

Uranus Exodus

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The Champion

Her hips swaying side to side, The Sexy Fox saunters to him through the cloud of dust. Stripped of all her weapons, she has nothing left to fight with but her empty fists. She must be insane. Or desperate. More likely desperate. With less than 19 seconds before the end of the battle, what choices does she have?

“You want more scores?” The Brave Lion thinks. “No problem. Come and get it, loser. If you can.” He chuckles and checks the scores rendered on his glasses:

00:00:19

The Sexy Fox 8.72 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

The Brave Lion has won. Almost. All he needs to do is stall her for the next 19 seconds, and the championship will be his. All the years of playing video games day and night finally paid off. In 19 seconds, he will be called the winner, and he will be recognized as such by thousands of VR fanatics all over the world. The avatars of hundreds, who have paid for the first-class ticket, are gathered in Rome’s Colosseum—the virtual one—to watch the battle closely with *their own eyes*. Lynda could also be sitting among them, admiring his gaming skills and envying his victory. “Forget about her, Ryan,” The Brave Lion tells himself. “Just focus on the game.”

In 19 seconds, Ryan will be on the top, and he will get the respect that he deserves. Girls will die to take a photo with him...and will be honored to date him too. Lynda will probably try to get back in touch with him. He, however, will not return her calls. She missed her chance. That is her loss. “Forget about her. Concentrate, Ryan. Concentrate.”

Stepping his right foot forward, he stiffens his slightly bent knee. His left toes barely touching the ground, he slides the other foot back into Akimatto position. Like a veteran samurai, he holds up the lightsaber with both hands. “Come to Papa,” he mutters, clenching his teeth.

Her eyes glued to The Brave Lion, The Sexy Fox picks up speed, her saunter turning into a stride. What could she possibly do barehanded?! Her face twisting into a suicidal rage, she sprints towards The Brave Lion, screaming at the top of her voice.

Aiming for her neck, The Brave Lion raises his lightsaber. His eyes locked on her and her every micro-motion, he repositions his fingers on the grip to tighten his clutch.

Dashing the last step, she shields her face with her left hand, as if flesh and bone can ever stop a lightsaber.

Roaring his early victory, The Brave Lion strikes down the sword.

The burning light is a span away from her neck when she ducks by throwing herself at his feet.

That is a dumb move, The Brave Lion thinks. Now, she cannot even run away. Turning to the left, he follows her neck with his lightsaber.

Why is her right fist turning green? The Brave Lion wonders and worries. Is that a Hulk fist? How did she—

Before she falls on the ground, with her fist swollen to five times its size, she punches The Brave Lion in the crotch. *Why in the balls?* With the power of a thousand fists jammed

into it, the Hulk Punch crushes everything that comes its way. *For the love of God, why in the balls?*

Damn this G38 VR gears! The designer must be a man-hating woman. Why else they built this I-can-feel-my-freaking-balls feature into it? There is a limit on how realistic a game has to be. And that limit is Ryan's balls. What is it with these female fighters always aiming for them anyway? That is just plain mean. More than mean, actually. It is cruel. Borderline criminal even. There should be a rule or law or something against it somewhere. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, perhaps. Thou Shall Not Punch a Man in the Balls.

The Brave Lion is thrown in the air like a light, goose-down pillow. Ryan can hear every beat of his heart. Time slows down while the body of his avatar travels through the air. In a moment of weightlessness, his eyes survey the audience, searching for Lynda. Having their mouth half open and their eyes bugged out, none of the fans is chanting his name anymore. Disloyal scums! No, Lynda cannot be one of them. She has faith in Ryan. She knows well that a great player always has aces hidden up his sleeves. What makes a gamer powerful is not the size of his avatar nor his tools and weapons. It is rather the *twist*, the exit strategy that he keeps under wraps until the very end. And Ryan has got plenty of those.

The Brave Lion falls on his back, his lightsaber thrown away, far from his reach. Before he can draw his laser gun, The Sexy Fox jumps on him, pushes his hands back, above his head, pinning them to the ground. He checks the scores rendered on his glasses:

00:00:13

The Sexy Fox 8.73 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

Ryan has guessed right. The punch has earned her only 0.1 points. Not a big deal.

His hands pinned to the ground, The Sexy Fox is lying on top of him—and not in a good way. This position is called the *crucified* since the gamer underneath her cannot make any move as if his hands are nailed to a cross. She has got The Brave Lion at her mercy. That is what she thinks!

Now is the perfect time for The Brave Lion to reveal one of his twists. What she does not know is that he has used half his credit to augment his left hand to a robotic one. With a quick jerk, he frees his robotic hand. Ha. She did not see that coming. All he needs now is his lightsaber, and The Sexy Fox will wish she had never been born.

The Brave Lion looks left. Damn! It is out of reach, too far away.

An amateur gamer would struggle to reach the heaviest weapon. But the great gamer Ryan is, he can predict his opponent's next moves. There is a 95% chance that she has a dagger or something under her shield. With her left hand that is free now, she would draw the dagger. With a probability of 80%, she would stab The Brave Lion 0.15 seconds before his right hand reaches the lightsaber. That brings the total odds of him successfully attacking her before she does down to only 76%. *Ironically, Ryan got an F in math.* That is too slim of a chance to take. Ryan cannot risk the championship on such low odds.

Instead, he decides to go for the oldest—as well as the simplest—trick in the book, sand in the eye. It's a bit too dirty of a trick. One might even call it immoral. But when it comes to winning the championship, morality cannot get in the way. And Ryan is in here to win it.

His robotic hand is grabbing a fist of sand when The Sexy Fox presses her lips against his. What the hell is she doing?! Having the score disappeared from his glasses, he can see nothing but her hazel eyes. Her silky soft, blond hair surrounding their faces brings them

privacy. Her irises change color, to green, the color of Lynda's eyes. The Brave Lion can see his reflection in her pupils; it is the image of a lonely teenage boy longing for love.

No longer under the control of his brain, his lips reflexively decide to pucker. The burning sting that he feels on his rebellious lips dashes throughout his face's skin and then his neck. In a fraction of a second, he loses control over his entire body, frozen like dead meat. What the hell is happening?!

With a triumphant smile on her face, The Sexy Fox separates herself from him, showing the bottle of poisonous Okra between her teeth. Less than 12 seconds before the end, Ryan finds himself fallen for the second oldest trick in the book. *Shame on you, Ryan! Shame on you.* Having his central nervous system depressed by the poison, his body will remain paralyzed for the next 10 seconds.

Ryan blames his momentary lapse on these modern G38 VR goggles. The rendered image is just too real. The first thing he will do with the prize money is buy himself one of these, the full set. While other gamers get to practice with their personal G38 gears, Ryan had nothing to train with but his dinosaur-age Oculus gear. The G3x series not only will improve the resolution by like a zillion times, but also, thanks to the advanced motion detectors, they will enable him to play anytime, anywhere, even at nights when he is lying on the threadbare couch of his Grandma. She is also fed up with him jumping all around, acting out the limited space in her small one-bedroom apartment. She almost kicked him out when Ryan broke her purple fern pot while playing with Oculus.

Sitting on his crotch, The Sexy Fox slowly draws a spear from under her arm shield.

His eyes dilate when the glare of the sharp blade falls on them. That is the Spear of Destiny! She must have stolen it from Solomon's Temple. Overtaken by fear, Ryan gasps for air. A stab with the Spear of Destiny would earn The Sexy Fox one full point. With his heart pounding fast, he thinks and thinks.

Such a plight! There must be a way out. He just needs another twist. Perhaps the Hammer of Thor. Or an Iron Fist. Or a Venom Strike. It has to be fast. And it has to score him the most. He will have only one second to execute it. At the very end, when his body regains its muscle power. Just one second before the game ends. He has about 10 seconds to figure that out. That is plenty of time for a veteran gamer like Ryan. He just needs to *concentrate*.

With both hands, The Sexy Fox stabs the spear in his chest, screaming her desperate hunger for winning.

The score renders on his glasses again, indicating hers boosted from 8.73 to 9.73.

00:00:10

The Sexy Fox 9.73 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

Ten seconds are left until the end of the game and nine seconds before The Brave Lion regains his muscle power. Rising to her knees, she lays down her weight on the spear. The further the spear penetrates his heart, the higher her score goes.

It is indeed a brutal move, but GameCon is no place to exercise kindness. This is the battlefield for ones with a burning desire to win. And Ryan has got one of those too. He is willing to apply any trick, no matter how dirty it would be. He just needs to concentrate and figure out an optimal move. Ten seconds is plenty of time to maintain his victory, regain the respect of his faithless, brainless fans, and collect the prize money that is his. After paying for the four-month overdue rent, he will make amends with Grandma by a pair of rechargeable Bluetooth hearing aids, the ones that the Affordable Health Act cannot afford.

Her clenched teeth showing through the drunken smile, The Sexy Fox pushes the spear further into his heart.

00:00:09

The Sexy Fox 9.74 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

What is she smiling for? Does she not know that Ryan cannot lose? Does not she know that Grandma depend on him? Does she not understand that failure is simply not an option for Ryan?

Poor Sexy Fox! She has no idea what is coming to get her. She is going to be so stunned when Ryan will pull off his next twist. Ryan should not feel too sorry for her though. She comes from downtown, probably from a well-off family; definitely rich enough to have bought her a G38 VR gear. She does not know what it means to wear oversize, Goodwill shoes that always leak water when it rains. Her bones have never shivered with the touch of piercing winters that cut through Grandpa's shabby pullovers—may he rest in peace.

00:00:08

The Sexy Fox 9.75 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

But Ryan is not of the type who would forget his humble beginnings when he reaches the top. Holding free gaming workshops, he will pass the gift to the next generation of young adults in Detroit, the district fallen to its knees. He will go from one elementary school to another to give motivational speeches to young kids. He will look into their malnourished faces and will tell them never mind their threadbare shirts that do not fit anymore. Tell them just to hang in there, follow their hearts, and pursue their dreams, because dreams do come true in life, even if you are born in Detroit. And Ryan is the undeniable, live evidence for it; the winner of GameCon, the ultimate tournament in virtual reality games.

00:00:07

The Sexy Fox 9.76 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

And he will donate tons of money to cure Ovarian cancer once forever; so that mothers do not die. Because when they are gone, these kids become so lonely. There will be no one left to play Nintendo Switch with, snuggling in her arms. No one left to show excitement with every little score you make; to make you feel like the champion of the universe. Grandmothers would say that she is on a long work trip and that she will come back soon. But it does not take long for the kids to realize that 'soon' will never come. And that they would have to spend the rest of their lives desperately looking for a special someone who gets what it means to be a true gamer.

00:00:06

The Sexy Fox 9.77 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

On second thought, Ryan *will* return Lynda's calls. It was mean of him when he thought he would not. Ryan can be mean sometimes, especially when he is caught up in the middle of a competitive game. It is true she is the one who broke up with him. For no reason whatsoever. But, as Grandma puts it, the one with a bigger heart should be more forgiving too. As the champion of the GameCon tournament, he should play the bigger person and graciously accept her apology.

What if Lynda has forgotten Ryan's number? Or maybe her phone got stolen during a bank robbery, and she has lost all her contacts. It is possible. Ryan thinks that he will probably try to initiate the phone call. Given that he is the champion of GameCon now, this

time she must be willing to return his calls. To remind her of the good, old days, he will also send her some flowers. Her favorite, Alchemilla.

Ryan remembers the first Valentine's gift he got for Lynda, the beaten-up Nintendo Switch. The same he used to play with by his mother. Ryan saw something in Lynda that makes him believe she is worthy of this priceless gift. And he was right. Lynda loved the gift—at first, at least. Even though she was obviously from downtown, it was the gesture in the gift that she valued, not the price tag. And Ryan loved that about her—among many other things.

Lynda used to carry the Nintendo Switch in her light gray backpack all the time. At first, Ryan thought it was because she wants to show how much she cares about him and his gift. But then, it occurred to him that perhaps she genuinely loves video games. Whichever. As long as she is happy.

She once even got caught playing with that during the Algebra class. Principal McManaman said that she should kiss the Nintendo Switch goodbye unless her mother comes over from downtown to have a *serious* chat.

Lynda, however, somehow managed to get the game console back without involving her mother. The rumor says that Principal MacManaman received a threatening phone call, perhaps from Lynda impersonating a hotshot, a mayor or something.

After that incident, Ryan did not see her with the handheld console anymore, and little by little he saw less of her too. Not long after, it was over between them, and she was gone. Ryan wonders where she is now and whether she still plays with the handheld console. If not, what kind of games is Lynda playing these days?

00:00:02

The Sexy Fox 9.81 vs. The Brave Lion 9.81.

Prom Night

"A little cleavage doesn't hurt anybody," Lynda shouts. She wears a light blue party dress with a deep, plunging neckline, which she has made by herself, along with a short matching skirt. She also has made a bow tie for Dad and a scarf for Mom but that is for later. It is going to be a lovely surprise.

It took two months to finish the dress, but it is all worth it. She is exhilarated about the admiration that she will get, not to mention the attention. Yes, the plunging neckline is a bit revealing but a little cleavage is quite stylish these days.

"A little!" Mom exclaims, her voice almost squeaky. "You can see the whole Grand Canyon down there."

"Ple-e-e-ase," Lynda pleads. "This is it."

"Honey, don't you think you are too pretty to dress like that?"

"This is the night. All the school will be seeing me in my new dress."

"That's... ah... what I'm afraid of."

"I... I... I'll wash the dishes. All the dishes. For the whole month."

"Ms. Gonzales does the dishes."

"I'll do anything. Anything. I... I'll make you a scarf, with yellow embroidered butterflies all over it; just like the one you loved so much."

Pursing her lips, Mom tilts her head.

Lynda anxiously awaits a response, her eyes glued to Mom's lips.

Abandoning Lynda's gaze in the air, Mom crosses the colorful Persian rug to the fireplace. She adjusts one of the crystal owls she collects, moving it the slightest fraction of an inch. Taking a deep breath, she turns her sullen face back to Lynda. "No means no," she says, hands on waist.

That is a slap in the face! Lynda did not want to take it this far, but what can she do when Mom is asking for it?

"Oh, I see," Lynda says, mimicking Mom by putting her hands on her waist. "So it's OK when *you* do it, but when it comes to me—"

"I'm the adult and... when did you *ever* see me showing cleavage?" Mom squeaks, her voice trembling. "In this family, we never do such a—"

"Oh, really?"

"Really," Mom replies firmly.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. Really."

Lynda says nothing. Biting her lips and breathing angrily, she returns her mom's daring glares. After a few moments of staring contest, she breaks the gaze and rushes into her parent's bedroom.

"Where the hell you think you're going, young girl?" Mom yells from behind. "Don't you dare go in there. Hey, I'm warning you."

Ignoring the warning, Lynda searches the bedroom.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Mom whispers to Dad, standing next to her. “Just standing there like a useless cucumber.”

The insult quickly triggers something inside Dad. Raising his head and pumping his chest, he puts on his most serious face, clears his throat, and calls Lynda with a surprisingly soft voice: “Sweetie, do you mind—”

Lynda storms out of the bedroom, holding the family photo album before her. She opens the album, showing a wedding photo. “See. See. Cleavage.”

“That’s... eh...” Mom sputters the words, gulping in between. “That’s different.”

“Different how?” Lynda asks, holding the wedding photo next to her cleavage.

Mom is still silent. A vein pops on her forehead. She must be running out of excuses to try out. Lynda and Dad privately have named it The Scarlet’s vein since the Scarlet Dickinson’s case. It was the first divorce settlement case in many years that Mom had lost, and it took almost two weeks for the popped vein to settle back to normal. Lynda is one inch away from winning this case. Her face celebrates in advance with a victorious smile.

“Answer me,” Lynda says, louder this time. “Different how?”

“That was my wedding day,” Mom says, bursting out. “I was with your Father and close family members. Not with a bunch of horny teens in a silly school party.”

Out of breath, Mom pants. She said what a mother should never say. That is a dangerous territory that she has crossed into.

The early victorious smile wears off Lynda’s face, replaced by a look of unleashed rage. Lynda’s noisy breathing now interweaves with that of Mom.

Dad’s awkward gaze switches rapidly between his wife and his daughter, never quite settling on either.

Tears welling up in her eyes, Lynda swallows hard against the lump in her throat. Gone way beyond touching a nerve, Mom’s unleashed remark has left a deep slash on Lynda’s heart.

“Is *that* what my Prom is to you?” she asks finally with a trembling voice. “Just a stupid party?!”

“Sweetie,” Dad jumps in when Mom subtly touches his hand with the back of her fingers, “I guess what your mom is trying to say is that the expectations are higher from decent families with deep, cultural roots.”

“Yeah,” Mom affirms.

“In those days decency was a trait well suited for a young girl at your age.”

“Yeah,” Mom affirms more strongly.

“Oh, yeah,” Lynda fires back, turning to Mom. “Then welcome to my era! We are Generation Z, and that’s how we roll.” Lynda proudly gestures to her cleavage.

“Oh, Darling,” Mom cries, throwing herself into her husband’s arms with a dramatic motion, resembling Hitchcock’s 1940’s Rebecca.

Dad soothes Mom, caressing her gently. “See what you did?” he says, his voice hardened, shooting an angry gaze at Lynda. “Happy now? You hurt your mother’s feelings.”

“Oh please,” Lynda says dismissively. “Even in Hollywood, this overly dramatic acting is out of fashion. Watch some new movies for God’s sake.”

Dropping her act, Mom turns back to Lynda. “You talk this way to *me*, your *mother*,” she growls. Brows knitting together, she separates herself from Dad’s embrace. “Just because of an *Indian* boy?” Teeth grinding, a condescending tone crawls into her last words.

Disgusted by the remark, she fixes her cold, dead eyes on her mom. “Now we’re talking,” she fires back. “Here we are again. Your real problem is with Michael.”

“Who the hell is Michael?”

“I think Rajneesh mentioned that before, honey,” Dad whispers softly, leaning down toward Mom. “Apparently, he pretends to be Michael B. Jordan.”

“He doesn’t pretend,” Lynda snaps. “He was ranked the hottest guy in the high school yearbook. He’s really Michael’s look-alike.”

“His eyes, maybe,” Dad argues, “But the nose is a little—”

“Oh my God,” Mom yells at Dad. “Are you seriously discussing this?”

“Sorry honey—”

“Is the issue,” Mom continues, “whether Rajneesh looks like Michael Jordan or—”

“He does,” Lynda interrupts. “He really, really does. And don’t you dare tell me he doesn’t,” she expresses her demand in a begging voice.

“Your mother is right, sweetie. You know we love Rajneesh—”

“His name is Michael.”

“I mean Michael. And it was all cool when he would stay the night over to study with you—”

“Hah!” Mom sneers at Dad’s naiveté. Lynda restrains her smile.

Still not getting it, he continues with the same sincere tone.

“But when it comes to real life, you want to pick a man that appreciates how amazing and special you are. Someone from our own people.”

“And Michael is what? From another species. What kind of racist shit is that?”

“Language, Lynda,” Mom warns gently.

“No no no no no no. I don’t say that because Michael is black, I mean brown, I mean... help me.”

“Indian,” Mom shouts.

“Thank you. Indian,” Dad says, letting out a relaxed breath. “We love Indian food, and you know it. But at the end of the day, they are still different..., culture-wise.”

“Michael knows *nothing* about his heritage. His favorite food is cheeseburger.”

“Yeah, but still *deep* inside—”

“His parents are MIT graduates. He was born and raised in Boston—”

“Yeah, but *deep, deep* inside they are still—”

“Oh for God’s sake. I’m done with this shit. I’m going to Prom with Michael, and I am wearing my sexy dress,” Lynda says, pointing to her cleavage.

“You can’t,” Mom says calmly, looking away.

“Sure I can. I’m wearing it right now.”

“You can’t go to Prom, not with Rajneesh,” Mom continues with the same irritatingly confident tone while turning to Lynda.

“Who’s gonna stop me?” Lynda asks, fear growing in her tone.

“I forbid you.”

“Honey, perhaps—,” Dad interjects.

“You stay out of this.”

"You *forbid* me? Do I look like a child to you?"

"You are under 18."

"So?" Lynda says with a trembling voice after gulping.

"By the power vested in me by the state of California," Mom says in her most formal voice, "I shall involve the law enforcement in the matter should any man, including but not limited to Rajneesh, attempts to take my underage daughter from my house, against my will, a crime punishable by up to 20 years of prison according to California penal code, Section 207."

Lynda is defenseless when her mom employs her lawyer skills. Like a pitiful puppy seeking shelter, she turns her face to her last resort, Dad. Perhaps he can protect her from Mom.

While flinching, Dad watches Lynda's pain with sympathy. But sympathy is not enough. With her eyes, Lynda begs for his support. Lowering his gaze, Dad takes a step back, almost behind Mom. Dad's support is out the window.

Lynda is on her own. Tears running down her face, she holds back a sob and turns to Mom. "You... with your lawyer shit. You always do this to me. You always do this," she says and runs into her room before she bursts out crying.

The [Almost] Champion

“God damn it,” Ryan says furiously while taking the VR headset off, flinging it to the ground. Soon, the sound of the headset cracking is lost among the cheers of the audience who are gathered in the indoor amphitheater.

The board above them shows the scores:

00:00:00

Kathy, The Sexy Fox 9.82 vs. Ryan, The Brave Lion 9.81.

Covered in blood, Ryan’s avatar on the board is flashing red, which is a long-standing tradition in GameCon, the national tournament in virtual reality games. That is meant to humiliate the loser. It is working quite effectively on Ryan—compounded with the audience’s cheers that could have been for him.

Kathy, The Sexy Fox, is still lying in her recliner. Biting her tongue, her gloved fingers are pressing hard against the recliner’s armrest as if she is choking someone in the game. The game is finished, but apparently, she cannot resist having fun with the corpse of the underdog, The Brave Lion.

Her growl growing into a roar, she jumps up from the recliner. The VR headset still covering her eyes, she stands before the applauding audience. The large screen above her cuts from her avatar sitting on The Brave Lion’s chest to herself standing on the stage. The cheers amplify when she throws her fists in the air. With a smile of victory on her face, she bows before the fans who congratulate her win.

Breathing heavily, Ryan bolts upright. His eyes fall on the broken headset that lies on the dark green stage. He wishes he had not done that. If GameCon decides to charge him for the damage, there is no way in hell could afford it. His eyes downcast, he rushes for the exit door.

Ryan stops the moment he faces the standing audience, not a single of them rooting for him. Their eyes covered by the VR headset, like androids, nine hundred game enthusiasts are chanting for Kathy. Although the system is rendering nothing but Kathy standing on the stage right before them, they would rather watch the reality through their virtual-reality headsets! That infuriates already-raging Ryan. These idiots should be chanting for him instead.

While rushing up the stairs, he takes off the VR gloves and flings them to the ground. It feels lonely and alienating to be surrounded by people unappreciative of his talents. “These ungrateful blockheads,” Ryan thinks, “don’t know the reach of my powers, the extent of my potentials, or the real me.” Not to see the irritating face of the cheering audience, he keeps his eyes lowered.

Ryan trips, somewhere midway up the stairs. His hands are too late to save his face from the impact, leaving him with a bleeding lower lip. Teeth grinding, he turns back and finds a red high-heeled boot sticking out in the walkway. The boot and the blue miniskirt are the only garments covering the otherwise long, naked leg.

Ryan peers at her face to see who this clumsy moron is.

With her middle finger extended, she waves her hand while peeking from the corner of her VR headset.

Is she for real? If they were in a video game, she would be a stereotypical villain NPC—Non-Player Character—designed to piss the players off. Ryan would guess she is Samantha if she did not have the brown mole on her chin.

“Bye-bye, loser,” she says and turns her face back to the stage, where the winner is standing tall. Putting the VR headset back on her eyes, she joins the audience in applauding Kathy.

Ryan’s face wrinkles in humiliation. GameCon fans are mostly of the excitable type, but this jerk has gone way out of her way. What makes it more hurtful is that the same jerk would be worshiping Ryan now if he had scored 0.02 points more. But this is GameCon, where the winner takes it all.

With his clenched fists pressed against the ground, Ryan pushes himself up. I’m done with this ridiculous game, he thinks. The sooner I’m out of this damned place, the better. He sprints up to the exit door.

The Prom Date

A flower bouquet in his hand and all dressed up, Michael walks through the long corridor that leads to Apartment 932 on the 9th floor. Raising his right arm, he smells his armpit to check if his deodorant is working. Almost. It doesn't matter anymore. He does not carry deodorant anyway. He does have a pack of Tic Tacs though. He decides to chew a mint from it. He later tosses another one in his mouth, just to be on the safe side.

The gloomy long hallway is lit by a few light bulbs, one flickering. Under the dim light, Michael tries to read the door numbers. 926, 928, 930. Light seems to be coming out of the next door. Suspicious at that, he approaches the ajar door, his legs trembling. He can hear his heart beating. After fixing his tie, he takes a deep breath and raises his hand to knock.

The door opens before his hand reaches it. Lynda's mother stands there, furious. She gives him a look as if Michael is a criminal caught in the midst of the crime. Stricken by fear, he quickly extends his hand, offering the flower bouquet that he has brought for Lynda.

"It's for you," he says, hoping for some leniency. There is, however, no change in her menacing glare. He can feel sweat coming out of every hair on his scalp. Having his desperate search for words failed, he gulps.

Lynda's dad saves the moment by hastily appearing from the side, blocking the gaze of Lynda's mom. He still has not completely put on his jacket.

"There is my favorite man," he says, taking the flower bouquet with his left hand. "What beautiful flowers!" While sniffing them, he puts his other arm through the sleeve of his jacket. "They smell good too."

Lynda's mom shuts the door behind them. With her gone, Michael lets out a relaxed breath. Having gained his speech ability back, he asks, "Is Lynda home?"

"She's alright," her dad replies while guiding Michael outside by a gentle push on his back.

Her dad's out-of-nowhere assurance distresses Michael. He checks the new messages on his cell phone.

"There's nothing to worry about," Dad continues. "Oh, is that a Nokia? I thought they're extinct. Can I take a look?"

Michael takes his gaze off his cell phone. "I... I..."

Dad reaches over and takes the phone, using a bit of force.

"What do you say we first have a little chat, man to man. Or should I say *de hombre a hombre*?" he says, flashing a big PR smile.

"Why in Spanish?" Michael finds himself asking, a bit confused, a bit offended.

"No reason. Let's just go for a walk. What do you say, big boy?" Lynda's dad responds while walking Michael away.

"Is she OK?" Michael asks, looking back in the direction of Lynda's apartment.

"In reflection, you do look a bit like Michael B. Jordan," her dad says, maintaining the push on Michael's back. "Have you considered acting as a profession?"

His resisting legs finally surrender. Michael walks with Lynda's dad through the long corridor toward the elevators. His eyes, however, cannot give up, turning back to the apartment every few moments.

Arrested

Both hands and eyes both on the doorknob, Ryan pushes open the thick, sound-proof door of the amphitheater. The door half-open, he faces a big belly in a purple shirt. Before he gets a chance to slow down, his head bounces back after bumping into the belly. As his hand lets go of the doorknob, Ryan slowly turns his head way up. His stomach clenches when his eyes fall on the face of the huge man in the black suit. Judging by the dark sunglasses and the white earphone in his right ear, he must be a security guy. People in uniform would always make Ryan nervous, whether they are police officers, security guards, or even doormen. Given the shady things that he does, trouble is awaiting him at every corner.

But no one has ever been arrested for being a loser. Oh, damn! Ryan remembers the broken headset. There is no way he could pay for it. Could it be why the security is here? Nah. That cannot be it. They would not learn about it so fast. Ryan should just play nonchalant and sneak aside.

The door shuts behind Ryan and with that, the sound of cheers stops too. With silence reigning in the hallway, Ryan can hear the guard wheezing.

“Your name is Ryan?” Ryan hears the deep voice from behind. Awfully close to him stands another huge security guard who is not only dressed the same way, but also looks like an exact clone of his colleague. If this was a video game, some lazy coder had simply copy-pasted the source code for the guard character.

“No... Yes... I mean, yes. Why?”

“You’re coming with us,” the first guard says, grabbing Ryan by the wrist.

Ryan could just chop off the arm of the security guard with a swing of his lightsaber. Too bad they are not in the game. Or are they? Life is just a game anyway, only instead of laser guns, lightsabers, and robot hands, Ryan has only his wits to rely upon. “Think, Ryan, think,” he tells himself. You can handle two dumb elephants. Ryan turns back to the guard. “Look. It’s just a headset,” he says in a begging voice. “I can easily pay for it. It might not even be broken.”

“You’re coming with us,” the second guard repeats from behind.

“I just need to call my Grandma,” Ryan pleads, turning to the second guard. “She can easily get the money right away, by the end of the week max.”

“We can do it the easy way or the hard way,” the second guard growls. Lifting up his coat, he shows a gun holstered at his waist.

“Ouch,” Ryan cries when the first guard squeezes his wrist. “The easy way. The easy way,” he says while unsuccessfully trying to free his hand from the guard’s firm grip.

“He comes voluntarily, boss,” the first guard says while his other hand reaches over his white earphone. “Okay, boss,” he says and slowly walks up the hall toward the VIP rooms, dragging Ryan behind him.

“Listen, guys,” Ryan says, his voice tight. “Do we really need to bother the boss? I really think my Grandma could pay for the headset by the end of the month.”

‘Keep walking’ is all Ryan hears from the second guard, who pushes him on the back.

The Prom: Plan B

Half an hour of sewing later, the plunging neckline is not so plunging anymore, stopping right above the cleavage.

Lynda swallows the Diazepam tablet and hides the bottle behind the thick dictionary on the shelf. Her red eyes cried out, she takes a deep breath and exits her room.

The symptoms of multiple needle punctures are showing on her fingertips. Are they self-inflicted, a deliberate cry for attention, or just the accidental result of clumsy needling? Lynda is not sure anymore. But it does not matter. It is all over now, she thinks. It is time for a peace offering. She could not let a dress ruin her big night with Michael, the hottest boy in her high school.

Sitting on the tall, dark-brown armchair, Mom smokes while staring at the black, cracked screen of their 70-inch TV. It has been broken since last Wednesday when it accidentally fell to the floor while Ms. Gonzales was cleaning it. Mom would have fired Ms. Gonzales if Lynda had not stood up for her.

Lynda approaches Mom with hesitant steps. "Mom," she says, her voice tight.

Her glare still on the screen of the broken TV, Mom takes another puff on the cigarette.

After clearing her throat, Lynda continues with a begging voice that unsuccessfully tries to be cute. "Mom, look. No more cleavage. I fixed it. Just the way you wanted it."

Dad enters, alone, a flower bouquet in his hand. He nods when Mom immediately turns to him. Lynda finds their eye contact unsettling.

A bitter smile barely cracking on her face, Mom exhales the smoke and puts out the half-smoked cigarette in the full ashtray. She then turns to Lynda, the bitter smile still on her face.

"What's going on?" Lynda asks, freaking out.

"Problem solved," Mom responds mercilessly.

"What?!"

"Sweetie," Dad interjects, "there is a slight change of plan. Rajneesh has been having second thoughts about Prom, and... and he decided to change his mind for the better and go to Prom with his Indian classmate instead. Chhaya, I believe, is her name. In the end, it worked out for the best." Dad flashes one of his PR smiles.

"Yeah," Mom says, her voice empty of sympathy.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways." Dad maintains the mirthless smile.

"Yeah," Mom repeats.

"No," Lynda says, holding back a sob.

"It's OK, sweetie," Dad says, the smile disappeared from his face. Eyebrows drawing together, he moves closer to Lynda.

"No, that's a lie," she cries, the sob taking over gradually. "A liar. That's what you are. A liar."

"Look, look," Dad says, trying to sound convincing. "He even sent these flowers for you. It's your favorite. Alchemilla."

"Isn't that nice?" Mom growls like a heartless wolf, without even looking at the flowers.

That is like something Michael would do, Lynda thinks. But she is still in doubt. Something does not add up.

“Did you not get his message?” Dad asks and like a deceitful snake rolls his eyes to his master, Mom.

Lynda’s hands are reaching for her cell phone in her pocket when she notices that her party dress does not have any. She spies her cell phone lying on the TV stand, connected to the USB charger.

Hesitantly, she steps toward the TV and picks up the charged phone. The notification on the screen says: ‘1 new message from Michael.’ She turns her back to her parents when reading the message.

Tears run down her face when she unsuccessfully tries to hold back the sob.

If only Lynda would understand that this is for her own good. Biting her lips, Mom watches the reflection of her daughter’s tears on the TV’s cracked screen. Mom knows the tears are coming right from the heart when Lynda cries silently. With every tear that Lynda sheds, Mom’s tough exterior cracks further. Perhaps they have gone too far this time.

Mom no longer can stand her daughter’s suffering. She is getting up from her armchair when her hand hits the ashtray, knocking it on the floor. Ignoring the ashes spread on the carpet, she approaches Lynda.

“Honey—,” she says, extending her hand to caress her daughter’s cheek.

Lynda turns the moment she touches her, throws the cell phone on the floor, and runs to her bedroom, whimpering. She slams the door behind her, locking it afterward.

“Honey,” Mom mutters. Tears welling up her eyes, she stares at Lynda’s bedroom. “Why are you so stubborn?”

“That, she got from you,” Dad says, touching Mom on the shoulder.

Mom turns. “If I don’t protect her who—”

“It’s OK, honey. In time, she’ll understand.”

Dad gives Mom a much-needed hug.

The Boss

“For God’s sake,” the boss yells, “who the hell do you think you’re dealing with?” He is a tall, rather skinny man, clad in a dark blue suit with a gray pocket square poking out of his breast pocket. His appearance fits the stereotype of heartless wall street douchebags who compensate their hollow inside with the shiny outfit outside. He is not likable at the first sight, or even at the second, but as long as he is yelling at the giant guards, Ryan gives him the benefit of the doubt.

“This is Ryan, boss,” the first guard responds, lifting his wrist.

“This *gentleman* is a national treasure, you imbecile.” With his angular face shrunk, the boss’s hollow cheeks appear more frightening. “You can’t treat him like that,” he continues.

The deep furrow on his brow softening, Ryan starts to take a liking to the boss. “Come to think of it,” Ryan tells himself, “I *am* a national treasure, yet to be discovered. But how does the boss know about it? He must be a bright person.”

“Sorry, boss,” the guard responds flatly, his blank face empty of any emotions.

“Are you still holding his wrist?!”

“Sorry, boss,” the guard says in an indifferent, monotone voice and after a moment lets go of Ryan’s wrist.

“Ouch,” Ryan cries while rubbing his freed wrist as people do in movies; perhaps a bit more dramatically.

“Let me look at you, soldier,” the boss tells Ryan. “Why’s your lip bleeding?”

“Ask the gorilla, *boss*,” Ryan responds, pointing to the guards.

“We didn’t touch—” the second guard jumps in, fear obvious in his voice.

“Shut up,” the boss yells, “Shut up. Just shut up and get out of my face, you imbeciles.”

“OK, boss,” the security guards say in unison and leave the VIP room but not before giving Ryan a dirty look.

Ryan reciprocates that with a smirk and makes sure that they see it. “You do not know who you are messing with,” Ryan says with his look.

“You must excuse them,” the boss tells Ryan, bringing him a tissue. “They’re only trained to—”

“To kill,” Ryan jumps in.

“—to *protect*,” the boss continues. “Etiquette, hence, was not exactly part of their curriculum.”

His narrowed eyes on the boss, Ryan snatches a tissue. The college talk does not impress him. He never trusts one who hides behind big words. He already took care of the guards, and now it’s time for the final touchdown. “All right,” he begins. “I might’ve cracked your VR headset, and your gorillas gave me a fat lip. I say we call it even, shall we? Or you’d have to deal with my dad, otherwise. He’s a lawyer and he could sue the *whole* tournament.”

“No, no, no, my son. I have summoned you for a mission of utmost... ah... aren’t you unfathered?”

“How do you know?!”

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