

## CTF

My worst fears were confirmed today. We were on the roster for CTF.

Don't get me wrong, I appreciate how Capture the Flag is one of the cornerstones of team combat, but whenever Blue Team plays it, it always ends up the same: I get to be the flag bearer. Which means every single person on the opposing team is constantly shooting at me.

Now, the Game has pretty amazing flexibility as far as character models go; little girls can hook up and play hulking masses of male muscle and vice-versa. Me, I've gotten used to being me, so when I first tried it out I went with a model that's basically myself with fewer blemishes because of resolution issues. This means I didn't have to readjust to a new body and learn how my in-game character body worked as opposed to my real-world meat and bones body, but it also means that in game terms, I'm pretty scrawny. Hertz says that's why I'm always picked to be the flag bearer; apparently I'm a smaller target. Anyway. Back to CTF.

We were playing against the Ginsburg Green again since this is exhibitions season. I've never really liked Green Team, but then I guess I can't really like any other team except my own since the Booleantown Blue are the only people who aren't constantly trying to shoot me. There's also the fact that Shrug is on the Green Team. She's a little thing like me, except she went with a leaner model and apparently she has much fewer qualms about getting in the thick of things than I do. I'd like to think we get along great, but the fact of the matter is, she only comes to mind because she's the only person who messages me after every frag to tell me what I did wrong. Whether she's gloating or helping, I haven't really been able to tell yet. What mattered was that today I was going to face her and her team again and that was unnerving enough to give me the pre-game jitters.

I ended up as a Scout here too, which means I had the full power of the Game's least noisy pistol and a couple smoke grenades at my beck and call. I had the Scout HUD too, which means free zooms and level 3 target analysis, but I'm not a fan of knowing the velocity parameters of a rocket just before it blows me into my component pixels.

Today's arena was Stadium V, a big huge valley-shaped neon nightmare. It's one of the classical CTF stages, made up of what look like plastic floors decorated with primary colors in lines and curves. It's all very high-tech, but it gives me just about no cover and it means everybody's pretty visible. The crowd really likes it though, so I suppose we have to do what we have to do. This was a five on five match with reserves, but I was on the starting team. The announcer did his thing (did you know that's not his real hair?) and started off the match, leaving everyone to "scramble to their positions", like Jagged always says. Speaking of Jagged, just like always he was playing Artillery this game. He gets a real kick out of protecting the base with enormous guns, but I'm really in no position to point that out to him.

Jagged's plan was simple this time: Hertz (playing Knight), Karat (Assault) and Low (Assault too) were going to charge and do the cover to cover thing to take care of the big boys. While they'd be doing this, my job would be to just run as fast as I could down our slope and up their side, grab the flag, then run just as fast back to capture it. I never liked Jagged's plans when they included me in this way, but I had no choice and he is the team leader, so I had to give him due respect.

The first part of the plan went right. Karat and Low are pretty much crack shots with the integrated rifle, so they were able to frag Green Team's first wave without getting beat up that badly. Hertz was off on the side, doing the melee combat thing with the Green who'd decided to go Knight too. I know I'd never have the courage to try the Knight; that class has a pretty powerful laser-edge sword and the only shield in the Game (and what a shield it is... anything just bounces off), but it's based entirely around the concept of walking up to people and trying to frag them in person. That takes guts and I try to keep mine from spilling out.

The problem came when it was my turn. I was taking a breather in the bunker right at the bottom of the arena's big V and I saw my buddies pushing through the last bunch that had come down, so I took my chance and leaped out, running as fast as I could up the side of the arena to get to that flag while the Greens still hadn't respawned. Then all of a sudden I saw my body vaulting back down. When the ground rushed up and smacked me in the face a few times, I had just enough time to hear the announcer shout "Headshot!" before I came back in the reserve pool. That was fine by me – I tried my best and got fragged for it, and now a few more Blues would get their chance before it was my turn to go back in there. I took the time to rest up, look at how my friends were doing and read the latest message I'd gotten before my head hit the ground.

*Strafe when you run, little girl. –Shrug*

For a strange reason, I smiled. I can't really explain why, but right as I was reading that little line a part of me was glad I'd gotten so soundly fragged by her of all people. I don't know if she's keeping count, but I'm betting she's gotten me more than anybody else so far, not even Temper from the Richardson Red. I guess I was flattered she thought of me as worthy of post-kill advice. Or, maybe I was just happy to get messages that don't consist of Jagged telling me where to go and what to do. I can't tell if that was her intention, but Shrug's little combat taunt really put me in a good mood, good enough to start pining to get back in there. My turn came around and I got back into the thick of things.

I made it to the top of Green Team's side. Running uphill and ducking behind everything that could possibly stop a sniper shell, I went a little nuts and tosses both smoke grenades up on the top plateau. To my surprise, it worked: I didn't get my head shot off when I looked around and I had a clear run at the flag. So, well, I ran at the flag. I spun around it and snapped it off the base, not even bothering to sling it back before running all-out towards the end of the plateau, where I could just run run run down the hill as fast as I could. Then I heard a loud **BKAM**. Hertz stumbled back into me and I realized he'd taken a shot for me. I backed away when I heard another **BKAM**, that time even louder. The smoke was clearing and I could see Shrug up on one knee, taking snap shots and trying to tag me. I tripped up on my feet and it was all I could do to duck behind the first low wall a few meters down the slope, curling up with the flag and wondering what the hell I was going to do now. I heard a **KLANG**.

I looked back up; it was Hertz's shield, having slid down just past me, stopping on a speed bump. I guess he'd let go of it, probably after being finished off up on the plateau. Then I heard a sound I knew really well – clips being swapped in a sniper rifle. And it was just behind my head. I leaped for the shield without looking back. I had, of course, forgotten about the flag and I tripped on it while diving down, my arm catching on the strap of the shield. I did a quick over-the-shoulder tumble and slipped the shield under me, hoping its teflon-esque properties would work on the plastic landscape. It did. I slid down the slope in less time than it takes a marksman to reload a sniper rifle. I ran back up the hill, darting, strafing and tumbling from side to side, trying to get the flag up there. I was just seeing Jagged's gun poking out from the plateau's edge when I heard another **BKAM**, though now they all sounded very distant. I knew the next one would hit me, so I threw the flag up towards the plateau as hard as I could before I realized that there was red all over the ground in front of me, along with a nice large hole. I went numb and slumped forward, slowly sliding back down the hill as I looked up listlessly, waiting for the light to come, waiting for sleep but expecting a rude awakening as always. The announcer going "Blue Team captures!" was the last thing I heard before respawning in the reserve pool.

—Valerie "Volley" LaGrande

P.S.: I got this little message when I was waiting for my turn to come again. I'd forgotten to ask Hertz why he'd taken so many sniper shells for me, but after reading this it made enough sense for me to let it rest.

*To play, take the flag. To win, take the shot for the flag. –Hertz*