

Ethan Goffman

The Game

Roll dem bones! Rufus the Paladin tossed two sixes and a five and his character, Allen, aced the math test. “Yes,” he cried out in joy.

They were gathered round the dying embers of a campfire, tossing dice, scrawling on parchment, consulting a haphazard pile of irregularly bound texts filled with rules, keeping track of distant lives. Lives of joy in trivial things, dating and first kisses, learning to drive, mastering Algebra and Physics, playing sports and watching a magic screen known as a television in this faraway land where magic never happened, just technology so advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic. Life for the adventurers was brutal, with all the tromping and hunger and battles with monsters, the constant danger of attacks from around any dungeon corner or any forest glade, the threat of death from sneaky goblin hordes or flaming Balrogs. Less and less could Rufus see any point to the endless tromping and collecting of treasure. And for what? Death was coming in the end in any case, no matter how much gold one had, how many magical trinkets.

Increasingly, Rufus felt pity for the beings he killed, evil though they may be. Just yesterday, he had slit the throat of one poor little goblin, and he couldn’t stop envisioning its eyes gazing up at him. In the depths of insomnia, Rufus would ponder whether the goblin deserved to die, whether it was just the victim of circumstances. What chance had the goblin been given? The Game was a distraction from all that, a glimpse at another possible life.

For a Paladin, the Game also held a hint of the forbidden. It was disreputable, since the thieves of Granapolis had invented it a few years ago. Indeed, they continued to extract as much money as possible from The Game’s players for endless sets of rulebooks and polished, rollable bones with numbers carved into their

surfaces. How could a noble Paladin stoop to worlds created by disreputable thieves? Still, The Game spread quickly among the witches and warriors, the bungling magicians, the dwarves and elves and halflings, that considered themselves adventurers.

Many a party, rumor had it, had been ambushed and massacred while distracted by The Game, and yet it continued to spread. Rufus himself could no longer concentrate on watching for monsters and gathering gold, jewels, and whatever magical items should appear hidden deep within caves or beneath secret trap doors. Instead, his mind wandered and he thought of The Game, how Allen would soon graduate from high school, perhaps with honors, how high he would score on the SATs, whether he would be accepted to the Ivy League school he most desired, whether he would remain with his new girlfriend, Dolores, when they both moved on to college (and whether he would accidentally get her pregnant and if, in a way, he wanted that to happen).

A flight of arrows disturbed the adventurers, hitting Dwinkle the elf (in The Game, Dolores the cheerleader) in the elbow. The adventurers sprang up and Rufus drew his broad sword, but just then a bevy of lightning bolts sang out and slaughtered the Orcs ambushing the party.

“You fools,” said Wanda the Wizard. “You’re so distracted by that stupid game you nearly got us all killed. Luckily, I saved us, but I had to use one of my precious scrolls to do so.”

“Thanks,” said Dwinkle, “but I have to find out how I do in the cheerleader competition.”

“Yah,” said Rufus, “I have to study for the SATs.” And the party, except for the ever-vigilant Wanda, who didn’t know how to enjoy herself, huddled again around the fire to be transported, by a few polished bones alongside parchment and ragged books, into another world.