

Stakes

By Alexander Saxton

The game was called Trigger.

It started as a play variant for a big title first person shooter, but took on a life of its own among certain highly competitive communities online. The rules, simple. Ninety-nine lives, no shields, no heads-up display, pistols only. The map was always Snowspire. A headshot always killed.

Yuli had spent so much time walking those frozen corridors that they felt real to him. He dreamed of cold winds whipping through the high halls; the crunch of his footsteps through the central plaza. His pulse pounding in his neck as he chased some half-glimpsed human prey across the skyways and through the tunnels. The gritty snow stinging his cheeks.

When he played long enough, he could sometimes convince himself his breath was beginning to fog.

Maybe that's just because he lived in an unheated basement.

* * *

"There are ways of making this more interesting, you know."

He never knew what Reaper's gender was. Their voice ambiguous over a low-quality mic.

"Am I not interesting enough for you, baby?"

He said this while leaping from the highest point of the map, blowing Reaper away from halfway across the plaza.

"There's interesting and then there's *interesting*."

He licked dry lips.

"Go on."

"You're not supposed to bet on the games. You can get banned. But everyone does, secretly. There's a third-party site. Here, I'll send you the link."

The third-party site looked 1.0. Black background, green text. A chunky 'paypal' button with the aspect ratio slightly off. A bitcoin logo that looked even worse. You could also wager the ownership of your NFTs, but Yuli doubted many people did that anymore.

"This looks sketchy."

“It’s fine; everyone uses it. Check Reddit if you don’t believe me.”

He browsed through some forums between their next two matches.

“This is how you make money if you’re not fuckable enough to be a streamer,” Reaper said.

Yuli wasn’t sure if the comment was meant to be pointed, but it stung anyway. He’d tried to make a go of streaming, but never got any traction. Even though he was good, it wasn’t any fun to watch him play. He was joyless.

“Hit a nerve?” Reaper pistol-whipped him in the base of the skull. Little rubies of frozen blood skittered across the screen.

“I’m going to make you literally pay for that.”

* * *

For all its rough appearance, the third-party site worked well. Create a secure password, attach an account, enter your match ID. Watch the number in your account go up the second you won. They started out playing 5 dollar ante. Since the matches went quick, you could swing up or down by a hundred bucks an hour. The problem was, the two of them were too evenly matched. They could play all night and the winner would walk away with only ten or twenty dollars.

They needed something more to scratch the itch.

So they raised ante to a hundred bucks. Real money now. The equivalent to months of rent changing hands over the course of a night. But still, they were so evenly matched it didn’t matter. Even when they raised the ante to 200 a match, the most either of them ever went down was when Yuli dropped 800 in a night. It hurt badly. He spent the next day in an anxious fugue. But then that night he went up by a thousand.

“This isn’t working,” Reaper said. A thirst in their voice. “We need to raise the stakes.”

Yuli sat back in his chair. 4am, and wide awake. Washing down an adderall pill with stale redbull. Dehydrated, and the dryness of his lips and mouth compounding an... ontological thirst. His soul could take a piss and it would turn the toilet water golden-brown.

“What do you suggest.”

By way of response he received a notification in his inbox. A screenshot of a credit card maximum. Just over five thousand. Give or take the same amount Yuli could call on. And real debt considering the triple-digit balance in his bank account.

“Poker rules,” said Reaper. “I’m all in.”

Something in their voice made Reaper’s bad mic crackle. A kind of husky excitement. A tone of voice that made Yuli’s heart tap a little faster. He couldn’t do it. Couldn’t possibly. Gamble more than everything he had? He could lose everything.

...unless he won.

“Five thousand’s a lot of money.” He stalled, trying to make sense of the tight excitement in his chest. “I don’t know where you live, but I’m in the city. Rent’s a lot, even for this shithole. And the first of the month’s only a week away.”

“It’s expensive everywhere; don’t be a pussy.” There should have been contempt in Reaper’s voice. But if there was, it was drowned by the heavy breathing, the excitement.

“I could end up homeless,” Yuli said.

“Yeah...” said Reaper. “Yeah, you *could*.”

And now Yuli’s heart was grinding like a motor. Five *thousand* on one match. Moving-up-in-the-world money. But his thoughts weren’t on the things he could *buy*. They were on the match *itself*. The sheer, dangerous ecstasy. The thought of sharing that with Reaper. Of finally settling things between them, dominating, coming out on top.

God, god, his pulse was pounding in his neck. He already had his account open.

“Five thousand?” He could hear Reaper’s breath. Reaper could hear his.

“One match. All the apples.”

Yuli’s fingers trembled on the mouse. Then, without even really being told to, they clicked, *accept*.

The hit of adrenaline came sudden and intense.

* * *

And then the next thing he knew he was sprinting through the snows of the central plaza and a sudden stutter of light opened the haze and Reaper’s bullets drilled through his chest and skull and then he was alive again not far from where they’d shot him and he was coming up behind with the magnum cold in his hand and he was fighting the recoil as he sent the bullets through their back and then he jumped down to the lower level just in time for Reaper to respawn and he killed them again with the butt of his pistol and then he ran down to the grav-lift and they dropped down from above filling him with lead and then he respawned and Reaper killed him

three more times in a row, and each killing felt close and intimate and he felt the pain of each bullet and it was just a razor's edge away from pleasure, and then he was killing Reaper back and it flowed back and forth and back and forth like a dance, like a close dance, flesh-to-flesh between two experts who know each other's bodies with a personal fervour and he wished the game could go on and on forever but even more than that he wanted to *win* and all of a sudden he was falling from the top of the map in a spasm of bullets that killed Reaper just before he tumbled off the stage to his death.

And that was the 99th life and he kicked back from his desk and threw back his head and howled at the top of his lungs, not even remembering it was five AM in a shared building.

"That's *right*. That's right I *fucked* you. I fucking killed you and came all over the map. I fucking won. Five thousand dollars, fuck you."

He didn't care his upstairs neighbour was pounding on the floor.

"I fucking got you," he screamed. "I fucking got you."

But his cries fell on deaf ears. Reaper had already quit.

"Fucking *pussy*." He screamed into the deaf mic. "I fucked you! *I fucked you!*"

* * *

He found that he didn't even know what to do with the money.

Made some investments, bought some new clothes. The kind you see advertised in sidebars when you turn off adblock. He ordered them but they turned out to be shit and when he put them on he looked like shit.

He did move into a new apartment: and he bought some new things for it. An affordable couch, a big screen TV. But when he'd spent almost all of Reaper's money the apartment was almost as grey and hollow as when he'd started. The walls just as blank. The stainless-steel fridge was full of fresh produce but he didn't cook and it all wilted and rotted and shat beige juice over the bottom of the crisper drawers. Got so bad in there he barely used it anymore. Just threw an arm over his nose before he ripped the door to grab a beer or energy drink, then slammed it shut.

What money he had left, he gambled. Made fake accounts, played 5-dollar ante matches against nobodies. Each time he could only swing a few rounds before people realized he was hustling and he'd have to create a new account to get anyone to play him. But it felt good to win even these little victories; to take money from other people and put it in his pocket. To prove he was the best by making them hurt just a little bit, so they wouldn't forget.

He played a few higher-stakes games as well, but nothing more than 200-dollar ante. Somehow word about his game with Reaper had gotten out in the community. Become the stuff of urban legend. And when he played against these guys, and they were almost always guys, he could hear that little bit of... panting, thirst in their voice. Like the story of that match excited them, in the same way it had excited him, the same way it excited Reaper.

But they were all just voyeurs. None of them ever had it in them to take things to the next level. And if he joked with them about raising the stakes, they'd laugh and pull back. And when they did it filled him with a hunger and frustration that nothing else could slake. Not alcohol, not nicotine, not masturbation or smashing his head against the wall.

He missed Reaper.

After that first week of victory he'd messaged them every night. Sometimes ten or twelve times a night when he'd been drinking.

"Come back," he wrote one night. "Come back, come back, I miss you."

Then, after half an hour,

"I need you."

Then, at last, in the depths of loss at 4 AM,

"I love you."

But never once he offered to return the money.

He couldn't have done that. It would have meant the whole thing had been for nothing. He couldn't bring himself to dilute the intensity of that thing they'd shared, and he didn't think Reaper would have wanted him to. It would have been sacrilege.

But he never got any reply from Reaper again. Not for weeks and months. Not even when he won big matches against well-known opponents. Not when he messaged them again and again and again and again and again.

He heard nothing.

* * *

Until one day something arrived in the mail.

A brown paper package with only his name written on it. No stamp. Delivered by hand. Where the return address should have been, only a sticker with a QR code.

He knew immediately who it was from. And his heart rate tripled.

You shouldn't scan strange QR codes. Worse when you know they're from someone whose last five thousand dollars you took. He scanned it anyway, because it didn't matter. All that mattered was bringing Reaper back into his life.

Fortunately the code didn't crash his phone or take him somewhere showing snuff films. Just to a 1.0 looking website with a chat function. Black background, bright green text. And a new message from Reaper, reading 'Hey'.

* * *

"Where did you go?" Yuli asked. "I missed you."

"Times got hard. I lost my place."

"Where are you now? You can stay with me."

He wanted that painfully.

"I'm okay, lol. Squatting in an empty apartment."

"You can stay with me," Yuli said again.

Reaper ignored the offer. Instead they asked,

"You want to play?"

And Yuli's mouth went dry. His body responded as if to a different stimulus. He felt suddenly very warm.

"Always."

And then a few minutes later they were in the lobby again, talking just as if nothing had ever happened between them. Yuli had bought a better headset since last they spoke. But Reaper's voice was just as crackly, distant, and ambiguous as ever. He still knew so little about them.

"F-friendly match?" Yuli said.

"No, fuck that. Let's make it interesting."

If there was any difference to Reaper's voice it was a certain tiredness. But underneath that Yuli could still hear the excitement, the thirst, and it matched his own.

“You want to make it interesting.” A statement, not a question.

“I want to make it very interesting.” They said.

“One hundred dollars? Two hundred? Or...” He hesitated: it took him a moment to dare ask the question that made him *pulse* with anticipation. “Or do you want to go all in.”

Long silence at the far end of the line. Yuli bit his lip. He had gone too far, had pushed too hard. He drew a breath to apologize, but Reaper spoke first.

“I don’t have any money, Yuli.”

“Then... then...”

“But I want to make it *more* interesting than that.”

Yuli had no idea what that could mean; his imagination ran wild; he heard his own breath heavy in his mic.

“Then what,” he said.

“Did you open that package I sent you?”

“No... no, I was waiting.”

“Open it now.”

He rolled away from his computer, ripped open the package on his lap like a kid on christmas day. Revealing a blank brown cardboard box. He scooted back towards his computer, holding it in both hands like a relic.

“What’s inside the box.”

“Open it.”

He unsheathed the box’s twin tongues, unfolding it.

Inside: a hard black plastic band with radioactive accents. It looked almost like a half-closed black ziptie, but two-and a half inches wide, three quarters of an inch deep, and large enough to wear like a crown.

Its inner circumference was bright with silver needle-tips, like a shining churn of little silver lamprey teeth.

“What is this?” he asked. He was painfully aroused.

“The stakes.” Reaper’s camera flicked on, for the first time ever in their relationship. In the blurry, low-res greyish light, Yuli found himself looking through at an identical band, cinched tight around a pale, hairless thigh.

“And, what are the stakes, exactly?” But Yuli already knew.

“Pain.”

It was too good. It was too good. It was too close and personal and perfect. Too sick and horrifying. He ran a finger along the grain of those silver teeth, feeling their sharpness, their potential. He imagined them ripping into his skin and found he couldn’t really picture it. He imagined them biting into Reaper, into the soft pale flesh of that thigh, so close, so out-of-reach, and the thought filled him with frenzy and disgust.

He didn’t want this. He didn’t want this to happen to him, and he didn’t want this to happen to Reaper. He was still tortured by taking their money after the last match. By making them suffer, by making them homeless. His only friend in the world; his only love.

But he hadn’t given the money back.

And the thought of the, the pleasure of the match, the win or loss, the ecstasy--

He bit his lip. Sat for a long moment in silence torn between two needs. Reaper breathing into his ear, the tension pounding between them.

Then in front of the camera, Yuli removed all of his clothes, revealing himself. Slid the plastic apparatus up over his thigh and cinched it tight as he sat back down in the chair.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, let’s begin.”

When the recording of the game leaked out, hundreds watched in darkened corners of the internet: wide-eyed, breathing heavy, waiting for that moment at the end when a sound so like a buzzsaw started up.