

EMERGENCY



Catalyst Game Labs

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... SYSTEM ANOMALIES ...

Sneaker's low-light revealed every crack in the hallway's worn linoleum tiling. Doors with silent, black portholes lined up to the right. Eerie red lights blinked steadily on the keypad next to each, signaling that the automatic locks were still engaged. Heavy rain pummeled the windows, and the occasional flash of lightning interfered with his night sight. *No doubt about it, this place gives me the creeps*, Sneaker thought. He signaled Shane and Walks-the-wyld to move forward toward their target, held in the cell three doors down. He'd had a bad feeling about this extraction, ever since Johnson first mentioned the target's location ...

"The Renton mental asylum?" Duster asked, her sleek elven eyebrows rising.

"I assure you, the subject poses no danger to your team." The Johnson answered as if he had the conversation scripted.

"Yeah, right!" Duster snapped. Sneaker cut her off with a look.

"Why's he being kept there in the first place?" He asked. "It isn't a penitentiary institution, so he's probably not a criminal."

"I assume in your ... line of work, you have heard of Artificially Induced Psychotropic Schizophrenia?"

"You mean the guy's ridin' the 'trix-monkey? He's got the Apes?" It was hard not to have heard about Artificially Induced Psychotriwhatsoever, aka the "Apes." People trapped online when the global network went down in '64 expressed all sorts of weird disorders—if they survived and weren't turned into vegetables, that is. The more treatments they tried on these poor souls, the fewer successes were reported.

"As I said, Mr. Sneaker, he poses no danger to you or any member of your team. Now, do we have a deal?"

"Sneak, you comin' or what?" Shane's voice over the link ripped Sneaker's attention back to his crew huddled around the cell door. "Get this—a manual keypad! Everything here's old-style! The sec-system's isolated from their main network, cameras and all—waste of time that hack was. Pickin' up wi-fi emissions, though. 'Ack, freakin' tiny wires ... got it. Boss?"

Taser in hand, Sneaker pulled the door open. Inside the padded cubic cell, a teenage ork covered in a corner, shielding his eyes from the flashlights. "Go away."

"We're here to—" Sneaker was interrupted by Duster's sudden curse.

"GO AWAY!" The kid's voice boomed like thunder in the runners' ears, sending them reeling. *Did that just come over my link?* Sneaker wondered, doubling over in pain. Duster's fingers danced frantically over an invisible AR display as she tried to regain control of her commlink, a thin thread of blood oozing from an ear. Walks-the-wyld leaned against the doorjamb, ripping the commlink plug out of his ear.

"THE VOICES! YOU BRING THE VOICES! JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Sneaker raised his hands in appeasement, "Kid, nobody's gonna hurt you, we're—"

"GO AWAY! THEY'RE CALLING ME, BUT I DON'T WANT TO GO! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Sheer volume brought Sneaker to his knees. Waves of digital icons, and diagnostic screens flooded his vision. Swamped with nausea and vertigo, he fell to the floor, clutching his head. Too late, the safety cutout on his screeching earplugs kicked in. Deaf and disoriented, he could not hear his teammate's muffled screams.

