

TWISTED

THE VIDEOMANIAC



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The town of Kennisek held a flea market twice a year: once in the spring and once in the fall. To Brian Hart, it meant just one thing—*video game stuff*. No one around liked video games more than Brian. No one had a cooler collection. No one was better at playing them.

Brian and Elijah started at the first table. They looked over everything carefully. Then they went to the next table. Brian wanted to do it slowly. Elijah went along because that's what best friends did.

“Whoa,” Brian said. “Hang on . . .”

The fourth table was mostly covered with junk. There were plates, dirty silverware, and an

old toaster. But he saw a box tucked underneath. **“MISCELLANEOUS”** was written in marker across the front. There were all sorts of things inside: toy cars, pool balls, some broken jewelry, and a couple of Christmas ornaments.

Brian didn't really think there would be any video game stuff here. But he kept digging anyway. Two years ago, he'd found a Nintendo Game Boy at this very flea market. It was at the bottom of a box of old sheets and blankets. He realized then that he should always look. You just never knew. This time though, he found nothing.

Halfway down the second row, Brian saw a PlayStation 4 with a bunch of games. *First released in 2013*, he thought. He didn't mind older games. But the salesman said he wouldn't take it back if it didn't work. Brian wasn't willing to chance it.

In the third row, he found an old Mario Kart poster. Mario Kart was one of his favorite games. He talked the seller down to three bucks. But by

the time they reached the end of the last row, he'd found nothing else.

“One poster,” he said. “One lousy poster. And I have to wait six months until the *next* flea market!”

“Maybe some of the car people will have stuff,” Elijah said.

The car people were sellers who came too late to get a table. They sold things out of their cars instead. They were always in the back of the lot.

“I doubt it,” Brian said, “but I’ll check it out . . .”

Elijah said he was going to go back to a table they had passed. It had kitchen stuff and he wanted something for his mom. Brian nodded and walked away. He was still whining under his breath.

The first car person had a bunch of wooden signs. He had carved and painted them himself.

The second car had the biggest collection of sunglasses Brian had ever seen.

The next few spaces were empty. Then Brian came to the very last spot. An old station wagon was parked in the farthest corner of the lot. Its back door was open. The seller's table was covered with all sorts of computer junk—monitors, keyboards, cables, and disc drives. But it wasn't the computer stuff that caught Brian's attention. It was the person selling it.



The man looked about a hundred years old. He was thin and bony. A stubbly beard grew on his saggy cheeks. Wispy white hair blew around his bony head. He smiled at Brian. His teeth were as yellow as old piano keys. And his eyes were the darkest green Brian had ever seen. Like two perfect gems.

Creepy, Brian thought. *Really creepy*.

“Good afternoon, my young friend,” the man said. His voice was deep and powerful.

“Umm, yeah . . . good afternoon.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Odium, at your service. And you are . . . ?”

“I’m Brian.”

“It is nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Sure, you too.”

Odium spread his hands out like a showman in a circus.

“Are you admiring my wares?”

“Your what?”

“My *wares*. That is the term for the things a humble vendor, such as myself, would sell to an interested buyer. Such as yourself.”

Brian could feel his brain spinning. He tried to keep up with the man’s strange speech.

“Umm, yeah . . .” he said again. “Sure.”

“Of course you are. You are a wise young man. I can always spot a sharp mind at work!”

“Thanks,” Brian said with a laugh. This guy must’ve spent some time in a nuthouse.

“You are welcome! And what might I have that would interest you today? Blessed, as you are, with the gift of youth, you are likely knowledgeable of the joys of technology, yes?”

Brian nodded. He was already back to

thinking about the Question of the Day—*Is there any gaming stuff?*

“I’m pretty good with computers, yeah,” he said as he started looking through the piles. “But I’m really interested in video games.”

“Ah!” Odium said. “A gamesman!”

Brian laughed again. “I like them a lot. Doesn’t matter if they’re action, role-playing, sports, whatever.”

“Some parents don’t approve of such things. But they can be very good for the mind.” Odium tapped the side of his head.

“That’s true,” Brian said.

“And do you think you’ll find something of value among the many treasures I’ve brought here today?”

Brian was hoping the guy wouldn’t ask this. All the computer stuff he had was just too old. Most of it seemed to be from the 1980s and 1990s.

“I . . . I don’t think so,” he said carefully.

“I’m sorry. I don’t see anything I can use here.”

“Wait, wait!” Odium turned back to his station wagon and took out another box. “I have some things you might like. Some games!”

“Umm, okay . . .”

“I have *Crash Bandicoot*,” he said, walking through the CDs in the box with his fingers.

“No thanks,” Brian said. *I think my dad used to play that.*

“*NBA Jam?*”

“No, sorry.”

“*Quake?*”

“Nope.”

“What about *Mortal Kombat?*”

“That’s from, like, 1992,” Brian said more angrily than he meant to.

Odium looked up from the box. A smile spread across his face. It showed off every one of his horrible mummy teeth. Even worse, Brian thought he saw Odium’s green eyes *swirling* for

just a moment. Like the color was liquid churning around and around.

“Ah, you’re looking for something modern!” Odium said. “Something *new!*”

“Well . . . yeah, sure.”

“I have just the thing for you, Master Brian.” He held up one bony finger. “I ask for your patience, please.”

He dug through the back of the station wagon again. This time he came out with a CD in a plain envelope.

“I believe,” he said, “you will find this very much to your liking.”

As Brian took it, their fingers touched. Odium’s were freezing even though it was a warm day. And the skin didn’t feel real, either. It didn’t feel *alive*. It was more like the hard leather of an old baseball mitt.

Brian couldn’t stop himself from pulling away. Odium didn’t seem to mind, though. He just

kept on smiling.

“Take a look,” he said, “please.”

Brian pulled the CD out of the little envelope. One side of it was shiny. That was the side the computer would read. The other side had two words in a scrawled handwriting—

ULTIMATE FOOTBALL

“What’s this?” Brian asked.

“Is that not obvious?” Odium said. “It’s a football video game. The *ultimate* football game, just as it says there. It has amazing graphics and sound. Also, it has unbelievable gameplay. And it’s very easy to use!”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“No one has. You, my young friend, are the very first!”

Now Brian smiled back at him. “You made this?”

“I did indeed.”

“You *programmed* this? Wrote the code and everything?”

The old man nodded. “That is correct, my friend.”

Brian looked over the piles of out-of-date computer junk. Then he shook his head. He couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“Before you decide my game is not worth your time,” Odium went on, “I ask that you at least give it a try. If you still don’t like it, then that’s that.”

Brian laughed and looked at the disc again. “Well, okay. I guess I’ve got nothing to lose. Wait, hang on. How much do you want for it?”

“Let’s not discuss price just yet,” Odium said. “I want all my customers to walk away happy. So as I say, go home and try it first. We will consider it a kind of test. And if you think it’s good, then we can decide the price next time I see

you.”

“You mean six months from now? In the spring?”

“Yes. Does that sound fair?”

Brian shrugged. “Sure.”

“Good, then we are in accord.”

“Right—we are in accord.” Brian didn’t even know what “accord” meant.

Odium leaned his head back and laughed. Brian thought again that he was one of the weirdest people he’d ever met. Then he heard his name being called. He turned and saw Elijah waving at him from the tables.

“I have to get going,” Brian said. “But thanks for this. I’ll try it out as soon as I get home.”

“I hope you enjoy it,” Odium replied. Then he bowed grandly. “It was a very great pleasure to meet you today.”

“Uh, thanks . . . you too.”