

I tore the plastic wrapping off the package, and the top off the cardboard box, and mom tsksd tsksd at me: “Don’t litter.”

I ignored her and shook the box upside down. A big plastic CD case fell out, along with a manual. It landed flat on the floor, and a malicious red skull leered up at me. I scooped both items off the carpet and ran over to the computer and booted it up. Janie picked up the trash I had created.

Mom told her, “Good girl.”

Janie walked past me on the way to the trash can in the kitchen. She stuck her tongue out.

Windows finally loaded up, and I opened the disk drive and put the CD into the holder. I closed it and was rewarded with the install screen for “Diablo 2.” “This is going to be great,” I muttered.

“That was really expensive,” mom said, walking into the living room. “Why are those computer games so expensive?”

A little red bar showed me the progress of the installation program. I answered, “Don’t know.”

Janie popped through the kitchen door. “That’s because you’re stooopid!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Shut up! Mom! Get her away from me!”

Janie flipped me off and pranced upstairs. I heard her bounce along the hallway and into her bedroom. “Stupid sister.”

I went back to installing the game. I had to switch disks a few times, but it was all finally loaded, and a little Diablo icon appeared on my desktop. I clicked it and watched the opening animation. My eyes bulged out. It was a hundred times better than the paltry little movie that had come with the first “Diablo.”

“That’s neat,” mom said. I whirled around in the chair to see her looking over my shoulder. “It looks like a real movie. Turn up the speakers.”

“Why?”

“I want to hear.”

“I’m trying to play,” I said, hitting the mouse button to end the movie. I could watch it later, when no one was spying on me.

“Okay, okay,” she said. She walked away. “Don’t play for too long.”

I nodded absently and went right to the character creation screen. I looked over the different classes, at graphics of them standing around a fire. The paladin looked cool, with full armor and a long sword. I read under his picture, "Party leader, holy man, and blessed warrior." I liked the sound of that. I flipped open the game manual and found the section about paladins and ran my finger down the big list of skills and spells at his command. Smite, Might, Prayer, lots more! He sounded really awesome. I nodded my head with satisfaction, and clicked the paladin. He would be my first character. I typed in my own name, "Jamie," and I started to play.

#

There were zombies all over the screen, and BloodRaven struck me with another arrow. I used up my last health potion and kept hitting her with my sword. She only had a tiny sliver of life left, but more zombies were shuffling in from the right and cutting off my only avenue of escape! I just needed one more hit!

A mighty blow of my weapon, and BloodRaven finally died. Streaks of white energy shot across the screen and wiped out the zombies. I let out my breath and watched as a yellow hammer dropped from her body. "Cool," I said. Yellow items were supposed to be more powerful than normal items. I picked it up and looked in my inventory, but I didn't have any identification scrolls. I was out of portal scrolls, too. I would have to walk all the way back to the main camp before I could figure out what the hammer could do. I scrounged around the graveyard to pick up all the dropped items to sell to the merchants back at the camp.

"Jamie," mother suddenly said. "You've been playing for an hour already."

"So?"

"That's enough for today."

I turned around in my seat to see her standing on the other side of the dining room table. "Just another hour? Please?"

She crossed her arms, shook her head. "That's enough for today. You have things to do."

"Like what?"

She pointed at the computer. "Turn it off."

"Fine," I snorted. I saved my character and quit the game, powered down the computer. "I don't have anything else to do, mom."

"Aren't you going to astronomy club tonight?"

“I don’t know. I don’t want to.”

“Simon called. Didn’t you hear the phone? Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

“No. What did he want?”

“He was asking if you wanted a ride tonight. I wrote down his number.”

“I don’t want to go, mom. It’s stupid.”

“Call him, Jamie. He was polite enough to call you.”

I moaned and marched past her to the phone. Simon’s number was written on a notepad, and I grabbed the receiver and tapped in the number. I pressed the phone against my ear and listened to it ring five times. I sighed, and started to hang up, but a voice said, “Hello?”

It was Simon. I muttered, “Hi. It’s Jamie.”

“Hi, Jamie. I called you earlier.”

“I know. I was doing something.”

Simon said, “Okay. I was asking if you wanted a ride to the club tonight. My mom’s already driving two other people, and she said it wouldn’t be any problem to pick you up, too.”

“I don’t know if I want to go, Simon.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got things to do.”

“What?”

“Things,” I said. Maybe if I did the dishes and vacuumed the upstairs hallway I could talk mom into letting me play for another hour.

“You should come. Andrea Garza told me that she was going to be there tonight.”

My mouth fell open, and I thought of the small, pretty junior that smiled at everybody and never hesitated to say hello. She was probably the nicest girl in the entire school. We had the same lunch period, and I liked to watch her from behind my lunch bag. She always smiled. “She’s not going to be there.”

“Yes she is,” Simon said. “Her aunt called my mom to ask for directions. She’s going to bring her friends, too. You should come. It’ll be fun.”

I wrapped the telephone cord around my wrist and thought for several seconds. “Okay,” I said at last. I could play the game tomorrow. “You can pick me up.”

I hung up and saw mother hovering nearby. “Are you going?”

I nodded, and she grinned. “Simon is such a nice boy. So polite.”

#

He was polite. At nine o’clock Simon rang the doorbell, and mother answered, and he said, “Good evening, Mrs. Randall. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Simon. Come on in.”

Janie leaned around mom’s body. She waved her hand at him and exclaimed, “Hi, Simon!”

“Hi.” Simon stepped into the house. “Is Jamie ready?”

“I’m right here,” I said, stepping in from the dining room. I ran my hand through my hair to straighten it.

“You look terrible,” Janie spat.

“Shut up.”

“You should put on a jacket,” mom told me. “In case it gets cold.”

“It’s not going to get cold,” I hissed. “Come on, Simon.”

I walked out the front door. A big minivan sat by the curb with its motor running. I heard Simon say, “We’ll be back around eleven, Mrs. Randall.”

“Bye, Simon!” Janie cried. “Take good care of my big, stooopid, brother!”

“Don’t say that,” mom sighed. Then the front door closed, and Simon ran up beside me.

“It’s really dark tonight. It’s a good night to look at stars.”

I glanced up. They all looked the same to me.

He opened the side door of the minivan, and his mother smiled over her shoulder at me. “Hello, Jamie.”

“Hi, Mrs. Douglas.” I glanced inside and saw Brittany Jones, a freshman like me, and some other boy I didn’t know. He might have been a sophomore, one of Simon’s friends. I’d never seen him before. I climbed into the closest seat, and Simon slid the door shut. He got in the front passenger seat, and the minivan set off through the dark streets. I asked, “Where are we going?”

“The field behind the middle school,” Simon said. “It’s still the best place.”

His mother said, “You should have brought a jacket, Jamie, in case it gets cold.”

“I’ll be fine.”

We pulled into the parking lot of the middle school, and Simon opened the door for us. I stepped onto the parking lot and stared at the building. It seemed really small now, not like the high school.

“Come on,” Simon said. He handed out flashlights. The ends were covered with colored cellophane paper so that the beams were red instead of white. I raised my eyebrows, and Simon explained, “It’s for your eyes. The red light keeps them adjusted to the dark.”

“That’s weird.”

Simon shrugged. “Come on.” He motioned with his flashlight and we all walked around the building and to the big, wide field behind it. We saw standing in the middle of the baseball diamond, about a hundred yards away, twenty more figures, marked by their wavering red flashlights. They all hovered around a big telescope that was pointed at the southern horizon, toward Mexico.

Simon stopped so that I could catch up with him. He pointed to the south, at an especially brilliant dot of white. “Look. There’s Jupiter.”

“Really?”

“Yes. When you look at it through the telescope you’ll see little bulges where the moons are.”

“That sounds cool.” I walked a little faster.

“Watch where you’re going,” Simon advised. “You don’t want to trip.”

We reached the telescope. Mr. Bechtel, the physics teacher and club sponsor said hi, and I looked around at all the other kids. They were the science whizzes, the smart kids, the quiet ones that no one every noticed. Like me. Like Simon, but he was better than the rest of us because he was the smartest of all, now, and he was starting to become handsome, and he liked to talk to people, and everyone respected him. All of the parents

were right, he was a good boy. He would be a fine man, the adults said, and I couldn't really agree with them.

Simon patted me on the back and whispered, "See? I told you they'd be here."

He pointed with his chin toward a group of five girls, huddling together for warmth because, I noticed, it was kind of cold. Andrea Garza saw me staring at her and waved. "Hi, Jamie!"

I blushed, but luckily it was dark and she couldn't see. She knew my name!

Simon walked over to her and they talked, but I couldn't hear them over Mr. Bechtel's voice. He was saying something about Jupiter. Moons and stuff, but I turned my head so that I could watch Andrea and her friends out of the corner of my eye. Simon said something funny to her, and she giggled.

His mother, Mrs. Douglas, sidled up to me. "Isn't this better than a computer game?" she asked.

"What?"

"Your mom told me that you were playing a game all afternoon. Isn't this better? Aren't the stars pretty?"

"I guess," I answered, but I still really wanted to know what that yellow hammer could do.

#

Jupiter was okay; I could actually see the bulges, and Mr. Bechtel said, "Those are the moons. With just a slightly bigger telescope we could make them out clearly."

Near the end of the gathering, I finally made my way over to Simon and Andrea, and she grabbed my hand and rubbed it between her palms. "You're so cold, Jamie. You should have worn a jacket." She pointed her flashlight in my face, zipped it back and forth from one eye to the other, and giggled.

"I forgot," I muttered.

Then it was time to leave. The telescope was packed away, and the kids started to walk across the field back to the parking lot. Andrea kissed everyone on the cheek, even me, and she hopped into her aunt's car along with her friends, and they left. Mrs. Douglas took me home. Simon walked me to the front door.

"I'm glad that you could come. I'll call you when we have our next meeting."

"Okay," I said.

Simon patted me on the back again, and I went inside my house. I yawned, held my hand over my mouth and headed up the stairs.

“Jamie,” mom said.

I jumped in surprise. I stared into the living room. I could just make her out, sitting in the dark under the lamp. “Holy shit, mom. You scared me.”

“Don’t curse, Jamie.”

“Sorry, but you scared me. What are you doing?”

“My boss called while you were gone.”

“And?”

“I have to work third shift tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night? What about us?”

“That’s why I was waiting for you. We have to find someplace for you to sleep tomorrow.”

“Can’t I just stay here?” I asked, walking over. I sat down next to her. “I’m old enough.”

“And what about Janie? Are you old enough to watch her, too?”

I nodded, but she probably couldn’t see me in the dark. “Yes.”

“But do you want to watch her?”

She had me there.

“Anyway, Janie’s already staying with Kimmy tomorrow night, which means that you would be here all by yourself. I can’t let you do that. You need to find someone to spend the night with.”

“Can’t dad come over?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Absolutely not.” Mom chewed on her lower lip. “Can you ask Simon? He seems like a really nice boy. I bet he would let you spend the night.”

”I barely know him, mom. We only talk to each other a little bit.”

“Can’t you just ask him? Tomorrow at school?”

#

Mom dropped Janie off at Kimmy’s house, and Janie carried her sleeping bag up to the porch. She waved at us. “Bye-bye!”

Mom waved. “Say ‘bye,’ Jamie.”

“Just go, mom. I don’t see why I can’t stay by myself now. I’m not a little kid.”

“We already talked about this, Jamie.”

We drove a few blocks to the Douglas house. It was much bigger and nicer than our house. The grass was neatly cut, and every plank of wood was painted the same color. Simon sat on the front porch, but as soon as he saw us pull up, he jogged down the sidewalk. He poked his head into my window. “Hello, Mrs. Randall. Hi, Jamie.”

“Hi, Simon,” mom said. “Thank you so much for letting Jamie spend the night with you.”

“It’s no problem. It’ll be fun. Do you want to come inside for a minute?”

We all walked into the house. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas sat in the living room and watched television, but they rose for my mother. They all shook hands. My mom blushed and covered her mouth with her palm. “Thank you so much for watching Jamie tonight. My boss sprang a third shift on me. I couldn’t just leave him and Janie at home alone.”

“It’s okay,” Mrs. Douglas said. “We’ll take good care of him.”

Mom grabbed my hand and pulled me back into the entry. She kissed me on the cheek. “You be good.”

“Stop that,” I whined. “Just go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow after school.”

“Bye, mom!”

She left, closing the door. I stood in the entry and stared at my reflection in a mirror set on the wall. My glasses were drooping down my nose, and I pushed them back up.

Cheap plastic frames, not like Simon's nice metal ones. I glanced down at my ugly brown backpack and threadbare sleeping bag.

"Moms," Simon said from the side. "Mine is just like that, too. Smothering." He came and picked up my stuff. "You don't need the sleeping bag. The guest room is all set out for you. Come on."

We passed by the living room. Mrs. Douglas stood up and came to me, took my hand. "Do you want something to eat? We have ice cream."

"Maybe later, Mrs. Douglas. Thank you."

Simon led me upstairs. "This is my room. This is the guest room."

I poked my head into the guest room. It was small and plain, but warm in the light of a single lamp. Blankets were spread out over the mattress, and the pillows were fluffed neatly. Simon put my things on the carpet and headed back to his bedroom. I followed him.

His room was very large, the size of my mom's, but much neater and brighter. The paint wasn't peeling in the corners, and there were no little spider webs along the molding. Windows looked out over the dark front lawn, and posters of cars and airplanes lined the wall. His bookshelf was stuffed with little golden trophies. Perfect attendance. Science awards. Citizenship awards. Top Freshman. "You're going to be your class' valedictorian?"

He shrugged, sat down on his bed. "Guess so, but that's still years away." He reached out to his nightstand and folded a picture down so that I couldn't see it. "Not like it really matters."

I ran my finger along some science magazines and pulled the top ones away. I let out my breath.

"What is it?"

I saw a "Diablo 2" game manual. "You have a computer?"

"It's in the study."

I held the booklet up by the corner, stared at the familiar red skull. "You play?"

He nodded. "Do you? It's pretty cool."

"Can I see your characters?"

Simon led the way down the hall to his dad's study. A shiny new computer sat on the desk. Simon sat down and turned it on. "I only play every now and then. It's so addictive."

"I have a level sixteen paladin," I said, "and I just started a barbarian. My paladin is about to kill the first boss, Andariel."

"That's cool." Windows was booted, and Simon clicked on an icon.

"What's that?"

"America Online."

I heard the phone buzz and hiss. "What's that for?"

"It's the Internet."

I nodded in understanding. I'd used the Internet, at school, when the teacher had let me check up on the history of Texas from a web site, but I hadn't known about the telephone thing. "We have that icon on our computer, too."

"Then you probably have a modem. All you have to do is sign up, and you can use the Internet."

"But aren't you going to play?"

"Look," Simon stated, starting the game. "Haven't you wondered about the 'multiplayer' option here? It lets you play over the Internet."

"I wanted to finish single-player first."

"Multi-player is better. Look." Simon clicked on the button, and a log-in screen appeared. He typed in his password, and the multi-player screen appeared. Text scrolled along the side, people talking to each other about the game. Little pictures of all the characters logged in lined the bottom. Paladins and barbarians, amazons and sorceresses.

"They're all online?" I asked.

"Sure." Simon clicked a few more buttons, and he joined a game where people were standing around the camp at the beginning of the game. Simon typed, "Hello," and everyone responded with "Hi!"

"That's so cool," I said. "What level is your barbarian?"

"Level seventeen."

“That’s it?”

“I don’t play very often.”

“Why not? This is amazing.” All of the characters on the screen were running toward a blue teleportation portal at the bottom of the screen. “Where is everyone going?”

“They’re going to kill Andariel.”

“Can I make a character?”

Simon got up and logged off. “You have to make a new account. It’s easy.”

Within a minute, I had my own account on the server. “Can I use my character from home?”

“No. You have to make a new one.”

“That sucks,” I hissed, and I made another paladin. I tried to name him “Jamie,” but it was already taken. So I named him “Jamie1000.” That one was free, and then the main screen appeared. “Now what do I do?”

“You can join a game,” Simon explained, “or you can make your own. If you name it something enticing, people will join.”

I decided to join a game called, “JUST STARTING.” My character appeared on the screen with three other players. I grinned from ear to ear. “Those are real people.”

“Isn’t technology amazing?”

“How long have you had this? I’ve only been playing for a few days.”

“I got it when it first came out, during the summer.”

“And you’re still only level seventeen?”

“I have one level thirty-four, but I don’t play that much anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked. The other players were already heading out into the game area to kill monsters, and I followed them.

Simon sat on the edge of the desk to watch. “Why not?” I asked again.

“I sort of promised someone that I wouldn’t play that much.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“She asked me.”

I looked over my shoulder at Simon. “What are you talking about? Who made you promise?”

“Never mind. I’m going to go to my room. You can play for a little while, but my dad will want to use the computer before he goes to bed. You’ll have to get off then.”

“That’s okay,” I said. I turned back to the screen. The other players were already hacking away at some mummies. I ran up to help them.

#

I rushed home from school as quickly as I could, but Janie still beat me. She always beat me home. How was she so fast? She sat on the couch in the living room and sneered at me. “What took you so long?”

“Shut up!” I ran into the kitchen and saw mom leaning over the stove, shaking a package of noodles into a pot. “Mom! Mom!”

She kissed me on the cheek. “What is it?”

“Can we get on the Internet?”

“What?”

I went into the dining room and flipped on the computer. “Look,” I said, when it was completely started. “That little icon. It lets us connect to the Internet.” I grabbed the phone and disconnected it. I brought the wire to the computer and got down on my hands and knees to peer at the back of it. There was the modem jack, just like Simon had said. I plugged the phone wire in.

“What are you doing?” mom asked. “What if someone calls?”

“No one is going to call.” I clicked on the America Online icon, and the program started. “We can get on the Internet.”

Mother crossed her arms. “I don’t know, Jamie.”

“Please, mom? Please? It’ll be good for us. We can use email to talk to dad. Janie and I can do stuff for school. It’s good. Please?”

“Please what?” Janie asked, walking in. She stood behind mom’s hip and glared at me. “Watcha doing?”

“I’ve heard things about the Internet,” mom whispered.

“The Internet?” Janie hissed. “Child molesters! Only child molesters use the Internet. Like Jamie.”

“Shut up!”

“Go to your room, Janie.”

She held her nose in the air and marched up the stairs. We watched her go, and then mom turned back to me. “Jamie, I don’t know about this.”

“Please? Please? It’s not that bad. Not like the news says. And it can really help us. It doesn’t even cost that much.”

“It costs money? How much?”

Damnit! Why had I said that? I muttered, “I don’t know. Not that much.”

Mom wrung her hands together. “Jamie, you know that we don’t have that much to spend.”

“You can take it out of my allowance, mom. Please? Simon was showing me at his house last night. It’s so cool. It’s like discovering a whole new world! Please?”

#

Jamie1000 passed level thirty, and I stopped to clap my hands. Now I could finally start to use the really powerful spells. I checked my watch. Mom would be home from work soon. Her boss had put her back on first shift, and that gave me an hour or two every day after school to play before she got home. I turned off the computer and sat in the living room, spread my algebra book over my lap and started to do my homework. I only had a few problems. After dinner mom would let me play for another hour.

Multi-player really was much better than single player. Playing with other people made my character get experience much more quickly, and we found better items. I already had one unique item, a hammer, and with it I could kill most monsters with just a few hits. I had found a web site that listed all of the other unique items, and I had written down on a piece of paper the things that I wanted for Jamie1000. Some would be hard to find.

The web site also had a little forum, where people could post questions about the game and talk about their playing strategies. I had another paper where I had written down some of the better ideas. Jamie1000 was going to be as strong as I could make him. I tapped my pencil against the book in my lap and stared out the window. The computer was calling out to me, to play just a little bit more. Mom might be another half hour in coming home.

Janie was suddenly right in front of me. "I'm going to tell."

"What?"

"I'm going to tell mom that you're playing the computer when she's not here."

"So?"

"She told you not to play when she's not home."

"Go away."

Janie grabbed my pencil. "I'm going to tell on you!"

"Give me that!"

Janie danced away. "Catch me if you want it. You big, stooopid brother. You're fat, too!"

"Shut up!" I shouted, standing. The book fell off my lap and landed on the floor. Janie giggled and ran into the kitchen.

"Fatty! Fatty!"

I chased her, knocking over the phone stand in the hallway, and it clattered to the floor. Janie kept singing, "Stooopid! Fatty!" and her voice echoed along the walls into my ears. "I'm gonna tell on you!"

I shoved open the kitchen door, and Janie stood in front of the refrigerator. The freezer was wide open, and she held a tub of ice cream in her hands and scooped big portions out with her fingers. Her face was smeared with vanilla.

"Put that back!" I told her.

"Make me, fatty."

"Stop calling me that!" I stomped up to her and swiped the ice cream out of her fingers. I shoved it back in the freezer.

Janie grabbed my arm and tugged, smiled viciously. "Gimme, fatty! Gimme, gimme!"

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" I screamed, grabbing her arm and twisting it hard. Janie yelped in pain, her face contorting from a grin to a grimace, but I didn't care about that. I shook her. "Stop calling me that!"

She clawed at my hand with her little fingers. “Let go! You’re hurting me, Jamie!”

“Shut up!” I said again, and I suddenly swung out my other hand and slapped her across the face.

The blow was loud, much louder than I had expected, and it reverberated off the counters and cabinets and right back to me, as if I had been slapped, too. Janie stopped yelling, stood shock still, and brought her trembling hand up against her cheek to touch the big red welt there. I released her arm, to see more red where I had been crushing her skin. She staggered back toward the door and glared at me with huge eyes. She started to sob, “I’m going to tell on you!”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean to.”

She ran out. I followed her, but she was fast, and was up the stairs in a flash. She was so fast. She ran to the bathroom and locked the door. I leaned against it, pushed, knocked. “Janie? I’m sorry, Janie! Open the door. Please? I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Go away,” she wailed. “You hurt me! I’m going to tell on you! I’m going to tell mom!”

“I’m sorry, Janie. I’m sorry!” I knocked some more, but Janie refused to answer. I imagined her sitting on the toilet and crying, gasping for air between the snot and tears, rubbing her face and forearm. Why had I hit her?

#

“She’s only ten years old, Jamie!” mom yelled at me. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry,” I said again, for the hundredth time, but mom wasn’t hearing me. She held Janie in her arms and glared at me. My sister cried softly.

“Why, Jamie?”

“She was calling me ‘fatty.’”

“That’s no excuse to hit her! You’ve never acted like this before, Jamie. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Look at her face! Look! She’s going to have a bruise. What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can’t play that computer,” mom snapped.

“What?”

“It’s that game. It’s making you violent. You can’t play. That’s your punishment. You can’t play for one month.”

“No!” I protested. “If I don’t play I’ll lose my characters!”

Mom hissed, “You should have thought of that before you lost your temper, young man! This is your punishment.” She marched to the computer and looked around the desk. She saw the “Diablo 2” disks lying next to the mousepad, and she reached out and grabbed them, held them against her body.

“Mom! No! Please, if I don’t play I’ll lose my characters.”

“I don’t care. This is your punishment. Now go to your room. Don’t come down until I call you.”

I held my hands at my sides, and I could feel my arms quivering. If I didn’t play I would lose Jamie1000. All of my work would be erased, wiped away. All those hours, just gone.

“Go!” mom screamed, her voice cracking. “Get out of here!”

I ran up to my room. Stupid Janie. This was all her fault.

#

The computer club met every day after school for an hour. The students worked on programs and stuff like that, making their own games. I saw one, once, a game where people moved boats around the screen and shot cannons at each other. It was sort of neat that a student made it, but kind of lame when compared to Diablo 2, which I wasn’t supposed to play.

Mom believed me when I told her that I joined the club. It was easy. “I’m going to be learning programming.”

“Okay,” mom said. “It’s good that you’re learning something useful about computers. Not just that game. But you come straight home when it’s done.”

“Okay,” I said, and the next day after school I walked with Simon straight to his house.

Me: “Thanks for letting me use your computer. My mom said she’d buy a new power supply in a week or two.”

Simon said, “It’s no problem.”

We went inside. His parents weren't home from work yet, and Simon let me into his father's study. He gave me the Diablo 2 disks. "Have fun."

#

Jamie1000 was moving along well. I was following the advice on the web site, and he was getting stronger. I cracked my knuckles, because today a bunch of us were going to kill Mephisto, the boss right before the final level.

"Everyone ready?" Ice_Sorceress asked.

"Let's go!" BulgingMuscles replied.

The five of us ran through the portal and into the demon's citadel. A swarm of Stygian dolls immediately surrounded us, and I ran around in circles so that they wouldn't explode near me. In the back of brain I registered someone knocking at the front door downstairs, and Simon left his room to answer it. Probably the mailman, I guessed.

Footsteps coming up the stairs.

"I knew it!"

I twisted around to see Janie standing in the doorway. She still had on her school clothes, and her pink backpack was hiked up about her shoulders. My mouth fell open. She'd found me! Her eyes were big and angry, and she raised a finger at me. "I knew it! I'm going to tell mom!"

I was out of the chair and in front of her in a second. I grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her into the study. I slammed the door shut.

"Let go of me, Jamie!"

"You can't tell mom!"

"I'm going to tell! You're not supposed to be playing!"

If Janie told mom she'd never let me play again. She'd probably snap my game disks in two! That what other people on the game forum had said that mothers did. "You can't tell her, Janie. Please, Janie?"

"I'm going to scream if you don't let go!"

I released her, but stepped around to block her from the door. "You can't tell mom!"

"What are going to do?" she asked, sneering. "Hit me again?"

“I didn’t mean to hit you, Janie. I’m sorry about that.”

She crossed her arms and sniffed. “I’m going to tell.”

“Please?”

Janie squinted at me. “I won’t tell, if you give me all of your allowance.”

“What?”

“Give me your allowance each and every week, and I won’t tell mom.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as I say, stooopid!”

“You sneaky little bitch!”

“You better do it!” she said. She took a deep breath. Her face started to turn red. “I’m going to scream.”

Simon knocked on the door. “Are you two all right in there?”

“We’re fine,” I cried. I scowled at Janie. “I’m going to tell mom that you’re blackmailing me.”

”I don’t care. It’s you who won’t be able to play that stupid game anymore. You love that game!” Janie grinned evilly. “So, your allowance, stooopid?”

I just wanted to play Diablo, and it wasn’t like my allowance was so huge anyway. Just ten dollars a week, and I’d find a way to get back at sister. I would. I hissed, “Fine! Just go home!”

Janie sniffed. She marched past me and opened the door. Simon stood in the hallway. She poked him in the stomach. “Take good care of my big brother, Simon. He doesn’t know how to watch out for himself.” She cast one last glare at me and ran down the hallway, the stairs, right out of the house.

Simon crossed his arms and walked into the room. He asked gravely, “Jamie, are you supposed to be playing?”

I rushed back to the computer. I moaned, “Oh, no!” Jamie1000 was dead on the screen, exploded by one of those damned Stygian dolls. I typed, “Did you guys kill Mephisto?”

Someone else responded, “Yeah. What happened to you?”

“My little sister started messing with my computer.”

The others laughed, “HAHAHA! Too bad!”

Simon leaned in between me and the computer screen. “Jamie, are you supposed to be playing?”

“What? Janie was just being a brat.”

“I heard her say that your mom doesn’t want you playing.” He sighed, “Jamie, I don’t want to be used to disobey your mother. It’s not right. You’re taking advantage of me.”

I pounded on the keyboard. “I got in a fight with Janie, but it was all her fault! My mom said that I couldn’t play for a month, but she wouldn’t even listen to my side of the story. It was completely unfair! I just want to play the game, and if I don’t use my character they’ll be deleted.”

“I’m sorry,” Simon said, shaking his head, “but I can’t let you play if your mother told you not to.”

“What’s the big deal? It’s only a fucking game! My mom made a completely stupid choice, and I’ll lose my characters! It’s not fair.”

But Simon reached over me and quit the program. He took out the game disks. “I’m sorry, Jamie.”

“Fine,” I hissed. I stood up and put on my backpack. “Some friend you are. It’s only a game. All I want to do is play a game, and you’re acting all pissy.”

“You won’t lose your characters.”

“What?”

“They’re deleted if you don’t play for ninety days. Ninety days. One month isn’t so bad.”

“But I’ll fall behind. I won’t be able to find the items I want. Whatever. Be a momma’s boy. I’m going home. Thanks for nothing.” I turned my back to him and ran all the way outside of the house. I stood on the sidewalk and glanced back to see Simon staring at me from his bedroom window. I snorted loudly, shoved my hands in my pockets, and started down the street. It wasn’t fair. I only wanted to play a game. Why were people being so stupid about a damn game?

#

I had signed up for the computer club, so I actually went to a meeting. A bunch of boys sat around the terminals and stared at lines of program code. “That’s the problem,” one said. “See? The array isn’t formatting right.”

I groaned, and almost turned right around to leave, but I heard some other kids talking in the corner: “Yeah, I found a three-socketed executioner sword last night. It’ll be perfect for my barb.”

I froze, turned my head to see who was talking. Three boys, but I didn’t know who any of them were. They wore dark, baggy clothing, looked kind of mean, but they were talking about “Diablo 2.” They couldn’t be all bad. I wandered over.

#

His name was Miguel. He was a sophomore, like Simon, and his basement was his personal computer lab. He had three computers set up on counters lining the walls, and there were extra printers and monitors and cards piled up in big boxes. Other parts were scattered all over the floor, and when you walked you had to watch your feet to make sure that you didn’t crush anything. “It’s all surplus junk,” he explained. “The computer store throws out old stuff, and I just put it all back together. I could probably upgrade your system, no problem.”

“You have the Internet?”

“Yep. I talked my dad into installing some extra phone lines down here. Three of us can play at once. We have our own clan. ‘Los Diablos.’ Cool, no?”

“Can I join?”

“I don’t know. We have pretty high level characters. What level is your strongest character?”

“Level thirty-three.”

“Noob. We’re all in the fifties.”

My mouth fell open. “Wow.”

“We’re playing ‘nightmare’ difficulty, too.”

“I haven’t even finished ‘normal.’ Can you guys help me?”

Miguel shrugged. “I guess. Let’s play. You can use that computer. You’re not afraid of the dark, are you?”

“Of course not.”

“Good,” he said, turning off the lights, so that the only illumination came from the three computer monitors. I saw my shadow flicker on the wall behind me. Miguel tried to laugh ominously, but he sounded kind of lame, saying, “Cuz we play in the dark.”

#

I sat at the dining room table and doodled on my algebra homework. I had problems to do, but they were boring. I was thinking about a story, about the adventures of Jamie1000, and his brave deeds against the demons. Maybe I could post it on the forum site. Lots of people posted little stories. Most of them weren’t very good, but they were fun to read.

I glanced at the computer in the corner. Dust was starting to collect on the keyboard. Janie had put her lunch pail on the mousepad. She’d even put a smiley sticker on the side of the monitor.

Janie stomped into the room and stood next to me. She put her hands on her hips. “You’re not in the computer club.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I went there yesterday. You weren’t there.”

“What do you mean you went there?”

“I went inside the high school,” Janie said. “I told the people in the office that I had to talk to you. You weren’t there.”

“It was in another room yesterday.”

“You’re playing that game. You’re going to someone’s house and playing.”

I shook my head. “No I’m not.”

“You are, and I’m going to find out where. Then I’m going to tell mom.”

“Shut up.”

“You can’t hide it from me forever. You’re too stooopid.”

“Go away!”

Janie flipped her hair at me, skipped out of the dining room and up the stairs. Mother came in from the kitchen. “What was that about?”

“Nothing.”

She sat down across from me. “How is school?”

“It’s fine. I have to do my homework, mom.” I hunkered down and wrote a formula for something. Just something to get rid of her.

“How is the computer club? What are you doing?”

“Stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Mom! I have to do this homework. This is really hard.”

Mom’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I was just curious.”

I picked up my books and carried them to the stairs. “I’m going to do my work in my room. It’s nice and quiet in there.”

“Jamie!” mom said.

“What?”

She held her hand over her mouth and looked at me. I shook my head at her. “What do you want?”

She whispered, “I really wish that you and Janie wouldn’t fight so much.”

I sniffed.

“It really hurts me, Jamie. You’re brother and sister. You shouldn’t bicker so much.”

“I have to do my homework,” I muttered, and turned my back to her, stomped up the stairs. Near the top I glanced down into the dining room. I saw mom slumped over the table, her forehead on her arms.

#

I watched my experience points go up and up, and I moved to level forty right before my eyes. “Cool!”

“Finally,” Miguel said. “Took long enough.” He leaned back from his computer and shook his hands in the air.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Don’t know. I’m going to wait for Simon.”

“Simon?”

“Yeah, he’s coming over.”

“I can’t stand him,” I hissed. “He’s acts superior to all of us.”

Miguel laughed, “He told me all about that thing between you two. That’s tough.”

“Do you think he should have let me play?”

“Hey, I don’t know about any of that. Simon did what he thought was right. Can’t say I blame him.”

“But you’re letting me play.”

“I’m not as good a guy as Simon is.” Miguel rummaged under the counter and produced a can of soda. He popped it open and took a long drink. “Yeah, he’s full of morals. He’s bringing his girlfriend over, too.”

“Girlfriend? He has a girlfriend?”

“Didn’t you know? Dadi.”

“Who?”

“Dadi. Caridad Stark. You know who she is.”

I leaned back in my chair and opened my eyes wide. I remembered her. She was a year older than me, like Simon and Miguel, and she had paraded around the halls of our middle school like a fairy-tale queen, with blonde hair and the prettiest face. That was Simon’s girlfriend? I couldn’t believe it! But I hadn’t seen her for a long time. She wasn’t in our high school. “How could she be with Simon? I haven’t seen her for, like, two years. What happened to her?”

“She goes to some fancy private school in Houston now, but she’s visiting this week.” Miguel suddenly leered. “But I saw them at the movie theater last night. Wow! She takes ‘hot’ to a whole new level. Jesus Christ! Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

“What for?”

“Simon doesn’t like it down here. He says it smells like cat shit. It doesn’t smell, does it?”

I thought that maybe it smelled, just a little, but I said, “No. It’s fine.”

We trudged up the stairs to the living room. Miguel’s dad was out, so we had the house all to ourselves. He turned on the television and watched a cable sports show. I sat in a chair and looked over some print outs I had made of different paladin strategies. People had thought up lots of different ways to develop the character’s points and skills, and I was finally getting to a high enough level to care about their tiniest little suggestions. Every point mattered. Every extra skill could make a difference.

Miguel muttered, “That Dadi. She’s hot.”

“You already said that.”

“I mean it. You’ll be amazed.”

A knock at the door, and Miguel yelled, “It’s open.”

I lifted my head to notice Simon walk into the house, but I really didn’t see him at all. The only thing I saw, the one thing that immediately filled my entire brain, was Dadi. It was her, all right, but she wasn’t the middle-school girl that I half-remembered from nearly two years ago. This was a woman, the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen in my life. Her face was perfect, her brown eyes big and bright. Her golden hair was pulled into a ponytail and shimmered in the light falling through the windows. It was cool outside, but she wore only a tight white T-shirt and a black miniskirt that floated up around her hips. She had on sandals with big soles, and that made her tall, but she was tall anyway, taller than Simon, and he had a couple of inches on me. I swear, she must have been six feet tall. She could have been a statue of a goddess, but she was only Dadi Stark.

She had big boobs, too.

“Hey,” Miguel said. “What’s going on?”

“Hello,” Simon replied. “You both know Dadi?”

Miguel whistled. I tried to say “Hello” or “Hi” or anything, but my mouth had suddenly stopped working.

Dadi stared at me. “Something wrong, Jamie?”

“How do you know his name?” Simon asked her.

“I know everyone’s name.” She stepped toward me, right up to me, and sat down on the arm of my chair. She grabbed my chin with her hand and pushed it back up. “You’re drooling on yourself, Jamie. It’s unbecoming. How is Janie?”

“She’s fine,” I muttered.

“That’s a good boy,” Dadi said, patting my head. “Simon, see what Miguel wanted. We have places to go.”

Simon and Miguel sat next to each other on the couch and talked about an assignment they had to complete together. I wasn’t really listening; I was staring at Dadi out of the corner of my eyes. I felt my nose grow hot as a blush spread across my cheeks and down my neck. It was stupid, blushing, but thinking that just made me embarrassed to be embarrassed, and so I blushed even more. What was there to be embarrassed about? Was it her arm slowly snaking across my back to rub my shoulder? Was it the feel of her soft skin against my bare neck and the fact that she smelled like vanilla? Was it the fact that I was staring at her white bra through her flimsy T-shirt?

She didn’t even notice me, of course. She just glanced all around the room. She asked, “Miguel, is anyone else home?”

“No. My dad is at work.”

“The house is empty, except for us?”

“Yeah.”

She asked, “Can Simon and I have sex here?”

Miguel’s eyes bulged from their sockets.

Dadi explained, “Our parents don’t want us doing it at our own houses. So we’re stuck with the car, but if we could use your place, it’d be so much more comfortable.”

“Dadi,” Simon groaned.

“It was just an idea, baby.”

“We have to go in a minute,” Simon said.

“Not yet,” Miguel protested, shaking his head. “Come look at my characters. I’ve found some great shit for them.”

Simon sighed, “We have to go, Miguel.”

“It’ll just take a minute. Come on.” Miguel jumped up and stormed toward the basement. Simon rolled his eyes but followed. That left Dadi and me all alone in the living room. She got up off the chair arm, taking away from me her wonderful body heat, leaving me cold again, and stood in the middle of the room.

She crossed her arms under her breasts and frowned. She asked, “Don’t you want to go look, too?”

“He’s already shown me his characters.”

“Do you play?”

“Yeah.”

“Simon used to play, too.”

“I know. He told me that he promised someone he would stop.”

“That was me,” Dadi stated.

“What do you mean?”

“God, you’re dense. That was me. I’m the one that he made the promise to. I’m the one that asked him to stop playing.”

I sat up. “But why? It’s fun.”

Her eyes grew wide. “It’s fun? Really?” She stomped toward me and grabbed my arm, yanked me easily out of the chair and toward the basement. She put me in front of her and pushed me down the steps. There was a landing halfway to the bottom, and we stopped there. We could see Miguel sitting before the computer, Simon standing behind with his hand on the chair. Dadi stood behind me and leaned down, so that her face was right next to mine, and she whispered in my ear, “Look at them.”

“What?”

“Just look.”

So I looked, in the dark. Miguel always had the lights off now, and in the monitor glow the shadows of his face were weird, twisted, and I saw in Simon’s glasses a reflection of what was going on in the game, on the screen. “What am I supposed to see?”

“Don’t you see?” Dadi hissed. “Look at their faces.”

I readjusted my glasses on my nose and squinted, really tried to ignore her vanilla-smell and just look. Miguel played, his hand moving the mouse back and forth, the fingers of his other hand deftly pressing keys to call up different spells. My eyes wandered up to his face, to his slack, expressionless face, with blank eyes and limp jaw, pale skin sick in the computer light. Simon looked the same, too. Oblivious to us, standing just ten feet away, to the entire world. Almost dead. They looked almost dead.

Dadi knew what I saw. “Do they look like they’re having fun? Is that the look of someone who enjoys a game?”

I shook my head a tiny bit.

“It’s a game, but it’s one that you can never win. It will never end. You’ll keep playing and playing and playing, for another point, for the chance for just one more treasure to drop, but why? It’s momentum that keeps you playing, not the love of a game, not joy. Look at them, Jamie. Do you want to look like that? Do you want to be a ghost, like Miguel? That’s why I made Simon stop playing. I couldn’t stand the thought of him looking like that, ever.” Dadi wrapped her arms around my chest and hugged me tightly. She kissed my cheek, and slid her mouth over to my ear, so that just I could hear her words: “I want Simon in my game, with me. He can win my game. He can win me.”

#

After Dadi and Simon left I sat in front of the computer and thought about playing again, but the image of me, sitting here in the pallid electric glow, my face blank and dull, kept intruding, until I had to push the chair away from the counter. Did I really look like that? Did I?

“What is it?” Miguel asked. “Don’t you want to play?”

“How long do you think you’ve been playing for?” I asked.

“What?”

“How long have you been playing, do you think?”

“Since the summer.”

“But how many hours?”

“Shit. I don’t know. Four, five hours a day.”

I closed my eyes and calculated. Six months, playing just four hours a day. That was over seven hundred hours! That was a whole month of playing! That was just like sitting in front of your computer for an entire month, playing a damn game! It wasn’t even real. It was just one game. There were so many others.

I muttered, “I think I should go home. I’m going to go home.” I stood up and picked my backpack off the floor.

Miguel shrugged. “Okay. See you tomorrow.” He turned right back to his computer, and I watched as his face turned slack again, his eyes become unfocused, his jaw droop.

I shuddered, ran out of the house and all the way home. A floating picture of a corpse, my game-playing corpse, chased my feet all the way. “I don’t want to be like that,” I hissed. “I don’t want to be like that.”

Panting, I turned the corner to my street. I saw Janie sitting alone on the porch. She spotted me, and smirked as I came and stood at the base of the stairs. “You’ve been playing,” she hissed. “I can tell.”

“Yes, I have.”

Her eyes grew big. “I knew it! I’m going to tell mom!”

I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m going to tell her.”

“What?”

“I’m going to tell her. I was playing even though she told me not to, and I’m going to face the music.” I paused. “I’m going to tell her about you, too.”

“Tell her what?” Janie demanded.

“I’m going to tell her that you were blackmailing me. She’s going to be upset with you.”

Her face turned white, and her bottom lip started to tremble. “No. Don’t do that, Jamie. Please?”

“We were both bad, Janie. Come on. Get up.”

I grabbed Janie under her armpits and raised her to her feet. She hung her head against my body. She started to cry. “I don’t want to be in trouble, Jamie. I didn’t mean to. I was stupid.”

“It’s okay,” I said, hugging her. “I’m sorry I hit you, Janie. I don’t know why I did it. I’m really sorry.”

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Mom said it was because of that stooopid game. I wish you wouldn’t play it.”

“It’s not really a game, I think. It’s something different, and I’m not going to play any more.”

Janie looked up at me with big eyes. “Really?”

“Really. You’re right. It’s stooopid.”