



GAME OVER

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DEDICATED TO MY MOM, FOR
BEING A COMPUTER WHIZ WAY
BEFORE EVERYONE ELSE WAS
A COMPUTER WHIZ, AND FOR
TELLING PAT WHEN IT WAS MY
TURN ON THE COMPUTER. AND,
YOU KNOW, FOR EVERYTHING
ELSE. IN THAT ORDER.

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LEVEL 1

A lot of people will tell you I had a problem with HIVE, but that's not true. I liked HIVE. I was good at HIVE. It's just that, if I'd had it my way, I'd have been given the option to sit somewhere and read instead. As it turned out, this would have been very bad for the fate of the entire world. But it would have been pretty great for Kara Tilden, which is to say, me.

Okay, maybe it would have been bad for me, too.

Hard to say.

Let's start again.

At its peak, this is how popular HIVE was: Some days, the teachers didn't even bother to show up to school.

This was not as fun as you might think.

It *could* have been fun; I really think it could have. Case in point: I had the option to sit somewhere and read. Like right now, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy were about to get married again. Well, for the first time in the book, but this was my second or third time reading *Pride and Prejudice*, so for me, the weddings were starting to stack up, and even though I was sitting in the front row of a practically empty chemistry classroom, I could just about hear church bells chime.

Then, instead, I heard someone threaten to light someone else on fire.

“I’m gonna light you on fire!”

I tried to ignore this. This was not my problem. I only wanted to read, as discussed. And frankly, as far as threats went, it just wasn’t great dialogue.

Then I heard the flick and *hiss* of one of Mr. Teigen’s butane lighters being switched on, and with a sinking in my stomach, I realized it had been less of a threat and more of a very blunt promise.

“Get off me!”

“What’s the matter, Cornball? Forget what it’s like to have to deal with another human?”

“You can’t—”

“I can. Welcome back to the real world, Hivehead.”

With great regret, I marked the page in my already well-marked book and put it down. I knew, on some (most?) levels, I shouldn’t get involved. But I also knew no one else would. It was twenty minutes into eighth period and Mr. Teigen was nowhere to be seen. Most likely, he’d ditched school early to run home to his HIVE headset. This in turn meant that more or less the whole class had felt free to do the same. I hadn’t looked up from my book in a while, but a few minutes ago, Gracie Garner had stood up and announced she was going for “boba and HIVE,” and as Gracie Garner went, so went the rest of the class. So there was a good chance I was the only one left in the room to intervene.

And I know what you're thinking: That's ridiculous, teachers can't just leave, there'd be an uproar, et cetera. But I'm telling you: This was peak HIVE popularity. This happened.

And anyway, of course I was going to get involved. I had it on good authority that I'd always had a tendency to assume it. Authority, I mean. Dad said I got it from Mom. My older brother, Kyle, agreed. But Gus, my boyfriend, said I got it from always sticking my nose in books.

"It's like practice," he'd explained, grinning. "Y'know, for sticking your nose into other people's business."

I'd punched him on the shoulder, and then we'd kissed. It was like that with Gus.

But Gus wasn't here right now. In fact, as I stood up and turned around, I discovered I'd been right: There were only three people left in the room. One was me (hello). The poor sucker stuck in a headlock was another. And, of course, administering that headlock, there was the bully with the butane, Markus Fawkes.

This was not good. Markus Fawkes had been held back a few times over the years, and it showed in the way he towered over his peers—a group that, regrettably, included me. At five foot three in boots, I may have been a Good Samaritan, but I was not exactly the *ideal* Samaritan.

"I'm not asking for much," Markus said, leering, too busy with his victim to look at me. "Just every cheat code you know for the next time I'm in HIVE. I know you know them. You

spend so much time in there, I'm amazed you haven't turned into a little worker Drone."

"HIVE doesn't have cheat codes!" spat the kid under Markus's arm, struggling to get free and hissing like a cat each time his fingers met open flame. "And even if it—*hms*—did, why would I tell a moron like you?"

Markus looked genuinely surprised by the question.

"Because otherwise I'll light you on fire," he said. "I thought I was really clear about that."

"Get *off*!"

Emerging from under a dangling mess of brown hair, the victim's voice cracked. In that moment, I realized I knew that voice. And what's more, I knew that if I didn't do something right away, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

"Hey, Markus," I said, taking a step forward. "Why don't you pick on someone your own age?"

Trash talk wasn't my normal go-to, but I felt you were allowed to aim a little low when the person in question was trying to barbecue your classmate.

Markus turned to look at me with faint surprise but never for a second loosened his grip. If anything, his smile only got bigger, and his already-ruddy cheeks turned the same bright shade of red as the curly hair that blazed on his head—and, for that matter, pretty much everywhere else on his body.

"Nerd," Markus said, the way other people would have said *bello*. "You into HIVE? You wanna get in on this?"

I shook my head because, y'know, no.

“Just let him go, Markus,” I said, taking another careful step forward. “You can’t afford another summer of detention.”

Markus snickered.

“You see anyone here who’s gonna give me detention?” he asked, sweeping his non-headlocking arm out in a grand and jeering gesture at the empty classroom. “Consequences only happen in HIVE now. And as soon as this nerd gives me what I need, I won’t even have to worry about— *Hey!*”

I’d been waiting for Markus’s arm to reach the end of its long arc. As soon as it was fully extended and the lighter was as far out as possible, I hurled myself forward, a move Markus had clearly not expected. I’d never been anyone’s idea of an experienced athlete, but I was a *very* experienced little sister, and years of Kyle playing keep-away with my books had taught me exactly what to do in situations like this, which was, unfortunately, to go for the armpit.

“*Oof!*” With a grunt and a clatter, Markus dropped the lighter to the classroom floor as I essentially headbutted him in the underarm, sending him and his hostage reeling. It was a gross maneuver, made even grosser by the ionosphere of spray-on deodorant that surrounded Markus Fawkes at all times. But it was an *effective* maneuver, and with bullies, as with older siblings, I figured you had to play every card you had.

Another card in my favor: being closer to the ground. As Markus crashed into a table, scattering and/or shattering a row of test tubes, I dove to the ground, snatched up the lighter,

whirled around, and held it between us, trying as hard as I could to keep my hand from shaking.

“Let him go,” I said, “or you get a taste of your own medicine.”

“You won’t use that, dork,” Markus spat. “I’ve seen you. You just read books all day, right? You’re not gonna *burn* someone.”

“You’d think,” I said, wiping what I hoped was just deodorant from the side of my face. “And yet.”

We stared each other down. The funny thing was that he was absolutely right: I was just playing brave, acting the way I thought someone in one of my favorite books would act. And yet, when I looked into Markus’s eyes, small and beady though they were, I got the sense that he was playing, too.

And I played better.

“Whatever,” Markus said, breaking off his gaze to roll his eyes, as if he had suddenly become bored. “You two dweebs deserve each other, anyway. Let’s see how brave you are when you meet me fully equipped in HIVE.” And with that, he dropped his gasping captive to the floor and made a break for the hall.

“I’m honestly sort of a casual player,” I called after him, “so I feel like we won’t—”

But Markus’s footsteps were already fading into the distance, presumably taking him to the Bullworth Apiary, where he could intimidate other HIVE players in peace.

As soon as I was sure he was gone, I turned back to the grumbling boy on the floor.

“Geez, sorry about that,” I said, extending a hand to help him up. “But, hey, Jason. Long time, no . . . Jason?”

My hand froze in midair, which turned out to be fine, since the boy was making quite a show of pushing himself up to his feet without accepting my help. This was not exactly surprising behavior for Jason Alcorn, the resident loner of Bullworth High.

It was, however, sort of rude, considering we went way back.

We had met reaching for the same Dr. Seuss book in the children’s reading room of the Bullworth Public Library, where even at the age of six we were both already seasoned regulars. After a brief standoff, we’d agreed to share the book, and a tentative friendship had begun, made slowly less tentative over hours spent in the comfy beanbags and stained-glass lighting of the reading room. We never spoke very much (it was a library, after all), but I think this had almost made me feel a closer bond with Jason than if we’d been chattering away the whole time. It was the bond between two people comfortable spending lots of time together without saying anything at all.

But that same silence was probably why it took me a few years to realize that we were there at the library for different reasons. I came back again and again because, duh, I loved books. But it turned out Jason, with his worn-down clothes and his rumbling stomach—extremely noticeable in a silent reading room—came to the library because of something else.

He didn’t really have anywhere else to go.

Around the time I figured this out, Jason must have found

somewhere else after all because he started coming to the library less and less, and then stopped showing up entirely.

And now Jason was fixing me with a glare that was *not* the look of someone who had once helped me to sound out the words *Truffula Tree*. It was not even the look of someone who had just gotten their skinny butt saved and who should probably say thank you. It was more the kind of look that made me slowly retract my outstretched hand and fold my arms across my chest.

“Hey, are you . . . okay?” I asked.

It was an effort to fill the awkward silence, but it was also a genuine question. As long as I’d known him, Jason had been kind of skinny and . . . unconcerned with his appearance, to put it nicely. But the Jason standing in front of me now seemed to have gone even beyond that. His cheekbones jutted out severely in a way that shot just a little past handsome and landed at malnourished. His brown hair had always been fairly long and frequently messy—and, to be fair, it had just been rumpled up by Markus Fawkes’s *other* armpit—but it was clear that he’d not had a haircut for several months. And just as I was wondering why it had taken me so long to notice any of this, I realized that I couldn’t actually remember seeing him in class for several months.

With a pang of guilt, I wondered if he really hadn’t been there. Even worse, maybe he *had* been there and I just hadn’t noticed.