

*"In the pale light of the moon,*

*I play the game of you.*

*Whoever I am.*

*Whoever you are."*

*Neil Gaiman, "A Game of You"*

Anthony didn't clearly remember how he'd been kidnapped. There had been a tall, massive man in a long black overcoat following him. He remembered that much. There had been a blue van, and several other people involved. Another massive man, he was pretty sure about that. Both of them blonde and the same body type, perhaps they were brothers. He had been in the mall parking lot when it happened. That was about all he remembered.

The next thing he knew he was in the stone room. Gray stone walls barricaded him in this room with cold efficiency. The floors and ceiling were composed of more impassable stone.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/2.

Along one wall of the long narrow room were twelve steel doors with ornate metal pull handles. Except for the modern look of the steel doors, Anthony felt as if he had waken in a medieval dungeon. All that was missing were flickering torches mounted on the walls. In their place were cold florescent lights.

The only other things breaking the illusion of a castle dungeon were speakers protected by heavy metal grills in the ceiling corners at each end of the room. Four speakers, four grills, and something else ... something that looked like a water nozzle sticking out from the wall underneath each speaker.

There were eleven other people in the room, each lying in their own heap like winos recovering from the fruits of a whiskey truck accident outside their alley. Apparently Anthony was the first to wake. None of the people looked like jailers. These were probably fellow kidnap victims then. Anthony rose shakily to his feet and made his way to the wall of doors. It didn't take him long to discover that all twelve were locked. There was no other obvious way out, so their escape lay through one or all of these doors.

"What have you done to me?" Someone snarled, gripping his ankle with one wire strong hand.

Anthony jerked his foot away. "I haven't done anything. I just woke up here myself."

The man looked to be as tall as Anthony and was perhaps twenty pounds heavier, though these things were hard to estimate when someone was curled up on the floor. The grip on his foot had not been weak, however. This was a strong man, and right now he was glaring at Anthony with piercing eyes.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/3.

Others were sitting up now.

A heavysset blond woman focused her bleary eyes on him. "What do you want?"

Anthony realized that people waking up and finding him the only one standing were assuming he was their captor. He sat down next to the woman. "The same as you, to find out who did this to us and why. My name is Anthony Gaiman."

The woman yawned hugely. "Excuse me. I'm Jessica."

A thin, balding man sat up, resting his back against the wall. "Francis." He said as if they'd asked him. It wouldn't take long for them to bond, they were all in the same boat.

A stocky man behind Francis chimed in next, "I'm Logan York."

"Maurice Fisher." The first person beyond the man who'd grabbed Anthony, a black man with a luxurious graying beard, said.

The man who'd grabbed Anthony grimaced angrily. "What is this AA crap? Hi, I'm Logan and I'm an abductee! Hi Logan!"

"I suppose you're the person who hides all his emotions, especially fear and wanting, behind sarcasm?" Logan replied mildly.

"And I suppose you're the armchair shrink?" Sarcasm Boy shot back.

Anthony spoke up. "Fuck all this, can anyone remember being taken? I was at a mall ... there was a blue van ... I don't remember much."

"I think I was given a shot." Jessica muttered.

A woman further down the room murmured in agreement.

"There was someone following me, I remember noticing that." Francis said dreamily. "A large man."

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/4.

"Looked like The Rock," Logan, who along with Anthony and Sarcasm Boy wasn't a small man himself, agreed.

"Why it is so hard to remember?" Anthony wondered aloud.

"They obviously gave us something!" Sarcasm Boy growled. "She even said she was given a shot."

"Why do you have to be an asshole?" The second woman snapped. "We're in enough shit as it is, we can't be turning on each other."

Sarcasm Boy laughed bitterly. "You think I trust any of you people? Please! For all I know all of you are in on my kidnapping and this is a continuation of your sick plans."

"Yeah, and maybe there is only one person in this room in on it and you're him." Logan shot back, again in a mild voice.

SB glared at Logan. Anthony would wonder later if they would have come to blows had Francis not asked his question. He would also wonder how many lives it would have saved had Logan beaten SB senseless right then.

"You remind me of a cop," Francis said suddenly. He was looking at Anthony curiously. "Are you a police officer?"

Sarcasm Boy and Logan both turned with interest to hear the answer to this question.

"I used to be." Anthony sighed. "How did you know?"

"Just the way you immediately jumped up and checked the doors. I was half awake but too scared and disoriented to even move."

"So you quit?" Jessica asked, rubbing her arms as if she were cold.

"He got caught shaking hookers down for dope and pussy!" SB catcalled.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/5.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!!" Logan said, turning to scream down at the still supine man.

Oddly, though, the moment for them to resort to violence had passed. SB had his hands under his head and grinned as if he enjoyed getting under Logan's skin. Anthony had witnessed instant bad chemistry before but never anything as bad as these two had for each other. "Hey, I'm not gonna let Francy here be the only Miss Cleo." SB answered mildly.

"I got tired of seeing the people I busted my ass to lock up go free in months or even overnight. This was before 9-11, we were getting no respect back then. That didn't help either."

"You ever hear of anything like this happening?" Maurice asked nervously.

"People go missing every day," Anthony sighed. "Thousands a year. Gone without a trace. Lemme try something, tell me what city you all came from. I came from Atlanta." The rest, except for a quiet woman who was staring emptily at her hands, and SB, answered. "Just as I thought, none of us from the same city. I'm an accountant now. I always got on well with numbers. What about all of you? What are your current jobs?" Again each person who answered gave a different answer. "Only you, Maurice, have an occupation expected to earn a lot of money, being a doctor."

"I spend most of what I make," he returned ruefully.

"And each of us a different job. Just looking at our clothes and grooming styles it looks like we are a cross-section of America. Looks like 8 of 12 are Caucasian, the rest various minorities. I can't see any pattern, any rhyme or reason to all of us being in this room together." Anthony finished.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/6.

"And I don't think I've ever seen any of you before." Logan said. "So it is not even a casual connection."

SB opened his mouth, no doubt to make another cutting comment, but the speakers thankfully picked that moment to come to life.

"You twelve are now awake." The computerized monotone voice came from the speakers at a slightly uncomfortably high volume. "First and foremost, notice the gas injection nozzles below the speakers. The room can be filled with any gas I wish within a minute. I can induce nausea, pain, blindness, unconsciousness, or death. There is nothing you can do, no one you can fight. No one can hold their breath forever."

"What do you want from us?" The so far silent woman, leaning against a far wall, cried out.

The voice continued unabated, talking over her last couple words. "But as long as you comply with my orders, and you win the game, you will live. Hopefully this is clear as I have no interest in anything any of you might say. This is strictly a one-way relationship. I talk, you listen. It doesn't work the other way around."

"Great." SB muttered, eyes focused on one of the speakers.

Anthony, meanwhile, was looking at each prisoner in turn. All of them seemed to be paying attention intently. He didn't see any cameras. That didn't mean there wasn't any but chances were there were not. Which brought him back to something SB had said. One or more of the people in this room might be in on this. An observer silently laughing at all of them. But if one of his companions was behind this he couldn't tell it from their expressions.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/7.

All of them looked as surprised at and interested in the voice over the speaker as he was.

It further occurred to him that he was the only one looking at everyone else, so he could come across as such an observer secretly behind this kidnapping! Anthony returned his gaze to the speaker.

"When I finish speaking, a tone will sound. You will then have sixty seconds to select a door. Each of you pick a separate door. The door will unlock with the tone. Each door is airtight if it is closed and the locking mechanism engages. When the 60 second deadline has been reached the room you now inhabit will be flooded with nerve gas. If you fail to enter one of the 12 rooms and close your door firmly behind you by the time the gas is released, you will die. If more than one person enters a room, that room's door will fail to lock. So if you follow my orders you will live. If you do not, you will die."

A tone that reminded Anthony of an answering machine greeting, sounded. They jumped up except for SB. Despite his earlier claim to not being physically assertive, Francis was the first to reach a door. He looked abashed at the person he had beaten to that particular door. "Sorry."

Maurice shrugged. "One's as good as another." He grabbed the door next to Francis.

"You motherfuckers are so scared you're fighting over who can get in a room fast enough!" SB piped up, right on cue. "You're going to let him order you around like puppets? Don't you see, this is his game? He's probably jacking off right now just watching us jump at his command!"

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/8.

"He'll cum while he watches you choking and writhing yourself to death." Anthony told him coldly as he went to the other door next to Francis. Jessica took the one on his other side, sparing him a timid smile. She looked white as milk. "It's going to be okay as long as we follow orders." He told her gently.

"Yeah! Follow them orders real good! Baaaaa!" SB screamed, his face reddening. "BAAAAA! You stupid cows!! BAAAAA!!"

Logan had already opened his door and was on his way through when he burst out laughing. "Cows moo, you fuckwit. You're thinking of your exwife, the sheep. Jesus you're a stupid bastard!"

Anthony found to his relief that his door opened (he had wondered if one of the games today might be randomly locking one of their doors and making them fight over who gets to use it) and hurried inside the room. He closed the door, listened with relief to it lock, and turned to see what hell waited inside.

The room was benign looking. A flat monitor molded into the wall to his left. Below that were two buttons, a red one and a white one. On the other wall was another speaker/protective grate combination. The wall facing him contained another door. The way out, then.

After inspecting the monitor and the buttons, Anthony returned to the door he had entered though and listened for the sound of emerging gas and the screams of Sarcasm Boy, but he could hear nothing. Apparently the seal was soundproof as well as airtight.

The voice spoke again. "All of you decided to join me in your individual rooms. Excellent.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/9.

I put you in the common room so that you could see for yourself that other human beings are involved in this. It is not an abstract concept, they are real human beings. Some of you have introduced yourselves to each other, you are all human beings. This is important because at least one of you is going to leave your room alive. If you are the one person you will have survived at the expense of you other eleven. I say 'may' because there can be more than one survivor. There are four rounds in this game. Failing any round results in death. Any or all of you who survive all four rounds walk out of here alive and financially rewarded. I give any survivors a million dollars each. There doesn't have to be a survivor in each game. The game stops if only one person is left after any earlier round, we don't play rounds with only one person. But there is no guarantee ANYONE will survive any particular round. For your information, there have been multiple winners only twice. The norm is one survivor after three rounds.

"So most likely, only one of you will still be alive a couple hours from now. As you listen to that, as that concept sinks in, of course each one of you is thinking that you will be the survivor. It is only human to believe that life is a movie and YOU are the star! Other people, bit players and supporting characters, will come and go, die and live. But you will never die.

"I find it fascinating that all 12 of you are standing thinking that you will be the only person to live and that 11 of you are dead fucking wrong, to coin a phrase.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/10.

On the other hand, one of you is probably correct and this experience will just strengthen your conviction that everyone else can die except for you.

"Anyway, you are not here to listen to my blatherings. You are here to play my games. The first game is simple. You have 60 seconds to decide which button to push. The red button or the white button. If your button push results in your death the door will open and a very nasty person will come in to kill you with a hacksaw. It will take a long time to die and you will also suffer the embarrassment of knowing the sounds you make will be heard by everyone else. The rules are on your monitor. Read them and press a button. At the tone you will have 60 seconds to decide."

Anthony rushed to the monitor. On it was written:

1) *If all 12 of you press the white button, all 12 of you live.*

2) *If all 12 of you press the red button, all 12 of you die.*

3) *If you press the red button and no more than 10 others do the same, Red Pushers live, White Pushers die.*

4) *Likewise, if you push the white button and EVEN ONE OTHER PERSON presses the red button, you and every other White Pusher dies.*

5) *Failure to press either button within the 60 second time limit will result in an excruciatingly painful death.*

The tone sounded. He had sixty seconds.

Obviously, the best thing for everyone was for them all to press the white button. If all twelve of them pressed the white button they would all live. Until the rules changed they would have it made. Surely all of them would see that?

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/11.

But the selfish thing, the way to GUARANTEE you'd live, would be to press the red button. Unless everyone pressed it, the red button was the sure way to live. Even if everyone else pressed the white button, he'd guarantee his life by pressing the red. Indeed, if everyone else did press the white they would all die right here and now and he would be the sole survivor. The Game Master had stated that when a round ended with only one survivor the game was over.

But everyone would think of that, wouldn't they? If every single one of them thought this way, they would ALL press the red button and all of them would die. But there was nothing he could do about that. Pressing the white button if all of the rest of them pressed red would only result in him being the only casualty, the sacrifice that permitted all of them to live at his expense. No, even in that case pressing red was the best possible result.

This was a case where doing the selfish thing was not the smartest thing. The selfish thing was the press red because only in the unlikely event all of them pressed red would you die. But moral thing was for everyone to press white because then no one had to die. Pressing red was murder any way you looked at it. If you pressed red then someone, even if it was all of them, was going to die. Doing something when you knew it would result in someone's else's death, was murder.

His time was running out! Anthony glanced at his wrist and realized his watch was gone. That couldn't be a coincidence. The Game Master wanted them to sweat it out and not know for sure how much time they had left. He had to decide and do so fast.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/12.

He checked his pockets to see if any of his possessions had made the trip. None had, but he had been given two things. A pencil and small pad of paper. He didn't have time to jot anything down but he could figure this one out in his head. He only had an 8% chance of living, 1 of 12, if he pressed white. Only if all 12 of them pressed white would he live. Conversely, he had a 92% chance of living if he pressed red, 11 of 12. Only if all 12 of them pressed red would he die. He would be a murderer, but would be alive.

It actually wasn't as simple as calling it murder, though. You had to look at human nature. It was human nature to be selfish, not smart and not moral. Sure, most people could rise above their animal natures and do the saintly thing from time to time. Not everyone was selfish. But what were the odds that ALL 12 of them would rise above and do the smart thing and press white? Not very good, even if they didn't have Sarcasm Boy in their midst. (He'd obviously decided to join them because the Game Master had stated their number as 12.)

Anthony had no doubt that SB would press red. Therefore SB was the murderer. Which meant Anthony could either press red and live or press white and be another victim. Better to outlive SB and punish him that way than to die in vain. That would be stupid.

And the sad thing was that there was no way all 12 of them would be good and smart enough to press white, but it WAS a sure thing that at least one of them was saintly enough to refuse to press red under any circumstances. Because, rationalizing aside, anyone who pressed red had blood on their hands. (Anthony had no doubt the color choice was not a coincidence.)

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Time was running out! He had to pick something now. And Anthony knew that if he picked white he would be signing his own death warrant. He would be dead in another five minutes. He had no choice.

Anthony pressed the red button.

Three seconds later the speaker activated again. "Time is up. One of you didn't pick in time. Let us all listen to you die first."

The speaker stayed on. Anthony jumped at the loud sound of a door slamming open. He noted with some small relief that it was not his door, the sound had come from the speaker.

"No!" Came a male voice Anthony didn't recognize. "No! Oh God, please! I'll press one next time, I swear! Give me one more chan- AHHHHHH!" The sound preceding that scream was a meaty thud.

For the next twenty minutes Anthony listened to this man's screams and pleas be interrupted only by beating sounds. Finally, mercifully, there was a final long, wet scream and the speaker fell silent right before Anthony was ready to start screaming himself. He had retreated to a corner, sat, and covered his ears, but it did no good.

"Now to punish you two white pushers. Nine pushed red, two pushed white. Let us listen to you two die."

Two more doors slammed open. These two men screamed and begged as well, and the best Anthony could tell they were also not Francis, Logan, Sarcasm Boy, or Maurice. These beatings didn't last as long before the final wet sounding screams, apparently brought upon by a knife.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/14.

"There, that's out of the way." The Game Master said with a chuckle in his voice. Anthony had never hated someone as much in his life as he hated this smug bastard this instance. "All the speakers are now open, you may discuss strategy amongst yourselves. You have three rounds left. If you cooperate, more of you will survive. If all of you had pressed white this time, you would all still be alive. You have twenty minutes to talk."

Anthony found his voice. "Francis? Maurice? Logan? Jessica? You guys still there?"

They answered more or less at once. All of them were still alive.

"My name is Jane, I'm still here." This woman sounded nauseous. Anthony had little doubt she'd been sick during their listening experience.

"We're in hell," a man said. "My name is Jimmy."

"Hi! My name is Jimmy!" Sarcasm Boy mocked. "I murdered two people by pressing the red button!"

"Shut the fuck up," Logan snapped. "We all pushed red, obviously. I did it because I KNEW you were going to."

"And I pressed it because I knew your selfish PUNK ass was gonna press red!" SB came back.

"You're a fucking hypocrite, you know it?" Anthony yelled out. "You make fun of us for coming into these rooms and I notice you did the same fucking thing! And now you're calling us murderers and you're one too! In fact, you're the only reason I pressed red!"

"Sure, blame me. That's real convenient." He sounded less vehement now, like he had just said it to keep the conversation

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/15.

going while he thought things through. Anthony could almost feel him starting to calculate in his mind.

"Look, the only way to get out of here is to cooperate. You heard that man." Jessica said in a tear stained voice. "We have to trust each other! We have to all press white the next three times and we're all out of here."

"I'm not trusting that fucker." Logan grunted angrily.

"Sure, announce you're pressing red, you moron." SB came back immediately. "That way everyone HAS to press red and we ALL die!"

"We can't ALL die, you heard what he said. Someone has to win." Logan said defensively.

"You didn't listen very carefully," the Game Master said quickly. "The must survive rule just means we don't play rounds with just one person. If everyone makes a selection that results in everyone dying, so be it. That has happened 12 times, actually."

How long had this maniac been doing this to people? He was obviously a billionaire to be able to afford the manpower help, the construction of this prison, the kidnappings, and to get people to look the other way.

Anthony returned his focus to the conversation and said, "so we're back to square one. We have to trust each other. If we don't, we're all dead."

"I'm never trusting that son of a bitch." Logan said strongly.

"And you think I'm going to trust any of you pussies?" SB returned.

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Anthony found himself reverently wishing that Logan had beaten SB senseless and left him laying on the floor of the common room to choke to death. If not for his disruptive presence they probably could have convinced each other to trust and they would all be walking out of here.

"He's probably not going to let any of us live no matter what." Maurice moaned pessimistically. "You think he'll let someone walk and on top of that give them all that money? If that's been going on for years, he would have been busted by now. We've never heard anything in the news about this kind of thing happening. We're all dead."

The Game Master chuckled. "Survivors have blood on their hands, of course they say nothing. But I have them monitored just to be safe and have erased the couple who suffered second thoughts about keeping their mouths shut. And you have no idea how many law enforcement officers from your home towns are on my payroll. Don't go to the wrong person. And if you do betray me its no longer just about you, I go after your family as well."

A long silence greeted this.

The Game Master spoke again. "Well, I guess we'll play another round and see who feels like cooperating then. Assuming any of you are still alive. Your speakers have now been turned off again. The rules are on your monitor. Read them and press a button. At the tone you will have 60 seconds to decide."

Anthony rushed to the monitor again, inferring that the rules were different this time. He was correct.

- 1) *If all 9 of you press the white button, all 9 of you live.*
- 2) *If all 9 of you press the red button, all 9 of you die.*

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/17.

3) *If more than half of you press either button without ALL of you pressing that button, the more than half group dies. (Ex, 6 people press White, three press red, the six white die. If five press red, four press white, the five red die.)*

4) *Failure to press either button within the 60 second time limit will result in an excruciatingly painful death.*

The tone sounded.

Oooo, this was getting nasty now. Obviously cooperation was still the thing to do. If they all pressed white they would all live. But they didn't trust SB, and under this rule change, SB could still kill them all by pressing red if they all pressed white. But if they all thought this way, they would all die. If even four of them thought this way, those four and SB would die.

In fact, SB might now change his strategy to white! He would be expecting everyone to think he'd pick red, so he would change to white to be in the surviving minority. And if this occurred to Anthony, he had no doubt it occurred to some of the others as well.

Something else occurred to Anthony. SB's inclusion in their group had been no accident. The Game Master had obviously selected his playmates very carefully. And he wanted at least one asshole no one would trust. Otherwise everyone would cooperate.

What a nightmare.

He had to pick. Now.

Anthony liked some of the others and didn't want their blood on his hands but obviously he had to look out for himself first. He couldn't survive and get revenge for this treatment if he got clouded by guilt for the others.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/18.

So he had to figure out what most of the others were going to do and do the opposite. As cold blooded as that was, he had to do it.

It was obvious that most people would pick red. Some of them were panicked and disoriented, perhaps disgusted. They wouldn't be thinking clearly and perhaps wouldn't comprehend the rule change. They would only know that they didn't trust SB and they would think he'd pick red. It would only take a couple such people picking red to make that color the majority since the rest, clear thinkers strategizing, would be split down the middle. Strategically, a rational argument could be made for picking either color, so they would likely split on those terms. But Anthony believed that all the people no longer capable of thinking clearly would pick red if only because that had saved them last time. When you had logical thinkers splitting (hopefully) and non logically thinkers all likely to pick red, then white was the only choice.

But what if enough of the logical thinkers took this the extra step and thought of this? Then white would be the majority.

It didn't matter, he was out of time.

Anthony picked white.

No more than a couple seconds later the tone sounded again. This time he had cut it ever closer.

"The selection ran 6 to 3. Those six will now die." The Game Master intoned playfully.

Anthony noticed that he had not declared which color was to die.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/19.

The game player to the end, their captor was going to leave them guessing and wondering if their door was about to be slammed open.

The speaker had been left open. Anthony could hear doors being opened. He heard two distinct doors opening, which was the most he had heard at once last time. Apparently there were only two executioners. Which meant that he could still be on the death list, he would have no way of being sure until he had either heard six deaths or his door slammed open.

Two women were screaming. One of them was Jane and the other Anthony didn't recognize, she must be the woman who'd been staring at her hands in the common room and who hadn't given her name or contributed during the last discussion.

"Oh my god! Don't! I'll do anything! I mean it! I'll do ANYTHIN-." The stranger's pleas were cut off by a whooshing sound. The high piercing screams dwarfed even the sound of the fire cooking human flesh. There was a second whoosh and Jane's screams were even louder, if possible.

Anthony ran to the speaker grill and attacked it with his fingers. "Stop it! Stop it! This is insane!"

The screams were dying now, and the sound of burning was his only reply.

Then two more doors slammed open. This time there were no pleas, though there might have been if any of them had any remaining hope they would work. This time there were scuffling sounds. Then one whoosh and a man shrieked.

There was a smacking sound and then a deep baritone, "he got past me!"

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/20.

A shot rang out. Logan shouted, "you! I'm going to kill you, you bitch!"

Two more shots rang out. There was a heavy thud. The Game Master spoke, sounding breathless. "His wife and two daughters are going to regret that. Any more attacks or escape attempts as my men carry out their duties and your families will get what his is going to get. Long, sweetly lingering rapes followed by anal torchings. Male or female family members, I don't care, they all get the same."

Two more doors slammed open. "FUCK YOU!!" Maurice screamed and apparently charged. There was a whoosh and his scream changed texture. The final victim was Jimmy, judging from the other screams.

One of the men had not spoken or screamed in such a way that Anthony could tell who it was, so he didn't know if Sarcasm Boy or Francis had survived.

"Francis?" Anthony called out hesitantly. "Did you make it buddy?"

The speaker came to life, but it was the Game Master and he remembered that their captor had to allow them before they could talk amongst themselves. "Well, that was dramatic. And the last two still resisted, so I'm adding their families to my list. We're heading into round 3 so you have five minutes to talk. I suggest cooperation."

"Francis?" Anthony asked plaintively.

"You wish, motherfucker." Sarcasm Boy spat. "Francis is a crispy critter now. He and those other five thought they could outsmart me but I showed them."

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/21.

I guess Logan's not gonna beat my ass now, is he?" He laughed nasally. "And did you hear that woman? Did she actually think this is about SEX?" He laughed harder.

Anthony's jaw was bulging as he tried to grit his teeth hard enough to keep from launching himself at the speaker grill. "I don't even care if I survive any more as long as you die with me, you piece of worthless dog shit."

"Anthony, we have to cooperate." Jessica moaned.

"Fuck that! This human garbage is not walking out of here when those others died!"

SB laughed again. "Ooooo, tough guy. I'll tell you what. I've already got about half a boner from hearing what that woman said, so I want you to know that while I listen to them torch you or cut you to pieces I'm going to be jacking off. I hope I cum right when you're screaming for the last time."

"I'm done talking to you, dogshit." Anthony raged. "The next thing you're going to hear from me is my laughter as your door slams open after this round." He turned away from the speaker and walked to the monitor.

The Game Master cut in over SB's laughter with his own, nastier chuckle. "Well, this has certainly been more fun than the last few games. You've been fantastic, Willy."

"Willy?!" Anthony screamed, oblivious to the fact that his output had been cut off. "No wonder you're a selfish, bitter, little shit!"

"I'm almost sad this has to end soon. But let us play the third round now and see who laughs and who plays with themselves. Go to your monitors. There is no tone this time.

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Game Master/Dexter Goad/22.

You will have five minutes to think this time, starting from the moment I finish speaking."

Anthony rushed over to his.

- 1) *If all 3 of you press the white button, all 3 of you live.*
- 2) *If all 3 of you press the red button, all 3 of you die.*
- 3) *If two of you press the white button, white pushers live and the red pusher dies.*
- 4) *If one of you presses the white button, the white pusher dies and the red pushers live.*
- 5) *Failure to press either button within the five minute time limit will result in an excruciatingly painful death.*

Anthony dug the paper and pencil from his pocket. This round he had enough time to write out his strategy. He wrote down the possible results if he pressed white:

They both pick Red; I die. A loss, obviously.

One picks Red, one picks White; I live. A win.

They both pick White, I live. A win.

Next he wrote the possible outcomes if he picked red:

They both pick Red; I die. A loss.

One picks red, one picks White; I live. A win.

They both pick White, I die. A loss.

So he had two chances out of three to win, or life, if he picked white and one chance out of three to live if he picked red. However, he could actually take this a step further. No matter what he picked, red or white, if the other two picked Red he would die! He had no control over that, it was a grim reality. If he picked red and they both did as well, all three of them died.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/23.

If he picked white and they both picked red he would die by himself. Either way, he was doomed if they both picked red. So it was not actually a chance at ALL, it was certain doom. Therefore, it didn't matter what he did if they both picked red so he wouldn't worry about it.

In light of that, he had a 100% chance of surviving if he picked white and at least one of the other two did as well, and only a 50% chance of surviving if he picked red. He had no control over what the others did, but he could control his own chances and the obvious choice then was to press white.

But this was about more than pure numbers and percentage chances. SB had gambled last time that most people would pick red and so he defected to white. That had been a canny gamble and it paid off. He was very smart under his crude exterior. It had not taken him long to assess the situation and turn it to his advantage. At first he had just been a belligerent asshole, but now that Anthony looked back, he saw that "Willy" had manipulated them between rounds one and two. Egged most of them into going red.

SB would figure that white was the only safe choice. He would figure that the other two survivors, Jessica and Anthony, would know this and would play it safe. They merely had to survive this round and they were one more game away from freedom. White was the safe, smart move. So SB would finally cooperate and join them in white and see what happened next round. Gambling with red was suicide. It was possible that either Jessica or Anthony might gamble with red but both of them? Certainly not.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/24.

And even if they did, SB was dead either way, the only way picking picking red would matter in this case was that he would take Jessica and Anthony with him if he picked red and would die alone if he picked white.

Anthony straightened. And that was precisely why SB WOULD pick red! "If he has to die, he'll take us with him! So he doesn't consider that a loss! He's mean enough to take solace in that!" Anthony said aloud. He wrote White's wins and losses down with this in mind. They both pick Red; I die. A loss.

One picks Red, one picks White; I live. A win.

They both pick White, I live. A win.

Next he wrote the possible outcomes if he picked red:

They both pick Red; I die. A win.

One picks red, one picks White; I live. A win.

They both pick White, I die. A loss.

In this case, from this twisted perspective, both choices presented the same chances of winning or losing! In fact, Anthony suspected that SB had a death wish and that explained a lot of his attitude. So he might prefer death if he could take them with him. So he would be HOPING that the both of them also chose red!

Anthony jumped to his feet, dropping the pad but absently pocketing the pencil. He was running out of time, and he now knew that he had to pick white. Not just because it was the statistically safe thing to do but because he knew SB was going to pick red and he would not help that bastard murder Jessica.

Anthony pressed the white button.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/25.

This time he had done it with time to spare. An agonizing wait of at least half a minute transpired before the speaker turned back on. "Well, that was exciting, wasn't it?" The Game Master crowed. "I have to admit you three surprised me. The tally was two to one, so after this elimination, two of you will remain to duke it out in the final."

His voice was followed by a door slamming open.

"Come on with it, you big ole bitch!" SB screamed.

Anthony pumped his fist with elation. "YES!"

"Oh yeah, come on, punk motherfucker, I'm taking you with me!" Sarcasm Boy raged. There followed several meaty sounding blows and slaps.

Anthony sighed and sagged against the wall. As he slid down the wall to rest on his butt on the floor, his elation faded. Willy was still a human being, all attempts to dehumanize him with a derisive nickname notwithstanding. Anthony had allowed the real villain, the Game Master, to cloud his thought and turn him against one of his fellow victims.

On the other hand, Willy's personality had lead to most of the deaths because none of them could trust what he would do.

There was a sudden scream, and it wasn't Willy's. It was the same deep baritone Anthony had heard before. "He cut me! He's got my knife!"

"Come on, motherfucker!" Willy shouted gleefully. "I got more for you!"

The Game Master sounded annoyed for the first time. "Just get out of there, you incompetent buffoon. I'll flood the room with gas."

(CONTINUED)

"Don't you turn your back on me!" Willy howled. There was the most awful ripping sound Anthony had ever heard, followed by a flood of liquid hitting a stone floor. This was followed by Willy cackling in insane delight. The laughter was abruptly cut off, the Game Master apparently didn't want them to get any ideas.

After a minute of two of silence, a very annoyed sounding Game Master came back on. Anthony marveled that this electronically distorted voice could still convey this emotion and wondering if he were projecting. In any case, the Game Master said, "he has been gassed to death. And his family will be brutally murdered for his transgressions. So don't get any ideas.

"This has been very entertaining, but let us finish this now. If more people were left this would not be a winner take all event, but since the last place player must die, and there are only two of you left, this will in effect be winner take all, loser loses everything. Go to your monitors. When the tone sounds, you'll have exactly three minutes."

Anthony went to his monitor for the final time.

- 1) *The first person to press a button dies.*
- 2) *Failure to press a button before the time expires results in death.*
- 3) *If more than 30 seconds elapses between the two button pushes, both players die.*

Obviously, rule 3 was designed to keep a Good Samaritan from sacrificing himself for the other player. Anthony had the idea that the rules were basically the same no matter how many people played from round to round, just adjusted at the moment for whatever the actual number was.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/27.

If all three of them had survived to this round, only the first person to press the button would die and rule 3 probably wouldn't even be necessary. If not for rule 3, Anthony would have considered giving his life for Jessica's. Now he couldn't do that for sure without sacrificing her life as well.

The tone sounded while he was thinking about that. They had three minutes. It occurred to him suddenly to start counting seconds and he began to do it. He couldn't be sure but he thought that no more than 20 seconds had elapsed before he began to count. He tried to keep his counting rhythmic, not too fast or too slow. It wouldn't be perfect but would be a good guide.

When he reached 135 seconds he would press the button. Accounting for the delay in starting that should bring him within thirty seconds of the deadline. That should make him the first presser and allow Jessica to live. He could fight better than her and maybe he could take out the other executioner. Then maybe The Game Master would have to come down himself.

Of course, the GM would just flood the room as he had done with Willy. But Anthony didn't care. He couldn't live with the blood of 11 eleven people on his hands. He didn't think he could ever get his initial reaction to Willy's fate being sealed out of his mind. Better to die saving Jessica.

If only Jessica could be patient. If only she could wait longer than he was.

What if she decided to do the same thing? What if she decided to sacrifice herself for him? What if she had decided that SHE couldn't live with this either?

(CONTINUED)

There was nothing he could do about that. He could only control what he did, not what she did. The Game Master had given them no opportunity to converse, so they were both selecting in the blind. All he could do was follow his plan.

Anthony readied his hand over the button. He wondered if some secret tiebreaker involved the color of the button. Nothing had been made about color this time but he figured that if they somehow both pressed at the exact same moment color would probably be the second tiebreaker. So he decided to pick red since he was sure Jessica would naturally pick the safe color, white.

Anthony counted down the last few seconds out loud. "Thirty. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. Thirty-four. One hundred and thirty-five!"

Anthony pressed the red button.

No more than five seconds later, the tone sounded for the final time. What the fuck? He must have counted really fast! Or the delay before counting was longer than he'd thought. Unless they had both pressed their buttons and waiting out the time limit was pointless...

"Runnerup, meet your death." The Game Master teased. The sound of a door slamming open broke Anthony's paralysis.

It was his door. In the doorway stood a massive man. Almost seven feet tall and at least 350 pounds, this heavily muscled man was coated with dried blood and soot. He wore jogging shorts, knee length biker boots, a football helmet, and nothing else. Under other circumstances it would have been uproariously funny.

The Game Master laughed. "But first! Let us meet our winner! Anthony Gaiman!"

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/29.

You are the 20th annual winner of My Million Dollar Button Game. Go with Neil to collect your prize and be escorted out. I'll allow Jessica to listen to your travel through my mansion before she is punished for being second best."

"You sadistic cocksucker! Take me instead! I trade my life for hers!" Anthony cried.

"Do I sound like Monty Hall? Neil, escort him now. If he resists ... smack him around some. If he annoys you too much just kill him and we'll double the punishment Jessica will receive before she is mercifully put out of her misery."

Anthony sagged as if in defeat and headed for the door. Neil was gripping a Desert Eagle .45 in one massive paw and he backed up to allow Anthony out of the room. A stone hallway ran the length of the rooms before terminating in a set of stairs leading up. A pool of blood revealed where Logan had been shot like a dog.

Neil motioned that way with the pistol and started to turn that direction. Jessica's door was the other direction, however, the first one past his own. A simple steel bar latch kept it locked.

Anthony darted that way and unlatched the door.

"Hey!" Neil shouted.

It was too late. He had the door unlocked. He slammed it open. At least Jessica would have a chance, especially with him to fight by her side. If she was still to die maybe it would be a quick headshot.

She rushed to his side, muttering "oh thank god," and then a runaway freight train hit him and he was thrown down the hallway.

(CONTINUED)

Neil had rebounded a little after his charging shove of Anthony. Now he regained his momentum and followed, grunting like a pig, face (what Anthony could see through the football helmet) red with anger. Jessica pushed him as he went past her. Though she was a larger than average woman, her push had little effect on him other than to make him jerk a look back at her.

But the distraction proved to be the reason why Neil didn't see his right foot land solidly in the pool of blood in front of the next door down. As soon as Neil lifted his left foot he slid and then slammed against the metal door. He crashed to the floor, splattering blood everywhere.

The automatic pistol skittered to a stop two feet from Anthony. He had recovered his breath so he snatched up the weapon stood in one motion.

Neil got up to his knees before he realized his Desert Eagle was aimed at his skull. The helmet would offer no protection. "No." Neil breathed.

Jessica moved away from behind him to the other side of the hallway. "Yeah," she snarled, "beg like they did, you son of a bitch." Her voice was coated with animal fury.

"Fuc-," Neil began. He got no further before there was an explosion and the upper half of his head disappeared. The remains of the helmet fell on either side of his massive body. That body crashed to the floor.

Anthony was thrown against the wall and the pistol landed several feet away. This was the first time he'd fired a gun and this one was a monster. He shook his right hand several times as he picked up the .45 with his left.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/31.

"What now?" Jessica wanted to know.

"Now we look behind the curtain," Anthony said and went to the door on the other side of his. He returned his pistol to his right hand and reached to unlock the door. He was not surprised to note it was already unlocked. When he opened it there was a shot. The shot was wild, but Anthony's return fire was not.

There was the sound of a gun being dropped to the floor. "Okay! Okay! I surrender! Don't kill me! You fucking shot me!"

Jessica joined Anthony at the door and saw Francis holding his left arm, from which blood was gushing furiously.

"I knew a control freak like the Game Master would want to personally interact with us first." Anthony seethed. "And I noticed the way you leaped up to this particular door. I also noticed after the fact the way you asked me about my past just when it looked like Logan and Willy would come to blows. Mustn't have two players kill each other, must we?" He indicated the mike sticking from the wall and the keyboard below the monitor, which none of the other rooms had. "To top it off, you were one of the few we didn't really hear get killed."

"His voice was a recording until we got into our personal rooms." Jessica added. "Remember how he didn't interact with us? He just spoke his little speech and didn't even slow down when interrupted. It wasn't until we were isolated that Game Man here became interactive."

"I'm worth billions. Don't do anything foolish. You can name your price. Just let me live." Francis pleaded.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/32.

Anthony nudged Jessica. "You had better go. Francis, tell her how to get out of here."

"Follow the steps. They lead outside to a dock. We're on a small island near the Bahamas. There is a small cruiser with enough fuel to take you back to Florida. The course is already plotted into the computer. All you have to do is start it up and engage the autopilot. There is food for days on board, as well as a briefcase with a million cash. If more than one person won we'd add to that of course."

"Why do you want me to leave? What are you gonna do?" Jessica sounded a little suspicious, as if she wondered if he was going to cut a deal.

"I've got a few games of my own I'm gonna play with this motherfucker before I finally let him die." Anthony replied coldly.

"NO!" Francis shouted. "I told you! I'm worth billions-."

Anthony's cold smile cut that off. Francis saw his own death in that smile and realized nothing he could say was going to change that. He would have been better off keeping his gun and trying to shoot it out.

"Okay Jessica, you can play too." Anthony said.

She nodded eagerly. "I find it fascinating that you weren't expecting this, Francis. I mean, your life is a movie and you're the star! The supporting actors never rise up and kill the star! It just doesn't happen!"

Francis peered at her dully, probably not even catching the irony of her words.

(CONTINUED)

Game Master/Dexter Goad/33.

Anthony did catch it and he was grinning. "Now listen closely to the rules, Francis, I'm not going to repeat them."

Going white as a sheet, still holding his wounded arm, The Game Master sagged against the wall and slid to his butt in an unconscious imitation of what Anthony had done less than an hour ago.

"Rule number one..."

THE END