

# **The Game Games Bowl**

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## One

*Feet. Why does everything smell like feet?* Ethan groans, his sleep-addled brain fighting to distinguish reality from the fading fog of his dreams. It's like swimming in molasses, but small fragments of recent memories start to break through the surface. *Cupcakes... and... cats? Did I eat a cat cupcake?* Another piece of the puzzle falls into place, and his hand instinctively reaches for his head, but instead of finding his crown, or even his hair, he comes up with a handful of rough-spun fabric. After a moment of groggy confusion, he realizes that the cloth covers his face as well, the loose fibers tickling his nose.

He tears off the hood and with it goes the musty smell of the old fabric. A deep breath of cool, fresh air helps clear the cobwebs from his mind. He sits up and rubs the sleep from his eyes and blinks, trying to force them to adjust to the...

Nothing. Blackness. Ethan sits in silence for a moment to be sure, periodically waving his hands in front of his face, reaching out in front of him, but to no avail. It's pitch black.

"Hello?" He asks the darkness, a slight hollow echo his only response.

There's a chill in the air, but the abrasive, hard ground is even colder. *Concrete*, Ethan guesses by the texture. He shifts to his hands and knees, tentatively exploring the darkness. It's not more than a couple of shuffles forward before his fingers clumsily bump into a wall. He follows the wall up with his hands, until he's standing, his fingertips brushing along the rough grain of the surface. A gentle knock confirms it. Plywood.

From there running the perimeter takes no time at all; the room is little larger than a closet. Pawing each wall in turn, he finds a seam running vertically down the center of one, and blindly traces it with his fingers. Up... over... down again... a door? Ethan begins shoving, kicking, shouldering and yelling at the door but the exit, if it even is such, is unimpressed.

Leaning against the door, breathing heavily, Ethan's mind races, flipping through thoughts like a Rolodex of crazy. *What is this? Why won't the door open? Is this part of the competition? Am I losing already? Wait, did I even make it to the tournament? What if I was kidnapped?! What if there's surprise butt-sex on the other side of this door?!*

Ethan presses his head against the sheet of wood, sucking in his breath and holding as still as possible, listening. His pulse pounds in his ear, but if there is anyone on the other side of the plywood barrier, they are holding just as still.

*Maybe it's a trick door!* And before even completing the thought, Ethan is slamming his forehead into the center of supposed door, attempting to headbutt his way out of his small wooden prison. A burst of light fills the room, not from an open door but from the billions of tiny stars that flood Ethan's vision. Dazed, he stumbles back a step and sits down hard on his rear.

Minutes, hours, it's hard to tell how much time passes in the darkness. It feels like an eternity. He covers every inch of the small room three times over, looking for clues, but comes up empty every time. Finally, he resigns himself to sitting in the middle of the floor, rocking back and forth, mumbling commercial jingles to himself. "Oh oh oh, oh oh spaghetti-O's. Oh oh--"

A loud click echoes through his small chamber, interrupting his stirring rendition of the classic Campbell's tune. At the soft whine of metallic hinges, Ethan is scrambling to his feet. A dim light now outlines the edges of the door in front of him, which now sits ajar. He blinks his eyes, unsure if they're playing tricks on him. It wouldn't be the first time; a short while ago he would have sworn he'd seen a koala dancing in the corner of the small wooden box.

Carefully he reaches out and taps the door, which swings forward another inch, allowing more light in. The temptation of freedom overrides caution, and Ethan pushes the door wide open, squinting as his eyes adjust.

Only a single light is on, high overhead in a sea of darkness. Immediately in front of him, Ethan spots a blue and gray hiking backpack hanging on a crude wooden stand in the shape of an upside-down T. The floor is definitely concrete, old, gray and pockmarked, with scrapes and unidentifiable stains decorating its surface. Unfinished walls ring the small room he's in, sheets of plywood held together and reinforced by rows of two-by-fours. Some of the wooden studs are visibly crooked. Not the work of professional carpenters. Nine or ten feet up, the walls end, and beyond he can see only black shadow.

Ethan takes a couple of steps out of his former prison, glancing nervously from side to side. "No butt-sex, please," he pleads under his breath. Moments pass and nobody jumps out to accost him. Satisfied that he's alone, at least in this room, curiosity gets the better of him. He heads for the backpack.

The loud clang of a breaker being flipped accompanies the sudden explosion of light from overhead. The blinding brightness is so immediate and overwhelming that Ethan staggers back a couple of steps as he tries to shield his eyes, his first instinct to scurry back into the safety of his closet. The crackle of a loudspeaker and the following announcement stops him.

"Rise and shine, competitors!"

Ethan recognizes the voice instantly. *Lucas*.

"You all know why you're here. You have the honor of competing in the very first Game Games Bowl. At the end of this trial one of you will be crowned the King or Queen of Winter-eeen-mas for one year!"

"Please listen closely to the rules of this event, as they will not be repeated. In front of each of you is a backpack. Inside you will all find the same items: food, water, a first-aid kit, and a paintball pistol with twelve rounds. The tournament will last the next twenty-one hours, so make them count!"

Ethan's eyes are fixed on the backpack in front of him as Lucas's voice echoes around him.

"Throughout this tournament arena there are currently eleven active game stations. Every three

hours on the hour they will load up a new game. You will receive points based on your performance. If you do not participate in the tournament game being played, you receive zero points.

“Every time one of you is eliminated, a random game station will deactivate. There will always be one fewer active game stations than there are gamers, so stay on your toes and be ready to fight to compete!

“If you are directly hit with paint, you are eliminated from the competition. Taking out another gamer wins you five points. Please do try to avoid shooting your fellow competitors in the face, though as a reminder, you all *did* sign liability waivers!

“The winner is the Gamer with the highest score at the end of seven game rounds, or the last one standing, whichever happens first! Good luck, and play it like you mean it!” A burst of static and a click followed by silence marks the end of the broadcast.

*Well, he certainly took my concept to heart, Ethan muses. Games within games. Survival of the--*

The realization that he's been standing out in the open this entire time hits Ethan like a Super Thwomp. For all he knows the other competitors were already on the move during Lucas' speech, and without knowing how large the arena is, they could be around any corner. Panicked, Ethan grabs the backpack off the stand and ducks back into the small closet.

He crouches down, peering out as he watches for any sign of his opponents. High above, dozens of round industrial lamps bathe the arena in light, and he gets his first good look at the world behind the short plywood walls. Straight ahead, sheets of rusty corrugated steel reach all the way to the ceiling, which itself is a massive network of pipes and duct-work at least three stories up. *An old warehouse or factory.* A row of windows lines the wall, just shy of where it meets the ceiling. Most of the glass is broken, and they're all boarded up from the outside. *Abandoned, it seems. That explains the chill.*

Beyond the wooden stand that held his backpack, Ethan spots a short wooden bunker, slapped together from scrap wood; the sort of feature you'd see on a paintball field. It sits between two exits, rectangular doorways cut into the plywood walls, one on each side. Nearly everything is made of raw, unpainted wood, so the small gray plastic device sitting atop of the corner of a wall stands out. A camera. The notion that his every move is being watched is unsettling, especially since at the moment he's playing the part of a scared bunny rabbit afraid to leave its hole. He pushes the thought from his mind.

Off to the right, in the distance, he sees a structure jutting up above the walls of the arena. Suspended on thick wooden stilts two stories up, it's a small box resembling a child's tree fort. Through a small window in the side Ethan can make out the glow of a monitor. One of the so-called 'game stations.' Posted up in there, you'd be protected from nearly all sides, but the only way to reach it appears to be a rope ladder dangling underneath. Twenty feet of exposed climb that is likely visible to every competitor in the arena.

Above it, something else catches his eye. Hanging amongst the lights is a giant digital clock, its glowing red numbers presumably counting down to the next tournament. Two hours, fifty one minutes left. Below the timer sits a row of brightly colored 8-bit icons. A red and blue Koopa shell; Mario mushrooms; an invincibility star; one of those weird pinwheel Yashichi that Capcom likes to use. He

furrows his brow. The seventh icon is a Mega Man energy tank, identical to the one sewn onto the shoulders of his jumpsuit. Then it dawns on him. Twelve competitors, twelve classic gaming icons. This is a scoreboard of some sort.

Ethan turns his attention to his backpack, hastily unzipping it and then immediately regretting it. The sound of the zipper seems to echo and reverberate like machine-gun fire tearing through the silence. He clutches the backpack to his chest and holds his breath, waiting for his opponents to converge on his location.

But they don't come.

*Stupid Ethan! Stupid stupid stupid! You need to be more careful than that!* He quietly opens the bag and peers inside. Two bottles of water. Four granola bars. A small, white, plastic first-aid kit. Reaching inside he pulls out the anodized, blue metallic paintball pistol. The metal is cool in his hand, and he hefts it to get a feel for its weight. He doesn't recognize the brand, but he notices the magazine has been glued in place.

He slowly zips the backpack up and slings it over his shoulder, keeping the pistol in hand. Ethan glances up at the clock again. *Two hours, forty two minutes. I need a plan,* he decides. For a moment he considers finding his way to the base of the elevated game station he spotted earlier, but quickly decides against it. Too many eyes might be watching. *Will be watching. With twelve of us and only eleven game stations, someone is going to have to go for that one. Let it be someone braver than me.*

Instead Ethan starts looking at his other options. From the small courtyard his backpack was in, there are only the two exits, one to the left and one to the right. The path on the right looks like it leads in the general direction of the raised fort. *That's where people will go. Either to try and seize that game station, or looking for easy targets.*

Adjusting his backpack, he readies his pistol in front of him, and starts to move towards the door on the left. He resists every urge to run, and instead tries to focus on moving quickly and quietly across the concrete floor. He reaches the opening, pressing his back up against the wall the way he's done as Sam Fisher so many times before. After a quick pause to listen for footsteps, he swings out into the doorway, finger on the trigger.

The room is slightly larger than the one he began in, but also more cluttered. He spots old wooden shipping crates piled up to fashion makeshift bunkers. Barriers of various shapes and sizes and heights, some U-shaped, some just a single panel. All manner of different battlefield features waiting for combatants. He stalks through the room, sticking to the walls as he makes his way towards a doorway on the far side. His aim nervously bounces back and forth between fortifications, expecting someone to pop out at any second.

Ethan crosses room after room this way, prepared for an encounter, and finding none. He takes note of his surroundings as he passes through the maze of passageways and walls. A large rope net draped over some more crates, a pile of worn out rubber tires, various cubbyholes and crawlspaces made out of hastily constructed plywood. Lots of great hiding places, but no game stations in sight.

In the fourth room, Ethan ducks into one of these nooks, a small lean-to that he has to crouch to enter. He can't see the clock from here, but he estimates that it's taken him about twenty minutes to get this far. He delicately slips his backpack off his shoulder and unzips it, wincing at the telltale sound it

makes. Peeking out from his hiding spot, watching for signs of the other competitors, Ethan pulls out a bottle of water and takes a sip.

The concept of hunting eleven strangers, of being hunted himself, has preoccupied him until now, but the cool liquid brings to attention how very thirsty he is. He allows himself another generous swallow of the refreshing water, but then forces the cap back on and stuffs the bottle into the backpack. *Conserve it*, he reminds himself. *This needs to last all day.*

A few uneventful rooms later and Ethan is just beginning to question if he's running in the wrong direction, if he's moving *away* from the game stations, when he spots the gentle blue glow of a monitor.

Standing at the entrance to the room, there's another doorway directly opposite him. Along the right wall a crude staircase leads up to a landing over the wall, presumably providing convenient albeit exposed access to the adjacent room on the other side. The alcove underneath the stairs is walled off at first glance, but the light spilling out from the far side catches Ethan's eye.

Completely obstructed from this entrance, the alcove would be totally exposed and open if coming from the other direction. Another gamer might already be holed up inside, and there's no way to tell from where Ethan is standing. Still, it's the first accessible game station he's come across, and the giant clock above is ticking away valuable seconds.

Crouching, he does his best impression of walking on eggshells as he makes his way to the only other feature in the room, a small wooden paintball bunker made out of fresh two-by-fours and old planks of wood. Like everything else, the barrier looks like it was made in a hurry, and there are gaps between the planks. Ethan settles in behind the bunker, the pleasant smell of fresh lumber filling his nostrils. Peering out through one of the gaps in the bunker, he watches for any signs of movement.

From this vantage point the blue glare is unmistakable, but Ethan still can't see the monitor, or anything (or anyone) else inside the alcove itself. The only way to get a clear look would be to walk over to the other doorway, putting himself in plain view of both the alcove and the next room over. *Patience*, Ethan thinks nervously as he glances up to the countdown overhead.

Ten excruciatingly long minutes pass before Ethan is satisfied that either there's no one in the alcove, or they've fallen asleep. Creeping out from around the bunker, he makes his way around to the far doorway in a wide, slow arc. His pistol raised, finger on the trigger, ready to fire at the first sign of movement, at the first noise that isn't his.

As the interior of the enclosure comes into view, Ethan lets out the long, slow breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The alcove is empty save for the small monitor mounted to the wall, a keyboard and mouse on a little wooden shelf, and an Xbox controller hanging from its cord which, like all the other cables, disappears into the plywood.

He quickly rushes over to the compartment, and as he gets there realizes it's much smaller than it first looked. Uncomfortably small, he decides after crawling inside. There's absolutely no room to maneuver or dodge if someone were to find him there. Trapped. *Like shooting fish in a barrel.* The open side of the alcove is a liability he can't ignore.

Ethan rushes back over to the bunker in the center of the room, but one gentle push tells him all

he needs to know. It's too heavy to lift, and sliding it across the floor will make too much noise. Everyone in the warehouse would hear it, and that would defeat its purpose.

He looks up at the clock again. One hour, two minutes. His mind races, looking for options. It locks on to something he saw two rooms back; the pile of worn out tires. Three or four of them should be adequate to conceal the open side of the alcove, at least for the most part. And he could roll them here without making too much noise. It would be extremely risky; the more time he spent running back and forth between rooms the higher the chance that he'd cross paths with another gamer. But the thought of spending the next hour trapped in that alcove with no cover tips the scales. He sets off running.

The tires are old and worn, with thick chunky tread. Some sort of truck tire. They're heavy, but once on the ground they roll easily enough and are as silent as round, rubber ninjas. Ethan makes an attempt at rolling two at a time, but they are too unwieldy and offers no way for him to hold his paintball gun. He quickly abandons the idea and settles on making the extra trips.

He moves quickly, giving up on stealth in favor of being done with this business as soon as possible. Every trip back to the game station is more nerve-wracking than the last, in constant fear that he'll arrive to find another gamer has found the alcove. After four trips he can't take it anymore, and decides to quit while he's ahead. Five tires would cover the entryway completely, but with his luck the fifth trip would be the one that goes wrong, and he doesn't want to risk it. He'll make do with four.

Ethan backs into the crawlspace, and begins pulling the tires into place in front of him, Stacking them the best that he can to obscure as much of himself and the game station as possible. He offsets one tire to the side about an inch, leaving a space between the edge of the alcove wall and the tires that he can peek through.

When the last tire is in place and he's satisfied that it's the most convincing facade he can manage, he carefully opens and empties his backpack, stacking the contents neatly in the corner. There's no power switch on the monitor, so he unzips the backpack all the way, slipping it over the small screen and masking as much of the blue glow as he can. Then he leans back against the wall to wait.

He's hungry, but too anxious to eat. Too focused on watching the door through his spyhole, listening too intently for any signs of what might be happening in the rooms nearby. An hour and a half has passed since the Game Games Bowl started and he hasn't seen any sign of the other competitors. He figures everyone else must have the same idea, to find a game station and lay low. Still, with less than thirty minutes to the first game, and only eleven game stations for twelve people, someone out there must be getting desperate.

Almost as if on cue, the pop of a paintball gun echoes through the warehouse, followed immediately by two more in rapid succession. Then nothing. Ethan sits frozen, listening, trying to gauge how far away they were and if they came from the same gun, when an announcement overhead interrupts his train of thoughts.

“First blood! Fire Flower has been defeated! Heart Container awarded five points!” Lucas' voice echoes throughout the warehouse.

Ethan presses his face against the small opening between the tires and the wall, straining to see

the game clock high above. The familiar Mario Fire Flower icon goes dark. Five points appear under the pixelated heart container from a *Zelda* game; he's not sure which one. Twenty-two minutes to game time. Suddenly another couple of paintball shots ring out.

“Heart Container has been defeated! Yashichi awarded five points!”

The shots definitely all came from the same direction, but not from anywhere nearby. *The inevitable fight over a game station*, Ethan guesses. The first game hasn't even started yet, and already two people were out of the tournament. *Oh well, that's two less people for me to--*

A feeling of dread envelopes Ethan like a wet blanket. Ten gamers remaining. Which means there should be only nine game stations active. Two game stations will be shutting down. He turns and rips the backpack off of his monitor, staring at the calm blue screen, afraid to breathe. Afraid that at any second the screen will go dark, and he'll be forced to hunt down another station with only twenty minutes until game-time. A station that will likely be fiercely guarded by another Gamer.

His heart is racing. The passing seconds drag on for an eternity. From somewhere towards the direction of the shots, a loud mechanical click; the sound of power shutting off.

The second click is incredibly close by, close enough that it takes Ethan a moment of staring at his screen to reassure himself that it wasn't his station going dark. To drive the point home, a yell of equal parts frustration and panic immediately follows. A woman's voice. Not more than a few rooms away.

Ethan allows himself a brief sigh of relief, but it's short-lived. Whoever that was is close, and will now be on the hunt for a new game station before time runs out. If she heads this way...

Shifting around in the small cramped space, Ethan tries to situate himself both comfortably and ready to spring into action, but such a position eludes him. He checks his pistol, hoping it's ready to fire but unable and unwilling to test it. He waits.

It doesn't take long. She isn't making any attempt to be discreet. Ten minutes until the first round starts, and she needs a game station. Desperation has taken over. Footsteps, heavy breathing. Ethan hears her well before she whirls into the room.

The woman's blonde hair is pulled back into a short ponytail. She's wearing the same black and white outfit as Ethan, but with a large blue Koopa shell patch emblazoned on the shoulders. She's about his age, he guesses, tall but thin. Her eyes are wide with panic, but there's something more there. Determination, bordering on a wild frenzy. She's ready for a fight if she can find one, and she's definitely looking.

Ethan's heart leaps into his throat as her eyes lock directly on his hiding spot. Does she see him? Were four tires not enough? *The monitor!* He curses himself silently. He forgot to cover it back up.

He's certain she sees him, but her eyes dart to another corner of the room, apparently finding nothing of interest behind the stack of tires by the stairs. Either the tires are doing their job, or she's in too much of a rush. The woman spins around, looking back the way she came, debating her options.

Her back is turned. Ethan raises his pistol to the small gap in the tires, leveling it at her. One



shot. She'd never even see it coming. His finger brushes the cold aluminum trigger, but pauses at the last instant before squeezing it. Something inside is nagging at him, fighting past the impulsive desire to eliminate an opponent. Reason.

Taking Blue Shell out of the game means another game station goes dark. This time Ethan might not be so lucky. With ten minutes until game time, the last thing he wants to do is be in her shoes. He lowers the gun.

The woman turns back around, again focusing on Ethan's alcove. No, not the alcove, the stairs above it. She takes off running again, and after a moment Ethan hears the loud wooden echo of urgent footsteps scaling the stairs above him, onto the landing and down into the next room over.

He remains utterly still until he can no longer hear her movements. He sets the paintball pistol on the ground next to him and leans back against the plywood wall of the alcove, his legs sore from kneeling on the cold concrete. He turns his attention to the monitor. The first game of the day should be starting any time now. The blue screen goes black, replaced by a simple message and countdown in white text.

*Mouse and Keyboard.*  
2:00

As the two minutes begin to tick away, Ethan quickly moves the one offset tire flush to the wall, closing his little window to the outside world. Blue Shell will still be out there wandering around, and he doesn't want to take the chance that she doubles back and catches him off guard while he's in the middle of the game. The timer on the monitor expires, and after a brief moment, the first game of the Game Games Bowl begins to load. Ethan recognizes it immediately.

Quake 3.

While the game accesses the server, Ethan tries to recall everything he remembers about Quake 3; the maps, locations of weapons, but his attention is instantly hijacked by a larger issue at hand. *Sound.* The game's sound is playing through the monitor's speakers. It's not blaring, but anything louder than perfect silence at this point is too loud as far as Ethan is concerned.

The map loads in. He tries to access the options menu, but finds it disabled. *Gods dammit, Lucas.* The sound can't be turned off. Everyone at a game station is suddenly broadcasting their location to anyone nearby hunting them. He prays that Blue Shell is far, far away from him by now.

Unable to do anything about the noise, he tries to turn his focus to the game at hand. The feeling of vulnerability and desire to constantly look over his shoulder is hard to shake, and it costs him in-game. He dies three times before he gets a kill of his own. Slowly though, he enters the zone, allows his twitch reflexes to take over, and gets himself on the board with some kills.

It's a thirty-minute marathon of virtual bloodshed, but time disappears behind the trigger of a rail-gun. Fortunes and scores ebb and flow as the nine competing gamers vie for kills. Ethan makes a slow climb from last place up to first place for the briefest of moments. He's overtaken in the last ten minutes of the match, knocked into the third place as the game draws to a close. The scoreboard lingers on screen for a few seconds, and then disappears, giving way to the familiar blank, blue, glow. He hangs the backpack over the monitor, and the blue screen disappears as well.

For the first time since the games began, Ethan lets himself relax. He slumps down into the corner of his alcove, and takes a deep breath. The last three hours have been exhausting, but he hasn't allowed himself to really feel it until now. He grabs a bottle of water, and one of the granola bars, settling in for a quick lunch. Or dinner. It occurs to him he doesn't actually know what time it is, or when he last ate. *The cupcake, I guess. How long ago was that?*

His hunger is undeniable though, so it must have been quite a while. The granola bar is delicious. Chewy peanut butter with nuts and raisins. It takes the edge off, but he's still hungry. He spends a few minutes debating a second helping, before finally and reluctantly deciding he needs to ration them over the course of the tournament. He's washing the granola bar down with water when he hears the speakers overhead crackle to life.

“First game is complete. Scores have been posted. Good luck going into the next round, Gamers! Play it like you mean it!” Lucas booms. Ethan thinks he detects a hint of sadistic pleasure in his voice, but perhaps he's just imagining it.

He shuffles his tire barrier a bit to get a look at the scoreboard. Every symbol now has a number beneath it. The scoring has begun. Seven points under the Energy Tank. Seven points for coming in third. He looks over the other scores. Green Mushroom is in first with nine points. Blue Shell has zero. *Guess she didn't find another game station in time.*

He pulls the tires back into place and sits down to plot out his strategy. The safe bet would be to stay put for the next couple of hours, and see how things play out. If anyone is going to be out hunting, they'll be doing it now, well before the next game starts. Blue Shell is definitely out looking for a game station and, currently in last place, she's got nothing to lose. That makes her the most dangerous opponent right now.

Ethan finishes off the water and sticks the empty bottle in an opposite corner. As much as he hates the idea of camping, there's too much on the line to take unnecessary risks. He decides to stay put.

Apparently everyone else settles on the same strategy. The next hour and a half passes without incident. No noises, no more announcements. Ethan curls up inside the alcove, gun in hand, but is unable to get any rest. With no immediate threats, his attention turns to the incredible arena that Lucas and the volunteers managed to put together in only a few weeks. Its construction is inelegant, but functionally elaborate, and far beyond anything Ethan had pictured when he first envisioned the tournament; a competition that completely tested the resourcefulness and dedication of a gamer under pressure.

He begins to ponder the size of the game field, which eventually leads to an internal debate about the pros and cons of taking to higher ground. Obviously it puts him in a vulnerable situation, not only for leaving his hiding spot, but climbing above in plain sight without any cover is an enormous risk. Even if he doesn't get shot right off the bat from nine different angles, it might give away his location. However without any concept of the lay of the land, he may later find himself wandering blind, an equally dangerous situation.

He's just resolving to venture out after the next game, to explore the immediate area and maybe get an idea of the scope of the arena, when the distant pop of a paintball gun shatters the silence. Ethan sits up and leans to the small opening by the tires. Another pop.

He waits for an elimination announcement, but none comes. Another couple of shots ring out, followed by some yelling that's too far away for Ethan to make out. The next twenty minutes sees another half dozen paintballs exchanged, all of which apparently fail to find their mark. Ethan wonders if Blue Shell is part of the back and forth. *If she isn't, she will be soon with all that noise.*

Despite the activity, the clock ticks down with no further eliminations. There are still nine game stations in play when the blue screen fades and the final countdown appears.

*Xbox Controller.  
2:00*

This time, when the screen comes to life with the familiar starting tone of the Xbox 360 loading screen, Ethan tells himself that any wandering competition is far out of earshot, over where the flying paintballs were. After a moment he's staring at the title screen for Street Fighter 4.

“Fuck.” He doesn't even attempt to restrain himself. He looks down at the controller in his hands. With the default Xbox d-pad? *That is a special brand of evil, Lucas.*

The game launches right into character select. Ethan chooses Guile. His opponent, whoever it is, takes Cammy. If a fight follows, Ethan blinks and misses it. One second the match is about to start, the next Guile is lying defeated on the ground, and somewhere in between there was a blur of lengthy combos and special attacks. He loses both rounds so quickly he has to wait five minutes before he's matched with his next opponent.

He fares better in his second match, squeaking out a win in the third round. Over the next hour he faces the remaining seven gamers one on one, ending just on the other side of a positive win-loss ratio at five to four. Not terrible, but not the sort of display that will bring him to the head of the pack.

As he sits back to wait for the scores, his lone hope is that Green Mushroom didn't also ace this tournament. If he did, he'll be incredibly difficult to catch.

When the scores go up, Ethan is surprised to see Blue Shell with six points. *I guess she was involved with that shootout after all.* He studies the rest of the scores. Red Mushroom is still at three points from the last round. Driven away from their game station by a certain fierce blonde.

He's disappointed to see that he's only advanced three points as a result of the last game, and even more disheartened to see that he's now tied for fifth place with Invincibility Star. Green Mushroom has held onto first place, but only barely.

Deciding not to waste time dwelling on it, he starts to pack up his remaining food and water. First place doesn't mean much when a well-placed splatter of paint can take you out of the running entirely. This early, survival is most important, and learning his surroundings is an important element of surviving.

Swinging his backpack over his shoulder, he still hesitates before pushing the tires out of the way. He tries to convince himself he's just being cautious, listening for any opponents nearby, but he knows the truth beneath that lie. He's scared. Scared of being eliminated, scared of watching the crown pass to someone else. He's been over it a hundred times in his head... knows this is the best path for Winter-eeen-mas. To give the holiday a chance to grow under new leadership, should a better option present itself. Still, he can't shake the last grasping tendrils of selfishness. He doesn't want to lose the crown, but now, finally here in the tournament, it's a very real possibility he has to face.

He shakes the thoughts from his mind, knowing they only lead to endless second guessing. It's too late now, anyway. All that's left is to focus, play smart and trust that the Gods will see him through.

He pushes the tires out of the way.

Standing up after being crouched in that alcove for nearly five hours introduces pain to areas of his body his nervous system had forgotten about. He stands for a moment, trying to stretch through the cramping and aching, letting his eyes adjust to the brighter light, and then he pushes the tire wall back into place. He fidgets with it for a few minutes until he's satisfied that it hides the game station the best it can. He contemplates leaving the backpack covering the monitor for further camouflage, but that would also mean leaving his supplies. He decides to be content with the tires.

He doesn't want to go up and over the wall where Blue Shell headed, so he decides to seek out her defunct game station. From there he figures he'll be able to scout a different path, and maybe locate an active station.

He stays low, and sticks to the walls. Most of the scenery is the same, arranged in different orientations. Rope netting; solid wooden boxes; milk crates stacked to create see-through walls; ladders and partitions made out of equal parts plywood and two-by-fours.

He's made it three rooms before the entire bottle of water he drank comes back to haunt him, and a new dilemma surfaces. *Surely Lucas would have thought of this... what does he expect us to do?* Ethan questions as he glances around. He opens his backpack, rummaging around inside, and curses when his suspicions are confirmed. The empty water bottle is still back in the alcove. He looks up at a small cameras perched high above, watching his every movement, and frowns. *So much for pissing in*

*a corner.*

He forces all thoughts of running water and babbling brooks into the far corners of his mind. He's pretty sure he's read somewhere that you can hold your bladder at least eight hours before you have to worry about your insides exploding. He treks onward.

Blue Shell's abandoned game station isn't hard to find at all. It sits in the center of the room, surrounded on all four sides by a nine-foot tall booth of plexiglass. It's narrow; you wouldn't be able to sit down inside. One side is hinged like a door, and slightly ajar. On the wall opposite the opening, the monitor hangs at eye-level showing a black screen with a giant red X on it. On each of the four sides, at waist height, is a tiny hole. Ethan stares at the plexiglass booth, confused. The top is open to air, so they can't be air holes...

He scratches the side of his head with the barrel of his pistol, puzzling it over, and then it hits him. The holes are just large enough to stick the barrel of a pistol out of. Or into, actually. The game station is protected on all four sides if you were to lock the door, but you're completely visible inside. If someone were to get right up next to the booth without getting shot, they could shoot directly inside through the holes... there would be no way to dodge it.

*I'd hate to have ended up stuck with this game station,* he thinks, pleased that it's no longer a concern.

Continuing on past the game station, he finds what may have been Blue Shell's starting area. The small wooden closet and empty vertical stand are nearly identical to the ones where he started. However in this room, there's only the one doorway, and from the top of the opposite wall hangs a thick, knotted rope. *Up and over, I guess.*

Standing in front of the climbing rope, he realizes he'll need both hands to scale the wall. He grumbles as he pulls the backpack off his shoulder, not thrilled about the idea of being so defenseless at the top of the wall. But with nowhere else to stash the weapon, he sees little other choice. With his gun stowed he slips the bag back on, cinches it tight, and grabs the rope.

Despite the generous knots along the length of the rope, the ascent is one long stream of exasperated expletives and wild flailing. He reaches up attempting to grasp the top of the rough plywood wall, while secretly telling himself the struggle is due to the extra weight of the backpack, and not his complete lack of upper body strength. As he clings to the top of the wall for dear life, he's less concerned with what lies on the other side than he is with trying to swing his leg up and over.

After his less than ninja-like acrobatics, once on the other side Ethan at least has the presence of mind to promptly make a bee-line for the nearest structure that provides cover. Just to his right is a bunker of sandbags stacked closely against the wall. He plops down behind it and focuses on catching his breath. He glances up at the rope and at the thought of scaling it again to get back to his game station he considers that perhaps it wouldn't be *so* bad if he just skipped the next game. He also realizes that he forgot to stop and look around while he was up there, and reminds himself to do it when he heads back this way.

When he's satisfied that no one was alerted by his scaling of the wall (and when his breathing no longer resembles that of a dog left in a hot car), he retrieves the pistol from his pack and stands up to survey the room. Opposite the climbing rope, across the twenty-foot room, is a small two-story fort.

Open on the sides with solid walls blocking the front, and tiny little windows to shoot from, it would be a fantastic place to hole up and catch people passing through. Nobody seems to be doing that now, though, or he'd have been covered in paint head-to-toe the instant he topped the wall.

Along the right wall are two doors, the only other exits. With one as good as the other, he decides to just take the closest one. He looks up, searching for the giant clock overhead. An hour and fifteen minutes. *Just a little further and then I'll head back.*

The doorway leads to a long hallway. Ethan stalks its length slowly, watching the other end down the iron-sights of his pistol as he approaches. Something about the room ahead doesn't seem quite right, and he struggles to figure it out. When he glances back over his shoulder and catches sight of the sandbag bunker he hid behind, it hits him.

While all the other rooms so far have been littered with random debris and obstacles to provide an interesting battlefield, the one ahead is, so far, entirely empty of such features. No bunkers, no barricades, no partitions in sight.

At the end of the hallway, he nervously peers around the corner, and finds the rest of the room equally barren. All except for a port-a-potty situated in the leftmost corner. At the sight of the universal "Men/Women" icons, his bladder screams out for attention, threatening lasting bodily injury and embarrassing stains if it isn't heeded.

With absolutely nothing to hide behind in this room, there's no question that he is alone. Still, he sticks to the wall as he approaches the latrine. He keeps his gun pointed at the one other doorway in the room, directly next to the port-a-potty. He glances over his shoulder periodically, to make sure no one is following him.

The door on the john reads 'unoccupied', but nevertheless the barrel of his handgun leads the charge as he opens the door. Upon seeing it empty he jumps inside being careful not to slam the door when he quickly pulls it closed behind him. He pauses, debating whether it would be safer to lock the door, or leave it displayed as unoccupied. He settles on locking it. Better to announce his presence to a passerby than take a surprise paintball to the back while peeing.

He rests his gun on the toilet paper holder, and unfastens the drawstring on his track pants. He begins to relieve himself, but the accompanying sigh is interrupted by a tinny voice overhead. He's so startled he jumps back, nearly tipping the entire port-a-potty over.

"Greetings gamer. Our sensors have detected urination." It's not Lucas. Ethan doesn't recognize the voice. "The timer has begun. You now have sixty-seconds to answer this trivia or the paint bomb above you will detonate."

Ethan nearly gets whiplash, he snaps his head back so fast. Sure enough, next to a speaker and what looks like a microphone, is a large paint grenade affixed to the ceiling above him. Before he can even begin to formulate a panicked thought, the voice continues.

"In which game are you tasked with collecting the five pieces of Dracula, what are the five pieces, and which of the five pieces acts as a shield. Fifty seconds remaining."

So this is what deer caught in headlights experience. Between the questions, peeing, and the

impending paint-filled explosion above him, Ethan can't decide what to freak out about first.

“Forty seconds.” The voice chimes in. That's not helping at all.

“Castlevania two! Simon's Quest!” Ethan blurts out. He remembers that much, at least.

“Correct. Continue.”

“Uhh...” His mind races. Memories of the classic Nintendo game are interspersed with warring concerns about peeing all over the toilet seat. “His rib! His rib was the shield!”

“Also correct. Please name the remaining four parts of Dracula. Thirty seconds remaining.”

Keeping one hand on his business, Ethan reaches behind him and fumbles with the lock. It won't budge.

“Twenty-five seconds.”

“Okay, okay! Just shut up!” Ethan snaps as he frantically looks around the small water closet, hoping to suddenly find a giant window he can crawl out of. “Umm, his heart! His...” Pixels fly around his mind, begging for meaning, begging for names. He can see them, the simple 8-bit icons, but what were they again?! “His.... eye! And his ring! And... and...”

“Fifteen seconds.” Is the only help the disembodied voice volunteers.

The answer is there, on the verge of consciousness, but it won't cross the threshold. In his mind's eye Ethan can see the icon, a blue... blob. A tear? Dracula's teardrop? No, that 's not it. Images of breaking blocks with Simon's whip play out on the Nintendo emulator in his brain.

“Ten seconds.”

Heart. Rib. Eye. Ring. And a fifth item. The fifth item required to resurrect Dracula and remove the curse. The fifth item. So close to the tip of his tongue and yet so desperately elusive.

“Five.”

Sharp! It was sharp! His tooth?! “It was his...” Ethan blurts out.

“Four.” The voice says, unsympathetically.

Not his tooth... but sharp... sharp like...

“Three”

“His nail! Dracula's fingernail!” The answer clicks as soon as he says it. That's right. That has to be right. Right?

Silence.

“That is correct. Congratulations.” The speaker finally announces. A click from behind signals that the door has unlocked.

Ethan reaches out to brace himself against the side wall of the port-a-potty. He's trembling, but otherwise stands quietly in stunned disbelief. After a moment, his heart begins to pound less urgently, and the reality of the last couple of minutes begins to sink in. He looks down, and is amazed to find he didn't spill a drop.



Stumbling out of the urinal-turned-torture-device, Ethan is halfway back across the room before his wits have recovered enough to realize he left his pistol sitting on the toilet paper holder. He runs back to grab it, reaching in from the threshold, afraid to even step foot inside the port-a-potty again.

The clock overhead tells him that the time for exploring is over, and his rattled nerves wholeheartedly agree. After the bathroom, climbing the rope again sounds immensely appealing by comparison. He stashes his gun in his backpack again, tightens the straps, and does a few quick aerobic stretches as if to try and coax his muscles into getting excited for the climb ahead.

The ascent does actually seem easier this time, though it may just be that his expectations are now so much lower. He reaches the top and swings a leg over, straddled across the wall half on one side and half on the other, when he hears a loud crack. He freezes, thinking that the wooden structure is collapsing, but the second crack is preceded ever so slightly by a pop. The paintball explodes against the wall mere inches from his head, leaving behind a bright green flower, already beginning to drip.

In the room he just left, leaning out from the top floor of the fort that Ethan had admired earlier as a fantastic place to ambush people, is a young man with sandy brown hair. His triangular face is accented by a sharp nose, and cold blue eyes narrowed in determination. The gun in his hands is pointed at Ethan, and he's trying to line up his next shot to compensate for the slight arc of the paintball that caused his first two shots to miss. His shoulder patch bears a green 1-up mushroom.

Ethan's first instinct is to reach for his own gun, but that hopeful train of thought runs headlong into a brick wall as he remembers that his gun is safely tucked out of reach in his backpack. Faced with no option to retaliate, he opts for the next best thing. Running.

There's no time for a graceful descent, so he shoves himself off the wall away from his attacker with all of his strength, just as the third paintball leaves the barrel. Feeling no sting following the pop of compressed air, he has a split second to congratulate himself on dodging the shot before he slams into the concrete ground eight feet below.

His right shoulder takes the brunt of the impact, and he would scream out in pain if the unceremonious fall hadn't also blasted the air out of his lungs. He rolls onto his back, ignoring his own paintball gun jabbing into his kidneys, and grabs at his shoulder. A brief wave of nausea washes over him, but is fought head-on by the adrenaline pumping through his veins and the screams of urgency echoing through his mind.

He fights through the disorientation, and the pain. He fights to breathe, to see past the stars clouding his vision. He needs to get up, he needs to run, but he may as well try creating a giraffe out of thin air for as possible as those things seem right now. He settles on a smaller feat; getting his backpack off.

Ethan can hear Green Mushroom running towards the wall on the other side. Or is that the sound of his own pulse pounding in his ears? He fumbles with the zipper on the bag, fishes around inside, his hand finding a water bottle, the first-aid kit, finally the gun. Tearing it free of its blue and gray nylon prison, he levels it towards the top of the wall where the rope hangs.

A crop of flaxen hair just begins to clear the top of the wall. Ethan squeezes the trigger. At the

sound of the pop Green Mushroom drops out of sight, either ducking down or dropping off the rope altogether. The paintball clips the very edge of the plywood wall, severing it in half. A spray of blue mist disappears into the air over the next room.

The crack of compressed air from the gun, so close, also serves to snap Ethan out of his haze. His shoulder throbs but the adrenaline is in full effect now. He scrambles to his feet, scooping up his backpack in one hand and runs full tilt to the door on the other side of the room. As he reaches the opening, he glances back over his shoulder in time to see an arm reaching over the wall, blind-firing in his direction. Ethan ducks into the next room just as two paintballs leave their brightly colored marks on the wall behind him.

He doesn't stop running. Past the clear, plexiglass game station booth, past barricades and bunkers that could be hiding any of the other gamers waiting to strike. He doesn't care. He wants to put as much space between Green Mushroom and himself as possible. He wants to get back to the safety of his alcove.

He reaches the familiar room with the stairs at full sprint, so he only has the briefest of seconds to notice that the tires have moved, but by then it's too late to change course or pull back. Instead he runs straight towards the alcove, as the barrel of a gun pokes out from beside the tires. Whoever it is tries to line up a shot, but Ethan is moving too fast. He veers past the alcove, and nearly collides with the wall as he attempts to change directions. He scurries up the wooden stairs and onto the platform. The hollow wooden sound of his footsteps on the stairs reminds him that this is the direction Blue Shell had run, but he can't worry about that now.

At the top of the platform he hears another pop from a distance, and he has no idea if the shot was even aimed at him. It doesn't matter. He descends the stairs two at a time, anxious to get below the cover of the walls. He breaks for the only door, catching the contents of the rest of the room out of the corner of his eye; what looks like sheets of rope netting hang from wooden rafters, and at the far end of the room some sort of box against the wall. Something about the box piques his interest, but there's no time to investigate it now.

He skids to a stop in the next room, almost pitching headlong into the wall-to-wall pool of bright orange paint that cuts the room in half. A cardboard sign with hand-written lettering on the wall reads "Lava", with an arrow pointing down to the paint. Someone drew a smiley face after the word. Straddled across the pool of thick paint are three evenly spaced lengths of four-by-four. Ethan reaches down to try and slide them together to form a thicker bridge, but finds them nailed into place. *Of course.*

Unwilling to backtrack towards Green Mushroom and whoever stole his alcove, Ethan presses on. He steps up onto the plank, wobbling a bit as he finds his balance. *One foot in front of the other, Ethan.* He steps forward, arms extended like he's pretending to be an airplane. Three steps out and he's hovering over the sea of thick orange goop, with no chance to turn around. For some reason he's suddenly reminded of the Wii Fit telling him how terrible his balance is, and he freezes. The other side may as well be a million miles away.

He closes his eyes, trying to feel his center of balance, trying to block out his surroundings. He takes a deep breath, sure that a moment of quiet concentration will give him the focus he needs. Two paintball shots ring out and his eyes pop open. Without even thinking he bursts into a full on run across the plank, crossing the distance in three well-placed strides. He's on the other side when Lucas'

announcement chimes in overhead.

“Green Mushroom eliminated! Invincibility Star awarded five points!”

The 1-up mushroom icon on the scoreboard overhead goes dark. With the kill bonus, Invincibility Star has just taken first place. Ethan glances back across the “lava” pool. No one is chasing him. Green Mushroom is out of the competition. Had that been Invincibility Star who had found Ethan's alcove? Was Green Mushroom so focused on chasing Ethan that he ran right into Star's cross-hairs?

Ethan lets slip a little chuckle and shakes his head at the irony. The amusement is fleeting though, as the reality of his situation creeps back in. He's lost his game station, the throbbing in his shoulder is beginning to make itself known and there's only – he glances up at the clock - forty minutes until the next game. He listens for the click of a station turning off forever, but if it happens, he doesn't hear it over the sound of his own heavy breathing. It must have been on the other side of the arena. It definitely wasn't the alcove station, which would have meant that whoever was camped out underneath would suddenly be on the move, and very near to Ethan. He thanks the Gods for small favors.

He's having trouble thinking clearly, due to the pain in his shoulder and beginning to crash from the adrenaline high, so he decides he needs to find a place to rest. Not about to tempt fate crossing the lava paint again, he moves forward on to the next room. On to where Blue Shell went.

The ache in his right shoulder is severe enough that he can't raise his arm up past his sternum, so he takes the pistol in his left hand. He won't be able to reliably hit the broad side of a barn with his left, but at least he won't be shooting at the floor.

The next room has exactly what he's looking for. Though it has four exits, one on each wall, at the corners of the room are bunkers placed diagonally. They're tall enough to conceal anyone sitting behind them, and he can be certain no one is sneaking up from behind.

He stands at the passageway for a few minutes, peering into the room to make sure nobody is already camped out behind any of the four bunkers. Unsatisfied, he carefully reaches into his backpack and grabs one of the remaining granola bars. He hesitates, realizing he may lose it if this goes wrong, but decides it's better to lose a snack than his spot in the tournament. He throws the granola bar at the nearest bunker, and quickly raises his pistol, sweeping it from side to side watching for anyone to pop up and investigate.

No one does. He quickly runs over to the bunker he pelted with munchies, winces as he scoops up the granola bar with his right arm, and clumsily vaults over the barricade, plopping down into a seated position behind it. He sits there in silence for a while, listening for footsteps. When none come, he fishes through the bag and pulls out a bottle of water. He's unbelievably thirsty, and it's a struggle to force himself to stop after only a few sips. *Going to have to stop running around like this or the water won't last the day*, he scolds himself. Flashbacks of the port-a-potty chime in with their agreement with the “Drink Less” initiative.

The worst of his thirst sated, he pulls out the first-aid kit and rifles through its contents. Band-aids, tape, tweezers, aspirin. At the bottom he finds what he was hoping to. Pulling out the cold pack, he squeezes to break the center, dispersing the liquid within. Cold instantly spreads through the pack, and Ethan slips it inside his jersey to press against his shoulder, just underneath the large blue Energy

Tank patch. It's uncomfortably cold in an already chilly warehouse, but it does help to dull the aching pain throbbing up and down his arm. He doesn't think anything is broken, but a nasty bruise is a certainty.

With his back to the corner here, the large overhead scoreboard isn't visible from this position, but he knows he's running out of time until the next game. There are nine gamers left, which means only eight stations active. He tries to sort out who might be roaming around. Red Mushroom almost for sure. They were displaced before the Street Fighter match judging by the score. Whoever was at the station shut down after Green Mushroom was eliminated will now also be out hunting. And of course, Ethan. He curses himself again for leaving the alcove.

Green Mushroom definitely had a station for the previous game, which he'd left to go exploring as well. Considering how that turned out, Ethan decides things could be worse. That game station may still be open, but based on where he first ran into the young gamer over by the bathroom, it's probably further in the opposite direction. He can't risk passing by the alcove again.

As he sits there, fatigue begins to overtake him, and the broad, insistent ache in his shoulder ushers in a disappointing realization. He's in no shape to participate in the next game. He fights it, trying to will himself to stand up and march back to his alcove. To reclaim it by force against all odds. But reason won't back down, and he doesn't budge. As loathe as he is to lose out on the points of the next round, a setback he may not be able to recover from, he's *certain* there's no way to recover from a paintball between the eyes. Rushing out there at half capacity will only get him eliminated.

He takes another sip of water, and stuffs everything but the pistol back into his bag. He wants to be packed and ready in case he needs to move in a hurry. He props the backpack up in the corner where the two sheets of plywood meet, and then settles in against it. The pistol lies on his chest, his left hand resting lightly on top of it. The sleeve of the jumpsuit holds the icepack loosely against his shoulder. Slight hunger pangs tug at his abdomen. *I'll eat when I find another game station*, he promises himself.

He attempts to stare directly in front, to stay on watch for anyone approaching too close to his bunker, but his eyes inevitably wander up towards the dark ceiling of the warehouse. Crisscrossed with vents and pipes and ducts, the industrial pattern high above past the bright floodlights illuminating the arena is calming. Soothing. Almost like counting sheep.

## Four

“Third game is complete!” The speakers above boom to life. “Scores have been posted.”

Ethan startles awake with a gasp that quickly turns into a yelp as he wrenches his shoulder. The pistol clatters to the floor. He looks around panicked and disoriented. *Shit! I fell asleep!* He gathers up the gun and grabs his backpack, scrambling to get his feet underneath him. He freezes, listening, coiled tensely like a squirrel poised to bound away at the first sound of a predator. He thanks the gods that nobody happened across him while he was sleeping, doubly-so because Lilah often accuses him of snoring.

The warm ice pack hangs caught up inside the sleeve of his shirt, all of its dulcifying chill having dissipated. He shakes it loose and slides it into the corner. His shoulder still hurts, but the urgent pain is gone, leaving in its place a general soreness. It will be a little tender, but he should be able to use it in a pinch.

After rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he runs his fingers through his hair and tries to focus on his next task. He has to find a game station before the next competition. Falling further behind in the scores would mean he'd be relying entirely on his skills as an assassin to win this event. Not a situation he'd place money on. He pokes his head above the barricade's edge, checking for opponents and finding none.

He crosses the room to one of the bunkers on the other end, looking to get vision on the scoreboard, trying to reconcile any changes that took place while he slept. His score, obviously, hasn't changed, but he's surprised to see that neither has Red Mushroom's, who still sits at three. *Guess they didn't find Green Mushroom's game station.*

Invincibility Star held on to first place, with everyone else hot on their heels. They all pulled ahead, bumping Ethan down to sixth place. He lets out a sigh. It was expected, but still disheartening. *You can get back in this*, he reassures himself. *You just can't miss another game.*

He heads out with renewed purpose, determined to find and take a game station before the clock counts down again. He's anxious, but with just over two hours on the game clock, he forces himself to take it slow. Plenty of time, no reason to get sloppy. He approaches each new room methodically, watching closely from the doorway, inspecting every detail of the room before cautiously stepping inside. Always staying within arms reach of cover. Always alert. He makes it a point to regularly check behind him as well, to be sure no one gets the drop on him.

In one room on the floor, peeking behind a barrier, he sees a small lump of red and gray trailing black nylon straps. A backpack. He watches the bag for a while, but there's no movement nearby. Slipping off his sneakers, the cold concrete saps the warmth from his feet as he pads across the floor in his socks, gun poised. When he's near enough, he runs the last few feet, pistol leading the charge, ready to fire. But the backpack is alone behind the bunker.

Empty, as well. Ethan checks it for supplies, but finds only granola bar wrappers and empty

bottles. The paintball gun and first-aid kit are missing.

An hour remains on the clock when Ethan comes across another “lava” room. The pool of bright fiery paint covers the left half of the long rectangular room. Rather than blocking off an exit this time, instead it sits beneath a giant wooden cube rising four feet out of the paint on stilts. A series of smaller wooden blocks are scattered around it, poking just above the surface of the viscous liquid. They look like stepping stones, allowing tenuous access to the cube, but why anyone would *want* to reach it, he can't figure out.

On the left side of the room he sees nothing but wooden crates of various sizes, stacked in a pile that almost reaches the top of the wall. The same crates that appear in nearly every room. These ones are piled high enough that you might be able to use them to climb over the wall. The only other door is directly across from where Ethan stands.

He turns his attention back to the cube. Something doesn't seem right. There's no ladder or rope to climb onto the cube even if you got out there. And if you did manage to get on top of it... where would you go? Ethan shakes his head. He's wasting valuable time staring at this cube, he knows he should just keep moving. But he can't shake the nagging feeling that there's something here. He looks over every inch of the cube that he can see from the doorway. Every seam, every surface. Nothing looks out of place. It's just a wooden box.

He's about to give up and step into the room when something else about the cube catches his eye. No, not the cube... the paint *underneath* the cube. The glossy wet surface is sparkling with the reflections of the huge lights high overhead. The color of the paint directly underneath the cube is off, somehow. Just slightly tinted... purple.

Ethan drops to his belly, to get another look. Sure enough, the underside of the cube is open. And spilling out from inside a faint blue glow. A game station.

He thanks the gods as he gets up and brushes himself off, examining the situation with this new information. The blocks leading to the cube are small, and spaced pretty far apart... it won't be any easy task to reach the cube in the first place. Anyone inside the cube would have plenty of time to take shots at a would-be intruder working their way across the lava.

There are no windows or murder holes in the cube that Ethan can see, at least from this angle. That at least meant that if he were quiet, whoever is camped inside that cube might not know he was there until he was right underneath them. Maybe it would be possible to get the drop on them after all.

He slides his backpack off his shoulder slowly, not wanting to take the risk that the contents will shift and give away his position. He sets it gently by the door, and grabs the paintball gun with both hands. He decides to get a better look at the cube before moving in, so he starts to circle around into the right side of the room, He moves cautiously, completely picking up each foot and softly placing it back down, so as not to risk scuffing along the rough concrete floor. He nears the crates, never taking his eyes from the suspended cube.

Somebody snuffles. Ethan freezes in his tracks.

He stands there, in the middle of the room, his breath caught in his chest. His eyes are still locked on the cube as his brain processes the sound he just heard. It was quiet, but crystal clear. He

wouldn't have heard it had it come from the cube. Slowly, afraid of what he might find, he cranes his neck around to look over his shoulder. No one in sight.

Swiveling back around, he looks in the opposite direction, to the stacks of crates he had dismissed as a point of interest earlier. He silently mouths a few choice curse words, annoyed at his carelessness. He studies the crates. Now knowing what he's looking for, he sees it. Between two stacks of crates out front... a small gap, maybe six inches wide. And there, down by the floor and just barely visible from this angle, the round anodized metallic muzzle of a paintball pistol trained right on the lava pool.

Ethan finally lets out a slow controlled breath, muffling it with his sleeve. He looks over the crates again. What at first looked like a random stacking of boxes against the wall, he now recognizes as a meticulously constructed fort. And inside, a fellow gamer lying in wait to ambush anyone trying to sneak up on the lava game station. An ambush Ethan nearly walked right into.

The gun is so low to the ground, Ethan has to assume the gamer inside is lying on their stomach with their arms out in front of them. A sniper's position, easy to maintain for long periods of time. He takes three generous steps towards the fort, making sure to stay out of the assassin's narrow field of vision. At the corner of the fort he crouches down to listen, but no further sounds come from inside. The sole ill-timed onset of nasal irritation is the only mistake this Gamer makes.

Ethan considers his options. There are no noticeable gaps in the fort, save for the one right in front. The crates are stacked right up to the wall, so there's no sneaking around behind it. He knows he can't move any of the crates without making noise, and once the predator inside is alerted to his presence this will become far more difficult.

The only way in is through the front, it seems. He gives the crates one more brief inspection. Based on their size, and the fact that this assassin was able to pull them into place, they shouldn't be too heavy. He stands, lining himself up with the side of one of the two stacked columns in front, and prays his assumptions are correct. He'll only get one shot at this.

Before he can begin second-guessing himself, Ethan takes a step back with his right foot, and then snaps it forward into a kick aimed right at the bottom box in the stack. It's filled with sand or some other weighty material, but it moves, sliding forward a couple of inches.

A surprised yell escapes the fort, and a single shot fires off towards the lava pool as the assassin's gun hand is pinched between the two columns of crates, at least momentarily. Ethan seizes the opportunity, leaping forward in front of the crates and jamming his own pistol into the narrow opening, squeezing the trigger three times. More screams as at least two of the paint balls find their mark.

He jumps back, ducking around the side of the crates again and waits. A resigned sigh from within precedes the rough scraping of wood on concrete, as the gamer inside emerges from his fort. He's young, heavy-set with a head full of thick ink-black hair that looks like it's never seen the business end of a comb. Bushy dark eyebrows top a plain, broad face that wears an expression equal parts frustration and exhaustion. Fragments of paintball casing fall away from two bright blue splotches on his jersey, directly above the patch of a pink Pac-Man ghost.

The dark-haired gamer looks around, his eyes finally meeting Ethan's. He furrows his brow,

squinting slightly, as if trying to work out how this slim, awkward stranger got the drop on him. Then something else flashes across his face... recognition? A smile reveals a mouthful of white, slightly crooked teeth. He takes a couple steps towards Ethan, who tenses and grips his pistol tighter. Pac-Man Ghost thrusts his hand out in front of him.

Ethan eyes it suspiciously for a moment, then grabs it tentatively in his own. They shake.

“Good luck. Play it like you mean it.” Pac-Man Ghost says, his smile growing wider.

Ethan nods in return.

A commotion pulls their attention towards the wall to their left, and at the top they see a couple of young men in blue “Volunteer” jerseys lowering a ladder down into the room. They point towards Pac-Man Ghost. The lumbering, raven-mopped gamer shoots a curious look back at his fort, then to Ethan with a knowing smile, and turns to climb the ladder. In moments they're gone, and Ethan is alone in the room.

Even though he knows it's coming, the loudspeakers overhead still make him jump a little bit. “Pac-Man Ghost eliminated! Energy Tank awarded five points!” Lucas announces, followed abruptly by the crackle of the microphone cutting out.

The pink Pac-Man ghost on the scoreboard blinks out, and the extra points have brought Ethan into fourth place, behind Star, Super Leaf and Metroid. The clock above reminds him that if he wants to stay there, he'd better get a move on.

He runs over and grabs his backpack, and as he's slipping it over his shoulder, he realizes that Pac-Man Ghost wasn't wearing one as he climbed the ladder to leave. Ethan spins around to the fort, and remembers the short glance the big gamer had tossed its way.

The pink backpack is inside, and pulling it open reveals granola bar wrappers and empty water bottles. Disappointed, Ethan tosses it aside, turning to leave the cramped fort, but hesitates when the bag makes a solid “thud” on the concrete floor. He upturns the backpack, and amidst a shower of trash an unopened water bottle and granola bar fall out.

He decides to treat them as bonus supplies, and thus not subject to the strict rationing rules he'd been trying to adhere to. Sitting against the wall of the fort, he wolfs down the granola bar, and drains three quarters of the water bottle in four large gulps. He knows he'll have to deal with the consequences of that later, but he's too thirsty to care anymore.

He polishes off the rest of the water, and puts the empty bottle in his own pack. Perhaps it can save him another trip to the torture-toilet. He leaves the trash on the floor, but rolls up the other empty pink backpack and stuffs it into his bag as well. Just in case.

Feeling renewed and refreshed by the small snack, and still riding the high of his first direct elimination, it's time to tackle the lava pool. The stepping blocks are placed further apart than they'd seemed from the other side of the room, and the trip is slow-going. He repeatedly glances back behind him, terrified of getting caught by another gamer while stranded in the middle of the giant paint pool.

After ten minutes of careful balancing and one near disastrous stumble, he finally reaches the



last block just at the edge of the cube. Leaning forward, he ducks underneath and immediately understands why Pac-Man Ghost had elected to spend his time in between games in the fort across the room. Aside from being strategically clever, it was also a far more comfortable place to be.

The open interior of the cube is roughly six feet along both dimensions. He can see the monitor and keyboard shelf mounted to one wall. And about a foot below that, a single steel pipe running parallel through the center of the cube serves as the only seat. Once he got up there he'd need to balance on the metal rod while gaming, or risk toppling into the red paint below.

*Fantastic*, he thinks, as the last bit of his enthusiasm over winning this game station fades. Nothing to be done about it now. The clock is relentlessly marching towards the next game round, and he can't afford to sit another one out.

He puts his gun into his bag. Standing on his tip toes, he reaches up and grabs onto the metal pipe. Instinctively he gives it a little tug to make sure it will support his weight. Of course it will, if Pac-Man Ghost sat up here with no problems, but it makes him feel better anyway. He grips it tightly with both hands, and pulls himself up.

He struggles a bit, dangling over the simulated lava, but manages to get his chin above the bar. A grunt escapes his lips as he quickly swings one arm over the pipe, and then a second, putting the steel rod under his armpits. He grimaces as the pressure irritates the pain in his shoulder. Another few grunts, with some cursing mixed in, and he's seated precariously atop the bar, holding on to the keyboard shelf to balance himself. He wipes a bead of sweat from the side of his brow. *Made it. Nothing to do now but wait.*

## Five

The thin metal pipe digs into the meat of his thighs, but he feels fairly steady. At the back of his mind he knows that it's only a matter of time before this really begins to hurt, or even cuts off the circulation to his legs, but he can worry about that later. The next game is all that matters now. He pulls his backpack off, and manages to unbuckle one of the black nylon shoulder straps. Holding the other strap in his teeth, he loops it around the metal pole and refastens it, allowing the pack to hang freely. He's just finishing up when the blue screen announces the impending game round.

### *Mouse and Keyboard.*

2:00

With the weight of the pack no longer pulling him back Ethan finds it a little easier to balance on the pipe. He notices that pushing against the wall of the cube with his feet provides some stabilization as well, freeing up his hands a bit. He won't be able to sit up here for hours on end, but hopefully he can last until the game round is over.

The screen flickers for a moment and a League of Legends champion select screen reveals itself, bringing with it a tidal wave of questions. The game is set up for three versus three-- a team game?! Ethan quickly does the math in his head... or at least what passes for 'quickly' as far as Ethan and math are concerned. There should be eight gamers left in the arena, with seven active stations. But only six are represented here. Red Mushroom has been the perpetual wanderer so far these games, but Pac-Man Ghost's elimination must have displaced someone else as well, someone who didn't make it to another station in time.

For the second game in a row, two competitors will be left out. Ethan is thankful it isn't him again, but can't ignore the other problem at hand. While he's tenuously balanced here playing an intense action strategy game, there are two hunters out there that could happen upon him at any time. He grits his teeth in frustration and adjusts his seating on the metal bar.

Rather than names or handles, each gamer is simply identified by a letter of the Greek alphabet. Ethan is Gamma, his teammates Alpha and Rho. The select timer is counting down, and his two teammates have already picked champions. He doesn't recognize most of these characters from a hole in the wall. League of Legends was always Lilah's game; MOBAs never quite clicked with Ethan. He closes his eyes and tries to remember watching his wife play, tries to remember anything she may have said about particular heroes.

One memory rises to the surface... Lilah complaining about a champion being "easy-mode." That's what he needs. Cheap and easy. He replays the memory over and over, trying to recall more details. His name.... it began with a 'G.' The select timer is beeping, time running out. He types G into the search bar, and that narrows it down to five champions. He mouses over them in a hurry. No, it wasn't a pirate. No, not a gargoyle. Was he fat? He can't remember if the champion was fat or not... he doesn't think so. That leaves the cowboy, and the guy with the World of Warcraft shoulder pads. Three seconds to decide.

*Fuck it.* He clicks on the Garen just as the countdown ends and then it's too late to change his

mind. The game locks in his choice, and proceeds to load. He stares at the character art on the loading screen, and lets out a quiet sigh as the memories of watching Lilah play continue to cycle through his mind. He misses her. It's only been twelve hours since he saw her last, when she slipped him the roofie cupcake, but it feels like it's been so much longer..

She must be here in the warehouse with Lucas somewhere, watching everything play out through the cameras all over the arena. Is she laughing herself silly right now, knowing how much he dreads MOBAs? He smiles, picturing the last time she tried to teach him to play League of Legends, and how she playfully nicknamed him “my little feeder” for the next week.

Loading finishes, and he's dropped into the game, on an unfamiliar map. This isn't the one he's seen Lilah play. It still has three lanes, but it seems much smaller. He purchases some items from the “recommended” tab of the store. His teammates are already on the move, taking top and middle lanes respectively. Ethan heads bottom.

He opts to play safe and conservatively, and prays that his anonymous teammates are better than he is. He stays by his turret, and the first ten minutes of the game is tense but uneventful. First blood goes to top lane, with Alpha getting the drop on Kappa. Ethan relaxes a bit, with the worry of feeding the first kill alleviated. He's slowly getting more comfortable with his champion's abilities, and getting a little bolder, pushing his lane out further, even taking a couple of shots at his opponent, Iota, in the bottom lane.

His strategy of holding his lane and taking no risks slowly begins to pay off as his teammates, who are clearly far more practiced with the game, begin joining up for ganks on the other lanes. The enemy team gets a few kills, including catching Ethan too far from his turret once, but Alpha and Rho are unstoppable as a pair. They have two of the enemy's turrets down before losing any themselves. Ethan manages to build tanky enough to survive most team fights, and while the enemy team is focusing him, Alpha and Rho annihilate the opposition.

They're pressing the enemy's base for the win when a loud pop nearby startles Ethan, causing him to spin around towards the sound and losing his unstable seating. He slips backwards off the smooth metal bar, flipping upside down and nearly plummeting into the paint below, only jerking to a sudden stop as the metal bar catches behind his knees.

Dangling there, blood rushing to his head, his panic over his current predicament is trumped only by the second loud pop of a paintball gun. A tall, lanky gamer scrambles into the room, almost sprawling headfirst into the concrete as he struggles to regain his balance. In contrast to his dark mahogany skin, the whites of his eyes, wide with fear, are plain to see from across the room. He carries no backpack, no gun, just desperation. He gives no indication that he notices Ethan, whose head is peeking out from underneath the cube, only sparing a couple of quick glances backwards as he runs as fast as he can towards the next doorway. Ethan can't make out the patch on his jumpsuit... red and white... it could be a mushroom or a shell.

Ethan instantly recognizes the tall blonde as she bounds into the room in pursuit, brandishing her paintball gun. She pauses to let loose another shot, just as the dark-skinned youth slides around the corner and out the door. The paintball splatters harmlessly against the edge of the opening creating a dark blue bruise on the plywood. She resumes the chase, but spares a glance towards the cube as she crosses the room. The look of surprise on her face as she notices the upside down head sticking out from underneath borders on comical, but she doesn't break stride. She disappears after the other gamer.

*Shit, shit shit.* Ethan grabs hold of the bar with both hands. He pulls himself back up into a seated position, bracing against the wall as the blood drains from his head and a wave of dizziness washes over him.

The League of Legends map is just wrapping up. His champion, Garen, is back at the fountain, having been killed and respawned, but Alpha and Rho have such a lead on the enemy team there's no stopping them. Victory is assured. That provides some small measure of relief, but Ethan's primary concern right now is Blue Shell. She knows where he is, where this game station is, and she'll be back. He unzips the backpack, which still hangs from the metal pipe, so that he can grab at his gun if he needs to.

Then everything happens at once. The match ends in a win for Ethan's team, though he participated little in the final moments of the game. Just as the enemy's nexus explodes, two more paintball shots ring out nearby. These ones have found their mark, and the announcement follows quick on their heels.

“Red Mushroom has been eliminated! Five points to Blue Shell!”

*Shit.* Ethan had been hoping that Blue Shell would be occupied longer than that. Now she's already probably on her way back, looking to secure this game station for the next round, and rid herself of another opponent to boot. Ethan considers just staying put, inside the cube. She'll have a hard time getting to him, and he may be able to get a shot on her before she has line of sight to him.

The calming blue screen has just returned to the monitor inside the cube when a loud mechanical click removes it, ushering in a black screen with a giant red X across it. *Well that figures.*

“Fourth game is complete! Scores have been posted.” Lucas continues overhead.

It's just as well, Ethan decides. Sitting on the bar for the past forty-five minutes has taken its toll. His thighs are sore from where the metal rod has been digging into them, and his right shoulder has begun to throb again, from the strain of keeping himself balanced this entire time. He's beginning to unhook his backpack when he hears her.

“Comfortable in there?” Blue Shell asks from across the room.

Ethan pauses, remaining completely still, but he's under no illusion that he'll be able to fool her into thinking he's gone. He considers his options. He's sore and achy, and the game station is offline, but she doesn't know that. As far as she knows, there's no reason for him to leave.

“Oh it's great. I've got a whole beanbag chair up in here.” He shoots back.

“Well that must be nice.” Her tone is playful, but there's a coldness underneath.

“Yeah, it's pretty snazzy. There's a cappuccino machine in here too.” He finds himself wishing he had just taken her out earlier when he'd had the chance.

“So I suppose I won't be able to convince you to come on out of there?” She knows the answer already.

“Nah, I'm pretty settled. I get my mail here now, and the cable guy is coming in the morning to hook up HBO.” This won't last forever. Eventually she'll grow impatient and attempt to cross the lava, or the pins and needles creeping through his legs will force him to climb down. Either way ends up with one of them eliminated. The question is, who falters first?

Unless there's another way... She's saying something about having the upper hand here, and that she'll give him a head start if he climbs down, which he doesn't believe for a second. For the most part he's tuned her out. He's replaying the day's eliminations in his head, counting on his fingers. *Two shots to take out Red Mushroom... three that I heard during the chase. That's five. And earlier, when she chased him away from his game station... at least ten shots were fired... how many of them were hers?*

At least half of them had to be hers, he figures. Ten shots total, give or take. She should only have a couple left. Unless she picked up somebody else's gun. Is that even legal? Lucas didn't say it was against the rules. It's a gamble, but he can't think of a better option.

“You still there?” She shouts.

He has no idea what she was just saying. “Oh, sorry. I was in the shower.”

She laughs. “Well I was offering you one of my waters and a ten-minute head start if you come out quietly.”

“Now why would I want to leave this perfectly cozy game station?” He reaches into his bag, careful not to make too much noise. Delicately, he pulls out and unfolds the pink backpack.

A loud pop and the smack of a dark blue paintball against the inner edge of the cube a few inches below his foot is not the response he was expecting. She must be lying at the edge of the lava pool, it's the only way she could have gotten that angle. Even still, a quarter inch above or below and it would have hit the outside wall, or missed the cube completely. He doubts it was a lucky shot. “Because,” She yells. “If I have to walk out there, are you *sure* you can get me before I get you?”

One less paintball to worry about. “You make a pretty valid argument.” Ethan concedes. “And you promise you'll give me a head start?”

“I promise.”

“Okay then,” He warns. “I'm coming out!” He makes some mock shuffling noise with his feet against the side wall. With his right hand, he quickly lowers the pink backpack below the edge of the cube, and right on cue, it's pelted with two paintballs in rapid succession. He drops the pink backpack, which lands in the red paint below with a soft splatter, and grabs his own pistol. Tightening his grip on the pole with his left hand, he slides backwards, locking the bar underneath his knees. Flipping upside down, he swings the pistol out towards the blonde crouched at the edge of the pool.

She fires first, but the empty hiss of compressed gas is all that escapes the barrel of her gun; she's out of ammo. Her momentary surprise is all the hesitation Ethan needs to orient himself in his upside down position, and train his own gun in her direction. He squeezes off one shot that goes wide, but it's enough to get her attention. She drops her empty pistol and rolls to the side in a blur of charcoal jumpsuit and whirling blonde hair.

Ethan's second shot also goes wide, but he's mostly just shooting to keep her moving. She's sprinting towards the door now, and Ethan holds off wasting any further ammo. He doubts he could hit her if he was right-side up, much less swinging from a metal pipe with the world turned on its head.

As soon as she disappears around the door, he reaches up and stuffs the pistol back into his bag. He zips it up and frantically attempts to unhook it from the metal pipe. Yanking it loose, he slips his arm through the other strap and then goes about trying to untangle himself. Hanging by both hands, he's just able to reach the nearest stepping block with the toe of his shoe, and shift his weight to it. Safely on the platform, he retrieves his pistol and points it towards the door. He doubts she'll be coming back while she has no weapon, but he keeps the gun ready as he makes his way off over the pool of lava-paint. Back on solid concrete, he takes a moment to catch his breath and plan his next move.

He grabs her discarded paintball gun and tosses it into the red paint. It lands with a plop, and slowly sinks into the thick liquid. It had no ammo, but he feels safer knowing there's one less weapon in the arena. The idea of hiding in the fort in case she comes back, either for the gun or another stab at the game station is tempting, but ultimately counter-productive. She's less of a threat with no gun, and Ethan needs to find yet another game station.

The scoreboard updates him on the situation. Energy Tank is showing a five point increase. Star and Red Shell have both gained five points as well, so that must have been Alpha and Rho. The other team won no points. A little over two hours until the next game. He sighs, preparing himself for yet another nerve-wracking expedition through the maze that is the arena. He wonders if the alcove game station is still active after all this time. He rubs the weariness from his eyes. *Should have just stayed in the damn alcove*, he tells himself again.

Weapon or no, he's not going in the same direction as Blue Shell. He takes the door he came in through, backtracking a couple of rooms until another path opens up. Once in unfamiliar territory again, he slows down, exercising the caution that has worked well enough for him so far. He's keeping a good pace until he reaches the tubes.

## Six

The room is entirely empty, clearly not intended to be a battle zone but more of an anteroom for what lies ahead. In front of him, instead of a door, is a wide, rectangular wall with half a dozen manhole-sized circles cut out of it. Connected to these openings are brightly colored, opaque plastic tubes, like you might see on a child's playground. Each tube extends a few feet back before snaking off wildly in one direction or another. A giant hamster maze, a network of plastic tunnels leading to who knows where.

The thought of backtracking again crosses his mind, but treading the same ground over and over will get him nowhere. He'll never find a new game station if he doesn't keep moving forward. With Blue Shell wandering around, there's at least one active, unoccupied station out here, and he wants to find it before she does.

Tightening the backpack across his shoulders, he stuffs the gun into the rear waistband of his pants, and approaches the entrance to a blue tube a few feet off the ground. Climbing in, the smooth plastic is cold against his palms, and crawling along on all fours makes it impossible to avoid making noise. Noise that also echoes down the tunnel. *Well, if there's anyone else in here, they know I'm coming.*

Someone else *was* in here. After about ten minutes of navigating twists and turns, and tunnels that loop back on themselves to connect with tunnels of various other colors, the path in front of him opens up into a small compartment, with a game station. He sees the black screen with the red X first, before he can get his hopes up, so he just focuses on the tunnels.

Ten more minutes crawling around in the nest of tubes and he's beginning to get frustrated at the amount of time he's wasting. For all he knows the tunnels just lead back out to the room he started in, and this whole thing will have been a waste of time. But the only other option is to sit down and give up, so he presses on.

A few twists and turns later, and he sees light around a bend ahead. He slows down, inching forward with his gun drawn, in case there's anyone waiting in the next room. He's sure that his approach has been broadcast down the hollow tube, so the element of surprise is long gone. He's more concerned about seeing any potential threat in time to make a hasty retreat.

The tube reaches its end higher up off the ground than the one he entered. The room below is large, with an exit off to the far left. There are no bunkers, and no other gamers hiding in the room but something else captures his attention. Something silver about the size of a mailbox. He's seen it before. No, not this one, one just like it, earlier in the room with the rope netting. Unlike most things in the arena, it looks to be made out of metal, with a hinged hatch on the front secured by a padlock. A white glow emanates from the top. He remembers seeing the same white glow on the other box as he ran past.

Rubber tires are laid out on their sides all around silver box, a giant field of black rings ten feet deep. He thinks back to the other box he saw, situated behind sheet after sheet of rope netting. Clearly they didn't want anyone getting to these boxes easily.

He shuffles out of the tube, making the short drop to the floor. Looking back at the wall, there's only the one opening... all of the other tubes must have run off towards other rooms. He stretches a moment, thankful to be able to stand up straight again after nearly a half hour crawling around on his hands and knees. Casually walking over to the mass of tires, he notices something else. Some sort of clear jelly slathered all over the tops of the rubber rings. Crouching, he reaches out and gently touches the nearest tire. His finger sticks. Adhesive.

He wipes the glue residue off on the side of his pants. Better not trip, he tells himself. Carefully he places his first foot in the center of the tire in front of him, balancing on one leg as he places his second foot. Moving slowly and making sure to pick his knees up, he traverses the tire obstacles with relative ease. He stumbles once, and plants his left foot on the side of a tire, where it sticks fast. He has to yank it free, trying not to stumble backwards in the process. His left sneaker makes a smacking sound each time it tears free of the cement for the last few steps.

Once clear of the tires, he scrapes his shoe back and forth on the concrete, trying to rub the adhesive off. Satisfied that it's as clean as he can get it, he turns back to the silver box he came for. It's definitely metal, sturdy and cold to the touch. The small hatch in the front is secured with a large combination padlock, the kind with four number dials.

The glow he'd seen isn't coming from inside the box, but rather from a digital tablet mounted to the top. He steps up to the large chest to get a better look at the screen of the tablet. In the center of the touchscreen is a giant round button that simply says "Begin." Above it, the text reads:

*Answer Trivia?*

Ethan takes three hasty steps back from the box, looking at it like it's a barrel of poisonous snakes. He searches around for any paint bombs attached to the sides of the container, the walls, inside any of the tires. Nothing looks like it could explode into a blast of tournament-ending paint. Still, memories of his last trivia experience nearly convince him to just leave the box alone, to move on. Curiosity wins out though, and he steps back up to the chest.

He presses the 'Begin' button, and leaps back, ready to run at the first sign of trouble, but nothing happens. He creeps back up to the tablet like a man about to try and disarm a nuclear device. He peers at the screen, but there's no doomsday countdown, just a single question.

*Mike Haggar is the mayor of what city?*

*Easy one!* Beneath the question is a touchscreen keyboard. Ethan taps out "Metro" and hits enter. He freezes, waiting for alarms and bells and explosions. Another silent question pops up instead.

*Guybrush Threepwood is afraid of this.*

Ethan pauses, unsure of the answer. It's been over a decade since he's played Monkey Island, and exhaustion has starting to cover his mind like a blanket of wet snow, making it harder to think. *Was it plaster? No... Porcelain! It's porcelain, dur.* He laughs to himself when the next question appears.

*Name the only character to appear in every Fallout game.*

Without hesitation, he types out "Harold" and presses enter. That might have been a tough one



for someone else, but Ethan knows Fallout better than he knows his own parents. In giant bold letters, a four digit number blinks onto the screen. *Well that wasn't so bad.* He grabs the large steel padlock and begins entering the numbers. He gives it a quick pull and with the a click the padlock pops off. He pulls the hatch open, and inside the little compartment, on a shelf is a small green sack of crushed velvet, cinched at the top with a drawstring. He's so excited to retrieve his prize, he doesn't think twice before grabbing it.

There's a short beep, the screen on the tablet turns a bright red, and large white words begin blinking really fast. He leans forward to read it.

*Air Strike Imminent.*

*What? Air str--?* The thought trails off as he looks up, and hanging from the rafters high above by the lights he spots about twenty large balloons. Judging by the way they're sagging, each one is filled with thick, heavy paint. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.* He clutches the velvet pouch tighter, and spins around, only then remembering the tire obstacle course in between him and safety. *They didn't put these here to make it harder for people to get to the box. They're here so it's harder to get away!*

He's managed to set one foot into the tire field in front of him when, off to his far left, a loud smack accompanies an explosion of yellow paint. He starts running, kicking his knees high into the air to clear the tires, focused entirely on the ground in front of him where his feet need to land. Around him more wet explosions spur him on, but he refuses to look anywhere but straight down. He's never been an athletic person, but decades of video games have given him some measure of coordination. He tears through the tire field like he's been practicing all his life. The bombs are falling faster now, a symphony of liquid detonations, but he's almost clear. A paint balloon explodes directly behind him, where he was just moments before.

Ethan's almost to the edge when he gets sloppy and stumbles. Hands sprawled out in front of him to break his fall, the velvet pouch goes sliding across the floor just past the obstacle course. His hands and knees make contact with the sticky surface of the tires, and immediately he's ensnared. A moment later there's a pop in front of him, and a splotch of yellow paint blossoms into existence right where he'd have been if he hadn't tripped. He stares in disbelief for the briefest of seconds, then begins struggling to stand, struggling to break the grasp the adhesive has on him. It's slow and arduous, and balloons continue to deliver their bright yellow destruction all around him.

Finally he clears the last couple of tires, diving free of the bombing zone. Reaching down he scoops up the velvet bag, the glue all over his hands ensuring it won't slip free again. He runs to the far corner of the room, collapsing from sheer exhaustion and adrenaline overload. Looking back at the field of tires as the last couple of balloons fall, nearly every inch of the area is now dripping with neon yellow paint.

He's got glue all over his hands and knees, and some small spatters of yellow mist in a couple of places on his uniform, but remarkably he avoided taking any direct hits. Ethan takes a moment to offer silent thanks to the gods, and then forces himself to his feet. He needs to find someplace to take cover and clean up. He contemplates crawling back into the tube, but the entrance is nearly seven feet off the ground, and he doesn't want to risk getting lost in those tunnels again. Perhaps the next room will have a bunker or something.

It has something better. Situated in the corner of the next room is a two-tiered fort, similar to the one he saw earlier when he ran into Green Mushroom. A ladder on the side marks the only way up to the second story of the small building, which is surrounded on all sides by mock wooden crenelations. Ethan climbs up in a hurry, his hands sticking to the wooden rungs of the ladder. Up top he shrugs the backpack off his shoulders and slumps down to the floor.

He starts rubbing his hands against the rough wooden walls, attempting to work the glue residue off with friction. He uncaps a fresh water bottle and, after taking a generous swallow, uses a small splash of it to work the last of the adhesive off of his fingers. He leans back against the wall and reaches for the velvet pouch. He unties the drawstring and yanks the top open. A wide grin breaks across his face, and tears of happiness well up in his eyes.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out the gleaming silver and blue can of Red Bull. Anything that helps him keep going is worth its own weight in gold at the moment. He grasps the tab and pulls back, a spray of mist escaping as the can cracks open. He puts the cold aluminum to his lips and drinks deep, enjoying the burn of the carbonation against the back of his throat. With an exaggerated gasp of approval, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and sets the drink down.

Looking back in the pouch he finds even more goodies. A small flashlight that attaches to the rails on top of his paintball pistol. Another granola bar, which he scarfs down on the spot. And there's something else. He immediately recognizes the rubbery, olive green object at the very bottom of the bag, but hesitates to grab it. Small and oval, it's little larger than a baseball. At one end is a bright red plastic cap, from which dangles a thin black ring. A paint grenade.

He closes up the velvet pouch, carefully wrapping the excess material around the grenade, bundling it up nice and safe. He gently places the package in his backpack next to his remaining supplies, taking care that it won't get jostled around too much. Paint grenades can be unreliable in his experience, and he doesn't want to take any chances. Ethan is just zipping the bag up when Lucas chimes in via the speakers overhead.

“Yashichi has been eliminated! Only six gamers remaining!”

He watches the bright orange and white pinwheel icon flicker off on the scoreboard overhead, but no points are awarded to any of the remaining gamers. He's confused at first, but finally decides that Yashichi must have fallen victim to one of the traps around the arena. Maybe he went for a treasure box, and couldn't escape whatever horrible ambush lay in wait. Or maybe he just had to go to the bathroom.

Finishing off his Red Bull and stifling a belch, he gathers himself up. The second floor of the fort is incredibly defensible, but there's no game station up here. As much as he'd love to just curl up and let the other gamers fight themselves into elimination, there's too much at stake. With the backpack securely around his shoulders, and his paint gun tucked into his waistband, he climbs down the ladder.

## Seven

As he moves through room after room, Ethan begins to get a second-wind. Whether or not his renewed vigor is a legitimate result of the energy drink, or just a placebo effect, he's not sure, and he doesn't care either. The fatigue he'd been feeling is subsiding, at least a little bit, and all that matters is making it to the end of this tournament.

Another deactivated game station reminds him that with only five left in the entire arena he's going to have to pick up the pace. This game station is the most exposed he's seen yet. A desk sits in the corner with a black leather office chair behind it, facing out into the room. Sitting behind the desk, a gamer would have a constant view of the two entrances to the room while playing, but no cover aside from the desk. As a testament to that fact, the entire corner is peppered with splotches of blue and red paint. The walls, the desk, even the back of the monitor took a hit, though the dripping paint is mostly dried now.

The clock is running out, and so Ethan is sprinting through the maze now, pausing only briefly at the entrance to each room in order to check for obvious signs of game stations or other competitors. This makes him far more vulnerable, but the sheer size of the arena leaves him no choice. Nearly fifteen hours have passed since the games started, and he still doesn't think he's seen half of the rooms in the giant labyrinth.

He's so preoccupied with imagining the size of the arena and how many people it must have taken to put it together, that he rounds a corner without slowing down and runs headlong into Blue Shell. The two of them crash to the ground in a tangle of limbs, and surprised shouts.

Ethan lands on his injured shoulder, sending a nauseating shock of pain shooting through his torso. He rolls over, unscrambling himself from the young blonde gamer who is also attempting to catch her breath. As the dazed bewilderment of the sudden impact wears off, they both really see each other for the first time, and all physical ailments are instantly forgotten.

They scramble to sit upright, Ethan reaching for the paintball pistol in his waistband but grasping at air. He glances around frantically, spotting the gun lying on the ground six feet away. It must have fallen free during the collision. Out of the corner of his eye he can tell that Blue Shell has spotted it as well.

They both lunge for the firearm, hitting the ground swatting, grappling and clawing at each other in an attempt to reach it first. Ethan blocks an elbow thrown by the fierce woman, taking the opportunity to grab onto her forearm and pin it to the ground. She kicks at him, snarling like a feral beast, but he draws his legs up in time and his shins take the brunt of the attack.

Ethan turns slightly, one foot getting traction on the concrete, and scrambles forward reaching for the gun with his left hand. Blue Shell seizes a handful of his jersey and stops him with the gun just inches out of reach. He throws an elbow of his own, attempting to dislodge her grasp, but connects squarely with her left breast instead. Ethan's head spins back, eyes wide with a plea for forgiveness, expecting a torrent of fury in retaliation. She pays his silent admission of guilt no mind, and uses his momentary hesitation to lunge for the handgun herself.

Snapped out of his apologetic pause, he too turns his attention back to the gun. Blue Shell grabs it first, but Ethan's hand locks on the barrel a split second afterward. Both attempting to wrest the pistol free, a frantic tug of war ensues. After a brief struggle on the floor, Blue Shell tries to stand, hoping the superior positioning will help her rip the handgun from Ethan's grasp. As she tries to get her legs underneath her, Ethan pulls with all his strength, catching her off balance. She stumbles forward again, knocking the wind from his chest as she lands on top of him.

The fall loosens her grip for just a split second, but it's enough for Ethan to twist the gun around in their mutual grip so that the barrel is nearly pointing directly at her left shoulder. She recovers quickly, recognizing his plan and fighting to keep clear of the gun's business end. She's skinny, and he's slightly stronger than she is, but she has gravity on her side.

Sweat begins to bead up on his forehead as he grits his teeth and pushes back, the pain in his shoulder fighting against him. He looks up at the woman, seeing her up close for the first time. Her deep green eyes are focused on the gun with an intensity so fierce he wouldn't be at all surprised if they suddenly started shooting lasers. Small cinnamon freckles dust her cheekbones. Her hair is tousled, no longer entirely contained in the neat ponytail as it was earlier. Wild strands of thick yellow hair fly free of the elastic, evidence of the long, trying day she's had.

She's attractive, save for the sheer murderous blood lust currently twisting her features into a mask of rage. The realization that he's being straddled by a young, attractive blonde suddenly dawns on him, and for a fleeting second he thinks of Lilah, likely watching this through one of the cameras somewhere. *Wait, this doesn't count as cheating, does it?!*

The momentary lapse in concentration is enough. Blue Shell, perhaps seeing it in his eyes, snatches the opportunity and pushes down with all of her weight. It's too late for Ethan to push back, but he recovers in time to roll with it. He releases his grip on the gun as she pushes forward, throwing her off balance. At the same time he kicks up with his legs, tossing her over his head.

As she lands sprawling on the ground behind him, he leaps up and runs for the nearest exit. He hears her swear aloud as she tries to get to her feet. She'll be right behind him, he knows, so as he runs he pulls the backpack off his shoulder and praying that it didn't rupture in the tussle, fishes around for the crushed velvet bag inside.

Pulling out the small, soft bundle, he tosses the backpack behind a bunker as he runs by, hoping she doesn't see it. If this works he can always go back for it. If it doesn't, well, the backpack won't matter anymore.

He runs as fast as he's ever run, trying to put as much distance between him and her as possible. He can hear her footsteps mingled with his own, so she's a room back but not much further. Currently in last place, there's no way she can win the tournament based on score. Her only chance at this point is to be the last one standing, and she knows it. She won't give up the opportunity to eliminate an opponent. Ethan is counting on it.

He darts into another room, making sure his footsteps are loud enough that she'll be able to follow. However just after clearing the doorway he spins around, almost losing his footing as he changes directions. He flattens up against the wall and holds his breath as he unwraps the grenade.

His heart is pounding in his chest, his lungs screaming for air when she finally runs into the room after him. As he hoped, she's focused on the chase, not even considering that she should check her flanks for an ambush. As far as she knows, he's unarmed. He may as well be. He only gets one shot at this.

As she nears the center of the room, barreling towards the only other way out of the room, his lungs can't take it anymore. He exhales loudly as he pulls the pin on the grenade. The sound catches her attention and she whirls around just in time to see him lob the grenade in her direction. She's paying no attention to the strange green object hurtling towards her feet though. She brings the gun around, squeezing off shots before it's even leveled in his direction.

Ethan drops to the floor, hard, eating concrete for the third time today. At least this time is wholly intentional, and he can break his fall a bit. It's still a rough landing though, another few bruises to add to the running tally. The cracks of exploding paintballs hitting the wall above him ring in his ears, and he can feel the droplets and broken pellet pieces raining down on him. The grenade hasn't detonated. It didn't work. He tenses, squeezing his eyes shut, preparing for the sharp sting of the paintball that will mark the end of the tournament. Then he hears the loud pop from the center of the room, followed by the sound of a gentle rain.

He dares to open one eye slightly and peek over to where Blue Shell was standing, still expecting to be met with the sharp smack of a paintball. But she isn't firing anymore. Instead she stands in stunned silence, looking down at her legs which are covered up to the knees with glistening purple paint. The empty grenade tube rocks back and forth just in front of her, ending its pressurized, paint-dispensing spin. Ethan blinks a few times to make sure he isn't dreaming. It worked! He can't believe it!

Neither can Blue Shell, who continues to stand there in disbelief even as Lucas announces her elimination to the entire arena. She says nothing as the volunteers scale a nearby wall with a ladder, calling out for her to come with them. She bends over, gently dropping Ethan's paintball gun to the concrete floor with a soft clatter. She looks at Ethan for a moment, but says nothing. She turns and follows the volunteers.

Ethan climbs to his feet, brushing himself off. He wants to call out to her, to say... what? Congratulations on a good fight? Better luck next time? He can't think of anything to say that won't sound like gloating, so instead he says nothing. He just raises his hand in a silent farewell as she ascends the ladder but she doesn't turn back. And just like that she's disappeared over the wall, her time in the Game Games Bowl having come to an end.

Ethan walks over to retrieve his gun. The kill put him in second place, but it won't last long. The next game begins in fifteen minutes, and the chances of finding an active game station in time are slim. With a sigh, he resigns himself to missing another game round. He walks back to retrieve his backpack, which he finds right where he tossed it. He's tired of running, and he welcomes the opportunity to take it easy for a little while.

## Eight

No sooner is he settling into the idea of a nice relaxing stroll, than he wanders into a room with the cruelest game station he's seen yet. In the center of the room sits a giant dunk tank, like you'd see at a carnival fair. Instead of water, however, the tank is filled with neon green paint. A sign on the side labels it as "Acid". *Of course it is*, Ethan thinks sarcastically. A ladder mounted on the side of the tank provides the only access inside, where a wooden bench hovers over the green liquid. And inside, a monitor with a bright blue screen.

High above is a small metallic targeting circle sticking out of a long metal arm shooting up the side of the tank. A well-aimed softball (or in this case, paintball) would trigger the mechanism, dropping the bench into the vat of green slime below. Remarkably, the lack of a mess suggests that it hasn't happened yet. Whoever occupied this game station earlier left of their own volition. *And never came back.*

Something is written on the game station's screen, but Ethan can't make it out from where he's standing. The thick, clear plastic walls of the dunk tank distort everything on the other side. The clock above tells him that the current game round is already underway, but perhaps you're allowed to join a game in progress. He's not convinced it's even worth it.

If this was the open game station he and Blue Shell were hunting for, and it's still active, then her elimination shut down a different station, displaced someone else, and they'll now be on the move. And none too happy, either. Ethan can't imagine any way to escape elimination if he were to get caught in that dunk tank. Even if his opponent was a terrible shot, he'd still be a sitting duck in that tank.

On the other hand, there are only three game rounds left, including this one. Can he really afford to give up the opportunity to put more points on the board?

He climbs the ladder, praying that he won't end up regretting it. Inside the dunk tank, the smell of paint is nearly overwhelming, and he chokes back his gag reflex as he settles down onto the bench. The chemical odor makes his eyes water and he can almost hear Lilah chiding him over the inevitable loss of brain cells. The seat bounces a little bit as he shifts into position, and he grabs onto the edge of the tank in case the mechanism fails and the bench gives way. But it holds.

"Join Game in Progress?" The computer monitor is asking him. He reaches for the keyboard, only then realizing that the shelf in front of the screen is empty. He follows the cord down to where it disappears into the green paint. Whoever was here earlier, either accidentally or intentionally, knocked the peripherals down into the "acid". Fortunately the wire for the Xbox controller wasn't as long as the others, and it dangles a few inches away from the paint. *Fantastic. I hope this is an Xbox game.*

He grabs the controller and hits start. After a brief loading screen, Ethan is relieved to see a game he knows this time. Puzzle Quest 2. The game randomly generates low level heroes for him and his opponent, and the match begins. Ethan's solace of recognition is short-lived, as the gems don't fall his way, and he loses the match in just under ten minutes.

His second match ends in defeat as well, but he manages to turn it around against his final

opponent, bringing in at least one win. The game round won't add many points to his score, but anything is still better than zero, he tells himself. When the round is over, he can't climb out of his deathtrap of a game station fast enough.

Back on the ground outside the dunk tank, he's considering where to spend the next couple of hours while he waits for the next game, when Lucas' customary announcement bellows through the speakers.

“Fifth game round is complete! Only two more to go! Good luck!” Ethan notes that Lucas sounds entirely more pleased with himself than usual, and he learns why a minute later. With resounding, rhythmic clangs, the bright lights over the arena begin to shut off, one row at a time. In seconds the entire warehouse is bathed in complete darkness.

“Son of a *bitch*.” Ethan says aloud to no one in particular. He remembers the flashlight now attached to the top of his gun, and gives silent thanks for his decision to go after that treasure box. He's fumbling in the dark to find the switch when another clang rings out overhead, and the entire room is bathed in a rich, red light. He blinks, eyes struggling to adjust for the second time in as many minutes, and looks around. The dunk tank now looks even more sinister, the green paint now appearing as a slightly murky brown under the intense red light.

Ethan looks up again, wondering why they would only turn a single light back on, but notices another in the distance. And another not too far from that one. Four in total. He shudders involuntarily as the realization dawns on him; the lights are marking the locations of the remaining active game stations. Once again he has to stop and congratulate Lucas for his sheer evil genius. Now not only do the competitors know where to go to find each other, but in between them is a sea of shadow where any number of traps and ambushes could be lying in wait.

Under the red glow, Ethan finds the switch for his gun's light, and memorizes its location by touch. Satisfied that he'll be able to locate it in the dark, he leaves the dunk tank room, looking to put some distance between himself and the bright red beacon that at this very moment may be attracting other hunters.

Once in the next room, he pauses, attempting to give his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness. He fights the urge to switch on his flashlight, knowing it would make things easier, but also immediately give away his position. He keeps one hand on the wall, moving slowly, feeling for obstacles with his feet.

He finds a U-shaped bunker against the wall, though he can't tell its relation to other exits or obstacles in the room. Sitting down behind it, he opens his backpack and gropes around inside. His brief rental of the Red Bull from earlier has expired, and he's not about to hunt down another port-a-potty. He finds the empty water bottle inside the backpack and takes the opportunity to relieve himself. He's nearly finished when it occurs to him that Lucas probably set up night-vision cameras to continue tracking the Gamers during this blackout. *Too late now*. He raises his head and grins for any cameras that may be watching. He caps the bottle and sets it against the wall.

Next he pulls out and eats his remaining granola bars, opening the wrappers with as little crinkling as he can manage. The tournament is winding down, and he's tired of carrying the backpack around. He's enjoying his little feast in the dark when the wrappers give him an idea. He gathers them up and crawls out from behind his bunker, back towards the doorway to the dunk tank room. In what he

thinks is the middle of the room, he lays out the granola bar wrappers in a straight line. He gropes his way back to his barricade.

There isn't much to do in the dark but sit and stare up at the scoreboard overhead. He's hung on to second place behind Invincibility Star, but Super Leaf isn't far behind. Ethan catches himself beginning to nod off, so he stands up. It's not like anyone can see him anyway. He paces back and forth a bit, watching the clock tick down minute by minute.

They're halfway to the next game round when somebody decides they're sick of waiting, and makes their move. The first pop of compressed CO2 echoes through the darkness, and even with the echoes, Ethan is easily able to identify which direction it came from. Off to his left, over the wall that his bunker rests against, he can just make out the top of the really tall game station that he saw when he first woke up in the arena; the fort on stilts with the ladder beneath it. He can't see more than the roof from here, awash in a crimson glow, but he can hear the battle taking place to control it.

The exchange is erratic, and sometimes three or four minutes pass between shots. Ethan is listening so intently to the distant battle, he nearly jumps out of his skin at the crunch of thin plastic wrapper so close. Someone with a nasally voice whispers a curse under their breath, and his heart leaps into his throat. Someone creeping towards the dunk tank game station has walked into his makeshift alarm system just a few feet away!

Ethan raises his gun towards the direction of the noise, towards where he thinks he put the empty wrappers. He concentrates, listening for another noise, anything to help him pinpoint the location of the intruder. Apparently they're not going to be that accommodating. A couple of minutes pass, silent save for the occasional crack of paintballs in the distance.

He reaches for the light on the top of his paintball gun, brushing his fingers along the cold aluminum, exploring with his fingers until he finds the switch. He's suddenly blinded by a bright light, but not from his gun. He squeezes off a round as he stumbles back, startled by the sudden illumination. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the light veer off sharply as well, the person holding it equally alarmed by Ethan's wild shot in his direction.

Ethan hits the floor, but at once scrambles back to his feet, gun at the ready. The other light has clicked off, again shrouding the two gamers in absolute darkness. *Shit. I guess I'm not the only one who went after one of those treasure boxes.* He cautiously takes a few steps to his right, feeling around for any obstacles. He's lost track of his opponent, but at least the same holds true for the other guy as well.

He's alerted by the scuffle of sneakers on concrete ahead and to the right. He snaps his light on, squinting at the sudden brightness, just in time to see someone in a black and white jumpsuit scrambling towards a bunker. Ethan shoots in that direction, and quickly turns his light back off. He ducks down and as quietly as possible, moves away from where the other gamer was, feeling around so as not to run into anything. He finds a bunker of his own and climbs down behind it.

Lucas' voice breaks the silence. "Metroid has been eliminated!"

Ethan breathes a sigh of relief. He can't believe the lucky shot in the dark made contact. Propping himself up against the wall of the bunker, he calls out to the stranger. "Hey good try, man. You almost had m--" Lucas interrupts him, apparently not finished yet.



“Five points awarded to Red Shell.”

*Wait a minute, Red Shell?* That's when Ethan realizes the distant back and forth duel of paintball shots has quieted. The elimination happened by the other game station. That means...

The flashlight clicks on, followed instantly by a few pops as the paintballs smash into the barrier that Ethan is hiding behind, his position given away by his premature good sportsmanship. *Godsdammit!* He crouches down further. No more paintballs are loosed in his direction, but the light stays on. The other Gamer has Ethan trapped, and he knows it.

Ethan tries to think, tries to imagine a way out of this. If he had his backpack, he might be able to trick his guy into wasting some paintballs, the way he did with Blue Shell, but he left it behind the other bunker. He could make a run for it, but the nearest cover is at least six feet away. He'd be gunned down before he even got close. Maybe if he switched on his own light, he could use it to temporarily blind the Gamer while he made his escape...

He's sifting through his various options, none of them all that promising, when he notices the light on the wall is swaying back and forth every so slightly, and the shadow cast by his bunker is growing smaller. The Gamer is walking towards him.

Ethan spins around, lying flat on his back, gun raised, Reservoir Dogs-style. Maybe he'll be able to get a shot off before the gamer sees him. The light is getting closer, and his palms are beginning to sweat. The Gamer is almost to the bunker. Almost... almost...

He flinches at the familiar pop of CO<sub>2</sub>, but his eyes snap open again when it's accompanied by a loud, nasally yelp, and not his own scream. The light goes erratic for a second, and then lowers to the floor.

“Awwww man.” The frustrated nerdy voice complains.

Ethan lies as still as a rock, still uncertain exactly what's happening.

Lucas clears it up for him. “Super Leaf has been eliminated! Five points awarded to Invincibility Star!”

“I didn't see you there. Good shot.” The nerdy voice offers someone in congratulation.

“Thanks. Good game, man.” A girl's voice replies.

*That voice... no, it can't be.* Ethan rolls onto his side, silently sliding to one edge of the wooden bunker. He peeks out from around his hiding spot, and blinks in disbelief, unable to believe his eyes.

There in the center of the room are two gamers, eerily lit from below by a gun flashlight pointed at the ground. The owner of the flashlight, and the whiny voice, is a short, extremely skinny lad with poor posture. His large, hooked nose and prominent Adam's apple round out the picture of awkwardness. Affixed to the shoulder of his standard issue jumpsuit is the brown Mario Super Leaf.

Standing across from him, shaking his hand, is a young woman with dark, almond-shaped eyes rimmed with long, thick eyelashes. Though normally pale, her skin looks even whiter in the bright

glow of the flashlight. Her scruffy shoulder-length black hair is as fashionably tousled as ever, with bright pink bangs that sweep across her forehead. A happy yellow Invincibility Star emblazons the patch on her shoulder.

*Abby!* The obnoxious girl that hangs out at GameHaven from time to time; he'd recognize her anywhere. Irritation overrides fatigue as he realizes that she's Invincibility Star, the gamer currently holding first place in the tournament, and poised to take the Winter-een-mas crown! And she's even further ahead now with her latest kill!

He grinds his teeth, shooting daggers in her direction with his eyes. If she wins, she'll lord it over him all year. She'll be even more unbearable than she already is. Volunteers with flashlights of their own are climbing over the nearby wall, helping the scrawny, awkward Super Leaf amble up the ladder. Abby waves at him, her back turned to Ethan.

All of a sudden Ethan realizes that she doesn't know he's there! Super Leaf didn't mention him, either intentionally or because he was completely distracted by his own elimination. Abby hasn't even looked in the direction of the bunker where Ethan is hiding.

Fumbling with the gun, Ethan berates himself for getting so caught up with other emotions and not seizing the opportunity earlier. By the time he's got the pistol pointed around the edge of the bunker, it's too late. Super Leaf and the volunteers have disappeared over the wall, taking their flashlights with them. The room is engulfed in shadow again. If Abby has a light of her own, she isn't using it.

He reaches for the light on his own gun, but stops himself at the last second; he took too long. She could be anywhere in the room now, and turning on the light will only give away his position again. As much as it irritates him, the smart play here is to let her go, and try to get the drop on her later.

Lying there, he chuckles silently to himself as he thinks back to earlier in the tournament. Abby was the one who stole the alcove from him. That means she's also the one who saved him from Green Mushroom. And she saved him from Super Leaf just now. *No*, he reminds himself. *She did that for herself. She didn't even know I was here. Right?*

The ground is cold, but it helps to soothe his aching muscles, so he lies there for a bit. Before long though it's threatening to put him to sleep, so he makes himself stand up. It seems darker than it did before, and he notices that a red light no longer illuminates the dunk tank game station nearby. *It's for the best*, he decides. *There's no way I'd want to sit in that thing again.*

Only three icons remain lit on the scoreboard. Abby holds first place, followed by Ethan and finally Red Shell bringing up the rear. The countdown taunts him with its unrelenting march towards zero, each minute that passes a grim reminder that he is once again without a game station. His shoulders slump as he lets out a long, low sigh. He's exhausted, he's hungry, he's achy. He has to hand it to Lucas; this tournament has truly tested his will and determination, pushed him to his physical and mental limits. Whoever walks away with the crown tonight will deserve it. For the first time since announcing the Game Games Bowl, he truly believes that. His desire to win remains unshaken, but the last shreds of selfishness and possessiveness over the crown have worn away over the past dozen hours. He takes a deep breath, straightening his shoulders.

Time to finish this.

## Nine

He works his way towards one of the remaining two game stations, but it takes forever. Unable to see and unwilling to turn on his flashlight, he heads in the general direction of the red beacon by following the walls, but still manages to get disoriented a couple of times and ends up heading the wrong way. He manages to accumulate a few new scrapes and bruises as well, blindly discovering low barriers and crates with his shins.

The clock reaches zero and resets to three hours, marking the start of the new round. Ethan has gotten close to one of the illuminated game stations, but has to slow down even further to avoid alerting any nearby competitors. It's clear that he won't reach it in time to claim it for himself, but maybe he can catch one of his opponents off guard.

A wrong turn forces him to backtrack and try another route, so twenty minutes have passed before he finally sees a red, door-shaped glow in the darkness ahead. He's hoping the game round is still in progress as he creeps towards the entrance. He sticks to the wall, carefully placing one foot in front of the other so as not to make any noise. Finally, readying his pistol, he peeks around the doorway.

The center of the room is dominated by a large rectangular plexiglass box. A door on the right side appears to be the only way inside it. In the center of the cube is a thin wooden post sticking out of the floor by about a foot. Nearby is another pole that reaches all the way to the ceiling of the cube. Attached to it is a shelf that holds the monitor and keyboard. The only way to get to it would be balancing on the short wooden post and reaching upwards, a tough and strenuous position to play from. Nearly impossible for a shorter gamer. The monitor emits the calming blue light that indicates the station is active, yet it's unoccupied.

Ethan ducks back into his room confused. Did his two competitors converge on the other game station, leaving this one wide open? Did they get lost in the darkness altogether? Or are they just lying in wait, waiting for some poor fool to go for the easy grab? Ethan's determined not to be that fool. He finds a stack of tires opposite the door, which he shuffles around to make a little hiding spot. And there he waits.

Forty-five minutes into the new countdown, and nobody has made a play for the open game station. He understands why when Lucas chimes in overhead.

“Game round six ends in a draw! No competitors. Only one game left! Who will be the new King or Queen of Winter-een-mas?!”

*Abby will be, if everyone stays holed up in their hiding spots,* Ethan answers silently. It's now or never. If he does nothing, he loses. He's certain that if there are still three people in the arena when the next game starts, the only people going for a game station will be second and third place. Abby will stay hidden and attempt to ambush one of them, securing her victory. The only chance he has is eliminating one of them before that happens. Crouched behind his wall of tires, he tries to think.

Wandering back off into the darkness is out of the question. The chances of getting completely

lost are too high, and he can't afford to waste any time. He needs to set up a trap, and it needs to be here, in the room adjacent to the game station. He decides to risk turning on his flashlight for a brief second, to get the layout of the room. Sweeping it across the room, he sees another bunker on the opposite side of the room. He quickly turns the light off and ducks back behind the tires, nervously waiting to see if he was discovered.

The anxiety lights a spark, causing an explosion of ideas to rip through his mind, a chain-reaction of subsequent thoughts that expand, build on each other and then coalesce into a cheap, desperate plan.

When he's sure no one is going to start shooting at him, he slips off his shoes and arranges them so the toes of his sneakers poke out from behind the tire wall. He tugs at the left sleeve of his jersey furiously, until the stitches begin to tear at the shoulder seam. Yanking the sleeve loose, he tosses it to the side and begins working the flashlight free of the metal rail on top of his pistol. Tying one end of the sleeve around the little light, he tucks the other end in between two of the tires at the top of the stack.

He stands, looking around once more, and then switches on the flashlight. He pulls it forward and then lets it go, turning to run to the other bunker as the flashlight starts swinging back and forth on the pendulum. Safely behind the bunker on the other side of the room, he kicks the wooden surface in front of him as hard as he can. He doesn't have to entirely fake the scream of pain that follows the loud smack of bone on wood. He lets loose another couple of agonized whimpers for good measure, and ducks down to wait.

It doesn't take long; as he suspected, both of the other Gamers were hovering around the vicinity of the two active game stations. Abby arrives first. To her credit she moves as deftly as a cat as she works her way through the shadows, and he doesn't see her until she's almost in front of him. But by the time she's gotten there, the flashlight at the end of the torn fabric is only swaying gently back and forth. Combined with the "feet" sticking out from behind the tires, it looks as if someone is writhing back and forth in pain.

Abby approaches cautiously, her gun intently concentrated on the tire stack. She passes the bunker Ethan is hiding behind, circling around to the tire fort. Seeing her rush to the aid of a wounded opponent, Ethan feels a brief pang of guilt, for luring her in with such a cheap plot. He shakes his head. *No. She's been drawn in by the prospect of injured, easy prey. Nothing more.* But she won't be fooled for long. Ethan stalks forward, his socks once again making absolutely no sound as he crosses the concrete floor.

The girl in front of him has paused now, eyeing the bait ahead of her. She's figured it out. Ethan takes the last step forward before she can run, gently pushing the barrel of his pistol into the small of her back. She jumps slightly, startled by the sudden contact from behind, but doesn't turn. Ethan leans in behind her. Her hair smells like strawberries. She turns her head.

"Gotcha." He whispers into her ear.

Ethan's finger is brushing the trigger, when suddenly the soft reddish glow spilling out of the game station room to the left is interrupted as a large, imposing figure passes in front of it. Red Shell. He has broad shoulders and thick arms. Dark shadows mask the details of his face, but his hair is trimmed close to his rectangular head. Lit half by the crimson luminescence of the room behind him

and half by the white glow of the flashlight by the tires, he looks like some freakishly hulking jester. And he's charging into the room waving two pistols.

Time slows down. Red Shell's head turns as he enters the room, instantly finding Ethan and Abby standing there; the last two of his competitors, conveniently waiting to be eliminated. His two handguns begin to swing around in their direction. *Where did he get two paintball guns? That's so fucking cool*, Ethan catches himself thinking, immediately before *Oh shit, he's going to shoot us!*

Ethan tenses. All he has to do is drop back, duck down behind the safety of the bunker. Abby hasn't seen the huge gamer yet, she'll never get out of the way of his shots in time. Just a couple of quick steps and Ethan would be rid of her, she'd be out of the tournament. Then he could worry about how to deal with Red Shell on his own. He slides his left foot back.

That's as far as he goes. Instead, before even thinking about it, he wraps his left arm around Abby's waist and spins her out of the way, raising the pistol that was just pressed to her back a moment before. Red Shell roars, bringing his guns to bear. Ethan closes his eyes, and pulls the trigger. Once, twice. The gun is empty after that, but he continues pulling the trigger anyway.

Red Shell's bestial roar turns into a howl. "Fuck!!" He screams. Ethan opens his eyes in time to see the large brute stagger to a halt, and throw his guns to the ground in frustration. He reaches up to rub his neck, and his hand comes away glistening in the dim light. He sniffs it. Just paint.

"Red Shell is eliminated! Five points to Energy Tank!" Lucas screams above, unable to contain his excitement.

Ethan realizes he's still pulling the trigger on his empty gun, and stops, lowering his weapon. Red Shell says nothing to him, but storms off the way he came, muttering an impressive stream of profanity. Ethan watches him go.

When he finally remembers Abby, and turns back to his left, he finds himself staring down the barrel of the pistol pointed right between his eyes.

"Gotcha." She says, mocking him.

Ethan can't help but smile. He lets the empty gun fall out of his hand, and it clatters to the ground at his feet. She has him dead-to-rights. It's over.

Abby lowers the gun to his chest. He's grateful for that, at least; it shouldn't hurt as much. Her eyes dart away, unable or unwilling to meet his. She's nibbling on her lower lip.

"Here. I'll close my eyes." Ethan does as he promises. Moments pass, and still she doesn't fire. When he opens his eyes again, she's finally looking at him with those brown eyes the color of coffee. But the gun is spun around, with the handle outwards. He looks at it.

"I don't understand." He admits.

"I... can't do it. You *are* Winter-eeen-mas. The crown is yours. Here." She insists, pushing the gun forward.

He glances back down at the pistol, hesitating a second before finally reaching out to take it from her. He grins as he looks down at the gun in his hand. "Thank you, Abby." He says with a nod. He takes a deep breath and lets it out.

In one fluid motion he sticks the barrel to his chest and pulls the trigger. He was wrong about it not hurting as much. It feels like being punched by a hot oven poker. The splatter of yellow paint tickles as it decorates the bottom of his chin and neck. He pulls the gun away and tosses it aside, as broken bits of paintball roll off the brightly colored kill-shot on his jersey. Despite the pain, he can't help but laugh at the look of sheer surprise on Abby's face.

Lucas apparently can't believe it either. "What?!" He yells out in disbelief over the loudspeaker. "Energy Tank eliminated! Invincibility Star is the new Queen of Winter-een-mas!" The lights begin to come up slowly, lifting the shroud of darkness from the arena.

Abby is shaking her head. "Why?!" She gasps.

Ethan pauses. He was just asking himself that very same question. "Because you earned it, even if you couldn't pull the trigger." He smiles. "Hell, maybe *because* you couldn't pull the trigger. You were the better gamer and the better person out here today."

He hears the clatter of volunteers setting up their ladders behind him, so he turns his back to her and begins to walk away, leaving her standing there. Part of him wants to run out of the arena as fast as he can and keep running, to get far far away before he starts to second-guess himself. But he doesn't. It was the right decision. He pauses, looking back over his shoulder with a smirk. "Take care of my crown. I'll be coming for it next year." The volunteers help him up the ladder.

They cross two more rooms going up and over this way, to the outer wall of the arena. A group of volunteers run past, going to escort Abby out as well. A group of people are waiting as he descends the last ladder, finally free of the tournament zone. Many of them wear volunteer shirts, others he guesses to be spectators. They cheer, clap him on the back, reach out to shake his hand, but he just pushes his way through the small crowd. He spotted her towards the back as he climbed over the final wall, the very sight of her putting a huge grin on his face.

Lilah's smiling when he finally reaches her. He runs the last few feet, throwing his arms around her and lifting her up into the air. His injured shoulder screams out in protest, but he ignores it. She's laughing, he's laughing, nothing else matters. He's not sure he's ever been quite so happy to see her.

He sets her down, nearly collapsing into her arms with exhaustion. She hugs him close, and he just wants to sleep right there for the next week. He smiles as she leans in close, as her lips brush the side of his forehead with a gentle kiss.

"I'm proud of you." She whispers.

"I lost the crown."

"You gave up the crown. There's a difference. But... I thought you hated that girl?"

He lets out a long sigh. "Oh she's *incredibly* obnoxious. But... she was the right person for the crown this year."

As if on cue, a loud cheer erupts from the crowd behind them. Ethan turns to see Abby clearing the top of the wall, the masses below waiting to congratulate and crown their new Queen. He looks back at his wife and smiles. "Take me home."