

PuppetGAME Part 1

By Liam Vickers

An explosion rocked the room softly, sending tainted speckles of dust down from the rafters. The particles shimmered in the golden beams of light struggling through the wooden blinds. On a bed in the far corner, a figure shifted uncomfortably, pale hands grasping at the covers. The room shuttered again, a thunderous roar spreading through the ground.

Dull green eyes snapped into view as the figure tumbled from the bed, hands flailing to catch the floor and roll them hastily to their feet.

They checked their wrist, skin paling further.

They scrambled across the carpet with blurred movements, wood of the door snapping against the wall with flying splinters as they tore outside into the hallway.

The harsh beeping started up moments later, ear piercing shriek emanating from smoke alarm-like fixtures overhead.

"John?!" A petrified form was already standing at the other end of the hallway, massive shirt draping down to her knees. Her ghastly hands were clenched tight against the doorframe, pajamas sliced with the polluted morning light.

"It's alright," John didn't slow down, skidding to a stop and inputting a command into a small wall mounted panel, "Lilly, get the key . . ."

The foundation of the house shook with another tremor, the alarms dying down as everything cut out with a jagged electronic beep. The house went dark.

Lilly's contacts shimmered with a metallic whirl as red tinted emergency diodes activated, spilling light into her view.

The sunlight behind her faded rapidly into a sickly orange before being snuffed out.

It wasn't sunlight at all.

Her flashlight gaze glanced off the dead digital clock in the kitchen, time frozen in place. 2:30 in the morning.

Her hands were slippery with burning sweat, doors and cabinets flying open as her search grew more frantic.

Her wrist watch blared a dead black encircled with red text, screech silencing as she slapped at it haphazardly.

She didn't want to look, but her eyes caught the number regardless . . . Something she wouldn't have believed even if she had had all the time in the world to double check it.

200 feet.

The windows split with the next vibration and flash of light, membranes of glass crawling with necrosis as the horizon light again flickered, clouds of warped dust vaulting past.

Dishes within the cupboards were lobbed against the far wall of their containers, rattling with deafening clatter. Lilly flinched backwards, hands flying up to shield her face from several whipping shards of shattered glassware.

At the other end of the house, John slapped the control panel back closed in a cold sweat, again checking his wrist.

"Immediate Vicinity – Splice Light Visible," he input a command to stop the beeping, rushing into the kitchen.

"I can't find it!" Lilly's voice was strangled with mute terror, her shaking legs barely able to support her.

"Where did she leave it?!" He tried to remain calm, immediately going for the cabinets she hadn't already checked, before yelling upwards, "SAMS, route us to the emergency line! Danna Matthews now!"

"Dial Danna Matthews now?" SAMS' voice glitched through interference, an off kilter female tone, "Yes to confirm."

"Yes!" The drawer clattered to John's feet as he tore it out, "Emergency line!"

The voice hissed with static pops, John's eyes flicking nervously to the hatch door, archaic LED panel shimmering with a dull blue hue.

"I'm sorry," SAMS picked back up, "It appears your area is experiencing a large volume of emergency calls at the moment. Connection could not be completed. Yes to retry."

The outside light grew more intense, rumbles culminating into a sub bass drone.

"Lilly, try the input override," John snapped to tear her from her petrified trance, "I'll keep looking. Hurry!"

She quickly nodded her head, feet softly clapping against the ground as she ran to the metallic hatch.

Everything was dead silent now, not even the raining dust making the slightest sound as the percussions dropped below human hearing.

"SAMS, input override splice cellar." Lilly commanded with a weak voice. UI glitched through her contact lenses, AR interface mapping to the keypad and highlighting her options.

"*Splice Anomaly Inbound.*" Red text was permanently burned into the lower third of her gaze, "*Proceed Immediately to Safety.*"

"Request incomplete." SAMS's voice crackled after a second to buffer, "Your area is experiencing a disaster. Input override unavailable at this time. Manual entry only."

Decay rotted the air outside, debris tearing at the windows and glass. John's fists clenched, before one more wave of distortions split through the house, a shimmering key making a harsh clatter as it tumbled across the reflective floor.

"Got it!" He cried, kicking his foot sideways to slam the key across the tiles.

Lilly's UI tacked the object poorly through her vision, eye lights flickering as she scrambled down to catch it.

The hatch shuttered with automated locks and she stabbed the key into its socket and twisted.

John was quick to clamber across the kitchen in the darkness, faint light from his own contacts doing little against the oppressive gloom closing in. The dancing lights on the horizon seared down to a violent black pinpoint, scenery being vaulted into the murky sky.

The hatch slammed behind the duo.

From inside the room, the door howled with agony, metal creaking and groaning with massive pressure as the final explosion was felt rather than heard. The air skewed sideways, John and Lilly's stomachs dropping as if displaced from their bodies. They staggered down the ladder.

John winced as his feet touched solid ground, blinking heavily to turn off his lights in the fluorescent room. Tiny motors within his lenses worked to reorient his visual perception to the tilted world. He glanced to Lilly beside him.

She breathed heavily, hands on her knees as she bent over, chest rising and falling as if unable to catch up to her heart rate. The key was clutched so tight in her hands her knuckles were bleached corpse white.

"I thought she might have taken it with her accidentally . . ." John laughed as he pointed to the tiny key and caught his own breath, "Like, she accidentally put it on her key ring or something, haha . . . ha."

"Way too close for comfort," Lilly shook her head, suppressing a relieved chuckle as well, "We . . . we should update Optical . . . Let people know we're safe."

"Are we, though?" John grinned, gazing around the room with amused contempt. Small metallic shelves were severely understocked with rations, an open bag of chips just about the only thing left. The room was in surprising disarray for all its clean white walls and reflective chrome flooring.

"I'm updating it for you," Lilly nervously laughed, cautiously sinking backwards onto a dull grey sofa in the middle of the space "Some people actually worry about you, you know."

Her irises danced with the AR text display as she scrolled with her vision, staring up at the ceiling.

"If this Splice knocks out our internet again," John just smirked to himself, slowly walking over to a small refrigerator in the corner, "I don't know, sis, we might not survive. Don't post too soon."

"Done," she retorted to the ceiling, "Looks like you'll just have to deal."

She rolled on to her stomach to smile at John, skinny limbs jutting out like toothpicks from her baggy sleepwear.

John recoiled, hands flying into a karate stance as he opened the fridge door.

"You drank everything!?" he was aghast, eyes darting like daggers to her now paling figure, "We have drinks in our regular fridge, you know!"

"Not Fuze!" her words seeped through a forced grin as her face reddened, "Eehehe . . . You never take me to the store! Was I supposed to wait for mom to get back?"

"Yes!" John chopped at her head with a comical motion, though the impact was real, "She's only gone for, like, another month! You can't just raid our Splice Shelter!"

"Gah!" She squeaked, squirming under his hand with fists flailing, "You do it all the time!"

"I also replace it later!" he chopped her again, far lighter, "At least . . ."

He frowned.

"I mean . . . sometimes." His eyes narrowed, gaze flicking to the sides.

"Maybe if we stocked it with actual water like normal people . . ." Lilly pouted, face down in the sofa cushions.

"2:32am, December 18th, 2034" The update message finally flashed to the side of John's gaze, focusing into view as he looked to it, *"A 5.3 Magnitude Splice Anomaly has Occurred in the Jeffco District. Lilly Matthews has confirmed her safety."*

He laughed, dismissing this and the subsequent messaging about his own safety being confirmed.

The inside hatch door light periodically rose and fell, bathing the room in unnatural red hues.

"5.3 Emergency in Effect," the glowing text red, "Manual Latch Disabled. Do Not Attempt to Open Door."

"So you're quarantined, right?" Sarah's face lit up, arms shoved deep inside her massive hoodie pocket as she walked backwards to face him, "Magnitude 5.3? Dude, I remember having to do those stupid bio kits when we got a 6-er."

"Right, now we have to wake up even earlier," John rubbed at the raw flesh of his wrist and looked to Lilly beside him, "waking up just to scrape away some skin from my arm, that's my idea of a good time."

The trio walked steadily down a shotty road, asphalt uprooted by the towering trees above them. The early morning sun streamed unsteadily through pine needles, birds chirping quietly amongst the brambles.

"But they lifted the emergency after just a few hours," Lilly chimed in, catching up and wrapping her arm around Johns, "we were still able to get some sleep in."

"Meaning she fell asleep before it was even over," John rolled his eyes and adjusted his backpack, "I had to reset SAMS and update our data myself . . . not to mention make sure our house wasn't obliterated."

"I saw the vector you posted on Optical," Sarah laughed as she looked at it again, contacts lightly shimmering as it projected slightly in front of her, inverted from John's view.

The grainy screen saw a plume of toxic black smoke rising over a nearly mile wide crater, charred earth painted with search lights from helicopters and SWAT cars.

"Missed you by less than a few yards, huh?" She continued grinning, "And the fallout? What's 5.3? . . . Mimic, right? Doppelgänger?"

"None," John shrugged, "Guess that's why the emergency was lifted so quick."

"Fallout was found dead at the scene," Lilly nodded, breathing harder to see her breath in the mist, "Makes the quarantine seem even sillier. Hopefully they'll lift it by tomorrow."

"I've always thought it was overkill," Sarah nodded in agreement, "those fallout things never survive more than a few minutes anyway. What have we got here? Three SWAT cars and two helicopters? You can't get in or out without passing a bio test? All for a super duper dead monster . . ."

She pulled up a new tab on her display, forgetting to un-project it.

"Splice Incident #30487; December 18th, 2034." The screen scrolled softly, "Magnitude: 5.3. Location: Jeffco District, Colorado. Death toll from Splice Fissure: 3 . . . Death toll from Fallout: 0."

Her eyes flicked down to move the scroll bar.

"Fallout State: Contained," the report continued, grizzly image showing a mangled creature with bulging decayed eyes, clawed hands, and jutting bones, "Mimic class - Found dead at scene. Authorities believe deceased subject to be the lone fallout."

"Yeah, that thing's not going anywhere," she laughed, eyes widening as she finally realized she was still projecting her view.

Her lenses swiveled, display shimmering from existence.

She pressed her finger to her lip, pondering. Her other hand remained in her hoodie.

"I suppose it's just for VERE . . ." She seemed to affirm to herself, "She survived, what, forty minutes after coming through the splice before suffocating? Er, well . . . IT, I guess. That's the longest ever, I think. That was 50 years ago or something crazy though . . . All I know is that my mom was a kid at the time."

"Killed over thirty people in that forty minutes," John shook his head, glancing in concern to Lilly, "I don't know. Could have been much worse if the splice occurred in a more populated area. I guess being overly prepared is better than letting something like that happen again . . . even if nothing has survived since."

"I don't like how they name them," Lilly just frowned into John's shoulder, squeezing closer, "I get that it's just like naming any other natural disaster, like a hurricane or whatever . . . but it just makes it creepier . . . at least we understand why hurricanes happen."

"Awww, it's all good," Sarah smirked, grinning a toothy smile, "Your sister is so cute, John, why doesn't she walk with us more often?"

"Her grade cancelled today due to the Splice," John responded, watching Lilly frown at Sarah's condescension, "Guess it's only us seniors that have tests important enough to warrant our potential deaths."

"So she's just tagging along with you for the fun of it?" Sarah's icy blue eyes just sparkled further, grin widening into a chasm, "You two are so precious I just want to kill myself. You almost make me wish I gave a shit about any of my older brothers."

"She's just going to chill down in the digital Library server room until we get out," John sighed, "I know I wouldn't want to be alone at our house right now."

Lilly's grip tightened.

"I have work to do anyway," she muttered under her breath, "It's a good place to study."

"Sure," Sarah giggled, finally turning around to walk the correct direction, "I feel ya. Wish we got the day off."

The drab interior of the school gleamed with astounding numbness. People busted back and forth, though none of them with particular haste. John leaned against the door to prop it open as Sarah and Lilly streamed through behind. Sarah's face fell the minute she stepped through the threshold and her UI display prompted her about a test in 10 minutes.

"Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit," she frowned, arms folding, "What?! It was just the paper!"

"As preparation for the test," John mumbled out as he nodded to Lilly and patted her head.

"See you after," Lilly nodded softly, glancing to the elevator down to the subbasement level.

The words, "Server Room" were poorly scratched in next to the bottom floor.

She slowly walked off, dragging her backpack behind her.

"So the paper isn't even for credit?!" Sarah paled, nearly denting a crater into the tiles by her feet with frustration, "This class should be happy I even show up!"

"Did you do the paper?" John cocked an eyebrow, following slightly behind her as heavy footsteps carried her through the school. Several passersby stole glances at her red face and quickly flinched away.

"That part's not important," her scowl deepened and she threw up her left hand, "Fuck the system, John. Authority can blow me! What does writing a paper teach me about Trig? I understand the material just fine."

"Then you'll do great," John suppressed a snicker, "Have you told authority about your feelings?"

"Oh it understands me just fine," She waved her hand, "One day it'll take me up on that offer."

"Riiiiight," John laughed, brushing past several people to keep up with Sarah's storming steps, "Have you ever thought abo-"

His words stop cold, irises suddenly glitching with UI static, limbs failing to respond.

Both he and Sarah froze up without warning. The crowd around them parted in confusion as they crashed to the ground like plastic toys. Their dull eyes were bleached a colorless grey for less than a second before snapping back to life, UI rebooting.

John's limbs flailed in a delayed response to stop his fall, his eyes wide with confusion. Sarah was much the same, struggling back to her feet with heavy blinks, as if trying to recover the second of lost memory.

"Did . . . you just trip me?" She half accused, half genuinely asked, quickly pulling her backpack back up and fixing her ruffled hoodie with one hand.

John shook his head and the two of them began hesitantly walking again, avoiding the stares that slowly dissipated into shrugs and giggles.

"Wait . . . I think I lost SAMS," John spoke uncertainly at first, before his eyes began frantically searching his vision, "what the hell?"

Sarah's own field of view was equally empty, small circle in the corner of her peripheries informing her that her UI was rebooting. No windows came up despite her repeated attempts.

"Yours too?" she frowned, "Mine's rebooting . . ."

"What the heck just happened?" John repeated, eyes lost without the display as the two of them entered the classroom.

"YO!" a voice boomed out to intercept John at the door, a hand smashing against his shoulder, "That thing nearly took out your house, dude!"

John stumbled with the impact, but was held in place by the catcher's mitt palm gripping him.

"Gah, Max!" His vision was temporarily blurred, lenses not there to orient him, "Chill, dude!"

"His backyard is gone!" Sarah was far quicker to adjust, smile exploding into view as Max's energy hyped her back up, "A few more feet and our little John might have had to relocate!"

Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she flailed at her pockets.

"Shit!" She cursed, darting towards the door, "tell the teacher to wait if I'm late!"

"I was actually freaking out for you, dude," Max finally let go of John with a playful shove, "Did you see the location SAMS initially gave for the Splice? It was like . . . your freaking address, bro! Glad it was a bit off with that one!"

"Me too," John winced out a smile, rotating his shoulder slowly, "I didn't know that . . ."

"Hahaha, yeah," Max just laughed with his trademark open mouthed grin, something that would have looked perfectly at home with a backwards baseball cap and tank top.

"Wait, wait," John quickly shook his head, turning back to Sarah only to remember that she had stepped out.

"Shit," he grumbled, turning back to Max, "SAMS is down for me . . . didn't they say we were going to need a calculator for this test? I should tell Ms. Kanade, right?"

"Down?" Max questioned, looking closer at John's eyes, "What do you mean? Like . . . frozen?"

John breathed out a large sigh, glancing up to the teacher's desk at the front of the room. Kids were already clustered around it turning in their papers.

"No, as in offline," John shook his head, "I don't know, this has never happened before. Not even when I updated to 11.03 last year."

"Oh shit . . . yeah," Max pulled back, as if not entirely sure if John was joking, "Really? Like you don't see anything? Did you break a lens?"

"I don't know, maybe," John pursed his lips, "I can tell that it's trying to reboot. Should I tell her or not?"

"Yeah, probably," he nodded, again leaning uncomfortably close to search John's eyes, "That's so weird . . . Don't get spooked dude, but didn't this happen to a whole bunch of people before? Like, in Shika or whatever?"

"When that Splice that set off the reactor in Japan?" John frowned, "I don't think that has anything to do with anything. That town lost power for almost a week, and everyone lost SAMS . . . yours is still working, right?"

"Right," he pondered, putting in all his effort to make it look as though he was thinking, rather than actually doing so, "Maybe you . . . have you sneezed really hard recently?"

John sighed.

"I'm going to tell her," he spoke, turning and walking steadily to the front.

As he finally reached her desk through the cluster of people, he heard snickering coming from Max. Sarah had returned, nudging him in the ribs.

At John's gaze, she straightened up and gave him a sarcastic thumbs up, much to his confusion.

He paused, debating for a quick second before immediately returning to them, throwing out his hands.

"What?" His eyebrows cocked, "What the heck are you doing?"

"No no no!" Sarah shook her head, laughing, "Wait, John, tell her! I was just joking with Max. I've actually used this exact excuse before to get out of taking a test."

She paused for a second, before laughing again and continuing, "It didn't work."

John's frown reached peak capacity. He went to reply before his vision suddenly glitched again, UI spilling into view. Both he and Sarah jolted in surprise, irises frazzling as their limbs again locked up.

This time, however, they were both able to steady themselves before they fell, and only Max's hands splayed out in concern.

Numbers and diagnostics blotted out John's gaze, painting his irises death red. Letters and Unicode characters jittered across the lower third of his view, flickering in and out of existence.

"Splice Anomaly Inbound." It twitched, *"Proceed Immediately to Safety."*

This text was immediately replaced with, *"High Temperature Warning"* and then simply several jumbled remnants of past webpages, words stitched together in an incoherent mess.

John shook his head, recovering just after Sarah and standing up straight beside her. He figured the Splice warning had merely been a product of the glitching text, but as his UI cut out once again with a harsh frazzle and the text glitched away, he realized how dead silent the room around him was.

Seemingly now the only one without UI, John stood alone as the class was paralyzed in confusion, eyes flashing red with warnings. All at once, their watches blared to life with red numbers.

He stood as stunned as the rest of them, glancing to his watch to see the screen dark, nothing out of the ordinary.

"Can't be . . ." John's words fell out quietly and numbly, "Is this a drill . . . or . . ."

"Another Splice?!" Max cried out, immediately being drowned as wailing sirens shrieked to life.

"Everyone leave your stuff in the room!" Ms. Kanade tried to yell over the electronic screams, the sheer amount of noise seeming to twist the room. Color quickly faded to a fetid grey as the world itself became ill. Shadows scurried along the walls as students filed out of the classroom, several stealing quick glances at the charts on the wall to make sure they were going the right way.

"Quickly!" The teacher again yelled, "Follow the crowd! You know where the shelter is, stay out of the doorway!"

A guttural percussion shook the room, ceiling lights swaying.

"John!" Sarah commanded, grabbing his wrist with one hand, the other remaining in her pocket, "Let's get a move on, dude!"

He snapped into motion and rushed to follow her and Max, clambering figures darting past them in a sea of limbs.

Suddenly, however, John's face broke out in a cold sweat, heart staggering into his throat.

His UI was offline . . . something that had never happened before. Sarah's had seriously malfunctioned as well. Were they somehow connected? If that was the case . . . and if Lilly was experiencing the same thing . . . if she didn't have access to SAMS . . .

The hallway pitched with a vicious explosion, bodies being thrown down like ragdolls. John, Sarah, and Max all saw the world tumble through their vision as the floor beneath them bowed.

John was the first to get back to his feet, immediately spinning around and shouting to Max and Sarah, "I'm going after Lilly!"

"Wait, What?!" Sarah's voice was drowned out, another blast rupturing through the floorboards, "John, WAIT!"

"You need SAMS to call the elevator down from inside the server room!" He just cried back, heels digging in further, "If she's offline like me, that means she's trapped! Someone will have to take it down! I'll meet you guys in the splice shelter! Don't worry!"

Max and Sarah continued to cry out as he scrambled with unreal speed, darting straight past the safety of the metallic shelter door where teachers frantically waved kids inside. Several panicked voices called out after him as he tore down a now abandoned hallway. The lights above him flickered with the increasingly frequent percussions, sub bass tones building.

"Immediate action necessary . . ." SAMS voice split through the loudspeakers, "One minute until sealing of Slice shelter. Do not attempt to hold open door."

John's shaking hand slapped against the elevator call button. The light immediately dinged. It hadn't been called down yet.

His stomach twisted further.

The doors slid shut as several terrified faces watched from outside, the elevator shuttering with another vibration. The metal coil above sent shockwaves through the air as the elevator rapidly descended. The rumbles of the impending Splice sounded deafening underground without the steel walls of a shelter.

John's teeth clenched. SAMS had yet to reboot in his contacts, the small circle of its loading stalled out into a static frame.

"Come on, come on, come on," He muttered with panicked breaths, floor numbers dropping until he reached the subbasement. The elevator lurched to a stop as the numbers leveled out, sheering metal far louder than he cared to admit to himself.

"*Server Room*" the panel displayed, quickly flickering out as it attempted to map to John's offline UI.

No message appeared prompting him to open the doors.

He flailed, searching desperately among the unused and anachronistic manual buttons, finally finding one that appeared as though it might open the metal slabs.

The doors shuttered to give way, creaking open with great effort. The light from the elevator spilled into the room.

It was pitch dark inside, the sliver of light slowly dissipating to reveal empty rows upon rows of lightly humming computers.

"30 Seconds . . ." SAMS voice came through a speaker overhead.

"Lilly?" John cried out in desperation, keeping his foot wedged in the door as he frantically surveyed the room, "LILLY?! Hello?!"

There was no one inside.

A rolling detonation split through the ceiling, dust raining down only to be kicked back up by the powerful cooling fans. Cracks formed along the walls and the higher shelves sagged dangerously.

Above ground, the sky paled to a ghastly white, searing light of the Splice condensing into a pinprick of black.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" John was hysterical, hand smashing against the elevator up button.

The elevator doors closed . . . and then nothing.

"Splice shelter closing . . ." SAMS voice was horrifically calm.

John jabbed the up button again, skin deathly pale.

"You are experiencing an emergency," SAMS voice was cold, "Elevator services disabled until emergency is lifted."

John's hand fell to his side, mouth slightly open as the weight of his current situation reached forwards to strangle the breath from him.

The shaft above shuttered with percussions.

"Wait! Hold it!" Max's voice was laced with horror, mechanical whirring resounding as the metallic hatch pivoted slowly closed.

Lilly paled in the crowd, Sarah having to hold her firmly with one hand as she fought hysterically to free herself.

Max's hands cracked against the metal, machine axis screeching as it struggled to continue closing, still making slow progress.

"Do not attempt to hold open door," SAMS voice was beginning to rattle with distortions, "You are delaying the safety of this enclosure."

"The Splice hasn't detonated yet you fucking robot!" Max cried, "There's still time!"

"This is my fault!" Lilly was beside herself, "SARAH! We can't leave him! Let me go!"

Sarah's hands were fixed, cold steely eyes narrowed in resolution despite the conflict swirling beneath.

Max's expression contorted into helplessness as he looked behind him at the crowd in the shelter. Everyone was petrified with fear, many clearly seconds from pulling his hands from the door themselves.

Slowly, his hands dropped to his sides, palpable guilt spreading through his face in defeat.

Sarah suddenly winced with pain as Lilly twisted back, jabbing at her stomach with a hard blow. Sarah cried out to stop her as she wrenched herself free.

Lilly's sprint was frantic and failed, tears welling in her eyes as the door pressed closed all the same.

The locks clicked shut.

Back underground, the sound of static suddenly screeched out in the darkness. John flinched as his emergency lights came on, spilling red into the elevator.

His UI abruptly booted up with a harsh flash, mangled and unrecognizable. There were no clean windows or familiar icon elements, instead raw text data bearing its ugly skinless form.

"John Matthews, what are you doing?!" Turquoise text spilled across the lower third where the Splice warning should have been, *"You will be crushed down here!"*

John was stunned, eyes flicking around in mortified confusion.

"I'll override SAMS!" The text glitched like an out of focus memory, blurring at random intervals, *"Take the elevator back up! Hurry!"*

The text hesitated.

"Although maybe you should actually stay down here . . ." It pondered.

The floor numbers frazzled with a turquoise hue, buttons illuminating.

John remained motionless, breath caught in his throat.

"NOW!" The text continued, *"I can get the splice door open, but only if you move fast! Or maybe don't move at all . . ."*

John shook his head, quickly adjusting his footing and opening a text prompt in his vision, before being immediately cut off.

"I can hear you through your mic!" The text blurred sporadically as it was typed, *"Just talk to me with your voice! If you don't go fast you're going to be obliterated! Or you might be obliterated way more if you go up to the surface . . ."*

"Who are you?" John choked out, refusing to move, "No one can open a Splice door. I . . . at this point, I stand the best chance of survival down here . . ."

"If by 'survival,' you mean death!" the text shattered across his view, font increased in size, *"Either you believe me or you die! Let's get a move on!"*

John frantically made up his mind, jabbing at the elevator button . . . only to have it immediately flash red.

"Okay, no wait . . ." The text scrambled, *". . . You might be right, actually."*

It glitched into an uncertain Unicode emoji face.

"Maybe you really should stay down here . . ." It continued after a long pause, being typed far slower, *"I, uh . . . What do you think? Oh gosh . . . How much time do we have again?"*

"What?!" John cried, red gaze darting around the elevator, jabbing at the button again, "Make up your mind!"

"You took too long to decide!" The text darted across the screen, a timer beginning to rapidly fall in the corner, *"Don't blame me! What's a girl to do?! Just duck and cover at this point, I guess! You've got 2 seconds now, my human friend!"*

"WHAT THE HELL?!" John flinched to the ground, barely hitting the cold tiles before a deafening explosion sounded in the near distance. The initial pressure wave was the first to arrive just milliseconds later, slating the enclosure against the far wall of the elevator shaft. John rolled like a broken marionette, the secondary wave arriving immediately after, tearing through the ground and vaporizing it to dust.

The walls of the elevator buckled, the structure dropping as the steel tether snapped with a horrific sound, sheering against the rock walls like a whip and skewing the elevator sideways against its railings. Blood pooled as if suspended in zero gravity as John's fading mind watched his left hand get pressure cleaved from its socket by jutting metal, remaining attached only by bloodied sinews and skin.

The ceiling caved, everything cutting to black.

Darkness.

Then soft beeping.

Skin slowly shifted, splitting open in the darkness to flood it with weak scarlet light. John's eye was unfocused and dim, iris bleached red from warnings. A heart rate monitor in the bottom left corner was frighteningly low. A warning continuously scrolled through the same protocol, the system attempting to automatically contact 911 but being unable to get through.

"Exsanguination warning . . ." the type scrolled again and again, "You are losing blood. Blunt force trauma detected. Attempting to contact emergency services."

John shifted agonizingly slowly, lights flickering in the gloom to reveal an entirely closed off maze of twisted metal and rock around him.

"S . . . SAMS . . ." His voice coughed up dust, pale hand a sickly grey as it dangled limply by his side.

"You have been unconscious for 2 minutes and 17 seconds," SAMS voice prompted, "Brain damage expected. Please follow protocol on screen as emergency services are contacted . . ."

John blinked slowly, unable to sit up.

"What is your name?" A message prompt popped up, UI seemingly back to normal, no strange turquoise text visible anywhere, *"Please speak clearly. If you cannot speak, please select NEXT."*

"J- . . . John Matthews," His voice was weak, "SAMS, is the Splice over?"

"Select the correct date from the list . . ." the prompts just continued, *"If you do not know, please select NEXT."*

"SAMS, exit automatic EMT protocol," John grunted, sitting up with great effort, "Diagnostic report on recent Splice."

"7:14am, December 19th, 2034" The menu finally changed, *"A 6.1 Magnitude Splice Anomaly has Occurred in the Evergreen District. You have yet to confirm your safety. Do so now?"*

John glanced to the time at the top right.

7:16am.

The menu glitched away, emergency medical services being activated again with a warning message.

"Exsanguination imminent . . ." the type scrolled, *"You are losing blood. Blunt force trauma detected. Attempting to contact emergency services."*

As John went to close it, the box was suddenly torn off to the side. Text scrambled as everything again flooded with electric turquoise.

A surprised Unicode emoji face flashed into view.

"Holy mother of myself!" A string of text splayed across the screen under the face, *"You're a tough one!"*

"You again . . ." John winced, putting weight on his partially severed limb only to immediately roll to the ground as the air was leached from him.

"You'll never guess how happy I am to see you alive!" The text sprinted across before pausing for several seconds, *". . . I guess kinda happy . . ."* it concluded, *"Or, wait . . . maybe very happy . . ."*

"How the hell are you doing this?" John wheezed, using his other hand to shove himself back to his knees, "Who are you?!"

"I'm your friend," the text typed, the surprised emoji disappearing, "You'll make it out of this alive if you follow my instructions! . . . or, wait . . . you might die regardless."

"Get out of my system!" John hissed, getting to his feet unsteadily, breathing heavy, "I need SAMS."

"I can be your SAMS," the text typed, a winky face emoji following, "I can do whatever you need."

The text quickly backspaced, a horrified emoji replacing what it once said.

"That sounded weird." The text followed up.

"Where the hell am I, and how can I get out!?" John hissed, "Is this a game to you?! Get out of my system! I'm seriously injured!"

"I can see that," The text scrolled up to a new row, "I've got your gaze camera after all. You're a few floors down, approximately 10 feet below the server room in front of you, which is decimated, by the way. The elevator doors appear to be welded shut. The best route out of here is up."

John's eyes flashed upwards grudgingly. The ceiling was caved down several feet, but there was indeed a small crawlspace twisting straight up through the jutting metal. At the other end, yawning blackness extended out until his faint light was consumed by it. Rotting wind howled in the empty expanse.

"I don't think I can climb . . ." John glanced down nervously to his hand. The bruising was spreading up his arm like a disease, likely internal bleeding.

"I would try if I was you," The text responded, ". . . or maybe not. I think it's up to you. You definitely need to get to the surface, though."

It paused again for quite some time.

"Or maybe not." It typed slowly.

"Stop talking for a second," John frowned, taking several more seconds to glance up at the hole, before suddenly leaping up for it. Metal rattled and displaced, the entire elevator groaning as it shifted slightly.

His teeth gritted as he used his good hand and his other elbow to hoist himself up with surprising aptitude.

The wind of the decimated elevator shaft whipped at his hair as he rolled to the surface and pulled his legs out from the tunnel.

"Whoa, 10/10," The text scrolled, *"Keep this up and you might actually survive this. Or . . . I mean, maybe-"*

"Maybe not," John sighed, "I get it. Stop talking."

"You got it . . ." The text deleted itself, *"You're passing the server room now. Keep climbing straight up. No reason to go in there."*

A gaping hole in front of John lead to where the server room once was, now simply a pile of rubble and steel.

John slowly climbed past it.

". . . Unless maybe you want to." The text scrolled, another surprised emoji following suit.

"Shut up!" John grunted, feet shakily stepping on loose rock and rust as he continued ascending.

"You're right," the text typed slowly, *"Best to keep going . . ."*

Down below in the sever room, the darkness was all consuming, rubble quietly sprinkling down. One small sliver of metal drifted from the twisted rafters, spinning several times like a razor blade snowflake before slowly settling . . . on a pale hand.

Black blood leaked steady out from a pile of twisted rubble.

The surprised emoji on John's screen updated to a smiling one.

Sarah paced around the room, hands in her hoodie, face contorted in forced stoicism.

"All a Splice shelter is, is a stupid hole in the ground anyway!" Max spoke, aiming the words in Sarah's direction, yet clearly meaning them more for himself, "John's underground too! It's the same thing! He . . . he's got this!"

Sarah didn't respond, eyes angrily flashing back to the Splice door.

Lilly had been sick several times into a trashcan, now lying in a grey ball in the corner of the room as several classmates carefully comforted her.

Nervous whispers and chatter filled the small space, packed full with more bodies than it was meant to hold.

Sarah's UI suddenly flashed with a blinding spark of blue, her legs splaying out to catch herself.

Everyone was too preoccupied with their own thoughts to notice her stumble, but as she shook her head, everything had cut out.

Only a single line of turquoise text remained.

"John is alive."

Her eyes widened in disbelief, before narrowing immediately. Her gaze flashed around the room nervously before she opened a text prompt of her own.

She typed deliberately, running her left hand through her black hair slowly.

"How injured is he?" her words were cold and unyielding, "Will he bleed out if we're lucky?"

"Plan B already in effect," the text scrolled.

"No!" Sarah typed angrily, teeth clenching, "The other team will be here any minute! We don't have time for that! Keep him down there, break his spirit and let him bleed out!"

Her icy eyes flicked to the door one more time, fist clenching.

"Heyyyyy . . . John, can I talk to you?" Turquoise text typed slowly across blank space, John's eyes flicking to it as he hoisted himself upwards onto a precarious ledge.

"What do you want?" he breathed heavily, vision swimming with after images, "Once I get to the surface, you're really going to need to go so I can check SAMS."

". . . for what?" the text was slower than usual.

"To . . . check on someone," he grunted as he swung himself to the nearest bar of jutting metal, "It doesn't matter. I still don't understand why you're doing this, but do I have your word you'll stop hacking me once I get to safety?"

The text was silent for a while.

" . . . sure." It finally spoke.

Several more seconds passed before it typed again.

"Is it . . . to check on your sister?"

John's hand hesitated as he reached for the next ledge. He retracted it slowly, eyes narrowing.

"Who are you?" he hissed, "I'm tired of this game. You clearly know me. Be honest, or I'm going to rip these lenses out. How did you know the exact time the splice was going to hit? Why did you call me your human friend?"

The screen was empty for a long time.

" . . . My name is Malie." The turquoise text slowly clacked across the space, typed one letter at a time, *"and I'm about to dump a lot of information on you. We don't have time for anything less."*

A picture glitched into view. An awkwardly smiling girl of Pacific Islander descent was framed slightly out of focus, blushing away from the camera. Thick rimmed glasses extenuated her shy demeanor, hands clasped uncomfortably by her grass skirt. It appeared to be some kind of year book photo, and it was quite old, made up of digital pixels rather than vectors. The girl in the photo was around 15 or 16 years old at the time of it being taken.

"This is me . . ." the type continued, overlaying the picture and hesitating for a bit before continuing, *"two weeks before I died."*

John read the text carefully.

"I am now what you call 'fallout.'" The text continued, *"I arrived here at 2:32am, on December 18th through what you refer to as a Splice anomaly."*

John hesitated, eyes scanning the darkness above him.

"Splice anomalies occur when beings cross between dimensions," Malie continued, *"You and your planet think you know this, think you're prepared for it . . ."*

Rubble cascaded down from high above, John parrying to the side to watch it tumble past, disappearing into the depths below.

"You don't know the half of it." The text warned, "You just receive trash, beings killed or exiled by the game masters. You have no idea what's coming for you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," John shook his head, breathing out before reaching for the ledge above him again, "But to be honest, right now I have other things to worry about."

"No you don't!" the harsh text suddenly jittered to block his view, and ear-piercing shriek ringing out.

John flinched back, nearly slipping off the edge. He flailed out to grab the jagged side of a rock wall, gaze distorting slightly as his lenses warped.

"I'm sorry . . ." The text downsized again, being typed slower, *"I'm really sorry. It's just . . . you might want to be on stable ground for this, John. I don't mean to frighten you . . ."*

John breathed out, hoisting himself back onto balance. His eyes scanned the text before a small black rectangle slowly faded into the center of his screen.

"Virtual Camera 01" a caption below it said.

With great caution, a figure within the frame slowly and carefully lowered their hand from their face. The screen flickered in the dim light.

The ghastly form had been hollowed out into a decrepit husk of grey flesh, eyes starched open to unending black voids, ringed with darkness and caked on blood as if carved out by knives. Its hair was tinted an unnatural turquoise in the faint light, floating as if suspended in water.

Its head was tilted away in embarrassment, rotten blood pooled like mascara.

Small electric diodes of blue light within her sockets seemed to be how she looked around. Rows upon rows of computer code were her only companions in the black void, the text giving off a deathly glow that was lost to the empty oblivion.

John's heart struggled over its next few beats, eyes widening as the girl's pinprick cobalt beams flicked nervously to stare into the camera. It was the same girl from the photo.

"Sorry . . ." the creature's voice was shaky and nervous, crawling from her lips like spiders as text below the frame mirrored it, *"But I cannot allow you to crawl to your death."*

John was at a loss.

"Even in my own dimension I was a monster," The girl continued, *"I was once human like you, but I can hardly remember that time anymore. After my death, my conscience did not fade and I found solace in manipulating a new kind of reality I could still control . . . computer code. In my timeline, we called my type of entity a poltergeist, John. I might assume we share that word."*

Only the girl's blue dots were visible, nervously flicking away from the camera.

"Do poltergeists exist in your world, John?" she continued, *"I always thought of believing in ghosts as silly."*

John was silent.

"The point of this," the girl shrunk back further, *"Is that while I may be disturbing to you . . . there are creatures far fouler than me. There are things you can't begin to fathom, creatures that prey on me, and others like me . . . creatures that experience none of the humanity you and I share. All crawling out of here will allow you to do is witness the end of your world. Or . . . I mean, I guess that plus a few other things maybe."*

Malie's eyes sparked with dread, diodes flickering.

"The Splices are our doing," she nodded, hair drifting slowly behind, *"But they are not our choice. I don't pretend to understand any more than any other contestant, John . . . but there is a race of creature puppeting a survival game on a scale none of us can comprehend. The other contestants have arrived sooner than I thought. I can't let you leave the safety of these ruins."*

"Safety?" John laughed, shaking his head in an attempt to either comprehend this information, or disregard it completely, "I'm sorry Malie, but I'm having a bit of trouble believing you right now . . . both about this world ending scheme of yours, and the fact that you're supposedly helping me. What I know is that I'm going to die if I don't get medical help soon, and my sister is either inside a shelter right now, or she needs more help than me."

He reached back up, beginning to climb.

"You can't stop me," he continued coldly, "No matter what, I'm not just going to sit down here and-"

Malie hesitantly moved forwards again, shielding her face with her left hand . . . and slowly bringing up her right.

Rather than her other hand, a large puppet gradually rose into frame.

John's grip slipped, heart freezing up as he glanced to the fraying image.

A white eyeless rabbit character lay slumped over, perched on her hand as if about to put on a show.

From its fuzzy cookie monster style mouth, massive orca-like teeth spilled forth, prevented it from closing all the way.

A small TV symbol was etched into its soft felt body.

"*This . . .*" The girl flinched, realizing there was a lot of light on her and sinking back, "*This is my leash.*"

John's skin paled further, the exit above him darkening into his peripheries. At the base of the puppet, rather than simply an opening for a hand to use it, metallic pincers and spring traps had dug into the girl's flesh, locking it in place. Countless small rotating needles endlessly churned beneath the mesh of the puppet, working delicately around like millipede legs.

At being shoved in front of the camera, John watched in horror as the puppet purred to life, a large pair of metal incisors unfurling from the base and scraping tenderly back up along the length of the girl's arm. Its head tilted upwards with gentle and precise mechanical whirling, mouth widening into a massive grin. It looked directly into the lens with its blind face.

One of its two tiny paws waved cutely, head cocking to the side.

"*O- . . . only contestants can hear their own leash,*" Malie tried to keep her breathing calm as the cold metal playfully retracted, "*But it's saying hello. You asked me before if I thought this was a game, John . . .*"

She put down her hand carefully, eyes flashing back to the camera.

"*To them, it is.*" She continued, "*I need you to listen to me, or you will certainly die . . . Or, I mean, probably certainly.*"

"You're a . . . contestant, then?" John spoke, "What does that mean? They tell you what to do? That tiny puppet?"

"*You don't . . . you couldn't understand,*" The girl nervously retorted, the screen flickering to nothing as her words died, only the text remaining to pick up her sentence,

"But you can understand this . . . I'm sorry. Your friends are about to get slaughtered on the surface, and you will be too if you continue. This is for your own good, John Matthews."

John's gaze flashed to the corner of his screen, eyes narrowing.

"How are you so calm?" Max cried, watching Sarah frown at the floor as she continued to pace, "What if John is alive, but no one can get to him in time?! Why are the first responders taking so long?!"

The crowd had only gotten louder inside the room, the warning lights of the door still softly fading in and out.

Lilly now stood by the door rigidly, hands clutched at themselves. Her eyes were dull and lifeless.

"6.1 Emergency in Effect," the glowing text red, "Manual Latch Disabled. Do Not Attempt to Open Door."

Sarah ignored Max, biting at the nails of her left hand feverishly.

Suddenly, more turquoise text crawled in her UI, her eyes hastily flashing to it.

"Unexpected results," Malie was frantic, "John's headed to the surface faster now! If he reaches the top, he'll be like a sitting duck for the other team!"

Sarah cursed out loud, causing Max to stop mid-sentence.

"What?!" He spun, "What's wrong?! Were you able to connect to his vitals?! Is he okay?!"

Sarah's eyes just sizzled with heat, her fist clenching.

"Sarah?!" Max stood up, running and putting his hands on her shoulders, "What the hell is wrong?! What just happened?! I can handle it, I just want to know!"

". . . Now a lot more people are going to die." Her words crawled out like sticky poison, not an ounce of remorse in her voice.

Max was stunned into silence.

"Wh- . . ." he stammered, several other people turning their direction as well, "What?"

"Good riddance," Sarah spoke equally numbly.

Her feet pivoted so hard the floor tiles cracked, her right hand finally tearing out from her hoodie.

The rabbit puppet cackled with glee as it came into view, metallic spines flaying outwards in a flurry of blurring silver as Sarah hacked it against Max's neck.

The crack of his spinal cord resounded through the small room, blood painting the walls and floor as Sarah's puppet bit through his soft flesh like putty. She thrashed sideways with unnatural force, Max's limp body being torn like a ragdoll before the puppet let go and he slammed against the far wall with a deafening crack.

His head rolled from his mangled body, Sarah's dark hair falling to covering her eyes as she breathed heavy, face bowed in shadow.

The puppet applauded with enamored glee, toothy grin plastered with blood and sinews as Sarah dropped it to her side.

The room was filled with deafening silence, the clacking of Sarah's feet toward the door the only sound before the image settled in and hysterical shrieks erupted outwards. People scrambled to the sides of the room and dropped to the floor like dying flies. Sarah ignored them all as she walked headlong.

People flailed out of the way as she approached the door and her hand slowly raised again. Lilly's dull eyes sparked with new terror as she staggered to the side. The puppet's teeth slammed against the metal as gleaming pincers inverted out from under its soft body to rupture through the other side of the steel.

Metal blurred with a sickening grinding noise, the door buckling as Sarah wrenched backwards, throwing the massive chunk of metal behind her like a Frisbee. The 200 pound disk blurred with speed, the people cowered against the front wall unable to even blink before their torsos were shattered with a deafening clatter. Flesh and bones sheered into view as they fell to pieces.

"Malie," The creature commanded, skin flaking away as its spine contorted, "Keep John away from those fuckers. No is killing him but us, you got it? Plan B better go fast."

Lilly was helpless as Sarah's knobby hand stabbed against her neck, bony fingers latching around hard enough to choke her breath away.

"... Yes AVA," Turquoise text hesitantly typed.

In the darkness, Malie's empty sockets sunk in remorse.

*** End Part 1