

# respawn



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This document has been cleansed to remove profanity, naughty words, and [REDACTED].

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Three.

Two.

He pushed the left stick in.

One.

He was sprinting before anyone else moved. He hit Y and flipped his submachine gun around and pulled in the glock and tactical knife. He flew down the alley of the *favela* and chucked a stun grenade toward the corner. He began cooking the semtex even before the little x flashed, and when it did, he threw again. 100 for first blood, little window with his *Third Time Charm* triple-prestige title for all to see. *Mack928x3 shouldn't run with scissors*, he thought. Plus the truck was on fire. He waited a second, shot it twice, and felt the blast as it exploded and took another enemy combatant down. Another hundred. He switched back to the submachine gun and squatted. Holographic up, moving slowly. *Let him come to me*, he thought. He saw movement, but he didn't have a shot. Too far away. Two seconds. Three. *This guy has patience. Maybe it's Mack928x3 again, waiting because he knows where I am*. He went prone and slithered up behind the railing. Waited a second, ready to spring up. Then he heard fire to his right and saw the red dot in the mini-map. He got to his feet and spun around and raced into the little sniper house. Mack928x3 shot from the other direction and missed. *How did that other guy get to the sniper house so fast?* he wondered, then decided: *He must have taken the rooftops*. He dashed into the sniper house and wasted the guy and squatted in the corner and threw up the UAV and let out the breath he'd been holding.

The red dots were far away now, so he took a second to think. He switched back to the glock and knife and reloaded the glock. Then he pushed the left stick again and sprinted back to the smoldering truck. He ducked down and kept along the wall, then flew down the ramp and turned the corner and stabbed the guy hiding in the dark spot. Mack928x3 again. *Man, he's gotta be pissed at me*. He spotted another guy dash into the garden-roof building, so he took off and caught up quickly and pushed the steel in and turned around again and barely caught the last pass of the UAV. They were all on the north side, so he ran back to the smoking truck and popped smoke for the sentry gun. The chopper came and dropped the crate and he grabbed it and saw all the green triangles on the west side so he ran east through the sniper house toward the barbershop.

Someone was waiting downstairs in the barbershop; he stepped aside just as the guy lunged out at him and then the guy fired his handgun wildly around but he was just a little faster and hit his target just in time and the guy dropped. Mack928x3 again. Third time's the charm. He ran upstairs and pulled out the sentry gun and put it in the sweet corner spot so it could see the street and the entranceway too and then he switched back to the submachine gun and went back downstairs and waited. He reloaded and waited as the sentry gun did its thing and just as it took down the ninth enemy Mack928x3 jumped around the corner and blasted him in the face until he was very very dead.

He smiled as he watched the killcam; Mack928x3 had crept like a wolverine, slow and steady, toward the

barbershop. He knew where the sentry gun was and where his prey was hiding. And when he finally shot him he reloaded and emptied another clip into the corpse. *Can't say I blame him*, Germ thought.

Someone in his headset said "Dude that guy was pissed."

"Yeah," Germ replied. "Well, I got him three times in a row. I would be pissed at me too."

"They shot down your pave low too."

"Yeah I know."

"You suck at calling in choppers."

Germ made a face. "How can you suck at calling in choppers? That doesn't make any sense. You're an idiot."

"At least I don't [REDACTED] suck at calling in choppers."

Germ rolled his eyes. "Shut up," he said.

Something moved in front of the screen and blocked his view. "Jeremy! Did you just tell me to shut up?" she asked.

"You shut the [REDACTED] up," the voice in the headset said. "[REDACTED] fag. You're a little [REDACTED] [REDACTED]."

Germ closed his eyes and grinded his teeth hard. "Mom," he said, "get out of the way!"

She reached back and turned off the TV. Suddenly he was back in his bedroom: grey chair, red-wine carpet, KMFDM poster on the wall over the TV. "Don't talk to me like that," she said. "You're lucky I didn't turn off the game." He sat back in his chair, pulled off the headset and let out an angry breath. She ignored this, stood glaring at him with her hands on her hips, a beige dishtowel clenched in the right. "I've been calling you for five minutes. Where's your brother?" she asked.

Germ held the guide button down for several seconds, then pressed up twice and hit A. "I don't know," he said, dropping the controller on the floor. "He said he was going out."

"Nice of him to tell me," she said and turned to leave the room. She moved back to the TV and turned it on again, but it was just blue. Germ got up and crossed the room to the bed.

"You can turn it off," he said. "I'm done." His mom clicked the set off again and closed the door as she left.

+ + +

Two hours later, he was back in the same spot. Crouching in the barbershop, letting another sentry gun take down enemies. Another random idiot in his headset, whining about campers. *People camp because it works*, Germ thought. They accused him of camping all the time. Among other things. Lately it was care-package glitching. He stopped using them altogether, just to shut them up. *It's not me, it's them*, he thought. *I'm not doing anything wrong. But I'll change what I do anyway. The morons win again.*

Paul came online. Germ backed out and sent him an invite. He popped into the lobby.

"Germ man," Paul said. "What's up?"

"Nothin. What's up with you?"

"Nothin. Did you do the algebra stuff yet?"

"No. Just lemme see yours tomorrow."

"Whatever dude. Do your own [REDACTED] homework."

"[REDACTED] you."

"Fag."

Germ set them looking for a hardcore headquarters game. He preferred team deathmatch, but Paul hated it. So they played HQ. It took three tries before they both made it into the game.

"God I'm sick of that," Paul said, once they were inside.

"Yeah, it sucks," Germ said, and glanced at the score. 2300 to 4700. "Jesus!" he cried. "Thanks for putting us on the suckiest team that ever sucked."

Paul laughed and said "Yeah, with these damn weiner kids." They could hear someone in the headset laugh. Germ hoped they got the *Simpsons* reference, but he doubted it.

The HQ location popped up and Germ sprinted for it. Glock and tactical, flying across the snowy base. He dipped behind a crate and waited. An enemy rushed past and he jumped out and stabbed him and moved into the HQ range. A few tense seconds and it came online. The bar filled at a crawl.

"Paul, where the [REDACTED] are you?"

"Don't worry," Paul said. "I see ya. I see everything."

"Sniper dork."

"Better than being some gay running man."

"You could be here helping me capture."

In a half-second, Germ saw a bullet hit the wall next to him and he turned around just in time to see the guy drop.

"Yeah," Paul said. "But then I wouldn't be saving your [REDACTED] when you're about to get shot."

With the bar half-full, a stun grenade went off and Germ pushed the stick left, trying to move but dragging himself like a drunk sloth. He cursed as the screen filled with light, and he saw his name pop up in the list of kills. He cursed again.

"Sorry dude," Paul said. "I tried."

"They're gonna capture it now."

"That guy isn't," Paul said.

"Is anyone on it?" Germ asked, more to the team than to Paul. As usual, no one answered. "Why the [REDACTED] do you people have mics if you never use them?"

"I used my mic when I was with your mom last night," someone said.

"I'm getting back into position," Paul said. "There's no one on it."

Germ sprinted back into the room and set up in the opposite corner. The bar began crawling again, and again a stun grenade went off. But this time he was ready, watched carefully as someone came ducking over the steps. Germ fired and dropped the guy. The bar crawled some more. A semtex started beeping, and went off just after he captured the HQ.

"I'm out," Germ said.

"Yeah, I saw," Paul said. "But you got it."

"No thanks to you." He clicked around until he found Paul's screen. He smiled and watched as the guy behind Paul waited just a second before stabbing him.

"Eat me. Oh [REDACTED]!"

Enemies scurried around the HQ until it went away, and Germ pressed the left stick to start again. He knew they would lose, but he was determined to rank up before they did.

+ + +

Friday night, Ashley was sprawled on his bed, texting Stephanie. Her dirty brown hair was splayed on his dark blue pillowcase, her hands moving furiously over the tiny keyboard. "The movie starts at seven-thirty," she said.

Germ sat hunched forward in his grey chair, peering into the screen. "I know," he said, running his harrier crosshairs over the map. He tried to predict where they were headed; the northeast corner looked like a safe bet. "But these invaders.. must die!" He said these last words in time with the music coming from the huge speakers on either side of the TV. A ripple of tiny x's crackled on the screen, and he grinned as several yellow hundreds followed. He waited for two more to send him over the top for the pave low, but the strike ended. He spotted an enemy soldier in the distance and fired twice but missed. Then the guy dropped and he noticed Paul got the kill.

"Paul, you [REDACTED]!" Germ cried. "You took my kill! I [REDACTED] hate you!"

Ashley sat up. "See?" she said. "There it is again!"

"Yeah, yeah," Germ said.

"Yeah what?" Paul asked.

Germ sighed. "Ashley's got this thing where guys always say they hate each other. She says---" Ashley yanked the headset off his ears and put it on her own.

"You *do*," she said. "You guys always go 'I hate you' when you're hanging out. And you're always punching each other and putting each other in headlocks. It's [REDACTED] weird." She waited and listened. "Whatever. I think you say 'I hate you' when you really mean 'I love you, man'." She waited again. Germ shot a guy. "Whatever," she repeated. "We don't have time to discuss it. Now would you kindly finish this dumb game so we can go to the movie?"

"A slave obeys," Germ said.

Ashley froze, then slowly pulled the headset off. "Okay, that was too [REDACTED] weird for words."

"What?" Paul took the headset back and replaced it on his head.

Ashley stepped back toward the bed. "You both said the same exact thing." She returned to the bed, back to the cellphone. "Come on," she said after a second. "We're gonna miss the previews."

"Hang on," Germ said. He crept toward the corner and waited, moved slowly, crouched for better aim. The red dot was up, edging around the side of the building; its chipped brick was blurry and he tried to ignore the flaming garbage can to his right. His left finger was clamped down, holding the sight up, his right finger poised tensely over the trigger. He took a breath, waited. "Just let me finish this round," he said.

Suddenly a guy flung himself around the corner and Germ sprang up and started firing wildly and so did the enemy guy and they both shot at each others' feet and into the walls and the guy backed up but he ran out of ammo first and just as he was about to reload Germ put the red dot in place and set up a headshot. Then everything went still. The round was over; they lost. "No way!" Germ shouted, punching his armrest. "I was just about to get my [REDACTED] pave low!"

"That's because you're too gay for a pave low," Paul said in the headset. "Hey, doesn't that movie start soon?"

"Shut up," Germ said. "We're going."

"I'll be here," Paul said.

Germ stood up, peeled off the headset, and clenched his hands a few times. He turned off the console and his TV. Ashley was in front of the mirror, paused with her green hairbrush in her left, poised overhead while texting with her right. "Wow," he said. "I thought I was bad."

Ashley smiled. "Shut up," she said. "I just need to tell her something."

Germ rushed to her side to peer at the tiny screen. He spied several words before she shoved him aside and hit *send*. "Hey!" he said. "That game's not stupid! Show some respect!"

"Looks stupid to me," she said, stuffing the phone in her jeans pocket. "Come on, we're going to miss the previews." She took his hand and tried to pull him close, but he resisted.

He put a hand to her hair and smiled. "I wish you'd let me cut this."

She tried again, moving in to kiss him, but he moved upward at the last second and kissed her forehead instead. She froze, glaring at him. He smiled slightly and rubbed her palm with his thumb. She waited.

"What?" he asked.

She pulled her hand away. "You tell me."

"It's nothing," he said. "Don't worry about it."

She gave an exasperated grunt and turned to the door. "You get so tense when you play that [REDACTED]. I'm sick of it."

He chuckled. "It's not that," he said. "I just..". He shrugged at her back, watched her hair jostle as she shook her head slightly. A desperately thick silence dragged itself between them. He could see how jagged her eyebrows were in the reflection of the dormant TV. He wished he could call in a real-life care package, to get some new words that would make her not angry. But he needed an emergency airdrop, or maybe an AC130.



For Paul, he would need an EMP.

"Come on," she said finally, hustling toward the stairs. "We're gonna miss the previews."

+ + +

Three hours later Germ was back in the lobby. He sent Paul an invite, and a second later he appeared with Mike.

"Hey Paul. Hey Mike."

"What's up," Mike said.

"Hey dude," Paul said. "How was it?"

"It sucked," Germ said. "I don't care what you say about Megan Fox, that movie was [REDACTED] stupid."

"Oh my God," Mike said. "Dude, you're so right. He *is* queer."

"Shut the [REDACTED] up," Germ said, trying not to get mad. "Maybe I just want some [REDACTED] plot and character development when I pay eight bucks to see a movie."

Paul laughed. "In other words, you're as gay as Big Gay Al and Bruno put together, dancing at the Springfield steel mill."

"I guess you didn't [REDACTED] Ashley yet, either?" Mike asked.

"You morons ready to play some deathmatch?" Germ said.

"Hang on," Paul said. "I need to change my title so it matches your purse." There was a pause. Germ flipped to the music player and started up The Crystal Method.

"You guys ever play that *Nitrous Oxide* game on the PS1?" he asked. "That game was [REDACTED] sweet."

"Nah," Mike said. "What was it?"

"It was this bug game where you were going down a hole and shooting at all the bugs. [REDACTED] intense."

"Shooting bugs?" Mike asked. "Like in *Donkey Kong 3*? That's so gay."

"Dude, it was awesome. You shoulda played it."

"Okay," Paul said finally. "Check it out." Germ moved over to Paul's name and saw the light blue *My Little Pwny* title with the flower emblem. Mike laughed hard.

"That's cute," Germ said. "You ready to play?"

"Do hardcore," Mike said. "I can't take that softcore [REDACTED]."

"No way dude," Germ said, firing up Team Deathmatch Express. "I need to win some rounds tonight."

They were dropped in a team that was yelling full-tilt. Rednecks and black guys, each threatening to mutilate the other. Germ sighed.

"You [REDACTED], I'd like to [REDACTED]."

"Come find me, [REDACTED]."

Despite their violent animosity, the Klansmen and the Black Panthers were beating the snot out of the enemy. Germ chuckled at the irony as he lit up a sniper with his submachine gun. He ran up the stairs and swung around to find a sniper watching the bridge. He stabbed the guy and turned around just in time to see another enemy jump down from the sniping room. Germ nailed a headshot and sent up the UAV.

In the headset, meanwhile, the black guys had gone silent and the rednecks were trying to rile them back up. Germ imagined they had put the white guys on mute, which would be a smart move. But of course, people online usually didn't make smart moves.

Thirty seconds later, Germ was sweating in the dark room with the barrels, waiting for the guy near the big gas tank to show his face again. He only had seven bullets left in the submachine gun, and he doubted it would reach that far anyway. He thought about making a run for it, but he suspected the guy had a buddy watching from on top of the stairs. A flashbang went off across the way and Germ raced out. He dipped to the right and doubled back, spied the enemy in the distance and let loose. The seventh shot hit the guy's head and Germ finally got to call in his pave low.

He sat back and grinned as the beautiful green icon appeared in the mini-map. He didn't even mind when someone stabbed him in the back. He just nodded as his name appeared in the top right, showing off his *Third Time Charm* title. He panicked and left the room and went into the callsign menu and was about to change it, then he stopped.

He remembered a line from *Office Space*, and said it into the headset, even though he was alone now in the lobby. "Why should I change? He's the one who sucks."

+ + +

Saturday night. They were in Paul's basement, playing splitscreen Special Ops. Paul was in his big blue chair, focused intently on the big plasma screen bolted to the wall. Germ was on the couch, much less centered. A bottle of [REDACTED] Germ had swiped from his brother's closet sat between them, mostly empty. Germ was sliding onto his side, but Paul was barely buzzed. He sighed as Germ went down again.

"For [REDACTED] sake," he said, racing to revive him for the fifth time. "Can't you stay alive for two minutes?"

Germ just laughed and started singing the Bee Gees, then switched to Homer Simpson. "Ah, ah, ah, ah, table five. Table five." He tried to stab a soldier in front of him, missed by a country mile, and got shot again. Paul threw the controller down.

"[REDACTED]," he said. "This is [REDACTED] pointless."

"Yeah," Germ said, dropping his controller. "I'm not really in any shape to kill terrorists right now." He looked at Paul, running his hands angrily through his hair. "You're not even buzzed, dude."

Paul held up the blue bottle. "That's because this stuff tastes like [REDACTED]." He took a pull and made a hideous face. "Why don't you steal something decent like [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]?"

"Because Ryan doesn't keep that [REDACTED] in his closet. Just me."

Paul jerked his head at him. "Just *what*?"

Germ reached out and grabbed the bottle. "Just this," he said, and took a swig. He looked at Paul, who still glared at him with confused fury. "Why? What did I say?"

"You said just you."

Germ laughed and offered the bottle to Paul, who shook his head slowly. Germ drained it and put it on the coffee table, and started singing a line from *South Park*. "Tom Cruise is in the closet..."

Paul shook his head but laughed a little. "Dude, if you got something to say, just say it."

Germ laughed and tried to keep his eyes open. He was slumped toward Paul. "Hey man, I'm gay. I'm a [REDACTED] queer."

"Yeah," Paul said, flipping the TV to ESPN. "I know."

"Do you think---" and then Germ gagged as a thick clump of vomit spewed into his teeth. He put his hands up just in time to smear it on his chin and shirt. He bolted into the bathroom and heaved into the toilet; only half of the mess made it inside. He groaned and took a breath and then another wave hit and he spewed into the bowl again, wheezing in pain as the smell doubled back on itself and then throwing up some more.

Paul cackled with laughter at the disgusting sounds, and turned the volume up to hear the highlights of the Dallas-New York game.

From the bathroom, Germ coughed and spat. "Oh [REDACTED], man," he moaned. "I'm so [REDACTED] wasted." He looked down at the streams of saliva and semi-digested burrito on his shirt. He grabbed the towel beside him

and wiped at the putrid mess. "Dude, I need to---" but he slumped forward and something cracked on a hard surface and he went silent.

Paul ran to the bathroom and froze. "Oh [REDACTED] dude!" he said, and knelt down to Germ's bleeding head. He picked him up a bit and leaned him on the wall. Germ was conscious and laughed a little at himself. Paul rinsed the towel in the sink and wiped up the puddles of blood from the floor. "You're lucky you're my buddy," Paul said with a grimace. "This is some nasty [REDACTED]." He handed the towel to Germ.

"Yeah, I know," Germ said, and took the towel. He wiped his face clean, and pulled off the filthy shirt. "Do you have something I can wear?"

"Yeah, here." Paul grabbed a Florida State University shirt from a drawer and tossed it to him. It landed on the floor outside the bathroom.

Germ sighed and glanced at it. "Dude, I may have thrown up all over myself, but I have *some* dignity."

Paul smiled. "[REDACTED] Gator boy. Gay-tors. You do know that, right? That they're all gay?" He grabbed a red tank top and chucked it in Germ's direction, then sat back in the big blue chair.

He took a deep breath and wiped his chin one last time, then pulled on the fresh shirt. He took some toilet paper and did his best to clean up the area around the commode. Then he stood up slowly, balled the nasty towel, and threw it in a laundry basket in the corner. He stumbled toward the couch and collapsed on it, one arm over his eyes. "Dallas win?" he asked.

"Yeah," Paul said. "Overtime field goal." He sat with one foot on the seat of the chair, watching the replays.

"Nice." He took a deep breath. "Can I crash here?"

"Yeah, sure," Paul said. "Just don't puke on the couch or nothin'."

Germ chuckled. "I won't," he said. There was a pause. "But I *am* wasted." Another pause. A commercial for *Girls Gone Wild* rang in Germ's throbbing ears.

"Yeah," Paul said. Another pause.

"Dude," Germ said after a minute. "I'm serious."

As the commercial ended and a beer ad came on, Paul flipped through several channels. "Yeah, I know," he said. "You're totally [REDACTED] up."

Germ waited. "No," he said. "Not about that."

Paul hesitated, then muted the TV. "What the [REDACTED] are you talking about?" Germ tried without luck to figure out what sort of voice he was using.

"Remember what you said the other day about why I didn't like that movie?"

Paul turned his head slightly. "Germ, what the [REDACTED] are you telling me?" He waited a second, then another. Then he stood up. Germ pulled his arm away and peered at Paul through the light from the halogen lamp.

Then he dropped his eyes and nodded a little.

"Oh my god," Paul said quietly. "Oh my god." He looked around helplessly. "You're.. You're.." He gestured with the remote. "You're wearing my [REDACTED] shirt."

Germ sat up and steadied himself, unable to be as precise as he wanted. "What does that mean?"

"I dunno," Paul said, his face twisted slightly. "I mean, why are you [REDACTED] telling me this [REDACTED]?"

Germ's face twisted too. "I dunno," he said. "I mean it's---"

"How the [REDACTED] can you be gay, you [REDACTED] idiot? You've got a [REDACTED] girlfriend." He gave a quick shallow laugh and then pointed at Germ. "So that's why you haven't..."

Germ stood up and held a hand out. "Hey," he said. "Leave Ashley out of this."

"She doesn't even know, does she?" His face fought between smiling and scorn. "Gimme my shirt back."

Germ squinted at him. "What? Why?"

"I don't want you getting AIDS on it." He reached for the shirt but Germ slapped his hand away. "Hey!" He held his arms out, ready to respond.

"What the [REDACTED]!?" Germ cried. "One second you're my buddy, helping me clean up my puke, and the next you're calling me a [REDACTED]!"

Paul threw the remote on the couch and shoved Germ toward the door. "Get the [REDACTED] out."

Germ spread his hands. "What the [REDACTED] is wrong with you? How have I changed in the last ten minutes?"

"You're not staying here tonight. Probably try to [REDACTED] me while I'm asleep. Brokeback [REDACTED]."

"Are you listening to yourself? I'm not [REDACTED] attracted to you. What is your [REDACTED] problem?"

Paul pointed. "You make me [REDACTED] sick. You're a [REDACTED]."

Germ dropped his shoulders and let out a quick breath. Then he lunged at Paul and clocked him in the face, dropping him to the floor. Germ stood over him. "Who the [REDACTED] do you think I am? Who had your back when

those kids were trying to steal your [REDACTED] jacket? Did you forget that [REDACTED]? I wasn't such a [REDACTED] then, right?" Paul scowled with acidic fury at him. "And what about when your [REDACTED] parents split?" He waited. "Huh?" More waiting. "Who let you sleep over for a [REDACTED] week? Who didn't tell anyone when you cried for twenty minutes that first night?"

Paul looked away, still scowling.

Germ spat on the floor. "[REDACTED] it," he said, grabbing his jacket from the shelf next to the TV. "You're an [REDACTED]." He pulled his jacket on and turned away. "You've always been an [REDACTED]." He walked up the steps and slammed the door behind him.

+ + +

A week later Germ was sitting in the dark on the floor of his bedroom. The blinds were closed; the only light was the green ring of his console and the screen of his cell phone.

"Seriously," Ashley said. "Why don't you come over or something? We can watch *The Princess Bride*."

"No thanks," he said. "I'm just gonna go to sleep."

There was a pause. "When are you gonna tell your mom?"

He gave a desperate chuckle. "In ten years," he said. "Maybe never." He let out a breath. "Man, Ash, you don't know how much I appreciate---"

"Stop it, Jeremy," she said. "You don't have to keep thanking me." She waited. "And you don't have to keep wallowing in your.." She adjusted her voice. "*pit.. of despair*."

Germ tried not to laugh. Then he laughed. "Stop clapping before y'all make me smile."

"Okay, Shabazz K. Morton."

"Ash, I might have killed myself if it wasn't for you."

She paused. "You better be [REDACTED] kidding."

He sighed. There was a silence. Then he yawned. "I need to sleep," he said.

"Call me tomorrow," she said.

"I will."

"Good night."

"Night."

He hit *end* and went to the TV. He turned his controller on and started searching for a game of Mercenary Team Deathmatch. Halfway into the game he saw Paul come online. He went to the user preferences and turned off notifications, then went back to the game.

+ + +

Three days later he was playing Domination in the dark. No music, no headset. He realized halfway through the match that he didn't care if they won or lost.

Mike sent him an invite. He sighed and hesitated. Then he muttered "What the [REDACTED]" and joined the game. He plugged his headset in and waited to connect. Mike and Paul were waiting with three of their buddies.

"What's up guys?" Germ asked.

"Hey Germ," one of the other guys said. Someone from Paul's work. Germ didn't know him very well. "Where you been, dude?"

Germ paused. "Busy," he said. "Just.. doing stuff. We gonna play or what?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "Hardcore headquarters all right?"

"Hang on," Paul's work buddy said. "Lemme switch my classes."

"Make it quick," Paul said.

Germ flipped to the music player and started his Ministry playlist. "Stigmata" came on and he smiled.

"Okay," the guy said. "Ready."

Mike launched the game and after two false starts they dropped into a lobby with an annoying kid singing into the mic and two guys who sounded drunk. Germ's mind scratched at the noises in his headset, wondering if Paul was going to say anything.

The game started, and their team grabbed an early lead. Germ was in top form, his tactical knife slicing through enemies like a fork through soup. He captured the first headquarters and nearly shot Mike when he popped around the corner.

"Hey!" Mike said, startled. "Take it easy, dude. It's just me."

"Sorry," Germ said. "Hard to tell in hardcore,"

"Guys," Paul said. "There's someone on the other side of that wall."

Germ moved to the left and suddenly shots burst around him and he tried to figure out where it was and then the guy was dead and then Germ was down too.

"Oh [REDACTED]," Paul said. "Did I shoot you, Germ?"

He chewed his lip a little. "Yeah," he said.

"[REDACTED]. Well, at least I got that other guy first."

"Yeah," Germ said again.

There was a pause. The music sent profanities around the room. "Germ," Paul said, then hesitated. "Sorry, man."

Germ smiled. He felt a wave of relief wash over him. "It's okay, dude." He went back to the fight.

They won two rounds and sat in the lobby waiting for the third to start. Germ took a breath. "I'm done, guys," he said. "I need some sleep."

"All right dude," Mike said.

"Take it easy, Germ," Paul's work buddy said.

"Yeah, I gotta go too," Paul said. "I gotta get up early."

"[REDACTED]," Mike said. "Go get your beauty sleep, you queers."

Germ chuckled and backed out. He was about to shut the system down when he got a party invite from Paul. He tilted his head a bit, then accepted it.

Paul was the only one in the party.

"Hey," he said.

Germ let out a breath. He tapped the controller with his thumb. "Hey."

"I'm sorry," Paul said.

"I know. You already said that."

"No, I mean---"

"I know what you mean."



There was a silence. It was relaxed, filled with solace and comfort.

"Thanks," Germ said.

"Yeah," Paul said, then changed his tone. "Now. Would you kindly give me my shirt back?"

Germ laughed. "No, but I'll beat you to death with a golf club if you want."

Paul chuckled. "Hey dude, we should go bowling or something this weekend."

"Yeah," Germ said. "I get paid on Friday. Let's do it."

"Cool. Talk to you later."

"Night, man." He was about to unplug the headset.

"Hey Germ," Paul said.

"Yeah."

"I hate you, dude."

Germ smiled. "I hate you too, man."

The party went dead and Germ shut down his console. The room became silent and he climbed into bed and fell asleep.