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I hate Christmas. Every other kid in this city, in Hunting Park even—they get something, they go somewhere, at least they got someone to hang out with. Not the skinny white kid who runs stuff for Marty. When I slide the closet door open and roll out onto the grimy carpet of my room floor, my fists are already clenched.

Christmas Eve, yeah, right. From the way Marty was talking we're setting up to ice that Chicos guy tonight, because he's been stealing our customers. And Marty will send me out with the hit guy—probably Jenk, and he'll try to push me around.

Cussing under my breath, I kick through my pile of clothes and comic books, looking for a Captain America shirt. When I find one, my fists melt into hands again while I pull it on. I let out a long breath, looking over at my dirty-white comforter, empty aspirin bottles, and notebook lying open on my closet floor. Can I crawl back in there and wake up when Christmas is over?

In the living room, I turn the PlayStation on and stick my head in Marty's room. Empty. Over to the kitchen area and stick my head in the fridge. Empty. No more milk anyway, and I don't feel like beer for breakfast.

I let the fridge door swing closed and turn around, my eyes falling on the open *Fantasy Battle* case on top of the PlayStation. Okay, Racer, I guess it's just me and you again. I look up, out the window, at the Christmas lights decorating Sam's house across the street. I remember me and Marty did lights one year, when I was like five. I would stare at em, falling asleep against his arm. We're not like that anymore. We're pretty much what the neighborhood thinks we are—a tough-looking drug lord and a silent blond kid who runs for him.

A minute later I'm gripping my controller as Racer dodges burning projectiles on his way into an ancient Frisian monastery. The monster catches us off-guard, right inside the door. I raise my gun but his smoking black arm comes down on it, pinning me in a corner. Trying to pull free, I fire, banging the buttons on the controller. But it's not working—this thing is too strong for me. He opens his mouth, I see all these rows of rotting teeth—almost smell the stench—he opens his mouth with a roar, it comes down on my head... I cry out. "No!"

Hearing a key in the lock, I hit pause. Take a breath and glance around the living room. For once, reality seems safer than Racer's world.

Marty comes in the door, in his raincoat, clutching a cup of coffee and a handful of mail. I smell sausage and toast and whipped cream, and my stomach feels hollow. My eyes track him to the kitchen table, watching as he drops the mail, flicks through it, lifts a red envelope and sets down his coffee so he can tear it open.

It's a Christmas card from my mom. I watch him pull a twenty-dollar bill out and drop the envelope back to the table.

As he pushes the bill in his pocket, I get up and come over, reaching for the envelope. I stare at my name in her neat, businesslike print. *Connor Cavalier*. Pulling the card out, I glance at the grinning Santa—open it, look inside. Always the same card, always the same blank space staring back at me.

Blank space can say a lot. I drop the card back down on the table and push my hands in my pockets. Can't believe Marty got the money again. Next year I gotta be faster.

When I glance up he's turning toward his room.

"Marty, can I have like five bucks? For breakfast?"

He tosses his raincoat on the bed.

"Marty?"

"Who pays the rent, kid?"

He used to say, who feeds you, or who bought you that shirt. But he don't do much of either of those anymore, so I guess he knows better than to play that card.

"We're meeting Jenkins at 10:00." He barely glances at me. "No gang colors."

I look down at my skinny blue jeans and Captain America shirt.

As he drops himself down on the bed, rubbing his head, his spiked-up hair crumbles into tousled brown waves. “Get it, huh?”

Here in the ghetto they don’t say ‘get it’, they say ‘ya dig?’ But Marty’s not from the ghetto—grew up middle class, Chicago suburbs. He glances at me and I nod. Then he reaches into his nightstand drawer, slides a gun aside, and fishes out a five-dollar bill. Holds it out, face turned the other way.

My eyebrows go up, I’m smiling as I come over to take it. “Thanks, Marty.”

“Yeah, don’t get used to it.” He drops back on the bed with a half groan, his eyes closing. When I don’t move from my spot in the doorway, he opens them again. “Quit staring at me.”

Back in the living room, I pick my controller up off the couch. The monster’s still got his mouth around my head. Half of me just wants to quit the game and go down to Dunkin’ Doughnuts for some hash browns. But something else in me thinks—give me two seconds—I’ll have you down on the ground, screaming for mercy.

Hitting play, I use my last boost to swing the gun—fire. It hits him in the foot just as the screen starts going black. He reels—I have my head back, I raise the gun and aim. The third eye from the right—that’s the way to kill em with one shot. Which is good, cause I only got one bullet left.

I fire, he screams an eerie scream right before he hits the dusty tile floor.  
*Thud.*

Marty’s voice—“Quiet, kid.”

I hit the mute button without looking and smile as Racer springs over the dead body and runs free.

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10:00 p.m. We’re sitting in the dark car at the Sunoco three blocks away from our house, waiting for Jenkins. Marty’s on his phone—the pale white light cast across his expressionless face. I’m trying not to watch him. Trying not to figure

out what he's gonna make me do tonight. Whether it's my brains he wants, or my quick fingers, or my quiet, skinny body, so strung out it's hardly got a shadow. Whether he's coming with me, whether he'll leave me alone with Jenkins, what I'll do if that guy tries to go for me.

You'd think after eight years you'd be like, whatever. But instead it's every other week you're terrified all over again.

My hands are damp. I lean my head back against the seat and clench my fingers into my blond curls. Stare at a couple black kids hanging outside the convenience store, pushing each other and stumbling around. I rub my sweaty hands on my jeans—first one, then the other, push em into my jacket pockets, take em out again and clench my hair. I'm trying to calm down.

Headlights flash across our faces as Skin Jenkins pulls up next to us. He gets out, slapping his hand against the chain on his leg and pushing a pair of sunglasses over his eyes.

Marty rolls down his window and grunts at him. "Can you even see anything?"

Jenk's crooked mouth kinda smirks. Is he looking at me? I can't tell.

"Take the kid." Marty jerks his head toward me. "Sam'll meet you." He lowers his voice. "Just what we planned, give him a run-down..." He half glances over at me. "Don't need to tell him...you know..."

While my heart pounds, Jenk nods and comes around. Flings my door open. Instinctively I lower my head, pulling away.

Marty's voice is quiet. "Kid."

Swallowing, I glance up at him. "Ain't you coming?"

"Shut up and listen to Jenk, okay?"

"Marty..." I try to beg him with my eyes, try to breathe. "Can't I go with—"

He pushes a button and the car sputters to life. Jenk gets hold of my arm and yanks me to my feet. I pull away, glaring at his shadowy, ash-smeared face, my hoarse whisper going harsh. “You touch me tonight I’ll kill you.”

A sick grin goes over his face—the grin that says, no one cares what I do to you tonight and you know it. I shove my shaking hand into the pocket of my leather jacket and grip my knife.

“Jenk, don’t get him all worked up.” Marty shifts into drive. “Shut the door, man.”

My stomach sinks as I watch Marty pull away. I follow Jenk to his car, trying hard to breathe. Slip into the back seat, smash myself up against the door. I can see him in the mirror—not his eyes, but his thin mouth and part of the scar across his chin. He glances at me—grins. I grip my knife tighter. I wouldn’t kill him, no, but I *will* protect myself. It’s how you gotta live in this world, with these guys. And Marty’s taught me a lot in the last ten years, but the toughest thing is that I gotta fight for myself, cause he’s not sticking around to look out for me.

When we pull up to the curb I’m watching Jenkins so close I don’t see Sam till he’s jumped into the passenger seat in front of me. He’s grinning too, but it ain’t the same kind of grin. He grabs Jenk’s head in a playful greeting. “Yo Roguey!”

Jenk punches his shoulder and Sam turns to grin at me. “Yo Baby Rogue.”

I try to let out a little of the breath I’ve been holding in. Sam’s pretty decent. He might stick up for me if Jenk gets rough.

Sam’s looking at me again. “Yo, you look freaked, man. Don’t know what you’re doin’?”

Don’t wanna know. I swallow, looking away.

“Bro, you know Gonzales, you know he’s crossed the Avenue? We can’t have Chicos crossing the Avenue, man, you know they tryin’ to take over.”

He waits for me to agree, but I don’t even blink.

“He never seen you, man.” Sam reaches over to jostle my head. “We just have you knock and when he opens me and Jenk take care of him, yeah, bro?”

I pull my head away.

The playful grin comes back to his face. “Yeah, you chill, man.” He turns back to Jenk. “We gonna rip up a party after this, yo?”

Jenk is probably smirking, but I’m not gonna look at it. Leaning forward, I drop my head in my hands, messing with my hair. I got Captain America. I got a vibranium shield guarding my chest. This is like in a movie—this is cool.

The car slows, my door opens and a hand grabs my arm. I gulp to hold in a scream. It’s Sam, whispering in my ear. “Right up those stairs, room 25, quick now, make somethin’ up, don’t forget to duck so we don’t gotta hit you, man, you listenin’ to me?”

Trying to breathe, I nod. Glance around, taking in drab hotel building, multi-colored lights, and pounding Latino music in one frightened sweep.

“Ya dig? Gonna remember?”

Again, I nod. I remember everything.

A minute later I’m going up the stairs, staring at a couple girls hanging on the railing, giggling and waving at me. I want to smile back, but it’s not working. I think I’d give my right arm just to be a kid. A 14-year-old guy should be rapping and playing pranks and going out with his buddies. A 14-year-old guy should at least know how to smile at a girl.

By the time I find room 25 my heart is pounding. Not cause there’s a rival gangster on the other side of the door who might open it and shoot me. My heart’s pounding cause I just thought of Emily. She makes my heart do this crazy jumping thing. And she ditched Jaden last week. I don’t know if she’ll even give me a chance, but if there’s ever a time to try—

The door opens. He's big, skulls and flames tattooed all over him and the Chico scar a straight line across his knuckles. I point my thumb over my shoulder, kinda stammering. "Um...yeah. Gonzales? They sent me over for..."

He starts pulling the chain off, eyes darting around the darkness behind me. I take a step forward—and feel a blow from behind—Sam, knocking me outta the way. The Chico has his gun out in a flash, but Sam's faster. A shot, a groan, a body hitting the floor—I watch it happen, but I'm not really thinking. You can't think with this stuff, you can't feel. If you see it and really *see*, you'll go crazy.

Sometimes not feeling anything feels really good. I watch Jenk grin a dirty grin, watch them rustle through the baggy pockets of the guy's clothes. Numbly, I follow Sam to the door. He reaches for the handle, putting his hand out to hold me back. "Stay here," he whispers. "Gotta know who's bringin' the message—stick here and chill, man."

Every unconscious muscle in my body wakes up, tightening, preparing for a fight. "No..." I push his hand away. "Don't leave me, Sam."

"It's chill—he's dead, just—"

"Who's gonna pick me up? I don't wanna be here alone—what if someone comes in, what if—"

"Shh..." He puts a finger to his lips, like he's hushing his sister's baby. "Boss ordered."

"I don't care who the—"

Cussing only brings a slight smile to his face and makes him reach out to ruffle my hair. I jerk away, grinding my teeth together.

"Hey." He's opening the door, face serious again. "You be alright, man."

I jump forward a second too late. He's gone. Bringing my fists down against the weathered wood of the door, I cuss him. But the angry words and kicks against the door are drowned in the loud, steady beat of the music down the hall.

Clenching my hair, my head, the damp back of my neck, I try to breathe. Don't think, kid, don't think. They'll come, someone'll come for you eventually.

The room is dim and colorless—heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke, sweat, and filth. I find my fists clenched again, my stomach turning uncomfortably. Marty *knows* I hate being left. A message? Sam's lying to me. I don't even know where I am. It's Christmas Eve, and I'm stuck in rival territory with...

He's right there on the floor next to the bed. Taking a deep breath, I try to distract myself. The TV. My sweaty fingers slip on the remote as I jam the button to turn it on. I don't look at it—just want faces, voices, music. And food. The plastic bag on the table makes a nice crinkle as I rummage through it. Wow, the Chicos feed their guys better than Marty feeds me. Haven't had a burrito this good in a long time.

My muscles start relaxing as I sit down on the floor, lean back against the bed, and start on my dinner. Staring at the city lights out the window, drinking, I start forgetting everything I don't wanna think about, which is pretty much my whole life. When everything's gone I slowly squeeze the empty beer cans into hourglasses, mumbling to myself. "Hey, it's warm in here, kid...Who wants to be home on Christmas anyway... Yeah, Connor, Merry Christmas..."

My head goes back against the bed and I smile, feeling relaxed and sleepy. "Sound like my teachers now—*Connor*. Please answer me, Connor... Watch your language, Connor... What happened to your face, Connor?"

I laugh a little, but it comes out like a cough.

"I gotta get myself a girlfriend."