

## The Game

“But you’re not going to tell, right? You have to promise.” She dug her fingernail into my arm, pressing me for an answer I had no choice in.

“No.” I imagined her hand was closing around my throat instead of my arm. “I promise.”

She nodded, satisfied, and released me. I breathed in the crisp air and wondered how long I was going to do this.

“I’m really glad we’re friends,” she said, nudging me with her shoulder.

I looked up at her. “Yeah, me too.” The sick part was that I meant it.

It was ritual. She could teach me whatever lesson she wanted when we hung out. Today it was a lesson in nail art.

When I got home, my mom asked me if I had fun. I nodded. I did have fun. We laughed a lot when we were together and got along really well, all things considered. We had shared interests in comics and sci-fi and late-night comedy TV shows we weren’t supposed to be watching. She taught. I learned.

“What did you do?” My mom asked without looking up from cooking dinner. I took my customary spot on a stool and started talking about the class project we worked on, the latest comic we were obsessed over, and her dogs. I didn’t tell about the nail art. I kept my promises.

That night I peeled my sweater off and looked at the new designs on my arms. Small, half-moon cuts covered them, high density up by my shoulders trailing into small patches on my forearms. I walked into the bathroom to get ready for bed

and pulled the Neosporin from underneath the sink. I applied it to the worst of the cuts, wincing as they burned. I had the vague impression that this wasn't okay, that this wasn't what the rest of my friends in the sixth grade were doing, but she was my best friend. She said that meant we were closer than anyone else: we could do this.

I lay in bed that night, Neosporin sticking to my pajamas, and thought about today's events. I didn't want to move my arms because they were starting to burn, the cuts oozing small dots of blood. And I thought about how today I had gotten some in. She was probably lying in similar pain, her few cuts burning from where my nails dug into her skin and refused to let go, a disturbed cathartic ritual.

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"You're coming over tomorrow," she said later that week.

I thought of the indents on my arms, the last evidence of our previous hangout fading into nonexistence. I nodded like I had any choice in the matter.

When tomorrow came I fought back alternating tides of excitement and terror as my mom dropped me off in her driveway, calling out for me to be ready to leave at six as she pulled away.

She opened the door when I stepped onto the porch. "Hey! C'mon in. I've got a new episode of *Doctor Who* taped if you wanna watch it."

"Yeah! Sounds good," I said.

The credits rolled to the familiar tune, and David Tennant's face appeared on screen. She turned to me. "Pin me."

“What?”

“Pin me. Try to pin me. C’mon.”

“Why?”

“Cause I want you to.”

I turned away and focused on the TV. The Doctor was getting on a spaceship to see a diamond planet and Donna was staying behind. I knew something bad was going to happen; it always did.

“Hey.”

My head turned unwillingly.

“Did you hear me? Get over here and try to pin me.” She was standing off to the side of the TV, in the largest empty space of her basement. Her short red hair was coming un-tucked from behind her ears as she looked down at me.

I sighed and looked back at the TV one more time. I wanted to see what was going to happen. But I pushed myself out of the old La-Z-Boy and walked over to her.

“Fine.”

I pushed her first. She stumbled backwards but quickly caught her balance and came back at me, pushing me square in the chest. She was undoubtedly stronger than I was, and I caught myself on the arm of the La-Z-Boy. The wooden handle knocked into the back of my ankle and pain shot through my foot. I felt it then, the adrenaline release in my veins.

It’s not like I didn’t know why she did this. In some back corner of my brain common sense was screaming that this was messed up. But the bottom line was that it felt good. It felt like processing emotions so that things made sense again, so that

cloud of anger parted for just a little. It felt like strength in the form of adrenaline, forcing me to push myself harder in the interest of self-preservation. As much as I wanted to deny it, I felt it too.

I ran back at her, my head lowered to use my height to my advantage. I managed to hit her low, my hands hitting her waist. She fell to the floor, her head hitting the floor with a solid thunk. She immediately flipped over, throwing me onto my back, punching my stomach as hard as she could. She knew it wouldn't leave bruises if she hit me there. I kicked as hard as I could but couldn't flip her. I knew this wasn't going to end until I had pinned her. That's what she wanted; only then would our lesson be over.

On the TV, the Doctor was making friends with everyone on the ship, even the woman everyone else was ignoring.

I glared up at her and grabbed her stomach, digging my nails in as hard as I could. She squirmed in pain, momentarily restraining from punching me. My stomach hurt, but I managed to pull myself into an almost sitting position and push her back. Instead of wasting time like before, I knelt on her stomach and braced my hands on her shoulders. She tried to push me off, using her hands to tear at every piece of skin she could. I moved my hands closer to her throat and slowly applied pressure. Finally she stopped attacking and nodded in secession.

I climbed off her and she sat up, smiling. "You pinned me," she said.

"Yeah."

"Nice!" She began to laugh then and stood up. "That was a fun one. Wanna finish the episode?"

“Sure,” I said, accepting her hand to help myself up. We sat back in our seats and watched *Doctor Who* until I had to leave. It was like nothing had happened. Like it was normal.

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After that day it was different. She knew I could beat her. It had never happened before. My lessons became more frequent and more aggressive. It had been some unspoken rule between us that we only had lessons at her house, but suddenly that rule was off. A lesson could come at any time during the day at school. And I accepted it. This was just how our friendship was.

I was pretty sure that wasn't normal.

It wasn't like any of this was new; she'd been giving me lessons for four years before this. Admittedly I'd learned a lot. But it had been a secret. It had to be. We both knew the trouble we'd be in if someone found out. And like she said, if I told, we wouldn't be able to be friends any more. I wanted to stay friends.

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“I'm really glad we're friends,” she said one day at my house, roughly a year after the pinning lesson. There were never any lessons at my house. There was no basement to escape to. We were listening to a new CD she'd gotten for her birthday.

The singer was lamenting about escaping from his dead-end town. We'd both decided they were our new favorite band.

"Me too," I said. It was easy to mean it when you were lying on your stomachs next to each other listening to music. I rested my head on my hand, feeling the painful push of my weight against the bruise that had started to form.

"I know I'm not an easy person to be friends with," she continued.

I closed my eyes and let her talk.

"I'm not always really nice, you know? And sometimes I get mad and can't help it. And it feels like I'm always fighting something. But it's better when we hang out."

"Yeah," I said, my face still turned away from her.

"I mean it. And you're a good friend too. You let me get mad cause you know I'd never really hurt you. I wouldn't, I promise. You're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too," I said. I remembered the first time she had taught me a lesson. We were in fourth grade, a year after we'd met. We had already solidified our friendship. A year was long enough for us to learn about mutual interests and create our own inside jokes. It was the fall of that year and we went outside for recess. I wanted to play this great game we'd invented called "good cop, bad cop" that was kind of like tag but better. She wanted to play basketball. I hated basketball. After only a year I already knew she would always be taller than me and I would never be able to beat her in one-on-one.

In typical fourth grade fashion we argued over what would be more fun, until she got fed up and slapped me. She hit my cheek with all the force a nine year old

could muster. It stung so badly I could feel tears in my eyes. I was determined not to cry, but couldn't believe she would do that to me. Her eyes widened, but she didn't want to apologize. Even then she was too stubborn to admit she was wrong. Instead, she turned and walked off to the playground equipment where she did the monkey bars over and over for the rest of recess. No one tried to stop her. I sat down with my back to the chain link fence that surrounded the playground and watched.

When we were walking back into the classroom she leaned down and whispered into my ear. She told me she was sorry, but that I shouldn't have provoked her like that. That I needed to learn how to act around her. That I needed to learn how to help her calm down when she got too mad. She offered to teach me, and said that for the rest of the week we could play "good cop, bad cop." I nodded then, with no idea of what I had just agreed to, except for getting to do what I wanted during recess. It had seemed like I won.

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It was the spring of our eighth grade year that I wanted to be done with the lessons. They were really starting to hurt, more than normal. She had hit a growth spurt that I had yet to experience. It gave her even more of an advantage.

"Just pretend you scratched yourself," she said, holding my chin to look at her latest work across my face. "It'll be fine."

I nodded. There was nothing else I could do, anyway. We walked back to class and she rested her hand on my shoulder, right on top of another bruise. My body

hurt. Tiny scars littered my arms and legs at this point. Bruises overlapped each other in varying degrees of healing. I was a walking canvas of purple, blue, red, and yellow.

It was later that day that I got called out of class.

“What happened to your face?” My History teacher asked as we stood in the hallway outside my classroom door.

“I scratched myself,” I said.

“You scratched yourself?”

“Yes.” I could see her watching me through the window in the door. She wanted to make sure I kept my promise. I didn’t want to find out just how badly I’d regret it if I didn’t.

“Are you sure?”

I almost said something. But I couldn’t. “Yes.”

I could tell my teacher didn’t believe me. That was okay; I didn’t believe myself either.

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We got called down to the Vice Principal’s office the next week. We were in class together when the announcement crackled through the speaker system. She looked at me and raised her eyebrows. I shook my head.

“Did you tell?” She said when we were outside of the classroom, making our trek to the office.



“No. I told you I wouldn’t. I promised.” She needed to believe me. I didn’t tell; I couldn’t afford to.

We walked into an ambush in the office. Our History teacher was sitting in a chair at a round table, accompanied by the school counselor, the Vice Principal, and both of our mothers. I froze. She was going to think I told.

Somehow I sat down next to my mom and she did the same directly across from me.

“Now,” the counselor started, “It has come to our attention that there are some things you two might want to talk about in the presence of others. Like those scratches.” She looked at me, and my mom put her hand on my arm. My teacher gave me an encouraging look.

I knew I couldn’t say anything. I felt my face heat up and knew it must look like I’d stepped into a vat of radiation like the superheroes in our comics. I looked across the table and swallowed. Her face didn’t look like she was telling me to say anything. But I’d known her for five years and knew that she was. “No,” I said, somehow sounding convincing. “I just scratched myself, that’s all. No big deal.”

The Vice Principal looked across the table between us. “Are you sure there’s nothing you want to say to each other? This is a safe environment; whatever you say will stay here and we can work it out together, peacefully.”

I looked down and started picking at the eraser shavings littering the table.

The counselor added, “We just want to make sure you’re both happy and safe here at school and home. Some students have expressed some worry about your friendship, they said they’ve seen the two of you fighting frequently.”

“Who?” she asked, and I was glad I was still looking down. I could practically feel the counselor flinch.

“Now, I can’t tell you that; it would be a breach of confidentiality. But we do need to know if there is any truth to those claims.”

I knew I was going to regret what I had to say.

“Look, I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” I said. “We’re best friends. I like hanging out with her. We have fun. I like being friends with her. I don’t think there’s anything we really need to talk about. I said it before, these are just scratches. She wouldn’t do that to me. I think whoever said anything was confused.”

The adults looked at me and I dug my nail into my palm.

“Well, if you both say nothing is wrong, then I suppose you can go back to class. Just know if there is anything you ever want to talk about, not even about your friendship, you can come to me,” the counselor said.

We smiled and nodded. Once excused, we stood up and began walking to class.

“So you didn’t say anything?” She asked when we were safely down the hallway.

“I told you I didn’t,” I said. Of course I didn’t. I couldn’t. I knew what would happen if I said something, that it would be much worse than everything that had happened combined. Even those adults wouldn’t be able to protect me.

“Good,” She said, throwing her arm around my shoulders and pulling me towards her. “I’m glad you didn’t. I like our game. It’s fun.”

Our game. “Yeah, me too.”