Kingdom, “and the castle.” Shawn pointed at the enormous castle comprising the center of the Kingdom.

“The Good King, Athalos, survived an assassination attempt and a coup by his insane son, who is known simply as the Mad King. Athalos was forced to flee to the North, where he’s hiding out until you defeat his son. Athalos also has a daughter, whom the Mad King is in love with.”

“The princess? His own *sister*?? What’s her name?” Sarah asked.

“Well...” Shawn began, looking at Victor. “You can name her whatever you want, and I named her--Sarah--” Sarah’s eyes widened as Shawn blushed and added quickly, “--which means Princess.”

“I know it does,” Sarah replied, nodding reassuringly. “Go on.”

“So, the princess runs away from the castle when her brother takes over, and Carac, that guard that we met, hides her in a church. The Mad King attempts to find her, by first sending a dragon--”

“Which you fought off,” Sarah broke in, admiringly.

“Correct--and then he rides on the dragon in the middle of the night--which I believe should be *tonight*--and comes and gets her himself.”

“How does the dragon find the princess?” Sarah asked.

“A crystal ball,” broke in Victor, explaining, “the Mad King dabbles quite a bit in sorcery, and he has a crystal ball that he consults a lot.”

“So, you said you named the princess Sarah...” Sarah thought out loud. “Could it be that this crystal ball somehow showed *me*, instead of the real princess? And that's why the dragon was after me?”

“I--well....” replied Shawn thoughtfully. “I never thought about that but...well, we *have* seen that it is possible to change the actions of the game characters...I suppose it's *possible*...I mean the sorcery predictions are always really cloudy and fuzzy. I guess it could be that it showed multiple Sarahs, or multiple *princesses*,” Shawn nodded at Sarah, who blushed. “Which I guess makes it all the more important that we get rid of this stuff ASAP. And you shouldn't go home until we do, Sarah.

“Okay, looks like it's done compiling. Alright, Victor, it's at--uh--my network--/pub/WoS/*INSTALL.exe*”

“Ah...ha...” Victor began, eyeing Shawn as he navigated into Shawn's network shared drive from his laptop. The network name was “Fox.”

“Right,” continued Shawn with his explanation. “So, I expect we will just need to get into the castle and kill the Mad King, so his dad can come in and restore the Kingdom.”

“Simple enough,” said Victor, shrugging. “We can just spawn our characters in the throne room and slit the son-of-a-bitch's throat.”

“I wish,” replied Shawn, “But what about all the bad guys in the castle? They're not just gonna magically disappear when we kill the Mad King.”

“They might,” replied Victor.

“They won't,” said Shawn. “Remember when we used cheat codes to walk straight to the throne room? We killed the Mad King, but the game didn't advance: Athalos didn't return, the princess didn't congratulate us; it's like the game was waiting for us to kill the Brood.”

“But it might be different now, now it's all a lot more realistic,” replied Victor.

“Well, I suppose it's worth a shot. I mean, what's the worst that could happen?” said Shawn, looking at Sarah, who shrugged. She was lost in all this geek-talk.

“Cool,” said Victor, beaming. It was like the old days of gaming with Shawn, before the bullies, and concussions, and miles of highway and different school districts that separated them.

“Okay Victor, is your game all set up?” Shawn asked, looking over at his friend’s screen.

“Yes, I’m just getting my character set up now,” Victor replied.

“Ugh, it takes forever,” Shawn remembered how long it had taken to create his own character. “I’ll just spawn in there and kill the Mad King.”

Shawn navigated to the spawn selection screen, and scrolled to the very center of the kingdom, scrolling his mouse wheel down to zoom out, so he could see the top floor of the castle. At the far west side of the room, on the left side of Shawn’s screen, was an enormous gold throne, trimmed with silver, with red satin cushions upon it. This throne sat on a raised dais, about 10 feet above the main floor, with marble steps leading up to it.

In the middle of the room was a gigantic red satin carpet, surrounded on the north and south by balconies which overlooked the kingdom, and a large oak door on the east. In the very middle of the carpet was a pillar with a crystal ball on it.

“There’s a good chance to be a lot of guards in there,” said Shawn. “I wonder where the Mad King will be. It’d be nice to just spawn behind him, kill him, and be done with it.”

“Hm...” wondered Victor aloud. “What if....did you program in any cheat codes?”

“I’ve had time to program invisibility, and unlimited weapons is already on by default. I’d been having some trouble getting invincibility to work,” Shawn said thoughtfully.

“Well, it makes sense if you can’t be invincible. The ‘echoed’ characters are just flesh and blood, right?” Victor replied.

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Shawn, remembering the injuries that his player had sustained just before the massacre of the guards. “I wonder if I can be invisible, though.”

With that, Shawn selected, as his spawn point, the area directly behind the throne. “Hopefully, this’ll give me time to enter the cheat code before anyone sees me.”

Once the game had loaded, Shawn quickly brought up the console, typed, “COWARD,” and hit Enter. Shawn glanced over at Sarah, who gave him an understanding look. With that, they saw Shawn’s hands disappear from the screen, replaced by a sort of distortion of the throne in front of him.

“You’re not completely invisible,” Sarah said. “It looks more like you’re cloaked or something.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Shawn said. “I guess it makes sense. I mean, true invisibility would mean allowing light to pass through unencumbered, rather than simply bending it, which of *course* is an impossibility without negating mass--”

“Ah--a simple yes would do,” said Sarah, holding up her hand. “Don’t you have some work to do?” She pointed towards the screen.

“Yeah, sorry, I’ve been reading this Quantum Physics Primer for a while,” Shawn said, picking up and dropping the gigantic book on his floor.

Cautiously, Shawn peeked around the throne on his laptop, looking around the room. Sure enough, stationed at points all around the room were guards, armed with spears. In the middle of the room, gazing into the crystal ball, was a short, wiry, red-headed man with a crown and regal-looking robes.

“That’s him,” said Victor, pointing at the Mad King.

Shawn moved cautiously down the steps of the dais.

“We are not alone!” a raspy voice from behind Second Shawn made Shawn jump and Sarah gasp.

“It’s Abaddon! Don’t move!” Victor cried.

Shawn held completely still, at the foot of the throne steps.

“Who’s Abaddon?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide.

“Sorcerer,” Shawn said quickly, his eyes glued to the screen.

At the crystal ball pillar, the Mad King looked up at the throne. “Who’s here?” he asked.

“I sense, spirits. Vengeful spirits, that wish you harm. You must flee!” The raspy voice came from behind Second Shawn again, but he didn’t dare turn around.

“Spirits. Ghosts. Nonsense! You want the throne, Abaddon, and I’ve had enough of your treachery!” The Mad King screamed, his eyes spinning, his red eyes resembling fire.

“My liege, do not patronize me,” the raspy voice resounded with anger and disgust. “You think I care about this world? I do not seek thrones and positions in this pathetic Kingdom; why waste my time? Have you not seen the enormous fertile kingdom to the north that has sprung up?”

Shawn’s heart stopped. ““The new kingdom to the north??”” Shawn exclaimed, looking out his window to the south, towards the *WoS* Kindom, though it was now too dark to see. “Is that...”

“Who cares? Just kill him already!” Victor exclaimed. “While they’re arguing!”

Shawn had nearly forgotten why he had come there in the first place. Moving his character very slowly across the carpet, towards the pillar, he listened to the two continue to argue.

“Well then, we have a common enemy!” shouted the Mad King. “This ‘One’ they speak of, the one who is supposed to regain the throne for my father, now sits on the throne in the North! I see him here....And my queen beside him! He is merely a child; kill him and we can rule his kingdom together!!” The Mad King’s eyes spun even faster than before, his hands on the crystal ball in front of him.

“TOGETHER!! NEVER! I’ve had enough of your insolence!” shouted the sorcerer behind Second Shawn, as he came within arm’s length of the Mad King. Shawn switched his weapon to his dagger, and positioned himself behind his victim.

“Wait, something’s happening,” Victor exclaimed. “Look left.”

As Shawn turned his character to look towards the throne, Sarah gasped. They now got full view of the sorcerer Abaddon. A hulking mass, Abaddon was nearly 7 feet tall, muscle-bound and shaved bald. Draped in black robes, his nose was pierced with a bone, and his face was painted blood-red. Abaddon rose from the throne on which he had been seated, but did not appear to get to his feet, rather hovering above the platform.

As lightning began crackling from Abaddon’s hands, Victor cried, “Get out of there! I don’t think you’ll need to kill the Mad King!!”

Shawn didn’t need more convincing. Turning towards the huge oak doors, Shawn sprinted away, just as the entire room became consumed by bolts of electricity. Opening the doors and heading out into the hallway, they heard screams of pain erupting into a crescendo as blood and intestines coated even the wall in front of Second Shawn in the hallway.

Suddenly, on Shawn’s screen in front of him appeared the painted face of the sorcerer, his eyes wide and his mouth open in an awful scream. Acting purely on reflex, Shawn hit the left mouse button. In front of him, Abaddon’s face melded into an expression of horror and pain, as he dropped to his knees, Second Shawn’s knife stuck in his belly.

As blood and entrails poured out, Shawn ran forward over the body. On the screen flashed a message, “Picked up the sapphire key.” Running forward, Shawn dove down the stairs.

“Wow, good job man!” Victor exclaimed. “The Mad King and Abaddon dead. Now, hopefully all of the Brood is gone.”

“I know, that’s what I’m checking,” Shawn replied, full of adrenaline.

At the bottom of the stairs was a golden door, with a large black sapphire in the middle. Hitting Ctrl, Shawn used the key to open the door. In front of him, a filthy young girl dressed in rags turned around, holding a finger to her smiling mouth. At that, she screamed, gliding incredibly fast towards Second Shawn, so that Shawn had no time to react, before she had reached him.

Opening her mouth to reveal many missing or rotting teeth, she sank them into Second Shawn's left hand, so that he dropped his sword. He held his hand up to his face, and the three friends observed a black spot begin to spread around the spot where Second Shawn was bitten, as he collapsed on the ground, blood spewing from his mouth. Spinning around in his seat, Shawn said smartly, "Alright so...first thing we're gonna need to do is order some pizza and tons of caffeine. It's gonna be a loooong night," looking at both Sarah and Victor in turn, over his glasses.

Chapter 12

“Okay, here’s a mouse for you, Victor,” said Shawn, handing a spare mouse to Victor so he could connect it to his laptop, thus increasing the efficiency and precision of game-playing, compared with the miserable, tiny touchpad that was on the laptop.

“Thanks,” replied Victor. “So, when they were talking about the kingdom to the north...you don’t think...”

“I *do* think,” began Shawn. “I think that our world became visible from the top level of that castle, and both the Mad King and Abaddon saw something they wanted. They realized that their Kingdom was tiny and pathetic, compared with this new World, that looked undefended, with a child king in charge--”

“That’s another thing,” Sarah broke in, “He mentioned that he *saw* the king with his queen next to him...who do you think he saw? The President and First Lady??”

“I don’t know,” said Shawn. “But since it seems like he had confused *you* with Princess Sarah, it seems possible that he would confuse *me* with the Shawn from the game...it’s like the crystal ball gets confused when multiple results exist...”

“Yeah, I could see that,” Victor replied. “It’s like when you return the top row from a database, when multiple results exist, and you don’t tell it how to sort the results. You never really know which row is gonna show up.”

“In other words,” said Shawn, nodding, and turning to Sarah, “life is like a box o’ chocolates, you never know what yer gonna get.”

“But,” said Sarah thoughtfully. “How would they be able to see us? I mean, crystal balls don’t actually *work*...”

“True,” said Shawn as he walked up to his laptop, turning around as he tapped the camera above the screen. “But Quantum Balls; that’s another matter entirely.”

“They’ve got Quantum Balls?” asked Victor with a straight face.

“They’ve got Quantum Balls,” replied Shawn, turning to face him, his eyebrows raised. Taking a big gulp of his energy drink and another bite of pizza, he continued, “at least that’s how it seems to me. Okay Sarah, it looks like your character is done. Let’s go ahead and spawn you....”

Shawn found an open field within the kingdom walls, and selected this as the spawn point on both his and Sarah’s screens. “Okay Victor,” Shawn continued, “go ahead and spawn here.”

Soon all three of the friends' characters were facing each other.

"Okay, Victor, the controls are like in *World of War*."

"Ah, got it," replied Victor, grabbing a slice of Pepperoni. *World of War* was a very popular first-person shooter whose controls had become the standard for new games of this genre.

"Now, Sarah," began Shawn, "I'm not sure how familiar you are with video games..."

"Not very," said Sarah, apologetically.

"Okay. So, if you take the mouse in your hand," he grabbed her hand and placed it on the mouse, "this controls your head. Look around by moving this, and fire whatever weapon you're holding with the left button." As Shawn pressed down on Sarah's index finger, he blushed.

"The right button fires your secondary function," continued Shawn.

"Secondary?" asked Sarah, getting a slice of Supreme.

"Yeah, every weapon has a secondary function. Just like an alternate way of using the weapon," Shawn explained. "For example, if I choose the dagger, and sneak up to Victor..." Shawn said as he took the controls and crept up behind Victor. "I'm gonna kill you Victor; don't move." Pressing the right mouse button, Second Sarah stepped forward, placing her left arm around Second Victor's face, and slicing her dagger across his throat. His character fell to his knees, blood spewing from the gash in his throat.

"Ctrl-N, now," Shawn ordered Victor.

Victor obliged, and a new Second Victor spawned a few feet away from the murder scene.

"I see," said Sarah. "So we can kill each other. We'd better be careful."

"That's right," said Shawn. "Friendly fire is on, even though I programmed against it. Everyone be careful of crossfire."

"Check," said Victor.

"Now," said Shawn, taking another bite of pizza. "You move your feet with W, S, A, and D, like this." He placed Sarah's left hand on those keys, moving her character forward, backward, left and right. "Scroll through your weapons and inventory items with the mouse wheel."

"What inventory items?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, like bombs, potions, medpacks--" Shawn explained.

"Medpacks? Like health?" Sarah inquired.

“Exactly. We’ll see more inventory items later. For now, let’s do some target practice.” Looking around, Shawn spotted some chickens fluttering around at the far end of the field, near a shed. “Okay, Sarah, try selecting your bow, and shoot one of those hens.”

Sarah fidgeted a bit with her mouse, and then got the mouse wheel to turn. One by one, the weapons cycled in her hands: dagger, short sword, compound bow, broad sword--

“Stop, that was it,” Shawn interrupted her.

She scrolled back to the compound bow. A complex system of strings and pulleys, this weapon, which was really more of a modern invention, was not the least historically accurate item to be found in *World of One* and *World of Shawn*. Aiming her cross-hairs at one of the chickens, she clicked the left mouse button. An arrow immediately shot straight down at the ground.

“What happened?” Sarah asked.

“A lot of actions in this game have to be charged up,” Shawn explained. “Try *holding* down the mouse button.”

As Sarah held down the left mouse button, the strings noticeably tightened, and the ends of the bow bent closer and closer together.

“Okay, let go,” Shawn said.

As Sarah released, an arrow shot out with an incredible velocity, straight into the neck of the hen at which she had been aiming. The chicken was pinned to the shed, the arrow stuck in her, her eyes visibly bugged out and beak stuck open in the middle of a cluck.

“Gross,” replied Sarah, disgusted.

“Yeah, I know,” replied Shawn, “but better her than you,” motioning towards the dead hen.

“True,” Sarah said.

“Hey,” broke in Victor, “don’t the farmers usually come out and yell at you when you attack the chickens?”

“Yeah,” said Shawn thoughtfully, a scene flashing in his mind of angry villagers chasing him down with backhoes and pitchforks when he’d go on a chicken-thrashing rampage. Walking towards the chicken coop, he poked his head around the corner and looked in the adjoining house. No one appeared to be home. Shawn turned his character around to face Second Sarah and Victor.

“What’s that?” Victor asked, turning to face Shawn’s laptop.

“What?” asked Shawn, facing him.

“That noise,” Victor asked. “Turn up your speakers.”

Shawn turned up the volume on his laptop. The faint sound of music played in the room.

“It sounds like...the music that plays when you beat the game,” said Victor, “You know that, dun, dun, dun dun dun! Like, it usually comes from a flute.”

Shawn directed his character cautiously around the corner, down the curved street. The song became louder, as Second Sarah and Victor followed behind. As they came around the bend, they began to hear shouting and laughter accompanying the music. As they approached a wooden sign hanging from a pole protruding from a storefront, they heard glasses clinking as well.

“It’s *Little Shambles*,” said Shawn. Turning to Victor, he said, “Remember, that’s where the whole town goes after you kill the Mad King...Come on, let’s check it out!”

Without further ado, Shawn directed his character to the bar door, and hit Ctrl. The door opened. Inside the bar, they saw hundreds of people, what must have been the whole town, packed tightly together. Everybody was singing, swinging glasses, and spilling beer.

Upon each table were lit jack-o’-lanterns, with various faces; some resembled evil spirits, but most were carved in the image of the Mad King or his sorcerer. One table, however, had the pumpkin moved to the floor, to make room for a striking young girl with hair that, fittingly, matched the orange of the pumpkins. Dressed in a long green-and-yellow dress, she was dancing a jig to the flutes and lyre that were being played by a band on the far side of the bar. All eyes were upon her.

When they saw Second Shawn walk in, the crowd rushed him, lifting him up on their shoulders and shoving beer and a gigantic turkey leg into his hands. Shawn looked around and beamed at Sarah and Victor.

As they carried Shawn’s character around the room, he took in the scene: all of these people reminded him vaguely of characters from *World of One*, yet they were much different. Where the characters in the original 16-bit game were a mess of pixels that were difficult to make out, they were now shown in movie-quality reality on his screen.

When they finally put Second Shawn down, the bartender in front of him asked him, “What can I get ya? It’s all on the house!”

Shawn held V, and spoke to the bartender, “Why is everyone celebrating--”

“--Are you mad??” the bartender interrupted, beaming. “The festivities are in honor of *you*, for killing the Mad King and that devil sorcerer of his!!”

Looking around at Victor, Shawn said, still holding V, “But, it’s not *over* yet!”

“*What?*” asked the bartender, straining his ears.

Just then, someone whispered in his avatar’s ear, “Turn around and face thy Princess, brave Knight.”

Shawn turned his character around, and he, Sarah, and Victor saw the red-headed young lady reach up, grab and cradle Second Shawn’s head in her hands, laying a kiss directly on his lips. “You have saved the Kingdom, my good Sir!”

Turning to the microphone, Shawn spoke very loudly so that the bartender could hear as well, as the song ended, “*I said*, it’s not *over*, the Brood is still alive!”

At once, the entire room went silent.

Chapter 13

“The Brood,” said Shawn, turning to Sarah, as he flipped the paper map over, revealing a layout of all of the enemies and characters in *World of One*, “is a collection of people, who have died, and been brought back to life by the magic of Abaddon.”

“So they’re zombies,” replied Sarah, cautiously.

“No,” retorted Victor, who was busy talking and joking with Princess Sarah on his laptop. “No, ha ha, the guy asks her finally, ‘Would ya like to dance?’ Ha ha, and she says, ‘Would I? Would I?’ Hm, hm-hm, and he thinks she’s saying ‘Wood-eye,’ like his false eye!”

The princess and Victor both erupted in laughter.

“Ah, glad to see he’s found someone who hasn’t heard that joke,” Shawn said under his breath, turning to Sarah. “No, well anyway, the Brood are not exactly like zombies: they’re resurrected using magic, and so they retain some semblance of their old personalities. In fact,” Shawn said, imagining his player’s dead body back in the castle, lying in a pool of his own blood, as the girl fed on him, “they’re cursed to kill people in the same method by which they were killed.”

“So that girl was bitten by someone?” asked Sarah.

“No, well...she may have been, we don’t really know,” replied Shawn. “We just know that she died from the Black Death.”

“A.K.A., the Black Plague,” broke in Victor over his shoulder, turning back to the princess. “No, *you* cut it out! Ha ha!”

“I think he’s in love,” said Sarah, turning from him back to Shawn, rolling her eyes.

“Well, good then, we’ve both found our princesses tonight,” replied Shawn, smiling at Sarah, who laughed lightly, cocking her head in thought. “So anyway, the Mad King locked this Brood in his castle, to protect him. He then fixed locks on all the doors *inside* the castle, unlockable with hidden keys.”

“Why would he lock all the doors?”

“Well, the Brood *hates* him, because when they were resurrected, their spirits returned to their bodies. Even if their brains aren’t fully functioning, their souls are prisoners in their dead bodies, forced to kill and feed on their victims.”

“So, essentially, they’re in Hell,” said Sarah.

“Right, and they’d do anything to get their hands on the one responsible for sending them there,” answered Shawn.

“Okay, well, you killed the sorcerer, so why wouldn’t the curse be broken?” asked Sarah.

“Well, that’s a good question,” answered Shawn, glancing over at Victor, who was showing the princess his short sword. “Fitting,” Shawn said, rolling his eyes and turning back to Sarah. “The way the game was set up, you had to kill all the Brood on each level of the castle, in each room, before you were able to discover the key to the next room, and so on, until you get to Abaddon, and then finally the king. There never really was ever programmed a connection between the sorcerer or king, and the existence of the Brood. It was always, just, you kill the Brood, you get *access* to Abaddon and the king. If you--*cheat*--for lack of a better word, and kill the sorcerer first, the game had no idea it was supposed to break the curse.”

“So, we’re going to have to go through the castle, killing all the Brood,” replied Sarah. “Why can’t we just leave them there, again?”

“BAM!!!” the front door slammed open, as everyone in the bar pressed back against one another to get away. A young child fell down in front of Second Victor. Victor turned his avatar away from Princess Sarah, pressing Ctrl to bend down and pick up the child, narrowly pulling him out of the path of a very large, charging woman.

“Thank yeh, sir,” replied the boy, as Victor placed him back on his feet.

“Don’t mention it,” Victor said, as he turned back to the front door to see what all the commotion was about. With his left arm still pressing the door against the bar wall was a man wearing woolen pants and leather shoes and shirt, all covered with dirt and mud. He carried a scythe in his other hand.

As the man stumbled forward towards the crowd, he swung the sharp tool back and forth wildly in front of him. It took a second for it to register with Victor that this man had no head! Bumping into a table, a jack-o’-lantern carved with crooked teeth, triangle-shaped eyes and nose, with eyebrows twisted into a devilish sneer, was sent rolling around on the table. Just before the pumpkin rolled off the table, the headless man picked it up, placing it between his shoulders, on his stump of a neck.

The man stood there for a second, seeming to look around the room, as the carved eyes appeared to look back and forth, flickering from the flame inside the pumpkin. Swinging his scythe back and forth once again, he resumed his march towards the crowd of villagers in the bar. An elderly man, passed out on a stool at a nearby table, raised his head, just as the headless man’s aimless blade swooped towards his neck.

Just as the blade was about to decapitate the man, the arm holding the scythe was thrown backward, a short sword stuck in the wrist. Victor turned to see the princess with her arm cocked forward, recovering from the throw she had just performed with the sword.

“Princess! That was *amazing!*” gushed Victor, staring in amazement.

Rather than gloat over her perfect aim, the princess ran forward, vaulting from a table through the air. Landing on the bar’s hard-wood floor, she rolled forward, turning her momentum into a somersault. Emerging from her roll under the headless man’s right arm, she pulled the short sword from his flesh and bone. Using the blade to hack his hand off with unbelievable force and precision, she grabbed the scythe as it fell toward the ground.

Princess Sarah took a deep breath, and heaved the scythe from the ground, over her head, burying it into the back of the man with the jack-o’-lantern for a head. He fell to his knees, the pumpkin wobbling on his shoulders. The princess thrust the sword through the middle of his back straight through his chest, sending him falling forward. The jack-o’-lantern rolled off his neck, catching on fire from the lantern inside, as it hit the ground. The man’s body, smashing the pumpkin underneath it, was soon engulfed in flames.

“Ah, AH! Quick, water! Water!!” the bartender ran frantically to stamp out the fire, as two barmaids carried a large bucket of water between them from the back of the bar.

“I think I’m in love!” said Victor, turning around and grinning at Shawn and Sarah, with wide eyes and high brows, as the barmaids dumped the water over the fire. The bartender, jumping up and down on top of the burning body, was drenched with the downpour.

“So, that guy was one of the Brood, then, I take it,” said Second Sarah, staring across the table at Second Shawn and Victor, and the princess, who was drinking from a beer stein.

“Yeah,” said Princess Sarah, turning to face the barmaids, who were carrying off the charred, headless body. The delightful smell of pumpkin, mingled with the smell of burnt, rotting flesh, filled the air. “He was beheaded for practicing sorcery. His crops were growing faster and larger than his neighbors, so naturally they accused him of witchcraft. My father never would have stood for that.”

“Where is your father?” asked Victor.

“We have sent word to him that the Mad King and his sorcerer are dead. He will take care of the Brood, don’t you worry about that.” She looked down into her near-empty glass. “But why aren’t you lot drinking?”

“It doesn’t do anything for us...” said Victor into his laptop’s mike. He added quickly, “We-- have something to show you.”

“What are you doing?” said Shawn, turning around in his chair.

“You saw her fight, Shawn. We need her fighting with us!”

“Okay, sure, she can fight with us...so what are you going to show her?” Shawn asked.

Sarah, staring at Victor knowingly, replied, “He’s going to bring her out.”

“Bring her out of the bar?” asked Shawn, confused. “Well, that makes sense; there probably aren’t too many more of the Brood in here.”

“No, I mean he’s going to bring her *out* out. Like, out of the Kingdom,” Sarah countered, catching Victor’s eye.

“NO! It sounds like her father may have spawned outside of the Kingdom; if anything we’ll have to bring *him* back *in*. But under NO circumstances are we bringing *anyone out* of there!” Shawn shouted.

“Okay, think about it, dude,” replied Victor calmly. “The dragon’s already been here, he’s smashed up your street, killed--”

Shawn shook his head rapidly, eyeing Sarah. She was not yet aware of her ex-boyfriend’s fate.

--possibly killed some animals, birds, pets, possibly...like, such as,” Victor replied, as Shawn rolled his eyes and raised his eyebrows, seething through his teeth. Continuing, wiping his brow, Victor said, “and the king is lost somewhere. Given all that, you’re concerned about bringing this girl out? Ha. Like it or not, *World of One*, *World of Shawn*, and the world of *us*, are already merged. I just want to protect my princess; isn’t that what you’re doing??”

“Uh...” Shawn hesitated, glancing over at Sarah, who shrugged, blushing. “Ah, fine, okay. But if we bring her out, she *is* gonna fight. We’re all out of computers, though...” Shawn glanced around him, exasperated. He took a long chug of his energy drink.

“My dad has a laptop he brings home from work every night,” Sarah said helpfully. “He should be home by now.” She checked the time on Mr. Mitchell’s computer. “We could walk over there; if I ask nicely, he might let us borrow it.”

“No,” rebutted Shawn. “We’ve already wasted enough time. Victor, you and Sarah, escort the princess out and bring her here. I’ll spawn into Sarah’s house and grab the laptop.”

Chapter 14

“So, wait, you’re telling me that you are not really in these bodies, but that you’re using some device to control them. What you’re describing is witchcraft, and you want me to come join you?? You must be mad!” Princess Sarah said to Victor, flipping her long, curly red hair over her shoulder and looking up at the *Little Shambles* storefront sign. It was creaking, as the wind rocked it back and forth. She rubbed her arms against the cool October night.

“Your highness,” replied Victor, glancing sideways at Sarah, “I know it might sound like witchcraft to you, but, believe me, it’s not. It’s science. Trust me, we hate witches as much as you!”

“Uh-huh,” replied the princess, warily. “Well, you are friends with The One, who did *kill* the sorcerer Abaddon. Plus, you are funny, and rather cute. I suppose I can trust you.”

Victor’s face turned pink, as he said, “Great! Walk with us.”

As Second Victor and Sarah walked the princess toward the raised drawbridge, Shawn was busy loading his player into Sarah’s bedroom. When he was in, he quickly brought up the console, typed, “COWARD,” and hit Enter. Invisible, or translucent at least, he crept out into the hallway.

“Okay, where’s the laptop?” Shawn asked Sarah, who was still sitting next to him at his desk.

“Um, he usually leaves it in his bag at the front door,” Sarah replied, glad for a distraction from walking with the two love-birds.

Shawn directed his avatar down the hallway to the stairs, as Second Sarah and Victor walked with the princess closer to the drawbridge. As they neared the castle, Princess Sarah sputtered, “*Why* are the castle doors open?”

Victor stopped short, and gasped.

“What?” asked Sarah.

“Shawn, the castle doors are open...” Victor exclaimed, leaning his head back towards him.
“That means...”

“Ah, that explains it...” replied Shawn.

“Will one of you tell me why you’re so concerned about the castle doors being open??” Sarah asked, looking helplessly between her two friends.

“In *World of One*,” explained Victor, “after you defeat the Mad King, all the doors in the castle unlock and open.”

“So?” asked Sarah, still confused.

“So,” replied Shawn, as he crept his character through the entryway of Sarah’s house, toward the front door, “remember the Brood? They’re free now.”

“Let’s just get out of here,” Victor spoke into his mike to the princess, heading to the guardhouse at the drawbridge. “Lower the bridge,” he commanded the guards.

Having located the laptop case, Shawn picked it up with the Ctrl key, seeing it added to his inventory on the left side of his screen. Hoping to not alert the Lyons, Shawn quickly opened the front door, stepped out, and closed it again. He jumped off the front porch and sped through the yard, bypassing the street.

“Listen to *me!*” said Victor frantically. “We’re trying to *protect* the princess! It’s not safe here!”

“Sir,” replied Carac apologetically, “I’m sure you have the best of intentions, but try to see things from my perspective. One, I’ve never seen you before. And, two, even if you are telling the truth, I could never allow the princess to leave the Kingdom! Not without the express permission of the king. Let me assure you, she will be much safer here.”

“Ugh,” said Victor, turning around to face Shawn. “They won’t let me take the princess out!”

“Well, it’s probably just as well,” said Shawn, glad that they were not, in fact, lowering the drawbridge. “We don’t want anything, in *there*, coming out *here*.” Stopping short, he turned around, heading back to the Lyons’ front door.

“Look, I would be *happy, ecstatic*, to supply you with soldiers, weapons, anything you need, to help you destroy the Brood. In fact, I will fight for you, *personally*. It simply doesn’t make any sense to bring a princess to fight with you.”

“Carac, they have, devices, with which they fight, avoiding any danger to themselves personally. They would allow you to use one of these devices,” whispered the princess.

“Witchcraft! Treachery!” exclaimed Carac, eyes wide with terror.

“Let me assure you, they are no witches,” replied Princess Sarah tensely. Looking around, she said, “They are friends of The One.”

“Friends of Sir Shawn! Well why didn’t you say so?” replied Carac graciously.

“So you will let us take Princess Sarah out?” asked Victor hopefully.

“Oh, no, no, I can’t allow that. The king would have my head!” replied Carac solemnly.

“Any news from the king?” Victor asked.

“None yet. We have sent word, but riders on horseback will take awhile to find him. It would be easier if we had the dragon at our disposal...” Carac replied. “Well, anyway, I shall be happy to assist you in any way I can, but I must insist upon returning Princess Sarah to hiding, nor can I myself leave the Kingdom.”

“But you could be killed!” replied Victor. “If you come with us, you’ll have unlimited lives! If you die, you can just re-spawn.”

“Re-spawn, sire? I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Carac.

“Re-spawn, it’s like, like--” sputtered Victor.

“It’s like being born again!” replied Sarah, beaming.

“But, my Lady, and good Sir, I already *have* been born again, into the Kingdom of Heaven,” replied Carac, furrowing his brow. “What more do I have to fear in this life? My allegiance is to God, King, and Country. I have sworn an oath, and I cannot leave the People in their time of need, especially while the king is away.”

Meanwhile, Shawn was creeping up to the Lyons’ front porch. Suddenly, the front door opened, Mr. Lyon searching all directions, holding a baseball bat. “Where are ya?” he asked the darkness, still as bright as daylight on Shawn’s screen. When no one responded, he yelled, “Yeah, you better run!”

Second Shawn, glued to the spot, and still hidden, tossed the laptop case back in through the gap in the doorway, just as the door closed.

“Made it!” Shawn yelled aloud to Victor and Sarah.

The Lyons’ front door opened again, Mr. Lyon poking his head left and right. Seeing no one, he reached down and picked up the laptop case. Examining it, he closed the door yet again.

“Whew, okay,” Shawn muttered, quitting to the game’s main screen to remove his character from the map. He glanced over at Sarah’s screen, seeing that she and Victor were walking away from the guardhouse, Carac following from behind. Staring hard at where they were headed, Shawn chose to spawn his player in a new location, this time within the Kingdom village.

As Shawn’s game loaded, Victor was busy in conversation with the princess. “So, where’d you learn to fight like that? I’ve never seen--ah, a girl fight that brilliantly,” said Victor.

“Well, I’ve never really been one to live up to others’ expectations, just because they think I should,” replied the princess, as they turned a corner to head down a street, walking past an armory, a potions shop, and a clothier, all of which were closed.

“No, I respect that,” said Victor. “I’m the same way. It’s like, my mom’s always telling me, ‘Go outside, and play,’ ‘Try out for baseball,’ or, my favorite, ‘Clean up your room!’ No, Mom, I won’t be doing *any* of that!”

“Right,” said the princess, chuckling.

Looking around the chapel that he found himself in, Second Shawn walked down the aisle towards the altar at the front of the church. Looking straight above him, he saw a humble crucifix, on which was hanging a bloodied figure. Shawn looked around, to ensure the place was safe.

As Princess Sarah and Victor came off the street into the town center, Second Sarah and Carac followed behind. “So where are we headed?” asked Second Sarah.

“There,” said Carac, motioning toward a very tall clock-tower, which read 9:59. On the roof of the tower was a weather vane, with a rooster on top, pointing towards the north, from which a bitter wind was blowing. “Where the cock crows at midnight.” At that moment, the hands moved into the 10:00 position. The rooster on the vane began crowing, as if daybreak had come.

“So that’s what that meant...But it’s not midnight,” said Sarah, checking the time on her cell phone, which read the same as the clock tower.

“Don’t worry, we’ll fix that,” replied Carac, stepping past Sarah’s avatar, between Second Victor and the princess, and walking across the the courtyard.

Following Carac, Sarah noticed a fountain in the center of the square, with the statue of a large dragon on it, with a knight standing up to it, brandishing a lance. The dragon’s hollow mouth was filled with large, jagged teeth, as it attempted to set foot on the knight.

Seeing what she was looking at, Princess Sarah turned around and said proudly, “St. George the Dragon-Slayer: there once lived a dragon who terrorized a village, forcing the villagers to sacrifice two sheep every day to feed it. One day, the dragon’s hunger was no longer satisfied by the sheep, and required a human sacrifice to quench it.

“The townspeople drew lots to decide who would be given to the dragon. Apparently, the lot fell to the child princess. When she was brought to the lair of the dragon, dressed as a bride, the good knight George chanced to ride by. The princess bade him to keep riding, that he might not be killed, but George remained, bravely fighting the dragon and lancing him. Wrapping the dragon in her girdle, the princess led it back to the town, like a lamb. The knight spoke to the townspeople to have no fear, but to be baptized.” Princess Sarah looked down at her feet, as they turned down another street off the courtyard, wiping her eye.

“That princess was you,” said Sarah, observing her closely.

Lifting her head, the princess nodded, laughing nervously. “I love that dragon; I will miss him!”

“Huh?” Sarah asked, staring quizzically from the princess to Victor.

“That dragon that tried to kidnap you,” Shawn muttered to Sarah, leaning over to her. “It’s supposed to be the dragon from the legend, that was stayed by St. George. It answers to whomever wears the crown.”

“And now that the throne is empty...” said Victor, trailing off.

“...He’s gone missing,” replied Sarah, nodding. “Wait,” she said, speaking into the microphone, “I thought, in the legend of St. George and the Dragon, St. George *slays* the dragon...chops his head off in front of the entire village?”

“The legend is wrong!” the princess replied angrily.

“But--” began Sarah.

“--Just, let it go,” Shawn muttered.

“Uh, so why isn’t there water in the fountain?” Sarah asked, thinking better of her response.

“Well, it’s cold, isn’t it?” asked the princess, rubbing her arms again. “Don’t want the pipes to freeze.”

“Ah, right,” replied Sarah, who was entirely comfortable sitting in a padded chair next to Shawn, though the window was open, allowing the cool autumn air to filter through from the south, as the hot air from the three computers and friends to filter out.

Walking up to the tall church doors, Carac pulled a large keyring out from within his tunic, pressing a brass key into the lock and turning it. Pushing the heavy wooden door open, he exclaimed, “Sir Shawn!” and, putting the keyring safely back into his tunic, he made quick strides toward Second Shawn, grabbing his forearm and patting his back. “Good work, my friend!” Carac congratulated Shawn.

“Thank you, my friend. Any trouble coming here?” Shawn asked through his mike, although he knew very well they hadn’t encountered anything.

“No trouble so far, though the Brood is unleashed. We’ve come to put the princess back into safekeeping,” Carac said, his expression hardening.

“I...know, Carac,” replied Shawn sagely.

“Of--course you do, Sir. You have a way of understanding that is far beyond that of--” Carac looked at Victor with exasperation, continuing, “others your age.” Victor rolled his eyes at his screen.

“You’ll have to excuse Victor,” said Shawn. “He is faithful and true; he would gladly lay down his life for any of his friends. The quality of his friendship and character is rivaled only by your own, and I am honored to call him friend. Alas,” Shawn now whispered, as Victor and Sarah turned to look at Shawn with respect, “he loves the princess, and I’m afraid that love has left him a little...blinded.”

“Ah, no need to convince me about being blinded by love,” Carac said, staring off into space.

“Whom does he love?” asked Victor, a little embarrassed by everything Shawn had just said, and anxious to get the conversation off of himself.

“He’s married,” replied Shawn, rolling his eyes and turning to face Victor. “Remember his wife, when he invites you into his home for dinner?”

“Oh...yeah...she sure loves to eat,” said Victor, remembering the scene. “She’s gotta be at least--”

As if reading Victor’s thoughts through Second Victor’s mind, Carac said, snapping back to reality, “My wife, she has as much fat as a wealthy maiden! You’d think she didn’t work all day, making delicious meals for us.”

“Oh, you know, weight isn’t everything...” began Victor, looking at Shawn and Sarah, embarrassed.

“I should say not! She’s not only fat, she can work like an ass, drink like a mule, and make love like a redheaded gypsy!” Carac said proudly.

“What does that *mean*?” asked Victor. “Is that good?”

“Let’s just drop it,” replied Shawn, horrified. Leaning into his mike, he said, “Well anyway, let’s get the princess into the hiding place then, shall we? It is still safe, right? No one else knows about it?”

“Yes, I believe it should be safe,” replied Carac. “Only my eldest brother knew about it, and he is dead.”

“Carac, I am very--” began Shawn.

“My liege, please, please,” Carac said, waving his hands. “He was a lost cause, and a traitor to God and his king. I won’t say it is a good thing, for no death is good, but his death could perhaps bring about greater good. Let us put it behind us. Now, without further ado,” he continued, stepping toward a staircase by the entrance doors, “let us waste a little time.”

Shawn, knowing that Sarah would be confused, muttered to her, “he’s going up in the clock--”

--tower, to set the clock ahead two hours, I got it," said Sarah, annoyed by his patronization, and a little tired.

"A-ha, but do you know what happens then?" asked Shawn, himself a bit annoyed and tired.

"Uh..." Sarah hesitated, looking around the church. "I'm guessing...the hiding place opens up?"

"Very good," said Shawn, genuinely impressed. "For someone who doesn't play video games, you're catching on pretty quick!"

"Well, it's not exactly a video game," said Sarah, a bit concerned, as she stared up to examine the cross. "That's a very unusual crucifix..."

"I will be back as soon as I can," said Carac, as he opened the staircase door. "There are numerous steps to the top. I used to be able to sprint up and down them, but lately, I've started to slow down."

"I understand," said Victor, remembering the almost cartoon-like speed at which characters used to run up and down steps, as cut-scenes would skip the time it would realistically take. "We'll be here waiting for you."

As Carac headed up the steps, he turned and said, "If anything should happen, save the princess. She is the sole heir to the throne now that her brother is, thankfully, gone, along with his son," nodding to Second Shawn, who pumped his fist in the air.

"How'd you do that?" asked Victor, turning.

"Switch to the Unarmed weapon, and charge up the fire button," Shawn said, demonstrating.

"Primary or secondary?" asked Victor.

"Primary."

Victor was soon fist pumping along with Shawn.

"You guys, what are you doing?" asked Princess Sarah, who had been silently taking everything in.

"Okay, well, ahem," said Shawn, as he walked out through the tall front doors. "I'll keep a look out. You guys just stay in here. If you need anything," he looked around over his shoulder, "you know where to find me."

Chapter 15

Shawn stared down the deserted lane, past the familiar empty storefronts and cottages, remembering the wonderful many hours he had spent with Victor in exploring these very spots. Everything seemed so much more real now. No longer could they simply restart the game, should the princess or Carac die. They would die for good, like the soldiers he had wiped out.

How much Shawn wished he could restart his own life, to the way things were before his parents divorced, or before that, before he had moved away from his best friend. Best of all would be to go back to before people started picking on him, to his grade school days, in good old Lawrence. But Shawn knew there would be no going back.

Besides, Shawn thought, glancing to his right at Sarah, maybe...maybe everything has a reason.

“Wait,” Sarah’s voice snapped Shawn out of his daydreaming. She had stopped abruptly in front of the princess as they approached the altar underneath the giant cross, on which was hanging the figure of a man, naked except for a white cloth tied around his loins. Turning her head aside to Shawn, she said, “I’ve got it: this crucifix. Christ is wearing a king’s crown. So weird...”

“Why is that weird?” asked Shawn, his eyes glued to the fountain in the courtyard, which seemed to be suddenly flowing with water. He began walking toward it, his heart beating faster.

“Because,” replied Sarah, “He wore a crown of thorns. It was like a sort of mockery that he was forced to endure...as if everything else wasn’t enough...”

“Ah, you’re right,” whispered Victor. “But sometimes He wears a real crown; I’m sure I’ve seen pictures--”

“Not when His head is down, and still covered in wounds and blood. Does it always look like that in this game?” asked Sarah.

“Actually,” said Shawn, getting a bit concerned, placing his face close to Sarah’s screen. “I don’t think the game *has* a Jesus on that cross.”

“In fact,” said Sarah, getting concerned, “look at His head...”

Shawn strained to make out the head and face on the figure above him. “It does seem rather large...” He was about to turn around and head back, when he noticed the fountain. It was indeed flowing. However, the water flowing out of the dragon’s mouth was dark, reddish, and filled with what appeared to be grass and rocks.

The princess, who had been struggling to make out what Sarah and Victor were staring at, squinted her eyes to make out the figure's face in the darkness. As the moon became uncovered by a crossing cloud, moonlight poured through the large stained glass windows. The princess gasped and whispered to Sarah, "It's the *farmer*!"

"Huh?" Sarah asked, trying to make out the face.

"The *headless farmer*! That's his face!" replied the princess, her eyes wide with horror.

Taking a deep breath, Sarah said to Victor, her eyes still glued to the cross, "Take the princess, and get out of here."

Victor didn't need any more convincing. Whispering into his mike, he said to the princess, "Let's get out of here, Princess." Slowly, they turned around and walked out through the doors, closing them behind them.

Taking a few steps backward, Sarah held her left mouse button to charge up her compound bow. The pulleys started working as the ends of the bow bent towards each other, and, taking a deep breath, she released, aiming for the head of the man on the cross.

Meanwhile, Shawn's eyes were transfixed on the fountain, as the dark liquid continued to pour out of the fountain. The liquid, rather than filling up the basin, was collecting into two ovular pools, each approximately one foot in length and half a foot wide. As he continued to stare, Victor and Princess Sarah came running up.

"Why is the fountain running? It will freeze up!" exclaimed the princess.

"I'm afraid that is the least of our concerns," whispered Shawn. The two pools were getting taller, tapering into two pillars. All throughout the liquid, the rocks and grass appeared to be dispersed.

"What is that?" asked Victor, alarmed.

Back in the church, Sarah's arrow had struck the figure on the cross in between of the eyes. As Sarah stared in horror, tears filling her eyes at the sight, the figure's head rolled forward and fell onto the ground. Sarah closed her eyes, expecting to hear shattering. Sarah opened her eyes, as she heard, not ceramic shattering, but a sickening *thud*, followed by a metallic *clang*. Looking at the area around where the head had fallen, she saw drops of blood.

What? Sarah thought. Could it be? Could this game have...oh, but surely not. She approached the head cautiously, a thousand thoughts running through her head. Had this game somehow re-created the actual body of Christ?

As she got closer, she stared up at the cross, and stopped dead. Another head was in the place of the one that had fallen, and this one was not wearing a crown. Sarah turned to face Shawn, and said, "Shawn! Look!"

When she turned back to her screen, something fell in front of her face, blocking her view. “What?” came a voice from Sarah’s computer. “You’re not the princess...Ah...Queen of the North; all the better!” Her screen turned red and then black.

“You died!” yelled Shawn, who was too preoccupied with the fountain to pay much bother to Sarah’s screen.

“What do I do?” Sarah asked, as she stared up from her dead body at the ceiling.

The two pillars in front of Shawn, Victor, and the princess were getting taller, now converging. “Those almost look like legs,” whispered Victor.

Sarah gasped, as a figure stepped in front of her view, bending down to stare straight in her face. A bald head, with a red painted face and a pierced nose with a bone filling it, filled Sarah’s screen, as she stared in shock. A large, muscly arm reached down towards Sarah’s chest, as she sighed in frustration.

“Abaddon can never die,” the figure screamed, as he removed his arm from Sarah’s dead torso, his hand gripping something. “Like your Christ, I have risen. But ‘man does not live by bread alone,’” he quoted from Scripture. Holding his hand up, palm out, so Sarah could see it, he revealed what he was holding: her heart!

“With this, I lay claim to your throne. ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in,’” Abaddon said, lifting his hand up to his mouth. As Sarah screamed, Abaddon froze, staring down at the corpse which was now shrieking.

“Ctrl-N! Ctrl-N!” yelled Shawn, finally glancing at her screen. “Just keep hitting Ctrl-N!” He couldn’t let Sarah see this, for, as the liquid in the fountain continued to pour from the dragon’s mouth, it became apparent that it was taking the form of a human being. Not only that, but two wires had just poured forth, and were being placed at the spot where the mouth would be, if this person had skin. As the head was completed, a few red hairs then floated onto the top.

“Is that--?” began Victor, as Shawn turned around violently in his chair, clearing his throat loudly.

“Yep!” said Shawn, as Victor turned around to see Shawn making a cutting motion across his throat, to indicate that Victor shouldn’t say anything about this resembling Sarah’s dead ex-boyfriend, Steven. Continuing loudly, Shawn said, “It’s another of *the Brood*. Apparently this poor soul was *crushed* by something, and all that was left was his--or her--blood, bone fragments, and muscles. Perhaps they were stuck to--uh, whatever crushed the body. Sarah, you’d better not look, this’d make you sick!” Shawn turned his screen away from Sarah.

“Deal,” replied Sarah. She was now staring at Abaddon from the eyes of a fresh new player, but she was not the only one. All around the room, dozens of those big brown eyes stared at him as well, from half as many Sarahs.

“Are...you guys okay?” Mr. Mitchell asked, peeking his head in through Shawn’s doorway. “I, heard screaming.”

“Yeah, we’re fine, Mr. Mitchell, it’s this game, it’s *insane!*” replied Sarah, thinking quickly. “Super scary!”

“Well, sounds like a great game for Halloween,” chuckled Shawn’s dad.

“Yeah, thanks for asking though!”

“Well, just wanted to let you know I’m heading to bed soon.” Muttering under his breath to Victor, he said, “Keep an eye on them,” and, speaking more loudly, “we got 101 trick-or-treaters tonight; a new record!”

“Great, ‘night Dad!” Shawn said shortly. Glancing over at Sarah’s screen, Shawn exclaimed, “Sarah! I meant, keep pressing Ctrl-N *once* every time you *die!* Ha!”

Chuckling to herself, Sarah said, “Oh, ha, I guess I panicked. Oh well, I suppose it worked just as well,” for, at that moment, Abaddon, who was staring around him at the once-empty room, dropped Second Sarah’s heart to the ground.

Muttering, “Cheap parlor tricks,” Abaddon raised both hands above his head. As he screamed, the tall cathedral began filling all over with sparks of electricity. Sarah raised an arrow to her bow.

Shawn, arming the Hammer of War, and preparing to strike, stopped short, as he heard whispering coming from Steven. Stepping closer, he saw his braces moving apart from each other, as if the bloody figure was trying to speak. Placing his character's head right next to Steven's, Shawn could finally just make out the words, “*Release--me,*” as the Hammer was pulled from his arms.

As Steven pulled the Hammer back, preparing to swing, Shawn, Victor, and the princess all ran the other direction, away from the fountain and the church. The hammer came down hard, sending shockwaves across the entire square, and demolishing the fountain and the statue of the dragon which it contained.

The church was now filled top to bottom with white streaks of lightning. Sarah, about to shoot another arrow at the sorcerer, was suddenly struck down. In fact, *all* of the Sarahs in the cathedral were struck down, as Abaddon’s furious bolts spread through them all like some game gone horribly wrong. The room was soon filled with blood covering every pew and wall.

“Ha, ha, ha!” Abaddon madly laughed, as the lightning died down. ““One may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness,”” he quoted, striding toward the altar steps leading to the aisle. “You are forgiven, my child.” He was stopped when Sarah re-appeared directly in front of him. “You!” he snarled.

““Through him all things were made,”” Sarah quoted back, arming her dagger. ““Without him nothing was made that has been made.”” She thrust the dagger forward, as Abaddon easily grabbed her arm, thrusting it back, the knife piercing Sarah’s throat.

Shawn’s eyes darted over to Sarah’s screen. An image of the Higgs Boson flashed into his mind. Sarah’s words, and the giant wooden cross behind Abaddon, combined to remind Shawn of the fiery cross visible within the “God particle” that was supposed to explain how the universe attained mass.

Turning his focus back to his own screen, Shawn discovered Steven, gliding towards them across the town square, brandishing Shawn’s Hammer of War. Steven, incredulously, didn’t seem to need to take steps in order to move, the blood making up his body rolling him forward as it circulated. He lowered his head as the braces moved into a devilish grin, approaching Shawn, more than ever, like a shark.

Shawn armed his bow, pulled back on the strings, and unloaded an arrow into Steven’s chest. Steven looked down at his torso, as the arrow sunk into it. As Shawn breathed a sigh of relief, Steven turned his head around to watch the arrow pass straight through his liquid body and stick into the remnants of the statue of St. George far behind him. His sick smile grew even wider, as Shawn began to panic.

Taking another step towards the aisle, Abaddon placed his bare foot on the first step. Sarah popped up, again blocking him from taking another step. She scrolled up to the broad sword and held down the left mouse button. The sword, held out to her side and glowing blue, was kicked out of her hand by the sorcerer, as he reached his hands up to her head and twisted. As he held her disembodied head out in front of his eyes, now glowing red, he heard her say, ““In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.””

Shawn, having seen what just happened on Sarah’s screen, decided to try the same attack. As he moved backwards, he armed his broad sword, said to Victor, “Get the princess out of here,” and charged up the attack. As his blade began glowing blue, Steven turned to face toward his right. Now holding the Hammer on his right side, he began gliding sideways to his left toward Shawn. As he increased in speed, he began lifting the Hammer with tremendous force, the remaining fibers of his muscles closing in upon the handle, and contracting and expanding in his shoulders and arms.

“Now!” yelled Victor, as Steven got ever closer to Shawn.

“Not...yet...” replied Shawn. Then, just as the Hammer was directly above Steven’s head, Shawn released his mouse button. Second Shawn took a step forward, as he swept the sword forward, angling up as his feet left the ground. The hot blue sword swept through Steven like butter, connecting with the Hammer, and sending it flying through the air. It landed on the church, blowing a large hole in the roof with the impact.

Turning around, Shawn saw, horrified, that Steven was still standing, grinning at him. Both Steven and Shawn sprinted off toward the church.

Abaddon, now agitated, dropped Second Sarah's head and took a leap off the steps onto the landing. As he landed, a thunderous noise erupted from the ceiling of the church, the Hammer just having landed on it with a crushing thunder. As Abaddon looked up, the tremendous wooden cross fell straight down. Abaddon, attempting to run down the aisle, was stopped by Sarah, who appeared in front of him again. Sarah this time scrolled through her weapons backwards, stopping at what looked like a large syringe. Noticing this out of the corner of his eye, Shawn exclaimed, "The flame-thrower! I forgot about that; yeah, use it!"

"Oh yeah, the Cheirosiphōn! We never got to use that enough!" exclaimed Victor, as he and the princess rounded a corner, heading toward the drawbridge. They stopped dead. The guardhouse was being overrun by a hoard of the Brood, scores of revived corpses of women with their wombs ripped out, and children and priests with black, rotting flesh, were attempting to beat down the door.

"They're trying to lower the drawbridge!" screamed the princess at Second Victor, grabbing him.

"The light--shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," Sarah quoted, unleashing a fury of liquid fire from her Cheirosiphōn, the Greek Fire Hand Syphon. The fire poured out, drenching Abaddon from head to toe. As he stood there, staring at Sarah, however, he began laughing. Confused, Sarah turned to look at Shawn, who was busy trying to beat Steven to the church.

"When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame scorch you!" Abaddon growled, as the liquid fire cooled, forming a black cloak for him from head to toe.

"Oh wait, on second thought, don't use the Syphon: fire makes him stronger!" exclaimed Shawn.

"Oh yeah, *that's* why we never used it much," replied Victor.

"Great, juuuust great," said Sarah, rolling her eyes. Above her at that moment, however, the cross, which had landed upright on the altar, teetering forward and back, fell forward, crushing both Sarah and Abaddon. From high above them, the cock finally began to crow.

Second Sarah, now dead, saw from her vantage point that the sorcerer was still moving, struggling against the weight of the cross. Sarah was about to hit Ctrl-N again, when she noticed a pair of hands reaching up from the floor around the altar - now here was a curious sight. The hands were followed by arms, which pulled up a torso and legs in knight's armor. Taking a look around, the knight spied Abaddon on the floor in front of him, and signaled to some unseen force. Dozens, then hundreds, of hands appeared to protrude through the floor, all around the altar, as soldiers with bloody wounds, some missing arms, legs, and even heads, pulled themselves up. As one, they rushed Abaddon.

Shawn, try as he might, could not keep up with the tremendously fast Steven, as he glided along effortlessly toward the church. Steven ascended the steps and sped down the aisle. As Shawn followed, he saw the mess of soldiers grabbing at Abaddon under the cross, sparks flying from the sorcerer's hands, sending soldiers flying off in agony.

Steven, upon reaching the crowd of soldiers, saw the target of their attacks, and turned left, moving down and over pews. Shawn, arming his Cheirosiphōn, continued his pursuit of Steven. He was about to unleash a stream of of vengeful fire at Steven, when he saw him mouth, "Thank you." Then, picking up the fallen Hammer stuck in the ground in front of him, Steven side-stepped to his left, raising the Hammer above his head, and landed with a tremendous blow in the center of the attacking horde of soldiers.

Knights seemed to fly out in every direction, all throughout the church, some through the hole in the roof, some blown apart into fragments, and some completely disintegrating. Sarah looked all around her dead corpse, to find Abaddon. Not only could she not find the sorcerer's body, she couldn't even see her *own* body. The cross, having been thrown off by the Brood horde, was resting on the altar, splintered, but still intact.

Shawn, Sarah observed, was bending down. Pressing Ctr-N, Sarah spawned her character beside him. "Whatcha got there?" Sarah asked, as Shawn quickly put his hand to his pocket.

"Uh, ah..." Shawn looked around, and spied the king's crown, lying on the altar, under the cross. "Ah, just looking for this," he said, striding up the steps and grabbing the crown.

"It--was--incredible! Should--have--seen--wouldn't--believe--" Princess Sarah's voice echoed in the high ceiling of the cathedral, as she stumbled in through the large entry doors.

"What was that?" asked Sarah, glancing at Victor.

Second Victor, bounding closely behind the princess, and full of energy, exclaimed, "There were like a *thousand* zombies--I mean, Brood--and they were like, trying to get in to the guard house, to--like, lower the drawbridge, you know, and I'm like, 'Not on my watch,' and then they all turn around and look at us, and they all just sort of, fall down, dead...again! I guess they were scared!"

Looking at Sarah out of the corner of his eye, Shawn said, "Wow, um, maybe, or maybe Sarah held off the sorcerer long enough for the Brood soldiers, which I killed, and who were tipped off by Carac's brother, to finally get their hands on Abaddon." He nudged a mutilated soldier with his foot, whose pale blue eyes bore a striking resemblance to Carac's. "And then the curse was broken."

Carac, who had just emerged from the clock-tower stairwell, paused, and walked up the aisle. "Ay, it would appear that way, eh Shawn?" he asked, as he approached the body. "Yeah, that's him, alright," he said, sighing as he straightened up. "Well, at least he's at peace now. I reckon they were hiding in the secret spot, then?"

"It looks that way," said Shawn. "Sarah's the only one who saw everything; did they come out of the floor?"

Sarah, walking her character up to the altar, looked around at the floor. "Yeah, they did. How did that..." She looked at Shawn, who was raising his eyebrows, and a thought occurred to her. "Of

course...the hiding place was under the altar! And so, apparently it closes again when...the rooster stops crowing?"

"Very good, milady!" said Shawn, clapping his hands lightly and nodding at her.

"They were still fighting for the Mad King, even in death," said Carac, shaking his head.

"Avenging him against Abaddon, you mean?" asked Shawn.

"Well, I was thinking more that my brother wanted to get his hands on *me*, but yeah - they probably assumed a good chance of Abaddon showing up here to capture the princess, perhaps marry into the family to gain the throne," replied Carac, thoughtfully.

"No, he didn't want this kingdom; he said he wanted the large kingdom to the north...our country," said Shawn, remembering the heated conversation he had overheard in the throne room.

"Men who seek power are never satisfied with the power they have, my lord," said Carac, staring at the crown in Shawn's hands. "The throne would give him unquestioned access to the armies of the Kingdom, and riches beyond imagination. That would give him a good start on conquering that fertile northern kingdom."

Shawn, seeing where Carac's eyes were glued, examined it. Solid gold, with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, the crown did look appealing to him. How different would his life be, if he left the house of his divorced father, in this wretched town, and ruled the Kingdom with his Queen, Sarah Fox, with riches untold. No Russian teachers or idiot principals telling him what to do, no more bullies picking on him.

Turning to face the princess and Second Victor, he thought, they could be my advisors, or even my low king and queen, to rule under me. Shawn looked around his room, at Sarah, beside him, and Victor, to his right. Both of them turned to face him, expectantly. Turning back to his screen, Shawn saw the beat-up cross, resting on the altar.

He thought of war, and peace, of computer games and FaceWorld. He remembered pizza parties with Victor, and of watching funny shows with his dad. He thought of his mother's brown eyes, and of college.

While Shawn was pondering all this, his screen suddenly began moving. As everyone watched, Second Shawn walked himself down the aisle toward the entryway. Shawn, in a state of shock, wondered whether the A.I. that had taken over his character was going to make the decision to take the throne. Just as he was about to walk out the door, Second Shawn turned, placing the crown gently on the red head of the princess, saying, "Until the Good King returns, your Grace!"

Waking out of his thoughts, and glancing around the room, Shawn quickly placed his hands on the keyboard, to ensure that Sarah and Victor thought that *he* had made the moral decision, and not the *computer*.

Chapter 16

“Do you guys want to meet the dragon?” asked the princess, hopefully.

“Uh...we’ve already met,” replied Sarah, rubbing her arms. The four friends were standing in the town center, along with the entire town, which had gathered there after learning of the true demise of Abaddon and the Brood. Dancing and revelry ensued.

“The Mad King had sent the dragon to retrieve her,” explained Shawn. “It was...not a good first impression.”

“But he’s really nice, and would love to meet you on *proper* terms!” said the princess. “After all, *I* hold the crown now. Here, I’ll call him.” Straightening the too-large crown on her hastily tied-up red locks, she tilted her head in the air, and cupped her hands over her mouth. “Caw! CAW!” she squawked so loud that Sarah had to turn down her speakers.

From somewhere on the horizon, they saw motion, as an enormous serpentine figure lifted off. Sweeping across the sky, they soon saw the shape of the dragon crossing the now-pale white moon. Turning his head down and looking around, he spotted them. Turning the enormous body with tremendous ease, he approached, coming in for a graceful landing in the middle of the square, sending dancing townspeople scattering, spilling steins of beer all over themselves.

Princess Sarah walked over, tenderly caressing the end of the dragon’s snout, as he snorted and licked her, his large, snake-like tongue tickling her. She laughed, and motioned for the others to come over as well.

Sarah moved her character in front of the dragon, facing him. She said, “Dragon, I forgive you.” His yellowish eyes flicked between her and the princess, as he jerked his head back. Sarah turned to the princess. “What does he want? Is he hungry?”

“God, I hope not!” replied Victor, shuddering.

“He wants to give us a ride,” replied the princess, looking excitedly at Victor. “Have you ever ridden on a dragon before??”

“Uh, I’ve meant to, and, uh, I’ve been trying to find the time but, um, I’ve just, you know, been so busy living in a world in which dragons don’t *exist*,” replied Victor with a straight face.

“Good one, *Dicker*,” replied the princess, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “You guys are gonna love this, it’s so *romantic*.” Running up the wing which the dragon had laid down for them to climb aboard, she continued, “at least, *I* think so. The men--ha, I should say, *boys*--I’ve taken up here have had a way of ceasing their courtship with me soon after.”

“What, uh, happens to them?” asked Victor, anxiously.

“I, don’t know...” the princess trailed off, as she waved sweetly at a young man hobbling away from the dragon on crutches. “But, if a man doesn’t like my pets, or vice *versa*, then I guess we have a little problem then, don’t we?” She winked at Victor.

“Ahem,” said Victor, quickly, clearing his throat. “Let’s do this thing!” And, running up the dragon-wing, he sat down promptly beside the princess. Turning around to Shawn and Sarah, he cried, “You guys coming?”

“Sh-sure,” said Shawn, shrugging, as he moved his character over to the wing. Turning around, he said to Sarah, “After you, milady.”

“Why, thank you good Sir,” Sarah said, in a falsely high-pitched, throaty whisper, as she walked up the wing and sat down behind Victor.

Shawn brought up the rear, and took his seat beside Sarah.

“Dragon,” spoke the princess kindly. “Give them the tour.” The dragon snorted, as small flames protruded from his snout. Sarah struggled to retain her seat as the dragon began rocking from side to side. “Not--*that* tour,” the princess said, glancing sideways at Victor. “The one for friends and dignitaries will do.”

Immediately the rocking and snorting stopped, as the dragon lifted his gigantic wings. Victor snickered, glancing back at Shawn. As the dragon began flapping his wings, the crowd of people in the square covered their heads against the torrent of wind and dust.

Rising into the nighttime, moonlit November sky, the princess again rubbed her shoulders against the cold.

“What am I thinking?” Victor said, cycling through his inventory. “I picked up a ton of these in the church!” Turning to the princess, he clicked the right mouse button, causing Second Victor to hand a knight’s tunic to her.

“Well, you *are* a gentleman!” replied the princess, wrapping the tunic around her bare arms. Victor blushed.

As they began to rise higher above the ground, Shawn noticed that, not only was the street in front of his *house* now visible, but streets and houses all around town, and beyond. He pointed out to Sarah their houses. As they rose even higher, the lights of the big City could be seen to their left, and Victor pointed out their hometown of Lawrence to their right.

“I hope to see it someday,” said the princess, her pale, freckled face turning a shade of pink.

Victor, his heart beating faster, said, “I’d like that. What are your plans for school?”

“You mean, like University?” replied the princess. “I--uh--women are not allowed at University.”

“What, that’s ridiculous!” shouted Sarah, grabbing the princess’ shoulder. “In our country, *everyone* is allowed in, as long as they meet the requirements...” Sarah glanced nervously at Shawn.

“Yeah!” shouted Victor. “Shawn and I are going to KU when we get out of high school...”

“KU?” asked the princess.

“The University of Kansas,” exclaimed Sarah. “It’s in our hometown...where Victor lives! I haven’t told you guys yet; I’m planning on going there too!”

“No way!” exclaimed Shawn. This was too good to be true; it was like fate. The tunic that Victor had given the princess reminded Shawn of the object he had placed in Second Shawn’s pocket. Scrolling through his inventory, he found the object, and, turning to Second Victor, pressed the right mouse button. Victor, seeing a message on his screen, “Shawn has just given you Braces,” turned around, to see Shawn with a finger to his mouth. Scrolling to it, he examined Steven’s braces.

The princess turned to him, asking, “What are you looking at?”

Pressing D to drop the item, Second Victor tossed the braces out into the evening sky. As they fell to the ground, Victor said, “Nothing. Just a thorn in my side,” putting his arm around the princess.

“Brace yourselves!” exclaimed the princess, as the dragon swept down towards the Kingdom. Shawn turned around and winked at Victor, as Princess Sarah pointed out all of the various parts of the enormous Kingdom.

Looking up at the big pale moon, Shawn took a deep breath, and reached his hand over to Sarah’s, resting on the desk in front of the keyboard. Whispering, “Look at the moon,” he grabbed her hand. Rather than jerking it away, as Shawn was afraid she was going to do, Sarah rotated her hand, gripping his. Chancing a glance at her, Shawn turned his head to his right, in time to catch her big brown eyes boring into his.

Completing their tour of the Kingdom, the dragon landed on the top balcony of the castle. “Well, I guess this is where we say goodbye,” said Sarah.

“For now,” replied the princess. “I’m going to look into everything you said about University.”

“Yeah,” replied Victor. “Maybe they’ll let you off easy on the requirements, considering you’re from a primitive nation.” He snickered, as the princess playfully socked his character in the stomach. “Didn’t hurt,” he replied, laughing.

“I would also like to meet you in person, so I can actually hurt you,” replied the princess, shaking her fist in Second Victor’s face.

“Me too,” said Victor, thoughtfully. The princess leaned in and kissed his character on the cheek, as Victor’s mouth went wide.

Stepping sideways to Sarah, the princess said, “Well, my *namesake*,” chuckling. “I just want to say, you are one of the *bravest* girls I have ever met; much braver than myself. To stay there in that church, so I could escape...and facing down Abaddon...I could never do that.”

Sarah, choking back tears, whispered, “Thank you, princess.”

“If there’s ever anything we can do for you, the court is always at your service. And Shawn, brave Shawn,” she said, stepping toward his avatar. “How can I thank you? You, who rid this Kingdom of the evil of both my brother *and* his sorcerer...” She stared up at him, incredulous.

“I’m not brave,” replied Shawn. “I feel like a scared little boy in this crazy mixed-up world, trying my best not to mess things up too bad. As much of the credit, if not more, go to my friends here, and you, your Highness.” He turned Second Shawn’s gaze down, bowing his head. “If there’s *anything* we can do to help *you*, Princess...”

“Well,” said the princess, gravely. “My father; we must get word to him that it is safe to return. The riders on horseback could take *ages* to get to him, and who knows what resistance they might face out...there...” She turned to face the north. “And, now that we have the dragon...”

“Done,” said Shawn cheerfully. “We’ll do it tomorrow. But for now...” he checked his computer time: 2:15 A.M. “We’d better get Sarah home!”

They all bid a fond farewell, and Sarah, Shawn, and Victor disappeared from the Kingdom.

Chapter 17

“It *is* getting really late Shawn,” Sarah said slowly, the hint of a smile tugging at the edge of her mouth. “I told my mom I’d be home by 1:00; she’ll be waiting up for me: she always does. She won’t be able to sleep until I’m safe in bed.”

“Oh, well--um--let me, ah, walk you home then,” Shawn replied nervously.

“I’ll come with you guys,” Victor replied. “Or better yet, I’ll follow with Second Victor.”

Shawn looked at Victor, frustrated. He was wrestling between wanting to walk Sarah home alone, maybe getting a goodnight kiss, and wanting to ensure her utmost security in case anything else was waiting for her along the way, or in her house.

“Ahhh...Okay, let’s go,” Shawn sighed, exasperated and tired.

“You guys, uh, wanna hear a joke?” said Second Victor, with an extremely high-pitched, annoying-as-hell voice.

“Uh, not really,” said Shawn, eyeing Sarah out of the corner of his eye. The two of them were walking side-by-side, their hands coming dangerously close to one another as they walked. Second Victor was following behind them, dwarfed by his two tall friends.

“Well,” Victor continued anyway, sitting at his laptop in Shawn’s room. “It seems a guy who had a false eyeball asks this girl to a dance--”

“Wood-eye! Wood-eye!” Shawn interrupted, exasperated. He was the one who had taught the joke to Victor, years ago, after he had heard it from his dad.

“Oh, you’ve heard that one, eh? Knock, knock!” Victor persisted.

“GO HOME!” said Shawn.

“Mooo...” said Victor sadly, still in his ridiculously high-pitched voice, as he fell behind.

“Interrupting cow. You told it wrong,” replied Shawn, smiling at Sarah, as they walked up to Sarah’s porch.

“Well, thanks for a *very* interesting Halloween, Shawn...” Sarah said, fidgeting with her shirt’s hemline. Looking down, she said, “Um, I’m not sure what you and Vic are doing tomorrow, but--”

“Catching up on homework,” said Shawn awkwardly, as he rubbed his neck. What had he just said?? Stupid! he thought.

“Oh, well...we should get together then,” she said slowly. “You’ll need to get your homework from me again anyway,” she continued quickly. “It’s probably half-way to Wichita by now--”

“Ha! Ha-ha! Wichita,” replied Shawn, nervously laughing.

“--because of the wind...” Sarah didn’t know what else to say.

“Oh-ha ha, I get it,” replied Shawn. He nervously looked back at Second Victor, who was scanning up and down the street, and in every direction except towards Sarah and Shawn. “Well, sounds good then,” he said, as he reached for her hand, as if to shake it.

She gave him her hand, giving him an odd look. Shaking it, Shawn then thought better of it, brought the hand up to his mouth, and laid a big, wet kiss on it. Taking her hand back, she said, “Thanks...” as she wiped it dry on her shirt.

“Well, g’night,” said Shawn sullenly, as he turned around, heading down the porch steps. Second Victor was staring at him, his lips moving. As he neared him, he heard him whispering, “YOU IDIOT, WHAT WAS THAT??! GET BACK THERE, SHE’S WAITING FOR IT!”

Shawn raised his eyebrows and said through his teeth, “I tried!”

Victor armed his sword and took two steps toward Shawn, who hastily turned around, and, full of adrenaline, marched right back up the steps and grabbed Sarah, who had, in fact, still been waiting on the porch, staring back at Shawn, incredulous. Shawn dipped her, kissing her for a good, long time. When he finally pulled back, he heard a noise above them.

“Ahem, there’s my daughter.”

Shawn raised Sarah back to her feet, and, stepping away, stared down at his feet. “Mrs. Fox, ah, I mean, uh, Lyon...I, um--”

“Shawn: We like your family, and I am honored to have you date my daughter...especially after that *last* boyfriend,” Mrs. Lyon said, rolling her eyes. She looked like a slightly older, slightly more developed version of Sarah, but just as attractive, and much more intimidating. “But if you ever, EVER, bring Sarah back an hour-and-a-half past curfew again, well! Let’s just say--”

“It’s not his fault, Mom. I was with him and Victor over there...and Shawn’s dad was there too...and we were investigating that mess that happened tonight, and...oh, I almost died, Shawn saved me!” Sarah sputtered.

“What’s all this? Well, we can talk about it all tomorrow, with your father,” Mrs. Lyon replied sternly to Sarah. “Goodnight,” she said briskly to Shawn and Second Victor, “thank you for bringing Sarah home safely. We’ll be in touch.”

As Shawn turned back around and headed down the steps to his awaiting friend’s avatar, he couldn’t help but dancing a tiny bit in the street, the victory music from *World of One* playing in his head. Everything was going to be different now, thought Shawn. A whole lot different.

Chapter 18

“Shawn! Oh! Shawn, are you there?” Sarah’s voice awakened Shawn, who had been having the most beautiful dream about her. Thinking he was still dreaming, he closed his eyes once more.

“Shawn!! I’m up here, on the roof! I jumped off the dragon and landed here!” Sarah’s voice continued to filter through the window screen, along with the crisp November morning air.

“Huh??” Shawn replied groggily, still very tired, as he opened up his laptop. Checking the Action Feed on FaceWorld, he noticed two posts getting a lot of attention; odd, considering it was before 8:00 A.M. on a Saturday:

“Krazy King” arrested for public disturbance; state-appointed attorney expected to recommend insanity plea

In early morning hours, a man in his late 40’s, dressed in royal robes made quite a spectacle, waving a sword at drivers on I-35 just north of Overland Park. When questioned, he said he was trying to “slay the dragons” running at him, and was trying to “return to [his] Kingdom,” speaking of armies awaiting his command...

-- Channel 9 *Action News*, KCMO

1,142 people like this

NEone seen my sister, Sarah Lyon? Woke up this morning to my Mom goin’ crzzy...
-- Tara Lyon

Comments

Yeah, she spent the night at my place; go back to bed, sheesh -- Evan Harper

10 people dislike this

NOT funny Evan! :-(-- Tara Lyon

9 people like this

Shawn rolled his eyes and smirked smugly, realizing that, if anyone should be boasting about being with Sarah last night, it should be him. “Victor, hey Victor, wake up,” Shawn said softly to Victor, shaking him awake.

“Ugh, what??” Victor replied, eyes glued shut. “What *time* is it??”

“It’s almost 8:00--” Shawn replied.

“Shawn! Come get me *down*, you *coward*!” Sarah’s voice interrupted.

“--that’s why I’m up,” Shawn explained. “Believe me, I’d still be in bed, but it looks like Sarah went missing, jumped off the dragon onto my roof, or something.”

Opening the screen window, Shawn stuck his head out and looked around. He didn’t see Sarah. “Where are you?” he asked.

“Oh, thank *goodness* you heard me! I’m over here, on the other side. I’m afraid I’ll slip if I move!” Sarah’s cries continued to filter over the roof, into Shawn’s bedroom, where Victor sat up in his sleeping bag on the floor.

“Ugh, why was she on the dragon, anyway?” Victor asked, rubbing the grit out of his eyes. “AH, got any more energy drinks up here?”

“Check the mini-fridge,” Shawn replied, distracted. Sticking his head out the window, he yelled, “Why were you on the dragon?”

“SSSH!! You’ll wake my parents!” Sarah replied. “Just--uh--AHH!”

Shawn heard a slip and a crash out on the roof, and he quickly climbed out of the window and dashed up to the roof’s peak. Victor left the fridge door open and ran out after. At the top of the roof, both Shawn and Victor looked down, but saw nothing.

“Help! I fell, I’m holding on to the gutter, I--don’t think it’s gonna--hold!”

Side-stepping down the roof, Shawn and Victor peered down to where they had heard Sarah. Shawn bent down and reached his arm out, looking for her. “Where--are you??” Shawn asked. “I think she may have fallen.”

“I don’t see her on the ground..or anywhere,” said Victor, standing and peering all around the Mitchells’ front yard. “Nope, no Foxes anywhere,” he replied darkly.

“Did you check the castle tower? That’s where princesses belong!” Sarah’s voice came from behind Shawn.

Shawn, still crouching, smiled and turned around, only to see, rather than Sarah's lovely state, his own body, standing high above him, wearing a king's crown adorned with jewels. "Wha--?" Shawn asked, his face twisting into a pained confusion.

"Hey four-eyes, I hear you've got a crush on my girl," replied King Shawn, in a deep, sinister voice. "She and that Ginger Princess are safe and sound, locked up in my tower; they'll make good concubines. Hey, d'you think the princess is a *natural* redhead?? Ha, ha ha!"

The voices he had added to *WoS*! Somebody must be playing the game right now, controlling a new Shawn character! But who? Evan? He had access to his laptop in class; he could've copied the game files over. But no, that would've taken too long. And besides, Shawn hadn't even added the new voice files until after he had been sent home.

Steven? That's definitely possible. He had hacked into the secretary's computer in middle school; surely he'd be able to figure out how to gain access to Shawn's computer files. But he's dead; he died twice! thought Shawn. But he could've started the game, and left, letting the A.I. take over. That's more likely, because how would anyone know enough about the game to be able to switch voices from the console, in the middle of a game session?

Shawn was shaken back to reality when King Shawn drew his sword.

Defying him, Shawn got to his feet, drew himself up to his full height, and said, picturing Steven as a child, "No.... You don't deserve her, and you'll never have her. Sarah hates cowards!!"

Sneering at Shawn's words, King Shawn raised his sword, coming down hard at Shawn's neck. Springing into action, Victor dove in front of Shawn, parrying the sword with his own hands. As Victor fell back down on the roof in front of King Shawn and to his left, dripping blood from his arms, his leg became entangled with the ankles of Shawn, who, caught off balance, swayed back and forth, recovering his balance.

King Shawn raised his leg, and laid one hearty boot kick square in the middle of Shawn's chest, sending him head-long off the two-story roof. Connecting with the ground, he landed with a sickening thud onto his neck. The pain quickly faded, as he began to feel numb. Craning his head fully back, he looked behind him to see police cars and paramedics arriving in front of his house for the second time in two days.

"THIS IS THE POLICE," came a voice over the loudspeaker. "YOU HAVE NOWHERE TO GO BUT DOWN. RELEASE THE HOSTAGE, DROP THE WEAPON, AND PLACE YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD."

Looking up to the roof above him, Shawn watched in horror, as the so-called king backed over the peak of the roof, towards the other side, brandishing Victor in front of him, knife to his throat. He disappeared over the other side, as guns began to fire from the police.

"HE'S KILLED THE HOSTAGE, OPEN FIRE!"

Shawn's world began spinning, as he caught sight of the dragon, heading off to the Southeast, towards the Kingdom, the outline of a crowned figure vaguely visible on its enormous back. As Shawn lay there, a beautiful Golden Retriever came sniffing up to him, licking his hand. Shawn was unable to feel the dog's tongue on his fingers, nor was he able to reach up and scratch Sarah's beautiful animal's ears. A single tear fell slowly from his face.

"Dear God," said Mr. Mitchell, holding the leash on which the dog was fastened. "Where'd *that* come from?" He was staring aghast at the Kingdom in the Lyons' backyard. "The people who live behind the Lyons called me early this morning, said they had found their dog; guess the Lyons aren't listed yet. I definitely didn't see *that* from there..."

Shawn stared up at the sky. The map importer must have created some kind of portal when I attached the *World of One* map to Sarah's backyard, Shawn thought glumly.

"Shawn?" Mr. Mitchell asked, concerned. "Shawn, answer me. Why are you lying there? Shawn?? Are you okay? Oh--God, my son! Help! Ambulance! Over here!! My son, my son--I--I don't think--he's not moving!!"

Epilogue

In one young college-aged boy's room, the normal posters of bikini-clad models and sports cars are not hanging, and the desk is not cluttered by homework. Instead, the walls are bare, and the desk is filled with printouts of maps and diagrams, filled with X's, lines, and notes.

There is also a laptop on the desk, along with a second monitor. On the big, external screen is a game, where a young man is standing with a sword drawn, staring down a street. The other screen is filled with code, with various debugging breakpoints set and comments made.

Instead of using the standard mouse and keyboard, the boy is using Eye Trackers to move the mouse and blowing in a straw to click it, along with text-to-speech recognition to type for him. Controlling his character in *World of Shawn* is difficult, if not downright clumsy, yet he presses on, for he is trying to find the love of his life, who has been lost, and avenge his only other friend in the world, both of whom have suffered their fates because of this game that he created.

This boy is in a wheelchair, and no longer enjoys the use of his arms and legs, because of an injury, caused also by this game *World of Shawn*. The boy is Shawn Mitchell, and he is now controlling a computer character on his screen who is, in fact, also standing on the street outside his house. He is waiting for something.

Shawn checks the time on his screen: 1:58 A.M. In the three years and four months since that fateful day which took his friends away from him, Shawn's parents had grown further apart. His mother had gotten remarried, and his father had started drinking, on a couple occasions raising a hand to Shawn. Sole custody of Shawn was awarded to his mother and step-father in their new home in Denver.

Shawn fell into a depression, and became obsessed with discovering where the figure had come from who was able to trick Sarah into thinking he was Shawn, and who had killed Victor and paralyzed Shawn. Ignoring his mother's pleas to enroll in college, Shawn spent all of his time searching the world for this King Shawn, who had to remain on the run so that Shawn could not simply sneak up on him and stab him using his watchful avatar in *WoS*.

Searching and poring over the forums and news sites for word about King Shawn, Shawn had found nothing, until recently, when he began to read whispers of a warlord who had raised an army of men dressed up like medieval knights and refitted with modern body armor and weapons, purchased with a store of priceless jewels and gold. Teaming this army up with druglords, cartels, and gangs of Columbia and Mexico, this warlord appeared to be moving gradually north, causing mayhem and acts of terror along the way, although Shawn had not been able to confirm this; the posts seemed to be delayed and sporadic. No clear path seemed to be followed.

Finally, one day a message was delivered to Shawn on his computer:

Sir Shawn,

Have received word that The Sinister One is heading your way. He is coming 10,000 strong this night at 2 A.M. Recommend flight.

Forever Your Servant,

Carac

Shawn had spent the day attempting to make any arrangements he could: he had contacted the authorities, but, as no one had taken him seriously, he had urged his mother to spend the night at a hotel. At first she refused, but when he continued to plead in tears from his chair, she herself collapsed in tears and consented. She had threatened to take him with her to stay in the hotel, but he had refused, telling her that the trouble would simply follow him wherever he went until he took care of it.

1:59 A.M.

At the end of the street, Shawn spots a single man turn the corner in a march. Shawn begins breathing faster. Following this man, an endless stream of men follows, marching shoulder to shoulder, filling the entire street. All the men are dressed in black armor. About 1000 feet from Second Shawn, the men stop, and the man in front gets down on the ground, setting up a tripod with a sniper rifle on top.

A loud voice rings out all down the street, as neighbors begin to peek out of their windows and doors: "WE ARE HERE FOR THE IMPOSTOR SHAWN. EVERYONE STAY IN YOUR HOMES AND NO ONE ELSE NEED BE HARMED. THE ONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF SHAWN: SURRENDER YOUR AVATAR; WE HAVE COME TO BRING YOU BEFORE THE KING FOR CRIMES OF HIGH TREASON."

Shawn drops his head and begins crying, feverishly praying, "Please, High King of Heaven...let this all go away. Let this all have been a nightmare. I'd do anything if I could just go back to the way things were. I miss Victor, I miss Dad, I miss Sarah. Jesus," the tears are now flowing freely, "please save them. Take me instead...it's all my fault. I'm so sorry. So sorry, so, so...so..."

His voice trails off, as a shot rings out down the street and Shawn jumps, still crying. Looking up on the screen, however, Shawn sees down the street from the viewpoint of a player that is still standing tall. The army of soldiers are still there, but are no longer moving or speaking.

“What?” Shawn asks, his heart beating faster. He begins running down the street, his eyes wildly scanning the street. All the doors and windows of the houses are still open; his neighbors, eerily still, silently watch him. Suddenly his character stops.

“Why--can’t I--move? Uh!” Shawn asks the silence. Then, backing up, he sees it: a large-caliber bullet, hovering in mid-air, directly in front of and in between where his eyes would be. Circling around it, Shawn examines the trace left in the wake of the bullet, as light refracts through it at all sorts of odd angles. At the other end of the street is the sniper, lying prone in the middle of the road, smoke and black powder hovering all around him. Shawn’s mind races.

Turning back around, Shawn spots a clock on the lamppost outside of his mother’s house. Blinking his eyes twice, Shawn commands Second Shawn to begin sprinting back towards it. Once he reaches the lamp, Shawn blinks to stop, and looks up at the clock above his head from the sidewalk; the minute hand, which is moving slowly, approaches the One position. The clock now reads 2:05, just as an error message pops up on Shawn’s screen, covering up the clock:

Error L107 : Address Space Overflow

“Ugh...wait a minute,” Shawn says aloud. “I’ve seen this before. When...?” Shawn had only seen this message one other time, and still had not been able to fix this error, because he was never able to reproduce it.

Shawn clicks OK. The game shuts down, and he examines his desktop. He really doesn't like his new laptop nearly as much as his old one. Since he was not going to college, his mom had refused to buy him a new one, so Shawn was forced to pay for one himself. As he would have difficulty getting to a job, and spent nearly all of his free time looking for King Shawn and Sarah, he never bothered looking for work.

Naturally he had sprung for the cheapest laptop possible to replace his four-and-a-half-year-old beast. Sometimes he wondered if the one his dad had given him wasn’t faster than his new one. He had also wondered if WorldSoft’s new Operating System was making his laptop slower, so he had installed his old copy of the prior OS, WorldSoft XP, a couple days ago. It didn’t seem to help very much.

His eyes are drawn down to the system tray, and he reads the time: 2:05 A.M. Next to the time, there’s an update icon, and Shawn hovers the mouse pointer over this. A message reads:

28 new updates

“Agh, so many updates!” Shawn says. He had already been through 90 updates and 3 reboots. Apparently he hadn’t finished the endless update process before he had resumed his search for

King Shawn. Double-clicking on the update icon, Shawn scrolls through the list of updates by flicking his eyes down and up. He stops when he reads:

Daylight Saving Time Patch

Using his straw to open up the info pane for this update, he reads:

CRITICAL UPDATE! This patch updates WorldSoft XP's DST capabilities to the new DST interval. According to the recently enacted Energy Policy Act, DST shall now begin on the 2nd Sunday in March, rather than the 1st Sunday in April...

He checks the time on his cell phone:

3:06 A.M.

Opening up his calendar, he sees that this is, in fact, the Second Sunday in March, and on that day is one event:

Daylight Saving Time Begins

His mother hadn't been around to remind him to "Spring Forward" tonight. Setting his computer time manually forward one hour to 3:06, Shawn starts up *WoS* again. Choosing to spawn under the clock on the lamppost again, Shawn suddenly remembers where he had seen the Address Space Overflow error before: it was when he had spawned a character in Sarah's room, when he was angry with her. But what had caused that error? What was there in common between what had led up to that, and what had led up to this error?

"Oh well, it doesn't matter right now," Shawn says, as the game finishes loading. Looking to his left, he sees the massive army of soldiers and terrorists, who had continued their march, and are now nearly in front of Shawn's next-door neighbor's house! Suddenly a hand flies in front of Second Shawn's eyes, and another pulls him backwards, behind a hedgerow. Yelling out, Second Shawn's voice comes out of the speakers muffled.

Shawn finds his character being spun around, and is about to blow in his straw to swipe at the figure in front of him, until he recognizes a friendly face: Carac, standing in Shawn's view, holds up a finger to his mouth to warn Shawn not to speak, and slowly removes his other hand from Second Shawn's mouth.

"Sir Shawn," Carac whispers, "is that really you? I--mean--you're the *good* Shawn, right?"

"Of course," Shawn whispers into his microphone. "Look in the window behind you!" and Shawn turns on his room's overhead lights from his computer's control panel.

Carac looks into the well-lit room, seeing Shawn sitting in his wheelchair, raising his eyebrows animatedly. "Okay," Carac says, "I see you. Now listen: I'm disappointed you didn't observe my

wish to flee this army, but I'm not surprised. You never were one to run." Carac winks at Second Shawn. "But, we have come, and we're ready to fight."

"We?" asks Shawn.

"300 soldiers who have not bowed a knee to the Sinister One," Carac turns around, raises his hand, and places a finger to his lips. Helmets and swords raise slightly from behind trees and bushes all over the yard in which Carac and Second Shawn are also hiding.

"Wait, you mean he didn't fool you? He tricked everyone else!" Shawn cries, thinking of Sarah.

"Ssh! Not *everyone* else was fooled. Your Lady Sarah had to be dragged kicking and screaming into that castle tower that is now her prison," Carac whispers, as a spark of hope, mingled with guilt, fires in Shawn's head. "I can't speak for her reasons, but, as for the rest of us, well, he is left-handed, sir. Dead giveaway."

"Carac," whispers Shawn. "I'M left-handed!"

Carac looks down and sees Second Shawn's sword in his left hand. "Oh," Carac whispers. "Well, our scientists tell us that left-handedness is a sure sign of demon-possession--"

"What!?? Your 'scientists??' You don't honestly believe their bullshit do you?" whispers Shawn loudly, trying to control his temper.

"I suppose next you're going to tell me that witches don't float in water!" Carac now tries to control *his* temper. Shawn looks at him skeptically, shaking his head and sighing.

"Look, maybe you're right," Carac continues. "Your world does seem to be slightly more advanced than mine. But listen: you once told me, 'this is a Kingdom of light.' This man moves about in darkness. 'A land of one king.' This one is mad for power; sets himself up as king when the throne is still warm, while we wait for the true king to return. Finally, 'a World of One.' This man means to murder The One. Shawn, *you* are The One. Flee from here, and live to fight another day!"

"But," says Shawn, "300 against 10,000! You'll be *slaughtered*!"

"My liege, we have no time," comes another familiar voice, as a new, *Third*, Shawn, steps from behind a large oak tree on the other side of Carac. Lowering his face shield, he raises his sword and steps forward, turning to face Second Shawn and saying, "Save the princess. Rescue the Kingdom." Gripping his Zweihänder with both hands and raising the Great Sword above his head, he speeds his gait to a sprint, screaming at the top of his lungs, "FOR VICTOR!!!"

At once, all 300 men, including Carac, rush out from their hiding places and crash into the approaching army, which is now directly in front of Shawn's house. As he watches, Third Shawn and Carac hack and slash their way through soldier after soldier, cutting through their body armor and slicing off heads with a vicious fury.

Back in his room, Shawn closes his eyes and tries to force his mind to focus on escape, but it just keeps going back to the Address Space Error. Where did Third Shawn come from? What had he done? When DST occurred at 2:00 A.M., everything around him in the game had paused, except for the lamppost clock, which was very slowly moving forward...moving forward to...the correct time!

So, the computer time had been different from the real time. That's what had happened in Sarah's room too, thinks Shawn. He had set the time *ahead*, to test out the lighting effects in the game. And then what had happened? I crept over to Sarah, armed the knife, and then I hit Ctrl...but then the error popped up.

"That's it!" shouts Shawn. It's all coming to him now. Before, he had set the time *ahead*, and his character had actually traveled forward in time. That's why the game showed that Sarah was asleep in bed when she was actually walking home! Then the game had caused an error and crashed. And then this time, the system clock was left *behind* when the real time jumped forward from 2:00 to 3:00; the game was stuck in some kind of limbo, since that hour didn't exist for anyone else. And tonight, thinks Shawn, the player I left behind when the game crashed, remained, and got taken over by the computer, because I was idle. When I spawned back at the correct time, I ran across the character that had been taken over by the A.I., an hour earlier!

So, is that what happened to Sarah, when I jumped *ahead* in the future? Yes, that's it, thinks Shawn. There's no other place a computer-controlled twin could have come from. And then that evil twin kidnapped Sarah while she slept, and brought her back to the Kingdom, where he crowned himself King. He then returned, to eliminate any other threats that the crystal ball showed--Victor and me! But why had that Shawn turned evil, when Third Shawn is apparently good, fighting for Victor? Was it because I was angry when the evil one spawned, and I wanted to avenge my friends when the good one spawned? Did the A.I. really take all that into account when taking over my character??

Looking out the window, Shawn is surprised to see that the battle is going well: Third Shawn has given Carac the Hammer of War, and the two of them are standing back-to-back, circling around slowly and demolishing anyone who comes near the house. Shawn hears familiar words pop into his head, from some time long ago:

Quantum physics, especially quantum computing, is much an unknown branch of science, Shawn...It turns existing physics and science on its head; the possibilities are exciting - extremely efficient computing...teleportation, even time travel; we really don't know what all this can or can't do. If someone just-- plays around with this stuff, using untested computations--

The words call forth a scene to Shawn, haunting him from the very back of his head:

“But don’t worry, we’ll make sure everything’s safe. And if anything happens to us, we can always just spawn a new character and try again,” Shawn said, flashing a reassuring smile at Sarah.

That’s *it!* That’s what he has to do; it’s so simple, and yet so very complicated. If he was able to travel in the past on accident, surely he could do it again, on purpose. Minimizing *World of Shawn*, Shawn sets his laptop clock to 7:50 A.M, on the date he knows all too well: the day when his World was ripped from him. That should give me plenty of time to turn on invisibility, sneak up on him and stab him in the back, thinks Shawn, referring to King Shawn.

Bringing the game back up, Shawn looks out the window. Oh no, he thinks. They’ve got the dragon! Horrified, Shawn watches as the dragon that still answers to King Shawn swoops down out of the sky on Carac and his loyal knights, who are in the middle of carving out a nice chunk of the 10,000 soldiers.

As Shawn gets back to work with a renewed sense of purpose, bringing up the map selection screen and loading his dad’s house in Overland Park, the dragon blows a wide swath of fire at Carac and Third Shawn, sending both of them, as well as a number of soldiers and knights of both allegiances, running off in flames, leaving an open path to the door of Shawn’s house. Ignoring everything else, Shawn moves his eyes to the roof of his dad’s house, and blows into the straw clicker.

“HOLD IT! SLOW-LY, TURN, AROUND!” comes a booming voice behind Shawn. “There are five guns on you; we each have one eye on you and the other on the computer. Any of those eyes see a false move, and you’re dead, got it? NOW TURN AROUND!”

“Enter,” Shawn says, turning his chair around. The map selection screen is showing on the external monitor, turned toward Shawn and hidden from the soldiers at the door. His spoken command to the soldiers also confirms his map selection by way of the text-to-speech interpreter.

“I’ll give the commands around here,” says the lead soldier at the door. Eyeing Shawn through his goggles, he says, “Why’d you do it, anyway?”

“What do you mean?” asks Shawn, glancing nervously sideways at the screen: 95% loaded.

“All this,” says the soldier. “Why are you so intent on murdering the king?”

“The king? Murder??” says Shawn, scoffing. Glancing at the monitor, he sees that the level is now loaded; King Shawn is standing directly in front of him with his back turned. Shawn would have to forgo invisibility, and just do this. However, no sooner are the words out of Shawn’s mouth, than the Sinister King on the screen spins around, swinging his sword down towards Second Shawn’s head, which is now looking to his left. He must have heard him!

“HA!! HA HA HA!!” shouts Shawn suddenly, eyes fixed straight ahead. His goal is to blow enough air into his straw in order to block King Shawn’s sword, and to follow up with his own sword-thrusts. “Don’t make me *laugh*!” Shawn now has an idea. Blowing a long, low whistle, he hopes to charge up his sword. Ending the whistle, he says coolly, “Boy, he really has you fooled, huh? He must think you’re an--idiot!!”

At that moment, Shawn had glanced sideways again, only to see King Shawn come down hard with his sword into Second Shawn’s neck. He had been unarmed. His broadsword, evidently stripped from him by King Shawn, lay visible on the slanted roof, several feet above and behind King Shawn.

Enjoying himself, King Shawn looks down upon Second Shawn, saying, “I’m going to make an example out of you,” and collecting Second Shawn’s decapitated head. As he kicks the lifeless body off the roof, he holds the head up to his own face, and says, so that Shawn can both see and hear from his chair, “Hey four-eyes, I hear you’ve got a crush on my girl. She and that Ginger Princess are safe and sound, locked up in my tower; they’ll make good concubines. Hey, d’you think the princess is a *natural* redhead?? Ha, ha ha!”

“Alright, let’s go,” says the soldier as he approaches Shawn.

“No....NO!!” As the soldier grabs Shawn under his arms, meaning to drag him out of his chair, Shawn struggles. “You don’t--deserve her, and you’ll never have her. Sarah hates cowards!!” Shawn yells at the top of his lungs, as the soldier notices the screen that Shawn is staring at.

“What the--hell??” the soldier asks, as he stares into the face of King Shawn. Shawn bites down hard into the soldier’s hand, which is still under Shawn’s arm. “HEY! I thought I said, ‘No funny business!’” He drops Shawn back into his chair and takes out his gun.

“ENOUGH!” the soldier continues. “I’ll just have to tell the king that you were killed while trying to escape.”

With the gun pressed to his temple, Shawn stares at the screen to his left. On the roof under King Shawn’s feet, he sees blue light. His heart begins to race. “Wait, I’m sorry! I’ll go quietly,” Shawn says.

“You’ve had your chance,” says the soldier, kicking the desk over, sending the monitor and laptop flying. “Say hello to Victor for me.”

As the soldier raises his goggles and lowers his face shield, Shawn recognizes his own face staring down at him, his lips curled into an evil smirk. It’s the present-day King Shawn. Staring up into the greenish hues of his own hazel eyes, Shawn’s mind flashes back to game and pizza parties with Victor...walking home from school with his best friend...Victor trying to stop Steven from hitting him...Victor and Sarah saving his life...Sarah. Everything fades to black as Shawn hears a gunshot.

Shawn doesn't move. Am I dead? he wonders. He finally gets up the courage to look around him. He's standing on his own legs; he must be dead. Is this Heaven? Hell?? He's in some kind of bedroom; video game and superhero posters are tacked all over the walls, along with Three Stooges, Don Knotts, and University of Kansas Jayhawk memorabilia on the dresser; a broadsword is mounted above the door. Pictures of Shawn, Victor, Sarah, and Shawn's parents are on the desk; they all look so happy.

"Shawn?" a familiar voice comes from behind behind Shawn. As he turns around, he sees Victor, and decides this must either be Heaven or a dream, pinching himself.

"What's up man?" Shawn asks, skeptically. He pinches himself *hard*. "Ow."

"What are you doing??" asks Victor. "You're gonna bruise up." He comes over and grabs Shawn's arm, examining it.

"This, isn't a dream? Is this Heaven? Are we dead?" asks Shawn.

"No!" Victor scoffs. "What is *with* you man, are you high?"

"Maybe," says Shawn, sitting down on a *World of One* bedspread. Looking down and seeing the princess, he asks, "Any news on Sarah?"

"News on Sarah? Uh...let me investigate, chief," Victor impersonates a 1920's Chicago news reporter, pulling an imaginary pencil from behind his ear. "Um, she's coming here in five minutes," he shakes his head, snickering. "You gonna be ready? Want me to hold the presses??"

"What?" Shawn doesn't know what else to say. He checks the time on his cell phone, gets up, turns the light switch off and on, then turns around on Victor. "I'm really not dreaming. This is reality..."

"Yeah? Duh? You sure you haven't been dropping acid?" Victor comes over and feels Shawn's forehead, examining his eyes.

"*I'm not high, Victor!*"

The door opens, and two girls walk in: Sarah and--

"Is that...Princess Sarah??" Shawn is incredulous, as he strolls up to the princess and grabs her arm, examining it.

"Easy there, killer, that princess is *Victor's* date. *This* princess," Sarah Fox grabs Shawn's arm and places it over her shoulder, staring in his eyes, "is yours."

"Date??" Shawn asks, a smile playing over his face.

“Well sure, unless you want to get married, I mean we have been dating for three years, but who’s counting?” Sarah Fox examines her bare left ring finger longingly. “Of course,” she says, turning her head back to face Shawn. “*First*, we have a little job to do.”

“A...job?” Shawn says, turning to Victor uneasily.

“Okay, Mr. Horndog, you got me there,” says Sarah Fox, rolling her eyes, and holding out an envelope. “Not *that* kind of job. I’m talking about a real, actual job, for the government. They have a prisoner they want us to break out.”

“Yawn,” replies the princess jokingly, “as if breaking out my father wasn’t easy enough. Shall I call upon Carac again?”

“Well, that *was* a minimum security mental institution,” says Victor, putting his arm around Princess Sarah.

“And this is an Iranian prison,” Sarah Fox says sternly, turning to Shawn. “However, I think we’d better handle this on our own. I believe Carac has enough on his hands at the moment,” she continues, her tone softening. She picks up a picture frame off Shawn’s desk, containing Carac, his very pregnant wife, and three very large children.

“Okay,” says Shawn, his eyes watering, “we’ll do the job before the date, but, before any of that, we just need to clear a few things up.”

“What is it, Shawny?” Sarah Fox strokes Shawn’s arm, her caring brown eyes boring into his, again bringing out their brown hues.

“Sit down, everyone, this could take a while.” And for two hours non-stop, Shawn explains everything that had happened to everyone in *his* reality, and everything he had done that has led them all to *this* reality.

“And so,” Shawn concludes, “I think, if the game errors out, the main process is killed, and certain processes are left running, because the program doesn’t properly destroy them. After that, the game loses track of them; they’re orphaned processes.”

“And that’s where this King Shawn came from, the guy who kidnapped me?” asks Sarah Fox skeptically. “From an orphaned future Shawn?”

“Well, technically a *past* Shawn who *became* orphaned, after he was sent to the future, but that’s really just semantics. And then, when he was idle for five minutes, he got taken over by the program’s best guess of my personality, which was angry at the time, to give him A.I.,” explains Shawn.

“When you were about to do God-knows-what to me,” Sarah Fox says, rolling her eyes. “Five minutes..sure, wouldn’t want to keep me waiting! By the way, what a great personality you have!”

“A-ha,” laughs Shawn nervously. “Well I didn’t know that what I was seeing, and doing, was real...”

“Uh-huh,” says Sarah Fox, turning away from him. “What a gentleman,” she says, not able to keep a straight face as she turns back to look at him.

“So wait,” asks Victor, his face beaming. “Lemme get this straight: you’ve invented, not just quantum physical computer rendering, but now *time travel*?? *What* are we going to *do* with you??” Victor laughs.

“Hold on, hold on, Victor, honey, honey,” the princess holds up a hand, “Now, Shawn, I don’t mean to be the Debbie Downer, but...all this stuff that happened in this, alternate reality...being paralyzed, your parents divorcing, Victor dying and Sarah missing...my father stuck in the asylum, and your evil twin taking over the Kingdom...sounds kind of like a dream, doesn’t it? Or a nightmare??”

“Believe me, I thought the same thing,” replies Shawn, a thought occurring to him. “But, Victor: what exactly happened that day that,” Shawn catches a lump in his throat, “Sarah went missing? Did anything, sort of, odd, unexplainable, happen?”

“You mean, when we found the Sarahs locked up in the castle tower?” asks Victor.

“No, before. When King Shawn died,” Shawn replies. “Didn’t you ever wonder where he and the other Shawn came from??”

“Well,” replies Victor thoughtfully, “you always said that you figured that Steven had stolen a copy of *WoS*, and was messing around, but--”

“--Steven’s dead,” says Sarah Fox, looking down. Shawn and Victor look at each other with knowing glances, and then at her. “That dragon smashed him. I’m surprised you two hadn’t heard...”

“I’m not sure how clearly I remember any of it myself,” replies Victor thoughtfully, eager to get off the topic of Steven. “Can we, watch it, on your laptop? That would prove your whole story wasn’t just a dream, right?”

“It would, *and* it would show me how my big man saved me,” Sarah Fox jokes, as she playfully pokes Shawn in the ribs.

“Well, okay, I suppose it’d be alright, but we have to get out of there in under *five* minutes, or else it’ll error out, leaving us with another Shawn on our hands.”

“One Shawn’s...enough!” Victor jokes, poking Shawn in ribs, imitating Sarah.

Setting the time to 7:50 A.M., and the same date and spawn point as the last time he had done so, when he was in his wheelchair (he still shudders remembering what he had so barely escaped by doing this just hours ago), Shawn loads up the all-too-familiar game. *WoS* comes up extremely fast on his new laptop, a graduation present from his parents, who are back together and living in Mr. Mitchell’s house in Overland Park.

When his player spawns, he is staring into the back of the head of Second Shawn. He had chosen the sign language voice, as it didn’t include any audible voice files when Shawn had installed it three-and-a-half years ago, even if the actual signing hadn’t ever been tested. He hadn’t wanted to take any chance on being overheard by anyone, to ensure he didn’t change any events in the past, upsetting the perfect conditions he now found himself in, in the present. He quickly brings up the console and types, “COWARD.”

Shawn hits Enter, making his Silent avatar disappear, except for the cloak-like outline around him. Crouching and going prone, Shawn moves his character ever-so-slightly to the left and looks up, to have a good view of the whole event. This is what Shawn, Victor, and the Sarahs see and hear:

“The king? Murder??” says Second Shawn, swinging his sword wildly in front of him. King Shawn, missed by the sword, turns around, sneering when he sees Second Shawn, and swings his broadsword. He brings his sword down toward Second Shawn’s head, which is turned to his left, appearing to look directly at the four friends as they watch on the laptop.

“HA!! HA HA HA!!” shouts Second Shawn suddenly, his head now fixed straight ahead at King Shawn. Raising his sword, he blocks the deathblow from above, and counters with three of his own swordthrusts. King Shawn dodges the first thrust, blocks the second, and when the next one comes, he parries, sending Second Shawn’s sword flying onto the roof behind King Shawn.

“Don’t make me *laugh*!” says Second Shawn. Blowing a long, low whistle, he raises his left fist into the air, and says coolly, “Boy, he really has you fooled, huh? He must think you’re an--idiot!!”

At that moment, Second Shawn had turned his head towards the four friends again. King Shawn had landed a deathly blow to Second Shawn’s neck, severing his head. Smiling, King Shawn looks down upon Second Shawn, and saying, “I’m going to make an example out of you,” he picks up Second Shawn’s decapitated head by the hair. The large, square glasses are still intact.

Kicking Second Shawn’s lifeless body off the roof, he holds the head up to his own face, and says, “Hey four-eyes, I hear you’ve got a crush on my girl. She and that Ginger Princess are safe

and sound, locked up in my tower; they'll make good concubines. Hey, d'you think the princess is a *natural* redhead?? Ha, ha ha!"

"Alright, let's go," comes a voice from Second Shawn's head. "No....NO!! You don't--deserve her, and you'll never have her. Sarah hates cowards!! What the--hell?? HEY! I thought I said, 'No funny business!' ENOUGH! I'll just have to tell the king that you were killed while trying to escape."

A quizzical look plays on King Shawn's face, as he ponders the strange words that continue to emerge from this decapitated head. Behind him, Young Shawn and Victor have been awoken and alerted by Second Shawn's shouts and screams, and have snuck onto the roof.

Young Shawn crouches, creeps up behind King Shawn and picks up the sword, considering it for a moment. Then, he holds it out in front of him, and a blue light begins to erupt from it, casting its hues all around.

"Wait, I'm sorry! I'll go quietly," says Second Shawn's head. "You've had your chance. Say hello to Victor for me."

Holding the now-hot blue sword out to his side, Young Shawn swings towards King Shawn. He continues to spin around in an upward spiral, as he connects with King Shawn, who is taken up with the blue, flaming sword, cut to pieces. When Young Shawn lands back on the roof, he slips from the impact on the blood and intestines which have landed with him, sliding down towards the ground below.

Without hesitation, Victor grabs Shawn's hand, but the force of Shawn's weight sends Victor sliding down the roof as well. The both of them slide off the roof towards the ground, two stories below.

"AH! DRAGON!! I *love* you!" shouts Victor, off-screen.

"To the castle!" Shawn directs the dragon. Gigantic wings swoop by, an enormous tail striking the invisible Silent Shawn, who takes a rather sizable hit to his health.

Everybody begins speaking at once, getting louder and louder:

"That--was--incredible!" shouts Victor. "Let's see if we can find your severed head!"

"I...just want to say, for the record, that I am grossly offended by everything he said," says the princess, shaking her head. "Is that really what you think Shawn, deep down??"

"So you saved *all* of us! Oh, *Shawn!*" gushes Sarah Fox.

“Well, don’t forget, I *am* responsible for all of this!” replies Shawn, as he walks up to the top of the roof, turns around, and stares out towards the Kingdom, getting misty-eyed again. “After all, this is my World...” he continues. Wiping his eye, he notices the time: 7:55 A.M.

Error L107 : Address Space Overflow

The game crashes. The four friends, having been carried away with the scene and in excitedly recapping, had forgotten about the error time limit. They anxiously look around at each other and the room, to see if anything has changed. Rather than everything disappearing, or someone ending up a quadriplegic, however, Shawn, Victor, and the Sarahs all appear to be safe and sound, and the pictures on the desk unchanged.

“Ooh! What was that!” yelps Sarah Fox, jumping out of her chair. As Shawn's eyes follow Sarah, he notices that the sword above the door is missing. On the desk in front of her empty seat, on a piece of paper, Shawn, Victor, Sarah Fox, and Princess Sarah watch some nearly-invisible hand as it begins to write:

I watch you from afar,

You don't know who I am,

But I care for you,

And would die to defend you.

You are my Princess,

And I am here to save you.

I am Always,

Your Hero...*in Hiding...*

Silent Shawn Mitchell