"I'm bored." Max said.

His father looked up from his work and gestured helplessly. "Sorry, kiddo. I've got to finish grading. I'll play with you as soon as we get back home, alright? Why don't you go play with Grandma?"

"Grandma’s sleeping.”

His father snorted. "I guess that’s typical." He looked at Max, his pen absentmindedly scratching marks across the paper. "There's an old computer upstairs that has a few games on it. I don't know if it still works, but you want to try it?"

"Yes!" Max said. He loved computer games. Maybe it would have Minecraft on it.

Once, on his computer at home, he had built a town in Minecraft, on the edge of a chasm, a small mining village. He had built mine lifts which descended into the gorge, and mine cart tracks which tunneled into its sides. In the subterranean depths he had stumbled upon a whole other city below his own, a massive, abandoned metropolis, built by some other player long ago. He had explored the streets of that cavernous city for a few hours, searching for signs of life among the flickering torches, but found nothing except for a lingering sense of dread.

Eventually, he had left, sealing the passageway behind him with stone blocks.

"Alright kiddo, let's go." His father steered him through the hallways of the house with one hand on his shoulder. Up a flight of stairs, quietly past Grandma's room and her echoing snores, and up a dusty wooden staircase to the attic. "Oh, dear," his father said, as they opened the door. "This place has seen better days."

The walls were covered in cobwebs, and the floor layered in sawdust. The room was cluttered with assorted junk. Max saw a few dollhouses, a half-open chest full of clothes (an actual, authentic wooden chest, with a silver lock), a spilled tin of Lincoln Logs, and countless other interesting things. It was a treasure trove.

His father was looking at one of the dolls. "This was my sister's, I remember her playing with it. It was her favorite. Well, until she threw it out her bedroom window. Then one of the arms snapped off, and she wouldn't play with it, because it was broken."

In the corner of the room was a mahogany desk with an ancient computer on it. Max was already searching for the power button.

"Max, why don't you come back down?" his father said. "We'll find something else for you. I doubt that computer can even boot up, anyway."

"Nope, got it." Max said. The computer screen flickered to life.

His father came over to stand by him. "Hm. I didn't even realize that thing was plugged in."

They both stared at the computer for a second as the logo of Windows '95 flashed across the screen. "Well, I guess if you want to stay here and play, that’s fine," his father said, after a moment. "If you're sure. There might be a few spiders up here, you know."

"I don't mind," Max said. He started digging through a box of CD-Roms next to the desk.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," his father said. "I think it has pinball," he offered as he left.

Max sifted through the games. "Math Blasters," he read. "Minesweeper Deluxe, Eye-Spy, Zoombinis... Myst..." He lingered on Myst before deciding on the last game in the pile. “Mission Command II: Travel through Time,” he read as he held it up to the light. “The definitive sequel to the award-winning Mission Command I. Gather resources, build your base, and command your armies to crush your enemies. A unique installment in the real-time strategy genre.”

The game had a picture of a few guys with swords fighting a dragon. Max inserted the disk into the CD-Rom drive and waited hopefully. After a few moments, an icon appeared on the screen. *Play?* Max double-clicked.

Tinny music started playing from the computer’s speakers as the game launched. Max watched a confusing cutscene involving a couple scientists, the President, and a time machine. Then the main menu appeared. *Continue as* *Dan?* The game asked. *Or New Player?*

*New Player,* Max selected. *I am Max, son of Dan.*

*Welcome, Max, son of Dan,* the game displayed. *Would you like to play a tutorial before starting the campaign?* Max thought for a second, then skipped it as a matter of principle.

The first level was a little confusing, and Max had to replay it a couple times. It was basically the same as the Age of Empire games, with a few tweaks. You controlled a town in the middle of a forest with twenty or so people, and you had to give them orders, mostly things like collecting firewood or harvesting berries. The goal of the level was to survive the harsh winter.

The first playthrough, Max didn’t properly store the food and rats ate it, and all his villagers starved. The next time, he sealed the food away and filled the granary with mousetraps, but this time wild animals attacked and he couldn’t figure out to fight them off. Finally, he managed to build wooden barricades, and held out until the end of the level, though with only three surviving.

He continued through the campaign, with the levels getting more and more complex. In one level, he built hot air balloons to float over the mountains and ambush the enemy as they were sleeping. Another level had him playing as Vikings and building deep canals in the snow to irrigate an evergreen forest. The objectives didn’t really make sense, and often glitched. Once, he was supposed to be an Egyptian pharaoh, with the objective of building a fleet, sailing to the edge of the world, and capturing the sun. Max used the wood to build storehouses, but strangely enough the game marked him complete anyway.

As the campaign progressed, a convoluted storyline began to emerge, one that combined real history and made up nonsense. Max smashed the Persian fleet at Salamis, took elephants over the Alps as Carthage, and played as the dread lord Auräs, commanding battalions of demon warriors in the astral plane. A few hours later, his father found him bent over the old computer, mouse clicking frantically.

“Max, time to go.”

“One second.”

His father came over to watch. “Oh, that old game? I could never beat the first level.”

“I need to avenge the death of elf princess Calliona at the hands of the Mongol horde.” Max said. “If I can get my assassin into their base through ley line teleportation I can kill and impersonate their khan. Then I can order them into this trap I’ve set here, where I can trigger a rockslide on their entire army.”

His father blinked. “Wow.” He paused for a second. “Elf princess Calliona, hm?”

“Yeah. She was my betrothed.”

“Your betrothed.”

“It was a political match made to secure the alliance between the Kingdom of Elf and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Unfortunately, at the end of the last level they showed a cutscene where the Mongols intercepted her caravan and chopped off her head.”

His father nodded slowly. “Oh. I’m sorry, I guess. Did you love her?”

Max’s face set in a hard line. “No. But I made her a promise.”

On the screen, Max’s assassin was strangling the Mongol khan with what looked like a piece of bacon. The game was a bit too pixelated to be sure.

“Well, do you know if you can avenge the elf princess in the next five minutes or so?” his father asked.

“I think so, yeah. These guys aren’t that strong.”

“Okay, well, meet me downstairs when you’re ready. Don’t take too long, because it’s going to be a long ride back.”

“Okay. No problem.” Max turned back to the screen. The rest of the level went smoothly. He triggered the rockslide and used his archers to mop up any Mongol survivors. With the level done, he exited the game. *Thank you for playing, Max, son of Dan,* said the game. *Your progress has been saved for next time!*

Max took the disk out and powered off the computer. He put the game back in its case and held it in his hands for a moment. He kind of wanted to bring it back to play on his computer at home, but something about that just didn’t feel right. A part of him felt like if he took the game away from the old computer, from the dusty old room, it wouldn’t work, at least, not in the same way.

So after a second, he put the game back in the box, where he had found it, and went downstairs. Grandma was awake, and trapped him in a stifling hug. Then he and his father left, and as the sun went down, the light in the attic slowly faded.