



A Knight's Quest

Robert Castiglia



While searching for the ultimate gaming experience, Andy Coppersmith discovers his Quantum Physics Professor is developing a holographic simulator-a sort of fancy videogame. After seeing the Professor's creation, Andy's curiosity gets the best of him and he secretly tries the machine. However, the Professor's invention is not a simple virtual reality device and Andy embarks on an epic adventure where there are no do-overs...

A Knight's Quest

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Though this is a work of fiction, some of the events and characters in the book were real, though many years dead. Historical events and characters have been altered in order to dramatize the plot. Any other characters or events depicted in this novel are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual individuals is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER I

The Bronze Knight knelt before the dais, and bowed his head. He extended his arms out toward the throne. Reverently, he held a glowing white translucent orb cupped in both hands.

"Majesty, I have succeeded in finding the Sacred Stone of Ajman." he said.

The King of Endor smiled. "You've done well my most trusted knight."

The King took the glowing stone from the knight's hands and held it to the light. "Now I have the power to see into the future. Now, I can conquer our enemies the.."

###

"Mister Coppersmith! Oh, Mister Coppersmith! Do you think you could possibly join us today or is sleeping a new method of absorbing my lectures?"

Andrew Coppersmith raised his head from his desk. He brushed away the blond hair covering his blue eyes and wiped a trickle of saliva from the corner of his mouth. Two feet in front of him stood his quantum physics professor with a frown on his face.

Andy cleared his throat. "I'm sorry Professor Davis. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Actually, Andy seldom got much sleep. He was a computer gaming junky, and he had been one since he was in junior high. Back then, school had been easy for him and he could get by with staying up late playing his games, but now as a freshman physics major, college was more demanding on his time. Time he wasn't willing to sacrifice for his beloved videogames.

Professor Davis drew his bushy eyebrows together as he looked down at his sleepy student. "Apparently you don't get much sleep at all—except in my class. This is the third time in two weeks. Maybe quantum physics isn't interesting enough for you. Do you possibly need a different major?"

"Oh no, Professor Davis—it's just that I've been up late working on your assignments. Please forgive me. It won't happen again. I promise." Andy shifted in his seat and sat up straight.

The professor sighed. "That's the most flattering rubbish I've ever heard. Why don't you go back to the dorm and finish your morning nap. When you return tomorrow please be kind enough to stay awake long enough to hear my entire lecture!"

Professor Davis pushed his bifocals back up his hawk-like nose and spun away from Andy's desk. He then returned to the whiteboard and continued explaining the remainder of his equations to the class.

Andy gathered his backpack and quietly left the lecture hall. He went straight to his dorm room, where he collapsed his lanky six-foot frame on his bed and promptly went to sleep. Two hours later, he was sitting at his computer drinking a Mountain Dew, playing his favorite online virtual reality game, *A Knight's Quest*.

Since he started playing videogames, he'd played almost every game imaginable on the market, from sports to high

adventure role-playing games. His favorites by far were the virtual reality role-playing games; especially those set within a medieval environment—the more realistic the graphics the better.

While he was in the middle of slaying an ice-breathing dragon, his roommate, Douglas Hartford, entered their room. "Hey dude, I thought you had an English Lit class at eleven."

Andy didn't even notice his hometown buddy. Doug and he had been friends since they were in sixth grade together. He was as much a gamer as Andy was. In fact, it was Doug, who introduced Andy to the world of videogames. They'd spend their afternoons after school and weekends playing these games until Doug's mom would send Andy home. Sometimes when he slept over, they would stay up all night playing one game after another.

Over time, Andy became addicted to the limitless possibilities and unfettered traditional constraints these virtual realms had to offer. It was only when he was playing these games that Andy felt as if he was in control of his life and the world around him. Unlike his real life which seemed stale and ordinary by comparison. For Andy, the more lifelike the gaming experience and the more he could submerge himself, the greater the high.

When Andy didn't respond, Doug went over to the desk and stood next to his roommate only to find that Andy was too busy talking over his headset to his quest-mates to acknowledge his friend's presence. Doug frowned at his buddy, walked over to the light switch by the door, and flipped it on and off several times. "Hey dude! Get off that machine and talk to me!"

Andy took off his headset and turned to face his friend. "What's the problem? Is there a fire or something?"

"No. But if you don't pull yourself away from that computer for a few hours so you can attend a class or two, there might be."

"Oh shoot! What time is it?"

Doug glanced at his watch. "It's eleven-twenty. You were due in class twenty minutes ago."

Leaning back in his seat, Andy stretched his arms over his head and yawned. "Well, it's too late now, and you've interrupted my game. We might as well get something to eat. You hungry?"

Doug looked at his friend as if he were stupid. "Duh, I'm always hungry. You know that. Let's go to the cafeteria in the Student Union, and smash down some groceries."

Andy grabbed his book bag, and hurried out the door in his friend's wake. Five minutes later, they were sitting at a table in the corner of the cafeteria. In the middle of their table was a small mountain of cheeseburgers and fries.

While Doug was working on his first burger, Andy spoke. "You know, I wish they'd make a virtual reality game where you're really in the middle of the game."

Doug swallowed down a bite of his burger. "Yeah, like the holodeck on the old Star Trek the Next Generation series. You know, where everything looks and feels real."

Andy nodded. "Yeah! You'd fight actual monsters and not some image. Everything would even smell genuine—from the scent of animals to the bad breath of ogres. Now that would be an awesome game."

"Well dude, as far as I know that technology is still a few years away. Though I've heard there's a prototype being developed here at the university."

Andy plopped down his soda and leaned forward in his chair. "Really? I didn't know that. Where?"

"It's only rumor. But, I've heard that Professor Davis is one of the scientists developing it. He's doing it for the Department of Defense."

"Oh bull! If he were doing that, he would've said something to our class."

"Well, if you'd stay awake in class long enough you might've heard. But alas, sleep is more important than physics."

Andy grimaced. "It's not that I want to sleep, I just can't stay awake."

Changing the subject, he asked, "So, where is this machine supposed to be?"

"They say that the professor has a hidden laboratory in the basement of the science building. That's where he's believed to be creating his top-secret invention."

Shaking his head Andy replied, "Where in the world do you hear this stuff? That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard."

"Well, Doubting Thomas, I'd suggest the next time you're in the professor's class you might ask him. Then you'd see for yourself if it's true or not."

Finishing his drink, Andy grabbed his backpack and stood to leave. "Well, before I miss another class today I'd better get going. I'll see you at supper."

Andy turned away from the table and went to the door while Doug started on his third cheeseburger and second bag of fries.

###

Having finished his last lecture for the day, Professor Davis went directly to his office in the basement of the science building. He was becoming impatient and frustrated with the recent results of his project. If he couldn't provide something worthwhile within the next few months, the Department of Defense was going to pull his funding. Though the machine appeared to work, the results were far from desirable. There seemed to be a problem in the operating program, but the professor and his assistants just couldn't determine what it was.

While he was pondering over the previous day's reports, he heard a knock on his door.

"Come in."

Mark, his graduate assistant stepped into the room. "Dr. Davis, I think I found the problem in the machine's instructions. However, I'm not sure. I'm still typing the solution into the computer, and I should be done tomorrow. When it's complete, I'll put a copy of the fix on your desk to review before we try it."

"And, while you were gone, the head of the department called. He's still concerned about the lab's security system."

The professor sighed. "How many times do I have to tell that man that contrary to the rumors, this project is neither classified nor top-secret? The government will not fund high security measures for such a low priority project. As it is, I had to do a lot of paperwork just to get maintenance to install the lock we have now."

"Don't worry; I'll call the department head when I'm finished with these reports."

Mark wrinkled his forehead. "Then the Department of Defense doesn't believe our machine will work?"

"Let's just say they are cautiously optimistic."

###

The next morning Andy was sitting at his desk in his Quantum Physics class, and like the rest of the students, he was in the middle of scratching down an equation Professor Davis had written on the whiteboard in the front of the lecture hall. While all the students were busy with their copying, the professor sent Andy a text message. Andy frowned when he heard his phone vibrate on his desk. He turned it over so he could see the display. It read, "Please see me in my office this afternoon at three."

Andy started to sweat as his heart raced. He just knew he was going to get canned from class. But if that were true, wouldn't the professor have told him yesterday not to come back? Maybe Davis wanted him to do some extra stuff for sleeping in class. After convincing himself it was only additional work, Andy relaxed and continued taking notes.

That afternoon, Andy walked into the science building in search of Professor Davis's office. It seemed odd that he'd been in school for nearly three months and didn't even know where to find the professor's office. Surly anyone majoring in a science would know where the offices for the physics teachers were. However, Andy had been so absorbed in his games; he never took the time to find out.

While searching the halls for the offices, he found a security guard. "Pardon me sir, would you know where I might find Professor Davis's office?"

The guard smiled. "Why sure. You'll find them down the stairs in the sublevels, the second one down. Just take those stairs. His offices are at the end of the hallway."

Andy smiled nervously. "Thanks. But, did you say offices?"

"Why yeah. He's got a suite of offices down there, along with a lab of some sort. The offices are for the professor and his assistants. The lab's for his research. Something for the government, I think." The guard gave Andy a casual salute and continued down the hall.

At the bottom of the stairs, Andrew walked up to the only door in the hallway and knocked. He waited several moments; but there was no response. Andy tested the knob and found the door unlocked. He opened it and stepped into a narrow reception area. It was simply furnished with a couple wooden chairs, and a small table between them. Against one wall was a steel gray desk with an office chair behind it. The only light was from a lamp sitting on the table. At the end of the room and on each

side were several doors. The one next to the desk had a wooden engraved sign that read, "Professor Anthony Davis, PhD."

Andy knocked on that door, but there was only silence.

"Professor Davis," he called, but there was still no reply, so he causally took the knob and twisted. It was locked. Puzzled he checked his watch—five minutes before three.

Maybe I'm a little too early, Andy thought.

He sighed, decided to wait, and settled into one of the chairs. Fifteen minutes later, Professor Davis stepped out of an unmarked door that had an old style numeric-keypad lock next to it. Intently reading a file he was holding, the professor didn't notice his student in the room. Andy anxiously stood and cleared his throat. Surprised, Professor Davis quickly looked up from his paperwork. "Oh! Andrew, I almost forgot about our little meeting. Please, sit. I'll be with you in a minute."

The professor seemed extremely preoccupied as he went to his office, unlocked it, and disappeared behind the door. After a few moments, he reappeared empty handed. "Okay then; please come with me."

Andy followed his professor to the laboratory door and closely watched as the scientist typed the entry code on the numeric pad. The door gave a quiet buzz, and Professor Davis pulled it open. He held the door for Andrew and then stepped in behind.

Andy squinted upon entering the lab. Unlike the dim light in the reception area, the laboratory was brightly lit by two rows of florescent lamps mounted on the ceiling. After his eyes adjusted to the harsh light, the first thing Andy noticed was an array of processors covering the entire wall to his left. The gamer in him immediately recognized the configuration as a supercomputer. He was tremendously impressed, because he knew it required considerable funding to own and maintain such a machine.

However, the feature in the laboratory that really caught Andy's attention was a large metal box standing in front of the wall across from him. A door mounted in front was the only opening to this room-within-a-room. Surrounding the steel-gray enclosure were massive electromagnetic coils with thick wires leading to a pair of large transformers stationed against the wall to his right. Positioned on one end of the supercomputer, alongside the mysterious container, was a worktable. On the table were a couple of monitors and keyboards. Behind the workstation mounted on the wall were several additional screens. Seated at one of the keyboards was an assistant not much older than Andy. It appeared to Andy that the aide was working on some kind of program. The computer language was familiar to Andy, but he couldn't make sense of the code.

"Wow! I guess the rumors are true. You really are working on a holographic simulator."

"In a way, you could say that, yes."

Andy's face lit up. "That's so cool. Do you think when it's ready I could try it?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible. This is a government project and except for my assistants, there can't be any other civilian involvement. However, there is a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Andy took a deep breath and waited for the worse.

"I'm afraid if you don't start applying yourself, Andrew, you're going to flunk out of school." The professor frowned at his student. "You know, one of the reasons why I became your academic advisor was because you're extremely gifted with a lot of potential. However, this constant playing of computer games isn't going to get you a degree. Someday, I'd like to have you as an assistant, but at present you won't even graduate, let alone become a graduate student."

Andy lowered his head and felt his face redden. "How did you know?"

"This is a small campus and I like to follow the activities of those select students I advise."

Professor Davis went to the workstation, picked up a folder, and handed it to Andy. "I'd like you to research the answers to these questions. Consider it a little make up work for sleeping in class."

"And if I don't do this?" Andy held up the folder.

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to fail you. And as you know, you can't continue to major in physics without passing Quantum Physics; and if that happens you'll lose your scholarship and I will have wasted my time."

The freshman's shoulders sagged. "Okay. When do you want this back?"

"You'll have until the end of this semester. However, if I were you, I'd finish that as soon as possible, since I'm also expecting you to do my other assignments as well. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir. I'll get this done A-S-A-P. I promise."

"Good! Now my assistant will show you out."

Finished with his wayward student, Professor Davis went to the workstation and sat at the other keyboard.

###

When Mark returned, he asked, "Professor, do you think it's wise to allow students in this laboratory?"

The professor swiveled around in his chair and smiled at his young assistant. "Sure, it's really not a problem. As far as the rest of the school is concerned," he pointed to the metal module, "that thing is simply a fancy videogame."

"But, what if one of the students figures out what it really is?"

"Unless they have several degrees in nuclear and quantum physics, I seriously doubt anyone could ascertain what that thing is."

The lab assistant shrugged. "Okay, you're the boss." He then returned to his keyboard and continued his work.

###

Andy left Professor Davis's offices in a sullen mood. He was too upset to go to any classes, so he went back to his dorm room. When he walked into the room, Andy dropped his jacket on the floor and plopped down on his bed. A few minutes later, his roommate arrived.

"Well, how'd it go?" Doug asked as he hung his book bag on a hook next to Andy's backpack.

"Just as I expected. The old man gave me extra work. He says its makeup work, but I really think its punishment."

"Maybe from now on you'll stay conscious in his class."

Andy shrugged at the comment. After Doug took a moment to settle into the only chair in the room, Andy suddenly sat up in his bed and smiled at his roommate. "You ought to see the professor's lab. It is *sweet!* He's got a supercomputer and everything. And, you're right. It looks like he's building a holographic simulator. I'd sure like to test-drive that baby."

"Well, unless you have some special clearance, I doubt if that'll ever happen any time soon," Doug quipped.

"Don't be too sure." Andy grinned mischievously as his blue eyes twinkled. "I was able to memorize his entry code to the lab. I think tonight, when everyone's gone from the building, I'll have a closer look at that contraption."

"Andy! Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry. I'm only going to have a little look-see. That's all—I promise."

"Okay, but if the cops call, I'm not going to bail you out of jail." Doug said as he turned to the desk and proceeded to attack his homework.

#

It was eleven o'clock that night when Andy snuck into the science building and crept down to the lower levels. He went straight to Professor Davis's offices. The outer door was unlocked, so he slipped into the reception area and quietly shut the door. Andy pulled a penlight from one of the pockets in his backpack and used it to survey the room. He found the laboratory door with its antiquated keypad lock. Andy quickly punched in the same code he saw the professor use that afternoon. Immediately an indicator light on the front of the pad lit green. When he heard the low hum that signified the magnetic lock had been released, he pulled the door open.

Except for the LED lights on the processors of the supercomputer, the room was completely dark. Andy searched the wall next to the door for the light switch. When the overhead lamps came on, he put away his flashlight, and went straight to one of the keyboards at the workstation. As he took a seat, he set his backpack down on the floor. Every monitor in the room was blank, but after Andy moved the mouse sitting next to the keyboard, all the screens lit up. Both the monitors on the workstation displayed the following message:

Compiling of program complete
Press ENTER to continue...

Andy smiled to himself. *I bet this is the program that assistant was working on this afternoon. I wonder what it's supposed to do.*

He was always on the prowl for a better game. Andy's pulse quickened as he hurriedly pressed the Enter key and then typed in the *Run* command. The screens went blank and the room filled with the sound of industrial size capacitors charging to full power. After a couple minutes, all the monitors surrounding the workstation displayed the message:

Time Traveler's Program
Property of the Department of Defense
Developed by
Dr. Anthony Davis, PhD, et al

Please enter the year ____

The gamer's palms were beginning to sweat. This was way too cool; a simulation game that allowed the user to experience any moment in time. He had to try it, and he had to try it now! Andy eagerly entered 1105 AD—11 for the month of his birth and 05 for the day.

The next prompt was for the location. Impatiently, the freshman student entered Oxford, England. What happened next caught Andy completely by surprise. The door to the metal chamber opened and a computerized voice from speakers mounted on the walls next to the monitors intoned, *"The pod will activate in 20 seconds. Count down beginning now: 20...19...18...17...16..."*

Without a second thought, Andy jumped up from the workstation and ran to the pod door. As he stepped across the threshold, the heavy metal door sealed shut behind him.

"...4...3...2...1...Activating pod."

The module droned to life creating a power surge so great that it caused the lights in the laboratory to flicker out.

#

Across campus in his apartment, Professor Davis frowned when his reading lamp went dim. Knowing there were no storms in the area, he reached the only obvious conclusion. He quickly went to the computer in his study and logged onto the system in the lab. His heart faltered when he read the screen.

"Damn," he whispered to himself. "Someone is using the device."

The professor immediately placed a call to Washington, D.C. As soon as someone on the other end of the line answered, he simply said, "This is Dr. Davis, we have a situation."

Professor Davis then hung up the phone and hurried to his laboratory.

#

Doug was startled awake by a metallic rendition of the *William Tell Overture*. It took a moment before he realized it was the ringtone from his phone. The sleepy student groped at his nightstand reaching for the music's source. When he found it, the first thing he noticed was the time on the display. It was six o'clock in the morning.

"Who in the world would be calling me at this time of day, especially on a Saturday?" he moaned to himself.

Doug curtly answered the phone. "This had better be good."

"Is this Douglas Hartford?" The male voice on the other end of the phone sounded very officious.

Doug sat up in bed as he responded, "Yes. What is it?"

"This is Officer Carter of the police department. Are you the roommate of an Andrew Coppersmith?"

Good grief, Andy's in trouble, Doug thought.

"I am."

"Sir, there's been an accident and we need you to come down to the station to identify your roommate."

"Identify? Why do I need to identify who Andy is?"

"I'm sorry Mr. Hartford, but your roommate, Mr. Coppersmith is dead."

CHAPTER II

Andy awoke in the middle of a large wheat field. The smell of wet earth assaulted his nostrils. He estimated it was early autumn by the number of stalks scattered throughout the field. In addition, he noticed that the stubs sticking out of the ground were uneven as if they'd been cut by hand. Andy shook his head to clear his mind, but the images around him remained the same.

The last thing he remembered was stepping into Professor Davis's holographic machine. When the door sealed behind him, the inside of the pod went pitch-black. It was so dark Andy was unable to see; even with a hand in front of his nose. The next thing he remembered was hearing the violent rumbling of the chamber walls and being blinded by a bright flash of light. After which he collapsed on the floor and lost consciousness.

Now the college student was sitting in this field in the middle of nowhere. He shaded his eyes, as he surveyed his surroundings. *Wow! This is by far the best computer game I've ever experienced*, he mused. *Everything seems so real. I can even smell the scent of farm animals in the distance.*

When Andy stood, he observed he was on the side of a small hill. At the top of the rise were several elm trees marking the field's perimeter. From the other side of the grove came the sounds of muffled shouts and metal striking metal. Occasionally he heard the dull blast of a horn, trumpeting some type of signal.

There must be some sort of skirmish raging over that ridge, Andy thought. Curious and eager to see this confrontation, the gamer started hiking to the top of the rise. As he approached the tree-covered summit, the sound of the battle grew to a roar. When Andy passed through the grove, he saw a pastoral valley before him and several hundred men locked in combat. The sound of the fight was deafening for the combatants were no more than a stone's throw away.

Andy was so engrossed with the events taking place before him, he hadn't noticed the soldier running in his direction until the man ran into him and knocked him to the ground. The college student struggled to stand, but the soldier was lying on top of him. When Andy did manage to roll over, he saw the face of a young man about his age holding a knife.

The young soldier stabbed at Andy, but the college student managed to block the knife-swinging arm. With his free hand, Andy swung at the determined stranger's face. His fist made contact with the man's jaw and the soldier rolled off the student's chest. Taking advantage of his freedom, the gamer quickly scrambled to his feet. At the same time, the young warrior jumped up to face his foe.

The knife-swinging youth looked very thin, maybe twenty pounds less than Andy was and appeared to be about four inches shorter. Yet, the soldier had the same look of bloodlust in his eyes the gamer had so often seen in the characters from his videogames. However, this was by far the most real gaming avatar Andy had ever encountered.

The soldier charged again, and Andy instinctively blocked the attack, but this time the knife caught the gamer in the forearm. Andy was startled at the considerable amount of strength the young man had and was even more surprised when he realized the knife had actually cut his arm. He stepped back to avoid the knife-swinging fighter who was so intent on killing him.

Suddenly, the young warrior dropped his weapon and gave Andy a curious stare. "Thou art not one of Sir Guile's men. What are ye...?" However, before Andy could hear the rest of the sentence, he felt a sharp blow on his head and fell to the ground.

When the college student regained consciousness, the first thing he noticed was the headache. His skull felt as if a baseball bat had pummeled it. In fact, the only other time his head hurt even close to this, was when he was in little league and had been hit by a wild pitch. Even compared to that, this was many times worse. He reached up with a hand to touch the tender spot on his skull, but someone grabbed his wrist and held his hand away.

Andy opened his eyes and saw the face of the same man who had assaulted him with the knife. "Aye, take it easy lad. That's one nasty blow to thy head."

As the college student's vision began to clear, he saw that the young soldier was dressed in a chainmail top over a blue woolen tunic. For a warrior, the lad had gentle green eyes and a very sympathetic expression on his face. The young man brushed back Andy's sweaty blond hair from his forehead and placed a damp rag over his brow.

"Where am I?" Andy moaned.

"Ye are in the district of Worcestershire—forty leagues northwest of London. Sorry 'bout that cut in thy arm. I thought ye were one of Sir Guile's men."

Andy propped himself up on his elbows and stared at the young soldier. "Who are you? And what year is this?"

"Aye, that blow must've knocked the wits out of thee. 'Tis October twentieth, eleven hundred and five in the year of our Lord," the young man replied. "And my name is Sergeant John the Red" The sergeant smiled as he pointed to the flaming red crop of hair on his head.

"Well, Sergeant John the Red, I'm Andrew Coppersmith, and you're the most real looking avatar I've ever met. Moreover, this is by far the best videogame I've ever experienced."

John wrinkled his brow. "Ye wits still haven't fully come to thee. I'm Saxon, not some ahveeture. And, I've never heard of such a thing as a veedeeogame."

Andy frowned at the young sergeant. "You mean this is real? I'm really in England?"

"Aye, 'tis real. And, ye are in Engla-lond." John raised an eyebrow. "What! Do ye think that bump on thy head is fake? Maybe I need to fetch thee a physician."

Andy raised a hand to stop the man. "No—no physician. I just thought ..." His eyes widened. "Oh my God! I must've been sent back in time by that infernal machine"

The redheaded sergeant scrutinized the young time traveler as if he'd gone crazy.

Andy shook his head. "Oh never mind. I'm just surprised at how I managed to wander into your battle, that's all."

"Well, ye need to be more careful. This isn't some game. We play for keeps in the shire. Now if ye think thee can travel, I'll take thee to Worcester."

John helped the traveler to his feet and with one of Andy's arms over his shoulder; the sergeant led the time traveler to a brightly painted farm cart. Harnessed to the little wagon was a stocky pony with a shaggy coat of hair. The soldier escorted Andy to the back of the cart and helped the traveler settle onto the straw-lined bed next to a pile of weapons. With his patient secure, Sergeant John went to the pony, grabbed the lead rope,

and led the beast down a path toward what appeared to be a large fortress in the distance.

The path wandered across the meadow until it intersected at a broad gravel road. John turned the cart onto the highway in the direction of a castle standing at the end of the artery. As they approached the fortress, the stone structure grew ever larger. The walls had to be at least a hundred feet high, if not more. Along the walls at about every fifty yards were watchtowers that rose another fifty feet above the top of the fortification. In addition, there was a row of arrow slits lining the structure and a walkway across the top for soldiers and guards. It looked like the typical castles Andy had encountered while playing his games. Except, this fortress was many times more massive. The highway ended directly in front of an iron portcullis where there were guards on either side of the opened gate.

After passing through the sally port, Andy was astonished by the sights that unfolded before him. What he thought was a castle was really a small city. The street they were on was bordered on both sides by well-kept houses that were closely packed together. Andy could see at the end of the avenue another smaller citadel. He surmised that that building was the castle of Worcester—a fortress within a fortress.

John continued to lead the cart several more yards down the main thoroughfare, until it opened onto a large plaza. Within this courtyard were numerous brightly colored stalls and booths. The same type of buildings that lined the main thoroughfare surrounded the perimeter of the plaza. However, on the ground level of these structures was a variety of artisan shops. Wandering among the establishments was a multitude of people barking and bartering for one type of ware or another. All of these patrons were wearing simple but vibrantly colored garments. As the cart rumbled across the plaza, Andy's nose was overcome with the smell of spices, food, humanity, and animals.

The attack on the poor time traveler's senses exacerbated his headache and made him feel woozy.

The street they were on bisected the market and continued toward the far side of the bazaar where the thoroughfare again was lined in buildings. John kept pulling the pony down the route until they reached a side street that lead to another smaller courtyard. In this plaza were several soldiers engaged in a number of different modes of fighting, from fencing to fisticuffs. There was even a small archery range off in one corner.

The sergeant stopped the cart in front of one of the buildings that encircled the exercise yard. Outside the structure sat a burly man whittling on a block of wood. His face was covered with a beard that matched the coal-black hair on his head.

When he saw John, he set down his carving and grinned. "Oy! Red—I see ye've been picking up strays again."

The redheaded sergeant feigned a scowl at the black-bearded man. "I wouldn't need to if thou hadn't bludgeoned the poor soul from behind."

While John helped the time traveler out of the cart, he said to Andy, "I'd like ye to meet my comrade-in-arms and truest of friends, Darrick the Black—black in heart as well as hair."

The black-bearded man stood and tipped his hat at the traveler. Andy was so stunned by the sheer size of the man; he could only gape at John's friend in awe. Darrick the Black was a wall of flesh that stood at least six-foot-eight and easily weighed in at three hundred pounds.

"And Darrick, this poor creature you assaulted in battle, is Andrew the Coppersmith."

Darrick gave Andy a big smile that parted his beard with a row of white teeth. "A coppersmith? Why would a smithy be wandering about near a squabble between Lord Rowan and Sir Guile?"

Andy was caught off guard until he remembered that during the Middle Ages few individuals had surnames. Most men were identified by their occupation, body characteristic, or from where they lived. "Oh no, I'm not a coppersmith. That was my great-grandfather's vocation. That label simply stayed with the family. As for the battle, I got lost and wandered into your skirmish by accident."

"Aye." The Black understandingly nodded.

Suddenly Andy felt dizzy and stared to sag at the knees. Darrick quickly grabbed the stranger by the arm. "Sergeant John, I think ye need to take this ailing fellow to your wife Mary. He still seems to be suffering from that blow I gave him."

Together John and Darrick carried Andy into the house and set him down in a chair next to a crude wooden table. Standing over an open hearth was a young woman wearing a simple dress. And like everybody else in the town, her garment was gaily colored. When she turned to face the men, Andy was taken aback at the sight of her, for she had large brown eyes and long sandy-blond hair that hung loosely over her shoulders.

The young woman frowned at her redheaded husband. "Jonathan Red, what in the world do ye have here?"

"Well, my love, this here fellow is a causality of war. It seems your cousin there decided to give this poor man a couple more lumps on his noggin." John continued to introduce Andy to his wife as she hurried over to take a closer look at the traveler's head.

"Good graces, he's as pale as a lamb. Lay him down on our bed and I'll fix him some willow's bark tea. I'll wager he's got one devil of a headache."

While the two soldiers helped Andy onto the bed in a room at the back of the house, Mary prepared the tea. When it was finished, she entered the room and handed a mug full of the

steaming concoction to the time traveler. "Here drink this. It may taste terrible, but it'll cure thy aching head in a jiff."

Andy carefully took a sip of the hot brew. He grimaced, because not only was the tea bitter, but it was the most awful tasting stuff he'd ever drank. When he attempted to put the cup down on the table next to the bed, Mary grabbed his hand. "Nay! Don't put that down. Ye have to drink it all or it won't work."

It took him several more minutes to empty the mug, but by the time he finished, his head stopped its intense throbbing. Feeling better, Andy settled back against the headboard and closed his eyes.

#

"Master Coppersmith? Master Coppersmith?"

Andy opened his eyes and saw Mary sitting on the edge of the bed next to him holding a wet rag against his forehead. He moaned. Though his headache was gone, he still felt as if he'd been beaten all over with a ball bat. "How long have I been asleep?"

"'Tis the morrow morning. You slept all night. But, I must say you look much better. I made you some porridge and scones. Eat." The more Andy heard these people talk the better he was able to understand their manner of speaking.

She handed Andy a shallow wooden bowl filled with oatmeal. On the rim of the bowl were two golden brown rolls. In addition, there was a steaming mug of cider resting upon the small nightstand. Andy's mouth watered from the aroma, for he hadn't realized how hungry he actually was until he smelled the food. While he ate, John and Darrick entered the room.

John, all fresh in clean clothes, was grinning from ear to ear. "Well you're looking much better, now that you've got some food in you."

Darrick's mop of shaggy black hair bounced on his head as he nodded his approval. "Indeed. You look like you could wrestle a bull. My cousin Mary's the best healer in the shire"

Sergeant John's smile disappeared. "Do you think you're ready to meet Lord Rowan? I'll get in a lot of trouble if I don't bring you to him soon."

"Do I have a choice?"

The sergeant frowned at his guest. "No. Not if you want to live."

"Well, I guess we better go then."

Andy started to get out of the bed when Mary put a hand against his chest and pushed him back. "Not now you won't! First, you're going to take a bath and then put on some clean clothes. You still smell of cow dung from wrestling around in that field with my Red."

"Bath? Did you say bath?"

"Aye. I don't know where you come from, but we're civilized here. Now get out of those strange clothes and I'll have Red warm the water in the trough out back. When you're done, there'll be a clean set of clothes on the bed. Aye—I'd say you and my brother are about the same size." She abruptly got up and left the room.



While searching for the ultimate gaming experience, Andy Coppersmith discovers his Quantum Physics Professor is developing a holographic simulator-a sort of fancy videogame. After seeing the Professor's creation, Andy's curiosity gets the best of him and he secretly tries the machine. However, the Professor's invention is not a simple virtual reality device and Andy embarks on an epic adventure where there are no do-overs...

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