

Ultimate Combat 7

Fred was annoyed. He'd been saving up for ages – he'd gone without sweets, he'd walked to school instead of getting the bus, he'd done jobs for his mum to get extra pocket money – but when *Ultimate Combat 7* finally reached the shops, it was dearer than he'd expected. And of course Tom Webb had bought it at once. It was Tom who'd got the new Playbox before anyone else, just as it was Tom who always got the new games first. It was Tom whose mum dropped him off for school in the big off-roader, and always took him to Disneyland and places like that for his holidays. None of this happened to Fred: their last holiday had been in Bridlington, where it was freezing and the sea was a long way out.

Fred slammed the front door behind him and kicked off his shoes. One of them left a muddy mark on the wall, so he tried to wipe it off with his sleeve.

'Is that you Fred?' called his mum from the kitchen.

'Yes,' he mumbled, and threw his bag in the corner.

'Let's have that lunch box,' she called. 'We don't want it going mouldy.'

He gave loud sigh and slouched into the kitchen.

'Hello,' said his mum, bending to kiss him, 'where did you get that long face?'

'Why can't we be rich?' said Fred.

'What do you mean?'

'Why can't we have more money?'

She paused from peeling the potatoes and pushed a stray lock of hair away with the crook of her wrist. 'Well, it isn't that easy, dear,' she sighed. 'We do our best. What's happened now?'

'Tom Webb's got *Ultimate Combat 7* already!' Fred shouted. 'He always gets things first! He always gets better presents than me!'

'Now, Fred, that's silly –'

'I'm *not* silly! I hate being poor! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!' he said, and, flinging the back door open, ran through the yard, out of the back gate and down the alley. He ran until he had to stop for breath, flopping down on a wall by the old factory. A scruffy mongrel came to sniff at his boots.

'It's not fair!' he said, through clenched teeth, as he fought back the tears.

'What isn't?' said a voice.

Fred jumped up; his mum had warned him not to talk to strangers. He looked around, but couldn't see anyone.

'What's not fair?' said the voice again. Fred wasn't sure whether to rub his eyes or to check his ears. He thought it was the dog, sitting a few paces away, who was talking to him.

'Er...' said Fred.

The dog said distinctly, 'Maybe I can help? There's more to me than meets the eye.'

'We-ell,' said Fred, 'uh, Tom Webb's got more things than me...'

'Do you wish you were him?'

Fred wasn't sure about this, but he could hardly change his mind in front of a dog. 'Yes,' he said. And the next thing he knew, he found himself ringing the doorbell of Tom's house.

He didn't have time to wonder if he was now Tom, or if he just looked like him, or if he still looked like himself. The door was opened by a young woman carrying a baby. Fred knew it wasn't Tom's mum, but he remembered he'd heard Tom talking about a babysitter, or something like that.

'Hi,' she said. 'I'm just feeding Duncan, I'll get you your tea after that. All right?'

Fred nodded, and she disappeared into the kitchen. When he looked around him, Fred's mouth fell open and stayed that way. The hall was about twice the size of his own living-room, and there was a wide, red-carpeted staircase leading up to his right. Bright spotlights were set into the ceiling, and arty prints decorated the walls.

He dropped the school bag which he now discovered he was carrying, and cautiously made his way into the lounge. He was relieved to find it wasn't much bigger than the hall, but it still took him a long time to cross it. At home, once you stepped into a room – well, you were *there*.

In one corner was a television with a Playbox attached. A few games lay scattered on the floor, and amongst them he found *Ultimate Combat 7*. Quietly – he still felt he was going to be discovered at any minute, even though that was definitely Tom's reflection he could see in the screen – he switched on the television, grabbed the controller and started to play. Wow! There were seventeen levels on this one, and Ungkor could do even more things with his light staff than before. It was trickier, too, and Fred was soon engrossed. Enjoying himself, he turned the volume up, and for half an hour the room was filled with gunfire, screeches and screams. He only just noticed as the babysitter brought in his dinner on a little table, and set it by the couch.

'There y'are then,' she said, and was gone.

Fred was quite hungry, so he tore himself away from level three and sat down. The Webbs had Sky and all kinds of different channels, but although Fred searched he couldn't find anything better than his usual programme. Watching that made him think of home, and how he and his mum and dad always sat together for their tea while they talked about what had happened during the day. And his mum would have cooked him something nice, he thought, as he peeled the plastic top off his microwaved curry-for-one and poked at it with his fork.

After tea, Fred got up to level six before he began to get a bit bored with Ungkor, who was just the same as in *Ultimate Combat 6* really, he decided. He picked up the two-thirds-empty plastic dish and the Coke bottle, and took them through to the kitchen. The babysitter was perched in front of a small television, eating an individual trifle while the baby painted his high-chair with rusk. She looked up.

'Ooh,' she said, 'aren't we the helpful one today? Getting points at school or something, are we?'

'Uh,' said Fred, 'where's Mum? And, er, Dad?'

Now she turned to look at him. 'Forgotten what day of the week it is, have you? Your Mum goes to her dance classes on Thursdays, doesn't she? And I bet she'll be back

late again,' she added gloomily. 'She'll stay out all night with that bloody Antonio one of these nights, and *then* where will I be?'

'And what d'you mean, about your Dad?' she added. 'I hope he's not coming this weekend. It's years since he's darkened her door, and I 'ope for all our sakes it stays that way. You don't *want* him to come, do you?'

'Er, no,' said Fred. 'Er, just asking...' And he edged back out of the kitchen.

Back in the lounge, he couldn't get interested in the game again. He tried a few others, but they all bored him almost as soon as he started. Then he slumped on the couch and put his head in his hands. He wanted to talk to someone, but he didn't want to go back into the kitchen in case the babysitter told him more about Tom's parents. Then he had an awful thought. Was he stuck as Tom? Would he have to live like this, with nothing but Playbox games and TV dinners, for the rest of his life? And where was Tom – was Tom sitting in Fred's house, with Fred's mum and dad, eating Fred's tea?

He had begun to cry when the doorbell rang again. It must be Tom's mum, he thought. What if she's brought her boyfriend home? Will she recognise me – will she know I'm not Tom? He could feel a lump growing in his throat, and his stomach went tight. Then the front door was answered, and he heard a voice. It wasn't Tom's mum; it was worse. It was Tom.

'Here,' he heard the babysitter saying, 'what are you doing outside? How did you get there?'

Fred didn't wait to hear the answer. He pushed back the patio window and ran out into the dark garden. The security light came on, flooding the lawn like a searchlight; he pelted on. He ploughed into the bottom hedge, pushing himself through, pulling at his clothes so that they tore, and finally tumbled out into another garden. From here he could see a low fence with the road beyond, and in no time he had flung himself over and landed in a heap on the other side.

It was a long walk home, and when he got there his dad was on the phone, reporting him missing. His mum and dad spent the next half hour alternately telling him off and hugging him (Fred was glad to see his own face in the mirror), his mum crying in between times and his dad saying 'Thank God!', but even while he was being told off Fred couldn't help smiling with relief. It was proper home-made chips and home-cooked sausages for tea, with just the right amount of ketchup splodged on the side of his plate; and afterwards he thought he'd help his mum in the kitchen, just to check she was there.

After that, Fred didn't mind when Tom got *Chiller Killer* and *Premier Manager IV*. He didn't even mind next time they went to Bridlington. But he promised himself he'd never talk to strange dogs again.