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Author

Simpson, Kevin Thomas

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Reality

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Kevin Thomas Simpson

December 2015

Thesis Committee:

Professor Mark Haskell Smith, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

Professor Stephen Graham Jones

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The Thesis of Kevin Thomas Simpson is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Dedication

To my parents, Tom and Blanche, who always supported me through every venture. To my wonderful girlfriend, Christina, who has been understanding and patient with me.

Chapter 1

Venn moved through the darkened labyrinth, taking deliberate strides, wary for any signs of movement. The Rose Mantis was blind, but it could feel vibrations through the ground. He had heard rumors about it from other players, but so far no one was able to piece together the clues of exactly how it worked. With the beta test coming to an end, he thought it would be a fitting quest to complete, since beating the Isle Boss was impossible on his own.

For the last few days, Venn had spent several hours gathering clues that revealed the quest. He talked to NPCs in the game and searched the forums outside of it. He soon figured out that it spawned in Lorwynne's Labyrinth on Isle 9. The only problem, though, was that it appeared at a certain time of day, which he couldn't figure out. The time in upper right of his HUD read 8:15 PM, but in Acharia it was closer to noon. Since time moved faster in the game than in the real world, he only had a small chance to find the Rose Mantis. If he didn't find it in time, he would have to wait for a day to cycle in game, before it would respawn. Still winter vacation had a few days left and he had all night and day to search for it.

Wandering deeper into the cave, the darkness receded. Clusters of fungus spotted the walls and ceiling, emitting a pale blue light. Venn edged away from them, lining himself up in the center. Mushglooms were troublesome and sometimes deadly if you set them off. They clung to walls using a translucent mucous, undulated, and emitted a soft glowing light. These nonaggressive creatures gave light to the darkness, but when

provoked they release a cloud of paralytic spores. He continued down the corridor, keeping his Black Blade close to his side. In the lower right corner of his HUD, the trail behind him traced its way through the black space of his map. It then ran into a forking path he had already taken.

“Damn.”

Using two fingers, he tapped the map icon, expanding it in front of himself. Half of it was lit up and traced like an ant hill. The other half was still covered in an opaque blackness that he had yet to explore. The only way to go was south where the faded into darkness of the unexplored. Venn closed the map and continued south. Rounding a corner and saw a lanky player prodding one of fungus clusters with his sword.

“No. Don’t,” said Venn.

“What—”

It was too late. Venn jumped back, avoiding most of the toxic cloud. His body seized, though he was still able to stand, but the other player was too close. He was covered in a cloud of paralytic spores and collapsed. Any player who made it this far, thought Venn, should know not to mess with those things.

Is this guy that much of a noob?

In the upper left corner of Venn’s HUD, by his health meter, a yellow lighting bolt appeared. Reaching into his med pouch, he removed a yellow crystal and crushed it in his hand. The lighting bolt disappeared and he was able to move again. He glanced over at the fallen player’s still body. Above his red faux hawk, a green diamond rotated slowly

next to the name Thane. Venn moved closer. Thane's chubby face was contorted into a half smile with a hint of surprise. His eyes were squinted shut and not a hair was out of place on his character's head. Sitting off-center next to the player indicator, Thane's health bar steadily fell from green to yellow. A lightning bolt symbol appeared and next to it, a purple skull. He had breathed in a lethal dose. Removing another yellow crystal, Venn shoved it into the Thane's hand and forced him to crush it. The lightning bolt vanished, but the purple skull remained.

"What happened?"

"You were paralyzed, but I healed you."

"Thanks," said Thane, "and you are?"

"My name's Vennitas, but you can call me Venn."

"Well, thank you for saving me Venn. I'm Thane, by the way."

"You're still losing health," said Venn, watching the health bar sink farther into yellow, "Do you have any more health potions?"

"I do, but what were those," said Thane, "they looked like jewels in the rocks?"

"Mushglooms," said Venn, "not too dangerous unless you get a face full of spores. You better heal."

Venn was still amazed at all he saw in this world. Streams of data and 3D renderings were compiled together in the first true virtual reality that didn't involve gimmicky suits and traction apparatuses. He had already cleared through eight of the Isles in the last three months since the Beta test began. He traveled through forests, smelled the

dew of grassy fields, and felt the chill of icy mountains. He spent every waking moment here and often fell asleep with Limbo still on. This world was more real to him than anything he experienced on the outside.

Thane's health bar dipped into the red. He opened his pouch, removed a green vial, and drank. His health bar shot back to full, but then depleted bit by bit.

"Another one should do," said Venn, "two standard potions break the paralysis poisoning."

Thane took out another vial and chugged. His health meter returned to full and the purple skull faded away.

"That was my last one."

"How many did you start with."

"I had about fifteen, but used them while being lost."

"Here take these then."

Venn motioned with his hand and opened up his inventory menu. Scrolling through, he marked five Health Potions, five Paralysis Potions, and a shield called Bane's Buckler he had found earlier. A screen then appeared in front of Thane asking if he would accept the trade.

"What do you want for this," said Thane. "I don't have much give you."

"I don't really need anything."

"But that's a legendary item, why are you giving it to me?"

“I’m not a shield user,” said Venn, “and your gear could use an upgrade. That bronze shield won’t help too much down here. Plus, this one regenerates fifty health per second.”

Thane looked up at Venn, paused, and then accepted the trade. He pulled open his menu and equipped the shield. An arrangement of bright white pixels swirled around Thane’s left arm and materialized into Bane’s Buckler.

“It’s a bit heavy,” said Thane, raising his arm up and down.

“You might need to increase your strength stat,” said Venn, “but if it doesn’t slow you down too much, then you’ll be okay.”

He watched Thane work his arm around and practice bringing it up to defend himself. He still seemed new to the nuances and even the basic mechanics of the game just as Venn had been months ago. How did he make it this far?

“Why are you down here?”

“I was trying to grind some levels, ran out of warp crystals, and got lost in here. What about you?”

“I’m searching for the Rose Mantis.”

“Really,” said Thane, his face brightening, “I heard it was impossible to find.”

“I’m right on it’s trail,” said Venn.

“Can I join you, please? I won’t be a burden.”

“Sure, just don’t touch those mushglooms again.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. If I get the drop, I’ll give it to you.”

“Thanks,” said Venn, “Let’s get going.”

“Yeah,” said Thane, admiring the shield on his arm, “let’s.”

Leading the way, Thane took long strides, tottering under the weight of the new shield. Venn kept back a few feet, following their path on the map. When they entered a deeper part of the unexplored tunnel, two Copper Werecats spawned in front of them. Their fur a lustrous brown and eyes ruby red. They hissed, leaping toward them. Venn charged, parrying the beast’s swiping paw, and stabbed it’s underbelly. Thane rushed the second Werecat, his sword raised and shield low. The beast’s tail stiffened.

“Stop,” said Venn.

He doesn’t know their movements, thought Venn. He sliced through his enemy, wasting little time to help Thane. He dashed towards him and saw the Werecat tackle Thane to the ground. Somehow he still managed to raise the shield, blocking most of the damage. Venn darted around, stunning another Werecat that just spawned.

“Help,” said Thane.

The Copper Werecat clawed at his shield, snapping it’s jaws. Venn stabbed the monster in the back and kicked it off of Thane.

“You gotta recognize their attack patterns,” said Venn.

“I thought I could handle it,” said Thane, scrambling to his feet.

“When Copper Werecats stiffen their tails,” said Venn, eyeing the two beasts, “they’ll pounce, knocking you back or worse to the ground.”

“Got it.”

“Either jump back out of range or sidestep them.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Thane charged again, barely avoiding the pounce attack and slew the creature.

Venn followed, attacking the other beast. The Copper Werecat lowered itself on it's haunches and lowered it's tail.

“Watch out,” said Thane, “it's going to pounce.”

Venn ignored him and dashed toward the creature. The Werecat leaped, clawing the air above his head. Venn ducked, pivoted, and killed the beast before it could land. With the enemies defeated, he rejoined with Thane.

“Why didn't it pounce?”

“It did,” said Venn. “That attack, though, was supposed to land and strike me from behind, but I knew it was coming.”

“From it's tail?”

“Exactly, but don't worry these things will come the more you play.”

Thane nodded, drinking a potion. Venn examined his health and gear. Once everything was patched up, they continued down the unexplored tunnel.

Though he was average in combat, Venn was thankful Thane was there. Being a solo player came with its advantages and disadvantages. On his own, he could get the best loot and gear without having to share. He didn't have to deal with jerks online that talked endless trash and spit racial slurs. Even with all that, traveling sometimes became

lonely. Some games became boring right after popping them in. They were always more fun to play with friends, but finding a game to play was easier than finding friends.

With Thane's help, Venn was able to combine their map information and deduce which parts had already been explored by both of them. What remained of the map was a narrow band of blackness that plunged deeper into the labyrinth. The Mushglooms now amassed into strange fungus balls. Small groups of them oozed out of the cave walls. The larger clusters brightened the tunnel, revealing sharp stalactites and narrowing walls. Moving down the corridor, Venn kept an eye on his map and Thane maintained a safe distance from the walls. Soon they reached the end of the path that overlooked a circular room.

"Watch it," said Venn, grabbing Thane's arm.

He took one step too many and almost slid down the ridge.

"Thanks," said Thane.

"Be careful, man."

"Sorry," said Thane, staring down at the room. "There it is."

Venn crouched down next to him. Below them, in a circular arena tacked with stalagmites, six Giant Mantises were eating the mushglooms off of the walls.

"Those are just regular mobs," said Venn, "the one we're looking for is pink."

"I figured that," said Thane, "but I see it right there."

He pointed near the back of the area where the light seemed to glow brighter.

Venn focused and saw the outline of a smaller mantis.

“That could be it,” said Venn.

It was 8:59 PM and the Rose Mantis could disappear at any moment. Next to the time, in the upper right, the outside indicator light was blinking.

What does mom want now?

“What are we waiting for? It’s right there.”

“Hold on, my mom needs to tell me something.”

“Dude, really? We need to go now or we might miss it.”

“We need to strategize first,” said Venn, “those other mantises could be a problem. Also the room is shaped to specifically like it could be a boss room.”

“I see your point,” said Thane, “but it could disappear at any moment, especially if the time of day is random.”

He leapt over the edge and slid down the cliff.

“Wait,” said Venn, “don’t draw their aggro yet.”

Thane didn’t hear him. He was already near the edge of the arena when the six Giant Mantises took notice of him. Though they were data, they were still ferocious. Saliva dripped in globs from their hissing mandibles and their scythe arms gleamed in the pale light.

Venn ignored the blinking orange light and rushed after Thane, hoping to catch him before the mantises did. They were slow to move, but one was already closing in on Thane’s left. He didn’t flinch, as the creature’s bladed arm swiped just past his head. He

was focused solely on the Rose Mantis. Venn had to do something before Thane got himself surrounded and killed.

He charged at the closest mantis, raised his arm, and felt the familiar tug that he had spent hours mastering on the first day of the beta. He had died over thirty times before he was able to learn the basics of using tech attacks. Shifting into position, Venn's left hand began to glow a bright yellow. Every weapon had a different initial starting point, but they all exhibited the same tugging motion. It was like skipping a rock across a pond or throwing a baseball. There was an inherent motion that flowed into a point of resistance where, if executed correctly, the game's code would finish the rest of the move, completing the attack.

This was the beauty of Limbo and the *Reign of Swords* game. It's why Venn had yet to grow tired of it. It was challenging, not just in difficulty, but in mastery. Learning the basics was fun without being grueling or repetitive. Once you mastered those, then the game opened up to you, giving you endless worlds to explore, quests to achieve, and monsters to fight. No day was the same. Sometimes the grind became boring, but the combat provided relief from the monotony. You put your whole body and mind into it. You could be anyone you wanted to be. It was all made possible, after years of study, by neuroscientist and self taught programmer, Damien Titor, and his colleague Virgil Price. It was the first video game to take advantage of their efforts and fully utilize the VR technology beyond educational purposes.

Venn moved his arm, meeting the point of resistance. With a swift slice of his Black Blade, the first mantis was cleaved in two. He chained his next attack to the next closest mantis, taking it down before it had any time to react.

Two down.

He glanced at Thane, who was chasing after the Rose Mantis. The commotion had set the Rose Mantis fleeing around the room. Thane avoided every rock formation, but the pink bug was always out of reach. Behind him, the remaining mantises tried to keep up, but they were too slow and seemed to be confused about who to attack. They would often freeze in place and quiver for a second before returning to the chase.

Probably a bug in the code.

Thane's HP was still green, but if he had taken any damage, the shield would have helped him recover. The Rose Mantis veered left and looped around a large boulder. Thane hopped onto of the rock to track the pink bug. Hissing, the remaining mantises scrambled forward swiping their bladed arms at Thane's back. He jumped down, avoiding the attacks, and continued his pursuit. Venn racing behind them, destroyed two more bugs.

A piercing shriek shook the room. The final two mantises whirled around, making Venn their target. They closed in on him, mandibles quivering. Their large eyes focused on him, watching his movement. He heard Thane's cursing and his sword pinging off rocks in the chamber. Venn took a few steps back, readying himself for another strike.

Raising its large bladed arm, the mantis on his right lunged forward. Venn sidestepped the attack and countered, slashing the bug's thorax, severing its legs. It collapsed in front of him in two pieces. The last mantis slashed at him. He rolled out of the way, guarding with his sword. Their blades clashed, ringing throughout the room. Thane was nowhere to be seen, the orange indicator light was still blinking, and something wasn't feeling quite right. Venn whipped around and dodged backwards, avoiding the other bladed arm. It smashed into the ground, locking down the mantis. Spotting the opening, he launched himself upward, raised his blade, and sliced the bug in two symmetrical pieces with a braver attack. All six Giant Mantises were down, but the bodies hadn't disappeared. This was all wrong, but at least things had calmed down.

"I'm going AFK," said Venn, hoping Thane would hear him.

He swiped downward with his hand, opening the menu. He flipped to the last screen and paused Limbo. The darkness of Lorwynne's Labyrinth melted away into streams of chromatic polygons. When he opened his eyes, the bright light of his room forced them shut.

"Working the late shift," said Venn, squinting through his visor, "or going out?"

"Working. The hospital needs some help tonight." She sat down at the edge of his bed, smoothing out his comforter. "I wish you wouldn't play that game in the dark, it'll hurt your eyes."

She was wearing purple scrubs and her golden hair was tied in a ponytail. Venn sat up, removed the Limbo interface from his head, and set it down beside him next to his keyboard.

“This isn’t like the games you grew up with mom. This one won’t hurt me or give me seizures or any of that other made up crap.”

Two wires ran from the back of the helmet into the computer tower under his desk. A small blinking green light on the side indicated that the game was still running.

“That’s not what I read on the internet today. They said kids are getting addicted to it.”

“Who’s they, mom?”

“The newspeople.”

“Right, okay. I’m sure they said the same thing when television was invented and every fun thing created after that.”

He stared at her, expecting a response, but she was too busy picking the lint off the bed. She then looked at her watch. The rose gold band made light dance on the ceiling. It was the one his dad had given to her for her birthday years ago. The one they had gone to two malls and an outlet shopping center an hour away to find because his dad thought none of them were perfect. They had picked it out together and when Venn saw it, he knew it was the right one.

“I better get going. Don’t stay up too late.” She gave him a hug and kissed his cheek. “I love you Vince. Dinner’s on the table.”

“Love you too mom.”

She left the room, turning off the light, and closed the door. He could smell her perfume lingering in the air and on his clothes. It made him sick. The fruity aroma was a putrid reminder of his mother’s deceit. The only time she wore it was for dates. His dad had been buried months ago and she was already going out.

He picked up his cell off the bedside table. There were a few texts from Lazar. Some were days old. The most recent was Lazar, sweaty, kissing a trophy. He and Wakefield High’s basketball team had just won a tournament. Venn replied “Congrats” with a thumbs-up emote and set the cell back down. It vibrated on the table, but he ignored it.

Picking up the helmet, Venn placed it back on his head. Through the visor, his room was even darker, but he could still make out the light creeping under his door. When it went out, he lay down, and pressed enter on his keyboard. The visor illuminated with his username and requested his password. When he finished typing it in, he moved the keyboard aside, and was washed away in chromatic polygons. The labyrinth materialized around him. It’s dank earthy smell mixed in with his mom’s perfume.

“Hello,” said Thane, “anybody in there?”

“I’m back,” said Venn, leaning away from Thane. “Would you stop that?”

He was waving his hands in front of Venn’s face.

“Oh, sorry. Why’d you leave?”

“My mom need to talk to me.”

“Do you gotta leave?”

“No. She’s going into work, but that’s a lie.”

“If she’s not working then what is she doing?”

“Going out on a date.”

“Yikes. What about your dad?”

“Dead.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, but where were you? I could have used your help.”

“It took me awhile, but I got the loot, see.”

In his hand, he held an arm of a mantis. Though it was much smaller, the blade had the same curve and it was a pink.

“It’s called the Rose Razor,” said Thane, “it boosts both speed and strength stats by fifteen points and has a unique ability.”

Thane stepped closer to Venn, opening his menu. Something wasn’t right, the air had thickened and the corpses of giant mantises still hadn’t disappeared.

“Check it out,” said Thane, “I want you to have it.”

A screen appeared in front of Venn.

“That’s it,” said Venn, “

“Of course that’s it. I’m showing you the loot you were looking for.”

“No, not that. This is—”

The floor began rumble beneath their feet. Venn remembered that he didn't get an indication screen for experience or mylrin. Venn canceled the trade and drew his Black Blade.

"You're gonna need that," said Venn.

"What's going on?"

"Boss time."

The rumbling underneath their feet increased and then suddenly halted. The bodies of the mantises began to glow the same bluish color as the Mushglooms. Strings of the fungus propelled themselves out of the bug's open wounds, writhing in the air like worms. The fungus and mantis corpses began assimilating. Thoraxes and abdomens tore open and sealed shut by the fungus. A dozen arms attached themselves to a single body, growing larger.

"We don't know what this thing will do," said Venn, "so for now we will need to figure out its attack patterns. You understand?"

"Yeah, I got it," said Thane, staring wide-eyed. "Actually no, not really."

"Just keep your shield up," said Venn, "and potions ready."

The mantis corpses finished their transformation and what stood before them was, Lamentis the Flayer. At level 35, it was much larger than the Giant Mantis and had five health bars. The Mushgloom fungus slithered over its dozen bladed arms and six spiny legs. From its mandibles, it released a large glob of golden spit and a piercing screech. Its eyes flared a rainbow of colors, as it dashed towards them.

It was fast, faster than the Rose Mantis. They barely had time to avoid its first flurry of slashes. Venn blocked two of the arms and darted behind a stalagmite. Thane blocked with his shield, but was pinned down under Lamentis' unrelenting blows. His screams echoed over the metallic impacts. Pain receptors were inhibited by Limbo, so any attack felt any where between a feather caressing you or a pinch. This made the device safe for players, but the fear of getting hurt was nothing compared of having a fifteen-foot-tall mutated bug hissing and hacking at you. Venn had to help. He knew the shield wouldn't hold up for much longer. That many attacks would have reduced its durability by at least half. Any more it would break, leaving Thane exposed. He peeked around the rock formation. Thane's body was covered with red cuts from where the boss' attacks broke through his guard. His health bar was in the yellow and still dropping. Lamentis' golden saliva dripped into pools around Thane.

That will be troublesome.

Venn didn't fear dying nor did he worry if Thane died, but it was still an inconvenience. If the battle appeared to be futile, he could use a warp crystal and be transported outside to the entrance. If they happened to both die here then they would just respawn back at Isle 9's main town, Stoneden. They would have to repair gear, restock on items, and make the trek back.

That was how these games worked. If you died you needed to learn from it. You had to be wary of traps. If a monster's level is too high, you needed to level up more. If you're the same level as the boss and you still died, then you didn't recognize its attack

pattern well or you need to adjust your character's build. If you're not doing enough damage, then you needed better gear or level up even more. Grinding levels was the core aspect of any RPG. Dying was an inconvenience and a learning experience.

Having come this far, after hours of searching the labyrinth, Venn didn't want lose all that progress. He could try to solo the boss, but if it had a rage timer, he would need Thane's help. Venn was at level 32 and Thane had reached level 24. To do any significant damage, they would have to work together.

Venn raced from his cover and circled around the back of the bug. Thane cowered behind his shield. When Lamentis relented its attack, it raised its head back, and hissed. Venn scrambled to his feet, fished out a health potion, and drank it. With his health bar returned to full, he closed the gap to Lamentis' abdomen.

Raising his sword, Venn hacked at the abdomen in six quick strikes. Taking down half of the mantis' first health bar. Thane, steady on his feet, used the opening to drive the Rose Razor into the monster's underbelly for a critical strike, dropping its HP to half-full on its second health bar. Lamentis hissed, raising its twelve bladed arms. The fungus throbbed over its body. It undulated between green and blue until a purple aura emanated around its exoskeleton. The boss shrieked again and eight of its arms fell to the ground, exploding into thousands of pixels.

"What's happening?"

"It's entering its enrage mode," said Venn.

Thane looked at Venn, perplexed.

“If you don’t defeat it within the time limit or if its HP reaches a certain point, its stats will be boosted greatly and its attack patterns change.”

“Got it,” said Thane, charging at the screeching beast.

“Wait,” said Venn.

The boss was vulnerable, but unpredictable. The golden saliva near its mandibles was foaming and its head was rearing farther back. That’s not good. Thane circled around to the right, keeping his shield ready. Lamentis turned toward Thane and attacked. He raised his shield, but the attack never came, instead Lamentis fired a volley of golden spit. The first shots missed Thane by a few feet and erupted into a cloud of spores.

Venn circled around the opposite side, using Thane’s distraction to mask his advance. He had been wanting to use this skill since he acquired it a few levels ago, but it was difficult to execute. Dashing to a boulder close Lamentis, Venn raced up its side, and leapt off. When he felt a tug at his elbow, his hand began to glow yellow. Hovering for a second, just above the boss, Venn angled himself down toward the monster’s abdomen and made an X motion in the air.

Two jagged lines appeared, forming an X. He raised his sword high and plunged it downward. Thane still had the boss distracted when Venn’s attack made contact. Lamentis shrieked and clicked ferociously. Its HP depleted down to quarter of the last health bar.

“Nice,” said Thane.

“Watch it,” said Venn, leaping off the monster’s scarred backside.

Thane had stopped running and Lumantis fired another volley of spitballs. He was pelted with three direct hits. Venn saw Thane's health bar drop into the red through the cloud of spores. Before he could regain his footing, the boss whipped around, striking Venn to the ground.

The impact resounded through his body. It felt like he had the wind knocked out of him, even though he could still breathe. His muscles ached. He tried to stand up to avoid the next attack, but his body refused to move. He couldn't even raise his sword. The health bar, in the upper left of his HUD, was at the threshold of red with a yellow lightning bolt underneath it. Lumantis unleashed a flurry of slashes at Venn. Managing to roll away from the attack, Venn felt his medicine pouch tear open, spilling his healing items. He lay on the ground, spying the gleam of yellow among the blue crystals and red vials. All he had to do was touch it. Lumantis readied its next slash. Venn squirmed his way over to his spilt items, reaching for the paralysis heal. The boss hissed, its scythe arm crashing down like an executioner's axe.

When the hissing stopped, Venn opened his eyes. He saw the insect's blade halted in midair and explode into thousands of triangular pixels. They fluttered in the blue light like jeweled confetti. Emerging from the falling remains of Lumantis, Thane strutted over with the Rose Razor resting on one shoulder. Behind him, a screen appeared with the word CONGRATULATIONS in bold letters. Another screen popped up in front of Venn, displaying the experience and mylrin he earned.

“That was close,” said Thane stabbing his sword in the ground a little too close to Venn’s torso.

“Yeah, thanks,” said Venn, “could you help me out?” Venn motioned to the paralysis heal that rested inches away from his finger tips.

“Oh, You want my help,” said Thane. His genial face shifting into a sneer. “This is what you want, right?” He delivered a swift kick that sent the item skidding across the arena.

“What are you doing? Why aren’t you paralyzed?”

“Remember that hidden ability I mentioned,” said Thane, “its Paralysis Immunity. Thanks to the shield you gave me I knew I’d survive that attack and you left him perfectly for me to finish off.”

“You wanted the kill bonus item,” said Venn.

“Of course, dummy,” said Thane, “this item is pretty good, too.” Thane pulled open his inventory menu and scrolled through it. Venn saw that a majority of Thane’s items were legendaries and other high level rares.

“You’re a sniper,” said Venn.

“Hey! You figured it out,” said Thane still scrolling through his items, “but I’m a little different from the norm.” He stopped scrolling and selected an item. Above his immaculate faux hawk materialized a metallic blue helmet in the shape of a mantis head. Glitching through the top, his faux hawk made him look like a mantis-rooster hybrid.

“You look stupid in that,” said Venn sitting up. The paralysis was starting to wear off.

“It’s called Lamentis’ Exo-cowl,” said Thane closing the menu, “it boosts defense by 20, speed by 30, and has the nifty ability to create poisonous potions that can be disguised as healing items.”

“So that’s what you do,” said Venn still struggling though the paralysis, “swoop in for the final blow just for some rare item.”

“Bingo, but like I said, I’m different,” said Thane. He bent down next to Venn and grabbed his limp arm. He tried to resist, but his arm wouldn’t budge.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.”

Thane motioned with the limp arm, opening Venn’s inventory screen. He hit Select All with Venn’s finger and pushed Trade. A small screen appeared in front of Thane.

“Oh wow, look at all this good stuff.”

“Stop,” said Venn.

“You mean I can have it all.”

“Stop it.”

“You’re so generous, Venn thank you.”

“You asshole.”

“That’s so unbecoming of a nice boy like you.”

“This will all reset once the beta ends,” said Venn, feeling the lingering effects of the paralysis leaving his arms.

“This is simply a test,” said Thane, “once I work on my potion crafting skill, I’ll be able to get foolish players, like you, to hand over their loot easily. I won’t have to rely on these plants to paralyze my victims when I have an arsenal of potions at my disposal.”

Venn didn’t know that doing something like this was possible. He knew Snipers existed in other games and typically they could be kicked from a party or banned from a server for their actions. In this game, it was more difficult thing to do. Only network administrators could kick players and even then you had to present proof of what the player had done. Venn thought he had known every aspect of *Reign of Swords*, even the cheating techniques or duping glitches, but this was on a new level. He felt his rage building. Screaming, Venn swung his sword at Thane. This time he didn’t feel the tug of the programming. Being paralyzed even a little interfered with activating an attack. Thane sidestepped it and pinned the Black Blade to the ground with his foot.

“Woah, calm down. It’s only game,” said Thane. “If you’re so upset, I’ll let you keep that sword of yours. Oh and you can have this.”

Thane backed out of the menu, deselected the Black Blade, added another item, and accepted trade. In silence, Venn watched his leather cloak, his boots, and the belt he was wearing dissolved away, and replaced with one of the standard starting outfits. All of his items disappeared from his inventory as well as his mylrin. His character’s physique

more distinguishable. It made him look like some action hero, all muscle no brains. He felt naked, exposed. Both real and fake at the same time. His hair didn't help things either. It was still perfectly blonde and the right kind of messy. It hadn't changed since the day he started playing three months ago.

He was one of the farthest players along in the beta. He was on Isle 9 of 50. If he had a few friends, clearing each Isle could go faster, but making friends online was just as hard as it was in real life. At least, though, playing solo made it so he didn't have to rely on anyone or that no one would get hurt from his mistakes. Even if that mistake was trusting others.

"I really don't want you telling anyone else about this," said Thane, removing the Rose Razor from the ground. "I guess, I'll have to send you on your way out of here."

"Don't," said Venn.

Thane raised the sword and thrust it into Venn's stomach. He screamed watching his life bar drop. Thane laughed, the indicator above his head turning from green to yellow.

"Please, don't."

"Sorry kiddo, I have to."

He pulled out the sword and jammed it in again and again until Venn had a little life left. The yellow diamond was now a deep red.

"I'll see ya around. Thank for the loot, once again you're way too kind."

Venn watched his health and Thane disappear. He could hear his laughter fading away into the darkness. Why couldn't I protect myself? There was a flash of red light then blue from the back of the arena. Why am I so powerless? He watched Thane activate the portal to the next Isle. The darkness grew thicker, casting out the labyrinth. Why me?

When he opened his eyes, Venn was back in Stoneden's main square. He opened up his inventory and saw his only two possessions: the Black Blade and a Rose Mantis Wing. Some parting gift. He trashed the wing and went looking for an Item Shop in the square. He need mylrin and the only thing of value to sell was his sword.

Bells chimed throughout the city and other players started appearing in flashes of blue light. He recognized a few of them from previous Isles, but he didn't see Thane anywhere. Finding him was going to be difficult, but he would manage it, somehow. Even if he had to return to previous Isles below to earn more mylrin and obtain decent gear.

Soon the square was filled with more players, their faces perplexed. Venn was just as confused, wondering what was happening. The bell's chime silenced and robed figure materialized in the sky.

"Welcome."

The voices of the players fell silent. The figure was dressed like a male network administrator character model. Both versions wore red velvet robes with gold cords around the waist. The females had gray hair, horned rimmed glasses, and the fortitude of a librarian. The males had white beards, pointy hats, and a scholarly demeanor. This

administrator, though, wore a white robe without a hat. His face was younger, lacking the distinguished beard, and his black hair was slicked back.

“My name is Damien Titor. I am the creator of *Reign of Swords* and Limbo.”

Venn knew all about Titor’s work in neuroscience and the video game industry. He was born a genius, a child prodigy. Highly rated in both fields, Venn had idolized him ever since he first announced his work improving VR technology. He had sent several applications to take part in the beta test months ago and felt lucky to be one of a thousand chosen.

“I’d like to apologize, first, for forcibly transporting all of you to your respective main towns and second to inform you that the beta test will be concluded early.”

There was a murmur of discontent from the crowd. Venn heard complaints about the unfairness and the lack of player loyalty. Some players were transfixed on Titor’s avatar, mouths agape. Others shouted about how they lost out on good loot because of the warp. Venn didn’t understand their entitled mentality. The beta test is always for a limited time and they were lucky to even be chosen at all. It was a fact that your gear and levels would be reset the next time you logged in for the actual game, but still the rabble continued, growing louder.

“I understand,” said Titor. He waved his arm through the sky, muting the crowd. They fell silent, their mouths still moving. Venn was both awed and scared of Titor’s power over the game.

“That’s better. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience. We promise to get the bugs fixed, especially that annoying hair glitch that so many of you brought to the admins attention. Now, the servers will be shutting down in sixty seconds. Say your goodbyes, get any friend’s information, and remember your stats and gear will all be reset come the June release.”

Titor then restored the players abilities to speak and faded out into the bright blue sky. Players scrambled to add their friends. Some hugged each other and waved goodbye before logging out. Others pestered any female player they saw, to add them. They didn’t seem too concerned if the person in the real world was a girl or not.

There was nothing left for Venn to see of this world. The spiraling islands above him would have to be explored and conquered later. He’d find new, better gear and grind to higher levels. Despite the incident with Thane, he still enjoyed his time in Acharia. It was still better than the reality he had to face at home. Breathing a heavy sigh, he opened the menu screen and logged out.

Chapter 2

Venn opened his eyes and removed the helmet. His room was still dark. Stretching his arms and legs, he set it aside, and made his way downstairs. The house was dark and cold. His mom had turned off the heater before leaving. In the corner of the living room, the dark figure of the Christmas tree loomed. Venn walked past it into the kitchen and flicked on the light. On the table was a plate of ham, mashed potatoes, and some green

vegetable mush. He removed the plastic wrap from the plate and set in the microwave.

The machine sang its mechanical tune, climaxing with three harsh beeps. He grabbed the plate and went into the living room. Under the undulating lights of the shadowy tree, Vincent prodded at his plate, trying to win a losing battle.

When Christmas came, a few presents appeared under the tree. They were marked with Santa's name, even though he had outgrown that fairy tale long ago. It was his mom's way of being cute.

The gifts were the typical thoughtless things: socks, a couple of T-shirts, the wrong graphics card he asked for, the only thing he asked for. Worst of all was Keith, in his clown-vomit reindeer sweater, sitting on their couch drinking eggnog by the quart.

"They're going to start experimental treatments at the hospital after the first of the year."

"Great," said Venn, gathering up scraps of wrapping paper.

"The director is being hush-hush about it, though. Supposedly the fifth floor will be put to use."

"That's interesting, Emily," said Keith, taking a swig of eggnog. "I've got a good joke I killed with at work the other day."

Venn rolled his eyes. Emily shot him a look, but he continued balling up the paper and tossing it to the trash.

"So I say to the guy, it's called a Form 1040, because for every \$50 you earn, you get \$10 and we get \$40."

Emily laughed, her face plastered with makeup and a polite smile. She had met Keith at a party a few weeks back and insisted they spend Christmas Day together. He was an accountant at some big firm in the city, but Venn didn't care.

"You get it," said Keith, sipping more eggnog, "right, Vince?"

"I get it," said Venn, eyeing Keith. "It just wasn't funny."

"Vincent, don't be rude."

"You didn't find it funny either."

"Of course I did, it was the best joke I've heard all year."

"Right."

"So your mom says you like playing computer games?"

"I do."

"I used to play them all the time, back before controllers had more buttons than a TV remote and Mario was still a little pixelated man."

"That's cool," said Venn.

Retro games still had a special place in his world and sometimes he would revisit them through emulators; they were antiques that treated the disease of nostalgia. Hearing Keith talk about them with his pudgy build and poor dye job, and saying how special his mom was, made Venn hate the things he loved most.

"Your mom is quite special Vince," said Keith, holding her hand. "I know it's not the funniest joke since it really relies on a certain audience, but she is polite enough to

laugh anyways and carry a conversation even if the topic doesn't interest her. That's what I love about her."

"You love that about her," said Venn, "how long have you known her?"

"Vincent Graves, don't start. This is supposed to be a joyful time."

"Fine then, you two can be happy without me."

Venn grabbed his package of socks, the retro gaming T-shirts from Keith, the wrong graphics card, and stomped upstairs to his room, stopping at the landing.

"Don't go Vince," said Emily.

"Just let him," said Keith, gulping down the rest of the eggnog. "Kids need discipline, a farther figure of sorts to pull them away from bad influences."

"Maybe you're right."

"I am, Emily. My dad had to yank the controller out my hand to set my head straight. And I'm thankful for it."

"I understand, but when he's lying there with that contraption on his head, it's the only time I've seen him smile. Like a real smile. Not since, you know." She took a sip from her glass. "He doesn't have many friends or any that I can think of. They don't come around anymore."

"All the more reason he should get away from those games. Go outside, make new friends, join a sport. Growing up isn't easy, but staying inside for eighteen hours a day won't make anything better."

"I'll talk to him about it. Let's finish watch the movie."

“Before you start it, could you get me some more eggnog?”

Venn left the landing and wiped his face. Closing the door, he heard Keith’s terrible Jimmy Stewart impression and the smacking of a kiss. He threw the T-shirts in the trashcan, tossed the socks on the bed, and booted up his computer. Gray sunlight peeked through the blinds, revealing dust with its narrow beams. The bookshelf next to his desk was filled with boxes of old computer parts and hard copies of games. Shelves housed a couple of turned over picture frames and dusty trophies. On his night stand, underneath Limbo, was a notebook filled with loose wrinkled papers. His desk was covered with notes, charts, character builds, and hand drawn maps of Acharia.

When the dual monitors came to life, Venn slid the papers out of the way and pulled out a wireless keyboard and mouse. He opened the web browser and searched for a buyer for the graphics card. After a few minutes of searching, he found ReddingSteiner, a name he knew well, who was willing to offer the exact purchase price and more for prompt delivery. He had sent him parts before and he always paid on time. Venn grabbed an empty box from under his desk, slapped on a shipping label, stuffed the graphics card inside, and sealed it.

Snagging his coat from the closet, he made his way downstairs. Though the living room was empty, the television was still on. George Bailey was talking to his guardian angel on the bridge for the umpteenth time. Venn wondered about the people he left behind during George’s little vacation? Did time stopped for them?

No.

They mourned, suffered, said their condolences, and within the week they would forget all about the Baileys. But when George has his epiphany and returns do they remember the time without him there or were their minds wiped? Was George the only one who knew the future of that timeline? If his life continued on a separate timeline with the memories of his death would he have been happy? Would he have cherished those around him before welcoming death with open arms? Or would he have begged for another chance, so his friends and family wouldn't suffer again? What if they died first? Mrs. Bailey or Zuzu? He doesn't get to pick. He just watches the circle of life complete another cycle and hear the words, "There's nothing we can do." Does he then grovel before God, asking to take him instead? Does He send him another angel or leave him to suffer? What if the angel arrives and grants his wish, then what happens to the townspeople? Who's suffering is worse, his or their's? Who matters more, him or them?

But George lives a happy life with his friends, family, and generous townspeople. No one is the wiser. A good man who got what he deserved. It's a miracle. That's what movies do, especially around Christmas. They spread happiness and joy for family even if that's a false reality.

He clicked off the television and saw two coats were missing from the entryway. Keith's car was gone, its tires leaving fresh tracks in the snow. With the package under his arm, he crunched his way to the mailbox, wiped some snow out of the way, and typed the code into the keypad. The hatch hissed open and Venn placed it inside. A small red laser scanned the shipping label, then the contents of the package, finishing with a vivid

green light and *Jingle Bell* chime. After a few seconds, the door sealed shut. On the keypad screen, the arrival time read nine minutes. When he pushed send, the mailbox quivered for a few seconds, shaking off the remaining snow, and sucking out the air. The package was then ejected underground through a series of tubes to its destination.

Venn crunched back inside and left his boots to dry in the entryway. Upstairs, he shrugged off his coat and opened his account. After refreshing it a few times, the balance changed. ReddingSteiner had paid even more than he had said. Venn then moused over to the page with the part he wanted and ordered it. Arrival time was in twenty minutes, slower than normal, due to the holiday rush. Shrinking the window down, he refreshed the *RoS* forum where the leading post read: “HUGE ACCIDENT: 30 CAR PILE-UP, DAMIEN TITOR IN CRITICAL CONDITION.” Venn clicked on it, jumped to Alpha Gaming’s forum, and refreshed. The same article was the top post. He tried Gamer Grotto and PC Portal achieving the same result.

The story was the same on each site. A melter had malfunctioned, sliding off the road and leaving the highway covered in a fresh snow and black ice. Drivers panicked and used the manual controls, causing their cars to skid off the road. When crews arrived on scene, though, they found a vehicle belonging to Damien Titor smashed into a tree after rolling over several times. He was immediately rushed to the nearest hospital, but no word about his condition beyond critical had been reported. Other drivers suffered minor injuries, sprains, and a broken arm or two.

Venn pushed back from his desk and spun around. A chime echoed through the house this time it was *Jingle Bell Rock*. His package had arrived, but he couldn't focus on that. What did the accident mean for *RoS* and its fans? What about Titor and his family? Would they be okay? He had a daughter and wife. Were they involved? Venn scanned the article again, but saw no mention of their names. He felt a bit of relief, but still worried about them. He understood what they were going through. It's not easy to see a loved one confined to a hospital bed, breathing through tubes punctuated by rhythmic beeps. The smell of bleach still made him queasy. He hoped everything would be all right for the family and the game. He hated to think that way, it was selfish after all, but he longed to return to Acharia and conquer each Isle. It was better than anything that waited or didn't wait for him here.

Chapter 3

Christmas went and by New Year's so did Keith. School started again, dragging the weeks along with it. Wakefield High was a large creaky building with a brick facade and iron bars. Separate from the main building was the lunch room where the staff consisted of malfunctioning service bots and student workers. Behind the school was a modern sports complex. The multifield was in soccer mode, its synthetic grass a pristine green. The domed arena outside the track housed three basketball and volleyball courts. It was used at least twice a week for prep rallies, games, and other school-wide events.

Thick, tinted windows accented the shimmering sides, allowing those in the weight room to lift unseen.

Tryouts for spring teams were taking place upstairs. Venn was running a mile on the self-adjusting low-impact treadmill along with other students. When he finished, he moved to the weights and did some reps. His chest and throat burned. His arms and legs were shaking, but pushed himself. He had promised his mom he'd try and she had promised to return limbo after stealing it from his room. Before he could finish lifting, the athletic director approached with his basic athletic assessment. It found him unsuitable for any team. Venn struggled to stand. When did it get that bad? A little out of shape, maybe, but still capable of having some athletic ability. He leaned against the rack of weights, catching his breath. His heart pounded in his chest. When he tried to unstick his clothes, the rack shifted under his weight and toppled over. The weights thudded across the floor almost hitting members of the basketball and baseball teams. Before they could say anything, he snagged his backpack and took off down the stairs. Outside, he willed himself not to look back. He could feel the eyes of dozens of people staring down at him. Pulling his backpack's straps tighter, he crossed under the bare trees toward the main building.

Inside, a couple janitor bots swept across the floor. Moving along the rows of dented lockers and darkened classrooms, Venn arrived at a set of stairs. He climbed to the second floor and entered another hallway. The walls were water stained from the winter storm and scent of mildew and fresh paint filled the air. When he reached his locker, he

punched in the code popping open the door. Venn retrieved his school provided tablet and shoved it into his bag. All his homework and class assignments were given and submitted on the device. He then pulled out a few loose papers about Titor's accident he had printed at lunch.

It had become an obsession. News sites were reporting about it for the past few weeks and rumors surged online. They ranged from a government hit to aliens saving him from the coming apocalypse, which should be any day now. Users began asking questions like how could a melter malfunction so easily? Why were the cars exceeding the programmed speed limit? Why did it take rescue crews so long to show up? Others tried to argue that black ice couldn't send cars toppling over themselves with modern braking systems unless the driver did it. Some even tried to analyze the dents in Titor's car, saying it was forced off the road by another vehicle. Eventually they devolved into insults and sarcasm. Whatever their points were, good or bad, Venn followed along, wanting to know more.

"Hey, hey, Vincey-boy."

Venn jumped, dropping some papers on the floor. He spun around and saw Lazar grinning. He was a foot taller than Venn and was dressed for practice.

"Christ, dude."

"When did you get this jumpy? You almost hit the roof. Good thing you didn't piss yourself like you did at my tenth birthday party."

“That movie was getting good and I thought I could hold it. At least I didn’t puke pizza and cake all over my presents.”

“Touché, touché. Those toys smelled bad for a whole month.”

Their laughter echoed in the deserted hall and drifted into silence.”

“Don’t you have practice or something?”

“I had to turn in a paper to Mr. H. He gave me some extra time ‘cause of the tourney.”

“That was kind of him,” said Venn, bending down to retrieve his fallen papers.

“You know, as well as I do, that he had to,” said Lazar. “Let me help you.”

Venn was glad Lazar was smarter than the average student at Wakefield High. The assignments were remedial. Administrators provided all the work online and ensured teachers taught to the test so star athletes could pass. Most teachers played along for the bonuses and other perks. Venn once saw Mr. H driving a brand new Autom-Roadster, priced at \$300,000, for a whole semester before taking a two week vacation to Tahiti. Those on staff, who voiced their disapproval, met with the union and learned from their mistakes. Venn considered himself lucky to be in classes with most athletes. It made homework trivial and allowed him more time in *RoS* during the closed beta.

“So where were you man? I texted you over break, hoping to play a little catch to get the arm loosened up before baseball starts.”

“I was busy. Family stuff and all. Congrats on the win though.”

“Thanks. How’s your mom?”

“She’s okay, I guess. She had a boyfriend, but he’s gone now.”

“That sucks,” said Lazar, handing over the papers. “Your dad was a cool dude. Would have never gotten my jumper down without him.”

Venn took the papers, but Lazar didn’t let go.

“Titor? I know that name,” said Lazar. “He’s the guy that invented Limbo, right? Didn’t something happen to him?”

“A bad car accident. Some people were saying that’s why the beta ha to end early.”

“Is he okay? Wait, you got in to the beta?”

“I thought I told you.”

“You didn’t. I tried to get in, but missed the deadline. How was it?”

Venn stood up, tearing the papers from Lazar’s hand and shoved them into his backpack.

“Too busy with basketball again?”

“Of course. If I’m gonna go pro, I have to play everyday,” said Lazar, standing up. “Especially if I want to do both baseball and basketball. I can’t play video games all day like some people.”

“Like being passed along in school is much better?”

“You do it too, man. You’re in most of my classes.”

“I’m surprised you even know I’m there Mr.—”

“Laser!”

The shouting came from down the hall. Jasen and Alvan approached, dressed in muscle shirts and shorts. Jasen had a star cut into the side of his hair and wore two sweat bands on each forearm. Alvan let his hair grow long and pasted it to his head with a concoction of products.

“Laser,” said Jasen, “coach has been looking for you.”

“I told him I had paper to turn in.”

“He forgets.” said Alvan.

“Shit it’s the death kid,” said Jasen.

“Who?”

“Him,” said Alvan, pointing at Venn. “You know, Graves. Death. Get it?”

“Clever,” said Venn. “How long did that take you to come up with?”

“Not long,” said Jasen, “just a few minutes after you nearly killed the athletic director and part of the baseball team.”

“What happened?”

“It was an accident,” said Venn.

“You should’ve seen it,” said Alvan, “he thought he could make the team.”

“Failed before everyone else,” said Jasen, “then he knocked over a rack of weights and ran out.”

“It was hilarious,” said Alvan.

“Damn,” said Lazar, “Anyone get hurt?”

“Nah their all good,” said Jasen.

“I might have hurt my sides from laughing,” said Alvan.

Venn slammed his locker shut and slung his backpack over his shoulder.

“Watch out now,” said Jasen, “he’s mad.”

Alvan and Jasen laughed. Venn glanced at Lazar, but he shrugged his shoulders.

This happened more often than Venn liked to admit. Lazar was his oldest friend. They grew up doing everything together: video games, sports, sleepovers, birthday parties, dances. They were best friends, but high school changed things. Lazar became Laser, known for his speed on the court and his ninety-five mile an hour fastball. He made new friends and even some from colleges that were recruiting him. Vincent became Venn, but only people in the gaming world called him that.

“C’m on guys,” said Lazar, “let’s get going.”

“Hopefully, coach remembers why we left,” said Jasen.

“I don’t want to do anymore suicides,” said Alvan.

They pivoted around, juked an invisible player, and started down the hall.

“Later, Vince.”

“See ya, Lazar.”

Venn watched his oldest friend walk away. Shouldering his backpack, he headed for the side stairwell behind him. He passed another dark classroom and spotted the first attempts at VR technology. These crude goggle devices strapped around your head, providing two screens, one for each eye. The effect it created gave the impression you were in the middle of a historic battle or at the subatomic level watching atoms trade

electrons. When paired with a traction apparatus, they could be used to make the most realistic movement in gaming history. However, both cost way too much for the average person to own. Before Apex Systems went bankrupt, the government bought the unsold devices and repurposed them for use in the public school system. Compared to the current Limbo, it was like shoving a curved television screen right in your face. We've come a long way, thought Venn. He pushed through the doors, went down the staircase, and exited into the brisk air.

The latest rumor said Titor had been transferred from Silver Birch Hospital to North Star Medical Center. Blurry photos of two black A-SUVs following a medicopter were posted along with the article. Titor's condition was presumably stable, but other tests needed to be done and Silver Birch wasn't equipped to handle them. Though it was a rumor, several gamers were organizing a vigil for him that afternoon. Venn hopped on the light rail, rode down a few stops, and arrived at North Star.

The medical center stood eight stories tall next to an outpatient facility. A treelined concrete walkway lead up to the automatic sliding doors of the main building. Venn had been here a few times before, but the trip was never became easier. He gazed up at the fourth window from the right on the sixth floor. The blinds were closed, the room dark.

Before his father died, Venn would often catch him, his frail frame slumped in a wheelchair, staring out that window. From the doorway, he could hear the labored breaths above the beeps of the machines. The man that used to be able to carry him on one arm,

who played catch with him, could barely stand on his own. The backs of his legs were spotted with sores. His remaining hair was a few thin strands. But every time Venn visited, a smile filled his gaunt face. After his mom's shift, she would join them from the fourth floor and spend those few hours together. They would be a family again like they used to be. Even though it was brief, Venn hoped his father was happy. When they would leave for the night, Venn would see him wave from the window, wondering if it would be for the last time.

Turning away from the building, Venn circled around to the East lawn. A crowd of young men and women were bundled together near the walkway. Some were holding electric candles, their heads lowered over the soft light. Others held up handmade signs, reading: "Get Well Damitor," "Damitor for President," and "Lord Titor shall not fall." One man was even dressed up like Titor. He wore a black Pixel Intelligence polo tucked into a pair of over sized jeans and made a cardboard mask using a print of Titor's face. Holes were cut out for the eyes and mouth, but the rest of the picture had Titor's pudgy chin, gray beard stubble, and long brown hair. Venn found it amusing, but disheartening. Titor was still recovering and using internet memes he hated, probably wasn't helping to cheer him up.

Venn moved to a smaller group who had separated themselves from the others. There was a man in a suit next a little girl in bright pink who couldn't stand still. Behind them were three guys standing in order of increasing size. The first had gauged ears and wore ripped jeans, exposing most of his upper legs. The second wore gray slacks and a

blazer. He had his hair in a bun on top of his head. The third had thinning hair and wore stained khakis and sandals. All three were wearing the same retro gaming T-shirt of Pixel Intelligence's logo, a brain rendered in 16 bit format. Two women, one with purple hair and the other with blue, knelt in front of framed photograph of Titor with two large candles posted next to it. They all stared up at the building, holding lit candles.

Wax streaked down the sides, cooling before it reached the paper covering near the base. They were silent and tense. When Venn stood next to them, the man in the suit handed him a candle, but didn't take his eyes off of the building. None of the them did, except for the little girl who stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes at him. Venn shrugged his shoulders and dipped the wick into the dancing flame of a large candle. He stood in silence unsure of exactly he was supposed to do. He wasn't a religious person. He had never really thought hard about it. It never seemed that important.

When his father was dying, his mother would take him into the hospital chapel. They'd kneel in front of the alter and she would pray. Kneeling next her was awkward. She would mumble a prayer and he would try to follow along, but would quickly lose interest. He knew who he was supposed to speak to, but wasn't sure if they were even listening. They never spoke back so he didn't bother. He would get lost in his thoughts, staring at the cross and wondering why a torture device was revered so much. When that thought passed, he would imagine the chapel was a level in a video game.

He pictured the altar table had a hidden passage below, but it would only open when the candles were lit in the right order. If the order was wrong then he would have to

fight the figures that emerged out of the stained glass windows. When they were lit correctly, the altar table would slide out of the way, exposing the hidden passage. Venn would approach the darkness, a candle in hand, but then Jesus would pull himself off the wall and fling the cross at him. The boss battle would begin, the music pounding, and Venn would have to defeat him to find the Holy Grail.

In those moments, he would wonder what life would be like if it were a video game. He could slay monsters for easy money and for fun. He would raise his speech stat and win any argument. Losing weight and being handsome would happen with the press of a button. He could take back all of his mistakes with a quick save and prolong death with extra lives. Each day would be a new adventure, a new quest, and a new reason to play.

Standing next to the silent group of Titor worshippers, Venn didn't know what to say or if he should say anything at all. The man next to him rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. He was in a navy blue wrinkled suit and looked to be in his late thirties, but the patches of gray hair made him appear older. Next to him was the young girl in pink who now had her hands clasped together and eyes closed. Every few seconds she would sigh heavily and peek at the man. The man ignored her, taking a deeper breath.

"Dad, this is boring," said the girl.

"A bit longer," said the man.

"I wanna go home now."

"Please, if you're good, I'll buy you ice cream."

“I don’t want ice cream.”

“A toy then?”

“No. I wanna go home. I’m hungry. I don’t wanna see a creepy old man.”

The man looked down at the girl and tried to smile. The others in the group scowled at him and his face turned red.

“Home now, home now, home now.”

“Fine, let’s go home.”

He grabbed the girl in pink by the arm, blew out his candle, and left the East lawn. The others in the group returned their gaze to building. The blinds of a window on the fifth floor stirred. A face Venn couldn’t quite distinguish appeared and pressed itself against the glass. The crowd gasped.

“It’s him.”

Venn turned around and saw a woman in a T-shirt two sizes too small, her muffin top spilling over her jeans. She was squealing and squeezing a plushy bearing the likeness of Titor.

“Hail be to Damitor,” said the man in the Titor mask.

The rest of the crowd joined in the masked man’s chant. They waved their signs and erupted into a cacophony of cheers. Venn turned back to the window and saw the face was joined by two hands. Titor was waving and the crowd roared louder.

“Disgusting fanboys,” said the purple-haired woman.

“So annoying,” said the blue-haired woman.

They had blown out the candles, picked up the photo frame, and stood by the others. Venn saw them focused on the window, eyes wide. He turned to the window and saw Titor motioning for them to come up. Then he started banging his head against the glass. He pounded it harder and harder and the crowd of fanboys cheered louder. Venn watched in stunned silence. He didn't understand what was going on. Titor seemed happy a second ago and now he appeared insane.

Rearing his head back, Titor tried to slam it against the window, but was flung backwards. A streak of red was left trickling down the glass. The blinds closed and the crowd went silent.

"We should go," said Gauge.

"They won't let us go up there," said Blazer.

"He was telling us to," said Khakis.

"They're going," said Gauge, pointing to the blue-haired and purple haired women.

Venn saw the two women walking toward the front of the hospital, their hips rocking side to side.

"I'd follow them anywhere," said Khakis.

"Not time man," said Blazer.

"Maybe Titor can sign our shirts," said Khakis.

"Again, not the time."

"Let's go already," said Gauge.

Venn watched them leave and looked back up at the window. The group of fanboys behind him cried a half hearted cheer when the blinds opened again. A man in blue scrubs had appeared in the window and was cleaning the blood. He was unconcerned with the people below. He did his job and vanished behind the blinds.

The crowd of fanboys started to disperse. Venn turned his gaze away from the window to the candle in his hands. The flame had gone out and holding it felt like a hollow gesture. What was a candle going to accomplish? There was no secret remedy to make Titor well. If it was support, he already had plenty of it. But were they really hoping he'd recover? The crowd of fanboys only seemed concerned about Titor's celebrity status, not his health. At least the others were respectful.

Venn pocketed the candle and headed for the main entrance. He wanted to know what the other group was planning. Titor wanted them all to come see him, but the fifth floor was mostly private rooms for recovering patients. They were expensive, but if you had the money, you get easily get one. If not, you were stuck in a room with two other people and a curtain your only means of privacy. Only family could have access to the floor, but visiting hours were limited and security had no problem throwing people out.

A black copter passed over head, catching the light of the setting sun. Venn watched it hover above the roof of the building for a second before landing. Fanboys surged passed him, racing for the main entrance.

"It's Price," said one.

“Those two in the same place at the same time. I could die,” said the woman with the plushy.

“This is epic,” said another.

Through the sliding doors, Venn saw the lobby crowded with more Titor and Price fans. They were wearing Pixel Intelligence shirts, holding photos and electric candles. Some had even dressed in all black. Every chair was filled and the walls were lined with fans. The hospital staff gave them wary looks and shushed them on occasion, but they continued with their duties. He moved passed the counter to the back hallway, where a crowd had gathered.

A large man in a black polo stood arms crossed next to the elevators. His bald head glistened in the fluorescent light and a thick vein pulsed in his neck. On his left breast was the word *Apex* in red stitching. He was a part of Price’s security team. Venn wondered why Price brought his security team and why the hospital would allow it. Close to the front was Gauge, Blazer, and Khakis among other fans. Ahead of them were the blue and purple-haired women. The Bouncer kept shaking his head and held his arms out to stop them from pushing.

“Let us through man,” said one fan.

“Titor wants to see us you big tree,” said Gauge.

“Mr. Titor,” said the Bouncer, “will not be seeing guests today. He thanks you, but he needs to rest.”

“But he was telling us to come,” said Khakis.

“You need to step back,” said the Bouncer, “Mr. Titor—”

“Screw Titor, Price is the real genius,” said a man, wearing a black baseball cap.

“Shut it asshole,” said Blazer, “Price is a thief and you know it.”

“Fuck you dipshit,” said the fan, shoving Blazer.

Blazer pushed back and Gauge joined the fight. The bouncer leaned in to break up the fight, but the crowd surged forward, enveloping him. Punches were being thrown and the security guard raised his arms to protect his face. He tried to make his way to the front, but the crowd was unrelenting.

Venn backed away from the scene to the opposite side of the room. The fight snowballed further and soon more people from the lobby joined in. The Bouncer disappeared from view and the hospital staff started to panic. When the elevator doors opened, the crowd rushed forward, cramming themselves inside. The remaining empty space was immediately filled in by more fans, who kept on fighting. The Bouncer crawled out from the side and pressed his ear piece, relaying the trouble. Next to him, another set of doors whizzed open. Two orderlies stepped out, confused. Shoving passed them, the screaming fans piled into the elevator. The orderlies tried to force the group to one side, but it proved impossible. One with a bushy mustache grabbed his communicator off his waist and brought it to his mouth.

Behind Venn, the stairwell doors opened and two more orderlies emerged. They hesitated, but ran forward to stop the crowd. Before the doors shut, Venn ducked into the

stairwell. He peeked through the narrow window and saw the Bouncer back on to his feet. With the help of the orderlies, they forced the crowd back.

He climbed the steps up to the fifth floor without running into anyone else. The air smelled like bleach and the remanence of cigarettes. He wasn't surprised, though. Every door leading into the stairwell was labeled Emergency Exit. The bright red paint and fear of setting off an alarm kept people from ever using them, but these didn't have an alarm system. It was never hooked up or even installed. When he used to visit his father, Venn would see nurses and doctors sneak through the doors and return later, tucking in their shirts or pocketing a pack of cigarettes.

Reaching the landing, Venn peeked through the narrow window. A nurse in purple scrubs stood at the counter, rocking on the balls of her feet. Her head was craned over a tablet, her platinum blonde ponytail bobbing to her own beat. Then the beat stopped. She grabbed the tablet and darted out of sight. Venn pushed through the door into the deserted hallway. He heard a low roar of voices coming from down the hall.

When he rounded the corner, he saw the nurse trying to push though the crowd Titor and Price fans. Another large man with a pompadour haircut and a silver earring stood in front of the door to room 510. His Apex Security polo was stretched tight across his chest. Venn moved toward the crowd, staying near the fringes.

"Move it kids," said the man, shoving the crowd. "Let the lady through."

"Hell no," said the crowd, pushing back.

"Let us see him," said the purple and blue-haired women.

They clawed at the guard's arm, but he didn't seem to feel a thing. Gauge, Blazer, and Khakis lurched forward, but the guard brushed them aside. With a cleared path, the nurse entered the room. For a brief a second, before the door closed, Venn saw a pair of legs flailing about. Against the wall watching, stood Price, his head downcast. The door shut and the guard filled in the frame.

"I saw him," said the girl with the plushy.

The purple and blue-haired women pushed her into the guard. He fell back against the door, but kept his balance.

"We saw him too," said the women.

"Price was in there," said the fan in a black baseball cap.

His hat was turned backwards, displaying an alligator's head pointing downward, jaws spread wide. Venn recognized it as Apex Systems logo, Price's old company, before they became Apex Security, specializing in personal protection in real life and on the web. The logo wasn't used any more because Price opted for something more streamlined; the word Apex.

"Apex was trash and still is," said Gauge.

The guard perked up at the insult, but Apex fanboy whipped around, throwing a punch. He missed the target and hit Blazer in the nose. Blood spilled down Blazer's shocked face. He pinched his nose and Gauge tried to apologize. The crowd grew restless and started pushing their way forward. Venn backed up, stepping on something soft.

"Fuck."

“Sorry,” said Venn, turning around.

An old woman with thin gray hair was leaning against the wall rubbing her foot. Her eyes narrowed at him. The wrinkles on her face deepened. The name on the monitor next to the door read Evelyn Magnani.

“Damn kids. All got the brains of piss ants. Why you all out here anyway?”

“A famous video game designer is in that room and everyone’s trying to see him.”

“Fuck all. I thought it was someone important.”

“He is important.”

“That’s going to bruise,” said Evelyn, “I don’t think you broke anything. You’re lucky.”

“Sorry,” said Venn, unsure of what to do.

The crowd behind was getting louder. More patients were poking their heads out of their doors. Most were elderly and some were children younger than Venn. Orderlies and nurses were talking to a few, coaxing them back into their rooms.

“Do you need help?”

“Not from you. I’m not old enough to be needin’ any help, especially from you.”

“Then why are you here?”

He couldn’t stop himself.

“I won myself a free trip to Cabo, but sold it for a relaxing time here.”

Venn ignored her.

“Ha. Couldn’t get you on that one. You might have more brains than these other piss ants.”

“So why *are* you here?”

“Won a contest,” said Evelyn, breathing deep. “Got picked for some experimental treatment. Everyone here is on it. Folks older than me and kids less annoying than this bunch. Don’t know how it works, but Doc says my tumor stopped growing.”

She knocked on her head and tried to smile.

“I still forget, though. Sometimes can’t remember what day it is or if I’m still dreaming. You real, right?” Evelyn’s face went slack. “Why all these people here?”

She cocked an eyebrow and bit her lower lip. Her stare was vacant and Venn wasn’t sure if it was another trick. He looked around for help, but the nurses were still a couple rooms away.

“Wait here—”

Evelyn was gone. Venn turned and saw her shuffling down the hall toward a nurse. The nurse gently turned her around and led her back to her room. When they walked by, Evelyn was mumbling about giant bugs crawling over everything. Closing the door, the nurse glanced back, giving a disgusted look to the crowd. They had gotten louder and were now surrounded by hospital security and staff.

“It’s him,” said a few fans.

The crowd cheered and whistled. Venn was pushed back, stumbling into the wall. He turned around to see Price standing next to the guard.

“Everyone please stop,” said Price, raising his hands.

The crowd stilled, but continued chattering.

“Thank you Rodrigo.”

The guard relaxed and moved aside. Price stepped forward in a crisp black suit, giving a weak smile. The whiteness of his teeth shown through his small mouth and his face was burnt orange, except for the pale flesh encircling his puffy eyes.

“I’d like to thank you all for the support, but what you are doing is reprehensible. This is a hospital. There are patients recovering all around you and you act like children. My friend is in there suffering and—”

Price pulled out the handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his eyes. Some members of the crowd hung their heads and others pretended not to pay attention. Running his hand through his slick hair, Price sighed and pocketed the handkerchief.

“I had to tell him in person when I found out. He didn’t want anyone to know, but I’m sure it’s out there now. So I beg you all to leave. Let him rest. Please.”

“Why should we?”

Venn leaned back against the wall watching part of the crowd scream for answers. Others were too lethargic to move or speak. They had their cells out, staring wide-eye at the screens. Venn dug through his backpack and found his. He loaded up the web browser and saw the top news story was about Titor.

“You don’t care do you,” said Price, “three hours ago, this man lost everything. His wife and daughter are gone and you’re concerned only about yourselves. Fucking

disgusting. I'm glad I left the gaming industry so I don't have to deal with your selfishness. Now, leave."

Rodrigo stepped forward, moving the stunned crowd back. Forming a barrier, the nurses and orderlies forced the crowd toward the elevator. Venn shuffled along with them until they came to a stop. Even with the weight of what had been said, some people were saying Price was an ass and Apex games were garbage. Some gave them dirty looks, but most seemed unable to look away from their cells. The doors hissed opened and the first group entered with two orderlies.

Venn unlocked his cell and skimmed over the article. The news had said that Titor was alone in his car, but now they reported his daughter, Nina, and his wife, Zora, were critically injured in the crash. According to the article, Titor's lawyers and Price worked to keep their names anonymous in the reports fearing for their safety given Titor's celebrity status. Nina and Zora suffered severe head trauma and internal bleeding, but the report didn't enter into specifics. A picture of the family, taken years ago at the 75th anniversary of E3, was posted in the article. A slimmer, thick-haired Titor and a chunkier Price stood shoulder to shoulder in a small booth. The prototype of Limbo rested on a mannequin's head on a table. Zora was next to Titor, her long auburn hair parted down the middle and resting on her shoulders. She was holding a sleeping toddler and smiling wide. Venn felt numb. He understood what Titor was feeling and knew there wasn't anything that could be done to help. Closing out of the article, Venn pocketed his phone and stepped onto the elevator.

They rode in silence down to the lobby. Blazer had two wads of tissue shoved into his nostrils and Gauge was trying to talk to the blue-haired woman. She ignored him and he tried her purple-haired friend. She ignored him too, but he didn't stop until Khakis gripped his shoulder and shook his head.

When they entered the lobby, Venn saw all the fans had left. The bouncer still stood in the hallway. His shirt was ripped in a couple places and he had a large bandage on his head. The orderlies shuffled them past the counter and out the sliding doors. Coming up the path, Venn saw Emily walking with a businessman in a blue suit and thick sunglasses. She was in her scrubs smiling and he had his hand on the small of her back. They were too involved with each other to notice the large group of people. Venn passed them, biting his tongue.

Chapter 4

News of Titor's freak out and the loss of his family circulated through the net. Venn read through the forums and discussion boards that night. Someone had recorded a super high definition video on their cell and posted it. He watched Titor bash his head against the window several times, feeling his pain with each hit. The blood was bright red on the glass and the anguish on Titor's face was clear. It had over two million views by the time Venn fell asleep.

The next day, he walked through the lunch room, his plastic tray in hand. Heart decorations and pink streamers dangled from the ceiling. Painted posters were taped to

the walls, advertising the Valentine's Day dance. It was a few days away and desperation was setting in for those without dates. Guys were settling for whoever was still available and girls were planning on going with each other.

Venn wasn't as determined as his peers. There were three reasons why dances were a waste of time. One, he didn't know how to dance. His mom had tried to teach him when he was in junior high, but that was more awkward than it was helpful. Especially, when the hospital staff and patients were gawking at him. Two, he hated the old gym where dances were held. It was stuffy and smelled musty. The decorations were cheap and some people still believed in using an over abundance of cologne and perfumes. Three, no one would care to go with him anyway. Rosalie was already going with Lazar.

Balancing his processed burger, soggy fries, and can of Coke, Venn maneuvered around the lunch tables. Lazar was seated by Alvan and Jasen who were laughing and banging their fists on the table. When Venn passed them, he was welcomed with scowls from Alvan and Jasen. Lazar turned away, taking a swig from his steel water bottle. That's one less friend, Venn thought. He continued through the doors, passing a table where tickets were being sold.

"Vinnie, did you buy your ticket?"

Venn stumbled over his feet, but kept his lunch on the tray. He turned around to see Rosalie sitting at the tables. Her long curls rested on her shoulders, framing her pale cheeks and dark eyes.

"I haven't yet," said Venn, trying to maintain eye contact.

Rosalie was wearing a bulky black coat over a pastel pink V-neck. The shirt stretched tight against her chest, revealing the tops of her breasts.

“You can get them now. If you want?”

She smiled and batted her eyelashes. Even though Venn knew this technique, he still felt compelled to approach the table. He had known Rosalie since middle school, when she joined his sixth grade class. Back then, she wasn't popular with either the boys or the girls. She was chubby and new, which led to daily teasing. Venn, Lazar, and some of the other boys ranked her above Patricia Diller, who was fatter, and below Erica Colburn, the girl obsessed with horses. Even though Venn thought she should have been placed higher, he didn't argue with them about it.

“I'd like to,” said Venn, patting his back pocket, “but I just spent what I had on lunch.”

“No worries,” said Rosalie, “I can spot you, just pay me back later.”

She batted her eyelashes again. Venn had teased her like everyone else. He knew he liked her, but couldn't figure out why. Something about her smile and her laugh. Her easy-going nature and good humor made her plenty of friends by seventh grade.

“I don't want to owe you anything.”

“It's no biggie,” said Rosalie, leaning forward.

Venn glanced at her cleavage and looked away.

“Did you hear about Titor?”

“I saw the video, tragic stuff.”

“I was there. Apex security guards blocked the room and people mobbed them. Then Price showed up. It was fucking nuts. Do you still play?”

“Not anymore. School and work take up most of time now. This student council gig wastes my afternoons. So are you coming?”

Venn watched her pull out the card reader.

“I can’t. I have plans.”

“C’mon it’ll be fun and it supports our class.”

“It’s family stuff.”

“You’re lying Vinnie,” said Rosalie, “tell me.”

Venn wanted to, but couldn’t. He stared at her soft pink lips. They used to be much closer, when they were younger.

“Mom and I are going to visit dad.”

“That can’t take all day.”

“You’re right,” said Venn, dropping his tray on the table. “It can’t.”

“Everything good Rosalie.”

It was Lazar. He was by himself, eyeing Venn.

“All good,” said Rosalie, smiling, “Vinnie was upset he didn’t have the money for tickets.”

“I can spot you,” said Lazar, reaching for his wallet. “Wait, who’re you bringing?”

Venn glanced at both of them.

“I’ll get them tomorrow.”

He picked up his tray and walked passed empty benches toward the back of the school. Sitting alone, he remembered back in eighth grade, when he and Rosalie had to report on the history of an entire decade.

Having been assigned the 1980s, Venn delved into the technological element. He started with arcade games, the introduction of personal computers, the conviction of criminals using DNA for the first time, and ended on the creation of the World Wide Web. Rosalie arrived with bookmarked articles of assassinations, terrorist attacks, and the Cold War. She had also downloaded hundreds of super retro games from that era.

They played Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Galaga, and Super Mario Bros. all day long. The next day, The Legend of Zelda, Bubble Bobble, and Sim City sucked up their attention until Rosalie had to leave. Venn then stayed up the entire night completing the presentation and messaging with Rosalie. Usually, he chatted with Lazar, but he had been busy impressing high school recruiters.

Venn and Rosalie discussed their favorite and most hated games. RPG genres won out over the FPSs. This led into movies and music tastes, which were almost identical. Action flicks starring Cly Bishop were their favorites. They liked alternative rock, but not the new age mixes. Then through some winding path, their conversation became personal.

Rosalie had told him that she cut herself because of the teasing. Venn’s stomach twisted and his chest ached. He apologized, but she said she didn’t need an apology. Her

grandmother had kept it a secret and helped her overcome the pain, but she had passed away earlier that year. Venn apologized again and told her his father was dying. He didn't know what to feel. Anger? Sadness? Despair? He had never told anyone before, not even Lazar. It was strange for Venn to talk about these things, but in doing so Rosalie became his number one.

Their first kiss happened weeks later behind the gym after a dance. Under a yellow light, Venn looked into her dark eyes. She batted her eyelashes and he leaned in. His dry lips met hers. She kissed him back. The rhythm of his heart pounded in his ears. When he moved in closer to hold her, she wrapped her arms around his waist. They swayed together, dancing to an unknown beat. She didn't say anything, but Venn had so much to say. He could smell her peach shampoo. He was worried that he reeked. He thought about the kiss and if it was good or bad. He wanted to ask, but changed his mind. When Rosalie let go, he realized he didn't want it end.

Those moments were scattered memories now. High school changes things. He wondered who had changed more, him or them? Lazar had wanted nothing to do with Rosalie years ago, but now they were dating. Venn had wanted to be with her since their first kiss, but now he could barely talk to her.

He shook his head. It was a teenage romance, nothing special at all. A stupid crush, he knew wasn't going to last. He snagged the soda can off its side and tapped the top. His moment had passed and it wasn't coming back. So why stay trapped in a memory? He popped the lid, soaking himself in its rotting sweetness.

Venn made it through the rest of the day without much trouble. He had cleaned himself up, but his clothes were stained and slightly sticky. He kept out of sight from the ticket tables, ensuring the sellers wouldn't talk to him. Lazar avoided him in class like usual. He cruised through forums and discussion boards on his cell during history. The latest reports were that Titor had left the hospital to attend his wife and child's funeral service. Pictures of him and Price entering a funeral parlor were everywhere. Titor had shaved, but still had bandages on his hands and face. Price was in all black and his security staff were a short distance away from the entrances of the funeral parlor.

"No parent should have to bury their child" was a frequently posted comment with the photos. Venn didn't think they knew what it was like to have to bury a parent, especially a father. They didn't know to be the man of the house when new men stared forcing their way in. They didn't have to force their mother eat or hear her cry through the whole night. This didn't have to pretend to be strong. They were miles away, unaffected by what happened, preaching their false compassion.

When he arrived home, a blue A-BMW 5000 series was parked in his driveway. He had never seen the car before, but it wasn't the first time a mysterious vehicle showed up at his house. He entered the house and found them sitting across from each other at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

"Vince, this is Brad—"

Brad coughed.

“I mean Bradley. Bradley this is my son, Vincent.”

Brad stood up and straightened out his suit jacket.

“A pleasure to meet you Vince,” said Brad, extending his hand.

Venn shook it and smiled politely. Brad’s hand was soft and greasy like he’d lathered it in lard.

“He’s a sales rep for Dimar Labs. We met at the hospital and he finally asked me out yesterday.”

“She was hard to persuade, but I eventually wore her down. She is special after all.”

He winked at Emily. She giggled. Venn rolled his eyes.

“I gotta go shower,” said Venn, “spilled soda on myself earlier.”

He left them in the kitchen and went upstairs. How long will this one last, Venn thought.

The rest of the week Brad sent gifts to the house. Flowers, chocolate, a giant stuffed bear that danced and sang love songs showed up on the doorstep. Emily believed it was sweet and romantic. Venn found it annoying and overbearing like Brad was trying way too hard.

At school, the same things were happening. Couples exchanged gifts, left flowers in each other’s lockers, and made out in the halls. The never ending announcements about buying dance tickets made Venn grit his teeth. He couldn’t wait for it to end.

On the day of the dance, he skirted around a pair of entwined lovers and popped open his locker. A crinkled envelope fell to floor. He picked it up and found his name written on it in Rosalie's handwriting. Inside, he found a pair of tickets and a note that read: "For you and your date. Please come." What a joke, thought Venn. He threw the envelope in his backpack with all his other crumpled up papers. Slamming his locker, he startled the pair making out and left out of the side stairwell.

The house was quiet and dark, when he arrived. He expected Emily to be home and Brad to be around making calls, but the house was empty. Upstairs, Venn pulled his shirt over his nose. It reeked of Emily's perfume. He walked down the hall to his mom's room and saw that it too was empty. Shrugging his shoulders, he turned around and went in his room. He tossed his backpack on the bed and plopped down in his computer chair. When his computer finished booting up, Venn opened up an emulator and set out to finish the original Final Fantasy 7 where the characters had Popeye arms and pointy bodies.

Around ten that night, Venn heard Emily and Brad stumbling up the stairs. They banged into the walls and shushed each other, trying not to laugh.

"Is he here?"

"I don't know, I thought he'd be at the dance."

Emily knocked on the door and opened it. The hallway light poured into his dark room. Venn was sitting at his computer, still playing through Final Fantasy 7. He spun around in his chair. His mom was barefoot in a tight black dress and leaning against the door frame.

“Home early from the dance?”

“I didn’t go. No ride and no date.”

“What about your friend Rosalie? You should have asked her?”

“The kid doesn’t have any friends, Em,” said Brad, slurring his words.

Venn rolled his eyes.

“She went with Lazar anyway.”

“How is he? I haven’t seen him in long time. I think it was—”

“Kid, women are fickle,” said Brad, poking his head into the room. His tie hung loosely around his neck and his suit jacket was rumpled. “They don’t know what they want. You just gotta go for it. They love confidence. I wouldn’t be here if it I didn’t have the courage to ask this lovely nurse out.”

He wrapped his arm around Emily’s waist and squeezed. She bit her lower lip.

“You don’t need a date to enjoy a dance,” said Emily, “if you leave now maybe you can have fun with your friends.”

“I don’t think so.”

“There’s no shame in putting yourself out there. Try it next time.”

She peeled Brad’s arm off her waist and went to her room. Brad winked at him and followed after Emily. He didn’t even have the decency to close the door or turn off the light. Before returning to his game, Venn entered the hallway to turn off the light. Voices rose from his mom’s room.

“Why not?”

“Not while he’s here,” said Emily.

“I have needs, you know.”

“And I don’t? I thought he’d be gone. I’ll make it up to you.”

“When will that be? He never leaves his room.”

“Your place, tomorrow?”

“It’s being renovated, remember.”

“I’ll figure something out then, just be patient. It’ll be worth it.”

“It better be.”

Venn turned off the light and shut his door. Sitting down in his chair, Venn stared at the screen. The game no longer interested him. It wasn’t the same. It lacked the thrill that it once had. Nothing could compare to *RoS*. He wanted to return to Acharia. To its pristine graphics, amazing combat, and realism. But with Titor still recovering, it was unknown if the project would continue. He had hope, but it was fading fast.

Chapter 5

Hazy sunlight spread through the kitchen, washing it in dull grey. March had bled into April and Wakefield High went into a frenzy. Lazar and the basketball team had won state, the baseball team was undefeated, and the spring formal was weeks away. He had avoided the hysteria of school pride and settled further into obscurity. It didn’t matter to him. He felt alone all the time and now he knew, for sure, he was.

After removing the pan from the oven, Venn plated the baked chicken with spinach and a side of steamed red potatoes. He called upstairs to Emily, but received no response. He hardly saw her since Brad left. If she wasn't working her third late shift in a row, she was holed up in her room. Venn went upstairs and knocked on her door.

"Dinner."

Still no response.

He knocked one more time and went back downstairs. Minutes later, Emily appeared at the table. She was in hoodie and sweatpants. Her hair was frizzy, face pale, and dark shadows clung under her eyes. Their clattering silverware carried the only conversation. He had seen her this way before, when his father died. Back then, he had taken care of her and now he was doing it again. Venn sliced into his chicken and took a bite. Emily looked lost prodding at hers.

"How is it?"

Emily picked up the slab and bit into it.

He gave her a quizzical look. "It's your favorite," said Venn. "I made it like dad used to."

She swallowed and looked at him. "It's dry, but it's close."

"I tried," said Venn, taking a bite of a potato.

"You're dad could never get it right either."

Venn looked at her, then at the clock, and continued eating in silence. Emily grabbed a glass and a bottle of wine from the cabinet. Brushing the hair out of her face, she filled the glass to the brim and took a gulp.

“Have you asked anyone to the spring formal, yet?”

Venn stopped chewing and shook his head.

“Are you even going?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Mrs. Hyland’s daughter, Felicia, is available. You can take her.”

“Who?”

“She works in radiology and I told her you could take Felicia.”

He poked at his chicken. “I don’t think so.”

Emily took another gulp and sighed.

“This is supposed to be the best time of your life. Get into trouble, have fun, but you don’t do anything. You don’t go to any of the games. You haven’t been to any dances. You—you—” Emily searched for the right words. “Do you even like girls? It’s okay if you don’t, I mean you haven’t had a girlfriend or boyfriend. You just spend your day on that computer and I know what teenage boys do—”

“What?” said Venn, feigning disgust.

“Don’t act innocent,” said Emily. She finished her wine. “You don’t give anyone a chance. So what if Rosalie is with Lazar, find someone else. The worst they can say is ‘no’, right?”

“‘Hell no, you sack of shit’ is much worse.”

“Damn it Vince. When are you going to start acting like a normal kid?”

“When you start acting like a normal mom.”

Emily’s eyes widened and her nostrils flared. “You’re going to that dance and you’re taking Felicia. I’ve already arranged it and you’re seeing her tomorrow.”

“You can’t make me go.”

“I can,” said Emily, “if you want these back.”

She pulled out a ball of tangled wires from her pocket. Venn knew they belonged to his computer and to Limbo.

“I need those.”

“You *need* these,” said Emily, jiggling the wires like toy keys, “so you can sit in your room and obsess over a stupid game. I have needs too, Vince, and I need you to go to that dance.”

“You *need* a reality check, mom,” said Venn, “I’m not going.”

He flung his chair back, leaving his meal half eaten. Emily shook her head and poured herself another glass.

Venn slammed his door and locked it. Limbo was missing from his nightstand. The wires that ran from it to the back of the tower were gone. He ducked under the desk and felt the back of the tower.

Damn.

Every wire was missing from there too. Pulling open drawers, Venn discovered more wires and cords were gone. Emily had taken every cord and wire without knowing what they belonged to. He open his closet door and started digging through boxes of old computer parts. Inside a plastic bin, he found a power cord and an old SHDMI cable for one of his monitors. After hooking them up to the tower, he booted up the machine. One monitor lit up and open to his desktop. He ran a diagnostics check, making sure nothing had been corrupted. He couldn't remember if it had been on before Emily ripped out the cords. When it came back negative of any problems, he felt relief. Computers were more powerful now, but they still did strange things like corrupting files or crashing his games. It was a nightmare to having to debug and restore them. Most of the time, the files were completely useless afterwards.

When he closed out of the terminal, another window appeared asking to download an update to *RoS*. Venn almost couldn't believe it. He hit the update button and jumped to Alpha Gaming's website. The top post was made by ReddingSteiner and read: "*RoS* slated for May; Price and Titor collaboration." Venn recognized the name and checked the profile, but the basic information said the user was born in 1895 and had been a user for one day.

Venn clicked the link, reading that Titor had been released from the hospital and was now recovering at home. Price announced that they were collaborating again, "to ensure that *Reign of Swords* could reach every deserving fan." He continued saying it was

Titor's wish to push through with the project despite his loss, confirming Apex Security would be assisting Pixel Intelligence.

Fuck yeah.

He leapt up nearly falling out of his chair. It was happening. Months of waiting were almost over. He would finally be able to go back. Venn read through the article two more times, but the excitement faded with each iteration. Titor had lost his family, broken bones, and even though he was grieving, he wanted to continue working. Maybe that was all Titor had left; a lifelong ambition he didn't want to die and a friend to help him fulfill it.

Before Venn could close the window, the screen went black. At first, he thought the computer crashed, but everything was still working. He crawled under the desk, shoving boxes out of the way and checked the connection of the SHDMI cord. That too was secure. Sitting back in his chair, he noticed a pink dot in the middle of the screen. The dot grew larger until a 16-bit brain appeared. Venn stared at Pixel Intelligence's logo, wondering why it was there. A red alligator then crawled into the frame and snapped its jaws, swallowing the brain. When it plodded across the middle of the screen, its scaly body became pixelated. Its head began glowing a bright white, revealing the outline of a brain and its body grew larger. The words Pixel Intelligence and Apex Security appeared above the alligator, before it exploded washing the screen in red. Where the body of the reptile used to be was a message: "Update Completed. Use the following passcode within 72 hours for early access to RoS."

The message was replaced with the passcode: S!NL1N31V4 and a timer counting down from thirty seconds. Venn jotted the code down on the back of a piece of paper with an old character build on it. When the timer hit zero, the code was replaced by another message: “Spaces are limited. Codes are one-time-use and tied to a user’s Limbo account. Selling or revealing the code will result in a permanent ban from *RoS*. Thank You.”

The window closed and the desktop returned to normal. Venn sat gawking at the screen. He needed to get Limbo back.

Inside Alric’s Alterations & Cleaners, Alric helped Venn slip on a black suit jacket. He then crouched and fiddled with the pant legs. Venn stared at himself in the mirrors. Six pairs of bloodshot eyes stared back at him. He had stayed up searching for answers about the video, but there was nothing about it on Alpha Gaming or any other discussion board. He had thought about making his own post, but feared being banned from the game.

He had searched all over the house for his Limbo when Emily left. It wasn’t in any of the usual spots like the back of the closet or in the attic. He couldn’t find it anywhere. Online, they were for sale, but they were too expensive. Even if he sold his games and computer parts, he still wouldn’t have enough to cover the cost.

“How does it feel?” said Alric, examining Venn.

“Shoulders are a bit tight,” said Venn, buttoning the top button.

“Let me see.”

Muttering to himself, Alric pulled out a measuring tape. He ran his soft and knotted hands across the jacket's shoulders and then lifted Venn's arms up.

"It was my dad's. Stephen Graves, do you remember?"

Alric continued measuring like he didn't hear anything.

"Sleeve length perfect, shoulders narrow. Turn around."

Venn did so and Alric straightened the jacket.

"Good, good. I can fix the shoulders, but not the belly. You fix that."

Alric chuckled.

Taking the pencil from his ear, he jotted a few notes down on a slip of paper. Venn unbuttoned the jacket and turned sideways. He stuck out his stomach and stared at it. He didn't think he looked fat. He sucked it back in and stuck it back out. It was impossible to deny that a few inches of his belly hung over his pants.

"You doing the Hokey-Pokey?" said Alric, copying him.

Venn laughed at his exaggerated imitation and jack-o'-lantern smile.

Alric had always joked with his regular customers. When Venn was younger, he used accompany his father to pick up his suits. Alric often teased Stephen about his thinning hair or protruding belly. Stephen would laugh and return with a quip of his own, sometimes making Alric snort. Even after Stephen became ill, Alric would banter with him about his weight loss. He would ask if Emily's cooking was the cause and if he could have some to lose a few inches. Stephen would chuckle, but his raspy laugh would quickly become a coughing fit. The last time Venn came to Alric's alterations was almost

a year ago to have his father's tux cleaned for the funeral. That was the only time Alric didn't make a quip about him or his father.

"What's the damage?" said Venn, removing the jacket.

Alric's tongue protruded from the corner of his mouth. "Jacket's one-fifty and pants seventy-five, but for you, two-twenty-five for both."

Venn's brow furrowed. "That's the same cost."

Alric chortled. "Mr. Graves didn't fall for that either. Had the same look too." He grinned, grabbing the jacket and sliding it on a hanger. "Half-off. My best offer."

Venn accepted, taking the handwritten receipt. Alric's was the only place he knew of that didn't use handheld card readers or sent electronic receipts. Over the last few years, paper money and coins were being replaced by plastic bio-cards similar to debit and credit cards. Unlike their predecessors, bio-cards were linked to the fingerprints of the card holder. Only when the card was in direct contact with the holder, could they be used.

Despite this, Alric still used an old register with a built-in card swiper and recorded his payments in a leather-bound ledger. He even took cash Venn had asked him once, why he didn't use any of the newest technology with its improved security features and streamlined accessibility from any electronic device. Alric's response was a simple one. He liked dealing with people, not numbers on plastic cards or microchips. He wanted people to come into his store and not just send him their clothes to fix. By talking to customers, he claimed this was his greatest security check. Venn didn't quite

understand it, but he knew that was one of the reasons his father liked coming to Alric's shop.

Venn pocketed the receipt. "I need it by the weekend."

"Got a hot date?" said Alric, winking.

"Something like that. My mom's idea."

Alric tried to contain his laughter. "A date with Mrs. Graves?"

"Nasty," said Venn. "It's a date with a girl from my school."

"I understand," said Alric, his laughter subsiding. "I'll have done in time."

Venn nodded. The suit took care of the first thing Emily wanted done. The second was meeting Felicia for an arranged "pre-dance date" as she called it. Pushing open the door, a cool breeze blew into the shop.

"Mr. Graves," said Alric, "the pants."

Venn stopped and looked down. He still had on the black slacks.

"I'll go change."

The store front of Meridian Games was plastered in posters advertising *RoS* and *Limbo*. Some were of a grassy field overlooking a vast expanse of fog where a jagged isle hung in the distance. Others had a similar view, but the grassy field was replaced with thick swampland, or frozen tundra, or desert. These were the backdrop of another poster with the words "Sold Out."

Venn rocked on the balls of his feet underneath the overhang. The sun was bright and the air was cool. Thick clouds sailed across the sky, reminding him of the isles of Acharia. He had been to a forest isle and a swamp isle, but hadn't experienced a frozen tundra or desert. There was still so much of Acharia he wanted to explore. There were bosses he wanted to beat and loot to find. Since leaving the beta, he had wanted life to be more like it.

He wanted a world that wasn't bleak and constantly teetering on the edge of some crisis. Domestic mass shootings, religious radicals, celebrity sex scandals, and war flooded the headlines of every news site. Armed forces clung to the Middle East trying to maintain control over the oil fields. Private military corporations had long abandoned their cooperation with the US government seeking more valuable opportunities. They moved into parts of Africa and China, negotiating mining rights for precious metals for companies like Apex Security. The constant fear and paranoia seemed to grow each day.

Venn didn't want to live in a toxic world. He wanted clear blue skies and lush landscapes filled with excitement and adventure. A place that allowed him to be whoever he wanted to be, where others couldn't define him. He could be stronger and have control over his life in Acharia. It was his perfect world, where the rules were clear and death was an inconvenience instead of a harsh reality.

"Vince?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Felicia. She smiled, pushing a loose red hair behind her ear. She was wearing a white coat with faux fur around the hood and dark

jeans tucked into her leather. Venn thought she looked like a marshmallow with toothpicks for legs.

“Goodie, I knew it was you. C’mon let’s go.”

She looped her arm around his and led the way from Meridian Games. They walked passed boarded-up store fronts toward Bean Me Up, a made-to-order coffee and smoothie café. Venn had seen Felicia around Wakefield High, but hadn’t talked to her since freshman year in Mrs. McGoldrick’s English class. She was a part of the dance team and hung out with the cheerleaders. Though they ran in different social circles, Venn knew she wasn’t the most popular. That spot was still reserved by Rosalie. Still, she had guys vying for her attention, which made him wonder why she agreed to be his date.

Inside the café, Venn waited for Felicia at a table near the far wall. Little silver UFOs were stenciled on the bright green walls. A ticker LED screen ran along the top of the wall around the café. Every two minutes, an alien would appear in a spaceship shaped like a coffee pot. Dragging a banner with a customer’s name on it, the alien would circle the café until the order was picked up.

He sucked down a mango smoothie and watched steam rise from her triple shot latte. Lines of customers lurched toward the counter, where a row of screens waited for them to place their orders and pay. Blenders and brewers in the back whirled to life, only to be drowned out by, *Epoch Echo*, the latest hit from Pain of Digitalism.

An attendant with dirty blonde hair stuck out of his lime-green Bean Me Up cap, sat behind the counter, staring at a computer monitor. He appeared to be in his early

twenties and was ready to keel over from boredom. He craned his neck over the monitor, checking out his coworker near the back of the room. His focused stare and goattee reminded Venn of a llama.

Walking around the rows of pay-to-play computers, was a girl in the same green cap and matching polo. Her jet black hair was braided tight and her thick hips rocked with the precision of a metronome. Several customers were gaming and others were scrolling through their *Zelf* accounts. Explicit sites were filtered by the system, but that didn't stop kids and adults from accessing them. Venn had heard that someone managed to break through the filters and display several pornographic gifs through the ticker. After that incident, Bean Me Up reluctantly hired an additional employee to supervise the computer stations.

When she finished her rounds, he ducked behind the monitor. Venn hoped he didn't slobber over the computer and fry the system. In recent years, Made-to-order restaurants, bars, cafés had sprung up in several locations. Most businesses had shut down because of the increasing mechanization of the workforce. They couldn't afford to pay employees a decent wage and maintain a steady stream of customers nor could they afford the technology that would allow them to compete with bigger companies. Corporations were able to buy-out successful businesses and adapt them to modern era, hiring skeleton crews to ensure everything operated proficiently. Venn took another sip of his smoothie, feeling like the guy behind the counter.

“Sorry, about that. Just my mom checking in.”

Felicia sat down and blew into her latte. Venn watched her take a sip, her blue eyes never leaving him. He averted his gaze, focusing on the rows of computers. He could see a few were emulating retro games and others were still playing old RTSs like *StarCraft 3*.

“She’s always bugging me when I’m out.”

“Mine’s always bugging me to go out.”

She laughed, revealing bright white teeth. He didn’t intend to be funny, but he smiled at her laughter.

“I’ve heard,” said Felicia, reaching across the table, “but I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Venn glanced down at her hand, then back at her. She pulled it away, but retained a smile.

“Our moms talk all the time, if you didn’t know.”

“I figured, since they arranged this date.”

“So this *is* a date?” said Felicia with a wry smile.

“You know what I mean,” said Venn.

“Anyway, they’re both worried. I mean, this wasn’t completely their idea. I’ve seen you around school. You don’t talk to anyone. You’re always by yourself. I—”

“I get it.”

Venn bit his straw and glanced over at the gamers. He didn’t think this would become complicated. It was simple. Go to the dance and get Limbo back, but he had to

get a suit, go on this arranged pre-date, and worst of all he knew he wasn't going to get Limbo back within the seventy-two hour time limit. All he wanted was to be left alone and play his game. Why couldn't they understand that?

"Is that *Call of Duty*?" said Felicia.

"Looks more like *Counter Strike: Universal Offensive*," said Venn, looking at her. She was staring at one of the gamers bunny hopping through a Martian desert town. "You game?"

"I've dabbled," said Felicia, taking another sip, "mostly when my brother isn't around."

"I've been playing old RPGs while waiting for *RoS* to drop."

"Everything I've seen about that game remind's me of a Bob Ross painting."

"Bob who?"

"He was a landscape painter with a big afro on TV decades ago," said Felicia. "All the *RoS* promotional posters remind me of his work. I used to watch him with my dad when he was sick." She stared intently into her cup. "I-I understand."

Venn saw her eyes swell. "What other games are you into?"

Felicia dabbed the corners of her eyes with a napkin and smiled. They talked about their favorite games, though Felicia hadn't played as many as Venn had. He told her about the time he and Lazar found their eighth grade teacher's secret stash of sodas in the back of the classroom and sold them at lunch. She said she once threw an ice cream bar at her P.E. teacher, who had laughed it off and started throwing food back. Sharing

old stories made those feelings of intimacy and trust he had once shared with Rosalie return. He laughed harder than he had in a long time.

Felicia was different. She wasn't stuck up like the rest of her clique nor was she petty. Venn learned she had taken a part-time job to help out after her father died. She wanted to become an engineer and help find a way to alleviate drought stricken states in the Southwest. When Venn asked if she wanted to play a few games, she didn't hesitate saying yes.

Sitting in the chair, Venn popped into a game of *CS:UO*. Felicia pulled a chair over and sat down next to him. He played a few matches, glancing back at her between rounds. She was focused on the screen and smiling. After explaining how to play, what guns were best, and what the objectives were, Felicia took over.

"Guy on your right," said Venn.

"I see him," said Felicia.

She tapped on the keys and slid the mouse over, targeting the terrorist. She clicked, and SparkleLord flopped to the ground. Venn found himself staring at her more than the screen. Her face was tensed in concentration and her nostrils flared. The tip of her tongue poked out of her pursed lips.

"Nice shot."

"Sucker. Counter terrorists win again."

"Is that six in a row now?"

“Seven,” said Felicia, checking her cell. “Crap. I was supposed to be home an hour ago.”

She grabbed her purse, Venn logged out, and they headed through the door.

The sky was milky orange and pink. Automaton cars whirred passed, their drivers napping, reading, or texting in rumpled suits and dressed. They moved at constant speed and automatically maintained a safe distance from the vehicle in front. Street lights began illuminating the streets, exposing the dark recesses the homeless called home. Walking together, Felicia slipped her hand in Venn’s. Warmth spread through his face and chest. Though his heart pounded, he was at ease.

When they reached the station, Venn waited with Felicia for her train. They sat on bench, fingers intertwined, watching commuters race across the platform. Security drones hovered through the steel beams and hanging lights over head.

“This was fun,” said Felicia.

“I had a good time,” said Venn, “it’s been a while since I gamed with someone else.”

Felicia smiled. “It’s always more fun with someone else.”

Venn stared at her glossy lips. She had made him forget about this being Emily’s forced date. He hadn’t had this much fun since the *RoS* beta. He was even looking forward to the dance, but he couldn’t let his mom dictate how he got a date.

“Felicia—”

“Glenn View Point. Six cars. Now arriving,” said the mechanical PA.

“This is mine,” said Felicia, standing up.

The train glided to a halt and passengers shoved one another through the open doors.

“Felicia,” said Venn, “do you have a date to the Spring Formal?”

She turned and winked. “I do.”

Venn scowled.

“It’s you, dummy,” said Felicia. “About time you asked. It’d be embarrassing if I had to tell everyone our moms hooked us up.” She leaned up, kissed him on the cheek, and hopped on the train. The doors sucked shut and she was gone.

Skipping his way to the opposite platform, he checked his cell. There were messages from Emily and Rosalie, but he ignored them. Still feeling Felicia’s lips on his cheek, he sat down and checked the countdown. Forty-nine hours remained.

The next couple of days passed in a blur. Venn spent most of time texting and talking with Felicia. At lunch, he still ate by himself and she stuck with her clique. He didn’t know what they were, but it didn’t matter, he was enjoying himself and Emily was leaving him alone. She was being overrun at work and hadn’t been home the last few days. The message she had left him said there was some emergency at the hospital that needed every available nurse. Venn didn’t believe it. He thought it was another lie so she could go out and troll for a new boyfriend.

On the day of the dance, Venn swung by Alric's and picked up his suit. In the fitting room, he slid into the crisp jacket. The jacket was still snug around his stomach, but fit better around his shoulders. It will have to do, thought Venn. He took off the jacket and set back on the wire hanger. When he emerged from behind the curtain, Alric was behind the counter, fiddling with his sewing machine.

"Fits good doesn't it?" said Alric, sticking his head up.

"Perfect," said Venn, "thanks for getting it done so quickly."

"It was no trouble. Mr. Graves was a good friend. Always loyal."

Venn nodded. He pulled out a few bills and set them on the counter. Alric pocketed the money, before returning to his machine. The dance was few hours away and Venn still needed to get home. He pushed through the door, hearing Alric call out behind him.

"Come back if that belly hasn't stopped growing."

Venn shook his head at Alric's squeal of laughter and headed home.

When he arrived, Emily was rushing around the kitchen talking on her cell. Her hair was a frizzy mess and she sounded tired. Venn went to his room to get dressed. He pulled a dress shirt out of his closet and put it on. The buttons strained against his stomach barely holding the shirt together. He tried on another and another with the same result. Even the shirt he had worn to the funeral no longer fit. He hadn't realized how much weight he had gained over the last few months.

Staring at himself in the mirror, Venn looked and felt like an encased human sausage. His face was puffy with a tinge of red and beads of sweat had gathered on his temples. The collar was impossible to button close without squeezing his throat. He was screwed. He didn't have any other shirts and the dance was a few hours away.

Tearing off the dress shirt, Venn threw his T-shirt back on and booted up his computer. A new message appeared, warning that his chance for early access was about to expire. Though, four hours remained on the timer, Venn was more preoccupied with his thoughts of Felicia. Her soft lips, slim figure, round ass. They would walk into the gym together with his arm wrapped around her waist. Everyone would see them and be amazed. He wouldn't be the weird loner anymore. He would fit in. Rosalie would be jealous and Lazar would want to be his friend again. At the end of the night he would make out with Felicia and possibly get lucky. He was definitely going to the dance now, but he still needed a shirt. Emily stomped down the hall and opened his door.

"I'm on my way," said Emily, clicking off her cell. "Got another emergency at the hospital."

Venn turned off his monitor and spun around in his chair. She was dressed in blue scrubs and her hair was still wild.

"What is it this time?"

"Still short staffed," said Emily, tying back her hair. "I have to take over patients that aren't even mine on a floor I never go to. Aren't you going to get ready?"

"Right," said Venn, "I would, but none of my shirts fit."

“There’s a box of your dad’s old clothes in the attic. Check there.”

Venn nodded.

“I gotta go. Have fun tonight. I’m glad you’re going.”

“Didn’t have much choice, did I?”

“Nope, but Mrs. Hyland says Felicia is smitten with you. So maybe something good will come of this.”

Venn blushed. “Who knows?”

Emily patted her pockets. “Crap. Where did I put my purse?”

She turned and stomped back to her room. Venn went downstairs, entered the garage, and flicked on the light. Circling around Emily’s car, he spotted a large box through the window. A silver plastic dome with a black transparent stripe down the middle stuck out of the top. He froze. It was here the whole time, his Limbo. Without hesitation he opened the door and pulled out the helmet. It was still intact with no apparent problems. He peeked into the box and found the ball of cords.

“Vince.”

Emily was calling for him. He grabbed the cords, shoved them into his pocket, and folded the top of the box down. He pressed the button lowering the stairs to the attic and scaled up them with Limbo in hand.

“Vince,” said Emily, at the base of the stairs, “I’m leaving. Make sure you pick out a good shirt and wash it.”

“Got it,” said Venn, shoving the helmet out of sight.

Sifting through boxes, he waited for Emily to leave. He found a red dress shirt in a box labeled Stephen's Clothes that looked like it would fit. It smelled old and dusty, with a subtle scent of his dad's cologne. It reminded him of riding in the car after practice and listening to baseball on the radio, spending hours playing catch and shooting hoops, receiving help with homework. They were all good memories with no hope of ever being repeated. And like his scent, they were steadily fading away.

When the Emily left, he descended the stairs and ran up to his room. He hooked up Limbo and placed it on his head. On the log-in screen, he typed in his account name, password, and the code he had received. A red alligator stalked after a pixelated brain across the black screen. When they completed their pass, the black screen was replaced with the character customization menu.

Standing with arms at his sides, the standard male avatar rotated, modeling a blue tunic and brown pants. Venn took control, designing himself a lean and muscular avatar with long blonde hair and strong jaw. After he accepted his creation, the next screen asked him calibrate the system. Venn patted his arms, shoulders, waist, and legs like the screen indicated. Every time he moved, Limbo's servos and sensors hummed, absorbing the information.

When he finished, Venn turned off his monitors, and laid in bed. Before him, stood his avatar gazing out over a grassy field. His blonde hair twirled in the wind, never sticking to his face. Islands floated by in the distance and the sound of pounding drums

filled the air. The time in the upper right read 5:00 PM. He could play for a few hours before meeting up with Felicia.

Wiping his sweaty hands on the bedsheets, Venn fumbled for his keyboard and hit enter. His arms fell limp and the scene of his avatar melted to black. Iridescent pixels rushed past him, landing on the black space. A mosaic of rainbow colors spread over the black, filling the holes. They zoomed by faster and faster, the picture becoming clearer. It was the grassy field where his avatar had been standing. Fissures then spread through the scene. It cracked and crumbled, disintegrating in a burst of white light. Venn shut his eyes.

Chapter 6

Venn was back. Back in the world he loved. Pixels and data more real and vibrant than anything he had ever seen. A place where players could be warriors, blacksmiths, shop owners, bounty hunters, adventurers, anything they wanted save for wizards and mages. Venn didn't care about the lack of magic abilities. Who wanted to fling fireballs from safe distance any way? Chopping up monsters like heroes of legend was way more fun.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing the chiseled square of Ouro's Forge. His HUD came into view displaying his name and HP at the top left. His location was in the bottom right next to his a circular map with the four cardinal directions. The time was

displayed in the upper right, next to his total mylrin count. Around him, other players appeared in flashes of blue light, their green indicators spinning above their heads.

He needed to get started, but was enthralled with everything around him. He had forgotten how pristine Acharia was. Around the plaza, smooth seamless stone made up the buildings and pathways. The floor beneath his feet was an intricate design of mosaic tiles in golds and silvers, depicting the rising sun over a lush hillside. Large columns outlined the plaza in a semicircle and rose to the height of the surrounding buildings. Flawless stone houses, two and three stories high, spread from the central plaza to the large walls. Behind Venn was the altar-like stoop where the portal to the next Isle would open once he defeated the boss.

Venn smiled to himself. It had been way too long. He wandered around the plaza, taking in everything he missed. There were four entrances into Orous Forge each one in a cardinal direction. A spider's web of streets extended and intersected every few blocks. Players wandered down alleys, gazing up and the tan buildings. NPCs stood behind stalls and next to wooden carts, displaying their goods. They wore dresses and tunics of deep blues and burgundies.

"Best blades for sale," said a male NPC, stroking his beard.

"Customize your look with these accessories," said a female NPC, bowing.

They were packets of data, but their movements their voices were so lifelike they appeared to be real. The only quick indication that they weren't users was the absence of the green gems above their heads. If you talked to them long enough, they would repeat

the same lines of dialogue. Their movements were always contained in certain areas, too. If they were removed from their spot or were killed by monsters, they would return to their specified location.

Moving past them, Venn eyed their wares. One cart had bronze swords, bucklers, and leather armor, all solid starting gear. Another sold a variety of potions and crystals, things he would purchase later. For now, he needed to find the blacksmith where the best gear was available. A large shadow filled the plaza, spooking some of the players. Venn looked up at the jagged island, hovering over head. It was a fertile green with red dirt. A tall mountain peak jutted out of the center, surrounded by a thick forest. It floated across the sky, but seemed to slow down. Venn moved his arms, but they didn't respond right away.

Stupid lag.

Rapid flashes of light illuminated the plaza, filling it with more players. Since so many had spawned at once, it caused a lag spike. In non-VR games, it caused frames to drop and sometimes meant the difference between living and dying. Venn moved his arms again and they responded correctly. With this many players, he thought, resources and quests would be limited.

He had read that over one million games had been preordered and it seemed like all of them had gotten the early access code. There had been about two thousand people in the closed beta. It was rare for him to come across more than three or four people in a day.

Feeling claustrophobic, he turned down a side street with still more players arriving behind him. He avoided a giggling couple, who were more interested in each other than the road in front of them. A slender girl, named Scarlex, with pink hair in basic leather armor had her arm wrapped around her oaf of a companion, Jerelader. He had short brown hair, a goofy grin, had to bend over so she could whisper in his ear. She squealed some more and he roared as though she were the funniest person in the world. Venn watched them stop at vendor in a burgundy cloak selling overpriced weapons. They gazed at the goods on the table. Pink was wide eyed and drooling.

“OMG,” said Scarlex, clapping her hands with excitement. “This is the perfect dagger.”

Venn was sure the entire plaza heard her squeal. Jerelader gave her a love-struck smile and bought her the dagger. Hugged him, she leaned up and kissed his cheek. He quickly opened his inventory and in a few swift motions another window appeared in front of Scarlex. She accepted the weapon and equipped it. Around her waist appeared the dagger in a gold sheath studded with rubies and sapphires. Jerelader then leaned down, leading with pursed lips. Hesitating Scarlex, glanced down at the dagger, and back up at him. She took a deep breath and kissed him on the cheek again.

“Really,” said Jerelader, flinging his arms in the air, “you promised.”

Scarlex didn’t flinch at his outburst. She wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her chest into him, and whispered something in his ear. Jerelader lowered his

arms and stood up straighter. Releasing him, she continued down the road and he lumbered after her without hesitation.

Venn shook his head. Jerelader was being played and by a girl that was probably a guy. It happened all the time in non-VR MMOs. Guys thought they could win a girl's affection online by giving them gifts. Taking advantage of this, guys started playing female characters for the free loot. When Jerelader's mylrin ran out, she would move on to someone else. Venn thought about telling him the truth, but they were already gone. He shrugged his shoulders and continued down the street toward the sound of the blacksmith's hammer.

The door to the blacksmith's shop stood solid on three large hinges. Two black metal bands stretched across the thick planks and an iron ring hung between them. Above him rocked a wooden sign marked with a hammer and anvil.

Despite how impregnable the door looked, Venn heard the echoes of the striking hammer behind it. Even the smell of burning coal wafted through, which he didn't realize he was smelling. A group of excited players dressed in basic gear filed passed him and stopped in the middle of the road.

"Smell that," said Dolford, taking a deep breath. His long blue hair cascaded around his shoulders and down his back. "It's like someone just blew out candles."

"I don't smell nothing," said MaskedHamster. The sun gleamed off his polished bald head.

“Fix your settings noob,” said XRavier, messing with his green mohawk.

“Like you could do any better,” said MaskedHamster. “We’re all noobs.”

They all laughed deep and guttural. The kind of laugh like they had been friends for a long time. Where in those simple words, was a joke they all shared. Venn noticed an unusually silent player with spiky blonde hair and a worried expression.

“Do you even know where you’re going?” said XRavier, flinging his arms in the air.

“I do,” said Calrin, glancing left and right. His hair remained rigid despite his frantic head turning. “He said to meet him somewhere around here, I think.”

“Can’t you read a map,” said MaskedHamster, “or are you as useless as pedals on a wheelchair?”

“This is twice as sad as a stalled hearse,” said XRavier.

“Come on guys,” said Dolford, “he’s doing fine...at getting us lost.”

Silence fell upon the group.

“Weak,” said MaskedHamster.

“Lame,” said XRavier.

They laughed again. Dolford turned red, but joined in.

Calrin wasn’t amused. “You guys lead then.”

No one stepped forward to take over.

“That’s what I thought,” said Calrin. “If I wanted any lip, I’d tap my zipper.”

They glanced at each other and then erupted into wild laughter. Other players scooted away, giving them weird looks. When their laughter subsided, Dolford opened a map screen for them all to see. They each pointed in different directions, jamming their fingers into the digital window. Eventually, they closed the map and wandered down a side alley, still laughing about something.

Even lost and frustrated they were still friends. Venn missed that camaraderie. He and Lazar used to have each other's backs in everything from schoolyard fights to homework assignments. They used to be mind readers on the basketball court, able to throw no-look passes predicting where the other one would be. They were the one two combo leading off in baseball, which often led to two stolen bases and two runs scored. But that was when friendships mattered more than popularity.

Venn pushed the heavy door with little resistance and entered. A blast of heat washed over him from the orange coals in the furnace. The room was dimly lit and broad wooden beams stretched across the stone ceiling. Expensive weapons were displayed on the walls. Unlike the standard silver finish of basic gear, these had different colored handles, marking their rarity. Shelves lined the walls and formed two columns in the center of the shop. These held even more weapons along with armor sets and helmets, though they were all polished silver.

Venn walked to the back of the shop, where the sound of striking hammer was loudest. Smithing tools hung on the wall for those who wanted to craft their own weapons. At this point in the game, that wasn't impossible since you needed crafting

items scavenged from slain monsters, extra pieces of gear, and treasure chests. For Venn, he never took an interest in the crafting aspects of games. The attributes for weapons and armor were randomized so that, unless you had a high smithing skill, you never got what you really wanted. On top of that, locating the necessary resources sometimes took days.

He approached the counter where the blacksmith NPC was swinging his hammer on a molten brick. He was much bigger than Venn and wore a soot-stained white tunic under a leather apron. Thick dark hair covered his forearms and sweat dripped from his stubbled face. After the third strike, the molten brick expanded into a glowing orange mace. The blacksmith then picked up the weapon with his metal tongs and dunked it into a trough of water. Steam erupted filling the room like a sauna. He then pulled out a small stamp from his apron pocket and marked the mace with his insignia. The mace dematerialized in the air and reappeared across the room on the shelf next to the others.

Venn couldn't see what the mark looked like, but he knew all blacksmiths did this. Even player crafted weapons were marked with the name of the creator. It was an easy way to identify where you got the weapon or who made it in case it was somehow lost or stolen. It also made players proud that people used their weapons to fight.

Finished with his work and recognizing that a player was waiting, the blacksmith walked to the counter. The name Havel Anchier appeared above his head.

“What are you buying?”

His voice was rough and thick like layers of ash coated his throat.

“Got any one-handed swords with stat mods?”

Venn didn’t know why he answered the blacksmith. Maybe it was out of habit or even politeness. He could have simply opened the menu and sorted through Havel’s inventory. Either way, it felt natural to respond.

“Take a look,” said Havel.

An item screen popped up, in front of him. It was sorted by weapons and armor and divided further by each type. He scrolled down to the one-handed swords and found nineteen that varied in price. One of the swords, the Barbas Sabre, was grayed out.

“Someone must have bought one already,” said Venn.

He clicked on the weapon to view it. The blade was curved like a scimitar, but thinner. The hilt featured a spiked guard that looked even sharper than the blade. Range, weight and damage were all average, but all basic stats were boosted by seven. It sold for 3000 mylrin, which wasn’t too bad, but you had to be at level six before you could use it. With the low amount of traffic into the shop, Venn figured a beta player had bought it.

He stood at the counter for several minutes, scrolling up and down through the list. The blacksmith waited with his arms crossed. His face wasn’t angry nor was it smiling, it was a perfect neutral expression.

After minutes of deciding, he settled on the Abyssal Blade. The sword had a double-edged straight blade that appeared to be violet, blue, and orange all at once. With above-average range and damage, it boosted his agility and strength by three, but lowered

his intelligence and defense by two. The point differential was a little bit of a hinderance, but at the cost of 2500 mylrin and low level requirement of five, it was worth the tradeoff.

After buying the weapon, his inventory screen opened up in front of him. The Abyssal Blade's name appeared and the 2500 mylrin disappeared. He was now left with 1000 mylrin to spend on items or other armor. Venn closed his inventory menu and then Havel's.

"Is that all?"

Havel appeared to be smiling, but it looked more like a grimace.

"That's it," said Venn, "thanks."

Thanking the NPC still seemed strange, but walking away would have been stranger.

"Come again if you need armor or repairs," said Havel, returning to his work. "I'll have you back in fighting shape in no time."

He walked to the front of shop and the hammer strikes rang out again. He made his way through the center aisle and felt like someone was watching him. He whirled around to find nothing. The blacksmith had returned to his programmed life and the racks looked undisturbed. It was an odd feeling that Venn tried to shake off.

Reaching the door, he caught movement in his peripheral. He turned his head slightly and saw a figure watching him in the reflection of a helmet. The polished steal made the watcher blurry and the dim lighting made it difficult to distinguish any features. To his surprise, names didn't appear on reflective surfaces.

Act natural.

Venn left the blacksmith's shop wary of followers. More players were gathered on the streets, browsing the merchant stalls. He moved among them, angling himself to watch of the blacksmith's door.

A few seconds later, the watcher emerged from the shop. He was taller than Venn and had long red hair sticking out from under his leather helmet. His red shirt and brown pants were covered in the basic leather armor set. The watcher craned his neck, searching for someone down the street. Venn saw his name floating above his head, but couldn't distinguish it from the surrounding players. Tense seconds passed, before the watcher took off down the street.

Venn relaxed, exhaling a breath he didn't know he was holding. His body had gone rigid and he clutched the hilt of his iron sword. He knew there wasn't any danger. Towns were safe zones, after all. *RoS* only allowed duels to happen inside safe zones. They had to be agreed upon by both players and prevented their HP from ever reaching zero. If players wanted to participate in PvP, they both had to agree to it, but that was only allowed outside of the cities. However, these things didn't prevent indiscriminate killings of players, which were frowned upon by the community. That's why the player indicators changed color, so players could identify those who killed without consent. Still, Venn felt like he recognized the watcher from somewhere. His red hair curled out from under his helmet and he walked with a lanky stride.

Thane? No. It can't be.

Even though months had passed since the beta, the memories of Thane's betrayal still lurked in his nightmares. Venn didn't believe he would ever run into him again, but the odds weren't impossible. Millions of players were online and few seemed to have left Orous Forge in the three days since early access began. Venn started to wonder how many people had received a code. If Thane had he would have moved on by now, thought Venn, unless he stuck around to pick on new players. He didn't want a new player to experience what he had. This was an amazing game, a marvel of modern technology that rivaled space flight and self-driving automaton cars. It was a world of pristine beauty he didn't want defiled. Gathering his resolve, Venn followed after him.

Further down the street, Venn saw the watcher pause at an intersection. He peered down the streets on his left and right. His name and player indicator were no longer displayed above his head. It was the same for the other players around him. When Venn took a couple steps forward, the names and indicators reappeared for those closest to him. By taking it slow, he hoped to see the name pop up without the other ones blocking it.

He weaved through the crowds, focusing on the spot just above the watcher's head. Names and indicators sprang up in quick succession. He tried to ignore them, but they flooded his field of view. After a moment of deliberation, the watcher decided to venture down the street on his right.

Venn increased his pace, tracking the target around the corner. Up ahead, Venn saw a troop of five players, taking up the width of the alley. They were decked out in

lustrous suits of armor with shoulders like football pads. They feinted punches at other players, including the watcher, who skirted out of their way.

Can't let him get away.

He darted toward the knights of the kitchen table, kicked off the middle one's chest, and leapt over him. He moved fast enough that they didn't have time to avoid him. Landing on the other side, Venn saw his target sauntering around a cart where several female players and a few males had gathered. The center knight tottered backwards and crashed to the ground. Keeping sight on his target, Venn avoided being squished. For a brief second, he caught a glimpse of the target's name, but he could only discern the letters "A" and "N."

"Asshole."

Venn glanced back and saw all five knights glaring at him. The knight on the ground was named Guyle. On his left were Yigoloth and DinoSythe and opposite them were Bachelord and Masteroid.

"Sorry," said Venn, extending a hand to help up Guyle. "There was no other way to get around."

Guyle slapped his hand away. "You damage my gear, you owe me five hundred mylrin to get it fixed."

The four knights leaned closer, trying to surround and intimidate Venn. He knew the technique from seeing it done to others at school and from experiencing it for himself. It wouldn't work now, though. This was his world, he had control here.

“Whoever told you to buy that armor,” said Venn, bending his knees, “should be the one apologizing.”

The four standing knights glanced at Guyle then back at Venn.

Guyle staggered to his feet. “Let’s kick his ass boys. This armor has the best defense and raw strength.”

The four standing knights blitzed, trying to tackle Venn. He leapt back, avoiding Yigoloth. He sidestepped DinoScythe, juked Bachelord, and kicked off Masteroid’s chest, knocking him into Guyle. They fell back, crashing like cymbals.

“Strength doesn’t mean much,” said Venn, “if you can’t move. Those tin cans have a movement speed reduction.”

“Shut it nerd,” said Guyle. “Get him guys protect your quarterback.”

They launched another attack. Venn rolled his eyes and sighed. He couldn’t waste anymore time. Digging the balls of his feet into the ground, he drew his sword. Bachelord rushed first swinging a bronze mace. Venn dashed forward, his glowing a golden yellow. He struck Bachelord in the arm causing him to drop the mace and followed up with a backhand strike. Bachelord tumbled to the ground and Masteroid screamed in rage.

Unarmed, he charged. Venn ducked under his punch and uppercutted Masteroid with his free hand sending him careening into Yigoloth, who was too slow to avoid the flying body. He turned to find DinoScythe, standing with his hands up.

“I give up. You win.”

“Not yet,” said Guyle.

He pulled out a large two-handed battle axe and raised it high above his head.

Venn sheathed his sword and waited.

“I knew you were a pussy,” said Guyle, bringing down the axe.

It slammed into the street, kicking up dust that quickly disintegrated it to iridescent pixels.

“Got him boys. Chopped his ass in two.”

“You really are an idiot,” said Venn, leaning against the axe. “Bad armor. A worse weapon. I don’t understand why they listen to a dumbass like you.”

Guyle raged, swinging the axe wildly. Venn avoided each strike with. Every attack was telegraphed because of the axe’s large size.

“Why can’t I hit you?”

Venn leapt forward, drawing his sword. “You’re too predictable and too dumb to know why.”

Raising the blade, Venn’s hand started to glow. He ducked under the axe and slashed Guyle across his chest. Guyle flew backwards and crashed into DinoScythe. Venn sheathed his sword and approached the fallen knights.

“Armor’s durability doesn’t decrease in a safe zone,” said Venn, crouching next to Guyle. “Weapons don’t do any damage either. Strength is always overrated and outclassed.”

Fighting and maneuvering with such speed and power was one of the reasons Venn loved this game. The combat was an incredible rush, like riding a roller coaster

without a harness. Near misses made him want to test his limits further. He wanted see how close he could dodge a blade or evade a trap. There was nothing like it anywhere. Venn reached down to help Guyle up, but was snubbed again. He shrugged, stood up, and left him lying in the street next to his buddies.

Glancing around for his target, Venn saw a large crowd had gathered around him and the knights. Their eyes were wide and mouths agape. Some carried on down the street, unimpressed. Others hesitated leaving. They were unable to pry their eyes away. Venn hadn't intended to cause a scene, but the thrill hooked him and he couldn't stop himself.

The fallen knights tried to stand. Venn stepped away from them and weaved through the crowd. They moved out of his way, flowing like water around a rock. Needing to find his target, he looked for players wearing a leather helmet. There were a dozen iron helms, some cloth cowls, and a couple tiaras. He spotted the leather helmets on two stocky players with large biceps and thick forearms.

Damn.

Not wanting a rematch and risk being reported to an admin for unnecessary combat, Venn squeezed through the crowd. He had lost the watcher and the possible chance of stopping something terrible from happening. Odds were that the watcher wasn't Thane, but a part of him hoped he was. Venn believed he had gotten over Thane's betrayal, but when fighting the knights he realized he hadn't. He felt bad for beating them, even though they needed it. They couldn't bully other players and intimidate them

for mylrin. Thane, though, was more devious. He showed no remorse and wasn't above stripping a player of all they had. He was much worse than they were. Venn wanted him to experience the same pain and humiliation he had.

When he reached the edge of the crowd, they began dispersing in every direction. Venn wasn't sure what to do next. He wandered down street, passing the inn and an item shop. He wanted to explore the fields outside of the city and do a little leveling, but his adventure around Orous Forge had spent most of his time. He had to meet Felicia in an hour and still needed to shower and change.

"Damn it," said Venn, stopping in the road. "This sucks."

A few players gave him wary looks, but he ignored them. This wouldn't have been a problem if Emily hadn't forced him to go to the dance. He would have been able to play for hours without interruption and been happy. Though, he should be grateful that he met Felicia. If his mom hadn't arranged it, he would have never talked to her. He checked the time. Thirty more minutes, thought Venn, that's plenty of time.

He broke into a sprint, heading for the eastern exit.

"Wait!"

Venn halted and whipped around. Standing behind him, trying to catch his breath was the watcher. Above his head was the name Karnack. Venn stepped back, readying himself. It was possible Thane had made a new account, thought Venn.

"What do you want?"

"I was looking everywhere for you," said Karnack.

“I know,” said Venn, still unsure why he looked familiar. “I saw you leave the blacksmith.”

“You were in there? I didn’t even see you.”

Venn didn’t understand what was happening. He was sure Karnack had been watching him. A pair of female NPCs walked by diverting Karnack’s attention.

“What do you want then?”

Karnack tracked the NPCs until they turned the corner. “You’re amazing. I saw that fight with the rejects from OZ. You kicked their metal asses with ease.”

“Thanks,” said Venn, embarrassed. “I’ve got some things to do. So I’ll see ya around.”

“I need your help,” said Karnack, almost shouting.

“What kind of help?”

“My friends.”

“I’m the wrong person to ask about friend advice.”

“That’s not it. I convinced them to buy this game, but they’re not very experienced. I’m even having a hard time learning the mechanics. I can’t even make my hands glow those cool colors.”

“You mean a tech attack,” said Venn, surprised. “You won’t get anywhere if can’t do those.”

“They’re that important,” said Karnack, hanging his head “Man, am I screwed.”

Venn still had a gut feeling that he had seen him somewhere before. Though he couldn't figure it out, he wanted to help. Karnack looked deflated and hopeless and Venn didn't want him to let his friends down. If this was a trap, he could always escape by warping back to town.

"Come with me, Karnack," said Venn, turning to go. "I'll help you out."

A smile spread across Karnack's face. "I knew you were the man. You can call me Karn for short."

Outside the Eastern entrance, Venn and Karn walked along the dirt path. Venn still unsure of Karn, kept his hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

"A level two boar," said Venn, laughing, "You were killed by a level two boar."

"You should have seen it though," said Karn, his face turning red, "it was huge and had the eyes of a demon."

"And you died three times," said Venn unable to contain his laughter.

"I bet you didn't do much better your first time."

Venn thought about it for a second. "True, but I didn't die to a boar three times."

"What did kill you? A wolf or A slime?"

"None of those weak creatures," said Venn. "I killed myself."

Karn stopped and looked at him, his mouth agape.

"What?"

“I tripped charging at a wolf and my attack kept going. I tumbled forward and ended up landing on my own sword.”

Karn erupted with laughter. Venn blushed, but laughed along.

They walked through the Grassy Plains rolling hills, waiting for a monster to spawn. The sun flared high above them disappearing behind the clouds floating by. Beyond the clouds were the floating islands that made up Acharia. Most of them spiraled upwards, but a some could be seen drifting in the distance, their cascading waterfalls disappearing into the mist below. When a beast appeared, Karn jumped into battle.

“You swing too wildly,” said Venn.

“What do you mean?”

The boat angled toward Venn and he stepped out of the way of its charge.

“You’ve thrown a baseball or flung rocks at bots, before right?”

“Who hasn’t?”

“It’s like that. You wind up, tensing the muscles in your arm and then you release it in one go. The problem comes with the arm angle. You need to make sure it’s in the right spot.”

“Where’s the right spot?”

The boar circled back, readying another attack. It shook its head, snarled, and dug its rear hooves into the ground.

“You’ll feel it. A tug pulling you forward and your weapon hand will begin to glow.”

The boar charged at them. Karn stepped forward, giving the hairy beast a target. Standing, knees slightly bent, he brought his iron sword up like a tennis racket. The boar closed in and Karn ran toward it. Venn found his technique a little sloppy, but it was working. A pale red glow emanated from Karn's hand. He raised the sword higher, extending his elbow. The red light became brighter, stronger. When the boar was within striking distance, he sliced through it and watched it shatter like glass.

"That was awesome," said Karn, jumping into the air.

"Not bad," said Venn. He felt a tinge of pride watching Karn succeed. "Fighting should be easier now that you know what it feels like."

"What do you mean?"

"Tech attacks do the most damage," said Venn, "Basic strikes like you were doing, do very little and are used for parrying enemy attacks."

"Good to know. Sucks, though, without magic."

"Magic is overrated," said Venn. "Fighting in close combat is way more fun."

"It feels odd not having any."

"It was a design choice. The first true VR game to utilize the whole human body. Maybe there was no room for it."

"You gotta point, but still I'd like to shoot a fireball or lightning bolt if I could."

Another boar spawned and Karn killed it on the first strike. Venn watched Karn perfect his technique and joined in, earning some experience. Soon, the sky turned from bright blue to a mixture of oranges and pinks. The sun hung in the distance, outlining one

of the isles in its glow. Behind him, he heard the squeal of another slain boar. They had killed several wolves and boars over the last two hours and discussed the seemingly infinite possibilities there were to do in game. To Venn's relief, Karn never asked why he had attacked him. He didn't even seem to remember. They were having fun slaying monsters.

"Just hit level three," said Karn, walking up to Venn.

"Nice," said Venn, "now you can help your friends."

"Damn it. I completely forgot I was supposed to meet them."

He smiled sheepishly and Venn couldn't help but laugh. The air was light and the world around them was peaceful. Having been to the upper levels, Venn wondered how much had changed. He was excited to see what was waiting for him on the upper floors.

"It's getting late," said Karn sliding his sword into its scabbard, "I need to eat. I'll text my buddies and meet up with them later."

"Shit," said Venn.

He had forgotten about Felicia. The time in his HUD read 7:30 PM.

"What is it?"

"I'm supposed to go to this dance and I needed to meet my date thirty minutes ago."

"You better go," said Karn. "And remember to wrap it up."

Venn rolled his eyes and opened his menu.

"Thanks for your help."

“No problem.”

“Venn?”

They shook hands. Karn had made good company and though Venn hadn't started any quests, he was glad Karn would be a capable fighter. He flipped to the logout screen, but didn't see the option.

“Where is it?” said Venn, swiping through the menus. “Where's the log out button?”

“Where's what?” said Karn.

“The log out button.”

Venn saw Karn open his menu and flip to the last screen.

“I'll contact an admin,” said Karn. “It could be bugged.”

Venn had seen the option earlier, but now it didn't even exist. It wasn't even grayed out. He hoped Felicia was okay and that she wouldn't be too angry at him being late.

“I can't get a hold of anyone,” said Karn, looking up from his screen. His face filled with panic. He closed the menu and started pulling at his hair.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to take Limbo off.”

“That won’t work,” said Venn, trying to think. “The system blocks out your senses from the outside. So whatever you’re doing in here, your body is lying still in the real world.”

“Could we turn off the power?”

“That could work. Only if someone from the outside turns it off. Good luck contacting them. And the machine has its own internal super capacitor that can’t be removed.”

Karn hung his head and fell to the ground.

“I should have expected day one bugs.”

“Let’s head to town to see if other players are having this problem.”

When Venn reached out his hand to help Karn up, they were washed in a blue light and appeared back in the plaza of Orous Forge.

“What happened?”

“We teleported to the city,” said Venn, looking around at all the players in the plaza.

More appeared in dazzling flashes of blue light, filling the plaza. Now, it seemed like every player was here. Names and indicators were an indiscernible mess. Venn somehow saw Scarlex and Jerelader near a pillar holding each other and looking confused.

“What’s going on?”

“I was almost done with my quest,” said one player.

“I can’t log out,” said another player.

“Me neither,” said a few more players.

Piercing cries and shouts of anger filled the air. This wasn’t right. Everyone knew it.

“Look,” said Karn, tapping Venn on the shoulder.

Wisps of clouds rolled through the sky, becoming thicker and darker. Lightning struck and thunder roared. Bathed in celestial light, a hooded figure appeared from between the clouds. The white and gold of his robe flowed over them. His face and hands were hidden in the recesses of his robe.

“Silence!”

Everyone was too stunned to talk.

“Welcome to *my* world.”

The robed figure spread his arms wide in a gesture that was more menacing than inviting. Thunder clapped and lightning streaked across the sky.

“What you’re experiencing is not a glitch, but by design.”

Chapter 7

Venn’s voice caught in his throat. Everything stood still.

“It’s gotta be an event,” said one player.

“This is the opening ceremony guys, just relax,” said another.

“As of this moment I, Damien Titor, am God of this world. I trust you have already noticed the logout button is missing from the main menu. This is not a defect, but a feature of *RoS*. Logging out is impossible. Should anyone attempt to shut down or remove Limbo, the transceiver inside the helmet will emit a powerful microwave, destroying your brain and thus ending your life.”

The crowd was silent. Venn looked around at the thousands of avatars forced to gather here on the first floor. He felt numb. He didn’t even feel Karn tapping him on the shoulder.

“Venn, is that true?”

“It’s possible,” said Venn, searching for the words. “The transceiver’s microwave signals can kill if the limiter malfunctions or is disabled.”

“Can’t someone just cut the power?”

“That won’t work. The internal super capacitor battery has a charge that lasts for a week and if that shuts down more than likely we will die.”

Karn’s entire body went slack.

Venn gazed up at the sky. If this was really Titor, why would he do this?

“You may think this is some prank, but I assure you it is not.”

He swept his hand across the sky, displaying dozens of screens. Each one broadcasted a news story about Limbo, Price, or Titor. Price’s tanned face in full color with a wide white smile was placed next to Titor’s grayscale shot. Pundits discussed the crisis and the safety of VR video games. They were playing audio recordings of Price’s

interview about the situation. Other screens showed crying parents and police taping off houses. Venn thought he saw his house flash on screen.

“News organizations from around the world are now reporting on the incident. I have given the authorities two hours to place you all under protective care. If they do not comply, many of you will lose your lives—”

“No, no, no!”

Venn turned and saw a player with white hair breaking apart. He cried and screamed, dissolving into iridescent polygons. Then he was gone.

“Unfortunately, several people have ignored this warning and have attempted to remove the device. Two hundred and thirty-four players, excuse me, two hundred and thirty-five players have been killed here in Archaria and the real world. Hopefully, your friends and family will heed my warning.”

All around him, cries of panic rose into the air. Venn was still numb. Why was this happening? What was Titor doing? This wasn’t the man he had admired? This was the man he saw bashing his head against the window of his hospital room.

“You can now assume that the danger of having your Limbo system removed will be greatly reduced. So please relax and enjoy this experience. Enjoy *my* world that I have labored to create for you. Remember, once your HP reaches zero, you and your avatar will be permanently erased.”

The crowd shifted around him, but Venn continued to stare at the floating screens. Families held each other, weeping. Shots of medicopters flying to hospitals filled in the

space when the anchors weren't showing pictures of Titor and Price and flapping their lips endlessly. He wondered what his mom was doing. Was she crying for him, worrying? Was she even home or at a bar with some new guy? Was Felicia still waiting for him? Did she know? How long did he have left? Questions he never thought about now were the most concerning. What was he doing with his life? Why was he so alone? Would he even be missed if he died?

A blow to the shoulder snapped him out of his train wreck of thoughts. Players were trying to leave the square, bumping into others that couldn't find the strength to move. He saw the Scarlex and Jerelader from the market holding each other tightly. She had her face buried in his chest and he seemed unable to choose between fear and happiness. His shaking legs betrayed him, though.

Karn had moved a few feet away and was straining to see above the sea of players, his red hair a bobbing buoy. Venn waded towards him, pushing, and shoving his way through.

"There's no way out," said Karn, furrowing his brow, "looks like a magic forcefield."

"Most likely something he's set up," said Venn nodding to the sky, "no magic, remember."

"Right. So what do we do?"

"We can't do anything."

It was a futile situation and soon the crowd figured that out. Minutes passed before they settled back down. When they had resigned to their fates, they hung their heads low like cattle.

“I’m glad you’ve finally calmed down,” said Titor, removing the floating screens, “but you are not as doomed as you think you are.”

Some of the players raised their heads. Venn and Karn never took their eyes off of Titor. The robed avatar produced a spiraling 3D hologram from his palm. The first Isle was lit up and pulsing. The others floating above it, in a corkscrew shape, remained black.

“You are currently here, on the First Isle of Acharia. Somewhere on this Isle is the Boss Dungeon. Find it and defeat the boss to advance to the next isle. There are seventy Isles total to clear. You must beat all of them to make it to the top where I will be waiting for you. Defeat me and you will all be free.”

Venn was stunned. Clearing seventy floors was an impossible task. No one had even made it halfway in the beta, let alone the tenth isle. How long was it going to take him to clear a seventy? All these people had lives and Titor was playing with them. Venn loved video games, but this was insane. This was making a game real beyond what anyone had thought possible. It was taking hardcore mode to a whole new level.

“Look,” said Karn.

He pointed to a male avatar with a bowl cut of purple hair who was bashing his head into a stone pillar.

“He’s not the only one feeling that way.”

They both surveyed the crowd. Some players stood motionless staring at their floating captor, while others squirmed like toddlers needing pee. A few sat on the ground with their knees tightly pressed into their chests. Their faces were fearful and big tears streaked down their cheeks. The rest were still too stunned to move or close their mouths.

“Should we help him?”

“We’re beyond helping anyone.”

Lightning shattered across the sky, striking the plaza. It crashed and arced, zapping every player. The crowd shrieked in terror. Venn tried to dodge, but was hit immediately. When the lightning storm ended, he saw his HP was still full, but he couldn’t move.

“Can you move?” said Venn.

“No. I’m stuck,” said Karn.

“Players, I’ve been struck by a note of genius,” said Titor.

In the black space of Titor’s hood, two shining yellow eyes appeared. They sparkled like diamonds, growing brighter. Venn tried to turn away, but couldn’t.

“Help me,” said a player with silver hair.

Purple flames engulfed him until Venn couldn’t see him anymore. Another shriek came from his left.

“What is this?”

In his peripheral, Venn saw flames of plum and lavender consume a girl with blue hair. Terrified screams erupted around him. He glanced at Karn who was mesmerized by the light from Titor's avatar. Flames appeared, lapping down his arms to his legs. Only when they had risen above his shoulders did he look at Venn.

"It doesn't hurt," said Karn.

The flames covered his head, leaving Venn dumfounded. He closed his eyes, averting them from the light. There were screams and heat all around him. The light was getting brighter. He couldn't keep them shut for much longer.

When he opened them, he stared right into the light. He couldn't move. Flames covered his entire body in a tingling warmth. They danced around him, licked him, kissed him, teasing every nerve. Then they were gone. Around him everyone had changed. They still had their same armor and clothes, but Venn didn't recognize any of their faces.

"Venn?"

Venn turned around, meeting Karn's scrutinizing stare. The person standing in front of him had change drastically. Karn's red hair had become dirty blonde and a thick goatee covered his chin. His focused eyes reminded him of a llama.

"Bean Me Up," said Venn. It had clicked immediately.

"How'd you know where I worked?"

"I was in there the other day with my date."

"So many people come through," said Karn. "I don't really pay attention. Wait how did you recognize me?"

“You look like you,” said Venn.

Karn patted himself down. He felt his face and when he reached his goatee, his eyes went wide.

“This isn’t supposed to be here.”

At Karn’s reaction, Venn examined himself. He touched his face, smoothing his cheeks. They were softer with a little peach fuzz. His chiseled jaw line had disappeared and was replaced by his slight double chin. He felt his head, discovering his hair was a mess and much shorter. His hands were smaller than his avatar’s and lacked dark hair around the knuckles. He was shorter than Karn too, reaching the top of his shoulder. Venn was his normal self, now. His real self.

“Players,” said Titor, his voice calm, “I assume you realize that these avatars are identical to your real world selves. This is my gift to you to enhance your experience in my world.”

“How did he know what we looked like?” said Karn.

“Limbo,” said Venn.

Karn gave him a confused look.

“It scanned our faces for profile recognition. That’s how it knows what we look like. Then we had to calibrate it by touching different areas of our bodies.”

“Christ. Did he plan this from the very beginning?”

Venn was silent. He was lost and confused like everyone else.

Around the square, players came to the same conclusion. They examined themselves, trying to catch glimpses of their new selves in their swords and shields. Horrified expressions spread over their faces. Venn saw Scarlex and Jerelader arguing. Jerelader's face was bright red and his arms gyrated excessively. Scarlex still had the jeweled dagger, but no longer had pink hair. She was now a he with curly brown hair.

Venn looked back at Karn, who was licking his fingers and smoothing out his eyebrows.

"Gotta make sure I look good for the ladies."

"This isn't the time for that," said Venn.

Why was he so calm?

They were trapped in a game where they would have to fight to stay alive and he was cracking jokes.

"Karn," said Venn, "do you live alone?"

"I gotta a roommate. Why?"

"Is he there?"

"I think he's out. But no worries. I'll be okay."

"Aren't you scared?" said Venn, his body tense. "You could die."

"That can happen any time, in here or out there," said Karn, pointing his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm scared, but I won't let that stop me from having fun. You only get one, so enjoy it while you can."

Venn nodded and relaxed a little. He could make this work. It was still a video game in the end. He knew how to play it and he had an advantage over other players, knowing what lay ahead.

“Karn—”

“Now, all of you must be wondering why. Why would Damien Titor, the creator of Limbo and *Reign of Swords*, a man that has lost everything of value in his life, do all this?”

Venn remembered his visit to the hospital where he watched Titor spill his blood and thrash in his bed. Venn wondered if it all that suffering had caught up, causing Titor to break. He glanced over at Karn, who was transfixed on the floating figure. Thunder clapped and Titor spread his arms wide. Decrepit hands with thick yellow nails protruded from his loose sleeves.

“The answer is simple,” said Titor, fading away, “to preserve life.”

The dark clouds dispersed, returning the sky to its orange and pink hue. The crowd was silent. Venn knew Titor had meant every word. This was reality, now. A game with no restarts. Even though he was still anxious, Venn knew what needed to be done.

The crowd’s silence broke. Players began realizing what their lives were going to be like now. Venn saw tears falling from some players eyes, slow and steady like a leaky faucet. Murmuring voices rose into a dull roar, until they erupted all at once.

“No. No! No, you can’t do this.”

“I have a business to run.”

“I can’t stay here. I’m seeing my girlfriend later.”

“Screw you. Let me out!”

“Someone do something.”

Players shouted and cursed. Some fell to their knees unable to move. Venn saw Karn crane his neck, his head darting back and forth.

“C’mon,” said Venn, grabbing his wrist.

Venn dragged Karn out of the square and up the northern path.

“Listen,” Venn said, trying to be calm, “I’m heading to the next town right now. Come with me.”

“What?”

“We need to level ourselves up as quickly as we can. Quests, mylrin, and experience are limited. Soon players, like myself, will start taking the good grinding spots and easy quests. The fields around this town will be picked clean. If we go now, we can get a jump on the rest of them.”

“That’s if what he said was true,” said Karn, throwing his hands in the air. “How do you know that wasn’t an impostor or a hacker?”

“It’s him,” said Venn, almost yelling. “I don’t know how or why, but what he said is true. We have to leave now. I know the way and I can navigate us around the dangerous areas. We can get there safely even at a low level.”

“I can’t.” said Karn, “If it’s true then I need to find my friends. I’m responsible for getting them into this. I made them preorder the game and enter the early access code. If I don’t help them, they’ll be killed.”

Venn understood. If it were just Karn, they could make it easily. Anymore, though, they would risk losing out on valuable experience or worse, losing a player or two. He clenched his fists. Would that be worth it? What if Karn betrayed him like Thane? He hardly knew him, after all. But even those he knew seemed to let him down all the time. Why did he even ask Karn to come with him? He enjoyed teaching him how to fight and explaining the mechanics of the game. He hadn’t had that much fun in a long time, especially killing weak enemies. Being alone, left him wanting a partner. Maybe that’s why he trusted Thane? And why he was trusting Karn?

“Sorry,” said Karn, “I really shouldn’t be asking you for any more help. You’ve done a lot for me already.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about me. Just go to the next town. I used to run a guild in the last MMO I played.” He pointed his thumb at himself. “I’ll get by somehow with the stuff you taught me.”

Venn nodded. “All right.”

It would be better this way. Letting someone too close could be disastrous. What if he died or worse what if he failed and saw Karn die? Could he even take seeing another

person lose their life? Was this Titor's way of exacting revenge for losing his family? But why use his life's work to do it? This wasn't preserving life, at all.

"I guess that means we'll part here then."

"Guess so," said Karn.

"Message me if something happens."

"Will do."

"Well, see ya Karn."

Venn turned and headed down the street. He had only taken a few steps, when a screen popped up in front of him. It displayed, "Friend Request from Karn. Do you accept?" Below the message were a green circle and a red 'X.' Venn pressed the green circle and the window disappeared. Flicking open the main menu, he found Karn's name below the list labeled Friends. He glanced back to see if Karn was still in the street, but he was gone. This was for the best.

Chapter 8

Venn ran. Boars, wolves, and sometimes slimes would spawn and attack. Though they were weak enemies, he was still cautious of them, slaying the ones he could and running from the ones he couldn't. His speed and dexterity stats were high enough to outrun any of the basic enemies on the first few Isles. It was a little trick he had learned in his time playing the beta.

He gained experience on his way to the next village and some items he could sell. Games like this were all about grinding levels and gathering good loot. Venn already had plenty of experience from years of playing similar games, but they were not as intense as this. The threat of death weighed heavily on his mind with every enemy encounter. When Venn faced a monster, his stomach would seize and his heart would start pounding hard in his chest.

He stopped in the middle of the road, catching his breath. There were no stamina bars so he could potentially run for hours and never get tired, but he wasn't sure if he could keep it up. The running wasn't what wore him down. It was the mental strain.

Taking a step forward, he felt a familiar sensation like someone had grazed the back of his neck. It was similar to the lag spike that occurred when all the players appeared in the plaza, except he didn't freeze or stutter. There were no frame drops either. It was like he could feel the data being loaded to the area. This feeling, when Venn experienced it, always led to a fight.

Appearing in front of him, was a Blue Slime and a Gray Wolf; a combination that wasn't seen until after the next town.

Great.

He was so close to the next town. His health was half full and he was at level five, but he couldn't avoid the two creatures. On either side of the path, was a dense forest that held creatures of much higher levels that could kill him in one hit. On their own, these enemies were easy to deal with, but together they might prove troublesome.

The wolf at level five, was agile and able to attack in succession, while the slime, at level six, kept it's distance to attack and moved slowly. He had to be sure he kept track of both enemies. He knew he was being reckless, but here were no other options.

Venn drew his sword, took a couple steps forward provoking the wolf into attacking. The AI programming of the wolf took the bait and charged, saliva dripped from it's snapping jaws. It's matted fur stood on end looking like spines. Venn raised his sword, triggering his tech attack, and sliced into the beast. The wolf whimpered, tumbling back in the dirt. Venn glanced back and saw the creatures HP had been brought down by half. He could finish off the wolf before the slime even moved to attack.

He launched another attack at the recovering wolf, but when he tried to mover he felt a stinging pain in his legs. Glancing down, Venn saw his feet were covered in blue goo. When he had attack the wolf, the slime attacked him. His HP bar depleted little by little from the goo.

Wincing, Venn tried to move, but was stuck. The pain was miner, but his heart began to race. Limbo's pain sensors provided just enough sensation to get players to feel like their lives were in jeopardy. At least, that's what they used to be for. Now, that *RoS* was a game of life or death, the pain sensations amplified his fear.

Venn struggled to keep his composure, but he kept looking at his depleting health. A snarl caught his ear from behind. He turned and saw the wolf back on its feet, black eyes focused on him. It charged, drool and tongue flapping. Even the slime was inching it's way closer toward him. He was trapped. To be killed by two of the weakest creatures?

What a joke? If Karn was with him, they would have easily beaten these monsters. But he wasn't. Venn was on his own and no one was coming to save him.

Gripping his sword, a yellow aura appeared around his hand, and he plunged it into the ground. The blast caused the slime and the wolf to halt their advance. The goo on his feet was blown away. Freed, Venn leapt to his feet and charged the stunned wolf. With two hands he slashed straight through the beast. The wolf didn't react, collapsing into a burst of iridescent polygons. The slime shot more goo at Venn, but he avoided it. The slime wiggled its way trying to circle around him. Its beady black eyes never left its target. Inside its gelatinous body was a solid red core. Venn targeted it and dashed toward the slime, avoiding another volley. Plunging the sword straight into the core, the slime rose up like a geyser and collapsed into a puddle before disappearing.

Venn placed his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. His health bar in the corner was only an eighth filled. He needed to get to town. It was the only safe place where he could rest and heal.

Sheathing his sword, he took a step and then another. His stride was falling short and every step made him more paranoid. Would another monster spawn? Would another player attack him and steal his gear? It was unlikely, since he hadn't anyone else, but Player Killers still worried him. They appeared in almost every game genre that featured multiplayer. Typically, they were at much higher levels and had expensive or rare gear. They liked the thrill of PvP, but mostly they enjoyed slaughtering weaklings and newbies. In this world, where your avatar's death meant your death, Venn wondered if Player

Killers would even be a thing. If Titor's threats were true and death was now a game mechanic, then they would be murders. But how would anyone know if a player really did die in real life? All he had to go on was Titor's word, news casts that could have been easily faked, and a player disappearing. Still, he didn't want to test that theory.

Venn shook his head trying to purge the thoughts of death. Maybe it was a sign of nearly dying that forced these thoughts to the surface. He didn't know, but somehow it had distracted him enough to reach the town's entrance. Sighing, he collapsed just inside the gate. He looked up and saw the hanging wooden sign burned with the name Porre. He was safe.

It had taken him almost two hours of game time to get here. Out of potions, exhausted, frightened, and with little health, Venn discovered he was smiling. He was enjoying himself more than he thought he would. Even the beta hadn't made him feel this way. Was it the addition of death that brought out this new thrill? Venn couldn't help but wonder.

He realized thinking straight. He desperately needed to heal and rest. The sun had already set and the lights were on in the windows of the buildings. Venn stood up, dusted himself off, and made his way to the Inn.

The outskirts of Porre, took after its namesake. Dirt roads with wheel tracks snaked around wooden houses with thatch roofs. Small gardens were fenced in by rotting logs and branches. NPCs in tattered clothing attended their gardens before entering their homes. Soon the dirt roads turned to streets of smooth cobblestone. Lit gas lamps lined

the walks, their flames casting shadows along the sides of the stone one-story houses. A few NPCs still roamed the streets. Some were closing their stalls and others entered their homes. Porre only had three buildings over one-story. He passed the item shop and weapon shop, which were both two-stories and closing soon. Making a left, Venn arrived at the inn.

It was a stately two-story building, larger than he remembered. The front doors were thick with a simple designs and marked by two lamps on either side. Venn pushed through one of the doors and entered into a bright candle lit room. Against the far wall was a stone fireplace with a roaring fire surrounded by a few lounge chairs. In the center of the room, on the wooden floor, was a large red rug frayed at the ends and a golden chandelier dangled above between the exposed beams.

Venn walked over to the counter where a man dressed in a white shirt and leather vest was polishing a brass key. The inn keeper turned and placed the key on the number 17 hook alongside the rest of the available room keys. There were 40 hooks and keys in total, which meant Venn was the only one here. He then pulled out a leather bound ledger and set it on top of the counter in front of Venn.

“Welcome to Porre Inn,” said the Inn Keeper, his eyes beaming, “would you like to spend the night?”

A screen appeared in front of Venn listing several options:

One Night – 15 mylrin

One Week – 105 mylrin

___ Night(s) – ___ mylrin

Speak with the owner.

Leave.

Venn glanced up at the Inn Keeper. His face, though stuck in a friendly smile, was highly detailed. There were wrinkles in the corners of his squinted eyes and a small scar on his chin. The man's salt and pepper hair was thinning, but more seemed to erupt from under his collar. He even smelled like a mixture of pine and mothballs. If it weren't for the menu screen in front of him, Venn would have believed that he was an actual person.

One of the options listed allowed for a near unlimited stay if Venn had the mylrin to pay for it. Often in games, the farther you progressed into the game the more expensive the stays became so 105 mylrin for a week was fairly cheap. Venn selected that option, figuring that other players wouldn't arrive until a few days from now. It also would give him enough time to level up and if necessary, he could always leave early. He did have money to spare.

The menu closed and the Inn Keeper turned around snagging a key from the number 3 hook. He extended it to Venn and another menu appeared asking "Accept" or "Decline." Venn accepted. The key then dematerialized and reappeared in his inventory.

"Your room is located down the hall and to the right," said the Inn Keeper, gesturing with his hand.

"Thank—" Venn caught himself.

Would he really respond to a "Thank you?" The Inn Keeper was just a computer program, simple code. It wasn't like he was an adaptive AI. Though virtual reality had

finally hit the market, adaptive AI was still far away from happening. There were still troubles of incorporating human language with all its subtleties of sarcasm and inflection. Let alone trying to get the voices to sound human. Navigation systems and smart phones still had that robotic tone to them that made them easily distinguishable as a machine. The Inn Keeper differed because he sounded so human and smelled real too. The enemies Venn had fought also had a smell, but it was less pleasant, like wet garbage. Even boss monsters adapted their abilities depending on the number of players fighting, the amount of remaining hit points, and even what attacks are used against them. This was all preprogrammed. It was still impossible to get a program to do something on its own using inference or even guess work. Though the Inn Keeper sounded human, Venn knew it was just advanced programming or prerecorded voice work. Turning, he headed in the direction the Inn Keeper pointed to.

“Anything else, Venn?” said the Inn Keeper.

Venn whirled around. The Inn Keeper was standing there with a plastered smile on his face.

“How do you know my name?”

Still smiling, the Inn Keeper pointed to the ledger on the counter. Venn peered at it and found his name written in the first space and the date next to it. His information was copied down and the Inn Keeper simply recited the information he received from his purchase of a room. It would prove troublesome, he thought, if players were searching for one another if they could access the ledger. Venn made sure to remember that.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” said the Inn Keeper.

The menu screen popped up again. This time Venn selected the option to speak with the owner. At once the Inn Keeper started speaking.

“Welcome, welcome. My name is Gaius and this inn is my pride and joy. I’ve recently expanded for the influx of guests that are coming. It was all thanks to a helpful tip from the Broker. What would you like to know?”

Another menu appeared. Venn never really delved into talking to NPCs in the beta. Often it resulted in things he already knew and ultimately wasted his time. He’d rather have been out fighting than going up to every NPC to learn about the town or an area. Scanning the choices displayed in front of him, he saw what he expected. There were the typical options: About Porre, About the inn, About Isle 1, and Leave. One option, though, Venn found intriguing. He selected it.

“Oh ho ho, so you want to know about the Broker?”

“Yes,” said Venn embarrassed by the fact the he couldn’t stop himself from responding.

“The Broker isn’t someone that can be messed with. They have all the information you might need. It’s like they can predict the future. They told me that several travelers will be coming to Porre within the next two weeks. Low and behold a week later, here you are, my first customer.”

“Where can I find the Broker?” said Venn, trying to force the conversation along. He got the gist of it, but the Inn Keeper kept on talking.

“They are always around, you just can’t see them. They are quick and vanish like shadows, but if you got money they will make you broker, hence the name.”

The Inn Keeper laughed at his little pun. Again, Venn thought, a prerecording. The laugh was all too real not to be.

“Is there anything else, Venn?”

“No,” said Venn, “there isn’t.”

He was a little frustrated. Even the information he wanted to know wasn’t all that useful. The Broker was simply an NPC that sold information and either it was just added to the game or Venn was never able to find one. What Venn really wanted to know was what type of information the Broker had. He selected the option to leave and headed to his room. Obviously, the Broker didn’t predict the future, it just gathered information of the world and the game. The Inn Keeper adding on to his inn was just a programmed scenario to lead players to seek out the Broker. Hearing his name called by the Inn Keeper, forced Venn into finding out the information. It was still part of the tutorial, he thought.

Reaching the room marked with the number 3, Venn opened up his inventory and selected the key. He turned the door knob and entered into the room. There was a twin sized bed against the wall and a gas lamp on the nightstand. To the left were two chairs

and a small table with a blue rectangular rug covering a large portion of the wooden floor. He locked the door and triple checked that it was locked.

Venn sat down on the edge of the bed and opened his menu. Less than a day had passed in the real world, but he felt like he had been up for three days straight. He flipped to the Equip screen and took off his sword, boots, armor, and tunic. Closing the menu screen, he turned off the gas lamp and crawled under the covers. The light from the street filtered in through the curtains of the window and danced along the ceiling. His bed was soft, but not too soft. It was perfect. He didn't need to seek out the Broker. He knew he needed to gain levels and use his mylrin to keep him healthy. If he happened to have any spare cash he might just look for the Broker, but right now gaining levels and resting were the most important. With that last thought, Venn fell asleep in a bed that wasn't his own, in a virtual world that was starting to become real.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Venn woke with a start. At first he wasn't sure where he was. He had dreamed that he was back home in his room, staring into the computer screen. An old video was playing. It was taken at a park he vaguely remembered from when he was younger. The trees in the background had few leaves remaining and the sky was a mixture of bright blue and sullen gray. The wind was blowing hard enough that it interfered with the camera's microphone. Sitting in the swing was a little boy bundled up in a bright red jacket with a matching beanie. He was being pushed by a woman with

black hair tied in a ponytail. She was wearing a black winter's coat, matching gloves and earmuffs, and jeans. They were smiling despite the cold.

“Higher mommy,” said the little boy.

The mom pushed him higher and he squealed with joy. A deep laugh echoed from behind the camera as it zoomed in on the smiling boy and his mother. Then the video went black. Venn felt the warmth of his tears as they rolled down his face. He moved his mouse to replay the video. He clicked, but nothing happened. He clicked again. Same result. He clicked some more and still nothing not even an indicator that the computer was processing his request. He flung the cursor across the screen to prove it wasn't frozen. He clicked again, mashed commands to bring up the task manager and still nothing.

Pushing back from his seat, Venn found the power cord and the surge protector it was plugged into. First, he flicked the switch on the protector on then off, but the computer and the monitor didn't react. Next he tried unplugging the computer, though not the safest or wisest thing, he did it anyway. Still nothing changed. He stood at his desk and threw his hands down. That's when he heard it. A cracking sound like ice breaking across a frozen lake. He looked up saw a fracture spreading across the monitor. It moved from the top left corner to the center of screen branching out as it went. The video started playing. This time it was distorted. The colors and sounds demonic and angry. More fractures spread until the entire screen looked like a kaleidoscope. Venn reached out to touch it. Just as the video was ending, the entire screen turned black washing the room

into complete darkness. He felt around for his desk, touching the keyboard, the mouse and then finding the monitor. An icy wind exploded outwards knocking him down. Shards of the screen whipped by him, slashing at his face and hands as he fell into the darkness. He never hit the wooden floor of his room instead he passed right through it.

He was sinking, freezing, flapping his arms trying to fly or swim up to the surface. Darker shapes fell around him. From their outlines he distinguish his bed, his desk, the computer tower, the remains of his monitor, and his chair. They sank faster than he did and soon they were gone in the darkness below. Above him, he saw a light flickering between dim and bright. Venn tried to push himself in that direction. With every stroke he became colder and more exhausted until he gave up. There was no way out nothing he could do. He floated there for a second or two and then started to sink.

His eyes started to close. He felt heavy. He felt heavy, sinking into the pitch black. The current shifted around him as something passed by. It grazed by several times until it bumped him. Venn didn't react. He got bumped again. Opening his eyes a little, he saw ten knotted appendages swiping at him. Panicking, his eyes wide, he tried to move, but couldn't. Fear collapsed in on him as he closed his eyes hoping that whatever was happening would be over soon. He was hit and this time the creature didn't let go. It clawed and grabbed at him as he shifted into a fetal position to protect to himself.

Venn screamed.

His mouth filled with the darkness around him, choking out his words. He screamed louder until he felt his body go numb. Then the spider or squid or whatever it

was dragged him upwards, jolting him from sleep to his warm bed in the world of Acharia.

Venn woke, gripping the sheets. He felt his heart pounding and was unsure of where he was. After the panic subsided, he remembered that he was still in the game. There was light coming in from the window and sounds of NPCs milling about in the streets. Footsteps on cobblestone, a few ringing hammers, even a bard or two announced that the day had begun. Venn wondered if they made noise only when players were present. If that were true, would the higher levels just be filled with still and silent characters until someone got there? He opened his menu screen and equipped his gear. The time read 5:21 AM, but that was where his body was locally. The game time seemed to be more around seven or eight o'clock in the morning. A bell chimed somewhere in the distance. Listening, Venn counted the number of rings and determined that it was eight o'clock. He opened his menu again and this time went to the settings and changed the time to reflect that of the game. It would be easier this way, he thought, less confusing. Trying to guess the time of the game could lead to missed opportunities. Satisfied with everything so far, he left his room, locked it, and headed out to start leveling up.

Chapter 10

Walking through the lobby of the inn, he saw Gaius still standing behind the counter. Behind him were the set of room keys with only one missing, the number three. No one had made it to Porre, yet. He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad omen.

Leaving the inn, he shielded his eyes from the morning sun and headed for the item shop. NPCs walked along the sidewalks conversing about things Venn didn't care about. Some were behind stands selling various goods including dyes for hair, clothing, and armor. He ignored these items, because they were a waste of mylrin. Right now, he had to spend mylrin wisely on items he needed.

Turning the corner, he found the item shop. It was distinguished by the bright blue awning and the obvious sign of three potion bottles. Venn entered, hearing the bell chime. Inside, blue banners with gold frills hung from the walls. Four wooden columns rose from the floor supporting the exposed beams. Along each column, two lamps hung from tarnished hooks and gave off enough light to illuminate the entire room. Three cabinets with various bottles in all colors of the rainbow lined both side walls. Venn watched the flames flicker on the glass doors as he strode through the middle of the room. It was completely empty except for the blue circular rug and a couple wooden chairs. Behind the counter were shelves display more goods that Venn would need later on. He prompted the shopkeeper, opened the menu and bought as many potions and warp crystals as he could fit in his pouch, which were five apiece. The rest would have to go into his inventory. Having items in his pouch made for quick and easy access in battle. He could always use the ones in his inventory, but that would leave him exposed for several seconds, which could mean life or death.

After he had plenty of both items, he left the shop and went next door to the weapon shop. It was much smaller than the blacksmith in Orous Forge. Only the wall

opposite the counter was lined with axes, swords, and lances. Standing guard on either side of the young curly haired man behind the counter, were two mannequins. One was dressed in a chain mail shirt, studded bracers, and a pair of leather boots with steel covering the toes. The other looked like the walking tin cans Venn had seen on launch day. The steel chest plate looked like it weighed twice maybe three times as much as him. Despite it's simplistic design, it had spiked shoulder guards and a pair of iron knuckle gauntlets. Venn knew he didn't have enough points in his strength stat to even equip the heavy set. Even if he did, he still preferred to be light on his feet. After shifting through menus and selling off some old gear, he bought the chain mail shirt, the studded bracers, and the boots.

His new gear boosted his dexterity and more importantly his defense and attack. When facing an enemy, he would be able to dodge quicker and deliver a more damaging attack. It as a simple strategy to learn to dodge and counter, but he had died several times in the beta to master it. Those were just growing pains of getting used to the mechanics and the game. His skills were now far superior than when he had first started. He wouldn't make any more reckless decisions. He had to be smart about his fights and not push himself. With a large supply of warp crystals, he'd be able to get out of any dooming situation. Warp locks, zones where warping couldn't be done, only started to appear after Isle 7.

All geared up and rested, Venn left the weapon shop. He had caught himself again, saying goodbye to the NPC. Closing the door, he made his way to the East exit located

between two houses with thatch roofs and worn wooded fences. When he reached the exit, a male NPC in a tattered tunic waved over to him.

“Please good traveler, I’m in need of your assistance.”

Venn stared at the graying farmer.

“Fiends have been plaguing on my family, stealing our tools and crops. We can’t survive for much longer without them. I beg you to please help us.”

When the NPC stopped talking, a screen appeared:

Bazrog’s Harvest

Track down the thieves and return the farmer’s crops.

Accept Decline

Venn pressed Accept.

“Thank you kind traveler. Best of luck to you.”

On the map in Venn’s HUD, a green quest marker appeared some distance away to the East. He left Porre following a dirt path through a grassy field, slaying any monster that spawned. His new gear made fighting much easier. Even when another blue slime and wolf attacked him, he dispatched them with ease and gained enough experience to equip the Abyssal Blade.

When the path curved south, toward the next town, Venn veered into the tall grass. In the distance, a thick tree line arose. According to his map, the quest marker was located there. He continued walking until he reached the edge of the woods. Thick trunks

and gnarled roots rose from the ground snaking away in every direction. It was difficult, for Venn, to distinguish which roots belonged to which trees.

Readying himself, Venn entered the woods. The forest was a perfect circle, surrounding a grassy meadow at its center. Its thick canopy barred sunlight from reaching its muddy floor. Narrow twisting trails carved through the woods, making it easy to become disoriented. The first time Venn took the farmer's quest it had taken him hours to complete. He had spent most of his time trying to navigate his way to the center without ending back on the outside.

After several minutes wandering and marking certain tree trunks, Venn emerged into the clearing. Lush grass spotted with white flowers blew in the gentle breeze. Near the center of the field was a pile of goods. Squash, corn, pumpkins, sacks of grain, barrels, and pitchforks were a few of the items he could see. Drawing his sword, Venn approached the pile, his hand wrapped in its yellow aura.

When he touched the pile, two Spitelings appeared and attacked. Venn cut through the first before it could swing its pick axe and blocked the second's attack. Dressed only in overalls, Venn could see its ribs sticking out of its gray-green skin. Its eyes were milky white, teeth black like obsidian, and its hair were caked in dirt. The creature was no taller than three feet and had toenails as long as its claws. It didn't have a lot of health, but it was tenacious in combat. Snarling, the Spiteling recovered and lunged at him. Venn parried the attack and ran his blade through. The devilish gnome exploded into shiny

polygons. Before they reached the ground, Venn felt a slight lag spike. This time three Spitelings spawned and began swiping at him furiously.

Venn cleaved the first one, dodged the second, and blocked the third's flurry. Enraged, the remaining two charged, foam falling from their mouths. Using the same strategy, he slew the first one to attack and avoided the second. When he dispatched of the all three, four more spawned. He made short work of the final wave, by eliminating one at a time. He kept his distance, which allowed him to avoid being attacked all at once.

After clearing the meadow, Venn had gained another level and three hundred mylrin. It was a good start and the first of many quests to make him stronger. He approached the pile and touched it. A white light surrounded the goods, When it vanished so did the pile. Venn opened his inventory and under quest items was the name Famer's Goods. He checked the map and saw the quest marker had also changed locations. Now, it was directing him west, back to Porre. He pulled out a warp crystal from his pouch strapped to his waist.

"Porre," said Venn.

The crystal glowed, shattered, and in a flash of blue light he was back at the East exit. He walked through the gate and found the same NPC still waiting.

"Thank you. Thank you, traveler."

"It was no trouble—"

“Those fiends won’t ever come back thanks to you. Here, take this as a token of our gratitude.”

The NPC walked away, returning to his home. A screen then appeared, displaying his rewards:

500 Exp.

250 Mylrin

2x Leather Hide

1x Old Knight’s Rapier

Venn closed out of the screen and opened his inventory. The Famer’s Goods were no longer there. They had been removed automatically. Scrolling down, he found the Old Knight’s Rapier. It was a dull silver blade with a simple dome shaped guard at the hilt. It would sell well with the Leather Hides, thought Venn.

Wandering into town, he smelled fires burning and barbecued meat of some kind. His stomach started to grumble and he started drooling at the thought of a juicy hamburger or a steak. During the beta, if he got hungry, he would logout and go eat in the real world. Now, he didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t walk into an NPC’s home and take their food, could he? Even though they were data, it didn’t seem right to him. It had always bothered him how the protagonist of any RPG had free reign. They could enter houses, steal NPC’s goods, break their pots, leave, and they would continue their digital lives as though nothing had happened. Did they ever wonder why their stuff was

missing or broken? Or did they not care because everything returned to normal the next time the protagonist entered? It was a never-ending cycle.

Deciding against breaking into NPC houses and stealing their food, he searched elsewhere for something to satiate his appetite. He looked everywhere in town and found nothing. Desperate, he tried opening the door of one the NPC's houses. Surprisingly, it was locked. He knocked, but no one answered. Unable to think of a solution, he returned to the inn. Pushing through the doors, he was greeted by the smell of roasting chicken. Off to the side of the lobby were six empty tables with four chairs and a stack of menus. Gaius wasn't behind the counter, he wasn't even in the lobby. Venn glanced at the back wall. His key was still the only one missing. He then sat down at one of the empty tables and looked at the menu. There were several chicken meals and a couple pork, but Venn was familiar with all of them. Next to each item was the price and a blank space to enter the number of meals you wanted. In all his time playing the beta, he had never even seen players sit down to eat or that the game even had food for reasons other than atmosphere.

Setting his menu down, Venn placed an order for the half chicken with vegetables, a side of bread, and a pitcher of water. A few seconds later, Gaius came down from the second floor and set his plate in front of him. His meal looked like every food advertisement he had seen. The chicken was roasted golden brown and the vegetables were steaming, their colors vibrant. The food was the definition of perfect. He devoured it, ordered another, and finished that one too.

His stomach silenced, Venn left to find more quests. He met a female NPC Apothecary who needed ten Thornling spines, five Vapor Snake fangs, and two Spiteling claws for an anti-venom potion. Another farmer NPC needed him to help plow the ground and plant seeds. He also found a little girl, who needed help finding her cat. He accepted all the quests, managing to complete them before nightfall. The rewards he earned weren't the best, but the experience and mylrin more than made up for it.

For the next few days, Venn continued gathering and completing quests. He fought alone and ate alone, trapped in his unrelenting thoughts. He wondered what Felicia was doing. Was she mad at him? Did she want to see to him at all? Was Emily out with some new guy or actually being his mom for once? He wanted to know where his body was. It could still be in his bed or could have been taken to a hospital. It was weird not knowing. He wondered if any more players had died and hoped Karn was still alive. To ease his mind, he sometimes he talked to Gaius, telling him about an awesome battle or the real world. He was an excellent listener, but his unending silence was maddening.

One night, after completing another set of quests, Venn returned to the inn. He sat down in his usual seat and ordered a pork loin. Soon, Gaius came down the stairs with his meal.

“Guess who leveled up,” said Venn.

Gaius set plate down.

“Damn straight, it was me. I'll be at level twenty in no time.”

Gaius gave him a blank look.

Venn cut into his pork. “I know, I know. Overconfidence will be my downfall.

You always say that.”

Gaius turned and walked toward the front desk.

Venn watched him go. “Nice talking to—”

On the back wall, behind the counter, Venn saw his key was missing, along with nineteen others.