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A girl stands in a snowscape, staring directly at you. She's young – a teenager, you'd guess. Tall – enough that it ought to be awkward. But this girl stands with her shoulders squared. With a confidence that, on second glance, makes her seem older. The snowflakes land, catching in the curls of her hair – but she's not bothered. She isn't wearing a coat – but she doesn't look cold.

Perhaps that's what makes this feel like a dream, you think.

'Everyone wants an escape,' she says, her voice low, private. Even though the line feels rehearsed – the first line of a speech or a screenplay – it sounds like she's talking to you and you alone. 'Why do you think virtual reality is so popular? There's something in VR for all of us: from addictive puzzle games where you can distract yourself with a world of

abstract colour, music and wild pattern; through fantasy role-playing games where you can wield unimaginable powers to fight – or even be – evil; to real-world games that feel a lot like life except you can be, and be with, anyone you want ... Trust me, there's a VR world out there just for you.'

A sly, slight smile as she walks towards you.

'And somewhere on the dark web, there is a VR world that trumps them all. It's not a game you can choose to play. It's a game that draws you in from other VR worlds like the extending tendrils of a spider's web and keeps you there, captive, until the game is done.' The snow swirls around her face. 'Have you heard of it? Most people have, by now. They call it the Game. *The Game*. It's a game that has the power to change your life – your real life. Because in the centre of its web, if you can make it, there's a prize. What is it that you most desire? If you win the Game, it is yours.'

She opens her hands wide and, though the space between her palms is empty, you feel yourself start to fill in the gap. What is it that you want? What is it that you need? You know. You see it now.

She drops her arms down. You refocus on her eyes. She's close now, a little too close, for a stranger. 'Perhaps, if you can win, you won't need VR any more, you won't need to escape,' she says. 'You could create the reality you really want. You could change the hand you were dealt.'

She smiles.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

Her eyes gleam as she finally draws to a halt, her face mere inches from yours.

'So keep your eyes wide open when you're in VR. A door might appear in the fabric of your world, one that doesn't fit. Open it if you dare. If it's the Game, you'll know it by the snow.'

And with that, the snowstorm swallows her whole.

LEVEL ONE

1

Coldness whispered on her cheeks, tickled her eyelids. A heartbeat sounded in her ears, fast, heavy and ponderous – her breath hitched as if she'd been running. The girl blinked, opened her eyes. Snow drifted down from an iron-cloud sky. For a moment, she was peaceful. Blank. But cold. Then the questions started.

Where am I?

She tried to raise herself on to her elbows to find out – but her body refused to obey. That worried her. That, and the fact her memory was fogged – non-existent, even. Who was she? What was the last thing she remembered? Disconnected images flashed through her mind – white sheets, a red cloak, a forest, golden light – and she didn't feel so peaceful any more. *Why* couldn't she move? Then a single

word screamed through her like a siren.

Veronica!

That was her name. She knew that much at least. And this word, this *scream*, was the last thing she remembered.

Panic raced through her body. She pushed herself away from the ground again, successfully this time, her head spinning as she forced herself up to a seated position, snow fluttering down around her.

Then, other phrases roared at her through the cloud of her mind, as if in moving she had dislodged an avalanche.

Veronica, help me!

It's happening again.

Her heart lurched as fragments of memory surfaced.

'Max?' she called. Her voice was croaky; her breath plumed into the air, ghostly against the dark charcoal lines of trees beyond the small clearing in which she lay. She sat up abruptly and stared at the pale skin of her hands in confusion. 'Max!' she tried, louder. 'Where are you?' Her brother had been right next to her, hadn't he? Right there under the white hospital sheets? But where were the sheets now? Where was Max? ... And where was she?

White sheets, white snow ...

And then ...

Her neck prickled; she had the strong sensation she was being watched. She scrambled to her feet and spun around. A

small, sad shed stood behind her, stacked with logs – but it was obviously empty of anything or anyone else. A broad stump with an axe lodged into its top stood nearby – someone had been chopping wood, but not recently. Two inches of snow already lay on top of the stump like whipped cream on a hot chocolate.

She stumbled to her feet, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it was trying to escape. She scanned the rustling fir trees. Her mind was running in overdrive now. *I've been abducted*, she thought wildly. *Abducted and brought here, perhaps to be killed. Whoever it was, they must've drugged me – that's why I can't remember anything.*

I have to get out of here.

'Haven't you figured it out yet?'

Veronica spun around so violently she slipped over on the icy ground, falling hard on her hip. The pain shot through her like a warning – but what was worse was the screeching sound in her aids as she hit the ground. She lifted a hand to her left ear. The aids felt bulkier – their normally familiar shape now alien to her touch – which was confusing. Even weirder, her hair – normally a wavy, puffy mess – felt as if it had been curled. *Permed?* But she didn't have time to ponder the bizarreness of someone perming her hair while she was unconscious.

An extremely pretty Asian girl around her age had walked out from between the trees. The kind of pretty that

belonged in advertisements, or between the pages of magazines. The girl was wearing a yellow plaid skirt suit with wide shoulders and thick-soled platform boots. Her sleek black hair was pulled into a ponytail, not a single strand out of place. Veronica relaxed slightly. The girl was intimidatingly put-together, but she didn't look like the kind of person to drug her, bring her to the middle of nowhere, perm her hair and kill her.

But then, does anyone really look like a killer? she pondered, before shaking the thought away.

She was thinking like her dad, dreaming up one of his murder mysteries in the garden shed. Back when her mum and dad were still together, Veronica had sat with him sometimes, curled up on a beanbag pretending not to watch him. Sometimes, even though she was only little, he'd run something by her, asked for her input. She'd liked that. But this wasn't fiction. Right now, she had to focus on what was important.

'Who are you?' Veronica managed, scrambling to her knees. 'And what's going on?'

'I'm Charlie.' The girl stared at her coolly. Her voice was rounded, plummy. A posh accent – posher than Veronica's anyway. Like the girls in Veronica's class nowadays, since her dad had hidden her away in private school. The girl didn't offer to help her up, or ask her if she was OK, or even answer her second question. 'And you are?'

‘Veronica,’ she mumbled, wincing as she forced herself on to her feet again. Only then did she finally notice the clothes she was wearing: a multicoloured jumpsuit with a drawstring waist under a red puffer jacket. Bright colours. Not her clothes. Not any clothes she recognised. She felt chilled to the core at the thought of someone undressing her and redressing her without her even having woken up. Even changing her hearing aids. And ... she lifted her hands to her face. Yes, her glasses too. They felt huge.

They’d changed everything on Veronica’s body, as if she were nothing more than a doll.

What was more, she stood out against this monochrome world like a target. She swallowed, feeling doubly vulnerable. These days, she dressed to blend in. She didn’t like feeling conspicuous. *Be calm, deep breath in ... and out.* ‘Do you know what’s going on?’ she asked Charlie again, in what she hoped was a rational tone. ‘Who brought us here? I ... I can’t seem to remember.’

Charlie met her eyes. ‘You really *haven’t* worked it out yet. We’re in the Game, Veronica,’ she said, her eyes sparkling.

Veronica felt as if she’d been thrown off balance – she reached out for the shed, felt the grain of its wood against her hands, rough and pitted and oh-so-real.

‘What game?’ she managed.

‘You know, *the* Game – the one everyone’s been talking

about,' Charlie said, her left eyebrow arching. 'The viral YouTube video game. VR? The real-life actual game.' Annoyance rang through her voice when Veronica's face displayed no signs of recognition.

Veronica shook her head. 'Can't be VR,' she whispered. 'I don't play any more. Plus it feels ...'

'So real?' Charlie's impatience was starting to show in more than her tone. She tapped one of her platform boots against the ground in annoyance. 'You must've been playing some kind of VR game before you came in here. That's how you get drawn in – through other games. Do we really have to go over this? We need to start playing.'

Veronica closed her eyes and breathed deep. What was the last thing she remembered, really ...?

She'd been sent to fetch the coffee from the vending machines for her stepmum Nyra and Dad, who'd been sitting with Max when she left. The rubber soles of her trainers squeaked across the floor as she carried the brimming cups from the kitchen. Except, when she returned to the spot outside Max's room, the door was open and they weren't inside. Max's eyes were shut – he'd fallen asleep. He did that, nowadays: wide awake one second; flat out the next.

Voices drifted from a small consulting room across the hall. She stepped closer.

‘There’s nothing we can do. I’m afraid we’re looking at a matter of months.’

Her stomach suddenly screwed itself up into a tight, tangled ball. She dumped the coffee cups on a table beside her, hands shaking. She missed whatever her dad said next because her ears were ringing. She lifted a hand to adjust her aids, but they were fine – the noise was something her brain was producing. The consultant was speaking again, her voice professional but gentle.

‘... an experimental treatment. But the cost is in the millions. The NHS won’t cover it. You’d have to fly out to the treatment centre in California.’

‘V? Are you out there?’ Max’s voice.

She stepped quickly away from the consulting-room door, attempting to compose her face. She breathed deep, then poked her head around Max’s door.

‘Hey, you! You’re awake,’ she said.

‘There’s a VR set in here!’ Max was rummaging in a box one of the nurses had left by his bed. ‘Look!’ He pulled out two chunky VR headsets.

She’d noticed how the paediatric wings of hospitals were filled with junk from well-meaning people. Books. Old tech. Soft toys with plastic fur. And Max’s room ... well, he was

one of the really sick kids there. So naturally, his room had turned into a charity shop.

‘Wow, those look old,’ she said with a smile.

‘I want to play,’ Max had said.

She hated VR. She hated the way it pretended to be real, but wasn’t. Hated how sometimes VR could be more real than reality itself ...

‘Please,’ said Max. ‘I know you don’t normally play, but just this once? Mum and Dad never let me, the nurses are too busy, and the other kids here are all losers.’

‘Hey, that’s not nice,’ she said.

He shrugged. ‘So, will you? Pretty please? I just want to try it. All my friends play all the time.’

She thought of the bad news she’d overheard outside and swallowed her ‘no’.

‘Are there even any games in there?’ she asked.

‘Just one. Hide and Seek. The original version. Is that OK?’

Of course. Of course it’s Hide and Seek, she thought. She’d played a later version, once – two years earlier, in fact – on super fancy equipment. The original would be as dated as the headsets: at least ten years old. Subpar visuals, tinny sound effects, unrealistic gameplay. Still, she was reluctant. ‘I don’t know if it’s a good idea. You’re supposed to be resting.’

‘They wouldn’t have given it to me if it was a risk,’ Max argued.

He had a point.

It won't feel real, she'd told herself. *Not this time*. 'OK, just one round. Dad and Nyra won't like it.'

'Awesome,' Max had said, handing her one of the headsets.

Hide and Seek was as simple as it sounded, except you could choose any setting you liked – some harder than others. Veronica removed her hearing aids and placed them on the bedside table. Then she pulled on her headset and scanned the menu. Max was full of enthusiasm.

'How about the under-the-sea one?' he suggested excitedly, his voice muffled. 'Or, look, the old creepy mansion!'

'No,' she'd said quickly. 'Not that one.'

They'd settled on the forest.

'I'm hiding!' Max shouted, as he ran off between the semi-pixelated trees, his avatar cloaked in bright red as he was swallowed into the leaves. And she had started counting ...

Veronica shook herself out of the memory. A small amount of tension unfurled from her shoulders as her mind gathered itself together. At least she remembered that, yes, she *had* been playing a game.

That game.

She shouldn't have agreed to play it. Not again. But Max had begged her. And it was hard to refuse your sick eight-year-old brother.

So Charlie was right. This *was* VR. And whatever tension had started to unfurl now returned, double the strength.

Because being here was literally her worst nightmare.

'Remember now?' Charlie said, half sighing with impatience. 'I've heard this kind of thing can mess with your head. What were you playing? How did it happen?'

Veronica swallowed. 'I was playing Hide and Seek with my little brother. I was the seeker. I was searching for him and then, out of nowhere, there was this ... door. In the middle of the forest. It didn't even look like it belonged in the game – it was too realistic. I reached out to open it ...'

'Then you were here.' Charlie nodded. 'Right, you've got it at last. You're in the Game. *You'll know it by the snow* – blah blah blah.' She gestured round at the snowy woodland clearing, palms spread. 'So if you don't mind, I'm going to have a poke around.' She headed for the shed. 'There might be something important here – something we can use later on. I wonder if it'll be a racing game? Doesn't seem like it. Maybe a first-person shooter? Or some kind of RPG?'

As Charlie continued to rant about everything this game might or might not be, Veronica stared at the forest around her. *White sheet, white light, white snow*. She felt the

snowflakes falling across her cheeks and the backs of her uncovered hands, cold and feathery. It didn't feel like a game. It looked and felt *totally* real. She stared down at her hands – normally a dead giveaway – but they were perfect. Right down to the small mole on the back of her right hand. She'd been using a really shitty old headset – was it even capable of these kinds of visuals? Even the sensation of the freezing air in her lungs was totally authentic.

She thought back to how pixelated the forest had been in the early version of Hide and Seek she'd been playing with Max – the way the game hadn't been totally immersive, so she'd still been able to hear some of the sounds of the hospital in the background, even without her aids: the footsteps scuffing the linoleum floor outside; the muffled sound of voices – perhaps from the room opposite, where her parents were trying to figure out what the hell they could do to save Max's life, or where they had already started to grieve. She shook away the thought.

Charlie continued to speak, now stalking around the perimeter of the woodshed '... This whole thing is pretty insane, isn't it? I haven't heard any real clues about what the prize is, not a single one, though plenty of speculation ...'

No sounds intruded, here, past the snowy silence and Charlie's constant chatter. Even the newer version of Hide and Seek, the one she'd played a couple of years earlier, hadn't

been this convincing. This was the most immersive VR she had ever experienced.

Charlie rattled around inside the woodshed, as if anything interesting might be hiding between the logs.

‘How does this work?’ Veronica interrupted in a hollow voice, stopping Charlie in her tracks. ‘How does it feel so real?’

Charlie’s face turned serious for a moment as she walked out of the woodshed, resting her hand gently on the tip of the axe jammed into the log. ‘You’re right – I forget sometimes, but it’s pretty bloody amazing, actually. This isn’t just great graphics and stuff, though that’s part of it. For a while now, they’ve been perfecting this technology where our actual consciousness is uploaded here. *We’re* here. Our avatars are like perfect digital replicas of our actual bodies. And this ... The games I play are always convincing, but *this* is next level.’ She brushed the snow off the axe handle with her hand then wriggled her fingers, as if contemplating the sensation. ‘You really haven’t experienced this before, huh?’

‘Once before,’ Veronica replied quietly. ‘But not this good.’

She felt queasy at the thought of her consciousness – her very *self* – being literally uploaded into a VR world, a place she had no control over. Then she remembered: if you wanted to leave VR, you only had to ask.

‘I want to leave,’ she said, her voice coming out strangled

and trembling as she lifted her face to the sky. Nothing happened. She screwed her eyes shut and clenched her fists. ‘Hey, computer, get me out of here!’ Her voice cracked. ‘Game over, OK? I never consented to this!’

‘That’s not going to work, dummy,’ said Charlie, who was now curling her fingers around the axe’s handle.

‘This is VR, right? So why won’t it let me out?’ Veronica said. ‘I have to go. My brother—’

‘It’s the Game, Veronica. I’ve said it, like, twice already.’ Charlie stared at her, her hands still wrapped around the axe’s handle, and Veronica stared back. ‘You can’t just *get out* of the Game.’

Veronica had no idea what she was talking about. She could barely focus on Charlie’s words over the sharp ring of a flatline in her imagination. Max had called for her, like he was in pain, or in trouble. His voice had been ringing through her head as she’d arrived in this place. He could be having one of his episodes. The ones that could ultimately kill him. She imagined herself out cold with a VR headset on, lying beside her brother, useless. She tried to calm herself, but her thoughts were spiralling now. The last moments she could ever spend with the one member of her family who actually cared about her, wasted in a stupid dream – some ridiculous game she’d never asked to play. Why hadn’t anyone removed the headset?

A short, sharp laugh rang through the clearing, breaking Veronica's cycle of panic. 'Whoa ... OK, I finally get it. You've actually never heard of the Game, have you? That's ... really crazy. Where have you even *been*?' Charlie pulled sharply on the handle. The axe lifted free of the snow-covered stump and she held it up to the light admiringly.

Veronica felt her cheeks colour. Didn't Charlie understand how little this mattered? 'I—'

'Listen to me. You've got to hear this before you say or do anything else. OK?' Charlie didn't soften her tone one bit – she stalked towards Veronica at a steady pace, her voice brash and confident, snow crunching under her heels, the axe dangling from her right hand. 'It's not *a* game; it's *the* Game. The legendary virtual world hosted on the dark web – it's, like, the most incredible game ever created ... or so they say. Only a few people have ever played it so far. You've really never heard the phrase "You'll know it by the snow"? It's been everywhere for ages.'

Veronica's eyes widened slightly. She *had* seen the phrase – graffitied around town or carved into the doors of the women's bathrooms at the hospital. And, now she thought about it, she might've even heard about the Game on the news. But it was probably the sort of thing she would've switched off anyway. 'So ... let me get this right. We've basically been digitally abducted and the

Game won't let us out? And we're now trapped in the dark web?

'You make it sound so *bad*.' Charlie scuffed the snow with her boot, scanned the woodshed. 'This is an opportunity, V.'

Veronica bristled at Charlie's use of the nickname. Max called her that – but this girl, she hadn't earned it.

'Look, legend has it that some shadowy coder created this place. I've heard rumours he's a rich guy with an insane inheritance and he decided to give it all away ... to those who win. He planted gateways to it inside other games. Even Hide and Seek, apparently, for some unknown goddamn reason,' Charlie said. 'That game is for little kids.'

Max's shrill scream rang again through her mind. *I have to get back*, Veronica thought. 'Why hasn't someone just removed my headset?'

Charlie looked at her like she was insane. 'You can't do that, obviously. Pulling someone out of VR like that is super dangerous, but especially if they're in as deep as we are. The more convincing the VR world, the more dangerous it is to be jolted.'

'*Jolted?*' Veronica repeated.

'That's when you're pulled out of VR without your consent,' Charlie replied. 'It would be really dangerous if that were to happen to you. Your entire consciousness is here, you

know? ... Whatever,' she added, obviously tired of Veronica's questions. 'We're wasting time. I've heard about the people who've played the Game already. They're all rich now. We should get a move on if we want a chance to win.'

'I don't want to win – I don't want any of this. How do I get out?' Veronica could hear her voice rising with panic, now. 'Oh my god ...' She doubled over, visions flashing through her mind – a hospital monitor flatlining, Dad and Nyra's horrified faces, Max's cold, pale body. *And Em's body, two years ago.* The edges of her vision were blurring. She was shaking all over. 'Let me out!' she shouted at the sky. 'Let me out!'

Charlie dropped the axe, stepped up to Veronica and jerked her upright with both hands. Then, without hesitation, she drew back her arm and slapped her once, hard, around the face.

Veronica wanted to object, but she was actually speechless. She touched her stinging cheek mutely.

'Get it into your head, V: you can't leave,' Charlie said, her voice perfectly calm and cold as she picked up her axe again. 'I'm pretty sure the only way out is to play it through until the end. Got it?'

Veronica clenched and unclenched her fists. Her eyes felt prickly, but she didn't want to cry in front of this girl. She knew her type from school – from Em too. Showing weakness

never ended well. ‘Trapping us here can’t be allowed,’ she said, her voice thick.

Charlie shook her head, a low chuckle leaving her lips. ‘Hey, this is the dark web. The whole thing isn’t technically allowed.’ She scanned the path behind Veronica, snaking off into wherever they were headed.

‘So will the police—’ Veronica ventured, but Charlie cut her off.

‘Oh my god. Do you have to be such a wet wipe?’ Then she snorted. ‘Whatever. Who cares? Let’s be real – we don’t know each other, and we’re not going to get to know each other. I have literally no interest in you. We’re both playing for ourselves. If you want, you can go it alone – what do I care? You’ll probably lose anyway, since you have about as much spine as a banana. But, if you can get a grip, staying together would be good. Alliances are good. Especially for you. So if you’re smart, which I think you are, you’ll want to come along with me. And you’re going to have to stop with the “I need to get out” crap, OK? You’re a player now. So play.’

For some reason, despite Charlie’s attitude, the thought of being alone here among the silent snow and trees actually filled Veronica with horror. So, she bit her tongue. Charlie was right – she was clueless about this place, about anything to do with gaming. So she’d stick with the girl, however

much she disliked her – until she could find a way to leave. Her eyes fell to the axe hanging from Charlie's hand. She didn't seem like someone Veronica would want to cross.

'Well, if there's firewood, there's got to be a house,' said Charlie. 'I'm freezing my tits off. Let's go.'

She didn't wait for Veronica before setting off down the snowy, winding path through the trees.