



# GAME SYSTEM

A Prison to Call Your Own

The future holds many strange and mysterious options... or is it the past? I can never keep those two things straight.

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**T**he white walls of the jail seemed as sterile and lonely as they always did. George McDermott chaffed at the cold handcuffs keeping him restrained to the table. They seemed overkill. He'd never been violent... not that he hadn't thought about it.

The guard opened the cell door and a man in a dark gray suit entered, carrying a briefcase. He put it down on the metal table with a clang. McDermott's expression never changed as the man took a seat across from him. "Dr. Jordan."

"McDermott."

Shifting uncomfortably in the metal seat, he stared down the doctor. "Look, as I've told all the DA's I had nothing to do with hacking those government files. It was my partner. And I certainly didn't have anything to do with killing the accountant."

Dr. Jordan sighed. "I'm not interested in your case, McDermott. You've already been convicted. Personally, I think you got a bum rap. It's why I am here. I've been authorized to offer you a deal. If you agree, I can see to it your sentence gets significantly reduced. Unfortunately for me... and I guess for you... it would have been better if you had killed the accountant. I need someone with a killer instinct for this project."

McDermott straightened himself in the chair. "So, for the sake of argument, let's say I did kill the accountant. What would I have to do?"

The laboratory room of the prison was just as bleak as the rest of the structure. Gray and white walls coated with the smell of too much bleach. The rumors must be true. The room had once been the prison's old laundry room. The only odd thing about it was the control console and the six glass tubes, mixed in with the overhead fluorescent lights, dangling from the ceiling. Dr. Jordan glanced over at McDermott from behind the control console. "McDermott, I work for a gaming company."

"Not White Lion Games! Those bastards stole everything we ever invented."

A wry smile crossed Dr. Jordan's face. "No, I work for Real Challenge Systems. We build simulation games. One of the problems we have is building realistic opponents for our players."

"We did a lot of work in building non-player character AIs. Best in the industry. Won awards, you know. Well, I don't think I can do much effective programming for you with my hands in cuffs."

Dr. Jordan shook his head. "We're not interested in your programming skills McDermott. Real Challenge Systems is going in a different direction. We're using living humans to power our characters."

"You're going to put me in some CGI suit?"

His hands ran over the controls. "I'm on a bit of a schedule, so I don't have a lot of time to explain all the details to you. Basically, we're going to use your mind to run one of our game characters. You'll become the living breathing soul of the character. Step over here please."

Pointing at the floor, he noticed for the first time, a small 'x' taped to the floor. As directed, McDermott stood over the spot on the floor. Dr. Jordan pressed a button. Before he realized it, one of the glass tubes had descended from the ceiling. He ended up inside it. "Hey, what's going on?"

"I noticed in your records you played a lot of dungeon roleplaying games as a kid."

"Yeah, what does that have to do with anything?"

The doctor was as cool as a cucumber. "Don't worry McDermott, you'll be fine."

McDermott, on the other hand, was in full-on panic mode. Once he saw the gas coming down, he started smashing himself against the glass tube. His voice rose to a crescendo. "Yea, I'm not sentenced to be executed." He tried to hold my breath. It never occurred to him before, but when you are panicking it's impossible to hold your breath for more than 30-seconds. "This is cruel and unusual," he protested.

He could see the doctor serenely running his fingers over the controls. But he was starting to get blurry. At first, he thought it was his breathing fogging up the glass. But it was worse. He was losing consciousness. He was...

When he woke up, it was dark. He had a pounding headache. Slowly he started piecing together fragments of memories. Flashing images of misty glass tubes and mad scientists. Before long, he had a tremendous rush of clarity and he recalled what had happened. Rubbing his wrists together he was pleased to find he was no longer wearing handcuffs. Those things chafe. What he did notice was how big his hands and wrists had become. He must have been wearing the cuffs so long they'd made his hands swell.

He struggled to his feet. At first, he attributed the feeling of carrying a lot of extra bulk to being knocked out, but it was something else. Was his whole body swollen? He felt his chest with his now pudgy hands. "What the hell happened to my shirt?" One he got on his feet, he noticed he also wasn't wearing any shoes. He could feel the soft ground with his feet. The fog was gradually lifting from his mind, although he still felt groggy. It was the feeling you get when you wake up somewhere between a power nap and a full night's rest.

He had to blink several times. There were trees and his head was near the top of them. Overhead, he could make out a sky full of stars, but no moon. His eyes were still adjusting to the dim light. Felling around his mouth with his hands, he tried to figure out what was wrong. Had someone punched him in the face? Then his finger ran across one. Moments later he found the second one. Yep, there were tusks. Two large teeth growing out of his lower jaw. They were so large they were impossible to keep in his mouth. The tips of these teeth covered over parts of his upper lip.

McDermott checked his waist. It was there, a massive belly. Tall, check. Overweight, check. Tusks for bottom teeth, check. "Oh, my god," he caught himself saying out loud, "I'm an ogre."

In the morning he got a better look at himself. Gazing into a calm, open pond at the edge of the woods he didn't like what he saw. Big, ugly and dumb looking. He seemed to be wearing little more than two belts. One around his waist and one over his shoulder. In a show of morbid fashion, he was wearing a neckless which appeared to be made of human skulls. He assumed they were real. They smelled rank.

He then had the strangest feeling. He had to search his memory for a minute, but he found it. It was hunger. It made sense since he hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday.

Almost instinctively he started wandering around looking for a source of breakfast. About half a klick away the woods opened into a pasture. There were a bunch of cows grazing on the side of a hill. McDermott was overcome with the desire to eat one of them. It didn't even matter to him they would be uncooked. He hesitated. Part of him remembered all the westerns where you could get hung for cattle rustling. Technically, it wouldn't matter if this was all part of a game.

Running across the pasture, he overtook one, grabbed it and took a bite out of its side. The meat tasted good. Better than any Porterhouse he could recall. Certainly, better than prison food. In the distance, McDermott could see a small figure approaching at a run, carrying a pitchfork. He appeared so small. What happened next seemed like instinct rather than intent. He dropped his fist on his head, driving the man's body into the ground like a stake, killing him instantly.

He had a bad feeling about the whole thing. He vomited all over the ground as the farmer's wife ran off, screaming. This did not seem encouraging. The death of the farmer would surely require a response. It was the kind of thing that attracted nescient adventures with a taste for monster killing. He had no idea what would happen to his real body if someone was to kill him in the game. The idea concerned him.

McDermott left the pasture even though his belly was empty. He sulked back into the woods. His thought was he could hide out among its trees. It was a comforting thought, which didn't turn out to be comforting at all. He realized this was the first location revenge-seeking adventurers would start combing through. Passing by a fast-moving river, McDermott used his giant paw to scoop up a handful of fish. They tasted fine, although it was more like a snack than a meal.

Before McDermott had a chance to react, he heard footsteps behind him. It was followed by a voice. "What are you doing here?"

McDermott turned on his heels, prepared for the worse. Before him stood another ogre. Only this one had more skulls hanging from his neck. Plus, he was carrying several tree trunks tied together into a makeshift club. He took one glance at McDermott's face and held up his hands. "Sorry," he announced, "I failed to introduce myself. Name's Mormax."

McDermott hesitated for a moment, unsure of what was going on. "Mine's McDermott."

"Crappy name for an ogre."

"It's my name," McDermott protested, more than a little insulted.

"Don't you know you're not supposed to use real names in a game? I think I call you Ginner."

"What?"

"It's short for beginner. So, Ginner, what do you want?"

There it was. An odd revelation. McDermott didn't know what he wanted. His mind reverted to what he truly longed for. He wasn't guilty and he wanted out of prison. "I guess I want out."

Mormax settled down on the ground and crossed his legs. “Well, then. You’re going to have to play the game. Do what they want, so you can get out of prison. So, what’s troubling you. Play the game.”

McDermott’s voice trembled slightly. “I think I killed someone.”

Leaning his head back, Mormax chuckled. “No, you didn’t. This is a game. Are you actually a two-ton ogre?”

The notion was too absurd to even contemplate. McDermott replied immediately. “Of course not.”

“Then you didn’t kill anyone. You played your part in the game.” Mormax sighed. “Chances are it was only a non-player character anyway. Besides even if it was a player character, who cares... it’s only a game. It’s what you are supposed to do. I mean as an ogre. Think of it as time off for good behavior. You play your part in the game. The players are happy, they let you out of jail. Everybody wins.”

“But...”

Mormax sounded exasperated. “But? There are no buts in a game.” He rubbed his oversize belly. “You hungry?”

“Yeah,” McDermott replied surprised at his response. “Why is that. I mean if this is only a game? Why am I hungry? I’m not real.”

Uncrossing his legs, Mormax rose. “It’s called an incentive. You get used to it. Come on, let’s go kill something.” McDermott rose too and followed him. He sniffed the air. “South,” he muttered.

The woods were cluttered with undergrowth, but McDermott hardly noticed. His feet were big enough to squash a bush with almost no trouble at all. Birds flew off as the two ogres approached. McDermott was sure this was giving their position away, but Mormax didn’t seem to care. In the distance, McDermott could hear the hoofbeats of a horse on the hard-packed ground. Mormax headed in the direction of the sound. It seemed like he was looking for trouble. What they found looked every bit the caricature of a knight from a fairy tale. Silver armor, with the horse armored to match. The knight was wearing a stuffed multi-colored headband around his helmet. There was even a feather sticking out of it.

The man drew his sword. “Ho, foul varlet. Prepare to meet thy doom.”

McDermott tilted his head. “What do we do now?”

Mormax stomped his feet. “No, No. No. Not like that. You’ve got to get into the role.” He took several steps forward. “Mormax smash. Mormax smash man in tin suit.” He stepped forward and dropped the tree-trunk club on the knight’s head as he approached. Both the knight and the horse went squish. Mormax sat. “You want the guy or the horse?” Mormax asked.

McDermott stood there in stunned silence. “Okay. I can see you’re not ready for this yet. I’ll eat the guy and you can have the horse. Trust me. It’s tasty.” Sitting, Mormax dismembered the man like he was a crab at Red Lobster. McDermott sat next to the horse. “Go ahead, dig in,” Mormax declared. “Think of it like meat in a can. You need to get it out of the metal container to get at the good stuff.” Finally, McDermott dug in. It seemed to him, at least, better than filet mignon.

Putting one of the bones aside, McDermott turned to his partner. “Won’t we get a bad reputation doing this?”

Without pausing to stop chewing Mormax whipped his lip. “Who cares? It’s all part of the game. You ever hear of the Red Baron?”

“Of course.”

Spitting out a piece of gristle, Mormax continued. “He painted his plane bright red so that everyone knew who he was in the air. He wanted it to inspire fear. I say, let’s paint the landscape red. Show everyone who we are. Let them come after us, knees trembling.”

“So, what do we do next?”

Mormax crewed even louder, if possible. “Well, Ginner, I tell you. We find ourselves a little village and terrorize it.” Mormax sucked the brains out of the knight’s skull and then carefully attached it to his ever-growing string of skulls.

“Won’t they send an army out to hunt us down?”

He laughed. His tummy rolled with a deep chuckle that started from around his feet. “Naw, that costs too much money. The king around here is so cheap he’s tighter than the skin on a sausage. No, the village elders will hire adventuring parties to go after us. Player characters.”

“Then what?”

“Then, my friend Ginner... we eat lunch.”



People ran screaming as the two ogres entered the village. It was quite the town with its red clay rooftops, birchwood walls, and well-organized streets. The village had an amusing atmosphere. The smell of the birchwood was everywhere. The biggest building appeared to be the temple. Built using a multi-story pagoda style, it towered over the houses beneath it. A fountain in the town square had a staircase of waterfalls. A large bell from the top of the temple rang loudly as the ogres approached. The bell had a real high-tone oriental quality to it. It almost sounded like a gong. “Mormax crush houses.” He swung his club into the roof of a nearby building. Pieces of red tile flew off like a fiery clay explosion. Mormax hit the same building again, demolishing a wall.

McDermott/Ginner sent his foot into the town’s fountain and pushed until the water stopped flowing. He was finally getting into the role of a destructive ogre. “Fountain too loud. Annoy Ogre.” The two laughed at how well they were doing.

The villagers didn’t even attempt to resist. They spent all their energy trying to run away. There were plenty of dogs barking though. They seemed to be the bravest thing in the village. Although they wisely kept their distance. Stopping only momentarily to nip at the ogre’s heels. Mormax took a swipe at another building and with one swing he collapsed three of the walls. He turned to McDermott/Ginner and whispered under his breath. “How much you want to bet that building was not up to code.”

Ginner laughed a deep, almost malevolent laugh. To add to his friend's destruction, Ginner put his foot right through a door. The wood cracked open in a rain of splinters and broke like bolsa. The only trouble was Ginner couldn't get his foot out. Mormax had to grab him by the shoulders and pull. After three hard yanks, Ginner came free. The rest of the wall collapsed as the two of them flying across the street.

Mormax got up and dragged Ginner to his feet. "Come on," Mormax spoke in hushed tones. "Let's head back to the forest. We need to leave a few buildings up so we can come back later and cause some more trouble. "Puny humans die good," Mormax yelled out. "We came back for dinner." As the two strolled off toward the woods, Ginner grabbed a sign off what must be a tavern and pulled it right off its moorings. He threw the sign into a window, shattering the frame with the force of the blow. The two practically had a jaunty step in their stride and they ambled off back into the woods.

Later they stopped and pulled up some medium-size trees. Mormax wrapped several trunks together with vines. He put the longest one in the center and handed the result over to Ginner. "Here, give it one a try." Ginner took a swing at a larger tree. the wood split and the tree fell over with a crash. "How does it feel?"

"It feels good," Ginner replied.

"Good. Now we both have clubs. It'll come in handy when the player characters come after us."

Ginner sounded disappointed. "How this going to work? Humans aren't stupid. I mean they'll just start sending bigger and more powerful parties after us until they kill us."

Mormax snorted. "Let'em try. We're gonna play Poncho Villa on their butts. You know the American army chased him all over Sonora for a year and never caught him. We're gonna be Villa, you and I. We'll kick the butts of weaker groups and lead the bigger ones on a merry chase. The problem with a group big enough to tackle two ogres is they move slow. We'll out run'em."

The two spent the rest of the day looking for trouble. Eating local cattle and sheep. Ginner was more partial to the cows, while Mormax seemed to enjoy the sheep. It wasn't until the late afternoon when they encountered their first set of hired adventurers. Unlike the knight, they weren't wearing any steel armor but were rather wrapped in leather jerkins covered in tiny studs. Trying to overcome us with numbers, there were three of them. They also didn't carry swords. They were armed with crossbows. Ginner heard the first bolt fly past his head. It made a buzzing sound like a bee. Trying to wave the little bugger away, the second bolt went right into his hand. Ginner cursed out loud. "That little ... hurt."

Mormax and Ginner ran across the glade as if they were a thundering herd of bison. The earth trembled as they approached. Fortunately, crossbows take a long time to reload. Mormax smashed one with his club as he was pulling the string back for a second shot. Ginner ran after a different one, but the man was less accommodating. He ducked and weaved. Evading Ginner's first swing, the club hit the ground. He tried a roundhouse with the club, but this only impacted empty air. In frustration, Ginner screamed. It must have been a terrifying sound. At least to human ears. The man froze in place. He held his spot long enough for Ginner to swat him into the ground. It was a good thing too. The man had finally managed to reload his weapon when Ginner hit him. The third one thought better of the whole affair and simply ran away.

Ginner pulled the crossbow bolt out of his hand. It turned out to be much more painful than he would have imagined. "What's the deal with the pain?" he protested.

"It's another part of the incentive. Some guy hurts you and well... you tend to hit back harder than you otherwise would have."

Ginner found the nights cold despite all the extra fat he was now carrying around. He missed having a blanket to pull over himself. Lightning flashed across the sky. Thunder rolled in right behind it. Ginner felt the first few raindrops fall on him shortly thereafter. He noted how odd it was the first few drops of water always end up on your face. He'd hardly let out a second breath before the drizzle turned into a torrential downpour. Ginner stood and started ripping up pine trees by the roots.

Mormax spit the water out of his mouth. "What are you doing?"

"Building a shelter."

"No, no, no. Follow me."

The two ogres headed off into the woods. What began as a slight jog turned quickly into a headlong run to avoid the rain. Mormax seemed to know where he was going, so Ginner followed him. Cross a swollen stream they came to a barn. Kicking in the door, Mormax shoved his friend inside and then followed suit. It smelled of mold, but at least it was dry. Lightning lit the interior. "Hey," Ginner commented, "There's a horse in here."

"So? Eat it."

Ginner opened the gate and pushed the horse out of the stall with his big mitt of a hand. He shoved the horse out into the rain, and it took off at a trot. Mormax gave him a confused glance. "What you do that for?"

"I guess I lost my appetite."

The barn owner and his sons woke the two ogres in the morning. They didn't give Ginner any credit for not eating their plow horse and stuck him in the side with a pitchfork. Ginner found out Mormax was correct about the incentive of pain. Despite the boy's attempt to evade Ginner's attack, he swatted the boy's pitchfork with his club. The strike broke the pitchfork in two. Without a weapon, the boy had the good sense to flee the barn.

It had stopped raining, so they pushed the other two humans out of the way and headed back for the woods. The next few days sort of drifted into a repeatable series of events. Ginner and Mormax would walk into a town, shocking the inhabitants. A cycle of screaming and yelling was almost foreordained at this juncture. The two ogres would then proceed to perform much needed urban renewal. With all the speed and subtlety of a wrecking ball. The first town they visited, Ginner genuinely thought they were doing the locals a favor by demolishing their buildings. The place had a real bleak atmosphere. Downright macabre. With its murky wooden rooftops, faded adobe walls and unmaintained gardens, it was a wreck before they got there.

Ginner felt a little worse about the town with the ash wood buildings and limestone walls. It was rather pleasant looking. You know, a good place to settle down. He felt this way until he got to the central

common area. Instead of being a park or grazing area for livestock, it was a dueling ground. Patches of red-stained grass were scattered about randomly. Broken bits of foils lay strewn about. After seeing this they both headed over to the town hall and leveled the place until no two bricks stood atop one another.

After each act of ogre vandalism, they were approached by a group of hirelings bent on getting some revenge for the town. The first group was a quartet of men-at-arms with sword and shield. They had matching leather armor and accouterments. It was probably the entire staff of the town watch. Ginner yelled at them something about his refusal to pay any of his parking tickets. He certainly found he was getting better at squishing the little rodents. The next group was about a dozen woodsmen all armed with bows. These took quite some time to deal with and Ginner found the endless arrow pricks to be quite annoying. They did, however, end up being quite tasty.

“You think this is cannibalism?” Ginner asked.

“Are they ogres?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not cannibalism.”

The village which caused them the most trouble seemed almost mundane. None of the houses, huts really, even had a true solid roof. They were grass rooftops, with grass walls, surrounded by fields of farmland. Pushing these homes over led them to catch fire. Apparently, the locals didn’t worry too much about having open flames in their homes. This time the destruction was much more serious. Ginner could smell the smoke from the fires as they trotted back to the woods. Mormax remarked it was nothing more than Natural Selection at work.

“Step back,” Mormax announced.

Whispering, Ginner kept his voice down and his body hidden behind some thick brush. “What is it?”

“This party seems t know what they are doing.” He peered carefully over a rise as the group advanced following their trail. “See the fellow in the decorated black robes?”

“Yeah?”

“Mage. Those little are rats are dangerous. They can hit you from a distance and you never see it coming.”

Ginner blinked hard. “Doesn’t look like much.”

“That’s when you worry.”

“Poncho Villa time?”

“Si, senior. It’s time to hightail it out of here. Let’s head for the hills,” he replied in a completely fake Mexican accent.

The two crept down the hill as quietly as possible. They ducked down a canyon, crossed a shoulder-high river and dashed across four open fields. They were out of breath by the time they got back into the

trees. Their lungs were going heavily, trying to get oxygen back into their muscles when they saw the group crossing the same fields, they had so recently traversed. "Who are those guys?"

"See the guy in the green?" Ginner pointed him out to Mormax. "Ranger."

"Vermin. They have a tracker."

"Vermin?" Ginner asked.

"It's a game, Ginner. Kids could be playing this game. You've got to keep the cussing clean, I tell you. Didn't you play any games when you were a kid?"

"Doom."

"They cuss in Doom?"

"I guess not."

"So, we say vermin, not, not... you know... the other thing."

"I'll say Daisey's from now on."

"Don't go there. Daisey's sounds stupid."

The two ogres led them on a merry chase. They circled back to the river and practically dove back in. They walked upstream with water almost up to their necks. After about half a mile they crawled out. They were wet and tired. Crawling over the terrain, they made their way up to the foothills, the Grave Mountains reaching their way toward the clouds. Halfway up they turned and saw the trailing party working their way up the slopes.

Ginner grabbed Mormax by the shoulder. "If you find me a cliff and tell me the fall is going to kill me, I may just push you off myself."

"I was hoping," Mormax explained, "if we find a cliff, we could push them off."

It took the two almost two full days, but they finally lost them. They took their frustrations out on the next village they ran into. But before they could even get out of the outskirts, they ran into another group, bent on revenge. This one had two of the black-robed mages. Some of the men-at-arms looked quite competent. They were using long spears to keep the ogres at a distance. Each spear had a long blade attached, like a short sword attached to a pole.

Ginner took a swipe at one of them who ventured in a bit too close. The man deftly weaved himself out of the way and then drove the tip of the spear into Ginner's thigh. He let out a howl of pain and knocked the spear out of the way with his club. Warm blood ran down the ogre's leg. The man's strategy was clear. He wasn't going for the killing blow. He intended to wear Ginner down. Incapacitate him so he wouldn't be able to escape. This way he'd become easy prey.

Attempting to back away, the closer man kept thrusting, as Ginner felt another blade rip into his heel. Ginner swung his club madly, but it was already too late. The human who had gotten behind him in the scuffle had already backed away, out of club range. Ginner swung wildly, hoping to get in a lucky shot.

He roared his defiance. Only, this time, the men didn't flinch. The pain in his leg was starting to draw his attention and his ire. Nobody warned him playing the game would involve so much pain.

From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Mormax, he was fighting off a pair of well-armed humans himself. As Ginner watched, his partner simply broke off and ran for the other side of town. Ginner attempted to follow, but the minute he put any weight on his wounded leg the pain shot up to his hips. "What are you doing?"

"Poncho Vila always escapes," Mormax hollered over his shoulder.

"What about me?"

"Have fun. It's a game."

His first attacker stepped in to land a second blow while he was distracted. But he wasn't as distracted as the man hoped. Swinging the club around he caught him in the side of the head. He lay still on the ground, a fair-sized dent in the side of his helmet. Two more stepped in to take his place, but they kept their distance. One of the men turned his head over his shoulder. "Now."

Ginner saw a ball of pure flame shoot out from the hands of one of the black-robe creatures. In the next instant, he was burning. The pain was beyond intense. It felt as if he'd put his hand on a hot stove, only worse. He shook himself as if trying to shake off a burning rag or some oil. But there was nothing to shake off. It was a magical flame that seemed to burn nothing but his skin. The flames extinguished themselves only after turning his skin black. Ginner roared with mindless rage. Swinging the still burning club wildly, he struck nothing but empty air.

The burning fire did have one effect. Ginner no longer cared about his leg. He hopped across the open ground, dragging his injured leg behind him. He flatted one of his tormentors without a second thought. As he pulled his club back, a man with a long spear made a sudden lunge. The blade bit deep into Ginner's belly.

This slice had a disturbing effect on Ginner. He began to grow dizzy, which made standing up tricky. He charged the man who attacked him. The rapid movement caught him by surprise, but Ginner couldn't put much mass into the blow. The spear went soaring into the air. Ginner's human target flew back into the bushes but was soon back on his feet. His partner thrust his spear forward to keep the ogre back. Furious now, Ginner took away his spear. But he had to do it by letting the blade plunge into his arm and turning so it was twisted out of the man's grasp.

He barely had time to remove the blade in his arm when he saw the next fireball heading in his direction. Ginner managed to twist out of the way, just in time. The ball passed his right shoulder and smashed into a tree, setting it ablaze. The lone ogre struggled to regain his feet as the spear-wielding men circled him like a pack of yapping dogs. Ginner still had some fight in him. He lashed out, but the men kept their distance, wearing him down.

Charging one of the blacked-robed mages, the fellow turned and ran to stay out of the ogre's way. Ginner felt a thud land right above his right eye. Reaching up, he pulled out a crossbow bolt. Well, most of it anyway, the end of the tip remained buried in his skull. This pissed off Ginner and sent him into a blind rage. This fellow had deliberately tried to put one of his eyes out. Who does that? Oh yeah, Ginner

recalled having done the same thing to numerous other monsters in games he had played. Still, he didn't consider it very sportsmanlike.

He was slowing down. Each step now sent searing pains shooting into his head. Ginner swung with little effect, only managing to keep his tormentors at a distance. He bellowed in agony. After only half a dozen pointless swings, he fell to his knees. A spearman took the opportunity to slice his chest with the blade and back quickly away. Ginner hardly responded.

Now stationary, a black-robed mage readied another fireball. Ginner sneered at him with one eye. He couldn't see out of the other one. Blood from his forehead wound kept pouring over it. Without too much thought, Ginner threw his battle club at the mage. The ogre smiled broadly as he watched the mage's head fly off his body and the mage's own fire incinerate the resulting corpse. Ginner tottered backward. He could feel it. He was faint and near the end. The last thing Ginner saw was the ground rushing up toward him.

George McDermott woke up in the tube back in the prison lab. Dr. Jordan was standing before him holding a clipboard. George couldn't move his arms, but he would feel a whole web of electrodes protruding from his head. It didn't hurt, it was merely disturbing.

"Well, Mr. McDermott," Dr. Jordan remarked, "Or should I call you Ginner? For your first run-through, you did extremely well."

McDermott tried to talk, but his mouth was too dry.

"Take a sip of water, there's a drinking tube to your right."

George did as he requested, and he instantly felt better. "What's... What happened?"

Dr. Jordan let out an almost imperceptible grin. "You played a game. You did very well. It'll just take a minute for the machine to reset and then it'll send you back in. Just relax."

McDermott glanced around the room, at least as far as the electrodes would allow him. Each one of the other tubes was filled with his fellow inmates. In the far corner, two orderlies were removing one from the last tube. He appeared to be dead. Even with the water, McDermott had trouble getting words out of his mouth. "What happened to him?"

Glancing over at the last tube Dr. Jordan sighed. "You mean to Fredricks? Unfortunate really. It doesn't happen very often. Sometimes you don't make it back here after someone has killed you in the game. I wouldn't worry about it. You're fine. We'll be sending you back in shortly."

George's hands had been numb, but now they were starting to feel tingly. His palms were sweaty. He was back in his own body, but he could still feel the twinges of the spear he'd taken in the arm. He considered it for a moment and then decided it was phantom pain. Like feeling the pain of the toothache, even after the dentist had pulled it. One leg was bothering him. McDermott wondered if it was possible to have two phantom pains.

Dr. Jordan knocked on the glass of the tube to get McDermott's attention back. "Mr. McDermott, you did so well, we're going to up the quality of the players you've been facing. What you did, well it was mostly a practice run. To see how well you would perform. I think you'll find the next rounds a bit more

challenging.” Dr. Jordan went back to the controls, running his fingers over the switches. McDermott’s vision was starting to get blurry again. He felt himself losing consciousness. He was...

When he woke up, it was dark. He had a pounding headache. His arm and leg still hurt, but only slightly. He struggled to his feet. The fog was gradually lifting from his mind, although he still felt groggy. It was the same feeling he’d had before as was waking up after an incomplete rest. He was back. He was Ginner again.

He had to blink several times. He could smell the pine needles, the leaves on the apple trees. His feet felt the soft, mushy earth. Overhead, he could make out a sky full of bright stars.