

PuppetGAME Part 3

By Liam Vickers

"I understand it's necessary, sir," the nurse spoke softly, "But a few more days and she might be feeling a bit more herself . . ."

The man turned to his partner, conversation exchanged without a word spoken.

All three figures were faded and worn, sleep deprived features blending them into the hollow background. The hallway was filled with gurneys and mobile life support systems, patients sharing cramped rooms and even beds.

The nurse had no fight left in her, simply bowing her head and sighing.

Coughs rang out like the rhythmic tapping of leaky pipes, machines filing in the gaps in sound.

"She refused eyepiece prosthetics," the nurse's voice carried an air of death, "She's frequently violent with staff, and what few professionals we can manage to fly in. Her mental state is deteriorating faster than her health, and . . . I know it's not my place, agents, but I don't think you'll get the information you're looking for. Not from her."

"We understand," the first agent's skin was wind lashed and worn, his eyes a cold dreary brown. "Simply put," He concluded, words sinking immediately to the floor, "There aren't many options left."

"Of course," the nurse again let exhaustion seep into her resigned voice, "Room 108. I've restrained her to the bed, make sure you lock the door when you leave."

The men nodded solemnly, the nurse brushing past them as she walked like a specter down the grime filled corridors.

"December 21st, 2034," text above the agents scrolled softly, "Welcome to St. Parson's Hospital - Splice Emergency Unit"

The two lanky shadows walked carefully through the clusters of dying and dead, black shoes brushing grey limbs. A suitcase trailed behind one of them, black beady shell catching no reflected light.

Only two other silhouettes stood to watch the agents approach, carefully positioned outside room 108. The light inside the room was dim, seeping out from the door like pale water.

ID's were checked, each man having his turn to nod silently, before the first agent's hand slowly pressed against the cold metal handle.

The deadbolt creaked softly, cold air rushing out from the room in a decayed whisper.

The figure inside was calmly lying face up, hands and legs bound with cloth that lightly cut into her grey flesh. Her black hair trailed smoothly down her gaunt cheek bones, yellow flashing in the darkness as the agents softly entered.

The skin around her empty eye sockets was mangled and malformed, gruesome purple streaks trailing with infection. One mechanical yellow refractor filled the empty void of her right eye, black gears shifting like insects. The other side of her face was still wrapped in bloodied gauze several days old.

"Good evening Ms. Matthews," the agent spoke slowly as he closed the door behind him, "We're sorry to disturb you so late. I'm agent Gomez, my partner here is agent Trate. We just have a few questions if you'd like to help us."

Lilly didn't say anything, haunting mechanical eye unyielding in its stare.

"The nurses tell me you're upset," the agent continued after the silence dragged on. He softly pulled up a chair and sat down with a heavy sigh, "tell me that . . . maybe you're blaming yourself for all this?"

Lilly's skin bristled with hatred at the man's approach as he leaned at her bedside.

Her fingers twitched.

"13 cities around the world," He shook his head slowly, "All at once, the only warning a seemingly joke broadcast put on by a sesame street charact-"

Lilly's hand strained against the strap with a harsh snap, the agent's words being cut off.

"Sesame Street character." He concluded with a lengthy sigh, "You're too young for that reference, anyway. The fact you saved yourself and a handful of others in your condition makes you a hero, Lilly. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to convince them the warning was real."

Lilly's fingers softly scraped at the bed.

"They could have all burned for all I care." Words finally slithered from her lips like bile.

Gomez was slightly taken aback, before he simply ducked his head, clasping his fingers together.

"Of course . . . your brother." He spoke slowly.

He let the silence hang for some time before changing tactics.

"Let's get to the point, Ms. Matthews," he spoke, leaning back, "As I'm sure you're aware, Ponder's demonstration cost the lives of millions, and with the epicenter of several Splices in your home town, none of the other witnesses survived. We need to talk about what you saw that day, the day your brother was taken."

"Like you give a damn," Lilly's hissing voice dripped, "I've already talked to enough agents. You can't do a damn thing."

This time Gomez flashed a smirk, Lilly's eye narrowing slightly.

"You seem to have gotten us confused," he spoke slowly, reaching into his jacket pocket, "I'm afraid we're a different agency than you've dealt with before."

The plastic coating of his badge shimmered lightly with blue hued AR encryption as he softly held it up to Lilly.

"I don't care about what you were doing before or after the event, I don't give a damn about the mimic you had contact with. We have bigger fish to fry." the man tucked his badge away again, motioning to agent Trate who slowly stepped forwards.

"I want to know anything you can tell me about this . . ." He continued, Trate carefully opening the suitcase and heaving upwards to lift a cylindrical plexiglass container nearly a foot thick.

Lilly's eye widened, gears churning.

The metal insect leg inside rapped softly at the glass like an impatient hand before intermittently lying motionless extended periods of time.

"We briefly spoke to another witness in urgent care before their passing," Gomez continued, motioning again to Trate, "They mentioned that the puppet device possessed several dozen metallic apertures that mimicked what they referred to as "spider legs.""

Lilly's eye was still wide, for the first time showing some signs of movement.

"This sample was picked up nearly two decades ago in 2016 after a seemingly random Splice in the Pacific," Gomez nodded as Trate softly placed the heavy container on the corner of the bed, "Can you confirm this is similar to what you saw two days ago?"

Lilly tried to sit up, Gomez cataloging her reaction.

"You see," he continued, "We're not like the other agencies, Ms. Matthews. This isn't new to us . . . We can get your brother back."

"No you can't." A crooked smile crawled across her face, metallic eye transfixed on the leg.

Gomez sighed, moving to speak again, before Lilly cut him off.

"Because you don't want to. You won't do what's necessary," her smile dripped saliva, dried blood on her bandages cracking as her face shifted into euphoria, "But I will. There is nothing I will not become. Nothing I will not do."

Gomez's face deepened into worry, eyes flicking to a projected TV display barely visible outside the room's foggy glass.

A puppet on it waved its arms in excitement, Lilly's eyes narrowing in hatred as she watched.

"And your partners are as follows!" Ponder's eyes widened on the TV screen, grin splitting across his face.

John paled, eyes flashing nervously to the camera shakily scanning the contestants.

"Step forward when your name is called," the puppet continued, "As last week's winner, Malie and her partner will be spliced in first! The difference of 5 minutes here will mean nearly an hour in your destination dimension, so order is important to success! You will only learn the round goal once you've been spliced in, so be sure to stay light on your feet and be prepared for anything!"

Malie flickered, avoiding the eyes of the other contestants.

"The red players this round have already been chosen," Ponder grinned at the camera, "You know who you are, but no one else does. Keep in mind that if you haven't been tagged as Red in your UI, it doesn't necessarily mean your partner has . . . But the chances are more likely."

John's eyes crawled along his UI.

He hadn't been tagged. Everything was blank.

"This is for your home dimension, everyone who has even given a single damn about you in your entire life, plus the lives of billions of innocents," Ponder seemed to narrow its nonexistent eyes, "There is no failing here. Only one can succeed in the end, and there will be blood. I wish you all the most mediocre of luck. Let's do this!"

Brilliant lights split from dark canisters overhead, flashing and swiveling as Ponder played an audience applause track on a keyboard in front of him.

"And our first two players," The puppet called over the noise, an enormous dial of lights and colors spilling into a projection screen behind him, "Malie and Door Guy!"

"Fuck yeah!" Door Guy cheered, pumping his fist, "Malie, my muse, we got this! Damn, why are my partners always so amazing? How'd you get so cute, my turquoise poltergeist? And smart too!"

Malie flushed deep red, gaze jittering away in embarrassment.

The other girls in the contestant lineup rolled their eyes.

"Alright settle down, Door Guy," Ponder shook its head, "You only say that to literally every partner you've had. Eventually people are going to catch on. Your round starts now!"

"But this time I mean it," Door Guy again winked at Malie as they stepped forwards, physically causing her pain as she drowned in embarrassment.

The two of them suddenly split from view with a soundless implosion of air, dirt and char painting the ground.

"Next!" Ponder held up a tiny prop envelope, opening it only to turn it to the camera and reveal that it was blank, "Halogen and Kali!"

"Mmmhuehuehue," Halogen giggled to herself, fanning her neck with her hand and waltzing forwards, yellow raincoat billowing behind her, "A weapon of mass destruction, how positively amusing."

Kali said nothing as she walked like a specter, chains rattling behind her with a grizzly chorus of needles and metal.

"I am positively akdmonored," Halogen swooned closer to the creature, eyes sparking a hideous glow, "I've never had such a ghastly servant, but I believe we can make great impotants in due time with you protecting me. Hmmhuhu . . ."

"Player status . . ." Kali's cold voice seeped out slowly, "Red."

Halogen paled.

"Asa Fear, Siren queen of C-YH1," Kali's dead eyes and words fell to the floor with needle tips, "I will be ending your life upon the beginning of this round."

"Wait . . . WAIT!" Halogen flailed, "WHAT?! Can she just admit that?! Yo- you- you, don't tell me that! You insolent little parasite! You will not betray me!"

The creature kept its head bowed, chains beginning a terrifying screeching ring as they vibrated with distortive waves of heat. The ground around it began to partially liquefy.

"Ponder!" Halogen shrieked, throwing her arms down, "She can't do that, right?! Is she lying?! Ponder?!"

"Well shit, good luck," The puppet shrugged, "It's technically not an illegal move to admit your player status. It's not smart if you need the element of surprise . . . But I think subject 12 will be okay without that, don't you think?"

"WHAT?!" Halogen grew faint, needles spilling from her wrist as she continued backing away, "Ponder, I will not stand for this! I am a queen, I will rule you all! I demand you-"

The two of them cracked from view with a violent fissure, silence rushing back into the room.

"Well someone's boned," Ponder again giggled to itself, before re-grabbing its same prop envelope, "Let's hope she can run fast and this round doesn't end too soon. Who's next?"

John, Sarah, and Cold all stood nervously, but a figure beside them couldn't seem to contain itself, shaking with excitement.

"Me, me, me!" SKETCH jittered like an overcharged battery about to pee itself, pink backpack flopping with jangling keychains, "Come onnnnnnn . . ."

Her ghastly blank eyes were filled with the lights of the room.

"SKETCH and Sarah!" Ponder called, SKETCH immediately jumping 360 and letting out a shriek.

Sarah pulled back in disgust as the creature scurried across the floor in a blur of grey, clawed hands clacking around her back as it hugged her.

"This is my chance!" The creature barely staggered as Sarah shoved her away, "I know this game is hard for you, Sarah, maybe I can show you how to make it fun!"

Sarah frowned, steely eyes narrowing in hatred.

"John," she didn't even address the monster, "Find me if you can once the round has started. I have something important to tell you. Watch out for that girl on your right."

John's eyes widened, unasked questions going unanswered as SKETCH and her exploded from existence.

Soot and ash rained from the fissure, settling down like snow on John's head and the purple beanie of Cold beside him.

She seemed to be shivering slightly, eyes locked on the ground. Her skin pulsed with death grey, gangly limbs swaddled in minuscule clothing. Her exposed stomach bared several grueling scratches across its smooth emaciated surface, stick like legs jutting into large pink boots. A thin layer of dried blood had settled over everything.

Suddenly, her limbs fell limp, her body sinking to the floor.

John recoiled in concern, the girl's head nearly cracking against the tile.

"Umph!" Her puppet flailed as it was trapped under her, John pressing his own to the ground as he knelt down hesitantly.

"C- . . . Sarah? Cold?" He glanced curiously to the puppet at the podium who simply stood watching, "Yooooooo, you alright?"

The girl suddenly showed ragged signs of moment, chilling bones creaking as she curled into a fetal position. The tears came first, hot water rolling slowly down her face before her mouth curled wide to intercept their path.

Her body began convulsing, John's hand stopping in its track as he put it out to help her.

Saliva rapidly split apart like spider webs inside her mouth as her grin carved further, peeling back frigid flesh.

Then the laughter started.

The sickly noises were haunting and wrong, the girl's gaunt body seemingly breaking just to force them out.

John's face fell in confused terror, backing up slightly.

Cold suddenly rolled onto her back, face twisted into unhinged laughter as her pinprick eyes stared holes in the ceiling above her. Her hands and feet curled on the floor, her face blushing a dark red.

"Woah, Alright then," Ponder finally spoke from the podium, "That's a character introduction . . . I guess. Good luck with that one, John."

The world split from view.

"Sensor's been tripped," the man shrugged, Kevlar vest squeaking against his helmet, "These cells are getting old though, the feeds don't even work."

"So what's inside?" The woman behind him hurried to catch up, assault rifle clanking in her hands, "Without camera feeds, how can we see what we're walking into? Just through the door latch?"

"Oh, no, there's nothing there, Andrews," the man shook his head, "This is D block, the facility hasn't held any fallout in here for probably 20 years."

"So why are we armed?" Andrew's face was obscured by green metal, lights from her helmet painting the hallways in front of her.

"Grant's been breathing down my neck about following protocol," The man's own weapon dangled casually in one hand, "We won't use them, but I'm tired of hearing his shit. You know how it goes around here. Armed at all times, even when shits just malfunctioning."

The dim green lights above flickered, stretching their shadows long along the corridor.

A pair of double doors at the end lay obscured in shadow, padlocked to a seemingly absurd degree.

The doors had no windows, but a large metal latch seemed to act as a portal.

"Keys, Hacket?" Andrews spoke curiously, "Was I meant to have those?"

"Nope," he muttered absentmindedly, presenting a bundle of archaic metal keys around a silver ring.

"Block D." A sign above the doors read, "Eastern Ward - Splice fallout containment unit 48."

"Do a quick check through the door portal," Hacket nudged Andrews, gesturing to the cameras watching them, "Again, there's nothin' in there, but I ain't gettin' reprimanded again for letting you greenhorns be lax."

"Absolutely sir," Andrews nodded, sliding a large deadbolt to the side, the old warped metal screeching in protest.

"Just wave your flashlight around in there a bit," Hacket muttered as he checked through the various keys, "Jesus fuck, how many damn stupid keys does this place need?"

Andrews slowly pulled back the latch about eye level on the heavy metal door, a small slit beneath it allowing someone to peer through.

She softly brought up the flashlight attached to her rifle, peering through the dark slash.

"Fucking hell," Hacket sighed, as he kneeled down and tried the same key for the third time, "I'm about to break these locks off with my damn head, help me look through these things. Ya done yet?"

"Someone . . . inside . . ." Andrew's voice was weak and faint, uncharacteristic fear having overtaken her voice.

"No, these keys," Hacket clearly didn't hear her, "I said are ya done?"

"Hacket . . ." Andrews began to slowly back up, "Don't unlock that door . . ."

He finally slide the correct key into a massive hole connecting the various strands of padlocks.

"Hacket stop!" Andrews suddenly rushed forwards, kicking his hand away with her steel toed combat boot.

Hacket cursed loudly, waving his gloved hand in agony and shooting to his feet.

"Fucking Christ, Andrews!" He barked, "Are you daft? What is-"

A sudden knock came casually from the door.

Three soft raps.

Hacket stopped cold, eyes slowly swiveling from Andrew's reflective helmet to the dark door.

"Grant? This is Hacket," he slowly spoke into the radio at his shoulder, "Are you getting this?"

The line fizzled with shrieking static.

"Grant?" Hacket tried again, pulling the device from his shoulder and holding it in front of him, "We've got something in block D. I repeat, we've go-"

"You fucking moron," a voice at the other side of the door called out, "It's me you numb skull. Open up."

"Grant?" Hacket froze in fear, eyes darting to Andrews as he rapidly motioned for her to try her own radio, "Repeat that."

"Oh, you more deaf than usual today?" Grant knocked at the door again, "Cut the chatter."

"This is Agent Andrews," Andrews spoke into her radio, flashlight beam looking through the slit, but coming up with nothing but black, "We've got a situation at D block. Confirm Grant's location in headquarters?"

"How about I confirm my location here," The voice at the other side of the door called out, "Oh for fuck's sake, Andrews, you're new here, I get it, but if you want to stick around, do a fallout check quickly and let me in."

"Confirm that radio call?" Hacket repeated, again coming up with static, "We've got a situation down at-"

"Confirmed-" a female voice suddenly spoke out, "This is Circe Parson's. We read you, Hacket and Andrews."

The line fizzled again.

"We've got Agent Grant on a service request at D Block East Ward," the line returned to focus, "I repeat, Agent Grant is currently fulfilling a service request in the east ward of D block. Do you confirm, Hacket?"

"Confirmed," Hacket's eyes narrowed, gaze darting to again motion Andrews to check through the door latch.

"Repeat that, Parsons," Andrews shook her head, "I'm seeing something blocking view of the latch. This might be fallout."

"Received and noted," Parson's voice crackled, "Proceed with standard fallout check. However, note that we have no record of fallout in your area. Headquarters is giving you a go ahead."

"This isn't right," Hacket muttered to himself slowly, "Something is off here . . ."

"Entity in question," Andrews nervously stammered, trying to remember memorized words, "What are you claiming to be?"

"Agent Grant Charles," the voice on the other side spoke, "And I won't jump over your next 10 standard questions, Andrews, but please go through them fast. I was off an hour ago."

"Mother's maiden name?" Andrews fumbled to pull out a clipboard with names and information listed.

"Gunnison," the voice sighed.

Andrews stared quietly at the clipboard.

She flinched nervously as Hacket tried to look over her shoulder.

"I'm going to need face to face confirmation of your update, Parson's," Hacket pushed, "You know protocol. We should have been informed of this in person prior to coming down here."

He slid the door latch closed, motioning to Andrews.

"Come on, we're going," his finger now rested on the trigger of his weapon, "Something is wrong here."

"Noted, Hacket," his radio crackled, "Confirm your safe departure from potentially hazardous situation for headquarters."

"Confirmed," Hacket nodded, picking back up the keys, "If I had to guess, I'd say Ghoul in East Ward, D Block. But Andrews and I are unharmed and safely returning to headquarters."

"Confirmed," the radio sizzled.

"Your security is pretty tight, alright," Andrews wiped at her helmet visor as she walked beside him, freckled face barely visible beneath, "I didn't think you guys knew so much."

Hacket's eyes suddenly flicked to his radio, seeing faint tendrils of turquoise smoke softly rising from it.

"Andrews," he suddenly froze, "This isn't right. This almost looks like . . . Oh shit! Poltergeist in the system! Drop everything, we've got to-"

His eyes flashed back to Andrews only to see a mangled smile of needle teeth peering out from behind the visor.

His torso split open with a devastating crunch.

The girl's skin slowly flayed off as she wiggled her hooked fingers inside his sternum, giggles rocking her body as his eyes bulged in agony.

"Oh my! This is going to be a tough one!" SKETCH cooed, slowly raking outwards as her other hand pressed his head to the wall, "you guys know all about us!"

"Appreciate you confirming your safety," the voice came through his radio again, device beginning to heat up, "But in a change of plans, we're going to need you to stay there, actually. I'm so sorry."

Hacket coughed up blood, hand falling limp as his gun clattered to the floor along with his flaying entrails.

SKETCH finally slashed his hollowed body from the wall, playfully plopping down and quickly working the membranes from his small intestine in order to wind it together into a braid.

"SKETCH, yo!" The voice on the other side of the door slithered, "If ya get a chance, I'd much appreciate you holding up your end of the deal."

"Okay, yeah!" SKETCH bounded to her feet, armor now far too large for her little girl form as she wobbled her way like a penguin over to the door, dragging intestines and the keys behind her.

The locks fell to the floor after she spent several seconds jangling the proper key into place.

"Well these guys aren't going to let us out easy," Door Guy yawned as he stretched and stepped into the hallway, merely a shadow along the walls.

SKETCH immediately plopped back down and continued braiding.

"Thanks cutie," Door Guy winked at the camera watching him, turquoise glow painting the lens.

It quickly swiveled away, red light blinking.

"N- . . . No problem." Malie's voice squeaked from Hackett's radio.

John tumbled across the floor as a pressure wave split out from around him. He finally rolled to a stop only after impacting a wall.

With everything pitch black, he blinked with wincing pain, red lights slowly warming up and spilling from his UI.

A hospital? No . . . A prison? Why was the inbound splice so much less destructive than usual?

Reflective flooring and beds surrounded him, though the attached tables lay scattered with gruesome tools like something out of a mad scientist's lair. Red and blue lights rhythmically flickered on and off, several large dome shaped wall protrusions glimmering with dull chrome.

Massive plexiglass walls divided each space, only fitted with tiny air holes at the top.

"Round Begin!" His UI flashed faintly in the corner of his vision, "Gaze for 2 seconds to view round goal."

John's eyes slowly built up the slider bar until the menu opened, only a single line of text spilling into view.

"Escape the containment facility alive." It read.

As John continued looking, his eyes suddenly fell on a tattered corpse across his room, a mangled figure with black hair and twisted limbs.

As his light reached it, however, it suddenly stirred to life, limbs slashing at the ground as it scrambled forwards out of nowhere.

John flailed, backing up only to have it lunge with horrific speed, pinning him to the ground as saliva speckled his face.

The giggles started again, hair trailing down from its gaunt skin and sweeping along John's eyes.

"You came back . . ." Cold's words were like poisonous tar, her bloody hands clutching at his wrists as she held him down, "You came back for me."

John's heart pumped enough blood to let him run for several years, breaths struggling as her weight pressed against him.

"H- . . . Hey," he choked, red light highlighting her body as he scanned her in panic, "Uh, oh, hey Cold . . ."

"After everything I did to you?" She slithered down to lie on top of him, tearful hysterics continuing to shake her, "I will make it up to you, I promise. Cold promises, okay?"

"Uh, er," he nervously tried to wiggle free, "Sure, okay. And what exactly did you do to me again? Just er . . . For the record."

Her dead irises sparked with something indescribable, head shaking as she flushed further red. She sunk yet closer, head burying in his chest, hands clawing at his wrists hard enough to draw blood.

"I killed you," she whispered softly.

John winced as her nails raked along his veins, mind racing.

"In my home dimension. But only because you didn't love me back," she tried to keep his eyes in hers, hands only gripping tighter as John tried to free himself, "I wanted you to match my feelings, to be there and hold me, to smile and say everything was okay. You gave that to me in death."

She laughed, curling like a cat as her eyes flashed up to stare into his.

"But now you're here," she whispered, fingers playing with the gashes she opened up, "Because you want to be with me again, even after your body rotted and fell away."

"Get off me, ya damn psycho!" Her puppet muffled out from under her, "Have a yandere breakdown elsewhere!"

"I'm a red!" Cold suddenly shook her head, finger pressing to John's lip to silence his nonexistent talking, "But I won't do anything to hurt you, John! Cold would never! Not so long as you love me!"

"Well you, er," John choked out as he finally was able to turn the tables and grab her hands off him, "That's quite a bit of incentive for specific feelings, I guess."

He rubbed his head as Cold finally dropped her hands and allowed him to sit up slightly, still sitting on his stomach.

"At least for this round," he winced, "but I gotta be honest with you Cold, I don't even know you, and I don't think I'm the same John you killed."

Cold jumped to her feet, hand splaying out to help him up.

John took several seconds to look at her outstretched limb before nervously taking it and hoisting himself up.

"Sure you are," she cooed as she kept a hold of his hand and pressed against him, "And I love you. Do you love me back?"

"If I say no, will you rearrange my face again?" John cringed, letting out a small laugh.

Cold's smile rotted away, eyes horrific disks of cobalt as she thumbed a large blade in her pocket.

"Why would you say that?" She whispered, eyes darting away, "I don't understand ..."

"Okay, Cold," John winced, "See that reaction? Not what I'm looking for. This isn't really going to work, this whole crazy person thing. I don't-"

A flash of silver nearly severed John's windpipe as Cold slated him against a plexiglass wall, gangly limbs angling to press the cold steel against his flesh.

"I love you," she whispered softly, "You don't understand. You don't-"

Her eyes widened as John suddenly pivoted, slamming the blade from her hand. She squeaked, John's own hand grabbing her wrist and slashing it against the plexiglass wall with a hard crack.

The blade clattered to the floor before his foot kicked it upwards, puppeted hand catching it in its mouth.

"No, YOU don't understand!" He hissed, tone suddenly much darker, "My home, my sister, my dimension, EVERYTHING I care about is being undone by this game, and the longer I spend in these stupid rounds, the further I get from being able to stop it."

Cold's eyes were starchy wide and unblinking.

"Don't threaten me," John barely winced as Cold's own puppet flayed out metallic pincers, "If the John you knew in your dimension would just lie there and let you manipulate him, he's not the same as me."

Cold flushed.

"I'm glad you like me, Cold," he continued, quickly loosening his grip and sighing, "I- . . . I'm sorry, but I have too much to fight for to let you be my enemy here. I want to work together, would that be okay?"

His puppet spit the knife out into his hand, where he slowly thumbed it around and presented it to Cold.

"If you're red, it means I could also win the round by killing you." He continued, watching her simply stare at the blade, "But I'm not going to do that. I want to save people, Cold, not betray them. Red or blue, that's not how I do things."

He urged the handle of the blade forwards.

"You're right that I don't understand," he finally just pressed it into her hand, "But you have to understand me too, alright? If you think you love me, I can't reciprocate that because I don't know you. But if you help me out here, if we can find a way out of this

together . . . I don't know, we can go see a movie in my dimension or something later, alright?"

Cold shook slightly, knife immediately falling from her hand again.

John sighed, eyes dropping to watch it clatter across the floor.

"Listen," he took a deep breath as he bent down to pick it up, "I really am going to need your help, okay? I know it's hard to hear, but this is a good opportunity for a clean slate. I won't judge you for your past crimes, I don't care about who you were before this . . . I just hope we can do the right thing here and now."

He grabbed the knife off the floor, fingers scraping on the blood dried to its surface.

"What do you say?" He urged, eyes looking back up, "I'm sorry about everything, I hope we can work toge-"

He was nearly pushed backwards as Cold's hands swaddled his waist and she forcefully kissed him.

"Gah!" He flailed back, "Jesus Christ! What did I JUST say?"

"That was me kissing you," she blushed, immediately letting go and sinking back, "You said we could work together and if I do my best, you'll love me."

"Very VERY wrong paraphrasing," John face palmed.

"I will do my best," she continued, "Cold will do her best. She will protect John until the end. She will be so valuable, talented, and dedicated that John will have to love her back."

Her eyes fell, face blushing profusely. "Then maybe eventually," she continued quietly after a short pause, "You will be the one to kiss me."

John sighed heavily.

"Alright, whatever," he responded, "That's fine, Cold. Seems to me like you're throwing your life away, but if you truly think so much of me, I'll-"

The room rumbled softly, a suddenly distorted flash of blue enveloping the space.

The light faded as soon as it began, John left staring in confusion at nothing.

"Wha . . ." He shook his head, "What the heck was that?"

"Every ten minutes," Cold's face was still red, smiling faintly, "all injuries sustained by still living contestants are healed."

The lights flickered overhead.

"Right, of course," John shook his head, "why not, I suppose that makes about as much sense as everything else. Either way, we're the last to splice in, meaning we're already behind everyone else. We've gotta get out of here. You ready, Cold?"

Cold's smile reached new heights, ghostly hand softly reaching for the blade in his hand.

Somewhere distant, an explosion rocked the facility.

"You lowly monster!" Halogen shrieked as the explosion dissipated around her, hood fluttering behind her as she darted away in panic, "Just you wait, I'll- I'll- I'll get back at you for this! I'll make yo-"

She shrieked, rolling to the ground to avoid a tile being lobbed in a blur of speed.

The material shattered against the wall with a deafening crack, immediately being followed by many more tiles.

She scrambled in fear, a haunting figure walking slowly after her, tendrils of distorted air slashing outwards. Its ghostly pale skin seemed to shift with heat waves, searing green eyes quavering in the wind.

"You're ruining any element of stealth, you brute!" Halogen cried, face red with frustration as she pressed her hands against her sides, "You might want to win by homiciding me, but you cannot brutalize a queen! I own you!"

She again flailed to the side as the ceiling was lacerated with cuts of air, gas lines spilling ooze overhead.

The hallway was wreathed in flames with another volatile explosion, Halogen's needle teeth gritting as she shielded her face with the puppet.

The flames bent around the fuzzy creature as if water.

"MY PATIENCE HAS RECENTLY BEEN TAMPERED WITH!" Halogen screamed over the echoing repercussions, bathed in obscuring smoke, "Your insolence is applauding! Enough is enough!"

Her non-puppeted hand thrashed outwards, razor thin wire slicing from her wrist like unspooling hair. The line glistened in the dim light, Halogen's discolored eyes lighting up.

Kali slowly lifted a hand, head still bowed as the smoke flattened against the walls with unnatural wind to clear her view. Her chains slithered softly behind her, shrieking and glowing red hot.

Halogen slowly came into view through the haze, standing directly in the center of the hallway, head tilted as if broken. A grizzly smile split across her face.

"What variety of WMD takes such intervals to kill one person?" Halogen's voice slithered out cooly, laced with toxic poison that dripped to her feet, "Are your godlike overpowered abilities not suspect for ya?"

The ground by Kali's feet vaporized, tiles vaulting upwards in a chorus of shrieking metal as countless slashes of air tore forwards like knives.

Halogen gracefully parried to the side, waving her puppet to absorb the distortions and slashing a tile back at Kali with her large yellow rain boot.

"Gonna have to get closer for that," Halogen's tongue slithered, eyes narrowing in amusement as the tile shattered into dust in front of Kali, "Distortions aren't going to be gantry anymore, you poor soul."

Kali's eyes sparked into view as she slowly lifted her head, chains rising beside her laser focused gaze. She stopped walking, teeth gnashing.

"In a fair sphere . . ." Halogen soothed, thumbing with the zipper of her coat as she licked her lips, "I wasn't the one who started this compiled thing. You're the red player here."

The world fell into liquefied blurs as Kali suddenly darted forwards, floor exploding out behind her.

"But me?" Halogen held her ground, softly biting at her hand, "Oh, I guess I'm just the . . . INNOCENT BLUE!"

Kali's leg was nearly cleaved from its socket as it contacted paralyzing razor wire stung between the walls, more of the shimmering string spilling from Halogen's wrist as she thrashed it like a lasso.

The creature rolled to the ground in a flurry of metal, Halogen cackling madly as she darted forwards with, razor wire loops tangling in the flurry of chains and slicing through Kali's flesh as she yanked tighter.

"What's this?!" Halogen's saliva spilled like water as her mouth stayed wide with hysterical laughter, "Paralyzed so soon?! Shame you won't be able to move when I-"

Halogen screamed in agony, explosion of gore leaving her to tumble backwards.

Kali calmly got back to her feet, shimmering wire vaporizing around her.

On the ground, Halogen rolled in excruciating pain, screams ripping outwards and she wrenched out the tile shard embedded in her left eye.

"You cannot paralyze a corpse." Kali's voice was emotionless and plain, "My muscles are controlled through matter distortion, not metabolic processes. I am curious as to your thought process."

"I'm so ailed of you ghastly monsters!" Halogen hissed, more wire spinning out as she dropped the bloodied tile behind her and tried to stagger to her feet.

She barely got upright again before Kali was suddenly feet from her, chains cracking with terminal velocity as they lashed forwards.

"Fulfilling Red player task now," She spoke coldly.

Halogen's non-puppeted arm was sheered from its socket, but the chain meant to impact her skull was deflected to the side harmlessly as she threw her puppet in front of herself.

She stumbled back in soundless shock, frantically staggers quickly devolving to further tumbles as her arm socket gushed sticky blood.

Kali rushed forwards again, before suddenly flinching as a massive crack left light to flash in front of her face.

The bullet deflected back down the hallway, hole punching the armed guard in the face.

Down the hall, lights and laser sights suddenly painted Kali's form and countless more agents ran into view.

"Fallout possesses bullet redirection!" voices rang out, "Incendiary rounds, front line! Class 4+ parasite!"

Kali hissed, eyes narrowing.

"FIRE!" A voice commanded, the hallway immediately being painted with blinding light as Halogen dropped to the ground and frantically crawled away.

Gunfire echoed far too close for comfort, John flinching back against the wall.

"Subject 12," Cold whispered, eyes nervously scanning the security cameras in front of them, "She's close. She's the only one who would attract so much attention."

"Kali?" John echoed nervously, stepping forwards as the camera swiveled, "The Weapon of Mass Destruction?"

"The parasite," Cold nodded, rushing past John to the next safe spot, "We must be sure we never cross paths with something so-"

A figure staggered out from a door just behind them, directly into line with the cameras.

They collapsed in a pool of gore, breaths fast and frantic before shakily standing up again.

John flinched, whirling around and hesitating in panic.

"Leave her," Cold hissed in a whisper, "She'll distract the cameras, let's go."

"W- wait," John staggered, "Who is-"

"Injuries are healed by the puppets every ten minutes!" Cold hissed, "Remember? It should be any minute now! She'll be fine, but we won't if we stay here!"

The gunfire grew closer, screams echoing out. The figure again collapsed.

"John!" Cold snapped, "Now is our chance!"

"Who is that . . ." John looked sick, eyes flashing between the hallway ahead and the dying form.

The figure rolled to its side in agony, spitting up blood and revealing its hideous empty eye socket.

John's feet clacked against the ground as he darted out into the open.

Cold's eyes exploded wide, teeth gnashing.

"We can't leave her!" John shook his head as he hastily wrestled Halogen's bulky and bloodied coat off to be able to lift her, "We'll just drag her until she hea-"

"WAIT STOP! That's a Siren!" Cold cried, "Don't touch her bare ski-"

John flinched as blood pooled beneath his fingers, rough shark like skin hidden beneath the girl's seemingly porcelain flesh.

Toxic sweat immediately began leaching between their contacting skin, John's blood discoloring.

An explosion shook the hallway, light visible down the adjacent corner.

Halogen's words slurred, but a paled grin suddenly worked up her face.

"So where's Sarah, though?" Door Guy whistled whimsically as he strolled down the corridor, "SKETCH, what happened to that partner of yours? And why are you still wearing that dumb suit?"

The little girl bounded beside him, clawed hand pressing against her lip as she looked up to the ceiling.

"I think she's distracting guards," she giggled, "probably. I don't know, she's slow."

"Oh really now?" Door Guy cocked an eyebrow, glowing eyes narrowing slightly, "And why would-"

His silhouette suddenly shuttered with black vapors as he grew nervous, eyes flashing down an adjacent hallway.

"Malie?!" He hissed, "What's going on?"

Footsteps began rounding the corner at the end of the hallway, lights painting the walls.

"Ah shits!" Door Guy flailed, "We've got company! SKETCH, we've gotta go!"

"Oh . . . Do we now?" SKETCH paused, eyes flicking up curiously as she put her finger to her lip again.

"I don't know where they came from!" Malie cried in Door Guy's UI, "I wasn't getting anything in my feeds! They must know I'm in the system! Someone ratted us out!"

SKETCH'S spine began to shift.

Armed men spilled around the corner, laser sights immediately painting Door Guy as he flailed.

Suddenly, however, a foot swiped his legs out from under him, bullets littering his back from point blank range.

Black sludge painted the tiles as he tumbled across the floor and SKETCH continued to shoot, having again assumed Andrew's skin.

Her freckled face was flushed with terror as she ran to the approaching armada, throwing up her hands.

One last turn of her head gave a snarky wink to DOOR GUY.

"Sorry champ," she giggled under her breath for him to hear, "Only one team is winning this thing. Funny prank, no?"

Sarah stood amongst the army, steely eyes narrowed. She was handcuffed, yet appeared very much in control.

"I highly recommend killing that ghoul now," she spoke coldly to several nervous scientists beside her, "That thing is not on my team."

Door Guy spat up black goo, bullet punctures slowly spilling ooze and closing shut like putty as he lay paralyzed.

Kali flinched backwards, heels scrapping back along tiles as volatile explosions shattered her vision apart.

"Volley one!" A voice screamed above the gunfire. A block of figures 8 wide and 3 deep formed an intimidating silhouette to block off the hallway. Men with dark green helmets and piercing head mounted flashlights sprayed bullets with sinister persistence.

Blinding flashes of detonating incendiary rounds continued to form a glowing sphere of energy around the creature. Her dark eyes danced with the orange fireworks, before everything suddenly cut off, several dark grey masses dropping in their arc. The creature glanced up with disinterest.

Grenades.

Her lids narrowed absentmindedly, posture devolving further before she suddenly scrambled forwards at the last minute. A blinding flurry of metallic slices left the girl on one knee as shrapnel scattered like dust, firing pins punctured from the perforated shells.

The diffused hunks of now useless metal clattered like stones around her, her ghastly form slowly standing upright as her mouth began to curl unnaturally upwards.

"Volley two!" The voice again screamed, "This one's been trained! Begin cautiously retreating, and keep that fire u-"

The creature cackled, lips splitting wide in hysterics.

Her legs snapped against the ground to rupture tiles in every direction as she tore across the hallway.

"Fire fire fire!" The voice jumped up an octave of fear, "Push it back!"

The first men in the line splayed out like insects the minute Kali was in range despite the commander's orders.

The first body stabbed to the floor exploded with distortions before he could get a shot off, his arm spewing hot blood like a paintbrush as the creature wrenched it in an arc towards her.

Two other fleeing members saw their torsos leave their legs milliseconds before metal spears ruptured through their mangled bodies to carve them lengthways.

The creature softly reached out its emaciated hand, a severed arm falling to the wayside as her chain retracted a gun into her possession.

Her finger curled around the trigger. The screaming blurs before her erupted into a frenzy and more guns clattered to the floor.

Diffused grenades fell around the creature the minute they were lobbed, the only explosions resulting from shells she intentionally deflected back or disregarded completely. Limbs sprayed like discarded laundry as she sprinted forwards, the fastest and most panicked runners not nearly fast enough.

The creature ignored most of them, however.

She had her target.

"Drop the bayonet, human," Halogen giggled, blowing a puff of air to move hair from her eye. Her puppet pressed closer to John's neck, countless spines wreathing his flesh with metal.

"We don't have time for this!" John struggled, "Halogen, just stop! You can't kill me without being eliminated, and if the facility guards find us here, we'll all die! We helped you until you healed, let me go!"

Cold's eyes were starchy wide with absolute horror, teeth gnashed together. Her grip on the knife was so tight the handle nearly cracked.

"Oh we'll exit," Halogen narrowed her eyes to match Cold's gaze, neither of them flinching as they stood in the middle of the hallway, "Just as soon as your acquaintance here disarms herself."

"Don't . . ." Cold's hands began to shake, "Don't touch him . . ."

"Okay, chance delivery of the final!" Halogen hissed, ghastly mouth spilling toxic saliva onto John's shirt, "Kali is catching up! There's no way I'm getting past these guards without a human hostage, so gravity the blade and let us pass, or John loses his windpipe!"

"She won't kill me!" John snapped, "She won't risk losing this game!"

He struggled again.

"Halogen," he snapped, "I'll help you willingly, there's no need for this! I want to work together!"

"Fighting for audience's favor?" Halogen scoffed, "Being nice to avoid getting voted off is only going to get you killed here and now!"

Metallic spines pressed in closer to halt his movements.

Cold quivered slightly with a dead grey complexion, fingers slowly sliding to readjust her grip. Her eyes were a calculated dull hue.

"No, you don't understand!" John cried in frustration, "Let me go, Halogen, I'll help you!"

"Oh sure!" Halogen laughed, "I'm sure yo-"

A brutal shriek escaped her lips as a crack of silver slashed at her shoulder, knife spilling out the other side of her flesh.

She spun backwards in agony, John jerking free as the spines scraped past his neck.

Halogen barely had time to glance at the knife in her muscles before Cold was inches away, foot hacking sideways with violent speed.

Halogen's jaw partially dislocated, eyes starched wide as her skull cracked against the wall with Cold's bloodied boot.

Wall tiles scattered to the floor as Halogen staggered, puppeted hand limply flailing to get a grip before Cold's hand slashed at the blade in her shoulder, tearing it sideways and wrenching the girl to the ground with another horrific impact.

Paralyzing wires split it from Halogen like party streamers, Cold dodging with frightening aptitude and immediately thrashing her puppet at the girl's neck.

The serrated orca teeth glimmered towards Halogen's soft flesh, before suddenly being wrenched back.

"Stop!" John's own foot kicked the puppet away, hand rushing to grab Cold's wrist.

She flinched, fighting as John tried to drag her back.

"If you kill her, you die too!" John cried, "Just leave her!"

Halogen lie face up, breathing ragged breaths as her pinprick eyes vibrated with terror. They slowly slid to watch John fight with Cold as she continuously slashed at her, blurring silver inches away.

That's when shouting voices began to round a distant corner ahead of them, the sound of jangling weapons all too apparent.

"Ah shit!" John flailed

Then, from just behind them, blood spilled into the hallway with a massive explosion. The sound of rattling chains could be heard. A facility-wide siren booted up.

"AH SHIT!" John repeated far louder, not even finishing before Cold rapidly darted to a locked door a ways down the hallway, motioning him along.

Her puppet whirred to life, tiny armatures spilling into the handle and immediately clicking the lock free.

The voices were almost upon them, lights beginning to paint the floor.

John was quick to run after cold as she kicked the door open, holding it for him.

He barely took two steps, however, before his limbs suddenly locked up, shimmering razor wire snapping against his ankle.

He crashed to the ground with a soundless cry, Halogen cackling as she promptly took off in the opposite direction.

Cold's eyes exploded wide, flinching and closing the door as armed agents came into view, immediately beginning to fire at Halogen before she disappeared around a corner, John's dragged body following suit.

"Malie, stop this." Sarah hissed, "This won't solve anything!"

"L- I- like hell it won't!" Turquoise text flashed across the UI of every member in the firing squad, "That's my partner, you sick . . . Horrible person!"

The armada stood with their sights still on Door Guy, his smile all but absent as he kneeled before them in the middle of the hallway.

"WARNING - Block A power supply unresponsive" red text flashed on every screen that could display images, siren indicating a small countdown in the corner.

"Kill him and this entire place goes dark!" Turquoise text ran across it, the countdown jumping down several minutes, leaving only 30 seconds, "Good luck getting back your fallout specimens from block A! Drop your weapons!"

"Don't negotiate with her!" Sarah snapped, "The only way you can end this is by letting Andrews and I outside! If you leave that Ghoul alive, he will do everything in his power to stop that from happening!"

"If I can get a word in?" Door Guy put up a finger, cocking an eyebrow, "What exactly did you tell them, Sarah?"

"The truth," she responded, "They know everything."

His finger flopped downwards, eyes squinting.

"And they believed you?" He frowned, before laughing, "Ha! Doubt they would have bought it coming from me. That's some racism right there . . . speciesism? What kind of crackpot organization is this?"

10 seconds left. 9 seconds . . . 8

"Fine, Malie!" Sarah finally gnashed, "You get your wish!"

Her teeth gritted, eyes flashing to the men beside her.

"Stand down," she spoke, "Leave him be for now, what's important is that Andrews and I get outside."

She was met by countless uncertain gazes, but one more siren wail finally caused hands to shuffle, red laser sight dots scurrying along the floor away from Door Guy.

"If you want us all to go, you'll take Andrews and I right out those front doors," Sarah commanded, lifting up her puppeted hand.

"Andrews, we have confirmed your location and identity," one of the members spoke, "Are the things this fallout is saying true?"

"She's human fallout," Andrews nodded with a soft grin as she ran to catch up, "She's telling the truth. Walk and talk with me."

The guns hesitantly trained on Sarah as the entire group began shifting down the hallway. Feet clacked and lights flickered, silence finally falling over everything as Door Guy let out a large sigh.

He stood up after some time, giving a big stretch and yawning.

"Thanks girl," he stretched out, "I guess I should have seen that one coming, this one's on me. Thanks for the impromptu ultimatum."

"W- . . . What do we do now?" Text nervously typed, "Sarah and SKETCH are going to win for sure . . ."

"Yeah, who ever thought telling the truth would get you anywhere," Door Guy slumped, "Only one contestant here could take on that many armed dudes to stop her now."

His eyes widened.

"Malie, check the roster," he snapped his fingers, turning around and tearing down the hallway, "Check who Kali's partner is! We haven't lost yet!"

John twitched slightly, eyes wrenching from the ceiling to glare daggers at Halogen.

The girl responded with a haughty grin, eyes narrowing in amusement as she smoothed down the ruffles on her dress. Beneath her, an agent lay in a crumpled mess, two puncture wounds in his neck spilling blood softly in a massive pool around him.

"Mmmhuehue," Halogen giggled, zipping back up her coat and licking her lips, "Are you ready to end this round, Mr. Matthews?"

John's hands twitched against paralysis, frown growing.

"W- . . . Wait . . ." His voice was hardly recognizable as he had to force out every breath, "Are . . . kidding me?!"

Even his puppet lay with a stupid smile starched into its face, metallic apertures dangling limply.

"Oh what a keygen," Halogen fanned herself with a giggle, slinking forwards slowly like a cat and crawling over his body, "And let's not have you conversing when I'm trying to unruffle things over with the facility, shall we?"

Her lips parted as she sunk downwards, black saliva splitting apart in sticky strands as John's numb arm barely even registered Halogen's jagged black spine being forced up the flesh of his wrist

"You've already got some of me in your bloodstream," her voice slithered, "Swallow this, and your brain turns to mush. Spit it out, and you lose your head."

She leaned forwards, puppet reforming a ghastly vice around his neck as her eyes narrowed to wicked sickles and she kissed him. Saliva spilled to the floor in black viscous blobs, steaming softly.

She giggled again with a flushed face, rolling off him and reaching for the agent's corpse with her other hand.

"Let's play dress up," her voice bubbled with toxicity, "What a fun toy . . ."

Behind the door at the other end of the hall, Cold's eyes flinched, skin paling.

Soldiers softly worked past her shimmering eyes as she spun around to glance out the fogged glass.

Her pastel hands steadily mangled the handle of the knife, stabbing gaze darting to where Halogen and John had disappeared.

Suddenly, a flashlight beam split though the glass, her hair blurring as she slammed against the wall to avoid it. Her eyes narrowed, muscles tensing.

"You see this?" A muffled voice spoke outside of the room, "Voyer, I could have just sworn . . ."

Cold's lids softly sunk closed, chest rising and falling three long times as her mind's eye navigated the sounds outside, her composure growing.

"Who has access to these rooms?" The voice continued slowly, several clanking uniforms sounding out as shadows approached the glass, one faded green visor pressing in close to look through, "If this block is suppos-

His head snapped back as the door slammed open, the man furthest back not even having time to flinch before a flash of silver split out from the dark room. The sheering blade twirled end over end before impacting the flesh between his neck plates as if cutting through butter.

The other agents squirmed to lift their weapons before a blur of white slashed forwards and Cold slammed her puppet against the closest man's neck. Its teeth slashed clean through, countless spiny apertures rushing out before Cold's arc was even completed.

Three shots were fired into the ground as a last ditch attempt before the five agents crumpled to pieces.

The other agents down the hall spun to open fire immediately, but Cold had already claimed two of the men's assault rifles, one firmly in her hand, supported by the puppet whose apertures gripped another like it was a toy.

The explosion of bullets came before they even fully turned, blood scattering the ground as boiling shell casings vaulted behind her.

The agents scattered like calves, those able to scramble over their comrades' dropping corpses quickly ducking around a corner to return fire.

The return volley largely deflected around Cold's puppet, before ricocheted bullets began to slice far too close for comfort. And yet, her aim remained frighteningly impeccable, as did the puppet's - one bullet per head. Cold's boots clacked against the ground as she walked steadily forwards, ignoring the stray bullets beginning to pool blood on her shirt.

"Okay, jubilant we go," Halogen tilted her head high, through her hood was down to bury her face, "Play along now, won't you statesman?"

John struggled, metallic pincers pressed against the space between his neck plates as he desperately tried not swallow or spit up the foul sludge in his mouth.

His limbs were slowly regaining functionality, though everything seemed several seconds delayed.

Finally able to catch his finger on a sharp edge of the uniform, ruby liquid began pooling out as he fought Halogen's pull and hastily scrawled on the ground.

"Won't work"

"Shoot you"

Halogen frowned, scoffing and yanking him upwards as more razor string softly spooled from beneath her coat.

"Want to be paralyzed repeatable?" She scoffed, "My plans are unable of failing. Ever. Got it?!"

She grew more frustrated despite John's lack of a response. He was saving up energy.

"I rule you!" Her face was hot, blue and gold eyes darkening, "I'm sick of this insolent dimension! Perform like a proper captive and no more blood drawing! Especially not the sass kind!"

She wrenched John up, kicking down the door.

As soon as the metal slab cracked into the hallway and Halogen stepped out, shouting voices rang out from the cowering agents spraying fire down the hallway at Cold.

"On your 6!" Someone shouted, several of the agents immediately diverting their fire to Halogen's widening eyes.

"Shoot and your friend loses their head!" She frantically hissed, "I don't want to harm anyo-"

Bullets tore forwards, Halogen letting out a shriek as John threw his puppet up in front of her head. The volley splintered around the rabbit, stray led steaks littering John's Kevlar vest and punching several holes in the floor around them.

This was short lived, however, the agents suddenly slamming to the floor with torrents of gore as a gangly figure stepped into view from around the corner, exposed stomach baring several bullet holes that flowed dark rivers down her pale legs.

Her eyes were narrowed into sickles on Halogen, her emotionless form not changing pace or blinking once as magazines dropped from the weapons dangling at her sides.

An aperture of the puppet stabbed up another body as she seamlessly swapped out weapons, lifting the pistol to her eye line.

"Wait!" Halogen backed up in absolute terror, "Don't come any-"

Cold fired, Halogen's throat rupturing outwards with a deafening explosion of hot liquid.

She immediately went limp, puppet falling from John's throat as her eyes rolled back in her head. Her body cracked against the tiles, limbs spasming and curling at nothing.

Cold still didn't stop, eyes steely and frozen as she rushed her puppet forwards. Two of the rabbit's longer hooked armatures cut down to cleave into Halogen's eye sockets, tearing flesh from bone. Halogen's mouth was agape with numb shock as she failed again and again to breathe, limbs dragging limply behind her as Cold yanked her across the floor.

John's eyes were wide with horror, wrenching the helmet from his head as he scrambled after her.

"If you kill her, you'll be eliminated too!" He cried in protest after spitting out Halogen's saliva, "Cold what are you doing?!"

Cold didn't even look at him, set in her path as she softly counted down to Halogen's death under her breath.

"59 . . . 58 . . . 57 . . ."

Finally, as she rounded the corner and fired off one more shot at a strangler agent who was bleeding out against a wall, she suddenly threw her puppeted hand with all her strength, sliding Halogen's near corpse across the slick blood soaked floor.

Her empty eye sockets spilled out nerves out like rubber bands, Cold's countdown jumping down several seconds.

"20 . . . 19 . . ." She mumbled just as Kali came around the corner.

John finally understood, eyes widening.

"This round is yours, subject 12" Cold's voice slithered out, throwing Halogen's eyes against the wall to her right where they stuck like wet play-dough.

The creature took several seconds to glance down, hidden green eyes running calculations behind them.

Her chains softly slithered, face still covered with black hair before she casually looked up. Her lifeless mouth seemed to almost curl upwards.

"Statistically, based on my calculated chances," Her voice spilled to the floor with warping distortions, "Halogen presents no threat to me."

Cold's eyes widened, skin paling.

"I would far rather see you eliminated than win this round myself," the creature cocked its head, "You present a far greater threat to me. After weighing the options . . . I will let Halogen bleed out. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Cold's hand began to shake in horror as the creature remained absolutely still, Halogen's blood beginning to dry to the floor.

"5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . ." Cold's voice fell in defeat.

"Oh fuck no, you don't!" John suddenly hissed, "That's my partner, you fuck!"

His hand slapped against Cold's to wrench the gun from her shaking grasp before darting forwards and slashing his puppet against Halogen's corpse to yank it upwards in front of him.

His hand slammed the trigger back, sights directly between Kali's eyes.

The creature flinched backwards, bullet exploding with brilliant orange light as it deflected back at John . . .

. . . Impacting Halogen's skull with a shattering crunch.

The girl's puppet hissed with a massive pressure release, slumping to the floor as Halogen's eyeless corpse sunk to the ground and ceased to breathe.

Kali was baffled, wide eyes still attempting to track what had happened as John pushed Halogen to the ground and backed up beside Cold.

Cold's face convulsed into a bright red pool of shock, insanity ridden smile eating away her flesh as her hand fumbled for John's.

"Technically," John's puppet whirred to life as it spit out bits of Halogen's flesh, "You fired the shot."

"But it was you who acted last on the projectile that killed her," Kali's puppet glanced up to her, "As a red player this round, you are pronounce the wi-"

"HEY KALI, I NEED YOUR HELP!" Door guy flailed into view down the hallway, "SARAH IS BEING A MASSIVE DOUCHE AND I NEED YOU TO-"

His eyes widened, gaze suddenly so captivated with the carnage before him that he smacked directly into the adjacent wall.

"Ow fuck me!" He flailed back, having left a dent in the tiles with his head. He collapse to the floor, attempting unsuccessfully to get back to his feet on the slippery blood.

"Malie," he frowned with a pouty face, staring up at the ceiling, "What happened here? Did we still win?"

"Shut up." His puppet crossed its arms.

"ROUND WINNER - KALI" flashed across all of their views.

". . . So is that a yes?" Door Guy glanced around, "What's happening? I can't read."

"GOOD JOB OUT THERE EVERYONE!" Ponder cackled, clapping its little soft hands, "We've had an on-site casualty! Asa Fear, also known as Halogen, has been betrayed by her red partner, Kali Aimes before anyone successfully escaped the facility to complete the round goal!"

The 7 remaining contestants stood in a strict semi-circle, facing a massive circular projection behind Ponder. The puppet seemed to not be controlled by any hand at all as it rested atop a podium like a misplaced sock.

"Cold, get away from him," the puppet snapped as the girl crept slightly closer to John, "Get a room you two, Jesus."

Her face exploded with red, hastily slinking back to her place.

"Welcome to endGAME!" The puppet continued, a pitiful fireworks display crapping out behind it, "One of you here will be now be eliminated by popular vote!"

Ponder slowly turned to the camera, rubbing its paws together.

"Hope you all gained some sort of audience favor this week," it continued, talking directly to the lens, "Because you're about to have a real shit time if you didn't."

More fireworks suddenly split out behind Ponder, clearly a misfire. It frowned and slapped at a control panel in front of it.

"Anyway," it slicked its fuzzy ears back with its tiny hand, "Let's go around the room and say what you did this week that should make the audience decide to keep you on for the next round! Your reasons better be good! Let's start with you, Kali!"

"Based on this game's rules and regulations," the creature stood stoically, "You cannot vote me off this week. No reasons are required at present time."

"Holy shit that's a good reason!" Ponder nodded approvingly, "Next!"

"HI GUYS!" SKETCH cheered, intestine necklace bouncing up and down as she jumped, "This week I tricked a whole bunch of people, even my friend, Door Guy, who I really like! He takes my pranks in stride! This game would be so boring without a mimic like me! Plus, anyone who doesn't vote me off gets a free coupon for limited edition T-shirts that have my pretty little face on them!"

"That's illegal," Ponder frowned, "Also a dumb incentive."

"And your pranks suck," Door Guy muttered under his breath, "They're not even that funny. Especially when they happen to me."

SKETCH just giggled, waving her mangled grey hand.

"Thanks guys!" She sunk back, twirling her skirt.

"Next." Ponder sighed.

"Listen," Sarah turned to the cameras, eyes filled with frustration, "Ponder has rigged this game! Some characters got more screen time than others, some were cast in a villainous light simply because everything is told from a subjective standpoint! He knows who you are going to vote off! Everything is crafted to subconsciously fit an overarching narrative!"

"Sarah," Ponder shook its head, "Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. You and your whole 'not following the question prompt' thing is getting rather tiring."

"He is trying to eliminate the players who have information that could stop this game!" Sarah cried, "You have to listen! Why do you think I was barely in this round? If you eliminate me, Ponder will..."

"Or maybe you don't get much screen time because you're kinda annoying?" Ponder softly tapped at its pursed mouth, "You're a pretty boring character also. If I put you in the round more, the audience would probably kill themselves before I got a chance to blow up their dimension."

"No!" Sarah yelled, "Please you have to believe me, I'm the only one here who..."

"And that's enough from you," Ponder waved its arm, Sarah's puppet slashing several metallic incisors against her throat, "Not because you're onto some conspiracy or anything, but pretty much just because I'm bored now. Moving on!"

"If you don't vote me off, I'll tell you my real name," Door Guy cocked an eyebrow, "Also I'm totally lying. I won't do that unless I win this whole thing. You vote for whoever you want, don't let me run your life. You're chill, audience. I trust ya."

"It's cool how he just rolls with it," Ponder clapped excitedly, "Isn't it great? The rolling part? Anyway, next!"

"M- . . . I'm sorry," Malie's hologram flickered as she covered her face, "I messed up so much this week . . . I'm so . . . I'm sorry I'm so disappointing . . . I- . . . I-"

"Careful Malie," Ponder rolled its nonexistent eyes, "If you keep that up, you're going to sound full of yourself."

"Hey, it was my fault," Door Guy shook his head, "Dream team wasn't any good without me pulling my weight. Easy on yourself, Malie, I'll try harder next time for you, okay?"

"Gross," Ponder shook its head as Malie flushed, "I should ban B-plot romances, I'm going to vomit. Next please."

"I . . . If you're going to vote John off, please vote me off instead," Cold's eyes dragged along the floor as she fiddled with her hands, "I am nothing."

"What did I JUST say?!" Ponder gaged, "That literally didn't follow my question at all! John, please for fuck's sake, say something intelligent to end this thing on a good note."

"If you're going to vote off Cold, I guess vote me off instead," he shrugged, "Only seems fair. Fuck you, Ponder."

"GAH!" Ponder gnashed, "I CAN'T FUCKING WAIT TO DESTROY ONE OF YOU FUCKERS! I CAN'T- . . ."

It paused, suddenly laughing and throwing up its hands.

"Nah, J kidding," It swooned, "I couldn't give less of a shit about any of you. The day you get under my skin is the day I'll know I've hit rock bottom. Say what you want John, you're so cute."

He slowly brought up a large felt button, turning back to the camera.

"As per usual," his grin widened, "Let's end this episode with a bang. And not the John and Cold gross kind, I mean an explosion."

His hand circled the button, Halogen's dimension pooling to view through the hologram in the background.

"Go to <http://PuppetGAME.LiamVickers.com> to vote for this week's loser" it continued, "I'll kill 'em and blow the shit out if their dimension next week, so choose wisely!"

His hand slammed down the button.

***End Part 3