

Sometimes we play the games and  
sometimes the games play us ...

# Game Spirit

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Lou Zbreski's face was a mirror of disinterest as he stared at the laptop screen placed on his desk. "What am I Looking at?"

"It's a computer game," Sam Young responded in the humorless way one would have expected for someone of his affiliation with the New York FBI office.

Lou narrowed his eyes, peering over his glasses at three FBI agents. "I gathered as much, But I still don't understand why you brought this to my office." Lou didn't get a lot of walk-in trade from the federal agencies. He'd done some work for the NYPD over the years, but federal agents tended to ridicule the business of paranormal investigations. There had been a fair number of jibs about ghosts, deity packed refrigerators and if anyone had stopped Lou from drilling a hole in his head.

Lou had met Jeffery Bailey and Sam Young before while working on some of his NYPD cases. Being FBI agents, they didn't make jokes, but they scoffed enough to make up for it. He'd never met the woman before. She was an unknown quantity.

He knew Jeffery Bailey was the least likely person to appear in a paranormal investigator's office. A skeptic of the first water, he was the oldest of the three, a veteran of the National Cyber Investigative Joint Task Force over at Federal Plaza. He was a husky guy with frizzled hair which gave him the appearance of a man who worked long hours without taking vacations. "This isn't your standard game. It's not made by any software company. It's been making the rounds of the Dark Web."

Lou took off his glasses and scrutinized the screen. "I understand you folks are doing a bang-up job protecting us from cyber-attacks by criminals, overseas adversaries, and terrorists. As you might be able to tell from the state of my office," he pointed to a selection of paper piles. "We're a bit-fashioned here. Most of our files are still kept on paper. We have a few computers, but we don't have a network. I'm not big into kids' games, so I don't believe we are much of a risk. Besides I keep all my antivirus files up to date."

Zbreski's office looked like a throwback to the 1950s. It was a tossup as to whether there were more filing cabinets or loose piles of paper. The windows facing 10<sup>th</sup> street had the blinds pulled to keep out the glare. Desk were strewn about the edges and a large conference table occupied the center of the space. At the moment, the office was particularly empty. Lou liked to give the staff extra holidays, mostly because he couldn't afford to pay them year-round.

"We understand." The woman was the youngest and shortest of the three. Conservative looking, even beyond her co-workers, she had long bleach blond hair with immaculate styling. Her pasty skin, however, gave away the fact her customary hangout was the inside of an office. Not your average field agent. "In our opinion, no one in your office made the game or is distributing it. And we're also sure none of your staff has played the game. We're more concerned about the victims."

Lou's expression changed to flabbergasted. "Say again?"

"Were concerned about the victims, Mr. Zbreski," Jeffery Bailey interrupted. Lou could tell he really didn't want to be here. Which was why he was amazed he wasn't busy convincing the other two to make a hasty retreat.

"May I take a seat?" she asked.

"Of course," Lou offered them all chairs.

Gathered around the conference table, she regarded Zbreski with a cold demeanor. "All the players we've found so far have been dead. The FBI is taking this very seriously. In the past, the most serious effects of a cyber-attack have been the loss of data or the interruption of vital computer-controlled systems. But this particular program seems to be able to kill its victims directly."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to doubt your findings, but may I ask how you determined the computer program was used to cause their deaths?" Lou had no medical degree, but he was fairly sure computer programs were not fatal.

"All the player's remains were mummified." She explained. "But it's not the mummification which bothers us, Mr. Zbreski."

"What does bother you? Miss ... Miss..."

"Bonnie. Bonnie Moss," she introduced herself. "What concerns us is the dating of the remains. The FBI lab in Langley, Virginia and three other forensic labs have all dated the mummification process to have started over 70 years ago."

"Say again?"

Bonnie gave the distinct impression of being cross at the prospect of having to explain herself twice. "The bodies had all been in the process of mummification for over 70 years, yet the victims can all be identified by dental records and the oldest of them was 27." She waited for the information to sink in.

"I'm afraid I still don't follow you." Lou related. "I don't have any medical degree, nor does any of my staff."

Sam Young was a tall, lanky fellow with short cropped black hair. He was trying to say something, but Lou could tell he was uncomfortable with what he was about to explain. "I want to make it perfectly clear I don't believe a word of this garbage, you understand. My supervisor wasn't having any of it either. But the New York office director ... the New York office director ..."

"Yes, Mr. Young?" Lou did his best to coax the information out of the agent. He was curious as to why three obvious skeptics had been sent to his office by the higher-ups.

Sam's shoulders sank. "The New York office's director believes the program is haunted."

"You're kidding?" Lou remarked.

Sam did not seem happy or even professionally neutral like his colleagues. "I wish I were."

Jeffery glanced over at Zbreski. "I understand the NYPD finds you valuable. They swear you're the real thing. You've helped them out dozens of times. I'm not afraid to say it. This whole thing may be a fool's errand. No offense, but I think this is probably a waste of time. But, could you at least take a crack at it? So we can go back to our boss and tell him we did what he asked."

Lou put his glasses back on and grabbed the laptop off his desk. "Let's start over if we can." Lou gave the screen a serious appraisal. On the screen was a wreck of the World War II bomber. The tail section had

been broken off and was laying perpendicular to the forward part of the aircraft. Lou could tell from the plane's condition, it would never fly again. "Is this a B-17?"



"It's a B-24D Liberator, Model 32 specifically," Jeffery explained. "AAF serial number 41-24301."

"What's the writing on the side here?"

"The crew named the plane and had it painted on the fuselage. They named her the *Lady Be Good*." Jeffery rattled off like an aviation expert.

"This was a real plane?"

"Yes," Jeffery responded. "On April 4, 1943, *Lady Be Good* flew back by itself from a raid on Naples, Italy back to its home base in Soluch, Libya. At around 12:12 AM the pilot radioed to say his automatic direction finder was not working and asked for the location of the base. The plane must have overflown it in the dark. It continued into the interior of North Africa deeper into the Sahara Desert for the next two hours. At 2 AM the crew parachuted to the ground 300 miles south of Soluch as the B-24 flew deeper into the Calanshio Sand Sea before it crash-landed."

"So, the crew was rescued, then?"

"No," Jeffery was frowning ...it was the most emotional expression Lou had ever observed on the man. "They all died. They tried to walk back to the base. The last one was only 100 miles south of it when he died."

Lou shifted the laptop closer. "All the bodies were recovered during the war?"

"I'm afraid not," Sam added. "The plane wasn't discovered until the late 1950s and the bodies weren't found until the 1960's"

"But they found all the bodies?"

"Not quite," Jeffery explained, "No one has ever found the top gunner, Staff Sergeant Vernon L. Moore. He still remains missing."

"And the condition of the crew's bodies?"

Bonnie Moss gave the investigator a serious glance. "Mummified."

"Well," Lou slid back in his chair. "Your director may be on to something."

Sam shook his head. "The FBI has no funds to pay for ghost hunters. So, if you are of the opinion you've found a few gullible types you're sadly mistaken. We're not naïve. We get how you folks operate."

"I'm not looking for any money, Sam." Lou was indignant. "I've never charged the NYPD a single red cent. I don't charge for investigative work. And I don't write tell-all crime novels after the fact to cash in either."

Bonnie was more sympathetic. "How do you pay for all this?" She indicated the office.

“Well, as you can tell from the surroundings, we don’t have a lot of funding. Which is why the filing cabinets and the paper, instead of computerizing everything. We have a few close friends who donate to help us out, but most of it comes out of my pocket. We could go on about this, but I probably didn’t come over to hear my life story. Why don’t you go down to South Central and talk to Captain Browning if you want the full story from a respectable public servant? Then, if you still want to, you can come back.” Lou rose from his chair to escort them to the door.

“We’ve already spoken to Captain Browning,” Jeffery explained, “Which is why we’re here.”

“So, what data do we have on Staff Sergeant Moore?” Lou inquired.

“Not much,” Jeffery replied. He brought out several pieces of paper from his jacket. Glancing down at the papers he picked off the relevant information. “The usual. Vernon was from New Boston, Ohio. Joined the Army Air Corps after Pearl Harbor. Trained in California. Apparently, he wanted to be a fighter pilot, but he got assigned to a bomber wing. Trained as a gunner. Trained on B-24’s out of San Diego ... with Bob Altman no less. Few with his crew from California to Virginia and then on to Libya. Arrives March 25<sup>th</sup>. Once at Soluch they changed planes to the *Lady Be Good* due to mechanical problems. The plane was brand new, having only arrived in theatre before they got there on March 18<sup>th</sup>.”

Lou scanned them over the laptop screen. “Any technical experience? Ground crew training? Before the war?”

Jeffery checked his papers. “No. It says he was a gas station attendant before the war.”

“Humm,” Lou mumbled. “Any chance Mr. Moore survived the war?”

“If he did,” Sam piped up, “He’d be 97 years old.”

“Not your usual hacker or terrorist profile, is it?” Lou grunted.

“No, sir.”

“Well, let’s assume he died with the rest of his crew in 1943, shall we?” Lou leaned back.

Bonnie agreed. “It would seem the most likely outcome.”

Lou rocked his chair back and forth, balancing it on the two rear legs. “Trouble is, I’ve never encountered any spirt who has passed on and then learned new skills.”

“Like computer programming ...” Jeffery commented.

“Yes, like computer programming.” He rocked some more. “I believe what you have here is a hoax.”

With this statement, Lou was all set to watch the FBI agents pack things up and go back to their Manhattan office. It was Bonnie who broke his impression. “How do you hoax a 70-year-old mummified body?”

Lou smiled. “You have a very good point.”

Lou adjusted the laptop one more time. “How do you play this thing?”

Sam Young practically ripped the laptop out of his hands. "I'm sorry, but I have my orders. No one is to play the game."

"Sam, let me explain what's going on here." Lou gazed at him like a Norte Dame football coach. "Your boss sent you here because you don't have any clues. None. Zero. Zip. Do I have the picture so far?" Agent Young's silence was all the reply Lou needed. "So, you need someone to investigate the game. Someone who's expendable."

"Mr. Zbreski," Bonnie Moss broke in, "I assure you, no one is considered expendable by the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"Not counting you average Paranormal investigator, right Sam?" Agent Young remained silent. "I'm sure you are right, Miss Moss, But I'm the most expendable person the FBI can think of at the present time. So, how do you play this thing?"

Lou began to fiddle with the keyboard, but nothing happened.

"You need to have a set of headphones on," Jeffery explained. "The game won't start unless the headphones are plugged in." He reached into a bag on the floor and pulled out a set of game-style headphones, complete with microphone. It seemed to be one of the expensive versions Lou had seen in downtown electronic stores. Well, at least the FBI hadn't skimped on the accessories. It was always nice to know where your taxpayer's money was going. Lou took the headphones from the older FBI agent.

"Do me a favor," Lou requested.

"What?" Bonnie replied in a pleasant tone.

"Pull these off me, if I get in trouble?"

"How will we know if you're in trouble?" Sam asked.

"Well, if I start to appear wrinkled or anything ... you know, like your average Egyptian mummy."

Lou Zbreski put the headphones on his head. He instantly felt sucked into the speakers. His sight went black for a second, only to be replaced by a bright light. The light was so blinding, even closing his eyelids had no effect. When he did manage to open them, he found himself in a sea of sand particles, hostile to all life. The air itself was an inferno, the scorching heat seemed to come at him from everywhere at once.

He was yanked back as if someone had grabbed him. When he rotated his head to determine who it was, he saw a series of parachute shroud lines pulling him towards a dune. His sight was so obscured by the glare, his sight was so limited he couldn't make out the chute itself. He pressed a button on his chest and the tugging ended, but the straps slapped him in the face as they came off. He could taste blood on his lips.

Shadows appeared, blocking out the sunlight. There were five of them. "Hey, Harold, we thought we'd never find you. Have you seen John or Vern?"

Lou squinted. "Who the hell are you?"

A tall one stepped forward. He was clearly wearing an old-style military uniform. A silver bar glinted in the sun on his collar. "What's the matter with you, buddy? You hit your head or something? It's us, Toner, Hays, LaMotte, and Adams."

"Lieutenant?" Lou's response was almost automatic to the silver bar, having served in the army ages ago.

"Yea, it's me, Hatton. You must have hit your head good their pal."

To Lou, he looked calm and determined, but his outfit was definitely out of place. Only a madman would wear a heavy jacket in this stifling heat. He was still a little groggy from being pulled through the headphones. Still, he was able to recall a few facts. Even in the desert, the temperature at altitude for an unpressurized bomber would have been quite cold.

"Here's what we'll do." The lieutenant faced the assembled men. "We'll head north. Sooner or later we'll hit the coast road. Then we'll flag somebody down and get directions back to the base." He wiped the sweat off his brow. "With any luck, we'll run into Moore, Shelley, and Woravka like we ran into Sergeant Ripslinger here. Now let's get going, we don't know how far we have to travel." He set off into the sea of sand, the sun trailing behind him.

Lou had to jog for a while to keep up the pace. The heat. The heat made it difficult to even think. Lou watched as D.P. Hayes, the plane's navigator stripped off his flight jacket and dropped it on the ground. Lou picked it up.

"You might want to keep this." Lou handed the fur-lined jacket back to Hayes. "It can get pretty cold out here at night."

"Learn a lot about deserts up there in Saginaw, Michigan, did you?" Hayes sneered. "You folks in Michigan think every place is cold, right LaMotte?"

Bob LaMotte just grumbled.

"Now in Missouri," Hayes chattered on. "We know about heat. You don't go out of the house in July wearing a fur parka, I can tell ya."

Hatten shouted over his head, "Keep the chatter down. In this climate, every time you exhale you're letting out moisture. You going to need all you have." The six walked on in silence, the sand crunching beneath their feet like it was powdered snow.

"Wait a minute," Lou complained. "The crew was supposed to have bailed out at night ... 2 AM... why isn't it dark?" he grabbed Hatten by the sleeve to demand an answer.

"Boy, you must have hit your head something fierce." The lieutenant stated gazing into Lou's eyes as if giving him a medical examination. "You've been out all night, buddy. It's nine in the morning." The lieutenant pushed Lou forward, placing him in the lead.

As he walked, Lou watched as the desert terrain gradually evolved around him. Slippery piles of sand, which made you lose your footing, gave way to a yellow-tan soil as hard as bare rock. The whole vista seemed like a patchwork quilt of hard table sediment and drifting clouds of sand. The wind picked up each piece of silt and blew it across your face. Any place where the skin was exposed was soon raw and tender. Across the horizon, jagged salt-columns broke out of the hard-packed soil. They rose into the air

like demented fangs of some long-dead monster. Their weird shadows cast behind them odd shapes as if they were vibrating metronomes.

In the distance, heat-waves glimmered, reflecting the sun. They undulated hypnotically, making the edge of the horizon almost invisible. Long ponds of cool water appeared out of thin air and vanished just as rapidly. One of the vague apparitions moved as the wind slowly blew it in their direction. As they approached, Lou could make out the shape as an old sandal, made from rope. It was just the left sandal, the right one was nowhere to be seen. Lou pondered as to the whereabouts of the owner. Although in this environment the shoe could have blown here straight from the Egyptian 22<sup>nd</sup> dynasty.

One of the puddles they observed didn't vanish as they approached. Unable to stop themselves the crew ran towards it. When Lou arrived, he found the others in a semicircle on their knees around the dark puddle. Each man was spitting his lips dry upon the sand. Lou examined it, dipping his fingers into the liquid. He pulled them up, coved in a black, gooey substance ... oil.

The party moved on coughing and hacking as they pressed on. Lou noticed his traveling companion's faces had begun to swell. His face must have looked about the same. The navigator's eyes were so puffy, he barely had room to gaze out between the bloated lids. Lou himself was so thirsty, it was like there was a rat gnawing at the inside of his belly. By dusk, it seemed as if the rat had acquired a knife and was carving up his insides like a cake.

Once the sun went down they didn't so much lay down to sleep as they fell. The entire crew took nose dives, face first into the dusty soil and passed out. Lou had the oddest dream. He could make out the three FBI agents in his office, sitting around the table, unmoving. Lou tried to shout at them to wake him up, but they neither moved or blinked. In desperation, he tried to reach up and scratch the headphones from around his ears, but it was pointless. He found his arms to be as immobile as the three agents.

In the morning, only Lou rose. The other five lay about in a random pattern. He turned Hayes over to wake him, but the man was already dead. His tongue stuck out between his teeth, swollen from the oil he had tried to swallow. His body seemed warm, not the cold you'd expect from the dead. Turning his head, he glanced up at the sun. If anything, the inferno had increased from the day before. There would be no cold bodies in this God forsaken place.

Lou quickly checked the others to find them in the same condition. They must have died during the night. At last, he gathered himself and set off to the north again. None of this made sense to him. Was he living in the computer game or had the game transported him back to 1943? The heat made rational thought beyond his capabilities. Moving one leg after another was an exercise in pain. His only idea was ... if he could make it out of the desert or find Vernon Moore he might be able to get out of this. If this was the game there had to be a way to win, right? If it was 1943 ... well, then he had nothing to lose by continuing his trek northward.

Another day and a night passed. The days were like living in an oven. The nights felt like he was packed in dry ice. By the third day, he could barely see. Everything appeared as frenzied shadows, irrational objects materialized and vanished. Lou was briefly reminded of an old Arab story. The one where the starving man comes across what he believes to be a bag of rice; only to curse the fates once he discovered it was nothing but priceless pearls.



One figure did not vanish. Lou didn't make it out at first, but the sound of shuffling footsteps behind him was clear. He didn't have the energy to walk back to tell who it was, so he stood waiting. Could this be Staff Sergeant Moore at last?

Finally, the man caught up to Lou's position. He was overjoyed to make out sergeant stripes on the man's shirt; yet crushed noticing the man's name tag. It read Shelley.

Sergeant Shelley's lips were too swollen for him to speak. Lou turned back north, there was the distinct sound of slow footsteps following him. They shuffled across the sand as if they were half-awake sleepers about to raid the fridge. All Lou could think about was the endless pain and the mind-numbing heat. The torture was so oppressive, he became aware of it for some time, the absence of the footsteps behind him. Using his last ounce of strength, he turned. As far as his eye could discern, only one set of footprints remained.

Lou considered going back to search for Sergeant Shelley, but he couldn't make his feet move. Without willing them to do so, they started out to the north again. His feet seemed to move of their own volition, regardless of his wishes. As the sun rose higher, Lou lost the ability to keep his eyes open. They were now swollen shut. He continued to shuffle north, using nothing but the blazing sun on his back as a guide.

Time melted. In fact, everything seemed to melt in the relentless intensity of the sun. Lou's pace slowed. He was nearing the end. It wouldn't be long now, without realizing how it happened he found himself walking on his knees.

His eyes fluttered open. They were no longer welded shut. Standing before him was a man in tan uniform. Somehow, Lou Zbreski knew it was Vernon Moore. He appeared untouched, healthy even.

"It's the end of the line, Lou," the man laughed. It was the same maniacal laughter you might hear from the villains of Saturday morning cartoons. "You made it pretty far. About 200 miles. Pity is, you have 100 miles to go. I don't think you're going to make it. Mr. Zbreski."

Lou was barely able to speak. "You know who I am?"

There were peals of laughter once more.

"Can you give me a hand?" Lou stretched out one arm in supplication, begging for assistance.

"Why?" Vernon asked with deep malevolence. "No one helped us."

The last thing Lou Zbreski saw was the desert floor rushing toward his face.

## **Epilog**

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Sam Young held the phone up to his ear. "He just put the headphones on, sir. There was nothing we could do, I swear."

A voice at the other end of the line was shouting.

“Yes, like the others.” Sam Young explained. “He looks like he’s been in the desert since World War II. Yes, sir. I’ll take the headphones off sir.” There was another loud voice on the other end of the phone. “What do you mean sir, we’ve only been here twenty minutes, tops. Yes, sir. I’ll look out the window.”

Sam Young pulled up the closed drapes. The full moon high up in the night sky was easy to discern, but the lights of the street blotted out all the stars. He pulled the phone away from his face and looked at the time. 9 PM. They pulled into what had once been paranormal investigator Louis Zbreski’s office at 9 AM this morning.

Sam Young reached down to shut the laptop. Now, Sam had never believed in the supernatural, but he could swear he could hear laughter as the laptop snapped closed.