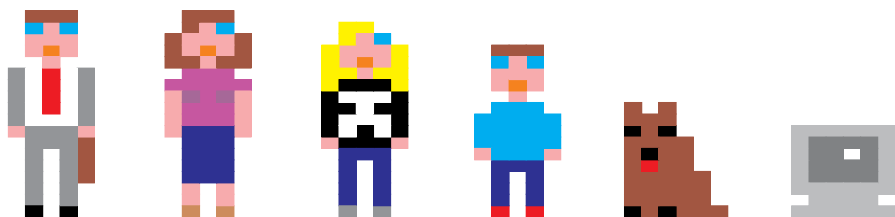


# Game Quest



*a novel*

## requirements

- ☐ Creativity
- ☐ Friendship
- ☐ Sanity
- ☐ Patience
- ☐ Coffee
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Bar-B-Ques



**Leopold McGinnis**

# *An Epic Novel about Success in the Face of Failure, Family & Computer Games!*

*It's 1994 and everything is falling apart...*

The tight-knit Madre family, nestled deep in the California Mountains, is the envy of the computer gaming world. Since founding the company fifteen years ago, Will and Kendra Roberts have pioneered an industry by following their own brand of folksy, do-the-right-thing business ethic. But success proves to be their greatest enemy as their company begins to slip wildly beyond their control and venture capitalists, smelling money, flood the market with cheap knock-offs of Madre's product. Not only that, but the new, monstrously popular 3D shoot-em-ups threaten to put the final bullet in Madre's signature Adventure Games.

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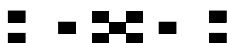
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■ ■ ■



Game Quest

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■ Inspired by a True Story ■



■ **for Christine** ■

without whose love & support  
this book may have never  
been written.





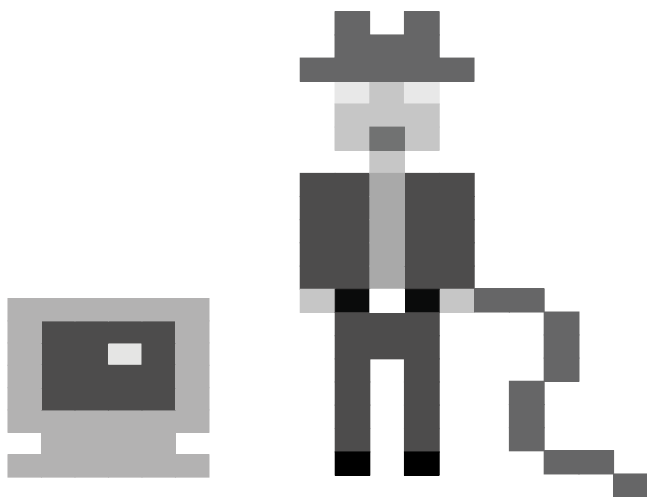
# Game Quest





# 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.

## Game Quest

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

## Game Quest

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.



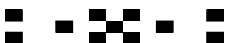
You fall and manage to catch yourself on the lip of the hole. Beneath you seems to be a portal into the depths of hell. Or, at least, boiling hot lava, which is still bad.

#### CHANT INCANTATION

**Ooops! 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

## Game Quest

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!*

## Game Quest

"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

## Game Quest

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."

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

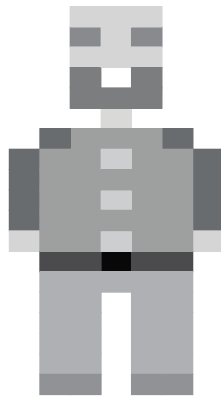


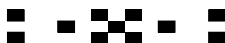
“What do you mean?”

“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

## Game Quest

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...”

*Arrrggkk! 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.

"Wellll, 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

## Game Quest

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

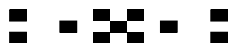
## Game Quest

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

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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

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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

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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

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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 Obfuscator – 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 Obfuscator 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 Obfuscator to fall back on. Tim wished he had a Transvernacular Obfuscator 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.

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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

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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 peckeneck. 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 25<sup>th</sup>, 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 Andalucia. 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

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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

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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

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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.

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"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 unmuscl'd 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.

**BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA!!!!** 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.

## Game Quest

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

## Game Quest

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.





## Chapter 6; mocha latte freedom fighter

May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1994

It was a sunny drive down the dirt road to Berney, a refreshing start to a trip that would only get worse. Calm roadways would turn to thick asphalt highways. Increasing traffic meant passing cars in oncoming traffic lanes. And the closer their little data packet got to the SuperNode the more complex the roads would become, the less time they'd have to make turn-offs until finally entering, getting lost and withering on the spaghetti overpasses in San Francisco. Even thinking about going to the big cities reminded Will of why they had moved out to Redwood.

Heather, as usual, had been asleep when they got up. Mark and Dwayne, as usual, had been up for several hours – playing with their *Genetically Altered Lizard Beasties*...or whatever the toys were called. Dwayne's mom was coming to pick him up at ten.

"You think the house will be alright while we're gone?" asked Kendra.

"I'm sure it will. We've left them home for several days before."

"But not both together. And before we've had someone check in on them a couple of times..." The muffled sound of gravel crunching under the wheels filled the cabin for a few moments. "I hope they remember to walk the dog," Kendra said absently.

"It'll be fine. We're only gone two – maybe three days. They're easily old enough. Heather's 15 and Mark's 12...11? Yeah. 11." Will smiled to himself. "Besides, it's not like you have to worry about Heather throwing a big party or having boys over," he said in reference to their conversation over dishes the other night.

"Yeah. Actually, it will probably be a pretty boring weekend for them." Kendra smiled, peering out at the rows of coniferous trees rolling by. "It'll be nice to get away... Well, it would be if we weren't going to *San Francisco* to look at *real estate*."

The sound of crunching gravel returned.

They were set for the drive at least, Kendra thought. Tapes and trail mix. She loved trail mix.

## STUFF FACE WITH TRAIL MIX

Mmmmmmm. Tasty. Salty. Raisiny. An eclectic mix of pure carbohydrates. You're getting thirsty.

## DRINK COFFEE

What coffee?

## DRINK HOT COFFEE TO QUENCH THIRST

You don't have that.

## CHECK INVENTORY

**You have:** Money  
Driver's License  
Trail Mix  
A comb  
"Strange Brew" A book adaptation of the hit movie.  
Tapes  
Staple remover from Will's office.

"Damn!"

"What?"

"I forgot to pack the coffee. After I went to all that trouble of preparing it."

"Don't worry. I'm sure the kids will drink it," quipped Will. They looked at each other for a moment and laughed – picturing a caffeine frenzied Mark and Dwayne burning down the house. "No Problem," continued Will. "We'll just stop in Naughté Latte as we pass through town. I'm itchin' for a pastry anyway."



Will brushed through the doors of this modern day saloon, swaggered over to the counter and bellied up to the cash register. It was a long pilgrimage today, to see a man about some new pasture to graze on. He'd need supplies. Beans. Bacon. Coffee.

He recognized the young woman behind the counter. They didn't wear name-tags here – the management thought it was tacky – but Will

## Game Quest

knew her name. He'd forgotten when he'd learned it – but being a regular customer, for personal and professional reasons, he'd seen her quite a lot. She often delivered the coffee to Madre's meetings. She was kind of cute.

"Hi!" she beamed, genuinely glad to see him. "How are you doing?"

"Pretty good, Nicole. We have a coffee and pastry emergency."

She smiled. "At this time on the weekend?"

"Yeah. Business trip, unfortunately." Will motioned to his suit and tie. He liked wearing the suit and tie, though. Especially at the beginning – when Madre was just an office of 18 people. He was the only one who wore the suit then. Now he was the only one among the creative and programming teams. All the lawyers and accountants wore suits and ties, though – almost as if an excuse for their lack of personality. As Madre got bigger, the less Will felt special for wearing it. He *did* look good in it, though. Especially with that red striped tie. He had to wear it today for the meeting. Well, he was the boss. He didn't *have* to wear anything, but the circumstances demanded it. It's unseemly for cowboys to be seen without their chaps.

"What kind of emergency supplies would you like?" Nicole asked.

"I'll have a Mochaccino and a large café au lait. Whole milk."

"Sure," she confirmed and began to do that thing with the machine that makes the coffee...with all the gurgling and steam and stuff. You know.

Will had been sceptical when these fancy coffee places first started opening. They were just the latest fad, he thought. What happened to pouring grinds in a sieve? But then he'd tried a few 'specialty' coffees, as they called them... Sure, the atmosphere was a bit precious with the couches and book shelves and coffee-making do-hickies that looked like they had once belonged to eighteenth century royalty, silver and clunky – but the coffee was good, he discovered. And the atmosphere was actually nice. It wasn't pretentious and it wasn't quite hipster doofus either. Though without proper care, the whole trend could easily cross the line into either one.

Will began to inspect the pastries. He loved pastry. That pastry case wasn't big enough to hold all of them, he thought. Some of them were going to have to go. "I'll have a cheese and dill scone. Oh. And I'll have two Cinmemellon Danishes too."

After flipping the hoopy and spinning that there wammer-wuzzle to get the froof on the latte and topping off the mochaccino, Nicole handed over the two cups in a made-from-100%-recyclable-material, unbleached

cup holder. Nicole then handed over the pastry rations wrapped in made-from-100%-recyclable-material, unbleached paper napkins.

She punched up the register. "That'll be \$3.45. Oh. And do you want to sign our petition?"

*Was there trouble in them thar hills?* Actually, Will wasn't much into these petition signing extravaganzas that seemed to be such a big part of the nineties, but he was always interested in seeing what people were concerned or making a stink about. If he agreed he'd usually sign.

"What's it about?" he asked, the seductive aroma from his mochaccino trickling up into his nostrils.

"It's to prevent Che's Coffee Revolution from kicking us out."

"Che's Coffee Revolution?" The name sounded vaguely familiar to him.

"Yeah. You know. The big coffee chain? They bought our lease right out from under us. They're gonna evict us and set up shop here. They've done it in several towns in California and throughout the country. They find a successful shop, go directly to the landlord, buy out the lease from him and then convert the shop to an another cog in the Che's Coffee Revolution franchise – with very little overhead costs for them since we've already put up the money and worked up the customer base."

"Geeze!" Will was appalled. That was appalling! Could they do that? It seemed so sleazy! Especially here in lil' ol' Berney!

"In Willem they bought the lease out but there was so much protest that Che's was forced to continue renting to the local coffee shop. We're hoping if we get enough awareness and signatures we can do the same thing."

"Yeah," said Will. He was *appalled!* "Of course I'll sign it. That's awful. Is that even legal?"

"Yeah. I guess," Stella shrugged. "They did it anyway. They own the lease. We have until the end of July. They were really clever too. Bought it just as our re-negotiation was coming up...so we wouldn't have time to organize against it."

Will was appalled. He scribbled his name and number down on the sheet. Under comments he wrote the only thing that came to mind: *I'm appalled!* He stood back up and just stared blankly at Nicole. He wanted to talk more about it, but was stunned. And he had to go. Kendra was waiting out in the car.

"Well, how are you doing for signatures so far?"

"Pretty good. We got a couple of sheets full already. We only learned about this two days ago."

## Game Quest

"Wow. Well, I really wish you luck," he said as he turned to go.

"Yeah. Thanks. We'll need it. Have a nice trip."

"Definitely. Thanks Nicole." Will exited the saloon, deflated. It was like he'd heard they were just putting fences up on all the land. You couldn't roam free any more.



They were ripping along a paved road now on one of the major arteries into civilization...though they were still very much in the country. Cows grazed in the field beside them as they whipped by. Fenced in.

It was a sunny day out but Will felt sour. "I can't believe that that's legal. I know it is, but it just seems so sleazy."

"Definitely," agreed Kendra. She found it funny that he was so worked up about it – especially after his tirade four years ago, when all these high-end coffee shops first burst on the scene, about how pretentious and faddy it was. Still, she'd always liked these coffee shops and agreed with him.

"I mean. We moved to a small town to get away from this sort of thing. This sort of thinking. It's like a cancer. The city just eats up the small towns."

"Sometimes," added Kendra, "I feel like we're nomads or something, being hunted by the cruel dominant race. Being culturally eliminated. Ainu. Neanderthals. Cree." Kendra was surprised she'd managed to think of so many astute examples.

"*Che's Coffee Revolution?*!" Will exasperated, "They don't have anything to do with *revolution*! They sell coffee! Not even decent coffee. Pre-fab, instant coffee, faux-café-coffee. How do they get away with that crap? Who believes it?"

They drove a while in silence. "Have you ever heard of them?" he asked Kendra.

"Che's?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah. But only a little. Only recently."

"Me too. I never heard of them before. So how come they're suddenly everywhere. You read about them in the paper. People make jokes about them. Yet they didn't even exist two years ago. I don't get it."

They were pulling through Milner now. Will remembered 12 years ago when this was just a small town you drove by. The town used to be on one side of the highway. Now it had enveloped it. They stopped at a light, turned towards the city centre and followed the signs towards San



Francisco.

Suddenly they were driving by a Che's Coffee Revolution coffee house – with its slick green logo on the outside; its polished, clean, hep image; its flawless, over-replicated brand colors of green and purple; its stylized, vector-graphic logo of Che Guevara's face half submerged in shadows... Will didn't know much about that point in Cuban history, but he was pretty sure Che wouldn't have approved of the absconding of his visage to sell coffee. Will and Che were equally appalled. Brothers in disgust.

"Look! There's one here now!" he said. Last time he'd driven through Milner, maybe a year ago, there hadn't been one. They continued to drive on. About 5 minutes later they were driving through the thick of the small downtown. Suddenly there was another one. And, but a few blocks later, another Che's Coffee Revolution. Perhaps the term revolution wasn't such a misnomer. To Will it *was* revolting.

Three towns later, passing through the outskirts of Sacramento, the biggest town on their way to San Francisco, they had seen two more Che's and a couple of other small chain coffee shops with similar stylings and cloned reproducibility. They dipped into Sacramento to stop for lunch and, as they passed through the downtown core, Will saw something shocking. On his left there was a Che's Coffee Revolution, full of people. Then, on the kitty corner, was ANOTHER Che's Coffee Revolution! Will could feel his eyes pop out of his head and his brain strain to find an explanation. It went against all of Will's accumulated business sense. He was self-trained, so maybe it was some of that high-level business...but Will couldn't figure it out.

When they were back out on the highway and heading along Will spoke up. "I don't understand how they can open all these stores in the same area? How can that possibly make money? What kind of business model are they using? Doesn't that eat into their profits? I'm just blown away by those two in Sacramento. I mean, there was one on one corner... and then another one on the exact opposite corner. That's weird enough for two differing coffee shops, but for the SAME chain? I don't get it!"

Kendra was stunned too, though a little less naïve. Maybe she got out more. She'd seen this pattern developing over the last year. Still, the Sacramento set had surprised her too. "Yeah. It's strange. I mean...why can't homeless shelters or schools grow like that?"

They drove in silence for a bit. Kendra had an idea.

"Maybe they have two stores in that one street because they're so popular they couldn't fit all the customers in one store. So they decided another was profitable."

## Game Quest

“Hmmm.” Will thought. His philly was a clever lass. “Yeah. That could be. Still...seems weird.” He stared off into the horizon where San Fran was just beginning to loom. They’d be there in an hour.

“It’s like a bad simulation game,” Kendra thought aloud. “Sim-Corporate Coffee.”

“I don’t understand how they can expand like that. Do they put cocaine in the coffee? Must have something to do with stock valuation or something. The expectations for their stock among the stock buying public must be so high that they have all this money to expand like nuts. Everyone sees them expanding like nuts so they think they’re wildly successful - so they buy more stocks.” Will shook his head. At first he’d just been kind of upset, and it was hard to make Will upset, about closing down his favorite coffee shop – his company’s favorite coffee shop. But now he was more incensed at new business...business that didn’t seem to have any goal or logical rationale. The closer he got to San Francisco, the happier he was they were secluded in Redwood. These trips were always like this, ending with him happy he didn’t live in the city. He would be glad to dump the business stuff off at the SuperNode. If business like this was necessary to keep Madre alive, he would do it...but let someone else handle it. Will liked the small, production and people-oriented business.

“It’s sorta like the Roman Empire, I guess” Kendra offered. “As long as they’re expanding, as long as the people have a goal – they’re doing incredible. But as soon as they run out of places to expand or conquer...it’ll all collapse. At some point they’re going to have to change their name to Nero’s Coffee Revolution and play their violin as the walls of Caffeine come burning down. It’s just like that big box book-chain everyone’s talking about. Dickens’ Diction. It’s like the Holy Roman Empire in a micro-culture: I’m not sure it’s sustainable.”

With all the expanding and rearranging of Madre in the past year, Will hadn’t been able to focus on much else. Even, ironically, business theory. The topic didn’t really interest him – though it didn’t bore him either – but it was, at least, something he tried to brush up on every now and then. He didn’t want to follow the latest business trends. Will felt that trends destroyed true originality and management. Madre wasn’t just a business. It was a unique collection of individuals and talents. Ruling by peer pressure and fads was a ridiculous idea that, somehow, seemed to fly in the city. None of it made sense to Will, but he liked to see what was being said in the business magazines every now and then...if only to stimulate his business sense. But, in the last two and a half years he

hadn't been able to do much of anything except scramble under all the changes. He didn't even know what the latest business fad was. He hadn't even cracked a book in probably a year and a half. Come to think of it, he hadn't even taken a real vacation in that long. He'd been surviving on his cherished monthly family picnics...but he hadn't had a vacation.

"You know, I think we should take a vacation again sometime soon," he said.

Kendra thought about it in silence for a bit. He was right. They hadn't taken a vacation in...two...three years.

"I mean. We've been so busy...but we could do it. I'm hiring this new manager so that they can do all this expansion stuff that I don't want to do, that takes up all my time. But when he's all settled in...well, I should have the first break I've had in years. We could go somewhere. Somewhere nice. The stocks are soaring. I believe we're loaded at present."

Kendra smiled. God, she would love an excuse to get away from designing another game. She needed a break. She had a couple of ideas running around in her head...for a new type of game...one she was even marginally excited about...but all the time and effort to make a game... A vacation would be great.

"We'll go somewhere nice. Tahiti. Hawaii. You know, one of those vacations you don't need a vacation to recover from – no travelling. Just lying on the beach, swimming, eating, drinking. We could go in March. Maybe February even."

"That sounds great." Kendra reached over and took her husband's hand. This trip to San Francisco wasn't a total loss then.

As they drove on Will felt like he was on a field trip. An unpleasant, but very informative one. He was surprised he was getting so riled up about this coffee stuff. It wasn't like him. He didn't really like city ways but he bowed to them sometimes in running his company. Companies are a city thing and if he wanted his company in the country...he'd have to bow every now and then. But the coffee stuff was invading his personal space. He definitely felt like he should be learning something from this field trip. Somehow it seemed about something more than just coffee.



Will brushed through the doors into the saloon. It was two days later and dusk was just setting on the small town of Berney. Will had parked his horse outside and marched in with grim determination on his face. He wasn't the fighting sort. He was the stoic cowboy. But undesirables were riding in and bullying people around in the town. Encroaching on this

## Game Quest

peaceful settlement. It was time to take a stand. This here town wasn't big enough for the both of them. Someone had to go.

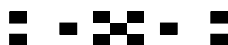
Will sidled up to the counter. Nicole was working again today, but the café was pretty silent. She smiled as she recognized him.

"Say," he said, "Do you think I could have a blank photocopy of that petition?"

"Uh...sure! I've got a spare copy here." She handed him one from under the counter.

"Great," he said examining the sheet. "Oh, and a double mocha-latte to go, please."





## Chapter 7; the almost-as-big-meeting

May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1994

"That's a dumb idea."

"Why? What's so dumb about it?" asked Tim.

"It's just not funny."

"I think it's funny."

"He falls down the hole and lands in Dranhem Beast droppings? It's so contrived. It's so...so...Swarthy Victor," said Geoff.

"I heard that!" Art chimed in with a smile from down the table. He prided himself on his low-brow humor. Even so, he had never yet resorted to 'landing in a pile of dung.' He wasn't that big on scatological humor. That seemed more...more...more Sci-Fi Quest humor, actually. They'd used jokes like that in the previous games...but now those guys couldn't agree on anything. Their bickering, though funny at first, was getting irritating. Why couldn't they develop a relationship like him and Bill? One based on trust. Intelligence. Penis jokes.

"Do think we have enough penis jokes?" Art quickly asked to Bill sitting beside him in a sudden, last minute game-design anxiety attack.

"Sure. We have tons. Speaking of penis jokes...where's the coffee?"

Art laughed. *Speaking of penis jokes, where's the coffee?* That was funny. Bill was funny. "Speaking of penis jokes...where's the pastry?" Art added.

Then, as if Will had been standing just outside the meeting room listening for his cue, the door opened and Will came in with the coffee and pastries, setting them down on the middle of the table. The coffee had been delivered to the front door a few moments ago...specially ordered for each member present at the meeting. It hadn't been Nicole who delivered it and, for a moment, Will had worried that Naughté had already been usurped, absconded, assimilated. But then he noticed the Naughté Latte logo on the guy's apron.

Today could have been two months ago: It was a Tuesday, the sunlight was just breaking through the tops of the trees and spreading across the large oak table like it had during their last big meeting, and the

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Madre family was all here – including Smith and the other guy – ready to hear the big news about Will's San Francisco pilgrimage, about the new headquarters, about the head hunt for a new manager. They were here to learn what was going to happen at Madre.

But Will didn't want to talk about that just yet. He had more important things to start off with. As the individualized cups of coffee were passed around, Will took a piece of paper out of his suitcase.

"Enjoy your coffee especially well today," he said. "It could be the last time." There was stunned shock and surprise around the room. Will had expected some outrage at this news, but the family seemed, well, shocked, like someone at the office had died. What Will didn't realize was that they had interpreted his statement to mean 'You're all being fired and never drinking coffee in this room again'.

"Naughté Latte is being bought out," he continued.

Faces around the room visibly relaxed as they realized they still had job security. But faces didn't relax much. Naughté Latte couldn't go away! Naughté Latte had become a custom. Naughté Latte had been there when they needed it most. Naughté Latte was their comfort, their guidance counsellor – it had helped them through these big meetings with the hard and heavy news. It was their soother. It was really good coffee.

"What?!" asked Tim. He especially liked Naughté Latte's tall, iced chococcino.

"Closing down?" asked Ron. "It can't be losing money. They practically cater to us, man!"

"No," said Will. "Actually. It's quite the opposite. They've been too successful. You know the chain coffee shop Che's Coffee Revolution? Well, apparently, in their bloodlust for expansion, they keep tabs on existing coffee shops. One of their tactics is to find a coffee house that's doing well, go directly to the landlord of the property and buy the lease right out from the existing coffee house, close 'em down and set up shop. That's what they've just done to Naughté Latte. Naughté Latte will be gone in less than two months."

There was silence around the table. Tim was appalled. Geoff was appalled, but secretly glad it hadn't been Berney's Classic Pizza. Art was ruffled. Smith and the other guy were just made aware of the fact that all the coffee at these big meetings had come from the same place.

"That's terrible," said Ron.

"That's what I thought."

"I can't believe they'd just buy out the lease like that," added Geoff.

"It seems overly sleazy," admitted Will. "The thing that most gets me,

though, is that I'd never heard of Che's a year ago. And now they're everywhere, banging at our doorstep!"

"Well, Atomic Sub Sandwiches started as one store in Minneapolis in '87 and grew to 3,400 stores in six countries in five years," offered the other guy.

"Really? How do they do that? Where do they get all the capital?" Madre was expanding insanely fast...and even Will couldn't imagine it ballooning like that. How do you even manage something growing so fast?

"How is it even possible to grow that fast?" Art took the words right out of Will's mouth. He'd had Che's pastries before and he was livid at the thought of them replacing Naughté Lattes! "I like submarine sandwiches as much as the next guy – maybe even more – but isn't one or two local stores enough? Why do we need 3,400 identical sub-shops? I mean...I like my prostate a lot, but I don't want it to start consuming my other cells and grow to the unwieldy and unhealthy size of a grapefruit!"

"I don't understand how it's even feasible. It's like money doesn't even *matter*," Will continued. "In Sacramento we saw two Che's right across the street from each other! They're packed in, one about every four blocks. I don't understand how that makes money."

"It's called cluster bombing," the other guy offered suddenly. All eyes were on him now as the apparent resident expert on a topic they were all fascinated by. The other guy felt good about that. He had the feeling that he was the odd man out in this group. By the way they referred to him he was pretty sure that half of them couldn't even remember his name. "They open as many stores in an area as they can. They call it 'saturating the market.' Sure, it cuts into their profits, but since they're a franchise they don't have to worry about it. It's the franchisee, the individual manager, who puts up all the money and therefore the one who stands to lose it too. The headquarters makes all their money selling supplies, cups and real-estate to the franchisees, in effect, by opening stores. Che's headquarters doesn't lose any money by over-saturating – it only cuts into the franchisee's profits, the local guy who puts up the money. The more stores they open the better... And then, once they've squeezed any local coffee house out of the market, they just close down the excess stores to return the profits. It's brilliant. A franchising siege."

Everyone stared in awe at this golden information nugget. Who was this guy? Why did he know all this? Why couldn't they remember his name?

"Wow," said Tim. "How do you know all this?"

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The other guy shrugged with casual deference. “My brother. He’s a culture studies student at the University of North Carolina, but he’s taking a business course out of interest. Mostly because he thinks business as a course in university is a joke and wanted to see if his suspicions are right. The more he learns the more sure of it he becomes. He says it’s like getting a degree in gym teaching.”

Everyone laughed, especially Art. That was pretty funny, Art thought. *A gym teaching degree.* He’d have to remember that. He recalled the huge scandal at his university, his junior year. Some 60 business students were caught handing in the exact same paper! The news even made it into the local papers. But what did they expect? It was the most efficient way to the best results. That’s what you learn to do in business. This is what makes successful, modern day businessmen – people willing to do anything to take the quickest, easiest route to success. With all this business wheeling and dealing at Madre over the last year Art (and the others apparently) could really appreciate a businessman joke.

Even Will thought this was kind of funny. Will respected the demands of business, the calculability of it. The logic, the risk taking. Running a business required skill and intelligence. There was an art to it. But getting a degree in it seemed rather cheap. Like a shortcut to a corner office. It was like getting a degree in drama. You don’t learn drama in a classroom – you learn it by doing it. And yet, he thought, it was all about business these days. If you were going to get a degree...and you just wanted a good job and good money...it was the degree to get. Caring about the business wasn’t important.

Will had had no business experience when he’d started Madre. He’d learned it all himself. Now his business sense was personalized to Madre. He knew what it was and what it needed. *That’s* what business was about: A personal connection with your company. You couldn’t teach that in a classroom. These people who took business courses...the ‘pure’ business people – they were like lego pieces. Taking shortcuts to fit into any anonymous hole in the corporate structure. *Plug n’ Profit.* But as Will laughed at the gym teaching joke he was aware of the irony of it. These were exactly the kind of people they were looking for to fill their new managerial position. People who just did business – no personality needed – just good with dollar signs.

Will was a little surprised to hear the other guy make this joke, though. He was one of the big manager types over at Synapse Games. But the other guy had started off as an industry guy too, Will remembered. He was a programmer first who became a business man by necessity, like



Will.

"Anyway," Will continued, "we can have a say in whether we're drinking Naughté Latte coffee at the next big meeting or not. They've got a petition going. If the community puts enough pressure on the Che's chain, they may not be able to push Naughté Latte out. I picked up a copy of the petition to pass around the office. I'll put it up outside my door later. If anyone cares."

"Actually," said Henry, "Why don't you pass it around here now. I'll sign it. And having a few signatures already on when it goes up will help."

"Good idea." Will passed it over to Henry who, signing it, passed it around the table.

Geoff found himself bitter at this newfound activism on Will's part. Will was such a conservative guy, hardly the protest signing, banner waving cause-fighter! He and Tim couldn't even design their new game because Will had made them back off all of their great lampoon ideas... because Will was afraid of Madre getting sued... 'cause our lawyers were contacted by MacClownBurgers' lawyers or Toys B Good's lawyers and threatened with suits. *They had no case, but we backed down!* Geoff shouted out in the roomy interiors of his mind, still angry about it. And now him and Tim were stuck for ideas! It had killed their flow. Sci-Fi Quest was all about parody. Or at least...the fun parts to design and play were, the parts people liked. Sci-Fi Quest was basically a rudimentary sci-fi plot wrapped around sci-fi and pop-culture in-jokes and references. And now their best ideas were getting fried out of the air like a Gornothian Tremor Egg because they were too 'litigious.' They'd been in the design stage for this game for months, blanking out, shooting down each other's ideas, fighting, self-censoring...all this time because the basic structure of Sci-Fi Quest was being undermined. Will wouldn't stick up for their game, but he'd stick up for the local coffee shop? Geoff gritted his teeth.

Well, in all fairness, Will had stuck up for them initially. Madre had yet to be successfully sued. But the sheer number and vitriol of corporate lawyers was mind numbing. And Will hadn't specifically *forbidden* them from doing parodies. But he did point out that they could do as many parodies as they wanted if they were comfortable paying the legal bills. So they backed down. Still, they should have fought more. It was bullying. They didn't slam or insult these companies – they just used them as in-jokes, quirky cultural references. In a way it was flattering – in a way it was advertising. MAD Magazine got away with actual *critical* parodies all the time! Why couldn't they? Geoff didn't understand.

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The companies they parodied didn't even used to care. In the first two games they spoofed whatever they wanted...and there was no problem. They hadn't even *considered* lawsuits. But now Sci-Fi Quest was getting too big for its britches. The game industry was getting huge and Sci-Fi Quest famous enough that the companies now actually noticed their products being parodied...and were paranoid to the extreme about their bottom line. Now, if Tim or Geoff even *mentioned* a product in a brain storming session, the next moment the phone would ring and it would be a lawyer saying, "Don't even think about it." Why wasn't there a petition to let Sci-Fi Quest be free to parody? Why didn't Will stick up for their best-selling game? ...Granted, Madre wasn't going to get sued for signing this petition. It wasn't entirely rational bitterness, Geoff realized. It was more jealous, irrational bitterness. In a brief moment of hope, Geoff saw this as a new face to Will. Maybe Will was about to start sticking up a little more instead of getting pushed around by the waves of corporate consumership.

Geoff looked over at Tim. He was scribbling on a pad, drawing crude cartoons of Dan Destroyem shooting stuff up, bikini babes dangling over his arms. Tim drew a dialogue box and wrote in it: "Eat explosion!" Tim pointed the pad so Geoff could see better and mouthed the words 'Eat explosion!' and laughed silently. Tim had locked his computer in the basement several days ago because his girlfriend accused him of having a closer relationship with Dan Destroyem than her. The irony of Tim spending more time with a man who incessantly searches for babes than with his girlfriend was not lost on Tim. Even after beating the game three times he kept wanting to play more. He kept wanting to be Dan Destroyem. It was so much more fun to be Dan Destroyem than Tim McAllister. He knew all his cool lines and kept waiting for a situation to use one of them...to really burn his opponent. But Tim never thought of them when the time came up. Some day, he would. He promised himself. And it would be sweet.

"Well. That's the unpleasant news," Will now changed the topic. "And not what you came here to learn. As you know, Kendra and I took a trip down to the newly acquired Madre headquarters in San Francisco this weekend and things are coming along quite nicely. Our space, the top four floors, should be in operational condition, with computers and desks, etc..., in a few weeks. In the meanwhile, the head-hunters are quickly narrowing our search for a new business manager down to three which I will be interviewing in the next month or so. Several staff from here and a few from our small eastern office have applied for the new management team positions and we will be interviewing in the next

couple of weeks.

"I'd just like to stress again that the head office isn't a replacement for me or for our work here in Redwood. We remain the most important aspect of this company. Think of the headquarters more as a department that focuses solely on our business ventures – concerning itself with markets, advertising, expansion, research, etc. Our division – along with the other game designing and programming divisions," Will gestured to Smith and the other guy "will now be focusing on just that – game design and programming. We'll be able to concentrate on making fun, intelligent and addictive games. Think of it as a division between the legal and PR sections of a company. Both are necessary, neither more powerful than the other, but both having input into what the other does."

People were listening calmly, emboldened by Will's hopeful and encouraging tales of new and better pastures. There was no longer fear of the new direction they were facing. Sure, there were dark clouds overhead, seething with lightning and thunder, but it was no more scary than it was exciting. The cattle were settled into the path, heads down and moving slowly ahead, as they always had, under the steady direction of their cowhand.

Kendra was still thinking about the hiring. Scanning the table she remarked to herself how few women there were present. She'd have to remind Will to hire a good portion of women in this new hiring phase. In a way it was ironic. In this company composed mostly of men, the average woman's salary was higher than the average man's...because there were much fewer women here and Kendra, as co-owner, made tonnes. Madre had a fairly evenly gendered staff for a computer game company, actually, but the majority of the women were in the business departments. Not in game design. The new hiring phase wouldn't solve that. But there should be more in design, she thought to herself. And more female programmers too...if there were such a thing.

"After we've chosen the new Headquarters Manager," Will continued, "we'll move to hiring new employees and moving some of the existing employee pool in Redwood to the head office. We'll be shipping a lot of the lawyers and accountants, etc... from downstairs to San Francisco."

Good-hearted cheers shot up from around the table. All the game-side employees generally got along quite well with the business-side employees, but it was always fun to make a joke about shipping off the lawyers and accountants.

Will smiled. "And most of the complaints I've received over the years about our location out here in Redwood have come from accounting and

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legal so they'll be glad to go, I think.

"We will also be moving some of our design and programming work down there...but nothing serious. Mostly it will be similar to the stuff we did when we opened the Madre Coast and Madre North offices. Those offices will be doing mostly grunt work, or specialized stuff, particularly in batches via temp work. This is necessary because, as you all know, there isn't a big pool of programmers in Redwood. In San Francisco, there's lots.

"Furthermore, the—"

Tim had tuned out. At some point in this discussion he had wandered down some path in his brain, trailing off at the forks in the neurons and finding himself in a new and wonderful place. Sparkling with lights, brightly colored synapses shooting sparks, raining fire flowers to the ground like fireworks. Look what he'd found back here, hidden deep in the depths of his brain. It had seemed too dark and thick and foreboding lately. All he had found in here was weakness and bad moods for weeks. But here was a beautiful find! It was a brilliant idea! He wasn't sure how he'd arrived here. Hadn't been cognizant of the path he'd taken down the gray matter. But it was stunning! Brilliant! He quickly scribbled it down on his pad and passed it to Geoff.

*What if we made Dan Destroyem as the enemy? He's trying to destroy Johnny 10-4 because Johnny's become outdated.*

Geoff looked down and read the note. A long silence. Geoff wasn't going to like it, Tim thought. As usual, he was going to shoot down Tim's idea as impractical; too 'out there'. And they would be back to square one...again. Actually, looking at the idea on the paper again even Tim thought this idea was, perhaps, a little too wild. He'd closed his eyes for a moment and lost the beautiful idea. He was back in the swamp of his mind. He'd understand if Geoff didn't want to use Dan Destroyem or some parody in the game. They'd probably get sued for this too.

Geoff took the pen and wrote down on the pad.

*Like an 'out with the old, in with the new' invasion story?*

*Yeah,* wrote Tim. Geoff would never go for it. It was too zany. They were never going to find their way out of this swamp. They would be trudging through this sludge forever. There was a long pause. Geoff took the pen again.

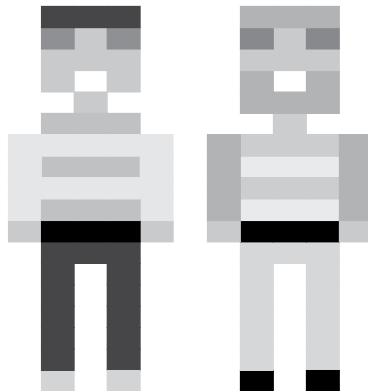
*That's brilliant!*

Another pause. Tim was stunned. Geoff continued to write.

*And I don't think we'd get sued either. Apocalypse software would probably be flattered if we used their character. It would be an in-joke within the industry. And it's very fresh. Of course, we wouldn't use the REAL Dan Destroyem...just someone similar...a macho shoot-em-up game character. Trying to kill off Johnny to increase his own game sales...or out of some twisted belief that he is bettering the world by ridding the world of inferior gaming styles and characters...*

Recovering from his shock Tim further fleshed out his idea for Geoff. Geoff added plot points and serious criticisms – as he was always good at. They were both really excited. The small note pad's pages bubbled over...

Will babbled on in the background. And before they knew it, the meeting was over and everyone funnelled out of the room. Tim and Geoff went to their office and put a chair in the doorway to signify it was closed since they had no door (more on this later). For the first time in a long time they were making progress. And everyone knew, because there wasn't any shouting.





## Chapter 8; Name Quest

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1994

“How about Swarthy Victor: Searching for Lesbos?” suggested Art, his hand to his chin, pacing back and forth in front of his office window. They were down to the final bit of design now. The programmers had already started programming. This was the hard part. No longer could you just throw in wild ideas – you had to focus. FOCUS! Refine! Edit!... and throw away a lot of good ideas. Right now they were trying to come up with a list of possible titles for the game. The working title for the past few months had been “Swarthy Victor goes to Greece.” But that was just too blasé to go on the final product – almost embarrassingly so.

“Lesbos?” asked Bill.

“Yeah. It’s a Greek island.”

Fred, the intern, son of one of the programmers at Madre, was busy jotting their brainstorm down on a yellow pad in his lap. The scritch-scratching of his pencil was ever-present in the room as he tried in desperation to keep up.

“It’s funny,” noted Bill, “But it doesn’t really reflect what’s going on in the game.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Art continued to casually pace his ‘orifice’ in thought. Today was Friday. Casual day. Of course, casual day at Madre was unofficial – mostly because it was meaningless. Most everyone dressed however they wanted all the time – though a few wore suits: the lawyers, the accountants, the PR people, Will, Henry. But Art had a suspicion that these people didn’t dress up for work – instead they dressed up for weekends. Especially Will and Henry. Their normal clothes, what they felt most comfortable in, *was* a suit jacket or pleats. But on weekends, well, it’s just not acceptable to wear a suit – so they have to dress up in jeans or sweat pants. The only thing Art did differently on casual Fridays was to wear his loafers without the tassels. No one ever noticed the difference – and that was the beauty of it. It was Art’s casual day secret.

“How about Swarthy Victor Gets a Piece of Athens?” suggested Bill.

"Nahhh. Too much of a stretch for that pun."

"How about Swarthy Victor becomes a Cretan?" Bill countered.

Art laughed. "That's funny. But, again, doesn't have much to do with the game. *Hmmm*. Swarthy Victor: What a Greek? Nah. Lame. What a Cretan? That's not bad."

"Swarthy Victor plays with his Venus?" Bill offered.

"Whoa. Whoa. Slow down," complained Fred. "What was that last one? Plays with his Venus?"

"Yeah." Fred scribbled madly trying to catch up.

"Ok. Go on," Fred said.

"Ooooh," said Bill. "How about Swarthy Victor: Hex on the Brain."

"Hey...that's not bad. But it's a curse, not a Hex. Still – it might work."

"Swarthy Victor gets Lei'd on the Virgin Islands?" shot back Bill.

"He's not even ON the Vir–"

"I know. I know. How about Swarthy Victor and the Trojan Whores!"

"That's clever, but a little strong – and insulting – for a title," said Art.

"Yeah." They paused in thought for a moment. The mad scratching of Fred's pencil filled the silence. "Swarthy Victor gets Meduced?" Bill continued.

"Huh?" Art stopped and looked at Bill.

"Never mind. I was trying to mix Medusa and seduced. Too obscure."

"Oh." Art sat down in his chair and leaned back, thinking. "*Hmmm*." There was a pause as they thought and just as Fred thought he was going to get a break, Art continued. "Swarthy Victor *mounts* Olympus?"

"Swarthy Victor Angers Uranus?" Bill returned.

Art smiled but, "That's such an overused pun, though."

"Swarthy Victor suffers from a bad case of the Harpies?"

"Ooooh. That's *very* good," Art sat up in his chair, laughing. "A little long, but relevant. Swarthy Victor gets a bad case of Hermes could also work. Are you getting all this down, Fred?"

"Yep." The pencil was moving so fast it appeared to be alive and Fred's hand was like a bull rider merely trying to stay on.

"How about 'Women are all Greek to him?'" suggested Bill.

"It works, but it's kind of convoluted. Swarthy Victor Plays with his Discus? Swarthy Victor gets Hermes on his Discus? Swarthy Victor Tries to Hit Uranus with his Discus but gets Hermes Instead?"

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There was laughter from all three of them. That was funny, but obviously unfit for a game title for several reasons. Art's sigh was followed by a brief pause.

"Swarthy Victor gets Kicked in the Argonauts?" suggested Bill.

The sound of Fred's pen finally seemed to overcome the rapid flow of ideas.

"Oh, well, we've got some now," said Art. "Maybe we should have a name contest around the office. We can worry about the title later. Let's finish up some of the other details."

"Sure." Bill opened his briefcase and started to pull out his idea sheet. Fred flipped to a new page, relieved at the breather. He was going to have to type this up immediately or he'd forget what he'd written down, it was so messy.

"I had a great idea for the painting," said Art.

"The painting?"

"Yeah. The one they steal from the museum. You know how they always have these descriptive names on classical paintings: *Still-life with Fruit*. *People in Park*. *Man and Dogs*. The painting should be of a topless woman and the title could be 'Girl with Breasts.' That's funny."

"Yeah. Not bad. Or 'Still-life with Melons.'" Bill wrote these down. So did Fred.

Today Fred was extra happy with his job. For the past three months he had just regarded this job as any other he had ever had – mowing lawns, babysitting, working at Garden Pot – a way of saving up money for future plans – in this case to blow traveling around Europe for a few months before starting college in the Fall. He wasn't even interested in working in the gaming industry – although he knew there must be kids all over North America dying to have his internship. Fred wanted to be a journalist – you know, do something that actually mattered. Defend truth. Break stories. Uncover cover-ups. *That* sort of thing. He'd only taken this job on his father's recommendation and mother's emotional pressure. There wasn't an internship position, *per se*, at Madre – but it was pretty common to hire someone's kid once or twice a year as a general helper to give them experience and some money. Games were fun. The work was less mundane. It was a good office experience. Fred didn't dislike the job at all. He just wasn't really into games. They seemed trivial. Also, he'd been worried, at first, about working with and being the office boy to his father's friends. But, as it turned out, he didn't work with the programmers at all. Instead he mostly helped out the designers and they were all pretty cool – like Art and Bill.



But that wasn't why Fred was extra happy with his job today. No, the reason Fred was happy about it today was because he was actually getting paid for it. He'd been in contact with the job placement program coordinator at one of the colleges he was thinking of applying for to learn a little more about the program. The coordinator went through it all – the types of jobs available for students with all sorts of experience from none to tonnes. 'There are plenty of internship opportunities as well – if you don't mind extending your degree,' she had said. 'We even have a few internships where you get paid!' She had said this with such glee, like it was a major accomplishment, a real find...to *actually* get *paid* for work.

'What do you mean?' Fred had asked. 'Don't all internships pay?'

'Huh?' the coordinator was stunned for a moment and then laughed. 'Oh no! You work for the experience! Say you want to work for NBC – well, a lot of students want that job, it's a major national television network, so there's heavy competition. But if you've got experience in the field – especially at *that* network – and have done an internship with them, then it's a good step towards getting that job. Your experience is your pay. All internships now-a-days are like that.'

'Oh.' was all Fred could say. But that's not what he wanted to say. What he wanted to say was, 'Isn't the whole point of an internship that you *WILL* get the job after? To get *PAID* experience in that field? Isn't that how the company ensures fresh blood – by hiring interns to train the new breed to take over the shop when the rest are old and retiring? Isn't it a mutual benefit thing?'

'If you do a couple of internship terms there, you've got a good chance of being hired on afterwards!' the coordinator had added enthusiastically.

'Oh.' was all Fred could say. A *good chance* of being hired on?! After doing two terms – effectively a year and a half of unpaid work – for this company, you'd think you had better in hell be hired for sure! What would their excuse be? And what about all the people who can't afford to work full time internships for no pay? Fred's family was fairly well off – but even he wasn't sure how he'd pay to go to school and then work full-time for no pay! What happens to people who can't afford to work for free? The discussion ended then without any of these questions being asked or answered.

But Fred didn't believe it after hanging up. It made no sense. Taking a trip down to the local student centre on the weekend he checked out the handouts on internships from several major continental companies. Sure enough, the coordinator had been right. The applications were more like magazines: four-color, slickly papered, photo-ridden brochures explicitly

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describing how cool and fun a place (insert company name here) is to work for and how lucky you should be to be chosen to work even for free! Fred brought them home and showed them to his mom. He couldn't quite believe it. It seemed so...so...sleazy. And they were *all* like that!

That night – last night – he had lain awake in bed thinking about it. Maybe he *would* go into the games industry. At least it wasn't run by corporate sleazebags. But nah, it was so trivial. People don't go down in history books for making sex adventure games... That would be it! The idea suddenly came to him and he sat up in bed. He'd write a story exposing to the world this new trend in abuse of young people...the non-pay internship racket! And he was getting the real experience to write that story here at Madre! And he was getting paid for it!

"Hey, speaking of art," said Art offhand as they wrote, "We got another Victor script from a production house for Tantamount pictures."

"Another one?" Bill looked up. "Really? That was fast. How many is that now?"

"Six...no...seven with this one, I think." Art said sitting back down in his chair.

"You think Will would ever go for it?"

"Go for what?" asked Fred, curious.

"Swarthy Victor: the movie."

"Really?" Fred was amused. They were going to make a *movie* of this game?

"It's been Hollywood's idea all along. They're really eager. They've been approaching us about it for a few years. Actually, I'm pretty sure Will would go for it, despite the bad scripts, but every time it gets down to negotiating profits, they want to split it 80/20 – they claim it will be advertising for us. We always say no because it's OUR game, but these production houses keep coming back...and still never want to offer a fair price. Anyway, they keep sending scripts, mostly just to show they're expressing interest - or they're hoping by showing us the right script we'll jump on a terrible deal."

"Have you read it yet?" asked Bill. *Wow*, he thought. *Art's creation, Swarthy Victor, was being sought after by Hollywood! He could never get over this. Swarthy Victor was hot property. Even Hollywood thought Art was a genius.*

"Nope. But I'm looking forward to it!" Art said with a grin, and then as an aside to Fred, "They're usually so terrible. Some of them are grossly inaccurate – even insulting sometimes – stuff I wouldn't even put in the games. These Hollywood types...get their hands on a property and then

want to change everything that made it good in the first place. Also, these scripts are just treatments so they're hardly polished. Ever read a terrible script? It's fascinating. There's been a couple half-decent scripts though."

"Video Game movies seem to be all the rage now," said Fred. "There's two out in theatres at the moment, I think."

"Yeah. It's getting nuts. It reminds me of before the crash."

"The crash?" asked Fred.

"Oh yeah. I guess that would be before your time," said Art with a nostalgic smile. What a great time for a war story, he thought, sitting up and rubbing his hands together. "The crash of '83," he began. "This was before computers were a big player in the gaming market, but the video game industry had just boomed after the introduction of Pong and the Odyssey home gaming systems in the late 70s. Profits were just booming and everyone was getting into it. God, I couldn't count all the Pong clones there were. Who would have thought you could have so many variations of a white bar bouncing a white ball across a screen? Anyway, by '82 – about the time I was hired on at Madre – the market was just nuts. Incredibly over-inflated. Everybody and their dog was making games. There must have been 20 different home video systems – Colecovision, Odyssey, the Atari 2400, Intellivision, Channel F, Astrocade... all being updated and improved and resold within months of the last release. It was crazy. Everybody started jumping on the bandwagon. It got so bad that they started putting free game cartridges in cereal boxes – or at least you could send away with your cereal tabs for one – it was considered advertising. I remember there was a...a Cornflakes game. Even MacClownBurgers had a game out!"

"I played that! It was terrible!" said Bill suddenly laughing, remembering. "You had to get all the fries in the box? Talk about training the MacClownBurger employees of tomorrow!"

"Anyway, you can imagine how popular *that* game was. And that was the problem. Suddenly there were games everywhere and most of them were crap. Companies figured they could just make a quick buck by putting out a game. Any game. Suddenly the market share dropped – people got tired of playing crap games and within months the market bottomed out. Like everyone decided overnight not to buy games anymore. It was huge. All these massive companies went down within months. People predicted it as the end of the video game 'fad'. Well, that wasn't true – now Nintendo rules the home console market with an iron fist – but it took a few years for stores to even start carrying game consoles without

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assurances from the manufacturer that they would buy back all unsold stock.”

Fred was definitely learning on this internship. Being paid to learn. What a concept. What a job!

“Well,” volunteered Art. “Things aren’t that bad now, I guess. Just... the adventure game arena has bloomed. It’s like every company out there is putting them out. And they all stink.” Art laughed. “Well. I guess that’s not fair. But most are pretty lackluster. It makes it harder to sell our games. Actually, not all the competition’s games are bad, though. Caprafilm Games’ *Ape Atoll* and *Return to Ape Atoll* were pretty good. I wish I had made those. But that doesn’t help us sell games either! Now this whole 3D shooting thing is going nuts...” Art threw his hands up in the air to suggest it was anybody’s guess as to what was going to happen to the industry.

“I wonder...,” started Bill. He always started off with this when he had an idea that he thought was a little bit controversial and Art might not like. “I wonder if we should have an action sequence in this game.”

“An action sequence?” asked Art.

“You know. Something non-puzzle like. Like a race, or a shoot-em-up. Maybe do something with 3D graphics – a shoot-em-up like Heather Hüterguns – but with a sex twist.”

“HMMMMMMMMMMMM,” thought Art. “You think we need it?”

“Well, these 3D shooters are all the rage. Maybe if we had a bit of something like that, we could compete.”

“Compete?”

“Well, not compete...but snag a bit of the interest in that,” Bill qualified. He could already tell Art wasn’t quite going for it.

“HMMMMM,” Art responded. “The problem is our players are *looking* for a puzzle game. A game with a story, that involves critical, logical thinking, puzzles. Anyway, when we put that hippo-chase action sequence in Swarthy Victor 3 – well, you saw the letters we got. People find that stuff really frustrating – when you move from puzzles to quick arcade-reflex action. A lot of our players are older – adults – especially those who play Swarthy Victor. They weren’t born with 8 knuckles per finger like their kids, allowing them to play these super quick *Blam! Blam!* games.”

“Yeah. I know,” said Bill. “But we could always have an option to skip it. Or maybe a trial thing. If they don’t get it in, say, five tries, the game automatically skips the arcade sequence...Or we could have a difficulty setting of some kind.”

“Yeah. That’s not a bad idea. Still, I really don’t think an action bit

will have much advantage to us. If our whole game was an action shooter – THEN we'd be able to capture some of the popularity surrounding action shoot-em-ups, but that wouldn't make any sense for us. A little action scene would hardly make any difference in sales because no one would know about it until they played the game. Besides, I'm not even sure we'd have the programming experience to make a game like that. I mean, we've been making puzzle games forever! We can all play Gloom, but no one here is Adam Clayburn. I don't know where we'd begin designing one that had that level of addictiveness." Art laughed. "I think we're too old!"

"Yeah," said Bill. "I still can't believe the average age of the guys at EGO. Their oldest member is, like, 24. I read somewhere the average age there is 17. *17 year olds* designing platinum selling games! It's crazy. And Adam Clayburn. I couldn't even type with all my fingers at 17 and here this guy single-handedly creates the most revolutionary game engine in years! It's craziness!"

Art laughed again. "I feel outdated. Even the guys over at Synapse games are all under 30. God. Everybody in the industry is so young now." There was a small pause and both Art and Bill spontaneously turned over to look at Fred the 17 year old intern who was busy rewriting some of his messier notes. Fred looked up and caught them both staring at him. "What?" he asked. "Did I miss something?"

"But the 3D game thing is not a bad idea," Art said turning back to Bill. "Maybe just a bit late in the design stage to add it in. We could do a lot of good stuff with that idea, though. We could either do a quickie 3D game release later with Victor as the main character...or we could put a bit in the next game. Could be pretty funny. Remember that for next time."

Bill smiled and wrote a reminder down on his pad. Art was right, Bill thought. Art's always right.



## Chapter 9; Explosion\_Sweat69 & the Misfits

June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Heather needed a manly name. Something men would find cool. She stared blankly at the screen as the cursor blinked steadily in the little text box – the digital equivalent of tapping ones foot with impatience. Heather stared and the computer blinked until, suddenly, it came to her and she typed in her new, manly username.

*1:27:29am Explosion\_Sweat69 has joined the chatroom.*

Heather was now in the gamer's chatroom on SupraNet...and though she usually revelled in her status as a girl gamer...tonight, she wasn't that interested in having to constantly defend her gender. Besides...it was fun to be a boy sometimes. Mark and Dwayne had settled into the hide-a-bed downstairs in the TV room for their sleepover. She could hear the giggles waft up every now and then. Her parents had trotted off to bed again at their usual lamely early hour. The night was hers. This was when she was at her best. Tonight, she was *Explosion\_Sweat69*.

Heather logged into the 3D shooter chatroom and spied on the conversation for a while.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> And then he fell \_back\_ onto the transporter and accidentally fragged me!! I couldn't believe it. He was out of ammo, had 1 health. I was fully loaded and had 170% health and he killed me \_accidentally\_!

<Man\_Missile> Whoa. Cool. I once killed two guys by blowing up their rockets with my pea-shooter.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> Nice.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Hey. I hear that in Gloom 3, it'll be true 3-D. Like, they won't just use paintings for the backgrounds and objects.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> What do you mean?

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Like, the plants and lanterns and enemies, etc...

will all be made out of polygons - like the rooms are made now.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> Is that good?

<Man\_Missile> Of course thats good! It'll be super real. You can blow up plants and lanterns and stuff then. And it will look more real. Not like flat 2d objects that kind of look 3d.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> Oh. Really? Can thye do that? I didn't think computers were fast enough

<Man\_Missile> No, computers really can't. But, technically, Gloom wasn't supposed to be possible either...They are basically programming geniuses.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> The guys at EGO games are gods.

<Man\_Missile> No doubt.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> I heard in Gloom 3, when you shoot zombies, their eyes pop out of their heads! My friend said he saw a demo of it.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Cool! That's wicked.

Heather saw the perfect time to jump in.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Actually, I kind of doubt that. They haven't even finished making the engine to that game yet.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> REally? How do you know?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> I read it on a chat group. Ego games posts on some of them even.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> Wow. That's so cool. You can actually talkk to the game creators. Awesome. where did you say it was?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> I don't know. it changes. Try one of the programmers forums.

<Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket> Cool. I gotta go. But i'll check it out.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> bye.

<Man\_Missile> cya

1:33:02am Rocket\_from\_the\_Pocket has left the room.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Bye.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> oops. toolate.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Hey. Do you guys know anything about KillNet?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> No.

<Man\_Missile> You mean the new Virtual Arena?

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Yeah. I heard a couple of people talking about it.

## Game Quest

What is it?

<Man\_Missile> Really? You don't know?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> me neither.

<Man\_Missile> Really? It's like Supranet...but it's solely for linking up 3d shooter games. You can play deathmatches with up to 8 people in a room.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Like a gladiator arena, but for Gloom2. That's awesome.

<Man\_Missile> Yeah. And for Dan Destroyem too. It's pretty fun. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Neato.

<Man\_Missile> And it works over the internet, so all you have to do is pay for a subscription to KillNet. There's all these clans of players teaming up and having matches already. It's really getting popular.

*1:34:56am Dan\_DestroyemX has been disconnected.*

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Hey. That's cool. How much is it?

<Man\_Missile> Only 8.95 a month, I think. No too bad.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> wow. 8 can play at once? That's sweet. The max I've ever played was 5...and that was major slow

<Man\_Missile> Oh yeah. It's way more interesting with 8. You need a pretty good computer to do it, though. And at least a 33.6 modem.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. No problem. I got all that.

*1:36:49am Dan\_DestroyemX has joined the chatroom.*

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Sorry about that. computer trouble.

<Man\_Missile> It's cool too because you can have two teams of four and play capture the flag and stuff.

<Man\_Missile> Welcome back.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Yeah. I want to sign up. But I need to upgrade my computer...and my mom won't pay for it.

<Man\_Missile> That's too bad. Moms... Women will never understand computers.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> What did you say about my momma? ; )

<Man\_Missile> Ha ha.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Especially they girls suck at computer games.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Most won't even play if you ask them. It's like they're afraid of it. My little sister isn't bad.



<Man\_Missile> Fuck. I hate it when you meet women gamers. Their so cocky like they think they're special for playing games. And they always suck Thank god there's only, like, one or two that I've met.

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Yeah. They ruin competitive play too. Asking stupid questions like total ditzes.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> It's fun to attack them in competitive play. It's fun to toy with them because they are so bad.

*1:39:12am Dan\_DestroyemX has been disconnected.*

<Man\_Missile> What? Again? It's probably his mom disconnecting him.  
Ha ha.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. "Dan\_DestroyemX!! Come here and do the dishes right this minute!"

<Man\_Missile> Ha ha! "Honey, it's time to take out the garbage! Heather Huterguns may not have to take out the garbage, but this is \_real\_ life!"

<Explosion\_Sweat69> ROFL!\*

*1:40:03am Dan\_DestroyemX has joined the chatroom.*

<Dan\_DestroyemX> Damn modem.

*1:40:19am Dan\_DestroyemX has been disconnected.*

<Man\_Missile> Ha ha. What a loser.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> No doubt. Ha ha.

<Man\_Missile> Sigh. There should be a law against letting women near computers, I think.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> You think so?

<Man\_Missile> It just ruins it. Their no good at. I mean, look at my mom. The concept of double clicking is completely lost on her. Then all these salesmen are trying to get into the girl market so they make games like Kelsey's Dream House or Crypt Destroyer and it just ruins it.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> You don't like Crypt Destroyer?

<Man\_Missile> I LIKE it. I just don't like that they put that Heather chick in there. It's like - as if she would be shooting zombies. She'd be worrying about breaking a nail the whole time.

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\* Rolling On the Floor Laughing

## Game Quest

Heather paused. This really irritated her. She'd been playing the game so far - trying to act male. She was interested in seeing what this guy thought, to delve into the male mind. But now it was getting insulting. She felt that fire rising up in her belly again. She'd come on here wanting to avoid harassment and...somehow had found it. Or, at least, she found a desire to combat this creep. She moved to type. Then hesitated. Then she typed:

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Actually. I am a girl.

There was no response. Suddenly Heather seemed alone in her room again, staring at a bright screen, rudely awakened from virtual reality. Shit. Just because I'm a girl, now they don't want to talk to me, Heather thought. But Man\_Missile was still logged in the chatroom. What a jerk. Heather was typing out an insult revolving around the possibility of whether or not Man\_Missile actually *had* a man\_missile when the response came.

<Man\_Missile> Actually...

<Man\_Missile> Me too.

Heather quickly deleted her unsent response. Now it was her turn to pause. This was strange. This was the first time that this had happened. She hadn't considered the possibility, perhaps naively so, that other people might be lying about their identity on-line too. And even more so, she hadn't figured there were any other girl gamers. Especially one as obviously skilled and knowledgeable as Man\_Missile. Then she wondered if Man\_Missile was telling the truth. He (she?) could still be a man.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> I didn't know there were any other girl gamers.

<Man\_Missile> Really? I met a few.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Actually, me too. But somehow randomly meeting you makes it seem like there are a whole lot more out there. I don't feel... so alone - as dumb as that sounds.

<Man\_Missile> Ha HA! Yeah. Me too. That's funny we were both pretending to be guys. Usually I do it just to avoid harassment. Boys are so stupid.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Tell me about it. It's bad enough just talking to these guys on-line. Actually, that's not fair. a lot of them are interested in talking to you. Just some are dicks. And way too many losers ask you for dates on-line. Seems really tacky.

<Man\_Missile> Ha ha. Tell me about it. The worst, though, is that when you actually play a game over link-up, they all turn into total dicks. Making a point of killing you - even ganging up - unofficially - to destroy you. Like their manhood is at stake. What a bunch of losers.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> The nicer guys let you win. They play poorer or let you get a few shots in to be nice. I really hate that. It's condescending or something. Like, I can play the fucking game, ok?

<Man\_Missile> Totally. It's patronizing (I just learned that word. ; ) ). Actually, I think that girl gamers are better than boy gamers. Mostly because the guys are such dicks and gang-up over link-up that you have to be a better to survive as a girl.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Definately.

There was a long pause. Heather typed again.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Hey. You wanna go private?

<Man\_Missile> You mean to a private room?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. Then we can talk without worrying about guys coming into the room.

<Man\_Missile> Sure. Good idea. That Dan Destroyem guy might come back. Just a sec.

During the pause Heather could hear her brother and Dwayne downstairs. But the sounds were muffled. She would have wondered what they were up to, but she didn't want to know.

"See?" said Dwayne. "It sticks. I told you it would."

Mark was laughing so hard. He couldn't believe it was actually sticking to the mirror. He didn't think it would work. But Dwayne was right. He couldn't stop laughing...he didn't want to wake up his parents upstairs cause then they'd be in trouble...luckily the sounds were muffled pretty well through the bathroom.

"Here," Mark said through giggles, "Let me try." He peeled the rag off the mirror as it made a long, sickening 'sllllllllshhh!' sound that made them both grin and giggle. Mark reached back and threw the sticky rag high onto the mirror. But he threw too hard and it bounced off, fell about three feet and then re-attached to the mirror. Mark and Dwayne looked at each other and burst out laughing! It was SO funny!

Upstairs, Heather heard this muffled laughter and rolled her eyes.

"The trick is to not put too much water in and lots of soap. If it's too watery, it won't stick and will just make a big mess," Dwayne informed.

## Game Quest

Again they both grinned at each other as they both secretly thought about trying it with lots of water just to see the mess...but they both secretly and individually decided against it.

Upstairs both Heather and Man\_Missile had entered a private room.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Hey.

<Man\_Missile> hey. Now that we're away from the boys, we can get naked.

<Man\_Missile> ha ha. just kidding. ; )

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Where are you from?

<Man\_Missile> New York. You?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Wow. That's far. I'm in California.

<Man\_Missile> Wow. Must be nice. I wished I lived in California.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Ah, it's alright. I live in the woods. It's nice, but it's hard to see friends or do anything. That's probably why I play computer so much.

<Man\_Missile> Sounds nice, actually. I come from Ottawa. In Canada. My mom got a job down here about 2 years ago. I don't really like it. There's so many people and there are bums everywhere. I go visit my dad in Toronto sometimes, but it's also a big city.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> But there's lots to do and see in New York, right?

<Man\_Missile> Yeah. I guess. But it's all the same after a while. And in a way it's almost like there's so much to do, there is nothing to do. And people aren't very friendly. Smaller towns are nicer.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. I guess youre right. I wouldn't want to live in New York. But I'd like to visit.

<Man\_Missile> Well, you can come visit me, then.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> So, do you go on KillNet a lot?

<Man\_Missile> Sure. I go on all the time. They are based here in new york so I got a free subscription when they first started. I have to pay now, though. : (

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Nice.

<Man\_Missile> Are you any good at 3d games?

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. Pretty good. I can hold my own against the boys.

<Man\_Missile> Nice. Actually, I know another girl at my school who is really good. We all should start our own clan.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Clan?

<Man\_Missile> Yeah. You know - like a team that plays together against

other teams. That way we could play each other fairly - and not be ganged up on by men - which is a problem when you've got 7 out of 8 players male. And we could also, if we got four girls, have matches against...

<Man\_Missile> ...men teams. It might shut them up. It wouldn't be about trying to get respect from the men, though. Cause who needs em? Their a bunch of dicks. Actually, it wouldn't even be about being able to play fairly without being ganged up on. It would be about being good and being girls.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Hey. That sounds like fun. We could even just play with each other. Let's do it.

<Man\_Missile> Totally. I'll ask the other girl at my school.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> I have to get a subscription first. I'm sure I can convince my dad...or pay for it with my allowance. We should have lots of time now that school's almost over.

<Man\_Missile> Cool. This is the best idea I've had yet. My email is shebitch@redfez.net.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Thanks. Mine is Starscream@Snet.Madre.com.

Starscream@Snet.Madre.com was Heather's new changeable address. She didn't know this person well enough to give out her normal email.

<Man\_Missile> My name's Carol. I usually go with the username Pizzazz...or sometimes BitchSlap.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> I usually go by Aphrodite's Bow. My name's Heather.

<Man\_Missile> Nice to meet you.

<Explosion\_Sweat69> Yeah. For sure.

There was a pause for a bit as neither seemed to have anything to say. Downstairs Dwayne had gotten up to nine.

"Nine," whispered Mark.

Dwayne pushed another raisin up his nostril.

"Ten."

"Eleven."

"Twelve," Mark couldn't keep a straight face anymore and giggled out that last count. He didn't think you could put that many raisins up your nose. This killed Dwayne's composure and he burst out with one large 'HA!' The raisins exploded out of his nose like grapeshot. Some of them were sticky. They died laughing.

## Game Quest

Upstairs Heather rolled her eyes. When Heather looked back at the screen she saw that Carol had logged out and logged back in under Pizzazz. Heather did the same under her preferred name.

<Pizzazz> Actually, I didn't used to be much of an action game fan. I really liked adventure games.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah. Adventure games are good.

<Pizzazz> Except they've totally sucked lately. I mean, first of all, everyone and their dog is copying Madre games but they're mostly just lousy. Except for Caprafilm games. Theirs are good. And even Madre's games are starting to suck. They seem so short. Like their just pumping them out and going for graphics over story.

Heather smiled to herself. It was funny to be talking about her parents and her parents' friends' games.

"Now you try," said Dwayne.

"No way, I'm not stupid!" retorted Mark.

"Come on! I did it. You have to!"

There was a long silence.

"Ok," said Mark.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> yeah. I know what you mean. I thought the latest Fantasy Quest was pretty weak.

<Pizzazz> It's like their just out for money now or something. The stories are lame, the puzzles are way too easy or non-existent. Somethin'g's missing from the earlier games. I only made it half-way through the latest fantasy quest game. Actually, it's not bad compared to some of Madre's latest games, but still lackluster. And all the fairy tale stuff is gone. They look better than they play these days.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Actually, my parents work at Madre games.

<Pizzazz> Really? What do they do? God, I hope I didn't insult one of their games!

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Actually. They own Madre.

There was a long pause and the silence on the screen made Heather aware that there were no sounds coming from downstairs. Suddenly there was laughing, a short pause and then someone was pretending to sneeze over and over and over again. *How stupid!* Heather thought. *How fun is it to pretend to sneeze?*

"Are you ok?" asked Dwayne.

Mark didn't answer - he kept sneezing. "I think there's" *ATCHOO!!* "I think—" *ATCHOO!!* "There's one still in there!" *ATCHOO!* Suddenly the raisin rocketed out of Mark's nostril. It stuck to the bed. They were both grossed out and put the raisins away.

<Pizzazz> Are you serious?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah. God. My idiot little borthor and his friend are downstairs goofing around. Now they're fake sneezing or something.

<Pizzazz> no way. Your parents own Madre? You're not lying to me, are you?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> No way. I swear. My mom and dad are Kendra and Will Roberts.

<Pizzazz> Oh. Sorry. No offense.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Don't worry about it. I kind of agree actually. Their games have been kind of going downhill. Better than a lot on the market, but not that great.

<Pizzazz> Whew! Did you tell them that?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Maybe. I don't remember. I haven't been into adventure games for the past couple of years. Now that I think about it, it's probably because they haven't been as good. I think they kind of thought I was just getting tired of adventure games. And when they ask what I think I usually just shrug and say, I don't know. I don't know why I do that. Their interest in my activities and what I think seems so phoney. They're always trying to be the perfect parents. Annoying.

<Pizzazz> Ha ha. You sound like the typical teenager. Actually, I wish my mom would take more interest in my activities. She's absolutely appalled that I play computer games. Sometimes I think she thinks I'm a dyke. Well, not exactly. But she wishes I was more into clothes or something. Or at least, powersuit and business, like her.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah, even my mom is a game creator and she doesn't understand why I like the computer so much.

<Pizzazz> Really? That's funny. Yeah. The only thing that Madre really has had going for it in the last few years was SupraNet. But even it's not so good now. No offense.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> That's ok.

<Pizzazz> The internet and Usenet has really caught up. And, ironically, KillNet too. You'd think Madre would have come up with online deathmatches before someone else. But SN is still the best way for online person-to-person chatting. Even, ironically, for the little games

## Game Quest

like checkers it's not the best anymore. Why didn't SupraNet ever get into the on-line gaming thing. You'd think it would be right up their alley.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Probably because they don't know what to do with it. It's been hemorrhaging (is that how you spell that?) money since it started.

<Pizzazz> REally? But it's so popular!

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Not enough. It's a huge expense. And usenet has been killing us. My dad tried doing some online adventure gaming, but it was expensive and they weren't sure how to do it. Doesn't work so good for adventure games.

<Pizzazz> Oh. That's too bad.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah. I don't know what's going to happen to it.

<Pizzazz> BRB \*

Nothing was happening on the screen now. Heather sat back in her chair and waited. She looked out the window into the darkness of the forest, sprinkled from above by the stars. She could sometimes make out the sounds of conversation coming through the floorboards below...but not what they were saying.

"I wish girls in our class wanted sex."

"Yeah. Me too," agreed Dwayne. They were both lying back in the hide-a-bed.

"Then they could come over to our sleepover and we could talk and have sex."

They both smiled as they thought about it.

"Maybe they *do* wanna have sex too..." pondered Dwayne.

"No way!" Mark said. "Women don't like sex. They only want to have sex if you can give them babies... Or maybe drive a fast car and buy them earrings. But we can't do that yet. Besides, they'd probably slap us and we'd have to go to the principal's office because kids aren't supposed to know about sex."

"Yeah. It sucks to be a kid."

"It's not fair."

"Not fair at all."

Dwayne thought back to that magazine they had found in the park and stashed under his bed last summer. "Then why do those women go naked in the dirty magazines?" he asked.

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\* *Be Right Back*



"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if they only want cars and babies, why do they take off their clothes for the magazines?"

Mark rolled his eyes. Dwayne just didn't get it. "For the money. It's a job. If they strip for a magazine, then they don't need a man...unless for babies...because they get paid A LOT!"

"Really? How much?"

"I don't know. It costs a lot of money to strip...because it's very difficult to do. You can't just get people to show you themselves naked. That's why people don't do it. It costs a LOT of money. They get paid more than Bill Gates."

Dwayne shook his head. "Nuh-uh! Bill Gates is the richest man in the universe. They don't get more than him."

"Yeah, they do," retorted Mark. "It's just that they can only strip once. After you seen them naked, you don't need to see them naked again... unless they get breast implants. So they can only work once or twice. So they get paid more then Bill Gates, but they only get to work one or two days. But Bill Gates can work everyday, so he gets more."

"Oh."

<Pizzazz> How do you rate yourself?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> What do you mean?

<Pizzazz> I mean, how hot do you think the guys at your school think you are?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> I don't know. Average, I guess. But I'm uncool. Boys aren't really interested in me. Maybe because I don't dress cool. But it seems so stupid to dress cool. It's weak, I think.

<Pizzazz> Wow. Definitely. Everyone at my school just thinks I'm psycho...even the girls. Except for that girl who I play Gloom with sometimes. She's spanish.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> All the guys at my school are dorks. Actually, there are some nice ones, but I don't want to go out with them. What about you?

<Pizzazz> Kind of. I hooked up with this guy at a couple of parties. He's got a nice body. But I never talk to him much and I only met him at parties. He's a friend of someone. I don't have his number.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> oh.

<Pizzazz> I don't think I want a boyfriend in the normal sense...that you go to movies with and talk on the phone. That's boring. And guys are boring. I like to play on my computer.

## Game Quest

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> How do you rate yourself?

<Pizzazz> I don't know. I think maybe I'm a seven or an eight (out of ten.) But people think I'm weird. I'm not skinny, but I have big boobs. I can't tell if I'm good looking or not. My mom says I'm really beautiful under all the black makeup...but she's prejudiced.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> I don't wear any makeup. I pluck my eyebrows...and sometimes I wear eye shadow, but that's it.

<Pizzazz> Yeah. I wear lots of black eye shadow and a really dark, dark blue lipstick.

<Pizzazz> My hair is purple too! ;p (At least this week.)

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Wow. Purple hair. That's cool.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> I have really small breasts, actually.

<Pizzazz> Does that bug you?

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Kind of. I kept waiting for them to grow. But now that I'm almost 16, I guess that they're not.

<Pizzazz> Oh. Mine are almost too large. If I eat too much, it all goes to my breasts.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> I don't know why it bugs me. I don't really want a boyfriend...it just bugs me.

<Pizzazz> Yeah. I understand. I think I have a fat ass, if that makes you feel better.

<Aphrodite's\_Bow> ha ha. Not really, but thanks.

"What's your favorite part?" asked Mark.

"Of what?"

"In the magazine. What is your favorite part to look at?"

"I dunno." Dwayne shrugged. "I like the vagina. I like the boobs too."

"Yeah, especially the real big ones," agreed Mark.

"Really? You like the big ones?"

"Yeah. Don't you?"

"They're ok, I guess," Dwayne shrugged. "I like them all, but I really like the small ones."

"Really? Why? They're...small."

"Yeah. I like them."

"That's weird." There was a pause. "Actually," Mark said. "I like the face the most."

"Yeah," said Dwayne. "Me too. I like the face the most too. But you can see that anytime so it's not the most interesting to look at in the magazine."

"Yeah," agreed Mark.

<Pizzazz> Fuck, it's late.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> I thought you were a late person.  
<Pizzazz> I am, totally. I'm a vampire.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> It's only 2:30.  
<Pizzazz> Over there! It's almost six over here!  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Oh yeah.  
<Pizzazz> It was awesome meeting you Heather. I really want to get an all-girl clan going. That would be wicked.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah.  
<Pizzazz> Then I can see what you're made of.  
<Pizzazz> I'll talk to my friend at school. I'll email you.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> not if I email you first.  
<Pizzazz> You on SupraNet a lot?  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> My parents own it...so yeah.  
<Pizzazz> Oh yeah. I forgot. That's so cool. All my parents own is a mortgage. Well, my dad anyway.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Good night Carol.  
<Pizzazz> Ugh. I hate my name. Call me Pizzazz.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Like the girl from the Misfits.  
<Pizzazz> hey! You're the first one to notice that! That's where I got it from.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Yeah. I always liked the misfits better.  
<Pizzazz> me too.  
<Aphrodite's\_Bow> Ok. good night Carol.  
<Pizzazz> Good morning.

*2:38:34am Pizzazz has left the chatroom.*

Heather sat back and sighed. It was still early...she could see if anything new had been posted in the body.surgery.cosmetic board where she had been lurking recently, a guilty fantasy world not unlike her computer games...but she really didn't feel like chatting any more. That was unusual. She turned off the computer, got into bed and read some of her book for the English final. Her brother and Dwayne were still talking downstairs.

"Hey Mark," asked Dwayne. "Have you ever seen your sister naked?"

"Sure. Lots of times."

"What does she look like?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her naked in a long time. When she was

## Game Quest

younger. She's got boobs and stuff now."

"Wow."

"You don't like her do you?"

"Yeah. She's hot. She's got really nice breasts."

"Ewwwww! She's gross. No way."

"Do you think she's naked right now?" Dwayne wondered.

"She'd KILL you if you tried to see her naked."

"It would be worth it though." Dwayne smiled inwardly and looked up at the ceiling as if he were in seventh heaven, peering through the clouds to the eighth. As if he'd seen her naked and she HAD killed him and he went to heaven because it WAS worth it. That was the kind of smile he had.

"Yuck. No way."

"Too bad we couldn't peek in her bedroom."

"Impossible. No one gets into her bedroom. Not even mom and dad. Anyway, she isn't naked in there. She stays up all night playing computer," said Mark.

"When I get older, I'm going to marry your sister. That will be awesome! Then we can all live in the same house together! Friends forever."

"No way. I don't want to live with my sister."

"Fine. I'll live next door."

"Ok. That'll be good. But she won't have sex with you!" said Mark.

"Yeah she will!"

"No she won't. She'll just be in front of the computer all the time. She loves computers, not men."

"Whatever. Then I'll just dress up as Dan Destroyem and come in and say 'Baby, give me some hot stuff!' and then she'll want to because it will be like a computer game. She can be Heather Hüterguns."

"Ok. Good luck," said Mark, rolling his eyes. "But if you marry her, then we can't trade wives."

"Oh yeah." Dwayne thought about this for a moment. "I'll just get another wife too."

"You can't!"

"Why not?"

"It's not legal."

"Yeah it is!"

"No it's not!"

"Uh-huh!"

"Nunh-uh!"

"Uh-huh!"

"Nunh-uh!!!"

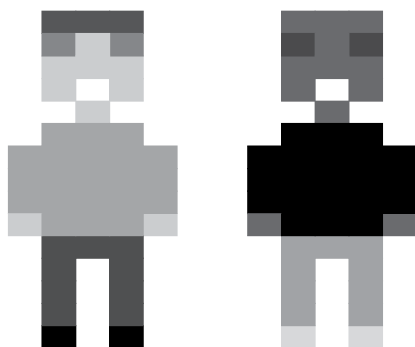
“Really?” asked Dwayne.

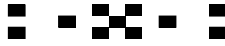
“Yeah. You could go to jail and stuff.”

“That sucks! Why can’t you have more than one wife? I’m going to be a lawyer and change it.”

“Good luck. They’ll put you in jail and torture you. They’ll pull your teeth out and then make a necklace out of it and the guard will wear it around.”

“Eeeeww!”





## Chapter 10; Whoa Nellie!

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Will liked Mondays. There was always something fresh about them. Crisp. Clear. Refreshing...like being up on top of a mountain and seeing for miles, the workweek spread before him like an unforded river. He was usually in the office way before everyone else on Mondays. He sipped his Naughté Latte Double Mochaccino as he strolled down the hallway and flipped through the increasing pages of the petition. They had started off with three pages. Now they were up to six. Some of the staff had even brought the sheets home to have family and friends sign it. On Friday, off to San Francisco again, Will was going to drop the sheets off personally.

The battle against Che's was going well. There even had been an article in the local paper about it and Che's predatory business practices...and Will learned more about the coffee shop up in Willem, just outside of Portland, that fought a similar battle and won. Though Che's had the lease, the publicity was so bad they had to sublet their lease to the local coffee shop! Now that was stinging them where it hurt, Will thought.

But there was bad news too. In that case, Che's Coffee Revolution had just waited a year and when the Willem café lease was up for renewal again, Che's booted them out and set up shop. There wasn't anymore fight left in the community. And who was going to raise a stink every year to keep the shop alive? It felt like a lose-lose situation where defeat was just a matter of time. Will wondered if they won this battle, how long would Naughté Latte have to look over its shoulders until Che's finally dropped them? A year? Less? This whole process would just become a slow roast, rather than an instant grind. That was kind of disheartening...but at least it proved that Che's could be held off, which meant something. Yet, with a full year and the help of Madre and other townspeople, maybe they could do something. Buy the lease from Che's themselves, perhaps. Who knows? Will was upbeat about it.

As he flipped through the sheets Will thought about signing twice to see if anyone would notice. But he decided against it. It would be dishonest. Instead Will took his coffee inside his office, straightened

his red striped tie and began to go over the interview materials he had prepared.

The best part about Mondays in a programming outfit was that half of the staff didn't even show up to work until about ten. Programmers lived on diets of Kepsi Kola and nocturnal work hours...shunning Monday mornings like vampires. Will felt like the Mondays in this office were disproportionately his. He felt lucky to be so blessed. But even better than this was when people finally did start arriving...and the office started to fill with the imperceptible hum of work, as it was now, nearly an hour and a half after he had set down to his notes. There was this...tangible bustle...that seemed to build without him ever noticing it...and when it was all around him and he was in his nice clean suit with red striped tie...he was invigorated by it. Will's best work was done on Mondays. After Monday it was a slow wind down to Friday...until he pressed his suit on Sunday and then his body just...picked up again, excited about Monday.

There was a knock at the door. It was Kendra. She entered.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Good." Will smiled. He was kind of glad they were finally getting to the interview stages. Within a few weeks they'd have a new manager and all this new stuff they had taken on...the headquarters, the general running of all the subsidiaries, the advertising, would be someone else's responsibility. And he could get back to maintaining the heart of the ranch, the farm, the homeland and the sacred cows. He could see that future Monday now, sun streaming into the ranch...like it was today, but cleaner, purer, simpler.

"I wanna hire a woman to replace me," Kendra came right out with it.

"What?!" Will sat forward. If he had been drinking coffee he would have spit it out across his desk and interview sheets.

Perhaps I phrased that wrong, Kendra thought. Still, it was one of the first times Will had obviously been really listening. He was a great listener at home, but when he got in this office, his kingdom, sometimes it took longer to get through to him. Like that suit was a protective shield.

## RESTART

"I want to stop making the Fantasy Quest games," she clarified.

"*What!?* Why? You can't just quit!" She was blowing him out of the water here. What was wrong? What did he do?

## Game Quest

Perhaps that wasn't the best approach either, Kendra thought.

### REPHRASE

"I don't mean quit Madre. I want to do something else. I'm tired of making Fantasy Quests." She'd been thinking about it for months. And on Friday evening she'd decided she was not going to make another one. But she didn't like to bring work home so she waited until today to tell Will.

Will calmed down. He could resume his composed approach now that he realized she wasn't going to quit. "But why? Don't you enjoy making games anymore?"

"Sure I do. I'm just tired of Fantasy Quest. I've been stretching it for ideas for the last two games. And the quality is dropping. They're still good by adventure game standards, I think. But they don't live up to Madre, to the Fantasy Quest series."

"But FQ5 is selling really well."

She'd lost him, Kendra thought. He was reverting back to his calm, gentle listening...which was kind of like not listening at all. He had begun managing what he was hearing...sorting, filing words. Nuts, she should have taken the advice of the game manuals and remembered to save her game early and often so she could restore to the better situation.

"But that doesn't mean it was good," she began. "FQ5 sold on the success of the series and the previous game. But even the last one wasn't nearly as good as the first three, I thought. I'm not doing as good a job and I'm bored of working on them."

"But do you think we can get away with another long break before the next one? We just had a two year break between 4 and 5." Will thought back to the room full of fan letters demanding a sequel after almost two years had passed after FQ4.

Kendra sighed. She'd definitely lost him. He wasn't listening. "I don't want to take a break. I want to stop. Like a telegram. FULL STOP."

"But we can't just get rid of Fantasy Quest! It's our flagship." God. He had thought it was going to just get immeasurably easier after they hired the new division head...and now these curveballs... Had he displeased the computer game gods?

"I know. I want to hire another person – a woman – to make the next Fantasy Quest game. I'll help her out, be a consultant...but I want to do something different. Something new. Besides, we need more women designers...women employees period."



"Sure. I agree we need more women. I don't know if we can find another Kendra Roberts, though."

Kendra smiled. She'd won. Actually, she'd won as soon as she had decided to do it. She was co-owner and the only one who could do the series and if she wanted it, it was going to happen. And if he refused, which he never would, but if he had, she would hire the new woman herself. And that was that. "Thanks," said Kendra. "I'll start looking for someone right away."

Will was now curious as to what she was going to do with her next project...and a little worried about it. Fantasy Quest, to a lot of people, WAS Madre Games. Fantasy Quest WAS Kendra Roberts. But what could he do? The familiar business cogs in Will's mind began to spin and intermesh, churning over data and concluding (or was it just looking on the bright side?) that now was a better time than ever to make some changes. They were a bigger and more stable company than they had ever been...and had a strong presence in the industry. They, for the first time in what seemed like a long time, could take risks, and walk a little off the beaten path again. They could take a risk by breaking away from their first and consistently best selling hit game...

Kendra smiled and walked happily (and a little bit flirtily) out of the office, grinning back at her husband as she left. Will hoped she knew what she was doing. But she was probably right, as usual. Madre games had been built on her game ideas. In many ways, the computer game industry had been built on her game ideas.

Will suddenly felt good about this, the way things were intermeshing: new designer, new headquarters, new manager. The simpler days of just running a good game factory instead of a national conglomerate were just around the corner. Will was pleased with the info sheets HR had given him on the three finalists for the job. It felt close now. After the interview on Friday, it would be like old times again.

Kendra felt invigorated, too. She had focus again! She had a goal. And she was excited. This was when Kendra was at her best...when things were changing...when she had new directions. She was always good at moving towards a goal, but never at completing them...particularly when she didn't have another goal to move on to.

With her afternoon Kendra crafted a few want ads and emails seeking a game designer and sent them around to a few contacts in the industry. And there was that novel she'd really liked lately... Who was that author? Kathy Willis? Maybe she'd contact her, see if she was interested in an interview. Why not? That would be really neat! She'd have Sheena get

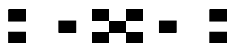
## Game Quest

her contact from the publisher.

Down the hall somebody – it sounded like one of the programmers – yelled out ‘Kicking your ass hurts soooo good!,’ in the familiar tough-guy Dan Destroyem voice.

On the bulletin board just outside Kendra’s office, someone had drawn and posted a picture of Dan Destroyem, the game hero du jour that just wouldn’t go away. He stood there flashing his white toothy grin, that fat, phallic machine gun in his hands aimed directly at Kendra. He was supposed to be macho...but a joke stereotype at the same time: his overly cool look – spiked neon-orange hair, sunglasses and tank top, muscled muscles, the stupid Hollywood action-hero quips – were calculated to make him both the idol of macho-cool and a self-deprecating parody at the same time. To half the men in the company, Dan Destroyem was their new hero. Someone had drawn a speech bubble on him. “Bite my gnubs,” it read. Dan almost seemed to be grinning down at her. Kendra turned back to her computer.





## Chapter 11; the really short chapter

June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1994

***BLAM! BLAM!!***

***ZARRRRGGG!!!!***

***Snort! GROOWWWWWLLLL!!!***

Will pushed the door to his home office open slightly to watch his daughter at work. She sat unaware of his presence, cross-legged in the big chair, the flickering lights of the game illuminating the side of her face he could see. She was running around on screen with a ridiculously large weapon, firing rockets and strafing behind pillars.

“What are you playing?” he asked. She liked his office computer because it was faster. He had already agreed to upgrade the one in her room, because he couldn’t even get on his own computer anymore. He hadn’t gotten around to lifting the parts from the office yet, though. Kendra hadn’t wanted to give in to their daughter’s demands, but Will felt a little sorry for her. As kids, both their children had loved the freedom of life out in the woods. But somehow it was antithetical to the teenage mind. He couldn’t see Heather wanting to go to malls even if they were around – she’d probably stake her identity in being one who *despised* malls – but here neither option was available for her. She seemed to like playing games and chatting over SupraNet, though.

Without turning or making any other response that would signify that she recognized his existence in the room Heather answered, “Gloom 2.”

“Oh.”

***RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT! BLAAMMMOO!!!***

“I thought you didn’t like Gloom.”

“I don’t really, but this is the only game I can do multiplayer on Killnet.”

“This is over the Internet?”

“Yeah. I signed up for it.”

## Game Quest

Will stepped in closer for a look. He knew a little bit about Killnet. He hadn't had time to keep up, things had been so busy. But seeing it in action, seeing his daughter dance a tango of death with four other intelligent players from different parts of the continent, jumping, dodging, strafing...he could understand why people were so excited about it. Even watching it was intense.

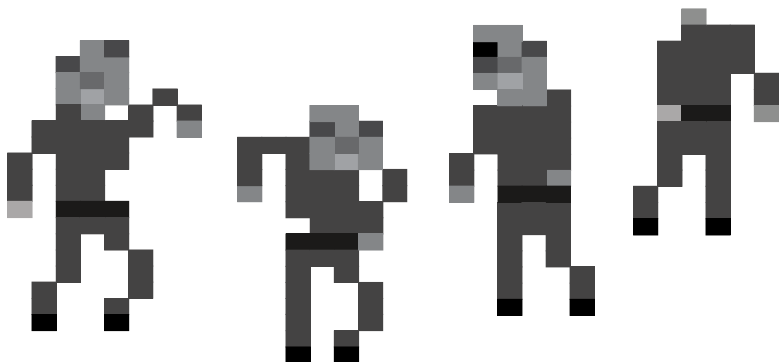
"I joined a clan. We're practicing. So far we've got four girls."

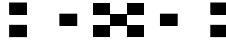
Will was impressed by the speed and skill with which the other players on the screen moved about. He thought it was funny that these four girls were playing as men-at-war. But then he realized all the characters wore space helmets...so they could be any sex under there, really...or species.

"I heard about this Killnet. You paid for this out of your allowance?" Will didn't like the name of the thing. It seemed like they were selling the business on the idea that killing was fun...or cool. He wasn't sure if he was more annoyed that they sold it that way...or that it worked.

Heather was busy concentrating on the game. "Yeah." She said. She nuked one of the other players into a bloody sauce. "It's great." Her responses came toneless like one of the undead monsters in the game... she was really concentrating.

Will watched for a while longer. She really was good. He'd played Gloom 1 in his office sometimes...but he wasn't nearly as good as this. Kendra was worried their daughter was turning into a computer zombie. But she moved too fast to be a zombie.





## Chapter 12; interviews

June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Will pulled up into Geoff's gravel driveway at eight on Friday. The two were going to drive down to San Fran together. Madre was taking on a few more graphic designers for the new headquarters and Geoff, the most senior graphic designer around (though he rarely did that sort of work anymore), was going to sit in on those interviews. Will was initially going to drive but Geoff insisted on trying out his new car. One of these new half-van half-jeep things. Despite the initial 'Wow! This is a Polyester Palace on wheels!' reaction, after an hour's drive Will began to miss his second-hand Concorde. This thing seemed more for driving through war zones than the humble countryside and Will felt like a despot being chauffeured around in a tank. A rocket couldn't penetrate the thing and so neither did the fresh mountain air or sound of birds. For a while Will wondered if the windows weren't actually TV screens, broadcasting a nature show rather than the real thing. Geoff seemed to like it, though.

As planned, they stopped off in Berney to drop off the signed petitions. Will had been making a point of getting coffee and pastry from Naughté Latte every day this week, despite the war it waged on his waistline, since at the end of the week they might be gone. It was high noon and the second hand was clicking steadily towards showdown. Will strolled up to the saloon doors and burst through. Che's posse had come to town looking for trouble. Now Will had assembled his band of good men and was going to lay down his terms. He could picture Che – a fat, unshaven Spaniard in a large sombrero and multi-colored, striped poncho...with a bad tobacco chaw habit. Or maybe Che was the slick, top-hatted, stripe-suited investor come to buy up the town, put down oil interests and screw the locals – that was probably more accurate. Will was going to stick up for the people.

"Hi Will," said the bar-maid. Nicole again.

"Howdy." He handed over to her the seven pages of petition he'd managed to fill up, some three hundred signatures. "I got some signatures from around the office."

## Game Quest

She smiled and took them. "Wow. That's great. Thanks. We've got a whole stack now."

"How do you think it's going?"

"Well," she said. "We're optimistic. But the new lease owners, Che's, haven't said anything...so we don't know."

"I see. I guess we'll have to wait."

"Yeah." The naturalness of her smile somehow contrasted with all this talk of leases and buyouts. "But I have a job interview at the hardware store next Wednesday, just in case. What can I get you today?"

Will ordered a latte, a chococcino and two scones...one with the white chocolate in it. Nicole handed the order, tucked away in 100% recyclable materials, over the counter.

"This one's on the house," she announced.

"Oh no," said Will. "I couldn't really...not with all the trouble."

"No. It's ok," she said. "If we're going out of business, then we might as well treat the customers who made us a success. Besides, management has made a lot of money and you helped us out a lot."

"Wow. Thanks."

"Our pleasure." She handed over the bag and smiled. "Hope to see you again," she said.

Knowing that they may not be around Monday, Will said, "Yeah. Me too."

Getting back into the beast of a vehicle, Will handed a scone to Geoff.

"Just put the coffee in the holder there," said Geoff.

Will looked down. There were eight possible coffee holding choices...and that was just in the front seat. Ridiculous. Will picked one and dropped the cup in. They continued on towards San Francisco.



Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the response to Kendra's job solicitations had been overwhelming. Actually, she'd only received two feasible responses so far...but one was an interested reply from the author she had contacted. She'd booked that interview for today, worried that if she took her time it might slip away. As she stared out the window near the cooler into the forest she slowly sipped her coffee and sighed at what a great day for an interview it was. A lot of people in the office had taken this Friday off, aside from the bug-testers on the soon-to-be-released HomoSapien Quest 3 team. Kendra returned to her desk.

## THINK OF GOOD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

You sit at the desk and think about what kind of questions you want to ask. Kathy Willis comes in for coffee and an interview at 1...so you can take your time.



As they moved down the highway, Will flipped through the interview book he had picked up at the library a few days ago. "Geeze. Can you believe these questions?" he asked shaking his head. *"If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?"*

Geoff laughed. "Rubber," he said. "Does it actually have that question in there?"

"Yeah. It suggests a bunch of them. Says it's supposed to throw the interviewee off and draw out their 'real' personalities...force them to be creative and open up. As well as see if they can think on their feet. Here's another one: *What do you think is your biggest fault?*" Will put the book down and thought in bewilderment. "What kind of question is that? Of course everyone knows how to answer that question. You just make something bad sound good. It just gauges how good you are at lying!"

"Sometimes," Geoff said pretending to answer the question. "I work too much." They drove on in silence for a while as Will continued to flip through. "I'm an organization freak," Geoff continued. "Everything I do is always just so...in order. I know it's bad but..."

They drove on for a bit. "You know my nephew had an interview at a fast-food soup place," Geoff started up. "You know, doing the cash register and ladling soup. In the interview the guy asked him, 'What's the one word your friends would use if I asked them, 'Who is Derrik?' I couldn't believe it! For ladling soup! The questions should be, 'Can you ladle soup? Can you do simple math?' It was ridiculous."

"What did your nephew say?" Will was curious.

"I can't remember. I think it was 'efficient'...or 'determined'. Something like that. Either way, apparently it was the wrong word as he didn't get the job."

"It's the latest business fad...these questions." Will continued. "Remember when all the businesses were hiring security managers. Every company needed a security manager or they were unhip...going down the tube. Where are those security managers now? I mean, a book can't teach you how to run a company but I thought this book might be helpful in interviewing for a professional manager...but it seems so ridiculous

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and rigid. I'm used to normal interviews where you ask them what they can do and they tell you and then you chat a bit and then go away and make a decision."

"So you're not going to use any of those questions?" asked Geoff cheekily.

"Yeah. I'll use one or two of them. I mean, it's what these corporate types understand, right?" Will picked up the book and began to leaf through it again, hesitantly.

Geoff smiled to himself as they drove along. He was glad he didn't work for that kind of company.



Kendra led Kathy Willis (the author!) to the spacious room beside the meeting room. It didn't really have a name. It was used for a lot of things. Around the office it was just known as 'the nice room.' A couple of Naughté Latte coffees had been set up around a small, low coffee table that Kendra had brought in for this interview. A few pastries were there too. The chairs were facing the table at 45 degree angles. An informal interview. Kendra was dressed in her usual casual Friday wear. She was encouraged to notice that Kathy hadn't come in a suit and tie either, though still professionally done up. It was a meeting of the minds.

They both sat down. Kendra tucked her legs up onto the seat beside her.

"Oh? Is this for me?" Kathy asked reaching for the coffee on the table.

"Yes. I hope you like chocolate."

"Wow. Chocolate coffee for an interview," Kathy carefully sipped. "All the interviews I had before I started writing full time, the best you'd get was forty-five cent coffee from the staff room."

Kendra smiled. "I didn't expect you to reply so soon. Actually, I didn't even know if you'd reply at all. It was just kind of a wild idea to fire off an email to someone whose book I'd enjoyed. I'm glad it worked."

"Really? You didn't think I'd reply? Well, I guess you don't know me." Kathy laughed and took a sip of coffee. It was delicious...especially on this cool, summer day. "My son has all your games. He just talks about them non-stop. How could I turn down a personal interview with Kendra Roberts!? You're a god!"

Kendra blushed slightly. She never thought of herself this way. Although, articles in the game magazines had been writing this way about her for years, it was unusual to get it in person. "Really? Wow. I



didn't think you'd have even heard of me."

"And I have to confess," Kathy continued, "I've developed a nasty habit of playing them late at night before I go to bed...almost secretly. I really like the Fantasy Quests. And I like HomoSapien Quest too. I've beaten most of the Fantasy Quests...the only one I didn't like was the first one because I kept falling off that stupid bridge in front of the castle and dying...so I just gave up."

Hmmm, Kendra thought. This is going better than planned. Not only does she play the games, she's recognized problems with them. And Kendra hadn't even asked a question yet.

"Yes. I realize that was a problem. It was our first game 3D adventure game...so you improve over the years...learn what not to do and so on."

Kathy took a sip from her coffee.

"I have a confession to make too," said Kendra. "I really loved *Death in a Cavern*. It was a great book. I read it in two nights."

"Wow. Really? That's nice. At least somebody liked it."

"What do you mean?"

"It was hell getting that one published. I've only written two as you probably know. This was the second one...and my publisher said it was no good. But I convinced them to print it. Then it got terrible reviews and has been selling terribly."

"Really? But it was such a good book!" Kendra was surprised by this kind of modesty in an interview. "It was more than just a mystery..."

"Yeah. Well I liked it." Kathy said with a laugh.

"Me too." There was a pause. "Well," Kendra continued. "I don't really have a set format for this interview. Usually I just talk, and see what you can do...and see what kind of ideas you have."

"I'm sorry," said Kathy. "You didn't really say in your email what this interview was about...just you were looking for a game designer. Are you looking for a new series? A mystery series or something?"

"Actually. I'm quitting the Fantasy Quest series."

"No! Really? But they're so great!"

"Yes...but I'm getting a little tired of it. I want to do something new."

Kathy thought about this for a moment. "I understand."

"But we can't just drop the Fantasy Quest series...there's still a lot of demand. I think there's still a lot of potential in the series, just...I'm running dry in the idea well."

"Oh. So the new designer would take over the Fantasy Quest series?"

"Basically. I'd be a supervisor to make sure it flowed well with the

## Game Quest

previous ones. And the new designer could probably work on other projects too, if she wanted,” Kendra gestured towards Kathy, “but basically, they’d be in charge of Fantasy Quest 6.”

Kathy was awestruck. She had been stunned by the out-of-the-blue interview request from Kendra Roberts...but she’d never imagined she’d have the chance to take over the Fantasy Quest series. Her son would be really impressed.



Three finalists enter an interview: an old business guy, a forty-something upper manager, and a yuppie thirty-something computer whiz/entrepreneur. To Will it sounded like a joke from a Swarthy Victor game. But these were the three finalists. He looked over the sheets on his desk in the interview room atop the Sampson towers...their new head office was now almost workably furnished (though a very low level of workability...). They had a front desk...and the interview room – soon to be a meeting room, he guessed – was carpeted. Behind his large oak “I’m the boss” interview desk the windows looked far down onto the San Francisco streets. Will felt a little uncomfortable behind the pretentious piece of furniture, but he supposed this was what corporate managers expected to see in a serious, corporate manager interview. It would do. The interview, not the setting, was important.

The first interview was scheduled for 2:00.

When Interviewee #1 arrived, Will thought he looked just like the experience on his resume. Interviewee #1 was a tall, partially bald, white haired fat guy in a very fine, black suit. He wasn’t quite as tall as Will, but he had a very sturdy presence, an air of experience about him...like the fat, suspicious casino-owner from a film noir. He looked like he would be at home managing a stock brokerage on Wall Street, or delivering a profits report from the podium of some giant automobile company. In actuality, he came from one of the largest pressmaking companies in the U.S., a member of the board there. They made commercial presses or something.

Interviewee #1 sat down in the comfy leather chair provided. Will felt ill-at-ease in this office that seemed more like a great hall in the William Randolph Hearst estate than an office or a meeting room. But it was hard to buy corporate offices that didn’t look like this, he’d discovered.

“What’s your favorite sport?” Will asked. That was the least dumb of all the suggested questions in the book...and he figured he could get away with it right off the bat. A test run.

"Golf," said interviewee #1 without much hesitation.

"I'm sorry," said Will. "I have this interviewing book and it suggested a bunch of questions that are supposed to provide me with a wealth of insight into my interviewee's personality. I had to see for myself."

"And did it work?" asked the man.

"I'm not sure," smiled Will. The man laughed...almost showily. Will extended his hand. "Hi. I'm Will Roberts."

"Herbert Reynolds. I wouldn't know much about interviewing," laughed the man, his well clothed gut shaking, "Usually they don't do interviews for Executive Officer positions."

Will was hesitant as to what to say. He felt like replying 'really?' to facilitate conversation...but that would make him look out of touch... and he knew this. These interviews, apparently, were all done between bigwigs over cigars and wine at rich restaurants charging lunch to expense accounts while chatting about fishing and international shopping hotspots. No resumes, vague discussions of visions, the only requirements for the positions seemed to be a membership at the right club and mentions in the Wall Street Times. This wasn't really an executive officer position either...but Will didn't want to mention that at this time. So, instead, he just smiled and went to the next question.



"I always wanted to see the Fantasy Quest series return to Hylandia," Kathy said. "That was a great place you only got to see a little bit of at the end of Fantasy Quest 2...but it was my favorite part."

"I hadn't thought about that," admitted Kendra. They had both slipped off their shoes and were snuggled comfortably deep into their chairs. "It was really an interesting part of the game."

"Perhaps the game could start out there, with entirely new characters... totally unrelated to the previous Fantasy Quests aside from the fact that it takes place there...and you only discover later how it is connected... they have to journey back to Jordinal."

"Wow. That's a great idea." Kendra smiled. Even SHE was getting excited about the next Fantasy Quest game now. Maybe she would do more than just consult.



Interviewee #2 sat before Will. He was a tall, thin, but muscular guy dressed in a really sharp blue suit. It looked good on him, but it had casualness to it somewhere that Will liked. Not like interviewee #1. Will

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felt like he should be breaking out priceless scotch for that interview... Interviewee #2 was also a little bald, but his hair still had its dark, black color and was artfully cut to neither hide, nor show baldness.

"Basically, we're looking for someone to take over the corporate side of the business...managing the various software assets we've acquired over the years. Madre is made out of several divisions, publishing and programming and distribution houses scattered across North America. Obviously, the three biggest subdivisions are Madre Coast in New Hampshire, Madre North in Washington and Synapse in Portland. But we have a 12 person programming team up in Toronto, for example, and a distribution warehouse in the Midwest. Small stuff scattered about that's important."

"So you need someone to organize and run this."

"Yes," said Will. "Basically, we need a big boss. Like at the end of a game." Will smiled at his joke, but Interviewee #2 had no reaction, as if he'd never played a video game. "Ahem. Madre has acquired new offices and organizations over the years as the situation has demanded. There isn't a lot of organization between these sectors, though. We've been doing that from our current HQ, the Redwood office. But the links and organization between these holdings could be – *need* to be – a lot better. We need someone to take care of and run that...to open up new marketing channels, tweak efficiency..."

"I'll remain on as the CEO of Madre and in charge of game production...I'll, officially be the big boss, but in name mostly. I wish to devote my time to the Madre office, organizing and pushing the programmers to make state-of-the-art and entertaining games... Stocks, shares, distribution...that stuff I don't want to deal with. It's not my specialty, it's not my interest. I know Madre and the computer gaming industry like the back of my hand. But I need someone who knows about corporate management. The person we hire would have a great deal of autonomy with this."

"I see," nodded Interviewee #2.

Will flipped through the papers in front of him. "It says here that you were the senior manager and a Chairman at Softprint Inks?"

"Yes. Softprint was in the same situation you are when I came on board. It had been around since the late 1800s, changing radically in the thirties and staying nearly static since. They hired me on when they started dabbling in computerization. As technology changed, they'd bought out and expanded over the years to own a lot of modern printing houses, equipment and research centers. But the business had changed

fundamentally. In the thirties they were a printing company with state-of-the-art equipment. But with the rapid changes they found themselves in the 90s as a state-of-the-art printing company wrapped around an old style printing industry with outdated management and distribution structure, scattered subdivisions, much like Madre. They hired me to coordinate the change-over. They had all the equipment and were a leader in the industry...what they needed from me, at the end of the day, was an organizational make-over."

"Really? Well, that certainly is relevant," Will noted. "And you dealt with software and computing a lot in that job?"

"Not exclusively or in a hands-on manner. I oversaw the changes, so I had to understand the structure and basics of printing and computing... but not the details. I dealt a lot with the software industry and the workforce as Softprint was moving from press and offset printing to digital. I was to handle, arrange and hire the new workforce and set up a streamlined co-ordination structure for the new..." Interviewee #2 put his fingers in the air and made quotation marks, "e-printing."



"Mark never broke any windows but he drank bleach once...when he was three. We had to rush him to the hospital. It was horrible."

"Geeze. That does sound hideous."

"Oh. It was," confirmed Kendra. "And my eldest is at that stage where she takes great offense when her parents try to take interest in what she does. So she hides in the study or her room playing computer games all the time...sometimes I think it's just to get away from us."

Kathy laughed. "Too bad you can't get her to bug test for you."

Kendra smiled. "Oh, she used to love to do it when she was younger. But now...you know." Kendra shrugged. Kathy nodded in agreement. "She can have a summer job here next year after she graduates, if she wants," Kendra continued, "I'm not sure if she'd go for it, though. I think she'd prefer to work at a Pizza Shack than for us. I can understand that, though, I guess." Kendra continued.

"Boy," said Kathy. "I'll have to get tips from you when my daughter gets that old."



"Of course," Will looked up at Interviewee #3, "you'd spend most of your time here in San Francisco, not up at our place in Redwood. We could probably do a lot over telephone and email, etc... But you would

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be expected come up every now and then since it is our main game production house and I work there.”

Interviewee #3 was the youngest of the three. He was tall, still had all his hair and it was still a dirty blond and really curly...almost crazy in comparison to those literary glasses. Of the three, he had dressed the most casual: slacks, dress shirt and a colored tie. Will could appreciate the colored tie. Interviewee #3 had a lot of experience in the software industry as a head programmer and founder of Ino-vision software. He was looking to get out of the partnership and find something new. They had a lot to chat about in terms of software and the industry and Will liked him quite a bit, on a personal level. Will was impressed by his quick answer to the “If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?” question. Because of the ease of natural conversation, they had taken longer to get to the actual interview...and now it was wrapping up.

“And so,” Interviewee #3 asked, “What would this position entail, exactly?”

“Well, as the HQ manager, you’d be in charge of our network of game and programming centres, organize our marketing and make decisions on the company’s financial and organizational ventures. Basically, you’d be in charge of the corporate side of Madre. You’d be able to select a lot of your own staff and begin right away to organize and improve connections between all our holdings...”

“Streamline the code,” Interviewee #3 remarked.

Will smiled. *Nice programming analogy.* “Exactly. Of course the Madre division is our most important and you would probably make your way up there every couple of weeks to meet and discuss and just run things by me. But other than that, I’d leave it up to you to understand Madre and manage our network and resources as you think best.”

“I see. Sounds like quite an organizational task.”

“Yes.”

“Sounds exciting, though.”

There was a pause. “Do you have any other questions?” asked Will, dying to get out from behind this desk.

Interviewee #3 adjusted his glasses as he thought. “No, that’s about it.”

“Great. It’s been a long day,” he smiled. Interviewee #3 smiled back. “We’ll be making our decision sometime in the next few days and will notify you at the end of the week.”

“Great. Thanks for the interview. It was a pleasure to finally meet you.”

"Likewise," said Will. It was interesting to meet one of the guys from Ino-Vision. He'd heard a few things about them and respected their work. Interviewee #3 took himself and his briefcase out of the room. Will sat back and sighed. It was almost five o'clock now and time for the long drive home.



Kendra and Will stared at the ceiling as they lay in their bed. They could hear the crickets from outside their window, creatures of the same mind as them. After a long and stressful day of interviewing they'd both benefited greatly from that lovemaking session. It felt like they'd just cleared a large hump at Madre. All the increasing chaos of the last few years was now going to settle down. *Hump*, Kendra thought, *what an appropriate choice of words.*

"So when does she start?" asked Will.

"The middle of August. She said she could move out at the end of next month. And she really liked the community up here, being away from it all."

"Wow. That was quick. Are you sure she's the one?"

"Yeah," said Kendra. "She'll do a great job."

"I think I'll go with number two," said Will, his arms crossed behind his head. "The first guy was just too...Citizen Kane for me. Reminded me of one of these guys on Wall Street that has a fireplace in his office and a big bear rug. He had the most business experience...but nothing in the new technology sector."

"I thought you liked the third guy best?"

"Yeah. He was great. I got along with him really well. He had the most software experience, an old hacker," Will used the term appropriately and with affection, as someone who could work magic with computer code, like a carpenter with wood or a wine-maker with grapes. "Good management experience too, but not at the corporate level. He reminded me of me. I'd hire him in a second to take over my job...but to manage the really stiff, calculable world of corporate HQ? I don't know. I was impressed, though. I'll tell him I'll keep his records on file if something in a division comes up. He'd be great for that. Maybe I'll even make a job for him."

Kendra smiled, rolled over and snuggled next to her husband. "So why do you pick contestant number two?"

"I don't know. He seemed very competent...not extremely stiff like the first guy. Easy to talk to, but with really relevant experience in the

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corporate business sector. And he had experience working with new technology. He seemed confident and had a strong business sense. He's exactly what we're looking for, I think."

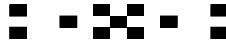
Closing her eyes, Kendra nestled her head against his chest, feeling herself drifting off. "Are you excited about just working on Redwood business?" Kendra asked.

"Yeah. In a lot of ways I wish we were still just an independent software firm hidden deep in the forest...without an HQ and subdivisions and everything. But this is as close as we'll get, I guess."

Kendra was asleep. Will thought about interviewee #2 – Thomas Newman. He seemed to have the intelligence, the guts, the business savvy to move the business forward. The farm was getting big and he needed to hire ranch-hands...to settle the wild plains and guide the ever increasing number of livestock. Will rode this thought like a horse into the sunset of sleep, where he would soon join his wife, just over the hill.







## **Chapter 13; if a spinach slaps in the forest, what is the sound of one introduction happening?**

July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Will stared at the brown paper bag sitting on his neatly organized desk hardly believing its contents. Naughté Latte officially closed down today, four days shy of the termination of its lease. All the petitions...the stink... and it didn't matter. There weren't enough people to stop it anyway. Most of Naughté Latte's customers were out-of-towners, people driving through and stopping for a coffee. They had a good location, so Che's didn't really have to worry about decreased business if the locals decided to boycott: there was fresh meat coming through the grinder every day...and with a brand name, Che was sure to lure customers. People like monotony, predictability. Why drive away from home to try something different?

Che's didn't even have to worry much about the locals anyway, who would soon forget about the politics in the face of convenience and packaged slickness. Besides, there was hardly a decent alternative in Berney, was there? The crumpled, non-descript brown paper bag from Louis' Sandwich House sitting on Will's desk painfully illustrated that. It was the closest snack food alternative you could find down there. Louis made one hell of a roast beef sandwich...but it wasn't a pastry and a coffee. You could get coffee there, but it came in a Styrofoam cup. And as everyone knows good coffee doesn't come in a Styrofoam cup. You can pour the world's best coffee into a Styrofoam cup and it instantly becomes bland. Crude coffee...raw, unrefined...not like the frappaccino from Naughté Latte. No, that's not coffee...that's a cup a joe. Will sighed as he realized that even he might have to resort to reporting to Che's for his office snack food. But he'd do his best to research alternatives.

Somehow this whole thing quite unsettled him. Deep down. He'd been so successful in his life...then to try and save this coffee shop only to fail...well...it was an odd feeling. Maybe he should just stick to games. And that's what he was doing, anyway. Their new corporate

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manager, Thomas Newman, would be visiting this afternoon to lay out the groundwork for running the corporate headquarters, for letting Will get back to what he was best at, games.

Will never managed to eat the food sitting in that sad little bag until lunch. A roast beef sandwich just wasn't a breakfast kind of thing. He even reheated the coffee in the microwave. It warped the Styrofoam cup a bit. Will didn't like reheated coffee, but it seemed to fit well with the grease and mess of the roast beef sandwich.

Will was just wiping his face and looking over some sales results when there was a knock at the door. It was Newman, Interviewee #2, dressed sharply in a blue suit very similar to the one he wore to the interview... although this was more gray.

"Hi," said Will, standing up to shake hands.

Newman shook back. "You're one of those office eaters, aren't you?"

Will smiled. "Yeah. There aren't a lot of places to go out for lunch around here. There's a couple of picnic tables out back, but with all the squirrels...it gets kind of messy. I like eating in my office...it's got a great view."

"It does," confirmed Newman.

"Come in," Will motioned to the chair at the other side of the desk. "I've pulled together a bunch of files you can look at and...uh...I'll get you up to speed on how things work in Redwood, recent developments and the like."

"Great." Newman set his black, leather suitcase down beside the chair.

"How're things going at the head office?" Will asked.

"Quite smoothly, actually. They're almost done with the cubicles. I've drafted up a list of personnel types I need so we'll be conducting interviews all this week and maybe next week...probably do a lot of hiring the week after. I've spent most of the time in my office going over files and sitting with the accounting staff you sent down and getting up to speed on the company assets. I understand you started this whole business yourself?"

Will smiled. He knew he made the right choice. This guy was quick.

"Yeah. Well, officially. I couldn't have done it without my wife who really wrote the best-selling content...and later with the help of some of the now more senior staff. I make the final decisions on the business end but I do a lot of things by consensus."

"Hmm. Interesting," Newman said, "Well. It was certainly interesting to look over the records. A lot of abnormalities – I don't mean that in

a bad way – just different ways of doing things – original ways of doing things – but great results. You have a real original touch.”

Will thanked him for the compliment and excused himself to finish up the last bit of his sandwich.

“I make sure I get out for lunch, though,” Newman continued. “My view isn’t as nice as yours...just the tops of buildings. There are some really nice restaurants in the area.”

“I’ll bet,” said Will and they moved on to business.

About an hour and a half later, Will took Newman around to meet the staff. It was a lot of quick introductions...mostly with the support staff who would be dealing with the new HQ head the most. The programmers greeted Newman with their usual indifference due to having their head wrapped around the latest code problem, fuelling their problem solving skills with Kepsi Kola. It was going well, for introductions anyway. Last on the list were Will’s band of merry men (and women): the game designers. They would probably have the least to do with Newman, but they, as much as Will, were the bosses and owners of Madre who had built and continued to shape the company. They were Will’s confidantes and co-managers, they had made half of the decisions that had brought the company where it was, they had made the best selling games, they had stockpiled nearly all their retirement eggs in the basket of Madre stock. Will was obligated to introduce the new manager to them. Will wanted them to feel at ease with the new guy.



“You can’t put the tentacle-pig after the crash landing! It makes no sense.”

“What do you mean? It makes perfect sense.”

“Not in the story line. It really breaks the continuity. Why would the tentacle-pig appear after Johnny 10-4 steals the ship?”

“It doesn’t matter. But if we put it before, then the puzzle with the transporter cell is too easy. You find the transporter cell in one scene and use it in the next right after. It’s too obvious.”

“But it makes no sense! Are you daft?”

“Daft?! Are you some sort of retard?”

Will entered the office with Newman. “How’s the game going guys?”

Tim and Geoff both looked up simultaneously and with great enthusiasm replied, “Great!” Will heard them fighting a lot. He could hear them from his office down the hall and that usually meant one of two things: Either the game wasn’t moving at all and they were fighting

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about it, or the game was going incredibly well and they were fighting about it. Thankfully, things appeared to be going well.

"This is Thomas Newman." Will motioned to the thin, tall, balding man in the blue/gray suit beside him.

"Ah, our boss from afar," said Geoff.

Newman smiled. "Think of me more as your 'Value Added' boss," he said and shook hands with the both of them. Geoff wasn't quite sure what he meant by this, but he smiled anyway.

But Tim knew. "Like a consultant boss," he enlightened Geoff.

"I know that," Geoff snapped back, feeling sheepish.

"Geoff and Tim create the award-winning Sci-Fi Quest series," Will informed Newman.

"Ah yes," said Newman. "Great sales on that series," he remembered. "And a lot of threatened lawsuits," he added. Both Tim and Geoff smiled at this...they were in some way proud of the fact.

"A real variety of suits too," said Tim. "From Nebina Dog Chow to Megaduty batteries."

"And Radio Shlock," added Geoff. "We actually had to go to court over that one. Of course, we won."

"We're trying to cut back on the lawsuits, though," said Tim, a little disheartened.

"It makes it a lot harder to make a game when you have to inhibit your creative spirit...you can't just let it flow. You start to second guess everything."

"Definitely." Tim agreed. It was one of the few things they agreed on.

Newman smiled and nodded.

"Just like a story. A story's got to flow," continued Geoff, cutting into Tim.

"But not if the *puzzles* don't make sense!" retorted Tim.

"The puzzles DO make sense!" Geoff shouted back.

The two fell into arguing again. Will looked at Newman and smiled. "The creative process," he said. Will didn't understand the creative process himself. He and Newman headed out of the office and down the hall to meet the husband and wife HomoSapien Quest team.



"It needs more plucking and less strumming than the other game," Art said. He was consulting with Henry on the game music for Swarthy Victor. A musician by trade, Art had always made music an important part of his games. He couldn't help it. Music was in him...and so it

naturally played a key part in his series. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to compose the entire scores, themes and scene transition music games required these days. But Art clicked with Henry. Henry was a good musician and the music he did for the last Swarthy Victor, in Art's opinion, had been perfect. Henry was somewhat bland of personality sometimes, Art thought, but his personality seemed to come out in the music. Art was fond of saying that 'they made beautiful music together.'

"I was thinking about using a real seedy 1940s jazz bass and overlaying it with a Greek balalaika or something in the taverna," Henry thought aloud as he stood, tapping down on the keys of his computer.

"Or maybe you could do an entire, traditional jazz piece, but ONLY use Mediterranean instruments," Art suggested.

Henry paused. "That's a good idea."

Art thought so too. Henry rarely said something was a good idea...so when he did, you knew that it was a great idea.

"How are the sounds going, anyway? Did you get the spinach slap? The spinach slap is really important." Art couldn't wait to hear the spinach slap sound. There were always, of course, plenty of sex scenes in your typical Swarthy Victor game – but they were never explicit – no dirtier than an R rated movie. An R-rated cartoon at that. And they were usually silly – in the laughing-at-the-main-character's-expense variety. Art and Bill had come up with a great idea for one of the sex scenes in the now officially titled 'Swarthy Victor and the Greecian Formula.' The whole thing would happen for the player in the dark – instead of *seeing* this sex scene, obscured by the usual suggestive, erotically placed potted plant or lamp, the player would only *hear* it. They'd have to let their imaginations construct what was actually happening.

And so he and Bill had had a blast thinking of sounds to throw in. It was a brilliant idea and an excellent use of new technology since they now were using real, digitized sounds in their games. Together they'd managed to come up with several sounds in a matter of minutes but they needed one more...something perfect...to really clinch the scene...but they just couldn't think of it. Art and Bill had sat in silence for minutes, trying to think of sounds, staring at the walls, drawing blanks... It was like all the creative air had been sucked out of the room by their previous efforts and now they were suffocating on thick, half-good ideas.

Then Art said it needed the sound of spinach going "Spilllackchh!" not really expecting it to be funny. Silence fell over the room again and then they suddenly were both dying with laughter. Their bodies contorted as if the souls of humor were trying to escape their bodies,

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wrenching their guts, prying open their mouths and watering their eyes. It was exactly what the scene needed! It was *exactly* the sound they were searching for: suggestive...but stupid.

Art was really eager to hear what it sounded like...especially with all the new real-sounding digitized sound effects they could do. No longer did they rely on beeps or a quick 8-bit trill on the computer speaker or some tonal approximation of an explosion sound. Now they could actually record and play REAL sounds. They could actually slap a spinach, record it and put it into the game. *What a great world we live in*, Art thought to himself.

Henry just shook his head. "Yeah, I gotta go see that new sound guy," he said. Henry was, unofficially, the sound guy's boss. Since they had now gotten into digitized sound – in fact, Madre had pioneered the whole high quality computer sound revolution, at least on the software side – Madre had to hire a professional sound man. And for that they needed someone who knew about professional recording and sound making. Thus, the sound guy.

*God, these games are getting expensive to make*, Henry thought to himself. Once, a couple of game enthusiasts in a garage could do it all...now they needed business models and producers on top of designers and programmers and marketers. A lot of companies were resorting to investors. Gone was the day of judge, jury and executioner. So Madre had hired this guy from Hollywood – one of those guys that sits in a dark room watching silent movies and punching meat and breaking vegetables. Henry had supervised all the sound and music effects before they went digital. As the composer, it had been his job to figure out how to get a sound effect out of the standardized, rigid MIDI music set. A fat tuba combined with a high-pitched high-hat to simulate the sound of someone getting hit with pterodactyl droppings in Sci-Fi Quest 2, for example. Because of this it unofficially fell on Henry to be the boss of the new sound guy. To be honest, Henry hated the job. He was glad to see it move on to a professional. It was just that Henry didn't particularly like the professional either. And he had to deal with the professional.

"Why do you shake your head?" Art asked. "He's no good?"

"No. He's good. It's just that he's...weird."

"Everyone around here is a little weird," Art said. He was mostly referring to himself.

"Yeah, but he's annoying weird. He never has anything to say. Just 'yup' and 'nope.' Whenever he's around he's always tapping and hitting things. Listening to the sounds they make. *Tang! Tok. Thup.*

*Bannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnggg. Clunk. Yup. Shpinng!! Woogle woogle woogle.* Nope. He never stops! It drives me nuts. Everything's a sound device." Henry shook his head. Art found this really funny.

*Knock! Knock!* A sound came from the doorway. Henry and Art looked up to find Will and a new guy in a blue/gray suit there.

"Hi," said Will. "Did the spinach thing come out?"

"I don't know," said Art. "Henry has to go see the sound guy."

Henry refrained from rolling his eyes at the thought.

"This is Thomas Newman," Will began. "Thomas, meet Art. He's the creator of our best selling Swarthy Victor series."

"Nice to meet you," Newman stuck out his hand. Art wiped his hand on his pant leg (a force of habit from shaking too many hands after having a greasy hot dog for lunch) and shook Newman's.

"I'm sure it is!" Art joked. Newman smiled but to Art he seemed like a serious guy. *At least there's another bald guy at the office now*, Art thought. *Soon, we'll take over the world.* "How many Swarthy Victor games have you played?" Art asked. He always liked to hear what people thought about his games.

"I'm sorry," said Newman. "I haven't played any."

Art was surprised. "Really? It's on every office computer in North America. It cuts into office productivity more than the water cooler!" Art was proud of this fact...or at least...probability. There was no response from Newman. Then Art realized, "Oh. You're a manager. You're the reason they all turn it off as soon as you come by."

Newman smiled.

"This is Henry Washington. He's our composer."

"Hi!" Newman's face brightened up and he eagerly stuck out his hand. "Thomas Newman."

Henry took his hand and shook but didn't have anything to say.

"So you're the composer here, huh? How do you feel about mixing the classical arts with new age entertainment?"

Henry shrugged. "It's composing...not many people get paid to compose."

"Then you're a lucky man," Newman said.

"I guess," said Henry.

"Well," Will began, "it's getting late and we've got a bunch more introductions to make...and Mr. Newman's got to head back to San Francisco."

"It was nice meeting you," Newman said, nodding to Art and Henry.

When they were gone Art said, "Well, he seems like an OK guy, at

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least. I think he's lying about not playing Swarthy Victor games, though. I never met a business guy who hadn't played it at least *once*."

There was a pause as they both watched the two bosses walk down the hallway.

"I don't like him," said Henry. As soon as he said it he wondered if he should have kept his mouth shut. He didn't usually make his opinion known...only if it was solicited. But he somehow felt an affinity with Art.

Art was surprised. "Really? He seemed to like you..."

"He seemed to treat me special."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, how people go out of their way to be nice to you because you're different."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like he treated me nice because I'm a minority."

"A minority?" Art asked.

Henry couldn't believe Art wasn't following him. It had been so obvious. Henry didn't want to say anything more, though. He wasn't the kind to complain or make a stink about things. He'd rather just let it pass. But Art held his gaze and Henry felt obligated to explain his feelings now. "Because I'm black. I don't know. Maybe not. It was just a feeling I got."

Art was surprised at this comment. He didn't even think the issue of Henry's blackness had ever come up before. "No he didn't. Besides, what's so bad about being treated nice?"

"It's just the same as being treated bad for something superficial. I don't know for sure if it was that...it's just the vibe I got."

"Hmmm." Art pondered. "Maybe."

"What if everyone treated you different just because you were bald?"

"But I AM bald."

"No, but what if everyone..." Henry sighed. Majorities just didn't understand this. "I don't want special treatment. I just want to be treated like everyone else. That's what I like about this company...no one ever treated me as if I was black. I'm just another guy. Any recognition I get it's because I deserve it. Any flack I get, it's just par for the course. I'm not different, so when other people see me as different, it rubs me the wrong way."

"I can understand that I guess." Art sympathized.

"Now I'm sorry I brought it up...because it makes an issue about it...and it's not an issue."



“Honestly,” said Art, “I think people don’t like you because you’re a composer.”

Henry turned to Art and a smile broke out. He laughed. It was rare to see Henry laugh. “Yeah, well that I can understand. I don’t like composers either.”

Art laughed too. “Well, that’s my cue to leave.” He turned towards the door.

Henry followed him out. He was off to see the sound guy, Art to get back to preliminary bug testing...and to sitting back, closing his eyes and imagining that spinach slap. He hoped it lived up to his fantasies of it.

From out of some path in the maze of cubicles, Tim and Geoff suddenly rushed up to them, almost as if they had been hiding in there.

“Did he talk about the bar-b-que?” prodded Tim.

“What?”

“The annual bar-b-que. Did Will mention it?”

“Damn,” Art realized what they were talking about. “I was going to ask about it. That’s coming soon isn’t it?” Already Art was salivating. He could see Geoff and Tim were too. The great Madre end-of-summer bar-b-que. It was infamous. They knew it was coming. The question was when...when would Will mention it?

“Damn,” agreed Geoff.

“Well, that’s good,” said Tim, “At least we didn’t miss the announcement.”

As it was they needn’t have worried. Will posted the bar-b-que sign-up sheet outside his office that afternoon after Newman left.





## Chapter 14; the Bar-B-Que chapter

August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1994

Will had replaced his red tie with an apron. God, he loved his red apron. He wished he could wear it to the office like a tie...treat his work like a bar-b-que. After all, they weren't that dissimilar – being a boss and being a chef: He'd stroll in with his apron and turn the pressure on to a simmer, getting some sizzling and popping out of his hamburgers as they warmed up; he'd move the patties around the grill so some don't get over cooked, keep track of who gets well done and who stays rare...keeping the fish separated from the sausages and the sausages away from the beef, smothering his employees in thick, red, bar-b-que sauce and slapping them in a bun. Well, there probably were a lot of similarities between bbq chef and boss...but he couldn't think about them right now. That was too much work...and he too busy pitching the woo to his bar-b-que.

He loved bar-b-queing and he, all by himself, was mastering three grills at once...for the fifty or sixty employees chatting and gossiping in the backyard behind him. He couldn't let his cattle starve! They'd need a big feast to last through the winter...and they were hungry after the big push across the plains. Though he was sweating over the grill, moving and working as fast as he could, perhaps no one else at this bar-b-que was having more fun than he. Will loved bar-b-queing. And, man, did he love his red apron.

Smoke wafted up above his head and migrated like storm clouds of flavor over to the mass of people behind him sipping drinks and munching chips and talking shop in the cool breeze and warm rays of the afternoon. They'd gathered in clusters to talk, like nodes in a network, soaking up the sun and, every now and then, sending out a data packet in search of another conversation or more beer. Everyone was here. Bob from accounting. Art. Tim. Fred, the intern. Fred's dad. Bill. Gene the lawyer. That guy from Synapse games...Will couldn't remember his name at the moment – the guy who knew a lot of stuff. Henry. Henry's wife and his hyper kids...the new baby. Hal from programming. It just went on. He was never really aware of how vast his empire had become until he

had to fill up his backyard and their mouths for the bar-b-que. And this was just the Redwood staff!

Above the three grills, set up just outside the back of the house, the *blams!* and *growls* of some shoot-em-up game were rolling out from the top floor. Heather had gotten up at 12, an hour before the official start of the Bar-b-que, eaten breakfast, and then begun her endless crusade to rid the earth of zombies – or whatever the goal of this week’s game was – on that new KillNet server. Will had gone up just after he lit the bar-b-ques and asked, “Don’t you want to come down for the party?” She said she was practicing. It was up to her, really. She used to love the bar-b-ques when she was younger, Will lamented.

### **BLAM! BLAM! SNORT!**

Will found it ironic that, at a bar-b-que of over sixty or seventy game-developers, his daughter couldn’t be bothered to come down because she was too busy playing games.

“Do you need any help, Will?” came a voice from beside him. It was Wayne, the motorbike riding, hippie manual writer.

“No, that’s great Wayne.”

“Sure.” Wayne turned to go.

“Oh, wait,” said Will. “You’re a hippie. Do you know anything about veggie burgers?”

“Hmm? No way, man. I’m a red-meat hippie...all the way through.”

“Damn.” Will was worried about that veggie burger. He’d never cooked one before. He’d only bought one and he didn’t want to screw it up. It really looked like a burger...he couldn’t believe it was made from vegetables. Where were the vegetables? It looked like slimy meat. It smelled like meat. He had been assured that it tasted like the real thing too...but he wasn’t so convinced of that.

“Who ordered the veggie?” asked Wayne.

“Carl. He’s not vegetarian...he’s on some no-meat doctor-recommended diet.”

“Oh. Too bad.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “At the annual bar-b-que...” he shook his head.

“I guess it’s just like a burger...but I imagine it cooks faster,” Wayne suggested. “Maybe cook it at the end.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “I’ll try that, put it on one of the cooler spots so it cooks slow-*whoa!!*” He felt paws on his back pushing him towards the grill. Turning around he found Barker there, nudging him and pushing

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him.

"Jeezus. Off his leash again. No! No Barker! Down boy. This meat is for Madre staff. MADRE STAFF ONLY," he shouted, looking stern to drive home the point. Barker chose not to understand. Will waved his rag at him a couple of times. "Shoo! Shoo."

Barker bit onto the rag and growled, pulling and shaking it. "Dammit Barker!" Will laughed. Wayne took Barker by the neck and pulled him away. "I'll go tie him up again."

"Thanks Wayne. I don't know what's up with him. He's been hyper all day. Must be all the people." Wayne led Barker away, Barker shaking his tail and jumping.

Meanwhile, as the burgers were frying on the grill, the young children were frying in the backyard. Kendra found a table umbrella for Kuriko, Henry's half-Japanese wife, to sit under with her newborn daughter. To keep the other kids, who were quickly getting grumpy, from baking, she found some of Mark's shorts and unrolled the cover off of the small pool. That seemed to keep them pre-occupied...but she was worried that Dai, Kuriko's youngest son, was getting too hyper. That kid had boundless energy coupled with having newly turned ferocious four. In between all this, Kendra had to run around and find clean glasses, tell people where the bathroom was, etc...etc... She liked the annual bar-b-que...but liked it better when it was at someone else's house. Will always got to do the fun bar-b-queing while she had to make slaw and keep the thing from falling apart. At least seeing everyone obviously enjoying themselves was a comfort.

Art and Bill and Harold from Programming were sitting on three lawn chairs just under the large pine trees drinking beers and laughing. The programmers were all clustered together and as Kendra walked by she could hear them talking about their code-conquering escapades and discussing the merits of one programming language over another, as well as philosophizing on the adjustments that needed to be made to the in-house programming module. They were all drinking Kepsi too, just like at work.

Over by the pool, Henry was chatting it up with Neil and Andrew. He worked with them a lot over in programming getting music placed in the games. They were reminiscing about past Madre bar-b-ques, which piqued Henry's interest because this was his first. He'd been hired on just after one and missed the next one because he had been on holiday visiting relatives.

"Man, I remember the juice was really good that one year," continued

Neil as he drank his crystallized, faked-fruit powder drink. The powdered drink seemed like something out of a Sci-fi Quest game to Henry, now that he thought about it, like an insta-drink or something. "I remember it was really hot...and there was that Mango Tango drink...or whatever it was...this pure mango puree mix that Phillis had brought back from the Philippines. It was great."

"That was the year of the fridge incident," Andrew commented.

"Oh yeah!" Neil laughed. "Ha. Ha. I remember that. I totally forgot about it."

"The fridge incident?" enquired Henry.

"Oh yes..." said Andrew, "the fridge incident."

"I would like to know more about the fridge incident," Henry stated.

"Art feels better at the Roberts' place. No cats."

Andrew smiled. "Man, after the fridge incident, you'd be afraid of cats too."

"Especially if you were already afraid of cats," Neil nodded.

Andrew laughed and drank his watered powder drink.

"What happened at the fridge incident?"

"Well, I don't know," began Neil. "Starting about...maybe four years ago? I'm not sure exactly, Bob – you know, from accounting – started hosting some of the yearly bar-b-ques at his place...just for a change of scene or whatever. Anyway, Bob has this cat—"

"Mr. Tingle." Andrew interjected with a wry smile.

"That's right. Mr. Tingle. Nice cat, you know, fairly typical. Wanders around the bar-b-que sniffing food, rubbing up against legs, spying, hiding, ignoring, sucking up." Neil took a long sip from his drink as if he were diving down the straw himself and cooling off in tropical waters. "Well, Art is deathly afraid of cats."

"Deathly," emphasised Andrew.

"Really?" asked Henry.

"Oh yeah. Kind of weird, I know...but people have phobias about weirder things...like spiders—"

"Or...toilets."

"At least cats I can understand," continued Neil. "Anyway, Art has his eye on this cat the whole time. Whenever that cat came strolling by Art would get all tense. The cat didn't really notice and Art didn't really care – I don't think he thought about the cat much...just when it was around. Anyway, at one point Art goes to grab another beer out of the fridge – everybody gets their own stuff out of the fridge at Bob's – so people are going in and out of there. Anyway, on the way out he

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runs into Susan and they start chatting up in front of the doorway inside – well, people have to go in and out of there so someone comes along and she and Art step away. Now, while Art and Susan were talking I guess the cat had snuck up behind Art and sat down. When Art stepped back he stomped on Mr. Tingle's tail."

"Oh my god."

"Art turns around to see this hissing and screaming cat and he freaks. He takes his foot and flings it about a meter and a half into the bushes."

"Oh my god!"

"So Mr. Tingle runs off and—"

"It landed in the water," corrected Andrew.

"What?"

"Yeah. Bob had a wheelbarrow beside the bushes. It had filled with rainwater from the night before and the cat fell into it."

Neil laughed. "Really? Mr. Tingle fell in a wheelbarrow full of rainwater? I didn't see that. Ha ha. Man, that cat must have been *pissed!*"

They all laughed.

"So the cat runs off," Neil continued, "Art is a little jittered but mostly fine. Mr. Tingle doesn't come back for the rest of the day...just goes somewhere and hides...much to Art's relief. Art feels kind of guilty about the cat and apologizes to Bob. Bob feels kind of guilty about Art. Anyway, Bob says the cat's been in worse fights with the neighboring felines and the only thing hurt was its pride. So Art feels better and the BBQ goes on just fine."

Neil slurped on his space beverage.

"Hey, they're serving up. Let's go get a seat," said Neil. They nodded and all three headed towards one of the tables set out on the lawn and sat down at one end together. Henry looked cautiously over to the other end of the table. The sound effects guy had removed the top bun from his hamburger and was tapping on it with his carrot stick, his head down low to discern the sound made. He switched to a spoon and then to tapping it with the underside of his glass full of orange juice. He seemed to really like the orange juice/burger combination as a big grin came across his face and he kept doing it. God, that guy was strange.

"So the next year the BBQ is at Will's house," continued Neil, "No cat, no problem. Everyone has a great time. Art's not afraid of dogs. It's just dandy. But the *next* year it's held at Bob's house again. And I don't see the cat ANYWHERE. Art, I think, totally forgot that Bob even had a cat. Anyway, so I go in to get a drink and notice the cat is on top of the refrigerator, kind of hidden back there. The poor thing is just not

interested in coming out this year.

Andrew laughed at some unforeseen punch line, quenching his giggle with cool insta-drink.

"Anyway, so the party goes on as normal. But, about half an hour later we all suddenly hear this high pitched scream coming from the house. We turn around and Art comes running blindly out of the house waving his arms and he has this cat wrapped around his head...just clawing onto him."

"Jesus Christ," said Henry.

"Before anyone can react Art throws it off and the cat runs around to the back of the house and disappears," Andrew finished.

"Poor Art, he has no hair so his nice chrome dome is all scratched up and a little bloody. Nothing serious at all, but he's real spazzed out. Eventually he calms down, though. Anyway, I guess a lot of other people had seen the cat up on the fridge too. Someone saw it happen. When Art came in to grab a beer the cat started wiggling its butt and then just leapt on his head. It had just been *waiting* there for Art. This cat planned revenge and waited not one, but TWO years to get back at Art. That's nuts."

Andrew was laughing. *Mr. Tingle, the attacking cat*, he could never get over that story.

Henry smiled, but felt sympathy for Art. "Poor Art. He's such a good natured guy."

"Yeah, but he got over it pretty quick. Knowing Art he'll probably put that in his next game."

Will slipped hamburgers onto the table in front of them and Henry dug in. It was really delicious. Will's reputation as a grill master had not been exaggerated.

Over by the corner of the yard Barker was staring woefully at the people eating delicious, red meat.

"I've got that veggie burger cooking now," Will informed Carl. Carl was looking forward to it. Because of his doctor's diet he couldn't even munch on chips. He was looking for something to go with his coleslaw. He didn't want to be left out of the great burger bonanza of '94.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Kendra was...

## GET BAR-B-QUE SAUCE

There is none.

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They'd only finished about two-thirds of the requested burgers and they were already out of bar-b-que sauce. She had to think.

GET KETCHUP

Good idea! Reaching into the fridge you pull out a bottle of the red stuff.

GET MAYONNAISE

Check! You now have a bottle of mayonnaise.

COMBINE MAYONNAISE WITH KETCHUP

You now have a nice, pink mix.

TAKE MIX TO GRILL

Naw. It's not ready yet.

ADD VINEGAR, MUSTARD AND SPICES TO MIX

Mixing the three ingredients together you get an interesting concoction that, at first taste, puts the store bought sauce to shame. You receive 10 self-confidence points.

Kendra delivered the sauce to Will and found a free spot on the end of one table to sit down to her own burger. At the other end of the table Tim was shooting the breeze with Ron of HomoSapien Quest.

"How's your latest coming?" asked Ron. Partly due to the location of their office Ron and Laura Johansen were kind of the odd couple out of the company designers. Unlike the others, who had moved up from lower positions, they'd been hired explicitly to design a game. Their office, for one, was decorated with African antiques and wall hangings from Morocco. It was not unusual to find the husband and wife team burning incense in there. Sometimes strange hums could be heard coming from down that end of the office. They usually kept tight lips on their game development, sometimes seeming to disappear for months in the midst of their creation cycle, emerging later as if from a coma trying to find out what everyone else was up to. They were much loved by the rest of



the Madre team, partly because they sometimes seemed to come from another world.

"It's going great," said Tim. "We've got all the plot and dialogue sorted out. Maps of the game screens are done and some character sketches. It's going to be great to see a game with the new digitized graphics...it still blows me away to see these sketches and think *that's* what you will see on the screen. I still can't believe how good HSQ3 (HomoSapien Quest 3) looks."

"Yeah. We did a lot of great stuff playing with the graphics. My number one favorite thing is that when your character moves further away on the screen...he actually gets smaller. Such a small detail, but adds so much. It allowed us to expand the fighting system and put in a lot more sight gags, you know? And we totally got to capture the feeling of the endless dunes of a Saharan landscape..."

"Man," said Tim. "You must be tired. You just finished shipping everything Friday, right?" It had been a really busy month since Will had posted the BBQ notice on his office door. Time had just flown by.

"Yeah. We were up until 4 a.m. packing that jazz up. It was tough because we had to cram an extra disk into the box. Disk #9 is pretty much just a bug patch disk! Of course it doesn't say that on the disk, though." Ron held his hands up to his lips in a 'shhhhhh' motion and laughed. Tim smiled. He wasn't looking forward to shipping. It was such a hassle – especially now with their strict adherence to ship dates.

"So when does HSQ3 officially hit stores?"

"Monday," Ron said.

"Wow. Nervous?"

"Nah, man. The last two, like, sold really well. And I think the improved graphics will really help the sales, you know? Even before people play the game. Anyway, pre-orders have been good and we've almost broke even on that alone so I'm not too worried. I just hope people like it, you know? Reviews will start coming in at the end of the week...so I'm all excited about that."

Tim thought about it. He couldn't believe they were going to be shipping their fifth Sci-Fi Quest game in the late spring. It seemed like only yesterday they had pitched the original idea to Will. He hoped that new guy from HQ wouldn't complain too much about the ad-spoofs in the game. That Newman guy didn't seem to know much about games... which could be good or bad. Maybe, if he didn't care enough to learn about the content, he wouldn't catch wind of any ad spoofs until the game shipped.... But if someone complained, he also might crack down

## Game Quest

on that sort of stuff really hard, not understanding the gaming mentality. Ah well, thought Tim, they were just going to do what they did best and if Will or Newman didn't like it, that was that.

BWWWAAAAANNNNNHHHH!!!!

There was crying beside them. Tim looked over to see Kuriko hushing her newborn child.

"Sssshh. Ssssh, now. *Nakanaide*." She bopped the child up and down on her knee. The child quieted.

"How old is she?" Sheila, Tim's girlfriend, asked.

"Only one month." Kuriko rocked the baby a bit more and, pulling a bottle out of her purse, began to feed the child. "Thank goodness it's another girl. I think we went disastrously wrong with our one boy."

Tim was about to say something when suddenly a young girl beside him was tugging on Kuriko's sleeve. "Mom. Mom. Jason is spraying ketchup on his fries from four feet away."

"Yes. Yes," Kuriko said, pre-occupied with the child. "You don't have to tell me every bad thing that Jason does. Mommy only has so much care in her."

"He's getting it all over the table and chairs," she said.

Kuriko sighed and rolled her eyes at Sheila and Tim as if to say, "I rest my case."

"Go tell your father, ok?"

"Ok." And Henrietta ran off to the next table. All three of them watched Henrietta talk to Henry and Henry get up to go rein in his child.

"Big police sister, huh?" said Tim.

"Don't you know it. She's always on his case...she gets to play the part of the adult now and she loves it. HE, on the other hand plays a great crook. The dynamic is ten times more stressful. I'm worried what throwing a third into it will do."

"How old is Jason?" asked Tim.

"Four."

"Ah," said Sheila. "That explains a lot." Sheila looked at Tim if only to drive home the point that she didn't want kids.

"Yes," Kuriko agreed. "The worst thing is his grandma sends him over all these tapes from Japan. Kid's cartoons. Have you ever heard of Shin-chan?"

Both of them shook their heads no.

"Oh, well. It's this really popular cartoon in Japan about this four year old little boy. He's always getting into trouble – wants to be an adult, but

is always getting into trouble. And his mom is always shouting *Ikimasen! Ikimasen!* Which means, 'Don't even think about it!' It's really funny. Adults quite like it too."

Tim laughed. "*Ikimasen!* I'll have to remember that."

"Anyway, Shin-chan is always mooning people. Well, now my son thinks this is a cool/funny thing to do and is constantly pulling down his pants and mooning people. It's been really hard beating it out of him...but at least he's stopped quite a bit."

They all looked at the daughter on Kuriko's knee and each wondered to themselves what sort of terror she would cause. Tim found it hilarious that mild mannered Henry had such wild kids.

Meanwhile, back at the grill, Will was putting the finishing touches on his last batch of burgers. Almost everybody had been fed...and there wasn't much chance of people wanting seconds (Will made big burgers). He stacked the last twenty or so patties on a plate and set it on the table behind him to remove the sausages. When he turned around to set the plate of sausages down both his hands were full (the left with a flipper) which is why he couldn't do anything about what happened next.

"BARKER!!!" he yelled as the dog, already moving at full speed, leaped up onto the table in front of him, grabbed a patty in his mouth and took off across the yard. Quickly putting down his stuff Will ran after the dog. "BARKER!" he yelled. But the dog was gone and Will, irritated, went back to his plate. At least he'd only nabbed one patty, Will thought.

Then Will picked up the hamburger plate and then noticed that the veggie burger was gone. *THE FUCKING DOG ATE THE VEGGIE BURGER!! It came for meat and it took the only frigging veggie burger there was! ARRG! That stupid dog! It couldn't even steal a burger properly!* Will had spent so much time on the veggie burger getting it right, worrying about it, poking and prodding it, flipping it until it was the right color and texture... It was so infuriatingly ironic. It was more than that, it was ironical! And how was he going to explain this to Carl. At that moment Will was the most unhappy person at the bar-b-que; It was soon about to be Carl.

"Carl," Will put his hand on Carl's shoulder.

"Yeah?" Carl turned around, sick of munching on coleslaw and eagerly anticipating the veggie burger Will had promised. He was perplexed by Will's empty hands.

"About that veggie burger..."

"Yeah?" Carl still held out hope that Will was going to ask 'How would

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you like it done?”

“Uhh, the dog ate it.” Will felt like a kid explaining where his homework had gone.

Carl’s face drooped, followed by his body. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

Carl sighed. “That’s ok, I guess. I’ll just have some more slaw.” He turned back to his plate with the small section portioned out for slaw and began eating the pitiful, green, droopy vegetable mix. Will felt really bad.

Beside Carl, Bill and Gene, Madre’s resident lawyer, were talking.

“You know that the guys from EGO software just started selling their game engine a few months ago.”

“Game engine?” asked Gene. He was a lawyer. He wasn’t aware games had engines.

“You know, the programming code that powers the whole thing. It’s like our Madre Creative Interpreter...that we make all the games with. Anyway, they’ve actually sold theirs to another company.”

“Really? That’s unusual. Proprietary software. I’d tell a company to hold onto the rights for that stuff with dear life,” remarked Gene.

“I know. But they sold it...not their brand new one, mind you, but Clayburn’s older Gloom 1 one. Guess how much it sold for? \$140,000 just to develop with it. They’ve sold four licenses already. 560,000 dollars! Man, these guys are making more money selling the engine to their game than selling the actual game! It’s nuts. And most of these guys’ testicles haven’t even dropped yet! They’re geniuses...or prodigies or something...not to mention filthy rich!”

Gene pretended to be impressed. He didn’t know exactly what Bill was talking about. He didn’t know prices much either. He knew litigation – also known as the Sci-Fi Quest series. Still, 560,000 dollars in a few months...he’d heard Gloom 1 was a major hit...but still, that was a lot of money to make a copy of Gloom 1. Maybe instead of law, he should have gotten into the video game business, Gene thought.

Meanwhile, Will had gone upstairs to see if his daughter wanted to come down – maybe she had forgotten – you know how time passes and the world disappears when you’re playing those games...he’d seen his employees do it while at work. But as he neared her door he heard her voice. Wondering whether, in her video game gusto, she was talking to the computer, Will sheepishly snuck nearer and listened at the door. Pretty soon he could tell she was talking to someone on the phone...but he stayed and listened anyway.

"It's probably going to get shut down," Heather said.

"Oh?" came Carol's voice on the other end.

"It's lost so much money, and now it's losing popularity."

"Really? But it seemed so popular."

"Well, do you use it anymore?"

"Yeah...but not much, I guess."

"Anyway, they sunk so much money into SupraNet to establish it. And for the first few years it just lost money because nobody was ready for the world's first on-line community. So even though they've been the only and most popular net for the last 2 years, they've only made back half of what they sank into it. Madre did more favors for the Internet and Internet population than for themselves."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah. I guess," said Heather, cracking her wrists. They got sore sometimes after a lot of playing. "SupraNet was great. But as a business venture it was not so successful. Anyway, my parents haven't said anything about officially shutting it down...but you can tell. I don't know what else they're going to do with it."

There was a pause in the conversation.

"Is your computer rebooted yet?" Heather asked. They had taken a break when Carol needed to reboot – but Carol had phoned Heather to talk during the interim few minutes. Mostly they wanted to talk about the last Killnet round...and how their all-girl clan was doing on the competition ladder. In a way they were surprised they had lasted this long...and in a way they were not. They were one of two girl gaming clans...and there was a good chance they were going to make it to the semi-final competition this weekend.

"Ok, great!" Carol confirmed from the other end of the line.

"Let's shoot up some zombies."

"All play and no kill makes poor results on Killnet," Carol quipped.

"Ok, see you in a bit." Heather hung up and went for her computer.

Will, fearing he might get caught standing outside, quickly slipped back down the stairs to the kitchen. About ten minutes later, after Carl had eaten about as much coleslaw as he could stand he felt the familiar hand on his shoulder again. It was Will. And he had a big sandwich on a plate for him.

"I'm really sorry about the burger, Carl," Will said. "I made you up a special order."

Carl looked at it. It was a big sandwich. It looked really good. His face beamed. "Thanks! That's great!" He took it and chowed down, obviously

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enjoying himself. Will felt better. Now that everyone was satisfied he could finally feed himself. Taking off his apron he found a spot on the porch and began to feast proudly on a burger with flavors only a red apron could produce.

Above, the sun continued its slow, relentless roll across the sky, now dipping closer to the house. It was still hot out. Over the next hour, the guests shifted, sat, digested, chatted, scattered and regrouped and went in and out of the house as the shadows on the ground slowly elongated. Around four o'clock Kendra started bringing out pieces of cake for people who were interested in dessert.

Kuriko waved hers away. She had been quite filled by the enormous hamburger only an hour or so ago. And she was quite enjoying her wine; that was her kind of dessert. Henry had their daughter now and it was her break time which she used to chat it up with some other video game widows by the pool. There was a tug on her sleeve.

"Mom. Mom."

"What is it now Henrietta?" Kuriko was getting annoyed with this.

"Jason is doing something bad."

"I don't want to know about it," she replied and turned her head back to the women. The tug came again, more insistent this time.

"He's doing something really bad, mom."

Kuriko looked down at her daughter again...and gave in. "Alright. What is he doing?"

Henrietta looked cautiously at the two ladies and then back at her mother. "Something bad," she repeated and pointed towards the bushes. This worried Kuriko – if her daughter didn't want to say what he was doing in front of the other guests, it *must* be bad. Kuriko turned her head towards where her daughter was pointing. A few moments ago there had been a large cluster of people there talking and chatting. Now they seemed to be dissipating...or at least stepping slowly away from the bushes. Some were looking at the bush behind them, perplexed. Whatever was bugging them, it seemed to be breaking up the conversation.

"Excuse me for a moment, won't you?" Kuriko asked her conversational party, not yet embarrassed, but feeling that any moment she could be. They nodded and Kuriko moved towards the group of people. As she neared she became aware of a rather nasty odor. Careful not to let the people in the group see her, Kuriko broke past the pungent smell and squeezed herself into the bushes. It took her a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the light...while her nose reeled in the powerful smell. Somehow, she recognized it. And as the edges of the darkness began to

sharpen she saw her son standing there looking up at her...shock on his face...looking very guilty. And there, beside him on the ground was a little brown coiled-up roll. He'd taken a DUMP in the bushes!!

Kuriko freaked. "*N-N-nande?! Nande toire ni ikinakatta yo!!!!? Koo-iu wa mokoto ni dame desu yo!!!*" But as she yelled at him, his face grew hard and he insolently turned his back on her. This infuriated her...but before she realized what was going on he had moved his hands to his pants.

**"IKIMASEN!!!!!"** The words trembled to her lips like foreshocks from a violent volcano, but it was already too late. By the time those fierce words erupted in a violent flush of parental lava heard across the yard, her son had dropped his drawers and was mooning her.

Kuriko was immobilized by her fury for a moment – and Jason took the opportunity to pull his pants back up and bolt out of the bushes. She tore off after him, careful not to step into his 'deposit.'

"*Anata!!! Matte yo!! Maaaaattttteeeeeeee!!!!*" she yelled as she tore off down the backyard after him. Henry, watching all this from the other side of the yard, pretended he was in another world. A world in which he didn't know these two, let alone was related to them. A world in which he was happy.

Will didn't notice this commotion as he chatted with the two guys from Synapse on his patio. He was more pre-occupied with a change in the air. Suddenly it had cooled, almost imperceptibly so, and the sun had dipped behind the house. The lawn took on a darker shade of green and they were all swimming in a light shadow. The wind had picked up slightly. And there was that familiar smell: A hollow, wholesome, earthy smell. A few leaves, still green, fell from the trees in the wind. But it was the smell that gave it away for Will. Autumn was coming. It would still be several weeks away, but like a native with his ear to the ground, Will had heard it coming. Their bar-b-que had sent summer out with a bang.

Not long after that people started leaving. Unsurprisingly, this was when Heather decided to join the party, sneaking out to the food table and picking on the scrap vegetables and chips there, eating her cake and chips at the same time as if they were all part of a well balanced meal. She talked with a few of the people there...some of the ones she felt more comfortable with...and some of the ones that liked her. Then she hung out with her mom for a bit and helped bring stuff inside. She told Kendra about this wicked battle she had just had on KillNet. Kendra listened sympathetically...but her mind was playing its own games: *Mystery Quest? Horror Quest? Mother Quest? Money Quest?* Will could hardly believe that Heather had been up there in her room this whole

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time...shooting things. There'd been a couple of nice teenage boys here at the party...maybe she could have met them...ah, but they would have been still too young for her. As a business man he tried to make addictive games – but as a father he was a little disturbed at the amount of time his daughter was spending in front of the machine.

Around five thirty the backyard started clearing out. Will found himself, more and more, near the front door saying good-bye, sending people home with extra food and best wishes for the end of their weekend. Fred the intern, who was on his last week at Madre, despite offers to keep him on, was continuing with plans to travel around the world and become a journalist. Will wished him good luck and told him he was always welcome back at Madre. Gene, Tim, Henry, Fred, Shane, Andrew, Neil and their girlfriends, friends and wives too were all shown off in typical Roberts style.

After the bush incident, Kuriko had been itching to get out of there. She and Henry waited until the earliest possible moment when it wouldn't seem rude to leave, and left. Which was too bad, because they both had really enjoyed themselves... until...well, you know.

Kuriko was glad that the Roberts' dog had acted up. It seemed to make her son's contribution to the afternoon's entertainment less unforgivable. As she and Henry were leading their kids out to the car a couple of guys from her husband's work were talking in front of them.

"Man, did you see the size of a dump that dog took behind the bushes?!"

"No way, man. That stank so bad. I couldn't go near it."

"Man, that veggie burger must've gone right through 'im."

Kuriko was burning up with embarrassment...but simultaneously relieved that people seemed to think it was the dog. At least she had some hope of living down the humiliation.

By six-thirty the sun had totally hidden itself behind the house, but the clouds had disappeared, bathing the back lawn in a comfortable, golden light. Only the dedicated and close friends remained now – Art, Geoff, Wayne, Bill and a few others – casually chatting on the deck, revisiting the cake and the wine. Will sat on the back porch with his wife for a while and they talked...no longer feeling obliged to be helpful hosts. This sort of party could take care of itself.

"It's fall," Kendra said.

"Yeah."

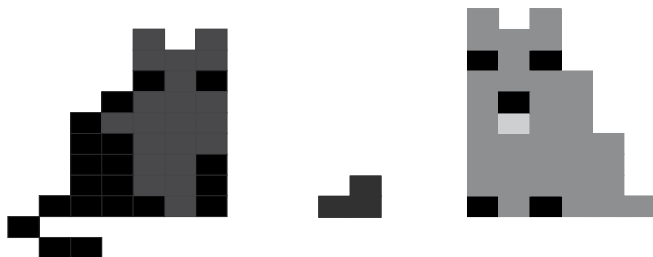
"I like this smell."

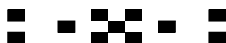
"Me too."



They sipped their wine together. Mark joined them for a while on the patio but found them boring and went back inside to read comics. Heather hung around the remaining guests, listening in on their conversations and chatting with Art for a while.

As more guests disappeared Will got back to cleaning up the yard, washing down the grill and tossing paper plates. Will paused as the soft summer wind blew around him, It had been a great bar-b-que, had lived up to its status as the *great* summer bar-b-que...despite coming so late this year. In fact, despite everything – like Barker stealing the sole veggie burger only to purge it in the woods – it had been great. And even if they never had a bar-b-que again...this one would have made it all worth it.





## Chapter 15; not so SupraNet

October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Down in San Francisco fog had started to roll off the bay in thick clouds like froth overflowing from a coffee cup, spilling down the streets and through the gridwork moats of downtown. There were even a few autumn leaves dancing on the gray cement streets, gold and auburn, defying the logic of the local climate, dancing beneath the thick white soup. San Franciscans, still refusing to accept the unseasonably early cold, wrapped themselves in sports jackets and sweaters, huddling their briefcases close for warmth and dipped into pubs for something warm for lunch, like beef au jus and beer.

Will and Kendra stood outside their newly acquired head office. Looking up at this giant, gleaming, grey monolith before them – stretching upwards and upwards, warping into the cool fall sky – it was hard to believe they owned the thing. This had grown out of their garage? *Bizarre Quest*, Kendra thought. Actually, they didn't really own this thing...they just rented the top four floors...but that was unbelievable enough.

The big revolving doors seemed to suck in the fog from the street as they passed through and spill out nothing on the inside. Passing the lobby of busy bodies they found their way to the elevators and began ascent. Kendra really didn't have any business down here today...but she was along for the ride...and she was trying to give Kathy the feeling of free reign on the next *Fantasy Quest*. Not being there forced Kathy, and herself, to come to terms with Kathy's new responsibility. The author had officially started working for them just over a month ago. No official work on *Fantasy Quest* would be started until Kathy got adjusted. In the meantime, Kendra was surprisingly without work.

It was these ups and downs of game design, Kendra ruminated, she was appreciating the downtime: reading books in her office, doing general support work, resting her brain...trying to think of some other type of game to make besides *Fantasy Quest*...but so far only drawing blanks. Kendra was still in her rest period, though, so she wasn't worried about it yet. And since they'd hired Newman, a huge workload had been

taken off her and Will...she should force herself to enjoy the slowdown. This was the first time she'd been down since they'd first inspected the office. It was Will's third time since they'd hired Newman.

It seemed like they spent forever sitting in this metal box riding up to the top. Kendra couldn't imagine having to ride in this contraption, up and down, just to visit staff on other floors. The two floors of the Madre office were enough. Stairs were great, as far as she was concerned.

The doors opened up onto a cubicled wonderland, sleek blue and silver. It wasn't that different from the Redwood office but it seemed more...professional: a business environment rather than a gaming family. But that's what they needed. The colors of the cubicles were more modern, more serious...and there were no sounds of people shooting monsters on a game break. No free Kepsi Kola machine, either, but a lot of suits and a lot of faxes and printers. It was a different world. Kendra was glad they'd shipped this side of the business down here. It was kind of depressing in some way. So organized, so stiff... Now Madre would just be a creative outlet. They'd hit their pinnacle – reached their goal...pure entertainment.

Will led them down the rat maze of cubicles to a door on the far end. It seemed like most of the people here didn't even know who they were, that they were paying their salaries...which was fine with Kendra, but it was odd having all these employees that she didn't even know and vice versa. Will knocked on the door and Newman came to open it. They were both motioned to come inside.

Kendra was impressed with Newman's office. It was certainly suitably proportioned to his big title. The desk looked almost insignificant down on the far end. It was so far away...and it was a big end. The office was six or seven window panes long and required a large number of potted plants in the corners and along the walls to make it look lived-in. There was some nice art up on the wall and several – very mod – couches and tables for informal meetings.

"Great to see you again," said Newman, motioning them to sit down. He took their coats and hung them up on the coat rack. "Would you like some coffee?"

Will didn't feel in the mood for stale office coffee. "No thanks."

"Really? I've got café latte."

Will looked over. Sure enough, Newman had a small cappuccino machine in the corner. Now there was an idea! Maybe he wouldn't have to buy from Che's! Surely he could afford a cappuccino machine...he was the boss! Except...he wouldn't hoard it in his office. He'd put it in the

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lunch room. What a great idea!

“Yeah. That sounds great!”

Newman went to work on two cinnamon topped café lattes. Kendra and Will were both quite impressed. They finished their lattes through various work and non-work related chit-chat. Afterwards Kendra excused herself to go and explore downtown. The latte had put her in the mood for a walk. She loved autumn...even in a city that had few changing colors...there was still that cool, fall feeling. Will and Newman had to discuss business anyway.

Stepping out into the uncharacteristically chilly afternoon Kendra window shopped the old stores along the back street – antiques, furniture, card shops... She liked to just browse. Perhaps she could find a game idea here? She loved the atmosphere: solemn, secretive, friendly. But you couldn't just make a game about quaint shops...

She stopped into an underground mall later, created to provide San Franciscans respite from the rain, and found a local independent coffee shop. This was hard to find even in San Francisco, but she'd halfway taken up Will's cause. She'd had a café latte only an hour ago, so she ordered this half-coffee half-hot chocolate mix to warm herself up. Delicious. Sitting down she picked up and read one of those free independent newspapers – you know, the ones with 30 pages of content and 50 pages of advertisements, especially for single and gay sex date lines, at the back.



Meanwhile, back in the top half of the monolith, Will and Newman had gathered in another, smaller room, to discuss business-of-the-week stuff. There had been a lot of changes since Newman had arrived – nothing that anyone at Madre had noticed...and that was good. Mostly just streamlining stuff. Changing processes, adjusting systems and policies. Small, efficient business stuff. Stuff Will had hired Newman for. Stuff Will didn't want to do, and looking at it now, stuff Will wasn't sure he *could* do. Newman was good at what they'd hired him for: organization, efficiency...seeing the forest and separating the trees.

Will wondered if he should bring it up. He hadn't discussed it with anyone else. Usually he did...but it was a touchy subject. He'd talked a little bit about it with Kendra...but not in the sense of doing anything about it...more just feeling around. He wondered if he should consult Newman's opinion on it at all. He was worried that once he'd mentioned it, there would be no turning back. The proverbial cat would be out of

the proverbial bag. But then, Will thought to himself, if I can't feel free to leave the decision on this to Newman – or at least consult him on it – then I've hired him for nothing.

"What about SupraNet?" asked Will.

Newman looked up at him. "What about it?"

"Well, it's never made any money. In fact, it's making more now than it ever has...but I doubt it will break even unless we sink a bunch more money into it to compete with the Internet and KillNet, etc... which may be a hopeless cause."

"Well," Newman looked a little relieved, "Actually, I'm glad you brought this up. SupraNet, as my tech research guys tell me, was a great idea. But about ten years ahead of its time. They tell me that, in a lot of ways, it's still ten years ahead."

"Yeah, it could be."

"But the problem is that now it's getting sunk, ironically, by more primitive competitors – who've caught up on the craze and cherry-picked the best ideas out of SupraNet. In a way, you've done the R&D and they're picking up the ball and running with it to the goal line."

"Yeah. I noticed. Actually, I'm kind of sensitive about all this," conceded Will. SupraNet had been his idea. "The reason we've hung onto it for so long is, well, because it was a great idea...and we kept waiting for it to catch on...and we sunk so much money into it that backing out would mean we did it all for nothing. It had the potential to make so much money – just like the guys over at KillNet are making now. And it's still an idea I believe in...and I know if we put more money into it we could easily beat those guys in terms of service...*but...*" Will hesitated, "This could just go on sinking and sinking like a..." Will tried to think of something that sank really slowly over time and, despite all attempts to keep it afloat, would eventually sink – rocks? Styrofoam? Seaweed? He couldn't think of anything. "It might just sink for good and take us down with it. One half of me wants to hang on – I feel like I'm giving up just as it's about to get good, like if I just held in there for a little while longer...it would work out. It's like giving up on a child, or admitting you were wrong. But I don't feel like I was wrong...just unlucky. Then the other half of me...well...even my own daughter, who represents a true hardcore SupraNet fan, is abandoning it. And it's FREE for her. So...I don't know. What do you think?"

"Well," began Newman, "Maybe I can provide a fresh viewpoint on this. I'm not personally attached to it at all. Basically, it's like a white elephant vacuum. A great beast...but it's been sucking profits out of you

## Game Quest

– even put you into debt with shareholders – which isn’t a really bad thing because stocks really put you in position to expand and boost your resources – but even if we did continue to put money into SupraNet it would still have to make some enormous profits just to break even with the total losses. Right now it’s not adding value to the company. Now, if this is a pet project, maybe you don’t mind losing money on it. But you’ve got to ask yourself, at the end of the day, how bad you really want a white elephant?”

Will didn’t know what to say. Newman put it pretty well...but Will still didn’t know. In a way he felt intimidated by the big city talk...by the decision. But he’d hired Newman to do this job. “I think you should make a decision on it. I’m too close to the issue...and that’s why I hired you. To make these hard decisions.”

Newman grimaced a little bit. “Look, I know this is a tough decision... and I don’t just mean personally...but from a business perspective. We dedicated a lot of time to SupraNet. How about we take this topic off-line for now and I’ll approach it on a ‘move-forward’ basis.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Now, I’m assuming from this conversation that you’re leaving the decision up to me, after I’ve looked at it closely, on what to do with SupraNet.”

“Yeah.” It came suddenly, quickly out of Will’s mouth. That was it. He’d let go of SupraNet. In a way it felt great...as if a great white elephant had been lifted from his back. But he was fond of that elephant. It was his third child – Heather, Mark, SupraNet – the lovable, disabled white elephant; the sad, innocent boy who dies at the end of the movie; the white elephant among his herd of cattle.

Newman pulled out another folder. “Now I’d like to look at some of our distribution routes.”

Distribution logistics. Now Will could talk about *that* ‘til the cows came home.

“I’ve gone over a lot of it and I think we could cut down costs and hassle while increasing our reach...both nationally and internationally. Your distribution up into Canada is a little backwards and yet, it is a sizeable portion of your adventure game market.”

Will smiled to himself. Canadians. What a funny word for a people. They did buy a lot of product, though...



Kendra was walking briskly back towards the monolith now...their

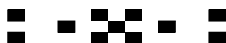
monolith. The sun had come out a bit, though the wind was still strong, and it beat down, highlighting her hair and warming her face. It felt really nice against the cold of her cheeks. No doubt Will and Newman would be wrapping up their business talk now. Surely they couldn't talk about business *all* day. Besides, they had to leave soon if they wanted to get back to Berney at a reasonable time.

She had no trouble finding her way back to the tower. People in their business outfits were now leaving the offices, rolling out with the fog. Kendra reached towards the handle on the revolving door but the group of people coming through the other way did all the work. And that's when she saw the face. Her heart stopped for a moment. It terrified her in a way...though it was such a cartoonish face.

It was Dan Destroyem. Right there. Coming the other way through the revolving doors. She could have reached out and touched him but for the pane of glass between them. He looked just like he did in the game...with his spiky nuclear-orange hair, sun-glasses and ear-rings. And he was looking right back at her, locking onto her pupils through his sun-glasses. The world froze...for a moment or two. The revolving door stopped revolving. The people in the other section of the door were frozen, oblivious that time had turned into molasses. And Kendra and Dan Destroyem stared at each other...for just a moment...maybe two.

And then Dan Destroyem broke the gaze, looking in front of him as if he hadn't seen her at all. Time, as if nothing had happened, resumed, instantaneously, and Kendra flowed into the warm office building, poured out the other end of the people gate. Pausing for a moment she quickly took the revolving door back out and looked both ways down the street. She couldn't see him anymore... There was a guy with spiky orange hair a ways off...but it wasn't him...it must have just been her imagination...it had only been a second. She hadn't really seen him...and he was wearing sun-glasses. And he'd looked away from her. It must have been somebody else.

Of course it must have been somebody else!! Kendra felt like slapping her own face to bring her out of it. *Dan Destroyem is a computer game character!* Man, she was losing it. There must have been more caffeine in that chocolate coffee drink than advertised. Kendra turned around and headed back up the elevators to meet her husband. On the way up she had thoughts that maybe Dan Destroyem had planted a bomb...and the building was going to explode, taking them all with it! But she laughed it away as some strange paranoia. Maybe her period was coming... Anyway, Dan Destroyem was supposed to be a good guy...right?



## Chapter 16; guerrillas in the midst

October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1994

You could now play Swarthy Victor and the Grecian Formula from start to finish. Art was impressed with himself. It looked amazingly better than the previous games. The leap in graphics was stunning...and the new interface was more intuitive. It had been hard designing for the new game engine after using the old, text-based command one for so long: MAKE GAME WITH CODE. LIGHT AIRSICK BAG WITH MATCHES. Now all the puzzles had to revolve around using your hand or mouth or feet...or other point-and-click icons. One thing that disappointed Art was that a lot of the objects you could pick up were too obvious. Because of the digitized painting technology they were using, moveable objects stood out because they had to be painted separately. Looked like a cheaply animated cartoon or bad superimposing in a movie, which made it really obvious what you were supposed to pick up. The game was still full of bugs and incomplete parts, the inventory pictures hadn't been done, a lot of the character faces were missing during the dialogue...but still, it was fleshing out. Despite the few drawbacks, Art was impressed by what they had so far.

Tim had heard that Art's game had reached milestone 3. It was still early morning when he entered Art's office to watch him playtest the game. Tim wanted to see how it turned out...so he could know how the new Sci-Fi Quest might turn out. Geoff was already there, hunched over, hands on his knees, observing with a crooked smile.

Not long after, Will also came in to watch. He'd just gotten off the phone with Newman. Turned out there were several companies eager to jump in on the online-gaming/Internet boom who'd expressed interest in buying SupraNet which was good news to Will. They'd at least recover some of their costs from the sale and, more importantly, SupraNet wouldn't die. He was more interested in selling it to a company that would keep it alive...just under new ownership. Will watched Tim watching Art play the prototype game.

It was good that a new Swarthy Victor game was on the way. Will



had just gotten the sales results for HomoSapien Quest 3 this morning from HQ. Not too good. Though the game had good initial sales, those were from people who liked the previous game, the die-hard fans HSQ was known for. But once the reviews started coming in...well, they were lukewarm and dragged sales down with them. Madre hadn't lost money on the project...but they hadn't made much yet either...and it was bad to have that kind of publicity, particularly in this market. Mostly the reviews complained about how unstructured and short the game was. Will agreed the shortness was a problem...but with all the high-tech graphics and digitized sound, much more disk space was needed...and there was only so many disks you could fit in a box. At least their new games looked better than anybody else's. It was just going to take people a little while to get used to the new Madre style and interface...

Henry came in the door behind Will, following the trail of game music, music he'd composed, from down the hall. Listening to it now, he felt a near uncontrollable desire to tap his toe in time. Henry loved that feeling – when the music took over, flushed illogic and spontaneity through your veins. When it was his own music, the feeling was unbeatable!

They all watched Art play his game, testing things out and writing down notes. Henry spoke up. "I went into Che's Coffee Revolution today..."

Everybody pricked up their ears to listen, but held their eyes on Swarthy Victor trying to escape from a room with nothing but a plastic blow-up sheep. As Will had predicted, Madre employees had started going to Che's. They were resistant...but Che's was the only game in town...so what could you do?

Henry continued. "You know, when I first went in – maybe I was just justifying it to myself, I don't know – I thought, 'this place isn't so bad. It's a little fabricated, but it still pulls off the nice, atmospheric café feeling that Naughté had, even if it was stamped out of a mould. It's a little swankier than Naughté Latte, less local – but it's not so bad.' But every time I went in there, something bugged me a little bit. And I think it's the hard seats."

People were turning their attention away from the game now to Henry.

"You can't sit on those things for more than twenty minutes without your butt going numb. I guess fast food joints have been pulling that for years so you don't sit around, but with Che's it seems really insincere. There's no pretension in a fast food joint that it's a place to hang out. The whole point is to eat and go. But Che's pretends to be all about relaxing

## Game Quest

and lounging, feeling welcome to hang out. Its interior says 'we're friends, come and relax and stay as long as you like' while the seats bark 'drink quickly and get out.' Naughté Latte's chairs were comfortable and locally made, at least."

Geoff turned his attention fully from the game now. "Huh. Kind of like psychologically induced customer turnover, right? I don't know. Could be a city thing and they're worried about people coming in and lounging for hours."

"Still," Henry said. "Naughté Latte never did that. And this isn't the city." Henry went on now, caught up in his thoughts as they occurred to him, cascading off of each other, "You know what also drives me nuts? How they stamp their logo on everything. I mean, I liked the local glazed ceramic mugs Naughté had, but even the mugs you *buy* at Che's have their logo on it. Everything in that place is stamped out of some factory in Chicago. And if you order to go it's all styro-poly-ethylyne or whatever... again with their big fat logo on the side."

"You know why those stores do that?" Tim jumped in, "You'd think it's a big waste of money to print your logo in full color on the side of all your cups and napkins, right? People just throw it out, right?"

"Well, it's basic advertising," Will joined in. He was used to having to be the devil's businessman with this group, to defend business & marketing practices. Maybe it was an artist thing. They all had a healthy suspicion of money and sometimes Will wondered if they wouldn't be making games for free if he wasn't around to stop them! That was where he came in. As a business man it was his job to focus on money. He tried not to let it interfere with their creativity. Ultimately, making games was more important than the money...but only so long as they didn't run out of money!

"But it goes beyond that," Tim continued, "When you toss that stuff in the garbage or on the ground or some careless slob leaves it in the park...it's free advertising. Even the garbage sells to you these days! The town would never let Che's put up a big billboard in Berney Park...but walking through it yesterday I saw three discarded Che's cups. Guerrilla advertising: you can't escape the revolution. It's a pretty safe plan for them...nobody's going to start blaming Che's for littering, right?"

"Huh," Henry considered this.

Will dropped out of the conversation. He wasn't up to playing devil's advocate for Che's. He wasn't against them being popular, or making money. He didn't really even care that they were mass-manufactured – though he found it tacky – as long as they didn't interfere with his

desire to seek out the authentic, the unique, the local and independent. But they went beyond that, stormed into town and crushed the pretty flowers growing on their own. Will liked business and would gladly argue in favour of it. But Che's wasn't business. It was something beyond. Something corrupt. Places like Che's gave business a bad name, created the sentiment prevalent in his artistic staff.

"How's the coffee?" Geoff asked cheekily, noticing the logo-laden Styrofoam cup wrapped in logo-laden cardboard coffee slip in Henry's hand.

"Yeah. The coffee's good," Henry said. "They don't have as much selection or cool little variations like Naughté Latte...but it's pretty good. What can I do, anyway? There's no other coffee place around."

"I'm going to get a cappuccino machine for the kitchen."

All heads turned toward Will.

"Really?" they all asked.

"Yeah, we'll get a nice one with a couple of nozzles on it...get someone in here to train people how to use it. We can all be programmer/baristas."

Tim and Geoff looked at Art, Art looked at Henry, Henry looked at Tim and Geoff. Then they reversed their gaze: Henry to Art, Art to Tim and Geoff, Tim and Geoff to Henry. Then they all turned their heads to Will.

"Wow," said Tim. "Now that's a REAL revolution!" Will's the greatest boss ever!, Tim thought.

"When are you going to get it?" asked Henry, not quite convinced.

"Right now," said Will. It had been an impulsive decision. He'd forgotten all about the cappuccino machine idea since his meeting with Newman almost two weeks ago. The Che's discussion had refreshed Will's memory. He hadn't officially decided to get it...it just came out. And since the decision had already been made by some independent micro-neuron in the back of his brain, why wait? Why not get it now? "I'll go ask Gladys to find a cappuccino machine retailer."

Tim and Henry could hardly wipe the grins off their face. Art wasn't much of a coffee drinker...but a cappuccino machine in the kitchen...now that was classy. Art could brag to his brother-in-law about that: "Do YOU have a free cappuccino machine in YOUR lunch room?"

"Oh, there's Ron," said Tim, excusing himself and taking off to ask Ron about borrowing his hookah for the weekend.

"Well, that's my cue to go too," Henry said and headed off with his hand-sized billboard full of coffee to his office.

Will stepped over to the screen. "It's looking good," he commented.

## Game Quest

"Yeah, it's coming along. Playing it now, I've thought of a lot of great stuff we could add...and a few things to take out. The new icon interface trips me up a bit. I'm still used to typing in commands." Art wiggled the mouse around using the hand icon on all the pillars of the coliseum. He laughed to himself and wrote something down on the pad.

"It's looking great. I look forward to testing out the final version before vacation."

"Vacation?" Art asked. "You're going away this year?"

"Yeah. Kendra and I are going to take an extended holiday just after Christmas." Usually the staff at Madre worked hard through December, pushing games out for the Christmas season. Madre itself didn't have any games to go this season, but Synapse did and Will wanted to stick around to help supervise those. But he and Kendra, long overdue for a vacation, were going to hit up Hawaii for a couple of weeks just after Christmas dinner, he told Art.

"January. Isn't there the Annual General Meeting and board vote on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>? I thought you had to be around for that."

"Yeah, but it'll be fine. Newman will be there. I need a break. Besides, we just opened a new head office. Stock prices are up. It's going to be a no-brainer vote. As long as stock prices are going up shareholders don't care what happens. They're as snug as bugs in rugs. I doubt most will even show up."

"Yeah. Hell, you know better about all this stock stuff than me," Art said. "You *look* like you need a vacation."

Will believed it. He couldn't remember the last vacation he'd had without having to pause to reflect on it, count on his fingertips. But with the new HQ...and Kendra between games...they finally could afford the time to do it. It felt like the first vacation they'd taken since starting the company.

It made Art a little uneasy, though, with Will not being there. Art didn't like the shareholders. It was like Madre was working for a big fat boss who smoked cigars and didn't know anything about games and only understood large bags of money with dollar signs on them. The kind of boss who would say, 'Why don't you put more hot dogs in games? Everyone loves hot dogs. It's a multimillion dollar industry!' or 'You know what this game needs? Product placement! We reach a large audience. I'm sure Goke or Kepsi would pay handsomely to have our main character drink their product.' Ugh. Art shivered at the thought. He was surprised product placement hadn't happened already. It was only a matter of time...to bring costs down and shareholder profits up.

Ever since they had to issue more shares to pay for the SupraNet project, since staff ownership of Madre stock dipped below the 50% mark, work felt different to Art. It wasn't different on the surface: Madre ran the same, made the same decisions as it always had. All employees together still had the majority share, some 37%, and as long as the share price increased shareholders didn't complain. But still, work felt different. To Art, it felt like they weren't quite working for Will anymore. They were working for Will, but under the loyalties of some dark lord in a distant tower that Will had to appease...Puppet Will...and everyone rued the day that Will and the puppet master would have a conflict.

Art would be glad when the number of non-staff shareholders was diminished again. In a move to remedy the situation Madre had introduced stock options for the employees – putting more control into the hands of people who actually worked at Madre, who knew the industry, who cared... Art knew that, with the recent profits, Will had been buying back shares. But together Will and Madre employees owned significantly less than 51% of the total shares. Not enough for Art to feel safe yet. And so, secretly, Art was waiting for the day when Will would come back from the AGM and announce they had to put the MacClownBurger burger-of-the-month in all their games. Direct order from the Dark Lord.

But this was being pessimistic...which wasn't Art's strong suit. Why worry about something that hadn't happened? Art was enjoying his prototype and that was a strong sign that they were still doing quality work. Maybe it would have better sales than HomoSapien Quest. It had *better* have better sales than HomoSapien Quest, Art thought.

"Well," said Will, trying to break away from watching Swarthy Victor's antics, "I've got to go make sure people are *working*." He laughed at his little joke. Art smiled back and Will left the room. As Will walked down the hall he thought, *hey, the music in that game is pretty good*.

Passing the kitchen Will's eye suddenly caught the familiar green of a Che's Coffee Revolution mug peeking out from the top of the garbage. Will stopped, furrowed his brow and stared at it a long time, infuriated by the infiltration of this menace into his moral stronghold. Che, the ready-to-serve-coffee rebel, just beamed that winning smile out from within his trash jungle. Despite himself, despite how wacky he thought radical Tim's theory on garbage advertising was, Will quickly reached into the trash when nobody was looking and turned the cup around so Guevara faced deep into the pit of rubbish. Will covered the back end with a paper towel and continued to his office.



## Chapter 17; butt zits never die

October 29<sup>th</sup>/30<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Kendra wasn't snooping around. It had been just lying there on the newel post. It was already opened. Sure, she knew Heather hadn't meant to leave it there...and she had to physically *take* the letter out of the envelope... but that wasn't snooping. She was just curious what her daughter's life was all about...since the only answer she ever got from her daughter was a shrug...and usually a snide shrug at that.

Also, it was obviously computer game related. The reason Kendra had noticed it in the first place was because it was on the post on the way upstairs and she saw the logo on it. She thought it was Will's and, being co-owner of the company, Will's game related stuff was fair to look at. Then she saw Heather's name on the envelope...but curious as to why Heather was getting mail from computer entertainment companies she eased the letter out. That's not snooping. It was more like a game... looking for clues.

Heather spent all her time on the computer. Heather shut them out of even the faintest peek at her personal life, which was all in a computer, locked behind a door. Heather had a mysterious Internet friend she'd sometimes talk about but withhold any meaningful information. Heather couldn't be persuaded to get anything more than painfully passable grades in school. How to solve this puzzle? Kendra wished her daughter kept a diary so she could go through it. When playing a game, you never felt guilty. You could do anything. But here, even if Heather did keep a diary, the guilt would keep Kendra from it ...or worse yet, going through the SupraNet logs at work to see what her daughter had been up to. Long ago, when Heather had first got online, Kendra had checked the logs and even though nothing interesting came up she felt terrible about it.

But Heather wouldn't talk to her anymore. She wasn't an open book like when she was 12, when she used to rest her head on Kendra's lap in front of the TV, play with her mother's hair, come by to see what SHE was doing. Kendra remembered a time when Heather wanted to please her mother rather than actively striving to *displease* her! In an

Adventure Game, the best way to get characters to open up was to give them something they wanted. But what did Heather want? Aside from being left alone and leaving home which were both, according to Kendra, game ending scenarios. Kendra was sure there was a solution to the Heather puzzle. She just needed to find the right item, get enough clues. This wasn't snooping. Heather had left the letter in plain view. It was a hint.

The letter was rather slickly printed with a full color, modern vector-graphic logo in the corner.

**Heather,**

**Congratulations on your Clan's 5<sup>th</sup> place win at the KillNet Bloody-Sundae Frag-off tournament. Not a small feat considering that the Bloody-Sundae Frag-off event was the largest attended on-line competition in history with some of the industry's top game designers taking part in the competition! As you may know, two of them made it to the top five – but couldn't receive awards or placement since, well, they designed the game!**

**But you don't have that excuse! No, your only excuse for such a high ranking is unreal game-playing ability! Congratulations. Please find a check for \$50 enclosed - your share of the **CamelToes** clan's win. As a Top 12 contender you will automatically be eligible to compete in the KillNet Death-0-Rama showdown this December. We look forward to seeing you and the rest of the **CamelToes** clan there.**

**Bite my gnubs!,  
Chuck Mendellson  
KillNet Competitions**

Kendra stuffed the letter back into the envelope and returned to the bedroom. Lying in bed she thought about this. It seemed strange. Who would have thought all that time playing video games would make you money? Kendra thought this without a trace of irony that she herself stared at a screen all day making games for a living. Her husband rolled over in bed beside her and cuddled.

"Did you see that letter Heather got from KillNet today?" she asked.  
"Mmmm." That was a no.

## Game Quest

"She got paid fifty dollars for playing games on-line! I don't understand it. You get paid for playing games now?"

"The thing that bugs me," Will mumbled, "is the name. KillNet? What kind of a name is that? Like murder is a cool thing? A sales tool? I don't get it."

Kendra didn't have anything to say to that. She just lay on her back and stared at the ceiling. Will started snoring lightly beside her now. Outside her room she heard her daughter run downstairs, stop at the post at the bottom of the stairs and return to her room, no doubt to pick up her letter before her parents got any clues as to what she did with her life.

Heather jumped back into her chair in her room and re-read the letter. It was very cool. She was going to put it on her wall above her computer. She hadn't even noticed that the letter had arrived until about nine this evening. After she'd gotten up (2pm) and played games (until 3:30), had a shower and had breakfast (around 4:30) played some more games (until 6:30), had dinner (until 8), did some homework (until 8:15) and bummed around, she wandered into the living room and saw a letter set aside by her Dad. She'd quickly opened it up and excitedly ran upstairs to find Pizzazz on-line. But she wasn't there. Heather had brought the letter downstairs again to read it around 11 p.m. and forgotten it on the newel post.

Heather checked the computer again. Damn. Carol still wasn't online. What was she doing? Heather had emailed her two long hours ago. She was excited, she wanted to see if Carol had got the check too...and ask if Casey (their other clan member, from Carol's school) had gotten hers. But no luck. Pizzazz *had* to come on eventually.

Heather stared at the letter for a while and when she looked back up at the screen there was a flurry of activity. There were only four users in the chatroom at that time, but they seemed to be typing frequent and long questions. Heather put down the letter to catch up. She'd been in some gaming forum talking about the new Dan Destroyem expansion-pack (20 new levels! 2 new guns! 6 new enemies!) that was due out sometime next year.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> It was a pretty good competition. We play better in the office, but for average gamers it was pretty good. They played well.

<Menace\_2\_Sobriety> I didn't get to watch. Too bad it can't be like TV - cause if you don't get to play in the tournie...you can't watchit.



<FRAGle\_Rock> Did you play at the Bloody-Sundae competition, Adam?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Of course. We came in first place – again, of course.

<Calpis> I heard that the whole EGO games team secretly joins on-line death matches all the time. Is that true?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Sometimes...usually we're busy designing Gloom 3, though...and Gloom 2 is a little outdated for us now. Also, we're way better than the average gamer so playing on-line isn't as much a challenge as playing each other.

<Calpis> Wow. I'll bet.

<FRAGle\_Rock> I can't believe we're talking to Adam Clayburn! This is crazy.

Heather sat up in her chair. Adam Clayburn?! No way. This had to be a joke. She knew those guys came on-line and stuff...but what was the chance of actually meeting them...of them wanting to answer a bunch of lamer fan questions...maybe it was an ego boost for them. She'd heard Adam Clayburn was really cocky – probably because everyone called him the boy genius so often for his creation of the Gloom engines that he'd started to believe it. Or maybe he always had an ego. But this <Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> could have just been some geek coming on and pretending that he's Adam Clayburn.

Heather reached forward and typed, as Camel Command:

<CamelCommand> What was your team name at BloodyS?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> That's a secret.

<CamelCommand> As if. Prove you're Adam Clayburn. If you played and came in first...then tell us what your clan name was.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Ha ha. Ok. We went by the name Nerzul.

Well, that was correct. Nerzul had come in officially first...but hadn't received ranking recognition – meaning they were a game company. Well, if it was just some geek, he could have learned that on-line somewhere... the results had been posted. Still...

<CamelCommand> Yeah. You guys played ok.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> CamelCommand, huh? Are you from that Camel team?

<CamelCommand> CamelToes. Yeah.

## Game Quest

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Heh. Nice name. You guys played ok too. Fifth. Not bad.

<CamelCommand> Well, we're just "average gamers."

<Calpis> So how do you get into the game industry? I want to design games really bad. I've got a couple of cool ideas.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Well, you have to know how to program, first of all. And you have to be really dedicated. It's not all fun and games. You have to work hard.

<FRAGle\_Rock> What's Gloom 3 gonna be like? I heard there's way more gore.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> So Camel Command, I guess you're going to the Death-0-Rama in December, then.

<CamelCommand> Of course. We're going to get number 1.

Well, that was accurate too, Heather thought. No-one, except people who had received the letter from KillNet knew when the Death-0-Rama was being held. Maybe it really was Adam Clayburn.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> You mean number 2.

<CamelCommand> Whatever. Why do you bother playing these tournaments if you think it's so easy for you to win?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> We like winning. Don't you?

<CamelCommand> Sometimes. But taking down a braggart like you will be sweet.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Braggart? Ha ha. That's such an old word. I like it though, seriously. Don't worry your little head about it. I will "smite" you in December.

<Calpis> What programming languages should I learn?

<CamelCommand> We'll see.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> [to CamelCommand] There's a big players-only chat-forum planned after the Death-0-Rama. They probably didn't tell you that because you're just a gamer...but after the competition there's a big on-line 'party' planned...so all the Death-o-Rama competitors can talk about how they played afterwards.

<FRAGle\_Rock> Is there more gore in Gloom 3?

<CamelCommand> That sounds cool. We can talk about how sorely you were beaten.

<Corporal\_Smashem> Hey Boot\_Quaker. I've got a cool game idea too. I wanna see what you think.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> That's Boot\_Quaker\_Maker.

- <Corporal\_Smashem> Sorry. There's this spaceship, right? And it's come through this wormhole. But the wormhole is a dimension to hell. But it's not like normal hell – it has all these mummies and Egyptian zombies and stuff. So you're this sergeant and you have to get back this mummy key to close the wormhole.
- <Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Sounds fascinating
- <Calpis> I heard I should learn C. Should I learn C?
- <Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Yeah. Or C++. Those are the ones you need to know. But knowing a lot of languages helps.

Heather rolled her eyes. He was just getting bombarded with lamer questions. She disconnected, went to the bed and lay down to read the letter again. She took the stylized KillNet check off of the bedside table and looked at it wondering if she should cash it or keep it as a memento. Maybe she'd take a picture of it and then cash it.

Well, she'd freed up the phone line now and it was late on a weekend so she picked up the phone and dialed Carol's number. The phone rang a couple of times and then it picked up. Heather worried she'd woken up Carol's mom – it was like three in the morning over there – but remembered Carol had her own line.

"Hello?" It was Carol's voice

"Hey!"

Carol laughed. "Hi Heather! I was wondering who was phoning so early!"

Heather smiled. "Yeah. Did you get the letter!?"

"Yeah totally! That's so awesome. It was a kind of cheesy form letter, though."

"Yeah," said Heather. "But it was still cool. Are you gonna cash your check?"

"Probably. I don't need the money, though."

"Yeah. I think I will. But I'm going to take a picture first. Oh! And I talked to Adam Clayburn on-line!!"

"What?"

"Yeah. I was looking for you and I was just going through this chatroom and he was there!"

"Are you sure it was him?"

"Pretty sure. I tested him with a bunch of questions. He says there's gonna be a big chat party after the Death-0-Rama for all the competitors."

## Game Quest

"That's so cool. I wish I got to talk to him. I heard he's kind of arrogant. Is he arrogant?"

"Yeah. A little. But he was nice too."

"Wow. You're lucky."

"Definitely. But I left pretty quick because all these dorks were asking these stupid questions like," Heather changed to the best dork voice she could muster, "'So where do you get all your cool ideas?'"

Carol laughed hard. "That's so lame."

"Hey," Heather interjected, "So where've you been all night?"

"Ah, I was at some party."

Heather swallowed her jealousy. She wished she had friends who hosted parties...or even people she liked to hang out with...or a way to get there instead of being stuck in the woods. But it was pretty easy to swallow, she was excited and glad to finally talk to Carol. "How was it?"

"It was ok. Most of the people were too normal for me. Actually, I had this really bad zit on my butt. It's all inflamed and I couldn't sit down because it hurt."

Heather laughed. "That's too funny. I hate butt zits. Butt zits never die."

"Oh well," Carol said, "I guess it's better than getting them on your face. That's a pain in the ass."

There was a pause as they both thought about this before breaking out laughing. Really hard.

"But at least you don't sit down on your face," Heather added. They laughed again.

When they'd calmed down Carol interjected, "Hey, do you want me to phone you back?"

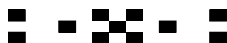
"Sure, if you want to." Carol's mom paid the long distance bills all the time. She made all these international calls for her work so she let Carol phone anywhere in the country for free. Carol was lucky.

"Yeah. I wanna talk for a while," Carol said.

"Ok. I'll pick it up quick."

"Ok, talk to you in a few though. I'm gonna go to the bathroom first. I just got in."

"Ok." They hung up. A few minutes later the phone rang again and they talked for who knows how long.



## **Chapter 18; the Rilly, Rilly, Rilly Big Meeting**

November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1994

They had never had a meeting this big before. Art knew because they had to pull extra chairs out of the storage closet to make seats. Everybody from the usual big meetings was there...as well as Newman from the head office and his secretary. Some of the guys from legal were here too with a few from the communications department, unseen since they moved to San Francisco. It was really, really big.

This made most people nervous. Was it good news? Was it bad news? How could a meeting get so big without people having any idea of what it was about?

Will cleared his throat but it was unnecessary as everybody in the room was already haunted by silent anticipation. He had discussed the subject of this meeting before with Newman. Newman had offered to break the news himself, 'to pull the wrath in his direction'. Newman said he didn't care if the staff didn't like him. He was used to making hard decisions. But Will had to do it himself. He was the ranchman, their caretaker. And it wasn't necessarily bad news...just BIG news. Anyway, he didn't want it to look like the decision was coming from the new head office. It was coming from him.

"We're selling SupraNet to USACoolConnect!," Will stated matter of factly. The room was all dropped jaws and blank stares.

"The reason we're selling to them," Will continued, "is because they already have a large stake in the on-line chat and networking business and, mostly, they agreed not to dismantle SupraNet if we sold it to them. They will just own and run it now. They offered \$95 million for the backbone and everything...which puts us just under breaking even on the whole project."

Henry looked over at Will...and then at Newman. They were selling SupraNet? He was convinced that this meeting was going to be about pay cuts. A meeting this big? How could it not involve pay cuts? Instead, head office had axed that cancer, lanced its spreading disease into oblivion. Maybe Newman wasn't so bad after all...

## Game Quest

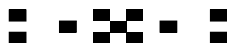
There was general muttering around the room. A lot of wows. A few nods of agreement. A few people who agreed but lamented the loss. Others said they were sorry it never worked out...and that it was good that we got away as clean as we did. But the general consensus, much to Will's relief, seemed to be agreement with the decision.

And then came the questions. Oh the questions! SupraNet was such a huge part of Madre. It would affect *everything*. And the questions lasted from that 10 a.m. meeting well until 3 p.m. Newman had foreseen this and ordered a caterer all the way up from San Francisco to handle lunch. Will thought this a little extravagant, but was at a loss for an alternative food supplier. No one in Berney catered.

The work day was a loss. After people came out of the meeting, the thick black moats of fatigue were obvious under their eyes. In those moats floated the crocodiles of surprise, reluctance, change, and finally, understanding. As people crowded out of the meeting room, put away the extra chairs and went home, Will stayed at the table and recapped the meeting with Newman. "I think that went pretty well," he said.

"You've got a good team," said Newman. "It's a big change. SupraNet was a key part of this company for the last four years."

"Yeah. I think it was the right thing to do." Will picked at one of the left-over sandwiches. But he was glad to have that over with. He wanted to get home, have a shower and hang out with his wife and children. Today was the end of an era for Madre. There was no dead weight about their feet anymore. After so many days of rainy travel, tomorrow they'd break through the mist, like golden rays of the sun, into the waving wheat of a new pasture.



## Chapter 19; the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Christmas

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1994

Art sat at his desk. As usual he was in the office just before almost everyone else. There were fewer and fewer people around these days. Some had already left for early holidays...those who weren't under immediate game deadlines. And it was the first year in a long time that Art could remember where everyone in the office hadn't been cramming in 16 hour days to get some game out for the all-important Christmas buying mania.

Outside the window behind him, the pine trees were capped with thick, wet layers of snow. The snow looked almost exaggerated, like the frosting on the gingerbread house in Art's living room. The branches looked so heavy that if a tree were to dump their burden as someone passed under they could be buried alive. And this white silence stretched for miles, across the treetops of Redwood forest.

Madre had its own mini-tractor to clear the snow on the driveway. There was always at least one or two of these major snow falls a year. They could have hired someone to come in and clear the driveway...but that would take a long time... especially during the winter months when they were sweating bullets to pump out a game and couldn't wait for some schmo to come clear the driveway. Besides, it was just cool to have a company tractor. It boosted morale. This way, on a major snow storm day, whoever got to work first got to use the snow tractor. There were a lot of early workers on a major snow day.

Art found it easier to work on his game in this weather. He enjoyed the winter... but it was also easier to fantasize about being in his game: in a tropical paradise, picking up exotic women. He could really get into the mood. But he was having trouble getting into the mood this morning. He'd just seen Newman's slick sports car pull up the road outside and park. It set him off thinking about that really, really, really big meeting last month...when they announced they were selling SupraNet. SupraNet was gone now, the property of USACoolConnect! or, at least, would be soon enough. When Art thought about why it was done, he guessed

## Game Quest

selling it was the right decision. But why did they have to sell it to *USACoolConnect!!* He hated their TV ads. They were such a cheesewhiz company. All those idiots on the screen shouting *wow!* and talking about how their lives had been drastically altered for the better by signing up, staring at the TV camera and reacting to *USACoolConnect!*'s service as if it were a theme park ride with a free orgasm at the end. Selling *SupraNet* to them was like selling a prized antique you couldn't keep anymore to someone you just knew wouldn't, *couldn't* appreciate it for its *true* value! Art hated their name too. *USACoolConnect!* They had more subscribers in countries outside of the US than inside... They were growing rapidly, giving a bad name to computer literacy everywhere.

Art had been sure the sale, when announced to the public, would sink the stocks. But, so far, they'd gone up. The shareholders must have seen it as dead weight. Still, Art liked *SupraNet*. He had believed in it. He was sorry to see it go.

He watched Newman come in through the front door, snow lightly dusting the shoulders of his long, black, wool trench coat. Art liked Newman generally...but there was something that bugged him. And a part of what bugged Art was that Newman was bald. Until now, Art had cornered the market on baldness at Madre. Art was skeptical of Newman's baldness. Newman wasn't funny. He wasn't really charming either, at least in any genuine way. He was a stiff. A business whiz with no personality. Newman was a bald-impostor! He should have to get a wig...or hair plugs. He was a faux cool bald guy. But Art saw through it. He knew it was superficial and phoney.

Newman entered the upstairs part of the building where the majority of the staff now worked, and disappeared behind the cubicles. Art decided to go hang out by the new cappuccino machine. It had become the new water cooler, where everyone gathered to chat...especially on these cool winter days. Someone had even developed, for the festive season, a way of using eggnog instead of milk in the coffee. That seemed kind of disgusting to Art. But everyone was always there now, making fancy coffee and chatting. Like Will had said, they had become game making baristas...in a few short weeks. Will and a few others were first trained on it when it first arrived. They learned the secrets of how to make the froof, and swizzle the wimmer-wammer juuuusssst so and create the steam. And then, in turn, they passed that knowledge unto others. And those others unto others until everyone was an expert and Will wasn't worried somebody was going to break it.

Newman rapped on the door to Will's office. Will looked up and



smiled. This was the last meeting he'd have with Newman before vacation. His trip was marked off on his calendar, just after Christmas. Twelve days to go.

They took their coffee and scones into the small room Will had set aside for these head office meetings. The staff often referred to it as the 'nice room.' That was a pretty fair description. It was just nice. Not fantastic. Pretty utilitarian...but nice. It had been nicer, but some stuff from it had been transferred down to HQ. It was a comfy room, though, narrow with a window facing the picturesque landscape of the mountain, and a round table perfect for placing lots of documents and beverages. The room was near the secretaries in case somebody needed something, but far away from the worker bees, so they wouldn't be noticed or disturbed. At this time of year, though, Will guessed the latter point didn't really matter. A lot of employees had taken advantage of the long, easy Christmas.

Newman draped his coat over the back of his chair and sat down. Will thought Newman had kind of a funny look for a man in his late thirties...especially for a successful business man of this age. Where was his gut? He looked like one of these thin manager guys who kept sneakers in his desk drawer at work and ran every lunch, ate at fancy, overpriced restaurants only to order lean, fatless meals. It seemed a strange contrast to Will. He pictured business men to be like himself: men who enjoyed a good steak and a soda. A middle aged man – he should have a gut. Not an unhealthy one, but one like Will's – slight. After all, Will was still in good shape. Being a cowboy ensured it. But this new guy he's a...a...city slicker. A dude. A suit. Will didn't have any feelings that he'd hired the wrong man for the job. In fact, this man was what a head office needed... but Will couldn't appreciate Newman on a personal level. He seemed too slick. But all this big business stuff needed someone slick and Will wasn't good at slick. He knew that the world needed slick, somehow, because there was so much of it. Even he needed slick for the head office, but it was odd to work with slick, to see slick out of its natural habitat.

They set to business and coffee.

"I just found out that we've had three movie offers from Tantomount Pictures to make a Swarthy Victor movie!" exclaimed Newman.

Will wasn't sure if this was a conversation starter or if Newman was going somewhere with this. "Four," Will elaborated.

"Really?" Newman was interested.

"Seven if you include the independent production houses that approached us."

"Why didn't you go forward on any of the offers?"

## Game Quest

"Well," Will laughed, "The scripts they sent were beyond terrible, some totally missing the point or humor and style of the Swarthy Victor games. But mostly the studios saw it as an opportunity to use the hard-earned popularity of our hero for their own profits at our expense. They wanted the rights to everything."

"Did you ever go into negotiations?" he asked.

"Naw. Not really. We talked in earnest a few times, but they were never serious from the beginning. They tried to screw us from the get-go so we just brushed them off. We're not really in the business of movies."

"Yeah. I think that's how Hollywood does business," Newman added, "But we should look into that. Think of the synergy. We could have books and action figures. I can have a team put on it, if you want." Newman was giddy at the thought.

"A team can look at it, if you want," Will cautioned. He wasn't really sold on the idea. Swarthy Victor wasn't a toy for kids. It was a dirty video game for adults. He could already picture Swarthy Victor gracing candy bar wrappers, leaping out of cereal boxes. The idea made him queasy.

"I think it would be a great opportunity to advertise," continued Newman. "I think we need to push that aspect of the business. It would really push up our sales. Especially when they've been sagging lately."

"I think the market's really saturated with adventure game clones right now," Will said. "It's a lot harder to break through...even as the industry leader."

"Mmmhmmm," Newman agreed. "I think the poor sales of HomoSapien Quest kind of highlighted the dangers present. We need to look at our image a bit. Focus on the things that will put us above the cheap clones."

Will never really obsessed over the Madre image. It seemed superfluous and besides the point to making great games. Great games sold games, not logos. But he was interested in what Newman had to say. "Like what?"

"I have a friend over at Paradise Film Entertainment. He has just hired a full time cool-hunter to help raise sales and project their image. I think it would be a great move for Madre. Madre has done a lot of noteworthy stuff...with just a little more brand recognition," Newman paused for effect, "we could really boost sales. Now I'm not talking about *hiring* a cool-hunter. But I'm pretty sure we could rent him from my friend's company for a while. Have him come in and look around. Pick his brain. Have him give us a suggestion or two. No need to re-invent the wheel, right?"

"A cool hunter?" Will was almost afraid to know.

"Yeah. That's kind of a silly name for them. It's what they call themselves professionally, though. But, basically, they're cool. They make a life out of knowing what's cool – what sells to kids, hip people – make a business of being on top of cool...of knowing what's hot or not."

"I don't know," began Will. "I think a lot of people in this department are pretty cool. Or, at least, not uncool. Our games are popular with kids...and adults."

"But the expendable income is with the kids," Newman argued. "Besides, all those other game companies, they're run by kids now. They're cool. They're up to date. We may be cool now. But we could be cooler. And if we don't do *something* we may be uncool soon. And that wouldn't be cool. Anyway, this is getting off the point. I'm not trying to suggest Madre needs to suddenly focus all its efforts on being cool. I'm not even sure that's a direction we need to go. But it is definitely something we should think about...and since I have some contacts with this guy, I can bring him in for little or no cost just to have a look. All I'm suggesting is that we listen to what he has to say. Then see if his advice is worth anything at all."

Will was reluctant to do this. It seemed so...business fad... Even if it was a legitimate business technique it seemed so...calculated...so phoney. To Will it even seemed uncool. Having to hire someone to make you cool? Will was never an ultra-cool guy, but he was pretty sure that hiring someone to make you cool was a very uncool thing to do. It was like paying someone to be your friend.

But this wasn't high-school, Will thought. This was big business. Newman knew this sort of stuff and it was what Will had hired him to do. Will wasn't sure if Newman was awaiting a yea or nay – or just making Will aware of what he was thinking.

"Look," said Will. "If you think this is a good idea, then let's give it a try. Certainly doesn't hurt to see what he thinks. Corporate image is headquarters' domain now..."

"Ok," Newman said with a smile. "I don't think I convinced you, but I do think it's a good step."

"Sure. Anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Yeah..."

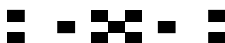
Will sipped his coffee and stared out at the snow now falling again. He wasn't really listening. He was thinking about his vacation to Hawaii.



# Part II

The Dark Lord;





## Chapter 20A; H-A-W-A-I-I spells F-U-N

December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1994

A thousand feet in the air a sign on the door said, 'For Emergency Use Only'. The statement relaxed Will: the ship was in the control of the Captain. Will was absolved of any responsibility. All he could do was sit back and let someone else run everything for a change. He felt as if he had left the whole world behind him, as if he had never owned Madre...or been tasked with this whole HQ thing. This vacation, he decided, was going to be good for everybody.

Will was a cautious man, though, and had left a contact number and itinerary with his reserve pilot, Art, the day before he left. But he made it very apparent that he did not want a call. "This number is for absolute Emergency Use Only. If my house is on fire. Or if the entire office crashes and the data is stuck on my hard-drive and you need the password and it absolutely cannot wait. Everything else can go to Newman. That's what he's for." Art had nodded. It was a good exercise for them, Will thought, to get used to offloading their problems onto Newman.

"When do you phone me?" Will had asked. "Never," replied Art. "Right," Will confirmed. The whole Christmas thing was over with now...and Will could have fun again, be stress free, finally spend some of all that money he'd earned. Take a break from providing for the family and finally spend some *time* with the family. There was nothing left to prepare now, except his tan, and Will was looking forward to that.

Beside him, a thousand feet in the air, Kendra was anxious. Heather was surly. Mark was trying to figure out how to spell Hawaii on the coloring mat the stewardess had given him.

Kendra hated the trip to and from vacations. That was the most work. Getting everyone organized. Packing. Making flights. Sitting in cramped seats. And now Kendra was even kind of irritated by her own anxiousness. She'd been so jittery the last couple of months. There'd been so much going on: rushing that game, creating and hiring for HQ, hiring/training Kathy for Fantasy Quest...and now having to think of a new game project. Kendra swore to herself that she wasn't going to even

start thinking about a new game until the vacation was over. But she still knew, in the back of her mind, she had NO idea what to do. All that time wanting to do something, *anything!* other than Fantasy Quest and now the creative side of her brain was completely dormant. Perhaps she was washed up. Dried out? That would almost be a relief, she thought. No pressure in being a failure.

She caught herself tightly gripping the sides of her seat in anticipation of all the running around they would have to do at landing. Kendra was really hoping this vacation would work. She'd been so neurotic lately. Ever since they started wrapping up FQ5. Game releases always made her anxious, but this one just spread over to the hiring of the new manager... and now trying to think of a new game idea. She felt that if she were a character in a book, she wouldn't like herself very much: always so worried, so stressed...which she didn't think was an accurate picture of her true self. What happened to the fun Kendra? The Kendra who put a lot of funny jokes in her earlier Fantasy Quest games? The creative, breezy Kendra she remembered. She knew that Kendra was hiding inside somewhere and hoped this vacation would call her out. But it had been so long...could Kendra find her old self? Catching herself now getting neurotic about *new* doubt, Kendra pulled up the command interface in her brain.

## RELAX

It seems to work. Slowly your body sinks back into the seat. The stewardess comes by.

## ORDER WINE

You flag the stewardess down and she brings you a glass of wine. You begin to feel more at home, despite sitting in an artificially heated, flying aluminum tube, hurtling through the sky at 1000 miles per hour. Aluminum. Isn't that what pop cans are made out of?



Heather was still surly. She'd worked herself into a good fit of surliness and was comfortable in it now, like a troll in a hole under a rock in a swamp. Heather wished she really was a troll in a hole under a rock in a swamp. Then people wouldn't ask stupid questions like "Why are you so grumpy?" They'd just say, "Don't mind her. She's a troll." And she could

## Game Quest

do it too, living deep in the recesses of her room. With a connection to KillNet she could just play for checks...and have food sent in...never speaking to anyone...or going on stupid vacations.

Already Heather could feel her deathmatch skills getting rusty. She should be practicing instead of wasting valuable practice time sitting here staring at the back of a chair, losing money. If she had to be sitting, she should at least be playing, refining her technique. If she had the laptop she could play. She hadn't even been surly until her dad said she couldn't bring the laptop. He told her that this was a vacation...that he was paying big bucks to take them all to a tropical paradise, to get out of small rooms and away from bright screens... "and that's what we are going to do." Dads can be so cruel. At least she'd be missing the first week of school after Christmas vacation. School was dull.

Mark had been kind of embarrassed that the stewardess had given him a coloring book with crayons. He'd just turned twelve. But, enjoying drawing, he made the best use of it. Yet he was aware that, as a seventh grader, coloring books were now out.

"Mom," he tugged at Kendra. She had her eyes closed and was lying back.

"Mmmhmm?" she didn't even open her eyes.

"Is this how you spell Christmas?"

She opened her right eye and looked down. "Sure is."

Mark was proud of himself. It was another one of those words that he always spelled wrong. But then he realized it was a combination of Christ and mas. He didn't know what mas meant, but if he divided words up into additions and subtractions, like math, it was easier.



The wine had worn off as the plane began its descent and Kendra couldn't stop staring at the back of this person's head about five rows down. She couldn't see anything but this person's neon orange hair sticking up over the seat. She kept hoping this guy would get up, or turn, so she could see his face...so she could tell herself she was just being paranoid...or nuts...but he never did. She knew she was being ridiculous but...was that Dan Destroyem? It was impossible...but then again, she'd thought she'd seen him coming through that revolving door in San Francisco. It had creeped her out. And this *really* looked like him...from behind at least. All she could see was the tip of this hair...but her imagination filled in the rest.

She focused on the hair all through landing and was hoping to rush



ahead during unloading to get a glimpse of even a side of the face...but was stalled by the people flooding into the aisles at landing. She tracked the man with her eyes as he got up but something was always in the way of her sight and he disappeared down the narrow pathway.

"Kendra?"

"Kendra?"

"Mom!" There was a tug at her sleeve. It was her son. He motioned with his eyes to Will.

"Kendra," Will said holding out her bag that he had taken down from the overhead compartment. She took it and said thanks. They exited the plane and entered Hawaii.



Will was the first into room 356. Unlocking the door with most of the luggage dangling about his arms he enthusiastically waltzed inside and began flipping switches and checking amenities. He tossed the luggage on the bed and went to the window, opened it and looked down below to the crystal pool, haunted by children and bathers, perfectly pale and sparkling in the sunlight.

"What a great view!"

The others had barely entered the room at this point. Will went to the bathroom for inspection. It was sparkling clean and tiled in that nice beige hotel bathrooms are tiled in. He pulled aside the curtain and looked at the bathtub that had a rough bottom so people wouldn't slip and fall and sue the hotel. He checked the sink. Five glasses wrapped in paper, a sign asking guests to "re-use towels to protect the environment" and mini soaps. Will loved mini-soaps. "Nice bathroom," he commented and returned to the main room. He sat down on the bed and tested its resistance. It was firm...but not too firm. Just the right hotel firmness. The corners of the bedsheets were tucked in like they had been vacuum sealed. Will always wondered how they got them so tight. He'd heard you could bounce a quarter off of beds like these. He'd have to remember to try this later.

Will tested the bedside lamp and scanned the card that described all the channels available on the TV. Not that he'd let anybody watch TV here. They hadn't come to watch TV. Still, it was great to see how many channels you were allowed. The rest of the family, just inside now, was sluggishly selecting their beds and hoisting their suitcases on top.

"Wow! Isn't this great? HAWAII kids! That's H-A-W-A-I-I!" Will said.

## Game Quest

Heather turned a sarcastic face to him and said, "We've been here before dad." Was she still mad at him for not letting her bring the laptop? He had brought her to Hawaii! Wasn't that good enough? *She was going to enjoy this whether she liked it or not!* he thought. And if *she* didn't, he was still going to enjoy it. He didn't care about the rest of them!

"Like you even remember it," Will retorted, sounding almost like a teenager, "You were four."

"I was nine."

"Same thing," he said, realizing it wasn't. "Ok," he corrected himself, "You are in HAWAII *again!* That's H-A-W-A-I-I H-A-W-A-I-I!"

Heather rolled her eyes. "I'd rather be on K-I-L-L-N-E-T."

Mark spelled this out in his head: KillNet. He was proud of the speed in which he did it. Math and science were more his forté. "Yeah!" said Mark enthusiastically. "HAWAII!"

"Yeah!" Will cheered back. "Let's all go to the pool!"

Mark needed no convincing. He started stripping bare and flung all his clothes out of his luggage, pulling his swimsuit from the bottom. Heather was annoyed. Mark's clothes were now all over the floor. She was annoyed by his weak, little naked body with its small penis and pasty white buttocks as he hurriedly jumped into his swimsuit...like it was some sort of race. She was annoyed by his sucking up to Dad and his enthusiasm.

Kendra was game too. She was exhausted...but they had finally made it. She didn't need to worry about anything now...and the kids were old enough she didn't need to worry about them getting themselves drowned. A rest by the pool with an alcoholic beverage sounded heavenly. "I'll go too," she said, pulling out her swimsuit and going into the bathroom to change. Will joined her in the bathroom and they emerged a few moments later, ready for sun and swimming, still wearing the leis they had received at the airport. (Heather had tucked hers into her pocket as soon as they boarded the bus.)

Now Heather was really annoyed. She wanted to go to the pool too, but now that everyone was doing it, it would seem like she agreed with them, or wanted to be here which, for the record, SHE DID NOT! They might think she wasn't mad at them or actually liked them or something. But she still wanted to go to the pool.

"Are you going to stay here Heather?" Kendra asked.

"I'll come down in a minute." That was a good answer. Noncommittal. Stubborn and independent. Heather felt proud of herself.

"Ok, we've got the key." And they all stepped out with their towels

into the fuzzy carpeted hallway and made their way off. About five minutes later, Heather changed and went down and sat on the other end of the pool, away from her family, relaxing underneath the subtle shade of palm trees.

She thought a little bit about the big online chat/party after the Death-0-Rama a few weeks ago. The CamelToes Clan placed an extremely good 3<sup>rd</sup> and, if the promoters were to be believed, a check for \$500 would be arriving in the mail sometime in January. There was a lot to reflect on – the excellence of their playing, the size of the prize, some of the more memorable moments of the match, such as two members from the same team accidentally nuking each other with rocket launchers and dropping their team two points down the ladder. And as fun as the game had been, and as cool as winning 3<sup>rd</sup> place was – not to mention the money Heather would receive – all this paled in comparison to the after-game experimental e-party. Heather, felt, for a moment, that she belonged. That she was doing and exploring new things, discovering life, somehow, instead of just being another person stuck in the woods, dragged on her parents' vacations, unable to direct her own life. It was nice to have other people to talk to. Adam Clayburn had been there, as he'd threatened, and remembered her. They'd had a nice chat and, despite living up to his reputation for cockiness, he was actually kind of a nice person, Heather thought. At least Adam had something to be cocky about, not like the losers at school who thought they were AMAZING because they wore their pants ten times too big. He liked to talk about programming a lot. That was kind of boring. Her dad and his friends always talked about that stuff, too, but Adam had a sort of charm in his nerdiness, she thought, peering up at the sky through the palm fronds. She had forgotten about her family now, and so doing, forgave them their sin of being related to her. Now she even wanted to spend time with them and joined her brother and dad at play in the pool until they were all really hungry.

They found a Mexican restaurant not far from the hotel and sat down to eat. Now everyone was in a relatively good mood and enjoying each other's company. A family. Brought together by the desire for food and the possibility of getting it.

Will ordered burritos. Heather chose chimichangas. Mark took a taco salad. Kendra requested a quesadilla. When the waiter placed the quesadilla down in front of Kendra's nose she looked at it and thought, *maybe I could make a game about a quesadilla*. She laughed at the thought. She wanted to do something different. That was definitely different... but, nonetheless, ridiculous. God she was getting desperate... reaching

## Game Quest

everywhere for ideas and coming up empty.

### THINK OF EXCELLENT GAME IDEA

You can't.

Kendra was getting frustrated with her inability to come up with a new idea, actually. But right now she was too hungry to care.

### EAT QUESADILLA

You can and do. You get 3 points.



The next day in her robe Kendra joined the rest of her family out on the hotel lawn after a cool morning swim. The waitress was already away with the order when Kendra arrived at the table. Will had taken the liberty of ordering for his wife. He knew what she wanted. He always knew what she wanted for breakfast.

"I ordered you grapefruit and cereal," he squinted up at her.

*Perfect*, she thought, kissed his forehead and sat down, drying the rest of her hair with the ends of her robe. Now that they had a cappuccino machine at work the only thing they needed was a cool pool, Kendra thought. Think of the increased productivity that would result from brisk breaks in a cold pool. She'd heard that they'd had hot tubs over at Atari before Warner Bros. bought them out, fired Nolan Bushnell and made everyone wear ties to work. How can you design a game in a tie? But then, her husband loved his tie...so there must something to it. But, then again, he didn't design games.

She smiled across the table to her son who was fidgeting with something. His hair stuck up in tufts from a thorough sleep and, at that moment, Kendra was charmed by her son's cuteness. Heather, remarkably, was there too. As most scientific journals will tell you, surly teenagers don't get up before noon. *And here is a remarkable occurrence! How lucky we are to see how the teenager reacts outside of its natural habitat. Away from its screens and phones and 'keep out' signs the teenager has no reason to stay up late. The natural, disconcerting effect is that the teenager finds herself awake at such an awkward hour that she is unable to cope. Her body is awake, but her mind is not.* Kendra could hear this documentary running in the back of her head. Heather looked like she had been tossed into a sack,

beaten up and dumped out. She was like a zombie from one her games: staring forward blankly, mouth slightly agape, body faintly swaying as the brain struggled under minimal capacity to keep balance. Kendra knew the best response to Heather's condition was to say nothing. Food would come. And, as everyone knows, food is the only antidote to the teenager's ills. It's nice to have everyone at the breakfast table like this, Kendra thought.

The sun was just reaching over the palm trees now – lighting the table with diamond flecks refracted from cutlery, glasses and watches... accompanied by an ambient soundtrack of clinking knives and forks.

The waitress returned with a large tray while another set up a small collapsible table from which the breakfast was served to each of them. As Heather's plate of sausages and hash browns was set in front of her, Kendra remarked, thinking herself funny, "Some flesh for the zombie?" As soon as she said it, she knew she shouldn't have and awaited the cold 'oh mom, you're so uncool' non-response. Instead Heather smiled and grumbled, "Fleeesssh!" Everyone smiled and dug in.

Will and Mark started talking about what *else* they were going to do while they were here. By the tone of Mark's voice it sounded as if he'd seen it all in one day and couldn't fathom what else there would be to do other than hang around here for two weeks. Kendra sank her jagged grapefruit spoon deep into the yellow semicircle. As she brought the sun-sparkled, pinkish-orange flesh to her mouth, she suddenly halted, the moist fruit on the verge of her lips. Framed between the shoulders of her husband and son, she saw, at a table several yards away, hair the color of her grapefruit. A muscular man in a white tank top sat there drinking a beer for breakfast. It was Dan Destroyem. Kendra's heart leaped. For sure! Definitely for sure it was him. Kendra put the fruit to her mouth and swallowed, barely chewing.

She looked around the rest of the table. But no one seemed to notice. They carried about the conversation, oblivious to the nonsensical, impossible occurrence. Kendra continued eating, staring downwards for a few moments, trying to calm herself. About a minute later she looked up. He was still there. Somebody asked her something and she forced herself to answer, but her eyes kept slipping over Will's shoulder to Dan Destroyem. Was she seeing things? At one point Will, noticing Kendra's constant shift in gaze, turned around in his seat and looked back. He didn't seem to notice anything unusual and, returning his gaze to Kendra, smiled.

Kendra picked at her breakfast while her family embarked on a

## Game Quest

sunny conversation and when she last looked up in that direction Dan Destroyem was staring *right* at her. Or at least, it seemed like it through those dark sun-glasses he always wore. She couldn't break the gaze...and then he grinned, a devilish grin that made her skin crawl. A grin like the eyes of a predator sizing up its meal. She could feel the burning heat of his pupils emanating from behind those dark sunglasses...

"Ow! Mom! Mom!!" Kendra broke away. Heather was wiping her eyes. "You squirted me right in the eye!" Kendra looked down at her grapefruit, back at her daughter and apologized.

"Geeze," said Heather. "Of all the places that squirt could go it goes right into my eye." Heather laughed. Kendra looked back at the far away table but Dan Destroyem was gone.



Kendra had finished her novel that afternoon by the pool and took an excursion down the muggy streets to a book store a few blocks away. She checked the mystery section to see if Kathy Willis had another book out. She knew she hadn't because...well, Kendra had hired her. But she wanted to look at the books to see if she could understand how Kathy got her inspiration. She was disappointed to notice that the store only carried Kathy's first book...not the second one that Kendra had so admired. Kendra half-heartedly flipped through books all over the store, hoping to catch something, a spark that would set fire to her creativity... but nothing. This was an odd position to be in. When Madre had first started out she hadn't had any problems thinking of ideas. It was hard to pick the best ideas from all the ones pouring out of her brain every few minutes. She'd never had any problems dreaming up sequels for Fantasy Quest either. Why was she so blocked now?

Kendra picked up a book she figured would entertain her and headed back to the hotel.

Passing across the large lawn of the hotel she saw *him* again, several palm trees ahead of her, walking slowly, coolly. She followed him across the grass and out behind the hotel. But when she got around the corner he wasn't anywhere to be seen. Just the soft breeze and the sights and sounds of people soaking up their vacation like the atmosphere was a stress sponge, sucking the strain out of their tired, overworked bodies, redistributing it into the atmosphere.

Kendra shook her head to rid herself of this phantom obsession and turned to go when a clammy hand came up over her mouth and jerked her backwards. She was pressed up against somebody. Somebody hard.

A deep, hoarse voice whispered in her ear, hot, sweaty, wet. "Your ass is grass."

Under normal circumstances, this pathetic quip would have made Kendra burst out laughing, but in this one she was terrified. Terrified, particularly, by the realism of it. His voice, that deep, raspy, ridiculously tough cartoonish taunt, was directly from the game...and if Kendra hadn't felt the breath on her earlobe, she would have believed she'd been grabbed from behind by a computer speaker. In the game, Dan Destroyem was played for laughs, but here he was horrifying, because it proved that Kendra wasn't crazy (or really was!) – it proved he existed!

The hand slipped away and Kendra waited for a moment...but nothing followed. When she summoned up the courage to turn around Dan was gone. He was nowhere in sight and she was left with the sound of her rapidly beating heart.



Kendra stood in front of the ice machine humming in the silence of the hallway. She wasn't sure why she was there. She was just staring at it with the hotel ice bucket in her hand. Kendra had always wondered what these things were for. Who ever needed ice in their room? Those little drinks you could pull out of the little fridge (whoever actually used those either?) were already cold... And yet, here she was now, staring at an ice machine. Obviously she'd come for ice...but she couldn't, for the life of her, remember why.

But that didn't really matter, she guessed.

GET ICE

You dig the bucket deep into the vast oasis of ice. You now have a bucketful of ice.



Kendra turned left and looked down the hallway. It was silent and vacant. She turned right and looked down the other hallway. They looked identical. She peered down the third hallway. Ditto. This was a conundrum. Which way was the way back to her room? Did she even remember the room number? She started down the left hallway. But after passing several doors it felt like the wrong direction and she turned back.

Halfway back she casually turned her head to glance behind her. But

## Game Quest

there was nobody there, no face to go with the footsteps she'd heard. Kendra continued on and when the footsteps returned she looked again and there he was, following her.

She pretended like she hadn't noticed him...or cared...and continued at her pace, forcing herself to keep it calm and steady. He couldn't be there. If she turned around in a minute...he would be gone...just like the other times. But she didn't want to turn around...because he *might* be there. As she approached the end of the hallway she stared hard at the reflection in the painting's glass frame hanging on the wall. He was still behind her...and closer. Kendra turned the corner and then went quickly down a flight of stairs hoping to lose him. She could hear the stairwell door above her re-open as she descended. Popping out on the third floor she kept her slow pace, but was now even more agitated. She didn't hear footsteps. Had she lost him? She turned around again...and there he was! Further behind now, but still following determinedly. Now she was starting to worry.

She ducked down a hallway, then another and went up the stairs again...but the footsteps followed. Turning a corner she broke into a run, hoping to get around another corner before he could see her again. But the bucket of ice in her hand rattled loudly and as she turned the corner she could tell that he was running too.

Kendra panicked and ran as fast as she could, nearly stumbling as she turned to look back. He was coming at her full speed and she saw him reach his hand up behind his back to pull out a massive Gatling gun that had been strapped there. It bounced up and down in his arms, dancing in opposition to the ups and downs of his run. Kendra couldn't imagine how he'd gotten that thing through airport security. She heard a high, whining sound and, just as she dove around the corner, heard the loud bass thumping that coincided with hundreds of pock-marked explosions blasting out of the wall. The thumping stopped and the whining slowed. Short controlled bursts.

Kendra raced down the hall and leapt around the second corner. The whining of the machine gun barrel spinning had started up but stopped as she had already made it around the corner. She could hear Dan Destroyem's footsteps coming steadily up the carpet. She had an idea.

PUT ICE ON CARPET

Quickly, you dump some ice onto the carpet as you run.



As Kendra turned the corner she turned back to see the muzzle of Dan Destroyem's machine-gun preceding him around the last corner. The ice didn't work. He missed most of it and even the cubes he did step on simply sank into the carpet.

Kendra burst open the stairwell door. The only chance she had was to make it to the lobby. Luckily, he couldn't fire very far in the stairwell. As she rounded the second flight of steps she had another idea.

## PUT ICE ON STAIRS

You cleverly spill the ice on the cement stairs behind you.

Dan's steps were now echoing down the cement stairwell. Just as Kendra was nearing the door to the lobby she heard a loud 'Whoa!' followed by a short silence that should have been filled by Dan's footsteps. Instead, there was a loud crack and a clang followed by a 'Bbwaaahhhhhh!!' It was the pain sound...just like when Dan was getting shot in the game. She hoped he had landed on his back on the hard, jagged cement stairs.

Kendra burst through the lobby at full speed, dropping the bucket on the marble floor. No one paid any mind as she ran for dear life. Out in the open she quickly found a place to hide and watched the front of the hotel. A few moments later Dan Destroyem emerged, looking around and looking menacing, that fat, phallic machine-gun at waist height. No one seemed to pay any attention to him...as if he wasn't there.

He walked around the corner of the hotel. Kendra wasn't sure what to do. Think! She had to think. Maybe she could sneak back in and make it to the room...if she could find it. Would the kids be disappointed that she didn't get ice? But getting back to the room seemed really risky. She was safe here...as far as she could tell. What she needed now was a Transvernacular Obfuscator.

After ten or fifteen minutes she nervously decided to risk re-entering the building. She was no more than ten feet away from the pool when the ground suddenly began spitting up around her. The bullets made a rapid, dull thud as they entered the ground. This was it for sure. She had nowhere to run...and he was right behind her with automated artillery. The only direction she could go was towards the water. She couldn't stop and go around it...so she just approached it faster and faster, getting ready to jump and knowing that she could not possibly make the four yard leap. But as she neared the edge of the pool a man with a hairy beer gut floated into the middle of the pool on an inflatable, relaxing and

## Game Quest

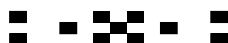
drinking. If she could jump far enough she could land with one foot on him and do a double jump to the other side of the pool! It might work. She had no choice...and no more time to think about it as she hit the edge of the pool at full speed.

Kendra leaped into the air. The man with the beer gut looked up at her in horror as this fully clothed, terrified woman flew towards him. He seemed more terrified of her than of the bullets now zipping into the water. She placed her foot out to land on his gut, missed him by at least two feet and splashed deep into the water.

Suddenly she was on a lounge chair beside the pool. Had she surfaced already? Why was she lying down? She saw her son Mark running away from her with a bucket in his hand, laughing. She was in her swimsuit now too...soaked, head to toe. Dan Destroyem didn't seem to be anywhere, nor the fat man in the pool...only her daughter, who smiled at her. Instinctively, Kendra smiled back. *Did she want the ice?* Kendra wondered. At that point she clued in that the whole thing had been a fitful dream. Even the breakfast. They'd eaten breakfast at a small restaurant just outside the hotel this morning...not by the pool. And they'd been visiting the USS Arizona memorial all morning, not lazing about the hotel. Kendra let unfurl a giant sigh of relief into the moist air.

Even through the water still drizzling off of her, Kendra could feel the sweat that had been beading on her forehead. Mark had splashed her awake. She should have been mad about this...but was relieved to have been wakened. What a hideous dream. Definitely bizarre. What would other people think if they knew she was having nightmares about Dan Destroyem? It was silly. And he was hardly a threatening character ...just macho. Kendra laughed at herself and smiled at her son as he ran off to resume horsing around. Kendra returned to her book, letting her heart rate slowly return to normal as the sun pressed down.

But deep inside she was still terrified. Cautiously, she looked around. The resort seemed normal. She knew she was awake now. Dan Destroyem didn't really exist, right?



## Chapter 20B; insert disk #2 to continue

January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1995

Kendra slipped the key into the lock, turned the knob and was infinitely thankful for the cool rush of air that came through the window as she entered. All that lying in the sun had cooked her skin. What an afternoon. She'd gone down to the pool to relax but had away with a terrible nightmare *and* a sun-burn. It was as if she suddenly had the luck of Swarthy Victor. Funny about the window, though. Kendra had been the last one out and didn't think she had left it open.

Dropping her towel on the bed Kendra stepped into the bathroom to assess the damage to her skin. Well, it was pretty red. She burnt easily. But it didn't seem to hurt when she touched it. Kendra reached for the moisturizing cream she had in her cosmetics bag and then noticed that half the stuff had been pulled out and strewn across the counter. Suddenly she was nervous. Had someone been in the room? Or maybe it was Mark? But what would Mark want with her cosmetics bag?

Kendra was worried now. Peering out the bathroom door she quickly returned to the bed and slid on a pair of jeans over her swimsuit. The room seemed only slightly messy, the mess typical of hotel rooms, and Kendra seemed to be the only one in it.

Kendra walked cautiously over to the window to see if anyone could have gotten through. Nobody was behind the curtain, which danced gently in the breeze suggesting shapes of assassins. She stepped closer to peer over the window ledge.

There was a sudden roar as Dan Destroyem flew up in front of her. A wide grin stretched across his face.

"Peek-a-boo" he growled, drifting from side to side as the transparent jet flames streaming from his sleek silver jet-pack quivered behind him. Looking through the vapor Kendra saw the resort below ripple and warp as if beneath boiling water.

Dan jerked his heavy machine gun from his side, cocking off the safety. Kendra dove sideways, landing between the wall and the bed, the whining of the gun barrel starting up before she hit the ground. The unopened

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half of the window shattered as bullets ripped through and entered the far wall. As Dan strafed the opening the bullets chewed through the standard hotel décor: bedside lamp, comforter, mass reproduced flower painting...

As soon as the barrel began to wind down Kendra leaped over the bed and out the door, tearing off down the hallway towards the stairs.

She was halfway to the end of the hall when Dan Destroyem hovered into view outside the window at the end. Kendra's heart was racing now. He jerked his gun up again and Kendra, having no choice, jumped down the laundry chute beside her. She felt pleased that she fit but quickly realized racing face first down a metal shaft wasn't much preferable to being riddled with bullets, especially when you are on the sixth floor. Luckily the drop wasn't far, perhaps ten feet, and Kendra landed in a big pile of laundry – some sort of maid's room.

Kendra ran for the only door. It opened and she ran down the dank utility stairs. Both doors on the way to the bottom greeted Kendra with the disappointingly familiar *chunk* of a locked door. The door at the very bottom opened up into a pitch black basement. She could barely tell where she was until her eyes adjusted, but by the smells, sounds and subtle gleams off nearby bins and machinery, Kendra guessed it was some sort of utility room. As Kendra wildly searched for an exit she realized the basement storeroom was like a massive, empty dead end. The first door marked 'exit' was locked. Kendra couldn't open the next door she found no matter how she tried. She felt the disturbing microwaves of panic shivering up her skin towards her brain. He would be here any minute! He was going to find her and she was lost! A few minutes later, feeling her way around the wall, she found another door and yanked. It opened.

*Thank god!*, Kendra thought and ran inside, only to be greeted by a wall right in front of her...and immediately to her left and right. A closet! Her heart gave out and she fell to her knees, sobbing quietly. She didn't have her strength anymore. It was only a matter of moments before that door opened and she was riddled with bullets. No more making games. No more mother for her kids.

It was like a bad dream.

A bad dream? It had to be a dream. She knew...because jet-packs don't exist. Do they? She was pretty sure they didn't exist. Her recollection seemed hazy. And Dan Destroyem was from a game... That seemed right...somehow...or maybe she just dreamed that. Or maybe Dan Destroyem was based on a real life person... But why did he want to

kill her? It didn't make any sense. It was a dream. She was sure now. It couldn't be anything else.

And if it was a dream, she could change it, right? She should be able to wake herself up. But she couldn't. She closed her eyes and thought hard...tried to remember herself in a field of flowers...anywhere but here...and just as she was starting to believe it, she opened her eyes. She was still in the closet. Frustrated and angry, the tears began to flow again.

"WAKE UP!!!!" she screamed in terrified frustration at the command interface in her mind, but then quickly shut up. Fuck. That was a dumb idea. Her anguished voice burst through the closet door and echoed around the walls of the basement...slowly fading away. Kendra waited in silence. Then she heard a door unlock and open. And then footsteps. She didn't know if it was him...but she would assume that it was.

It was then that she noticed the cool breeze at her side. Feeling down the wall she found a vent. She tried to pull it open, but it wouldn't budge. It was screwed shut.

## CHECK INVENTORY

**You have:** The room keys  
Change  
Staple remover from Will's office

Kendra had an idea.

## USE STAPLE REMOVER ON VENT

How?

## USE STAPLE REMOVER ON SCREWS

Opening the staple remover you carefully and quietly unscrew the two screws holding the vent in place. Nice work!

Quietly placing the vent beside her, Kendra squeezed into the opening. At least she still had a thin body. Buried in the ground, the vent didn't bend or make noise like one in the ceiling would, luckily for her. Kendra crawled several meters and stopped, listening to the footsteps. For sure it was him. *Clunk! Clunk!* He was trying to open doors. A few minutes later

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she heard the door of the closet open. There was a slight pause and the door closed again. The footsteps moved away. After a few more minutes of this a door opened and the footsteps didn't return.

Kendra, who had been tensely holding her head up to listen, let it collapse into her arms, simultaneously letting out a sigh of relief. Sigh is, perhaps, too small a word for the weight that blew off of her...it could have pushed a sailboat across the ocean. The hard beating of her heart against her chest was now the only sound in this narrow tube. She closed her eyes and rested.

It was really cold in here with the cool wind rushing through and she began to shiver, too tired to crawl out. In a way she felt stuck...but she didn't care. She started to fall asleep. Was she dying from the cold?

Kendra woke up. She was freezing. The clock on the bedside table burned 3:18 a.m. into the back of her eyeballs. The kids were asleep in the bed next to her. Looking to her right, she found Will cuddling all the covers like a baby at its mother's breast. Beyond him the open balcony door blew the pale curtain about. The wind coming through the window was biting cold...or no...it was just blowing across the sweat that had gathered under Kendra's arms, between her legs and on her forehead. She was shivering but noted, with some relief, that the window hadn't been shattered with bullets and as she went over to slide the door shut she was also pleased to remember that they had been placed on the third floor and not the sixth, as she had dreamt.

Kendra unwrapped a glass in the bathroom for a drink. The sunburn she'd gotten a few days ago when she'd fallen asleep by the pool was going away, thankfully. Her eyes were bloodshot. They had been here five days already and she was being terrorized by nightmares. This was nonsense. She hadn't come here to stress herself out. If she was going to have dreams, couldn't they be inspiring, at least? And having dreams about Dan Destroyem no less... a cheesy game character... he couldn't be less frightening! How juvenile.

But he was scary in her dreams. Absolutely terrifying. Well fuck him, she thought, angry at herself. She was tired of running. If Dan Destroyem wanted to terrorize her, she was going to give him a run for his money. She took another drink of water.

Taking off her pajamas she ran water over her face, under her armpits and breasts, dried off and put her pajamas back on. Turning off the lone bathroom light, Kendra returned to bed, reclaimed a substantial amount of sheets from her husband, and snuggled up to him for warmth. He was always so hot when he slept.



They were at the pool again. It had been a few days since they'd last been here. The family had been busy taking in attractions...the volcano, god statues, museums, stuff that was blown up years ago. But as they had gotten tired of the pool and beach after the first few days, they had grown tired of excursions and returned to the pool again. It was less crowded now, since all the seasonal tourists had returned to work...to their cold parts of the world.

Kendra sat by the pool, soaking up the sun and a mystery novel. The novel was kind of disappointing. Interesting...but fairly typical. In the pool Will and Heather and Mark were playing some sort of treasure hunt game. One would hide the hotel key in the pool while the others would close their eyes. Then it would be 'hotter' or 'colder' until someone found it. Whoever found it got to hide it next. This was the sort of game, Kendra figured, that could only lead to paying fifty dollars to replace a set of hotel keys. Mark had hidden the key a moment ago and they hadn't been able to find it. They were looking everywhere.

"Colder," Mark said to Heather. "Colder. REALLY COLD! Papa's really hot," he said. They searched a bit more, diving under the pool. Looking into the pool vents, in the pots around the pool. All the while they seemed to be getting hotter and cooler... seemingly at random. Even Kendra was curious now where it was. They'd been looking for about five minutes...which was by far the longest time so far.

Will and Heather were teaming up now, confused out of their minds, and did a full scan of the pool, walking up and down, peering closely into the water, 'hotter' and 'colder' fluxuating randomly. Kendra suddenly realized where the key was and shook her head at the stupidity of it all. Heather and Will were going to be sooooo mad when they finally figured it out.

They were so mad, in fact, that the argument over it and the chastising of Mark, popped up periodically through the day...as if a running theme. Mark had hidden the keys in his swim trunks.

"Of course you can't hide it there!"

"Why not? You didn't say it was against the rules."

"It's a game...it's supposed to be findable, Mark," Will said, sounding like the calm advising dad from a fifties family TV program. "The game loses its fun if it becomes impossible."

"Well, you found it."

"God, and who wants to touch the key after it's been nestled in your

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crotch for half an hour...”

“Heather, please,” Kendra commented as she fed a forkful of pasta into her mouth.

“Well that’s what he did!” she retorted.

“It’s chlorinated,” Mark defended. Will and Heather rolled their eyes. Kendra rolled her eyes at all of them.



She’d taken Will’s bird-watching binoculars and was squatting behind a fat palm tree. She was invisible. No one would see her in this hidden corner of the hotel grounds, near the obtuse power generator. The palm tree and generator covered her well, the corner of the hotel wall protected her from a rear attack. From here she could survey a large portion of the grounds.

Kendra wasn’t aware of how long she’d been waiting here, but it was quickly paying off. His orange hair was like a beacon, a lighthouse warning of imminent danger. Kendra spotted him the instant he entered the hotel gate, casually making his way towards the hotel. He didn’t appear to be on the hunt. She ducked behind different palms and fronds as he moved, getting closer to him, hoping he was headed for his room.

Sneaking towards the hotel doorway Kendra saw him take his key from the concierge. Taking position behind a potted plant she watched Dan Destroyem enter the elevator. When the door closed Kendra watched the elevator lights climb to five. Recalling the elevator, she entered and hesitantly pressed five. The carriage jolted and started ascent. The elevator buttons counted down to Kendra and Dan’s next encounter.

The elevator stopped and Kendra pressed herself up against the corner. Her hands were shaking. After a short pause the elevator doors separated onto a quiet and empty floor lobby. Cautiously, Kendra peered out. Nobody. A door slammed down the hallway to her left. Creeping around the corner she found no one was there, but the sound had definitely come from this direction. Ducking behind a potted plant Kendra waited.

About ten minutes later a door down that hallway opened and orange hair emerged from behind the door. Kendra quickly counted the number of doors down before slipping down another hallway and hiding behind a couch. She peered over the top and a few moments later Dan came into the elevator lobby. He was wearing only shorts, with a towel slung over his shoulder. They were the trendiest shorts too, really short with a colorful pineapple decoration, tied with a white string at the front. Had he not been her deadly enemy, Kendra might have been pleased by the



sight of this tanned, well muscled, orange topped young man in tight shorts. But instead she just hoped he would get into the elevator and disappear.

Dan pressed the button, put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle his theme song from the game. The elevator doors opened and Dan stepped in. But Kendra hadn't counted on him turning around to select his floor. She ducked as quickly as she could but was sure he had seen her. She cursed her stupidity. She sat there, hunched over, her eyes held tightly shut, for several long moments, waiting for the death blow that was sure to come. When nothing did she carefully opened one eye, and then another, expecting to see Dan Destroyem's shoes there in front of her face, toying with her. But there was nothing. Carefully, and expecting certain doom, she peered around the edge of the couch. Nobody. A careful, cursory check of the halls revealed the same.

*PHEW!* Kendra moved swiftly down the left hallway to the seventh door. This was his room. She was sure of it. Room 563. Mission Successful!

She reached for the door handle and turned. *Clunk!* It was locked. Hmmm. Too bad. But this was a contingency she had prepared for.



"You're lucky I'm not in charge of this hotel or you would have been fired. Very, very fired. Just be thankful Mrs. Wrigsworth has decided not to sue."

"But I'm not even the ice guy, I'm supposed to— "

"That doesn't matter. You do the jobs you're told to do and do them right, Mister, or..." The snooty concierge made an 'off with your head' motion and a hiss.

The bellhop nodded and sighed.

"It's even more important now that we get ice up there because of her hip. I can't imagine how swollen it must be. Just be thankful nobody else slipped on it! Don't drop any this time." The bellhop, biting back his lip to hold forthcoming insults, nodded and walked off. The concierge turned to Kendra, waiting next in line at the front desk.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. Our ice machine on the second floor broke down. Now what can I do for you today?" The concierge offered his best customer service smile. To Kendra it seemed he had a very big head.

TALK TO CONCIERGE

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"Room 563 please," you say confidently.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You must be mistaken. That's Mr. Destroyem's room," the concierge replies. "Are you sure you have the right number?"

Mr. Destroyem? "That's right," you say. "I'm his sister."

The concierge's attitude suddenly, almost imperceptibly, changes as he eyes you up and down...feeling the power that must emanate from behind that desk. "May I see some ID please?"

"I don't have any. It's in the room." Great. This is all you need. A concierge out of a Swarthy Victor game. You'll have to remind Art Loel to stop messing with your dreams.

"I'm sorry. But I don't believe you. I really doubt that Mr. Destroyem would rent the deluxe love suite with his sister."

The concierge turns away snottily and looks busy behind the desk, forgetting you ever existed.

### TALK TO CONCIERGE

"Yes, how may I help you?"

"Room 563 please."

"I'm sorry, that's Mr. Destroyem's room."

"I know. I met him out by the pool. He wants me to slip into his room and slip into something more comfortable."

The concierge smiles knowingly. "Don't you wish! You're a little old to be Mr. Destroyem's type, sister." He turns back to his business behind the desk.

Too old?! What did he mean by *that*?! She was barely 39. Is that too old?! You are getting very frustrated.

### JAB PEN IN CONCIERGE'S EAR

Grabbing the ink pen you plunge it into the side of the concierge's head. He lets out a high pitched wail and flings his arms about yelling 'Security! Security!' Two overly large Hawaiian thugs come and drag you off to jail...or worse. Hmmm. That wasn't such a good idea. Too bad, and you were getting along so well. You got 56 out of a total 134 points. Unfortunately, your game is over. You have three options. Restore, Restart, Quit.

### RESTORE

"May I help you?" the concierge asks. You shake your head no and he returns to his business.

#### LOOK DESK

This is where they keep the keys.

#### LOOK KEYS

The keys are right behind the desk. You could just reach over and take them.

#### TAKE KEYS

"Ah ah! That's my job. What room please?"

"563"

"I'm sorry, that's Mr. Destroyem's room." The concierge returns to his fake working behind the desk. If only you could distract him somehow.

Kendra turned around in frustration. She sat on a bench by a potted frond and pondered her predicament. Maybe she needed another item? In front of her the berated bellhop carefully carried buckets of ice to the elevator. Kendra suddenly had an idea. It might work.

She quickly headed up to the second floor and over to the ice machine.

#### GET BUCKET OF ICE

You take a bucketful of ice. It's free after all, you should abuse it!

Kendra returned to the lobby and walked into the middle of the marble floor.

#### DUMP ICE ON FLOOR

You subtly dump some ice and water into the middle of the floor. The ring of the elevator sounds behind you. Better get out of the way...

Standing by the sitting area you see an old lady limp out of the elevator, aided by a younger man. She has a pack of ice pressed to her hips.

Suddenly, the concierge is out from behind his desk and walking along side Mrs. Wrigsworth.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry Mrs. Wrigsworth. I just wanted to say how

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grateful we are that you pitied us and decided not to sue. We will make it up to you.”

“You just better make sure it doesn’t happen again!” cautions the old lady.

“Oh, I assure you Madam, we have made every effort to right the situation. The worker responsible will be severely disciplined.”

“You know I’m paying a good deal to stay at this hotel. One is not supposed to break their hip in a hotel they paid to relax in.”

“I know, Mrs. Wrigsworth and—”

And then her good foot, carrying most of her weight now, steps down on a cube of ice sending both her legs flying out from under her. Time seems to freeze as the concierge looks on in horror, his faced twisted into an exaggerated ‘Oh no!’ Mrs. Wrigsworth’s expression is that of half-surprise, half ‘it figures’, but mostly of ‘that’s enough!’ The young man beside her does his best to maintain his balance... Time starts up again and the lady hits the floor with a loud, muffled thud causing, no doubt, Richter-like ripples along the plump skin beneath her baggy clothes.

What follows is an incredible scene in which Mrs. Wrigsworth berates the concierge and explains how she is going to sue and the concierge tries to shirk responsibility while begging her not to press charges.

“It’s the help. We’ll have him fired immediately!”

“And who is in charge of the help, Mr. Tillnik?” she retorts, assuring him she will have his job too. It serves him right for being such a snob, you think as you make your way to the counter and snag the key to room 563.

Slipping into the elevator, you are off to floor five, where it is much quieter.



The inside of the Deluxe Love Suite was quite something. Impressive... but suitably tacky. Although there was only one door leading in, the room was the size of three and the first thing one noticed was a large, heart-shaped Jacuzzi only feet from the wide window that peered out over the hotel grounds. There were a few girly magazines lying about, most by the pool next to empty cans of beer and a half-consumed bottle of champagne now half-floating in a bucket of tepid water. The carpet was pink and quasi-erotic paintings adorned the wall which, unlike the magazines, came with the suite.

Kendra began to snoop. She first rummaged through Dan’s suitcase: White tank top, ammunition, trendy shorts, white tank top, blue jeans,

white tank top, orange hair dye, a +10 medi-kit, blue jeans... There were a couple of used tank tops and blue jeans scattered on the floor and another +10 medi-kit. Kendra used the medi-kit to boost her health, but other than that, there was nothing of use. Kendra nervously snuck into the bathroom.

There wasn't much interesting there either. Some half used hair dye. A hair restoration bottle. It claimed 'to bolster the war against hair-loss by bringing soldiers to the front!' This made Kendra laugh. She didn't know Dan Destroyem had hair problems. Now she felt like she had power over him. *Too old indeed! He was too bald for her!*

Sneaking back over to the window Kendra peered way down at the pool. As she suspected, Dan had gone for a swim. Or, rather, a poolside visit. Though it was far down, his hair was unmistakable. He lay by the pool on a long white lounge chair, as Kendra often did, holding a large, colorful drink – no doubt made with exotic fruits, dyes and bizarre Mediterranean alcohols like almandine – with a large pineapple speared on the side. A large, curly, twisty straw wound out the top. On each side Dan Destroyem had some svelte beach babe fawning over him. For what reason they were attracted to him, Kendra could not fathom. Perhaps for his high sense of trend and low level of intelligence? Kendra didn't always understand other women. Especially popular ones.

Seeing him way down there, without a care in the world (especially of killing her) calmed the twitches in Kendra's hands. She inspected the pool where most of Dan's junk seemed to be strewn. It was most likely his hub of the room... Perhaps he even slept in the Jacuzzi. As she turned around a large flash blinded her for a moment. The sun was gleaming off of a large metallic object. His jetpack. Now *that* was something. She knelt beside it.

## LOOK JET PACK

Although you know absolutely nothing about jet packs, it seems to be intuitively labelled. There's the large ignition pull-chord, the safety, and the jet fuel compartment...

This was good. Kendra had an idea.

## OPEN JET FUEL COMPARTMENT

It's screwed shut.

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### USE STAPLE REMOVER ON SCREWS

The edges of the staple remover are too fat for that.

### USE CHANGE ON SCREWS

Taking a dime you find it fits perfectly into the screw slot, but only hurt your thumbs trying to turn it.

This part had Kendra stuck for a few minutes. But she was good at these games. In fact, she invented these games!

### USE STAPLE REMOVER ON DIME

Good work! Pinching the staple remover around the dime you now have enough torque to twist open the security screw. The lid pops open to reveal a small canister of fuel. A small wire leads from the tip of the can to an indicator on the outside.

### EMPTY FUEL

The release valve is too small for your fingers.

### USE STAPLE REMOVER TO EMPTY FUEL

You can't get a good angle on the release valve.

### USE KEYS TO EMPTY FUEL

Good idea. Using the pointy end of the key you depress the valve and leak the fuel into the hot tub, careful to leave a bit left. The fuel indicator now reads low.

### CUT INDICATOR WIRE WITH KEYS

You slowly saw through the wire. The fuel indicator swings back to half-full.

### BREAK SAFETY

You bend the back of the safety switch. It now looks on...but is off.

That should do it, you think.

Kendra wondered, momentarily, how many points all that was worth, but, smartly, didn't dwell on it, slipping out of the room instead.

The Dan Destroyem theme song in muzak form was playing in the fifth floor lobby. Somehow all its energy had been drained away into an easy-listening sludge. Maybe it was all the violins. Kendra fidgeted as the elevator lights climbed, anxious to get out of there.

The door had barely opened when she saw the sliver of trendy shorts and orange hair through the crack. Instinctively, Kendra turned and bolted down the hallway towards the stairwell. Looking behind her she saw Dan smile and turn casually towards his room. She hoped he was going to follow her, that he felt like hunting. Turning back she rushed into the elevator just as the doors closed, and rode down to the first floor. Bursting out into the lobby she ran for the grounds and found a hiding space deep in the palm trees. Moments later Dan exited the resort, decked out in his attack gear.

Through the binoculars Kendra watched and waited until he began to search near the palm forest. She snuck from tree to tree, keeping out of sight, keeping behind him as he searched, inching closer. Suddenly he changed direction and she ducked behind a tree. She could hear his footsteps coming closer now. She could hear his breath. He couldn't have been more than a foot away, on the other side of the tree. Noiselessly she slipped around the tree until she could see his jetpack. She reached out for pull cord and yanked it hard. Nothing happened. Dan turned and grabbed her hand, grinning. Reaching out behind him with her other hand she yanked the cord again. There was a small *click* and Dan's face suddenly lost its grin. At rocket speed he blasted up into the air, losing his grip of her in the jolt. He rocketed through the fronds of the palms above, which rattled and shook after he blasted through. It was now very silent except for the distant sound of the jet stream from Dan's jetpack way above. Then, slowly, it died away while another sound faded in, growing louder and harsher.

**"BRWWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGHHHHHHHHH!!"**

Suddenly there was a large *WHUMP!* and the ground shook, sending coconuts to the ground with dull syncopated *toks!* There was no doubt in Kendra's mind that she had finished him off. Suddenly a coconut fell and clocked her on the head. Kendra woke up in the dark of her hotel room. Her heart was racing. But she felt good. Nobody was going to ruin *her* vacation.



"What are you doing?" Will asked groggily. Kendra was hunched in front of the bedside light. Will didn't know what time it was...but it must have been 3 a.m. or something.

"Writing," she said.

"oh. Did you have a dream?"

"No," Kendra says. "Inspiration."

"Oh." Will was too tired to enquire further. He watched her writing madly on the small complimentary hotel pad. He turned over and went back to sleep.

It was a brilliant idea. It had come to her, like good ideas always do, in a sudden flash...an idea so perfect there was no denying it. She'd woken up from her dream, sweating slightly, wishing that she could capture that fear...the *pure terror* she felt in her nightmares, in a game. And that was it! She was going to make a horror game! It hadn't been done yet. Not a really scary one...with a plot, anyway. Not an adventure game. And Kendra wanted to make a really scary one. It would be a fugitive-horror. Like her dream...but not so cartoonish and silly. A young reporter...in a haunted house for some reason. A dare? A bequest? Something like that...and something is chasing her. Trying to kill her...something unnatural. And she has to find out why. What it is, how to deal with it...and most importantly...find out what happened in this house. That was great! She wrote that down...but ideas were coming so fast she could barely keep up.



Kendra was still writing on that pad at breakfast. She'd had to get the people at the front desk to sharpen the pencil. Her family sat talking around her, but Kendra was engrossed in her ideas, barely finding time to stuff food into her mouth between thoughts.

She wrote all day when they went to the beach. Will and Mark played with a ball in the salty water, running tip-toed over the hot sand. Heather was equally inactive as her mother, lying on a beach towel a few feet away. A couple of times Will tried to convince Kendra to come take a swim but she said she couldn't because she was having a brainstorm.

"I don't understand," said Will. "We came on vacation to *relax*. To get away from Madre. Why are you working all the time?"

"Because I've got ideas now," she replied.

Will just shook his head, dumbfounded by her answer. Will didn't



understand the creative process. He turned around and took a swim.

Kendra paused for a moment to watch her husband swim. She felt wonderful. Loose. Breezy and careless. The vacation had worked. All her dark energy had been sucked out by those nightmares.... She'd found the release valve and diverted her dark energy into this work of horror. Negative energy into positive energy: the zen of computer game making. Kendra felt normal. Happy. Funny. Her normal self. She returned to her pad.

Heather lay back on her towel, wondering about Carol. *What was she up to now?* It had been a week and a half since they'd last spoken. She couldn't wait to get back and tell Carol how lame the vacation was, how stupid her own family was. At least she was getting some sun. She had been really pasty before coming here. Not that she really cared about tans...but at least she felt like she was accomplishing *something*. And the tan made her look tougher. Less sickly.

Heather inspected her fingers. They were wrinkling up like prunes from all the water. Even her calluses were going away. She had worked long and hard at those gaming calluses...and now they were peeling off; she could feel herself losing her gaming touch as she sat here. They'd been on this stupid vacation long enough. Five days was good...but TWO weeks? Even her dad seemed to be struggling to think of things to do. And they still had four days left.



That night Will broke down and finally let the kids watch the hotel TV. He'd managed to hold his ground for a week and a half. Not bad, but the kids had complained there was nothing to do.

"Nothing to do?" he retorted, incredulous. "You could take a walk! Read a book! Play a card game!"

Mark and Heather both looked at each other and then back to Will. "That's what we said, Dad. Nothing to do."

He didn't have the strength to argue any more. Kendra was busy in the corner writing on her pad, shaking her hand out, as it seemed to be sore. Will went out for a walk.



The next day Will and Kendra sat out on the patio sipping their drinks and relaxing in the sun. Kendra shook her hand out and massaged it.

"Geeze. I'm getting a hand cramp from all this writing. And I'm going to have to re-type all this into the computer when I get back. I hope I can

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read my handwriting then.” She pushed deep into the pad of her hand with her thumb. “You should have brought the laptop,” she added.

That was it! Will was mad now! He had had enough of this abuse. Next time he was going to leave the family behind and go on his *own* vacation. And with all the money he saved he would rent a decent family that knew how to appreciate and enjoy a vacation and he’d have a good time.

“Humpf!” he retorted. And he said it loud and clear...to make sure she knew that he was mad. But she didn’t hear. She was too busy writing to care anyway. It was only two and a half days until they went home. He would survive.



The night before they were to head back to California, they decided to get dressed up and hit up a nice restaurant for an early dinner. Everybody seemed genuinely excited. And they had all gotten hungry after a big hike up the volcano.

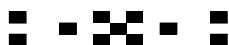
They were just exiting the lobby into the cool, crisp Hawaiian air when the phone in their room rang. It rang ten or eleven times before it stopped.



They were all packed up by 9 a.m. the next morning. After breakfast, they picked up their bags and headed down to the lobby for check-out. The hotel room had seemed strangely empty with all their stuff tucked neatly away in their luggage. It was hard to believe it had been their home for the past two weeks. But they were all glad to be returning home, for one reason or another. They had had enough vacation.

Just minutes after they locked the door behind them the telephone rang again. A good dozen times. When it stopped ringing the hotel room seemed even more desolate. A missed call in an empty and abandoned room. A breeze blew gently in through the window, blowing about in the emptiness.





## **Chapter 21; trouble at the Not-so-OK Corral**

January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995

For the first time that Art could remember, Will had closed and locked the door to his office. Worse yet, he'd locked the three of them inside. It was symbolic to Art. It spoke to the gravity of the situation. Outside, snow piled high on the window ledge, forming its own miniature landscape of snow dunes. Down below, the stretch of grass between the office and the forest was layered in three feet of snow, shimmering, cold, beautiful. The pine trees were capped like snow rockets, ready to fire winter into outer space. Some lucky bastard had struggled early against the snowfall just for the opportunity to use the snowplow this morning, but the snow kept piling up.

Upon arriving this morning Will was oddly surprised by the snow... like a cat's first winter. He wasn't used to dealing with it after the sandy beaches of Hawaii... There had been a little bit hanging around yesterday but overnight the snow had piled high and now Will couldn't even see the lines in the parking lot. Even by Sierra mountain range standards it was a big snowfall. Will tried his best to park straight and then felt a large bump. Despite an embarrassing few minutes of loud roars from the engine, skull vibrating grinding noises and hopeless fishtailing in the snow, Will's car would not come off whatever he had driven over. "Shit," he declared, getting out to find a cement parking log wedged under the front end of the car. Will gave up and headed into the office. His car was completely crooked. What a great start to his first day back at work.

But Will had been confident the day would get better. It was Monday, after all, and when he woke up this morning he was ready and eager to return to work. And the snow was beautiful, laid up against the pillars of the building, trying to swallow his car. It seemed the snowfall was getting heavier every year. Will secretly loved snow. The air was crisp and clear and cool. There were a lot of good things about today and, the way Will had seen it, with the parking log, he'd gotten the crummy part of the day over with and it was all smooth sailing from here. He marveled at the irony of that thought now, after the news. Will had been surprised to see

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Art in so early, waiting for him by his office door. He'd wondered what was up. Now he wished he didn't know.

Will now went behind his desk and sat down, his chin pressed into the pockets of his large hands in deep thought, as if he needed his arms to support the weight of the turmoil in his head. There was a long silence as Will's face glazed over. Henry had been accidentally locked in with them. He'd just arrived for work and saw Will and Art talking seriously just outside Will's office. Henry had been pretty sure he knew what about. Just as Henry was passing by, Will drew Art into the office. Spotting Henry, Will asked him to step in also, for a second opinion. Henry reluctantly joined as Will closed the door, trapping him in. It was the first time Henry could recall Will locking his office door.

Art finally spoke up. "We tried to phone you but we couldn't get through. There was no answer."

"When did all this happen?" Will asked.

"Thursday, we think," Art said. "Nobody really noticed, but on Friday morning people were making strange comments. I didn't know what they were talking about. Somebody asked 'So what are you going to spend all your cashola on?' I thought it was a weird question and then one of the programmers, that new woman – Sheryl? She asked if I had an extra copy of the paper. Geoff came in moments later with a fresh copy and we read about it."

Will sat there silent, listening, chin buried in his palms.

Art continued, "We were kind of numb to it at first. We were all pretty happy to see our stock selling for so high...and then we realized it was *abnormally* high so we had Phuong from accounting look into it and discovered that all the buying was coming from one spot...from—"

"Melfina Enterprises," Will finished for him, face still glazed over in thought.

"Yeah. Worse yet...they were only buying voting shares..."

Melfina Enterprises. That was ominous. Will had always found them a strange corporation. A new and unusual beast in the gaming industry – the corporate giant. Not a corporate giant in the same sense as Madre: a company that had worked from the ground up, working experience, success and skill into developing the largest fanbase of computer gamers. No, Melfina Enterprises was a corporate giant in the sense of rich old men sitting around a table and realizing that, suddenly, there was a lot of money in a new industry, and had decided to buy their way into it. Will couldn't quite remember when Melfina had first appeared. It wasn't long after Succubus Inc. had got into games...

Succubus...Will found that corporation interesting too. Succubus was one of these corporate giants that had its hands in every pot. They didn't sell anything specific, just their name. They put their logo on pop, CDs, books, built buses, ran travel agencies, opened huge amusement park-like 'megastores' to sell records... Will was pretty sure he had a Succubus stapler on his desk somewhere. They sold everything, bought into any industry that was making a profit, made mediocre products and slapped their name on them. It was odd when Succubus entered the gaming industry; It was like the local grocery store chain suddenly producing computer games and stamping its logo on them. But the more that Will thought about it, the less random it seemed. The product was an afterthought. Somehow, their brand was the only thing that mattered.

What had seemed stranger to Will at the time was how Succubus had just bought their way in. No other company since the beginning of the game industry had started that way. Every game company Will could think of had been started in garages or bedrooms by computer tech dropouts. You couldn't just *buy* into the industry...could you? He had been a little worried about this new, old-money competition at first, wondering how Madre could possibly compete with that sort of money and bloodlust. But that was before, as cautionary research, Will had played a few of Succubus' first game releases.

Their games were beyond terrible. They improved a little when the company began focusing more on translating arcade hits – already designed by established gaming houses – for the computer rather than trying to make their own with unexperienced staff. But even the translations had been poor – true to form but, somehow, the fun, the *soul* of the game, had disappeared. Will hadn't worried about Succubus, or old-money after that. You couldn't just *buy* your way into gaming fame.

But Melfina Enterprises had been different. Unlike Succubus, they had come out of nowhere. Suddenly, one day about three years ago, Jubegames was bought out by some company called Melfina. Nobody knew who Melfina was or had ever heard of them before. When Will looked into it at the time, out of curiosity, he'd discovered that some software company called Ubergames had been bought out half a year earlier by Melfina Enterprises. But who was Melfina Enterprises? And, with no background, where did they suddenly get the money to start buying out game companies? Granted, the purchases were very small, independent gaming houses. Ubergames hadn't even released its first game yet when Melfina had bought the few shares that had been issued. A few months later, when the game shipped and stocks rose, Melfina

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dumped the shares. Very crude...but effective. And they had been doing this for the last few years, steadily acquiring game properties and leeching the profits through increased share prices when the games shipped, often selling the company down the river afterwards. Melfina, Will realized, wasn't in the game industry, they were in the stock business. They were corporate raiders. The Heather Hütergunes of economics.

Melfina was created solely to buy ownership in the game industry. Some fat CEOs with lots of money read the papers one day and noted that the electronic gaming industry was raking in \$5 billion a year, rivalling Hollywood, and decided to set up a major conglomerate overnight. They weren't gamers. They didn't know anything about the industry. The men behind Melfina just smelled the money and a way to siphon it off of the game pioneers' successes. Melfina was the fat nobleman, whipping the game industry donkey to pull his overloaded cart of jewels along the gravel road.

Of course, Will had never perceived Melfina as a threat to Madre. They had mostly been a quirky and unpleasant nuisance, an inevitable bad apple that was bound to appear as the industry grew, and preyed on small start-up companies. But Madre wasn't a small start-up company... so why were they suddenly under attack? Had Will let his guard down? Suddenly Melfina had leapt out from feasting on the vibrant fringe to knocking on the door of one of the industry leaders. Suddenly money was no object! Yesterday, Melfina had been a distant, improbable and weak threat, a bottom feeder. Overnight it had leapt to the top of the food chain! What did Melfina want with Madre anyway? They didn't care about its games, its people, innovation. But Will knew the answer. They wanted the money.

"It was bizarre," continued Art. "We didn't know what to do. They timed it nicely, though. It was late in the week so that it would catch us off guard, and Phuong said it was a dawn raid, they dropped a huge bid for our stocks as soon as the exchange opened. If it didn't sound paranoid, I'd say they even knew about your vacation, Will."

"Well, maybe they did," offered Henry, hoping to get this over. He didn't like stocks.

"How?" asked Art.

"Well, we don't know how many shares of Madre they bought before this so-called Dawn Raid, right? It would be foolish for them to come in with a huge offer like that all of a sudden... It would raise the share price and cost them a lot...unless they knew they were going to be successful. Wouldn't they try and buy as many shares as they could surreptitiously

until they felt they had good ground to go for a quick takeover?"

"I guess."

"So...if they have shares then they must have been at the shareholder's meeting. And Will wasn't there. No doubt Newman would have had to explain why Will wasn't around – especially after the big move with the head office...so they probably did know."

"Damn," Art thought. Henry was an intelligent guy. Perhaps that explained his lack of personality.

"What was the share price again?" Will asked now, rubbing his temples.

"\$32.50 per share," Art informed. There was silence for a moment. "We weren't sure what to do. We called an emergency meeting – just me, Bill, Henry, Evelyn, Geoff and Fred...and Phuong from accounting, to figure out what to do. We held it in here because it seemed more official and private. Plus, you had copies of the stock reports."

Will had been wondering how that peanut butter had gotten on his drawer.

"Nothing made much sense so we tried phoning you at your hotel that night, but there was no answer...so we decided to get ahold of Newman. He had just found out a few hours previously, too, and suggested we not freak out. He said it was not necessarily bad to have interest generated in our stock. It could even be a good sign. I don't know about that, but he suggested that we send a letter around to all the employees apprising them of the situation and request that they hold off on selling any shares until we had decided what our position was. We all agreed it would have to be carefully worded to avoid causing takeover panic and since none of us knew much about stocks we left it up to Newman. Newman also wanted to explain that this whole affair could turn out to be beneficial. I agreed to put that in as it would, at least, calm down the staff...though I can't see how Melfina's actions could be construed as...friendly."

Henry hadn't been quite sure he agreed with this 'letter writing' idea when it had come up at the time. He wanted to cash in his stock options. He'd always hated these bonded perks. He'd always wanted to turn his shares into cash, cash he could put in a bank account, cash that didn't suddenly fluctuate up and down and stress him out. Henry could make a lot of money by selling now. And, more importantly, he'd have actual money instead of paper promises. *I have four mouths to feed*, he had thought, *I can't feed them stock tickets! But...if I sell...I could be selling my job away*. And that was an even worse idea, he decided. Henry wasn't particularly fond of Melfina, either. They represented all the aspects

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of big business that he found distasteful – like indentured perks – so he didn't speak up against the letter thing. Besides, he was probably in the minority.

"We all met in the big meeting room, after the email was sent around, to videoconference with Newman," Art continued. "Newman suggested that, if we were averse to Melfina buying out our stock we could put up a counter offer to stall things, giving us a while to figure out what we were going to do. But anyway, by that time on Friday the stock exchange was already closed so there wasn't much we could do. We figured it would be best to get your opinion on things anyway so we decided to wait until today.

"I tried to call you in Hawaii again Saturday morning, but you weren't there either. I didn't phone Sunday, since I didn't know when you were getting in and I figured you might as well unpack, rest and enjoy the end of your vacation before coming back to this."

"Well I'll be damned if we are going to be bought out by Melfina," Will said assuredly, as was his style. Art breathed a sigh of relief. For a while there he hadn't been sure, exactly, if Will would agree with Newman on the prospects of a Melfina buyout. It was good to hear Will's positive reaction. Will was a real leader. He was going to rally the troops. If Will was motivated for it not to happen, then it wouldn't. Will could do anything.

"Ok. So what do we do?" asked Art.

"Well, I like the idea of a counter offer. We don't have a lot of disposable funds after creating the head office and mediocre HomoSapien Quest sales, but we can at least match Melfina's price. I don't know how long that will last...but a while anyway. Hopefully it will stun the shareholders and they'll wait to see if Melfina counter-counter-offers. Then we can match again and hopefully stall things for a while without buying many shares."

"Good plan," agreed Art.

"And we need to find out as much about Melfina as we possibly can. No doubt they've been watching us for a while. What do we know about them? Find out how many shares they already have. Find out how many shares Madre-faithful people have altogether – I mean employees and friends and family of employees that have shares. Last I checked we had 36%, but I want an up-to-date statistic on that."

"Ok. I'll tell the guys in accounting to get on that," Art said.

"Find out what tactics Melfina has used before to buy out companies. Find out what they did after they bought them out. Find out if they failed



to takeover any companies. If so, why? Find out why they are suddenly interested in us.”

Henry nodded, just hoping that nodding would end this “meeting.” He hated this stuff. He just liked doing his job and doing it well.

“I’ll get on the phone to Newman and see if we can’t figure out the next step,” Will finished. “Take a couple of guys out of accounting and send them to me too.”

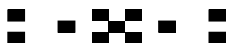
“What should I do about Swarthy Victor?” asked Art.

“For today, forget about it. I’ll try and round up a bunch of people that are between projects and qualified for this sort of stuff to put together a sort of Melfina response team. I’ll probably call another small meeting this afternoon to go over the rest.”

“Ok,” agreed Henry. This all felt very surreal to him somehow. Madre had been such a fun and breezy place to work for over the last two years. Now it seemed as if they were all suddenly stiffs in suits, racing for deadlines and obsessing over numbers. Granted, they had been forced into it. But it chilled Henry. He’d always hated this sort of rush, rush, buy, buy, sell, sell, work, work attitude. The ‘GO FASTER!’ work ethic. And now it felt like they were right in the midst of it. Though the office hadn’t changed, something in the air had. Will’s suit seemed more sinister than before. As if the suit were *wearing* Will instead.

Will picked up the phone and began dialing Newman’s number. Art and Henry took that as their cue to leave, unlocking the door, exiting and closing it behind them again.

Out through his window to the office Will could see Kendra arriving through the elevator. He wondered if he would be the first to break the news to her or if someone else would get to her first. He wondered how she would react. She always avoided this business stuff. She didn’t care how the games got funded, she only cared about making them. She was the Yin to Will’s Yang, in a way. She always supported his initiatives and left it all to Will’s judgement, despite her co-ownership. If this takeover business had happened before their vacation Will would have expected to see Kendra melt into a nervous wreck over it. But now that she was focused on her next project...she was in that unstoppable enthusiasm phase: She was in a good mood. She was excited. She had goals. And it was pretty hard to bring Kendra out of that. Sure, she’d be worried about it, but her mind would be elsewhere. She would just trust Will and support him to do what he felt best. Which would be good, Will thought, as a takeover had the potential to Stress. Will. Out.



## Chapter 22; stocks & shares 101

January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Will peered out through the blinds in the 'nice room'. The sun reflecting off the morning snow was blinding as he watched Newman's black car pull up into the lot. The reflection off the car's sheen was somehow more blinding than the sun. When the car parked, a man unfamiliar to Will stepped out of the driver's side. Then Newman stepped out of the passenger side accompanied by his usual trench coat, laptop and briefcase.

On the phone yesterday Newman had convinced Will to do just enough to put the whole takeover on hold – "Stall switchover with an equal share bid" – until today when they could meet in person and Newman would have a better idea of what was going on. Will hadn't wanted to do that. He couldn't just sit around during an emergency like this. He felt they had to move forward, not just...stall.

"Look, nothing is going to happen in one day," Newman had comforted Will...and Will had believed him. He knew that much about stocks. In just an hour, billions could be lost on a ten cent change in stock, but companies weren't bought out in minutes...especially when there was good reason to think the stakes would rise. But it sure felt like they were lying with their belly exposed. To Will it felt like the barbarous hordes of Melfina were marching through the snowy fields of the Redwood forest now, swords and shields in hand, ready to lay siege to fort Madre. And Will and his lone band of gunmen were going to fight to the last. The only question was, did they have enough food and water to last? Will had spent the rest of the day pacing the office, unable to work, worrying about this question. Could they fend off the horde?

Newman and his driver punched deep foot holes in the snow as they came towards the building. Will headed towards the entrance to greet them. As they came through the door Will shook hands with them both and Newman introduced the other man as an assistant he'd brought along so he could work on the drive up. The assistant would take notes in their meeting as well. After a few quick pleasantries they redoubled for the small meeting room and sat down. There was really only the meeting room table

in the room now. Most of the stuff that made the nice room indeed nice had been shipped down to fill up HQ. Will had Stella, the admin assistant, bring them all hot chocolate.

"Did you see the share price today?" Newman asked after he had opened his briefcase, booted up his laptop, taken a sip of hot chocolate and generally gotten ready.

"No," confessed Will. He couldn't bear to look.

Newman smiled. "We're still fine," he said. "The shareholders are waiting for a price war, it seems. So we played our cards right. Gives us a bit of time." Newman browsed through a spreadsheet. "Melfina hasn't raised their offer yet...so we're in a holding pattern at the moment. Anyway, I've got a much clearer view of the stakeholder landscape now. Melfina picked up a few hundred shares since Friday. Since their initial bid they got 2% of the total shares, perhaps. Not terrible. Things are still relatively the same as they were two months ago."

"How many shares do they have total now?"

"About 22%."

Will grimaced. He knew the answer, but against his desire he had enquired anyway. That was a lot. Not nearly enough...yet, but a lot.

"I think things will stall for a few days here. Grimshaw down in finance said we also picked up a couple hundred shares yesterday. We now own shares in ourselves..." Newman mused. He smiled at this thought, as if to suggest the absurdity of taking this action, but Will didn't see anything really funny about it. "So everything is still in control for a bit. They are stuck at 22% for the moment." Newman concluded by tapping his pile of notes on the table to flatten out the edges.

Will breathed a sigh of relief, though he knew it was false. Nothing was going to be safe until a herald called to inform them that the barbarian horde had turned back. No, the barbarians were merely camping in the forest now. Will could see the steam pouring out of the nostrils of a black-as-night Friesian war horse, the Black Knight pacing his steed back and forth through the white snow, silently, ominously, amidst his troops.

"So now we plan," Newman opened up a few documents on his computer. "It was too early to do it yesterday. But I have disks of information now. The first point I would like to make, perhaps to ease your mind a little, is that this situation isn't necessarily an onerous one..."

"They're trying to take over my company!" Will exclaimed, exasperated.

"Well, that's true," Newman conceded. "But that isn't necessarily bad. First of all, Melfina is a huge corporation with loads of money. That means

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security for us.”

“We already have security.”

“Right,” Newman half agreed. “Also, it would mean lots of funding. They’ve proven to have a bottomless resource of cash. Perhaps we could forestall on selling SupraNet to USACoolConnect! and get it back up and running. Our profits could potentially *triple* with backing from a company like Melfina...helping push out SupraNet’s competitors. Our distribution and advertising networks would vastly increase because of all the new sister companies we’d have...”

“How can this be beneficial?” Will asked. “They didn’t even warn us of their intentions to buy us out. There was no friendly meeting to see if we would agree to this. Their intentions towards us are less than honorable. Certainly not amicable!”

“It may be hostile – but maybe because they knew that you would never agree to a takeover. That doesn’t mean their intentions aren’t going to benefit us at the end of the day.”

Will shook his head. No way. He didn’t believe it for a second. He’d read what Melfina had done to its previous acquisitions. They particularly liked to prey on small ones and as soon as they reported a loss, which most any fledgling company does, Melfina would gut ‘em and sink them like a plundered galleon, for easy profits. What was that called again? Asset stripping. That was it. These little companies never even asked to be bought out. They hadn’t asked to be sold down the drain either. It was utterly pointless. If that had happened when Madre first started, they wouldn’t have gotten anywhere. Will had a duty to the industry to stop this.

“They are only interested in money. They are only interested in taking our company and using it to whatever end they can,” Will began. “There’s no way I spent 15 years of my life building up this company to have it be bought out by a bunch of jerks with no vision.”

Newman opened his mouth as if to speak but Will continued. “It’s not only that. The people at Synapse...and a few other small companies we’ve incorporated into the Madre family. Those were amicable deals. They agreed to work for us because they liked what we stood for. But they didn’t agree to be eaten by Melfina. I’ve got to stand up for them too.”

“Alright,” Newman smiled, conceding. “Well, that’s good. At least we know certainly where we stand now. We don’t want to be taken over. We can take that to the bank. So now the next step is to own up to the challenge, to decide what can we do to ensure we meet that objective.”

Newman searched among his things for a file. His assistant typed away

on the laptop but Will couldn't imagine what. They hadn't even *discussed* anything yet.

"Basically, the only way to prevent a successful takeover is to prevent Melfina from getting shares. I figure we have one of two options." Newman spread a few diagrams and graphs out in front of them. "Forgive me if this seems obvious to you. I just want to make sure we're all on the same page." Will nodded. Newman continued. "We can either get our hands on a solid majority of the voting shares...or we can try to make ourselves undesirable to buy. The first option is ideal. If we're lucky, we can retrieve more than 50% of the shares available and completely shut out any chance of Melfina, or anyone else, taking us over. This is ideal, but a little difficult when you compare the size of Melfina's bankroll to ours. Alternatively, we can strive to basically maintain what we have now: a non-controlling majority – not quite 50%, but more than anyone else. Madre, through employees shares has...has..."

"37%," Will aided.

"Right. That's more than anyone else so...no problem. We still run things. However, if Melfina gets more than us," Newman held up his hands in the air suggesting 'game over.' "We want to prevent that. The problem with just maintaining a liquid majority share is that it doesn't make us immune to takeover. We could be locked in a battle with Melfina for the next ten years over 25% of the share. It's ugly and could cost us a lot of resources. Unlikely that it would last ten years. In truth, this whole thing will probably be decided in less than two months."

The review on stocks was good for Will. It was freshening him up. Ever since they'd gotten an accounting department, Will had pushed a lot of the detail stuff out of his mind. When they'd first gone public almost twelve years ago, Will had learned the ins and outs of investing by rote. And almost six years ago he had done a strong review to help him decide whether giving up true majority in his company was worth it to support SupraNet and buy out Synapse Games...which, he'd decided at the time, he didn't have much choice but to do. Over the last two days he'd been struggling to get it all back and was amazed at how much he'd forgotten. When he was slapped in the face with the takeover Monday morning he'd felt so unprepared, like all this knowledge of shares and stocks had been buried under the massive amount of paperwork in his brain: Madre paperwork that was stacked up the walls, pouring out of open cabinets, loosely sorted, migrating between 'In' and 'Out' boxes, spilling out under the door of his cerebellum. And most of this unsorted clutter had come in the last two years. He hadn't had reason to worry about or remember all

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that investment stuff, to keep it organized.

Things seemed messed up now. They'd never had to worry about shares before: they were the majority shareholder. Whatever they wanted done, was done. Annual meetings and Board of Directors elections were a formality, something Madre only did as a legal requirement for public investment. No one else ever had enough votes to tell Madre different. Other shareholders rarely attended the AGMs. Some voted by proxy, but most people didn't care. As long as Madre was making money, and it was, they didn't get involved. The Board of Directors barely did anything. Art, who knew nothing about management, was one of the chairs. It was kind of an office joke. There had been no reason for Will to concern himself with the shares and so it was just shuffled under all the other paperwork in his head. And now he was scrambling to retrieve it.

But Newman's simple, straightforward review was helping it come back and Will was reminded of Newman's calm, calculated take-charge demeanor that had so impressed Will at the interview those many months ago. The overview was triggering neurons in Will's brain, reminding him where he'd last seen that investment info document...in which drawer. He could picture Madre's position now, understand exactly where they were...clearly and concretely. And nothing had seemed clear or concrete since Will had come back from vacation.

"So, if we're going to try and outbuy Melfina," Newman continued, "we're going to want to start buying as many shares as we can and shoot for 51. To beat Melfina at their own game, we're going to have to be tricky... because if this becomes a price war and they want us bad enough, we'll lose. So we'll have to be clever. Our *other* option, is to make ourselves very undesirable. Take a poison pill. One pill is, if we start battling with Melfina for shares, the price will rise: If we're lucky, they aren't that interested in us, and the price rises to a point where they don't want us *that* bad. Additionally, as the price rises, we are spending our profits on shares... and so the real value of the company will go down...also making us less desirable – Pill number 2. Or maybe we can just try and drag this fight out until they decide we're not worth it – Pill 3.

"Of course, there is a whole stash of poison pills in the back room as well, like asset dumping, rule changes, etc. But these tactics are tricky as they could backfire on us – and even wade a little bit into the question of legality. I don't know about that. I'll have to have someone in legal update me. The trick with the poison pill option is to take only as many poison pills as will be effective – and no more. We don't want to overdose. And, frankly, I think this poison pill strategy is going to be a hard sell. Considering

Madre's reputation, it will be hard to convince Melfina Enterprises that we are an undesirable company. Looking at the money they threw behind their blitzkrieg tender I'd say they want us pretty badly."

"We could delay a game," said Will.

"Right. We could even sabotage projects: release a bad game to have our stock ratings go down. We could sell off our share in other companies. Cut Synapse, Sell SupraNet for peanuts...acquire liabilities. However, self sabotage will be rather evident to Melfina – and I'm not sure how legal that is. Anyway, Madre is the leader of the computer gaming industry. It will take more than a few bad games to make people pull their investment... even more to convince Melfina that we're not just 'playing dead', as it were."

Newman took a sip of his hot chocolate. Will followed suit, enjoying the warm, thick liquid trickling down his throat, the cottony steam unfurling across his lip and deep into his nostrils. This mug of hot chocolate was the only thing Will could recall finding comforting in the last few days. In the two days since returning, Will felt as if this whole Melfina affair had sucked up every ounce of relaxation he had built up in two weeks in Oahu.

"Not only will it be a hard sell, but the more poison we take, the less 'strength' we'll have to fight off Melfina if they still decide they are interested. Also, a scorched earth policy takes years to recover from. You may win a plagued kingdom. Or, worse yet, you might prevent Melfina from pillaging your ship by sinking it. That is worse than a takeover."

Will, actually, wasn't entirely sure about this last statement. This White Knight would consider the suicide pill if it came down to that, Will thought.

"Also, any self-mutilation we perform to lower our stocks is going to anger our shareholders. If Melfina backs off and our share prices drop through the floor...they'll be pissed and they'll blame us. This could mean a lot of bad things from shareholders selling shares to Melfina out of spite or tossing you out as CEO...it wouldn't take too much agreement to topple your 37%." Newman took on an almost fatherly tone, "This is an investment for them. This is not about creating great games, or doing what is right. And they won't care that you are trying to do that. They see you as the chief money maker – if you stand in the way of them making more money, they will not like you. You really don't want to make your shareholders angry. That would be a nightmare...especially since you only have a liquid majority."

Will was already fairly sure what step they would take, but he wanted Newman's opinion. "What do you suggest?"

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“Well...” Newman let out a big breath of air. He ruffled through his files. “The place to start is with the shares. The counter offer seems to be working. Melfina could counter today...or a week from now. Depends on how much they care, how much they want to think about their next step.”

Will could see them now, deep in the woods, planning their attack, drawing maps over tree-stumps, hardening the steel of their swords over campfires, the Black Knight storming back and forth across the snow, frustrated by planning, furious with the desire to conquer, steam billowing out of his black steed’s nose, red eyes glaring out from within its thick, black helmet.

“I say we use that time to develop a strategy for purchasing as much stock as we can. Ask staff to purchase stock – scare ‘em a little into thinking they could lose their jobs if we are taken over. We should also start scrounging up company funds to put towards purchasing shares. If the price keeps going up it will come to a point where even all our money won’t buy much. Melfina can go a lot higher than us. We’ll need cash. I’m getting someone to talk to the guys at USA CoolConnect! about coming through early on the SupraNet purchase. But I don’t know if they’ll be able to.”

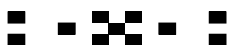
Newman continued in his no nonsense fashion. “Thirdly, we should start putting together PR. Send messages to our shareholders telling them we don’t think Melfina would be good for their stocks. Get into the moralizing too: how they don’t care about games, blah blah. Make it an honorable fight, since our weapons aren’t big enough for a monetary battle. While we’re bargaining for time with a price war, we should really prepare a contingency plan. Our scorched earth backup. If things start going badly, we may need to throw some monkey wrenches into things.” Newman exhaled and smiled, “That’s what I think we should do.”

Excellent, Will thought. He knew he’d hired Newman for a reason. Will found Newman’s personal tactics a little questionable – almost Machiavellian, perhaps – but he was analytical and ruthless and to win a war, sometimes you needed an analytical and ruthless general. *Throw open the war chests! To the turrets! Bring me my maps and prepare for war!*

“I agree entirely,” said Will.

“Alright, then let’s start with plans for conglomerating and buying back shares.” Newman received the war map from his assistant, spread it out on the table and weighted the edges down with his mug, his laptop and his gauntlet.





## Chapter 23; the gigantically huge meeting

January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1995

“What is *this*? A roast beef sandwich?” Bill flipped the greasy, cling-wrapped object around in his hands. He looked over at Tim who shrugged back. Bill dropped the sandwich back onto the serving tray, disgustapointed. Bill liked roast beef sandwiches as much as the next guy...but as snack food for a 10am meeting? It just seemed wrong. Worse yet, that greasy roast beef sandwich was the meeting’s ‘alternative’ food to the stacks of pizza from *Berney’s Classic Pizza*. Pizza? Pizza was the meal of choice at 10-year-olds’ birthday parties. Pizza bespoke happy times. It was not an appropriate food choice for the meeting where they discussed their hostile takeover. Bill surveyed the room, packed to the gills with glum faces: Accounting, Smith and the other guy, Programming, Legal, the usual designers...crammed side by side on chairs stolen from other rooms. Nobody was touching the finger food. Who eats pizza at 10 o’clock? What next? Would they bring in punch to drink? Maybe some hostile takeover balloons?

Will came clumsily through the meeting room door, his arms piled high with documents. The last few days had been a frenzy for him. Working late. Rushing. Panicking. Staying on the ball. Staring at the televised stock ticker now set up in his office. He had just gotten off the phone with Newman who was conducting a similar meeting with the HQ staff and other relevant people down in San Francisco. Then he paused for a minute at the billboard to enjoy the latest morale-boosting anti-Melfina comics posted there. The majority of them took the shape of one of the usual heroes from a Madre game, defiling the Melfina logo in some way shape or form while spouting lines from Dan Destroyem: *Burn, baby, burn! Suck Explosion, Melfina!* The ones out of the art department were better. More...artistic. Still, there was a certain base entertainment, so much more satisfying, to be had from the crudely drawn, crass pseudo-comics.

It took a few moments for Will to decipher a path through the employees that had jammed the room, leaning up against walls, sitting on

## Game Quest

table edges, legs interlocking under chairs. Navigating himself through the people maze, Will slid his documents onto the table, squeezed between two people and sat down at the boss chair. "Sorry about the food choice," he began almost as if he had been reading everyone's mind. "We couldn't get a caterer this quickly and I refuse to get our meeting food from Che's... especially considering our present circumstances. This was the best we could do."

Will leaned forward and pulled a pizza box toward himself. He opened it for a slice, reached in and—

"What the—? *Anchovies?*" His face wrinkled in disgust. He closed the lid and pushed it away. He sighed and began.

"As you all know, it's been just over a week since Melfina Enterprises began its hostile takeover attempt of Madre Games Entertainment. Just so it's clear in everyone's minds, we've decided that this is NOT something Madre welcomes. It will not be good for Madre – and by that I mean Madre's employees, and the goals and dreams we all have for Madre – and it will not be good for the industry either. Last Monday we matched Melfina's share offer and things were quiet long enough for us to get our affairs in order and develop a game plan. The ball was in their court."

To Tim, this whole stalling thing seemed like the unnatural peace at the beginning of war, the long, dead space between declaring war and the first attack - before you're actually at war, before anyone knows just what kind of war it's going to be. Just waiting for it to come over the hill.

Will went on. "On Thursday they raised their bid offer significantly. Not exorbitantly, but significantly, which we think means they are willing to pay quite a bit to get us...and are eager to do it quickly rather than having this drag on for half a year. We matched them immediately and are now deciding whether we should continue to play the bidding game, or make some blows to get stock back in our court. At this point we're going to play a little bit of both. I've been meeting with headquarters and the marketing department in San Fran has been hard at work on a company wide campaign to ask shareholders/employees to hold onto their stock and, if they can, do whatever possible to buy away shares from non-employees. We need as many shares as we can get. We cannot let Melfina get majority share.

"I actually can't say much more than that at the moment. That PR campaign should start hitting tomorrow morning. It will explain the situation more clearly, what you can do, answer some questions, etc... I want to focus this meeting more on getting you, the Madre brass, up to

speed, explain work priorities and messages you should be getting across to your employees. Marketing will also be releasing an official statement from Madre to the public explaining that we are against the takeover and that we don't feel, in the long run, that this move will be to the shareholder's advantage. I have some sample materials here you can look at after."

Will took a sip of his coffee. There was no way their cappuccino machine was going to handle all the coffees needed for this meeting, so they had to order that in too. Cup of Joe. It tasted terrible. Will noticed he was the only one drinking it.

"Well, I know you must be brimming with questions, so let's start there."

There was the usual silence that comes when the floor is open and everyone waits for someone else to speak up. Will could feel the cold air emanating off the window from across the table. Frost was edging its way up the pane. Outside, the forest seemed peaceful, as if Mother Nature was ignoring their predicament...while at the same time she was harboring the Black Knight's barbarians deep in the forest.

"Why can't we just raise our bid?" came a voice. It was Laura from the HomoSapien Quest team. "We only need about 21% more to get majority, right? Why don't we just raise the price super high and blitzkrieg to 21?"

"Basically," Will began, having gone over all possible questions with Newman over the past few days, "because Melfina will match us before we even get another 2%...and we'll only have ended up setting the share price higher. And Melfina can outbid us easily. The only reason they aren't offering more is because they want to get us for as cheap as possible. The shareholders are dug in for a price war. They want to see how high it'll go. I'm not even sure, at this point, if we have enough money to buy another 21% - even at the current price. Raising the price is not to our advantage. Right now we're doing it just to stall for time."

Silence overtook the room for a while.

Tim spoke up. "What's stopping us from releasing a bunch more shares at a cheap price only to Madre employees. Dilute the shares in our favor?"

"What do you mean?" Will asked.

"Well. If Madre released a bunch more shares but only sold them to employees, that would give us a bigger percentage of the shares...and water down what Melfina's got, right? Could we do that?"

"Well, possibly. We *could* issue some common stock. The problem with that is, if we issue enough shares to make a difference, even a small

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one, that will also water down our own stocks. A lot of people at this company have a lot of money invested in Madre. More than twelve years worth. Their retirement is in their stock options. If we suddenly issue more stocks, your retirement savings will plummet. Not only that, but we'll be asking staff to buy more, less valuable stocks. Besides, legally, I think we'd have to offer the stock at market value, which is super high since Melfina jumped in. I don't think it's feasible. If we were within 3% of 51% it might work, but we're not even close."

"What about Synapse?" Smith spoke up beside him. Smith was one of Madre's Board of Directors, Will just remembered. "I'm pretty sure I know the answer to this question, but I wanted to get it straight from the horse's mouth so I can tell my employees. If Madre is bought out, do Synapse and the other sister companies go with it?"

"Unfortunately, anything Madre owns, they would own. Sorry."

"I don't understand any of this stuff, man," Ron spoke up. "I mean I don't even understand how a company can buy shares in itself. Isn't that, like, a snake eating its own tail? It's like borrowing money from Peter to pay Peter! But then there's this other snake trying to eat that snake at the same time..."

There was a long pause after Ron finished.

"Is that a question, Ron?" Will asked earnestly. There were laughs around the table. Will smiled too. For the first time in a week.

"Nah," said Ron. "I was just trying to contribute." A few more laughs.

"Why do I suddenly feel like a Naughté Latté employee?" someone asked rhetorically in the back of the room. It hadn't been meant to be heard, but the laughter dying out made it very audible and the room descended into an uneasy hush, broken only by coughs.

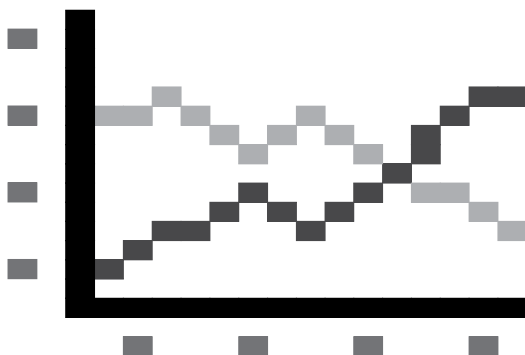
Will took the opportunity to pass around his samples of the appeal to shareholders that was going to be printed in the papers.

In the back corner Kendra wasn't paying attention. She let Will handle all the shares anyway. She was sure things would be fine. In the entire time she had known Will and Madre, nothing had ever stood in the way of them accomplishing what they wanted to accomplish. Instead, leaning up against the corner she bounced some ideas for her new horror game, "Gorr" off of Kathy Willis.

Kathy Willis was all ears to Kendra. All this share stuff went over her head. She didn't own any stock, certainly couldn't afford to buy any and hadn't been around long enough to understand half the stuff discussed in the email takeover bulletins. She was a little worried about her job, but

currently it was more fun to talk with Kendra Roberts about her game. The horror game was a good idea. Original. Kathy admired Kendra's seemingly limitless capability for creativity. Kendra admired Kathy's cool approach and level-headed ideas.

Kendra passed the clipboard to Kathy who added some excellent details. Ideas cascaded from her head with such bounty that they couldn't hope to catch them all, only the best ones. Kendra felt unstoppable. Nothing could stand in the way of her Game Interface. Takeover or no takeover, Melfina wasn't going to stop their creativity. With the right amount of ingenuity and inventory items, how could they not triumph?





## Chapter 24; game pimp

January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Art was pleased. Just today he had learned that he was author of the most pirated game in history. Normally game designers are touchy about this sort of thing...but piracy of this magnitude...well, it bespoke Art's success. Besides, it was an accolade somehow befitting of Swarthy Victor, the greasy loser.

Art had always had his suspicions about this. Madre always sold wayyyy more Swarthy Victor hint books than actual software. But now an industry insider had confirmed these suspicions. Art didn't know when these industry 'insiders' started appearing, people whose jobs it was to know what was going on in the world of electronic gaming. *The industry is really going mainstream*, he thought as he walked down the hall. Still, this man's job was to be on top of this sort of stuff, and Art was tickled pink by the thought— no, the *fact* of it. Subversive success, was there anything better? But this musing was stalled by a strange sound rolling around the corner. It sounded like...wheels. On carpet. And heavy stamping. Art slowed down and listened curiously. What *was* that?

Suddenly a man in his mid to late twenties zipped around the corner on a scooter. He was *scooting* down the hallway! Though it barely had any roll because of the carpet. *The gall!* But more astounding were the accoutrements the man had adorned himself with. He was decked out in a long white, faux-fur glamour coat – some sort of pimp jacket! His pants were three times too large with massive 'look-at-me' sized designer labels on them...and lots of extra, unused pockets. This...person wore his sunglasses inside, and topping off the look, containing it all underneath, was a large, white cowboy hat. He looked like one of those weirdos from San Francisco to Art, a total trendy idiot – like he was transmogrified out of the pages of some bad New York style magazine. What was he doing way out here in the middle of the forest? Who were they hiring these days? Maybe Will was really losing it, Art wondered.

The idiot on the scooter stopped at the water cooler and frowned upon discovering just normal non-brand mineral water in the tank. Art

involuntarily stopped, turned and stared at this guy. Captain Trendy, noticing Art, smiled at him and, with a nod, tipped his cup, chugged it down, turned and scooted off down the hallway leaving Art's gaping jaw in his wake. Art just stared after him in disgust, shaking his head and wondering if he had missed something. He turned and waddled off down the hallway. *Wait till Bill hears about this!*

"Bill!" Art came rushing into Bill's cubicle, perversely excited by this encounter. "Did you see the guy on the scooter?"

"Scooter?"

"Yeah! He's rolling it around the office. He looks like the pimp from Swarthy Victor 1!"

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I heard some rattling before. Maybe that was him. Should call security?" Bill half-jokingly suggested.

"Do we have security?" asked Art. Considering the present circumstances with the stocks, it was a double entendre, Art realized.

"I don't know."

"He acted like he belonged here," Art responded. "It would be embarrassing to sic security on a new employee – if we had security. He could be some new whiz programmer. Probably is." Still, Art wasn't sure that people who wore fur coats and rode around the halls on scooters didn't automatically lose the right to not be interrogated. "I don't understand these new kids. Whatever happened to nerd-as-programmer? I liked that style."

"You're right," said Bill. Art was always right. "It's like suddenly it's cool to be a computer nerd...except you don't dress nerdy."

"Still. I can't imagine Will will let him ride his scooter around the office. He'd better be a damn amazing coder to get away with that! And I couldn't imagine Will hiring him if he interviewed in a get-up like that! Maybe the new H.R. department hired him."

"Who knows?" Bill shrugged and turned back to his screen.

"How's the testing going?"

"Good. I tweaked a couple of the item pictures, but the whole thing is pretty functional now. Programmers will have plugged through milestone 5 by the end of the week – probably, Carl said. Then we can send it to the testers."

Art saw the pimp guy talking to Will in the hallway as he returned half an hour later from Bill's cubicle to his 'Orifice'. The pimp guy was leaning casually up against the wall and had his scooter folded up under

## Game Quest

his arm. Henry passed by and Art gave him a ‘who-is-this-guy?’ look. Henry just shrugged.

Later, Art sat in his office figuring out some data on the Sci-Fi Quest game. Now that he’d finished up most of the work on Victor, it was back to doing grunt work for other people’s games. He paused to look out the window. It had been almost a month now since the whole Melfina thing started. Well...three weeks. But that was almost a month. It seemed strange to him as he looked out the window at the still, snow covered forest. They seemed so isolated out here. Most of them had calmed down and gotten used to the idea of being in a daily equity war. But they didn’t see any enemy. They weren’t even near any other *form* of business. It was a war they heard about only in their emails and on the company Intranet. It seemed surreal, as if the whole thing was people puffing out and beating their chests in other rooms.

Art had a copy of one of the trade papers with the ad they placed to the shareholders, to go along with today’s mailout: a message in the dark to this extraneous, gaseous, incohesive group of shareholders no one at Madre knew personally, the Dark Lord that they had to appease once a year. But after the annual meeting they seemed to dissipate into vague everyday peasants. No one knew how to get ahold of them. No one really thought about them – only we knew that we had to report to them at the end of the fiscal year. Now the real Dark Lord was riding into the shire, gathering the peasants and swaying them to his side. It wasn’t quite real, somehow, although the ill look on Will’s face every now and then made it hard to forget that it was, indeed, very real. Art tried not to follow it much. Other people were all over it. They could tell you the exact share price at any time of day. Water-cooler discussion now felt like conversations one might overhear in a Wall Street deli.

Art perused the newspaper ad once again:

**Public Notice to all Shareholders of Madre Games  
Entertainment, Inc.**

*Dear Madre Shareholders,*

*Since January 9<sup>th</sup>, Melfina Enterprises has been aggressively acquiring shares in Madre Games Entertainment. The manner in which they are conducting themselves indicates that they are seeking a controlling interest in our company. This was done without consultation with or warning to the Madre Board of Officers and, as*



*such, is a hostile move. We feel it is important to let you know that this takeover, if successful, will not be of benefit to anyone except Melfina for these reasons:*

*1. Madre has gained and maintained a major role in the computer gaming industry through independence, an independence that has allowed us to think innovatively and take risks. This has brought us from two employees in a garage to a multi-million dollar industry leader in just 16 years and has led to continual stock growth and success in an industry which shows no sign of slowing down. Melfina, on the other hand, is a corporation built on financial calculability and would stifle the operations, creativity and innovation that make Madre a success.*

*2. Melfina already controls several small, but wide-reaching areas of the gaming industry. The strengthening of Melfina represents a critical threat to start ups and other innovative entrepreneurs buoying up this young industry. Melfina, as its reputation shows, would be bad to the industry as a whole.*

*3. Despite the high values being offered by Melfina Enterprises we believe that selling now would be selling short. Averaged over our lifetime, Madre has achieved consistent and stable growth in its share price. At the helm of the ballooning computer gaming industry, our success and the value of your stocks can only increase. Why else would Melfina be so interested in Madre? Though Melfina's offer now may seem like an incredible bargain, the value of Madre shares can only increase. Don't sell yourselves short.*

*For these reasons, we are asking our shareholders to hold onto their shares in Madre Games Entertainment in the interests of shareholder profitability and security, out of respect to a burgeoning and innovative gaming industry in which you've all invested and made money, and on behalf of the patient, hardworking and visionary staff at Madre.*

*Thank you.*

**Will Roberts,  
President & CEO  
Madre Games Entertainment**

## Game Quest

Art thought it was a valiant effort...and the right thing to do, but he wondered how this was going to work. The majority of shareholders weren't involved in the gaming industry. Nor did they care about innovation, etc. They cared about their retirement funds. Or their second house in Acapulco. They cared about the money and Melfina was riding through the village, throwing gold doubloons off the cart.

There was a knock at the door. Art looked up to find the white, fur coat wearing, scooter riding cowboy pimp coder at his door. Will was with him.

"Art," nodded Will. "This is Tray. He's our new..." Will had to pause to get the words out. He felt embarrassed showing this guy around. The guy must have been sweating his ass off inside that fake fur coat. *His ideas better be good*, Will thought. And then there was the job title. It still seemed terribly...uncool. "He's a cool hunter," Will forced it out, "and HQ wants him to have a look around to see if he has any ideas. Marketing and the such. So he'll be here to check around on some things over the next week, looking at our games and advertisements and making some evaluations and suggestions."

"Oh," said Art. "Tray. Is that short for something?"

"No. Just Tray." Tray sized up Art's office and then, returning his gaze to Art, continued. "I'm gonna bum around the office for the next few days. Scope things out. Real caj, you know?"

"Does that mean I have to throw out my pocket protector?" Art joked. But Tray didn't laugh. Apparently Art was failing the cool test.

"He's...uh...with the recent sales on HomoSapien Quest, etc... we thought it would be interesting to get his ideas," Will was trying to save his reputation in front of Art. He wanted to say that it wasn't his idea, it was Newman's...but that didn't seem like him at all and he was embarrassed for having the thought.

Art nodded.

"Art creates the Swarthy Victor games," Will informed Tray.

"That's the game where you pick up chicks, right?" the cool hunting, white fur coat wearing, scooter riding cowboy pimp asked.

Art swallowed his pride and refrained from saying, 'It's more about a loser who tries to pick up women.' But it didn't matter. "Yeah."

"Cool."

"Well, we're going to head along," said Will. "But he'll be around all week so you'll have a chance to consult."

Art could hardly wait. Was this guy really going to go around and tell them what was cool?...and make 'cool' suggestions? That didn't seem

very cool at all.



Tim and Geoff were playing the first screen of their game. One of the coders had hacked it together for them so they could make a presentation to Will. Things were a little behind schedule. They had just finished tweaking the plot, dialogue and puzzles. But, by now, they were supposed to be near milestone 3...instead of with just one screen. And maybe some of that had to do with the release of Dan Destroyem those months ago.

Tim was still obsessed with the game. Last night he'd read and re-read the *Computer Gaming Universe Monthly* article on the Dan Destroyem expansion pack, talking excitedly about it to his girlfriend: *Look at that picture. Do you see anything different? That's a new gun. I think it's a new gun. I've never seen that gun before. And what the hell is that, huh? That thing looks scary. I wonder if it's a new boss or just a regular enemy. Crazy. It's too bad the sneak-preview picture is so small. You can't see hardly anything. They don't even say when it's coming out. I wonder when it's coming out?* Tim's girlfriend didn't seem overly interested, so he called up Carl from programming to talk about it. But now Tim had forgotten all about Dan Destroyem and the super cool expansion pack. Now he and Geoff were playing their screen. It was the first time they'd seen it with the new digitized paintings and it looked quite good even if all you could do was walk around the screen.

"This is awesome," said Tim.

"I'd buy this," said Geoff.

"I think we could tweak some of the puzzles with this. It's so clear. We could have some puzzles that are more visual than having to describe everything all the time."

"Good idea!" Geoff wrote that down.

Ron entered the office. "Hey mans," Ron said in his usual self-mocking hippy style. "What's the buzz?"

Suddenly Ron heard rattling and felt the Cool Hunter whipping down the carpet on his scooter, blasting a gust of wind at Ron's back as he zipped by.

"What the—??" said Geoff.

"Who was that? Is there an activity day?" Tim asked.

"Oh," said Ron. "He's the cool consultant."

"Cool consultant?"

"That's his job. He's a cool consultant...or hunter or something like that."

## Game Quest

“Really?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Ron. “His name’s Tray.”

“You know him?”

“Nah. Will introduced him. He gave me his business card.” Ron took it out of the breast pocket of his fractal-decorated shirt. “He told me to take note of that card. He said that was how you ‘made it’ these days. ‘You gotta sell yourself. It’s not like the old days where you just gotta work hard. You’ve got to go *beyond* marketing yourself. You’ve got to *be* a product. You can’t just be a person, you’ve got to *become* your own brand.’ Or something like that.” Ron handed the lime-green and brown, circular business card to Tim. It was printed on thick cardboard and had a very stylized logo that took up most of the space. It must have cost a fortune to print. Tim flipped the ‘business card’ over in his hands hardly believing it was a business card at all. He read the text.

**Cool**

304.555.2665

“Cool? Is that his last name or something?”

“Yeah, I think so,” said Ron.

“That’s his last name?” Geoff asked. “Tray? Tray, as in tres cool? Is this some kind of joke?” Geoff smiled, honestly thinking it was.

“I guess it’s all the rage in marketing now. Sheila down in shipping has a brother-in-law in who sort of does cool marketing. You know how they’ve had these child marketing firms?” Ron asked.

Tim and Geoff just stared at him. “I guess that’s a no,” Ron said. “You know, they’re these specialty marketing firms that do research on children. Find out what they like. Test products on them. Get their opinions and ideas and hopes and dreams. Basically, they try and get in the kid’s head, become a kid themselves, so that they can sell this information and knowledge to marketers to sell stuff back to kids...or to kids’ parents anyways.”

“That’s twisted,” remarked Tim.

“Yeah well, hey, that’s the modern world for ya. Anyway, I guess this cool-hunting is the next step, you know? For the teen to mid-twenties crowd. These guys try to research cool. ‘What is cool?’ They ask themselves. And so, to do that, they become cool themselves. They step into cool and try to embody it with every part of their soul, you know? They *know* cool. And then you hire them to come around and tell you what is cool. Cutting edge, I guess.”

"That seems pretty tacky," said Geoff. "It's like hiring the Fonz or something." Everyone laughed.

"So he's gonna tell us whether our office is cool or not?"

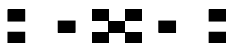
"I dunno," said Ron. "I don't think anyone really knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing. I think Will is just gonna try and see if he's got anything to say. It may look dumb as hell...but most marketing does. We'll see, I guess."

"Hey Geoff," Ron veered off the topic, "can I borrow your stapler? Mine got jammed."

"Sure," said Geoff. "But I need it back."

"No problemo."





## Chapter 25; five minutes in the virtual closet with you

January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1995

<CamelToePizzazz>This is totally like a virtual party.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Really?

<CamelToePizzazz>Don't you think? I mean...all these random text messages flipping by out there. It's like background chatter.

<CamelToeAphrodite>I guess. But there's no alcohol or music.

<CamelToePizzazz>Don't be a party pooper! At least it's way better than that last one in December. Anyway, who knows? Everyone could be drinking at home.

<CamelToeAphrodite>I'm not being a party pooper. It just doesn't seem that much of a party. All these faceless people we blew away over the last week talking about all the cool moves they pulled at the contest. There's not even interesting video game celebrities here this time.

<CamelToePizzazz>You're just missing Mr. Stud Gloom creator Adam Clayburn.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Whatever.

<CamelToePizzazz>Don't be sore. At least you can actually read what's going on this time. At least now they've got these sub-rooms.

Heather sat back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. It was only 8pm, but her eyes hurt from staring at the screen so long. The deathmatch contest had started at noon...New York time and not only did she have to get up *early* to play games (*how messed up is that?!*) she and Carol and Casey and Lisa had been fragging their way up the deathmatch ladder for a good seven hours, not including meal and match breaks. Heather had managed to get her deathmatch skills back after the finger-atrophying vacation time...but barely in time. She'd put in hours of playing to get in tip-top shape. Neglecting homework by closing the door and turning the volume down so she could say that homework *was* what she was doing. But it had all paid off. They had dominated the contest...and it had been

a lot of fun, too. Now the Death-0-Rama: Remembered & Dismembered contest, a sort of follow up match to the one last December, was over and she found herself stuck in this experimental after-game party chatroom. A noble experiment, but kind of lame.

The 'party' was better than the first one in terms of organization. Last time there had been so many people in the one room that no one could keep a conversation with all the different messages by different people ripping up the screen. KillNet had fixed that near the end by breaking the groups up into smaller rooms. This time you could break off entirely into a separate room and carry a semi-private conversation, like a small chat group at a party, without excluding others. People could move from room to room and join a conversation if they wanted. It was nice to talk to Carol, Heather admitted to herself...but even Carol was getting on her nerves tonight.

<CamelToePizzazz>Don't look now but I think that guy likes you! Yes!

Yes! He's definitely checking you out.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Ha ha. >:\

<CamelToePizzazz>No seriously. He's pretty cute. If you don't want him, I'll take him.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Real clever.

<CamelToePizzazz>Well if you don't want to chat, I'll go to another room and talk with someone else. I'll go find Casey.

9:44:09pm Boot\_Quaker\_Maker has entered the room.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker> Ah, if it isn't the notorious CamelToeses.

<CamelToeAphrodite> <:o What are you doing here? I thought designers weren't allowed in this competition.

<CamelToePizzazz>Oh, hi Mr. Clayburn!

<CamelToeAphrodite>Shut up, Pizzazz!

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>We're not. We hacked in. Just to the party though.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Really?

<CamelToePizzazz>Ha ha. That's hilarious. Virtual party crashers. I told you it was just like a real party.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Yup. We're the bad boys of the cyber party. Well me and Steve, anyway.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Anyway, looks like you guys got first place! I just wanted to congratulate you guys. From the other chat rooms it

## Game Quest

sounds like you played well.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Tied for first, actually.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Good enough. Still first.

<CamelToePizzazz>Thanks. Too bad you chickened out on this one.

Then you could be second!

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Well you guys are good. But not good enough to beat us yet. I think Death-0-Rama proved that. Maybe you'll get another chance to be humiliated sometime.

<CamelToePizzazz>Tell him about Madre.

<CamelToeAphrodite>He probably already knows.

<CamelToePizzazz>Heather's parents own Madre.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>I know. She told me.

<CamelToePizzazz>oh. Did she tell you Madre is being hostilely taken-over by Melfina? Sickening.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Yeah. I heard. Kind of nerve-wracking, actually, for EGO, being a small game company ourselves.

<CamelToePizzazz>Yeah. Seems really wrong. But you guys don't have stocks do you? I don't think you can get taken over if you don't have stocks. I'm not sure how it works.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>We have a few, I think. I don't know much about the business side.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Can we talk about something else?

<CamelToePizzazz>Well, I feel like this is the 'bedroom' of the virtual party and I'm interfering in a serious up-and-coming make-out session. I'm going to go and find Casey.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Shut up carol!

<CamelToePizzazz>Now now. No reason to resort to names! I'm leaving, already...

9:49:56pm CamelToePizzazz has left the room.

Heather sat back in her chair, irritated yet begrudgingly amused with Carol. Now she felt kind of awkward left in the 'bedroom' with Adam Clayburn. Maybe it *was* like a party. Heather didn't really know. She hadn't really been to a party since grade-school. The balloon and cake variety. But awkward discussions...that seemed like a party thing...

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Did I interrupt something?

<CamelToeAphrodite>no. Pizzazz is just being irritating.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>How did you feel about the match-up?



<CamelToeAphrodite>Not bad. Actually, I thought it was kind of easy. I don't know if that was because we got better...or if everyone else played bad...or if it was because of the lack of designers present.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Well, the others seem to think yo did pretty well. You should hear them complain about how you cheated...

<CamelToeAphrodite>Cheated!! How can you cheat?! It's no holds barred war!

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Hey hey. Easy. I know that. You know that. THEY know that. It's just sore loser talk. Makes them feel better.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Well, you got the loser part right.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>heh. Well some of them are going as far as to suggest that the all-female CamelToes Clan isn't actually made up of women...

Heather was MAD now, boiling on the volcanic edge of furious.

<CamelToeAphrodite>WHAT?! That's bullshit! Why would \_men\_ pretend to be girl gamers? All they talk about is how girl gamers suck! Why would they pretend to be them?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Well, I believe you.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Thanks I guess. But I don't need your support.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Fair enough. Just thought I'd let you know.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>You seem kind of grumpy.

This also irritated Heather. What business of his was it? But she deleted her response before she sent it. She was irritated because he was right, too.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Maybe I am a little. I don't know why. This "party" is kind of lame. I mean, we're all "partying" by looking at a screen alone in our rooms.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Boy. You don't sound like a gamer. Last time we talked you were all gusto on the Death-0-Rama.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Yeah. I don't know. I'm just a little sour now anyway, I guess. I also just want to get outside. It takes so much time to get good at these games. All the practicing actually gets to you after a while.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>You gonna quit?

<CamelToeAphrodite>Ha ha. No...I don't think so. I just think I enjoy games more when it hasn't become work. I'll play more when you get

## Game Quest

Gloom 3 out. So hurry up. Quit crashing parties and make it! ; )

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Well my engine is complete. Gotta make a bunch of revisions though. Maybe in a few months we can preview it.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Too long.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>can't rush quality.

<CamelToeAphrodite>I wish I could just get out now. But there's just miles of forest around me. I can't just take the car...and even then it's at least an hours drive to the nearest real civilization. So I just play a lot of games. I guess I'm just getting tired of school and all this. I wish I had more to do with myself.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Boy. Don't talk too loud. You'll put us out of business.

<CamelToeAphrodite>ha ha. Sorry.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Yeah. That's alright. Kind of bored myself.

<CamelToeAphrodite>That why you're crashing parties?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Yeah. maybe.

<CamelToeAphrodite>So what would you do if you weren't virtually crashing virtual parties?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Virtually nothing.

<CamelToeAphrodite>ha ha. Clever. Me too I guess.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>So...you wanna go join the rest of the party?  
If we stay in the 'bedroom' too long, people might get suspicious.  
Especially with me being so much older than you.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Whatever. You're still a baby. They say girls are more mature anyway...so you're only one year older than me instead of...four.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>I shouldn't even be talking to you. They'll think I'm some kind of pervert.

<CamelToeAphrodite>Who's they?

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>Everybody.

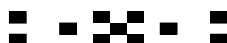
<CamelToeAphrodite>Good point. Ok. Let's go find another room.

<Boot\_Quaker\_Maker>raceya!

<CamelToeAphrodite>Oh please!

9:56:14pm Boot\_Quaker\_Maker has left the room.

9:56:15pm CamelToesAphrodite has left the room.



## Chapter 26; people that go bump in the night

January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1995

Will stared at the ceiling of the bedroom. He couldn't get to sleep. Kendra lay on her side snoring lightly; things certainly had switched. Kendra rarely ever snored while Will, as his son once declared, normally sounded like he was trying to 'vacuum the ceiling in his sleep'. *Kendra* was the one who paced the halls at night thinking about ideas for games, agonizing over deadlines, editing, re-editing, re-re-editing and, of course, re-re-re-editing.

She seemed so much more relaxed since the vacation and Will was glad. Getting Kendra to calm down had been one of his biggest goals for the trip. Usually vacations didn't succeed at this, but somehow, to his dismay, it had worked this time. Yet now, paradoxically, *he* was all keyed up. Even through all the expansion craziness of the last few years Will had never felt stressed. Sure, he'd often felt like he wasn't really in control of what was going on, like he was, through dumb luck and a strong grip, just *barely* staying on top of the wild stallion called Madre. But it had never stressed him out. He had never lost sleep over it.

In the darkness, Will turned his head over to the bedside table where Kendra had rows upon rows of horror books, both tawdry and classic, stacked on top of each other. She was reading through them voraciously, devouring the pages. Will wasn't much for horror stories. Never found them scary. But in the dark, that towering stack looked to Will like two corporate concrete and glass monoliths, seen but unseen, silhouetted on the edges of the horizon from whence an attack on his company was assembling. And that scared Will. It was scarier to him than any horror story he'd ever read.

Will decided to go downstairs for a pbj and some milk. That usually helped. After eating, he paced the halls a bit thinking about things. Finally, he felt tired and again settled in for sleep.

About half an hour later, Kendra suddenly woke from her sleep with an idea. She scribbled it down on a pad and went back to sleep. But ten minutes later she woke with another one, one that needed developing

## Game Quest

and she went downstairs to pace the halls a bit. After she'd sort of worked out how it was going to fit into her story, she returned to the stairway, passing another of Heather's gaming checks. She'd stumbled upon it earlier today. For someone who guarded her privacy like a fort of gold, sometimes Heather left big nuggets just lying outside the door.

"250 dollars for playing games!" Kendra had noted to Will. "I don't get it."

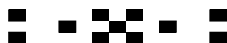
"Yeah," added Will, in one of his increasingly infrequent light moments, "It's already hard enough to get her to do chores around the house. Now we can't even entice her with money." Will figured it would be this way whether she was working at a convenience store – or Che's – or as a gamer. He thought gaming was the best job.

Kendra was a little worried about her daughter, though. To be honest, it was rare that she wasn't worried about her daughter. She was worried about Heather's obsession with games, her lack of friends and opportunities to get out and do her own thing. Most importantly, Kendra was worried about her schooling. It was her last year. Time to get some good grades and decide what she wanted to do with her life. But Heather seemed to just want to play games. Kendra would have more of a case if Heather's grades were slipping, but they weren't. They were tolerably mediocre: way lower than she knew Heather could get if she tried...but painfully passable in a way that spoke more about Heather's distaste for school life than any F could.

Kendra was tempted to check the light under Heather's door to see if she was still up. But she stopped herself. That was the old Kendra. She wasn't going to give in to the impulse. That would just be the first step into the downward cascade of neurosis. But she could take the nasty edge off of her anxiety, control it...and let her creative energy flow freely. It would just take work...and calm, thoughtful, self control. And constant vigilance. But she was up to the task. It had worked against Dan Destroyem. It could work here. She just had to use her Game Interface.

### GO TO SLEEP

You tuck yourself in, snuggling up against the warm body of your husband, drifting into a soup-like dream, rich in creative nutrients.



## Chapter 27; Bazam! return to Coolsville

February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1995

Tim was radiating irritation. The micro fibers of his skin were vibrating back and forth, sending out invisible waves of extreme annoyance. But they were ineffective. Inside his skull, Tim was fuming. He knew, if he really wanted, he could just suddenly slam his fist backwards and smack that face staring over his shoulder at the screen. He was sure he could feel that feather boa resting against his back. It made his skin crawl. He was trying to work here! He didn't need this idiot peering over his shoulder!

Tim was glad this was his last day. He couldn't stand him. All he did was wander around and interfere with things. Ask stupid questions. Say this was 'cool' or that was 'cool.' Tim had thought today was going to be easy. At the end of the day Tray Cool was going back into whatever hole he crawled out of. But today was the worst. Today the cool hunter wanted to focus on Sci-Fi Quest.

"I'm gonna grab a cappuccino," had been Tim's first excuse to get away.

"A cappuccino?" the cool hunter had asked.

"Yeah. From the machine."

"You got a cappuccino machine here? That's cool."

Tim rolled his eyes at the thought of that conversational exchange earlier this week. Now he'd run out of excuses to get away. Tres Cool, indeed! The guy was a serious dork. And Tim knew dorks! At the moment, Tim was trying to correct this small glitch in the new engine. The screen kept coming up green for some reason. It would have normally taken him five minutes to solve this problem but with Tray breathing down his neck he couldn't concentrate. He kept switching numbers:

```
p=(p * x);
```

```
NewPos=*crevicePoint(mousePosX, mousePosY) + MemSet;
```

Tray's face hung over Tim's shoulder, watching him in action.

"What if you switched the X and Y positions?" Tray suggested. Tim

## Game Quest

could barely contain his grunt. That was the stupidest, most pointless suggestion. The guy knew nothing about programming. *Why was he making suggestions?!?!?!?*

"That won't work," said Tim in the calmest voice he could muster. The frequency of his vibrations bumped up a notch.

He thought of something else to try.

```
p=p++;  
If (p=(r-MemSet)) {  
ClickPoint=MemSet*InitMouse;  
NewPos=*crevicePoint(mousePosX, mousePosY) + MemSet;}
```

Tim compiled it and suddenly the screen went normal. He'd solved it. Finally.

"Bazam!" shouted Tray enthusiastically.

Tim was getting really tired of that too. He kept shouting *Bazam!* What did that mean? It meant nothing. It was some stupid catch statement he'd made up himself. It was so asinine...and the worst thing was it was catching. Tim had to try his hardest not to say *B*— not to say it. When he'd heard a co-worker down in testing yell it yesterday – those guys all thought Tray was the coolest (they *would*) – he wanted to throttle him.

Tray slammed both his hands down on Tim's shoulders and gave him a quick 'pep-massage.' "Well, big guy, good work. I'm off to scope out the office." And with that Tray flipped open his scooter and scooted down the hallway. Tim would have gotten up and shut the door to lock him out...except he didn't have a door. An office door on another office, Tim couldn't remember which anymore, had been busted at a Christmas party a few years back. They'd never ordered a new one and that person had just taken someone else's door. It was a big office joke for a few months, the door switching around in the middle of the night, until finally everyone got tired of it and Tim and Geoff were stuck with a permanent window. Now he seriously regretted not returning the favor. So instead, he closed a door in his mind, focusing on pushing the cool hunter out of existence. Tim thought about the state of the takeover...and then decided that thinking about the cool hunter was a better idea. He grabbed his coat and decided to go out into the snow for a quick walk down a nearby trail...freshen himself up.



Henry was revising the title music for *Sci-Fi Quest*. When he looked up,

the cool hunter was there.

"That's pretty good," the cool hunter said referring to the music, even bothering to take the ever-present portable CD-player headphones from out of his ears to hear better.

"Thank you," said Henry.

"You know, with this new sound-recording stuff you're doing, you should really get some hip-hop in some of your games. It's about to really blow into the mainstream."

Henry smiled and ignored this comment.

"Well, and you should be good at hip-hop," the cool hunter added.

Henry couldn't believe what he just heard. He clenched his fists, counted to ten and then thanked the cool hunter for his suggestion. Behind him, Bill came in.

"Hey Henry," he said. "Can I use you for a portrait?" Then Bill saw Henry was busy with the cool hunter. "Sorry."

"No probs," said Tray, plugging his brain entertainment device back in. Tray swung his hand out for a handshake. Bill met it and then the cool hunter inflicted a bizarre series of twists and turns and bumps and slaps to Bill's hand – something resembling more of a secret treehouse passcode than a handshake – while Bill's hand sat passive, manipulated like a rubber puppet by this bizarre greeting.

"Later man," and with that the cool-hunter was scooting off down the hall.

Henry shook his head and said nothing.

Bill imagined a cool hunter convention with thousands of these cool guys together, in feather boas and sunglasses, wearing hoodies and baggy pants, giving secret handshakes. It made him laugh. "You know," he said to Henry, "this cool-hunting stuff. It's the latest cutting edge marketing, right? But no doubt the idea came out of one of these real stiff, research heavy schools. That Tray guy is probably some total stiff out of Stanford or something...but he's *become* his job. He lives in Coolsville now." Bill found this amusing. As if under that big fur coat Tray had worn the first day you could see the suit and black rimmed glasses. As if you could scratch him like a lottery ticket to reveal the square underneath.

Henry paused, looked up. "You want me for a portrait?" He was wary. What kind of portrait were they doing?

"Don't worry. It's not what you think. It's for Captain Sandar in the new Sci-Fi Quest. Carl over in programming said that he kept picturing your face as Captain Sandar and everyone pretty much agrees you look just like what we all think he should look like. Don't worry, only the people in the

## Game Quest

office would know it's your face...and it would be slightly cartoonized for the game. He has a big scar on the left side of his face. No one will really know it's you." Bill knew this was going to be a tough sell.

"I don't know. What does this Captain Sandar do?"

"He chews Johnny 10-4 out at the beginning of the game. It's minor. We'll make his eyes blue too. Come on. No one will recognize you..."

Henry scrunched up his face.

"I can do it here in five minutes. You won't even have to stop working. I'll just do some model sketches."

Henry sighed. He knew it was a bad idea, but, "Alright. But if I don't like the pictures, I'm pulling it."

"No problemo, Captain Sandar!" Bill saluted him. Henry rolled his eyes. At least they wanted him for a Captain and not to play Hip-Hop-Henry.

Henry had been in a really bad mood lately. He felt as if his loyalty was somehow under a giant magnifying glass. With the price war going on, shares in Madre were higher than anybody had ever seen before...and Henry wanted to sell. He hadn't, up until this point, because he didn't want to work for Melfina...but now they were so close to owning Madre it seemed a faint hope that Madre, with its total 43% shares, would be able to outbid Melfina, at a close 37%. It was practically a sure thing...and when Melfina won those stock prices would drop through the floor. Henry wanted to sell his shares now! When they'd make money. Finally trade in those stupid slips of paper for something useful. But then he'd be labeled a traitor. Or, even if not, he'd feel like a traitor, like he was selling out his co-workers and the company, the Judas of Madre...

But why did they pay him in stocks if it was frowned upon to sell them? That's like getting paid in IOUs. He was frustrated and upset by all of it and hated being put in this position. He'd lose money by not selling and the way Melfina was coming, there was little point in *not* selling. But he loved Madre and he didn't want anybody here – Will, Art, anybody – to think that he didn't believe in the Madre dream, because he did. He really, really did. He wished Will would just buy the stocks off of him, but Madre needed to use its money to buy shares from non-employees.

When visiting Art yesterday he'd seen a draft of a new poster that was going to be put up around the office. It almost seemed like a World War II propaganda poster to Henry: *Support the front, buy stocks!* Henry couldn't let this go. He had to talk to Will. This was going too far...and he even worried that Will would be unnecessarily hurt by the rejection that would surely follow, but he had to tell him.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Henry had told Will. He wasn't good



at venturing his opinion...but he *had* to say something. "I think it'll really divide the staff. I know some staff are dying to sell their shares right now. That's why people work for shares...so they can sell them later and make money from them. People have held off out of loyalty...and because nobody wants to work for Melfina. But asking them to shell out *more* money is really pushing in the wrong direction. Some of these people have been waiting for their stocks to go up for years so they can sell...and now you're asking them to buy more when they're terribly inflated. And whe—if Melfina takes us over, those stocks will drop through the floor and they'll lose a lot of money. Even if we *win*, share prices will still drop. It's a bad situation for morale already. Everybody's making a sacrifice by not selling, but asking them to buy more..."

"People need this job. They can't afford to lose Madre...because there aren't any other hi-tech jobs up here. Everybody trusts you and wants to beat Melfina, ...but, what I'm saying is, a push to have employees buy stocks is only going to alienate those people on the fence and feels like our loyalty is being called into question..."

Henry sensed tension so tight you could pluck it like a guitar string. He couldn't tell what Will was thinking. Already he felt like Judas for spilling the beans.

"Finally," he continued despite his desire to quit, "At the current prices this move will hardly put even a sizable dent against Melfina. I hate to be a naysayer, but I had to say something."

"Well, how do *you* feel Henry?" Will asked sincerely.

"Honestly, I wish I had never been paid in stocks. I understand why we made those decisions when we did, I even agreed with them, but I don't want anything to do with the dirty business. I have four mouths to feed. I wish I'd just gotten checks...because now I'm in this nasty dilemma where I feel my honor is on the line. You know we accept stocks for payment because we all want to support the company, but then we can't actually sell them either. I don't want to say I'm disloyal...I just don't know what to think. I wish...I just—out damned spot! You know?"

Will looked at him hard then. Henry couldn't tell what was going on behind that furrowed brow. Will had put down his paper and sighed. "Yeah. You're right." Henry had been waiting to be fired, but Will seemed to be sincere. "It's a bad idea. You know, Henry, I'm just scrambling for ideas." Will motioned to his desk but didn't say anything more, obviously frustrated and a little desperate. Henry had never seen this side of Will, Will the unstoppable.

On that desk was Madre's 'scorched earth policy', which was the only

## Game Quest

thing burning up. They had announced a full delay of Swarthy Victor by four months, despite the fact that it was one of the first games in a long time where Madre was actually *ahead* of schedule. They'd done it to shake the market...to no success. Melfina wasn't buying. Madre's most drastic sabotage maneuver was to sell off Braingames, a small, but innovative subsidiary specializing in education games that Madre owned in Texas. Braingames was very promising and had raised Madre's stock significantly when they'd been purchased. They even had government contracts for education institutions in a few states. Selling it off was a bad business decision by any means, but had two advantages: First, it made Madre worth less to Melfina. And, second, it added about a million dollars to the coffers, which they used to buy back shares. And yet, they had had to use this secret weapon earlier than expected...and it hadn't seemed to phaze Melfina at all. Will was hoping, at least, to drive them into negotiation. But nothing! Most maddening of all, the news that Melfina was taking over Madre made *Melfina's* share price rise...giving them more money with which to fund their insidious invasion! Melfina just kept offering more and more for Madre stock, marching steadily forward through the forest. Unstoppable.

"You know, Henry," Will said, "If you really need or want to sell your shares, you should go ahead and do that. I don't want you to think that we would all view you as some sort of traitor if you did. We sold you those shares as part of your salary...to do whatever you wanted with them. It would be really hypocritical of us to ask that you not to use them. I'm certainly not going to hold it against you. It would be like telling you how to spend your salary."

"Yeah," was all Henry could think of to say. He was relieved. Relieved that he hadn't been fired. Even more that Will had listened to him...and agreed! "Actually, I don't have many shares in Madre left. I've been selling them since I started. I hate the damn things. I never really wanted them."

Will managed a laugh. It wasn't that funny, but right now it didn't take much.

"I only have about \$1000 worth...I could even donate it to Madre. Well, \$1000 before all this," Henry motioned to the screen in the corner on a never ending scroll of stock prices. "It's probably worth more than \$9000 now."

"Don't worry about it Henry. Thanks for the advice."

Henry nodded. "What happened to the talks with USA CoolConnect! about buying SupraNet?"

Will smiled. That was their only good news. "We're still in talks. They're

pretty sympathetic to our cause...they don't want us to be taken over by Melfina either. They'd like to buy SupraNet ahead of the agreed date...but the money is tied up. Still, they seem optimistic and are trying to help us out. We could buy a lot of shares with that money."

Henry smiled. "Maybe if you got close...like 45% or something, you could really convince Madre staff to buy more shares. If it was a certainty that we'd survive...but not now..."

"We'll see. It was good to get your opinion, Henry," Will affirmed. "I'll run more stuff by you from now on."

Henry had known Will was telling the truth, and actually grateful for what he had done, because the next day Henry had been added to Will's 'inner-circle' of opinion givers. Ironically, Henry had wanted nothing to do with the stocks and Will had made him a committee member on what to do in this mess. Still, Henry was relieved by the confirmation that he wasn't a traitor, that his feelings were valid. It didn't solve everything – he was still sure some staff would see him as a traitor if he sold his paltry .002% of the total shares, even if Will didn't. But Will's opinion of him he cared about.

Tapping his pen impatiently on his desk, Henry was really hoping that the SupraNet talks were going well. Will had left this morning for the meeting with the USA CoolConnect! brass in San Francisco. Henry wished for the best...though he was aware of the irony of now using SupraNet to help fend off Melfina. The creation of SupraNet had caused them to sell out their majority share...and its poor performance had pushed stock prices down to their lowest in years which, no doubt, played a good part in the timing of Melfina's bid. Henry knew that SupraNet was going to be the end of him. You couldn't win with it. It was cursed.



Art was reviewing something Will had sent him when he heard the telltale squeak of scooter wheels. He'd gotten used to hearing it over the past week. And in a way the cool-guy had grown on him. Art had managed to get over the phoniness of his style...mostly because he had nothing but praise for Art's game. The first time the cool-guy had seen a demonstration of the new Swarthy Victor he said 'Bazam!' Art wasn't sure what that meant, but the way he said it sounded hip. Cool. Like the latest hip buzzwords, straight out of Coolsville, were being applied to his game, designed by a 40-something bald man. Tray had said that his game was "totally caj." Art guessed caj was short for casual. Which he guessed was good.

The scooter turned rapidly at Art's door and zoomed in. Tray hopped

## Game Quest

off and simultaneously flipped it into compact carry mode as he ran to a stop in front of Art's desk.

"Dude! Your game is soooo funny!" Tray said. "I was down in testing... those guys were just cracking up. I'm gonna get my secretary to buy it for me when it comes out! I never played the previous ones...but definitely cool. Funny shit man. Funny shit."

"I had hoped to have more funny shit than the last game," Art said, very tongue in cheek. Mr. Very Cool did not catch on.

"Too bad it's all delayed for several months now. Total bummer about the takeover. I wish you guys luck." Tray beat his fist on his chest in some manner that seemed to indicate solidarity. "Anyway, I'm heading out now. My "observation period"," he used his fingers to make quotes in the air as if he was too cool for the technical terms of his own job, "is done so I gotta head back to the Fran and do up my report. Anyway, just wanted to send my shout-outs to you for showing me your stuff, brother."

"Yeah. It was my pleasure. I look forward to seeing what you think."

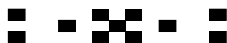
"For sure. It's a cool little booklet that I do, you know? None of that boring black and white stuff. It's got diagrams and cartoons...and graphic designers working on it. Gotta embody cool, you know, otherwise it's just a fake-out."

"Yeah," agreed Art. "For sure."

"Check ya later," Tray reached out for a handshake. Art moved his up to meet it and then Tray's hand manipulated and abused Art's hand in some tribal, highly choreographed set of movements that seemed like secret handshake code. Art didn't know what he was doing but Tray acted like Art did, doing all the movements to Art without Art having to do anything...like Tray didn't even notice that Art didn't know the secret 'cool' handshake. That made Art feel cool too. The coolest guys always made you feel cool too.

Tray hopped onto his scooter and zipped off down the hall. About fifteen minutes later Art looked out his window to see Tray in the parking lot with about five guys from testing. They were all standing around his sports car admiring and talking about it, no doubt Tray telling stories of how fast he was driving it this one time, and the chicks he made out with in the back seat. And all the testers fawned and cooed over the thing as if it were hotter than any chick. And they all hoped that they were Tray Cool's favorite... and that, somehow, some of his cool would rub off on them. They were sucked in by the cool.

Art just shook his head and thought, *'Kids these days'*.



## Chapter 28; high noon

February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1995

### *Melfina seeks 'hands off' approach to Madre*

Roger Hubel, CEO of Melfina Enterprises Inc, speaking at a local business gala this weekend commented that his company was seeking a 'hands off' approach to Madre Games Entertainment.

"We're simply interested in the networking and business opportunities there. Madre is a phenomenal commercial success that has customers, networks and affiliates across North America. We don't want to mess around with what has made Madre a success. We simply want to tie their expansive distribution and computing network into our own."

Melfina has been pursuing shares in the famous industry pioneer over the last year, greatly stepping up its efforts since January. Starting out in a garage in 1979 California-based Madre has grown to be the largest player in the computer gaming industry today. Analysts contend that, while Melfina has vast financial resources, they lack the 'street credibility' of Madre, considered the founder of the computer gaming industry and often seen as the 'gamer's company.' The takeover move is suggested to be an effort to buy that credibility.

"There are worries out there that Melfina...only has eyes on Madre's treasure chest. I'd like to assuage those fears by saying that we have no intentions of altering Madre's successful approach to business. Acquiring Madre is a big and necessary step for us and will increase our reach within the industry. Not only will it be a boon to our shareholders, it's also a symbolic step for us," said Mr. Hubel. Melfina has been trying to stake a place in the gaming industry for the last five years. The addition of Madre to Melfina's corporate holdings is considered by analysts to be a milestone in those efforts.

"It proves that we have arrived...", continued Mr. Hubel. "And will help us really focus on bringing computer gaming to the next level. This is an excellent opportunity for Madre too. As part of the Melfina network they will vastly increase their market reach, gain the help of

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*a host of sister companies and have access to a much larger, collective wallet. Madre has pioneered and leads this industry. That's why we are interested in them. We don't intend to change anything. We don't want to add our chefs to the Madre kitchen."*

*When asked by one reporter what sort of games he would like to see in the industry, Mr. Hubel, to much laughter, jokingly suggested 'diaper-changing game' in reference to the arrival of his fifth child.*

Will angrily tossed the paper back onto his desk. It was such a transparent public relations grab...timed to win over the wafflers. Will had been waiting for something, anything to get the takeover news into the papers...and this was it? The reporter didn't even ask, if Mr. Hubel had such honorable and innocent intentions, why Melfina was resorting to a *hostile* takeover!!! What kind of reporting did they call this? They didn't even ask what Madre thought. This is journalism? Impartiality? And what was that quip at the end? They might as well have talked about Roger Hubel's singing dog!

Will picked the story up again and morosely read it for the third time. He didn't understand how this article even got printed in the paper. It was one of the Primault industry papers. The Primault papers hadn't even wanted to print Madre's 'Public Announcement to Madre shareholders'. They complained about the size of the ad Madre wanted so, in the end, Madre could only post a quarter page which looked...insignificant. It might as well have been a hole in the paper for all the effect it had. And the few other papers, outside of Primault control, who had allowed them to print a full page ad hadn't written *anything* about the takeover. It was non-news. Will didn't understand. Wasn't Madre big enough to warrant articles in the business section? But they had written nothing. So how and why did this article end up in here now?

Something came to him and he began flipping through the paper clippings on his desk. He'd gone through them a million times. Now he was looking for a tiny article on Roger Hubel he had clipped. Something about it tweaked in his mind. Here it was. Will skipped to the quick bio of Roger Hubel: Former CEO of Primault Industries... Major stakeholder in Primault Industries... Will also noticed that several of the board members at Primault were prominent stakeholders or board members in Melfina.

Will threw his hands in the air and let the paper fall back to the desk. No wonder the Daily Chronicle forced them to run a quarter page ad. No wonder the only news out of the Daily Chronicle was this pithy little piece of pro-Melfina junk. And everyone was going to believe it now because

it appeared in the *newspaper*. Suddenly, Will recalled all the teachers in high school who had taught him about the impartiality of the press. He wanted to call them up and inform them: these papers were all in the pockets of the business interests that owned them! Will was disgusted. And more than disgusted, he was upset.

The TV propped up on the cabinet beside Will's desk flicked blue highlights across his face. Will watched the share prices drifting lazily up the screen. It was almost as if Melfina and Madre were playing a game of Pong. Two non-descript paddles bouncing a ball back and forth across the screen. Melfina sets the share price. Serves. Madre matches. Melfina responds. The ball is in Madre's court. Madre sends it back. Back and forth and the points score at the bottom goes up. But the scoreboard is in percentages: Melfina 42%, Madre 44.5%: First to 50.1% wins. And it was only 11 a.m.. There were another 6 hours until the exchanges closed.

Today Will had his door shut. He didn't want to be visited by anybody. One of the lights in his office had gone out and he didn't bother getting it fixed because the dim light seemed to fit his mood...dark, depressed. The bright, rapid flicker of the TV made his eyes sore and tender. Will felt that being inside his office now was like living inside a wound. And since this whole thing had begun, life *was* a wound. A sore bruise that got more tender each day.

This week had been the worst. There had been hope before. But on Monday Melfina broke from returning serves and set forth a major volley – blitzkrieging their offer up by a full dollar. It had been good for another percentage point before Madre matched.

And then there was the whole SupraNet disaster on Tuesday. Despite hours and hours of talks, USACoolConnect! had completely failed to come through on the early purchase. The money was tied up, they said. Now they were pushing for Madre to lower the price so they could buy it early. Will couldn't tell if this was just some cynical attempt to get SupraNet for a cheaper price or if they were genuinely interested in helping Madre out but couldn't afford to buy it at that moment. He had a sneaking suspicion it was the former...especially since they refused to go for an installment plan. But Will wasn't going to be taken for a sap...even if he needed the money. He left the meeting sour and upset.

Will was tempted to hide his phone in his drawer he was so sick of calls from Finance...either relaying bad news or asking him for some major decision. He was popping antacids with every blip on the stock TV now. He'd cleared out one of his desk drawers solely for jars of antacids. Now he sat slumped sideways on his desk staring at the scrolling white blips in

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the dark.

Will knew Wednesday, today, wasn't going to be any better when, first thing, he flicked on the light to his office only to hear it *POP!* and leave the room grimly lit. Melfina was sitting at 40.5% that morning. Within five minutes of sitting down Melfina had blitzkrieged again. Will wracked his brain, telling Finance to match the price while knowing that Madre could only buy an insignificant amount of shares at this price. It was a frivolous battle.

And now Will was worried. Not the general worry that can be cured with antacids, but the seriously worried worry. What could they do now? He couldn't think of anything. With the share price where it was, Madre could purchase 3% more...max...and that would break them. Will was draining their moat rapidly. Even if they could fend off the invaders at the castle gate they'd have nothing left to live on afterwards. Will was facing the suicide pill.

But then...in a way that didn't matter. Part of Will would rather sink his ship than be raided by those buccaneers. But at the same time, that attitude didn't make sense. Madre could still go on, at least in some capacity, with Melfina at the helm. What if Hubel was telling the truth about staying out of the Madre kitchen? Then this whole battle, the stress and the flagrant loss of money, didn't matter much, did it? Will didn't know what to do. And that was the worst part.

On top of this, Will felt like this whole affair and the resulting stress was stealing away his life...his real life...the part he didn't spend at work. To relieve this Will had rented a hot-tub for the backyard on the weekend and the family had a party in the snow. It was quite nice, actually. But that had been before this week...when there was still hope.

Will sat in his dark room staring at the screen. The half light created deep, dark shadows and the bright screen hurt his eyes. Will truly felt like the white knight barricaded high up in his castle fortress.



Will snapped his head up and shook it to stay awake. He looked at the clock on his desk. 3 p.m. He'd been getting such poor sleep lately. Making love to Kendra helped him get to sleep sometimes...at the same time all the worry put him out of the mood. And sex wasn't a solution that could be employed every night. He took his feet down from the desk and groggily double checked the TV. The Melfina percentage rolled by.

"Holy shit!" Will leaped out of his chair and grabbed the phone. He dialled down to San Fran...and waited through what seemed like endless



rings.

"Hello?" the voice finally came.

"Jeezus, Frank. The Melfina price just jumped t—"

"Yeah. Already on it just now. We've matched the price. Should go up in a few minutes," Frank informed.

"Ok. Thanks Frank."

"No problem," came the voice at the other end. Will hung up and slumped back in his chair and opened a drawer. He was out of antacids. A few minutes later the change came up. Madre and Melfina's were both offering \$48.27 per share. Madre was at 44.5%. Melfina was at 43.5%.

Will felt like he was getting an ulcer. Like his stomach was starting to physically manifest the emotional turbulence churning in his head. The market had been so volatile this week. Even though Madre was matching Melfina at every jump the shareholders were selling like crazy now. With prices this high, the war couldn't go on much longer...their window of opportunity to sell big was closing and the closer the two percentages got to 50% the quicker they sold. It would all stop when somebody won...and then fall fast. If the whole takeover experience had been a mach-speed motorcycle trip, then these last two days felt like they had broken the light-speed barrier. Will was completely unable to assess, let alone react to the landscape. The only certain thing was that it was just a matter of time before they hit the wall.



An hour later Will's door creaked open. Will looked to see who was peeking in without knocking and his wife slipped into the dark room, shutting the door behind her. Will could tell from the empty sounds that coughed through the door that most of the office had gone home. He turned back to the screen.

Kendra came up behind him without saying anything and hugged him. She massaged his shoulders a bit as he stared into the blue screen...an ocean in which he was drowning. On Will's desk she noticed the paper with that Roger Hubel article. Though it was a medium size article it seemed insignificantly small to her. The frown on Will's face, the incalculable rumors floating in ears and out mouths in the office, the number of jobs and livelihoods at stake, the uncertainty...somehow it was incredible how inaccurate, how inadequate that little strip of finely printed words tucked away on page E13 was at capturing any of this...this...of what was going on...of all the people and lives affected. When you appear in the paper it means you are important, but this only made Kendra feel little. Like she

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didn't matter. Like they didn't matter. She wished it really *didn't* matter... but looking at her husband's gaunt face she knew that it did.

### USE WOMAN'S WAYS ON HARDENED COWBOY

You come around in front of your loving husband and sit in his lap as he stares grimly at the screen. He puts his arms around you and you watch with him, for a while, the endless repeat of little white numbers crammed into rows and columns. The stock market had closed half an hour ago...these numbers would repeat all night.

Kendra turned and kissed Will on the cheek. He thanked her and sighed.

"It's over," he said.

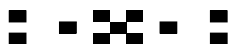
Kendra resisted, pointing out that they still had a percentage point on Melfina. In a way she was relieved that it was over. In the hot tub over the weekend she'd actually missed Will. She saw him relaxed and jovial for the first time in a month...and wanted that husband back. It was like a visit from a ghost.

Unless some miracle was going to happen...there was nothing to stop Melfina from outrunning Madre now. And that was all that counted. Madre was not going to catch up. Will turned off the TV with the remote and pressed his arms tighter around his wife, pulling her close. She felt warm and soft, like bread dough, in his lap. She pressed her head against his cheek and they both stared out the window into the forest. Millions of tiny snowflakes parachuted down across the window. This mass immigration of white spread out for miles. To Kendra it almost seemed peaceful. Despite the takeover, the snow still falls. It was reassuring. They were mostly alone in this office in the forest. Hidden.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"I don't know." Will thought about it for a moment in the thick darkness. "We wait."

Outside, Will didn't see the calm like Kendra. Instead he saw the hordes of barbarians suddenly breaking through the perimeter of trees with the crisp Melfina logo sewn onto their tattered war clothes and banners. They waved their swords in the air, shouting, and charged into the field of snow outside, towards the office, raiding the herds while the dark mages in their long, satin, blood-red robes, their gaunt, old, white faces hidden under their hoods, commanded the attacks from deep within the trees. Off in the distance Will could hear the demonic whinney of the Black Knight's horse.



## Chapter 29; 2:49 p.m. Thursday February 16<sup>th</sup> 1995

February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1995

The office was unnaturally subdued today. Although Will hadn't made any announcement as to the status of Madre's independence...people knew. They knew by the expression on Will's face, by rumors out of the head office, by the way Will had locked his door and stayed at the office way past everyone else last night. Will peered out through the bay window at his empire. It almost seemed a desolated wasteland...a landscape incapable of habitation by programmers. Not a person was in the hallway...and all the heads were tucked solemnly behind the cubicles.

Will still hadn't had that light in his office fixed. It was almost as if no one was in here...but he was: sitting in his cave and staring at screens as shadows from the trees outside stretched across the snow with the rising of the sun, ghostly hands from a crypt. Will knew that Madre had lost – save a favor from *deus ex machina* – and yet none of it was official yet...as if the author had forgotten to write the ending. This was just time spent waiting in the graveyard. It was unpleasant.

Just after lunch Will ventured out to suckle from the cappuccino machine. Wisps of a conversation drifted from around the corner.

“What do you think?”

“I guess everyone assumes it's bad. But I dunno. The worst thing is the uncertainty. They own us now...or are about to, I guess...but things might be totally the same, right? I mean, they are buying us out because we're good, because Madre makes money, right? Why would they want to change that? If anything, they are going to put money *in* to help us make *more* money. There might even be *more* opportunities for us to move up...”

“Well, that's the most optimistic thing I've heard since this whole thing started,” came the other voice. Will crept silently up to the wall to listen. He recognized the second voice as Jerry from Programming. He wasn't sure about the first voice.

“Well, I'm not trying to be overly optimistic. I mean...it is a pretty shitty thing to have happen. If I had the choice I'd rather not be another piece in

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the Melfina empire...but it might not be so bad, you know? There might be some new opportunities. Maybe not. There might be a few changes. I don't know. See...it's the uncertainty that bugs me the most. But everyone is all gloom and doom around here...I just can't see Melfina buying us out to dismantle or fundamentally change us. Makes no sense."

"Yeah. That's a good point, I guess. Anyway, even if they do want to mess with everything, Stan was saying that they'd have to wait until the next AGM to change the CEO anyway... So, at worst, we've got, like, ten months to look for another job."

"Why worry, right? There's nothing we can do about it now anyway."

"For sure."

Will slipped back to grab his coffee and disappeared down the hallway. He wasn't sure how to feel about this. On one hand it was good to see his employees were pulling through all right...at least better than him. On the other hand...it seemed like they didn't totally support this battle to keep from Melfina. But then, what could they do? It was over anyway. And they were probably right. Melfina wouldn't destroy everything...at least not instantly. And their jobs weren't under siege...just Will's job. It was his property, his life, his passion that was being absconded, pirated away.

Will opened his office door and slipped into the shadows, took up his still warm seat and watched the countdown. As the coffee slowly trickled down his throat Will wondered more and more what he was doing in here... watching this so morbidly. Nothing was going to change it. The coffee bubbling in his veins was only aggravating his state of mind...sitting and moping was contrary to being proactive...Will *needed* to do *something*...but was able to do nothing. Even turning off the screen wouldn't help. And so, he sat there, allowing the blue light from the screen to pour into his sore eyes until, at 2:49 p.m. that Thursday, February the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1995, he watched Melfina's share in Madre, to no fanfare, pass Madre's stock at 45%. Madre remained at 44.5%.



The walk had done Will good. As soon as he had seen that final push for the finish line, Melfina's racer breaking the red ribbon, he was released from the spell. He turned off the TV, grabbed his thick winter coat and went out for a walk in the snowy forest...

The cold air rushing into his lungs, the numb sensation on his cheeks as he pressed through the snow, revived him, cooled him down, so to speak. At first he imagined his footprints hissing as his burning heels sank into the uneven snow. Now he was coming back towards Madre. He couldn't

yet see the building, but he knew it was in this direction. Somehow it was reassuring that, despite the fact that the world seemed to be falling apart, it wasn't. He could still enjoy a walk through the forest. Melfina couldn't buy that away from him. In fact, the more he thought about it, he hadn't had the opportunity to walk in the forest at work for years. He and Kendra used to do it together all the time. But things had been so insane... He hadn't realized how much he missed it.

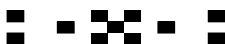
He felt a lot better anyway. Stepping out of the trees, he passed through the parking lot and noticed several cars were gone. Checking his watch it was almost half past four. He climbed the stairs and went immediately for a coffee from the machine, feeling good. He still wasn't accepting of the takeover...but somehow he seemed more ready to face it...to go back into that room and meet the next step. He was sure he would be able to see it in a more positive light...or find some new direction that would re-invigorate him. Maybe even think of something they hadn't thought of...to escape this trap. The world was not all glum. He knew that because, in a glum world, could you take a walk alone through the forest?

Will headed towards his office but, before entering, stopped by an empty cubicle and made a call to get the light in his office fixed. Then he entered the room and sat down in front of the screen, sipping his coffee. And what appeared there was quite interesting. It confused him for a moment. The stock exchange had closed half an hour ago and Melfina had gone up to 45.5%. But that wasn't what interested him. It was the fact that Madre was still sitting at 44.5%, that they were still afloat!

Will hadn't expected that. He had assumed, and rightly so, it seemed, that the stock would start selling faster once Melfina surpassed Madre. Stakeholders would crawl over each other to sell. Worse yet, people who had been Madre faithful up to this point, seeing they had lost, would loot the stores and cash in, power-boosting Melfina to the finish line. Will hadn't considered the fact those shares might also go to Madre. Will was suddenly buoyed by the fact that they still might win. They didn't really have any more tricks up their sleeves to pull...but depending on the odds, if more shares went to Madre than Melfina...

"This isn't over yet!" Will laughed to himself, floating on clouds of relief. It isn't over until the fat barbarianess, riding naked through the forest, exhorts the barbarians to cease fighting through song. There was still hope!

That was enough good news for Will and he decided to end on a high note for once. He turned off the set and shut out the unworking light. He was going to go home and spend time with his family.



## Chapter 30; Atlas and the if/else

February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Will was in good spirits the next morning. He woke early and made breakfast for the family and saw his kids off to the school bus, much to his elder daughter's embarrassment. Hope had done him good. Even a small hope. Normally, this little hope wouldn't do much for anybody, but it was all Will had so he decided to make the most of it. If he didn't then that meant Melfina had bought away his hope as well...and Will wanted to assure himself that this, if nothing else, was not for sale.

Will got in to work before most everyone else, as usual. Making his way to his office he opened the door and flicked on the lights. Someone had fixed the bulb. That was a good sign. Good signs are good.

Hesitantly he turned on the TV. Will searched the floating numbers for Madre...and felt relief. At least, at this early hour, Melfina hadn't made any more blitzkriegs or dawn raids...or done anything, really. Will quickly picked up the receiver and made a call down to HQ.

"Well," Ashok from Finance said after Will asked how many shares Madre could buy if the bids didn't increase. "If it stays at this price and we sell off parts of Synapse and make some *deep* cuts to our budget this year...maybe we can make it to about 50... 50.5%?"

That was good news.

"But that's assuming Melfina doesn't raise their bid price again. I mean, if it looks like we're going to get 50%...there's no reason why they wouldn't just raise their offer...unless they're hurting for cash, too."

Will chose to ignore this nay-saying opinion. What was the point of being rational about it? Hope had nothing to do with rationality. He only wanted good news. Will didn't subscribe to the belief that no news was good news. Good news was good news.

"Thank you," he said and hung up the phone.

Grabbing the day's paper off the desk and tucking it under his arm, Will exited the office and strolled down the hall to the coffee nook. He scooped out just the right amount of cappuccino from the grounds bag and put it in the little cup. He used that little mushroom shaped thing

to tamp the grinds down jussst so and he twisted the spoon thingy into the machine. Starting up the machine he got some milk out of the fridge and frothed it up good. He was getting to be a real expert at this. Café au Will in hand, he returned to his lair. Will dropped the paper down on his desk, sat down and sipped on the hot liquid. *Jussst* perfect. With a satisfied smile he swallowed, took another sip and turned towards the screen. If life were a cartoon he would have coughed his coffee out all over the monitor.

The stocks giveth and so they shall taketh away.

“Fuck!” Will yelled involuntarily. Someone outside of the office must have heard it. Melfina had raised their bid again. All Will’s hope, all his false levity sank like a stone deep into the emotional quagmire he had been excavating over the last month. This was impossible! They wouldn’t stop! They were immune to even *hope*! They were unholy! No matter how wrong it seemed for them to win...they just kept storming through...an unstoppable juggernaut on wheels with spikes.

Beside him the phone rang. Will hesitated answering it. What was the point? But he picked it up anyway. It was Finance seeking Will’s direction. Will swallowed hard. He’d seen all the documents. He’d been over all the funds and accounts. He knew they had no money to continue this war. Even as it stood they were operating on a critically reduced budget for next year...having sold off a good portion of their lucrative assets. There was no point going any further...they were just throwing money away.

“Raise it,” answered Will. He just couldn’t accept anyone else running his company.

Aschok reconfirmed Madre’s dire straits and asked again if Will wanted to match Melfina’s bid.

“Raise it,” Will said meekly.

About ten minutes later the change popped up on the screen. A few minutes after that the score was 46% Melfina, 44.5% Madre.

Will shut the door and sunk into his chair, half paying attention to the screen...and half fading away. Not dreading the future...but not looking forward to it either. Just waiting for it to happen. So this would all end.



He sat like this for several hours, through lunch. And the share prices barely moved at all. Finally at 3:25 Will noticed a blip on the screen. It had probably been there for a while, but he hadn’t been paying attention. Melfina had raised their offer a fraction of a cent. They were dealing

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in micro-money now, shifting particles to make rippling effects in the universe. Any minute now there would—

RING!!!!

The phone rang beside him and half scared Will to death. Any minute now there would be a phone call, he finished his thought. Absentmindedly Will picked it up. Sure enough it Finance awaiting his command like troops in the trenches at the front line.

"I'll call you back," he said, "I've got to think." Will stood up and walked over to the window, peering down into the snow. His battle commanders were waiting for the surrender call. Will surveyed his land, the soft snow falling on the quiet landscape. A landscape that he had tilled, farmed and made perfect. Cattle he had raised. A job he had done so well that the Melfina posse now coveted it for their own...and were going to take it. Well, dammit, it wasn't theirs! Was he just going to give it them!? Will wondered. But the answer didn't come easily.

"Am I just going to give it to them?" Will silently asked the room. What choice did he have? And then he tapped into something that made him feel good, made him feel like he was in charge again. Was he going to give it to them? **No!** If he couldn't have it, and he'd put the work into it, then they sure as hell weren't going to. We'll raise our bid even if it means filing bankruptcy! If they want this land, then they will inherit a desert! Let them storm into this burning house! Will, suddenly boisterous, was cruising on the fast and weightless feelings of anger, revenge and power, over the soft, purple clouds of helplessness and self pity. He turned and stormed toward the desk...but caught himself staring out the opposite window, at his rows of cubicles, his cattle, his soldiers and cowhands. His brain hit the pause button.

Heads passed down the hall, busy at their workstations. Sinking the ship would mean sinking the crew, Will knew. His loyal crew of several hundred: People who had set up here, far from the cities and technocracies. People who had put hard years in for him, who had made this company as much as he had. People who trusted him. Sure, they didn't want to see Madre overrun by Melfina...but he couldn't just *sacrifice* them... Slaughter them for their own good? And, in a way, Will suddenly realized that the company hadn't been his for quite a long time. When they grew beyond a crew of ten or so...as Madre expanded, the company had become all of theirs. He wasn't Atlas. He couldn't hold this entire organization on his shoulders anymore. It was too big. It was really his employee's company...and his employees' decision...not his. And he knew what they would choose.



It had been at least ten minutes since Finance had phoned. Will stepped over to the monitor. Melfina had gone up half a percentage point.

Will picked up the receiver and played out the touchtone melody to HQ Finance that had become so familiar over the last month.

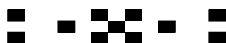
"Match it," Will said. "But first thing tomorrow morning bring it back down to \$2.32 per." The man on the other end agreed and Will hung up. He sighed. There was a certain relief in the finality of it. Will quickly finished the last of his coffee, grabbed his thick winter coat and ducked outside for a walk in the forest. He felt calm and relaxed when he returned. Complacent and accepting. Any false hopes he came across in the forest he left behind in the snow, tucked under branches and twigs... to rest in this winter fantasy land where they belonged.

As he walked Will wondered, what if there were stocks in people? If they went up and down based on some pre-judged criteria...say common perceptions of success in life. Will passes high school, stocks in Will go way up. Will graduates from tech college, Will shares rise. If that were the case, stocks in Will were WAY down today. And would it work the other way as well? Would stockholders in people have a say in what people did? Will wants to go home early today and see his beautiful young daughter and newborn son, but that would bring shares down. Will must work to keep the shareholders happy.

Will banished it from his mind. It wasn't helpful to think of such things. He was in the forest. He needed to clear his mind. He breathed in the cold, clean air and exhaled all these thoughts.

Returning to the office, Will found Kendra at her desk and they left early, together.





## Chapter 31; tickets to the gathering of nerds

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1995

For once her computer was off and, for the first time in a long time, Heather remembered there was a skylight in the ceiling of her room. Now, the strong rays of winter sun beamed through, draping a big, rectangular white patch across her legs, warming the dog and her feet, which were resting on top of the dog. Barker didn't seem to care.

Heather was glad for it really. She was getting tired of playing games. The constant hours it consumed...and there hadn't been any significant new game releases since Gloom 2 just over a year ago. Most of the new products on the market had been adventure games, one of them from Madre. The few action games that had come out were all lacklustre clones of Gloom put by companies that had bought the original engine from EGO. Madre clones, good and bad, were still pouring onto the market but Heather had grown tired of adventure games when fat ties were still in style. Another Crypt Destroyer was on the way, apparently, but it looked like the same old thing, just with new levels. Besides, Heather had tired of that game too, having played it so much.

Still, sometimes she fantasized about being her namesake. Running around wherever she pleased, paying no heed to borders or governments or fat men in white suits. Exploring things. Pushing people around. Taking no nonsense and beating up on cheesedick men who try to pick her up. Maybe she'd meet some guy she'd like. But he wouldn't be the stalwart hero loser like in all the movies. He'd be somebody different. Like her odd, lab scientist. Meek. Helpful. Self-consciously witty. And they'd flirt awkwardly, not believing that their two disparate character sets could possibly have an attraction for each other. Maybe he'd tag along on one of her adventures...'cause she needs him, his smart lab-analyzing abilities, and she would have to rescue him. But he wouldn't play a major part in her adventures. Mostly her adventures would involve running around wherever she pleased, paying no heed to borders or governments or fat men in white suits. Exploring things. Pushing people around. Taking no nonsense and beating up on cheesedick men who try

to pick her up. Except she'd be more real than Ms. Hüterguns. Not just gigantic tits on a rail thin body. She'd have big, strong hips to match. And a thick body. Still curvy, but in a strong, womanly way. Not fat, not thin – but tough. Like a Teutonic barmaid from hell.

The computer hadn't been turned on for two days...mostly because there was nothing to do on it, which shocked Heather when she realized it. It was a multi-media system of endless entertainment resources and suddenly...it had failed. Suddenly...it had become *boring*! She cringed at the thought of more Gloom 2. Doing the CamelToes clan thing was cool...but really took the fun out of the game. It was work, playing over and over, just getting better and better. It was fun that, at first, they had something to prove as women. But after they came in first on that last contest...the final reason for her to keep practicing disappeared. They were the best. And they had proved it. Now what?

So Heather was reading a book she found on her mother's shelf: an odd little story about a man with a red fez and a pointy mustachio smuggling artefacts. In some way she found the odd cross-breed of characters intriguing. It had been a while since she'd read a book. She had read a lot more when she was younger and had forgotten how much more...rich, rife with possibilities and reader conjecture a good book was than TV or movies...or even games. Somehow books felt more real to her...like she was actually doing and seeing the things in the stories. They weren't as addictive, but they let her believe, somehow, that there was more to her life than being stuck in the woods with old video games for entertainment. You didn't feel empty when you closed a book.

The phone rang beside her bed. Heather was hesitant to answer as it was probably for her parents and her parents were out. Nobody phoned her on Sundays. But then again, she had nothing else to do, so she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Yo! Soul Sista!" came a voice on the other end. Heather grinned.

"Hey Carol!"

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing. Just farting around."

"Yeah. I noticed you weren't on-line lately."

"Yeah. What are you up to?"

"Eating." Heather could hear Carol chewing something on the other end. "Fuckin' melted cheese in a bowl. It's terrible I know, but there's no food."

"You mean...just melted cheese in a bowl?"

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"Yeah. You just put a hunk of cheese into a bowl and microwave it for a few minutes. I was hungry. It's kind of greasy, though."

"Yuck."

"Hey. When is e2c2 this year?"

"e2c2? About a month and a half from now, I think. Why?"

"Let's go," Carol suggested.

"Wha—really?"

"Yeah. Everyone's going to be down there. Gamers, programmers. We'll meet people – maybe some other girl gamers too."

"Ok! Let's go." Heather agreed.

"How much do tickets cost?" Carol asked.

"Tickets?"

"Or is it free?"

"What? You mean to e2c2? We can't get into e2c2 – it's a trade show – it's not open to the public," Heather explained.

"What!? Really? But it looks like in the game magazines you can...it's a huge event. Everyone goes!"

"Nah. For trades people only. People *making* games, not *playing* them."

"Really? That totally sucks. It's like a big secret club...elitist computer gaming...but *you've* been before right. Because of your parents?"

Heather could hear Carol smacking her lips down on a forkful of melted cheese at the other end of the line. "No. Not a chance. They don't even allow anyone under 18 to go. My dad's been, though."

"Really? That's stupid! Why? They're selling all this stuff to kids and minors but they won't let any of them into the show? Who thought of that!?" Carol seemed outraged. But Heather was surprised she didn't know about this. The Electronic Entertainment and Computer Convention was a huge event. Gigantic casino buildings packed with sneak-previews of every type of computer entertainment device imaginable. Desks and advertising panels, flashy lights, testing areas, speeches, prizes, product tests. Thousands of men (mostly) with little ID cards on lanyards wandering around and bathing in an industry self-orgy.

"So...even if you *were* a member of the industry," Carol posited, "but if you were under 18 you couldn't go? What does age have to do with anything?"

"I guess they have a bunch of porn stars there too. I don't know how it ties in. Maybe to keep all the nerdy male programmers excited." No wonder they hold it in Vegas, Heather suddenly thought, what better place for men who make games composed entirely of lights flashing

rapidly on a screen and faked-out members of the porn industry to come together.

"Really? Pornstars? I didn't know that. How lame! Ha, those pornos are so fake though, I can see how they qualify as 'electronic entertainment.' I guess video porn would qualify as 'electronic entertainment.' Still, it's a stretch. Just an excuse to invite half-naked huge breasted women, I guess."

"Yeah. They're having a lot of problems with the age thing this year, though, because of EGO," Heather continued. "Some of those guys are barely 17 and they're HUGE in the electronic entertainment industry right now. So e2c2 can't *not* let them in. They gotta bend the rules somehow. Man, adults are stupid."

"No kidding. Let's never be adults," Carol suggested.

Heather laughed. "Ok."

"So if we can't get in, how come you wanted to go?" This seemed like a logical question to Carol.

"Well...haven't you heard the rumors? It's all over the chat rooms. The Gloom guys think the whole closed off to the public thing sucks and are going to rent out a place near the casino for some of their display – a kind of unofficial, public e2c2 thing. It's really cool."

"Really? I'm surprised e2c2 would allow it?"

"Come on, Gloom is the biggest thing since Pong! They'd bend over backward to get them in. And they can't really stop them from having their own booth outside anyway."

"Yeah, I guess. They pioneered the whole shareware distribution scheme too – or at least made it big...so you could try before you buy and didn't have to go through a distributor. That was cool. They do their own thing. Kind of anti-establishment. That's cool."

"Yeah, so I want to go see them."

"Awesome! Let's go. Maybe we can play our clan!" Carol was excited again. They were going to go! What a great idea! Her enthusiasm was catching.

"Yeah."

"AND WE'D GET TO MEET! THAT WOULD BE SO AWESOME!" Carol added.

"No kidding! I'm so excited!" Heather sat up on the bed as if she were going to run off to Vegas right after hanging up.

"ME too!!" There was a pause. "I hope you like me," Carol appended.

"Geeze. Why *wouldn't* I? I already spend all my time with you and

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you're on the other side of the continent."

"And I guess you're not a boy so looks shouldn't matter. Still...it will be weird."

"Yeah."

"Definitely. I hope we're not...like...awkward and stuff."

"Oh, we will be totally! I know it," Heather said.

"I'll probably talk a lot. I talk a lot when I'm nervous," Carol confessed.

"Good, because I clam up," Heather offered.

"Then this should be a piece of cake," Carol laughed.

"Will your mom let you go?" Heather asked.

"Yeah. She won't like it...but she'll let me go. She's too busy with work not to let me anyway. And I can pay for it all with my game checks. What about you?"

"For sure. I think. My dad...or somebody will probably go...so I can get down there with them...it's a lot closer for me, though. Are you sure it's ok?"

"Yeah. It will be fun."

"Awesome. I'm so excited."

"How are you going to get down there?" Heather asked.

"I dunno. I haven't thought that far ahead yet. I just had the idea this morning."

"Cool. Good idea. Maybe we can break into e2c2. That would be funny."

"Yeah. It'll be cool to see Las Vegas too."

"Definitely." There was a pause. "I'll talk to my dad about it," Heather said. "I mean, not that I need his permission. I'll go anyway if they say no...though I know they won't. But he'll know more about it. He can tell me the best way to get there and when exactly it is and stuff so we can plan."

"Awesome. Besides, he's a dad." Carol added. "So he'll totally want to help. It makes them feel special...and then they let you get away with extra stuff."

"Boy, do *you* know my dad!"

Carol's laugh came small through the small phone receiver.

"Oh wait. Is your dad gonna go this year? I thought Madre got taken over?"

"Kinda, I guess. I don't know what's going on. They officially bought out our stocks or something. They own us...but nothing's happened."

"Really? Nothing? Weird. I don't understand that corporate takeover

stuff.”

“Me neither.”

“Are your parents home now?”

“Nah. They all went out shopping or something.”

“Yeah. My mom isn’t home either.”

“Yeah, but your mom is never home,” Heather said.

“True. True. Man, I went through my mom’s old record collection last night. You should see some of the crap she listened to. Stuff, like...Barry Manilow. Terrible.”

Heather laughed. She didn’t know any of Barry Manilow’s stuff, but she knew it was uncool, especially by the way Carol said it.

“It’s hard to imagine my mom listening to music,” came the voice from the other end, “She doesn’t even have CDs because she doesn’t have time to listen to music.”

“My mom doesn’t buy much music either. Just reads.”

“Oh, wait! I’ll switch phones and we can listen to some of my mom’s music, ok?” Carol suggested. “It’s funny.”

“Ok,” Heather sat up again, excited. The dog stirred as she lifted her feet. He opened his eyes, half expecting something really exciting might be happening, like Heather wanting to play ball with him. Barker quickly realized she was removing her feet only to pay even less attention to him, so he sighed, closed his eyes and went back to sleep under the warm rays of the sun.

A few moments later Carol came back on with the sweet sounds of Barry Manilow behind her.

“I swear she’s got some Yanni in here,” Carol said.

Heather laughed. Even a name like Yanni seemed uncool.



## Chapter 32; dabbling in alternatives

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Kendra wondered what the cake for her new horror game would look like. Maybe a gory corpse with a candle impaled in its forehead, red icing oozing out from the bottom of the candle? Or maybe candles as pins in a tortured cake body? Who knows. One didn't get to plan the cake for their unofficial launch party. It was a surprise from the team to the designers. Well, that was assuming they even *had* a launch party for her game. This was the first one they had had in...god...2 years? Had it really been that long?

This was Art's party for the new *Swarthy Victor and the Grecian Formula* hitting stores nationwide in three days. It was actually more of a surprise than usual, since they hadn't had an unofficial launch party in such a long time. Although they should have guessed it was coming. With the postponed release date the Swarthy Victor team actually had enough time to finish the game properly. After the takeover, Will scrapped the scorched-earth policy and reset the release date for mid-March. So the team had spent the last two weeks just sitting on their hands, *waiting* for its release. Two weeks is more than enough to plan an unofficial launch party...even for a really nice one. This party was the only good thing to really come out of the whole takeover ordeal...which still hung in the air like a hawk, circling, circling with its eyes on the gophers far below frozen in fight or flight response limbo, wondering if the hawk was *ever* going to make a move.

Kendra had forgotten how much fun these things were. In fact, she'd totally forgotten they used to have them. In the insanity of the past few years – engaged in clone wars, working until the wee hours of the morning the night before launch...only coming to work the next day to start on the next game – spare time seemed like a fantasy. Plan an unofficial launch party? Good luck.

Kendra decided she liked the celebration and she wanted one for her new horror game when, hopefully, it launched. It wasn't up to the designer to choose to have a launch party, but she'd drop some strong



hints. And she was the wife of the boss, Kendra thought, so she should get what she wanted. Assuming she was still wife of the boss. The hawk was still circling...

Everyone had gathered downstairs in the old marketing & accounting department, the part that wasn't storage space for games, which had been significantly emptied of staff since the opening of the Head Office. The tables and chairs had been set aside and hundreds of official Swarthy Victor and the Grecian Formula boxes were piled up on two tables to make a platform. Lying on top were two cakes, a nude male and female... with rather well endowed sexual appendages... even for cartoons. Quite the suitable choice for a Swarthy Victor game.

Betty, the wife of Tristan in programming, had made the cakes. The original idea was to have a naked, cartoon cake Victor jumping out of a real cake. But that was pure fantasy. Plan B turned out quite well, though, and Art now hovered over one of the cakes, knife in hand, as everyone watched and chatted.

Looking at the well-endowed female cake Art announced, "Oh good! There's enough breast for everybody." There was a lot of laughter and a cheer from one of the guys in programming. They were rowdy guys. Perhaps it had something to do with their steady diet of Kepsi Kola and cookies.

Art leaned in and put the knife over the female cake. This was awkward. He was about to plunge a knife into a nude female. Art liked looking at naked women, not cutting them up!

"This seems wrong," he said with a blush. There were a few nervous giggles around the table, but no one was going to help Art out. He moved instead to the male figure and, for laughs, made the first cut between the legs. There was a large, sympathetic groan from the men in the audience.

"Traitor!" someone yelled out. Probably from programming. Laughs again. Art placed the erotic cake slice on a plate, lifted it up and asked, "Who wants a piece of Victor?"

There were more laughs. Kathy, the new designer, put up her hand and there were some claps around, this time from some of the women. But one of the programmers shouted out, "No! The designer gets the first piece!"

There were more cheers and claps as the audience seemed to concur.

"Aw man," Art looked down at the saccharine penis and laughed, imagining eating this sugar phallus. "Fine," he said. "Bill, hold this." He passed the plate to Bill, who laughed. Looking at the slice Bill wanted

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to ask Tristan if his wife had used a model for this cake...but he didn't think he wanted to contribute to further bawdiness. What with sexual harassment suits running rampant in the courts these days, he was surprised everyone was relaxed enough about this to joke as they were. Then again, they all worked in an office that made the world's first and foremost dirty computer game. Art proceeded to carve up the cakes and the crowd broke into discussion. People gathered around the computers set up around the floor to watch the game's intro.

Bill and Art, amidst mouthfuls of cake, admired the box. Not the design, but how non-bulbous it looked. Art recalled their conversation from a few days ago, with Bill rushing into his office holding up a 3.5" floppy disk.

"Disk 11," Bill said.

"Disk 11?" Art returned. There wasn't supposed to be a disk 11. But he knew what had happened instantly. With the extra days granted by the takeover, Art, Bill and the Team had used the opportunity to squeeze in a few more jokes, a couple more scenes, a phallic object or two and some extra sounds into the game. They were all quite pleased at how much it had added to the game. But nobody had considered a disk 11. No Madre game before had ever had eleven disks.

Both their eyes instinctively turned to the test game box sitting on Art's desk. They turned their eyes back to each other.

"It'll fit," Art said.

"Eleven disks," cautioned Bill. "We never—I mean, there was—" Bill couldn't get the words out. He could only remember the design team for the last Fantasy Quest sitting around a desk for hours trying different combinations of laying the 9 disks in the box, like a puzzle, until they came across a way that you could jussst slip the cover over the box.

They scrambled over to the box, opened it and fiddled with the disks inside.

"It'll fit," Art said every time they tried closing the box and the lid wouldn't shut.

Finally, they found, if they applied the ancient rule of luggage packing and pushed on the lid really hard, it would close without ripping open the cover. Of course, it looked less like a box now than a mailbomb.

Art gently shook the package as if it would explode. But it was fine. Nothing rattled around inside.

Bill laughed and let out a guffaw. "Disk 11!" Art had been right.

"No, disk 10B," Art said. "Will would flip if he found out we added an extra disk. Label the disk, 10B."

Bill nodded. Art was right. It was too bad. This was a moment to be shared with the office!

Luckily, the printer, sceptical at first, had managed to get his employees to fit in the extra disk, applying Art's luggage technique, and the cost of an extra disk had been negligible. After packing and unpacking the game several times, Art and Bill found the disks undamaged. A close call for Swarthy Victor!

"Some of the best parts of a game, the customer never even notices," Bill philosophized through a mouthful of cake. Art agreed and suggested they celebrate with more dong.

Upstairs, as the unofficial party wound down, a serious backlog had formed at the cappuccino machine. Will was worried there was going to be a riot and demands for a second cappuccino machine...which Madre could NOT afford right now. Looking at the line-up Will imagined it must be the first time in history that a coffee machine had actually *decreased* productivity. Even the programmers, who usually suckled their caffeine from the pop machine, were lined up. Cappuccino went better with cake, Will supposed. He had hoped to grab a coffee here before leaving for HQ, but there was little chance of that now. He'd have to grab something on the way.



Will's stomach was grumbling. He'd passed up stopping in Berney, still refusing to support Che's Coffee Revolution, but unable to reconcile with the alternative of grabbing a cup-a-joe. Will couldn't help but notice how the great American road trip was now dotted not by the historical landmarks and natural photo-ops of his youth, but by MacClownBurger outlets, Katy's Hamburger outlets, Atomic Sub restaurants, Che's coffee houses, MallMarts and big box retail stores with...Che's coffee houses and MacClownBurger restaurants inside. This was frustrating for Will, mostly because he was in desperate need of a scone and a coffee and was searching for an alternative, any alternative!...but there was none! *Is this what it felt like to be...alternative,* Will wondered?

Now he was getting quite tired at the wheel. Perhaps Kendra waking him up at 3 in the morning to make love was the cause of it. Will could not refuse. When she's in her energetic game creating phase she's unstoppable. Not that Will wanted to refuse...but he was now in such desperate need of a nice, thick, foamy, rich coffee that he didn't care *how much* it cost or *who* made it.

Will pulled into the next town, Milner, the town where he had seen

his first Che's after hearing about the Naughté Latté lease almost a year ago. Will hadn't noticed then, or had forgotten, but, as luck would have it, there was an independent coffee house sitting directly across the street from that Che's. Will parked and walked up to the café but, just as he was about to enter, he stopped, turned around and stared at the Che's. Then he recrossed the street and went into Che's Coffee Revolution.

Will stepped into the short line before the counter. He'd been curious. Were all the Che's coffee houses truly the same? He'd spent all this time disgusted with Che's, but really, he didn't know too much about them. He'd never actually been inside. Some force had driven him here. He wanted to see what it was people liked so much about the place, to see if his assumptions and beliefs were right, to re-evaluate his opinions.

The inside of this one truly looked like the one in Berney. A young, zitty kid in the standard Che's uniform (beige army fatigues with a military green apron and a beret with a coffee bean on it) stood behind the counter.

"What can I get for you, sir?" the dull voice came. Will still found it hard to imagine guerrilla revolutionaries serving coffee to yuppies. The kid took Will's order and while he waited amongst the burbling and hissing sounds of coffee creation Will noticed that they were selling newspapers at the counter. Initially Will thought this was a good idea but as he went to sit down he thought about it. Naughté Latté or any other coffee house he had been in hadn't sold newspapers. Why? It seemed like a smart idea. People like to read news with their coffee. And then he remembered that there was usually a *free* customer copy of the paper in Naughté Latté. Additionally, there were the copies that other patrons had brought in and left lying around. Will grunted as he sipped his coffee. It figures, he thought, that Che's would sell its papers. Next, you'd have to rent a seat too.

Will wasn't too interested in reading papers anyway. He was increasingly disappointed with them, especially after their lacklustre, if not blatantly inaccurate, coverage of the Melfina debacle. He wouldn't mind breezing through one of those thick, free San Francisco independent weekly papers right now, though. The ones with all the ads. They had some interesting articles on some stuff not usually covered in the mainstream papers. Speeches, local arts scenes. But there were none of those papers around in here. Was that because they couldn't sell them?

He sipped and looked out at the coffee shop across the street. It seemed less slick. More homely and humble, but nice. Will wondered if he shouldn't have gone in there instead. Obviously they were older than

Che's and hurting from the competition on this side of the street. Yet they seemed to have held out so far, which must speak to their service and quality. But then again, Will thought, how could he go on speaking out against Che's when he never went in? How could he argue against it, if he hadn't experienced it? It was an odd paradox, because people will always counter an argument with, 'Well, have you ever *been* there?' or something to that effect. It was odd how people would defend this stuff sometimes. He'd been talking to a couple of guys down at HQ when it first opened. They didn't know Will ran the company, but he made some offhand criticism of Che's and they leapt to the coffee house's defense, like he had just insulted their kid or something. Just because they happened to go buy their coffee there, telling them there was something wrong with Che's...it was like you insulted *them*.

Will was surprised by their response. It wasn't vitriolic or anything, but definitely defensive. It had shut Will up. That was the power of the brand, Will supposed. Will had never focused much on the Madre brand. But the cool-hunter was all over branding: extolling its virtues, talking about how the brand was, ultimately, more important than product. Did that mean that Madre customers would viciously support the Madre brand in a time of need...which, under the current circumstances, Will couldn't be sure *wouldn't* come up? Still, he wanted to think that they supported Madre because Madre made good products, because they were an honest company...not because of their logo or a bunch of *Us vs. Them* marketing crap. This whole "brands not products" business confused Will, warped his sense of direction. Had what they had been doing all this time, concentrating on making good games above everything else, been wrong? It had served them so well. To Will it had always been about producing a fine product, taking care of your workers, communicating with your customers. The branding thing just rubbed against all of Will's self-taught business instincts. He didn't understand it.

Actually, thinking about it now, Will did want a peek at the paper to check the stocks. He'd been a little jittery about Melfina's recent activities. They were still buying stock, despite having already clearly won. Why? Will certainly wasn't going to *buy* a paper from Che's, though. He'd just get one off that guy in the corner who was leaving his behind. Will sipped his coffee and stared out the window for a bit. Then he turned about to see if the guy was gone, which he was, but one of the staff was cleaning the table so Will waited for her to finish. But then, much to his chagrin, she took the paper with her! Will followed her with his eyes to see where she was going to put it down. But she took it back behind the

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counter with her and then tossed it and everything else down below her waist – Will couldn't see – but it must have been into the garbage!

Why would they just throw out the paper like that? So that people would buy from the counter? Were the staff instructed to do that? Even Will had trouble believing that Che's would instruct their staff to do something as chintzy as that! It must have been the woman...just thinking about cleaning up...right?

Well, either way Will knew he had better get going. He took his coffee out to the car and, thinking about his impressions upon his visit to Che's, re-embarked on the great American road trip, now sponsored by...MacClownBurger foods, MallMart, Dicken's Diction.



They reclined in Newman's deep couches; the ones that surrounded the sleek, glass-topped coffee table of his swanky downtown office. The view outside was of steel gray office buildings reaching for the sky. An ugly view, but in the cold weather, it looked very serious, very businesslike. That was the big advantage of Newman's office over the quaint little room they had in Redwood. Here it felt like you were making big decisions, world-altering decisions. Yet, Will felt somehow like his suit wasn't quite right for this office. His suit was more homey...a ranch suit.

After they discussed some details on the Swarthy Victor launch and potential sales stats they moved on to the Melfina situation. Newman still had a bunch of people following and researching into Melfina's past. Will wasn't sure what Melfina was up to and asked Newman what he thought of Melfina continuing to pursue stock. Newman said that it made sense that Melfina would push for more than 50% ...to ensure that they had complete control.

"Which is a good thing for us," he continued, "because it means they are serious about keeping us as a company, instead of selling us down the drain...which would be crazy to do, really."

"And why haven't we heard anything from them?" Will asked. Will had his own experienced ideas and opinions, but he wanted to know Newman's.

"Probably a hundred reasons," Newman said with a shrug.

"But isn't it a little odd to expend all this money and energy on a takeover...and then not say *anything*?"

Newman thought about this for a moment. "Well. Yes. It is a little odd. But certainly not unheard of. I'm fairly sure we'll learn why soon enough."

This wasn't a satisfactory answer for Will and he sat back in his chair, folding his arms. "And the worst thing is we really can't plan ahead with this kind of information."

"Sure we can," Newman replied. "In fact, I was hoping we could do some of that now. Mostly, damage control."

"Damage control?" Will didn't like this phrase. He hadn't entirely agreed with Newman's attitude towards the whole takeover in the first place. Newman almost seemed too eager for it to happen. Not that Will questioned his ability as a businessman. In fact, almost the opposite: Newman was a great businessman and more concerned, it seemed, with the prestige and bottom line of the company than the company itself. But Will should have expected this in an HQ manager. To be honest... Will was looking for that sort of individual when he hired for the HQ. It wasn't that Newman didn't listen to Will. Will just wished they were more...on the same level. He was positive that he and Newman would have different ideas on 'damage control'.

"Well, we have to come to terms with the fact that we are now owned by Melfina," Newman continued. "While they can't really do anything drastic until the next shareholders' meeting, which is almost a year from now, they can definitely exert pressure on us. Additionally, our financial situation is...well...desperate at the moment and it may be in our interests to get funding from them later on. We made it painfully apparent that we weren't interested in being run by them during the stock wars...and well, now that we lost and *are* owned by them, we have a lot of egg on our face. We've kind of got a reputation to fix here. It's in our best interest to let them know, at the end of the day, that we are willing to cooperate and work to ensure that the company is run according to their interests...shareholder interests. Say to them, 'What's past is past,' and look eager to face the future. Otherwise... If they see us as a hostile management...who knows what they'll do to us at the next shareholder's meeting.

"I think it's in our best interests to start doing things to pre-appease them. Basically, if we make changes consistent with the way they see the company being managed...or with their ideals (which we can judge by looking at their numerous past acquisitions) then there'll be a better chance that they won't want to come in and change everything."

Will sat up. "So you're saying that if we make the changes they want to make ourselves, then that will stop them from having to come in and make the changes themselves. Well, what does it matter who makes the changes then? Whether we make them or they do?"

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Newman flushed at Will's attack, "Well, sort of. I don't think there's much way we can get out of doing business, at least somewhat, the way they want things run. But the advantage of *us* making the changes is that the ball remains in our court...and we can continue to make our own decisions on other things."

Will lay back. He didn't like the sound of this. But, again, he wasn't sure Newman was incorrect. At the same time, why should they waste a year of being able to do things their way just to appease Melfina who was going to do what they wanted *anyway*.

"Hear me out first before you reject it out of hand," cautioned Newman.

Will leaned forward again. "Oh, don't worry. I appreciate your opinion. I'm sorry. I'm not going to reject anything out of hand...I'm...just finding this a difficult decision. Deciding what to do. I've always sat and thought about these things before. And then followed a gut decision."

"Well look," continued Newman, smiling now, "I've had some folks here put together a list of administrative and other changes that we could pursue to make us appear more favorable in the eyes of the board at Melfina. They range from small and insignificant to large...even ones I wouldn't suggest we do. But I asked them to give me the *full range* of possibilities."

Newman pressed down on the sheets of paper and slid them across to Will. "Why don't you have a look at them over the next few days and then we can proceed on a go-forward basis after that. As long as we're goal-oriented and results-driven, we should be fine."

Will flipped through the pages. They ranged from things as small as introducing direct deposit instead of paychecks, which Will had actually been considering for a while now, to firing half of the workforce.

"Sure," Will said. He wasn't looking out the window but he noticed that it was getting dark outside from the amount of light reflected off of the paper.

"Why don't we wrap this up? It's getting kind of late."

"Sure."

"Can I get a specialty coffee for my trip back?" Will asked.

"Sure. I'll make one for my trip as well," Newman responded.

"Two café lattes. Won't that be grandé?" Will punned with a smile.

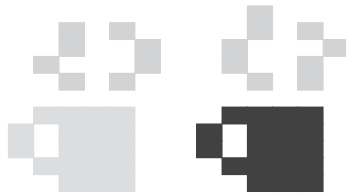
Will picked up an independent newspaper from a box on the street on the way out of the office. On the third page there was an article on Che's questionable business practices and unfair pricing schemes with coffee bean farmers in Latin America. The list just goes on, Will thought. The

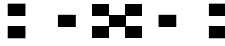


articles in these independent papers always seemed to slant left...but Will believed this one regardless.

The next day at work Will told Henry, the only person he knew for sure still dropped by the Berney Che's every now and then, about his experience with the newspaper.

"Sure, they throw out the customer papers here all the time too," Henry said. "I'm surprised that the Milner Che's didn't have the free papers, though. I figured the Berney one didn't carry the local freebie because the community had been pretty vocal about not letting Che's in. But I guess the fact that they are free at all might be a reason to not carry them. Or maybe the free papers didn't want to be associated with Che's? But I doubt that. Those independent papers like to get into everything they can." Henry shrugged and Will accepted his answer. He had other things to worry about.





## Chapter 33; arguments

March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1995

"It wasn't Bushnell," Tim argued.

"No way. It *for sure* was Bushnell," retorted Geoff. "Are you gonna tell me Ralph Baer invented it?"

"No. I'm not. But even so, Ralph Baer invented Pong *before* Nolan Bushnell. Bushnell totally stole the idea."

"Whatever! There's no proof!" Geoff's hands shot up into the air for emphasis.

"No proof!? They have Bushnell's signature on a sign-up sheet to see the sneak preview of the Odyssey game system...before it came out in '72. Bushnell went there, had the trip paid for by his company, saw Baer's electronic tennis game, played it, then went back, created the same thing in an arcade cabinet and called it Pong. He totally stole the idea. MagnaVox successfully sued him over it! There's more than enough proof. Bushnell didn't invent Pong, he stole the idea from Baer."

"Ok, sure, whatever," Geoff conceded, "but Bushnell was working on the Computer Space arcade game before Baer's game anyway. Pong wasn't his first game."

Tim tapped his foot for a moment. "Fine...but Computer Space was invented on a computer 10 years before Bushnell at MIT. Bushnell copied that too!" Both their voices were carrying down the hall as usual. They seem to fight a lot on Fridays.

"Yeah, but it required a super-computer to play it way back in nineteen-sixty two--"

"Not a *super* computer..." Tim retorted. "All computers were like that then. There *weren't* any home computers then. MIT's computer was standard for computers at the time. Either way, MIT's Spacewar was still output on a screen, you played interactively via switches, the actions were all calculated by a bunch of transistors. It was a game on a computer with a screen. *It* was the first computer game, not Pong...and it certainly wasn't invented by Bushnell."

"Well by that standard, then Higinbotham is the first inventor of the

video game,” Geoff was proud that he managed to catch Tim on this.

“Oh, so we’re full circle now? Willy Higinbotham did *not* invent the video game. His game wasn’t even *on* a video screen!”

“So what!” Geoff throws his hands up in the air, “You just said that the criteria for defining a video game was that it was outputted to a screen. That’s what you said. Calculated by transistors. Higinbotham’s game did that. You’re telling me that just because the oscilloscope screen his transistors outputted to isn’t generally considered a ‘video’ screen that his game doesn’t count? It displays, via electronics, an image on a screen. The game itself was run by a computer. Baer himself stole the idea for his Table Tennis game from Higinbotham’s Tennis for Two!”

“An oscilloscope is different. It’s not true *video*, which is the definition of video games: it’s on video.” Tim was sulky on this point. *Geoff is back on the winning argument, making me retreat. Using my own arguments against me. Damn.*

Geoff grinned. “How is it different from video? If they switch to making TVs digital like they say they’re going to then suddenly games won’t be video games because they’re being played on a digital screen? What, will everyone suddenly have two categories of games? Digital games and video games?”

“Well...It doesn’t matter anyway. Baer owns the patent for the video game.” This was a good fact to rely on, thought Tim. He was off of the ropes.

“Ah, but it’s totally false! Baer just argued that Higinbotham’s invention, a good 10 years before his own, wasn’t a *true* video game because it wasn’t on a TV...just so he could keep his patent on the video game, so he could defend his system against Bushnell and all the clones. Anyway, the whole video game thing was new then. At that time a video game, by definition, had to be on video. But that’s like saying that a book has to be made out of paper. Sure, that might have been an accurate definition 100 years ago. But what about now? What if a book is in a computer? It’s not a book then? The video game world has exploded. A video game is a game that interprets human commands and interaction via some sort of electronic computer and outputs it. Doesn’t even need to be on a screen at all, actually. The courts went in Baer’s favor because Higinbotham only created the thing to make tours of his lab more fun...and he was probably retired by ‘72. He could hardly care if the patent went to Baer.”

“So you’re saying it’s Higinbotham then? First it was Bushnell and now it’s Higinbotham?”

*Ha! I’ve got him on the defensive!*, Geoff thought. “Well, first I said it

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was Higinbotham but then YOU said that he didn't count so I went with Bushnell! Because he's generally considered the father of video gaming... and he started the first video game company, but then YOU said that--"

A loud rap at the door interrupted their heated, nerdish argument over the great founders of their industry. Art entered.

"Do you know who invented the TV?" Art asked. He had obviously overheard most of their conversation from down the hall.

Geoff and Tim looked at each other blankly. They didn't. And they didn't believe it! The name was on the tip of their tongues...but they couldn't remember. Yet, thinking about it further, neither of them seemed to recall ever having been told. But that couldn't be! It was a huge, ubiquitous, life-altering invention! Without the TV...they wouldn't even have video games! How could they not remember? They knew who did the radio. And the light bulb...and the car. Even the loom. But who did the TV?

"Give up?" asked Art, satisfied by his superior knowledge. This question got them every time. And burdened by their natterly, endless argument from down the hall, Art couldn't resist stunning them with his number one piece of trivia.

"I...don't know," confessed Tim, the argumentative wind sucked out of his sails.

"I give up too," added Geoff, floored.

"Philo T. Farnsworth," Art stated proudly.

"You're kidding," said Geoff.

"Nope," Art smiled. "That's his name. He was a farm hick. Invented it at nineteen or something like that."

Now that Geoff and Tim had heard the name they were certain they'd never been told before. They would have remembered a name like that.

"The funny thing, though," Art continued, "was that he wouldn't let his own children watch television. Makes you think, don't it?"

And, truly, it did.

In a showdown between Geoff and Tim, Art had won. Because Art knew that their arguments were never about who was right, but who could argue better...and who *knew* more facts. The argument sputtered and died on the floor.

These inventors had strange names, Tim thought. Higinbotham. Farnsworth. Bushnell.

Art turned on his heel and haughtily left the room. He felt good. What a strong way to finish the week. He was going to look for some food. To celebrate. Maybe stop in to see Henry.

"Good reviews for the music in SV5," Art said as Henry typed away.

"I know," Henry replied. Art thought, perhaps, SV5 had the best music of all the Swarthy Victor games...even though he thought nothing yet had caught on like the theme song he created.

Henry thought about the magazine clipping the sound guy had pasted on his door downstairs. It was a long review of *Swarthy Victor and the Grecian Formula* from some quirky mag in Seattle. About three lines up from the bottom there was a comment that the sound effects in the game being 'solid' or something like that. The sound effects guy had highlighted this seven word line, resting alone at the bottom of the column, in yellow. Henry had smiled inwardly when he saw it. It was kind of funny in a sad way – that this was the only comment for sound probably ever written and it was only seven little words; not even a full sentence...yet obviously meant so much to the sound guy. Yet Henry could sympathize. Sound is an important part of the game. When, *ever?*, does the sound guy get a mention? And a good mention at that? People only notice game sounds when they're bad. Music was sometimes the same. Henry was on better terms with the sound guy now. He still drove Henry nuts with all his tapping and weird mannerisms...but he was an honest, unassuming guy. And that Henry could respect.

"Yeah, lots of comments on the technical proficiency of the game," Art added. "Mediocre reviews on the content."

"Disappointed?" Henry looked up at Art.

"Naw, actually. I mean...it's our fifth game! I'm just glad that after four games we still have enough creative energy to produce something that qualifies as," Art quoted the phrase he had come across in several reviews, "'a decent outing.' I mean...no matter how good a game we make here, people have already been playing this game for years. We can't do anything really new, stray far enough to blow them away. Mediocre is, actually, really good for a fifth game, as far as I'm concerned. And I'm not surprised there's been a lot of focus on the technical aspects. I mean, we've added digitized sound, music and artwork, 240 new colors...even some speech in the CD-ROM version. That's the cool new stuff. That's what people will focus on. I'm just happy that our *fifth* re-telling of a story can live up to those improvements."

"That's a good attitude," Henry commented.

"Well, it's how I feel anyway. Will seems a little on edge about it...but then again he's on edge about everything these days. The sales have been mediocre. Not poor. But not blasting through the roof. I guess we need blasting through the roof sales after...well, you know... But you can't expect too much from a fifth game except definite purchases by the tried

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and true fans. Anyway, it's still only the first week...and the reviews ain't bad." Art dipped into the jar of nuts Henry had on the table, crunching them in his mouth. He loved nuts. Henry had actually put them there as an enticement to Art. He enjoyed talking to Art...and knew that it gave Art a reason to come by. And Art talked when he ate.

"Will's kind of freaked out today too because Melfina's share just crossed the 50% line this morning," Art continued. "Freaks me out too, kinda. I mean, they've taken us over...and nothing. It's like they're just remaining in the shadows. Waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"That whole stock thing is a bad scene," Henry added. He was glad, really, that it was all over. Like most people he had welcomed the chance to get back to work. Melfina, by saying nothing, was only helping. They could forget anything ever happened. Everyone was glad to get back to less serious things. If the work itself hadn't changed after the takeover, then all that nasty takeover stuff ultimately didn't matter either.

Henry especially wanted to forget about the stocks. He'd gotten rid of his shares as soon as it was apparent that Melfina had won. He'd cleaned up but was more relieved just to be rid of them. He felt kind of guilty selling Madre out...mostly because he'd gotten almost \$9000 for \$1000 worth of stocks. All he had really wanted was the \$1000 that he had earned. He didn't enjoy feeling like a traitor for spending his earnings. In a way, though, by selling out at the very end, he was really sticking it to Melfina. Either way, Henry didn't want to see a stock ever again. Stocks weren't going to put his children through college.

"How's the music for the new Sci-Fi Quest coming?" Art asked, rolling a few nuts around in his loosely fisted hand.

"Not bad. It is a definite switch from the SV5 music."

"You got any I can hear yet?"

"Ah, I've got some bits here and there. And you heard the new version of the theme song."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"I've got part of that alien tavern scene. Kind of tried to parody the Space Wars theme song a bit. Got most of the OrcimSoft Corporation Incorporated death march fleshed out...but not really instrumented yet."

Henry booted up the bar song. They both listened.

Afterwards Art wandered down the hall and stopped in the HomoSapien Quest office to say hi. The week after releasing a game was great. You just walked around and asked everyone what they thought. That new Fantasy Quest designer, Kathy, was in Ron and Laura's office too. Well, she was hardly new. She'd been here almost four months now. Hard to believe.

They were chatting about some TV show, when Theresa from payroll popped by the room. Like animals in a cage, they all crowded and pushed around the doorway to feed upon their fat, juicy pay checks. Theresa moved on and they resumed their original positions. The conversation had stalled as they silently opened the envelopes and peered at the slips, inspecting the numbers. This bi-weekly ritual was somehow highly anticipated even though the numbers on the stubs were the same every month. There is a desperate attraction to ritual for human beings. Ritual and money.

"Theresa!" came a voice from outside. Art recognized it as Tim's. "Theresa!" Tim rushed quickly by the doorway...and then returned shortly. He must have lost her. He quickly popped in the door and held up the familiar, newly-colored green pay stub.

"What the hell is this!?" he demanded, looking at them all scrutinizing their identical pay stubs.

"Your pay-stub, Tim," said Ron in all earnestness, but everyone laughed as it seemed obvious and sarcastic.

"Yeah," said Tim entering the office, "But where's the check!?" He was exasperated. Irrate.

"Check? It's direct deposit now."

"How could you not know?" asked Kathy.

"Direct deposit?" Tim practically spit the words out in a whisper...as if he had just learned his arch-nemesis still lived... "No one ever told *me*!"

"There was a big memo around two weeks ago. *Everyone* saw it," Laura explained.

"Well I didn't see it!"

"That's weird," Art offered.

"Anyway," Laura continued, "We've switched over to direct deposit."

"Well I never agreed to it!" Tim protested.

"We'll it's here now."

"What have you got against direct deposit, Tim?" Ron asked sincerely.

"It's EVIL!" Tim said. "Already it's bad enough you give your money to the bank and they write a number on a sheet and just pretend they are actually storing the money. But it's just pretend. Direct deposit is one step further. It's virtual money. My boss tells my bank that he's gonna give me so many imaginary dollars. They add that number to my imaginary number in the bank. No thanks. It's too much like spacebucks. I create sci-fi games cause I like to *imagine* the fantasy. I don't want to *live* in it! Next thing they'll be inserting microchips under our skin!"

"Geeze. I didn't know it was possible to get so worked up about direct deposit. Of all the things to hate," Kathy added.

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"No kidding," Laura added. "Don't you think it's convenient? I don't have to go down to the bank every month now. It's like the company hired someone to take my checks to the bank for me! A check chauffeur."

"A lot of bad things slip by under the banner of convenience, Laura," Tim cautioned. "Besides it's...it's so...techno-fascist! What about homeless people...who don't have a bank? Suddenly you've got to have a bank account to get paid! They have this problem in England...you gotta have a bank account or something to get paid now, some security feature, and it's totally screwed those in desperate need of work. Or what if you're against banks?"

"You're not a bum Tim," someone said.

"And *who's* against *banks*?" someone else asked, incredulous.

Art ventured a question, "Well where would you keep your money, Tim? Under the soap?" Everyone burst out laughing at this. Tim felt flustered. He knew his face was turning red.

"People are against a lot of things. And banks are already pretty sleazy. Service charges, fishy investments... With direct deposit you don't even have a *choice* not to use a bank anymore. It just gives them more power to charge you for lending them money," he defended, but nobody really heard him over the laughing, everyone imagining him hiding his money under the soap.

The laughter died down after a while into an uneasy silence, everyone realizing Tim was angry, but them all still thinking his objections quite funny.

Tim broke it. "I don't even understand how they got my bank info!"

"I think Geoff gave it to them," said Ron.

"*What?* How!?"

"He said you had your bank stuff in your drawer. You weren't around so he gave it to payroll. He figured you'd want to get paid."

"But that's a secret! How did he know I had it in there?"

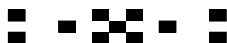
"Geeze," said Art. "Do you keep pre-signed checks in there as well?" Snickers broke out.

"Boy, maybe you really *do* keep your money under the soap," Kathy added, rekindling a blaze of joyous laughter at Tim's expense.

Tim gritted his teeth. "Bite my gnubs," he muttered bitterly under his breath and walked out of the room. Nobody had heard him. He fumed as he walked down the hallway.

Philo T. Farnsworth would never have approved of direct deposit, Tim thought.





## Chapter 34; a C+ in Coolness

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Grass was pushing its way up through the snow outside Will's office window. The melting snow clung to the stalks and blades in a vain attempt for just a few more hours of life before being sucked into the dirt. And, as if defrosting itself, Melfina had come back to life, making its first announcement since the takeover. It had been a month since they'd stolen Madre and Will wasn't sure what angered him more, the content of the small column in which the comments had been reported or the fact that it was so...anti-climactic, like a squeaking giant. It made Will suspicious...just by the very nature that the article was so un-suspicious.

"Garbo speaks," Kendra had said at the breakfast table, handing over the business section of the newspaper folded open to page D6.

Will took the paper and mumbled 'thank-you' through a mouthful of toast.

"Who's Garbo?" asked Mark stirring his cereal lethargically.

"Garbo comes and eats little kids who are late for school, so hurry up," Kendra said pouring herself some juice.

"Ha ha, mom," Mark replied sarcastically but, nonetheless, began to eat quicker.

Will scanned the page and found the headline **Melfina Consolidates Game Companies**. Without hesitation Will skimmed the article:

*Melfina Enterprises spokesman Karl Paxton announced today the company's intention to consolidate their various computer and video entertainment properties under the recently acquired Madre banner.*

*"Madre has a long history in the gaming arena and a reputation for creating high quality, carefully crafted and intelligent games. They are the strongest card in our hand and we are aiming to consolidate our holdings under one functional banner. Melfina is a business venture, not a game company, so all our game properties will now fall under the Madre name."*

*The move is expected to help focus Melfina's many holdings, reduce*

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*costs and extend market and advertisement reach. Analysts expect the shift to rally Melfina's already blooming share price.*

*"New products will still be released with the game developer's name on the product, but with the sub-title 'a Madre company,'" Paxton stated.*

*Melfina enterprises owns several important electronic entertainment companies in the industry including Ilk games, Pipe and the small but critically acclaimed software group, Triad Adrenaline Systems. Madre, Melfina's most well known and important holding, was acquired in mid February.*

On the way to work Will didn't know what to make of the article. On the one hand he was irritated by the fact that Madre's name was suddenly being associated with all these other game companies. Companies primarily of questionable talent – particularly Ilk. Their games sold well, but were fairly pallid and unoriginal in content: Hyper-violent shoot-em-ups, rip-off variations on popular puzzle games. Will didn't mind violent shoot-em ups...if they were done well, or did something new. Like Gloom...that blew him away. As a once top-notch programmer, he himself had sat in disbelief before the god that was Gloom. *Could this game actually be running on his 486 computer?* He'd almost thought somebody was playing a practical joke on him at the time, putting an extra chip in his computer or something. And Gloom was scary too. You got a big rush out of it. But companies like Pipe just made simple rip-off games based on someone else's idea or technology. Bottom feeders that really hurt the market with cheaply made but profitable titles. Illusion, one of Ilk's games, Will had found not only poorly plotted and lame, but almost offensive. Now the sequel was going to be released under the banner "a Madre company."

It made Will angry. But he could hardly *not* expect something like this from Melfina. In fact, it was the very *least* he could expect. You don't spend millions of dollars buying out disparate software companies and then just leave them working against each other. Of course they were going to consolidate. Considering all of Melfina's possible opening moves, this was the weakest, gentlest they could make. And that was something that really bugged Will too. It had been a whole month since the takeover and there had been not one word from Melfina. *Nothing.* Will felt as if, by silence, they were waiting for everyone at Madre to calm down, to be lulled into some false sense of security...and then they would strike! But Will refused to be lulled. He waited, knowing they

would have to say something eventually. Everyone knew they'd have to say something. Everyone knew some sort of statement was coming as Melfina crept up percent by percent, 51, 52, in the stock listings. And this was it? It was so non-controversial! It was such a trivial item. It was like they were in no rush to do anything. Like they'd forgotten they'd bought Madre and just remembered now.

What were they up to? This wasn't Melfina's style. From Will's study of Melfina's past behavior, Melfina liked to march right in after a take-over and start slashing and burning and dictating. A month of silence was odd. It made Will nervous. And yet, at the same time, he was relieved. After waiting and worrying for over a month, all that came out was this little drip. Will didn't know what to think. He was wary of being hopeful...and yet this was good news by virtue of no news.

Will tossed the paper back on his desk after reading it again and stood looking out over his domain, at the forest newly springing to life, the patches of yellow-brown grass peeking through the snow. He'd have to remember to take a walk later this afternoon. Gazing at the stretch of land before him, it was almost as if the horde's invasion had been a bad dream...and Will had woken up. Or a premonition of things to come, a future so far off Will couldn't quite worry about it. Now he'd woken up and was still carefully tending his cattle on his own little farm, hidden in the vast flatlands of the West, safe from the nightmares in his head. It was almost as if the horde didn't own 53.5% of his land. *Almost*.

There was a knock at the door and Gladys from the front desk entered. She was holding up a brown, bubble-wrap envelope.

"This just got couriered in for you."

Will came and inspected the package. It was from Newman. He hadn't been expecting anything. Perhaps it was about all the Melfina appeasement changes they had been talking about. They'd been able to do a lot of small manoeuvring recently that, they hoped, would make them look good to the new, silent boss...and Will had generally come to terms with the fact that doing *something* to give Melfina a reason to trust his judgement would be a good idea. Still, there were some loathsome decisions he was having to make. But Newman would just fax or email stuff related to that...

"Thanks, Gladys."

Will turned over the document in his hand and then tossed it on the desk. It was Monday. He had too much to do. He'd look at it later.



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Tim and Geoff were laughing. Will came in and leaned up against the radiator by the window behind them. They were playing the latest version of their game just out of programming. They were merely playing a rudimentary treatment of some of the concept art and the script – the very basics of programming in a process that was becoming increasingly more complex – but the two designers seemed bursting with ideas for additions.

“Hey! We should have that dog alien zipping around in a shuttle-pod in the background here. You know, randomly. As a joke.”

Geoff laughed. “Oh! That’s a wicked idea!” He scribbled it on a pad. Geoff turned around to Will. “Hey...what are we doing for e2c2 this year?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Will, “That’s what I came to talk about. I wanted to ask you about the displays...”

“Geeze, I don’t know if I can do any design stuff for it this year. I mean, I can do some prelim stuff, but Sci-Fi Quest is taking up all my time,” Geoff replied.

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, I figured we’d use some of those new media guys down at HQ. I’m really not planning anything big this year. We suddenly don’t have the budget for it. I just want something small. But I wanted your input on some stuff. Remember for SFQ2 you guys got those fake alien noses and wore those salesmen suits? That worked really well and, more importantly, was cheap and popular. I’d like to do something like that, you know? Something unique. You guys gotta come down this year.”

“Sweet!” said Tim who was still fiddling around on the screen. Neither Geoff nor Will knew whether he was talking about something in the game or about getting to go to e2c2.

“I wanna talk to the guys down in art about Kendra’s new game,” Will continued.

“You mean the horror one?” asked Geoff.

“Ha ha. *Taco-burgers!* Did one of the programmers put that in?” said Tim. They were pretty sure he was talking about the game this time.

Will returned his gaze to Geoff, “Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t think there’s ever really been a horror game on the market...well, aside from Gloom...which is more a scary action game. It’s a really original idea. I know we’re totally in the beginning stages of the process – I don’t think Kendra even has a full plot yet – but I think it would generate some much needed excitement...especially something different and darker from the creator of Fantasy Quest. I want to show it early before anyone else

gets the same idea. Was going to talk to a few guys in art about putting something together for e2c2, just from the concept art or something.”

“Sounds good,” said Geoff.

“Are we driving or flying?” asked Tim. There was a pause as they waited to see if Tim was talking about e2c2 or the game. Soon Tim turned his head around and stared inquisitively at Will. He was talking about the conference.

“Driving,” Will said immediately. He hadn’t thought that far ahead yet, but he knew there was no budget for plane tickets. Anyway, it wasn’t *that* far a drive and *someone* was going to have to get all the panelling and materials down there. Although, Will suddenly remembered the last time the three of them drove together: Tim and Geoff *insisted* on stopping off at the Charlie Cheese restaurant. Those two ate pizza amongst a giant, animatronic, singing rat and moose until they were ill and ran around in the arcade room playing every possible game imaginable, waiting in line with seven-year-olds to play whack-a-mole. They were like kids, bouncing off the high of a road trip to a huge video game conference where there would also be lots of half-naked women. Will had been embarrassed by their enthusiasm for the place, by being three lone adults eating in a kids’ restaurant, by being surrounded, in his *suit*, by adrenaline crazed children...but he’d agreed to come because he’d wanted to see what the whole Charlie Cheese family/arcade restaurant thing was like...if he should invest in it. It was like eating in the middle of a Disneyland theme park attraction, Will decided. He didn’t understand the appeal of it.

Driving away from Charlie Cheese’s, Tim and Geoff began a never-ending argument in the back seat about who invented the first video game. The only way Will was able to get them to shut up was by informing them that Bushnell, after being bought out of his company, Atari, by Warner Bros., used the money to open the Charlie Cheese chain of restaurants. Both their mouths dropped open. Neither of them knew this and they went on to discuss how entrepreneurial Bushnell was.

These two had an odd dynamic, Will thought, sometimes creating manic insanity like at the Charlie Cheese, but also often culminating in genius, like what they put into the Sci-Fi Quest series. On other occasions it sometimes resulted in anti-energy that created loud, bizarre arguments between them that the whole office was privy too. But despite the craziness in the car on that trip, their overabundant energy also led to the creation of the hugely popular alien salesman shtick they had used at e2c2 that year.

“I think I’ll be driving with my daughter,” Will clarified. He wanted

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to get that out on the table right away, that he wouldn't be driving with them. He didn't want a repeat of the Charlie Cheese incident – though, as always with Tim and Geoff, that incident was a one time thing, most likely.

“Oh, Heather's coming?” asked Geoff. “Can she get in to e2c2?”

“Nah. Not really. But she wants to see Las Vegas...and she's meeting some friend from New York that she met over SupraNet. They're gonna check out the EGO games thing.”

“Wow. That's cool,” said Geoff, “Your daughter is making friends and long-distance contacts over a network you created. You must be proud.”

“Yeah,” said Will. Now that he thought about it, he was. He was always glad that Heather used SupraNet so much. It encouraged him that it must be good. He had really liked it when she used to play the old Madre games and give suggestions. But she was too cool to do that sort of stuff now. “Too bad SupraNet's gone,” Will lamented. It had made his daughter friends. He couldn't think of anything else he'd done that could top that.

“Not gone. Just transferred ownership,” reminded Tim, who had returned his attention to the screen.

“Anyway, they informed me they are going to get their own room...in a different hotel,” continued Will.

“Really? You're gonna let them?”

“I don't think it's a matter of permission. They threatened to pay for it themselves, and I'm afraid to say that, with their winnings from KillNet, they could do it. I think this girl's mom is going to help pay for part of the hotel.”

“You're ok with that?”

“Well, she's practically 17. I think it would be a good experience for her. Besides, she's always complaining about being stuck out in the middle of the woods with her parents. I'm proud of her for arranging this. And it's not like she's going on her own vacation. I mean, I'll be there too.”

“They spelled ‘bee sting’ wrong,” Tim informed them.

Will also didn't think that two teen girls would much enjoy hanging around a bunch of middle-aged programmers, especially with Tim and Geoff who, under the influence of e2c2, devolved into acting like a couple of rock stars' kids who had lost the medication for their Attention Deficit Disorder and discovered a limitless supply of highly caffeinated pop instead. The e2c2 organizers had to make a No Frisbee rule in the conference room because of those two. Will figured his daughter already had a dim enough view of boys' intelligence and maturity without Tim

and Geoff for examples. Now that he thought about it, when Tim and Geoff got really excited they reminded him of when his son Mark got together with Dwayne.

"Media down in San Francisco has been working on the details for the past couple of weeks so all we gotta do is figure out the displays and what we want to show," Will informed Geoff. "I was going to set up a small meeting for it on Wednesday so you and I could talk with the guys down at HQ. Is that good for you?"

"Yeah. That's cool." Geoff turned back to the game. "What'd you do?" he asked Tim.

"I got stuck on the mushroom. I can't get out of it."

"How does one get stuck on a mushroom?" Geoff criticized.

"You wrote this part!" Tim shot back.

Will took that as his cue to leave. He went to talk to Kendra about putting her game up at the trade fair as voices began to rise in the office behind him.



It was almost 4 p.m. before Will was able to retire to his office. He watched the trees outside of his window rustling gently in the now warmer wind, the subtle breeze stirring them awake, to Spring. Will bathed in this moment – as cathartic and serene as a Japanese garden – before picking up the package from Newman on his desk. Damn, he'd never got around to that walk, he remembered.

Will peeled away the flap and pulled out...well...he wasn't sure what it was. It was some sort of bright, round cardboard. When Will finally figured out it was some sort of booklet/document, he then had trouble discovering which way was right side up. After flipping it over a few times he found the words 'Madre Enterprises,' in some odd electric-bubble font and just beneath that, in big letters, 'Cool Report Card'. From there, Will figured which side was the front. He wondered if, in the entire history of man, report cards had ever been cool. Tray Cool's name was at the bottom.

As with most report cards, Will was hesitant to open this one. Would he have to show it to his staff? Would it require their signature? Will tried to open it but it took him a few moments before he realized that the front page didn't really turn, but kind of spun and folded back. Flipping quickly through, Will was greeted by a multitude of pages, pictures and slots. The design theme of the document could best be described as a wet dream on acid or Technicolor puke.

## Game Quest

The first page, pink, was sparse. In the middle there was only a sentence in large black letters:

***“In the modern market, where a young demographic holds the resources and directs the trends, a company’s value is measured in...”***

Will turned the page and the word “**...cool**” lifted up from the crease towards him, like a children’s pop-up book. There was nothing else on the page. Will turned to the next page. There, in an extremely staid and ‘uncool’ layout was a description of Madre.

Madre Enterprises humbly began as a pet project by MIT computer science grad Will Roberts in his garage in 1979. After a few minor projects, Will’s wife, Kendra Roberts, took Will to task to create a visual adventure game. The success of this project led to a contract with BMI Computers developing an adventure game to show off the graphical capabilities of BMI’s new PCsr computer. Despite the early death of that system, the resulting Fantasy Quest game was a stellar commercial and technical success, expanding the company’s budget from a few thousand dollars to several hundred thousand in less than a year. Translating the game for several other competing systems, Madre officially became Madre Games Entertainment on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1981. Quickly building on the success of this first game with other award-winning game projects, Madre’s staff bloomed and Kendra Roberts became an industry icon. With the quick and consistent addition of other highly original and successful adventure game series to its roster including Sci-Fi Quest, Swarthy Victor, HomoSapien Quest, In-Quest and more, Madre became the first major, and perhaps most influential, computer gaming company in the last twenty years...

Even Will thought this description was hopelessly boring, as if they had hired an accountant to write the history of Madre. It went on but Will just skimmed the rest.

The next page was in stark contrast to the previous one, oozing sleek and cool. It was half transparent with the print in relief.

***If all the computer gaming companies were put into a death match arena... every one of them would be sucking down Madre’s rockets. Madre is the mother of computer gaming and it didn’t get there by falling into line or getting a haircut***



*and climbing corporate ladders. Madre, from the beginning, did what it wanted. It took risks. Put quality over quantity, cared more about the entertainment than the money. From the beginning, Madre was kicking skulls and taking names.*

*And so they had a quest. And it wasn't to count beans. Madre set out to make the best games. A Game Quest as it were. They weren't the first, but they quickly proved to be the best, landing an exclusive contract with BMI to make a game to blow away customers of BMI's graphically advanced new PCsr machine. Designed by Kendra Roberts, the world's first woman game designer, Fantasy Quest was an experiment in originality. And that innovation paid off, becoming the biggest selling game of its time, the first to ever sell over two million copies. It was such a success that, despite the early demise of the PCsr system, the game was ported to other machines. And Madre didn't do this in an office skyscraper, they did it in their garage. The garage was level 1, and Madre quickly powered up to advanced to the next level.*

*Madre did everything different...*

Very clever, Will thought. The previous page was supposed to be the dull, boring business Madre, right? And this page was supposed to be the potential, super-cool Madre? It was so trite it made Will queasy. The boring version hardly represented Madre at all and the slick version read like a commercial for processed food: something teenagers might go for, but was so...phoney, so poseur. Will got the point, though. It was pathetically transparent. The implication from this latter, cooler description was that this could be the Madre of the future, the infinitely cool Madre with its finger on the pulse of cool that money-mad kids would buy *anything* from.

Madre's market wasn't even teenagers, anyway. Not that Will was against teenagers. In fact, a lot of them bought Madre's product, being games, but Madre had the highest portion of adult customers in the industry. Their games were more adult oriented, focusing more on thinking and puzzles than rapid-fire action and explosions. The teenagers that *did* play Madre games were mature teenagers. Or, at least, more introspective, enjoying a good logic puzzle. The kids that bought Madre bought Madre because it treated them like an adult...not a stereotype.

On top of this, the 'cool retelling' was inaccurate. Kendra wasn't the first female game designer in the world...the woman who had invented Centipede owned that accolade. Kendra was maybe second...or third. She was the first woman *computer* game designer, possibly. Definitely the most successful and well-known. Will couldn't even remember the name of the woman who had made Centipede. And Madre had started off as a business application software experiment, not as an 'experiment in

## Game Quest

innovation.' Will had counted plenty of beans. Oh, how Will had counted the beans. The gaming stuff had been a hobby/side interest thing at the time, brought about mostly by Kendra's curiosity and insistence...and Will had liked the challenges that putting one of her game ideas into reality presented. They had cracked open the computer gaming industry by accident.

Despite himself Will turned the next page. The rest of the report card consisted almost entirely of gimmicks: Scratch and Sniff patches, holograms, that silvery stuff they put on credit cards, rhetorical questions... all used on the way to explaining the philosophy of cool marketing and understanding which 'framework' and 'mindset' a company must seek and how to position itself to 'maximize revenue levers'.

There was even a fold-in right out of the DAM magazines Will used to read as a kid. On the top there was some question about the distribution of disposable income in the modern family, a picture of a bunch of people around a table in the middle and a phrase at the bottom. When you folded the page over, the answer to who has all the spending money was revealed – with a picture of a teenaged boy, hat backwards looking aloof. The text at the bottom of the folded in fold-in now read: kids 12-18.

The last half of the report fell into a more traditional business style: bars and grids listing Madre's facts and figures, listing 'action items'. The overall report for Madre's coolness on the last page, centered in the middle, was a big, fat, red C+. Will found this funny, since it was so close the name of Will's favorite programming language: C++.

Will tossed the "document" on his desk, unsure of what to make of it, slightly insulted by the assumptions and suggestions within, feeling almost greasy on the inside from touching the thing.

The sun was going down. Will decided to take that walk, but the thought was interrupted by a phone call. Will recognized Newman's voice at the other end. Staff cut-backs were on the menu for today. He knew Newman had been wanting to talk about it for weeks but Will kept avoiding it. Downsizing was on the list of things they could do to get profits up, but, thinking about it, Will couldn't recall *ever* having to fire anyone. Not even once. That couldn't be right, he thought, but he couldn't recall. In the end, Will supposed there was no harm in discussing it.

"I think we better get cracking on some of this stuff," Newman started, "I just got correspondence from some guys at Melfina...and there was an article in the paper this morning. You probably saw. They phoned us and want to set up a meeting sometime for next week. I think they just want

some internal information. A kind of report on everything.”

Will bit his lip. Why should Madre give them this information? Since when do shareholders get to march in and demand company documents? *It's our stuff. Melfina may own us, but they don't have any direct power to tell us what to do...not yet*, Will thought. *I still run the company. And they can't force us to do anything until the meeting in December.*

“A report?” Will asked. He was also a little miffed that this stuff was going through Newman. Although, he supposed it made sense, he *was* the manager of Madre.

“Just a general overview of what we do.”

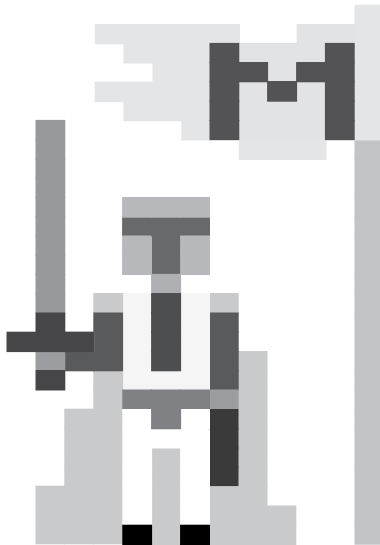
“What’s wrong with the annual report?” Will countered, stubbornly.

“Well...I think they want something more detailed...” Newman changed the topic quickly, “Hey, did you get the cool report card yet?”

“Yes.”

“What did you think of it?” Newman asked. “A lot of interesting ideas, huh?”

“Uh. Yeah. Interesting.” Will responded with the uneasy feeling that by ‘interesting’ Newman meant ‘good’.





## Chapter 35; to fire staff, press 1 now

March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1995

"I'm not going to do it," Will said firmly into the phone, squinting off into the back of his office. Dead air met his statement.

"I appreciate this is a hard decision to make but that doesn't change the fact that it's the smart thing to do," came Newman's eventual reply.

Will was glad they were doing this over the phone. Newman liked to video-conference these things. Will hated the video-conferencing. When it was one room full of people talking to another room full of people it worked ok, he guessed. But Will felt awkward when video conferencing with just one person. He sat way at the end of the big meeting room talking to a large screen. It reminded him of an old mansion where two people ate dinner together at the opposite ends of a forty foot table. Except, in these circumstances, the man at the other end was a gigantic head on a screen. You couldn't be natural in that sort of situation and Will often found himself off-balance in the impersonal and abnormal environment, found it difficult to get his thoughts out. Will preferred the phone. And, especially with conversations like this, he was glad to have his wits about him.

"This is one of the smaller decisions we can make," Newman continued. "If we can't make this decision, and it's relatively minor, then we're not going to be able to make any of the bigger changes that, I feel, are vital to keep Melfina management happy and off our backs. We need to streamline. We need to lower costs. We've done the processes and the books. We have to look at the staff too."

"Yes, but I was never considering *firing* anyone. Just moving people around to improve efficiency," Will replied. "I'm not saying that you can't let go some of the staff down at HQ if you feel it's a proper decision, but I'm not going to lay off anyone from payroll up here. After all, your staff has been there for less time and most of them are from the San Francisco area. They haven't relocated, set up a family and established ties in the middle of a forest. If I fire someone here I have to take into consideration that they likely won't find work around here and may even have to move.

I'm not comfortable making that decision to save a few bucks at the expense of employees who have been loyal for years. We're not talking a lot of savings here Newman."

"We're talking about saving your company. It's not just about money. It's about the perception," Newman countered.

"So we have to be jerks and fire people to please Melfina? Do you want to sit down with the staff and tell them they've become sacrifices for Melfina? I don't. Besides, we only have *two* payroll people here and you want to fire *both* of them. And they've both been here as long as I can remember."

"But there's no point in firing payroll staff down here," Newman said. "They do the payroll for all the divisions. It's your guys who were put out of work by the move." Will could tell that Newman was getting a little exasperated. He didn't mean to piss him off...or frustrate him. He just thought of firing people as a last ditch effort. And it certainly hadn't come to that. They could still use their staff in many places, with a bit of retraining.

"Look," said Will, "I've got an idea. Why don't we put it down on paper that we *dispensed with* them, or something to that effect. And just transfer them into new roles. That way it'll appear to Melfina that we fired them...or something. I mean, we've reduced the costs...why fire loyal employees who know a lot about the company. We can put them somewhere else and increase production."

There was a pause. "Fine," came Newman's response. It wasn't an unhappy fine. Not even a frustrated concession fine. It was almost a relieved-that-they-had-reached-a-passable-solution fine. But certainly not a happy fine either. "Uh, well, you figure out what exactly you want to do with them, what official title, etc...and send it down to Larry and he'll fix it up," Newman finished.

Will nodded and wrote that down on a scratchpad.

"What about the advertising materials?" Newman asked. Will could tell Newman was on the defensive...hesitant. Will didn't like this position. He didn't like the conflict.

"Yeah. Sure. Let's go with it. I figure something new won't hurt."

"Ok good. I'm not sure where we'll get the funds for increased advertising, but I can squeeze some out of a budget here and there. The budgets have been chopped so much no one will notice anyway." Newman was being light-hearted. Will laughed in the interest of amicability. "I'll send up the list of magazines we're looking at advertising in and I'll get Kent to open a dialogue with them for some price quotes. I'll let you

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know.” Will had never been big on advertising, but he figured after the poor sales of the last few games, trying something new couldn’t hurt. It was the only decision tabled on the list of Melfina appeasements that Will really supported.

“Ok,” Newman continued. “Damn. I’ve got to rush off to this meeting and then I’ve got to rush home to pack.”

“Oh yeah, the trip. I forgot about that,” Will said.

“Yeah, Bahamas. It’s going to be great. We just got an ocean side cottage there. Hired some local workers to take care of it for less than 30 bucks a month!” Newman said enthusiastically. Will wondered why a man who made Newman’s salary was so driven by thrift.

“That’s great,” Will said. “Have a good time.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you Wednesday. Good luck with the trade show.”

“Thanks.” Will hung up the phone. At least they’d managed to end the conversation lightly.

Will stared out the window and thought about their exchange. He wondered if he had made the right decision in hiring Newman. They were butting heads more and more now. They didn’t seem to connect on any sort of level. Will felt like he was constantly having to defend his decisions when he disagreed with Newman. Maybe he should let him go? But Will laughed at that idea. First of all, Will didn’t even want to think about what kind of severance package they had offered him. Secondly, who would run HQ? They needed Newman to run HQ. He was good at that. Will brushed it out of his head. It was stupid to think about it.

Will read the latest sales results on the way down to the art department. Swarthy Victor, though doing well by sales standards, wasn’t doing well enough. It sold about two thirds as much as Swarthy Victor 4. But Swarthy Victor 4 cost half as much to make and at the time Madre was only one of four adventure game makers on the market. Now they were competing with...he couldn’t count them all. The fact that Swarthy Victor 5 sold as much as it did was almost a miracle. But still – it had to generate the cash. They were counting on it to pull Madre out of the hole HomoSapien Quest 3 had dug. But adventure games seemed more and more the cardboard targets for the rifles of action game shooting gallery. Gloom 1 was still outselling Madre’s games...and it had been released over two years ago. Even Crypt Destroyer was still selling well. Will didn’t even want to think about it. Hopefully they could get some good press at e2c2 and that would boost sales.



Kendra was impressed. She was kind of disappointed they were letting the cat out of the bag so soon on her new Gorr game – She didn't even have a complete (or believable) storyline yet – but the artists' conception of one of the potential characters, Skilp, for the e2c2 show was fantastic. The assistant phantom character's twisted and bloody body, complete with rotating eyes, took up the vast majority of the large 10x10 foot paneling. Artist sketches, decorated to look as if bloodied, filled up the rest of the wall, half-faded as if wafting in and out of reality...just like Skilp was supposed to be in the game. At the bottom, in a rather creepy, white font was the tagline: 'This isn't no Fantasy. Kendra Roberts' Gorr.' That was it. You couldn't tell anything about the game from this panel other than that it was a rather gruesome horror game...and probably the first adventure horror game in history...by the creator of the terminally nice and fantastical Fantasy Quest series. Kendra was happy with it.

"Remember at Halloween parties when you were a kid? They'd turn out the lights and make you stick your hands into stuff that felt all weird... like meatballs and sauce, and tell you it was eyeballs?" Kathy asked.

Kendra turned to Kathy. "What? I never did that."

"Really? I thought everyone did," Kathy said. "It was really scary. Effective in a really simple way. Too bad you couldn't do something like that for Gorr."

"Yeah. Well, we're just starting so if you have any good ideas..."

"We could always ship a baggie of spaghetti and meatballs with the game," Kathy joked. They both laughed.

"Hey, if Art can get an 11<sup>th</sup> disk, I don't see why not." They laughed again.

"Is that the panel?" Will came by. It was gruesome alright. It would attract attention...especially coming from the Madre booth. "Looks great, Carlos. How many parts?"

"6 panels. I figure 3 in each car will work."

"Yeah. Sounds good." Will looked over to his wife, "Too bad the creator won't be there."

Kendra smiled. "What would I do? There's no game to talk about. It would just kill the whole thing. This is just a teaser...and a major one at that. The teasing is going to sell the whole thing at this point. Besides, if you're going to start promoting this thing already, I better get working on it!"

"I know. I know," Will chuckled. "Heather will like it better anyway if you don't come."

Kendra gasped and put her hand over her mouth, torn between shock

## Game Quest

and smile. She laughed and punched Will in the arm.

They were both a little surprised that Will had ribbed her on this and that she even took it with good humor. She'd meant to spend more time with Heather during vacation, to break down the teenage walls, but, well, she'd barely had the mental energy to keep herself alive! But lately she hadn't worried about Heather. Maybe between the takeover and the new game her energy reserves were used up, but her daughter seemed to be doing well without Kendra's help! She'd made that friend online and Kendra was so delighted to see her have at least ONE close friend, even if only virtual, that she didn't want to interfere. She hadn't quite solved the Heather puzzle: she was still barely passing school and now spending even *more* time in front of the computer, but Kendra could tell she was happier, felt, for once, a sense of direction emerging from Heather's life – although Heather would be loath to admit it. Heather had even talked about Carol openly to Kendra once or twice, dropping juicy tidbits of her life – hints! Hints! Hints! Yet now she had faith in her Game Interface. If it could destroy Dan Destroyem, it could solve the puzzle of Heather Roberts, but for the moment that could wait.

Kendra had put up a bit of a fuss about Heather going to Las Vegas. Her daughter was, socially, a farm girl...and she was going off to Las Vegas with some Internet friend from New York? It would worry any mother, and yet Kendra felt a little guilty about the fact that she had to mostly fake being upset and concerned. She was so caught up in her game it was hard to find time to focus on the responsibilities of parenthood. She was a bit worried, of course, but torn between the worlds of work and home she had been easily convinced by Will and her daughter that the trip would be fine. And the fact that Heather actually wanted to get out of the house and *do something* was a MAJOR breakthrough. Heather never wanted anything but her parents to leave her alone and Kendra felt good about being able to fulfill this wish for once. *I'm getting pretty good at channelling this dark energy into light energy*, Kendra thought.

"Come on," Kendra said to Kathy, "Let's let the boys prepare for their geek party. We'll do some REAL work."

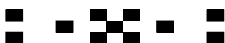
Those two had become real chums, Will thought as he watched them return upstairs. Kendra had been soliciting a lot of plot advice from Kathy, he knew. And Kathy was aghast at the fact that she had the job of trying to *copy* the great Kendra Roberts. The two admired each other, he could tell, and they seemed to do really good work together. Will hoped some really innovative, fun and, most of all, cash generating games would bloom from the partnership.



As Will discussed logistics with the designers he thought about his upcoming trip. The journey to e2c2 was always interesting. In fact, it got more interesting each year... although not necessarily in a good way. It had always been a kind of male oriented industry orgy. But in the last seven years that industry had been exponentially flooded with people and money, annually. Especially by young men. Will remembered when companies started adding scantily clad models to their booths to increase the number of visitors and press agents that would come through. Come for the boobs, stay for the game. Now it was a cliché to have a so-called "booth babe." Will found the booth babes more ridiculous than the porn star booths that took up the lower floor. Porn was an actual industry, but what did booth babes have to do with most games? The convention itself was turning into a teenage boy fantasy. The cool hunter would have loved it.

Even all the press agents were young now. Will came from a company that probably had the highest proportion of age 30+ workers AND women in the whole trade show! Just walking in last year had reminded Will instantly that 95% of the people in the industry were male, and probably 80% of the customers. Even though Madre didn't have a lot of female workers, particularly in the programming and design fields, he was glad for those they had. Across all departments, women comprised almost 40% of their work force! That was pretty good, he thought. It was mostly thanks to Kendra, who had encouraged Will to hire the wives of male programming staff that had moved out to Redwood. But because of Madre's gender make-up, going to e2c2 was a reality check. And the reality was bizarre.

For a brief moment Will wondered if he should have hired a woman for Newman's job. But there weren't any women qualified. And he wasn't supposed to be thinking about this. He brushed it from his mind and concentrated on the upcoming show.



## Chapter 36; e2c2 or bust

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Heather had initially refused to drive with her father. Not so much that she didn't want to drive with him...or didn't like his company, but she desired to be independent. Also, Carol was coming *all the way from the other side of the country by bus!* and Heather wanted to feel strong and independent like that. She thought it would be super cool if they could both get off at the bus station and meet there, fresh, having arrived independently and on their own. But when she told her father about it, he disagreed.

"I can pay for the bus myself, dad," she had countered.

"I know you can. But I would like you to ride with me. It'll be cheaper. What's the big deal? We've already let you stay in your own hotel without any terms or conditions in a seedy place like Vegas for *three* days. We've excused you from school for the Friday. I don't think asking you to ride with me is too much to ask." Will had been looking for some father-daughter time and had been looking forward to the trip: just him and his beautiful daughter doing something they were both kind of interested in. He tried to make it appear as if it were a concerned parent thing (which was uncool) because he knew he could never convince her to drive with him if he portrayed it as a desire for 'bonding-time' (which was *way* more uncool). He didn't want to lay a guilt trip on his daughter.

Parents just didn't understand, Heather had thought. "But dad..." she said.

"Look, how about if I drop you off at the bus station. Alone. I won't be anywhere near. You'll get there before your friend anyway...and you can both wander around and try to find your hotel on your own," Will had said, visions of the two getting lost in Las Vegas rushing through his head and trying not let it show.

Heather thought about it. This was acceptable. Also, she could tell that her father was kind of looking forward to spending some time with her...and by refusing to drive with him she might hurt his feelings. She was kind of looking forward to spending some time with her dad too.

He was a really nice man, she thought at that moment. "Ok." She had conceded.

Cacti were whooshing by now as they closed in on Sin City. The landscape was so different here, she thought. Only a few hours ago they had been pushing out of a dense, coniferous mountain forest, some remnants of snow still dotting the sides of the highway. Now they were travelling through bone dry desert...where tenacious shrubs and weeds were the only things desperate enough to grow. She was amazed that two places so environmentally different could exist within only a few hours of each other. This sort of stuff must have been what amazed the poets and settlers that first came to this country. In a way, Will and Heather were like the settlers of tomorrow, caravanning off to explore and colonize the virtual realms of the future.



The bus station was like a clump of hardened sand fused to an ancient fossil. In the dryness and heat you could just chip the station off of the landscape with a chisel and it would crumble into dust. Heather tried to imagine what the bus stops at the casinos were like. They'd be very swank driveways, with towering palm trees and fountains and paved walkways. Heather could picture old ladies stepping down off the bus in sunglasses and flowered shirts, porters greeting them with tall, silver luggage trolleys and leading them in to the concierge for registration while, behind them, their balding husbands busily snap photographs in front of a Japanese or German tour bus as it pulls in next, exuberant faces pressed up with wonder against the windows. Those bus stops, Heather imagined, would be very much unlike this bus station, which might as well have been miles away from any sort of civilization, by its appearance.

Unlike the fancier real estate they had driven by on their way through town, this place had no unnatural, trimmed grass growing around the edges. A big wire fence surrounded the concrete bus platform that was just cemented into the sand, surround by dry, cracked mud on all sides. Buses waited, mostly empty and silent, along the bays. Next to the bus station was a power plant with the constant hum of energy generation flowing out over the terminal in long black power lines. There were no trees here, and desert dust wafted over the pavement. Welcome to the outskirts of Vegas proper. Heather felt like she was in a ghost town rather than in the biggest tourist destination in the US. This was the bus station for losers...for people who just *arrived* in Vegas, unworthy of fanfare. This bus station was much cooler than she had expected, Heather thought.

## Game Quest

She was excited by the seediness of it.

A bus coughed in through the gateway, holding its breath as it rode through the cloud of dust it created. It pulled into bay 10, but was not Carol's bus. Heather felt herself getting nervous. Butterflies rose up in her stomach. She'd known Carol for almost a year now...and she was anxious about seeing her. It felt strange. Did Carol feel the same way? She wondered how tall Carol would be.

Heather coughed from the hot air. The only thing she could compare this type of heat to was being in a sauna. Except that a sauna was wet... and here the air was so dry. She felt that if she stood out in the sun for a day and someone tapped her on the shoulder, she would crumble to dust.

Ten minutes later another bus pulled in and Heather noticed with a great, nervous leap in her chest that it had come from New York. The bus station clock confirmed it was the time for Carol to arrive. Heather slowly meandered over to the bay where she could see the bored-looking, stern bus driver though the big shaded window, behind sunglasses himself, turning off the engine and fiddling with things. For the next few minutes he sat there and didn't open the door.

Why were they waiting? What was the delay? Heather hated this waiting, standing out in front of the bus like a dork. Why didn't he just open the door and let the passengers come out? She wondered if Carol could see her waiting from inside. She both hoped that she could and that she could not. Finally, the lazy bus driver opened the bus door with its telltale hydraulic hiss and people started to pile out. Heather waited a few feet from the door with her arms crossed nervously.

An old man followed by an old woman with permed, purplish hair stepped out first, followed by a man in his mid forties. Then a young woman stepped down and Heather stared at her nervously. Was that Carol? She had brown hair...and she looked about the right age...but she didn't look how Heather had imagined her. As the girl came closer and didn't appear to be looking for anyone, Heather realized with some relief that it must not be her. She darted her eyes back along the two passengers who had gotten off behind her. Out came a couple in their thirties, another old man, a couple of guys in their mid twenties, a teenage boy. Heather watched as each one stepped down off of the bus, wondering, *wondering* if the next person would be her friend. God this was torture!

Her heart was pounding hard in her chest...she felt a ticklish sensation when she swallowed, which was difficult. She wondered if Carol was

nervous too. Probably not. All she had to do was get off of the bus and Heather would be there. She didn't have to anticipate like Heather. As more and more people piled out she wondered if Carol was on the bus at all. Heather almost hoped she wasn't just so this nervousness would stop. Maybe she should have had her dad wait around in case Carol didn't show up. But that wouldn't make any sense. Why wouldn't Carol show up?

Another young lady stepped down off of the bus but Heather quickly realized it wasn't Carol. Behind her came another teenage girl. Heather stared at her like all the others to see if it was her friend. She had a forward-heavy, plopping gait and both hands tucked into the straps of her backpack. Her hair was a dark purple and her black jeans were purposefully torn in some places. Heather, uncontrollably, broke into a grin, recognizing her friend. When Carol turned and saw Heather grinning at her she just stared at first, which made Heather feel uncomfortable and wonder if she was grinning at a total stranger...then Carol recognized her too and grinned back. Carol plopped up to the pillar where Heather was standing.

"Man, it's like the bus driver was afraid the bus was going to melt in the desert...they just had the air con cranked the whole way. I should have brought a winter jacket to Vegas," Carol said.

"Hi," Heather said back.

Carol laughed. "Hi."

They sized each other up for a bit. Carol was pretty much as Heather had imagined her. Although, she was shorter than Heather figured; they were the same height. Carol's hair was purple, like in the picture she had mailed, and cut chin length. On her feet she wore thick, black shit-kicker boots and had some large safety pins pinned to her ripped, black jeans. Her body was thicker than Heather's and, she was right, she did have breasts – bigger than Heather's anyway, not huge, but they were downplayed under her blue punk shirt. Everything on Carol was bigger. Not fat, but thicker. She had one of those mesomorph bodies. Heather was a little jealous. Thick hips, a healthy stomach, strong legs and arms, a round face, pendulous breasts. Breasts always seemed so womanly to Heather. She always wished she had that no-nonsense body – tough, matron-like. Those were the kind of breasts Heather wanted. Not sex objects (although, sometimes she wanted those kind of breasts too), but objects of female power. She was a little jealous of Carol's solid form. People took her seriously, she knew.

Carol thought Heather looked like a nice, naïve teenage girl which

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she found odd, because that didn't seem to be Heather's personality at all. She seemed smaller than Carol had imagined, although she was the same height, maybe a little taller than Carol. Her face was thin and pretty, not beautiful, but in a soft way. Her body was thin too...in a natural way. Slender and compact, with small breasts and manageable hips...shoulder length hair. She reminded Carol of a short version of a basketball player on her school's women's basketball team, perhaps a bit lankier and awkward. Heather looked...cuter than she had imagined. She didn't look like someone who was a viciously talented deathmatch gamer with a sharp, dry ironic wit and sardonic backbone. She looked almost waify. But waify was a cool, subversive look too.

"What do you think?" Heather asked, her heart was beating still, but now it was pleasurable, in excitement.

"Yeah, it is weird to see you," said Carol. "Like we've known each other a long time and you suddenly changed bodies."

Heather laughed. "Yeah."

"Are you nervous?" Carol asked.

"Yeah. A little. You?"

"Yeah. Me too. I don't know why, though." They suddenly both burst out laughing, a little nervously, at the irony of the situation.

"Yeah," said Heather. "It's weird."

"I'm thirsty. Let's get a drink," Carol suggested.

"Ok!" They stepped into the bus station where the aircon was blowing furiously again and picked up a couple of bottles of pop.

"Do you know where the place is?" asked Carol.

"The hotel?"

"Yeah. It's not too far. Maybe five or six blocks. We can walk."

"Cool. Lead on." They both popped back out into the dry heat and headed down the bare, dusty streets towards their hotel, thumbs in the shoulder straps of their backpacks.

"Man that was a long trip," Carol said. Her forehead was starting to drip from sweat now that they were walking through the thick heat of Las Vegas. Her black clothes and dark purple hair didn't help keep her cool.

"How long was it?" asked Heather, though she already remembered the answer.

"Two and a half days, moving all day, all night."

Heather didn't have anything to say to this and they walked on.

"Boy, I'd like to get back into one of those igloo buses right about now," Carol admitted.



"Wow. Tacky. I like it. Especially the orange carpet." Carol dumped her black, button and white-out riddled cloth backpack onto the bed and went over to the closed blinds. Sun filtered through the beige strips. "This must have been the coolest cheap hotel in the Seventies." She spread her fingers between the slits and peered out over the parking lot. The view stared away from downtown into the dry, brown crust of concrete and sand, the Las Vegas nobody ever thought about. The motel was a long white building with 2 stories and no pool. It looked like it was built in the sixties from the outside.

Heather dumped her yellow hiking pack on the bed and checked out the washroom. "The water works," she called out to Carol.

"Bonus," Carol cheered, moving over to the TV and switching it on, testing stuff. "Man, I feel as if I've already sweated out all my water and the pop is coming out of my pores now." She flipped the channels and then noticed a movie card on top of the set. "Hey, they got 5 minute free previews of porn here," Carol laughed. She quickly flipped her way up the channel range looking for the porno.

Heather had flung herself back onto the bed and was bouncing on it. "Uh-oh. What will our mothers think?" Heather joked.

"I don't think moms worry that their daughters are going to watch porn," Carol looked back at Heather. "I think they worry about their sons doing it. Kind of a double standard, isn't it?" She flipped some more but the screen said that the next porn showing was in 25 minutes. "Awww," Carol whined sarcastically and laughed. She turned off the TV and copied Heather by falling back onto the other bed. "Boy. I hope there aren't any *stains* on my bed..." Carol said.

"Ewww!" Heather laughed. Carol chuckled at her naughtiness and at grossing out her friend. They rested and stared at the ceiling in the half-light of the room.

"So e2c2 starts tomorrow?" asked Carol.

"Yup."

"But the EGO booth only opens on the second day so we've got all today and tomorrow to check out Vegas."

"Cool."

"Too bad we have a room way over here instead of at...the Raj Mahal or something," Heather mused.

"Well, my mom offered to pay for it, but you said..."

"I know. I think this is better...cause we paid for it. It's all ours. This

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is our own thing.”

“Totally,” agreed Carol, resting her hands behind her head and staring up at the spackled ceiling. “My mom totally didn’t understand why we wanted to stay in a *cheap* hotel. It was a good idea, though.”

“Thanks. I like this cheesy room. I was just saying about the Raj Mahal because a casino hotel would be closer to all the...stuff. Anyway,” Heather continued, “My dad and his guys have got a room at the Sands for the show so we can swim in their pool.”

“Awesome. How far is it to the strip?”

“I dunno. About eight blocks or something? Not bad. We can walk. Anyway, my dad said all the casinos are super air-conned so if we start getting too hot we can just stop in one of the casinos on the way. We’ll probably want to see most of them anyway.”

“Ok.” Carol looked over at Heather and vice versa. They both laughed.

“It’s weird actually meeting you in person, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m getting used to it, though.”

“Me too.”



“Thanks for dinner, Mr. Roberts,” Carol said leaning back in her chair, her stomach absolutely full.

Heather couldn’t ever have imagined Carol being so polite to anyone. It was hard enough to imagine Carol to saying ‘Mr.’ to anyone except in sarcasm, but here it was in unison with ‘thank you’...sincerely! Heather was almost embarrassed...at the same time she was glad that her friend liked her dad.

“It was my pleasure,” Will said.

Heather was trying to think of a way to get off of this topic.

“What are you two g—two up to tonight?” Will asked. He kept wanting to call them girls...but he knew on some level that this was insulting...and they were grown up women, he could plainly see at the table now. But by the nature of him being perceived as the responsible, stiff adult and being so much older than them, he kept having to catch himself saying the ‘girl’ word. He was trying to be nonchalant. He knew he didn’t have a chance in hell of pulling off cool. But he hoped he could get away with nonchalant.

Heather was just glad the conversation had been switched. But she decided to switch it again for good measure, to keep it away from her dad taking an interest in their activities. “I can’t believe you ate all that,”



Heather said with her HUGE half-eaten chimichanga on her plate. They had ordered the same thing, but Carol had finished hers.

Carol shrugged. "I was hungry."

"I'll bet," said Will. He had finished his rather large burrito as well. He turned to his daughter and was going to suggest, "you need to put some meat on your bones," but decided that would be the wrong thing to say even though he knew that his daughter agreed with him. He said nothing instead.

"We're just gonna check out some more casinos, I think," Carol said. "I heard there were a lot of cool night shows for free."

"What are you gonna do, dad?" Heather turned the focus of conversation back onto her father.

"Oh, I don't know. Probably work on some stuff for the show tomorrow. Go to bed early. We've got to get the booth ready early tomorrow morning."

"So can we use the pool like you said, dad?" Heather asked.

"Oh yeah. Sure. No one will know. We'll go upstairs after this and I'll give you the other key so you can change in our room while we're all at e2c2."

"Sure."

"Thanks, Mr. Roberts."



The two were walking down the now bearably warm street after leaving Heather's Dad back at the Sands. All the lights came out at night, Greek columns of incandescence seemingly holding up the sky, holding away the darkness from the city so it would never have to sleep, fountains burbling green, yellow, red and orange as if alien jellyfish inhabited the water. Heather was grateful that her father had refrained from giving her any 'take care' and 'stay out of trouble' advice as they parted. He was actually pretty cool at dinner, she thought. Kind of nonchalant.

"Your dad's kind of cute," Carol said.

Heather rolled her eyes.

"He seems really nice."

Heather didn't say anything.

"I can't decide what is weirder: having dinner with your dad, or having dinner with the CEO of Madre Games!"

"I can't believe you called him Mister," Heather finally responded with a laugh.

"Well, what was I supposed to call him?"

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"I dunno," she shrugged.

"He was kind of cute, though. I think I like older men."

"You like *any* men," Heather retorted.

"Yeah, but I like some more than others. Hey! Let's go in there!"

Heather grinned. "Ok!"



Who knew what time it was now. Late. And they were tired. But they didn't just want to go to sleep, so they both lay together on Carol's bed with one piece of the headphones from Carol's CD player in each ear. Heather had asked where Carol had gotten all the buttons on her backpack and it had segued into talking about the music she brought, so now they were both talking and listening to the music pumping into their ears. This song was something about Pablo Picasso not being called an asshole. Heather didn't quite understand what the band was trying to say, but somehow it spoke to her. Maybe they weren't really trying to say anything. And that really *spoke* to her.

"Is this grunge?" Heather asked naively. It didn't sound like the grunge she'd heard on the radio.

"Punk. Some Industrial," Carol replied. "Grunge is lame."

Heather wasn't a big music fan. She could never get into the few records her parents had. But she really liked this stuff. She was glad Carol had showed it to her.

"Are you missing a lot of homework this weekend?" Carol asked.

Heather shrugged. "Not really. You must be, though."

It was Carol's turn to shrug. "I'm not too concerned about it. I pass."

"Are you worried about finals?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure if I'm going to do university...so the grades don't matter. But failing high school would be pretty loserish...even though I can't stand it...I'd still like to pass and get it over with."

"Yeah. I can't believe this is our last few months. It's weird."

"What are you gonna do afterwards?"

"Who knows. Both my parents probably expect me to go to university or something. I don't know. I really have no idea what I want to do with myself. I don't seem motivated. I'd like to move out."

"Yeah. I don't think my mom cares what I do either way," Carol noted.

"Oh, this song is awesome."

When the song was over they played it again. After a few minutes they were both singing the chorus together and shaking their heads, "Say what you must. Do all you can. Break all the fucking rules and go to hell

with Superman and die like a champion ya hey!"

Half an hour later they were both asleep on Carol's bed, the earphones hushing dead air lullabies in their ears.



They were sweating so much from the walk to Will's hotel room the next morning that they immediately stripped down once inside to get into their swimsuits. As they changed Heather laughed at Carol's swimsuit.

"What?"

"I dunno." Heather sized up the two-piece yellow swimsuit. It was a sexy swimsuit even. "It just doesn't seem very...you." Heather laughed. "Maybe you should paint a skull and crossbones across the top."

Carol smiled. "I guess. It's kind of hard to make a punk swimsuit. I don't swim much anyway. Yours looks good though."

Heather looked down at the small red suit wrapped around her diminutive frame. "Thanks," she said.

"I guess I'll just have to rely on my purple hair and belly piercing to get across the punk look."

"Maybe I'll do my hair that color," said Heather looking down at her suit. They had both decided last night that they were going to dye Heather's hair.

"Red?"

"Yeah...like neon red. Maybe..."

After lounging around at the pool for almost two hours they stopped in a 24 hour buffet for lunch. Afterwards they looked around for a salon but couldn't find one anywhere.

"Doesn't anyone get their hair cut here?" asked Carol as they walked through rows of slot machines, flashing, chiming, ringing, a crazy hubbub over the carpeted floors.

"Even so, I doubt they have blue dye." Blue was the color Heather had finally decided on.

"Wait a minute." Carol went over to one of the hostesses, dolled up in an oriental dress with a long slit up the side. Carol came back. "She says we'll have to do it ourselves. That's better anyway. She told me a store where we can get some dye. It'll be cheaper and cooler."

"Yeah."



"Will your dad totally freak?" Carol asked as she applied the dye to Heather's hair in the bathroom of their motel room.

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"Probably not. He might not know what to say. He just won't understand."

"Cool," Carol said.

"What about your mom?"

"It's hard to tell. She'll probably be a little more appalled by it... But, in a weird way, at the same time I think my mom would understand it...while my dad really wouldn't. My dad will just think it's weird and accept it."

"It's looking good."

"I'm excited," Heather confessed. She looked up at Carol's reflection in the mirror in front of her. Carol looked tough with her purple hair. Heather wanted to look like that too. Tough.



After Heather's hair was done the two headed back out on the town, adventuring all up and down the strip: chatting between towering palm trees and thick crowds, loitering alongside burbling, majestic waterfalls, giggling over discarded flyers for strip shows. They watched a really fake, but undoubtedly costly, pirate show outside of Treasure Island for free in the heat of the late afternoon and then wandered through some of the casinos they hadn't seen yet, making fun of the gamblers to each other.

In another casino they found a bunch of slots that worked on quarters.

"Can we play them?" Heather asked.

"Do it," Carol egged her on.

"We're underage."

"Do it."

Heather laughed. She plugged a quarter in and pulled the lever. The thing beeped and spun. No luck.

"Lemme try," Carol plunked in a quarter and pulled. Nothing either. They switched off laughing until they were out of quarters.

"That wasn't *that* fun," Carol said perplexed.

"No. But it did get all our quarters."

"Good point."

"Hey, I got an idea," Carol said.

"What?"

"Let's go over to the expensive tables and just hang out. I want to see how long it takes before someone asks to leave."

"Why would they ask us to leave?" Heather asked.

"Cause we're young. Because of our hair and clothes."

"Oh yeah."

"Wanna do it?"

"Ok."

They got as close to one of the busy roulette tables as they could and watched for a while. A little while later, sure enough, a croupier came by and asked them to leave.

"Why?" Carol pressed.

The croupier looked uncomfortable but explained that it was so they could make room for players of legal age who were actually going to lay bets. The croupier left and they hung around the table just a little while longer to show that they left because they wanted to, not because he told them to.

"That's so lame. We weren't doing anything," complained Heather, somewhat exasperated. She'd followed Carol into hanging out at the table because she didn't think they *would* get asked to leave. She was disappointed and a little hurt that Carol had been right.

"Welcome to the city, kid," Carol said.



"I'm jealous about your breasts, actually."

They were both staring into the bathroom mirror. It must have been eleven now, still early but they'd seen enough casinos for one day. They'd played cards in the room for a while from a cheap used deck they'd bought at the giant pyramid casino. Then they'd migrated to the bathroom mirror to check themselves out in a conversation about how they actually looked compared to what they thought each other would look like.

"Really?" asked Carol, inspecting hers closer in the mirror, smoothing her shirt with her hands.

"Yeah."

"Why? You've got a nice body...I think. Slim."

"I dunno. It doesn't suit me, though," Heather revisited her form in the mirror. It looked especially wimpy in this white light, she thought.

"What do you mean?"

"You know. When you look in the mirror you expect to look how you feel inside...and I see this small, thin, flat-chested ...*girl*. It's like I'm looking at someone else."

"You want to be a man?" Carol chided.

"*Ha ha*," Heather returned sarcastically. "No. I want to look...like a *woman*."

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"You're not flat-chested," Carol said truthfully.

Heather rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. It's not just the breasts. The whole shape. It's like...your body determines your life or something...and when I look in the mirror I see a magic reflection of what my life is going to be...meek, bland, stuck as far in the woods from an exciting life as possible forever, weak."

"huh. That's interesting," they stared at their reflections for a bit longer. "I think you look really nice, though."

Heather scrunched her face, rejecting Carol's opinion.

"You're petite," Carol continued. "Isn't that what everyone wants to be? Petite?"

"Not me!" Heather returned. "That's like being 'cute' or 'nice'. Do you want to be *cute*?"

"Not really, I guess."

"I wish mine was more like yours," Heather said.

Carol examined herself, twisting around to look at her butt, "*Really*? You want my body?" She smoothed down her clothes. She was surprised. It was the first time *anyone* had ever said that. She'd always been comfortable with her form, she figured, because it was something that didn't have a chance at perfection. "It seems pretty plain to me," she said.

"Yeah. It is...I mean, it looks good. You know what I mean...but it's more...like a woman's body. When I picture myself in my mind, I look more like you."

"Oh." Carol grabbed her own ass. "I bet most guys would say that my butt is too big. And they wouldn't like my belly." She grabbed that too, the little there was, and shook it. She turned back to Heather with a big grin. "Fuck 'em!" she said.

Heather laughed. "Well, you would."

"And how!" Carol returned. "But not like—like the model types. I don't like them. I like the thin, wiry guys. The loser types. Anyway, who cares about boys? They're big fat losers. And I'm a big fat winner and you're a little skinny winner. So what are we gonna do now? We got this room all to ourselves. We should get some drinks!"

"Drinks? How?"

Carol grinned and ran into the other room. She grabbed a small liqueur bottle out of the miniature fridge. She handed one to Heather and took one for herself.

"There's probably not enough here to do too much," Carol said to herself. She looked back up at Heather. "You wanna?" she asked.

Heather shrugged. "Sure."

"Have you ever drank before?"

Heather shook her head. "Just wine at dinner sometimes."

"I know," said Carol, "You're nervous. Everyone is their first time. It's like this BIG mystique about alcohol. Don't worry, it's not like we're going to do anything bad, just fart around this hotel all night."

"Ok."

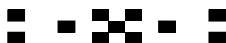
"You don't have to if you don't want to," Carol continued.

Heather, tired of being treated with kid gloves, twisted off the cap of her bottle, took a swig and then coughed. A shocked Carol laughed and toasted Heather's bottle. They took another swig together.

"It tastes terrible," Heather laughed.

"I know."





## Chapter 37; not another Booth Babe

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995

"How do you feel?" Carol asked.

"Tired," admitted Heather.

Carol smirked. She felt the same. The sun, even at 10 a.m., was high and beating down on their backs as they made their way towards the Sands. This was the first moment they had actually spoken and broken into conversation this morning. Since awaking they had merely grunted their greetings and responses. Operating on a mere six hours sleep, much below par for a teenager, they had reverted into cavegirl mode. When Heather came out of the shower, Carol grunted. It meant 'good morning.' When they were about to leave the motel room, Heather grunted and held out Carol's keys. Carol grunted back and took them as if saying 'thanks, I almost forgot.' \*GRUNT!\* Carol said as they stepped outside. Heather grunted in sympathy. The sun was high and hot. But now, after a few blocks, and refreshed from the bottles of pop they'd picked up for breakfast, they were evolving, had developed the ability of speech.

"You seemed a little tipsy last night," Carol said.

"Yeah. Weren't you?" Heather asked.

"I was good enough."

Heather smiled. They were pretty sure they were going to miss the first part of the speech...but, then again, they were kind of dragging their butts on purpose, a little nervous.

"Nervous?"

"A little bit," Heather said with a smile.

"Me too," Carol conceded. Both sort of imagined they'd be the only ones showing up and hanging out at the EGO Games booth...with Adam Clayburn and the Gloom gang.

"Even though this is open to people under 21...I still kind of feel like I'm trespassing or something."

"Yeah."

As it was, neither of them had anything to worry about. They did miss about 20 minutes of the presentations, and the auditorium was



packed, so they had to stand at the back of the room. But they felt safer there...and had a good spot to survey the huge collection of press squads and game geeks swarming the room. They felt a lot more inconspicuous back here in the crowd, even though they were probably the only girls in attendance.

They heard about the last ten minutes of the opening presentation, but, from what they could tell, hadn't missed too much. It seemed a little about where the business was going in the future, and mostly about taking cheap shots at the competition and making in-jokes. Heather had heard this was, actually, pretty standard for an e2c2 speech, especially with the major three home gaming system manufacturers. They'd stir up empty patriotic cheers and whistles in their corner by claiming how their business model or vision of the future of video gaming was going to obliterate the other major console maker – making a lot of tacky video game metaphors along the way.

And then the main speaker started mentioning a bunch of achievements and accolades and anecdotes about the next speaker and both Heather and Carol realized he was talking about Adam Clayburn just before he introduced him.

Adam Clayburn walked awkwardly up to the podium and shook hands with the main speaker while the crowd applauded. Heather's heart started up again, like when she was waiting to meet Carol, but this time not as strong. Still, it was weird seeing this guy up on stage...who she had talked to online several times...and knew all about from the papers. And he didn't even know she was there.

He was tall and lanky, with messy sandy-brown hair. He wasn't wearing a suit or anything like the main speaker, just jeans and an e2c2 t-shirt. Speaking wasn't his forte, but he seemed to relax and get into it after a while as he broached the topics he obviously loved. He discussed the technical aspects of creating a game engine, demonstrating some real-time examples on a computer hooked up to a giant screen overhead.

Carol turned to Heather, "He is kind of full of himself, isn't he?"

Heather nodded. Adam didn't seem to mean to be arrogant. He just didn't seem to bother holding himself back when he was the topic of the discussion, which nowadays he invariably was. But his pride wasn't at the expense of others. He didn't seem like the kind of person who would alter his opinion of himself just because it was frowned upon to look arrogant. He was confident and impressed with himself and not afraid to say it if people asked. Somehow it fit him, though. Like your typical computer nerd with an overdeveloped intelligence and underdeveloped social skills

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this was his personality quirk. Arrogance was his defense, his adaptation to deal with the world. He looked a little nerdier in person as well, Heather thought...though he was handsome. Definitely no poindexter.

"The name *EGO Games* suddenly seems really appropriate," Carol chided.

After the speeches were over they were the first to file out the back door and decided not to visit the EGO booth right away. Starving, they instead found a 24 hour buffet at which to chow down. They laughed and joked and told stories and gossiped and sucked back coffee until they felt more awake then they had ever been.

The caffeine in Carol's blood was percolating in her fingers as she rapidly tapped the tips to some imaginary drum beat on the Formica table top.

"You wanna go check out the booth now?" Heather asked.

"Yeah." They both got up and wandered back to the Sands. Despite all the flashing lights, large banners and strange sounds coming out of the EGO booth, Carol and Heather walked past it the first time, totally oblivious. It didn't stand out much against the typical Vegas backdrop. They laughed about it as they doubled back.

Booth must be a general term, Carol thought, as the term conjured up in her mind a hot dog stand with a computer on it...and maybe a panel, which the EGO 'booth' was definitely not. Instead it was a dark room about twenty yards deep and seven wide, the size of a large convenience store. Around the sides were monitors and computer stations where visitors could play interactive games, watch a preview of an upcoming game, test an older one, take a quiz or learn about the history of EGO. The place was dark and packed, with the majority of the people crowded around two long rows of networked computers in the middle. A big sign over the computer station notified them that it was "The first official EGO Games Deathmatch Competition. Climb the ladder, win a prize."

In several parts about the dark, sinisterly lit room were large 3D models or cardboard cut-outs of horrific creatures from the game, dribbling blood, reaching out with claws. It was kind of cool. There was an annoying voice booming out of the loudspeaker every now and then plugging some prize or station or asking everyone "Are you having *fun* yet?!" to a loud response of cheers. Near the back stand where the game creators were autographing Gloom 2 boxes, there were two women in futuristic looking military outfits like the ones in the game (except there were no women in the game! And really only one human, actually). Their suits were open down to their navel, hinting at large breasts. They

winked and took pictures with the crowd.

"Are those porn stars?" asked Carol incredulously, pretty sure they weren't but at a loss as to what they were doing here.

"No," said Heather. "Those are booth babes."

"Oh," said Carol, as if that was all the explanation they needed. "Kind of tacky isn't it?"

Heather nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, but they all do it now, I guess. Brings in the boys...and really, the whole thing is a big boy party...so maybe they feel entitled to some fake-o-rama bimbos."

Carol laughed. Of the one hundred or so people crammed into this 'booth', Heather figured they were two of four, five *max*, women here - not including the booth babes. The majority of the crowd was between 16 and 25. Most of the boys were too busy oogling the games, the death match, the game creators and the booth babes to notice these two odd women out. Even with their crazy hair and clothes. (Carol noticed that the overwhelming dress of choice at this event was sneakers, black jeans and a white t-shirt. And you could tell who was a cooler guy by whether they had their shirt tucked or untucked.) A few of the guys they stood or brushed by did take long curious glances at them, however, wondering what they were doing there, surprised that girls were interested in this stuff. Did girls play video games? Wishing that *they* knew some girls they could play video games with...and maybe date.

Heather and Carol took casual interest in the death match, but it was fairly amateur, just fans trading off spots blowing each other away. Mostly they went up and down the stations and tried a quick bit of the Gloom 3 demo, watched a few short videos, checked out the 3D zombies and then Carol wanted to get their picture taken with the booth babes, so they saddled up for a shot.

After they got their Polaroid Carol asked, "I wonder if they think we're lesbians?"

"I don't think booth babes aren't paid to think, Pizzazz," Heather replied.

They hung around a little ways from the counter at the back end where the EGO team was signing and chatting with fans and each other. Heather kept scoping the EGO team out...especially Adam Clayburn. He wasn't the most good looking of the group...none of them were *really* good looking...But Adam was definitely the least sleazy looking. And probably one of the more nerdish looking ones...but not too nerdish. Anyway, Heather didn't mind a nerdish look. It was honest.

She kept looking his way, finding it difficult to believe that this was

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the guy she had talked with online, who she had flirted with. Well, Heather wasn't quite sure what the definition of flirting exactly was, but Carol kept accusing her of flirting with him...so she must have been. She'd look away when his eyes would come towards her direction. He looked younger than he was, she thought, about 18...maybe 19.

When she looked back up at him he was looking right at her this time so there was no point looking away. She was trapped. It was like they were total strangers who, for some reason, found each other curious. He didn't know who she was so she felt safe looking at him for a bit. Then he turned away and said something to a friend. The friend spoke into the microphone at his desk and suddenly the tacky loudspeaker voice blurted out, "Do we have any Clanners from the Death-0-Rama here today?! Put up your hands!" A few hands across the room shot up, including some of the people at the computers. Carol's went up and when Heather didn't put hers up Carol lifted her arm into the air. Adam was looking directly at Heather as Carol did this. He smiled...like he was Sherlock Holmes and had uncovered Moriarty. Heather waved meekly and smiled, slightly embarrassed. He waved back and then returned to talking with his team mates. Carol had been oblivious to the whole thing.

A few minutes later Heather felt a tap at her shoulder and turned around. It was Adam Clayburn towering over her.

"You guys are from the CamelToes Clan, aren't you?" he asked.

"Damn straight," Carol replied. "Who are you?" she asked, knowing full well, but taking any chance to be anti-authoritarian she could get.

Adam laughed. "This is the first time I've had to introduce myself." He held out his hand, "I'm Adam Clayburn, resident genius at EGO Games."

Carol shook it. "Carol Philmore. Also known as Pizzazz."

"And you must be Aphrodite's Bow," Adam said, turning his hand to Heather.

"Heather," she nodded and shook it. It felt strange shaking hands. So formal.

"Why aren't you guys in the tournament?" he asked.

"We were late," Carol confessed.

"We're tired of playing Gloom 2. We want to play Gloom 3," Heather bit.

"Well, you can play a dash of it on station 3..."

"Yeah, we tried it already," Carol said.

"It was ok," Heather added.

"Ok." Carol confirmed.

"Ok?! There's nothing else out there like it! *I* designed it."

Carol and Heather just shrugged.

"It's easy for you guys to criticize. You just play the games, not make them."

"Well, we're good players," said Carol.

"Better than *you* anyway," Heather added.

Adam laughed. "Sure you are. You want to prove it? Now's your chance."

Carol shook her head, "No way. We came here to play, not work."

"Are you frightened? You always say you can beat me, but nobody can. So put your money where your mouth is."

Heather shook her head.

"Typical girl gamers," he said.

Heather laughed. "That's lame. You think just by calling me a girl you're going to get me to play you? Try harder."

"You just know you couldn't beat me." By now several of the people around them were watching this exchange...seeing if the women would accept the challenge of playing the game creator...and wondering why *Adam Clayburn* would want to play a couple of punk looking girls.

"Whatever. Anyway, you'll never get the chance to prove it," Heather returned.

"Hah," there was a pause as he sized her up. Adam was stuck now. Then he had an idea. "If *you* can beat me, I'll give you a *job* at EGO."

He was so cocky, Heather thought, so sure of himself. It was kind of irritating. Kind of cute too, though she didn't know why. But now the stakes were high enough that he would be sufficiently humiliated if she won.

"Fine," Heather accepted.



About ten minutes later they had booted everyone else off of the top end of the computer network and set up Adam and Heather at computers, facing each other. Throngs of young males were stacked behind each person, most of them behind Adam. A big screen at the back, above the designer desk, would switch between Adam's screen and Heather's screen. The cheeseball announcer, who Carol had learned was one of the level designers at the company, announced it as a half-time show. "A face-off between creator and gamer. Professional and amateur. Man vs. woman." Heather rolled her eyes and was really beginning to regret agreeing to this. Carol backed her up. "Don't worry, you're not just taking down the

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head cheesedick, you're taking down all his cheesedick followers as well." Heather laughed. She was ready.

"The stakes?" the announcer continued, "A job at EGO games...you better not lose this Adam. The rules? No holds barred!" There were cheers. When they died down the announcer continued "First person to fifteen kills wins!"

After a few more adjustments they were ready and the announcer fell into further clichés: "Let the games begin!"



Heather found herself in a dark, square room with four pillars. Hopping down the steps into the middle section she picked up the shotgun that lay there, half-expecting it to be booby trapped. But there was nothing. Running down the long corridor she searched for her enemy. She saw him almost immediately, a shadow darting down a corridor in the far distance, but decided against attacking as her armor was still low. However, the next four minutes were pure, queasy jitters as she ran down the corridors, hiding in shadows and peeking around corners trying to find him before he found her. He was like a ghost. She'd searched every nook and cranny of the underground dilapidated science lab twice. It was as if he didn't exist. She was stocked to the max with weapons and armor...but by this time, she figured, so must he be.

Coming across a narrow ledge she suddenly heard the sound of a rocket being fired at the same time she was blinded by a flash. As the flash faded she was falling off the ledge into the lava below. She ran around screaming for a few moments as the armour drained away and she succumbed. Lava bubbled over the screen as she sank in. Score: Adam 1. Heather 0.

Heather met death almost immediately two more times after this. After respawning she was practically unarmed while he was armed to the teeth. Adam knew this building even better than she did. He knew where the power-ups were. He knew all the hiding spots and ammo locations. Heather was going to have to reacquaint herself quickly.

She ran in fear, doing her best to power up, and managed to escape several encounters with only minor damage. She weaved and dodged expertly as Adam took heavy damage from his own rockets exploding too close to him while she took pot-shots at his armour. Finally she succumbed, collapsing to the floor as her helmet filled with blood. Score: Adam 4. Heather 0.

Taking advantage of the work she had done with her previous

incarnation Heather grabbed a nearby shotgun and quickly took Adam out from behind with a shot close and square between the shoulders. He flew forward and collapsed on the floor, dead. She'd hurt him before more than she'd thought. She looted his body for all it was worth. The tables had turned. Score: Adam 4. Heather 1.

Unfortunately the rule was that the level would be changed after every five kills. Now they both started from scratch on the moon of Kelph'ar. They met outside running through the grainy sands and thick mists of a crater. The territory slowed them both down and Heather, who had picked up a semi-automatic, used this to her advantage, pummeling away at Adam while he tried to return fire unsuccessfully with his shotgun. Adam sank face first into the sand bequeathing his shotgun to Heather. Score: Adam 4. Heather 2.

Finding the entrance to the moon base, Heather had trouble adjusting to the dim light of the corridor, the harsh sun blasting down from behind. At 12% health she didn't even see Adam as he fired two point blank pistol shots into her. Falling backwards she slid down the stairs. She saw him picking up her weapons as she blacked out, blood filling up her helmet like a fishbowl. Score: 5 to 2.

Heather fired a rocket launcher into Adam's side as he came through the security door into the lab. Point Heather.

Adam hit Heather point blank with a rocket launcher. Both their vital signs went flat. Point Adam. Minus Point Adam.

A petty weapons scrap under the flickering florescent lights of the Samples Lab left them both near death. Adam ran out of bullets before Heather but, luckily, much to the delight of the crowd, managed to do her in with his chainsaw. "And Adam drags her back to his cave," the announcer gleefully announced much to the audience's amusement. Heather heard a disgusted 'ug!' at the comment from Carol, who she had forgotten was standing directly behind her. Point Adam.

A long chase through the passageways ended up in the bombed out section. Adam, running from Heather, jumped over a crevice and turning mid-air fired into her as she followed. The force stopped her advance and she tumbled deep into the pit. The crowd oohed and ahed at this masterful technique. It was crowd-pleasing showmanship and Adam was obviously sucking it up saying, 'Thank you. Thank you.' and 'She hasn't seen anything yet,' which made Heather angry. Point Adam. Score: Adam 7. Heather 3.

In the Military Depot Heather collapsed the elevator on top of Adam. Point Heather.

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Heather chainsawed Adam down a flight of stairs. Point Heather.

Adam won a shoot-out in the ammunitions room between a pulse-rifle and a grenade launcher. Point Adam.

Heather, hiding behind the draft shuttle saw Adam come to pick up an armor boost item sitting in the middle of a very open and dangerous area. He immediately, as Heather had expected, ran for the teleporter. As soon as he was in Heather, from her spot a few feet away, jumped in after him. Teleporting over top of Adam he split into a million pieces. There were hushed comments and an 'oh' from the smaller crowd on Heather's side. It had been a good trick and the gamers were impressed. Heather didn't say anything. Point Heather.

In a scrap in the yard, Heather expertly fired 4 grenades off objects and around corners DIRECTLY hitting Adam four separate times as he dodged. The crowd laughed at the first one, thinking it fluke or one of those lucky moments of pristine unrepeatable skill. They were silent on the second one. There was lots of hushed comments and a 'holy shit' on the third one. As Adam's lifeless body was blown backwards into a gigantic flare pit someone said aloud, "I can't believe she can do that!" It was Heather's area of specialty, trajectories. Point Heather.

Adam, flushed, and egged on by his friend on the speaker who said, "Looks like the lass is putting up a fight!" dared Heather "I'd like to see her do that again." Heather did it again. Point Heather.

Heather's side of the room was now bigger than Adam's. The lure of watching a game creator's masterful strokes on his own game was quickly being overshadowed by the lure of watching the young girl who could hold her own against him. Score: Adam 8. Heather 8.

In the Devil's Arena, Adam made four more kills. One of which was a crowd-pleasing rocket launched at his own feet to propel him high up into the air and onto a ledge with a switch that opened the floor on which Heather stood below, dropping her countless feet to her death. Adam grinned at this. Score: Adam 12. Heather 9.

Heather lured Adam into a shaft at the processing plant and used Adam's own rocket-bounce to blow him away and escape to the top of the shaft. Heather 10.

"It looks like a tight race, gentlemen," came the announcer's voice as Heather fired a grenade off of the ground and bounced it up through the two foot gap between Adam's upward moving elevator and the wall eight meters away. Adam yelled 'Come on!' in frustrated dispute as his body slumped to the floor. The crowd spontaneously erupted in applause. Heather could tell Adam was getting irritated. Heather 11.



A big gun fight in the food hall, as they dodged and ducked under tables, brought Adam to 13 as Heather was blown across a bench. Seconds afterwards Adam was fully loaded with weapons and armor.

"It certainly is an exciting race gentlemen. Although, our own Adam Clayburn is pulling into the lead. Who will be the first to fifteen?"

"He's not *that* hard," Carol said to herself behind Heather. But Heather heard it and, for the first time since the game started, broke a smile.

In a wild fight, as they dodged giant pistons and each other, Heather made a crazy decision to fire grenades all around the room in hopes that she was a better dodger than Adam. She was. Heather 12.

"Lucky," Adam commented.

Heather snuck down the long rows of tables in the food hall, gathering the bullets sporadically placed around. She ventured into the back room, which was very dangerous as there was only one way in or out, to get the shotgun. She realized it was a mistake as she suddenly heard bullets ricocheting off of the wall. She quickly sidestepped out of the path. He had her trapped. She could see Adam angling to shoot through the entrance at her and she quickly rolled to the other side of the doorway. When Adam came around to fire from the other side she was ready and fired a shotgun point blank into his chest. Several of the bullets from his semi-automatic pulsed into her. Adam zipped back to the other side of the door anticipating that she had moved, but she hadn't and she took the opportunity to run out of the room, jump over the table and then jump over another one to the other side of the hall. Before she'd ducked a few more of Adam's slugs had entered her. She was at 57% health and 32% armor.

Popping up from behind the table she fired the shotgun at Adam. It was on target, but he was too far away and the bullets spread too much to do any sort of damage. She jumped over the table and strafed to the other end of the hall, firing the shotgun twice at him. Both were about as effective as the last one. Adam chased her backwards down the long row of tables, riddling her with bullets. By the time she'd run through the kitchen and jumped back out the serving bay she was at 13% health with 0 armor. Two shots would get her. Adam had apparently run out of ammo and had switched to shotgun. Heather was down to her pistol.

"How can you still be alive?" he shouted, frustrated. He fired at her but she dodged in time and placed two very accurate shots into his head. He fired another shot at her as she leapt from one table to the other. Her screen flashed but she was still alive as she landed and hid behind a canister.

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“Die Dammit!” Adam shouted. Heather quickly glanced at her health. 2%. Heather backed up quickly and half jumped, half ran backwards towards the east exit, firing at Adam as she moved. Adam fired at her but missed. Of the three bullets she fired in his direction, two found their target and Adam’s body collapsed on the floor with a scream.

“Fuck!!” Adam yelled, slamming back in his chair. There was some nervous laughter throughout the room. Heather 13, Adam 13.

Adam tried to hunt her down quickly after he revived for the easy kill. Heather picked up a few bullets and a 15 pack of health before they met up. Adam charged at her, angry & not caring, firing his pistol as she ducked behind a pillar. Running backwards down a hallway Heather fired at the charging spaceman hitting him easily. She took a bullet and didn’t dare look down at her health...somehow she was still alive. While running backwards she’d picked up a few shotgun shells and switched to that. Instead of running she waited at the corner and when Adam came charging around she let him have it point blank. There was a scream and Adam’s body slumped to the floor.

“Whatever!!” Adam yelled. Heather glanced at her health. 1%. Score: Heather 14. Adam 13. Heather’s side of the room was WAY more popular now. The only reason there were people on the other side watching Adam at this point, Carol figured, was because there wasn’t enough room on this side for everybody.

Heather quickly scrambled for health and bullets. At 65% health she ran into Adam, but with a lack of bullets she ran away. Adam with a lack of weapons was only happy to oblige. After a long silence Heather figured Adam was trying to set some trap for her somewhere. When she caught him running by the end of a corridor she was sure. But she followed him anyway. Sure enough, as she came running out Adam was waiting by a switch that dropped the floor into a pit of lava. But Heather had anticipated this and, as she was falling, fired a rocket onto Adam’s ledge knocking him off into the lava with her. Heather fired another well-time rocket just below where Adam was falling and destroyed him before he even fell into the lava. Heather heard a loud barrage of cheers burst around her. The screen went blank. A loud air horn sounded from somewhere.

“Oh, you disappoint us, Adam,” the announcer’s voice haunted the air, smothered by the cheers and voices, “What an upset!!”



Carol’s eyelids were so heavy they were falling into her lap. All that

death matching and swimming and six hours of sleep had tired her out. She leaned against the corner of the 24-hour buffet booth now, absentmindedly stirring her coffee wondering which was darker, her coffee or the bags under her eyes. Adam and Heather were talking beside her, but she wasn't paying attention anymore. After Heather's win they were allowed to hang out behind the EGO games desk and talk with all the guys. Actually, most of them weren't that interesting, so they mostly talked to Adam who wasn't such a dork after he'd been put in his place. He was actually kind of fun when he loosened up...and had other things to say, surprisingly, other than games. He didn't try to pick them up either, like that cheesewhiz announcer guy.

Still, they'd gotten bored and left an hour later promising to come back and pick up Adam after their 'booth' closed at around 8 p.m. So Heather and Carol went swimming again. They had a lot more fun together than at the booth, she thought. It was kind of ironic that they came down here for e2c2 and expected it to be the highlight when it was proving to be the least exciting of their adventures. Although, winning that deathmatch against Adam was satisfying. Another nail in the coffin of the myth of the female gamer.

They'd come back to pick up Adam and show him around since it was his first time in Vegas. They'd pressured him into blowing thirty bucks on a slot machine, which he totally lost.

"You're not very good at this game either," Carol had teased. Adam's body had deflated at the insult, as if the very last of his hot air had leaked out. Heather and Carol laughed and Adam shrugged and smiled. Around eleven they had ended up at this buffet where they had had lunch earlier, just eating dessert and sucking back coffee and talking.

About half an hour ago Carol had dropped out of the conversation. Even Heather was looking tired now and they all were just sort of staring off into space and stirring their coffee. It wasn't an awkward pause...but definitely a tired one.

"I don't know what kind of job I can get you," Adam suddenly started a new topic. "I don't think the guys will let you jump into a designer position or whatever. But I think I can find something. Don't worry, I won't make it like coffee girl...or janitor or anything. It'll be a real position."

"It better not be booth babe either," thought Carol, but she was too tired to speak, propping her face up by leaning her cheek into her hand.

"Well, I've got to finish school first," Heather said. "Besides, I don't know if I really want a job there."

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"What? Everybody wants a job at EGO games!" Adam was exasperated.

Heather just shrugged. "I'll let you know." Heather looked into the deep, black pit that was her coffee. Even the caffeine wasn't helping anymore.

"Ok," Adam conceded. "Just let me know."

"For sure."

They decided to call it a night and Heather and Adam exchanged emails under the pretense of discussing the job thing. Carol rolled her eyes at the serious, professional manner with which they progressed this relationship. It was obvious they both liked each other. Adam even complimented Heather on her hair...Carol was under the impression that it was a very rare thing for a compliment to come from his lips. But he was natural at it, anyway, and it sounded sincere. Carol could recount the entire exchange: *Your hair looks cool. I like the blue. Thanks. Beaming smile. Carol puking.* But they weren't going to get anywhere unless someone broke down, took the risk and *admitted* liking the other.

Adam walked with them a little ways and they had an awkward parting at the foot of the Sands. As the two walked back through the pleasant heat Carol asked, "So your dad is gonna pick us up tomorrow and drive me to the bus depot?"

"Yeah," Heather confirmed.

"That's nice. Man, I'm bushed." It was still a twenty minute walk to their motel and Carol's feet cringed at the thought.

"Me too."



Heather and Carol parted at the bus station the next morning. Carol was even a little teary-eyed as they hugged goodbye, which surprised Heather, as the only reason Heather wasn't weeping herself was because she swore she wasn't going to get sentimental and embarrass Carol. Heather made Carol promise to phone her when she got home and then Carol climbed up onto the bus as she came, in black pants, punk shirt, black and buttoned cloth backpack, her heavy shit-kicker boots clunking on the metal steps. Carol looked back and they waved one last time. Heather returned to the car where her dad was waiting.

"That was kind of sad," he said.

Heather nodded, not wanting the emotion to break out if she said anything.

About forty five minutes later as they were blasting through the red,

dry desert Will spoke up after a pause in the conversation.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked.

Heather continued looking out the window and said, "Oh it was the *funnest* time ever, Dad." She'd meant it to come out sarcastically, but the fact that it was true made it come out enthusiastically sincere, much to her chagrin.

Will smiled. "I'm glad," he said. Silence as thick, fat and lazy as the desert heat filled the car for a while.

"She thought you were cute, Dad," Heather informed him, trying to suppress a grin.

"Who? Carol?"

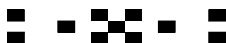
"Yeah."

"Really?" Will was both flattered and stunned by this. Carol seemed... well... rather interesting. What they call a punk...or a Goth...or something like that. Will was not sure he was into that whole angry mischief making type of woman. But at the same time, someone thought he was cute!

"That's what she said."

"Well," returned Will, "She seems like a nice young woman." Will was being sincere. 'I mean, she didn't *look* like a nice young woman,' he thought. She looked... mean or something. She looked like a bad influence. From her dress and what Will had read in the papers and saw on TV, people who dressed like that were supposed to be bad apples. But she'd been more than polite the whole time they'd been together. She'd even called him Mister! And the only things she'd possibly influenced his daughter to do was arrange a very grown-up tour of Las Vegas and to join a gaming team that actually earned them money. That was hardly a bad influence. Oh yeah...and dye her hair. But that was fairly harmless. He was glad his daughter had a close friend.

As Heather watched the desert scenery brush past on their way back to cold Camp Redwood Heather thought about the whole trip. She hadn't felt shy or awkward or afraid about doing anything. Maybe part of that was having Carol around. She'd felt like she'd done more growing up in the last three days than she had in the last three years.



## Chapter 38; first contact

April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Will squints through the afternoon sun that dips just low enough now to scrape under the makeshift wooden roof of his porch. In front of him, beyond the grazing cattle and prancing horses, beyond the wooden fences, Will can see the vast, empty, beautiful plains stretching out in all directions in a time before barbed-wire. He leans his chair back against the wooden boards of his modest shack in which he sleeps wrapped in a blanket he'd gotten trading with the natives. His feet rest on an empty supply box; his hands rest behind his head. He can feel the cool, fresh air blow across his face and whiskers. He is miles from anything. From anyone. Alone on his natural tilled field, Will chews on a long reed of straw, waiting for the phone beside him to ring.

Will opened his eyes and surveyed the molasses of his office. Today had actually been a slow day. Will had forgotten these days existed. Looking out his inner window at his herd, clattering away at their keys, it was almost as if they were in slow motion. The paperwork on Will's desk was moving too, but so slow you couldn't tell. But you know it moves...because you find it in other people's Inboxes later. Everything is dripping like molasses today: the hands of the clock, the paperwork, the cattle, dripping down over the desks and across the carpet. Will only hoped that his whole day wouldn't melt away before the phone call he was waiting for came through.

Will was grateful for the slow day, however. He couldn't remember when they'd last had one. Maybe before Christmas? Now that e2c2 was over and the majority of their projects were in phase 2 or 1, the office was remarkably slow paced. People were working...but the pits and the pendulums of deadlines were comfortably far off. Several of the programmers had taken time to play a good half an hour of Dan Destroyem this morning. It had been a long time since they'd done that. They'd been motivated by the sequel previews showcased at e2c2. Dan Destroyem's booth had been a big hit. Will wished his booth had been a hit, rather than midly popular at best. But that was the thing these days;

considering the state of the adventure game industry he wasn't sure that a substandard showing wasn't actually a good one.

Even he had left the booth at one point to see the new Dan Destroyem expansion pack...it looked good. Will had been tempted to fire up a game of Gloom 1 this morning when he caught the Dan Destroyem theme song rocking across the cubicle tops...but, in the end, he didn't feel like it...didn't want to spend the first slow day in months diving into a rapid fire, adrenaline pumping, stress-out shoot-em-up. Instead he wanted to reflect on the slow day.

Usually slow days were reassuring to Will. Somehow they reminded him that the world was alright. But not today, for some reason. Today was only giving Will the opportunity to dwell on the mach-speed insanity that had orbited his life for the last few months. He felt as if he were a small republic with the anti-missile, pre-emptive strike defense network of the world's most powerful country buzzing overhead, constantly locking in and threatening... There's no such thing as a relaxing day, even if slow, under those conditions.

The phone call was the worst part, though. He couldn't relax, even a little, until it was done with. He and Newman would, as usual, have issues to work out...and Will was beginning more and more to dread these interactions. And it was getting worse...now that brass from Melfina were sticking their noses into things.

Will wondered if he should have attended that first meeting last week. He'd jumped at the chance to get out of it, really...using the e2c2 preparations as an excuse for not attending. And what good could he have done there? It was just a formality, it seemed. He wasn't needed... and that was what Newman was for. He could do a better job. So Will had decided to not attend the so-called 'First Contact,' the first meeting with Melfina.

When Will had first heard that Melfina was finally requesting a meeting he had cringed. His gut response was to think 'I'll just let Newman handle it.' Of course, that was nonsense, considering that this was Will's company, Will was the CEO and Will was, more and more, having fundamental disagreements with Newman on how the company should be run. But Will *really* didn't want to go. Was it that this meeting was confirmation that they had really been defeated? Was it that he hated Melfina with such a passion for raping and pillaging his kingdom that he couldn't even face them? Was it that he would now have to swallow his pride and righteous indignation and act as the Black Knight's humble page? Was it because he had never experienced a meeting like this and

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had no idea what was going to happen in it or how to prepare for it? Was he nervous? Subversive? The answer was probably f) all of the above.

But Will had bit his lip, tucked away the churning in his gut, and decided, as he had done a hundred times before, to do what was somehow physically as well as mentally repugnant. After all, if Will had backed down every time his body had disagreed with the necessities of reality he would never have dated or married Kendra, gone to college, started a company, narrowly turned down the suicide pill...

And then Newman forwarded the agenda that Melfina had set for the meeting. Melfina was sending peons: upper management lackeys as their messengers, people who probably had no input on the takeover and who, really, would have no decision making power in the future of Madre. It was as good as a non-meeting, a PR stunt. The agenda itself was remarkably simple, as well. Melfina only wanted to interview Madre management to get their hands on info they shouldn't really be privy to anyway: wages, policies, sales results, plans and projects. They wanted to know the mundane inner workings of his castle, like which trap door they emptied the bedpans down, and have their little messengers report it back verbatim. It was a protocol meeting with Melfina's protocol droids... with an agenda suitable for robots. Nobody of any real importance from Melfina, the Dark Mages or the Black Knight, was going to attend. It was a waste of time.

Will was both disgusted and relieved by this. Are they too important, too elitist to show up for First Contact?! They couldn't stoop so low as to face the company they had invaded? Would they deny Will's right to face his pallid, corrupt and morally withered conquerors? Yet...Will was relieved he didn't have to meet with these people face to face. It had been a long and bitter battle and Will had made it very apparent, to the point of almost extinguishing his own company, that he could think of nothing more distasteful than working under Melfina. But perhaps the prospect of this meeting was just as uncomfortable for them as it was for him. Animosity like that might make a meeting...awkward. Counterproductive. Come to think of it, Will thought, that animosity might have also been behind Melfina's long wait after the takeover...to let things cool down.

Hmmm, Will had never thought about this before. How did the victims and conquerors of a hostile takeover finally work together? Sure, Melfina had won on the battlefield, captured the castle...but getting the peasants to accept the new rules would be quite a task. How does a hostile ruler reconcile with the fact that they aren't wanted? How does



the victorious Black Knight turn the White Knight's men after victory? It probably made a lot of sense to have a really low key first contact. But Will was insulted by it.

Well, if Melfina was going to send protocol droids, they were going to have to meet with his ranchman. The e2c2 was more important to him...and definitely worth his time. He had hired the HQ to handle this sort of pain in the ass business stuff so he could get back to the business of making good games...and that's what he was going to do. Relieved at the chance to skip the meeting, Will scheduled Newman to handle it. He knew he wasn't in danger of Newman misrepresenting him. It was a fact meeting and he and Newman rarely disagreed on facts. They disagreed on implementation. Newman would probably be able to deliver the facts better anyway. He spoke the business tongue Melfina liked to hear.

Of course, what bugged Will now, several days after that meeting, was that it made *so much* sense for him *not* to attend. If it made more sense for Newman to be the leader for First Contact, then what did that make Will? Newman knew the business stuff. Newman was in charge of the financial, subsidiary and distribution details, stuff that Melfina was interested in, the business stuff. Will had now been away from the day-to-day management side for so long that he was having to defer to Newman for answers. He didn't quite know the details of what was going on...in his own company.

Will closed his eyes again to get away from this thought but couldn't find his pasture. He was sitting, instead, on a hard seat behind a lopsided wooden table in a dank, cold castle room. What little light there is streams through a slit in the wall. Will's white beard flows into the white drape of his robe as he examines the war maps on the table, dotted with wax from candles. He is alone, closed in on all sides by cold, gray stone walls, waiting for the phone to ring. Will steps up to the slit in the wall, wide on the inside, narrow on the outside to facilitate shooting arrows, and stares at the rolling, green hills beyond the moat wondering, if he walked far enough, could he find a field miles from anyone to make his own? A place to raise cattle and live a simple life? But he is in this cold room waiting for the phone on the table to ring.

*ring.*

*ring.*

Hesitantly, Will picked up the phone.

It was Newman. "Sorry I'm behind schedule. I just got out of the management meeting with Delphi Printing. It went into overtime."

"Any problems?"

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“Nah.”

“And how was Friday’s big event?” Will jumped straight to the point. Today had been Will’s first chance to learn about the First Contact meeting.

“Good. As expected. Basically, it went exactly according to agenda. We told them a little about Madre. They told us a little about Melfina. We gave them a tour. Gave them the report we’d put together. Repeated that they wanted to make Madre their flagship...”

“Anything interesting?”

“A few things...one in particular that I wanted to talk about. They seemed to be dropping hints...or maybe I was just picking this up from the focus of their questions, but—”

“What kind of hints?”

“Well, it sounds as if they are considering consolidating...”

“Consolidating?”

“Well, they asked a lot of questions about what things were being run from here and what from up there in Redwood or up at Madre North, and how they were co-ordinated, and cost differences from that set-up, etc.... Basically, I think they’re wondering why the main production house for Madre is way up in the Sierras while HQ is down here.”

Will laughed, “What do you mean? Because Madre started in Redwood and we got so big we needed an HQ, but one in Redwood wouldn’t make any sense,” Will answered the question that didn’t need answering.

“Well, I think they are considering consolidating HQ and Redwood into one place...maybe even Synapse too. I’m not sure.”

“Where? In San Francisco?”

“Yeah. I think it’s worth looking into. It could really cut costs and bolster productivity. We could get games out faster by hiring temporary pools of local programmers, testers, etc..., for part-time work when we have high workloads. What do you think?”

“It would never work. That’s got to be—” Will caught himself, “It would never work.”

“Why not?” Newman asked. Will wondered how Newman could have worked here for nearly a year and not understand.

“Because of the people. All the talent is here. They live here...we can’t just ask everyone to get up and move to San Francisco. More than half the people here took their jobs here because they *liked* the location, the way we thought as a company. I doubt we could convince even *half* the staff to move. We can’t lose this staff. All our games are gone if the staff leaves. We could move the smaller departments like graphics down

there...but not the designers. But what would be the point of having the design support teams down in San Francisco and the designers up in Redwood?"

"Well, I think Melfina is really looking at it in terms of costs and production."

"But not in terms of reality," countered Will, "Not to mention product quality. There would be no point in it. It would destroy any reason for purchasing Madre in the first place. It'd be like buying out MacClownBurger's and then stop selling burgers."

"I don't know about that. And, honestly, I don't think it matters what MacClownBurger's sells as long as they make money at it," Newman countered. "Look, all I'm saying is that we should at least put down on paper that we are thinking about it...at least to appease Melfina."

The image of one of the art cutouts at e2c2 flashed through Will's head: a two headed, horned, demi-god statue sitting over a large black cauldron of molten lava, a god to whom the villagers had to constantly sacrifice severed pieces of themselves so as not to arouse its vengeful and purposeless wrath.

"There's no point. I'm not going to put that down on paper. I can't even *imagine* the chaos that would ensue here if that got out. I have to keep some modicum of respect with my workers here... Besides, it would be pointless because moving Redwood down to San Francisco would not be a good idea. Period...and it has nothing to do with mine or my staff's personal feelings."

"So you're against even looking into it?" asked Newman, obviously exasperated.

"Well, I'm not against looking into it. You can look into it all you want. But all the little men in white jackets with clipboards are going to tell you is that, yes, it will reduce costs and save money. You can't just start drilling a well in San Francisco because it's cheaper. The oil isn't in San Francisco. It's in Redwood."

"Yes, but with all due respect, Will," Newman began, "you're not the owner of this company. I don't mean that as a threat or anything, but Melfina owns us now. They are going to want to make changes that are unpleasant...we can't stop that. I know it's not an easy decision. And, yes, it will definitely have an effect on the Redwood team...all I'm saying is that we look into it. At least, put on *paper* that we are trying to work with them and put their ideas on...on...paper."

"I wish it were that easy but even saying that we will move 2, 5, 10 years from now is still a lie. I do not want to work in San Francisco. And

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most people here do not want to work in San Francisco...and will *not* work in San Francisco, me among them. I'd say, yeah, sure, we'll think about it. But it would be a complete lie. I might as well promise to stop making games because that would be the net effect. I might as well just fire all the staff too. We can look into it all we want, try to make it look like a good idea...but it wouldn't be a good decision."

"You know, I just think that, with things the way they are...especially considering the bitter takeover, that it would probably really help your...our situation if you'd just accede... even a little to their wishes. They may keep you as CEO."

"Well, I'll be CEO for the next nine months whether they like it or not...that's plenty of time to restructure and get profit flowing again. And if they want to do something as ridiculous as move Madre down to San Francisco, then it's not going to come under my command. I'm not saying this as CEO, I'm saying this as someone who knows the staff and the company. It's not going to work whether I issue the order or Melfina issues the order. Let it be their mistake. If, in eight months they still feel that I'm no good, let them do it then. But what they are *hinting* at doing is a dumb idea and is not something I'm going to enter into lightly. I've been running this company for 15 years. They showed up yesterday."

"You know, I'm just trying to make suggestions in my capacity as the manager of the headquarters..."

"Yes. I appreciate your advice. And as founder of this company, I feel that this idea is a total failure."

Newman let out a throaty laugh on the other end of the line which sounded like exasperation, but Will couldn't tell for sure. "Well, I'd just like it noted on the record that I suggested we go with this idea," Newman finished.

Will rolled his eyes. What, did Newman think they needed a record of what was suggested? Was Newman worried that Will was suddenly going to point at him and say 'it was all his fault!' if something ever came down? That Will would say 'I told us to move, but Newman rejected it!' It was ridiculous. "It's been noted," Will said ironically.

"Alright, well, I have to get some of the info from this meeting to my secretary before it all drains out of my head."

"Sure."

There was a pause. It was unlike Newman to pause. It came off as hesitating. "And did you get my email?" Newman asked.

"Yeah."

Another pause. "What did you think of the idea of bringing the cool

hunter back in for a bit?"

"I don't think we should bring the cool hunter back in," said Will firmly.

Newman's silence spoke volumes.

"Melfina asked several questions about the brand as well..." Newman pushed it a little further.

"Well, we can look at the brand if you want," Will conceded. "But I don't think Joe Cool can tell us much."

Newman's silence came again. He was probably biting his lip. "Ok," he said.

Will hated these disagreements. He hated shooting down Newman's ideas too. He just wanted everyone to get along. But it wasn't his fault Newman had some *bad* ideas. Will had been generous enough to agree to the Cool Hunter thing in the first place.

"Are you still on for coming down on Wednesday?" Newman finally asked.

"Yes."

"Ok. Good. Melfina wants to hold another meeting in a few weeks time. I guess some of the higher ups will be there. People who make decisions, at least. We can talk a little about that then."

"Ok." Will was actually enthused about meeting them this time. If they were going to run this company, Will was going to make sure they knew how to do it right. He was going to have to knock some sense into their heads.

They said goodbye and hung up.

When Will looked out his bay window he noticed a lot of the staff had left. It was getting dark out. Everyone leaves early on a slow day, he thought, but as Will grabbed his coat off of the hook he noticed on his watch that it was only a little bit early. Kendra had already gone home.

As he passed down the corridor to the exit he saw Geoff sitting in his office, hacking away at the computer. Will felt the need for a little human interaction ... especially with his beloved staff. After sitting in that office all day he was looking forward to talking to his people...talking about something non-work-related, carrying on life at human speed, drifting by with idle conversation. He also wanted reassurance that the staff he was fighting for were worth it...though he knew they were. But the reassurance was always invigorating in continuing struggle.

"Late night hacker, huh?" Will asked, coat tucked over his arm. He leaned back against the radiator as he always did and watched Geoff comparing paper diagrams and drawings to the screen. Nostalgically, Will

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drifted off to his own days, so many years ago, as a young hardcore hacker, hacking out computer code into the night, making these machines work, beating them at numbers games, forcing them to understand the human intellect and grasp of logic, conjuring up magical tricks and tools out of yeses and nos ...

Geoff sighed. "Yeah," he replied. It was like Will had this sixth sense about when an employee needed someone to talk to. Geoff was glad he came in to visit. It cheered him up. Reassured him somehow. Not that Will was the most interesting guy. He was the reassuring type. His personality was...stable. The way he carried himself bespoke leadership, safety, responsibility, trustworthiness. The way Will rested against the radiator insinuated thoughts of open-mindedness, casualness...but in a structured, dependable manner. In a way, thought Geoff, Will's suit was the perfect skin for his personality. The fact that he wore a suit itself said so much...and its fabric, the unassuming gray wool, too. But the red tie he wore with it was...unusual. It didn't clash, but somehow added just a tiny bit of spice and daring to the whole ensemble. Millions of years from now, futuristic humans could dig up Will, and tell from his suit, hanging loosely around his skeleton, boney jaw agape, what kind of person he was. That's how dependable Will was.

*Dependable, Geoff thought. Not like that Tim, taking off early today... probably home by now, smooching with his girlfriend while I'm here actually working towards finishing the game...again; finalizing and double-checking details before they go in for major programming. The only reason this stuff gets done is because I pick up the slack for Tim. I'm the hard worker of the team. I'm not irresponsible.*

"Looks good," Will added.

Geoff laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretty pleased with the way it's going. I think it's something new too. Not just another Sci-Fi Quest knock-off, you know?"

"That's what I want to hear!" Will exclaimed.

"On schedule too," Geoff added. Will loved to hear this stuff. In some way it made Geoff feel better to please Will...even though he was referring to the new schedule they had set because they were so behind on the original one...

"We could use the cash," Will confessed.

Geoff wondered if the cash would make a difference. Melfina was in charge now. He knew it. And he feared them. Because they weren't like Will. Geoff distrusted them to the extreme. And he knew what was coming. It was just a matter of time. Geoff remembered his video game

history, and he remembered when Warner Bros. bought out Atari. Before, all the programmers at Atari got to wear whatever they wanted to work. They'd hack together code and hammer together arcade cabinets in jeans and sideburns between soaks in the hot tubs that Nolan Bushnell had bought for the employees. It was employment heaven, an employment revolution! Then they got bought out and in came the new management: Out went Bushnell, out went the hot tubs, and most importantly, out went the jeans and sideburns. In came the dress code: everyone had to wear suits to work now. They had made it their mission to squeeze the fun out of Atari. Geoff was *positive* this was coming down the line from Melfina. It wasn't a hunch. He *knew*.

*It's just a matter of time before they stuff us all in those iron tins, mould us into protocols and efficiencies. This is how they think. They need to organize you and press you into their little war uniform to wage business. Maybe they'll let us wear slacks on Fridays...and leave the tie at home. But that's it!*

It was ok that Will wore a suit, Geoff thought. Will *liked* to. It suited him. But Will didn't design games. Geoff did. And there was no way he could design in a suit. It would choke him. He wasn't sure he could finish Sci-Fi Quest in a suit. So he was trying to get this done as fast as possible, no thanks to Tim. It wasn't to be released until early Fall, but Geoff wanted to get as much done before the decree came.

They both relaxed and stared at the screen, saying nothing for a while. Birds chirped outside. Geoff tried to think of the crazy things he'd gotten up to at e2c2 this year but, disappointingly, there hadn't really been any.

"You want to get a coffee and sit outside on the picnic bench for a while?" Will asked.

Geoff had never been asked to sit outside with Will before. A quick assessment of the situation made Geoff realize that they were both stressed out. He could always take a break and come back after the coffee...it might help.

"Yeah," said Geoff. "That sounds nice."



## Chapter 39; virtual celebrity

April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1995

<RepoWoman> Hey

<Pizzazz> Still using the new name, huh?

<RepoWoman> Yeah. I'm still getting messages.

<Pizzazz> That's crazy. When will people give it up?

<RepoWoman> I don't know, but until they do, I'm sticking with RepoWoman.

<Pizzazz> Ha ha. You're like a minor celebrity now. Haunted by fans and paparazzi.

<RepoWoman> God. It's annoying. And embarrassing, really. It was just a stupid game.

<Pizzazz> like a sub-celebrity...or e-celebrity.

<RepoWoman> I wish I'd never played Adam at that their booth.

<Pizzazz> Oh come on. You like him. And it was fun, right? And you're getting a job out of it, right?

<RepoWoman> Yeah. I guess. I just wish it wasn't made into such a big deal...

*\*RepoWoman rolls her eyes.\**

<Pizzazz> Mrs. Aphrodite's Bow. The WOMAN who beat Adam Clayburn at his own game, ladies and gentlemen!

Heather rolled her eyes. She was sick and tired of hearing phrases like this; sick of the subject in general. Of course Carol was being facetious but Heather was still tired of it. Everyone made her win out to be, like, this giant achievement. But it just seemed lame to Heather. Exploring Vegas on their own, dying their hair, getting kicked out of casinos and experimenting with underage drinking – that was an achievement. That was great, conquering the world. Beating games was...tiresome...and the big fanfare over it even more so. If a boy had won, it wouldn't have been such a big thing. But it was almost as if they couldn't believe that a *woman* could do it. Well, Heather had proved it and now she just wanted people to accept it so she could move on.



<RepoWoman> Shut up, please. If I hear that phrase one more time I'm going to spew. I would never have agreed to compete if I knew this was going to happen. Its embarrassing. I just wish it would go away. I hate feeling 'special.'

<Pizzazz> ha ha. It's kind of funny though. You have to admit.

<RepoWoman> i'm surprised the news spread so fast. I remember when we first got on-line when my dad started up SupraNet. There was like, maybe a 1000 people in the country on-line. 2000 max. Now it's like a million. There's so many sites and people you can't keep track of it all. And a vast majority of them are computer gamers who now all want to talk to me. I'm just glad I didn't give out my real name.

<Pizzazz> It's too funny. The two days I was on the bus on the way back was like...media blackout...I didn't know that all this was going on. Kind of nice actually. Then I logged in and I was like – Whuh!???? That picture of you playing Adam was EVERYWHERE. And all everyone was talking about was you, you, you and how you beat the creator or Gloom (one of them, anyway). It was nuts. Ha ha. I as jealous until I saw how crazy it had got. Then when I tried to find you online and you were just getting swamped with questions and stuff. LOL.

<RepoWoman> Ug. We couldn't even talk. It was frustrating.

<RepoWoman> I wonder if this is what Adam's online experience is like.

<Pizzazz> Maybe.

<RepoWoman> I dunno. It was kind of cool at first. When I first got back from e2c2 the news was already on a few sites... and a lot of other e2c2 stuff too. A bunch of newsgroups were talking about the match. But it wasn't like, this BIG story.

<Pizzazz> I didn't think it was that big a deal really. Our win at Death-0-Rama was, really, more important...in terms of girl gaming. It's just like nobody realized it until e2c2.

<RepoWoman> Yeah.

<RepoWoman> It was cool talking to the people in the newsgroups that first night back. They were curious and nice and we talked about the Ego booth and not being allowed into e2c2 and vegas and stuff. It was casual adn fun. But then, somehow, it turned into this HUGE story and I couldnt get away from it. People knew my handle and one of my emails got out so that's been swamped. And then, like a week after e2c2, as its finally starting to die down and Ego puts up the 'official web page' on the event - like it was something they \_planned\_ all along and I was the lucky winner that won the first

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place prize of a job at Ego... Now it's totally nuts again.

<Pizzazz> Was that Adams idea?

<RepoWoman> The 'official' site? No. He told them not to do it. But they put it up anyway. Partly because they thought it would be excellent publicity for Ego, which it has been, really, but I think they did it more to chide him for losing to a girl.

<Pizzazz> too funny.

<RepoWoman> Well, I'm glad you're enjoying it.

<Pizzazz> It's got to die down eventually, though, right? I mean, it's been a \_month\_ since e2c2 now.

<RepoWoman> Yeah. It's been getting better...but I'm tired of it. It actually died down a lot last week. But there are still trickles. And I don't want to restart anything by showing up now. I'll hide out as RepoWoman for a few more weeks.

<Pizzazz> Do you talk to Adam at all?

<RepoWoman> Yeah. I've been talking to him a lot.

<Pizzazz> So are you two officially 'going out'?

<RepoWoman> What? On e-dates?

<Pizzazz> Ha ha. I get your point.

<RepoWoman> I don't know. I like him.

<Pizzazz> That's good. I'm happy for you.

<Pizzazz> So I guess since Ego made such a big deal about this contest they are going to have to give you the job, heh?

<RepoWoman> Yeah. I'm going to be a level designer probably.

<Pizzazz> Whoa! Really? That'd be cool. I thought for sure it would be coffee boy or something.

<RepoWoman> Yeah, but that wasn't part of the deal. Besides, we're top gamers. We should know a good level when we see one.

<Pizzazz> Yeah. But if you take the job, aren't you going to have to move down to Lodi or something? Will your parents let you?

<RepoWoman> I dunno. It's practically a sure thing by now. I'll start after I finish school in the summer. There's some six month probationary term or something, but then it's a real job. But I've been putting off telling mom and dad. I don't know. They'll have to let me...probably. I mean, I'll be graduated. And all parents want their kids to get jobs...and don't want to stand in the way of that, right?

<RepoWoman> And it's a good paying job in the same industry they are in so I don't see how they can say no. But they'll probably be all worried about it. I don't know why I'm procrastinating. I haven't even hinted about it to them. They don't even know I'm, like, this big star.

Well, my dad heard from some friends are work...but he thinks it's just like a little thing. I don't know. Maybe I'm not 100% sure I want this job. I mean...I do...but I don't know.

<Pizzazz> You don't know!? Whatever. Of course you want this job.

Heather thought about this for a moment. She thought about life outside of Redwood. Her *own* life. Her *own* apartment. Finally breaking out of this slump of existence, trapped in the social isolation of her parent's dream and held back from her own Heather Hütergun adventures. She thought of being like Carol. Going to parties. Sleeping recklessly with men. Dating. She thought of Adam. Drinking. She thought of working and making friends with people who she liked, who were intelligent and not like all the morons at school.

<RepoWoman> Yeah. I do.

<Pizzazz> Will your dad be disappointed that you're going to work for the competitors and not him?

<RepoWoman> I doubt it. I don't even know if there's going to be a Madre to work for in two years.

<Pizzazz> WHAT?!??? I didn't think it was that serious! I thought they were just bought out but nothing was happening. What happened?

<RepoWoman> Ok...I exaggerated. It's just my dad has been having troubles with Melfina guys for the last month.

<Pizzazz> Phew! Madre can't go away! That would be so wrong.

<Pizzazz> What kind of troubles?

<RepoWoman> I don't know. They want him to make all these changes. Or at least Newman keeps saying that they do...but my dad thinks its crazy and refuses to do them. But Melfina can't really do anything until the next shareholder's meeting anyway.

<Pizzazz> Why not?

<RepoWoman> Cause thats the only time they can fire him, I guess. But until then Madre's safe...for a year, at least.

<Pizzazz> Geeze. Scare me already. Who's Newman?

"Fuck!!"

Heather heard the muffled shout waft up through the floorboards of her bedroom floor. It sounded like her father. But she couldn't recall ever having heard her father swear before. Especially loud enough to hear it through rooms. There had been a crash before the yell, but it hadn't been big - like the coat hanger falling over again, as it always did.

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<RepoWoman> I don't know. The head of the San Fran headquarters or something. He does all the business stuff.

<Pizzazz> Oh.

<RepoWoman> Hey, I gotta go here. I'll call you tomorrow.

<Pizzazz> o k

Kendra came into the dining room to see what was the matter. She'd heard the crash and Will swear in a way she hadn't heard since, well, before the kids were born. She was worried when she saw Will so upset with the coat hanger that had fallen over, as it had a thousand times before. He rather crudely stabilized it and threw his coat on it, almost daring it to fall over again so he could punch its lights out. He slapped his suitcase on the table and then looked up and saw Kendra.

Kendra didn't say anything. Will took off his shoes and deflated. Kendra snuck in a little closer and Will drew up to her. They embraced. After a moment of this comfort Will spoke up.

"Melfina called a shareholder's meeting."

"What do you mean?" asked Kendra. Heather had come downstairs to see what was going on and was peering around the corner at them. Mark, who Kendra had just brought back from baseball practice, was at her side.

Will dug through the papers in his suitcase and handed them to Kendra.

"The highlighted bit. It basically states that anyone with more than 50% of the shares can call a shareholder's meeting at will. We had that clause in there when we first went public. It was supposed to benefit us so we could change things around if we had to, instead of having to wait a year."

Kendra looked up. "What does that mean?"

"It means that in two weeks we have a shareholder's meeting with nothing on the agenda other than the Board of Director positions. No shareholder other than Melfina is going to come to vote at a secondary meeting barely two months after the last one. And even if they did, it wouldn't matter. Melfina has 56% of the shares."

"Well, do you think they'll...?"

Will huffed, "Of course they will! That's the only reason to have this meeting! To toss me out!" Everyone was silent in the tense aftermath of his thundering voice.

"Well, maybe they'll just change some of the other seats," Kendra suggested kindly.

"Without discussing it with me first?" Will shook his head, his voice soft now. "No. This is about me." Kendra could see Will's face was red. His eyes were a little watery, like he was struggling to hold back something...sadness? Anger? She didn't know.

"But you won't lose your job will you?"

Will laughed suddenly, exasperated. "No. I don't think so. I'll still be in charge of our office...of the games...I think."

"Well that's good."

A short, pregnant pause followed.

"Dammit," Will blurted out suddenly. "I'm not so much worried about losing the CEO position. I never liked it. I'm worried who they'll hire to put in it! Because then whatever Melfina says goes."

Kendra snuck in closer to re-embrace him.

"No doubt they've got some ideal cost-cutting yes-man lined up. A pinch hitter they want to trade in...like this business is just a game of baseball."

Mark suddenly felt odd in his baseball outfit.

Kendra didn't say anything. She just hugged him close.

"It means..." Will's voice faltered a little, choking up. "We've lost the company." Kendra looked up and gently brushed a lone tear off his cheek with her thumb.

Mark came out from behind the corner and pressed himself into Will's leg. Will put his arm around his son, ruffling his hair with his hands.

Will cleared his throat. "What's worse," he said, "I found out today that Newman's been having personal phone calls with top brass at Melfina for the past month."

"Behind your back?"

"See, well, I don't know. Not quite. I mean, it is his job to talk to them. I guess he's been the one dealing with all the stuff Melfina has been requesting, numbers, documents etc... But I was under the impression that this was all just being fired off to middle management lackeys, as it started out. But at some point it moved beyond that and some of the big brass have been speaking with him directly. I was staying out of it, waiting for an official meeting with upper management before getting involved myself. But since Newman *never told me* that big wigs were now phoning, the only contact they've had with Madre is Newman."

"Do you think he didn't tell you on purpose?"

"I don't know. He says not. I had really strong words with him this morning but he said it was *they* who were calling him and if they'd been discussing anything important I'd be the first to know. Whether I believe

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that or not he *should* have told me.”

“Can’t you fire him?” asked Mark.

“Sure, I could do that,” Will said, smiling, rubbing his son’s hair. He didn’t distrust Newman, he just wished they saw eye to eye better. Firing him would do nothing but saddle a financially crippled company with an embarrassingly large severance package and throw away the best card they had in working with Melfina. Melfina could just reverse Will’s decisions anyway, after the meeting. But, most of all, “I’m afraid of who Melfina would put in his place,” Will said to himself more than to his son.

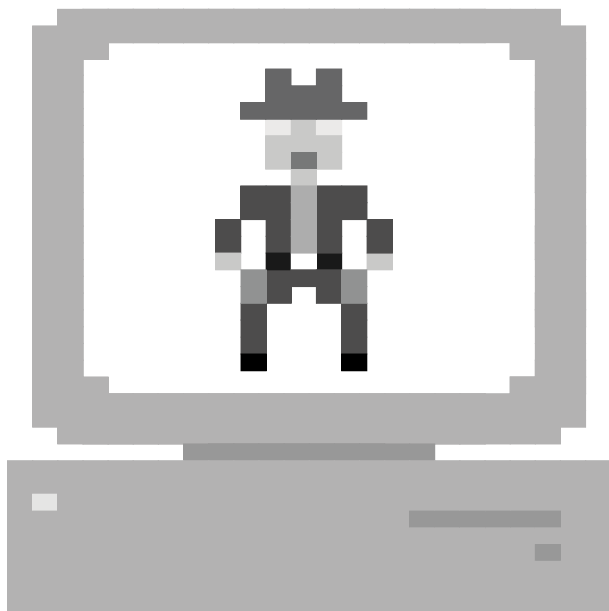
The three stayed there motionless. Heather came over and joined them.

“I don’t know,” said Will. “I don’t know.”

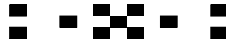


# Part III

## Stand-Off at Camp Redwood;







## Chapter 40; stop the presses!

May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Geoff had a stomach ache.

"It's probably the coffee," Art suggested, leaning back in his chair.

"You think?"

"Sure. People have been going nuts ever since we got that cappuccino machine. We don't come to work to make games anymore. We breed ulcers."

"Hmmm. I thought it might be the stress."

"The stress?" asked Bill naively.

"Yeah. The stress." Geoff rubbed his belly and grimaced.

Art turned around to Bill for emphasis. "The stress."

"Aren't you stressed?" Geoff asked.

"About what?" Bill looked so innocent.

"About *what*? About the meeting. About the fact that Will is about to be fired!"

"Oh yeah. *that*." Bill grimaced at the thought of it. "Yeah. I am. More sad though." Art just realized that none of them had known that the others had known that Will expected to be fired...and yet they all somehow knew that Will had told them, found some time to subtly, confidentially break the news to each of them.

"Actually, I'm sad *and* stressed," added Geoff. There was a long silence as they reflected on this individually.

"So you don't have any STUMS?" Geoff asked Art.

"No."

"Do you think he's going to be really fired?" asked Bill.

"I can digest anything," Art stated proudly.

"Well...who really knows? Will certainly seems to think so." Geoff said. "And I think he'd know...but then he's been really down in the dumps...so that might make him pessimistic."

"You don't have STUMS?" asked Bill to Art.

"No," said Art. "Well...I mean. They wouldn't fire him from this job...would they? Just as the CEO, right?" Art looked around but,

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although he'd started the sentence confidently, it had quickly turned into a desperate plea for reconfirmation.

"Then why is everyone under the impression you have STUMS? I asked everyone and they all said go see you," said Geoff.

"Because I'm portly?" Art guessed.

"But they wouldn't fire Will from the Redwood office...it wouldn't make any sense. It would be like stopping selling games. It wouldn't make any sense," said Bill.

Both Art and Geoff nodded at this. It was a good point. They couldn't fire Will. It would be like firing the whole staff!

"Maybe it's the coffee and the stress," Geoff rubbed his belly. "It's a vicious circle. I can't get to sleep at night worrying about the company or Sci-Fi Quest...so I need coffee all day to keep awake...and that gives me a stomach ache, which gives me more to worry about."

Neither Art nor Bill had anything to say to this.

"And on top of that I'm doing all the work on Sci-Fi Quest and Tim's doing nothing," Geoff added.

"Funny, Tim said the same thing about you," Art informed Geoff.

"Yeah, well he would. To cover his tracks."

Everyone could tell that Tim and Geoff were getting into the final phase of production on Sci-Fi Quest. That was the boring part, thought Art, where you had to pay attention to details, where it became a chore more than fun. And it was always the time when Tim and Geoff fought the most, bickering comically, griping about who did the most work.

Art was glad he was the boss of Swarthy Victor. Sure, he relied on Bill for a huge chunk of good ideas ...and to bounce his ideas off of. Having Bill around made everything better. But you couldn't *co*-design a game. It was a recipe for disaster, a recipe for turning into Geoff and Tim. Heads begin to butt. Egos step in. Art would never reject Bill's ideas out of hand...or be a design tyrant. As far as Art was concerned, Bill *was* the co-designer. But on paper Art was the boss and he made the executive decisions, guided the game. Art knew his place and so did Bill. That's why designing games was fun. Unstressful. Easy. He and Bill were the perfect team.

"I feel sorry for Will," Bill said.

"Yeah," Geoff mused. "I keep thinking about my interview...when we didn't even have enough people to fill this office. It didn't even feel like an interview. Will was such a nice guy. He explained his vision for Madre...like, this golden vision, and it just made me want to work here for him so bad." The others nodded. "Was it like that for you? And it's

been so cool to see him make his vision for the company and for the game industry blossom." This thought momentarily distracted Geoff forget from his ulcer. "And now...I don't even want to think about it. I think too much about it anyway." He rubbed his stomach.

"The government should just recall them," suggested Bill.

"Recall them?" asked Geoff.

"Who?" asked Art.

"Melfina. You know. Like in the old days."

"How could the government recall Melfina?" Geoff asked incredulously.

"Easy. Legally, they can. Why do you think corporations need to register? That's was the whole thing with a corporation. They had to get approval by the president or whatever. They had to get 'incorporated,' right?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. You didn't know that? And if they were acting badly or malfeasant or one of those big legal words – scummy – the government could trash them. There's a couple corporations I'd like to see trashed. It's a democracy, right? I think we should be able to vote on it."

"Yeah, but no government is going to trash a corporation," Geoff rebutted. "Who's going to contribute to their campaigns?"

"I hate to tell you this, Bill, but Melfina's got more votes than we do."

"I know," said Bill. "I was just talking out loud. Just saying that it's too bad they don't do it anymore, you know?"

"Somebody's got to have antacids," continued Geoff.

"Try Sheila. She's one of those health nuts."

"Do health nuts get indigestion?"

"Hmmm," Art nodded, "Good point."

There was a long pause. "What do you think's going to happen at the shareholder's meeting?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither."

"Anything can happen," shrugged Art.

"Yeah," agreed Bill. Art was right. Anything could happen.



Well, if these are the last few days that I'm going to be in charge, I'm going to use them, Will suddenly decided.

All those fantasies one has about being the perfect boss when one

## Game Quest

is not a boss, about all the cool things that you'd do that you never actually *do* do when you become boss because it's fantasy...or you're too busy running things, trying to stay afloat to actually follow through on them...well, now was the time to do it, Will thought. Will suddenly found himself with the freedom to be cool boss. Of course, with only two days left and Melfina breathing over his neck he couldn't do anything really big...like raise wages. But there were still some cool things to be done.

And so Will typed up the memo and sent it to all@madre.net.

**To:** All Cowhands

**From:** Will Roberts

**Date:** Thursday May 4th 1995, 1:27 p.m.

**Re:** Stop the presses

*Since this may be my last week as CEO & Owner of Madre Entertainment I've been presented with the opportunity to do something I've always wanted to do. I'm changing our mission. Our new mission is to all drop work as soon as we read this, go home and spend a long weekend with our families...and forget about work. Completely.*

*So please grant my wish to be the nicest boss ever and enjoy your long weekend. And for those workaholics among you, this is not a request, but an order.*

*Faithfully,*

*Will*

Grinning and sitting back Will basked in the feeling. It felt good. It was something he could never imagine himself doing before. There was always work to be done. And just giving people afternoons off...that wasn't productive, particularly with cascading deadlines that never let up. When had there ever been time for it, anyway? If they hadn't been taken over, he would never have been loose enough to do something like this. But today, it was nice out. Today, he felt like it. Today, he could.

Will got up to go around and convince the few non-believers that, yes, it was true and, no, it was not a joke. Although, most people who knew Will on a more personal level understood that this was for real and only stopped by to thank Will before tearing off. Nobody mentioned the shareholder's meeting this weekend, though Will knew it was on all their minds. But that was how Will wanted it. He wanted the Madre family to enjoy this long weekend despite everything. He wanted them to forget

about things they could not change, and about the dreary politics of business. To forget the world and pretend they were the only ones that mattered for one, long weekend. Will had good employees. They knew how to accept a gift.

From his window Will watched the office empty. Barely half-an-hour later, the sun still high in the sky, the office was bare. Kendra was still out there somewhere, but he couldn't see her. They were going to be leaving together. Surveying the vacant office space, Will found it gratifying to know that, at his command, he could clear a building of over 200 people.

He thought about the last two weeks and was glad that the meeting was upon them. He'd asked Newman to lay their options out on the table, but they were the same options as before – fire staff, move the headquarters, push quantity over quality – and they still were bad ideas. He felt somewhat helpless. Will was always ready for a fight – but when fighting meant becoming your enemy you'd already lost. If they were going to turf him, it was already decided and there was little he could do about it but wait and see what happened.

Will turned towards the other window and looked outside at the evergreens and the wild flowers pushing up through the earth. The grass swayed in the light breeze. It was calming.

And then he heard a strange noise. It was low...and odd. Unlike anything he had heard before. Will stepped closer to the window and peered around to discover what it was. But it was as if nothing had happened; as if it had been a phantom sound heard only in his head. The forest seemed gentle and quiet again.

And then the sound came again. Closer...more aggressive. And worse yet, Will thought he knew what it was. He blanched, darting his eyes back and forth along the tree line...and then the hoofs emerged. Black as char, they fell to the ground. Ice edged its way up the side of the dark hoofs and, as they set into the soil, large patches of frost developed around them, freezing and wilting the flowers into gray skeletons. The hoofs picked up and galloped forward as the rest of the dark juggernaut came charging out of the forest. The black, helmeted rider pulled the steed to a quick halt and trotted back and forth along the grass in front of the office. Will watched steam billow out of the horse's mouth...or, wait, it wasn't steam, but the horse's ice-cold breath. From the slots in the rider's black helmet the same frosty breath billowed up into the air. Two red eyes glared out from impossibly deep within. Beneath the pair, where the horse anxiously twists back and forth, the ground had turned

## Game Quest

to frozen tundra.

Suddenly the Black Knight reared up and charged towards the building, disappearing underneath the window and out of Will's sight.

Calmly, Will stepped out of his office and peered over the tops of the cubicles to the doorway, waiting in the silence. Suddenly the double doors burst open and the Black Knight rode in, ducking to fit under the door frame. The panes of glass frost up as he passes. From across the building the Black Knight glares, long and cold, at Will. Again he whips the reins and the horse trots, quickly but calmly, down the cubicle maze. Once the Knight is thwarted by a dead end and, irritated, turns back. But soon enough he finds his way through the maze and comes up to Will.

He is pitch black against the background. It is as if the part of the universe in which he exists has been erased...leaving a black void. The rider has to duck his head slightly to keep it from rubbing against the foam ceiling panels. Will can feel the icy touch of the horse's breath on his face. But Will doesn't run. He has been waiting for this. He is a noble Knight.

The red eyed rider reaches beside him and pulls out, cleanly, a long, fat, glistening broadsword. With ease and little fanfare he swings it towards Will.

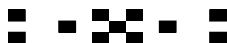
Suddenly, Will is outside of his body, watching this from another cubicle. The sword passes right through him as if encountering no resistance and Will, in his gleaming, silver armor collapses to the floor. The pieces of the armor fall about as if there never was a body in there at all. And perhaps there wasn't. The Black Knight rears into the air, the steed's front hooves beating into empty space.

Will feels a hand on his shoulder and he snaps out of it, finding himself still staring out at the sunny Spring grass. He turns his head to see his wife there. She smiles at him. Her hand on his shoulder feels nice.

"Art wants to have us over for dinner on Friday," Will said. "Henry and his wife will be there too."

"Oh!" Kendra was surprised. "That would be nice! We haven't been over there in ages." As they passed through the office to the exit Kendra added, "I invited Kathy over for dinner on Saturday."

"Well, I'm sure we can swing it," said Will. "We have a long weekend."



## Chapter 41; sub-boss

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995

**To:** All Madre Employees

**From:** Will Roberts <Director of Game Development>

**Date:** Thursday May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995, 8:24 a.m.

**Re:** A new leaf

As many of you know the brass at Melfina Enterprises, our new major stakeholder, called a mid-term AGM for this past weekend. The only item on the agenda was a vote for the Madre Board, in which the current twelve members of the board, including myself as CEO and several others you may know, would be either re-elected or replaced. Following the results of that vote I, and ten others, have been resigned from our chairduty posts in a significant reshuffle of the Board that is now occupied mostly by Melfina staff.

While this may be disheartening news for many of you, especially the longer-term employees and me, the longest, I believe there are positives to this change. My original intent, just over a year ago, when I embarked on the task to send the Madre Headquarters to San Francisco, was to remove myself and our creative hide-a-way here in the Redwood forest from the increasingly burdensome and complex tasks of running a rapidly expanding game company. I may have started this business, and learned how to run and grow a business, but I am not a businessman by training...and there comes a point when all the good intentions and practical experience in the world still can't keep up with the skills needed to do the job. The San Francisco HQ was the right thing to do at the time for me. It was the right thing to do at the time for the company. I still think that it was the right thing to do. My wish for us in Redwood was to get us back to focusing on what we enjoy and are good at: making great games. So, despite the unpleasant events of the last half year, we have, really, been granted our wish.

I have been looking forward to the moment when we could get back to worrying about games over dollars. Of course, there will always be

## Game Quest

the need to worry about dollars and profits, but Melfina has offered to take care of that for us. This is not really our concern anymore. To be honest, the rapidity with which our company has grown has created an unnecessarily complex business system. More importantly, though, I honestly feel that the cumulative effect of us flying by the seat of our pants all these years has been a decrease in game quality and, ultimately, flagging sales. In a new market where adventure games are flooding the shelves it is even more important that we take the time to 'find ourselves'. I know I have lots of ideas for new directions for Madre. We are still the most innovative game maker on the market. Quality has been the root of our success. Although I would have liked to have kept the headquarters and control of my own company, this option hasn't been presented to us. We are, however, being presented with an excellent opportunity to revamp, refocus and excel at what we do best. We have always done well as the underdogs.

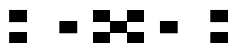
Your new Chief Executive Officer is Tom Newman. Some of you may know him by name, if not in person, as the former director of our headquarters. Although Mr. Newman is Melfina's choice for CEO, please remember that I hand picked him to do this job nearly a year ago. He is a capable individual and one who has had time to see how our business is run and to understand the quirks and idiosyncrasies of its operations, if not its staff. In terms of working with Melfina, he is our greatest ally. The sooner and smoother we can adjust to this new work hierarchy, the sooner we can return to stability. Tom Newman will remain Chief of Operations at the San Francisco headquarters.

I will be staying on as the director of game development for Madre and, for most of you, will be the only 'big boss' that you ever come up against. I will be working, generally, in the same capacity you have always known me to work in (including overseeing development at our other divisions and subsidiaries). It has been an excellent 19 years as your boss and I look forward to several more as 'the boss around here.'

Sincerely,

**Will Roberts**  
**Director of Game Development**  
**Madre Games Entertainment, Inc.**





## Chapter 42; attack of the city slickers

May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Two lone horsemen ambled across the long, dry fields. Free in a land before barbed-wire. The early morning sun silhouetted them against a rich backdrop as orange as...a California orange. Will Roberts led the two-man posse. Art was backup. Someone had to meet with the slickers. An upstanding, natural leader was needed, a voice for the community. Will was the obvious choice. But it was best not to do this sort of thing alone. Will needed someone who could counter his weaknesses and cover his back. It was a dangerous excursion. But Art was up to the task.

Will knew how these business guys played. He knew how Newman would play it anyway. But Will could be shrewd too. That's why he'd grabbed Art: to even out the numbers, to flatten the imbalance. Will didn't go for these psychological business tricks. Now it was two on two in this meeting. Team Melfina vs. Team Madre.

They squared off across the small, round table in the nice room. It was the first time they'd seen the city slickers since the shake-up. The city slickers acted cool as cucumbers in their slick suits, monocles and top hats, but Art could tell they were a little uneasy as he watched them from across the table, their eyes and hands at the ready, flipping through their notebooks, ready to draw and fire business-lingo at any second, to blast them away with their diagrams and drafts for laying down hotels and railways on Indian land, messing up any peace the locals had managed to forge with the Natives over the years. Silence hung in the air as both sides consulted their notes, tumbleweeds tumbling across the desk... And in that time Art reflected.

Earlier that morning Art had seen Tray Cool in the hallway, chatting it up with the programmers. They were all guffawing at some story Tray was regaling them with. Today Tray wore a much more compact ensemble. He had on baggy cargo pants, but, to counteract this, wore a very tight fitting yellow nylon top, not too unlike a pair of too tight bicycle shorts. He was bespectacled in sun-glasses with a spotted leopard print tint to them. Art came right up to Tray, his arm outstretched in greeting, ready

## Game Quest

for the cool handshake and said in a loud, friendly, enthusiastic voice: “BAZAM!!”

After which followed a short, painful pause as Tray Cool just looked at Art like Art had made the biggest faux pas and it was all Tray could do to keep from sneering. The programmers were obviously waiting for Tray’s reaction before passing their own judgement. They picked up on the cue quick enough, though, and conspiratorially glanced at one another, snickering like Art was the biggest, uncoolest idiot in the history of uncoolhood. Tray reluctantly reached out and did a short, cool handshake with Art...but as if Art were diseased...as if Art was Tray’s mother, embarrassing him in front of all his friends.

For a moment Art had thought he had said *Bazam* wrong....and they just didn’t get it. But no. Bazam. It wasn’t that difficult. And Tray had said it enough times that Art was sure he had said it right. He had just been, as Tray would have put it, ‘shafted.’ Was there a new cool word this week?...and Bazam was just...sooo *last week*. Sheepishly, and a little angrily, Art said ‘see you later’ and just walked away. *Jerks*.

This meeting had been scheduled for over a week. Now that Newman was the CEO, he was coming up to play foreman, inspecting operations and making suggestions. And all those suggestions, Will just knew, were going to be based around the ‘Cool Report.’ So Will had automatically and unconsciously expected Tray to show up...even though he wasn’t officially listed on the agenda, which he should have been. But whenever Will pictured the meeting he’d always pictured Tray there. And when Newman showed up, surprise, surprise, he had brought along Mr. Cool himself.

There had been no agenda at all, really, now that Will thought about it. It didn’t need to be declared; their agenda was obvious. But HQ seemed to have the *need* to keep it unsaid, as if they were embarrassed, or were planning a sneak attack and didn’t want Will to be prepared. So Will really had no idea, *exactly*, what was expected to come out of this meeting. But Will felt safe in the fact that even though Newman was now the man in charge he didn’t have too much sway here. Will would nod and agree to his suggestions when he and Art couldn’t dissuade him...and then kill the ‘action items’ later with bureaucracy, lag and lack of enthusiasm. But it wasn’t until Newman and Cool showed up together that Will suddenly realized he would be in the meeting *alone* with the two of them. They were going to double team him! He should have seen that coming.

So Will called for backup...and with the home advantage, Will now

felt confident staring across at Team Melfina. He'd noticed a significant drop in their... authoritative demeanor since they'd arrived this morning, waltzing around and 'inspecting.' They'd been smug...in that business sort of way, like Will always imagined managers in companies to be: very aware that they are in charge, and somehow important, without being condescending – but just barely, the kind of manager Will worked his ass off not to be. But now that the odds were even in here, Team Melfina seemed more diffident. Organized and confident, but less haughty...like they might have a fair fight on their hands.

"I want to talk a bit about future game development," Newman began.

"Ok," Will replied.

"I guess the first question I have is what is your plan for restoring capital inflow? Madre's funds took a large hit in the takeover and I'm wondering how you're planning on replenishing the bank."

"Well," began Will, "Sci-Fi Quest is scheduled for release in late summer. It is our most popular series next to Fantasy Quest. We expect to make a good return on that..."

"Yes, but your other quest games, Swarthy Victor and Homo Sapien Quest, didn't do so well. What makes you expect that this one will?"

"Well, Swarthy Victor and Homo Sapien Quest still *made* money. Just not as much as we had hoped; not enough to support SupraNet or fund our anti-takeover bid, Tom. But we still made good sales, just less profit. It costs a lot more to make an adventure game these days. The market's tougher. But on its own, Sci-Fi Quest should add to our coffers."

"Uh-huh," Newman noted rather unenthusiastically. He wrote something down on the pad. Tray Cool had set his feet up on the desk and rested his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling through his odd shades. If Kendra were here, he would get such a slap for putting his feet up on the table, Will thought. Will was irritated by it and if Newman noticed that Will disapproved, he chose to ignore it. There were logos on the bottom of Tray's shoes, Art noticed, designed to brand the dirt as he walked over them.

"Well, we have some new things in development," Will offered. He was trying to be helpful. He didn't want to start off this meeting with butting heads. He wanted everyone to work together so they could all get what they wanted. "A totally new game. Not something we have ever done before."

Newman looked up. He appeared interested.

"It's called Gorr. It's Kendra's new game. We've passed the torch for

## Game Quest

Fantasy Quest on to someone else, as it is still a consistent money maker. Gorr is a horror game. We think it'll be the first true horror game out there. And it's quite a change for Kendra, so we think that angle might also appeal to gamers. 'A totally different, non-family oriented game from Kendra Roberts, creator of Fantasy Quest.'" Will couldn't believe he was trying to sell this game to them. Suddenly he felt like one of those Hollywood guys from a couple years ago, trying to pitch a Swarthy Victor movie script to him. But he guessed that's what it would take from now on, until they decided to trust his industry recognized good judgement.

Tray seemed to pick up at the mention of a horror game, although he didn't change much from his stance of feet on the table, hands behind his head. That would be uncool. Newman wrote some more stuff down.

"What kind of game is it?" Newman asked.

"Horror. That's popular," added Tray as if that was his professional opinion.

"Mmm?" Will asked.

"What kind of game is it," Newman repeated. "Action? 3D?"

"No. It's an adventure game."

"Oh." Newman suddenly lost interest. He wrote more down on his pad. After a while he looked up. "There's no money in the adventure industry. The market's been overcrowded for over a year and nobody is interested in buying anymore. We need to be putting out 3D shooters. That's where the money is."

"But the adventure game industry is *our* industry. We're still making money—"

"— not much —"

"—and I think we just need to think creatively to break out of the pile of adventure clones...and even the shadow of our own success. Do something innovative. Besides, who's going to make the shooters?" Will asked. "No one here has any experience designing or programming them. I agree with you that they are fun. And they are good games, but shooters, in fact, are the very opposite of what we design. I think that getting through all the overhead just to make the first 3D game would be *immense*...we'd lose money."

"We could buy an engine," Art added, "But then we would have just turned from *the* most innovative adventure game company to one that makes 3D knock-offs. Let's leave 3D shooters to the professionals like EGO, and adventure games to us."

Newman nodded at this, but not as if in agreement.

"You could become a distributor," added Tray. "Have someone else

make them. We could just use our distribution network and make the money as publisher.”

“That’s a good idea,” Newman said. “Takes the risk and overhead off of us.” He wrote that down.

Tray Cool took his feet down from the table and leaned forward. Apparently, he had been silent and cool for a sufficiently long time and was now ready to join the conversation, fashionably late.

“Market research suggests that 12-18 year olds, especially males, now have the most disposable income in the family,” he raised his eyebrows as if expecting them to be impressed by his statistic, “Beyond the purchasing power...and *time* of their parents.”

“But we don’t make games for kids,” Will countered. “Kids like them. We just try to make games that are good. If you make a good game, people will buy it and you’ll make money. It’s the golden rule.”

Tray Cool leaned forward, “But kids have all the money, Will,” he stated.

“What does that have to do with anything? We’ve always sold to an adult, sometimes school-age, audience. I don’t see why we should start prostituting ourselves to teenagers, focusing more on cool marketing than content, just to get their money. We’ve never jumped on cool bandwagons to sell games. We’ve always done our own thing. We’ve made money that way. We’ve still been popular with the teenagers that way. If we played this game by the numbers this industry wouldn’t be where it is. We didn’t come up with Swarthy Victor or Fantasy Quest by focus-grouping wallets. There wasn’t a market until we *created* it!”

“But your market isn’t making you money now,” Newman added coolly.

“Yes it is. It’s just not covering our overhead which has become really bloated in the last few years.” Will resisted mentioning that Melfina’s hostile takeover was responsible for the vast majority of Madre’s financial troubles. “We’ve just got to rethink what we’re doing. Maybe do some new stuff. We’ve always done well against the ropes. You can’t expect profits to shoot through the roof year after year. It’s ridiculous. You have gains and you have fallbacks. I don’t want to dominate the world with our games. Right now we’re supporting a staff of over two hundred in this little town, giving them profitable, gainful and enjoyable employment making a good product. That’s a success. We’ve never reported a loss except in the first year or two of our business. We don’t need to take over the world. You can’t expect increases every year. It’s unrealistic to expect that.”

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"Melfina expects that, Will," Newman said. "The shareholders expect that."

Even Art thought this response was smug.

Tray Cool entered the fray. "Teenage boys spend more on a whim and are highly influenced by labels and brands. We already know they buy a lot of games. Madre, although it has never purposefully developed in this direction, has a strong brand. It is the most well known of all the game manufacturers. Kids actually have locker room arguments about which video game console is better. All we need to do, to get a bigger slice of the multi-billion a year industry pie, is get the Madre name in that locker room. We've got to push our brand. But we also have to make games they like. And right now, they like 3D shooters. Adventure's dead."

A cold chill went through the room for a while. Tray went back to his former position. Will gathered his thoughts.

"Look," Newman said. "I'm talking about a business model. I need to know what you're going to do to make money. I still can't even comprehend how you managed to get this successful without ever having one before, but—"

Tray Cool's ears picked up. "You guys never had a business model?" he asked, almost giggling as if they'd said they'd never had a refrigerator...or an indoor toilet.

"We don't have to calculate everything," Will rebutted. "Life doesn't live inside a matrix. We weren't following fads. We were just trying things and being innovative and seeing what worked. Our business model has been our experience of what works and what doesn't."

"You know, you can trust Will's judgement," Art went guns ablazing into the role of stoic backup. "He's been in this business a long time and I can personally vouch for him. Even Steve Work over at Pear Computers has been impressed by Will's ingenuity. He was gaga over Will's bi-pixelated coloring trick. Will *invented* that!"

Tray and Newman both stared at Art blankly, daring Art to make them understand what he was talking about and, even more so, daring him to make them care.

"Well," Art continued. "Back in the day when there were only 16 colors you could use on a screen, Will figured out a way to square that into 256, by crosshatching the colors. Interlacing two separate colors had the same effect, visually, as mixing paint, the result being a color in between the two. Like pink and dark purple made a kind of rose color. It was a really brilliant. Steve Work – you know, the CEO of Pear computers – even sent us a letter saying it was 'pure computer wizardry'."

Newman and Tray Cool just looked at each other like this wasn't very cool at all. "The marketplace has more than sixteen colors, Art," Newman replied as if the whole thing had been some sort of metaphor. It was, officially, the second time Art had been shot down that day, and this time they had managed to take Will with him. These two were so high on their 'business sense', Art thought. They don't need to know anything – just how to squeeze more blood out of whatever they had their hands on.

"Look," Will said. "I'm not against making money. I'm certainly not against trying something new. I'm not against action shooters, either. I'm just saying we didn't get as big as we are by not trusting our own judgement. And, to me, pumping out shooters doesn't seem like a good direction to go. I know you're anxious about turning Madre back to the profit center it once was. It will return. But I think dropping the backbone of our company, the adventure game, and switching, rather transparently, to shooters will only undercut us. That's my honest opinion."

Will's appeasement seemed to work.

"Ok," said Newman, forcing a smile that seemed like he was at least trying to be genuine, "I just wanted to see what you guys were thinking and," he gestured vaguely to Mr. Cool, "give you an idea of what we were thinking."

"Swarthy Victor," Tray mentioned into the air. "That game does pretty well, doesn't it?"

"It's the most pirated game in history," Art stated proudly.

"It's a consistent seller," Will said. "Our top three are Fantasy Quest, Sci Fi Quest and Swarthy Victor."

"Yeah, I played a little bit of that last one," Tray added, pausing. "But you know what I'd really love to see?" He suddenly came down from his position, leaning forward, almost excitedly, over the table, then raising his eyebrows in a cue for everyone to get ready for his genius. "I'd love to see Swarthy Victor...as a *movie*."



About an hour and a half later Tray Cool came, uninvited as usual, into Art's office. He had in his hands one of the Hollywood script treatments for Swarthy Victor Madre had collected over the years.

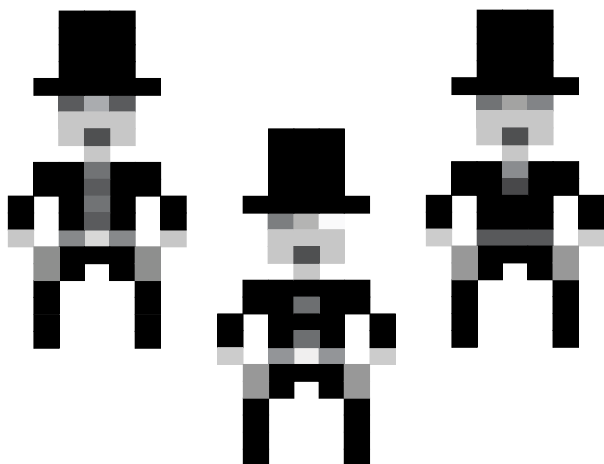
"Why didn't you tell me they wanted to make a movie out of this?" Tray Cool asked excitedly. Art just looked up at this ridiculously dressed grown man and wondered how he ever could have thought he was cool. Art was still mad at being 'slammed'. But he wasn't mad at Tray. He was

## Game Quest

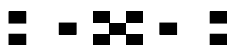
mad at himself. For being a sucker. For being a cool dupe. He should have trusted his first instincts. Tray wasn't a cool hunter. He was a cool pimp.

"This is *toooo* funny," Tray said genuinely, laughing and flipping through the script.

Now that Art thought about it, Tray Cool laughed at almost anything even remotely humorous. That thought suddenly made Art feel cheap for feeling great that Tray had thought his game was 'awesome.' But, like so many people before him, Art had been sucked in by the 'cool.'







## Chapter 43; save early, save often

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Kendra was telecommuting. Which is the 20<sup>th</sup> century term for ‘working from home.’ Which was in reality known as ‘taking a break’ or, in Kendra’s case, sitting out on the back porch, sprawled across a lawn chair, absorbing the first truly hot rays of summer and sipping on a cool, slightly alcoholic beverage. It was good to be a boss...and the only famous female game designer. You could telecommute whenever you felt like it.

Of course, that was the problem with Madre, with doing work that one actually liked or cared about. You didn’t want to take breaks. You voluntarily sucked yourself in, spending your weekends thinking about game design, or writing down ideas in the middle of the night. You stayed after hours succumbing to artistic perfectionism. You pushed your limit, tired yourself out, became neurotic and believed that other characters from competing game companies were trying to hunt you down and terminate you.

Yet, Kendra figured that despite these inconveniences her job was still better than the majority of the working folks across the nation who put in the same amount of overtime because they were forced to, or might lose their job or never get a raise if it appeared that they were only doing what they were *paid* to do. Kendra was glad she’d lucked into life the way it was today. But she still needed to take a break.

She had been inspired by Will’s ‘stop-the-presses’ decree several weeks ago. You shouldn’t take a break when you’re burnt out, you should take breaks before that. Take them regularly to ensure smooth running. Will’s ‘everyone go home’ order had come right in the middle of a really positive creative streak for Kendra. She’d managed to get over the initial hump of fleshing out a plot for Gorr and was starting to get all these great ideas for characters and dialogue and twists and turns...and...and cool stuff. She felt creativity blasting out of her body like white lightning, curving unnaturally and magnetically to the computer screen. She paced, she wrote, she drank coffee; everything was coming together so well; she was excited and enthused. On top of that, Kathy had just started basic design

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on the new Fantasy Quest game and Kendra was having a great time passing the torch, explaining, mentoring, anecdoting. And then Will's email came: *Stop. Go home. Full stop.*

Kendra wasn't disappointed by it. Everyone likes a long weekend. And she could always work at home. But since Will had the weekend off as well, they spent their time together and she forgot all about the work. A couple of times during the weekend she had wanted to sneak away to the computer, but by then the shareholder's meeting had been in full swing. Will didn't even attend the meeting. There was no point. She could tell the whole thing was rough for Will, but for the most part he did a good job of ignoring it and she worked to keep him distracted. The outcome was expected and he was mostly beyond stressing about it at this point. The takeover had drained his stress reserves, she saw. When the news of Will's dismissal came it was almost a relief to know it was over. It was all in Melfina's court now. Whether they liked it or not, a great weight had been lifted from their shoulders. And by Sunday, Kendra wasn't willing to work for free on her days off because she was now working for somebody else.

Yet when Kendra returned to the office on Monday she picked up right where she had left off: after a brief warm-up period she was busily fleshing out Gorr and helping Kathy on Fantasy Quest as if she hadn't even skipped a beat, hadn't lost the groove. And better yet, she felt physically energized. Not just that crazy creative energized, like a Starship powered by a black hole, bound for destruction, where enthusiasm alone propels a tired, wrecked hulk of a body forward. No, this time Kendra felt rested. She hadn't expected that. Ever since she'd started making games she'd feared that if she stopped for even one moment she'd lose the thread. So she went on and on until her energy levels fell through the floor...and then spent just as long recovering. But Will's break had shown her that this wasn't necessary. You could just pick it up so easily again! So Kendra, who still felt like she was going strong yesterday, decided to arrange a telecommute day...before she turned into a babbling, creative wreck. It was like the auto-save feature. Now she didn't have to spend so much time retracing her steps because she'd forgotten to take thirty seconds to save her game.

Today was a constructive break. A break that contributed positively to the work force. By her not being there, Kendra was making things better on multiple levels. Aside from keeping her creative energy stored up, Kendra found that lately, among all this takeover business, she needed to have the positive attitude and energy of two people to compensate for

Will. It was as if Will's enthusiasm was being sucked out of him double speed with every Newman or Melfina encounter, like they were gray, transparent wraiths that latched onto your face and sucked your life force. *Hmmmm, that's a good idea for Gorr. I'll have to write that down*, Kendra thought. *No*, she caught herself.

LATER. THINK OF GOOD GAME IDEAS LATER.

You save your energies to devote to work and your husband who needs all the support he can get right now.

While Will had always handled the business side of Madre, Kendra had always played a large unofficial part. Will always discussed important decisions or problems with her. Not because she was co-partner or because he felt he had to, but because he valued her advice and opinions...her supportive skills. Whenever he was having management troubles, or getting frustrated she was always a calming agent, whether he realized it or not.

Will, though not a designer, was largely responsible for her success as well. He was always interested to hear her ideas. And his talking about the business side (usually excitedly, but sometimes in frustration) made her forget the trials and tribulations of design, made her glad that she didn't have to handle numbers and accounts, glad he liked the business stuff so much that she would never have to do it. And Will encouraged her with honest enthusiasm. They were a good team and, at the moment, he was down so she needed to keep herself up. Kendra needed to be in tip top emotional state. She needed constructive breaks.

This was also constructive for Kathy who, so far, had been working entirely under Kendra. But the ties needed to be severed. Kathy needed to get used to making her own calls and decisions, to start doing things without Kendra looking over her shoulder. Even though they had become great friends, this break would be constructive for the both of them. Although, Kendra was both reluctant and overjoyed to sever the ties with Fantasy Quest.

Kendra slurped on the iced beverage that was rapidly melting in the hot sun. Beads of golden dew formed on the outer shell of the glass, creating jewelled hexagonal patches of sun across Kendra's stomach. She felt loose and relaxed, as if her life were an adventure game and she was playing without needing the hint book. She felt like she'd got over a hump and was coasting through the puzzles: still challenging, but not

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frustrating... After her beverage ran out Kendra was going to jump in the pool. The pool was filling now with hose water, the slow rising of the water level sloshed wrinkles of sun along the white walls of the pool.

Kendra looked out over the large lawn with its raggedy patches of grass and recalled, fondly, last year's bar-b-que. Although, she was glad she wasn't going to be hosting it this year. Neither of them had the energy. Art, at dinner at his house a few weeks ago, had graciously offered to host this year's event. Art had requested, though, that it be named the 'No-cats-allowed Bar-b-que 1995.' Will said that as long as Art hosted it, he could call it whatever he wanted...so long as it wasn't the 'Melfina Bar-b-que'. At least, Will had joked, they can't force us to invite them to our parties! Despite how much control Melfina had over everything, Madre still had the power to be snobby to them, to take pleasure in not inviting them. If nothing else, they still had the Madre bar-b-que and sense of independence. And no matter how small a thing that was...it was a big thing.

Kendra felt a dark shadow crawl across the lawn chair and over her body. A long, human figure. Nobody was supposed to be home today. Dan Destroyem? Kendra felt the first signs of tension creeping into the hairs along her arms.

### RELAX

You relax and think about it. Six months ago you would have been sure it was Dan Destroyem. But the footsteps sound like your daughter...but shouldn't she be in school? Oh yes, she gets off early on Wednesdays.

"What is it, honey?" Kendra asked not even turning around to greet her daughter. She felt cool about this.

"Mom," came the voice in a form Kendra recognized as hesitation. This voice usually came before phrases like 'I broke the bathroom mirror,' or 'I've been suspended from school for three days.' Kendra tensed a little, but the relaxation in her body was too great. She waited for the conclusion of the phrase.

"I got a job at EGO games and I'm moving near Sacramento after graduation."

*That does not compute.*

Kendra continued slurping her tall glass. "What was that?" she asked

again. She mustn't have heard right.

"I got a job at EGO games and I'm moving to Lodi after graduation."

Before Kendra even had a chance to access her Game Interface she'd stopped slurping and spun around in her chair to face her daughter. "What?! When did this happen?" She was now officially uncool again.

Heather sighed. "When I went down to Nevada I won a deathmatch against Adam Clayburn. They offered me a job."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"That's..." Kendra stumbled around in her head trying to decide which of the many words that were coming to mind she would use. "That's supportive! I mean, wonderful!" she exclaimed. Kendra wasn't even aware EGO hired women. But she wasn't going to mention that. Kendra could feel her body tensing up. "How long have you known?"

"A few days ago," Heather lied. She'd known for sure for about two and a half weeks and for pretty-sure for about almost a month and a half.

Hundreds of different feelings were bubbling up inside of Kendra. On the one hand she was incredibly proud of her daughter, her daughter who somehow managed to completely bypass the slave-wage service industry, who just broke into an all male field...on her own! *How did this happen? I know nothing of her life. She's so damned secretive. I mean, she got a job at the hottest game company on the planet right now. When – HOW? – did this happen? All she does is sit in her room all day.* "Great! Good for you!" Kendra re-iterated, smiling. She was incredibly proud...and also incredibly perplexed...and also feeling a little selfish. She wondered how she could not know something like this. Was she not paying enough attention to her daughter? Was this lack of information an oversight on her part? Was she a poor mother? Her daughter's parents own a gaming company, why doesn't she want to work at *their* company? *Who was she kidding?* Kendra thought. Madre didn't even have the authority to hire new people right now.

## JUGGLE WORK WITH FAMILY

You do not have the necessary items!

Heather thought her mother was taking this pretty well, though she could tell she was being a little weird about it in one of those dumb mom ways, which was why Heather had been so hesitant to tell her in the first

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place.

They just looked at each other for a while.

"Do you...where are you going to stay? Do you know?" Kendra bumbled out.

"No, but Adam said that they all have an apartment building nearby that they stay in. I could get a place there easy," she said. "And if I came down he'd show me around."

Questions and concerns overflowed in her head, but managed to control herself. "When do you start?"

"I don't know. After school ends. Maybe the third of July."

*July?! That's just a month away! That does NOT compute!* She'd barely got over the fact that her daughter was going to be graduating...and didn't seem interested in any sort of further education... Was this thought through? She had to do something!

### CHECK INVENTORY

**You have:** Motherly concern  
Pocket lint  
Guilt  
An emergency tampon  
Keys  
Staple Remover

### USE GUILT ON DAUGHTER

Your daughter doesn't want it.

The cursor blinked in Kendra's mind for a few moments, but no solutions came to her. Calm washed over her as she stared at her daughter. What was she doing? Her daughter was actually opening up to her for once!

### SMILE

You smile benignly.

### ASK NON-OVERPROTECTIVE QUESTION

Smart thinking. You're getting a hang of this sanity stuff. "Is it a

permanent job?"

Heather shrugged. "Not really. I don't know. I guess it depends. I'm hired for six months. If they like me they'll hire me for more."

"That's great," Kendra said. "Does your dad know?"

"No," Heather lied. "I'll tell him tonight." *Tell him that it's ok to talk to mom about it now, that is, she thought.*

Kendra was bursting with questions, most of them panicky and most of them, she was sure, would irritate her daughter. She'd cut the ties with Fantasy Quest, she needed to do the same with her daughter...but she didn't feel like she was finished with her daughter yet. "It's going to be quite the adventure, huh?" Kendra asked, but she had a suspicion that even this was uncool.

"Yeah," her daughter replied, trying to conceal a huge grin, relieved her mother was taking it so well. She didn't want Kendra to construe it as genuine joy at escaping from the clutches of her parents. Not that this wasn't the case as well. For three years or more Heather had been dreaming of this moment. When she could escape childhood and the humble ways of her parents into her own life, emerging from her room like a butterfly, or more like a wasp, now fully developed beyond her meek cave-dwelling ways into a woman to be reckoned with, a woman like Heather Hüterguns on an adventure of her own direction.

"Do you want to sit with me?" Kendra asked.

There was a pause. "Yeah."

"Do you want to swim with me when the pool is full?"

"Yeah."



## Chapter 44; Hollywood Types

July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Geoff and Tim were jostling for a position in front of the fancy fax. The final draft of the first advertisement for the latest installment of Sci-Fi Quest was coming through from HQ. It jiggled forward out of the machine, strips at a time, like an inch-worm. The fancy fax was indeed fancy. It could handle documents larger than 8.5x11. It had three times the resolution of a normal fax. Tim and Geoff were almost equally excited just to be receiving something, *anything* on the fancy fax!

But they were more eager to see what the ad would look like; the first, full page, slick, color, cover advertisement to appear in a major magazine in the Sci-Fi Quest series' history. Of course, it wouldn't come out in color on the fax...but they could see everything else. Actually, neither Tim nor Geoff had much respect for advertising, as you may have noticed. The two had practically built the Sci-Fi Quest franchise out of lampooning logos, corporations and marketing gimmicks. But somehow, the excitement of seeing the first major piece of marketing work for their game made them forget about that for a moment and drew them to the excitement of seeing *their* game marketed.

They stared eagerly at the machine. It seemed to take hours! They'd been watching for over a minute now and the first inch and a half, the bottom of the ad, had just barely wriggled out... But they were beginning to make out things. There was a thingy on the left side that they didn't recognize at first...but then they could make out the words: Madre, the mother of all games. Tim and Geoff looked at each other with raised eyebrows. What came out above this line appeared to be the new, stylized company logo. It didn't look too bad, and they were both kind of excited about being among the first to see it. It was simpler. Slicker. But not bad. The new tagline, however...it was so...so...cocky, exactly the sort of advertising inanity that the duo liked to shame. But they shrugged and got over this quick enough. It wasn't their game that was tacky, after all, and any negative response to the new logo would go on Melfina's head. No one would attribute that to Geoff and Tim, surely.



The paper jerked and jibbled forward. They started making out screenshots from their game. They weren't exciting screen shots...these were some of the first ones that had been done...and they had been running around the office forever. But they were new to the public. Under the screen shots were captions: explore strange new worlds, seek out new orifices, steal intergalactic space cruisers by accident. Tim and Geoff were both pleased with this bit and felt their excitement knobs turned up a notch.

About a minute later all the screen shots had appeared and a larger set of words began to come through: Sci-Fi Quest 4. Available in stores, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1995. This looked good too and made Tim and Geoff forgive, slightly, all of Melfina's idiotic waffling and micro-management nit-picking over the last two months that had caused their release date to be bumped this far ahead in the first place. But Tim and Geoff were reserving their judgement until they saw the whole thing. They squinted at the paper now as what looked like a picture came into view. It was smooth; a solid, light color.

"It seems...round," observed Tim.

"It's a coffee cup."

"No, it's a cereal bowl."

"Good call." They both imagined some alien or maybe the main character, Johnny 10-4, eating some really funny futuristic cereal or something. It shifted out a bit more.

"What is that?"

"Is that a foot?"

"What's a foot doing in a cereal bowl?"

It probably wasn't a cereal bowl. They squinted harder. Some leg came into view. And a hand. It was a man...lying down? The paper jerked and the machine took its time squeezing out the page. No...it looked like a teenage boy falling and hitting his face. But what the hell was he in? It still looked like a giant cereal bowl...but sliced in half? A small, oblong shape started to come into view just above the boy. After a few more millimetres they both realized it was a skateboard. And the boy had wiped out while half-piping in this...thing and smacked his face on the wall. This was kind of stupid, but quirky enough to be funny. It seemed like something Johnny 10-4 would do. Maybe he wiped out in a giant space toilet? That might work. But the page wriggled out another inch and they could tell that he was skating inside an empty pool. Hmmm. Though it seemed pretty stupid and inane, it could still be funny. But that all depended on the main text at the top, a punch line that would

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point out the inanity and tie it all into Sci-Fi Quest. Tim and Geoff looked at each other excitedly, and then back at the fancy fax, waiting for pure advertising brilliance.

They stared at it for the final intense minute, gripped with anticipation. The lurching finished and the full ad halted, dangling before them like the fax's long, flat tongue. And the main text to the ad, that brought it all together, was:

"Spaced out?"

They both stared at it for another few minutes as if the fax was still feeding.

"I don't get it," Tim finally said.

"There aren't any skateboarders in our game," Geoff noted.

"Do we have a big skateboarding following?" pondered a perplexed Tim, not sure if skateboarders really had computers.

They both stared at it for a few more moments in silence.

Geoff read the whole text aloud. "Spaced out? Sci-Fi Quest 4. Available in stores, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1995." They both waited a moment for this to sink in. "I don't even know what that means. What does the skateboarder have to do with Sci-Fi Quest?"

There was another long pause.

"It's like they didn't even try," added a disappointed Tim.

"Not to be crude," Geoff started, which was a pretty good indication that he was about to be crude, "But I could have crapped on a plate and it would have made a better advertisement." Tim pulled the sheet out of the fancy fax and held it in front of them. It was, like, disappointment manifested in paper form. "I mean, the design is competent. But the idea...is so empty!" continued Geoff, the trained graphic designer. "It's like they spent two seconds thinking about it and came up with this trash."

Tim thought back to what he'd read in the past about advertisement committees. "Or they spent weeks thinking about it and came up with this trash."

They were both suddenly reminded why they made so much fun of advertising in their games. And here, as a representative of their work, was everything they found insipid about the practice rolled into one.

Geoff suddenly recalled that one of the reasons he liked working in the computer gaming industry was because it didn't advertise. Oh, they did marketing. But it was targeted to computer gaming stores or previous customers, or at e2c2 – to people who might actually want to know. Of course, with the boom of the industry, which Madre was in

part responsible for, the market was flooding and over the last five years he'd noticed an increasing number of computer game companies relying on broad based advertising to make their mark. It was an inevitability, he supposed, as the market grew. But even so Madre had kept its advertising to a minimum.

He, Will and a few others in a committee meeting several years ago had decided to keep their advertising low key. They felt their money was better spent on making good games which created the only sort of marketing you could rely on – word of mouth. Mass advertising was like firing grapeshot: it was noisy and it hit mostly people you weren't aiming at – an act of desperation by the game maker who didn't know enough about their audience or product to sell it properly. *We're not looking to take over the world*, Will said. *Just make a living making great games. Have some fun. I don't like the direction this sort of advertising takes us in. We've made fans by taking the high road – let's stick to it.* Looking at the ad before him Geoff knew it had been the right path to take. But now it was as if they had never been on that road.

"At least," said Tim as he stared at it, "it should be an alien skateboarder."

Geoff nodded. Actually, that was a pretty good idea! "Yeah. That would at least make some sense."

The fancy fax suddenly whirled to life again. Was more stuff coming through? An unexpected second part to the ad?

The fax fed out the first several inches of white space very quickly. Then a rectangle, about the size of a dollar bill, began to appear. It scrolled slowly out and told them that you could save \$3 off the cost of your next...pizza...from Pizza Shack.

"A coupon?" Geoff asked.

"Who's faxing us coupons?"

Another coupon came out of the machine and then paper's forward lurch stopped. The fax whirled down to standby mode, coupons dangling tantalizingly out of the feed slot like apples in the Garden of Eden. They stared blankly at the coupons for a few more moments until the true horror of this message seized them.

"Oh no," Tim groaned. He quickly ripped the sheet out of the fax.

"What?"

"I didn't think they were serious..."

"What?" Geoff asked again. He didn't see it.

"Look," said Tim. He pointed to lettering down at the bottom of one coupon: Uncle Weezblit's Coupon Directory. "And look at this coupon.

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*Get a medium pizza of your choice when you buy our large Double Deep Pizza. It's an out of this world deal! They want to include these coupons in the game box!"*

Geoff suddenly understood. Uncle Weezblit was a re-occurring fast-talk salesman character in their games. He sold everything from indestructible knives to machines that power-charge and shape up your Thrakazoid muscle (the muscle that makes you attractive! "*You see attractive people all the time. What makes them attractive and you not? They've been blessed by genetics with a well developed Thrakazoid muscle. It's the indistinguishable characteristic that tells the opposite sex: Hey! I'm a healthy, wealthy organism and you should mate with me. Well, now you can develop your Thrakazoid muscle too with the new Thrakamalazizer: the pinnacle in achievement of Thrakazoid muscle work-out machines!*"). He always had some sort of annoying deal that Johnny 10-4 had to purchase for some reason or another. When they had released their first Sci-Fi Quest they had included Gag satire coupons in the box for futuristic stuff that didn't exist. You know, *Buy one weak, sentient creature from Pet-Universe and, with this coupon, get another one FREE! Or At Tim's Transporter Warehouse, come in and buy \$50 worth of merchandise and, with this coupon, save 10% off your next coupon!* They were joke props designed to immerse the player into the game.

Suddenly Geoff remembered a meeting about three weeks ago where somebody from HQ had mentioned this idea about putting coupons, real ones...but like gags, in the box. The proposal had been vague and no-one took it seriously, at least not Tim and Geoff. They threw around a lot of crazy ideas in that meeting. In fact, Geoff remembered brushing the suggestion off, thinking, *they would never do something as lame as that*. Beyond the suggestion, the idea hadn't even been *discussed* in the meeting. Surely they wouldn't have gone ahead with something like that without consulting the game creators! But obviously they had and now here were the coupons, ready for insertion!

Madre didn't have meetings to discuss this stuff any more. They didn't have big meetings anymore. They didn't have *any* meetings. Things just came down from HQ by decree. Today you do this. No discussion. No input. Little if any forewarning. Will had even confessed that he didn't know what was going on at HQ anymore. No idea. It made Will nervous. They'd just phone him up and say, this is what we've decided and that was that.

"When did we start sleeping with Pizza Shack?" Tim asked, bewildered.

"They tried to sue us!" Geoff exclaimed. Back in Sci-Fi Quest 2 there was a store you could go into called Pizza Pit. It had a logo similar to the Pizza Shack one, but not really. It was like a futuristic Pizza Shack where robots got their pizza. That was it. They weren't even making *fun* of Pizza Shack. It was just a quirky pop-culture reference. Sci-Fi Quest games were full of them. But it was apparently enough for Pizza Shack to sic their legal team on Madre. It was their first lawsuit. Madre had stood up for itself and went to court. They'd won easily enough, but at the expense of a few thousand dollars and much wasted time.

"It's like a SLAPP lawsuit," Tim had said at one of these 'how are we going to react to *this* lawsuit' meetings...their third or fourth.

"A what?"

"It's...uh...A Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Policy? Participation? Something like that. Where they know you are in your legal right to be doing what you are doing, but they sue you anyway because they know you don't have the funds or the resources to defend yourself, so you just shut up instead of fight back."

Will and Geoff were both intrigued by this informational tidbit. Radical Tim certainly had his moments...

"Except," Tim said, "In this case...we weren't trying to make any sort of statement. It was just a silly joke. We weren't even trying to make fun of them." Neither Tim nor Geoff ever pretended their game was intellectual...or made serious social commentary. It was goofy fun, not polemic!

Now Pizza Shack was first in line to put their coupons in their award winning, super-popular game. Tim was beginning to feel literally ill, but waves of anger were starting to drown the nausea. All this time these companies had been suing and threatening them, making their game development a total pain in the ass...to the point where, especially with this newest game, they had to compromise their basic vision just to avoid unfair lawsuits...and now they were just letting Pizza Shack jump in on all the hard work they had done...like leeches! **He was so ANGRY!** What were they going to do next? Put product placement in the games? And neither he nor Geoff could say anything about it or the rather lacklustre and stupid ad they had just received because it had been made pretty clear to them that they, meaning all of Madre, would have no say in how their games were marketed or distributed. That was HQ's job. That was their call. And Tim was pretty sure that the ad and these coupons were all the suggestions of that stupid cool hunter. Tim clenched at the paper, crumpling it, hurting it, squeezing the life out of it,

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as if it were Mr. Cool's weakly body. He pretended to hear the last raspy gasp of air hiss out of the paper as if it were the life force of Tray Cool, purged from the world forever.

"Do you think we should talk to Will about this?" asked Geoff.

"We can he do?" Tim retorted. "He barely backed us up against the lawsuits when he was in charge. What's he going to do now?"

"I guess," agreed Geoff.

"Besides, he's still in the meeting room teleconferencing with those Hollywood types about the Victor movie."

"Oh yeah."

They both stared at the crumpled page in Tim's hands. Tim felt stupid for unwittingly being so enthusiastic and positive about their ad.

"I wonder why no one ever wanted to make a movie out of our game?"

"I don't know," shrugged Tim. "Too anti-commercial? It used to make me jealous, but now I'm more and more glad that they didn't."

Geoff sighed.



Meanwhile, on the other side of the office, Bill and Art were having a phantom meeting. Why not? There was nothing else to do. The meeting was a brainstorm for the new game that Art wasn't supposed to be designing.

"I think we should put lots of sheep in this game."

"Sheep?"

"Yeah. The wild west had a lot of sheep. Sheep are funny," said Art.

"And he brings the sheep to England?"

"Maybe he shoots sheep. He's the sharpest sheep shooter in the west. And he keeps blowing away innocent English sheep."

"That's funny," added Bill. Art knew funny, Bill thought. It was like it oozed from his pores.

But it was the only good idea they'd had in the ten minutes since this phantom meeting had started. It was hard to take seriously, not knowing whether this project would ever get off the ground. In fact, they weren't even supposed to be *thinking* about designing another game.

About a week ago, Will had approached Art in the hallway and asked him what he thought about doing another Swarthy Victor game. Art kind of cringed and said 'not right away.' To which Will responded:

"Good. How would you feel about doing something new?"

Art was stunned. He was delighted. Ever since Kendra had started

her new game, Art had wanted to too. She was a true visionary. But it was just a vague desire floating aimlessly in the back of Art's skull until Will had mentioned it.

"Melfina wants us to do something new and I can't say I don't agree with them on this," Will had said. "Don't go full out on it...but just think about it."

Art was just doing some general side work helping out with the initial design of the new HomoSapien Quest. While he was working on that he started ruminating about developing an entirely different adventure game. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. He'd been getting sick of Swarthy Victor. But it was harder to think of a new idea after dragging an old one around for so long. He wondered how Kendra did it.

When Art did kind of get a quirky idea, about a cowboy who goes to England in the 1800s – Art wasn't sure why yet, that was the gist of his idea so far – he decided to enlist Bill as a full partner on this one. Bill, his faithful design companion, would be co-producer. And then, suddenly, four days ago Melfina put the new Homo Sapien Quest game on hold. The explanation was that Melfina wanted a halt put on production while they revised and re-assessed what 'kind of game company' they were. They didn't want to waste money wandering towards uncertain directions. It was disappointing news. Now the only projects on the go were Sci-Fi Quest and Kendra's Gorr. There were a couple of others in basic development... but not as full games, more just promo ideas to try and sell to Melfina brass. Melfina had stopped the presses this time. And that meant on Art's unofficial game too. Suddenly he, and many others, like Bill, found themselves in no-work limbo.

Art had sat in his office for the first few days trying to do things. He found people to help out here and there, but today was really slow. Sitting in his office he couldn't get his mind off of the fact that Melfina was in contract talks with Hollywood over the possibility of a Swarthy Victor movie...and Art wasn't invited. He was snubbed by Newman, Corporate Overlord Esq. Even Will had to fight for the chance to speak to them today. *Hollywood types*. Art hated them; They had served as the personal inspiration for the bad guys in Swarthy Victor 3. So, in this absence of work, Art and Bill decided to have a design meeting for Art's new game anyway. They had called it a phantom meeting because any results were potentially vaporous. Actually, come to think of it, it was a lot like most normal meetings. But they were finding it harder and harder to take the meeting seriously and it was devolving quickly from a make work project into a make chit-chat project.

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"I hope they don't use one of the existing scripts," said Art, referring to the various number of *Swarthy Victor: the Movie* treatments that had come his way.

"It would probably save time and money if they did," Bill added. "They like to save time and money." Art wasn't sure if he was referring to Melfina or Hollywood types, but he guessed it didn't matter.

"Hey!" Art said, suddenly bucking up. "I got a call from Fred the other day!"

"Fred the intern?"

"Yeah! He gave me a call."

"Cool."

"Yeah. He was just checking up. Seeing how everything was going."

"How's he doing?"

"He said his first semester at Berkeley was good. He said he wasn't sure he wanted to be a journalist anymore, though. Said he was disillusioned by how things were run these days."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"He said he was kind of disappointed that the Madre internship program was cancelled. He said he could use a good summer job."

"Yeah. I could use a job right now," Bill lamented.

"I don't imagine they will get away with putting HomoSapien Quest on hold long," Art hypothesized.

"Yeah, I heard letters were already coming in asking when the sequel was coming out," Bill added.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Although HomoSapien Quest was far from Madre's most popular game, but it had one of the most intense and vocal fan bases on the planet.

There was a knock at the door. Will entered looking tired.

"How did it go?" asked Art, not really wanting to know.

"That depends," said Will. "Of course the movie studio is interested. But as soon as they saw that we, and I mean Melfina, were biting, they started playing hard to get. Saying, *we'llllll, we don't know if we want to...* Blah blah. And basically they offered up to HQ the same sort of deal they offered to us, where they get everything and we get nothing. That kind of ticked HQ off, but they didn't rule it out. They were only feeling things out, really. They're still interested in the possibility."

"Hollywood types," Art muttered the words with disgust.

"What are you two meeting about in here?" Will asked off hand.

"Nothing," Art and Bill both said simultaneously. But Will wasn't



suspicious.

"I think I'm going to take Friday off," said Will. "I'm going down to Lodi. You think you can cover for me? I know you need work..."

"Sure!" Art jumped at the opportunity. Of course, a Friday in Will's new director capacity, with a full freeze on the majority of game production, wasn't much faster paced than the day Art was having now.

"You visiting your daughter?"

"Yeah," said Will. "Going to check out her new place. She's going to show me around. It'll be nice."

Will's daughter had become a minor celebrity around the office. Will had heard it from programming first that his daughter had beaten Adam Clayburn at e2c2.

"Did your daughter really beat Adam Clayburn at a Death match?" one of the programmers had asked him only two days after returning from e2c2. Will didn't know what he was talking about. But, sure enough, according to the world wide web, she had. She hadn't even mentioned or *hinted* that she'd even met the creator of Gloom. And Will, in the interest of father-daughter conversation and bonding, had peppered her the whole ride home from Vegas with questions about what she and Carol did the whole time they were there. But she shrugged and gave minimal answers for most of them...and preferred to talk about things less personal...like *his* time at e2c2. Daughters these days, Will thought.

Still, if she didn't want to tell him, then he wasn't going to press it. Then, a couple days after Will found out about it at the office, Heather told him that she'd been awarded a job for the contest. Apparently, this news circulated pretty fast over the Internet and the next day all the programmers at work were verifying it and asking Will questions. Everyone was impressed and secretly jealous about it. It had raised Will's status in the eyes of the often 'too cool for school' junior programmers who now chatted with him and kept asking 'When is Gloom 3 coming out?' and telling him to relay to Heather that all the programmers thought that it would be cool if she designed a level based on Madre's cubical maze. You know, as a tribute to her roots. The buzz seemed to slip by Kendra, though. Perhaps because she hadn't gone down to Vegas, they didn't ask her questions. He kept waiting for her to find out, and then felt more and more guilty about not telling her when she didn't.

"Is she going to give you a tour of her workplace?"

"Maybe, if she isn't too embarrassed by it. She only started a few days ago. I guess a lot of them all have places in the same apartment complex, so I'll see where they all live."

## Game Quest

"The guys who invented Gloom live in an apartment?" Bill asked, his face scrunched up. "I thought they'd have more money than that."

Will shrugged. "They like being close to work. Heather said they spend all their money on sports cars and stereo equipment...and deathmatch parties on yachts off Santa Cruz."

All three of them simultaneously shook their heads as they each thought, "That's not what I'd spend my money on."

"Are you gonna steal some trade secrets?" grinned Art.

Will laughed. "I can't believe she's been down there a week already."

"Is Kendra going too?" asked Art.

"No. Mark's got some camping trip this weekend. Kendra forgot she'd agreed to take some kids there and back."

"Oh, well, it will be just you and her then. That sounds nice," Bill remarked.

"Sorry. I've got to go look at some numbers that HQ sent up," Will ended the conversation.

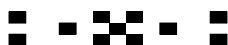
"Sure thing boss," Art saluted.

"I can't believe his daughter works for EGO," Art remarked after Will had left. "I guess it pays to have connections."

"Right out of high school too!" Bill remarked.

"I think it's their policy not to hire anyone over thirty," Art said. "Their new marketing tagline is 'Old people can't design cool games. Only young guys (and a chick) can.'"

Bill laughed. It was funny. Art knew funny.



## Chapter 45; Crypt Furnisher

July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1995

Everyone online kept telling her she was so lucky.

Heather wondered what lucky felt like. Did it feel like this?

Now that she'd arrived, Heather wondered what she was doing here. It wasn't that she regretted it. She really hadn't been here long enough to regret anything. And everything so far had been just peachy keen. Hell, things had been great. But she'd never really thought this whole thing through either. There'd been no planning involved. Suddenly she was graduating – the last adult-enforced insult she'd be forced to endure – and the next thing she was in Lodi with an apartment and furniture and a job and a boyfriend.

Heather was pretty sure she didn't just want to go to college right after high school, though she had to work hard to not let on to her parents that she felt that way. She'd been offered the opportunity she'd been dreaming of for years, the opportunity to get out of Redwood, and so she took it, had been swept along...not by a raging current, but a slow, warm stream where she couldn't decide, or was too lethargic, to get onto the shore. At first it had been really exciting. This tributary felt like the first step towards the river of her life. She'd gotten a job that everyone her age dreamed of, she really liked having Adam as a boyfriend, or at least someone to hang around regularly who she didn't hate. But the last couple of days she felt weird about it, out of sorts.

The job turned out to be alright. After almost a month they'd finally got around to giving her levels to design. She wasn't going to be designing the single-player levels of the game. She got to do the bonus deathmatch levels. Since she was the deathmatch champ, she should be able to design good ones. That was the reasoning anyway. And after a couple weeks on the design program she was feeling pretty confident and had just started her first real level this week.

Heather was the only woman at the office. Well, aside from Linda in distribution who lived in San Francisco and only came down when they were close to distributing something. It was a small office...in terms of

## Game Quest

staff anyway. Heather was their twelfth employee. Most of the guys were fine to talk to. The staff took time off constantly to play deathmatches. They all tried, at one point or another, to personally challenge Heather to a one-on-one game, all convinced *they* could beat her. She always refused. They thought it was because she wanted to keep her reigning champ title, but it was more that she was tired of playing this sort of game, having to constantly prove herself. Sometimes she joined in when they had an eight player match. She could just have more fun that way and not worry about trying to live up to expectations, even her own. She had to admit the new Gloom game was more fun than the last, but it was still more of the same old. She never liked Gloom as much as Crypt Destroyer anyway. She only played it because she had something to prove...and now that she'd proven it...it had little allure.

Heather's new place was ok, too. She'd worried about living on her own before moving, as everyone does their first time, but Adam had made it really easy. He'd found an apartment in the building where a lot of the staff lived – just across the street from work, actually – and showed her around town on their extended lunch breaks. It was both really sweet and irritating. She liked spending time with him, and he usually had interesting sarcastic comments to make. Heather could appreciate sarcastic comments. But she kind of wanted to explore on her own, too. Like the adventure games she used to love, Heather wanted to explore, figure things out, solve puzzles. She didn't want a hint book. She didn't want to be the princess locked in the tower. Her dad had given her the family laptop as a parting gift but she'd hardly turned it on. She had to work in front of a screen all day anyway. Instead, Heather preferred to sit on her balcony and watch the sun sink over the small town's building tops. She enjoyed her time with Adam, but they never explored anything together – it was always him showing her stuff, checking off a things-to-see list.

Still, there were some more interesting moments. All the guys, or most of them anyway, seemed to have spent the majority of their immoderate Gloom lucre on sports cars, Mercedes in particular. On the second day after work they all took her into the basement of the apartment building where there were about fifteen Mercedes in bright neon colors, spotless. It seemed really funny to have all these flashy cars hidden in the basement. Weren't they for showing off? Turned out they were worried about leaving them in the front of the building. Anyway, you could only fit one or two cars in front and the spots were usually filled. Some of the guys drove them across the street to work, or took them out for a 'spin' during lunch breaks. When she and Adam were going back up the elevator she asked

him where his Mercedes was. He confessed he didn't collect Mercedes and took her to his room to show what he collected: ancient calculators. He had an abacus. He had a 200 year old rudimentary, clock-like French calculator, a bunch of massive early 1920s prototypes, a slide rule. It was quite interesting. He'd devoted two shelves on a wall to them. His most expensive one cost \$30,000.

She'd been dazzled at first by city living. She still couldn't get over the fact that she could look out a window and see city...and people...that she could walk five minutes to a café for breakfast. Usually Adam would want to walk with her to work, but sometimes she'd sneak out early and go to the café without telling him. It was nice to do that by herself. She was amazed that you could pick up the phone, dial a number, and a pizza would show up at your door thirty minutes later! Heather was a big fan of the pizza breakfast. Sometimes she'd just order a pizza so she could have cold pizza the next morning. She also liked the fact that she could roll out of bed in the clothes she had slept in and walk the two minutes to work where they didn't really care what time you came in. These were her favourite parts of her new life.

Just inside the sliding door the phone rang. Heather picked it up. Unrestrained by parental recriminations she answered with "Uh-huh?"

"I'm bored. Entertain me," Carol said.

Heather laughed. She reached inside the sliding door from her patio to pull the phone the rest of the way out with her.

"You're hard to get a hold of," Carol continued.

"Yeah, sorry. I've been busy." Heather put her feet up on the railing and looked out over the houses across the street.

"Were you out with Adam?" asked Carol.

Heather was a little irritated by this. "I don't have to spend all my time with him, you know." They'd spent almost too much time together lately, perhaps that's why she was testy.

"Sorry. *You're touchy*. I was just asking."

"I think they're having a deathmatch-o-thon at the office or something."

"I see," came Carol's voice. "I figured you were probably too busy boinking to pick up the phone."

Heather tried not to laugh at this and almost succeeded, "Maybe we *were*," Heather thought back on their conversation two weeks ago, just before her dad came down to visit, where she and Carol had stayed up all night talking about their first times, Heather's not even a day out of the package at that point. "I should have never told you about that."

## Game Quest

“Yeah, but you wanted to share,” Carol chided her. “Compare notes with a man-expert.”

It was true. She’d been proud of it, for some reason. She felt more accomplished about losing her virginity (she preferred to think of it as *using* her virginity, as if it were a one-time power-up) than getting the job, living on her own or even starting the deathmatch clan. It was up there with the Vegas trip (but not quite) and it was one of the things she’d most enjoyed doing with Adam. Perhaps because it was an area where she felt he didn’t have any more claims to expertise than she did. And, particularly afterwards, she enjoyed relaxing against him as he just stared at the ceiling and talked about all the stuff he was thinking – without an agenda or goal, for once. She liked to hear him just think out loud. He’d been really sweet in bed. It was what she had expected...and for that reason, maybe, had felt so comfortable with him, with her body.

“What are you doing?” Heather changed the subject. She didn’t want to talk about Adam with Carol.

“Nothing, man. It’s *sweltering* out. Plus 100 or something.”

“Ouch. It’s nice here.”

“How’s work. Are you actually designing levels yet?”

“Yeah, work’s kind of fun. I’m going to be making mostly the deathmatch arenas...not the actual single-player levels. It’s not as complex or as interesting as designing the single player levels, but it’s kind of fun designing the perfect deathmatch level, making sniper points and hiding items. It’s more fun making them than playing them, I think.”

“You’re lucky. My job options this summer are Sub-Machine employee or movie ticket girl.” Carol sighed. “It’s hard to be motivated to find a job and contribute to society when the jobs offered are so demeaning and low paying. Especially when you can just stay in your parents’ swank loft.”

“But you can’t stand living with your mom,” Heather countered.

“Yeah. But I’m finding it a more attractive alternative than flipping veggie burgers for minimum wage at ‘Extreme Falafel’ again. I’m so sick of falafels it isn’t even funny. The only reason I go back to that job is because my mom thinks I’m too good to be working there. You’re lucky.”

“I guess.” Actually, Heather liked living in the city more than she liked the job. At first, taking advantage of Adam’s late night work habits, she explored the area around her apartment on her own – felt like her own little Heather Hüterguns adventure. The job was interesting, though. Better than flipping burgers, she was told. Although, she had imagined working on games would be more exciting, somehow, and exploring the city soon grew less invigorating. Lately, Heather really missed their Vegas

invasion, when it felt like they were conquering the world, running off on random adventures to which the ending was unclear and you had to improvise every moment. Life in Lodi, she was disappointed to notice, was quickly turning out to be not much different from life in the Redwood Forest. A boyfriend had replaced parents, a job had replaced school, an apartment had replaced home. But what else was there? Her only plan had been to get out of Redwood. If that didn't make her satisfied, she had no other solutions up her sleeve... In a weird way she was almost jealous of Carol and her summer job opportunities. But she wasn't sure why.

"Are any of them cute?"

"Who? At work?"

"Yeah."

Heather thought about this. "Not really. None of them are my type anyway."

"What is your type?"

"I don't know. There was this intern at Madre last year who I had a big crush on. But I didn't see him much...and I never talked to him. I was too shy...played too much Gloom. He seemed exciting though..."

"What did you like about him?"

"He looked nice. He seemed cool in a quiet, uncool kind of way. He went travelling all over the world this year. I would have liked to do that. I would have liked to have gone with him. Explore Italy, make love on hot clay roofs..."

"That would be cool."

"Yeah."

"Don't tell Adam about him. He'll be jealous."

Heather laughed. "Probably."

"How's it working for *the* EGO games, anyway?"

"I don't know. I don't really have any previous experience to compare it to. The guys are kind of crazy though: wear jeans to work and shout insults at each other, order like six pizzas and a crate of Kepsi for lunch. They're always hanging out and playing deathmatches n' stuff. Apparently, they host these big parties every so often and invite a bunch of industry guys down in San Francisco to go out on Yacht parties with them."

"Man, that's crazy. Partying, bragging, slugging each other. They're like rock stars. Nerd rocks stars."

Heather laughed. "Yeah, except for the women. I don't think they have any chick groupies. That's why they put up all those pin-ups on their cubicles."

"So are all their egos as big as Adam's?"

## Game Quest

“Actually, Adam is the most level-headed guy there. If you think Adam had an ego, you should see the rest of them. I think it’s a culture of ego... and he’s just been infected. George Stevens is the worst. I mean, he’s totally nice...but the guy thinks he’s beautiful...on the inside and outside...not to mention a genius, with flawless taste and all the money to prove it. Talks about all these women he knows, like they’re girlfriends or something. But you never see them. I think they’re friends he just sometimes manages to con into going to a movie with him.” Heather shook her head, laughing. Carol laughed too.

“How did your dad like the place when he came?” Carol asked.

“He said that back when he was a teenager kids didn’t just land apartments. You had to band together with something they called ‘roommates’. And they didn’t just have Quicky stores where you could buy your breakfast, you actually had to make it yourself...out of a can.”

Carol laughed, “Your dad’s funny.”

“Eh. Not usually. But sometimes he is.”

“Have you bought lots of stuff to fill it up?”

Heather thought about this and shrugged. “No. I don’t know. Adam wanted to take me around to buy a bunch of things...like furniture, etc... but I didn’t really want to. I didn’t want much stuff. I don’t know why. He thought I was weird when we went to go shopping for stuff for my place and we came out of the furniture warehouse with just two bags. All the guys at work were having an argument over which stereo equipment I was supposed to buy. I told them I didn’t want a stereo, I like my little portable cd-player, but now they want me to come over to their apartments and check out their stereos, as if by me buying their brand of stereo, they will win the inter-office competition for who has the coolest stereo.”

Carol laughed. “Too funny.”

“I kinda like it empty,” said Heather. She recalled her and Adam’s trip to the furniture megastore yesterday to pick up stuff. It was mostly Adam’s idea. Heather figured she needed stuff for her apartment... Yet, she didn’t want anything. She just wanted to sit on the floor...with nothing. Of course, that wasn’t practical and she didn’t articulate this desire to Adam because she barely understood it herself. Shopping was ok. Adam helped her pick out most things. He’d suggest stuff and she’d go along with it... until they came to the lamps.

Heather saw a really ugly striped lamp that, up until this point, had been the only thing she even remotely wanted. She immediately fell in love with its ugliness. And yet, Adam seemed to think that she should buy this beige one and then took her disagreement with his suggestion



personally, like he was trying to stop her from making a wrong choice and she was refusing help. Heather was irritated because it was like he was picking out her stuff for her...like they were sharing the apartment...but it was *her* apartment. And who was he to judge her choice and try to convince her not to buy it?

They bickered a bit over this until Heather found herself staring at the lamp and wondering why she was considering buying this in the first place. She didn't really want to own anything. All this stuff seemed like heavy pieces of jewelery, instead, weighing down the apartment like chandeliers, heavier than responsibility... hanging off her earlobes like lead anvils.

"You still there?" Carol called out from the depths of reality.

"Yeah," Heather stared out into the now purple sunset. "What have you been up to?"

"Meh. Playing old computer games. I wish they'd release something new."

"Did you play Swarthy Victor 5 at all?"

"Oh. No. That's a good idea. I'll go buy it."

"Don't bother. I'll send it to you for free."

"Really? Don't your parents care that you're sending their games out for free? Especially when they're in financial trouble?"

"No. All the money goes to Melfina anyway." Heather said. "Besides, it's not nearly as good as the original. More of the same jokes. Enjoyable, though. Looks cool. Good music."

"Cool. I look forward to it."

"Hey, are you gonna be around later?" Heather asked

"Why," asked Carol suspiciously.

"I was going to catch a movie at the theatre."

"Awww," Carol whined. "Nooooo. Entertain me!"

"I'll entertain you later. I want to see this movie."

"But I'm bored *now*."

"Well, now you know how I felt when I was at home and you were out at parties all the time."

"Fine. Fine," Carol acceded. "I'll just console myself with food."

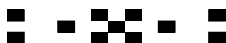
"That sounds good. I'll phone you later."

"Ok," said Carol. "But I might be busy doing something cool and not have any time to talk to you."

"Ok. Fair enough."

"See you later."

Carol sighed. "Bye."



## Chapter 46; Holy Roman Pay Clerks

July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Madre moved to San Francisco today. It up and left at 12:00 a.m. sharp while everyone slept. Will had almost forgotten about it until he came in to work and saw the large plastic Madre logo up on the corner of the building, sun beaming off as always. Will had stopped in the parking lot and looked up at it for a while. He didn't know if it was re-assuring or ironic that the old sign was still up there. He was pretty sure HQ wasn't going to spare the expense to take it down...or replace it with the new logo. So it would remain up there either laughing at them or stoically reminding them of who they really were on the inside despite what they were now called. Technically no one here worked at Madre any more. They were now all a part of something called Redwood Studios. Although both owned by Melfina, Madre and Redwood Studios were officially separate identities. Like Synapse, Redwood was just another subsidiary. Madre was their distributor. Melfina had bought their name for millions of dollars.

Will just stood there for a while, briefcase dangling at his side, staring up at that sign, feeling the warmth of the summer sun beating down on his face. And for the first Monday that he could remember, he didn't want to enter this building.

Despite what the sign on the outside indicated, stationary with the new Redwood Studios logo lay on Will's desk to greet him as he entered his office. Will's first order of the day was to change the name on his email to 'Director of Redwood Studios.' He cringed as he did this. Not so much because their office had been demoted, in a sense, but because he suddenly pictured all the thousands of places where the old Madre name was hiding that they would have to change. These little changes would be popping up for the next few months, like little demons, laughing, dancing. At least, on the bright side, it would provide some work for the staff to do.

Around 3:30 that afternoon Will sent out an email reminding everyone about the name change. Tim deleted it immediately. He was revisiting

happier times with a letter that had arrived in the mail this morning. He'd read it four times already today. A fifth time wouldn't hurt.

*Dear Tim and Geoff,*

*Hi. How are you? I am fine. My name is Joseph and Sci-Fi quest is my favorite adventure game of all time. But I like Fantasy quest and homosapian Quest too. I have all the first 3 Sci-fi quests and have beat them all by myself. Except for 2 because I needed a hint book to get passed the sludge monster. But I finished it. I really like your games. Me and my best friend Jamie play them all the time and my mom has to kick me off the computer. When will the next sci-fi quest come out? If you guys need any ideas for a next game I have some good ideas. Some day I want to work at Madre and be a game maker like you guys. How do I do that?*

*Ok. Thank you a lot for the sci-fi quest games!*

*Bye,  
Joseph Dickin*

On the front of the envelope was a crudely drawn picture of Johnny 10-4, the hero of Sci-Fi Quest, shooting lasers at some monster.

Tim really loved these letters. They were so great. Especially the ones from the younger fans. Sci-Fi Quest and Fantasy Quest had a lot of younger fans, partly because of their content. Demographics told them that they probably had about three times more adult fans than children, but the children and teenagers were the most vocal, particularly the under fifteens. Of course, demographics also told them that games like Swarthy Victor had very few young fans...but Tim had a suspicion that Swarthy Victor was quite popular with teenage boys 12 and up. There was no law stopping them from buying the game...and teenage boys go more for that stuff than adults do. What teenage boy would turn down the opportunity to play their dad's risqué game? Tim felt this was the real reason behind Swarthy Victor being the most pirated game in computer game history – post pubescent boys. Still, out of all the games, Sci-Fi Quest, after HomoSapien Quest, received the most fan letters. Tim liked to think it was because of their honest, unpretentious and humorous style.

Tim really liked hearing from the young fans. Not only did they make him feel like his work was worthwhile, but the letters were cute. He

## Game Quest

remembered a couple of kids who were coming through California one year and wanted to have a tour. He and Geoff took them around the office. You should have seen their eyes: bigger than saucers! Blown away by the fact that they were meeting the people from Madre. It was really cute. They were nice kids. And Will was cool with it. Although he didn't want to turn Madre into a theme park, touring kids every week, Will didn't see the problem with letting a few fans check the place out. He thought it would be nice to have some customers around...to give them something back for their support.

*Dear Tim and Geoff,*

*Hi. How are you? I am fine. My name--*

There was a knock at the door. Tim looked up from his letter to catch Ron poking his head in through the doorless office.

"Hey man, aren't you gonna come and say goodbye to Sarah?"

"Oh. Is that already?"

"Yeah. It was in Will's email."

"Oh," Tim blushed. "I deleted it."

"Come on. It's downstairs."

"Thanks," said Tim and they headed off.

Downstairs, Sarah's desk was a sad sight. She had sat there for as long as anyone could remember. And now it was shiny, spotless, cleaned out. Sarah stood smiling, with her files neatly stored in the banker's box held in her arms. She wasn't smiling over the loss of her job, Tim was pretty sure, but over the large gathering of well-wishers who'd come to see her off. The atmosphere was jovial despite it being the first time any of them could remember someone from Madre – sorry, Redwood Studios – being fired. Melfina, in their slight restructuring, had turfed two payroll clerks. One here and one in San Francisco. This happened a few days before they also completely closed Madre North – a total of 13 people fired there. Most of the staff here knew the pay clerk in San Francisco, as well, as she used to work here before the headquarters opened.

When the news that the two payroll clerks were getting fired came in Tim almost felt like going over to Kathy and Laura and Art and all those who had made fun of his objections to direct deposit and asking them "Is this a good enough reason not to have direct deposit?" But he didn't. He didn't even know how much time the direct deposit process saved, really. He guessed it wouldn't really help anything to gloat. They'd probably call

him a luddite anyway. A luddite who writes sci-fi computer games.

At least the farewell appeared to be going well, Tim thought. No one was in tears. Everyone was upbeat. Sarah had even confessed that she was looking forward to leaving. She'd wanted to travel for a while now, so the time off was a good opportunity. And she wasn't in dire financial straights either. Her husband made some good coin in town...and her payroll clerk skills were likely to be in demand in Berney. Employment here, unlike for the majority of the staff, was at least possible for Sarah.

Tim noticed that Sarah, being the sweet, meticulous and overly-helpful woman that she was (the generous traits all employees wish for in their payroll clerks!) had even wiped down the desk with soap and water after cleaning it out. This was very Sarah and it was almost sad to see her being so helpful on her last day. If Tim were being fired he would have stolen something. He would miss her.

Someone took the bankers box from Sarah's arms and a long chit-chat fest followed. Someone had brought cake.

"I've had more invitations to dinner this week than in the rest of my life!" Sarah joked and everyone laughed. Eventually the crowd died down and the remaining few helped Sarah out to her car.

"There's another two women eliminated from the list," Kendra said to Kathy, referring to the two payroll clerks, as they walked in from the parking lot. Kendra was miffed. Kathy was secretly glad that she'd made it through the 'restructuring' at all.

"Come on, let's get some cappuccino," Kathy said. Kendra agreed.

Inside, the office was mostly cleared out. People were going home early all the time now. The office was only slowly beginning to crawl out of limbo. As they came up to the cappuccino nook, they heard Bill's voice come from around the corner.

"Damn," he said.

Kendra and Kathy came up behind him.

"Cappuccino machine's broke," Bill said. He wondered if this was secretly planned by Melfina to coincide with the name change to Redwood Studios.

"No way," Kendra complained and jiggled with the handle. A blast of milky steam shot out of the nozzle making her, Kathy and Bill jump.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Bill said too late.

"I was really looking forward to a cappuccino," Kathy frowned.

"Well, there's old coffee," Bill announced. They all looked over to the corner cupboard where the old coffee, stocked before the days of the cappuccino machine, was kept. It practically had cobwebs on it. Bill had

## Game Quest

made it sound so tantalizing too: *old coffee*.

"Let's go into town," shrugged Kendra to Kathy. Normal coffee would not do.

"Can I come?" asked Bill.

"Sure."

They all hopped into Kathy's car and drove the fifteen minutes to the Berney Che's. As if reading the slight guilt in all their minds, Kathy said, "Well, we'll mostly be supporting some local franchisee and not Che HQ." It was enough justification for Bill and Kendra and they felt a little better.

"It's not like we have any other choices," said Bill, as they took their coffees away from the till. This too, was good justification. They tried to forget it. They just wanted to enjoy some coffee, dammit.

As they sat out on the patio drinking and soaking up the slowly setting sun Kathy said, "I wonder what happens when Che's fills up every corner of the globe?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, they make money by expanding, not by selling coffee. The money is in real estate, by getting more franchisees. So they have to focus on... conquering. But what happens when the conquering is done? I mean, *MacClownBurgers* is reaching...global saturation. What happens when there are no more places to go?"

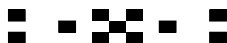
Kendra remembered having a conversation like this with Will when Che's was buying up the Naughté Latte that used to be right under their feet. What was it she had said then? She couldn't remember. "I don't know. They find something else to takeover," she shrugged.

Bill and Kathy sipped on their coffee, comfortably inhabiting their spot on the patio. Now Kendra remembered, "When the Holy Roman Empire ran out of places to expand, it collapsed on itself."

Kathy nodded.

Bill held up his coffee cup. "To Rome," he proposed.

They all touched cups and took another sip. Kathy closed her eyes and tipped her face up to the sun.



## Chapter 47; behind closed doors

July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1995

Tim blamed the cool hunter.

Both he and Geoff stared at the computer screen's long list of names and numbers. Although they had felt enthused, rebellious, clever while initially collecting the data, now that it was here in front of them, like a big red 'Do Not Push!' button, they were both squeamish about doing what they'd set out to do. The thick slab of overcast clouds hanging over the world outside the window behind them only helped set the scene.

"We don't have to use it. It's just safe to have," justified Tim.

*I would have never thought of this if it wasn't for that cool hunter*, Tim rationalized. It had just been an offhand fantasy until *he* started screwing with things. His visit to the office two weeks ago was flashing through Tim's mind as vividly as if it were displaying on the monitor before him...



Tim walked down through the cubical maze stewing about things. He'd been stewing about a lot of things lately. Melfina was sticking their fingers in everything. First the ad. Then the coupon. Two days before this he had learned that Melfina was going to submit their game to a focus group before release. A focus group?! Not a beta test, mind you, which was quickly becoming standard practice in the industry, but a *focus group*. As Geoff had complained, "Focus groups are like Hollywood test audiences that watch a Romeo and Juliet movie and then say 'give it a happy ending'...only worse!" They'd both tried to dissuade Melfina on this. Neither of them were really even sure *why* Melfina wanted to do this. What purpose would it serve? But Melfina was going ahead with it anyway. The game's release date was bumped up another month.

Then there was the work stoppage. Not only that, but they were all forced to drink normal, *old* coffee now! They couldn't even get the funds released to repair their cappuccino machine. So someone had gone around with a Styrofoam cup with the words 'Save the old cappuccino

## Game Quest

machine collection' written on the side. On the back of the cup was 'save us from old coffee!' Tim didn't know who had thought of it, but it was pretty funny. And successful. In a day they had raised nearly fifteen dollars in change!

Thinking about that at the time, Tim was almost in a good mood again when he heard a strange squeaking noise. Unsure of what it was or where it was coming from Tim bent his ear closer to a cubicle wall to investigate when he suddenly realized what it was! His head shot up and he saw the top of the cool hunter's head scooting across the cubical tops...coming right his way! Tim turned quick, but there was nowhere to run. He was stuck in the cubical maze! He quickly checked out the nearby cubical hoping to find someone to rescue him with conversation. But there was no one. Tim quickly decided to sit down in one of the cubicles and hope that Tray would scoot right by. But it was too late.

"Heyyyyyy, Tim-bo!"

Tim-bo?!?! Tim stopped dead in his tracks. *The presumption!!*

Tray Cool skidded to a halt dangerously close to Tim, jumped off and in the same movement flipped his scooter into compact mode.

"What's the haps, my man?" Tray asked holding out his hand. Tim reluctantly extended his and Tray did a simplified cool-shake which he had adopted for this office where no one except the programmers had even the basics of cool-shaking down. Tim winced as Tray Cool cool-raped his hand.

"Heyyy, your game is popular!"

Of course it is, Tim thought. He had fan letters to prove it. He didn't need a so-called cool hunter to tell him this. The question was, *why* was he telling him this?

"Even the marketing guy at Dickens' Diction knows your game!"

Dickens' Diction? Tim thought. The chain bookstore-warehouse? "Oh?" Tim responded.

"Yeah. He gave me a call the other day. He wanted to know how to get lampooned in Sci-Fi Quest."

Tim didn't say anything. He didn't like the direction this was going.

"He wants to start marketing to a younger crowd...one that doesn't normally buy books. He figured your game would be a good idea."

"Well, we don't actually take requests...that's not the poi—"

"Cool, huh? I told him we'd be happy to add him in. He's willing to pay some good coin for it, too. Congrats, man. It would be no problem to add them into the game, I figure. I talked to a couple of programmers and they said they'd just have to add another screen or something.



Piece of cake and will cost nothing really. Tom Newman loved the idea and told me to tell you to go ahead and put something in. Of course, Dickens' Diction will have to give it final approval, but I'm sure they'll like whatever you think up."

Tim didn't have a problem with encouraging kids to read. But their game and his hard work wasn't an exercise in promoting predatory book stores. He opened his mouth to speak but Tray cut him short, slapping his hand down on Tim's shoulder.

"Well dude, I gotta see a lot of people today. I'll come by later and scope you out."

Tray unflied his scooter and was zipping down the cubicle maze before Tim could respond, leaving him eating Tray's dust and gritting it between his teeth. Tim's knuckles were white from clenching his fists to tightly. He wanted to scream...but it would just be eaten up in the maze around him.

Half an hour later, as Tim was in his office, trying (and failing) to forget about the whole incident by focusing on work, Tray walked in and sat behind him, watching. But the problem was that Tim wasn't *actually* working. Then when Tray showed up he had to look like he was bug testing or something...so he just played the game and wrote things down on a pad, praying to God that Mr. 'Cool' would leave. But Tray just kept watching and laughing at the game and, every now and then, making suggestions. Tim was getting furious.

The notes he put down on the pad began to reflect his growing frustration. *Piss off, freak! I hate you so fucking much! Why don't you just go away and DIE!* But Tray never noticed.

Finally, Tray Cool pointed on the screen – not just *at* the screen – but *ON* it!

"You know what would be funny?" Tray Cool began, but time had stopped for Tim as he stared at the finger actually touching his screen, imprinting Tray's fingerprint on this last bastion of Tim's world! "You should make that a beer bottle instead of a garbage can."

Tray pulled his finger away and a big, glaring glop of finger-print grease gleamed off the screen! Tim could feel the fury burning up his face from the inside. He was going to snap. So instead he just snapped out.

"Why don't you go do your job and let me do mine, ok?!" he snapped.

Tray retracted and laughed. "Chill out Timothy. It's just a game. You're working too hard," and then he left. He was just lucky Tim didn't say what he really wanted to, which was something along the lines of 'Shut up and go back to Loserville!'

## Game Quest

The day was shot and Tim paced up and down his office thinking of burning remarks to make. How he wished he had a door to his office like Geoff...or, at least, Geoff around to talk to, but his partner had the day off. And why did Geoff get the new office when it opened up after the HQ move and he didn't?

Tim had left early from work that day and drove to Geoff's house, pacing uncontrollably up and down Geoff's living room carpet as he related the Dicken's Diction news to him.

"It's product placement!" Geoff exclaimed, disgusted. "I knew it! I knew it was coming!" Now Geoff wondered how much longer it was going to take before they were all required to wear suits to work. He knew it was coming. He just knew it.

"And they're going to pick a bunch of dorks to be in the focus group. They won't get a true reading from it...because they aren't asking our fans. None of our players would want any of this!" Tim had added at the time. "I wish all our customers could just come in and tell the corporate overlord and his cronies to jump in a lake...that we're doing *fine*."

"No kidding," said Geoff. "But they don't know."

Tim stopped.

It had just suddenly come to him. "Let's tell them!" he'd said.

"Tell them?"

"We'd have to be careful about it...we wouldn't want it to appear that we were sabotaging Melfina...but I'm positive if we leaked this info...about the control, about the meddling in our content...to one of those Internet fan sites and sent out some anonymous emails and letters to fans...asking them to write in. Well...it would at least hamper Melfina's efforts!" Tim was almost laughing, his gut clenched tight in excitement. It was a brilliant idea!!

Geoff's face was bright. "That's a brilliant idea! We could get the mailing info for almost all our fans off of the stock order list. "

And so, when no one was looking, and when they had time, they secretly gathered and put together a list of potential media contacts – fan sites, fan zines, fan clubs, people who had ordered two or more of their games directly from Madre. Recruiting militia.

That was two weeks ago. About two days ago, though, Geoff had received a call from Newman explaining that the focus group idea was off. Geoff found this odd since Melfina had been so gung-ho and 'full-steam ahead!' about the whole thing before. Why did they just suddenly bail out? But Newman didn't provide any explanation and Geoff was just glad that it was off. However, this pulled a lot of the impetus out of their

letter campaign. All in all, they were more ticked off about the product placement than the focus group, but they suddenly weren't sure that a few coupons and a plug for Dicken's Diction was enough to justify mutiny. They could get everyone in a lot of trouble. And they were no more aware of this than they were now, staring at the screen of names.

"Maybe we should ask Will," suggested Geoff.

"Are you nutzoid? We don't want to get Will in trouble with this! And what if he's pissed at us for even coming up with the idea in the first place?"

"I think there's a good chance that Will will like the idea. And I think he'd appreciate the chance to have a say before we just go ahead and do something this potentially shit-disturbing."

"But we're not even sure we're going to do it now, right? Why piss off Will when we don't know?"

"Well," Geoff began, "Maybe we can just ask him if it would be a serious error to leak to a game magazine some of the stuff going on here. But that's all we'll ask. Just feel around..."

Tim thought about this. He swished his lips back and forth as he weighed the pros and cons, as if swishing to the left was pro and to the right was con. "Ok," he said.

"Ok," agreed Geoff.

They left the office and went down the hall to Will. The door was closed. Tim turned to Geoff, "It's closed."

Geoff went up to the bay window and peered in as unobtrusively as possible. Will was pacing the room, talking on the phone.

Tim went over to the nearest cubical where Carlos' workstation was. "Why'd Will close his door?" he asked.

Carlos shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Nobody ever knows why Will closes his door. That's probably why he closes it...so no one will know," Carlos trailed off mysteriously. Tim pursed his lips in thought.

"How long ago did he close it?" Tim asked, trying to get an idea of when it would open again.

"It's been closed all morning," Carlos informed.

"All *morning*?" asked Geoff.

"Yeah."

"Geeze..."

"I know," said Carlos half-wincing half-shrugging.

Tim and Geoff hung around for a bit, but then decided whatever it was that Will was dealing with was probably more important than their little 'feeling out' question. They returned to Geoff's office. Ron was making

## Game Quest

little action figures out of the paper clips on their desk.

"Hey dudes," he said looking up. Tim was relieved to notice that the screen saver had come on, hiding their evil deeds...not that Ron would be able to extrapolate any meaning from the list of names and emails anyway. Ron visited them a lot now. Since HomoSapien Quest had been put on hold he didn't have a lot to do. Tim and Geoff both liked Ron and he was helping them a little bit on the final touches with Sci-Fi Quest.

"You guys looking forward to the bar-b-que this weekend?" Ron asked.

Tim slumped into his chair and sighed. "Yeah."

Geoff nodded.

"Me too. I love burgers man!" Ron said.

They were all looking forward to it, perhaps even more than in previous years. Everyone needed a break from the occupation. They needed a place where they could all just relax, be themselves, joke around, do what they wanted and act like there was no pressure or deadlines...just good food and good friends. And Art seemed really excited about hosting it this year. He went around personally to everyone to invite them...with invitations he'd actually made. On the back read: *This card entitles you to partake in flesh of beast (or vegetable approximation thereof) this weekend from 3 p.m. onwards at 14 Kerburn Way.* Art's enthusiasm was catching.

A knock came at the door. It was Stella with the pay-stubs.

"Alright! Mail!" Ron exclaimed. He looked forward to anything these days. "Pay time!" he confirmed as they all opened their envelopes.

"And the winner is..." Geoff trailed off as he opened his envelope.

"Whoa! Ron's the winner," Ron exclaimed, flipping his pay stub around to inspect it closer, as if he didn't believe it was real.

"What?" Geoff asked. Ron held the stub out to Geoff. Geoff looked at it for a moment.

"Holy...f—" he trailed off. "Is that normal?"

"No way," Ron exclaimed.

"What?" Tim leaned over Geoff's hand to see. He didn't see it at first, but then the amount deposited into Ron's account was, well, six or seven times what Tim's monthly salary was. "Wow."

Geoff handed the sheet back to Ron who said, "That can't be right."

"I wish that was my check," Tim said.

Ron inspected it closer. "What does 'Lump Remainder' mean?" he asked. Both Tim and Geoff shrugged. They both looked at their checks but those words weren't there.

"Must be a mistake."

"Bank error in your favor," said Tim.

"I wish," Ron replied. "I'll have to ask Finance. I don't need this much money, man. Minimal living, that's me. I don't work for the money. I work for the *joi de vivre*." He headed for the door. "I'm gonna go see if Laura's got the same thing."

They said farewell and went back to their desk. The two both decided to get back to addressing the latest Bug Reports out of Testing and ignore their militia list. Both saddled up to the computer to work and they were in this same position an hour later when Art came rushing into the office. They both looked up at him.

"Laura and Ron just got fired!"

It was as if Art's statement had sucked all the air out of the room, slamming Geoff's door shut in the process and sealing them all in a vacuum where words wouldn't travel, even if you opened your lips to speak them.

"Will got the call this morning," Art continued. "He spent all morning try to save them but it was no use."

The vacuum was still too strong for Geoff or Tim to speak. Thoughts weighed heavy on their mind. They didn't even know what to do. Should they rush over to Ron and Laura's office to find out if it was true? But they didn't want to crowd around like vultures, or rubberneckers at a car accident.

"That's terrible," was all that Geoff could say. Indeed it was, but Geoff still felt stupid for stating the obvious, for filling the vacuum with nonsense.

"How's...How are they taking it?" Tim asked.

Art didn't know. All he knew was that Will had just gone into their office and closed the door about an hour ago. Someone else had told Art the news. "People over there are talking to them now. I guess they've got to the end of next month," he said.

Since people were already over there Tim and Geoff decided to go and see how things were going. Ron and Laura were people people. They, unlike Tim and Geoff, preferred to be with company during bad times. Art, Tim and Geoff sidled up but already there was a crowd outside of the office. They sat around for a while, overhearing snippets of conversation and gathering tidbits of what had happened. Ron and Laura seemed to be taking it well. They seemed angry most of all. Ron kept breaking the silences by saying "This is so harsh!" aloud to himself, as if still in disbelief.

"This is total bullshit," someone beside Art said.

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It was total bullshit, Art agreed. Ron and Laura had put their sweat and blood into this company as much as any one else. And even though their last release might have had rather lacklustre sales, their second game had blown everyone away by becoming the highest selling adventure game next to only Kendra's Fantasy Quest 3. Not only that, but, unlike all the other designers, Ron and Laura had a general over-arching story planned out for their series that would culminate somewhere around HomoSapien Quest 5. Each game was adding on the previous one. Art was looking forward to the culmination...but now that they were fired, no one would know, would they? Redwood Studios was now going to be besieged with complaint letters from disgruntled fans...and all we'll be able to do, Art thought, is sit around and reply 'sorry there was nothing we could do about it' while drinking 'old coffee.' Ron and Laura getting fired was wrong. Also, Art thought, looking around at all the glum faces, this was really gonna put a downer on the 'no cats allowed bar-b-que 95'.



After fifteen minutes Tim and Geoff figured there were too many people crowded around the office. They were just watching anyway and so retreated to Geoff's office dejectedly.

"Melfina's got to be crazy," Geoff said. "Are they not aware of the wrath of the HomoSapien Quest fan? I can just see the complaint letters now."

There was a pause as they both came to the same conclusion.

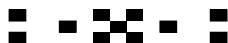
Geoff began excitedly, "You know, it wouldn't take much work at all to get the names of the HomoSapien Quest fans added to that list. We already know where to look."

"And there's tons of fan zines we could write too," Tim said. "They'll be outraged. They'll be out for blood!"

Suddenly they had a very justifiable reason to call in the militia. If they started now, Melfina could have nasty emails waiting for them first thing in the morning! In record time! Tim and Geoff quickly sat down at the computer to drudge up the info. They were still compiling this list half an hour later when Will walked in.

"Carlos said you came by earlier to ask a question. What did you want?" Will asked.

Tim looked at Geoff. Geoff looked at Tim. They both looked at Will. Tim went and closed the door behind Will.



## Chapter 48; namesake

August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Heather Hüterguns' fingers poked up over the sharp, ice-laden edge of the precipice. Her fingers would have frozen to the rock if the heat from her bulging muscles hadn't been radiating through her as she climbed the mountain face. Dangling miles above the valley she began to pull herself up, with poetic ease, over the giant, snowy crag. Manoeuvring her elbows into position, Heather's gravity-defying überboobs flipped up over the ledge, resting on the flat shelf as she peered around at ledge level. The air was thin here and the wind bit at her face. And, as Heather had hoped, there appeared to be no traces of anyone having been around in the recent or further-flung past. But appearances could be deceiving. Heather's strong arms lifted her up into a crouching position on the ledge, her hands waiting above the guns in her holster. There was nothing here but ice and rock...

It was there in front of her. Indistinct amongst the boulders and snow sat a once ornate mountain cave entrance. Centuries of harsh wind, snow and ice had humbled it into a modest, religious-looking doorway. Heather moved towards the entrance, grinning at the thought of getting down to her forte, exploring ancient vaults.

Suddenly, something caught her attention: a motion of white against white. Heather stopped and swivelled her eyes left, squinting into the whiteness. There a snow wolf sat, watching cautiously. There was movement to her right and Heather spotted another wolf...slowly moving towards her, back hunched. The first wolf, emboldened, began creeping forwards now too. Heather cautiously took another step towards the vault entrance and the two wolves stopped. Heather took another step and they both burst into a sprint towards her, fangs, saliva and growls streaming from their vicious faces.

Some girls would hesitate shooting a couple of puppies, but not Heather. Spinning on the spot, she had her left gun out of its holster and fired it into the wolf on the right while, like a whirlwind, her other hand blew the second wolf, leaping, from the air. It slid into the snow, dead.

## Game Quest

The harsh wind seemed to have died with them. After a cautious few moments, Heather reholstered her weapons and stepped into the ancient tomb.

Darkness enveloped her as the wind outside dulled to a low whistle, trickling along the floor of the cave. Pulling a flare out of her utility belt Heather stepped further into the cave and pulled the fuse. At the same moment as the passageway was flooded with brilliant light, the ground beneath her gave way and she felt herself tumbling through a jagged passageway, the flare bouncing down the tube before her, lighting up an ice tunnel. Bits of ice tore at Heather's coat and she spread out her feet to slow the fall. She was soon thrown onto a giant floor of ice.

Heather found herself alone in an enormous cavern, ice stalagmites stretching up from the ground, ice stalactites hanging, like the icy fingers of a lich, from the ragged ceiling. The flare was starting to melt the ground where it lay. Moving to it, Heather picked it up and illuminated the cavern. It was as if she was standing inside a hall of mirrors, only they didn't fog under your breath. The wind was faint and distant now. The temperature seemed warmer in here.

Dodging the stalagmites Heather moved along the ice wall, searching out an escape route. But something felt off. Stopping, she tried to understand what...but it eluded her. Heather continued along the wall, strangely haunted by something terribly out of place.

And then she recognized that her reflection in the ice was not her own, but of a young girl, shorter & weaker than her, with slimmer hips and much, much smaller breasts. But the girl's face was the most haunting. She was an attractive young woman, frail with very soft, cute features, but ghostly and white, her hair dangling impotently in her face. This girl almost seemed familiar to Heather...as if she might be an old friend. She stared harder and then quickly, shockingly, realized that it was her reflection after all! Turning her gaze down to her own body Heather saw her own frail frame, which she had tried for a year in high school to beef up by overeating, her thin wrists, her small breasts and diminutive feet. The gun holster was made for someone with much more voluptuous hips than hers, and she had to hold the holster up with one hand. She felt a few inches shorter.

The cave seemed to suddenly echo with this question: Was she Heather Hüterguns believing she was a young, frail woman? Or was she a young frail woman believing she was Heather Hüterguns?

Heather Roberts woke suddenly from this unpleasant dream. From where she lay she could see right out the bedroom window to where the



city lay asleep. It was 4:30 a.m.. Adam lay half off the other side of the bed, the book he had been reading still in his hand, draped to his side. Heather turned and stared out the window for a while and listened to the few sounds that came through. Although pained by the dream, she felt dull. This entire moment felt dull. She imagined Heather Hüterguns must have dull moments like this. But they would be the relaxing prologues and epilogues between exciting adventures, and Heather couldn't think of any adventures she had up and coming. There aren't any tombs to raid in real life...there's just one long, dreary cave.



At work that day she felt as if she was living a lie. She didn't know why. It was like she was living somebody else's life – sort of like in her dream – and nobody noticed. She had, by this point, rethought her theory on tombs to raid in real life. There were a few, but they were elusive, more ethereal than achieving fame or wealth. At the tender age of 17, she'd already managed to raid one of the bigger life-lotteries there was: working for the coolest computer game company in the world. She was glad to be independent, even blazing trails, perhaps...but was designing computer game levels the rest of her life? Were these the trails she'd imagined blazing all throughout high school? Was this her path? Or somebody else's? Where was her path? All she had was a high-score, but the game sucked.

Something was wrong with her. This was every game freak's dream. It was the proverbial work that was not work. And she had finally escaped Redwood, to her own life. She was in a city! A town, at least, which was a big improvement over being in Redwood. But Redwood was nice and felt like home. And here felt like the ice cave, a cold, strange place where she was not what she seemed. She felt like a drop of water resting on top of a small pool of water...but unable to sink in and join the rest. Was this the moment she had been anticipating since she was twelve? She expected it to be more like when she and Carol conquered Vegas.

Vegas. That was fun. That was life. She felt...dynamic. Like she was alive. In two days they had conquered Las Vegas. They came, they saw, they raided. Here she felt numbed, as if she were on artificial respiration. She felt timid, diffident, as if a dark figure were lurking over her, directing her life. Heather wasn't timid. Not in her mind. Not in her actions. And this city wasn't even large or exciting like Vegas. So why did she feel small and weak?

Heather wanted to talk to Carol really badly and kept checking online

## Game Quest

to see if she was there, but she wasn't. She turned down several offers to join the afternoon deathmatch. Begrudgingly she went back to level-designing. At least level-designing was kind of fun. Even if it was work in front of a computer screen in a cubicle, it passed the time.

Heather left work early and walked home but, just before the entrance, decided to take a longer walk in the pleasant weather instead. There were a few places she liked to visit, like the park, or Daisama street, an older strip full of antique stores and mom-and-pop shops run by Asians. Heather liked to explore.

Heather was glad that her mother was coming down again to visit. Although she often never told her mother things and was irritated by both her parents a lot, their support and their familiarity when they came down was cathartic. They reminded her that she did fit in *some* place...and that people *do* manage to find happy lives and fulfill their dreams. Surely her parents must have been in her situation at some time. And yet, it seemed like her father and mother had just had their dream handed to them: Madre. Most people didn't have that luxury. Heather had that luxury but felt like she'd been handed the wrong dream. Was there a way out of that?

Adam still wasn't back from work yet when she got home, quite late. Sometimes the guys at EGO worked until nine or ten. Work, play, it was the same to them, it seemed. Heather was kind of glad, though, that he wasn't around. She tried to phone Carol but no luck. *Damn*. So she loafed on the couch for a while and sat out on the balcony, watching the last of the sun set. Now things were reversed again. When Heather had first arrived, she'd been so busy...and overjoyed at the possibilities of the city, even a small one, that she never had time to talk to Carol. Carol had gotten used to it and now that Heather wanted to talk, *she* wasn't around. Maybe Carol had a long shift at her dead end job.

Heather came in from the balcony later and turned on the laptop. Half an hour later Carol came online.

<Pizzazz> Hey. You're actually around!

<Aphrodite's Bow> Yeah. I was waiting for you, actually. Where you been?

<Pizzazz> I met these cool guys at work. They have a band so I went there after work to see.

Heather was jealous of this.

- <Aphrodite's Bow> That is cool. Are they any good?
- <Pizzazz> Yeah, they're not bad. It's really heavy death punk or something. Weird, but they look like they are having fun. Are there any bands out there?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> I don't know, actually. I'm not old enough to get into a bar anyway.
- <Pizzazz> Yeah. Me neither, heh heh.
- <Pizzazz> What've you been doing?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> Not much. I walked around a bunch today. Did some thinking.
- <Pizzazz> \_thinking?\_ Sounds serious.

Heather didn't reply to this. After a few moments Carol wrote back:

- <Pizzazz>What were you thinking about?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> I'm thinking about getting breast implants
- <Pizzazz> Yeah. Seriously. What were you thinking about for real?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> I WAS being for real.
- <Pizzazz> You are not serious.
- <Aphrodite's Bow> I am. Maybe. I don't know.
- <Pizzazz> Ug. That's too weird. What's wrong with your breasts?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> They're wimpy – little girl breasts.
- <Pizzazz> Well, I like your breasts... They're cute. Not sacks of cement like mine.
- <Aphrodite's Bow> Well, I like yours.

Heather just sat there for a while, waiting for Carol's reply, waiting for her make another statement about how her breasts weren't that great so that Heather could continue talking about why she wanted breasts like Carol's. But Carol didn't bite. After a few minutes of silence Heather typed again.

- <Aphrodite's Bow> I don't know. Mine don't feel right.
- <Pizzazz> I wonder if they actually \_feel\_ different, like inside of you, after you get them.
- <Aphrodite's Bow> You mean the implants? I don't know.
- <Pizzazz> What's not right about your breasts?
- <Aphrodite's Bow> I don't know. When I look in the mirror, they seem wrong. Everything seems wrong. Like my outside doesn't match my inside. I wish I was taller. And stronger. And not so thin. My face

## Game Quest

is too...nice looking. I don't mean pretty, I mean...soft. My boobs should be bigger too. But that's the only thing I can fix...that I'd feel comfortable fixing.

There was a lull in the conversation.

<Aphrodite's Bow> Do you think I should?

<Pizzazz> No one can make this decision but you, Heather. I think you should research it a bit. Besides, this is kind of sudden, isn't it? I mean, you should think about it for a while.

<Aphrodite's Bow> I've been thinking about it forever. I used to tell myself it was the one thing I would change when I got a job. I stopped thinking about it for a while, I guess. But sometimes I'd look at breast implant stuff when I'd surf the net...or see it on the back of a Metropolitan Magazine or something. They always look so perky, though. I don't want them to stick out. I want mine to hang. What's the point of having woman breasts if they aren't going to hang?

<Pizzazz> I don't know. I thought perky breasts were ideal?

<Aphrodite's Bow> No. I want mine to look real. Like a woman's breasts.

<Pizzazz> Hey, what's happening at Madre now? Anything change?

Heather was irritated at Carol for changing the subject, but she answered anyway.

<Aphrodite's Bow> I don't know. I haven't talked to my parents in a few days. Last I heard nothing had changed.

<Pizzazz> Oh. That's too bad. I talked to a bunch of people online who said they wrote to Madre complaining about the firings. There's tons of internet sites popping up about it, too. Save Madre, etc... I was surprised there was so much support. I mean, I guess I knew that Madre was really popular and everyone has, like, at least one of their games. I just didn't think they'd...rise up just for a game company. Especially when Madre isn't as popular as it used to be...

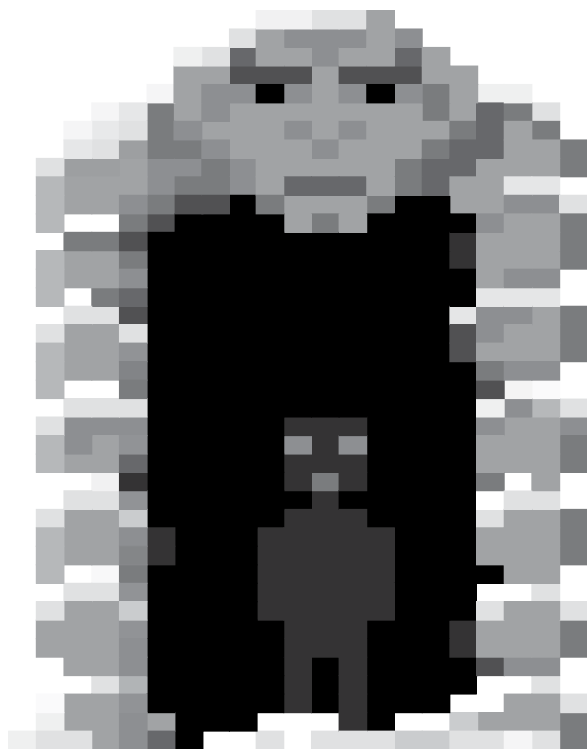
<Aphrodite's Bow> I don't know.

They talked, but superficially as Heather's mind had drifted off. She was happy to talk to Carol and get lost in their easy chatter...but it didn't soothe the niggling thought in the back of her mind that somehow her life wasn't right, like someone had put the wrong brain in the wrong

body. There had been a mix up in the bureaucracy between sperm and egg. Somehow her name had ended up on the wrong form. Heather felt like she was still dreaming, unable to wake up.

She thought about last night's nightmare now... About how disappointed she'd been to be that girl in the mirror. And it stung as only things in a dream can sting.

That night, lying in bed next to Adam, Heather asked him what he thought about breast implants.





## Chapter 49; viva la revolución 94109

September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Out of hope and respect they hadn't reassigned Ron and Laura Johansen's office space. It had been a week since the husband and wife team had officially put in their last hour. They'd punched out. The papers normally scattered across the desk, the hanging bead passageway that they used instead of a door, the African tapestry with project artwork taped to it, the large didgeridoo they sounded as an alternative to venting frustrations... it was all gone. Only the empty metal filing cabinet, a chair, a desk and the lonely, unused computer that sat on top of it remained. Although Art could still, if he concentrated, detect the faint smell of incense that used to burn in the office in happier times. Stopping and peering in for something to do, Art thought the office seemed like a fetid lagoon, bare and misty...but beneath the silence lay a primordial ooze ready to burp, gurgle and spring into a vibrant microcosm. It was still ready to spring back to life...with Ron & Laura, rebirthing from gigantic flower pods.

Normally unassigned space was sucked up so fast you could hear the 'Ssssschlllllluuuuuupppp!' sound of staff instantly filling up the vacuum. There were plenty of people who deserved and had been waiting for an office with a window for a long time. But this time, nobody had even asked for the empty room, as if there was an unspoken expectation that the HomoSapien Quest designers would be back...or perhaps it was in deference to Ron & Laura's incredible talent: no one felt they could live up to the office's reputation.

And there was reason to hope. Although the mail from Madre fans was slowing down now, the response and vitriol of not only HSQ fans, but of other Madre adventures as well, had been beyond expectations. Of course, HQ hadn't responded either way. No comment. It was almost as if they weren't opening their mail...but they couldn't ignore fans like that, numbers like that, not with the way those business types lived by facts and figures. Art imagined that if they put all the letters in Ron and Laura's office, they would be spilling out of the doorway dramatically, like in that movie where they brought all those bags and bags of letters to

Santa Claus into the court room. But, Art recollected sadly, technology was rapidly doing away with physical communication and the vast majority of their support, the complaints and pleas, had come not on sheets of paper at all but in the ethereal form of bits...letters that didn't really exist: email.

Investigating the office was depressing so Art moved on, changing the subject in his mind. It was a good thing it had been a no-cats-allowed bar-b-que, Art thought as he walked down the hall. Cats would have hated it.

Art had had a sneaking suspicion about the weather the moment he woke up on the day of the bar-b-que. It was the way it was sunny for the most part and then you'd turn around for just a moment and the sky would suddenly sour, clouds curdling over, as if a wizard's mysterious smoke had been waved over the crystal ball of the world by his long, wizardy fingernails. And then, just as you'd turn back it would clear up in a matter of seconds, as if making faces behind your back. Art and Betty, his wife, prepared to have the bar-b-que inside. Art didn't trust nature. He was sure he would get the whole thing set up outside and then it would rain. But then it was sunny for several hours straight and so they set up outside anyway. The guests started arriving, the sky went dark again and droplets of rain came down. They waited for fifteen minutes to see if it would go away, but it didn't, so they moved everything inside. It didn't downpour, but it turned into one of those long, drawn out weeps that lasts long into the night and sucks all the worms up out of the ground and on to the veranda.

It wasn't the first time it had rained on the infamous bar-b-que day. But it didn't happen often. Art had read the statistics somewhere and this was usually one of the driest times of year at Redwood. But the event had been pleasant enough despite this. Everyone huddled inside and stared outside the windows at the moody rain, the droplets of water clinging to the underside of the desk railing, popping off of Art's raincoat and sizzling as they hit the grill. In a way, Art had felt the rain was appropriate: Sour, sad...but cleansing at the same time. Beer in one hand and flipper in the other, Art was pleased. Somehow the weather made the whole affair more low-key and personal. Conversations couldn't help but start in those cramped personal quarters and somehow beer went almost as well with rain as it did with sun.

When everyone had finished their meals Art had just taken the dishes outside to the lawn and let the rain do the hard work. And, thankfully, everyone this year pooped in the proper place... Art didn't

## Game Quest

find any surprises behind his couch or TV. All in all, he'd say it was one of those sleeper-hit bar-b-ques. Nobody could ruin the Madre bar-b-que. Not Melfina. Not the gods.

Art wandered down the hall to Henry's office. He strode through the door, mouth open with something witty to say and then remembered, by the lack of a certain Henry in the office, that Henry was off today. Henry hadn't much work to do now either, due to the stalled production. How long was this going to go on for? Then HQ had Henry put together some theme song for some advertisement they were doing. Art could still remember Henry's reaction to this: *They've reduced me to a jingle writer!* So, when Henry finished that up he booked a holiday. He figured that he'd never known this office to not be busy, so he had best get away while it was for once. Also, Henry reasoned, if he wasn't around they couldn't assign him any more jingle-duties.

Art grabbed some peanuts off of Henry's desk, swirled them in his fist then popped them into his mouth. He moved down the maze to Bill's cubicle.

"How's it going? Want a peanut?"

Bill took a peanut. Bill, who was also rather underused while Melfina tried to decide what the hell they'd bought Madre for anyway, had unofficially been keeping track of the letter campaign. He called it Revolution 94109 for Madre HQ's zip code.

"meh," Bill replied. He pursed his lips. "*Nothing* from HQ yet. I mean, they must have received thousands of letters. And in three weeks we haven't heard anything from Newman."

They both stared at the screen almost as if waiting for the reply to come that instant. But nothing did.

"It makes me so mad," continued Bill. "It makes me want to slip laxatives into his coffee."

"That's not a bad idea," Art added.

Bill and Art suddenly locked gazes. The same thing went through their minds. The little twinkles in the back of their eyes were communicating, arcs of energy leaping from their retinas and meeting halfway. And then they both, just as suddenly and decisively, broke the gaze. Even though it was a good idea, it was probably not a good idea.

"I wonder how many of these changes actually come from Newman, though," Art pondered. "Are they his ideas? Or are they Melfina's and he's just a lap dog."

"Both," Bill said. "He's a lap dog that you don't have to instruct because he knows what and agrees with what the Master wants anyway."



"I'm glad we got Swarthy Victor done months ago," continued Art. "I'm glad we didn't have to put any product placement in our game."

"Yeah. For sure. Tim said to me yesterday every time he picks up the phone he cringes thinking it's going to be Newman saying *Che's Coffee Revolution* wants to be in their game."

"Ecch! I always knew that product placement would happen someday. I knew it. I just never thought I'd see it here...and definitely not first."

There was a pause in their conversation as they monitored Bill's screen. Across the way, Art saw Will walking purposefully down the hall. Art hadn't recalled seeing Will all day. His face looked kind of red. He wondered where he'd been hiding out.



Tim and Geoff were both admiring the box cover design for Sci-Fi Quest 4 on their computer. Again. Although they'd received the design over a week ago, they kept coming back to admire it. It was always hard to imagine their game in finalized form. Staring at the box always provided them with a surreal feeling of accomplishment. As if the box was a beautiful, voluptuous, radiant fairy calling to them, saying 'You are both good boys. You've worked hard for me...and now I'm yours.' Besides, the box art was cool. It was the first thing to come out of San Fran they were genuinely pleased with.

"It's still cool," Tim said. "Even after a week."

"Yeah. Especially the hologram." Although they couldn't actually see the hologram on the computer screen, holograms were generally cool no matter what they depicted...well, almost. A little placeholder marked 'hologram' was there instead.

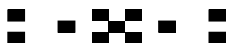
Tim and Geoff were so engrossed they'd hardly noticed Will had stormed into their office. Only when Will shut the door behind him did they both look up.

Will hadn't thought about how he was going to say this. He couldn't think of a diplomatic way to do it. All his diplomatic energies had been sucked up. And what he was about to tell them hadn't been his decision. He'd been arguing on the phone over it all morning. So, lacking energy for tact, he went straight to the point.

"Sci-Fi Quest is cancelled."

Tim and Geoff both squinted, sure they'd heard Will speak nonsense and not something that sounded like 'Sci-Fi Quest is cancelled.'

"What?" they asked in unison.



## Chapter 50; a fistful of cool

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Tim had found the perfect hiding spot. A place where the worries of the office, of the world and of a *certain individual* could not get to him. Already he could feel himself calming down. Sure, he couldn't hide out here forever, but in this moment he felt like a child laying in a field. Time dragged on in the clouds above but it had no bearing on Tim. Way up in the sky (or Styrofoam ceiling panel, as it were) he saw clouds in the shape of what had happened in the last few weeks. And they brought him back...

"What?" they had both asked in unison. An odd melange of disbelief, tension and shock hung in the air, as pungent as a rotting jungle flower.

*They found us out!* Was Tim's first thought. Melfina had overheard the mumblings of mutiny behind their office door...and had decided to take revenge by cancelling their game!

Tim's heart was beating hard in his chest. If they were going to cancel the game, did that mean that he'd be fired next? But then Tim quickly realized that this was too simple and dramatic an explanation for the cancellation of their game. Melfina must have known, practically from the start, that someone in Redwood was encouraging the letters. That was fairly obvious. And even if they could have, somehow, discovered that it had been Tim's original idea, they wouldn't have canceled the game. They are business men! You don't make money by cancelling games. But why, Tim wondered, was Sci-Fi Quest suddenly cancelled then? And so close to release?

Newman had received a call from Tilnom Board Games threatening legal action, Will informed them. Tim and Geoff waited for more.

"That's it?!" Tim belted out, exasperated. "That's why they're cancelling our game? I thought we'd heard the last of them years ago..." Way back on SFQ2 Tilnom had requested the removal of a key character in their game because the character's name was similar to the name of a board game they had yet to release, but they owned the copyrights to.

In no way, shape or form had Tim or Geoff based their character on the unseen game and a sludge beast was hardly related to their board game. Madre had decided to ignore it and the petty legal threats went away. Now this character was making a cameo in SFQ4 and Tilnom Board Games had found out about it, phoning to complain.

"I guess they noticed it from the previews at e2c2," Will had said.

"But that's stupid. They have no case!" Geoff added. "And if they had a problem with it, they should have done more about it three years ago. They're hardly threatening!"

"I can't believe Melfina would cancel a game over that! Besides, we could change his name. It's so minor." Tim couldn't actually believe he was offering to make changes to his artistic vision...but at least it was better than having it obliterated. And after coupons and skateboards, a name change was nothing.

"It doesn't make any sense," added Geoff, still in disbelief at the news.

"Yes, well..." Will sighed. "I've been arguing with Newman for over two hours. Honestly, I don't think it's about the lawsuit at all. It's just a convenient excuse. I get the sense they've been thinking about cancelling Sci-Fi Quest for a while. They don't want to spend or tie up the budget on distributing your game. Their selective market research tells them what they want to hear, that the profit margins aren't big enough to spend their time on it. And they also figure adventure games are dead. They don't want to associate themselves with that anymore. They don't want to pay to publish it."

"Well, that explains why they killed the focus group," Geoff added, throwing his hands up in the air.

"I don't know," Will continued. "I really don't know what they're doing over there any more. But you're right. Cancelling Sci-Fi Quest over our weakest lawsuit does not make sense."

"I mean," Geoff exclaimed, "we have a *completed* game! Nearly two years work. They're only losing money by not distributing it."

"Well, not really," said Will. "Because of the way the books are cooked, most of the expense comes out of last year's budget, before the Melfina thing happened. But, either way, yeah. It's a profitable product. Just letting it sit around—" Will trailed off, exasperated and beaten over two hours of long-distance arguing. He'd tried every possible way to convince Newman to change his mind, Melfina's mind...and failed.

"I don't know what to say," Will had said. "It's cancelled."

"But..." Geoff began, his words hanging on the edge of uncertainty,

## Game Quest

“...what do we do?”

Will had just shrugged. “I don’t know.”

But Tim wasn’t worried. Because it was impossible. It was just crazy. Anyone who thought for a moment that Sci-Fi Quest could be cancelled this far along in development was also crazy. It wouldn’t happen. Melfina had no choice but to see the error of their ways. The decision would be reversed. It would still make money and fans wouldn’t let it happen. This wouldn’t last five days.

That was over two weeks ago, and things had gotten worse. But they hadn’t started that way.

Both Tim and Geoff had been angrily optimistic and defiant at first. This was far from over. They had a finished game on their hands with over a year of promotion and fan anticipation. While their fans weren’t as crazily vocal as the HomoSapien Questers, Sci-Fi Quest had a larger audience and more years behind it. A lot of people were going to be unhappy. Melfina only had petty excuses as justification to cancel the game. Tim and Geoff had a good case. And if there was one thing Geoff and Tim were good at, it was at being subversive.

Before nightfall, on the day the Sci-Fi Quest team got the news, a general call to action had been sent out to the list of HSQ fans. By the next day several major SFQ fan sites had been notified. A Sci-Fi Quest fan email list had been created and mailed out before Madre HQ even made the official cancellation announcement. As expected, Madre’s mail services, which were just recovering from the beating they took for sacking Ron and Laura, were again flooded, this time by an even greater response. The HSQ campaign, which had been close to exhaustion, revived as well. And while Sci-Fi Quest at e2c2 hadn’t generated much buzz in the magazines, the cancelling of it did! It had become a newsworthy issue! Will even had the programmers work unofficially on the final debugging...since there was no other work to be done anyway and it looked like Sci-Fi Quest had a good chance of survival.

And last week, news was, somebody down in San Francisco had made up “Save Sci-Fi Quest” bumper stickers, snuck into the Madre Headquarters parking lot and affixed them to all the cars of upper management! Both Tim and Geoff giggled at the ingenuity of it, picturing Newman driving to work with a “Save Sci-Fi Quest” sticker on his car...and maybe not even noticing it! Most people wouldn’t even know what Sci-Fi Quest was, probably. Tim had noticed this morning, with amusement, that there was a sticky patch on the back of Newman’s car where a bumper sticker had been painstakingly scratched off. But it was the only thing Tim was

amused at today.

Four days after the cancellation, fan response had been so overwhelming that both Tim and Geoff were in excellent moods. Melfina's foot was in its mouth and the letters were still pouring in. They'd have no choice but to release the game. Tim and Geoff had an unofficial celebration in their office. Putting the game's intro on and saluting each other at the theme music. Their game would be back on track any day. A few days passed and the influx of letters remained steady. Another article on the cancellation was published...yet there was still no news of SFQ's revival. Melfina was being stubborn. Still, Tim and Geoff remained confident that Melfina would have to admit the error of its ways eventually. Even if they didn't read the letters, the number of them alone proved that Sci-Fi Quest 4 was, at worst, going to turn a profit. But four days later, over a week since the campaign had started, there had still been no move on Melfina's part.

*They aren't like real business men, Tim thought, they're like a demon scourge!*

Now, a week after that, the flow had trickled down to about fifty letters a day. The campaign was dying fast...and still no reaction from Melfina. It was as if they weren't even receiving the letters. A couple of times, half-seriously, Tim had checked the mailings they'd sent out to the fan clubs to see if they'd put down the right address for Madre HQ. But they had...and Tim didn't understand it. In the face of their hope, and the economics and the numbers and...and...reason, Melfina said no. It didn't make sense. And Geoff and Tim felt deflated. Today Newman and the cool hunter had come in...and it was business as usual. As if there never had been a letter campaign. The little eight by two patch of sticky residue on the back bumper of Newman's new sports vehicle was the only evidence that anything had ever happened. It looked like Melfina had driven right over the protest, not noticing at all.

Seeing those two come in like that today was too much for Tim...so he just sat in his office and stewed. Stewed about everything...including the fact that he didn't have a door he could lock himself behind. He'd seen the stupid cool hunter's toque bobbing up and down the isles in the distance. The last person he wanted to see again was Tray Dork. Tim secretly wished that he was washed up on an abandoned island with the cool hunter just so he could have his way with him...murdering him creatively with coconuts. Ohhhh, that would be cool. That would be sweet. Tim would show the cool hunter some cool *hunting*...

But, actually, more than that he just wanted to never see the cool

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hunter again. But that wasn't going to happen. No. Tim just *knew* that Tray Cool was going to try and come visit him. And he just *knew* that sitting here alone doing nothing with no door was an open invitation. But what Tim didn't know was what to do about it. And now he was stewing about that. He wished that this meeting between Will and Newman would just end so that he could stew in peace. But there was nowhere to hide.

Unless...

Tim moved determinedly down the halls, ducking his head while trying to remain unnoticed, to look as if he wasn't headed anywhere in particular. If anyone asked about him, he wanted the response to be 'Gee, I don't know where he's gone.' That was the whole point of a hiding spot, after all. He cursed to himself as he passed someone in the hall and had to say hi. But it would have appeared as if he was just going to get some old coffee. Tim leaned into the water fountain until the coast was clear and then he snuck up close to Stella's desk near the entrance. She couldn't see him and, after a quick double check, he opened the door to the supply room and slipped in, shutting it quickly behind him. He was sure – he hoped to god – that nobody had seen him.

He stood there in silence for a few moments, listening. He was completely safe in here. Nobody would know or guess where he was. It was as if he didn't exist! Tim welcomed the pitch black, feeling his stress levels ooze out into the limitlessness of the dark. He suddenly recalled his first summer job, working in the Service and Food booths at the Redwood National Park, where he would sneak into and spend minutes at a time in the bathroom, just to get away from the bosses, the co-workers, the heat of the deep-fryer and the shitty 'serve-me slave' attitudes of the customers. This nostalgic thought calmed him a little. Suddenly he felt as if he carried the same load of responsibility as a fry boy – practically none. And he didn't feel like he owed the world much. He felt unhindered. At peace.

But then, he figured, what would happen if someone suddenly opened the supply room door and turned on the lights to find Tim here sitting in the dark? He tried for a few moments to think of what he would say in that situation but it was useless. So he reconciled with the fact that he would have to turn on the light. No one would notice the light from outside anyway, or know he was in here. To lend credibility to the idea that he was just in the supply room getting supplies he put a box of pens in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. He faced one of the tall, light metal shelves for added realism as he thought and relaxed in his secret

garden, pretending the supply room was actually just a hut, secluded at the top of a giant Tibetan mountain.

After a while Tim had calmed down a bit. He had managed to complete his stewing, but found his stress levels slowly eeking up. Hiding out was only fun for so long and now Tim was mad at the fact that he'd had to resort to this in the first place. This was no way for a grown man to behave...and it was all because of Mr. Cool guy. He was trapped in this little room and couldn't go back out because that idiot was running around. Tim could swear the hands on his clock were moving slower. It felt like he'd been in here an hour...but his watch said only twenty minutes. At least, Tim justified, he was safe. At least, he thought, he would avoid the cool hunter. *The mountain, must refocus on the mountain...*

Suddenly he felt a gust of wind at his side and sounds from the office flooded in to fill the quiet supply room space.

"Tim-bo!"

Tim looked over to find Tray Cool standing in the doorway, grinning and examining the small beige room.

Suddenly, any peace of mind, any calm that had been granted to Tim, evaporated, like water thrown onto a hotplate. Tim tried desperately to think of a calm cool place, water flowing over rocks in a quiet Japanese garden, a secret bedroom at the very bottom of the ocean...but it was useless and Tim could feel his fists clenching tightly around the paper and pens in his hands, his blood pressure rose and ran up his arms to his head. If he were a cartoon his head would have *tooted*. It was no use. He was furious. His secret garden had been invaded!! By Tray Cool!!!!

"I didn't know you were in here," noted Tray. "I was looking for you. Just checking things out. Never opened this door before." Tray Cool looked around, perusing the area as if passing judgement on its suitability or coolness for a supply closet. Tim didn't say anything, he just looked ahead at the flimsy, overloaded, underorganized, dusty shelf in front of him, trying to avoid any recognition of his unwelcome guest.

"So this is the supply room, huh?" Tray said to himself and stepped in past the doorway, sending the Tim's blood pressure levels dangerously upwards. Tim's eyeballs percolated, he could feel the blood in his veins expanding.

"How's it going my man?" Tray asked, "Sorry to hear about your game, dude. I thought it was cool." Tray's offering only made Tim angrier. *He doesn't know the first thing about real cool. And it was all of your cool nonsense that was probably behind the push to kill my game!*

"But I guess everything changes, right?" Tray continued. "The

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adventure game had its day, but now it's time to rest. The next stage of gaming evolution has arrived. We all have to catch the train of tomorrow or we're going to be extinct like the dinosaurs."

Tray put his hand up on Tim's shoulder. Tim pictured his teeth shattering like chalk under the pressure of his gnashing teeth.

"It's for the best, man," came Tray's empty consolations. "Things will be better this way."

Tim didn't know what he was doing. It happened so fast. Suddenly he'd swung his arm up over Tray Cool's head and shouted:

**"Bite my gnubs!!"**

They were both stunned for a moment as Tray found himself bent over with his head locked in Tim's arm. Neither of them was sure what to do from here and Tim wondered if Tray thought he was just joking or play fighting or something. Tray's toque lay on the floor.

Tray suddenly started struggling. "What are you doing?"

And Tim's gut reaction was to not let him go. He brought his other hand up to Tray's head and started rubbing his knuckles hard into his scalp.

"Ow! Ow!"

**"I'm going to rip you a new one!"** Tim threatened as he stumbled about trying to contain Tray's awkward struggling.

Tray waved his arms about. "Quit it!"

But Tim didn't seem to want to quit. Tray fought harder to break loose, grunting, and they both stumbled backwards into one of the tall gray shelves with a **BANG!** Sticky notes and pens fell to the floor. Tray, in his struggle whacked his hand against a shelf and shouted "Ouch!" He tried to grab Tim's leg and Tim reacted by running them both forward and slamming Tray's head into the opposite shelf. A laser printer box fell to the floor, narrowly missing Tim's head. People had started to gather at the door, watching.

"Urg!!" Tray reached up and was pushing at Tim's face, one finger finding its way awkwardly into Tim's nostril. Tim stretched away to keep his eyeballs safe while still firmly holding Tray's neck.

"Think you're cool now?!" Tim taunted. "Think you're cool now?"

They spun around in the middle of the room, nearly tripping over spilled supplies for a few moments, ramming into boxes and a stored chair, Tray's other arm flailing wildly, until Tim suddenly felt two strong arms grab him from behind and pull him away.

"What the **hell** are you two doing?!" came Will's voice.

Tim let his grip on Tray go and Tray stumbled and fell inelegantly into



a pile of boxes in the corner.

Tim turned around to face Will who was still waiting for an answer. Tim was suddenly faced with the choice of being apologetic or defiant. He chose defiant.

"I'm ripping him a new one," he informed Will, calmly. Then he brushed past his boss and the crowd and stormed down the hall.

"I'm ok," Tray Cool said standing up and brushing himself off as if anyone cared. The crowd began to disperse. "He's just stressed out. It's ok."

"I wonder what the hell came over Tim?" said Kathy to Art as they walked down the hall.

Art shook his head. "Maybe he was playing too many violent video games," Art posited. Kathy laughed.

"Tim vs. Coolness," Art remarked to himself. "I love it!"

They walked off down the hall.

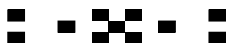
Later that day Art was passing by the programmers section and saw Tray Cool chatting it up, as usual, with all his admiring fans. Art overheard a little.

"I could have wasted him," said Tray. "But I didn't want to."

The programmers nodded and agreed. They all wanted to believe.

"What was the point?" Tray continued. "He was just making himself look like an idiot anyway."

Tim was told to take the rest of the day off. He felt a little sheepish about his behavior, but he just couldn't take it any more. And he didn't regret what he did. It had been a natural reaction. He hadn't been in control. And anyway, going home early, gave him the opportunity to stew outside. And the outdoors were meant for stewing.



## Chapter 51; caravan

October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1995

A celebration was called for. And even if it couldn't be held on company funds, a celebration they would have!

Kendra peered out the rearview mirror as her car rolled down through the trees. Behind her a string of cars followed along the hot roadway, like a silvery fish tail reflecting the late afternoon sun into the forest. It was like a modern day caravan. A caravan to Hernando's Hideaway, Berney's popular (and only) Mexican Restaurant.

There was a palpable buzz among the staff, an underlying tremor of excitement. It reminded Kendra of the feeling that always led up to the annual bar-b-que...but more intense, more meaningful. The feeling was like a simmering pot, on the verge of boiling over, simmering with invisible energy. In the back seat, Art and Bill were making puns. Kathy, from the front seat, was tossing one in every now and then. Kendra wondered what sort of hijinks were going on in the other cars. There was a lightness and gaiety to this whole affair that Kendra hadn't seen or felt in a long time. It was a remarkable sight to see all these people so carefree and excited...especially in contrast to the veil of gloom that had been hung over the office for the past year. There had been times in the last year when they had laughed or seemed carefree, but looking back on it now, Kendra felt as if those moments paled in comparison to today. Even those good times somehow seemed...tempered: Humor, as best as it can be under the sword of Damocles.

And come to think of it, she hadn't felt this good in a long time. Even before the whole business with the HQ and the takeover and the firings. The last four or five years had been great ones. They'd done excellent business. They'd achieved fame and stability. They enjoyed their work and their co-workers and it seemed as if the good times were a golden field stretching on forever in front of them. But even those moments, Kendra thought now, were haunted by a staid comfortability. No, at this moment she felt as if it were eleven years ago, when her second Fantasy Quest had just been released...and the first Swarthy Victor and Sci-Fi Quests were

getting rave reviews, before the industry had become this giant honey pot where everyone wanted to stick their fingers, before their names were known. They were running a company, and they were making it up as they went along, but there was nothing else like it. Their ideas were fresh. They didn't know what they were doing, but they were enjoying it...and being very successful at it. In this fleeting moment, Kendra felt like that again. Surprisingly, this feeling even surpassed her joy at the news almost two weeks ago, which had started this whole caravan off. Kendra felt as if she had been given license to feel this good again.

While this celebration was not for all staff members, more for those closest to the issues at stake, a good twenty five Madre staff still pushed through the door to swamp Hernando's Hideaway. Of course, no one was happier to see Hernando's Hideaway full of happy people with hungry stomachs and generous wallets than Hernando himself! Tim wondered, from his seat at the end, napkin tucked into his collar, if Hernando had ever been threatened with a lawsuit for his use of the Hernando's Hideaway name. It was the name of a Broadway song, right? Tim was sure of it. He also wondered if Hernando would ever have to face the possibility of a hostile takeover if he became too successful. If it happened to Naughté Latte and it happened to Madre, then Hernando couldn't be safe. But so far the best rebuttal business tycoons had for the family restaurant was a fast food chain...and Tim doubted Hernando had much to worry from the Fajita Gong chain of fast food 'restaurants'.

It was nice to have an official party, even if they had to pay for it themselves, Geoff thought. They'd already had an unofficial party for the good news on the same day it came...but an *official* party made their happiness, and their perception of victory more...concrete. More official. Of course, the Redwood office didn't have the funds to pay for this sort of affair, and it would never be approved of by HQ, so everyone was paying their own way. Everyone except for Ron and Laura, for obvious reasons.

After everyone had ordered suitable amounts of alcohol and chips and salsa had been brought to the tables, Will stood up to give the official sales report. Technically, it should have been given tomorrow morning, but when Will received it, opening it with anxiety, he realized that reporting the results would only add to the celebration they'd been looking forward to for two weeks. The fact that this good news fell on the same day was only more of a sign, a reason for celebration in itself.

"I always have to be the bad guy," Will started off. "When a game is behind schedule, I'm the one that has to come in and tell you to get your

## Game Quest

act together. When you're over budget, I'm the jerk that comes in and cuts strings. When we're getting sued, I'm the one who has to tell you to curb your artistic vision. Especially, over the last year or two, I've been the one who, when your games weren't meeting our sales expectations, had to break the news. I know you hate to hear it, but I'm the one who always has to tell you that, in this business, money counts – even when I don't want to hear it myself. So when the opportunity comes up for me to be the good guy, I relish the occasion. If the revival and launch of the latest installment of Sci-Fi Quest weren't good enough news, I just received the official initial sales figures for the game today. In just over a week of sales we've hit a 35% reorder rate. Our team in San Francisco figures that a good 25% of our initial run has already been sold for an estimated total of two-hundred and thirty thousand dollars. Although not our strongest results ever, by far this is still a major improvement over our last releases, and a strong profit margin...if not a strong message to Melfina. We've certainly recouped our costs and should look forward to good returns in the next few months...I only wish I could say that more of that money would be coming to us, as usual, than to honchos at Melfina...but don't tell them I said that. I'm trying to improve relations."

There was some anxious laughter from around the table, although Will hadn't meant it as a joke.

Will went through the columns and rows of profits and stats, reading aloud numbers and facts to applause. Geoff, who had decided a long time ago not to judge the success of one of his games by the money it had made, drifted off to the day that he first heard they were re-launching Sci-Fi Quest 4. No one around the two large tables, draped in red and white checked plastic tablecloth, understood why Melfina had so suddenly reversed their decision...especially after everyone had seemed to have given up hope. For a long time people had expected Melfina to change their mind at any moment, what with the letters and articles and complaints... But days turned to weeks and HQ said nothing. The way Madre just *ignored* the outrage, the way they just stonewalled the whole protest...was unholy. It had killed even the most hopeful amongst the Redwood staff. Melfina had proved they were invincible! The villagers had thrown all they had at the fortress and the sentries hadn't even heard the sound. And then, suddenly, a press junket was called and Newman announced, in terms that made him look like a good guy for being able to 'save' Sci-Fi Quest, that Sci-Fi Quest had been pulled from its 'parked' status (like it had only been a temporary decision) and would be released on the last planned release date—within the week. And, for extra 'I'm

such a good guy' effect, he ended his speech by adding that, due to overwhelming response from fans, Ron and Laura Johansen would be having their contracts with Redwood Studios renewed.

It was a complete surprise. No one understood why they suddenly turned around when the battle had been won.

"Some letter must have just been the straw on the camels back," Kathy had said.

"If so," returned Kendra, "I'd like to get my hands on that letter and have it bronzed and plaqued."

But Geoff wasn't so sure. If it wasn't a jinx, and unfitting for a celebration, Geoff would question what was going on at Melfina. It seemed so random. As if they were up to something... None of it made sense to Geoff. But whether they understood the reasoning – most probably monetary – behind the change of heart or not it didn't need to stand in the way of an opportunity for merry making.

"Although the increased cost of making these games factors into the profit margins, the fact we've made this much on this game already, in an era saturated by adventure game clones and dominated by the very popular and slick 3D shoot-em-ups, is something we can all feel proud of. I think the biggest message it sends is to us. And that is that the adventure game is not dead." There was applause around the table. Will looked out to his friends and workers, sitting up to the saloon and thought.

He had no doubt that the controversy over Sci-Fi Quest's cancellation had inspired people to support Madre. Will knew, as he sat at the far end of the big table, that his customers, whose trust and respect he had cultivated over these years, would pull through for him. He preferred to think that he bonded with his customers, engaged them in a customer service dialogue, instead of barking at their Id while reaching for their wallets like all this branding nonsense. He felt as if he had made a million fans through the work he had done, the work he believed in. It was the greatest feeling in the world. He wondered if anyone at Melfina could say the same, that they had fans who felt as if their company was their friend...a trusted neighbor who would be missed if they went away. And, like friends, the customers had come through for Madre in rough times. If anything, this had all proved that Will was right in his approach...that he was making more than just money: he was making a difference.

"Madre hasn't lost its relevance and I know I have a lot more to give to the adventure gaming public," Will continued. "We've been given an excellent opportunity to do something new here. To revive. We've always done well when we're struggling. And speaking of new ideas, I'd like to

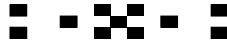
## Game Quest

officially welcome back the award-winning creators of one of our more original game series, Ron and Laura Johansen. In many ways we have to thank the dedication of their fans for keeping us afloat and reinforcing our faith in what we do... We are far from dead. We are just beginning. I'd like to toast their return."

Sounds of cheers, clinking glasses and thanks to Ron and Laura filled the room. Everyone was glad to have them back most of all. More than the revival of Sci-Fi Quest or the good sales results. Of course, despite it having been over two weeks since the announcement of Madre's intention to re-hire Ron & Laura, no sign of a contract or talks had appeared. But nobody thought about that. There was too much to celebrate.

Food was coming to the tables now and Will decided to wrap up. "I think this is the sign a lot of us have been looking for: That we will be able to continue to do the work that we love, contribute to the gaming community, and support the local Berney community in the process by staying in the beautiful Redwood forest."

Again, there were cheers and clinking glasses followed by the sounds of people digging into food and falling into conversation. The sounds of informal good times and endless but uncertain tomorrows, just like in the old days.



## **Chapter 52; at least she's not on drugs**

October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Heather's backpack bounced off onto the bed and onto the floor. It was the second time in four months that she had been home. Moving away from home was strange. For years you are dying to get away, and then when you do your new place doesn't quite feel like home...and you miss your old one. You miss the invisible map that takes you from your bedroom to the washroom in the middle of the night, the feeling of the carpet under your toes, the location of the toilet paper, the sounds of familiar people in the house doing predictable things, the smells of the forest outside, the lack of street traffic sounds... Heather had wondered a lot lately why she had moved away from where she had had it so good: parents cooking her meals, driving her places, asking about her day like they actually cared... This time especially Heather had longed to come home. Now, ten minutes after setting foot in the door she felt bored and, even more, that this, too, was not her home anymore.

Her parents hadn't touched her room. It was the same as it had been for the past four years, except clean. But Heather made headway in correcting that by tossing her jacket and bag of chips onto the middle of the floor before heading back downstairs. Her dad was in the kitchen cooking dinner. Heather noticed he was cooking her favorite meal. For a brief moment she was unsure whether to be irked by the special treatment of her parents catering to her...or heart-warmed and thankful. Heather picked a feeling somewhere between the two. Mark had been excited to show her a model house he had built with cardboard and glue and they went off until supper. He seemed taller.

Very late that night at Heather's favorite hour – that loooong hour between midnight and when you can't believe that the sun is coming up – Heather noticed Carol was online and called her up for old times' sake. Somehow, talking to Carol here in her old haunting grounds seemed more satisfying than in her apartment in Lodi. Carol couldn't talk forever, though. As it was, when Carol hung up she was going to have approximately 4.5 hours of sleep before she had to get up for her Ice

## Game Quest

Cream Stupor job.

Heather was stirred awake at the ungodly hour of 12:30 p.m. the next day by her mother with whom she'd agreed to take a walk. Normally, Heather wouldn't get up for anything, but she had agreed to the walk last night when she'd actually felt like it and now felt obligated. Lying half out of the warm covers, eyes stinging from the sun, drool encrusted on her cheek, Heather still felt like taking the walk. But she was so goddamn tired. Eyelids sticking together, she dragged herself into a robe and into the familiar shower. Although this house no longer felt like it was where she belonged, the shower was perfect. She remembered long washes on cold winter mornings, closing her eyes and letting the water run down her face, as if the shower was a time-freeze capsule and closing one's eyes could put off having to dress and go to school for just fifteen more minutes.

Each shower has its own flow, as uniquely identifiable as a fingerprint... like slipping into the warm embrace of someone familiar. Heather recalled the numerous occasions where she spent extra time under this comforting blanket of water, pleasuring herself in the hot steam, relaxing afterwards, sitting on the floor of this tiled womb with the rivulets pouring over her back. Engaging in the same pleasures this morning she emerged wide awake. But then she was hungry and had to make some breakfast.

Remarkably, her and her mother managed to make it out of the house by 2 p.m. Fifteen minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of the State park. Mark, along for the ride, wandered off ahead. Kendra recalled that one time, perhaps only a few months ago, he would have *run* ahead. But, as if maturity was weighing him down, his demeanor had become more introspective. Lately he'd been spending hours in his room designing cardboard buildings. Almost fretfully Kendra began to recognize the beginning stages of Heather's teenage voyage, manifesting in her son. Lately she began to wonder if she'd done enough for her daughter. When she counted up the energy and time she put into her games to make them successes, she grew frightened at the fact that the time spent with her daughter couldn't compare. Heather mattered to her more than any game, but she was remarkably without a hint book – Kendra kept feeling like, although she was progressing through the game, she was missing points all over the place.

RESTART

You can't. This is real life.



It was one of the basic game design no-nos. Never make a puzzle where the items or information needed to solve it are in the past and no longer accessible.

Lately she'd worried about her daughter. Living alone. Working with a group of men. She knew what that was like, although she had had Will even from the beginning. Heather, as far as she knew, had nobody and her best friend was on the other side of the continent. She had suspicions something was going on with Adam Clayburn, but Heather hadn't confided anything. She'd vaguely slipped in a lesson about dating coworkers over the phone one time, but Heather had clammed right up, so she had to switch the subject. But the fact that her daughter, who had always barricaded herself behind doors, called home at all concerned Kendra. Mother's intuition told her something was up. But that was the problem with mother's intuition, all it could do was blare. It never provided any answers and often sent false alarms.

What Kendra needed was a hint book.

But then again, her daughter was like a game that refused to boot. You can't solve the puzzles when the game won't let you play... Yet today everything was running beautifully. Her lovely daughter who had so much potential had happily agreed to come on a walk. She wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

No one else was here as Kendra and Heather entered the forest. They chatted for a while on small things, in between long bits of relaxed silence. Kendra enjoyed the casual, carefree walk with her daughter. She wanted to explore this moment, but had to proceed carefully, as always, with her daughter. Chances to RESTORE with her daughter were unlikely. She wanted to make sure everything was alright. But how to learn more without breaking the sensitive teenage boundaries of prying.

## ENQUIRE ABOUT WORK

"How are you enjoying EGO?" you ask, cringing at the expected harrumph.

"It's fine," Heather said. Kendra could never tell whether Heather's lack of enthusiasm was a sign of unhappiness or an attempt to disguise her true feelings from her. Well, that was neither successful nor disastrous. They walked for a bit, slipping through the large redwood trees and along the dewy, bug ridden path.

"Do you think you want to work there for a long time?" Kendra enquired further.

## Game Quest

Heather shrugged.

*Maybe I could apply a pincer move,* Kendra thought. “Did you think about, maybe, going for some more schooling?”

Heather rolled her eyes. It was a dangerous move. Kendra dropped it lest she ruin their walk. Just spending time together, perhaps, was more important than hints. It was low-key bonding and relaxing. Kendra already felt the stress, which had been slowly building throughout this takeover, drain from her muscles.

They stepped out into a field largely bald of trees. Walking in silence, neither of them had anything in particular to say, and, for once, neither worried about it. The late fall sun was pleasantly warm.

Then, inside a long pause, Heather told her mother and immediately didn’t understand why she did. She’d suddenly had an incredible urge to speak her mind. She knew what the reaction would be...and it was the sort of thing that Heather would *never* tell her parents. She’d stopped telling her parents about things that mattered to her when she was fifteen. She could barely even bring herself to tell them how her day at school had been...so why did she suddenly feel a terrible urge to volunteer this? But she couldn’t help it. It just came out.

“What?” Kendra turned to her daughter, looked at her seriously and blinked. Kendra was pretty sure what she’d heard couldn’t be. Surely it was a bug in the program; an Easter Egg in the game and she waited for the smile from her daughter that would signify she was only joking. She waited for the rational explanation, the indication that her daughter was actually talking about someone else.

“I’m going to get breast implants,” Heather repeated, earnestly, cringing, cursing herself for confessing this to her mother. Maybe she was seeking support. Maybe she needed *one* person, besides Adam, to back her up on this, to tell her that her desire was rational...and acceptable. She was reaching out to her mother for some reason, who never seemed to understand anything, hoping for support. It was very apparent that this was not going to come from her mother.

“What?” Kendra asked again, her expression blank. *That does not compute. That does not compute. That does not compute. That does not compute.* Then she broke out of it and, with no further response coming from her daughter, sputtered out “W-Why?! What’s wrong with your breasts?” Kendra wildly gestured to them with her hand and felt strangely odd about focusing her attention at her daughter’s bosom. Heather flushed red and was just glad they were in a forest with nature stretching for miles. Mark was too far ahead to hear, thankfully.

Heather gritted her teeth and turned away. End of conversation. It was going to be no use, obviously, trying to explain this to her mother. She could barely explain it to herself.

"I-I don't understand," Kendra continued after a moment's silence, trying to remain cool despite the alarm bell blaring over her thoughts. "Why do you want to do this? Wh..." she scrambled for an explanation in her head. "Not all men like big breasts, you know!"

Heather shook her head. "This isn't about men, Mom. *At all.*" She knew this was a bad idea.

"You can't be serious," Kendra repeated, but the way her daughter, red faced, stared ahead, she knew she was.

RESTORE! RESTORE! RESTORE! RESTORE!

You can't engage that function at this point in the game.

"Then what is it? I don't understand," her mother pleaded. She hadn't expected this! She thought maybe she was lonely! Was she having troubles with men? Her daughter never struck her as someone insecure about her body...Kendra used to admire her stubborn confidence. Heather had been so good for months now. How could she have missed this! Where were all the hints?!

"It's...it's just something I want to do, mom. For myself. Please, just forget it. You obviously don't understand..."

OVERLOAD! OVERLOAD!

Kendra fumed in silence as they walked across the grass, scrambling to keep the system from shutting down. "You're not Heather Hüterguns, you know. Heather Hüterguns is not a *role model*. She's just a *game* character. You can't...you can't just *customize* your body! Life isn't a computer game. You can't just...power-up your chest!"

"This *isn't* about Heather Hüterguns, mom!" Heather shouted out in frustration, feeling that intense pressure of controlled anger building in her chest. "It's about *me!*"

Kendra could barely function under the stress.

"God, you're one to tell me life is not a game!" her daughter suddenly turned on her.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Christ, mom. PUT TOAST IN TOASTER. BRUSH TEETH BEFORE BED. You mutter to yourself like you're the text interface from

## Game Quest

your own game!”

“I do not!” Kendra stated. Did she? Out loud? And suddenly she was aware she did, sometimes. “But I’m just joking about that! I’m not—I’m not about to – you know...live my life like it was a...like a...” she trailed off helplessly.

Heather shook her head, furious now, mostly at herself. And mostly she was furious because, on some level, her mother was right. Although her mom was wrong about everything else... even in the way she *tried* to understand what Heather wanted...this whole thing *was*, on some level, about Heather Hütorguns. And it *was* stupid that Heather didn’t want to admit it. But why? She knew it was just a stupid computer game character. She knew slapping on bigger breasts wouldn’t supersize her into a Nordic warrior. It really bugged Heather to know that this was somehow behind her desire...and even more that her mom *knew* it!

It wasn’t the *only* reason, she told herself. She didn’t think to herself, *Gee, I’d like to be more like my favorite video game character*. That was ridiculous, obviously. And yet, the desire was real. She looked up to Heather Hütorguns in some way. Even though she was just some stupid character dreamed up by horny computer nerds, she still wanted to be like her. It didn’t make sense, and that made her mad. And it made her mad at her mom for seeing right through it. But that *couldn’t* be the only reason...it couldn’t. She didn’t think it was...

“*When?* When are you thinking of doing this?!” Kendra attacked again.

Heather just shrugged. She really didn’t know. She hadn’t actually planned anything out yet, or even done research on it.

“How are you going to pay for it?” Kendra exclaimed. Her daughter was clamming up. If she kept this up she’d never get in.

### CALM DOWN

You struggle to find the zen, fighting the frenetic energy shooting through your nerves. You are losing the struggle.

“Adam said he would pay for them,” Heather answered. As soon as the words came out Heather cursed herself for saying them. Obviously, her mother was going to take it the wrong way. It wasn’t Adam’s idea. He was just being supportive...but now her mom would see her as some sort of weak plaything, which drove her nuts. Heather could actually feel her skin shrinking around her bones in anger just thinking about reinforcing the idea that she was weak, swayed by others.

Thankfully, her mother said nothing and they just walked in silence. Kendra was biting her lip to keep from asking 'Are you two sleeping together?' She'd been biting her lip ever since Heather had gone down to Lodi. I mean, how else did her daughter get that job? But, it would be just the wrong thing to ask. And it really wasn't any of her business. She'd given the safe sex speech a million times. Anyway, she was pretty sure that if Heather and Adam were talking about breast implants, they were probably sleeping together. But it seemed so out of place for Heather to, first of all, accept a job given to her by her boyfriend... and then to accept his offer to pay for breast implants which may or may not have been his idea. If there was one thing Heather hated, it was hand-outs. Kendra pondered over all these inconsistencies, feeling too steamed to speak, knowing that whatever she said would come out accusatory.

Heather was now thinking back to the situation in which she'd first confessed her wish to Adam, listening to him talk in the afterglow of sex not long after she'd mentioned the idea to Carol. She'd cleverly segued into the conversation, though, asking Adam, genuinely, what he wanted from life...to which he replied "I'm already doing it."

"But how do you know that's what you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how can you tell that's what you really want? Is there a sign?"

"I dunno," Adam had replied. "No. It's just...you feel like doing it. You want it."

"But how do you know you won't want to do something different later?"

He shrugged. "If I want to do something later, I guess I'll just do that. It's not hard to find out what you want. It's just what you want."

Heather tried to understand this. It seemed like such a simple answer. Too simple to be truthful. "What do you want most in the whole world?" she asked him...but only so he'd ask her back.

He turned to her. "You," he answered.

Heather smiled. It was sweet and made her feel good. In some ways, she wished she could say the same to him. But she couldn't really, so she just smiled.

"What do you want?" he asked.

She paused for a moment, half thinking, half pretending to think. "Bigger boobs," she said, joking about it to disguise the fact that she was serious.

Adam smiled and waited for her real answer. When she kept smiling

## Game Quest

back he asked, “Really?”

Heather wasn't sure why she'd told Adam. She didn't really care whether he approved or not. Perhaps because she knew he would be supportive...because she wasn't confident enough to make the decision on her own and needed others to validate it...but to validate it in the way she wanted. After she'd told him, they lay in bed and talked about it for a while. Then Adam, sincerely, offered to pay for them. Heather wasn't sure how to feel about this. It almost turned the gift for herself into a gift from him. She was doing this by herself *for* herself. Having someone else pay for it, for some reason, seemed to invalidate the whole desire...but she didn't understand why. She knew Adam only meant well, wanting to please her with the gift she most wanted. But then again, he didn't really try to dissuade her, to question her desire. Judging by the female characters in EGO's games Heather was pretty sure Adam would be all for bigger tits. He might have viewed this as an excellent opportunity to increase his girlfriend's bra size...or maybe not. He was always trying to buy her stuff, but she never wanted anything. So here was his opportunity...and she knew it would please him to let him do it...and it would force her to stick to the decision... so she said yes.

She regretted that a little now, feeling obligated to feel happy about it. He gave her this job. He found her her apartment, showed her around town. He was always very useful and sweet about these things, almost to the point of being annoying. She liked to do things on her own. She didn't want to share everything with him. This was her fantasy. It wasn't something someone could give her. She wanted it to be her adventure.

Kendra and Heather were coming to the path that would take them back to the car. Finally Kendra spoke, unable to come to any solutions. “I don't even understand why you're telling me this. If you're so sure you're going to do it...and you don't care if you have my permission or not, then why didn't you just go and do it?”

Heather shrugged. She didn't honestly know. She'd been excited about it first. Had always dreamt about it ever since it became clear hers had stopped growing well below her expectations. But she was oddly aware, suddenly, that the fantasy was not going to fulfill her for long. She might even regret it. But she couldn't think of anything else but to go forward.



Will was sitting up against the bedpost with two pillows propped up behind him. His hand worked steadily, making notes on the item and sales sheets in his hand. Kendra lay silent beside him, staring up at the

ceiling, waiting and waiting for him to ask ‘What’s wrong?’ or ‘What are you thinking?’ or notice in any way that she seemed worried. But he was too preoccupied to notice. He didn’t usually bring work home, but ever since work had become a constant struggle to prove his worth to Melfina, he was overloaded with tasks that Melfina would never pay for...but it was effort Will would still put in because he wanted to see his baby thrive. Work was hobby, hobby was work, even in these dire days. He would find some way to make it whole again, but it would take...work. Finally, he put down his papers and tucked his arms around her.

“What do you think of Heather’s breasts?” Kendra asked.

“*What?*” Will blurted out. Then Will realized that she must have been referring to Heather Hüterguns, not their daughter, and he relaxed. Still, it was an odd question for Kendra...

“I mean, as a man,” Kendra continued. “Do you think they’re too small?”

“Heather Hüterguns?”

“No! Heather *Roberts!*” she slapped his arm in frustration. Was he so goddamned thick? she wondered. Didn’t he notice anything?

She seemed frustrated, Will thought. “Why are you asking this?”

Kendra sighed. “She told me today she wanted to get breast implants.”

“Oh,” said Will. They both lay in silence in the calm of their bedroom. “Heather? The same Heather who refused to wear makeup in Junior High School?”

Kendra nodded. “Yeah.”

“Was she serious?” Will asked.

“Yes,” Kendra sighed.

Will pondered this, more humbled and curious at the turn of events than shocked. “Is she unhappy with them?”

“I don’t know,” Kendra sighed. “She didn’t really say. It’s hard to tell with her. She never says anything. I guess so, because she seems determined.”

“Has she actually planned a time?” asked Will, concerned.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” Will trailed off, reassured. “Well I wouldn’t worry about it just yet.”

THAT DOES NOT COMPUTE!

“Not worry about it? How? She’s your daughter! Don’t you care?”

## Game Quest

"Of course I care, but she's not getting them yet, is she? It's probably just a phase."

"A *phase*?! How can you be so sure?" Kendra scoffed.

"I'm not. But...she's probably just testing the waters by asking us. The last thing we want to do right now is piss her off so she does it just to spite us...or won't listen to us if she actually *does* decide she wants to do it."

"But what if she *DOES* do it? She said she's going to get them!"

"What can you do about it?" Will asked.

"Talk to her. She talks to you."

"I'm *not* going to talk to her. You've gotta understand Heather. She's gotta run through this stuff herself. You remember how she freaked out when you accidentally told her how to beat Fantasy Quest III. Heather is not good with help. The best way to go is totally hands off. Listen, if she talks, but don't tell her what to do."

"But what if she gets them?" Kendra wondered how Will knew so much about their daughter that she didn't. They always were alike, she supposed. Fiercely independent. Stubborn beyond anything.

"Kendra, I don't approve of it. I hope to god she doesn't, but it's her body. I think the fact that she told you about it before she told me means she's not sure about it."

"Why?"

Will sighed. "Because she tells me everything before she tells you. She must have known how you were going to react. It's almost like she wanted you to freak out about it."

"It wasn't that, Will. She was serious."

"I don't know. I'll talk to her. I won't mention it, but if she raises it I'll talk about it."

Kendra shook her head. She didn't understand how her husband could be so calm. And at the same time she was jealous of him. He always got along with Heather so much better than her. They were chums. But with Kendra and Heather it was either on or off. Will was so good with people.

Begrudgingly, she admitted that he was probably right. If Heather was set on doing this, there was not much she could do about it. Still, Kendra wished her daughter would just get a nose ring or a tattoo, or dye her hair again...like a *normal* rebellious teenager. But Heather always had to do the double rebellion, rebel against the rebelling.

"At least she's not on drugs," Will added sincerely.

Kendra sighed. "It's like she treats life like it was a game. Like that Crypt Destroyer game, where you just customize yourself at will. Inflate



air into your breasts. I don't see what's wrong with her breasts. They're not big, but they're not small by any means, either. They're nice. Why doesn't she appreciate that? They're *REAL*, at least. I don't see what breasts have to do with anything but Swarthy Victor games. What does it have to do with Heather Roberts?"

"She's only 17, Kendra. And for a 17 year old she isn't doing bad at all. She's moved out on her own and got a really good job out of high school that most people would kill for. It's even in the family business... although with a competitor. I didn't go to college right after high school. I just hung around at home and talked cars and played Frisbee with my friends for a year. We should take this slowly."

Kendra sighed. It was almost a relieved sigh. Silence filled the room for a moment. "I guess growing up is like a game," Kendra postulated, frustration ebbing away and sleepiness setting in. "A Quest game...except you don't know what your goal is...or where you're going. A Quest game where your goal is to find what your quest is."

"It would never sell," Will joked.

"I know...but it seems like life is like that...or maybe we've spent too much time dealing with games...thinking of the world as a game." Kendra didn't know. Her daughter was right. Kendra herself was living in a game. Was she totally nuts? "I'm even using games as a metaphor for life. Maybe we're not connected to reality anymore."

"I don't know," Will said. "In a lot of ways I'm proud of her. But, sticking with the game analogy, she's been released. We've put a good 17 years in developing this woman. Now we've unleashed her on the public and, like publishing a game, all we can do, really, is sit back and watch and hope we did a good job. If the worst thing our daughter does is get breast implants, I think we've done an alright job."

Kendra ran her hands through his hair and slipped further into the covers, looking at the ceiling for a while. "What do you think of my breasts?" she asked, feeling the familiar sense of neurosis setting in.

Will looked at them a little longer than necessary. "They're great!" he grinned. She smiled.

It didn't make her feel better, but it made her smile. She thought about the fact that Heather had told her before Will. He was right. That never happened. Maybe that did mean something.

Staring up at the ceiling Kendra thought about how her Game Interface had been useless against her daughter. Had it encountered a puzzle it could not solve? Kendra wanted to phone Tim up and ask for the Transvernacul Obfuscator.



## Chapter 53; black monday

October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Art had always liked Fall. It was a time for winding down, renewal. It made Art feel calm.

At this time last year HQ was in full steam and the tension of overwork at Madre seemed to be subsiding. It felt as if they had reached the crest of a big hill and were *just* pushing over to the point where they could coast the rest of the way. Even though he and Bill were in the middle of putting out Swarthy Victor 5 then, they had finished up the hard stuff and were wandering into the familiar (and often boring) territory of final editing...a winding down to publication. For Art, the world felt at peace in Fall, as if the season were a promise from nature of calmer things to come, a promise that everything was going to be alright. Today, as Art stepped out of his station wagon and onto the parking lot, he could smell that promise.

And, of course, as Art grew older he only found more things about Fall to like. Today it was the wind across the top of his head. Double checking to make sure he was alone in the parking lot, Art paused for a bit and closed his eyes, sensing the world through his other probes: his nostrils, his skin and his bald-o-sensor: the patch of bare skin across the top of his head. This was something only bald people could enjoy; the wind across your scalp felt like the gentle caress of a wind goddess. There were a lot of things they didn't tell you about baldness...like the fact that it was going to happen to you. You knew it was going to happen to someone else...but not *you*. But what came particularly to Art's mind now was how, in the muggy summer heat, beads of sweat would form all over the top of your head. It was annoying and generally embarrassing. It was a lot like having a sweaty forehead, except that your dome was now about 25% head and 75% fore. And when you'd put your hand up to rub it, your hand would greet the thousand bulbous swamps of perspiration dotting the cranium and slide off like Teflon. But in the Fall, it was different. In the Fall, Art's head became a cool, serene place, like a mossy boulder in the shady forest.

Art opened his eyes again and struck off towards the entrance. It was a good time for Madre too, the Redwood building also like a mossy boulder in the shady forest. Art could almost see the signs of renewal radiating out from it. Things were going well. There were signs of hope. Despite all their fears of massive changes and layoffs, little had happened. CEO Newman's showy tours of the office and lip service to big changes, had manifested themselves in superficiality: a logo change, a reworded corporate vision, staff shuffling... And, most importantly, Madre – or Redwood Studios as they were now called – had beaten Melfina over the fate of Sci-Fi Quest, stunning Melfina into silence ever since the massive triumph and reversal of the decision. Frustratingly, despite Melfina's public statement to the contrary, there was still no sign of Ron or Laura being hired back. But Will had felt confident enough to give Art and Bill an official unofficial go-ahead on their new Western. Statistics, too, were on their side. Bad things couldn't keep happening forever, Art knew. It was a rule. It's how gamblers win. Statistically, everything had to turn around. It was just a matter of hanging in long enough. Fall, Art thought, was an excellent sign.

The last thing Art saw before entering the building was the old Madre logo high up on the office. Despite the logo and name changes, the old tried-and-true sign remained, stoic and confident – like Will on his best days. And that had to be a good omen.

Art waddled his way down the typically quiet cubicle maze. Lately the office had been calm. Only a few projects were on the go and the general uncertainty about where Madre was going next lingered in the air. Art overheard a brief bit of a conversation between two programmers as he walked towards his office:

"Goddamn, and I just threw out all my boxes too!"

"That's nothing," came a flat, sardonic voice from the adjoining cubicle, "I just had a new patio installed."

Art continued towards his orifice. Leaving his door open as usual, he set to work gathering materials and ideas for his 10:45 with Bill. A few minutes later he heard a shout from across the building. He looked up and smiled. *People are in good spirits today*, he thought, *making merry in the hallways...* Steve, one of the accountants, passed by Art's door.

"So, where are you going for your vacation, Art?"

How did Steve know about his vacation? He'd only agreed on it with his wife the other day. Will was the only one he'd told.

"Oh," Art began, pleasantly surprised. News sure got around fast here. "We're thinking of going to Bermuda. We've heard good things," he said

## Game Quest

with a smile. But Steve reacted oddly, as if this were not the response he was looking for, as if Art had chosen the *wrong* vacation destination and confused Steve.

"Oh," said Steve awkwardly and then moved on.

That was odd, Art thought to himself. Somewhere in the middle of the cubicle maze Art heard somebody cry out. He now noticed the fitful sound of drawers being open and shut quite loudly. The lack of work around the office had provoked a lot of shenanigans lately. Art wondered what was on the agenda today.

He returned to his computer screen but a few minutes later the yell came again, accompanied by...*banging*? Art looked up again.

"What the hell is going on out there?" he asked aloud, perplexed and amused. His last attempt to return to his work was interrupted almost instantly by a loud clanging at the doorway. Tim was there banging a pair of scissors loudly against a metal garbage can.

"Bring out your dead!" he shouted. Tim turned and continued slowly down the hall shouting "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!"

"What the—?" Art got up, noticing that it was now almost 11:15 and Bill hadn't shown up. Was this some sort of Halloween thing? He went to the doorway and peered down the hallway to Tim, who was banging his can at a cubicle entrance.

"Bring out your dead!" Someone threw a piece of paper into the basket. In the distance, Art saw Henry pacing nervously in front of Will's doorway. Will's door was shut. Art moved down the hall and caught up with Tim just as he was leaving the cubicle.

"What are you doing?" Art asked.

Tim banged the can and shouted "Bring out your dead!" as if that was the only explanation it needed.

Art smiled, not understanding. "What's going on?"

Tim smiled at Art, as if he didn't get Art's joke. He decided that Art was not joking. "Didn't you check your email?" Tim asked.

"Yeah," Art confirmed, ordinarily.

Tim paused, almost as if he didn't know what to say. "Didn't you get anything?"

"I got a couple of things..." Art replied, not following Tim's drift. There was a pause.

"Art," Tim began, now serious, almost exasperated, "Everyone's been fired."

Now it was Art's turn to smile, his eyes gleaming at Tim, awaiting the punchline. Slowly he realized that that *was* the punchline. The

punchline to a very unfunny joke.

"What?" Art replied lamely.

"Everyone's been laid off."

"Everyone?"

"Well," began Tim, "we're not sure. Most people so far. That's why I'm collecting the dead," he motioned to the basket full of virtual pink slip printouts, "...so we can make a count."

Art's first instinct was to go confirm this with Will. But he was quickly reminded that the gateway to Will's office was shut, and Henry was obviously claiming first dibs on speaking to the boss. Poor Henry, Art thought, he's got five mouths to feed.

Art looked back at Tim, the dented garbage can cradled in his arm.

"You should go to Geoff's office. A lot of people are meeting there."

Tim turned and lurched melodramatically down the hallway.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!** "Bring out your deeeaaaaaad!" **BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!**



A group of six or seven people were gathered around Geoff's desk. Kathy was reading aloud from a printed piece of paper.

"—services are no longer required. We thank you for your efforts which have greatly contributed to making the Madre name what it is today. Salaries for the remaining weeks and compensations will be calculated according to individual contracts. Further details will follow later today. We thank you for your contribution and efforts to our company and wish you the best of luck in the future. Sincerely, Tom Newman."

Kathy put down the email and they all turned to Art as he entered. He suddenly realized that Steve, by 'vacation', was referring to being fired...

"You too, Art?" asked Geoff. They all looked up at him.

"I didn't get an email," Art explained, wondering why he didn't: Did they screw up? Had he deleted the email by accident? Or had he escaped the guillotine? Or did they have a fate even worse than termination prepared for him?

Bill felt relieved upon hearing that news. He knew they wouldn't fire Art. They'd have to be crazy to fire Art. He was a game genius.

Art looked around the room. The scene reminded him of the impromptu get together they'd all had when Melfina suddenly started buying out their stock last January...but minus all the energy. Art turned to Kendra.

## Game Quest

"Kendra?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No," she said, meaning 'No, I haven't been fired.' Art wasn't sure whether to be relieved by that or not.

"How many?" he asked.

Kathy shrugged. "We don't know. But so far as we can tell, only Kendra, Will and you haven't received notice."

So, basically, everybody, Art confirmed in his mind. He moved towards the back of the room.

From down the hall came the voice of a programmer as he passed, "Fuck this," he said. "I'm going home."

Art leaned up against the radiator as Will often did.

"I don't get it," said Mary-Ellen, one of the artists. "They must be crazy. People are going to go nuts. Response was so crazy over Sci-Fi Quest that they had to retract! Now that the entire company's been fired...they're going to be swamped with opposition!"

"They don't care," said Kathy. "Don't you see? That's why they retracted in the first place. They knew they were just going to fire all of us in a month's time anyway. It was easier just to release the game."

"They knew for a month and didn't even bother to...even hint to us that this was going on," added another artist who was in the room. "I mean, they probably didn't tell us knowing that we'd fight it tooth and nail, but...it still seems so sleazy. In three and a half weeks, we're all out of jobs. An extra month could have been really helpful for me...at least figuring *something* out." There were nods around the room.

Bill was still trying to get over the fact that he wouldn't be working with Art any more. It seemed...so tragic.

"They've fired everyone at Synapse too," somebody informed Art. "It's gone."

Geoff wasn't paying attention. He was thinking about what he wanted to steal first. He and Tim had better start looting the souvenirs they wanted before everyone else got to them. Geoff was damned if he was going to let Melfina have them! *I wonder how I could sneak the cappuccino machine out without anyone noticing...and without giving myself a hernia...*

Thick silence filled the room: mourning for the dead.

Kendra mumbled something. A few people looked at her curiously.

"Oops! You've encountered an error and the game cannot continue," Kendra mumbled again. The line had been running over and over in her head since this morning.

People reflected on this in the silence.

Beside Art the sound guy was recording the room. Art didn't even

bother to ask what he was doing. But apparently, the sound guy needed to explain himself, "I'm recording the sound of people being laid off. It's for my Sound-Art exhibit in San Francisco," he whispered. "It's a comment on human beings as apes."

Art nodded. At least somebody was coming out ahead from all this. Art reflected on the fact that this was one of the few times that the sound guy had spoken without being spoken to. Art found it interesting that they had a sound guy who rarely spoke.



Henry was now hiding in his office, repeatedly refreshing the inbox on his email.

He cursed Newman under his breath.

He was sure. He knew it. He knew the reason why he didn't get an email. It was because he was black. He was sure of it. Although he was also sure he turned pretty white when he realized that practically *everybody* had been fired but him. It looked really bad. He couldn't commiserate with anyone. Instead, they'd ask him the inevitable question: "What about your email, Henry?" and he'd have to tell them that he was spared. That he was receiving special treatment. Henry felt sick as he slunk away back to his office from Will's, hoping he'd just missed his email. But there was no email.

He knew it sounded crazy. If he told anybody, they'd say "Henry, you're being irrational. They wouldn't keep you just because you're black. That's crazy." Yes. It did sound crazy. It was ridiculous. But what was the explanation then? Why the hell does a company that doesn't make games anymore need a musician? Artists are always the first to go. They can be contracted. But it was as if Newman would feel guilty or something if he fired Henry. The thought of this infuriated him. Singled out again for his skin color, he couldn't even stand in solidarity with his maligned co-workers and friends. The bitter irony sent the churning acids of his stomach burning into his chest.

Art had dismissed it when Henry had said he thought Newman was treating him differently because of his race. Sure, Newman's actions had been extremely subtle. And, he could see why Art wouldn't understand his complaint. Henry wasn't complaining that Newman was racist. Although, technically, treating someone differently because of their skin color qualified... But he wasn't accusing Newman of being a cross burner or anything. He even supposed Newman believed his own actions to be positive. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that he *saw* Henry

## Game Quest

as different... It felt like benign condescension, a pat on the head and Henry was the only one who seemed to notice it! And it wasn't because he was black and he was sensitive to these things, it was because he *just knew*! He'd been black all his life and he could smell different treatment from a mile away, and it drove him nuts. Not as a black man, but as an ordinary. human. being.

He was going to have to quit. That was it. But quitting would involve having to confess to Will why he wanted to quit – which would mean pointing out, AGAIN, his difference. Was there no escape from this maddening circle?! Will's door was still shut so Henry's only route was to keep clicking on the send/receive button hoping for a way out.



Henry paced the floor of Will's office. He'd entered so quickly it was like the door never opened at all.

"I don't think you should quit," Will said. Today was Monday, Will's favorite day.

Henry had barely been able to choke out his theory on why he wasn't fired to Will, yet Will had barely reacted...almost as if Will knew too. It was like Will knew everything sometimes. This put Henry considerably more at ease...but he was uncomfortable now that Will wouldn't let him quit.

"I don't believe Newman understands, exactly, how to be genuine," Will said. "So he makes up for it by believing in systems and catch-ideas. I don't think he believes that he kept you just because you were black. He certainly would never say he did, anyway. If you asked him, he'd have several other reasons. But deep down, I think you're right. It's very possible that he didn't fire you because you were black. But I still don't think you should quit."

"But, don't you see how it looks?" complained Henry. "I was the one who sold out all my shares in favor of Melfina. Now I'm the one who's not getting fired. Not only is it humiliating to be treated different, but it also makes me look like...some sort of Judas – which is completely unfair. I deserve to be fired like everyone else!" Henry looked at his clammy palms as if they belonged to somebody else. He was overwhelmed by the frustration. No matter how hard he tried, they were always going to put him on the outside. This company was the only place where he'd ever been allowed to be *just* Henry. Now that was all gone and by the very nature of his skin color, over which he had no control, he was once again excluded.



"Nobody thinks you're a Judas, Henry," Will stated calmly, even though seeing low-key Henry so out of sorts was unsettling. "And I'm asking you, as a personal favor to me...and the rest of the staff, to stay on. We're all interested in seeing as few people fired as possible. Use Melfina like they've used us. Take their paycheck, look for another job and then leave them in the lurch. We'd all much prefer to see you do that than quit. Right now almost a hundred and fifty people are wondering how they are going to continue to feed their families and whether they can continue to live in Redwood. I think we'd all like nothing more than to know that, at least one more of us doesn't have to go through that."

Henry stopped pacing and tapped his finger repeatedly on the chair. "But I can't just screw around this job. I need a reference."

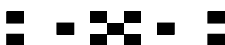
"I'll be your reference," Will ventured.

Henry stopped tapping his fingers. Will was right. It was what Henry should do and Henry knew it. It made sense. And what was he doing in here, unloading his angst on a man who had just lost his company? Henry suddenly felt selfish and out of control. It was arrogant of him to demand so much from Will in this chaos. Still, the idea of being Melfina's equal opportunity poster boy made him sick to his stomach. Even Will, who understood everything, couldn't understand what it was like for him at that moment. Maybe, acceded Henry, this was just something he was going to have to go through alone.

"Yeah," Henry nodded. A long silence passed between them and Will turned his back to Henry to look out the bay window to the office. Although there were few people left in the office now, Will didn't see the cubicles at all. Instead, he saw his green, grassy, endless field. The blades of grass swayed gently in the breeze at the hooves of his beloved cattle. But the cattle were not grazing. Instead they were lined up, head to tail, in one long curving line that halted in the middle of the field by a shiny rectangular building, completely foreign to the landscape. Sleek, sliver, menacing in its deceptive simplicity, the building billowed smoke out of its top. Beyond his cattle and the machine, there was nothing else for miles. A void in space.

Slowly, one by one, and without help, the cows walked up a ramp into a little black hole on the side of the building. The hole was just big enough for a cow to disappear into. They would walk into the machine through that hole.

But, there wasn't another hole big enough for them to come out of.



## Chapter 54; bosom buddies

October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1995

Heather liked to turn off all the lights in her apartment, pull the blinds on the balcony windows and sit inside the closet. Even with her eyes wide open she couldn't make out anything, like she was living in a sealed-off pod, submerged thousands of miles underwater where nobody knew she existed and nobody could get to her. She had the power to make the world go away. The closet's size seemed tailored to her thin body, perfect for wrapping her arms around her knees and leaning against the wall. The sounds went away too. And she could just think.

She'd discovered this quite by accident, during a phone call with Carol, crawling in here for fun, for something to do, so she could focus on Carol's voice until it became like the voice of God in the absence of everything else. But after hanging up she'd just stayed in here. Someone knocked at the door, Adam or one of the programmers no doubt wondering where she went, but she let it fade. Disappearing made her feel whole, somehow. She couldn't remember a time recently when she'd felt so good naturally, simply... The closet soon became her sanity space where she sequestered herself for an honest high, to cheer herself up.

Recently she'd taken it further, refusing to sit on her furniture. The floor seemed more like her place. She didn't want to place her imprint in the couch, to inhabit the table, to have her essence rub off on them...or them to latch onto her. When Adam asked her why she was sitting on the floor, she said, 'just for a change.' He seemed to accept this like he accepted all her little quirks and differences. In truth, Heather didn't know what was happening to her.

But all too soon these simple pleasures disappeared. Today the floor and even the closet weren't working. Tonight it felt as if she was just sitting in a closet, waiting for...for something to flash and life to begin. She felt like she'd been in here for an hour. More likely it was five minutes. She was getting restless...all the more so because she knew that outside the closet she had nothing to do either. She wanted to slip into bed with Adam, backing her naked body against him and draping his arm over

her, their body heat fusing them together. That always made her feel better. But, back in the daylight she always felt the same. In the daylight, sometimes she didn't feel the same about Adam. Anyway, they were all off at some pre-Halloween deathmatch competition.

She closed her eyes and tried to think about Adam talking in bed after sex:

"See, the NR40 analytic polygons aren't scaleable. And I tried to hack the lighting plots, but that, obviously, underruns the memory packet. I don't get it. Unless the Gornax card I'm using needs a double pass for that function. But surely they wouldn't be that stupid. I mean, that's really stupid. It's gotta be something with the ASB buffers, but I've tried everything from multiple-vectors to vendor specific pathing."

It was soothing somehow. He seemed to know so much. What went on in that head? She didn't understand a word of what he was saying. She only wished she could harness his awesome mental powers to explain her life. But his brain was hard wired for logic and Heather felt like a randomization algorithm, spewing out nonsense in an ordered world. What was her function?

Heather admired his confidence. His self-assuredness. Adam *always* believed he was right. He *knew* he had the best ideas, the correct opinions. Perhaps it came off as egotistic, but Heather admired the clarity of it. Adam knew what he believed. There were few ambiguous questions in his world of black and whites. He lived like a god in the land of ones and zeros, creating landscapes out of yeses and nos. Heather felt like she could pull apart the universe with maybes and who-knowses.

Heather left the closet for her old companion the computer. After hours of working on it all day it soon lost its lustre as an entertainment device and Heather had become haunted by the fact that she had nothing else. But now she was hoping to make herself feel better by making herself feel bad. There was something enjoyable about staring at a computer screen with no lights on. The way it made her eyes sore, made them water. In the lifeless void of her dark apartment it was a golden portal, spilling out light. Heather, the troll in a hole under a rock in a swamp, stared into the glorious window of her computer, too small to crawl through, but big enough to sit in front of and watch the otherworld, full of open-ends, odd and interesting people. Life.

Heather felt better, wallowing in her self-pity.

<Pizzazz> What're ya doing, Repo?

## Game Quest

The message flashed up on her screen. *Shit*, it was Carol. Maybe she would go away if she just ignored her. But then, again, why did she log-on as 'available' if she didn't want to talk? What she really wanted was Carol to keep pestering her to make her feel wanted... So she waited several minutes in nervous anticipation, gnashing her teeth, hoping her friend would both reply and go away.

<Pizzazz> Hellloo? What's going on? Are you in the bathroom?

Heather continued to surf. Finally, as if giving up for Carol's sake, she replied.

<RepoWoman> Nothing. surfing.

<Pizzazz> Still going by repo, eh? Still getting the fan mail?

<RepoWoman> It creeps me out. Why do all these people care about us? Why do they want to know who is going out with Adam Clayburn. It bugs me that they know about my personal life. It bugs me that they think I'm important or something.

<Pizzazz> They'll go away eventually. You don't like attention, do you?

<RepoWoman> No. I don't. Not like you.

<Pizzazz> Hey. play nice. I'm not some attention whore. I don't act or dress different to get attention you know. I'd think you would know that. I just don't want to look like I'm another dork following all the rules to yuppieville. It pisses me off when people pay attention because they think I'm a freak. I wish they'd just get over being so concerned what everybody else does...stop focusing on differences.

Heather didn't want to talk about Carol's problems. She wanted to make her wait. A few minutes passed.

<Pizzazz> I had a totally weirdo customer hit on me today. It was creepy.

<RepoWoman> Hmmm. How interesting.

<Pizzazz> Ok.... Well you're not offering any topics of conversation.

<RepoWoman> I'm reading about plastic surgery places, if you must know.

This time the pause came on Pizzazz's end.

<Pizzazz> Are you seriously thinking about getting breast implants?

I mean, I'm trying to be supportive and everything. But I just don't understand.

There was a long pause. Heather thought about how she'd avoided the phone since coming home for fear of it being her mother pleading to convince her against this decision. But she hadn't called and Heather was both relieved and somehow hurt.

**<RepoWoman>** You sound like my mother.

**<Pizzazz>** Geeze, why so nasty tonight? I'm not acting like your mother. I'm just trying to understandas your friend. Man, if explain it to me, maybe I'll understand. It just so does not seem like you. If you really want huge tits, then I say go for it, but I just don't understand what fake oobs are going to do for you? What if you regret it?

**<RepoWoman>** Well, you dye your hair. Does your mom understand that? She says it makes you look ugly.

**<Pizzazz>** Dying yor hair and getting a boobjob are not the same thing.

**<RepoWoman>** It's not about that. Don't you ever wish you could look the way you feel inside? You have purple hair. You wear dark clothes. That's your image. Well, this is how I feel. This is the dress I want.

**<Pizzazz>** but why?

This infuriated Heather. She didn't know the answer to that question and she didn't feel like trying to explain it.

Heather waited for Carol to write again, but after five minutes of nothing, Heather broke down.

**<RepoWoman>** Besides. I can always have them removed.

**<Pizzazz>** Then why get them in the first place? I don't see what its going to accomplish. It's not real. You want to look how you feel...but that's not ever really going to happen. No one looks how they feel. Most people just lamely adapt their personality to fit their shape and hope that will pass. You're still going to be scrawny, wimpy heather...with fake boobs. That seems way worse to me. Then *you're* just fake. And to the world you'll be Adam Clayburn's girlfriend he gave a boobjob to. Why are you so obsessed with what you look like? It's what's on the inside that counts.

**<Pizzazz>** God, I sound like a friggin' kid's cartoon.

**<RepoWoman>** Sure, it's easy for you. You like the way you look.

## Game Quest

Things aren't so easy for me.

Heather sent her message, angry at how hollow and stupid her own comment was. And it wasn't even how she felt. She was just angry. She'd spent hours and hours searching online for the perfect breasts, but everything advertised was about lifting, making breasts rounder or perkier. She wanted something fuller, heavier...but even the breasts she saw on porn sites were always somebody else's. Nothing would be perfect, she knew, and that made her incredibly angry!

And Carol was replying.

<Pizzazz> Give it a rest, heather. You're not the only person on this planet who doesn't know what the fuck they want to do with their lives. Sometimes I think the whole reason my mom works so much is that she's terrified if she has time she'll have to answer that very question.

<RepoWoman> Why are we talking about your life again?

<Pizzazz> Not to sound like valley girl, but excuse me for living.

<RepoWoman> Fuck off.

<Pizzazz> Fuck you too.

Heather waited for Carol to reply. She waited twenty minutes - she sure as hell wasn't going to reply to Carol. Then Carol was offline and Heather was hurt and angry now. *What kind of friend was she that she couldn't tell I was pissed off and take my abuse?*

Afraid of the empty evening around her Heather checked her email. There was an email from her dad saying he'd tried to get through on the phone, but she must have been on the Internet. He wanted to tell her that Melfina shut down Redwood today and nearly everyone was fired. *Just wanted to tell you before you heard it somewhere else first.*

Heather felt like shit. Her eyes stung and she felt as if her skin was drooping off her face. Her back was sore and she was tired. Emotionally, she felt like a walking bruise, she stung like lime had been poured into her veins. Still, she refused to go to bed. Instead she went out on to the balcony and sat under the rich, dark blue/black canvas tent of the sky. Staring upwards it looked as if a million little pinholes had been poked through it.

She remembered something Adam had said one night after they'd first started sleeping together. "Everyone loves computers because you get to be god. You create the world, atom by atom, and you decide the rules.

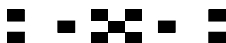
You are master of everything and your only limit is yourself. In the real world we're all nobodies with no control over anything."

Heather liked the idea of being able to control everything. But her problem was she didn't want to live in a computer. She'd lived in a computer at home because it was the only alternative to living in the middle of the forest. But now she was here in the city, sort of, and she still had no control over anything. Madre didn't have control over anything. Her father didn't have control over anything.

Everything was crumbling. Heather Hüterguns was a fantasy. And her fantasy that her life would one day be like Heather Hüterguns' was fantasy. A pleasant one that had made her happy and kept her going through high school. And now it was gone. Creating games was no more a fulfillment of that fantasy than playing them – in fact, it was worse. Her boyfriend, as nice as he was, didn't live in the same world as her. And her best friend in the entire universe now hated her.

Heather stared up at the pinholes in the sky and cried.





## Chapter 55; goodbye, red tie

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1995

*It's not often that you get sufficient reason to yell 'stop the presses.' Short of a major misspelling of your magazine's name on the front page, once you're at the press the show must go on...even if you misspell the word computer (see issue #214). But, last night, three hours past deadline, we got a call that had 'Stop the Press' woven into the ring tone. The news was that, at 9 a.m. that morning, 95% of the staff at Redwood Studios had been fired and the studio closed down. This might not send off any flares for you until you realize that, until four months ago, Redwood Studios was the heart and soul of Madre Games Entertainment, creators of the infamous 'Quest' games: Sci-Fi Quest, HomoSapien Quest, Swarthy Victor, and the most profitable computer game series in history, Fantasy Quest. Quickly labeled around the industry as 'Black Monday,' yesterday morning saw the majority of the designers of these games fired.*

*Although this may come as sudden to a lot of you, Madre and Redwood Studios had been undergoing major reshuffles since opening their San Francisco Headquarters two years ago and being taken over by Melfina Enterprises earlier this year. Brass at the Madre HQ cited financial and logistical problems as the key factors behind the closure. "Redwood Studios hasn't turned out to be the kind of profit center we'd hoped it would be," Karl Paxton, spokesman for Melfina Enterprises said. "With our headquarters in San Francisco and the sag in the adventure game market it made little sense to retain this branch. Madre has felt losses and a weakened presence in the industry over the last few years. We've devised a new business model that will bring Madre to the next level. Unfortunately, to do that we had to make a lot of tough decisions, and dismantling Redwood Studios was, sadly, part of that. Madre is not gone, it has simply re-organized in order to return profitability and make a comeback as the largest and most influential of computer game companies. This isn't the end of Madre, but a new beginning."*



*While Madre, as Paxton says, may indeed not be gone, the Madre that we knew is definitely under fire. It is way too early to determine the outcome of the firings, however. Previously, news of the cancellation of the Sci-Fi Quest and HomoSapien Quest series brought so much outcry from fans that Madre was forced to rescind those orders. One can only imagine what kind of backlash these firings will incur.*

*Still, this news is almost unfathomable. It is hard to imagine an industry without Madre. For as long as we can remember Madre has been both the giant, industry leading tiger of computer gaming and the kindly, matronly mentor for the industry. They weren't aggressive. They weren't combative. But they were very, very good and very, very original. Consistently. Their vision, it can be argued, created the industry today. Even games as different as Gloom have relied much on Madre's work pushing the boundaries of computer gaming and functionality. It is nigh impossible to picture what a world without Madre would look like. Our magazine has had a very personal relationship with the Redwood/Madre team over the years. In fact, our first magazine cover featured the second HomoSapien Quest game. For the first two years of our publication it was hard to find any issue that devoted less than a third of the pages to Madre. (Trust us, we checked.) For the longest time, Madre was the industry.*

*It is still too early to know what the final outcome of all this will be, however, you can count on two things. One, if it's for the worst, you can count on us, and thousands of others in the industry, to wish the best to our friends, idols and co-workers over at Redwood Studios. And two, you can count on us to follow this story closely to bring you detailed coverage in our next issue. Even if we have to stop the presses.*

*Phil Tilman,  
Founding Editor, Computer Gaming Universe Monthly*

Will tossed the magazine onto his desk. The gloss of the cover caused it to slide across the bare maple, slipping perilously close to the desk's edge. Will sighed. That issue was a week old now and the first real industry coverage of what was going on.

More detailed reports were to follow. Will recalled declining to comment for that issue. At the time he'd just been crazy busy. The office was getting flooded with calls and he had basically told his friend over at CGUM that he didn't have time to give analysis on the situation. He had damage control to do. 99% of his 139 member staff – his friends and

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trustees – had just been fired, porting everyone's lives into upside-down mode, and he had a month to make their transition from here to the next stage of their lives as easy as possible. Suddenly it wasn't about winning, or marketing, or games anymore. It was about people. And Will, as sorry as he was, didn't have time for interviews.

What could he say, anyway? He didn't have any ideas or time to fight this. Firing everybody wasn't like cancelling a game. It was pretty final. Anyway, all the fan websites were following the details of Madre's demise better than *he* was...and providing much more interesting commentary and criticisms. He directed CGUM to them.

Will had used the same excuse to avoid calls from other magazines over the next two weeks. But now that *Computer Gaming Universe Monthly* was out, suddenly everyone who even *remotely* followed games, including the media, knew about it. And now that all the staff was leaving, in fact, a large chunk had already left last week, thirty days after Black Monday, Will couldn't use the damage control excuse to dodge phone calls.

Ultimately, Will just didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to dissect the death of his company. It was morbid. He didn't want to talk about what business decisions went wrong, or stocks or takeovers or finances or bottom lines. His company was never about that. His company was about games and fun...and people. All three gone. There was nothing left to talk about.

Will stepped past the boxes he had been half-heartedly packing since he arrived this morning. The vast majority of stuff around his office lay as if it were going to be used tomorrow: the binders, the couch, the note stabber thingy. Will tried to remember what he was boxing all this stuff up and taking it home for. Because he wouldn't have a chance to come back to it next week, was why. That was obvious. But what was he going to do with it at home?

Will stepped up to the window and surveyed his private forest for the last time. As usual, Mother Nature was calm, soothing and consistent. Will, thankfully, didn't feel as if the trees were sheltering invading armies, ready to spill out of the forest like ants and seize his carcass, eating away at the skin. The only thing Will felt, looking out at the evergreens, was that it was going to snow soon.

Will caught the reflection of himself in the window. The office, in the reflection, looked the same as it ever did. Ready for one more day. Behind him, the door was open, as he used to always have it, and Will, still in his suit, even on his last day, looked sharp and ready for business. Even his red tie was flawlessly in place. Taking it in his hands, Will smoothed it

between his fingers. What would he do when he couldn't wear a tie every day? he wondered. Will wondered about Monday, too, his favorite day. Of all the office comforts he was sad to part with, Monday was the worst. The people he would really miss, but since he was friends with most of them, he would continue to see them regularly. In fact, those friendships might even improve, now that they weren't operating on a manager/employee level. But his friend Monday he would never see again. Not the sort of Monday Will lived for. The hop out of bed and into the shower, eager to greet your desk Mondays. Those Mondays, like a faithful dog at the end of a sad movie, were going away for good.

Down the hall, Geoff packed his boxes on another planet. He was preoccupied with his heist. Geoff hadn't quite anticipated all the problems that would arise in stealing a cappuccino machine. It was easy in theory. But even if you rigged the perfect plan, whereby nobody saw it and you didn't irreparably damage your lower back, there were other problems that Geoff hadn't even considered until he got the thing home. Like...what do you do with it? Geoff wanted to set it up right away and have an informal cappuccino party on the last day of work in his kitchen. But when Will found out that somebody had pinched the machine, he was furious. And Geoff felt bad. And it quickly came up that Will had hoped, himself, to host a little impromptu staff cappuccino party on the last day, now that they had paid all that money to get it fixed. But that was what Geoff was gonna do! And then Geoff felt extra special bad.

"What about the Bahamas?" a voice drifted in from planet earth, crackly and soft over the space-receiver in mission control atop Planet Geoff.

Ultimately, Geoff knew Will would eventually be glad that an employee got the machine rather than Melfina. In some ways, Geoff figured Will was most upset because nobody had consulted him on the stealing first. But that's not how looting works! First of all, it was illegal for Will to 'ok' the theft. Secondly, Will would be unable to do it. He was the sort of guy who believed in honesty and justice and always tried to uphold those values even when it was benefiting the jerks of planet Earth. Will would probably be torn over the fact that stealing was the wrong thing to do... even when it was the right thing to do! *Melfina wouldn't even notice!* Most likely, though, Will was irritated that the cappuccino machine had come down to a first-come first-serve (or self-serve, Geoff quipped to himself) basis, his employees reduced to petty thieves, grave robbers of the not yet cold Madre corpse, sneaking around and stealing the last remaining bits of value from underneath each other's noses, generally ignoring the

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values of honesty, co-operation and community that he had been faithful to, tried to instill in his staff for the last 20 years.

Nobody here would ever steal something from Will, or deliberately do something they thought would upset him. They respected him too much, respected his ways. But this wasn't about Will. This was getting back at Melfina, who had played every move as underhandedly as they could. Employees were seeking retribution. It was a shame if Will took it personally, but that was all it was. Perhaps Will had hoped that by setting such an honorable example all these years it would have rubbed off on his employees who, when faced with a grim and unlawful enemy, would take the higher road, the path to making the world a better place for everyone. But their employer was Melfina now and while they would try and uphold the rules Will had espoused every day for the rest of their lives, there would be times when one couldn't play by these rules. David didn't turn the other cheek to Goliath. Melfina had trampled all over their White Knight and his values. The world they had all worked hard and valiantly to build had been stolen by Melfina. The law and the system had failed. But the cappuccino machine wasn't going to go so easily.

"What about the Bahamas, Geoff?"

No one was answering the interplanetary-intercom on Planet Geoff. Everyone was outside enjoying the solar storms and couldn't hear the communication device with the quality of a drive-thru window speaker.

Will was also probably upset by the fact that, as a much lusted after first-come first-steal object, the cappuccino machine hadn't been distributed more equitably. But there was only one, and no way of dividing it evenly.

The day after Geoff had taken the machine (stealing a cappuccino machine proved to give an even greater high than the cappuccinos it dispensed!) he'd overheard two programmers in the hallway talking about it. They were both in awe, praise and envy of the dastardly thief. Geoff eavesdropped as they commented on the cat burglar's 'excellent timing. He got to it before anyone else was even *starting* to think about looting,' and 'fine choice, taking perhaps the most iconic object in the office' and how they were glad that 'he got to it before Melfina did.'

"If I had that machine," said one programmer, "I would throw a cappuccino party on the last day of work."

Geoff was a hero! While he had been hatching this plan, he saw himself as a modern day Robin Hood who would modestly tell no one he had been the sacred liberator...until his surprise cappuccino party! But, pretty soon after that, Will noticed it was missing and got mad and now Geoff didn't dare tell anybody. The machine was on the lam. It had

to go into hiding. So now Geoff had a cappuccino machine hiding out in his basement and he was sad about that because, really, a cappuccino party would have been great. Maybe he'd just suck it up and confess so everyone could have a cappuccino party and Will would understand and let him keep it anyway. Maybe. If he had the guts. But it wasn't easy admitting stuff like this to Will. It was like disappointing your father.

Still, it wasn't like Geoff was the only person who had pinched something. And he wasn't even going to take anything else. Geoff only wanted the machine. Although it was a lot less obvious a lot of game design art had been 'taken home by accident' by the artist staff. Just to confirm that he wasn't the only one stealing, and to alleviate guilt, Geoff checked out the supply room the other day and, for a company that had been doing practically nothing in the last month, they had used up a LOT of disks, notepads, software... Like half a year's worth. But the real looting would happen today, the last day. The looting of the good stuff. Geoff would bet good money that at the end of the day if you lifted up all the computers in the office, you'd find a lot of *light* computers.

But even knowing all this, Geoff was still sad about disappointing Will. It was the last thing he ever wanted to do. Perhaps he could throw the cappuccino party and then say it was Will's idea first and then give the cappuccino machine to Will at the end of the party for being a great boss...that might work. And then they could—

"EARTH TO GEOFF!! WAKE UP WING-NUT!!"

Geoff scrambled for the interplanetary intercom. He hadn't realized he'd been just standing there, box in his hands, staring into space.

"What?"

"How about the Bahamas?" Tim repeated. Tim was planning his and Sheila's vacation. Things had been so nuts over the years, he'd never really gone on a vacation. It was easy to put things off...and when did Tim even have time to plan to plan a vacation? All his creative thoughts were sucked up by game projects. But now, his contract being prematurely ended, Tim had a good year's worth of pay coming to him, with no work needing to be done. They wanted to go somewhere nice... He wasn't worried about looking for another job just yet. As a game designer from the most famous computer gaming company in the world, surely he could find another job! He wasn't set on having to stay in Redwood, either, which would give him a world of options.

"Sure, Bahamas is nice. Ask...uh," Geoff furrowed his brow in concentration, "ask Kevin in art. He went there two years ago, I think."

Tim nodded and put his pad down. He gestured to a box full of letters,

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“Are you sure you don’t want any of these?” Tim asked, hoping Geoff would say no.

“Nah,” Geoff replied, “You keep ‘em. I only wanted a few.”

Tim grinned. “Thanks.” Geoff might have scored the cappuccino machine, but Tim knew he’d made away with the real steal: 99.9% of the Sci-Fi Quest fan letter museum. In his spare time, Tim was thinking, maybe he could make a mural out of them. Or one of those websites – a Sci-Fi Quest Fanmail website. That would be neat. The best part was, since the news of Black Monday got out, fanmail had been flooding in. People showing support, trying to get Melfina to change their mind, or figuring it was their last chance to speak to the creators of their favorite game, sent in a lot of mail. Tim had his reading material for the vacation all set up, drooling at the thought of responding to each and every one.

“Will there ever be another Sci-Fi Quest? Will you guys make one individually?” *Who knows. Right now Melfina owns all the rights so we are legally unable to create another game without their permission. This doesn’t mean that they might not change their minds in the future and release another Sci-Fi Quest. It also doesn’t mean that they won’t sell those rights, either.*

“Do you think Madre will change its mind and hire you all back?” *Very unlikely. Firing all your staff is a very permanent decision and hard to reverse. Not only that, but hiring us back would cost them a fortune as they are already paying us for broken contracts...Either way, the mass firing is a symbol that this is a final decision on Madre’s part and that they are very unlikely to be swayed into reversing the decision.*

“Where do you get all your cool ideas?” *Often I’ll make ketchup and raisin sandwiches and eat them until I start to hallucinate...But seriously, most of—*

“EARTH TO TIM!! WAKE UP BOHONK!!” came Geoff’s voice. Tim looked up. Steven from programming was in the doorway. “All the programmers linked up the computers for the biggest Dan Destroyem Deathmatch Extravaganza ever!” he said excitedly, his hands almost shaking in anticipation. “They’ve even got the *Add-on!*”

“What?!” Tim was nearly blown out of his seat by this most excellent news. The Dan Destroyem Add-on wasn’t supposed to be out for another week! Someone must have sneaked an advance copy! Maybe an industry insider, showering them with pity.

“49 networked computers for gaming! James and Karl have been tweaking the code for a few weeks so that you can have more than 8 people in a deathmatch at a time.” Tim couldn’t even fathom a deathmatch that large. Most of the game testers and programmers had cleaned out their

desks weeks ago. But they weren't about to pass up the opportunity that a work free day and 103 computers presented!

"We can get about 18 before it starts affecting the game speed, so we've got two deathmatch centers going. We're planning on going all night, baby, and far into tomorrow," Steve said. "There's still tons of Kepsi Kola in the free soda machines that need to be used up... so I think we've got a good shot at going 'til tomorrow afternoon."

*Dan Destroyem? 36 member deathmatch melee? Add-on?* Tim felt all funny on the inside. Suddenly he leapt up and ran for the door. All three of them burst forwards, barely cramming through the doorway together, and tore down the cubicle maze to where, sure enough, the largest Dan Destroyem Deathmatch Extravaganza (also featuring, Gloom & Gloom 2) in the world was being held. People had brought in guitar amps for the sound. This was going to be the best last day of work ever!



Art and Bill hardly even noticed the sounds of beeps, bleeps and gunfire rippling over the cubical walls, but it had the subliminal effect of transporting them back to the days before Madre HQ, when programmers and game testers would often break into quick rounds of Gloom...when he and Bill were hard at work designing their latest risqué adventure. Bill had just been saying offhand how it was a pity that their game was cancelled because he'd just had a really good idea for it. And then Art asked what it was and it *was* a good idea and Art bounced off that and put out another idea and Bill bounced back and suddenly, somebody had grabbed a piece of paper out of a box and they were drawing diagrams and making puns and wishing Fred the intern was around take all this down to the tune of the Dan Destroyem Theme song thumping through the thin material of the cubicle walls. Looking at the office at that moment you would have thought it was two years ago.

This spontaneously beautiful moment pulsed on for half-an-hour, thriving in an environment unencumbered by the pesky details of actually having to *finish* the game. The laughter and Bill and Art's excited voices brought Henry to the door. Henry enjoyed the sound of laughter. He enjoyed his wife's sense of humor, and the light irreverence of his children. He liked Art for all the jokes that he cracked, his clever repartee and for never being at loss for a witty comeback to anything. These were some of the things Henry had most enjoyed about Madre, how relaxed and easy going it was. He gravitated to funny people, to people at ease...because these were things Henry had difficulty with.

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And in the last year, especially the last month, there hadn't been much humor *or* relaxation around the office.

Art and Bill looked up from their work, flowing naturally into a conversation with Henry, forgetting about their game entirely. They segued, as almost all conversations did these days, into talk of Black Monday and the takeover.

"It seems unreal," Bill said. "It seems like something too fictional to be real..."

Henry agreed.

Suddenly Bill smiled, "Somebody should write a book about this!"

"A book?" Art replied, "Nah, that's too unoriginal. Somebody should write a game about this!"

They all paused and reflected on this. Art was right, Bill thought, that's a brilliant idea. A *game* about a *game company*! It could have lots of fun, exciting stuff in it...without having to rely on space heroes, or cowboys or magic guns. It would be the most original game ever...if you pulled it off right. Art was a genius! Of course, in these days of business models and market analysis, nobody would ever fund such an idea.

Next, conversation turned to the fact that Art and Henry were the only two Redwood Studios employees, besides Kendra and Will, still on the payroll. Madre had opted to keep Art on until his contract ran out in seven months time. It was cheaper than firing him...and they wanted to use him as a consultant for the Swarthy Victor movie they were working on.

"I guess it's better to have a job and have *some* sort of creative input on this movie than none," Art justified. "But, at the same time, it's such a terrible script, taking so many liberties with established Swarthy Victor standards that I'm embarrassed by it and kind of want to refuse to be a part of it on principle."

"Yeah." Henry could understand refusing on principle. He still didn't know what he was supposed to be doing for Melfina. He hadn't been doing much of anything besides filling the time composing for himself. There was talk out of HQ of him working on music for commercials... but he doubted Melfina was going to produce their own commercials when they wouldn't even produce their own games. He'd already started looking for another job.

"And I'm kind of grateful to be getting, at least, 7 more months of full pay," Art continued.

They'd depressed themselves a bit now, the conversation slowing to the pace of lazy river.



The moment seemed right so Henry did what he came to do.

"You two were perhaps my closest friends when I was here and I wanted to thank you for your friendship. I truly enjoyed working with you two and I will always remember our friendship fondly."

Art and Bill were floored by this. Henry had always been straightforward, but this heartfelt compliment took the two by surprise. Both of them remembered what they liked in Henry so much, besides his ability to compose a damn catchy tune.

"I hope we can keep in touch," Henry filled the silence.

"Yeah. Yeah, for sure we will," Art choked out, simultaneously cursing himself for not thinking of anything better, or not having some heartfelt statement ready to offer in return. Art hoped that Henry didn't take their awkward silence as proof that they didn't feel the same. In fact, quite the opposite. Henry didn't though. He moved along to say his goodbyes to a few other people.

Bill and Art were alone again, but the magic of their creative energy had dissipated, leaving them staring at the notes on the desk, historical documents of their once bountiful output, inscribed in wild marks and dashes. Marks and dashes that were now futile...empty. Neither of them said anything...and they couldn't even remember the point of lifting a pencil.

"Must be Creativity and Enthusiasm's last day too," Art mumbled.

"Yeah..." They both stared at the papers, drifting dangerously close to an awkward pause. Art had never had an awkward pause with Bill before. They never felt uncomfortable around each other...even inside of awkward pauses.

Moments later, somebody blasted in from the deathmatch desperately begging Bill to sub-in for him while he went to 'drain the Kepsi Kola, if you know what I mean.' Bill capitulated. Art didn't join them. He was no good at those games. He wanted to finish packing up, anyway.

But he quickly realized, watching Bill walk off like it was just another day, that that little creative moment in his office would probably be the last time they'd ever work together. And it would probably be the last time he and Bill just hung out in the office and talked and joked, the last day it would be normal to see the other's face around and know what was going on in their life. Art suddenly wondered if he gave Bill enough credit, over the years, personally and professionally, for their games. Sure, most of the ideas had been Art's...but he wondered how he would have ever dreamed them up, fleshed them out without Bill's input.

Art directed what remaining energy he had to cleaning his office. He

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honestly didn't know what he was going to do after all this was put in boxes. What was he going to do now? What was there to do at home all day? He was afraid of just sitting up in the mountains doing nothing. He didn't want that. And yet, he was almost too old to be hired anywhere else. With his children and social ties in Redwood, he wasn't about to move to another city for a job and he just couldn't picture himself farting around all week, looking forward to Sunday just so he could mow the lawn. Well, maybe he wouldn't mind that at retirement age...but not at 49. He'd been prematurely retired and prospects didn't look good. It was very unlikely that he would find anything related to his work here...unless he went back to teaching... Art was an optimist at heart, but everything was too uncertain, too worrisome today to be optimistic about.

Later, Art went over to watch Bill play in the deathmatch. When he left the office that day, for the last time, only Kendra and Kathy and the remaining hardcore Dan Destroyem Deathmatch Extravaganza players, who were down to about 28 now, were still in the office. Three Dan Deathmatches were running simultaneously as Kepsi Kola flowed freely and insults were traded above the heavy sounds of gunfire, explosions, discombobulated flesh, and heavy metal music.

Somehow the Dan Destroyem phrase "*I'm kickin' ass for the children*" floating over the cubicles from the other end of the office was comforting to Kendra. It made her laugh somehow at how stupid it was, at how involved she'd been, physically and mentally, in game production...and now...now it was hard to care...even if Madre was keeping her on as a contractor to finish her Gorr game.

"I feel bad," Kendra volunteered.

"About leaving? Me too," Kathy returned, stuffing some folders into her banker's box.

"No. That I hired you. I mean...that I hired you to move out here and work on a game and it never happened and now you're out of a job. I feel...personally responsible."

Kathy laughed and rolled her eyeballs. "You're not seriously going to beat yourself up over this, are you? What could you have done about it? Not hired me?"

"I guess. Still, it's pretty crappy. And I was starting to get really excited about the stuff we were doing with Fantasy Quest. I haven't felt excited about doing a Fantasy Quest in five years."

"Really?"

"God. I was getting so sick of it." Kendra stuffed some disks into Kathy's box. It seemed odd that both Kathy and Newman had had their

interviews and were hired around the same time. And now, just over a year later, Kathy was fired and Newman was CEO. And unlike everyone else, Kathy hadn't been here long enough to receive any benefits.

"Well, you've got Gorr to work on," Kathy added.

"Yeah, that will be nice, I suppose. Though I feel less motivated after all this. But I can work on it from home, so it should be more relaxing. It's odd, really. We started this company working from out of our house, just the two of us. And now we're back at it...except working for Melfina. The world operates in circles."

Kathy nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Kendra asked.

Kathy shrugged. "I don't know. This is a nice part of the country. I'd like to stay here. I'll probably write again. Look for an easy part-time job on the side."

"Oh yeah. I forgot you wrote," Kendra said sheepishly. They both laughed.

"Yeah," Kathy bent over to pick up the last of her things. "Me too. I was having too much fun to remember."

They stared at each other over a long pause. Kendra was holding the photo of Kathy's son. It was the last thing she had picked off the desk and held onto it hoping it would give her enough time to think of something to say...but she was coming up dry.

## THINK OF SOMETHING TO SAY.

You can't. You are devoid of ideas.

*Arrrg!* This was the time to say something, something important or meaningful. Will was always shooting out important and meaningful things off the top of his head. Kendra was only brilliant on paper. And now she was saying goodbye to her good friend and she felt like there should be something she could say to make her not go away, or...but she struggled to find anything at all. Kendra awkwardly flipped the photo between her hands and then gave up, resting it on top of Kathy's box.

"Thanks for all the help," Kendra finally managed.

"I should thank you."

"Yeah, you should."

They both laughed.

"Well..." Kathy said, lingering before turning to go.

"Hey," Kendra burst out.

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“Yeah?” Kathy turned around.

“You think, maybe, when you’re writing, I could see some of it or something?”

“You mean critique and make suggestions?”

Kendra laughed, “Well. I don’t know if I could do that...I just...I’m just curious what it’s like. I always wanted to write. It’s how we got into all this, really. I wanted to be a writer, but somehow I ended up in computer games.”

“That would be great,” said Kathy.

“*Nobody* blows up my strip joint...and lives!” Dan Destroyem’s voice boomed from across the office.

Kendra and Kathy both laughed and went to watch the extravaganza for a while. Dan Destroyem had a load of new quips and half-naked babes which was entertaining enough to watch. Around 9:30 they left the building, chatting too much on the way to the parking lot to even think about looking back. They had a good laugh trying to stuff all the horrible Gorr promotional materials from e2c2 into Kendra’s car. Zombies now inhabited her back seat and the life-size wraith cardboard stand-up peering hauntingly out of the back window was sure to freak out anyone who pulled up behind her on the way home.

The two decided to stop over at Kendra’s place for some coffee and chit-chat instead of calling it a night. Kendra felt like it was the last day of school – that tinge of excitement, that summer promise of fun-times-forever, stretching out endlessly in front of you. Anything could happen during summer holidays. It was a creative playground, waiting to be filled by your best ideas...and too often filled by the ideas of your parents. Conversely, Kendra also felt like it was the very last day of school – of grade twelve, when a bizarre uncertainty, the sadness of finality and goodbyes lingered in the air.

“I don’t have any exciting coffee,” said Kendra. “I’m jealous of whoever took the cappuccino machine. I was thinking it would be nice to have a little cappuccino party on the last day of work, for old times sake, you know?”

Kathy agreed.

When Kathy finally shuffled off after too many coffees and laughs, Kendra stared out into the back yard, watching rain fall onto the infamous Madre BBQ turf. She thought about her daughter and hoped she was ok. In a bizarre way she felt jealous of Heather’s struggles to find herself. Kendra’s life had been so straightforward, a tumbling into success. She made adventure games for a living but her daughter was...adventurous.

Will was right. Heather was released now. She just hoped she'd passed along enough puzzle solving tools to get Heather through, hoped she'd done as much for her daughter as she had done for her fans.

Beside Kendra, Dan Destroyem had now materialized and was staring out the deck window with her, sipping on a cup of coffee. She turned to him and smiled. He smiled back, took a bite out of his digestive cookie and said in that gravely voice, cookie crumbs dancing about in his mouth, "Your ass is grass."

Kendra laughed, understanding his comment about Madre, expressed with the limited range of personality the first person action shooter had granted him. "Ain't that the truth!"

Looking out the window again Kendra didn't have any projects due tomorrow – Gorr was on a it'll-be-finished-when-it's-finished schedule. There weren't going to be any more requests for other Fantasy Quests. No more supporting Will through the takeover. No more getting the kids to school before work.

Kendra had felt an unusual sensation wash over her earlier this evening, and it was still with her now, lingering. The feeling danced on the tip of her tongue with memories of a former life. What was it? What was this feeling? She'd felt it before. Sometime a long time ago. She remembered certain seasons with it.

And then Kendra realized what it was.

She was relaxed.

Laughing at the realization, Kendra pressed her hands up to the window, resting her forehead on the cool pane, watching the black rain drops settle into the grass.

"I guess I won't be needing this anymore," she said.

DELETE GAME INTERFACE

Are you sure you want to permanently delete the Game Interface?

Kendra thought about this...and then let go.

YES

Game Interface deleted.

Beside her, Dan Destroyem faded away.



## **Chapter 56; hot chocolate days and the secret hideout**

**Monday December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995 10:15 a.m.**

If Will had been here today, he might have wondered at how much the office building resembled a secret hideout. And indeed, it really was. Sequestered high up in the Sierra mountains, enclosed by miles of forest, accessible only by an intricate and sparse network of roads, Madre's building housed a busy group of the world's most skilled, specialized, talented, recognized and visionary computer game creators, clandestinely keeping their activities shrouded from the rest of the world until release dates.

The falling snow now only added to the effect. Cascading down from the chilled, opaque sky, it nestled on top of the rows and rows of pine trees that embraced the secret hideout creating little white caps that, if you blurred your vision, gave a realistic impression of a giant, green ocean, sea-foam sloshing over the top. It was early in the season for a snowfall this heavy, but it was known to happen. Although today was a little gray, they said on the news that it would warm up again before winter finally settled in. But it wasn't going to. An early winter had come and it was going to be one of the heaviest snowfalls in recent memory. It would fall and fall and fall and the snow would pile up and up and up around the ankles and legs of the building. And since nobody was around to operate the snow plough, it would just grow and grow, slowly enveloping and burying the secret hideout... forever. Secret from the world, secret from even the mad computer scientists who used to work here, swallowed up and succumbing, finally, to its own secretiveness.

Will would have seen this. He would have felt this. Standing at his window, he would have somehow enjoyed the finality, the serenity of this image. He would have enjoyed, as he always did, the first snowfall from his window. He would be enjoying, immensely, his Monday. But Will wasn't here. No one was. It was a secret hideout, the best kind of secret. A real one. Sealed forever. Or at least until the Heather Hüterguns of the year 3000 came around.

If the building were capable of memories, of holding impressions made on and in it by the people it took care of, sheltered and nurtured like a mother, today it would have remembered hot-chocolate days, something long since forgotten by everybody. It was the first year that the team, then numbering a total of fourteen people, moved into this newly constructed office. Everyone was busy working on the sequel to their smash hit *Fantasy Quest*, designed and produced out of the Roberts' garage, whose profits sent them careening into this office. Team Madre had moved in early in the spring, easily doubling their staff by the end of the year, including hiring their first graphic designer, Geoff. It was their first winter in the office and everyone remarked at how neat the place was, how far they felt from civilization. Shielded from the harsh elements of modern living in this serene, beautiful forest...it was hard to believe they earned their keep by making games. Was this heaven?

In those early days it sometimes felt as if the arms of the Madre office cradled them, protected them, comforted and encouraged them. Made them invincible. This was long before the days of the snow plough and it was not unusual for people to show up extremely late or not at all on bad snow days. This was long before Berney even *had* a coffee shop. *Ma Greenley's Restaurant* served coffee off a hot plate, but it was the only place in Berney that served coffee, really...and not nearly close enough to be worth driving down to Berney for. This was before the days of even *fantasizing* about specialty coffee in the U.S., when lines of allegiance were drawn between normal and decaf, dairy or creamer, sugar or Supra-Sweet. On these especially cold days, Nadine, who had been their marketing help since before the first *Fantasy Quest*, was always drinking hot-chocolate. Somehow, this caught on and before long, on the worst days of winter, everyone who managed to make it into work would sit down together, making hot chocolate paid for by the company, sipping and sharing conversation. It was a lot less hectic those days. The event was enough to make people give 125% to get in during a blizzard.

Hot chocolate days became sort of an informal tradition that winter, but when summer returned, everyone forgot about it. Naturally, it revived the winter after, waking up to a staff of 37 people. The year after, however, Nadine left the company and with her, so did hot chocolate days. It just faded away somehow...a collective memory entirely extinct. Nobody had thought about it or remembered it for over twelve years now. But if the building were alive, today would have reminded it of hot chocolate days.

On Saturday, not long after noon, the last hard-core group of Dan

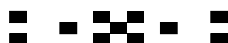
## Game Quest

Destroyem Deathmatchers had finished their final clean-up/looting, collected all their work effects and straggled home to bed, eyes stinging for sleep. Soon after, the cleaners came. They cleaned out drawers, desks, cabinets and trashcans. They wiped down the washroom and the kitchen counter and the desks. And then they left and locked the door behind them. All the office equipment wasn't going anywhere for weeks...waiting to be claimed by Melfina it remained set up as it had always been, like ghosts of the former office: visible but more not-here than here. Will's door, as it had been nearly every day for the past twenty years, was open, a testament to co-operation, consultation and kindness. The long-familiar sign on Art's door, hung up on the first day they moved into the office, was now gone. Art's 'Orifice' had ceased to be. Now it was just an office. The cubicles remained, stretching across the carpet in a confusing but familiar layout, yet housed no people. Desks were functional, yet empty. Cables ran along the floor to other computers, but devoid of signals. It was an office haunted by once-loved office equipment. At the print and fax areas, where usually there was a small line-up and a couple of conversations, there was nothing but silence. The printers lay lifeless, waiting...waiting to jolt to life, to communicate, to send a message to somebody, waiting for people that wouldn't come back. Nor was anyone in the kitchen, lining up for cappuccino. And the cappuccino machine was gone too, hidden behind boxes in Geoff's basement.

Silence, more deafening than the constant Madre hum, hung in the dead air over the cubicle maze. There was no movement. There was nobody. There weren't even protoplasmic traces of former staff haunting the hot spots, their actions and presence so woven into the fabric of space and time that after they'd gone, their energetic imprints would hang on for a few days more, lingering like a smell...or a memory of *deja-vu*, like the ghosting of other sitcoms on a television channel with bad reception. But this didn't happen. Even ghosts had forsaken Madre this Monday.

Against the window sill along the designers' offices, snow gently piled up in little slopes. Above the office the sky was vast, stretching on for miles, perhaps bigger than anyone had ever remembered seeing it. Medium gray with light-white streams it poured snow down. It wasn't a heavy snow, but constant, as millions of little, individually unique flakes parachuted to the ground, coating the forest, piling up impossibly high on the branches of trees, as if it were trying to reach its home back in the sky from where it had fallen.





## Chapter 57; hello world

December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1995

It was the twelfth time this week Heather had beaten the game from start to finish. She watched now, half-dazed as the credits rolled up the screen. It was odd to see all these creators and designers...all this work, all these people to design one woman...

Heather wasn't even sure what time it was. The blinds were closed and her bedroom door was locked. It was like sitting in the closet...but with a computer. She was pretty sure it was Sunday. Maybe it was Saturday morning. She couldn't remember. It had been a long weekend and she'd come home early after work on Friday to play, like she had on Thursday and Wednesday and Tuesday and Monday. She didn't talk to anyone. She just slipped out of the office, headed right home to her room, shut the door, booted up *Crypt Destroyer* and played it...without emotion, without enjoyment, without desire. She just played it. And when she had beaten it, she watched the credits roll by until the intro screen returned with the familiar *bling-bling-chang!* where she selected 'new game' and started again. And again. And again. And again. And again. She was playing like an automaton, ruthlessly conquering the game with no goals in mind except to complete the task, almost as if observing, from inside her skull, her own playing.

The demon statue of Toqra-zah had just finally fallen for the twelfth time. Heather didn't know how many hours had passed since she'd started, but she knew how many times she'd destroyed the final Mayan Statue Boss. She'd been living off the pizza she'd ordered that now lay, mostly finished, in a corner of her room. Heather had been sleeping both on the floor and on the bed for the past few days, occasionally sneaking out to go to the washroom...or get pizza from the door.

Her eyes felt heavy, like they were buckets of water; the soft light of the computer felt like soap on her skin. Credits finished, Heather Hüterguns jumped down onto the screen, her voluptuous appendages bouncing as if in zero-gravity. She fired a shot towards the player and the screen went 'game over.'

## Game Quest

Heather selected a new game and hit enter. She began to run down the entry corridor of level 1, episode 1. When she'd first played this game, an undeniable feeling of glee had swelled in her gut. She couldn't put the thing down and it wasn't just because it was fun...it was because of something else. She fantasized about not only playing the game when she was in bed or at school, but about BEING the game. She'd become obsessed with it, in a way...but for a reason. The only problem was, Heather didn't understand the reason. And so she played...and replayed...and replayed. And the more she played it, the closer she figured she would get to understanding...she was sure of it. This wasn't fun anymore, this was business.

Heather knew that when she was first playing the game she had kind of wanted to be like Heather Hüterguns. Not for real...not for real, because, obviously, that was fantasy. Heather never actually *believed* she could be Heather Hüterguns – making a living raiding cultural artifacts and killing things. But she wanted to be *like* Heather Hüterguns in a fantasy way... And maybe she *could* be like Heather Hüterguns. Maybe she could embody her style: the strength, the power, the no-nonsense femininity, the devil-may-care independence... She didn't care if Heather was the product of some male fantasy...she was her fantasy too.

But all these thoughts were new thoughts to Heather. They had come over the last few days as she locked herself away in here, tapping keys diligently. When she'd first decided she wanted to be like Heather Hüterguns...it hadn't been a conscious choice. She'd known it was fantasy. She liked the game because she got to be tougher, stronger, reckless... But she adored it. Was envious of it and decided that *this* would be her future, or the real life equivalent of it, at least. At some point, she guessed, this innocent desire, which she hadn't really acknowledged, had perversely mutated into a quest for breast implants...

Heather was angry at herself about that. Because it was so *not* the point! Why had she wanted to get them, anyway? It didn't make sense. She KNEW that it wasn't about bigger breasts. In fact, getting implants had the general effect of being the exact *opposite* of everything she had wanted to be and have and prove. If she was really tough and independent, she wouldn't feel like she needed 'improvements'. Heather Hüterguns would have never got breast implants...but then again, Heather Hüterguns didn't need to... and if Heather Hüterguns didn't need to, well then, neither did Heather Roberts. Heather was mad at herself and embarrassed that she had told all these people she was going to get implants. She felt like an idiot, was disappointed in herself. And

yet, she still wanted to be like Heather Hüterguns...

Heather stopped the controls. She dropped her hands to her side and watched the screen. Heather Hüterguns stopped too. She didn't move or react to anything. She'd been so purposeful, running through mazes, picking up ammo, pushing blocks around...and now she just stopped, as if she were a marionette and the puppetmaster had just gone home. Heather watched her stand there, hollow, unable to move. A snake slithered into the room, found Heather Hüterguns and began biting her. She reacted, jumping back automatically, but the snake moved in, biting again. Her health bar dropped with each bite until, finally, she slumped to the floor dead. The snake slithered out of the room. Heather didn't push any buttons to revive her, just watched her lie there, as lifeless as when Heather had dropped the controls. There was no sense of loss.

Heather reached for the phone and dialed Carol's number. Heather didn't know what time it was, but it was important that she talk to Carol. She had an idea...and she knew Carol wouldn't mind.

"How may I serve you?" came Carol's voice. Heather could tell Carol was eating food. It'd been weeks since they spoke.

Heather laughed. "Is that how you answer the phone now?"

"Yeah," laughed Carol. "Today, anyway. So...how may I serve you?"

Heather was glad they were beyond apologizing. Forgiveness came with true understanding and needed no apologies. "Do you want to go to Seattle?" Heather asked.

"What do you mean?" Carol stopped chewing. "Like, now?"

"No. In February."

"February? Why? For a visit?"

"No. I mean, move there. You and me. We'll get work."

"Really?" A pause came from Carol's end, "What about EGO?"

"I don't know. I think I'm going to quit at the end of the probationary period." Heather stared at the flickering game screen.

"Really? Why?"

"I dunno. Lots of reasons. I'm not sure if I want to continue doing this...staring all day at a screen. And the office is kind of macho. I mean, they're all nice. And a lot of them are interesting to talk to...like most computer nerds in high school. I dunno. They all really like it...making games, I mean...and...I do too, I guess. But it's not...I don't want to just design games all day...for the rest of my life. Adam is good to talk to... but he's really absorbed in the computing stuff. He's hunched over that screen for hours doing...code magic. It is magical... No one knows how he does it. But it's – I don't really want to talk about that stuff. I dunno.

## Game Quest

It's fun. I just don't know. I want to have fun like in Las Vegas. Like when we first started the CamelToes clan. I want to have an adventure with my life."

"I guess *they* didn't survive the probationary period," Carol joked.

"Yeah," Heather answered back with a smile. Carol had an infectious way of making Heather smile...but it hadn't happened in a long while.

"They're moving into a new office in April," Heather added. "Something bigger."

"I'm surprised they stayed in that little place for so long," said Carol. "It doesn't seem to fit their rock-star reputations..."

"Heh, yeah. I think if they could buy up this apartment, level it and put up a giant palace shaped like a gun or a naked woman, they'd do it. But I think they enjoy the apartments. Anyway, the new place is in this warehouse across town. Oh! And they're importing this giant 18 foot square slab of marble to put in the foyer of the new office. I saw pictures of it today. It has their logo engraved gigantically in it. It's crazy. They're shipping it from Taiwan."

"Oh my god. You can't be serious. 18 feet square? That's massive! How much does that cost?"

"I don't know. I don't think the office even knows. They don't care. They've got more money than they know what to do with. They just ask for stuff and Alice, who's basically been hired to be their business mom, gets it."

"Man, that's crazy. They might as well just have their faces carved into mount Rushmore. Four presidents...and the designers of Gloom."

Heather tried not to laugh at the thought of it, as if it was making fun of them. She genuinely liked everyone in the office. But it was just craziness.

"I don't know. I guess I can understand that," Heather said. "How can you help but lose touch with reality? I think, I mean, these guys see their names everywhere, in gaming magazines, business magazines, they have to turn down interviews because they get so many requests. Fans and gaming magazines, with a straight face, call them gods. It's not even that they started out with inflated egos...it's that their godlike egos are created by the gaming community."

"So you want to go to Seattle?" Carol confirmed.

"Yeah."

"What's in Seattle?"

"I don't know. That's why we should go. I just picked it. Heather and Carol conquer Seattle. When we get bored of it, we can conquer

somewhere else. Seattle seems interesting, though. I kind of always wanted to go there. It's...different. I think you could get a cool job there. We could get coffee and we could go to see bands!"

"I like bands."

"We could find a place and be roommates...and find some lame-o jobs. And live life, you know."

"Yeah? Wow. I don't know." Carol was stunned. It was a radical idea. Or, at least, a big idea and one she hadn't thought of herself. "It would be cool. It'd be cool to move away from here. My mom wouldn't like it...but that's even more reason to do it."

"Well, it's just an idea... But I want to do it. Let's do it."

"Yeah. Definitely. Wow. I couldn't wait to graduate from high school and do something...but now that I'm out...I really have no plans. I've just been hanging around here doing nothing, staying at home when the whole reason I was so desperate to graduate was so I could get away."

"I think it would be fun."

"Yeah, it would be awesome!"

"I've never lived in a big city before," Heather said. "I think it would be cool. And it's by the sea! Think of all the stuff we could do there, all the trouble we could get into."

"Definitely!" Carol joined, "and my favorite aunt lives in Abbotsford, just across the border. She's really cool. You'll like her. We could visit any time and go to Vancouver too."

There was a pause as the smile on Heather's face set permanently into her cheeks.

"What about Adam?" Carol asked after a while, seriously.

Heather shrugged and paused. "I dunno." It was the truth.

"Things aren't going well?"

"I don't know. I don't know what 'well' is. Its not that we aren't getting along. I think we get along. I like him. But, it's just like...the job...it feels like the relationship is as exciting as the job. He's nice...and sweet...and he's not totally in love with himself like George Stevens or anything. I don't know. But I'm not sure Adam knows how to fit into the normal world, or, at least, the world I inhabit where people aren't gods. Where the things I like about him are his faults. I don't think he can understand that. He always wants to do these extravagant things. Hosting deathmatch parties on massive yachts in San Francisco...renting out hotels and inviting fans for major gaming parties. I don't know. I guess that just doesn't impress me. Not that he's trying to impress me. But I'm supposed to find that fun. Everyone does, right? But I don't. Maybe something is wrong with me...I

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don't know, but it's not me. I don't want to stay here...and these aren't the sort of things I find exciting. But Adam is not going to want to leave. He's comfortable here. I don't want Lodi to be the end of the line."

"Yeah. Hmmm. Well, that's ok. There's lots of boys in Seattle. And with the two of us we can double our efforts."

"Yeah. I'll ride your coattails."

Carol laughed. "Ok, sport. I'll show you how it's done."

Heather laughed too.

"You're going to be a real heartbreaker, I know," Carol said. "And after we've seen everything worth seeing and humped everyone worth humping in Seattle we'll move on."

Heather laughed, "Yeah." The conversation lulled into relaxed silence.

Heather's mind wandered off into Seattle fantasies and she stared up at the cork-board above her computer, photos of her family taped there.

"So what about the... You still think you're not going to get them?"

Heather wanted to just forget she had ever mentioned getting breast implants. She was glad Carol was still her friend after such a dumb idea. "I'm sure. I'm sure I don't want them. I think I never really wanted to do it, actually. I think that's the whole reason why I told my mom about it. I never tell my mother *anything*...especially stuff she will poo-poo. Subconsciously I think I wanted her to say no or something...to convince me not to do it."

"Well, it worked," Carol said.

"Yeah,"

"I want to move to Seattle. That's what I want."

"Seattle Quest. Cool. I think moving to Seattle is better than getting a boob job."

They both laughed at this.

"Ok," Carol said. "Let's do it. For sure."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Let's start planning now."

"Ok!" Heather shouted excitedly, searching for a paper and pencil in the wreckage of plates, papers, disks, pop and pizza boxes on her desk. She found a pencil sitting in a glob of garlic butter.

"Oh wait," said Carol, "How are your parents doing? Anything going on with Madre?"

Heather shrugged. "No. It's done for. It's been almost two months since they decided to close Redwood and there's no way any of them are going to be hired back. Art Loel's contract will end in April...and

everyone's pretty sure they won't hire him back. My parents are adjusting, I guess. Mom's still got her Gorr game going, but there doesn't seem to be much support for it in San Francisco. She hired her writer friend to work on it with her, so I think she's enjoying that. My dad's taking everything harder, though. He hangs around at home a lot. He does some work for Madre, but not much. He walks the dogs and my mom says he bar-b-ques almost every night and she is getting sick to death of it, but they have mini bar-b-que parties with the other staff sometimes. I don't know. I don't think either of them want to jump into making more games...or starting another company. And they've got a lot of money so they don't really need to. They've got to figure out what they want to do with their lives now, I guess."

"That's sad," Carol said. "Do you think Madre will ever change their mind and make more Quest games?"

"I dunno. My dad is optimistic but my mom doesn't think so and Madre has stated several times that they have no plans for development. I think my mom is right about that. Firing all your creative staff kind of kills any chances you have of continuing those games."

"But what about the designers? Couldn't they make more games on their own? If Madre doesn't want them anymore and isn't going to do anything with them, then the designers could make sequels themselves, right?"

"Madre owns the rights and they won't sell them. A group of the designers, mostly the HomoSapien Quest guys, have got together to try and get Madre to sell the rights, but they are refusing."

"That's *stupid!*" Carol was obviously angry at this news. "What's the point? If they're not going to use them..."

Heather nodded in agreement. But what could they do? "I feel sorry for my dad," she said. She missed him a little bit.

"Yeah, me too. Your dad is nice."

There was a pause on the phone. When the conversation started up again they were agreeing on how to meet up in Seattle.



## Epilogue; restart? restore? quit?

### Madre Quest

By Fred Goodwin

*(uncut final draft article for Game Mania Magazine, May/July 1998.)*

I never liked video games. They were too frivolous to take seriously. Somewhat ironically, though, my father worked at what was commonly recognized as the greatest computer game company of all time. Much to my own consternation and the envy of my friends, this made me eligible for the company's annual Internship program. To throw that consternation back in my friend's faces I swore that I would never ever apply. This amused me to no end and made them wriggle and steam in their seats with jealous frustration. I wanted to do something with my life. I wanted to be a writer, change the world and win a Pulitzer...not a Golden Joystick.

Then grade 12 rapidly arrived and I suddenly had to face the fact that I had not saved up *any* money for university, or for the around-the-world trip I had been dreaming of since grade 10. This, coupled with the prospect of another summer at Burger Hut **and** strong encouragement from my mother, forced me to do the unthinkable: ask my father for an internship application. Through some miracle my half-assed application made it through the piles and I was chosen. At the time it was a double-edged sword for me: my pride and values versus money to spend on my dreams. But, in retrospect, filling out that application was one of the best things I ever did. That company was Madre Entertainment, one of the most innovative companies in computer gaming history.

Little did I realize that by the end of my short internship my opinion on computer games and the men and women that make them would have rotated 180 degrees. I would also probably never work for a company as interesting, enjoyable and innovative as Madre ever again. Indeed, I have yet to. But, more importantly, at the time of my internship, nobody in the entire company had any inkling that I would be the last intern they would ever hire and, little more than a year after my departure, Madre as they knew it would be bought out, the office closed, all the employees



fired and the production of 3-D adventure games, Madre's creation and signature product, discontinued forever.

Madre's contributions to the computer gaming industry have been so significant and copious that the industry can easily be organized into two periods: Madre and post-Madre. Madre's litany of accomplishments include: creating the world's first graphical adventure game, employing the world's most prolific, awarded and successful female computer game author, countless gaming awards (including 7 Games of the Year!), breaking numerous sales records (often their own), pioneering realistic sound quality in computers, having the largest female fan base of any gaming company, having the largest number of female employees of any gaming company, and for creating, at the time, the world's largest commercial computer network, SupraNet.

Of course, not everything can be measured in records and many of Madre's accomplishments are ethereal. Madre was best loved for taking risks, striving for originality and for doing things for the love of games, sometimes at the expense of profit. Madre was the envy of all competing companies not only because of its success, but because of its renowned relationship with its employees. Madre was the people's game company and web sites dedicated to Madre games, music and characters continue to proliferate across the Internet despite the fact the company hasn't released an adventure game in three years and has publicly stated it has no intentions of doing so in the future.

The current Madre is a shell of its former self. Another entity entirely rests under the name. Madre no longer creates games, but publishes, distributes or contracts the work of smaller firms. The heart and soul of Madre left on Black Monday and whether you are a fan of the original Team Madre or not, you cannot deny that the industry is not the same without them. Madre's current financial and legal troubles only serve to remind us of the company's former days, when it flew high and proud.

I won't be maudlin and say that the industry is worse off for the loss of Madre. I don't think that is true. However, things are definitely different and Madre's fall was the first and biggest sign that the gaming landscape had been seriously altered. Perhaps the reason Redwood Studios' collapse is seen as so significant is because no one from Team Madre – the biggest names in the industry at that time – has done anything since. It is as if they have dropped off the face of the gaming planet.

I know I'm not the only one who wonders what happened to these individuals and so decided to go on a quest of my own to hunt down my former colleagues, to find out what these heroes of Sci-Fi Quest,

## Game Quest

Fantasy Quest, Swarthy Victor and HomoSapien Quest are doing now and uncover their insights into the gaming industry three years after Black Monday.

**Art Loel**, *Creator and Designer of the Swarthy Victor series.*

**Bill Shafer**, *Former Madre art-lead & Swarthy Victor co-designer.*

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I have just finished watching *Swarthy Victor: the movie* released on VHS last year. Art excitedly asks me what I think as we sit on the couch, staring at the static ridden TV. I dig into the nuts on the table to avoid answering. I'm not sure if Art is proud of this movie or not and am hesitant to say what I really think. Art laughs. "Pretty mediocre, huh?" he prods. I agree. But I think he is being kind to his own movie. Insipid is a better description.

"Art's son said it best," Bill chimes in. "*It sucks donkey balls!*"

Art laughs. "I think that would have made a better quote for the newspaper ads than what they used...what was it again?"

Bill, as usual, helps him out. "'The laugh-a-minute movie marathon of the year!'"

"That's right," Art chuckles to himself, "Where do they come up with this stuff? I couldn't write something that bad if I locked myself in my closet and ate nothing but cheese-puffs for two months. I think of all the phrases to use to plug a movie 'The laugh-a-minute movie marathon of the year!' is the phrase most likely to make me NOT want to see that movie."

Bill and Art laugh together, almost revelling in how much the movie, based on their hit game series, stinks. I am transported back five years to our brain-storming sessions in their office. Although I was the communal gopher around the office, obliged to get coffee or take notes for anyone whenever they wanted it, I worked primarily for Bill and Art. They claimed me from the beginning, forcing me to be the overworked zookeeper in their tent of wild and untamed ideas. Somehow we are in this position again. Bill, visiting from San Francisco, and Art go off as usual while I struggle to copy everything down – my tape recorder having run out of batteries on the drive up.

"I'm actually quite pleased that it stinks so bad, actually," Art says. "It's rather fitting: Victor finally gets some attention, gets a big budget Hollywood movie made out his life and it's a total stinker. It's perfect. It's what would happen to Victor. Art imitates life...in art."

I try to steer Bill and Art's conversational circus in a cohesive direction:

**Q:** *I know you've been asked this question a million times by fans, but will there ever be a Swarthy Victor 5?*

**Art:** Who knows. It certainly isn't going to happen anytime soon. After the movie sunk...which was really their own fault, they abandoned what little plans they had for a game sequel. Madre owns the Quest game rights so we can't legally make another one without their permission. I know several people have tried to secure the rights, but Madre refuses to sell and, frustratingly, refuses to do anything with the rights themselves.

**Bill:** I think that should be illegal. If you have the rights but aren't going to use them...

**Art:** I would be interested in doing another Swarthy Victor game if the opportunity came up...but I wouldn't hold your breath. I really don't see it coming, particularly with the recent financial troubles.

**Q:** *The adventure game has all but disappeared in the last four years. Are rumors of the genre's death greatly exaggerated, or do you see a comeback?*

**Art:** That's hard to say. It's kind of dogma to say that the market drives the economy...that demand will create supply. But I don't see that happening. I know there are thousands of players who want nothing more than another adventure game. I still get emails daily asking if another Swarthy Victor will come out. There are fan sites all over the web devoted to Madre and adventure games. There's a market, but Madre and others argue that the adventure gaming public just isn't willing to cough up the dough because once in a blue moon some company releases a crappy adventure game and then they lose money.

**Bill:** Gamers lost faith in the adventure game because the market was flooded with a lot of bad games. Most of the few released today are really sub-par. Nobody wants to spend 50 bucks on a dull adventure game. One advantage an action game has over an adventure game is that even a bad action game can be enjoyable...while a bad adventure is a terrible chore.

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**Art:** Morbid Macarena. That came out after the market bottomed out and was probably one of the best adventures ever created. It did well but didn't blow the socks off of any sales records or anything. It proved that a well-made adventure game in a cynical market could sell, but it's gonna take more than one under-marketed game to win back that faith. But the companies aren't interested. The problem with the adventure game is that it's not going to make *scathes* of money. The vast majority of gaming houses today are shareholder or venture capitalist run – money is predominantly the driving force of the game production. The actual creators of the game, I'm sure, want to make the coolest game ever. Every game designer's dream is that they'll get a big cool plaque that says 'Creator of the Coolest Game Ever in the History of the Universe.' Funders don't care about that though. They want a plaque that says 'Maker of the Most Money Ever in the History of the Universe – Communism Sucks!' They want the shortest route to the biggest bucks. Adventure games are like a Japanese garden. They take skill and time and are usually immeasurably satisfying. Action games are like pet rocks. They sell like crazy but any fool can make them and most fools will buy them.

**Bill:** I don't think it's dead. The desire and hope is out there and continues to grow. I think there's a comeback in the works. Even if the games are fan made and distributed as freeware, it will return. Fans would probably produce better games, too, with the pressure of investment out of the equation. I mean, even in the good days at Madre we always had to kill good ideas because of money or timeline issues.

**Art:** Yeah. I think action games are suffering the same fate as adventure games. There's too many of them and they need to be increasingly sophisticated to sell. All the companies know this, but they'll keep pumping them out until they panic and sink their own ship by all jumping overboard at the same time. They're like lemmings.

**Q:** *How do you feel about the notorious Black Monday...and what do you miss most about working for Madre?*

**Art:** I still get angry sometimes. Not so much because of what happened with Melfina...but because we were the ones that, ultimately, put ourselves in that position. We were so naïve. I mean, when they changed our name to Redwood that should have been a big flashing sign of impending doom. Melfina's plan all along was to kill the adventure

game. They wanted in on the action game market. The trick for them was getting rid of all of us. They should have just renamed us Deadwood—

**Bill:** (laughs) Deadwood. Good one.

**Art:** Thanks... Anyway, we were naïvely rallying our fans to write protest letters but Melfina didn't care. We were stupid to think the fact that people liked our games mattered. Melfina changed our name so people wouldn't notice when Redwood was axed. *Everyone at Redwood got fired? Who were they?* So, sometimes I get angry at ourselves for being so...out of touch with what was really going on.

**Q:** *And what do you miss most?*

**Art:** I miss...I think the hardest and strangest thing about Madre was not that it ended...but the realization that the work we did there was the best we ever did and would ever do. It's hard to move on when you know that you'll never top what you did before. I don't think any of us realized it at the time...but we were doing incredibly important things, shaping an industry. I still find it hard to believe we were paid as much as we were, and celebrated and respected for so much work that wasn't work...for having fun. And knowing that is an incredibly rare thing to achieve and we will never replicate that again in our lifetimes makes me a little sad sometimes. It's really bitter-sweet. On the other hand, I've already done incredibly important things, so I can focus on relaxing, hobbies, retirement.

**Bill:** I miss working with Art.

**Q:** *You know how they do these 'where are they now?' exposés for old pop stars? How would you describe yourself to fans now wondering 'where are they now?'*

**Art:** (laughs) Well, I maintain my website for fun. It's nice to get letters from people who enjoyed my games...and my books. Oh yeah, I've written a couple of children's books in the last two years which were well received. Critics describe me as 'offbeat & brilliant' which is a nice change from the usual 'bald and fat man who writes dirty computer games for a living.' (laughs) I wrote a couple of joke books too. Most people who come to my website via my kids' books are surprised to learn

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that I wrote Swarthy Victor...but most of them accept it. The humor is the same. And the ones that get uptight about it, well... Who cares? If they get uptight, then they're not really the ones I want reading my books. Other than that I relax and do what I want. Art Loel: teacher, musician, author, professional dirty game maker. I've lived a full life.

**Bill:** Right now I'm working as an artist and designer for Zenihil studios, a small gaming studio in San Francisco. We just released our first game last year. It was actually published by Madre.

### **Kendra Roberts,**

*Co-founder of Madre, Designer of Fantasy Quest, Gorr.*

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Kendra doesn't seem like the type of woman to wear sunglasses, but out on the patio of Mama Mia's Ristorante Italiano the sun is scorching. I feel overdressed. We are in Berney, the town nearest the Robert's residence and the forest where Madre once reigned. Kendra digs into her Caesar salad and I am disappointed that I can't see her eyes. It makes it harder to do an interview. But, then again, talking to her here, I get the feeling that I will never fully understand Kendra Roberts. Working at Madre I only spoke with her on a few occasions. Even I, the computer game hater, was in awe of Kendra Roberts. She was a god in the computer game world...and a woman – with seemingly boundless creative energy. She kept changing, evolving, like you could never catch her. Peering through her sunglasses is the closest, perhaps, anyone will ever get to understanding the complex being that is Kendra Roberts. I'm lucky to have even a shot at getting a few glimpses.

We chit and chat and I'm surprised at how easy she is to talk to...and wonder why I never spoke to her much during my internship. The lemon slices in our tall glasses of water bounce light off the ice cubes, painting yellow rays across our forearms, plates and the tablecloth. Kendra wipes her mouth and I segue into our interview.

**Q:** *Madre had a reputation, shocking at the time, for having a large number of female customers in an era where most women wouldn't even touch a computer. Statistics show that female gamers are increasing in number. What's your take on the myth of the girl gamer?*

**Kendra:** Well, like you say, I think girls were afraid to touch computers because it was seen as a male domain – like peeing standing

up or something. I think some shied away from it because they felt using a computer, or pretending to know about it, would make them seem less feminine. I also think a lot of guys in the industry can be pretty macho about their machines. *Girls can't use machines!* So encouragement certainly wasn't there. I think a lot of women didn't play computer games, not so much because of the games, but because of the computers...because of the genderification – is that a word? – of the computers themselves. That's changed a bit over the years. It's seen as something that everybody uses now...

**Q:** *So you don't think the fact that men are designing all the games makes a difference?*

**Kendra:** No, no. I'm not saying that. I don't know, maybe ten years ago I would have argued that it was a self-fulfilling cycle: *Women don't play games because they don't have 'womany' stuff in them. They don't have 'womany' stuff in them because they are mostly designed by men. The games are all designed by men because most women don't know or care about computers or games.* I'm not so sure I'd argue that now, though. I mean, it still plays a large part. Traditionally, women aren't too into guns and explosions...but I think that is more of a *girls aren't supposed to like that stuff* attitude rather than that women, biologically, don't care about that stuff. But, more importantly, scantily clad females or the whole 'save the helpless female and win the game' plotline syndrome – which I admit even I used in *Fantasy Quest 1* – doesn't offer up as much excitement for a woman as it might for a man. They're just less likely to associate with male characters, even if the goals are the same.

But things have changed a lot. It's pretty common today to have a female main character...it's almost sacrilege not to have at least one major female character to choose from. Sure those females are always slim and sexy and busty...but it's more interesting than playing a muscle-bound man. And, really, the slim, sexy tough woman, I think, can be as much an attraction to women as to men. It's fantasy. Nobody wants to play a homely wimp. The male characters are never fat and ugly. They, too, are muscular ideals – often violent ideals – but ideals, none the less.

I guess if I had a concern about females and gaming today it would be the almost total lack of female designers. There are, generally, more women involved in the industry than when we started, but, I think they're usually involved as artists and producers. Game design is still largely a male domain. When women designers *are* allowed into the fray,

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it's usually to make games based on dolls or hair or something. So, I don't know. I think more women are playing and liberating themselves from constraining stereotypes like *women can't play games*...but, at the same time, there are so few women making games...just normal, good games. That's a disappointment. To me, games shouldn't be about gender. They're about fun.

**Q:** *As, arguably, the creator of the 3D adventure game, how do you feel about its present status? Is the adventure game dead? How do you feel about action games dominating the market?*

**Kendra:** I don't know what to say about action games. I mean, people seem to like them. They are fun, I guess. They work on a totally different level from an adventure game, though. They push the wow factor and work on adrenaline. They get you excited, pull you in faster, play on your body's instincts and split second decisions. An adventure game is more cerebral, slower and less passive than an action game. Like a book the excitement comes from a plot and character development and you, as a player, have to invest some time in getting into the adventure, associating with the characters. You keep playing because you want to follow the story and learn how it ends...and you have an active part in doing that. I think a good adventure game can be much more satisfying than an action game overall. It's easier to get stuck in an adventure game, I think, but then you feel more satisfied when you do solve it. You feel clever. But it takes more patience and intellect to enjoy than an action game. That sounds really elitist, I know, and I don't mean it to be. I'm not saying people who like action games are dumb. Those games work on the opposite plane of human intelligence. A lot of people like both types of game. But I think it's easier to play an action game. Just like it's easier to watch TV than to read.

So is the adventure game dead? I don't know. I don't think so...but it's not returning to its heyday. I think it will remain a minor game genre. One or two will come out a year. It will develop a certain steady demographic, but it won't own the market.

**Q:** *We used to hear from Kendra Roberts all the time. Now that Redwood Studios is gone, so are all your voices. What is Kendra Roberts up to today? Will we be seeing any more games from the famed Adventure Game writer?*



**Kendra:** *(laughs)* I'm not doing much. I'm really enjoying the low key lifestyle these days. You know, everybody wants to accomplish something with their life, to feel like they did something important. I feel like I achieved that with Madre. The compulsion that says 'I've gotta do something important before I die!' is gone. It's a weight off your shoulders and after nearly 20 years of Madre, well, I think I'm still recuperating. The video game industry has changed a lot since I started. I'm not sure I'd want to get back into that. It would be more work than ever for less recognition...and I don't know what I have to prove. For now I'm working on other things...and keeping a relaxed approach.

**Q:** *What else are you working on?*

**Kendra:** Well, I don't want to give you any false-starts. I'm working on writing a book. It's something I always wanted to do...but making games kind of satisfied that creative desire. But now I have time. My friend Kathy Willis, the novelist who helped co-design Gorr and the never released Fantasy Quest 6, is helping me with it. So that's a lot of fun. I don't know if it will ever be finished...I don't want to start receiving letters asking 'when is your book coming out?' Let me say this: I plan on finishing it and publishing it. But who knows when. *(laughs)*

I've never done a novel, but dammit, if Art Loel can write a book for children, then I can write a book for adults! *(laughs)*. Don't ask me how he pulled that one off. Don't ask me how Art pulls anything off.

**Q:** *What do you miss most about Madre?*

**Kendra:** Nothing really. I mean, Madre was great. I can't even remember all the good times I had there. But it was over. I think we really accomplished something spectacular. We made an impact on the industry, on people, even the world, maybe. It ended rather abruptly and shockingly, but I don't think we would have ended it on our own. Good books can't go on forever. Sequels are rarely as good as the originals... especially when you get past four. Like our games, I think we did something new and important. It was great and it finished...with a bang. It was a nice little story, but someone else has to write a new book now.

I don't miss Madre. I don't think Madre is gone either. I still see a lot of people I worked with. They are friends. And I've moved on to the next part of my life. Madre wasn't the beginning and it wasn't the end. It was the middle. I'm excited to see what happens next.

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**Henry Washington,**  
*Madre Composer & Sound Engineer.*

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Henry's personality, like his role at Madre, hides in the background. You may not recognize his name, but if you ever played a Madre game, you can probably sing one of his songs, and probably have in the shower.

We are sitting around the table in his San Francisco office where he works as a consultant composing primarily for video game companies, but works on everything from bathroom tissue commercials to museum exhibit muzak. Henry left Madre soon after Black Monday.

Henry confesses that it is good to see a face from Madre again, even if it is only an intern. He genuinely misses Madre, you can tell.

**Q: *How did you feel about Black Monday? Why did Madre disappear so fast?***

**Henry:** I guess, mostly, I feel sorry that Madre couldn't go on. There are very few really decent things in life. Madre was one of those for me and a lot of people. Black Monday felt like watching a movie where the good guys lost, you know?

I feel most sorry for Will, though. He didn't lose his job but he beat himself up a lot. I think, not only did he lose his company and vision, he felt like he'd let everyone down. He always treated this thing – Madre – like a family affair. When Madre went down a lot of people were unemployed in an area with limited job options. I was sad to see it go, but for Will it was the hardest.

I think Madre was dead before Black Monday, though. Our games were getting pretty uninspired, as I've heard from fans since. We were becoming really corporate on our own. To stay alive we had to keep growing; we had to invest in stocks. I think if anything led to the downfall of Madre, it was the stocks.

**Q: How so?**

**Henry:** Lots of ways, I guess. The day we sold out to shareholders was the day we sold our jobs. I wasn't there at the time, but when Madre did that, the employees ceased to be their own boss. They were reporting to somebody else...people whose only interest in Madre was to get money. Suddenly the point of Madre wasn't to make games, or to contribute to society, or provide jobs, or to make a difference, whether they realized it

or not. I remember one of the guys in accounting talking with Will by the water cooler when I was first hired and they were still losing money on SupraNet. This guy asked him, ‘But why sustain it? What about making money?’ And Will answered ‘Making money is what the treasury does.’ I never actually liked SupraNet. I was sure it was going to sink us in the end, but I think that was the first time I really felt that I’d joined a company trying to do something beyond the obvious. People hear that ethic now and think we’re crazy – but we had a lot of success with it.

**Q:** So you think that if Madre had never sold those initial shares, it would still be here today?

**Henry:** Well, I don’t see how you can not get into stocks these days. It wasn’t like Madre ever really had a choice. It started growing so fast, it needed investment just to keep up with itself. Financially, all your competitors have stock money and if you don’t, you’re toast.

Once you have shareholders suddenly you’re trapped in this endless pole-vault to beat the previous year’s profits. Every year the bar is raised. It’s not enough that some company makes a decent product and solid revenue every year because, on the stock screen, that looks like you’re stagnant. Shareholders don’t make money unless stock value goes up. You have to make more money each year. This has to go on forever.

That’s how you end up with places like Che’s Coffee Revolution engorging the planet and why it’s so difficult to get eco-friendly cars made, or affordable drugs, or find effective solutions to world poverty. It’s like a horse with blinders in a never-ending race towards that dollar hanging at the end of the stick. But, like I said, you can’t avoid stocks anymore. Even companies that didn’t traditionally need stocks, like coffee houses, get trampled by stock bearing franchises like Che’s.

Anyway, all that Madre stuff was quite a while ago. I have a new job now and three kids to feed, so I really don’t think about it a lot.

**Q:** *What do you think about the state of games these days?*

**Henry:** I was never much of a gamer. The games look better. All the programmers are always telling me they are better, faster, but I never play them. I’m not good at them. My son tries to get me to play but it feels like playing piano without the sound coming out. The music quality is greatly improved. I can think more like a musician now, rather than a programmer. I can compose traditionally, hire a band and put a live

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recording into the game. You have so many more options.

**Tim Wilko & Geoff Rogers,**

*Award winning designers of the Sci-Fi Quest series.*

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“I’m still recovering from the ulcer,” Geoff tells me as he froths milk from a machine that has ‘property of Madre Games Entertainment’ branded on the side. “It was crazy, like we’d all turned into coffee fiends that last year...coffee and games and coffee and games – that’s all we thought about. I don’t know how that happened. When I left I looted this cappuccino machine...but before I’d used it even once my doctor diagnosed me with an ulcer. Now friends come over just to use the machine and rub it in.” He hands Tim and me our mugs. We sip and Geoff enjoys the flavor vicariously.

“Thought that one out well, didn’t you?” Tim snickers.

Geoff tells him to shut up and this seems as appropriate a time as any in the world of Tim and Geoff to begin the interview.

**Q:** *So, what do you guys think about the fact that, of all the Madre fans on the net, the vast majority of them are Sci-Fi Quest fans? Will their cries for another Sci-Fi Quest work? Do you guys still interact with your fans?*

**Geoff:** It’s cool. We’re the best.

**Tim:** Yeah. It’s nice to feel like you did something that people liked.

**Geoff:** Although, now it’s a little strange because, well, we haven’t created anything in three years...but the mail still comes.

**Tim:** We get asked for interviews a lot. That’s fun.

**Geoff:** The fan mail is from older people now, people who remember us. It’s nice...but not as exciting as when we were putting out new games.

**Tim:** Yeah, there are no more real young kids writing. Sci-Fi Quest is like another world to the current generation of young-uns. It’s old people stuff. I miss the young mail. But browsing through one of the more popular Sci-Fi Quest web sites I actually recognized the site founder’s

name because he'd written us a letter when he was, like, 11. That was kind of funny. I kept all our fanmail. Still read it sometimes.

**Geoff:** Even though it says designed by Tim Wilko and Geoff Rogers on all the game boxes, that's inaccurate. It's more like Geoff did 75% of the work while Tim spent 25% of the design time reading fan mail over and over.

**Tim:** Shut up! I did not.

**Geoff:** As if!

**Tim:** Whatever! I was left carrying the bag because you spent all your time at the cappuccino machine! Didn't take a doctor to know you were giving yourself an ulcer.

**Geoff:** Let's stay on topic, ok Tim?

**Tim:** I was on topic! You were the one that—

**Q:** *If the opportunity came up, would you do another Sci-Fi Quest?*

**Geoff:** Maybe. I don't know. It's hard work. And we've got our own projects going now. I think we'd both want to take it in different directions.

**Tim:** Yeah. Anyway, I really don't think the opportunity is going to come up since Madre is hoarding the rights to those games.

**Q:** *What do you think about the games Madre is putting out now?*

**Geoff:** Meltdown was cool. It was original. And it took a step I'm surprised nobody took long ago of weaving actual plot into an action game... But then, Madre didn't make that game. They just published it. There's nobody creative at Madre anymore...except for a few people who make ads and design game boxes.

**Tim:** Yeah, Meltdown was the only thing in the last three years of any note. Everything else has just seemed...painfully average. It's funny how quick a name and logo can be associated with blandness. It's odd

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because they were so focused on being ‘hip’ and ‘cool.’ They bought us for our brand real-estate – our name and logo - and then frittered it away churning out pablum. In computer gaming the proof is in the pudding. Companies earn cool by making cool games. Yes, Melfina puts out a fair number of decent, even cool games, but everyone knows they’re just a distributor. People want cool games, not cool distributors.

Anyway, we made the Madre name by focusing on game quality. We never cared much about brand recognition. In the end, Melfina bought our name and tossed the quality. It’s ironic.

**Q:** *With the recent embezzlement scandal threatening to kill off the Madre name for good, do you guys feel vindicated that your way of running a game business was smarter than theirs?*

**Tim:** Not in the least. It’s only the next obvious step in a series of inevitable chain reactions.

**Geoff:** Oh no. Now you’re going to hear his *theory*. I hope you have lots of batteries in that thing. (*my tape recorder*)

**Tim:** I don’t understand why people are surprised when good, original companies eventually get bought out by visionless corporatocracies. Because, if you look at the rules of modern day business, that’s the inevitable conclusion. If anything is surprising it’s that Madre managed to remain independent and innovative for nearly two decades in this sort of environment.

**Q:** *What do you mean?*

**Tim:** Ok, it’s like... I like to call it Business Darwinism: The most vicious and amoral thrive. The guy who wants more money, more power, is more willing to sink to new lows for promotion is much more likely to apply and achieve promotion over the guy who’s just satisfied doing a good job, doing the right thing, is satisfied with the money he’s making and the time off from work he has to focus on his hobbies and family, right? It’s like a pyramid where you keep knocking out the most ethical and down-to-earth on the way to the top. So, at the top you end up with slimeball #1. Who’s going to win a job for CEO? The qualified guy with morals, or the qualified guy who’s willing to cheat and lie to win the interview? I’m not saying this happens in all companies, but, for the most

part, the system drives the power-and-money-hungry into the captain's chair. These guys, like Tom Newman, are basically cogs in the machine, both driven by and driving the machine.

Not only are these guys promoted, but they are *rewarded* for their greed too. Save a million dollars by unethically dumping the company's waste in a field? Get a promotion! Give everyone a raise because the company is making money hand over fist? You get fired.

But this doesn't just apply to employees, it applies to companies within the business world as a whole. The bloodlust businesses buy-out or crush the little ethical guys who aren't prepared to play this sleazy game. How's a little company that never really cared about dominating the world going to stand up to one that does and has a million troops to do it? In fact, the only reason Madre got as far as it did doing things so much differently was because we found unconquered land: The computer gaming industry. But as soon as we settled it, the conquistadors smelled money and stormed in, uprooting crops and replanting nothing. In this system the reward for people like Will and Kendra is to have the land they settled bought out and turned into everything they hated. If you are not prepared to play the game the Melfina way, you get conquered. What happened to Madre was inevitable. It happens every day.

So, no, it doesn't surprise me that Madre now has to deal with corruption in its own ranks. In a company that sees the rules as 'what you can get away with', 'steal or be stolen from', business becomes a race to the bottom. Well, they're hitting bottom.

**Geoff:** Well, I'm not as radical as radical Tim... I'm not so jaded as to say there is no point in starting a company like Madre. We had a great 16 years and we showed a lot of people that you could do things your own way and be wildly successful. Those are important things. But the bigger you get, the more you have to decide what the point of your company is. You have to say 'Well, we could stay in business and compromise our values...or we could move on to something else. Start something new and different.' Madre, ultimately, made the second choice. And I'm proud of that. Madre was true to itself right to the end.

But that doesn't mean there was no point. Sure, it's frustrating, because every time you create something nice the 'power-leeches', as Tim likes to call them, storm in, steal your ideas, take credit, and abuse your inventions to further their world domination. It's disappointing and, in a way, Tim is right: we live in a system that promotes jerks. The true innovators of the world, the ones really making meaningful changes, get

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trampled on while companies like Melfina reap the rewards.

But in the end I don't think that matters because the reward isn't in winning. The reward is in creating, building new and better things, doing a job you know is useful and valued. Melfina will never have that. They don't know how to create that and they can't just grab it away. It's too ethereal.

In a way I'm glad we were destroyed by Melfina because our Madre, the Madre that represented the things we all believed in, when put between its values and its money, settled for its values. I think everyone at Madre won the struggle with Melfina. We all walked away from Black Monday feeling like we still had our principles and our integrity. The takeover also allowed us to move on, to try new and different things. What did Melfina and Newman walk away with? Just more money.

**Q:** *If there ever was to be a Sci-Fi Quest 5, what would it be about?*

**Geoff:** That's for us to know and you to find out.

**Tim:** It would be about space groupies.

**Q:** *What work are you doing these days?*

**Tim:** Well, I figured that since I was always slacking off at work playing games, a good job for me would be to be a game reviewer. But somehow, having to play games as part of your job takes all the fun out of it, so I'm seeking other ways to slack off.

**Geoff:** I'm doing graphic design and visual identity work for a lot of Internet start-ups. It's unbelievable the amount of cash investors are pouring into this stuff. I'm doing well.

**Tom Newman,**

*Much vilified ex-CEO of the current Madre.*

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It's as if nothing has changed for Tom Newman. Despite being 'retired' from Madre earlier this year with a healthy compensation package, he still works in the same building, four floors down, at another high-tech company – Kelmore Media – where he occupies the CEO position as well. Kelmore Media produces some of the most powerful and expensive



arts software for film special effects.

As we sit down around an oval glass table in the expanse of his new office, I swear I can almost hear Madre HQ working three floors above. Newman offers me a coffee from his cappuccino maker. When it arrives in my hand I notice it is made with unnatural perfection, as if the foam wouldn't move if I tipped the cup. The coffee he makes is as impeccable as his suit. Newman sits down and though he gives off an air of settling in for a relaxed, chatty interview, I know he has only scheduled 20 minutes for this meeting. I can't imagine a life divvied up into 20 minute intervals. I decide to get right to the point.

**Q:** *You are often vilified as the man who destroyed Madre. How would you respond to this charge?*

**Tom:** (*laughs*) I don't know if I'd normally bother responding to something like that. The people who say that I destroyed Madre are living in some sort of ideological dream world. Despite large profits Madre had refused to expand beyond the garage-based business model it began with... It might not have shown from the outside, but Madre was already in trouble by the time I got to it. Will Roberts knew that. That's why he created an HQ. It's why he hired somebody who knew big-business to run it. Madre needed change to survive, to stay competitive.

People may say I destroyed Madre...but if I hadn't made the necessary changes, breaking away from the stale adventure game format and outsourcing product, Madre wouldn't be where it is today. Stockholders would have bailed out a long time ago. I thought Will Roberts was crazy to try and fend off the whole Melfina acquisition because it couldn't have come at a more perfect time. A year later, after the fall of the adventure game, Madre wouldn't have been *worth* taking over. Maybe they could have eeked out an existence, but that's the thing, you've got to flow with the current, change directions at the drop of a hat. At the end of the day, it's the swimmers who make the quick decisions and take the risks that survive the flood. With Melfina we were guaranteed a future. If people want to blame me for good business practices, for saving Madre, then so be it.

**Q:** *So you don't think that Will Roberts, who practically started the industry, understood the market? He couldn't have survived the 'flood.'*

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**Tom:** I mean no disrespect to Will Roberts. He was a visionary. And he did a good job, with no business training, creating a profitable little company. But Will didn't want to bring Madre into the future. He wanted it to keep it tucked away in the woods...but that's not how it works. You've got to get bigger. I'm not saying that he was a poor businessman. Anyone who could pull Madre together out of a garage is not a poor businessman. But he wasn't a BIG businessman. Will is a talented guy but he refused to take Madre where it had to go. The industry became a raging river...not just the little backwoods trickle he loved. It was sink or swim and Will still wanted to do the backstroke. The shareholders could see the throne had grown too big for the King so they elected one that could rule the greater kingdom.

And really, after twenty years, I think Will and his staff were beginning to lose direction. They weren't doing anything new. They were stuck making sequels to games that were popular fifteen years earlier.

**Q:** *Madre was known for being highly innovative and taking risks. Just before its closure, Redwood Studios was working on some unique games. You don't think that they could have adapted to a new market while remaining true to their core beliefs?*

**Tom:** Well...No. I don't think so. They'd already missed the boat. The adventure game was dead. A lack of consumer interest killed it. Madre wanted to continue full steam ahead, but the writing was on the wall.

**Q:** *A lot of criticism was leveled at Madre on Black Monday, not only for the decision to fire the entire Redwood staff, but for the way they went about it, with no forewarning. What's Madre's side of the story?*

**Tom:** Well, I don't work for Madre anymore, but you don't make money by holding onto dead weight. We couldn't pay the people at Redwood Studios to make games that weren't selling. The money was in the 3D action genre. We tried to reason with the staff at Redwood. We made some attempts, out of loyalty, to fix their circumstances, but they fought us tooth and nail on everything. When we cancelled Sci-Fi Quest for unsatisfactory financial prospects and decided we wanted to take the company in a new direction, away from adventure games, they organized a massive fan-revolt. It was ridiculous. You don't have

fans dictate your business decisions. It was undercutting business and management and Redwood Studios put themselves in a place where we *couldn't* give them forewarning because they would have organized an all-out war. The closure was the company's decision and the right thing to do, but Redwood wasn't about to accept that. The suddenness and secretiveness of the firings was the fault of Redwood, really.

**Q:** *For the record, the final Sci-Fi Quest instalment turned one of the largest profits for a game by Madre in almost a decade.*

**Tom:** Yes, but that was largely due to Tim and Geoff's efforts to rile up the fans over the game's possible cancellation. So, in a way, firing them was a good idea. It increased sales.

**Q:** *What do you say to the fans who argue that Madre was still making money on adventure games when they chose to fire all the staff at Redwood.*

**Tom:** That depends on how you look at it. Sure, we were still making money, and might have for a few more years if adventure games continued to do well. But market analysis said they wouldn't. Anyway, they weren't making *enough* money. If the shareholders see you piddling around in the garden while letting the acre go fallow, they're going to hire a new farmer. Madre was like a little hut in the forest, producing wool. Sure they could feed themselves and get by just fine. I'm sure it was warm and cozy. But as the cities come in with real changes, there's better use for that land. Redwood was just standing in the way of progress, so we re-zoned them. That's just common sense. That's just good business.

**Q:** *Last year Madre fell into a rather deep embezzlement scandal which, many speculate, was the reason you were let go. Some Madre fans claim this as proof of your incompetence. What do you have to say to them and how does this scandal bear on the future of Madre?*

**Tom:** (*laughs*) Well, again, I don't really care what people say about me. None of those people run a business. Decisions need to be made. Things can't always remain the same. It's all about image. As CEO my duty is to the shareholders. Though I was not involved or implicated in the scandal in any way, shareholders are like scared little children and sometimes you have to rearrange the world to make them feel safe

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again. These efforts can be nonsensical, but they work. A departure from Madre seemed like the most symbolically effective thing I could do for the Madre shares. But, basically, embezzlement is something that can happen in any company. There isn't much you can do about it except keep good watch. Financially, the embezzlers didn't get away with much, and a lot of what was stolen has since returned.

Under my term, Madre made record profits, expanded its market coverage by 25% and developed a strong and stable income base. I amicably agreed to leave Madre for the good of the shares and I was compensated.

Anyway, to answer about the future of Madre: the so-called scandal is a drop in the bucket. An unfortunate PR event. It caused us to cut back some projects, sell off some dead properties and tighten our belts a bit. But I think all those predictions of the company going completely under are exaggerated. The bad eggs have been tossed out and Melfina has injected Madre with new cash. Madre will be around for a long time.

**Q:** *How do you feel about the game industry today, having left it?*

**Tom:** Well, the industry is still going strong and shows no signs of slowing down in the immediate future. It's a good place to invest money.

On my way out of the building I pass by a board with the Madre logo on it. In one corner is an advertisement for the Madre internship program, the same program that I worked in five years ago.

*How would you like to wake up everyday with a smile on your face knowing that you're coming to work for one of the world's top game companies? The 1 year, unpaid, Madre Internship program grants you the invaluable opportunity to turbo-charge your career in the gaming industry with valuable and exciting experience in actual game development! And, who knows? If you work hard enough, maybe we'll hire you to stay on afterwards...*

I think to myself, if the internship had been unpaid when I was in grade 12, I would never have applied for it...and never have saved up enough for my trip around the world, changed my mind about computer games, or be doing this interview.

**Will Roberts,***Founder, ex-president and ex-CEO of Madre Entertainment*

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I'm talking to Will in the backyard of his house, tucked deep inside the Redwood forest, just a few miles from the old Madre building. We drink beer at the picnic table where the infamous annual Madre bar-b-ques were held. It was in the garage (now demolished) of this house that Madre had its meagre beginnings. Will lives here with his wife, renowned computer game creator Kendra Roberts, his son and two dogs.

This isn't the first interview I've had with Will Roberts. When I first found out that my internship interview would be with their president and CEO I felt sick to my stomach. *For real? With the CEO!!* Will turned out to be very friendly; the interview was relaxed and impromptu. I was impressed by the fact that, as president and CEO of this organization, he still took the time to personally interview even the lowly interns. Will was always a friendly, confident individual with an uncommon ability to make you feel at ease and give you direction at the same time. Five years later I can see that, at least in these respects, he hasn't changed.

**Q: *Why did you stay in Redwood?***

**Will:** I always thought I would stay in Redwood. I set up Madre around my life in Redwood, not the other way around.

**Q: *How do you feel about life after Madre?***

**Will:** Well, it was tough at first. I was still on the Madre payroll as a consultant afterwards, but I wasn't doing much and I think they only kept me on to stem off outrage over the firings. That irritated me so I quit. Anyway, after spending all those years creating something like Madre – geeze, I was barely 24 when we first put that computer in the garage – and it becomes so big and successful and it's the only thing that you do for nearly twenty years...you can't imagine yourself doing anything else. That job is the only job you want to do. It's like losing a child, I guess – you expect they're going to outlive you...and you put so much time and energy into raising them...and you really get to love them. Well, if they go...it's...you don't really feel like having another child, you know? Madre is what I did...and it was great. But I don't want to start something else. Madre was its own unique thing.

But I feel good about it now. Not about the way it ended, but all good

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things finish and when I look back at those...17 years it seems amazing that we did what we did. Sometimes it seems like it was just a dream. We put out some of the best games in the industry. We did things differently and weren't afraid to do things our own way. We were pioneers. During that time I managed to feed my family. I raised two kids. In a way, it's like running Madre was just a sub-quest in the greater picture of my life: raising a family. My youngest will be graduating high school this year and wants to go into architecture and it's been really rewarding to watch my daughter come into her own. I still wish she'd go to college, but, you know, she worked at EGO Games for a while and then moved to Seattle with a friend that she met over SupraNet. She was a bike courier for about a year and a half, which is pretty dangerous, I guess, but she seemed to really enjoy living there with her friend. She was mostly just saving up money to go on some big world trip, which she and her friend are still on, nearly six months after their departure. I got a postcard from Thailand the other day. So, I'm really proud of her.

You know, and that, really, was the quest all along, I think. The stuff we did at Madre helped my daughter make friends. And I think some of the games we made had a good influence on her...and other people I'm sure. We did some incredible things at Madre. Sure, I'm sorry it's over, but I'm more glad we had twenty years of incredible success and happiness that also allowed us to live fulfilling lives. I feel good about Madre and everything that's come out of it.

**Q: Are you working on anything now?**

**Will:** I have my own little projects I'm concentrating on. Less stressful...smaller. You grow to appreciate that stuff. That's another lesson I learned from Madre...big isn't necessarily good. (*laughs*) I've got a few things going, but I'm gonna keep them secret. They're not big, just little business hobbies for me. Beyond that, I have to admit I don't have too many ideas. Sometimes I itch to start something again. But I'm still recovering from Madre in a lot of ways. If someone gave me a list of all the things we did at Madre and then said, 'Ok. You have 17 years to do all this' I'd say it's impossible. I wouldn't even attempt it.

**Q: For so many years Madre seemed invincible, then, in just over a year, it collapsed. Why do you think it happened so quickly? If you could have done anything different, what would you have done?**

**Will:** It's easy to have doubts. Should I have done this? Should I have gone to that meeting? Should I have sold SupraNet? Should we have sold shares? You can kick yourself forever over stuff like that...and I did a lot after Black Monday. I examined every little detail and decision I'd made, creating alternate realities stemming off of major choices... But eventually, after all that moping, brain wracking and soul-searching, I figured that I did the best I knew how and, actually, given the chance to do it again, wouldn't do much different. I used to really wonder, should I have tried to appease Melfina more? But if I did that I would have just become a puppet for Melfina. Even then they wouldn't have kept me as CEO. They needed somebody they owned in that position. As for why Madre fell so quickly, things happen quickly in big business. Big money buys fast results. Besides, Madre did everything quickly.

**Q:** *How do you feel about Madre the company now?*

**Will:** Nothing really. I used to get angry that they were using the name I had built for their backwards, impersonal goals...but it's hard to care anymore. Sometimes I feel disappointed. You just can't help but feel disappointed about a good thing that's gone away. Mostly, I still feel bad about all the people that got fired and the difficult position that put them in, but everyone I know of seems to have done well beyond Madre. Anyway, Madre isn't the same company: logo's different, staff's different, location's different, games are different. It's not there anymore.

**Q:** *What are your thoughts on the embezzlement scandal?*

**Will:** Mostly, I'm really angry about that. I still had a lot of shares in Madre. A lot of people did. Art Loel, before his books took off, had his entire retirement banked on Madre stocks. Now the scandals have sunk the stock value to practically zero and sucked away all that money. All that time we spent fighting over shares during the takeover, and now they're pretty much worthless. They might come back up, but it'll take years and, in the meantime, we all have a lot less money. I know a lot of employees were frustrated by that scandal because it affected them personally. It was like a last kick in the pants from Madre...just when you thought we were done with them. And I'm frustrated because I know that would have never happened under my watch. Satisfied employees don't embezzle money. It's when they feel they're getting screwed over that they take revenge... Or, at least, I know I would have been in tune

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enough with the staff to know something fishy was going on... Really, I'm not surprised at all about it. The way Madre runs things that stuff's bound to happen. I still had quite a few shares invested in Madre at the time. I guess I still had loyalty to or a belief, for some reason, in my company. Dumb. But I can't say I always make good decisions. I just try to do my best.

I think the scandal was kind of a boon for Madre, though. Now the pressure is off. Their company wasn't seeing any significant growth. Shareholders were going to jump ship. Now the bar has been lowered again, so the endless pole-vault can continue.

**Q:** *If you could send a message right now to all the fans of Madre games, what would you say?*

**Will:** That's a good question.

Will drinks from his beer and takes a long pause, staring out into the trees that line his backyard. Just as I think he isn't going to answer my question he speaks up.

**Will:** I want to encourage our fans to follow the lead set in our games. Everything you need to learn, I think you can learn from our adventure games. Be creative. Don't be afraid to think...and especially think differently. Don't give up. You can beat the game. Don't be afraid to put things down for a while and come back to them. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Playing with a friend can be a lot more fun, and easier, than playing alone. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself and try different things. The end will be worth it.

And, I'd also like to encourage our fans to follow the lead we set in making our games. Be true to yourself and to your friends. Don't do things just because everyone else is doing them. And I'm not just talking about smoking or drugs or something asinine like that, but I mean everything. Think and understand why you're doing things. I think that was sort of the unofficial motto at Madre. Maybe we lost sight of it a little at the end, but in a way, we've all found it again. You know, sometimes it's the hardest thing to do, following your own path, and sometimes it might seem to lead you down the wrong path or fail you totally. But stick it out because, in the end, you'll realize that it *does* work out better, you'll realize that it was the best route for you and you'll have friends and family that care for you at the end. You'll still find the world a wondrous



place when you wake up in the morning, even if it isn't Monday. That's more important than anything, I think.

Will hangs on this last bit for a moment, almost as if he is going to say more, but decides against it. He smiles. Our interview is over.

*Q: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. I'm sure many Madre fans will take your advice to heart.*

**Will:** Thank you, Fred. It was my pleasure.

On the drive out of Redwood I talk into my tape recorder, searching for an ending to this article. It isn't going well and I pull into Berney for a coffee. There's a busy little quickie coffee hut on the highway to service a world increasingly filled with people on the go. It isn't until I pull into the lot that I realize the place is called Naughté Latte. There's a generous line-up inside and as I wait for my coffee I tell the barista that this place was the bees knees at Madre before the store suffered its own takeover. I'm glad to see it came back. The barista tells me that, actually, it was the founder of Madre that started this place up again, opened it up sometime last year. It's obviously doing very well.

Watching the new Naughté Latte shrink in my rearview mirror I find my ending: there isn't one. The heyday of Madre may be gone and the future seems bleak for our favorite genres: Sci-Fi Quest, Fantasy Quest, HomoSapien Quest, Swarthy Victor. But even in death Madre remains strong. The personalities behind those games are alive today... Although they no longer make games, the aftershocks of their work at Madre continue to impress upon the world, as do the personal quests they embark on today.

Madre has been responsible for too much of the computer game industry to ever truly disappear. With the legion of Madre fans swarming the Internet and moving into the gaming industry themselves, the principles, values and precedents set by Madre live on in the community, no doubt shaping the games of tomorrow. Madre is not gone and Madre is not forgotten.





# ***Congratulations on completing Game Quest!***

We hope you had as much fun reading it as we  
had making it – Madre Programming Staff

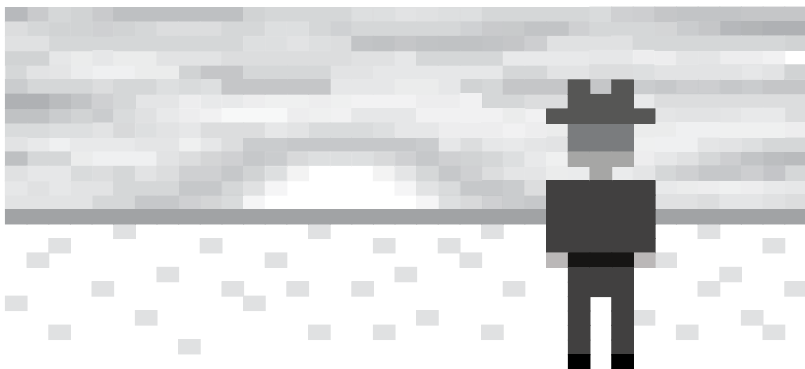
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*Pages: 496*

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## Special Thanks

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## About the Author

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**Leopold McGinnis** is an independent Canadian author currently living in Edmonton, Alberta. He is a founding member of The Guild of Outsider Writers ([www.outsiderwriters.org](http://www.outsiderwriters.org)) and the founding editor of [www.redfez.net](http://www.redfez.net), an online database of under-recognized literature, poetry and comics by under-published authors. In the past 6 years he has lived in Calgary, Vancouver, Manila, Victoria, Tokyo, Ottawa and Toronto for no sane or profound reason.

Game Quest is his first full-length novel.



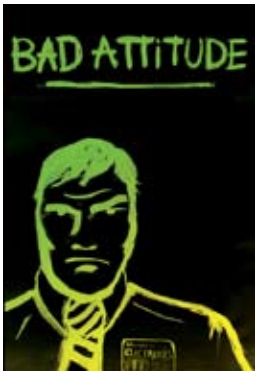
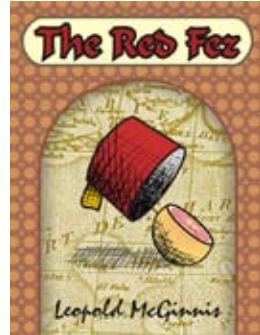
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## Other books by Leopold McGinnis



In 1936 Algiers, a valuable artifact is ‘stolen’ from a French archeological site and seemingly nobody knows where it has gone. Pierre Rensard, Chief of Police, is suddenly charged with recouping the item in a realm of moral ambiguity where everyone feels entitled to the ill-gotten gains. When Savid, proprietor of *the* underground gambling hotspot, and Sylvia Longshot, gun trader and supposed husband murderer, (alongside her new hunchedback lover, Afiz) enter the picture, law, order and morality all go by the wayside in this humourous casablanca-esque crime caper. And all this is before the city is swamped in thousands of crates of grapefruit. And where is Habibi during all this mess anyway?



Jesse Durnell has shunned the rat race for a series of go-nowhere jobs in the high-pressure world of wage-slavery. Wandering from McJob to McJob he has his sites set on a higher metaphysical plane: the nuclear oasis. In his current occupation as a Widget peddler for Electronics-Pit, Jesse makes it his mission to sell the most useless crap to those who most deserve it. But it won't be easy. There's know-it-all Tom Davis, who'll stop at nothing to expose Jesse's game. Then there's the morning store cheer, which could test the limits of even the most hardened nihilistic optimist. But

Jesse will perservere through the bad motivational posters, the dingy lunch room, the 15 minute breaks...for the only true reward for a life of servitude is front row seats to the kicking game and Jesse knows that the day of reckoning is close at hand. (Coming Fall 2007)

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