

PuppetGAME Part 2

By Liam Vickers

The charred sky sagged with toxic sludge above the crater caused by the splice. In the center, a pale figure steadily came into view.

"Welcome to 5-C, EARTH!" A puppet shouted out excitedly, "Looks like your bet to Splice in so close was worth the risk, Kali! The target, John, is still alive, but everything is in chaos! This could be our chance!"

Ash and fire spun in a haunting column above the girl holding the puppet, four metallic chains draping from her back like intestines, tipped with barbed spears.

"We know AVA and Malie are already here . . ." the puppet continued, "They must be insanely inept to have not completed the task already!"

"Inept . . . yes." The girl spoke with a dead dry voice, distortions softly quavering around her like heat waves, "This challenge will be simple. I would appreciate it if you were to not speak unless you have useful information."

The puppet froze in shock before waving its tiny arms angrily.

From behind Kali, a dark figure stepped forwards, white bulging sphere eyes scanning the horizon.

It casually shoved its puppeted hand into its pocket, entire body appearing practically two-dimensional - a single shade of pure black.

Its other hand held a wooden baseball bat, wide grin lighting up its face like a drawn on image.

It cackled, stooping down to pick up some dirt and throw it into the air with a poorly imitated explosion sound.

It kicked its heels and casually slid next to Kali, giving her a nudge and winking.

She stared back at him with emotionless eyes.

"Sad." Kali spoke under her breath, beginning to walk towards the decimated school at the other end of the crater.

"I just wanna bash the dude's head in, ya feel me?" the silhouette recovered, continuing to laugh as it ran to catch up with her, "Why all the stupid rules? Killing him without touching or throwing anything at him?! Who writes this shit?! Am I right? He's already got main character syndrome on his side!"

"Makes it require more skill," Kali spoke coldly.

"Right, but teeeeechnically you have telekinesis, right?" the black form nodded eagerly, "Would that count as touching? What if you pushed a big rock on his head?"

"No influencing any object or series of objects directly to kill him," His puppet waved its hands from inside his pocket, voice muffled, "Use your head, Door Guy. If you feel like it might be against the rules, then it probably is. Would hate to disqualify you so early in the game."

". . . Maybe if I could just tell him a bad enough joke," The figure pondered, shrugging with a wide grin, "or maybe I'll just let you take this one, Kali."

"Second option preferred." The girl muttered.

"John . . ." Turquoise text flashed repeatedly across his screen, "Where are you going?! Don't do anything drastic! Especially not in your condition!"

John was beginning to see light above him, heavy breaths full of sticky blood. He finally found a doorway intact enough to enter. The stairs inside were still undamaged enough to allow him to begin ascending them.

In the darkness, Malie's hands rose to her face in panic, eyes darting to her other side to follow AVA's movements on a different screen.

The creature stood in front of a mortified crowd to block the doorway, sickle-like fingers still grasped around Lilly's frail neck.

"Start the video," The doppelganger hissed, still wearing Sarah's skin, though parts of it had begun to flake away, "Pick any one of the crowd members and stream their view!"

"R- r- right," Malie panicked, code scrolling past her vacant eyes, "Gimme a sec . . ."

"Tell me, Malie," John slowly spoke on the other screen, eyes flashing up to a large obstruction in his way, ". . . Is the real Sarah still alive?"

Malie froze, scrolling lines of code stopping dead.

"I- I'm not sure what you mean . . ." She typed hesitantly, sweating bullets, *"The real Sarah?"*

John's teeth clenched as he judged his next leap carefully, legs swinging below him as he gripped the exposed rebar and hoisted himself up.

"What is he doing?!" AVA's voice hissed out to Malie's left, "Have you started?!"

"You're not fooling anyone" John spoke coldly, "I know you're not actually trying to help me, Malie . . ."

Malie's face fell, cold hands dropping limply to her side.

For him to figure it out so fast . . .

"Malie?!?" AVA hissed, wrenching Lilly against the wall in impatience, "What is he thinking?!"

"I- He knows . . ." Malie sweated, looking positively sick, *"I think he knows . . ."*

"WHAT?!" AVA hissed, stopping cold, "How the FUCK?! What did you tell him, you whore!? It doesn't matter! Just start the stream!"

"No one else is getting hurt," John continued, finally dropping over the side of the obstruction, wrenching the exposed rebar with him, "Figures you wouldn't care to encrypt your message server if you were the one hacking me. Those messages from Sarah . . . that's not her. She wouldn't say those things."

"I- . . ." Malie typed, eyes scuttling in horror to AVA's vision window, watching the creature's POV as it grew more and more impatient, *"You hacked into my . . . How long have you . . . I'm not . . . I- . . ."*

"What does it want?" John continued, the rusted metal of the rebar glinting in the dim flickering lights, "What is the game's end goal?! How can I stop it from killing anyone else?"

Malie was stunned into silence, eyes wide with shock.

"MALIE!" John cried, "You said your puppets tell you what to do! If I can somehow sever its puppeted hand, will that do anything?!"

"You . . ." Malie began to shake, eyes darting rapidly between AVA and him, "You want to . . . help?"

"HOW DO I STOP THE GAME?!" John yelled, nearly to the top level, "What are the puppets telling it to do?! Will it kill anyone else if it doesn't have to?!"

Malie's hair fluttered in the numb computer generated wind, hands frozen in place. The countdown on the stream reached zero, video feed starting up.

In the crowd, one of the students nearly fell to their knees as their vision suddenly flashed a blinding turquoise hue.

AVA's face glistened with joy, her gnarled hand rapidly scraping Lilly back in front of her. Her other puppeted hand dangled by her waist, its long ears softly swinging back and forth.

"Oh good," The creature swooned, losing its form intermittently, limbs occasionally twisting and warping as if in a blender. Its eyes flickered between dark blue and its true vile grey. "Welcome to the show," it continued, looking directly into the student's turquoise lenses, "John Matthews, can you hear me?"

Finally stumbling on to the top level, John screeched to a halt as his UI flashed with the student's video feed. His eyes widened, limbs spaying out in horror.

"Stop right there," the creature hissed, "You're about to have a real shit day. Let's work together to not make it any worse."

John's eyes darted in panic as another student shakily stood at the other end of the hallway. It was Penny, a classmate of his, her blonde hair in a tattered and worn ponytail, rouge hairs spilling around her freckled face.

Her turquoise tinted eyes were fixed on him, lenses whirling softly to feed the video into the creature's UI. Her hands were balled in front of her, shaking softly with terror.

"W- . . . okay wait," John put out his hands and took a step forwards, irises fixed on Lilly's ghastly form struggling for breath, "Please just wait . . . what do you wan-"

The creature cackled, the screen shimmering with distortions as it slashed its hand forwards. Lilly's cry was strangled to silence immediately, mouth hanging open in twisted shock as the gangly hand pressed fingers through her left eye socket. Boiling blood sputtered forth, screams erupting from the crowd as her eye slapped across the floor with a soundless squelch, optic nerve tangled with bits of flesh.

John's blood chilled to solid ice, limbs locking up.

The creature grinned widely, bones horrifically brittle as it seemed to tower over Lilly's muted form, limbs creaking and popping.

"Was the connection bad?" Its ghastly mouth spilled open in a chasm sized grin, "I said 'stop right there,' not 'do whatever the fuck you feel like.' We'll get right to the point then, John, right? Would you like that? Preferably before your sister loses a few more body parts . . ."

John's fists clenched, rebar in his hands shuttering.

Penny's eyes twitched with horror, her pale skin flushing with sickly green. And yet, her eyes remained firmly locked on him.

"Bad day to be a main character, right?" the creature cocked its head, irises shimmering with black, "Ever wonder why everything seems to revolve around you?"

John stalled, words dead in his throat.

"Well, regardless, it ends here," The creature smiled, stringy black hair molting like dead skin from its scalp, "Malie tells me you've been listening in, so that saves me from some exposition . . ."

John's gaze suddenly flickered violently, red slashing into his lower third.

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

Sirens blared to life again, overhead lights beginning to flicker.

"And not a moment too soon," the creature's teeth sharpened, "Looks like more team members are arriving. John, my demand is simple. You see, it appears our challenge this round is to kill the main character of this dimension without physically harming them directly."

The school shook with a distant percussion, hallway warping off kilter.

"I don't understand!" John shook his head, regaining his balance, "Tell me what you want and I'll do it! No one here deserves to die!"

"Super god damn correct!" The creature's lips parted in a hysterical chuckle, "And as a matter of fact, you can be the one to ensure that! If we can't harm you directly, you'll just have to take the higher road here . . . allow my team to win the game by doing us all a favor."

The creature's finger slowly pressed to its neck, raking across its flesh.

"Take that rebar of yours there and hole punch your own throat," It continued, taking a second to let this sink in, "Your life for all of these people? What a laughable trade, right? Only a fool wouldn't take that!"

John's heart stopped, eyes flashing down to the rebar in his hand.

The sky outside blackened with dust and silt, sporadic light flickering in the approaching Splice.

"That would mean NOW!" The creature hastily prompted, "What's there to think about? It's what you main protagonists are best at! Noble sacrifice, the best way to kill a main character!"

"W- . . . can . . ." John's voice struggled out, failing him.

"Can't hear you!" The creature's neck split sideways, hand stabbing into Lilly's other socket with a sickening snap.

"Fuck," John flinched backwards, sweat beading his forehead as he hastily brought up the rebar, "Okay, OKAY! WAIT!! God DAMNIT!"

"No waiting!" The eye slapped against the ground, Lilly's anguished figure losing any strength and crumpling, now held up only by the creature's hand against her neck.

"FUCKING STOP!" John was hysterical, teeth gnashing, "I'll do it! But what will happen when the splice comes? There's no shelter door! Everyone will still die!"

"They'll stand a better chance though, no?" The creature played with Lilly's eyeless near-corpse like a doll, "You don't hold any cards, John, sad to say! This isn't a bargain, I'm offering you a sweet deal. There is no way to stop the Splice, but you can stop your sister's pain in her last moments of life, no?"

John swallowed hard, heart shuttering as it fought to break free.

". . . not true . . ."

Turquoise text flickered across John's screen, the world devolving to slow motion.

"That's not true . . ." it continued, Malie hunched in the darkness as she clawed at her hair, *". . . The leashes are immune to distortion based teleportation . . . AVA could seal the door with her puppet if she wanted to . . ."*

John's face twitched to hide his surprise from Penny's turquoise stare, hand hesitating at his throat.

The light outside began condensing, rumbles dropping below hearing.

"Running out of time!" The creature snapped, slamming Lilly's skull against the wall with a deafening crack, her muted shriek enough to cause John's fists to ball again, "Let's get a move on!"

". . . You can't sever her wrist," The text continued at a breakneck pace, *"The leashes are wired into the host's nervous system . . . the distortion based barrier prevents hosts from cutting themselves free to escape the game . . ."*

John hesitated, pushing the rebar slowly closer to his flesh, time running down faster than it would take him to process what she was saying.

"But if you kill AVA, the leash will detach automatically!" The text flashed hastily, sensing John's impending suicide, *"Listen! You can save everyone if you take her place!"*

John hand was delayed again, mind racing with blurred words.

Was this another trick?

"If I electronically interrupt the feed, AVA will kill your sister!" The text jittered violently, *"Or she'll die anyway if you don't act! Find a way to naturally get out of view long enough to reach her!"*

John flinched. Why was she suddenly helping?!

His gaze flashed back to Penny, her terrified eyes wincing as he brought the rebar closer and closer. His eyes narrowed.

"Too bad," the creature gnashed, hand squeezing so tight around Lilly's neck, bones began to shift out of alignment, "And here I thought you cared about your sister. Guess not enough to prevent her neck from snapping like a-

John's throat gushed hot blood with a brutal slash of his wrist. Penny's eyes flashed away in sickness as she let out a squeak and vomited. Bile spilled onto the ground in her POV, the creature stopping dead in admitted shock.

Its grip lessened, eyes hesitantly searching the screen in confusion.

"Holy shit," it hissed, shrugging and almost immediately twisting Lilly's neck sideways until it began to crack, "Guess the fucker actually had it in h-"

Rebar stabbed into her view, blurred in her vision as it jutted out beneath her chin.

Her words steadily filled with sticky tar-like blood, eyes starched into wide saucers that slowly twitched down to the metal spear stabbing through her neck.

Her breaths were in vain, air whistling through the open gash and bubbling out warm fluids. Her clawed hands fought to retain their strength, dropping painfully limp all the same as she staggered forwards until she rolled to the floor in a sprawled crunch.

Behind her, John's eyes were wide with panic, shaking hand stained with blood that was both the creature's and his own. He was dripping with the red substance, large cut across the side of his neck, not deep nor direct enough to be life threatening.

Lilly, however, lay gasping on the floor, frozen in a paralytic state as blood drained from her like water.

The crowd was mortified and dumbfounded, hollow stares still filled with red warnings.

The creature on the ground slowly stirred, groaning in agony before its spindly hand clacked against the tiles with exposed needle like fingernails, skin shedding away entirely. One of its hands slowly worked around to the back of its neck, sliding out the rebar with agonizing slowness. Its other hand pressed the puppet to the floor.

"You . . . fucking BITCH!" AVA coughed up tar, Sarah's feature's ebbing away completely as it bled back to its unaltered form, "My fucking throat!"

Its body was stitched together like a haphazard collection of parts, limbs horrifically long and thin for its slender torso, working more like a spider than a bipedal creature. Its eyes were void bulging spheres with dot like irises possessing no pupil at all. Her needle teeth gnashed together in rage.

"You can't kill a mimic like that!" Malie's words splayed across his screen, *"What are you doing?! Your main character status will only get you so far!"*

"Big mistake," AVA spat, spine twisting backwards as she slowly worked her way back to her feet, "I'm going to rip your fucking arms off! How fucking d-"

Its words were smashed to nothing as John slammed his heel down on its head, driving its skull into the floor with a resounding crack.

Panicked flared in his eyes, the creature's limbs splaying out like a dying insect.

"FUCK!" It screamed through broken teeth, "Malie, help for fucks sake! Fry his vision!"

Nothing.

"Oh, you fucking TRAITOR!" AVA screeched, hand slamming back to ground to hoist her up, "I should have known you were--"

Her jaw dislocated as John swung again, shoe splattering with dark tar. The creature violently rolled across the floor, puppet slapping against the reflective tiles as it fought to steady itself.

The rebar clattered from its hand, John hastily rolling to grab at it.

"The head must be completely severed!" Malie panicked, *"Otherwise it will just shed the damaged flesh!"*

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" The creature spat out needles and pieces of bone, eyesight foggy and warped as it scrambled to its feet.

John pinwheeled backwards as AVA lifted her puppet in his face, countless knife tipped armatures rupturing forth.

The blades spun like a lawnmower, painting his face with reflected silver as several of the longer legs stabbed forwards in an attempt to pull him into the center.

He flailed in panic until he stood slightly crouched a safe distance away, breathing heavy with the rebar firmly grasped in his right hand. His left hand was still numb, resting uselessly atop it.

"Whatcha gonna do now kid?" AVA's tongue slithered, grin widening as the room began shaking with the approaching Splice, "Now the Splice is gonna eradicate you all, no?"

Her puppet cackled, tiny head looking towards John.

"I win!" AVA's face suddenly brightened, "You'll die here either way in this standoff! Aahaha! I won't even have to touch you! I WIN!"

Her hissing laughter split through the room before John's heels suddenly dug into the floor, rebar clattering across the ground behind him as he darted forwards.

His eyes narrowed, hand rushing forwards into the blades.

"What are YOU-?!" AVA cried hysterically, at the last second registering his movement and yanking the puppet upwards in panicked fear to avoid touching him.

John's hand, however, continued forwards, snapping against her forearm with a hard crack.

AVA's eyes widened in raw fear as she realized his play, limbs unable to respond before John pivoted, yanking her own hand against her skull. The blades sprayed gore like a wood chipper, AVA's mangled scream being drowned out by the noise before her cranium split like an egg.

John jerked back as the creature fell sideways, puppet screeching to a stop as it jittered across the ground, scaring gashes in the steel flooring.

The creature's limbs twitched slightly, blood pooling in frightening amounts before it lay still, foul air escaping its dead lips.

The puppet hissed with a massive pressure release, scalding steam shooting out in tiny jets as it dislodged from the creature's hand, leaving behind a mangled mess of scarred flesh and bone.

"Eric, get Penny from outside!" John commanded to a kid watching on in horror, "Bring her in here!"

No one moved.

"NOW!" John cried, the kid finally scrambling into action before John hesitantly knelt down next to the puppet and looked at his own hand worriedly.

"Think about this!" Turquoise text rapidly typed, *"Doing this will enter you into the game! You will be able to save your friends, but you won't be around to see them!"*

"I don't know what you mean by main character," John spoke softly, already damaged hand trembling as he hesitantly pushed it forwards, "But I guess we're going the noble sacrifice route anyway, huh?"

". . . I guess so." The text typed slowly, Malie's eyes falling into worry as the puppet struggled to life, mechanical gears shifting at John's approach.

He didn't have to do much. The minute his hand entered within range of the puppet, the device distorted into action, needled flesh opening up like a gaping maw as it scurried forwards with spider legs of metal. John flinched back, gasping in shocked pain as metallic pincers snapped into place hard enough to shatter his Radius, skin feeling as if fire was being poured down inside of it.

His vision blurred, breaths faint and panicked as he staggered to his feet and fought the urge to attempt to rip the puppet off with all his strength.

Eric finally appeared, frantically dragging the still queasy Penny into the room.

The first pressure wave of the approaching Splice followed them by milliseconds, the entire room upheaving as the doorway buckled and people were thrown from their feet, screams mixing with breaking bones and sheering walls.

John, however, merely felt the deafening impact as if behind an indestructible plexiglass door, the wave distorting around him like water.

His feet clacked against the ground as he threw himself forwards, raising his hand into the doorway and flinching away.

The light was eerily silent in its second wave, spreading outwards from the epicenter in a hideous sphere of influence, the already decimated structure of the school shattering to rubble in its wake.

John's eyes squeezed closed, Malie's diodes constricting in further panic.

Her hand clenched, mouth frozen partially open before John's dark POV cut out completely, a soft shutter in her computer world leaving the screen around her to fray slightly out of focus. Penny's view was lost immediately after, the virtual space going dark.

Malie's skin flooded with frost, the silence around her all-consuming. The lines of code quietly faded back to focus after some time, scrolling just as normal.

No POV screens came to life.

Slowly, however, a faint green glow began to illuminate her face, her eyes rapidly flashing to it.

"Round Winner." It read, "Congratulations – Enjoy your immunity."

A smile fractured across her face.

Malie floated softly in the darkness, hair sluggishly undulating around her.

"What a roller coaster!" Her puppet suddenly cackled as it waved its arm and gestured to the green text box, "Jesus, you couldn't pick a side, could ya?"

Malie's eyes sunk, guilt quickly rising inside of her as she again glanced hopefully to the dark space where her video feeds once were.

"Oh cheer up!" The puppet giggled, "Immunity! You can't be voted off this round! You're on a good streak now! Winning the past two games? You might just be an audience favorite!"

"I- . . . I don't know, Ponder" Malie nervously wrung her hands, *"But why did I receive it? I don't want to be a favorite . . . How did I win the round?"*

"I dunno, I'm enjoying the fake suspense," Ponder snickered, "Did John and his friends die? Oh gosh, I dunno, it's not like he has main character syndrome or anyth-"

"I would also like to know this . . ." a voice suddenly spoke up, John's POV flickering into view through dust and grit, "Because you sure did a shit job of killing me if that was the goal."

Malie's eyes widened.

"Ooo! Newbie!" Malie's puppet giggled, "Speak of the devil. You did well for yourself!"

"Who is that?" John stammered, unable to see into Malie's space.

"Oh you'll get to know me just fine," Ponder cackled, "I'm also attached to your hand now, you know? Malie and I gotta bounce to Game End now, you go ahead and meet us there when you're done with your whole first story arc conclusion. The overall story is just beginning, John, and I wouldn't expect you to be the main character the entire time. You're in for a rude awakening, Mr. Matthews, but it's good to have you on board regardless."

With a suddenly clap of black distortive air, Malie and Ponder imploded from view. John's UI finally snapped back to normal as the turquoise text flickered from existence.

Back in the Splice shelter, he blinked several times to orient himself, finding that the splice warning had disappeared, the dust around him softly settling.

Groans emanated from behind him in the mist, figures helping each other to their feet all around.

John slowly and nervously glanced down to his hand, admittedly unsurprised to see the rabbit softly staring directly back at him with its eyeless face.

"The name's Ponder," the puppet grinned out like a big excited dog, "We're about to have a lot of fun, John. We puppets are all connected, fed by the same AI. Talking to one of us means you're talking to all of us. We know everything that's happening everywhere, and at any time in a simplified linear progression."

John was already searching around for Lilly, finding that his arm was frighteningly heavy with the massive hunk of metal on it, yet surprisingly easy to wield, the pain in his damaged hand a memory of the past.

"Of course, once we make you an official contestant," Ponder continued, fighting to remain in John's view as he looked around, "you'll only be able to talk to me, your own personal version of PonderAI. We know everything, but of course we'll only tell you stuff we want you to know . . . to make a story arc more interesting, or to shove some plot twists down the viewers throats, as I'm sure you understand."

John finally spotted Lilly, legs pivoting to run towards her, before a jolt of electrifying pain stunned him where he stood.

"Yo! Talking to you!" Ponder frowned, "Are you always so disrespectful to hand puppets? Your sis is fine, alright? Did I mention the whole omnipotent thing? You've got nothing to worry about for now."

John glanced down to the furry creature, distrust clearly written across his face.

"Distrust clearly written across his face," Ponder quoted, "I get it, you've got some understandable trust issues. But I'm telling the truth, and to be honest, I don't give a darn if you believe it or not. If you have unfinished business here before you go, be my guest, but Lilly's gonna take a few hours to wake up, and a week or so of intensive care before she's back to herself. What kind of attention span do you think our viewers have, John?"

John glanced back to his sister's crumbled form, teeth gritting.

"Speaking of plot twists," Ponder grinned, "I decided I'm bored after all, you seem like a pretty straightforward character, John. Motivated to help others, but often held back by your own fear. I can't wait for you, the classic reluctant hero type to be thrown into a world where you're not protected by your main character status."

"You keep talking about that," John shook his head, "What does that mean? Main character?"

"Of course it's hard to see from your perspective," Ponder giggled, "But every dimension has its own main character, John. You might think yourself human, but main characters are monsters in their own right. What other being could adapt to a situation so quickly and come out victorious against all odds?"

John watched Penny and Eric loom out of the fog, immediately running to Lilly in his absence.

"Mimics, like that AVA lad you sliced and diced," Ponder continued, "can be pretty hardy. They cannot die from blood loss alone, nor will losing any limb affect them. But you, John, you possess an immunity in this world that is hard to match. You cannot be killed if it doesn't complete your character arc."

"Character arc?" John fought, "That doesn't make any sense! Do you think this is some kind of movie?"

Penny's dark blue eyes flashed to John in concern as she knelt beside Lilly, watching as he seemed to talking to no one, moving the puppet around as if putting on a show for himself.

"Oh it's very real," Ponder soothed, tiny paws rubbing together, "I'm sure we could classify it as medical condition if we wanted, though I would consider it more of a dimensional anomaly. Life has been all about you here since we started, but you're about to be competing in a game where everyone is a main character in their own world . . . therefore no one is."

"I've never been important," John shook his head, "My life isn't anything special! Until now I haven't even--"

"Yeah, see, I'm bored again," Ponder tapped its head softly, "I know I'm right, so listening to you talk is kinda worthless, right?"

John's lips pursed.

"J- . . . John," Penny nervously spoke, having stood up and walked slightly closer. She looked like she was about to throw up again.

"J- John . . . I can't feel a pulse," Ponder mocked, folding its arms.

". . . I can't feel a pulse . . ." Penny continued, eyes deepened into abyssal worry, "Your sister . . ."

"Don't worry, she just doesn't know the first damn thing about first aid," Ponder talked over her, "Eric is about to find it."

"I . . . I think it's okay . . ." John nervously responded to Penny, dropping the rabbit.

He was horrified to see her flinch away as he moved the device, her gaze flashing nervously to it as swung softly back and forth at his side.

"Got it!" Eric cried out, "She's faint, but still here! Someone help me get together a stretcher!"

"Oh thank God," Penny squirmed, watching more people rush to Lilly's side as she turned back to John. "I thought . . . I thought . . ."

Her words died out as her eyes again focused on the puppet, fear stitching her face a bone white.

"Are you okay?" She asked at great length, hands filled with unrest, "W- . . . what is that thing?"

"Oh she'll learn soon enough," Ponder chuckled, "We're going to start broadcasting to your dimension since you've now joined us in our game! After all, if you were part of this dimension, wouldn't you want to know that your entire planet is about to be destroyed if you lose?"

John paled, pupils constricting.

"AND WE FINALLY GET THE PLOT TWIST!" The rabbit giggled, "This game has bigger stakes than you could have ever imagined! You thought you saved your little school friends, but it came at the cost of throwing your planet into the ring as a bargaining chip! You solely represent the whole of your dimension, a dimension that dies the minute you do! Funny how leaving out information until it's too late to back down works, huh?"

"John?" Penny pressed, apprehensively crouching down to try and make out what he was listening so intently to, "Are you okay?"

"That's how you structure a narrative, baby!" Ponder cackled with hysterical laughter, "Welcome to act 2!"

John's terrified eyes flashed to Penny, skin paling to a sickly grey.

"I . . . I'm sorry." His words were cold and dead.

Penny was nearly knocked off her feet as John suddenly split apart with a blinding flash of warped air, the sound of the implosion shattering the ceiling tiles above.

John had disappeared, Penny's frantic eyes now staring at an empty space in front of her that softly spewed toxic smoke.

Lilly's eyes shuttered, lids slowly opening with great effort. Gears and diodes shifted intermittently to keep her vision focused as she slowly looked around. Harsh fluorescent lighting dotted the ceiling above her, hospital curtains following small metal tracks through her gaze.

She tried to sit up, only to find that her neck was in a large brace. Her delicate movements became frantic until she finally spied a remote by her hand.

Her vision glitched with a fake electronic field of view, her eyelids constantly shifting to try and account for it. Her fingers hesitantly reached forwards, slipping along the remote surface several times before she finally managed to grasp it.

A TV droned softly in her AR view, tracked to the far wall at the end of her bed.

The bed made a soft whirring noise as she adjusted the back to sit herself up and glance at the screen.

She appeared to be in a daze, mechanical eyes not really processing anything, until the display suddenly shocked her back to reality. There . . . in the middle of the screen . . .

A large rabbit puppet.

"And for our viewers just now conveniently waking up from a small coma," The creature's mouth flopped soundlessly, subtitles filling in for the lack of voice, "Let's do a quick recap of the game's structure and this week's challenge!"

The camera jittered with violent distortions.

"This game is divided into rounds, each taking place in a different dimension with a set time limit and goal," The creature continued, graphics filling the screen to illustrate

its point, "Players are assigned a different partner each round, and must work together to complete the round's assigned task."

The camera slowly panned in a circle, 8 silhouetted figures standing in the darkness.

"At the Game End vote after each round," Text continued beneath the footage, "viewers across all eight dimensions will decide on which player to eliminate by popular vote."

The screen sparked with red, the puppet jumping back into frame with a maniacal grin.

"The eliminated player is killed in a spectacular manor," the creature waved its fuzzy arms, "And their home dimension is destroyed! 9 billion souls gone in a flash, what a way to go!"

The word "BUMMER" flashed across the screen in comic sans.

"However!" The puppet cackled, grabbing at the lens, "Players can earn immunity from elimination in one of two ways!"

Whoever was holding the camera seemed to be having a good deal of difficulty keeping the puppet in frame as it flailed around.

"Completing the challenge successfully will grant both players on the team immunity," Text continued beneath the footage, "But that's not all!"

The screen flashed back to graphics, four pairs of two stick figures populating the screen.

"Each round," the text jittered, "a random number of teams will have an added difficulty."

On two of the groups, one of the stick figures turned red, the other tinting a dark blue.

"Teammates might just be assigned to kill their partners!" The rabbit giggled, "No players will know their partner's roles, and only red players will be informed of theirs! If a RED player betrays their partner before the round is up, or before a team completes the round goal, they alone will win immunity and end the round!"

One of the red stick figures stabbed the blue one in the back, giving a big thumbs up to the camera.

"ROUND END" flashed in papyrus.

"However," The puppet nodded, the dead stick figure resetting to a standing position, "If a BLUE player is certain their partner is a RED, they can win the round by turning the tables!"

The blue figure pulled out a comically small Swiss army knife, punching the red player to the ground and stabbing them repeatedly in the head.

"Player killing is strictly forbidden outside of these circumstances," The creature's ears flopped, "If, for example, a player thinks their partner is RED for that round, kills them, and turns out to be wrong, they will face immediate elimination. Player to player violence, on the other hand, is highly encouraged. Non-life threatening injuries and torture can be a great way to limit other team's success, or extract whether or not your partner is a RED."

The puppet gestured the camera back to the Eight silhouettes, remaining in the corner of the screen to pick up a fuzzy toy microphone.

"That's enough exposition for now!" it smiled brightly, "Let's take a look at last week's winner . . . Everyone's favorite poltergeist from dimension C-HDIS1, Malie Lau!"

One of the silhouettes suddenly shuttered to life, blue tinted light projecting her in 3D space as if a vocaloid. Her haunting eyeless sockets darted away from the camera, hands uncomfortably pressed against her sides.

"A RED player last week," The puppet continued, "Malie entered with her teammate, Julie Rowe, with the assignment of infiltrating and detonating the fusion core of a reactor in dimension 8-SD. The teams scrambled to get past the heavy security, only to have this manipulative poltergeist kill Julie and claim victory 7 minutes into the round!"

Malie's image flickered, her hair quavering softly.

"With the added winner bonus," Ponder continued, "Her and her teammate this round, AVA, were granted early access for this week's goal, to kill Dimension C-5's protagonist without directly harming him!"

The puppet chucked its microphone across the room, clasping its hands together in glee.

"Of course, you won't see AVA here this week!" It snickered, another player suddenly being illuminated by bright overhead lights, "A RED player twice in a row, in an

impressive twist strategy, Malie worked with the dimension's protagonist to kill her partner and win the round yet again!"

John winced under the bright lights, his eyes flashing in horror and betrayal to Malie.

Malie sunk back, avoiding his gaze.

On the hospital bed, Lilly nearly choked as she recognized John's face.

"In an unprecedented turn of events, however," Ponder cackled, "The protagonist of C-5 has entered the game in AVA's place, making this the first round in which there will be no elimination vote!"

Malie's puppet lifted a large metallic claw from under its body, bopping her on the head.

"Making your immunity useless!" Ponder cackled, "Did you do that on purpose, you silly? Selfless actions aren't going to get you very far, you know."

John's gaze softened, Malie sinking back.

"AND OF COURSE!" The puppet in front of the screen cheered, "C-5 dimension is now a first time subscriber, championing their very own John Matthews! An American teenager to represent an entire global dimension? That seems about right! Nothing weird or self-absorbed about that!"

Malie and John's lights flickered off, the eight players again bathed in shadow.

"And now for our new viewer's viewing pleasure," Ponder continued, pointing to the first contestant in line, "Let's see who your dimension is up against! I hope you all practiced your speeches! Keep in mind your audience is human and tailor them accordingly! I should remind you that these people of C-5 will potentially vote to decide your fate, so the more you can suck up to them, the better, no? Things are about to get CHARACTER DRIVEN!"

The first circle sparked to life, blinding spotlight illuminating a figure that stood hunched in a large yellow raincoat. The hood was over their face, some sort of black dress slightly protruding from under the bulky yellow material to cover her spindly legs.

As she slowly lifted her head, two blinding eyes sparked into view, one a golden yellow, the other a chilling blue.

"From Dimension C-YH01," Ponder nodded excitedly, "We have Halogen Fear, the queen of a Siren colony! Royally spoiled but tactfully gifted, she can mimic any sound and possesses neurotoxin loaded needles in her wrists to disorientate her prey and lure them to their deaths. Her saliva acts as a catalyst to the toxins, so let's not get too excited, eh boys? Don't let her seduce you unless you're willing to trade your life for dat ass."

"A proclivity to greet you, C-5," the girl spoke calmly with a sly grin, saliva dripping softly down her chin, "I'm induced you will find that you'd rather watch your own dimension burn than see me fall."

Her grin was filled with needle teeth, her tongue running softly along them.

"I'm excited to feel your unending devotion," She continued, eyes narrowing in desire, "We cannot be made torpid."

"Confident words!" Ponder cheered, "Confident . . . weird words, but close enough! Let's keep in mind Sirens do not possess any inherent supernatural armor, dying from anything that would kill a normal human! With that said, let's move on!"

The next figure was lit up as Halogen went dark, glowing eyes continuing to pierce in the darkness.

The next creature stood silently with intense stoicism, head bowed as black hair strung down over her face. She wore tattered scrubs, a faint '12' printed in red text. From her back, four chain tendrils seemed to be physically rupturing from her flesh, coiling down to the ground where they ended in horrific speared tips.

"Kali Aimes!" Ponder cheered, "Otherwise known as Subject 12! Dimension C-D13 has a bit of a problem with parasitic creatures seeking to overtake humanity. The parasites kill off a female host, continuing to puppet the corpse and using the once human brain as a factory to produce a telekinetic phenomenon known as matter distortion! Kali is a test subject, the government's half assed attempt to combat the threat by weaponizing a parasite infected individual for their own use! She possesses volatile telekinetic powers through which she influences four chain tendrils!"

"I am Subject 12," The creature spoke coldly without a shred of emotion, "Weapon of mass destruction."

The silence hung in the air for some time as if something else was supposed to happen, but it seemed the girl was done.

"Right!" Ponder hurried to fill in the awkward silence, "Well she's clearly got a lot to say! Let's keep in mind that as a parasitic corpse, Kali cannot be killed by most conventional means. Her matter distortion means she subconsciously redirects objects traveling fast enough to kill her, and can heal major life threatening injuries within seconds, including loss of limb and organ failure. She is vulnerable, however, to knives and slow moving objects at the base of her spine, where the parasite resides. With that said, let's keep this rolling!"

The light flicked off, the next one erupting to life.

"SKETCH!" The figure cheered before Ponder could even get a word in, "I'm a mimic! But mostly I'm your friend!"

The creature had managed to stuff itself inside normal human clothing with the fashion sense of an eight year old princess. Its hollow dotted eyes were encircled by dead flesh, gangly limbs making it look like the most nightmarish grade schooler in existence. Its pink skirt billowed up and down as it twirled cutely in an attempt to replicate some sort of Kids Bop star.

"Hi, C-5!" she continued, excitement and energy frighteningly limitless, "Six out of eight dimensions officially endorse me as most fun contestant! Let's make that seven! Follow me on Optical and Instafilter at SketchPretends! I can be your idol too!"

"SKETCH is a mimic, as she's so aptly blurted out," Ponder's forehead creased, "It can take the form of any humanoid creature, and apparently has a desperate attention complex."

"I'm dying for your approval!" She winced out with a cheery voice, "Literally! Tune in tangentweekdays at 5 ar to see me read fan letters! You might even get a chance to be on the show wi--"

Her own puppet electrified her with a loud static pop.

Her eye twitched and she sunk back grudgingly, giving a cutesy wave to the camera.

"T-Shirts available online," she whispered, winking.

The light flicked off, illuminating the next contestant.

Or rather, the figure remained a silhouette despite the light on them. White circled eyes and a pencil thin smile spilled from the blackness.

"This contestant won't give us his name," Ponder again frowned, "So we refer to him as 'Door Guy.'"

"Yo C-5," Door guy waved his puppeted hand, "Man, this John guy of yours seems hella chill. Like, low key, we could be best friends. Me and you, C-5, we're going places, ya know?"

"Door Guy," Ponder sighed, "like many of our contestants, can mimic any human voice. He also possesses supernatural strength and a knack for pranks . . ."

"But my most damning aspect?" Door Guy nodded with a big grin, looking around the space as if waiting for people to fill in the rest of his sentence.

"My good looks!" he threw his arms down, "Come on you guys! That's obvious! What, were you stuck deciding between that and just my overall charm? It's a tough choice, I understand."

The light clicked off.

"Sarah Duffy is up next!" Ponder cheered, the light landing on a girl with sleek black hair and narrowed steely blue eyes.

In the hospital, Lilly again was dumbfounded. Sarah?

"From dimension C-6," Ponder continued, "This Sarah and our newest contestant, John, are practically dimensional family! The only difference between their worlds is that, well . . . This Sarah is still alive!"

Ponder chuckled, but Sarah didn't seem to be having anything to do with it.

"Listen C-5," she spoke to the cameras, shifting the tone dramatically, "fuck this. FUCK this. Ponder is going to try and prove to you that you're actually a part of their game. He's going to set off several splices in populated areas to do so! You have to get to shelter now!"

"Now, now" Ponder shook his head in front of the lens, "Sarah, is that really the speech you practiced?"

"FUCK. The. Hell. Off!" Sarah snapped, "Listen! Any of you watching this broadcast now, this is NOT a joke! This broadcast has been hacked into every network in you dimension, it's not a fucking prank!"

"Kinda ruining the feel of the show, right?" Ponder sighed, the puppet in her hand whirring to life, "They're not going to believe you until I show them. Why waste your time?"

"It happened to my dimension!" Sarah cried, still addressing the cameras, "Stop fucking sitting there and RUN! Don't play into this sick carnival of freaks! You have to listen to me!"

"You done yet?" The puppet in her hand mimed looking at its wrist to check the time, "Kiiiiinda feel like you're done now."

"This isn't fucking funny!" Sarah snapped again, slamming her puppet against the wall behind her, metal screeching with the impact, "Fuck you, Ponder, and fuck you C-5! LISTEN TO ME! JOHN, tell your dimension the truth!"

"Sh- she- she's right!" John's voice was still in the darkness, "Lilly, Eric, Penny, everyone who knows me, this isn't a joke! Get to shelter NOW! Call everyone you know and tell them to do the same! I'm real, THIS is real!"

Silence.

"Cool cool." Ponder nodded, "That wasn't over dramatic or anything. Moving right along, you can tell that although Sarah is human, she's got a lot of fight in her. She's not wrong either, I am going to obliterate a few of your capital cities around the globe to prove a point at the end of this broadcast, that's not information I'm trying to keep from you, I admit it openly . . . Too bad I'm right like usual that none of you sad saps will believe me until it happens though. People tend to not believe a rabbit puppet when it makes death threats. Not until they learn, that is."

Sarah's teeth gritted, the light on her flicking off . . . Only to relight on yet another Sarah.

This Sarah, however, flinched at the encounter, shying away. She didn't say a word.

"And this!" Ponder smiled, "Is an interesting matchup indeed! From Dimension C-ACLS1, welcome to another human, an alternate version of Sarah. It's easy to be so naïve when your upbringing was fine and dandy, but circumstances can break a person, can warp them into something completely different with the same face. To avoid confusion, we tend to nickname this Sarah 'Cold.'"

Cold didn't say anything, a fuzzy wool hat perched haphazardly atop her head. Her eyes were ringed with grime and sleep deprivation.

"December 18th, 2014" might not mean much to your dimensions," Ponder grinned, "but to Cold's home dimension, that marks the Jeffco Massacre, 13 students, 2 faculty, 2 uninjured adults found dead and dismembered one frigid winter day in a quiet sleepy town."

Cold seemed to be looking through the floor, unresponsive.

"They say human is a relative term," Ponder giggled, "I must admit I personally know a lot of monsters who have killed less."

The light flicked off, briefly illuminating both John and Malie again.

"And of course you know these two by now!" Ponder quickly summed up, "Your very own human contestant, and a poltergeist respectively."

The lights of the room switched to red, illuminating all 8 contestants.

"RED MEANS BAD!!" The puppet cheered, bringing up another soft felt prop of comical proportions, "No elimination vote this week, but we're not going to leave you guys hanging! We still get a bang to end this week's show with!"

The prop was a massive red button, not even connected to anything.

"The loser of this round, AVA, is from Dimension C-2Y4" the puppet grinned widely, placing its tiny hand on the button, "Let's take a quick tour, shall we?"

"Dimension C02Y4," an overly robust narrator voiced as if it were a travel commercial, "A 'C' class mirror Earth dimension of sprawling industry and 7.4 billion souls . . ."

The camera panned over scenery that was almost identical to the Earth John and Lilly knew, perhaps set a decade or two in the past. Cars drove like tiny beetles along freeways, towering skyscrapers dotting the horizons

"Let's take a look at some dogs!" Ponder grinned, teeth sharpening, "Maybe some puppies!"

'DOGS!' The screen flashed with a retro 80's style graphic, the camera cutting to a dog park with a slightly overcast sky. People casually strolled along, several different breeds of dogs romping through the grass.

"Mimics are feared and ostracized," the narrator continued, "being a mirror dimension to C-5, much of the population is human. Mimics like AVA would have lived a

life of undetected solitude, preying on lowly humans that strayed too far into their territory.”

Suddenly, the camera panned up to see John slowly walk through the frame, Lilly struggling to catch up as she tried to get a small stubborn corgi to walk properly.

“Whoops!” Ponder waved its arms, the camera cutting away back to an aerial view, “That’s awkward! What are the chances of seeing an alternate version of one of our contestants on a planet with so many souls?”

Its face bowed, hand slowly circling around the button.

“It’s almost like I did that on purpose for shock value . . .” It continued with an ever growing sickle shaped smile, “Or maybe it was to make an impression on your home dimension, John. They’re first time viewers, after all. Let’s hope you were having a good day with your sister . . . looks like things are about to get a heck of a lot worse!”

He paused.

“Of course, that was all preroll footage,” it softly continued, teeth dripping some sort of saliva like fluid, “They know this is coming, they’re watching this show too. Let’s go to live, shall we?”

Its tiny hand slammed against the button as the camera focused live on a crowd shot in some American city. People were clustered close together, faces all white with terror as they watched the very show spelling their demise. Like a virus, red immediately began spreading through the crowd as their eyes displayed Splice warnings, one after the other.

The camera began slowly pulling out as several people saw their own faces on their screens, turning to the camera and waving their arms frantically in hysteria. Tears rolled down like water, some people simply sinking to the ground, being immediately trampled by running feet.

The camera cut back to the same highway shot from earlier, the roadway now clustered with smoldering carnage as dark silhouettes ran in every direction.

The camera again cut to a large city with signage in Japanese, massive LED displays on buildings glitching with overflowing splice warnings. One screen in particular showed a picture of AVA, her grinning face plastered with a massive “ELIMINATED” sign in Kanji, subtitled in Hiragana.

People below stood silently and stoically, heads bowed.

On several adjacent buildings, large posters of SKETCH adorned their sides, bright colors depicting her happy needle smile.

"Statistically 150,000 of these suckers would die each day, anyway," Ponder pressed the button several more times in impatience, "Makes it not seem so bad, huh?"

Dust and filth suddenly erupted into the air as a massive fissure split across the city. Buildings toppled like dominos as everything man-made went dark. Light split from seemingly the core of the earth, the camera cutting out to a far wider shot as massive waves of distortion seemed to be twisting topography back on itself.

A quick insert shot showed a small fuzzy dog yip in terror as the ground scorched black around it, quickly cutting away before the creature's flesh sheered from its bones.

"Tasteful animal cruelty!" Comic sans scrolled across the lower third of the screen, before the TV frayed into indistinguishable static with a deafening percussion.

The planet shuttered as the camera cut out yet further, blisters searing across its surface in countless firestorms that vaulted crust into the atmosphere as if putty.

"Well . . . it's a planet, ya know?" Ponder sighed as the scene dragged on, "Trust me, that entire hunk of rock is going to completely break apart, but at that scale it's probably going to take a few days until it actually looks like it . . . either way, everyone's super dead, and that's what matters."

The lights tinted slightly more red.

"Uh Oh!" Ponder chuckled, "That must mean something slightly worse is going to happen!"

It again brought up the button to its face.

"I know that looked like cheap visual effects to you, C-5" Ponder continued, maniacal grin twitching, "Perhaps I should show you that it looks much cooler up close. Just in enough places to get your attention. You only get completely destroyed if John here fucks up and loses the game for you. Let's just give you a taste so you believe me. You didn't really think would forget, did you?"

His hand steadily approached the button.

"Wait, no!" John cried out, "Ponder, stop! Don't press that remote!"

"Oh okay sure," Ponder took a moment to think, "I guess since you asked, that's good enough for me."

The puppet shrugged and casually tossed the button to John who caught the felt device with horrified flails to keep it off the ground.

"Of course," Ponder continued, suppressing laughter, "That's just a fucking prop. TV isn't real, you moron. Jesus Christ, I'm surrounded by idiots. Let's light it up!!!!!!"

The show cut out, the nurse's UI fraying back to regular programming as she steadily walked down the aisle to Lilly's room.

"Weird," she thought to herself, flicking through more channels to see news reports already beginning to discuss the hacked broadcast.

Suddenly, her UI flashed with Crimson, words spilling across the bottom.

"Splice Anomaly inbound."

***End Part 2