

READY PLAYER ONE

by

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The Hunt began on a Saturday morning.

This was fitting, because even in the troubled year of 2040, Saturday mornings were still sacred. It was still the one morning each week when most kids were unencumbered by adult-imposed obligations like school or church. On Saturday morning, you got to stay in your PJs, plant yourself on the living room rug, and revel in a cavalcade of cartoons, sugar-infused breakfast cereal, video games, and the unbridled possibilities of your youthful imagination.

On Saturday morning anything seemed possible.

Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout, enjoying my third bowl of Fruit Rocks cereal (a *Fruity Pebbles* knockoff) and watching an episode of *Robotech*, a really old Japanese cartoon series I'd recently discovered on a vintage anime channel. Right in the middle of an epic space battle a news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during the night.

I'd heard of Halliday, of course. Everyone had. He was the brilliant-but-reclusive video game designer responsible for creating the OASIS, an ambitious massively-multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality that most of

humanity now used on a daily basis, for everything from business to communications and entertainment. The unprecedented success of the OASIS had made Halliday one of the wealthiest people in the world.

As hard as it is to believe now, that was all I knew about him at the time. I was only twelve, and Halliday hadn't been seen in public since before I was born, so the news of his demise meant very little to me. More than anything, I was annoyed by the unwelcome interruption of my Saturday morning cartoon and cereal ritual. But I checked a dozen different video feeds and the same news bulletin was running on every channel.

At first, I couldn't understand why the media was making such a big deal of the billionaire's death. After all, the people of Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars. You know-- *Dogs and cats, living together, mass hysteria*. Normally, the newsfeeds didn't interrupt everyone's interactive sitcoms and soap operas unless something really major had happened. Like the outbreak of some killer virus, or a major city vanishing in a mushroom cloud. Big stuff like that. As famous as he was, Halliday's death should have only warranted a brief segment on the evening news, so that the unwashed masses could shake their heads in envy when the newscasters announced the obscenely large amount of money that would be doled out to the rich man's heirs.

But that was the rub. James Halliday had no heirs.

He had died a sixty-seven-year-old bachelor, with no living relatives, and, by most accounts, without a single friend. He'd spent the last fifteen years of his life in self-imposed isolation, during which time (if the rumors were to be believed) he'd gone completely and totally insane.

So the real jaw-dropping news that January morning, the news that had everyone from Toronto to Tokyo crapping in their cornflakes, concerned the contents of Halliday's last will and testament, and the fate of his vast fortune.

Halliday had prepared a short video message, along with instructions that it be released to the world media at the time of his death. He'd also arranged to have a copy of the video e-mailed to every single OASIS user that same morning. I still remember hearing the familiar electronic chime when it arrived in my inbox, just a few seconds after I saw that first news bulletin.

His video message was actually a meticulously constructed short film, titled *Anorak's Invitation*. A famous eccentric, Halliday had harbored a lifelong obsession with the 1980s, the decade during which he'd been a teenager, and *Anorak's Invitation* was crammed with what I later discovered to be obscure 80s pop culture references, nearly all of which were lost on me the first time I viewed it.

The entire video was just over five minutes in length, and in the days and weeks that followed, it would become the most scrutinized piece of film in history, surpassing even the Zapruder Film in the amount of painstaking frame-by-frame analysis devoted to it. My entire generation would come to know every second of Halliday's message by heart.

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The following is an excerpt from Anorak's Invitation – The Official Annotated Gunter Transcript v2.4:

Anorak's Invitation begins with the sound of trumpets, the opening of an old song called *Dead Man's Party*.

The song plays over a dark screen for the first few seconds, until the trumpets are joined by a guitar, and that's when Halliday appears. But he's not a sixty-seven year old man, ravaged

by time and illness. He looks just as he did on the cover of Time Magazine back in 2014. A tall, thin, healthy man in his early forties, with unkempt hair and his trademark horn-rimmed eyeglasses. He's also wearing the same clothing he wore in the Time cover photo: faded jeans and a vintage *Space Invaders* T-shirt.

Halliday is at a high school dance being held in a large gymnasium. He's surrounded by teenagers whose clothing, hair styles, and dance moves all indicate that the time period is the late 1980s.¹ Halliday is dancing, too-- something no one ever saw him do in real life. Grinning maniacally, he spins in rapid circles, swinging his arms and head in time with the song, flawlessly cycling through several signature 80s dance moves. But Halliday has no dance partner. He is, as the saying goes, dancing with himself.

A few lines of text appear briefly at the lower left-hand corner of the screen, listing the name of the band, the song's title, the record label, and year of release, as if this were an old music video airing on MTV: *Dead Man's Party, Oingo Boingo, MCA Records, 1985*.

When the lyrics kick in, Halliday begins to lip-synch along, still gyrating: "All dressed up and nowhere to go. Walking with a dead man over my shoulder. Don't run away, it's only me..."

Then he abruptly stops dancing and makes a cutting motion with his right hand, silencing the music. At the same moment, the dancers and the gymnasium behind him vanish, and the scene around him suddenly changes.

Halliday now stands at the front of a funeral parlor, next to an open casket.² A second, much older Halliday lies inside the casket, his body emaciated and ravaged by cancer. Shiny quarters cover each of his eyelids, later high-resolution scrutiny reveals that both were minted in

¹ Careful analysis of this scene reveals that all of the teenagers behind Halliday are actually extras from various John Hughes teen films who have been digitally cut-and-pasted into the video

² His surroundings are actually from a scene in the 1989 film *Heathers*. Halliday appears to have digitally recreated the funeral parlor set and then inserted himself into it.

1984.

The younger Halliday gazes down at the corpse of his older self with mock sadness, then turns to address the assembled mourners³. Halliday snaps his fingers and a scroll appears in his right hand. He opens it with a flourish and it unfurls to the floor, unraveling down the aisle in front of him. He breaks the Fourth Wall, addressing the viewer, and begins to read.

"I, James Donovan Halliday, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby make, publish and declare this instrument to be my Last Will and Testament, hereby revoking any and all wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made..." He continues reading, more and more quickly, plowing through several more paragraphs of legalese, until he's speaking so rapidly that the words are unintelligible. Then he stops abruptly. "Forget it," he says. "Even at that speed, it would take me a month to read the whole thing. Sad to say, I don't have that kind of time." He drops the scroll and it vanishes in a shower of shimmering gold dust. "Let me just give you the highlights."

The funeral parlor vanishes, and the scene changes once again. Halliday now stands in front of an immense bank vault door. "My entire estate, including a controlling share of stock in my company, Gregarious Simulation Systems, is to be placed in escrow, until such time as a single condition I have set forth in my will is met. The first individual to meet that condition will inherit my entire fortune, currently valued in excess of two-hundred and forty billion dollars."

The vault door swings open and Halliday walks inside. The interior of the vault is enormous, and it contains a huge stack of gold bars, roughly the size of a large house "Here's the dough I'm putting up for grabs," Halliday says, grinning broadly. "What the hell. You can't take it with you, right?"

³ The mourners are actually all actors and extras from the same funeral scene in *Heathers*. Winona Ryder and Christian Slater are clearly visible in the audience, sitting near the back

Halliday leans against the stack of gold bars and the camera pulls in tight on his face. "Now, I'm sure you're wondering, what do you have to do to get your hands on all this moolah? Well, hold your horses, kids. I'm getting to that..." He pauses dramatically, and his expression changes to that of someone about to unveil a very big surprise.

Halliday snaps his fingers again and the vault disappears. In the same instant, Halliday suddenly shrinks and morphs into a small boy, wearing brown corduroys and a faded Muppet Show t-shirt in fact the way he looked in a school photo taken in 1980, when he was eight years old. The young Halliday stands in a cluttered living room with burnt orange carpeting, wood-paneled walls, and kitschy late-70s décor. A 21-inch Zenith television sits nearby, with an Atari 2600 game console hooked up to it.

"This was the first video game system I ever owned," Halliday says, his voice now much higher. "An Atari 2600. I got it for Christmas in 1979. " He plops down in front of the Atari, picks up a joystick, and begins to play. "My favorite game was this one," he says, nodding at the TV screen, where a small square is traveling through a series of simple mazes. "It was called *Adventure*. Like many early video games, Adventure was designed and programmed by just one person. But back then, Atari refused to give its programmers credit for their work, so the name of a game's creator didn't actually appear anywhere on the packaging." On the TV screen, we see Halliday use a sword to slay a red dragon, but due to the game's crude low-resolution graphics, this looks more like a square using an arrow to stab a deformed duck.

"So the guy who created Adventure, a man named Warren Robinett, decided to hide his name inside the game itself. He hid a key in one of the game's labyrinths. If you found this key, a small pixel-sized gray dot, you could use it to enter a secret room where Robinett had hidden his name." On the TV, Halliday guides his square protagonist into the game's secret room, where the

words *Created by Warren Robinett* appear in the center of the screen.

"This," Halliday says, pointing to the screen with genuine reverence, "was the very first video game Easter Egg. Robinett hid it in his game's code without telling a soul, and then Atari manufactured and shipped it all over the world, without knowing about the secret room. They didn't find out about the Easter egg's existence until a few months later, when kids all over the world began to discover it. I was one of those kids, and finding Robinett's Easter Egg for the first time was one of the coolest video gaming experiences of my life."

The young Halliday drops his joystick and stands. As he does, the living room suddenly fades away, and the scene shifts again. Halliday now stands in a dim cavern, where light from unseen torches flickers off the damp walls. In the same instant, Halliday's appearance also changes once again, as he morphs into his famous OASIS avatar, Anorak, a tall robed wizard with a slightly more handsome version of the adult Halliday's face (minus the eyeglasses). Anorak is dressed in his trademark black robes, with his avatar's emblem (a large calligraphic letter A) embroidered on each sleeve.

"Before I died," Anorak says, speaking in a much deeper voice, "I created my own Easter Egg, and hid it somewhere inside my most popular video game-- the OASIS. The first person to find my Easter egg will inherit my entire fortune."

Another dramatic pause.

"The Egg is well hidden. I didn't just leave it lying under a rock somewhere. I suppose you could say that it's locked inside a safe that is buried in a secret room that lies hidden at the center of a maze located somewhere--" He reaches up to tap his right temple. "Up here."

"But don't worry. I've left a few clues lying around to get everyone started. And here's the first one." Anorak makes a grand gesture with his right hand, and three keys suddenly appear,

spinning slowly in air in front of him. They appear to be made of copper, jade, and clear crystal. As the keys continue to spin, Anorak recites a piece of verse, and as he speaks each line, it appears briefly in flaming subtitles across the bottom of screen:

***Three hidden keys open three secret gates
Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits
And those with the skill to survive these straits
Will reach The End where the prize awaits***

As he finishes, the jade and crystal keys vanish, leaving only the copper key, which now hangs on a chain around Anorak's neck.

The camera follows Anorak as he turns and continues further into the dark cavern. A few seconds later, he arrives at a pair of massive wooden doors set into the cavern's rocky wall. These doors are banded with steel, and there are shields and dragons carved into their surfaces. "I couldn't playtest this particular game, so I worry that I may have hidden my Easter egg a little too well. Made it too difficult to reach. I'm not sure. If that's the case, it's too late to change anything now. So I guess we'll see."

Anorak throws open the double doors, revealing an immense treasure room, filled with piles of glittering gold coins and jewel-encrusted goblets.⁴ Then he steps into the open doorway and turns to face the viewer, stretching out his arms to hold the giant double doors open.⁵

"So, without further adieu," Anorak announces, "Let the hunt for Halliday's Easter Egg begin!" Then he suddenly vanishes in a flash of light, leaving the viewer to gaze through the open doorway, at the glittering mounds of treasure that lay beyond.

Then the screen fades to black.

⁴ Analysis reveals dozens of curious items hidden amongst the mounds of treasure, most notably: Several early home computers (an Apple IIe, a Commodore 64, an Atari 800XL, and a TRS-80 Color Computer 2), dozens of video game controllers for a variety of game systems, and hundreds of polyhedral dice, like those used in old tabletop role-playing games.

⁵ A freeze-frame of this scene appears nearly identical to a painting by Jeff Easley that appeared on the cover of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebook published in 1983.)

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At the end of the video, Halliday included a link to his personal website, which had changed drastically on the morning of his death. For over a decade, the only thing that had been posted there was a short looping animation that showed his avatar Anorak sitting in a medieval library, hunched over a scarred worktable, mixing potions and poring over dusty spellbooks, with a large painting of a black dragon visible on the wall behind him.

But now that looping animation was gone, and its place there was a High Score list, like the ones that used to appear in old coin-operated video games. The list had ten numbered spots, and each displayed the initials JDH--James Donovan Halliday, followed by a score of six-zeroes. This high score list quickly came to be known as "The Scoreboard, " and it would remain unchanged for a very long time.

An icon had also appeared on Halliday's website, just below the Scoreboard. It looked like a small leather-bound book, and it linked to a new website, anoraksalmanac.com, which hosted a free downloadable copy of a book called *Anorak's Almanac*, a collection of thousands of Halliday's undated journal entries. It was over two thousand pages in length, and it seemed to be part memoir and part geek manifesto. The journal entries contained very few details about Halliday's personal life or his day-to-day activities. Most of them were his stream-of-consciousness observations on various classic video games, science fiction and fantasy novels, movies, comic books, and 80s pop culture. There were also several humorous diatribes, denouncing everything from organized religion to diet soda. One entire chapter of the *Almanac* was written in Sindarin, Tolkien's invented Elvish language. When the text was translated, it turned out to be an angry rant about the inconsistencies between the *Lord of the Rings* novels and Peter Jackson's film adaptations of the same. This rant was immediately followed by a lengthy

and somewhat effusive essay asserting that Jackson's *Rings* trilogy, when taken as a whole, was the greatest fantasy film ever made.

From the outset, there were people who suspected that Halliday had somehow faked his death, and that his contest was nothing but a brilliant marketing ploy. But Halliday's lawyers dispelled these rumors a few days later in a nationally televised press conference, and confirmed everything he'd said in *Anorak's Invitation*. Halliday's entire fortune was indeed up for grabs, and the first OASIS user to find his Easter egg would get it all. Everything was outlined in Halliday's will, a mammoth legal document that his lawyers had been preparing for years, since long before his cancer diagnosis.

Halliday had taken every conceivable precaution to ensure that his will could never be revoked or invalidated. That didn't stop his company, Gregarious Simulation Systems, from immediately mounting a massive legal effort to do just that. The GSS Board of Directors were (as one executive put it) "less than thrilled at the prospect of the world's most profitable company being handed over to the first snot-nosed gamer geek who manages to prove that he's just as big a nerd as our late founder."

But, like an all-knowing Sith Lord, Halliday had foreseen this move by GSS, and the provisions of his will allowed for as much of his vast fortune as necessary to be used to prevent his wishes from being subverted. GSS still spent several years and millions of dollars trying to have the contest halted, before eventually throwing in the towel. Their efforts only managed to prove that Halliday's will was rock solid, and confirm that his dying wish would be carried out.

The Hunt, as it came to be known, quickly wove its way into global culture. Like winning the lottery, finding Halliday's Easter Egg became a popular fantasy among adults and children alike. It was a game that anyone could play, and at first, there seemed to be no right or wrong

way to play it.

The only thing the contents of *Anorak's Almanac* seemed to indicate was that a familiarity with Halliday's various obsessions would be essential to finding the Egg. This led to a widespread fascination with classic video games and 1980s pop culture, especially in North America. Forty years after the decade had ended, the movies, music, games, and fashions of the 1980s were suddenly all the rage once again. By 2041, spiked hair and acid washed jeans were back in style, and covers of hit 80s pop songs by contemporary bands dominated the music charts. People who had actually been teenagers in the 1980s, all now approaching old age, had the strange experience of seeing the fads and fashions of their youth embraced and studied by their grandchildren.

During this same period, a new subculture was born, comprised of the millions of people who now devoted every free moment of their lives to searching for Halliday's egg. At first, these individuals were known simply as Egg Hunters, but this was quickly truncated to the nickname "gunters." During the first year of the Hunt, being a gunter was highly fashionable, and for awhile nearly every OASIS user claimed to be one.

Gunters swarmed like hungry insects to any OASIS location that seemed like a possible hiding place for the three keys, specifically planets that had originally been coded by Halliday himself. Chief among these was the planet *Chthonia*, a painstaking recreation of the fantasy world Halliday had created for his high school Dungeons & Dragons campaign, and also the setting of many of his earliest video games. Chthonia became the gunters' Mecca. Many of them traveled there to visit Castle Anorak, the stronghold of Halliday's avatar. But the castle was impregnable and always had been. No avatar but Anorak himself had ever been inside. Even so, most gunters felt obligated to make a pilgrimage there, to try and unlock the castle's secrets.

During the first year of the Hunt, dozens of gunter-themed movies and cartoons began to appear. They portrayed gunters as average citizens by day and heroic treasure hunters by night. Stalwart heroes who traveled from one online world to the next, quoting *Anorak's Almanac* as they gathered clues, occasionally pausing in their quest long enough to help avatars in need that they met along the way. But in reality, most gunters were solitary, ruthless, and obsessive. They lived like monks, scratching out a meager living by selling virtual items they collected during their online travels. They shunned the real world completely, and spent all of their time studying Halliday's life and immersing themselves in his obscure interests. They relentlessly scoured the four corners of the OASIS, searching for the Copper Key, which they believed would lead them to the first of the three gates. Most gunters cared only about their quest, and very little else.

When the first anniversary of Halliday's death arrived, the fervor surrounding the contest began to die down. An entire year had passed and no one had found anything. Not a single key or gate. Part of the problem, many believed, was the sheer size of the OASIS. It contained over a thousand simulated worlds where the keys might be hidden, and it could take a gunter years to conduct a thorough search of any one of them.

Despite all of the "professional" gunters who boasted on their blogs that they were getting closer to a breakthrough every day, the truth gradually became apparent: No one really even knew exactly what it was they were looking for, or where to start looking for it.

By now, gunters had divided *Anorak's Almanac* into numbered chapters and verses, and they studied and quoted it like a holy text. (And to them, it was.) But if the *Almanac* contained any clues about the location of the three keys, no one was able to decipher them. Many people began to suspect that the *Almanac* was nothing more than a collection of self-indulgent rants written by a deceased madman.

Another year passed.

And another.

Still nothing.

The general public lost all interest in the contest. People began to assume that it was all just an outlandish hoax perpetrated by a rich nut job. Others believed that even if the Egg did really exist, no one was ever going to find it. There were hundreds of thousands of fanatical gunters around the world, and they'd been hunting for Halliday's Egg night and day for over three years now. None of them had managed to find it, so why would the average sane person even try?

The story of Halliday's Easter Egg gradually moved into the realm of urban legend. It became a kind of fairy tale--one that even most children didn't take seriously.

The ever-dwindling tribe of gunters gradually became the object of ridicule. Each year, on the anniversary of Halliday's death, newscasters would jokingly report in on their continued lack of progress. And each year, more gunters called it quits, concluding that Halliday had indeed made the Egg too difficult to find.

But there were still those who refused to give up. They searched on, each believing that at any moment they might finally stumble across the clue that would lead them to the Copper Key and the First Gate.

But it didn't happen. The Scoreboard remained blank. And another year went by.

And another.

Then, on the evening of February 11, 2045, an avatar's name appeared at the top of the Scoreboard, for the whole world to see.

After five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by a seventeen-year-old kid who lived in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City.

That kid was me.

Dozen of books, cartoons, movies, and mini-series have attempted to tell the story of everything that happened next, but all of them got it wrong. So I want to set the record straight, once and for all.

LEVEL ONE:

*"Being human totally sucks most of the time.
Video games are the only thing that
makes life bearable."*

*-Anorak's Almanac,
Chapter 91, Verses 1-2*

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I was jolted awake by the sound of gunfire in one of the neighboring stacks. The shots were followed by a few minutes of muffled shouting and screaming, then silence.

Gunfire wasn't uncommon in the stacks, but it still shook me up. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, so I decided to kill the remaining hours until dawn by brushing up on a few coin-op classics. *Galaga*, *Defender*, *Asteroids*. These games were outdated digital dinosaurs that had become museum pieces long before I was born. But I was a gunter, so I didn't think of them as quaint low-res antiques. To me, they were hallowed artifacts. Pillars of the pantheon. When I played the classics, I did so with a determined sort of reverence.

I was curled up in an old sleeping bag in the corner of the trailer's tiny laundry room, wedged into the gap between the wall and the dryer. I wasn't welcome in my aunt's room across the hall, which was fine by me. I preferred to crash in the laundry room anyway. It was warm, it afforded me a limited amount of privacy, and the wireless reception wasn't too bad. And, as an added bonus, the room smelled like liquid detergent and fabric softener. The rest of the trailer reeked of cat piss and abject poverty.

Most of the time I slept in my hideout. But the temperature had dropped below zero the past few nights, and as much as I hated staying at my aunt's place, it still beat catching

pneumonia or freezing to death.

I used to live with my mom, in a small RV in another part of the stacks. But when she died, I had to move in with her sister, Alice. Aunt Alice didn't take me in out of kindness or familial responsibility. She did it to get the extra food vouchers from the government every month, which she used to buy drugs. Most of the time, I had to find food on my own. This usually wasn't a problem, because I had a talent for finding and fixing old computers and busted OASIS consoles, which I then sold to pawn shops or traded for food vouchers. I earned enough to keep from going hungry, which was more than a lot of my neighbors could say.

A total of fifteen people lived in my aunt's trailer. She lived the smallest of its three bedrooms. The Depperts lived in the bedroom adjacent to her, and the Millers lived in the large master bedroom at the end of the hall. There were six of them, and they paid the largest share of the rent. It sounds crowded, but our trailer wasn't as packed as some of the other units in the stacks. It was a double-wide. Plenty of room for everybody.

I pulled out my laptop and powered it on. It was a bulky, heavy beast, almost ten years old. I'd found it in a dumpster behind the abandoned strip mall across the highway. I'd been able to coax it back to life by replacing its system memory and reloading the stone age operating system. The processor was slower than a sloth by current standards, but it was fine for my needs. The laptop served as my portable research library, video arcade, and home theater system. Its hard drive was filled with old books, movies, TV show episodes, song files, and nearly every video game made in the twentieth century.

I booted up my emulator and selected the game *Robotron: 2084*, one of my all-time favorites. I'd always loved its frenetic pace and brutal simplicity. *Robotron* was all about instinct and reflexes. Playing old video games never failed to clear my mind and set me at ease. If I was

feeling depressed or frustrated about my lot in life, all I had to do was tap the Player One button, and my worries would instantly slip away, as my mind focused itself on the relentless pixilated onslaught on the screen in front of me. There, inside the game's two-dimensional universe, life was simple: *It's just you against the machine. Move with your left hand, shoot with your right, and try to stay alive as long as possible.*

I spent a few hours of blasting through wave after wave of *Brains*, *Spheroids*, *Quarks*, and *Hulks*, in my unending battle to *Save the Last Human Family!* But then my fingers started to cramp up and I began to lose my rhythm. Whenever that happened at this level, things deteriorated quickly. I burned through all of my extra lives in a matter of minutes, and then my two least favorite words appeared on the screen: GAME OVER.

I shut down the emulator and began to browse through my video files, looking for something to watch while I tried to fall back asleep. Over the past five years, I'd downloaded every single movie, TV show, and cartoon mentioned in *Anorak's Almanac*. I still hadn't watched all of them yet, of course. That would probably take decades.

I selected an episode of *Family Ties*, an 80s sitcom about a middle-class family living in central Ohio. I'd downloaded the show because it had been one of Halliday's favorites, and I figured there was a chance that some clue related to the Hunt might be hidden in one of the episodes. I'd become addicted to the show immediately, and had now watched all one-hundred and eighty episodes, multiple times. I never seemed to get tired of them.

Sitting alone in the dark, watching the show on my laptop, I always found myself imagining that *I* lived in that warm well-lighted house, and that those smiling, understanding people were *my* family. That there was nothing so wrong in the world that we couldn't sort it out by the end of a single half-hour episode (or a maybe two-parter, if was something really serious.)

My own home life had never even remotely resembled the one depicted in *Family Ties*, which was probably why I loved it so much.

I was the only child of two teenagers, both refugees who'd met in the stacks where I'd grown up. I never knew my father. When I was just a few months old, he was shot dead while looting a grocery store during a power blackout. My mother, Loretta, had to raise me on her own. Like a lot of people, she'd become indentured as soon as she turned eighteen. It was the only way to get steady work. She had two full-time OASIS jobs, one as a telemarketer, the other as an escort in an online brothel. She used to make me wear earplugs at night, so I wouldn't hear her in the next room, talking dirty to tricks in other time zones. But the earplugs didn't work very well, so I would watch old movies instead, with the volume turned way up.

I was introduced to the OASIS at an early age, because my mother used it as a virtual babysitter. As soon as I was old enough to wear a visor and a pair of haptic gloves, my mom helped me create my first OASIS avatar. Then she stuck me in a corner and went back to work, leaving me to explore an entirely new world, very different from the one I'd known up until then.

From that moment on, I was more or less raised by the OASIS's interactive educational programs, which any kid could access for free. I spent a big chunk of my childhood hanging out in a virtual-reality simulation of Sesame Street, singing songs with friendly muppets and playing interactive games that taught me how to walk, talk, add, subtract, read, write, and share. Once I'd mastered those skills, it didn't take me long to discover that the OASIS was also the world's biggest public library, where even a penniless kid like me had access to every book ever written, every song ever recorded, and every movie, television show, video game, and piece of artwork ever created. The collected knowledge, art, and amusements of all human civilization. It was all there, waiting for me. But gaining access to all of that information turned out to be something of

a mixed blessing. Because that was when I found out the truth.

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I don't know, maybe your experience differed from mine. For me, growing up as a human being on the planet Earth in the Twenty-First century was a real kick in the teeth. Existentially speaking.

The worst thing about being a kid was that no one told me the truth about my situation. In fact, they did the exact opposite. And, of course, I believed them, because I was just a kid and I didn't know any better. I mean, Christ, my brain hadn't even grown to full size yet, so how could I be expected to know when the adults were bullshitting me? I couldn't.

So I swallowed all of the dark ages nonsense they fed me, and then some time passed, I grew up a little, and then I gradually began to figure out that pretty much *everyone* has been lying to me about pretty much *everything* since the moment I emerged from my mother's womb.

This was an alarming revelation.

It's also part of the reason I tend to distrust most people.

I started to figure out the ugly truth as soon I began to explore the free OASIS libraries. The truth was right there waiting for me, hidden in old books written by people who weren't afraid to be honest. Artists and scientists and philosophers and poets, many of them long dead. As I read the words they'd left behind, I finally began to get a grip on the situation. My situation. Our situation. What most people referred to as "the human condition." It was not good news.

In retrospect, I wish someone had just told me the truth right up front, as soon as I was old enough to understand it. I wish someone had just said:

"Here's the deal, Wade. Right now, you're stuck to the outside of a large spinning ball of rock that we call Planet Earth. This ball seems really big to you, but it's actually just a tiny speck

of dust in a vast and infinite universe that appears to stretch on forever in all directions. The universe contains everything we can see, all of those stars up in the sky, and it was created a really long time ago, during a huge explosion. We're still not sure exactly how or why that explosion happened, and we don't know what caused it.

“You should get used hearing that phrase, kid. *We don't know*. Because even though we've been trying to figure this stuff out for thousands of years now, there's still an awful lot that we humans don't have the first clue about.

“What's a human, you ask? *You* are a human, kid. Humans a really smart kind of animal. And like every other animal on this planet, we're descended from a single-celled organism that lived millions of years ago. This happened by a process called evolution, and you'll learn more about it later. But trust me, regardless of what you've been told, that's really how we all got here. There's proof of it everywhere, buried in the rocks.

“That story you heard? About how we were all created by a super-powerful dude named God who lives up in the sky? Total bullshit. The whole God thing is actually an ancient bullshit story that people have been telling to one another for thousands of years. We made it all up. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

“Oh, and by the way... there's no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny. Also bullshit. Sorry, kid. Deal with it.

“You're probably wondering what happened before you got here. An awful lot of stuff, actually. Once we evolved into humans, things got pretty interesting. We started to live together in small groups called ‘tribes,’ and we had to hunt for our food. Then we figured out how to grow food and domesticate animals, so we didn't have to move around all the time. Our tribes got much bigger, and then we spread across the entire planet like an unstoppable virus. Then, after

fighting a bunch of wars with each other over land, resources, and our made-up gods, we eventually got all of our tribes organized into a 'global civilization.' But, honestly, it wasn't all that organized, or civilized, and we continued to fight a lot of wars with each other. But we also figured out how to do science, which helped us start to figure out what we are and where we came from. It also allowed us to develop technology. And for a bunch of hairless apes, we've actually managed to invent some pretty incredible things. Computers. Medicine. Lasers. Microwave ovens. Artificial hearts. Atomic bombs. We even sent a few guys to the moon and brought them back. We also created a global communications network that lets us all talk to each other, all around the world, all the time. Pretty impressive, right?

"But that's where the bad news comes in. Our global civilization came at a huge cost. We needed a whole bunch of energy to build it, and we got that energy by burning fossil fuels, which came from dead plants and animals buried deep in the ground. We used up most of this fuel before you got here and now it's pretty much all gone. This means that we no longer have enough energy to keep our civilization running like it was before. So we've had to cut back. Bigtime. We call this the Global Energy Crisis, and it's been going on for awhile now.

"Also, it turns out that burning all of those fossil fuels had some nasty side effects. like raising the temperature of our planet and screwing up the environment. So now the polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and the weather is all messed up. Plants and animals are dying off in record numbers and lots of people are starving and homeless. And we're still fighting wars with each other, mostly over the few resources we have left.

"Basically, kid, what this all means is that life is a lot tougher than it used to be, in the Good Old Days, back before you were born. Things used to be awesome, but now they're kinda terrifying. To be honest, the future doesn't look too bright. You were born at a pretty crappy time

in history. And it looks like things are only gonna get worse from here on out. Human civilization is in ‘decline.’ Some people even think it's ‘collapsing,’ but we don't want to jump to any conclusions on that just yet. The jury is still out.

“You're probably wondering what's going to happen to you? That's easy. The same thing is going to happen to you that has happened to every other human being who has ever lived. You're going to die. We all die. That's just how it is.

“What happens when you die? Well, we're not completely sure. But the evidence seems to suggest that *nothing* happens. You're just dead, your brain stops working, and then you're not around to ask annoying questions anymore. Those stories you heard? About going to a wonderful place called ‘heaven’ where there is no more pain or death and you live forever in a state of perpetual happiness? Also total bullshit. Just like all that God stuff. There's no evidence of a heaven and there never was. We made that up, too. Wishful thinking. So now you have to live the rest of your life knowing you're going to die someday and disappear forever.

“Sorry.”

Okay, on second thought, maybe that *is* an awful lot to dump on a little kid. Especially when they've only just gotten the hang of walking, talking, tying their shoes, and not crapping their pants. Maybe honesty isn't the best policy after all. Maybe it isn't a good idea to tell a newly-arrived human being that they've been born into a world of chaos, pain, and poverty, just in time to watch everything fall to pieces. I discovered all of that gradually over several years, and it still freaked me out and made me want to jump off a bridge.

Luckily, I had access to the OASIS, which was like having an escape hatch into a better reality. The OASIS kept me sane. It was my playground and my pre-school. A magical place where anything was possible.

When my mom didn't have to work, we would log in at the same time and play games or go on interactive storybook adventures together. The OASIS was the setting of all my happiest childhood memories. Mom used to have to force me to log out every night, because I never wanted to return to the real world. Because the real world sucked.

I never blamed my mom for the way things were. She was a victim of fate and cruel circumstance, like everyone else. She'd been born into a world of plenty, just in time to watch it all slowly vanish. More than anything, I remember feeling sorry for her. She was depressed all the time, and taking drugs seemed to be the only thing she truly enjoyed. Of course, they were what eventually killed her. When I was eleven years old, she shot a bad batch of something into her arm and died on our ratty fold-out sofa bed, while listening to music on an old mp3 player that I'd repaired and given to her the previous Christmas.

My life got even worse when I had to move in with my aunt. I spent a lot of time wallowing in self-pity and despair. I tried to look on the bright side, to remind myself that, orphaned or not, I was still better off than most of the kids in Africa. And Asia. And a lot of other places. I'd always had a roof over my head and more than enough food to eat. And I had the OASIS. My life wasn't so bad. At least, that's what I kept telling myself, in a vain attempt to stave off the epic loneliness I now felt. If I didn't, how could I go on living?

Then, the year after my mom died, the Hunt for Halliday's Easter Egg began, and that was what saved me, I think. Suddenly I'd found something worth doing. A dream worth chasing. The Hunt gave me a goal and purpose. A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Most importantly, it gave me something to look forward to.

The moment I began searching for the Egg, the future no longer seemed so bleak.

I was halfway through the fourth episode of my *Family Ties* mini-marathon when the laundry room door creaked open and my Aunt Alice walked in, a malnourished harpy in a ratty housecoat, clutching a basket of dirty clothes. She looked more lucid than usual, which was bad news. She was much easier to deal with when she was high. When she was sober, her true hell-spawn nature came through. I still couldn't believe that this woman and I shared any DNA.

She glanced over at me with the usual look of disdain, then started to load her clothes into the washer. Then her expression suddenly changed and she peeked around the dryer to get a better look at me. Her eyes went wide when she spotted my laptop. I quickly closed it and began to shove it into my backpack, but I knew it was already too late.

"That's mine!" she barked, reaching for the laptop. "You owe me that for rent! Now give it to me, you little shit!" (Aunt Alice never called me by actual name. Instead, I was always "you little asshole" or "you little shit.")

"No!" I shouted, twisting away from her. "This is mine. I don't owe you anything!"

She tried again to grab the laptop out of my hands, but I refused to let go of it. She clawed at my face with her fingernails, then suddenly turned and stomped back to her room. A few seconds later, she returned with her boyfriend Rick, who was still half-asleep. Rick was perpetually shirtless, because he liked to show off his impressive collection of prison tattoos. Without saying a word, he punched me in the stomach and yanked the laptop out of my hands when I dropped to the floor. Then he and Aunt Alice walked out, already examining my laptop and discussing how much they could pawn it for.

When I was able to breath again, I slowly got to my feet. The dark blue light of dawn was starting to creep in through the laundry room window. I decided it might be a good idea to leave for school a little early today.

My pride was wounded, more than anything. Losing the laptop wasn't a big deal. I had two spares stowed in my hideout. But they weren't nearly as fast, and I would have to reload all of my media onto them from my backup drives. A total pain the ass. But it was my own fault. I knew risk of bringing anything of value back here.

I dressed as quickly and quietly as possible, pulling on the worn corduroys, baggy sweater, and oversize coat that comprised my entire winter wardrobe. Then I put on my backpack and climbed up onto the washing machine. After pulling on my gloves, I slid open the frost-covered window. The arctic morning air stung my cheeks as I gazed out over the uneven sea of trailer rooftops.

My aunt's trailer was the top unit in a "stack" twenty-two mobile homes high, making it a level or two taller than the majority of the stacks immediately surrounding it. The trailers on the bottom level rested on the ground, or on their original concrete foundations, but the units stacked above it were suspended on a reinforced modular scaffold, a haphazard metal latticework that had been constructed piecemeal over the years.

We lived in the Portland Avenue Stacks, a sprawling hive of discolored tin shoeboxes rusting on the shores of I-40, just west of Oklahoma City's decaying skyscraper core. It was a collection of over five hundred individual stacks, all connected to each other by a makeshift network of recycled pipes, girders, support beams, and foot bridges. The spires of a dozen ancient construction cranes (used to do the actual stacking) were positioned around the stacks' ever-expanding outer perimeter. The top-level or "roof" of the stacks was blanketed with a patchwork array of old solar panels that provided supplemental power to the units below. A bundle of hoses and corrugated tubing snaked up and down the side of each stack, supplying water to each trailer, and carrying away sewage (a luxury not available in some of the other

stacks scattered around the city). Very little sunlight made it to the bottom-level (known as the "floor"). The dark, narrow strips of ground between the stacks were clogged with the decaying skeletons of abandoned cars and trucks, their gas tanks emptied and their exit routes blocked off long ago.

One of our neighbors, Mr. Miller, once explained to me that trailer parks like ours had originally consisted of a few dozen mobile homes arranged in neat rows on the ground. But after the oil crash and the onset of the energy crisis, large cities had been flooded with refugees from surrounding suburban and rural areas, resulting in a massive urban housing shortage. Real estate within walking distance of a big city suddenly became far too valuable to waste on a flat plane of mobile homes, so someone had cooked up the brilliant idea of, as Mr. Miller put it, "stacking the sumbitches," to maximize the use of ground space. The idea caught on in a big way, and trailer parks across the country had quickly evolved into "stacks" like this one, a strange hybrid of shantytowns, squatter settlements, and refugee camps. They were now scattered around the outskirts of most major cities, each one overflowing uprooted rednecks like my parents, who, desperate for work, food, electricity, and reliable OASIS access, had fled their dying small towns, and had used the last of their gasoline (or their beasts of burden) to haul their families, RVs, and trailer homes to the nearest metropolis.

Every stack in our park stood at least fifteen mobile homes high (with the occasional RV, shipping container, air-stream trailer, or VW microbus mixed in for variety). In recent years, many of the stacks had grown to a height of twenty units or more. This made a lot of people nervous. Stack collapses weren't that uncommon, and if the scaffold supports buckled at the wrong angle, the domino effect could bring down four or five of the neighboring stacks, too. When that happened, a lot of people usually died. Not always right away, either. A few years ago,

there was a collapse at the eastern end of our park, and many of the people who didn't get crushed right away were trapped and bled to death. Others managed to survive inside the twisted wreckage, only to get killed a week later, when the cranes started clearing away the crushed units. Ambulances and rescue workers didn't come to the stacks, because the settlements were technically illegal and none of the residents paid taxes. Same story with the police and fire departments.

Our trailer was near the northern edge of the stacks, which ran up to a crumbling highway overpass. From my vantage point at the laundry room window, I could see a thin stream of electric vehicles crawling along the cracked asphalt, carrying goods and workers into the city. As I stared out at the grim skyline, a bright sliver of the sun peeked over the horizon. Watching it rise, I performed a mental ritual: whenever I saw the sun, I reminded myself that I was looking at a *star*. One of over a hundred billion stars in our galaxy. A galaxy that was just one of billions of other galaxies in the observable universe. This helped me keep things in perspective. I'd started doing it after watching a science program from the early 80s called *Cosmos*.

I slipped out the window as quietly as possible and, clutching the bottom of the window frame, slid down the cold surface of the trailer's metal siding. The steel platform on which the trailer rested was only slightly wider and longer than the trailer itself, leaving a narrow ledge about a foot-and-a-half wide all the way around. I carefully lowered myself until my feet rested on this ledge, then reached up to close the window behind me. I grabbed hold of a rope I'd strung there at waist level to serve as a handhold, then began to sidestep along the ledge to the corner of the platform. From there I was able to descend the frame of the ladder-like scaffolding. I almost always took this route when leaving or returning to my aunt's trailer. There was a rickety metal staircase bolted to the side of the stack, but it shook and knocked against the scaffolding, so I

couldn't use it without announcing my presence. Bad news. In the stacks, it was best to avoid been heard or seen, whenever possible. There were often dangerous and desperate people about-- the sort who would rob you, rape you, and then sell your organs on the black market.

Descending the network of metal girders always reminded me of old platform video games like *Donkey Kong* or *Burgertime*. I kept thinking that someday I should code a retro-style video game based on my life in the stacks, where you had to collect junk computers, snag food-voucher power-ups, and avoid meth addicts and pedophiles on your way to school.

As I climbed down, I paused next to the Airstream trailer three units below ours, where my friend Mrs. Gilmore lived. She was a sweet old lady in her mid-70s, and she always seemed to get up ridiculously early. I peeked in her window and saw her shuffling around in her kitchen, making breakfast. She spotted me after a few seconds and her eyes lit up.

“Wade!” she said, cracking open her window. “Good morning, my dear boy.”

“Good morning, Mrs. G,” I said. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“Not at all,” she said. She pulled her robe tight against the draft coming in the window. “It’s freezing out there! Why don’t you come in and have some breakfast? I’ve got some soy bacon. And these powdered eggs aren’t too bad, if you put enough salt on them...”

“Thanks, but I can’t this morning, Mrs. G. I have to get to school.”

“All right. Rain check, then.” She blew me a kiss and then started to close the window.

“Try not to break your neck climbing around out there, okay, Spider-man?”

“Will do. See ya later, Mrs. G.” I waved goodbye to her and continued my descent.

Mrs. Gilmore was a total sweetheart. She let me crash on her couch when I needed to, but it was hard for me to sleep there because of all her cats. Mrs. G was super-religious and spent most of her time in the OASIS, sitting in the congregation of one of those big online mega-

churches, singing hymns, listening to sermons, and taking virtual tours of the Holy Land. I fixed her ancient OASIS console whenever it went on the fritz, and in return, she answered my endless questions about what it had been like for her to grow up during the 1980s. She knew the coolest bits of 80s trivia--stuff you couldn't learn from books or movies. She was always praying for me, too. Trying her hardest to save my soul. I never had the heart to tell her that I thought organized religion was total crock. It gave her hope and kept her going, and it seemed to beat taking drugs.

When I reached the bottom level, I jumped off the scaffold and dropped the few remaining feet to the ground. My rubber boots crunched into the slush and frozen mud. It was still pretty dark down here, so I took out my flashlight and headed east, weaving my way through the dark maze, doing my best to remain unseen while being careful to avoid tripping over a shopping cart, engine block, or one of the other pieces of junk that littered the narrow alleys between the stacks. I rarely saw anyone out at this time of the morning. The commuter shuttles only ran a few times a day, so the residents lucky enough to have a job would already be waiting at the bus stop by the highway. Most of them worked as day laborers at one of the giant factory surrounding the city.

After walking about half a mile, I reached a giant mound of old cars and trucks that were piled haphazardly along stack's northern perimeter. Decades ago, the cranes had cleared the area of as many abandoned vehicles as possible, to make room for even more stacks, and they'd dumped the derelict vehicles in huge piles all around the settlement's perimeter. Some of the piles, like this one, were almost as tall as the stacks themselves.

I walked to the edge of the pile and, after a quick glance around to make sure I wasn't being watched or followed, I turned sideways to squeeze through a gap between two crushed cars. From there, I ducked, clambered, and sidestepped my way further and further in to the

ramshackle mountain of twisted metal, until I reached a small open space at the rear of a buried cargo van. Only the rear-third of the van was visible. The rest was concealed by the other vehicles stacked on and around it. Two overturned pickup trucks lay across the van's roof at different angles, but most of their weight was supported by the cars stacked on either side, creating a kind of protective arch which had prevented the van from being crushed by the mountain of vehicles piled above it.

I pulled out a chain I kept around my neck, on which there hung a single key. In a stroke of luck, this key had still been hanging from van's ignition when I'd first discovered it. Many of the vehicles piled here had been in working condition when they were abandoned. Their owners had no longer been able to afford fuel for them, so they'd just parked them and walked away.

I pocketed my flashlight and unlocked the van's rear right door. It opened about a foot and a half, giving me just enough room to squeeze inside. Then I pulled the door closed and locked it again. The van's rear doors had no windows, so I was hunched over in total darkness for a second, until my fingers found the old power strip I'd duct-taped to the ceiling. I flipped it on, and an old desk lamp flooded the tiny space with light.

The crumpled green roof of a compact car covered the crushed opening where the windshield had been, but the damage to the van's front end didn't extend beyond the cab, so the rest of the interior remained intact. Someone had removed all of the van's seats (probably to use as furniture), leaving a small "room" about four feet wide, four feet high, and nine feet long.

This was my hideout.

I'd discovered it four years earlier, while searching for discarded computer parts. When I first opened the door and gazed into the van's darkened interior, I knew right away that I'd found something of immeasurable value: privacy. This was a place no one else knew about, where I

wouldn't have to worry about getting hassled or slapped around by my aunt or whatever loser she was currently dating. I could keep my things here without worrying they'd be stolen. And, most importantly, it was a place where I could access the OASIS in peace.

The van became my refuge. My Batcave. My Fortress of Solitude. It was where I attended school, did my homework, read books, watched movies, and played video games. It was also where I conducted my ongoing quest to find Halliday's Easter egg.

I'd covered the walls, floor, and ceiling with Styrofoam egg cartons and pieces of carpeting, in an effort to soundproof the van as much as possible. Several cardboard boxes of busted laptops and computer parts sat in the corner, next to a rack of old car batteries and a modified exercise bike I'd rigged up as a recharger. The only furniture was a folding lawn chair.

I dropped my backpack and shrugged off my coat, then hopped on the exercise bike. Charging the batteries was usually the only physical exercise I got each day. I pedaled until the meter said the batteries had a full charge, then sat down in my chair and switched on the small electric heater I kept beside it. I pulled off my gloves and rubbed my hands in front of the filaments as they began to glow bright orange. I couldn't leave the heater on for very long, otherwise it would drain the batteries. I had to use it sparingly.

I opened the rat-proof metal box where I kept my food cache and took out some bottled water and a packet of powdered milk. I mixed these together in a bowl, then dumped in a generous serving of Fruit Rocks cereal. Once I'd wolfed it down, I retrieved an old plastic *Star Trek* lunchbox that I kept hidden under the van's crushed dashboard. Inside were my most prized possessions: my school-issued OASIS console, haptic gloves, and visor. These items were, by far, the most valuable things I owned. Far too valuable to carry around with me.

I pulled on my elastic haptic gloves and flexed my fingers to make sure none of the joints

were sticking. Then I grabbed my OASIS console, a flat black rectangle about the size of a paperback book. It had a wireless network antenna built into it, but the reception inside the van was for shit, since it was buried under a huge mound of dense metal. So I'd rigged up an external antenna and mounted it on the hood of a car at the top of the junk pile. The antenna cable snaked up through a hole I'd punched in the van's floor. I plugged it into a port on the side of the console, then removed my glasses and slipped on my visor (which automatically compensated for my near-sightedness and astigmatism). The visor fit snugly around my eyes, like a pair of swimmer's goggles, blocking out all external light. Small ear buds extended from the visor's temples and plugged automatically themselves into my ears.

I powered on the console and it booted up the OASIS Operating System. Suddenly, I was no longer sitting in the back of an abandoned van at the bottom of a junk pile. Now I was sitting at a large glass desk, in a spacious high-rise office overlooking a glittering futuristic cityscape. This was My Office. It was currently set to a cyberpunk theme, but there were thousands to choose from. You could change the theme so that your office was on the beach of a tropical island, in a secluded mountain cabin, or to any other setting imaginable. Your office was an offline simulation and not a part of the OASIS. It was a virtual location stored on your console's hard drive, and served the same function as the two-dimensional "desktop environments" of earlier computers. You could sit in your office and access any files or applications stored on your hard drive, but you couldn't check your email, chat, browse websites, or take phone calls until you connected to the OASIS.

I tapped the OASIS icon at the edge of my field of vision, initiating the login sequence. There was a brief flash of red as the visor scanned my retinas. Once my identity had been verified, I cleared my throat and said my login pass-phrase, being careful to enunciate: "*Crom,*

strong in his mountain."

My pass-phrase was also verified, along with my voice pattern, and then I was logged in.

The following text appeared, superimposed in the center of my virtual display:

**Retinal scan complete. Identity confirmed.
Welcome to the OASIS, Parzival!
Login Completed: 07:53:21 OST - 2.10.2045**

As the text faded away, it was replaced by a short message, just three words long. This message had been embedded in the login sequence by James Halliday himself, when he'd first programmed the OASIS, as an homage to the simulation's direct ancestors, the coin-operated video games of his youth. These three words were always the last thing an OASIS user saw before they left the real world and entered the virtual one:

READY PLAYER ONE

0002

I'd attended school in the real world up until the sixth grade. It hadn't been a very pleasant experience.

I was a painfully shy, awkward kid, with low self-esteem and almost no social skills—a side-effect of spending most of my childhood inside the OASIS. I was also the sort of person who never really felt comfortable in their own skin. Online, I didn't have a problem talking to people or making friends. But in the real world, interacting with people--especially kids my own age--made me a nervous wreck. I never knew how to act or what to say, and when I did work up the courage to speak, I always seemed to say the wrong thing.

My appearance was part of the problem. I was overweight, and had been for as long as I could remember. My bankrupt diet of government-subsidized sugar-and-starch laden food was a contributing factor, but I was also an OASIS addict, so until I set up the exercise bike recharger in my hideout, the only exercise I usually got was running away from bullies before and after school. To make matters worse, my limited wardrobe consisted entirely of ill-fitting clothes from thrift stores and donation bins--the social equivalent of having a bulls-eye painted on my forehead.

Even so, I tried my best to fit in. Year after year, my eyes would scan the lunchroom like

a T-1000, searching for a clique that might accept me. But even the other outcasts wanted nothing to do with me. I was too weird, even for the weirdos. And girls? Talking to girls was out of the question. To me, they were like some exotic alien species, both beautiful and terrifying. Whenever I got near one of them, I invariably broke out in a cold sweat and lost the ability to speak in complete sentences.

For me, school was a Darwinian exercise. A daily gauntlet of ridicule, abuse, and isolation. By the time I entered Sixth Grade, I was beginning to wonder if I'd be able to maintain my sanity until graduation, still six long years away.

Then, one glorious day, our principal announced that any student with a passing grade point average could apply for a transfer to the new OASIS Public School system. The real public school system, the one run by the government, had been an under-funded overcrowded train-wreck for decades. And now the conditions at many schools had gotten so terrible that every kid with half a brain was being encouraged to stay at home and attend school online.

I nearly broke my neck sprinting to the school office to submit my application. It was accepted, and I transferred to OASIS Public School #1873 the following semester.

Prior to my transfer, my OASIS avatar had never left Incipio, the planet at the center of Zone One where new avatars were spawned at the time of their creation. There wasn't much to do on Incipio except chat with other noobs, or shop in one of the giant virtual malls that covered the planet. If you wanted to go somewhere more interesting, you had to pay a teleportation fare to get there, and that cost real money, something I didn't have. So my avatar was stranded on Incipio. That is, until my new school emailed me a teleportation voucher to cover the cost of my avatar's transport to Ludus, the planet where all of the OASIS Public Schools were located.

There were hundreds of school campuses on Ludus, spread out evenly across the planet

surface. The schools were all identical, because the same construction code was copied and pasted into a different location whenever a new school was needed. And since the buildings were just pieces of software, their design wasn't limited by monetary constraints, or even by the laws of physics. So every school was a grand Palace of Learning, with polished marble hallways, classrooms like cathedrals, zero-g gymnasiums, and virtual libraries containing every (school board-approved) book ever written. The programmers tasked with building the OASIS School System had done their best to create an ideal learning and teaching environment. The School of the Future.

On my first day at OPS #1873, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Now, instead of running a gauntlet of bullies and drug addicts on my walk to school each morning, I went straight to my hideout and stayed there all day. Best of all, in the OASIS, no one could tell that I was fat, that I had acne, or that I wore the same shabby clothes every week. Bullies couldn't pelt me with spitballs, give me atomic wedgies, or pummel me by the bike rack after school. No one could even touch me. In here, I was safe.

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Once my OASIS login sequence completed, my avatar materialized in front of my locker on the second floor of my high school--the exact spot where I'd been standing when I'd logged out the night before.

I glanced up and down the hallway. My virtual surroundings looked almost (but not quite) real. Everything inside the OASIS was beautifully rendered in three-dimensions. Unless you pulled focus and stopped to examine your surroundings more closely, it was easy to forget that everything you were seeing was computer-generated. And that was with my crappy school-issued OASIS console. I'd heard that if you accessed the simulation with a new state-of-the-art

immersion rig, it was almost impossible to tell the OASIS from the real world.

I touched my locker door and it popped open with a soft metallic click. The inside was sparsely decorated. A picture of Princess Leia posing with a blaster pistol. A group photo of the members of Monty Python in their *Holy Grail* costumes. James Halliday's Time Magazine cover. I reached up and tapped the stack of textbooks on the locker's top shelf and they vanished, then reappeared in my avatar's item inventory.

Aside from my textbooks, my avatar only had a few other meager possessions: a flashlight, an iron shortsword, a small bronze shield, and a suit of banded leather armor. These items were all non-magical and of low-quality, but they were the best I could afford. Items in the OASIS had just as much value as things in the real world (sometimes more), and you couldn't pay for them with food vouchers. The OASIS credit was the coin of the realm, and in these dark times, it was also one of the world's most stable currencies.

There was a small mirror mounted inside my locker door, and I caught a glimpse of my virtual self as I closed it. I'd designed my avatar's face and body to look, more or less, like my own. My avatar had a slightly smaller nose and he was taller. And thinner. And more muscular. And he didn't have any teenage acne. But aside from these minor details, we looked more or less identical. The school's strictly enforced dress code required that all student avatars be human, and of the same gender and age as the student. No giant two-headed hermaphrodite demon unicorn avatars were allowed. Not on school grounds, anyway.

You could give your OASIS avatar any name you liked, as long as it was unique. Meaning you had to pick a name that hadn't already been taken by someone else. Your avatar's name was also your email address and chat ID, so you wanted it to be cool and easy to remember. Celebrities had been known to pay huge sums of money to buy an avatar name they wanted from

a cyber-squatter who had already reserved it.

When I'd first created my OASIS account, I'd named my avatar Wade_the_Great. After that, I kept changing it every few months, usually to something equally ridiculous. But my avatar had now had the same name for over five years. On the day the Hunt began, the day I'd decided to become a gunter, I'd renamed my avatar Parzival, after the knight of Arthurian legend who had found the Holy Grail. The other more common spellings of that knight's name, Perceval and Percival, had already been taken by other users. But I preferred the name Parzival, anyway. I thought it had a nice ring to it.

People rarely used their real names online, because anonymity was one of the major perks of the OASIS. Inside the simulation, no one knew who you really were, unless you wanted them to. Much of the OASIS's popularity and culture was built around this fact. Your real name, fingerprints and retinal patterns were stored in your OASIS account, but Gregarious Simulation Systems kept that information encrypted and confidential. Even GSS's own employees couldn't look up an avatar's true identity. Back when Halliday was still running the company, GSS had won the right to keep every OASIS user's identity private in a landmark Supreme Court ruling.

It wasn't always possible to maintain your online anonymity. If you worked or attended school in the OASIS, you couldn't keep your identity a secret. But once you quit your job or graduated from school, all you had to do was change your avatar's name, and your true identity would be secret once again.

And because OASIS users weren't allowed to have more than one account, you could only have one avatar at a time. It was possible for hackers to use modded visors to spoof their retinal patterns and thus create a second account for themselves. But if you got caught, you'd be banned from the OASIS for life, and you'd also be disqualified from participating in Halliday's

contest. Most hackers didn't want to take that risk.

When I'd first enrolled in the OASIS Public School system, I was required to give them my real name, mailing address, and Social Security number. That information was stored in my student profile, but only my principal had access to that. None of my teachers or fellow students knew who I really was, and vice versa. They only knew my first name. Students weren't allowed to use their avatar names while they were at school. This was to prevent teachers from having to say ridiculous things like "Pimp_Grease, please pay attention!" or "HotWang69, would you stand up and give us your book report?" Instead, students were required to use their real first names, followed by a number, to differentiate them from other students with the same name. When I enrolled, there were already two other students at my school with the first name Wade, so I'd been assigned the student ID of *Wade3*. That name floated above my avatar's head whenever I was on school grounds.

The school bell rang and a warning flashed in the corner of my display, informing me that I had forty minutes until the start of first period. I turned and began to walk down the hall, using a series of subtle hand motions to control my avatar's movements and actions. I could also use voice commands to move around, if my hands were otherwise occupied.

I strolled in the direction of my World History classroom, smiling and waving to the familiar faces I passed. This was my senior year, and I was going to miss this place when I graduated in a few months. I wasn't looking forward to leaving school. I didn't have the money to attend college, not even one in the OASIS, and my grades weren't good enough for me to get a scholarship. My only plan after graduation was to become a full-time gunter. I didn't have much choice. Winning the contest was my one chance of escaping the stacks. Unless I wanted to sign a five-year indenturement contract with some corporation, and that was about as appealing to me

as rolling around in broken glass in my birthday suit.

As I continued down the hallway, other students began to materialize in front of their lockers, ghostly apparitions that rapidly solidified. The sound of chattering teenagers began to echo up and down the corridor. Before long, I heard an insult hurled in my direction.

"Hey, hey! If it isn't Wade3!" I heard a voice shout. I turned and saw Todd13, an obnoxious avatar I recognized from my Algebra II class. He was standing with several of his friends. "Great outfit, slick," he said. "Where did you snag the sweet threads?"

My avatar was wearing a black T-shirt and blue jeans, one of the free default skins you could select when you created your account. Like his Cro-Magnon friends, Todd13 wore an expensive designer skin, purchased in some offworld mall with his daddy's money.

"I left my other outfit in your mom's bedroom," I shouted back without breaking my stride. "Maybe you could ask her to return it, the next time you stop at home to breast feed and pick up your allowance."

This elicited laughter from a few of his friends and the other students standing nearby. Todd13 scowled and took a few steps toward me. He was about to retort, but I muted him first, so I didn't hear what he said. I just smiled and continued on my way. The ability to mute my peers was one of my favorite things about attending school online, and I took advantage of it almost daily. The best thing about it was that they could *see* that you'd muted them, and they couldn't do a damn thing about it. There was never any fighting on school grounds. The simulation simply didn't allow it. The entire planet of Ludus was a no-PvP zone, meaning that no player-versus-player combat was permitted. At this school, the only real weapons were words, so I'd become skilled at wielding them.

When I arrived in my World History classroom there were already several students seated

at their desks. Their avatars all sat motionless, with their eyes closed. This was a signal that they were "engaged," meaning they were currently on a phone call, browsing the web, or logged into a chatroom. It was poor OASIS etiquette to try and talk to an engaged avatar. They usually just ignored you, and you'd get an automated message telling you to piss off.

I took a seat at my desk and tapped the engage icon at the edge of my display. My own avatar's eyes slid shut, but I could still see my surroundings. I tapped another icon and a large two-dimensional web browser window appeared, suspended in space directly in front of me. Windows like this one were only visible to my avatar, so no one could read over my shoulder (unless I selected the option to allow it).

My homepage was set to *The Hatchery*, one of the more popular gunter message forums. The Hatchery's site interface was designed to look and operate like an old pre-Internet dial-up bulletin board system, complete with the screech of a 300 baud modem during the login sequence. Very cool. I spent a few minutes scanning the most recent message threads, taking in the latest gunter news and rumors. I was mostly a lurker, and rarely posted anything to the boards, even though I made sure to check them every day. I didn't see much of interest this morning. The usual gunter clan flame wars. Ongoing arguments about the "correct" interpretation of some cryptic passage in *Anorak's Almanac*. High-level avatars bragging about whatever new magic item or artifact they'd obtained. This crap had been going on for a few years now. In the absence of any real progress, gunter subculture had gradually become mired in bravado, bullshit, and pointless infighting. It was sad, really.

My favorite threads were those devoted to bashing the Sixers. "Sixers" was the derogatory nickname that gunters had given to employees of Innovative Online Industries. IOI (pronounced *eye-oh-eye*) was a global communications conglomerate and the world's largest

Internet Service Provider. A large portion of IOI's business centered around providing access to the OASIS, and on selling goods and services inside it. For this reason, IOI had attempted several hostile takeovers of Gregarious Simulation Systems, all of which had failed. Now they were trying to seize control of GSS by exploiting a loophole in Halliday's will.

IOI had created a new department within the company, which they called their "Oology Division." (Oology was originally defined as "the science of studying bird's eggs," but in recent years it had taken on a second meaning: the "science" of searching for Halliday's Easter egg.) IOI's Oology Division had but one purpose: to win Halliday's contest, and seize control of his fortune, his company, and the OASIS itself.

Everyone knew what would happen if IOI took control of the OASIS. Access to the simulation would no longer be free, user privacy and anonymity would become a thing of the past, and there would be banner advertisements and commercials plastered on every visible surface. The OASIS would go from an open source utopia to a corporate-controlled dystopia overnight. It was horrifying to even think about.

IOI required its egg hunters, which it referred to as "Oologists," to use their employee number as their OASIS avatar name. These numbers were all six digits in length, and they also began with the numeral 6, so everyone began calling them the *Sixers*. These days, most gunters referred to them as "the Suxorz." (Because they sucked.)

To become a Sixer, you had to sign a contract that stipulated, among other things, that if you found Halliday's Egg, the prize would become the sole property of your employer. In return, IOI gave you a bi-monthly paycheck, food, lodging, healthcare benefits, and a retirement plan. The company also provided your avatar with high-end armor, vehicles, and weapons, and it covered all of your teleportation fares. Joining the Sixers was a little like enlisting in the military.

They worked seven days a week, and spent every waking moment jacked in to the OASIS, searching for Halliday's Easter egg.

To gunters around the world the Sixers were the enemy. The scum of the OASIS. Soulless corporate sell-outs who deserved to be killed on sight. I'd never seen a Sixer in person, because I almost never left Ludus. But gunters were constantly reporting Sixer sightings all over the simulation, on hundreds of different planets. There were several websites devoted to tracking Sixer activities and movements. Whenever a gunter spotted one of them, they snapped a screenshot and uploaded it to one of these tracking sites. Sixers weren't hard to spot, because they all looked identical. They were all required to use the same hulking blond-haired blue-eyed Caucasian male avatar (regardless of the operator's true race or gender), and they all wore the same jet black uniform. The only way to tell them apart was by checking the six-digit employee number stamped on their right breast, just beneath the IOI corporate logo.

Like most gunters, I loathed the Sixers and was disgusted by their very existence. By hiring an army of contract Egg hunters, IOI was perverting the entire spirit of the contest. Of course, it could be argued that all of the gunters who had joined clans were doing the same thing. There were now hundreds of gunter clans, some with thousands of members, all working together to find the egg. Each clan was bound by an ironclad legal agreement, stating that if one clan member won the contest, all clan members would share the prize. But the gunter clans weren't bankrolled by a huge corporation. None of them had the vast resources available to the Sixers. Not by a long shot.

The Sixers gave gunters a common enemy, and Sixer bashing was a favorite past-time in our forums and chatrooms. A lot of high-level gunters had a strict policy of killing (or trying to kill) every Sixer who crossed their path. Some gunters spent more time hunting the Sixers than

they did searching for the Egg. The bigger clans actually held a yearly competition called *Eighty-Six the Sux0rz*, with a prize for the clan who managed to kill the largest number of them.

After I finished checking a few other gunter forums, I tapped a bookmark icon for one of my favorite websites, the blog of a female gunter named Art3mis called *Arty's Missives*. I'd discovered it about three years ago and had been one of her loyal readers ever since. She posted these great rambling essays about her search for Halliday's Egg, which she called a "maddening MacGuffin hunt." She wrote with an endearing, intelligent voice, and her entries were filled with self-deprecating humor and witty, sardonic asides. In addition to posting her (often hysterical) interpretations of passages in the *Almanac*, she also linked to the books, movies, TV shows, and music she was currently studying as part of her Halliday research. I assumed that all of these posts were filled with misdirection and misinformation, but they were still highly entertaining.

It probably goes without saying that I had a massive cyber-crush on Art3mis.

She occasionally posted screenshots of her raven-haired avatar, and I sometimes (always) saved them to a folder on my hard drive. Her avatar had a pretty face, but it wasn't unnaturally perfect. In the OASIS, you got used to seeing freakishly beautiful faces on everyone. But Art3mis's features didn't look as though they'd been selected from a beauty drop-down menu on some avatar creation template. Her face had the distinctive look of a real person, as if her true features had been scanned in and mapped on to her avatar. Big hazel eyes, rounded cheekbones, a pointy chin, and a perpetual smirk. I found her unbearably attractive.

Art3mis's body was also somewhat unusual. In the OASIS, you usually only saw one of two body shapes on female avatars. The absurdly-thin-yet-wildly-popular super-model frame, or the top-heavy wasp-waisted porn starlet physique (which looked even less natural in the OASIS than it did in the real world). Nearly everyone – male or female (myself included) – selected a

trim and muscular body for their avatar. But not Art3mis. Her frame was short and Rubenesque. All curves.

I knew that the crush I had on Art3mis was both silly and ill-advised. What did I really know about her? She'd never revealed her true identity, of course. Or her age or location in the real world. There was no telling what she really looked like. She could be fifteen or fifty. A lot of gunters even questioned whether or not she was really a female, but I wasn't one of them. Probably because I couldn't bear the idea that the girl with whom I was virtually smitten might actually be some middle-aged dude name Chuck, with back hair and male-pattern baldness. I preferred to live in willful ignorance on the subject.

In the years since I'd first started reading *Arty's Missives*, it had become one of the most popular blogs on the Internet, now logging several million hits a day. And Art3mis was now something of a celebrity, at least in gunter circles. But fame hadn't gone to her head. Her writing was still as funny and self-deprecating as ever. Her newest blog post was titled *The John Hughes Blues*, and it was an in-depth treatise on her six favorite John Hughes teen movies, which she divided into two separate trilogies: The "Dorky Girl Fantasies" trilogy (*Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Some Kind of Wonderful*) and the "Dorky Boy Fantasies" trilogy (*The Breakfast Club*, *Weird Science*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*).

Just as I'd finished reading it, an Instant Message window popped up on my display. It was my best friend, Aech. (Okay, if you want to split hairs, he was my only friend, not counting Mrs. Gilmore.)

Aech: Top o' the morning, amigo.

Parzival: Hola, compadre.

Aech: What are you up to?

Parzival: Just surfing the turf. You?

Aech: Got the Basement online. Come and hang out before school, fool.

Parzival: Sweet! I'll be there in a sec.

I closed the IM window and checked the time. I still had about half an hour until class started. I grinned and tapped a small door icon at the edge of my display, then selected Aech's chatroom from my list of favorites.

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The system verified that I was on the chatroom's access list and allowed me to enter. My view of the classroom, which reached to the limits of my peripheral vision, shrank to a small thumbnail window in the lower right of my display, allowing me to monitor what was in front of my avatar. The rest of my field of vision was now filled with the interior of Aech's chatroom. My avatar appeared just inside the "entrance," a door at the top of a carpeted staircase. The door didn't lead anywhere. It didn't even open. This was because the Basement and its contents didn't exist as a part of the OASIS. Chatrooms were a standalone simulations--temporary virtual spaces that avatars could access from anywhere in OASIS. My avatar wasn't actually "in" the chatroom. It only appeared that way. Wade3/ Parzival was still sitting in my World History classroom with his eyes closed. Logging in to a chatroom was a little like being in two places at once.

Aech had named his chatroom *The Basement*. He'd programmed it to look like large suburban rec room, circa the late 1980s. Old movie and comic book posters covered the wood-paneled walls. A vintage RCA television stood in the center of the room, hooked up to a Betamax VCR, a laserdisc player, and several vintage video game consoles. Bookshelves lined the far wall, filled with role-playing game supplements and back issues of *Dragon Magazine*.

Hosting a chatroom this large wasn't cheap, but Aech could afford it. He made quit a bit

of dough by competing in televised PvP arena games after school and on the weekends. Aech was one of the highest ranked combatants in the OASIS, in both the Deathmatch and Capture the Flag leagues. He was even more famous than Art3mis.

Over the past few years, *The Basement* had become a highly exclusive hangout for elite gunters. Aech only granted access to people he deemed worthy, so being invited to hang out in *The Basement* was a big honor, especially for a third-level nobody like me.

As I descended the staircase, I saw a few dozen other gunters milling around, with avatars that varied wildly in appearance. There were humans, cyborgs, demons, dark elves, Vulcans, and vampires. Most of them were gathered around the row of old arcade games against the wall. A few others stood by the ancient stereo (currently blasting *Wild Boys* by Duran Duran), browsing through Aech's giant rack of vintage cassette tapes.

Aech himself was sprawled on one of the Basement's three couches, all were arrayed in a U-shape in front of the TV. Aech's avatar was a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes. I'd asked him once if he looked anything like his avatar in real life and he'd jokingly replied: "Yes. But in real life, I'm even *more* handsome."

As I walked over, he glanced up from the Intellivision game he was playing. His distinctive Cheshire grin stretched from ear-to-ear. "Z!" he shouted. "What is *up*, amigo?" He stretched out his right hand and gave me five as I dropped on to the couch opposite him. Aech had started calling me "Z" shortly after I met him. He liked to give people single-letter nicknames. Aech pronounced his own avatar's name just like the letter *H*.

"What up, Humperdinck?" I said. This was a game we played. I always called him by some random H-name, like Harry, Hubert, Henry, or Hogan. I was making guesses at his real first name, which, he'd once confided to me, began with the letter H.

I'd known Aech for a little over three years. He was also a student on Ludus, a senior at OPS #1172, which was on the opposite side of the planet from my school. We'd met one weekend in a public gunter chatroom and hit it off immediately, because we shared all of the same interests. Which is to say *one* interest: a total all-consuming obsession with Halliday and his Easter Egg. A few minutes into our first conversation, I knew Aech was the real deal: An elite gunter with some serious mental kung-fu. He had his 80s trivia down cold, and not just the canon stuff either. He was a true Halliday scholar. And he'd apparently seen the same qualities in me, because he'd given me his contact card and invited me to hang out in *The Basement* whenever I liked. He'd been my closest friend ever since.

Over the years, a friendly rivalry had gradually developed between us. We did a lot of trash-talking about which one of us would get his name up on the Scoreboard first. We were constantly trying to out-geek one another with our knowledge of obscure gunter trivia. Sometimes we even conducted our research together. This usually consisted of watching cheesy 80's movies and TV shows here in his chatroom. We also played a lot of video games, of course. Aech and I had wasted countless hours on two-player classics like *Contra*, *Golden Axe*, *Heavy Barrel*, *Smash TV*, and *Ikari Warriors*. Aside from yours truly, Aech was the best all-around gamer I'd ever encountered. We were evenly matched at most games, but he could trounce me at certain titles, especially anything in the first-person shooter genre. That was his area of expertise.

I didn't know anything about who Aech was in the real world, but I got the sense that his home life wasn't all that great. Like me, he spent every waking moment logged in to the OASIS. He'd told me more than once that I was his best friend, and since we'd never actually met in person, I assumed that he must be as alone as I was.

"So what did you do after you bailed last night?" he asked, tossing me the other

Intellivision controller. We'd hung out here in his chatroom for a few hours the previous evening watching old Japanese monster movies.

"Nada," I said. "Went home and brushed up on a few classic coin-ops."

"Unnecessary."

"Yeah. But I was in the mood." I didn't ask him what he'd done the night before, and he didn't volunteer any details. I knew that he'd probably gone to Gygax, or somewhere equally awesome, to tear through a few quests and rack up some XPs. He just didn't want to rub it in. Aech wasn't rich, as far as I could tell. But he seemed to be able to afford to spend a fair amount of time off-world, following up leads and searching for the Copper Key. But he never lorded this over me, or ridiculed me for not having enough dough to teleport anywhere. And he never insulted me by offering to loan me a few credits. It was an unspoken rule among gunters: if you were a solo, you didn't want or need help, from anyone. Gunters who wanted help joined a clan, and Aech and I both agreed that clans were for suck asses and posers. We'd both vowed to remain solos for life. We still occasionally had discussions about the Egg, but these conversations were always guarded, and we were careful to avoid talking about specifics.

After I beat Aech at three rounds of *Tron: Deadly Discs*, Aech threw down his Intellivision controller in disgust and grabbed a magazine off the floor. It was an old issue of *Starlog*. I recognized Rutger Haur on the cover, in a *Ladyhawke* promotional photo.

"*Starlog*, eh?" I said, nodding my approval.

"Yep. Downloaded every single issue from the Hatchery's archive. Still working my way through 'em. I was just reading this great piece on *Ewoks: The Battle for Endor*."

"Made for TV. Released in 1985," I recited. Star Wars trivia was one of my specialties.

"Total garbage. A real low point in the history of the 'Wars.'"

"Says you, asshole. It has some great moments."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It doesn't. It's even worse than that first Ewok flick, *Caravan of Courage*. They shoulda called it Caravan of Suck."

Aech rolled his eyes and went back to reading. He wasn't going to take the bait. I eyed the magazine's cover. "Hey, can I have a look at that when you're done?"

He grinned. "Why? So you can read the article on *Ladyhawke*?"

"Maybe."

"Man, you just love that crapburger, don't you?"

"Blow me, Aech."

"How many times have you seen that sapfest? I know you've made me sit through it at least twice." He was baiting *me* now. He knew *Ladyhawke* was one of my guilty pleasures, and that I'd seen it over two dozen times.

"I was doing you a favor by making you watch it, noob," I said. I reached down and shoved a new cartridge into the *Intellivision* console and started up a single-player game of *Astrosmash*. "You'll thank me one day. Wait and see. *Ladyhawke* is canon."

"Canon" was the term we used to classify any movie, book, game, song, or TV show of which Halliday was known to have been a fan.

"Surely, you must to be joking," Aech said.

"No, I am not joking. And don't call me Shirley."

He lowered the magazine and leaned forward. "There is no way Halliday was a fan of *Ladyhawke*. I guarantee it."

"Where's your proof, dick lord?" I asked.

"The man had taste. That's all the proof I need."

"Then please explain to me why he owned *Ladyhawke* on both VHS *and* laserdisc?" A list of all the films in Halliday's collection at the time of his death was included in the Appendices of *Anorak's Almanac*. We both had the list memorized.

"The guy was a billionaire! He owned millions of movies, most of which he probably never even watched! He had DVDs of *Howard the Duck* and *Krull*, too. That doesn't mean he *liked* them, asshat. And it sure as hell doesn't make them *canon*."

"It's not really up for debate, Homer," I said. "*Ladyhawke* is an 80s classic."

"It's fucking *lame*, is what it is! The swords look like they were made out of tinfoil. And that soundtrack is *epically lame*. Full of synthesizers and shit. By the motherfucking Alan Parsons Project! Lame-o-rama! *Beyond* lame. *Highlander II* lame."

"Hey!" I feigned hurling my Intellivision controller at him. "Now you're just being insulting! *Ladyhawke's* cast alone makes the film canon! Roy Batty! Ferris Bueller! And the dude who played Professor Falken in *WarGames*!" I searched my memory for the actor's name. "John Wood! Re-united with Matthew Broderick!"

"A real low point in both of their careers," he said, laughing. He loved arguing about old movies, even more than I did. The other gunters in the chatroom were now starting to form a small crowd around us to listen in. Our arguments were often high in entertainment value.

"You must be stoned!" I shouted. "*Ladyhawke* was directed by Richard fucking Donner! *The Goonies*? *Superman: The Movie*? You're saying *that* guy sucks?"

"I don't care if Spielberg directed it. It's a chick flick disguised as a sword and sorcery picture. The only genre film with less balls is probably... freakin' *Legend*. Anyone who actually *enjoys Ladyhawke* is a bonafide USDA-choice pussy!"

Laughter from the peanut gallery. I was actually getting a little pissed off now. I was a

big fan of *Legend*, too, and Aech knew it.

"Oh, so I'm a pussy? You're the one with the Ewok fetish!" I snatched the *Starlog* out of his hands and threw it against a *Revenge of the Jedi* poster on the wall. "I suppose you think your extensive knowledge of Ewok culture is gonna help you find the Egg?"

"Don't start on the Endorians again, man," he said, holding up an index finger. "I've warned you. I will ban your ass. I swear." I knew this was a hollow threat, so I was about to push the Ewok thing even further, maybe give him some crap for referring to them as "Endorians." But just then, a new arrival materialized on the staircase. A total lamer by the name of I-r0k. I let out a groan. I-r0k and Aech attended the same school and had a few classes together, but I still couldn't figure out why Aech had granted him access to *The Basement*. I-r0k fancied himself an elite gunter, but he was nothing but an obnoxious poser. Sure, he did a lot of teleporting around the OASIS, completing quests and leveling-up his avatar, but he didn't actually *know* anything. And the guy was always brandishing an oversize plasma rifle the size of a snowmobile. Even in chatrooms, where it was totally pointless. The guy had no sense of decorum.

"Are you cocks arguing about *Star Wars* again?" he said, descending the steps and walking over to join the crowd around us. "That shit is so played out, yo."

I turned to Aech. "If you want to ban someone, why don't you start with this clown?" I hit reset on the Intellivision and started another game.

"Shut your hole, Penis-ville!" I-r0k replied, using his favorite mispronunciation of my avatar's name. "He doesn't ban me cuz' he knows I'm *elite*! Ain't that right, Aech?"

"No," Aech said, rolling his eyes. "That *ain't right*. You're about as elite as my great-grandmother. And she's dead."

"Screw you, Aech! And your dead grandma!"

"Gee, I-r0k," I muttered. "You always manage to elevate the intelligence level of the conversation. The whole room just lights up the moment you arrive."

"So sorry to upset you, Captain No-Credits," I-r0k said. "Hey, shouldn't you be on Incipio panhandling for change right now?" He reached for the second Intellivision controller, but I snatched it up and tossed it to Aech.

He scowled at me. "Prick."

"Poser."

"Poser? Penis-ville is calling *me* a poser?" He turned to address the small crowd. "This chump is so broke that he has to bum rides to Greyhawk, just so he can kill kobolds for copper pieces! And he's calling *me* a poser!"

This elicited a few snickers from the crowd, and I felt my face turn red. Once, about a year ago, I'd made the mistake of hitching a ride offworld with I-r0k, to try and gain a few experience points. After dropping me in a low-level quest area on Greyhawk, the jerk had followed me. I'd spend the next few hours slaying a small band of kobolds, wait for them to respawn, and then slaying them again, over and over. My avatar was still only first level at the time, and it was one of the only safe ways for me to level up. I-r0k had taken several screenshots of my avatar that night and labeled them "Penis-ville the Mighty Kobold Slayer." Then he'd posted them to the Hatchery. He still brought up the incident every chance he got. He was never going to let me live it down.

"That's right, I called you a poser, poser." I stood and got up in his grill. "You're an ignorant know-nothing twink. Just because you're fourteenth-level, it doesn't make you a gunter. You actually have to possess some *knowledge*."

"Word," Aech said, nodding his agreement. We bumped fists. More snickering from the

crowd, now directed at I-r0k.

I-r0k glared at us a moment. "Okay. Let's see who the real poser is," he said. "Check this out, girls." Grinning, he produced an item from his inventory and it held it up. It was an old Atari 2600 game, still in the box. He purposefully covered the game's title with his hand, but I recognized the cover artwork anyway. It was a painting of a young man and woman in ancient greek attire, both brandishing swords. Lurking behind them was a minotaur and a bearded guy with an eyepatch. "Know what this is, hotshot?" I-r0k said, challenging me. "I'll even give you a clue... it's an Atari game, released as part of the contest. It contained several puzzles, and if you solved them, you could win a prize. Sound familiar?"

I-r0k was always trying to impress us with some clue or piece of Halliday lore he foolishly believed he'd been the first to uncover. Gunters loved to play the game of one-upsmanship, and were constantly trying to prove they had acquired more obscure knowledge than everyone else. But I-r0k totally sucked at it.

"You're joking, right?" I said. "You just now discovered the *Swordquest* series?"

I-r0k deflated.

"You're holding *Swordquest Earthworld*," I continued. "The first game in the *Swordquest* series. Released in 1982." I smiled wide. "Can you name the next three games in the series?"

His eyes narrowed. He was, of course, stumped. Like I said, he was a total poser.

"Anyone else?" I said, opening the question up to the floor. The gunters in the crowd eyed each other, but no one spoke up.

"*Fireworld*, *Waterworld*, and *Airworld*," Aeche answered.

"Bingo!" I said, and we bumped fists again. "Although *Airworld* was never actually finished, because Atari fell on hard times and canceled the contest before it was completed."

I-r0k quietly put the game box back in his inventory.

"You should join up with the Suxorz, I-r0k," Aeche said laughing. "They could really use someone with your vast stores of knowledge."

I-r0k flipped him the bird. "If you two fags already knew about the *Swordquest* contest, how come I've never once heard you mention it?"

"News flash, bit-brain," I said. "We never mention *anything* to you. Ever."

"Come on, I-r0k," Aeche said, shaking his head. "*Swordquest Earthworld* was Atari's unofficial sequel to *Adventure*. Every gunter worth their salt knows about that contest. How much more obvious can you get?"

I-r0k tried to save some face. "Okay, if you're both such experts, who programmed all of the *Swordquest* games?"

"Dan Hitchens and Tod Frye," I recited. "Try asking me something difficult."

"I got one for you," Aeche interjected. "What were the prizes Atari gave out to the winner of each contest?"

"Ah," I said. "Good one. Let's see... The prize for the *Earthworld* contest was the *Talisman of Penultimate Truth*. It was solid gold and encrusted with diamonds. The kid who won it melted it down to pay for college, as I recall."

"Yeah, yeah," Aeche prodded. "Quit stalling. What about the other two?"

"I'm not stalling, dick smack. The *Fireworld* prize was the *Chalice of Light*, and the *Waterworld* prize was supposed to be the *Crown of Life*, but it was never awarded, due to the cancellation of the contest. Same goes for the *Airworld* prize, which was supposed to be a *Philosopher's Stone*."

Aeche grinned and gave me a double high-five, then added: "And if the contest hadn't

been cancelled, the winners of the first four rounds would have competed for the grand prize, the *Sword of Ultimate Sorcery*."

I nodded. "These prizes were all mentioned in the *Swordquest* comic books that came with the games. Comic books which happen to be visible in the treasure room in the final scene of *Anorak's Invitation*, by the way."

The crowd burst into a smattering of applause. I-r0k lowered his head in shame.

It seemed obvious to me that Halliday had drawn inspiration for his contest from the *Swordquest* contest. I wondered if he'd borrowed any of the puzzles from them, too? I didn't know, but I'd studied the games and their solutions thoroughly, just to be safe.

"Fine. You win," I-r0k said. "But you both obviously need to get a life."

"And you," I said, "obviously need to find a new hobby. Because you clearly lack the intelligence and commitment to be a gunter."

"No doubt," Aeche said. "Try doing some *research* for a change, I-r0k. I mean, did you ever hear of Wikipedia? It's free, douchebag."

I-r0k turned and walked over to the long boxes of comic books stacked on the other side of the room, as if he'd lost interest in the discussion. "Whatever," he said over his shoulder, "if I didn't spend so much time *offline, getting laid*, I'd probably know just as much worthless shit as you two do."

Aeche ignored him and turned back to me. "What were the names of the twins who appeared in the *Swordquest* comic books?"

"Tarra and Torr."

"Damn, Z! You are the *man*."

"Thanks," I said. "You are the man also."

A warning flashed on my display, informing me that the three-minute warning bell had just rung in my classroom. I knew Aech and I-r0k were seeing the same warning, because our schools operated on the same time schedule.

"Time for another day of higher learning," Aech said, standing up.

"Drag," I-r0k said. "See you fags later." He gave me the finger again, then his avatar disappeared as he logged out of the chatroom. The other gunters began to log out and vanish, too, until only Aech and I remained.

"Seriously, Aech," I said. "Why do you let that moron hang out here?"

"Because he's fun to beat at video games. And his ignorance gives me hope."

"How so?"

"Because if most of the other gunters out there are as clueless as I-r0k--and they are, Z, believe me--that means you and I really do have a shot at winning the contest."

I shrugged. "I guess that's one way to look at it."

"Wanna hang after school again tonight? Around seven or so? I've got a few errands to run, but then I'm gonna tackle some of the anime on my need-to-watch list. A *Voltron* marathon perhaps?"

"Oh, hell yes," I said. "Count me in."

We gave each other a high five and then logged out simultaneously, just as the final bell began to ring.

0004

My avatar's eyes slid open and I was back in my World History classroom. The seats around me were now filled with other students, and our teacher, Mr. Avenovich, was materializing at the front of the classroom. Mr. A's avatar looked like a portly, bearded college professor. He sported an infectious grin, wire-rimmed spectacles, and a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. When he spoke, he somehow always managed to sound like he was reading a passage from Dickens. I liked him. He was good teacher.

Of course, we didn't know who Mr. Avenovich really was or where he lived. We didn't know his real name, or even if "he" was really a man. For all we knew, he could have been a small Inuit woman living in Anchorage, Alaska, who had adopted this appearance and voice to make her student's more receptive to her lessons. But for some reason, I suspected that Mr. Avenovich's avatar looked and sounded just like the person operating it.

All of my teachers were pretty great. Unlike their real-world counterparts, most of the OASIS Public School teachers seemed to genuinely enjoy their jobs. Probably because they didn't have to spend half their time acting as babysitters and disciplinarians. The OASIS software took care of that, ensuring that students remained quiet and in their seats. All the teachers had to do was teach.

It was also a lot easier for an online teacher to hold their student's attention, because here in the OASIS, the classrooms were like holodecks. Teachers could take their students on a virtual field trip every day, without ever leaving the school grounds.

During our World History lesson that morning, Mr. Avenovich loaded up a standalone simulation, so that our class could witness the discovery of King Tut's tomb by archaeologists in Egypt in 1923 A.D. (The day before, we'd visited the same spot in 1334 B.C, and had seen Tutankhamun's empire in all its glory.)

In my next class, Biology, we traveled through a human heart and watched it pumping from the inside, just like in that old movie *Fantastic Voyage*.

In Art class we toured the *Louvre*, while all of our avatars wore silly berets.

In my Astronomy class we visited each of Jupiter's moons. We stood on the volcanic surface of IO while our teacher explained how the moon had originally formed. As our teacher spoke to us, Jupiter loomed behind her, filling half the sky, and its Great Red Spot churning slowly just over her left shoulder. Then she snapped her fingers and we were suddenly standing on Europa, discussing the possibility of extraterrestrial life beneath the moon's icy crust.

I was a Senior, so I was allowed to go offworld during my lunch period if I wanted to, but I didn't have that kind of spare dough to blow. So, as usual, I sat in one of the green fields bordering the school and stared at the simulated scenery, while I munched on a protein bar with my visor on. It beat staring at the inside of my hideout.

Logging in to the OASIS was free, but traveling around inside it wasn't. Most of the time, I didn't even have enough credits to teleport offworld and then get back to Ludus. So I was stuck at school. I felt like a kid standing in the world's greatest video arcade without any quarters, unable to do anything but walk around and watch the other kids play.

When the last bell rang each day, the students who had things to do in the real world would log out of the OASIS and vanish. Everyone else would head offworld. A lot of kids owned their own interplanetary vehicles. School parking lots all over Ludus were filled with UFOs, Tie-Fighters, Vipers from *Battlestar Galactica*, and other spacecraft designs lifted from every sci-fi movie and TV show you can think of. Every afternoon I would stand on the school's front lawn and watch, green with envy, as these ships filled the sky, zooming off to explore the simulation's endless possibilities. The kids who didn't own ships would either hitch a ride with a friend or stampede to the nearest transport terminal, headed for some off-world dance club, gaming arena, or rock concert. But not me. I wasn't going anywhere. I was stranded on Ludus, the most boring planet in the entire OASIS.

The *Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation* was a big place, with its own strange culture, laws, and economy. For the sake of zoning and navigation, the virtual space inside the OASIS had been divided equally into twenty-seven cube-shaped "sectors," each containing hundreds of different planets. Each of these sectors measured exactly ten light hours across, or about 10.8 billion kilometers. So if you were traveling at the speed of light (the fastest speed attainable by any spacecraft inside the OASIS), you could get from one side of a sector to the other in exactly ten hours. That sort of long distance travel wasn't cheap either. Spacecraft that could travel at light speed were rare and they required fuel to operate.

Charging people for virtual fuel to power their virtual spaceships was one of the ways Gregarious Simulation Systems generated revenue, since accessing the OASIS was free. But GSS's primary source of income came from the teleportation fares. You could instantly teleport your avatar to any planet in the OASIS by stepping into a public transport booth and selecting your desired destination on a map. Then, in a blink, your avatar was there. Teleportation was the

fastest way to travel, but it was also the most expensive.

If you were lucky enough to own a ship, you could also fly through one of the stargates strategically located throughout each sector. Stargates were really just big teleporters, but since they charged by the mass of the ship and distance you traveled, so they were normally only used by corporations or extremely wealthy avatars with credits to burn.

In addition to being expensive, traveling around inside the OASIS could also be dangerous. Each sector was divided up into many different zones, which varied in size and shape. Some zones were so large that they encompassed several planets, while others covered only a few kilometers on the surface of a single world. Each zone had a unique combination of rules and parameters. Magic would function in some zones and not in others. The same was true of technology. If you flew your technology-based starship into a zone where technology didn't function, your engines would fail the moment you crossed the zone border. Then you'd have to hire some silly gray-bearded sorcerer with a spell-powered space barge to tow your ass back into a technology zone.

"Dual-Zones" permitted the use of both magic and technology, and "Null-zones" didn't allow either. There were Pacifist Zones where no player vs. player combat was allowed, and Player vs. Player Zones where it was every avatar for themselves.

You had to be careful whenever you entered a new zone. You had to be prepared.

But I didn't have that problem. I was stuck at school.

Ludus had been designed as a place of learning, so the planet had been created without a single quest portal or gaming zone anywhere on its surface. There was nothing here but thousands of identical school campuses, separated by rolling green fields, perfectly landscaped parks, rivers, meadows, and sprawling template-generated forests. There were no castles,

dungeons, or orbiting space fortresses for my avatar to raid. And there were no NPC villains, monsters, or aliens for me to fight, so there was no treasure or magic items for me to plunder.

This totally sucked, for a lot of reasons.

Completing quests, fighting NPCs (Non-Player Characters), and gathering treasure were the only ways a low level avatar like mine could earn experience points (XPs). Earning XPs was how you increased your avatar's power level, strength, and abilities.

A lot of OASIS users didn't care about their avatar's power level or bother with the gaming aspects of the simulation at all. They only used the OASIS for entertainment, business, shopping, and hanging out with their friends. These users simply avoided entering any Gaming or PvP zones, where their defenseless first level avatars could be attacked by NPCs or by other players. If you stayed in safe zones, like Ludus, you didn't have to worry about your avatar getting robbed, kidnapped, or killed.

I hated being stuck in a safe zone.

If I was going to find Halliday's Egg, I knew I would eventually have to venture out in the dangerous sectors of the OASIS. And if I wasn't powerful or well-armed enough to defend myself, I wasn't going to stay alive for very long.

Over the past five years, I'd managed to slowly, gradually raise my avatar up to third level. This hasn't been easy. I'd done it by hitching rides offworld with other students (mostly Aech) who happened to be headed to a planet where my wuss avatar could survive. I'd have them drop me near a newbie-level gaming zone and then spend the rest of the night or weekend slaying orcs, kobolds, or some other piddly class of monster that was too weak to kill me. For each NPC that my avatar defeated, I would earn a few meager experiences points and, usually, a handful of copper or silver coins dropped by my slain foes. These coins were instantly converted

to credits, which I used to pay the teleportation fare back to Ludus, often just before the final school bell rang. Sometimes, but not often, one of the NPCs I killed would drop an item. That was how I'd obtained my avatar's sword, shield, and armor.

I'd stopped hitching rides with Aech at the end of the previous school year. He'd reached tenth level and was almost always headed to a planet where it wasn't safe for my avatar. He was happy to drop me on some noob world along the way, but then if I didn't earn enough credits to pay for my fare back to Ludus, I'd wind up missing school because I was stuck on some other planet. This was not an acceptable excuse. I'd now racked up so many unexcused absences that I was in danger of being expelled. If that happened, I would have to return my school-issued OASIS console and visor. Worse, I'd be transferred back to school in the real world to finish out my senior year there. There was no way I could risk that.

So these days I rarely left Ludus at all. I was stuck here, and stuck at third level. As you can imagine, having a third level avatar was a colossal embarrassment. None of the other gunters took you seriously unless you were at least fifth or sixth level. Even though I'd been a gunter since Day One, everyone still considered me a noob. It was frustrating.

In desperation, I'd tried to find a part-time after-school job, just to earn some walking around money. I applied for dozens of tech support and programming jobs (mostly grunt construction work, coding parts of OASIS malls and office buildings), but it was completely hopeless. There were millions of college-educated *adults* who couldn't get one of those jobs. The Great Recession was now entering its third decade, and unemployment was still at a record high. Even the fast foods joints in my neighborhood had a two-year waiting list for job applicants.

After lunch, I walked back to school and headed to my favorite class, Advanced OASIS Studies. This was a Senior year elective where you learned about the history of the OASIS and

its creators. Talk about an “easy A.” I’d been dying to take this class since my Freshman year.

For the past five years, I’d devoted all of my free time to learning as much as I possibly could about James Halliday. I’d exhaustively studied his life, accomplishments, and interests. Over a dozen different Halliday biographies had been published in the years since his death and I’d read them all. Several documentary films had also been made about him, and I’d studied those, too. I’d studied every word Halliday had ever written, and I’d played every video game he’d ever made. I took notes, writing down every detail I thought might be related to the Hunt. I kept everything in a notebook (which I’d started to call my “grail diary” after watching the third *Indiana Jones* film).

The more I’d learned about Halliday’s life, the more I’d grown to idolize him. After all, he was a god among geeks. A nerd uber-deity, on the level of Gygax, Garriott, and Wozniak. Like me, Halliday had been a shy, awkward kid and an outcast in school. He’d escaped from his life by losing himself in a world of computers and video games. He’d left home after high school with nothing but his wits and his imagination, and he’d used them to attain worldwide fame and amass a vast fortune. Almost single-handedly, he created an entirely new reality that now provided an escape for most of humanity. And to top it all off, he’d turned his last will and testament into the greatest video game contest of all time.

So I spent most my time in Advanced OASIS Studies class annoying our teacher, Mr. Ciders, by pointing out errors in our textbook, and raising my hand to interject some relevant bit of Halliday trivia that I (and I alone) thought was interesting. After the first few weeks of class, Mr. Ciders had stopped calling on me, unless no one else knew the answer to his question.

Today, Mr. Ciders was reading excerpts from “The Egg Man,” a bestselling Halliday biography that I’d already read four times. During his lecture, I kept having to resist the urge to

interrupt him and point out all of the really important stuff the book left out. Instead, I just made a mental note of each omission, and as Mr. Ciders began to recount the circumstances of Halliday's childhood, I once again tried to glean whatever secrets I could from the strange way Halliday had lived his life, and from the odd clues about himself he'd chosen to leave behind.

0005

James Donovan Halliday was born on June 12, 1972, in Middletown, Ohio. He was an only child. His father was an alcoholic machine operator and his mother was a bipolar waitress.

By all accounts, James was a bright boy, but socially inept. He had an extremely difficult time communicating with the people around him. A self-described "mega geek," Halliday became obsessed with computers at an early age. Despite his obvious intelligence, he did poorly in school, because most of his attention was focused on comic books, sci-fi and fantasy novels, movies, and, above all else, video games.

One day in junior high, Halliday was sitting alone in the cafeteria reading a *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. The game fascinated him, but he'd never actually played it, because he'd never had any friends to play it with. A boy in his class named Ogden Morrow noticed what Halliday was reading and invited him to attend one of the weekly D&D gaming sessions held at his house. It was there, in Morrow's basement, Halliday was introduced to an entire group of "mega geeks" just like himself. They immediately accepted him as one of their own, and for the first time in his life, James Halliday had a circle of friends.

Ogden Morrow eventually became Halliday's business partner, collaborator, and best friend. Many would later liken the pairing of Morrow and Halliday to that of Jobs and Wozniak

or Lennon and McCartney. It was a partnership destined to alter the course of human history.

At age fifteen, Halliday created his first video game, *Anorak's Quest*. He programmed it in BASIC on a TRS-80 Color Computer he received for Christmas in 1982 (though he'd asked his parents for the slightly more expensive Commodore 64). *Anorak's Quest* was an adventure game set in Chthonia, the fantasy world Halliday had created for his high school *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign. "Anorak" was a nickname Halliday had been given by a female British exchange student at his high school. He liked the name Anorak so much that he'd used it for his favorite *D&D* character, the powerful wizard who later appeared in many of his video games.

Halliday created *Anorak's Quest* for fun, to share with the guys in his D&D gaming group. They all found the game addictive, and lost countless hours attempting to solve the game's intricate riddles and puzzles. Ogden Morrow convinced Halliday that *Anorak's Quest* was better than most of the computer games currently on the market, and encouraged him to try selling it. He helped Halliday create some simple cover artwork for the game, and together, the two of them hand-copied *Anorak's Quest* onto dozens of 5 1/4-inch floppy disks, then stuck them into ziplock bags, along with a single photocopied sheet of instructions. They began selling the game on the software rack at their local computer store. Before long, they couldn't make copies fast enough to meet the demand.

Morrow and Halliday decided to start their own video game company, *Gregarious Games*, which initially operated out of Morrow's basement. Halliday programmed new versions of *Anorak's Quest* for the Atari 800XL, Apple II, and Commodore 64 computers, and Morrow began placing ads for the game in the back of several computer magazines. Within six months, *Anorak's Quest* became a national bestseller.

Halliday and Morrow almost didn't graduate from high school because they spent most of

their senior year working on *Anorak's Quest II*. And instead of going off to college, they both focused all of their energy on their new company, which had now grown too large for Morrow's basement. In 1990, Gregarious Games moved into its first real office, located in a run-down strip mall in Columbus, Ohio.

Over the next decade, the small company took the video game industry by storm, releasing a series of groundbreaking action and adventure games, all using a groundbreaking first-person graphics engine created by Halliday. Gregarious Games set a new standard for immersive gaming, and every time they released a new title, it pushed the envelope of what seemed possible on the computer hardware available at the time.

The rotund Ogden Morrow was naturally charismatic, and he handled all of the company's business affairs and public relations. At every Gregarious Games press conference, Morrow would grin infectiously from behind his unruly beard and wire rimmed spectacles, using his natural gift for hype and hyperbole. Halliday, on the other hand, seemed to be Morrow's polar opposite in every way. He was tall, gaunt, painfully shy, and rarely appeared in public. Even in the early days of the company, Halliday preferred to stay out of the limelight.

People employed by Gregarious Games during this period say that Halliday frequently locked himself in his office, where he programmed incessantly, often going without food, sleep, or human contact for days or even weeks.

On the few occasions that Halliday agreed to do interviews, his behavior came off as extremely bizarre, even by game designer standards. He was hyperkinetic, aloof, and so socially inept that the interviewers often came away with the impression he was mentally ill. Halliday tended to speak so rapidly that his words were often unintelligible, and he had a disturbing high-pitched laugh, made even more so because he was usually the only one who knew what he was

laughing *about*. When Halliday got bored during an interview (or conversation), he would usually get up and walk out without saying a word.

Halliday had many well-known obsessions. Chief among them were classic video games, sci-fi and fantasy novels, and movies of all genres. He also had an extreme fixation on the 1980s, the decade during which he'd been teenager. Halliday seemed to expect everyone around him to share his obsessions, and often lashed out at those who didn't. He was known to fire longtime employees for not recognizing an obscure line of movie dialogue he'd quoted, or if he discovered that they weren't familiar with one of his favorite cartoons, comic books, or video games. (Ogden Morrow would always hire the employee back, usually without Halliday ever noticing.)

As the years went on, Halliday's stunted social skills seemed to deteriorate instead of improving. Several exhaustive psychological studies were done on accounts of his behaviour following his death, and his obsessive adherence to routine and preoccupation with a few obscure areas of interest led many psychologists to conclude that Halliday had suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, or from some other form of high-functioning autism.

But despite his eccentricities, no one ever questioned Halliday's genius. The games he created were addictive and wildly popular. Every title that Gregarious Games released went on to set new sales records and garner all of the industry's highest awards. By the end of the twentieth century, Halliday was widely recognized as the greatest video game designer of his generation, and, some would argue, of all time.

Ogden Morrow was a brilliant programmer in his own right, but his true talent was his knack for business. In addition to collaborating on the company's games, he also masterminded all of their early marketing campaigns and shareware distribution schemes, with astounding results. When Gregarious Games finally went public, their stock immediately shot into the

stratosphere, then kept going.

By their thirtieth birthdays, Halliday and Morrow were both multi-millionaires. They purchased mansions on the same street. Morrow bought a Lamborghini, took several long vacations, and traveled the world. Halliday bought and restored one of the original DeLoreans used in the *Back to the Future* films, continued to spend nearly all of his time welded to a computer keyboard, and used his newfound wealth to amass what would eventually become the world's largest private collections of classic video games, Star Wars action figures, vintage lunchboxes, and comic books.

Then, at the height of its success, Gregarious Games suddenly appeared to fall dormant. Several years elapsed, during which they released no new games. Morrow made cryptic announcements, saying that the company was working on an ambitious project that would move them in an entirely new direction. Rumors began to circulate that Gregarious Games was engaged in the development of some sort of new computer gaming hardware, and that this secret project was rapidly exhausting the company's considerable financial resources. There were also indications that both Halliday and Morrow had invested most of their own personal fortunes in the company's new endeavor. Word began to spread that their company was in danger of going under.

Then, in December of 2012, Gregarious Games suddenly re-branded itself as *Gregarious Simulations Systems*, and under this new banner they launched their flagship product--the only product GSS would ever release: *The OASIS - The Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory-Immersive Simulation*.

Initially marketed as a new kind of Massively Multiplayer Online game, the OASIS would ultimately change the way people around the world lived, worked, and communicated. It

would transform the nature of entertainment, social networking, and even global politics.

At its inception, the OASIS appeared to be little more than a glorified game. But it quickly evolved into a new way of life.

#

Prior to Gregarious Simulation Systems, Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) were among the first shared synthetic environments. They allowed thousands of players to simultaneously co-exist inside a simulated world, which they connected to via the Internet. These games often took place in a fantasy or science fiction setting, and the overall size of their simulated environments were relatively small, usually just a single world, or in the case of a few ambitious sci-fi games, a dozen or so small planets. Players controlled an in-game representation of themselves called an *avatar*, which served as their alter ego inside the game. MMO players could only see their online environment through a small two-dimensional window, their computer monitor, and they could only interact with it by using keyboards, mice, and other crude input devices.

With the OASIS, Gregarious Simulation Systems had taken the MMO concept and elevated it to an entirely new level. The OASIS didn't limit its users to just one planet, or even a dozen. The OASIS contained hundreds (and eventually thousands) of high-resolution 3-D worlds for people to explore, and each one was beautifully rendered in meticulous graphical detail, right down to bugs and blades of grass, wind and weather patterns. Users could circumnavigate each of these planets and never see the same terrain twice. Even in its first primitive incarnation, the scope of the simulation was staggering.

Halliday and Morrow referred to the OASIS as an "open-source reality," a malleable online universe that anyone could access via the Internet, using their existing home computer or

video game console. You could log in and instantly escape the drudgery of your day-to-day life. You could create an entirely new persona for yourself, with complete control over how you looked and sounded to others. In the OASIS, the fat could become thin, the ugly could become beautiful, and the shy, extroverted. Or vice-versa. You could change your name, age, sex, race, height, weight, voice, hair color, and bone structure. Or you could cease being human altogether, and become an elf, ogre, alien, or any other creature from literature, movies, or mythology.

In the OASIS, you could become whoever and whatever you wanted to be, without ever revealing your true identity, because your anonymity was guaranteed.

Suddenly a person's online presence was no longer limited to a website or a social-networking profile. Users could also alter the content of the virtual worlds that existed inside the OASIS, or create entirely new ones. In the OASIS, you could create your own private planet, build a virtual mansion on it, furnish and decorate it however you liked, and then invite a few thousand friends over for a party. And those friends could be in a dozen different time zones, spread all over the globe.

The keys to success of the OASIS were the two new pieces of interface hardware that GSS had created, both of which were required to access the simulation: the OASIS Visor and Haptic Gloves. These devices changed everything. They elevated the OASIS from a mere game to a global phenomenon.

The wireless one-size-fits-all OASIS Visor™ was slightly larger than a pair of sunglasses. It implemented new *Virtual Retinal Display* technology, using harmless low-powered lasers to draw the stunningly real environment of the OASIS right onto its wearer's retinas, completely immersing their entire field of vision in the online world. The visor was light years ahead of the clunky virtual reality goggles available prior to this time, and it represented a paradigm shift in

virtual reality technology. As did the lightweight OASIS Haptic Gloves™, which allowed users to directly control the hands of their avatar and to interact with their simulated environment as if they were actually inside it. When you picked up objects, opened doors, or operated vehicles, the haptic gloves made you *feel* these non-existent objects and surfaces, as if they were really right there in front of you. The gloves let you, as the television ads put it, "reach in and touch the OASIS." Working together, the visor and the gloves made entering the OASIS an experience unlike anything else available, and once people got a taste of it, there was no going back.

The software that powered the simulation, Halliday's new OASIS Reality Engine™, also represented a huge technological breakthrough. It managed to overcome software limitations that had plagued previous simulated realities. In addition to restricting the overall size of their virtual environment, earlier MMOs had also been forced to limit their virtual population, usually to a few thousand users per server. If too many people were logged in at the same time, the simulation would slow to crawl and avatars would freeze in mid-stride as the system struggled to keep up. But the OASIS utilized a "linear-scalable fault-tolerant quantum server array" that could also draw additional processing power from every computer connected to it. At the time of its initial launch, the OASIS could handle up to five million simultaneous users, with no discernable latency and no chance of a system crash.

A massive marketing campaign promoted the launch of the OASIS. It was unprecedented in its scope. The pervasive television, billboard, and Internet ads featured a lush green "oasis," complete with palm trees and a pool of crystal blue water, surrounded on all sides by a vast barren desert.

GSS's new endeavor was a massive success from day one. The OASIS was what people had been dreaming of for decades. The "virtual reality" they had been promised for so long was

finally here, and it was even better than they'd imagined. The OASIS was an online utopia, a holodeck for the home. And its biggest selling point? It was *free*.

Most online games of the day generated revenue by charging users a monthly subscription fee for access. GSS only charged a one-time sign-up fee of *twenty-five cents*, for which you received a lifetime OASIS account. The ads all used the same tagline: *The OASIS - It's the greatest video game ever created, and it only costs a quarter*.

The success of the OASIS exceeded everyone's expectations, except perhaps for those of Morrow and Halliday. At a time of drastic social and cultural upheaval, when most of the world's population longed for an escape from reality, the OASIS provided it, in a form that was cheap, legal, safe, and not (medically proven to be) addictive.

Within a month of its launch, the OASIS had over five million daily users. But GSS was prepared. They'd already upgraded their server array to handle ten million simultaneous users. Then twenty million. As the population of the OASIS continued to grow at an exponential rate, the capacity of the servers grew with it.

With the initial groundwork laid, and with a large, ever-growing international user-base in place, Gregarious Simulations System's business model went into action, and the whole world began to change as a result.

#

At first, there were only a few hundred OASIS planets for users to explore, all created by GSS programmers and artists. These worlds were spread across a giant expanse of virtual space, and their environments ran the gamut, from sword and sorcery settings, to cyberpunk-themed planet-wide cities, to irradiated post-apocalyptic zombie-infested wastelands. Some planets were designed with painstaking detail, others were randomly generated from a series of templates.

Each one was populated with a variety of artificially intelligent Non-Player Characters (NPCs)--computer controlled humans, animals, monsters, aliens, and androids with which OASIS users could interact.

In another ambitious move, GSS also began to license other virtual worlds from their competitors, so content that had already been created for games like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* was ported over to the OASIS, and copies of *Norrath* and *Azeroth* were added to the growing catalog of OASIS planets. Other virtual worlds soon followed suit, and before long, new online game were designed, built, and released exclusively inside the OASIS. The *Firefly* universe was anchored in a sector adjacent to the *Star Wars* galaxy, with a detailed recreation of the *Star Trek* universe in the sector adjacent to that. Users could now teleport back and forth between their favorite fictional worlds. Middle Earth. Vulcan. Pern. Arrakis. Magrathea. Discworld, Riverworld, Ringworld. Worlds upon worlds.

The OASIS also contained several hundred detailed recreations of the planet Earth, at nearly every period in its history. Whenever you liked, you could log in and visit the Jurassic Period or the Renaissance. You could be a soldier in the American Civil War or a hippie attending Woodstock. The most popular of these simulations was OEarth - an incredibly accurate up-to-the-minute recreation of the real Earth in its present state, which used live satellite and video camera feeds for reference.

You could do anything in the OASIS. Go horseback riding in the mountains, pilot a starship, be a superhero, or meet with your actual sewing circle – irrespective of where its members happened to be located – all without ever leaving your living room. There was something for everyone, and the options grew along with the population of the OASIS, as the users themselves began to add content to the simulation.

Most of the planets in the OASIS were malleable, meaning that users could alter them to their liking. If users found that the existing simulation of Paris in the 1920s wasn't accurate, they could (and did) rebuild and improve upon it. GSS put a democratic world collaboration system in place to approve changes and prevent vandalism. The moment the OASIS went online, thousands of creative people all over the world began to enrich and expand the simulation for everyone who inhabited it. At absolutely no cost to Gregarious Simulation Systems.

With each passing year, the technology used to power the OASIS got better, the computers got faster, and the simulation looked, sounded, and *felt* more real. And the more real the simulation became, the more people were drawn into it. As the population of the OASIS continued to swell, its vast commercial potential became clear, to corporations and small businesses alike. In addition to their existing websites, businesses began to open virtual storefronts and showrooms inside the OASIS. Where traditional Internet shopping failed, OASIS shopping excelled: Customers could walk around inside a virtual mall, browsing and examining the merchandise as closely as they could in the real world. OASIS users could visit an online car dealership and test drive all the latest models, on a variety of scenic mountain roadways, without even needing insurance. Online auction sites like eBay also relocated to their own private worlds inside the OASIS, effectively creating planet-sized garage sales.

Moviegoers could watch the latest blockbuster in a virtual cinema, where every seat had a great view, the audience was always quiet, the projection was always perfect, and you never heard a cell phone ring. And you could watch the movie with an old college roommate who now lived on the opposite side of the country.

The OASIS also spawned an entirely new kind of television. Interactive sitcoms, soap operas, and cop dramas in which the *viewer* was also the star. These shows contained built-in

commercials, which couldn't be ignored or fast-forwarded through, because they were part of the show's storyline. Users had to endure a little product placement if they wanted to reach the end of the episode.

And since any new form of media quickly becomes a vehicle for the distribution of pornography, the porn industry wasted no time in migrating to the OASIS. Everything from online sex shops to virtual brothels began to appear, spawning all sorts of new haptic interface devices.

Of course, all of these business endeavors needed space, and every square inch of virtual real-estate (which Morrow dubbed "surreal estate") was owned and controlled by Gregarious Simulation Systems. Anyone who wanted to set up shop inside the OASIS had to rent or purchase space from GSS. Anticipating this, the company had set aside Sector 1 as the simulation's designated business zone and began to sell and rent millions of blocks of surreal estate there. City-sized shopping malls were erected in the blink of an eye, and storefronts spread across planets like time-lapse footage of mold devouring an orange. Urban development had never been so easy.

In addition to the billions of dollars that GSS raked in selling land that didn't actually exist, they also made a killing selling virtual objects and vehicles. The OASIS became such an integral part of people's day-to-day social lives that users were more than willing to shell out real money to buy virtual accessories for their avatars: clothing, furniture, houses, flying cars, magic swords and machine guns. These items were nothing but ones and zeros stored on the OASIS servers, but they were also status symbols. Most items only cost a few credits, and since they cost nothing for GSS to manufacture, it was all profit. Even in the throes of a post-oil economic recession, the OASIS allowed Americans to continue engaging in their favorite past-time:

Shopping.

Morrow and Halliday went from multi-millionaires to multi-billionaires, seemingly overnight, and Gregarious Simulation Systems became one of the most profitable companies in the world. They wisely funneled a large portion of their profits back into research and development, to improve and refine the OASIS and the hardware it ran on. They also hired an army of the industry's most gifted programmers, game designers, digital architects, and artists, to continue adding new content to their ever-expanding online reality.

The OASIS quickly became the single most popular use for the Internet, so much so that the terms "OASIS" and "Internet" gradually became synonymous. And the incredibly easy-to-use three-dimensional OASIS OS, which GSS gave away for free, became the single most popular computer operating system in the world.

Billions of people around the world now worked and played in the OASIS every day. Some of them met, fell in love, and got married, without ever setting foot on the same continent. The lines of distinction between a person's real identity and that of their avatar began to blur.

The ongoing energy crisis also contributed to the OASIS's runaway popularity. As the skyrocketing cost of oil made airline and automobile travel too expensive for the average citizen, the OASIS became the only getaway that most people could afford. As the era of cheap, abundant energy drew to a close, poverty and unrest began to spread like a virus, and in America, the quality of life began to deteriorate drastically. Every day, more and more people sought solace inside the OASIS, a strange alternate reality with no laws or borders, where life could be whatever you wanted it to be.

#

In the summer of 2022, Ogden Morrow announced that he was leaving the company. At

the time, he claimed it was for "personal reasons." But, years later, Morrow wrote in his autobiography that he'd left GSS because "we were no longer in the video game business," and because he felt that the OASIS had evolved into something horrible. "It had become a self-imposed prison for humanity," he wrote. "A pleasant place for the world to hide from its problems, while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect."

Rumors also surfaced that Morrow chose to leave because he'd had a huge falling out with Halliday. But neither of them would confirm or deny these rumors, and no one seemed to know what sort of dispute had ended their lifelong friendship. But sources within the company said that, at the time of Morrow's resignation, he and Halliday had not spoken to one another directly in several years. Even so, when Morrow left GSS, he sold his entire share of the company directly to Halliday, for an undisclosed sum. Then Morrow and his wife retired to their mountain hideaway in Oregon.

That was the same year Halliday went into seclusion. His last public appearance was at a series of federal court hearings, where the antitrust lawsuits that had plagued Gregarious Simulation Systems for years were finally resolved. With the help of an army of the best lawyers money could buy, GSS emerged from the legal maelstrom virtually unscathed. It paid out a few billion in fines, then paid billions more lobbying to have the anti-trust laws changed in its favor.

Through sheer stubbornness and force of will, Halliday retained a controlling ownership in his company. He now conducted all of his business affairs inside the OASIS, never leaving his private estate in rural Ohio, where he remained for the rest of his days. Halliday was no longer directly involved in the day-to-day operation of his company, so there was wide speculation about what he was doing with all of his time. Some believed he was working on some sort of new game. In a way, this turned out to be true.

After he'd been living in seclusion for nearly ten years, Halliday fired one of his elderly housekeepers for "not knowing the name Bill Paxton's character in the film *Aliens*." This woman immediately violated the non-disclosure agreement she'd signed and granted several tell-all interviews, even though it turned out she actually had very little to tell. According to her, for the past ten years Halliday had spent nearly all of his waking hours in one room, jacked into the OASIS. He only emerged to watch movies in his private home theater, or to wander through the giant vintage arcade game collection in his basement. He communicated with his staff through email and intercom, never speaking to them directly. He dined alone, and never had a single visitor. The housekeeper also added that, in her humble estimation, Halliday was "as crazy as a shithouse rat."

No one found any of this news very scandalous or even all that surprising. But Halliday sued the old lady's pants off anyway.

During the years Halliday spent in seclusion, there was also no sign of Anorak, his equally famous OASIS avatar. Numerous Anorak sightings were reported, at various locations all over the simulation, but the screenshots offered as proof were always blurry and inconclusive, or revealed to be doctored fakes.

As the years passed, Halliday became the target of public ridicule. He was usually caricatured as a drooling wild-haired madman, an eccentric billionaire geek hiding out in the computer fantasy world he'd created. The increasingly common act of shunning the real world to spend an extended period of time in the OASIS became known as "taking a Halliday." The media drew obvious comparisons between Halliday and his 20th century counterpart, the similarly reclusive industrialist Howard Hughes. But Halliday would soon prove to be far more eccentric than Hughes had ever been.

In the fall of 2039, Halliday complained to his private physician that he was having persistent abdominal pains. At the doctor's urging, Halliday left his home for the first time in seventeen years to undergo a series of tests. They revealed that he had late-stage pancreatic cancer, which had spread to his liver.

He was told that he had less than six months to live.

Like almost everyone else who knew Halliday personally, his doctor would later write a best-selling tell-all book about his relationship with the eccentric billionaire. In it, the doctor wrote that Halliday reacted to the diagnosis with his usual stoicism. He refused to undergo chemotherapy and gave strict instructions that his illness be kept a secret. Then he continued to spend every waking moment logged into the OASIS, laboring on some secret project, now with an even greater sense of urgency.

Halliday kept on working, night and day, right up until the very end. Of course, no one knew exactly *what* it was he was working on. Not until the morning of his death, when the whole world found out.

#

Once I felt like I'd learned everything I could about Halliday, I began to research the life of his friend and partner, Ogden Morrow. To me, Morrow was just as fascinating a figure as Halliday. He and Halliday had grown up together, founded a company together, and then changed the world together. But Morrow had led a very different life--one involving a much greater connection to humanity. And a great deal more tragedy.

During the mid-90s, back when Gregarious Simulation Systems was still just Gregarious Games, Morrow had married his high school sweetheart, Kira Underwood. Kira was born and raised in London. (Her birth name was Karen, but she'd insisted on being called Kira ever since

her first viewing of *The Dark Crystal*). Morrow met her when she spent her junior year as an exchange student at his high school. In his autobiography, Morrow wrote that she was the "quintessential geek girl," unabashedly obsessed with Monty Python, comic books, fantasy novels, and video games. She and Morrow shared a few classes at school, and he was smitten with her almost immediately. He invited her to attend his weekly Dungeons & Dragons gaming sessions (just as he'd done with Halliday a few years earlier), and to his surprise, she accepted. "She became the lone female in our weekly gaming group," Morrow wrote. "And every single one of the guys developed a massive crush on her, including Jim. She was actually the one who gave him the nickname 'Anorak,' a British slang term for an obsessive geek. I think Jim adopted it as the name of his D&D character to impress her. Or maybe it was his way of trying to let her know he was in the joke. The opposite sex made Jim extremely nervous, and Kira was the only girl that I ever saw him speak to in a relaxed manner. But even then, it was only in-character, as Anorak, during the course of our gaming sessions, and he would only address her as Leucosia, the name of her D&D character."

Ogden and Kira began dating. By the end of the school year, when it was time for her to return home to London, the two of them had openly declared their love for each other. They kept in touch during their remaining year of school by emailing each other every day, using an early pre-Internet computer bulletin board network called Fidonet. When they both graduated from high school, Kira returned to the States, moved in with Morrow, and became one of Gregarious Games first employees. (For the first two years, she was their entire art department). They got engaged a few years after the launch of the OASIS. They were married a year later, at which time Kira resigned from her position as an Artistic Director at GSS. (She was a millionaire now, too, thanks to her GSS stock options). Morrow stayed on for another five years, during which

time he had his mysterious falling out with Halliday. Then he left the company, too.

Ogden and Kira "retired" to their home in Oregon and started a non-profit educational software company, Halcydonia Interactive, which created free interactive adventure games for kids. I'd grown up playing these games, all of which were set in the magical Kingdom of Halcydonia. As a lonely kid growing up in the stacks, Morrow's games had transported me out of my grim surroundings. They'd also taught me how to do math and solve puzzles while building my self-esteem. In a way, the Morrrows were among my very first teachers.

For the next decade, Ogden and Kira enjoyed a peaceful, happy existence, living and working in relative seclusion. They tried to have children, but it wasn't in the cards for them. They'd begun to consider adoption when, in the winter of 2034, Kira was killed in a car accident on a icy mountain road, just a few miles from their home.

After that, Ogden continued to run Halcydonia Interactive on his own, mostly as a way to keep busy and distract him from his grief. He managed to stay out of the limelight, until the morning of Halliday's death, when his home was suddenly besieged by the media. As Halliday's (formerly) closest friend, everyone assumed that he alone could explain why the deceased billionaire had put his entire fortune up for grabs. Morrow eventually held a press conference, just to get everyone off his back. I'd downloaded a video file of the event and watched it many, many times.

#

Morrow began the press conference by reading a brief statement, in which he revealed that he hadn't seen or spoken to Halliday in over a decade. "We had a falling out," he said, "and that is something I refuse to discuss, now or in the future. Suffice it to say, I have not communicated with James Halliday in over ten years."

"Then why did Halliday leave you his vast collection of classic coin-operated video games?" a reporter asked. "All of his other material possessions were auctioned off, if you were no longer friends, why were you the only person he left anything to?"

"I have no idea," Morrow said simply.

Another reporter asked Morrow if he planned on looking for Halliday's Easter egg himself, since he'd known Halliday so well and would therefore probably have a better chance than anyone of finding it. Morrow reminded the reporter that the contest rules laid out in Halliday's will stated that no one who had ever worked for Gregarious Simulation Systems, or anyone in their immediate families, was eligible to take part in the contest.

"Did you have any idea what Halliday was working on all those years he was in seclusion?" another reporter asked.

"No. I suspected he might be working on some new game. Jim was always working on a new game. For him, making games was as necessary as breathing. But I never imagined he was planning something... of this magnitude."

"As the person who knew James Halliday the best, do you have any advice for the millions of people who are now searching for his Easter egg? Where do you think people should start looking for it?"

"I think Jim made that pretty obvious," Morrow replied, tapping a finger against his temple, just as Halliday had in the *Anorak's Invitation* video. "Jim always wanted everyone to share his obsessions, to love the same things he loved. I think this contest is his way of giving the entire world an incentive to do just that."

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The rest of my school day passed quickly, until my final class, Latin. Even with the limitless possibilities of the OASIS at her disposal, my Latin teacher, Ms. Rank, still had a hard time making her lessons interesting. And today she was reviewing a bunch of verbs that I'd memorized, so I found my attention drifting almost immediately.

While I was in Latin class, the only reference material the system allowed me to pull up on my display was my Latin textbook. Luckily, during my junior year, I'd discovered a bug in the school's online library software, and by exploiting it, I could access any book in the school's online library. Including *Anorak's Almanac*. So whenever I got bored (like right now) I would pull it up in a window on my display and read over my favorite passages to pass the time.

Over the past five years, the Almanac had become my bible. Like most books nowadays, it was only available in electronic format. But I'd wanted to be able to read the *Almanac* night or day, even during one of the stack's frequent power outages. So I'd fixed up an old discarded laser printer and used it to print out a hard copy. Then I put it in an old three-ring binder that I kept in my backpack. I'd studied it until I knew every word by heart.

The *Almanac* contained thousands of references to Halliday's favorite books, TV shows, movies, songs, graphic novels, and video games. Most of these items were over forty years old

and so free digital copies of them could be downloaded from the OASIS. If there was something I needed that wasn't available for free, I could almost always get it by using *Guntorrent*, a file-sharing program used by gunters around the world.

When it came to my research, I never took any shortcuts. First, I worked my way down the entire recommended gunter reading list. Douglas Adams. Kurt Vonnegut. Bester, Bradbury, Heinlein, Tolkien, Gibson, Stephenson, Scalzi. I read every novel by every single one of Halliday's favorite authors.

And I didn't stop there.

I also watched and re-watched every single film he referenced in the *Almanac*. If it was one of Halliday's favorites, like *War Games*, *Ghostbusters*, *Real Genius*, *Better Off Dead*, or *Revenge of the Nerds*, then I rewatched it until I knew every scene by heart.

I devoured each of what Halliday referred to as "The Holy Trilogies": *Star Wars* (original and prequel trilogies, in that order), *Lords of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, *Mad Max*, *Back to the Future*, and *Indiana Jones* (Halliday once said that he preferred to pretend the 4th and 5th Indiana Jones film didn't exist. I tended to agree).

I also absorbed the complete filmographies of each of his favorite directors. Cameron, Gilliam, Jackson, Kubrick, Lucas, Spielberg. I spent three months studying every John Hughes teen movie and memorizing all of the key lines of dialogue.

Only the meek get pinched. The bold survive.

You could say that I covered all the bases.

I studied Monty Python. And not just *Holy Grail*, either. Every single one of their films, albums, books, and every episode of the original BBC series. (Including those two "lost" episodes they did for German television.)

I wasn't going to cut any corners.

I wasn't going to miss something obvious.

Somewhere along the way, I started to go overboard.

I may, in fact, have started to go a little insane.

I watched every episode of *Battlestar Galactica* (old and new), *Firefly*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *Airwolf*, *The A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, and the *Muppet Show*.

What about *The Simpsons*, you ask?

I knew more about Springfield than I knew about my own city.

Star Trek? Oh, I did my homework. *TOS*, *TNG*, *DS9*. Even *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. I watched them all in chronological order. The movies, too. *Phasers locked on target*.

I wanted to be prepared.

I gave myself a crash course in eighties Saturday morning cartoons.

I learned the name of every last goddamn *Gobot* and *Transformer*.

Land of the Lost, *Thundarr the Barbarian*, *He-man*, *Schoolhouse Rock*, *G.I. Joe* . . . I knew them all. *Because knowing is half the battle*.

Who was my friend, when things got rough? *H.R. Puff-n-Stuf*.

Japan? Did I cover Japan?

Yes. Yes indeed. Anime and live-action. *Godzilla*, *Gamera*, *Starblazers*, *Space Giants*, and *G-Force*. *Go*, *Speed Racer*, *Go*.

I wasn't some dilettante.

I wasn't screwing around.

Music? Well, covering all the music wasn't easy.

It took some time.

The 80s was a long decade (ten whole years), and Halliday didn't seem to have had very discerning taste. He listened to everything. So I did, too. Pop, Rock, New Wave, Punk, Heavy Metal. From *The Police* to *Journey* to *R.E.M.* to *The Clash*. I tackled it all.

I burned through the entire *They Might Be Giants* discography in under two weeks. *Devo* took a little longer.

I watched a lot of YouTube videos of cute-geeky-girls playing 80s cover tunes on ukuleles. Technically, this wasn't part of my research, but I had a serious cute-geeky-girls-playing-ukuleles fetish that I can neither explain nor defend.

I memorized lyrics. Silly lyrics, by bands with names like Van Halen, Bon Jovi, Def Leppard, and Pink Floyd.

I kept at it.

I burned the midnight oil.

Did you know that *Midnight Oil* was an Australian band, with a 1987 hit titled *Beds Are Burning*?

I was obsessed. I wouldn't quit. My grades suffered. I didn't care.

I read every issue of every comic book title Halliday had ever collected.

I wasn't going to have anyone questioning my commitment.

Especially when it came to the video games.

Video games were my area of expertise.

My double-weapon specialization.

My dream *Jeopardy* category.

I downloaded every game mentioned or referenced in the *Almanac*, from *Akalbeth* to *Zaxxon*. I played each title until I had mastered it, and then I moved on to the next one.

I even designed my own Atari 2600 game. This was a gunter rite-of-passage, like a Jedi building his first lightsaber. (My Atari game was called *Stacks*. You had to stack trailer homes and RVs as high as possible without a collapse. It was loads of fun.)

I worked my way through every video game genre and platform. Classic arcade coin-ops, home computer, console, and handheld. Text-based adventures, first-person shooters, third-person RPGs. Ancient 8,16, and 32-bit classics written in the previous century. The harder a game was to beat, the more I enjoyed it. And as I played these ancient digital relics, night after night, year after year, I discovered I had a talent for them. I could master most action titles in a few hours, and there wasn't an adventure or role-playing game I couldn't solve. I never needed any walkthroughs or cheat codes. Everything just clicked. And I was even better at the old arcade games. When I was in the zone on a high-speed classic like *Defender*, I felt like a hawk in flight, or the way I thought a shark must feel as it cruises the ocean floor. For the first time, I knew what it was to be a natural at something. To have a gift.

But it wasn't my research into movies, comics, or old video games that had yielded my first real clue. That had come while I was studying the history of old pen-and-paper role-playing games.

#

Reprinted on the first page of *Anorak's Almanac* were the four rhyming lines of verse Halliday had recited in the *Invitation* video.

*Three hidden keys open three secret gates
Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits
And those with the skill to survive these straits
Will reach The End where the prize awaits*

At first, this seemed to be the only direct reference to the contest in the entire almanac. But then, buried among all those rambling journal entries and essays on pop culture, I discovered

a hidden message.

Scattered throughout the text of the *Almanac* there were a series of marked letters. Each of these letters had a tiny, nearly invisible "notch" cut into its outline. I'd first noticed these notches the year after Halliday died. I was reading my printout of the *Almanac* at the time, and so I thought the notches were nothing but tiny printing imperfections, perhaps due to the paper or the ancient printers I'd used to print out my hard copy of the *Almanac*. But when I checked the electronic version of the book available on Halliday's website, I found the same notches on the exact same letters. And if you zoomed in on one of those letters, the notches stood out as plain as day.

Halliday had put them there. He'd marked these letters for a reason.

There turned out to be one-hundred and eighteen of these notched letters scattered throughout the book. By writing them down in the order they appeared, I discovered that they spelled something. I nearly died of excitement as I wrote it down in my grail diary:

***The Copper Key awaits explorers
In a tomb filled with horrors
But you have much to learn
If you hope to earn
A place among the high scorers***

Other gunters had also discovered this hidden message, of course, but they were all wise enough to keep it to themselves. For awhile, anyway. About six months after I discovered the hidden message, this loudmouth MIT freshman found it, too. His name was Steven Pendergast, and he decided to get his fifteen minutes of fame by sharing his "discovery" with the media. The newsfeeds broadcast interviews with this moron for a month, even though he didn't have the first clue about the message's meaning. After that, going public with a clue became known as "pulling a Pendergast."

Once the existence of the message became public knowledge, Gunters nicknamed it "The Limerick." The entire world had known about it for almost four years now, but the Copper Key still had yet to be found.

Over the years, various academics had written lengthy dissertations on *Anorak's Almanac*. Thick scholarly tomes that attempted to decipher its strange contents. But these works all tried to find a hidden subtext where none actually existed, or pointed out possible obscure literary references to nineteenth century books Halliday had probably never even read. When it came to The Limerick, these same scholars dissected it like it was a passage from *Ulysses*. But, like Pendergast, none of them actually understood its true meaning.

At first, neither did I. But I knew that Halliday had frequently used similar riddles in many of his early adventure games, and each of those riddles had made sense in the context of their game. So I devoted an entire section of my grail diary to deciphering the limerick, line by line.

The Copper Key awaits explorers

This line seemed pretty straightforward. No hidden meaning that I could detect.

In a tomb filled with horrors.

This line was trickier. Taken at face value, it seemed to say that the key was hidden in a tomb somewhere, one filled with horrifying stuff. But then, during the course of my research, I discovered an old *Dungeons and Dragons* supplement called *The Tomb of Horrors*, which had been published in 1981. From the moment I saw the title, I was certain the second line of the Limerick was a reference to it. Halliday and Morrow had played Advanced Dungeons & Dragons all through high school, along with several other pen-and-paper role-playing games, like *GURPS*, *Champions*, *Car Wars*, and *Rolemaster*.

The *Tomb of Horrors* was a thin booklet called a "module." It contained detailed maps and room-by-room descriptions of an underground labyrinth infested with undead monsters, which D&D players could explore with their characters. The Dungeon Master would read from the module and guide the other players through the story it contained, describing everything they saw and encountered along the way.

As I learned more about how these early role-playing games worked, I realized that a D&D module was the primitive equivalent of a quest in the OASIS. And D&D characters were just like avatars. In a way, these old role-playing games had been the first virtual reality simulations, created long before there were computers powerful enough to do the job. The events took place inside the players' collective imaginations, instead of inside a computer generated simulation. In those days, if you wanted to escape to another world, you had create it yourself, using your brain, some paper, pencils, dice, and a few rulebooks. This realization kind of blew my mind. It changed my whole perspective on the Hunt for Halliday's Easter egg. From then on, I began to think of the Hunt an elaborate D&D module. And Halliday was obviously the Dungeon Master, even if he was now controlling the game from beyond the grave.

I found a digital copy of the fifty-year-old *Tomb of Horrors* module, buried deep in an ancient FTP archive. As I studied it, I began to develop a theory. Somewhere in the OASIS: Halliday had re-created the *Tomb of Horrors*, and he'd hidden the Copper Key inside it.

I spent the next few months studying the module and memorizing all of its maps and room descriptions, in anticipation of the day I would finally figure out where it was located. But that was the rub: the limerick didn't appear to give any hint as to *where* Halliday had hidden the damn thing. The only clue seemed to be "you have much to learn if you hope to earn a place among the high scorers."

I recited those words over and over in my head, until I wanted to howl in frustration.

Much to learn. Yeah, okay, fine. I have much to learn about *what?*

There were literally thousands of worlds in the OASIS, and Halliday could have hidden his recreation of the *Tomb of Horrors* on any one of them. Searching every planet, one by one, would take forever. Even if I'd had the means to do so.

There was a planet named Gygax in Sector Two that seemed like the obvious place to start looking. Halliday had coded the planet himself, and he'd named it after Gary Gygax, one of the creators of *Dungeons and Dragons* and the author of the original *Tomb of Horrors* module. According to Gunterpedia (a gunter wiki), the planet Gygax was covered with recreations of old D&D modules, but the *Tomb of Horrors* was not one of them. In fact, there didn't appear to be a recreation of the Tomb on any of the other D&D-themed worlds in the OASIS, either. Gunters had turned all of those planets upside down and scoured every square inch of their surfaces. If there were a recreation of the *Tomb of Horrors* hidden on one of them, it would have been found and logged long ago.

So the tomb had to be hidden somewhere else. And I didn't have the first clue where. But I told myself that if I just kept at it and continued doing research, I'd eventually learn what I needed to know to figure out the tomb's hiding place. In fact, that was probably what Halliday meant by "you have much to learn if you hope to earn a place among the high scorers."

If there were other gunters out there who shared my interpretation of the Limerick, so far they'd been smart enough to keep quiet about it. I'd never seen any posts about the *Tomb of Horrors* on any gunter message boards. I realized, of course, that this might be because my theory about the old D&D module was completely lame and totally off base.

I continued to watch and read and listen and study, preparing for the day when I finally

stumbled across the clue that would lead me to the Copper Key.

And then it finally happened. Right while I was sitting there daydreaming in Latin class.

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Most students took a foreign language that they might actually be able to use someday, like Mandarin, or Hindi, or Spanish. I'd decided to take Latin because James Halliday had taken Latin. He'd also occasionally used Latin words and phrases in his early adventure games.

Our teacher, Mrs. Rank, stood at the front of the class, slowly conjugating Latin verbs. She would say them in English first, then in Latin, and each word would automatically appear on the board behind her as she spoke it. Whenever we were doing tedious verb conjugation, I always got the lyrics to an old *Schoolhouse Rock* song stuck in my head. *To run, to go, to get, to give. Verb! You're what's happenin'!*

I was quietly humming this tune to myself when Mrs. Rank began to conjugate the Latin verb *to learn*. "To Learn. *Discere*," she said. "Now, this one should be easy to remember, because it's similar to the English word *discern*, which also means *to learn*."

Hearing her repeat the phrase *to learn* was enough to make me think of the Limerick. *You have much to learn if you hope to earn a place among the high scorers.*

Ms. Rank continued, using the verb in a sentence. "*We go to class to learn*," she said. "*Nos peto ordo disco...*"

And that was when it hit me. Like an anvil falling out of the sky, directly onto my skull. I

gazed around at my classmates. What group of people has "much to learn?"

The answer: Students. High school students.

I was on a planet filled with students, all of whom had "much to learn."

What if the limerick was saying that the tomb was hidden right here, on Ludus? The very planet where I'd been twiddling my thumbs for the past five years?

Then I remembered that *Ludus* was also a Latin word, meaning "school." I pulled up my Latin dictionary to double-check the definition, and that was when I discovered that the word had more than one meaning. Ludus could mean *school*, but it could also mean *sport* or *game*.

Game.

I fell out of my folding chair and landed with a thud on the floor of my hideout. My OASIS console tracked this movement and made my avatar drop to the floor of my Latin classroom. The students around me chuckled as I scrambled back in to my seat.

I tried to calm down, and told myself not to get too excited. I might be jumping to conclusions. There were also hundreds of private schools and universities located on other planets inside the OASIS. The Limerick might refer to one of them. But I didn't think so. Ludus made more sense. Because James Halliday had donated billions to fund the creation of the OASIS public school system here, as a way to demonstrate the huge potential of the OASIS as an educational tool. And prior to his death, Halliday had set up a foundation to ensure that the OASIS Public School system would always have the money it needed to operate. The Halliday Learning Foundation also provided impoverished children around the globe with free OASIS hardware and Internet access, so that they could attend school inside the OASIS.

GSS's own programmers had designed and constructed Ludus and all of the schools on it. So it was entirely possible that Halliday was the one who'd given the planet its name. And he

would have also had access to the planet's source code, if he'd wanted to hide something here.

This realization triggered a series of others, which continued to detonate in my brain like atomic bombs going off, one after the other.

According to the original D&D module, the entrance to the *Tomb of Horrors* was hidden near "a low, flat-topped hill, about 200 yards wide and 300 yards long." The top of the hill was covered with large black stones, which were arranged in such a way that, if you viewed them from a great height, they resembled the eye sockets, nose holes, and teeth of a human skull.

But if there was a hill like that hidden somewhere on Ludus, wouldn't someone have stumbled across it by now?

Maybe not. There were hundreds of large forests scattered all over Ludus, in the vast sections of empty land that stood between the thousands of school campuses. Some of these forests were enormous, covering dozens of square miles. Most students never even set foot inside them, because there was nothing of interest to do or see there. Like its fields and rivers and lakes, the forests on Ludus were just computer generated landscaping, placed there to fill up the empty space.

Of course, during my avatar's long stay on Ludus, I'd explored a few of the forests within walking distance of my school, out of boredom. But all they contained were thousands of randomly generated trees, and the occasional bird, rabbit, or squirrel. (These tiny creatures weren't worth any experiences points if you killed them. I'd checked.)

So it was entirely possible that somewhere, hidden in one of Ludus's large, dense patches of forestland, there was a small stone-covered hill that resembled a human skull. But it had never once occurred to me to look for the Tomb here. Not until now.

I tried to pulling up a map of Ludus on my display, but I couldn't. The system wouldn't

let me, because while a class was in session, the simulation prevented students from accessing any data or programs that weren't authorized by their teacher, to prevent kids from watching movies, playing games, or chatting with each other instead of paying attention to the lesson.

"Shit!" I blurted out in frustration, interrupting Ms. Rank mid-conjugation.

She glanced over at me, frowning. "Is there a problem, Wade3?" she asked.

"Uh, no," I stammered. "No, sorry, Ms. Rank. My... cat just scratched me! Here in my living room." I rubbed my arm to indicate where I'd supposedly been scratched. Ms. Rank rolled her eyes and continued conjugating.

I looked at the time on my display. Exactly seventeen minutes and twenty seconds left until the end of the school day. I sat there with clenched teeth and counted off each second, my mind still racing.

Ludus was an inconspicuous world in Sector One. There wasn't supposed to be anything but schools here, so this was the last place a gunter would think to look for the Copper Key. It was definitely the last place *I* had ever thought to look, and that alone proved it was a perfect hiding place. But why would Halliday have chosen to hide the Copper Key here? Unless...

He'd wanted a school kid to find it.

I was still reeling from the implications of that thought when the bell finally rang. Around me, the other students began to file out of the room or vanish in their seats. Ms. Rank's avatar also disappeared, and in moments I was all alone in the classroom.

I pulled up a map of Ludus on my display. It appeared as a three-dimensional globe floating in front of me, and I gave it a spin with my hand. Ludus was a relatively small planet by OASIS standards, about a third the size of Earth's moon, with a circumference of exactly one thousand kilometers. A single contiguous continent covered the surface. There were no oceans.

Just a few dozen large lakes placed here and there. Since OASIS planets weren't real, they didn't have to obey the laws of nature. On Ludus, it was perpetually daytime, regardless of where you stood on the surface, and the sky was always a perfect cloudless blue. The stationary sun that hung overhead was nothing but a virtual light source, programmed into the imaginary sky.

On the map, the school campuses appeared as thousands of identical numbered rectangles dotting the planet surface. They were separated by rolling green fields, rivers, mountain ranges, and forests. The forests were of all shapes and sizes, and many of them bordered one of the schools. I switched the map to a flat view and selected the legend. Then I pulled up the *Tomb of Horrors* module. Near the front, it contained a crude illustration of the hill that concealed the tomb. I took a screenshot of this illustration, then dragged it over and dropped it onto the map. After a lot of fiddling with the map software, I figured out how to make it scan the entire surface of the planet for a hill with large black stones arranged in a skull-like pattern. One with a size, shape, and appearance that matched the illustration from the *Tomb of Horrors* module.

After about ten minutes of searching, the software highlighted a possible match.

I held my breath as I placed the close-up image from the Ludus map beside the illustration from the D&D module. The size and shape of the hill and the skull-pattern of the stones both matched the illustration perfectly.

I decreased the magnification on the map a bit, then pulled back far enough to confirm that the northern edge of the hill ended in a cliff of sand and crumbling gravel. Just like in the original Dungeons & Dragons module.

I let out a long triumphant yell that echoed in the empty classroom. Inside my tiny hideout, I was bouncing off the walls. I'd done it. I'd actually found the *Tomb of Horrors*!

When I finally managed to calm down, I did some quick calculations. The hill was near

the center of a large amoeba-shaped forest, located on the opposite the side of Ludus, over four-hundred kilometers from my school. My avatar could run at a maximum speed of five kilometers an hour, so it would take me over three days to get there on foot, if I ran non-stop the entire time. If I were able to teleport, I could be there within minutes. The fare wouldn't be much for such a short distance, maybe a few hundred credits. Unfortunately, that was still more than my current OASIS account balance, which was a big fat zero.

I considered my options. Aech would lend me the money for the fare, but I didn't want to ask for his help. If I couldn't reach the tomb on my own, I didn't deserve to reach it at all. Besides, I'd have to lie to Aech about what the money was for, and since I'd never asked him for a loan before, any excuse I gave would make him suspicious.

Thinking about Aech, I couldn't help but smile. He was really going to freak when he found out about this. The tomb was hidden less than *seventy kilometers from his school!* Practically his back yard.

That thought triggered an idea, one that made me leap to my feet. I ran out the classroom and down the hall.

Not only had I figured out a way to teleport to the other side of Ludus, I knew how to get my school to pay for it.

Each OASIS Public school had a bunch of different athletic teams. Wrestling, Soccer, Football, Baseball, Volleyball, and a few other sports that couldn't be played in the real world, like Quiddich and Zero-Gravity Capture the Flag. Students went out for these teams just like they did at schools in the real world. The teams had nightly practice, held pep rallies, and traveled to other schools on Ludus to compete against them. Our school gave out free teleportation vouchers to any student who wanted to attend an away game, so we could sit up in the stands and root for

old OPS #1232. I'd only taken advantage of this once, when our Capture the Flag team had played against Aech's school in the OPS championships.

When I arrived in the school office, I quickly scanned the activities schedule, while also consulting my map of Ludus. I found what I was looking for right away. That evening, our football team was playing an away game against OPS-0571, which was located roughly an hour's run from the forest where the tomb was hidden.

I reached out and selected the game, and a teleportation voucher instantly appeared in my avatar's inventory, good for one free round-trip to OPS-0571.

I stopped at my locker long enough to drop off my textbooks and grab my flashlight, sword, shield, and armor. Then I sprinted out the front entrance and across the expansive green lawn in front of the school.

When I reached the red borderline that marked the edge of the school grounds, I glanced around to make sure no one was watching me, then stepped across the line. As I did, the *Wade3* nametag floating above my head changed to read *Parzival*. Now that I was off school grounds, I could use my avatar name once again. I could also turn off my nametag completely, which is what I did now, because I wanted to travel incognito.

The nearest transport terminal was a short walk from the school, at the end of a cobblestone path. It was a large domed pavilion supported by a dozen ivory pillars. Each pillar bore an OASIS teleportation icon, a capital T in the center of a blue hexagon. School had only been out for a few minutes now, so I joined the steady stream of avatars filing into the terminal. Inside there were long rows of blue teleportation booths. Their shape and color reminded me of Doctor Who's Tardis. I stepped into the first empty booth I saw, and the doors closed automatically. I didn't need to enter my destination on the touchscreen because it was already

encoded on my voucher. I just slid the voucher into a slot and a world map of Ludus appeared on the screen, showing a line from my present location to my destination, a flashing green dot next to OPS-0571. The booth instantly calculated the distance I would be traveling (462 kilometers) and the amount my school would be invoiced for the fare (103 credits). The voucher was verified, the fare showed as *PAID*, and my avatar vanished.

I instantly reappeared in an identical booth, inside an identical transport terminal on the opposite side of the planet. As I ran outside, I spotted OPS-0571 off to the south. It looked exactly like my own school, except the surrounding landscape was different. I spotted some students from my school, walking toward the nearby football stadium, on their way to watch the game and root for our team. I wasn't sure why they bothered. They could have just as easily watched the game via vidfeed. And any empty seats in the stands would be filled with randomly-generated NPC fans, who would wolf down virtual sodas and hotdogs while cheering wildly. Occasionally, they would even do "the wave."

I was already running in the opposite direction, across a rolling green field that stretched out behind the school. A small mountain range loomed in the distance, and I could see the amoeba-shaped forest at its base.

I turned on my avatar's autorun feature, then opened my inventory and selected three of the items listed there. My armor appeared on my body, my shield appeared in a sling on my back, and my sword appeared in its scabbard, hanging at my side.

I was almost to the edge of the forest when my phone rang. The ID said it was Aech. Probably calling to see why I hadn't logged in to the Basement for our *Voltron* marathon yet. But if I answered the call, he would see a live video feed of my avatar, running across a field at top speed, with OPS-0571 shrinking in the distance behind me. I could conceal my current location

by taking the call as audio only, but that might make him suspicious. So I let the call roll to my vidmail. Aech's face appeared in a small window on my display. He was calling from a PvP arena somewhere. Dozens of avatars were locked in fierce combat on a multi-tiered playing field behind him.

"Yo, Z! What are you up to? Jerking off to Ladyhawke?" He flashed his Cheshire grin. "Give me a shout when you get a second. Gonna pop some corn later and have a Firefly marathon. You down?" He hung up and his image winked out.

I sent a text-only reply, saying I had a ton of homework and couldn't hang tonight. Then I pulled up the *Tomb of Horrors* module and began to read through it again, page by page. I did this slowly and carefully, because I was pretty sure it contained a detailed description of everything I was about to face.

In the far reaches of the world, under a lost and lonely hill, read the module's introduction, lies the sinister TOMB OF HORRORS. This labyrinthine crypt is filled with terrible traps, strange and ferocious monsters, rich and magical treasures, and somewhere within rests the evil Demi-Lich.

That last bit gave me chills. A lich was an undead creature, usually an incredibly powerful wizard or king who had employed dark magic to bind their intellect to their own reanimated corpse, thus achieving a perverted form of immortality. I'd encountered liches in countless video games and fantasy novels. They were to be avoided at all costs.

I studied the map of the tomb and the descriptions of its many rooms. The entrance was buried in the side of a crumbling cliff. A tunnel led down into a labyrinth of thirty-three rooms and chambers, each filled with a variety of vicious monsters, deadly traps, and (mostly cursed) treasure. If you somehow managed to survive all of the traps and find your way through the

labyrinth, you would eventually reach the Crypt of Acererak the Demi-Lich. The room was littered with treasure, but if you touched it, the undead King Acererak appeared and opened up a can of undead whup-ass on you. If, by some miracle, you managed to defeat the lich, you could take his treasure and leave the dungeon. Mission accomplished, quest completed.

If Halliday had recreated the *Tomb of Horrors* just as it was described in the module, I was in big trouble. My avatar was a Third Level wimp, with non-magical weapons and twenty-seven measly hit points. Nearly all of the traps and monsters described in the module could kill me easily. And if I somehow managed to make it past all of them and reach the crypt, the ultra-powerful lich could kill my avatar in seconds, just by looking at him.

But I had a few things going for me. First, I really didn't have much to lose. If my avatar was killed, I would lose my sword, shield, and leather armor, and the three levels I'd managed to gain over the past few years. I'd have to create a new first level avatar, which would spawn at my last login location, in front of my school locker. But then I could just return to the tomb and try again. And again and again, every night, collecting XPs and increasing in levels until I finally figured out where the Copper Key was hidden.

My other advantage (I hoped) was that I knew exactly what to expect once I entered the tomb, because the module provided me with a detailed map of the entire labyrinth. It also told me where all the traps were located, and how to disarm or avoid them. I also knew which rooms contained monsters, and where all of the weapons and treasure were hidden. Unless, of course, Halliday had changed things around. Then I was screwed. But at the moment, I was far too excited to be worried. After all, I'd just made the biggest, most important discovery of my life. I was just a few minutes away from the hiding place of the Copper Key!

I finally reached the edge of forest and ran inside. It was filled with thousands of

perfectly rendered maples, oaks, spruces and tamaracks. The trees looked as though they had been generated and placed using standard OASIS landscape templates, but the detail put into them was stunning. I stopped to examine one of the trees closely and saw ants crawling along the intricate ridges in its bark.

There was no path through the forest, so I kept the map in the corner of my display, and followed it to the skull-topped hill that marked the tomb entrance. It was right where the map said it would be. The low, flat-topped hill was located in a large glade at the center of the forest. As I stepped into the clearing, my heart was beating like a bass drum.

I climbed up onto the low hill top, and it was like stepping into the illustration from the D&D module. I couldn't believe my eyes. Halliday had reproduced everything exactly. Twelve massive black stones were arranged on the hilltop in the same pattern, resembling the features of a human skull.

I walked to the northern edge of the hilltop, then descended the crumbling cliff-face I found there. It was about twenty feet high and over three hundred feet long. By consulting the module map, I was able to locate the exact spot in the cliff where the entrance to the tomb was supposed to be buried. Then, using my shield as a shovel, I began to dig. Within a few minutes, I uncovered the mouth of a tunnel, which led into a dark underground corridor. The floor of the corridor was a mosaic of colorful stones, with a winding path of red tiles set into it. Once again, just like in the D&D module.

I moved the *Tomb of Horrors* dungeon map to the top right corner of my display and made it slightly transparent. Then I strapped my shield to my back and took out my flashlight. I took another quick look around to make sure no one was watching me, then, clutching my sword in my other hand, I entered the *Tomb of Horrors*.

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The walls of the corridor leading into the tomb were covered with dozens of strange paintings, depicting enslaved humans, orcs, elves, and other creatures. Each fresco appeared in the exact location described in the original D&D module. And so did the deadly pit traps that lined the corridor. Hidden in the tiled stone surface of the floor were several spring-loaded trap doors. If you stepped on one, it snapped open and dropped you into a pit filled with poisoned iron spikes. But because the location of each hidden trap door was clearly marked on my map, I was able to avoid all of them.

So far, everything followed the original module to the letter. If the same was true for the rest of the tomb, I believed that I might be able to survive long enough to locate the Copper Key. There were only four monsters lurking in this dungeon--a gargoyle, a zombie, a mummy, and the evil demi-lich Acererak himself. Since the map told me where each of them was hiding, I should be able to avoid fighting them. Unless, of course, one of them was guarding the Copper Key. And I could already guess who probably had that honor.

I tried to proceed carefully, as if I had no idea what to expect.

Avoiding the *Sphere of Annihilation* located at the end of the corridor, I located a hidden door beside the last pit trap. It opened into a small sloping passageway. My flashlight reached

into the darkness ahead, flickering off the damp stone walls. My surroundings made me feel like I was in a low-budget sword-and-sorcery flick, like *Hawk the Slayer* or *The Beastmaster*.

I began to make my way through the dungeon, room by room. Even though I knew where all of the traps were located, I still had to proceed carefully to avoid them all. Before leaving each room, I made sure to collect every piece of hidden treasure it contained. In a dark, forbidding chamber known as the Chapel of Evil, I found thousands of gold and silver coins hidden in the pews, right where they were supposed to be. It was more money than my avatar could carry, even with my Bag of Holding. I gathered up as many of the gold coins as I could and they appeared in my inventory. The currency was automatically converted and my credit counter jumped to over twenty-thousand, by far the largest amount of money I'd ever had in possession. And in addition to the credits, my avatar also received an equal number experience points for obtaining the coins.

As I continued deeper into the tomb, I obtained several magic items along the way. A *+1 Flaming Sword*. A *Gem of Seeing*. A *Bag of Holding*. A *+1 Ring of Protection*. I even found a suit of *+3 Full Plate* armor. These were the first magic items my avatar had ever possessed, and they made me feel unstoppable.

When I put it on the suit of magical armor, it shrank to fit my avatar perfectly. Its gleaming chrome appearance reminded me of the bad ass armor worn by the knights in the film *Excalibur* (1985). I actually switched to a third-person view for a few seconds, just to admire how cool my avatar looked wearing it.

The further I went, the more confident I became, because the tomb's layout and contents continued to match the module description exactly, down to the last detail. That is, until I reached the Pillared Throne Room.

It was a large square chamber with a high ceiling, filled with dozens of massive stone columns. A huge raised dais stood at the far end of the room, atop which rested an obsidian throne, inlaid with silver and ivory skulls.

All this matched the module description exactly, with one huge difference. The throne was supposed to be empty, but it wasn't. The demi-lich Acererak was sitting on it, glaring down at me silently. A dusty gold crown glinted on his withered head. He appeared exactly as he did in the illustration on the cover of the original *Tomb of Horrors* module. But according to its text, Acererak wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be waiting in a burial chamber, much deeper in the dungeon.

I considered running, then decided against it. If Halliday has placed the lich in this room, perhaps he'd placed the Copper Key here, too. I had to find out.

I walked across the chamber to the foot of the dais. From here I could see the lich more clearly. His teeth were two rows of pointed cut diamonds, arrayed in a lipless grin, and a large ruby was set in each of his eye sockets.

For the first time since entering the tomb, I wasn't sure what to do next.

My chances of surviving one-on-one combat with a demi-lich were non-existent. My wimpy +1 shortsword couldn't even affect him, and the two magic rubies in his eye sockets had the power to suck out my avatar's life force and kill me instantly. Even a party of six or seven high-level avatars would have had a difficult time defeating him.

I silently wished (not for the last time) that the OASIS was like an old adventure game, and that I could save my place. But it wasn't, and I couldn't. If my avatar died here, it would mean starting over with nothing. But there no point in hesitating now. If the lich killed me, I would come back tomorrow night and try again. The entire tomb should reset when the OASIS

server clock struck midnight. If it did, all of the hidden traps I'd disarmed would reset themselves, and the treasure and magic items would reappear.

I tapped the "record" icon at the edge of my display, so that whatever happened next would be stored in a vidcap file that I could play back and study it later. But when I tapped the icon, I got a "RECORDING NOT ALLOWED" message. It seemed that Halliday had disabled recording inside the tomb. I should've known.

I took a deep breath, raised my sword, and placed my right foot on the bottom step of the dais. As I did, there was a sound like cracking bones and twisting leather as Acererak slowly lifted up his head. The rubies in each of his eye sockets began to glow with an intense red light. I took several involuntary steps backward, expecting him to leap down and attack me. But he didn't rise from his throne. Instead, he lowered his head and fixed me with his chilling gaze. "Greetings, Parzival," he said in a rasping voice. "What is it that you seek?"

This caught me off guard. According to the module, the lich wouldn't speak. He was just supposed to attack, leaving me with no choice but to kill him or run for my life.

"I seek the Copper Key," I replied. Then I remembered I was speaking to a king, so I quickly bowed my head and dropped to one knee, then added: "Your majesty."

"Of course you do," Acererak said, motioning for me to rise. "And you've come to the right place." He stood, and his mummified skin cracked like old leather as he moved. I clutched my sword more tightly, still anticipating an attack.

"How can I know that you are worthy of possessing the Copper Key?" he asked.

Holy shit! How the hell was I supposed to answer *that*? And what if I gave the wrong answer? Would he suck out my soul and incinerate me?

I racked my brain for a suitable reply. The best I could come up with was: "Allow me to

prove my worth, noble Acererak."

The lich let out a long, disturbing cackle, which echoed off the chamber's stone walls.

"Very well!" he said. "You shall prove your worth by facing me in a joust!"

I'd never heard of an undead lich king challenging someone to a joust. Especially not in a subterranean burial chamber. "All right," I said uncertainly. "But won't we be needing horses for that?"

"Not horses," he replied, stepping away from his throne. "*Birds*."

He waved a skeletal hand at his throne. There was a brief flash of light, accompanied by a transformation sound effect (which I was pretty sure had been lifted from the old *Super Friends* cartoon). The throne suddenly melted and morphed into a old coin-operated video game cabinet. There were two joysticks on its control panel, one yellow and one blue. I couldn't help but grin as I read the name on the game's backlit marquee: *JOUST*. Williams Electronics, 1982.

"Best two out of three games," Acererak rasped. "If you win, I shall grant you what you seek."

"What if *you* win?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"If I am victorious," the lich said, the rubies in his eye sockets blazing even brighter, "Then you shall die!" A ball of swirling orange flame suddenly appeared in his right hand. He raised it threateningly.

"Of course," I said. "That's was my first guess. Just wanted to double-check."

The fireball in Acererak's hand vanished, and then he stretched out his leathery palm. In it were two shiny quarters. "The games are on me," he said. He stepped up to the Joust machine and dropped both quarters into the left coin slot. The game emitted two low electronic chimes and the credit counter jumped from zero to two.

Acererak took hold of the yellow joystick on the left side of the control panel and closed his bony fingers around it. "Art though ready?" he croaked.

"Yeah," I said, taking a deep breath. I cracked my knuckles and grabbed the Player Two joystick with my left hand, poising my right hand over the "Flap" button.

Acererak rocked his head from left to right, cracking his neck. It sounded like a snapping tree branch. Then he slapped the Two Player button and the joust began.

Joust was a classic 80s arcade game with a strange premise. Each player controls a knight armed with a lance. Player 1 is mounted on an ostrich, while Player 2 is mounted on a stork. You flap your wings to fly around the screen and "joust" with the other player, and also against several enemy knights (who are all mounted on buzzards). When you crash into an opponent, whoever's lance is higher on the screen wins the joust. The loser is killed and loses a life. Whenever you kill one of the enemy knights, their buzzard craps out a green egg, which then hatches into another enemy knight, if you don't scoop it up in time. There's also a winged pterodactyl that appears once in awhile to wreak havoc.

I hadn't played *Joust* in over a year. It was one of Aech's favorite games, and for awhile he'd had a *Joust* cabinet in his chatroom. He used to challenge me to a game whenever he wanted to settle an argument or some asinine pop culture dispute. For a few months, we played almost every day. In the beginning, Aech was slightly better than me, and he had a habit of gloating over his victories. This had really irked me, so I started practicing *Joust* on my own, playing a few games a night against an AI opponent. I honed my skills until I finally got good enough to beat Aech, repeatedly and consistently. Then *I* began to gloat over him, savoring my revenge. The last time we'd played, I'd rubbed his nose in defeat so mercilessly that he'd flipped out and vowed never to play me again. Since then, we'd used Street Fighter II to settle our disputes.

My Joust skills were a lot rustier than I thought. I spent the first five minutes of the game just trying to relax, and to re-acquaint myself with the controls and the rhythm of the game. During this time, Acererak managed to kill me twice, mercilessly slamming his winged mount into mine at the perfect trajectory. He handled the game's controls with the calculated perfection of a machine. Which, of course, was exactly what he was--cutting-edge NPC artificial intelligence, programmed by Halliday himself.

By the end of our first game I had started to get my old Joust groove back. The moves and tricks I'd picked up during all those marathon bouts with Aeche were starting to come back to me. But Acererak didn't need a warm-up. He was in perfect form from the outset, and there was no way I could make up for my weak showing at the start of the game. He killed off my last man before I even cleared 30,000 points. Embarrassing.

"One game down, Parzival," he said, flashing a rictus grin. "One more to go."

He didn't waste time by making me stand there and watch him play out the rest of his game. He reached up and found the power switch at the rear of the game cabinet, then flipped it off and back on, resetting the game. After the screen cycled through its chromatic Williams Electronics boot-up sequence, he snatched two more quarters out of thin air and dropped them into the game.

"Art thou ready?" he inquired again, hunching over the control panel.

I hesitated a moment, then asked: "Actually, would you mind if we switched sides? I'm used to playing on the left."

It was true. When Aeche and I played in the Basement, I always took the ostrich side. Being on the right side during the first game had screwed up my rhythm a bit.

Acererak appeared to consider my request for a moment. Then he nodded. "Certainly," he

said. He stepped back from the cabinet and we switched sides. It suddenly occurred to me just how absurd this scene was: a guy wearing a suit of armor, standing next to an undead lich king, both hunched over the controls of a classic arcade game. It was the sort of surreal image you'd expect to see on the cover of an old issue of *Heavy Metal* or *Dragon* magazine.

Acererak slapped the Two Player button and my eyes locked on the screen.

The next game started out badly for me, too. My opponent's movements were relentless and precise, and I spent the first few waves just trying to evade him. I was also distracted by the incessant click of his skeletal index finger as he tapped his Flap button.

I unclenched my jaw and cleared my mind, forcing myself not to think about where I was, who I was playing against, or what was at stake. I tried to imagine that I was back in the Basement, playing against Aeche.

It worked. I slipped into the zone, and the tide began to turn in my favor. I began to find the flaws in the lich's playing style, the holes in his programming. This was something I'd learned over the years, mastering hundreds of different video games. There was always a trick to beating a computer-controlled opponent. At a game like this, a gifted human player could always triumph over the game's AI, because software couldn't improvise. It could either react randomly, or in a limited number of predetermined ways, based on a finite number of pre-programmed conditions. This was an axiom in video games, and would be until humans invented true artificial intelligence.

Our second game came right down to wire, but by then end of it, I'd spotted a pattern to the lich's playing technique. By changing my ostrich's direction at a certain moment, I could get him to slam his stork into one of the oncoming buzzards. By repeating this move, I was able to pick off his extra lives, one by one. I died several times myself in the process, but I finally took

him down during the tenth wave, with no extra lives of my own to spare.

I stepped back from the machine and sighed with relief. I could feel rivulets of sweat running down my forehead and around the edge of my visor. I wiped at my face with the sleeve of my shirt, and my avatar mimicked this motion.

"Good game," Acererak said. Then, to my surprise, he offered me his withered claw of a hand. I shook it, chuckling nervously as I did so.

"Yeah," I replied. "Good game, man." It occurred to me then that, in a weird way, I was actually playing against Halliday. I quickly pushed that thought out of my head, afraid that I might psych myself out.

Acererak once again produced two quarters and dropped them into the Joust machine. "This one is for all marbles," he said. "Art thou ready?"

I nodded. This time, I took the liberty of slapping the Two Player button myself.

Our final tie-breaking game lasted longer than the first two combined. During the final wave, there were so many buzzards on the screen that it was hard to move without getting dusted by one of them. The lich and I faced off one final time, at the very top of the playing field, both of us incessantly hitting our flap buttons while slamming our joysticks left and right. Acererak made a final desperate move to avoid my charge and dropped a micro-meter too low. His final mount died in a tiny pixilated explosion.

Player Two Game Over appeared on the screen, and the lich let out a long blood-curdling howl of rage. He smashed an angry fist into the side of the *Joust* cabinet, shattering it into a million tiny pixels that scattered and bounced across the floor. Then he turned to face me.

"Congratulations, Parzival," he said, bowing low. "You played well."

"Thank you, noble Acererak," I replied, resisting the urge to jump up and down and shake

my ass victoriously in his general direction. Instead, I solemnly returned his bow. As I did, the lich suddenly transformed into a tall human wizard dressed in flowing black robes. I recognized him immediately. It was Halliday's avatar, Anorak.

I stared at him, utterly speechless.

"Now," the wizard said, speaking with Halliday's familiar voice. "Your reward."

The chamber suddenly filled with the sound of a full orchestra. Triumphant horns were quickly joined by a stirring string section. I recognized the music. It was the last track from John Williams original *Star Wars* score, used in the scene where Princess Leia gives Luke and Han get their medals (and Chewbacca, as you may recall, gets the shaft).

As the music built to a crescendo, Anorak stretched out his right hand. There, resting in his open palm, was the Copper Key. The item for which millions of people had been searching for the past five years. As he handed it to me, the music suddenly faded out, and in the same instant, I heard a chime sound. I'd just gained fifty-thousand experience points, enough to raise my avatar all the way up to 5th level.

"Farewell, Sir Parzival," Anorak said. "I bid you good luck on your quest." And before I could ask what I was supposed to do next, or where I could find the first gate, he dissolved in a shower of blue light, like someone beaming up on an old *Star Trek* episode.

I suddenly found myself standing alone on the empty dais. I looked down at the Copper Key in my hand and felt overcome with wonder and elation. It looked just as it had in *Anorak's Invitation*. A simple antique copper key. Its oval-shaped bow was embossed with the roman numeral *I*, and the blade had an E-shaped projection at the end. I turned it over in my avatar's hand, watching the torchlight play across the roman numeral, and that's when I spotted the inscription. Two small lines of text engraved into the metal. I tilted the key up to the light and

read them aloud:

*What you seek lies hidden in the trash
on the deepest level of Daggorath*

I didn't even need to read it a second time. I instantly understood its meaning. I knew exactly where I needed to go and what I would have to do once I got there.

"Hidden in the trash" was a reference to the ancient TRS-80 line of computers, made by Tandy and Radio Shack in the 70s and 80s. Halliday's first computer had been a TRS-80, with a whopping 16k of RAM. Computer users of that era had given the TRS-80 the derogatory nickname of *Trash 80*.

What you seek lies hidden in the trash.

That must be Halliday's way of saying that the First Gate was hidden inside his old TRS-80 computer. And I knew exactly where to find a replica of that computer in the OASIS. Every gunter did.

In the early days of the OASIS, Halliday had created a small planet in Sector 7 named Middletown, named after his hometown in Ohio. The planet was the site of a meticulous recreation of his hometown, as it was in the late 1980s. Halliday said he'd recreated his hometown inside the OASIS so that he could "visit his childhood whenever he felt like it." That saying about how you can never go home again? Halliday had found a way. Middletown was one of his pet projects, and he'd spent years coding and refining it. It was well known (to gunters, at least) that one of the most detailed and accurate parts of the Middletown simulation was the recreation of Halliday's boyhood home.

I'd never been able to visit it, but I'd seen hundreds of screenshots and vidcaps of the place. Inside Halliday's bedroom there was a replica of his first computer, a TRS-80 Color Computer 2. I was positive that was where he'd hidden the First Gate. And the second line of text

inscribed on the Copper Key said how to reach it:

On the deepest level of Daggorath.

Dagorath was a word in *Sindarin*, the Elvish language J.R.R. Tolkien had created for *The Lord of the Rings*. I'd taught myself how to translate Sindarin to English. The word Dagorath meant 'battle.' But Tolkien had spelled the word with just one 'g', not two. *Daggorath* (with two g's) could only refer to one thing: an incredibly obscure computer game called *Dungeons of Daggorath* released in 1982. The game had been made for just one platform, the TRS-80 Color Computer.

Halliday had written in *Anorak's Almanac* that *Dungeons of Daggorath* was the game that made him decide he wanted to become a video game designer.

Halliday has also coded a painstakingly detailed recreated of his hometown inside the OASIS, on the planet Middletown (named after the town itself). And I knew that *Dungeons of Daggorath* was one of the games sitting in the shoebox next to the TRS-80 in the recreation of his childhood bedroom.

The inscription on the key must mean that the First Gate was hidden inside that TRS-80, on the deepest level of the *Dungeons of Daggorath*. So all I had to do was teleport to Middletown, go to Halliday's house, sit down at his TRS-80, play the game, reach the bottom level of the dungeon, and... that was where I'd find the First Gate.

At least, that was my interpretation.

My brain was already jumping ahead. Middletown was in Sector 7, a long way from Ludus. But I'd collected more than enough gold and treasure to pay for the teleportation fare to get there. By my avatar's previous standards, I was now filthy rich.

I checked the time. 11:03pm, OST (OASIS Server Time, which also happened to be

Eastern Standard Time). I had eight hours before I had to be at school. That might be enough time. I could go for it, right now. Sprint like hell, back up through the dungeon to the surface, then hightail it back to the nearest transport terminal. From there, I could teleport directly to Middletown. If I left right now, I should be able to reach Halliday's TRS-80 in under an hour.

I knew I should get some sleep first. I'd been logged in to the OASIS for almost fifteen solid hours. And tomorrow was Friday. I could teleport to Middletown right after school and then I'd have the whole weekend to tackle the First Gate.

But who was I kidding? There was no way I'd be able to sleep tonight, or sit through school tomorrow. I had to go, *now*.

I began to sprint for the exit, then slid to a halt in the middle of the chamber. Through the open door, I saw a long shadow bouncing on the wall, accompanied by the echo of approaching footsteps.

A few seconds later, the silhouette of an avatar appeared in the doorway. I was about to reach for my sword when I realized I was still holding the Copper Key in my hand. I shoved it into a pouch on my belt, then fumbled my sword out its scabbard. As I raised my blade, the avatar spoke.

0009

"Who the hell are you?" the silhouette demanded. The voice sounded like that of a young woman, itching for a fight.

When I failed to answer, a stocky female avatar stepped forward, out of the shadows and into the chamber's flickering torchlight. She had raven hair, styled Joan-of-Arc short, and appeared to be in her late teens or early twenties. As she got closer, I realized that I knew her. We'd never actually met, but I recognized her face from the dozens of screenshots she'd posted to her blog over the years.

It was Art3mis.

She wore a suit of scaled gunmetal-blue armor, which looked more sci-fi than fantasy. A set of twin blaster pistols were slung on her hips in quick-draw holsters, and there was a curved Elvish longsword in a scabbard across her back. She wore fingerless *Road Warrior style* racing gloves and a pair of classic Ray-Bans shades. Overall, she seemed to be going for a sort of mid-80s post-apocalyptic cyberpunk girl-next-door look. And it was working for me, in a big way. In a word: *Hot*.

As she walked toward me, the heels of her studded combat boots clocked on the stone floor. She halted just out of my sword's reach, but did not draw her own blade. Instead, she slid

her shades up onto her forehead and looked me up and down, making a blatant show of sizing me up.

For a moment I was too star-struck to speak. To break my paralysis, I reminding myself that the person operating the avatar in front of me might not be a woman at all. This "girl," who I'd been cyber-crushing on for the past three years, might very well be an obese, hairy-knuckled guy named Chuck. Once I'd conjured up that sobering image, I was able to focus on my situation, and the question at hand: *What was she doing here?* After five years of searching, I thought it was highly improbable that we'd both discovered the Copper Key's hiding place on the same night. Too big of a coincidence.

"Cat got your tongue?" she asked. "I said: Who. The hell. Are you?"

Like her, I had my avatar's nametag switched off. Clearly, I wanted to remain anonymous, especially under the circumstances. Couldn't she take the hint?

"Greetings," I said, bowing slightly. "I am Juan Sanchez Villalobos Ramirez."

She smirked. "Chief metallurgist to King Charles V of Spain?"

"At your service, " I replied, grinning. She'd caught my obscure *Highlander* quote right off the bat, and had then thrown another right back at me. It was Art3mis, all right.

"Cute." She glanced over my shoulder, up at the empty dais, then back at me. "So, spill it. How did you do?"

"Do at what?"

"Jousting against Acererak?" she said, as if it were obvious.

Suddenly, I understood. This wasn't the first time she'd been here. I wasn't the first gunter to decipher the limerick and find the *Tomb of Horrors*. Art3mis had beaten me to it. And since she knew about the *Joust* game, she'd obviously already faced the lich herself. But if she already

had the Copper Key, there wouldn't be any reason for her to come back here. So she clearly didn't have the key yet. She'd faced the lich at *Joust* and he'd beaten her. But it appeared he hadn't killed her. So she'd come back to try again. For all I knew, this could be her eighth or ninth attempt. And she obviously assumed the lich had beaten me, too.

"Hello?" she said, tapping her right foot impatiently. "I'm waiting?"

I considered making a break for it. Just running right past her, back out through the labyrinth and up to the surface. But if I ran, she might suspect that I had the key, and decide to try and kill me to get it. (This was before I'd learned that the keys were non-transferable. You couldn't drop one of them, or give them to another avatar. And if you were killed while holding one, it vanished right along with your body.) The surface of Ludus was clearly marked as a safe zone on the OASIS map, so no player-versus-player combat was allowed. But I had no way of knowing if the same was true of this tomb, because it was underground, and it didn't even appear on the planet map.

Art3mis looked like a formidable opponent. Body armor. Blaster pistols. And that Elvish sword she was carrying might be vorpal. If even half of the exploits she'd mentioned on her blog were true, her avatar was probably at least 14th Level. Or higher. If PvP combat *was* permitted down here, she'd kick my 5th Level ass.

So I had to play this cool. I decided to lie.

"I got creamed," I said. "*Joust* isn't really my game."

She relaxed her posture slightly. That seemed to be the answer she wanted to hear. "Yeah, same here," she said, in a commiserating tone. "Halliday programmed old King Acererak with some pretty wicked A.I., didn't he? He's insanely hard to beat." She glanced down at my sword, which I was still brandishing defensively. "You can put that away. I'm not gonna bite you."

I kept my sword raised. "Is this tomb in a PvP zone?"

"Dunno. You're the first avatar I've ever run into down here." She tilted her head slightly and smiled. "I suppose there's only one way to find out."

She drew her sword, lightning fast, and turned into a clockwise spin, bringing its glowing blade around and down at me, all in a single blur of motion. At the last second, I managed to tilt my own blade upward to awkwardly parry the attack. But both of our swords halted suddenly, inches apart, as if held back by some invisible force. A message flashed on my display:

PLAYER-VS-PLAYER COMBAT NOT PERMITTED HERE!

"Well, there you have it," she said, grinning. "This is no-PvP zone after all." She whipped her sword around in a figure eight pattern, then smoothly replaced it in the scabbard on her back. Very slick.

I sheathed my own sword, too, but without any fancy moves. "Halliday must not have wanted anyone to duel for the right to joust the king," I said.

"Yeah," she said, grinning. "Lucky for you."

"Lucky for *me*?" I replied, folding my arms. "How do you figure?"

She motioned to the empty dais behind me. "You must really be hurting for hit points right now, after fighting Acererak."

So... if Acererak beat you at Joust, then you had to fight him. *Good thing I won*, I thought. *Or else I'd probably be creating a new avatar right about now.*

"I've got hit points galore," I fibbed. "That lich was a total wuss."

"Oh really?" she said suspiciously. "I'm 15th Level, and he's nearly killed me every time I've had to fight him. I have to stock up on extra healing potions every time I come down here." She eyed me a moment, then said: "I also recognize your sword and the armor you're wearing.

You got them both right here in this dungeon, which means they're better than whatever your avatar had before. You look like a low-level wimpazoid to me, Juan Ramirez. And I think you're hiding something."

Now that I knew she couldn't attack me, I considered telling her the truth. Why not just whip out Copper Key and show it to her? But I thought better of it. The smart move now was to split and head straight for Middletown, while I still had a head start. She still didn't have the key, and might not get it for several more days. If I hadn't already had so many hours of Joust practice under my belt, god knows how many attempts it would have taken me to beat Acererak two games out of three.

"Think what you want, She-Ra," I said, moving past her. "Maybe I'll run in to you offworld sometime. We can duke it out then." I gave her a small wave. "See ya round."

"Where do you think you're going?" she said, following me.

"Home," I said, still walking.

"But what about the lich? And the Copper Key?" She motioned to the empty dais. "He'll respawn in a few minutes. When the OASIS server clock hits midnight, the whole tomb resets. If you wait right here, you'll get another shot at beating him, without having to make your way through all of those traps again. That's why I've been coming here just before midnight, every other day. So I can get in two attempts in a row, back to back."

Clever. If I hadn't succeeded on my first try, I wondered how long it would have taken me to figure that out. "I thought we could take turns playing against him," I said. "I just played him, so it'll be your turn at midnight, okay? Then I'll come back after midnight tomorrow. We can alternate days until one of us beats him. Sound fair?"

"I suppose," she said, studying me. "But you should stick around anyway. Something

different might happen if there are two avatars here at midnight. Anorak probably prepared for that contingency. Maybe two instances of the lich will appear, one for each of us to play? Or maybe--"

"I prefer to play in private," I said. "Let's just take turns, okay?" I was almost to the exit when she stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

"Come on, hold up a second," she said, her voice softening. "Please?"

I could have kept walking, right through her avatar. But I didn't. I was dying to get to Middletown and locate the First Gate, but I was also standing in front of the famous Art3mis, someone I'd fantasized about meeting for three years. And she was even cooler in person than I'd imagined. I mean, I'd only been around her for a few minutes, and she'd already quoted *Highlander* *and* referenced Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. I was dying to spend more time with her. I wanted, as the 80s poet Howard Jones would say, to get to know her well. If I left now, I might never run into her again.

"Listen," she said, glancing at her boots. "I apologize for calling you a low-level wimpazoid. That was not cool. I insulted you."

"It's okay. You were right, actually. I'm only 5th Level."

"Regardless, you're a fellow gunter. And a clever one, too, or you wouldn't be standing here. So, I want you to know that I respect you, and acknowledge your skills. And I apologize for the trash talk."

"Apology accepted. No worries."

"Cool." She looked relieved. Her avatar's facial expressions were extremely realistic, which usually meant they were synched to those of their user. "I was just a little freaked to find you here," she said. "I mean, I *knew* someone else would find this place eventually. Just not this

quickly. I've had this tomb all to myself for awhile now."

"How long?" I asked, not really expecting her to say.

She hesitated, then began to speak very rapidly. "Three weeks!" she said, exasperated.

"I've been coming here for three freakin' weeks, trying to beat that stupid lich at that asinine game! And his A.I. is ridiculous! I mean, you know. I'd never even played *Joust* before this, and now it's driving me out of my gourd! I swear I was *this close* to finally beating his ass a few days ago, but then..." She raked her fingers through her hair in frustration. "Argh! I can't sleep. I can't eat. My grades are going down the tubes, because I've been ditching to practice *Joust*--"

I was about to ask if she went to school here on Ludus, but she continued to talk, faster and faster, as if a floodgate had opened in her brain. The words just poured out of her. She was barely pausing to breath.

"--and I came here tonight, thinking this would be the night I finally beat that bastard and got the Copper Key, but when I got here, I saw that someone had already uncovered the entrance. So I realized my worst fear had finally come true. Someone else had found the tomb. So I ran all the way down here, totally freaking out. I mean, I wasn't *too* worried, because I didn't think anyone could possibly beat Acererak on their first try, but still--" She paused to take a deep breath and then stopped abruptly.

"Sorry," she said a second later. "I tend to ramble when I'm nervous. Or excited. And right now I'm sort of both, because I've been dying to talk to someone about all of this, but obviously I couldn't tell a soul, right? You can't just mention in casual conversation that you've--" She cut herself off again, then said, "Man, I'm such a motormouth! A jabberjaw. A flibbertigibbet." She mimed zipping her lips, locking them, and tossing away the imaginary key. Without thinking, I mimed grabbing the key out of the air and unlocking her lips. This made her

laugh--an honest, genuine laugh that involved a fair amount of snorting, which made me laugh, too.

She was so charming. Her geeky demeanor and hyperkinetic speech pattern reminded me of Jordan, my favorite character in the movie *Real Genius* (1985). I'd never felt such an instant connection with another person, in the real world or in the OASIS. Not even with Aeche. I felt lightheaded.

When she finally got her laughter under control, she said: "I really need to set up a filter to edit out that laugh of mine."

"No, you shouldn't," I said. "It's a pretty great laugh, actually." I was wincing at every word coming out of my mouth. "I have a dorky laugh, too."

Great, Wade, I thought. You just called her laugh 'dorky.' Real smooth.

But she just gave me a shy smile and mouthed the words *thank you*.

I suddenly felt like kissing her. Simulation or not, I didn't care. I was working up the courage to ask for her contact card when she stuck out her hand.

"I forgot to introduce myself," she said. "I'm Art3mis."

"I know," I said, shaking her hand. "I'm actually a huge fan of your blog. I've been a loyal reader for years."

"Seriously?" Her avatar actually seemed to blush.

I nodded. "It's an honor to meet you," I said. "I'm Parzival." I realized that I was still holding her hand and made myself let go.

"Parzival, eh?" She tilted her head slightly. "Named after the Knight of the Round Table who found the grail, right? Very cool."

I nodded, now even more smitten. I almost always had to explain my name to people.

"And Artemis was the Greek Goddess of the hunt, right?"

"Right! But the normal spelling was already taken, so I had to use a leet spelling, with a number 3 in place of the e."

"I know," I said. "You mentioned that once on your blog. Two years ago." I almost cited the date of the actual blog entry, before I realized it would make me sound like even *more* of a cyber-stalking super-creep.

"That's right," she said, grinning at me. "I did."

She stretched out a racing-gloved hand and offered me one of her contact cards. If someone tried to call or email you without your permission, their message would get filtered or rejected. You could design your card to look like just about anything. Art3mis had coded hers to look like a vintage Kenner Star Wars action figure (still in the blister pack). The figure was a crude plastic rendering of her avatar, with the same face, hair, and outfit. Tiny versions of her guns and sword were included. Her contact info was printed on the card, above the figure:

Art3mis
15th Level Warrior/Mage
(Vehicle Sold Separately)

On the back of the card there were links to her blog, email, and phone line.

Not only was this the first time a girl had ever given me her card, it was also, by far, the coolest contact card I had ever seen.

"This is, by far, the coolest contact card I have ever seen," I said. "Thank you!"

I handed her one of my own cards, which I'd designed to look like an original Atari 2600 *Adventure* cartridge, with my contact info printed on the label:

Parzival
5th Level Warrior
(Use with Joystick Controller)

"This is awesome!" she said, looking it over. "What a wicked design!"

"Thanks," I said, blushing under my visor. I wanted to propose marriage.

I added her card to my inventory, and it appeared on my item list, right below the Copper Key. Seeing the key listed there suddenly snapped me back to reality. What the hell was I doing, standing here making small talk with this girl, when the First Gate was waiting for me! I checked the time. Less than five minutes until midnight.

"Listen, Art3mis," I said. "It was truly awesome to meet you. But I gotta get going. The server is about to reset, and I want to clear out of here before all those traps reset."

"Oh... Okay." She actually sounded disappointed! "I should probably prepare for my *Joust* match anyway. But here, let me hit you with a healing spell before you go." Before I could protest, she laid a hand on my avatar's chest and muttered a few arcane words. My hit point counter jumped back up to maximum. "There you go."

"Thank you," I said. "But you shouldn't have. We're competitors, you know."

"I know. But we can still be friends, right?"

"I hope so."

"Besides, the Third Gate is still a long way off. I mean, it took five years for the two of us to get this far. And if I know Halliday's game design strategy, things are just going to get harder from here on out." She lowered her voice. "Listen, are you sure you don't want to stick around? I bet we can both play at once. We can give each other Jousting tips. I've started to spot some flaws in the king's technique--"

Now I was starting to feel like a jerk for lying to her. "That's a really kind offer. But I have to go." I searched for a plausible excuse. "I've got school in the morning."

She nodded, but her expression suddenly shifted back to one of suspicion. Then her eyes widened, as though an idea had just occurred to her. Her pupils began to dart around, focused on

the space in front of her, and I realized she was looking something up in a browser window. A few seconds later, her face contorted in anger.

"You lying bastard!" she shouted. "You dishonest sack of crap!" She made her web browser window visible to me, then spun it around. It displayed the Scoreboard on Halliday's website. In all the excitement, I'd forgotten to check it.

It looked just as it had for the past five years, with one change. My avatar's name now appeared at the very top of the list, in first place, with a score of 10,000 points beside it. The other nine slots still contained Halliday's initials, JDH, followed by zeroes.

"Holy shit," I muttered. When Anorak had handed me the Copper Key, I'd become the first gunter in history to score points in the contest. And, I suddenly realized, since the Scoreboard was viewable to the entire world, my avatar had just become famous.

I checked the newsfeed headlines just to be sure. Every single one of them contained my avatar's name. Stuff like: *MYSTERIOUS AVATAR 'PARZIVAL' MAKES HISTORY* and *PARZIVAL FINDS COPPER KEY*

I stood there in a daze, forcing myself to breathe. Then Art3mis gave me a shove, which, of course, I didn't feel. She did knock my avatar backward a few feet, though. "*You beat him on your first try?*" she shouted.

I nodded. "He won the first game, but I won the last two. Just barely, though."

"*Shiiiiit!*" she screamed, clenching her fists. "How in the hell did you do beat him on your *first try?*" I got the distinct impression she wanted to sock me in the face.

"It was pure luck," I said. "I used to play Joust all the time against a friend of mine. So I'd already had a ton of preparation. I'm sure if you'd had as much practice--"

"Please!" she growled, holding up a hand. "Do not patronize me, okay?" Then she let out

what I can only describe as a prolonged howl of frustration. "I don't believe this! Do you realize I've been trying to beat him for *five goddamn weeks*!"

"But a minute ago you said it was three weeks--"

"Don't interrupt me!" She gave me another shove. "I've been practicing *Joust* non-stop for over a month now! I'm seeing flying ostriches in my goddamn sleep!"

"That can't be pleasant."

"And you just walk in here, and nail it on the first try!" She started pounding her fist into the center of her forehead, and then I knew she was pissed at herself, not me.

"Listen," I said, "It really was luck. I've got a knack for classic arcade games. That's my specialty." I shrugged. "Stop hitting yourself like Rainman, okay?"

She stopped and stared me. Then, after a few seconds, she let out a long sigh. "Why couldn't it be Centipede? Or Mrs. Pac-Man? Or Burgertime? Then I'd probably have already cleared the First Gate by now!"

"Well, I don't know about *that*," I said.

She glared at me a second, then gave me a devilish smile. She turned to face the exit and began to execute a series of elaborate gestures in the air in front of her, while whispering the words of some incantation.

"Hey," I said. "Hold on a sec. What are you doing?"

But I already knew. As she finished casting her spell, a giant stone wall suddenly appeared, completely covering the chamber's only exit. Shit! She'd cast a *barrier* spell. I was trapped inside the room.

"Oh, come on!" I shouted. "Why did you do that?"

"You seemed to be in an awful big hurry to get out here. My guess is that when Anorak

gave you the Copper Key, he also gave you some sort of clue about to the location of the First Gate. Right? That's where you're headed next, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. I thought about denying it, but what was the point now?

"So unless you can nullify my spell--and I'm betting you can't, Mr. Fifth-Level-Warrior--then that barrier will keep you in here until just after midnight, when the server resets. All of those traps you disarmed on your way down here will reset. That should slow down your exit considerably."

"Yes," I said. "It will."

"And while you're busy making your way back up to the surface, I'll have another shot at defeating Acererak. And this time I'm gonna destroy him. Then I'll be right behind you, mister."

I folded my arms. "If the king has been beating your ass for the past five weeks, what makes you're finally going to win tonight?"

"Competition brings out the best in me," she replied. "It always has. And now I've got some serious competition."

I glanced over at the magical barrier she'd created. She was 15th level, so it would remain in existence for fifteen minutes. All I could do was stand there and wait for it to dissipate.

"You're evil, you know that?" I said.

She grinned and shook her head. "Chaotic Neutral, sugar."

I grinned back at her. "I'm still going to beat you to the First Gate, you know."

"Probably," she said. "But this is just the beginning. You'll still have to clear it. And then are still two more keys to find, and two more gates to clear. Plenty of time for me to catch up with you, and then leave you in the dust, ace."

"We'll see about that, lady."

She motioned to the window displaying the Scoreboard. "You're famous now, " she said.

"You realize what that means, don't you?"

"I haven't had much time to think about it yet."

"Well, I have. I've been thinking about it for the past five weeks. Your avatar's name on that Scoreboard is going to change everything. The public will become obsessed with the contest again, just like when it first began. The media is already going berserk. By tomorrow, Parzival will be a household name."

Suddenly I felt a little queasy.

"You could become famous in the real world, too," she said. "If you reveal your true identity to the media."

"I'm not an idiot."

"Good. Because there are billions of dollars up for grabs, and now everyone is going to assume you know how and where to find the Egg. There are a lot of people who would kill for that information."

"I know that," I said. "And I appreciate your concern. But I'll be fine."

But I didn't feel fine. I hadn't really considered any of this, maybe because I'd never really believed I actually would be in this position.

We stood there in silence, watching the clock and waiting. "What would you do if you won?" she suddenly asked. "How would you spend all that money?"

I had spent a lot of time thinking about *that*. I daydreamed about it all the time. Aech and I had made absurd lists of things we would do and buy if we won the prize.

"I don't know," I said. "The usual, I guess. Move into a mansion. Buy a bunch of cool shit. Not be poor."

"Wow. Big dreamer," she said. "And after you buy your mansion and your 'cool shit,' what will you do with the one-hundred and thirty billion you'll have left over?"

Not wanting her to think I was some shallow idiot, I impulsively blurted out what I'd always dreamed of doing if I won. It was something I'd never told anyone.

"I'd have a nuclear-powered interstellar spacecraft constructed in earth's orbit," I said. "Then I'd would stock it with a lifetime supply of food and water, a self-sustaining biosphere, and a supercomputer loaded with every movie, book, song, videogame, and piece of artwork that human civilization has ever created, along with a standalone copy of the OASIS. Then I'd invite a few of my closest friends to come aboard, along with a team of doctors and scientists, and then we'd all get the hell out of Dodge. Leave the solar system, and start looking for an extra-solar earthlike planet."

I hadn't thought this plan all the way through yet, of course. There were still a lot of details I had to work out.

She raised an eyebrow. "That's pretty ambitious," she said. "But you do realize that nearly half the people on this planet are starving, right?" There was no malice in her voice. She sounded like she genuinely believed I might not be aware of this fact.

"Yes, I know," I said defensively. "The reason so many people are starving is because we've wrecked the planet. The Earth is dying, you know? It's time to leave."

"That's a pretty negative outlook," she said. "If I win that dough, I'm going to make sure everyone on this planet has enough to eat. Once we tackle world hunger, then we can figure out how to fix the environment and solve the energy crisis."

I rolled my eyes. "Right," I said. "And after you pull off that miracle, you can genetically engineer a bunch of Smurfs and unicorns, to frolic around this new perfect world you've

created."

"I'm being serious," she said.

"You really think it's that simple?" I said. "That you can just write a check for a hundred and forty billion dollars and fix all the world's problems?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. But I'm gonna give it a shot."

"If you win."

"Right. If I win."

Just then, the OASIS server clock struck midnight. We both knew the second it happened, because the throne suddenly reappeared atop the dais, along with Acererak. He sat there motionless, looking just like he did when I'd first entered the room.

Art3mis glanced up at him, then back at me. She smiled and gave me a small wave. "I'll see you around, Parzival."

"Yeah," I replied. "See ya." She turned and began to walk toward the dais. Then I called after her. "Hey, Art3mis?"

She turned back. For some reason I felt compelled to help her, even though I knew I shouldn't. "Try playing on the left side," I said. "That's how I won. I think he might be easier to beat if he's playing the stork."

She stared at me for a second, possibly trying to gauge whether or not I was messing with her. Then she nodded and ascended the dais. Acererak came to life as soon as she set foot on the first step.

"Greetings, Art3mis," his voice boomed. "What is it that you seek?"

I couldn't hear her reply, but a few seconds later the throne transformed into the *Joust* game, just as it had earlier. Art3mis said something to the lich, and then the two of them

switched sides, so that she was on the left. Then they began to play.

I watched them play from a distance, until a few minutes later, when her barrier spell dissipated. I cast one last glance up at Art3mis, then threw open the door and began to make my way back up to the surface.

0010

It took me a little over an hour to make my way back through the tomb and up to the surface. The instant I crawled outside, a "messages waiting" indicator began to flash on my display. I realized then that Halliday had placed the tomb inside a null-communication zone, so that no one could receive calls, texts, or email while they were inside. Probably to prevent gunters from calling for help or advice.

I checked my messages and saw that Aech had been trying to reach me since the moment my name appeared on the Scoreboard. He'd called over a dozen times, and had also sent several text messages, asking me to call back as soon as possible. Just as I'd finished deleting these messages, I received another incoming call. It was Aech trying once again to reach me. I decided not to pick up. Instead, I sent him a short text message, promising to call him back as soon as I could.

As I ran out of the forest, I kept the Scoreboard up in the corner of my display, so I'd know immediately if Art3mis won her Joust match and obtained the key. When I finally reached the transport terminal and jumped in to the nearest booth, it was just after two o'clock in the morning.

I entered my destination on the booth's touchscreen and a map of Middletown appeared

on the display. I was prompted to select one of the planet's two-hundred and fifty-six transport terminals as my arrival point.

When Halliday had created Middletown, he hadn't placed just a single recreation of his hometown there. There were actually two-hundred and fifty-six identical copies of it, spread out evenly across the planet surface. I didn't think it would matter which copy of his hometown I went to, so I selected one at random, near the equator. Then I tapped CONFIRM to pay the fare and my avatar vanished.

A millisecond later, I was standing inside a vintage 1980s phone booth, located inside an old Greyhound bus station. I opened the door and stepped out. It was like stepping out of a time machine. There were a several NPCs milling around, all dressed in mid-1980s attire. A woman with a giant ozone-depleting hairdo bobbed her head to an oversize walkman. A kid in a gray Members Only jacket leaned against the wall, working on a Rubik's Cube. A mohawked punk rocker sat in a plastic chair, watching a *Gilligan's Island* rerun on a coin-operated television.

I located the exit and headed for it, drawing my sword as I went. This entire surface of Middletown was a PvP zone, so I had to proceed with caution.

Shortly after the Hunt began, this planet had turned into Grand Central Station, and all 256 copies of Halliday's hometown had been scoured and ransacked by an endless parade of gunters, all searching for keys and clues. The popular theory on the message boards was that the reason Halliday had created multiple copies of his hometown was so that several avatars could search it at the same time, without fighting over a single location. Regardless, over the past five years gunters had scoured all 256 identical copies of Middletown, and the complete contents of Halliday's house had been inventoried and analyzed. Of course, all of this searching had yielded a big fat donut. No keys. No clues. No Egg. Since then, interest in the planet had waned

dramatically. But I knew there were probably gunters who still came here on occasion.

If there was already another gunter inside Halliday's house when I got there, my plan was to make a run for it, then steal a car and drive twenty-five miles (in any direction) to the next identical copy of Middletown. And then the next, until I found an instance of Halliday's house that was unoccupied.

Outside the bus station, it was a beautiful Midwestern day. The reddish-orange sun hovered low in the sky. Even though I'd never been to Middletown before, I'd done an extensive amount of research on it, so I knew that Halliday had coded the planet so that, no matter when you visited or where you were on the surface, it was always a perfect late autumn afternoon, circa 1986.

I pulled up a map of the town and located my current position outside the bus terminal, then traced a route to Halliday's childhood home. It was about a mile to the north. I pointed my avatar in that direction and began to run. Looking around, I was astounded at the painstaking attention to detail. I'd read that Halliday had done all of the coding himself, drawing on his memories to recreate his hometown exactly as it was during his childhood. He'd used old street maps, phone books, photographs, and video footage for reference, to make everything was as authentic and accurate as possible.

The place reminded me a lot of the town in the movie *Footloose*. Small, rural, and sparsely-populated. The houses all seemed incredibly big and were placed ridiculously far apart. It astounded me that, fifty years ago, even lower-income families had an entire house to themselves. The NPC citizens all looked liked extras from a John Cougar Mellencamp video. I saw people out raking leaves, walking dogs, and sitting on porches. Out of curiosity, I waved at a few of them, and got a friendly wave in return every time.

There were clues as to the time period everywhere. NPC-piloted cars and trucks cruised slowly up and down the shady streets, all of them gas-guzzling antiques: Trans-Ams, Dodge Omnis, Iroc Z-28s, and K-Cars. I passed a service station and the sign said gasoline was only ninety-three cents a gallon.

I was about to turn down Halliday's street when I heard a fanfare of trumpets. My eyes shot over to the Scoreboard window, still hovering in the corner of my display.

Art3mis had done it.

Her name now appeared directly below mine. Her score was 9,000 points--a thousand points less than mine. It appeared that I'd received a bonus for being the first avatar to obtain the Copper Key. Suddenly, the full ramifications of the Scoreboard's existence occurred to me for the first time. From here on out, it would not only allow gunters to keep track of each other's progress. It would also show the entire world who the current frontrunners were, creating instant celebrities (and targets) in the process.

I knew that, at that exact moment, Art3mis must be staring down at her own copy of the Copper Key, reading the clue engraved on its surface. I knew she'd be able to decipher the clue just as quickly as I had. In fact, she was probably already on her way to Middletown right now.

That got me moving again. I now had only an hour head start on her. Maybe less.

When I reached Cleveland Avenue, the street on which Halliday had grown up, I sprinted down the cracked sidewalk to the front steps of his childhood home. It looked just like the photographs I'd seen: a modest two-story colonial with red vinyl siding. Two late-70s Ford sedans were parked in the driveway, one of them up on cinderblocks.

Staring at the replica Halliday had created of the house, I tried to imagine what it had been like for him to grow up there. I'd read that in the real Middletown, Ohio, every house on

this street had been demolished in the late nineties to make room for a strip mall. But Halliday had preserved the setting of his childhood forever, here in the OASIS.

I ran up the walkway and entered through the front door, which opened into the living room. I knew this room well, because it appeared in *Anorak's Invitation*. I recognized the simulated wood grain paneling, the burnt orange carpet, and garish furniture that looked like it had been scavenged from several disco-era yard sales.

The house was empty. For whatever reason, Halliday had decided not to place NPC recreations of himself or his deceased parents here. Perhaps that would been too creepy, even for him. There was, however, a family photo on the living room wall. This portrait had been taken at the local K-mart in 1984, but Mr. and Mrs. Halliday were still dressed in late-70s fashions, and twelve-year-old Jimmy stood between them, glowering at the camera from behind his thick eyeglasses. The Hallidays looked like an ordinary American family. There was no hint that the stoic man in the brown leisure suit was an abusive alcoholic, that the smiling woman in the floral pantsuit was bipolar, or that the young boy in the faded *Asteroids* T-shirt would one day create an entirely new universe.

Looking around, I wondered why Halliday, who always claimed to have had a miserable childhood, had later become so nostalgic for it. I knew that if and when I finally escaped from the stacks, I'd never look back. And I definitely wouldn't create a detailed simulation of the place.

I glanced over at the bulky Zenith television, and the Atari 2600 connected to it. The simulated wood grain on the Atari's plastic casing perfectly matching the simulated wood grain on the television cabinet and on the living room walls. There was a shoebox beside the Atari that contained nine game cartridges: *Combat*, *Space Invaders*, *Pitfall*, *Kaboom!*, *Star Raiders*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Star Master*, *Yar's Revenge*, and *E.T.* Gunters had attached a large amount

of significance to the absence of *Adventure*, the game Halliday was seen playing on this very same Atari at the end of *Anorak's Invitation*. People had searched the entire Middletown simulation for a copy of *Adventure*, but there didn't appear to be one anywhere on the entire planet. Gunters had brought copies of the game here from other planets, but when they tried playing them on Halliday's Atari, they never worked. So far, no one had been able to figure out why.

I did a quick search of the rest of the house and made sure there were no other avatars present. Then I opened the door of James Halliday's room. It was empty, so I stepped inside and bolted the door. Screenshots and vidcaps of this room had been available for years, and I'd studied all of them closely. But this was my first time standing inside the "real thing." I got chills.

The carpet was a horrendous mustard color. So was the wallpaper. But the walls were almost entirely covered with movie and rock band posters: *Real Genius*, *War Games*, *Tron*, *Pink Floyd*, *Devo*, *Rush*. A bookshelf stood just inside the door, overflowing with science fiction and fantasy paperbacks (all titles I'd read, of course). A second bookshelf by the bed was crammed to capacity with old computer magazines and *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebooks. There were also several longboxes of comics books stacked against the wall, each carefully labeled. But the first thing my gaze locked on was the battered wooden desk in the corner, on which sat James Halliday's first computer.

Like many home computers of its era, it was housed in the same case as its keyboard. *TRS-80 Color Computer 2, 16K RAM* was printed on a label above the keys. Cables snaked out of the back of the machine, leading to a small color television, a dot-matrix printer, an audio cassette recorder, and a 300 baud modem. There was a list of telephone numbers for dial-up bulletin board systems taped to the desk beside the modem.

I sat down and located the power switch for the computer and the TV. There was a crackle of static, followed by a low hum, as the TV warmed up. A moment later, the TRS-80's green startup screen appeared, and I saw these words:

EXTENDED COLOR BASIC 1.1
COPYRIGHT (c) 1982 BY TANDY
OK

Below this was a flashing cursor, cycling through every color of the spectrum. I typed HELLO, and then hit the ENTER key.

?*SYNTAX ERROR* appeared on the next line.

I knew from my research that the cassette recorder functioned as the TRS-80s "tape drive." It stored data as analog sound on magnetic audio tapes. When Halliday had first started programming, the poor kid hadn't even had access to a floppy disk drive. He'd had to store his code on cassette tapes. There was shoebox beside the tape drive, filled with dozens of these cassettes. Most of them were text adventure games: *Raaku-tu*, *Bedlam*, *Pyramid*, and *Madness and the Minotaur*. There were also a few ROM cartridges, which fit into a slot on the side of the computer. I dug around in the box until I found one with *Dungeons of Daggorath* printed in crooked yellow text on its worn red label. The game's artwork depicted a first-person view of a long dungeon corridor, blocked by a hulking blue giant with a large stone axe.

When a list of the games found in Halliday's bedroom had first appeared online, I'd made sure to download and master every single one of them, so I'd already solved *Dungeons of Daggorath*, over two years earlier. It had taken most of a weekend. The graphics were incredibly crude, but even so, the game was still addictive.

I knew from reading the message boards that, during the past five years, there were gunters who had played and solved *Dungeons of Daggorath*, right here on Halliday's TRS-80.

There were people who had solved every single game in the shoebox, just to see if anything would happen. And nothing had. But none of them had been in possession of the Copper Key.

My hands were trembling slightly as I powered off the TRS-80 and inserted the *Dungeons of Daggorath* cartridge. When I turned the computer back on, the screen flashed to black, and a crude graphic of a wizard appeared, accompanied by some ominous sound effects. The wizard held a staff in one hand, and below him, printed in all capital letters, was the legend: *I dare ye enter . . . the Dungeons of Daggorath!*

I laid my fingers on the keyboard and began to play. As soon as I did, a jambox sitting on top of Halliday's dresser suddenly turned itself on, and familiar music began to blast out of it. It was Basil Polidorious's score for the first *Conan the Barbarian* film.

That must be Anorak's way of letting me know I'm on the right track, I thought.

I quickly lost track of time. I forgot that my avatar was sitting in Halliday's bedroom, and that, in reality, I was sitting in my hideout, huddled near the electric heater, tapping at the empty air in front of me, entering commands on an imaginary keyboard. All of the intervening layers slipped away, and I lost myself in the game within the game.

In *Dungeons of Daggorath*, you control your avatar by typing in commands, like TURN LEFT or GET TORCH, navigating your way through a maze of vector-graphic corridors, while fighting off the spiders, stone giants, blobs, and wraiths as you descend deeper and deeper, working your way down through the dungeon's five increasingly difficult levels. It took a while for the commands and quirks of the game to come back to me, but once they did, the game wasn't that difficult to solve. The ability to save my place at any time basically gave me infinite lives. (Although saving and reloading games from the tape drive proved to be a slow and tedious process. It often took several attempts and a lot of fiddling with the cassette deck's volume knob.)

While I was playing, the *Conan the Barbarian* score ended and the jambox clicked over and began to play the opposite side of the tape, treating me to the synthesizer-laden score for *Ladyhawke*. I couldn't wait to rub that in Aech's nose.

I finally reached the last level of the dungeon around four o'clock in the morning, and faced off against the Evil Wizard of Daggorath. After dying and reloading twice, I finally defeated him, using an Elvish Sword and a Ring of Ice. I completed the game by picking up the wizard's magic ring and claiming it for myself. Then an image appeared on the screen, showing a wizard with a bright star on his staff and his robes. The text below read: BEHOLD! DESTINY AWAITS THE HAND OF A NEW WIZARD!

I waited to see what would happen. For a moment, nothing did. Then Halliday's ancient dot-matrix printer suddenly came to life and noisily ground out a single line of text. The tractor feed spooled the page out of the top of the printer. I tore the sheet off and read what was there:

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE OPENED THE FIRST GATE!

I glanced around and saw that there was now a wrought iron gate embedded in the bedroom wall, in the exact spot where the WarGames poster had been a second before. There was lock with a keyhole in the center of the gate. It was plated with copper.

I took out the Copper Key and climbed up on top of Halliday's desk so that I could reach the lock. I slid the Copper Key into the keyhole and turned it. The entire gate began to glow, as if the metal had suddenly become super-heated, and its double doors swung inward, revealing a field of stars. It appeared to be a portal into deep space.

"*My god, it's full of stars,*" I heard a disembodied voice say. I recognized it as a sound bite from the film *2010*. Then I heard a low, ominous hum, followed a piece of music from that film's score: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss.

I leaned forward and looked through the portal. Left and right, up and down. Nothing but an endless field of stars in all directions. Squinting, I could also make out a few tiny nebulae and galaxies in the distance.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the open gate. It seemed to pull me in, and I began to fall. But I fell forward instead of down, and the stars seemed to fall with me.

0011

I found myself standing in an old video arcade, playing Galaga.

The game was already in progress. I had double-ships and a score of 41,780 points. I glanced down and saw that my hands were on the control. After a second or two of disorientation, I reflexively began to play, moving the joystick left just in time to avoid losing one of my ships.

Keeping one eye on the game, I tried to make sense of my surrounding. In my peripheral vision I was able to make out a Dig-Dug game on my left and a Zaxxon machine to my right. Behind me, I could hear a cacophony of digital combat, coming from dozens of other vintage arcade games. Then, as I finished clearing the wave on Galaga, I suddenly noticed my reflection in the game's screen. It wasn't my avatar's face that I saw there. It was Matthew Broderick's face. A young pre-*Ferris Bueller* and pre-*Ladyhawke* Matthew Broderick.

Then I knew where I was. And *who* I was.

I was David Lightman, Matthew Broderick's character in the movie *WarGames*. And this was his first scene in the film.

I was *in the movie*.

I took a quick glance around and saw a detailed replica of *20 Grand Palace*, the combination arcade/pizza joint featured in the film. Kids with feathered 80's hairstyles were

clustered around each of the games. Others sat in booths, eating pizza and drinking sodas. *Video Fever* by The Beepers blasted out of a jukebox in the corner. Everything looked and sounded exactly as it did in the movie. Halliday had copied every last detail from the film and recreated it as interactive simulation.

Holy shit.

I'd spent years wondering what challenges awaited me inside the First Gate. Never once had I imagined *this*. But I probably should have. *WarGames* had been one of Halliday's all-time favorite movies. Which was why I had watched it over three-dozen times. Well, that, and also because it's awesome, with a teenage computer hacker as the protagonist. And now it looked like all of that research was about to pay off.

I suddenly heard a repetitive electronic beeping. It seemed to be coming from the right pocket of the jeans I was wearing. Keeping my left hand on the joystick, I reached in my pocket and pulled out a digital watch. The readout said 7:45 AM. When I pushed one of the buttons to silence the alarm, a warning flashed in the center of my display:

YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE FOR SCHOOL!

I used a voice command to pull up my OASIS map, hoping to learn where the gate had transported me. But it turned out that not only was I no longer on Middletown, I was no longer in the OASIS at all. I was OTM - Off the Map. When I'd stepped into the gate, it had transported my avatar into a standalone simulation, a virtual location separate from the OASIS. It seemed that the only way I could get back would be to clear the gate by completing the quest. But if this was a video game, how was I supposed to play it? If this was a quest, what my goal? I continued to play Galaga while pondering these questions. A second later, a young boy walked into the arcade and came over to me.

"Hi, David!" he said, his eyes on my game.

I recognized this kid from the movie. His name was Howie. In the film, Matthew Broderick's character hands his Galaga game off to Howie when he rushes off to school.

"Hi, David!" the boy repeated, in the same exact tone. As he spoke this time, his words also appeared as text, superimposed across the bottom of my display, like subtitles. Below this, flashing red, were the words: FINAL DIALOGUE WARNING!

I suddenly began to understand. The simulation was warning me that this was my final chance to deliver the next line of dialogue from the movie. If I didn't say the line, I could guess what would probably happen next. GAME OVER.

But I didn't panic, because I *knew* the next line. I'd seen *WarGames* so many times that I knew the entire film by heart.

"Hi, Howie!" I said. But the voice I heard in my earphones was not my own. It was Matthew Broderick's voice. And as I spoke the line, the warning on my display vanished and a score of 100 points appeared, superimposed at the top of my display.

I wracked my brain, trying to mentally replay the rest of the scene. The next line came to me: "How's it going?" I said, and my score jumped to 200 points.

"Pretty good," Howie replied.

I started to feel giddy. This was incredible. I was totally *inside the movie*. Halliday had transformed the fifty-year-old film into a real-time interactive video game. I wonder how long it had taken him to program this thing?

Another warning flashed on my display: *YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE FOR SCHOOL! HURRY!*

I stepped away from the Galaga machine "Hey, you wanna take this over?" I asked Howie.

"Sure," he replied, grabbing the controls. "Thanks!"

A green path suddenly lit up on the floor of the arcade, leading from where I stood to the exit. I started to follow it, then remembered to run back and grab my notebook off of the Dig Dug game, just like David did in the movie. As I did this, my score jumped another 100 points, and *ACTION BONUS!* appeared on my display.

"Bye, David!" Howie shouted.

"Bye!" I shouted back. Another 100 points. This was easy!

I followed the green path out of *20 Grand Palace* and up the busy street a few blocks. I was now running along a tree-lined suburban street. I rounded a corner and saw that the path led directly to a large brick building. The sign over the door said Snohomish High School-- David's school, and the setting of the next few scenes in the movie.

My mind was racing as I ran inside. If all I had to do was rattle off lines of dialogue from *WarGames* on cue for the next two hours, this was going to be a breeze. Without even knowing it, I'd totally over-prepared. I probably knew *WarGames* even better than I knew *Real Genius* and *Better Off Dead*.

As I ran down the empty school hallway, another warning flashed in front of me:

YOU'RE LATE FOR YOUR BIOLOGY CLASS!

I continued to sprint at top speed, following the green path, which was now pulsing brightly. It eventually led me to the door of a classroom on the second floor. Through the window, I could see that class was already in session. The teacher was up at the board. I saw my seat, the only empty one in the room.

It was right behind Ally Sheedy.

I opened the door and tiptoed inside, but the teacher spotted me right away.

"Ah, David! Nice of you to join us!"

Making it all the way to the end of the movie wound up being a lot harder than I anticipated. It only took me about fifteen minutes to figure out the "rules" of the game, and to sort out how the scoring system worked. I was actually required to do a lot more than simply recite dialogue. I also had perform all of the same actions that Broderick's character performed in the film, in correct way and at the correct moment. It was suddenly being forced to act the leading role in a play that you'd seen many times, but had never actually rehearsed.

For most of the movie's first hour, I was on edge, constantly trying to think ahead to have my next line of dialogue ready. Whenever I flubbed a line, or didn't perform an action at the right moment, my score would decrease and a warning would flash on my display. When I made two mistakes in a row, a "final warning message" would appear. I wasn't sure what would happen if I got three strikes in a row, but my guess was that I'd either be expelled from the gate or that my avatar would simply be killed. I wasn't anxious to find out which it would be.

Whenever I correctly performed seven actions or recited seven lines of dialogue in a row, the game would award me a "Cue Card Power-Up." The next time I blanked on what to do or say, I could select the Cue Card icon and the correct action or line of dialogue would appear on my display, sort of like a teleprompter.

During scenes that didn't involve my character, the simulation cut to a passive third-person perspective, and all I had to do was sit back and watch things play out, sort of like watching a cut scene in an old video game. During these scenes, I could relax until my character came onscreen again. During one of these breaks, I tried to access a copy of the movie from console's hard drive, with the intention of playing it in a window on my display so that I could refer to it. But the system wouldn't let me. In fact, I found that I couldn't open any windows at all while inside the gate. When I tried, I got a warning: NO CHEATING. TRY TO CHEAT AGAIN AND IT'S *GAME OVER!*

Luckily, it turned out that I didn't need any help. Once I'd collected the maximum of five Cue Card Power-ups I began to relax, and the game actually started to be fun. It wasn't hard to enjoy being *inside* one of my favorite flicks. After awhile, I even discovered that I could earn bonus points by delivering a line in the exact tone and with the same inflection as in the film.

I didn't know it at the time, but I'd just become the first person to play an entirely new type of video game. When GSS got wind of the WarGames simulation inside the First Gate (and they did a short time later), the company quickly patented the idea and began to buy up the rights to old movies and TV shows, so that they could convert them into immersive interactive games, which they dubbed *Flicksyncs*. Flicksyncs became wildly popular. There turned out to be a huge market for games that allowed people to play a leading role in one of their favorite old movies or TV series.

By the time I reached the final scenes of the movie, I was starting to get twitchy from exhaustion. I'd now been up for over twenty-four hours straight, jacked in the entire time. But somehow I managed to make it through to the end. The last action I had perform was to instruct the WOPR supercomputer to "play itself" at Tic-Tac-Toe. Since every game the WOPR played ended in a tie, this had the improbable effect of teaching the artificially intelligent computer that Global Thermonuclear war, too, was a game in which "the only winning move is not to play." This prevented the WOPR from launching all of the United States' ICBMs at the Soviet Union.

I, David Lightman, a teenage computer geek from suburban Seattle, had single-handedly prevented the end of human civilization.

The NORAD command center erupted in celebration and I waited for the movie's end credits to roll. But they didn't. Something else happened instead. All of the other characters around me suddenly vanished, leaving me all alone in the giant war room. In the same instant,

my avatar reverted back to its original appearance. When I checked my reflection in a computer monitor, I saw that I no longer looked like Matthew Broderick. I'd changed back into Parzival.

I glanced around the empty NORAD command center, wondering what I was supposed to do next. Then all of the giant video display screens in front of me suddenly went blank, and four lines of glowing green text appeared on them. It was another riddle:

**The captain conceals the Jade Key
in a white house long neglected
But you can only blow the whistle
once the trophies are all collected**

I stood there for a second, staring at the words in stunned silence. Then I snapped out of my daze and quickly snapped several screenshots of the text. As I was doing this, the Copper Gate reappeared, embedded in a nearby wall. The gate was open, and through it I could see Halliday's bedroom. It was the exit. The way out.


I'd done it. I'd cleared the First Gate.

I glanced back up at the riddle on the viewscreens. It had taken me years to decipher the Limerick and locate the Copper Key. At first glance, this new riddle about the Jade Key looked like it might take just as long to figure out. I didn't understand a word of it. But I was also dead on my feet, and in no condition for further puzzle-solving. I could barely keep my eyes open.

I jumped through the exit and landed with a thud on the floor of Halliday's bedroom. When I turned around and looked at the wall I saw that the gate was gone and the *WarGames* poster had reappeared in its place.

I checked my avatar's stats and saw that I'd been rewarded several hundred thousand experience points for clearing the gate, enough to raise my avatar from 5th level up to 6th in one shot. Then I checked the Scoreboard:

HIGH SCORES:

1. Parzival	110000	
2. Art3mis	9000	
3. JDH	0000000	
4. JDH	0000000	
5. JDH	0000000	
6. JDH	0000000	
7. JDH	0000000	
8. JDH	0000000	
9. JDH	0000000	
10. JDH	0000000	

My score had increased by 100,000 points, and a copper-colored gate icon now appeared beside it. The media (and everyone else) had probably been monitoring the Scoreboard since last night, so now the whole world would know that I'd cleared the First Gate.

I was too exhausted to consider the implications. All I could think about was sleep.

I ran downstairs and into the kitchen. The keys to the Halliday family car were on a pegboard next to the refrigerator. I grabbed them and rushed outside. The car (the one that wasn't up on blocks) was a 1982 Ford Thunderbird. The engine started on the second try. I backed out of the driveway and drove to the bus station.

From there, I teleported back to the transport terminal next to my school on Ludus. Then I went to my own locker and dumped all of my avatar's newfound treasure, armor, and weapons inside, before finally logging out of the OASIS.

When I pulled off my visor, it was 6:17 am. I rubbed my bloodshot eyes and gazed around the dark interior of my hideout, trying to wrap my head around everything that had just happened.

I suddenly realized how cold it was in the van. I'd been using the tiny space heater of and on all night, but now it had drained the batteries. I was way too tired to get on the exercise bike and recharge them. And I didn't have the energy to make the trek back to my aunt's trailer either. But the sun would be up soon, so I knew I could crash there in my hideout without worrying that

I would freeze to death.

I slid off of my chair and onto the floor, then curled up in my sleeping bag. As I closed my eyes, I began to ponder the riddle about the Jade Key. But sleep swallowed me whole a few seconds later.

I had a dream. I was standing alone in the center of a scorched battlefield, with several different armies arrayed against me. An army of Sixers stood in front of me, and several different gunter clans surrounding me on all other flanks, brandishing swords and guns and weapons of powerful magic.

I looked down at my body. It wasn't Parzival's body, it was my own. And I was wearing armor made of paper. In my right hand was a toy plastic sword, and in my left was a large glass egg. It looked exactly like the glass egg that causes Tom Cruise's character so much grief in *Risky Business*, but somehow I knew that, in the context of my dream, it was supposed to be Halliday's Easter egg.

And there I was, standing there, holding it for all the world to see.

In unison, the armies of my enemies let out a fierce battle cry and charged toward me. They converged on my position with bared teeth and blood in their eyes. They were coming to take the egg, and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

I knew I was dreaming, and so I expected to wake up before they reached me. But I didn't. The dream continued as the egg ripped from my grasp, and I felt myself being torn to shreds.

0012

I slept for over twelve hours, and missed school entirely.

When I finally woke up, I rubbed my eyes and then lay there in silence awhile, trying to convince myself that the events of the previous day had actually occurred. It all seemed like a dream to me now. Far too good to be real. Eventually, I grabbed my visor and got online to find out for sure.

Every single newsfeed seemed to be showing a screenshot of the Scoreboard. And my avatar's name was there at the top, in first place. Art3mis was still in second place, but the score beside her name had now increased to 109,000. Just 1,000 points less than mine. And, like me, she had a copper-colored gate icon beside her score now, too.

So she'd done it. While I'd slept, she'd deciphered the inscription on the Copper Key. Then she'd gone to Middletown, located the gate, and had made it all the way through *WarGames*, just a few hours after I had.

Suddenly, I no longer felt quite so impressed with myself.

I flipped past a few more channels before stopping on one of the major newsfeed networks, where I saw two men sitting in front of a screenshot of the Scoreboard. The man on the left, some middle-aged intellectual-type billed as "Edgar Nash, Gunter Expert" appeared to

be explaining the scores to the newsfeed anchor beside him.

"The name 'Parzival' appeared first, yesterday evening, with a score of ten thousand points," Nash said, pointing to the Scoreboard. "The name 'Art3mis' appeared about two hours later, in second place, with a score of nine thousand points. Now, I believe these points were awarded to the avatars when they obtained the Copper Key. It would appear that the avatar named Parzival received slightly more points for being the first to find it." Nash paused for dramatic affect. "Then, early this morning, Parzival's score increased another one-hundred thousand points, and a Copper Gate icon appeared beside his score. The same change occurred to Art3mis's score a few hours later. This appears to indicate that both of them have now completed the first of the three gates."

"The famous Three Gates that James Halliday spoke of in the *Anorak's Invitation* video?" the anchor said.

"The very same."

"But, Mr. Nash. After five years, how is it that two avatars accomplished this feat on the same day, within just a few hours of each other?"

"Well, I think there's only one plausible answer. These two people, Parzival and Art3mis, must be working together. They're probably both members of what is known as a 'gunter clan.' These are groups of egg hunters who--"

I frowned and changed the channel, surfing the feeds until I saw an overly-enthusiastic reporter interviewing Ogden Morrow via satellite. *The Ogden Morrow*.

"--joining us live from his home in Oregon. Thanks for being with us today, Mr. Morrow!"

"No problem," Morrow replied. It had been several years since Morrow had spoken to the

media, but he didn't seem to have aged a day. His wild gray hair and long beard made him look like a cross between Albert Einstein and Santa Claus. That comparison was also a pretty good description of his personality.

The reporter cleared his throat, obviously a bit nervous. "Let me start off by asking what your reaction is to the events of the last twenty-four hours. Were you surprised to see those names appear on Halliday's scoreboard?"

"Surprised? Yes, a little, I suppose. But 'excited' is probably a better word. Like everyone else, I've been watching and waiting for this top. Of course, I wasn't sure if I'd still be alive when it finally did! I'm glad that I am. This is all very exciting, isn't it?"

"Do you think these two gunters, Parzival and Artemis, are working together?"

"I have no idea. I suppose it's possible."

"As you know, Gregarious Simulation Systems keeps all OASIS user records confidential, so we have no way of knowing their true identities. Do you think either of them will come forward and reveal themselves to the public?"

"Not if they're smart, they won't," Morrow said, adjusting his wire-rimmed spectacles. "If I were in their shoes, I'd do everything possible to remain anonymous."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because once the world discovers who they really are, they'll never have a moment's peace afterwards. If people think you can help them find Halliday's Egg, you're screwed, man. The public will never leave you alone. Trust me, I know from experience."

"Yes, I suppose you do." The reporter flashed a fake smile. "However, this network has contacted both Parzival and Artemis via email, and we've extended generous monetary offers to each of them, in return for an exclusive interview, either in the OASIS, or here in the real world."

"I'm sure they're receiving many such offers. But I doubt they'll accept," Morrow said. Then he looked directly into the camera, and I suddenly felt that he was speaking directly to me. "Anyone smart enough to do accomplish what they have should know better than to risk everything by talking to the vultures in the media."

The reporter chuckled uncomfortably. "Ah, Mr. Morrow... I really don't think that's called for."

Morrow shrugged. "Too bad. I do."

The reporter cleared his throat again. "Well, moving on... Do you have any predictions about what changes we might see on the scoreboard in the weeks to come?"

"I'm betting that those other eight empty slots will fill up pretty quickly."

"What makes you think so?"

"One person can keep a secret, but not two," he replied, staring directly into the camera again. "I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. But I *am* sure of one thing. Those cheating, unscrupulous corporate lackeys known as the Sixers are going use every dirty trick at their disposal to learn the location of the Copper Key and the First Gate."

"You're referring to the employees of Innovative Online Industries?"

"Yes. IOI. The Sixers. The Cheat Squad. The Bitch Brigade. The defilers of all that is holy. Whatever you want to call them. Their sole purpose is to exploit loopholes in the contest rules and subvert the intention of Jim's will. The last thing he would have wanted is for the OASIS to fall into the hands of a fascist multinational conglomerate like IOI."

"Mr. Morrow, IOI owns this network..."

"Of course they do! The own fucking everything!" Morrow shouted gleefully. "Including you, pretty boy! I mean, did they tattoo a UPC code on your ass when they hired you to sit there

and spout their corporate propaganda?"

The reporter began to stutter, glancing nervously at something off camera

"Quick!" Morrow said. "You better cut me off before I say anything else!" He broke up into gales of laughter, just as the network cut his satellite feed.

The reporter took a few seconds to regroup, then said: "Thank you again for joining us today, Mr. Morrow. Unfortunately that's all the time we have to speak with him. Now let's go back to Judy, who is standing by with a panel of renowned Halliday scholars--"

I smiled and closed the vidfeed window, then checked my email. The system informed me that I'd received over two million new unsolicited messages. These were automatically filed in a separate folder, so I could sort through them later. There were only two new messages left in my inbox, from people on my authorized contact list. One was from Aech. The other was from Art3mis.

I opened Aech's message first. It was vidmail, and his avatar's face appeared in a window. "Holy shit!" he shouted. "I don't believe this! Now you've cleared the motherfucking First Gate and you *still haven't phoned me*? Call my ass! Now! The second you get this!"

I considered waiting a few days to call Aech back, but quickly abandoned that idea. I *needed* to talk to someone about all this, and Aech was my best friend. If there was anyone I could trust, it was him.

He picked up on the first ring and his avatar appeared in a new window in front of me. "You dog!" he shouted. "You brilliant, sly, devious dog!"

"Hey, Aech," I said, trying to deadpan it. "What's new?"

"What's new? *What's new*? You mean, other than, you know, seeing my best friend's name appear *at the top of the Scoreboard*? Other than that, you mean?" he leaned forward, so

that his mouth completely filled the vidfeed window, then shouted: "Other than that, not much! Not much new at all!"

I laughed. "Sorry it took me awhile to call you. I had kind of a late night."

"No shit, you had a late night!" he said. "Look at you! How can you be so calm! Don't you realize what this means? This is huge! This is beyond epic! I mean... congratu-freakin'-lations, man!" He began to bow repeatedly. "I am not worthy!"

"Cut it out, okay? It's really not a big deal, you know. I haven't actually *won* anything yet..."

"Not a big deal!" he cried. "*Not. A. Big. Deal?* Are you kidding me? You're a legend now, man! You just became the first gunter in history to find the Copper Key! And clear the First Gate! You are a god, from this moment forth! Do you not realize this, fool?"

"Seriously. Stop it. I'm already freaked out enough as it is."

"Have you seen the news? The whole world is freaking out! And the gunter boards are going apeshit! And everyone is talking about *you*, amigo."

"I know. Listen, I hope you're not pissed at me for keeping you in the dark. I felt really weird about not returning your calls or telling you what I was up to..."

"Oh, come on!" He rolled his eyes dismissively. "You know damn well that if I'd been in your shoes, I would have done the same thing. That's how the game is played. But--" His tone grew more serious. "I *am* curious to know how that Art3mis chick happened to find the Copper Key and then clear the gate right after you did. Everyone seems think you two were working together, but I know that's horseshit. So what happened? Was she following you or something?"

I shook my head. "No, she found the key's hiding place before I did. Last month, she said. She just wasn't able to obtain the key until now." I was silent for a second. "I can't really go into

the details without, you know--"

Aech held up both hands. "No worries. I totally understand. I wouldn't want for you to accidentally drop any hints." He flashed his trademark Cheshire grin, and his gleaming white teeth seemed to take up half of the vidfeed window. "Actually, I should let you know where I am right now . . ."

He adjusted his vidfeed's virtual camera, so that it pulled back from a tight shot of his face to show a much wider shot that revealed where he was. He was standing on next to the flat-topped hill, just outside the entrance to the *Tomb of Horrors*.

My jaw dropped. "How in the hell--"

"Well, when I saw your name all over the newfeeds last night, it occurred to me that, for as long as I've known you, you've never had the dough to do much traveling. Any traveling, really. So I figured that if you'd found the hiding place of the Copper Key, it probably had to be somewhere close to Ludus. Or maybe even *on* Ludus."

"Well done," I said, and I meant it.

"Not really. I spent hours wracking my pea-sized brain before I finally thought to search the map of Ludus for the surface features described in the *Tomb of Horrors* module. But once I did, everything else clicked into place. And here I am."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, well, it was pretty easy once you pointed me in the right direction." He glanced back over his shoulder at the tomb. "I've been searching for this place for over a year now, and all this time it was within walking distance of my school! I feel like a total moron for not figuring it out on my own."

"You're not a moron," I said. "You deciphered the limerick on your own, otherwise you

wouldn't even know about the *Tomb of Horrors* module, right?"

"So, you're not pissed?" he said. "That I took advantage of my inside info?"

I shook my head. "No way. I would have done the same thing."

"Well, regardless, I owe you one. And I won't forget it."

I nodded toward the tomb behind him. "Have you been inside yet?"

"Yeah, but I had to come back out here to call you. The whole tomb is a null-comm zone. Of course, you already know that. Anyway, I'm waiting for the server to reset at midnight. The tomb is empty right now, because your friend, Art3mis, already blew through here earlier today."

"We're not friends," I said. "She just showed up, a few minutes after I got the key."

"Did you guys throw down?"

"No. The tomb is a no-PvP zone." I glanced at the time. "Looks like you've still got a few hours to kill before the reset."

"Yeah. I've been studying the original D&D module, trying to prepare myself," he said.

"Wanna give me any tips?"

I grinned. "No. Not really."

"Didn't think so." He was silent for a few seconds. "Listen, I have to ask you something," he said. "Does anyone at your school know your avatar's name?"

"No. I've been careful to keep it a secret. No one there knows me as Parzival. Not even the teachers."

"Good," he said. "I took the same precaution. Unfortunately, several of the gunters who frequent the Basement know we attend school on Ludus, so they might be able to connect the dots. I'm worried about one in particular..."

I felt a sudden rush of panic. "I-r0k?"

Aech nodded. "He's been calling me non-stop since your name appeared on the Scoreboard, asking what I know. I played dumb, and he seemed to buy it. But if my name shows up on the Scoreboard, too, you can bet he'll start bragging that he knows us. And when he starts telling other gunters that you and I are both students on Ludus--"

"Shit!" I cursed. "Then every gunter in the sim will be headed here to search for the Copper Key."

"Right," Aech said. "And before long, the location of the tomb will be common knowledge."

I sighed. "Well, then you better get the key before that happens."

"I'll do my best." He held up a copy of the *Tomb of Horrors* module. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to re-read this thing for the hundredth time today."

"Good luck, Aech," I said. "Give me a call once you've cleared the gate."

"If I clear the gate. . ."

"You will," I said. "And when you do, we should meet in the Basement to talk."

"You got it, amigo."

He waved goodbye and was about to end the call when I spoke up. "Hey, Aech?"

"Yeah?"

"You might want to brush up on your jousting skills," I said. "You know, between now and midnight."

He looked puzzled for a moment, then a smile of understanding spread across his face. "I got ya," he said. "Thanks, pal."

"Good luck."

As his vidfeed window winked out, I suddenly found myself wondering how Aech and I

would remain friends through everything that lay ahead. Neither of us wanted to work as a team, so from here on out we would be in direct competition with each other. Would I eventually regret helping him today? Or come to resent the fact that I'd unwittingly led him to the Copper Key's hiding place?

I pushed these thoughts aside and opened the email from Art3mis. It was an old-fashioned text message.

Dear Parzival,

Congrats! See? You're famous now, just like I said. Although it looks like we've both been thrust into the limelight. Kinda scary, eh?

Thanks for the tip about playing on the left side. You were right. Somehow, that did the trick. But don't go thinking I owe you any favors, mister. :-)

The First Gate was pretty wild, wasn't it? Not at all what I expected. It would have been cool if Halliday had given me the option to play Ally Sheedy instead, but what can you do?

This new riddle is a real head-scratcher, isn't it? I hope it doesn't take us another five years to decipher it.

Anyhow, I just wanted to say that it was an honor to meet you. I hope that our paths cross again soon.

Sincerely,

Art3mis

ps- Enjoy being #1 while you can, pal. It won't last for long.

I reread her message several times, grinning like some dopey schoolboy who had just received a note from the cute girl he has a crush on. Then I typed out my reply:

Dear Art3mis,

Congratulations to you, too. You weren't kidding. Competition clearly brings out the best in you.

You're welcome for the tip about playing on the left. You totally owe me a favor now. ;-)

The new riddle is a cinch. I think I've already got it figured out, actually. What's the hold up on your end?

It was an honor to meet you, too. Let me know if you ever feel like hanging out in a chatroom, let me know.

MTFBWYA,

Parzival

ps- Are you challenging me? Bring the pain, woman.

After rewriting it a few dozen times, I tapped the send button. Then I pulled up my screenshot of the Jade Key riddle and began to study it, syllable by syllable. But I couldn't seem to concentrate. No matter how hard I tried to focus, my mind kept drifting back to Art3mis, wondering when I might see her again.

0013

Aech cleared the First Gate early the next day.

His name appeared on the scoreboard in third place, with a score of 108,000 points. The point value of obtaining the Copper Key had dropped another 1,000 points for him, but the value of clearing the First Gate remained unchanged at 100,000.

I returned to school that same morning. I'd considered calling in sick, but was worried my absence might raise suspicions. It wouldn't have. Due to the sudden renewed interest in the Hunt, over half of the student body, and quite a few of the teachers, didn't bother showing up. Since everyone at school knew my avatar by the name Wade3, no one paid any attention to me. Roaming the halls unnoticed, I decided that I enjoyed having a secret identity. It made me feel like Clark Kent or Peter Parker.

That afternoon, I-r0k sent emails to Aech and I, attempting to blackmail us. He said that if we didn't tell him how to find the Copper Key and the First Gate, he would post what he knew about us to every gunter message board he could find. When we refused, he made good on his threat and began telling anyone who listen that Aech and I were both students on Ludus. Of course, he had no way of proving he really knew us, and by that time there were hundreds of other gunters claiming to be our close personal friends. So Aech and I were hoping that I-r0k's

posts would go unnoticed. But they didn't, of course. At least two other gunters saw his posts and were then sharp enough to connect the dots between Ludus, the Limerick, and the *Tomb of Horrors*. The day after I-r0k let the cat out of the bag, the name *Daito* appeared in the fourth slot on the Scoreboard. Then, less than fifteen minutes later, the name *Shoto* appeared in the fifth slot. Somehow, they'd both obtained a copy of the Copper Key on the same day, without waiting for the server to reset at midnight. Then, a few hours later, both Daito and Shoto cleared the First Gate.

No one had ever heard of these avatars before, but their names seemed to indicate they were working together, either as a duo or as part of a clan. *Shoto* and *Daito* were the Japanese names for the short and long swords worn by samurai. When worn as a set, the two swords were called *Daisho*, and this quickly became the nickname by which the two of them were known.

Only four days had passed since my name had first appeared on the Scoreboard, and one new name had appeared below mine on each subsequent day. The secret was out now, and the hunt seemed to be shifting into high gear.

All week, I was unable to focus on anything my teachers were saying. Luckily, I only had two months of school left, and I'd already earned enough credits to graduate, even if I coasted from here on out. So I drifted from one class to the next in daze, puzzling over the Jade Key riddle, reciting it again and again in my mind.

***The captain conceals the Jade Key
in a white house long neglected
But you can only blow the whistle
once the trophies are all collected***

According to my English Lit textbook, a poem with four lines of text and an alternate-line rhyme scheme was known as a "quatrain," so that became my nickname for the riddle. Each night after school, I would log out of the OASIS and filled the blank pages of my grail diary with

possible interpretations of the quatrain.

What "captain" was Anorak talking about? Captain Kangaroo? Captain America? Captain Buck Rogers in the 25th Century?

And where in the hell was this "white house long neglected?" Halliday had never been one for politics, so I thought it unlikely he was making a reference to *the* White House in Washington D.C. Halliday's boyhood home on Middletown was red in color, so maybe he was talking about a different house in his hometown? That seemed too easy, and too close to the hiding place of the Copper Key.

For a while, I thought the "neglected white house" might be a reference to *Revenge of the Nerds*, one of Halliday's favorite films. In that movie, the Nerds of the title rent a dilapidated white house and fix it up (during a classic 80s music montage). I visited a recreation of the *Revenge of the Nerds* house on the planet Booger and spent several days searching it, but it proved to be a dead end.

The last two lines of the quatrain were also a complete mystery. They seemed to say that once you found the white house, you would have to collect a bunch of "trophies" and then blow some kind of whistle. Or did that line mean *blow the whistle* in the colloquial sense, as in "to reveal a secret or alert someone to a crime?" Either way, it didn't make any sense to me. But I continued to go over each line, word by word, until my brain began to feel like Aquafresh toothpaste.

#

That Friday after school, the day Daisho and Shoto cleared the First Gate, I was sitting in a secluded spot a few miles from my school, a steep hill with a solitary tree at the top. I liked to come here to read, do my homework, or to simply enjoy the view of the surrounding green fields.

I didn't have access to that kind of view in the real world.

I was sitting under the tree, sorting through the millions of messages that still clogged my inbox. I'd been sifting through them all week. There were notes from people all over the globe. Letters of congratulation. Pleas for help. Death threats. Interview requests. Several long, incoherent diatribes from gunters whose quest for the Egg had clearly driven them insane. I'd also received invitations to join four of the biggest gunter clans, The Oviraptors, Clan Destiny, The Key Masters, and Team Banzai. I told each of them thanks, but no thanks.

When I got tired of reading my "fan mail," I sorted out all of the messages from companies that were tagged as "business related" and began read through those. I discovered that I'd received several offers from movie studios and book publishers, all interested in buying the rights to my life story. I deleted them all, because I'd decided never to reveal my true identity to the world. At least, not until after I found the egg.

I'd also received several endorsement deal offers, from companies who wanted to pay me substantial sums of money to use Parzival's name and face to sell their services and products. An electronics retailer was interested in using my avatar to promote their line of OASIS immersion hardware, so they could sell "Parzival approved" haptic gloves and visors. There were also endorsement offers from a pizza delivery chain, a shoe manufacturer, and an online store that sold custom avatar skins. There was even a toy company that wanted to manufacture a line of Parzival lunchboxes and action figures. These companies were offering to pay me in OASIS credits, which would be transferred directly to my avatar's account.

Holy shit. I couldn't believe my luck.

I replied to every single one of the endorsement inquires, saying that I would accept their offers under the following conditions: I wouldn't have to reveal my true identity, and I would

only do business through my OASIS avatar.

I started receive replies within the hour, with contracts attached. I couldn't afford to have a lawyer look them over, but they all expired within a year's time, so I just went ahead and signed them electronically and emailed them back, along with a three-dimensional model of my avatar, to be used for the commercials and ads. I also received requests for an audio clip of my avatar's voice, so I sent them a synthesized clip of a deep baritone, to make me sound like one of the guys who did voice-overs for movie trailers.

Once they received everything, my avatar's new sponsors informed me that they'd wire my first round of payments to my OASIS account within the next forty-eight hours. The amount of money I was going to receive wouldn't be enough to make me rich. Not by a long shot. But to a kid who'd grown up with nothing, it seemed like a fortune.

I did some quick calculations. If I lived frugally, I would have enough to move out of the stacks and rent a small efficiency apartment somewhere. For a year, at least. The very thought filled me with nervous excitement. I'd dreamt of escaping the stacks for as long as I could remember, and now it appeared that dream was about to come true.

While I waited for the money to arrive in my account, I continued to sort through my email messages. When I sorted the remaining messages by sender, I discovered that I'd received over five-thousand emails from Innovative Online Industries. Actually, they'd sent me five-thousand copies of the same email. They'd been re-sending the same message all week, since my name first appeared on the Scoreboard. And they were still re-sending it, once every minute.

The Sixers were mail-bombing me, to make sure they got my attention.

The emails were all marked *Maximum Priority*, with the subject line: *URGENT BUSINESS PROPOSITION - PLEASE READ IMMEDIATELY!*

The second I opened one, a delivery confirmation was instantly sent back to IOI, letting them know that I was finally reading their message. After that, they stopped resending it.

Dear Parzival,

First, allow me to congratulate on your recent accomplishments, which we at Innovative Online Industries hold in the highest regard.

On behalf of IOI, I wish to make you a highly lucrative business proposition, the exact details of which we can discuss in a private chatroom session. Please use the attached contact card to reach me at your earliest convenience, regardless of the day or hour.

Given our reputation within the gunter community, I would understand if you were hesitant to speak with me. However, please be aware that if you choose not to accept our proposal, we intend to then approach each of your competitors. At the very least, we hope you'll do us the honor of being the first to hear our generous offer. What have you got to lose?

Thank you for your kind attention. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Nolan Sorrento
Head of Operations
Innovative Online Industries

The message's smarmy, condescending tone made me want to vomit. But my disgust was quickly overshadowed by the realization of what this email meant. The Sixers wanted to recruit me. Or they wanted pay me to tell them how to find the Copper Key and clear the First Gate. And if I refused, they would go after Art3mis, then Aeche, Daito, Shoto, and then every other gunter who managed to get their name up on the Scoreboard. These shameless corporate sleazebags wouldn't stop until they found someone dumb or desperate enough give in and sell them the information they needed.

It was such an obvious move. I should have seen it coming.

I was about to delete every single copy of the email and pretend I'd never received it, but

then changed my mind. I wanted to know exactly what IOI was going to offer. And I couldn't pass up the chance to meet Nolan Sorrento, the Sixers' infamous leader. There was no danger meeting him in a chatroom, as long as I was careful about what I said.

I considered teleporting to Incipio before my "interview," to buy some new skins for avatar. Maybe an expensive suit. Something flashy and expensive. But then I thought better of it. I had nothing to prove to that corporate asshat. After all, I was famous now. I would roll into their chatroom wearing my default skin and a fuck-off attitude. I would listen to their offer, then tell them to kiss my simulated ass. Maybe I would record the whole thing and then post it on YouTube.

I prepped for the meeting by pulling up a search engine and learning everything I could about Nolan Sorrento. He had a PhD in Computer Science. Prior to becoming Head of Operations at IOI, he'd been a high-profile game designer, overseeing the creation of several (incredibly lame) third-party RPGs that ran inside the OASIS. It was obvious why IOI had hired him to lead their lackeys. They thought a game designer would have the best chance of solving Halliday's grand video game puzzle. But Sorrento and the Sixers had been at it for over nearly five years and still had nothing to show for their efforts. And now that there were gunter avatar names appearing on the Scoreboard left and right, the IOI brass had to be freaking out. Sorrento was probably catching all kinds of heat from his superiors. I wondered if it had been Sorrento's idea to try and recruit me, or if he'd been ordered to do it?

Once I'd learned as much as I could about both Sorrento and IOI, I felt like I was ready enough to sit down with the devil. I pulled up the contact card attached to Sorrento's email and tapped the chatroom invitation icon at the bottom.

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As I finished logging in to the chatroom, my avatar materialized on a grand observation deck, with a stunning view of over a dozen OASIS worlds, suspended in black space beyond the curved observation window. I appeared to be on a space station or a very large transport ship, I couldn't tell which. Regardless, it was by far the largest chatroom I'd ever seen. I couldn't imagine what it must cost to host a chatroom this size.

I tried to activate my avatar's vidfeed recorder, but IOI had disabled recording in the chatroom. They obviously didn't want me to have video evidence of what was about to go down. So much for my plan to post the interview on YouTube.

I turned around and saw that my avatar was standing in front of large C-shaped reception desk. The IOI corporate logo floated above it, giant overlapping chrome letters twenty-feet tall. As I approached the desk, an impossibly beautiful blonde receptionist stood to greet me. "Mr. Parzival," she said, bowing slightly. "Welcome to Innovative Online Industries! Just a moment. Mr. Sorrento is already on his way to greet you."

I wasn't sure how that could be, since I hadn't warned them I was coming. But less than a minute later, another avatar appeared, through a set of automatic doors on the opposite side of the observation deck. He headed right for me, boots clacking on the polished floor. It was

Sorrento. I recognized him because he wasn't wearing a standard-issue blonde-haired blue-eyed Sixer avatar. His face matched the photos of him I'd seen online. Dark hair, dark eyes, and hawkish nose. His uniform was a jet black bodysuit with gold epaulettes at the shoulders and a silver IOI logo above his right breast, with his employee number printed beneath it: 655321

"At last!" he said as he walked up, grinning like a jackal. "The famous Parzival has graced us with his presence!" He extended a gloved right hand. "Nolan Sorrento, Chief of Operations. It's an honor to meet you."

"Yeah," I said, doing my best to sound aloof. "Likewise, I guess." I stared down at his outstretched hand as if he were offering me a dead rat. He dropped it once it became obvious I wasn't going shake with him. But his smile didn't falter. It broadened.

"Please follow me." He led me across the deck and back through the automatic doors, which slid open to reveal a large launching bay. There was a single interplanetary shuttlecraft in it, emblazoned with the IOI logo. Sorrento began to board the shuttlecraft, but I halted at the foot of the ramp.

"What's with all the theatrics?" I asked. "We're in a chatroom." I motioned to the bay around us. "Why don't you just change our surroundings to a conference room or something and get on with your sales pitch?"

"Please, indulge me," he said. "This *is* part of my sales pitch. We want to give you the same experience you'd have if you came to visit us in person."

Right, I thought. If I had come to visit you in person, my avatar would already be dead, or locked in a cell somewhere.

I sighed loudly, then joined him inside the shuttle. The ramp retracted and we launched out of the bay. Through its wraparound windows I saw that we were leaving one of the enormous

Sixer space stations in orbit around the planet IOI-1, a massive chrome globe looming directly ahead. It reminded me of the killer floating spheres in the *Phantasm* films. Gunters referred to IOI-1 as the "Sixer Homeworld." The company had constructed it shortly after the contest began, to serve as IOI's online base of operations.

Our shuttle, which seemed to be flying on automatic pilot, rapidly descended and began to skim the planet's mirrored surface. I stared out the window as we did one complete orbit. As far as I knew, no gunter had ever been given this kind of tour.

From pole-to-pole, IOI-1 was covered with armories, bunkers, warehouses, and vehicle hangars. There were also airfields dotting the surface, where rows of gleaming gunships, spacecraft, and mechanized battle tanks stood waiting for action. Sorrento said nothing as we surveyed the Sixer armada. He just let me take it all in.

As we completed our orbit, the IOI Operations Complex swung into view ahead of us. It consisted of three mirrored-surfaced towers--two rectangular skyscrapers on either side of a circular one. Seen from above, these three buildings formed the IOI logo.

I'd seen screenshots of IOI-1's surface before, but they'd been low-res and taken from high orbit, just beyond the planet's impressive defense grid. The larger clans had been openly plotting to nuke the Sixer Operations complex for several years now, but they'd never managed to get past the defense grid or reach the planet surface.

The shuttle slowed and hovered above the O-shaped tower, then spiraled down to a small landing pad on the roof. "Impressive digs, wouldn't you agree?" Sorrento said, finally breaking his silence as we touched down and the ramp lowered.

"Not bad." I was proud of the calm in my voice. In truth, I was still reeling from everything I'd just seen. "This is an exact replica of the IOI towers located in downtown

Columbus, right?" I said. "Just a few blocks from the main OASIS server vault?"

"You've done your homework, kid," Sorrento said, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, the Columbus complex is our company headquarters. Most of my team works in this central tower. Our close proximity to the OASIS server vault eliminates any possibility of system lag. And, of course, Columbus doesn't suffer from the rolling power blackouts that plague most major U.S. cities."

He was stating the obvious. Gregarious Simulation Systems was located in Columbus, and so was their main OASIS server vault. There were redundant mirror servers all over the world, but these were all linked to the main node in Columbus. This was why, in the decades since the simulation's launch, the city had become a kind of high-tech Mecca, because it was the city where an OASIS user could get the fastest, most reliable connection to the simulation. Most gunters dreamed of moving to Columbus, myself included.

I followed Sorrento off the shuttle and into an elevator adjacent to the landing pad. "You've become quite the celebrity these past few days," he said as we began to descend. "It must be very exciting for you. Probably a little scary, too, huh? Knowing you now possess information that millions of people would be willing to kill for?"

I'd been waiting for him to say something like this, so I had a reply all prepared. "Do you mind skipping the scare tactics and the head games? Just tell me the details of your lame offer. I have other matters to attend to."

He grinned at me, like I was a precocious child. "Yes, I'm sure you do," he said. "But please don't jump to any conclusions about our offer. It's not *lame*, I assure you. I think you'll be quite surprised. In fact, I'm sure of it." He said that last bit in an extremely ominous tone. To prove I wasn't intimidated, I rolled my eyes and mimed jerking-off.

"Whatever, man."

A tone sounded as we reached the 106th floor and the elevator doors swished open. I followed Sorrento past another receptionist and down a long brightly-lit corridor. The décor was something out of a utopian sci-fi flick. High-tech and immaculate. We passed several other Sixer avatars as we walked, and the moment they saw Sorrento, they each snapped to rigid attention and saluted him, as if he were some high-ranking general. Sorrento didn't return these salutes or acknowledge his underlings in any way.

Eventually, he led me in to a huge open room. It was so large that it appeared to occupy most of the 106th floor, and it contained a vast sea of high-walled cubicles, each containing a single person strapped into a high-end immersion rig. There were thousands of them, sitting in haptic chairs or walking on omni-directional treadmills, all visored in to the OASIS.

"Welcome to IOI's Oology Division," Sorrento said with obvious pride.

"So, this is Suxorz Central, eh?" I said, glancing around impassively.

"There's no need to be rude," Sorrento said. "This could be your team."

"Would I get my very own cubicle?"

"No. You'd have your own office, with a very nice view." He grinned. "Not that you'd spend much time looking at it."

I motioned to one of the new Habashaw Immersion rigs. "Nice gear," I said. It really was, too. State-of-the-art.

"Yes, it *is* nice gear, isn't it?" he said. "Our immersion rigs are heavily modified and they're all networked together. Our systems allow multiple operators to control any one of our Oologist's avatars. So, depending on the obstacles they encounter during their quest, control can be instantly transferred to the team member with the skills best suited to deal with their current

situation."

"Yeah, but that's cheating," I said.

"Oh, come on now," he said, rolling his eyes. "There's no such thing. Halliday's contest doesn't have any rules. That's one of the many colossal mistakes the old fool made." Before I could reply, Sorrento continued walking, leading me on through the maze of cubicles. "All of our Oologists are voice-linked to a support team," he continued. "Comprised of Halliday scholars, video game experts, pop culture historians, and cryptologists. They all work together to help each of our avatars overcome any challenge and solve every puzzle they encounter." He turned and grinned at me. "As you can see, we've covered all the bases, Parzival. That's why we're going to win."

"Yeah," I said, not bothering to conceal my amusement. "You guys have been doing a bang-up job so far. Bravo. Now, why is it that we're talking again? Oh, right. You guys have no fucking clue where the Copper Key is, and you need my help to find it."

Sorrento narrowed his eyes at me, but said nothing. For a split second, I could sense how much disdain and raw hatred he had for me. This pleased me to no end.

We continued walking. A few minutes later, we arrived in Sorrento's enormous office. Its windows afforded a stunning view of the surrounding "city." The sky was filled with aircars and spacecraft, and the planet's simulated sun was just beginning to set. Sorrento sat down behind his desk and offered me the chair directly across from him.

Here we go, I thought as I sat down. Play it cool, Wade.

"You're obviously a sharp kid," he began. "So I'll just cut to the chase. IOI wants to recruit you. As a consultant, to assist with our search for Halliday's Easter egg. You'll have all of our company's vast resources at your disposal. Money, weapons, magic items, ships, artifacts.

You name it."

"What would my title be?"

"*Chief Oologist*," he replied. "You'd in charge of the entire division, second in command only to myself. I'm talking about five thousand highly-trained combat-ready avatars, all taking orders directly from you."

"Sounds pretty sweet," I said.

"Of course it does. But there's more. In exchange for your services, we're willing to pay you two million dollars a year, with a one million dollar signing bonus up front. And if and when you help us find the Egg, you'll get a twenty-five million dollar bonus."

I pretended as though I were adding all of those numbers up on my fingers. "Wow," I said, trying to sound impressed. "Can I work from home, too?"

Sorrento couldn't seem to tell whether or not I was joking. "No," he said. "I'm afraid not. You'd have to relocate here to Columbus. But we'll provide you with excellent living quarters here on the premises. And a private office, of course. Your own state-of-art immersion rig--"

"Hold on," I said, holding up a hand. "You mean I'd have to live in the IOI skyscraper? With all of the other Sux-- *Oologists*?"

He nodded.

"Well, that blows," I said. Then I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "What about benefits? Would I get healthcare? Dental? Vision? Keys to the executive washroom? Shit like that?"

"Of course." He was starting to sound annoyed again.

I leaned back and stared at the ceiling, pretending to consider the offer. Sorrento waited patiently, watching me like a hawk. "Okay," I said finally. "This sounds like a pretty great deal. Count me in. Sign me up. Whatever you guys call it. I'm in."

Sorrento looked surprised. This clearly wasn't the answer he was expecting. He smiled wide and was about to offer me his hand again when I cut him off.

"But I have three minor conditions," I said. "First, I want a fifty-million dollar bonus when I find the Egg for you guys. Not twenty-five. Is that doable?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Done. What are your other conditions?"

"I don't want to be second-in-command," I said. "I want your job, Sorrento. I want to be in charge of the whole shebang. Chief of Operations. El Numero Uno. Oh, and I want everyone to have to call me *El Numero Uno*, too. Is that possible?"

His smile had vanished. "What else?"

"I don't think I want to work with you." I leveled a finger at him. "You give me the creeps, Sorrento. And you come off like a total douchebag. Plus, you're obviously an idiot who doesn't have a clue. So if your superiors are willing to fire your ass and give me your position, I'm in. It's a done deal."

Silence. Sorrento's face was a stoic mask. Maybe he had certain emotions, like anger and rage, filtered out on his facial recognition software?

"Could you check with your bosses and let me know if they'll agree to that?" I asked. "Or are they monitoring us right now? I'm betting they are." I wave to the invisible cameras. "Hi guys! What do you say?"

There was a long pause, during which Sorrento simply glared at me. "Of course they're monitoring us," he said finally. "And they've just informed me that they're willing to agree to each of your demands." He didn't sound as upset as I'd hoped.

"Really?" I said. "No shit? That's awesome! When can I start? And more importantly, when can you leave?"

"Immediately," he said. "The company will prepare your contract and send them to your lawyer for approval. Then we-- *they* will fly you here to Columbus sign the paperwork and close the deal." He stood. "That should conclude--"

"Actually--" I held up a hand, cutting him off again. "I've spent the last few seconds thinking this over a bit more, and I'm gonna have to pass on your offer. I think I'd rather find the egg on my own, thanks." I stood up. "You and the other Suxorz can all go fuck a duck."

Sorrento smiled. Then he began to laugh. A long, hearty laugh that I found more than a little disturbing. "Oh, you're good! That was *so* good! You really had us going there, kid!" When his laughter tapered off, he said: "Of course, *that's* the answer I was expecting. So now, let me give you our second proposal."

"There's more?" I sat back down and put my feet up on his desk. "Okay. Shoot."

"We'll wire five million dollars directly to your OASIS account, *right now*, in exchange for a walkthrough up to the First Gate. That's it. All you have to do is give us detailed step-by-step instructions on how to do what you've already done. We'll take it from there. And then you can continue searching for the Egg on your own. Our transaction will remain a complete secret. No one ever need know of it."

I admit, I paused to consider it for second. Five million dollars would set me up for life. And even if I helped the Sixers clear the First Gate, there was no guarantee they'd be able to clear the other two. I still wasn't even sure if *I* would be able to do that. But if I sold out to the Sixers now and they actually did manage to win the contest, I'd be the one responsible. There was no way I'd be able to live with that. I just hoped that Aech, Art3mis, and any other gunters they approached felt the same way.

"I'll pass," I said. I slid my feet off his desk and stood. "Thanks for your time. I had loads

of fun."

Sorrento motioned for me to sit back down. "Actually, we're not quite done here. We have one final proposal for you, Parzival. And we've saved the best for last."

"Can't you guys take a hint? *You can't buy me*. So piss off. Adios. Good. Bye."

"Sit down, Mr. Watts."

I froze. Did he just use my real name?

"That's right, you cocky little shit," Sorrento said, nodding. "We know who you are. Wade Olin Watts. Born August 12, 2024. Parents deceased. We also know *where* you are. You reside with your aunt, in a trailer park located at 700 Portland Avenue in Oklahoma City. Unit 56-V, to be exact. According to our surveillance team, you returned to your trailer late last night and haven't left since. So you're still there right now."

A vidfeed window open directly behind him, displaying a live video image of the stacks where I lived. It was an aerial view, maybe being shot from a plane or a satellite.

"There you are, " Sorrento said. The image magnified a few times, zooming in on my aunt's trailer. Then it switched to over to thermal imaging mode, and I could see the glowing outlines of over a dozen people, children and adults, sitting around inside. Nearly all of them were motionless and appeared to be logged in to the OASIS.

I was too stunned to speak. How did they find me? It was supposed to be impossible for anyone to obtain your OASIS account information. And my address wasn't even *in* my OASIS account. You didn't have to give it when you created you avatar. Just your name and retinal pattern. So how had they found out where I lived?

They must have gotten access to my school records. But how did they find out I was a student on Ludus?

"Your first instinct right now might be to log out and make a run for it, " Sorrento said. "I urge you not to do that. Your trailer is currently wired with a large quantity of high explosives." He pulled something that looked like a remote control out of his pocket and held it up. "And my finger is on the detonator. If you log out of this chatroom, you will die within a few seconds. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Mr. Watts?"

I nodded slowly, trying desperately to get a grip on the situation.

He was bluffing. He *had* to be bluffing. And even if he wasn't, he didn't appear to know that I wasn't in that trailer. They must have been monitoring the trailer's two exits and hadn't seen me leave through the laundry room window early that morning. So they didn't know that I was actually half a mile away, in my hideout. Sorrento assumed that one of the smaller glowing thermal outlines on the display was me.

If a bomb went off in my aunt's trailer, I'd be safe down here, under all those junk cars. Wouldn't I?

"How--?" That was all I could get out.

"How did we find out who you are? And where you live?" He grinned. "Easy. You fucked up, genius. When you enrolled in the OASIS Public School system, you gave them your name and address. So they could mail you your report cards, I suppose. "

He was right. My avatar's name, my real name, and my home address were all stored in my student profile. I'd enrolled the year before the contest even began. Before I'd become a gunter. Before I'd learned to conceal my real-world identity.

"How did you find out I attend school online?"

"There's been a rumor circulating on the gunter message boards the past few days, that you and your pal Aech both go to school on Ludus. When we heard that, we decided to contact a

few OPS administrators and offer them a bribe. Do you know how much school administrators make a year, Wade? Very little. It's scandalous. One of them was kind enough to search the school's student database for the name Parzival, and guess what?"

Another window appeared beside the live video feed of the stacks. It displayed my school records. My full name, date of birth, Social Security number, and home address. My school transcripts. It was all there, along with an old yearbook photo, taken over five years ago - right before I'd transferred to school in the OASIS.

"We have your friend Aech's school records, too. But he was smart enough to give a fake name and address when he enrolled. So finding him will take a bit longer."

He paused to let me reply, but I remained silent. My pulse was racing, and I had to keep reminding myself to breathe.

"So, that brings me to our final proposal." Sorrento rubbed his hand together excitedly, like a kid about to open a present. "Tell us how to reach the First Gate. Right now. Or we will kill you."

"You're bluffing," I heard myself say. But I didn't think he was. Not at all.

"No, Wade. I'm not. Think about it. With everything else that's going on in the world, do you think anyone will care about an explosion in some white-trash rat warren in Oklahoma City? They'll assume it was a drug lab accident. Or maybe a domestic terrorist cell trying to build a homemade bomb. Either way, it will just mean there are a few hundred less human cockroaches out there, collecting food vouchers and using up precious oxygen. No one will care. And the authorities won't even blink."

He was right, and I knew it. I tried to stall for a few seconds, so I could figure out what to do. "You'd kill me?" I said. "To win a video game contest?"

"Don't pretend to be naïve, Wade," Sorrento said. "There are billions of dollars at stake here, along with control of one of the world's most profitable corporations, and of the OASIS itself. This is much more than a video game contest. It always has been. Halliday was a fool to put his company up for grabs in the first place." He leaned forward. "But you can still come out a winner here, kid. If you help us, we'll still give you the five million. You can retire at age seventeen and spend the rest of your days living like royalty. Or you can die in the next few seconds. It's your call."

"What's to stop you from killing me after I give you what you want?"

"There are two more gates, right?" He shrugged. "We might need your help to figure those, out, too. Personally, I doubt it. But my superiors feel differently. Regardless, you don't really have a choice at this point, do you?" He lowered his voice, as if he were about to share a secret. "So here's what's going to happen next. You're going to give me step-by-step instructions on how to obtain the Copper Key and clear the First Gate. And you're going to stay logged in to this chatroom while we verify everything you tell us. Log out before I say it's okay, and you go boom. Understand? Now start talking."

I considered giving them what they wanted. I really did. But I thought it through, and I couldn't come up with a single good reason why they would let me live, even if I helped them clear the First Gate. The only move that made sense was to kill me and take me out of the running. They sure as hell weren't going to give me five million dollars, or leave me alive so that I could tell the media how IOI had blackmailed me. Especially if there really was a remote-controlled bomb planted in my trailer to serve as evidence.

No. The way I saw it, there were really only two possibilities. Either they were bluffing, or they were going to kill me, regardless of whether I helped them or not.

I made my decision and summoned my courage.

"Sorrento," I said, trying to hide the fear in my voice, "I want you and your bosses to know something. You're never going to find Halliday's Egg. You know why? Because he was smarter than all of you put together. It doesn't matter how much money you have or who you try to blackmail. *You're going to lose.*"

I tapped my logout icon and then, as my avatar began to dematerialize in front of him, I showed Sorrento both of my middle fingers. He didn't seem surprised. He just slowly shook his head. "Stupid move, kid," he said, just before my visor went black.

I sat there in the darkness of my hideout, wincing and waiting for the detonation. But a full minute passed and nothing happened.

I slid my visor up and pulled off my gloves. As my eyes began to adjust to the darkness I let out a tentative sigh of relief. It had been a bluff after all. Sorrento had been playing an elaborate mind game with me. An effective one, too. I was shaking like a leaf.

As I was gulping down a bottle of water, I suddenly realized that I should log back in and warn Aech and Art3mis. The Sixers would go after them next.

I was pulling my gloves back on when I heard the explosion.

I felt the shockwave a split second after I heard the detonation, and instinctively dropped to the floor of my hideout with my arms wrapped over my head. In the distance, I could hear the sound of rending metal as several trailer stacks began to collapse, ripping free of their scaffolding and crashing against one another like massive dominoes. These horrific sounds continued for what seemed like a very long time. Then it was silent again.

I eventually overcame my paralysis and opened the rear door of the van. In a nightmare-like daze, I made my way to the outskirts of the junk pile, and from there, I could see a giant

pillar of smoke and flames rising from the opposite end of the stacks.

I followed the stream of people who were already running in that direction, along the northern perimeter of the stacks. The stack containing my aunt's trailer had collapsed into a fiery, smoking ruin, along with all of the stacks adjacent to it. There was nothing there now but a massive pile of twisted, flaming metal.

I kept my distance, but a large crowd of people had already gathered up ahead of me, standing as close to blaze as they dared. No one bothered trying to enter the wreckage to look for survivors. It was obvious there weren't going to be any.

Suddenly, an ancient propane tank attached to one of the crushed trailers detonated in a small explosion, causing the crowd to scatter and dive for cover. Several more tanks detonated in rapid succession. After that, the onlookers moved much further back and then kept their distance.

The residents who lived in the nearby stacks that were still standing knew that if the fire spread, they were in big trouble. So a lot of people were already scrambling to fight the blaze, using garden hoses, buckets, empty Big Gulp cups, and whatever else they could find. Before long, the flames were contained and the fire began to die out.

As I watched in silence, I could already hear the people around me murmuring, saying that it was probably another meth lab accident, or that some idiot must have been trying to build a homemade bomb. Just as Sorrento had predicted.

That thought suddenly snapped me out of my daze. What was I thinking? The Sixers had just tried to kill me. They probably still had agents lurking here in the stacks, checking to make sure I was dead. And like a total idiot I was standing right out in the open.

I faded away from the crowd and hurried back to my hideout, being careful not run, constantly glancing over my shoulder to make sure I wasn't being followed. Once I was back

inside the van, I slammed and locked the door, then curled into a quivering ball in the corner. I stayed like that for a long time.

Eventually, the shock began to wear off, and the reality of what had just happened started to sink in. My Aunt Alice and her boyfriend Rick were dead, along with everyone who had lived in our trailer, and in the trailers below and around it. Including sweet old Mrs. Gilmore. And if I had been at home, I would be dead now, too.

I was jacked up on adrenaline, unsure of what to do next, overcome by a paralyzing mixture of fear and rage. I thought about logging in to the OASIS to call the police, but then considered how they would react when I told them my story. They'd think I was a raving nutjob. And if I called the media, they'd react the same way. There was no way anyone would believe my story. Not unless I revealed that I was Parzival, and maybe not even then. I didn't have a shred of proof against Sorrento and the Sixers. All traces of the bomb they'd planted was probably melting into slag right now.

Revealing my identity to the world so that I could accuse one of the world's most powerful corporations of blackmail and murder didn't seem like the smartest move.

I seemed to be safe in my hideout for the moment, but I knew I couldn't stay in the stacks much longer. When the Sixers found out I was still alive, they would come back here to looking for me. I needed to get the hell out of Dodge. But I couldn't do that until I had some money, and my first endorsement checks wouldn't be deposited for another day or two. I would just have to lay low until then. But right now, I needed to talk to Aech, to warn him that he was next on the Sixers' hit list.

I was also desperate to see a friendly face.

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I grabbed my OASIS console and powered it on, then pulled on my visor and gloves. As I logged in, my avatar reappeared on Ludus, on the hilltop where I'd been sitting prior to my chatroom session with Sorrento. The moment my audio kicked in, I heard the earsplitting roar of engines, coming from somewhere directly overhead. I stepped out from under the tree and looked up. There was a squadron of Sixer gunships flying in formation, zooming south at low altitude, their sensors scanning the surface as they went.

I was about to duck back under the tree, out of sight, when I remembered that all of Ludus was a no-PvP zone. The Sixers couldn't harm me here. Even so, my nerves were still on edge. I continued to scan the sky and quickly spotted two more Sixer gunship squadrons, off near the eastern horizon. A moment later, several more squadrons dropped in from orbit to the north and west. It looked like an alien invasion.

An icon flashed on my display, informing me that I had a new text message from Aech:
Where the hell are you? Call me NOW!

I tapped his name on my contact list and he answered on the first ring. His avatar's face appeared in my vidfeed window. He was wearing a grim expression.

"Did you hear the news?" he asked.

"What news?"

"The Sixers are on Ludus. Thousands of them. More arriving every minute. They're searching the planet, looking for the tomb."

"Yeah. I'm on Ludus right now. Sixer gunships everywhere. "

Aech scowled. "When I find I-r0k, I'm going to kill him. Slowly. Then, when he creates a new avatar, I'm going to hunt him down and kill him again. If that moron had kept his mouth shut, the Sixers never would have thought to look here."

"Yeah. His forum posts were what tipped them off. Sorrento said so himself."

"Sorrento? As in *Nolan Sorrento*?"

I told him about the email IOI had sent me, and my chatroom conversation with Sorrento. I told him how the Sixers had bribed a school administrator to get access to our student records, and that Sorrento had used that information to try and blackmail me. Then I told him about the attempt on my life.

"*They blew up your house?*"

"Actually, it was a trailer," I said. "In a trailer park. They killed a lot of people here, Aech. It's probably already on the newsfeeds." I took a deep breath. "I'm freaking out. And I'm scared."

"I don't blame you," he said. "Thank god you weren't home when it happened..."

I nodded. "I almost never log in from home. Luckily, the Sixers didn't know that."

"What about your family?"

"It was my aunt's place. She's dead, I think. We... we weren't very close." This was a huge understatement, of course. My Aunt Alice had never once shown me any kindness, but she still hadn't deserve to die. But most of the wrenching guilt I now felt had to do with Mrs. Gilmore, and the knowledge that my actions had gotten her killed. She was the sweetest person

I'd ever known.

I suddenly realized that I was sobbing. I muted my audio so Aeche wouldn't hear, then took several deep breaths until I got myself under control again.

"I can't believe this!" Aeche growled. "Those evil pricks. They're gonna pay, Z. Count on it. *We will make them pay for this.*"

I couldn't see how, but I didn't argue. I knew he was just trying to make me feel better.

"Where are you right now?" Aeche asked. "Do you need help? Like, a place to stay or something? I can wire you some money if you need it."

"No, I'm okay," I said. "But thanks, man. I really appreciate the offer."

"De nada, amigo."

"Listen, did the Sixers send you the same email they sent me?"

"Yeah. Thousands of them. But I decided it was best to ignore them."

I frowned. "I wish I'd been smart enough to do that."

"Dude, you had no way of knowing they were gonna try and kill you! Besides, they already had your home address. If you'd ignored their emails, they probably would have set off that bomb anyway."

"Listen, Aeche... Sorrento said that your school records contained a fake home address, and that they don't know where to find you. But he might have been lying. You should leave home. Go somewhere safe. As soon as possible."

"Don't worry about me, Z. I stay mobile. Those bastards will never find me."

"If you say so," I replied, wondering what he meant exactly. "But I need to warn Art3mis, too. And Daito and Shoto, if I can reach them. The Sixers are probably doing everything they can to learn their identities, too."

"That gives me an idea," he said. "We should invite all three of them to meet us in the Basement later tonight. Say around midnight? A private chatroom session. Just the five of us. You can tell them everything you just told me, and then we can all decide how to deal with Sorrento and the Sixers."

"Good idea," I said. My mood suddenly brightened at the prospect of seeing Art3mis again. "Do you think they'll all agree to come?"

"Yeah, if we let them know their lives depend on it." He smirked. "And we'll have the world's top five gunters, together in one chatroom. Who's gonna sit that out?"

"Good point. I'll see you tonight."

#

I sent Art3mis a short message, asking her to meet us in Aech's private chatroom session at midnight. She replied just a few minutes later, promising to be there. I called Aech to let him know, and he told me he'd managed to reach Daito and Shoto. They had both also agreed to attend. The meeting was set.

I didn't feel like being alone, so I logged in to the basement about an hour early. Aech was already there, surfing the newsfeeds on the ancient RCA television. Without saying a word, he got up and gave me a hug. Then we both sat down and watched the news coverage together while we waited for the others to arrive.

Every channel was airing OASIS footage showing the hordes of Sixer spacecraft and troops that were currently arriving on Ludus. It was easy for everyone to guess why they were there, and so now every gunter in the simulation was also headed for Ludus. Transport terminals all over the planet were jammed with incoming avatars.

"So much for keeping the tomb's location a secret," I said, shaking my head.

"It was bound to leak out eventually," Aech said, shutting off the TV. "I just didn't think it would happen this fast."

We both heard an entrance alert chime as Art3mis materialized at the top of the staircase. She was wearing the same outfit she'd had on the night we met. She waved to me as she descended the steps. I waved back, then made introductions.

"Aech, meet Art3mis. Art3mis, this is my best friend, Aech."

"Pleasure to meet you," Art3mis said, extending her right hand.

Aech shook it. "Likewise." He flashed his Cheshire grin. "Thanks for coming."

"Are you kidding? How could I miss it? The very first meeting of *The High Five*."

"The High Five?" I said.

"Yeah," Aech said. "That's what they're calling us on all of the message boards now. We hold the top five high score slots on the Scoreboard. So we're *The High Five*."

"Right," I said. "At least for the time being."

Art3mis grinned at that, then turned and began to wander around the basement, admiring the 80s decor. "Aech, this is, by far, the coolest chatroom I've ever seen."

"Thank you." He bowed his head. "Kind of you to say."

She stopped to browse through the shelf of role-playing game supplements. "You've recreated Morrow's basement perfectly. Every last detail. I want to *live* here."

"You've got a permanent spot on the guest list. Log in and hang out any time."

"Really?" she said, clearly delighted. "Thank you! I will. You're the man, Aech."

"Yes," he said, smiling. "It's true. I am."

They really seemed to be hitting it off, and it was making me crazy jealous. I didn't want Art3mis to like Aech, or vice versa. I wanted her all to myself.

Daito and Shoto logged in a moment later, appearing simultaneously at the top of the basement staircase. Daito was the taller of the two, and appeared to be in his late teens. Shoto was a foot shorter and looked much younger. Maybe about thirteen. Both appeared to be Japanese, and they bore a striking resemblance to one another, like snapshots of the same young man taken five years apart. They wore matching suits of traditional Samurai armor, and each had both a short wakizashi and a longer katana strapped to their backs.

"Greetings," the taller Samurai said. "I am Daito. And this is my little brother, Shoto. Thank you for the invitation. We are honored to meet you each of you."

They bowed in unison. Aech and Art3mis returned the bow, and I quickly followed suit. As we each introduced ourselves, Daito and Shoto bowed to us once again, and once again we each returned the gesture.

"All right," Aech said, once all the bowing had ended. "Let's get this party started. I'm sure you've all seen the news. The Sixers are swarming all over Ludus. Thousands of them. They're conducting a systematic search of the entire planet surface. Even if they don't know exactly what they're looking for, it still won't be long before they find the entrance to the tomb--"

"Actually," Art3mis interrupted, "They already found it. Over thirty minutes ago."

We all turned to look at her.

"That hasn't been reported on the newsfeeds yet," Daito said. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Afraid so. When I heard about the Sixers this morning, I decided to hide an uplink camera in some trees near the tomb entrance, to keep an eye on the area." She opened a vidfeed window in the air in front of her, then spun it around so the rest of us could see. It showed a wide shot of the flat-topped hill and the clearing around it, looking down from a spot in one of the trees high above. From this angle, it was easy to see that the large black stones on

top of the hill were arranged to make it look like a human skull. We could also see that the entire area was crawling with Sixers, and more seemed to be arriving every second.

But the most disturbing thing we saw on the vidfeed was the large transparent dome of energy that now covered the entire hill.

"Son of a bitch," Aech said. "Is that what I think it is?"

Art3mis nodded. "A force field. The Sixers installed it just after the first of them arrived. So..."

"So from here on out," Daito said, "every gunter who finds the tomb won't be able to get inside. Not unless they can somehow get through that force field."

"Actually, they've put up *two* force fields," Art3mis said. "A small field with a larger field over it. They lower them in sequence, whenever they want to let more Sixers enter the tomb. Like an airlock." She pointed to the window. "Watch. They're doing it now."

A squadron of Sixers marched down the loading ramp of a gunship parked nearby. They were all lugging equipment containers. As they approached the outer force field, it suddenly vanished, revealing a smaller domed field inside the first. As soon as the squadron reached the wall of the inner force field, the outer field reappeared. In the same instant, the inner force field was dropped, allowing the Sixers to enter the tomb.

There was a long silence while we all contemplated this new development.

"I suppose it could be worse," Aech said finally. "If the tomb were in a PvP zone, those assholes would already have laser cannons and robot sentries mounted everywhere, to vaporize anyone who approached the area."

He was right. Since Ludus was a safe zone, the Sixers couldn't harm gunters who approached the tomb. But there was nothing to stop them from erecting a force field to keep

them out. So that was exactly what they'd done.

"The Sixers have obviously been planning and preparing for this moment for some time now," Art3mis said, closing her vidfeed window.

"They won't be able to keep everyone out for very long," Aech said. "When the clans find out about this, it'll be all out war. There will be thousands of gunters attacking that force field with everything they've got. RPGs. Fireballs. Cluster bombs. Nukes. It's gonna get ugly. They'll turn that forest into a wasteland."

"Yeah, but in the meantime, Sixer avatars will be farming the Copper Key and then filing their avatars through the First Gate, one after another, in a freakin' conga line."

"*But how can they do this?*" Shoto asked, his young voice brimming with rage. He looked to his brother. "It's not fair. They're not playing fair."

"They don't have to. There are no laws in the OASIS, little brother," Daito said. "The Sixers can do whatever they please. They won't stop until someone stops them."

"The Sixers have no honor," Shoto said, scowling.

"You guys don't know the half of it," Aech said. "That's why Parzival and I asked you all here." He turned to me. "Z, do you want to tell them what happened?"

I nodded and turned to the others. First, I told them about the email I'd received from IOI. They'd all received the same invitation, but had wisely ignored it. Then I related the details of my chatroom session with Sorrento, doing my best not to leave anything out. Finally, I told them how our conversation had ended--with a bomb detonating at my home address. By the time I'd finished, their avatars all wore looks of stunned disbelief.

"Jesus," Art3mis whispered. "No joke? They tried to kill you?"

"Yeah. They would have succeeded, too, if I'd been at home. I was just lucky."

"Now you all know how far the Sixers are willing to go to stop us from beating them to the Egg," Aech said. "If they're able locate any one of us, we're dead meat."

I nodded. "So you should all take precautions to protect yourselves and your identities," I said. "If you haven't already."

They all nodded, and then there was another long silence.

"There's still one thing I don't understand," Art3mis said a moment later. "How did the Sixers suddenly know to look for the tomb on Ludus? Did someone tip them off?" She glanced around at each of us, but there was no hint of accusation in her voice.

"They must have seen the rumor about Parzival and Aech that were posted on all of the gunter message boards," Shoto said. "That's how we knew to look there."

Daito winced, then punched his little brother in the shoulder. "Didn't I tell you to keep quiet, blabber mouth?" he hissed. Shoto looked sheepish and clammed up.

"What rumor?" Art3mis asked. She looked at me. "What's he talking about? I haven't had time to check the boards in a few days."

"There were several posts made by gunters who claimed to know Parzival and Aech, saying that they were both students on Ludus." He turned to Aech and I. "My brother and I have spent the past two years searching for the Tomb of Horrors. We've scoured dozens of worlds looking for it. But we never thought to look on Ludus. Not until we heard that you attended school there."

"It never occurred to me that attending school on Ludus was something I needed to keep a secret," I said. "So I didn't."

"Yeah, and it's lucky for us that you didn't," Aech said. He turned to the others. "Parzival unintentionally tipped me off about the tomb's location, too. I never thought to look for it on

Ludus, either, until his name appeared on the Scoreboard."

Daito nudged his younger brother and they both faced me and bowed. "You were the first to find the tomb's hiding place, so we owe you our gratitude for leading us to it."

I returned their bow. "Thanks, guys. But actually, Art3mis here found it first. Totally on her own. A month before I did."

"Yeah, for all the good it did me," Art3mis said. "I couldn't defeat the lich at Joust. I'd been at it for weeks, when this punk showed up and did it on his first try." She explained how we met, and how she finally managed to beat the king the following day, right after the server reset at midnight.

"I have Aech here to thank for my Jousting prowess," I said. "We used to play all the time, here in the Basement. That's the only reason I beat the king on my first attempt."

"Ditto," Aech said. He stretched out his hand and we bumped fists.

Daito and Shoto both smiled. "It was the same with us," Daito said. "My brother and I have been playing Joust against one another for years, because the game was mentioned in Anorak's Almanac."

"Great," Art3mis said, throwing up her hands. "Good for you guys. You were all prepared in advance. I'm so happy for you. Bravo." She gave us all a sarcastic golf clap, which made everyone laugh. "Now, can we adjourn the Mutual Admiration Society and get back to the topic at hand?"

"Sure," Aech said, smiling. "What *was* the topic at hand?"

"The Sixers?" Art3mis offered.

"Right! Of course!" Aech rubbed the back of his neck while biting his lower lip, something he always did when he was trying to gather his thoughts. "You said they found the

tomb less than an hour ago, right? So any minute now, they'll reach the throne room and face off against the lich. But what do you think happens when multiple avatars enter the burial chamber at the same?"

I turned to Daito and Shoto. "Your names appeared on the Scoreboard on the same day, just a few minutes apart. So you entered the throne room together, didn't you?"

Daito nodded. "Yes," he said. "And when we did, two copies of the king appeared on the dais, one for each of us to play."

"Great," Art3mis said. "So it might be possible for hundreds of Sixers to joust for the Copper Key at the same time. Or even thousands."

"Yeah," Shoto said. "But to get the key, each Sixer has to beat the lich at Joust, which we all know isn't easy."

"The Sixers are using hacked immersion rigs," I said. "Sorrento was boasting about it to me. They've got it set up so that different users can control the actions of every one of their avatars. So they can just have their best Joust players take control of each Sixer avatar during the match against Acererak. One after the other."

"Cheating bastards," Aech repeated.

"The Sixers have no honor," Daito said, shaking his head.

"No shit," Art3mis said, rolling her eyes.

"It gets worse," I said. "Every Sixer has a support team, made up of Halliday scholars, video game experts, and cryptologists, who are there to help them beat every challenge and solve every puzzle they encounter. Playing through the WarGames simulation will be a piece of cake for them. Someone will just feed them the dialogue."

"Unbelievable," Aech muttered. "How are we supposed to compete with that?"

"We can't," Art3mis said. "Once they have the Copper Key, they'll probably locate the First Gate just as quickly as we all did. It won't take them very long to catch up with us. And once they have the riddle about the Jade Key, they'll have their eggheads working around the clock to decipher it."

"If they find the Jade Key's hiding place before we do, they'll barricade it, too," I said. "And then the five of us will be in the same boat everyone else is in right now."

Art3mis nodded. Aech kicked the coffee table in frustration, then let out a heavy sigh. "This isn't even remotely fair," he said. "The Sixers have a huge advantage, over all of us. They've got an endless supply of money, weapons, vehicles, and avatars. There are thousands of them, all working together."

"Right," I said. "And each of us is on our own. Well, except for you two." I nodded at Daito and Shoto. "But you know what I mean. They've got us outnumbered and outgunned, and that isn't going to change anytime soon."

"What are you suggesting?" Daito asked. He suddenly sounded uneasy.

"I'm not suggesting anything," I said. "I'm just stating the facts, as I see them."

"Good," Daito replied. "Because it sounded like you were about to propose some sort of alliance between the five of us."

Aech studied him carefully. "So? Would that be such a terrible idea?"

"Yes, it would," Daito said curtly. "My brother and I hunt alone. We don't want or need your help."

"Oh really?" Aech said. "A second ago, you admitted needing Parzival's help to find the *Tomb of Horrors*."

Daito's eyes narrowed. "We would have found it on our own eventually."

"Right," Aech said. "It probably would have only taken you another *five years*."

"Come on, Aech," I said, stepping between them. "This isn't helping."

Aech and Daito glared at each other in silence, while Shoto stared up at his brother uncertainly. Art3mis just stood back and watched, looking somewhat amused.

"We didn't come here to be insulted," Daito said finally. "We're leaving."

"Hold on, Daito," I said. "Just wait a second, will you? Let's just talk this out. We shouldn't part as enemies. We're all on the same side here."

"No," Daito said. "We're not. You're all strangers to us. For all we know, any one of you could be a Sixer spy."

Art3mis laughed out loud at that, then covered her mouth. Daito ignored her. "This is pointless," he said. "Only one person can be the first to find the Egg and win the prize," he said.

"And that person will either be me or my brother."

And with that, Daito and Shoto both abruptly logged out.

"Well, that went well," Art3mis said, once their avatars had vanished.

I nodded. "Yeah, real smooth, Aech. Way to build bridges."

"What did *I* do?" he said defensively. "Daito was being a complete asshole! Besides, it's not like we were asking him to team up, anyway. I'm an avowed solo. And so are you. And Art3mis here looks like the lone wolf type, too."

"Guilty as charged," she said, grinning. "But even so, there is an argument to be made for forming an alliance against the Sixers."

"Maybe," Aech said. "But think about it. If you find the Jade Key before either of us do, are you going to be generous and tell us where it is?"

Art3mis smirked. "Of course not."

"Me neither," Aech said. "So there's no point in discussing an alliance."

Art3mis shrugged. "Well, then it looks like the meeting is over. I should probably get going." She winked at me. "The clock is ticking. Right, boys?"

"Tick tock," I said.

"Good luck, fellas." She gave us both a wave. "See ya around."

"See ya," we both answered in unison.

I watched her avatar slowly disappear, then turned to find Aech smiling at me. "What are you grinning about?" I asked.

"You've got a crush on her, don't you?"

"What? On Art3mis? No--"

"Don't deny it, Z. You were making googly eyes at her the whole time she was here." He did his impression of this, clasping both hands to his chest and batting his eyelashes like silent film star. "I recorded the whole chat session. Do you want me to play it back for you, so you can see how silly you looked?"

"Stop being a dick."

"It's understandable, man," Aech said. "That girl is super cute."

"So, have you had any luck with the new riddle?" I said, deliberately changing the subject. "That quatrain about the Jade Key?"

"Quatrain?"

"*A poem or stanza with four lines and an alternating rhyme scheme*," I recited. "It's called a quatrain."

Aech rolled his eyes. "You're too much, man."

"What? That's the proper term for it, dickweed!"

"It's just a riddle, dude. And, no. I haven't had any luck figuring it out yet."

"Me neither," I said. "So we probably shouldn't be standing around, jabbering at each other. Time to put our noses to the grindstone."

"I concur," he said. "But—"

Just then, a stack of comic books on the other side of the room suddenly slid off the end table where they were piled and crashed to the floor, as if someone had accidentally knocked them over. Aech and I both jumped, then stared at one another.

"What the hell was that?" I said, suddenly spooked.

"I don't know." Aech walked over and examined the scattered comics. "Maybe a software glitch or something?"

"I've never seen a chatroom glitch like that," I said, scanning the empty room. "Could someone else be in here? An invisible avatar, eavesdropping on us?"

Aech rolled his eyes. "No way, Z," he said. "You're getting way too paranoid. This is an encrypted private chatroom. No one can enter without my permission. You know that."

"Right," I said, still freaked out.

"Relax. It was a glitch." He rested a hand on my shoulder. "Listen. Let me know if you change your mind about needing a loan. Or a place to crash. Okay?"

"I'll be all right," I said. "But thanks, amigo."

We bumped fists again, like the Wonder Twins activating their powers.

"I'll catch you later. Good luck, Z."

"Same to you, Aech."

0016

A few hours later, the remaining slots on the scoreboard began to fill up, one after another, in rapid succession. Not with avatar names, but with IOI employee numbers. Each would appear with a score of five-thousand points (which now appeared to be the fixed value for obtaining the Copper Key), then the score would jump by another hundred-thousand points a few hours later, once that Sixer had cleared the First Gate. By the end of the day, the scoreboard looked like this:

HIGH SCORES:

1. Parzival	110,000	🏆
2. Art3mis	109,000	🏆
3. Aech	108,000	🏆
4. Daito	107,000	🏆
5. Shoto	106,000	🏆
6. IOI-655321	105,000	🏆
7. IOI-643187	105,000	🏆
8. IOI-621671	105,000	🏆
9. IOI-678324	105,000	🏆
10. IOI-637330	105,000	🏆

I recognized the first Sixer employee number to appear, because I'd seen it printed on Sorrento's uniform. He'd probably insisted that his avatar be the first to obtain the Copper Key and clear the gate. But I had a hard time believing he'd done it on his own. There was no way he was that good at *Joust*. Or that he knew *WarGames* by heart. I knew Art3mis was right. Sorrento

and the other Sixers were cheating.

Once the remaining empty slots were filled, the Scoreboard suddenly began to grow in length, to display rankings beyond tenth place. Before long, there were twenty avatars listed on the scoreboard. Then thirty. Over the next twenty-four hours, over sixty Sixer avatars cleared the First Gate.

Meanwhile, Ludus had become the most popular destination in the OASIS. Transport terminals all over the planet were spitting out a steady stream of gunters, who then swarmed across the globe, creating chaos and disrupting classes on every school campus. The OASIS Public School Board saw the writing on the wall, and the decision was quickly made to evacuate Ludus and relocate all of its schools to a new location. An identical copy of the planet, *Ludus II*, was created in the same sector, a short distance away from the original. All students were given a day off from school while a back-up copy of the planet's original source code was copied over to the new site (minus the *Tomb of Horrors* code Halliday had secretly added to it at some point). Classes resumed on Ludus II the following day, and Ludus was left for the Sixers and gunters to fight over.

News spread quickly that the Sixers were encamped around a small flat-topped hill at the center of a remote forest. The tomb's exact location appeared on the message boards that evening, along with screenshots showing the force field the Sixers had erected to keep everyone else out. These screenshots also clearly showed the skull-pattern of the stones on the hilltop. In a matter of hours, the connection to the *Tomb of Horrors* D&D module was posted to every single gunter message board. Then it hit the newsfeeds.

All of the large gunter clans immediately banded together to launch a full-scale assault on the Sixers' force field, trying everything they could think of to bring it down or circumvent it.

The Sixers had installed teleportation disruptors, which prevented anyone from transporting inside the force field via technological means. The Sixers had also stationed a team of high-level wizards around the tomb. These magic-users cast spells around the clock, keeping the entire area encased in a temporary null-magic zone. This prevented the force fields from being bypassed by any magical means.

The clans began to bombard the outer force field with rockets, missiles, nukes, and harsh language. They laid siege to the tomb all night, but nothing got through. The following morning, both force fields remained intact.

In desperation, the clans decided to break out the heavy artillery. They pooled their resources and purchased two very expensive, very powerful anti-matter bombs off eBay. They detonated both of them in sequence, just a few seconds apart. The first bomb took down the outer shield, and the second bomb finished the job. The moment the second force field went down, thousands of gunters (all unharmed by the bomb blasts, due to the no-PvP zone) swarmed into the tomb and clogged the corridors of the dungeon below. Soon, there were thousand of gunters (and Sixers) crammed into the burial chamber, all ready to challenge the lich king to a game of Joust. Multiple copies of the King appeared, one for every avatar who set foot on the dais. If an avatar beat the king at Joust two games out of three, they received a copy of the Copper Key. If they lost, they had to face the king in mortal combat. Ninety-five percent of the gunters who challenged him lost and were then killed. But a few gunters were successful, and at the bottom of the Scoreboard, listed after the High Five and the dozens of IOI employee numbers, new avatar names began to appear. Within a few days, the list of avatars on the Scoreboard was over a hundred names long.

Now that there were thousands of gunters in the area, it became impossible for the Sixers

to put their force field back in operation. Gunters were mobbing them and destroying their ships and equipment on sight. So the Sixers gave up on their barricade, but they continued to send avatars into the *Tomb of Horrors* to farm copies of the Copper Key. No one could do anything to stop them.

#

The day after the explosion in the stacks, there was a brief story about it on one of the local newsfeeds. They showed a video clip of volunteers sifting through the wreckage for human remains. What they did find couldn't be identified.

It seemed that the Sixers had also planted a large amount of drug manufacturing equipment and chemicals at the scene, to make it look like a meth lab in one of the trailers had exploded. It worked like a charm. The cops didn't bother to investigate any further. Two days after the explosion, the cranes started to clear away the crushed and charred trailers and they started to erect new stacks in the vacant lots. It was like nothing had even happened.

As soon as the first endorsement payment arrived in my account, I bought a one-way bus ticket to Columbus, Ohio, set to depart at eight the following morning. I paid extra for a first-class seat, which came with a comfier chair and a high-bandwidth uplink jack. I planned to spend most of the long ride east logged into the OASIS.

Once my trip was booked, I inventoried everything in my hideout and packed the items I wanted to take with me into an old rucksack. My school-issued OASIS console, visor, and gloves. My dog-eared printout of *Anorak's Almanac*. My grail diary. Some clothes. My laptop. Everything else I left behind.

When it got dark, I climbed out of the van, locked it, and hurled the keys off into the junk pile. Then I hoisted the rucksack and walked out of the stacks for the last time. I never once

looked back.

I kept to busy streets and managed to avoid getting mugged on the way to the bus terminal. There was a battered customer service kiosk just inside the door, and after a quick retinal scan it spat out my ticket. I sat by the gate, reading my copy of the *Almanac* until it was time to board the bus.

It was a double-decker, with armor plating, bulletproof windows, and solar panels on the roof. A rolling fortress. I had a window seat, two rows behind the driver, who was encased in a bullet-proof plexiglas box. A team of six heavily-armed guards rode on the bus's upper deck, to protect the vehicle and its passengers in the event of a hijacking by road agents or scavengers--a distinct possibility once we ventured out into the lawless badlands that now existed outside of the safety of large cities.

Every single seat on the bus was occupied. Most of the passengers put on their visors the moment they sat down. I left mine off for awhile, though. Long enough to watch the city of my birth recede from view on the road behind us, as we rolled through the sea of wind turbines that surrounded it.

The bus's electric motor had a top speed of about forty miles an hour. Due to the deteriorating Interstate highway system, and the countless stops the bus had to make at charging stations along the way, it took several days for me to reach my destination. I spent nearly all of that time logged into to the OASIS, preparing to start my new life.

The first order of business was to create a new identity. This wasn't that difficult, now that I had some money. In the OASIS, you could buy almost any kind of information, if you knew where to look and who to ask, and if you didn't mind breaking the law. There were plenty of desperate and corrupt people working for the government (and for every major corporation),

and these people often sold information on the OASIS black market.

My new status as a world famous gunter gave me all kinds of underworld credibility, which helped me get access to a highly-exclusive illegal data auction site known as the *L33T HAX0RZ WAREZHAUS*, and for a shockingly small amount of money, I was able to purchase a series of access procedures and passwords for the USCR (United States Citizen Registry) database. Using these, I was able to log in to the database and access my existing citizen profile, which had been created when I enrolled for school. I deleted my fingerprints and retinal patterns, then replaced them with those of someone deceased (my father). Then I copied my own fingerprints and retinal patterns into a completely new identity profile that I created, under the name Bryce Lynch. I made Bryce twenty-two years old and gave him a brand new Social Security number, an immaculate credit rating, and a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science. When I wanted to become my old self again, all I would have to do is delete the Lynch identity and copy my prints and retinal patterns back over to my original file.

Once my new identity was set up, I began searching the Columbus classifieds for a suitable apartment and found a relatively inexpensive room in an old high-rise hotel, a relic from the days when people physically traveled for business and pleasure. The rooms had all been converted into one-room efficiency apartments, and each unit had been modified to meet the very specific needs of a full-time gunter. It had everything I wanted. Low rent, a high-end security system, and steady, reliable access to as much electricity as I could afford. Most importantly, they offered a direct fiber-optic connection to the main OASIS server node, which was located just a few miles away. This was the fastest and most secure type of Internet connection available, and since it wasn't provided by IOI or one of its subsidiaries, I wouldn't have to be paranoid about them monitoring my connection or trying to trace my location. I would

safe.

I rented the room under my new name and paid six months rent up front. That kept the rental agent from asking any questions. We spoke briefly in a chatroom, and he showed me around a virtual mock-up of my new digs. The place looked perfect. I arranged to move in as soon as I reached the city.

#

Sometimes, during the late hours of the night, as the bus slowly hummed along the crumbling highway, I would remove my visor and stare out the window. I'd never been outside of Oklahoma City before, and I was curious to see what the rest of the country looked like. But the view out of my window was perpetually bleak, and each decaying, overcrowded city we rolled through looked just like the last.

Finally, after it felt like we'd been crawling along the highway for months, the Columbus skyline appeared on the horizon, glittering like Oz at the end of the yellow brick road. We arrived around sunset, and there already were more electric lights burning in the city than I'd ever seen at one time. I'd read there were giant solar arrays positioned throughout the city, and two heliostat power plants on its outskirts. They drank in the sun's power all day, stored it, and then fed it back out each night.

As we pulled into the Columbus bus terminal, my OASIS connection suddenly cut out. As I pulled off my visor and filed off the bus with the other passengers, the reality of my situation finally began to hit home. So far, I'd somehow managed to avoid thinking about it. But the fact was, I was now a fugitive, living under an assumed name. There were powerful people out looking for me. People who wanted me dead.

As I stepped off the bus, it suddenly felt as if there was a heavy weight resting on my

chest. I was having a hard time breathing. Maybe I was having a panic attack. I forced myself to take deep breaths and tried to calm down. All I had to do was to get to my new apartment, set up my rig, and then log back into the OASIS. Then everything would be all right. I would be back in familiar surroundings. I would be safe.

I hailed an autocab and entered my new address on the touchscreen. The synthesized voice of the cab's computer told me the drive would take an estimated thirty-two minutes with the current traffic conditions. During the ride, I stared out the window at the dark city streets. I still felt lightheaded and anxious. I kept glancing at the meter, to see how much further we had to go. Finally, the cab pulled up in front of my new apartment building, a slate-gray monolith on the banks of the Scioto, just at the edge of the Twin Rivers ghetto. I noticed a discolored outline on the building's façade, where the Hilton logo used to be, back when the place had been a hotel.

I thumbed my fare and climbed out of the cab. Then I took one last look around, inhaled one final breath of fresh air, and then carried my bag through the front door and into the lobby. When I stepped inside the security checkpoint cage, my fingerprints and retinal patterns were scanned and my new name flashed on the monitor. Then a green light lit up and the cage door slid open, allowing me to continue on to the elevators.

My apartment was on the forty-second floor, number 4211. The security lock mounted outside required another retinal scan, then the door slid open and the interior lights switched on. There was no furniture in the cube-shaped room, and only one window. I stepped inside, closed the door, and locked it behind me. Then I made a silent vow not go outside again until I had completed my quest. To abandon the real world altogether until I found the Egg.

I would end up breaking that vow. But even so, I didn't set foot outside that apartment again for over a year.

LEVEL TWO:

*"I'm not crazy about reality, but it's still
the only place to get a decent meal."*

- Groucho Marx

0018

Art3mis: You there?

Parzival: Yes! Hey! I can't believe you finally responded to one of my chat requests.

Art3mis: Only to ask you to cut it out. It's a bad idea for us to start chatting.

Parzival: Why? I thought we were friends.

Art3mis: You seem like a great guy. But we're competitors. Rival gunters. Sworn enemies. You know the drill.

Parzival: We don't have to talk about anything related to the Hunt...

Art3mis: Everything is related to the Hunt.

Parzival: Come on. At least give it a shot. Let's start over. Hi, Art3mis! How have you been?

Art3mis: Fine. Thanks for asking. You?

Parzival: Outstanding. Listen, why are we using this ancient text-only chat interface? I can host a virtual chatroom for us.

Art3mis: I prefer this.

Parzival: Why?

Art3mis: As you may recall, I tend to ramble in real time. When I have to type out everything I want to say, I come off as less of a flibbertigibbet.

Parzival: I don't think you're a flibbertigibbet. You're enchanting.

Art3mis: Did you just use the word "enchanting?"

Parzival: What I typed is right there in front of you, isn't it?

Art3mis: That's very sweet. But you're full of crap.

Parzival: I am totally and completely serious.

Art3mis: So, how's life at the top of the Scoreboard, hotshot? Sick of being famous yet?

Parzival: I don't feel famous.

Art3mis: Are you kidding? The whole world is dying to find out who you really are. You're a rockstar, man.

Parzival: You're just as famous as I am. And if I'm such a rockstar, how come the media always portrays me as some unwashed geek who never goes outside?

Art3mis: I take it you saw that SNL skit they did about us?

Parzival: Yes. Why does everyone assume I'm an anti-social nutjob?

Art3mis: You're not anti-social?

Parzival: No! Maybe. Okay, yes. But I have excellent personal hygiene.

Art3mis: At least they got your gender correct. Everyone thinks I'm a man in real life.

Parzival: That's because most gunters are male, and they can't accept the idea that a woman has beaten and/or outsmarted them.

Art3mis: I know. Neanderthals.

Parzival: So you're telling me, definitively, that you are a female? IRL?

Art3mis: You should have already figured that out on your own, Clouseau.

Parzival: I did. I have.

Art3mis: Have you?

Parzival: Yes. After analyzing the available data, I've concluded that you must be a female.

Art3mis: Why must I?

Parzival: Because I don't want to find out that I've got a crush on some 300 lb. dude named Chuck who lives in his mother's basement in suburban Detroit.

Art3mis: You've got a crush on me?

Parzival: You should have already figured that out on your own, Clouseau.

Art3mis: What if I were a 300 lb. gal named Charlene, who lives in her mom's basement in suburban Detroit? Would you still have a crush on me then?

Parzival: I don't know. Do you live in your mother's basement?

Art3mis: No.

Parzival: Yeah. Then I probably still would.

Art3mis: So I'm supposed to believe you're one of those mythical guys who only cares about a woman's personality, and not about the package it comes in?

Parzival: Why is it that you assume I'm a man?

Art3mis: Please. It's obvious. I get nothing but boy-vibes coming from you.

Parzival: Boy-vibes? What, do I use masculine sentence structure or something?

Art3mis: Don't change the subject. You were saying you have a crush on me?

Parzival: I've had a crush on since before we even met. From reading your blog and watching your POV. I've been cyber-stalking you for years.

Art3mis: But you still don't really know anything about me. Or my real personality.

Parzival: This is the OASIS. We exist as nothing but raw personality in here.

Art3mis: I beg to differ. Everything about our online personas is filtered through our avatars, which allows us to control how we look and sound to others. The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it.

Parzival: So, IRL, you're nothing like the person I met that night in the tomb?

Art3mis: That was just one side of me. The side I chose to show you.

Parzival: Well, I liked that side. And if you showed me your other sides, I'm sure I'd like those, too.

Art3mis: You say that now. But I know how these things work. Sooner or later, you'll demand to see a picture of the real me.

Parzival: I'm not the sort who makes demands. Besides, I'm definitely not going to show you a photo of me.

Art3mis: Why? Are you butt ugly?

Parzival: You're such a hypocrite!

Art3mis: So? Answer the question, Claire. Are you ugly?

Parzival: I must be.

Art3mis: Why?

Parzival: The female of the species has always found me repellent.

Art3mis: I don't find you repellent.

Parzival: Of course not. That's because you're an obese man named Chuck who likes to chat up ugly young boys online.

Art3mis: So you're a young man?

Parzival: Relatively young.

Art3mis: Relative to what?

Parzival: To a fifty-three old guy like you, Chuck. Does your mom let you live in that basement rent free or what?

Art3mis: Is that really what you're picturing?

Parzival: If it were, I wouldn't be chatting with you right now.

Art3mis: So what do you imagine I look like then?

Parzival: Like your avatar, I suppose. Except, you know, without the armor, guns, or the glowing sword.

Art3mis: You're kidding, right? That's the first rule of online romances, pal. No one ever looks anything like their avatar.

Parzival: Are we going to have an online romance? <crosses fingers>

Art3mis: No way, ace. Sorry.

Parzival: Why not?

Art3mis: No time for love, Dr. Jones. My cyber-porn addiction eats up most of my free time. And searching for the Jade Key takes up the rest. That's what I should be doing right now, in fact.

Parzival: Yeah. So should I. But talking to you is more fun.

Art3mis: How about you?

Parzival: How about me what?

Art3mis: Do you have time for an online romance?

Parzival: I've got time for you.

Art3mis: You're too much.

Parzival: I'm not even laying it on thick yet.

Art3mis: Do you have a job? Or are you still in high school?

Parzival: High school. I graduate next week.

Art3mis: You shouldn't reveal stuff like that! I could be a Sixer spy trying to profile you.

Parzival: The Sixers already profiled me, remember? They blew up my house. Well, it was a

trailer. But they blew it up.

Art3mis: I know. I'm still freaked out about that. I can only imagine how you feel.

Parzival: Revenge is a dish best served cold.

Art3mis: Bon appetit. What do you do when you're not hunting?

Parzival: I refuse to answer any more questions until you start reciprocating.

Art3mis: Fine. Quid pro quo, Dr. Lecter. We'll take turns asking questions. Go ahead.

Parzival: Do you work, or go to school?

Art3mis: College.

Parzival: Studying what?

Art3mis: It's my turn. What do you do when you're not hunting?

Parzival: Nothing. Hunting is all I do. I'm hunting right now, in fact. Multi-tasking all over the goddamn place.

Art3mis: Same here.

Parzival: Really? I'll keep an eye on the Scoreboard then. Just in case.

Art3mis: You do that, ace.

Parzival: What are you studying? In college?

Art3mis: Poetry and Creative Writing.

Parzival: That makes sense. You're a fantastic writer.

Art3mis: Thanks for the compliment. How old are you?

Parzival: Eighteen. You?

Art3mis: Don't you think we're getting a little too personal now?

Parzival: Not even remotely.

Art3mis: 19.

Parzival: Ah. An older woman. Hot.

Art3mis: That is, if I *am* a woman . . .

Parzival: Are you a woman?

Art3mis: It's not your turn.

Parzival: Fine.

Art3mis: How well do you know Aech?

Parzival: He's been my best friend for five years. Now, spill it. Are you a woman? And by that I mean are you a human female who has never had a sex-change operation?

Art3mis: That's pretty specific.

Parzival: Answer the question, Claire.

Art3mis: I am, and always have been, a human female. Have you ever met Aech IRL?

Parzival: No. Do you have any siblings?

Art3mis: No. You?

Parzival: Nope. You got parents?

Art3mis: They died. The Flu. So I was raised by my grandparents. You got parentage?

Parzival: No. Mine are dead, too.

Art3mis: It kinda sucks, doesn't it? Not having your parents around.

Parzival: Yeah. But a lot of people are worse off than me.

Art3mis: I tell myself that all the time. So... are you and Aech working as a duo?

Parzival: Oh, here we go . . .

Art3mis: Well? Are you?

Parzival: No. He asked me the same thing about you and I, you know. Because you cleared the First Gate a few hours after I did.

Art3mis: Which reminds me - why did you give me that tip? About changing sides on the Joust game?

Parzival: I felt like helping you.

Art3mis: Well, you shouldn't make that mistake again. Because I'm the one who's going to win. You do realize that, right?

Parzival: Yeah, yeah. We'll see.

Art3mis: You're not holding up your end of our Q & A, goof. You're, like, five questions behind.

Parzival: Fine. What color is your hair? IRL?

Art3mis: Brunette.

Parzival: Eyes?

Art3mis: Blue.

Parzival: Just like your avatar, eh? Do you have the same face and body, too?

Art3mis: As far as you know.

Parzival: Okay. What's your favorite movie? Of all time?

Art3mis: It changes. Right now? Probably Highlander.

Parzival: You've got great taste, lady.

Art3mis: I know. I have a thing for evil bald bad guys. The Kurgan is too sexy.

Parzival: I'm going to shave my head right now. And start wearing leather.

Art3mis: Send photos. Listen, I gotta go in a few minutes, Romeo. You can ask me one last question. Then I need to get some sleep.

Parzival: When can we chat again?

Art3mis: After one of us finds the Egg.

Parzival: That could take years.

Art3mis: So be it.

Parzival: Can I at least keep emailing you?

Art3mis: Not a good idea.

Parzival: You can't stop me from emailing you.

Art3mis: Actually, I can. I can block you on my contact list.

Parzival: You wouldn't do that, though. Would you?

Art3mis: Not if you don't force me to.

Parzival: Harsh. Unnecessarily harsh.

Art3mis: Good night, Parzival.

Parzival: Farewell, Art3mis. Sweet dreams.

chatlog ends. 3.17.2045 - 02:51:38 OST

#

I started to email her. At first I showed restraint and only wrote her once a week. To my

surprise, she never failed to respond. Usually it was with just a single sentence, saying she was too busy to reply. But I kept on writing her, and her replies eventually got longer. We began to correspond. A few times a week at first. Then, as our emails grew longer and more personal, we started writing each other at least once a day. Sometimes more. Whenever an email from her arrived in my inbox, I dropped everything to read it.

Before long, we were meeting in private chatroom sessions at least once a day. We played vintage board games, watched movies, and listened to music. We talked for hours. Long rambling conversations about everything under the sun. Spending time with her was intoxicating. Like a drug that I couldn't get enough of. We seemed to have everything in common. We shared the same interests. We were driven by the same goal. She got at all of my jokes. She made me laugh. She made me think. She changed the way I saw the world. I'd never had such a powerful, immediate connection with another human being before. Not even with Aech.

When I graduated from high school in early June, Art3mis came to Ludus II to sit in the stands and watch me get my diploma. Now that I was done with school, I'd intended to devote all of my to the Hunt. But all I really wanted to do was spend time with Art3mis.

As time passed, we both slowly began to drop our guard. We shared the details of our experience inside of the First Gate with each other, because that seemed like a safe topic. But before long, we were having long rambling conversations, sharing all of our ideas about Halliday and the Egg. We were like two scientists who had both devoted years to same obscure field of study, and who now, for the first time, had someone to talk to about it. Someone with the same all-consuming obsession.

Eventually, we started to go out on "dates." Day trips to exotic OASIS locales and exclusive night spots. At first, Art3mis protested. She told me I should keep a low profile,

because the Sixers still thought I was dead. As soon as my avatar was spotted in public, they would know that their attempt to kill me had failed and I would be back on their hit list. But I told her I didn't care. I was already hiding from the Sixers in the real world, and I refused to hide from them in the OASIS, too. Besides, they couldn't hurt me unless I was in a PvP zone, and I never entered one of those without taking a lot of precautions.

We still usually disguised our avatars before we went out, because we knew there would be tabloid headlines galore if Parzival and Art3mis started showing up in public together on a regular basis. But there were exceptions. On my eighteenth birthday, she took me to see the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in a huge stadium-sized movie theater on the planet Transsexual, where they held the most highly-attended and longest-running weekly screening of the movie in the OASIS. Thousands of avatars came to every show, to sit in the stands and revel in the audience participation. Usually only longstanding members of the Rocky Horror fan club were permitted to get up on stage and help act out the film in front of the giant movie screen. And only after they'd passed a grueling audition process. But Art3mis used her fame to pull a few strings, and she and I were both allowed to join the cast for that night's show. She played a note-perfect Columbia, and I had the honor of playing her undead love-interest, Eddie. I altered my avatar's appearance so that I looked exactly like Meat Loaf did in the role, but my performance and lip-synching still kinda sucked. Luckily, the audience cut me a lot of slack, because I was the famous gunter, Parzival, and I was clearly having a blast. That night was easily the most fun I'd ever had in my life. And I told Art3mis so afterwards.

To return the favor, I took her to one of my own favorite hangouts, a popular beatnik bar on the planet Kerouac called *Ann's Four-Forty*, where every Friday night they held the largest poetry slam in the OASIS. We went to the slam incognito, and she surprised me by jumping on

stage during the open mic to recite Lois Lane's classic "Can You Read My Mind?" poem from Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman* film. She got a standing ovation. I competed in the poetry slam competition, and in the first round I read a rambling, effusive poem of my own composition titled "An Ode to Art3mis." The crowd loved it, even though no one knew Artemi3s was actually there in the audience, and I got a score of 29.7 from the judges. But I was penalized for exceeding the time limit and didn't advance to the later rounds.

At the end of the night, Art3mis asked me to email her a copy of the poem I'd written for her. She opened it in front of me and silently re-read it, then she leaned over and kissed me for the first time. I couldn't feel it, of course. But it still set my heart racing.

I no longer cared that we were supposed to be rivals, and she didn't seem to either. We began to share details about our research. We told each other what movies we were currently watching and what books we were reading. We even began to exchange theories, and to discuss our interpretations of specific passages in the Almanac. I couldn't make myself be cautious around her. A little voice in my head kept trying to tell me that every word she said was probably disinformation, and that she was just playing me for a fool. But I didn't believe it. I trusted her, even though I had every reason not to.

#

A few days after my avatar appeared in public at the Rocky Horror show, I received another email message from Sorrento. It was an encrypted, set to delete itself once I'd read it:

Dear Wade,

Surprise, surprise. It seems that you're still alive and kicking. Congratulations. We're all very impressed. But you must know that you can't hide from us forever. Some day very soon, I'm going to find the rock you've crawled under, and when I do, I'm going to crush your skull with it. Until then, sleep tight.

*Kind Regards,
N. Sorrento*

At first I wasn't going to reply, but then I couldn't resist:

Dear Todd,

When I win the contest, I'm going to make sure you fry for all the people you killed.

Also, you're ugly and your momma dresses you funny.

Sincerely,

The Guy Who's Going to Beat You

I didn't tell Art3mis about Sorrento's email. I didn't tell anyone. I just did my best to forget about it. I told myself again and again that I had nothing to worry about. I'd taken every precaution. I'd changed my identity. I was well hidden. There was no way they could find me.

Eventually, I managed to convince myself, and I put Sorrento's threat out of my mind. It only resurfaced when I considered leaving my apartment. Then I would think better of it.

#

As the months continued to pass, Art3mis spent more and more time together. Even when our avatars were doing other things, we were sending emails and instant messages to each other. A river of words flowed between us.

I wanted more than anything to meet her in the real world. Face to face. But I never told her this. Not in so many words. I was certain she had strong feelings for me, but she also kept me at a distance. No matter how much I revealed about myself to her--and I wound up revealing just about everything, including my real name--she always adamantly refused to reveal any personal details about her own life. All she would say was that she was nineteen and that she lived somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. That was all I knew about her.

The image of her that I formed in my mind was the most obvious one. I pictured her as a physical manifestation of her avatar. I imagined her with the same face, eyes, hair, and body. Even though she told me repeatedly that in reality, she looked almost nothing like her avatar, and that she wasn't nearly as attractive in person.

When I began to spend most of my time with Art3mis, Aech and I began to grow apart. Instead of hanging out several times a week, we chatted a few times a month. Aech knew I was falling for Art3mis, but he never gave me too much grief about it. Even when I would bail on him at the last minute to hang out with her instead. He would just shrug, tell me to be careful, and say "I sure hope you know what you're doing, Z."

I didn't, of course. My whole relationship with Art3mis was in defiance of all my common sense. But I still couldn't help falling for her. And somehow, without realizing it was happening, my obsession with finding Halliday's Easter Egg was gradually supplanted by my obsession with Art3mis.

I'd heard all of the clichéd warnings, about the perils of falling for someone you only knew online, but I ignored them. I decided that, whoever Art3mis really was, I was in love with her. I could feel it, deep in the soft chewy caramel center of my being. And then, like a true idiot, I decided I had to tell her how I felt.

I know exactly what we both said, because I recorded our conversation and then watched a few thousand times, while obsessing over everything I'd done wrong.

We were hanging out in a private chatroom when I dropped the bomb. It was a chatroom she'd coded, a replica of the Ten Forward lounge on the Enterprise-D, from *Star Trek The Next Generation*. We were sitting by the windows, and I was listening to her explain to me why She-Ra was superior to He-Man in almost every way, when I suddenly interrupted her and the words just came out.

"I'm in love with you, Arty."

She didn't respond at first. Instead, she turned and stared out at the stars streaking past the window. Then, after a long, uncomfortable silence, she looked back at me and said, "No, you

aren't, Z. You don't even know me."

"Yes, I do," I insisted. "I know you better than I've ever known anyone in my entire life."

"You only know what I want you to know. You only see what I want you to see." She placed a hand on her chest. "This isn't my real body, Wade. Or my real face."

"I don't care! I'm in love with your mind-- with the person you are. I could care less about the packaging."

"You're just saying that," she said. I detected an unsteadiness in her voice. "Trust me. If I ever let you see me in person, you would be repulsed."

"Why do you always say that?"

"Because I'm hideously deformed. Or I'm a paraplegic. Or I'm actually sixty-three years old. Take your pick."

"I don't care if you're all three of those things. Tell me where to meet you and I'll prove it. I'll get on a plane right now and fly to wherever you are. You know I will."

She shook her head. "You don't live in the real world, Z. From what you've told me, I don't think you ever have. You're like me. You live inside this illusion." She motioned to our virtual surroundings. "You can't possibly know what real love is."

"Don't say that!" I was starting to cry, and didn't bother hiding it from her. "Is it because I told you I've never had a real girlfriend? And that I'm a virgin? Because--"

"Of course not," she said. "That isn't what this is about. *At all.*"

"Then what *is* it about? Tell me. Please."

"The Hunt. You know that. Since we started spending all of our time together, we've both all but abandoned our quests. We should be focused on finding the Jade Key right now. You can bet that's what Sorrento and the Sixers are doing. And everyone else..."

"To hell with our competition! And the Egg!" I shouted. "Didn't you hear what I just said?
I'm in love with you! And I want to be with you. More than anything."

She just stared at me. Or rather, her avatar stared blankly back at my avatar. Then she said: "I'm sorry, Z. This is all my fault. I let this get way out of hand. It has to stop."

"What do you mean? What has to stop?"

"I think we should take a break. Stop spending so much time together."

I felt like I'd been punched in the throat. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"No, Z," she said, and I could tell she was crying now, too. "I am *not* breaking up with you. That would be impossible, because *we are not together*." There was suddenly venom in her voice. "*We've never even met!*"

"So then... you're just going to... stop talking to me?"

"Yes. I think that would be for the best."

"For how long?"

"Until the Hunt is over."

"But, Arty... That could take years."

"I realize that. And I'm sorry. I don't like it either. But I think this is how it has to be."

"So, winning that money is more important to you than me?"

"It's not about the money. It's about what I could do with it."

"Right. Saving the world. You're so fucking noble."

"Don't be a jerk," she said. "I've been searching for the Egg for over five years. So have you. And now we're closer than ever to finding it. I can't just throw my chance away."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Yes, you are. Even if you don't realize it." She took a deep breath. "If I don't break this

off with you, neither of us is going to find the Egg. Which means the Sixers probably will. I can't let that happen."

Another long silence. We just stared at each other.

"When the contest ends," I said. "Then will you promise to meet me? In person?"

She nodded silently. Then, without saying another word, she suddenly logged out of the chatroom and vanished.

After that, she cut off all contact with me. She blocked all of my emails, phone calls, and chat requests. She also stopped making posts to her blog.

I tried everything I could think of to reach her. I sent her avatar flowers. I made multiple trips to her avatar's stronghold, an armored palace on Benatar, the small moon she owned. I dropped mix tapes and notes on her palace from the air, like lovesick bombs. Once, in a supreme act of desperation, I stood outside her palace gates for two solid hours, with a boom box over my head, blasting *In Your Eyes* by Peter Gabriel at full volume.

She didn't come out. I don't even know if she was home.

Somehow, an entire year had now passed since I'd found the Copper Key. It had gone by in a blink. But now the days began crawl, as I sank into a mire of self-pity. The Scoreboard still hadn't changed. I tried desperately to refocus my energy on finding the Jade Key, but it was no use. Every time I sat down to work on deciphering the quatrain, my thoughts would inevitably drift back to Art3mis. Where was she? What was she doing at that exact moment? Was she was making any progress in her own search? And did she ever think about me at all?

0018

My computer woke me up just before sundown, and I began my daily ritual.

"I'm up!" I shouted at the darkness. I'd been logging in late for work a lot recently, because I kept sleeping through the alarm. So I'd disabled the snooze feature and then instructed my computer to blast "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" by Wham as my alarm. I loathed that song with every fiber of my being, and getting up was the only way to silence it. It wasn't the most pleasant way to start my day, but it worked.

The song cut off and my haptic chair instantly reshaped and reoriented itself, transforming from a bed back into its chair configuration, lifting me into a sitting position as it did so. I pulled off my visor and the computer began to bring the lights up slowly, allowing my eyes to adjust. No outside ever penetrated my apartment. The single window had once provided a view of the Columbus skyline, but I'd spray-painted it completely black a few days after I moved in. I'd decided that everything outside that window was a distraction from my quest, so I didn't need to waste time staring at it. I didn't want to hear the outside world, either, but I hadn't been able to improve upon the apartment's existing soundproofing. So I had to live with the muffled sounds of wind and rain, and of street and air traffic. Even these could be a distraction. There were times when I'd slip into a kind of trance for hours, sitting with my eyes closed, oblivious to

the passage of time, listening to the sounds of the world outside my room.

I'd made several other modifications to the apartment for the sake of security and convenience. First, I replaced the flimsy door with a new air-tight armor-plated vacuum-sealed WarDoor™. Whenever I needed something--food, toilet paper, new gear--I ordered it online, and then someone brought it right to my door. Deliveries worked like this: First, the scanner mounted outside in the hallway would verify the delivery person's identity and my computer would confirm they were delivering something I'd actually ordered. Then the outer door would unlock itself and slide open, revealing a steel-reinforced airlock, about the size of a shower stall. The delivery person would then place the parcel, pizza, or whatever inside the airlock and step back. The outer door would hiss shut and relock itself, then the package would be scanned, x-rayed, and analyzed eight ways from Wednesday. Its contents would be verified and delivery confirmation would be sent. Then I would unlock and open the inner door and receive my goods. Capitalism would inch forward, without me actually having to interact face to face with another human being. Which was exactly how I preferred it, thank you.

The room itself wasn't much to look at, which was fine, because I spent as little time looking at it as possible. It was basically a cube, about ten meters long on each side. A modular shower and toilet unit were embedded in one wall, opposite the small ergonomic kitchen. I'd never actually used the kitchen to cook anything. My meals were all frozen or delivered. Microwave brownies were as close as I ever got to cooking.

The rest of the room was dominated by my OASIS Immersion Rig. I'd invested every spare cent I had in it. Newer, faster, or more versatile components were always being released, so I was constantly spending large chunks of my meager income on upgrades.

The crown jewel in my rig was, of course, my customized OASIS console. The computer

that powered my world. I'd built it myself, piece by piece, inside a modded mirror-black Odinware™ sphere chassis. It had a new quantum-core processor that was so fast its cycle-time bordered on precognition. And the internal data drive had enough storage space to hold three digitized copies of Everything in Existence.

My chair, where I spent the majority of my time, was a Shaptic Technologies HC5000 fully-adjustable haptic chair. It was suspended by two jointed robotic arms anchored to my apartment's walls and ceiling. These arms could rotate the chair on all four axis, so when I was strapped in to it, the unit could flip, spin, or shake my body, to create the sensation that I was falling, flying, or sitting behind the wheel of a nuclear-powered rocket sled hurtling at Mach 2 through a canyon on the fourth moon of Altair VI.

The chair worked in conjunction with my Shaptic Bootsuit™, a full body haptic feedback suit. It covered every inch of my body from the neck down, and had discreet openings so I could relieve myself without removing the entire thing. The outside of the suit was covered with an elaborate exoskeleton, a network of artificial tendons and joints that could both sense and inhibit my movements. Built into the inside of the suit were a web-like network of miniature actuators, which made contact with my skin every few centimeters. These could be activated in small or large groups for the purpose of tactile simulation--to make my skin feel things that weren't really there. They could convincingly simulate the sensation of a tap on the shoulder, a kick to the shin, or gunshot in the chest. (Built-in safety features prevented the suit from actually causing me any physical harm, so a simulated gunshot actually felt more like a weak punch.) I had an identical backup suit hanging in the MoshWash™ cleaning unit in the corner of the room. These two haptic suits made up my entire wardrobe. My old street clothes were buried somewhere in the closet, collecting dust.

On my hands, I wore a pair of state-of-the-art Okagami IdleHands™ haptic datagloves. Special tactile feedback sens-o-pads covered both palms, allowing the gloves to create the illusion that I was touching objects and surfaces that didn't actually exist.

My visor was a brand new pair of Dinatro RLR-7800 WreckSpex™, featuring a top of the line Virtual Retinal Display and built-in vestibular actuators. The visor drew the OASIS directly onto my retinas, at the highest frame rate and resolution perceptible to the human eye. The real world looked washed-out and blurry by comparison. The RLR-7800 was a not-yet-available-to-the-plebian-masses prototype, but I had an endorsement deal with Dinatro, so they sent me free gear (shipped to me through a series of re-mailing services, which I used to maintain my anonymity).

My AboundSound™ audio system consisted of an array of ultra-thin speakers mounted on the apartment's walls, floor, and ceiling, providing three-hundred and sixty degrees of perfect spatial pin-drop sound reproduction. And the Mjolnur™ subwoofer was powerful enough to make my back teeth vibrate.

The Olfatrix™ smell tower in the corner was the component I used the least. It was capable of generating over two-thousand discernable odors. A rose garden, salty ocean wind, burning cordite-- the tower could convincingly recreate them all. It also doubled as an industrial-strength air-conditioner/purifier, which was primarily what I used it for. A lot of jokers liked to code really horrific smells into their simulations, just to mess with people who owned smell towers, so I usually left the odor-generator disabled, unless I was in a part of the OASIS where I thought being able to smell my surroundings might prove useful.

On the floor, directly underneath my suspended haptic chair, was my Okigami Runaround™ omni-directional treadmill ("*No matter where you go, there you are*" was the

manufacturer's slogan.) The treadmill was about two meters square and six centimeters thick. When it was activated, I could run at top speed in any direction and never reach the edge of the platform. If I suddenly changed direction, the treadmill would sense it, and its rolling surface would change direction to match me, always keeping my body near the center of its platform. This model was also equipped with built-in lifts and an amorphous surface, so that it could simulate walking up inclines and staircases.

The most expensive component in my rig was the haptic doll. It was a faceless human-shaped marionette, mounted on a robotic arm, and it was used to simulate the presence of other humanoid forms inside the OASIS. Whenever I shook hands with someone, got into a sword fight with another avatar, or did martial arts training with a virtual Bruce Lee, my opponent's presence was simulated by the haptic doll.

There were also ACHDs (Anatomically Correct Haptic Dolls) available, for people who wanted to have more "intimate" encounters inside the OASIS. ACHDs came in male, female, and dual-sex models, and were available with a wide array of options. Realistic latex skin. Servomotor-driven endoskeletons. Simulated musculature. And all of the attendant appendages and orifices one would imagine.

Driven by loneliness, curiosity, and raging teen hormones, I'd purchased a mid-range ACHD, the Shaptic UberBetty™, a few months after Art3mis stopped speaking to me. After spending a highly-unproductive week inside a standalone brothel simulation called *The Pleasuredome*, I'd gotten rid of the doll, out of a combination of shame and self-preservation. I'd wasted thousands of credits, missed a whole week of work, and was on the verge of completely abandoning my quest for the Egg, when I confronted the grim realization that virtual sex, no matter how realistic, was really nothing but glorified, computer-assisted masturbation. There was

no actual human contact involved. At the end of the day, I was still a virgin, all alone in a room, humping a lubed-up robot. So I got rid of the ACHD, reinstalled a standard combat-oriented haptic doll, and went back to spanking the monkey the old fashioned way.

I felt no shame about masturbating. Thanks to Anorak's Almanac, I now thought of it as a normal bodily function, as necessary and natural as sleeping or eating.

AA 241:87 - I would argue that masturbation is the human animal's most important adaptation. The very cornerstone of our technological civilization. Our hands evolved to grip tools, all right - including our own. You see, thinkers, inventors, and scientists are usually geeks, and geeks have a harder time getting laid than anyone. Without the built-in sexual release valve provided by masturbation, it's doubtful that early humans would have ever mastered the secrets of fire or discovered the wheel. And you can bet that Galileo, Newton, and Einstein never would have made their discoveries if they hadn't first been able to clear their heads by slapping the salami (or "knocking a few protons off the old Hydrogen atom.") The same goes for Marie Curie. Before she discovered radium, you can bet that she first discovered the little man in the canoe.

It wasn't one of Halliday's more popular theories, but I liked it.

With the amount of money I'd invested in my rig, I could have afforded to get an OASIS Neural Interface implant instead. Then I wouldn't have needed any haptic gear, because an ONI implant transmitted everything you felt, saw, smelled, or heard inside the simulation directly to your brain. I'd heard that when you were jacked into the OASIS via an implant, everything seemed a thousand times more real than the sensations delivered by the best rig money could buy. Supposedly, it was just like you were really there, inside the OASIS. But these "brain plugs" also had a lot of nasty side effects. A lot of users developed S.O.S.--Sensory Overload Syndrome. This causes seizures, euphoria, disorientation, and sometimes, insanity. Implants were still illegal

in the United States, but the hardware could be discreetly mail-ordered from Japan, and you have the surgery done in Canada. There had been a rumor circulating for years that all of the Sixers used ONI implants. I didn't know whether it was true or not.

As I shuffled over to the toilet, a large flatscreen monitor mounted on the wall switched on, and the smiling face of Max, my system agent software, appeared on the screen. I'd programmed Max to start up a few minutes after I turned on the lights, so I could wake up a little bit before he started jabbering to me.

"G-g-good morning, Wade!" Max stuttered cheerily. "Rise and sh-sh-shine!"

Running system agent software was a little like having a virtual personal assistant--one that also functioned as a voice-activated interface with your computer. System agent software was highly configurable, with hundreds of pre-programmed personalities to choose from. I'd programmed mine to look, sound, and behave like Max Headroom, the (ostensibly) computer-generated star of a late-80s talk show, a groundbreaking cyberpunk TV series, and a slew of Coke commercials.

"Good morning, Max," I replied groggily.

"I think you mean *good evening*, Rumpelstiltskin. 7:18 pm, OASIS Sta-sta-standard Time, Wednesday, December 30th." Max was programmed to speak with a slight electronic stutter. In the mid-80s, when the character of Max Headroom was created, computers weren't actually powerful enough to generate a photorealistic human figure, so Max had been portrayed by an actor (the brilliant Matt Frewer) who wore a lot of rubber make-up to make him *look* computer-generated. But the version of Max now smiling at me on the monitor was pure software, with the best AI and voice recognition subroutines money could buy.

I'd been running a highly-customized version of MaxHeadroom v3.4.1 for a few months

now. Before that, my system agent software had been modeled after the actress Erin Gray (of *Buck Rogers* and *Silver Spoons* fame). But she'd proved to be way too distracting, so I'd switched to Max. He was annoying at times, but he also cracked me up. He did a pretty decent job of keeping me from feeling lonesome, too.

As I stumbled into the bathroom module and emptied my bladder, Max continued to address me from a small monitor mounted above the mirror. "Uh oh! It appears you've sp-sp-sprung a leak!" he said.

"Get a new joke," I said. "Any news I should know about?"

"Just the usual. Wars, rioting, famine. The impending collapse of human civilization. Nothing that would interest you."

"Any messages?"

He rolled his eyes. "A few. But, to answer your *real* question, no. Art3mis still hasn't called or written you back, loverboy."

"Fine."

"It's been four months since you heard from her. It might be time to move on. You think? Maybe? Perhaps?"

"Shut up, Max. You're begging to be deleted."

"Touchy, touchy. Honestly, Wade. You should rethink--"

"I'll erase you, Max. I mean it this time. Keep it up and I'll switch back to Wilma Deering. Or better yet, I'll try out the disembodied voice of Majel Barrett."

Max made a childish, pouty face, then spun around to face the shifting digital wallpaper behind him--currently a pattern of multicolored vector lines. Max was always like this. Giving me grief and unwanted advice was part of his pre-programmed personality. I actually sort of

enjoyed it, because it reminded me of hanging out with Aech. And I really missed hanging out with Aech. A lot.

My gaze dropped to the bathroom mirror, but I didn't much like what I saw there, so I closed my eyes until I finished urinating. I wondered (not for the first time) why I hadn't painted the mirror black, too, when I'd done the window.

The hour or so after I woke up was my least favorite part of each day, because I spent it in the real world. This was when I dealt with the tedious business of cleaning and exercising my physical body. I hated this part of the day, because everything about it contradicted my other life. My real life, inside the OASIS. The sight of my tiny one-room apartment, my immersion rig, or my reflection in the mirror -- they all served as a harsh reminder that the world I spent my days in was not, in fact, the real one.

"Retract chair," I said, as I stepped out of the bathroom. The haptic chair instantly flattened itself again, then retracted so that it was flush against the wall, clearing a large empty space in the center of the room. I pulled on my visor and loaded up *The Gym*, a standalone simulation.

Suddenly, I was standing in a large modern fitness center lined with exercise equipment and weight machines, all of which could be perfectly simulated by my haptic suit. I began my daily workout. Sit-ups, stomach crunches, push-ups, aerobics, weight training. Occasionally, Max would shout words of encouragement. "Get those legs up, you s-s-sissy! Feel the burn!"

The fitness lockout I'd installed on my computer required me to get a certain amount of exercise each day. I usually got a little exercise while logged in to the OASIS, by engaging in physical combat or running around the virtual landscape on my treadmill. But I spent the vast majority of my time sitting in my haptic chair, getting almost no exercise at all. I also had a habit

of overeating when I was depressed or frustrated, which was most of the time. As a result, I'd gradually put on about a hundred extra pounds. I eventually reached a point where I could no longer fit comfortably in my haptic chair or squeeze in to an XXL haptic suit. I was on the verge of being forced to buy a new rig, with components from the *Husky* line.

When I started having chest pains, I finally broke down and made an appointment with an online doctor. He gave me a quick examination using the diagnostic systems of my own immersion rig. It only took him a few minutes to analyze the data before hitting me with the cold hard facts: If I didn't change my diet and start exercising regularly, I was going to kill myself. Probably within a year. The doctor told me this in a pained monotone, as if it were the hundredth time he'd given this diagnosis that week. It might have been, too. My condition--obesity as a result of perpetual OASIS immersion--had become quite common in recent years. Epidemic, some people said. For gunters it was considered something of an occupational hazard.

I knew that if I didn't get my weight under control, I would probably die of sloth before I found the Egg. I couldn't let that happen. So I made a snap decision and enabled the voluntary OASIS fitness lockout software. I'd regretted it almost immediately.

From then on, my computer monitored my vital signs and kept track of exactly how many calories I burned during the course of each day. If I didn't meet my daily exercise requirements, the system prevented me from logging in to my OASIS account. This meant that I couldn't go to work, continue my quest, or, in effect, live my life. Once the lockout was engaged, you couldn't disable it for an entire year. And the software was bound to my OASIS account, so I couldn't just buy a new computer or go rent a booth in some public OASIS cafe. If I wanted to log in, I had no choice but to exercise first. This proved to be the only motivation I needed.

The lockout software also monitored my dietary intake. Each day I was allowed to select

meals from a preset menu of healthy, low-calorie foods. The software would order the food for me online and it would be delivered to my door. The program kept track of everything I ate, so if I ordered additional food on my own, it would increase the amount of exercise I had to do each day, to offset my additional calorie intake. This was some sadistic software.

But it worked. The pounds began to melt off, and after about six months, I was in near-perfect health. For the first time in my life I had a flat stomach and muscles. I also had twice the energy, and I got sick a lot less frequently. I required less sleep, too, which was a good thing. Less sleep meant more time to hunt. When the year ended and I was finally given the option to disable the fitness lock-out, I decided to keep it in place. Now, exercising was a part of my daily ritual. I used the time to mentally prepare myself for the day ahead.

Once I finished with my weight training, I stepped on to my treadmill. “Begin morning run,” I said to Max. “Bifrost track.”

The virtual gym vanished. Now I was standing on a semi-transparent running track, a curved looping ribbon suspended in a starry nebulae. Giant ringed planets and multi-colored moons were suspended in space all around me. The running track stretched out ahead of me, rising, falling, and occasionally spiraling into a helix. An invisible barrier prevented me from accidentally running off the edge the track and plummeting into the starry abyss. The Bifrost track was another standalone simulation, one of several hundred track designs stored on my console's hard drive.

As I began to run, Max fired up my 80s music playlist. As the first song began, I quickly rattled off its title, artist, album, and year of release from memory: *A Million Miles Away*, *The Plimsouls*, *Everywhere at Once*, 1983. Then I began to sing along, reciting the lyrics. Having the right 80s song lyric memorized might save my avatar's life someday.

When I finished my run, I pulled off my visor and began removing my haptic suit. This had to be done slowly to prevent damaging the suit's components. As I carefully peeled it off, the contact patches made tiny popping sounds as they pulled free of my skin, leaving tiny circular marks all over my body. Once I had the suit off, I placed it inside the cleaning unit. I laid my clean spare suit out on the floor.

Max had already turned on the shower for me, setting the water temperature right where I liked it. As I jumped into the steam-filled stall, Max switched the music over to my shower tunes playlist. I recognized the opening riffs of *Change*, by John Waite. From the *Vision Quest* soundtrack. Geffen Records. 1985.

The shower worked a lot like an old car wash. I just stood there while it did most of the work, blasting me from all angles with jets of soapy water, then rinsing me off. I had no hair to wash, because the shower also dispensed a non-toxic hair removing solution, which I rubbed all over my face and body. This eliminated the need for me to shave or cut my hair, both hassles I didn't need. Having smooth skin also helped make sure my haptic suit fit snugly. I looked a little freaky without any eyebrows, but I got used to it.

When the rinse jets cut off, the blow dryers kicked on, blasting the moisture off of my skin in a matter of seconds. I stepped in to the kitchen and took out a can of Sludge, a high-protein vitamin-infused breakfast drink. As I gulped it down, my computer silently took note, adding the calories to my total for the day. With breakfast out of the way, I pulled on my clean haptic suit. This was less tricky than taking the suit off, but it still took time to do properly.

Once I had the suit on, I ordered the haptic chair to extend. Then I paused and spent a moment staring at my Immersion Rig. I remembered being so proud of all this high-tech hardware when I'd first purchased it. But over the past year, I'd come to see my rig for what it

was. An elaborate contraption for deceiving my senses, to allow me to live in a world that didn't exist. Each component of my rig was a bar in the cell where I had willingly imprisoned myself.

Standing there, under the bleak fluorescents of my tiny one-room apartment, there was no escaping the truth. In real life, I was nothing but an anti-social hermit. A recluse. A pale-skinned pop-culture obsessed geek. An agoraphobic shut-in, with no real friends, family, or genuine human contact. I was just another sad, lost, lonely soul, wasting his life on a glorified video game.

But not in the OASIS. In there, I was the great Parzival. World famous gunter and international celebrity. People asked for my autograph. I had a fan club. Several, actually. I was recognized everywhere I went (but only when I wanted to be). I was paid to endorse products. People admired and looked up to me. I got invited to the most exclusive parties. I went to all the hippest clubs and never had to wait in line. I was a pop-culture icon, a VR rock star. And, in gunter circles, I was a legend. Nay, a god.

I sat down and pulled on my gloves and visor. Once my identity was verified, the Gregarious Simulation Systems logo appeared in front of me, followed by the login prompt.

Greetings, Parzival.
Please speak your passphrase.

I cleared my throat and recited my passphrase. Each word appeared on my display as I said it: *"No one in the world ever gets what they want and that is beautiful."*

There was a brief pause, and then I let out an involuntary sigh of relief as the OASIS faded into existence all around me.

0019

My avatar slowly materialized in front of the control panel in my stronghold's command center. The same spot where I'd been sitting the night before, engaged in my evening ritual of staring blankly at the quatrain until I drifted off to sleep and the system had logged me out. I'd been staring at the damn thing for over a year now and I still hadn't been able to decipher it. No one had. Everyone had theories, of course, but the Jade Key still remained unfound.

My command center was located under an armored dome embedded in the rocky surface of my own private asteroid. From here I had a sweeping three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the surrounding cratered landscape, stretching to the horizon in all directions. The rest of my stronghold was below ground, in a vast subterranean complex that stretched all the way to the asteroid's core. I'd coded the entire thing myself, shortly after moving to Columbus. My avatar needed a stronghold, and I didn't want any neighbors, so I'd bought the cheapest planetoid I could find, this tiny barren asteroid in Sector 14. Its designation was S14A316, but I'd renamed it *Falco*, after the Austrian rap star. (I wasn't a huge Falco fan or anything. I just thought it sounded like a cool name).

Falco only had a few square kilometers of surface area, but it had still cost me a pretty penny. It had been worth it, though. When you owned your own world, you could build whatever

you wanted there. And no one could visit it unless I granted them access, something I never gave to anyone. My stronghold was my home inside the OASIS. My avatar's sanctuary. The one place in the entire simulation where I was truly safe.

As soon as my login sequence completed, a window popped up on my display, informing me that today was an Election Day. Now that I was eighteen, I could vote, in both the OASIS elections, and in the elections for United States government officials. I didn't bother with the latter, because I didn't see the point. The once great country into which I'd been born now resembled its former self in name only. It didn't matter who was in charge. Those people were rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic and everyone knew it. Besides, now that everyone could vote from home, via the OASIS, the only people who could get elected were actors, reality TV stars, or radical televangelists. It was joke.

I did take the time to vote in the OASIS elections, however, because their outcomes actually affected me. The voting process only took me a few minutes, because I was already familiar with all of the major issues that GSS had put on the ballot. It was also time to elect the President and VP of the OASIS User Council, but that was a no-brainer. Like most gunters, I voted to re-elect Doctorow and Wheaton (again). There were no term limits, and those two guys had been doing a kick-ass job of running the council and protecting user rights for over a decade.

When I finished voting, I adjusted my haptic chair slightly and studied the command console in front of me. It was crammed with switches, buttons, keyboards, joysticks, and display screens. A bank of security monitors on my left were linked to virtual cameras placed throughout the interior and exterior of my stronghold. To my right, another bank of monitors displayed all of my favorite news and entertainment vidfeeds. Among these was my own channel: *Parzival TV – Broadcasting obscure eclectic crap, 24-7-365*.

Several months ago, GSS had added a new feature to every OASIS user's account. The POV (Personal OASIS Vidfeed) channel. It allowed anyone who paid a monthly fee to run their own streaming television network. Anyone logged in to the simulation could tune in and watch your POV channel, from anywhere in the world. What you aired on your channel and who you allowed view it was entirely up to you. Most users chose to run a "voyeur channel," which was like being the star of your own twenty-four-hour reality show. Hovering virtual cameras would follow your avatar around the OASIS as you went about your day-to-day activities. Exploring, adventuring, socializing, whatever. You could limit access to your channel so that only your friends could watch. Or you could charge viewers by the hour to access your POV. A lot of second-tier celebrities and pornographers did this, selling seconds of their virtual lives at a per-minute premium.

Some people used their POV to broadcast live video of their real world selves, or their dog, or their kids. Some people programmed nothing but old cartoons. The possibilities were endless, and the variety of stuff that was available seemed to grow more twisted every day. Non-stop foot fetish videos broadcast out of Eastern Europe. Twenty-four hour Bukkake competitions featuring deviant soccer moms in Minnesota. You name it. Every flavor of weirdness the human psyche could cook up was being filmed and broadcast online. The vast wasteland of television programming had finally reached its zenith, and the average person was no longer limited to fifteen minutes of fame. Now everyone could be on TV, every second of every day, regardless of whether or not anyone was watching.

Parzival-TV wasn't a voyeur channel. In fact, I never showed my avatar's face on my vidfeed. Instead, I programmed a random selection of classic 80s TV shows, retro commercials, cartoons, music videos and movies. Lots of movies. On the weekends, I showed old Japanese

monster flicks, along with some vintage anime. Whatever struck my fancy. It didn't really matter what I programmed. My avatar was still one of the High Five, so my vidfeed drew millions of viewers every day, regardless of what I aired, and this allowed me sell commercial time to my various sponsors.

Most of Parzival-TV's regular viewers were gunters, who monitored my vidfeed with the hope that I'd inadvertently reveal some key piece of information about the Jade Key or the Egg itself. I never did, of course. At the moment, Parzival-TV was wrapping up a non-stop two-day *Kikaida* marathon. *Kikaida* was a late-70s Japanese action show about a red and blue android who beat the crap out of rubber-suited monsters in each episode. I had a weakness for vintage *kaiju* and *tokusatsu*. Shows like *Spectreman*, *Space Giants*, and *Supaida-man*.

I pulled up my programming grid and casually made a few changes to my evening lineup. I cleared away the episodes of *Riptide* and *Misfits of Science* I'd programmed and dropped in a few back-to-back flicks starring *Gamera*, my favorite giant flying alien turtle. I thought they should be real crowd pleasers. Then, to finish off the broadcast day, I added a few episodes of *Silver Spoons*.

Art3mis also ran her own vidfeed channel, *Art3mivision*, and I always kept one of my monitors tuned to it. Right now, she was airing her usual Monday evening fare: an episode of *Square Pegs*. After that would be *Electra-Woman and Dyna-Girl*, followed by back-to-back episodes of *Isis* and *Wonder Woman*. Her programming line-up hadn't changed in months. But it didn't matter. She still got killer ratings.

It had been eight long, torturous months since my last conversation with Art3mis. But I hadn't spent that time moping around and feeling sorry for myself. Well, not *all* of it, anyway. I'd focused on starting my "new life" as a world famous sector-hopping gunter. For the first time, I

had the money and the means to explore the OASIS, and so I began to do just that. I focused on leveling up my avatar, by completing every quest I could find. Along the way, I began to build an impressive collection of weapons, magic items, and vehicles, all of which I kept in a vault deep within my stronghold. Leveling up kept me busy, and served as a welcome distraction from the growing loneliness and isolation I felt.

I'd tried to reconnect with Aech after Art3mis had dumped me, but things weren't the same. We'd grown apart, and I knew it was my fault. Our conversations were now stilted and reserved, as if we were both afraid of revealing some key piece of information that the other might be able to use. I could tell that he no longer trusted me. And while I'd been off obsessing over Art3mis, it seemed that Aech had become obsessed with being the first gunter to find the Jade Key. Over three years had now passed since we'd cleared the First Gate, and the Jade Key's location still remained a mystery, and the top ten slots on the Scoreboard remained unchanged.

I hadn't spoken to Aech in over six months now. My last conversation with him had devolved into an angry shouting match, which had ended when I reminded Aech that he "never even would have found the Copper Key" if I hadn't led him straight to it. He'd glared at me in silence for a second, then logged out of the chatroom. Stubborn pride kept me from calling him back right away to apologize, and now it seemed like too much time had passed.

Yeah. I was on roll. In the space of just a year, I'd managed to wreck both of my closest friendships.

I flipped over to Aech's channel, which he called *The H-Feed*. He was currently showing a WWF pro-wrestling match from the late 80s, featuring Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant. I didn't even bother checking Daito and Shoto's channel, *The Daishow*, because I knew they'd be showing some old samurai movie. That's all those guys ever aired.

A few months after our confrontational first meeting in Aech's basement, I'd managed to form a tenuous friendship with Daito and Shoto, when the three of us teamed up to complete an extended quest in Sector 22. It was my idea. I felt bad about how our first encounter had ended, and waited for an opportunity to extend some sort of olive branch to the two samurai. It came when I discovered a hidden high-level quest called *Shodai Urutoraman*, on the planet Tokusatsu. The creation date in the quest's colophon said it had been launched several years after Halliday's death, which meant it couldn't have any relation to the contest. It was also a Japanese language quest, created by GSS's Hokkaido division. I could have tried to complete it on my own, using the Mandarax real-time translator software installed in all OASIS accounts, but it would have been risky. Mandarax had been known to garble or misinterpret quest instructions and cues, which could easily lead to fatal mistakes.

Daito and Shoto lived in Japan (they'd become national heroes there) and I knew that they both spoke Japanese and English fluently. So I decided to contact them and ask if they were interested in teaming up with me, just for this one quest. They were skeptical of my motives at first, but after I described the unique nature of the quest, and what I believed the payoff for solving it might be, they finally agreed. The three of us met outside the quest gate on Tokusatsu and entered it together.

The quest was a recreation of all thirty-nine episodes of the original *Ultraman* TV series, which had aired on Japanese television from 1966 to 1967. Its storyline centered around a human named Hayata, a member of the Science Patrol, an organization devoted to fighting the hordes of giant Godzilla-like monsters that were constantly attacking Earth and threatening human civilization. When the Science Patrol encountered a threat they couldn't handle on their own, Hayata would use an alien device called a "Beta Capsule" to transform into an alien super-being

known as Ultraman. Then he would proceed to kick the monster-of-the-week's ass, using all sorts of kung-fu moves and energy attacks.

If I'd entered the quest gate by myself, I would have automatically played through the entire series storyline as Hayata. But because Shoto, Daito, and I had all entered at once, we were each allowed to select a different Science Patrol team member to play. We could then change or swap characters at the start of the next level or "episode." The three of us took turns playing Hayata and his Science Patrol teammates Hoshino and Arashi. As with most quests in the OASIS, playing as a team made it easier to defeat the various enemies and complete each of the levels.

It took us an entire week, often playing over sixteen hours a day, before we were finally able to clear all thirty-nine levels and complete the quest. As we stepped out of the quest gate, our avatars were each awarded a huge amount of experience points and several thousand credits. But the real prize for completing the quest was an incredibly rare artifact: Hayata's Beta Capsule. The small metal cylinder allowed the avatar who possessed it to transform into Ultraman once a day, for up to three minutes.

Since there were three of us, there was a debate over who should be allowed to keep the artifact. "Parzival should have it," Shoto had said, turning to his older brother. "He found this quest. We wouldn't even have known about it, were it not for him."

Of course, Daito had disagreed. "And he would not have been able to complete the quest without our help!" He said the only fair thing to do would be to auction off the Beta Capsule and split the proceeds. But there was no way I could allow that. The artifact was far too valuable to sell, and I knew it would end up in the hands of the Sixers, because they purchased nearly every artifact that went up for auction. I also saw this as an opportunity to get on Daisho's good side.

"You two should keep the Beta Capsule," I said. "*Urutoraman* is Japan's greatest superhero. His powers belong in Japanese hands."

They were both surprised and humbled by my generosity. Especially Daito. "Thank you, Parzival-san," he said, bowing low. "You are a man of honor."

After that, the three of us had parted as friends, if not necessarily allies, and I considered that an ample reward for my efforts.

A chime sounded in my ears and I checked the time. It was almost eight o'clock. Time to make the donuts.

#

I was always hard up for cash, no matter how frugal I tried to be. I had a several large bills to pay each month, both in the real world and in the OASIS. My real-world expenses were pretty standard. Rent, electricity, food, water. Hardware repairs and upgrades. My avatar's expenses were far more exotic. Spacecraft repairs. Teleportation fees. Power cells. Ammunition. I purchased my ammo bulk, but it still wasn't cheap. And my monthly teleportation expenses were often astronomical. My search for the Egg required constant travel, and GSS kept raising their teleportation fares.

I'd already spent all of my remaining product endorsement dough. Most of it went toward the cost of my rig and buying my own asteroid. I earned a decent amount of money each month by selling commercial time on my POV channel, and by auctioning off any unneeded magic items, armor, or weapons I acquired during my travels. During my avatar's meteoric rise to 20th level, I'd amassed more weapons and equipment than I could ever use. Now, whenever I found, stole, or looted a new item, it was usually a duplicate of something I already had in my arsenal. So I auctioned off these extra items to lower-level gunters who could actually use them.

My primary source of income was my full-time job, doing OASIS technical support. When I'd created my new Bryce Lynch identity, I'd given myself a college degree, along with multiple technical certifications, and a long, sterling work record as an OASIS programmer and app developer. However, despite my sterling bogus resume, the only job I'd been able to get was as a Tier-One Technical Support Representative at Helpful Helpdesk Inc., one of the contract firms that GSS used to handle OASIS customer service and support. Now I worked forty hours a week, helping morons reboot their OASIS consoles and update the drivers for their visors and haptic gloves. It was grueling work, but it paid the rent.

I logged out of my OASIS account and then used my rig to log in to a separate OASIS account that I'd been issued for work. The login process completed and I took control of my work avatar, a cookie-cutter Ken doll that I used to take tech support calls. My avatar appeared inside a huge virtual call center, inside my virtual cubicle, sitting at a virtual desk, in front of a virtual computer, wearing a virtual phone headset.

I thought of this place as my own private virtual hell.

Helpful Helpdesk, Inc. took millions of calls a day, from all over the world. They came in an endless, nonstop barrage. Twenty-four seven, three-sixty-five. One angry, befuddled cretin after another. There was no down-time between calls, because there were always several hundred morons in the call queue, all of them willing to wait on hold for hours to have a techrep hold their hand and fix their problem. Why bother looking up the solution online? Why try to figure the problem out on your own, when you could have someone else to do your thinking for you?

I glanced at the call queue stats as they appeared on my display. They told me the number of calls waiting, the average length of time each customer had been waiting on hold, the number of calls I'd taken so far that shift, the average length of those calls, and the average satisfaction

rating each customer had given me after the call ended. Since I was just starting my shift, the last three stats were at zero. The first two numbers were in the thousands and flashed red to convey urgency. They were always flashing red.

I sighed and tapped the *Available* button on my virtual phone console and the first caller's avatar appeared on the screen in front of me. His name and stats also appeared, floating in the air above him. He had the astoundingly clever name of "HotCock007."

Right away, I could tell it was going to be another fabulous day.

HotCock007 was a hulking bald barbarian, with studded black leather armor and lots of demon tattoos covering his arms and face. He was holding a gigantic bastard sword that was nearly twice the length of his own body.

"Good morning, Mr. HotCock007," I droned. "Thank you for calling technical support. I'm Techrep number 579741. How may I help you this evening?" The customer courtesy software filtered my voice, altering its tone and inflection to ensure that I always sounded cheerful and upbeat.

"Uh, yeah..." HotCock007 began. "I just bought this bad ass sword, and now I can't even use it! I can't even attack nothing with it. What the hell is wrong with this piece of shit? Is it broke?"

"Sir, the only problem is that you're a complete fucking moron," I said.

I heard a familiar warning buzzer and a message flashed on my display:

COURTESY VIOLATION – FLAGS: *FUCKING, MORON*

LAST COMMENT OMITTED – VIOLATION LOGGED

Our patented customer courtesy software had detected the inappropriate nature of my response and muted it, so the customer didn't hear what I'd said. The software was also supposed

to log my "courtesy violation" and forward it to Sally, my automated supervisor, so that she could bring it up during my next bi-weekly performance review. Fortunately, I'd hacked the customer courtesy software a few weeks after I was hired, to keep it from logging my violations. It still automatically muted them, though. So I could say whatever I wanted. It made my job a lot less stressful.

"Sir, did you purchase this sword in an online auction?"

"Yeah," HotCock007 replied. "Paid out the ass for it, too."

"Just a moment, sir, while I examine the item." I already knew what his problem was, but I needed to make sure before telling him or I'd get hit with another fine.

I tapped the sword with my index finger, selecting it. A small window opened and displayed the item's properties. The answer was right there, on the first line. This particular magic sword could only be used by an avatar who was tenth level or higher. Mr. HotCock007 was only seventh level. I quickly explained this to him.

"What?! That ain't fair! The guy who sold it to me didn't say nothing about that!"

"Sir, it's always advisable to make sure that your avatar can actually use an item before you purchase it."

"God dammit!" he shouted. "Well, what am I supposed to do with it now?"

"You could shove it up your ass and pretend you're a corndog."

COURTESY VIOLATION – COMMENT OMITTED – VIOLATION LOGGED.

I tried again. "Sir, you might want to keep the item stored in your inventory until your avatar has attained tenth level. Or you may wish to put the item back up for auction yourself, and use the proceeds to purchase a similar weapon. One with a power level commensurate to that of your avatar."

“Huh?” HotCock007 responded. “Whaddya mean?”

“Save it or sell it.”

“Oh.”

“Can I help you with anything else today, sir?”

“No, I don’t guess—“

“Great. Thank you for calling technical support. Have an outstanding day.”

I tapped the disconnect icon on my display and HotCock007 vanished. Call Time: 2:07.

As the next customer’s avatar appeared—a red-skinned large-breasted alien female named Vartaxxx—the Customer Satisfaction rating that HotCock007 had just given me appeared on my display. It was a 2, out of a possible score of 10. I frowned. I was hoping for something a bit lower. (I’d also hacked the courtesy software so that, regardless of what a customer entered in their post-call survey, I always got either a 9 or 10 rating.)

“Hello, Ms. Vartaxxx,” I said. “Thank you for calling technical support. I’m Tech Rep number 579741. How may I help you this evening?”

And so it went, on and on, all night. Some calls took two minutes, some two hours. Eventually, I settled in to the grind and one call began to blur into the next.

“I can’t find one of the items in my inventory!”

Just do a search, dumbass.

“How come I can’t access this porno simulation?”

You don’t have enough credits to pay for it, sir.

“My haptic suit is malfunctioning.”

That’s because you’ve got it on backwards, shithead.

My ten-hour shift passed slowly. I despised mandatory overtime. My work account was

rigged so that I couldn't browse outside websites, but I'd hacked my visor so that I could listen to music or stream movies off my hard drive while I took calls.

When my shift finally ended and I logged out of work, I immediately logged back in to my own OASIS account. I had thousands of new email messages waiting, and I could tell just by their subject lines what had happened while I'd been at work.

Art3mis had found the Jade Key.

0021

Like other gunters around the globe, I'd been dreading the next change on the Scoreboard, because I knew it was going to give the Sixers an unfair advantage.

A few months after we'd all cleared the First Gate, an anonymous avatar had placed an ultra-powerful artifact up for auction. It was called *Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding*, and it had unique powers that could give its owner a huge advantage in the hunt for Halliday's Easter egg.

Most of the virtual items in the OASIS were created by the system at random, and they would "drop" when you killed an NPC or completed a quest. The frequency that a certain item would drop was based on its rarity. The rarest items were artifacts, super-powerful magic items that gave their owners incredible abilities. Only a few hundred of artifacts existed, and they all dated back to the earliest days of the OASIS, when it was still primarily an MMO game. Every artifact was unique, meaning that only one copy of it existed in the entire simulation. Usually, the way to obtain an artifact was to defeat some god-like villain at the end of a high-level quest. If you got lucky, the bad guy would drop an artifact when you killed him. You could also obtain an artifact by killing an avatar who had one on their inventory, or by purchasing one in an online auction.

Since artifacts were so rare, it was always big news when one went up for auction. Some

had been known to sell for hundreds of thousands of credits, depending on their powers. The record had been set three years ago, when an artifact called the *Cataclyst* was auctioned off. According to its auction listing, the Cataclyst was a sort of magical bomb, and it could only be used once. When it was detonated, it would kill every single avatar and NPC in the sector where it was detonated, including its owner. There was no defense against it. If you were unlucky enough to be in the same sector when it went off, you were a goner, regardless of how powerful or well-protected you were.

The Cataclyst had sold to an anonymous bidder for just over a million credits. The artifact still hadn't been detonated, so its new owner still had it sitting around somewhere, waiting for the right time to use it. It was something of a running joke now. When a gunter was surrounded by avatars they didn't like, they would claim to have the Cataclyst in their inventory and threaten to detonate it. But most people suspected that it had actually fallen into the Sixers hands, along with countless other powerful artifacts.

Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding wound up selling for even more than the Cataclyst. According to the auction description, the tablet was a flat circle of polished black stone, and it had one very simple power. Once a day, its owner could write any avatar's name on its surface, and the tablet would show them where that avatar was located at that exact moment. However, this power had range limitations. If you were in a different OASIS sector than the avatar you were trying to find, the tablet would only tell you which sector your target was currently in. If you were already in the same sector, the tablet would tell you what planet your target was currently on (or closest to, if they were out in space). If you were already on the same planet as your target when you used the tablet, it would show you their exact coordinates on a map.

As the artifact's seller made sure to point out in their auction listing, if you used the

tablet's power in conjunction with the Scoreboard, it arguably became the most valuable artifact in the entire OASIS. All you had to do was watch the top rankings on the Scoreboard and wait until someone's score increased. The second that happened, you could write that avatar's name on the tablet and it would tell you where they were at that exact moment, thus revealing the location of the key they'd just found, or the gate they'd just exited. Due to the artifact's range limitations, it might take two or three attempts to narrow down the exact location of a key or a gate, but even so, that was still information that a lot of people would be willing to kill for.

When *Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding* went up for auction, a huge bidding war broke out between several of the large gunter clans. But when the auction finally ended, the tablet wound up selling to the Sixers, for almost two million credits. Sorrento himself used his own IOI account to bid on the tablet. He waited until the last few seconds of the auction and then outbid everyone. He could have bid anonymously, but he obviously wanted the world to know who now possessed the artifact. It was also his way of letting those of us in the High Five know that, from that moment forward, whenever one of us found a key or cleared a gate, the Sixers would be tracking us. And there was nothing we could do about it.

At first, I was worried that the Sixers would also try to use the tablet to hunt down each of our avatars and kill us one at a time. But locating our avatars wouldn't do them any good unless we happened to be in a PvP zone at the time and were stupid enough to stay put until the Sixers could reach us. And since the tablet could only be used once a day, they would also run the risk of missing their window of opportunity if the Scoreboard changed on the same day they tried to use the tablet to locate one of us. They didn't take chance. They kept the artifact in reserve and waited for their moment.

The moment they saw Art3mis's score increase, the Sixers used *Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding* to try and ascertain her exact location. Luckily, the Sixer avatar using the tablet (probably Sorrento himself) happened to be in a different sector than Art3mis, so the tablet didn't reveal what planet she was on. It only told the Sixers which sector she was currently in. Later that day, the entire Sixer fleet was spotted converging on Sector 7. Thanks to their complete lack of subtlety, the whole world now knew that the Jade Key must be hidden somewhere in that sector. Naturally, thousands of gunters began to converge on it, too. The Sixers had narrowed the search area for everyone. But there thousands of planets, moons, and other tiny worlds in Sector 7, and the Jade Key could have been hidden on any one of them.

I spent most of that week in shock, reeling at the news that I'd been dethroned. That was exactly how the newsfeed headlines put it: *PARZIVAL DETHRONED! ART3MIS NEW #1 GUNTER! SIXERS CLOSING IN!*

But being bumped to second place by my pseudo-ex-online-girlfriend was what finally snapped me out of my self-pitying lovesick funk. Suddenly, I wanted to win the contest more than ever. Not just for the money. I wanted to prove myself to Art3mis. And I wanted the Hunt to be over, so that she would talk to me again. So that I could finally meet her in person, see her true face, and try to make sense of how I felt about her.

Each evening, I would log in, pull up the Scoreboard, and make myself stare at it for ten solid minutes, while I mentally berated myself. This had become a daily ritual. I did it for motivational purposes.

HIGH SCORES:

1. Art3mis	129,000	🏆
2. Parzival	110,000	🏆
3. Aech	108,000	🏆
4. Daito	107,000	🏆
5. Shoto	106,000	🏆

6. IOI-655321	105,000	🏆
7. IOI-643187	105,000	🏆
8. IOI-621671	105,000	🏆
9. IOI-678324	105,000	🏆
10. IOI-637330	105,000	🏆

You've got no one but yourself to blame, I would say to myself. You let success go to your head. You slacked off on your research. What, did you think lightning would strike twice? That eventually you'd just stumble across the clue you needed to find the Jade Key? Sitting in first place all that time gave you a false sense of security. But you don't have that problem now, do you, asshole? No, because instead of buckling down and focusing on your quest like you should have, you pissed away your lead. You wasted an entire year, screwing around and pining over some girl you've never even met in person. The girl who dumped you. The same girl who is going to end up beating you.

Now... get your head back in the game, moron. Find that key.

After completing my daily self-abuse session, I would clear the Scoreboard off my display and opened up my grail diary, which had now grown into a vast mountain of data. Every scrap of information I'd collected since the contest began. It would appear as a jumble of cascading windows floating in front of me, displaying text, maps, photos, and audio and video files, all indexed, cross-referenced, and pulsing with life.

I kept the quatrain open in a window that was always on top. Four lines of text. Twenty-five words. Thirty-four syllables. I'd stared at them so often and for so long that they had nearly lost all meaning. Each time I looked at them now, I had to resist the urge to scream in rage and frustration.

***The captain conceals the Jade Key
in a white house long neglected
But you can only blow the whistle
once the trophies are all collected***

For awhile, I thought that the 'whistle' in the third line might be a reference to a late 60s Japanese TV show called *The Space Giants*, which had been dubbed in English and rebroadcast in the United States in the 70s and 80s. The Space Giants (called *Maguma Taishi* in Japan) featured a family of transforming robots who lived in a volcano and battled an evil alien villain named Rodak. Halliday referred to this show several times in Anorak's Almanac, citing it as one of his childhood favorites. One of the show's main characters was a boy named Miko, who would blow a special whistle to summon the robots to his aid. I'd watched all fifty-two ultra-cheesy episodes of the Space Giants, back-to-back, while wolfing down corn chips and taking notes. But when the viewing marathon was over, I still wasn't any closer to understanding the quatrain's meaning. I'd hit another dead end. I decided that Halliday must be referring to some other whistle.

Then, one Saturday morning, I finally made a small breakthrough. I was watching a collection of vintage 80s cereal commercials, when I paused to wonder why cereal manufacturers no longer included toy prizes inside every box. It was a tragedy, in my opinion. Another sign that civilization was going straight down the tubes. I was still pondering this when an old Cap'N Crunch commercial came on, and that was when I suddenly made a connection between the first and third lines of the quatrain: *The captain conceals the Jade Key...You can only blow the whistle...*

Halliday was alluding to a famous 70s hacker named John Draper, better known by the alias Captain Crunch. Draper was one of the first phone phreaks, and he was famous for discovering that the toy plastic whistles found as prizes in boxes of Cap'N Crunch cereal could be used to make free long distance phone calls, because they emitted a 2600 Hertz tone that tricked the phone system into giving you free access to the line.

The captain conceals the Jade Key

That had to be it. "The captain" was Cap'N Crunch, and "the whistle" was the famous toy plastic whistle of phone phreak lore.

Maybe the Jade Key was disguised as one of those toy plastic whistles, and it was hidden in a box of Cap'N Crunch cereal? But where was that cereal box hidden?

In a white house, long neglected

I still didn't know what long-neglected white house that lined referred to, or where to look for it. There were three recreations of the White House in Washington D.C. in Sector 7, each located on a different planets, and none of them suffered from neglect. Even though I was 99% sure Halliday was talking about a different white house, I had still taken the time to visit and search all three of them. No luck. Another dead end.

***But you can only blow the whistle
Once the trophies are all collected.***

I still hadn't deciphered the meaning of that last line, either. What trophies did I have to collect? Or was that some kind of half-assed metaphor? There had to be a simple connection that I wasn't making. A sly reference hidden in the quatrain that I still wasn't clever or knowledgeable enough to catch.

But I knew that Art3mis had already figured it out. And that kept me going.

I studied maps of Sector 7, searching for worlds with names I thought might somehow be related to the quatrain. There were a few planets named after famous hackers, like Woz and Mitnick, but none named after Captain Crunch. There was a statue of Draper located on the planet 2600, posing with an ancient rotary phone in one hand and a Cap'N Crunch whistle in the other. But that statue had been erected three years after Halliday's death, so I knew it must be a dead end.

According to my research, the only trophies Halliday had ever owned were the five Game Designer of the Year awards he'd won back around the turn of the century. These trophies were still on display in the GSS Museum in Columbus, and replicas were on display in the virtual GSS museum on Incipio, but that was in Sector 1. I went there to investigate anyway, but couldn't find anything special about the trophy replicas. And the GSS museum exhibits were coded so that it was impossible to remove the items on display, so the trophies could not be "collected."

I was barking up the wrong tree again, and I knew it.

Days and weeks continued pass, while I followed up dozens of other potential leads, all of which ultimately led nowhere. I kept telling myself, over and over, that if Art3mis could decipher the quatrain, then I could, too. I just had to keep at it.

I continued to search for clues on other worlds in Sector 7. Then, late one night, while wandering around on the planet Archaide, I'd discovered something interesting. Some sort of Easter egg, hidden inside an old coin-op video game. It wasn't *the* Easter Egg. Just *an* Easter egg. It appeared to be some sort of challenge or puzzle, one I was positive had been created by Halliday. Since then, I'd devoted all of my off-work hours to unlocking its secrets. I still wasn't sure it had anything to do with the Jade Key, but I wouldn't rest until I knew for sure. I'd made a trip to Archaide every day for the past ten days. And I was planning to return there again tonight.

I glanced over at Max, who was currently doing the samba on one of my command center's monitors. "Max, prep the *Vonnegut* for takeoff. If you're not too busy."

Max stopped dancing and smirked at me. "You got it, *El Comanchero*!"

I got up and walked over to my stronghold's elevator, which I'd modeled after the turbo-lift on the original Star Trek series. I rode down four levels to my Armory, a massive vault filled with storage shelves, display cases, and weapon racks. I pulled up my avatar's inventory display,

which appeared as a classic "paper doll" diagram of my avatar, onto which I could drag and drop various items and pieces of equipment.

On my last visit to Archaide, which was located in a PvP zone, I'd spotted a squad of roving Sixers. I'd managed to evade them without being detected, but next time I might not be so lucky. So for this visit, I'd decided to upgrade my gear and wear my Sunday best. I put on my gleaming +10 *Hale Mail* powered armor, then strapped on my favorite set of blaster pistols and slung a pump-action pistol-grip shotgun across my back, along with a +5 vorpal bastard sword. I also grabbed a few other essential items. An extra pair of anti-grav boots. A Ring of Magic Resistance. An Amulet of Protection. Some Gauntlets of Giant Strength. I hated the idea of needing something and not having it with me, so I usually ended up carrying enough equipment for three gunters. When I ran out of room on my avatar's body, I stored the additional gear in my *Backpack of Holding*.

Once I was properly outfitted, I hopped backed on the elevator, and a few seconds later I arrived at the entrance of my hangar, located on the bottom level of my stronghold. Pulsing blue lights lined the runway, which ran up the center of the hanger, to a massive pair of armored doors at the far end. These doors opened into the launch tunnel, which led up to a matching set of armored doors set into the asteroid's surface.

Parked on the left side of the runway was my battle-worn X-Wing fighter. On the right side was my flying DeLorean, which I'd won after completing a *Back to the Future* quest on the planet Zemeckis. The DeLorean came outfitted with a (non-functioning) Flux Capacitor and Mr. Fusion unit, but I'd made several additions to its equipment and appearance. I'd placed an artificially intelligent on-board computer named KITT into the dashboard (purchased in an online auction). I'd also installed an oscillating red *Knight Rider* scanner just above the

DeLorean's grill. Finally, to complete my 80s super vehicle theme, I'd slapped a Ghostbusters logo on each of the DeLorean's gullwing doors, then added personalized plates which read: ECTO-88.

My time-traveling, ghost busting, Knight Riding DeLorean had become my avatar's trademark. I loved taking it out for a cruise. But only in no-PvP zones. Otherwise I got attacked every five seconds by clueless avatars trying to steal my sweet ride.

Park on the runway itself was my most frequently used spacecraft, the *Vonnegut*. Max had already powered up the engines, and they emitted a low, steady roar that filled the hangar. The *Vonnegut* was a heavily-modified Firefly-class transport vessel, modeled after the *Serenity* in the classic *Firefly* TV series. The ship had been named the *Kaylee* when I'd first obtained it, but I'd immediately rechristened it the *Vonnegut*, after one of my favorite 20th century novelists. Its new name was stenciled on the side of its battered gray hull.

I'd looted the *Vonnegut* from a cadre of Oviraptor clansmen who had foolishly attempted to hijack my X-Wing, while I was cruising through a large group of worlds in Sector Eleven known as the "Whedonverse." The Oviraptors were cocky bastards, without no clue who it was they were messing with. I was in a foul mood even before they'd opened fire on me. Otherwise, I probably would have just evaded them by jumping to light speed. But that day I decided to take their attack personally. My X-wing was far more maneuverable than their large transport ship, so it was no trouble for me to avoid the barrage from their after-market guns, while I bombarded them with laser bolts and proton torpedoes. After I disabled their engines, I boarded the ship and proceeded to kill every avatar there. The captain tried to apologize when he saw who I was, but I wasn't in a forgiving mood. After I'd dispatched the crew, I parked my X-Wing in the cargo hold and then cruised home in my new ship.

As I approached the *Vonnegut*, the loading ramp extended to the hangar floor. By the time I reached the cockpit, the ship was already lifting off. I heard the landing gear retract with a thud just as I seated myself at the controls.

“Max, lock up the house, and set a course for Archaide.”

“Aye, C-c-captain,” Max stuttered from one of the cockpit monitors. The hangar doors slid open and the *Vonnegut* rocketed out the launch tunnel and up into the starry sky. As the ship cleared the surface, the armored tunnel doors slammed closed behind it.

I spotted several ships camped out in a high orbit above Falco. The usual suspects: crazed fans, wannabe disciples, and aspiring bounty hunters. A few of them, the ones currently turning to follow me, were Tag-a-longs. People who spent most of their time trying to tail prominent gunters and gather intel on their movements, so they could auction off the information later. I was always able to lose these idiots by jumping to light speed, which was lucky for them. If I couldn't lose someone who was tailing me, I usually had no choice but to stop and kill them.

As the *Vonnegut* made the jump to light speed, each of the planets on my viewscreen suddenly became a long streak of light. “Li-li-light speed engaged, Captain,” Max reported. “ETA to Archaide is estimated at fifty-three minutes.”

“Coolio,” I replied. “Access grail diary, Pac-Man sub-folder please.”

My main display filled with a collated list of all the Pac-Man related data I'd collected over the past week. The original game code. The unabridged biography of the designer, Toru Iwatani. Every Pac-Man strategy guide ever written. Every episode of the Pac-Man cartoon series. The ingredients for Pac-Man cereal. And, of course, patterns. I had Pac-Man pattern diagrams out the wazoo along with hundreds of hours of archived video of the best Pac-Man players in history. I'd already studied all of this data, but I skimmed over it again now to refresh

my memory. Then I spent the rest of the journey to Archaide psyching myself up. I played a warm-up game while reciting applicable passages from *The Art of War*.

Tonight, I would make my 17th attempt to play a perfect game of Pac-Man. On each of my previous attempts, I'd gotten slightly closer to achieving my goal, which only made failure that much more frustrating. But today seemed different. Today I had a good feeling, like this just might be the day I finally pulled it off.

0021

The Vonnegut dropped out of light speed and Archaide suddenly filled the cockpit viewscreen. It stood out from the other planets in the sector, because it wasn't coded to look real. All of the neighboring planets were perfectly rendered, with clouds and storm patterns swirling across their curved surfaces, along with oceans, continents, and impact craters. But Archaide had none of these features, because it was home to the OASIS's largest classic video game museum, so the planet was rendered with crude green vector lines, and it had a predominately black surface that didn't reflect light. Archaide's appearance was designed as a tribute to the vector graphic games of the late 70s and early 80s. The planet's only surface feature was a web of glowing green dots, similar to the ground lights on an airport runway. They were spaced evenly across the globe in a perfect grid, so that, from orbit, Archaide resembled the vector-graphic Death Star from Atari's 1983 *Star Wars* arcade game.

As Max piloted the *Vonnegut* down to the surface I prepared for the possibility of combat, by charging up my armor and buffing my avatar with several potions and nano packs. Archaide was both a PvP zone and a chaos zone, which meant that both magic and technology functioned here. This made it a very dangerous place to visit. I made sure to load up all of my combat contingency macros.

As the *Vonnegut*'s perfectly-rendered steel loading ramp lowered to the ground, it stood out in sharp contrast against the digital blackness of Archaide's surface. As I stepped off the ramp, I tapped a keypad on my right wrist. The ramp retracted, and there was a sharp hum as the ship's security system activated. A transparent blue shield appeared around the *Vonnegut*'s hull.

I gazed around at the horizon, which was just a jagged green vector line, denoting mountainous terrain. Here on the surface, Archaide looked exactly like environment of the 1981 game *Battlezone*, another vector-graphic classic from Atari. In the distance, a triangular volcano spewed green pixels of lava. You could run towards that volcano for days and never reach it. It always remained at the horizon. Just like in an old video game, the scenery never changed on Archaide, even if you circumnavigated the globe.

Following my instructions, Max had set the *Vonnegut* down in a landing lot near the equator in the eastern hemisphere. The lot was empty, and the surrounding area appeared deserted. I was now close enough to see that the green dots spaced evenly across the planet surface were actually the mouths of entrance tunnels. Neon-green circles, each ten-meters in diameter, leading below ground. Archaide was a hollow planet, and the museum exhibits were all located beneath the surface.

As I approached the nearest tunnel entrance, I heard loud music emanating from below. I recognized the song as *Pour Some Sugar on Me* by Def Leppard, off their *Hysteria* album (Epic Records, 1987). I reached the edge of the glowing green ring and jumped in. As my avatar plummeted down into the museum, the green vector-graphic theme disappeared and I found myself in high-resolution full-color surroundings. Everything around me looked completely real once again.

Below its surface, Archaide housed thousands of classic video arcades, each one a loving

recreation of an arcade that had once existed somewhere in the real world. Since the dawn of the OASIS, thousands of elderly users had come here and painstakingly coded a virtual replica of a local arcade they remembered from their childhood, thus making it a permanent part of the museum. And each of these simulated game rooms, bowling alleys, and pizza joints were lined with classic arcade games. There was at least one copy of every coin-operated video game ever made down here. The original game roms were all stored in the planet's OASIS code, and their wooden game cabinets were each coded to look like the antique originals.

The museum's various levels were comprised of vast caverns, linked by a network of subterranean streets, tunnels, staircases, elevators, escalators, ladders, slides, trapdoors, and secret passageways. It was like a massive underground multi-level labyrinth. The layout made it extremely easy to get lost, so I kept a three-dimensional holographic map on my display. My avatar's present location was indicated by a flashing blue dot. I'd entered the museum next to an old arcade called Aladdin's Castle, close to the surface. I touched a point on the map near the core of the planet, indicating my destination, and the software mapped the quickest route for me to get there. I ran forward, following it.

The museum was divided into layers. Here, near the planet's mantle, you could find the last coin operated video games ever made, from first few decades of the twenty-first century. These were mostly dedicated simulator cabinets, with first-generation haptics—vibrating chairs and tilting hydraulic platforms. Lots of networked stock car simulators that allowed people to race each other. These games were the last of their kind. Home video game consoles had already made most coin-op games obsolete, but after the OASIS went online, they stopped making them altogether.

As I ventured deeper into the museum, the games grew older and more archaic. Here

were the turn-of-the-century coin-ops. Lots of head-to-head fighting games with blocky polygon-rendered figures beating the crap out of each other on large flat screen monitors. Shooting games played with crude haptic light guns. Dancing games. Once I reached the level below that, the games all began to look identical. Each was housed in a large rectangular wooden box, containing a cathode picture tube with a set of crude game controls mounted in front of it. Joysticks, buttons, flight yokes, steering wheels and trackballs. You used your hands and your eyes (and occasionally your feet) to play these games. There were no haptics. These games didn't make you feel anything. And the deeper I descended, the cruder the game graphics got.

I'd once gone all the way to the museum's bottom level, located in the planet core. It was a spherical room containing a shrine to the very first video game, *Tennis for Two*, invented by William Higinbotham in 1958. The game ran on an ancient analog computer and was played on a tiny oscilloscope screen about five inches in diameter. Next to it was a replica of an ancient PDP-1 computer, running a copy of *Spacewar!*, perhaps the second-oldest video game, created by some kids at MIT in 1962.

Like most gunters, I'd gone to the core and had played both *Tennis for Two* and *Spacewar!* until I'd mastered them, while looking for clues Halliday might have left behind. But I hadn't found anything there.

I continued to run, further and further down, until I reached a giant cavernous chamber that contained something a kind of underground city, comprised entirely of pizza joints, bowling alleys, convenience stores, and, of course, video arcades. I ran through the maze of the empty streets, then down a winding back alley that dead-ended at my destination, a small pizza shop, wedged between a bowling alley and a Snappy Mart convenience store. It was called Happytime Pizza, and it was a replica of a small family-run pizza joint that had once existed in Halliday's

hometown in the mid-1980s. Halliday appeared to have copied the code for Happytime Pizza from his Middletown simulation and placed a duplicate of it here in the museum. But unlike the copy on Middletown, this one was fairly well hidden. I'd gotten lost and found it completely by accident. I'd never seen its existence mentioned on any of the message boards or in any of the strategy guides. So I thought there might be a chance that I was the first gunter to spot it.

Halliday had mentioned Happytime Pizza several times in the Almanac, so I knew he had fond memories of this place. He'd often come here after school, to avoid going home. The interior recreated the atmosphere of a classic 80s pizza parlor and video arcade in loving detail. Several NPC employees stood behind the counter, tossing dough and slicing pies. (On a previous visit, I'd turned on my Olfatrix™ tower, and discovered that I could actually smell the tomato sauce.) The shop was divided into two halves, the game room and the dining room. The dining room had video games in it as well—all of the glass-top tables were actually sit-down arcade games, known as "cocktail cabinets." You could sit and play Donkey Kong on the table while you ate your pizza.

If I'd been hungry, I could have ordered a real slice of pizza at the counter. The order would have been forwarded to a pizza vendor near my apartment complex, the one I'd specified in my OASIS account's food service preference settings. Then a slice would have been delivered to my door in a matter of minutes and the cost (including tip) would have been deducted from my OASIS account balance.

As I walked in to the game room, I heard a song by Bryan Adams blasting out of the speakers mounted on the carpeted walls. Bryan was singing about how, everywhere he went, the kids wanted to rock. I pressed my thumb to a plate on the change machine and bought a single quarter. I scooped it out of the stainless steel tray and headed to the back of the game room,

taking in all of the simulation's little details. There was a hand-written note taped to the marquee of a *Defender* game. It read: *Beat the owner's high score and win a free large pizza!* A *Robotron* game was currently displaying its high score list. *Robotron* allowed the all-time best player to enter an entire sentence of text beside their score, instead of just their initials, and this machine's top dog had used their precious victory space to announce that *Vice-Principal Roloff is a douchebag!*

I continued further into the dark electronic cave, and walked up to a Pac-Man machine at the very back of the room, wedged between a *Galaga* and a *Dig-Dug*. The black and yellow cabinet was covered with chips and scratches, and the garish side-art was peeling. At the top of the game, resting on the metal brace that held the glass marquee in place, was a single quarter. The date on the coin was 1981—the year Pac-Man was released. I knew that back in the 80s, placing your quarter on a game's marquee was how you reserved the next turn on the machine. But when I tried to remove the quarter, it wouldn't budge. It was as though it were welded in place.

The Pac-Man game's monitor was dark and there was an *Out of Order* sign taped to it. This sign had been there when I'd first discovered the game, and it was what had caught my eye. Why would Halliday include a broken game in this simulation? Was this just another atmospheric detail? Intrigued, I'd decided to investigate further. When I pulled the game cabinet out from the wall, I saw that the power cord was unplugged. So I'd plugged it back in to the wall socket and waited for the game to boot up. It worked fine.

I repeated this process now. I plugged the game back in, then slapped the Out of Order sign on the neighboring *Galaga* cabinet. The game went through its boot-up process, splashing a wave of multi-colored characters, numbers, and sprites across the monitor. Then the startup

screen appeared, listing off the game's villainous ghosts: Inky, Blinky, Pinky, and Clyde. The high score at the top of the screen was the same as it had been on my first visit: 3,333,350 points.

There were several things strange about this. In the real world, Pac-Man machines didn't save their high score if they were unplugged. And the high score counter was supposed to flip over at one-million points. But this machine had been coded to behave differently. Not only did it save its high score, the counter didn't flip at a million points. It kept going. And that high score of 3,333,350 points was just 10 points shy of the highest Pac-Man score possible. The only way to beat that score would be to play a perfect game.

Playing a perfect game of Pac-Man was no easy feat. You had to play all 256 levels perfectly, all the way up to the final split-screen. And you had to eat every single dot, energizer, fruit, and ghost possible along the way, without ever losing a single life. Less than twenty perfect games had been documented in the game's sixty year history. One of them, the fastest perfect game ever played, had been accomplished by James Halliday in just under four hours. He'd done it on an original Pac-Man machine located in the Gregarious Games break room.

When I'd first powered up the game and seen its high score, I knew I'd found something remarkable. Some kind of Easter egg, left behind by Halliday. I didn't know if it had anything to do with the Jade Key, or if it was related to the Egg at all. But there was only one way to find out. I would have to play a perfect game on the machine and beat its high score. Then see what happened next.

Since discovering the game, I'd devoted all of my free time to becoming a Pac-Man expert. I'd made over dozen trips back here to try and achieve a perfect game, and I'd failed every time.

I studied the machine, like a gunfighter sizing up an opponent. Then I stretched my arms,

rolled my neck around on my shoulders, and cracked my knuckles.

When I dropped my quarter into the left coin slot, the game emitted a familiar electronic *bea-wup!* sound. I tapped the Player One button and the first maze appeared on the screen in front of me. The message *READY!* appeared in the center of the maze.

I wrapped my right hand around the joystick and began to play, guiding my pizza-shaped protagonist through one maze after another. *Wakka-wakka-wakka-wakka.*

My synthetic surroundings faded away as I focused on the game and lost myself in its ancient two-dimensional reality. I was fully aware that I was now playing a simulation within a simulation. A game within a game.

#

Six hours later I was still rockin' like Dokken. My playing had been Iceman-perfect so far. Two-hundred and fifty-five screens in and I still hadn't made a single mistake. I'd managed to nail all four ghosts with every single power pill (until the eighteenth maze, when they stop turning blue altogether) and I'd snagged every bonus fruit, bird, bell, and key that had appeared, without losing a single life. I was having the best game of my life. This was it. I could feel it. Everything was finally falling in to place. I had *the glow*.

There was a spot in each maze, just above the starting position, where it was possible to "hide" Pac-Man for up to fifteen minutes. In that location, the ghosts couldn't find him. Using this trick, I'd been able to take two quick food and bathroom breaks during the past six hours.

A smirk crept onto my face as I chomped my way through the 255th screen. The song *Pac-Man Fever* had just started to blast out the game room stereo. I knew this had to be a small tip-of-the-hat from Halliday. He'd programmed this song to play whenever someone made it this far.

Sticking to my tried-and-true pattern one last time, I whipped the joystick right, slid into the secret door, then out the opposite side and straight down to snag the last few remaining dots, clearing the board. I took a deep breath as the outline of the blue maze began to pulse white. And then I saw it, staring me in the face. The fabled Split-Screen. The End of the Game.

Then, in the worse case of bad timing imaginable, a Scoreboard alert flashed on my display, just a few seconds after I began to play through the final screen.

The top ten rankings appeared, superimposed over my view of the Pac-Man screen, and I glanced at them for a split second. Long enough to see that Aeche had just become the second person to find the Jade Key. His score had just jumped 19,000 points, putting him in second place and knocking me into third.

By some miracle, I managed not to flip out. I stayed focused on the game.

I gripped the joystick tighter, refusing to let this wreck my concentration. I was nearly finished! I only had to milk the final 6,760 possible points from this last garbled maze and then I would finally have the high score.

My heart pounded in time with the music as I cleared the unblemished left half of the maze. Then I ventured into the twisted terrain of the right-half, guiding Pac-Man through the pixilated on-screen refuse of the game's depleted memory. Hidden underneath all of those junk sprites and garbled graphics were nine more dots, worth ten points each. I couldn't see them, but I had their locations memorized. I quickly found and ate all nine, gaining 90 more points. Then I turned and ran into the nearest ghost—Clyde—and committed Pacicide, dying for the first time in the game. Pac-man froze and then withered into nothingness with an extended *beeewup*.

Each time Pac-Man died on this final maze, the nine hidden dots reappeared on the deformed right half of the screen. So to achieve the game's maximum possible score, I had to

find and eat each of those dots five more times, once with each of my five remaining lives.

I did my best not to think about Aech, who I knew must be holding the Jade Key at that very moment. Right now, he was probably reading whatever clue was etched into its surface.

I pulled the joystick to the right, weaving through the digital debris one final time. I could have done it blindfolded by now. I fish-hooked around Pinky to grab the two dots near the bottom, then another three in the center, and then the last four near the top.

Then I realized that I'd done it. I had the new high score. 3,333,360 points. A perfect game.

I took my hands off the controls and watched as all four ghosts converged on Pac-Man. GAME OVER flashed in the center of the maze.

I waited. Nothing happened. After a few seconds, the game's attract screen came back up, showing the four ghosts, their names, and nicknames.

My gaze shot to the quarter sitting on the edge of the marquee brace. Earlier it had been welded in place, unmovable. But now it tumbled forward and fell end-over-end, landing directly in the palm of my avatar's hand. Then it suddenly vanished, and a message flashed on my display informing me that the quarter had automatically been added to my inventory. When I tried to take it back out and examine it, I found that I couldn't. The quarter icon remained in my inventory. I couldn't take it out or drop it.

If the quarter had any magical properties, they weren't revealed in its item description, which was completely empty. To learn anything more about the quarter, I was probably going to have to hire a high-level magic user to cast a divination spell on it, and there was no guarantee that would reveal anything either.

At the moment, I was having a hard time caring all that much on the mystery of the

undroppable quarter. All I could think about was that Aech and Art3mis had now both beaten me to Jade Key. And getting the high score on this Pac-Man game on Archaide obviously hadn't gotten me any closer to finding it myself. I'd been wasting my time here.

I slapped the OUT OF ORDER sign back on the Pac-Man monitor, unplugged the game, and then turned headed back up to the planet surface. Just as I sat down in the *Vonnegut's* cockpit, an email from Aech arrived in my inbox. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end when I saw its subject line: *Payback Time*

Holding my breath, I opened the message and read it:

Dear Parzival,

You and I are officially even now, got that? I consider my debt to you hereby paid in full.

Better hurry. The Sixers must already be on their way there.

Good Luck,
Aech

Below his signature was an image file he'd attached to the message. It was a high-resolution scan of the instruction manual cover for the text adventure game ZORK-- the version released in 1980 by Personal Software for the TRS-80 Model III.

I'd played and solved Zork once, a long time ago, back during the first year of the Hunt. But I'd also played hundreds of other classic text adventure games that same year, including all of Zork's sequels, and so most of the details of the game had now faded in my memory. Playing these old text adventure games was pretty straight forward, so I'd never bothered to read the Zork instruction manual. On the manual's cover there was a painting depicting a scene from the game. A swashbuckling adventurer, wearing armor and a winged helmet, stood with a glowing blue sword raised over his head, preparing to strike a troll cowering before him. The adventurer

clutched several treasures in his other hand, and more treasures lay at his feet, scattered amongst human bones. There was a dark, fanged creature lurking just behind the hero, glowering malevolently.

All of this was in the painting's foreground, but my eyes had instantly locked on what was in the background: a large white house, with its front door and windows all boarded up.

A white house long neglected.

I stared at the image a few more seconds, just long enough to curse myself for not making the connection on my own, months ago. Then I fired the Vonnegut's engines and set a course for another planet in Sector 7, not far from Archaide. It was small world called Frobozz, and it was home to a detailed recreation of the game Zork.

It was also, I now knew, the hiding place of the Jade Key.

0022

Frobozz was located in a group of several hundred rarely-visited worlds known as the XYZZY Cluster. These planets all dated back to early days of the OASIS, and each one recreated the environment of some old classic text-adventure game or MUD (Multi-User Dungeon). Each of these worlds was a kind of shrine--an interactive tribute to the OASIS's earliest ancestors.

Text-adventure games (often referred to as "Interactive Fiction" by modern scholars) used text to create the virtual environment that the player inhabited. The game program provided you with a simple written description of your surroundings, then asked what you wanted to do next. To move around or interact with your virtual surroundings, you keyed in text commands, telling the game what you wanted your avatar to do. These instructions had to be very simple, usually comprised of just two or three words, such as *GO SOUTH* or *GET SWORD*. If a command was too complex, the game's simple parsing engine wouldn't be able to understand it. By reading and typing text, you made your way through the virtual world, collecting treasure, fighting monsters, avoiding traps, and solving puzzles, until you finally reached the end of the game.

The first text adventure game I'd ever played was called *Colossal Cave*, and initially the text-only interface had seemed incredibly simple and crude to me. But after playing for a few minutes, I quickly became immersed in the reality created by the words on the screen. Somehow,

the game's simple two-sentence room descriptions were able to conjure up vivid images, all rendered in my mind's eye.

Zork was one of the earliest and most famous of text-adventure games. According to my grail diary, I'd played the game through to the end just once, all in one day, over four years ago. Since then, in a shocking display of unforgivable ignorance, I'd somehow forgotten two very important details about the game:

1. *Zork* began with your character standing outside a shuttered white house.
2. Inside the living room of that white house there was a trophy case.

To complete the game, every treasure you collected had to be returned to the living room, and placed inside the trophy case.

Suddenly, the rest of the quatrain made sense.

*The captain conceals the Jade Key
in a white house long neglected
But you can only blow the whistle
once the trophies are all collected*

Decades ago, *Zork* and its sequels had all been licensed and recreated inside the OASIS, as stunning three-dimensional immersive simulations, all located on the planet Frobozz, which was named after a fictional character in the *Zork* universe. So the *white house, long neglected*--the one I'd been trying to locate for the past year--had been sitting right out in the open on Frobozz this entire time. Hiding in plain sight.

#

I checked the ship's navigational computer. Traveling at light speed, it would take just over fifteen minutes to reach Frobozz. There was a good chance the Sixers would beat me there. If they did, there would probably already be a small armada of Sixer gunships waiting in orbit around the planet when I dropped out of light speed. I would have to fight my way through them

to reach the surface, and then either lose them, or try to find the Jade Key with them still breathing down my neck. Not a good scenario.

Luckily, I had a back up plan. My *Ring of Teleportation*. It was one of the most valuable magic items in my inventory, looted from the hoard of a red dragon I'd slain on Gygax. The ring allowed my avatar to teleport once a month, to any location in the OASIS. I only used it in dire emergencies. As a last ditch means of escape, or when I needed to get somewhere in a big hurry. Like right now.

I quickly programmed the *Vonnegut's* onboard computer to autopilot the ship to Frobozz. Then I instructed it to activate its cloaking device as soon as it dropped out of hyperspace, then locate me on the planet surface and land somewhere nearby. If I was lucky, the Sixers wouldn't detect my ship and blast it out of the sky before it could reach me. If they did, I'd be stuck on Frobozz with no way to leave, while the entire Sixer army closed in on me.

I engaged the *Vonnegut's* autopilot, then activated my Ring of Teleportation by speaking the command word, *Brundell*. When the ring began to glow, I said the name of the planet where I wished to teleport. A world map of Frobozz appeared on my display. It was a large world, and, similar to the planet Middletown, its surface was covered with hundreds of identical copies of the same simulation--in this case, recreations of the *Zork* playing field. There were five-hundred and twelve copies of it, to be exact, which meant there were five-hundred and twelve white houses, spaced out evenly across the planet surface. I should be able to obtain the Jade Key at any one them, so I selected one of the copies at random on the map. My ring emitted a blinding flash of light, and a split-second later my avatar was suddenly there. Standing on the surface of Frobozz.

I opened my grail diary and located my original notes on how to solve *Zork*. Then I pulled up a map of the game's playing field and placed it in the corner of my display.

Surveying the skies, I didn't see any sign of the Sixers, but that didn't mean they hadn't already arrived. Sorrento and his underlings had probably just teleported to one of the playing fields. Everybody knew that the Sixers had been camped out in Sector 7 for the past six weeks, waiting for this moment. The moment they saw Aech's score increase, they would have used *Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding* and learned that he was currently on Frobozz. Which meant the entire Sixer armada would already be on its way here. So I needed to get to the key as quickly as possible, then get the hell out of Dodge.

I took a look around. My surroundings were eerily familiar.

The opening text description in the game *Zork* read as follows:

WEST OF HOUSE

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

>

My avatar now stood in that open field, just west of the white house. The front door of the old Victorian mansion was boarded up, and there was a mailbox just a few yards away from me, at the end of the walkway leading to the house. Everything matched the text of the game exactly. The house was surrounded by a dense forest, and beyond it I saw a range of jagged mountain peaks. Glancing off to my left, I spotted a path leading to the north, right where I knew it should be.

I ran around to the back of the house. There was a small window there, slightly ajar, and I forced it open and climbed inside. As expected, I found myself in the kitchen. There was a wooden table in the center of the room, and on it rested a long brown sack and a bottle of water. There was chimney nearby, and a staircase leading up to the attic. A hallway off to my left led to the living room. Just like the game.

But the kitchen also contained things that weren't mentioned in the game's text

description of this room. A stove, a refrigerator, several wooden chairs, a sink, and a few rows of kitchen cabinets. I opened the fridge. It was full of junk food. Fossilized pizza, snack puddings, lunch meat, and a wide array of condiment packets. I checked the cupboards. They were filled with canned and dry goods. Rice, pasta, soup.

And cereal.

One entire cupboard was crammed with boxes of vintage breakfast cereals, most of which had been discontinued before I'd been born. *Fruit Loops, Honeycombs, Lucky Charms, Count Chockula, Quisp, Frosted Flakes*. And, hidden way at the back, a lone box of *Cap'N Crunch*. And printed clearly on the front of it were the words "FREE TOY WHISTLE INSIDE!"

The captain conceals the Jade Key

I dumped the contents of the box out on the counter, scattering golden cereal nuggets everywhere. Then I spotted it--a small plastic whistle encased in a clear cellophane envelope. I tore off the cellophane and held the whistle in my hand. It was yellow in color, with the cartoon face of Cap'N Crunch molded on one side and a small dog on the other. "Cap'N Crunch Bo'sun Whistle" were embossed on either side.

At last, it all made sense. I understood the full meaning of the quatrain, and knew what it was I had to do to obtain the Jade Key. To test my theory, I raised the whistle to my avatar's lips and blew into it. But the whistle emitted no sound, and nothing happened.

You can only blow the whistle once the trophies are all collected

I pocketed the whistle, then opened the sack on the kitchen table. There was a clove of garlic inside, and I added it to my inventory. Then I ran west, into the living room. The floor was covered with a large oriental rug. Antique furniture, the kind I'd seen in films from the 1940s, was positioned around the room. A wooden door with odd characters carved into its surface was

set into the west wall. And, against the opposite wall, there was a beautiful glass trophy case. It was empty. A battery powered lantern sat on top of the case, and a shining sword was mounted on the wall directly above it.

I took the sword and the lantern, then rolled up the oriental rug, uncovering the trap door I already knew was hidden underneath. I opened it, revealing a staircase that lead down in a darkened cellar.

I turned on the lamp. As I began to descend the staircase, my sword began to glow.

#

I continued to refer to the *Zork* notes in my grail diary, which reminded me exactly how to make my way through the game's labyrinth of rooms, passageways, and puzzles. I collected all nineteen of the game's treasures as I went, returning repeatedly to the living room in the white house to place them in the trophy case, a few at a time. Along the way, I had to do battle with several NPCs: a troll, a Cyclops, and a really annoying thief. As for the legendary Grue, lurking in the dark, waiting to dine on my flesh--I simply avoided him.

Aside from the Cap'N Crunch whistle hidden in the kitchen, I found no other surprises or deviations from the original game. To solve this immersive three-dimensional version of *Zork*, I simply had to perform the exact same actions required to solve the original text-based game. By running at top speed, and by never stopping to sightsee or second guess myself, I managed to complete the game in twenty-two minutes.

Shortly after I collected the last of the game's nineteen treasures, a tiny brass bauble, a notice flashed in my display, informing me that the *Vonneugt* had arrived outside. The autopilot had just landed the ship in the field to the west of the white house. Its cloaking device was still engaged and its shields were up. If the Sixers were already here, in orbit around the planet, I was

hoping they hadn't spotted my ship.

I ran back to the living room of the white house one last time and placed the final treasure inside the trophy case. Just as in the original game, a map suddenly appeared inside the case, directing me to a hidden barrow that marked the end of the game. But I wasn't concerned with the map or with finishing the game. All of the "trophies" were now "collected" in the case, so I took out the Cap'N Crunch whistle. It had three holes across the top, and I covered the third one, to generate the 2600 hertz tone that had made this whistle famous in the annals of hacker history. Then I blew one clear, shrill note.

The whistle suddenly transformed into a small key. In the same instant, my score on the scoreboard increased by 18,000 points.

I was back in second place, a mere one thousand points ahead of Aech.

A second later, the entire *Zork* simulation reset itself. The nineteen items in the trophy case vanished, returning to their original locations, and the rest of the house and the game's playing field returned to the same state in which I'd found it.

As I stared at the key in the palm of my hand, I felt a brief jolt of panic. The key was silver, and not the milky green color of jade. But when I turned the key over and examined it more closely, I saw that it actually appeared to be wrapped in silver foil, like a stick of gum or a bar of chocolate. I carefully peeled the wrapper away, and a key made of polished green stone was revealed inside.

The Jade Key.

And just like the Copper Key, I saw that it had a clue etched into its surface:

Continue your quest by taking the test

I re-read it several times, but had no immediate revelations as to its meaning, so I placed

the key in my inventory, then examined the wrapper. It was silver foil on one side and white paper on the other. I didn't see any marking on either side. I wondered why its purpose or meaning was. Why had Halliday placed the Jade Key inside a candy wrapper?

Just then, I heard the muffled roar of approaching spacecraft and knew it must be the Sixers. It sounded like there were an awful lot of them, too.

I pocketed the wrapper and ran out of the house. Overhead, thousands of Sixers gunships filled the sky, like an angry swarm of metal wasps. The ships were separating into small groups as they descended, heading off in different directions, as if to blanket the entire surface of the planet.

I didn't think the Sixers were foolish enough to try and barricade all five-hundred and twelve copies of the white house. That strategy had worked for them on Ludus, but only for a few hours, and they'd only had one location to barricade. The entire planet of Frobozz was in a PvP zone, and both magic and technology functioned here, which meant that all bets were off. There would be hordes of gunters arriving here soon, armed to teeth, and if the Sixers tried to keep all of them at bay, it would mean war, on a scale never before seen in the history of the OASIS.

As I continued running, across the field and up the ramp of my ship, I spotted a large squadron of gunships, about a hundred or so, descending from the sky directly above my location. They appeared to be headed straight for me.

Max had already powered up the *Vonnegut's* engines, so I shouted for him to lift off as soon I was aboard. When I reached the cockpit controls, I threw the throttle wide open, and the descending swarm of Sixer gunships banked hard to follow me. As my ship blasted its way skyward, I began to take heavy fire from several directions. But I was lucky. My ship was fast,

and my shields were top of the line, so they managed to hold up long enough for me to reach orbit. But they failed a few seconds later, and the *Vonnegut's* hull suffered an alarming amount of damage in the handful of seconds it took me to make the jump to light speed.

It was a close call. The bastards almost got me.

#

My ship was in bad shape, so instead of returning directly to my stronghold, I headed to Joe's Garage, an orbital starship repair shop over in Sector 10. Joe's was an honest establishment, with reasonable rates and lightning fast service. I used them whenever the *Vonnegut* needed repairs or upgrades.

While Joe and his boys worked on my ship, I sent Aech a brief email to say thanks. I told him that whatever debt he felt he owed me was now most definitely paid in full. I also copped to being a colossally insensitive, self-centered asshole, and then begged him to forgive me for being such a complete douchebag.

As soon as the repairs to my ship were finished, I headed back to my stronghold. Then I spent the rest of the day glued to the newsfeeds. The word about Frobozz was out, and every gunter with the means had already teleported there. Thousands of others were arriving by spacecraft every minute, to do battle with the Sixers and secure their own copy of the Jade Key.

The newsfeeds were airing live coverage of the hundreds of large-scale battles that were breaking out on Frobozz, around nearly every instance of the "white house, long neglected." The big gunter clans had once again banded together to launch a coordinated attack on the Sixers' forces. It was the beginning of what would come to be known as the *Battle of Frobozz*, and casualties were already mounting on both sides.

I also kept a close eye on the Scoreboard, waiting to see evidence that the Sixers had

begun to collect copies of the Jade Key, while their forces held the opposition at bay. As I feared, the next score to increase was the one beside Sorrento's IOI employee number. It jumped 17,000 points, moving him into Fourth Place.

Now that the Sixers knew exactly where and how to obtain the Jade Key, I expected to see their other avatar's scores begin to jump, as Sorrento's underlings followed his lead. But to my surprise, the next avatar to snag the Jade Key was none other than Shoto. He did it less than twenty minutes after Sorrento.

Somehow, Shoto had somehow managed to evade the hordes of Sixers that were currently swarming all over the planet, enter an instance of the white house, collect all nineteen of the required treasures, and obtain his copy of the key.

I continued to watch the Scoreboard, expecting to see his brother Daito's score increase as well. But that never happened.

A few minutes after Shoto obtained his copy of the key, Daito's name suddenly disappeared from the scoreboard entirely. There was only one possible explanation: Daito had just been killed.

0023

Over the next twelve hours, chaos continued to reign on Frobozz, as every gunter in the OASIS scrambled to reach the planet and join the fray.

The Sixers had dispersed their grand army across the globe, in a bold attempt to blockade all five-hundred and twelve copies of the *Zork* playing field. But their forces, as vast and well-equipped as they were, were spread far too thin this time. Only seven more of their avatars managed to obtain the Jade Key that day. And when the gunter clans began their coordinated attack on the Sixers forces, the "boobs in black" began to suffer heavy casualties, and were forced to pull back.

Within a matter of hours, the Sixer high command decided to deploy a new strategy. It had quickly become obvious that they wouldn't be able to maintain over five-hundred different blockades, or fend the massive influx of gunters. So they recalled and regrouped their forces, then placed them around ten adjacent instances of the *Zork* playing field, all near the planet's south pole. They installed powerful force shields over each of them, and stationed armored battalions outside the shield walls.

This scaled-down strategy worked, and the Sixers' forces proved sufficient to hold those ten locations and prevent any other gunters from getting inside (and there wasn't much reason for

them to try, since there were now over five-hundred other instances of *Zork* standing wide open and unprotected). Now that the Sixers could operate undisturbed, they basically formed ten lines of avatars outside each white house, and began to run them through the process of obtaining the Jade Key, one after another. Everyone could plainly see what they were doing, because the digits beside each of the IOI employee number on the Scoreboard began to increase by a fixed value of 15,000 points.

At the same time, hundreds of gunter scores were increasing as well. Now that both the location of the Jade Key and the exact actions required to obtain it were public knowledge, it was there for the taking to anyone who had already cleared the First Gate. As the Battle of Frobozz drew to a close, the rankings on the Scoreboard stood like this:

HIGH SCORES:

1. Art3mis	129,000	🏆
2. Parzival	128,000	🏆
3. Aech	127,000	🏆
4. IOI-655321	122,000	🏆
5. Shoto	122,000	🏆
6. IOI-643187	105,000	🏆
7. IOI-621671	105,000	🏆
8. IOI-678324	105,000	🏆
9. IOI-637330	105,000	🏆
10. IOI-699423	105,000	🏆

Even though Shoto had matched Sorrento's score of 122,000 points, Sorrento had achieved that score first, which must be the reason he'd remained in the higher slot. The relatively small point bonuses Art3mis, Aech, Shoto, and I had received for being the first to reach the Copper and Jade keys were what kept our names in the hallowed "High Five" slots. And now that Daito was gone, Sorrento had earned one of these bonuses, too. Seeing his IOI employee number above Shoto's name made me ill. Sorrento had weaseled his way into the High Five.

Scrolling down, I saw that there were now over five thousand names on the Scoreboard, with more being added every hour, as new avatars finally managed to defeat King Kratos at Joust and collect their own instance of the Copper Key.

No one on the message boards seemed to know what had happened to Daito, but the common assumption was that he'd been killed by the Sixers during the first few minutes of the Battle of Frobozz. Rumors about exactly how he had died were running rampant, but no one had actually been witness to his demise. Except for maybe Shoto, and he'd vanished. I sent him a few chat requests, but got no reply. Like me, I assumed he was focusing all of his energy on finding the Second Gate before the Sixers did.

#

I sat in my stronghold, staring at the Jade Key and reciting the words etched into its spine, over and over, like a maddening mantra:

*Continue your quest by taking the test
Continue your quest by taking the test
Continue your quest by taking the test*

Yes, but what test? What test was I supposed to take? The Kobayashi Maru? The Pepsi Challenge? Could the clue have been any *more* vague?

I reached under my visor and rubbed my eyes in frustration. I decided that I needed to take a break and get some sleep. I pulled up my avatar's inventory and placed the Jade Key back inside. As I did, I noticed the silver foil wrapper in the inventory slot beside it--the wrapper that had covered the Jade Key when it first appeared in my hand.

I knew the secret to deciphering the riddle must involve the wrapper in some way, but I still couldn't sort out how. Why would Halliday put the key inside a foil wrapper, like a chocolate bar? At first I thought it might be a reference to Willie Wonka and the Chocolate

Factory, but then I decided against it. There hadn't been any golden ticket inside the wrapper. It had some other purpose or meaning.

I stared at the wrapper and pondered this, until I could no longer keep my eyes open. Then I logged and out and went to sleep.

A few hours later, at 6:12am OST, I was jolted awake by the gut-wrenching sound of my Scoreboard alarm, alerting me that one of the top rankings had changed again.

Filled with an impending sense of dread, I logged in and pulled up the Scoreboard, not sure what to expect. Maybe Art3mis had finally cleared Gate Two? Or perhaps Aeche or Shoto had achieved that honor.

But all three of their scores remained unchanged. To my horror, I saw that it was Sorrento's score that had increased, by 200,000 points. And there were now two gate icons beside it.

Sorrento had just become the first person to find and clear the Second Gate. As a result, his avatar now stood in first place, at the top of the Scoreboard.

I sat there frozen, staring at Sorrento's employee number, silently weighing the repercussions of what had just happened.

Upon exiting the gate, Sorrento would have been given a clue as to the location of the Crystal Key. The key that would open third and final gate. So now the Sixers were the only ones who possessed that clue. Which meant they were now closer to finding Halliday's Easter egg than anyone had ever been.

I suddenly felt sick to my stomach, and I was also having a very difficult time breathing. I realized I must be having some sort of panic attack. A total and complete freak out. A massive mental meltdown. Whatever you want to call it. I went nuts.

I tried calling Aech, but he didn't pick up. Either he was still pissed off at me, or he had other, more pressing matters to attend to. I was about to call Shoto, but then I remembered that his brother's avatar had just been killed. He probably wasn't in a very receptive mood at the moment. I decided to let him be for the moment.

I considered flying to Benatar to try and get Art3mis to talk to me, but then I came to my senses. She'd had the Jade Key in her possession for the past two months, and she still hadn't been able to clear the Second Gate. Learning that the Sixers had done it in less than twenty-four hours had probably driven her into a psychotic rage. Or maybe a catatonic stupor. She probably didn't feel like talking to anyone right now, least of all me.

I was so desperate to hear a familiar voice, that, with no other options, I resorted to talking to Max. In my current state, even his glib computer-generated voice was somehow comforting.

You know you've totally screwed up your life when your whole world suddenly turns to shit and the only person you have to talk to is your system agent software.

I couldn't go back to sleep, so I stayed up watching the newsfeeds and scanning the gunter message boards. The Sixer armada remained on Frobozz, and their avatars were still farming copies of the Jade Key.

Sorrento had obviously learned from his previous mistake. Now that the Sixers alone knew the location of the Second Gate, they weren't going to be stupid enough to reveal its location to the world by trying to barricade it with their armada. But they were still taking full advantage of the situation. As the day progressed, the Sixers continued walk additional avatars through the Second Gate. After Sorrento made it through, another twelve Sixers cleared it during the following twenty-four hours. As each Sixer score increased by 200,000 points, Art3mis,

Aech, Shoto, and I were all pushed further and further down the Scoreboard, until we'd been knocked out of the top ten entirely, and the Scoreboard's main page displayed nothing but IOI employee numbers.

The Sixers now ruled the roost.

Then, when I was sure things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did. They got much, much worse. Two days after he cleared the Second Gate, Sorrento's score jumped another 30,000 points, indicating that he had just acquired the Crystal Key.

I sat there in my stronghold, staring at the monitors, watching all of this unfold in stunned horror. There was no denying it. The end of the contest was at hand. And it wasn't going to end like I'd always thought it would, with some noble, worthy gunter finding the Egg and winning the prize. I'd been kidding myself for the past six years. We all had. This story was not going to have a happy ending. The writing was on the wall. The bad guys were going to win.

I spent the next twenty-four hours in a frantic funk, obsessively checking the Scoreboard every five seconds, expecting THE END to come at any moment.

Sorrento, or one of his many "Halliday experts," had obviously been able to decipher the riddle and locate the Second Gate. But even though the proof was right there on the Scoreboard, I still had a hard time believing it. Up until now, the Sixers had only made progress by tracking Art3mis, Aech, or I with their cursed artifact. How had those same clueless asshats found the Second Gate on their own? Maybe they'd just gotten lucky. Or perhaps they'd discovered some new and innovative way to cheat. How else could they have solved the riddle in a single day, when Art3mis hadn't been able to do it with several weeks head start?

My brain felt like hammered play-dough. I couldn't make any sense of the clue printed on the Jade Key. I was completely out of ideas. Even lame ones. I didn't know what to do or where

to look next.

As the night went on, the Sixers continued to acquire copies of the Crystal Key. Each time one of their scores increased it was like a knife in my heart. But I couldn't make myself stop checking the Scoreboard. I was utterly transfixed.

I felt myself inching towards utter hopelessness. My efforts over the past six years had been for nothing. I'd foolishly underestimated Sorrento and the Sixers. We all had. And now we were going to pay the ultimate price for our hubris. Those evil, soulless, corporate lackeys were closing in on the Egg at this very moment. I could sense it, with every fiber of my being.

I'd already decided what I was going to do when it happened. First, I would email one of the kids in my official fan club, someone with no money and a 1st level newbie avatar, and I would give them every item I owned. Then I would activate the self-destruct sequence on my stronghold and sit in my command center while the whole place went up in a massive thermonuclear explosion. My avatar would die and GAME OVER would appear in the center of my display. Then I would rip off my visor and leave my apartment, for the first time in fourteen months. I would ride the elevator up to the roof. Or maybe I would even take the stairs. Get a little exercise.

There was an arboretum on the roof of my apartment building. I had never visited it, but I'd seen photos and admired the view via webcam. There was transparent plexiglas barrier installed around the ledge to keep people from jumping, but it was a joke. At least three determined individuals had managed to climb over it since I'd moved in.

I would sit up there and breathe the unfiltered city air for awhile, feeling the wind on my skin. Then I would scale the barrier and hurl myself over the side.

This was my plan.

I was trying to decide what tune I should whistle as I plummeted to my death, when my phone rang. It was Shoto. I wasn't in the mood to talk, so I let his call roll to vidmail, then watched as Shoto recorded his message. It was brief. He said that he needed to come to my stronghold to give me something. Something Daito had left to me in his will.

When I returned his call to arrange a meeting, I could tell that Shoto was an emotional wreck. His quiet voice was filled with pain, and the depth of his despair was apparent on the features of his avatar's face. He seemed utterly despondent. In even worse shape than me.

I asked Shoto why his brother had bothered to make out a "will" for his avatar, instead of just leaving his possessions in Shoto's care. Then Daito could simply create a new avatar and reclaim the items his brother was holding for him. But Shoto told me that his brother would not be creating a new avatar. Not now, or ever. When I asked why, he promised to explain when he saw me in person.

0024

Max alerted me when Shoto arrived an hour or so later. I granted his ship clearance to enter Falco's airspace and told him to park in my hangar.

Shoto's vessel was a large interplanetary trawler named the *Kurosawa*, the design of which had been modeled after the *Bebop* in the classic anime series *Cowboy Bebop*. Daito and Shoto had used this huge ship as their mobile base of operations for as long as I'd known them. It was so big that it barely fit through my hangar doors.

I was standing on the runway to greet Shoto as he emerged from the *Kurosawa*. He was dressed in black mourning robes, and his face bore the same inconsolable expression I'd seen when we spoke on the phone.

"Parzival-san," he said, bowing low.

"Shoto-san." I returned the bow respectfully, then stretched out my palm, a gesture he recognized from the time we'd spent questing together. Grinning in spite of himself, he reached out and slipped me some skin. But then his dark expression immediately resurfaced. This was the first time I'd seen Shoto since the quest we'd shared on Tokusatsu (not counting those "Daisho Energy Drink" commercials he and his brother appeared in), and his avatar seemed to be a few inches taller than I remembered..

I led him up to one of my stronghold's rarely-used "sitting rooms," a recreation of the living room set from *Family Ties*. Shoto recognized the décor and nodded his silent approval. Then, ignoring the furniture, he seated himself in the center of the floor. He sat seiza-style, folding his legs under his thighs. I did the same, positioning myself so that our avatars faced one another. We sat in silence for awhile. When Shoto was finally ready to speak, he kept his eyes on the floor.

"The Sixers killed my brother last night," he said, almost whispering.

At first, I was too stunned to reply. "You mean they killed his avatar?" I asked, even though I could already tell that wasn't what he meant.

Shoto shook his head. "No. They broke into his apartment, pulled him out of his haptic chair, and threw him off his balcony. He lived on the forty-third floor."

Shoto opened a browser window in the air beside us. It displayed a Japanese newsfeed article. I tapped it with my index finger and the Mandarax software translated the text to English. The headline was "Another Otaku Suicide." The brief article below said that a young man, Toshiro Yoshiaki, age 22, had jumped to his death from his apartment, located on the 43rd floor of a converted hotel in Shinjuku, Tokyo, where he lived alone. There was a school photo of Toshiro beside the article. He was a stoic young Japanese man with long, unkempt hair and bad skin. He didn't look anything like his OASIS avatar.

When Shoto saw that I'd finished reading, he closed the window. I hesitated a moment before asking: "Are you sure he didn't really commit suicide? Because his avatar had been killed?"

"No," Shoto said. "Daito did not commit seppuku. I'm sure of it. The Sixers broke into his apartment while we were engaged in combat with them on Frobozz. That's how they were able to

defeat his avatar. By killing him, in the real world."

"I'm sorry, Shoto." I didn't know what else to say. I knew he was telling the truth.

"My real name is Akihide," he said. "I want you to know my true name."

I smiled, then bowed, briefly pressing my forehead to the floor. "I appreciate you trusting me with your true name," I said. "My true name is Wade." I could no longer see the point in keeping secrets.

"Thank you, Wade," Shoto said, returning the bow.

"You're welcome, Akihide."

He was silent for a moment, then he cleared his throat and began to talk about Daito. The words poured out of him. It was obvious that he needed to talk to someone about what had happened. About what he'd lost.

"Daito's real name was Toshiro Yoshiaki. I didn't even know that until last night, until I saw that news article."

"But... I thought you were his brother?" I'd always assumed that Daito and Shoto lived together. That they shared an apartment or something.

"My relationship with Daito is difficult to explain." He stopped to clear his throat. "We were not brothers. Not in real life. Just in the OASIS. Do you understand? We only knew each other online. I never actually met him." He slowly raised his eyes to meet my gaze, to see if I was judging him.

I reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Believe me, Shoto. I understand. Aech and Art3mis are my two best friends, and I've never met either of them in real life either. In fact, *you* are one of my closest friends, too."

He bowed his head. "Thank you." I could tell by his voice that he was crying now.

"We're gunters," I said, trying to fill the awkward silence. "We live here, in the OASIS. For us, this is the only reality that has any meaning."

Akihide nodded, a few moments later he continued to talk.

He told me how he and Toshiro had met, six years ago, when they were both enrolled in an OASIS support group for *Hikikomori*, young people who had withdrawn from society and chosen to live in total isolation. Hikikomori locked themselves in a room, read manga, and cruised the OASIS all day, relying on their families to bring them food. There had been Hikikomori in Japan since back before the turn of the century, but their number had skyrocketed after the hunt for Halliday's Easter egg began. The Hikikomori problem was considered an epidemic in Japan. There were millions of young men and women all over the country who had locked themselves away from the world. They sometimes called these children the "missing millions."

Akihide and Toshiro became best friends and spent almost every day hanging out together in the OASIS. When the hunt for Halliday's Easter egg began, they'd immediately decided to join forces and search for it together. They made a perfect team, because Toshiro was a prodigy at video games, while the much younger Akihide was well-versed in American pop culture. Akihide's grandmother had attended school in the U.S., and both of his parents had been born there, so Akihide had been raised on American movies and television, and he'd grown up learning to speak English and Japanese equally well.

Akihide and Toshiro's mutual love of samurai movies served as the inspiration for their avatar's names and appearance. Despite their five-year age difference, Shoto and Daito thought of themselves as brothers, so when they created their new gunter identities, they decided that in the OASIS they *were* brothers, from that moment on.

After Shoto and Daito cleared the First Gate and became famous, they gave several interviews with the media. They kept their identities a secret, but they did reveal that they were both Japanese, which made them instant celebrities in Japan. They began to endorse Japanese products, and had a cartoon and a live-action TV series based on their exploits. At the height of their fame, Shoto had suggested to Daito that perhaps it was time for them to meet in person. Daito had flown into a rage and stopped speaking to Shoto for several days. After that, Shoto had never suggested it again.

Eventually, Shoto worked his way up to telling me how Daito's avatar had died. The two of them had been aboard the *Kurosawa*, cruising between planets in Sector 7, when the Scoreboard informed them that Aech had obtained the Jade Key. When that happened, they knew the Sixers would use *Fyndoro's Tablet of Finding* to pinpoint Aech's exact location, and that their ships would soon be converging on it.

In preparation for this, Daito and Shoto had spent the past few weeks planting microscopic tracking devices on the hulls of every Sixer gunship they could find. Using these devices, they were able to follow the gunships when they all suddenly changed course and headed for Frobozz.

As soon as Shoto and Daito learned that Frobozz was the Sixers' destination, they could finally decipher the meaning of the quatrain. And by the time they reached Frobozz, just a few minutes later, they'd already figured out what they needed to do to obtain the Jade Key.

They landed the *Kurosawa* next to an instance of the white house that was still deserted. Shoto ran inside to collect the nineteen treasures and get the key. Daito remained outside to stand guard. Shoto worked quickly, and he only had two treasures left to collect when Daito informed him by comlink that ten Sixer gunships were closing in on their location. He told his

brother to hurry, and promised to hold off the enemy until Shoto had the Jade Key. Neither of them knew if they'd have another chance to reach it.

As Shoto scrambled to get the last two treasures and place them in the trophy case, he remotely activated one of the *Kurosawa's* external cameras and used it to record a short video of Daito's confrontation with the approaching Sixers. Shoto opened a window and played this video clip for me. But he averted his eyes until it was over. He obviously had no desire to watch it again.

On the vidfeed, I saw Daito standing alone in the field beside the white house. A small fleet of Sixer gunships was descending out of the sky, and they began to fire their laser cannons as soon as they were within range. A hailstorm of fiery red bolts began to rain down all around Daito. Behind him, in the distance, I could see more Sixer gunships setting down, and each one was offloading squadrons of power-armored ground troops. Daito was surrounded.

The Sixers had obviously spotted the *Kurosawa* during its descent to the planet surface, and they'd made killing the two samurai a priority.

Daito didn't hesitate to use the ace up his sleeve. He pulled out the Beta Capsule, held it aloft in his right hand, and activated it. His avatar instantly changed into Ultraman, a glowing-eyed red-and-silver alien superhero. As his avatar transformed, he also grew to a height of one-hundred and fifty-six feet.

The Sixer ground forces that were closing in on him froze in their tracks, staring up in frightened awe as Ultraman Daito snatched two gunships out of the sky and smashed them together, like a giant child playing with two tiny metal toys. He dropped the flaming wreckage to the ground, then began to swat other Sixer gunships out of the sky like bothersome flies. The ships that escaped his deadly grasp banked around and sprayed him with laser bolts and machine

gun fire, but both deflected harmlessly off his armored alien skin. Daito let out a booming laugh that echoed across the landscape. Then he made a cross with his arms, intersecting at the wrists. A glowing energy beam blasted forth from his hands, vaporizing half-a-dozen gunships that were unlucky enough to fly through its path. Then, still firing the beam, Daito turned and swept it over the Sixer ground forces around him, frying them like terrified ants under a magnifying glass.

Daito appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. So much so that he paid little attention to the warning light embedded in the center of his chest, which had now begun to flash bright red. This was a signal that his three minutes as Ultraman had nearly elapsed, and that his power was almost depleted. This time limit was Ultraman's primary weakness. If Daito failed to deactivate the Beta Capsule and return to human form before his three minutes were up, his avatar would die. But it was obvious that if he changed back into his human form right now, in the middle of the massive Sixer onslaught, he'd be killed instantly, too. And Shoto would never be able to reach the ship.

I could see the Sixer troops around Daito screaming into their comlinks for backup, and additional Sixer gunships were still arriving in droves. Daito was blasting them out of the sky one at a time, with perfectly aimed bursts of his specium beam. And with each blast he fired, the warning light on his chest pulsed faster.

Suddenly, Shoto emerged from the white house and told his brother via comlink that he'd acquired the Jade Key. In that same instant, the Sixer ground forces spotted Shoto, and sensing a much easier target, they began to redirect their fire at his avatar.

Shoto made a mad dash for the *Kurosawa*. When he activated the *Boots of Speed* he was wearing, his avatar became a barely visible blur racing across the open field. As Shoto ran, Daito repositioned his giant form to provide him with as much cover as possible. Still firing energy

blasts, he was able to keep the Sixers at bay.

Then Daito's voice suddenly broke in on the comlink. "*Shoto!*" he shouted. "*I think someone is here! Someone is--*"

His voice suddenly cut off. At the same moment, his avatar froze, as if he'd been turned to stone, and a logout icon appeared directly over his head.

Logging out of your OASIS account while you were engaged in combat was the same thing as committing suicide. During the logout sequence, your avatar froze in place for sixty seconds, during which time you were totally defenseless and susceptible to attack. The logout sequence was designed this way to prevent avatars from using it as an easy way to escape a fight. You had to stand your ground, or retreat to a safe location before you could log out.

Daito's log out sequence had been engaged at the worst possible moment. As soon as his avatar froze, he began to take heavy laser and gunfire from all directions. The red warning light on his chest began to flash faster and faster, until it finally went solid red. When that happened, Daito's giant form fell over and collapsed. As he fell, he barely missed crushing Shoto and the *Kurosawa*. As he hit the ground, his avatar's body transformed and shrank back to its normal size and appearance. Then it began to disappear altogether, slowing fading out of existence. When Daito's avatar vanished completely, it left behind a small pile of spinning items on the ground--everything he'd been carrying in his inventory, including the Beta Capsule. He was dead.

I saw another blur of motion on the vidfeed, as Shoto ran back to collect Daito's items. Then he looped around and ran back aboard the *Kurosawa*. The ship lifted off and blasted into orbit, taking heavy fire the entire way, I was reminded of my own desperate escape from *Frobozz*. Luckily for Shoto, his brother had wiped up out most of the Sixer gunships in the vicinity, and reinforcements had yet to arrive.

Shoto was able to reach orbit and escape by making the jump to light speed. But just barely.

#

The video ended and Shoto closed the window.

"How do you think the Sixers found out where he lived," I asked.

"I don't know," Shoto said. "Daito was careful. He covered his tracks."

"If they found him, they might be able to find you, too," I said.

"I know. I've taken precautions."

"Good."

Shoto removed the Beta Capsule from his inventory and held it out to me. "Daito would have wanted you to have this."

I held up a hand. "No, I think you should keep it. You might need it."

Shoto shook his head. "I have all of his other items," he said. "I don't need this. And I don't want it." He held the capsule out to me, insistent.

I took the artifact and examined it. It was a small metal cylinder, silver and black in color, with a red activation button on its side. Its size and shape reminded me of the lightsabers I owned. But lightsabers were a dime a dozen. I had over fifty in my collection. There was only one Beta Capsule, and it was a far more powerful weapon.

I raised the capsule with both hands and bowed. "Thank you, Shoto-san."

"Thank you, Parzival," he said, returning the bow. "Thank you for listening." Then he stood. Everything about his body language seemed to signal defeat.

"You haven't given up yet, have you?" I asked.

"Of course not." He straightened his body and gave me a dark smile. "But finding the Egg

is no longer my goal. Now, I have a new quest. A far more important one."

"And that is?"

"Revenge."

I nodded. Then I walked over and took down one of the samurai swords I had mounted on the wall. I presented it to Shoto. "Please," I said. "Allow me to present you with this gift. To aid you in your new quest."

Shoto took the sword and drew its ornate blade a few inches from the scabbard. "A *Masamune*?" he asked, staring at the blade in wonder.

I nodded. "Yes. And it's a +5 vorpal blade, too."

Shoto bowed again to show his gratitude. "*Arrigato*."

We rode the elevator back down to my hangar in silence. Just before he boarded his ship, Shoto turned to me. "How long do you think it will take the Sixers to clear the Third Gate?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Hopefully, long enough for us to catch up with them."

"It's not over until the fat lady is singing, right?"

I nodded. "It's not over until it's over. And it's not over yet."

0025

I figured it out later that night, a few hours after Shoto left my stronghold.

I was sitting in my command center, holding the Jade Key and endlessly reciting the clue printed on its surface: *Continue your quest by taking the test.*

In my other hand, I held the silver foil wrapper. My eyes darted from the key to the wrapper and back to the key again, as I tried desperately to make the connection between. I'd been doing this for hours, and it wasn't getting me anywhere.

I sighed and put the key away, then I took the wrapper and laid it flat on the control panel in front of me. I carefully smoothed out all of its folds and wrinkles. The wrapper was square in shape, six inches long on each edge. Silver foil on one side, dull white paper on the other.

I pulled up some image analysis software and made a high resolution scan of both sides of the wrapper. Then I magnified both images on my display and studied every micrometer. I couldn't find any markings or writing anywhere, on either side of the wrappers surface.

I was eating some corn chips at the time, so I was using voice commands to operate the image analysis software. I instructed it to de-magnify the scan of the wrapper and center the image on my display. As I did this, it reminded of a scene in the movie *Blade Runner*, where Harrison Ford's character, Deckard, uses a similar voice-controlled scanner to analyze a

photograph.

I held up the wrapper and took another look at it. As the virtual light reflected off its foil surface, I thought about folding the wrapper into a paper airplane and sailing it across the room. That made me think of origami, which suddenly reminded me of another moment from *Blade Runner*. One of the final scenes in the film.

And that was when it hit me.

"*The unicorn*," I whispered.

The moment I said the word "unicorn" aloud, the wrapper suddenly began to fold on its own, there in the palm of my hand. The square piece of foil bent itself in half diagonally, creating a silver triangle. Then it continued to bend and fold itself into smaller triangles and even smaller diamond shapes, until at last it formed a four-legged figure, which then sprouted a tail, a head, and finally, a horn.

The wrapper had folded itself in a silver origami unicorn. One of the most iconic images from *Blade Runner*.

I was already riding the elevator down to my hangar and shouting at Max to prep the *Vonnegut* for takeoff.

Continue your quest by taking the test.

Now I knew exactly what "test" that line referred to, and where I needed to go to take it. The origami unicorn had revealed everything to me.

#

Blade Runner was referenced in the text of Anorak's Almanac no less than fourteen times. It had been one of Halliday's top ten all-time favorite films. And the film was based on a novel by Philip K. Dick, one of Halliday's favorite authors. For these reasons, I'd seen *Blade Runner*

over four dozen times and had memorized every frame of film and every line of dialogue.

As the *Vonnegut* streaked through hyperspace, I pulled the Director's Cut of *Blade Runner* up in a window on my display, then jumped ahead to review two scenes in particular.

The movie, released in 1982, is set in Los Angeles in the year 2019, in a sprawling, hyper-technological future that had never come to pass. The story follows a guy named Rick Deckard, played by Han Solo. Deckard works as a "Blade Runner," a special type of cop who hunts down and kills *Replicants*--genetically-engineered beings that are almost indistinguishable from real humans. In fact, replicants look and act so much like real humans that the only way a Blade Runner can spot one is by using a polygraph-like device called a *Voight-Kampff machine* to test them.

Continue your quest by taking the test.

Voight-Kampff machines appear in only two scenes in the movie. Both of those take place inside the Tyrell Building, an enormous double-pyramid structure that houses the Tyrell Corporation, the company that manufactures the Replicants.

Recreations of the Tyrell Building were one of the most common structures in the OASIS. There were copies of it on hundreds of different planets, spread throughout all twenty-seven sectors. This was because the code for the building was included as a free built-in template in the OASIS WorldBuilder construction software (along with hundreds of other structures borrowed from various science fiction films and television series). So for the past twenty-five years, whenever someone used the WorldBuilder software to create a new planet inside the OASIS, they could just select the Tyrell Building from a drop-down menu and insert a copy of it into their simulation, to help fill out the skyline of whatever futuristic city or landscape they were coding. As a result, some worlds had over a dozen copies of the Tyrell Building scattered across

its surface. I was currently hauling ass at light speed to closest such world, a cyberpunk themed planet in Sector Twenty-Two called Axrenox.

If my suspicion was correct, every copy of the Tyrell Building on Axrenox contained a hidden entrance into the Second Gate, through the Voight-Kampff machines located inside. I wasn't worried about running into the Sixers, because there was no way they could have barricaded the Second Gate. There were thousands of copies of the Tyrell Building on hundreds of different worlds, and I should be able to enter the Second Gate through any one of them.

Once I reached Axrenox, finding a copy of the Tyrell Building only took a few minutes. It was pretty hard to miss. A massive pyramid-shaped structure, covering square kilometers at its base. It towered above most of the structures adjacent to it.

I zeroed in on the first instance of the building I saw and headed straight for it. My ship's cloaking device was already engaged, and I left it activated when I set the *Vonnegut* on one of the Tyrell Building's landing pads. Then I locked the ship and activated all of its security systems, hoping they'd be enough to keep it from getting stolen until I returned. Leaving your vessel parked out in the open on cyberpunk-themed world Axrenox was like asking for someone to steal. I knew it would get jacked by the first leather-clad booster gang that spotted it.

I accessed a map of the Tyrell Building template's layout and left it up in the corner of my display. I located a roof-access elevator a short distance from the platform where I'd landed. When I reached it, I punched in the default security code on the codepad and crossed my fingers. I got lucky. The elevator doors hissed open. Whoever had created this section of the Axrenox cityscape hadn't bothered to reset the security codes in the template. I took this as a good sign. It meant they'd probably left everything else in the template at its default settings, too.

As I rode the elevator down to the 440th floor, I powered on my armor and drew my guns.

There were five security checkpoints between the elevator and the room I needed to reach. Unless the template had been altered, there were fifty NPC Tyrell Security Guard Replicants standing between me and my destination.

The shooting started as soon as the elevator doors slid open. I had to kill seven skin jobs before I could even make it out of the elevator car and into the hallway.

The next ten minutes played out like the climax of a John Woo movie. One of the ones starring Chow Yun Fat, like *Hard Boiled* or *The Killer*. I switched both of my guns to autofire and held down the triggers as I moved from one room to the next, mowing down every NPC in my path. The guards returned fire, but their bullets pinged harmlessly off my armor. I never ran out of ammo, because each time I fired a round, a new round was teleported into the bottom of the clip.

My bullet bill this month was going to be huge.

When I finally reached my destination, I punched in another code and locked the door behind me. I knew I didn't have much time. There were klaxons blaring throughout the building, and there were thousands of NPC guards stationed on the floors below who were probably already on their way up here to find me.

My footsteps echoed as I entered the room. It was deserted, except for a large owl sitting on a golden perch. It blinked at me silently as I crossed the enormous cathedral-like room. It was a perfect recreation of Eldon Tyrell's office, the founder of the Tyrell Corporation's founder. Every detail from the film had been duplicated exactly. Polished stone floors. Giant marble pillars. The entire west wall was a massive floor-to-ceiling window, offering a breathtaking view of the vast cityscape outside.

A long conference table stood beside the window. Sitting on top of it was a Voight-

Kampf machine. It was about the size of a briefcase, with a row of unlabeled buttons on the front, next to three small data monitors.

When I walked up and sat down in front of the machine, it suddenly turned itself on. A thin robotic arm extended a circular device that looked like a retinal scanner, and it locked into place directly in line with the pupil of my right eye. A small bellows was built into the side of the machine, and it began to rise and fall, giving the impression that the device was breathing.

I glanced around, wondering if an NPC of Harrison Ford would suddenly appear, to ask me the same questions he asked Sean Young in the movie. I'd memorized all of her answers, just incase. But I waited a few seconds and nothing happened. The machine's bellows continued to rise and fall. In the distance, the security klaxons continuing to wail.

I took out the Jade Key. The instant I did, a panel slid open in the surface of the Voight-Kampf machine, revealing a keyhole. I quickly inserted the Jade Key and turned it. The machine and the key both suddenly vanished, and in their place, the Second Gate appeared. It appeared as a door-like portal, resting on top of the polished conference table. Its edges glowed with the same milky Jade color as the key, and just like the First Gate, it appeared to lead into a vast field of stars.

I leapt up on the table and jumped inside.

#

I found myself standing just inside the entrance of a seedy-looking bowling alley. The place had disco-era décor. The carpet was a garish pattern of green and brown swirls, and the molded plastic chairs were a faded orange color. The bowling lanes were all empty and unlit. The place was deserted. There weren't even any NPCs behind the front counter or the snack bar. I wasn't sure where I was supposed to be, until I saw that *Middletown Lanes* was printed in huge

letters on the wall above the bowling lanes.

At first, the only sound I heard was the low hum of the fluorescent lights overhead. But then I detected a series of faint electronic chirps, emanating from off to my left. I glanced in that direction and saw a darkened alcove, just beyond the snack bar. Over this cave-like entrance was a sign. Eight bright red neon letters: GAME ROOM.

Suddenly there was violent rush of wind, and the roar of what sounded like a hurricane tearing through the bowling alley. My feet began to slide across the carpet, and I realized that my avatar was being pulled toward the Game Room, as if a black hole had opened up somewhere in there.

As the vacuum yanked me across the bowling alley and through the Game Room entrance, I spotted a dozen video games inside, all from the mid-to-late eighties. *Crime Fighters*, *Heavy Barrel*, *Vigilante*, *Smash-TV*. But I could now see that my avatar was being drawn toward one game in particular, a game that stood alone at the very back of the game room.

Black Tiger. Capcom. 1987.

A swirling vortex had opened in the center of the game's monitor, and it was sucking in bits of trash, paper cups, bowling shoes. Everything that wasn't nailed down. Including me. As my avatar neared it, I reflexively reached out and grabbed the joystick of a *Time Pilot* machine. My feet were instantly lifted off the floor as the vortex continued to pull my avatar inexorably toward it.

At this point, I was actually grinning in anticipation of what I thought was about to occur. I was all prepared to pat myself on the back, because I'd mastered *Black Tiger* long ago, during the first year of the Hunt.

In the years prior his death, when Halliday had been living in seclusion, the only thing

he'd had posted on his website was a brief looping animation. It showed his avatar, Anorak, sitting in his castle's library, mixing potions and poring over dusty spellbooks. This animation had run on a continuous loop for over a decade, until it was finally replaced by the Scoreboard on the morning Halliday died. In that animation, hanging on the wall behind Anorak, you could see a large painting of a black dragon.

Gunters had filled countless message board threads, arguing about the meaning of the painting, about what the black dragon signified, or whether or not it signified anything at all. But I'd been sure of its meaning from the start.

In one of the earliest journal entries in Anorak's Almanac, Halliday wrote that whenever his parents would start screaming at each other, he would sneak out of the house and ride his bike to the local bowling alley to play Black Tiger, because it was a game he could solve on just one quarter. *AA 23:234: For one quarter, Black Tiger lets me escape from my rotten existence for three glorious hours. Pretty good deal.*

Black Tiger had originally been released in Japan, under its original title *Burakku Doragon. Black Dragon*. The game had been renamed for its American release. I deduced that the Black Dragon painting on the wall of Anorak's study had been a subtle hint that Burakku Doragon would play a key role in the Hunt. So I'd studied the game until I completely mastered it. Until, like Halliday, I could reach the end of the game on just one credit. After that, I continued to play it every few months, just to keep from getting rusty.

Now, it looked as if my foresight and diligence was about to pay off.

I was only able to hold on to the Time Pilot joystick for a few seconds. Then I lost my grip and my avatar was sucked directly into the Black Tiger game's monitor.

Everything went black. Then I suddenly found myself in surreal surroundings.

I was now standing inside a narrow dungeon corridor. On my left was a high gray cobblestone wall, with a mammoth dragon skull mounted on it. The wall stretched up and up, vanishing into the shadows above. I couldn't make out any ceiling. The dungeon floor was comprised of floating circular platforms, arranged end-to-end in a long line that stretched out into the darkness ahead. To my right, beyond the platforms' edge, there was nothing-- just an endless empty black void.

I turned around, but there was no exit behind me. Just another high cobblestone wall, stretching up in the infinite blackness overhead.

I looked down at my avatar's body. I now looked exactly like the hero of *Black Tiger*, a muscular, half-naked barbarian warrior, dressed in an armored thong and a horned helmet. My right arm disappeared in a strange metal gauntlet, from which hung a long retractable chain with a spiked metal ball on the end. My right hand deftly held three throwing daggers. When I hurled them off in the black void at my right, three more identical daggers instantly appeared in my hand. When I tried jumping, and discovered that I could leap thirty feet straight up, and then land back on my feet with catlike grace.

Now I understood. I was about to play *Black Tiger*, all right. But not the fifty-year-old 2-D side-scrolling platform game that I had mastered. I was now standing inside a new, immersive three-dimensional version of the game that Halliday had created.

My knowledge of the original game's mechanics, levels, and enemies would definitely come in handy, but the gameplay was going to be completely different, and it would require an entirely different set of skills.

The First Gate had placed me inside one of Halliday's favorite movies, and now the Second Gate had put me inside one of his favorite video games. While I was pondering the

implication of this, a message began to flash on my display: GO!

I looked around. An arrow etched into the stone wall on my left pointed the way forward. I stretched my arms and legs, cracked my knuckles, and took a deep breath. Then, readying my weapons, I ran forward, leaping from platform to platform, to confront the first of my adversaries.

#

Halliday had faithfully recreated every detail of Black Tiger's eight-level dungeon.

I got off to a rough start, and lost a life before I even cleared the first boss. But then I began to acclimate to playing the game in three-dimensions (and from a first-person perspective). Eventually, I found my groove.

I pressed onward, leaping from platform to platform, attacking in mid-air, dodging the relentless onslaught of blobs, skeletons, snakes, mummies, minotaurs, and, yes, ninjas. Each enemy I vanquished would drop a pile of "Zenny coins," which I could later use to purchase armor, weapons, and potions, from one of the bearded Wise Men scattered throughout each level. (These "wise men" apparently believed that setting up a small shop in the middle of a monster-infest dungeon was a fine idea.)

There were no time-outs, and no way for me to pause the game. Once you entered a gate, you couldn't just stop and log out. The system wouldn't allow it. Even if you removed your visor, you would still remain logged in. The only way out of a gate was to go through it. Or die.

I managed to clear all eight levels of the game, in just under three hours. The closest I came to death was during my battle with the final boss, the Black Dragon, who, of course, looked exactly like the beast depicted in the painting in Anorak's study. I'd used up all of my extra lives, and my vitality bar was almost at zero, but I managed to keep moving and stay clear of the dragon's fiery breath, while I slowly knocked down his life meter with a steady barrage of

throwing daggers. When I struck the final killing blow, the dragon crumbled into digital dust in front of me.

I let out a long, exhausted sigh of relief.

Then, with no transition whatsoever, I suddenly found myself back in the bowling alley game room, standing in front of the Black Tiger game. In front of me, on the game's monitor, my armored barbarian was striking a heroic pose. The following text appeared below him:

YOU HAVE RETURNED PEACE AND PROSPERITY TO OUR NATION.
THANK YOU, BLACK TIGER!
CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR STRENGTH AND WISDOM!

Then something strange happened - something that had never happened when I'd beaten the original game. One of the "wise men" from the dungeon appeared on the screen, with a speech balloon that said: *"Thank you. I am indebted to you. Please accept a giant robot as your reward."*

A long row of robot icons appeared below the wise man, stretching across the screen horizontally. By moving the joystick left or right, I found that I was able to scroll through a selection of over a hundred different "giant robots." When one of these robots was highlighted, a detailed list of its stats and weaponry appeared on the screen beside it.

There were several robots I didn't recognize, but most were familiar. I spotted *Gigantor*, *Tranzor Z*, *The Iron Giant*, *Mechagodzilla*, *Jet Jaguar*, the sphynx-headed Giant Robo from *Johnny Sokko and his Flying Robot*, the five lions that formed *Voltron*, the entire *Shogun Warriors* toy line, and many of the mecha featured in both the *Macross* and *Gundam* anime series. Eleven of these icons were grayed out and had a red X over them, and these robots could not be identified or selected. I knew they must be the ones taken by Sorrento and the other Sixers who had already cleared this gate before me.

It seemed possible that I was about to be awarded a real, working recreation of whichever robot I selected, so I studied my options carefully, searching for the robot I thought would be the most powerful and well-armed. But then I stopped cold when I saw *Leopardon*, the giant transforming robot used by *Supaida-Man*, the Japanese incarnation of Spider-Man that had aired in Japan in the late 1970s. I'd discovered Supaida-Man during the course of my research and had become somewhat obsessed with it. So I didn't care if Leopardon was the most powerful robot available. I had to have him, regardless.

I highlighted that icon and tapped the fire button. A twelve inch tall replica of Leopardon appeared on top of the Black Tiger cabinet. I grabbed it and placed it in my inventory. There were no instructions and the item description field was blank. I made a mental note to examine it later, when I got back to my stronghold.

At the moment, my attention had already been drawn back to the Black Tiger monitor, where the end credits had begun to scroll over an image of the game's barbarian hero sitting on a throne with a slender princess at his side. I respectfully read each of the programmer's names. They were all Japanese names, except for the very last credit, which read: *OASIS PORT by J.D. Halliday*

When the credits ended, the monitor went dark for a moment. Then a familiar symbol slowly appeared in the center of the screen, a glowing red circle with a five-pointed star inside it. The points of the star extended just beyond the outer edge of the circle. Then an image of the Crystal Key appeared, spinning slowly in the center of the glowing red star.

I felt a rush of adrenalin, because I recognized the red star symbol, and I knew the name of the OASIS world where it was meant to lead me.

I snapped several screenshots, just to be safe. A moment later, the monitor went dark and

the Black Tiger game cabinet suddenly melted and morphed into a door-shaped portal with glowing Jade edges. The exit.

I let out a triumphant cheer and then jumped through it.

0026

When I emerged from the gate, my avatar reappeared back inside Tyrell's office. The Voight-Kampff machine had reappeared in its original location, resting on the table beside me. I checked the time. Over three hours had passed since I'd first entered the gate. The room was deserted, save for the owl, and the security klaxons were no longer wailing. The NPC guards no longer appeared to be searching for me. The coast was clear.

I made my way back to the elevator and up to the landing platform without incident. And, thanks be to Crom, the *Vonnegut* was still parked right where I'd left it, its cloaking device still engaged. I ran on board and left Axrenox, in an even bigger hurry than the one in which I'd arrived.

As the *Vonnegut* streaked through hyperspace, headed for the nearest stargate, I pulled up one of the screenshots I'd taken of the red star symbol. Then I opened my grail diary and accessed the sub-folder devoted the legendary Canadian rock band *Rush*.

Rush had been Halliday's favorite band, from his teens onward. He'd once revealed in an interview that he'd coded every single one of his video games (including the OASIS) while listening exclusively to *Rush* albums. He often referred to Rush's three members, Neil Peart, Alex Lifeson, and Geddy Lee, as "The Holy Trinity" or "The Gods of the North."

In my grail diary, I had every single *Rush* song, album, bootleg, and music video ever made. I had high-res scans of all their liner notes and album artwork. Every frame of Rush concert footage in existence. Every radio and television interview the band had ever done. Unabridged biographies on each band member, along with copies of their side projects and solo work. I pulled up the band's discography and selected the album I was looking for: *2112*, Rush's classic sci-fi themed concept album.

A high-resolution scan of the album's cover appeared on my display. The band's name and the album's title were printed over a field of stars, and below that, appearing as if it were reflected in the surface of a rippling lake, was the symbol I'd seen on the Black Tiger game's monitor: a red five-pointed star enclosed in a circle.

When I placed the album cover side-by-side with the screenshot of the game screen, the two symbols matched exactly.

2112 is an epic seven-part song, over twenty minutes in length. The song tells the story of an anonymous rebel living in the year 2112, a time when creativity and self-expression have been outlawed. The red star on the album's cover was the symbol of the "Solar Federation," the oppressive interstellar society in the story. The Solar Federation was controlled by a group of "priests," who are described in Part II of the song, titled *The Temples of Syrinx*. Its lyrics told me exactly where the Crystal Key was hidden:

***Look around this world we made
Equality our stock in trade
Come and join the Brotherhood of Man
Oh what a nice contented world
Let the banners be unfurled
Hold the Red Star proudly high in hand***

***We are the Priests of the Temples of Syrinx
Our great computers fill the hallowed halls.
We are the Priests of the Temples of Syrinx
All the gifts of life are held within our walls.***

There was a planet in Sector 21 named Syrinx. That was where I was headed now.

Syrinx was located a good distance from the nearest stargate, so it took me awhile to get there. The OASIS atlas described Syrinx as "a desolate world with rocky terrain and no NPC inhabitants." When I accessed the planet's colophon, I saw that Syrinx's author was listed as "Anonymous." But I knew the planet must have been coded by Halliday, because its design matched the world described in 2112's liner notes.

2112 was originally released in 1976, back when most music was sold on twelve-inch vinyl records. The records came in cardboard sleeves with artwork and a track listing printed on them. Some album sleeves opened up like a book, and included more artwork and liner notes inside, along with lyrics and information about the band. As I pulled up a scan of *2112*'s original fold-out album sleeve, I saw that there was a second image of the Red Star symbol on the inside. There was a naked man cowering in front of the star, both his hands raised in fear.

On the opposite side of the record sleeve were the printed lyrics to all seven parts of the *2112* suite. The lyrics for each section were preceded by a paragraph of prose that augmented the narrative laid out in the lyrics. These brief vignettes were told from the point of view of the 2112's anonymous protagonist.

The following text preceded the lyrics to Part I:

"I lie awake, staring out at the bleakness of Megadon. City and sky become one, merging into a single plane, a vast sea of unbroken grey. The Twin Moons, just two pale orbs as they trace their way across the steely sky."

When my ship reached Syrinx, I saw that there were, in fact, twin moons orbiting the planet, named *By-Tor* and *Snow Dog*, names taken another classic Rush song. And down below, on the planet's bleak gray surface, there were exactly One-Thousand and Twenty-Four copies of

Megadon, the domed city described in 2112's liner notes. That was twice as many instances as there'd been on Frobozz, so I knew the Sixers couldn't barricade them all. At least, not for very long.

With my cloaking device engaged, I selected the nearest instance of the city and landed the *Vonnegut* just outside the wall of its dome, watching my scopes for other ships.

Megadon was anchored atop a rocky plateau, on the edge of an immense cliff. The city appeared to be in ruins. Its massive transparent dome was riddled with cracks and looked as though it might collapse at any moment. I was able to enter the city by squeezing through one of the largest of these cracks, at the base of the dome.

The city of Megadon itself looked like something from the cover of an old 1950s sci-fi paperback. The crumbling ruins of a once great technologically-advanced civilization. In the absolute center of the city stood a towering obelisk-shaped temple with wind-blasted gray walls. A giant Red Star of the Solar Federation was emblazoned above the entrance.

I was standing before the Temple of Syrinx.

It wasn't covered by a force field, or surrounded by a detachment of Sixers. There wasn't a soul in sight.

I drew my guns and walked through the entrance of the temple.

Inside, mammoth obelisk-shaped supercomputers stood in long rows, filling the giant cathedral-like temple. I wandered along these rows, listening to the deep hum of the machines, until I finally reached the center of the temple.

There, I found a raised stone altar, with the five-pointed Red Star etched into its surface. As I stepped up to the altar, the humming of the computers suddenly ceased, and the chamber grew silent.

It appeared that I was supposed to place something on the altar. An offering to the Temple of Syrinx. But what kind of offering?

At first, I thought it might be the twelve-inch *Loepardon* robot I'd acquired after completing the Second Gate, but that didn't seem to fit. I tried placing it on the altar anyway and nothing happened. I placed the robot back in my inventory, then stood there for a moment, thinking. Then I remembered something else from the *2112* liner notes. I pulled them up and scanned over them again. There was my answer, in the text that preceded *Part III - Discovery*:

"Behind my beloved waterfall, in the little room that was hidden beneath the cave, I found it. I brushed away the dust of the years, and picked it up, holding it reverently in my hands. I had no idea what it might be, but it was beautiful. I learned to lay my fingers across the wires, and to turn the keys to make them sound differently. As I struck the wires with my other hand, I produced my first harmonious sounds, and soon my own music!"

I found the waterfall near the southern edge of the city, just inside the curved wall of the atmospheric dome. As soon as I found it, I activated my jet boots and flew over the foaming river, then passed through the waterfall. My haptic suit did its best to simulate the sensation of torrents of falling water striking my body, but it felt like someone pounding on my head, shoulders, and back with a bundle of sticks. Once I'd passed through the falls to the other side, I found the opening of a cave and went inside. The cave narrowed into a long tunnel, which terminated in a small cavernous room.

I searched the room, and discovered that one of the stalagmites protruding from the floor was slightly worn around the tip. I grabbed the stalagmite and pulled it toward me, but it didn't budge. I tried pushing, and then it gave, bending as if on some hidden hinge, like a lever. There was a rumble of grinding stone behind me, and I turned to see a trapdoor opening in the floor. A hole had also opened in the roof of the cave, casting a brilliant shaft of light down through the open trap door, into a tiny hidden chamber below.

I used a wand that could detect hidden traps, magical or otherwise. I didn't find any, so I jumped down through the trap door and landed on the dusty stone floor of the hidden chamber. It was a tiny cube-shaped room with a large rough-hewn stone standing against the north wall. Embedded in the stone, neck first, was an electric guitar. I recognized its design from the 2112 concert footage I'd watched during the trip here. It was 1974 Gibson Les Paul, the exact guitar used by Alex Lifeson during the *2112* tour.

I grinned at the absurd Arthurian image of the guitar-in-the-stone. Like every gunter, I'd seen Excalibur many times, so it seemed obvious what I should do next. I reached out with my right hand, grasped the neck of the guitar, and pulled on it. The guitar came free of the stone with a prolonged metallic *shhingggg*!

As I held the guitar over my head, the metallic ringing segued into a reverberating guitar power chord that echoed throughout the cave. I stared down at the guitar. This was what I'd come here for. This was the object I needed to place on the altar in the Temple of Syrinx. I was about to activate my jetboots again, to fly back up through the trap door and out of the cave. But then an idea occurred to me and I froze where I stood.

James Halliday had taken guitar lessons for a few years in high school. That was what had first inspired me to learn to play. I'd never held an actual guitar, but on a virtual axe, I could totally shred.

I searched my inventory and found a guitar pick. Then I opened my grail diary and pulled up the sheet music for *2112*, along with the guitar tablature for the song *Discovery*, which describes how the hero finds a guitar in a room hidden behind a waterfall. As I began to play the song, the sound of the guitar blasted off the chamber walls and back out through the cave, despite the absence of any electricity or amplifiers.

When I finished playing the first measure of *Discovery*, a message briefly appeared, carved into the stone from which I'd pulled the guitar.

*The first was ringed in red metal
The second, in green stone
The third is clearest crystal
and cannot be unlocked alone*

In seconds, the words began to vanish, fading from the stone with the strains of the last note I'd played on the guitar. I quickly snapped a screenshot of the riddle, already trying to sort out its meaning in my head. It was about the Third Gate, of course. And how it "cannot be unlocked alone."

Had the Sixers played the song and unlocked this message? I seriously doubted it. They would have pulled the guitar from the stone and then immediately returned it to the temple.

If so, they probably didn't know how to unlock the Third Gate. And that would explain why they still hadn't reached the Egg.

#

I returned to the temple and placed the guitar on the altar. As I did, the towering computers around me began to emit a cacophony of sound, like a grand orchestra tuning up. The noise built to a deafening crescendo and then suddenly ceased. Then there was a flash of light on the altar and the guitar transformed into the Crystal Key.

When I reached out and picked up the key, a chime sounded, and my score on the Scoreboard increased by 25,000 points. When added to the 200,000 I'd received for clearing the Second Gate, that brought my total score up to 353,000 points. One thousand points more than Sorrento. I was back in first place. And I'd earned enough experience points to bring my avatar up to 21st Level – on par with Aech and Art3mis.

But I knew this was no time to celebrate. I quickly examined the Crystal Key, tilting it up

to study its glittering, faceted surface. I didn't see any words on its surface, but there was a small monogram etched in the center of the key's crystal handle. A single calligraphic letter *A* that I recognized immediately.

That same letter *A* appeared in the "Character Symbol" box on James Halliday's first Dungeons & Dragons character sheet. The very same monogram also appeared on the dark robes of his famous OASIS avatar, Anorak. And, I knew, that same emblematic letter adorned the front gates of his avatar's impregnable stronghold.

That was when I knew -- the Third Gate was somewhere inside Castle Anorak.

#

When I got back to my ship, I blasted off and set a course for Chthonia. Then I began to scan the newsfeeds, intending to check out the media frenzy my return to first place was generating. But my score wasn't the top story. No, the big news that afternoon was that the hiding place of Halliday's Easter egg had, at long last, finally been revealed to the world. It was, the news anchors said, located somewhere on the planet Chthonia, inside Castle Anorak. They knew this because the entire Sixer army was now encamped around the castle.

They'd arrived earlier that day, shortly after I'd cleared the Second Gate.

I knew the timing couldn't be a coincidence. My progress must have been what prompted the Sixers to end their covert attempts to clear the Third Gate and make its location public, by barricading it before I or anyone else could reach it.

When I arrived at Chthonia a few minutes later, I did a cloaked flyby of the castle, just to gauge the lay of the land for myself. It was even worse than I'd imagined.

The Sixers had installed some type of magical shield over Castle Anorak, a semi-transparent dome that completely covered the castle and the area around it. Encamped inside the

shield wall was the entire Sixer army. A vast collection of troops, tanks, weapons, and vehicles surrounding the castle on all sides.

Several gunter clans were already on the scene, and they were making their first attempts to bring down the shield by launching high-yield nukes at it. Each detonation was followed by a brief atomic lightshow, and then the blast would dissipate harmlessly against the shield.

The attacks on the shield continued for the next few hours, as the news spread and more and more gunters continued to arrive on Chthonia. The clans launched every type of weapon they could think of at the shield, but nothing affected it. Not nukes, not fireballs, and not magic missiles. Eventually, a team of gunters tried to dig a tunnel under the dome wall, and that was when it was discovered that shield was actually a complete sphere surrounding the castle, above and below ground.

Later that night, several high-level gunter wizards finished casting a series of divination spells on the castle, and announced on the message boards that the shield around the castle was generated by a powerful artifact called the *Orb of Osuvovox*, which could only be operated by a wizard who was twentieth level or higher. According to the artifact's item description, it could create a spherical shield around itself, with a circumference of up to half a kilometer. This shield was impenetrable and indestructible, and could vaporize just about anything that touched it. It could also be kept up indefinitely, as long as the wizard operating the orb remained immobile and kept both hands on the artifact.

Nothing could penetrate the sphere. So no one could reach the castle but the Sixers.

In the days that followed, gunters tried everything they could think of to penetrate the shield. Magic. Technology. Teleportation. Counter spells. Other artifacts. Nothing worked. There was no way to get inside.

An air of hopelessness quickly swept through the gunter community. Solos and Clansmen alike were ready to throw in the towel. The Sixers had the Crystal Key and exclusive access to the Third Gate. Everyone agreed that The End was near. That the Hunt was "all over but the crying."

During all of these developments, I somehow managed to keep my cool. There was a chance the Sixers hadn't even figured out how to open the Third Gate yet. Of course, they had plenty of time now. They could be slow and methodical. Sooner or later, they would stumble on the solution and figure out how to get it open. And that would be all she wrote.

But I refused to give up, because I couldn't accept defeat. Not now. Until an avatar reached Halliday's Easter egg, anything was still possible.

Like any classic video game, the Hunt had simply reached a new, more difficult level. A new level often required an entirely new strategy. My options were extremely limited, so it didn't take long for me to decide on a course of action. I began to formulate a plan. A bold, daring, outrageous plan that would require epic amounts of luck to pull off. I then set this plan in motion by emailing Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto. My message told them exactly where to find the Second Gate and how to obtain the Crystal Key. Once I was sure all three of them had received my message, I initiated the next phase of my plan. This was the part that terrified me, because I knew there was a good chance it was going to end up getting me killed. But at this point, I no longer cared.

I was going to reach the Third Gate, or die trying.

LEVEL THREE:

"Going outside is highly overrated."

***- Anorak's Almanac,
Chapter 17, Verse 32***

0027

When the IOI corporate police came to arrest me, I was right in the middle of watching the movie *Explorers* (1985, directed by Joe Dante). It's about three kids who build a spaceship in their backyard and then fly off to meet aliens. Easily one of the greatest kid flicks ever made. I'd gotten into the habit of watching *Explorers* at least once a month. It kept me centered.

I had a thumbnail of my apartment building's external security camera feed at the edge of my display, so I saw the IOI Indentured Servant Retrieval transport pull up out front, siren wailing and lights flashing. Then four jack-booted riot-helmeted dropcops jumped out and ran into the building, followed by a guy in a suit. I continued to watch them on the lobby camera as they waved their IOI badges, blew past the security station, and filed onto the elevator.

Now they were on their way up to my floor.

"Max," I muttered, trying to remain calm. "Execute security macro number one: *Crom, strong in his mountain.*" This voice command instructed my computer to execute a long series of pre-programmed actions, both online and in the real world.

"You g-g-got it, chief!" Max replied cheerfully, and a split second later, my apartment's security system switched into lockdown mode. My reinforced plate-titanium WarDoor™ swung down from the ceiling, slamming and locking into place over my apartment's built-in security

door.

On the security camera mounted in the hallway outside my apartment, I watched the dropcops get off the elevator and sprint down the hallway to my door. The two guys in front were carrying plasma welders. The other two dropcops held industrial-strength VoltJolt™ stun guns. The suit, who brought up the rear, was carrying a digital clipboard.

I wasn't surprised to see them. I knew why they were here. They were here to cut open my apartment and pull me out of it, like a chunk of Spam been removed from a can.

When they reached my door, my scanner gave them the once over, and their ID data flashed on my display, informing me that all five of these men were IOI credit officers, with a valid indenturement arrest warrant for one Bryce Lynch, the occupant of this apartment. So, in keeping with state, local, and federal law, my apartment building's security system immediately opened both of my security doors to grant them entrance. But the WarDoor™ that had just slammed into place kept them outside.

Of course, the dropcops expected me to have redundant security, which is why they'd brought plasma welders.

The IOI drone in the suit squeezed past the dropcops and gingerly pressed his thumb to my door intercom. His name and corporate title appeared on my display: *Michael Wilson, IOI Credit and Collections Division, Employee # IOI-481231*

Wilson looked up into the lens of my hallway camera and smiled pleasantly. "Mr. Lynch," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the welders. "My name is Michael Wilson, and I'm with the Credit and Collections division of Innovative Online Industries." He consulted his clipboard. "I'm here because you have failed to make the last three payments on your IOI Visa card, which has an outstanding balance in excess of twenty-thousand dollars. Our records

also show that you are currently unemployed and have therefore been classified as impecunious. Under current Federal Law, you are now eligible for mandatory indenturement. You will remain indentured until you have paid your debt to our company in full, along with all applicable interest, processing and late fees, and any other charges or penalties that you incur henceforth.” Wilson motioned toward the dropcops. “These gentleman are here to assist me in apprehending you and escorting you to your new place of employment. We request that you open your door and grant us access to your residence. Please be aware that we are authorized to seize any personal belongings you have inside. The sale value of these items will, of course, be deducted from your outstanding credit balance.”

As far as I could tell, Wilson recited all of this without taking a single breath, speaking in the flat monotone of someone who repeats the same sentences all day long.

After a brief pause, I replied through the intercom: “Sure thing, guys. Just give me a minute to get my pants on. Then I'll be right out.”

Wilson frowned. “Mr. Lynch, if you do not grant us access to your residence within ten seconds, we are authorized to enter by force. The cost of any damage resulting from our forced entry, including all property damage and repair labor, will be added to your outstanding balance. Thank you.”

Wilson stepped away from the intercom and nodded to the others. One of the dropcops immediately powered up his welder, and when the tip began to glow molten orange, he began to cut through my WarDoor™'s titanium plating. The other welder moved a few feet further down and began to cut a hole right through the wall of my apartment. These guys had access to the building's security specs, so they knew the walls of each apartment were lined with steel plating and a layer of concrete, which they could cut through much more quickly than the titanium

WarDoor™.

Of course, I'd taken the precaution of reinforcing my apartment's walls, floor, and ceiling, with a titanium alloy SageCage™, which I'd assembled piece by piece. Once they cut through my wall, they would have to cut through the cage, too. But this would only buy me five or six extra minutes, at the most. Then they would be inside.

I'd heard that dropcops had a nickname for this procedure—cutting an indent out of a fortified residence so they could arrest him. They called it *performing a c-section*.

I dry swallowed two more of the anti-anxiety pills I'd ordered in preparation for this day. I'd already taken two earlier that morning, but they didn't seem to be working.

Inside the OASIS, I closed all of the windows on my display and then set my account's security level to maximum. Then I pulled up the Scoreboard, just to check it one last time, and reassure myself that nothing had changed and that the Sixers still hadn't won. The top ten rankings had been static for several days now.

HIGH SCORES:

1. Art3mis	354,000	🏆 🏆
2. Parzival	353,000	🏆 🏆
3. IOI-655321	352,000	🏆 🏆
4. Aech	352,000	🏆 🏆
5. IOI-643187	349,000	🏆 🏆
6. IOI-621671	348,000	🏆 🏆
7. IOI-678324	347,000	🏆 🏆
8. Shoto	347,000	🏆 🏆
9. IOI-637330	346,000	🏆 🏆
10. IOI-699423	346,000	🏆 🏆

Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto had all cleared the Second Gate and obtained the Crystal Key within forty-eight hours of receiving my email. When Art3mis received the 25,000 points for reaching the Crystal key, it had put her back in first place, due to the point bonuses she'd already received for finding the Jade Key first, and the Copper Key second.

Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto had all tried to contact me since receiving my email, but I hadn't answered any of their phone calls, emails, or chat requests. There was no reason to tell them what I intended to do. They couldn't do anything to help me, and would probably just try to talk me out of it.

There's was no turning back now, anyway.

I closed the Scoreboard and took a long look around my stronghold, wondering if it was for the last time. Then I took several quick deep breaths, like a deep sea diver preparing to submerge, and tapped the logout icon on my display. The OASIS vanished, and my avatar reappeared inside my virtual office. I opened a console window and keyed in the command word to activate my computer's self-destruct sequence: SHITSTORM.

A progress meter appeared on my display, showing that my hard drive was now being zeroed out and wiped clean.

“Goodbye, Max,” I whispered.

“Goodbye, Wade,” Max said, just a few seconds before he was deleted.

Sitting in my haptic chair, I could already feel the heat coming from the other side of the room. When I pulled off my visor, I saw that smoke was pouring in through the holes being cut in the door and the wall. It was starting to get too thick for my apartment's air-purifiers to handle. I began to cough.

The dropcop working on my door finished cutting his hole first. The smoking circle of metal fell to the floor with a heavy metallic BOOM that made me jump in my chair.

As the welder stepped back, another dropcop stepped forward and used a small canister to spray some sort of freezing foam around the edge of the hole, to cool off the metal. I realized they were doing this so they wouldn't burn themselves when they crawled inside. Which is what

they were about to do.

“Clear!” One of them shout from out in the hallway. “No visible weapons!”

One of the stun-gun wielding dropcop climbing through the hole first, and then, suddenly, he was standing right in front of me, with his weapon leveled at my face.

"Don't move!" he shouted. "Or you get the juice, understand?"

I nodded that yes, I understood. It occurred to me then that this cop had just become the first visitor I'd ever had in my apartment, in all the time I'd lived here.

The second dropcop to crawl inside wasn't nearly as polite. Without a word, he walked over and jammed a ball-gag in my mouth. This was standard procedure, because they didn't want me to issue any more voice commands to my computer. They shouldn't have bothered, though. The second the first dropcop had entered my apartment, an incendiary device had detonated inside my computer. It was already melting to slag.

When the dropcop finished strapping on the ball gag, he reached down and grabbed me by the exoskeleton of my haptic suit and yanked me out of my haptic chair like a rag doll and threw me on the floor. The other dropcop hit the kill switch that opened my WarDoor™, and the other two dropcops rushed in, followed by Wilson.

I curled into a ball on the floor and closed my eyes. I had started to shake involuntarily and I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. I tried to prepare myself mentally for what I knew was about to happen next.

They were going to take me outside.

“Mr. Lynch,” Wilson said, smiling. “I hereby place you under corporate arrest.” He turned to the dropcops. “Tell the Repo-team to come on up and clear this place out.” He glanced around the room and noticed the thin line of smoke that was now pouring out of my computer.

He looked at me and shook his head. “That was stupid. We were going to sell that computer to help pay down your debt.”

I couldn’t reply around the ball-gag, so I just shrugged and gave him the finger.

They tore off my haptic suit and left it for the Repo-team. I was totally naked underneath. They gave me a disposable slate-gray jumpsuit to put on, with matching plastic shoes. The suit felt like sandpaper and it began to make me itch as soon as I put it on. They’d cuffed my hands, so it wasn’t easy to scratch.

They dragged me out into the hall. The harsh fluorescents sucked the color out of everything and made it look like an old black and white film. As we rode the elevator down to the lobby, I hummed along with the musak as loudly as I could, to show them I wasn’t afraid. When one of the dropcops waved his stun-gun at me, I stopped.

They put a hooded winter coat on me in the lobby. They didn’t want me catching pneumonia now that I was company property. A human resource.

Then they led me outside, and sunlight hit my face for the first time in over a year.

It was snowing, and everything was covered in a thin layer of gray ice and slush. I didn’t know what the temperature was, but I couldn’t remember ever feeling so cold. The wind cut right to my bones.

They herded me over to their transport truck. There were already two other new indents in the back, strapped into plastic seats, both wearing visors. These must be people they’d arrested earlier that morning. The dropcops were like garbage collectors, making their weekly rounds.

The indent on my right was a tall, thin guy, probably few years older than me. He looked like he might be suffering from malnutrition. The other indent was morbidly obese, and I couldn’t be sure of the person’s gender. I guessed male. His face was obscured by a mop of dirty

blonde hair, and something that looked like a gas mask covered his nose and mouth. A thick black tube ran from the mask down to a nozzle on the floor. I wasn't sure of its purpose, until the obese person lurched forward, drawing their restraints tight, and vomited into the mask. I heard a vacuum activate, sucking the indent's regurgitated Oreos down the tube and into the floor. I wondered if they stored it in an external tank or just dumped it on the street? Probably a tank. IOI probably had your vomit analyzed and put the results in your file.

"You feel sick?" one of the dropcops asked me, as he removed my ball gag. "Tell me now and I'll put a mask on you."

"I feel great," I said, not very convincingly.

"Okay. But if I have to clean up your puke, I'll make sure you regret it."

They shoved me inside and strapped me down directly across from the skinny guy. Two of the dropcops climbed into the back with us, stowing their plasma welders in a locker. The other two slammed the rear doors and climbed into the cab up front.

As we pulled away from my apartment complex, I craned my neck to look through the transport's tinted rear windows, up at the building where I'd lived for the past year. I was able to spot my window up on the forty-second floor, because of its spray-painted black glass. The repo-team was probably already up there by now. All of my gear was being disassembled, inventoried, tagged, boxed, and prepared for auction. Once they finished emptying out my apartment, custodial bots would scour and disinfect it. A repair crew would repair the outer wall and the replace the door. IOI would be billed, and the cost of the repairs would be added to my outstanding debt to the company.

By mid-afternoon, the lucky gunter who was next on the apartment building's waiting list would get a message informing him that a unit had opened up, and by this evening, the new

tenant would probably already be moved in. By the time the sun went down, all evidence that I'd ever lived there would be totally erased.

As the transport swung out on to High Street, I heard the tires crunch the salt crystals covering the frozen asphalt. One of the dropcops reached over and slapped a visor on my face. I found myself sitting on a sandy white beach, watching the sunset while waves crashed in front of me and then rolled up to my feet. This must be the simulation they used to keep indents calm during the ride downtown.

Using my cuffed hand, I pushed the visor up on to my forehead. The dropcops didn't seem to care or pay me any notice at all. So I craned my head again to stare out the window. I hadn't been out here in the real world for a long time, and I wanted to see how it had changed.

0028

A thick film of neglect still covered everything in sight. The streets, the buildings, the people. Even the snow seemed dirty. It drifted down in gray flakes, like ash after a volcanic eruption.

The number of homeless people seemed to have increased drastically. Tents and cardboard shelters lined the streets and all of the public parks had been converted into refugee camps. As the transport rolled deeper in to the city's skyscraper core, I saw clusters of people on every street corner and in every vacant lot, all huddled around burning barrels and portable fuel-cell heaters. Most of them wore disposable visors and bulky outdated haptic gloves, and their hands made small, ghostly gestures as they interacted with the far more pleasant reality of the OASIS.

Finally, we reached 101 IOI Plaza, in the heart of downtown.

I stared out the window in silent apprehension as the corporate headquarters of Innovative Omnipresent Industries Inc. came in to view. Two rectangular skyscrapers flanking a circular one, forming the IOI corporate logo. The buildings looked identical to their headquarters in the OASIS on IOI-1, but here they seemed much more impressive, probably because they were real. The IOI skyscrapers were the three tallest buildings in the city, mighty towers of steel

and mirrored glass, joined by dozens of connective walkways and elevator trams. The top of each tower disappeared into the sodium-vapor drenched cloud layer above.

The transport rolled into a parking garage at the base of the circular tower and then descended a series of concrete ramps, until we arrived in large open area that resembled a loading dock. A sign over a row of a row of wide bay doors read: IOI Indentured Employee Induction Center.

The other indents and I were herded off the transport, and a squad of stun-gun armed security guards were waiting to take custody of us. Our handcuffs and ball gags were removed, then another guard began to swipe each of us with a hand-held retina scanner. I held my breath as he held the scanner up to my eyes. A second later, the unit beeped and he read off the information on its display. "Lynch, Bryce. Age 19. Full citizenship. No criminal record. Credit Default Indenturement." He nodded to himself, tapped a series of icons on his clipboard, then I was led into a warm, brightly-lit room filled with hundreds of other new indents. They were all shuffling through a maze of guide ropes, like weary overgrown children at some nightmarish amusement park. There seemed to be an equal number of men and women, but it was hard to tell, because nearly everyone shared my pale complexion and total lack of body hair, and we all wore the same gray jumpsuits and gray plastic shoes. We all looked like extras from *THX-1138*.

I was placed at the back of the line, which fed into a series of security checkpoints. At the first checkpoint, each indent was given a thorough scan with a brand new Metadetector™, to make sure they weren't hiding any electronic devices on or in my person. While I waited for my turn, I saw several people pulled out of line when the scanner found a subcutaneous mini-computer or a voice-controlled phone installed as a tooth replacement. They were led into another room to have the devices removed. A dude just ahead of me in line actually had a top-of-the-line Sinatra OASIS console concealed inside a prosthetic testicle, linked to an illegal brain

implant interface. Talk about balls.

Once I'd cleared a few more checkpoints, I was ushered into the testing area, a giant room filled with hundreds of small, soundproofed cubicles. I was seated in one of them and given a cheap visor and an even cheaper pair of haptic gloves. The gear didn't give me access to the OASIS, but I still found it comforting to put them on.

I was then given a battery of increasingly difficult aptitude tests, intended to measure my knowledge and abilities in every area that might conceivably be of use to my new employer. These tests were, of course, cross-referenced with the fake educational background and work history that I'd given to my bogus Bryce Lynch identity.

I made sure to ace all of the tests on OASIS software, hardware, and networking, but I intentionally failed the tests designed to gauge my knowledge of James Halliday and the Easter egg. I definitely didn't want to get placed in IOI's Oology Division, because it would raise all kinds of red flags when I refused to sign the Sixers' enlistment contract. Most indents would kill to get placed in the Oology Division.

There was also a chance I might run in to Sorrento there. But even if we crossed paths, I didn't think he would recognize me. He'd never actually seen me in person, and I now barely resembled my old school ID photo. Even so, I didn't want to risk it. I was already tempting fate more than anyone in their right mind ever would.

The testing seemed to go on for hours. When I finally finished the last exam, I was then logged into a virtual chatroom to meet with an Indenturement Counselor. Her name was Nancy, and in a hypnotic monotone, she informed me that, due to my exemplary test scores and impressive employment record, I had been "awarded" the position of *OASIS Technical Support Representative II*. I would be paid \$28,500 a year, minus the cost of my housing, meals, taxes,

medical, dental, optical, and recreation services, all of which would be deducted automatically from my pay. My remaining income (if there was any) would be applied to my outstanding debt to the company. Once my debt was paid in full, I would be released from indenturement. At that time, based on my job performance, it was possible I would be offered a permanent position with IOI.

This was a complete joke, of course. Indents were never able to pay off their debt and earn their release. Once they got finished slapping you with pay deductions, late fees and interest penalties, you wound up owing them more each month, instead of less. Once you made the mistake of getting yourself indentured, you would probably remain indentured for life. A lot of people didn't seem to mind this, though. They thought of it as job security. It also meant they weren't going to starve or freeze to death in the street.

My "Indenturement Contract" appeared in a window on my display. It contained a long list of disclaimers and warnings about my rights (or lack thereof) as an Indentured Employee. Nancy told me to read it, sign it, and then proceed to Indent Processing. Then she logged out of the chatroom. I scrolled to the bottom of the contract without bothering to read it. It was over six hundred pages long. There was a signature window at the bottom. I signed the name Bryce Lynch, then verified my signature with a retinal scan.

Even though I was using a fake name, I wondered if the contract might still be legally binding? I wasn't sure, and I didn't really care. I had a plan, and this was part of it.

There were signs with arrows mounted everywhere. They led me down another corridor, into the Indenturement Processing Area. I was placed on a conveyor belt that carried me through a long series of stations. First, they took my jumpsuit and shoes and incinerated them. Then they ran me through what amounted to a human carwash—a series of machines that soaped, scrubbed,

disinfected, rinsed, dried, and deloused me. Then I was given a new gray jumpsuit and another pair of plastic slippers.

At the next station a bank of machines gave me a complete physical. Then I was given a series of inoculations, with an array of automated needle guns that shot me in both shoulders and both ass cheeks simultaneously.

As I inched forward along the conveyor, flatscreen monitors mounted overhead showed the same ten minute training film over and over, on an endless loop: “Indentured Servitude: Your Fast-track from Debt to Success!” The cast was made up of D-List television stars, who cheerfully spouted corporate propaganda while relating the minutiae of IOI’s indenturement policy. After five viewings, I had every line of the damn thing memorized. By the tenth viewing, I was mouthing the words along the actors.

“What can I expect after I complete my initial processing and am placed in my permanent position?” asked Johnny, the training film’s main character.

You can expect to spend the rest of your life as a corporate slave, Johnny, I thought. But I kept watching as, once again, the helpful IOI Human Resources rep pleasantly told Johnny all about the day-to-day life of an indent.

Finally, I reached the last station, where a machine fitted me with a security anklet—a padded metal band that locked around my ankle, just above the joint. According to the training film, this device monitored my physical location, and also granted or denied me access to different areas of the IOI office complex. If I tried to escape, remove the anklet, or cause trouble of any kind, the device was capable of delivering a paralyzing electrical shock. Or, if necessary, it could also administer a heavy-duty tranquilizer directly into my bloodstream.

After the anklet was on, another machine clamped a small electronic device onto my right

earlobe, piercing it in two locations. I winced in pain and shouted a stream of profanity. I knew from the training film that I'd just been fitted with an OCT. OCT stood for *Observation and Communication Tag*. But most indents just referred to it as their "eargear." They reminded me of the tags environmentalists used to put on endangered animals, to track their movements in the wild. The eargear contained a tiny comlink that allowed the main IOI Human Resources computer to make announcements and issue commands directly into my ear. It also contained a tiny forward-looking camera that let them to see whatever was directly in front of me. There were surveillance cameras mounted in every room in the entire IOI complex, but that apparently wasn't enough. They also mount a camera to the side of every indent's head.

A few seconds after my eargear was attached and activated, I began to hear the placid monotone of the HR mainframe, droning instructions and other information. The voice drove me nuts at first, but I gradually got used to it. I didn't have much choice.

As I stepped off the conveyor, the HR computer directed me to a nearby cafeteria, reminiscent of the kind I'd seen in a lot of old prison movies. I was given a lime-green tray of food. A tasteless soyburger, a lump of runny mashed potatoes, and some unrecognizable form of cobbler for dessert. I devoured all of it in a few minutes. The HR computer complimented me on my healthy appetite. Then it told me I was permitted to make a five-minute visit to the bathroom.

The HR computer then directed me onto an elevator with no buttons and no readout to tell me what floor I was currently on. When the doors slid open, I saw the following stenciled on the wall: INDENT HAB – BLOCK 05 – TECHSUP REPS.

I shuffled off the elevator and down the carpeted hallway. It was quiet and dark. The only illumination came from small path lighting embedded in the floor. I'd lost track of the time. It seemed like several days had passed since I'd been pulled out of my apartment. I was dead on my

feet.

"Your first Technical Support shift begins in seven hours," the HR computer droned softly in my ear. "You have until then to sleep. Turn left at the intersection in front of you, and proceed to your assigned Hab-Unit, number 42G."

I continued to do as I was told. I thought I was already getting pretty good at it.

The Hab Block reminded me of a mausoleum. It was a network of vaulted hallways, each lined with coffin-shaped sleeping capsules. Row after row of them, stacked to the ceiling, ten high. Each column of Hab-Units was numbered, and the door of each capsule was lettered, A through J, with unit A at the bottom.

I eventually reached my unit, near the top of column number forty-two. As I approached it, the hatch irised open with a hiss and a soft blue light winked on inside. I ascended the narrow access ladder mounted between the adjacent rows of capsules, then stepped onto the short platform beneath the hatch to my unit. When I climbed inside the capsule, the platform retracted and the hatch irised shut at my feet.

The inside of my hab-unit was an eggshell white injection-molded plastic coffin. A meter high, a meter wide, and two meters long. The floor of the capsule was covered with a gelfoam mattress pad and pillow. They both smelled like burned rubber, so I assumed they must be new.

In addition to the camera attached to the side of my head, there was also a camera mounted above the door of my hab-unit. The company didn't bother hiding it. They wanted their indents to know they were being watched.

The only amenity was the entertainment console, a large flat touch-screen built into the wall. A wireless visor was snapped into a holder beside it. I tapped the touchscreen, activating the unit. My new employee number and position appeared at the top of the display:

Lynch, Bryce T. – OASIS TECHREP II – IOI Employee #338645.

A menu appeared below, listing all of the entertainment programming to which I presently had access. It only took a few seconds to peruse my limited options. I could view only one channel: IOI-N – the company’s twenty-four hour news network. It provided a non-stop stream of company-related news and propaganda. I also had access to a library of training films and simulations, most which were geared toward my new position as an OASIS Technical Support Representative.

When I tried to access one of the other entertainment libraries, Vintage Movies, the system informed me that I wouldn't be granted access to a wider selection of entertainment options until I had received an above-average rating in three consecutive employee performance reviews. Then the system asked me if I wanted more information on the Indentured Employee Entertainment Reward System? I didn't.

The only TV show I had access to was a company-produced sitcom called *Tommy Queue*. The synopsis said it was a “wacky situation comedy chronicling the misadventures of Tommy, a newly-indentured OASIS Tech-Rep struggling to achieve his goals of financial independence and on-the-job excellence!”

I selected the first episode of Tommy Queue, then unsnapped the visor and put it on. As I expected, the show was really just a training film with a laugh track. I had no absolutely no interest in it. I just wanted to go to sleep. But I knew I was being watched, and that my every move was being scrutinized and logged. So I stayed awake as long as I could, watching one episode of Tommy Queue after another until I finally drifted off.

0029

IOI's Technical Support call center occupied three entire floors of the eastern I-shaped tower. Each of these floors contained a maze of numbered cubicles. Mine was stuck back in a remote corner, far from any windows. My cubicle was completely empty, except for an adjustable office chair bolted to the floor. Several of the cubicles around me were empty, awaiting the arrival of other new indents.

I wasn't permitted to have any decorations in my cubicle, because I hadn't earned that privilege yet. But if I obtained a sufficient number of "perk points" by getting high productivity and customer approval ratings, I could "spend" some of them to purchase the privilege of decorating my cube, perhaps with a potted plant or a inspirational poster of kitten hanging from a clothesline.

When I arrived in my cubicle, I grabbed my company-issued visor and gloves from the rack on the bare cubicle wall and put them on. Then I collapsed into my chair. My work computer was built into the chair's circular base, and it activated itself automatically when I sat down. My employee ID was then verified and I was automatically logged into my work account on the IOI intranet. I wasn't allowed to have any outbound access to the OASIS. All I could really do was read work-related emails, view support documentation and procedural manuals,

and check my call time statistics. That was it. And every move I made on the intranet was closely monitored, controlled, and logged.

I put myself in the call queue and began my twelve hour shift.

I'd only been an indent for eight days now, but it already felt like I'd been imprisoned here for years. Doing Tech Support here was nothing like working from home. Here, I didn't have unrestricted OASIS access, so I couldn't watch movies, play games, or listen to music while I answered the endless stream of inane calls. The only distraction was to stare at the clock. (Or the IOI stock ticker, which was always centered at the top every indent's display. There was no way to get rid of it.)

During each shift, I was given three five-minute restroom breaks. Lunch was thirty minutes. I usually ate in my cubicle instead of the cafeteria, so I wouldn't have to listen to the other Tech Reps bitch about their calls or boast how many perk points they'd earned. I'd grown to despise the other indents almost as much as the customers.

I fell asleep five separate times during my shift. Each time, when the system saw that I'd drifted off, it sounded a warning klaxon in my ears, jolting me back awake. Then it noted the infraction in my employee data file. My narcolepsy had become such a consistent problem during my first week that I was now being issued two little red pills each day, to help me stay awake. I took them, too. But not until after I got off work.

When my shift finally ended, I ripped off my headset and visor and then walked back to my hab-unit as quickly as I could. This was only time each day that I ever hurried anywhere. When I reached my tiny plastic coffin, I crawled inside and collapsed on the mattress, face down, in the same exact position as the night before. And the night before that. I lay there for a few minutes, staring at the time readout on my entertainment console out of the corner of my eye.

When it reached 7:07PM, I rolled over and sat up.

“Lights,” I said softly. This had become one my favorite word over the past week. In my mind, it had become synonymous with freedom.

The lights embedded in the shell of my hab-unit shut off, plunging the tiny compartment into darkness. If someone had been watching either of my live security vidfeeds, they would have seen a brief flash as the cameras switched to night-vision mode, then I would be clearly visible on their monitors once again. But, as of that moment, the security cameras in my hab-unit and my eargear were no longer performing their assigned tasks. So, for the first time that day, I was longer being watched.

That meant it was time to rock.

I tapped the entertainment center console's touchscreen. It lit up, presenting me with the same choices I'd had on my first night here: a handful of training films and simulations, including the complete run of *Tommy Queue* episodes.

If anyone checked the usage logs for my entertainment center, they would show that I watched Tommy Queue every night until I fell asleep, and that once I'd worked my way through all sixteen episodes, I'd started over at the beginning. The logs would also show that I fell asleep at roughly the same time every night (but not at *exactly* the same time), and that I slept like a log until the following morning, when my alarm sounded.

Of course, I hadn't really been watching their inane corporate shitcom every night. And I wasn't sleeping, either. I'd actually been operating on about two hours of sleep a night for the past week, and it was beginning to take its toll on me.

But the moment the lights in my hab-unit went out, I felt energized and wide awake. My exhaustion seemed to vanish as I began to navigate through the entertainment center operation

menus from memory, the fingers of my right hand dancing rapidly across the touchscreen.

In just a few seconds I reached an area that I wasn't supposed to be able to access, one I wasn't even supposed to know about--the unit's hidden "Maintenance and Testing" sub-menu. I was prompted for a maintenance-tech ID number and password. I entered both on the codepad.

I'd obtained these passwords about seven months earlier, from the L33T HAX0RZ WAREZHAUS, the same black market data auction site where I'd purchased the information needed to create a new identity. I monitored all of the black market data sites, because you never knew what might be up for sale on them. OASIS server exploits. ATM hacks. Celebrity sex tapes. You name it. I'd been browsing through the L33T HAX0RZ WAREZHAUS auction listings when one in particular caught my eye: *IOI Intranet Access Passwords, Back Doors, and System Exploits*.

I would have assumed the data was bogus, had it not been listed on such a respected site. The anonymous seller claimed to be a former IOI contract programmer, and one of the lead architects of its company intranet. The seller was probably a turncoat—a programmer who intentionally coded backdoors and security holes into a system they designed, so that they could later sell them on the black market. It allowed them to get paid for the same job twice, and to salve any guilt they had about working for a demonic multinational corporation like IOI . Of course, the turncoats were breaking several federal laws by selling this data, in addition to violating their non-disclosure agreements with IOI. But smart programmers usually found ways to cover their tracks.

In the IOI password auction listing, the seller claimed to be offering classified proprietary information on IOI's intranet architecture, along with a series of administrative access codes and system exploits, which could "give a user carte blanche inside the company network." The

obvious problem, which the seller didn't bother to point out in the auction listing, was that these codes were useless unless you already had access to the company intranet. IOI's intranet was a high-security standalone network, with no direct connections to the OASIS. The only way to get access to IOI's intranet was to get a job there, and the only way to do that was to become one of their indentured servants. For non-executive positions, IOI had been using an all-indentured workforce for over a decade now. They did this because they could. They still had no shortage of applicants. These days, most people were more than willing to sign away their freedom if meant they could pull down a steady paycheck.

I'd decided to bid on the IOI access codes anyway, on the off chance they might come in handy someday. Since there was no way to verify the data's authenticity, the bidding stayed low, and I won the auction for few thousand gold pieces. The codes arrived in my inbox a few minutes after the auction ended. Once I'd finished decrypting the data, I examined it all thoroughly. Everything looked legit, so I filed the info away for a rainy day and forgot about it -- until about six months later, when I saw the Sixer barricade around Castle Anorak. The first thing I thought of was the IOI access codes. Then the wheels in my head began to turn and my ridiculous plan began to take shape.

I would alter the financial records on my bogus Bryce Lynch identity and allow myself to become indentured by IOI. Once I infiltrated the building and got behind the company firewall, I would use the intranet passwords to hack into the Sixers' private database, then figure a way to bring down the shield they'd erected over Anorak's castle.

I didn't think anyone would anticipate this move, because it was so clearly insane.

#

I didn't test the IOI passwords until the second night of my indenturement. I was

understandably anxious, because if it turned out that I'd been sold bogus data and none of the passwords had worked, I would be totally and completely screwed.

Keeping my eargear camera pointed straight ahead, away from the screen, I pulled the entertainment console's viewer settings menu, which allowed me to make adjustments to the display's audio and video output. Volume and Balance, Brightness and Tint. I cranked each option up to its highest setting, then tapped the APPLY button at the bottom of the screen three times. Then I set the volume and brightness controls to their lowest settings and tapped the APPLY button twice. A small window suddenly appeared in the center of the screen, prompting me for a maintenance-tech ID number and access password. I quickly entered the numeric ID number and the long alpha-numeric password that I'd memorized. I checked both for errors, then tapped the OK button. The system paused for what seemed like a very long time. Then, to my great relief, the following message appeared:

MAINTENANCE CONTROL PANEL - ACCESS GRANTED

I now had access to a maintenance service account, designed to allow repairmen to test and debug the entertainment unit's various components. Even though I was logged in as a technician, my access to the intranet was still very limited, but it gave me all the elbow room I needed. Using an exploit left by one of the programmers, I was now able to create a bogus admin account. Once that was set up, I had access to just about everything.

My first order of business was to get some privacy.

I quickly navigated through several dozen sub-menus, until I reached the control panel for the Indent Monitoring System. When I entered my employee number my indent profile appeared on the display, along with a mugshot they'd taken of me during my initial processing. The profile listed my indent account balance, pay grade, blood type, current performance review

rating—every scrap of data the company had on me. At the top-right of my profile were two vidfeed windows, one fed by the camera in my eargear, the other linked to the camera in my hab-unit. My eargear vidfeed was currently aimed at a section of the wall. The hab-unit camera window showed a view of the back of my head, which I'd positioned to block the entertainment center's display screen.

I selected both vidfeed cameras and then accessed their configuration settings. Using one of the turncoat's exploits, I performed a quick hack that caused my eargear and hab-unit cameras to display the archived video from my first night of indenturement, instead of a live feed. Now, if someone checked my camera feeds, they'd see me lying asleep in my hab-unit. Not sitting up all night, furiously hacking my way through the company intranet. Then I programmed the cameras to switch to the pre-recorded feeds whenever I shut out the lights in my hab-unit. The split-second jump cut in the feed would be masked by the momentary video distortion that occurred when the cameras switched into night-vision mode.

I kept expecting to be discovered and locked out of the system, but it never happened. My passwords continued to work. I'd spent the past six nights laying siege to the IOI intranet, digging deeper and deeper into the network. I felt like a convict in an old prison movie, returning to my cell each night to tunnel through the wall with a teaspoon.

Then, last night, just before I'd succumbed to exhaustion, I finally managed to navigate my way through the intranet's labyrinth of firewalls and into main Oology Division database. The motherload. The Sixers' private file pile. And tonight, I would finally be able to explore it.

I knew that I needed to be able to take some of the Sixers' data with me when I escaped, so earlier in the week, I'd used my intranet admin account to submit a bogus hardware requisition form. I had a ten zettabyte data drive delivered to a non-existent employee ("Sam

Lowery”) in an empty cubicle a few rows away from my own. Making sure to keep my eargear camera pointed in the other direction, I’d ducked into the cube, grabbed the tiny drive, pocketed it, and smuggled it back to my hab-unit. That night, after I shut off the lights and disabled the security cameras, I unlocked my entertainment unit’s maintenance access panel and installed the data drive into an expansion slot used for firmware upgrades. Now I could download data from the intranet directly to that drive.

#

I put on the entertainment center's visor and gloves, then stretched out on my mattress. The visor presented me with a three-dimensional view of the Sixers’ database, with dozens of overlapping data windows suspended in front of me. Using my gloves, I began to manipulate these windows, navigating my way through the database's file structure. The largest section of the database appeared to be devoted to information on Halliday. The amount of data they had on him was staggering. It made my grail diary look like a set of Cliff Notes. They had things I’d never seen. Things I didn’t even know *existed*. Halliday’s grade school report cards, home movies from his childhood, emails he’d written to fans. I didn’t have time to read over it all, but I copied the really interesting stuff over to my data drive, to (hopefully) study later. I couldn’t take everything. (I would have needed a few thousand data drives to do that.) So I had to be selective about what I copied to the drive.

First, I focused all of my energy on isolating the data related to Castle Anorak and the forces the Sixers had positioned in and around it. I copied all of the intel on their weapons, vehicles, gunships, and troop numbers. I also snagged all of the data I could find on the Orb of Osuvon, the artifact they were using to generate the shield around the castle. I found out exactly where in the castle they were keeping it and the employee number of the Sixer wizard they had

operating it.

Then I hit the jackpot - a folder containing hundreds of hours of OASIS simcap recordings, documenting the Sixers' initial discovery of the Third Gate and their subsequent attempts to open it. As everyone now suspected, the Third Gate was located inside Castle Anorak. Only avatars who possessed a copy of the Crystal Key could cross the threshold of the castle's front entrance. To my disgust, I learned that Sorrento had been the first avatar to set foot inside Castle Anorak since Halliday's death.

The castle entrance led into a massive foyer, where the walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of gold. At the north end of the chamber, a large crystal door was set into the wall. There was a small keyhole at its very center.

The moment I saw it, I knew I was looking at the Third Gate.

I fast-forwarded through several other recent simcap files. From what I could tell, the Sixers still hadn't figured out how to open the gate. Simply inserting the Crystal Key into the keyhole had no effect. Nothing happened. The gate didn't open. They'd had their entire team trying to figure out why for several days now, but still hadn't made any progress.

While all of the data and video on the Third Gate was copying over to my data drive, I continued to delve deeper into the Sixer database. Eventually, I uncovered a restricted area called the "STAR CHAMBER." It was the only area of the database I couldn't seem to access. So I used my admin ID to create a new "test account," then gave that account superuser access and full administrator privileges. It worked. With the superuser account, I was able to log in to the Star Chamber sub-database, which appeared to contain information to which only Sorrento and his superiors had access. The data was divided into two folders: *Mission Status* and *Threat Assessments*. I opened the Threat Assessments folder first, and when I saw what was inside, I felt

the blood drain from my face. There were five file folders, labeled PARZIVAL, ART3MIS, AECH, SHOTO, and DAITO. Daito's folder had a large red X over it.

I opened the folder labeled with my avatar's name first. A detailed dossier appeared, containing all of the information the Sixers had collected on me over the past six years. My birth certificate. My school transcripts. At the bottom there was a link to a simcap of my entire chatroom session with Sorrento, ending with the bomb detonating in my aunt's trailer. After I'd gone into hiding, they'd lost track of me. They had collected thousands of screenshots and vidcaps of my avatar over the past year, and loads of data on my stronghold on Falco, but they didn't know anything about my location in the real world. My current whereabouts were listed as "unknown."

I closed the window, took a deep breath, and then opened the file on Art3mis.

At the very top was a school photo of a young girl with a distinctly sad smile. To my surprise, she looked almost identical to her avatar. The same dark hair, the same brown eyes, and the same beautiful face I knew so well—with one small difference. Most of the left half of her face was covered with a reddish-purple birthmark. I would later learn that it was the type of birthmark sometimes referred to as a “port wine stain.” In the photo, she wore a sweep of her dark hair down over her left eye to try and conceal it as much as possible.

Art3mis had led me to believe that in reality she was somehow hideous, but now I saw that nothing could have been further from the truth. To my eyes, the birthmark did absolutely nothing to diminish her beauty. If anything, the face I saw in the photo seemed even more beautiful to me than the one I already knew, because I knew this one was real. That was really her face, and not a collection of pixels rendered by a computer.

The data below the photo said that her real name was Samantha Evelyn Cook, that she

was twenty years old, five feet and seven inches tall, and that she weighed one-hundred and sixty-eight pounds. The file also contained her home address--2206 Greenleaf Lane, Vancouver, British Columbia—along with a lot of other information, including her blood type and her school transcripts going all the way back to kindergarten.

There was a unlabeled video link at the bottom of her dossier, and when I selected it, a live vidfeed of a small suburban house appeared on my display. After a few seconds, I realized that I was looking at the house where Art3mis lived.

As I dug further into her file, I learned that they'd had her under surveillance for the past five months. They had her house bugged, too, because I found hundreds of hours of audio recordings made while she was logged in to the OASIS. They had complete text transcripts of every audible word she'd spoken while clearing the first two gates.

I opened Shoto's file next. They knew his real name, Akihide Karatsu, and they also appeared to have his home address, an apartment building in Osaka, Japan. His file also contained a school photo, showing a thin, stoic boy who looked nothing like his avatar.

Aech seemed to be the one they knew the least about. His file contained very little information and no photo--just a screenshot of his avatar. His real name was listed as "Arthur Dent," but that was the name of the main character in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* novels, so I knew it must be an alias. His address was listed "mobile," and below it there was a link labeled "Recent Access Points." This turned out to be a list of the wireless node locations that Aech had recently used to access his OASIS account. They were all over the place. Boston, Washington DC, New York City, Philadelphia, and most recently, Pittsburgh.

At first, I couldn't figure out how they'd located Art3mis and Shoto. But now I began to understand. IOI owned hundreds of regional telecom companies, effectively making them the

largest Internet Service Provider in the world. It was pretty difficult to get online without using a network they owned and operated. From the looks of it, IOI had been illegally eavesdropping on most of the world's Internet traffic, in attempt to locate and identify the handful of gunters they considered to be a threat. The only reason they hadn't been able to locate me was because I'd taken the paranoia-induced precaution of leasing a direct fiber optic connection to the OASIS from my apartment complex.

I closed Aech's file, then opened the folder labeled DAITO, already dreading what I was going to find there. Like the others, they had his real name, Toshiro Yoshiaki, and his home address. Two news articles about his "suicide" were linked at the bottom of his dossier, along with an unlabeled video clip, time stamped on the day he died. I clicked on it. It was handheld video camera footage, showing three Japanese-speaking men in black ski-masks (one of whom is operating the camera) waiting silently in a hallway. They receive an order via radio earpieces, and then use a key card to open the door of a tiny one-room apartment. Daito's apartment. They yank him out of his haptic chair, and then throw him off the balcony. The bastards even filmed him plummeting to his death. Probably at Sorrento's request.

I copied the contents of all five dossiers over to my data drive, then opened the Mission Status folder. It appeared to contain an archive of the Oology Division's status reports, intended for the Sixers' top brass. The reports were arranged by date, with the most recent one listed first. When I opened it, I saw that it was a directive memo, sent from Todd Sorrento to the IOI Board of Executives. It confirmed that Sorrento still hadn't figured out how to open the Third Gate. Sorrento's proposed solution was that the send agents to abduct Art3mis and Shoto from their homes, and then force them into helping IOI open the Third Gate. Once the Sixers obtained the Egg and won the contest, Art3mis and Shoto would "be disposed of."

I sat there in stunned silence. Then I read the memo again, feeling a combination of rage and panic.

According to the timestamp, Sorrento had sent the memo just after eight o'clock, less than five hours ago. So his superiors probably hadn't even seen it yet. When they did, they would still want to meet and discuss Sorrento's suggested course of action. So they probably wouldn't send their agents after Art3mis and Shoto until sometime tomorrow.

I still had time to warn them. But to do that, I would have to drastically alter my escape plan.

Before my arrest, I'd set up a timed funds transfer, which would deposit enough money in my IOI credit account to pay off my entire debt, forcing IOI to release me from indenturement. But that transfer wouldn't happen for another five days. By then, the Sixers would probably have Art3mis and Shoto locked in a windowless room somewhere.

I couldn't spend the rest of the week exploring the Sixer database, like I'd planned. I had to grab as much data as I could and make my escape now.

I gave myself until dawn.

0030

I worked frantically for the next four hours. Most of that time was spent sabotaging the IOI intranet, while copying as much of the Sixer database as I could fit on my stolen data drive. I coded and uploaded a series of worms, logic bombs, and viruses, all programmed to launch simultaneously in two days, at high noon.

When I finally stopped coding long enough to check the time, it was by six-thirty the following morning. The next tech support shift change was now only ninety minutes away, and my hab-unit neighbors would start waking up soon. I was out of time.

I pulled up my indenturement profile, accessed my debt statement, and then zeroed out my outstanding balance--money that I'd never actually borrowed to begin with. Then I selected the *Indentured Servant Observation and Communications Tag* control settings sub-menu, which operated both my eargear and security anklet. Then I did something I'd been dying to do for the past week--I disabled the locking mechanisms on both devices.

I felt a sharp pain as the eargear clamps retracted and pulled free of the cartilage on my left earlobe. The device bounced off my shoulder and landed in my lap. In the same instant, the shackle on my right ankle clicked open and fell off, revealing a band of abraded red skin.

I knew that I'd now passed the point of no return. IOI security techs weren't the only ones

who had access to my eargear's vidfeed. The Indentured Servant Protection Agency also used it to monitor and record my daily activities, to ensure that all of my human rights were being observed. Now that I'd removed the device, there would be no digital record of what happened to me from this moment forward. If IOI security caught me before I made it out of the building, carrying a stolen data drive filled with highly incriminating company data, I was dead. The company could torture me and kill me, and no one would ever know.

I performed a few final tasks related to my escape plan, then logged out of the IOI intranet for the last time. Then I pulled off my visor and gloves and opened the maintenance access panel next to the entertainment center console. There was a small empty space below the entertainment module, between the prefab wall of my hab-unit and the one adjacent to it. I removed the thin, neatly folded bundle I'd hidden there. It was a vacuum-sealed IOI maintenance tech uniform, complete with a cap and an ID badge. (Like the data drive, I'd obtained these items by submitting an intranet requisition forms, then I'd had them delivered to an empty cubicle on my floor.) I pulled off my indent jumpsuit and used it to wipe the blood off my ear and neck. Then I removed two band-aids from under my mattress and slapped them over the holes in my earlobe. Once I was dressed in my new maintenance tech threads, I carefully removed the data drive from its expansion slot, pocketed it, then closed the access panel. Then I picked up my eargear and spoke into it. "I need to use the bathroom," I said.

The hab-unit door irised open at my feet. The hallway was dark and deserted. I stuffed my eargear and indent jumpsuit under the mattress, then put the anklet in the pocket of my new uniform. Then, reminding myself to breathe, I crawled outside and descended the ladder.

I passed a few other indents on my way to the elevators, but, as usual, none of them made eye contact. This was a huge relief, because I was worried someone might recognize me and

notice that I didn't belong in a maintenance tech uniform. When I stepped in front of the express elevator door, I held my breath as system scanned my maintenance tech ID badge. After what felt like an eternity, the doors slid open.

"Floor please?" the elevator said as I stepped inside.

"Lobby," I said hoarsely, and the elevator began to descend.

Harry Tuttle was the name printed on my maintenance tech ID badge. I'd given the fictional Mr. Tuttle complete access to entire building, then reprogrammed my indent anklet so that it was encoded with the Tuttle ID. When the doors and elevators scanned me to make sure I had the proper security clearance, the anklet told them that yes, I sure did, instead of doing what it was supposed to do, which was zap my ass with a few thousands volts and incapacitate me until the security guards arrived.

I rode the elevator down in silence, trying not to stare directly at the camera mounted above the doors. Then I realized that the video being shot of me would be scrutinized when this was all over. Sorrento himself would probably see it, and so would his superiors. So I looked directly into the lens of the camera, smiled, and nonchalantly scratched the bridge of my nose with my middle finger.

The elevator reached the lobby and the doors slid open. I half expected to find an army of security guards waiting for me outside, their guns leveled at my face. But there was only a crowd of IOI middle-management drones, waiting to get on the elevator. I stared at them blankly for a second, then stepped out of the car. It was like crossing the border into another country.

A steady stream of over-caFFEinated office workers scurried across the lobby and in and out of the elevators and exits. These were regular employees, not indents. They were allowed to go home at the end of their shifts. They could even *quit* if they wanted to. I wondered if it

bothered any of them, knowing that thousands of indentured slaves lived and toiled here in the same building, just a few floors away from them.

I spotted two security guards stationed near the reception desk and gave them a wide berth, weaving my way through the thick crowd, crossing the immense lobby to the long row of automatic glass doors that led outside, to freedom. I forced myself not run as I pushed through the arriving workers. *Just a maintenance tech here, folks, heading home after a long night of rebooting routers. That's all. I am definitely not an indent making a daring escape with twenty zettabytes of stolen company data in his pocket. Nosiree.*

Halfway to the doors, I noticed an odd sound and glanced down at my feet. I was still wearing my disposable plastic indent slippers. Each footfall made a shrill squeak on the waxed marble floor, standing out amid the rumble of sensible business footwear. Every step I took seemed to scream: *Hey, look! Over here! A guy in the plastic slippers!*

But I kept walking. I was almost to the doors when someone placed a hand on my shoulder. I froze. "Sir?" I heard someone say. It was a woman's voice.

I almost bolted out the door, but something stopped me. I turned and saw the concerned face of a woman in her mid-forties. Dark blue business suit. Briefcase. "Sir, your ear is bleeding." She pointed at it, wincing. "A lot."

I reached up and touched my earlobe and my hand came away red. At some point, the band-aids I'd applied had fallen off.

I was paralyzed for a second, unsure of what to do. I wanted to give her an explanation, but couldn't think of one. So I simply nodded, muttered "thanks," then turned around and, as calmly as possible, walked outside.

The frozen morning wind was fierce that it nearly knocked me over. When I regained my

balance, I bounded down the tiered steps, pausing briefly to drop my anklet into a trash receptacle. I heard it hit the bottom with a satisfying thud.

Once I reached the street, I headed north, walking as fast as my feet would carry me. I stood out like a sore thumb, because I was the only person not wearing a coat of some sort. My feet quickly went numb, because I wasn't wearing socks under my plastic indent slippers.

My entire body was shivering by the time I finally reached the warm confines of The Mailbox, a post office box rental outlet located four blocks from the IOI plaza. The week before my arrest, I'd rent a post office box here online, and then had a top-of-the-line portable OASIS rig shipped to it. The Mailbox was completely automated, so there were no employees to contend with, and when I walked in there were no customers either. I located my box, punched in the keycode, and retrieved the portable OASIS rig. Then I sat down on the floor and ripped open the box. I rubbed my frozen hands together until the feeling returned to my fingers, then put on the gloves and visor and used the rig to log in to the OASIS. Gregarious Simulation Systems was located less than a mile away, so I was able to use one their complimentary wireless access points, instead of one of the city nodes owned by IOI.

My heart was pounding as I logged in. I'd been offline for eight whole days--a personal record. As my avatar slowly materialized on my stronghold's observation deck, I looked down at my virtual body, admiring it like a favorite suit I hadn't worn in awhile. A window immediately appeared on my display, informing me that I'd received several messages from Aech and Shoto. And, to my surprise, there was even a message from Art3mis. All three of them wanted to know where I was and what the hell had happened to me.

I replied to Art3mis first. I told her that the Sixers knew who she was and where she lived, and that they had her under constant surveillance. I also warned her about their plans to abduct

her from her home. I pulled a copy of her dossier off the data drive and attached it to my message as proof. Then I politely suggested that she leave home immediately and get the hell out of Dodge.

Don't stop pack a suitcase, I wrote. Don't say goodbye to anyone. Leave right now, and get somewhere safe. Make sure you aren't followed. Then find a secure non-IOI controlled Internet connection and get back online. I'll meet you in Aech's basement as soon as I can. Don't worry - I have some good news, too.

At the bottom of the message, I added a short post-script: *PS – I think you look even more beautiful in real life.*

Once that message was sent, I sent similar emails to Shoto and then Aech, along with copies of their Sixer dossiers. Then I pulled up the United States Citizen Registry database and attempted to log in. To my great relief, the passwords I'd purchased still worked, and I was able to access the fake Bryce Lynch citizen profile I'd created. It now contained the ID photo taken during my indent processing, and the words WANTED FUGITIVE were superimposed over my face. IOI had already reported Mr. Lynch as an escaped indent.

It didn't take me very long to completely erase the Bryce Lynch identity and then copy my fingerprints and retinal patterns back over to my original citizen profile. When I logged out of the database a few minutes later, Bryce Lynch no longer existed. To my great relief, I was Wade Watts once again.

#

I hailed an autocab outside the Mailbox, then held my breath as I pressed my thumb to the scanner. The display flashed green. The system recognized me as Wade Watts, not as the fugitive indent Bryce Lynch.

“Good morning, Mr. Watts,” the autocab said. “Where to?”

I gave the cab the address of a clothing store on High Street, close to the OSU campus. It was place called *Thr3ads*, which specialized in “High-Tech Urban Streetwear.” I ran inside and bought a pair of jeans and a sweater. Both items were “Dichotomy Wear,” meaning they were wired for OASIS use. There were no haptics, but the pants and shirt could link up with my portable immersion rig, letting it know what I was doing with my torso, arms, and legs, making it easier to control my avatar than with a gloves-only interface. I also bought a few packs of socks, underwear, a simulated leather jacket, a pair of boots, and a black knit-wool cap to cover my freezing bald noggin.

I emerged from the store a few minutes later dressed my new threads. As the frigid wind enveloped me again I zipped up my new jacket and pulled on the wool cap. Much better. I tossed the maintenance tech jumpsuit and plastic indent shoes in a trash can, then began to walk up High Street, scanning the storefronts. I kept my head down to avoid making eye contact with the stream of sullen university students filing past me.

A few blocks later, I saw a Vend-All franchise and went inside. It was a large room lined with rows of vending machines that sold everything under the sun. One of them, labeled *Defense Dispenser*, offered self-defense equipment: lightweight body armor, chemical repellents, and a wide selection of handguns. I tapped the screen set into the front of the machine and scrolled through the catalog. After a moment’s deliberation, I purchased a flak vest and a Glock 47C pistol, along with a three clips of ammo. I also bought a small canister of mace, then paid for everything by pressing my right palm to a hand scanner. My identity was verified and my criminal record was checked.

NAME: WADE WATTS
OUTSTANDING WARRANTS: NONE
CREDIT RATING: EXCELLENT

*PURCHASE RESTRICTIONS: NONE
TRANSACTION APPROVED!
THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS!*

There was a heavy metallic *thunk* as my purchases slid into the steel tray near my knees. I pocketed the mace, then put the flak vest on underneath my new shirt. Then I removed the Glock from its clear plastic blister packaging. This was the first time I'd ever held a real gun. Even so, the weapon felt familiar in my hands, because I'd fired thousands of virtual firearms in the OASIS. I pressed a small button set into the barrel and the gun emitted a tone. I held the pistol grip firmly for a few seconds, first in my right hand, then my left. The weapon emitted a second tone, letting me know that it had finished scanning my handprints. I was now the only person who could fire the gun. I loaded a clip and racked the slide, then put the gun into my jacket pocket. There was no safety, but weapon had a built in timer that would prevent it from firing for another twelve hours (a "cooling off period"), but I still felt better having it on me.

There was an OASIS parlor a few blocks away, a franchise outlet called *The Plug*. The dingy backlit sign, which featured a smiling anthropomorphic fiber-optic cable, promised *Lightning-Fast OASIS Access! Cheap Gear Rental! and Private Immersion Bays! Open 24-7-365!* I'd seen a lot of banner ads for *The Plug* online. They had a reputation for high prices and outdated hardware, but their connections were supposed to be fast, reliable, and lag-free. For me, their major selling point was that they were one of the few OASIS parlor chains not owned by IOI or one of its subsidiaries.

The motion-detector emitted a beep as I stepped through front door. There was a small waiting area off to my right, currently empty. The carpet was stained and worn, and the whole place reeked of industrial strength disinfectant. A vacant-eyed clerk glanced up at me from behind a bulletproof plexiglas barrier. He was in his early-twenties, with a mohawk and dozens of piercings just in his face alone. He was wearing a bifocal visor, which gave him a semi-

transparent view of the OASIS, while also allowing him to see his real world surroundings.

When he spoke, I saw that his teeth had all been sharpened to points. “Welcome to the Plug,” he said in a flat monotone. “We have several bays free, so there’s no waiting. Package pricing information is displayed right here.” He pointed to the display screen mounted on the counter directly in front of me, then his eyes glazed over as he refocused his attention on the world inside his visor.

I scanned my choices. There were a dozen immersion rigs available, of varying quality and price. *Economy, Standard, Deluxe*. There were detailed specs on each. You could rent by the minute, or pay a flat hourly rate. A visor and a pair of haptic gloves were included in the rental price, but a haptic suit cost extra. The rental contract contained a lot of fine print about the additional charges you would incur if you damaged the equipment, and a lot of legalese stating that *The Plug* could not be held responsible for *anything* you did, under any circumstances, especially if it was something illegal.

“I’d like to rent one of the deluxe rigs for twelve hours,” I said.

The clerk raised his visor. “You have to pay in advance, you realize?”

I nodded. “I also want to rent a fat-pipe connection. I need to upload a large amount of data to my account.”

“Uploading costs extra. How much data?”

“Twenty zettabytes.”

“*Damn*,” he whispered. “What you uploading? The Library of Congress?”

I ignored the question. “I also want the Mondo Upgrade Package,” I said.

“Sure thing,” the clerk replied warily. “Your total comes to Eleven-thousand big ones. Just put your thumb on the drum and we’ll get you all fixed up.”

He looked more than a little surprised when the transaction cleared. Then he shrugged and handed me a key card, a visor, and some gloves. “Bay Fourteen. Last door on your right. The restroom is at the end of the hall. If you leave any kind of mess in the bay, we'll have to keep your deposit. Vomit, urine, semen, that kinda thing. And I'm the guy who has to clean it up, so do me a solid and show some restraint, will ya?”

“You got it.”

“Enjoy.”

“Thanks.”

Bay Fourteen was a sound-proofed ten by ten room with a late-model haptic rig in the center. I locked the door behind me and climbed into the rig. The vinyl on the haptic chair was worn and cracked. I slid the data-drive into a slot on the front of the OASIS console and smiled as it locked into place.

“Max?” I said to the empty air, once I'd logged back in. This booted up a back-up of company of Max that I kept stored in my OASIS account.

Max's smiling face appeared on all of my command center monitors. “H-H-Hey there, compadre!” he shouted. “You were gone a long time. I was starting to worry.”

"It's good to see you, too. Now strap in. We've got a lot of work to do."

I opened up my OASIS account manager and initiated the upload from my data drive. I paid GSS a monthly fee for unlimited data storage on my account, and I was about to test its limits. Even using the Plug's high-bandwidth fiber-optic connection, the total estimated upload time for twenty zettabytes of data was over three hours. I re-ordered the upload sequence so that the files I needed access to right away would get transferred first. As soon as data was uploaded to my OASIS account I had immediate access to it, and could also transfer it to other users

instantaneously.

First, I emailed all of the major newsfeeds and told them that IOI had tried to kill me, that they *had* killed Daito, and that they were planning to kill Art3mis and Shoto. Then I attached one of the video clips I'd retrieved from the Sixer database to the message--the video camera footage of Daito's execution. I also attached a copy of the memo Sorrento had sent to the IOI board, suggesting that they abduct Art3mis and Shoto. I also considered attaching the simcap of my chatlink session with Sorrento, but it decided to hold off. In it, Sorrento said my real name and showed my school photo, and I wasn't quite ready to reveal either to the world.

Once those messages went out, I spent about fifteen minutes composing another email, which I addressed to every single OASIS user. Once I was happy with the wording, I stored it in my Drafts folder. Then I logged in to Aech's Basement.

When my avatar appeared inside the chatroom, I saw that Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto were already there waiting for me.

0031

"Z!" Aeche shouted as my avatar appeared. "What the hell, man? Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for over a week!"

"So have I," Shoto added. "Where were you? And how did you get those files from the Sixer database?"

"It's a long story," I said. "First things first." I addressed Shoto and Art3mis. "Have you two left your homes?"

They both nodded.

"And you're each logged in from a safe location?"

"Yes," Shoto said. "I'm in a manga café right now."

"And I'm at the Vancouver airport," Art3mis said. It was the first time I'd heard her voice in nearly a year. "I'm logged in from a germ-ridden public OASIS booth right now. I ran out of my house with nothing but the clothes on my back, so I hope that Sixer data you sent us is legit."

"It is," I said. "Trust me."

"How can you be sure of that?" Shoto asked.

"Because I hacked in to the Sixer Database and downloaded it myself."

They all stared at me in silence. Aeche raised an eyebrow. "And how, exactly, did you

manage that, Z?"

"I assumed a fake identity and masqueraded as an indentured servant to infiltrate IOI's corporate headquarters. I've been there for the past eight days. I just now escaped."

"Holy shit!" Shoto whispered. "Seriously?"

I nodded.

"Dude, you have balls of solid adamantium," he said, whistling low. "Respect."

"Thanks. I think."

"Let's assume you're not totally bullshitting us," Art3mis said. "How does a lowly indent get access to secret Sixer dossier files and company memos?"

I turned to face her. "Indents have limited access to the company intranet, via their hab-unit entertainment system, from behind the IOI firewall. From there, I was able to use a series of back doors and system exploits left by the original programmers to tunnel through the network and hack directly into the Sixers' private database."

Art3mis studied me for a second. "You did that? All by yourself?"

"That is correct, madam."

"It's a miracle they didn't catch you and kill you," Art3mis said. "Why would you take such a stupid risk?"

"Why do you think? To try and find a way to get through their shield and reach the Third Gate." I shrugged. "It was the only plan I could come up with on such short notice."

"Z," Aech said, grinning, "You are one crazy son of a bitch." He walked over and gave me a high five. "But that's why I love you, man!"

"I'm sending each of you a copy of all the Sixer data I smuggled out. Twenty zetabytes of it. You should have it now." I waited while each of them checked their inbox. "The size of their

database on Halliday is unreal. His whole life is in there. They've collected interviews with everyone Halliday ever knew. It could take months to read through them all.”

I waited for a few minutes, watching their eyes scan over the data.

"Whoa!" Shoto said. "This is incredible." He looked over at me. "How the hell did you escape from IOI with all of this stuff?"

"By being extra sneaky."

"Aech is right," Art3mis said, shaking her head. "You are certifiably nuts." She hesitated for a second, then added: "Thanks for the warning, Z. I owe you one."

"Yes," Shoto said. "So do I. Thanks."

"Don't mention it, guys."

“Well?” Aech said. "Hit us the bad news already. How close are the Sixers to clearing the Third Gate?"

"Dig this," I said, grinning. *“They haven’t even figured out how to open it yet.”*

Art3mis and Shoto stared at me in disbelief. Aech smiled wide, then began to bob his head and press his palms to the sky, as if dancing to some unheard rave track. "Oh yes! Oh yes!" he sang.

“You’re kidding, right?” Shoto asked.

I shook my head.

“You’re *not* kidding?” Art3mis said. “How is that possible? Sorrento has the Crystal Key and he knows where the gate is. All he has to do is open the damn thing and step inside, right?”

“That was true for the first two gates,” I replied. “But Gate Three is different.” I opened a large vidfeed window in the air beside me. "Check this out. It's from the Sixers' video archive. It's a vidcap of their first attempt to open the gate.”

I hit play. The video clip opened with a shot of Sorrento's avatar standing outside the front gates of Castle Anorak. The castle's front entrance, which had been impregnable for so many years, swung open as Sorrento approached, like an automatic door at a supermarket. "The castle entrance will open for an avatar who holds a copy of the Crystal Key," I explained. "If an avatar doesn't have a copy of the key, they can't cross the threshold and enter the castle, even if the doors are already open."

We all watched the vidcap as Sorrento passed through the entrance and into the large gold-lined foyer that lay beyond. Sorrento's avatar crossed the polished floor and approached the large crystal door set into the north wall. There was a keyhole in the very center of the door, and directly above it, three words were etched into the door's glittering, faceted surface: *Charity. Hope. Faith.*

Sorrento stepped forward, holding out his copy of the Crystal Key. He slid the key into the keyhole and turned it. Nothing happened.

Sorrento glanced up at the three words printed on the gate. "Charity, Hope, Faith," he said, reading them aloud. Once again, nothing happened.

Sorrento removed the key, recited the three words again, then reinserted the key and turned it. Still nothing.

I studied Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto as they watched the video. Their excitement and curiosity had already shifted into concentration, as they attempted to solve the puzzle before them. I paused the video. "They've been trying to figure out how to open it for the past three weeks," I said. "Whenever Sorrento is logged in, he has a team of consultants and researchers watching his every move. You can hear their voices on some of the vidcaps, feeding him suggestions and advice through his comlink. So far, they haven't been much help. Watch--"

On the video, Sorrento was making another attempt to open the gate. He did everything exactly as before, except this time, when he inserted the Crystal Key, he turned it counter-clockwise instead of clockwise.

"They try every asinine thing you can imagine," I said. "Sorrento recites the words on the gate in Latin. And Elvish. And Klingon. Then they get hung up on reciting First Corinthians 13:13, a bible verse that contains the words 'charity, hope, and faith.' Apparently, 'charity, hope, and faith' are also the names of three martyred Catholic saints. The Sixers have been trying to attach some significance to that for the past few days."

"They're barking up the wrong tree," Aech said. "Halliday was an atheist."

"They're grasping at straws now," I said. "Sorrento has tried everything but genuflecting, doing a little dance, and then sticking his pinky finger in the keyhole."

"That's probably next up on his agenda," Shoto said, grinning.

"Charity, hope, faith," Art3mis said, reciting the words slowly. She turned to me. "Where do I know that from?"

"Yeah," Aech said. "Those words *do* sound familiar."

"It took me awhile to place them, too," I said.

They all looked at me expectantly.

"Say them in reverse order," I suggested. "Better yet, *sing* them in reverse order."

Art3mis's eyes lit up. "*Faith, hope, charity,*" she said. She repeated them a few times, recognition growing in her face. Then she sang: "Faith *and* Hope *and* Charity . . ."

Aech picked up the next line: "The heart and the brain and the body . . ."

"Give you three... as a magic number!" Shoto finished triumphantly.

"Schoolhouse Rock!" they all shouted in unison.

“See?” I said. “I knew you guys would get it. You’re a smart bunch.”

“Three is a Magic Number, music and lyrics by Bob Dorrough,” Art3mis recited, as if pulling the information a mental encyclopedia. “Written in 1973.”

I smiled at her. “I have a theory. I think this might be Halliday's way of telling us how many keys are required to open the Third Gate...”

Art3mis grinned, then sang: “*It takes three.*”

“*No more, no less,*” continued Shoto.

“*You don’t have to guess,*” added Aeche.

“*Three,*” I finished, “*Is the magic number.*” I took out my own copy of the Crystal Key and held it up. The others did the same. “We have four copies of the key. If at least three of us can reach the gate, we can get it open.”

“What then?” Aeche asked. “Do we all enter the gate at the same time?”

“What if only one of us can enter the gate once it's open?” Art3mis said.

“I doubt that Halliday would have set it up like that,” I said.

“Who knows what that crazy bastard was thinking,” Art3mis said. “He’s toyed with us every step of the way, and now he’s doing it again. Why else would he require three copies of the Crystal Key to open the final gate?”

“Maybe because he wanted to force us to work together?” I suggested.

“Or he just wanted the contest to end with a big, dramatic finale,” Aeche offered. “Think about it. If three avatars enter the Third Gate at the exact same moment, then it becomes a race to see who can clear the gate and reach the Egg first.”

“Halliday was one crazy, sadistic bastard,” Art3mis muttered.

“Yeah,” Aeche said, nodding. “You got that right.”

“Look at it this way,” Shoto said. “If Halliday hadn’t set up the Third Gate to require three keys . . . The Sixers might have already found the Egg by now.”

"But the Sixers have a dozen avatars with copies of the Crystal Key," Aech said. "They could open the gate right now, if they were smart enough to figure out how."

“Dilettantes,” Art3mis said. “It’s their own fault for not knowing all the Schoolhouse Rock lyrics by heart. How did those fools even get this far?”

“By cheating,” I said. “Remember?”

She grinned at me. “Oh, that’s right. I keep forgetting.”

"Just because the Sixers haven't opened the gate yet doesn't mean they won't figure it out eventually," Shoto said.

I nodded. "Shoto's right. They're working on it around the clock, and sooner or later they'll make the connection to the Schoolhouse Rock song. So we can't waste any more time."

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Shoto said excitedly. “We know where the gate is and how to open it! So let’s do it! And may the best gunter win!”

“You’re forgetting something, Shoto-san,” Aech said. “Parzival here still hasn’t told us how we’re going to get past that shield, fight our way through the Sixers' army, and get inside the castle.” He turned to me. “You *do* have a plan for that, don’t you, Z?”

“Of course,” I said. “I was just getting to that...” I made a sweeping gesture with my right hand, and a three-dimensional hologram of Castle Anorak appeared, floating in the air in front of me. The transparent blue sphere generated by the Orb of Osuvox appeared around the castle, surrounding it both above and below ground. I pointed to it. “This shield is going to drop on its own, at noon on Monday, about thirty-six hours from now. And then we're going to walk right through the castle's front entrance.”

"The shield is going to drop? On its own?" Art3mis repeated. "The clans have been lobbing nukes at that sphere for the past two weeks, and they haven't even scratched it. How are you going to get it to 'drop on its own?'"

"I've already taken care of it," I said. "You're gonna have to trust me."

"I trust you, Z," Aech said. "But even if that shield does drop, to reach the castle, we'll still have to fight our way through the largest army in the OASIS." He pointed to the hologram, which showed the Sixer troops positions around the castle, just inside the sphere. "What about these fools? And their tanks? And their gunships?"

"I don't think the four of us can take them all by ourselves," Shoto said.

"I know," I said. "Obviously, we're going to need a little help."

"A lot of help," Art3mis clarified.

"And who, exactly, are we going to convince to help us wage war against the entire Sixer army?" Aech asked.

"Everyone," I said. "Every single gunter on the grid." I opened another window, displaying the brief email I'd composed just before logging in to the Basement. "I'm going to send this message out tonight, to ever single OASIS user."

Fellow Gunters,

It is a dark day. After years of deception, exploitation, and knavery, the Sixers have finally managed to buy and cheat their way to the entrance of the Third Gate.

IOI's corporate lackeys have barricaded Castle Anorak and encamped their army around it to prevent anyone else from reaching the Egg. We've also learned that they've uncovered the identities of the gunters they consider a threat, with the intention of abducting and murdering them.

If gunters around the world do not rally together to stop the Sixers, they will reach the Egg and win the contest. Then the OASIS will fall under IOI's imperialist rule.

The time is now. Our assault on the Sixer army will begin tomorrow at noon, OST.

Join us!

Sincerely,

Aech, Art3mis, Parzival, and Shoto

“*Knavery*?” Art3mis said after she'd finished reading it. “Were you using a Thesaurus when you wrote this?”

“I was trying to make it sound, you know, grand,” I said. “Official.”

“Me likey, Z,” Aech said. “It really gets my blood stirring.”

“Thanks, Aech.”

“So that's it? This your entire plan?” Art3mis said. “Spam the entire OASIS, asking for their help?”

“More or less, yeah. That's the plan.”

“And you really think everyone will just show up and help us fight the Sixers?” she said. “Just for the hell of it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

Aech nodded. “He's right. No one wants the Sixers to win the contest. And they definitely don't want IOI to take control of the OASIS. People will jump at a chance to help bring the Sixers down. And what gunter is gonna pass up a chance to fight in such an epic, history-making battle?”

“But won't the clans think we're just trying to manipulate them?” Shoto said. “So that *we* can reach the gate ourselves?”

“Of course,” I said. “But most of them have already given up. Everyone knows the end of the contest is at hand. Don't you think most people would rather see one of us win the contest, instead Sorrento and the Sixers?”

Art3mis considered it for a moment. “You're right. That email just might work.”

“Z,” Aech said, slapping me on the back, “You are an evil, sublime genius! When that email goes out, the media will go apeshit! The word will spread like wildfire. By this time tomorrow, every avatar in the OASIS will be headed to Chthonia.”

"Let's hope so," I said.

“Oh, they’ll show up, all right,” Art3mis said. “But how many of them will actually fight, once they see what we’re up against? Most of them will probably set up lawn chairs and eat popcorn, while they watch us get our asses kicked.”

“That is definitely a possibility,” I said. “But the clans will help us, for sure. They’ve got nothing to lose. And we don’t have to defeat the entire Sixer army. We just have a punch a hole through it, get inside the castle, and reach the gate.”

“*Three* of us have to reach the gate,” Aech said. “If only one or two of us make it inside, we’re screwed.”

“Correct,” I said. “So we should all try extremely hard not to get killed.”

Art3mis and Aech both laughed nervously. Shoto just shook his head. “Even if we get the gate open, we still have to contend with the gate itself,” he said. “It’s bound to be harder to clear than the first two.”

"Let's worry about the gate later," I said. "Once we reach it."

"Fine," Shoto said. "Let's do this thing."

“I second that,” Aech said.

“So, you two are actually gonna go along with this?” Art3mis said.

“You got a better idea, sister?” Aech asked.

She shrugged. “No. Not really.”

“Okay then,” Aech said. “It’s settled.”

I closed the email. "I'm sending each of you a copy of this message," I said. "Start sending it out tonight, to everyone on your contact list. Post it on your blogs. Broadcast it on your POV channels. We've got thirty-six hours to spread the word. That should be enough time for everyone to gear up and get their avatars to Chthonia."

"As soon as the Sixers catch wind of this, they'll start preparing for an assault," Art3mis said. "They're gonna pull out all the stops."

"They might just laugh it off," I said. "They think their shield is impregnable."

"It *is*," Art3mis said. "So I hope you're right about being able to shut it down."

"Don't worry."

"Why would I be worried?" Art3mis said. "Maybe you've forgotten, but I'm homeless and on the run for my life right now! I'm currently logged in from a public terminal at an airport, paying for bandwidth by the minute. I can't fight a war from here, much less try to clear the Third Gate. And I don't have anywhere to go."

Shoto nodded. "I don't think I can stay where I am either. I'm in a rented booth at a public manga café in Osaka. I don't have much privacy. And I don't think it's safe for me to stay here, if the Sixers have agents out looking for me."

Art3mis looked at me. "Any suggestions?"

"I hate to break it to you guys, but I'm homeless and logged in from a public terminal right now, too," I said. "I've been hiding out from the Sixers for over a year, remember?"

"I've got an RV," Aech said. "You're all welcome to crash with me. But I don't think I can make it to Columbus, Vancouver, and Japan in the next thirty-six hours."

"I think I might be able to help you guys out," a deep voice said.

We all jumped and turned around, just in time to see a tall, male, gray-haired avatar

appear directly behind us. We all recognized him immediately. It was the Great and Powerful Og. Ogden Whitmore's avatar. And he didn't materialize slowly, the way an avatar normally did when logging in to a chatroom. He simply popped into existence, as if he had been there all along, and had only now decided to make himself visible.

“Have any of you ever been to Oregon?” he said. “It's lovely this time of year.”

0032

We all stared at Ogden Morrow in stunned silence, unsure of how to react.

"How did you get in here?" Aech finally managed to ask, once he'd managed to pick his jaw up off the floor. "This is a private chatroom."

"Yes, I know," Morrow said, looking a bit embarrassed. "I'm afraid I've been eavesdropping on the four of you for quite some time now. And I hope you'll accept my sincere apologies for invading your privacy. I did it with only the best intentions, I promise you."

"With all due respect, sir," Art3mis said. "You didn't answer his question. How did you gain access to this chatroom without an invitation? And without anyone of us even knowing you were here, monitoring our conversation?"

"Forgive me," he said. "I can see why this might concern you. But you needn't worry. My avatar has many unique powers, including the ability to enter private chatrooms uninvited." As Morrow continued to talk, he walked over to one of Aech's bookshelves and began to browse through some vintage role-playing game supplements. "Prior to the original launch of the OASIS, when Jim and I created our avatars, we gave ourselves super-user access to the entire simulation. In addition to being immortal and invincible, our avatars could go pretty much anywhere and do pretty much anything. Now that Anorak is gone, my avatar is the only one with these powers."

He turned to face the four of us. "No one else has the ability to eavesdrop on you. Especially not the Sixers. OASIS chatroom encryption protocols are rock solid, I assure you." He chuckled lightly. "My presence here notwithstanding."

"He knocked over that stack of comic books!" I said to Aech. "After our first meeting in here, remember? I told you it wasn't a software glitch..."

Og nodded and gave us a guilty shrug. "That was me. I can be pretty clumsy at times."

There was another brief silence, during which I finally worked up the courage to speak to Morrow directly. "Mr. Morrow--" I began.

"Please," Morrow said, raising a hand. "Call me Og."

"All right," I said, laughing nervously. Even under the circumstances, I was completely star struck. I couldn't believe that I was actually addressing *the* Ogden Whitmore. "Og. Would you mind telling us *why* you've been eavesdropping on us?"

"Because I want to help you," he replied. "And from what I heard a moment ago, it sounds as though you could all use my help." We all exchanged nervous looks, and Og seemed to detect our negative reaction to his statement. "Please, don't misunderstand me," he continued. "I'm not going to give you any clues, or provide you with any information to help you reach the Egg. That would ruin all the fun, wouldn't it?" He walked back over to us, and his tone suddenly turned serious. "Just before he died, I promised Jim that, in his absence, I would do everything I could to protect the spirit and integrity of his contest. That's why I'm here."

"But, sir--Og," I said. "In your autobiography, you wrote that you and James Halliday didn't speak during the last ten years of his life."

Morrow gave me an amused smile. "My dear boy," he said. "You can't believe everything you read." He chuckled heartily. "Actually, that statement was mostly true. I didn't speak with

Jim for the last decade of his life. Not until just a few weeks before he died." He paused, as if calling up the memory. "At the time, I didn't even know he was sick. He just called me up out of the blue, and we met in a private chatroom, much like this one. Then he told me about his illness, the contest, and what he had planned. He was worried that there might still be a few bugs in the game, and that complications he hadn't anticipated might arise after he was gone that could prevent the contest from proceeding along the lines he'd envisioned."

"You mean like the Sixers?" Shoto asked.

"Exactly," Og said. "Like the Sixers. So Jim asked me to monitor the contest, and to intervene if it ever became necessary." He scratched his beard. "To be honest, I didn't really want the responsibility. But it was the dying wish of my oldest friend, so I agreed. And for the past six years, I've watched from the sidelines. And even though the Sixers have done everything to stack the odds against you, somehow you four have persevered. You've beaten them every step of the way, so I didn't think I needed to step in. But now, after hearing you describe your current circumstances, I think the time has finally come for me to take action, to maintain the integrity of Jim's game."

Art3mis, Shoto, Aech and I all exchanged looks of amazement, as if seeking reassurance from one another that this was all really happening.

"I want to offer the four of you sanctuary at my home here in Oregon," Og said. "From here, you'll be able to execute your plan and complete your quest in safety, without having to worry about Sixer agents tracking you down and kicking in your door. I can provide each of you with a state-of-the-art immersion rig, a fiber-optic connection to the OASIS, and anything else you might need."

Another stunned silence. "Thank you, sir!" I finally blurted out, resisting the urge to fall

to my knees and bow repeatedly.

"It's the least I can do."

"That's an incredibly kind offer, Mr. Morrow," Shoto said. "But I live in Japan."

"I know, Shoto," Og said. "I've already chartered a private jet for you. It's waiting at the Osaka airport. If you send me your current location, I'll arrange for a limo to pick you up and take you to the runway."

Shoto was speechless for a second, then he bowed low. "Arrigato, Morrow-san."

"Don't mention it, kid." He turned to Art3mis. "Young lady, I understand that you're currently at the Vancouver airport? I've made travel arrangements for you, as well. A driver is currently waiting for you in the baggage claim area, holding a sign with the name 'Benatar' on it. He'll take you to the plane I've chartered for you."

For a second I thought Art3mis might bow, too. But then she ran over and threw her arms around Og in a bear hug. "Thank you, Og," she said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome, dear," he said with an embarrassed laugh. When she finally released him, he turned to Aech and I. "Aech, I understand that you have a vehicle, and that you're currently in the vicinity of Pittsburgh?" Aech nodded. "If you wouldn't mind driving to Columbus to retrieve your friend Parzival here, I'll arrange for a jet to pick up both of you at the Columbus airport. That is, if you boys don't mind sharing a ride?"

"No, that sounds perfect," Aech said, glancing at me sideways. "Thanks, Og."

"Yes, thank you," I repeated. "You're a life saver."

"I hope so, lad." He gave me a grim smile, then turned to address everyone. "Safe travels, all of you. I'll see you soon." And then he vanished, just as he had appeared.

"Well, this blows," I said, turning to Aech. "Art3mis and Shoto get limos, and I have to

bum a ride to airport with your ugly ass? In some shitheap RV?"

"It's not a shitheap," Aech said, laughing. "And you're welcome to take a cab, dickhead."

"This is gonna be interesting," I said, stealing a quick glance at Art3mis. "The four of us are finally going to meet in person."

"It will be an honor," Shoto said. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Yeah," Art3mis said, locking eyes with me. "I can't wait."

#

After Shoto and Art3mis logged out, I told Aech my current location. "It's a Plug franchise. Call me when you get here, and I'll meet you out front."

"Will do," he said. "Listen, I should warn you. I don't look anything like my avatar."

"So? Who does? I'm not really this tall. Or muscular. And my nose is slightly bigger--"

"I'm just warning you. Meeting me might be... kind of a shock for you."

"Okay. Then why don't you just tell me what you look like right now?"

"I'm already on the road," he said, ignoring my question. "I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

"Okay. Drive safe, amigo."

Knowing that I was about to meet Aech in person after all these years made me more nervous than I wanted to admit. But it was nothing compared to apprehension I already felt building inside me at the prospect of meeting Art3mis once we reached Oregon. Trying to picture the actual moment filled me with a mixture of excitement and terror. Eventually, I forced myself to put it out of my mind, so that I could focus on the approaching battle.

As soon as I logged out of Aech's Basement, I started sending my "Call to Arms" email to everyone on my contact list and posted it to all of the Gunter message boards. I also made a

short vidcap recording of my avatar reading it aloud and set it to run on a continuous loop on my POV channel.

The word spread quickly. Within an hour, our plan to assault Castle Anorak was the top story on every single newsfeed, accompanied by headlines like *GUNTERS DECLARE ALL OUT WAR ON THE SIXERS* and *TOP GUNTERS ACCUSE IOI OF KIDNAPPING AND MURDER* and *IS THE HUNT FOR HALLIDAY'S EGG FINALLY OVER?*

Some of the newsfeeds were already running the video clip of Daito's murder I'd sent them, along with the text of Sorrento's memo, citing an "anonymous source" for both. So far, IOI had declined to comment on either. By now, Sorrento would know that I'd somehow gained access to the Sixers' private database and everything it contained, and that I'd managed to take at least some of that data with me. I wished I could see his face when he learned how I'd done it--by masquerading as an indent for an entire week, just a few floors below his office.

I spent the next few hours outfitting my avatar and preparing myself mentally for what was to come. When I could no longer keep my eyes open, I decided to catch a quick nap while I waited for Aech to arrive. I disabled the auto-logout feature on my account, then drifted off in the haptic chair, with my new jacket draped over me as a blanket, clutching the pistol I'd purchased earlier that day in one hand.

#

I woke with a start some time later, to the sound of Aech's ringtone. He was calling to let me know he'd arrived outside. I told him I'd be right out. Then I climbed out of the rig, collected my things, and returned the rented gear at the front desk. When I stepped out into the street, I saw that night had fallen. The frozen air hit me like a bucket of ice water.

Aech's tiny RV was just a few yards away, parked at the curb. It was a mocha-colored SunRider, about twenty feet long, and at least two decades old. A patchwork of solar cells

covered the RV's roof and most of its body, along with a liberal amount of rust. The windows were tinted black, so I couldn't see inside.

I took a deep breath and crossed the slush-covered sidewalk, feeling a strange combination of dread and excitement. As I approached the RV, a door near the center of the right side slid open and a short stepladder extended to the pavement. I climbed inside and the door slid shut behind me. I found myself in the RV's tiny kitchen. It was dark, except for the running lights set into the carpeted floor. To my left, I saw a small bedroom area at the back of the RV, wedged into a loft above the RV's battery compartment. I turned and walked slowly across the darkened kitchen, then pulled back the beaded curtain that covered the doorway to the cab.

A heavysset African-American girl sat in the RV's driver seat, clutching the wheel tightly and staring straight ahead. She was about my age, with short, kinky hair, and chocolate colored skin that appeared iridescent in the soft glow of the dashboard indicators. She was wearing a vintage Rush 2112 concert T-shirt, and the numbers were warped around her large bosom. She also had on faded black jeans, and a pair of studded combat boots. She appeared to be shivering, even though it was nice and warm in the cab.

I stood there for a moment, staring at her in silence, waiting for her to acknowledge my presence. Eventually, she turned and smiled at me, and it was a smile that I recognized immediately. The same Cheshire grin I'd seen thousands of times before, on the face of Aech's avatar, during the countless nights we'd spent together in the OASIS, telling bad jokes and watching bad movies. And her smile wasn't the only thing I found familiar. I also recognized the set of her eyes and the lines of her face. There was no doubt in my mind. The young woman sitting in front of me was my best friend, Aech.

When I didn't say anything, her eyes dropped to her boots and stayed on them. I sat down

heavily in the passenger seat, still staring over at her, still unsure of what to say. She kept stealing glances at me, then her eyes would dart away nervously.

I couldn't help myself. I started to laugh. There was no meanness in it, and I knew she could tell that, because her shoulders relaxed a bit and she let out a relieved sigh. Then she started to laugh, too. Half laughing and half crying, I think.

"Hey, Aech," I said, once our laughter subsided. "How goes it?"

"It's going good, Z," she said. "All sunshine and rainbows." Her voice was familiar, too. Just not quite as deep as it was online. All of this time, she'd been using software to disguise it.

"Well," I said. "Look at us. Here we are."

"Yeah," Aech replied. "Here we are."

An uncomfortable silence descended. I hesitated a moment, unsure of what to do. Then I followed my instincts, crossed the short distance between us, and put my arms around her. "It's good to see you, old friend," I said. "Thanks for coming to get me."

She returned the hug, and as she did, I realized that it was the first time another human being had hugged me since my mother had died when I was kid. "It's good to see you, too," she said. And I could tell that she meant it.

I let go of her and stepped back. "Christ, Aech," I said, smiling. "I knew you were hiding something. But I never imagined . . ."

"What?" she said, a bit defensively. "You never imagined what?"

"That the famous Aech, renowned gunter and the most feared and ruthless arena combatant in the entire OASIS, was, in reality, a . . ."

"A fat black chick?"

"I was going to say 'young African-American woman.'"

Her expression darkened. “There’s a reason I never told you, you know.”

“And I’m sure it’s a good one,” I said. “But it really doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Of course not. You’re my best friend, Aech. My *only* friend, to be honest.”

“Well, I still want to explain.”

“Okay. But can it wait until we’re in the air?” I said. “We’ve got a long way to travel. And I’ll feel a lot safer once we’ve left this city in the dust.”

“We’re on our way, amigo,” she said. She put the RV in gear and pulled away from the curb.

#

Aech followed Og’s directions to a private hanger near the Columbus airport, where a small luxury jet was waiting for us. Og had arranged for Aech’s RV to be stored in a nearby hangar, but it had been her home for many years, and I could tell she was nervous about leaving it behind.

We both stared at the jet in wonder as we approached it. I’d seen airplanes in the sky before, of course, but I’d never seen one up close. Traveling by jet was something that only rich people could afford to do. The fact that Og could afford to charter three different jets to retrieve us without batting an eyelash was a testament to just how insanely wealthy he must be.

The jet was completely automated, so there was no crew on board. We were all alone. The placid voice of the autopilot welcomed us aboard, then told us to strap in and prepare for takeoff. We were up in the air within minutes.

It was the first time either of us had ever flown, and we both spent the first hour of the flight staring out the windows, overwhelmed by the view, as we hurtled westward through the

atmosphere at ten-thousand feet, on our way to Oregon. But we'd been in the air for a few hours now, and some of the novelty had worn off. We'd both relaxed and I could tell that Aech was ready to talk.

“Okay, Aech,” I said. “Tell me your story.”

She flashed her Cheshire grin and took a deep breath. “The whole thing was originally my mother’s idea,” she said. Then she launched into an abbreviated version of her life story. Her real name, she said, was Helen Harrison, and she was only a few months older than me. She’d grown up in Atlanta, raised by a single mother. Her father had died in Afghanistan when she was still a baby. Her mother, Marie, worked from home, in an online data processing center. In Marie’s opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given.

When Aech first logged in to the OASIS, she followed her mother’s advice and created a Caucasian male avatar. “H” had been her mother’s nickname for her since she was a baby, so she'd decided to use it as the name of her online persona. A few years later, when she started attending school online, her mother lied about her daughter's race and gender on the application. Aech was required to provide a photo for her school profile, so she’d submitted a photorealistic rendering of her male avatar's face, which she'd modeled after her own features.

Aech told me that she hadn't seen or spoken to her mother since leaving home on her eighteenth birthday. That was the day Aech had finally come out to her mother about her sexuality. At first, her mother refused to believe that she was gay. But then Helen revealed that she’d been dating a girl she met online for nearly a year.

As Aeche explained all of this, I could tell she was studying my reaction. I wasn't all that surprised, really. Over the past few years, Aeche and I had discussed our mutual admiration for the female form on numerous occasions. Sometimes, when we'd been watching old movies together, we would both whistle in unison at some cute actress. I was actually relieved to know that Aeche hadn't been deceiving me, at least not on that account. Even though "he" was actually a she, she really did share my affinity for girls.

"How did your mother react when she found out you had a girlfriend?" I asked.

"Well, it turns out that my mother had her own set of deep-seated prejudices," Aeche said. "She kicked me out of the house and said she never wanted to see me again. I was homeless for little awhile. I lived in a series of shelters. But eventually I earned enough competing in the OASIS arena leagues to buy my RV, and I've been living in it ever since. I usually only stop moving when the RV's batteries need to recharge."

As we continued to talk, going through the motions of getting to know each other, we both realized that we already *did* know each other, as well as any two people could. We'd known each other for years, in the most intimate way possible. We'd connected on a purely mental level. I understood her, trusted her, and loved her as a dear friend. None of that had changed, or could be changed by anything as inconsequential as her gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation.

The rest of the flight seemed to go by in a blink. Aeche and I quickly fell into our old familiar rhythm, and before long it was like we were back in the Basement, trash talking each other over a game Quake or Joust. Any fears I had about the resiliency our friendship in the real world had vanished by the time our jet touched down on Og's private runway in Oregon.

We'd been flying west across the country, just a few hours ahead of the sunrise, so it was still dark when we landed. Aeche and I both froze in our tracks as we stepped off the plane,

gazing in wonder at the scene around us. Even in the dim moonlight, the view was breathtaking. The dark, towering silhouettes of the Wallowa mountains surrounded us on all sides. Rows of blue runway lights stretched out along the valley floor behind us, delineating a rectangular swath that had been cut out of the forest to make room for the landing strip. Directly ahead, a steep cobblestone staircase at the edge of the runway led up to a grand, floodlit mansion constructed on a plateau near the base of the mountain range. Several waterfalls were visible in the distance, spilling off the peaks beyond Morrow's mansion.

"It looks just like Rivendell," Aech said, taking the words right out of my mouth.

I nodded. "It looks exactly like the depiction of Rivendell in the *Lord of the Rings* movies," I said, still staring up at it in awe. "Og's wife was a big Tolkien fan, remember? He built this place for her."

We heard an electric hum behind us, as the jet's staircase retracted and the hatch closed. Then the engines powered back up and the jet rotated, preparing to take off again. We stood and watched it launch back up into the clear, starry sky. Then we turned and began to mount the staircase leading up to the house. When we finally reached the top, Ogden Morrow was there waiting for us.

"Welcome, my friends!" Og bellowed, extending both his hands in greeting. He was dressed in a plaid bathrobe and bunny slippers. "Welcome to my home!"

"Thank you, sir," Aech said. "Thanks for inviting us here."

"Ah, you must be Aech," he replied, clasping her hand. If he was surprised by her appearance, he didn't show it. "I recognize your voice." He gave her wink, followed by a bear hug. Then he turned and me hugged me, too. "And you must be Wade--I mean, Parzival! Welcome! Welcome! It's truly an honor to meet you both!"

"The honor is ours," I said. "We really can't thank you enough for helping us."

"You've already thanked me enough, so stop it!" he said. Then he turned and led us across an expansive green lawn, toward his enormous house. "I can't tell you how good it is to have visitors. Sad to say, I've been alone here since Kira died." He was silent a moment, then suddenly laughed. "Alone, except for all of my cooks, maids, and gardeners of course. But they all live here, too, so they don't really count as visitors."

Neither I or Aech knew how to reply, so we just kept smiling and nodding. Eventually, I worked up the courage to speak. "Have the others arrived yet? Shoto and Art3mis?"

Something about the way I said "Art3mis" made Morrow chuckle, long and loud. After a few seconds, I realized Aech was laughing at me, too.

"What?" I said. "What's so funny?"

"Yes," Og said, grinning. "Art3mis arrived first, several hours ago, and Shoto's plane got here about thirty minutes before you arrived."

"Are we going to meet them now?" I asked, doing an extremely poor job of hiding my apprehension.

Og shook his head. "Art3mis felt that meeting you two right now would be an unnecessary distraction. She wanted to wait until after the 'big event.' And Shoto seemed to agree." He studied me for a moment. "It probably *is* for the best, you know. You've all got a big day ahead of you."

I nodded, feeling a strange combination of relief and disappointment.

"Where are they now?" Aech asked.

Og raised a fist triumphantly in the air. "They're already logged in, preparing for your assault on the Sixers!" His voice echoed across the grounds and off the high stone walks of his

mansion. "Follow me! The hour draws near!"

Og's enthusiasm pulled me back into the moment, and I felt a nervous knot form in the pit of my stomach. We followed our bathrobed benefactor across the expansive moonlit courtyard. As we approached the main house, we passed a small gated-in garden, filled with flowers. The garden was in a strange location, and I couldn't figure out its purpose, until I saw the large tombstone at its center. Then I realized it must be Kira Morrow's grave. But even in the bright moonlight, it was still too dark for me to make out the inscription on the headstone.

Og led us through mansion's lavish front entrance. The lights were off inside, but instead of turning them on, Morrow took an honest-to-god *torch* off the wall and used it to illuminate our way. Even in dim torchlight, I could see the grandeur of the place. Giant tapestries and a huge collection of fantasy artwork covered the walls, while gargoyle statues and suits of armor lined the hallways.

We rounded a corner and Aech and I both froze before the entrance of a giant room, filled with row after row of old video games. We both knew it must be James Halliday's classic video collection--the collection he'd willed to Morrow after his death. Og glanced around and saw us lingering by the entrance, then hurried back to retrieve us.

"I promise to give you a tour later, when all the excitement is over," Og said, his breathing a bit labored. He was moving quickly for a man his age and size. He led us down spiral stone staircase to an elevator, which carried us down several more floors to Og's basement. The décor here was much more modern. We followed Og through a maze of carpeted hallways, until we reached a row of seven circular doorways, each numbered.

"And here we are!" Morrow said, gesturing with the torch. "These are my OASIS immersion bays. They're all top of the line Habashaw rigs. OIR-9400s."

"9400s? No kidding?" Aech let out a low whistle. "Wicked."

"Where are the others?" I asked, looking around nervously.

"Art3mis and Shoto are already in Bays Two and Three," he said. "Bay One is mine. You two can take your pick of the others."

I stared at each of the doors, wondering which one Art3mis was behind.

Og motioned to the end of the hall. "You'll find haptic suits of all sizes in the dressing rooms. Now, get yourselves suited and booted!"

He smiled wide when Aech and I emerged from the dressing rooms a few minutes later, each dressed in brand new haptic suits and gloves. "Everything fit okay?" Og asked.

We both nodded. "This suit couldn't fit any better if it had been tailored," I said.

"Excellent! Now grab a bay and log in," he said. "The clock is ticking!"

Aech turned face me. I could tell she wanted to say something, but words seemed to fail her. After a few seconds she stuck out her gloved hand. I took it.

"Good luck, Aech," I said.

"Good luck, Z," she replied. Then she turned to Og and said, "Thanks again, Og." Then, before he could respond, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. Then she disappeared through the door to bay three and it hissed shut behind her.

Og grinned after her, then turned to face me. "The whole world is rooting for the four of you, my boy. Try not to let them down."

"We'll do our best."

"I know you will." He offered me his hand and I shook it.

"Can I ask you one question?" I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "If you're going to ask me what's inside the Third Gate, I have no

idea," he said. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You should know that..."

I shook my head. "No, that's not it. I wanted to ask what it was that ended your friendship with Halliday? In all the research I've done, I've never been able to find that out. What happened?"

Morrow studied me for a moment. He'd been asked this question in interviews many times before and had always ignored it. But I could see that he wanted to tell me. That he'd been waiting all these years to tell someone.

"It was because of Kira. My wife." He paused a moment, then cleared his throat and continued. "Like me, he'd been in love with her since high school. Of course, he never had the courage to act on it. So she never knew how he felt about her. And neither did I. He didn't tell me about it until the last time I spoke to him, right before he died. Even then, it was hard for him to communicate it to me. Jim was never very good with people, or with expressing his emotions."

I nodded silently, then waited for him to continue.

"Even after Kira and I got engaged, I think Jim still harbored some fantasy of stealing her away from me. But once we got married, he abandoned that notion. He told that he stopped speaking to me because of the overwhelming jealousy he felt. Kira was the only woman he ever loved." Morrow's voice caught in his throat. "I can understand why Jim felt that way. Kira was very special. It was impossible not to fall in love with her." He smiled at me. "You know what it's like to meet someone like that, don't you?"

"I do," I said. Then, when I realized that he had no more to say on the subject, I said, "Thank you, Mr. Morrow. Thank you for telling me all of that."

"You're quite welcome, my boy," he said. Then he walked over to his immersion bay and the door irised open. "Good luck, Parzival. You're gonna need it."

“What are you going to do?” I asked. “During the fight?”

“I’m going to sit back and watch, of course!” he said. “I have a feeling that this is going to be the most epic battle in video game history.” And then he stepped through the door and was gone, leaving me alone in the dimly lit hallway.

I spent a few minutes thinking about everything Morrow had told me. Then I walked over to my own immersion bay and stepped inside.

It was a small spherical room. A gleaming haptic chair was suspended on a jointed hydraulic arm attached to the ceiling, and it retracted into the curved surface of the sphere whenever it was not in use. There was no omni-directional treadmill, because the room itself served that function. While you were logged in, you could walk or run in any direction and the sphere would rotate around and beneath you, preventing you from ever touching the wall. It was like being inside a giant hamster ball.

I climbed into the chair and felt it adjust to fit the contours of my body. A robotic arm extended from the chair and slipped a brand new Oculance™ visor onto my face. It, too, adjusted so that it fit perfectly. The visor scanned my retinas and then the system prompted me for my passphrase.

I took a deep breath and logged in.

0033

I was ready to rock.

My avatar was buffed to the eyeballs and armed to the teeth. I was packing as many magic items and as much firepower as I could squeeze into my inventory.

Everything was in place. Our plan was in motion. It was time to go.

I entered my stronghold's hangar and pressed a button on the wall to open the launch doors. They slid back, slowly revealing the launch tunnel leading up into Falco's surface. I walked to end of the runway, past my X-Wing and the *Vonnegut*. I wouldn't be taking either of them today. They were both good ships, with formidable weapons and defenses, but neither craft would offer much protection in the epic shitstorm that was about to unfold on Chthonia. Fortunately, I now had a new mode of transportation.

I removed the twelve-inch Leopardon robot from my avatar's inventory and set it down gently on the runway. Shortly before I was arrested by IOI, I'd taken some time to examine the toy Leopardon robot and ascertain its powers. As I suspected, the robot was actually an artifact. It hadn't taken me long to figure out the command word required to activate it. In Toei's original Supaida-Man TV series, Spidey had summoned the robot simply by shouting its name. I did this now, taking the precaution of backing away from the robot a good distance before shouting

"Leopardan!"

There was a piercing shriek that sounded like rending metal as the tiny robot suddenly grew in size to a height of almost a hundred meters. The top of the robot's head protruded through the open launch doors in the hangar ceiling.

I gazed up at the statuesque robot, admiring the attention to detail Halliday had put into coding it. Every feature of the original Japanese robot had been recreated, including its giant gleaming sword and spiderweb-embossed shield. A tiny access door was set into the robot's massive left foot, and it opened as I approached, revealing a small elevator inside. It carried me up through the interior of the robot's leg and torso, to the cockpit located inside the robot's armored chest. I seated myself in the captain's chair. There was a silver control bracelet in a clear case on the wall. I took it out and snapped it on to my avatar's wrist. The bracelet would allow me to use voice commands to control the robot while I was outside it.

There were several rows of buttons set into the command console in front of me, all labeled in Japanese. I pressed one of them and the engines roared to life. Then I hit the throttle and the twin rocket boosters in each of the robot's feet ignited, launching it upwards, out of my stronghold and into Falco's star-filled sky.

For kicks, Halliday had added an old 8-track tape player to the cockpit control panel. There was also a rack of 8-track tapes was mounted over my right shoulder. I grabbed one and slapped it into the deck. *Dirty Deeds* by AC/DC began to blast out of the robot's internal and external speakers, so loudly that it made my chair vibrate.

As soon as the robot was clear of my hangar, I shouted "Change Marveller!" into the control bracelet (the voice commands only worked if you shouted them). The robot's legs, arms, and head folded inward and locked into new positions, transforming the robot into a starship

known as the "Marveller." Once the transformation was complete, I left Falco's orbit and set a course for the nearest stargate.

When emerged from the stargate in Sector 11, my radar screen lit up like a Christmas tree. The sky around me was filled with thousands of ships. Space vehicles of every make and model were crawling through the starry blackness. Everything from single-seater craft to giant moon-sized freighters. I'd never seen so many spacecraft in one place. A steady stream of ships poured out of the stargate, while others converged on the area from every direction in the sky. All of the ships gradually funneled together, forming a long haphazard caravan of vessels stretching toward Chthonia, a tiny blue-brown orb floating in the distance. It looked like every single person in the OASIS was headed for Castle Anorak.

I transformed the Marveller back into its robot configuration, then joined the long parade of spacecraft. My ship stood out in the vast array of vessel, since I was the only one piloting a giant robot. A cloud of smaller ships quickly formed around me, piloted by curious avatars zooming in for a closer look at Leopardon. I had to mute my comlink because so many different people were trying to hail me, asking who the hell I was, and where I'd picked up such a sweet ride.

As the planet Chthonia grew larger in my cockpit window, the density and number of ships around me seemed to increase exponentially. When I finally entered the planet's atmosphere and began to descend toward the surface, it was like flying through a swarm of metal insects. When I reached the area around Castle Anorak, I had a hard time believing my eyes. A concentrated, pulsing mass of ships and avatars covered the ground and filled the air. It was like some other-worldly Woodstock. Shoulder-to-shoulder avatars stretched to the horizon in all directions. Thousands more floated and flew through the air above, dodging the constant influx

of ships. And at the center of all this insanity stood Castle Anorak itself, a onyx jewel gleaming beneath the Sixers' transparent spherical shield. Every few seconds some hapless avatar or ship would inadvertently fly or careen into the shield and get instantly vaporized, like a fly hitting a bug zapper.

When I got closer, I spotted an open patch of ground directly in front of the castle's entrance, just outside the shield wall. Three giant figures stood side-by-side at the center of the clearing. The crowd around them was continuously surging inward and then receding, as avatars pushed back against each other to try and keep a respectful distance from Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto, who each sat inside their own gleaming giant robot.

This was my first opportunity to see which robots Aech, Art3mis and Shoto had selected after clearing the Second Gate, and it took me a moment to place the towering female robot Art3mis was piloting. It was black and chrome in color, with elaborate boomerang-shaped headgear and a symmetrical red breastplates that made it look like a female version of *Tranzor Z*. Then I realized it *was* the female version of *Tranzor Z*, an obscure character from that anime series known as *Minerva X*.

Aech had selected an RX-78 Gundam mecha from the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* anime series, one of his longtime favorites. (Even though I now knew Aech was actually a female in real life, her avatar was still male, so I decided to continue to refer to him as such.)

Shoto stood several heads taller than both of them, concealed inside the cockpit of *Raideen*, the enormous red and blue robot from the mid-70's *Brave Raideen* anime series. The massive mecha clutched his signature golden bow in one hand and had a large spiked shield strapped to the other.

I headed straight for them, weaving my way through the crowded airspace above the

castle. As I got closer, a tunnel began to open in the air ahead, as ships and flying avatars spotted my approach and scrambled to clear a path for me.

A roar swept through the crowd as I flew in low over the shield and then rocketed to a halt above the others. I rotated my orientation so that Leopardon was upright, then cut the engines and dropped the remaining distance to the surface. My robot landed on one knee, and the impact shook the ground. As I stood it upright, a thunderous cheer erupted from the sea of onlookers. Then they began to chant my avatar's name. *Par-zi-val! Par-zi-val!*

As the chanting faded back to a dull roar, I turned to face my companions.

"Nice entrance, ya big show-off," Art3mis said, using our private comlink channel. "Did you show up late on purpose?"

"Not my fault, I swear," I said. "There was a long line at the stargate."

Aech nodded his mecha's massive head. "Every transport terminal on the planet has been spitting out avatars since last night," he said, motioning to scene around us with his Gundam's massive hand. "This is unreal. I've never seen so many ships or avatars in one place."

"Me neither," Art3mis said. "I'm surprised the GSS servers can handle the load, with so much activity in one sector. But there doesn't seem to be any lag at all."

I took a long look at the sea of avatars around us, then shifted my attention to the castle. Thousands of flying avatars and ships continued to buzz around the shield, occasionally firing bullets, lasers, missiles, and other projectiles at it, all of which impacted harmlessly on the surface. Inside the sphere, thousands of power-armored Sixer avatars stood in silent formation, completely encircling the castle. Interspersed through their ranks were rows of hover tanks and gunships. In any other setting, the Sixer army would have appeared formidable. Maybe even unstoppable. But in the face of the endless mob that now surrounded them, the Sixers looked

woefully outnumbered and outmatched.

"So, Parzival," said Shoto, turning his robot's huge head in my direction. "It's showtime, old friend. If that sphere doesn't come down like you promised, this is going to be pretty embarrassing."

I used my robot's right hand to tap the back of its left wrist, indicating the time. "Hold your horses. It's still six minutes to noon."

The end of my sentence was drowned out by another roar from the crowd. Directly in front of us, inside the sphere, the massive front doors of Castle Anorak had just swung open, and now a single Sixer avatar was emerging from within.

Sorrento.

Grinning at the din of booing and hissing that greeted his arrival, Sorrento waved his hand at the Sixer troops stationed directly in front of the castle and they immediately scattered, clearing a large open space. Sorrento stepped forward into it, positioning himself directly opposite us, just a few dozen yards away, on the other side of the shield. Ten other Sixer avatars then emerged from the castle and positioned themselves behind Sorrento, each of them standing a good distance apart.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Art3mis muttered into her headset.

"Yeah," Aech whispered. "Me too."

Sorrento surveyed the scene, then smiled up at us. When he spoke, his voice was amplified through powerful speakers mounted on the Sixer gunships and hover tanks, allowing him to be heard by everyone in the area. And since there were cameras and reporters from every major newsfeed outlet present, I knew that his words were being broadcast to the entire the world.

"Welcome to Castle Anorak," Sorrento said. "We've been expecting you." He made a

sweeping gesture, indicating the angry mob that surrounded him. "I must say, we are a bit surprised that so many of you showed up here tonight. By now it must be obvious, to even the most ignorant among you, that nothing can get past our shield."

His proclamation was met with a deafening roar of shouted threats, insults, and colorful profanity. I waited a moment, then raised both of my robot's hand, calling for quiet. Once a semblance of silence had descended, I got on the public comm channel, which had the same effect as turning on a giant PA system. I dialed my headset volume down to kill the feedback, then said: "You're wrong, Sorrento. We're coming in. At noon. All of us."

A roar of approval erupted from the assembled gunters. Sorrento didn't bother waiting for it to die down. "You're welcome to try," he said, still grinning. Then he produced an item from his inventory and placed it on the ground in front of him. I zoomed in for a closer look and felt the muscles in my jaw tighten. It was a toy robot. A bipedal dinosaur with armor plated skin and a pair of large cannons mounted on its shoulder blades. I recognized it immediately, from several turn-of-the-century Japanese monster flicks.

It was Mechagodzilla.

"*Kiryu!*" Sorrento shouted, his voice still amplified. At the sound of the command word, his tiny artifact instantly grew in size, until it stood almost as tall as Castle Anorak itself, twice the height of the "giant" robots that Aech, Shoto, Art3mis, and I piloted. The top of the mechanical lizard's armored head almost touched the top of spherical shield.

An awestruck silence fell over the crowd, followed by a rumble of fearful recognition from the thousands of gunters who were present. They all recognized this giant metal behemoth. And they all knew it was nearly indestructible.

Sorrento entered the mecha through an access door in one of its massive heels. A few

seconds later, the beast came to life. Its eyes began to glow bright yellow and then it threw back its head, opened its jagged maw, and let out piercing metallic roar.

On cue, the ten Sixer avatars standing behind Sorrento pulled out their toy robot artifacts and activated them, too. Five of them had the huge robotic lions that could form *Voltron*. The other five had giant mechs from *Robotech* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

"*Oh shit*," I heard Art3mis and Aech whisper in unison.

"Come on!" Sorrento shouted defiantly. His challenge echoed across the crowded landscape.

Many of the gunters on the front lines took an involuntary step backwards. A few others turned and ran for their lives. But Aech, Shoto, Art3mis, and I held our ground.

I checked the time on my display. Less than a minute to go now. I pressed a button on Leopardon's control panel, and my giant robot drew its gleaming sword.

#

I didn't witness it first hand, but I can tell you with some certainty that this is what happened next:

The immense gold-lined foyer inside Castle Anorak was filled with palettes of weapons and battle gear that had been teleported in by the Sixers before they activated their shield. There was also a long rack of thirty Supply Droids, which had been installed along the foyer's eastern wall. Due to a lack of imagination on the part of the Supply Droids' original designer, they all looked exactly like the robot "Johnny Five" from the 1986 film *Short Circuit*. Supply Droids were workhorse robots. The Sixers used them primarily as gofers, to run errands and fill equipment and ammo requisitions, to resupply the troops stationed outside.

At exactly one minute to noon, one of the Supply Droids, designation SD-03, powered

itself on and then disengaged from its charging dock. Then it rolled forward on its tank treads, across the polished marble floor, to a makeshift armory that had been installed in a nearby antechamber. Two robotic sentries stood outside the armory's entrance. SD-03 transmitted its equipment requisition order to them--an order that I myself had submitted on the Sixer intranet two days earlier. The sentries verified the requisition and stepped aside, permitting SD-03 to roll into the armory. It continued past long storage racks that held a wide array of weaponry: magic swords, shields, powered armor suits, plasma rifles, rail guns, and countless other weapons. Finally, the droid reached the storage rack it was looking for and slid to a stop. The rack in front of it held five large octahedron-shaped devices, each roughly the size of a soccer ball. Each device had a small control panel set into one of its eight sides, along with a serial number. SD-03 found the serial number that matched the one on my requisition form. Then, following a set of instructions I'd programmed into it when I still had access to the IOI intranet, the little droid used its clawlike index finger to enter a series of commands on the device's control panel. When it finished, a small light above the keypad turned from green to red. Then SD-03 lifted the octahedron in its arms. As it exited the armory, one *Antimatter Friction-Induction Bomb* was subtracted from the Sixers' computerized inventory.

SD-03 then climbed a series of stone staircases, making its way to the highest level of the castle. Along the way, it rolled through several security checkpoints. Each time, robotic sentries scanned its security clearance and found that the droid was allowed to go anywhere it damn well pleased. When SD-03 reached Castle Anorak's uppermost level, it rolled out on to a large observation platform located there.

At this point, SD-03 may have drawn a few curious looks from the squadron of elite Sixer avatars who were guarding the platform. I have no way of knowing. But even if the guards

somehow anticipated what was about to happen and opened fire on the little droid, it was already too late for them to stop it now.

SD-03 continued rolling directly to the center of the roof, where a high-level Sixer wizard sat, holding the *Orb of Osuvov*--the artifact generating the spherical shield around the castle.

Then, executing the last of the instructions I'd programmed into it two days earlier, SD-03 lifted the antimatter friction-induction bomb it was carrying up over its head and detonated it.

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The explosion vaporized the supply droid, along with all of the avatars stationed on the platform, including the Sixer wizard who was operating the *Orb of Osuvox*. The moment he died, the artifact deactivated and fell to the now-empty platform.

A brilliant flash of light accompanied the detonation, momentarily blinding me. When it receded, my eyes focused back on the castle. The shield was down. Now, nothing separated the mighty Sixer and Gunter armies but open ground and empty space.

For about five seconds, nothing happened. Time seemed to stop and everything was silent and still. Then the silence ended abruptly, and all hell broke loose.

Sitting alone in the cockpit of my mech, I let out a silent cheer. Incredibly, my plan had worked. But I had no time to celebrate, because I was now standing smack dab in the middle of the largest battle in the history of the OASIS.

I don't know what I expected to happen next. I'd hoped that maybe a tenth of the gunters present would join our assault on the Sixers. But in seconds it was obvious that every single one of them intended to join the fight. The moment the shield went down, a fierce battle cry rose from the sea of avatars around us and then they all surged forward, converging on the Sixer army from all directions. Their total lack of hesitation astounded me, because it was obvious that many

of them were rushing toward certain death.

I watched in amazement as the two mighty forces clashed all around me, on the ground and in the sky. It was a chaotic, breathtaking scene, like several bee hives and wasp nests had been smashed together and then dropped onto a giant anthill.

Art3mis, Aeche, Shoto, and I stood at the center of it all. At first, I didn't even move, for fear of crushing the wave of gunters swarming around and over my robot's feet. Sorrento, however, didn't wait for anyone to get out of his way. He crushed several dozen avatars (including a few of his own troops) under his mech's titanic feet as he lumbered toward us, each of his footfalls creating a small crater in the rocky surface.

"Uh oh," I heard Shoto mutter, as his mech assumed a defensive posture. "Here he comes."

The Sixer mechs were already taking an immense amount of fire from all directions. Sorrento was getting hit more than anyone, because his mech was the biggest target on the battlefield, and every gunter with a ranged weapon couldn't seem to resist taking a shot at him. The intense barrage of projectiles, fireballs, magic missiles, and laser bolts quickly destroyed or disabled the other Sixer mechs (who never even got a chance to form Voltron). But Sorrento's robot somehow remained undamaged. Every projectile that hit him seemed to ricochet harmlessly off his mecha's armored body. Dozens of spacecraft swooped and buzzed around Sorrento, peppering his mech with rocket fire, but their attacks also seemed to have little effect.

"It is *on*!" Aeche shouted into his comlink. "It is *on* like Red Dawn!" And with that, he unleashed all of his Gundam's considerable firepower at Sorrento. At the same moment, Shoto began firing Raideen's bow, while Art3mis's mech fired some sort of red energy beam, which appeared to originate from Minerva X's giant metal breasts. Not wanting to be left out, I fired

Leopardon's *Arc Turn* weapon, a gold boomerang that launched from the mech's forehead.

All of our attacks were direct hits, but Art3mis's beam weapon was the only one that seemed to do any real damage to Sorrento. She blasted a chunk out of the metal lizard's right shoulder blade and disabled the cannon mounted there. But this didn't slow Sorrento down much. As he continued to close in on us, the Mechagodzilla's eyes began to glow a bright blue. Then Sorrento opened its mouth and a cascading bolt of blue lightning shot outward from the mech's open maw. The beam struck the ground directly in front of us, then cut a deep smoking furrow in the earth as it continued to sweep forward, vaporizing every avatar and ship in its path. I narrowly escaped a direct hit. But all four of us managed to leap out of the way, by launching our robots skyward. The lightning weapon shut down a second later, but Sorrento continued to trudge forward. I noticed that his mech's eyes were no longer glowing blue. Apparently, his lightning weapon had to recharge.

"I think we've reached the final boss," Aech joked over the comlink. The four of us were now spread out and circling above Sorrento, making ourselves moving targets.

"Screw this, guys," I said. "I don't think we can destroy that thing."

"Astute observation, Z," Art3mis said. "Got any bright ideas?"

I thought for a second. "How about I distract him, while the three of you cut around and head for the castle entrance?"

"Sounds like a plan," Shoto replied. But instead of heading for the castle, he banked and flew strait at Sorrento, closing the distance between them in the space of a few seconds.

"Go!" he shouted into his comlink. "This bastard is all mine!"

Aech cut across Sorrento's right flank and Art3mis banked left, while I rocketed upward and over him. Below me, I could see Shoto facing off against Sorrento, and the difference in the

size of their mechs was disturbing. Shoto's robot looked like an action figure next to Sorrento's massive metal dragon. Nevertheless, Shoto cut his thrusters and dropped to the ground directly in front of the Mechagodzilla.

“Hurry,” I heard Aech shout. “The castle entrance is wide open!”

From my vantage point in the sky above, I could see that the Sixer forces surrounded the castle were already being overrun by the endless mob enemy avatars. The Sixers’ lines were broken, and hundreds of gunters were streaming past them now, running up to the open castle entrance, only to discover once they reached it that they couldn't cross the threshold because they didn't possess a copy of the Crystal Key. There was huge clot of avatars at the entrance, all trying in vain to get inside.

I saw Aech swing around directly in front of me, then pop the hatch of her Gundam's cockpit and leap out, whispering the artifact's command word in the same instant. As the giant robot shrunk back to its original size, she snatched it out of the air and stowed it in her inventory. Now flying by some magical means, Aech's avatar swooped down, passing over the bottleneck of gunters clustered at the castle entrance, and then disappeared through the open double doors.

A second later, Art3mis executed a similar maneuver, stowing her own mech in mid-air and then flying into the castle right behind Aech.

I dropped Leopardon into a sharp dive and prepared to follow them.

“Shoto,” I shouted into my comm. “We're going inside now! Let's go!”

“Go ahead,” Shoto replied. "I'll be right behind you." But something about the tone of his voice bothered me, and I pulled out of my dive and swung my mech back around. Shoto was hovering above Sorrento, near his right flank. Sorrento slowly turned his mech around and began to stomp back toward the castle. I could see now that his mech's weakness was its speed. The

Mechagodzilla's slow movement and attacks counterbalanced its seeming invulnerability.

“Shoto!” I shouted. “What are you waiting for? Let's go!”

“Go on without me,” Shoto said. “I owe this son of a bitch some payback.”

Before I could reply, Shoto dove at Sorrento, swinging a giant sword in each of his mech's hands. The blades both cut into Sorrento's right side, creating a shower of sparks, and, to my surprise, they actually did some damage. When the smoke cleared I saw that the Mechagodzilla's right arm now hung limp. It was nearly severed at the elbow.

“Looks like you'll be wiping with your left hand now, Sorrento!” Shoto shouted triumphantly. Then he fired Raideen's boosters and headed in my direction, toward the castle. But Sorrento had already swiveled his mecha's head around and was now taking a bead on Shoto with two glowing blue eyes.

“Shoto!” I shouted. “Look out!” But my voice was drowned out by the sound of the lightning weapon, firing out of the metal dragon's mouth. It nailed Shoto's mech directly in the center of its back, and it suddenly exploded in an orange ball of fire.

There was a brief screech of static on the comm channel. I called out Shoto's name again, but he didn't reply. Then a message flashed on my display, informing me that Shoto's name has just disappeared from the Scoreboard.

He was dead.

This realization momentarily stunned me, which was unfortunate, because Sorrento's lightning weapon was still firing, moving in a fast sweeping arc, cutting across the ground, then diagonally up the castle wall, toward me. I finally reacted--too late--and Sorrento nailed my mech in the lower torso, just a split second before the beam cut off.

I looked down to discover that the bottom half of my robot had just been blasted away.

Every warning indicator in my cockpit began to flash, as my mech began to fall out of the sky in two smoking, burning halves.

Somehow, I had the presence of mind to reach up and yank the ejection handle above my seat. The cockpit canopy popped off and I jumped free of the falling mech, a split second before it impacted on the castle steps, killing several dozen of the avatars crowded there.

I fired my avatar's jetboots just before I hit the ground, then quickly adjusted my immersion rig's control setup, because I was now controlling my avatar instead of a giant robot. I managed to land on my feet in front of the castle, just clear of Leopardon's flaming wreckage. A second after I landed, I saw a shadow spill over me, and turned around to see Sorrento's mecha blotting out the sky. He raised his mecha's massive left foot, preparing to crush me.

I took three running steps and jumped, firing my jetboots in mid-leap. The thrust threw me clear, just as the Mechagodzilla's huge clawed foot slammed down, forming a crater in the spot where I'd stood a second before. The metal beast let out another ear-splitting shriek, followed by hollow, booming laughter. Sorrento's laughter.

I cut my jetboot's thrusters and tucked my avatar into a ball. I hit the ground rolling, tumbled forward, then came up on my feet. I squinted up at the metal lizard's head. Its eyes weren't glowing again--not yet. I could fire my jetboots again now and make it inside the castle before Sorrento was able fire on me again. He wouldn't be able to follow me inside, not without getting out of his oversize mech.

I could hear Art3mis and Aeche shouting at me on my comlink. They were already inside, standing in front of the gate, waiting for me.

All I had to do was fly into the castle and join them. The three of us could open and enter the gate before Sorrento caught up with us. I was sure of it.

But I didn't move. Instead, I took out the Beta Capsule and held the small metal cylinder in the palm of my avatar's hand.

Sorrento had tried to kill me. And in the process, he'd murdered my aunt, along with several of my neighbors, including sweet old Ms. Gilmore, who never hurt a soul. He'd also had Daito killed, and even though I'd never met him, Daito had been my friend.

And now Sorrento had just killed Shoto's avatar, robbing him of his chance enter the Third Gate. Sorrento didn't deserve his power or his position. What he deserved, I decided in that moment, was public humiliation and defeat. He deserved to have his ass kicked, while the whole world watched.

I held the beta capsule high over my head and whispered "*Urutoraman*," activating the artifact.

There was a blinding flash of light and the sky turned crimson as my avatar suddenly changed, growing and morphing into a gigantic red and silver-skinned humanoid alien, with glowing egg-shaped eyes, a strange finned head, and a glowing light embedded in the center of my chest. For the next three minutes, I was Ultraman.

The Mechagodzilla suddenly stopped shrieking and thrashing. Its gaze had been pointed down at the ground, where my avatar had stood a second earlier. Now its head slowly tilted up, taking in the size of its new opponents, until our glowing eyes finally met. I now stood face to face with Sorrento's mech, matching its height and size almost exactly.

Sorrento's mech took several awkward steps backward.

I crouched slightly and struck a offensive pose, noticing that a timer now appeared in the corner of my display, counting down from three minutes.

2:59. 2:58. 2:57.

Below the timer there was a menu, listing Ultraman's various energy attacks. I quickly selected *Specium Ray* and then held my arms up in front of me, one horizontal and the other vertical, forming a cross. A pulsing beam of white energy shot out of my forearms, striking the Mechagodzilla in its chest and knocking it backward. Thrown off balance, Sorrento suddenly lost control and tripped over his own mammoth feet. His mech tumbled to the ground.

A cheer went up from the thousands of avatars who were watching from the chaotic battlefield around us.

I launched myself into the air and flew half a kilometer straight upward. Then I dropped back down, feet first, aiming my heels directly at the Mechagodzilla's curved spine. When my feet hit, I heard something inside the metal beast snap under my crushing weight. Smoke began to pour out of its mouth, and the blue glow in its eyes suddenly dissipated.

I executed a back-flip and landed behind the prone mech in a crouch. Its single functioning arm flailed wildly, while its tail and legs thrashed about. Sorrento appeared to be struggling with the controls in an effort to get the beast back on its feet.

I selected *Yatsuaki Kohrin* from my weapon menu: *Ultra-Slice*. A glowing circular saw blade of electric-blue energy appeared in my right hand, spinning fiercely. I hurled it at Sorrento, releasing it with a snap of my wrist, like a frisbee. It whirled through the air and struck the Mechagodzilla in its stomach. In a blink, the energy blade cut into its metal skin as if it was tofu, slicing the mecha into two halves. Just before the entire machine exploded, the head detached and blasted away from the neck. Sorrento had ejected. But since the mecha was lying flat, the head shot out on a trajectory parallel to the ground. Sorrento quickly adjusted for this, and the rockets sprouting from the head began to tilt it skyward. Before it could get very far, I crossed my arms again and fired another specium ray, nailing the retreating head like a clay pigeon. It

disintegrated in an immensely satisfying explosion.

The crowd went wild.

I checked the Scoreboard and confirmed that Sorrento's employee number had vanished. He was dead. I couldn't take too much satisfaction from this, though, because I knew that he was probably already kicking one of his underlings out of their haptic chair so that he could take control of a new avatar.

The counter on my display had only fifteen seconds remaining when I deactivated the beta capsule. My avatar instantly shrank back to normal size, and my appearance returned to normal. Then I spun around, powered on my jetboots, and flew into the castle.

When I reached the opposite end of the huge foyer, I found Aech and Art3mis standing in front of the crystal door, waiting for me. The smoking, bloodied bodies of over a dozen recently-slain Sixer avatars lay scattered on the stone floor around them, slowly fading out of existence. Apparently, there had been a brief and decisive skirmish and I'd just missed it.

"No fair," I said, cutting my jetboots and dropping to the floor beside Aech. "You could have saved at least one of them for me."

Art3mis didn't reply. She just gave me the finger.

"Congrats on wasting Sorrento," Aech said, slipping me some skin. "It was an epic throwdown, for sure. But you're still a complete idiot. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "I know."

"You're such a selfish asshole!" Art3mis shouted. "What if you'd gotten yourself killed, too?"

"I didn't, though. Did I?" I said, stepping around her to examine the crystal door. "So chill out and let's open this thing."

I examined the keyhole in the center of the door, then looked at the words printed directly above it, etched into the door's faceted surface. *Charity. Hope. Faith.*

I took out my copy of the Crystal Key and held it up. Aech and Art3mis followed suit, and held up their keys, too.

Nothing happened.

We all exchanged concerned looks. Then an idea occurred to me, and I cleared my throat. "*Three is a magic number,*" I said, reciting the first line of the Schoolhouse Rock song. As soon as I spoke the words, the crystal door began to glow, and two additional keyholes appeared, on either side of the first.

"That did it!" Aech whispered. "Holy shit. I can't believe this. We're really here. Standing in front of the Third Gate."

Art3mis nodded. "Finally."

I inserted my key in the center keyhole. Aech inserted his into the keyhole on the left, and Art3mis placed hers in the keyhole on the right.

"Clockwise?" Art3mis said. "On the count of three?"

Aech and I nodded. Art3mis counted to three and we turned our keys in unison. There was a brief flash of blue light, during which all of our keys and the crystal door itself vanished. And then the Third Gate stood open in front of us, a crystal doorway leading into spinning whirlpool of stars.

"Wow," I heard Art3mis whisper beside me. "Here we go."

As the three of us stepped forward, preparing to enter the gate, we suddenly heard an ear-splitting boom. It sounded like the entire universe was cracking in half.

And then we all died.

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When your avatar gets killed, your screen doesn't fade to black right away. Instead, your point-of-view automatically shifts to a third-person perspective, treating you to a brief out-of-body replay of your avatar's final fate.

A split-second after we heard the thunderous boom, my perspective suddenly shifted, and I found myself looking at our three avatars, standing there frozen in front of the open gate. Then an incinerating white light suddenly filled the world, accompanied by an ear-splitting wall of sound. It was what I'd always pictured being fried in a nuclear blast would be like.

For a split second, I saw our avatars' skeletons, suspended inside the transparent outlines of our motionless bodies. Then my avatar's hit point counter dropped to zero.

The blast wave arrived a second later, disintegrating everything in its path. Our avatars, the floor, the walls, the castle itself, and the thousands of avatars gathered around it. In an instant, everything was suddenly turned to a fine, atomized dust that hung suspended in the air a second, before slowly settling to earth.

The entire surface of the planet had been wiped clean. The area around Castle Anorak, which had been crowded with warring avatars a split second before, was now a desolate and barren wasteland. Everyone and everything had been destroyed. Only the Third Gate remained, a

crystal doorway floating in the air above the crater where the castle had stood a moment before.

My initial shock quickly turned to dread, as I realized what had just happened.

The Sixers had detonated the Cataclyst.

It was the only explanation. Only that incredibly powerful artifact could have done this. Not only had it killed every avatar in the sector, it had even destroyed Castle Anorak, a fortress that, until now, had proven itself to be indestructible.

I stared at the open gate, floating in the empty air, and waited for the inevitable, final message to appear in the center of my display. The words I knew every other avatar in the sector must be seeing at this very moment. *GAME OVER*.

But when words finally did appear on my display, it was another message entirely:
CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE AN EXTRA LIFE!

Then, as I watched in amazement, my avatar suddenly reappeared, fading back into existence, in the exact same location where I'd died a few seconds earlier. I was standing in front of the open gate again. But the gate was now floating in mid-air, suspended several dozen meters above the planet surface, over the crater that had been created by the destruction of the castle. As my avatar finished materializing, I looked down and noted that the floor I'd been standing earlier was now gone.

I seemed to hover in mid-air for a moment, like Wile E. Coyote in the old Roadrunner cartoons. Then my avatar finished rematerializing and I plummeted straight down. I made a vain grab for the open gate in front of me, but it was well out of reach.

I hit the ground hard, and lost a third of my hit points from the impact. Then I slowly got to my feet and looked around. I was standing in a vast cube-shaped crater, the space where the foundation and lower basement levels of Castle Anorak had stood. It was completely barren and

eerily silent. There was no rubble from the destroyed castle and no wreckage from the thousands of spaceships and aircraft that had filled the sky a few moments ago. In fact, there was no sign at all of the grand battle that had just been fought here. It was as if the Cataclyst had vaporized everything.

I looked down at my avatar and saw that I was now wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans, the default outfit that appeared on every newly created avatar. Then I pulled up my stats and item inventory. My avatar was in perfect health, with the same level and ability scores I'd had previously. But my inventory was completely empty, except for one item--the quarter I'd obtained after playing my perfect game of Pac-Man on Archaide. Once I'd place the quarter in inventory, I hadn't been able to remove it, so I couldn't have any divination and identification spells cast it. So I'd no way of ascertaining the quarter's true purpose or powers. During the tumultuous events of the past few months, I'd forgotten I even had the damn thing.

But now I knew what the quarter was--a single-use artifact that gave my avatar an extra life. Until that moment, I didn't even know such a thing was possible. In the history of the OASIS, there was no record of any avatar ever acquiring an extra life.

I selected the quarter in my inventory and tried again to remove it. This time, I was able to take it out and hold it in the palm of my avatar's hand. Now that the artifact's sole power had been used, it no longer had any magical properties. Now it was just a quarter.

I put the quarter back in my inventory, then looked straight up, at the crystal gate floating twenty meters above me. It was still sitting there, wide open. But I had no idea how I was going to get up there to enter it. I had no jetboots, no ship, and no magic items. Nothing that would allow me to fly or levitate. And there wasn't a single stepladder in sight.

There I was, standing a stone's throw from the Third Gate, but unable to reach it.

“Hey, Z?” I suddenly heard a voice say. “Can you hear me?”

It was Aech, but her voice was no longer altered to sound male. I could hear her perfectly, as if she was talking to me via comlink. But that didn’t make sense, because my avatar no longer *had* a comlink. And Aech's avatar was dead.

“Where are you?” I asked the empty air.

"I'm dead, like everyone else," Aech said. "Everyone but you."

"Then how can I hear you?"

“Og patched all of us into your audio and video feeds,” she said. “So we can see what you see and hear what you hear.”

"Oh," I said.

"Is that all right with you Parzival?" I heard Og ask. "If it isn't, just say so."

I thought about it for a moment. "No, it's fine with me," I said. "Shoto and Art3mis are listening in, too?"

"Yes," Shoto said. "I'm here."

"Yeah, we're here, all right," Art3mis said, and I could hear the barely-contained rage in her voice. "And we're all dead as doornails. The question is, why aren't you dead, too, Parzival?"

"Yeah, Z," Aech said. "We *are* a bit curious about that. What happened?"

I took out the quarter and held it up in front of my eyes. “I was awarded this quarter on Archaide a few months ago, for playing a perfect game of Pac-Man. It was an artifact, but I never knew its purpose. Not until now. Turns out it gave me an extra life.”

I heard only silence for a moment, then Aech began to laugh. "You lucky son of a bitch!" she said. "The newsfeeds are reporting that every single avatar in Zone Ten was just killed. Over half the population of the OASIS."

"Was it the Cataclyst?" I asked.

"It had to be," Art3mis said. "The Sixers must have bought it when it went up for auction a few years ago. And they've been sitting on it all this time, waiting for the perfect moment to detonate it."

"But the Sixers just killed off all of their own troops, too," Shoto said. "Why would they do that?"

"I think most of them were already dead," Art3mis said.

"The Sixers had no choice," I said. "It was the only way they could stop us. We'd already opened the Third Gate and were about to step inside when they detonated that thing--" I paused, realizing something. "How did they know we'd opened it? Unless--"

"They were watching us," Aech said. "The Sixers probably had remote surveillance cameras hidden all around the gate."

"So they saw us open it," Art3mis said. "Which means they know how to open it now, too."

"Who cares?" Shoto interjected. "Sorrento's avatar is dead. And so are all of the other Sixers."

"Wrong," Art3mis said. "Check the Scoreboard. There are still twenty Sixer avatars listed there, below Parzival. And their scores indicate that every single one of them has a copy of the Crystal Key."

"Shit!" Aech and Shoto said in unison.

"The Sixers knew they might have to detonate the Cataclyst," I said. "So they must have taken the precaution of moving some of their avatars outside of the zone. They were probably waiting in a gunship just across the zone border, where it was safe."

"You're right," Aech said. "Which means there are twenty more Sixers headed your way right now, Z. So you need to get your ass moving and get inside that gate. This is probably going to be your only chance to clear it." I heard her let out a defeated sigh. "It's over for us. So we're all rooting for you now, amigo. Good luck."

"Thanks, Aech."

"*Gokouun o inorimasu*," Shoto said. "Do your best."

"I will," I said. Then I waited for Art3mis to give me her blessing, too.

"Good luck, Parzival," she said, after a long pause. "Aech is right, you know. You're never going to get another shot at this. And neither will any other gunter." I heard her voice catch, as if she were choking back tears. Then she took a deep breath and continued: "Don't screw this up."

"I won't," I said. "No pressure, right?"

I glanced back up at the open gate, suspended in the air above me, so far out of reach. Then I dropped my gaze and began to scan the area, desperately trying to figure out how I was going to get up there. Then something caught my eye--just a few flickering pixels in the distance, near the opposite end of the crater. I ran toward them.

"Uh, not to be a back seat driver or anything," Aech said. "But where the hell are you going?"

"All of my avatar's items were destroyed by the Cataclyst," I said. "So now I have no way to fly up there and reach the gate."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Aech sighed. "Man, the hits just keep on coming!"

As I approached the object in the distance, it became gradually clearer. It was the Beta Capsule, floating just a few centimeters above the ground, spinning clockwise. The Cataclyst had

destroyed everything in the zone that could be destroyed. Avatars, structures, ships, items. But it didn't destroy the artifacts people were carrying, because artifacts were indestructible. Just like the gate.

"It's the Beta Capsule!" Shoto shouted. "It must have been thrown over here by the force of the blast. You can use it to become Ultraman and fly up to the gate!"

I nodded, raised the capsule over my head, then pressed the button on the side to activate it. But nothing happened. "Shit!" I muttered, realizing why. "It won't work. It can only be used once a day." I stowed the beta capsule and started to scan the ground around me. "There must be other artifacts scattered around here," I said. I began to run along the perimeter of the castle foundation, still scanning the ground. "Were any of you guys carrying artifacts? One that would give me the ability to fly? Or levitate? Or teleport?"

"No," answered Shoto. "I didn't have any artifacts."

"My *Sword of the Ba'Heer* was an artifact," Aech said. "But it won't help you reach the gate."

"But my Chucks will," Art3mis said.

"Your 'Chucks?'" I repeated?

"My shoes. Black Chuck Taylor All-Stars. They're artifacts that bestow their wearer with both speed and flight."

"Great! Perfect!" I said. "Now I just have to find them." I continued to run forward, eyes sweeping the ground. I found Aech's sword a minute later and added it my inventory, but it took me another five minutes of searching before I found Art3mis's magic sneakers, near the south end of the crater. I put them on and they adjusted to fit my avatar's feet perfectly. "I'll get these back to you, Arty," I said, just as I finished lacing them up. "Promise."

"You better," she said. "They were my favorites."

I took three running steps, leapt into the air, and then I was flying. I swooped up and around, then turned back toward the gate, aiming straight for it. But at the last moment, I banked to the right, then arced back around. I stopped to hover in front open gate. The crystal doorway hung in the air directly ahead, just a few yards away. It reminded me of the floating door in the opening credits of the original *Twilight Zone*.

"What are you waiting for?" Aeche shouted. "The Sixers could show up any minute now!"

"I know," I said. "But there's something I need to say to all of you before I go in."

"Well?" Art3mis said. "Spit it out! The clock is ticking, fool!"

"Okay, okay!" I said. "I just wanted to say that I know how the three of you must feel right now. It isn't fair, the way this has played out. We should all be entering the gate together. So before I go in, I want you guys to know something. If I reach the Egg, I'm going to split the prize money equally among the four of us."

Stunned silence.

"Hello?" I said after a few seconds. "Did you guys hear me?"

"Are you insane?" Aeche asked. "Why would you do that, Z?"

"Because it's the only honorable thing to do," I said. "Because I never would have gotten this far on my own. Because all four of us deserve to see what's inside that gate and find out how the game ends. And, lastly, because I need your help."

"Could you repeat that last bit, please?" Art3mis asked.

"I need your help," I said. "You guys are right. This is my only shot at clearing the Third Gate. There won't be any second chances, for anyone. The Sixers will be here soon, and they'll enter the gate as soon as they arrive. So I have to clear it before they do, on my first attempt. The

odds of me pulling that off will increase drastically if the three of you are backing me up. So... what you say?"

"Count me in, Z," Aech said. "I was planning to coach your dumb ass, anyway."

"Count me in, too," said Shoto. "I've got nothing left to lose."

"Let me get this straight," Art3mis said. "We help you clear the gate, and in return, you agree split the prize money with us?"

"Wrong," I said. "If I win, I'm going to split the prize money with you guys, regardless of whether you help me or not. So helping me is probably in your best interest."

"I don't suppose we have time to get that in writing?" Art3mis said.

I thought for a moment, then accessed my POV channel control menu. I initiated a live broadcast, so that everyone watching my channel (my ratings counter said that I currently had over two-hundred million viewers) could hear what I was about to say.

"Greetings," I said. "This is Wade Watts, also known as Parzival. I'm about to enter the Third Gate. Before I do, I want to let the whole world know that if and when I find Halliday's Easter egg, I hereby vow to split my winnings equally with Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto. Cross my heart and hope to die. Gunters honor. Pinky swear. All of that crap. If I'm lying, I should be forever branded as a gutless Sixer-fellating punk."

I ended the recording, then set it to play on a continuous loop for ten minutes.

A second later, I heard Art3mis say: "Okay. That's good enough for me. I'm in."

"Excellent!" I said. "Then let's do this."

I flew forward, into the gate, and my avatar vanished into the whirlpool of stars.

0036

I found myself standing in a vast, dark, empty space. I couldn't see the walls or ceiling, but there appeared to be a floor, because I was standing on something. I waited a few seconds, unsure of what to do. Then a booming electronic voice echoed through the void. It sounded as if it were being generated by a primitive speech synthesizer, similar to those used in games like Q-Bert and Gorf. "*Beat the high score or be destroyed!*" the voice announced. Then, a shaft of light suddenly appeared, shining down from somewhere high above. There, in front of me, at the base of this long pillar of light, stood an old coin-operated arcade game. I recognized its distinctive, angular cabinet immediately. Tempest. Atari. 1980.

I closed my eyes and dropped my head. "*Crap*," I muttered. "This is not my best game, gang."

"Come on," I heard Art3mis whisper. "You had to *know* Tempest was going to factor into the Third Gate somehow. It was obvious!"

"Oh really?" I said. "Why?"

"Because of the quote on the last page of the Almanac," she replied. "*I must uneasy make, lest too light winning make the prize light.*"

"I *know* the quote," I said, annoyed. "It's from Shakespeare. But I figured it was just

Halliday's way of letting us know how difficult he was going to make the Hunt.”

“It was,” Art3mis said. “But it was also a clue. That quote was taken from Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest*.”

“Shit!” I hissed. “How the hell did I miss that?”

“I never made that connection either,” Aeche confessed. “Bravo, Art3mis.”

“Tempest also appears briefly in the music video for the song *Subdivisions* by Rush,” she added. “One of Halliday's favorites. Pretty hard to miss.”

“Whoa,” Shoto said. “She's good.”

“Okay!” I shouted. “It should have been obvious. No need to rub it in!”

“I take it you've haven't had much practice at this game, Z?” Aeche said.

“A little, a long time ago,” I said. “But not nearly enough. Look at the high score.” I pointed at the monitor. The high score was 728,329. The initials next to it were JDH – James Donovan Halliday. And, as I feared, the credit counter at the bottom of the screen had a numeral one in front of it.

“Yikes,” Aeche said. “Only one credit. Just like Black Tiger.”

I remembered the now-useless extra life quarter in my inventory and took it out. But when I dropped it into the coin slot, it fell right through into the coin return. I reached down to remove it and saw a sticker on the coin mechanism: TOKENS ONLY

“So much for that idea,” I said. “And I don't see a token machine anywhere around here.”

“Looks like you only get one game,” Aeche said. “All or nothing.”

“Guys, I haven't played Tempest in years,” I said. “I'm screwed. There's no way I'm going to beat Halliday's high score on my first attempt.”

“You don't have to,” Art3mis said. “Look at the copyright year.”

I glanced at the bottom of the screen. ©MCMLXXX ATARI.

"Nineteen-Eighty?" Aeche said. "How does that help him?"

"Yeah," I said. "How does that help me?"

"That means this is very first version of Tempest," Art3mis said. "The version that shipped with a bug in the game code. When Tempest first hit the arcades, kids discovered that if you died with a certain score, the machine would give you a bunch of free credits."

"You're kidding?" I said, somewhat ashamed. "I didn't know that."

"You would," Art3mis said, "If you'd researched the game as much as I did."

"Damn, girl," Aeche said, whistling low. "You've got some serious knowledge."

"Thanks," she said. "It helps to be an obsessive compulsive geek. With no life." Everyone laughed at that, except me. I was much too nervous.

"Okay, Arty," I said. "What do I need to do to get those free games?"

"I'm looking it up in my quest journal right now," she said. I could hear paper rustling. It sound liked she was flipping through the pages of an actual book.

"You just happen to have a hard copy of your journal with you?" I asked.

"I've always kept my journal longhand, in spiral notebooks," she said. "Good thing, too, since my OASIS account and everything in it was just erased." More flipping of pages. "Here it is! First, you need to rack up over 180,000 points. Once you've done that, make sure you end the game with a score where the last two digits are 06, 11, or 12. If you do that, you'll get forty free credits."

"You're absolutely positive?"

"Positively absolutely."

"Okay," I said. "Here goes."

I began to run through my pre-game ritual. Stretching, cracking my knuckles, rolling my neck left and right.

"Christ, will you *get on with it?*" Aeche said. "The suspense is killing me here!"

"Quiet!" Shoto said. "Give the man some room to breathe, will you?"

Everyone remained silent while I finished psyching myself up. Once I felt mentally prepared, I said. "Here goes nothing," then hit the flashing Player One button.

Tempest used old school vector-graphics, so the game's graphics were created from glowing neon lines drawn against a pitch black screen. You're given a top-down view of a three-dimensional tunnel, and you use a spinning rotary dial to control a "shooter," which travels around the rim of the tunnel. The objective of the game is to shoot the enemies crawling up out of the tunnel toward you, while dodging their fire and avoiding other obstacles. As you proceed from one level to the next, the tunnels take on gradually more complex geometric shapes, and the number of enemies and obstacles crawling up toward you drastically multiply.

Halliday had put this Tempest machine on Tournament settings, so I couldn't start the game any higher than level 9. It took me about fifteen minutes to get my score up above 180,000, and I lost two lives in the process. I was even rustier than I thought. When my score hit 189,412, I intentionally impaled my shooter on a spike, using up my last remaining life. The game prompted me to enter my initials and I nervously tapped them in: W-O-W. When I finished, the game's credit counter suddenly jumped from zero up to 40.

The sound of my friends cheering wildly suddenly filled my ears, nearly giving me a heart attack. "Art3mis, you're a genius," I said, once the noise died down.

"I know."

I tapped the Player One button again and began a second game, now focused on beating

Halliday's high score. I still felt anxious, but considerably less so. If I didn't manage to get the high score this time, I had 39 more chances.

During a break between waves, Art3mis spoke up. "So, your initials are W-O-W? What does the O stand for?"

"Obtuse," I said.

She laughed. "No, seriously."

"Owen."

"Owen," she repeated. "Wade Owen Watts. That's nice." Then she fell silent again as the next wave began. I finished my second game a few minutes later, with a score of 219,584. Not horrible, but still a far cry from my goal.

"Not bad," Aeche said.

"Yeah, but not that good, either," Shoto observed. Then he suddenly seemed to remember that I could hear him. "I mean-- Much better, Parzival. You're doing great."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Shoto."

"Hey, check this out," Art3mis said, reading from her journal. "The creator of *Tempest*, Dave Theurer, originally got the idea for the game from a nightmare he had about monsters crawling up out a hole in the ground and chasing after him." She laughed her little musical laugh, which I hadn't heard in so long. "Isn't that cool, Z?" she said.

"That *is* cool," I replied. Somehow, just hearing her voice set me at ease. I think she knew this, and that's why she kept talking to me. I suddenly felt re-energized. I hit the Player One button and began my third game.

They all watched me play in complete silence. Nearly an hour later, I lost my last man. My final score was 437,977.

As soon as the game ended, Aech's voice cut in. "Bad news, amigo," she said.

"What?"

"You were right. When the Cataclyst went off, the Sixers had a group of avatars in reserve, waiting just outside the sector. Right after the detonation, they re-entered the sector and headed straight for Chthonia. They..." Her voice trailed off.

"They *what*?"

"They just entered the gate, about five minutes ago," Art3mis answered. "The gate closed after you went in, but when the Sixers arrived, they used three of their own keys to reopen it."

"You mean the Sixers are already inside the gate? Right now?"

"Eighteen of them," Aech said. "When they stepped through the gate, each one entered a standalone simulation. A separate instance of the gate. All eighteen of them are playing Tempest right now, just like you. Trying to beat Halliday's high score. And all of them used the exploit to get 40 free credits. Most of them aren't do that well, but one of them has some serious skill. We think Sorrento is probably operating that avatar. He just started his second game--"

"Wait a second!" I said, interrupting. "How can you possibly know all this?"

"Because we can see them," Shoto said. "Everyone logged in to the OASIS right now can see them. They can see you, too."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The moment someone enters the Third Gate, a live vidfeed of their avatar appears at the top of the Scoreboard," Art3mis said. "Apparently, Halliday wanted clearing the final gate to be a spectator sport."

"Wait," I said, "You mean to tell me that the entire world has been watching me play Tempest for the past hour?"

"Correct," Art3mis said. "And they're watching you stand there and jabber back at us right now, too. So watch what you say."

"Why didn't you guys tell me?" I shouted.

"We didn't want to make you nervous," Aech said. "Or distract you."

"Oh, great! Perfect! Thank you!" I was shouting, somewhat hysterically.

"Calm down, Parzival," Art3mis said. "Get your head back in the game. This a race now. There are eighteen Sixer avatars right behind you. So you need to make this next game count. Understand?"

"Yeah." I said, exhaling slowly. "I understand." I took another deep breath and pressed the Player One button once again.

As usual, competition brought out the best in me. This time, I managed to slip into the zone. Spinner, zapper, super-zapper, clear a level, avoid the spikes. My hands began to work the controls without my even having to think about it. I forgot about what was at stake, and I forgot about the millions of people who were watching me play. I lost myself in the game.

I'd been playing just over an hour, and had just cleared level 81, when I suddenly heard another wild burst of cheering in my ears. "You did it, man!" I heard Shoto shout.

My eyes darted up to the top of the screen. My score was 802,488.

I continued to play, instinctively wanting to get the highest score possible. But then I heard Art3mis loudly clear her throat, and I realized there was no need to go any further. In fact, I was now wasting valuable seconds, burning away whatever lead I still had on the Sixers. I quickly depleted my two extra lives and GAME OVER flashed on the screen. I entered my initials again and they appeared at the top of the list, just above Halliday's high score. Then the monitor went blank, and a message appeared in the center of the screen:

WELL DONE, PARZIVAL!
PREPARE FOR STAGE 2!

Then the game cabinet vanished, and my avatar vanished with it.

#

I found myself galloping across a fog-covered hillside. I assumed I was riding a horse, because I was bobbing up and down, and I heard the sound of hoof beats. Directly ahead, a familiar-looking castle had just appeared out of the fog.

I looked down at my avatar's body and saw that I wasn't riding a horse at all. I was standing on the ground. My avatar was now dressed in a suit of chainmail armor, and my hands were held out in front of my body, as though I were clutching a set of reins. But in actuality, there were no reins. I wasn't holding anything. My hands were completely empty.

I stopped moving forward, and the sound of hoof beats also ceased, but not until a few seconds later. I turned around and saw the source of the sound. It wasn't a horse. It was man, banging two coconut halves together.

Then I knew where I was. Inside the first scene of *Monty Python's Quest for the Holy Grail*. Another of Halliday's favorite films, and perhaps the most-beloved Geek film of all time.

It was another flicksync, like the WarGames simulation inside Gate One.

I was dressed as King Arthur, I realized. I wore the same costume Graham Chapman had worn in the film. And the man with the coconuts was my trusty manservant, Patsy, as played by Terry Gilliam.

Patsy bowed and groveled a bit when I turned to face him, but said nothing.

"It's Python's Holy Grail!" I heard Shoto whisper excitedly.

"Duh," I said, forgetting myself for a second. "I know that, Shoto."

A warning flashed on my display: INCORRECT DIALOGUE! A score of -100 points

appeared in the corner of my display.

"Smooth move, Ex-Lax," I heard Art3mis say.

"Just let us know if you need any help, Z," Aech said. "Wave your hands or something, and we'll feed you the next line."

I nodded and gave a thumbs-up. But I didn't think I was going to need much help. Over the past six years, I'd watched Holy Grail exactly one-hundred and fifty-seven times. I knew every word by heart.

I glanced back up at the castle up ahead of me, already aware of what was waiting for me there. I began to "gallop" again, holding my invisible reins as I pretended to ride forward. Once again, Patsy began to bang his coconut halves together, galloping along behind me. When we reached the entrance of the castle, I pulled back on my "reins" and brought my "steed" to a halt.

"Whoa there!" I shouted.

My score increased by 100 points, bringing it back up to zero.

On cue, two soldiers appeared up above, leaning over the castle wall. "Who goes there?" one of them shouted down at us.

"It is I, Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, from the castle of Camelot," I recited. "King of the Britons! Defeater of the Saxons! Sovereign of all England!"

My score jumped another 500 points, and a message informed me that I'd received a bonus for my accent and inflection. I felt myself relax, and I realized that I was already having fun.

"Pull the other one!" the Solider replied.

"I am," I continued. "And this is my trusty servant Patsy. We have ridden the length and breadth of the land in search of knights who will join me in my court at Camelot. I must speak

with your lord and master!"

Another 500 points. In my ear, I could hear my friends giggling and applauding.

"What?" the soldier replied. "Ridden on a horse?"

"Yes!" I said. 100 points.

"You're using coconuts!"

"What?" I said. 100 points.

"You've got two empty halves of coconut and you're bangin' 'em together!"

"So? We have ridden since the snows of winter covered this land, through the kingdom of Mercia, through--" 500 points.

"Where'd you get the coconuts?"

And so it went, for another hour and a half. The character I was playing would change from one scene to the next, switching to whoever had the most dialogue. Incredibly, I only flubbed about six or seven lines. Each time I got stumped, all I had to do was shrug and hold out my hands palms up--my signal that I needed some help--and Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto would all gleefully feed me the correct line. The rest of the time they remained silent, except for the occasional giggle fit or burst of laughter. The only really difficult part was not laughing myself. I failed at this a few times and got hit with score penalties for it. Otherwise, it was smooth sailing.

Re-enacting the film wasn't just easy--it was a total blast.

About halfway through the movie, right after my confrontation with the Knights of Ni, I opened up a text window on my display and typed: STATUS ON THE SIXERS?

"Fifteen of them are still playing Tempest," I heard Aech reply. "But three of them beat Halliday's score and are now inside the Grail simulation." A brief pause. "And the leader-- Sorrento, we think--is running just nine minutes behind you."

"And so far, he hasn't missed a single line of dialogue," Shoto added.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Exactly," Art3mis said.

I took a deep breath and focused my attention back on the next scene (*The Tale of Sir Launcelot*). Aech continued to give me updates on the Sixers whenever I asked for them.

When I reached the film's final scene (the assault on the French Castle), I suddenly grew anxious again, wondering what would happen next. The First Gate had required me to re-enact a movie (*WarGames*) and the Second Gate contained a video game challenge (*Black Tiger*). So far, the Third Gate had contained both. I knew there must be a third stage, but I had no idea what it might be.

I got my answer a few minutes later. As soon as I completed *Holy Grail's* final scene, my display went black while the silly organ music that ends the film played for a few minutes. When the music stopped, the following appeared on my display:

**CONGRATULATIONS!
YOU HAVE REACHED THE END!
READY PLAYER 1**

And then, as the text faded away, I suddenly found myself standing in a huge oak-paneled room, as big as warehouse, with a high vaulted ceiling and a polished hardwood floor. There were no windows and only one exit--large double-doors set into one of the four bare walls. An older high-end OASIS immersion rig stood in the absolute center of expansive room. Over a hundred glass tables surrounded the rig, arranged in a large oval that encircled it. On each table there was a different classic home computer or video game system, accompanied by tiered racks that held a complete collection of its peripherals, controllers, software, and games. All arranged perfectly, like museum exhibits. Looking around the circle, from one system to the next, I saw

that they appeared to be arranged roughly by year of origin. A PDP-1. An Altair 8800. An IMSAI 8080. An Apple I, right next to and Apple II. An Atari 2600. A Commodore PET. An Intellivision. Several different TRS-80 models. An Atari 400 and 800. A ColecoVision. A TI-99/4. A Sinclair ZX80. A Commodore 64. Various Nintendo and Sega game systems. The entire lineage of Macs and PCs, Playstations and XBOXs. Finally, completing the circle, was an OASIS console-- connected to the immersion rig in the center of the room.

I realized that I was standing in a recreation of James Halliday's office. The room in his mansion where he'd spent most of the last fifteen years of his life. The place where he'd coded his last and greatest game. The one I was now playing.

I'd never seen any photos of this room, but its layout and contents had been described in great detail by the movers hired to clear the place out after Halliday's death.

I looked down at my avatar and saw that I no longer appeared as one of the Monty Python knights. I was Parzival once again.

First, I did the obvious and tried the exit. The doors wouldn't budge.

I turned back and took another long look around the room, surveying the long line of monuments to the history of computing and video games.

That was when I realized that the oval-shaped ring in which they were arranged actually formed the outline of an egg.

In my head, I recited the words of Halliday's first riddle, the one in Anorak's Invitation:

***Three hidden keys open three secret gates
Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits
And those with the skill to survive these straits
Will reach The End where the prize awaits***

I'd reached The End. This was it. Halliday's Easter egg must be hidden somewhere in this room.

0037

"Do you guys see this?" I whispered.

There was no reply.

"Hello? Aech? Art3mis? Shoto? Are you guys still there?"

Still no reply. Either Og had cut their voice links to me, or Halliday had coded this final stage of the gate so that no outside communication was possible. I was pretty sure it was the latter.

I stood there in silence for a minute, unsure of what to do. Then I followed my first instinct and walked over to the Atari 2600. It was hooked up to 1977 Zenith Color TV. I turned on the TV, but nothing happened. Then I switched on the Atari. Still nothing. There was no power, even though both the TV and the Atari were plugged into electrical outlets set into the floor.

I tried the Apple II on the table beside it. It wouldn't switch on either.

After a few minutes of experimentation, I discovered that the only computer that would power on was one of the oldest, the IMSAI 8080. The same model of computer Matthew Broderick owned in *WarGames*.

When I booted it up, the screen was completely blank, save for one word.

LOGIN:

I typed in ANORAK and hit Enter.

IDENTIFICATION NOT RECOGNIZED - CONNECTION TERMINATED

Then the computer shut itself off and I had to power it back on to get the LOGIN prompt again.

I tried HALLIDAY. No dice.

In WarGames, the backdoor password that had granted access to the WOPR supercomputer was JOSHUA. Professor Falken, the creator of the WOPR, had used the name of his son for the password. The person he'd loved most in the world.

I typed in OG. It didn't work. OGDEN didn't work either.

I typed in KIRA and hit the Enter key.

IDENTIFICATION NOT RECOGNIZED - CONNECTION TERMINATED

I tried each of his parent's first names. I tried ZAPHOD, the name of his pet fish. Then TIBERIUS, the name of a ferret he'd once owned.

None of them worked.

I checked the time. I'd been in this room for over ten minutes now. Which meant that Sorrento had caught up with me. So he would now be inside his own separate copy of this room. With a team of Halliday scholars whispering suggestions in his ear, no doubt. They were probably already working from a prioritized list of possibilities, entering them as fast as Sorrento could type.

I was out of time.

I clenched my teeth in frustration. I had no idea what to try next.

Then I suddenly remembered a line from Ogden Morrow's biography about Halliday and

Kira: The opposite sex made Jim extremely nervous, and Kira was the only girl that I ever saw him speak to in a relaxed manner. But even then, it was only in-character, as Anorak, during the course of our gaming sessions, and he would only address her as Leucosia, the name of her D&D character.

I rebooted the system again. When the login prompt reappeared, I typed in LEUCOSIA.

Every system in the room suddenly powered itself on. The sound whirring disk drives, self-test beeps, and other boot-up sounds echoed off the vaulted ceiling.

I ran back over to the Atari 2600 and searched through the giant rack of alphabetized game cartridges beside it, until I found the one I was looking for: ADVENTURE. Then I shoved it into the Atari and turned the system on, then hit the Reset switch to start the game.

It only took me a few minutes to reach the Secret Room.

I grabbed the sword and used it to slay all three of the dragons. Then I found the black key, opened the gates of the Black Castle, and ventured into its labyrinth. The Grey Dot was hidden right where it was supposed to be. I picked it up and carried it back across the tiny 8-bit kingdom, then used it to pass through the magic barrier and enter the Secret Room. But the Secret Room had changed. It no longer contained the name of Warren Robinett, Adventure's original programmer. Instead, at very the center of the screen, there was now a large white oval with pixilated edges. It was an egg.

The Egg.

I stared at the TV screen in stunned silence for a moment. Then I pulled the Atari joystick to the right, moving my tiny square avatar across the flickering screen. The TV's mono speaker emitted a brief electronic *bip* sound as I dropped the gray dot and picked up the egg. As I did, there was a brilliant flash of light, and then I saw that my avatar was no longer holding a joystick.

Now, cupped in both of my hands, was a large silver egg. I could see my avatar's warped reflection on its curved surface.

When I finally managed to stop staring at it, I looked up and saw that the double doors on the other side of the room had been replaced with the gate exit--a crystal-edged portal leading back into the foyer of Castle Anorak. The castle appeared to have been completely restored, even though the OASIS server still wouldn't reset for several more hours.

I took one last look around Halliday's office, then, still clutching the Egg in my hands, I walked across the room and stepped through the exit.

As soon as I was through it, I turned around, just in time to see the Crystal Gate transform into a large wooden door, set into the castle wall in the exact same location.

I opened the door. Beyond it there was a spiral staircase that led up to the top of Castle Anorak's tallest tower. There, I found Anorak's study. Towering shelves lined the room, filled with ancient scrolls and dusty spell books.

I walked over to the window and looked out on a stunning view of the surrounding landscape. It was no longer barren. The effects of the Cataclyst had been undone, and all of Chthonia appeared to have been restored along with the castle.

I looked around the room. Directly beneath the Black Dragon painting there was an ornate crystal pedestal on which rested a gold chalice, encrusted with tiny jewels. Its diameter matched that of the silver egg I held in my hands.

I placed the egg in the chalice and it fit perfectly.

In the distance, I heard a fanfare of trumpets, and the egg began to glow.

"You win," I heard a voice say. I turned and saw that Anorak was standing right behind me. His obsidian black robes seem to pull most of the sunlight out of the room.

"Congratulations," he said, stretching out his long-fingered hand.

I hesitated, wondering if this was another trick. Or perhaps one final test...

"The game is over," Anorak said, as if he'd read my mind. "It's time for you to receive your prize."

I looked down at his outstretched hand. Then, after a moment's hesitation, I took it.

Cascading bolts of blue lightning suddenly erupted in the space between us, and their spider web tines enveloped us both, as if a surge of power were passing from his avatar into mine. When the lightning subsided, I saw that Anorak was no longer dressed in his black wizard's robes. In fact, he no longer looked like Anorak at all. He was shorter, thinner and somewhat less handsome. Now he looked like James Halliday. Pale. Thin. Middle-aged. He was dressed in worn jeans and a faded *Space Invaders* T-shirt.

I looked down at my own avatar and discovered that I was now wearing Anorak's robes. Then I realized that the icons and stat readouts around the edge of my display had also changed. My avatar stats were all completely maxxed out, and I now had a list of spells, inherent powers, and magic items that seemed to scroll on forever.

My avatar's level and hit point counters both had infinity symbols in front of them.

And my credit readout now displayed a number that was twelve digits long. That meant I was a multi-billionaire.

"I'm entrusting the care of the OASIS to you now, Parzival," Halliday said. "Your avatar is immortal and all powerful. Whatever you want, all you have to do is wish for it. Pretty sweet, eh?" He leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "Do me a favor. Try and use your powers only for good. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, in a voice that was barely a whisper.

Halliday gestured around us. "This is your castle now. I've coded this room so that only your avatar can enter it. I did this to ensure that you alone have access to this--" He walked over to a bookshelf against the wall and pulled on the spine of one of the volumes it held. There was a click, then the bookshelf slid aside, revealing a square metal plate set into the wall. In the center of the plate there was a comically large red button, embossed with a single word: OFF

"I call this the Big Red Button," Halliday said. "If you press it, it will shut off the entire OASIS and launch a worm that will delete everything stored on the GSS servers, including all of the OASIS source code. It will shut down the OASIS forever." He smirked. "So don't press it unless you're absolutely positive it's the right thing to do, okay?" He gave me an odd smile. "I trust your judgment."

Halliday slid the bookshelf back into place, concealing the button once again. Then he startled me by putting his arm around my shoulders. "Listen," he said, adopting a confidential tone. "I need to tell you one last thing before I go. Something I didn't figure out for myself until it was already too late." He led me over to the window and motioned out at the landscape stretching out beyond it. "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. But reality is *real*. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said. "I think I do."

"Good," he said, giving me a wink. "Don't make the same mistake I did. If you have a chance for happiness in the real world, take it. Don't hide in here forever."

He smiled and then took a few steps away from me. "All right. I think that covers everything. It's time for me to blow this pop stand."

Then, right before my eyes, Halliday began to slowly disappear. He smiled and waved goodbye as his avatar slowly faded out of existence.

"Good luck, Parzival," he said. "And thanks. Thanks for playing my game."

Then he was completely gone.

#

"Are you guys there?" I said to the empty air, a few minutes later.

"Yes!" Aech said excitedly. "Can you hear us?"

"Yeah. I can now. Did you see all of that?"

"Yeah," Aech said. "We saw everything! But the system cut off our voice links to you as soon as you entered Halliday's office, so we couldn't talk to you."

"Luckily, you didn't need our help, anyway," Shoto said. "Good job, man."

"Congratulations, Wade," I heard Art3mis say. And I could tell she meant it, too.

"Thanks," I said. "But I couldn't have done it without you guys."

"You're right," Art3mis said. "Remember to mention that when you talk to the media. Og says there are a few hundred reporters on their way here right now."

"Dude," Aech said, "You've got to check the Scoreboard."

I opened a window and pulled up the Scoreboard. She was right. The list of high scores was gone. Now the only thing displayed on Halliday's website was an image of my avatar, dressed in Anorak's robes, holding the silver egg, along with the words: PARZIVAL WINS!

"What happened to the Sixers?" I asked. "The ones who were still inside the gate?"

"We're not sure," Aech said. "All of their vidfeeds vanished when the Scoreboard changed."

"Maybe their avatars were killed?" Shoto said. "Or maybe..."

“Maybe they were just ejected from the gate,” I said.

I pulled up my map of Chthonia and saw that I could now teleport anywhere in the OASIS, simply by selecting my desired destination on the map. I zoomed in on Castle Anorak and then tapped a spot just outside the front entrance, and in a blink, my avatar was standing there.

I was right. When I’d cleared the Third Gate, the eighteen Sixer avatars who were still inside had been ejected from the gate and deposited in front of the castle. They were all standing there with confused looks on their faces when I suddenly appeared in front of them, resplendent in my new threads. They stared at me in silence for a few seconds, then suddenly sprang into action, pulling out guns and swords, preparing to attack me. They all looked identical, so I could tell which one was being controlled by Sorrento. But at this point, I didn’t really care.

Using my avatar’s new Super User interface, I made a sweeping gesture with my hand, selecting all of the Sixer avatars on my display. Their outlines began to glow red. Then I tapped the skull-and-crossbones icon that now appeared on my avatar’s toolbar. In an instant, all eighteen Sixer avatars dropped dead. Their bodies slowly faded out of existence, each leaving behind a tiny pile of weapons and loot.

“Holy shit!” I heard Shoto say over the comlink. “How did you do that?”

"You heard Halliday," Aech said. "His avatar is immortal and all-powerful."

“Yeah,” I said. “He wasn’t kidding, either.”

“Halliday also said you could wish for whatever you wanted,” Aech said. “What are you gonna wish for first?”

I thought about that for a second, then cleared my throat and said, "I wish for Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto to be resurrected."

A dialog window suddenly popped up on my display, asking me to confirm the spelling of each of their avatar's names. Once I did, the system asked me if, in addition to resurrecting their avatars, I wanted to restore all of their lost items, too? I tapped the YES icon. Then a message appeared in the center of my display: RESSURECTION COMPLETE. AVATARS RESTORED.

"Guys?" I said. "You might want to try logging back in to your accounts now."

"We're already on our way!" Aech shouted excitedly.

A few seconds later, Shoto logged back in to his account, and his avatar materialized a short distance in front of me, in the exact spot where he'd been killed a few hours earlier. He ran over to me, grinning from ear to ear. "Arrigato, Parzival-san," he said, bowing low.

I returned the bow, then threw my arms around him. "Welcome back," I said. A moment later, Aech emerged from the castle entrance and ran over to join us.

"Good as new," she said, grinning down at her restored avatar. "Thanks, Z."

"De nada." I glanced back through the castle's open entrance. "Where's Art3mis? She should have reappeared right next to you--"

"She didn't log back in," Aech said. "She said she wanted to go outside and get some fresh air."

"You saw her? What--" I searched for the right words. "How did she look?"

They both just smiled at me, then Aech rested a hand on my shoulder. "She said she'd be outside waiting for you. Whenever you're ready to meet her."

I nodded. I was about to tap my logout icon when Aech held up her hand. "Wait a second! Before you log out, you've got to see something," she said, opening a window in front of me. "This is airing on all of the newsfeeds right now."

A video clip began to play. Hand-held camera footage showing a team of federal agents dragging Miles Sorrento across the main lobby of the IOI corporate headquarters. Sorrento was in handcuffs and he was still wearing his haptic suit. He looked disoriented and deathly pale. The caption along the bottom of the window read: *Top IOI Executives Arrested for Conspiracy and Murder*

"The feeds have been playing the simcap of your chatroom session with Sorrento for the past hour," Aeche said, pausing the clip. "Especially the part where he threatens to kill you and then blows up your trailer park. The feds broke into his office about twenty minutes ago and yanked him right out of his haptic chair, while he was still inside the *Holy Grail* sim!"

"They arrested the entire IOI Board of Directors, too," Shoto added, laughing. "Making this pretty much the greatest day *ever*!"

Aeche hit play and the news clip continued. Sorrento started to struggle and the federal agents began to practically carry him through the lobby, which was packed with reporters, all pushing against one another and hurling questions at Sorrento. One of the reporters, the one shooting the video I was watching, lunged forward and jammed his camera in Sorrento's face. "Did you give the order to kill Wade Watts personally?" the reporter shouted. "How does it make you feel to know that Watts has won the contest?" Sorrento opened his mouth, as if about to reply. Then his eyes rolled back and he suddenly lurched forward and projectile vomited directly into the camera lens.

0038

When I stepped out of the immersion bay, Og was standing there waiting for me. "Well done, my boy!" he said, pulling me into a crushing bear hug. "Well done!"

"Thanks, Og." I was still dazed, and felt unsteady on my feet.

"Several chief executives from GSS arrived while you were logged in," Og said. "Along with all of Jim's lawyers. They're all waiting upstairs. As you can imagine, they're anxious to speak with you."

"Do I have to talk to them right now?"

"No, of course not!" he laughed. "They all work for you now, remember? Make the bastards wait as long as you like!" He leaned forward. "My lawyer is up there, too. He's a good guy. A real pit bull. He'll make sure that no one messes with you, okay?"

"Thanks, Og," I said. "I really owe you."

"Nonsense!" he said. "I should be thanking you. I haven't had this much fun in decades!"

I glanced around uncertainly. "Do you know which way Art3mis went?"

Og grinned at me, then pointed. "Up those stairs and out the first door you see," he said. "She said she'd wait for you at the center of my hedge maze." He smiled cryptically. "It's an easy maze. It shouldn't take you very long to find her."

I stepped outside and squinted as my eyes adjusted to the light. The air was warm and the sun was already high overhead. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

It was a beautiful day.

The hedge maze covered several acres of land behind the mansion. The entrance was designed to look like the façade of a castle, and you entered the maze through its open gates. The dense hedge walls that comprised the maze were ten feet tall, making it impossible to peek over them, even if you stood on top of one of the benches placed throughout the labyrinth.

I entered the maze and wandered around in circles for a few minutes, trying and failing to make my way to the center. Then I suddenly realized that the layout of the maze was identical to that of the labyrinth in *Adventure*. It had been recreated perfectly.

After that, it only took me a few more minutes to find my way through the maze, to the large open area at its very center. There was a large fountain there with a detailed stone sculpture of *Adventure*'s three duck-shaped dragons. Each dragon was spitting a stream of water instead of breathing fire.

And then I saw her.

She was sitting on a stone bench, not far away, staring into the fountain. She had her back turned to me, and her head was tilted down. Her long black hair spilled down over her right shoulder. I could see that she was kneading her hands in her lap.

I was afraid to move any closer. Finally, I worked work up the courage to speak. "Hello," I said.

She lifted up her head at the sound of my voice, but didn't turn around.

"Hello," I heard her say. And it was her voice. Art3mis's voice. The voice I'd spent so many hours listening to. And that gave me the courage to step forward.

I walked around the fountain and stopped once I was standing directly in front of her. But as she heard me approach, she turned her head away, averting her eyes and keeping me out of her field of vision.

But I could see her.

She looked just as she had in the photo I'd seen. She had the same the same Rubenesque body. The same pale, freckled skin. The same crystal blue eyes and raven hair. The same beautiful round face, with the same reddish birthmark. But unlike in that photo, she wasn't trying to hide the birthmark with a sweep of her hair. She had it brushed back, so that I could see it.

I waited in silence. But she still wouldn't look up at me.

"You look just I always pictured you," I said. "Beautiful."

"Really?" she said softly. Slowly, she turned to face me, taking in my appearance a little at time, starting with my feet and then gradually working her way up to my face. When our eyes finally met, she smiled at me nervously. "Well, what do you know? You look just I always thought you'd look, too," she said. "Butt ugly."

We both laughed and most of the tension in the air dissipated. Then we stared into each other's eyes for a long time. It was, I realized, also the very first time.

"We haven't been formally introduced," she said. "I'm Samantha."

"Hello, Samantha. I'm Wade."

"It's nice to finally meet you in person, Wade."

She patted the bench beside her and I sat down.

After a long silence, she said: "So what happens now?"

I grinned. "We're going to use all of the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We're going to make the world a better place, right?"

She grinned. "Don't you want to build a huge interstellar spaceship, load it full of video games, junk food, and comfy couches, and then get the hell out of here?"

"I'm up for that, too," I said. "If it means I get to spend the rest of my life with you."

She gave me a shy grin. "We'll have to see about that," she said. "We just met, you know."

"I'm in love with you, you know."

Her lower lip started to tremble. "You're sure about that?"

"Yes. I am. Because it's true. The truest thing I know."

She smiled at me, but I also saw that she was crying. "I'm sorry for breaking things off with you," she said. "For disappearing from your life. I just—"

"It's okay," I said. "I understand why you did it now."

She looked relieved. "You do?"

I nodded. "You did the right thing."

"You think so?"

"We won, didn't we?"

She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

"Listen," I said. "We can take things as slow as you like. I'm really a nice guy, once you get to know me. I swear."

She laughed and wiped away a few of her tears, but she didn't say anything.

"Did I mention that I'm also extremely rich?" I said. "Of course, so are you, so I don't suppose that's a big selling point."

"You don't need to sell me on anything, Z," she said. "You're my best friend." With what looked like some effort, she looked me in the eye. "I've really missed you, you know that?"

My heart suddenly felt like it was on fire. I took a moment to work up my courage, then I reached out and took her hand in mine. Our fingers intertwined effortlessly. Then we sat there awhile, holding hands, reveling in the strange new sensation of actually touching one another.

It occurred to me then that, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I had absolutely no desire to log back in to the OASIS.

Some time later, she leaned over and kissed me. It felt just like all those songs and poems had promised it would. It felt wonderful. Like being struck by lightning.

Looking back on it now, all these years later, I think that first kiss was when everything changed for me, and I started to become the person I am now. That was the exact moment my old artificial existence ended and I finally began to live my life, as an active member of the human race.

#

THE END