

Girl Gamer Plays Games

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with

A Major in Literature at

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

Fall 2013

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World 1-1

This girl at the booth—with her mid-length blonde hair combed in a neat part, dressed in a short green skirt from American Eagle and a Hollister vest with that pulls in her gut and presses her tits together—she’s supposed to be somebody. A character from a horror game. Heather, the tormented survivor of the haunted town of *Silent Hill*. But this girl’s personality doesn’t fit the role at all. She’s too peppy, too forward, too sensual. I start to wonder if she even knows which series her persona is from when she smiles and tells me: “I think it’s great that you’ve come to support him.”

Around us swells a boisterous convention center, filled with art and merchandise from every major game imaginable. Dealers with T-shirts and posters, hats and toys, selling to all the local kids and teens and parents who managed to get the weekend off of school and work. There must be two hundred bodies in here, with most of the crowd split in two masses around the glowing glory of the convention’s projectors where the tournaments are easiest to watch. An army of *Street Fighter* fanatics cheer in the west end on the hall as each combo is blocked or avoided, and the players are barely visible on the stage in the distance, seated in cheap metal folding chairs with arcade controllers in their laps. In the east, the shooter *Counter Strike* goes into its second overtime with the kill-count tied at twenty four, and both teams exhausted. Spectators rush between the bouts, adding their loud footsteps to the cheers of the crowds, and still from within this cocoon of noise and emotion I can hear Lyle snicker. His blond hair is falling into his face again as the laughter builds, and it isn’t long before his scrawny body is convulsing. The girl at the booth pretends not to notice when I stab my elbow into his ribs, and once he recovers she’s quick to say: “You must be so proud. To be his girlfriend.”

“Oh sure,” I mutter. I can feel my face twitch when I try to force a smile, and Lyle’s about to collapse in fits of choked-back laughter. He knows I’ll give him hell for this later, so he’s milking the absurdity for all it’s worth. I can see he’s trembling with anticipation as he asks her: “Are you a gamer too?”

Her eyes light up and her voice is too cheery when she responds. Taking the bait, she recites every title she’s ever read on a billboard or seen on commercials. *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*. *Mario Kart* and *Grand Theft Auto*. I can read her pulse in her chest. She goes on and on, spilling her impressive memory, and all I can think about are button combos in her general direction. QuarterCirclePunch. ForwardDownForwardHighPunch.

My body shifts beneath my clothes. It’s an outfit designed to mimic my favorite historical-fiction game series. The pants are tight but the sweatshirt is long and loose, hooded and pale, full of layers and folds to hide away in. I pull the hood over my eyes, lean close to Lyle’s ear, and warn him to be nice. Quietly, I remind him that it’s not her fault; that conversing with gamers is her job and she’s doing it well. But I can’t help imagining what Kirby would become if he ate her.

Over the tremendous noise, a loudspeaker bellows. The first name for my tournament has been called.

“Are you here for *Halo*?” the girl asks. Lyle glances towards me, his smoky eyes begging permission to answer on my behalf, so I sigh and nod. Let the boy have his fun.

“Absolutely,” he answers. His voice always matures when he’s playing the trickster. “I’ve heard it’ll be a tough match this time. Sixteen-player free-for-all.” Another three voices are called over the intercom. Inside my sleeves, I’m tapping my fingers to my thumb one by one, warming up. I make a fist and relax it. Another two names.

“I’m a big *Halo* fan,” the booth-girl tells him. “The Blue ones are so funny.”

I hear my teeth scraping together as the next four names are called, and I’m concerned that I might actually kill her. With my eyes forced shut, I’m imagining what Plasmids would do to a person in real life. Given the choice, I wonder, would I rather see her electrocuted or incinerated? I tell myself that she’s just different than me, that the crowd of men taking her picture and laughing at her bad jokes proves that sex can be a source of power. But that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t please me to watch her explode. I open my eyes just as she opens her mouth again. She’s ready to repeat another misunderstood quote or detail from one of my favorite games when a hush falls across the entire convention center. The girl’s smile melts, and what’s left contorts into a befuddled grimace. All across the tournament floor, crowds of spectators and participants begin to shift their bodies and their gaze. There’s an anomaly here, and that can only mean that someone’s called a name that doesn’t belong.

“Did they say Alexia?” the girl at the booth asks us. “Like, a girl? There’s a *girl* competing?”

Usually people don’t get mad. Not at first. It begins with confusion. Simple surprise and disbelief. Before the match even starts, they’ll be taking bets. How long until the girl gets her pretty little ass beat? How long before she’s embarrassed and runs home? Will she cry and make all the boys feel like shit for being better than her?

“Lyle,” I whisper. “Come here.” He’s an adorable boy, early twenties with a round face and prominent cheek bones, olive skin and a dimple on his nose. He smiles like a lover and an artist and a trickster. As he slides closer, I remind myself that he’s here to support me in this spectacle, sacrificing his weekend to stand by my side. But he enjoys the chaos more than I do. “Sweetie,” I hiss in his ear. “What’s the point in having a fucking unisex name if you’re going to enter me with the *girl* version? Just once, can’t you put my name in as Alex?”

“I could,” he whispers back. There’s noise around us again, but it’s different. Subdued. Curious. The last five names have been announced and there’s only one vacant spot at the North side of the convention center. Mine. The other games have lost a lot of spectators. They’re all pressing to the north, desperate to see what sad stereotype will appear to humiliate my gender. “You’re up,” Lyle says, and he kisses me softly beneath my hood. “Try not to hold back this time.”

As soon as I turn, the crowd parts. They can sense me here. The estrogen. The anomaly. This early in the game, the men and boys will consider me a humorous addition to their contest. A story to tell later when the real match has begun. The women and the girls, they’ll think I’m brave. They’ll wonder if I have daddy issues or if I’m a lesbian. In their minds, they’ll be making stories that justify my existence. What could make a girl play in tournaments? What’s she trying to prove? Who’s she trying to impress?

I push through the masses, step onto the stage and onto my platform: #11. I take the controller in my hand. It’s heavy, wireless, solid. We’re only an amateur tournament, a relatively small convention center with some extra equipment on loan from an independent game shop, but a quick glance back reveals a throng of shirts and gear from larger conventions. People branded by *SXSW*. *PAX*. *Anime Expo*. The real tournaments. The ones people travel cross-country to, the ones with prize money or medals instead of bragging-rights and a gift card. The horde is diverse, balanced along gender lines, but all eyes are on me. There are 15 other competitors being ignored and I can’t help feeling unwanted. There are monitors on the ceiling, and they’re supposed to flip between close-ups of the players. Instead, there are at least six versions of my face staring down at me. The quality isn’t that great, but I can see my pale skin

oversaturated, my green eyes surrounded by a subtle mark of eyeliner, my black-cherry hair too long to spike up anymore, protruding like barbs at every angle from under my hood and before I can push it back, the announcing returns. An excitable, middle-aged, masculine voice cries out that the tournament is about to begin. I spin around and flip through the onscreen menus, changing the controller settings to something more familiar. Recon, toggle-crouch, high-sensitivity. The ritual vanquishes my self-consciousness and discomfort. I let go of every sense of identity. I am no longer a girl or a college student. I am no longer a journalist or the oldest daughter of a lower-class family. I am not a citizen of any place anymore. I am only a gamer. And just as the transformation is complete, the match begins.

What happens is Nirvana. The external world blends into an ambient grind and we are transcended. Above and beyond. We are no longer players in a tournament, no longer participants at a convention. We are reborn as Spartan soldiers from another different story, coming from different backgrounds than our own, to live and die on the flat ring of an alien machine-world called Halo. Our avatars—the characters on the screen—are our new selves.

The chaos of reality is recreated within the chaos of our match. We are not bound by the limited possibilities of set storylines or crafted narratives. Here in our multiplayer death-match, every battle is unique. Headshot. Grenade-kill. Turret. Assassination. Tactical Suicide. As the countdown begins, I am reminded that Buddhists believe in a cycle of reincarnations; that all creatures live and die and respawn. But our goal is not the Buddhists' goal. We do not wish to remove ourselves from this fate. We embrace it. We lust for it. Their Karma is our Kill/Death Ratio.

At first, none of the other players hunt me down. No one wants to be seen picking on the girl. Whenever I'm on their monitor, they switch to heavy weapons. Large blast-radiuses and tons of collateral damage. They want me dead, but not by a direct shot.

After I get my third Assassination, they take me seriously. The crowd is cheering from light-years away and the boys are getting anxious even though I'm only in sixth place. My gender is ruining their fun. They came to compete, and I've brought politics into their game.

Of course, it's not all of them. Some of the boys are treating me fair. They're laughing, calling me names like they would if I was anyone else, thinking of me as a player instead of a sex. But their voices are drowned out by the silence of the others. First place, third place, fourth and seventh, they stop firing at each other. Whenever they get a chance, the group attacks me and only me. Competition is replaced by vengeance and the free-for-all becomes a hunt. I'm forced against ledges and into valleys. Snipers find me within seconds of respawning. And worst of all, my every death is announced by the disappointed groan of the spectators.

The crowd knows nothing about me, but they want me to win. Isn't that a bitch?

Another death. Another groan. And before I return to the game, I wait. I set my controller onto the stand and breathe. Without me to kill, my murderers seem confused. They begin slaughtering each other again, as they should have from the start, and I stretch. The kills tick up and up and I wait. Eighth place now. Tenth. Eleventh. The automated respawn finally kicks in when I'm near last place. I'm losing by ten kills now, but there's still plenty of game left when my character pops back onto the screen and I snatch the controller again. I forget all the other players and rush towards the leader, calm and refreshed. His gamertag is FilthySean, and he's easy enough to see with his bright blue armor, so I waste no time and take him out with a few shots from my DMR across the map. From the curses, it's safe to assume he's the guy standing next to me at platform #10. "Oh shit," I say. "Did that mess up your kill-streak?"

FilthySean glares at me, but by the time he thinks of a retort, I've already found and murdered him a second time. Two melees to the face. "Damn F.S.," I laugh. "Was that you *again*?"

Another player finds me near the leader's corpse, and after a long firefight full of jumps and strafing and a couple of grenades, we both end up dead. Within the next minute, I've respawned twice and killed four players. I find a rocket-launcher and keep it as my secondary weapon, just in case they try to team up again. FilthySean finally gets me with a shotgun, but not before I toss a sticky-grenade onto his face. He actually laughs when he dies.

The match lasts for twelve minutes, and by the end of it, most of us are having fun again. Only a few of the competitors sulk: one because he lost third-place at the end, and a couple who're still mad that they got beat by a girl. FilthySean ends up taking first place, beating me by two close kills. I glance up one last time at the monitors that hang above us, the ones that held my image from every angle when the match began, and I'm glad to see that most of them are full of F.S. He's given his gift-card, smiles for the photos, shakes a few hands, and by the time he looks back towards platform #11 I'm already gone, just another hooded sweatshirt blending into the crowd of cosplayers.

It isn't long before the whole convention center is looking for me, but Lyle's the only person who finds me. He walks by my side, as casually as if we were strangers, and speaks quietly while we head towards the lobby.

"Will it always be like this," he asks. "You kicking ass, then disappearing?"

"It's possible," I say. "At least until a constitutional amendment grants women the right to play."

He holds the door open for me by pretending to tie his shoe. Anything to avoid any attention. Practiced and perfected from other conventions. When he stands up again, he asks if I think that's possible. A constitutional amendment for games. "Sure," I reply, shrugging. "Right after the Internet is recognized as its own country."

"I suppose their ambassadors would be on our side," he agrees. "And we'd have diplomatic immunity, digital currency, it'd be fantastic."

"An anonymous nation," I mused. "I could get used to that."

My character lands in a crouch with a heavy *thud*, kneeling on the concrete of an urban construction site. His body is covered in black leather armor, his face hidden behind a mask of black cloth and an iron headband. A short phrase in Japanese ends his introduction. He stands and the match begins, the ninja Ryu Hayabusa from the *Ninja Gaiden* series versus Tina, a Texan wrestler in a bikini.

"I almost feel sorry for her," I tell Lyle as he returns with our drinks from the bar. "All that money from winning wrestling tournaments, and poor Tina can't even afford a shirt." The game's A.I. takes control of Tina and throws a few punches in my direction. Lyle places my mocha martini on the short table by the television so he doesn't interrupt my counter-attack, and takes a seat in one of the other chairs. The crowd is sparse tonight, just a few more college kids playing old-school titles on arcade cabinets, so we have the console version of *Dead or Alive* to ourselves. "Still no sign of Ben?" I ask.

"Not yet," Lyle says, sipping his drink and leaning over to watch my match against the computer. "Is he bringing anyone else to the Barcade tonight, or is it just us?"

"Who knows? It's always a surprise with him. He might bring a boy or a crowd. Showed up with a parakeet one time." The Texan executes a flurry of attacks and knocks my ninja unconscious. I sigh and set the controller on the table, taking my drink in its place.

“A parakeet.” Lyle repeats. “Like, a bird? Where did he find a bird?”

“Hell if I know. Just walked in with it on his shoulder like he was a damn pirate. Didn’t mention it or anything, so no one bothered to ask about it, and I haven’t seen the thing since.”

Lyle nods and takes a long sip of his drink. “I suppose you could have a worse roommate.”

I place my drink on the table and take back the controller just as the next match begins. I knock Tina against a block wall within seconds. She collapses, leaps back up to attack, and manages to keep her breasts miraculously in place behind her bikini-top.

“But seriously,” I say. “This girl—in the game—she’s fought in at least four other professional fighting tournaments, right? Not to mention her entire career as a wrestler. And she wears this? A fucking bathing suit? That’s just stupid. You’re an artist, Lyle. Tell me why the hell she’s designed like this.”

Lyle opens a sketchpad and begins making wide sketch marks across the page, glancing in my direction before returning to the page. “You know why, Alex. You know exactly why.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. I curse as Tina dodges my strongest attack.

Appearing from the darkness, Ben drops onto the chair beside me. He says, “I thought I heard cussing,” and he says, “You must have done well in the tournament.” He stretches back, pulls a baseball cap onto his shaved head, and watches me play. A quick glance sideways tells me he’s growing his beard out again. It’s a bit spotty, like black clumps of coral growing against his skin. “Meet any fun people while I was at work,” he asks, and Tina flips Ryu over her back.

“Just some booth babe,” I tell him. “She was dressed up like Heather from *Silent Hill 3*, but all peppy and sociable. It was kind of sickening, to be honest.”

“Sure, sure,” he nods.

“Then Lyle over there, trying to be nice or evil I couldn’t tell, asked her what games she plays. She starts listing all the popular games that even Unplugged people know about.”

“Unplugged people?”

Lyle lifts his head and says, “It’s her new word,” before returning to his sketch.

Ben laughs as Ryu dodges a powerful attack. “You’re still trying to come up with a derogatory term for people who don’t play games?”

“Always,” I tell him. “There’s got to be a good one out there somewhere. I just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Sure Alex, sure. But tell me. This booth babe. Which crime of hers was worse? The fact that she was a person who didn’t play the same games as you, or the fact that she’s a woman?”

My eyes cloud over and in an instant, Tina has Ryu backed into a corner. “What,” I begin, but my combo is mistimed and ends too soon. Tina kicks Ryu to the ground. “I don’t,” I try again, but my rising attack is countered and Ryu goes flying again. “What are you—?”

Tina wins round two, and Ben says “That’s fine.” He says, “I understand.” I ask him why, and he answers, “It just makes sense. You not knowing the difference. Because of the way that you, well, you know.”

“No, Ben, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really now,” he laughs. “Of course you know. It’s because, I mean, because of how you hate women.”

“I what?” I yell. A few arcade-players turn in our direction, a few others turn away. But I’m certain everyone’s listening. “I do not! Ben I, Lyle, tell him I’m not....”

Lyle glances up, points at me with the sharp end of his pencil, and says “just like that. Keep that pose.” He returns to his sketchbook and makes a few quick shapes to build the structure of my confused expression.

“Now don’t be like that,” Ben whispers to me. “It’s no big deal. You just hate girls. It’s the same reason you don’t have any girlfriends, and you never want to invite any other girls when we go out. That’s why you didn’t try to get to know the booth girl and—.”

“She was obnoxious! She was...she didn’t even know the difference between....” My head keeps shaking, and my eyes get so narrow that the screen is difficult to see through my frustration. “That’s just not true,” I finally spit out.

Calmly, Ben points to the television. “Honey, you’re a six-foot-tall shinobi with a magical-spirit Dragon Sword, and you’re pummeling an unarmed, underdressed, southern gal. Now tell me again that you’re not a girl who hates women.”

I drop the controller onto the table and jump up, my legs twitchy and unsettled. I start pacing through the dark just as Ben picks the controller back up and massacres Tina in a few perfectly-timed combos.

“One day girl,” he tells me, “you’re going to have to get good at fighting games.”

“I’m great at fighters.”

“You’re shit at fighters.”

“So,” I reply lamely. “I could kick your ass at *Call of Duty*.”

Lyle lifts his head in time to say “that’s true.”

“You could kick everyone’s ass at *Call of Duty*,” Ben agrees. “But if you run out of bullets on the battlefield, you’re going to get your ass beat. You know why?”

“Because I’m bad at fighters?” I ask.

“Because you’re shit at fighters,” he corrects me. “Also, you hate women.”

I stop pacing and turn with my hands in the air. “Fuck you,” I say. “You are...no. And you too Lyle.”

Lyle glances up and asks, “What did I do?”

“You’re not arguing with him.”

“I don’t care if you hate women,” Lyle says. “I think it’s cute. He’s the one who’s trying to change you.”

I throw my arms up and turn again, facing the dark wall at the far end of the arcade. I feel my fists clench and relax and can’t seem to make them stop. When I face them again, Ben’s already won beaten Tina and has started a match against a female assassin with an unzipped jumpsuit for armor.

It’s only me and the darkness as I enter the apartment, push the wooden door back against its warped frame, and thrust it shut. The metal bolt locks loudly, and its echo reminds me of my DMR reloading in *Halo*. “Another 15 rounds,” I whisper, and the math keeps going in my head. Six shots to take out an Elite. Five shots for a Spartan on Slayer. One on Swat.

The only light is from the streetlamps outside. From their glow, I can see our bookshelves lined against the far wall, covered in books, graphic novels and game cases near the TV. At last count, our video-game collection housed over a hundred titles, but the number is always in flux from lending to friends or finding new games at the used-game store in town. I walk to the entertainment center and brush my fingers over the cases, my inner capitalist proud and still unsated. There is never enough money. There are always more games.

Despite doing well in the tournament, despite getting through the convention crowd without having to answer condescending questions, I can't sleep. Instead, I toss. I turn. I twitch. In my mind I'm watching visions of my childhood, making friends with Mario and Megaman and Kirby and Sonic and never any princesses because they're all too weak to save themselves and who the hell wants to be best buds with the victim when you could be the hero instead. I can't stop remembering the little neighbor boys from my childhood: Joey and Greyson and Victor, nicknamed Jay and Gee and Vee. I was the youngest, just starting first grade, and we all wanted to be Link and save Hyrule in dirty t-shirts and old shoes. We all wanted to fight with swords and shields, with arrows and bombs, and find secrets in dungeons and defeat wizards to save the world of our back yards. We all wanted to live *The Legend of Zelda* and recreate the adventures of the hero Link. We all wanted to, but we couldn't. Not all of us. Not me. Because a hero is nothing without someone to save.

"That's why you have to be Zelda," Vee explained, waving his sword—a knobby brown limb—in great waves as he spoke, conducting his argument. "You're a girl and Zelda's a girl, 'cause she's a princess, and Link is a Hero so he has to save a Princess." Then Vee and Gee, proud of their logic, walked away to piss against the base of a tree.

"You know we're right," Jay said when the others were too far to hear, his curly brown hair piled on the top of his oversized head like a sleeping cat. "Link is a boy. You don't want to be a boy." I expected his hair to purr and nod in agreement with his stupid ideas before running off into the woods to hunt mice. "But you can be Zelda!" Jay continued, wiping his nose on his hand. "The whole game's called Zelda. That's cool."

"Zelda's a bitch," I replied, drawing the game's Triforce in the sand, three stacked triangles in the shape of a larger triangle. "She doesn't even do anything. Just gets captured."

"That's because she's a girl. Girls get captured by bad guys."

I dropped my drawing stick, stood, and punched him in the arm. "Are you stupid? Girls can do more than get captured. Girls can fight, duh. I beat up you and Gee and Vee sometimes. At the same time. And I'm a girl."

"So," he shouted. "That's because you're crazy and...on your period all the time!"

"Oh my god Jay you're so dumb. Girls don't get periods until they're way older. You're a dumb ass."

"See? Like that. Girls aren't supposed to cuss. They're supposed to wear dresses and smile a lot. My mom said so and, and she says you're not acting like a girl."

"Dresses are gay."

"Only if boys wear them 'cause boys aren't supposed to be pretty." His cheeks reddened and he kicked his feet against the root of a tree. "That's why you can't be Link."

"Because dresses are gay?"

"Because you're pretty!"

I laughed, and all he did was run, back the other Links to play with sticks and pretend I was around to rescue. But I wasn't. I spent the next week inside, playing the game for as long as my parents would let me, until I had beaten the temples that none of the boys could. I didn't want to be pretty. Not if it meant wearing dresses and playing the victim. I wanted to feel powerful. And Link might have been a boy, but I was a girl and I was controlling everything he did. He was a hero and he was my puppet. And when, months later, Link finally saved the princess, it was by my hand.

World 1-2

The sun rises far too early, and it's destined to be another day of classrooms and lectures instead of rescue missions and dragon-slaying. The blankets have cocooned me overnight, and the alarm forces me to tear free from my protective shell before I can fully mature. I stumble awkwardly, wingless between stages of evolution, and tear the clock from the wall. *Alarm Disabled*, I think. *Stealth plus four*.

In the mirror stands a creature of uncertainty, sexually ambiguous despite the partial-nudity. Too strong to be a damsel. Too sexy to be a hero. The Bomberman boxers are creased from the sheets, and I press them smoothly against my thighs. I scour my closet, eager to learn which game reference I get to wear today, skipping over the Assassin's insignia and the Aperture logo before deciding on the purple fleur of the Third-Street Saints, the absurdist gang of *Saint's Row*. The long sleeves and tight waist hug my body while I pull on a pair of generic black jeans. I had always intended to sew some patch onto the back pocket to customize them, but never have.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I anticipate my classes. Today will be Humanities and Investigative Journalism, the only two courses I can't daydream through. Ben makes an entrance just as I pour a bowl of cereal. He takes his favorite place at the table, keeping his back to the early beams of sunlight, and spreads several sheets of paper—each listing the course requirements for different majors and minors—around his area.

"You can't be serious," I say, gesturing towards him with my spoon. "This is your fourth year. How can you not have a plan yet?"

"I have plenty of plans," he replies. He circles and crosses-out a few classes from each sheet, draws lines between others and writes quick notes in the margins. "For example, I'm well on my way to a degree in Computer Science. And Mathematics. Also, Computer Engineering. Then if you look here, there's a little Physics thrown in from that summer I got bored. And I've apparently got some credits towards Psychology for some reason. See? Plenty of plans."

"You know you're supposed to pick one, right?"

"That's what they tell me." He scribbles a lengthy paragraph beside a course about game programming. Under it, he draws a quick sketch of a goat.

"So that's school," I say. "How's life? How's your boyfriend?"

"Which one?"

"Which one?" I mimic. "There's more than one of those too?"

"Not at the same time," he promises, reorganizing his sheets of paper, "but they don't tend to stick around very long. Last month was Sam and Brad—again, not at the same time—but Sam was too timid and Brad was too...not timid. And insatiable. Greg and I broke up last week, because he's a stupid son of a bitch, and then I started hanging around Christian. But he wasn't a real gamer. Just played some bird game on his phone and thought he was hardcore. So I guess you could say I'm between boys at the moment."

"Still hoping Terry will come around?"

We both glance towards the ceiling, imagining what state our third roommate is in. "Don't get me wrong," Ben finally says, "I'd jump at the opportunity, but Terry's the straightest guy I know. I don't think he'd leave Jen for anybody. Not that he's ever had the chance to meet anyone else. He'd have to leave his room for that, and I'm honestly not sure if he ever does."

"But he has to eat sometime, right?"

"I would think, but I haven't even seen him around school. Have you?"

It's too early to think too hard, so I just try to recount any time in the past three months that Terry's made an appearance. Even a walk-by or a casual passing across the Quad. But there's nothing. "Weird. I'm not even sure I know what he looks like. He can't seriously play *all* the time, right? I mean, him and Jen have to meet up sometime, don't they?"

Ben gives a bored shrug and pours some cereal of his own. "As long as he pays the rent on time, which he always does, he can do whatever he likes. Just don't expect him to go on a roadtrip with us anytime soon."

Ben finishes his food and heads out within minutes, and I'm left staring at nothing in particular. All of our apartment's design and decoration is focused on our entertainment center, leaving the rest of our apartment feeling a bit empty in comparison. The dining table is far too large for our little group, and it sits alone on the wooden floor of our kitchen/dining area. Beneath the table lie the crumbs and dust and dirt of everyday life, tiny proofs of humanity that seem to follow us everywhere. From my chair I can see the random assortment of college foods—mac and cheese, dry cereal, ramen and soups—that litter the countertops in neat rows and stacks. They are real and they are necessary and I hate their details, their texture and taste, the comfort and nostalgia they bring, their low prices and long shelf-lives. I've only been awake for a half an hour, but even in our little gamer-sanctuary my eyes have caught glimpses of the real world and I'm bored already. No power-ups in the cabinets, no weapons to protect against the monsters and villains that also don't exist. My greatest quest will be a short drive to school to find a parking spot.

Skip cut-scene and I'm in class, only two minutes late which is pretty good for me, and the rest of my Humanities peers already have that glazed look in their eyes—dull and inattentive. I take my seat and ready my notepad, just in case Dr. Randall says something that I could use for a story in my Journalism class. He begins by showing an enormous basilica on the main projector. It's a gorgeous building with several partial domes, a complete one on top, and it's surrounded by four minarets. Without even listening to the lecture, I recognize it as "The Church of Holy Wisdom"—Hagia Sophia—from ancient Constantinople, which is modern-day Istanbul. Without taking notes, I could write an essay about how the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I ordered the completion of the basilica in 537 so it could become the imperial patriarchal cathedral, which it was until 1453. All of this and more, because I've been there. I've felt it, climbed to the top of its dome, and leapt to the ground below, not as myself but as the great assassin Ezio Auditore de Firenze in the year 1511. I've spoken with historical figures of the time and participated first-hand in the politics that surrounded the Ottoman rule of the great capital. And most importantly, while memorizing every corner of each district, I enjoyed it. I have personal memories and emotions invested in each iconic monument, from Galata Tower to Topkapi Palace. I know how long they take to climb, how much of the city you can see from the top, and what they mean to the people of the 16th century.

In the margins of my notebook, I write: *Games let us teach ourselves*. Beneath it, when the lecture finishes, I amend the note with an additional suggestion: *Games + Classroom*.

The moment I leave the classroom, Lyle's by my side. I'm not sure how long he waits in the hall for me, but no matter how early my class lets out, he's always there. Today he's chosen an old-school Pac-Man shirt that remains half-hidden beneath his purple, unbuttoned over-shirt. "An hour," he says. "Until your Journalism class. Right?"

I nod and we pass through the heavy glass doors to step onto the Quad. The grass is as tall as the groundskeeper will allow it, so they'll doubtlessly be mowing it when the weekend arrives. The rectangle of green life is a kind of hallowed ground in our secular institution, a

place for the hordes of students to gather in clique-less clumps and relax. Occasionally you'll see some poor soul scouring through his textbook or memorizing her notes, but for most, the Quad is stress-free and timeless. Here, people still play games and still gossip and still sleep. It's like the hollowed-out center of college, where the college itself can't quite reach us.

There are sidewalks surrounding (but not piercing) the greenery, but most people choose to walk through it anyway. Sidewalks are more of a suggestion here, like most of the rules. Lyle and I are no exception, so we begin our trek across the Quad to the other side of campus. In the meantime, we talk about release dates and sequels. We discuss the terrible games that should've never existed and the great games that never will. We bitch about the ubiquity of clichéd tropes, and in the same breath we praise the companies that take risks and reinvent genres. We rant together about Downloadable Content, because hardly no one does it right.

Nearing the edge of grass, Lyle starts on about a few Indie titles that I haven't heard of. I try to focus on his words, but my phone starts singing some song from Red vs. Blue and his words are lost in the tinny epicness. I retrieve the phone, slide my thumb across the screen, and stop. The alert is from a gaming app, and it's telling me that someone from my friend's list is online, ready to play. As it happens, that person is an asshole. And it's my sworn duty to make sure they know that at every opportunity.

"Lyle," I shout. "Take me to your dorm room. Now!" The words are out before I can adjust the volume of my voice, and now most of the Quad is staring at me and my reddened cheeks. Lyle stops and stares at me.

"Well yeah," he says. "Alright." He's fumbling for his keycard and I'm pulling his wrist across the parking lot of his dorm, away from the freedom of the Quad and the crowd's cheers. His room is up two flights of stairs, so even once we're inside he has plenty of time to get excited. "Do you think we'll have time," he asks. "I got some condoms from the Health Center—."

"This isn't about sex, Lyle. It's more important than that."

His eyebrows twist and raise and for a moment he's speechless. Then he asks: "Are you sure? I mean, are you *really* sure that whatever this is, it's more important than sex? Because I don't think it's going to be more important than sex."

We bust through the door of his floor, turn down his hall, and I tell him not to worry. That there's time for that later tonight if he wants to come over. But not now.

Cards for the doors outside. Keys for the doors inside. I never understood it, but Lyle's used to it by now. He has the door unlocked but keeps it shut, holding it closed while I shove against it, and when I glare at him I find his face in a rare state of solemnity. He quietly says my name, my full name, and my shoulders drop. "It's him," he says. "Isn't it? He's online?"

I nod.

"Are you sure this is healthy? It was funny when it started, but you've been taking it seriously lately. Are you even having fun anymore?"

"It'll be fine," I tell him. "God, you're talking like I'm hooked on heroin or something. It's just a friendly rivalry. That's all. Just a friendly rivalry. With some anonymous mother-fucker who needs his ass beat."

"Well if that's all," he says, and he kisses my forehead and releases his grip on the door handle. I smile and shove the door open, slamming it against a wall on the inside of his dorm.

I'm always surprised by how messy his room is. For a person so neat and tidy, always dressed in ironed dress-shirts and clean shoes, he lives in a shithole. The room is a single, since his parents have the money to afford it, but he's still managed to separate the room into sections.

It looks like three or four distinct individuals live in the dorm-room someplace, and they're all just as cluttered as Lyle. One section is stacked half-way to the ceiling in boxes, from the colorful cardboard that once held game consoles to the sturdy plastic shipping containers you can find at most department stores. Next there's the artist section, with toppling stacks of sketchpads full of characters from games that he and I and my roommates enjoy. But the largest section, which includes his bed, is the real Gamer section.

Lyle slides past a crate of games and retrieves a set of rechargeable batteries for the controller while I switch everything on. As the devices warm up, I remember how he went into a kind of obsession when shopping for his TV. He researched more than he ever has for a class or a paper, and he even learned what all of those numbers and acronyms and jacks actually meant. By the end of it, he was teaching the sales associate at the store why LCD screens were just as good—though less expensive—than LED screens. He was explaining how 720 was the only resolution that really mattered, because anything more tended to be unnoticeable unless you did a side-by-side comparison. He even stayed an extra hour in the store to make sure that this elderly couple found a set with the right RCA connectors for their old VCR to hook into. When he finally left, he had an HDMI cable and a 24" television which he buckled into his back seat, and it's hard to pinpoint a time when he was happier.

I blink and he's waving the controller in my hand, asking which game the "anonymous mother-fucker who needs his ass beat" is playing. I slide my phone out again and flick through the apps until the screen name *Trescres* flies past. "Left4Dead," I say. "You have that one, don't you?"

"Of course. It's a Valve title."

"Then why haven't I played it before?"

"Zombies," he replies. "They offend you or something."

"Oh." I mutter something else about *goddamn cookie-cutter enemies* but he isn't listening. Lyle unplugs one console and reconnects another like a trained surgeon, switching cables and plugs without glancing at his hands, and it takes less than a minute for the game to be set up. He passes me the familiar controller, solid but cold, and I flex my fingers over the plastic grips.

Lyle explains the basic gameplay while I log into my account. Shooter. Waves. Special Infected. Unlimited ammo for the pistol, but it's weak as shit. I nod through his tutorial, searching my menus for the lobby that *Trescres* has started, and my heart sinks.

"That bastard," I hiss.

"What's wrong?"

"He invited me to Survivor. That's co-op! How am I supposed to beat him in Survivor mode?" I ask.

Lyle sighs and plops onto his bed behind me. "You aren't. That's not what it's about. It's you, and him, and two others—either gamers or computer players—versus The Horde. You work together to see how long you can survive. As a team. Like normal people."

"Normal people? In a game? What's the fucking point in that?"

"It's fun," he assures me.

Onscreen, pitifully-slow zombies shuffle aimlessly on a country road. There are menus transposed over them, but their moans and screeches continue. *Trescres* has chosen our level, called "Last Stand," which has an image of a lighthouse next to it. It's up to us to choose characters now. There are four choices, and while I have to admit that the girl actually looks cool, I can't fight my tendency to avoid female characters. There's no one truly anonymous or

ambiguous, so I just choose a black character named Louis. He's the guy with the smallest frame and doesn't seem to be bursting with testosterone like the others.

"You know," Lyle begins again, "not all games have to be directly competitive."

"Of course not," I reply. "That's what single-player games are for."

He sighs as the loading screen pops up. It shows a movie-poster of our characters in heroic stances like an ironic homage to bad action movies. Lyle says something about "friendly rivalry" in a mocking tone to my back, but we both know our conversation ends the second the level loads.

Trescres and I spawn outside a squat lighthouse, with a white vinyl-sided two-story house built onto the base. It's desolate and abandoned, littered with trash and boarded-up windows. A paved road passes by, but there're no cars around. The level is silent except for the chirping of crickets and the occasional call of a nearby seagull. Visibility is limited since a heavy fog has settled around the area, but I can see a scattering of trees in three directions and a body of water in the fourth.

Trescres' character is a gruff war veteran named Bill, aged and hardened by his past in Vietnam. He nods to me. I pretend not to notice.

Between our characters, there's a pile of ammunition, some med kits, and a few weapons. We already have the pistols, so I take the sniper rifle that's laying near Louis' feet. My fingers flicker over the controls, pressing every button and memorizing their configuration. Right Trigger to fire, R3 for Zoom, Y to switch weapons and B to reload.

At first, no enemies will come. Lyle explains that the zombies don't know we're here yet, but we can't escape without evac (which never makes it in Survival mode). For that, we have to alert them by activating a nearby fuel pump, which is conveniently just loud enough to alert "the horde" of our position as well. Until then, we can alter the environment anyway we need.

Trescres is placing equipment on the ground by the house, so I choose the tower of the lighthouse above him for my hold-out position. At Lyle's suggestion, I scatter a few canisters of gasoline on the roof first so I can shoot them later and damage a ton of enemies all at once.

When the scene is set, Trescres uses the butt of his gun (he chose the assault rifle) and busts through the glass and boards of a large window and jumps into the basement. The fuel pump sits in the center of the concrete floor, beside a few shelves of additional supplies, and he activates it. The noise erodes the serene sounds of nature and replaces it with mechanical churning, which is echoed almost immediately by the throaty screech of the distant undead. The timer at the top of the screen begins to tick the seconds, tracking our survival time. As my character rushes outside and up the ladder to the roof, one of the A.I. characters calls out: "They're coming."

"Alright," I admit. "This seems kinda cool. But I still don't see how killing slow zombies is supposed to be fun."

My voice is followed by an in-game melody, three simple and dissonant piano chords, and Lyle laughs. "Well that's ironic," he says.

"What is?"

Before I can make it to the ladder for the lighthouse, a blur wearing a hooded-sweatshirt leaps from the darkness and pins my character to the roof. The zombie's sweatshirt is grey, and both his sleeves and the legs of his brown pants are wrapped in duct tape. Straddling my character, the attacker's arms are flailing, beating poor Louis in a fury while my health stutters lower with each hit. I press every button on my controller as quickly as I can, but nothing

happens. The attacker's undead screams are mixed with Louis' cries for help. As a character, he is helpless. As a player, I am helpless. And we are both dependent upon our allies.

And of course it has to be Tresces, rushing onto the roof heroically and smashing the butt of his assault rifle against the enemy's skull to knock it off of me, then showering a flurry of automatic rounds into the zombie's chest like some decades-old action movie. Tresces clears the roof of at least a dozen other regular zombies before Louis manages to stand up. Then my savior is off again without a word, leaping from the roof to battle on without me.

"That was a Hunter," Lyle explains, desperately attempting to stifle his own laughter. "They're frustrating little bastards, aren't they?"

"They're not the only ones," I mumble. Louis climbs the ladder with ease, firing a few sniper rounds at point-blank range into the unfortunate rotting torsos of some stray attackers that have the audacity to stumble towards him with outspread arms.

The top of the lighthouse is only a few times higher than the roof of the attached home, but I'm still surprised to see that the zombies are capable of leaping to the edge of my walkway and climbing up. A quick shove or a few pistol rounds prove sufficient for their threat. Before long, the few enemies are met by swarms of others, untold numbers clamoring to climb or leap onto the roof and make their way in my direction. Realizing the futility of sniping each one, I toss a Molotov cocktail instead. It lands in the center of a mass of zombies and instantly shatters onto the shingled roof, erupting in a satisfying flash of orange and red flames that ignites the bodies of the entire mob. As others rush into the flames, the flames grasp onto them and hold their decrepit bodies still until the flames burn them out of existence. In these few seconds, the fire from my Molotov activates the scattered gas cans and the entire mass explodes like a firebombed warzone. "Fuck yeah," I scream.

Reveling in the sudden jump to my kill-count, I only barely notice the new piano notes that play through the TV's speakers. Different this time, as haunting as the Hunter's tune but not the same notes. Louis turns just in time to see a sickening tentacle fling itself from the nearby trees and wrap around his neck. He screams as the unseen creature flips him to the roof and drags him off the lighthouse. Louis' body hits the ground, once again a useless and uncontrollable weight at the mercy of enemies and allies. Lyle offers a name, "Smoker," for the monstrosity that pulls Louis further into the brush. The tentacle is actually the thick and round tongue of a plain-clothes zombie whose body is half-covered in pustules and boils. I'd be impressed if I weren't being mercilessly beaten by yet another set of flailing zombie arms. Through gritted teeth and curses, I hammer against the controller, knowing from experience that no button combination can save me. Only Tresces can, that insufferable warrior, leaping through the trees like a fucking superhero to rescue the distressed damsel with a few concentrated bursts of fully-automatic rounds into the Smoker's throat. Louis catches his breath in time to see the horde crashing from the rooftop, a countless wave of zombies rushing forward without fear or strategy. Their numbers quickly overwhelm us, and the trees provide more cover from our bullets than from their powerful arms. The match ends abruptly as the last of us falls, eaten alive by a swarm of dead men and women. In our final moments, as we bleed out, we can fire pistols into the crowd of mindless enemies, and it is both satisfying and futile. Their shapes crowd around us like giants above our fallen bodies, striking us again and again until we're nothing but lump piles of tenderized meat.

The countdown stops and at 03:12:37. Lyle assures me that, for my first game, the score is more than acceptable. But when the rest of the team scores pop up, I'm furious to see that

Trescres survived four-tenths of a second longer than I did. I glance at Lyle's clock, estimate how much time is left before my next class, and hit the button to play another round.

As the game loads, I wonder if I'm more addicted to games or competition. Do I hate reality or losing? The screen loads, the scene is set, the horde arrives and I think, "Why can't I hate both?"

We nearly double our time this round, but unsurprisingly, Trescres is the last to fall. A glance at the clock, a calculation, another try, a higher time, and it yields the same result. It isn't even a battle of skill. It's experience. He knows the game, the level, the enemies. He has memories and strategies. But he isn't even trying to win. He's trying to help us survive, not only me but the A.I. characters as well. Trescres is our leader, our protector, and our commander. And no matter how many head-shots or multi-kills I get, I'm only a weapon. I can help, but I cannot win.

"So how do you like the game?" Lyle asks.

I drop the controller to the bed and shut off the system, gathering my equipment for the next class. "It isn't my style."

World 1-3

Back in the real world, my skin radiates from sunlight. It's such a simple and pleasant sensation, but one that I don't feel often enough. Between homework and gaming, I rarely escape into the daylight except to walk between classes.

The Quad is littered with my peers, those who find time in their busy schedule to lie on the landscaped grass and burn in the rays of the sun. Their golden bodies are ideal by anyone's standard: strong shirtless boys, slender girls in bathing suits, relaxing and resting as if on vacation while the rest of us hurry to class. I am aroused and furious, disgusted and jealous. I hear Ben's voice in my head again, his accusation that I hate women, and I forcefully ignore it. I pull my shoulders back and stand as properly as I can, chest-forward and chin-raised the way beautiful people are supposed to, the way my sister always has, but the confidence just isn't there. My posture droops again into my default slouch. I imagine my every step as a descending mark on the evolutionary chart, the weight of an uncertain identity pulling me further back in history, before characters wore skimpy female armor, before princesses needed rescuing by 8-bit boys in flat worlds, before a player knew the gender of the spite they controlled. If I could degrade enough, curl into a single dot on a screen and bounce between the paddles, maybe I wouldn't feel the pressure of gender and politics in the games I love and the life I live. Maybe I could just play.

"I thought you were taller," a voice says. Typically, a phrase with that much potential for absurdity would elicit some gamer-reflex in me. I would find a crowd nearby, blend in until I could eavesdrop on the intended conversation and sneak away unnoticed with a story to tell. But that sort of game mechanic is two decades too advanced for my current mood, so I pass it by without another thought. "Maybe it was the monitors," the voice continues, male, middle-aged, without any noticeable accent or peculiarity; a practiced voice. "But during the tournament, you looked a bit more heroic. Almost god-like. Or goddess, if you prefer."

I feel sick once I realize that the voice is intended for me. I am a social creature by nature, but it is not a social day. I tuck my neck even lower and pass the few people who stand outside the building I need. I'm almost to the door when a phrase of finality is flung towards me. "You *are* Alexia, right?"

The doors of our buildings are all glass, and if the sunlight hits them right, they can function a bit like mirrors if you're careful not to get the door slammed in your face from someone leaving the lobby while you're going in. It's handy if you want to see who's following you, or to spy on that person you have a crush on and see if they're checking out your ass like you hope they are.

Following today's luck, the sun shines with unprecedented perfection. The entire Quad is reflected behind me, the sunbathing models included, and I can see the detail of every single face except one. There's a man a few feet behind me, dressed in a silken grey shirt tucked into his pressed black pants, shining shoes and a golden tie that sways like a tail in the wind. The sunlight strikes the glass at the exact spot that his head should be. His image is that of Helios, Greek God of the Sun, which I specifically remember decapitating the last time I played as Kratos. Still, his form defeats my clever mirrored doors and I have no choice but to turn and face him if I want to know which face to avoid in the future. I pivot on my left foot and he continues. "It was an impressive match." My eyes adjust to the blinding light, his every feature emerging at its own pace. First his nose, slender with a tiny point at the end. Then his chin, a perfectly straight ledge above his neck. His hair surfaces from the light, dark and brown, cut to be professional but disheveled from the wind. The light-brown tone of his skin is shaded around his lips and jaw with the hint of beard-stubble. It's a face I've never met and yet feels familiar. It's the same generic image of nearly every lead video game character I've played for the past ten years.

His smile is flawless and practiced, with teeth nearly as blinding as the sunlight that forms his halo. If he isn't rich, he's certainly pretending to be. "You should have won," he says.

"It's a kill count," I explain, making no attempt to mask my irritation. "It's quantitative. You know, numbers? The higher one wins. So no, I shouldn't have won. FilthySean should have won. I should have gotten second place. And I did."

"But really. 'FilthySean?' You're better than that guy."

"Not yesterday I wasn't. And yesterday was the day that mattered."

The man's smile widens into a near grimace. "Does it bother you? Losing to him?"

"No," I reply.

"Is that because you did it on purpose?"

"Did what? Lose?" My eyebrows twist against the sun and his words. "You think I lost on purpose?"

"No," he assures me. "I think you got exactly enough kills to get exactly second place against fifteen other pro-level opponents that you've never faced before, during a live competition surrounded by a crowd of spectators. On purpose."

A stream of students pass between us, disappearing into or out of the building, and I say nothing. I stare through the man, watching every parallel timeline that frees me from this conversation. A thousand ghostly images of me run, teleport, or activate invisibility, while another thousand draw weapons, summon monsters, or use magic to eradicate the man from which ever world that version of me inhabits. But none of them erase his accusation. Dialogue options appear before me and I choose the simplest one. "Who are you," I ask. And the game continues.

"My name is Nick Stone—"

"—Of course it is—"

"—and I came a long way to watch you perform."

"Not creepy at all."

“You have a reputation,” he says.

“Do I?”

The generic man with the generic name nods. “I’m always looking for new talent. All the papers around your city, the blogs and online articles, they all mention the surprise of seeing a girl play video games. I mean, can you imagine? A girl? And in a competition no less.” He pauses to laugh. “And then, the fact that she almost wins, well, that’s just unnatural. And then you read the next paper or find the next site, and the same thing happens again. Every time, a single girl in a competition, described in the same way, and she always wins second place. Isn’t that just...spectacular?”

“She must be thrilled to be so popular.”

“Apparently not,” he continues. “That’s the odd thing. She’s never around for comment. No one’s gotten a clear photograph or an interview or anything. I’m not sure anyone’s even heard her speak. At least not a reporter.”

“Until now,” I ask. “Is that what this is?” I take a step forward, as threateningly as my tiny frame can manage. “You’re some big-shot reporter from a national magazine or some shit, and you’ve come to uncover the mystery of the ghostly gamer girl from Asheville?” Another step. “And you’ll get some bonus for harassing me on campus while I’m on the way to class?” My fingers flicker by my side again, warming up for complex button combinations.

“I’m not a reporter,” Nick Stone says. My fingers stop.

“Then who the hell are you?”

“I told you. I’m Nick Stone.”

“Sure,” I say. “But who the hell are you in relation to why I should give a fuck?”

The man hands me a card, the exact same shape and size of every other business card on the planet since the invention of the things, but the traditional default white color has been replaced by a matte black. There’s an etching of a simple video game controller scratched carefully onto the surface, combining design elements from all the major console controllers, and as I take the card I can feel the etching beneath my thumb. “Nick Stone,” I read. And below that, taking up most of the space on the small card, two X’s with a plus-sign between them are carved in elaborate calligraphy. “X plus X? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s the team name,” he says.

“What kind of team?”

“What other kind would it be? It’s a pro-gaming team. Girls only. Invite only.” My stony gaze apparently doesn’t match the reaction he expects, so he reiterates his offer in newer words. “I—Nick Stone, you remember—manage, invest in, and recruit for an all-girl pro-gaming team called X plus X. We’re new, and we’re just finished our first major tournament, taking third place out of 32 teams. We need new members so we can compete in more tournaments, and I’m here to offer you, Alexia Tate, a chance to play for us.”

“Girls only?”

He nods.

“And you’re recruiting us?”

Another satisfied nod. I stare at his card, the name and the etching, and feel the muscles in my arm twitch.

“Because I’m a girl,” I say, my voice distant and unfamiliar. I watch—a spectator in my own game, a player in third-person—as the business-card crumbles in my fist and my fist crashes into the generic man’s generic solar plexus. He buckles over my shoulder, enormous and heavy

like the fallen god Helios slain again. He coughs and slides away, collapsing on the concrete by my feet.

Control returns. First-person. The corners of a crumpled business-card piercing the skin within my clenched fist. A quivering in my muscles. Uncertainty and shame, fight and flight together. Fear.

I feel the crowd before I see them. They cheer for the violence without understanding its context. I push through them, feeling poisoned by each celebratory slap on my back, and rush through the mirrored doors.

I have two flights of stairs to climb before my class, and I want to sprint them. I want to leap up each set like an animal and tear apart anyone who stands in my way. Consciously, I hold myself back. One foot, one stair, one second. Paced and patient and in control. I pass students on the stairwell and none of them notice me. I am the appearance of calm. In my pockets, my hands quiver.

When my mom would teach me how to play, how to make difficult platform jumps or dodge ricocheting bombs, how to catch a quick enemy in your crosshairs or avoid a hidden trap, her words were always the same: “Try it slower. Try it again.” Repetition and Relaxation were the secrets of the artform, her Buddhist perspective on life reimaged in a virtual space. “You’ll fail if you’re angry,” she’d say. “The game wants you anxious and frustrated. It wants you to lose. You have to want to win. But you can only win if you are calm.” Years later, as I teased the idea of professional gaming, I could feel her words in my every victory. Button combinations are reflexes, memories of the muscle, not the mind. Your brain will only fuck them up. Gaming is precision and control. A quaking hand makes mistakes, and mistakes cost scores, kills, and lives. The trick is to force yourself into a trance, to see the screen and the avatar not as a distant representation of a puppet, but as an environment to move through. To let your eyes blur the room around you until only the game remains. To never think of yourself as a player. To always be a character. But the trance requires an almost Zen-like control over emotions and reflexes, and if I’ve proved anything, it’s that Alexia Tate isn’t as stable in reality as she is in-game. There’s nothing external to focus into when I’m in the real world. There’s only me. Only the player. And this fucking staircase and the memory of Nick Stone.

I pass a classmate on the final step. I smile. I bite the inside of my lip to feel control.

The corridor is eerily quiet. There are no loud conversations or lectures, no squeaking shoes or shuffling backpacks. In my naturally-drugged state, I have flashbacks to Toluca Lake and the Ishimura, those open worlds and closed corridors of the horror genre where silence only ever exists to build the tension. I turn the final corner into the classroom, expecting to see twenty students browsing some test I must have forgotten about, but none of the students are there. There is only our Professor, Dr. Holden, standing with her back to the door in an otherwise-empty room full of deep shadows. Her arms are crossed behind her back, her silhouette staring through the large classroom window—which provides the only light—and onto the Quad that spreads out below. My gaze drifts across the dim room, searching for key items that might serve as clues, but reality once again refuses to adhere to the conventions of video games.

“No class today?”

“None,” Dr. Holden confirms in a disinterested tone, but she doesn’t turn.

“Fuck.” I shift my weight, pulling the tension free from various muscle groups while standing in the doorway. If a game goes on too long, or you play too many games at once, you tend to forget details from the earlier parts of the story. You might not remember where you met

a certain character, or which small-town NPC sent you on a particular quest. Sometimes, you have to stop and think, letting the controller warm in your hands while your mind flips through the complex web of your memories. And then it hits you, that over-looked detail glowing like an Animus object in the recesses of your muddled past.

“Conferences,” I say. “For our papers.”

“That’s right,” she says, her voice without judgment or surprise. “Too many things going on in your life, Alexia?”

My heart beats too quickly. I lean against the doorway to keep from twitching. “You know. College.”

“You should try Grad school sometime.”

“No,” I laugh, “I shouldn’t. What...are you looking at out there?”

“Your friend,” she says. “The man in the suit. Certainly seems to take himself seriously, doesn’t he? Professional type. And what did that get him? Nothing but fist-wrinkles in his nice suit.” She turns, the light from the window flashing off her glasses for an instant as if she were an oracle, her knowledge supernatural. “No chance you were just overreacting again?” Facing me, I can see the unattractive boniness of her features, lending her a reptilian air. “Argonian,” I think, every time, except for the hair: long strands of black weaved into a single braid.

“Me,” I ask. “Overreacting? Pshaw.” I dig my nails into my palm.

Dr. Holden smiles, tiny wrinkles adding age and detail to her thin lips. “You can’t assault every source, critic, or interviewee that you don’t like.”

“That asshole,” I say. “He wasn’t a source. He’s, I don’t know. An asshole.”

“Everyone’s a source, Alexia. Even assholes. Especially assholes. And Liars and cheaters. Criminals. Wife beaters and child abusers and politicians.”

I sit in a nearby desk with my knees against my chest. Dr. Holden slides through the darkness, the tribal pattern of her long tan skirt wafting in the still air of the room, and settles across from me. Her knotted fingers wrap along the edge of her chair, strangling it for support. The window’s luminescence casts terrifying shadows across her bony features.

“I have a few minutes,” she says, “if you’d like to do your conference now. Get it over with. The paper is ten pages and needs at least four sources. Do you know what topic you’d like to write on? Something about games again, I assume?”

“Is that a problem,” I ask.

“Not a problem, no. But not a surprise either.” She takes a deep breath, holds it, like a bird puffed up to frighten a predator. She deflates and continues. “*Disappointment* might be the right word. I expected such great things from you in the beginning of the semester, Alexia. But you’ve slipped. Late to class. Violently defensive of criticism. Such simple errors on your drafts. And always about games. I wonder sometimes what kind of journalist you could’ve become, if you’d spent less time in those imaginary worlds. Maybe then you wouldn’t forget about conferences.”

I grind my teeth until my head throbs. “I didn’t forget because of games. I’m capable of fucking up my life on my own, thank you.”

“If that’s your goal, you’re certainly succeeding.”

“My grades are fine!”

“Your grades don’t matter,” Dr. Holden replies. “I matter. If you want in this major, you can’t do it without a recommendation from me. And the way things are going at the moment, I can’t in good conscience recommend you to represent our school and our department.”

“Are you trying to threaten me?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

I push my desk back, basking in the horrendous screech as it echoes through the empty room. Dr. Holden’s eye twitches, but her expression doesn’t change.

“What would it take,” I ask, emphasizing each word to prevent myself from screaming. “For a recommendation. What would I have to do?”

“Surprise me,” she says. “Do something with this paper that I’ve never seen before.”

“And I can write about games?”

She sighs, glances away into the dark corners of the classroom, and shakes her head.

“Write about whatever you want to, Alexia. As long as you can make me care about it.”

I stand, making sure to create as much noise as I can. I turn without thanking her or acknowledging the end of our conference. As I reach the door, she calls for me to wait. “That man,” she says, “the one in the punched suit. What did he do?”

I pull his card from my pocket, which I inexplicably held onto since it was in the same fist that punched him. “Offered me a job, I guess,” I tell her. “Professional gamer on an all-girl team.”

“Is that so bad?”

“I think so,” I say, and leave her to bask in the room of shadows.

World 1-4

Tonight, Lyle and I have plans. His last class for the day started a few minutes back, so there’s no point in going home yet. I wander the grounds, changing direction mid-stride when my mood shifts, and I soon realize that I’m going in circles. After a few uncertain laps around our campus, hoping the walk will spark some brilliant topic for my paper, I end up at the campus café. It’s a cozy little place, small like our campus, with less than ten places to sit and sip coffee. It’s adjacent to the library and the computer lab, but they keep you from bringing drinks near the electronics so it isn’t exactly an internet café. The closest you can get is if you bring your own laptop to one of the booths while your order is being made. This is easier for people who don’t own a five-pound overclocked gaming laptop with a wide screen and a dedicated graphics card. So for instant internet gratification, I settle for the small screen of my smart-phone and the mobile versions of my favorite social websites. This is doubly-effective since I can browse while standing in line to order my drink.

My emails for the day are dull and routine—a few sales on games I already own, or hardware I’m not interested in, and more than a couple bits of political spam. I have just enough time to check my online profiles for messages before it’s my turn to order. The barista is a short, pixyish girl with a close-cropped hairstyle and a round face. She’s familiar, either from some class we had together freshman year or just from seeing her around campus, and I can tell from her perky smile and cheek-dimples that she recognizes me as well.

These are the moments I fear. Not new situations or new conversations, but new people. I love my friends, but they’re my friends for a reason. We share that same addiction, obsession, love, or appreciate for games. We see the world through the same HUD. This girl, as nice and willing as she is, could never hold a conversation with me. She wouldn’t have the training, the knowledge of games and the culture, the lifestyle. There’s no overlap between people like me and people like her. She’s a woodland creature. I’m a machine.

“Alexia,” she says before I can order. “Right?”

“Yeah,” I reply, and I read off my drink: a double-shot cold mocha, frappé, with shattered bits of espresso beans mixed in for an extra kick.

She jots the details onto the side of a medium cup and adds my name beneath it in curly letters, including a smiley-face for the dot of the *i*. Holding the cup a foot away to appreciate her work, she asks: “You’re a geeky girl, right?”

“Sorry?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you wearing Halo shirts and stuff like that. You’re that game girl everyone tells me about. They keep saying we should hang out. I’m a geek too.”

“Really?” I ask, my voice masking my disbelief.

“Hells yeah! Do you read comics?”

“That’s not really my area—.”

“I get you,” she says in an upbeat voice. “I have a love-hate relationship with them, to be honest.” She hands my cup to another employee, ignores the person behind me in line, and flattens her palms against the counter. Pressing her weight against them, the bones of her shoulder press against her skin until they nearly tear through her body like some violent evolution. “My mom’s been collecting them since the sixties. Just has boxes of the things. The stories are fantastic, but you’d think that men who draw women for a living would be able to draw breasts that look like, you know, breasts. Instead of buoys. Hey!” She claps her hands together and chuckles. “You should come over and read some sometime. I bet you’d get into them if you gave it a shot. I have some killer Batman ones, Doom Patrol, Y, lots of—.”

“I’m not sure when I’ll have the time,” I say, leaning back. “I have a paper due the week we get back from Spring Break, and I don’t even have a topic yet.”

“Oh, that’s some balls. I hate when teachers do that. Remember when breaks used to be breaks?”

“Vaguely,” I admit. “High-school, maybe.”

“True true.” She hops. “I’m Claire, by the way. In case you were wondering.”

“I was just about to ask,” I lie.

The other employee hands her my order, which she cheerfully places in my hands. “Let me know,” she whispers, “when you wanna read some bitchin comics.”

I tell her I will, certain I won’t, and step to the next counter to pay for my order.

It’s still warm outside, so I sip my hyper-caffeinated drink while resting on the uncomfortable library steps. With my free hand, I flip through apps on my phone, checking the gamer profiles linked to my different consoles. My achievements and trophies—the ingame rewards that are unlocked when performing certain actions—seem to scroll endlessly, revealing either my great skill or simply how much time and money I set aside for gaming. I pride myself on having higher scores than all my friends, while being simultaneously aware of its frivolity. But pride is pride, and it feels great to feel great.

Below the scores, my profiles are centered around my avatars—the virtual representations of my gaming character—and they are unsurprisingly ambiguous. The cartoonish proportions allow for creative recreations of oneself, and given my belief that reality is boring, it’s easy to understand why my profile avatars are typically badass, scarred, assassin-types dressed in flowing clothes and wielding exaggerated weapons.

A swipe to the left reveals my list of virtual friends. Some of these are people I know in real life, while others are people who only exist to me as team-mates or competition in-game. Of

course Trescres is among them, the smug bastard appearing on the list of every profile I have, on every console I play, always near the top since we play so often.

I click his icon, a sterile, white square, and bring his profile up on my phone. The avatar is an empty canvas of a person, blank and without detail, like an unpainted mannequin or a plaster mold of a lifeless, human shape. His Gamerscore floats above its empty face. Seeing it, I nearly crush my phone in my fist. Compared to my score (well above 30,000 points for this particular console), Trescres has only earned enough to bring his score up to 1,500.

“The fuck?” I say to the screen, quickly flipping through his achievement list to learn how someone who plays so well could score so low. The list of games flies past without an unfamiliar title in the list. The games are all ones we’ve played together, and the only achievements are ones that can be unlocked by accident while playing multiplayer. Trescres apparently owns them all, since he plays them so often, but from the way his profile reads it doesn’t look like he’s played any of them on single-player. There are no achievements unlocked for completing the games, progressing through levels, or even defeating new enemy types. Flipping back to the main profile page, I check his information; it’s as empty as his avatar. Only the required fields Name and Location are filled, and only with the tag “Trescres” used as a placeholder.

In my experience, a gamer’s brain never stops playing games. Every event in their lives is just another in a long string of variables that get them to the next save point or continues the story. Boring things are filler quests, important things are main mission; acquaintances are NPCs while close friends are party members; work is rewarded with experience points. It’s the way that mathematicians must see the world as a series of equations, or physicists must see in forces. Gamers see puzzles everywhere. Staring at the void of Trescres’ profile, I can’t help but feel that I’ve stumbled upon a secret that will change everything, if I could only figure out what the hell I’ve found.

“It’s melting,” a voice warns me.

I blink away my train of thought and turn my head, rising my eyes to Lyle’s smile as he gently taps my coffee with the tip of his foot. I lift it from the ground and drink as much as I can in a single gulp. My brain unleashes a rush of pleasing chemicals to reward me for my addiction. The high calms me.

Lyle peeks his head over me and nods towards my phone. “Trescres again,” he asks. “Should I be worried? You planning on cheating on me with this guy?”

“Depends,” I reply, flipping back to my phone’s home screen. “Does murder count?”

“Na,” he says. He crouches down, leaning on me for support. “I’m pretty sure murder’s ok. But only if we’re honest about it. Don’t be sneaking around, killing people behind my back, you know?”

I give an exaggerated sigh. “I guess that’s fair. I’m apparently not as good at stealth as I thought I was anyway.”

“What’s that mean?”

I pocket my phone, wrap my fist around Nick Stone’s business card, and shrug. “I’ll explain it later. You done for today?”

“Done for the week. And for the week after that. Done until Spring Break is over.”

“You didn’t get stuck with any homework or papers or midterms or anything?”

“Nope,” he laughs. “All the midterms for my classes were today. I’m one lucky bastard.”

“Want to write my paper for me,” I ask.

“You wouldn’t want me to. I can’t explain why games are art. They just are. Anyone who says different is an idiot.”

“Or hasn’t seen a game since Mario,” I add.

“Hey,” he says, shifting his weight. “Don’t dis the retro. It took a lot of work to make a relatable character out of 8-bit graphics. Pixel art is hard. It’s like writing a 32-line poem with only the same 8 words, over and over again, and expecting it to be a Greek Epic.”

“See, that’s the problem,” I say. “Limitations. Novels don’t have to worry about that, except for language barriers. Plays do, since they have to build the sets and have to craft their own special effects, but no one talks about a particular performance of Romeo and Juliet or Doctor Faustus, they just talk about the script. But we don’t read game scripts. We play them. How are you supposed to explain the mood of Silent Hill to someone who isn’t playing it?”

“You don’t have a topic yet, do you?”

“Nowhere close,” I admit. I close my eyes and rest my head against his shoulder. “My brain’s all over the place. I need to focus on one thing. Just one individual aspect, one part of one game, something, anything.”

“Well,” he begins, and I can hear the trolling smile in his voice. “You could always write about women.”

I laugh violently. I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them, hoping to stifle the spasm, and nearly topple down the concrete steps. “You want me to write about women? And what, precisely, should I, write, about women?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “Maybe how girl gamers are harassed all the time? Or how women are portrayed in games?”

“I don’t get harassed.”

“That’s because you hide behind your unisex name. No one you play against knows you’re a girl.”

“That’s not why I do that,” I tell him, “and you know it. I just don’t want anyone to think I’m like *those* girls.”

“What girls?” he asks, unfolding his legs and sitting next to me.

“The ones who think they’re quirky because they play games with their boyfriends. People like that booth babe at the tournament. The ones who use gaming as a fucking fashion statement.”

Lyle lays back against the sharp steps and lets out a slow breath. “I know,” he says. “And guys have that too. Frat boys who think they’re hardcore gamers because they play sports games. But it’s different.”

“Why?”

“Alex, how many gamers do you think are female?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Like, four?”

“47%.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m serious! Last article I read, 47% of gamers are female. But no one knows it.”

“You think they’re all hiding under unisex names?” I ask.

“No. I think no one’s counting.” He sits up, dramatist that he is, and leans towards me. “The people who make the games can’t take risks because the people who publish them still think that little boys are the only ones who play, and they’ll keep thinking that because no one’s correcting them.”

“And you think they’ll listen to me?”

“No,” he says absolutely. “But I think someone will. And that’s a step.”

There’s a solid silence in the apartment. Ben must have his own plans, and Terry is either MIA or makes less sound than the whir of computer fans. I find us some music online, a video of album art with the full OST of a sci-fi FPS playing behind it, while Lyle creates industrial sounds in the kitchen with cast-iron pans. He’s the only one in our group that can cook real food. He loves reverse-engineering his favorite dishes from local restaurants, and most of the spices in the kitchen belong to him anyway even though he lives on campus. Tonight, with what little help I can give him, we’re making Parmesan Chicken. I get the job of cleaning the chicken, stripping the fat from it, and pounding it into thin strips. Holding raw meat in my hands has always felt pleasant, like some distant genetic savage in my DNA is relishing in the kill. It’s the closest I get to surviving in the virtual jungle of *Far Cry* and skinning the wildlife for their pelts. Oddly enough, the game never lets you use the bodies for food.

Lyle coats the prepared chicken in egg and dips it into a mixture of parmesan, breadcrumbs, and salt. Dropping them into the skillet, he recounts his most recent gaming experiences. He describes beautiful indie games that resemble paintings or sketches, where realistic graphics are traded for stylization and originality. They’re the type he buys the first day they come out, and I could never imagine him working on anything else.

“There’s a reason why Indie games are cheaper,” he says, laying a strip of meat in our skillet. “There’s no corporate ladder to work through, and there aren’t entire departments devoted to specific aspects of the project. When you’re a small group, with just a few people developing the whole game, you can take risks. You can make games that are damn-near impossible to play, or just don’t make any sense, and you don’t have to worry what the producers will think.” The chicken pops and darkens along the edges. His swift fingers, dexterous from untold hours of keystrokes and button-mashing, lifts and flips the strip of meat so the other side can cook. He tells me about speed runs through saw mills, love triangles with atomic bombs, and batters who purify ghosts. Just this week, he’s played as an entire genetic line of knights and traversed space in an FTL spaceship a dozen times in games designed to be played and lost again and again within a single sitting.

“But they’re so...small,” I say, flicking clumps of chicken fat from my fingers. “In gameplay. In scope. They feel like games *used* to feel. Like arcade titles and early consoles. Not like modern blockbusters.”

“Of course not. That’s the point.” He switches the cooked strip of chicken with a newly-coated raw piece. The oil pops violently. “They aren’t Triple-A titles. They don’t have to be, they aren’t trying to be, and while that limits their budget, it also liberates their creativity.”

I shrug. The argument itself is too familiar to both of us. We lack the energy to convince the other, knowing it to be in vain. We have infinite similarities, but this isn’t one of them.

“Every game uses art,” he says, the thesis to his most recent essay. “But there are indie games out there that really make something spectacular with it. That wrap art assets and gameplay together until you can’t have one without the other.” His eyes are unfocused and the chicken begins to burn. I step to the skillet and silently flip the strip to its uncooked side.

He goes quiet. I expect a list of upcoming titles and mechanics, another quote from his paper, but it never comes. There’s just the sound of water splashing against the raw breast of chicken while I clean the next piece. When he finally speaks, the words are new. “In all these art classes I’ve taken,” he tells me, “they show us masterpieces. From Rembrandt. Caravaggio. Dürer. The best of the best art in the history of the world, as decided by people who study

nothing but art for their entire lives. These are the works that are meant to inspire and humble us. And you know what they do? Have you ever seen one in real life? They just...sit there. You can't watch them because they never change. You can't play them because they don't need you. They exist on their own, without you, and they're always the same. One person's vision. And there's nothing you can do to change it."

"You could paint your own," I suggest.

He laughs and drowns another strip of meat in breadcrumbs. "Sure," he says. "But then it's a different painting all together, isn't it? There's no way to look at the Mona Lisa to make it your own. What you see, everyone sees. Different interpretations, sure. But nothing changes."

"You don't usually get this philosophical around chicken."

"Not usually," he agrees. "It's just that paper of yours. The one you're worried about. I guess I wanted you to understand that you aren't alone. You're not the only one trying to change the world."

When our meals are complete, and Lyle spends a bit too much time crafting the layout of our plates and sprinkling them with cheese and herbs, we settle on the couch to watch our favorite internet celebrities playing video games. It's a lot more interesting than it sounds, since it's practically a comedy skit between two absurd characters trying to make sense of the most bizarre moments in modern gaming while mocking each other. On other days, we might watch one of Lyle's favorites, such as the internet series that invite serious discussions about the state of the industry or how games could be made better. But today isn't one of those days. I'm already exhausted, overwhelmed by the mission that Dr. Holden and Lyle have set me on. The weight is familiar. I know it from the beginning of every great game: you, young boy, must eliminate evil from this land; you, young man, must take control of this city; you, man, must slay the reborn dragons. And it always seems impossible in the beginning. When you're weak. When you're inexperienced. But it's never too much for you then. No matter the odds, you know it's possible to succeed. In games, the world is designed to be beatable.

But in the reality, sometimes, we just need to laugh.

World 2-1

Today's games are trapped in a place called "The Uncanny Valley." The characters seem real enough when they're standing still, but the illusion is broken once they make the slightest movements; we know they're not human. Their motions are too stiff, the muscles of their faces aren't complex enough, their skin tension is wrong, and on and on. This is one of the reasons that sex scenes have never been effective within a video game. Some of the braver companies like Bioware have tried, but it always leads to humorous and awkward encounters.

This is the reason, and the only reason, that I'm glad my life is not a video game.

The sun opens on a scene of tangled sheets and blankets. The warm rays streak across my torso while my muscles rest from the night's exercise. My breasts rise with each breath, and I feel neither shame nor disappointment at the peculiarities of my body. Lyle is beside me, his eyelids drawn and obscured by his hands. His muscles are tight and lean, and I wonder if he exercises in secret.

I roll lazily from the bed and still manage to land on my feet, allowing the inertia to twist me towards my closet. I take a shirt at random, pull on some shorts, and head downstairs while Lyle sleeps. I am met instantly by the sounds of swords clashing against shields.

Ben is home and awake—or has never slept—and is busy slaying the undead of the kingdom of Lordran. I sit next to him on the couch and watch as he pulls off three perfect parries before being shot with a crossbow dart, stabbed in the back, and thrown from a ledge to his death. He hangs his head resignedly while he mumbles an impressive string of curses.

“Having fun?” I ask.

“I don’t understand why I subject myself to this.”

“You knew it was an unforgiving game. How long have you been playing?”

“Oh, like, an hour,” he says. Then he checks his phone for the exact time, turns to the window, and stares skeptically at the beams of sunlight that pierce through the gaps in the blinds. “Okay, six hours. I guess. But you know what they say. Time flies when you’re...screaming in frustration.”

“Rough night?”

“No,” he replies as the loading screen vanishes. “I had a great time. Well,” he adds, tossing me a quick glance, “not as great as you did, by the look of it.”

“What do you mean? What look?”

“Please, Alex. You never smile this much without caffeine unless you’ve had a crazy night of even crazier sex.”

“There’s nothing crazy about my sex, thank you.”

He scoffs, both at me and the game. I wait for his snide reply, but it never comes.

“Are you judging me?” I ask. “Don’t judge me.”

“No,” he says. “No judgment. I think it’s cute. You and Lyle, having all this ‘not-crazy’ sex. Being all normal.” He chuckles and dodges the enormous sword of a black knight, only to be caught by a second swing before he can heal. His health vanishes before he can fully form the word “fuck”.

I attempt to hide my smile. I’ve been through the game and all its frustration before. My eyes wander the room, glancing from our bookshelf of game cases to our shelves of consoles, and then finally at the Portal coasters that are scattered across our coffee table. I consider which blend of coffee I’d prefer on a day like this, but my thoughts flicker away before I can decide. Beside an empty wineglass on the table is the crumpled business card of Nick Stone which I must have dropped at some point last night. Attached to the card by a paperclip is a note written in small, block letters with a careful and nearly perfect hand. The words resemble the digital readout of alarm clocks, and the only letters large enough to read from the couch form the word “query” at the top of the page.

“What’s this?” I ask, and lean forward to take the note just as Ben meets his knight once again.

“What’s what?” He flicks his eyes from the screen while the parrying animation plays, then flicks them back. His posture changes. He turns from the television again even though the game is continuing without him, and I can hear his character being impaled. “Well fuck,” he says, leaning closer to read the note with me. “That’s Terry’s handwriting.”

“Terry?” I ask. “Our invisible roommate?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. But I’ve only ever seen it when he leaves the rent money out. He’s never actually attempted to make casual contact before...”

The note takes some practice to read. The perfectly straight lines of each letter feel unnatural, and I get caught up in the beauty of the script. When decoded, it reads simply enough:

query:

*we have met nick stone?
which one of us
had the honor?
-T*

“Fucking amazing,” Ben says. “This moment needs to be recorded. We should call someone, an anthropologist maybe, or some historians. Terry has spoken.”

“Not only that,” I add, “but he asked a question. That would typically imply a response, right?”

“Shit, yeah. There’s an honest-to-god dialogue going on here.” He sets the controller on the table while his character falls. Ben crosses his legs and turns his body towards the note, his fists resting lightly on his lips while his brow bends. “We have to do this right.”

“We?”

“We might not get another chance.”

“Another chance? At what?”

“Jesus Alex, haven’t you ever played a JRPG before? Dialogue options like this don’t come around every day.”

“Honestly, Ben, I don’t have the slightest clue where the hell you’re going with this. I’m groggy and you’re being weird.”

His shoulders drop and he stands, turning towards the kitchen. I follow the best I can, but each step is stiff and awkward. When I reach the doorway, Ben is already mixing a blend of grounds into the basket of my drip coffee maker. “Branching narratives,” he says, “are one of the major concepts that separate games from other forms of literature, right?”

“Sure,” I reply. “Because—”

“There’s not always a set story,” he continues. “Sometimes, you get to choose where the narrative goes. Save this person, destroy this city, invest in this company.” Ben pours a couple cups of water into the reservoir and hits the power button. He nods at the machine. He turns. “And those choices can sometimes reward you with a different ending, extra equipment, or sometimes a new playable character.”

“And?”

“And the reason branching narratives are so fucking fantastic, aside from the rewards and the interactivity with the story, is because they’re the narrative element that most closely resembles reality. Do you get it now?”

“This early in the morning? Not at all.”

Ben picks a mug from the cabinet and fills it with black coffee. “Here,” he says, placing my hands around the mug. “Drink. And listen. Terry made contact, and that has opened up a choice. A branching narrative in real life. Your response—what you say and how you say it—will have consequences. If you do this right, you might unlock a new character.”

“You mean, Terry might join our party?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

I nod. I drink. I’m satisfied with my current group of friends, so gaining a new one has never appealed to me. But secrets? Unlockables? That’s something I can understand. I recognize the pleasing pull in my chest, that anticipation before making a decision that will have actual impact on the future of the game. It’s becoming rare in modern games, since greedy corporations would rather sell you a hidden character for real money than allow you to earn them through investing your time. But here, with Terry’s note and my inevitable response, we have a

link to the old-school style of rewards, where time spent is positively reinforced with powerful weapons or allies. My urge for collecting ignites something deep within my brain, and I know what has to be done. Again, I nod.

Ben smiles. “Good.”

“What advice does our resident gay prophet have for me?”

“Don’t treat me like an NPC,” he replies. He returns the couch, reaches for the controller, and quits his game. “I’m coming with you.”

“Am I going somewhere?”

“Damn right you’re going somewhere. You think you can just write Terry a note back? Then what, wait another year for him to leave his room again? No. If you’re going to do this, you have to do it right. And for that, we need to head to campus.”

“The fuck for?”

“A computer.”

“We’re going to leave the house in order to find a computer to talk to the person who’s currently upstairs, literally less than ten feet away?”

“Yes.”

“But we have computers here. If we just need a computer—”

“Where’s your questing spirit?” he demands, standing from the couch and stretching. “If it were easy, it wouldn’t be fun. Besides, your computer isn’t good enough. You don’t just need the internet, you need the right software too.”

“Can’t I just download whatever I need?”

Ben shrugs. “Probably. If you want your game to be that simple. It’s your life. What kind of game are you wanting to play for the next sixty years?”

As dumb as I feel for admitting it, his words inspire me. When I play a game, I can sense what’s missing from a new franchise, and see where the developers should make adjustments in the sequels. Why shouldn’t I be able to do the same thing with my life? If I was a game, what would I change?

Ben’s smile twitches a bit at the edges. He knows. There’s no better time to change my path, my character, my genre, than now. While we gather our things, I instinctively snatch Nick Stone’s business card and shove it into my pockets.

Ben and Terry had been roommates for a year before I came along. The details of their origin story are fuzzy, but from everything I’ve heard, those details might be lost on Ben as well. Terry had emailed him a couple of months before the first semester of college without ever meeting in person. The way Ben told it, Terry had managed to download the school’s directory of incoming students without the techies even realizing it. He then ran that directory through a program of his own design that searched each person’s name and birthdate on the net for any social profiles associated with it, and copied and downloaded all the personal information from those sites into a database on Terry’s laptop, essentially gaining him an incredible amount of personal information that the students had provided for free. The program finally took the database, filtered out all the students whose interests and hobbies didn’t align with Terry’s, and spat back only two viable candidates. Ben was the first, and I was the other. But since I had already signed up for student housing that year, Ben got chosen instead, and he spent the next year convincing me to room with them.

I’ve still never met Terry.

Ben leads the way through a maze of glass-walled corridors that I've never been through before. The signs on the walls resemble English but are entirely incomprehensible to someone without at least six credit hours' worth of Computer Science courses. Every turn, I'm overwhelmed by the sense of the foreign and the knowledge that I've stepped into a world where I'm powerless and—if I'm being honest—stupid. A genius on one side of our campus becomes an imbecile when they wander too close to the other.

Down another flight of stairs. The mood shifts. We pass by vacant rooms full of lab equipment, complex machinery, test tubes and warning signs. A heavy scent of latex forms a fog around us.

"This computer," I say. "It's not alive, is it? Some kind of reanimated corpse with wifi or anything?"

"No," Ben assures me. "No no no." A pause. "At least I hope not."

"Then what are we doing here? Haven't we passed through the CS Department already?"

"It's not in Computer Science," he tells me. "It's in Chemistry."

"Why? Isn't that...counter-intuitive?"

"Because," he replies, "it is counter-intuitive. That's the kind of guy Terry is. If it was obvious, it wouldn't be a challenge. I don't know much about him, but what I do know is this: Dude loves playing games." And with that, Ben leans into a set of double-doors made of frosty glass. He strains against their weight (or is just putting on a show; either would be likely) until they hold themselves open. The room we see is the exact opposite of whatever it was I was expecting.

There are a few things that you only expect to see in video games. If I wrote them out in a list, barrels would certainly be at the top, followed directly by wooden crates. So of course, barrels and crates are exactly what I see. At least ten of each, stacked in the center and along the right edge of the room, creating a simple maze that obscures the only window. The light from that window scatters and forms a holy glow around the barrels in the center. The left side of the room is empty, aside from the insane number of cabinets that every chemistry lab has, each bolted shut with padlocks and labeled in unintelligible abbreviations.

"Ben?" I ask. "Exactly where are we?"

"Officially? I dunno. Storage probably."

"And unofficially?"

He smirks and marches through the short maze, beckoning me to follow. When we reach the end, we are greeted by the ceiling-high window that opens over the faculty parking-lot. A high table sits in front of it, rising nearly to my chest but no wider than the silver laptop that's perched upon it.

"Two guesses," Ben tells me. "One. You're wondering why no one knows that this is here. Or Two. You're wondering why no one's stolen it yet."

"Pretty much," I agree. I'm no expert on computers, but the sheer size of the laptop must be some kind of indication as to how much power is hidden inside. And power is money.

"Go ahead. Pick it up."

I study Ben's face, but his mask offers none of his secrets. He repeats his order and I place my hands around the machine, less from obedience and more from curiosity. I lift. Nothing moves. "The fuck?" I tilt my head to the side and bend lower, studying the table and the laptop, only to find that the metal from both are blended in a smooth smear. "Did he...weld this on?"

“As far as I can tell,” Ben says. “And the table’s bolted to the floor. Not sure how he pulled it off, but this thing’s going nowhere.” He gently pushes me to the side and lifts the screen. The machine instantly powers on, and my eyes trace a single cord that trails from behind the computer, winds down the table’s leg like a vine, and disappears through a hole in the floor.

Ben hits a few keys on the keyboard and by the time my attention returns to him, he has the program loaded. It’s a dark background with an overlay of overlapping blue lines that are constantly redrawn on the screen at wide angles, essentially outlining the center of the screen. At the top and bottom, an inch of screen is dedicated to a perpetually scrolling block of encoded text. I barely have time to read a line before it vanishes again, to be replaced by an equally bizarre string of code.

In the blank center of the screen, where the code and the blue lines fail to penetrate, a single line of zeroes and ones sits static. Ben points to this and explains: “This isn’t really binary. It’s...well...okay technically I guess it’s binary, but it isn’t meant to be read. It’s more like a picture. Each digit represents one of these terminals. A zero means that terminal is offline. A one means it’s running.”

“Alright,” I say. “So he has more of these computers scattered around?”

“Oh yeah. I’d guess one’s in his room, probably one with Jen as well. This one makes three. And...that’s all the ones I know of. But the readout says there’s a total of eight stashed around someplace. Four of them, counting this one, are online right now.”

“And I guess this program is on each one?”

“Yep. So each computer is connected at all times. Using this program, which he sure as hell made himself, we can group-chat with anyone at any of the other terminals. The username is the ID for the computer you’re using at the time. In Terry’s mind, it isn’t so important who’s talking or who’s listening. It’s where they are.”

I blink and open my eyes to a new string of text below the not-really-binary code:

Thm01: *We have received my message?*

“Oh god,” I sigh. “Please tell me he doesn’t always talk like that.”

“Not always,” Ben assures me. “But I think he thinks it’s cool. And if you build your own program and weld it to the school floor, I guess you get to talk however you want to.”

“Fair enough.” I read the text a second time, careful to search for any patterns or puzzles. “So. What do we say?”

“It’s your game,” Ben replies. “Play it.”

“What happened to ‘I’m not an NPC’?”

“Eh. I’ve played this part before. It’s your turn.” He makes a motion to rotate the computer towards me, then remembers that it’s welded in place. His cheeks redden as he turns towards the window and stares out at the cars.

I manage to contain most of my laughter and return to the screen, choosing my words wisely. Though I’ve lived with Terry for several months, this is the first time I’ve ever said anything to him. I intend to make it perfect, and once I admit that that’s impossible, I type out the first thing that comes to mind. A username attaches itself to my message and pastes it onto the screen.

Ucs003: *Alexia met with Nick Stone yesterday.*

I stretch my back, correct my posture, and type again.

Ucs003: *That’s me. Alexia. I’m Alexia.*

Thm01: *That’s fascinating. Where did you meet him?*

Ucs003: *Campus. He apparently came to talk to me.*

A long pause follows my statement. Ben turns from the window, seemingly as unnerved by my lack of typing as I am. He stands beside me, catches up on the conversation, and tightens his lips.

“Did I do something wrong?” I ask.

“No,” he says, allowing the end of the syllable to hang uncertainly in the air. “This is Terry. Such a mystery. I can always tell when something significant has happened. But I can never tell which word sparked it. And I think he likes it that way. He gets to be the anonymous intellect behind the screen while we’re blind to his emotions.”

“Easy, Ben. I don’t need his psych profile. I just wanted to know if I said anything to piss him off.”

“Oh. Shit. How the hell should I know? Dude’s an enigma.”

My shoulders drop. I feel my face twitch in Ben’s direction. Then his eyes light up as a new line of text flashes onto the screen.

Thm01: You must be proud.

At last, I feel something behind the words. “He knows,” I say aloud. “Terry knows why Nick Stone found me.”

Without waiting for Ben’s reaction, I attack the keyboard with physical accusations.

Ucs003: Terry. Who is Nick Stone? Tell me everything. Tell me who he is, where he comes from, how he found me, and what he wants. Tell me what you know.

Thm01: No, Alexia. That is not how we play.

“Oh for fuck’s fuck.”

Thm01: You get one question that I can answer with my current knowledge. Then, I will allow one question whose answer I do not know. That is all for now.

Ucs003: Why?

Thm01: Because knowledge comes from an investment of time. And my time is precious. I’m very good at learning. If I offered what I learned, for free, without limit, I would have no time to myself. Unlike the limited scope of your console games, my online games do not end. They require dedication, and I deliver.

“That bastard,” I say.

Ucs003: That’s it? That’s why you never leave your room? Because you’re playing computer games all day?

“That lucky bastard.”

Thm01: I thought you would approve.

“Harsh,” Ben says, and he clicks his tongue. “Only one question. Well, two, but only if you’re right about what he knows and what he doesn’t.”

“And he’s always like this?”

“Only with people he likes. If someone from outside our little circle tried this, it wouldn’t go so well.”

“I’d hate to see him when he’s being difficult.”

Ben moves away from the screen and begins pacing. “He knows I’m here,” he mumbles, his voice barely slipping between his fingers as he taps his upper lip. “Otherwise, you’d never have found the terminal. And it wouldn’t surprise me if he only ever shows each person one particular terminal, so he can keep tabs on who’s widening the circle. Since you’re on this one, it has to have been me that showed you.”

“Ben, be honest. Is he a super-villain? An evil genius? I mean, should we be concerned?”

Ben waves my words away and begins pacing towards the opposite wall. “He knows I’m here, but he didn’t say I couldn’t help. If we use game logic, then we are allowed to do anything that isn’t specifically forbidden.”

“And since he didn’t say you couldn’t help....”

“He might as well have said I’m expected to.”

There’s a certain elation associated with finally understanding the rules to a puzzle or game. Confusion transforms into excitement as an unintelligible jumble of useless information becomes a cypher. A wall becomes a door, and doors can be entered as long as you have the key. Progress can be made. I smile at Ben. “Then let’s get started.”

“Okay.” He slides a crate from the corner and perches on top of it, his slender frame arched like some bird of prey. “Don’t worry about what he doesn’t know. We can’t figure that out until we learn what he *does* know.”

“Which seems to be a lot. He didn’t seem to know that Nick Stone was visiting. But once he found out that Nick Stone came to talk to me, he seemed to know exactly *why*.”

“Right,” Ben nods. “Which means, Terry must know what Nick Stone is. What his job is, what he represents, and what he offers to people.”

“Mr. Stone is popular then.”

“Or some kind of famous. Now the trick is, you have to avoid asking something simple. There’s no point in wasting this question on something you could just look up on the internet.”

“Maybe something personal then?” I suggest. “Or subjective?”

Ben scratches his chin and nods. “That might be good. Terry’s knowledge reaches into frightening depths. He can find out the dirtiest secrets of the most powerful people. He just doesn’t care enough to ever use it. To him, it’s just another computer game. There’s no telling how much he knows, but I’m sure he’s at least looked into Nick Stone. And if he’s giving you this chance, then there must be something interesting to learn.”

“If there’s a treasure chest, there’s a treasure.”

“Exactly. So more than anything, what do you want to know about Mr. Stone? Or maybe, what secret could he possibly have that Terry would know you’d want?”

“Honestly?” I ask. “My mind has been a bit preoccupied lately, so I haven’t wanted much of anything. Unless Nick Stone could tell me which topic I should write my paper on. Or who the hell....” My lips refuse to form the name and already my mind knows it’s true. Flashes of fight scenes play out in my head like trailers for games I’ll never get another chance to play. I’m reveling in each satisfactory hit, ignoring the world around me.

Ben snaps and I blink. The trailers are gone and all that’s left is a blinking cursor and Ben’s eyebrows pinched up in a curious peak. “What just happened in that head of yours?”

“Tresces,” I spit. “That bastard, it’s this bastard. It’s the only thing that would make sense. Why Tresces keeps playing against me, how Nick Stone found me. And of course Terry would know that I’d want that information.”

“Alex, wait. You’re talking about that guy you always play against online? Seriously? I’m all for trippy plots in games, but this isn’t a game. Think about this. You know *nothing* about this guy or the other guy, and out of all the people who play online every day, you think you just met one specific one in real life?”

“It has to be him!”

“Why? Because he’s better than you, and that means he must be famous? Come on, man. He’s probably just some twelve-year-old brat who’s home-schooled and doesn’t have any friends.”

“As a gamer, I find that stereotype offensive. And as a girl, go fuck yourself, you’re wrong. I’m asking the question.”

Ben throws his head back and his arms up in an impressive maneuver that I secretly hope popped his shoulder out of socket. He returns to his window and slams his forehead against it so hard I can feel the vibrations in my fingertips as I type.

Ucs003: *Nick Stone. Is he Trescres?*

My finger hovers over the “enter” key and drops. In an instant, I’m reminded of every sad event in my childhood and adolescence—those small problems that seem so tragic at the time—and the fury I felt that real life didn’t have savepoints. If only I had saved before my dog ran away, or before I lied to my best friend, it wouldn’t be so difficult to make a decision. We could simply reload our lives to before the event occurred, allowing us a chance to try again. Choices wouldn’t feel so painful and terrifying if their consequences could be tested and avoided. My fingers hit the key, my text is written on the screen, and I wait, feeling as if I finally understand the drive behind Ben’s indecision.

Thm01: *Trescres? What is this word?*

“He doesn’t understand,” I translate. “How can he not understand?”

A whine from Ben explains: “Because you’re wrong.” He slams his head forward again, another tremor through my fingers, otherwise numb as they rest against the keyboard. “This isn’t about your little rivalry. It’s about someone with real power, searching you out because they’re so impressed with your skill, and offering you a job doing what you love to do anyway. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Nick Stone is—”

“Nick Stone is a bitch who thinks his fame or money or whatever gives him the privilege to make an all-girl fan-club. But guess what? My sex has nothing to do with my games, so it doesn’t matter. And if Nick Stone has nothing to do with Trescres, then he doesn’t matter either.”

“Alex,” his chilled and muffled voice replies, “there’s more to life than Trescres.”

“Not right now there isn’t. Not until I know who he is.”

“You mean not until you know why he’s better than you.”

“Trescres isn’t better than me.”

He chuckles, and I feel each sick lurch in my stomach. “He’s not?”

“Of course not. We’re...about even.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I echo.

“And Trescres...”

“What?” I feel my muscles tighten, but without a chair nearby or a table that isn’t bolted to the floor, my rage has no outlet. “What about him?”

“Do you think he does this?”

“Does what?” My voice is louder than I want it to be.

A sigh. “Do you think Trescres cares who the hell you are?” Ben asks. “Do you think he thinks about you at all, other than when he’s playing against you?” He turns. His face is red from the window-trauma, but it’s his eyes that I can’t stop staring at. In his gaze, I can feel the voyeuristic eyes of every crowd from every tournament I’ve snuck out of. It’s the penetrating stare of someone from the outside who wants to see into my head.

“Your gay-prophet powers won’t work on me, Benjamin.”

There’s a sudden drop of silence, caught like the photograph of a falling object, before we shatter it with laughter. Ben collapses, and after a few failed attempts to regain his standing, he

settles onto the floor like a child at story-time. He chokes back his laughs in time to say, “today is going kill me,” before rubbing his forehead with his hands. Then his eyes rise, and the feeling they inspire must be the same that a god feels when his priests are disappointed in him. “I don’t understand you, Alex. Why do you let him get to you like this?”

“Because I’ve never been this good at anything,” I scream. My voice echoes across the paneled walls and returns, accusatorily. My cheeks redden and my poster drops. “Fuck.” My fingers twitch again, preparing for the trigger pulls that will never save m from reality. I’m phenomenal, Ben. At this. At gaming. And you know what else? It’s fucking easy. I didn’t have to change my diet or run miles every day to keep in shape. I didn’t have to get a coach or go to a special school. I just played. And even so, even though this whole thing is just a game, it’s a game I try really hard at. And because of that, I’m really good at it. Even when it’s tough, it’s fun. Gaming is who I am, what I am, and what I want to be. It’s my identity and my life and thanks to Trescres, all of that has come into question. If I can’t be the best, then what the hell am I even doing?”

“Having fun isn’t enough?”

“I don’t know. It used to be. When I was younger. But now? Everything’s changed. The way people react when I go to a tournament, it bothers me. Losing bothers me. And then there’s Trescres, and whether he wins or loses, he’s always excited. It’s like it really doesn’t matter.”

“Wow,” Ben says.

“What?”

“Trescres isn’t just better than you at gaming. He’s better than you at life.”

“That’s helpful, Ben. I appreciate these moments between us.”

“Hey. All I’m saying is that Trescres is a superior human being. That’s all.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I’m starting to see that.”

Ben stands, stretches, and twists the stress from his body. “Then there’s only one thing left to do.”

“Ruin him?” I suggest.

“Exactly.” He takes my place at the keyboard and his fingers blur. My smile grows with each word he types.

Ucs003: *New question. An answer you don’t know.*

Ucs003: *Trescres is the gamertag for Alexia’s rival. Find them.*

Ucs003: *Learn who they are, where they play, and how to humiliate them.*

Ucs003: *We’re drafting you for war. Show us where to fight.*

The screen is alive with a flurry of new usernames, other people at other terminals, those who had silently spectated until now. All online users are accounted for as they offer their excitement and support. And then Terry appears.

Thm01: *We are interested in your proposal. You will have your answer.*

“That’s it?” I ask.

“That’s it. The man is a living Deus Ex Machina. Introduce him to your problem, and your problem will be solved.”

“And Nick Stone? What about him?”

Ben sighs. “Him? Well. We missed our chance to learn about him. And if I were you, I’d be terrified by that. There’s something about that man that Terry thought you needed to know. Something so important that he made contact. That’s not something to be ignored. Especially concerning a man who found you when no one else could.”

“Great,” I say. “So in the game of my life, I just lost my chance to learn about the boss.”

“If you’re lucky.”

“And if I’m not?” I ask.

“Then you just lost your chance to play the game at all.”