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Opening extract from

Gamer

Written by

Chris Bradford

Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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Gamer

by

Chris Bradford

For Matt,
a loyal friend

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Warning: Do not attempt any of the techniques described within this book without the supervision of a qualified instructor. These can be highly dangerous moves and result in fatal injuries. The author and the publisher take no responsibility for any injuries resulting from attempting these techniques.

Contents

1	Bread	1
2	Street Fighter	7
3	Roof Escape	13
4	Selector Truck	18
5	Game Over	21
6	Kat-Ana	27
7	Pain Limiter	34
8	The Catch	41
9	Trigger Time	45
10	Blaze and Burn	53
11	Missing in Action	56
12	Elite Gamer	60
13	No Escape	64
14	Reality Check	68
15	Back Door	72
16	The Forest	76
17	The Citadel	80
18	The Crown	84
19	Face-Off	89
20	PlayPods	93
21	The Greater Good	96
22	Log-off	101

Chapter 1
Bread

I can't tear my eyes away from the fighters.

Thunderbolt the kickboxer has just knocked Destroy's front teeth out. Destroy reels from the blow, spits blood. He is a powerful heavyweight boxer. He puts his head down like a bull and charges at Thunderbolt. His anvil-sized fist drives into Thunderbolt's gut. Thunderbolt collapses. Next, Destroy catches him with an upper hook on the chin. Thunderbolt's whole body flips high into the air, then lands in a dazed pile in the centre of the Arena.

The crowd jeer and shout.

I hold my breath. Thunderbolt was the favourite to win this match.

Destroy raises his fists on either side of Thunderbolt's head and slams them together. It's his most famous move – the Skull Crusher.

It's Game Over for Thunderbolt.

The 3D Street Screen in front of me switches to a red and black logo:

VK

A deep voice growls, **"VIRTUAL KOMBAT. SO REAL IT HURTS."**

After that an advert comes on for Synapse Drinks, the main company that sponsors Virtual Kombat. I try not to look. Adverts just make me want what I can't have.

Now the fight is over, the street kids turn away. They drift into the side alleys with the rest of the rubbish that pollutes this city. Unwanted. Ignored. Forgotten.

I'm one of them. Scott. Just another stray on the streets.

I lost my parents to the killer virus of 2030. It wiped out millions. Only thing was, it didn't seem to affect kids. At one point, docs said it might be *us* spreading the virus. Some parents even dumped their *own kids* on the streets. The orphans ended up there too. Now there are thousands of us.

The whole world went to pot. Then the army took over and their tough new laws brought order to the place. After that, people stopped going outside. The virus had run its course by then, but adults were still scared they might catch something. Most people escaped into life on the net. That's when VK first started. People needed an outlet – something to funnel all their anger and despair into.

VIRTUAL KOMBAT

the most realistic fighting game ever!

That's what the ads say. Virtual Kombat is *the* Number 1 show in the world. Everyone watches or plays. Massive Street Screens are everywhere in the city. Like sick suns that never set.

On the screen in front of me, a huge 3D picture of a Zing energy bar appears. I turn away. It's torture.

I hear a blast of horns and pounding drums. It's the VK theme tune. The ad break is over and the logo returns. The voice is back too: **"THE MOST REALISTIC FIGHT GAME EVER. WHERE EVERY ENEMY HAS A MIND OF ITS OWN."**

Two air-brushed presenters appear on the screen and flash their shiny white teeth. It's Highlight Time – all today's deaths repeated on a screen ten storeys high. Heads chopped off, limbs crushed, kombatants killed. They show every gory detail.

The leader-board flashes up. Destroy has jumped one place. Thunderbolt's name is gone.

VIRTUAL KOMBAT. SO REAL IT HURTS.

The only thing that hurts me at the moment is my stomach. I haven't eaten in days. VK takes my mind off the hunger. When the show's on, you don't think about it so much. But when it's over, the emptiness grips my guts once more.

I can't face the re-runs, and so I head up a narrow backstreet. There are big dumpbins down here, behind the restaurants where the rich and powerful eat. They still go out. That's if you count sealed MPVs, glass-covered walkways and huge malls as 'outside'.

If I'm lucky, I might find a few scraps thrown out by the chefs in the bins.

Then I hear a voice. "Hand it over!"

In the gloom up ahead, I see two lads standing over a little girl and boy.

The girl shakes her blonde head and hugs a brown paper bag closer to her chest. The taller of the two lads slaps her hard across the face and rips the bag from her grasp.

The girl doesn't cry. Street kids are tough. But even from here I can see the red mark of a hand-print on her cheek.

"Leave my sis alone," yells the boy, as he steps between them. "Give that back. It's *ours*!"

"Finders keepers, losers weepers," the other lad mocks. He's stocky, with dark red hair. He shoves the boy to the ground and laughs as the kid cracks his head on the kerb.

"You won't believe this, Juice," says the taller lad. His eyes glow with pleasure. "They've got bread."