

LEET

DASHIELL FORD

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For my family, whose unwavering support, love, and strength have always been there to light the way, even during the toughest times.

1

I had never seen a pit bull fly before. You could call it self-defense, though, since the beast attacked me first. I was just jogging on the sidewalk with my headphones on, enjoying the cool morning in high summer, not a soul in sight. Until I crossed into the dog's territory, which clearly included the sidewalk. And unfortunately, it considered trespassing an act of war. Or maybe it just didn't like my singing voice.

It lunged at me out of nowhere, growling and frothing at the mouth, snapping at my ankles. I went from jogging to running like my life depended on it, but I might as well have been a crawling baby compared to this beast. Within seconds, it closed the gap and went for my leg with an impossible leap. I winced, bracing for a sharp pain in my calf.

Instead, an ear-splitting crack and an even louder yelp startled every bird in the trees around us, causing them to screech as they soared to the sky. The pit bull flew as well, shooting away from me like a cannonball until it landed on the opposite side of the street. I kept running like a madman while keeping an eye on the dog, but it stopped chasing me and limped away. I breathed a sigh of relief and slowed down as I reached the corner, making a mental note to skip

this street on my next run.

After a hot shower at home, I lay in bed, replaying the dog's flight in my mind, wondering how on earth it bounced away from me like that, soaring through the air. As I remembered how its body had seemed to shake mid-air, something finally clicked in my brain, and I blinked.

Did I shock that dog?

I always gave people static shocks, way more often than others, so maybe the pit bull had experienced one of my trademark jolts, though this one had seemed exceptionally—

“Boy!”

I closed my eyes with a grunt. Ever since my dad started playing this old PlayStation game, ‘God of War’, he had been shouting ‘Boy’ at the top of his lungs—the same word the main character yells at his son throughout the entire game. Definitely not the God of Parenting, but my dad somehow thought it was hilarious.

Ignoring him, my thoughts returned to the shock—

“Booooooy!” my mom yelled this time.

With a sigh, I swung my legs out of bed and stretched my arms; I had to get up anyway. My two best friends would finally return today after being gone all summer, and I couldn't wait to see them again.

“Booooooooooy!” the lunatics downstairs screamed in unison before bursting out in laughter together.

I couldn't suppress a smile. Despite being sixteen, surrounded by kids that live inside their screens, my parents remained the biggest nerds I knew. They even tried to give me a name derived from

numbers: 1337, which, back in their day, was a popular term in online gaming. Luckily, naming laws existed to prevent parents from doing something so ridiculous. Yet it didn't stop the name from sticking because these four numbers had a clear pronunciation in their nerd world: *Leet*.

“Okay, okay, I'm coming!” I shouted, making my way toward my bedroom door. But I paused before I opened it, and pressed my ear against the door. Soft shuffling sounds were coming from right behind it, which in this house—especially for me—was a bad omen. These sounds undoubtedly belonged to my little seven-year-old sister, Lily, who always had it in for me.

After a slow twist of the doorknob, I threw open the door to startle her, and hopefully prevent some demonic plan. She wasn't there. The only thing in the hallway was a big red Swiss army knife suspended from the ceiling by a wire—flying straight at my head.

In hindsight, ducking might have been the wiser move, but I went with jerking my head to the side and slamming it hard against the doorpost. Groaning, I scanned the hall while rubbing the throbbing side of my face. There she was, concealed on the left side of my door with a wicked smile on her face.

I narrowed my eyes at her, but she didn't seem the least bit impressed. “*Hab!* You're such a baby. The knife was closed!”

I couldn't believe her. “You psycho! What if it had flown into my eye? I could have been blinded!”

She propped a hand on her hip and raised an arrogant eyebrow. “Well, did it?”

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself she was only seven years

old, though that became challenging as she started to laugh like a true maniac. I shook my head and couldn't help but wonder whether we were truly related. Sure, we might share the same light blue eyes and dark hair, but in every other way, she was an entirely different person.

“I'll call it Death Trap One,” she said proudly.

“Why would you call it a death trap if it's not supposed to kill me!?”

She looked at me as if I had asked the dumbest question in the world, whirled around with her long ponytail, and began muttering about Death Trap Two. I sighed and shook my head again. One of these days she'd actually kill me.

Downstairs, I found my parents in their—as my dad calls them—Insanely Awesome Ultimate Gaming Chairs. These chairs lived up to their name as a switch tilted them so far backward that they practically faced the ceiling. You might think someone would never use this feature, but they'd connected their PlayStations—yes, they both had their own—to 8k laser projectors fixed vertically on the ground, beaming their games onto the white ceiling above.

And when they weren't playing in their chairs, they were deeply absorbed in some Virtual Reality game, jumping around with their helmets on, slashing invisible blades in the air or firing shotguns at invisible zombies.

The only good things in their range of expensive gadgets were the noise-canceling headphones. My parents wanted full immersion,

which meant a quiet house for me. Usually.

I walked up to them with a frown. While my mom was engrossed in her favorite online shooter, muttering curses under her breath, my dad played Animal Crossing—kind of a kid’s game.

“Seriously, Dad?”

“What? This game is relaxing. You should try it sometime,” he replied with a satisfied smile.

“Right... Anyway, why were you guys calling for me so sweetly?”

My dad flipped a switch to adjust his chair into a somewhat normal position and turned, his face becoming serious.

“Leet. I need you to play FIFA with me. Right now. I’ve been practicing for weeks and finally made it into the first division today! I really think I can beat you now!”

I snorted and gave him a flat look. My dad had been trying to beat me at this soccer game since I was ten years old, and I’d never lost a game to him, not even once. The weird thing is, I didn’t even like gaming, and I still don’t. Maybe it’s because I always win, but I just find it boring.

“*Pleeeeeease?*” my dad pleaded.

I rolled my eyes, but I knew how happy it would make him. “All right, one game.”

His eyes lit up. “*Yes! Awesome!*”

He flipped his chair back to ground level and launched the game while I looked for a comfortable spot on the rug next to him. He chose his favorite team from Spain, one of the best in the game, while I selected a much lower-rated team from the Netherlands. I caught a hint of a scowl, though he remained silent. Perhaps he thought that

this slight ranking advantage gave him a chance.

He was wrong.

As soon as we began playing, the same scenario unfolded as always. My dad abused his controller, mashing the buttons to make his players perform flashy skill moves, while I simply passed around the ball, doing zero tricks whatsoever. Just before halftime I scored my fourth goal, while my dad didn't even get close to my goalkeeper.

At halftime, he cursed loudly and almost threw his controller on the ground. Then he took a deep breath and pulled himself together, making a host of changes to his team settings to ensure, in his words, 'a mind-boggling sensational comeback'. Six minutes later the match ended, and he didn't score a single goal.

Grinning at him, I propped myself up on my elbows. "Hey, Dad, I only scored three goals in the second half. All those fifty settings you changed at halftime must have worked!"

"Leet..." he grumbled, and I shifted farther away from him, my hands on the carpet now, ready to get up. Yet he paused and, after another deep breath, put on his serious dad face.

"Leet. How in the world is it possible that I'm in the first division, but you still defeat me like I'm a six-year-old child? Even though you never play this game! It's like all your players are all moving at the same time!"

"But that's the whole point, isn't it? To move your players to the right positions at the same time?"

"But you *can't* move multiple players simultaneously!"

"Maybe *you* can't, but you're like eighty years old. Isn't it time to stop playing games designed for quick young minds?"

His face was growing redder, and my mom chortled. Although she couldn't pause her online game, my dad's struggle seemed more entertaining for her at the moment.

"I'll have you know that I have been gaming since I was twelve years old!" my dad replied, trying—and failing—to stay calm.

"Well..." I drawled, bracing my arms. "I'll have you know that you can't keep up anymore. You're just too slow!"

As I uttered the last word I shot to my feet, feinted left, and then passed by him on his right, heading toward the door. He flung out his arm to grab me, missed, and fell from his insanely awesome chair, knocking over a side table in the process, causing a flood of chips to spill across the floor. Amid his chorus of colorful curses, my mom roared with laughter and gave me a thumbs-up.

"Max and Dylan should be back by now, later!" I said, waving as I dashed out the front door.

The sun shone brightly as I strolled to our usual spot: an old playground that nature had completely taken over. Grass and weeds grew everywhere, and any swings or slides had broken down long ago. Only three short brick walls had survived, and a couple of large birch trees were perfectly positioned to shield them from the sun. And as I'd hoped, my two best friends were already sitting on these walls. Well, one of them, at least. Max, the personification of laid-back, had sprawled himself out on one wall, even though you'd think it would be too small for that. Yet somehow, he always made it work.

"Hey!" I shouted, entering the playground.

Max, taking his time to get up, rose slowly and hopped off the wall. As soon as he reached his full height, I stopped dead in my tracks. Until now, I had been the tallest, especially compared to Dylan, my other best friend. However, Max seemed to have had some ridiculous growth spurt this summer. And on top of that, he looked like he had spent every second in the sun, and his arms were twice as big. Ever since I'd met him, his relaxed attitude and wavy sandy-blond hair already emitted a surfer vibe, but this transformation truly completed the look.

"Max, what happened!?" I said. "I thought you were stuck doing some boring office work with your dad. How did you end up looking like *The Rock*!?"

He gave me his trademark grin—one that makes you smile back involuntarily, even when he's being annoying—and bumped my fist.

"Yeah, it turned out to be more grunt work than I expected. My dad's company unexpectedly landed a big contract for an apartment complex, so he figured I'd be better off helping on-site. I had to spend entire days hauling big wooden beams in the sun, but I had a lot of fun with the other guys, and, as you can see, it paid off!"

He grinned, flexing his biceps, and Dylan glanced up from his laptop and nodded. "Yep, Max got a sick update."

I laughed and checked if Dylan had become taller as well, but he didn't seem to have changed at all. Sitting there with his laptop on his knees, he was the only one in our school who could out-nerd my parents, and he had the look to go with it—short, chubby, glasses, and black hoodies with computer quotes on them. Dylan was reserved, quiet, a typical introvert. But if you got to know him, the

real person inside, you'd find he was crazy smart, funny, and would do anything for his friends without even thinking about it.

I settled down next to him and clapped his back. "Good to see you again, man."

He nodded with a smile and closed his laptop. He was a wizard with those things and could hack anything with a chip, whereas I was the opposite; my grandma often helped me out.

"Don't worry, Leet," said Max, laying back on the wall. "You can still have all the girls you want. I'm only interested in one."

"Oh? Who's that, then?"

His eyes took on a dreamy expression. "My gorgeous Colombian surfer girl, *Valeria*..."

"Did you just say 'my'? Did you finally get a girlfriend?"

"Nah, she's playing hard to get."

"Ah..." said Dylan. "Another unrequited crush, I see."

"Don't worry, she can't resist my charms forever," Max replied, his eyes full of confidence.

Dylan snorted, and I laughed at both of their faces. Man, I missed these guys. Even though we all turned sixteen in the past year, we could still act like kids sometimes. Or a lot of the time. But hey, we're guys, so we get away with it.

I turned to Dylan. "So, wizard, where did you go again? The other side of the world, I believe?"

"Yep, I flew first class to Japan," he answered proudly. "I met up with people from all over the world to learn from each other."

"Ah, and by *learning*, you mean...?"

"You know exactly what I mean," he said with a big smirk.

And he was right. The only other people Dylan met up with besides us were his friends in the hacker community, and when they did, they swapped code for new ways to hack servers, databases, and other things I had no clue about.

I nudged him. “So, which companies did your gang hack into this time?”

“Well... Let’s just say that a few homophobic websites suddenly found themselves with a rainbow-colored singing unicorn bouncing around that they can’t get rid of.”

Max burst out laughing and I shook my head with a chuckle, picturing Dylan and his group of nerds laughing diabolically in a dark basement.

“And next to representing the gay community, did you pick up some new hacking skills?” I asked.

Dylan nodded eagerly and pushed up his glasses—they always slid down when he got excited. He then shifted against the wall but forgot he just placed his laptop there, and shouted, “*Kusò!*”, as it started tilting over the edge. I had never seen him move so fast before in my life, but he caught his laptop in the air right before it plummeted to the ground.

“*Kusò?*” Max asked with a raised brow, while Dylan blew out a breath and affectionately caressed his baby.

“Oh yeah, I picked up some new words in Japan. *Kusò* is the Japanese word for crap, damn, or something like that.”

“Right...” I said, not sure if I liked the sound of this word; it had a strangely aggressive tone. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“Well,” Dylan started, “I got intel about a few zero-day exploits,

but these guys didn't want to share all their knowledge. I need more time to research and see if I can get them to work."

I frowned at him. "Zero-day what now?"

Dylan let out a sigh. "Let's save that topic for, well, never. But what about you? What have you been up to all this time?"

It was a good question. What had I been doing these last weeks? Escaping from my gaming-addicted parents? Avoiding my evil sister? Static-shocking rabid dogs? I *did* take up running to stay fit, and it was an excellent excuse to run past Emma's house daily and act all surprised when I would bump into her. She must have gone somewhere else for the entire summer, though; it didn't happen even once.

Still, I was about to put on a broad smile and tell them how great my summer vacation was. Why? Because I realized a long time ago that people couldn't tell whether I was joking, and for some reason, I found it funny. Only close friends could see I was kidding, but anybody else assumed I was dead serious. In some situations, like telling people I had a fantastic vacation when it was terrible, this wasn't an issue. When I told my aunt that her newborn looked like a tiny demon, though... Let's just say she wasn't filled with joy.

But before I could answer Dylan's question, I tensed up as a loud, obnoxious laugh filled the air. It was a sound we knew all too well.

2

“Well, well... Look what we have here... Three poor, nerdy gay-boys, unprotected by their mommies and daddies...”

Splendid. Jake and his two goons. I didn’t even know the names of his loyal followers—Jim, Jeff, maybe? We just called the three of them *the J’s*. They represented the bulk of the bully federation at our school, and always seemed to be especially interested in the three of us.

It was a shame because Jake had the potential to be a cool guy. Tall, athletic, good-looking, and he could be funny sometimes. Yet, for some reason, he’d taken it upon himself to lord over the entire school, and his black belt in karate helped no one who had the guts to confront him.

“Hey, Jake, good to see you again!” I said with a friendly smile. “How was your summer vacation?”

My seemingly genuine enthusiasm threw him off and he missed a beat, frowning at me. See, only when you know me well enough can you appreciate—or tolerate—my sense of humor.

Meanwhile, Dylan paled and muttered ‘*kusò*’ under his breath a few times. Yep, this new word definitely annoyed me. I hoped it wouldn’t catch on.

Max, on the other hand, lay back on the wall. He didn't worry about anything unless absolutely necessary, which, by his standards, was close to never.

Jake recovered, scanned the playground for any bystanders, and continued his lazy stroll with an evil smile. "It was great, thank you! But I'm positive I'll enjoy seeing the three of you again even more..."

"Of course! We're awesome," Max replied cheerfully, and the three of us remained on the short walls, trying to appear unimpressed as he drew closer.

"Since it's the first day of school tomorrow, how about we give your faces some remarkable upgrades?" Jake threatened, his gaze fixed on Dylan.

Max now propped himself up on his elbows. "Hmm... I'm not sure my face can get any better, Jakey, but we can give yours a shot? Although, to be honest, it seems like a lost cause."

Jake growled in Max's direction, unfazed by his new look. "You honestly think that your slightly bigger muscles will help you?"

Before Max could reply, I pushed myself off the wall to face Jake, exchanging a glance with Dylan. He gave me a small nod and carefully put his laptop down on the ground.

These fights with Jake had been going on for three years already, and I'd had enough of them. It all started in the first year of middle school. Dylan was obviously an easy target for the J's, and they had been picking on him from the very first day. At the time, Max and I didn't know Dylan that well because he mostly kept to himself and his laptop. But when Jake pushed him for the hundredth time and everyone just stood there as Dylan came close to tears, I couldn't

stand by anymore. I walked over to Jake, gave him a hard shove, and he tripped and fell backward on his ass in front of everyone. From that day on, three things happened.

First, Dylan became our closest friend.

Second, the three of us became Jake's arch-enemies.

Third, the school installed cameras everywhere, tired of kids fighting. If it still happened, they could at least see who started it. Of course, this didn't deter Jake at all, since he could take the physical part outside. And inside, he just continued shouting 'unpleasant' things.

"Come on, man," I said. "Isn't this getting a bit old for you? No higher hopes in life?"

Jake ignored me and took another step to get within reach. Experience should have taught me his silence was dangerous, but I still wasn't prepared, and his hand shot out faster than I expected, hitting me hard in the stomach.

I doubled over in pain, gasping for air. Dylan backed up against the wall, frozen, looking scared out of his mind. It wasn't the first time Jake hit one of us, but it never got any less scary for Dylan.

Max, on the other hand, bolted from the wall toward me, but the other J's quickly closed in and blocked his path, jeering and daring him to fight both of them.

Jake looked down his nose at me. "Isn't being a pathetic loser getting a bit old for you? No higher hopes in life?"

Man, I hated him. Memories of the times he picked on us flashed through my mind and I clenched my fists, feeling my anger building up inside. Over the years, I had tried to fight back a couple of

times—emphasis on tried—but I doubt I ever landed a single hit. I was powerless against him, and we both knew it.

He laughed as he raised his fists again, and all I could do was brace myself and wince in anticipation.

This time, however, nothing happened. To me, at least.

Jake's hand snapped back with a loud crack right before it reached my stomach, and he staggered backward, his arm shaking.

“*What!?* Are you wearing a taser or something!” he snarled.

Of course, I wasn't, but I was just as surprised as him because I'd never shocked someone with my stomach, let alone through my shirt. And like the pit bull this morning, the power, the sound, and the blue sparks flying around were extraordinary. What was going on today?

Jake didn't seem to want a brainstorming session and moved closer again. “Let's see if you're wearing anything on your face!” he yelled.

Crap! Dodging him would be impossible, so I turned away as far as possible and raised a hand to protect my face.

Once again, I was saved.

This time not by a spark, but the loud rattling sound of a skateboard rushing toward us. While Jake stopped to see who dared to disturb his bullying, I shuffled out of his reach and only then looked up. *Of course*, it was Emma, my all-time crush. All I wanted for the entire summer vacation was to bump into her, and now she shows up while I'm flinching, scared, and still half-gasping for air. Fantastic.

“Hey, Jake, having fun? Do you still enjoy fighting people with zero karate experience? How very brave of you,” Emma said flatly,

giving him a level look while jumping off her board and kicking it up in one fluid motion. She caught it mid-air with one hand and casually leaned it against the closest wall.

She looked stunning. Her beautifully suntanned face, with freckles across her nose and cheeks, was hidden partly by her long blond hair that fell loosely over a white blouse, almost long enough to reach the blue cut-off jeans she wore beneath it. My heart was already racing, but it was now beating triple-time.

That said, she wasn't my lifetime crush because of her looks. Emma was the sweetest girl, completely non-judgemental, no matter what you looked like. If an enormous guy with tattoos and a baseball bat angrily ran toward her, she would smile at him and assume he was running late to play catch with his son.

Her dazzling green eyes smiled at me, and she ignored whatever Jake snarled at her. "Hey, Leet, good to see you again. Max, Dylan."

We all nodded to her, but I kept an eye on Jake. I knew him too well, and I was right. The second Emma turned to us, he moved silently to attack her from behind.

"Em! Watch—"

I stopped because she already moved. With an impossible sense of awareness, she had sensed Jake's attack and her hands blurred, her movements too fast for my eyes. She slapped Jake's attack away with one hand while she twisted her body in the same motion to smack his cheek with her other hand. *Not* lightly. If this was a cartoon, you'd see a giant red handprint on the side of his face.

Everything went real quiet...

While all of us—including Jake and his goons—looked shocked,

Emma shook her head, giving Jake a cold look.

“Wow... Attacking someone in another weight class from behind? That’s a new low, even for you.”

I inhaled through my teeth, positive that provoking Jake would only make things worse, and the look on his face confirmed it. He had always been quick to anger, especially when he tried to intimidate Dylan and received a smart-ass comment back, but apparently, we hadn’t seen his ultimate level of rage yet. His limbs trembled, knuckles turned white over clenched fists, and his glaring eyes seemed to bulge out of their sockets as he took a step toward her, his stance heavy and threatening.

Emma didn’t seem to care one bit, and calmly awaited Jake’s next move. I was sure he wouldn’t mind attacking a girl with his full strength, but he seemed to hesitate. Maybe he wasn’t sure he could beat her? I had no idea how good she was, but I knew she competed in martial arts tournaments, and the move she just pulled off looked insane.

At an invisible command by Jake his goons joined him, one on each of his sides. In response, Max and I flanked Emma, and even Dylan stepped forward to stand behind me. The J-boy facing Dylan and me seemed unconcerned. Obviously. The J-boy facing the upgraded Max 2.0 looked less comfortable. My heart pounded as the goons raised their fists, ready to throw their first punch.

Yet nobody made a move.

It seemed like everyone was waiting for Jake to make up his mind, and Emma took a tiny step toward him. Unlike everyone else here she looked relaxed, as if she was having a delightful picnic on the

grass.

She lowered her voice and looked him in the eye. “Alright, Jake, what’s it gonna be? Up for another round?”

He gave her a scorching glare but remained quiet. Then he looked left and right, probably questioning whether his goons could back him up, or if they’d be too busy fighting the three nerdy gay-boys.

Finally, he cursed and spun around, muttering something about ‘getting us eventually’ while he stomped the other way.

Most of us kept quiet until they were out of sight, except for Max, who waved and told them to come back soon. Dylan rushed to check the condition of his laptop and sat back on the short wall. He was still shaky, but using his laptop always soothed him.

I was still processing. It was unbelievable how she had pulled this off on her own. I looked at her—other people might use the word gawked—while my heart rate finally decreased to its normal rhythm. As I opened my mouth to thank her, she turned to me and put a hand on my stomach. My heart rate shot to the sky again as she went even further and lifted my shirt, bending over to take a closer look. Like any normal person in this situation, I froze—mouth hanging open.

She looked up at me and smiled. “It looks fine, Leet. You braced yourself in time. Nice reflexes.” She took another lingering look and then winked at me.

“Nice abs too.”

My manly reaction consisted of smoothly stepping back and replying confidently. And by that, I mean stumbling and somehow combining the words ‘well done’ with ‘thanks’.

“Well d-dhanks, Em.”

Yep, I’m amazing.

She laughed and winked at me again, stretching her arms above her head. “No worries. It’s always fun to put that jerk in his place. I gotta go, though,” she said, strolling back to her skateboard. “See you guys tomorrow!”

She waved, threw her board down, and kick-pushed away at high speed.

I stared after her, butterflies partying in my stomach. “Wow...” I muttered.

After a second—or a minute—I turned back to Max and Dylan, who smirked at each other.

“What!?” I asked, scowling at them.

“*Nice abs, Leeeet,*” Dylan said in a high-pitched voice.

Max burst out laughing and punched Dylan’s shoulder. “He did cover your ass, dude. But then of course, the love of his life covered his.” He turned to me. “Great job thanking her by the way, very smooth.”

Before I could come up with a good comeback, Dylan turned serious.

“Thanks, Leet... Jake would’ve attacked me first if you hadn’t confronted him.” He paused and gave me a sly smile. “You really had no chance, though.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have put down your laptop, evil hacker. It probably hits harder than your tiny hand.”

“Pff, I’d rather die.”

Max and I laughed, although this probably wasn’t even a joke.

“Wasn’t it weird, though?” Dylan said. “That you shocked Jake so hard?”

Max shrugged. “It’s probably the humidity, dude. They said in the news it was crazy low today.”

Ah, that explains the pit bull this morning, I thought.

“Maybe...” Dylan said, eyeing me curiously.

I chuckled and clapped his back. “The only logical explanation is that I got superpowers, right?”

He scoffed. “Yeah, okay. Never mind.”

The conversation moved on as we talked about the rest of our summer vacations. It was great to see them again, but another part of my mind was caught in a loop, playing the same scene over and over again: Emma getting real close and looking up into my eyes. I couldn’t wait to see her again.

3

I didn't fall asleep until long until after midnight, my mind too occupied bouncing between Jake and Emma. Unsurprisingly, I slept through my alarm by more than half an hour the next morning. Not the best start to a new year. As I left my bedroom no army knives flew at my head, so it seemed Death Trap Two was still in the works. Not sure if it was a good thing, though, as it might be more deadly.

After getting out of a quick shower, I remembered Emma's compliment and stopped my rush to check out my abs. *Not bad*, I thought. It wasn't a genuine six-pack or anything, but running had paid off. My thick, messy hair still annoyed me, but on days like this—seven days a week—I used the brilliant fashion invention called the 'out-of-bed' look.

I finally reached our school ten minutes later, threw my bike in the racks and raced through the halls to our math class, which I knew had already started. I took a few seconds to catch my breath and entered the class as silently as I could, keeping close to the wall ninja-style. The door being at the back of the class and my desk at the front made this an impossible mission, but there was no harm in trying; it couldn't get any worse anyway.

One of the J's tried to trip me, but I was expecting it. Pretending

not to notice, I lifted my foot at the last moment and shot the J a bored look. Emma sat next to him, but when I flashed a smile at her, she looked the other way, turning her head as far as possible. Was she blushing?

The teacher cleared his throat and I spun to him with a grimace. However, he was still looking at some papers on his desk, and I blew out a quiet breath. Still edging forward, I got closer and closer to my seat, now only a few steps away. I was going to make it!

I was wrong.

“*Good morning, Leet!*” Jake shouted from his seat at the back.

Several people in the class chuckled, and the teacher looked up from his desk with a grunt. With puppy eyes I pleaded innocence, and he sighed, giving me a dismissive wave while returning his attention to his papers. Assuming it was a gesture of ‘sit down quickly and I will not kick you out of my class’, I gratefully sat down in my chair. As far as math teachers go, this one was all right. Yet as far as math lessons go, this one wasn’t. It was so dull I could barely keep myself awake.

When it was over we had chemistry, which could be interesting, especially when we were concocting potions like wizards. Unfortunately, our teacher had decided to read the first chapter from our book out loud. In his low monotonous voice. For the entire lesson. I would have nodded off but Max forcibly kept me awake, kicking my leg throughout the hour.

However, both classes combined didn’t even come close to how boring the next class was. Computer studies, they called it. Programming. *Blegh.*

Of course, Dylan loved it. He walked into the room full of computers with a spring in his step and started typing at the speed of light before he even sat all the way down. I had a different strategy—closing my eyes at the speed of light while crashing down in my chair. The only good thing about this class was the mouse pad, which often served as my pillow.

Max flopped down next to me and punched my shoulder. “Dude, stay awake! Did you forget? We need to hand in our code at the end of each lesson this year.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, batting his hand away, trying to find the best position for my head. The assignment today was to code the start of some ancient game called Pong. We had to create a ball in the middle that would automatically move to the left, and once it reached the end of the screen, it should bounce right back to the other side, and so on. I think I really tried to write some code. Maybe. It’s hard to do so while glancing sideways at your computer.

More likely, I found the ultimate position on my mouse-pillow, because I woke up about fifty minutes later to Mr. Dos, our teacher, shouting with his horrible raspy voice. “All right, class! Let’s see the beautiful code Leet created for us! With his name, it should be nothing short of *elite!*”

He snickered at his own joke while striding toward me. Still half-asleep, I glared at him, and he glared right back at me. We’d never liked each other. Possibly because I usually fell asleep in his class and he yelled in my ear to wake me up.

To me, he seemed like a hateful man who held some power for the first time in his life. He slithered around the class like a snake, with

greasy black hair falling to his shoulders, looking down his beaky nose. If we had a Snape-lookalike contest, this guy would have no competition.

Mr. Dos copied the program from my computer to a USB stick and gave me a greasy smile as he walked back to the front of the class to show my code on the main screen. Max turned to me with a rueful smile.

“Sorry dude, I wanted to wake you up, but you whispered *Emmaaaaaa...* at least twenty times. I didn’t have the heart to end your dream.”

My brain was too tired to come up with something better than *shut up*, so I scowled at him with an unintentional yawn, and he grinned at the ridiculous face I ended up making.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dos finished opening my program. I stared at the main screen in defeat, convinced that I would receive the lowest grade. Something was there, though; the big screen showed at least fifteen lines of code, and I could absolutely not remember writing them. As our teacher launched my program, the entire class fell silent. There it was, the most beautiful black circle I’d ever seen, sliding smoothly to the left, and upon reaching the wall, it bounced and soared back to the right side of the screen.

Did I really write this? I glanced at Dylan, expecting a mischievous smile. He had bailed me out countless times by hacking my—or the teacher’s—computer. Yet he appeared glued to the big screen, shaking his head in disbelief at ‘my’ supposed code.

I rechecked the code, still failing to recognize any of it. Some lines even contained words I didn’t know existed. And next to that, I

couldn't fathom how these few lines of code could conjure this magically moving ball.

Now it was my turn to grin at Max. "Thanks for not waking me up man. This was refreshing."

He chuckled, and I shifted my focus back to my beautiful black ball, the slow movement mesmerizing. Our teacher had enough of my ball, however, and he took a few steps to loom over Dylan.

"Did you help him *again!*?"

Dylan didn't respond, still poring over my code with his mouth wide open.

"*Dylan!*"

Startled, Dylan's eyes snapped to Mr. Dos. "No, really, I didn't do anything! How could I? His computer is completely isolated from the network!"

Our teacher considered this for a moment. When Dylan had helped me out before, he always claimed he did nothing, but he was a terrible liar. Each time it happened, Mr. Dos spent a lot of time trying to figure out *how* Dylan did it. Unfortunately for Mr. Dos, Dylan was not only good at hacking but also a master at covering his tracks, either erasing them or using the art of misdirection. One time, the teacher believed he finally got him, only to discover the trace of the hack led back to a prince from Nigeria.

Ultimately, Mr. Dos gave up and resorted to disconnecting my computer—shutting off Wi-Fi and Bluetooth—and frequently inspecting my setup for any signs of new network cables, USB sticks or dongles. Once, he even took a screwdriver to pry open the chassis, checking if Dylan hadn't changed anything on the inside.

Again I turned my gaze to Dylan, yet he seemed so baffled that I actually believed he didn't help me this time. But that would mean *I* wrote this code...?

Mr. Dos didn't know what to do, his face switching between believing Dylan and disbelieving my capability to write some functional code.

"Well... I guess... you got... lucky... this time..." he said, struggling to get the words out. I gave him a loving smile, and his confusion at my expression was so worth it.

He swiftly moved on to showcase Dylan's code, praising the elegance of his separation of delegates and classes in comparison to mine, and all other kinds of programming whatnots. Naturally, Dylan created something way better. In only fifty minutes he recreated the entire game, with colors, playable online, working scoreboards and all. Normally, Dylan basked in the screen's glow while Mr. Dos commended him, yet this time he had a quizzical look on his face, occasionally glancing back at me.

As the class ended, lunchtime had finally arrived, and I needed it badly. But as soon as I exited the classroom, Dylan grabbed my shoulder.

"Leet, where did you learn that!?" he shouted.

"Whoa, take it easy man, I'm barely awake."

"But your code!"

I chuckled. "Awesome, right?"

"Did you really write it? I've never seen you code like this before. You even created custom methods in a framework we use!"

"Custom methods?"

Dylan breathed an exasperated sigh. “How could you write this code without knowing what I mean?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, man. Look, I’m tired. Can you explain, quickly and in plain English, what on earth you’re talking about?”

He nodded and pushed up his glasses. “Okay, you know you can use functions inside your code, right? For example, there is a math framework where you can use a ‘round’ function to round up a number.”

That was simple enough, so I nodded.

“But your code used a function that doesn’t exist! Which means you created those functions inside the framework yourself!”

He almost lost me there, but I got the gist of it. “So?”

Dylan blinked. “So!?”

All right, maybe I didn’t get the gist of it.

“How in the world did you create that function? The frameworks are private, so you can’t access them!”

I grunted. “Listen, man, I slept terribly, and I don’t know how I did it. Maybe I typed some random stuff in the wrong places and it actually worked out? Can you please let this go? I’m hungry.”

Max helped me out and clapped Dylan on his back. “Leet probably cheated, dude. Anyway, leave him be. He’s probably still thinking about his dream with *Emmaaaaaaa...*”

I snorted, punched Max on his shoulder, and turned to walk to the cafeteria while Max joked about whether Emma thought my code was as beautiful as my abs. Dylan looked after us bewildered and then grudgingly followed, shaking his head.

“Impossible...” he muttered.

In the cafeteria, Jake bumped into my shoulder the second I stepped through the door, hard enough for my open backpack to fall on the ground, sending my books skidding across the floor.

“Whoops! My bad, didn’t see you there, loser,” he said, fist-bumping his goons. He must have still been angry about the day before because he usually avoided anything physical with the cameras inside. Thankfully, this was the only thing he had planned and he walked away. I shrugged and ignored him, but Max didn’t. “He’ll get you this afternoon, douchebag!” he called after him while Dylan helped me pick up my stuff.

I looked up at Max with a frown. “Why? What’s going on this afternoon?”

“You know, the gaming challenge! It’s always on the first day of school!”

Yawning, I shook my head. “Nope, not happening.”

“*What? Why!?*” Dylan and Max said in unison.

“I’m tired, and besides, you guys know I’m not into gaming.”

I turned around to find a table, but Dylan grabbed my shoulder for the second time, eyes pleading.

“Come on, Leet, do it for me! I love the look on Jake’s face when he’s losing, and you know you’re the best of us!”

“Sorry, man, but no.” Then I gave him a level look. “And my school account password has been changed, so you can’t enter me again like last year.”

Dylan sighed, but his expression quickly changed to something

else. And I wasn't sure I liked the look in his eyes.

After our last class, the gaming challenge began. My friends managed to convince me to at least watch the qualification rounds with them, if only to see Jake lose. This year's competition featured a racing game, and the school had made an effort to please everyone by setting up a massive screen and projector in the auditorium. The event kicked off with four brackets, each containing eight players, and only the winner would move on to the semifinals.

Fortunately for me, it was over fast. Jake won his race in the first bracket easily, reaching the finish line at least ten seconds before the second car. He mostly won because—like in real life—he played like a jerk. He knew exactly when and where to bump into the other cars, wrecking at least four of them. And each time he succeeded, he laughed obnoxiously while his goons jeered at his opponents.

As soon as Jake's race finished, I stood up. "All right, he didn't lose, and will probably win this whole thing, so let's go."

Dylan stayed right where he was and closed his laptop, a gleam in his eyes. Max laughed and clapped his shoulder.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked, though I was afraid I knew the answer already.

"*Leet!*" a teacher shouted, waving at me to take my place in the next race, and I groaned. Did Dylan hack my account again? Or maybe the whole gaming challenge? Well, screw that. I spun around and headed in the opposite direction.

"Whoooooop, go Leeeet!"

Recognizing that voice, I halted and turned my head. Yep, it was Emma, smiling at me from across the auditorium. Another groaned escaped me; I couldn't back down now. Narrowing my eyes at Dylan, I made my way to the beanbag assigned to me and settled in. Then I grabbed the nearest controller and shot a quick glance in Emma's direction. Was that another blush!?

The possibility that maybe I caused that blush calmed me down, and the race went pretty well. I was lucky it was a racing game. In a fighting game, the others would've memorized all these weird combos, but a racing game was easy. Accelerate, brake, left, right. How hard can it be? Without trying too hard—or crashing any opponents—I won the race and advanced to the second semifinal.

After the last two brackets finished, the first semifinal started right away, pitting Jake against the winner of the third race. While the guy wasn't bad, Jake bumped into the side of his car in the first lap already, making it spin around and crash into a tree. Then he drove the rest of the race slowly on purpose, giving himself more time to laugh and talk loudly about how much the other guy sucked. Like yesterday, my anger built up inside, and now I actually wanted to face him in the final. I might not win in a fight, but beating him in a game would definitely satisfy me.

My second race proved to be a lot harder. My opponent was fast and quickly took the lead in the first lap. I kept up with him, though, and gradually got closer. Then, at a sharp turn at the end of the second lap he finally gave me a chance, braking too late, and I drifted perfectly to pass him on the inside. After that I stayed in front of him, not giving him a single chance to pass me, and finished about

two seconds before him. He turned and shook my hand, clearly impressed. “Well played, Leet. You must have put tons of hours into this game.”

I nodded my thanks, feeling it was best not to tell him I had never played this game before. In response to the cheers from Emma and my friends, I rose from my seat with a wide smile on my face. Though I might not love gaming, I couldn't deny I was good at it.