

Prologue

After the greenish flash, Ladrón of the thieves' guild found himself in a strange room. Shielding his eyes from the unnatural light, he sought some clue to his situation or at least someplace darker. There was no sign of his erstwhile companions. Feeling conspicuous, he exchanged his bright blue cloak for a gray garment lying on a chair. On the table beside it he saw a bag full of books and an arcane device displaying colorful squiggles that might be writing. "Fingal's palsied fingers," he cursed, not knowing how to read.

A frizz-haired crone on a high seat was regarding him suspiciously—probably a priestess or sorcerer by her look, if not worse. The woman stood up from behind a wooden enclosure and started toward him, revealing that she wore odd short skirts.

As usual, Ladrón did not think far ahead or far behind. He saw danger or at least unpleasantness approaching and quickly spotted an escape. Scurrying through a short dark passage, he was outside in the daylight before the woman could confront him.

Ladrón shivered, turning up the collar of the gray garment. The snow-covered thoroughfare was full of people. Some, although outlandishly attired, looked prosperous. Shiny vehicles with no horse or ox or other visible means of power rushed by. There seemed to be a great deal of magic in this place and that meant rich pickings. He hesitated for a moment, thinking of the world he had left behind—that had left him behind. Slipping his dagger into the pocket of his new garment, he walked out into the sea of passersby and disappeared among them.

Chapter 1. The Game

“Rats and double rats,” Ruth muttered, flouncing into the room with the computer. She hadn’t wanted to move to Chicago in the first place. She sulked, she argued, she wheedled—she even gave up eating for two days, which was pretty dire. But it was hopeless. And now her parents said she had to *baby sit* her sister Jennie and her brother Thomas while they went back to close up the old house.

When Ruth turned on the computer and clicked on the game icon, a dragon’s head breathed out spinning Old English letters accompanied by a blaring fanfare. She hit the escape key to skip the preliminary scenes. Inside the walls of the dungeon *she* was in control. She got out her notes, close to illegible by the time they were accurate. A lot of kids cheated, fooling around with the source code and using utilities to make invincible characters, but what was the point? She wanted the game to last. Her original party of adventurers had finished exploring this first dungeon in the game except for one corner of the last level. So she had started creating new characters and gaining them experience so that they would advance in levels. That was the part that she liked best.

Jennie came into the room dragging her tattered pink blanket and stared at the monitor. Since she hated games, she had no qualms about interrupting. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m making a few new characters,” Ruth said, without looking around.

“I want to make one,” Jennie said, leaning over her shoulder.

“No, you don’t know how,” Ruth objected.

“You tell me.” Jennie smiled.

Ruth sighed. Jennie would create someone totally useless who probably wouldn’t survive one melee. But her blue eyes under straggly yellow bangs were relentless and the thumb of the hand holding the remnants of blanket was headed toward her mouth—a sign of her willingness to sit out a long siege.

“Okay, okay,” said Ruth. “Human, elf, dwarf, halfling, or gnome?”

To her surprise, Jennie didn’t hesitate or ask what the words meant. “Gnome,” she said, lowering the blanket and turning her attention to the screen. “Like Ruggedo in Oz.”

It had been a long while since Ruth had read the Oz books, but she remembered Ruggedo the gnome king very well. He was her favorite character because he was so bad-tempered. “Male or female?”

“Girl.”

“Fighter, priest, mage . . .” Ruth stopped. That was enough to choose from.

“What does a mage do?” asked Jennie.

“Casts magic spells.”

Jennie nodded. “That’s what I want: mage.”

“Do you want her to be intelligent?”

“Yes, make her very smart so she can do a lot of magic.”

“What about charisma?” asked Ruth, forgetting to use a simpler term.

“Yes, a lot,” said Jennie immediately.

“You don’t even know what charisma is, I bet. Just charm. And it’s not very useful.”

“A whole lot of charisma,” Jennie repeated, savoring the word.

Ruth shrugged and typed a number in.

There weren’t many points left, so Jennie couldn’t make her character hardy or agile or strong. And she didn’t want her to have too much luck. “But some,” she added cautiously.

Ruth dutifully entered the absurd numbers. “She’s your character. What’s her name?”

Jennie thought a moment. “Mrs. Smith.”

Ruth’s fingers flew off the keyboard in exasperation. “You can’t call a mage Mrs. Smith. This isn’t some tea party. There’s no Mister and Miss and Mrs.”

Jennie hesitated, but she must have seen a stubborn look in Ruth’s eyes. “All right,” she said. “Then Smith.”

Ruth typed in the name. “Okay, there you are. Smith, level 1 gnome mage. Weak, clumsy, and not too lucky. But very smart and very charming.”

“Good,” said Jennie. Now that she had a character she was losing interest. “I’ll come back later and see what she’s doing.” She wandered off, trailing her blanket rag.

Ruth created a male gnome mage named Ruggedo, smart, hardy, agile, and semi-strong. That left hardly any points for charisma and luck. She took the two new gnome mages out to

retrieve Brak from the dungeon with a fighter to protect them and explored the safest part of the dungeon again. After half an hour of playing, they returned with enough experience points and gold to advance a level and learn new spells. Then she had to stop and save the game. It was time to take Thomas and Jennie to the local branch library.

It was a real old Carnegie library, with a T-shaped stone entrance. The opening on the left was barred with a black twisted metal gate, which added to the dungeon-like atmosphere. It was pretty dark inside until you reached the main door.

“This is good,” said Thomas, in his usual solemn way, touching the cold stone.

A strong-jawed woman with frizzled gray and red hair nodded as she passed. “Dungeon.”

Ruth was embarrassed and said nothing.

It was bright and warm inside the library. Thomas and Jennie went to look for books. Ruth sat at a study table while she waited for them. She had brought along the textbook for the computer class—the only course that looked promising. The boy who sat next to her, Jesse Ortiz, seemed a little less unfriendly than everybody else. She had heard him speaking Spanish to the girl behind her but could only catch a few words.

The book went all the way from the abacus to artificial intelligence. Ruth looked at the illustrations in the historical part. There was a surprisingly modern-looking ancient Greek set of gears recovered from the sea near Antikythera that was supposed to do astronomical calculations. Several pages later she saw a picture of shiny and elaborate brass machinery designed by Charles Babbage in the nineteenth century. One of the old-time people was a woman wearing a hoop skirt, with dark hair in puffs around her ears: Ada Lovelace. The caption said that she had written about the first computer and that she had died young . . .

Ruth glanced at her watch, impatient to get back to her game, and looked around to see what Thomas and Jennie were doing. As usual, Jennie seemed to have made friends: she had enticed the librarian with reddish gray hair out from behind her tall desk. The woman turned out to be the reference librarian—Hazel Wright, according to the nameplate. She and Jennie were engaged in an enthusiastic conversation. Thomas sat on the floor by a shelf, choosing books.

Ruth wondered what computer games the library had. Of course, she couldn’t stand to play right out in public anyway. In a small alcove in the back room she found two computers, one of

them on. The screen showed a game that she recognized from magazines, but she didn't see anyone around to play it.

Ruth found a few books on role-playing games, but they were all completely obsolete. One of them was a history of game development, which could be interesting but was drastically out of date. Graphics had certainly come a long way since then. A screen shot from one of the classic oldies, way before her time, had no color except for green lines marking the floor of the dungeon like a chessboard. Two pathetic-looking skeletons holding tinny knives stared eyelessly.

"Primitive, weren't they?"

Ruth dropped the book, startled by the librarian peering over her shoulder. How embarrassing!

"They were fun, though." The librarian winked. "Slow-moving, especially in combat, but fun."

Ruth turned to her in surprise. "You mean that you played these?"

"A lot of them. I mostly liked the spells and puzzles and developing characters."

"That's the part I like too," Ruth said, drawn out of her usual reticence (sullenness, her father often said) by finding a kindred spirit. "And the slower the combat the better for me. I've got very slow reflexes. Games now are all spinning around and slashing or shooting—that's not for me. I even get queasy. But I found one old game—a really cheap one—that emphasizes the role playing and character development, not just the combat."

The librarian nodded. "It's probably not as primitive as the games I played, though. You had to map everything yourself, including finding all the secret doors and hidden places by kicking at them. That was a pain—not literally, if course." She smiled. "The library closes in fifteen minutes, so if you have any books to check out . . ."

"OK—thanks." Ruth said. She put the school computer book in her backpack, leaving the history of games book on the table, and went to fetch Jennie and Thomas, who were sitting by the shelves. As they were getting ready to leave, Ruth picked up a book that Jennie had been reading. "What about this?"

"I remembered that we have that one," Jennie said.

Ruth looked at the Oz book. It was an old edition, with a faded color picture of the Wizard and a monkey in a tripod on the cover. It was her favorite Oz story, where a bad-tempered boy and Ruggedo learned a magic word that changed them into whatever they wanted to be.

“Come on, Ruth, the library’s closing,” called Thomas. They checked out the books and went home.

Hazel Wright picked up another book to be reshelfed. It had been a very long day. She was sure that the boy who usually checked out books on art had been playing a computer game. But when she next looked up there was no sign of him—only a shifty-eyed man in a blue velvet cape. She hadn’t imagined it—she found the cape stuffed under the table next to the boy’s backpack.

Hazel felt worn out. She looked down at the Oz book that the girl in the red coat had left behind. A very long time had passed since she had read this same edition of the story as a little girl. Looking down at the boldfaced word on the page, she remembered how hard she had tried to pronounce it so many years ago. Standing alone by the stump in the backyard so that no one would hear her, she had said it every way she could think of. But it never worked.

She was alone in the library. “**PYRZQXGL**,” she said out loud, one last time. Nothing happened, of course.

Ruth’s parents left early Friday morning. “We’ll only be gone two nights,” said Mrs. Arlen. “You can have soup and sandwiches tonight, and there’s money for a pizza tomorrow.”

“Earth calling Ruth,” said her father.

She hated it when he said that. “We’ll be fine.”

“We’ll telephone to see how you’re getting along,” her mother said.

“Ruth, try to tear yourself away from that computer every now and then to take a peek at Thomas and Jennie,” her father added.

For dinner they had split pea soup and turkey and Swiss cheese sandwiches on rye, wrapped in dampened paper towels and heated up in the microwave. When Thomas turned on the TV, Jennie joined him.

“I’m going to play on the computer for a while,” said Ruth. “Don’t go anywhere without telling me.” Thomas nodded. Ruth thought of Jessie as she sat down to play. He had been absent from the last computer lab. She hoped that he hadn’t dropped the course.

Ruth took out her latest party—Smith and Ruggedo and the fighter Brak—following the familiar route. This time on the fourth level they encountered a party of ghouls. The odds were bad, so instead of staying to fight she chose “Run,” which moved them a short distance away.

Weird: in the middle of the part of the screen where the carpeted stone walls of the dungeon usually appeared she saw a shimmering black rectangle a few inches above the floor. It didn’t look like a regular door or even a secret door. Brak was using a torch for light, and she had already explored all the areas on this level. It just hadn’t been there before. Ruth moved her characters forward toward the black space. She felt faint for a minute then thought that she heard waves lapping. Words flickered on the black rectangle for a moment: *You are standing on the shores of a lake*. She called up the map of the level, just to make sure. It showed nothing new: no hidden doors and no lake. Ruth grabbed her sheaf of notes but found no explanation.

There was no lake on this level—or anywhere in the game for that matter! Had she discovered something that she’d missed? Where had the black rectangle come from—and what did it mean? Then Ruth saw something very odd: Smith, the new gnome mage, had turned around and seemed to be looking right at her.

Ruth hesitated then put her finger to the screen to touch the strange blackness. It gave way, yielding first only darkness then a bright green glow. She felt a charge shoot through her from her hand down to her feet and shuddered as the green flared then faded to mist.

