

Easy Money

May 2044

In a shocking turn of events, Gladius was coming upstairs to eat breakfast. Well, it wasn't exactly *breakfast*: after all, it was 3:00 pm, and upon entering the kitchen, her mother informed her of how lazy she was.

"So?" responded Gladius. "I'm on break."

"Being on break doesn't mean you can forsake being a productive human being," her mother growled.

"Actually, that's exactly what it means," Gladius stretched.

Light from the windows gleamed against the surface of their countertop, which glowed with notifications underneath the glass. A paused holoprojection from her mom's HaloPlace account floated in the air, the colors flittering bravely against the sun.

"I bet you've spent all day flipping between social medias. You always tell me I need to be productive, but all you do is mindlessly watch HaloPlace videos." She tapped the counter and the image of a generic-looking man materialized before her.

"Hello, Gladius," he said, beaming. "What can I do for you?"

"Hey, handsome," she replied. "Make me some breakfast, pronto. I don't think I've eaten the past couple days." She held a clump of hair up to her nose. It was greasy and reeked of body odor.

"Certainly, Gladius." The refrigerator door swung open and a conveyor belt slipped out, carrying a package of shell-less eggs. The stove sprang to life, and they slid smoothly onto the heated glass. As the belt retracted, she and her mother argued.

"You haven't eaten for *days*?" her mother exclaimed. "Why not?"

"Gaming," she shrugged. "You forget food when you're battling."

"Oh, please. If you want to talk about battling, look at our American troops over the ocean, fighting for our Kurdish allies and their new country while you do nothing."

"I'm not impressed," Gladius sighed. "They're hardly any actual people over there. War is so low-risk, we no longer fear starting it."

"Gladius, when I was your age, real people went out and fought. Thank goodness only generals are there, just to control the fighting droids and drones! Otherwise, imagine the very *real* death!" she turned back on her HaloPlace video. "Eat your eggs and go back downstairs." The video ended and HaloPlace immediately started playing the next one.

Gladius glared as her mother's eyes glazed over. Gladius was judging her mother in that moment. Judging her need to go on technology whenever the conversation turned stressful. Judging her short attention span. Judging her...*addiction*.

Then Gladius went back downstairs, where she would undoubtedly spend the next days with VR wires attached to her head, alternating between gaming and sleep until she couldn't ignore her body's need for reality anymore and would have to go get "breakfast" again.

January 2052

Wheatley was surrounded by the thick glass of a holding cell. There wasn't a single distortion, a single bubble, and he loathed the monotony. So as Wheatly was roughly ushered away by human guards, a rare sight, he bid it *adieu* and concentrated on the task ahead.

Wheatley sat lightly, his feet resting on beaded carpet. Across from him, a pearly-toothed news-anchor spoke. Wheatly smiled and the wires on his head pulsed. It was a clever illusion; he could see why people liked it.

“It was quite the scheme, Mr. Wheatly,” the anchor was saying. Her name was Nevea, and after the lengths she had gone to, she planned to make the most of this interview. “Where did you get the idea?”

“Our tech wasn’t as advanced as the enemy’s,” he said plainly. “America pours vast resources into their military, and we couldn’t match it. One American piloted a whole squadron. Our outdated droids and drones still had to be controlled by the individual, and we were running out of individuals to control them. They were slaughtering our human soldiers.” He softened his voice and continued. “As the military director, it was necessary to think somewhat...uniquely. We needed maximum efficiency for what technology we had.”

“Exactly how did you accomplish that?” Nevea’s smile widened. She was a grinning fox, craving knowledge, and he was more than willing to share.

May 2044

Gladius was playing a fighter game when the notification appeared.

She was used to pop-ups, but they usually only appeared in Base Console, the entry point for all American VR players before they began. She’d never gotten one mid-game before.

It intrigued her.

Congratulations! We’ve been watching you.

GladiatorRoman_1792,

You have qualified for an elitist program by GreenStar studios, where you can use your expertise as an accomplished warrior to test our newest game, and get paid for it! You’ll make \$3 per kill, so with your skill, it should be easy to make hundreds! Help *us* improve our games.

-Mr. Wheatly, CEO of GreenStar

Gladius tapped suspiciously, and it transported her to a war-torn battlefield, mud and twisted metal everywhere. She looked down at herself and saw that her character was a decrepit, beaten battle droid. A line of text scrolled across her vision.

“Welcome to GreenStar studio’s fast-paced, heavy action wargame! Kill the droids and drones highlighted in red. It’s negative \$5 from your funds if you hit any allies, highlighted in green. After a certain amount of kills, you can unlock access to new battlefields, missions, and players. Good luck, soldier!”

As the text faded, Gladius was bombarded by the sounds and sights of the game. In the distance, red blobs were buzzing about. She narrowed her view in to reveal they were enemy drones. Cautiously, Gladius fired, and watched a drone slowly plummeted to the ground.

Almost immediately, a notification from Gladius’s bank account dinged. She glanced at it out of the corner of her eye. *New deposit: \$3.* Not much, but a start. She could make more. What a way to show her mother true *productivity!*

Gladius smiled and fired again.

January 2052

“We chose our targets very carefully,” Wheatly explained. “Kids and teenagers, mainly. Their reflexes were fast, and we incentivized them to stay engaged: easy money. Plus, the game

was more interesting than any wargame: they were unknowingly *in* a real war. We started sending them on missions, stealing weaponry. They were turning all the tides.”

“How could you afford to pay them?” Nevea questioned.

“Ha! Paying them was a lot cheaper than paying a trained soldier. Plus, if they didn’t get paid, then they wouldn’t stay in the war, and we wanted them to stay as long as possible.”

“These kids were American. Did they ever suspect they were fighting for their enemy?”

He shrugged. “Corporations paying people to play games is common. Everyone thought GreenStar was just another startup. I don’t think anyone realized it until the arrests started.”

“Oh *yes*, the arrests. We’ve heard numerous accounts of the youths ripped from their homes.” Nevea leaned forward hungrily. “Tell us how that affected you.”

November 2044

Whenever Gladius went upstairs, her mother nagged about how she was 19 and needed to concentrate on things beyond games. But Gladius had been busy making money.

She had made \$8,617 by then. Three dollars per kill. Four dollars per operative mission. She made a point to play at *least* eight hours everyday. There was something addicting about watching her bank account ping: *New deposit: \$3. New deposit: \$4. New deposit: \$3.*

Gladius hadn’t used much of the money, but she was excited to. She figured once she got bored of GreenStar, she could go to another company, make more there. She could use the money to buy new games or even VRkitX, with the most immersive VR in history!

Then there was a knock on the door.

At first, she thought it *was* the game. She was playing an RPG, and there were many doors around the cottage she was in. But as the knocking grew more insistent, she realized it was coming from reality. She logged back into Base Console and gently tugged off her wires.

“Mom?” she called. “Do you need something?”

But her mother didn’t come down the stairs. Two government employees did, and before she knew what was happening, she was already being taken away.

May 2046

“So what was it like, when they tracked you down?” Nevea asked. Her interview time was ending, and she wanted to milk every moment of the remaining minutes.

“I was surprised,” he frowned. “I never expected to be caught, but after the FBI learned who was piloting our weapons, it wasn’t hard for them to figure out that GreenStar was a front. I should have established GreenStar separately from the beginning, but the entire production was a desperate risk, and I don’t regret it. These children prolonged our defeat.”

“Mr. Wheatley.” Nevea looked at him closely. He blinked and watched her flicker. “What would you say to your oblivious weapon-masters? Even now, many are still detained and are being interrogated as the US government decides how to sentence them for their crimes against their own country.”

Wheatley paused, contemplating the question, then stated simply: “You are powerful warriors. Thank you for your service.”