

GORDON KORMAN

slacker



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For Harry and Nancy Korman

CHAPTER ONE

CAMERON BOXER

It was ill—ill being a good thing for it to be.

The basement was dim. The couch was soft and comfortable, perfectly molded to the contours of my butt by the thousands of hours I'd spent on it. And the aliens coming out of the smoldering wreckage of the mothership were dazed and slow, ripe for the blasting.

It was a moment to savor, but there was no time for savoring. The controller was an extension of my hands as I took aim and fired. My friends Pavel and Chuck had my back, and also this guy Borje, who was in Malmo, Sweden. Their voices rang out through my headset. We were a tight-knit team, even though Pavel was playing from three doors down, Chuck from two blocks over, and Borje at a distance of five thousand miles. The aliens were shouting, too, but they didn't seem to be as organized as we were. And definitely not as dedicated.

I heard another voice—my mother's—coming from upstairs. I ignored it. Nothing that happened on Earth could be important right now.

The basement lights began to flash on and off. Now, that annoyed me. With great effort, I had created a

cave-like atmosphere ideal for gaming. And here was Mom, standing outside the cave, flicking a switch and ruining my concentration.

“What?” I hollered, my finger tapping the Y control, which created a steady pulse of Omega radiation that the extraterrestrials were especially sensitive to.

Another thing my mother didn’t understand: “What?” was not a real question. “What?” meant “I’m busy” or “Do not disturb” or even “Go shout at someone who isn’t involved in a life-and-death struggle with seven-foot insects!”

She said something about having to go out, ziti in the oven, and ten minutes. What I heard was “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” Seriously, if she was going to be back in ten minutes, why did I have to know about this at all? I had an alien hit squad on my tail.

I focused on the screen, trying to peer through the burning extraterrestrial atmosphere. Suddenly a voice eerily like Darth Vader’s announced, “Cover me while I plant the heavy-neutron seed.”

Chuck was the first to panic. “Cam! Did you hear that? It’s him!”

“Yeah, but which one is he?” Pavel added desperately.

Borje was babbling excitedly, but when he got too amped up, he switched to Swedish, so he wasn’t much help.

I stared at the hideous aliens on the screen, with their

armored, insectoid bodies; undulating antennae; and cold, hooded eyes. It was impossible to tell which was being manipulated by the owner of that deep voice.

I screamed one word: *“Attack!”*

And we did, blasting away with lasers, disruptors, and antimatter grenades. I even threw rocks. It had to be the most intense battle we’d ever fought. It raged on and on and on. Pavel had to leave to eat dinner, and Borje’s dad caught him and made him go to bed. It was just me and Chuck against a lone enemy, holed up in the wreckage of his escape pod. We had him cornered, but you couldn’t tell by the way he was fighting, firing at us through a breach in the strontium field.

“You’ll never reach me in here!” the deep voice leered.

Of course, we should have expected that the last alien standing would be him. The gamer with the Darth Vader voice synthesizer had been stalking me online for months, foiling my Normandy invasions, sacking my quarterbacks, forcing my chariots out of the Circus Maximus, and battering me with steel chairs in extreme wrestling matches. I didn’t even know the guy’s name—not his real one, anyway. He went by his gamer tag, Evil McKillPeople, of Toronto, Canada. My archnemesis.

“What are we going to do, Cam?” Chuck was losing his nerve. “We can’t blast through strontium!”

“Aim for the breach!” I advised.

“But *he’s* aiming at *us*! And—Oh, hi, Mom. Dinnertime already?”

“*Do not put down that controller!*” I ordered. “We’ve got him outnumbered!”

The next voice I heard wasn’t Chuck’s or Darth Vader’s. It seemed to be coming from outside. What was it saying? I raised the headphones from my ears.

“*This is the Sycamore Fire Department. Is there anybody in the house?*”

Well, that had to be the stupidest question ever asked. Of course I was in the house. Why did the fire department want to know that?

Without putting down the controller, I got up, ran to the high window, yanked away the pillow I’d jammed there for extra darkness, and peered outside. All I could see were fire engines and guys in heavy raincoats and rubber boots.

“What?” I exclaimed aloud, and this time it didn’t mean “Do not disturb” or “I’m busy.” It meant: “Why is the entire Sycamore Fire Department parked on our lawn?”

An enormous crash shook the foundation of the house. Heavy running footfalls sounded upstairs. A moment later, the basement door was flung wide and one of those giant raincoats appeared on the stairs, enveloped in a thick cloud of smoke.

“Kid, what are you doing here?” he barked.

“I’m finally going to beat Evil McKillPeople!” I yelled back.

“Your house is on fire!”

He shoved me upstairs, the controller still clutched in my hand. By that time, another firefighter had invaded the kitchen and found the baked ziti—a coal-black charred lump of carbon.

“False alarm,” he announced. “This casserole burned and the whole house filled with smoke. Neighbor reported it pouring out the windows.” He turned to me. “Good luck getting the black off the ceiling.”

My mother’s “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah” came back to me then. Only this time, it sounded more like “I’m making a baked ziti for dinner. Wait ten minutes and take it out of the oven.”

That would probably have been about an hour ago—you know, back when our house still had a front door. I’d always wondered why firemen carry axes. Now I knew.

I was bound to hear a whole lot about this later tonight. It was definitely going to disturb my lifestyle.

Worst of all, when I finally went back down to the basement, the TV screen showed my character lying stone-dead on the alien surface. Evil McKillPeople was standing over him, a leering grin on his green lips.

Video games were exactly like life, only better.

Both followed the laws of cause and effect. You take a turn too fast in a racing game, you roll your car. Or in the real world, if you don't hear your mom talking about ziti in the oven, the fire department will bust down your door.

It was easy to get a new race car. That happened with the touch of a button on your controller. Our door, on the other hand, turned out to be a nonstandard size.

"Fensterman says it's going to take a month to custom-make a new one!" raved my father, explaining why we now lived with a piece of plywood nailed across the front entrance of our house. For the next month, we would have to use the back door.

Dad wasn't shouting because he was mad at me. He was shouting to be heard over the roar of the giant fans that stood all around, blowing out the smoke and burnt smell left over from the ziti.

He also happened to be mad at me. Just not as mad as Mom.

"I asked one little thing of you, Cameron Boxer," she seethed. "One thing: Take out the ziti after ten minutes and turn off the oven."

"That's two things," I pointed out.

“Two things any orangutan could do, no problem!” she raged. “Of course, he’d have to swing away from the game console for thirty seconds.”

Now, that bothered me. “You know,” I said, “you and Dad run a furniture store because that’s your lifestyle. Video games are *my* lifestyle. I’m not a big furniture fan, but I don’t dump all over it, because I respect your lifestyle.”

My father’s eyes bulged. “That ‘lifestyle’ puts food on the table and clothes on your back. And it pays for things like video games and the electricity to run them.”

“First prize at Rule the World is ten thousand dollars,” I reminded them. That was the East Coast gaming championship coming up in November. Pavel, Chuck, and I were in training—although I hadn’t decided yet which of those guys to take on as my wingman. We called ourselves the Awesome Threesome, but Rule the World only accepted twosomes.

Mom sighed. “It’s not the money. It’s not the dinner. It’s not even the house full of smoke and the ruined door.”

“It’s a little bit about the door,” Dad corrected her. “And it’ll be a little more if our insurance premium goes up because of this.”

Mom ignored him. “Look at yourself, Cam. You’re pale as a ghost. You look like you just got out of prison. The best thing I can say about your grades is that you’re not failing. You’ve never played a sport—”

“Too sweaty,” I interjected.

She forged on. “Or did drama—”

“Too showy.”

“Or joined a club—”

“Too many strangers.”

“Or participated in a single extracurricular activity. Cam, if you didn’t have a birth certificate, it would be next to impossible to prove that you even exist! Your only interest is video games.”

She said this like it was a bad thing. I was proud of my lifestyle. I saw this guy on TV once who said the key to happiness was to find what you love to do, and do it. I’d lived by that rule for every one of my thirteen years. Obviously, I still went to school, and flossed, and got haircuts and flu shots and all that. Even the TV guy admitted nobody could get away with only the good stuff. But if you could keep the balance in favor of doing what you love—80–20, let’s say—you could be at least 80 percent happy. Which was still pretty ill.

My dad took up the lecture. “We’re not saying there’s anything wrong with video games in moderation. But you don’t do anything else. Sooner or later it’s going to cost you the chance to have any kind of life that doesn’t come with an avatar on a screen. Not to mention that you’re hogging the game system that was bought for the whole

family. Your poor sister has to go to a friend's house if she wants to play at all because you're always on ours."

"Melody's not a serious gamer like me," I defended myself. "I'm in training. Doesn't that show initiative and involvement?"

Dad took a deep breath. "Listen up, kid. First of all, we're going to be using the back door for the next month. In that time, you will find something else to be interested in besides video games. It can be a sport; it can be a club; it can be anything you want, so long as it involves real human beings and it doesn't happen on a screen."

I was horrified. "But what about Rule the World? I've been practicing for months!"

Mom spoke up. "We're not taking your games away. Yet. But we're not kidding, Cameron. Your life is going to change."

"Is it the ziti?" I demanded. "It's the ziti, right? When I win the contest, I'll buy you ten thousand dollars' worth of ziti!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Your future is more important than any amount of ziti. This is going to happen, Cameron. It's going to happen before we have a real door again. And if it doesn't, you *will* lose that game system."

I staggered back. Honestly—like I'd been punched.

I remembered something else the TV guy had mentioned: There were always going to be people trying to mess up your lifestyle.

I'd been on guard for those people my entire life. But I never dreamed they'd turn out to be my own parents.