

FLICK OF THE SWITCH

The ADAM Academy Archives

Book One

By

Brent Golembiewski

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*For my parents. Thanks for giving me the gift of love, education,
and Nintendo.*

“Computers had their origin in military cryptography—in a sense, every computer game represents the commandeering of a military code-breaking apparatus for purposes of human expression.”

— Austin Grossman

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE

January 14, 2035 - Holly, Michigan

Syd

Five million dollars. That was enough money for Mother to hand me over to a government program to do who knew what. The word “yes” slipped out of her mouth faster than I had seen her agree to anything before, even when I caught her accepting a free hit on the porch a few weeks back. My nose crinkled, and the new piercing in my eyebrow strained. How could she do this? I was her child; granted, the oldest of three, but still her child. Turned out I was a ticket to a large bank account. A trinket only loved when it suited her, overlooked and thrown out when not needed.

The man slid a piece of paper across the table. I crossed my arms, my chest constricting with slow shallow breaths as my gaze burned a hole through Mother. She wouldn't look at me. The man smiled, attempting to seem warm and inviting, but I could tell it was an act. That he didn't really want to be here in our crappy little trailer. It only made me grind my teeth. I stood up, slamming the chair into the table.

The man sat up straighter, if that was even possible, eyebrows raised. Mother paid no attention, her bloodshot eyes straining to read, or pretending to read. Her hand grasped the pen loosely; her signature was poor,

unrecognizable, something I had learned to forge at a much earlier age.

I wanted to speak but instead pinched my lips tightly together. She was in a daze. Nothing would snap her out of it. A month or so and I'd be gone, a memory, a dream. I spun around, stomping off to my room, the weakened floorboards bowing under my feet. The reek of wet laundry permeated the air. I had been lazy the past few days and ignored it. My two younger brothers stank. I couldn't believe how disgusting boys could be. Liam was the oldest at nine, and Logan had just turned seven. We couldn't afford much of a party. To top it off, Mother forgot. Luckily, I was used to picking up the slack and had been able to scrounge up extra cash from my theater job slinging popcorn.

That was before teenagers burned down the theater. Now life was crap. No job, no social life—albeit by choice—and now this. A job was hard enough to get as a fourteen-year-old, though I had a leg up being a girl. Something about being female made it easier for me. I tried to tell myself that wasn't the case, but it was true. Two boys from school applied for the same job, both much better students than me, yet I had beaten them out. The manager proved to be overly-friendly, but my aggressive nature kept him at bay.

I entered the only other room in our tiny trailer, my gaze rummaging through the contents subconsciously,

when I caught movement out the corner of my eye.

“Okay, who took my controller?”

I peered around, lips pressed together. My fingernails dug into my palms. More movement. I jumped at the shadow in the corner and snatched Logan from his hiding spot, pulling him in tight.

“No fooling around—where did you put my controller? You know it’s off limits. Want me to kick your butt?”

Logan giggled. He was playing with me; more than likely Liam put him up to it. I needed that controller. It was the only thing that kept me sane. That and my phone, a small black touch-screen currently in my back pocket. The punk music on there was my life. The phone and the controller were the only escapes I had from the crappy reality life had dealt me. My hand tightened on Logan’s shirt, drawing him closer.

“You better give it to me now, or I’ll—”

At a tap on my hip, I swiveled my head around, eyes staring down at the ringleader, a death grip on Logan as he continued his snickering.

“Here it is. We were just messing with you.”

Liam stood just out of reach, Xbox controller in hand. The white plastic was scuffed and grayed from use,

the control sticks embedded with dust from the dirty environment they were faced with everyday. I snatched it from his hand, snarling, swamped by the miasma of sweaty boys. I swear they could take two showers a day and still smell.

“Go outside. Room’s mine.”

Liam scowled back at me, his arms straightening. “It’s cold outside.”

“Take the brat and give me some space,” I snapped, my frustrations manifesting themselves as miniature demons spitting out as fiery words.

Liam lifted his chin, eyebrows still furled. I raised my fist in threat. I had a tendency to get physical with them. Nothing hateful or abusive—but I’d had to pick it up to defend myself from their aggressive antics. They were two tough young boys—life had made them so. They responded to physical threats, not verbal. I’d tried to go easy on them with the kinder, gentler approach. That lasted all of one day before they were running all over me. My hand snapped up. Liam huffed as he threw his hands down, his gaze wandering away.

“Fine, we’re gonna freeze. Snowed today. It’s freaken cold.”

“I don’t care. Out!”

I pointed to the door. Liam shuffled out, his feet

dragging on the floor. Logan slithered by me, his eyes wide. My threats worked better on him, he had learned not to take me lightly. He looked back as I slammed the door.

Finally, my space for a while. The three of us shared the room. My twin-sized bed leaned against one side of the trailer with pink sheets and a bedspread I despised, but I couldn't afford anything else. Mother thought all girls should love pink. She had bought them years ago. Weathered, aged, a few moth holes, in desperate need of retirement, but at least they covered my mattress. My brothers' bed across from it was a poorly-constructed IKEA bunk set. Three boyfriends ago, Mother's loser lover assembled it. He left out half a dozen screws, saying they weren't needed, and I ended up duct taping some of it together. That was me doing the best I could to keep things together. The bunk bed was a physical metaphor for my life.

I flopped on my bed, shoulders dropping, my breath controlled and even as I pushed it all out. My gaze drifted to my escape: the system, released two years ago and purchased with the spoils from my job and a few small wagers on the side. The Xbox Nitrus was the most advanced system to date, and the best part was that the screen was included. VR glasses with ear buds completely immersed me in the experience. No need for TV screens, no one looking over my shoulder to bother me. I reached over the worn, ragged wood-look end table and grabbed the goggles.

I stared at them a moment; my mind slipped back to Mother sitting at the dining room table signing my life away. Five million dollars. It wasn't fair. I'd be leaving my friends, my school, my brothers, my life. What kind of person would sell their kid? My mother, that's who.

I slipped on the goggles. My eyes relaxed as the padded rims sat on my nose, the screen wrapping around my face. They were ultra-light and felt barely there. I was still amazed they felt so comfortable, turning invisible like a bracelet you've worn for too long, nonexistent. I focused as my hands grasped the controller and it became an extension of my hand. Even though it was 2035, they still hadn't perfected full motion VR, but this was the closest yet. I wasn't complaining—the controller was comfortable, an old friend, almost melting in my small feminine fingers. Like clothes, manufacturers began to customize them for your particular grip. I was able to find an aftermarket one just my size, much cheaper than the branded one.

I focused as the glowing menu popped up. You could do nearly everything on this system that people used computers for, emails, search function, attach your phone and text, but I wasn't there for any of that. I was there for one thing and one thing only: Metal Shark Apocalypse. A few years back, I had become addicted to anime, in particular anything with gundams—robot-like machines with pilots inside fighting wars, destroying enemies in space, saving the planet and galaxies from

invading hostiles. All things I enjoyed. I could be a hero in the game, a top scorer. While the world outside concentrated on the enemy threat sweeping through Asia, I only cared about obliterating alien mechs on Planet Sandstorm.

I was a solo player. Plenty of clans attacked as squads, but I found the best action alone, only me to worry about. The objectives were straightforward: kill the enemy targets, capture the enemy base. I clicked on the mission status sheet. The words rolled down the screen read by a male AI, its bionic voice revving my heart. A warm sensation swept over my body and my skin tingled as the words spewed out.

“StraightEdge77, your mission is to locate eight fusion cells captured by the enemy. We need these supplies to ensure our forces have enough energy for a critical advance this evening. The location is somewhere near marker 27.”

A map appeared on the right, shrinking as the letters displaying the marker appeared. The number 27 flashed in a 3D circle, spinning. The voice continued through the display.

“After acquisition, you will transport the material to Mother Anne. There you will be able to resupply and shutdown. Do you have any questions?”

I clicked no. The map and briefing disappeared,

replaced with the cockpit of my mech, my suit, my gundam, my home. Space greeted me. This would be a combat drop from the sky, high in the air, not quite out of the atmosphere but close. The curvature of the earth exposed the transition between light and pitch black flowing into my eyes. I smiled, breathing heavily through my nose. The ship dropped. My hands vibrated to the rumble of the controller. The visuals extending it through my body, and I almost felt the sensation of falling. I looked up. My ship, the spawn point, became a needle point. I swung my head down toward the planet. The planet's surface came into view, details expanded revealing the green environment I would soon be navigating, trees swaying in the wind. As the ground neared, I readied myself for the run.

My hands shook as I pressed forward on the controls. My mech ran forward, the windscreen full of vegetation. I extended my chainsaw from my waist, passing it to my hand. The motorized cutter made short work of the trees in my way. The map on the right side flashed a blue arrow showing my location and a red flag as the target, a classic game reference I was familiar with. I pummeled through the forest, head on a swivel, gaze scanning for enemy targets, and friendlies, for that matter. I would occasionally run into squads. I had been asked to join a few, even asked out on a date by one boy. None of it stuck; I didn't have time for any of that. This was my love, and I was happy that way.

My comm channel flashed, signifying an incoming transmission. I clicked it off, disabling it. I had no time for talking, even if it was someone I knew. I was on a mission, and they could wait. The game wouldn't. It was live, and I couldn't just turn it off—I would lose all my characters, all my stuff. Even after a successful mission, I was still required to return to the drop ship that was sent for me, Mother Anne. I continued my track, crushing the trees like twigs, cutting down old growth, trampling the uneven ground beneath me. The foliage was thick like some jungle akin to Vietnam or Cambodia, both countries I had learned about in school as my history teacher described the Vietnam War and the failures there. I didn't pay attention much, just enough to get a C in class and pass. School was a drag, a phase, one I couldn't be done with soon enough. I had just turned fourteen two weeks ago. Mother couldn't have told you what day it was, but I could. January 1st. I often wondered if the bitter cold of my birth environment affected my personality. Numb. I always felt cold, alone, distant.

The screen flashed. The controller shook. Jumping back, I turned, my gaze finding a tank firing projectiles at me, shells popping from its top like a broken fire hydrant. The flashes washed out my screen as my shields deflected them, the counter reading 98%. I spun the mech around, calling up anti-tank missiles and let two fly. The tank busters impacted, flipping shards of debris about like paper, the life-like graphics causing me to duck as one skipped off the top of my war craft. I proceeded toward

it, my mind now back where it was meant to be—on the game, no more surprises. I scanned, picking up two more enemy targets, one a fast mover. The enemy jet fighter had released heat seeking missiles so I took evasive action. I deployed flares and the sky filled with smoke. My tactic worked and the enemy's ordinance erupted above. I locked onto the aircraft, my reticle blinking. I depressed the button releasing a single surface to air missile. Switching cameras, I utilized the missile's nose camera. The flare tactic I had used would be ineffective against a manually-guided bomb.

The fighter came into view, a very earth-like ship akin to a Russian MiG that grew larger by the millisecond. I adjusted my aim, keeping the target centered. At the last second, the craft spun, my missile zipping past. I switched cameras back to my mech, the aircraft now in the distance. I called up my weapons load out. The ship adjusted course direct to my position. Two contrails like plumes from a fireworks show dispersed from the fighter. I called up the Gatling guns. Pulling the aim onto the incoming threat, I pressed the button.

The bedroom wall stared back at me, my purple hair spilling across my vision. I spun. Mother stood staring at me, holding the goggles in her hand, her eyebrows narrowed over her bloodshot eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

The high-pitched sound of the Sex Pistols screamed out from the phone lying on the table, a band I had grown to love. Slapping around, I attempted to find the device. I grimaced, wanting to rocket the phone against the wall but that would only hurt me in the long run. My fingers found the vibrating jukebox, pulling it toward my thumb. I peeked a sleepy gaze out from under one cracked lid, sliding my finger up the surface of the glass to ease the pounding in my head. The sound quieted, I closed my eyes, wishing I didn't have to wake up. Darkness surrounded me; more sleep would have done me good. The professionals knew it. Even before I was born, schools were changing. Younger kids like my brothers had the earlier start times, while teenagers like me were allowed to sleep in and attend school later. Well, most teenagers. Taking care of my brothers eliminated that.

I threw the pillow across the room, sat up, opening my phone, the light glared back at me like the single bulb hanging the interrogation room in all those old movies. My brothers needed to make it to the bus stop, but Mother wasn't going to ensure it, probably passed out on the sofa, drugged out of her mind. I stood up stretching, my mind wandering, the brain cells firing, starting to recall the evening's events. My eyes popped open, my fingers tingled. I switched on my phone's flashlight. I

had to see, I had to know if it was real. I prayed it was a dream, a nightmare. My hands rummaged through the debris on the floor, cheap plastic boys toys, hand me downs, most broken but sufficient to occupy my siblings' minds. My fingers swept over the end table. There they were. I picked up the goggles switching on the Xbox . The screen booted up, I swiped through menus, then selected the game, my game. I read the screen, scanning over it multiple times. I understood what the words meant, but didn't want to believe it.

-create new airman-

I pushed off the goggles, allowing them to slide from my hand to the floor. I exhaled as if my soul had departed, thinking of Mother once again ruining my life, interrupting my game at the worst possible moment. I stared off at the darkness in front of me. A sliver of light broke the space, its beam continuing to grow.

Liam called, "Hey, sis, ready to take us to the bus? Can't be late."

I didn't answer, continuing my stare, frozen in disbelief. Maybe this was still part of the nightmare. I had spent countless hours unlocking missions, acquiring all the weaponry, armor upgrades, extra suits and skills. I was number five on the leader charts.

It was all gone, destroyed, annihilated, obliterated...by a MiG, a stupid weak MiG.

My teeth clenched, my lips rolled over each other. I felt a hand on the elastic waist of my jammies. Liam gazed up at me, his backpack in one hand, jacket in the other. My eyes softened; he needed me. I took the backpack.

“PBJ or turkey?”

“PBJ, please.”

I shuffled out to the kitchen, dragging my feet, taking a minute to realize Liam was being nice to me. That was out of character. My eyebrows lowered. Pulling my shoulders back, I placed the backpack on the counter.

“What’s going on?”

Liam’s gaze drifted to the doorway just beyond the sofa, where Mother’s limp body lay.

“Mom says you’re going away. Is that true?”

My mouth opened and my eyes glazed over, staring out the window at the falling snow outside. A single lamp post lighting up a circular patch on the ground, the flakes illuminated like sparkler bits falling to the earth. My hands dropped to my sides. Going away? Did yesterday happen? Was it really going to happen? Would I be leaving in a week? A month? Mindless, I made lunch for my brothers. Logan played with Hot Wheels cars on the floor, quiet as a mouse. They’d learned not to be loud in the mornings when Mother was dead to the world.

Liam stood watching me. I ignored him, drifting in and out of reality. I couldn't leave. Did she really sell me? My hands worked on the lunches, finishing in a few minutes. I plucked the phone from the counter, checking the time. 6:30 a.m.

"Crap. Grab your jacket, gloves and hat. Help your brother."

I dashed into my room, throwing on sweatpants over my jammies. A hooded sweatshirt followed. I rushed out to the main door, grabbing my jacket, slipping on some high winter boots, well-worn and in need of repair. Liam was helping Logan with his jacket. I slapped a hat on him while they finished with their gloves.

"Come on, we don't want you to miss the bus."

My voice was as loud as I could make it still at a whisper. Mother stirred but didn't wake. If the boys missed the bus, the school would be calling. If they missed too many days, Mother would be fined. The government sure had their hands in everything, and it seemed to be getting worse every year. I ushered them out into the frozen darkness. The ground crunched as my weight crushed the snow, a sound I had grown to hate. I often wished I had been born in Florida, not Michigan with its ridiculous weather. "Don't like the weather? Wait five minutes and it will change," people would joke.

I pushed the boys along. The trailer park we

resided in was dark. A plow truck drove by, trampling the snow. I sneered at it; they could have cleared a path down the center. The government spent their money in other ways. The so-called “new pledge” allegedly to make us all equal seemed to be doing less and less of that by the year. I glanced across the street at two mothers walking their kids along the other side. One waved at me. I half-heartedly lifted an arm. Soon we came to the bus stop.

“Bit chilly today,” Georgia said, rubbing her daughter’s shoulders with her hands.

I pursed my lips, nodding. Chilly? It was downright frigid; weather app said five degrees. No one should be out in that kind of weather. I gave back a fake smile, not in the mood and attempting to conceal it. I longed to be left alone, left to my games and my room. That would soon be gone. Last night’s events ran through my head like a 2x speed replay of a sitcom on Netflix. Visions of Mother hurling obscenities while I took a defensive posture came to mind. She sold me to the highest bidder—it didn’t matter that it was the only bidder. All she cared about was herself.

I looked down at Liam and Logan, my shoulders dipping as I released a sigh. I watched my breath dance in the frozen air, a gray mist making unique shapes like in the movies when people smoked, making rings. The government had taken all that away, eliminating what they deemed unhealthy. I chuckled darkly to myself,

making my chest bounce. So many restraints to make us healthy, and Mother could still find all the drugs her heart desired.

I squinted as the bus headlights washed over my face, the soundless approach broken up by squeaking wheels and shattering ice. I ushered the boys into the bus, the driver smiling and nodding. She was a nice older lady. Some days I pretended she was my grandmother, having never met mine. I would see her again when it was my turn for school. Liam turned on the top step, facing me.

“You’ll say goodbye, right?”

“Stop. You need to get to school. I’m not going anywhere.”

Liam’s gaze flickered in the light, pausing before dropping to the ground. His mouth straightened as he headed down the aisle. I didn’t lie; I wasn’t planning on going anywhere. It couldn’t be true and I’d figure out how to fix it.

I stepped out of the way of the other children and headed back home. My gaze locked on the snow now beginning to taper off. The trailer park came alive for the day as people stirred and an electric bus stopped to pick up workers headed to the factories. The State’s car factories—now building only electric vehicles—were running strong, yet people were miserable. Minimum wage was the best most would do. This was supposed to be a

utopia? I wasn't seeing it.

I kicked a clump of snow, blasting it into a thousand bits, my mind snapping to my game. I clenched my fists, swallowing hard. I was back at square one, I had nothing, zero. I would have to level up from scratch. I coaxed myself on. I had done it before, I could do it again.

The door hinges squeaked, announcing I was home. Mother didn't stir. I stood over her, biting my bottom lip. My eye twitched. She was the evil in my life. In some ways I felt like Cinderella, except without the stepsisters, fairies, or the pumpkin coach. Definitely without the fairy godmother. I guess that was a bad metaphor. Shaking my head, I exhaled.

"Whatever."

I meandered into the kitchen, snatching a box of Fruit Loops and digging my hand in. I set it back on the counter as the synthetic sugar burned my tongue, reminding me why I didn't touch the stuff anymore. I gathered one of our four glasses, rinsing it in the sink before filling and taking a huge swig. The water washed the taste from my mouth. Leaving the glass, I headed to my room then flopped on the bed. I stared at the ceiling, a blindly searching for my phone. When my hand found it, I snatched it up and pushed it to my face. Maybe I could get away from the world by pulling up Instagram.

I scrolled through the same old things: everyone and their perfect lives. How unrealistic. I scrolled past cat pictures, a couple acquaintances' posts, but my favorites were the gamers. The best was a guy with the gamer tag Xdethb4failreX; he was amazing and top of the leader board in Metal Shark. I watched his latest video wreaking havoc on enemy tanks and mechs; he was pure poetry to watch, and supposedly my age. Man, how cool would it be if mechs were real? I might actually try in school instead of slide by so I could fly one.

My phone's screen lit up, overriding the video as my alarm buzzed back at me. I slapped my phone onto the mattress, my hand bounced as reality struck me once more. My mind had nearly been off my predicament. I groaned, pushing myself up off the bed. I slipped off the sweat pants and searched for my favorite pair of vintage Levi's. I examined the worn blue fabric for dirt or stains and found them acceptable. They were men's jeans, button-fly 501s that slipped over my petite hips more comfortably than girls' jeans, which were always super-tight stretch fabric and had no pockets. I had to wear a belt to get the waist to fit, but I liked having pockets. The torn hole in the knee exposed my tender skin. I found my Sex Pistols t-shirt, the emblem half erased from too many washes, and slipped it over my head. I popped ear buds into my ears, tapping on the phone to stream my favorite classic punk songs. I had become obsessed with it after the neighbor blasted it while working on his motorcycle all hours of the night. Something about the lyrics in the

anti-rules tunes mesmerized me. I slipped on a leather jacket as I passed Mother and grabbed my school bag.

I tensed as I walked past her, thinking of what she had done.

I made my way to the bus stop. The six usuals were there, none of whom I cared for. Over the years they learned to leave me alone. A couple punches in the right locations had made sure of that. I was the only girl still riding the bus because the others all had boyfriends taking them to school. I squinted, spying everyone huddled around like they were calling a play. I leaned my head forward as I continued my walk. My ears buzzed from the cold. My nose felt the same. As I inched closer, their conversation started to overpower my music, I tapped on the ear bud, raising the volume to blot them out.

Tom, the oldest of the bunch, spotted me. He waved me over, his eyes wide, mouth open as if something had happened. I rolled my eyes, finishing with my gaze on the ground, concentrating on my misery. I felt a tug on my arm. Slapping it away, I looked up. Tom waved his arm, aggressively insisting I follow. Looking away again, I ran my hand through my short bob cut. Another tug, but this time a phone pressed into my face. I snapped my head back, chin into my chest attempting to focus on the tiny screen.

“What? Gah.” My eyes popped open. Something

had happened—something even I realized was important.

The president stood at a podium and uttered words that would change the course of history.

“...it is due to this that we, the great nation of the United States of America, have no other choice than to declare war against the oppressive country of China and its allies.”

CHAPTER THREE

As I stepped off the bus, I could finally breathe freely. The ride was always filled with the stench of teenage hormones, body odor and mothballs. But today, there was a palpable fear of the unknown mixed into the adolescent miasma. The air outside wasn't much better, but the gentle breeze kept the air flowing. It had stopped snowing, placing the school in full view. A dilapidated two-story brick building with floor-to-ceiling windows stared back at me. Once upon a time I was sure it was nice, but now it was ragged like an old dog, malnourished and in bad need of a bath. The walls were tagged with graffiti from cartoon animals to phrases, some of which I was positive were gang signs. I found it hard to believe this place used to be glamorous, a wealthy suburb just to the north of Detroit. Now it felt like a war zone, resembling some games I had played. I shuddered thinking of what we'd watched at the bus stop. Gun violence had become prevalent, the economy was in a depression, or that's what the teachers told us, and now this? The other stuff was just normal life, but even I knew that war with China was a big deal.

I turned to the front door. Janet, my best friend—well, only real friend—was trouncing through the snow

toward me. I laughed; she didn't run very well in her long leather coat and thick leather boots, her elbows bowed out like she was fending off linebackers. Maybe it was from playing soccer, girls were always throwing elbows and continuing the play; not like the boys who would dramatically fall every time someone as much as grazed them. Or it could have been something she picked up at school, the hallways cluttered and difficult to navigate. The school was overpopulated, with no funds to build another. Teachers were outnumbered forty to one. Janet stumbled, tripping over a snow berm. She caught herself as she neared.

"Hey! Did you hear the news?"

My head bobbed and my mouth pursed. I was still processing everything. I couldn't tolerate anyone else but Janet, and while she was like a lost puppy with green hair most of the time, she liked me. Maybe that's how we became friends when I couldn't stand to be around anyone else. I examined her sweater under the jacket, its pink top exposed near her neck. I raised my eyebrows, pushing out air through my nostrils.

"Pink, huh?"

Janet's eyes popped open, her gaze snapped down to her chest.

"Oh yes, well...it was all I had that was clean. Mom's been on this kick, making me do laundry."

I rolled my eyes. Laundry, like that was so hard. I had to do the whole family's; Mother would get lost trying to find the laundromat. Recycled clothes were a daily occurrence in my household. Janet, on the other hand, was from a wealthy family, and when I say wealthy I just mean she didn't live in a rundown trailer with tires on the roof. Her parents worked in the State department, and while they weren't supposed to get preferential treatment, they did. I didn't care though, Janet was cool. She loved the same music as me and could kick some tail in Gears 8. That was her game. She only played soccer to appease her parents. Government employees kids had a whole different set of expectations. We proceeded toward the front door. Kids passed us, jogging on both sides. It was still freezing. My teeth chattered. Janet grabbed me for warmth.

"This is such a miserable day, the cold, the news—"

"Being sold."

Janet released my arm, sliding in front of me, her eyes darting back and forth, reading me. Mine narrowed. Her comment reminded me of how horrible the day actually was. Janet stiffened, her voice quick.

"Wait. Sold? Did you say sold?"

Her cute plump lip was trapped to one side between her teeth, awaiting my answer. The bell rang. I

pushed by, but she latched onto my arm, grasping tight.

“You said sold, didn’t you? Is it true—did they come to the house?”

I trudged along, my steps hampered by Janet. There were times I wished I didn’t have friends, well, a friend. I’d rather wallow in my self-loathing. I took a deep breath, continuing toward the door, part of me hoping she didn’t continue to hang onto my Freudian slip.

There were rumors of kids offered scholarships to a video game school. It was all over social media, and then it wasn’t. The government had a way of making things disappear. Until the visit, I vehemently denied they would target a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks. Turned out they would.

She hung onto me tightly, her sturdy body pushing me down as she leaned on my shoulder. She watched my every move.

“Yeah.”

I dragged out the word at the end of my breath, as if it was a chore to expel. Janet tugged me around the side of the building, her head swiveling about. She spotted a location to chat in the student parking lot. I let her drag me along. She was taller and thicker than me. Not only was I poor, I was also short, the shortest girl in our freshman class. My mind raced, recalling some of the evening’s events like bits of a play, only catching the highlights. We

slipped around a Ford Bronco, Janet attempting to hide me from the teachers. She knew better; they didn't care, we could have skipped all week. They would just write us up, and then our parents would get the blame. Janet pushed me against the truck, her eyes flickering in the morning light as the sun attempted to peek through the gloomy snow clouds.

“Okay, spill it. They offered you a contract. Did you take it? Are you going to? Are you going away?”

Her questions kept coming, as if she really didn't want the answer. I stared through her until a phrase caught my attention.

“I've heard rumors the school's a testing ground for game programmers.”

I refocused, looking at her once-blonde hair, now a light shade of green like an anime character. With my purple hair we must have made a great sight. I focused on the words “game programmers.” Was that true? I sharpened my gaze.

“Where'd you hear that?”

She looked at the front door then back at me. Biting her lip again, she released me, stepping back.

“Jake messaged me. Guess his friend knows a guy who...a programmer confirmed it.”

I laughed, shaking my head; rumors from an

uncle's cousin's roommate, that's what it sounded like to me.

She raised one eyebrow. "So...?"

I didn't know what to say. Did I tell her? My one friend, the friend I'd never see again because I was sold by my flesh and blood. My muscles tensed. I rubbed my lips together, my fingers immobile from the icy cold air swirling about.

She grabbed my shoulders, shaking me. "So are you going or what?"

I slapped her hands away, breaking free from her overzealous grip. "Yeah, okay. Gah."

Her head snapped back. She paused, reading me. I chewed on my cheek, turning my head toward the school. Two more absences, two more and Mother would get fined. I spun back around toward Janet.

"I'll tell you at lunch. We need to get to class. I can't afford any more absences."

Janet nodded, relenting; she wanted more, still bobbing on her heels, her calves flexing. We took off running toward the school, making our way in just before they locked the door. The security guard enabled the system, ensuring our safety. I slid my backpack onto the conveyor belt. After the detectors, we split up. Our classes were on opposite sides of the school.

My solitude of mindless learning was about to begin as I made my way to English class. The morning went as usual, reading assignments, groans when there was a pop quiz in my algebra class. I went through it with ease. Math was something I picked up quick. After listening to the history teacher mansplain how we were living in a great time, the bell rang, announcing first period lunch. I swung by my locker to pop the book inside then headed toward the lunchroom. As I turned the corner there stood Janet staring up at Mason, the football team's captain. Behind him stood two more of the teams' goons, Jack and Tommy. He towered over her and ran a hand through her hair. She held books tight to her chest and flicked her head away.

"Don't be like that, you should come out with us tonight. Just you and the three of us."

Janet turned to leave but Mason grabbed her shoulder, spinning her back toward him. I quickened my pace, my short legs wheeling like I was in a cartoon. Mason pressed Janet forcefully into the locker and a thud echoed down the hallway. His two teammates laughed as they scanned the hallway. Mason leaned in for a kiss but stopped short when Tommy patted him on the arm.

"What?" he said, spinning and looking right at me.

His eyes tightened before he smirked. "Come to join the fun are we, Sydney?"

I pulled up next to Janet grasping his wrist and prying it off her shoulder. She wiggled away, slithering behind me. Mason stood so tall I had to strain my neck to stare up at him, my eyebrow ring tugging at my skin. Janet grasped my waist.

“We should go,” she waveringly whispered.

Mason dipped his head still smiling. “There’s plenty of me to go around. Janet and I were going to skip lunch and take a little drive. What ya say? You wanna tag along?”

He reached forward attempting to grab Janet’s hand. She recoiled, dodging the attempt.

“I don’t think she has the same plans as you. Why don’t you just leave us alone?” I replied.

He reached again and this time his aim was true; he pulled Janet toward him. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken, she’s dying to join me, ain’t that right boys.”

The other two nodded and chuckled.

“Just got a new ride I gotta show off. Got a big back seat.”

He winked then gave Janet a forced kiss. She fought him but was no match. My body coiled and my skin began to steam. Jack and Tommy surrounded me. I felt a hand tug through my hair.

“That’s some pretty hair. It’ll be nice to play with,” Jack winked.

“I’d like to get my hands on that,” said Tommy.

I spun around. My fist rocketed into Mason’s groin. He let out a high-pitched whine, dropping to the floor. I snatched Janet’s hand, dragging her with me. Mason’s toadies stood dumbfounded. We slipped between them, running toward the cafeteria. They turned, screaming obscenities, and ran after us. Skidding around the corner, we neared the door. A teacher stepped out, yelling at us to stop running. Paying no attention we continued. We had to get away. I found the cafeteria and bolted in. My gaze raked over the crowded room. Finding two empty seats, we plopped down out of breath. Janet snickered then began to laugh.

“You punched him,” she said between breaths. “In the junk.”

I tried to hold back but laughter spilled out like an avalanche. Janet cut off her laughter scrunching up her cheek, eyebrows distorted. A noise came from the doorway. She leaned over to look. I didn’t, already knowing who it was. The footsteps pounded the ground behind me. My heart raced, my breath still shortened, my laughter faded. Janet grasped my arm, glaring behind me her face full of panic. Mason slapped his palm on the table leaning his face toward mine. I didn’t look, I simply stared at the far wall. His lips were inches from my ear.

“Now that I know you like it rough, me and the boys have something special planned for you tonight.”

I continued my stare without a word, my jaw clenched. Janet tightened her grip and my arm began to go numb. Mason slapped his hand on the table again then peeled back walking toward the door.

“You’ll remember tonight the rest of your life, Sydney. I promise you that.”

He and his buddies disappeared out the door. Janet stared at me like a Grecian bust.

“Tha. . .Thanks,” Janet uttered as she loosened her grip. “But what are we going to do? They said—”

“Don’t worry about what they said. We’ll figure it out. Why don’t you go grab us some pizza and let’s forget about it,” Janet stared a moment then nodded and headed off.

She plopped a plate in front of me, pepperoni.

Janet sat back down, snickering to herself, apparently over the fear for the moment. She picked up the slice of pizza. “I still can’t believe you did that. Okay, now that that’s behind us, spill it.”

She shoved a bite in her mouth, turning to watch me, her eyes intense and wide. I shook my head, sitting down across from her. I knew what she wanted but wasn’t sure how to tell her. This day just kept getting worse.

Now I had Mason out for me with all his boy hormones. Not sure what he saw in me or what he was thinking. I dropped my forehead to the table. A hand caressed my hair. I blew out the air in my lungs, allowing it to vibrate my lips.

“You okay? It can’t be all that bad.”

I kept my head pinned to the table. If she only knew. This day sucked. I placed my hands on top of my head, closing my eyes, hoping to be whisked away to a better place, or better yet wake up from this nightmare. Janet’s soft fingers rustled through my hair. I popped my head up.

“So, my mom sold me. Not sure when I’m going, maybe a month? Not sure where it is or anything about it.”

Janet plopped the pizza onto the plate, her mouth half full.

“Seriously?”

She swallowed and took a swig of water, her face glowing in a half smile. “That’s great! How much do you get?”

What was she going on about? I wasn’t going to get anything. Mother would get it all. She would blow it and be poorer than she was now, if that was possible. My brothers—who would take care of them, do the laundry,

wash dishes? Nothing good could come of this. I didn't know what I wanted, but it wasn't this. My gaze drifted to Janet's.

"I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation."

"Gravity," she chuckled. "You get to go to school to play video games. You get who knows how much—"

"I don't get anything. Mother gets five million."

I let it slip, feeling like my inner monologue switch failed. I pinched my lips tight, my gaze drifting down to the table, hoping she didn't hear.

"Five million?"

Her voiced boomed through the cafeteria. Half of the room stopped to look. I slapped my hands over my face, hoping to disappear. She settled down, grabbing my hand, her voice lowered.

"Five million dollars?"

I nodded. It was a good chunk of change, especially in our town. That sum couldn't get as far as it used to, but it would buy a nice house and comfortable living for a few years. What would I do with it if I was alone, no strings attached? The thought was fleeting, a dream. I had Liam and Logan, I had Mother. The money wasn't even mine to spend. My stomach churned; there was no way I could choke down the nasty cafeteria food. Janet

must have read my mind. She reached over, grabbing my hand still on the table.

“Let’s celebrate. McDonald’s?”

I let out a half laugh, shaking my head. This wasn’t something to celebrate, but it’d get me away from school and the threat of Mason.

“Okay.”

I stood up, taking Janet’s hand as we walked out. The trick would be getting out of the school. That’s when having friends in high places pays off. We headed to the principal’s office. Janet gave some sob story about how I was feeling terrible and depressed and needed a safe space. She reminded him on multiple occasions that her father worked for the government and was going to visit the school, check out how things were being run. He relented, allowing us to leave, though this was far from normal procedure. Typically, you were ushered into a makeshift bedroom they had on school grounds for anyone needing an escape from the real world for a while. As we headed toward the exit, Janet tugged on my arm.

“Hey, how about we prank that jock for his rude behavior at lunch.?”

She tugged me down a hall, scanning for guards and enemies. My skin buzzed; this was my Italian Job. We ended up in the boy’s locker room, Janet extruding a metal barrette out of her hair.

“Here, you do the honors.”

I stared at the shining metal, shaking my head and refusing to accept the task. She slapped it in my hand pointing to Mason’s locker. She guided my hands, explaining how to pick the lock. How she knew all of this, I’d never figured out. My eyes darted about, twitching at every noise. I made the final twist of my wrist and the locker popped open. Janet let out a silent cheer while my face glowed. She grabbed his jersey, dumping perfume on it then placing a hand-written note she’d signed from one of the popular girls. I could hardly contain myself thinking of the outcome of our prank; things would be entertaining to say the least. We headed out and hopped in Janet’s old beat-up Prius. It had seen better days and had been modified to fully electric, the feature she was most proud of. We stopped at McDonald’s, then chatted on the way back to school. As we pulled into a parking spot, she perked up, spinning her head toward me.

“Hey, if you don’t wanna go, why don’t you run away or hide out for awhile? I can keep you in my basement.”

She meant well, but I couldn’t run and she knew that. Besides, hiding in a basement would have worked for a few days, but it was the government—if they wanted to find me, they would. I shook my head, throwing fries in my mouth. Out of all the fast-food places, how had they kept their food tasting so good after all the new

regulations had passed?

Janet set down her pop, staring out the windshield. "I would do it."

My head swiveled forward, my mouth going slack. "Do what? Go to the school? Willingly?"

"Well, yeah. Think about it. Your family gets all that money, and you get to go play games for...how many years was it?"

I stared out the car window, my eyes unfocused. That was something I didn't know. In my anger, I didn't listen to a word the man said, my thoughts on Mother as her face practically glowed with greed. I don't think she contemplated anything else either; once the dollar signs showed up, her brain shut down. How long could it be? In my head I had placed it at forever. Maybe it wasn't that long. A slight glimmer of hope washed over me.

"I don't know. I think the contract is still on the counter."

Janet slapped the car into reverse.

"Let's go see."

I grew curious about the possibilities. Maybe it was only a year or so. My mind drifted to my video games, a world I loved better than this one. A warm sensation flooded my veins dreaming of the world the school might provide. We bounced down the road. Janet attempted to

avoid the potholes, but running over one was inevitable. Our only hope was not to hit the one that went to hell.

We turned down the still unplowed surface of my street. My gaze strained toward the trailer. Out front sat a gray SUV, but not one I recognized. Janet parked and I made my way to the door. I pulled it open to find the same man at the table, Mother across from him. He turned his face, greeting me with that same infuriating smile.

“Hello, Sydney. I was just talking with your mom. A slot opened up sooner than anticipated and I’ll be taking you to your new school today.”