

into a low hum, leaving only the pulse of the game and the sharp instincts buzzing in his head. It was a puzzle he couldn't wait to solve.

A boy leaned against the metal railing nearby, his posture casual but his eyes sharp. He couldn't have been much older than Kaiy. His dark hair fell into his eyes, and his jacket hung loosely off his thin frame. When he caught sight of Kaiy's expression he smirked.

"First time?" the boy asked, his voice cutting through the hum of the room.

Kaiy hesitated, his focus shifting from the game to the boy. He nodded, his curiosity overriding any caution. "Yeah. What is this place?"

The boy's smirk widened. "What? You just walked in by accident?" He looked Kaiy up and down, his gaze calculating. "It's called Tagbox."

"Tagbox?" Kaiy asked.

The boy laughed softly, a sound almost lost under the crowd's roar as one of the players dodged a metal beam by a hair's breadth. "Yeah, you haven't heard of it before because technically, it's illegal. The government doesn't like it, thinks it's too dangerous, too unpredictable. But they look the other way. Mostly because the right people love it. You see them?" He nodded toward the VIP section, where men and women in tailored suits sipped expensive drinks, their eyes glued to the screens showing every angle of the box. "Those are the ones who keep this place running. Politicians, business moguls, the kind of people who place bets like they're at a private casino."

Kaiy followed his gaze. The people there didn't belong in a basement surrounded by concrete and rust. Their presence added a strange legitimacy to the place, a sheen of power over the raw edges of the game.

"How does it work?" he asked, his voice low.

The boy shifted, resting his elbows on the railing. "Two players

in the box. One is 'it', the other the runner. The goal is simple: avoid getting tagged until the timer runs out. But it's not just about speed. You see those two up there?" He pointed to a raised platform where the two figures stood Kaiy had noticed just now, their hands moving over glowing panels, watching their screen. "Those are the controllers. They manipulate the box, shifting walls, activating obstacles. It's a two-person game. One on the inside, one on the outside."

Kaiy nodded. His mind raced, piecing together the rules and the strategy, but something else had caught his eye. A figure at the edge of the crowd, a broad-shouldered man in a dark coat, his hat pulled low over his face. Even with the shadow cast by the brim, Kaiy recognized him instantly. Bigshot.

His pulse quickened, a dozen questions firing through his mind. What was Bigshot doing here? Did he know about this place? Of course, he did. Bigshot knew everything that happened in the underground. He was the kind of man whose influence slipped through the cracks of the city, finding its way into every dark corner.

The runner inside the box leaped over a moving platform, twisting mid-air to avoid a swinging arm. Their opponent wasn't far behind, closing the gap with every step. The walls shifted again, a new path opening, and the runner darted into it, the crowd exhaling collectively.

"Controllers make or break the match," the boy continued. "The best teams are the ones who move as one. The runner has to trust their controller completely. No hesitation."

"What happens if you get tagged?" Kaiy asked.

"The roles switch. And when the timer runs out, whoever is 'it' loses. Simple." The boy's expression sharpened. "But it's not just about the game. It's about putting on a show. These people," he said, nodding again toward the VIPs, "bet on everything: who wins, who gets hurt, even who might not make it out alive. The darker the game, the higher the stakes."

A chill ran through Kaiy, but it only sharpened his focus. "Can anyone play?"

"Not exactly." The boy's smirk returned. "You need to know someone who gets you in. A lot of the players started like you, someone noticed them, gave them a shot. But if you want in, you've got to prove you're worth the risk."

Kaiy's eyes were glued to the box. The runner had gained ground, his movements fluid and controlled. But the tagger was relentless, his controller forcing the box to close in around the runner, limiting his options. It was a dance. A brutal choreography of instinct and precision.

"What's your name?" the boy asked.

"Kaiy," he replied, his voice steady.

"Well, Kaiy, if you're serious, stick around. Watch. Learn. The right person might see you. And if they do?" He shrugged, a casual motion at odds with the intensity of his gaze. "You might find yourself on the inside of that box."

The timer flashed red; ten seconds remaining. One of the competitors, a tall boy, vaulted over a horizontal bar, his controller creating a narrow alley through the shifting walls. The other one lunged, his fingers outstretched, but a platform under his feet dropped, throwing his balance. He stumbled, and the other boy slipped past him, vanishing into the maze.

The buzzer rang. The walls of the box slid open, and the crowd exploded into noise. The tall boy had won.

Kaiy barely noticed the cheering. His attention remained on the box, the walls smooth and still now, but he could still see the game playing out in his mind. The moves, the missed chances, the split-second decisions. It was more than just a game. It was strategy, architecture in motion. And he knew, deep down, that he could play it better.