



**D.M**  
**O.A**

## DEATH MATCH OPPONENT ANONYMOUS

I.B.

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Brett was in a hurry, making his commute feel like an endless journey. Sitting on the train, staring at the fat flakes of snow falling outside, all he wanted was to get home. All day Brett could think about only one thing: DMOA. The hours spent at the restaurant, cutting potatoes and deboning sides of salmon, moved in an agonizing crawl, each minute counting down to the end of his shift. He moved about the prep hall, crossing items off a list printed on receipt paper, but his mind wasn't there; it was in the sprawling battlefield of DMOA, reliving war stories from the night before. The second he finished his last prep item, Brett punched out and raced for the train. All that was between him and the game was the train ride home -- a couple stops through downtown.

While he was inside the prep hall, the sky had let loose a flurry of snow. The streets were white. Pyramids of snow sat on top of street lights. Slush soaked through the thin material of Brett's shoes, making his toes frigid and then numb. Blasts of cold air spilled down his back every time someone opened the train door -- which was a lot. They had been sitting there, delayed by the blizzard, for over ten minutes. The train got more and more crowded. Brett sighed, straining his neck to look further down the line, but he couldn't see a reason for the delay. Desperate for something to alleviate his anxious boredom, Brett looked around. There were only two things to see on the train: bus ads or people on their phones. Deciding to join the crowd, Brett pulled his phone out of his pocket.

With a couple of taps, a steady stream of content rolled into existence. Tiny changes in his facial expressions -- sarcastic squints, a twitch turning into a smile, a small head shake -- were the only

hints of Brett's reactions, of which he had many. The app, basing his feed on content liked by other users, pushed a mix of news, interesting facts, funny and cool images, and countless opinions at him. Brett didn't care about most of it, making it disappear as soon as it appeared, but each piece of content stirred a reaction: The news, an endless flood of scandals that always amounted to nothing, baffled him; the interesting facts, coming in short blurbs, made him feel smart; anonymous opinions made him judge. No matter what the reaction, all of it was distracting, making the train ride on a cold, snowy night move much faster. Brett looked up as the speaker crackled out the name of his stop. Stuffing his phone into his pocket, he was surprised to be at home already.

During the long elevator ride up to his apartment, he planned out his next few actions: throw on sweatpants, pack a bowl, turn on the computer, hit the couch. The second he was through the door, Brett did exactly that. The only thing he added was closing the curtains, shutting out the twinkling lights of the city and the veil of snow. Sitting on the couch, moving the mouse cursor across the giant television a few feet in front of him, Brett took in the moment as he clicked on the DMOA icon; it was the moment furthest from his next shift; Brett was free to fill it with whatever he wanted.

His avatar filled the screen, rotating against a blue background. Dressed in a brown leather duster, a red bandana covering his nose and mouth, and a pair of shades on his face, Brett's avatar -- Frags4Cash -- looked like an outlaw. It took him hours and hours to get all the clothing pieces he wanted, planning out the eventual look of his character weeks ago. Despite his commitment to the game -- bailing on nights out and rushing through his shifts -- Brett still hadn't won a match in DMOA, but tonight, he told himself, was the night he would. Giving Frags4Cash a quick once over, Brett -- switching to a controller -- tapped on the buttons. *Searching for Game* appeared on the screen, filling Brett with nervous excitement.

DMOA -- Death Match Opponent Anonymous -- wasn't a

relaxing game. Pitting a hundred players against each other, it was a battle royale across a vast map. Players parachuted into the map and scrambled through digital ghost towns looking for weapons and gear before all hell broke loose. It was a simple game, but the challenge of it was complicated -- at least for Brett. It took skill, cunning, and luck to win a match. Brett figured he had everything but luck, but luck can always change. Winners took home a fortune in points, spending them on cool clothing for their avatars. Brett, placing in the top ten a few times, had racked up some points, but the flashy, purple duster he wanted was expensive. He needed to win a match. *Joining Game* flashed on the screen before fading into black. The match started:

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The airplane was packed with players. White letters floated above their heads, spelling out names made up of letters, numbers and symbols. The only time the players had names was in the plane or when they died, other than that, they were all anonymous. Shit talking drowned out the noise of the jet engines (their voices loud and clear in Brett's ear, coming through his headset as he sat on the couch). Brett ignored them, keeping his eye on the transparent map showing their location. One by one, players flickered out of the plane. *Noobs*, Brett thought, *you gotta plan where you land*. Making his mind up on a small, isolated farm in the north most part of the map, Brett waited for the plane to get close. More players flickered out. He watched as the remaining players jumped up and down or spun around in circles. Brett chuckled at the name of one of his opponents: MrSnuggles90210. He was dressed in a plain white tee-shirt, brown pants, and had no shoes. Brett felt bad for MrSnuggles90210; clearly a new player, he was nothing more than cannon fodder, sure to die in the opening battles of the match. The plane, approaching the farm, was close enough. Brett flickered out of the plane. A second later, he was hurtling towards the ground, the map sprawled out in front of him, his avatar aimed

at the farm in the distance.

With his duster blowing in the wind of freefall, Brett scanned around as he came closer and closer to the farm. In each direction clusters of dots littered the sky -- a hundred other players falling into the death match. None of them were near Brett. As his boots hit the ground, he couldn't help but feel pumped on himself. Landing was a victory in and of itself. The player count was already dropping (a small, blue box in the corner of the screen kept track of the players. Brett's eyes constantly flicked across the screen, checking his stats, the mini-map, and the player count). Players that were lucky enough to drop to the ground first and find a sniper rifle made the most of it, sniping opponents as they floated to the ground. More than once, Brett had been the victim of those early kill waves. It was a nice feeling to hit the ground, safe and sound, with no one else around. Brett sprinted across a field, beelining it for the farm house, as an anxious feeling started to settle in.

He might have made it to the ground, but the real battles were still ahead.

Brett knew the house was clear -- there were obvious tells: front door closed, an untouched package on the porch, no broken windows. Every house had gear in it, guaranteeing an early start to the fighting. Grabbing the package on the front porch -- a couple of flash bang grenades -- Brett was desperate to find a gun. Without a gun, there was no chance for survival. Inside the house, he moved quick, scanning over each room and grabbing what he could. The sooner he had a gun and some armour, the sooner he could get out of the house and find a good place to hide. Brett found what he was looking for sitting on a bedside table: A P92 pistol. It wasn't the best weapon, or the best pistol, but it was better than most and gave him some claws. Brett grabbed it.

"Stop." A voice came from behind him.

Another player approached with his pistol raised, aiming at Brett's unprotected head. It was MrSnuggles90210. Brett recognized the barefeet, plain tee-shirt and ratty pants.

"If you move, I will you kill you," MrSnuggles90210 said. "But, I

will make you an offer -- a chance to win this match.”

Caught off-guard, all Brett thought to say was, “Ok?”

“I will spare you if you agree to team-up with me. It will give us both an advantage.”

“Ummm, what?” Brett, trying to stall, tried to think of ways to turn the table, but he couldn’t see any.

“We team-up. It’s a solo match, no one will be expecting a team,” MrSnuggles90210 explained.

“Only one of us can win.”

“If you agree, we will part when there are five players left. We’ll both have better odds of winning the match. If not, I will kill you now and you can try your luck in another round. What do you say?”

Feeling frustrated, Brett thought about letting MrSnuggles90210 kill him. He had no idea how he got the jump on him. *For sure*, Brett thought, *the house was clear*. But here they were, and after spending all day fantasizing about winning a match, it filled Brett with defeat. It wouldn’t take long to join another match, but there was something to MrSnuggles90210’s plan: no one would be expecting a team in a solo match.

“How do I know you won’t kill me before that?”

“You don’t, but I could say the same to you. We’ll have to trust each other.”

Brett mulled it over. *What the hell*, he decided, *let’s see where this goes. I can always kill him when his back is turned*.

“Sure,” he replied.

“Perfect!” MrSnuggles90210 lowered his pistol. “Now that we both have guns, let’s get out of here.” Turning around, he left the room and jumped down the stairs, Brett following behind.

After leading them away from the house, MrS insisted they hide in a nearby barn. “Don’t take anything,” he instructed as they passed caches of gear and ammo. “It’ll leave a trail for other players

to follow.” They entered the barn from either side, making sure it was clear before hiding in the hayloft.

“Now we wait,” MrS said as he laid down in a stack of hay, disappearing under the pixelated strands of gold.

“Why?” Brett asked while he crouched near a window, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

“Get away from the window, you need to lay down. Other players will see you there, players with sniper rifles.”

Brett moved away from the window, laying down beside MrS. He wasn’t thrilled by the constant demands, but something about the other player made Brett curious.

“We wait until the arena shrinks. Let the other players kill each other for awhile, we know they will.”

“This is your plan? To just camp out and wait? Why bother teaming up then?”

“Yes. For now. Teaming up gives us an advantage, so does camping out. Why not do both?”

“Getting gear gives an advantage and we just ran by a bunch of shit.”

“It might seem that way,” MrS explained. “But that isn’t the case. Everyone collects gear, so everyone has the same advantage. If everyone does it, it is no longer an advantage; it becomes standard. Not acting in the standard behaviour -- the expected behaviour -- becomes an advantage.”

“Right...” Brett trailed off. “So do you play every match like this? Forcing people into teams and hiding?”

“No,” MrS chuckled. “But it is a strategy, and in this scenario it becomes an effective strategy. You will see. We’ll both be in the last five players.”

Just as he finished speaking, the player count lowered. Five unseen players suddenly died. Brett checked the map: a white circle appeared on a chunk of it. During a match, as players die, a circle appears on the map, shrinking the battlefield. Any player caught outside of the circle takes damage until they die. Their barn was a good ways outside of the circle, and in a couple minutes -- once the

countdown was finished -- they'd start to take damage.

"We gotta move." Brett stood up from his prone position, careful to avoid the window.

"Yes," replied MrS. "We do. But we must be careful. There will be snipers everywhere."

"No shit."

"And we must find and kill one. In order to be successful, we must have a sniper rifle. You have flash bangs and a P92, yes?" He stood up.

"Ya?" Brett was confused. "How do you know that?"

"I checked on the gear in the house before approaching you. There were flashbangs and a P92. You grabbed them, yes?"

"Ya, what do you have?"

"A P18c."

"That's it?" Brett laughed. The P18c was the worst weapon in the game. Even a knife was better.

"Yes." MrSnuggles90210 moved towards the ladder leading out of the hayloft. "It is enough. Under the right circumstances, the worst weapon is just as effective as the best. We just have to find the right circumstances."

It didn't take long to find the right circumstances. Moving slow as snails away from the barn, the two players found themselves at the edges of a lush, dense forest. MrS, leading the way, slowed to a stop as they approached the crest of a hill. From there, they could see a small town and hear gun fire erupting in it. Neither of them talked as they looked towards the town. A gunshot sounded just feet from them -- loud, jarring, and singular. The player count ticked off another player.

It had come from a bush near them, and after hearing the shot, Brett could make out the camouflaged arm of a gilly suit and the barrel of a rifle. They were beside a sniper who was oblivious to them -- too engaged in his scope, picking off players battling in

town. MrS snuck up behind him, his gun aimed at the sniper's head. A burst of shots went off -- three rapid rounds -- burying themselves into the sniper's head. He dropped to the ground, the player count ticking off another death.

"Haha!" MrS laughed. "Didn't see us coming. Perfect!" He looted the corpse, taking only the sniper rifle and a packet of ammo. "Now we must move. Find a nice spot until the arena shrinks again."

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They camped out in the woods, out of sight of the town. Sandwiched between a cluster of trees and a rock face, the two players had a full view of the woods around them. They laid flat, the clusters of grass and shrubs hiding them. All they had to do was wait for the circle to shrink and keep an eye out.

"Only shoot if you have to," MrS instructed. "We don't want to give away our location. A good spot is more valuable than a kill."

"Sure," Brett replied apathetically. "What did you all get from that sniper?"

"His rifle -- a .50 cal -- and the ammo he had for it -- seven shots."

"You didn't take his gilly suit?"

"No, it's an unnecessary element."

"You're a weird dude." Brett chuckled. "Seems like that would help in hiding."

"Maybe, maybe not. It would be in my inventory and always in the back of my mind. Maybe I'd start to look for situations to use it -- to justify its spot in my inventory -- and that could lead to a bad choice being made. Best to leave it."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense." (On his couch, Brett shook his head and lit a half-smoked joint from the ashtray.)

"Think of it like this," MrS explained. "Everyone finds gear and looks for situations to use it. They try to force the match to what they have. But that's a problem. You cannot know what the other

players have, and without that knowledge, you cannot force the situation to your will with weapons. Everyone is even in their ignorance -- not knowing what the other has.”

“The solution,” he continued, “is that you might not know what gear they have, but you know how they will act. We can count on that. Since we know that, we can bend the situation to our benefit by counting on -- and eventually influencing -- their behaviour.”

“You really put some thought into this.” Brett laughed uncomfortably; he had pegged MrSnuggles90210 all wrong on the plane; he wasn’t a noob, but a someone who had put too much thought into DMOA.

“Yes, it is a part of my job.”

“Your job has you thinking too much about DMOA?” Brett laughed honestly.

“No, not DMOA. The way I think professionally lends itself very well to playing games like DMOA. It’s a hobby, gaming is.”

“And what’s your job?” Brett couldn’t wait to hear the reply. Something about MrS just stank of bullshit.

“I work for the F.S.B, gathering, using, and weaponizing intelligence.”

“The what? Is that some sort of government thing?”

“Yes, the Russian government. Have you heard of the K.G.B.?”

“Of course.”

“The F.S.B. is similar, the modern form in ways.”

Brett knew it: the guy was full shit. Here he was, talking in an American accent, clearly spending too much time gaming, and claiming to be a Russian spook. It was absurd, but it was entertaining.

“You don’t sound Russian,” Brett said sarcastically.

“Is this better, comrade?” A thick, heavy Russian accent took over MrS’s voice. “ Do I sound how you expect now?” He chuckled.

“If you’re an F.S.B. agent --” Before Brett could finish his sentence, another player ran towards them, jumping up and down.

They both fell silent.

A split second later, a burst of automatic gunfire ripped through the forest, a few rounds smacking into the jumping player. He wasn't running towards Brett and MrS -- he didn't even see them -- he was running away from someone else. The two stayed still. Brett's heart was racing, making his trigger finger itchy, but he knew what MrS would say: A good spot is more valuable than a kill. He was right. A kill only got twenty points while winning the match earned a staggering 2000 points. It was no contest. Brett kept still, anxiously waiting for their cover to be blown.

The player jumped one more time before a wave of bullets collided with his body, blood splashing out into the forest. His body landed just feet from Brett. Another player, dressed in a black tactical ops outfit -- a sign of an elite player -- started walking towards the body, an assault rifle cradled in her hands. *Please don't see me, please don't see me*, Brett repeated in his head. If he didn't get the jump on her, her assault rifle would tear him to shreds in a couple of bursts. Brett didn't care what MrS would say. He had to act before she spotted him.

It all happened in a couple of seconds: Brett stood up, letting off of a couple of rounds, all of them missing; the other player raised her assault rifle, instantly filling Brett with bullets from its burst fire, causing his health to drop to a sliver; a single, thunderous gunshot exploded from cover, blowing off the other player's head; she dropped to the ground as MrS stood up, the .50 cal in his hands.

"You've blown our cover," he scolded Brett. "We must run." He took off into the forest, Brett limping behind him.

They inched towards the edge of the town, approaching a lone house on a lonely road. Brett recovered a small amount of health, but even the slightest bit of a damage could still kill him. Recovering his health, MrS explained, was their top priority. They

needed a med-kit, and med-kits could only be found with other loot. The lonely house was their best option.

“There is someone in the house.” MrS crouched beside a pick-up truck. “I would guess he has a shotgun.”

“Why do you say that?” Staying crouched, Brett moved beside him.

“I scoped him out earlier. I couldn’t make out his gun, but he is crouched very close to the front door.”

“Why didn’t you snipe him?” Brett was getting frustrated, his low health nagging at his mind.

“It would’ve telegraphed our next move to anyone who noticed. I would’ve wasted a .50 cal round as well. Don’t worry, I have a plan.”

“And what’s that?”

“You need to rush the front door, kick it in and then immediately fall prone. He will spend one shell and miss. Then he’ll move forward to finish you off, putting himself right beside the window -- giving me a clear shot with my pistol. Before he can fire his second shot, I’ll kill him. Hopefully we’ll find a med-kit inside.”

“Fuck that,” Brett replied. “You storm the door and I’ll kill him. Or I could use a flash bang --”

“No,” MrS interrupted him. “This area is too hot. Any unnecessary noise or moves are a risk. I will kill him -- you proved earlier you’re a worse shot than myself.”

“Fine,” Brett grumbled.

Brett moved towards the door, his heart pounding in his chest as his health bar flashed. He thought it was a stupid plan, but MrS had gotten them this far. After rehearsing it mentally a couple of times, Brett rushed the door, kicked it in, and hit the deck. A scatter of shotgun pellets went high, bursting out of the open door. He could hear the other player scramble, his feet racing towards the porch. Three gun shots sounded and the other player stumbled onto the porch, his body falling on the ground.

“Get inside, I’ll check the body,” MrS said as he rounded the

corner. Brett did what he was told.

Rushing to the bathroom -- the usual location for med-kits -- Brett threw open a medicine cabinet. Inside was a shiny, green and white med-kit.

"Thank god," Brett exclaimed as he crouched onto the ground and applied it. A couple seconds later, he was back at full health.

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They found another hiding place: the second-floor balcony of an outlying house. With both of them lying down, the railing blocking their bodies, they had each entrance covered. It was perfect, but again, Brett felt like they were sitting out on the action. The player count continued to drop, slower than before, but steady all the same.

"So," Brett said, breaking the uneasy boredom. "You were telling me you worked for the F.S.B."

"Yes," MrS replied.

"How long you been doing that?" Brett asked, interested in poking the troll and hearing what tale came out of him.

"A long time. Before the F.S.B., I worked for the K.G.B. I've been around."

"You must be pretty old." Brett laughed.

"I don't feel that way, but yes, I am certainly older than most of the people playing this game."

"If you really worked for the F.S.B.," Brett questioned, "I doubt you would tell me that. I'm sure part of being a spy isn't telling randoms online that you are."

"I'm not a spy, and sure, I'm lying. Why not? We're both anonymous, just voices in headsets. It doesn't matter if I'm lying. Either way, you'll wonder if I am. The idea is there, and truth doesn't really matter. Not any more."

"What? Are you or aren't you?"

"Who knows?"

"Ok..." Brett trailed off, finding the strange man even stranger.

“Let’s say you are. If you’re not a spy, then what do you do for the F.S.B.?”

“Devise and execute a way to destroy America.”

Before Brett could reply, both players spotted an opponent moving towards the stairs, unknowingly heading straight towards Brett.

“Back up around the corner,” MrS instructed. “Get a flash bang ready and set it off the second he’s near you.”

“What?” Brett exclaimed. “The flashbang will blind me if I do that. I’ll just shoot him.”

“Too risky,” explained MrS. “You’ll both be blinded, but I won’t be.”

“And you’ll get the kill again.” Brett, annoyed but still switching to the flashbangs, didn’t like the plan.

“Because you have flashbangs and I don’t. Twenty points is peanuts compared to winning a match. Now, get ready before he hears us.”

Swallowing the urge to respond, Brett followed the plan and equipped the flashbangs. The stairs squeaked, signalling to Brett to cook the grenade. As the opponent turned the corner he was met with a blinding white light and a muted buzz, drowning out all other sights and sounds. Brett saw nothing but white too. In a series of small, subtle movements, MrS fired a couple of rounds. The blinded opponent fell to the ground, dead. The counter lowered the number. The opponent was out of the match before he even realized they were there.

“Good job!” MrS exclaimed. “Once you can see again, we have to move. We’ve given away our position again.”

“Ya,” Brett replied, laying on the ground and waiting for the effects of the flashbang to fade. “I got an idea,” he offered. “For when we part.”

“I figured we’d just head in different directions,” MrS said sardonically.

“We could, but what’s stopping you from turning around and killing me? Or me doing the same?”

“The same thing that prevents us from killing each other now: trust.”

“Fuck that.” Brett stood up as the effects slowly started to fade. “I don’t trust you. You’re a Russian spy after all.”

“I’m not a spy.” MrSnuggles90210 slipped into a Russian accent. “But what’s your idea, comrade?”

“We decide on a spot to split, an alley or something, and I’ll throw a flashbang between us. That way, if one of us tries to double back they’ll be blinded.” Brett felt clever for coming up with the idea; he didn’t see how it could fail.

“Sounds good to me,” MrS replied in an American accent. “Are you good to go? We gotta get out of here and find a spot in the circle. It’s gonna shrink again soon.”

“Ya, let’s get out of here.” The world was still fading back, but it was enough for Brett to get moving again.

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The arena would shrink only one more time. Most of the map was off-limits, and the arena took up little more than a section of the city and small cluster of warehouses. The other players, who for most of the match were abstractions -- little more than numbers being ticked away -- became real. Their gunshots were everywhere. They ran in the distance, dying from sniper fire or messy up-close gun fights. The game was changing, becoming frantic and tense. It got to Brett, but it sure didn’t seem to get to MrSnuggle90210.

“We can hide here.” He moved towards a group of dumpsters outside of a warehouse. “We can see into the city, but no one will be able to see us. One of us watches our back, the other the town.”

“Sure thing,” Brett huffed out. “But I don’t think hiding is a good a idea. We’re all pretty jammed together.”

“Now is the most important time. Everyone is frantic, desperate to get into the top ten. This is the point where victory feels tangible, making people act rash and overconfident. We stay the course.”

“Aye aye, captain. I’ll watch our back, you’ve got the sniper after

all.” Brett crouched, keeping his pistol raised, and stared at the warehouse wall and the patch of cement in front of it.

As the waiting turned to boredom, Brett asked, “So, what’s your plan to destroy America? Can’t you just nuke them?”

MrS laughed. “Only to get nuked in return. There’s no winning there, we all lose. Everyone knows that.”

“Ya, ya,” Brett droned on. “M.A.D. -- Mutually Assured Destruction. But that’s Soviet shit, isn’t it?”

“It’s the permanent state of things.” MrS’s voice was rigid. “It doesn’t matter whose flag is flying. The weapons don’t disappear.”

“So if you can’t use nukes, how do you destroy America?”

“I never said we can’t use nukes. We can’t use nukes so long as M.A.D. is working, if it stops, then we can. That’s the plan.”

Brett laughed. He had really found a wing-nut that was taking him for a ride. He wanted to see how far he could take it.

“But you just said the weapons don’t disappear. You’re contradicting yourself, dude.”

“M.A.D. has two parts: The weapons and the infrastructure to use them. The weapons can’t be attacked or disabled, but the infrastructure can be broken.”

“Without attacking it?” Brett was curious; for a troll, MrS liked details.

“Yes, in the physical sense. But there are other ways. The infrastructure might be glossed up with computers and procedures, but ultimately, it’s made up of people. People are weaker than machines. They can be manipulated.”

The crashing noise of a grenade exploding halted their conversation. Gun fire followed; it was a mix of different weapons. MrS remained still. Brett grew anxious.

“What’s going on?” Brett asked, looking around for people moving in their direction.

“They’re killing each other. If you want, we can trade places. There’s no point in my sniping right now anyways -- they’re doing all the work for us.”

“Ya, move over.” Brett spun around, crouching between the

dumpsters and staring at the city block ahead.

The buildings were packed together. Empty windows stared onto the street, each one a potential sniper's nest. That didn't stop a brave player from running onto the street. A sniper flashed from one of the windows, the shot missing the player in the street as he jumped and spun around. In a instant, he was lobbing grenades at the window. Most of them fell through the window, but one missed the mark and bounced off of the wall. It landed right at the player's feet, blowing him to smithereens. The grenades that made it through the window went off, taking the sniper with them.

"Fucking idiot." Brett chuckled. "We can switch back if you want, you can scope it out and tell me about destroying America."

"Of course." They swapped spots.

"So," Brett asked once he was crouched again, taking in the view of the warehouse. "You were saying you could stop M.A.D."

"Yes," MrS continued. "People are the weak point; they can be understood, influenced, and counted on. At the end of the day, the missiles need an order to be fired. That can be damaged. You Americans --"

Brett interrupted, "I'm not American, thanks."

"Where are you from?" For an instant, his voice became less confident -- almost worried.

"Canada."

"Oh, well." The rigid tone returned. "Believe what you want, but you're American."

MrS said it is a fact, not an insult. (Sitting on his couch, Brett leaned back, scrunched his face and mouthed *fuck you*. He was a Canadian, and like most Canadians, took pride in not being American.)

"Your people," continued MrS, "value a democratic exchange of ideas, thinking this exchange is the source of greatness. Your institutions are based on it, your politicians -- at least in theory -- are elected by it. Those politicians control the weapons -- the nukes.

For your democracy to work, you need a well of ideas. But that well can be poisoned, the ideas used to divide and confuse.

Eventually, you can divide and confuse so much that no one trusts each other. No one trusts in the orders they're given, especially orders to launch nuclear bombs."

"And how do you poison the well?" Brett asked, his tone becoming more serious.

"However you can. Lies, mostly. People think truth is valuable, but it isn't; a lie is even more valuable. A truth needs, well, *truth* to exist, but lies have no such condition."

"Ya, but lies are worthless if people know they're lies."

"Not so. Until a lie is admitted to, it causes doubt, no matter how obvious it is. Even after the lie is proven to be false, it still lingers there, staining thoughts and opinions. All we have to do is fill the well full of lies that anger people, and boom! Americans hate each other."

"Ok." Brett's tone started to become annoyed. "But *how* do you do that?"

"Oh easy," MrS chuckled. "The internet, of course. Seed a bunch of comments, make up some stories -- lie to infuriate others who wouldn't be infuriated if they hadn't seen the comment. Say cruel things, or things you know will incite a response. The people getting angry will look at their neighbours and say it's them. Online, we act like the worst of you, making the other side only see the worst. It's what they want to see. Eventually, you elect -- well, actual Americans I suppose -- a president with an asshole for a mouth spewing bullshit non-stop because you're so used to lies and bullshit. It's the norm. Then the day comes when orders are given to fire, but the distrust is too much -- the hierarchy damaged -- so no one can stand to fire. M.A.D. falls apart, and for one brief, shining moment, an opportunity arises. An opportunity to blow up our enemy -- an enemy of decades and decades -- and face no consequence because you're too tied up in petty lies and infuriating bullshit. And then....Boom!"

Brett didn't reply. He didn't know what to say.

"But we must focus," MrS shifted the conversation. "There are only seven players left, and I can see two fighting in the distance.

We should move into the final arena and part ways.” Then, slipping into a Russian accent again, he said, “It’s been good playing with you comrade, may the best man win!”

## 5

The final circle -- the setting to the game’s final battle -- took them into the city. Everything was chewed apart and battle worn: gun shots marking the walls, blown out windows, cracked glass clinging to window frames. No gunshots rang out; the last five all remained cautious. Brett, after being annoyed and confused for most of the game, was elated. MrS aside, he had never made it into the top five before. All he had to do was get the heads up on MrS and get three kills. *No sweat*, he thought. He had a plan for MrS: Brett was going to throw the flashbang right at him. He never intended to part fairly -- not for one minute. MrS thought he was clever, but the troll wasn’t that clever.

As they made their way into a narrow alley, obsessively looking around to make sure it was clear, Brett decided it was time.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

“Sounds good. Still want to throw the grenade between us?” MrS asked, stopping in the middle of the alley.

“Ya, let’s make this fair,” Brett lied.

“Well then.” MrS’s gun disappeared, a flashbang appearing in his hand. “Thanks for helping, comrade” he said in his caricature of a Russian accent.

Before Brett clued in to what was happening, MrS threw a flash bang at his feet. It took a minute to register; Brett had no idea MrS had any flashbangs. By the time he figured out he was being fucked over, his screen was white and a buzz filled his ear. MrS pulled out an assault rifle -- another item Brett didn’t know he had -- and fired a clip into the air, giving away their position, and then hid behind a pile of trash. It didn’t take long after that: the last three players flocked to the gunshots, finding Brett blind and dazed; one of them killed him; another player killed Brett’s killer; MrS fired a

single round from his P18c, taking the game. The match was over.

Brett threw the controller onto the ground as the match stats sheet filled the television. He had no kills -- no points. For the last hour, he had been led along, helping MrSnuggles90210 get all the points and had none to show for himself.

“Mother fucker!” He spat into the headset, but there was no one on the other end to hear him. Rising off of the couch, Brett tried to think about the match, but was too confused to make sense of it. *Fucking trolls*, he thought to himself, writing everything off as some anon’s delusional fantasy. Flopping back onto the couch, Brett looked for another match to join.