

"Gates of Horn and Ivory"

By Nicholas McClure ([Celestial Monkey](#))

SOUND: "CHURRO ZONE" INTRO FADES TO THE SOUND OF HOWLING WINTER WIND

NARRATOR: David stared out into the silent winter storm, a witness to the unceasing march of falling snow. He watched it collect on the scenery that summer helps us take for granted, the garden gnomes and backyard play-sets; the cold, lifeless branches of trees that showed little sign of their spring vibrancy. In these dark winter months, the conquering snow took everything by force and number. By themselves , each snowflake was insignificant, but with persistence they slowly overwhelmed the landscape, smothering the world in their frozen shroud.

ASHLEY: Remind you of anything?

NARRATOR: David jumped slightly, his head turning to find the source of the voice that interrupted his daydream. Ashley stood beside him, staring out at the winter scene, a grin dancing across her face. She had a knack for injecting playful optimism into any situation, even a darkened winter night. David knew that Ashley saw the same frozen landscape in a different light, and he hoped to capture some of her cheerfulness.

DAVID: What's that?

ASHLEY: This beautiful night. The falling snow. Does it remind you of anything?

NARRATOR: Ashley gestured over her shoulder with a nod, and David followed her eyes to the table behind her. There, stretching across table's surface, lay an immense game board, filled with cardboard tokens and playing cards that gave testament to the elaborate game that had engrossed their evening. Heavy cardboard cutouts depicted the various characters that the players controlled, surrounded by a substantial crowd of grotesque, snarling creatures that appeared to be walking human corpses in advance stages of decay. It was clear that the characters in the game were outnumbered three to one, and several more monsters lay off to the side, waiting their chance to join the swarm.

David gave Ashley a puzzled look, and Ashley's smile broadened

ASHLEY: The snow's kinda like the dead, you know? It just keeps coming. One zombie? No problem. A solid bat and a heavy swing and he's toast. Three might be trouble if you're alone, but it's really nothing on a global scale. But what if the stream is endless? If you're tough as nails and they're kind enough to come at you single file you could probably take 10 or 20. 50? Maybe. Eventually, you'll overextend, twist your ankle, pull a hammy. And then, WAM!

SOUND: FLAT PLAM SLAPPING THE TABLE

ASHLEY: You're buried!

NARRATOR: Ashley slammed her palm against the table. Characters and zombies teetered in their plastic stands as the table shook. David flinched at the sudden outburst.
It's only a game, David thought. Just a game.

ASHLEY: Is everything alright? You seem a little tense.

NARRATOR: David took a breath and nodded to his friend.

DAVID: I'm fine. Just daydreaming again.

NARRATOR: Ashley and David had been close for as long as he could remember. Their relationship had always been platonic, but David couldn't help but feel a slight jealousy when Ashley married James a few years back. Still, the group had forged a tight bond over the years, their mutual love of gaming helping to solidify their friendship.

JAMES: If you two are done fooling around, I wouldn't mind getting back to this.

NARRATOR: James gave Ashley a hard look as he fixed the game pieces she had disturbed. He was meticulous, each token and standee fitting perfectly into its designated spot. He was a brilliant player and strategist, but his compulsion forbade him from thinking clearly if the pieces were anything short of flawless in their arrangement. When the environment allowed him to focus, James was usually several moves ahead of his competitors. Fortunately for the rest of the table,

the game they shared this evening was cooperative. Unfortunately, they were cooperatively losing.

ASHLEY: Okay, okay. Back to the task at hand. How we lookin'?

JAMES: Not great. We need medicine for sure, and we're low on food.

NARRATOR: Ashley leaned in to get a better look. She pointed to the line of tokens on the side of the board. Each one depicted the silhouette of a nameless survivor, a hopeless soul that became the players' responsibility simply because they could not fend for themselves.

ASHLEY: That's a lot of mouths to feed.

JAMES: Seven, to be exact. Not to mention you, David and me. We'll need to find enough food to cover everyone, and we don't have much reserves.

ASHLEY: Well, we've barely searched the grocery store. It should have what we need. I say David and I make our way over there.

NARRATOR: James shook his head. He had a habit for rejected ideas that weren't his own.

JAMES: That doesn't help our medicine problem. We've been neglecting it for too long, and we can't let it go forever. If I send you and David there we might get the food we need, but then we come up short on the meds. You've got to split up.

ASHLEY: Why don't you go, James?

NARRATOR: James's lips curled in annoyance.

JAMES: Bad idea, Ashley. Have you seen what I'm dealing with?

NARRATOR: James pointed at the pair of wound tokens on his character card.

JAMES: If I leave now there's a good chance I won't even make it to where I'm going. No, I'll stay put. If we get enough medicine I might be able to heal up and head out later, but I can't risk it unless there are no alternatives.

NARRATOR: Ashley leaned back and shook her head. David could read the frustration on her face. James was the smartest guy they knew, but he's also the worst alpha gamer in history, and Ashley had no patience for it.

ASHLEY: Jesus, James, you're such an ass sometimes. Why do you have to be in control of everything? You know, it seems a little fishy that you have this master plan all laid out for us and(**ASHLEY'S VOICE FADES DOWN AS THE NARRATOR TALKS OVER HER**) *we're suppose to just take your orders. I'm sick of you rejecting everyone else's ideas just because you didn't think of them first. We're all in this together, aren't we? We need to start cooperating if we're gonna have any chance of surviving this thing. Why don't you at least ask us what we think before you start giving commands*

NARRATOR: As Ashley's voice began its slow crescendo, David put his head in his hands. Even though he agreed with her, he hated confrontations like this. It reminded him of his parents and how they used to bicker for hours and hours on end. Board games offered David an escape from the world, and he'd often use them as a distraction when things became too much for him.

DAVID: (INTERRUPING ASHLEY) It's fine. We probably should split up. I'll go to the gas station. We haven't searched there yet. You go ahead, Ash.

NARRATOR: Ashley shrugged, conceding the point as she picked up the twelve sided exposure die. She'd have to roll it before she moved, and pray that she didn't roll the tooth symbol, which meant instant death in this game. The odds were in her favor, but it made for a tense moment.

ASHLEY: Wish me luck.

NARRATOR: Ashley cast the dice across the table, putting enough force to clear the edge and send it tumbling over the side.

SOUND: **DIE ROLLING ON A TABLE/FLOOR**

NARRATOR: The die skittered across the room, finding a hidden resting place on the other side of the kitchen. David scrambled to see where it went, but before he could

find it, a crack of thunder roared across the sky, and with a flash the lights in the tiny apartment sparked and died, swallowing the players in heavy darkness.

SOUND: THUNDER

JAMES: Whoa. Okay, hang on. Let me get the flashlight.

NARRATOR: As James fumbled in the dark, David stared into the blackness that surrounded him. Like a child who is kept awake with the thought of monsters lurking behind the closet door, he couldn't help but visualize the unseen threats that only the night can conjure. He could picture the pieces of the game board coming to life, the zombies moaning as they shuffled their way toward the unsuspecting players.

SOUND: ZOMBIES MOANING, RISING SLOWLY TO A CRESCENDO

It's only a game, he reasoned as he tried to shake the image from his mind. *Just a game*. Although David could sometimes use his imagination to escape the world around him, the door swung both ways, and now it was his imagination using him to escape into the world. Through his mind's eye he could still see the dead crawling towards him, their rotten jaws snapping as they reach out to pull him in . . .

JAMES: David!

SOUND: ZOMBIE SOUND STOPPING ABRUPTLY

NARRATOR: David gave a startled shout as his hallucination dissolved. As the flashlight blinked to life, the board remained as he remembered it, the pieces undisturbed.

JAMES: Jesus, man, where did you go? It's like you were lost in your head or something.

NARRATOR: David released a heavy sigh, and then remembered the exposure die that he was about to collect. He now spotted it across the room, and could clearly see its face. A tooth shaped symbol stared back at him.

DAVID: Damn. Bad news, Ashley. Looks like you're . . .

NARRATOR: David looked up and found that Ashley was gone.

DAVID: Where is she?

NARRATOR: James gave David a puzzled look.

JAMES: Ashley left, David. You seriously didn't notice? She walked out right before the power went out.

NARRATOR: David put a hand to his forehead. Could he have been so wrapped up in his dream that he didn't notice? He remembered it now. She had asked him to wish her luck as she left, but it was almost impossible to separate the reality from the illusion the darkness had drawn in his mind.

DAVID: Yeah, I mean. . . I guess I was just in a daze

NARRATOR: David rubbed at his temple as he tried to force himself back into his reality. James shook his head in frustration.

JAMES: You're getting too wrapped up in this again. We should take a break.

NARRATOR: James laid his cards on the table and rubbed his eyes. He looked like David felt, frazzled and exhausted, as if this night had been going for months instead of hours.

DAVID: Yeah, maybe I need a break. Some fresh air or something. Get my head clear.

NARRATOR: David stood up, staring at the table as if he was still trying to piece it all together.

JAMES: If you're going out, can you run to Hector's? It's right across the street. The medicine cabinet is empty and my head is killing me.

NARRATOR: David's was still in a fog as he put on his coat. He knew he had to keep his mantra strong: *It's just a game*, he said to himself as he opened his apartment door and stepped out into the winter night.

SOUND: WINTER WIND. FOOTSTEPS IN THE SNOW

NARRATOR: The snow had abated somewhat, but gales continued to spin the blistering flakes around him, snapping at his face like a whip. When he made it to the street, he looked up and noticed the lights at Hector's Gas Station were out, but

NARRATOR: he could see movement in the window. Someone was still there, and though the power was out, they'd probably accept cash.

David approached the front door of the station and saw that it was shattered. Several shards remained in the frame, but he could still navigate through the hole where the glass pane once stood.

SOUND: **BOOTS STEPPING ON BROKEN GLASS**

NARRATOR: As his feet crunched against the broken glass that lay about him, David looked at the front counter to find the cashier. No one was there. He listened for a moment and heard the sound of someone rummaging through the aisles.

SOUND: **RUMMAGING/BOXES SHIFTING**

DAVID: Hello?

NARRATOR: David noticed the rack at the end of the first aisle had been turned over, and several bottles of aspirin lay strewn about the room. He reached down to grab one, but when he stood he was startled by a man standing before him.

SOUND: **RATTLE OF PILLS IN A BOTTLE AS DAVID PICKS UP THE ASPIRIN**

NARRATOR: The man wore a ragged winter coat, and his right ear looked black with frost bite. He gave David a grin under his grey beard, exposing an incomplete set of yellowing teeth. David took a step back, his arms rising in the air.

DAVID: I just came for some aspirin. I was going to pay for it, I swear.

NARRATOR: The man took a menacing step towards him, raising a pistol in his right hand.

SOUND: **COCKING PISTOL**

DAVID: Okay, okay. You want my wallet. No problem. It's yours.

NARRATOR: David's wallet was already in his hand, and he held it out to the bearded man. The man gave a puzzled look, then swatted the wallet away.

GRAY BEARD: I don't need your wallet, dummy! I want food!

NARRATOR: David took another step back as the adrenaline began pumping through his system. He looked to the man's left and noticed another figure lumbering down the aisle, but the man seemed oblivious.

SOUND: QUIET SHUFFLING FROM LUMBERING FIGURE

GRAY BEARD: Whatever you got, I want it. Now.

NARRATOR: David kept his hands raised, but he lowered a finger slightly to indicate the figure rapidly approaching from behind the man.

DAVID: Uh . . . is he with you?

NARRATOR: The man's eyes shifted slightly to register David's warning, but it was too late. With a moan, the lumbering figure made two quick, jerking steps towards the bearded man.

SOUND: QUICK SHUFFLING/LOW ZOMBIE MOAN; DARK MUSIC BEGINS TO FADE IN.

NARRATOR: At first, David was grateful for the distraction, but his face became flush with horror as the lumbering figure grabbed the man and sunk teeth deep into his throat.

SOUND: OLD MAN YELLS; SINGLE PISTOL SHOT

NARRATOR: The man screamed, firing a random shot from his pistol. David scrambled backwards, nearly falling on the shattered glass as he burst from the broken door.

SOUND: STEPPING ON BROKEN GLASS; DAVID PANTING AS HE RUNS

NARRATOR: As David ran, he looked over his shoulder and saw the bearded man fall under the weight of the creature. David turned back; he could not bear to watch as the monster continued to feast.

SOUND: **SOUND OF ZOMBIE FEASTING. OLD MAN GRUNTING. DARK MUSIC SWELLS**
FOR SEVERAL SECONDS IN DRAMATIC PAUSE

NARRATOR: David ran all the way back to the apartment before stopping to catch his breath.

DAVID: (OUT OF BREATH) It's just a game.

NARRATOR: He repeated to himself as he slammed the door behind him.

DAVID: (FRANTIC) It's only a game. . . . it's only a game.

NARRATOR: James' head turned as David entered the room.

JAMES: What's going on?

NARRATOR: David's heart raced as he tried to calm himself.

DAVID: Nothing. It's nothing. It's just a game, James. It's all a game.

NARRATOR: An unbridled anger contorted James's face as he looked at David. A small pool of sweat was forming under his adam's apple, soaking the thread bare neck line of his shirt.

JAMES: (ANGRY) You keep trying to console yourself, like none of this matters. Does this still seem like a game to you?!

NARRATOR: David stepped forward to survey the board again, trying not to look. There was something different about it this time, something familiar. He fought the reality of it with all his will, but he couldn't hide it any longer. The illusion he had drawn around himself faded, and the board became nothing more than what it really was: a map of his home town. In place of the tokens he once imagined lay a ledger denoting their dwindling food supply. The names of their survivors replaced the silhouetted icons, many of them scored with a single line through the middle.

JAMES: Open your eyes, David. You have to stop pretending this is some stupid game of yours. This is our reality, and we have to live in it.

NARRATOR: James fell back into his chair as a new wave of exhaustion overtook him.

JAMES: Ashley's still isn't back from Blazer's Grocery. I know you're just trying to cope with all this, but I need you to focus on what's real.

NARRATOR: David's hand reached up instinctively to support his forehead, to bear the weight of the reality he had been avoiding.

JAMES: Please tell me you found some medicine . . .

NARRATOR: David sighed, leaving the comfortable illusion behind him.

DAVID: Yeah. I got it.

NARRATOR: David reached into his coat pocket to produce the small bottle of aspirin he had acquired.

DAVID: Here.

SOUND: RATTLE OF PILLS IN A BOTTLE

NARRATOR: James snatched the bottle from David's offering hand, working frantically at the lid for a second before taking a closer look at the label.

JAMES: (EXTREME ANGER) Aspirin? You got me ASPIRIN?

DAVID: That's what you wanted, right? For your headache?

NARRATOR: James's temper overtook him as he rose from his chair again.

JAMES: Do you really think ASPIRIN is gonna take care of THIS?!

NARRATOR: James reached down pulled the bottom of his right pant leg up to his calf, exposing a blistery crimson wound. Thin red lines snaked up his shin and round his foot.

JAMES: Yeah, I got a headache. And a 103 fever. Jesus, David, I need amoxicillin, not aspirin! This is absolute JUNK!

SOUND: PILLS SPILLING ON THE FLOOR AS THE PLASTIC BOTTLE BREAKS

NARRATOR: He threw the bottle to the floor, its contents erupting into a small shower of powdery white pills. His voice cracked as his temperament slid from anger to panic.

JAMES: (PANICKED) What's a matter with you? I can barely walk, and the others are too old or too weak to do anything. I needed those pills! We won't survive without you!

SOUND: PILLS SPILLING ON THE FLOOR AS THE PLASTIC BOTTLE BREAKS. DOOR OPENING

NARRATOR: A breeze cut through the room. James and David looked to see Ashley in the doorway, her hand clutching her side as she leaned on the door for support. David rushed to her, barely catching her before she collapsed.

DAVID: Ashley! Jesus, what happened?

ASHLEY: Sorry, guys.

NARRATOR: Ashley replied weakly as David helped her to an open chair at the table.

ASHLEY: I made it to the store, but it was overrun with biters. I knew we needed food, so I tried to risk it.

NARRATOR: Ashley grimaced as she lifted her hand from her gut, exposing a oval shaped tear in her abdomen.

James cringed.

JAMES: A bite?

NARRATOR: Ashley didn't answer the question. She didn't need to. Her look gave no doubt.

ASHLEY: Good news is, I was able to hit the pharmacy on my way out.

NARRATOR: Ashley looked at James, smiling despite her condition.

ASHLEY: I brought you something.

SOUND: PILLS IN THE BOTTLE

NARRATOR: Ashley winced as she reached around the side of her pack, pulling a small pill bottle from the pouch. She looked at it a moment to ensure the cap was tight, and then tossed it into James' lap.

James grabbed it and read the label.

JAMES: Cephalexin?

ASHLEY: Remember our old golden retriever, Sparky? Never should have let the kids name him. Anyway, remember when he got that weird skin infection? The vet gave him that. I know you told me to get amoxi-somethin'-or-other, but I recognized the name of this one. Should clear you up, you old dog.

NARRATOR: Ashley gave a little chuckle at her joke, but an ugly coughing fit cut it short. She slumped back in her chair, her eyes red with exhaustion and fever. James looked at her with admiration.

JAMES: Thank you, Ashley. I just . . . thank you.

SOUND: PILL BOTTLE OPENING

NARRATOR: James cracked the pill bottle open and poured a couple in his open palm. He popped them into his mouth and swallowed them dry before carefully laying the bottle back on the table.

JAMES: I need rest. Just for a few minutes. We'll figure something out, Ash. I'm sure of it.

NARRATOR: Ashley nodded, closing her eyes as James limped out of the room. David was left alone, his head swiveling back and forth, trying to fight reality as it came bleeding back in.

ASHLEY: (WEAKLY) I heard James giving you a hard time as I was coming up the stairs.

NARRATOR: Ashley's eyes were still closed as she spoke, as if she were barely able to stay awake.

ASHLEY: Don't let him get to you. Everyone's gotta find a way to cope with this world we're living in, David. James is a control freak. I have my humor to hide behind. You have your daydreams. It's all the same. Just do whatever it takes to keep your sanity so that you can survive this world.

NARRATOR: David nodded slowly, knowing she was right. He walked back to his chair and rested his head in his hands. He looked down at the map as he thought about their dire situation. He heard James' words echoing in his ear:

SOUND: **ECHOING JAMES' EARLY RANT: "ASHLEY STILL ISN'T BACK" . . . "I CAN BARELY WALK" . . . "THE OTHER SURVIVORS ARE TOO OLD OR TOO WEAK TO DO ANYTHING" . . . "WE WON'T SURVIVE WITHOUT YOU!"**

NARRATOR: David looked at the list of survivors that were now his responsibility. He saw the itemized inventory that James had drafted of their food supply. It was barely enough to feed everyone for the week, let alone the winter. The map was flooded with marks, one for every place that was now either barren or overrun. He stared at the survivor list, desperate for any solution, until he noticed the corner of a playing card that peeked from under the map.

SOUND: **PAPER CARD SLIDING FROM UNDER THE MAP**

David slipped the card from its hiding place, praying it was the miracle he was after, but as he held the card before his eyes, he barely had the chance to read it before it fell from his shaking hands.

Emblazoned across the bottom, in letters traced in dark blood, was a single word.

Betrayal.

SOUND: **DARK MUSIC SLOWLY SWELLS**

DAVID: (HORRIFIED WHISPER) No . . .

NARRATOR: David whispered to himself, his voice shaking.

DAVID: I can't leave them. I can't!

NARRATOR: David practically shouted to himself, but Ashley was fast asleep and didn't wake to his outburst. He sprung from his seat, disparate to push his thoughts aside, but it was no use. This was why his daydreams had been so strong lately. This realization had been creeping up on him for days. It was why he brought aspirin when they needed antibiotics - he almost wanted them to fail. The group was done for, and David had known it all along. Now he had to make a move if he had any chance for his own survival.

This isn't me, He reasoned. I can't do this to them! How could I live with myself? There has to be another way! This can't be real.

DAVID: Then again . . . maybe it isn't.

NARRATOR: David opened the pantry door beside him. *It's only a game*, he thought as he stuffed a pack with as much canned food as he could carry.

DAVID: Just a game.

NARRATOR: He muttered as he poked his head into the next room to be sure that James was asleep on the sofa.

He swung the apartment door open and surveyed the room one final time. It was still several hours before dawn, and through the kitchen window David saw the snow had continued its patient invasion of the landscape. As he turned to leave, he remembered the bottle of antibiotics that Ashley had brought back from the pharmacy.

In a world where the dead outnumber the living like snowflakes, infection can creep up on anyone. David figured it was best not to take any chances, but he tried not to think about it as he stuffed the pill bottle into his pack and walked out the door. He forced himself not to look back.

Besides, it's not like any of this is real, anyway. It's only a game, he thought. It's just a game.

SOUND: **DARK MUSIC CONTINUES TO SWELL. ZOMBIES MOANING AND FEASTING.**
SLOW FADE OUT.