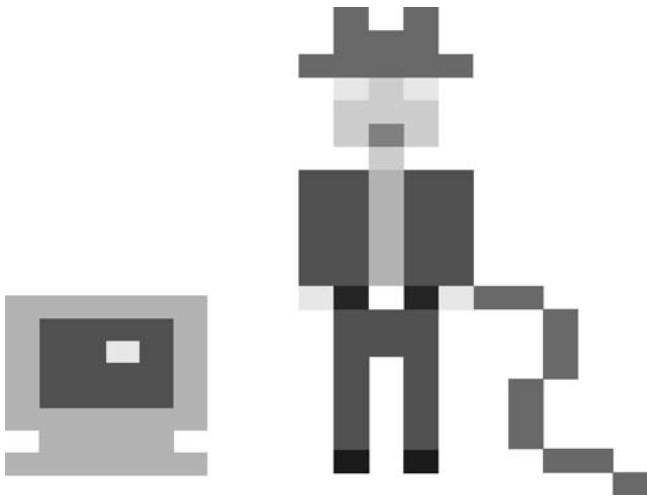


Part I

Thunder w/o Lighting;





Chapter 1; that does not compute, Sea Hag!

The Sea Hag stands cackling at the cave entrance, her green, knobbly hands clasped together with evil, arthritic glee.

“You’ll never find Princess Shareen now! *Ha ha ha ha!* The sorceress has just spirited her away to the palace. But even if you could find her, the tigress spell is irreversible! You’d have a 200 pound feline for a princess!” And with that the Sea Hag breaks into her hideous cackle.

USE SEA ROOT ON SEA HAG

That does not compute.

GIVE SEA ROOT TO SEA HAG

No way! She’s a Sea Hag! She’s your enemy, remember? Perhaps you should just show it to her.

SHOW SEA ROOT TO SEA HAG

You whip the small, damp root out of your travel sack and hold it before the Sea Hag. Her squinty eyes enlarge four times their usual size, flashing a chilling amount of white from behind those dark, dense pupils.

“Where did you get that!?” she howls in agony.

“From the Poseidon King,” you explain.

“Never! He wouldn’t betray me!”

“Believe it or not. Either way, I have the root and unless you take me to Princess Shareen, this will be your last incarnation.”

A long pause follows, filled by the hideous sound of the Sea Hag grating her teeth, crunching the salty sand in her mouth. “Alright,” she begrudges. “It won’t do you any good anyway. The Sorceress will destroy you effortlessly.”

Thus, the Sea Hag disappears into her cave and emerges on her broomstick. She pulls up in front of you. “Well?” she asks, snottily.

GET ON BROOM

You hop on the back of the broomstick and hold on for dear life. It’s even harder to balance on than it looks. You whip across the night sky. Down below you can see the old gnome’s hut as well as the fisherman’s. And the Diamond farm. Within moments you are hovering in front of a crescent shaped window in Sorceress Shareef’s palace tower, perched high on Shadow Mountain.

“Inside you’ll find Princess Shareen. Shareef is attending to the Sultan’s army below in the banquet hall. Now give me my weed.”

SAVE GAME

Game saved.

GIVE ROOT TO HAG

Removing the root from your satchel you hand it to the hideous green woman. *Oops!* That was a mistake. Having given away your only bargaining chip you’ve given the Sea Hag permission to exercise her dislike of you. With a nasty cackle she flips the broom upside down. Though you hang gallantly onto the end, her rotten, halitosis infested teeth begin to bite into your knuckles. You can’t decide whether the breath or the pain is worse. Either way, you plummet an uncountable number of feet to your death.

You’re dead. Too bad. And who says all fantasies have happy endings? You have three options. Restore, Restart, or Quit.

RESTORE

Game loaded.

GET OFF BROOM

Smartly stepping onto the window ledge, you turn and give the sea root to the hideous creature. She doesn’t deserve it, but being a brave, honest and chivalrous king, your compunction gives you no choice. With a half-snort, half-cackle the witch speeds away. You turn around and hop down into the main hall.

The inside of the evil Sorceress Shareef's bedroom is gorgeous with marbled floors and pillars stretching to the domed ceiling, great tapestries adorning the walls, silk pillows and an enormous, beautiful – but still evil looking – bed. There are droves of treasure chests, a beauty cabinet and a library full of books. But no sign of the Princess! Just as you are swearing under your breath and planning vengeance upon the Sea Hag, you hear a squeak above you. Peering up you see a giant silver cage dangling from the roof...with a beautiful tiger pacing inside it! The Princess!

LOOK CAGE

It's too high up to reach! The Princess, or at least, in tiger form, is trapped up there. There is a rope running from the top, through a pulley down behind a pillar.

LOOK PILLAR

Which one? Move closer to the one you want to examine.

LOOK PILLAR

There is a rope that comes down from the roof tied behind it.

UNTIE ROPE

It's fastened too taught.

CUT ROPE

With what?

USE CORAL TO CUT ROPE

Good idea, Mandeep! Taking the coral you got from the boy you saved you begin to saw through the thick, fibrous knot. Loosening the rope from the pillar you struggle to let the cage down slowly, though it fights to pull you off your feet.

OPEN CAGE

Unlatching the cage, you let the tigress slowly step out. Suddenly the beast is surrounded by a cloud of smoke, spinning, enveloping the tigress. And when the smoke just as suddenly disappears you are standing face to face with...Shareef! She peals with wicked laughter.

"*Ha ha ha ha ha!* Foolish Mandeep! Did you really think I would make it so easy for you to rescue my sister!? You have such pitiful wits!" Shareef claps her hands two times in the air and the wall near the back fades away. Inside is a cage with another tigress...one wearing the princess' amulet!

"Princess Shareen!" you cry. Shareef laughs again. The Sorceress flashes her hands and you find yourself unable to move. "Now your beloved will watch you perish slowly as I peel away your skin layer by layer." She raises her hands far above her head and the princess/tigress lets out a fierce roar. Shareef pauses and grins..."Oh, does the royal feline have something to say? Perhaps she's ready to sign the documents I've procured for her then?"

The Sorceress flashes her hands again and the tigress is transformed back into the beautiful princess. "No! You'll never get away with this!" she shouts from the cage.

"Hmmm. Too bad. I was hoping we could solve this peacefully. But you see, I've already gotten away with this. Either you sign the documents or you remain a tiger in a cage for the rest of your short life in cat-years while I do as I please." Shareef raises her arms again to cast a spell on you but only Shareen's scream stops her.

"No!! Wait. I'll sign the parchments," Shareen says reluctantly.

"No, don't!" you shout.

Sorceress Shareef throws her head backwards and laughs hard. "Such valiance!" She laughs more. "I just wanted to see if I could change your minds. But I don't think I want to have you sign the papers anymore. I'm enjoying this too much. It will be fun to tear apart Sir Mandeep here. I kind of like having you as MY inferior for once. Maybe I'll have my servants domesticate you. I deserve it after all. We were *born* equals, the same minds and same appearance...but because you were born but a few moments before me...that meant a lifetime of subservience and inferiority for me. Well, it's time to repair that."

"Is that still your excuse, Shareef?" asks Shareen. "You know as well as I do that you were the first born. Mother always said so until you were eight or so...and then she stopped saying it. Suddenly I was the first-born. You know why. You were not fit to be queen. Try as Mother might to control you, to 'fix' your errant ways, you continually showed

your unfitness to rule. And so she decided to make me the heir. Against her decree I tried to allow us to rule peacefully together...and this is the thanks I have received.”

“Ha! Go ahead and try and raise my ire! It will only make your deaths more enjoyable. No matter what the past is...I...rule...now.” And with a deep, dark, sinister laugh that bubbles up from her black insides, Shareef begins to grow, in spurts, with each hearty, dark laugh. Filling the room, her laugh grows deeper and more sinister.

“Think you can face majic like this?” the thick, now-inhuman voice pours out of her mouth and spills over the floor like hot tar. She laughs again and then waves her hands. Suddenly you can move again.

“No fun to play with food that can’t move,” she says. “Now, run!”

SAVE GAME

Game saved.

PUT RING ON

Slipping the ring on your hand, you feel a strange sensation and then your hand explodes. Of course, in this weakened state you are no match for Shareef who slowly tears you limb from limb. Thankfully, you’ve already passed out by this point.

You’re dead. Too bad. And who says all fantasies have happy endings? You have three options. Restore, Restart, or Quit.

RESTORE

Game loaded.

PUT RING ON MIDDLE FINGER

Pulling the dragon’s ring out of your pocket you place it on your middle finger as the old gnome instructed you to do. Suddenly there is a flash of brilliant light and a bright, multi-colored mist shoots out of your ring, latching onto the ring on Shareef’s enlarged finger.

“The twin ring! Where did you get that?” she screams. “Never mind. Shareen couldn’t defeat me when she had it. You’ll fare no better!” She stamps twice on the ground and the floor beneath you begins to crumble.

You fall and manage to catch yourself on the lip of the hole. Beneath you seems to be a portal into the depths of hell. Or, at least, boiling hot lava, which is still bad.

CHANT INCANTATION

Oops! You’ve encountered an error and the game cannot continue! Trust us, we’re exceedingly embarrassed about it. However, the good news is, whatever you did, you don’t need to do it to finish Fantasy Quest V. Thanks – Madre Programming Staff

Crud! Crap! and double crap! This is all we need. Kendra looked at her watch. It was 3:30 a.m. 4:00. She’d go to bed at 4:00 for sure. Kendra rebooted the game.





Chapter 2; women & other questionable material in computer games

April 4th, 1994

“Shrink her breasts.”

“You want smaller breasts?”

“Yeah. Make them smaller. We’ve already got two women with large breasts in this game. We need variety. Not everyone likes large breasts,” said Art.

Bill looked at Art and Art was right. Art was a genius. And this was another genius moment, thought Bill. “And besides,” said Bill, “without smaller breasts, there are no bigger breasts.”

“Exactly,” said Art, and Bill began to make the breasts smaller.

“Pass me another donut,” said Art. Will, president and CEO of Madre Games Entertainment, listening to these two from his spot against the radiator, pushed the donut box down the desk to the genius who chose a sprinkled one. Art liked sprinkles.

This was going to be the greatest Swarthy Victor installment yet. And it was just getting easier to crank these things out. They had it down to an art...and Art was the mastermind behind it all. He had single-handedly created the world’s first and most popular and, Bill thought, singularly brilliant series of adult-rated games...at the tender age of 40. Well, actually, it had been an update of an earlier, popular but lesser-known text based game by another person that came out in the early 80s...but it had been Art’s idea to update it about ten years ago.

Actually, it had been Art and Will’s idea, but Art had written it, programmed it, given it the ‘*Swarthy Victor Quests for Chicks*’ title and theme song and added the now-famous Art Loel humor and puns that came to embody Swarthy Victor games. Will had only really backed the update in a business sense...and acted as a sounding board for Art. Will wasn’t that creative. He was a business guy. And Art had designed and programmed the second game too. That game took Swarthy Victor in its own direction. No longer a copy, the sequel had expanded the original

basic idea into a universe, further fleshed out Victor’s character and established the game as one of the greatest ever created. Everything in that game was brilliant. At least Bill thought so.

Bill had come along in the third game as a graphic artist for Swarthy Victor’s more detailed close-ups...mostly Bill’s job was to draw sexy women, a task in which he had much experience from his Junior High School days. Only, now, he usually had to draw them *with* clothes. But Art had taken a shine to the young artist and though, on the third and fourth games, Bill had only done the character art, by the fifth game he had become a key part of the design team. Life was great.

And Art was so modest too, thought Bill. A lot of people might think that silly adult-rated adventure games are a shameful thing to waste genius on...but Bill didn’t think so. Actually, most people didn’t think Art was a genius – including Art. But Bill did and he *knew* others did – though no one ever explicitly mentioned it. He could just tell by the way they reacted the same way as he did to Art’s ideas-- like by saying ‘Brilliant!’ or ‘You’re a genius’ after seeing Art’s demos. When Bill would, off hand, say ‘Art’s a genius, isn’t he?’ to one of his co-workers, they would nod in the affirmative. Of course, if you needed someone to put that in writing, to make Art a certifiable genius – well, that would never happen. You just don’t ascribe genius to a man who makes dirty computer games for a living. And Art wasn’t *that* kind of a genius - not one of those certifiable ones who should be wearing a robe and smoking a pipe and telling everyone he’s a genius. No, Art was one of those brilliant non-genius geniuses – who eats donuts, tells great jokes and tells everyone he’s a genius...but only to get laughs. Though Art would never admit to being a genius, Bill knew he was. And he knew everyone else thought so too, even if they wouldn’t admit it seriously.

But Bill didn’t think it was a waste of Art’s genius to be making dirty computer games. Everything needs a touch of genius. There are unheralded genius plumbers and genius mechanics. Art was the genius of dirty computer games. And Swarthy Victor went beyond being just a dirty game – it was hilarious and brilliant...and sometimes had social commentary – though Art would be loath to admit that and, if called on it, would do all he could to remove any sort of redeeming quality from the game. ‘Redeeming quality material is obscene in a silly, dirty adult-rated computer game’, he would say. And Swarthy Victor was Art’s genius. Art was a *good* music teacher, a *funny* guy, a *great* father, had *excellent* taste in food – but he was a GENIUS when it came to Swarthy Victor. It his calling. And it was amazing to work with him...to be a part of the genius,

to work in this moment of history.

Art was leaning back in his chair, munching thoughtfully on his donut. The sun was just rising behind the frosted Madre forest treetops framed in the window behind him, streaming in and highlighting his leather chair, the top of his round, bald head, the sprinkles on his donut. "I'm thinking we should give her a different skin color," suggested Art into the creative ether of the room, the free space where suggestions could be remarked, modified, altered, judged by anyone. "We already have three mostly white babes. We need more variety. Adventure games need variety – especially when all you're doing is trying to have sex with women. They've got to be different."

Art's right, thought Bill, who stopped shrinking the breasts on the model sketch, sat back and thought.

"How about black," suggested Will. "There hasn't been a black woman in a Swarthy Victor game since number two."

"Yeah, I'm thinking that too," said Art, "but black seems so...stereotypical. I mean, whenever they want to add some ethnic diversity to... something...a movie, a book, an award show...they throw in a black person. Or if they're really creative they throw in an Asian person. I don't just want to have the appearance of ethnic diversity – I want *actual* ethnic diversity."

"Hmmm," Will sat back against the radiator, put his hand to his mouth and thought. Will was the owner & president of Madre Games Entertainment. He was the only guy to consistently wear a suit to work, always with a red striped tie hanging from the collar, resting lightly on the slight outward curve of his middle-aged belly. Will was the only guy in the entire company, including the recently acquired subsidiary, Synapse Games, to wear a moustache (well, except for Carlos in beta-testing. But that wasn't so much a moustache as it was a...face...thing.) In an industry known for people starting work at 11 a.m. and staying until 3 a.m., where jeans are too corporate for casual day and the main ingredient in lunch is Soda Pop, Will was the straight man. Not the straight man in the comedy duo, who is always the butt of jokes – no – Will was smart. And he had a sense of humor...maybe not to make up jokes, but to laugh at them. He was the serious guy who took care of all these wacky game geeks, herded them across the great, empty and dangerous plains of software publishing. He was the serious cowboy type. Didn't know much about fancy things like character design and third-tier puzzle theory, he just had to keep them programming cattle focused, protected and herd 'em across God's land. Will crossed the i's and dotted the t's at Madre

Games. No wait – that's the other way around. Well, he got it right anyway. He was good at that. He liked doing it. He planned the meetings. He organized the game release dates. He authorized new games. He was the Big Boss.

Will wasn't officially part of the Swarthy Victor design team. But it was he and Art who had initially thought of re-doing the original text-based game and it was he who had given the game the green light. He let Art have all the creative control. Will was more the programmer/hacker type. Good with logic, the kind of guy who made breakthroughs squeezing more computing power out of a silicon chip...and he'd pulled several stupefying programming stunts back in the day. He'd programmed all of Madre's original games when the company was just a computer in a garage...when he was the male half of Madre's workforce. But he hadn't done any programming in years. After they started hiring programmers, of which Art was one of the first, there were more important things for him to do.

Now he ran the ever-growing corporation, did the books and made the executive decisions...at least officially. His wife, Kendra, no doubt had a strong bedroom ear, and, unofficially, was the other boss of the company. Will really had nothing to do with the actual content of the games anymore, though he liked to stop in on these impromptu meetings in Art's office – the ones that start, unofficially, before everyone else is in the office. Will liked to see how things were going, make suggestions, join in on the development fun without having the odious responsibility of worrying about the details or actually finishing the game. And Art liked to have him around to use as a sounding board for his ideas. Will liked to be a sounding board. He was good at yay or nay decisions.

"What if we make her Swedish?" suggested Bill.

"Yeah," said Art, "but we already have too many white women."

"I know," said Bill, "But just because she's Swedish doesn't mean she couldn't be black."

Art turned from his seat and looked at Will. They looked at each other and both smiled.

"She could have a Swedish accent and everything," continued Bill.

Art laughed an excited laugh – the deep, hearty, quick *ha-ha* he always did when there was a development breakthrough that he was especially pleased with. "Good call, Bill!" he shouted. It was such a good idea that Art actually put down his donut. He wrote 'SWEDE' down on the pad in front of him. "That's AWESome!"

Bill smiled. Satisfied. *Art thinks I'm AWESome!*

“Great,” continued Art and scribbled a little bit more down. “Bill, show Will the proposed sketches for the museum bit. I want to bounce them off him. Well, not literally of course.”

“Sure,” Bill picked up the dossier from the floor and searched through for a couple of sketches he had done for the museum section.

“This is the scene where they are running naked through the museum,” Art volunteered, bringing Will up to speed.

“Almost got ‘em,” Bill said pulling a large sheet of paper out.

“Why are they running naked through the museum?”

“Because the Neo-Nazis are chasing them.”

“Oh. Why are they naked?”

“We don’t know yet,” said Art.

Bill said, as he pulled two large drawings out onto the desk, “We just thought it would be great to have a running-naked-through-a-museum scene.”

“Hmmm,” said Will pointing to the sketch of the man. “Are you planning on changing the look of Victor again?”

“No. Oh...no. That’s not Victor. That’s Manlio. He’s a cover model for romance novels and Victor’s main competition.”

“I see. That’s not a bad idea. Contemporary. And it will definitely be big with female players...” Will philosophized aloud.

“Hey,” said Art leaning in toward one of the drawings and squinting, “How come you can’t see his schlong in this one?”

“You want to see his schlong?” Bill started to ask but was cut short by a knock at the open doorway. Kendra Roberts, the other (unofficial) boss of Madre Games Entertainment (and Will’s wife) was standing there peering in. She looked serious. Perhaps like she hadn’t slept much the night before. She often looked haggard and tired just before one of her games was about to ship. And in four days one of hers was. Of course, everyone usually looks haggard when their latest game is about to ship, but Kendra usually much more so. And today, right now, she looked even more so than her usual much more so. Everyone looked up at the sound of her knock.

“Hi guys,” she said and then to Will, “We’ve got a problem.” It was definitely a ‘we have to talk about this problem before this morning’s big meeting’ problem. Will could tell from the sound of her voice. There was trouble in them thar hills and the cowpoke was needed on the plain.

“Alright,” said Will standing up from his unusually casual stance against the radiator. “We’ve got a couple of minutes.” He turned to Bill and Art, “I’ll let you guys finish up in here and see you at the meeting.

Sounds like the prelim design is coming right along.”

And with that Will and Kendra headed out and down the row of cubicles outside Art’s ‘Orifice’ as it had been altered by Art to read on the door.

“See ya,” said Art.

“See ya,” said Bill. Bill turned back to Art. “You wanna see his dink in this one? I thought we were gonna keep this series R rated?”

“Of course we are, but, I mean, we show women’s breasts – and, in extreme conditions, a little of the ‘hair down there’...we *gotta* show his wiener. It would be such a cop-out and probably sexist not to. Besides, it’s not like it’s a close-up...or erect. It’s way back there. It’s gonna be, what, three pixels long? Otherwise the female players will feel ripped off. That was the whole reason for putting the Elena and Manlio characters in, to even out the sexual references and broaden the playing field. I mean, there’s boobs and sex everywhere in the game and suddenly when a naked male character shows up, his wang is constantly hidden behind his leg? What? Is it taped there? That won’t work. Besides, we never had qualms about making penis and dildo jokes before. This man needs a wiener.”

“Ok,” said Bill. “I agree with you one-hundred percent, actually. I even have a live model I can use to make sure it looks right,” joked Bill.

“Actually, make it four pixels long. We only have one naked male character in this game besides Victor – who’s pretty much a loser in all categories. We might as well give the women something a little bit...extra.”

“He *is* a romance novel model, after all,” said Bill.

“Ooh! Ooh!” shouted Art, piping up as he got a good idea. “He should have a secret name for it. Something European. We could do a lot of jokes around that. Something like Alphonso or something...”

Art wrote Alphonso down on his pad. This had been a productive morning – a black Swede and an extra long European penis named Alphonso. This game was practically writing itself!, he thought.

Elena had been another of Art’s brilliant ideas – in the last Swarthy Victor instalment he had introduced a strong female main character that the player actually got to control. It added a lot of new playability to an idea that was getting old (there are only so many games you can make where the only objective is to sleep with all the women in the game), was really funny and, as Art suspected it would, drew a lot of females to the series.

At the time Will and others had worried that introducing a female

main character – a virtual sex-change as it was billed by Art – might turn away the traditional male player. But Art, encouraged by the few female fan letters he had received for the previous games (many of whom confessed to secretly playing their boyfriend's, husband's or brother's copies) correctly argued that “women play Swarthy Victor too. Everyone wants to role-play as a dirty, sleazy, horny Italian loser...even women. Besides, they're curious. They play because they want a peek into the male mind. Just the same reason men read their girlfriend's copies of Cosmo. With Elena men will finally have a chance to role-play as a woman and conquer *men*! It will be great! Think of all the new jokes we can make!”

So Elena was introduced and Art was right. She was a huge hit. Letters from female fans poured in for the best selling Swarthy Victor in the series. Latent female fans came out of the woodwork. Men loved the sex-change idea. The nature of the game hadn't been corrupted, it had been boosted, multiplying the opportunities for risqué and silly situations, to use bad puns, for Elena (or Victor) to be embarrassingly naked and to use personal objects as suggestive inventory items.

Art had been right. Just like he'd been right about the theme song – yet another distinction of Art's: creating the first recurring theme song for a computer game.

Bill tucked the two drawings back into the dossier. “We still haven't figured out how to give the player a clue on how to get through the Minotaur maze.”

“Yeah. I don't know. It's still not obvious enough. But I can't figure out a way to hint to the player how to do it. It's still gotta be a puzzle. And I really don't want to resort to a Transvernacular Obfusculator*.”

“For sure,” said Bill. “What if it's written on a bathroom wall? Victor is always getting sage advice from bathroom walls.”

“Yeah, but we do that in every game. Actually, that's a good thing. But we already did that once in this game.”

“Hmmm. What about if he gets it from a drunk, like in Swarthy Victor Quests for Chicks.”

“Yeah...that's not a bad idea. But it's gotta be something different.” Art leaned back in his chair. Bill put his hand to his chin and thought.

“Us!” shouted Art, suddenly sitting forward. He had that twinkle in his eye. “That's so perfect! *WE* tell him.”

“What do you mean?”

*the *Transvernacular Obfusculator* is famous among the employees at Madre Games. But you'll learn more on that later.

“I mean, he goes into a taverna – looking for one of the gods, I suppose – and *we're* there. You and me as creators of the game. We really don't need to be there. We just answer questions about the game and we tell him one thing we really want him to remember, stress that it's important – and tell him the hint for the maze. The hint's not perfect so the player will have to figure it out still – but they won't be totally left in the dark as to the sequence of turns. That's wicked!” He began to write on the pad. “I'm a genius!” he said to himself.

Art was right. That was the perfect solution. It was funny; It was irreverent; It worked.

Art was right. He *was* a genius.





Chapter 3; meanwhile, back at the ranch...

Kendra Roberts, game designing pioneer and star-of-the-show at Madre Games Entertainment, stepped through the door that Will Roberts held open for her and into his office. Will Roberts' office was the biggest in the building...but not by much...only enough for someone to notice that it could, possibly, be bigger than the others. Will didn't need an ego. He didn't work that way. Unlike most organizations, the size of his office wasn't a status factor, or a tool of intimidation. It wasn't compensation for the size of his dick, (which was pretty much normal size). Will didn't have an ego that needed soothing in that way. Nor did he feel he needed a large office to let people know who was boss. He *WAS* the boss...and they should know that. And he wasn't the sort of boss that felt he needed to remind people that he was the boss. Things worked best when people forgot there was a boss and everything went smoothly, with him working quietly in the background, the lone cowboy guide at the back of the herd. As long as the cattle were moving in the right direction on their own, he could sit back and relax. But for those times when the cattle wanted to sit around or piss off in the wrong direction – he had a whip. The power was in his hands if he needed it. He didn't need a ridiculously large horse and he didn't need to ride up and down the herd every few moments so that they would remember he had a really large horse.

Will's office *was* nice, though. Nicer than the others. Partly because he was boss (because when he asked for a new desk, he didn't need to justify it to the accountant) and partly because he was cleaner and more organized than the others. He had a few ferns. A big window looking out into the forest. His was the only office with a sofa, but that was more out of functional necessity for meetings. Actually, with the couch taking up floor space, it sometimes appeared that Will's office was just a little bit smaller than Kendra's or Art's. But it was nicer – lighter colors, no files and folders piling up on the desk, all the pencils neatly sharpened, file folders organized, nice pictures on the wall. Art, understanding well Will's role as the lone cowboy of Madre Games, referred to Will's office as 'the Ranch'.

Will ambled on in behind Kendra. She went and stood by the chair

but didn't sit down. This was very Kendra. Especially when she was stressed. Will had an open door policy so he left the door open behind him. No one was really in the building yet today anyway, so there was little need to worry about interruptions. Will had a window that looked out into the office as well, opposite of the one that peered into the forest. Will moseyed over to the desk and sat on the front of it, clasping his hands in his lap.

"I found a bug last night." Kendra started.

"Really? A bad one?" He wondered when Kendra would start pacing. He was humoring her.

"Uh...yeah. I'd say it was pretty bad." Kendra was bordering on the edge of sarcasm. She looked like a contained ball of energy, percolating over at the fingertips and corners of her mouth. Pace, pace, pace, her body told her.

Any minute now she's going to start pacing, thought Will. "Hmmm..."

"I was up until 4:30 figuring it out."

"Geeze, what a way to spend your Sunday. You should have come to the picnic with me and the kids instead of stressing yourself out over the game." He tried to change the subject.

Kendra bit her lip. God, she'd been up so late she was fidgeting worse than ever. Worse, she was beginning to think like the characters in her game. Started thinking of her purse as her inventory...holding onto things in case she'd need them later in the 'game.' As she made her quickie breakfast this morning she'd caught herself thinking:

PUT BREAD IN TOASTER

What bread?

GET BREAD

You take the bread. It is slightly stale. You get two points.

PUT BREAD IN TOASTER

Excellent idea. Diligently, you put the bread in the toaster hoping the magical device will change it into toast.

God, she was going nuts. At 39. And like the game last night, she was

just waiting for her life to crash. “This isn’t about coming to the picnic,” she said, “this is about finding a major bug in the program four days before it’s about to ship.” She started to pace.

Will doubted it could be that much of a major bug if the bug testers hadn’t found it. “I know, I know. I just think a nice day at the picnic would have been more relaxing than bug-hunting like nuts for an entire weekend after already spending the whole work week doing the same thing. Besides, we aren’t operating out of a garage anymore. The company is expanding. Rapidly. We have bug testers. You should let *them* handle this stuff. That’s what we pay them to do.”

Bug test MY game? It’s my game. Are you suggesting I shouldn’t be part of the bug testing? I know my game best! “Well, they didn’t find this bug, did they?” she said instead. “I found it. And now it’s a major problem. We’ve been rushing this too much.”

Kendra was right, Will thought. Designers are the best bug-testers, but he still didn’t think she needed to test the game. The bug testers would have caught that mistake eventually. And it wasn’t so much that he was against her testing her own game, it was just that she was stressful when she was stressed. They’d done all the hard work getting the company started – now it was time to lay back, relax. His wife could design the games and the testers could test them. It was the logical answer. She didn’t need to worry about it. It was a game, not her kid. “Well, I’m sure the bug testers would have caught the bug eventually...”

Arrrgkk! He’s not listening to me. Why doesn’t he listen?

BANG HUBBY’S HEAD ON DESK UNTIL HE LISTENS

No, he might resent it and then *you’d* have to mow the lawn and clean the gutters.

Will could see her clutching her nails into her fists. This was a bad sign. She was getting ornery. And he didn’t really have a problem with her testing the game if that’s what she *had* to do. If there was a bug, then it should be fixed. *It’s probably an easily solvable problem anyway. A few quick code tweaks. No need to scrap the already manufactured software.* “Well how bad a bug is it?”

“Perhaps the most hideous bug we have ever found four days prior to shipping a game.”

Kendra wasn’t much for hyperbole so this statement caught his attention a little. “Really? But if it’s that bad why haven’t the testers

found it?”

“That’s exactly my point. The bug is so obscure. They wouldn’t know about it. But it’s really nasty.”

“What is it exactly?” Finally, Will asked the question. Most people, when they hear there is a bug in a game, can’t wait to find out what the bug is. It’s the first question they ask. With Will, either from being well used to bugs from all his years of programming, or from only seeing them in a business productivity sense, it was always the last question he asked. And people who find the bugs are usually just dying to describe the bug and how cleverly they had found it. It’s like a war story. The weirder the bug, the better. The more you had to do, the weirder you had to get to find it, the greater your status as a bug-hunter. Like pulling freak mutant vegetables out of your garden – it was exciting. But, in Kendra’s instance, being the designer of the game, whose name was all over the cover and in the credits – this bug was not a happy occurrence. This was not fun.

“*Welllll*, if you give the carrot to the horse *after* you’ve completed the love-potion quest, then at the end of the game, you suddenly get booted when you’re fighting with Shareef.”

“Booted?”

“It just crashes.”

“Did you—”

“I’ve tried it almost thirty times. God, it took forever. It doesn’t make any sense. It took me at least 6 hours to find out that it was the carrot quest that does it. It’s so unrelated and separated by about 12 hours of gameplay!”

“Oh.” Will had to admit that was a pretty bad bug.

“*Conceivably*,” Kendra went on, “a third or so of the game players could get all this way in the game only for it to repeatedly crash. Even if they were patient enough to replay the entire game without using their save-games, they may *still* do the carrot bit *after* the love-potion bit and *still* end up with a crashed game.”

There was a pause. “How many copies of the game have we pressed anyway?” Kendra asked. She was fiddling with the objects on the edge of her husband’s desk.

“DiskTech was supposed to print about 750 copies yesterday. That was our first day of prelim packing.” Back in the old days, Madre didn’t press games until all the bug-testing was complete. But the adventure game business was booming. There was demand and suddenly you had to give out promise dates to dealers and gamers on the release of your next game ...or risk loss of market share. Now they had a promise date

for Fantasy Quest V in four days that couldn't be missed. Usually the last few days of bug-testing are quiet – only minor, minor bugs are discovered - so they can start punching out a few games with minor-minor bugs ahead of time to ensure that they have all the pressing done on time. It had worked flawlessly the time they had come so close to a promised ship date with Sci-Fi Quest III.

Will didn't like having to do this. Most people at Madre games hated the practice - especially the game designers. No one liked the idea of putting out an imperfect or buggy game. But it had to be done, reasoned Will – or Madre would be bogged under by the corporate powerhouses backing the adventure game surge. A few years ago they had some major game releases, but since nobody had expected them to come out, they hadn't been as widely purchased as they should have. They'd missed the boat somehow – somewhere in the last two years the release date became more important than the release itself.. But now, with advertising stepped up and launch dates on time, Madre's games were flying off the shelves again. Or at least, holding back all the new competitors.

"Well, what do we do about it?" Kendra asked. She had stopped pacing. They were now in pro-active phase. Doing something about the problem. It was her forte. Moving towards a solution was the only time she felt at ease.

"Damn. I guess we're going to have to stall pressing today," Will reasoned. "Alert the clean-up coders of the problem and as soon as it's fixed we'll begin pressing again...and we'll have to run into the night to repress the copies we already made. It'll cost a bit more, but if we miss the launch date by a few days, it won't make a huge difference. It will only up anticipation."

Kendra hated the release date thing and had been the head crusader against pre-pressing. But they had worked so hard for a year to meet this deadline. It was maddening her to miss it at the last second. "Couldn't we just put a patch up on the BBS and on the SupraNet network?" she asked, knowing it was stupid the moment it came out of her mouth. *God, I need coffee. I should make a game called Caffeine Quest: the search for Juan Valdez.*

"Yeah. But it's too big of a bug...and not enough people have modems or the technical know-how to dial-up and download. Maybe in a few years. But now we gotta 'stop the presses.'" Will smiled at his own cleverness. It was so rare that he was clever. He was pleased with himself. He was gonna use that term too when he told DiskTech to hold off. The chance to say that almost made it worth the trouble of fixing the problem.

Kendra was pleased too. The problem was solved now. Things were back to full-steam ahead stage. Kendra was more anxious than usual to get this game out. Not because of the new deadline system, but because...she hadn't really wanted to do this game in the first place. This was the fifth game in the series. She was getting tired of it. It had been three years since the last game during which she had taken a break to do a mystery game. It had been fun to work on. It had been something totally new. It had been different. But then it was back to Fantasy Quest. Kendra was starting to feel stale towards the series. It was still popular – but if it was boring making them...then that had to impact on the fun of playing them...and she was running out of fairy tale clichés to use as puzzles. Not that her puzzles weren't fun, but the fairy tale puzzles had been a lot of the charm of the original game.

Kendra knew it was time to take a break from FQ again. Her mental health told her so. Lately, at night, she'd been having fantasies about telling her husband to stuff it when the fan demands for another Fantasy Quest reached crescendo again. She would pressure Will to find someone to take over the helm, to do the sequel. She didn't want Madre to get in a rut...and recently it didn't feel like they were doing anything new... unique – the stuff that had made them cutting edge. Now she was getting stressed out on this line of thought and Will could see it.

"Why don't you go head into the meeting room and pick up a pastry?" Will suggested, stepping around to the other side of the desk. "I'll tell the code-cleaners to get cracking on the code."

This was another thing that had been introduced in the last few years: Code-cleaners. When bugs were found, no longer did the original coder go back and fix up the problems...they were too busy working on the next Madre smash hit. Now it was up to contract code-cleaners up from San Francisco to hunt and peck through the reams of unfamiliar code and fix problems. It was good because they managed to give jobs to fresh graduates – and provided a good branch-off for new programmers into the company in an industry where there were no college graduates in 'Game Design.' With code-cleaners you could brute force a solution, throw thirty or forty workers at the problem. But it seemed so corporate. So brawn over brains. Coders not fixing their own bugs? It just seemed wrong. But Kendra tried to forget about it. *I wonder if they have a lemon Danish in the meeting room?*

SAY GOODBYE TO DOTING HUSBAND

Game Quest

You say goodbye.

FIND PASTRY

As she wandered out of Will's office she noticed she had absent-mindedly picked up a staple-remover in the process of fiddling with the objects on Will's desk. She considered returning it for a moment, but a strange compulsion came over her to keep it. *I better save this for later. It could be useful.* Kendra added it to her inventory.



Chapter 4: the big meeting

It was eating at him. Did everyone know? Did they see the dark circles under his eyes? No...they didn't seem to. He was fidgeting, he thought. *I better stop fidgeting. Or maybe, if I stop fidgeting too much, they'll notice and wonder why I'm sitting so still. Does Geoff notice? Damn, I was supposed to get those dialogue lines written last night and instead...instead I just frittered the night away. Blowing things up. Getting keys. Strafing left. Strafing right. It was amazing. It was like being in a movie. It was brilliant...*and he couldn't stop thinking about it.

The meeting was going to start soon; in five minutes, as the rest of the Madre design crew straggled in. He'd probably be called on to say something. Or they'd expect his usual witty remarks. But he had to feel free, loose to make witty remarks. And if he felt free and loose he might slip up. It might just come out. He couldn't trust himself not to blurt out **"I've been up until 5 in the morning playing Dan Destroyem for the last week! I've had a total of 12 hours sleep in 5 days! I can't stop thinking about it! When I'm at work, I can't wait to get home to play! I play all night! When I have to take a bathroom break, I rush myself, squeezing my bathroom muscles, so I can get back to the game sooner! When I get up in the morning I feel like an idiot. I promise not to play the game again – to delete it from my computer.... But by the time I've driven to work, I need to play it again! I need it...I need it and I'm sorry!!"** And all their jaws would drop open at this sacrilege and then he'd be fired.

Of course, then he'd have plenty of time to play Dan Destroyem...

Maybe they wouldn't care about it. After all, it wasn't *wrong* to play the competitors' games. In fact, it was encouraged. It made great water cooler chat. Playing competitors' games happened all the time. It kept you abreast of the industry and inspired you. Often, the programmers would stay after work to play them. What he was doing wasn't any different... at all...but yes it was. It was Dan Destroyem. Dan Destroyem was dangerous. People were worried about Dan Destroyem. Dan Destroyem went, not only against the type of game Madre made, but their very creative ideologies. Madre made intelligent, witty, clever, original games

with storylines...at least, storylines more complex than 'save the babes' as Dan Destroyem's directive was.

Dan Destroyem was a good game, no one denied that. The people at Madre weren't elitist. They wouldn't argue that Dan Destroyem was sub-par because it was all about an adrenaline rush...about blowing things up. No, in fact, almost everyone would agree that Dan Destroyem was a great game. And that's what worried them. And it wasn't the first 3-D action game to do so. It had followed on the heels of Gloom, Gloom 2 and, now, Crypt Destroyer. All four games were record breaking sellers and in a similar vein: 3-D immersive environments, guns, ammo, explosions... maybe a puzzle or two...and no text. Dan Destroyem was a HUGE hit. And what worried Madre was...would anyone buy their games anymore? Madre's games, adventure games, were slow, low on explosions, babes and 3-D graphics... These new 3-D shooters were selling like hot cakes... and Madre's production costs were going up in inverse proportion to decreasing sales. The market flood of adventure games for the last five years hadn't helped their situation...so many bad imitations...people were weary.

It wasn't official doctrine that you couldn't play Dan Destroyem. No one had said that. It wasn't even a subtext – an unspoken taboo - under peoples' conversation. It was just...Dan was the bullet in the coffin – the anti-Madre hero. Dumb, cool and surrounded by scantily clad women. He blew stuff up and laughed. He was crude. And Tim loved it. And he knew it was wicked. Wicked. *Wicked!*

A couple more people straggled into the meeting room. Casual, light-hearted conversations were easily struck up. The camaraderie at meetings was great. Art sat over near the donuts as usual. He was talking to Smith – one of the guys from the new Synapse Games subdivision. Tim didn't know his first name, only his last – Smith. Tim wished he could be more like Art. Art doesn't 'get' the 3-D action games. In fact, Art doesn't get most games except the games he makes. When Gloom first came out, everybody was *oohing* and *ahhing* over the technical wizardry, the 3-D environment, the adrenaline-pumping, addictive violence and scariness. Art was too, but when he played it, he said he only liked it 'ok'. Everyone else was hooked. Everyone else couldn't stop talking about it. Art thought it was a great, original and stunning game...in theory. In practice he liked it 'ok'. Mostly Art would watch – but never felt the desire, the all-consuming itch - to play himself. He just liked designing his own games and telling jokes. *If I was more like Art, thought Tim, I wouldn't be having this problem.*

Will, the big-boss man, sat across the large oak table from Art, facing the extremely large meeting room window looking out over the pristine sea of coniferous trees that was the Redwood forest, cushioned high in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It was a beautiful, clear day and the sun broke into the office at an angle just low enough that it didn't shine in people's eyes, but just high enough to line the edge of the long oak table with gold. It was hard to feel like you were in a meeting in a room like this – felt more like an outdoor picnic with friends. Will was pondering silently and writing things down with his ballpoint pen on the pad in front of him. Tim wished he could be more like Will. Will was always focused. Will wouldn't let this sort of thing happen to him.

Tim knew that Will had a copy of Gloom on his office computer. Everyone had for a while after it debuted two years ago. It was the fastest selling game on the planet...catapulting EGO Games from relative obscurity to super-stardom. For a good reason. The game was insanely good. The staff couldn't stop playing it...so much so that it started to get out of hand. Productivity had gone down. People were talking more about Gloom (and later Gloom 2) than the games they were working on. And yet, just as it was getting out of hand, somehow it just stopped. There was no memo that went around saying everyone was just too obsessed with Gloom. That wasn't Will's style. He didn't like having an organization so big that it required impersonal memos to act as constables. Somehow, Tim thought, everyone just fell into line, people deleted it off their computers, talked about other things. Everyone had just done the right thing...as if guided to greener pastures by some silent, ghost rider in the sky. It hadn't become a taboo subject...it had just gone away.

Will, though, still kept a copy on his computer. He would play for 15 minutes every now and then. That was acceptable. Others did it too. And everyone still gathered after work to play the game, but Will was never sucked in. He didn't even uninstall Gloom 1 to install Gloom 2. He didn't even have Crypt Destroyer. Will seemed happy just to play 15 minutes of the long outdated Gloom every now and then. FIFTEEN MINUTES!! That's what Tim would tell himself: *I'll just play for fifteen minutes. To relax me. Then I'll go and get started on that dialogue. The game playing will get me in the groove.* And then it would be four in the morning and he wouldn't have had the dialogue done. *I'm such a moron!* Where was that Ghost Rider in the Sky to guide him now...

Tim decided he was going to delete the game when he got home from work today. Well, maybe he would play one last game and then delete it. He looked over at Geoff, the other half of the design team of the award

winning Sci-Fi Quest games. Tim wished he could be more like Geoff...

Geoff wondered if anyone noticed that he had been up all night playing Dan Destroyem. What an *awesome* game! Dan was soooooo cool! He kept getting this one line from the game stuck in his head, over and over. It was a sound byte: *Bite my gnubs!* What a great line. Geoff wished he had thought of that line. But he was going to have to abstain from playing tonight. He had to get his half of the work done. Otherwise, any minute now, Tim was going to finish up his dialogue lines and wonder why Geoff hadn't finished the inventory item descriptions. He really should get the work done, he thought. After all, Tim's work is always terrible – and if I do more, then more *good* work will go into the game, Geoff reasoned.

Henry the composer was at the meeting too. A relatively new addition to the family, Henry joined Madre just after their previous composer, a guy from a quasi-famous 70s rock band, departed Madre about two years ago. Henry was a fairly amicable guy. His music might not be as good as his predecessor, but it was good enough. And, rumour had it, he had a Shibachi 400 monster bar-b-que at his house. That, alone, was enough to keep him working at Madre, whose employees enjoyed, with near obsessiveness, their annual staff bar-b-que. But right now Henry was worried. He was worried they were going to announce another pay cut. That's what these big meetings meant. Pay-cuts. And he was sure it was about SupraNet – that bloated piece of crap...why had Madre ever gotten involved in it? Because it was original – and no other bottom-line focused company would have the guts to risk starting something like that – but not Madre. Madre did what it wanted. Actually, it had been a good idea...but it was too far ahead of its time. Will had really pushed the idea – an Internet that people could actually use for entertainment. At the time the 'Internet' had only consisted of newsgroups – filled by families of big business executives, professors or those in the computing industry. But Will saw the possibility for it expanding further...if they got in now they could have the world's first online community. And they always seemed on the cusp of doing it...even now, four years later.

Henry had been told from the start that it was a brilliant idea. Everybody was going to jump on soon. Henry didn't think about it much at first, but it didn't take long to understand what a revolutionary idea it was. And it didn't take much longer to realize what an elephant it was. Madre had been investing a lot of money and time into it since they first started it. Building up the infrastructure alone had been mind-bogglingly expensive. And then there were the advertising dollars to promote it...

and it just never seemed to catch on. Though, as time (and money) wore on, people got more responsive to the idea of online communities – but it was the Internet that was expanding to provide entertainment...people shied away from SupraNet, for some reason. Madre lost money through the nose...building up the idea only to have Internet User Groups suck up the interest. The idea had been too brilliant. And Madre was still carrying this bloated sack of sea water...unsure of what to do with it. Henry wished it would just go away.

About a year and a half ago, realizing that people were finally coming around to networks and internets, Will made a putsch to keep SupraNet alive, life support to hold it over until the people came – any minute now. Will had to ask staff to take small wage rollbacks in exchange for stock options. It wasn't obligatory...and if they wanted to, staff could vote no and kill SupraNet right then and there. But everybody, even Henry, had voted for it. It was the right thing to do. Madre even began issuing more stocks in an effort to keep it alive...lessening employee control in the company to less than 50 percent of total shares, risking true control of Madre to keep this thing afloat. But people went to Usenet and cheaper, freer alternatives that were suddenly popping up everywhere.

Henry was sure that's what this meeting was about. Will was going to notify everyone that the white elephant had now eaten Madre up – killed all its profits. Everyone was going to have their wages cut by 50% to keep the company afloat. *God, that would happen too.* He couldn't afford another wage rollback – Kuriko was due for another baby in 2 months. *God, another one!* If they rolled back his wage, then he would have to sell his stock – which was actually doing really well. But he didn't want to do that; already so much of Madre's stock was in the hands of non-industry people. He just wanted his salary. He had three mouths to feed!

The other guy from the Synapse Games sub-division had now arrived. Synapse Games was formerly an up-and-coming game company before Madre bought them out about a year and a half ago. Adventure games had been flooding the market for nearly two years by then. All those clones ate into Madre's market share, but then again, overall, their profits were soaring, so it still had a positive effect on their account books. Synapse, however, was a lean company that hadn't produced any big-sellers...but had produced notable ones, ones that Madre couldn't ignore. They were unique, not trite, and definitely original. Unlike the swaths of other games pouring into the market, Synapse's were a threat. So Will sat down with them and hammered out a deal to buy them up, incorporate them and make them a partner/sub-division. Madre had to issue more

shares to raise the money to do it. They really hadn't had much choice but to buy Synapse. They had to stay on top of the market...or face inevitable destruction.

The buy-out had been rather amicable, however, with most of Synapse's employees honored to become members of the great pioneer of computer games. And Madre had no interest in destroying the company. What Madre Games Entertainment really cared about was making good games. Incorporating Synapse was an excellent way to not only bolster Synapse's success, but to make that success part of Madre's own...and, most importantly, help them keep their jobs. Synapse management was very pleased with the deal. They basically retained their own management structure and autonomy, and had creative and financial control of their organization, even got to put their own name on their products. Only, now they were part of the Madre network with more resources at their disposal. Sure, they had to justify everything to Will at the end of the day...but as long as they made good games and didn't lose loads of money, they basically remained their own organization.

The only real change was that Madre and Synapse had to meet every now and then to coordinate and ensure they weren't stepping on each other's toes. Although the majority of contact between the two was over phone or email, Will would sometimes make visits down to Southern California. When there was a really important meeting, the two main reps from Synapse Games, Smith and the other guy (as they were known around the office), would come up, as they did today.

Today, everyone was here: Geoff and Tim, Will, Art, Henry the game composer, Smith and the other guy, Ron...the Madre family...others were still straggling in. The other major players at Madre, the infrastructure guys – accountants, lawyers, etc... - weren't around. They'd have another meeting later. This was a family meeting. The Madre family always got to hear the big news first. And without the infrastructure guys it was handled on a much more personal level. Less talk of bar charts, market analysis, gold doubloons, etc... Will was the only one who really paid attention to that stuff...and even he hated it. It seemed so antithetical to the art of making games. It was a necessary evil...and it needed to be dealt with in its own realm. This was the family realm; the heart of Madre. They were the kernel. All in all, there would be about 16 people at this meeting.

Kendra Roberts was the next to come in, her Danish Quest having been interrupted en route by the arrival of a code-busting concern idea that required her at her computer. Only a few of the other game designers,

working on final touches, were yet to show up. Kendra sat down next to Will, smiling at him.

GET SUGAR, Kendra thought.

You reach across the table for the sugar.

PUT SUGAR IN COFFEE

What coffee? You didn't bring any from the kitchen and the specialty meeting coffee hasn't arrived yet. How are you supposed to relax without coffee? You curse to yourself and wonder if you have enough time to quickly run to the kitchen and make a fresh pot...but no, it's not possible.

TAP FINGERS WITH IMPATIENCE

"You might want to pass that sugar down to Tim and Geoff when you're done with it," suggested Art, motioning down to the end of the table. The family turned their heads towards Tim and Geoff. Their faces were gaunt. They had dark marks under their eyes to put football players to shame. They looked so beat that, even though the coffee hadn't arrived yet, it seemed as if they needed a couple of spoonfuls of raw sugar just to keep them alive. Everyone laughed. They looked like hell. *Fuck!* Tim and Geoff both thought simultaneously, *They all know!*

"Why do you guys look so tired, anyway?" asked Kendra.

"We were working on game dialogue," said Geoff.

"Yeah," added Tim desperately, "Until really late!" *Was that too obvious?* wondered Tim. *That was too obvious.*

"You know," said Ron, co-designer of the wildly popular HomoSapien Quest. "Why don't you just, like, let the Transvernacular Obfuscator write the game, then you guys could get all your rest?" Laughter burst out around the table. Tim blushed. He'd never live down the Transvernacular Obfuscator puzzle. How he regretted ever even thinking of it in Sci-Fi Quest II. One of the inventory items you picked up was the so-called Transvernacular Obfuscator. At one point in the game, you needed to use it as a translator. At another point, it was a screw-driver. Later on it used its power to spy into another room. The bug testers nearly revolted when they got the first version of the game. None of it made sense – everyone accused Tim, creator of the Transvernacular Obfuscator. "It's

a cheap way out” they said. “A bad puzzle...a *really* bad puzzle.” It was a generic do-everything object. Not only was it confusing, because how was the player supposed to know what it did in the first place and then think to use it in that way, but it was like a skeleton key to any puzzle in the game. It was lazy game design. “It was seriously lame,” as Bill had said. And Tim knew it, but he resisted.

It had taken weeks of constant haranguing before he and Geoff finally backed down. Not because they really believed in the Transvernacular Obfusculator – but more because they knew everyone else was right. They were both deeply embarrassed that they had put it in; deeply embarrassed that it had come so far. If they took it out, it would not only prove that they were wrong, but be even more embarrassing – and make them the butt of jokes for the next millennium – which it had. But, they both knew the Transvernacular Obfusculator had to come out eventually. Everyone was right, it was the lamest puzzle ever. It was a cop-out. Now, whenever someone wanted to make a joke about an easy solution, they had the Transvernacular Obfusculator to fall back on. Tim wished he had a Transvernacular Obfusculator to make everyone shut up about it.

It’s funny to think how he and Geoff had both agreed on putting that thing in at the time...and then on taking it out. Now they couldn’t agree on anything. Well, they always disagreed, only now everyone knew they were disagreeing. Even arguing in front of other employees.

“Here, have some donuts,” the other guy passed the box down to a grateful Tim and Geoff. That diverted conversation away. *Maybe they didn’t know*, both Geoff and Tim thought.

“Sorry about the coffee,” said Will. “I forgot to order it soon enough. It should be here soon.”

It was good that people were feeling at ease at these meetings. There had been a disproportionate number of these ‘special’ meetings over the last year. Though the final outcome was usually good – and sometimes great – these big meetings always meant big changes. And because the industry was booming, especially the adventure game sector, Madre was changing faster than anyone could imagine...let alone keep up with. It had only been 4 months since their last ‘special meeting.’ That was when they opened a new division in the northwestern United States. They needed more programmers – and yet their head office was in a less than ideal location for the quick round up of new talent.

Berney, the nearest town, was quaint and small, set amongst the lush, quiet and expansive forest of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Here was a great place to *live*. Even to work. But a locus of hi-tech workers it

was not – and not everyone wanted to live in a small town, even for a paradise job. And so, over the last three years, they had opened a couple of smaller sub-offices across North America. Sometimes this involved bringing smaller game companies under their umbrella, sometimes it meant starting from scratch. It was exciting and fun for Will. But he was getting tired of the faceless expansion and eager to settle back into a niche...to focus on making games again. Though he was a good business guy, he’d gotten into the industry to make great software. Madre made games – and they made the games they wanted to make – not to maximize profits, but to please themselves and their fans. Business expansions were a necessary part of staying alive – to keep doing what they wanted, but Will looked forward to it settling down again. Expansion couldn’t last forever, he knew. He hoped.

Will had driven these cattle a long way...over treacherous rocky mountain terrains, waist deep through muddy raging rivers, through thunder and sunshine, he’d driven them on to find greener pastures. And it had gone incredibly well, but the journey was not over yet. Today, they were going to ford another set of rapids. But on the other side, no doubt, lay the greenest virgin pasture ever imagined. A cow heaven. Now they sat silent in the field, quiet in the grass knowing today was another step forward...they awaited Will’s move.

“We’re moving the head office from Berney,” Will said abruptly. Will was a master at guiding smooth transitions from office banter into serious meeting discussion. But he found it harder to do that with these special meetings. “Yeah, that was a great party. By the way, we’re hiring 100 more people.” “That’s a funny joke. Reminds me of the fact that we’ll all be taking pay cuts, and introducing stock options.” It just couldn’t be done smoothly. In fact, there was something deceitful about doing it smoothly. These things demanded abruptness. And so far the cattle hadn’t mutinied. They trusted Will, and when he spoke of the reasons, they ultimately agreed that each and every change had to be done. Still, Will was always unsure when he dropped the bombshells...

There was silence around the table. Although this move didn’t affect anyone’s wallets, it was a big shocker. No one had really expected it. Even Kendra didn’t know. She was staring at him now. Usually, he would have told her – but in the midst of cramming this game out she either didn’t listen to him when he started saying something about the business or really didn’t want the burden of knowing. Also, he’d kept tight lipped. With the big moves, he didn’t want things leaking out ahead of time. Still, the game family’s reaction was worse than Will had imagined.

People's jaws were hanging open. He could see the donut bits in the back of their mouths.

"We've all got to move?" Art asked bewildered.

"No. no. No, certainly not. No." Will blurted out, relieved that this might be the only fear behind their obvious shock. "Nobody here has to move. I should rephrase. Just, the official headquarters is moving. We'll be buying office space in San Francisco and hiring some company executives. A few of our lawyers, accountants and managers will have to make the move out there...but they're the ones that always complain about this location, anyway. All the game designing - your jobs - will stay here. Everything will be the same, except executive decisions will now be made from San Francisco. Well, starting in September, anyway."

Laura, co-designer of HomoSapien Quest and wife of Ron looked exasperated. "But why? Will you and Kendra be moving there?"

Will sighed. The rapids were wider and wilder than he had feared, twisting and turning like loose sails in a hurricane beneath the vast expanse of sour clouds looming above. Will, with furrowed brow, sat in an overwhelming silence that seemed to haunt the air, considering the best way to cross. Finally, he spoke. "There are, like all the previous weighty decisions we've made in the last year, several reasons for doing this...and several reasons for me not moving to the new headquarters. The rapid expansion and number of changes that we have gone through in the last two and a half years have been mind boggling. Personally, I would have liked to have remained an incredibly successful, but small, one-building operation in the wooded hills of Redwood forest. I would have preferred for the days of '85 to last forever. However, the game industry has boomed, fully revived since the console crash of '83, and now computer gaming is the darling child of the stock markets - god, I want to gag every time I hear an investor talking about multi-media like they've been in the industry for twenty years just because they bought a couple of stocks on the advice of some trend-following columnist in the Financial Journal." There was laughter around the table. It was a sentiment shared by everyone here, hardened pioneers of the gaming industry, but perhaps made funnier by the fact that Will, the business guy, rarely shared their sense of distaste for the financial aspects of the industry. Yet, there was no denying it, the landscape now seemed suddenly saturated with people in it to make a buck - not to make a game, not because they were interested in the technology. But that's what happens when industries take off, Will supposed. Morons jump on board: Insufferable people who bought a piece of the 'hipness' by owning

a share or learning a few key terms which they didn't understand but bandied about like a designer logo: Multimedia! GUI! Internet!

"Well," Will continued trying to keep the cattle calm as the thick gray plumes of storm clouds churned overhead, thunder rumbling deeply yet forebodingly quietly out from under those thick, curdling swells. "The company, out of necessity to stay alive, has become so big and hired so many new people, it is no longer really possible, nor convenient, nor practical to run it from this little back-water town. And most importantly, Madre is in desperate need of upper management." Will was preparing to drop the other bombshell. "Even if I wanted to run everything, with the size Madre has become, I couldn't do an effective job - not without hiring some more managers. And managers, usually being the type they are, like big cities and money. Money, we can offer them. But cities we cannot. And so we have to go to where the managers are."

Will took a deep breath before continuing to the other scary news. "I won't be moving to San Francisco." There were sighs of relief and a few 'goods', and 'greats' around the table. "But I'm not interested in running a large company. I don't enjoy teleconferencing. I enjoy hands-on work. And so, when we begin to hire new managers for the San Francisco head office, I will be looking for one to replace me."

There were audible gasps around the table. Will could see the donut bits again. "Mind you," time for damage control, "I'm not stepping down. I'm just divesting the parts of management I don't like. I'm not giving up control of the company. I'll still have the ultimate say if I don't like the way things are going. But there are a lot of mundane everyday decisions that need to be made that I don't enjoy doing or even feel qualified to be making. I'm not a manager. I started off as a programmer. I managed out of necessity to produce good software and great games. This office has always been the head of our creative operations and that's the job I love. I will stay on here and remain in basically the same capacity you people are used to, - in fact, more like when everything was sane, five years ago. I'll still be your boss. But we will have someone down in San Francisco to handle the more unpleasant bits - worrying about stocks, expansion, distribution. I'll still be the *de facto* boss - but my focus will be on things up here in Redwood."

These assurances seemed to provide some relief around the table. They weren't losing him as a boss but...still, it was a big shock. Art was relieved Will was staying but a little worried about what these changes all meant... Henry was caught. He was relieved the 'big news' hadn't been about SupraNet - or pay cuts. But this was...a big change. Smith and

the other guy looked, perhaps, the most shocked in the group – which was surprising since they had only been with the company for a year and a half and didn't spend much time at this office anyway. But, in a way, it affected them more. Pretty soon, someone else was going to be in charge of their division. Not cowboy Will, pioneer of the computer gaming industry, but stock-broker Dick – some high-society, WASPy, stock-broking peckerneck. They were comfortable with Madre as boss – but San Francisco corporate headquarters was another thing. The cows had made it across the stream, but were frightened...didn't know what lay on this side of the river.

"Anyway, these aren't overnight changes," Will continued. "We've been working and planning this for about a month or so and put up bids for office space in San Francisco. In a few days, notice will go out for the hiring of managers. Of course, everyone here and within the existing company will have priority in applying for these positions. They'll be posted on our intranet in the next few days. I don't imagine that we will even be ready to move into the offices until September sometime, and the head office infrastructure wouldn't be worked out completely until some time after that."

There was silence all around the table as they waited for Will to continue. "That's all," said Will with a sheepish, slight tossing of his hands into the air to drive the point home. Scanning around the table it looked, despite the bright, beautiful sunny day behind them, as if all these people's families had died. The crossing had been bad. Maybe even a little worse than expected, but Will could tell that he had gotten them through it. They would come around. By the end of the afternoon, they would be resigned to it. By tomorrow they would accept it. And by the end of the week, they would be excited about it.

"I'd just like to say to end this that part of my intention in all this is to accommodate both mine and other people's desire to get back to a simpler and more family-oriented Madre...as well as meet the need for Madre's expansion. In a way, things should be better. Here, at the Berney branch, things should be even more like they were three years ago, before this boom...before the expansions. And I'm excited about that.

"As usual, I have an open door policy and welcome...*encourage*...you to come talk to me if you have questions. This is another big step and I know you have things you want to know and talk about. Does anybody have any questions now?"

Nobody did...but Will knew they'd come. The questions were now hitting them so quickly and suddenly, fuming, swirling, mixing and

brewing inside, stunning them with a tumultuous, boiling rush of neuron activity that none could come out. But as they thought more about it, they would come, Will knew. They'd come individually, each with their individual insecurities and insights. Will enjoyed this one-on-one, hands-on management. It was like friendship, or peer counselling. He even looked forward to it now that the old pastures were slowly receding into the distance and he could weave tales of the new land.

"Can you pass the donuts?" Will asked but before someone could pass them there was a knock at the office door. Will stood up and opened it to find a young woman in a green apron holding a big box and a plastic bag.

"They told me to bring the food here?" she said.

"Ah yes. The coffee and pastry."

As the young woman from Naughté Latte, Berney's infamous corner coffee shop, placed the food on the table, faces brightened. The pastry was passed around. Someone made a joke and they broke into casual conversation about their weekend. Everyone was relaxed again – for the moment. Questions would come later.



Chapter 5; breast quest

May 25th, 1994

Heather Hüterguns dropped down off the precipice jutting from the hole two meters up the temple wall and landed in a crouch upon the dimly lit inner sanctum floor. Her large breasts bounced seductively, poetically, up and down with graceful artistry inside her spandex suit. All was quiet. The candles didn't even flicker in the absence of wind way down here.

The candles! Who had lit them?! Someone was here...

Spinning to her feet with a gymnast's ease she quickly backed into the shadow created by the precipice overhead. She listened and it was dead quiet – only a few spiders meandered slowly across the dusty floor. Nobody was here...there was no place for whoever had lit the candles to have disappeared to...

Suddenly she worried. Had they gotten to the emeralds first? Up high on the other side of the sanctum wall Heather caught a glint of the statue's glittering, dusty, green eyes. No, she'd gotten here first. Reaching into her sidepack she withdrew a small knife and held it up in the light. The tip flashed and a big, wide grin came across Heather's face. Those eyes were hers.

Stepping quietly out of the shadows she made her way slowly across the room, vaguely scanning for traps. On the other side of the room she approached the 6000 year old sacred sculpture of Shakram Z'ah. Taking hold of the statue's knee, she used it as leverage to begin her ascent. Pulling herself up she made a second grab with her other hand at the king's large and well sculpted 'package.'

Suddenly there was the heavy baritone rustling of stone shifting behind her. Had the king's rock codpiece been booby-trapped? But it hadn't moved...

Before Heather could turn around a voice came slithering across the room, more slimy to Heather than a snake. "After the King's jewels, I see, Miss Hüterguns." Heather rolled her eyes at the obvious double-entendre and slowly backed down.

She didn't need to turn around to know who it was. Professor Ranton

– head of the Archeological Department and foremost in his field at Yale University. An American. *Americans* – the word rolled off her tongue like acid - what a bland, urbane and supremely annoying breed – arrogant, like their British fathers, but less intelligent and more folksy. And American professors were the worst. Especially Ranton.

Heather turned around to find the professor standing near the back wall with two young, heavily armed thugs. She recognized them. They were the ones who had given her the information at the camp. It had been a set-up from the start. They had come through a trap door in the wall.

The professor pealed with high-pitched laughter – partly at his own clever joke, partly at having, finally, caught Heather Hüterguns right where he wanted her and partly because pealing with laughter was part of what the professor did. It was his shtick.

"Yes," Heather responded in her Norwegian accent. "Despite the fact that he is thousands of years older than you, *his* jewels haven't shrivelled up like raisins yet. Jealous?"

The professor snickered. "Good for you! For someone of such high birth it's refreshing to see that you're not above a low brow comeback."

The Professor slowly hobbled forward on his cane. Heather was proud of the work she'd done on that leg in their last encounter in Andalusia. Her contribution there seemed to be permanent. He was getting really old for this, she thought.

"Jeepers. Creepers," he said coming right up to her now. "But I'm afraid we've come for those peepers." He smiled at his own cleverness. He was a short one. Even though Heather was quite tall, he only came up to her well-endowed chest, deliciously contained in her tight-fitting explorer's spandex.

"Well," began the professor, sinisterly pulling a long narrow blade out of his cane. "It looks like your treasure hunting days are through." He drew the blade up high behind him. "Now, instead of being bejewelled you'll just be beheaded." And with that he swung sharply forward. But Heather grasped the professor's thin, anaemic wrist mid-stream and using his own force flung him sideways through the air. In an instant she had crossed her arms at her midsection (which uplifted her breasts into perfect, round, perky pillows) and withdrew both her mini-UZI sub-machine guns out of her hip holsters.

The professor's blade hit one of the four support pillars and landed on the ground with a dull clang. The professor followed with a large *thump!* Those two thug brothers both quickly raised their machine-guns towards

Heather's location and let loose a barrage of fire.

But they were too slow as she had already leaped sideways. Flying seven feet through the air, she faced the men and opened fire. Sparks, bullets and dust flew everywhere. The boys cowered in slow motion as rocks and dust shot off the wall behind them. Her leap ending, Heather tucked into a ball and rolled into a kneel behind the pillar. Had she hit either of them? She couldn't tell. The professor's high pitched peal of laughter told her she had failed.

"Most exciting! Most exciting indeed!" he shouted. Suddenly, in front of her, the wall began to explode as they fired in her direction. *Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!* Chunks of rock and dust blew off of the wall and onto her bare legs, pocking the skin. She turned her head to avoid getting dust in her eyes.

The pillar stood up to the bullet test and she could hear one of the boys reloading. Now was her chance! Bolting upwards she tucked one of her guns away and did a tumbling one-handed cartwheel across the room towards the pillar near the professor – opening fire with her UZI. Making a rotating circle of fire across the back wall she had to hit something. And she did. One of the men spun and crumbled as a bullet pierced his right shin. Another bullet blasted the gun out of the other brother's hand and another hit it mid-air sending it, destroyed, across the room. Heather landed near the professor and scooped him up, ducking again behind the adjacent pillar. Reaching out around the column with her gun she fired aimlessly at the wall. The rapid popping was suddenly replaced by a steady, automatic clicking. Out of ammo, Heather dropped the gun to the floor, took out the mini strapped to her boot.

Spinning out of her hiding spot she yanked the professor with her towards the southeast pillar, about 2 meters away. The wall lit up with explosions and though the men were too slow to hit her, she managed to see that they were both still standing. Keeping cover behind the column she quickly ducked and spun to fire around the other end of the pillar. She hit one of the men and he was blasted back into the corner, crumbling to the ground, but the other had been quick enough to duck behind the remaining pillar. Her second gun was out of ammo now and she ducked back behind the pillar, Professor Ranton headlocked between her breasts.

The wall in front of her exploded again as the remaining brother returned fire. The professor was sweating and the dust stuck to his face. The firing stopped and the room filled with stunned silence.

"Quit firing, you morons!" yelled the professor. "She's got ME!"

Heather reached down the top of her shirt and into the secret compartment of her size triple-F, industrial strength brassiere. Her spare clip of extra-explosive ammo, referred to by her enemies who'd previously been punished with it as Heather's Booby-trap, wasn't there! Damn. She'd forgotten she'd used it on the Mummy outside the tomb!

"She's got no amm—" the professor began to shout but Heather tightened her elbow around his throat pinching his voice into a high-pitched, yelping squeak. She liked that sound.

Again the wall exploded. They had certainly come well prepared with ammo. How was she going to get herself out of this one, she wondered.

"Heather," came a soft, feminine voice, echoing through the room.

Not now, she thought. What bad timing. She had to figure a way to get back up to that precipice.

"Heather, are you listening?"

Go away! Maybe if she threw the professor off to the left side she could use the distraction to rappel off the pillar and flip up onto the precipice...

"Heather..."

Suddenly there was that pop-pop-pop-pop-popping sound again but this time accompanied by the thick, dull meaty sound of bullets entering flesh. The professor danced in her arms as he was riddled with bullets and Heather was hit from the side. The other brother had suddenly appeared on her left!

Weak, Heather collapsed to the ground, slumping on top of the professor's small bony body. All she could see was the dust on the floor. Dead, she could hear the brothers moving about. The other one must have survived somehow...

"Mother! You just KILLED me!"

"You know," said Kendra, "Just because the main character has the same name as you doesn't mean you have to be her 24-7. Dinner is ready. Come on. You have all weekend to play Breast Enhancer II."

"It's Crypt Destroyer." Heather said through clenched teeth. She hated when her mom did that – purposely messed up a name like she didn't know the proper one. Usually it was a sign of derision for a game. But how could her mother not know the title of this game, she *worked* in the game industry.

"Come on," said Kendra. "It's dinner time."



Dinner was peas and steak with Dr. Skipper to drink. On Friday nights

they could have pop with their meals. Well, the kids at least. Kendra and Will had a glass of wine with dinner almost every night. The dog, Barker, knew enough not to beg but, instead, sat in the bean bag chair watching, with mopey eyes, everyone else eat. Secretly he lamented the fact that Mark's friend got to partake in the delicious steak and pea dinner but he, the faithful companion, who kept their feet warm at night, who fended off strangers, who fetched that stick over and over again, wasn't offered any. He would lament about this until the meal was done and then forget about it when the two boys would take him out for a walk.

Heather sat alone on her side of the table, making the best, surly, displeased teenage face she could muster while eating. Mark and his friend Dwayne sat on the other side stuffing their faces and talking about exciting elementary school boy stuff. It being a Friday night, Mark was having a sleep-over. Heather didn't make much of a fuss about it. After all, the parents were going away for the weekend and she could be by herself. And the two boys weren't that bad. Mom was pretty good about keeping them away from Heather. Anyway, at 15 to Mark's 11, Heather, Kendra figured, could manage for herself over the weekend.

"When are you leaving, again?" Heather asked. She knew when they said they'd leave, but she just wanted to stress the fact that she couldn't wait for them to go and was counting the minutes until they did. Also, somewhere in the back of her mind, she hoped that by rechecking somehow the hour would have magically become earlier.

"I don't know, hon," said Will. "Pretty early. We'll leave here around 8, I guess. It's a 3 and a half hour drive to San Francisco. We'll be gone before *you* get up anyway."

"We'll be checking out the new building for the headquarters so we won't be back until Sunday," Kendra added. "There's a possibility that we won't be back until Monday, but we'll phone you if that happens, ok? There's plenty of food in the fridge and freezer to feed yourselves. We'll leave 20 dollars for you to rent a movie or something and get a dessert from the store tomorrow."

"Cool!" said Mark.

"Awesome!" Dwayne joined in.

"What are you saying awesome for?" Mark asked. "You won't be here tomorrow."

"oh yeah." Dwayne said. And then after a pause, "I forgot."

"What's for dessert tonight?" Mark asked.

"I don't know. Maybe you two can make a pie."

"Cool!" said Mark.

"I don't know how to make a pie," explained Dwayne as if Kendra was teasing them.

"Well, I'll help you out," she said. God, pretty soon she'd have to start design on another game and wouldn't have time to bake pies with her kids. Baking a pie would be nice. She liked Dwayne. He was a sweet kid - a handsome boy with the same wide, white smile and rich, dark brown complexion of his mother, also of mixed race, who worked at the small press in Berney.

Heather wanted to ask if she could have some of the pie...but didn't want to look eager. She'd probably get some by not saying anything. She didn't want to help make it. She wanted to get back to Crypt Destroyer.



Kendra helped Will with the dishes, drying them off as he washed up. Will liked to wash dishes. Or, at least, more than he liked cooking meals. So he most always did them. Kendra helped out when she wanted to talk.

"Have you played that Crypt Destroyer game?" she asked.

"Sure. It's not bad. More of an idea game than great gameplay. But it's definitely enjoyable...and the technology is up to par."

"I was watching Heather play it the other day. I don't understand it. I mean, it's not that I don't understand the attraction of playing it...it's just that it's so outrageous. I mean, you play this rich girl with big tits who goes to third world countries, breaks into their sacred, holy, and ancient historical monuments (and I'm pretty sure you don't seek permission or apply for a visa) and then steals the valuables out of them to bring back to Western museums. And she's the *hero!*"

"Heh heh. I guess you're right. I never really thought about that. I guess Indiana Jones is the same way. Kind of socially-irresponsible, I guess."

Kendra dried a couple of plates. "Heather is really into it, though."

"Really? That's interesting. I guess that game was a big leap forward because it had a female main character. But really, I thought she was just a sex pot for the boys. I'm kind of surprised it appeals to her. But I guess she's always into lots of games."

Kendra held herself back from mentioning that *she* had been the first designer to ever put a female as the main character in a game, four years ago with Fantasy Quest III.

"Yeah. But she seems obsessed with this one. Actually, that's not true. She always plays a lot of games - maybe I notice more because this is the

first one that she's been this into that has not been one of ours. Anyway, I mean, she's *tied* to that computer. Just...so *focused* on that one game. Shouldn't she be out flirting with boys or something?"

Kendra paused for a moment. "God, look at what I'm worrying about. In High school I just stayed inside and read books all the time. My mother always bitched about me being a social misfit. People are so dumb in high school – I never wanted to hang out with them either. All I wanted to do was grow up. Still, it can't be healthy to be playing those games all the time. What does she see in it, anyway? I know this is ironic, since I make games and stare at a screen for a living...but I don't feel that it interferes with my life. I'm just worried about the amount of time and energy she devotes to it. As a parent you're supposed to help them grow up."

"Yeah," agreed Will.

"I don't know if this is positive for her or not. I really can't tell. It always kind of bugged me that she played so many games...but I was also proud. Now she's getting older...Is it just because they're not *our* games?"

Will didn't say anything. He just kept washing the dishes. It was listening time. He was a good listener. Well. Sometimes.

"In a way I should be proud. I'm always complaining that there should be more girls into games – but find they're either too scared of doing something that's 'for boys', too rigid to break out of their gender constraints...or they're intimidated by these aggressive pubescent boys who've been playing since they were eight and derive immense satisfaction from beating a girl who's obviously less trained at it."

"Would you be this worried about her if she was a boy?" asked Will, casually, scrubbing a dish in the murky water.

Kendra thought about this for a moment, shrugged. She was slightly irritated with herself that Will was able to point out potential gender-bias in her. Maybe she wouldn't be as worried if Heather was a boy...but she should be. And that still didn't make it right. No, that wasn't the only reason. Mostly she was just concerned about her daughter. "Still, she spends a lot of time in front of that screen," she replied. Will nodded.

Kendra paused and wiped down the last plate, signalling the end of her monologue. Will pulled the plug in the sink and watched the water gurgle away. She hadn't resolved anything with this talk – but she felt better.

"I wouldn't worry about it right now," said Will. "She seems pretty normal. And she does have friends over now and then. We're not exactly close to school so it's hard to have friends over a lot. We'll see how it

goes."

"Yeah." Kendra said. Will was right. She went off to find the boys to start on pie.



She was dead. Again. The game had crossed the subtle line between challenging and addictive to frustrating and compulsive. She was getting angry at dying, not even making it as far into the dungeon as she had on the previous tries...which made her mad – made her want to hit things – made her impatient – made her want to play again. *Quit fucking dying, you dork!* Heather cursed her dead alter-ego and reached for the F1 button to revive her again. This was the fifth try. She'd been on now for one and a half hours and hadn't gotten anywhere.

"Hey! Are you playing Crypt Destroyer?" a voice came from behind her. It was her little brother Mark. It was strange for him to take interest in a game. Especially one that was not a Madre game. Heather turned around. She could smell the pie baking downstairs.

"Yeah," she said.

"Cool!" said Dwayne.

"Can we try something, Sis?" Mark asked. Heather's first impulse was to say no, but the connection between her finger and the F1 key had been broken, throwing the vicious circle into a wobble – Heather really didn't want to frustrate herself again. If there was one thing these games did teach – via repeated failure – it was how to deal with frustration – and when to quit.

"Sure," she shrugged unenthusiastically. Besides, she was just a bit curious to see why her brother was interested. Heather didn't know who was a bigger shame to the family. Her, the girl who played shoot-em-up action games non-stop, or her brother who didn't like computer games much at all.

The two came in the room. Dwayne was holding a piece of paper. "I got it out of my friend's game magazine. It's a cheat-code," he explained. "It's supposed to be really cool or something."

With small fingers they approached the game like amateurs, unable to figure out how to escape to the main screen. Heather had to help them. Dwayne took the helm and Mark sat back to read out with his grade 6 reading abilities what was written on the sheet. "Press up, up, left and then type 'I must I must I must increase my' and then type in a number."

"How do you spell increase?" Dwayne asked.

“Idiot! It’s I-N-C-R-E-A-S.”

Heather rolled her eyes.

“Nothing happened.”

“You should hear a bell ring if it worked.”

“Nope.”

“Morons,” said Heather. “You spelt increase wrong.” She looked at her brother. “It’s right there on the paper spelled correctly and you called him an idiot and you still couldn’t spell it right. I-N-C-R-E-A-S-E.”

Mark grinned sheepishly.

“Ok, I typed it, but still nothing,” reported Dwayne.

“Try again.”

Dwayne typed it in again. There was a bell ring. The two boys grinned and looked at each other. “Ok, start a game.”

They did. They pressed escape to skip the intro and the game started. The boys both burst out in laughter. Heather rolled her eyes. There Heather Hüterguns stood. Her breasts were huge! Well, they were already huge, but now they were enormous. Beyond the point of absurdity and into the realm of...mega-absurdity. The boys couldn’t stop laughing. They were massive! The two boys rolled on the floor laughing.

“That’s *hilarious!*” cried Mark. Heather didn’t see what was so hilarious about it.

“Let’s do it again!” suggest Dwayne.

“Try 10. I don’t think you can go higher than 10.”

“Ok.” Dwayne, with his tongue out, typed it in. His typing accuracy was rewarded by the fairy-like bell ring. The two boys grinned and started pre-emptive anticipatory giggling – like drug addicts getting a buzz just from *thinking* about shooting up. The game loaded. They skipped the intro...

And huge bursts of laughter fill the room. Even more than before. They fell to the floor. They fell over each other. They couldn’t speak. Her breasts were now almost as long as Heather herself was tall...except they pointed straight out, defying any sort of gravity, defying the muscles in her unbelievably unmusclad back (for someone who carries around 10 pounds of boobflesh, heavy guns and does backflips). Heather Hüterguns stood totally erect, with these...monstrosities pointing out in front of her like cannons. If she fell forward, she would have been stopped by her breasts at a 70 degree angle. They laughed so hard.

“Try – *hee hee hee hee hee hee!*” began Dwayne. “Try moving her – *hah hah!* – around!”

Mark moved the keys. Heather Hüterguns ran, those giant melons

pointing the way as if pilots sat in the nipples. They were crying with laughter now. They tried other things too. They made her climb a box. Her breasts just disappeared into the box as she clambered up. That was kind of disappointing. They were expecting them to get in the way. But breasts don’t get in the way of video game heroines.

“I’ve got an idea!” said Mark. He quit the game and typed the code in again. *Jing! Jing!* The bell rang. He started the game, skipped the intro.

BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!! Tears were flying out of their eyes like in Japanese animation. Their stomachs hurt. They couldn’t pull themselves off the floor.

“*That’s the funniest thing ever!*”

“I wanna make video games when I grow up!” exclaimed Dwayne between guffaws.

Mark had typed in –10 as the number and now standing on the screen was Heather Hüterguns with enormous inverse breasts. The parabolic functions that created those round orbs were responding to negative digits and now the gigantic über-büübs were attached to Heather’s back, like bizarre wings or flesh jetpacks. There were two large concave pits on her chest where breasts should be. Heather, the intrepid hero of the game, in all seriousness stares forward ready to conquer the dungeon - unphased by her nega-boobs.

Even Heather thought this was a little funny, though the pits in Heather Hüterguns’ chest reminded her too much of her own shortcomings in this area.

The boys wanted to try other things with the game, but Heather was getting bored of this and wanted to get on the computer again. She left her Dad’s office and went upstairs to her own inferior computer where she logged on to SupraNet to chat.

■

Heather was logged onto the network by her favourite handle, *Aphrodite’s Bow*. Nobody was up now. The house was dead quiet. All the lights were out. This was the time of night she liked best. Around one in the morning she felt like she owned the house. She felt like an adult...and on SupraNet she felt like she was in her own little world. It was her home away from home when she was at home. It was her universe where suddenly she found meaning and compatriots. Heather wasn’t sure exactly what time it was...but it was late. She’d lost track. She’d been on SupraNet for at least three hours. Even the giggling from Mark’s slumber party downstairs had been dead for quite a while now.

Heather liked chatting. There was lots of stuff to talk about. Serious stuff. Silly stuff. Game stuff. She'd met a few people her age. There were several thousand subscribers to SupraNet so there were a fair number of people and chatrooms and discussion groups to browse through and get involved in. Addicted to. Another thing Heather liked was that she could lie about who she was. She had several handles, depending on her mood. Most of the time she liked to be herself – Aphrodite's Bow. But sometimes she liked to be older. Funnier. Meaner. Younger. A man. Sometimes she just wanted to avoid being harassed by the male subscribers. Most were fine, but some were vitriolic. Mean. Who had nothing better to do than find some stranger and harass her. Or hit on her. But that only made Heather feel more adult. Like she could hold her own. Anyway, she was used to losers from school. Although, sometimes Heather found these jerks titillating... sometimes she wondered if these men were really women pretending to be men – or women pretending to be what they thought men were like – mean...forceful – sleazy. Real men couldn't be such dicks, could they? That was the beauty of it all. It was so open...and all or none of it could be real.

But no matter who she wanted to be on-line, with her father's company owning the SupraNet, she had unlimited freedom to be whoever that was for however long.

She'd made a couple of regular friends on-line. From talking to them over the past while, she gathered they were about her age. Or, at least, not more than 5 years older than her. People who shared her interests. Tonight she'd been talking with some game enthusiasts earlier but they had gone to bed or gone out, being in different time zones. Truly alone now she meandered from discussion room to discussion room looking for something to talk about and decided to check the Tech Specs chat room. Heather was never really into talking about computer hardware, but when there was no one else to talk to, she could do it. There were only a couple others here; talking about soundcards.

<Aphrodite's Bow> Hello.

A long pause.

<Rock_Hard> Aphrodite's Bow. What kind of gay name is that boy?

<Aphrodite's_Bow> xcuse me?

<Rock_Hard> Sorry, we're having a non-queer discussion here...so please piss off.

<ROM-Master> Ha! Ha!

<Aphrodite's_Bow> First off, I'm NOT a boy. Secondly, computer nerds who sit around talking about Computer Hardware in the middle of the night are hardly manly men. I think you're more likely to be wearing the label Nerd.

<Rock_Hard> a pussy girl, huh? even worse. What? are you spying on our conversations? you'll never understand it.

<Aphrodite's_Bow> In fact, considering your deep knowledge of EVERY SINGLE LINE from Star Trek and in-depth discussions about who would beat who in a fight, Superman or Batman – it is probably more accurate to call _you_ a 'fag.' But that would be an insult to homosexuals.

Heather was proud of herself. That was quite a comeback. She was getting good at dealing with these losers. They were infrequent, but stupid enough to be disturbing.

<ROM-Master> Bitch

<Rock_Hard> You better watch what you say, cunt. You're lucky this isn't a _real_ room.

<ROM-Master> What do u call the useless skin around the pussy? A woman.

God, these guys just don't give up.

<Aphrodite's_Bow> Yeah, rockhard, so I don't have to be repulsed by all your zits and coke-bottle glasses from your nerd lifestyle.

<ROM-Master> We'd teach u a lesson youd never 4get Bitch!

<Aphrodite's_Bow> Ha! Ha! Ok, "ROM-Master." You know I'd be intimidated by your social skills that vanish when you have to have _real_ face to face conversation. Bt of course, you hang out in chat rooms instead of being out partying this Friday night because you're too cool and tough, right?

Damn! She was on a roll tonight!

<Rock_Hard> I cut your fucking cunt-lips off, bitch and tehn feed them too you while we both take turns raping you!

Heather was shocked by this. Though she shouldn't have been. There

was no winning with these losers. It was an escalating game. No matter how good your comeback, they'd just escalate...they'd come back with something crude or violent or just stupid. It didn't matter, they would win just by virtue that they would just up the ante every time you fought back until your surfing experience was ruined. You couldn't do anything about it. Heather considered telling them that she was the daughter of the owner of SupraNet, but thought better of it. She didn't want to give away her identity – she'd learned that one quick – for fear of further harassment. Her heart was beating now. She was angry, but accepting. She'd been through this before. It was just stupid and irritating now.

<Aphrodite's_Bow> Yup. I could tell you were a couple of real cool guys. Psychopathic murdering rapists. Always the coolest.

Well, that hadn't captured the clever insult that was in her head. She'd lost now. It was a losing battle from the start. All they had to do was raise the bar high to the point where witty comebacks – if you had them – didn't matter anymore. These people were so stupid. Is this the sort of stuff nerdy boys in the gym locker had to put up with? She'd met a few boys on-line who, when she told them about the few times this had happened on-line, had told her about being harassed by guys in their school.

<Rock_Hard> I've got your email, Afro. Hhbow@Snet.Madre.com I'd watch your back from now on...

Shit! What a couple of idiots. They'd checked her profile. She quickly checked her profile to make sure there wasn't any other information they could get. Thankfully, everything else was either too vague or lies. She'd fool-proofed it the last time. Her real friends could get her info and secure email from her personally after she got to know them on-line. Still, it was annoying. Now she'd have to change this email again. Heather thought about writing back but thought better of it. She'd rather just leave and forget these losers. She'd leave a note with a print-out of the chat-log for her dad before she logged off and on Monday or Tuesday these two would be booted permanently from SupraNet.

Heather's heart was still beating a little bit, which bugged her. She hadn't been afraid of these two. If anything, she'd felt total derision. They were a couple of big time freaks. Still, somehow it had gotten to her. The outrage of it all. She hadn't done anything! She hadn't been scared

or intimidated...so why was her heart beating? Too bad these two hadn't been gamers. She could have challenged them to an on-line game and humiliated them! She really enjoyed beating boys. Especially the cocky ones. She liked being good at games, period. But these two wouldn't have been worth her time or talent anyway. *Does Heather Hütergun's heart ever beat like this?* Heather wondered. At least SupraNet's security features had improved somewhat since it started. Part of those improvements came from Heather's own suggestions. She felt good about that.

Leaving a note for her Dad with the two guys' handles, Heather logged out. God! It was almost 4 a.m.! Shutting down she left her Dad's office and crawled off to bed, sleeping in her clothes on top of her covers.

