

Gamer

Warren finishes the sudoku as the subway train pulls into Dundas West station. In the aisle, a little kid in a stroller watches as he refolds the newspaper and sticks it in his courier bag. The kid has big brown eyes and a worm of snot heading for his mouth. His arms are propped out by a bulky neon snowsuit, he's clutching a small red ball in one hand. He is really studying Warren. His mother is yakking intently with another woman in a language of a-sounds.

Manahatabata.

Only a couple of people straggle into the subway car—it's Sunday morning and the train is almost empty. Warren braces for the discordant door warning. *So, mi* – one last body bursts through the closing door – *duhhh*. A woman across the aisle tsks loudly. "So dangerous," she says to no one in particular.

Dangerous. Warren watches the ribs of the tunnel strobe past and considers: death by subway door. People collecting points for avoiding everyday death traps. Breakfast without choking on your bagel, ten points. Shave without nicking an artery, thirty. Subway doors, a hundred points easy. Old people would get it. Offer avatars with walkers.

"Hey! Hey, Cunningham! Hey, isn't that you? Warren Cunningham?"

The tunnel recedes, Warren sees the subway car's fluorescent lights reflected in the windows. He knows that voice.

"Hey, Cunni, that is you! Fuck, man, long time no see!"

Max Bauer. Same voice, unmistakable fifteen years after high school.

"Geez, look at you. Same old Cunni. The hair, the beard. Man, you living in some kind of time warp?"

Warren turns from the window to look at his old torture-master. Facing him, seated now on the long bench seat, is a balding, bloated version of the guy who once locked him into the trunk of the principal's car. But this is Max Bauer on bad steroids. Shit, is he soft. How does that

happen? Warren looks away. He sees the kid in the stroller has shifted his gaze to Bauer.

“Talk to me, Cunni. How you doin’ man? Geez, you don’t come to any of the reunions. Man, you shoulda been at the last one. We had a blast. You remember Gomer, eh? Gaskell? He rolled his Lexus after the last one. It was just in May. Man, you shoulda come, Cunni.”

Warren can’t take in what he’s hearing. He checks it’s really Bauer. It is. The familiar thin-lipped leer in a fat-suit face. Creepy. There’s something else different, but Warren can’t say what. “So, what are you doing?” the face blurts.

Warren looks at the kid again, shrugs. “You know, computers. Programming.”

Bauer bounces on his seat. “Well, for sure! ‘Course you are. You were always such a dweeb, man. Hey, do you remember when we wrapped you like a condom and shoved you onto the stage at assembly? Oh man, the look on Stettelmeyer’s face!”

“I remember.” Warren notices the subway map, the one showing the proposed new lines. He hopes Bauer isn’t transferring with him at St George.

“Man, we were some bad! Eh? All of us, giving the finger to the man.” Bauer stops his squirming. Warren feels his stare. “You look good, actually, Cunni. A fuck of a lot better than you did at WT. Is that a leather coat? And check the GQ boots. Damn! Cunni coming up in the world!” He’s on the move again, bouncing against the bench back.

“There’s a kid.” Warren and the little kid are staring into each other’s eyes. The kid is better at not blinking.

“Yeah. I got a kid too.”

“No, I mean, there’s a kid listening. Watch your language.” Warren loses the link with the kid’s eyes for a few moments as the tsking lady gropes her way to the doors.

“Mother’s not speaking English. Kid won’t understand. What do you care?”

Now Warren remembers Bauer’s way of drawing lines in the sand for no particular reason. There’s an old, bad feeling to all of this. Warren closes his eyes and calls up the

safe zone on the Island of Sassila. Sometimes at night he leaves his computer on that frame just so he can fall asleep to the sound of the waterfall.

But Bauer wants conversation. “Anyway, so you got kids? Is the Cunster married?” His voice is taunting. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

Anvila materializes, her hair radiating round her head like blue-black lightning bolts. Warren positions her right in front of the kid, her mighty hammer raising back to smash Bauer’s brains out. Eighteen hundred points. Three hundred bonus if he’s packing a weapon. The kid turns in his stroller, boots on the footrest, he’s arching up and back toward the women behind him. He yowls. The women don’t stop talking, one of them pinches the snot away from the kid’s face with an empty muffin bag. Anvila dissipates.

Warren turns to Bauer and realizes what’s wrong: he has two eyebrows. Krakor waxes his unibrow? Warren is stunned.

But Bauer’s waiting for an answer. The curl of his lip helps Warren recall the question. “My wife is in film production. No kids.”

“Yeah, well.” Bauer settles back. “My kid lives with her mother. Great kid, plays soccer. I coach her team. I get her every other weekend, we do all kinds of shit—”

The range of emotions on Bauer’s broad face as he talks surprises Warren. He only remembers him flat and menacing. But here is interest and pride. Even tenderness. He’s having to teach his kid how to handle bullies, Bauer says, because she’s small for her age. “There’s some tough kids out there.”

Warren turns away.

The little kid in his neon green snowsuit has got his head cocked back. He’s staring at the ceiling of the subway car. Warren looks up. There’s nothing. Just a white surface, strapped up at intervals by metal strips. It’s calm up there. Warren leans his head against the pole behind him. Bauer carries on.

“—until the drop-off. That’s brutal. It’s bad enough

leaving Kylie. The ex comes out and gives me the third degree, big performance for the boyfriend du jour. Did I feed Kylie right, did she get her sleep. Always the same crap—“

Bauer’s unhappy. He wants sympathy.

Warren pushes a thought away and straightens on his seat. But as Bauer cycles through his grievances the thought comes back: something is slipping. Some non-variable Warren carries with him between worlds is in peril. He studies his old classmate, staring like the kid, not sure what he hopes to find. Under Warren’s steady gaze Bauer winds down. They sit silently, jostling with the motion of the train. Warren, who has Bauer in front of him, feels the pressure of a thousand avatars at his shoulder. But it’s no good. Nobody is stepping out to right this picture. Krakor is MIA.

“So, where you working, Cunningham?” Bauer’s flat voice startles Warren. The kid jumps, and looks like he might cry.

Warren answers, “Light Year Games. “

“I heard that.” Bauer shifts his jaw. “I’m with Cadillac Fairview. Security.”

Max Bauer is a mall cop? Warren drops his eyes to look. Gray trousers, black boots—hard to say. Could be a name badge under the gray duffle coat.

Bauer catches him looking and sneers. “Got eleven guys reporting to me. Twenty-four seven operation in the PATH. Thirty kilometers of retail tunnel. We got a bank of screens – even you would be impressed, Cunni. I probably spend more time in front of a computer than you do.”

“Probably.”

“So, Light Year, eh? I play a bit of *Storm Cloud*.” A quick look at Warren. “You work on *Storm Cloud*?”

Good question. Throzon appears on the bench beside Bauer, gripping his sceptre. He’s poised to re-route the game if Warren wants to spend Reveal points. Bauer is waiting. Throzon raises an eyebrow.

Warren isn’t ready.

In his imagination this always plays out differently.

Throzon vaporizes.

“Yeah,” Warren says. “I work on *Storm Cloud*.” He watches the little kid windmilling his arms around. He’s still clutching the small red ball.

Bauer is nodding. “I like it better than *WoW*, that’s for basement dwellers. *SC*’s got better story, better graphics.”

The praise lands like a punch. Warren feels winded, he’s having a hard time keeping up.

The train stops at Christie and the car empties. A throng of church-dressed people passes Warren’s window while Bauer complains some more, this time about last night’s misadventure in gaming. Warren tunes him out. He is thinking about *Storm Cloud 4*. They finalize in ten days, it’s all but done. The early *SC5* story boards are already coming, Krakor’s in them – but it’s Warren’s game, Warren’s company. Krakor mellowing—how would that play? Laertia would dump him—she’d take her conical red-armored breasts and join forces elsewhere, maybe with Anvila. Shaking things up could be good. Marketing would hate it, Krakor’s thin-lipped, heavy-browed grimace is the *Storm Cloud* icon. But here sits the model in a subway car, gone to seed.

“So yeah.” Bauer’s still nodding. “At least the points aren’t so stacked in favour of the Master. I’ve got some serious Zapix racked up. More than 860 grand. There are guys in Japan paying pro who don’t have that much.”

Hubris. This is more familiar.

Bauer apparently interprets Warren’s small smile to mean he is impressed. “EJ says I could get serious money for my Zs. Fuck, I don’t care about that. I just want to break 100M.” He stares into the mid-distance, a monument to perseverance. Then he picks up his thread again as if Warren has spoken. “Yeah, well, I’m lucky. I can play at work. Not all the time of course. When it gets quiet on a Monday or Tuesday night, sometimes on Sundays. You? “

“Yeah, I play at work.”

“What’s your level? “ A glint in Bauer’s eyes.

“Merchant and Foley and Ripper – I play three avatars.”

“Ripper?” Bauer puts his head back and hoots. “Well, whaddya know. I’m better than you!” He slaps both hands on thick thighs. “I finally beat out Warren fuckin Cunningham on the computer.”

Now would be the time. Mention the Kingsway house, the Cessna, St Maarten. Tell him about drinking with the president of Sony, hosting the Leafs. Throw it down.

But Bauer is filling the space: his crap hours, his crap boss, his daughter he doesn’t see enough. Warren looks at the little kid, who appears to be on a quest to memorize Warren’s face. The kid turns anxiously to his mother when Warren sighs.

Krakor, the Conqueror who never wins, the uber-villain who always comes back for more punishment, is an insecure man-child who whines about his job and misses his daughter.

The train is pulling away from Bathurst station. Across the aisle, the little kid’s mother and her friend manoeuvre toward the doorway, pulling the stroller backwards behind them. Warren is sorry to see the kid go. He drops his hand to his side and wiggles his fingers good-bye. The kid sees him.

Bauer is circling back to an old theme – “And she’s such a bitch about the drop off. Always the same bullshit. She acts like I got nothing better to do.” — as the kid opens his hand and lets his small red ball drop to the ground.

It is a sponge ball, a Rudolph nose from last week’s Santa Claus parade. It rolls forward as the train slows.

“Objects in motion,” says Warren under his breath to Bethanika, who has materialized at his side. Together the game designer and the Protector wait for the kid’s toy nose to roll slowly along the floor of the subway car. The ball is on a direct path to them.

Bauer has seen the ball too. His bellyaching slows, then stops. As it rolls past him, he stretches his leg and traps the nose beneath his boot.

The train comes to a stop at Spadina. The kid is arching up in his stroller again, howling wordlessly,

protesting to his mother, to the whole unfair world. He's too young to point. The doors open, and his blue stroller and green snowsuit disappear, all noise and misery.

Warren looks at Bauer.

Here is the old leer of complicity. Directed not at EJ or Gomer or one of the other lugs, directed at Warren. Bauer raises his shaped brows and his black boot at the same time. There's the ball.

The kid is still howling as the women walk past Warren's window.

"Give the kid his toy, Bauer."

"Yeah, right."

Warren's on his feet. He shoves Bauer's knee and scoops the nose up as the door warning starts. Before the *duhhh*, he's in the doorway.

"Hey!" he yells.

His voice echoes off the tile walls. He braces in the doorway to stop the door closing. "Hey!" again. The TTC guy who operates the train doors pokes his head out a window to look. The kid's mother and her friend are walking to the escalator exit. They look back. Everyone is looking at Warren.

He holds up the nose. "Hey, for you!" He bowls the nose along the station wall toward the women. He holds the door open long enough to see them recognize the small red ball. The door closes.

Bauer is smirking. "Fuck, Cunningham. You're such a loser." He shakes his head broadly.

Warren's own head has cleared. Stepping over Bauer's outstretched legs, Warren sees the middle-aged bully deciding whether to trip him. Krakor returns!

Warren grins.

Bauer looks surprised and keeps his feet on the ground.

Warren doesn't sit. He lifts his courier bag from the seat Bethanika has abandoned. He feels great. He makes a decision. "I have a cheat for you, Bauer," he says. "Get Krakor to the last mine head and line up a cohort along the

bridge to cover for him. When Throzon shows up, use the Klepitron to blast him. Bingo. Fifty thousand Zs, and twenty-five thousand Stealth.”

Bauer’s look is calculating. Some so-called cheats wipe the gamer out.

Warren knows what to say.

“I wrote it in for the guys at Light Year— they were complaining that Krakor always gets beat. They haven’t found it yet. It’s not in circulation. Here’s my stop.”

That’s enough. Bauer will Google him now, Warren would bet his life on it. He’ll find the articles and the photographs and the rest. “Huh,” Warren says to the Mind the Gap sticker on the subway door. Sooner or later, Krakor is bound to recognize himself.

Warren smiles.

Bauer will want to use the cheat, but he won’t trust the source. Warren knows. He’s still in Krakor’s head.

The train slows for St George station. Bauer follows Warren to the door, but not too close.