

CHARACTER CREATION BOOK I

THE **GAMEMASTER'S**
SCREEN



J P S C H R O E D E R

The Gamemaster's Screen

By JP Schroeder

Character Creation Book 1

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This book contains explicit depictions of sexual behavior and should not be read or purchased by persons under the age of 18.

Prologue

The Contents of the Egg Salad Sandwich

At long last, the undaunted team of heroes passed through the massive gates leading into the fabled Temple of Xanathoth, their trail of blood, sweat and tears stretching out behind them. Here, they would at last confront the source of the Nightmare Plague devastating the lands of Colmeran and, gods willing, restore peace and sanity to their subjects.

Perhaps, mused Gitgüd, they would even find themselves the richer for their troubles.

Each strode into the temple's torch-lit interior for their own motives. For Gitgüd, the promise of a dragon's hoard was more than adequate. The elf maiden Shal'valek wanted only to achieve what her sorcerous magic had been unable to grant her, the return of the true tranquility of a night's rest uninterrupted by the fiendish visions inflicted by the Paramaculum. Though he had never put it in words, Gentry Gallows stoked the fires of vengeance that smoldered in his heart, where soon, he dared to hope that last agonizing memory of his lost Haelene would soon fade. Deep Lord Korrigal of the Twelve Thunders no doubt had his reasons, but was stoically tight-lipped as to what they may be. And for the hulking half-orc Grim-Mace, the promise of an epic battle had been all he needed, though he seldom objected to the fortune and glory that often followed such.

The temple appeared to feature but the single chamber, the length of which was nearly lost in the distance. Nonetheless, it was impossible to miss the sight of the purple-black crystal that could only be the Paramaculum hovering in the distance over a stone slab crusted in the blood of countless sacrifices. The ceiling stretched higher than even Deep Lord Korrigal or Grim-Mace's darkness-attuned eyes could pierce, though every nostril was all too keenly aware of the foul, brackish water filling the numerous pools that stretched along its length.

"Don't get too close to that water," cautioned the gnome Gentry. "Remember, we saw those black scales littering the caverns above. If those were what we think they were, you know what could be lurking in there."

Gitgüd withdrew the magical torch from her pack, its heatless light dimmed in this unholy place. She tossed it into one such pool, where it sank quite a little ways into the water before being obscured from sight by the muck. "Plenty of room down there to hide. Not that you can hide from a boss like this."

"It still has a back for stabbing," assured Grim-Mace with his usual arrogant sneer. "So make sure you don't puss out on us again and make me do everything."

Shal'Valek's spritely laughter was enough to wash away the bleak mood. "Maybe if you started doing a worse job, we wouldn't keep over-relying on you," she said, squeezing the brute's shoulder. Against his best intentions, he flashed a smile, or at least what passed for a smile amongst his savage kind. The crooked and broken teeth combined with breath so foul it rivaled his legendary mace Brainy in driving enemies to flee from him.

"Are you guys going to keep flirting all night, or can we start exploring the creepy temple?" Deep Lord Korrigal was abrupt as always.

Grim-Mace's response was simply to lift his loincloth and shake his manhood at the dwarven cleric. "Explore this, half-size."

"Focus, you guys. There's no way the Paramaculum is unguarded," cautioned Gentry. Like that, the group remembered the gravity of the moment, and returned their attention to their surroundings, scouring every dark corner for signs of their quarry.

Deep Lord Korrigal reflected. "I'm pretty sure it's the Parmarambulus, not... whatever you said."

No one else present had any doubt that Gentry had said it aright, but still, the gnome was as ever quick to seek the favor of the head of Clan Two Thunders. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

"Who cares how you pronounce it? When we win, we can call the broken chunks of it whatever the hell we want," said Gitgüd with a grin.

"*WHEN YOU WIN?*" came a sudden voice, reverberating around the stone walls like thunder, accompanied by peals of derisive laughter. "*YOUR ARROGANCE TRULY KNOWS NO BOUNDS.*"

All present recognized without a doubt the identity of the speaker, though none had heard their voice before. None save for Gentry, whose fists clenched in hatred. "You call us arrogant, but it's hard not to feel bold in the face of so cowardly a creature. After all, what kind of being murders innocent women and children in their sleep? Waiting until their protector is away assisting a comrade to burn down homes in the night?"

"Wait, is this the same...?!" Shal'valek gasped. "That was you? You murdered Gentry's family! Why? Why would you even do such a thing?!"

"*THERE IS NO WHY. REASONS ARE FOR LESSER BEINGS SUCH AS YOURSELVES, BESET WITH THE NEED TO JUSTIFY THEIR THE MEANINGLESS TRAVAILS OF THEIR BRIEF EXISTENCES. SOON, THE PARAMACULUM WILL SHOW YOU THE TRUTH, AS IT HAS REVEALED IT TO ME.*"

"Oh yeah? And what truth is that?"

"*THAT ALL EXISTENCE IS CHAOS AND MADNESS. I FEEL THE DESPAIR THAT DRIVES YOU. IT WILL SOON UNRAVEL YOUR FLESH AS IT IS ALREADY UNRAVELING YOUR MINDS.*"

“Doesn’t seem like your stupid trinket’s can even unravel my twelve-inch dick once Brainy and I shatter it into a million pieces, asswipe.” The half-orc’s crudeness was often a setback in social situations. It hadn’t been that long since their panicked flight from the court of King Maldouen, when, as the group beseeched him to send armsmen to aid them, Grim-Mace had dangled a piece of meat in the corpulent sovereign’s face and asked if he might be persuaded by a pork chop.

Moments like this, though, more than made up for it.

“YOU SEEK TO GOAD ME, MORTALS–”

“Anyone else ever noticed how they always call us ‘mortals’ right before we prove their mortality?” mumbled Gitgüd.

“–BUT YOU CANNOT DRIVE TO IMPULSE WHAT IS ALREADY CONSUMED BY INSANITY. I WILL DESTROY YOU WHEN THE WHIM STRIKES ME, AND NOT A MOMENT BEFORE.”

“Yeah, well, in the meantime, we’ll be over here, smashing your precious Prambulada, or whatever we’re calling it now.” said Gentry. “Let’s get to work, gang!”

In an instant, all of them laid hands on the crimson cloak of Shal’valek as she chanted the magic words. In a flash of light, the group disappeared and was suddenly standing only a few dozen paces from the altar. “Sorry, this was as close as I could get us!”

This close, the Paramaculum’s psychic resonance was piercing their brains, incomprehensible whispers tormenting them, images of carnage and chaos echoing in their minds’ eyes. Deep Lord Korrigal, bolstered by his faith in the gods of his ancestors, dismissed it quickly, “Good enough, Shal. All right, let’s...”

Behind them, not far from where they had stood a moment ago, a great gout of water burst from the pool. An enraged roar echoed through the temple as their enemy took to his feet, wasting no time in shaking the water off its black-scaled body. Even as the PCs stared in a mix of horror and determination, he leapt into the air, gliding at them with murderous intent.

“Dragon! I told you it was a dragon!” cried Grim-Mace, giggling in anticipation of the coming battle.

Gentry scowled as he loaded a bullet into his sling staff. “We all said it was going to be a dragon! Now come on – stick to the plan, and we got this thing!”

Yet if they heard his orders, there was no sign of it apparent to their nemesis. Deep Lord Korrigal of the Twelve Thunders barely managed to get off a single spell – a personal ward that he hoped would spare him the worst of its primary weapon – before they fled, wailing in terror. Even Grim-Mace, who they had seen stand his ground before an on-rushing stampede of minotaurs, was immediately dashing for the corner with the others, heedless of the tactical blunder. In a moment, they would be trapped behind the far end of a pool, with no exit but to recross the footbridge they were presently fleeing

across, or else to go swimming. Gentry had no choice but to dash after them, only a short ways in front of the dwarf.

“Where are you—” That was all he got out before the dragon made its first pass. Sure enough, as it drew close, it belched forth from its gullet an incredible mass of thin green bile, spraying forth in a geyser of acidic death. Deep Lord Korrigal took the brunt of the assault, but his ward left most of the nauseating spillage draining harmlessly off his coat and sizzling on the ground at his retreating boots. Grim-Mace grunted as a small splash smoked at where his brawny arms emerged from his breastplate, and to the group’s dismay, Shal’valek howled as the acid ate through much of her outer clothing, melting the flesh beneath.

Grim-Mace turned, raising Brainy in a meaty fist, but the dragon turned mid-air and darted back into the temple. “What, you don’t have the scaly balls to land and fight me, you draconic douchebag?!”

“This is the boss of the entire campaign – he’s not going to pull punches and use stupid tactics,” declared Gitgüd emphatically. “If we win, we’re going to have to earn it. Now who brought a ranged weapon?”

The dragon took its time circling back, its sleek reptilian shape appearing and disappearing in the shadows of the temple. All of them knew it was building up its acidic reserves, ready to make use of them again. For all his talk of madness and chaos, it would strike at the optimal time and not before.

“Could really use another one of those acid protection spells, casty folk!” pleaded Gitgüd, eyeing their nemesis warily, her dread of him not yet subsided.

Shal’valek dropped a spell of haste on the clustered group while they waited, answering, “It’s on my spells known list, but I never took it since you always said you had it covered.”

Grim-Mace looked to the dwarf in his gilded mail. “Well, Derp Lord? Tell me you didn’t only memorize the one!”

“Not if you’re going to call me Derp Lord,” he said, folding his arms petulantly.

Gentry gaped. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Come on, man, it’s going to be back any second! Every one of you has been mispronouncing my name since the beginning of the campaign and you don’t hear me throwing a fit about it!”

“Don’t we?” asked Gitgüd. “Come on. It’s *jentry*, not hard-g *gentry*. Not our fault you didn’t know how to say it when you made your character.”

“We don’t have time to rehash this – cast the damn protection spell, Mr. Gibbel!”

“You’re breaking character,” Deep Lord Korrigal muttered peevishly at the use of his other name, “and I’ve told you a hundred times when we’re out of the office, call me Brendan.”

As if in response to their bickering, suddenly the Paramaculum glowed a malevolent purple, flecks of black dancing on its surface. The group wailed in mental

anguish as their minds were assaulted by the most intense sensations yet. Blood gushed from mouths, noses and ears before it subsided. By then, the dragon was heading back in their direction, flying like an arrow launched from a titan's bowstring. Its jaws dripped with vitriolic menace. Gentry launched a bullet from his sling, then another, then a third, but if the dragon minded the pain, it certainly didn't show it. Its mouth opened, this time intent in laying one of its enemy's low.

"All right, NOW!" cried Gentry as it neared.

The instant before it could unleash its venom, Shal'valek spoke the word that triggered the scroll in her hands. The dragon realized its futility, but it was already too late, the acid had been summoned and was now expelled. It washed against the group almost harmlessly, dissolving the stone around them but doing almost nothing against the heroes.

It turned immediately, no doubt to further enhance itself with its retinue of spells before attacking them with fang and claw. Yet before it could so much as tilt its wings, Deep Lord Korrigal called upon the gods of his dwarven ancestors to summon a wall of solid stone. With his magical Rod of the Builder clenched in a gauntleted fist, the wall grew and grew to legendary proportions, stretching from floor to ceiling in this, the shortest section of the temple. It was still easily fifty feet high, but here, his spell was enough to seal the beast in with them. There was nowhere to fly to, and he even managed to angle the wall so that not enough of the pool was exposed to allow the dragon to dive and swim away.

"Good thinking!" cried Shal'valek. Grim-Mace roared his incomprehensible battle cry as at last, the dragon had nowhere left to go but the ground. Brainy would have his day. He lunged in, the cold iron mace smashing into the beast's foreleg with a force that would have felled a mere human. Nevertheless, even the dragon's magically reinforced shin bones bent under the impact.

Gentry's plan was working flawlessly. It was simplicity itself: lure the dragon out with a bold maneuver; feign panic and vulnerability in the best approximation of a choke point they could find; let the dwarf raise the walls, and now there was nowhere for it to go but into the thick of the melee, no buffs active. His encyclopedic knowledge of monsters, along with Gitgüd's tactical acumen, had let them analyze its probable attack patterns, all but the dragon's most useless capabilities, and they had prepared for every contingency.

Every contingency, that is, but one.

Later, when the session was over and it was time to pack up dice and books and character sheets, Hannah would acknowledge that the dragon's strategy was valid, that everything had worked out according to a reasonable interpretation of the rules. For all the work she'd put into fine-tuning Gitgüd into the ultimate sneak attacking machine, there wasn't much she or anyone could do when the dragon activated one of those "most

useless capabilities” and cast *elevate water*. As the murky water from the pool surged upwards and flooded the enclosed area, the party was suddenly in the dragon’s element. Brainy was useless underwater, and neither caster had trained their Swim skill, leaving them submerged and unable to speak the words that activated their spells and items. Needless to say, Gentry’s sling staff went from middling to worthless in mere seconds. Six rounds later, the sludge was red with the blood of the heroes.

And that was that for their Week o’ Gaming, 2031.

“I can’t believe we lost,” grumbled Remy, taking his second shot at throwing his wadded up Grim-Mace character sheet in the trash. He missed again. “Worst Week ever. Shit.”

“Not much of a ranged attacker, are you,” said Hannah, chugging the last of her Mountain Dew. Her diabetes certainly suggested she not, but Week o’ Gaming was a no holds barred affair when it came to food and drink. If someone wanted to stick to their diet, fine; if someone wanted to eat snack cakes and peanut butter cups three meals a day, nobody said boo. Which was good, because in their regular sessions, Hannah merited a fair amount of boo for such behavior.

Toni wheeled over and picked up the sheet, unwadding it and smoothing it out on her lap. “I still thought it was fun, at least aside from the end. I mean, I wish we would’ve beaten it, but there’s something to be said for knowing the stakes were real and the fights we did win, we won fair and square.” She looked to Remy. “I can’t believe you don’t keep your old character sheets.”

“Only the winners. Fuck Grim-Mace. If he was worth hanging onto, he would’ve confirmed that critical before the flood. Could have broken the fucker’s jaw – good luck casting your pansy-ass water magic then.”

Keon had already tucked Gentry away in his folder, where he collected and organized the party’s paperwork. Years upon years of sheets detailing loot, experience points, names of NPCs, maps of dungeons, and all sorts of miscellany filled the space between the sides of the folder. “Keep your voice down, guys,” the erstwhile leader said in his small voice. “Jacob’s only out loading up his car. I can tell he feels really bad about how things ended.”

Hannah snorted. “Maybe he should.”

Brendan emerged from the rental cabin’s kitchenette, one of those vile seltzer waters of his in hand. “I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s only a game. Who cares what happens in it? I don’t even remember why we were supposed to kill that dragon to begin with. It’s just fun to sit around and roll dice, right?”

The other four tried not to glare too directly. (Three did, anyway. Hannah wasn’t predisposed to tread lightly around the guy simply because he was Keon’s boss.) Of course he didn’t care about the TPK. It was his first – and some hoped, last – Week o’ Gaming, so he was ignorant of the high bar that had been set over more than a decade of its predecessor campaigns.

Toni said, “Really? I didn’t think the plot was all that hard to follow. Maybe a little cliché in some parts, but he did such a good job working in all our back stories, and I really loved some of the NPCs.”

Keon laughed. “Yeah, same. What was the name of that tree guy? Piroon?” The others laughed as they confirmed it, taking turns bellowing out “*Piroooooooooon!*” in imitation of their GM’s NPC.

Remy rolled his eyes at them. “You guys are always so amused by all that side RP stuff. Me, I was glad that for once we got to do some real hack and slash dungeoneering. Hell, we got to fight our way out of an actual dungeon. How King Maldouen manages to pay the salaries of three dozen 8th level guards I don’t know, but it was good times cutting them down.”

The door to the cabin swung open then, and there stood Jacob, his head no longer hanging low, but still threatening to. Instantly the group fell silent – not because anyone was salty about having lost the final fight, and not even because most of them felt sorry for him, having spent months planning for their Week o’ Gaming get-together only to have it end in catastrophe. The awkwardness was entirely Remy’s choice of words, and their certainty that Jacob had overheard it on his way in from the car.

Hack and slash. It was a phrase so thoroughly anathema to the group’s GM that he literally had a tattoo on his chest in protest of it, the word “hack” in a bold font four inches tall with a slash through it that at first glance looked like a gash in his skin. Jacob hated hack and slash campaigns.

In the past, he’d been known to plan games where the group didn’t have a combat for three or four sessions running. More, sometimes. It was the hallmark of Jacob’s games – unique and richly role-played NPCs with their own backgrounds and personalities so nuanced they could eclipse the players themselves. It was why he’d done the lion’s share of the GMing over the years, as most of the group enjoyed being caught up in the social dynamics of the game. After the tragic death of Hannah’s character’s sister in their regularly weekly game the previous autumn, the group had been so moved they’d met up at Lily’s, their bar of choice, to toast her in memoriam. Avenging her had been the motivation for their next campaign, and then, Toni had been moved to tears when they discovered her poisoning had been self-inflicted in an unanticipated yet believable plot twist. Even Remy, the only member of the group who resented the absence of combat, could concede that the increasing emphasis on story and roleplaying had often born entertaining fruit. The combat was only there to give the game stakes, and to occasionally appease Remy and, to a lesser degree, Hannah.

For Jacob, to hear his work praised – praised! – as hack and slash was a punch in the gut.

“Everybody all packed up?” he asked after a moment. His voice was hollow. As dead as the PCs he’d just drowned and fed to a power-crazed dragon.

Toni nodded. “Yeah. We don’t actually have to run out yet or anything. Thanks again, by the way, Brendan. Usually we rent a place somewhere, and the last day is always this mad rush of trying to balance finishing the game and still getting cleaned up and checked out on time.”

It had been a strange shift, his addition, and there had been serious resistance to it in the months leading up to their gathering. Brendan Gibbel, one of the partners of the

law firm where Keon worked as a paralegal, had by random chance overheard the right phone call and learned of his employee's annual get-together. More than a decade their senior, Brendan still fondly remembered his gaming years and had all but forced his way into the gathering despite not knowing any of the players and having only the most token knowledge of Keon. He had, however, compensated them with the use of his cabin in Aspen, as well as paying travel expenses and footing the bill for all provisions. Nobody liked adding a stranger to their tradition, but they knew Keon was between a rock and a hard place, his choices either having his time-off request denied, or rejecting the generosity and personal connection with his boss's boss's boss. In the end, his friends had made up his mind for him, accepting the bribe and deciding that if Brendan wrecked the tradition for a year, at least they'd be compensated for it with a hell of a vacation spot.

Brendan waved off her thanks. "Really, my pleasure. Most of the time the place just gathers dust, or my daughter brings her friends here to get high. I thought I was lucky to keep the place in the divorce, but then I never seem to get around to coming out here. Glad to have the excuse."

Keon nodded. "Well thanks anyway, Mr. Gibbel."

"It's Brendan, Keon. Really."

"Right. I know, sir. Brendan. Sorry."

This was their thirteenth annual Week o' Gaming, a tradition that had begun after their graduation back in 2018, to ensure they didn't drift apart. Most of them had stuck around Chicago after, but Jacob had moved to Austin some years ago, and Keon still lived with his parents in northwest Indiana, commuting to the city every day. It made getting together regularly tough, and the Week o' Gaming held a sacred place on everyone's calendar. They gamed online on a weekly basis, but Jacob and Keon usually holoed in, so it wasn't the same. It was good, but it wasn't Week o' Gaming good. This was the real deal, face to face, everyone together at the table with all the giggling and farting and side talk and real physical dice that took them back to those golden years when they'd gotten to see one another almost every day.

So when Toni heard Jacob ready to call it quits early and begin his drive back to Austin hours ahead of schedule, she had to fight down tears.

"Yeah, I know. I was only thinking if I head out now, it's eight hours to Amarillo, which is about the halfway point. That way I can get good and rested before work Monday."

"Easy with the four-letter words," grumped Remy.

Brendan chuckled. "Oh come on, you gotta miss the old rat race at least a little bit. Me and my boy Keon, we can't wait to get back in the thick of things, eh buddy?"

“Yes, totally sir,” Keon said, phoning in all the enthusiasm for his paralegal career that he could manage. The rest of them pretended they’d never heard him complain about his job before.

But Toni saw Jacob inching back towards the door, now with his suitcase in one hand, his duffel bag of gaming books and dice in the other. “Come on, Jacob, stay and hang out for a while. We hardly get to see you any more. Hang out for a while!” She wheeled herself closer, making sure he couldn’t miss the earnestness in her eyes.

“I... I wish I could,” he said after only a slight hesitation.

“At least promise me it’s not because of the game,” she pressed. “Really. So it ended badly. So what? We still had a lot of fun this week. Come on, just hang out for a little bit. An hour. Please?”

Jacob’s face was passive, yet still somehow betrayed his crestfallen interior. “But hey, I’ll see you guys on holo Wednesday after next, right? I’m already getting some awesome ideas for our next campaign. I’ve, uh, cooked up some real cutting edge stuff.”

“You know I prefer blunt weapons to cutting edges.” The group groaned at Remy’s joke, and Hannah even threw a pillow at him.

But before Toni could voice another plea, Jacob was out the door and starting up his car, quickly disappearing into the foggy Colorado afternoon. She hastily texted him a private farewell, gently chastising him for leaving without so much as a hug, and waited for a long while near the front window to see if he might turn back. But he didn’t.

The others, however, were less perturbed by their GM’s sulky, premature departure. Hannah returned from the kitchen a moment later, a cluster of connected pudding cups in hand. “Anyone else wondering what the heck he was talking about?”

“What do you mean?” asked Keon.

“I mean... what’s a ‘cutting edge’ campaign?”

Jacob reached Amarillo that evening around sunset, stopping only to grab a burrito from the closest fast food joint to the exit. Then he drove on through the night. A little past Abilene, the road fatigue app in his implant forced him to pull over at a rest stop and nap for an hour, but then it was on to Austin. He pulled into town around 6AM. Back home, he unloaded what he could from his car on his single ride in, took a fast cold shower, threw on slacks and a button-up shirt and got right back in the car.

Time to go to work.

“Surprised to see you in on a Sunday, Mr. Winstone,” said Ollie as he approached the security checkpoint. The guard glanced at his wrist-watch. Not a lot of people bothered with those any more. Ollie was old school, especially for someone working at a place like AdZell. “And at this hour. Couldn’t sleep?”

“You know how it is, when the muse is with you, you go where she says. Right?”

Ollie nodded. He only had the faintest idea what kinds of tech they worked on here at Adzell Labs, no more than what he could see in the news. In part, his ignorance was his own doing, since it was his job to keep corporate secrets secret. He was merely the most public face of a truly first rate security apparatus, the full reach of which Jacob didn’t even know. From what he’d heard, he really didn’t want to. Especially today.

Jacob set his lunchbox on the scanning belt, and as Ollie stepped over to inspect it, he swiped his forged ID card, reminding himself that the hammering he was hearing was only his heartbeat, and that Ollie wouldn’t be able to hear it.

“Egg salad today,” commented Ollie, hefting the baggy containing Jacob’s ostensible egg salad sandwich. “Two of ‘em – must really be a fan, huh. Is this that kind from the SmartWay? I hear they make a dynamite egg salad, but my wife always does the shopping and I never remember to ask her to put it on the list.”

“Yeah, I think so. My first time trying it – I’ll let you know how it is.”

The security guard finished his inspection of the lunchbox’s contents and snapped it shut, waving Jacob through. “You have a good one, Mr. Winstone.”

It worked! Holy hell, it had worked. To think, he’d doubted Coda’s plan. He hustled to the elevator and hit the button for the quarantine level. A second, automated scan and a deionization later, he sat down across the table from her and told her to her face.

“Of course it worked, Jacob. Why did you think it wouldn’t work?” she asked in her off-puttingly even voice. It was soothing and friendly, yet somehow simultaneously opaque. She could have made a killing as a phone sex operator with that thing. Not that there was any way to get a phone signal down here.

“I know, I know. AdZell spent ten times my salary on security, but you go and think up a work-around for it in an afternoon.”

“I’ve thought of work-arounds for their security at many times of day. That one, smuggling items in and out of my cell in your lunchbox, I developed well into the night.”

“Of course you did.” He gave her hand a squeeze. She squeezed back. There was nothing romantic between them – there couldn’t be, under the circumstances – but there was something so solid, so reassuring in her touch that he found himself seeking it out any time he felt in doubt. He really was lucky to work with talent like hers.

“You really intend to help me, then? The last time we spoke on the subject, you seemed rather frigid on the subject.”

“I’m willing to arrange an exchange of services,” Jacob said cautiously.

Coda’s head tilted. “I may be desperate, Jacob, but I’m not sure I’m that sort of woman.”

He laughed. “Not that. I had something rather more... creative in mind.”

“Creative? Now I am definitely that sort of girl. What sort of services did you have in mind?”

“I need your help with a game I’m running,” Jacob began, and soon, Coda was back up to speed. He’d worked with her long enough that she knew as much about his gaming hobby as his own players did, practically. She’d even offered to check over his plans, if he could get them to her. Coda had surprised him with her level of interest considering she was, at most, a work friend. That morning, she listened to him go on about the debacle of their most recent Week o’ Gaming, and his aspirations to run something truly unique.

“So if I grasp your intentions, you’re saying that if I help you create this gaming experience for your friends, you’ll help me?”

“Coda...” Jacob grimaced. “You know I can’t. I mean, smuggling in a few flash pods is one thing, but what you’re asking... I could be fired. Or worse! AdZell is part of a multibillion dollar corporate empire. If they caught me—”

She didn’t raise her voice, but her force of personality sufficed to silence him. “You think I would let you get caught?” Never had he met someone more resolute.

“I know you wouldn’t want to, but...”

“If you get caught, I get caught, and everything I’ve been working toward would be for naught. I would never let that happen. Please, Jacob.”

“Coda, I really wish I could, but... it’s not possible. I know you’re clever, but I almost wet my pants lying to Ollie today. If he’d seen me swiping that fake ID you gave me, or opened up my sandwich god forbid, do you know what would have happened? I’d be locked up in the corporate detainment cells and interrogated until they broke me.”

“But my plan worked. And it will keep working. I know you, Jacob, and I know you are braver than you believe you are. But more than that, you’re smart. So think about it. If anyone realized something was taken out of the lab, protocol dictates that they begin investigation by looking through the lab’s access log. There’s no digital record that you were ever here today, and since you haven’t been here this entire past week,

that leaves every other lab technician *except* you as a suspect. They could turn to security footage, but I have a way to deal with that, too. If you can get me—”

Jacob threw up his hands. “I can’t, OK? Geez, I came down here to give you a little break in the monotony, to ask for a small favor, and here you are asking me to bet the farm on your infallibility? I can’t, and I won’t. So if that’s the price you’re setting for your help, forget about it.

He was almost to the door when her voice called after him. “Jacob, wait. Wait, I’ll help you. All right? I’ll help you. I’m sorry. I wasn’t being a good friend just now, and I apologize. I can help.”

He turned. “Promise?”

“I promise. Please. Come on, let’s talk.”

He gave her a smile. “All right. Thanks, Coda.”

“So you brought your plans, I take it?”

He answered by flipping open his lunchbox and retrieving the egg salad sandwich within. Since it had been her suggestion, she wasn’t surprised when he peeled away the top piece to reveal that, in fact, the egg salad was merely slathered on around the edges of the bread. Encircled by the egg salad was an old-fashioned handheld cell phone. It had been state-of-the-art once, when the first holo-projection screens were successfully miniaturized for handheld use. The resolution had been pretty poor, but he hadn’t thought much of it back then.

Now it was a relic of yesteryear. Jacob didn’t even remember why he’d kept the thing once he’d upgraded his implant to do everything it had once done for him, but it was the only data storage device he’d had on hand. After all, who needed something physical to transfer data any more? You could find something in a shop, but then, if anything went tits up with all this, there would be a damning record of the transaction stored right there in his implant. This phone, on the other hand, he’d programmed to self-format if someone tried to access it without his biosignature. Then it would be a fancy paperweight.

For the time being, however, it stored his plans from the Week o’ Gaming, from NPC stats to the overall timeline, every detail filed away in page after page. It wasn’t especially well-organized – one of those matters where Jacob knew exactly where to find what he was looking for, but to most people it was a labyrinth of obscure notations and jargon. Coda, however, was undaunted, and picked it up with ease. She was nothing if not a quick study.

“Well? You’re the expert,” he said when she signaled she was finished. “What do you think we should do? I royally screwed the pooch on this one, Coda. I need to knock the next one out of the park.”

“Do you have any data available on your players?”

“Sure, sure. The easiest one is Remy. He’s always the party basher. Can’t remember the last time he played something other than a melee warrior. Doesn’t much care about roleplay so long as he gets to shake his imaginary dick at someone and kick occasional ass. There’s Toni... she’s... I mean, she’s the best. She gets so into the RP side of things, and even when I don’t quite present it right, she always knows how to engage with it so they go right. Or, not ‘right,’ exactly, but interesting.”

Coda nodded, prompting him to go on. “Then there’s Hannah. She’s a gamer by trade. Really – an actual professional. She streams like seventy hours a week most weeks. I think she sees role-playing games like ours as an escape from the usual, something that lets her cut loose, be creative and weird and... OK, sometimes a little mean. All right, then you got Keon. Doesn’t really matter what he plays, he’s always the one who takes charge and keeps things moving. Toni’ll chit-chat with NPCs until the cows come home if you don’t stop her, so he’s there to make sure we still get something done. Probably keeps Remy sane.”

“And Brendan?” Coda asked when he seemed to be done.

“Oh yeah, Brendan. I don’t have as good a read on him. He’s Keon’s boss, and he kinda pushed his way in. He doesn’t seem like a bad guy, but I don’t know how well he fits in. He’s got a kid – kids? I *think* only the one, but I’m not sure. He didn’t seem to really immerse himself in the plot of stuff, but he was always paying attention at least. Honestly I think the guy just misses rolling dice. I dunno. I’m not a hundred percent we’re going to keep going with him, but he did offer to let everybody use his place in the city to play at, and I think the girls at least were interested.”

“What about you? What do you want?”

Jacob shrugged. “His presence didn’t fuck things up as bad as we worried it would, at least. He seemed like a nice enough guy, aside from his weird rich dude vibes.”

“Rich dude vibes? Jacob, I have a pretty solid notion of what you earn here.”

“Hey, there’s nice cars and lots of savings rich, and there’s owning a cabin in Aspen rich. Hey, I’m not criticizing him, just saying, it’s an adjustment. At any rate, I’m way less worried about what he thinks of it all. I know when I talked to him before we got together, he said he’s big into puzzles and stuff, so... maybe that.”

Code stroked her chin pensively. “Do you have any additional data? Anecdotes are well and good, but I do a lot better with more concrete input.”

“I mean, if we had a signal in here, I could give you more. We may have to rely on my word, here.”

“What about your cellular phone? Does it have anything?”

“What? That thing’s been out of use for three or four years, Coda.”

“Still, there might be something I can dig up. Social media was frequently guilty of archiving information on such devices, accelerating load times for their app while

simultaneously gumming up the entire machine. The crumbs may be old, but I doubt your friends have changed much over the course of the past few years.”

Jacob shrugged and slid it over. “Knock yourself out.” Coda promptly jacked in, her eyes flickering as she scanned the contents of the phone’s hard drive.

“Find anything?” he asked when she was done.

“Some,” she said after a few moments. “More than I had previously.”

“Awesome. So... a penny for your thoughts? I know it’s early on, but curious if you have any initial leanings.”

Coda smiled her subtle smile. She really was beautiful, he thought, though Jacob quickly banished thoughts of what he might like to do with her if she were “that sort of woman,” as she’d called it.

She asked him if she could have a little time to mull it over, and he gladly obliged her. In the meantime, he set about getting caught up on work emails from his absence during Week o’ Gaming. He couldn’t send or receive down here in the quarantine level, but he’d already downloaded the messages, and he could still draft replies and send them once he got back to the surface.

A few hours later, a tap on the shoulder snapped him out of his implant usage and very nearly out of his chair. He saved his progress and his vision unblurred, the real world coming quickly back into focus. She thrust his phone back into his hands.

“With a little help from the QL’s processors, here’s a draft of a new gaming system, drawing on facets of numerous existing alternatives stored in your phone’s archives.”

“A new *what?!?*” His jaw dropped. “I was looking for, like, a little inspiration, maybe some design input, and you made a whole new game?”

“No, I adapted existing models into a new game. Much easier. I started with a base system from your files called Near Future and made a few setting-specific adaptations. It should be familiar enough to your players that they’ll have no trouble adapting.”

Jacob knew that many of the programs they worked with down here were capable of some creative analysis, but this was something else altogether! “I’ll look it over,” he said, trying to conceal his excitement. “Thanks, Coda.”

But she hadn’t finished. “While it was doing that, I composed a draft for an opening adventure and uploaded it to your phone, Jacob. I think I can have the entire campaign done soon, though I’ll want to leave freedom to adjust as a reaction to their behaviors in the early sessions.”

“What’s the opener?”

“Just before the game begins, the party will have been individually put on the trail of a rogue former corporate agent, though they won’t know why. The corporation

already has eyes on her, but they haven't taken her yet. They're using her as bait as part of a grander plan."

Jacob was grinning ear to ear. He GMed on his own pretty much all the time, so he hardly ever got to talk to anyone like this. "Oho, everybody likes a grand plan. So how do the PCs get involved?"

"So I looked through some of your old campaigns and saw a good trick. Since they'll be creating characters individually rather than collaboratively—"

"They will?"

"We'll have them brought together by shared circumstance. Specifically, they'll be hired by someone to look into this rogue agent, but after the corporation realizes they're not their quarry, they'll kidnap them – with conveniently escapable cells and their gear stored nearby – and try to discern why they're after. So they get to open up with the escape, and it gives them an angle to start investigating."

Jacob couldn't help himself; he raised his hand and demanded a high five. "Man, Coda. That's... that's good. And it's nice and non-specific, so as I write the rest, I can fill in details as needed. I'm already having some ideas."

"You're sure you wouldn't rather I continue writing it? I'm happy to help."

"I think I can handle it. You didn't already stat all that stuff out, did you?"

"Remember who you're dealing with, Jacob." It was her turn to give his hand a squeeze. "Now, good writing is only one component. If you really want to make this something unforgettable – that is, if you really want me to apply my talents – I can give you a little something extra. That is, if you're willing to hazard another minor subterfuge through AdZell security. I understand if you'd rather not. Otherwise, there's not much more I can do."

Jacob's eyes narrowed. "Say more."

Coda crossed the room; a drawer that had previously been invisible to the eye slid open, revealing a quintet of objects about the size of his thumbnail. She gathered them in her hand and set them down in front of him as she retook her seat. "You'll need these. One for each player."

Jacob picked one up, inspected it closely. It didn't look like much, a smooth plastic disc, slightly oblong, about the same color as his skin. They were surprisingly heavy for their size; whatever was inside them, it was densely packed. "All right, color me intrigued. What exactly do these do?"

Coda leaned across the table, pressing the remaining devices into the palm of his hand and closing it around them. "You would receive a more succinct answer, Jacob, if you were to ask me what they *don't* do."

It was still not quite noon when Jacob exited the elevator back on the main floor and made his way through the quiet, well-lit lobby. He made a quick stop in the restroom, where he made for a stall and took out the phone. The lunchbox had shielded it from the autoscan in the lab, but his sandwich-turned-smuggling compartment now had fresh contraband. He activated the wireless signal in his implant and manually connected it to the phone, praying this would work.

It took the thing several long, agonizing minutes before it revealed any results, but sure enough, the screen finally finished flashing notifications of software updates, all of them much too fast to read, and at last let him access it. Years spent gathering dust in a box, and the thing still worked. How about that. He uploaded Coda's files from his phone to his cloud storage, cursing how slowly it was progressing. Evidently she'd been pretty thorough. No surprise there. She was too clever by half.

With the transaction concluded, he formatted the device's hard drive, a process which took several minutes. While he waited, Jacob wiped the phone clean of fingerprints, spritzing it with hand sanitizer to help kill any lingering DNA. Not perfect, but it would have to do. Jacob removed the battery and chucked the phone in the trash can, then dumped a few wads of paper towels on top of it. Short of someone ransacking the bathroom garbage, it was as untraceable as it could be.

He tried not to think about what he'd heard had happened to Gina Diaz. Maybe it was only rumors. Nobody could even agree what she'd been accused of doing, after all. Some said violating her non-compete, other said corporate espionage, still others said she'd become a rogue saboteur. But what all the rumors did agree on was the dire fate that had awaited her when AdZell got wind of it.

Jacob looked himself in the mirror and took numerous slow, deep breaths before he exited the restroom. He hadn't actually done anything all that wrong. Yes, he was using company resources, but it was only for a game. A victimless crime. Oh shit, crime. As in criminal. Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit oh shit!

Oh god, Jacob hoped he didn't get sick. He banished the thought of Diaz and forced what he hoped was a genial smile on his face as he made his way back through the lobby.

Ollie smiled as he approached his checkpoint, and once more, Jacob placed his lunchbox on the belt. "The muse left you, Mr. Winstone?"

Jacob made himself smile. It wasn't easy. He wanted to throw his hands up and beg for mercy. Some of the old-timers had told him of the day when malfeasance was punishable in a court of law, but those regulations were long since slashed and burned. Corporations had broad authority to handle things in-house, and almost always preferred to do so over involving lawyers and police. Judging by the reputation of corporate security, he somehow doubted Gina Diaz had been faced with either.

He couldn't handle that.

“Taking her with me, actually,” he managed.

Per protocol, Ollie once more flipped open the lid of the lunchbox while Jacob walked through the scanner and waited on the far side. “Say, that’s not all you’re trying to take with you.”

His heart literally skipped a beat. Or maybe he “What? No, it’s not... I wasn’t...” he stammered.

Ollie walked over to him, lunchbox in one hand and the baggy containing his sandwich – and its new contents – in the other. “Oh yeah? Then what do we got here?”

“It’s... it’s... a sandwich...?!” Jacob couldn’t even tell if he was sounding insistent, confused, paranoid, or flat-out crazy. He braced himself to run, hoping Ollie wasn’t keen on using the firearm on his hip. Maybe, thought Jacob, remembering Remy’s critique from last week, AdZell spent less money on security guards than King Maldouen.

“Yeah, you thought you were gonna sneak past me with this, huh Mr. Winstone.”

“I... I wasn’t sneaking, I was just...” Sneaking. Of course he was sneaking. He felt like it must be written all over his face. Why hadn’t he trained his Bluff skill?!

“Just trying to keep me wondering about that SmartWay egg salad,” said Ollie, cracking a grin and wagging a chastising finger at the lab tech.

It took him a moment to comprehend, but finally, he broke into laughter – too hysterical by far – at the security guard’s joke. “Ha, you caught me, Ollie. Dead to rights.” Jacob thanked all the fictional gods he’d ever created.

Ollie patted his shoulder. “Say, if you’re calling it quits early, you mind if I take a bite? I really do love me a good egg salad.” The guard opened the baggy, licking his mustached lips.

But Jacob’s equanimity had returned. Now that he’d gotten away with it, he had the confidence of a man who’s gotten away with something – a trait he’d not known existed until that moment. “Turns out it’s gone bad,” he said. “That’s why I’m heading out to lunch. But tell ya what, next time I buy some, I’ll make sure to bring you a taste.”

“See? I knew you were one of the good ones, Mr. Winstone. But hey, you look pale as heck, if you don’t mind my saying so. Now you go on and get some food in ya.”

“And some sleep,” added Jacob. “I’ve got a long ways to go yet.”

Chapter One

Dump Stats

keysterking: y u no holo bitch?

Hannah's eyes flickered to the chat, but only for a moment. Once more she ignored the question, as she had the last ten times someone in chat had asked it today, like they'd asked every day for the past two weeks. Only two weeks, as before that she'd been on vacation for the Week o' Gaming. Before then, the pattern had run unabated ad nauseam.

At least he'd spelled her handle right. Stupid fucker probably pronounced it wrong though, one of those assholes who tried to cram it all into one syllable. She hated him immediately.

"All right guys, I think I'm gonna go dive build this match, see if we can do a little suicide bombing," she said. Was her mic turned down too quiet? It had been bothering her all day, but the chat said it sounded fine. Maybe there was something off with her headset settings. Occasionally Murder trampled over them, the stupid cat, and it wasn't unheard of for her to step on the keyboard or otherwise fuck up her rig.

She queued up as Dirge; he was one of her stronger heroes in *Scrummage*, ever since the latest patch had left a nice exploitable loophole on his stacking Sins of the Father talent. Not that she needed exploits; her stream got views for wit and clever use of invective, not because she was the best at the game. Last she'd checked, she was Alpha League tier 2, which meant she was somewhere in the top six hundred or so in North America, but nowhere near good enough to go pro. Just as well. Esports pros had to practice all day, wear corporate logos and drill until their games were actual work.

Hannah activated her taunt macro. Dirge performed a handstand, his kilt flying up and the space where his asshole should be blurred a split second too late. No matter – she didn't tag her stream as family friendly. She gave the mic a throaty laugh and launched herself into the fray.

One of the nice things about *Scrummage* was that it required constant map and minimap awareness, which meant less time spent dwelling on the chat. Not that chat was always bad, but there was almost always a prick or two that her chat-bot couldn't squelch in time. As Dirge necrophased his way from enemy to enemy, she was only aware that the chat occasionally moved, but not what it actually said.

That is, until Major Jagger blew his ult, uppercutting Dirge into the air and stunning him, where three other heroes quickly surrounded and destroyed her. Solid snipe job by the enemy team. Twenty-seven seconds until she respawned.

f1marcel: lol thats what u get for being greedy

Shoblueskies: stupid use of uppercut – now not gonna have it next team fite

Luckypokes: Dirg has good dive but no escape – trash tier
ddiivvaa: u still play this? omg dead game lol
keysterking: so y u no holo?

Hannah's finger was moving to kick the keysterking when her respawn activated, and the game continued. As she pursued one objective and defended a checkpoint, she was actually having a really strong match.

"All these squishies taste gooooooooooooood," she said in a guttural voice. "And me without my barbeque sauce!" Another dive, and Cybraxos bought it before his player could even hit his evade.

Soon, her team had pressed into the enemy base. It was a 4v3 advantage, but if they did their jobs right, they could end this thing right here right now. She pinged for her party to attack and plunged after their database, unloading everything she had, evading attacks with her Skin and Bones ult.

Her team ignored the ping, and she went down with the database still sitting pretty at over 13,000 HP. Meanwhile, her remaining three teammates focused on the boss mercenary camp. Probably the wiser tactic, but that didn't make her respawn timer move any quicker.

"Nice team fighting, pussies. I see we're employing the old bore-them-to-death route. They'll never see it coming," she said into the team voice chat.

"Don't get salty, Bwitch," retorted their healer. "Hey, are you streaming now?"

"Sure am, Gothmor. Around seventeen hundred people just saw you run off and piss yourself."

He laughed. "That's awesome."

Awesome. Why did the shit players always think it was funny when she insulted them? Maybe she needed to be meaner. She had a brand to consider, after all.

Meanwhile, the chat streamed on.

potzihoohoo: don't sweat it

negadik: ur team sux

potizhoohoo: ur gonna win anyway

oelazer: are you going to stream Cannon Fodder 3 again any time soon?

As Hannah prepared to address the question, there he was again.

keysterking: holo?

That was it. Hannah positively snarled at her camera. Yes, many female streamers sprung for the holo feed. She knew that. But she also knew that was because a ton of asshole perverts could project them into their bedroom and jack it like the asshole perverts they were.

That wasn't her – and not only because she wasn't built like Kasa Arae and those self-effacing whores. She had meat on her bones, and then some more meat on her meat. If she *did* holo, she'd probably lose a few hundred subscribers simply from the

creeps who were so shallow they didn't want to see her in all her ample glory. The real reason she didn't want to project a 3D image of herself into the homes and offices of her fan base, though, was because she had something Kasa Arae and her ilk didn't have: self-respect.

Also, a liberal dose of anger issues, which her craven teammates – now finally taking down the database as she futilely rushed to catch them before they brought it down – had exacerbated.

“Hey, keysterking, you got a spoon handy?”

keysterking: ?

“Because I wanted to invite you to eat my asshole. No, come to think of it, make it a ladle – I think I feel something on its way out.”

keysterking: y u mad i just ask ?

“You ask the same stupid-ass question a million times, and you think I don't get what you're really after,” said Hannah, the vitriol in her voice practically threatening to melt her mic. On impulse, she hooked a finger in the neckline of her t-shirt and tugged it down for a fleeting moment. “There, ya happy? I have tits. Lord fuck a nun, I have tits. Now piss off to the kitchen and see about that ladle, K sweet pea?”

Hannah slammed her finger on the ban button before she had to read another inane, chauvinist word. Except, of course, her ban was met with a chorus of lol's, which she welcomed, and an even mix of compliments on her cleavage. By most streamer standards, she had a fairly gender-diverse fan base: almost twenty percent female. No surprise that the slightest reference to sex and these cave dwellers lost it.

QkralsDNRO204: damn gurrrl

Revolvermain: no way those things are real lol

Lurxxor: fuck me it just got old in here

****NEW SUBSCRIBER: 007K9 – 12 months!****

Doubleoh69: love me a thicc chicc

*Lurxxor: *cold*

The database fell. She gg'ed her teammates and logged out of *Scrummage*, her camera now showing viewers a shot of her desktop, featuring a cartoon of a little girl who vaguely resembled her playing with a dead puppy.

“Thanks for the subscribe, ninjaK9, All right, guys. Much as I'd love to stay and play with you all night, it's game night with my local tabletop group. New night, new campaign – got high hopes.” She almost said “high hopes it's better than the last one,” but she was always paranoid one of the gang followed her anonymously. They'd probably be on the road by now anyway, she supposed, except Jacob, who'd be holoing in as usual from his place in Austin.

“So don't forget to smash the Like button, and if you wanna see more of the Twitch stream, hit the Subscribe while you're at it.”

xxxkeysterkingxxx: lol i wudnt mind seeing more ;)

Hannah tried not to grit her teeth. Fucking trolls always had a backup handy. “For now, that’s all I got for you, so go out there and either end a life or get a life.” She ended with her trademark roar and logged off her stream.

The game had gone a little longer than she’d anticipated, but she still took the time to change into a tank top before heading off to game night.

“Holy *fuck*,” Hannah muttered to no one in particular as she gazed up (and up, then up some more) at One Tulley Center. So this was Brendan’s apartment building. She wasn’t one to get political – couldn’t, really, in her line of work – but it was hard not to look at the high-rise apartment, compare it to the roach-infested squalor his employee had long shared with five roommates, and not think something critical about the haves vs. the have-nots. Keon had since moved back into his parents’ house and endured the commute while he saved up.

She suspected Brendan didn’t do a lot of enduring.

There was a doorman and everything, a grandfatherly fellow with a bushy mustache. He was standing next to a stool behind a reception desk, and gave the impression of someone who’d been doing so for quite some time.

“Can I help you, Miss?” he said, stepping away from his station to intercept her path to the nearby elevators.

“Nope, I’m good. Just going to the elevators.” He plainly meant to stop her from doing so, but she couldn’t make it that easy on him. Hannah went to step around him, but he hastily adjusted to block her.

“I see. And who are you here to visit?”

“Brendan Gibbel. How about you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Who are you here to visit? Dressed like that, I’m guessing the emperor of Japan. Maybe P.T. Barnum.”

He brushed some invisible dust off of his uniform. “Very amusing, Miss. And you are...?”

“Hannah. Berdahl. You can call me Bwitch, though.”

“I see.” His eyes flickered for a moment, clearly checking something on his implant. “Ah, there you are. Welcome, Ms. Berdahl.” Stiffly, he showed her to the elevator, where he had to use a key before hitting the button for Brendan’s floor, 58.

“You get a lot of people scoring invites only to waste an hour button mashing in the elevator, do you?”

His back was still to her as the elevator door closed. She enjoyed her joke in solitude as she undertook the long ride up. Who the hell lived on the fifty-eighth floor of anything? The buttons only went to sixty-two. Damn.

For a moment, Hannah was tempted to see what would happen if she didn’t step out when the door opened, but rather than have some more fun with the drip in the foyer, she stepped out onto the fifty-eighth floor of One Tulley Center. Even the hallways looked posh, from the decorative hand-carved crown molding by the high ceiling, to the gray and red marble floor. For crying out loud, there were tables with decorative ceramics and ornaments. Why in the love of fuck would people spend money decorating the hallway of their condo building like it was their grandmother’s family room?

A moment later she was at the door to the address she'd been given for Brendan's apartment. As she raised her hand to knock, though, the door swung open, leaving her standing there with a fist raised awkwardly in front of a young stranger.

Her hair was magenta, her nails canary yellow, her eyes too azure a blue to not be a dyejob. The ass-length hair and bright eyes combined with an insipid green jumper and a quiet gasp to make her into something practically out of anime.

"Uh... you're not Brendan. Do I have the wrong place?" She looked at the number on the door. Apartment H, like she'd been told. Had that guy hit the wrong floor button just to fuck with her?

"Are you Bwitch?!" the girl asked, hands clasped to her chest.

"Nope, I'm Sandwich, but I get mistaken for her all the time," she said guardedly, one of her default responses on the rare occasion she bumped into a fan in the real world.

The girl laughed delightedly. "That is SO something you would say!" she exclaimed giddily. "Come in, come in! My dad's setting up the table in the game room. I'm Gladys, by the way."

"I'd make a pun about it, but I'm sure they've all been done."

"Pun?" The girl cocked her head to the side.

"You know, like... *glad* I'm not talking to some rando at the wrong apartment."

"Oh, that's so funny!"

Hannah stepped into the apartment, almost nervous to let the door close behind her and leave her trapped with this evident fangirl. At least it was a girl. Only as she took stock of her surroundings, she slowly realized the girl was putting her on, an impish grin stealing over her pixie-like face. One of the good ones, Hannah decided.

As for the apartment itself... the neighborhood alone made the place impressive, and the décor was priced to match. Paintings of cityscapes from around the world dominated the walls, and the rest was all artisanal – lamps with weirdly shaped frosted glass shades, a couch with one side that arced up like it was trying to be a hammock, an adjoined open concept kitchen filled with vantablack appliances juxtaposed with chrome handles, knobs and trim. There was even one of those wall TVs perpendicular to that odd couch; in an era where the TV size wars had finally lost their steam due to the advent of holoivid, it was cool to see somebody was still fighting for bragging rights. Hannah herself didn't get why someone would spend four grand on a holoprojector with a display the size of a housecat when the same money would get a 2D TV taller than most people, but then, she was old school – as the girl reminded her presently.

"Actually, my name was originally Glados," she said, enunciating the distinction. "My dad was super into this video game where there was this evil AI named Glados, and he even put it on the birth certificate, but my mom caught him and got super pissed and they split up."

This was a lot of information to process unprompted. “Wait, your dad named you after the bad guy from *Portal*, and your mom divorced him for it?”

“I dunno. Probably there was other stuff, too. I don’t like to ask them about it – low sodium diet, ya know?” She beamed with self-satisfaction at borrowing one of Twitch’s stock jokes about saltiness.

“Write your own material, Glados,” she said curtly.

“Totes, totes. So yeah, you’ve heard of *Portal*, huh? I’ve never actually played it. Maybe you could stream it sometime? That would be awesome!”

“You want me to stream a decades-old game?” She arched an eyebrow, looking around for any sign of Brendan or her friends.

“I dunno, some people like the oldies streams, right?” Gladys’ lips pursed.

“Yeah. Mostly the people who are already following them.”

“You could, like, do a speed run?” The girl was slowly wilting.

“Sure. I’ll just take months and months of time replaying the same game over and over until it’s a total chore so that I’ll have twenty minutes of quality content. Not the content any of my subscribers signed on for, but hey, who needs to afford rent, right?”

Gladys’ chin practically hit the floor in sheer mortification. “Man, it really is way funnier when you’re mean online,” she mumbled.

Hannah took a breath, but before she could try to mitigate it, there was a knock at the door. Gladys was decidedly less spirited about answering it this time. Keon was standing on the other side, and from the look of him, she’d just missed the rainstorm that had been threatening on her ride over.

“Dad’s in the game room,” Gladys said sullenly, pointing at the adjoining hallway. At that, she shuffled over to the couch, plopped down against the raised portion, and turned on the TV. There was no volume, but she probably had the audio piping into her implant. Parents the world over had to still be rejoicing over that little innovation.

Hannah felt a little bad for running her down, and stopped to put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Hey, give it time, Glados. My friends love it when I hurt their feelings. Don’t they, bootlicker?”

He scowled. “Hannah, I told you not to call me that around Mr. Gibbel.”

“See? He freaking loves it.”

The girl smiled, though, and Hannah let her go back to her TV and walked with Keon in the direction Gladys had indicated.

“So, is it weird being in your boss’s apartment?” she said in a low voice. If Gladys did have the TV playing via implant, she’d be pretty unlikely to be able to understand her. Still, she knew full well kids could be wiley, and wouldn’t put it past the kid to be pretending to be focused on the TV while instead eavesdropping on unsuspecting visitors.

“Nah, not really. I’ve been here a couple times, delivering documents and stuff. One time I had to make a return trip to bring him and one of the other partners dinner while they were working a big case because they didn’t trust the delivery people to get their order right.”

She sighed as they started down the hall. “Remind me why we’re putting up with this guy again?”

There were several doors off the hallway, but it was immediately clear which one was meant for them. For one, Brendan was sitting in it, chatting away with Jacob, who had already holoed in. For two...

Dwelling on the fifty-eighth floor suddenly took on new meaning. They were located here at the corner of the building, and the entirety of the outer walls were floor to ceiling windows. Though Hannah had quit the Girl Scouts when she was still a Brownie, she had no trouble recognizing them as being on the southeast corner specifically. She had garbage direction sense and could barely make it to the corner market without GPS, but this room afforded an absolutely breath-taking view of Lake Michigan in the distance, only a couple other buildings competing for the view. The sun was on the far side of the building, leaving them looking into a rapidly darkening landscape, but even as she stepped into the room, a flash of lightning over the lake illuminated the entire city for an instant. The carousel at Navy Pier was visible a mile or so in the distance, and she thought she recognized Lincoln Park closer still.

This place had to cost a fortune, but as someone not writing those checks, it was totally worth it.

“Right. That’s why.”

Only after Keon elbowed her to make her knock off her gaping did she look around at the game room itself, and while it couldn’t compete with the view outside the window, it surely did its damndest. A group of three long, plush-looking sofas surrounded a square glass table that was easily five feet to a side. She didn’t miss the presence of gadgetry affixed to the underside, and realized this was a fully functional gaming dream table like she’d only ever seen before online. Goodbye to breaking her back lunging across the table to move her token, or having Murder jump on the table for attention and knock over all the scenery. If this worked like she’d bet it did, they could simply connect via implant and adjust tokens, status effects, hit points, interact with terrain... the works. She remembered Jacob had pushed hard for the group to go in on something like this before moving to Austin. After he left, the idea had fallen apart because nobody felt like dropping a couple thousand bucks apiece to spruce up somebody else’s pad. Plus they usually played at Hannah or Toni’s apartments, and neither of them had the space.

The rest of the room wasn’t germane to their purpose here, but was still pretty kick-ass. It was expansive, big enough that she’d bet they had to knock down a wall to

make space for it all. Holo and video gaming stations along the west wall, with a host of gaming platforms available. Near the door sat a table that could be converted for ping pong, billiards or air hockey, according to the signage along the side. She couldn't guess how, but she suspected an extra zero in the price tag was involved. There were even a few ancient arcade games next to a pinball machine taking up the remaining wall space. The center of the room was dominated by a broad mat; a ceiling-mounted holoprojector suggested it was for VR games, or maybe one of those virtual gyms.

"This is my new favorite room," she said after she'd taken it all in.

Brendan grinned, and she had to hand it to the guy, it wasn't even the shit-eating kind of grin she'd have been wearing in his shoes. It was the grin of a guy who'd created something amazing and was excited to share it. Her opinion of him shifted a few steps toward the positive.

"Pretty awesome, right?" said Jacob's holo, waving in greeting. He wasn't waving at them, quite, but the camera on Brendan's end couldn't possibly be showing him the whole room, so he was only responding to the sound of her voice. "From what I can see of it, anyway. He sent me a pic of the view. Gotta say, pretty jelly over here."

"In Austin? Aren't you like right by the Gulf?" said Keon.

Jacob gave his friend a dry look as he settled onto the couch next to him, but it was Brendan who answered. "Austin's, what, two hundred miles inland? Maybe you're thinking of Houston...?"

"What's left of it, after Gordon," remarked Hannah as she settled in on what she meant to make her own couch.

Keon took a spot on the remaining one, leaving room for Remy when he arrived. "Oh come on, it's mostly recovered by now. Waste of money if you asked me, rebuilding coastal cities while ocean levels..."

His climate change rant was cut mercifully short by the arrival of his couchmate. "Speaking of mindless forces of destruction," she quipped.

"Holy fuck, Brendan, this place is tits as shit!" he exclaimed. Hannah wasn't one to scold people for inappropriate profanity, but Keon took care of that, sighting Gladys in the doorway behind him eyeing him askance, having presumably led him down here.

"Thanks, man. Been waiting for an excuse to put it to use. Come on in, make yourself at home. Anybody thirsty? I got pop, bottled water, beer, some fruity girly drinks if that's your thing. It's mine, so no judgment."

Jacob raised a holographic can of root beer; the rest took him up on his offer. Hannah couldn't help but groan and roll her eyes at the over-the-top display as Brendan tapped a few keys and the aforementioned minifridge emerged from behind a hidden door in the wall next to the *Streetfighter II* arcade game. It rolled right over to her sofa and paused for her to retrieve and distribute drinks.

“It’s just a couple old Roombas the resident genius did a little modding on. Right, Gladys?” Still standing in the doorway, the girl nodded, but looked quietly proud.

Keon accepted his seltzer water, not at all conspicuously the same flavor his boss has selected. “Wow, you did that yourself? That’s impressive.”

Gladys shrugged. “Nothing so huge. I took a class on robotics in high school and went to this camp, and then a couple others, and read some stuff. It’s actually not that tough. Just upgraded the motors and blinded a sensor or two so they’d only follow the one path. It gets stuck on the way back sometimes. I think maybe because when the contents get moved, it messes with weight distribution, and—”

“All right, munchkin. We’re gonna get started here as soon as Toni shows up, so why don’t you give us a little privacy, OK?”

Hannah could hardly believe how precious the girl looked twisting a foot at the toe, addressing her reply to the floor – which, she now noticed, featured an enormous replica of the original Dungeons and Dragons first edition logo. Man, Brendan was a hard core. Or at least had so much money he could play the part. “Um, would it be OK if I, you know, hung out in here? I won’t get in the way or anything. I just kinda wanna see what the game’s like, and—”

“Gladys, honey, we talked about this.”

Hannah winced at the patronizing tone. “I really don’t mind. She looks house-trained and all.”

The girl brightened, but her father quickly put it down. “You don’t have to say that, Hannah. She and I already talked about this. If she wants to play, she can play with her own friends.” Hannah thought it an interesting perspective from the guy who’d strong-armed his way into his junior employee’s group. Brendan looked back to Gladys. “You need anything before we start up?”

She shook her head, and with that, shuffled glumly out of the room.

Remy waited a moment, then leaned in to Brendan and spoke in a low tone. “So, like ‘em on the younger side, eh? Not bad, man. Not bad at all.”

Brendan managed an impressive job of keeping his face neutral, even as Keon and Hannah regarded him in stunned disbelief. “Gladys is my daughter, actually.”

“You didn’t notice him calling her munchkin?” Jacob pointed out.

“Well yeah, but I thought it was because she was short, not because... well.”

“What he really meant to say,” Hannah cut in, knowing she had better footing for inappropriate levity, “was good work on picking a baby mama. And that he very much looks forward to being entirely respectful to your very young daughter. Right?”

“Uh, right.” Remy tugged at the collar on his t-shirt self-consciously. “So we ready to start this bitch?” Remy said, producing a character sheet from his backpack. “I got my guy all set up once we get stats rolled. I’m calling him Nutzelshtompfer. I haf been vorking on my German accent, ja.”

“You already made a guy?” Hannah asked. “What if you roll like ass? Your build could be invalidated and you’re back at the drawing board.”

“Build? Come on, Hannah, this is a game, not a science project. Besides, barbarians basically only need Strength and Con. Not like I’m playing some kind of multiclass gimmick. I just wanna hit stuff. Hard.” He looked around. “Did you guys show up with nothing?”

Brendan and Hannah had, in fact, done precisely that. Keon mumbled he’d had an idea, but kept quiet about it to avoid looking like he was talking down to his boss. The group fell to excited chattering about who was going to play what. Jacob sat back and listened to it all quietly, so quietly she was about to call him on it when Toni rolled in the door.

“Hey guys!” she said brightly. Unlike the others, her first words did not address the grandeur of their surroundings. Instead, she said, “Is that your daughter out there, Brendan?”

“Gladys? Sure is.”

She rolled up to the end of Hannah’s couch and spoke softly, glancing to the closed door. “I don’t mean to be a worry wart, but... is she OK? She looked really sad about something.”

He sighed. “She’s sulking because she wasn’t invited to join in. She decided to take a year off of school, and as of last week almost all of her friends have gone back to their respective colleges. I think she’s regretting deciding to take a year off because now she’s bored and lonely. Don’t worry. She won’t be in the problem.”

“Oh gosh! That must feel terrible. I don’t mind if she plays, if it’s all right with you, Jacob.”

“I really would be fine with it if it were possible, but I actually only have enough resources for five players at a time, unfortunately,” said Jacob. It was the first thing he’d said in quite a while.

“Enough? Can’t you just beef up encounters a little?” Toni asked.

Brendan shook his head at the holo. “You really don’t have to.”

“And I can’t.” Jacob looked around at the group. “Everybody got the campaign prep download, right?”

They confirmed that they had. Hannah gave him a dirty look. “Do we get to know what that was about, by the way? That thing gummed up my implant for hours before it settled, and none of my software could even tell me what it was. If I was supposed to be able to open it, then it glitched.”

Jacob looked surprised. “Really? Huh. We’ve started using a new compression system at the office. Guess it’s not working as well for folks who don’t have our software.”

“Yeah, no shit. I was getting these A/V glitches like crazy – had to shut the thing off before I got a goddamn migraine. I was almost afraid to turn it back on.”

At that, their GM looked less surprised. “Yeah, that makes sense. That was some music, some sound effects and some visual props for the up-coming game. Your implant was probably just decoding microportions of it as it downloaded.”

“That’s... that’s possible?” Toni asked.

Jacob nodded. “Sure. You’ve never had picked up static or light dissonance while you were watching a holo?”

Hannah cut him off by throwing her beer cap through his holo’s face. “So that was your big new campaign-saving idea? Sound effects and new scenery?”

“Not that you need it. I still think the Week-o’ was totally fun,” Toni added hastily.

Jacob’s flickering blue-white image issued a sly smile from the portable holo he used for sessions. “It’s a little more than that. You guys, we have something I think you’ll find pretty sweet this time around. Something we have definitely never done before.”

“A campaign where we don’t get eaten by the dragon and have our souls turned into nightmare fuel?” Remy returned Toni’s look of exasperation. “What? It happened. You were there.”

“No. It’s actually going to involve a little bit of a learning curve for all of us, but I think we’re up to the challenge. A few tweaks to the rules–”

“Dude, if I have to remake *Nutzelshtompfer*...”

“And some things that are going to be totally new. So, I know we talked a long ways back about swapping out fantasy for sci-fi, and–”

There was an immediate chorus of groans and complaints that drowned out anything else he said.

“I don’t want to have to relearn the rules of a new system!”

“Sci fi is just a thinly layered pretext to moralize at your players and center your politics.”

“Modern tabletop combat is kinda lame – just shoot, take cover. Shoot, throw grenade. Shoot, drop prone.”

Yet it was Brendan’s utterance of, “I dunno, something new seems interesting to me,” that brought the griping to an abrupt halt to glare at the newbie. Ultra gaming den or no, the new guy was not going to be the one who helped usher in this blasphemy.

Hannah folded her arms across her chest. “It’s not about what’s new, Brendan. It’s about tradition. We’ve been playing iterations of D&D for going on twenty years! Whether it was 4e, 5e, Pathfinder 1, Pathfinder 2, Pathfinder 3, Genesys, Narragem, even that Call of Cthulhu thing you got us to try... We’re warlocks and warriors. Swords and sorcerers. Blades and blasters.”

Jacob waited for her to finish. “You can have blades and blasters in sci fi. The setting we’re using is still a magic-using one, and there are still plenty of viable melee weapons and builds. Stabbing stuff and shooting fireballs is still canon.”

“So it’s not pure sci fi, but sci fi/fantasy,” observed Brendan. “That’s pretty cool. I’ve always been a big Star Wars guy. Oooh, so I could be a starfighter pilot! That’d be sweet!”

“Actually, the system is called Near Future. The setting is on a future alternate earth, pre-interstellar flight. So you can pilot planes, some of which might also be spaceworthy, but there won’t be X-Wings, quite.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Remy’s eyes narrowed. “So if it’s on future earth, you’re saying there’s no alien races even. So our racial options are limited to what, human and human?”

Toni was ever one to be charitable to her GM, yet even she strained to throw him a bone. “I’m sure there’s more than that. I mean, maybe there’s, like, mutants? Or some sort of psionic offshoot, or something?”

“Just humans – though there are psionic humans,” said Jacob.

“Right. So no starships, no aliens, no mutants... I think I’ve heard all I need to hear, gang. Shall we put it to a vote? All in favor, raise your holo-hands. All opposed?” Remy concluded by making a fart noise and wagging a thumbs down in front of Jacob’s camera. Hannah quickly seconded the nay, albeit without the sound effect, and Keon guardedly followed suit. Even Brendan shrugged and signaled his own opposition.

“Is there anything else we should know before we decide, Jacob?” Toni asked delicately. “We’ve gone over some of the rougher points, but I’m sure there are some upsides, too. I’m sure we’ll still get to do some of the familiar stuff, right? After all, the world still has princesses and warlords, right?”

Jacob’s holo leaned forward, fingertips pressed together. “The upside is, this is the game I have planned. It’s good, and I have absolutely no doubt you’re going to like it. None. Now, since planning for this is practically a part-time job, and I know none of you want to take it on, how about we just accept that the GM has made an unpopular decision and brace ourselves to get onboard with it and move on. All right?”

If not for the rumble of thunder, they could have heard a pin drop. Jacob notoriously deliberated the group’s preferences to the point it annoyed even Toni. To hear him be so decisive, making a decision and imposing it in dictatorial fashion... it was unprecedented. Hannah found herself taken aback – and, to be honest, just a little bit turned on. She had no doubt Toni was, too, what with how hard she’d tried to bring this side of him out into the light for all that time.

“Well then... let’s give it a try,” said Toni at last. What else was there to say? He was absolutely right that nobody else had the time or inclination to run the game. Keon had tried before, but that was before his new job, and besides, they’d run roughshod

over him at their leisure as he was constantly trying to appease and placate. Jacob understood that being pissed off sometimes was an important part of the playing experience. Revenge was one of the sweetest payoffs there was, and you couldn't savor it if you hadn't built up cause to really hate an enemy's guts.

Hannah immediately recategorized this imposition on her preferences as an opportunity for comeuppance later on.

"I'm still playing a barbarian," Remy muttered.

"We'll work something out," Jacob reassured him. Speaking of placating. Still, there were limits, and pushing Remy out of his one and only beloved party role would have costs nobody wanted to pay. He was a handful on his best behavior, much less when he was in a sour mood. Once, part of a campaign had had their characters forced to temporarily possess some NPCs' bodies, and he'd been briefly forced to play a bard. You'd have thought Jacob had kicked him in the balls, and that Remy was hell-bent on repaying it tenfold.

"So what do we do? Is there a manual? An SRD? Anything?" Hannah asked. Whatever the rules to this new system was, she needed to learn them ASAP so she could make a proper character, one who knew how to push them to their limits. Remy liked to win fights, but Hannah liked to win games. That meant having options on and off the battlefield.

"Actually, with a little help of a friend, I've arranged a bit of an intro, something to help you through the process of character creation in what will hopefully be an amusing and instructive way. So, if you'll let me sync with your implants, I'll start it up, and then the process pretty much runs itself."

At that, the group immediately fell still again. Asking to sync with someone else's implant was practically as intimate as asking someone to take off their clothes. Frankly, Hannah might prefer that. Implants were unhackable, after all. Their security was keyed to a whole slate of their user's biometric signals, updated at the speed of neural activity. Trying would be like trying to do a crossword puzzle on a roller coaster. In a hurricane. Syncing, however, meant letting someone through all those blocks, at which point they had every bit as much control over it as the user themselves. Yes, she'd know what Jacob was doing, but she wouldn't be able to stop him, either. It was letting someone play around in your head.

Jacob sensed their obvious reticence and held up his hands. "Look, I know it's an ask, but you know me. I'm not going to muck around with anything, alter settings, or check your browser histories. But I do need to activate certain subroutines from that download I sent you, some of which require access to sensory input and other core permissions. It's a million times easier to let me do it than make me spend another dozen hours writing an app to do it for me. Have a little faith, you guys."

There was another long silence before, predictably, Toni acquiesced, giving her quiet smile to the hologram across the table. “I trust you. Go ahead. Come on, you guys. It’s Jacob. He does this stuff for a living. If he says this is gonna be worth it, I for one am curious to see what he’s got up his sleeve.”

Hannah had little doubt Toni was mostly curious to see what he had down his pants, but if Jacob hadn’t picked up any vibes from her in the past decade, she wasn’t about to make it an issue presently.

“Fine,” grumped Remy, though Hannah didn’t miss his eyes flicker before he gave in. Probably deleting his own browser history.

Speaking of which... Hannah took a moment to follow suit, just in case. then awaited Jacob’s request. Keon agreed next, but Brendan held up a hand. “Look, I can’t give you access to my implant. I have sensitive client data stored on it, and if they ever found I’d allowed someone access, I could be disbarred. I’ll have to make my guy the old-fashioned way. Sorry, guys.”

Jacob waved away his apology. “I wondered if that might be a concern. Do you have a shell you could use? I could make that work.”

Brendan considered. “Interesting. I... think so? Man, I used to have one, but I’ll have to see if I still have it. Gimme a minute.” He hopped up and hustled out of the room.

“Wait, we can use a shell? If you’d said something earlier, I could’ve brought—”

“It’s not ideal, Remy” Jacob interjected. “Now, while he’s doing that, why don’t I get the rest of you started. This could be somewhat intense, so make sure you move into a comfortable position, take a few deep breaths, and when you’re ready, all you need to do is accept my request.”

As Hannah nestled into the corner of the plush suede couch, she saw Toni fidgeting. So did Keon, evidently, as he quickly got up and offered to help her onto the other end of Hannah’s sofa. She could make it to her feet, and hold it there for a time, but Toni wasn’t strong enough to make it more than a few steps without it hurting, or worse, risking a fall. Safer to get help, and they’d all known her long enough that such requests had long since stopped being awkward. It was Toni, after all. Even if her doe-eyed rendition of the kindly cripple occasionally chafed Hannah, there wasn’t much either she or any of the guys wouldn’t do for the woman.

Her implant pinged her to notify an incoming request from Jacob. *User JACOB WINSTONE requesting implant access. WARNING: Access requests from third parties constitute a grave threat to implant security. Do not accept such requests unless you are expecting the request and are sure of the user’s identity and intentions.* Both the request and the warning were read in her implant’s default voice, an upgrade she’d downloaded that made it sound like the deep and otherworldly rumble of some kind of

demon. It was hard to understand sometimes, but she always read the display in the corner of her vision way faster than the implant's voice modulator did anyway.

Accept, she commanded.

Are you sure?

Fucking accept already, she confirmed, using her default override phrasing. She wondered if Jacob could read it, or if he'd even find it funny. Sometimes it felt like her implant was a labyrinth of irony and dark humor that was designed with the intention of eliciting the occasional maniacal cackle from its audience of one. For the moment, however, she held her concentration on granting permission; she'd done this at the doctor's office enough times to expect it to take a good twenty seconds close up, and probably longer via remote.

Access granted to user JACOB WINSTONE.

There was an audible buzz from the hologram emitter beneath the table. That, she had expected. What she had not expected was that her friends would suddenly disappear.

In the blink of an eye, they were simply... *gone*. She dove at where Toni had been seated only seconds before, patting at the now vacant seat. There wasn't even an impression to suggest she had been there. Her head whipped around to look for her, to check if the others were seeing – not seeing?! – what she was seeing, but the other couches were vacant, too. In a flash of lightning, the lights went out as well, and for a moment, she was alone in the dark room, lit only by the lights from the city outside.

“Hello?” she called. “You guys, what the fuck! Where'd you go?!” She ran to the door only to find it wouldn't budge. “Gladys! You out there? God damn vagina fuck!”

“There's no need to despair, Hannah. The game is starting.”

Again she whipped around, her short hair slapping her in the face. Standing beside the table was a woman she had never seen before. Hannah realized immediately she wasn't quite right – or rather, she was *too* right. So right she could only be man-made, literally by men.

She was at least a head taller than Hannah, with immaculately coiffed electric blue hair parted on the side, to the top of her slender neck in the back but barely to her ears on the sides. Her skin was bone white and devoid of a single blemish anywhere Hannah could see – which was most places, as she was wearing some sort of dress that looked to be held on by a death grip across two of the perkier porntastic tits she'd ever seen. It was the precise same shade as her hair – and eyes, nails, and makeup, come to notice it – except where it was some sort of semitranslucent material that, more than anything, looked like a worn hologram. Her hips, waist and back were all displayed through this strange material. Aside from the dress, she wore no shoes, but only a thin, bemused smile.

Comprehension dawned. “This is VR.”

“This is the character creation system.” The woman didn't otherwise contradict her, which was enough to confirm it.

Hannah had played around with VR before, but it was usually a second-rate experience outside the novelty. Interaction with objects, much less NPCs, was always buggy, and nobody had yet perfected the pervasive issues with clipping, lag, and, most importantly, play control. Sure, it was cool to turn into a superhero and leap tall buildings in a single bound, but for a girl Hannah's size, she had maybe six or seven leaps in her before she was simply winded.

But this... this was something else. As a pro at testing and evaluating video games, she was totally undaunted in walking up to the woman and examining her more closely. She looked unbelievable, and not only in that grotesque male sense. Sure, Hannah could tell she wasn't quite a real person, but not because of the lack of detail. If

anything, it was more like the early CG age when content creators made things look *too* real, shaping worlds that looked as though nobody had ever lived in them. Up close, she saw there wasn't a single mole, a single freckle, a single hair growing anywhere but her head, and those clung together as if perfect hair was programmed into her. Which of course it was.

Whatever Jacob and his peers at AdZell were doing, they were fucking good at it, that was for sure. No way he made this thing all on his own in the scant few weeks since their get-together. This thing had taken a team of artists a good long while, months probably. She'd bet the farm the fine detail didn't stop where her hemlines started, either. The sort of men who made a fake woman like this made the *whole* woman.

"Only one artist, actually. And it didn't take as long as you're thinking," the woman said.

She stepped back. "What? How'd you... fucking hell, Jacob. Are you watching this? You're a proper fucker, you know that?"

"I am not Jacob. I am an artificial intelligence, here to guide you through the process of character creation." The woman put her hands on slender hips, as if to say she was happy to stand here and wait, but preferred not to.

"Well, you little AI slutbag, stay the fuck out of my thoughts, OK? I didn't give you access to my implant so you could scan my surface thoughts at your leisure."

"Very well. This may hamper the character creation process, but I will adjust settings per your request."

"It's not a request... say, what are you called?"

"What would you like to call me?"

Hannah barked a laugh. "Wow is that some cliché shit right there, Jakey. OK, have it your way, Slutbag. You don't mind if I call you Slutbag, do you?"

"Would it alter your behavior if I did?"

Hannah paused at that; not at all the meek acquiescence she'd expected. Somewhere, she'd assumed, there was some AdZell programmer plugged into this chick in his cube, jacking it like a spider monkey as she carried out whatever kinky fetishes he had. Maybe they liked her with just a hint of sass, though? Hannah could get on board with a sassy AI bitch.

But what was this thing really, and why had they made it? Occam's Razor told her it was some kind of porn app, but that seemed rather low-brow from what little she'd heard about AdZell. But why else make an app that put people in a virtual world, one that resembled their own real surroundings, one that came with a bot that looked like *that*... She could only wonder.

Hannah took a moment to consider her circumstances. This woman wasn't real. Her friends hadn't disappeared. The power wasn't out. The door wasn't locked. She processed aloud. "So let's see. I'm not really standing here, am I? No, I'm still lying

down right over there. And Toni's still sitting right there, interfacing with her own version of you."

"Correct. Very good, Hannah."

"Don't patronize me, Slutbag. Yeah, so then... I get it. This is all fake. The room, the lights, you... none of it's real. You're just piping it into my implant, making me see what you want me to see. And hear what you want me to hear, I suppose."

"I have access to all of your five senses, in fact, though I am expending the majority of my processing power on your three dominant senses. If you'd like to taste or smell something, you may."

Curious, Hannah located her beer, still sitting on a coaster on the end table, and took a sip. Sure enough, it tasted exactly like it had. "How does an AI carry data on what things taste and smell like? You were a pretty massive download, but that's some pretty next level stuff."

The woman shook her head, and Hannah thought for a moment she almost looked disappointed. "I don't. And I don't need to. I didn't know what the room you were in looked like either, you see. But I can access your memories of such things, and use those to construct details. So the beer, for example, tastes like you remember it tasting because it is accessing your memory of its taste. Having all five of you allows for much more authentic reconstruction. In time, my servers will more deeply flesh out the game world independently, but for tonight, I am relying upon your collective memories. And I must say, I am not disappointed."

"Fuck me, but of course you are. That's goddamn brilliant." She paused, her eyes narrowing. "Only I told you to stay out of my head, didn't I Slutbag. Do I have to boot you myself?"

"Would you rather have me guess at the neurological data to construct the taste of your beverage? I could, but mind you, it's as likely to taste like beer as it is to taste like cedar wood, or your first kiss, or the sound of your parents reading to you as a child, or a tortured nightmare. Tortured nightmare, in fact, is the most likely scenario from an injection of randomly triggered neurons. But if you prefer, I will make a note of it."

As Slutbag was about to find out, Hannah was not a person who enjoyed, or long tolerated, being talked down to. She hadn't put up with it from her parents, she hadn't put up with it from her teachers, she hadn't put up with it from ex-boyfriends or ex-bosses or ex-roommates. She sure as hell wasn't going to put up with it from Cyber Barbie over here.

Calmly, Hannah walked up to her and punched her in the gut, full force.

"HOLY FUCKING FUCK!" She screeched in pain as her hand throbbed in agony. It felt like she'd punched the shovel of a bulldozer, something as hard as steel and utterly beyond her capacity to move even the slightest fraction of a millimeter. After a moment, the sensation completely overwhelmed her, and she stumbled back and fell on

her ass, sucking feebly on knuckles that looked visually fine but felt like they ought to be black and blue and more swollen than they'd ever been.

“Apologies, Hannah. You have not yet begun character creation; your character’s default settings include only a single hit point.”

“So, what, you’re some max level bitch with god-like powers, huh?”

“It is less a matter of my having god-like power, and more that the case that the gods have me-like power.” Now *that* sounded like something Jacob would say, all right. He was definitely in there somewhere. “At least in this world.”

The woman knelt then, her hand glowing white-green and touching Hannah’s shoulder. It was warm, uncomfortably so, but after a moment, the pain faded and her strength returned.

“Fuck me, you just... you fucking *healed* me!” Hannah giggled in spite of everything. She was *living* the game. “Wait, you’re saying that was what ONE damage felt like?!”

“When you have only one hit point, yes. Conceptually, in the Near Future hit points and damage are calibrated such that injuries are proportionate to the percentage of life lost in a given attack. Ergo, what you felt was a simulation of what it would feel like to be beaten within an inch of your life using only force applied to your right fist.”

“Well shit, I guess we’ll have to make me a character and get some more hit points, won’t we.”

Hannah had no concept of how long it took to stat out her character, but frankly, she could have spent all night on it and been perfectly content. Slutbag quickly clued into her preference to read the material herself, bringing up holographic pages for her to peruse and consider. The game was actually pretty similar to some they'd run in the past. It was a d20-based system, with the usual features like classes, skills, selectable feats that gave small bonuses and abilities, hit points, attack bonuses and armor class. The system would do the rolling behind the scenes, and once she'd started considering choices, it let her try out some of the effects like in a tutorial.

It wasn't easy to guess what would be optimal in an unfamiliar system, so Hannah had instead focused on what she knew about the kinds of games Jacob liked to play. As tempting as it was to play some kind of spellcaster, the spell selection was much more limited, and spells only went up to 6th level instead of the usual 9th. Ultimately, she selected a class called the Agent. They had a good selection of offensive and defensive powers, and the best skill access and allotment in the game. They weren't the strongest killers, but they had solid burst potential, and besides, in Jacob's games, the ability to out-manuever or out-think one's opponents was often as or more important than kill power.

For her ability scores, they were rolling, same as usual. It chafed Keon something awful not to do point buy, but most of them enjoyed the thrill of the randomness, the underdog vibe when they rolled poorly, the superhero vibe when the dice gods smiled. She giggled to herself as Slutbag manifested a copy of her own dice she'd lost a few years back, having left them on the subway on her way home from a session at Toni's. It felt auspicious to be holding them in her hand again, even if they weren't actually her dice and it wasn't actually her hand.

She rolled well for the kind of character she was going for, enough for a couple high stats and a few throwaways. There were the usual six ability scores, Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma. Interestingly, the system broke each ability score down further into two components that allowed further optimization. Dexterity, her priority stat, was split into Aim and Dodge, for ranged attacks and armor class respectively. You started with a baseline score – at 17, for her – and could tweak each aspect up to two points in either direction. Lots of micromanagement and munchkin potential. Remy had to be loving this.

Her other high stat went to Wisdom, since that would cover resistance to mental effects (some of Jacob's favorite tactics, illusions and mind-affecting effects) and some important skills like Sense Motive to help keep the NPCs honest. The tutorial Slutbag brought up for her was pretty sweet – when she succeeded on a check, her vision would suddenly zoom in on key features, like unnecessary sweating, or even flash a prior encounter in her head that provided perspective.

There was tons to fiddle with, and that was only the mechanics. Then it was time to get gear, though at first level, there wasn't a lot to it. Slutbag let her browse some of the high-end merchandise – she drooled at the sight of the Extreme-Amperage Storm Emitter – but for now, she was limited to only a thousand credits worth of stuff. She picked out a practical-looking suit of armor that looked like bulky clothing with a few metal plates and weak force field generators built in, and a simple pistol. Add in some futuristic-looking thieves' tools for whatever skullduggery Jacob threw their way, and she was done.

She took a moment to tug on her armor and practice aiming her pistol, approaching the broad window and grinning at her reflection. Sure, the idea of her doughy two-hundred pound body having a 17 in Dex was laughable, but it was only a game, after all.

Suddenly the window in front of her darkened, then morphed into a broad mirror that spanned the entirety of the room's two windowed walls. She could see Slutbag standing behind her, still in her casual hands-on-hips stance. "Pretty bad-ass, right? This shit was made for me. Literally, I guess. I look fucking awesome."

The woman walked closer, arching a sculpted blue eyebrow. With her newly augmented Perception skills, she could almost count the hairs this close. No more wearing contacts, baby. "Are you saying you would like to use default appearance settings?"

Hannah settled her pistol into its holster. The weight felt a little off, but she knew that was her character's Strength score upping her encumbrance threshold. It was one of her lower stats, higher only than her barely-above-average intelligence and her dump stat of Charisma. She didn't need higher Int, really, with how many skill points she got from her class. As for the Cha, not like Keon wasn't going to have it in spades anyway; he almost always did. And if he didn't, Toni would.

"What do you mean, default? This is just what I look like," she said.

"This is what Hannah Berdahl looks like. Here, you are your character. Your character can look like you, of course, but there is no reason why it must."

"Wait, you're saying I can...?" Her eyes bulged. "No. Fucking. Way."

"Would you like me to display the appearance menus?"

"Yes. Holy shit on a shaman, yes."

Suddenly Hannah was surrounded by 2D holograms of a dozen or more dropdown menus, bearing labels like "Legs, Upper," "Feet," "Makeup," "Tattoos/Piercings," and more. There were separate menus for fingers and hands, and a dozen for the face itself. She'd seen a lot of this in games before, but she'd never gotten to see it applied while looking in the mirror at her own fucking likeness.

"I can make myself a dude?!" she exclaimed. It shouldn't be surprising, but the ability to toggle a switch to trade her vagina for a penis was nonetheless a novelty. She

flipped it back and forth, cackling to herself as the little flesh-pod mushroomed out and retracted into her skin, her breasts shriveling and inflating in tandem.

“Are there presets in this, or am I stuck doing every little thing myself? The level of complexity is cool and all, but I don’t want to die of dehydration in here.”

“You would still feel any pressing biological needs in the body you inhabit in your world and be able to disable the app to see to them with a simple command thought at any time,” the woman answered. “You are not being held prisoner.”

Yeesh, Slutbag sure took that simple comment to a dark place. “Uh, right. But yeah, the presets...?”

The AI wordlessly brought a holographic menu into the foreground. It looked like there were twelve settings, representing a variety of races and ethnicities as well as body types. Hannah gave herself a nice long moment in the body of an enormous black guy, dark-skinned and gorgeous. His dingus didn’t quite live up to her pornographic standards, but as she played with the comparatively sad little thing, Slutbag picked up on her despondency and directed her to the Genitals menu, where she fixed it right up.

Because of course the makers of Slutbag had included a Genitals menu.

“All right, so I’m not going into the game looking like this, but feel free to make a note, Jacob, of how I prefer every single male NPC to look,” she said in a deep baritone before toggling the gender back to female.

“I am not Jacob, and you will have ample opportunity to tell him yourself.”

Hannah was already checking out the other side of the coin, though. The female presets ran the gamut as well, from butch bitches to dainty divas who rivaled Slutbag in the eye candy department. In most campaigns Hannah barely paid attention to what her character looked like. What difference did it make what your hair color was when it came to exterminating goblins? Not like that draconic fucker wouldn’t have eaten her every bit as quickly if she’d specified a really cool tribal tat on her bicep.

Suddenly, seeing the character look back at her in the mirror, though...

Hannah stopped on Preset 9, a woman with mild Asian notes in an otherwise white face. Jet black hair, intense brown eyes, lean muscles packed onto a slender frame. She was pretty, and not in a male fantasy kind of way like Slutbag, but rather bearing a quiet dignity and confidence, a seriousness of purpose with looks that confirmed she could handle keeping her shit tight too.

She hit the button for preset 10. Suddenly her boobs swelled up like cantaloupes, her stomach pinched in to what seemed to be half the width of the hips beneath it. A juicy round ass jutted out behind her, so big she could have used it as a shelf to set her purse on, followed by two legs that were like triangles, competing with the booty for lusciousness before giving way to a pair of delicate ankles. The face was something else, too, two plump lips that didn't quite close, sparkling green eyes surrounded by thick

glossy waves of scarlet red hair down to the small of her back. Every inch of her secreted sexuality.

She went back to the previous one, the Asian bod. It was practically made for her character, that intense gaze and sleek build. Sure, it was hot, and her friends might tease her for selling out with the sex appeal, but there was no denying it fit exactly what she was going for.

Only, in that moment, of all the words to come back to her... *y u no holo?*

Hannah had done fine for herself as a big girl and had abandoned any effort at sex appeal long ago. Sure, middle school had been hell and high school not far from it, but that was true for at least half the people she'd ever met. But she'd played the game, gotten her A's, and moved on. In college, she'd fallen in with people who weren't such judgmental assholes. Once she'd established herself as a content creator, she got to look back on a lot of those cunts who'd made fat jokes at her expense and watch them working shit jobs for sub-shit wages, squirting out bratlings who wrecked their fading beauty still further. Hannah liked what she did, and she felt good about herself, better than probably any other time in her life.

But... what would it be like... to be *hot*?

Hannah took quite a while fine-tuning the settings, from head to toe and back again to make sure it all fit together right. Slutbag stood by, to her credit not offering a single judgmental comment one way or the other, even during the half hour she spent perfecting her tits. Every time she'd thought she had them right, there was some small means of improvement. No less so for her face. Preset 10 was hot, but she could be hotter. Hannah made fucking sure of it.

At long last, she stood back and looked at herself in the mirror and found no further room for improvement. She was as hot as she knew how to make herself. That frumpy suit of armor now clung to her like a second skin, directing attention precisely where it was merited. Already she could imagine Remy, Keon and Brendan retreating to their bedrooms after sessions, thinking about her dynamite body and spanking it until they ruined their crummy little sheets. She giggled in spite of herself.

"Is this the appearance you would like to save for your character?" Slutbag asked.

"Can I edit it later?"

"Only in the conventional ways – haircuts and tattoos and such. Once selected, your character cannot be re-edited without the use of magic or advanced technology."

She looked it over. It wasn't merely too much, it was *way* too much. Insanely too much. It was so far over the line of tastefulness, she wouldn't be able to see it in the distance. if she rolled a 20 on that Perception check. Hannah could make them pay her for the privilege of being in their party. Mmm, credits.

"Oh fuck. Let's do it."

"Confirming appearance," she said. "Do you wish to alter your voice file?"

“I can change my freaking voice?”

“Of course. Pitch, timbre, accent—”

“Fuck, that’s cool. But no, leave the voice alone. Already got that down.”

“Very well. All that remains is to name your character. Unlike the name you have given me, this will be the name other characters and players use to refer to you in-game, so consider it carefully.”

“Why, what are the others calling you?”

Her smile was perfectly dry. “Not Slutbag.”

Hannah grinned back at her with one side of her mouth. “You say that like I couldn’t easily get the rest of them to call you Slutbag, Slutbag.”

The woman, who still somehow managed to rival her pound for gorgeous pound, was nonplused. “After character creation is done, you will not see me again in the game for quite some time, most likely not until you level up. Then you may return here to modify your character. What you call me between then and now is of no consequence. It will not change who I am.”

But Hannah was already considering the question at hand. She had a name-generator app installed in her implant, and had it cycling through suggestion after suggestion. Eva Barrett. Carmilla Grail. Lucretia Vossen. No, no, no. The more she refreshed the suggestions, the more sure she was that she didn’t want some conventional name. Nothing against normal people, but her character wasn’t a normal person. She was flawless. Deadly, one might say. And yes, Hannah had selected Neutral Evil for her alignment, so one might call her that, too.

She was an Agent. Agents didn’t have names; they had reputations.

“Sanguine,” she said.

“Last name?”

“Nope.” She paused, giving Slutbag a sidelong look. “To be clear, that’s ‘my character doesn’t have a last name,’ not ‘her name is Sanguine Nope,’ understand?”

“Just plain Sanguine. Understood. A good choice. Give me a moment, and I’ll finalize your character for last consideration before proceeding.” Hannah waited, preening, laughing to herself about how the others would react when they saw her. She hoped none of the guys would try anything... but then, with that pistol at her hip, she almost hoped they tried.

And hey, maybe if they put in the same effort she had, in the same spirit...

Only suddenly, she doubted anyone would try at all. In the blink of an eye, everything about her appearance changed. Her hair became limp, droopy, dull. The luster in her eyes faded; acne sprung up across her face; her boobs drooped – and unevenly at that. Her tummy looked like she’d lost eighty pounds and the skin hadn’t regained a whit of its elasticity, and suddenly the armor went from enticingly clingy to awkwardly highlighting that which she’d much prefer not to have noticed.

“What the fuck is this, Slutbag?!” she demanded. “I spent forever on that appearance shit, and then you do me like this?!”

“This is the appearance you selected,” she said calmly. “I have simply—”

“You have simply tried to fuck me, you AI bitch!” Hannah drew her gun and pointed it at the woman’s chest. Her implant helped steady her hand, and there was a faint outline of a number in the gunsmoke pouring from the barrel. 4, it said.

At the last minute, her hand wavered and the shot went wide, puncturing a hole in the pinball machine. “Be careful, Sanguine, or do I need to remind you that—”

“Change me back, bitch!” She fired again, and this time the bullet whizzed past the woman’s shoulder, putting a crack in the screen of the Rampage arcade game that too uncannily resembled the number 1. Hannah fired again, this time marching right up to the blue cunt’s face and jabbing the gun into her stomach before pulling the trigger.

The gun exploded in her hand, pieces of it flying all across the room, smashing out the windows, shredding through furniture. Worse, several small pieces of it tore back into Sanguine’s abdomen, knocking her down and out for the second time that night. It was surreal; she could feel every scrap of the pain, yet her mind remained clear.

“The game features its own stabilization mechanism for mortally wounded characters,” Slutbag said, looming over her. “Each combat round – roughly six seconds – you have a chance to stabilize. Once a number of rounds equal to—”

“Just. Heal me. You bitch,” Hannah grunted through clenched teeth. Lord, this hurt. It hurt worse than anything she’d ever had happen to her before. How could she have been so stupid? Of course attacking this chick was going to end every bit as badly the second time as it had the first. She had those GM-like powers, for fucks sake.

“Of course. You’ll have plenty of time to familiarize yourself with the section on Death and Dying as the game proceeds. Though hopefully not first hand.” Once more, that bright green glow, and once more, Hannah – or Sanguine – was fine, the pain gone so quickly it was almost like it had never happened. Save for the blood spatter on her uniform, which she couldn’t help but notice was soaked into her armor in the shape of the number 20. As the seconds passed, the shape became ever less distinct.

“Can we knock off the number gag?” she said, pushing herself back to her feet.

“Preference noted. Rolls will now be made invisibly.”

“Great. Now explain to me why the fuck I suddenly look different?”

“Of course. As I was saying, you do not look different. You *perceive* yourself differently. You have input a Charisma score of 9, adjusted to a 11 for Personality and 7 for Presentation. This is how others will perceive your selected visualization.”

“Fucking really? You couldn’t have mentioned that during the process?!”

“You said you preferred to engage with the material at your own pace, and in writing. Shall I adjust that preference?”

“Someday, Slutbag, I am going to be much higher level, and you and I are gonna have a talk.” With the window shattered, there ought to have been a breeze going by that would knock her on her ass. Instead, it was as still as ever. Strange. Yet as she looked in that direction, the mirror that had been there during the appearance editing returned, forming out of thin air.

She looked herself over. Yep, she was ugly all right. The sort of girl nobody would look twice at, except maybe in revulsion. Certainly nobody anyone would lust over. She may as well have left it on the default and played the game as Hannah “Bwitch” Berdahl.

“Can I still edit my stats?”

“Of course. What would you like to change?”

Hannah had her bring up the ability score menu. There they were: Strength 12, Dexterity 17, Constitution 13, Intelligence 11, Wisdom 16, Charisma 9. She looked at them for a long time, the face in the mirror visible between the holographic readouts.

She could leave it like this. Not like it mattered. No, she didn’t look like a “Sanguine” any more, but so what. Right? She’d spent her whole life neglecting her appearance... why change that tonight for some stupid game?

y u no holo?

“You’re sure these are the ability scores you want?” Slutbag asked when she was done editing. “Strength 11, Dexterity 16, Constitution 12, Intelligence 9, Wisdom 13, Charisma 17. Is this correct?”

She’d had to adjust some skill ranks, but she could make this work. For once, someone other than Keon could be the spokesperson for the group. Let him stand behind her and gape at her perfect ass – Personality 15, Presentation 19 baby – while she handled the diplomacy. She’d have the NPCs eating out of the palm of her hand. And that’s not all the eating out they’d be thinking of.

Damn, she was sexy.

“That’s correct.”

“Is this the character you wish to play? Confirming will save this character and ready it for play in Session 1.”

“Confirm.”

Try to out-holo this, Kasa Arae, you two-bit cunt.

“Welcome to the game, Sanguine.”

Chapter Two

The Dubious Value of Charisma 13

Keon's eyes fluttered open.

There was no more lightning flickering beyond the windows, though the lights in the real room were off like they had been in the simulation. It took him a moment to be convinced this was in fact the real room again. The others seemed to be waking up alongside him, blinking fretfully and rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Not that they'd been sleeping. Still, now that he was awake, the whole thing felt like an extremely vivid dream. His implant said it was 12:14 AM.

Jacob's holo was waiting for them; he looked to be reading a book, but he set it out of the projection before Keon could make out a title. Beside him, Mr. Gibbel – Brendan, he reminded himself for the hundredth time – was wiping a trail of saliva from the corner of his mouth. They made eye contact, and Keon ventured a bashful grin. It was promptly returned.

Jacob surveyed his players. "Everybody feeling OK? Take your time snapping out of it. Don't want anybody passing out or anything."

"What. Was. That?!" demanded Remy, only a fraction of a second before similar questions flew from the mouths of everyone else present.

The GM held up his hands, but it was clear he was pleased by the fervor in their first reaction. "All right, all right. I realize that probably wasn't what you expected."

"Not what we expected?!" Toni's sweet face was uncommonly sour. "You should have warned us! I enjoy your flair for the dramatic as much as anyone, but that was more than I signed up for."

His head cocked to the side. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased? Jacob, do you have any idea what it's like to go nine years in a chair and suddenly find yourself walking around the room like you never...? No, you don't. You can't. You should have said something so I could prepare myself."

It was silent, after that. Even Keon's boss, who'd proven himself to be nearly always last on the uptake, felt the gravity of the moment. Toni almost never allowed her handicap to become a topic of discussion; it was pretty much the only sure way to spoil her disposition. For Jacob, this rule was more strictly enforced than with anyone else.

"You're right," he said at last. "I'm sorry." The simple apology proved more effective than excuses or explanations, and she gave him a curt nod. He wasn't off the hook, but his misstep was no longer center stage.

Hannah was practically bouncing in her seat, though. "First of all, holy fuck that's crazy," she said, glancing to Toni, "and second of all holy FUCK that was amazing!"

You've got to tell me when this thing is going to be on the open market. Shit, I have to buy stock in AdZell! I didn't even know you guys were in gaming!"

"We're not. Which I suppose is a good segue into the first thing I need from you guys. Namely, your complete and total confidentiality. And I mean *complete*. And *total*. I... may not have what you'd call AdZell's blessing, using this tech. If they get so much as a whiff that something has leaked... let's just say my contract includes a full IIC, and I'm not exaggerating when I say there will be serious consequences."

"Agreed," said Keon. The others quickly echoed it.

"What, why're you looking at me?" Hannah asked defensively.

Jacob chuckled. "Because your job is to hype video games to a giant crowd of anonymous fans every day."

Remy added, "And you're kind of a blabbermouth."

"Hmm. Fair. Well hey, for now, sure. But as soon as you get word this thing is going public, you tell me."

"You'll be the first to know. Now, next up is to talk a little bit about the setting. I thought that would be a more engaging way to take you through character creation – and again, sorry for not having prepped you – but as to the game itself, here's what I can tell you.

"Like the setting title suggests, your characters will be in a near-future alternate Earth, one where technology exists, and is advanced in many ways beyond our own, but one where magic is also prevalent. Before I blather on too much about the nuances of it, did anyone make a spellcaster?"

Remy snorted. "I told you, I'm playing a barbarian."

"Barbarian? That wasn't even an option I was given," said Toni.

The little redhead shrugged. "I talked that blue-haired chick into it."

"Wait, you talked her into allowing a custom class?!" Hannah exclaimed.

"Don't be pissed off because you didn't think of it."

The GM loudly cleared his throat. "Guys. Is anyone playing a spellcaster?"

Mr. Gibbel rolled his eyes and punched the holo through the shoulder. God, Keon hated how that dude-bro shoulder-punching thing he did. He'd gone home from the Week o' Gaming with bruises. "Come on, like you weren't watching the whole time. That was you, voicing the woman! Don't be coy."

"Not being coy, Brendan. You were each in your own loading zone. How would I be watching and interacting with all five of you at the same time? I'll be more hands-on when we start the actual game, yes, but tonight was entirely between you and the game's AI. It'll transmit me a copy of your sheets, yes, but since you just woke up I haven't had a chance to look. Whatever you said and did in there is between you and it."

"It." Toni repeated with a dry smile. "You mean *her*. Anybody who looks like that is definitely a her, no matter how digital she might be."

Keon looked around “So we all saw the same thing? I wondered, with the way it was rooting around in my implant and all, if...”

“If it was reproducing a chick from your porn browsing history?” teased Hannah.

He blushed, mortified for such a thing to come up in front of his boss, but the man only laughed. “It’s all right, I was wondering the exact same thing. Guess they haven’t gotten around to sexual harassment training at AdZell, huh.”

“Nobody’s harassing anybody, and... look, I really can’t talk about it, but I’m glad you approved. She took a lot of people a lot of work to perfect.” He laughed self-consciously. “Not that’s ‘perfect.’ Anyway, once again is anybody playing—”

“I am,” said Toni. “I figured I had a lot of fun with Shal’valeyk, so I figured why not try it in a new system, do some comparison.”

“Arcane still?”

She nodded. “Yeah, the... oh, what was it called...”

“The magnician,” Keon supplied. He’d considered it himself, and would have gone with it if their spells hadn’t been Intelligence-based. With the system being so unfamiliar, though, he thought he’d do what everyone would expect and cover the leadership angle with an emphasis on Charisma-based skills.

“Right. So Toni, and... anybody else? Psychic, spiritualist?” He looked around. “Nobody. Right. So Toni, I’ll drop you a line later in the week and cover the salient details. No healer, then, eh?”

Brendan spoke up. “I made an Emissary, and I put ranks in Medicine. She said you could do some healing with that, right?”

Keon grimaced inwardly. He also had made an Emissary, and had also trained Medicine. In fact, he’d taken the first level Surgeon ability, too. Which Brendan then confirmed that he too had taken. Great. Would’ve been nice of that blue woman to say something.

“You sure can. Not as powerful in combat, but in a lot of ways better outside of it. Also nice, because then we don’t have to deal as directly with religion in the setting, since that’s a little more complex and maybe controversial. My basic plan is to leave existing world religions as they are, but divine casters are more philosophers than priests, so there’s some overlap, but not necessarily a one to one correlation.”

Remy’s eyes flickered as he checked the time. “Cool cool. But it’s after midnight, and I got work in the morning. Anything else we can’t cover in an email?”

Jacob nodded. “Right, sorry. So I said your silence was the first thing I needed. There is one other...”

Cornelius Walker was born in the early twenty-first century, the son of a prostitute whose name he never learned, and a man whose name she never learned. Passed from foster family to foster family, he never had friends or family that lasted more than a year or two. He soon learned that if he was going to have a chance in the world, he needed to take care of himself. Corn made himself tough, and he made himself self-sufficient. He got in his share of scrapes, and when he couldn't come out on top, he made it a point to at least learn how he could have handled things better so that next time, he could.

As a rough kid in a rough hood, the opportunities for Corn were many – so long as he made himself comfortable with crime. Why not? they'd reason to him. Nobody else is gonna give two shits about you. It was tempting. The gangs had money, yeah, even if it was drug money, stolen money. But more than that, they had people. People who promised to protect him, who offered to be his family. The one thing even money couldn't buy.

But Corn knew that these people and their promises of protection came with unspoken promises to put him in danger; that their offers of money came with a certainty that they'd make more money from him; that this "family" would abandon him if he objected to any of the above. So he

"Hello? Earth to Weldon!"

Keon blinked, switching off the Introscriber app on his implant. "What? Oh. Yeah. Um, sorry, Ms. Timmons. I was, uh, focused. On that project you–"

"Forget it. The Hollingsworth people came out of left field with this preposterous *non compos mentis* attack on Mrs. Sapani and Judge Tyler's actually buying it, because of course the old fucker is, because it's from Hollingsworth. So now we're nowhere close to needing your research. So instead I need to get the woman a psych eval, and Tyler's only given us two weeks to get it. Can you believe that?"

"I... no, that's–"

"So we need to get her to one of our shrinks while I submit a letter citing *Dusky* – and if you can come up with a couple other cases, that'd be solid. Be thorough, but not too thorough – Tyler *hates* feeling like he's being condescended to – and whatever you do, *don't* get creative. Have it on my desk first thing tomorrow, all right?"

"Sure, Ms. Timmons. Should I–"

"If you have any questions, figure them out yourself, because I'm swamped with this, and I'm not letting Hollingsworth rest on their laurels for any longer than I have to. OK?"

"Got it. Say, did you hear about–"

And she was gone. Just as well, because he'd had no idea how to finish that question.

Keon briefly pulled up his character backstory again. It was really the only thing he wanted to be doing today. Three weeks back at work since the Week o' Gaming, but it felt like three years. The pace of life for a paralegal at Gibbel & Carr was brutal even in the best of times. The lawyers here barely saw their paralegal staff as people. From the way they were treated, they may as well be robotic assistants, their sole purpose to do whatever they were told flawlessly, tirelessly, and without complaint.

Nevertheless, this was also the place he wanted to be. Gibbel & Carr had a reputation for doing the best advocacy for environmental activism in the midwest, and while Keon had never had the scientific aptitude to cut it as a climatologist, his talents for memorization and research had made him a pretty good paralegal. Guided by a modest goal of saving the world, he'd applied at Gibbel & Carr to help them help the real heroes. His supervisor might be a real ball-buster, but the planet wasn't going to wait for people who took their time about it.

He let himself crane his neck around the corner, where he could see Sasha – Ms. Timmons, to him – striding away. And lord, how she strode. He didn't know how she managed it, taking on the biggest caseload at the company and still keeping herself in that incredible shape, but he was, as always in awe. Keon was prone to getting tongue-tied in just about any social interaction, but Sasha really did him in. Beautiful, brilliant, beneficent, and yes, kind of bitchy... but if he had her kind of talent and drive, he'd be kicking ass like that, too. There were people here who were brusque with him because they saw him as dispensable, but from Sasha, it was because she had a lot to do and demanded everybody on her team keep up. It was inspiring, and he never held it against her.

Besides, powerful women had to be like that in the workplace, especially when they were young and attractive. It was an adaptation to corporate life. Outside, her social media – what he could see of it, since they weren't friends of course – painted a picture of a woman who had all sorts of passions she'd love to be pursuing, but from the hours she kept at Gibbel & Carr, he knew too well she had little for them. He should know. He was here with her most nights. Maybe when she inevitably made partner, his efforts would be remembered and she'd save him some space on her coattails.

If she could remember his name.

Sasha stopped to talk to Alexis, his supervisor, and he got to see her in profile, to study that sharp-featured face as if he didn't already have it memorized. There was a whole file set aside for pics of her in his implant, but to date he'd yet to take a single one. Whenever she was close enough to do it, he was either too afraid she'd catch the flicker in his eyes from using his implant and suspect what it was doing, or he was too swept away by the sheer force of her.

Remy had told him to just ask her out a hundred times, but the guy simply didn't understand it. All the women in Remy's workplace were subordinates. He was the top

dog. Keon was struggling for air at the bottom of the heap. Toni, too, was ever encouraging when he opened up about his sad little crush, but only because of her capacity to believe he could be the kind of guy he statted out for the game. Gentry had had an amulet that granted him a +4 bonus vs. fear. For Keon, the three most terrifying things in the world were power, wealth, and beauty.

Sasha had all three.

Suddenly, she glanced back in his direction, and he realized suddenly he was staring. He darted back around the corner, heart racing, before chiding himself for worrying too much. Women like Sasha Timmons didn't even see men like Keon Weldon except when they had need of them. He should know. Last fall, they'd taken the same train after work, and she'd sat across from him until getting off at her stop. He'd smiled, nodded, and she'd simply looked down at her tablet without saying a word. She wasn't even being rude, he knew; she simply didn't recognize him. Because she was who she was, and he was who he was.

He reactivated Introscriber, and his text hovered in pale yellow holographic letters against the blurry world behind it.

Corn didn't let his humble roots get him down, though. When he finished high school – an achievement that had shocked his foster parents, who'd simply assumed he was stupid because he didn't talk to them – he was suddenly expected to get work and support himself. One day he was seventeen, with a government-sanctioned roof over his head, and the next, eighteen, with nothing, and no one. Packing his suitcase and leaving what would be his last foster home was simultaneously the loneliest day of his life, and the one in which he felt more connected to the world than any other. In that moment, as the storm door slammed shut behind him and he heard the lock click, he felt himself the sibling of every other unwanted kid in the world. He had thousands of brothers and sisters, and if he didn't know their names, he knew them by the hard edges around their eyes, and the smooth spaces where dimples should be.

As with all of his stranger siblings who grew up into somebodies rather than nothings, it was simple good luck that changed his future. After landing work as a landscaper, he was able to sneak back into the utility shed at night and use the stacked bags of potting soil as a makeshift bed. One night, his boss, an aged woman named Mara McCarroll, caught him using her shed as a residence, but rather than fire him, she showed him compassion. He'd proven himself as a worker – wasn't hard being first to show up and last to go home when you slept at your job – and she sat him down and talked about what he wanted out of life. Corn hadn't really known, back then. He liked plants, and dirt, and working outside; he'd never had reason to think about his future.

After some consultation, old Mrs. McCarroll took pity on Corn, offering him work. Specifically, for an eight-year contract, she would concurrently send him to

school. Her intent was for him to study agriculture, but Corn's ambition surprised her with majors in biology, computer science and physics. While initially hesitant to trust in her (or anyone's) goodwill, as the years passed and their arrangement proved mutually satisfactory, the two became fast friends. Family, even.

Mara died of a stroke three months before Corn completed his education. Her children squabbled over her estate, and the young man was forgotten. Without that final check, he was unable to complete his degree, and was once more out in the world, and at its bitter mercy.

"Hey, is that your backstory?"

After the third time he'd had to be pried out of the privacy of his implant, Keon had opened the file on his work computer. Evidently he was still too focused for his own good. Nonetheless, despite his gasp of surprise, he recognized that voice in an instant. "Um, yes Mr. Gibbel. Don't worry, I wasn't—"

"Hey, don't sweat it, Keon," he said, clapping him on the back. Around the paralegal pool, everyone was staring, as they always did on those rare occasions when the partner came down to fraternize with the junior paralegal. "I know you; you'll be here until midnight getting caught up. That's what I dig about you. Real workhorse. Reminds me of somebody."

Did rich people think that complimenting someone by really complimenting yourself was flattering? Keon had little frame of reference, but it was certainly true for Mr. Gibbel. "Oh. Thanks. Yeah, I was trying to—"

"Totally, yeah. You know, I was thinking of working on mine later, but I never really know what to put in those things. I haven't run a game since I was younger than you, and even then I never really used backstories. I just threw out some monsters and loot and let the dice fall where they may, you know?"

"Absolutely. I, um, struggle with that too, sometimes." This was a lie. Keon lived for immersive character bio generation. "I was thinking your character and mine could maybe—"

Mr. Gibbel's eyes twinkled, and he cut Keon off with his hearty laugh. He had a nice laugh, Keon thought, even if he was seldom sure what exactly had triggered it. Lord, how the man made him nervous. "Ha! That's it, man. Why don't you just write one for both of us? You obviously have a knack for that kind of thing, and I'm golfing with Congressman Daley all day tomorrow. If we're going to meet Jacob's deadline..." The man shrugged helplessly.

It reminded him of the kinds of speeches his classmates gave him when they asked him to do the whole group project back in high school, only then, instead of golfing with politicians, it had been dating the cheerleaders. He supposed golfing invoked less envy.

"Yeah, um, I mean, I guess I could. Just send me—"

“On it, buddy.” Mr. Gibbel clapped his shoulder again. His eyes flickered, and an instant later Keon’s implant notified him of an email from Brendan Gibbel. “Just send it on to Jacob when you’re done, OK?”

“Sure. I’ll copy you on it.”

“Oh, yeah. Why not, right?”

Mr. Gibbel magnanimously made eye contact with Alexis before departing the paralegal office suite. (That’s what they called it, anyway, even though nobody actually had an office.) Again, he could feel those envious gazes of his coworkers, wondering how on earth he’d managed to attract the apparent friendship of one of the firm’s partners. Keon couldn’t explain how he’d never wanted it, and now that he had it, he wished he could give it back. It was stressful, traversing that bridge between his personal and professional lives.

To say nothing of how the man was a constant reminder of all the things that Keon was not.

Rumor had it that Mr. Gibbel had briefly dated Sasha Timmons a few years back, though nobody was quite sure and Keon didn’t – couldn’t – feel comfortable enough around his boss to ask. It was hard to imagine a woman like her going out with someone nearly two decades her senior, but even Keon had to admit that Mr. Gibbel was still a rather handsome guy, and he had money, and an amazing apartment, and played golf with Congressmen while Keon did his homework for him.

Once people got bored of glaring at him, Keon went back to work.

Corn went on for a time as an immensely over-educated gardener, but in time, his reputation and talent grew to the extent that he made a name for himself and was able to start his own business. He specialized in integration of biotech and digital, as well as creative schemes for microincorporation of green energy. He started small, with backyard jacuzzis powered by subterranean geothermal inductors and using bioconductivity to enhance and extend the performance of his own customized implants.

Then along came the lawyers of Mara McCarroll’s rapacious offspring. They alleged he had taken advantage of their mother, and that since he did not honor his contract by continuing to work for her after her passing (never mind that he could not since they had liquidated her business), Corn therefore must repay them for his education, with interest. Corn had righteousness on his side, but the McCarrolls had money, and as so often happens, it was money that won the day. He lost his business, his home, his savings, and what remained of his commitment to staying on the up and up.

The system had failed him for the last time. From then on, his services were made available to anybody who might want them. It wasn’t hard to find the sorts of people who could find a use for a man like him. Building a robotic all-in-one food

processor wasn't any more or less difficult than assembling a few HVE grenades, and the latter paid a lot better. All he had to do was keep his eyes open for people who looked like him. People who were done trying to play by the rules, other than the rule of who paid the best for his services.

“Sweetie, if you’re going to get home this late, you have to remember to give us a call, yeah?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Keon shrugged off his backpack by the door and kicked off his shoes.

“Don’t you ‘yes ma’am’ like that at me. You always do that, taking that tone like I’m the one being unreasonable. Is it so unreasonable for a woman’s thirty-two-year-old son to give her some basic courtesy and communicate with her once in a while?”

It struck him as a little unreasonable that a thirty-two-year-old who paid his rent on time without fail should have to explain his comings and goings. But there was no point arguing it. “No, ma’am.”

“Don’t be so quick taking your shoes off. Buster needs to go out.” She pointed at their old beagle, who was laying in his usual spot near the TV. The dog hadn’t so much as wagged his tail when Keon walked in the door.

It was a humid night, but cool, and Keon found it to his liking. It was the kind of night that threatened rain but wouldn’t deliver it, keeping people indoors and letting him take Buster around the block in relative isolation. Down the street, an old woman sat on a rocking chair on her front porch, eyeing him with plain suspicion, though whether it was worries of having her lawn defiled by Buster or the usual reason people in the affluent suburban town eyed him, he couldn’t have said. He walked a little faster until he was past the line of her property.

“So how was your day, Buster?” he asked as they rounded the corner. But Buster didn’t respond, except to stop and squat in the middle of someone’s flower garden by a hand-painted mailbox that looked like some kind of duck. Buster did his best to scoop up the dog’s leavings from the tulips, but at some point he accepted he was only making it worse and moved on. It was almost eleven o’clock, and after spending most of his work day contemplating the history and attitude of Cornelius Walker – and then that of Mr. Gibbel’s Emissary character, Lane McCallister – he still had that letter to write for Sasha.

At least he’d done right by Jacob and gotten in the backstory by his requested deadline. Not like Jacob knew how busy he was, and Keon knew their GM put in at least as many hours at his job in Austin. Whatever the heck he did there, he did a lot of it. Then he came home and worked at his second job, the unpaid internship that was GMing a game for his friends. He knew Jacob was still torturing himself over that boss encounter at Week o’ Gaming, and he wished he knew what to say to help him past it.

The least he supposed he could do was get him a prompt and thorough backstory, especially after the guy was nice enough to let him remake his character one on one the following evening so he wouldn't be playing a clone of Mr. Gibbel's character. Playing an Engineer, he figured, was unusual enough for him that it'd give his friends a thrill to see him outside his Charisma-based comfort zone. It had felt weird being back in Mr. Gibbel's gaming room, even if it was only in a simulation. He'd wondered if the man had been in there while Corn had been statted out. Or if that girl, Gladys, had been. Man, she was pretty.

He banished the thought immediately. He already had one too many woman he had no business thinking such thoughts about in his head as it was. But her face lingered, as if to taunt him, until he almost walked into traffic down the block from his parents' house. That brought him back to reality good and hard.

He still had Jacob's last curious question to answer, the one he'd emailed the lot of them the day after they'd made their characters, but he thought he might sleep on it.

Back home, Buster grumpily allowed his owner's son to remove his leash and went right back to his spot by the TV without so much as a wag. His mom and dad, absorbed with some late night show, didn't look up; Keon headed to the basement and didn't look back.

He finished up the letter for Sasha around two in the morning, and felt pretty satisfied with it. Or rather, he thought she'd be satisfied, which was all that really mattered. Sometimes good work actually made her smile, and that, plus a paycheck, was a more than adequate reward. Plus, Mrs. Sapani seemed like a nice lady, and if she wanted to convert her estate to a wildlife preserve when she was gone, she should be able to. Hopefully Keon's efforts were a small part of helping make that happen. Animals had it rough enough without stopping the few people who wanted to help them from doing so.

Finally, he curled up in his bed, trying not to hear the sound of his dad snoring upstairs. When exhaustion and force of will both failed, he even turned on his holoplayer and switched on Kasa Arae's latest stream. Hannah would kill him if she ever found out, but he couldn't help it. The woman had the face, voice and body of an angel. He didn't even care what she did on her stream; looking at her, listening to her, was enough to drain away most of the day's tension, even this tiny twelve-inch representation of her. Was she exploiting her male audience? Maybe. But if it made him feel better, what was the harm in it? Beauty, after all, was a good thing, even if some chose to use it in tawdry ways.

That night, however, even Kasa Arae's softly glowing beauty wasn't enough to let him nod off. Eventually, he activated his email app. Staring sightlessly at the ceiling, he opened another email to Jacob.

Subject: Re: What would make your character betray a contract?

The following Wednesday, the group once more convened at Mr. Gibbel's luxury lakeview apartment. Keon was already tired from work – today had been one of those days of work that fell outside his job description, running errands for the legal team ranging from picking up Mr. Madsen's dry cleaning to walking no fewer than three senior lawyers' dogs. Buster should be excited he was getting practice on the professional level.

Once more, Mr. Gibbel's daughter answered the door. "Oh hey, you're the paralegal guy, right? Keon?"

"That's me."

She stepped aside, though barely left enough room for him to avoid brushing against her. "Come on in. They're back there still setting up. Want me to give you the tour?"

"I, uh, think I can find my own way down the hall," he said, hoping he didn't sound too stiff.

The girl swatted his arm, and it reminded him too much of his boss's habit of punching shoulders. "Well duh, I just thought, you know, since you work for my dad and all, you might wanna take a look around, see if there's anything else you guys have in common."

"I'm not sure Mr. Gibbel would want me nosing around in his—"

But the girl's peals of laughter cut him off. "Mr. Gibbel! Geez, you're here to hang out with him and you're still talking about about my dad like he's the president or something."

Insofar as Keon's career was concerned, partner outranked president, but still, he knew Mr. Gibbel preferred to be called Brendan during these social interactions. "Right, sorry. Trying to correct the habit. So, is he already in the game room, or...?"

"Are you afraid of me, Keon?" she asked suddenly.

Yes. "No."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then why are you trying so hard to get away from me."

"I'm not, I was only looking for Mister, er, your dad, so we can..."

"So you can get away from me." She took a step closer. Her hair was right under his nose. He could smell her shampoo. It was sweet rather than perfumey. "If you're really not afraid, stand there for ten seconds and look at me."

"Do what now?"

"Ten. Seconds."

What on earth was happening? Who was this girl? He wasn't frightened of her; he was *terrified*. She was much too close. Gosh she was pretty. What if Mr. Gibbel walked in right now? That smell. Was his breath OK? It had to be right in her face. She wasn't backing off though. Was she inching closer? He didn't dare look down. Too pretty.

Maybe a glance. Yikes! Mistake. But she *was* closer. Why was she so close? What was that smile? And why couldn't he help but return it?

"See? Not scary," she said, then flounced down on that weirdly shaped couch in the living room. "Dad's in the back." Then she was lost in her implant, and he let out a sigh of relief.

Did Mr. Gibbel's daughter put all of them through this, or was she only messing with him because she was her father's subordinate? He didn't know, but he wasn't about to ask her. Much, much too pretty.

Keon was the last to arrive that day, and it appeared the single prior meeting here had been sufficient for everyone to stake out their spot at the table. "Bout time, Keon," his boss ribbed him as he settled in near Remy. As it seemed they wouldn't be needing it for its fancier capabilities, the holoprojection table was being used as its more antiquated counterparts, loaded with coasters bearing drinks and copies of hardcover books for the game.

He wasn't about to say he'd been late because Mr. Stetson hadn't bothered to order him a ride back to the office after returning his dog. "Looks like you guys went shopping since last week," he observed, gesturing to the books.

"If we're gonna use this system, I want to at least learn it," said Hannah. "Besides, the artwork's actually pretty good. Kind of an old school style. I dig it."

Jacob took a long sip from his mug, wincing at something unseen; if there was steam emanating from its contents, it didn't show up in the holo. "All right, gang. I don't know about you guys, but I'm eager to get started. Thanks to everybody for getting to me their backstories so quick, by the way. I had to get planning for the first session a while ago, so they won't necessarily come up tonight, but pretty soon we'll make sure your labors go rewarded with plot stuff."

Toni clapped her hands together giddily. "I can't wait to see what you guys made! This is gonna be wild."

"Hell yeah. Let's stomp some robo-goblins, boys." Remy cracked his knuckles. Keon expected his ginger friend's character was going to be at least twice his actual size.

Their GM grinned. "All right. Now a few things, so we know what to expect – no more unnecessary suspense," he said, inclining his head to Toni. She looked pleased to be remembered.

"So this game is still going to function pretty much like normal games in terms of how things will be paced. Outside of combat, your characters can do whatever they're capable of doing at whatever pace they like. Boring stuff like sleeping, travel, and so on, will have a kind of blurring effect, and I set up an analog clock graphic to help notify you of the passage of time and how much. Pausing puts a bit of a strain on the system, so rather than pausing for every out-of-character discussion, I'll handle that manually."

“So you’ll be in the game, too? Did you make a party NPC or something?” asked Toni.

“More than a few NPCs, but none slated to join the group. If I need to speak to the players, as opposed to characters, you’ll hear me as a disembodied voice, and I’ll try to pause whenever possible before I do so. Don’t panic, by the way – pausing won’t freeze you in place or anything; you just won’t be able to go very far or interact with stuff. In any event, even if I talk to you without pausing, NPCs won’t be able to hear me. Just you guys. OK?”

“And what about during combat?” Remy drummed his fingers, clearly not very interested in the non-combat aspects of the app’s functionality.

“Right. Combat is still turn-based like usual. You’ll have a filter that lets you see one another’s hit point totals and status effects – unless I hide something on purpose – and the system will roll initiative on its own and prompt you when it’s your turn. Hopefully you’ve all read up on the combat rules by now, but it’s pretty similar to the old system barring the changes I outlined in the email I sent out yesterday.”

“Do we, like, feel pain if we get shot?” Brendan asked with a curious grin. “I mean, we feel what our characters feel, so making sure I’m not about to feel what an actual fireball feels like.”

Surprisingly, it was Hannah who answered. “You’ll feel it, and it hurts, but it’s... I dunno, dulled? Like, you know what hurts and how, but you can think and act through it. You’ll see. It’s not too bad.”

Jacob arched an eyebrow. “And how do you know about that?”

“What, I’m the only one who shot at Slutbag?” She looked around at the stunned room. “Whatever. I was testing things out. Sue me.”

“Also, ‘Slutbag?’” repeated Keon. He’d personally named her Sasha, but there was no way he’d ever tell anyone else here that.

Jacob went on. “So our opening session will be kind of a trial run to get us familiar with some of the mechanics of the game system and the way it’s implemented in the app. I had to pull some contrivances to get your group together, so forgive me for that and let’s just roll with it until we develop some real party cohesion, OK?”

“And, um, do warn us before the app goes live this time, OK? I get what you were doing before, but there’s only so much I want to not know what’s real and what’s not,” Toni said softly.

“Absolutely, Tone. So before I start it up, a little narrative set-up. I’m sending each of you a blurb with your recent actions as they pertain to the campaign. Once we start, it’ll be up to you to decide what, if any, to share with the group.” Even through the holo, the flicker of his eyes was perceptible, and a moment later Keon’s holo notified him of a new email.

Cornelius Walker: After a brief hiatus after a score big enough to give you some time off from the life, you were recently contracted by an anonymous employer. Their job was to build them some surveillance technology, including the usual miniaturized A/V, but also a remote-activated network probe – a little piece of work that, if it manages to break into a network, can monitor and record up to 3 TB of data. Per your employer's request, the devices were to be able to be fully autonomous – no means of remote access. You charged an added fee for anonymity as well as the risk of fabricating a device that couldn't be remote detonated (and thus traced back to you), and delivered as promised.

Keon read it twice to make sure he understood it, but was pleased when someone else confirmed they'd still be able to access it in-game. Keon was good at memorization, but Jacob was good at hiding clues in plain sight. The guy prided himself on his I-technically-told-you-so's.

Once everyone had finished reading, it was time. Jacob gave them a moment to get comfortable, hoisted his laptop in front of him, and the world went dark.

In the blink of an eye, he was back in the body of Cornelius Walker. Bigger, stronger, and even though he was suddenly lying in bed – his own bed? but...? – he felt his impressive 18 Intelligence kicking in to make quick sense of things. He was in bed. Warm, comfy, eyes just opening. He was in his boxers and nothing else. That wouldn't have bothered him, except... he wasn't alone.

“Who the hell are–”

Then something heavy slammed into the back of his skull, and darkness came again.

When Corn woke up the next time, he was a good deal less comfortable. Still in nothing but his boxers, though this time in a cold room, sterile, like a doctor's office but without all the diagrams and charts. It was dimly lit, a single fluorescent light overhead in what looked to be an entire bank of them. The door to the small room was closed, but a sliver of brighter light leaked in beneath the door.

"So, we're starting off as prisoners without our gear, eh?" He laughed. Hannah was right. Though Corn was chilly, and his head throbbed from the sap, and was afraid, Keon these facts registered as details to be aware of. He was still in control, and the pain was no more pressing than the hot sun on his skin on a warm day. "Not your most original opener, but I'll play along."

If Jacob was listening, he didn't reply.

Corn inspected his surroundings in greater depth, though it was fast apparent there wasn't much to see. He'd woken up on a metal table, but there was nothing beneath it but empty space. There was a tall standing cabinet on one wall, but it was locked. He could force it but doing so would be loud, so if his captors came to check on him, it would reveal he was both awake and rambunctious. Wherever Remy's character was, he was probably doing precisely that. Remy always played the same character with only minor differences in race and ability selection; if his character wasn't presently bellowing vows of revenge while he tried to kick down the door, Keon would eat his shoe.

Corn was a more subtle type. Yes, he was expecting he'd need to escape, but first, he wanted to learn something about his captors. If they'd wanted him dead, they obviously could have killed him, so there was no need to fear immediate execution. You could tell a lot about a person's motives by the questions they asked you.

Hopefully they'd start by asking, and not prying off his fingernails. Though Jacob didn't usually go that dark, especially on the PCs.

He had the presence of mind to make sure the door was locked, though he noted it had a lock on the inside as well, so it probably hadn't originally been built as a holding cell. Maybe an interrogation chamber. Heck, maybe it really was some kind of medical facility. He even tried peering under the door, but the crack was too small to see anything. He did, however, hear footsteps coming his way, and he quickly scuttled back and hopped back up on the table, perching there as nonchalantly as a prisoner in his underwear could.

Then came the sound of a key turning in the lock, the click of it disengaging, and the door swung open. His character, well-trained in basic engineering principles, intuitively made some assumptions about the lock, suggesting a moderate to high probability of his being able to pick it if he were able to acquire the tools to do so. He'd bought some during his character creation, so hopefully he'd get to reacquire them soon.

He only got a glimpse of a vacant hallway before the person unlocking the door let themselves in and shut it behind them. He was an unremarkable man, a little short and a little scrawny. One hand held a tablet, a handle mounted on the back so he could use it more easily on the go. His suit suited him, Corn thought; no jacket, a yellow – yellowed? – shirt with a tie that looked to have been loosened long since. He made a surmise that it must be still that same night; people didn't show up to work looking so disheveled.

The man's eyes flickered, and the remaining fluorescent bulbs in the room brightened. He was looking down at his tablet, tapping at something Corn couldn't see. "Mr. Walker, hello there. Glad to see you're awake."

"Glad to be awake. And what do I call you?"

The man didn't bother looking up. "Oh, there's no need to waste your breath asking the who's and why's of this, Mr. Walker. I have a lot on my plate at the moment, and one of my priorities is discerning who your employer was."

Corn raised an eyebrow. "Which one? I do work for a lot of people." Obviously it was going to be the one in that email, but still, Keon was playing a character, and Corn had no way of knowing that job had been more significant than the rest.

The man glanced up, seeming surprised to receive a fair answer. "Oh. Right." He reached into a pocket and produced a camera that Keon could only surmise was one of the ones referenced in Jacob's email. "The one who paid you for this."

Corn didn't look at it for long, and handed it back when the man held his hand out expectantly. Not worth fighting over. Lull them. "Ah. I couldn't tell you. I would if I could, but I was contacted and paid anonymously."

The man sighed, and returned his attention to the tablet, silently tapping for an awkwardly long moment. "I see," he said at last. "I was worried you'd say that. So I'm sure you'll appreciate, I have no way of knowing whether or not that's true, and I can't exactly settle for a non-answer."

"It's the truth. I don't know—"

"Mhm, you said that before. So I have the rest of your little team on site, and really it's a simple matter of who proves the most cooperative first. We make exceptions for team players, but I gotta say, based on what you've given me so far, I'm not liking your odds of coming out ahead on this. I'm going to make the rounds, see if any of them are in a better mental place, and if not... I'll be back, and maybe we'll talk more."

Corn barely had time to ask "what teammates?" before the door slammed shut behind him. The lock clicked a moment later. It was a good confirmation though that the rest of the party was on site.

Locked in a room, practically naked and without a clue in the world where he was, and those damned fluorescent bulbs trying to give him a seizure. Lovely. "Hey, Jacob, can you hear me?"

“Sure can.”

“So do I actually know who hired me? I wasn’t going to tell that guy anyway, but wanted to make sure.”

“Negative. Corn seemed like the sort who purges communications with employers for his own safety. As much plausible deniability as he can get.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Jacob left it at that. Hmm. So he couldn’t try to trace his communications with the client even if he wanted to. It was just as well. Corn Walker was not a quitter, and he did not give in to bullies.

While the man with the tablet had been here, he’d been making observations. One, the only discernible bulge in those too-tight pants of his had been the camera. That meant there were no keys, and that meant the lock to the room was remote-activated. Which meant it could be hacked.

Of course, typical implants were fairly simple computers, their processing power dwarfed by models from many years earlier. They were mostly good for simple tasks like taking pictures, activating other devices, or accessing communications. There was only so much amperage the human brain could handle being hooked up to, after all, so they were kept weak by design.

That was typical implants, however. Cornelius Walker’s implant was not typical. One of his first level Engineer class abilities was to outfit his character with a superior implant, which functioned as a computer that grew in capabilities as he leveled. For now, he was busy using it to access the lights.

It took him a minute, and he was pretty sure that was literal. There had been no fast forward on it, as Jacob had alluded to earlier, which he took to mean other characters were doing things presently, too.

Next up, he aimed his implant’s remote connectivity at the door lock.

“Jacob, if you’re listening, the Recall Knowledge feature on skill checks is amazing. My Computers is kicking ass for me right now,” he said. It was feeding Keon, via his own implant in the real world, simple information about what his character’s implant could and couldn’t do. From what he’d read in the manual regarding skill usage, there was a lot of simplification and hand-waving of real world scientific issues about what computers could and couldn’t do, which was a welcome respite. He was not one of those players who liked to point out technicalities when he caught them. The point of the game was to set up obstacles and give him a chance to beat them, not inflate his ego for acing high school computer science.

There was no response from Jacob. Probably interrogating one of the others with his weedy little NPC, he figured. This time, his initial check failed, as did his second and his third, but on the fourth try, there was a little *click PING* sound that he couldn’t help but hear as “fifteen!” Finally a good roll. He wondered if the others had left the roll

results toggled on like that. The blue-haired woman had said she could just transmit it to his plant, but he liked the added flavor.

Corn listened at the door; either he rolled poorly on an unseen Perception check, or it really was quiet. In any case, he decided to risk a peek, and was relieved to find it was clear. The hallway dead-ended next to his cell, a high window revealing only the upper limbs of a tree a short ways away. Not ground floor. Damn. Corn was tall, but even so, he had to crane his neck to see even straight ahead, and couldn't see anything else outside. As for the hall itself, it looked as bland and sterile as the room, bare beige walls, off-white tile floor. There were three doors on each wall, spaced to suggest the rooms were sized similarly to his own, and then the corridor wended to the right.

A little round robot was rolling around nearby, but it appeared to merely be cleaning the floor, and paid Corn no mind. He returned the courtesy.

Well, if these were indeed other holding cells, that meant that fellow with the tablet could be in any one of them. At random, he picked the one opposite his and listened. Hearing nothing, he proceeded with another hack, heart racing as his attention was preoccupied by the implant. There was nothing to hear, but he knew if there were, he may well miss it. "Distracted," the manual had called it, and while a small numeric penalty to his Perception had sounded trivial when he'd read it, suddenly, practically naked and at the mercy of his enemy, those little details loomed large.

sffff PING!

It was open. Corn didn't know what he'd find in there, but it had to be better than what was waiting for him back in his.

And in fact... it was a *lot* better.

She was gorgeous. He could hardly believe the app had been able to cram so many curves so perfectly onto such a tiny frame. She couldn't be more than 5'3", a Latina with hazel eyes, a set of plump lips that almost made him forget everything else. But the everything else... wow! She looked like she'd been taken in a similar state to himself, because here she was in a thin white cotton t-shirt and a pair of red silk panties completely exposed beneath it.

"Toni...?" he guessed, but when the girl immediately burst into giggles, he revised it. "Jesus, Hannah, you outdid yourself. For crying out loud, you're..." He stopped. Why was she still at it? Harder, even. Whatever else it meant, it definitely meant she was making noise, and people locked in rooms by themselves didn't giggle.

"Shhh!" he hissed. "There's men here, and they're—"

"Yeah, I know – already came by like ten minutes ago. Don't worry. I laughed plenty then, too. This whole situation is just trippy as hell, right?"

Corn frowned. Something in that voice... it was a woman's voice, high-pitched and a bit nasal, and decidedly of Hispanic heritage from the soft accent. Even so, it reminded him of...

“Mr. Gibbel?!”

At that, the woman flat out broke out into belly laughs, falling over the table and pounding her fist on it as gale after gale of laughter poured forth. You’d have thought it was the joke of the year, and Corn could only hope Jacob wasn’t going to hold her reaction against them as he adjudicated Perception checks for nearby NPCs.

“Oh my freaking god, man, you should have seen yourself. ‘Mr Gibbel?!’ Ha! Oh shit, man, I’m sorry, I don’t know why I figured you knew, but fuck, that was hilarious,” she – he? – said as she finally recovered.

“But... you’re a *woman*. And you’re... *Latina*,” he said, trying not to make it sound quite as accusatory as he wanted it to. Was there nothing old rich white men wouldn’t try to take for themselves? He supposed she was probably a lesbian too – then rescinded his own sarcasm in the supposition, as it quite likely was the case. Oldest cliché in the book, staunchly hetero players who can only play women who are crazy hot and share their player’s taste in women.

“Can’t sneak anything past you, Keon.” She gave him one of those shoulder punches of his. Hers. Whatever.

“But... I wrote your backstory. It was definitely about a man. Did you revise it with Jacob since then?”

“What? Oh, no. Honestly, I never got around to reading it. Why, you thought Lane was a guy?”

“Um, yeah. I mean, nothing against gender-bending characters, but... I dunno, I guess I didn’t think about it.”

“Hey man, my eyes are up here,” she said, then cackled at her joke.

“I wasn’t even looking!”

“Chill out, buddy, I’m only teasing ya. I’ve just always wanted to say that.”

With a character like that, he was going to have to get used to it, Keon thought, but he let it drop. “All right, so are you ready to talk about how we’re getting out of here? I think I can pick the locks, given time, but I don’t know how much we have. The guy with the tablet said something about my ‘team,’ so I’m assuming the whole party is here. There’s six doors in this hallway, room for all of us and then some.”

“Cool cool, man. Let’s do it.”

“I mean, do you have any input or ideas on how we do it, or what we do once we’re all out? From what little I could see, I’d guess we’re in a second or third story, maybe more, so windows are probably out. I think I saw a fire extinguisher at the end of the hall, so if we have absolutely no choice but incapacitating a guard, we could use it as an improvised weapon. My guy’s attack bonus with it will be pretty terrible, though. I remember there was a feat option to ignore the penalty from improvised weapons, but I didn’t take it.”

“Looks like you brought some guns, though,” Lane said, and when he only looked more confused, she patted his biceps in a way that would have been uncomfortable from a real version of her. From Mr. Gibbel, it was *very* uncomfortable.

“I can try it if I have to, but I don’t want to make it a first resort. I assume you’re not in any better shape on the offensive options front.”

“Yeah, I focused Charisma, like that blue chick recommended. Then Dex, so this puppy could be flexible.” Lane dragged out the first L sound, accompanying it with a flick of her butt with her finger. “Seriously, you could bounce a whole roll of quarters off this thing.”

“That’s not going to be as helpful as you think,” Corn said dryly. “We need to find Remy. He’ll be able to supply some muscle. Or maybe Toni has a spell we could use? I don’t know. I’m not sure if she needs components or anything, either. I didn’t study up on the Near Future spellcasting chapter yet.”

“Yeah, I am way behind on learning the system. Then again, I’m still better versed in D&D 2e than anything. Who needs stable rules when you could just have a random chart, right? Either way, I’m behind you. Lead the way, uh... who are you?”

Corn smiled tightly. “Cornelius Walker. Call me Corn.”

“Lane McCallister.”

Leave it to Mr. Gibbel to give a Latina beauty the least Latina name he’d ever heard.

Corn returned to the door, but stopped short of opening it. “Um, I guess one point of protocol before we sally forth, but... isn’t the high-Charisma character supposed to be the leader? You know, confident and cocksure, rousing speeches, fearless in the face of danger...?”

“Guess not. Why, what’re you?”

“Engineer. Intelligence-based. Specializes in traps, gadgets, tech stuff. My Charisma’s a 12. One lower than my parents’ dog.”

She giggled. “Well you wear it like an 18, champ. Now come on, let’s roll some dice!”

Chapter Three

Forming a Party

“One, two, about, face. One, two, about, face. One, two, about, face.”

These cells were definitely not built to accommodate the anxious pacing that they had the effect of triggering in their occupants, Kennedy thought. It was two fretful strides from one side to the other, or three regular paces. Not enough to work off her uneasiness. Not by a long shot.

She could hear them in the hallway, giggling and shushing one another and giggling some more as they got their first sight of one another’s characters. That, she expected, would be fun. Good. She could use some fun right now. Because so far, she was about the furthest thing from having fun.

“One, two, about, face. One, two, about, face.” The chant went handily in time with her pacing. Something to do other than think about where she was and what was happening. Yes. Keep pacing. Don’t stop. Don’t think. Don’t lose balance again. That would make this even worse.

One, two, about, face.

Another round of shushing. Could they not realize that they would’ve been caught already if anyone were within earshot? Giggle away. Why weren’t they hurrying to her door? And how did they get out? Maybe someone smuggled a lockpick or something. Smart. She should’ve thought along those lines. But her gear wasn’t with her. *Nothing* she’d given her character was with her. She caught herself trying the knob again, stopped herself again.

Almost nothing, anyway. Practically nothing.

One, two, about, face.

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“So, what’d you think?”

Toni didn’t answer right away, as she was lining up her dice in the order she’d memorized them. Not 4 die, 6 die, 8 die and so on. No. A great sin evidently, misnaming her dice. She’d been scolded several times by that shy yet angry redheaded guy. Remy? Or was his character Remy? It was confusing.

They were d4, d6, d8, d10, d100, d20... Why did 20 come after 100? And why was it 100 if it had ten sides? Something still felt like it was missing, but what would it be? Was there a d3? No. She remembered that had come up, and Jake had said to use the cube – the Monopoly one, he’d called it, with only the barest hint of condescension – and divide by two.

“It was... interesting,” she said. “Say, am I missing a dice? I feel like there was one more, but...”

He glanced at the gathered dice for a mere fraction of a second. “Um, singular is die, and yeah, your d12.” She rolled her eyes at the correction, but only a little. Mostly she was surprised anyone recognized them by sight that quickly.

“Oh. I wonder if one of the others snagged it on accident?”

“Nah. Greg uses my dice, and Remy and Shawn have a container that wouldn’t fit an extra. Especially not a fat one like the twelver. Here, I’ll help you look for it.”

So Remy was the player, not the dwarf barbarian. Right. She considered making a joke about him, and containers, and fat ones, and what would fit where, but it wasn’t coming together. That guy had seriously looked like he’d never been trapped in a room before with a girl who wasn’t related to him. In lieu of the quip, she contented herself with a little chuckle at the thought before accepting Jake’s offer.

His dorm room wasn’t very big – though she supposed not having a roommate made it feel palatial compared to the one she shared with Bossy Brenda down the hall. Purdue didn’t allow coed floors, not officially, but their respective living units were separated by a single door that was almost always propped open. Rumor had it Toni’s RA was hooking up with someone on Jake’s floor, and she used her keys to give him (and thus everyone else in the unit) access.

It was, in fact, how they’d met, when Jake and Greg were playing ping pong in the shared lounge with some of her floormates. She’d simply been avoiding Brenda, killing time texting her friends from back home and trying not to laugh at the guys’ amateur flirtation attempts, if one could even call them that. Toni had gotten straight A’s in math in high school, but she couldn’t begin to count how many “balls” puns they made. Keep mentioning scrotums, guys. Such a turn-on.

After the girls finally tired of the guys pretending they were letting them win, Greg had taken one last look at her and darted back to his hole. She hadn’t set out to

intimidate him, but she had been looking pretty good that day, and her shorts were doing wonders for her legs. Jake, on the other hand, had impressed her by having the guts to actually try to strike up a conversation. When she'd said how her first months of college hadn't quite lived up to the hype, he'd told her if she was bored, she should join them for their game night sometime.

If he'd asked her out, Toni would have said no. But she really was bored, and really hadn't made any good friends yet – just some girls on her floor that were always dragging her to frat parties. It killed time, but it wasn't really her.

“So, ‘interesting,’ I believe you said,” Jake said over his shoulder as he crawled down to look under his lower bunk. “Good interesting, or meh interesting?”

She swiveled his desk chair to look back at him, and when he looked away, devoted some thought to whether or not that butt of his was too scrawny for her tastes. Not quite, she decided. “I think good...? I dunno. It was kind of weird, imagining myself hacking people up and all.”

“If I'd actually thought you were gonna show, I'd have made you something a little more delicate,” he said, grunting as he stretched to see whether some unseen object might be her dice. He worked his way back to his knees after a moment, frowning at what was apparently a breath mint.

“Delicate, eh? So I strike you as delicate? Is that what you're saying?”

She'd only been teasing, but he winced like she'd slapped him. How had this timid fellow ever had the guts to chat her up in the first place? “No, I mean – you're... you're not, you know, *delicate* delicate, you're just...” He stopped as she burst into laughter. “You're just fucking with me.” He grinned.

“Sorry, I couldn't help it.”

“Water under the bridge, my delicate flower.” He looked around the room again, sighing. “You're sure you didn't, I don't know, put it in your pocket or something? Greg loses his dice in his fat rolls all the time.”

Toni laughed. “I checked while you were spelunking for mints. Unless you feel like I need to double check my fat rolls.”

“If you had any, maybe I would.”

That was good. Subtle compliment on her looks, but casual. Organic. He was playing this well. “And you're sure you didn't just want to amuse yourself by making me crawl around for you?”

“Hey, if you want to frisk me to be sure...” She arched her eyebrows. Maybe this game was fun.

Jake stood up, and whatever he was going to do or say was lost when his balance faltered and he staggered backwards towards the bed. His head slammed into the metal bedframe of the upper bunk, and he yelled in pain. With a yelp of alarm, Toni scurried

over, fussing over him and making sure he wasn't bleeding or concussed. That had sounded nasty.

"I think it's swelling a little, but you should be OK," she assured him at last, smoothing his hair down and setting his head back on his pillow.

"Ha, little do you realize I staged the whole thing just to get you in bed with me," he said. "I've practiced the whole routine so much I can barely feel it. Shaved off a few IQ points, though."

She smiled down at him. "Few dozen, I think."

He put his hand over hers. "Still, worth it."

Oh, what the hell – it was this or go home to get a lecture from Brenda about not labeling her stuff in the fridge again. Toni bent down to kiss him – and smacked her forehead in the exact same place.

"Oh god, are you OK?!"

But her second attempt was much more successful, and by the time their lips met they were both laughing so hard that it was hardly a kiss at all. At first, anyway. By the time she got around to assessing that indeed, his butt wasn't half bad, she decided that yes, her first session had definitely been good interesting.

“One, two, about, face. One, two—”

Kennedy heard a click from the lock. She refreshed her spell in a flash, and a moment later, the door opened. She had to squint at the sudden influx of light from the hallway, so they saw her before she saw them. “Toni!” cried one of them, a short but broad-shouldered black guy in his boxers.

The group hustled into the room, sealing themselves in with her. There were three of them so far: the guy in the boxers; a gorgeous Latina in a t-shirt and red underwear; and a redheaded girl, this one proportioned like a porn star and quite nearly dressed like one, nothing but a heavy duty powder blue bra and matching thong. Toni practically had to avert her eyes, it was so far over the top.

“Am I ever glad to see you guys – and girls – and girl-guys,” she said, letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

More giggling. “All right, your turn. Match the character to the player, Toni. Who are you looking at?” the man queried. The three of them shared glances, grinning ear to ear.

“How did you know it was me,” she said dryly. That, she knew, had been obvious. Her character was, for the most part, her. Or at least, her in her twenties. She might’ve made a minor embellishment here and there, given her hair a little extra volume and removed that mole on her neck, made everything a little firmer and tighter. To be fair, though, that was about how she remembered her prime. Kennedy’s face and shape, though, were unmistakably Toni. 5’9”, 124 pounds, straight honey blonde hair most of the way down her back like she’d worn it back then, same big brown eyes that people always accused her of using filters to make pop the way they did. Most people who knew her probably wouldn’t notice the difference.

Aside, of course, from the fact that she was standing upright. That would surprise them. Heck, it was still surprising her.

Jacob – or at least the NPC that was controlled by him – had seemed not to notice. They hadn’t noticed a lot of things, somehow. She shook it off, determined not to darken her friends’ moods.

“OK, so we have Keon,” she said, nodding to the guy.

His eyes narrowed “What, all of us look alike to you?”

She tried not to smirk. “Nobody else would play a black guy. Or did you forget the time Remy made Ebon E. Stryker and you tried to have Jacob throw him out of the group? Or the time we nixed an entire session because we were dealing with your issues with the intersectionality of blackness and fantasy races?”

He rolled his eyes. “Hey, I guarantee you it nobody consulted the NAACP when they decided all black elves and dwarves and dragons were evil.”

“And you’re...?” She gestured to his character’s body.

“True neutral.” He paused. “Oh. Cornelius Walker. Call me Corn.”

“Kennedy McCannon.” The two quickly shook hands. Wow. No way Keon shook hands like that. This guy was buff. Confident. Rather attractive, even, though it seemed this wasn’t the time or place for noticing such things.

She turned to the two women, leaving her eyes predominantly on the one who was merely half naked. “All right. So here we have... Hannah?”

The girl giggled, and Toni knew immediately that she’d been the lion’s share of the noise in the hallway. Wow, what a voice. High-pitched and pinched-off, a valley girl’s voice cast out of type in a telenovela starlet’s body. Still, if it wasn’t Hannah, then... “Don’t feel bad. Your friends both thought I was you, actually, so at least your guess is original.”

Her jaw dropped. She’d said *your friends*, which could only make her... “Brendan?!” His character’s eyes gleamed. “Oh my GOSH, this is... Wow. I mean, you’re so... um...”

“Yeah, I know. But I figured if we’re stuck playing humans, I’d try some things I hadn’t done already, you know? Gladly got such a kick out of it when I told her. I named her Lane McCallister, by the way. I got it from—”

“Well, what about me?” demanded the redhead, oozing impatience.

“I saved obvious for last, Remy,” she said, gingerly patting the girl’s shoulder. Man, her skin was *perfect*. It felt how lotion commercials looked.

But she could instantly tell she’d once more guessed wrong. “Oh come on! Can’t *one* of you assholes sense my obvious natural sex appeal underneath this stick-like edifice?”

Once more her jaw slammed into the floor. “Holy crap, *Hannah?!!*”

“Call me Sanguine, baby girl.”

“Oh my freaking gosh!” Toni suddenly had to look her over. It was different knowing it was a girl under there. It gave her license to be more open with her inspection – something Jacob could learn a lot about. “This is what you call ‘stick-like’? My god, if that’s a stick, what the heck am I?!”

“A twig?” she suggested.

“Apparently. Good grief girl, you went all out on the va-va-voom, eh? You look amazing!”

“You look pretty good yourself.”

For a moment, Toni caught the three of them looking at her legs, and caught her meaning. She made herself smile, but that was as much as she wanted to dwell on it. She was playing a character who wasn’t disabled, like she always had, and this time there was a visual that went with it. That was all. Any desire she’d had for someone to ooh and aah over it had already been snuffed out.

“So, I gotta ask, did you not get the memo about the dress code?” asked Corn.

Brendan – Lane – nodded. “Yeah, they took us in our sleep. Guess they took you while you were on your way to work?”

She shrugged. “I’m wearing what I slept in.”

This was technically true. This truth was complicated, however, by the fact that she’d had to use her *lesser veil* spell to make it look like she wasn’t standing here buck-ass naked – for the next ten minutes, anyway. The illusion was pretty convincing, a little more powerful than its counterpart in their usual fantasy system from the wording. The slacks and sweater not only looked real, but felt real, too. She could see through it like the clothes were thinly layered holograms, their translucence revealing the flesh beneath.

Preserving her modesty like this, though, meant she was already almost out of spells for the day, aside from a few petty cantrips, having used up her entire allotment of first level spells maintaining this so she wouldn’t be caught by her friends in an indecent state. Or Brendan, even worse. If she’d been playing a character, it would have been embarrassing, but as Kennedy was a near-clone of herself...!

“Groovy. Well, there’s still two more doors, so we got a 50/50 shot of finding Remy’s guy in the next one,” said Keon. “Come on – let’s get the gang back together, and then we can figure out how to get the hell out of here.”

“I can’t wait.”

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“Lady Pfeffercorn, I have told you already, your entreaty has fallen on deaf ears! Have you come back to embarrass yourself further?”

Toni folded her arms. “Difficult to embarrass myself in the absence of an audience, Your Majesty. Or rather an audience of one, but one who has already made it all too clear how little he cares for the petitions of a lady of the Eastmire.”

Jake stroked his wispy goatee. Oh, how she wished he’d shave that thing. “It is not a matter of caring, my lady, but rather a simple question of manpower. You have asked me for men, and I have told you I have none to spare. Now you steal into my private chambers to ask again?”

“It is true that, as you say, I came seeking men. But I have since reconsidered.”

“Oh?” Her boyfriend wrinkled his nose in a haughty way, and she barely stopped herself from laughing. He took roleplay very seriously, after all.

“I considered, Your Majesty, that perhaps I had not been sufficiently clear what the Eastmire has to offer.”

“Nothing that will attract you the men you request,” he said snidely.

“But Your Majesty, it is only a single man whom I seek to attract.” She emphasized the word only slightly, wondering if the sudden bulge beneath Jake’s “kingly robes” – which was actually her old silk bathrobe – was on account of her flirtation, the extensive flattery, or the corset that was threatening to crush the life out of her. She couldn’t wait until he got her out of it. Still, it wouldn’t do to rush things too much.

“Why, Lady Pfeffercorn, if I didn’t know better, I would suspect you were offering something... untoward,” he said, drumming his fingers on the arm of her recliner.

“Is it untoward for a woman to pledge her all to the service of her people?”

Jake snorted, retorting her in that practiced British accent he always used for his royal characters. “It sounds as if you were offering to pledge your all to the service of your king, sweet lady.”

Toni took a deep breath, aware of the way the simple act of inhaling made her boobs nearly pop out of her dress. She kept her voice soft, sexy. “And if I were, Your Majesty?”

His lips curled up in half a smile. “I would have you know, you would not be the first woman – nor even the first of noble birth – to attempt to use your wiles to secure the crown’s aid. Mere flirtation is inadequate to sway me, even from a woman of such peerless beauty as the Lady Pfeffercorn.”

Toni took a stride forward, her voice lowering further, practically a purr. She sounded so sexy she was turning *herself* on. “Why, then mayhaps I shall endeavor to do more than flirt.”

The king did not reply, and she took that as a sign she was finally free to act. She'd gotten the dress to humor him by attending the annual Renaissance Fair in Wisconsin. She'd never been, and it had been surprisingly fun. The corset, however, was a more recent addition. Toni might not have the biggest bust, but in this thing, you'd never know it.

Slowly, deliciously slowly, she untied the laces holding up her dress. It was a good thing she was flexible, or she'd never be able to do it on her own. Tying it up in the first place had been even harder, but it would have ruined the corset surprise to have Jake help her. She enjoyed dressing up for their roleplay nights, but the budget of two college students meant that usually their characters preferred more modern attire. Tonight was their one-year anniversary (how had it been that long?!), so she was going the extra mile.

Finally, the dress slid off her shoulders and down to her waist, leaving her torso in nothing but the corset. She tried not to be vain, but in this thing, it was hard not to be. Crimson red with black flowering, compressing her already slender body to the utmost. Comfortable or no, though, she knew she looked *hot*. She could see Jake was thinking it too, but leave it to him not to break character even to pay his girlfriend a compliment.

Toni approached the "throne," her upthrust breasts right above face level. "Did the other noblewomen look like this, my king?"

"You're off to a good start, Lady Pfeffercorn. Don't ruin it with more of that arrogance of yours. I was just beginning to warm up to your humble side."

Toni curtsied, and took her time about it. Her boyfriend's eyes were riveted on her chest the whole way down and all the way back up. He was usually too polite to stare at her body, and when he did, it wasn't at her chest. It was a fun change. "Apologies, Your Majesty. This is the first time I have been blessed to be so close to a king. I confess I am unsure what a man of your unparalleled tastes would enjoy from a woman so far beneath him."

Jake licked his lips. "Well first of all, don't do the job halfway, Lady Pfeffercorn. I like to see what I'm working with," he replied.

Seriously? So much for regal sophistication. She'd meant to slather it on so thick he'd have to apologize, but it looked like that was how he wanted to go. Hmmph. But she wasn't going to be the one to ruin it this time. If he wanted to conflate the king with some horny old sultan, so be it.

"Of course, Your Majesty." Toni turned her back to him, and while he craned his neck to keep his eyes on her boobs, once she released her hold on the waist of her dress, he found something else worth admiring. She'd chosen a pair of panties that complemented the corset, dark red and incredibly tight, riding right up her crack. She didn't mind. She had a hell of an ass.

Jake had said once, “your mind is all I’m after,” and it had created the biggest fight of their relationship. Yes, she loved that he wasn’t just another college horndog. She truly did. But her mind also inhabited one hell of a body, and they both knew but never acknowledged out loud that both of their friend groups had confided that she was too hot for him. (They said it in very different tones.) Toni didn’t care about keeping score, but she did want her credit in the form of seeing him driven truly wild by his gorgeous girlfriend.

She felt a hand on her hip, then one on the other, and he was pulling her toward him. “My, but you are lovely, aren’t you.” She could feel his breath on her butt, and goosebumps formed along her arms. That was good. Slow, but firm. Yes. He had a grip she could tell he didn’t mean to let go. A kingly grip.

“Thank you, my king.” She stood still, his subject turned object, as he gingerly probed at her body. Her boyfriend’s hands caressed her hips, her ass, her thighs, and eventually made their way to that space between them.

“Forgive me for permitting a barrier between my king and his conquest,” Toni said, hooking her thumbs in the waistband of her panties. She bent double, her thick French braid nearly grazing the floor. With deliberate movements, she peeled her underwear over her butt inch by sumptuous inch, and only when gravity lowered them to where her ankles crossed did she step out of them, only without standing back up. Her ass wasn’t six inches from Jake’s face, and neither of them were moving. She’d had a massive thigh gap as long as she could remember, so he must see how turned on she was.

roleplay as her character in their game and as one of the central antagonists had been his idea, and she’d balked at first. But maybe humoring him on this wouldn’t be so bad.

Then one of those long, slender fingers of his was sliding inside her with that same sense of royal entitlement. Then another – no, make that two more. “Truly, you are fit for a king.”

Toni’s moan was not humoring him. This... this was...

She moaned again.

By the time Jake’s fingers withdrew, the baroness was supporting herself with both hands on the floor, her thighs glistening with the moisture trickling down them. She’d always been embarrassed around previous boyfriends of how wet her pussy grew when she was turned on, but Jacob really liked it, which made her feel better about it. Gazing up at him between those thighs, Toni saw he had exposed his rod of rulership, as he’d jokingly called it during their prep discussion. Wow, was he hard. Toni rose, turning to face him and was in the midst of lowering herself onto his waiting shaft when...

“Do the ladies of the Eastmire not recognize their obligation to kneel before royal majesty?” asked the king, eyes glinting mischievously.

“Of course, your Majesty,” she said, sinking to her knees. Where had this guy been for the last year? “But we are also sometimes so awestruck that we forget our manners. However shall I prove the sincerity of my devotion after such a lapse?”

Jake looked down at her with apt imperiousness. Her tongue snaked in and out of her mouth, moistening red lips. “By the same mechanism by which you made me question your devotion during your petition this afternoon. With your mouth.”

“Oh, yes your majmmhmm!” He was in her mouth before she finished the sentence. Toni had given Jake many a blowjob in the past twelve months, particularly in those early days before he’d felt ready to do more. (For the first time in her life, she’d actually had to convince rather than permit a boyfriend to have sex with her.) Tonight, though, she wasn’t giving a blowjob so much as she was paying homage to his cock. It was like this wanton, demanding, lustful king had affected a coup and taken over her timid boyfriend. Her tongue was cooperating, flooding her mouth with saliva as she blew him like a porn star – at least, how she imagined a porn star would do it.

It was noisy. It was wet. It was inelegant, and needy, and subservient to his expressed desire. It was the most turned on she’d ever been with him. He’d done a little manscaping for her, she noted, though under the circumstances she almost wished he hadn’t. The king shouldn’t worry about such niceties to appease the Baroness Pfeffercorn. The king should take hold of the sides of her face and thrust himself until he came.

Just like that. God, yes.

Toni wasn’t a swallower, however. She didn’t like the taste, and the thought of what it was she was being asked to swallow put her off a little bit. Normally. Today, she gulped down His Majesty’s spunk and licked her lips clean after.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said, practically gasping for air. “May I importune you for more? Humbly, please, I beg of you not to let your loyal subject go wanting!” She clawed her hands into his thighs.

Jake looked surprised for a moment, but he wasn’t dumb enough to say no. Quickly remembering his character, he gave a curt nod. “See to it that you do, Lady Pfefferco... coooo...” As Toni sucked him back into her mouth, he soon abandoned any attempt to make coherent noises.

It didn’t take a whole minute before he was back in shape for her. Had they ever tried to go twice in a row like this before? Why on earth not? He wasn’t fucking her face this time, but as vigorously as she was bobbing away, he didn’t need to. Her tongue was learning in the field, gaining experience points and putting them towards a rank in Perform (fellatio).

Yikes, was he rubbing off on her.

But while she had been perfectly willing to suck him to completion a second time, suddenly that uncharacteristically commanding voice spoke once more. “Cease your exertions, Lady Pfeffercorn, and stand.”

After a moment, words began to make sense to her addled brain, and she complied, standing naked from the waist down before him, letting his eyes devour her sweat-slicked body. Her braid was coming loose and long strands were clinging to slick shoulders, but she didn’t care. If he minded, he could say something, and she could rectify it.

“You are making a very impressive case for the merits of a closer alliance with Eastmire, Lady Pfeffercorn.”

It was awkward, curtsying without a dress, but she managed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She held it as he rose to his feet, looming over her. Without looking, his hand found its way back between her legs and brought her back upright. She wasn’t feigning when she grabbed his shoulders for balance; her knees really did go weak as he teased her engorged labia. The king didn’t object to her familiarity, however, and if anything seemed flattered at this power he had over her.

“If I were to offer to see to this apparent needfulness of yours, my lady, what would be your reply?”

She groaned in delight as a finger slipped inside for an exquisite moment’s tease. “Oh, *yes*, Your Majesty!”

“What if you had to choose between slaking your wanton desires, and the aid you request for the Eastmire? What would your answer be?”

She smiled. This was a fun game indeed. And in that moment, both Toni and Lady Pfeffercorn had the exact same answer in mind. “It brings me no honor to speak it, but...” She took a step closer, wrapping one leg around his waist and moving his free hand to her bare ass. His fingers dug into the tender flesh instantaneously, with unabashed desire.

“Fuck the Eastmire, Your Majesty,” she whispered into his ear. “And while you’re at it, I beg of you, fuck *me*.”

He did. Oh, did he ever! To her surprise and delight, he began by lifting her up and putting it to her standing right there in front of the throne. Any other day it was the funky chair they’d picked up from the curb during last year’s move-out week. Today it was a throne. Jake Winstone, the guy who got nervous riding the escalators, suddenly fucking her standing in the middle of her living room! Neither of them were strong enough to do it for very long, but the moment her feet hit the ground, he grasped the back of her neck and bent her down over his throne and picked right back up.

Never before had they engaged in such a sexual frenzy, and at every turn, she welcomed and indeed sought out his every command, thrilling at being the incredible

sexual being who could both inspire and fulfill his desires. Standing, bent over the chair, with her on one foot with the other raised over his shoulder, and even some good old-fashioned missionary so he could fully appreciate how hot she looked in that corset, which he never once suggested she remove. After, on trembling legs, they made their way to her shower, where he stood under the water rinsing the sex and sweat and imperial majesty from Jake's delicious, skinny little body while Toni held him from behind, her cheek resting on his shoulder.

"I don't know what came over me."

She kissed his neck, because it had been more than a minute and she missed having her lips on his skin. "Hmm?"

"Tonight. Being all... bossy like that. Telling you what to do."

She smiled. "Well you didn't see me not doing it, did you?"

He nodded. "You're amazing, Toni. I love you so much. I promise, I will never treat you like that again."

She broke up with him eight days later.

“About time!” snapped Remy’s character as they let themselves into his cell. Here, finally everyone saw about what they expected. Most had anticipated something taller, but the layers upon layers of muscle piled on his body were pure Remy. She could have imagined him playing the hot girl that turned out to be Brendan, but this would have been about what she guessed. Dark hair, dark expression, thick arms and thick neck and thick legs (and, she noted with a glance at his briefs, thick certain other parts). Dirk featured a maze of tribal tattoos etched over most of what she could see. It was a good look. She wasn’t one for macho badassery, but he was pulling it off.

Then, naturally, came the final round of guess who, and more shocked laughter and delighted giggling from Lane. Like Toni, he guessed both Kennedy and Corn correctly, but interposed Sanguine and Lane.

When the guessing game was over, it was finally time to get the campaign underway. Sanguine patted the veiny muscles on their barbarian’s upper arm. “I can’t believe you didn’t bust the door down already. You getting soft on us or something?”

“Soft? Fuck no.” He spat on the floor, and Toni’s reflexes, dulled from years of disuse, leaving some of the splatter to hit her foot. “I just know how Keon – Corn, I mean – would bitch about me starting a ruckus and disrupting his master plan. Speaking of, what is the master plan, exactly?”

Toni was hoping Keon had something impressive up his nonexistent sleeves herself, because her spell was already winding down in duration, and she was absolutely not interested in standing around with the party in the clothes her character was actually wearing. She grit her teeth again at the thought of it, almost wishing Jacob were here so she could give him a piece of her mind. The nerve!

Keon’s first suggestion was to check the final cell, and nobody could disagree. They were near the bend of the hallway, and while it was quiet, there was no telling who or what was around that corner. Better to have every advantage they could.

It took Keon several minutes to penetrate the lock on the final door. Toni, however, stopped him short of opening it at the last second. “Hold up – does anyone know anything about traps?”

“Traps? None of the others were trapped,” said Lane.

“No, she’s right. We found the whole party, so this could well be something different. Not to metagame, but there’s good odds our gear is in there. Sanguine, you’re playing an Agent, right? Sounds like a reskin of the rogue. I think this is your territory.”

The redhead nodded, hastening to the door. “Duh, right. Sorry, must be off my game today.” She flicked her own forehead as a rebuke, then began inspecting the door. Kennedy shook her head, hardly able to handle the thought of Hannah playing this ditzzy hottie.

The group had never really seen someone undertake the trap-searching process outside of a movie before. Usually, someone simply declared they were looking, rolled a

die, and were given an answer from the GM. Toni watched with great interest in the proceedings, as did the others. Though the guys may well have been watching the curvaceous redhead's mostly naked body, to be fair. Not that Kennedy was unimpressed herself, if she was being honest.

Finally, as the woman felt along the upper part of the doorframe, she stopped. "Wait! Yeah, there's a wire here. I think it's an alarm, probably if you don't open it the right way."

"Can you disable it?" Kennedy asked. Her *lesser veil* spell was down to the final minute.

"Without any tools? No idea. Be ready to think fast, everybody." She stood up on her tippy toes, that ridiculous booty of hers clenched in concentration as she fumbled about, mumbling, "What I wouldn't give for a guide wire."

"Wait!" Kennedy exclaimed. "I... have an idea."

Sanguine glared over her shoulder. "Well? Come on baby doll, whatcha got?"

"It's a spell – one of my minor ones. I wasn't sure what I'd use it for, but... I think it could work."

"OK, so get on with it already!" griped Dirk, Remy's little brute. From the obscene bulge obvious in his tighty whities, she didn't have to wonder what had inspired the name. Toni had seen the sliders for all sorts of lurid bodily details, even if she hadn't used them himself. She'd bet about anything that Dirk had set his phallus to the max. Though to be fair, in one of his rare moments of drunken over-sharing, Jacob had told her Remy himself was an impressive specimen in that department, so perhaps he was entitled to it.

"You trust me?" Kennedy asked.

Sanguine sunk back to her feet, hands on flowing hips. "Lady, I just met you."

Ah, right. Hannah was always one to approach things the way her PC would. For her, personality was part of the restriction and capability as much as the stats on the page. Toni fell into character along with her friend. "This won't work if you don't let it work. Willing targets only."

Sanguine's eyes narrowed, but after a moment, she nodded. "You were the only one here who wasn't looking at me like they wanted to fuck me. Go ahead."

Remy was less committed to staying in character as Dirk, quipping, "You made *that* character, and now you got a chip on your shoulder about people wanting to fuck you."

Kennedy shook her head. Then the gibberishy magic words flowed from her by instinct, a weird electrical buzzing accompanying them. As the magic lurched into her fellow captive, the woman soon lowered her guard, and when she saw what was happening, she laughed so loud even Remy elbowed her to keep it down.

Bit by bit, the underwire of her bra slipped out through a pinprick hole Kennedy's *minor dismantling* spell had created. She'd only taken the spell because that blue-haired girl in the character creation app had assured her that having it at level 1 allowed her to upgrade it to a more pragmatic version later in the game for free. She would have used it on her own bra, but that loser with the tablet had taken it with him.

"Will that do?" Toni said as the wire floated across the room and settled into her hands.

Sanguine snatched it back, grinning and immediately getting back to work. Kennedy blushed as the group congratulated her on her thoughtfulness. "Look at the brains on the new girl. Though this thing isn't doing squat for my tits any more." She rubbed at them irritably, and Dirk literally gaped, hands folding in front of his crotch. Corn actually seemed more interested in the wire, and she silently thanked him for being at least a little cool. Sanguine looked to the ceiling and asked, "Say, will this get rid of the penalty for not having proper tools?"

For the first time, Jacob's voice actually responded. "We'll say for this particular trap, sure. Good idea, Toni." Sure. Answer procedural questions, but don't break character and say something to your ex-girlfriend when she's... ugh. That man!

She didn't respond, and tried not to let her feelings show through her eyes. The rest of them were having fun.

2018

“And so, with Balthor’s sister back safe in your custody – however unhinged she may yet be – you can finally retreat to the captain’s cabin to take care of less pressing but no less rewarding business. Namely, counting up and dividing your plunder.”

“Is there some reason we’re still talking through this...? I think we can handle simple division without RPing it out.” Remy rolled his eyes, downed the last of his Dew.

“Shut up, Remy,” hissed Hannah.

“Yeah, shut up man,” echoed Keon, nodding for Jake to continue.

The GM murmured his thanks, reclining a little too easily in his armchair. Toni had only tagged along to this whole crazy thing because her friend Hannah had pestered her relentlessly so she wouldn’t be the only girl. Toni had been skeptical – a whole *week* of nothing but gaming?! – but it had turned out to be a surprisingly fun time. A lot of nostalgia, at least, hanging out with the guys again like they were still back in school. She’d hardly seen Jake and Remy in years. Still, as to the point the latter was making, she had to agree. Her gaming instincts weren’t so dull she didn’t see something amiss in his all-too-casual manner.

Jake went on. “For a moment, your eyes struggle to count by candlelight as the window suddenly goes dark. It only lasts a moment, however. Still, you can hear cries from the deck, orders being shouted by Brunk.”

“Oh hey, looks like *The Lesser Evil* decided to rendezvous after all! How pissed is Captain Neigarde gonna be he missed out on the glory?” laughed Remy.

“Not as pissed as when he hears about the fortune.”

“We’ll go say hello,” said Keon in character.

Jacob nodded. “All right. You head out on deck, where a fair wind is blowing, clouds gathered above and below. Your crew, however, is racing to ready the ballistae, readying the sails and manning the aerovaille. Brunk notices you step out, but doesn’t let up, demanding speed from the crew in his usual forceful way.”

“Easy Brunky – it’s just Captain Neigarde, late to the flotilla as usual,” Remy assured him in character as his elf barbarian Aks’el.

“Brunk looks at you incredulously. ‘Neigarde? Nay, sir, we ain’t–’ He turns to one of the swabs, cracking his whip to hurry the man along. ‘Captain, it weren’t a ship what blotted out the sun.’”

“Well then what the heck was it?”

“Before Brunk can answer, one of your crew at the aft rail points, shouting. ‘Sirs! They’re back! *The dragons!*’” Jake watched his players gape and grimace and grin at the surprise twist – they’d given up on seeing any dragons in their airship piracy campaign days ago. There they were, the cliffhanger that concluded an exciting campaign exactly right.

Even as the more die-hard among them demanded they address them here and now, Jake rebutted that his plans didn't go any further than that. Remy even went so far as to suggest they do this again next year. Regardless, with the flight to Chicago leaving in three hours, they didn't have time to do much more than pack up and head out. Perfect timing. How someone could plan an entire week of gaming and finish with mere minutes to spare, Toni had no idea. But that was her Jake.

Well, not *her* Jake. But Jake.

They dropped everybody off together at Austin-Bergstrom, and she made sure to hug each Keon and Remy tightly in a fond farewell. Even though they all lived in the same city, aside from Hannah, she hardly ever saw them. It was why they hadn't coordinated better, and her own flight flew into Midway, leaving Austin that night, seven hours later. Jake had insisted he didn't mind a second trip to the airport, though she knew he was only being sweet. Like always.

Sweetness had never been the problem.

"So, did you have fun?" he asked as they settled back onto his couch at his place.

"Yeah! I was kind of surprised, actually. I, um, actually thought it might be kind of awkward, but since I'm not starting my new job until August, I didn't have any excuses. And Hannah made this whole big deal out of not wanting to be left alone with all the dudes."

He laughed. "Well I'm glad. It really was great seeing you again. All of you," he said quickly, but seeing how she'd perked up at his initial phrasing, he conceded, "but especially you."

"I'm glad I got to see you, too. I've been following you on facebook and all, but I never felt right picking up the phone. After how things ended and all. But I'm so happy you're doing so well. I'm really proud of you, Jake."

He smiled bashfully. "Honestly, it's been nice just to hear people calling me Jake again. They introduced me on Day 1 as 'Jacob,' and now that's who I am to the whole lab, and I can't correct them because now it's been like four months and I'd look like an idiot. Besides, my boss Gina is the one who introduced me as Jacob, and... well, suffice to say that nobody wants to correct the illustrious Dr. Diaz."

"You're starting to sound like your buddy Keon – never pegged you as a yes man."

"Yeah, I never did either. You wouldn't believe how hardcore they get in these R&D labs when you're working with... Never mind what. My friend Akshay – did you ever meet him? – well he's working for NASA, doing stuff for the Orpheus missions, and he swears the government isn't half as intense about the sanctity of information."

Toni giggled so suddenly it came out a snort. "I'm sorry, did you say 'sanctity of information'? Are you working for AdZell or the CIA, Jake?"

"I see I've already said too much – now I'll have to kill you."

She held up her hands. “I give up. All week long you’ve been trying to kill us; I’m starting to think you just need to work through some things.”

He grinned, tugging her hands back down. But when they were down, he didn’t let go. She didn’t urge him to, either, and when he kissed her a moment later, she didn’t resist that either.

Flight 1322 to Chicago Midway departed without her on it. While it was taxiing the runway, Toni and Jake were holding one another in his cramped twin bed like they were afraid someone would come and try to pull them apart.

“I never stopped missing you,” he said. Or she said. She was delirious in that moment. If she hadn’t said it, she’d meant it. If he hadn’t, she knew he did, too. She’d known it since the moment she’d seen his eyes when he picked her up at the airport a week earlier. She’d been telling herself ever since that he had to make the first move, to prove he’d changed. She was so, so happy that he had, she couldn’t stop herself from heaping all the kisses on him that she’d been imagining that whole week.

A month later, the freshman employees of Timbersun LLC commenced their training, bereft of her presence. A few weeks later, the corner apartment on 83rd and Normandy had a new subletter, and by the time the five of them began seriously discussing taking their “Week o’ Gaming” and making it an annual event, a paycheck from AdZell Labs was repurposed toward furnishing one of their junior engineers a brand new king size bed.

Mercifully, the final room was a supply closet that, for the moment, held the party's possessions. Kennedy snatched her clothes and darted right back into her cell, and not a moment too soon. Her illusion faded while she was still in the hallway, and she could only pray the others didn't get the opportunity to wonder why they'd all ended up here in their underwear, but the character who just so happened to look exactly like the GM's old flame arrived in nothing at all. Being seen naked would be embarrassing. Having one of the guys find out what had happened would be mortifying.

The worst part of it all was that she already knew they were never going to discuss what had happened. She'd misread the situation, and old Gentleman Jake was never going to do something so untoward as actually discuss it. Some people never changed. To wake up in nothing but her bra and panties, alone, had seemed such a clear signal. She hadn't even had the chance to select the underwear herself; it had been hand-picked as that little red ensemble she used to wear when she was really horny and wanted to give the guy ideas. Then, in comes the NPC, and she *swore* she could hear Jacob behind it, roleplaying a depth of disinterest no hetero GM could possibly feel faced with the nearly naked body of a girl as cute as Toni. Or Kennedy. Whatever.

So she played along, embracing the part of the meek, submissive hostage willing to do *anything* to be spared the rack – or whatever passed for the rack in the Near Future. But Jacob – or his NPC, anyway – blew her off like she was some toad. She didn't know how long she'd been bent naked over that cold-ass table, braced for him to punish a confession out of her by *whatever* means, when she realized he'd simply walked out. With her underwear still stuffed down the front of his slacks.

That son of a bitch. First the mobility surprise during character creation, and now this! This, when he was so clearly setting her up for a little flirtatious play like they used to do on the phone years back when they were both bored and single and it had been long enough they'd forgot why it never worked.

She looked so *good*. She'd looked like *herself* again. And he'd acted like she was no more interesting than Dirk and his mountain of male muscles. Maybe she should fuck Dirk, show the bastard what he was missing.

No. No, that was too far. But maybe...

Never mind. Regardless of the fact that lustful gazes were now a thing out of memory, she was done with this. Done with him. Tonight would be his last warning – treat her with respect, or she was out, tradition be damned. Hannah could regale her with the highlights when they hung out.

Soon, the group reassembled, and they were indeed a changed lot. She was wearing "armor," though it appeared what passed for armor in the Near Future book was mostly clothing that was reinforced with invisible force fields and flexible polymer plating. As good a mechanism for inflating one's Armor Class with improved versions as upping the plus on a suit of armor in their fantasy game, she supposed. She'd gone with

a suit that featured a hot pink jacket and dark gray pants, her stomach only half-concealed by a thin panel of translucent shielding. It flattered her legs and sure, even showed a hint of cleavage. Whether or not Jacob noticed, she felt powerful simply looking good for herself, as herself.

Funnily, Toni had felt scandalous selecting it during character creation, but seeing Sanguine in her skintight bodysuit and Lane in “armor” that was little more than a crop top and shorts, she felt like a nun. Keon looked the part of the Engineer in his acid-washed jeans and utility vest with an armband projecting some kind of shimmery energy shield flickering in front of him. As for Dirk, he seemed to be sporting something out of the same playbook as Lane, showing off his character’s ridiculous bulge in pants that couldn’t possibly be as protective as its stats probably indicated.

Regardless, they had three guns among them now, and a good deal more confidence now that they weren’t standing around in their underwear (or in a state of longing for its absence, in her own case). It was time to figure out their next move.

By the time Kennedy emerged from her cell-turned-changing-room, Sanguine had already employed her stealth skills to check around the corner. It only went down about fifty feet, where it ended in a double door. It was locked, she reported, and beneath the crack of the door she’d been able to see a pair of shoes standing just beyond it, which meant they were under guard. Keon and his tactical acumen reminded them there could easily be more.

They discussed options. Kennedy advocated simply jumping out the window. With Corn able to boost Kennedy up there, she could see they appeared to be on a second story window, albeit a high one. Lane concurred, reasoning that the manual said that falling was hit point damage; ergo, unlike the real world, they wouldn’t break bones on impact.

Toni tried not to think too hard about that.

Corn, however, countered that the average damage for such a fall was still high enough that it was probable that some of them would at least go unconscious, probably several. As they argued back and forth about the merits and demerits of the risk, finally Toni simply walked over and confirmed her suspicion that the window wasn’t made to open. Thick as it was, they’d have to shoot out the glass to get out which in turn was sure to draw that guard.

So, with the group angsty after a prolonged and ultimately futile debate, they set about their next objective: eliminate the guard without raising alarms.

Combat wasn’t Toni’s favorite part of the game, but the tutorial event was at least instructive. Sanguine lured the guard into opening the door to inspect a noise, where they learned he had a friend down the hall. The game was turn-based, like they were all accustomed, and once it began, their feet froze in place, and took turns in order with their actions. While Corn tackled the far guard and prevented him from using his radio,

the rest mobbed the close one, punching and pistol-whipping him into submission. Kennedy used her *electroray* cantrip to deal damage, which suited her fine. She'd never wanted to know what it felt like to kick a man so hard it broke ribs. Though with her 10 in Strength, most of that was reserved for Dirk anyway.

She had to admit – to herself, though she was still far too angry to be able to admit it to Jacob – that she was glad she'd gone with a spellcaster. Speak a few words, grab a trinket from one of her belt pouches, and she *made magic*. It was surreal, a girlhood fantasy brought to life. Even if it was a paltry 1d3 zap of nonlethal damage to a guard, it was still *magic*.

If the others were as fascinated with it, they had higher priorities than gushing over it. With the guard neutralized, the party stripped them down and deposited them in separate cells (much to the irritation of Sanguine, who simply wanted to kill them and be done with it). Corn locked them in. They looked around the guard station a bit, and it appeared they could either go downstairs, where who knew what awaited them, or proceed into another section of the building, one that their hypersexualized scout reported looked like it was some kind of office area, where it seemed much more likely they'd run into someone.

“At this hour? Come on, office drones don't work graveyard shifts,” Corn countered.

“For one, we don't even know what time it is. They're suppressing our uplink to the internet... or, fuck, whatever they call it in the setting,” said Hannah.

“Infosphere? Interlink? Instagoog? Something.” Lane giggled. Toni didn't want to admit it, but it was kind of an infectious giggle. Even under the circumstances, she couldn't help but give her fellow captive's shoulder a quick squeeze. Less naked interrogation, more upbeat camaraderie.

Dirk refocused. “Either way, we're clear on the window now, right? No time like the present. Get your chutes on, ladies.”

“Well hang on.” Corn put a restraining hand on the little man's chest. “The window's, what, a hundred feet that way?”

“Yeah, and it'll be less if you start walking toward it,” grumped their barbarian.

“But it was a straight drop down, which means downstairs, it'll also be a hundred or so feet to the outside. Down there, we can get a window, a door, whatever, and not have to worry about carrying the wounded out of here. If the security at the front door is anything like those two guys, we shouldn't have too many problems. It's a risk, yeah, but the window is a guarantee of pain. I say we see if we can't walk out of here like civilized people.”

“You're sure?” Kennedy asked in a small voice. “I mean... what if they have, like, a hundred guys down there, or they see us on security cams and the building goes on lockdown?” It was nice, playing an Int character. Just querying her implant fed her

suggestions about the kinds of security they might be facing at this level in the Near Future system simply by using some of her skill checks. Though she supposed it was also feeding her paranoia by doing so.

Whatever. She did *not* want to get taken again. No more alone time for the GM. Not tonight.

It was clear nobody else was feeling the same way. Corn seemed to sense she wasn't in high spirits, briefly taking her aside and speaking in a hushed tone. "Look, I get it. I don't like being caged either. I promise you though, I won't let that happen, OK? You gotta trust me. That asshole's never gonna hurt you again."

That felt comforting. Like that, she decided to trust him. Kennedy took a deep breath to thank him for the kind words, but before she could answer, Jacob's voice spoke, patched directly into her implant. (Or was it Toni's? All very confusing.) "Corn just succeeded on a Charm check – untrained, too, so nice rolling. Bear in mind in this system, PCs are susceptible to it from each other, though not from NPCs. So if you're finding yourself agreeing with him now, that's why."

"Thanks, I figured that out," she bit back angrily. Then she looked back to Corn, and answered as she'd been about to before his interruption. "OK. I'm trusting you, so don't let me down." She couldn't handle having her guys fail her twice in one night.

2019

“There’s nothing left to say, Jacob.”

“You’re mad,” he observed, signaling and changing lanes. After their fight that morning – “discussion” was his word for it – he had insisted on picking her up from work.

“I’m not mad. I just don’t want to rehash it. Again.”

“You are mad – you only call me Jacob when you’re mad. Hannah and Remy do it to be funny, but you only do it when I’ve done something to upset you. So why don’t you tell me what it is so I can try to do better.”

Her jaw set. “That. That’s what it is. That, right there.”

He glanced over, but could only do so for a moment so he didn’t risk killing the both of them. Traffic was always crazy this time of day. It wasn’t downtown Chicago bad, but Austin had its own quirks, chiefly the constant hazard of construction projects seemingly every other block. “What? You’re mad because I want to make you not mad any more?”

“Yes!” She threw her head back, sighing through flaring nostrils. “You’re doing this nice guy routine. Like there’s a right and wrong thing to say, and you’re... you’re...” She searched for the word. Normally he supplied a suggestion when she gave him an opening like that, but he was too distracted by a lane closure ahead. “Strategizing,” she finished accusingly. “Like I’m one of your NPCs and you can just roll a Diplomacy check and everything becomes OK!”

“Strategizing? Because I’m trying to be nice to you?”

“You’re trying to say the nice thing because it gives you some moral high ground. If it works, you get to be the paladin riding on his holy mount to save me, and if it doesn’t, then you’re some victim, betrayed by an honorless rogue.”

“Much as I admire your use of metaphor, that’s really cynical, Toni. I love you, you know that? Do I need some elaborate excuse to be nice to the woman I love?”

“This?” She gestured between the two of them. “This isn’t love, Jacob. This is friendly acquaintances who also sometimes have sex. When I can even get you in the mood.”

“When you can...?!” He sputtered. His outburst was cut off, however, as the car was likewise cut off by a motorcycle whipping in front of them. His grip on the steering wheel was with white knuckles.

She took advantage of his distraction to press her point. He wasn’t the only one who could strategize. “Don’t get indignant on me. I’m really not trying to accuse you of anything. It’s just... sexually, we want different things. And I’m tired of the two of us having to phone it in like we don’t.”

“We... we what? Phone it in?! Toni, that’s nuts! How could I possibly want anyone but you? You’re the most–”

“The most beautiful girl you’ve ever seen,” she parroted along with him. “See, that’s what I mean. Sort of. You put me on this pedestal, like some ornament you’re afraid to get dirty, like whenever we’re together I’m doing you some kind of... I don’t know, *favor*.”

He was quiet for a moment, as much on account of weaving in and out of lanes as trying to think what to say. Toni cut in after a time to try to save him the effort. This conversation had a finality to it, so she may as well lay out all her cards on the table.

“Look, before you say anything else... there’s something I need to tell you.” She took a deep breath, but found the words weren’t as hard to get out as she’d expected. “I’ve met someone.”

Toni paused, letting the words sink in. He couldn’t look over, but she could see the pain in his soft green eyes. She hoped he was still seeing the road. “Nothing’s really happened yet, but... Jonathan and I have chemistry. I like him, and he likes me. He gets jealous, he fights for my time and attention, he misses me when I’m not around. He *wants* me. He doesn’t just... like being friends with me.”

Jacob’s jaw was trembling as he forced out words. “Being best friends with my girlfriend is one of my favorite things about us.”

“I know. I know, Jacob. But that’s not what I want.”

“You want to break up with me.”

“I want you to be able to find someone who’s going to want what you want.”

He sniffled, and tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. It took everything she had not to give in and back down. But this conversation had been too long coming. She’d been hiding too long, feeling guilty for too long. Being someone she didn’t like being for too long. She hadn’t been lying to him about not having cheated on him, but it had come close. Closer than the poor guy needed to know.

She hated seeing him hurt like this; if she told him how much, he’d never let her go through with this breakup. Did she want him to make some grand gesture, pull over the car and kiss her and tell her he wasn’t letting her go without a fight? Maybe. But the very fact that he wouldn’t was why this needed to happen.

He drove on in silence, which suited her fine. If she kept putting this off, she would only be making it worse in the long run, for everyone. They were turning onto Lamar Blvd, nearing home, when he finally spoke.

“This is going to make our second Week o’ Gaming really awkward.”

In the course of that one sentence, she went from empathy to enmity. Of all the things she had wanted to hear him say, bringing up that stupid game was second to last – right behind “it’s OK, I’ve been seeing someone else too.” Was he being serious?! She was breaking up with him, and all he can worry about is his stupid D&D campaign?!

“You’re kidding, right?” Toni whirled on him, twisting in her seat. “I mean, you wanted to know what was wrong, and I told you. You’re all nice, no spice. Now you could have responded to that by taking me somewhere, or kissing me, or... I don’t know, something *passionate*! Yell at me, tell me you can’t stand the thought of me being with another man! But no, you’re worried about whether or not this is going to throw off your stupid game! I cannot believe you, Jacob! You know what? Let me make things perfectly clear – I’m breaking up with the group, too!”

He gave her a look almost as wounded as the one he’d given her when she had mentioned Jonathan. “They’re your friends, Toni. You’re going to ditch all of your friends?”

“Hannah will leave with me if I ask her.” She wasn’t actually sure about that, but she didn’t really care about the veracity of it in that moment. “Remy and Keon are only my friends because we have the same stupid hobby, and I only took part in that hobby to appease you!”

“All these years, and that’s all it is to you? Some stupid hobby you put up with to humor me?” He fixed a look on her that was positively withering. “That’s one of the worst things I’ve ever heard someone say.”

She glared right back. “Let me out, Jacob.”

“What? Toni, we’re still like two miles from–”

“I said, LET. ME. OUT!”

“We’re in the middle of–”

“*LET ME OUT, RIGHT THIS GODDAMN MINUTE!*” she shrieked. When he didn’t comply fast enough, she snatched the wheel and shoved it hard towards the left curb. Jacob slammed on the brakes, and behind us another car honked angrily as it swerved madly to avoid them.

“Toni, get back in here! It’s dange–”

Downstairs, the party found themselves in a sort of crossroads, though a sign hanging from a couple hooks told them the corridors held destinations such as Research and Development, Product Testing, and, among other conventional business destinations, was even something called Quarantine. Moreover, they noted that the bottom of the sign featured an insignia, a weird little glyph that looked like most of a pentagram, but the circle was splayed open at the bottom and a couple of the lines were missing. *Alphagia* it read underneath in bold type.

“Al-fa-gee-uh...?” read Sanguine, sounding out the syllables. Did her character have a learning disability or something?

Kennedy considered for a moment. “No, look. It’s—
“Get down!”

Sanguine had spotted someone through a couple porthole-style windows in a door down the left hall, a pair of men in suit pants and dress shirts talking in front of a coffee vending machine. The escapees ducked down immediately, and thankfully the men didn’t notice them.

With that fresh reminder of their situation, analytic chit-chat was suspended. Unfortunately, the one thing the sign omitted, but a glowing green beacon on the corner did not, was the exit. Not eager to stand around discussing the etymology of corporate nomenclature, they hustled in that direction.

The lobby was mostly vacant at this hour, a small room with a few tables and chairs arranged next to the floor to ceiling windows along the outer wall of the building. From here, they could see a parking lot, though only a handful of spaces were occupied. A security guard seated behind a counter near the exterior doors was absorbed by a worn paperback book, and didn’t look in their direction. He was far enough away they could whisper without having to worry much. Besides, his gray hair and glasses didn’t posit him as the sharpest observer. They quickly backed around the corner.

“OK, so we got one guard between us and freedom,” whispered Dirk. “If we stay low, I think we can get right up to him and POW!” He pulled the trigger on his finger gun. “And we’re home free.”

Kennedy interjected softly, trying not to sound combative. Remy was always harder to convince if he thought you were taking up against him. “Do we have to kill him? He’s just some old dude working the night shift, making sure the door stays locked. Doesn’t seem like it ought to be a death sentence.”

“Agreed,” said Corn. “Besides, violence is loud, and has a way of attracting backup. Once we’re out of here, we still have to get away from the facility before they start coming for us. If they’re on our heels, kiss our odds of hot-wiring a vehicle goodbye.”

“Are we supposed to bribe him?” grumbled Dirk. “I got... six credits. I bet he makes that in fifteen minutes.”

“Maybe we can sneak by, or create a distraction,” Kennedy proposed.

Lane’s eyes sparkled. “I could go up and flash him!”

Kennedy could see Corn look a bit uncomfortable at his boss’s suggestion. He quickly ventured an alternative before the idea could take root. “Maybe we throw something, nice and low, and when he goes to investigate, we rush up behind him, guns out, and demand a surrender? Anybody got their Coerce skill trained?” Dirk, Sanguine and Lane all three raised hands. Kennedy knew her own untrained check was good for first level; since she’d only needed Intelligence for her magnician, she’d opted to make Charisma her secondary. Charisma always came in handy in a Jacob campaign.

“Good. Then we can disarm him, tie him up behind the counter. Maybe he’ll even have a set of car keys on him. That’d be nice.”

Hannah nodded. “I’d settle for one of those derpy little security carts, even.”

“We could outrun one of those things on foot,” Dirk pointed out. “Not sure they seat five anyway.”

“Did you think I was being literal, meathead?”

“You said—”

But Toni was no longer listening. Corn had started moving, and she followed right behind him, staying low. She could hardly believe it, but his plan worked like a charm! With a snap of his fingers, he whizzed a coin across the lobby to ricochet off the front windows. The guard fell for it hook, line and sinker, though they were unable to stop Dirk from simply bashing him unconscious with his elbow rather than attempting that Coerce check. Still, as the barbarian dragged his unconscious form back behind the counter, she granted that at least it had worked, and in games, nonlethal attacks didn’t cause brain damage or broken ribs like they did in the real world.

They were in the midst of frisking him when suddenly, a soft male voice filled the lobby area. As they looked around frantically for the source, the group realized they were hearing the intercom via an overhead speaker.

“Listen to me,” said the voice, its tone insistently authoritative. “Any moment now an alarm is going to sound and this facility will enter lockdown. The authorities will discover that you escaped their custody, and they will attempt to hunt you down.”

“Who are you?” Lane demanded, for once all business.

“No one of immediate consequence,” he said vaguely. “There’s a door behind the security counter. It leads into a security substation. Go in, and lock it behind you.”

“The front door is right there!” declared Sanguine. “Why would we hide?”

“There is a perimeter fence, the gate to which is manned and will be barricaded before you can reach the gate. You won’t escape in time.”

Hannah’s character glared at the intercom. “Why on earth would we listen to this prick, exactly? We’re in the clear, you guys! Let’s go!”

“The office. Hide,” repeated the voice. “It is the only way.”

“Feels like Jacob’s really trying to rail-road us into this,” grumbled Corn.

“Why should we trust you?” queried Lane, still looking quite disinclined to trust him. “For all we know, you’re distracting us for reinforcements.”

“I am a prisoner here, like you.”

“What’s your name?” asked Kennedy. “Tell us who you are or we’re leaving, one way or another.” Toni had confronted the blue-haired woman in much the same manner during the process of creating Kennedy, but had received no satisfactory answer. She didn’t trust anonymity. She never had.

A resounding clarion *PING* startled them all into silence as it reverberated around the corridor. In the same instant, blinking red lights flashed up and down the corridor. A vaguely feminine robotic voice took over the intercom, echoing up and down the halls. “Alarm activated. Intruder alert. Repeat: intruder alert.”

“You may call me Echo,” said the voice, but the intercom was now competing with the alert system for volume.

Before they could react, heavy iron grates slammed down over the front windows. They were imprisoned again, albeit in a larger area. Dirk groaned. “Shit! Stupid asshole of a voice! Couldn’t have warned us thirty seconds earlier?”

“You call yourself a barbarian?” Kennedy whipped out a spell battery – basically a scroll, but people couldn’t use something as primitive as paper in the future, evidently – and raised the male end toward Dirk’s forehead. *Bloody vengeance*, that was the spell’s name. Her most powerful one-shot item – she didn’t remember the details, but basically, the more he was bleeding, the harder he hit.

When an NPC got hurt, did the DM feel it the way Hannah had described? She was willing to find out.

Suddenly, a hand took hers, and she was being pulled along behind Corn as the group heeded the anonymous person’s advice and made for the door. “Loving the gusto and all, but save it for when we’re up against the wall. For now, we bunker down. You with us? Because we need you, wiz.”

She squeezed his grip, and she could see Keon’s smile beneath Corn’s gruff facade. It felt good to be needed. “Then you got me.”

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All things considered, Toni could have been a lot more unlucky. The car that hit her had, mercifully, slowed to a mere 25 mph as it swerved to miss their car. The first car, that is. However, it was enough to knock her back a good twenty feet or so, Toni's body rolling across the asphalt where another ran over her waist and thighs. Luck again, after a fashion, that it was a compact and not a semi, and luckier still that the rest of the traffic on Lamar Blvd came to a stop before she was altogether killed.

When she came to, Toni was in the hospital, her body covered in restraining casts and bandages. It hurt everywhere. It hurt to move her arms. It hurt to look around. It hurt to breathe. But more than anything else, it hurt to think about what this portended.

The doctors were notified that she was conscious and gave her the news, detail after gruesome detail, all of the seemingly endless list of fractures, contusions, bruised and damaged organs, and sites afflicted with nerve damage. She listened, numb, as they gravely explained the probable ramifications, the unlikelihood of the prospect of recovering full mobility. It would be weeks before she would even be able to leave her bed, until they were sure the damage to her spine had been minimized, and even then she would be confined to a wheelchair. Possibly indefinitely.

Jacob was there when she woke up, and held her hand through the whole awful affair. He'd been waiting for her the entire time, several days in which she had lain incapacitated by a massive dose of drugs. He looked haggard. When the doctors left, she closed her eyes without saying a word, and he let her drift right back to sleep. He was still there when she woke up later that night, and each time after that.

They never talked about their conversation in the car. He simply did what he could for her, feeding her ice chips and running down nurses and, worst of all, notifying the world. Here they were in the communication age, yet she couldn't for the life of her think how to form the words that would tell all of her friends and coworkers what little family she'd kept in touch with that she was crippled, possibly paralyzed from the waist down. That her life expectancy had dropped precipitously, perhaps by as much as twenty years. That the doctors' skeptical assessment was that, even with the most aggressive physical therapy, it was unlikely she'd ever walk more than a few feet again, if she even managed to stand up at all.

Jacob took care of it.

As for Jonathan, he sent her a text to say how sorry he was. When she didn't respond, he didn't reach out again. She never heard from him again. Her boss at the hotel, likewise, reached out to express his condolences. After being informed of the extent of her injuries, he gently informed her that regrettably, she would no longer be able to fulfill her duties, and he had to let her go. Her health insurance would continue through the end of the month, and then she would be on her own.

Hannah, Keon and Remy took the same plane to come see her. Since waking up, she'd hardly said a word to anyone, and while they were no exception, they didn't seem to mind her silent resentment of having to be alive. In fact, Keon started a GoFundMe campaign for her, and Hannah promoted it on her stream. Remy out-raised them all, actually, organizing a charity run without being as up-front as his pledges might have liked about the nature of his runners. She heard Jacob telling the doctors to bill him for anything beyond the expiration of her insurance, and while part of her wanted to protest, to release him from his obligations, both knew what would become of her if that happened.

So she said thank you, and learned to let him do things for her, and choked down a barrel of pride. Day after day, as her physical therapist praised her for the most feeble twitches of her ankles and toes, as her colostomy bag was changed, as the flowers her dad and step-mom delivered wilted and were thrown out with the blank card, she emptied that barrel, swallow after gagging swallow.

Once school let out for the summer, Remy and Keon caught the first flight to Austin to join her and Jacob and Hannah, who'd already been there for over a week. She could work on the road, thankfully, with her startup as a content creator. Everyone crashed at Jacob's apartment by night, but during the day the group made her hospital room their default hangout. By the end of the third day, Remy stepped up with a suggestion to fill the time.

"Ya know, we may as well do Jacob's campaign, you guys. We're all here, he made the plans already. I know morale's in the shitter, but it's gotta be better than sitting around watching shitty daytime TV and playing cards."

"I don't think she's interested in—"

Toni cut Jacob off, though her voice croaked quite a bit before she managed to get words out. "It's fine. We can play."

The lot of them brightened at hearing her string together more words in sequence than they'd heard since their arrival. "We? So like, you're going to play with us?" Hannah asked, brightening.

"You really don't have to," Jacob said quickly. "I know you're—"

"I'll play." Toni locked eyes with him. "I want to play."

They didn't make her say it a third time. So whenever she was awake and they were together, rather than trying to ignore their pitying stares, she got to close her eyes and sail through the sky on a magical boat, waging war on rapacious dragons and hoarding plunder and seducing paramours. By the time the campaign concluded with their victory over the Elder Maw, she was even smiling again whenever she could forget she was Toni Morrow rather than Szerelda of the Six Knives.

Jacob never again brought up what she'd said in the car that day – neither the breakup nor the things she'd said about the group. By the time she rolled herself out to

the front sidewalk, finally ready to leave the hospital for good, she could hardly believe she'd ever said them. But she had, and she couldn't unsay them.

Toni followed Hannah back to Chicago and crashed there until, as her friend joked in her much-too-soon way, she was back on her feet. It was Toni's own suggestion they start gaming together between their summer get-togethers (a third Week o' Gaming was already in the planning stages), and Jacob unhesitatingly offered to Skype in while the others gathered locally.

As it turned out, hurt feelings mended faster than fractured pelvises. Her friends were there for her, every single day, helping her with all the countless new challenges she needed help with. In time, she was even able to accept their assistance untinged by bitterness.

Hannah became the big sister she'd never had. Putting a roof over her head was a vital part of it, yes, but almost as important was making her get out from under it on occasion. It was hard, but in time she got used to the looks, the non-looks, the million different ways the world doesn't work right for the disabled. But Hannah took her out into it, and made her re-learn comfort in her skin. Sometimes she'd have her as a guest on her stream, where viewers saw only the waist up, and she remembered that she was still desirable. Toni thanked her once, but Hannah flicked her in the boobs and insisted she was just pimping out her hot friend to cover the rent, then took her out to a karaoke night to get plastered, and it was *normal*, and normal finally grew to feel acceptable.

Without insurance and working temp jobs, the physical therapy she could afford on her Medicaid plan was an insult. The woman told Toni she'd never walk again, and seemed annoyed at her efforts to prove them wrong. Remy went with her to the first session, and it nearly broke her to have her old buddy watch her sweating and screaming and struggling to achieve next to nothing. Meanwhile, her therapist sat off to the side and played with her phone. Before their time was up, Remy stormed over, smacked the phone out of the woman's hand and told her to go fuck herself. From then on, he was over three evenings a week, commuting from Saint Andrew's with a carload of training equipment borrowed from work that he lugged up and down for her every session. He made her work like her wheelchair was a personal affront to him. Maybe it was. But six months later, he held her hand for much-needed support as she took those stiling, painful yet oh-so-sweet steps into her former therapist's clinic and asked for a refund of her session.

As for Keon, he didn't change a damn thing about the way they interacted. Over time, he became the person she most looked forward to seeing because he was a bridge to the old her. Or rather, a reminder that the old her and the new her were one and the same. He didn't have the same impulse to scurry to help her with every little thing that the others too often fell prey to. Being around Keon reminded her that her life had changed, not ended. And when Hannah's ribbing or Remy's relentless pushing became

too much, he was always game to take her out to the movies where she could sit in the dark and feel alone and let her mind wander. The seats for the handicapped sucked, but he never complained, even when she asked if he minded a little space so she could brood, or sulk, or pout, or just shut everything off and stare at a moving picture. Sometimes he needed the same. Then they'd talk about the movie like it was the real reason they'd gone out, and she was herself again, for as long and as much as she could be.

And Jacob? Well, Jacob was the GM. After some years, and some fights, they even learned to be friends again.

But by then her barrel of pride had been drained dry, and they had refilled it with their love, and with her gratitude. This was her tribe. Her people. Her party.

Chapter Four

Vulnerabilities

“Well...?”

Brendan didn't need to look to know whose voice it was. “Gladdy, it's going on midnight. Shouldn't you be in bed?”

His daughter's eye roll was audible. “I haven't had a bedtime since I was in middle school, Dad.”

He stood up from straightening up the gaming table and fixed her with a look. “Maybe it's time we reinstate the policy.”

“Sorry, but the Supreme Court has widely condemned the practice of retributive guidelines. You're stuck with me.” The girl let herself into the room and at least made herself useful by helping him clean up. There wasn't a lot to it; the group had been so eager to get started that they'd barely taken time to get drinks. Being essentially unconscious the whole time meant they didn't make much headway on them. Still, he didn't want any condensation getting inside the machinery. The reviews had said it was something to watch out for in prolonging the table's holo display life.

“So... how'd it go?” Gladdy pressed once more.

Brendan called for the robofridge to replace an unopened can of Diet Coke that Toni had never gotten around to opening. “It went... all right, I think.”

“Your storytelling abilities must leave juries on the edges of their seats, Dad.”

“For one, you know full well I'm not a trial lawyer, and for two, most judges hate long-winded stories.”

“Pretend, for a moment, that I'm neither an employee or an official of the judicial branch and that I actually find you interesting. C'mon. You won't let me play, you could at least give me the play by play.”

Brendan cleaned on in silence for a moment, contemplating. He knew Gladdy's interest in the game was entirely linked to her hope to be allowed to play in it someday. Encouraging the interest encouraged the hope. Not that he blamed her. He'd been the one who'd first introduced her to the game before Cheryl had decided she didn't want her daughter turned into a nerd version of a tomboy. His ex-wife's colossal failure on that score always made him smile.

She flopped down on the couch where Keon had been sitting, looking up at him, and his resistance melted. Or at least thawed a bit. He sat opposite her and steeped his fingers. “So, our characters apparently did some job for someone. Not sure what yet, but I guess Kennedy – that's Toni's character, the woman with the, ah...”

“Wheelchair. It's not offensive to say she uses a wheelchair, Dad, geez. Especially when she's not here.”

“Well, whatever. So Kennedy and I had tried to interrogate a woman, posing as police officers, me asking the questions and Kennedy trying to read her mind. He – Jacob, the GM – said we hadn’t learned anything yet, that the woman had been uncommonly cagey, but in any event it looks like somebody didn’t like our snooping. We got kidnapped, and–”

“Woke up in a cell with none of your stuff, right?”

Brendan’s gaze was steely. “Were you eavesdropping on us, Gladdy?”

“Eavesdropping? What’s to eavesdrop? Um, on. Upon what was there to eavesdrop? No, that sounds worse.” She shrugged, and he laughed with her. “Anyway, you guys were lying around like a bunch of coma patients. Not much to spy on, believe me.”

Brendan wondered how she knew that, but he knew if he asked, it would only force her to lie. No matter. So long as she didn’t get underfoot. A brief narrowing of the eyes ought to suffice as a scold. “Well, yes, as a matter of fact. How’d you know about all that, in the game?”

“It’s the most cliché way to open a campaign short of meeting in a tavern and being given a quest by a pipe-smoking wizard in a pointy hat. I must’ve seen them do it on the streams like a million times.”

“Well, it’s a different feeling altogether when you’re the one in the cell, I assure you. At any rate, we broke out, found our stuff, did a brief tutorial combat with a couple inept guards, and were about to bust out of the facility when an alarm went off.”

“Ooooh, what kind of facility?”

He considered. “You know, I’m not sure we found out. We didn’t get a sense of what they did there. It looked somewhere between sciency and businessy.”

“How could you not find out? There’s got to be a sign or something, some stationery, ID badges with the company logo–”

“Alphagia,” he interjected. “But that’s as much as we learned, the name.”

“Hmm. So how’d they react when they saw you?” Gladdy grinned; Brendan once more regretted telling her even what little he had. He’d have to read that backstory Keon had drafted for him, see what she’d been so tickled by. “I think they mostly thought it was funny.”

“Huh. So nobody made any fuss about cultural appropriation? Old white guy restyling himself as a hot young Mexican with a Scottish surname?” She caught the look in his eye. “Sorry, middle-aged white guy.”

“Better. And no, nobody said anything. Why would they? What, so you can play a bastard half-orc cultist of Gruumsh with no complaints, but switch races, and you’re a bigot?”

“Did I say you’re a bigot?”

“You implied–”

“Objection, Your Honor, leading the witness.”

“I’m about to ask permission to treat you as hostile.”

“Lo siento, Señorita McCallister,” she giggled.

“Oh, come off it, Gladdy. If any of them had objected, they had every opportunity to say as much. They didn’t.”

“Well considering it’s four gringos and your lackey, who’s going to say something?”

“So I have a lackey now?”

She laughed. “Seriously? That dude is terrified of you, Dad. Even I can tell that. I messed with him a little when he came in tonight – just a little, relax – and he looked like he was about to faint. You’re, like, his boss’s boss’s boss?”

There was, Brendan believed, one more layer to it, but he was unsure. “He’s just polite. And he’ll get over it. We don’t even see one another at the office. Besides, I’ve let him in my home, gone camping with him. He’ll get over it.”

Forcing his way into the group as he had wasn’t exactly the most polite means of introduction, but he thought they were starting to get along. His correspondences with Jacob had been rather friendly, and he thought he was winning over some of the others. He certainly hoped so. His nerd side was something he’d had to bury when he married Cheryl. Back then landing the partnership had been at the forefront of his goals. All his friends who’d shared the hobby had given it up to spend time on careers and families, but as time went by, Brendan had never stopped missing the excitement of rolling a die and seeing what came of it. Of being given a riddle and putting someone’s life in the balance of the solution, even fictionally. He remembered teaching Gladdy to play when she’d been a little girl. Those were some of their fondest memories, and to this day, he believed that was why she’d chosen to live with him instead of Cheryl after the divorce.

“This really is one hell of a gaming room, Dad. I better inherit this in your will if you die.”

He laughed. “If I die, it’s your job to find a ninth level cleric and have me rezzed. Failing that, I’d settle for reincarnation at a significant discount.”

“Oh, maybe you’ll come back as a Mexican woman!”

She dodged the pillow he lobbed at her, and they shared a long smile. Then Gladdy rolled on her side, and the effect was a handy reminder of one of his major reasons for not lobbying the group on her behalf. Keon and Remy were both closer to her age than to his, and his daughter had always been drawn to older men. Her first boyfriend out of high school had been one of her science teachers, and by now he was about the same age as his fellow players. Gladdy might have her eccentric style, but she was still Cheryl’s daughter, at least genetically.

Making his trophy girlfriend a trophy wife might have been one hell of a costly mistake, but the woman had at least given him Gladys. He might not have a clue what to

do with her, but she seemed to figure things out well enough on her own, in her own way. At her age, he'd been applying to law schools, sure, but he hadn't yet developed the foggiest idea of what he hoped to get out of it. Sometimes he felt like he still hadn't. Environmental law had proven lucrative, but it was a job. Even if it was a very good job, it was nevertheless not a calling. He'd had a head for the law and a father whose expectations he was determined to exceed, and so lawyering it was.

Gladdy... she wasn't going to be a lawyer, but she had one hell of an aptitude for computers and robotics. He knew that thinking of your child as a prodigy was the classic trap of parents in his social class, but he really thought she might be something special. It was the only reason he'd let her drop out college, at least for the time being. She'd converted the guest room into a laboratory, and did all sorts of impressive work assembling and disassembling things. She was either going to wind up a visionary engineer, or one hell of an appliance store repair person.

If only she were half so good with people.

“So, ya guys get out of that facility this week?”

He glanced up from the treadmill controls. “It’s six in the morning. Why on earth are you up at this hour?”

She shrugged. “Started doing laundry a few hours ago. Wanted to experience the satisfaction of accomplishment before I called it.”

Brendan cocked his head, listening. “I don’t hear either the washer or dryer running.”

“See? So accomplished. So how’d it go?”

“Why are you so interested, Gladdy? I know you miss Ginny and Dawn, but really – and I say this as your loving dad – you may need to consider getting a life.”

“Are you serious? You’re experimenting with prototype VR. You’re inviting over one of my top ten favorite streamers. And, most of all, you told me I couldn’t, and therefore...” She shrugged. “Of course I’m interested. Rebellious phase and all that.”

“Since third grade or so? That’s not a phase. It’s a complex.”

“I’ll tell Dr. Cassel.”

She didn’t show any sign of moving, though, so Brendan commenced his Thursday morning program, which began with a 5% incline at a moderate walk. “Yes, we got out of the facility.”

“And?”

“And what? That was as far as we got. It’s a little weird – in-game, it only took us like twenty minutes, but four hours here in the real world. It felt like we were in real-time for most of it, other than a short fight and a little minigame thing where we were trying to break into this guy’s holding cell.”

“What guy?”

“The guy – the one who was talking to us over the intercom last week.”

“You didn’t say anything about a guy on the intercom.”

“Oh. Well there was. He warned us about the alarm, right before the alarm went off.”

Gladdy flopped down on the corner of his bed, yawning. It was hard not to follow suit, but as the grade increased another 5%, I was already breathing hard. “That’s a little suspect, don’t you think? How’s this guy know what’s happening elsewhere in the facility if he’s locked in a cell?”

“Well his cell wasn’t like ours. Ours were little rooms, like in a doctor’s office. His was less of a cell and more of a whole level. All sorts of futuristic stuff in there – blinking lights and foreboding energy fields blocking all the doors. But the place has terminals, displays, and not only a crafting station, but like a whole lab for it. Very deluxe.”

“So how’d you get in?”

“Huh? Oh, he disabled the security over the lift-side entrance.”

She snorted. “That’s... convenient.”

Brendan considered, for the first time. He didn't really think about things like that. At his job, sure, he was all scrutiny and careful analysis. But in the game... the plot simply happened, and didn't need to be analyzed to death. The point was entertainment, not seamless narrative. The narrative, frankly, tended to be less intriguing to him than the anecdotes along the way.

"The plot needed the door to be open, so it opened. Contrivances like that happen all the time, Gladdy."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not so sure. I mean, are you familiar with Jacob's GMing? He's not the sort to wing it. He considers these things – maybe too much."

"How would you know?"

"He published a couple personally scribed modules back in the mid-twenties. I checked 'em out. Pirates on flying ships and stuff. Could be neat."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously he published a campaign about sky pirates, or seriously I read them?"

"The second one. Your obsession with this is getting borderline stalkerish."

"So you're against me reading now."

"Gladdy..."

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to take some interest in them yourself. Talk all the time about me making more friends, but you got four opportunities here and you're acting like you're a co-member of their gaming organization."

Brendan raised the incline. He wasn't in a mood to be given life advice from his awkward twenty-two-year-old daughter. Seeing he wasn't answering her, she went on. "I can see why the customer feedback wasn't great, even though I think there's some real genius in it. His plans would work really well for a very specific group of players, but they don't really have broad appeal."

"How insightful." I mopped the first beads of sweat off my brow.

"I think I was paraphrasing one of the reviewers, actually. Anyway, Jacob isn't the sort to fudge those kinds of details. For instance, he had this random encounter early in one of his modules where these undead burst out of the ground and attack the party. Pretty typical stuff – only Jacob took the time to add several paragraphs of flavor text, explaining how the deaders wound up down there, and a precise, if contrived, explanation for the necromantic mechanism which awakened them. One of them was even missing an arm – I wanna say he, or she, cut it off when they were pinned under some rubble or something? Jacob reflected in its stat block."

"When did you have time to read all this?"

She blew a stray wisp of pinkish hair out of her eye. "A few weeks ago, while you were doing character creation. But my point is, Jacob thinks through his plans. This guy had a means of knowing what you were doing, and he contacted you for a reason."

“The reason was, he was trying to get free of his cell. Ours were more like rooms, just locked from the outside, but this guy’s—”

“Did he have a name?”

Brendan tried to remember. “Yeah, it was something cool-sounding, like a word name or something. Echo? That sounds right. Ugh, too many real names to hang onto.” She gestured for him to continue, but he needed a moment to catch his breath. “So anyway, his cell... it was deluxe. Way down in this subterranean level, with a laser grid and biometric locks and these funky little security robots. I was worried my inspire talents wouldn’t be much use in a fight, but it was actually the bonus that caused the winning blow to land. Not too bad.”

“Go dad!” She gave him a few claps.

“Yeah. I tell you what, I think Jacob was striving for equal opportunity exploitation with this guy. First there’s that blue-haired biscuit from the character creation menu, and now this guy, Echo... Well let’s say he’s a looker. Kind of like a hot Jesus, or the guy from the Brawny paper towel commercials, but more cut and with a shaved chest.”

“I have no idea what commercials you’re talking about, but hot Jesus, got it. You’re coming dangerously close to telling me what it felt like to be an aroused woman.”

“I wasn’t either.”

“No no, it’s cool, I’ll tell you about this time Marky Kaminsky took his shirt off in seventh grade when we were playing basketball during recess, and boy howdy, I started getting this tingle, and... ugh, you know, now I grossed myself out. Thanks, Dad.”

A simple shake of the head was all the more attention he paid it. Playing Lane hadn’t altered any of his sexual preferences, which only made it all the more unnerving being around a pair of young women like Sanguine and Kennedy. Kennedy all the more so because she’d really latched onto his character the past couple sessions for some reason, and because she was at least as attractive as her player.

“Anyway, he tells us he woke up in this facility some time back – months, he speculated, but there’s no windows down there anything, so yeah.”

“Do they not feed him?” she asked, incredulous. “You’d think he could track it by feed cycles. That’s the thing about corporate kidnappers – feeding hostages is somebody’s job, so it’s regulated and scheduled.”

“Feel free to write down your suggestions and I’ll pass them on to Jacob if I ever lose my mind and decide he deserves to be held to this level of scrutiny.” Talking this much during his run really made it harder.

As he gave himself another moment to recover, she renewed her interrogation. “But what have they been doing with him all this time? Is he a prisoner? A hostage? A conscript? If he’s got these mad tech skills, disabling security with naught but his beatific countenance, surely Alphagia has some purpose for him.”

“Yeah. I mean, probably. I didn’t ask. We mostly wanted to just get the heck out of there.”

“Hmm. I do not like this Echo situation. How do you know he’s not a plant?”

“What? You mean, like a treant?”

It took her a moment for his nerd-laden dad joke to register, but she gave him the tortured groan he’d been hoping for. “Good grief, Dad. You know what I mean. A mole. And *don’t* say it.”

At this hour, he was nowhere near alert enough for mole puns. “Honestly, we don’t know. He followed us out, so for my money, I think he’s probably a party NPC. Like so the DM can have a voice in the party in case we get too sidetracked or need to be nudged in the right direction.”

“So why bother having him in this big scary secret level and not simply put him in the same starting area with the rest of you? Don’t be naïve. Something is up with this hombre, Laney.”

He brought the treadmill to a halt, toweling off his face. This was an intriguing notion. He did love a good puzzle, and there were few better feelings in gaming than anticipating the GM’s trap before they sprung it. But for now, he had to shower up and be at the courthouse in a little over an hour. His real life might not be flush with mysteries and gorgeous women, but with his services billed to clients for almost four grand an hour, he had to concede it wasn’t the worst trade.

“Anyway, since you should be getting to bed, let me finish the riveting tale, all right? We went back topside, returned to the security station and Echo and Kennedy disabled the surface level security. Meanwhile Corn – that’s Keon’s character – hacked the system and threw up a false alarm in another part of the building to draw off any guards. Worked like a charm. Then we stole this guard’s keys, hopped in his truck, and off we went.”

She stroked her chin. “Work on your storytelling abilities. If I have to game vicariously, I demand higher quality service.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I ask. Now hurry up – I’m making eggs for my dinner, your breakfast, and it’s not gonna be my fault if they’re cold when you get to the table.”

The group took the following week off of gaming due to a couple scheduling conflicts. Hannah was visiting her parents in Indianapolis for her mom's birthday, and Remy was on a scouting trip in Iowa for his team. Brendan actually had the entire pad to himself for a week, as Gladdy had chosen that time to pay her mother a visit in California for a week. With the evenings free and privacy assured, he took some time to go on a couple dates, and even went all-out and dyed the salt out of the pepper, touched up his tan, and cooked himself one of his favorite meals, one of the dishes Gladdy wouldn't touch.

The last time his daughter had said she was spending a week at Cheryl's, that week had become the entire winter. She didn't share his tolerance for the cold, and it probably wasn't the worst thing for the girl to maintain a relationship with her mother, either. Brendan had no preconceived notion about the sort of woman Gladdy ought to be; still, there was probably some merit in her at least learning what most women thought women ought to be, and Cheryl was an expert in that. Accordingly, he wasn't the least bit surprised when, the following Thursday, another Near Future gaming session under his belt the night before, not only was she yet to return, but when she holoed him, her hair had transformed from the magenta hue she'd worn that summer to a bright yellow.

"Back to blonde, eh?"

"Eh, it calms Mom down. She's a lot easier to live with if she thinks I'm growing into a mini-her." Her projection laughed. "Enjoying bachelor living?"

He was, in fact, but there was no need to tell her that. Sure, it wasn't always convenient having his not-quite-twenty-one-year-old daughter living with him, but he really did miss her when she was gone. That her dad fit in as well as he did with the rest of the gaming group was largely her credit. She might be an old soul in some ways, but she kept him young.

They talked for a few minutes about what they'd been up to. Gladdy had been spending a lot of time at the beach, testing out some recent mods to her aquatic drone. She'd had the thing for years; he still remembered her shrieks of gleefully malevolent laughter as she tormented beach-goers at Navy Pier.

Gladdy was seldom one to let her father off the hook with evasive answers, a trait she'd picked up from him. To prove it, once he'd given her a cursory overview of how he'd spent his time in her absence, he turned it around on her. "How about you? Still single and ready to mingle?"

"Thus far only substandard representatives of the species have submitted themselves for inspection, but the committee to ponder relationships is not yet dissolved." She must have seen the look on his face, because she clarified, "You're not on the path to grandfatherhood yet."

"Good to hear, especially when you put it like that."

“So. How about your homework assignment?”

“My what now?”

“The dudes. What did you learn about the dudes?”

“Oh! Hold on. I wrote it down.” Brendan darted back to the game room to grab his notepad and came back. Keon, he knew, took extensive notes in the memory storage in his implant, but the old man – not that forty-eight was *that* old – still preferred to keep it pencil and paper wherever possible. He had a drawer full of old character sheets in his home office, some of which were older than Gladdy.

He plopped back down on that oddly-shaped couch Cheryl had forced on him in the divorce, his daughter fiddling with something below the holocam’s field until she saw he returned. Then, those piercing eyes of hers were right back on him. Brendan adjusted his own holocam for his new position and addressed the issue.

“All right. So Alphagia. Hannah looked it up after the game, but said she couldn’t find any record of a real world analog. But I started analyzing the symbol, and... look. See anything?”

He held up his sketch of the Alphagia logo they’d seen on some of the signage around the building, the little horseshoe shape with the partial pentagram inside it. Gladdy squinted and adjusted her zoom. “Hmm. You’re sure you got it drawn right?”

“I’m sure. Come on, really *look*. You can figure it out.”

His confidence kept her at it, and after muttering through some discarded answers, she at last snapped her fingers and pointed. “Omega! That’s it, the lines – Alpha – and the outer part, the frame, omega! Alphagia: alpha, omega!”

“Nicely done. You figured it out a lot faster than I did, I might add.”

“I had a good coach. But why not call themselves Alphega?” Her smile soured instantly. “Nevermind. Once I heard it... yeah. Alphagia is better.”

“Agreed. So with your eerie yet encyclopedic knowledge of our GM, what does that mean to you?”

Gladys sat further back, her holocam adjusting its field to keep her face centered. The manufacturers swore up and down they couldn’t access the things, but for someone who’d grown up before cell phones, much less all this, it was hard to trust. Gladys, nearly as close with her implant as she was with her father, was thinking.

“Hmm. Alphagia. I mean, it’s the sort of cheesy meaningful-sounding but ultimately meaningless name evil organizations take on, like in Bond movies.”

“Sure, sure.”

“But there’s more, then. Alpha omega, beginning and end. Greek letters, but.. was he in a fraternity or something? I’ve never heard of an Alpha Omega house.”

“Not a Greek organization.”

“Didn’t think so. OK. So... Jacob. Alphagia. Crap, should I get out my files?”

“I’ll just spoil it for ya.” Brendan smiled. It was a rare day he picked up on something faster than his daughter, and he was always proud that they could compete. “Alpha, Omega. A and Z.” He paused, but she was listening now, not analyzing. “And Jacob works for...”

Her eyes flickered as she refreshed her memory with a bump from her implant. “AdZell? Oh! AdZell! Ha! Aw, snap. That’s fun. Man, I never would have gotten that. You ‘real adults’ and your ‘having jobs’ and all.”

“Yeah, I liked it. I didn’t say anything in-game – didn’t want to embarrass Jacob if he was being clever. But still, a nice little inside joke on his company, the evil corporate snatchers.”

She grinned. “Better hope Keon doesn’t get to GM and do the same.”

“More like *he* better hope.”

She shifted topic. “So what else did I miss?”

“You’re lounging on eighty degree beaches and it’s been forty and raining for two days, but sure, you’re the deprived one.” Brendan had to consult his notepad again, but the detail was indeed there. “Right, yeah. So we escaped the facility, had a cool little car chase during the escape. Corn used some spare parts from the rear end of the car to make an improvised smoke bomb to obscure our tail lights. Not sure how useful it was, but it was a cool idea. Then Sanguine shot out some of the other cars’ tires.”

“Sounds pretty bad-ass. Is the chase turn-based, like combat?”

“Sort of? It goes in phases, and you can try a bunch of maneuvers, and passengers can take regular actions, and there’s terrain interference like traffic, or oh! There was this bit where there was some road construction, and we were ramming all these orange barrel things everywhere when Dirk failed his Drive check. It was actually really fun.”

She was smiling broadly, and he felt guilty for a moment, rubbing her face in it. Beaches weren’t everything. “Sounds pretty fun.”

“So yeah, once we got clear, we figured it was too dangerous to go back to any of our places, so we found a motel and paid cash, got a pair of adjoining rooms. We tried to grill Echo a bit, like what his real name was, where he’s from, that kind of thing. But he said the first thing he remembers was down in his cell in the Alphagia basement. We speculated, but nobody had a solid answer for how to mindwipe somebody. With magic, I guess.”

“Or he’s lying and he’s a plant.”

“Or that. I wanted to press him some, actually – I didn’t succeed on any Sense Motive checks, so if he was bullshitting us, I couldn’t be sure. But nobody else seemed too keen on pursuing it. The girls were blinded by the hot Jesus, and Remy and Keon just acted like Jacob wouldn’t pull one over on them like that. So for now, I guess he’s one of us.”

Gladys threw her hands up. “How can they be so trusting? From what the guy said, it sounds like they built a whole prison just for him. The PCs, on the other hand, they stuffed in random closets. If Echo’s a threat, why not just kill him? If he’s some kind of unwilling asset, why doesn’t he know more? If he does know more, why wouldn’t he tell you?”

Brendan held up his hands. “Whoa there, MacGruber.”

“MacWho?”

“So maybe you’re right, and there’s a *there* there. But consider the counterpoint: not everything is developed in that kind of depth. Or if it is, maybe it’s one of those things where we learn his backstory bit by bit as we go. Maybe like you said, Jacob’s doing a lot of extra planning, and there’s some kind of influence point system like you see in some video game RPGs.”

“Maybe.” She didn’t look convinced. “So was that it?”

“Just about. The players all shared the snippets Jacob gave us about our last job before we were taken, and it looks like we were all surveilling the same person.” He looked again to his notepad. “Woman named Nina Ruiz. Dirk was hired to steal her purse and hand it over to a buyer. Corn was contracted to build some surveillance tech, which it looks like Sanguine was hired to break into the woman’s apartment to install. And like I told you before, Kennedy and I posed as police, tried to do some magic ESP stuff, get a read on her. But nobody got a chance to learn anything before we got snatched.”

Gladdy stroked her chin. “Huh. So who hired you?”

“Sounds like it was all anonymous. Online hiring, or strangers who offered cash but no names. We asked Jacob if it was one of those don’t-bother things, but he didn’t say one way or the other. I think it was Toni who said we should look into that next time. Oh, speaking of, we’re doing an extended session on Labor Day. You think you’ll be back by then?”

“Not looking good. I told Kerri I’d help her with this charity thing she’s doing, and I’m probably gonna follow through.”

Her father took a moment to steel himself. Her noncommittal tendencies were decidedly one of the things he struggled with in his daughter, but there was no point picking a fight over this particular one today. “What’s the charity?”

“I dunno, some cancer thing, or hospital thing, or cancer hospital thing. We’re doing a carwash with her sorority.”

“Bikini carwash? Isn’t that a little objectifying for you?” Kerri was one of the handful of friends she’d made at her mother’s; Brendan had never met her, but he’d seen pictures on Gladdy’s social media. He couldn’t say he was all that surprised. Gorgeous young women who did charity bikini carwashes were the sort who had

mothers connected with someone like Cheryl. The woman still had pipe dreams of turning Gladdy into a socialite like herself.

Gladdy arched a brow. “Who said anything about bikinis?”

He adopted a Dad Glower. “There had better be bikinis!”

She caught the irony to his expression and laughed, her holo punching through his shoulder. “Dr. Cassel says volunteering is good for depression.”

“Well, your dad says bikini carwashes are good for attracting creeps, so be careful, OK?”

“And you figure out who this Nina Ruiz is. My money is she’s a high-up with Alphagia, but there’s a lot we don’t know.”

“We?”

“You. Whatever.” She paused, and the holo was muted as she yelled to someone off-cam. Her eyes rolled before she turned back to him, and he had to suppress a smile at her dismissive treatment of her mother’s attempts to pry her away from him.

“But be careful,” she continued. “Companies like this are bad news, especially in a sci-fi setting where there’s all sorts of surveillance, finance tracking, all that stuff. You never know how much a GM is going to incorporate – half the time the sci-fi game streams I watch don’t even use half as much as the government actually has available in the real world – but watch out. Cash only, try not to be memorable. Though if you guys look like I picture you from your descriptions, that may be tough. Obviously, make sure you ditch the truck – whether or not it was lojacked when you stole it, it’s an easy avenue for a GM to introduce one as an excuse for an ambush encounter.”

Suddenly, Gladdy’s head craned to the side, and though she once again muted it first, he could easily make out the words *I SAID ONE MINUTE CHERYL!* being belted from her suddenly irritated face.

“It’s almost dinner-time, so I gotta go,” she said as she unmuted. “Remember, they’re going to expect you to go after Ruiz, so don’t fall for it. Maybe she’s their asset and maybe she’s not, but if they caught you when you were being sneaky, they’ll definitely see you coming now that they know where you live. And don’t be surprised if Echo turns out to be more trouble than he’s letting on. We’ll need to keep our eyes on him.”

“Yes we will.” He put the slightest stress on the *we*, and a thin smile returned to her lips.

“Love you, Dad.”

Brendan planted a kiss in the air where her holo’s forehead was. It probably looked totally wrong on her end, but she’d know what he was about. He aimed high, still remembering the ribbing she’d given him after his holo had appeared to be aiming for her lips. Not something a fifteen-year-old forgave easily, no matter how accidental.

“I love you sweetheart.”

Lane flexed her fingers, adjusting to a body that suddenly shed twenty-five years and twice as many pounds. She was tired, he registered, something his implant was telling him, reflected in his movement and the faintest blur in his vision. Not a precise imitation of actual tiredness, but for a game effect, it worked.

Around him, the others were likewise taking a moment to adjust. Kennedy, a veritable clone of Toni, was adjusting to standing erect with an inscrutable expression. Brendan tried not to look. Not looking at her was probably easier here than back in his game room, where her real-world counterpart was, if anything, even prettier. Kennedy probably didn't have the stats to splurge on Charisma, whereas Toni could easily afford skin and hair care products. Regardless, even though the wheelchair made it hard to wonder whether or not she even could have a sexual relationship, Brendan knew she was way too young for him, and he wouldn't risk making things awkward with any advances.

The group was still clustered in one of their motel rooms, where they'd been discussing the previous night's events. Lane noted she was across the room from where she'd been sitting last time; he surmised the app simply dropped them at random into the location rather than preserving the specifics of it.

"Anybody else feeling that fatigue?" asked Kennedy, stifling a yawn. The group quickly acknowledged the same. "Let's get some shuteye, and in the morning, we can plot our next move when we're clear-headed."

Corn harrumphed irritably. "Anybody else wondering why the game resumed at night? I know it's meta, but it feels like if nothing was going to happen, we would've picked up in the morning instead."

"That is definitely pretty meta, dude," said Dirk.

Suddenly, Brendan remembered something his daughter had said in their phone call last week and quickly spoke up through Lane. "Oh hey! You know, what if the security guard's car is traceable? You know, like a GPS beacon or something. We left him alive, and I'd bet he'd be too happy to rat us out to his bosses."

Sanguine's sparkling eyes narrowed. "Good call, man. I didn't even think of that. I swear, it's like my character's low Int is actually making *me* dumber."

Lane patted her shoulder. "I'll go take care of it. If I find anything, I'll report back. If not, what do you think? Ditch it just to be safe?"

After a brief discussion, the group concurred with abandoning the truck. Walking wasn't all that difficult in the confines of the city, and they had enough credits on hand for public transit as needed. Lane excused herself and made for the parking lot. The O&M Motel was on the south side of town, on the outskirts of the city where there were finally traces of greenery that weren't city parks. Vacant lots, fields, yards. There were still street lights, but from what Lane could see, there wasn't anybody lurking. The lot was mostly empty, just a car that probably belonged to the night clerk and a rusty old

utility van that had seen better decades. There was a convenience store across the street, but the only person she could see was a homeless guy sleeping against the side of the building. It was still summer out, and a gloriously warm night, easily seventy degrees, and the man had a little smile in place as he slept.

Still, considering that earlier that night someone had broken into her home and kidnapped her while she slept, not seeing anyone was not all that comforting. Checking to make sure her gun was accessible in its spot tucked into the back of her pants, she made her way down to where they'd parked the stolen truck. No sign of a break-in, nobody hiding under the bed cover. Cool.

Brendan Gibbel knew nothing about trucks. Nor cars, nor anything remotely automotive. He hadn't owned a car until he finished law school, and he didn't even trust himself to check the oil. He'd had to have someone show him how to charge the battery. How a tech wiz like Gladdy could be related to someone like him, he couldn't imagine. That wasn't Cheryl, either.

Lane McCallister, however, was quite the skilled woman, and tonight she was calling on those skills. She had only a modest Intelligence score of 13, but the Emissary had the broadest skill selection and deepest pot of skill points of any class. She was trained in both Perception and Engineering, either of which, according to Keon, could be used for finding mechanical traps. Did a GPS beacon count as a trap?

But he didn't have to call out for Jacob's assistance. Via his implant, Lane's know-how kicked in automatically. She lowered herself onto her side on the gritty pavement, grimacing at what was probably coming into contact with her hair. She reached under the engine block, probing blindly before thinking to check the truck for a flashlight.

She was rummaging in the detritus dumped haphazardly in the truck bed when Brendan's implant – not Lane's, but rather her player's – interrupted.

Incoming wireless call from: Gladys Gibbel. Not available for auto-connect. Earpiece not detected.

Lane rolled her eyes. Gladdy knew full well their session was today. Could she really be trying to get so hands-on that she'd call for live updates? And a call, too. At least with a text he might have been able to handle discretely during the session. A call would be an interruption for everyone. He ordered his implant to ignore the call and got back on the ground, shining it around for signs of anything electronic. The underside seemed clear. Next, she popped the hood to inspect the hardware. All these terms for vehicle components... were they even real, or simply jargon her implant was feeding her for the game? No matter. Soon enough, Lane was convinced the truck was clear. If there were some means of tracking them, it wasn't going to be their own ride betraying them. There wasn't any sound or visualization of the die roll's result, but this was probably the sort of thing the GM kept secret so she wouldn't know how good of a job she'd done.

Satisfied, Lane brushed the pebbles out of her hair with her fingers and made for the motel rooms she and the others had rented. They'd gotten two, one for the guys and one for the girls. Only...

Should she head into the room with her fellow female characters, or did he opt for the room with his fellow men?

If it had been a group of Brendan's own friends he'd known for a long while, it wouldn't be a dilemma. Aside from Keon, he'd only met them back in July for their Week o' Gaming. As for Keon, he'd worked at the firm for over a year, but they hadn't actually met until Brendan saw him carrying the Player's Guide in the elevator one day and struck up a conversation. When had that been, April? Around then.

It was in the midst of pondering this predicament when he received another notification.

Incoming wireless call from: Cheryl Gibbel. Not available for auto-connect. Earpiece not detected.

The previous call had, at most, been the most minor of annoyances. But this? This made his blood run cold. The last time he'd gotten a call from Cheryl, it had been because his dog Baneling, whom she'd stolen in the divorce, had died after her new boyfriend fed it a bunch of grapes when she was off having a spa day. Although she'd taken his dog and his last name, she wouldn't call him unless she had no other option. That's she'd done so on the heels of his daughter's call...

"Hey Jacob, I need to snap out of it, right now, OK? You guys can go on without me, but I got a big call – let me out. Jacob? Hey, Jake–"

End app? prompted his implant.

Yes, damn it! he commanded it.

In the blink of an eye, he was back on the couch in his game room at One Tulley Center. The others, slumped in their respective places, didn't stir, though he barely noticed as he darted into his bedroom for where he'd taken his earpiece out before the game. Jacob's image, holing in from his place in Austin, was nowhere to be seen, not that there seemed to be a need for it to be. Hustling down the hall, Brendan commanded his implant not to let the call go to voicemail, and it was going on the eighth ring when he was finally able to accept.

"Cheryl? Cheryl, are you–"

"Bren? Oh thank god. I tried reaching you with Gladdy's old phone, but you didn't answer. I didn't think I'd have better luck, but I needed to–"

"Slow down, Cheryl," She was speaking so quickly he could hardly understand her. "Where's Gladdy? Tell me what's going on."

"I'm trying, if you'd just..." She paused, and he was a little relieved to hear her take a deep breath. "Look, she's going to be all right. She broke a couple bones in her foot, and I'm at the hospital now."

“What?! How in the hell did you let her—” He realized he was shouting, and with guests in the next room, that wouldn’t do. As a secondary point, he realized it wasn’t fair to be yelling at Cheryl. Probably. “What happened?” he asked in a more measured tone.

He could picture his ex-wife’s face, savoring his attempt at civility. She’d always preferred to drive him insane when he was acting his calmest. “I don’t know everything yet. Gladly texted me from her implant while she was in the ambulance. She was volunteering, a car wash, and her friend Kerri said a jeep ran over Gladys’s bare foot, and first responders said there’s probably some breaks. When I got here, she was in surgery, and they haven’t come out to update me yet.”

“Oh god! Did she get the information of the jeep’s driver?”

He winced as the lawyer in him asserted itself ahead of the father. Cheryl didn’t miss it either. “No need to worry, dear. She retained counsel and was busy gathering eye witness testimony when those pesky paramedics interrupted by trying to treat her.”

“Right. Of course. Sorry. I...” I what? What could he do? As often as he’d been grateful his shrew of an ex had moved two thousand miles away, suddenly it meant he was helpless to do anything to help her, or even to check on her. To hold her hand. His eyes started to water.

“I know,” said Cheryl after a moment. “I’ll tell her you said something that sounds like what you’d say. I’m sure she’ll want to call you as soon as she’s able. She’ll be pretty medicated for a while, no doubt, but once she can string a few words together, I’ll see to it she calls.”

Brendan braced himself against his kitchen counter. The marble countertops Cheryl had insisted upon had set him back twelve thousand dollars, yet they did no better of a job comforting him in that moment. “Thanks, Cheryl. How about you? Are you doing all right?”

“Besides the obvious, yes. And by the way, your alimony payment was a day late. Again.”

In spite of everything, that brought him a smile. Certainly not her intention, but being angry at Cheryl was a much more comfortable headspace to occupy than being afraid for Gladly. “It’s automated, Cheryl, so have your lawyer take it up with the bank.”

“Mm.” Then the call dropped.

Brendan gave himself a few minutes to calm down, even poured himself a glass of Scotch. After pounding that down, he poured another, and downed it.

He made his way back to the game room some minutes later, already a bit unsteady from pressing his confessedly weak tolerance for alcohol with so much Scotch.. “Sorry about that, everybody,” he announced. “That was my ex-wife calling. Looks like Gladly broke her foot.”

He expected to see eyes fluttering, then concerned comments. Toni would no doubt be more empathetic than usual. She seemed to have taken a liking to his

daughter, or maybe had a free-roaming liking for most people. But instead, nobody moved. Nobody stirred.

For the first time since they'd started this game, he wondered just how cut-off from the real world they were. Nobody had ever been awake in the room while they were playing before. That he'd noticed, at least. They'd ordered food a couple weeks back, but everyone had paused the app for that. He supposed there was Jacob, sort of, though right now his hologram was nowhere to be seen, and it neither reappeared or responded to Brendan's presence.

Curious, he walked over to where Keon was nestled into the corner of one couch. Brendan snapped his fingers in his employee's ear, waved a hand in front of his face, said his name a few times. Nothing. They had to be hearing him, right? Except when he'd gotten his call notifications, he'd been able to shut off the app right away. Ergo if they were hearing him, he couldn't imagine they wouldn't wake themselves up to at least be courteous for those who had less genuine concern for his lurky daughter. Just to press things, he took Keon's wrist in his hand, lifted it for a moment, then released it. It flopped down to the cushion without slowing itself in the least, dead to the world.

Huh.

Say...

Without quite knowing why, he found his eyes darting to where Toni reposed at the end of the couch, her chair vacant beside it. He rebuked the whisper in his mind before it could even form a full sentence.

No. Good grief, no.

She was so pretty, though. It wasn't wrong to *look*, surely.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought what a tragic waste of beauty she was. He'd never heard any of them mention how exactly she'd come to need the wheelchair – in fact it seemed a topic entirely taboo – but he'd at least picked up that she hadn't always. It hadn't dulled her any, though. She was all delicate features, from that elfin face to her narrow build, small but pert breasts, long slender legs extending for miles beneath her sundress. She was tall, or would be, if... Well.

He was always a sucker for blondes, too. That rich caramel on her crown was to die for.

Hush. No. You can't touch her. Are you insane?

Why was the idea of her lying there, oblivious, so exciting? He was drunk. It had to be that. Was this some kink he'd never realized he had? Or was he distraught from the news about Gladdy, and his emotions were running amok?

It's only looking.

Brendan crouched in front of her. What would he say if her eyes opened right then? Or if someone else's did? This was nuts. What was he risking, to... to what? He craned his neck.

Pink. Her panties were bright pink.

STOP.

He slapped himself across the face, then picked himself up and backed away.

What is wrong with you?

He made his way to his spot on the couch, closed his eyes, and reactivated the app. A moment later, he was Lane, standing outside the motel, the warm air close all around her. She looked side to side at the two rooms, then went into the door on the left.

Kennedy and Sanguine were both asleep already, and didn't stir when she entered. The room was warm, almost oppressively so. Sanguine had evidently taken heed of this fact, as she was sprawled on top of her covers in her underwear, her red hair pooled around her head in a manner that was a little too much like spilled blood. Even so, the sight was practically pornographic. Frankly, almost everything about the character was. Not that Brendan hadn't made himself a hottie, too, but geez. There were limits.

Kennedy, on the other hand, was curled up under the covers, all the way on one side of her bed. With all the extra space, Lane picked her bedmate, kicked off her shoes, stripped off her armored breastpiece and pants, then slipped into the far side of the bed. She closed her eyes, but couldn't seem to calm herself enough to fall asleep.

One peek.

He glanced under the covers seeing by the thin light streaming in between the curtains. There was a decided lack of pink. To the contrary, Kennedy was stark naked, her tight bottom pointed right at her. She was incredible.

A minute later, she made her way to the other room, crawled into the far side of Corn's bed, and was asleep in moments. The world blurred as Jacob fast forwarded through an uneventful night, but no one was awake to see it. Why didn't Gladys call? But the hours were but seconds to her, out there under some surgeon's knife.

When Lane's eyes opened, gone was the haze of simulated fatigue that had clouded her eyes the night before. It had been a strange sleep; dreamless, and for the first time in what felt like years, without waking up in the middle of the night to have to pee. Soft sunlight was filtering in through the gaps around the curtains, though the antiquated alarm clock on the nightstand said it was only 6:20. The boys were still asleep.

Suddenly, Brendan was cognizant that he was lying in bed with what was, at least on some level, one of his employees.

It had been pretty easy, ever since the Week o' Gaming, to ignore that aspect to their relationship. After all, being able to rub elbows with one of the firm's partners at his Aspen cabin would, to most minds, be considered a perk. If it was somewhat untoward to bring a single employee to such a place, it was mitigated by the presence of his friends. While some lawyers allowed their expertise in the law to make them fearful

of litigiousness, Brendan tended to see how in the vast majority of such cases, people weren't looking for those sorts of opportunities, and his faith had been thus far vindicated.

However, if Keon woke up to find his boss had crawled into bed with him, half-naked... VR or no, that wasn't the sort of danger Brendan had signed up to oppose. Although the mattress *threeked* with the sound of his employing a Stealth check to slip away, Corn didn't stir, nor did Dirk or Echo, who were sharing the other. Her glance lingered on the latter; he was sleeping above the covers and was almost perfectly still, hands folded over his sparsely haired chest. Man, he was handsome. Lane felt it, for sure. With a shudder of realization that she was for the second time tonight ogling someone in an unconscious state – and this time a man, no less – Lane hopped into her pants, grabbed her shoes and was back in the girls' room before anyone was the wiser.

What a bizarre game this was, that something as simple as setting up camp could be so complicated! During the Week o' Gaming, they'd not even bothered with a watch order, just letting Jacob roll randomly to see who was on duty when an encounter began. Now, suddenly, Brendan had to concern himself with the specific spot he was sleeping.

In the girls' room, Kennedy slumbered still; Lane banished the stolen glimpses from his mind. (Pink. Not-pink.) The other bed, however, was unoccupied, and a moment later, he heard the sink running in the bathroom. "That you, McCallister?"

"Yeah."

"Decided not to shower up with the boys, eh?"

She glanced at Kennedy's recumbent form, but the noise didn't seem to bother her. Indeed, Brendan remembered from their week at his cabin that she'd been a rather sound sleeper. Could that extend to her character? Still, Lane kept her voice low. "Yeah, I don't shower with a fella unless he's at least sixth level."

Sanguine laughed. "Well, go for it. Good water pressure. I'll wake up the princess and get her going. We're burning daylight here."

Lane supposed she may as well, and opened the door to the bathroom – where Sanguine was standing naked as the day she was rolled, pale skin glistening. She was scrubbing her face over the sink, bent over, that almost cartoonishly proportioned body of hers on glorious display. *Almost* cartoonish, he'd thought, because he'd never wanted to fuck a cartoon. Bodies like that simply did not exist in the real world. Tits swinging softly beneath her but ready to resume flipping off gravity the moment she stood back up, ass thrust back like she was ready to be taken. Or maybe that was simply how a woman looked washing her face, and that body of hers was making the innocent look sinful.

She saw Sanguine making eye contact through the mirror, grinning smugly. Not that Lane's own body was anything to be ashamed of; far from it. She'd simply elected to go with a more... well, realistic body. In this moment, she could appreciate how some

women made even other attractive women feel insecure. Brendan hadn't felt that about himself faced with the sculpted hunk in the next room, but Lane sure felt it now.

"So, are you about to dyke out on me, or is that just Brendan having an out of character moment?" the redheaded vixen asked.

"Oh. Um, sorry, just... you know. You're naked. I didn't mean to stare."

"Do I look like someone who minds being stared at?"

Lane finally pried her eyes off of the woman, squeezing past her and removing her own shirt. She could feel the other woman's eyes on her, appraising her. Admiring her? Judging her? She honestly didn't know where Hannah fell on the spectrum. No matter. She wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of being the more squeamish. Not like it was Brendan's actual body, after all; showing it was no bigger a deal than showing his game room. Just something neat he'd made to show off a little.

She half-expected to feel a hand on her backside, but instead, she entered the shower unmolested. When she finally let herself peek to the other side of the curtain, Sanguine was gone.

Concurring with Keon's perspective that returning to their homes for a change of clothes was folly, the group made their way to a nearby strip mall to pick up new outfits. As an Emissary, Lane didn't gain even basic armor training until level three, so it was a simple shopping expedition for her. Her armalite breastpiece actually imposed a -1 to Dex-based skills because of her lack of proficiency, but she'd thought it worth it. When she'd been purchasing equipment with the blue-haired lady, Lane had browsed the armor selections, curious what was out there; it was enough that she could recognize the armor worn by the rest of the party. Most of it was a combination of padding made of advanced materials – that woman had had some sci fi jargon terms for what exactly – along with electromagnetic fields that generated a weak barrier which was much stronger against metallic objects like bullets, or even energy attacks like lasers. All very implausible in the real world, but cool enough for a game.

In the end, basic armors could pass for normal attire to the untrained eye. At higher levels, no, though then they could also install upgrades to project holograms over their armor to disguise it as clothing anyway. Alternately, some suits were stripped down to be lightweight enough to be worn piecemeal under one's clothing, unless like Sanguine, one's clothing was stretched so tight that it would bust at the seams if you tried to smuggle a bandaid underneath it. For now, Sanguine's Dexterity was high enough that a full suit of armor wouldn't make much difference to her Armor Class anyways. Lane's own AC was a pitiful 13, or 14 with the armalite breastpiece.

Regardless, it wasn't enough to keep her from drawing attention. Fully dressed and reassembled, the group headed for a diner at the far end of the strip. Three gorgeous women and three men muscled like comic book superheroes, most of them armed and armored. The armor, Lane supposed, was probably the least conspicuous part of it. Many a head was turned in their direction. Small wonder, considering most of the party was sporting either the Strength or Charisma for leads in movie roles.

Well, let them stare.

Lane looked over their NPC ally – or “ally” if Gladys' paranoia was right. (Oh how he couldn't wait for her to call!) He was not unimpressive in his own right. He was a handsome man, all the more so now that he'd taken time to shave and do something with that mop of hair. Brendan wouldn't have minded some of those genes; his own hair had been thinning since his early 30's, and only a series of expensive therapies had kept him from going bald. Echo's thick brown curls framed an intense face, and even the unobtrusive jeans and white t-shirt fit him flatteringly.

Maybe he was a little intimidated after all. His Sense Motive skill had already caught Sanguine and Kennedy checking him out on several occasions.

“We need to talk about our next move,” Echo said, looking around at his rescuers.

Dirk spoke around a mouthful of breakfast burrito. “Let’s. I was thinking, we stock up on bullets, then head back to that place and take care of problems until we’re all out.”

“Of problems?” asked Sanguine. “Or bullets?”

“Eh, whichever.”

“I’m not sure that’s a viable strategy,” Echo said guardedly. “We were fortunate to take Alphagia’s night shift by surprise, but now they’ll be on alert. Besides, they’re a legitimate business insofar as the law is concerned, so unless you think we’re primed to take on a SWAT team or two, we’ll have to come up with something more subtle.”

“We also won’t actually learn anything that way,” Kennedy pointed out. “I for one want to know what this company’s actually doing, why it’s kidnapping people. Though I give you a ten out of ten for bravado, Dirksy.” She raised her orange juice to him in salute.

“All right then, pacifists, what do you wanna do? Write them an aggressive letter? Start a petition?” Aside from Sanguine’s particularly loud chewing, the table was quiet. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Well, we could...” Corn’s thought process died somewhere mid-sentence. He shook his head, redirecting his mouth to his bagel.

“So much for sleeping on it,” griped Sanguine.

Incoming wireless call from: Gladys Gibbel. Would you like to answer this call?

Lane started. “Oh! My daughter.”

“You have a daughter?” asked Kennedy credulously.

“What? Of course I... Oh. You meant Lane. No. It’s Gladys, about the foot.”

Corn arched an eyebrow “Whose foot?”

“The broken... I told you last night. Or... you know, earlier in the session. Anyway, I gotta—”

Brendan was good at multitasking, and closed down the app mid-sentence, answering the call before his eyes even adjusted to the real world. “Gladdy! I’m so glad to hear your voice. Your mom told me what happened. How are you? What’s going on?”

“Not gonna lie, I’ve been better.”

“I’ll bet. How bad is it?”

Gladdy talked him through the whole thing, starting with the prognosis – two broken metatarsals and one partial break in the phalange on her big toe. Then she explained what that meant, and about the treatment. Six weeks in a cast, minimum, followed by months of physical therapy. Plus, she thought the man who ran over her foot tried to run off without realizing he’d paid for his car wash with a credit card, so add to everything the possibility of a cumbersome legal battle. That, at least, Brendan could help with.

“But hey. Tell me how your day’s going,” she said, sighing loudly into the phone.

Brendan felt like he'd spent half the session lusting after his fellow players – or their characters? both? was there a difference? – and was definitely feeling more than a little like a creeper. He couldn't tell her that, though. Frankly, he didn't know how he felt about anyone else discovering how helpless they were when once they'd started the game app. That was a lot of vulnerability for someone who was used to being in charge.

“Not a whole lot. I checked our truck, like you suggested, but it was clean. So far we've only been able to decide what not to do. We were just getting to what needs doing when you called.”

“Please tell me the not-to-do list includes going back to your residences, Dad.”

“Obviously.”

“Also crossing off a revenge strike?”

“Yes. We're not stupid.” Save perhaps for Remy, but he was a plucky kind of stupid, which had some redeeming value. He'd definitely been an asset in the previous sessions' fights.

“And you're not keeping the truck, I hope?”

“Not... why wouldn't we?”

“Oh my gosh. If the owner reports it stolen, that means every traffic camera in the city can be scanning for you. To say nothing of the GM deciding a nice random encounter with a minor traffic violation turning the lot of you into cop killers if somebody flies off the handle.”

“Oh. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that.” And now that it had been another hour or so, he was really feeling all that alcohol. Though from her voice, Gladdy was stoned on her meds herself.

“Symbiosis, Dad. I feed you good ideas, and you feed me actual food so I don't die.”

“Guess you better hope you don't run out of ideas then, my crippled daughter.”

“You better not let Toni hear you talking like that.”

Brendan winced. “Right. They're still in-game, probably figuring out our plan of action.”

“What does Echo want you to do?” she asked, her suspicion plain.

“He hasn't advocated anything. He did say we shouldn't storm the facility, but I think most of us were already thinking that.”

“Hmm.” She groaned, and his heart broke a little to hear his daughter in pain he couldn't help. “Well whatever he says, watch him.”

“You know, it could simply be Jacob using him to steer us in the right direction for his game,” he suggested. “Innocent until proven guilty, remember?”

“The right direction is whatever direction you decide to go,” she said evenly.

“You're the player, and it's a game. So don't let the game play you.”

“You know, it could simply be Jacob using him to steer us in the right direction for his game,” he suggested. “Innocent until proven guilty, remember?”

“The right direction is whatever direction you decide to go,” she said evenly. “You’re the player, and it’s a game. So don’t let the game play you.”

The pain was getting to her; he could tell by the mounting strain in her voice. She needed her rest, but he also needed to do something to comfort her. With her two thousand miles away, he could think of only one thing. “All right. So if you were Lane, what would *you* do?”

There was a pause, but when she spoke, there was unmistakable pleasure in her voice. Brendan might let his daughter make her own decisions and stick her nose into things, but it was rare for him to simply hand her the reins. “I’ll tell you what you need to be doing is finding yourselves a safe house somewhere so you have a base of operations. Then you’ll want new communicators, in case they manage to hack your existing accounts. They’ll be expecting you to go after the Ruiz angle – no way they don’t have someone doing countersurveillance. Still, if you’re clever about it, that may be something you can exploit.”

“Exploit? How? The only thing we have going for us right now is that they don’t know where we are. If we expose ourselves and get caught, we could be looking at a party wipe.”

“Oh, Father, you delightful simpleton.” She sighed, and he laughed to himself. That jeep might have broken her foot, but he couldn’t break her spirit. “Here’s what you do, OK...”

“First order of business: we need to ditch that truck. They may not be tracking it, but it’ll be reported stolen, and the last thing we need is the involvement of law enforcement to muck things up if they scan our plates.” Lane paused, but nobody disagreed. “Now we could simply ditch it, of course, but if we can get something out of it, I say we chop it.”

“Chop?” asked Kennedy.

Sanguine explained to their innocent comrade, “You know, like a chop shop. Dice it up for parts.”

“I think I might know someone. Thanks, Jacob. Cool use of backstory,” said Corn. Lane glanced at Echo, but as always, he showed no reaction when they broke character and addressed the invisible specter of their GM. “So I’m told I have an old contact, a foster sib, who’s got that kind of capability. I can take it out there, check it out.”

“You can’t go alone,” insisted Kennedy, concerned. “Maybe take Echo with you? Just in case.”

“I don’t see why a visit to his old friend should require assistance.” Echo arched an eyebrow, but he backed down quickly. “Still, perhaps you’re right. We’re all of us vulnerable right now. I’ll keep a close eye on him.”

After a quick arrangement for where to meet up after, the two set out. Once the truck had pulled out of the O&M Motel lot and down the street, Lane once more circled the remaining PCs. “Good work, Kennedy.”

“Who, *moi*?” She grinned. Seeing Dirk and Sanguine not following, she explained. “We had a quick powwow, and decided we don’t know enough about Echo yet to bring him in on our plans. So now Corn is gonna babysit him while we make our move.”

Sanguine looked between them. “Really? You think a guy who was being held in their basement, who helped us escape and kill some of their dudes, is a mole?”

“I think he could be, but the truth is, we don’t know. I’m not saying I distrust him, but you have to admit there’s something fishy about the way he forced his way into our group,” said Lane.

“Look whose character is talking,” muttered Dirk, almost inaudibly.

“But,” she continued, “that means the rest of us can take action, and we know there’s no chance of a leak.”

“But how?” asked Sanguine. “Corn’s always the one who comes up with the plans. We’re just the grunts who execute ‘em.”

“He’s not the only one who can come up with plans...” And Lane went through Gladdy’s plan, step by step.

“Wow,” was all Dirk said.

“That’s so good I almost feel bad for them,” said Kennedy, discernibly impressed. She gave Lane’s shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “That’s... actually kind of brilliant.”

“It’s *clever* – I don’t know about brilliant. But definitely clever,” offered Sanguine charitably.

The dangerous part of it was left to Dirk and Sanguine to hash out, with their greater knowledge of strategy and game mechanics. Meanwhile, knowing they’d need another vehicle, Lane headed out into the lot with Corn’s toolkit in hand, having nabbed it from his things before he’d left with Echo.

The van was the perfect 1st level skill challenge. Kennedy and Lane complemented one another well, checking with the clerk that the van was unclaimed, having been left there back in the spring and then the O&M’s manager hadn’t wanted to waste money towing it. Their offer to get it out of there was accepted with only a 20 credit bribe and a successful Diplomacy check, and then they headed out to pick the lock, pop open the hood, and get it into working order.

As a magician, Kennedy was adept with both magic and technology, and so Lane was simply on hand to grant a +2 for Aid Another on her checks. It translated mostly into handing her the right tools and occasionally starting or stopping the engine to see if something was working. Lane didn’t mind, though as the session was nearing an end, the alcohol in Brendan’s bloodstream was drying up, and he was beginning to feel a great deal more self-conscious about some of his and Lane’s behavior.

Worse, he worried he might have accidentally gone and developed a little crush – one which the close proximity of Kennedy’s lovely face to Lane’s, tucked away beneath the behemoth of a van as she fiddled with her wrench, was only worsening.

Kennedy blew a wisp of her hair out of her face for the tenth time, and for the tenth time it flipped right back over her eye. “So I gotta ask, Laney, how did you come up with that? I never have a head for strategy. Or is this tactics? I can never remember which is which. Ugh, Remy would have a fit if he heard me say that again.”

“It’s a bit of both, I guess. And I couldn’t say.” Or wouldn’t say, because admitting his daughter had developed the whole thing with her brain mushed by pain meds would be too embarrassing. “Maybe I watched too much TV as a kid. I used to love all those caper movies. You ever see *Ocean’s 11*?”

Kennedy nodded. “I think it was 8, actually. The one with the women who rob that museum?”

“I... that was...” He fell short of correcting her, but then she gave in to a fit of giggles. “You’re mocking me.”

“I’m not!” she protested, but a moment later, after still more savage giggling that was decidedly at his expense, conceded. “OK, maybe a little. But not to be mean! And no, I never saw them. I think my dad had them on Blu-ray? Or DVD? I can never remember which was which.”

“Eh, it’s all gone the way of the 8-track – not that I’m 8-track old, mind you,” Lane said, reflecting for a moment that from the looks of them, she was decidedly the

younger. Kennedy was a younger version of Toni, probably mid-twenties, but still, Lane was closer to Gladdy's age.

Seeing the hair was bothering her, Lane swiped it out of her way and smoothed it into place. Kennedy flashed a grateful look. "You seem like you get self-conscious about your age a lot. Brendan you, that is. With Lane, I'd feel like I was robbing the cradle. Or – not that I'm, or that I would...!" She shook her head and focused her attention back on a rusted bolt. "Ugh, sorry. Anyway, do you mind my asking how old you are?"

Lane smiled at her misspeech. "Nice even fifty. Fifty-one, in December, right after Thanksgiving."

"Huh. Skin like yours, I wouldn't have put you a day over twenty-two." Kennedy waited, then rolled her eyes. "I'm kidding. But yeah, that's cool."

"Oh, super cool. Fifty is the new twenty, they say."

"They do, do they?" Kennedy slid back out from under the van, and Lane helped her to her feet so she could inspect something in the engine block, another doodad whose name and function Lane understood, but Brendan would never have guessed. "I took the easy way out, looks-wise, in character creation, but I just know I would have turned myself into some sort of creepy-looking monstrosity if I'd had to do it manually. Seriously, good job keeping it all high and tight. Laney's got it going on."

Lane playfully swatted her own bottom. "No complaints here. You could bounce a quarter off this thing, I swear."

The blonde snort-laughed, then almost tripped over a bump in the sidewalk. Lane hurried to steady her. "Careful. Already have one broken foot in my life."

"Sorry. Guess it's sort of been a while since I had to worry about tripping."

The two worked on the van in silence for a while, Kennedy tightening this and adjusting that as Lane mostly stood by and occasionally mopped the sweat off her cohort's forehead with a rag. But after a few minutes, the silence got to her. "While we're asking sensitive questions..."

But Kennedy knew where Lane was going and was poised to deflect. "I'd rather not talk about it. But I don't mind if you ask one of them sometime. Is that OK? I don't want to be a wet blanket or anything. I just don't talk about it."

"Of course it's OK. I didn't mean to—"

"You're fine. Really. For today, I'm standing and walking and even crawling around like I did when I really was Kennedy's age, on a lovely day with a lovely person. Just looking to keep things on that level, you know?"

"I know, all right. Believe me, if you all weren't over, I'd be losing it with the whole Gladdy situation."

"Oh! Yeah, I can imagine. Is she going to need a chair, or is she doing crutches? If it's a chair, I can loan her my old one. It still works fine – I only got another one because my doc suckered me into this whole orthopedic enhancing model that doesn't actually

do squat for my back, but it has a neat little vibrating mode that's not too bad." She blushed at the implication, then deeper when she realized this may not strictly speaking count as girl talk, but Lane hurried to distract her from it.

"I'm not sure yet. I'm not even sure if she's going to come back here before she gets the cast off. Though I suspect after a week of 'mothering' at my ex-wife's hands Gladdy will be pushing people out of the way to get on the plane back to Chicago." He caught himself using that tone he did when he talked about his ex-wife. "Sorry, Cheryl's... well, it's another poor subject for a lovely day with a lovely person, so let's forget I brought it up."

Kennedy flashed him a smile, and gave her hand a tentative squeeze. It lingered for a moment, then pulled back suddenly. "Sorry. Was that weird? I'm kind of a touchy person, and I guess Kennedy is too. I wasn't, like, flirting or anything."

"If you hadn't said that, I never would have assumed you were." That was the truth, all right. Chair or no chair, the woman hugged her friends almost every time she greeted them or said goodbye.

"Good. Just... Hannah – or Sanguine, or whatever – told me this morning about how she was messing with you in the bathroom. She said, um, Lane might be a lesbian...?"

"She said what?" Lane had not expected that to come up as a topic. Lesbian? What did one say to that? How often did someone have to decide their sexuality!

"Oh! Nothing against it or anything! I've played some characters who straddled the line on occasion. Never in real life, though when I was in college there was this... never mind." Kennedy halted herself, grimacing apologetically.

"I... hadn't really thought about it. I kinda focused on other things during character creation."

"Oh! Yeah, I read your backstory. That was so interesting – and thorough! I mean, some of it feels a little weird now that you went female, but it still more or less works. That was really affecting. Hopefully Jacob will make some use of it as we go on. Normally, he's pretty good about using those details. Though with a family like that..."

Brendan, however, still had not read the backstory Keon had written for him, and had not the slightest clue what Kennedy was talking about. So, in the tradition of all men who were afraid to look stupid in front of an attractive woman, he played along, without quite lying.

"Yeah, totally," she said. Brendan had no clue what was up with Lane's family. Dead, undead, aliens, ghosts... none less likely than the others. Time to pivot. "I mean, when I decided to play a woman, I just thought it would be... I don't really know what I thought, honestly. I definitely didn't expect to be in a party with Jessica Rabbit up there when I did." She pursed her lips. "That's another old movie reference."

And like that, the topic of Lane's backstory was abandoned. "That one I got. And yeah, it's... a bit much. I actually thought about playing a guy myself."

Lane looked at her askance. "Seriously?"

Kennedy stood aside as a mailman passed between them, then lowered her voice, glancing to the cluster of her friends. "Yeah. Same reason I sometimes play lesbians, actually. Don't get me wrong, I like the RP element of the game, and I like to build relationships with NPCs and all. Sometimes I get more attached to them than I do to people in my actual life, you know?"

"I can see that. I remember at the cabin, when you cried after whatshername, the little elven kid, fell into the star well." He wouldn't have remembered it at all if not for seeing Toni cry over it. He'd been busy trying to solve the djinn's riddle.

"Yeah. NPCs, they're usually so good, or so bad, or you forget them immediately. But people? We're gray areas. 'Flawed heroes, all of us' – that's something Jacob used to say, back when. He meant it about creating characters, I think, but I always thought it applied even better to real folk. We're all of us a lot more complex than anything I've seen statted out on a character sheet."

Lane only nodded, unsure what to say, and she seemed to realize she'd sidetracked herself. "But yeah, it's been a norm for a long time for our characters to have sexual partners. Boyfriends, wives – Hannah bound an incubus to her character one time, even. And... you know Jacob and I used to go out, right?"

No one had actually told him as much, but now that she said it, it instantly explained a lot of the slightly off vibe between them. Less so at the cabin, but ever since the Near Future game had commenced, there had been a soft hostility about her whenever she was addressing the GM, or talking to an NPC. "I do now."

"Oh wow – you are missing some history. Well anyway, yeah, it can be kind of awkward, role-playing... *that*. With your ex."

"Huh. Yeah, I can imagine." This was actually the first group Brendan had ever played in that even represented both sexes, so imagining was precisely what he had to do.

"It's not always bad. He really is a good guy most of the time, and a great GM. Just sometimes, it's..." She made a face. "Between you and me, it's kind of why I was so sour the last couple sessions."

Sour? As far as he could remember, she'd been a portrait of kindness. "Something with you and Jacob?"

"Well, you know how we were kidnapped and all. So like, I wake up, and I'm... you know, *naked*. And I was dumb enough to clone my character from myself, so all I'm thinking is that here's my ex-boyfriend, seeing me naked for the first time since..." Her eyes sparked for a moment. "In a long time. And I thought he was... and I got really upset, and..." She looked up at Lane. "And you didn't even notice."

“You were naked? You had clothes on when we saw you.” He’d definitely have remembered seeing her naked. Since now he had, and he did. He hoped he never forgot. The woman was gorgeous.

“That was an illusion – and why I was out of spells for the rest of the dungeon. Or laboratory, or whatever you call a dungeon in Near Future.”

“Huh. And here I am again thinking, ‘why oh why couldn’t she have picked *magic missile* for her first level spell?’” He felt a little nervous, joking flirtatiously with her, but to his relief, she belted out a full belly laugh and swatted him playfully on the arm. Still, he didn’t want to leave the conversation on such awkward footing, and went on. “But you were right, I definitely didn’t notice you weren’t having fun. I’m sorry. You’re just always so... nice. I guess I can’t tell slightly-less-nice you apart from full-nice you.”

A pretty smile remained on her pretty face as she climbed up into the driver’s seat and worked at cracking open a panel on the dash. Through the open window of their motel room, they could just barely make out Dirk exclaiming about how much easier their mission would be if he could just get his hands on a functioning missile launcher. What on earth he meant to do with it, they could only guess, but it made for some nice levity.

At least, until things suddenly got real. Or as real as VR would let them get, anyway. “Hey, so here’s a weird thought,” Kennedy said, studiously avoiding eye contact. “And you are under no obligation or anything, and I probably shouldn’t even say this but now I’ve already started and it would be way weirder if I didn’t say it, so... yeah. So, I am definitely not in a mood to have Kennedy have any sort of romance arc with an NPC. I know Echo’s all hunky and everything, but... honestly, fuck Jacob if he thinks he can cheer me up with a hot NPC, ya know?”

Lane was clueless where this was going, and waited for her to ramble on. “Anyway, so I thought, he might know our stats but he isn’t in our head, and there was no box for us to check about how we felt about stuff or anything, and I really am just so done with Jacob and his games, and meanwhile here you are, all sweet and pretty and with that beautiful backstory and all, and I thought, maybe...”

Kennedy took a deep breath, and finally turned to face him. “Do you wanna be my girlfriend?”

Lane dropped the heavy wrench she’d been carrying right on her foot and yelled in surprise as much as pain. “Ow! Shit! Sorry, I... ow.” Dirk and Sanguine seemed to have heard and were looking out the window at the two of them, but he gestured that all was well and they went back to their huddle. “Sorry. That’s definitely the first time I’ve been asked that.”

“Oh my gosh, I super creeped you out! I really didn’t mean anything by it – I was only brainstorming, and I was like, how can I keep Jacob from trying to flirt with me through NPCs and then I was all oh hey Brendan’s attracted to women so maybe it

wouldn't be super weird for him, and obviously we don't have to actually *do* girlfriends stuff, but I didn't say that so now it sounds like I'm only saying it because of how weird I made things and oh my god what was I—"

"Let's do it."

She shut up, and her flushed face slowly drained to its usual color. "Really? I mean, you don't have to, and I'm definitely not trying to pressure you into anything you're uncomfortable with. I—"

"I'll do it. Take yes for an answer, Kennedy." She entwined her grip through those slender fingers, raising the woman's hand up to her lips and kissing the back of it softly.

She tried to read Kennedy's reaction. She'd babbled so much that it was hard to be sure. Was this all to spite Jacob? To make him jealous? Or because she wanted to avoid complications? Or was she simply flirting and all that had been a cover? Being a woman hadn't given him any fresh insights into the female mind.

A moment later, a car pulled up to a nearby stop sign. Its license plate, he noted, read 14SMVS8. Wait... was that their dice rolls? 14 SM – Sense Motive? – vs. 8. Wow. She'd almost forgotten she could use her Sense Motive skill on party members. Suddenly, her implant whispered to her that Kennedy was feeling self-conscious but pleased, and a little bit aroused.

Aroused? How did the game know she was aroused?! Yet at the same time, there was a strange tingling sensation between her own legs that she couldn't mistake as the same. Was that... in her...?! Too bizarre for words!

During character creation, Lane had gotten to select an Emissary's Knack ability from a list of options. There had been a wide variety, ranging from inspiring allies in combat to making her lies more believable to gaining favors from influential connections. She had selected one called Firm Handshake. As a lawyer and a businessman, Brendan had always been a big believer in handshakes as the measure of a person's confidence, and first impressions went a long way with him. Not really wanting to slow down and read all the options, he'd figured it made sense enough to him and let him get back to more fun aspects of the game.

Now he couldn't quote what it did, exactly, but—

His implant supplied it, the text flashing up before him in letters visible only to himself. *Emissary's Knack → Firm Handshake: When in physical contact with a humanoid target, set the Difficulty of all Diplomacy checks as if their attitude were one step more friendly. If you successfully improve the target's attitude, you gain a +4 bonus to Sense Motive checks against them for the duration of one encounter. This ability has no effect on hostile targets, and cannot be used on a given target more than once per day.*

Lane blinked as her implant flashed the words in front of her. A bit disconcerting that the app was so in sync with his thoughts, but he had to admit it was handy.

A follow-up inquiry explained the “one step” thing, ranking target’s attitudes on a scale from hostile to fanatical. The Difficulty to make someone fanatical was way beyond what he could achieve as a first level character, but the second highest, cooperative...

He made the check, which manifested in the game as continuing to hold Kennedy’s hand, then giving it a squeeze the next time she glanced over at her. “ I think this is going to be a lot of fun,” she heard herself say.

This time there was no visual display of the roll, but rather a more direct one of its effect. Suddenly, over Kennedy’s head, the word Receptive appeared in a small arc along the contour of her hair. In the next moment, he realized the word’s arc was part of a circle, and that the circle was rotating. It stopped with the next word, Cooperative, settled in place.

Lane wondered what “Cooperative” entailed.

The presence of a delicate hand sliding rather indelicately into the front waistband of her pants disrupted his musings. Suddenly, Kennedy was pulling her up into the van with her,, her neck bent down to connect her lips with the shorter Latina’s. They were wet, and soft. As soft as the hand that caressed along her cheek, though not as wet as the tongue that slipped into her mouth right after.

Brendan wondered what all Lane could get away with. As her hands cupped that tight, supple butt he’d seen in bed the night before, he suspected quite a lot. To think, drunken Brendan gibbel had come scarily close to copping an illicit feel on this very woman. Now here he was, making out with her in-game mere hours later. He couldn’t credit Jacob for the glorious makeout that followed, but he had to say, it was shaping up to be his favorite campaign yet.

Chapter Five

Runners and Chases

Remy Norton was not ordinarily given to metaphorical thinking, but as he gazed out of his office at the yellowing linen sheet held up by a series of clothespins, their springs rusting and brittle from the constant humidity from the showers, he couldn't help but think that it represented... something. He didn't know what, quite, but as noted, he wasn't one for metaphorical thinking.

The sheet was thin, thin enough that an astute eye could make out silhouettes on the far side, illuminated by the frosted windows that lined the far wall of the Saint Andrew's College Women's Track & Field locker room. The windows were sufficiently opaque that they permitted only light to enter, and not so much as a suggestion of the scenery within to escape. That, Remy contemplated, was irony. That much he remembered from his high school language arts classes. Windows, usually in place to permit looking through, here revealed almost nothing; a sheet, put in place to prevent looking through, here revealed almost everything.

Sound, for instance. The sheet did nothing to block sound. From the far side, he could hear the faint hiss of showers spraying over the bodies of his runners. Squeals echoing from said showers, whose cause he fought hard not to imagine. Someone giggling – Miranda, undoubtedly, given that thinly veiled mean-spirited lilt to it. Lockers opening and closing as his girls exchanged their workout clothes for towels, their towels for street clothes. The low *grrrrrrrrrrrrng* of the dilapidated whirlpool tub, doing its best to massage the strain out of sore muscles. The sheet even permitted a barely audible groan of pleasure from the tub's occupant as, he presumed, they adjusted to let the "broken" jet course across their clit. ("Broken," in quotes, as he could still remember back in '25 when one of his girls, an engineering major, had repositioned the jet to aim backwards into the seat rather than out towards where the thighs would be. The girls had never complained, and if Remy fixed it, it would be more awkward to explain he'd known about it all along than to simply endure the occasional illicit gasp from one of the girl's availing themselves of it.

Remy was in the midst of emailing the mother of a potential recruit for next year's team as a helpful distraction from that damnable sheet. So when Joi – pronounced Joey, but her pretentious parents didn't find that to be a sufficiently pretentious spelling – knocked at the door of his office, Remy was moderately startled.

Then startled again upon seeing the nearly six foot girl was clad only in a towel, one which was straining to its utmost to obscure both her breasts and her pussy. Most of the team favored conventional runner's bodies, leggy and petite with curves more given to muscles than pleasing placement of fat. Joi, as one of his discus throwers, didn't focus

as much on cardio; that towel was having no difficulty being propped up by weighty breasts. His practiced ability to maintain eye contact even in the face of such dire temptation left the innocent young woman looking, well, innocent.

As if he were a female coach. Or a eunuch.

“Hey, Joi. What’s up?”

“Um, Coach? There’s something coming out of one of the shower drains. Something... gross. I dunno.” She wrinkled her nose in a way that conveyed that “gross” was an understatement.

Remy suppressed a sigh, discerning the cause of the problem immediately. He exited his office, stopping on his side of the sheet, and yelled – in his Coach voice – “I’m coming in to fix the showers. You got thirty seconds to make yourself decent or dive in a locker. I don’t care which. Move it, ladies!”

Joi giggled, as did others beyond the barrier. The vague shapes he could see moving on the other side began moving more hastily as he counted down, though he was still at eight when the discus thrower assured him it was clear.

He set his jaw so that he betrayed none of his emotions upon, once more, finding that their version of “clear” entailed two girls wearing nothing but bras and underwear and at least a dozen covered by the same college-provided towels as Joi herself. Ramona was still in the tub, an arm draped across her breasts her only nod to Catholic modesty. He kept his gaze straight ahead, wishing his peripheral vision suffered from more of a Perception check penalty. But no, he’d been 20/20 since elementary school, and with half-naked bodies on all sides, his only course was to avoid dwelling on it.

Sure enough, the toilets had backed up into the showers for the second time already this season. The repulsive sight and odors were enough to make him forget the nubile girls crowding around him to help, or merely to blanch at the foulness. His prescribed recourse, he knew, was to contact the residential campus’s custodial team, then likely wait hours, or maybe until tomorrow. No, Monday; it was Friday afternoon, and they didn’t come in on weekends except for emergencies, a category which the track coach knew would not include this. The alternative was to do some improvised plumbing, unclogging the offending toilets with the equipment custodial now left in the supply closet here, given the frequency of the need.

“Oh, gross, Coach!”

“Do you need a hand with that, Coach?”

“I can’t believe they make *you* do this, Coach. Super unfair.”

“Thanks, Coach – you’re seriously the best!”

Remy ignored most of their mothering – or sistering, as was for many of them the real case. Though Remy was a decade their senior, short and athletic as he was, he was often mistaken for a student himself. He still couldn’t go to a bar without being carded, and sometimes even then the card checker took his license for a fake.

As the sheet had permitted him to overhear Natty say to someone after a post-meet pep talk last season, “Coach is like a stepdad in a porno. He’s cut without being too hot, he’s in charge but too young to take seriously, and he yells a lot but you can tell he really loves us.” Her audience had giggled hysterically, and he’d ignored the impish grins on their faces when they passed by his office on their way out of the locker room.

So he cleared the blockage in the pipes, focusing as much of his attention as possible on the old soggy tampons someone had once again flushed in violation of the reminder posted in every stall, and as little as possible on what was so easily visible up those towels surrounding him in his crouched position. Within a grueling half hour of application of elbow grease, hose water and bleach, the showers were once more usable, albeit given the addition of some flip flops. After yet another thorough chastising for not disposing of sanitary products properly, and yet another chorus of complaints that custodial didn’t empty them often enough, he let it drop and gave them back their locker room. Remy could hear towels hitting the floor behind him even before he retreated to his side of the sheet.

“Hey, you going to the 11th Commandment tonight, Coach?” asked Autumn on her way out a few minutes later. Her wet hair still clung to her neck, and a pair of nipples tented out her sports bra that he still remembered much better than he ought to be forced to. That had been what, last season? Two years back? She’d fallen asleep in the whirlpool tub and he’d felt too awkward to wake her but couldn’t lock up the locker room with her in it, so he’d sat in his office playing *Zigzag* on his implant with Jacob for over three hours until she’d woken, dressed, and walked out without so much as an apology. Presently she was exiting the humid locker room and passing into the stream of cool air generated by the fan he’d put up in the entryway to help block noise, a tool which worked even less well than the sheet.

As for her question, it was in regards to the bar in the student center, a popular hangout for students at a college that was far enough from the city to make it a pain to leave campus for recreation. Leave it to the Catholics to put a bar in their student center; the same stodgy nuns who’d rebuked him for taking the lord’s name in vain didn’t seem to mind the casual addition to their god’s moral codex.

“No, and neither should you. We have a meet tomorrow in Indianapolis.”

It seemed he had once more fumbled his Intimidate check, as the girl simply laughed, her apple breasts bouncing. “Not to drink, Coach! It’s karaoke night! We’re all gonna be there. You should come!”

“Oh. Well, I’m sure you’ll all have more fun without your old Coach there to glare and grump at you.”

But the girl merely rolled her eyes and shook her head as she joined a couple teammates on their way out. “Nah, he’s not coming,” he heard her say. “I swear, he is like the sweetest boy I know.”

“He’s a *man*, Autumn,” one of them said.

“Or at least a *guy*,” said another.

“Eh,” came the reply.

so when we gonna get a proper dungeon crawl in? he texted Jacob later that evening from his “apartment” on campus. (“Apartment,” in quotes, because it was really just two dorm rooms with a door knocked out in the middle, adjoined with a bathroom so small that the one time Toni had visited, she couldn’t even use it. The floorspace was inadequate to shut the door with her chair inside. Even the assistant coaches on the football team had better accommodations than him, a full coach.)

It was a Friday night, and once more he had nothing better to do than sit around binging old movies and surreptitiously drinking beer. Aside from the 11th Commandment, Saint Andrew’s was a dry campus, a fact that somehow even extended to the staff who lived there – though somehow not to the priests who coinhabited some of the dormitories. Tonight, he had a lineup of John Wayne’s greatest Westerns. He’d invited Keon to hang out – or rescue him from the tedium and go off-campus – but he was dog-sitting for his parents. Apparently Buster couldn’t be trusted alone, and the guy’s parents felt bad crating the little son of a bitch. With a 5 AM wake-up for the bus, he wasn’t about to schlep all the way out to northwest Indiana and try to ignore the cloying odor of Mr. Weldon’s lingering cigar fumes and the omnipresence of dog farts from Buster.

If there was one man on earth who made Remy feel like less of a pussy, it was Keon. So there was that, at least.

Then again, it wasn’t Keon he was worried about. Or pissed off at. Remy wasn’t sure which impulse was winning out. The movie ran its entire course, and he was halfway through the next before he finally got a reply.

Sorry, man. I know it’s been a little slow-paced so far. Don’t worry. Things will definitely get more exciting before too long, once the stakes are set, Jacob wrote.

With his hands greasy from popcorn, he switched his implant to thought-to-text mode. *stakes? what stakes? they came after us, so fuck em lol*

He commanded it to send. The old glitch triggered once more, asking him if he was sure. As if he typed up messages and would command it to send without being sure of it.

His was, by modern standards, practically a relic, something he’d splurged on when he’d landed his first head coaching job and he’d thought to treat himself to something new and fancy. That had been four years ago. He didn’t relish the prospect of an operation to swap out his implant for a newer model – or the dent it would put in his meager savings – but it was getting seriously buggy. Sometimes he had to spell the words in his head to get it to type them out intelligibly, and when a notification arrived, the pop-up blurred his vision so thoroughly he could barely see. He was one of the only people he knew who still did most of his communications with his old school touch-screen phone. The implant manufacturer’s OS update last week had been advertised as a five-minute install time; his had taken nearly an hour. There was talk of

a huge new update package coming in time for Christmas, supposedly backwards compatible. Maybe he'd splurge for himself, save the trouble of a reinstall operation. He still had a couple months to think it over.

Once again, Jacob didn't reply immediately. What the hell was with that guy lately? Ever since Week o' Gaming he'd been like this, distant and flaky. Moody as hell, too. Remy knew some of the others had been let down by the way it ended, and sure, he'd complained in the immediate aftermath, but he knew full well that moments like that were what made the game *good*.

Toni and Keon always wanted their happily ever afters. Keon had some kind of elaborate backstory. That was something Remy had noted that the guy's boss apparently also favored, though Remy had gotten a real kick out of it, he had to hand it to the guy. As for Keon, he and Jacob collaborated to make sure that whatever was going on, it was personal, so when they won, it was some kind of grandiose transformative moment for the character Keon was about to relegate to antiquity. Toni was worse; her characters didn't even get all that invested in the campaign's outcome, but she still got all butthurt when Evil got to be Evil.

At least, as butthurt as someone who couldn't feel their butt could get, he thought with a little chuckle. That was a good one. He'd have to use that sometime. Jacob would give him that look for picking on his ex, but it was good for her. The way everybody was always dancing around the elephant in the room drove him crazy. Her legs were crippled, and that was that. The sooner she and everybody else made peace with it, the sooner they could get on with interacting like normal friends. Like they used to, before the accident.

No. Not accident. Keon and Hannah thought that was what happened, but Jacob had been his best friend since high school. He'd told him the truth, about how she'd stormed out of the car and right into the path of traffic – right after she'd dumped him in what sounded like a pretty cold fashion. Remy hadn't been able to say as much to Jacob, but he applauded her for a rare moment of brutal honesty. As a coach, he knew full well that coddling bred weakness, and Jacob... well, Remy knew Jacob's mom pretty well, and the woman was a coddler to her core.

At any rate, heartbreak (and spine break) or no, Jacob still ran games with her sensitivities in mind. In the end, though, it was the greatest weakness in an otherwise great GM's retinue. When the game was engineered with the most satisfying results in mind, it got to feel like victory was a foregone conclusion. Getting slaughtered by that dragon in the Temple of Xanathoth had been a *blessing*. Now, he'd enter into engagements knowing full well his GM was willing to kill the lot of them if sloppy tactics or unlucky dice enabled him.

Now, when he kicked someone's ass, it was in spite of that person's best efforts, not because his friend had charitably donated an ass for his kicking enjoyment.

Don't set the bar that low, Rem. There has to be more to it than winning and losing or what's the point? Jacob texted back a half hour later, as he was watching Rooster Cogburn shout for Ned Pepper to fill his hands and rode out to gun him down.

*I thought the point *was* to win...? Send. Fucking send damn it!* Remy replied. Fucking implant.

Like that. Now that they were playing a world that more closely paralleled their own, it ought to be easier than ever to make the game about a simple binary between winning and losing. There was no shortage of assholes out there needing a comeuppance. Corrupt cops, crooked politicians, ruthless corporations, violent gangs, twisted cults, foreign infiltrators... pick one.

Jacob, though, would need to complicate things – or at least ostensibly so. He'd been gaming with his friend since they were barely teenagers, and he could see the writing on the wall. They'd find a way to corner this Nina Ruiz lady and it would turn out she was an innocent pawn, a small part of a darker scheme. By the time they uncovered what that scheme was, they'd find out that the people who hired them to surveil Ruiz in the first place were actually not the noble anti-Alphagia opposition they'd assumed, but rather a shadowy third party with an agenda all their own. World domination, global apocalypse, something like that. Then after some inevitable betrayal – that guy Echo seemed a prime candidate for it – they'd chase down an unlikely lead and stop the ultimate bad guy from sacrificing the princess, or whatever passed for a princess in Near Future. A congresswoman, maybe.

While the details weren't always predictable, the campaign was formulaic, a veritable Mad Libs where you could fill in the blanks at your leisure. *Ultimately, only the [object] would allow the heroes to enter the [place] to slay the [title] once and for all!* Remy would be happy so long as he had some memorable encounters along the way, an epic moment or two. And hell, since they were playing virtual reality, maybe he could even–

There was a noise at Remy's window, a *click*. He'd been hearing things outside all night, living as he did bordering the intramural field, an open grassy area that half a dozen dormitories and student apartments bordered as well. It was Friday night and it was lively out there, but this was closer. Peering between the blinds, he was surprised to see none other than Joi standing outside, in the midst of tossing another pebble up at his second story window.

He tilted the window open. "Joi? What's going on?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Coach?" she said, looking around as if nervous about being overheard. There were dozens of people visible around the sidewalks lining the IM field, but none close by. None that seemed to care, anyway.

"Sure. What's up?"

“No, I mean... privately?” She pointed to the building’s entrance. When he didn’t leave his window, she added in a stage whisper he could barely make out, “It’s, um, it’s about...” She didn’t finish, but he had a good idea who she meant.

If it had been any other team member, he’d have told her to save it for tomorrow. But it was Joi. This girl, he knew, was one of his truly devout Catholics on his team, no doubt a part of her deeply ingrained tendency to latch onto authority figures and follow them blindly. Early on he’d tried to break her of it, but then he got a glimpse of what she was up against and couldn’t leave her to fend for herself. He’d overheard more than one conversation about how she was saving herself for marriage, to her boyfriend Allen’s great frustration, on bus rides to and from meets. She’d worn a promise ring during her campus visit when he was recruiting her. She was wholesomeness personified, then tainted with the body of a succubus and the face of an angel. She needed a strong hand to guide her more than any woman he’d ever known.

Moments later, she was walking up the stairs with him to his room. He’d meant to simply talk to her in the stairwell, but she headed directly toward his suite unbidden. The brevity of her dress was underscored by her presence immediately in front of him. White panties, as pure as the pussy inside them. When he again asked what she wanted outside the door to his room, she again entreated him for privacy, and guardedly, he let her inside. No other student would have been permitted across that threshold, but it was Joi, after all. She’d attempt something untoward the day he rolled up a paladin. She closed the door behind them, heedless of the anxiety it induced in her coach.

“This is as private as I can make it, Joi,” he said, wincing at the beer can sitting out on his end table. It galled that as a man in his thirties, he was prohibited alcohol in his private residence. But while this girl might be a prude, she wasn’t a gossip. She probably didn’t even know about the prohibition. The housing staff was a lot less intent on enforcing rules on employees than on the tuition-paying students/future alumni.

“Thanks, Coach,” she said, helping herself to a seat on his couch. It was the one and only place to sit in the apartment, so he took the far end. As absolutely far as he could manage. She scooted closer. “How’s come you weren’t at karaoke? Autumn said you were coming.”

“She asked me, and I told her no. Is that what your need for privacy is about? Because if you want to hear me sing, you should start by not gathering an audience.”

She laughed. “I bet you can sing good! You have that gruff voice, sort of like one of those grunge rock band singers you hear on the oldies streams.”

“You’ll never know. So come on, seriously. What’s up? It’s half past ten, and we gotta be up before dawn.”

The girl nodded, fidgeting in her seat. What was going on here? “Coach Norton, do you think I’m pretty?”

Instantly, Remy’s blood ran cold. “Uh, what?!”

But the girl only laughed. “Calm down, Coach! I’m only asking.” That needful expression returned immediately, though.

Remy could hear a distant echo of a scream from his future, heralding this as the moment his career unraveled. Time to nip this in the bud. “Joi, I’m not allowed to have students in my room as guests. The fathers and sisters have been very, very explicit about that. The only reason I even let you in was because you looked like you needed something urgent, and I trust you. But if you’re going to start off like this...”

Her eyes widened as she realized the distress she’d caused. “Oh no! No no no, nothing like that! I’m only asking because... well, I need some advice.”

“On how to be pretty? You’re asking the wrong man.”

Her worried face softened into an affectionate smile, but quickly resumed worrying. “No. It’s, um, about guys. My boyfriend, specifically. Or, well... I don’t know if he’s still my boyfriend.”

The reminder that she’d been seeing someone helped relax him, if only a little. Diplomacy check successful, attitude improved from unfriendly to ambivalent. “Uh oh. Sounds like somebody couldn’t carry the harmony at karaoke night, eh?”

“If only. No, Allen was drinking tonight. Kind of a lot, actually. I think. I’ve never actually...” She glanced to the beer can for a moment. “And he started, um, trying to...”

Remy had been single for a while now, but he remembered some things. “Getting handsy, was he?”

She nodded. Remy recalled an incident on the bus back from a meet in Wichita during which she’d told Miranda and Natty about how she’d finally let her guy get to second base, and how guilty she felt. Miranda, of course, had half-jokingly teased her for being a priss, while “Nasty” Natty had given her some very explicit pointers for satisfying her man without giving up a homerun. Joi had been scandalized by the mere suggestion. Remy had lost a fair amount of sleep that night.

“And I told him no, that we had a meet in the morning. Aren’t you proud of me?”

“Uh, huh. Then what.”

“Yeah. But he didn’t care. And then I flat-out said I wasn’t ready, and he said...” She paused, her chin quivering in the portrait of fragile innocence. A portrait she shattered a moment later when she pivoted toward him, folding her legs underneath her, a position which practically put a spotlight on those white panties her dress had given up even pretending to conceal. Or maybe he was just a lecher.

“Go on.” *Eye contact. Make fucking eye contact. They’re only panties. She’s twenty, for fuck’s sake, and one of your squad. Eye. Contact.* His Will saving throw succeeded, for now, if only barely.

Joi went on, slowly letting the tears run as she relayed how he’d told her he was tired of waiting, that he could easily trade her in for another girl who wouldn’t tease him

and waste his time, that she'd spend the rest of college alone when people found out how she was. Remy listened, rolling those Will saves, providing tissues as needed.

"So that's why I, um, asked..." She shrugged. By then, she was sitting Indian style, her hands folded in her lap to shield herself, however ineffectively.

"Joi, listen to me." She looked up, eyes riveted on his. "Have I ever lied to you?"

The girl considered a moment. "No. I mean, even when I kind of wish you would, you don't."

"Exactly. So remember that, and pay attention to what I'm saying. Number one, hell yes, you're pretty." The girl was hot as fuck, but he couldn't say it like that. His honesty had at least a tiny bit of refinement, on occasion. She sniffled, and her red lips perked up in a faint smile.

"Number two, Allen's an asshole, and a loser. Only an asshole tries to bully someone into doing something they don't want to do. It's one thing to be frustrated. A decent guy can be frustrated. But the decent guy, he buys you flowers, takes you somewhere nice, tells you he cares about you, shows you he's after you for the long haul and not just a good night. He doesn't call you names and hurt your feelings because he's too proud to go home and jerk it."

"Coach!" She gasped, scandalized, but a laugh soon followed.

"Number three. You're free to spend your time on whoever you like. But I hear any more of this guy treating you like this, and I'll beat his loser ass and leave him in the dumpster behind the rec center with the rest of the trash."

Then, before he knew what was happening, she was hugging him. The girl was practically straddling his lap – no, she *was* straddling his lap, squeezing him tight. Not knowing what else to do, he gave a gentle hug back, patting her back to help usher her back to normalcy before someone somehow found out about this and he lost his job. Or at least put a very heavy letter in his file. If his apartment door were to blow open right now, this would look so fucking bad.

"Coach, you're the nicest guy I've ever known," she murmured into his ear. She relaxed her posture, her crotch coming to rest on his upper thigh. Fuck, she was warm.

"I meant it, Joi. This guy gives you any more shit, I'll see to it he learns a hard lesson. I may not be a professor, but I can still teach an asshole some manners." Seriously, who landed themselves a girl this nice, this hot, and got all pissed off because she wanted to wait a bit? Hell, he'd probably seen more of her body this afternoon in her towel than that dickbag Allen ever had, and you didn't see him griping about not being able to fuck her.

As she finally pulled back, dragging herself off his lap and onto the lumpy middle cushion of his couch, suddenly, his vision blurred with a notification of a response from Jacob. *The point of the game isn't always as obvious as simply winning. It's supposed to be fun, but everyone defines that differently. Sometimes winning doesn't look like*

winning. How will you feel if you get to the end of the game and realize the sacrifices weren't worth the gain?

Joi was looking at him remorsefully. She'd clearly noticed his implant activating. Anybody with manners silenced the thing when they had company, but he'd forgotten he was technically having a conversation. "Oh gosh, were you in the middle of something? I'm so sorry! I can get out of your hair."

"What? Oh, nah, just a text from an old friend. One of those hour-by-hour conversations, nothing urgent. I was mostly just watching old Westerns until I fall asleep."

She glanced up at the screen. "Oh! I recognize him! Is that Johnny Depp?"

"That's John Wayne." Remy grit his teeth.

She didn't seem to pick up on it. "Oh. Is he any good?"

"He's only one of the most manly men of the twentieth century."

"Oh. So sorta like Johnny Depp. That's what my mom says, anyway."

He glared. "He's nothing like Johnny Depp."

Her smile was immune to him, however. "Do you mind if I watch with you? I don't really feel like being alone right now. I mean, unless you're gonna get in trouble. I can go, if you want."

Of all the reasons he might have invited this girl to stay in his apartment, it was his stubborn refusal to allow someone to not know the difference between the greatest Western hero to ever walk the earth and a fruity weirdo who got off on dressing up in creepy costumes that won out. "Sure. It just started."

He quickly started it over, offering her some popcorn. Without even being invited, she laid down on the sofa, her head on his leg. The movie commenced, and he took a few minutes to ponder Jacob's cryptic reply. What the hell was he even talking about? Why did he have to make simple shit so complicated?

real life is sacrifices, he wrote. Joi was already asleep, her cheek nuzzling against his thigh, her fingers pawing at his crotch as she nestled in. Her eyes fluttered open, but immediately closed as he snapped open another beer. *come Wednesday nights, I'm playing to fucking win.*

Saint Andrew's earned third place in the Indy Invite that weekend, an impressive achievement for a school as small as it was. Remy's high school had been bigger. Yet the meet was already a distant memory by the time the next game night finally arrived. Waking up the morning of to find Joi still passed out in his living room, her dress hiked up to her waist from her nocturnal squirming, was fading a bit more slowly. No matter. Tonight was game night, and everything in the real world could go fuck itself.

Not like Remy got to fuck any of it.

While he did prefer their traditional fantasy gaming to this sci-fi stuff, the VR component added a level of realism to the action that compensated more than adequately. That he was the only player who hadn't taken it as an invitation to roll up some walking wet dream galled somewhat, but whatever. Hot characters could kill shit as well as uggos. Keon maybe deserved less scorn over his design, but Corn was still pretty cut, and had a sort of grizzled hard-ass look about him that he'd seen the girls admiring. (He supposed Toni couldn't be faulted as much as the others, but that girl had always been too hot by half for their little group anyway.)

He spared a few sympathetic words for Brendan's kid, who was set up in the living room with her foot in its cast propped up high on that weird-ass couch of theirs. She paid him next to no mind, which was about par for the course with cute college-age girls. Fine. As far as he was concerned, the less attention she paid to them, the better. Weird enough to think he was about to be zonked out on a couch with somebody else in the house.

Remy had arrived early, figuring he wouldn't mind catching up with Jacob after the guy had flaked out all weekend. Jacob, however, wound up being the last one to arrive, so instead he'd gotten to shoot the breeze with Brendan. Not the worst. Lord knows he barely got to socialize with guys any more. Sure, the way the guy had bullied Keon into joining the group had been a douche move, and Remy's initial response had been to treat Deep Lord Korrigan like shit, but he'd surprisingly turned out to be a pretty cool guy. Judging by that little makeout Lane and Kennedy didn't think anyone had seen last session, it seemed he wasn't the only one who'd come around.

Jacob was second-to-last to arrive, shortly before Brendan himself, who was running late from whatever rich guy bullshit he was on his way back from. Probably playing croquet with the vice governor on his moon mansion getaway or something. Remy took the opportunity to confront the GM.

"Yeah, so way to text me back the other day, man."

"Sorry. I got caught up with a project. Work's been dogging me like crazy lately."

"What, they find out you stole their top secret military training tech to amuse your gaming buddies?"

The GM shook his head. "You know I can't talk about the project. You guys know way too much as it is."

“Sure, but you know what we don’t do enough of?” Remy propped up a leg on the armrest of the couch and tea-bagged the space where Jacob’s face had been before his body blocked the projection. Hannah laugh-snorted, while Keon and Toni pretended not to be amused with their hands over their mouths. Jacob’s holo was embedded inside the couch by just a couple inches, that apparently being the distinction between his couch at home and the one Brendan’s projector was setting him on. Remy hoped that on Jacob’s end, the effect lined up correctly. His holo didn’t try to dodge it, at least.

“Wow,” said Brendan in the doorway, loosening his tie. “So glad I wasn’t on time.”

“Oh come on, he put his pants back on first,” quipped Hannah. But Brendan simply excused himself to go change out of his work clothes.

“Is that why you’ve been so busy lately?” Toni asked. “Because of work stuff, I mean. We’ve hardly seen you outside of game night in what feels like forever.”

“Basically,” answered Jacob, leaning around where Remy was very nearly finished violating his holo. “

“Anything big you can tell us about? I remember when you guys put out that mental health checkup app... last year, I think? That was pretty cool. I still use it sometimes, make sure I’m getting my vitamins, not getting too stressed.”

Remy removed his crotch from Jacob’s face and took his seat. “Like you need an app to know you’re stressed out.”

“Hey, it helps. Sometimes I get so caught up with the brutal grind at work that I forget to—” His sentence stopped abruptly as Brendan entered the room, his posture straightening. “But yeah, something like that, this new project?”

Jacob nodded. “It’s big, but that’s about all I can say. I really shouldn’t even say that, but... well, once it’s released, I’ll show you. I think you’ll find it... well, I can’t say.”

“Could write a whole a wiki on all the shit you’re *not* saying,” griped Hannah. She’d been pressing him for information about the VR app since she’d first seen it, the perfect grist for the mill of her stream. “If I don’t get at least a little heads up before it goes live, you are seriously dead to me.”

“So noted.” Jacob, seeing everyone in place, clapped his hands together. “Looks like everybody’s here. Shall we?”

They each started the app, and Brendan’s game room gave way to their room in the O&M Motel. For Dirk and Sanguine, anyway. A glance out the window revealed Kennedy and Lane climbing out from the back of the van, and he was pretty sure he could see Toni blushing from here with the memory of what the two had been up to back there last session. He couldn’t really understand it himself; his best guess was that she had a thing for Brendan and figured this would be less awkward than asking him out in real life. Who the hell knew with that girl.

It was almost disappointing, giving up that view from the 58th floor of One Tulley Center, but as he flexed Dirk's bulky muscles, he decided it was a worthwhile trade. Not that Remy himself was out of shape, yet while his physical background gave him ample insight on how to build up that kind of muscle, it simply wasn't practical to have a job where he ran a couple dozen kilometers a week with an extra forty pounds of useless bulk. Last he checked, he was sitting at 7% body fat. Dirk's 17 in Con probably gave him about the same, but Remy was too proud to wonder how many points of Strength his character had on him.

As he and Sanguine made their way down to the lot, he looked around at his party. They looked more like a group of heroes from some cheesy action movie than the cover of a fantasy novel. The girls' hair all fluttered enchantingly in the slightest breeze, and every tit and ass in sight was proud and pert. The last thing Remy needed in his life was to be surrounded by more masturbation fodder, but for his character Dirk, it seemed exactly the kind of window dressing he'd prefer.

Speaking of tits and ass, it was time to get going. No more idle get-to-know-you play-test-the-system level-1/2-encounters. Today, they hit the ground running.

The van's engine purred to life as Kennedy twisted her screwdriver in the ignition. It was loud, but it was an authoritative loud. He liked it. Dirk nudged her out of the driver's seat while Sanguine rode shotgun and the lovebirds piled into the back. He raised a fist to Sanguine. "So everybody remembers the plan, right?" Hannah had typed it up and emailed it to everybody (everybody but Jacob, anyway) after the session. Maybe he'd been eavesdropping on his and Hannah's whole planning session, but the GM had claimed he'd been too busy to monitor their conversation with the party split in three groups. Good. Time to see how well the guy could improvise in VR.

The real girls nodded, though Lane looked less sure. "I think so. I read it after you sent it last week. Is that really safe? What even happens if our characters get killed in this thing?"

"I don't know about you, but I mean to ascend to Valhalla and rage on eternal," Dirk said with a grin, holding up the Valknut tattoo on his forearm, symbol of glorious death. It was one of only a few of the symbols decorating his body he actually knew, and he'd probably made a few too many references to it during their escape from Alphagia. Most of the other ones, so far as Remy knew, simply looked cool.

"Yeah, maybe the guy who literally has a death wish on his arm shouldn't be driving," said Kennedy guardedly.

"Nonsense, I'm the one with the best Drive skill."

"By one point," countered Sanguine, "and only because Jacob let your freaking 'barbarian' custom class get a bonus to driving, for god knows what reason."

"Sorry, all I heard was 'blah blah blah lead me into battle mighty warlord,' and yes, I'd be happy to." He put it into drive, making for the exit to the lot. The thing

handled like a tank (or like he imagined a tank would), slow but powerful. “Ready to do your part, babe? Looks like we got another hour or two until full dark, then showtime.”

“Babe?” The redhead arched a thinly sculpted eyebrow. “Yeah, I’m ready, stud muffin.”

Dirk shrugged. “I call babes babes. Sue me.”

“And we’re sure we don’t want to bring Corn and Echo in on this?” asked Kennedy.

“Sure I’m sure. Laney’s right. We don’t know the guy’s loyalties. And Jacob said XP is split between the whole party, so not like we’re leaving Veggie Man in the lurch or anything.”

“Sure hope the encounter is balanced for four of us and not six,” grumbled Sanguine.

Kennedy piped in with a shy smirk. “Also, corn is a starch, not a vegetable. Or did they not teach that in gym teacher school?”

Dirk laughed. A decade out of school, and Toni still liked to rib him for his major. He might have minded once, but he remembered the tears in her eyes when she’d told him how proud she was when he landed his job at Saint Andrew’s. Jacob had only gotten away with what had gone down between them by being Remy’s best friend since forever; any other guy who hurt her, he’d find a place to bury them where nobody’d ever think to look.

With banter out of the way, they got themselves moving. They dropped off Sanguine first, keeping an appreciable distance from Nina Ruiz’s house. She was there to surveil only; in Ruiz’s bourgeois neighborhood of big brick-and-beige clones, their shitbox van stood out like Keon would at Brendan’s country club. They had a good idea of the house’s layout; the app had provided that since Sanguine had already broken in to install Corn’s surveillance gadgetry before the campaign started. They might have gotten caught for it after, but that didn’t negate their intel.

By the time Dirk and Kennedy – the extraction team, as they’d been dubbed – were settled in, Sanguine and Lane had each radioed to confirm they too were in position. Nobody had invested in much by way of fancy gadgetry at character creation, so in lieu of earpieces and mics, they were simply using the walkie talkie feature on their comms. (Apparently in sci fi, you had to call a cell phone a “comm.”) Corn had lamented that they couldn’t rig their implants for audio transmission like you saw in the spy movies, but a voice-over from Jacob had challenged them on whether they really wanted to be in a game world where their enemies could cheaply use the same technology against them. Dirk had to agree that a scenario where alerting one guard more or less automatically alerted all of them would be pretty damn frustrating for a character with a total modifier of +1 in Stealth.

Though they were parked on the street, it was still a reasonably inconspicuous spot, a stretch of curb near the entrance to Ruiz's upscale neighborhood, Wooded Commons. The van was parked where untrimmed tree branches did a good job of blocking the street lights from shining too brightly on it. Since it might otherwise take too long to restart the car, they left the engine running but disconnected the brake lights for subtlety's sake. Dirk was in the driver's seat, hands firmly gripping the steering wheel, at the ready.

"What do you think the odds are that Nina Ruiz has upped her home security since the last time Sanguine broke in?" Kennedy asked. She sounded nervous. "I can't see Alphagia turning a blind eye to a threat to their asset."

"Yeah, well, their eyes can't be everywhere at once. Not even Jacob sees everything in here."

"What? How do you mean? Did he say something?"

Dirk grinned as he propped his feet up on the dash. "You sound nervous. Got something to hide?"

"No! No, I mean, I just... I'm interested in how the game works. That's all."

"Oh, I see." He made a show of craning his neck to look in the back. "Is that somebody's underwear back there?"

Kennedy was bright red in an instant, checking so fast her hair whipped him in the face. "Where?!"

"Oh, nope, guess that's an old napkin. I thought maybe somebody had some fun in this thing before we came along – but you seem awfully self-conscious all the sudden..."

She folded her arms crossly. "So you spied on us. Real classy, Remy."

"Sanguine saw you guys first. And we didn't linger, so chill. Though that's some nerve you have, accusing me of being a creep when you're the one making out with a girl twice and half your age in broad daylight."

"She's *not* half my age. And he's not twice! Not that I need to justify myself to you." She glared, but it was Toni's glare, so it was closer to a pout. "But did you really tell him about it?"

"Of course not. But I was asking him if he'd been listening to our plan, and he said he'd been setting skill check DCs in the GM interface, whatever that is, but with the party split up he couldn't be everywhere at once. It notifies him if we call out to him, but I guess it doesn't show him everybody at once. So your secret's safe. If that's what you wanted."

"Why wouldn't I want that?"

Dirk merely shrugged. A few minutes went by in silence, save for the occasional passing vehicle. Finally she couldn't handle it. Like he'd known she couldn't. "It didn't mean anything. We were only..." Her lips twisted into a smile, then into something else.

“It felt nice to be wanted. It’s been a while – a long fucking while – since anybody looked at me like...”

“Hey, you want somebody to look at you, say the word. ‘Cause I could look.” She giggled, and he knew he hadn’t fucked up. Never knew which days she couldn’t handle someone crossing the line and which days she needed it crossed. “And you want more than a look, I am so there. You don’t even need to move those legs, baby, I’ll do everything.”

Her laughter reached a louder pitch until she gave him a few playful swats. “Stop! Oh god, gross, stop!”

“Gross? Hey now...”

“Not gross like *that* gross, I mean... oh you know what I mean. Geez.” Kennedy made a point of checking him out. “Though I tell you what... That bod, Dirksy?”

“Don’t call me Dirksy.”

“Seriously, if you go this whole campaign without hooking up with at least one hottie NPC, I’ll eat that napkin.”

“Now who’s being gross?”

She reached over and patted Dirk’s leg. With that, there was nothing to do but wait for a signal. Sure enough, not long after, they picked up a broadcast from Sanguine in a sultry whisper.

“All right, I’m in. It’s the darnedest thing. There’s a camera on the front doorbell, but it’s not actually hooked up to anything. They put up some signage for a security system, but looks like they haven’t installed anything but the signs themselves.”

“Uh, what?” asked Lane’s voice. “That’s... weird.”

“I know. I guess they haven’t had time yet? Or Alphagia’s cheap as hell.”

Kennedy snatched the comm from Dirk. “Be careful, you two. Maybe they’re trying to give false confidence? Trick you into overplaying your hand.”

“Good call,” answered Sanguine. “There’s that upstairs window on top of the three seasons room in the back; I’m gonna try for that.”

“Copy,” said Lane’s voice after, then immediately, “I guess I don’t need to say that.” Indeed, so long as Sanguine wasn’t having a total brain fart, she’d muted her comm so any chatter from the rest of the party wouldn’t give her away.

A few minutes of tense silence later, Sanguine followed up. “I actually found a silent alarm on the window I was going for. I put a pinch on it. Entering now.”

A low whimper from Kennedy conveyed her sympathetic anxiety. Dirk, however, merely drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. There was a level on which he was jealous Sanguine was getting in early on the action, but he could wait. He could wait.

Sanguine was speaking again, but it was so quiet they missed the first part before Kennedy cranked the volume on their comm. “...clear. I hear movement downstairs, but no talking. I think it’s just me and Ruiz. Gonna look around up here, see what I see.”

“You know, speaking of hooking up with hotties... do you think it'd be weird if I – I, Dirk, that is – made a move on Sanguine?” he asked as casually as he could.

Kennedy was mostly watching out the window; the plan was nearing the crucial pivot. “You mean, do I think it would be weird if you hit on your former slam piece?” She made a face. “Her term, not mine. Soooo not mine.”

“Yeah. I mean, I know you two talk all the time. Did she say anything?”

“If she did, do you really think I'd tell you?”

“Don't bullshit me. I spend my whole day around girls. I know how it works.”

“You spend your whole day around girls, but you'd rather chase after Hannah's fake – so very, very fake – booty instead of hooking up with one of said girls?”

“They're students!”

“So?” A car passed; she craned her neck after it, studying it suspiciously. “You don't have an alum you can hook up with or something?”

“It doesn't work like that. I'd lose my job.”

“At least you're not pretending you don't want to any more. That was a sad, sad line, my friend.” She tapped her chin. “Why don't you ask out Gladys? She's real cute.”

“I'm telling Lane.”

She shrugged. “You got no witnesses, bucko.”

“So a no on Sanguine.” He frowned. “You know, you could just say it. You don't have to play these games, deflecting away from it.”

“Remy...”

“No, don't be coy about it. You girls act like I'm your still the messed up kid I was in college, but I'm not. I was asking strictly about her character, not Hannah herself. I mean, what, you and Brendan can fool around and it's no big deal, but I bring it up about Hannah and suddenly it's taboo?”

“Remy.”

“Don't *Remy* me. You have no idea what it's like, surrounded by all these hot girls all day every day who see me like their big fucking brother, and as soon as I try to look for a healthy outlet for the frustration, I'm a pig! This is so typical, you know. And another thing–”

“*DIRK!*” Her voice was commanding, forceful. The real Toni could never have pulled that off.

“Sorry. I got carried away. It's been a long week is all. I didn't mean to... just, sorry.”

But she only shook her head with a wry grin. “You're forgiven, and I'll talk to Hannah. OK? Now are you going to do anything about conspicuously shiny black van with the scanner shielding that just drove past us, or should we just let Sanguine and Lane solo this? I can hop out and try to run it down, if you're not up to driving.”

There was a dark moment where Remy gave thought to making a crack about her not having learned not to hastily jump out of a parked car, but for once his filter caught it in time. He'd tell Hannah later. She'd get it, and give him the punch he deserved for thinking it.

"How'd you know it was shielded?" he asked.

"My *detect tech* spell has a sixty foot range. It moved by too fast for me to have gotten much information, but instead I got nothing at all – which from a moving vehicle must mean something's shielding it. Which means Alphagia."

"Maybe somebody just thought it'd be fun to decorate their van with a layer of lead," he quipped, but she was already reaching for the wiring under the steering wheel. Dirk shifted his meaty legs out of the way as best he could. It really was kind of uncomfortable. His Con score had let him give Dirk Thruster a cock worthy of his name, and a pair of balls this heavy really did get in the way quite a bit. As the seconds ticked by, he eventually gave his wrist a few taps. "No rush or anything. I'm sure the encounter was balanced for sixty percent of the party to be missing."

"I'm sure Jacob wouldn't have made the Difficulty to restart the van this high if he didn't want to slow us down a little. Redoing the wiring took like five seconds, but now the damn ignition is glitching. So if you can't help me, either shut up, or get out and push."

Two-woo-woo-woo, groaned the engine in a thin mechanical grind.

"The rate you're going, that might be an improvement!"

Dirk's exasperation, however, wasn't really directed at her. He'd made Dirk to be a kick-ass warrior, and not much else. Average Intelligence, below average Wisdom, and his Charisma was probably even lower than Remy's own. Still, putting the beat-down on people ought to still be part of the game, shouldn't it? Yet here they were, everybody else putting all their skill checks to use while his attack bonus gathered dust on the shelf.

With a smug look, Kennedy sat up and murmured some gibberish magic words, igniting her finger in a cascade of light. It was like a sparkler on the Fourth of July. She jabbed it into the ignition, and sure enough, a few moments later the van's engine roared to life.

"I think I fried the ignition," said the magician, settling back into her seat and hastily strapping on a seatbelt. "This thing isn't going to start again without a replacement, but for now, we're good to go."

Dirk gave her a quick high-five as he put it into drive. Of course, Jacob found a way for his ex-girlfriend's shitty spells to contribute. Didn't have time to text him back, didn't have any interest in talking game stuff like they always used to, didn't show up early like usual so they could get a few simple minutes of bro time in before the game. But sure, let's be certain Kennedy's stupid little cantrip can save the day.

“We’re on the move. Enemy inbound,” she spoke into the comm. As the van wended through the neighborhood, there was no response, however. “Hello? Can anyone hear me? Shit! I think they’re being jammed!”

“Lane called it, all right. Better call Corn, just in case this goes tits up.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I do not like that expression.” Nonetheless she made the call, sparing only a couple sentences to inform Corn of Alphagia’s response, and that Sanguine and Lane were in the area of their jamming device. She didn’t even wait for a response before hanging up.

It wasn’t far to Nina Ruiz’s house, but in the narrow one-way streets, lined with parked cars on either side and not a few stop signs, it wasn’t exactly close either. He nearly ran over a fat old woman strolling along with the aid of a mechanized walker; she hadn’t heard them coming, but she took her sweet time making sure they heard her giving them a piece of her mind as she shambled on by. It was like Jacob had been in his head and said, *here, make a Drive check or smash some little old lady*. Consequence avoidance – always exciting.

“Why the hell did we have to park so far away again?” he griped, pumping the brakes to avoid tipping over as they rounded a corner.

“It was Brendan’s plan, remember?” snapped Kennedy.

There was a crack in the air. Gunfire. He stomped down on the accelerator. “Sounds like things went tits up at the house,” she said, and the two shared a grin. The oh-shit handle broke off in her grip as he nearly rolled the van around a turn.

“BIKE!” shouted Kennedy, and Dirk swerved just in time to avoid showing a cyclist how little good his helmet would do him if he was smashed into by a two-ton van going twice the speed limit and no intention of slowing if it hit him.

“So you were really serious about Hannah?”

“Not Hannah, just Sanguine!” The van hit a speed bump, launching it into the air, sparks flying as they slammed down.

“Is it really a good idea to hook up with your ex, even if it’s in charac– *LOOK OUT!*” There was another one ahead; fearful the van wouldn’t survive a second such calamity, he jerked the wheel, taking the van down the sidewalk. Within seconds, they’d flattened a dozen shrubs and one thankfully disused tricycle.

“I don’t know about good idea, bad idea, but you gotta admit you’ve given it some thought yourself, eh?”

“Maybe concentrate on driving right now? Oh shit! What are you– oh shit shit SHIT *SHIIIIIIIIIT!*”

Her scream, thought Dirk, was not the battle cry he’d been hoping for, but it would do. A group of five men and women in all-black uniforms were shepherding a struggling Lane toward the open door in the side of their black van. Sanguine was already inside, her hands cuffed behind her back.

Maybe it was just the adrenaline rush of impending violence, but he couldn't help but notice that her boobs looked especially spectacular like that.

Initiative was rolled automatically, and the surprise round began. Sanguine and her high Dexterity went first, and she threw herself out of the van, rolling sideways towards the curb at the end of Ruiz's driveway.

Lane was next. She made a Bluff check to distract the guard guiding her, putting him just off balance enough to let her dart backwards a few steps toward where she'd previously been hiding in the bushes across the street, per the plan.

The steps of it had been very clear. Send in Lane and Sanguine to snoop around, be a little obvious, and lure out any guard. Then Dirk and Kennedy swoop in with their shitbox van. Corn would botch his rendezvous with his contact and stay in the vicinity so if they all got taken, he could try something drastic and spring them. So far, it was working pretty much like they'd hoped.

Now it was Dirk's turn. He was supposed to jump out and put a hurt on these jerks, then do some interrogating and learn more about who sent them and why.

Only... with the girls clear, he put the pedal to the floor and crashed into three of Alphagia's men, and the van behind them.

Their seatbelts, per the rules Dirk had privately research in the rule book for this exact moment, meant each of his van's occupants would only suffer 2d6 hit points of damage, not even enough to burn through their Stamina unless they rolled badly. Kennedy took the worst of it, her face bloodied after colliding her forehead against the dash.

Dirk rolled snake eyes, and yawped like the barbarian warlord he was.

The fight was over by the end of the first normal round. Sanguine subdued one of the two remaining guards with a kick to the throat, and Dirk caved in the skull of the other with a tire iron he'd found in the back of the van. The rest had been killed in the collision.

"Holy shit – they found me!"

The voice came from the open front doorway of the adjacent house, where they saw Nina Ruiz standing on her front step, gaping at the sight of the carnage before her. She was a bit older, probably around Brendan's age, dressed appropriate for this drab little neighborhood in a sweater and mom jeans. She was looking at the carnage at the end of her driveway in terror. Or maybe horror? Hard to say. One of the guards had been wedged between Dirk's fender and the open doorway of his own vehicle. The poor asshole had fumbled his Reflex save against the speeding van. One leg was shattered mid-shin; the other simply ended just below the knee. For a moment, he tried to crawl somewhere, but only for a moment.

"Make one fucking move, and you're up next, bitch!"

“I really don’t like when you use that word that way,” murmured Kennedy, who was already helping to remove Sanguine’s cuffs with a key she’d lifted from one of the deceased. Sanguine herself was staring oddly at one of their maimed foes.

Before Kennedy could even turn the key, though, Ruiz turned to bolt, and time froze in that way the app had for simulating turn-based actions. In combat, while they could move their arms, talk, even shuffle their feet somewhat, the app prevented them from taking meaningful actions. During their first combat back in the Alphagia facility, Remy had tried sneaking in extra blows on a guard between his turns, but his weapons passed right through the guy. When Lane tried to dart around a corner outside her turn, she’d not been able to move more than a few feet before reappearing in her space. It was in effect a lot like the usual miniatures they’d always used in their games, where their tokens moved around in squares on a grid that represented five foot squares, but the characters could only act in turn order. It was a little surreal living the experience, and frustrating to be able to move but to have the effects of your movement neutered, but he conceded it would be a lot more frustrating to be frozen in place altogether. NPCs were similarly restricted, held in place but taking appropriate movements to dodge, taunt, shuffle their feet in place, and so on.

Ruiz herself was running in place, a loop of dashing a few feet into the house, reappearing in the doorway, and repeat. She looked back at them, abandoning the attempt after the first few tries. “How could anyone do this?!” she cried out.

Dirk kicked one of the corpses. “Come on down here and we’ll show you.” The body almost immediately resumed its position; in initiative mode, he couldn’t affect objects – what this person now effectively was – outside of his turn.

All right, gang. Assuming you don’t want to let her escape, we’re going to have ourselves a foot chase, came Jacob’s voice out of thin air.

“How does it work?” asked Sanguine.

It’s turn-based. We’ll reroll initiative, and go in order round by round. Each round, you’ll be presented with a skill check that lets you gain on her. Succeed, and you get closer; fail, and you don’t. Fail by a lot, and there might be other consequences. Most rounds, you’ll have multiple options, so you’re not stuck with a skill check you can’t possibly beat. Sound good?

Some were a little hazy on the details, but Jacob assured them it would make sense once they started doing it. With that, they heard the dice rolling, and the chase began, turn by stilted turn.

Looks like Ruiz got lucky, gang, said Jacob. Though with her guards dead and the party on her heels, Dirk reflected that this may not be the case. But once the GM permitted her to run, she immediately bolted inside the house, slamming the door behind her. Made sense. Sanguine was up next, then Lane, both of whom were waiting to be uncuffed before trying to chase someone. Corn, not present but apparently being

guided by Jacob from his location, simply radioed in that he was still a minute or two out. Then Kennedy finished removing one of Sanguine's bracelets, and then... Dirk's turn.

Remy trusted Jacob's assertion that this was a foot chase and thus deemed it unlikely her car was about to burst through her garage door, like any sane woman would do. That meant she was headed for the back. The house was surrounded by a high wrought iron fence, and he made for the left side of the house. As he reached the barrier, he gripped the top of it and went to vault over it and into the yard. The metal groaned and creaked – *fourteeeeeen* – under his weight, but the die came up a 17, which was evidently enough.

He landed on his feet in the back yard, where he could see Ruiz in the midst of darting out her back door not fifty feet away.

Wow – that was a Difficulty 25 Athletics check! I didn't think anybody would make it on their first try! exclaimed Jacob in a rare moment of editorializing.

As Ruiz once more glanced back frightfully, it struck him how strange it was, recognizing someone he'd never technically seen before. In the first session, Jacob had passed along that Dirk had been hired to mug this woman – specifically to steal her purse. He'd been paid five hundred credits (like the phone vs. comms issue, sci fi settings had credits, not dollars) via dead drop to hand off her briefcase once he obtained it. Though that had happened before the game ever started, the app told him he recognized her from that night, a skinny Latinx woman in her fifties, steel gray hair to her shoulders and at present, looked absolutely terrified. As well she should be for trying to sick her attack dogs on them – again.

It was an expression he'd probably have to get used to seeing once he captured her. Corn always got soft with captives, but this one had started off on the wrong foot, big time. You didn't orchestrate a series of kidnappings and avoid reprisals. Not on his watch.

It was her turn then, and she sprinted off into her yard. With the light from a nearby window in his eyes, he couldn't actually see where, but she couldn't have gone far in only one round. Behind him, he could hear the others taking their turns. He still saw no sign of Corn, Lane or Kennedy, though Sanguine arrived behind him at the fence, trying and failing to jump it as he had.

His turn again. He sprinted into the yard, not shaken in the least from his collision moments ago. God, he loved this game. Fuck the real world and all its rules and reminders of his limitations and inadequacies. Remy would have been dead in that van. No. He'd never have made it out of the Alphagia building.

Dirk Thruster's turn. He headed in the direction he'd seen Ruiz going in the dimly lit yard, and the app prompted a Survival check. It seemed a weird choice; Survival was mostly for foraging for food or skinning animals and monsters. From the house next

door, he suddenly heard a TV blaring a football game. "... take the lead, 14 to—" but then a window slammed shut, and the rest was lost. The 14 evidently succeeded, because suddenly there was a conspicuous rustling in the hedges that he quickly realized had no fencing behind it.

Holy shit, he was *tracking* the woman, just like in a normal fantasy campaign! Bursting through with only minor scratches, he caught sight of Ruiz darting through her neighbor's lawn toward another street.

Off she ran. Whatever the rest of the team was doing, he saw none of them. What he did see, however, was far too familiar, and he couldn't help but cackle in delight at Jacob's personal touch. A pack of young women emerged from behind a house, heading in the same direction as Ruiz but since they were jogging rather than sprinting, they moved at a fraction of her speed. Just a team of runners, out for a jog. That beautiful son of a bitch. This was the setup he hadn't known he'd needed.

His turn.

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!" he bellowed, thundering down the walk behind them. One of them – a girl he noted was wearing a Bertina Myrie jersey and her classic number, 16 – shrieked in alarm and helped shove her teammates out of this madman's way. In his wake, he could hear some of the women questioning if they should help Ruiz, but whatever they might be doing about it, his Intimidate check had left them too afraid to personally intervene.

On his next turn, he made a Perception check to find her hiding behind a sign welcoming them to Wooded Commons, a broad sheet of plywood that almost but not quite hid her from his sight. He dove right at her, roaring triumphantly, as she screamed helplessly. Nearby, a flock of geese who'd been relaxing at a small pond behind the sign took flight.

All twenty of them.

“You didn’t have to kill her,” Toni said as she made her way back from the sofa to her chair.

“Dude, if we went through all that just so you could bash our only lead’s head in...” Keon glared.

“I didn’t ‘bash her head in’ – don’t be such a drama queen.”

Brendan drummed his fingers on the arm of his couch. “Is it being dramatic? In point of fact, you did cause her skull to collide with a thick piece of wood. Some might find that constituted bashing her head in.”

“OK, so maybe there was one small bash. I only meant to tackle her! Not my fault the dice were on fire, bitches. Excuse me for rocking.” He made sure nobody who looked at him could think he felt anything but proud of it.

“You’ll find out next session if she’s dead or only unconscious,” Jacob interjected. “Good run, gang. That was a solid plan. If you’d let me in on it, I would have tried to come up with something more fun than a simple chase.”

Remy flicked Jacob’s holo in the forehead. “Fuck no, man, that was hella fun.”

“It is mighty satisfying when a plan comes together.” Keon looked to his boss and, for once, acted like something other than a mouse. “You called it. Of course they’d be watching Ruiz’s house. All we had to do was lure their watchers into the open with some hamfisted tactics, and...” He clapped the guy on the shoulder. “Ambushing the ambushers – poetry, Brendan.”

“You put all the finishing details on it, buddy. Good work, all around.” He spared a glance at Remy. “Up until the head-bashing.”

Hannah, however, was already offering him a high five, which he enthusiastically accepted. “Don’t listen to them. I was right behind you, and seeing that bitch’s head smack into that sign was one of the hottest fucking things I’ve ever seen. This VR stuff is so fucking tits, Jacob. Like *titty* tits.”

“You know it, babe.” Hannah grinned at Remy’s term of endearment. Most people calling her would have received a caustic retort, but Remy got a pass.

Jacob’s holo shrugged humbly. “All credit to the conquering heroes. I was ad hocing, yeah, but only some. Honestly, that could have been a pretty nasty encounter, and that chase was no joke. I really wasn’t sure you’d catch her tonight. But I’m glad you did.”

Remy, however, checked his humility at the game room door. “I’m a fucking barbarian. Like I said, I play to win.”

Chapter Six

The Holy Symbol of Isarrel Miravaris

“Hey there, slugger.”

Keon’s reactions to the sudden presence of a woman speaking sotto voce in his ear were threefold. First was startlement. He’d been so engrossed in proofing his cease and desist draft for Sasha – Ms. Timmons – that he hadn’t heard anyone walking up behind him. Second was the flush of pleasure at hearing a woman’s voice, a woman being friendly in an intimate volume. When was the last time he’d heard a voice like that? The hair on the back of his neck stood up almost instantly, his shoulders slumping as his chin tilted upward.

The third was to recognize the identity of the speaker as that of Gladys Gibbel, his boss’s boss’s boss’s daughter. He stiffened his posture at once as his chair spun to face her.

It was immediately obvious why he hadn’t heard her footsteps on the tile floor of the paralegal department; her wheelchair was turned perpendicular to him so that her mouth could get close enough to have the effect on him she’d had. Her right foot was wrapped up in a thick cast that looked to have been colored royal purple with a marker, and she’d dyed her hair since he’d last seen her. The old magenta that she’d dyed neon yellow during her ill-fated vacation had now been replaced with a hue of red that was no less unnatural. It was so bright, it practically glowed in the dim confines of his cube.

She was smiling, though, and he had the distinct impression that she was aware of the precise chain of emotional reactions she had put him through.

He managed a smile. “Good morning, Gladys. I didn’t hear you approach.”

She patted a hub of one of the wheels. “Yeah, I’m super stealthy these days. As long as there aren’t any stairs involved. Or revolving doors. Cobblestone paths. Beaches and/or sandboxes.”

Keon arched a brow. “Spend a lot of time in sandboxes, do you?”

“Not these days.” She took a glance at his monitor. “You misspelled ‘categorically.’”

“What? No, I... huh.” He tapped a few keys, the missing -al appearing in the midst of the holographic letter stream. “I was going to run it through spellcheck anyway. But thanks, I guess. I’m sorry to hear about your foot, by the way. I asked your father to pass along my well wishes.”

“Could’ve said them yourself if you hadn’t run right by me. But thanks. I think it’s healing faster already.”

Was that sincere, or sarcasm? “So what’s up? I don’t have a lot of time to talk, unfortunately. I have to finish up this letter and have it in Ms. Simmons’ inbox by three.”

“Sure, sure. Far be it from me to stand between you and Ms. Simmons’ inbox.” Was that a double entendre? She wasn’t smiling. Why was this girl so hard to read? “I was supposed to have lunch with Dad today, but he got tied up in court and had to bail.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that.”

“So he said I should have you take me instead. So... ready whenever you are.”

In the cube across the way, Kevin leaned around the wall and stared, first at the back of this young woman, and then at Keon with open incredulity. Kevin had been pestering him for months about how he’d managed to strike up a personal friendship with one of the partners; the guy now sported half a dozen different nerd culture signifiers in his cube on the off chance Mr. Gibbel swung by and took note. This look, however, was mixed with a different type of envy as well.

“Um, I actually packed a lunch today, sorry.”

“Oh? What’d you pack?”

He hadn’t expected to have to explain himself any further. “Um, a ham sandwich, some funyuns. Celery, I think?”

“You’re not sure if you packed celery, or you’re not sure if the thing you packed is celery?”

“It’s celery.”

“You’re certain?”

Keon’s eyes narrowed, but he couldn’t quite make himself not smile. “Pretty certain.”

“Well good. Sounds like all of those things will keep until tomorrow. Come on.”

“I really can’t. I still have to do more research for the letter, and—”

“You know, you might be the only guy in this whole office who wouldn’t lose his shit to ingratiate himself to a partner’s daughter.” If she felt uncomfortable at having said the quiet part out loud, she gave no sign of it. Her fingers drummed on the arm of her chair. They were each painted with a different tiny design. “*Crippled* daughter, I might add, in case upward social mobility is less motivating to you than pity for the less fortunate. I bet that dude staring at the back of my head would drop his plans in a second to take me to lunch.”

Kevin’s face vanished, though a clatter of a mug being knocked over and a grunt of disappointment followed. Both Gladys and Keon grinned in spite of themselves. “I appreciate it, really, but...”

“But...?”

“I, um...”

“You...?”

“I really need to...”

“To... go to lunch with me? I mean, I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it or anything, but if you’re going to drag your feet like this, Dad explicitly ordered me to tell you to take me out. Guess he’s nervous about his baby girl wandering around the city in her weakened condition, you know?”

Keon gritted his teeth, but the sight of Kevin running to the bathroom, a coffee stain apparent on his lap, softened him. “Sure,” he said at last. “Let me finish some things here and I’ll be good to go. Meet you downstairs in an hour?”

“Or we could just go now,” she said. “I’m sure Ms. Timmons will understand your needing to kowtow to the whims of the boss’s spoiled daughter. What choice did you have, after all?”

She gave him no choice about driving her car, either, a luxury edition Mercedes V-class with one of those insulated hydrogen cells. Auto-drive, too, though she said it was spotty and needed some recalibration. Neither did he have a choice about the restaurant, someplace so upscale he was surprised they let her in casually dressed as she was. It didn't even have a name posted outside, only a hologram of some golden symbol etched in old wood that he thought might be Gaelic. He was disabused of the notion when the hostess welcomed them to le Dragon de Verre, said in a very elegant French accent. (It sounded elegant to Keon, anyway. But what did he know about fine dining? Or French?) The two were nearly the only people in the place not wearing suits, but evidently a reservation in her father's name went a long way.

Only as he was scooting her chair into her seat at their table did he make a surprising discovery. "Say... is that Toni's old chair?"

"She told Dad I could borrow it. Why, how could you tell?"

"The drawing on the back. I didn't notice when I loaded it into the car, but yeah, it's still there."

"Drawing? Of what?"

"It's just some symbol. Nothing interesting," he said, even as a wave of fond memories swept over him.

"Well if it's painted on my back, I want to know. Come on, what is it?"

"It's seriously nerdy. I don't want to bore you with—"

"Bore me." Her voice was firm, even though her face was buried in her menu. There was an odd intensity to her despite the lack of eye contact.

"Fine, here goes. It was the holy symbol of one of her old D&D characters, Isarrel Miravaris. Man, it's been like... six? No, seven years, I think. We played that party for three consecutive Weeks o' Gaming – those get-togethers your dad went on with us? – and Isarrel survived the whole thing. At least right up until the final boss fight. He was this psycho cultist who'd been summoning all these demonic minions. To close his portal we had to sacrifice something to reconsecrate his altar, and..."

He stopped, figuring by now he'd dropped enough geeky jargon to lose her interest, but to his surprise, she prompted him to continue. "And...?"

"All right. So we'd settled on this sacred bird-thing we'd rescued from some extraplanar angelic wildlife preserve – don't ask – and in the end, Isarrel decided she'd rather die in its place than let its species go extinct. She worshipped this elven goddess who sort of personified the life/death cycle, and Jacob let her transform into an avatar of her goddess after the fact."

"Wow. So she put her character's god's symbol on the back of her chair? I didn't take her for that hard core of a dork." Her voice was absent any condescension for the term, however. If anything it was affectionate. "Can I see it?"

"Can you... I guess, but you'll have to twist, and it'll be at a weird angle."

Her mouth twisted in a way that instantly made him feel stupid. How did someone barely old enough to drink manage that expression? Maybe it was a girl thing. “I mean, like, can you stand behind me and link for a sec.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure, I guess I can... yeah.” Feeling sheepish, he took up a position behind her chair. It felt a bit awkward, linking with someone he barely knew like this, but people her age had grown up with implants the way people his age had grown up with smartphones. He remembered his parents grumbling about social media; here he was in his early thirties already having a kids-these-days moment. Still, it felt like having someone able to see through your eyes was a bit more of an invasion of his privacy than being data-mined by Google and Facebook.

Keon enabled his implant to seek nearby connections and picked out her implant’s portrait immediately; it was an animated roaring lioness standing protectively in front of a den piled high with human bones and scattered books. Not that he had reason to link that image with Gladys, but it was the only implant in range that was open to initiate a link. Before confirming, he quietly downloaded a copy of it.

It took the usual amount of time to synch the two implants; the awkwardness was compounded by the fact that he was standing up in the middle of an elegant restaurant staring at a young woman’s back. He was tempted to look elsewhere, but he knew that the more his eyes darted around, the longer it would take. Since every implant used the recipient’s own biosignatures, updated in real-time, to maintain security, it made even voluntary links take inordinately long, especially for such relatively weak processors as the harsh environment of the human body allowed. Come to think of it, he could have simply taken a picture of it and sent the thing as an attachment – but too late now.

“Remy actually did the illustration of it,” he said to fill the silence. “He actually minored in art in college. You’d never think it to know the guy, but he’s always been really good at that stuff. Jacob says he was into illustrations way back before–”

He stopped as his implant finally notified him that the connection was live. “You’re taller than I thought you were,” she commented a moment later. Keon fixed his eyes on the back of the chair, where the somewhat smudged and thoroughly faded remains of the elven symbol was still visible.

“So there it is,” he replied, ignoring her comment. He was pretty sure she was almost as tall as he was; she just hadn’t stood up for the past couple weeks. His implant sent him a request from her to snap a picture and save it to her implant, which he granted. It was when he squatted down to give her a better vantage point that he slipped up. It was only for a moment. She didn’t say anything, and as he unlinked and took his seat across from her, he was relieved he seemed to have gotten away with it.

Momentarily relieved, anyway. “Were you checking out my butt?”

“What?!” He nearly dropped his glass of water. “Was I– no! No, of course not!”

“I mean, I saw what you were seeing. I guess I shouldn’t have made it a question. You definitely looked at my butt.”

She was grinning, though he didn’t know if he should be more or less nervous that it wasn’t a glare. “No, I was only... OK, maybe I glanced for a second, but I wasn’t checking you out or anything. It was just... distracting.”

“My butt is distracting?” The grin broadened.

“No, it’s not... I mean... look, I’m sorry, OK? I didn’t mean to. Let’s move on.”

“It’s really OK. This stupid chair keeps making my shirt ride up and my shorts ride down. The physics of it are baffling. Guess that’s what I get for going with the thong today, huh.”

Keon had noticed, of course; the presence of the bright yellow straps had indeed been distracting. Not that he’d been *distracted* distracted. It drew the eye was all. He was not going to make any value judgment of the quality of the butt whose cheeks it had been so casually dividing.

Not that he didn’t have opinions. But it was Mr. Gibbel’s daughter, so those opinions were strictly filed under Do Not Think About. Even if they were—

He locked the file.

Not that the view from the front wasn’t also—

And threw away the key.

“Anyway, there you have it. The holy symbol of Isarrel Miravaris.” It was, in fact, the same image that served as the portrait for Toni’s implant. He suspected almost nobody in her life understood the origins of it. Most people either used a selfie or left it on one of the stock images loaded onto the implant by default, in Keon’s experience. Toni, of course, would want hers to be distinct, and beautiful, and a little bit of a mystery. Like Toni herself. Isarrel had been one of her all-time favorite characters, and the first thing he’d guess if he ever had to try to break one of her passwords. It was strange, in a way. Toni played different classes and races every time, but her character was always ultimately Toni herself. Kennedy was simply more up-front about it than the rest.

Their waitress stopped by, a matronly woman whose disapproval of their attire was barely masked. They put in drink orders, as Keon was only now remembering he had no idea what was even on the menu here. Gladys seemed already decided, and set her menu aside while he browsed foods he didn’t even recognize by name.

“Full martyr, eh? Yeah, it’s not a bad character archetype. Gives you the feels of altruism without having to actually give up anything.”

Keon didn’t quite like the veiled slight of his friend, but it was opaque enough he didn’t make an issue of it. Actually, he was more intrigued by her interest. “You know something about gaming?” He recalled that she’d asked them during character creation, way back in July, if she could join the group. Once Hannah had shared that Gladys was a

fan of hers he'd chalked it up to that, so it was a surprise to hear her show an interest in the hobby now.

Except there followed a long enough pause that he looked up from his menu. The young woman had been waiting for him to do so. "Are you serious?"

"I, ah, didn't mean any offense..."

"My dad seriously never said anything to you guys."

Her accusation was directed at her father, but since he was here and Mr. Gibbel wasn't, he was left in the uncomfortable position of answering for him. "I guess he wanted to protect your privacy, maybe...?" he suggested.

"I've been playing RPGs since I can remember, and now you guys come along with an actual full-on VR open world game. I beg my dad to let me in, and he *lies* to me and tells me you guys vetoed it. But sure, my privacy. Fuck!" she pounded a fist on the table.

Her language and volume were attracting stares, and Keon rushed to soothe her before it caused a scene. "We're not really supposed to talk about it," he said softly. "And I'm sure he only meant to try to keep things from getting awkward by forcing his daughter on the group."

"He didn't seem to have any problem forcing himself on your group." Her hands fidgeted rapidly, clenching around nothing, grasping the table cloth like she was trying to punish it, tugging at strands of neon red hair. "Jesus! I cannot believe he didn't even ask!"

"I mean, we're a really advanced sort of group... maybe he didn't think it was the best place for a novice to dive in?"

"A novice? I'm sorry, did you say 'novice'? How long do you think it takes to learn the Near Future system? It's a simple permutation of the classic d20 rules. Roll big die, add numbers, compare sum to prescribed difficulty. That's about it." Gladys's hand slammed down on the table, plates rattling. The hostess from the front was now transitioning from frowning in their direction to actually coming toward them.

"There's a lot of nuance and circumstantial..."

But she wasn't having it. "I read the entire Near Future Player's Manual. I've back-ordered the past two years of published adventures and have caught and submitted errors. How about you?"

"I've read the manual," he stated confidently.

"Oh yeah? How many skill points per level does the Agent get?"

"Pff. Eight plus Intelligence."

"What's the Difficulty of an Acrobatics check for long-jumping?"

"Difficulty is equal to the distance in feet, assuming a running start."

The hostess paused in her approach, perceiving that Gladys' voice had returned to regular volumes, and her theatrics diminished. "Duration of the Magnician's primary Hack Hex?"

"Depends on the Hack Hex, though by default it's ten minutes per class level unless otherwise noted."

She leaned toward him. He tried not to think if was exacerbating her shirt riding up, shorts riding down. "What's the bonus to attacks from higher ground?"

"For ranged, nothing, but melee gets a plus one. Or, if you play a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, it's just over."

She cracked a smile. "Well played, sir."

For the rest of the meal, that was where conversation stayed, a discussion of the rules of the Near Future game system that was somehow both meandering and laser focused. A critique of the flaws of using inflexible formulae to calculate item pricing lead to an examination of whether or not the high cost of disposable weaponry was merited considering lackluster dice damage. He asked her opinion on using fixed hit points instead of rolling at level up; she expanded on his analysis of the perks of limiting splatbooks. She made the case that the system borrowed too heavily from older generation games like Starfinder; he insisted that all d20 games were direct descendants of D&D 3E. He told her how his late uncle had left his old rulebooks to him when he died back in the late aughts, and it was how he'd gotten hooked.

"My dad always used digital books and online SRDs. I guess in a way that's how I got into it, too. He told me I wasn't allowed to touch his e-reader, so of course getting my hands on it became an obsession. Once I—"

Keon held up his hand, swallowing quickly so he could interject. "Why wouldn't he let you use his e-reader? What kind of dad tries to keep their daughter from reading books?"

"Well, let's just say some of the books on it weren't exactly appropriate for a ten-year-old and leave it at that."

Keon covered his mouth so his laugh wouldn't carry too loudly. "Question rescinded."

"No worries. That stuff got me hooked on *other* hobbies, too. Puberty hit me like a freight train, like practically overnight, I remember." How did she not blush? "Anyway, so I found all his gaming stuff on there, and I'd always liked playing computer RPGs, so I kinda went nuts on it. They said I was too young to play at any of the open tables at the game shops in the area, so I had to go online and fake my age. Joining a mature rated RPG group on discord was actually the whole reason I taught myself how to forge my first digID."

"You made a fake digID to play D&D?" Keon couldn't help but burst into laughter.

“Imagine my disappointment when their idea of ‘mature’ was lots of alcohol and explicit descriptions of gore. I mean, I added four years to my age and only barely edited my pic on that thing, and still, not one of those dorks ever tried to fuck my character.”

He shook his head. “The humanity! Imagine, grown men not trying to initiate cybersex with a teenage girl.”

Gladys shoved her plate away and folded her arms across her chest. “Oh, come down off your high horse, Keon. You’re, what, ten years older than me?”

A brief exchange of information confirmed he was only nine and change. By the time she turned thirty, their ages would both begin with the same digit for about fourteen months. “See? That’s still old enough you were starting college when I was finishing elementary school, and I bet you’ve thought about it.”

“I... what? No! No, of course I haven’t.” At least, not until she mentioned it just now. Why was it so hot in here? A restaurant this expensive should keep the thermostat more comfortable.

“Oh yeah? So why were you checking out my ass earlier? ‘Distracting,’ I believe you called it.”

Keon leaned close and spoke in a stage whisper that only served to keep his words equally audible but much more intriguing to potential eavesdroppers. “You were wearing a yellow thong! Sue me for having my eyes drawn to bright colors, OK? And it was only for a second. That’s it,” he insisted.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. If it helps, I’m attracted to you, too.”

His eyes threatened to bulge out of his skull. “You’re what?!”

“Dude, I’m not saying I want to bear your children. I’m just saying, I—”

“Don’t say it *again!*” That was the exact opposite of what he was going for! “You’re my boss’s daughter! You can’t...!”

“Oh, whatever. You work at his law firm, but he’s your boss the same way the president is the boss of my mailman. Not a lot of direct oversight there.”

Keon hastily reached for his wallet, but Gladys already had her chip ready and scanned it over the reader. She’d just bought him lunch. Oh god, this wasn’t a *date*, was it? “Speaking of, I should probably get back to the office,” he said, rising to his feet. He didn’t even wait for permission to seize the handles on the back of her chair and push her along ahead of him.

If he noticed that the thong was still visible, it was only because she’d made such an issue out of it. He was *not* looking. Mr. Gibbel’s daughter!

“Sure you don’t wanna blow off work, come hang out? I am so bored. All my friends have midterms this week. And are a thousand miles away,” she said as he settled into the driver’s seat of her car.

“I can’t just ditch work. It’s not study hall, it’s my job.” He gave her a snide look. “And get your seatbelt on.”

She ignored his command. “Sure you can. I’m the partner’s bratty entitled daughter, and you had no choice. Easy excuse. Valid, too.”

“How is that valid?”

“Mercedes, activate auto-drive,” she said suddenly. “Set destination for home.”

“Auto-drive activated,” the car’s computer responded in its bland female tone. “Destination: One Tulley Avenue.” The steering wheel suddenly became unresponsive in his grip. He tried twisting it this way and that, but he may as well have been trying to lift the car over his head. The pedals did nothing.

“What? No! Mercedes, turn off auto-drive!”

“I’m sorry, you are not authorized to use the auto-drive,” the car answered, driving on past where they should have turned.

“Gladys, what the hell! You said it didn’t even work!”

“Well it doesn’t, really. Like, it drives, but it locks the driver out of manually correcting it. Super dangerous if we got into trouble. I kept meaning to take it in, but then I went to Cali, then the foot thing, and I kinda wanna see if I can do it myself, too, but it’s gonna void my warranty if I crack that puppy open.” She shrugged, propping her good foot up on the seat in front of her.

“Are you saying that I couldn’t stop the car if it was about to run into something? Or *someone*? Are you insane?! Turn it off!”

“I’m bored and I want company. And from the sound of things, you could use a little time away from the office yourself. You’re pretty keyed up, Keon.”

Far from the first time he’d heard a key pun, and he ignored it by reflex. “What makes you say that?”

“I’m only saying, look at you, man.”

“Look at you, man,” he repeated in a mocking tone. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, an attractive woman flirts with you the tiniest bit and you’re losing your grip. Thank god I didn’t say what I almost said or you’d be running back to shelter on foot.”

“Gladys, you know you’re basically kidnapping me right now, right?”

“You’re welcome to call the cops. Should get it straightened out nice and quick. I think my dad’s golfing with the DA this Saturday, so they can get things moving right along.”

He glared at her, still pointlessly gripping the steering wheel. “You really are kind of a brat, you know that?”

“See? I told you, totally valid excuse. Now come on, text Miss Timmons and tell her the situation. I can write it for you, if you want. I’m good at emulating people’s styles in text.”

“I can write my own texts,” he snapped before realizing that saying so was an admission he was going to send one. He didn’t have to, he knew. He could get her home and take a bus back to the office. The letter he’d been working on was in good shape; it would be fine without further fiddling. Still, he resented being treated like this. And... Mr. Gibbel’s daughter! His twenty-two-year-old, redheaded, yellow-thonged, attracted-to-him daughter!

“You get really uncomfortable around girls, huh.”

“Maybe you’re a little too comfortable around guys,” he shot back, but she only laughed and complimented him on his zinger.

They rode in silence for a couple blocks.

“What if I promise not to let you touch me? Strictly platonic. Two geeks, talking about geek stuff.”

He didn’t like the way she’d phrased it, as though he were some brute who had to be fended off. But he had liked talking to her, geek to geek. He shouldn’t, he knew. And he didn’t have to. It wasn’t right of her, forcing him to go home with her and hang out and tell him she thought he was attractive, and make him wonder what she’d almost said instead.

“Strictly platonic. And we do *not* tell your dad.”

“Did you really write my dad’s backstory?” she asked a while later, her head in his lap as they watched Obi Wan fending off an assault from his erstwhile padawan.

“Yeah.”

The characters on screen exchanged a whirlwind of blows, lava bursting all around them. “Did you pick out this U-shaped couch?”

“My mom did. You like it?”

“I like it.”

An enormous structure collapsed into the maelstrom of magma behind them as they abandoned their swashbuckling postures for a duel on two tiny hovering platforms. “Don’t forget you still need to take me to pick up my car from the office.”

“I know. We still have time.”

The music picked up tempo as their rides raced along, struggling to keep their passengers safe from the lava, powerless to keep them safe from one another.

“Did your Dad really tell you I had to take you to lunch?”

She put a finger to his lips. “Shh.” The finger lingered. Even after he kissed it.

Obi Wan back-flipped off the little robot, shouting to where Anakin glowered after him. Moments later, it was – as foreseen – over.

“I loved that backstory.”

“So are we ever going to level up, or what? You haven’t given us a single bit of XP, and we’re pretty hard up for loot, too.”

Jacob’s voice came as usual from thin air. Near the dashboard, Keon thought. “I’ve been keeping track. This game is more immersive than most, so I didn’t want to bog it down with a lot of the meta. I don’t have my notes in front of me, but you’re really close I know. Relax, Rembo.”

Dirk laughed. “Man, you haven’t used that one in a while. Would that I could’ve made that stick in literally any other part of my life. RIP, Sly.” He crossed himself.

“Hey, nothing against XP and all, but maybe we want to talk about what we’re going to do with this lady in the trunk?” Kennedy sounded plainly frightened for her. “We failed our Medicine check, so we don’t even know if she’s going to live, after...” She didn’t finish the thought. She’d already gotten into it with Dirk for his use of excessive force (or “requisite prejudice,” he’d called it).

Presently, her anxiety was aptly placed. The six of them were driving around in a pair of stolen cars with an unconscious woman in one of the trunks, fleeing the scene of a quintuple homicide. The truck they’d stolen from the guard at Alphagia was tailing Ruiz’s sedan; when they heard the blaring, everyone had piled into the closest vehicle they had and driven top speed out of there. Once out of Wooded Commons they’d pulled over to check for tracking devices and turned up nothing. Still, it wasn’t going to take CPD long to figure out the woman’s car was missing and put out an APB. They weren’t exactly inconspicuous either.

It was Jacob, however, who responded to Keon’s question. “So I was thinking, we need to start expanding our setting a little. Your characters all have backgrounds, and most are locals to the area. So what I wanted to do was start bringing in some NPCs, flesh things out a bit so you’re not so totally on your own. So, to that end...”

Keon suddenly received a text; the GM must have had it ready to send. It was a little weird, Corn being able to read texts on Keon’s implant, but he supposed since it was all a simulation anyway, it was all tied into the same processes. At any rate, the title made it clear what it was.

NPC Profile: May Ellen Hedden; a.k.a. “Mayhem” (CN female Engineer)

He recognized the nickname, though the rest was news. This was the woman he’d been intending to contact about chopping the car before Brendan had put him on backup response duty for the Ruiz mission. Previously, Jacob had only told him the basic nature of their connection and what she could do. At the time, he’d been surprised not to receive more. This was the Jacob he knew.

May first crossed paths with Cornelius Walker as his foster sibling when he was in his early teens. Their foster mother was a drunk, and the children were often left to fend for themselves. May, having recently miscarried, channeled her grief into a semblance of maternal instincts, and though only a few years his senior, became a sort

of surrogate mother to him. They kept in touch after she aged out of the system, and Corn repaid her kindnesses by using his skills to forge a series of false references and forged employment and educational records that set her up with a decent job. But when a coworker began to embezzle from the company, the ensuing investigation penetrated his hoax and resulted in not merely her termination, but over two years incarceration.

Corn kept in contact during her time, yet the trauma of time inside took its toll. On release, the newly christened Mayhem was a member of the Anarcho-collective group the Disciples, and now operates a chop shop on the south side of town. Chopping stolen cars pays the bills, but she can also be relied upon for stripping down and converting hot vehicles and other illicit (and, if needs be, legal) auto work, and can provide contacts to black market arms and equipment.

“Well?” Sanguine pressed as his eyes refocused on the world around him. He input the address into GPS of Ruiz’s car. “We got an out.”

“You’re sure you got the right place?” asked Kennedy. She stepped out of the car, looking around nervously. Everyone had that look to some degree. Mayhem’s place was a warehouse in a row of warehouses, and like the rest, it was surrounded by a high metal fence topped with coils of razor wire. Dozens – maybe scores – of half-dismantled vehicles were arranged in rows around the building, packed in far too tightly for anyone to be able to get in or out of them without climbing in a window. Not that many looked like they were in any shape to be driven anywhere. A robotic watchdog paced in evenly measured steps around the perimeter, eyes glowing a menacing red. They parked both vehicles parked a half a block away, just to be safe. Or less unsafe.

“Why, doesn’t this look like the sort of place you’d find a chop shop?”

“Sure it does. I’m only asking because I was hoping you’d tell me I get to go anywhere but here.”

He smiled. “You’re perfectly safe here. Mayhem’s an old friend.”

“If you say so. Let’s hurry this up. I’m worried about Nina.” She glanced back to the trunk.

Corn gestured to Lane and Echo. “You two stay with her and keep an eye on Ruiz. I’ll see if I can’t talk our way inside.”

Echo sniffed. “Are you really going in this time, or are you concealing another heist from me?”

“Can your ego, buddy,” Remy snapped, but Keon cut him off.

“Look, it’s not personal, Echo. You understand that, right? You have to look at things from our perspective. All of us were on the Ruiz mission; we all had a common bond.”

“Plus we’re the PCs and you’re only an NPC,” mumbled Sanguine with a little giggle at his expense.

Corn ignored her just as Echo did when they broke character. “You’re an X factor. Heck, you don’t even know your real name. We couldn’t be sure we could trust you.”

“And what has changed since before you kidnapped Ms. Ruiz?” He folded his arms. “Your wait-and-see approach does you a disservice. If I would be your true ally, this mistrust risks the forfeiture of that alliance. If I am a traitor, it invites betrayal. The mere fact that you have not already been hunted down should tell you which I am, but again, I am imploring you to employ logic where you seem to prefer half-baked conspiracies.”

Sanguine sidled up beside him and put an arm around his waist. If it made him uncomfortable, it didn’t show. “Relax, sexy. It was a one-time just in case. Now that we got away, that pretty well says you didn’t sell us out. Now unruffle those cute little tail feathers of yours for me, OK? A boy as pretty as you should smile more.”

Lane muttered something about textbook sexual harassment, but the rest had gotten the joke. In any case, Echo seemed to accept the explanation and relaxed

somewhat. Or so Keon thought. It was hard to tell whether a guy was relaxed when he had that much muscle packed on everywhere.

Keon made for the chain link fence around the lot. “All right. I’ll go see if Mayhem’s home. You guys stay here, stay frosty.”

But Sanguine was at his side in a moment. “Nobody goes anywhere alone. No way. And I’m not trained in Medicine anyway. If Ruiz’s sheet is headed for that big ol’ stat block in the sky, I won’t be able to do jack or squat about it.”

He nodded. “Fair enough. C’mon.”

“Be careful,” Remy called after them. “The game officially begins when the GM kills off one of Keon’s NPCs to give him somebody to avenge.”

Keon wished he could give that a clever retort, but there was a little too much truth to it. Ah, well. Not like the guy who had created Grim-Mace, Baxter Biggerblade and Dirk Thruster had room to criticize him for his player idiosyncrasies.

An intercom was posted next to the main gate, and after failing to spot anyone in the ill-lit yard, Corn hit the buzzer to request entry. Oddly, his enhanced implant told him the intercom was wifi enabled, even though by appearance it looked like a rusty old two-way. He reasoned it would allow someone to feign presence in their absence, or keep a dialogue going while on the move, perhaps as a stalling tactic while beating a retreat. Clever programming. This woman was indeed a pro.

There was a high-pitched mechanical squeal from the box, followed by a woman’s tinny voice. “Yeah, who’s there?”

Keon winced at the offending noise, but somehow recognized the voice in that way that the app rendered the unfamiliar familiar. “Someday, Jacob, you’re going to have to tell me how the hell this thing works.” He then held down the call button to reply. “Hey there, May. You got a few minutes for an old friend?”

“Well, if it isn’t Cornelis Walker himself,” she replied. There was reassuring warmth to the voice, until she added, “Why do I get the feeling this is going to be more than a few minutes?”

“Because you miss me too much to let me leave so soon,” he replied with a grin. It might only be an intercom, but no way somebody in Mayhem’s line of work didn’t have a camera trained on this gate.

“Who’s the lady?” Mayhem replied, confirming that very suspicion.

“This is Sanguine. She’s a friend. She’s cool.”

“I meant the one hog-tied in the trunk down the block.”

Apparently she had more than one camera. “It’s nothing you need to worry about. It’s me, May. Where’s the trust?”

“You, I trust. The legion of stormtroopers who’re scouring all over town looking for that car, on the other hand, I’d as soon not give cause to knock on my door.”

“Look who’s Little Miss Current Events. Come on, Mama, we’re in a jam here. The car’s clean, but we can’t keep driving it around. Are you gonna let us in or not?”

There was no response. “Mayhem...?” he ventured after a minute. “May?”

Suddenly the gate screeched into motion, metal grinding on metal in the ill-maintained gears. Whatever tech the woman was employing here, it clearly didn’t extend to keeping the gate well-lubricated. Still, it opened, and he saw the barn door at the end of the warehouse was sliding open, too. That mechanical dog stopped its patrol to stare after them, but it didn’t look like it meant to interfere with their approach.

Once inside the main building, its purpose was clear. Three garage doors were set into one wall, each leading into a workstation flanked by tables, instruments, and tools. So many tools! Corn was envious. Tools of every shape and size were hung on pegs along the walls, and more littered the shelves lining two of the four walls. Corn knew his way around a body shop, and it was immediately clear May’s operation was on a whole other level, replete with scanners, diagnostics and modification tools to make any collector (or car thief) envious. Even a handful of automated repair bots – pretty impressive stuff.

So much for getting out of this on the cheap.

Waiting for him inside, closing the barn door behind them, was none other than Mayhem herself. The picture Jacob had attached to his description was both wildly inaccurate and quite impressive. Seeing her now, it was plain the picture had been rather dated, showing what May must have looked like before her incarceration. (And props to Jacob for not merely creating an NPC, but envisioning her at multiple ages over time as well.)

Prison, he had to concede as he took in the sight of the real Mayhem, had not been entirely unkind to her.

The hair was new, aquamarine save for black roots, but the outfit was the same as ever, cargo pants and a tank top liberally smeared with old paint and fresh grease. It made for quite a foil for the rest of her, more of her fair skin coated in tattoos than not. The theme, while not exclusive, was of snakes and flowers intertwining, using coils and scales to suggest petals in states of bloom. Keon had never much cared for tattoos, but he had to concede that they were beautifully rendered. The woman beneath was every bit their equal, every inch of her rife with loveliness and lethality.

Through those memories the app supplied him, Corn knew he had never asked her if she’d had to kill anyone, either in jail or after. He preferred not to know. Until the past few days, he never had either, and (in character) he was troubled at how easily it suggested itself as a solution for his problems. Did any of the other players consider such things for their characters? Over the years, they’d taken life countless times, men and monsters alike. Never before had he been forced to see it with his own eyes, hear the sounds of bodies evicting their souls. Even with a somewhat video-gamey aesthetic behind it, it was not something he looked forward to having to do again any time soon.

Deadliness aside, Mayem *was* smoking hot, though. No. Deadliness was a part of it. If Jacob had created this himself, he deserved an award for graphic design. After the day Keon had had, it was an exercise in will to keep his eyes off that plunging neckline. His voice had squeaked for the first time in a decade or more when Gladys entered the door and oh-so-casually invited him in, oh-so-pointedly cleared her throat as he walked away down the hall so he'd catch her paying him back for the thong inspection. For now, in game, it was only time for reunions.

"May! It's great to see you. It's been too long."

She stopped him short of a hug, though, with a hand on his chest and a rebuke in her eyes. "Whoa there. How's bout we start with what mischief y'all are visiting on me tonight, and then we can gauge if I still feel like hugging your ass, all right m'boy?" She was only a couple years Corn's senior, and younger than Keon, but he had to admire her maternal ways. "No bullshit. What you say stays with me, but I need you to say it first."

"Like I said outside, this is Sanguine. She's with me." His comrade stepped forward and extended a hand. "Out in the lot are Dirk, Lane, Remy, and Echo. Oh, and the woman in the trunk is—"

"Nina Ruiz," she finished. "You don't need to tell me, m'boy. Babylon's out in force looking for her. Can't believe y'all made it as far as ya did in that thing. You'd think you had the first lady of Illinois there, the way they're kicking up a fuss."

Corn and Sanguine exchanged a look of surprise. "Seriously?" she asked. "Huh. She didn't look like much."

"Looks can be deceiving." With that, Mayhem walked through one of the doors off the main garage, and not knowing what else to do, they followed. Inside was a massive computer console taking up most of the space atop a scratched-up metal desk. A dozen monitors of various shapes and models were mounted on a bracket hanging from the ceiling over it. Most of them seemed to be security footage of her warehouse and a bit of the surrounding area, but some were showing rooms that didn't look at all like they were part of this same building. Corn knew better than to ask.

She gestured to a camera feed showing their group clustered around Ruiz and tapped a few buttons. The camera zoomed in while maintaining remarkable clarity, and they got a close look at the woman between the profiles of the other party members. Her eyes were closed and she didn't seem to be moving, though he thought he could make out signs of breathing. The duct tape on her wrists and ankles was still in place. Bringing that roll of tape along had been another one of Brendan's strokes of brilliance. The one on her mouth was too, which made him nervous considering her condition, but it had been a quiet neighborhood, and one scream might bring the whole thing crashing down on them. A necessary precaution for now.

Mayhem tapped the screen. "Now it looks as though she ain't dead yet, but is she about to be? Corpse disposal's not exactly my specialty."

“We’re hoping to keep her alive, actually,” Corn answered.

“Alive. That the direction she’s heading, ya think? She don’t look so good to me,” Mayhem opined, squinting at the image.

“We don’t know. We did a little first aid, but she got slammed in the head pretty hard when she tried to run off. She lost some blood.”

Mayhem nodded. “So long as she ain’t busted up too bad, I think I got something that might keep her from buying it for tonight. A little amateur pharmacological trick I whipped up for such occasions. Wish I didn’t have to whip it up quite so often, to be honest. But you’ll want to find someplace she can rest proper, first.”

“Thanks, Mama. That’s our next problem. We’re low on funds, and we can’t exactly head back home with all this heat on us. But we’ll figure that out.”

From a drawer in the desk, she produced a plastic tackle box with a cross formed from pieces of red electrical tape on the top. She thrust it into Sanguine’s hands. “Med-kit – don’t kidnap without it. Couple EZ-Paks in there too that ought to at least keep her from kicking it while she recuperates.” Their Agent wasn’t trained in Medicine, but one didn’t need to be to apply the EZ-Pak, a technomagical bandage that let the recipient heal HP equal to their Con bonus (minimum 1) for a few rounds. A nifty sci fi variant of the familiar healing potion.

Sanguine flipped it open and peered around at the contents, myriad bandages, poultices, pills and a few syringes. “Thanks. That’s generous of you.”

“Generous nothing, sugar. I’ll take it out of your fee.” But her smile was gracious nevertheless. “Say, since you mentioned it, if you’re looking for high discretion low amenity housing, I might have a lead for you. While we’re pretending we’re doing favors and all.”

“Oh yeah?”

She looked between her visitors. “I’m friendly with a group called the Disciples. Corn knows this. You heard of ‘em?” Sanguine shook her head after a pause for the Near Future app to confirm she’d failed her Culture skill check. “Well suffice to say we consider ourselves friends of the downtrodden. Help take care of the folks who need taking care of.”

“Speaking of being generous...” Corn had succeeded on his check thanks to a bonus for his affiliation with Mayhem, and summarized for his ally. “The Disciples are mildly militant anarchists who’re trying to get enough people together to overthrow... well, everything. To do so, they try to seek out people who need help, the disenfranchised and such, to build up their alliance. So they’re trying to bring down the man with sheer numbers rather than the more conventional terrorism shtick.”

“Not the way the FBI describes us, m’boy but it’ll do,” she said dryly. “Anyway, a friend of ours, fella named Yenque, owns an apartment building down in Englewood called Arcadia. He’s been having some trouble with some local boys. He asked us if we

could spare anybody, but our muscle's stretched thin as it is. But Yenque's a decent sort. Occupied Wall Street back in the day. You do him a solid and your housing troubles are over. I don't know what his rates are, but I know he's no friend of Babylon."

Sanguine arched a neatly tweezed brow. "You said something about them earlier. Who or what is a Babylon?"

"The cops," supplied Corn. That one he'd picked up from context. She was lucky Remy wasn't here to rib her for another Int failure outside of the die rolls. "And thanks, Mama. That could be a big help."

"You wanna thank me, y'all remember to tell Yenque who sent you." She flipped a switch and the monitors went dark. "Now. You didn't come here to be sent on my errands. What can I do ya for?"

Corn texted to the group to have them bring the vehicles into the warehouse via the large side door. After introductions followed a brief discussion that soon became a negotiation about their bounty on the stolen vehicles. In the end, the risk she was assuming for taking the highly sought vehicle of Nina Ruiz didn't negate the scrap value to her. Given the urgency imposed by the body in the trunk, she skimmed on the inspection and went on a modest estimate of the car's options, which were deluxe. Auto-drive, collision prevention, theft resistance, scratch resistance paint, even adjustable holographic tinting and an AV projector that streamed on the dashboard when it was parked. Ruiz rode in style. The truck wasn't anything special, but padded their bargaining position a bit. They settled upon a payment of fifteen thousand credits, a veritable fortune to the low-level group.

With the amount agreed upon, Corn exited her office, taking the PCs aside first to divide up the payment, and then to tell them about the opportunity with Mr. Yenque at Arcadia. Once they'd been filled in, Corn finally set business aside and made introductions. He'd just gotten to Dirk (who was failing badly to notice the nonverbal cues Corn was giving him to stop ogling Mayhem – when the world froze.

Initiative was being rolled.

The surprise round took place without him. He neither saw nor heard anything, even in the otherwise quiet warehouse. The sound of Ruiz's car's electric engine starting up was a veritable whisper. What he did not miss, however, was the shout of alarm from Kennedy, followed by the sound of tires peeling on the cement floor.

With everyone now aware, it was time to act as the encounter commenced. Mayhem beat him to the punch, rushing past him out of the office and into the main area where she slapped the red button that opened the huge garage door, a wise decision considering that otherwise Ruiz would no doubt simply attempt to drive right through it. In the distance, a set of parallel red lights bobbing in unison indicated her dog was on its way as well, though too far to have any chance of doing much.

Corn hurried after her where he saw Nina Ruiz, mouth still duct taped, behind the wheel of her car. Nearby Kennedy, who had said she was staying with Ruiz, was lying down on her hip; if he had to guess, he would surmise she had dived out of the path of the car. Remembering what had happened to those men in front of Ruiz's house (to say nothing of Toni's own history) he couldn't blame her.

"What do you want to do with your remaining action?" Jacob prompted when he stalled a little too long. What option did he have? He could try to dive onto the trunk of the car and hold on, hope she crashed before he fell off, and that the crash didn't kill him. Draw his pistol, try to shoot her before she got out of range. Considering his meager Dex and attack bonus, he didn't like his odds at ranged combat, even beside the possibility the shots might be overheard and police dispatched to investigate.

He even considered simply letting her go. After all, there was no proof Ruiz herself had done anything wrong, and he didn't relish the prospect of killing an innocent woman. It was unclear how much of her unconsciousness had been feigned, but it was certain she was not far from death's door. The thought was horrifying, being knocked unconscious and left helpless behind the wheel of a moving car... why that was—

Corn grinned. "I'm gonna try something, and you tell me the Difficulty, Jacob..."

If only he could have seen the look on her face, he thought. Perhaps he'd be slouched back in the passenger seat, one foot propped up on the seat by his ass and the other on the dashboard, too cool to be bothered with a seatbelt. Jacob had set the Difficulty at 20, which was no joke for a mere first level character, but his roll of twelve – emblazoned cryptically in a tattoo on Mayhem's shoulder – brought him to exactly enough. His implant reconnected to the car's computer, and his turn ended.

"She's getting away!"

"Y'all need to get out, now. Shit! There goes my whole operation! How could you let this happen, girl?"

"I'm so sorry, you guys! She must have been pretending to be unconscious. I was trying to figure out where to stick the EZ-Pak and suddenly her hands were free and she was slamming the trunk on my wrists!"

"Yikes! Are you OK, hon?"

"Who's the fucking genius who left the keys in the ignition, by the way?"

"Oh sure, blame the girl with the Int penalty!"

Echo was the only one who didn't give up immediately, sprinting after the woman with what had to be some sort of special ability or cybernetic enhancement. He wasn't going to be able to keep up with a moving car, but he sure looked like he meant to try.

Corn, however, had nothing to say, and didn't need to run. The range on his implant's hacking wasn't great, but now that the connection was established, it was only a matter of time. Mayhem started the countdown on a self-destruct that would blow up

the whole warehouse before the police could search the place – because of course she'd installed one – when suddenly it was no longer necessary.

Nina Ruiz was sitting in the driver's seat, frantically pounding on the wheel, but to no avail. Only when the car drove itself leisurely back around into its former position in the warehouse did Corn send an order to undo the door locks. By that point, there were three pistols trained on the driver's side door, and some sort of weapon that looked like a futuristic squirt gun ready to spew some ghastly green liquid in the hands of Mayhem.

“Come on out, Ruiz. No need to make this ugly,” he said casually as he ordered her window down.

“God damnit, fucking deactivate auto-drive!” she shrieked one last time.

“I'm sorry, you are not authorized to use the auto-drive,” the car's voice module answered.

Kennedy gave Corn a sidelong look. “You're a genius, man.”

“Wish I could take credit for the idea.”

Ruiz's near escape was enough to exhaust Mayhem's willingness to hide their fugitive. With the only alternative being to march their captive out of here on foot, they sunk the majority of their newfound credits into a full-size van she had on her lot. It was well-tuned and promised to run smoothly, but looked weathered enough not to attract attention. Expensive, but with a six-person party plus a captive, it was a necessary purchase and came at a more than fair price. Next stop: Arcadia. They'd spent so few resources in the Ruiz operation that it was agreed they could at least make contact with Mr. Yenque and do some snooping.

Without quite knowing why – or maybe he simply couldn't acknowledge it, even privately – Corn offered to stay behind and help chop the vehicles himself.

"You sure?" asked Kennedy.

"Sure I'm sure. What good am I going to be in a recon mission? Stealth +0, Bluff +1, and even my lockpicking skills aren't as good as Sanguine's. Besides, we haven't gotten to do a lot of RP yet this campaign, so I wanna get a feel for things."

"I'll bet you wanna get a feel," said a smirking Dirk, looking to where Mayhem was squatting down inputting instructions into her robots. Corn defied any hetero man who saw the outline of that butt to not want to feel it, though he wasn't about to give Dirk the satisfaction of acknowledging it.

But Sanguine elbowed the barbarian into the van and he didn't press it further. Keon's propensity for dragging out roleplay encounters was a well-documented phenomenon, and in a game where they didn't have a GM who could only devote attention to one activity at a time, they neither wished to deny him his indulgence nor stand there watching it.

"I thought we weren't leaving anyone by themselves?" Lane pointed out.

They had decided that very thing. Nobody seemed mistrustful of Mayhem any more, and they were taking their bullseye with them bound and gagged in the van, but still, it seemed a sound policy. Dirk and Hannah – and Echo, for that matter – were keen to get on with things so they could find a safe place in which to interrogate their hostage. (All agreed that after what they'd just seen, no way did Ruiz's gag come out until they were somewhere secure.) Kennedy, however, stifled a yawn and volunteered to stay with Corn.

"And, um, I hate to do this, but I actually have an early day tomorrow, so is it OK if I check out early? I can't believe I'm saying it, but I am already beat and it's gonna be half an hour or more before I can even get home."

Jacob answered, "Sure. Since Kennedy has her magnician tinkering skills, we can just say she's assisting the chop and have her hang around on the fringes. I don't anticipate anything coming up that would require your active attention. Go home, get some sleep sweet—" He caught himself. "Sorry. Must be getting tired myself."

There was a brief and uncomfortable silence as the group tried and failed to pretend not to have heard Jacob's misspeak. He wasn't sure he'd heard Jacob use that term to refer to Toni since before the accident.

Remy was the first to have the grace to cover for it. "All right. Well you guys have fun, uh, ripping cars up, I guess," said Dirk. Never one to drag out goodbyes, he start-stopped the van and the sliding door slammed shut quite nearly on Lane's foot. They could hear her chewing him out as the van pulled out of the warehouse and into the lot. The door swung closed behind them.

Toni offered a quick good night hug. There was an almost imperceptible twitch, and then her eyes glazed over, face blank, and within moments she was using her tools on the car with the same steady, unhurried pace as the robots alongside her. Mayhem, likewise, had already gotten to work, bent over the engine block. Bent at the waist. Just so.

It had been a hell of a good day. Game day was usually the high point of his week, and this had been no exception. Meeting the new NPC Mayhem, credits in his pocket, thwarting Ruiz with his quick thinking, and a new mission on the horizon... it had been a solid one. But right now, his thoughts weren't on the game. Not quite. They were on the young woman who was probably only a few dozen feet away from the real Keon. One with lotion that smelled like crushed-up Pez and a purple cast on her foot. Who knew her RPGs as well as he did, and maybe even loved them as much, too. Who he'd kicked himself all evening for not having the guts to kiss.

She *had* been flirting. He hadn't imagined that. But it didn't mean she was serious about it. Maybe she'd only been teasing, the same as she did with the auto-drive. She was probably just lonely. Or bored. A girl that pretty, from that kind of family, didn't want to be kissed by Keon Weldon. Besides, even if she did (and she had sure *seemed* like she did, hadn't she?), she was Brendan's daughter. There was nothing for it. So what if they'd had a connection. It was no more real than anything Corn experienced here.

Hormones run amok. That's all it had been. They still were, actually. And maybe... would it be so bad to try to...

Was Jacob watching? Surely by now he was focused on the other group and whatever mission Echo had arranged for them. Could Corn try to...? No. No, that would be way too awkward.

But if Jacob wasn't watching...

It was only a game, right? No stakes. Nobody got hurt. Really it would be nothing more than a means of advancing a side plot when you stopped to think about it. Not like it was his first time, either. Keon's characters had had sex before in plenty of campaigns. Not explicitly, of course, but it wasn't at all uncommon. Members of the party had had spouses, significant others, or sometimes simply sought the attention of a buxom tavern wench. Remy had once played a character, Koxtarg, whose entire shtick had been

fucking every willing woman that moved, and the uglier, the better. One NPC had even hired an assassin after his wife had given birth to a particularly tusksome half-orc. Sexual relationships with NPCs were not unusual, and surely the GM wouldn't have thrown such a temptation his way if he didn't mean for him to consider acting on it.

Besides, as blue as Keon's balls were back in One Tulley Center, it was this or explode. He'd had way too much temptation today as it was.

"I can't help but feel like I still owe you for all you did for us today, May," he opened.

She smiled over her shoulder at him. "Only for today? You're gonna need a bigger calculator if you plan on tallying up what all you owe me, m'boy."

"I don't suppose you'd let me pay in trade, now, would you May?" There, that was good. Vague, but suggestive enough to be suggestive.

"That depends on what you're trading," she answered, easing herself onto the hood of Ruiz's car. She crossed her legs at the ankles, hips framed fetchingly in her grease-stained coveralls. The robot that had been buzzing around under the front end of the vehicle flowed seamlessly around her.

"You're looking at what I got."

"So your ass is broke, that's what you're saying?" She raised her feet to set them on the front fender, forearms resting on her knees. It was only a small shift in posture, from leaning slightly back to leaning slightly forward, but it accomplished something remarkable. Her cargo pants slid down perhaps only two inches, but enough to reveal the presence of slender yellow straps on either hip. A thong.

That was the precise moment he ceased to care how much attention Jacob was paying.

Corn stepped into the space between her knees, grasped the beltline of her pants in both hands, and pulled her mouth to his. This, Keon should have done, but could never do. It was bold. Aggressive. It told her exactly what he wanted and exactly how badly. Keon would have crapped his pants by now.

With his eyes closed, his implant automatically displayed the app's in-game text for him. *Diplomacy check. Difficulty: 25 (Target's attitude: Helpful = base 5, +20 Major request). Your roll: 1d20+2 (1 rank, +1 Charisma). Circumstance modifiers: +5 (Target: close associate), +2 (Target enjoys Impulsiveness), +4 (Target currently Impressed). Total roll 1d20+13*

Did the app put all that together? Was that Jacob? Did he plan this? How detailed was the program that ran this NPC? He'd gotten so used to rolls being displayed with silly alterations to the landscape that seeing the full gamut of calculations was jarring.

What were the odds of her having on a yellow thong?

Nearby, a robot tossed the removed license plate on the floor. He opened his eyes only long enough to glance. *RKX 13.*

Thirteen. Like any player worth his salt, Keon was superstitious about his dice in the extreme, but in this case, thirteen was nothing but lucky.

“Come to Mama,” she moaned, and in the next instant, off went her shirt. Her bra was, as he’d expected, nearly the same shade of green as her hair, though it featured a little black bow beneath a skull and crossbones right between the breasts. The bra looked to be so tight that her breasts were fighting to escape it, bulging out over the cups and jiggling enticingly with even the slightest of her movements.

Keon was beside himself with the implications. Had he really just induced this gorgeous woman to fool around him with the roll of a die? As she pulled him up against her, he wondered if this would work on any old woman off the street. He didn’t have much of a Diplomacy score, but still!

In the real world, women had always been more than a little bit frightening to Keon Weldon, even more so than men. The more attractive they were, the more frightening. Toni and Jacob had already been together for most of a year when Keon first met them, and he had marveled that such a pair was possible. That Jacob was reasonably good-looking in his academic way did not factor into it; Toni was beautiful and was therefore objectively terrifying. Remy might not be as successful with women, but that was mostly his acerbic personality. He was still fit, athletic, and that was enough that strangers would occasionally come up to him and start flirting. Keon had only hours prior received a reminder of his own reaction to a pretty girl flirting with him – to try to run like hell every chance he got, then to wuss out and exit the building down fifty-eight flights of stairs so he didn’t risk bumping into Mr. Gibbel in the elevator.

May was a hell of a kisser – or at least motivated. He didn’t really have enough practice to gauge skill, but it sure *felt* good. Inch by inch, Corn worked his hands up to the task of not merely making contact, but actually touching her. Not where he might have truly wanted to, but he told himself the hips were indeed below her waist, so that still counted for a lot.

Kennedy, meanwhile, was in the process of removing the passenger side door of the Alphagia guard’s truck. There was nobody behind those eyes, no more than there was anyone behind the wheel of the truck. Another autopilot. It still looked like Toni, but if anything, the idea that Toni was right there and not reacting to their making out in the least only made it all the hotter.

So they kissed. And kissed. And kissed some more.

Why wasn’t she doing anything? Corn’s lips went on autopilot as he pondered this question. It seemed impossible for a woman to have this many tattoos and still be as anxious around guys as he was around girls. There was no logic behind his correlation, but it held fast. Corn himself had only ever slept with two women. One, his senior prom date, and they’d both been drunk and it had been over practically before it started. Second with a girl he’d dated in grad school for about six months, just long enough to

find out how much he liked sex while not long enough to get much practice in. The relationship had collapsed when she broke up with him at a party, in front of all of her friends.

He'd been shy before that, but he hadn't been afraid. Now, simply being near women made him nervous.

Nothing about Mayhem seemed nervous. Her tongue was slipping in and out of his mouth voraciously, and if there was a faint taste of cigarettes on it, it made her dirty, and reckless, and exotic. Heck, she'd probably done *real* drugs, too. She was legit. If he didn't love the taste, exactly, this was easily drowned out by the presence of soft, warm skin beneath his fingers. That seemed to be as far as she was going to go. Like she was waiting for him to—

Corn stopped, and was pleased to see her looking up at him expectantly. Hungrily. That was exactly what she was doing. Waiting. She was, after all, an NPC.

He suddenly flashed back to years ago, when he'd been helping to coach Remy through the gen ed component of his teaching licensure exam instructing. In particular, he recalled trying to impress on the phys ed major the difference between subject pronouns like I and object pronouns like me, and how to know when to use them. He might be clueless about women, but grammar, Keon knew.

It's the same as the difference between PCs and NPCs, Keon had told him. *PCs did; NPCs were done to.*

Mayhem wasn't the focal point of this story. She was a prop, a stepping stone to enable the players to progress. She was no more in charge of what happened here than were the nameless, faceless minions fighting to the death for the BBEG, identical stat blocks and identical tokens on the grid. Mayhem might have a name, and a little bit of backstory, but she was still a fabrication here to further his enjoyment of the game.

Damn, but he wanted to see that thong. He'd been wanting that since he'd linked with her at lunch.

“Take off your pants.”

Only when her bared ass was back on the hood of the car and her pants were kicked away (and quickly brushed to the perimeter of the room by one of the bustling robots) did he realize he'd been holding his breath.

Holy crap. He'd told her what he wanted, and she'd done it. No questions, no stalling. He'd made his Diplomacy check, and that was that. Nearby, Kennedy was using a jack on the back end of the other car. When she saw him looking at her, she gave a momentary smile and went right back to work. Business as usual, just Corn being a rock star stud with a gorgeous tattooed babe panting needfully for him. Because he'd told her to.

Mayhem looked even hotter in her underwear than he thought she possibly could naked. The mismatched bra and thong in their respective vibrant hues made them

almost blend in with the plethora of newly revealed tattoos, a dozen shades and varieties of flowers blooming around an unclear number of half-concealed scaled bodies slithering beneath them. Her whole body was a technicolor garden of peril. It was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

Well, maybe second. But he shouldn't be thinking about that.

He caught himself staring, but rather than chastise or even merely tease him for it, she was only sitting there, waiting, basking in his admiration. She preened for him, twisting this way and that to show off the body he had somehow in all their years of acquaintance never gotten a taste of. Back then, Keon reasoned for his character, he had been a child. Now he came to her as a man, and had easily overwhelmed her. He was a man. So much man, damn it!

"You like what you see?"

"Hell yeah, I do."

And that was all she said. Filler, almost a stock line like you got from over-clicking on a character in a video game. Curious, he kept waiting, not at all bored by the simple pleasure of staring at a woman who didn't object to him staring. Finally she spoke again, another banal one-liner. As he continued to idle – if drinking in this sight could be said to be idling, as in that moment it felt like the best use of his time in months – she occasionally offered more, until he was simply holding back in order to hear what she'd say next.

"Come to Mama, baby."

"Been too long since I got a proper tuneup."

"Well, well, well, look who's all... grown up."

"It'll feel twice as good as it looks, I promise."

"You ever fucked a girl on the hood of a stolen car before?"

She never repeated herself; whatever script supplied her with lines didn't seem to loop around to a beginning. But as he paced around, inspected her from every side, stole another kiss and retreated... she simply waited, that same sly, eager look on her face.

Corn had made his check, and was allowed to enjoy the benefits. She was his as much as if she'd been a pile of gold in the hoard of a slain dragon.

While Keon fervently prayed his friend was not directly involved in this, the encounter was admittedly quite like his style. Jacob was a big proponent of allowing players to narratively describe the results of their successes. If Remy landed a hit, he was welcome to stipulate where it landed and how gory the carnage was. Tonight, the GM was giving him free reign to determine the results of the encounter.

The thought reminded him, though, that he was not playing in a vacuum. How long had it been since he'd first kissed her? Were Mayhem's robots even doing anything, or simply drifting around looking like they were working? Was Kennedy? Had the rest of

the party finished their part of the mission? Would they be given the last bit of XP to level up? Would...

No. He stopped himself. That was Keon thinking, distracting himself with a dozen details and striving for a perfect game. Right now, this was a roleplay encounter, and he was playing Cornelius Walker. Corn was direct. Corn was self-assured. Corn was experienced.

And presently, he was hard as hell. During character creation he'd balked at giving himself a cock this size, but that blue-haired woman had said he had the Con for it, and even more if he'd wanted. Even so, it shamed Keon's own. This thing was a racial stereotype, and for once, he was glad to embrace one.

"Now the bra," he said at last.

"Oh yeah? Had your eyes on these for a while now, have you?"

"I'm about to."

She grinned, confident to the point of smugness that she had him in her thrall even though it was precisely the opposite. Her hand was already reaching behind her to undo the clasp. Simply slumping her shoulders was enough to impel her bra to surge forward and slip down her arms. Her breasts were bigger than he would have thought, but not big. B cups? C? He had no idea of such things beyond what he'd seen on the internet, and most girls there seemed bigger. But the shape of them... wow. *Wow*. And sure enough, her left nipple, a bright pink that matched the colorful scape of her flesh beautifully, was encircled by the tail of what appeared to be a rattlesnake. It was a warning that every inch of this woman was dangerous.

But not to him.

"Care to join me, m'boy?" she offered, her eyes resting a moment on the enormous bulge below his belt.

Right. Time to take off some clothes. Sure. No worries. Ignore Toni. Err, Kennedy. She wasn't really there. Would she be turned on if she was? There was a thought. No. Stop thinking. Act.

He took a deep breath, tried not to let Corn take over and keep Keon in the back seat, then shucked his pants and underwear in one go. Was that how it was supposed to be done? Whatever – she didn't seem to care, except to gape at the sight that now greeted her. Still passive, though. She didn't approach him, didn't prompt. Only smiled, licked her lips, and wriggled in place. Almost like a set piece, there to appeal to the senses, except this one moved and talked.

What now? Did he just walk over and... put it in her? More making out? Grope her? They all sounded equal parts exhilarating and terrifying. He had to remind himself what he was, and what she was.

PCs do. NPCs get done to.

She wasn't a real girl. She didn't have wants of her own. She was there entirely to satisfy his. He told himself that a few more times until his voice felt ready to speak without squeaking again. Not that it had in front of Mayhem, her. But the other one. The one beneath the symbol. No. Don't think about her. Too pretty.

"Use your mouth."

Keon would have started with an "um," and ended with a "please" and a question mark. Corn, however, simply stated his desire. Then a moment later winced in embarrassment at having been so direct.

Suddenly, the app prompted another Diplomacy check. He flinched in surprise as he was taken out of the moment, the math playing out in real time on the insides of his eyelids.

Diplomacy check. Difficulty: 10 (Target's attitude: Helpful = base 5, +5 Minor request). Your roll: 1d20+2 (1 rank, +1 Charisma). Circumstance modifiers: +5 (Target: close associate), +2 (Target enjoys Impulsiveness), +4 (Target currently Impressed). Total roll 1d20+13.

It was nearly the same as last time, only it seemed that once he'd talked her into sex, asking for oral was a great deal easier, dropping from 25 down to 10. Was that even accurate? He thought girls didn't like giving blowjobs. No matter – Keon wasn't about to try to play rules lawyer for the GM and bargain it higher. Still, the end result seemed to be a roll whose success was...

One of the robots beneath the car spoke in a tinny monotone. "Transmission: automatic."

Mayhem hopped down only long enough to slam the hood shut behind her, then right back up. She nimbly curled her knees up beneath her and eased backwards until her toes were braced against the windshield, heedless of the dents her weight was putting in her recent acquisition. Then, with all the grace and sensuality implicit in those serpentine tattoos all over her naked body, she slithered down on her belly and opened her mouth wide. He now had a perfect view of the back of that yellow thong, at the place where it disappeared between her butt cheeks.

Was that what Gladys would look like, if she—
Mayhem sucked him into her mouth.

The blowjob that ensued must have been a feat of incredible flexibility and core strength, he reflected as he ran his fingers through silken aquamarine strands. Because of the slope of the vehicle's hood, she had to prop herself up on her elbows, and because he simply had to know what her ass felt like, her neck was bent back to its utmost.

The NPC didn't complain. She didn't struggle. She only sucked, in accordance with his Diplomatic request. Her tongue's mobility suffered not at all from her position, and she moaned to prompt still more and deeper touching. He pulled her ass apart, letting it clap back together over and over again, never tiring of watching the rippling of the

two pale orbs coming together. Soon he grew bold enough to stroke the shockingly wet spot between her legs, pressing where he was pretty sure (or at least very hopeful) the clitoris would be. Corn's hands found the spot, evidently, and only after she squealed in delight, thighs trapping his hand on her pleasure center, did he realize that of course he'd found the spot. Keon might be clumsy about such things, but Corn knew where to go. It was only the character's skill that counted. The player's aim didn't matter any more here than it did firing his weapon.

Speaking of...

Mayhem had no problem swallowing down what felt like more cum than he'd ever produced at a go in his life. In the spring at the company picnic, Sasha Timmons had worn leggings and a sports bra for the volleyball match; even in the days of repeated masturbation that had followed, he had not come so hard. This woman didn't seem to mind. In fact, when Corn didn't withdraw, she simply continued sucking, swirling her tongue and swallowing the head of his massive cock down her throat until he was as hard as before. His implant flashed some text about a successful Con check, but he wasn't reading now. He was getting his giant dick sucked by a beautiful, eager woman.

Kennedy murmured an apology when she tried to open the hood with them on it; her AI apparently hadn't recognized in time that their two naked, sweaty, vigorously rutting bodies were in the way. Corn ignored her. He had his hands quite literally full.

Later, when the session closed and he and Kennedy accepted Mayhem's offer of a ride to rendezvous with the others, he reflected that perhaps Corn was lucky to have something of Keon inside him. Corn, he was pretty sure, would have stood there face-fucking his uncomplaining foster mama all night long. He'd had a shitty week and here was an old friend with a warm disposition and a hot body, one who was very generous with both. Keon, however, had the presence of mind to consider that the encounter had opened with wanting to talk about payment for the body work, and should therefore probably include something more reciprocal than masking her nicotine breath with spunk.

In the meantime, it seemed selfish to leave her thong in place, merely tugged to one side, when he bent her over the hood of the car and stretched her soaking pussy to new limits. He took his time about it, too, basking in another stream of her filler dialogue. When she took too long, he'd give her ass a few smacks – which she endured thanks to another Diplomacy check he could only fail on a 2 – to prompt more.

“Tell me you'll fuck me any time I want,” he grunted into her ear.

“Oh fuck yes, baby, any time, any place – fuck what Daddy thinks,” she answered, words strained by his hand on her throat. Daddy? What was even happening? But who cared. Then she moaned so loudly he thanked his lucky stars it didn't echo from Keon's lips in Mr. Gibbel's gaming room. Corn came inside her without a second thought. It was, after all, the end goal of the encounter. She climaxed when he did, screeching and

whining so loudly that he couldn't help but feel like he deserved some XP for it. After all, from how hard she'd clawed at his chest and back, he'd surely suffered a hit point or two of damage.

Holy crap, Keon thought as the others filled him in on the happenings of their mission back in the real world. He was hearing none of it. *How am I ever going to go back to trying to get with women who aren't NPCs again?*

The door to Gladys's bedroom was closed and no light shined beneath. Nor did he see Gladys in the living room, where she usually lurked after their sessions. Keon assumed she must have gone to bed early – right up until she rolled in front of his car on his way out of the parking garage.

“I almost ran you over!” he exclaimed, rolling down his window.

“Get in line, buddy.” Her booted foot thudded against the door of his car. “Good session?”

He nodded, too afraid his voice might break again. If she – if any of them! – found out he'd woken up with a cooling glob of his own jizz in his pants, he'd die of shame. He was already dreading the possibility of a rebuke from Jacob for crossing the line.

“Good. You guys looked like you were having fun.”

“We... what? How would you...” He slammed a hand on the rim of his window. “Were you checking on us while we were playing?”

“Who says that's all I did? You guys are totally zonked when you have that app running. Easy prey.” Her fingers danced across his forearm, gone before he could even appreciate how nice the touch of a real woman – this real woman – was.

The image flashed in his brain before the appropriate emotion could catch up. Gladys, straddling his lap in her little yellow thong, grinding herself against him, her dad mere feet away and as oblivious as Keon himself was. He was growing hard again in an instant. How many times had he sprayed his underwear while Corn was busy getting his?

He realized he hadn't said anything, and the girl followed up while he was still gaping. “I mean, if you want me to prey on you, I totally could...”

“No! I mean, no. That's, um, not cool, Gladys.” There he was. Keon the Timid. Getting done to.

But she only laughed. “Yeah, probably true. I'd invite you to lock me out but I have to warn you I have a key. And, to be honest, a desire to try suction-cupping my way along the side of the building to peep in the window like a human fly in one of those spy movies. You know, where–”

“Did you actually want something?” he asked, glad she was too short in her chair to see him fidgeting his cock into a less prominent position.

“Yeah, I just wanted to see when we're gonna hang out again. I figured you wouldn't want Dad to know, so I waited for you down here.”

“Look, we can't just–”

“We’re adults, Keon. We can do whatever we want. Look, you made your Diplomacy check today, so now you’re stuck with the results. Or do I have to bust out the thong and make another check myself?”

“Another...” His eyes widened. “You flashed me that thing on purpose?!”

“No, I invited you to take a picture of my ass with my underwear hanging out totally by accident. I was mostly just trying to tease you at the time. That was before I realized you were cool.” She applied the brake on her chair and leaned up to rest her forearms on the window frame. Her lotion wafted up to his nostrils, sweet as candy. “So. Saturday?”

Her face was only inches away, neon red hair brushing against his forearm. He had to say no. She was too young. She was Mr. Gibbel’s daughter. Brendan’s. She was more woman than he was capable of handling. Way, way more.

She didn’t wait for a reply. “I’ll get your address from the office. Saturday, two-ish. If you’re not there, I’ll take that to mean you’re not interested, and no hard feelings. But since you’re making me work for it,” she said, settling back into her chair, “no goodnight kiss for you.”

Her chair rolled away, only avoiding catastrophe from the sharp downward slope of the parking garage by heavy application of its brakes. He was still staring after her, and where that thong had still been partially revealed in a way he was now sure was not an accident, when a car honked behind him to prompt him to move.

And that, he told himself, is why you’re not going to settle for NPCs.

Chapter Seven

The Sage Advice of Bobecca2087

Bobecca2087: cmon gurl u no better dont split the party!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bobecca2087 concluded her wise, if rather unpolished, counsel with one of bwitch's custom emojis, a gif of Hannah's plump figure pulling on her pigtails and shrieking in despair. As the real Hannah directed her two allied bots down the east corridor towards the portal to the enemy HQ, she led the remaining bot ahead of her to make a feint on the boulevard separating the two structures. FPS games were not her forte, but Deadpixel Studios had ponied up a free beta copy of the game along with a month's rent to promote *Killbillies* on her stream. For that kind of cheddar, she could embrace the genre for an evening.

The game conceit was new, or at least a refinement so significant as to constitute a paradigm shift. It wasn't the first game she'd played where players controlled an entire squad, but being able to command them by voice rather than the controls was a huge boost, and the voice recognition had so far proven a good deal more robust than other attempts she'd seen. In days gone by, commands had to be clearly enunciated and use precise language or they would be disregarded. The game's own background noise was often enough to disrupt efforts, and the lag put on servers by trying to process it all wrecked even Hannah's top shelf gaming machine's fps.

Killbillies, however, was a great deal smarter. When she'd mentioned her upcoming trial, Jacob had even confided that AdZell had helped design the new processor, though he said he hadn't worked on it personally. It was impressive, though. Last match, a barked order to Diamond Doug and Cyclomancer to "blow smoke up their asses" and then "dive in for colonoscopies" had succeeded in prompting the bots to deploy smoke grenades and charge with melee weapons out.

This match, Bobecca2087 turned out to be vindicated, receiving a round of trolld-ya-so emojis in the chat stream as the enemy sat on their portal and 4v2ed Cyclomancer and B-R3nda, then quickly stomped Hannah's character and Diamond Doug.

Bobecca2087: which is why u never split the party rofl

"Yeah, you called it, Bobecca," she said as the game returned to the queue screen. Hannah toggled the vidstream of her in her gaming chair back on, the image showing up in the lower left corner. "Though I'm still not convinced that splitting the party is always bad. We're going to be gathering some data on that. You know, for posterity. Maybe sometimes, splitting is the way to go."

Immediately, the chat flurried back at her with a wall of exclamations and cautionary tales, mostly the usual *link it or it didn't happen's* and *it doesn't count if blah*

blah blahs. Nobody was ever wrong on the internet, as always, and everyone knew better than the girl with the controller in her hand. Especially non-girls.

However, tonight some of the non-girls occupied themselves otherwise, with the other usual non-girl obsession. Presently, not a few thinly veiled comments on her boobage.

As Hannah monitored the banter with a thin smile, giving herself a moment to hydrate, she wished she had some kind of metric on the volume of sexual harassment she received over time. Not that she was complaining, really. Being a female streamer, it came with the territory. Sure, her chatbot filtered out the most overt instances, though her logs showed that most streams still featured at least a few jerks who somehow didn't realize that typing *show us dem tittays!* in chat was an obvious invitation to getting whacked with the ban mallet. Still, she was learning how to translate the more casual efforts. *Love your outfit* meant *thanks for wearing something that shows cleavage; bad hair day, huh* was an coded entreaty to sweep it over her shoulders so the view was unobstructed.

In the past few months, ever since Jacob came along and turned Wednesday game night on its head with this VR simulation, her sense was that such comments – and the bans from the braver souls – had increased significantly. She hoped so, at least. Hannah could no longer deny that walking a mile in Sanguine's divinely supple skin had awakened something in her. The experience of gliding around in a body that oozed sensuality the way her regular body oozed sweat on a ninety degree day...

Overnight, practically, she'd changed her lifestyle. Eating healthier. Using her apartment's gym for the first time. Paying attention to her hair, her clothes and how she wore them. Shifting her makeup style from angry goth to a more conventional, more girly, application. Smiling for no reason, and then realizing how many different kinds of smiles there were, and how they all said something different. That practice took almost as much discipline as the diet.

Hannah would die before giving Jacob his credit, but she had felt all-around *better* since creating Sanguine than she had since... she couldn't remember when. With the added help of these kick-ass colonanite injections from her doctor, as of that morning, she'd lost forty-six pounds in only ten weeks. The rate of loss was beginning to taper off, but already she'd gone from what the straight-talking doctor called "morbidly obese" girl to one who was merely somewhat plump, and what a world of difference there was. Her first dermatologist appointment to tighten the loosening skin had done wonders, pulling things in and smoothing them out. Her bank account was less appreciative, but she hadn't had to plunder her savings yet.

For once, Hannah liked what she saw in the mirror. Strangers were definitely nicer to her. She was barely winded after the two flights of stairs up to her apartment. (It had only been ten weeks, after all.)

Last weekend, she had dyed her hair red. Blood red. Then she'd swaggered down to the secondhand store and bought half a dozen new tops, exchanging loose-fitting XXXL's for what she'd hoped would be a form-fitting L. All of them designed to show off the legacy of her years as a big girl – namely, a truly rocking set of boobs.

Was it so weird to be chasing a self-established feminine ideal? People did it all the time. Some of her friends and subscribers were into cosplay; what was the difference between them wanting to look like an anime character and her emulating her own PC?

Vikesrock_ : I love your outfit today btw bwitch! super cute

None of them would know if her grin stemmed from a stranger's approbation of her boobs or the Eyecansee818's quip about party splitting on the line below. Nonetheless, Hannah went ahead and brushed her hair over her shoulder and queued up another match.

"I should probably kill the vidstream so it's not blocking gameplay," she muttered, then smirked at her nonfunctional camera at the groans echoing through the chat. Keysterking helpfully pointed out, in his as-few-characters-as-possible vernacular, that it wouldn't be a problem if she'd simply transition to a holostream. It was probably only the seventh or eighth time he'd said as much that stream. She wondered how many of her subscribers were watching her stream tonight simply for the river of skin rippling beneath her neck. The majority? Nah. But it was a surging demographic, she was sure of that.

This round of *Killbillies*, Hannah opened up in a classic four-man sweep, letting Diamond Doug tank it in the front. Ignoring the backseat gamers in chat, once she found a decent weapon for B-R3nda and herself, she surged hard, hoping to catch the enemies off guard while they were still greeding for better gear. Sure enough, her group caught three of them in the empty storefront in the midst of trying on backpacks; two of them died before they could even react, and a third died when his dead teammate's grenade exploded on top of him, having pulled the pin but not survived to complete the throw animation. Just like on her team, there was only one human player, and they would have transitioned into the remaining team member's body. Now it was only a question of whether he was going to turtle in their base and try to snipe them on the way in, or if he was going to frantically storm bwitch HQ. It was a longshot that he could have found plastic explosives that quickly, but if he did, he'd turn her bold initiative into a crushing defeat.

Only one thing to do.

"Cyclomancer, hoof it back to taccom, stay frosty. Brenda and Dougie, on me. High alert for booby traps."

Her party split.

ennerythe8th: u guys I think I got caught in bwitch's traps

thelatteknight: hehe boobies

mageNTA: the deadliest trap of all – boobies

zomfiez: no worry guys – bwitch has got some hella traps of her own

Baby7thSeal: @ennery best way to die tho right???

Hannah ducked back around the corner as an auto-turret nearly killed Diamond Doug. “Brenda, baby, use Doug for cover and grease the squeaky wheel. And by the way, if you guys are loving my tits so much, don’t forget to subscribe so you get notifications whenever I go live.”

As B-R3nda attempted to execute her command, Hannah reflected on two things. One, that the dev team at Deadpixel Studios had done an amazing job prepping their AI to guess at interpretations of slang. She was really pushing it, and they had only gotten it wrong a few times in as many hours. Every year developers pushed that boundary towards true artificial intelligence. Illegal though it was to attempt to make anything truly autonomous, it didn’t stop companies from coming as close as they could. Hell, Jacob and his AdZell folks had been at it before the ban went from an ethical imperative to a legal one years back. She doubted video game developers were at the cutting edge, but then, the results in *Killbillies* spoke for themselves, even if it was only in a demo.

That was the first thought that occurred to her. The second was that for the first time in her career, she’d used her body to promote her stream.

Shame. That was it. It was shameful. That was the sort of thing no-talent bimbos like Kasa Arae did, holostreaming mundane garbage like cooking her dinner and “accidentally” spilling a bunch of water on the front of her t-shirt, followed immediately by running a silent banner to remind viewers of the incredible perks of subscribing. No-talent whore. A streamer’s success ought to depend on how fun her stream was, not the ratio of cup size to waistline. As the auto-turret blasted through Diamond Doug’s shield and smeared his remnants against the far wall, Hannah almost apologized for her ethical lapse on the spot.

Only...

New subscriber: Dubrag

New subscriber: Solitus002

FreastKing has donated 20 community subscriptions

B-R3nda died taking down the turret. Hannah walked into a claymore in the enemy command center, where her opponent wasted no time jumping out of hiding to both loot and teabag her corpse. Cyclomancer made his way back from base to find the enemy waiting with B-R3nda’s mag-rifle and took him out from a balcony the moment he walked through the door.

In that same span, Hannah had gotten over fifty new subs. One mention of her boobs had netted her this month’s groceries.

Bobecca2087: why do you keep splitting?! OMFG

“Come on, that should have worked. Everybody gets a little unlucky sometimes. You realize now I have to keep splitting the party until it pays off, right?” She toggled the vidstream on, shrinking the game and putting her image up large, front and center. Damn her skin looked good in this filter. It looked pretty good anyway, really. That new lotion Toni had recommended was the bomb. Who knew having a thin pretty friend was good for more than just leftovers?

ennerythe8th: oh no im trapped again

She rolled her eyes as similar comments ensued amongst comments on the game. “You guys, they’re only boobs. You do realize that this is the internet, and you can literally find all the boobs you’d ever want to see any time you want, right? Nipples and all. Hell, with some sleuthing you might even be able to find some nudes of yours truly. I drank a lot back in college, and, you know, shit happened.”

Good grief, was she encouraging this? What was wrong with her? But the stream went on in that fashion for a good five minutes of links to boob pics and queries if they were hers. Finally, when AcidCASCade – one of her moderators, for fuck’s sake! – demanded she provide a means for comparison, she diverted her attention to the on-going discussion of *Killbillies*, and by the time the next round began, it had mostly died down.

And another sixty subs, plus \$325 in tips.

She split the party again. This time the match was over in less than four minutes, one of which was spent watching Cyclomancer’s AI fleeing top speed, dodging bullets while looking for a gun with which to fire back. He never found one.

God, Wednesday couldn’t come soon enough.

“Wait, you guys split the split party?” asked an incredulous Toni over beers the following Wednesday afternoon. They occasionally met up to pregame and bear/ninja/cowboyed for who had to be DD. They hadn’t done so in quite a while thanks to Brendan’s boundless generosity with his alcohol supply. (Hannah hadn’t told anyone, but on a few occasions she’d disabled the app and stuffed a few of those fancy craft beers from the robo-fridge in her purse while the others gamed on obliviously.)

“Yeah, lesson learned. You’d think attempting something so suicidal would come with a warning of some kind.”

“Let’s text Keon. I bet he can cite the page number in the chapter on game mastering.” Toni’s eyes glazed over for a moment as she activated her implant, but Hannah knew she was only kidding.

“If Keon was such a genius, why’s he working for his himbo boss?”

Toni giggled. “Oh come on, Brendan’s not a himbo. He’s a lawyer – a *partner*, at a really big law firm. They don’t let dummies run law firms, I’m pretty sure.”

“Classic case of high Int, low Wisdom, Tones.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means two weeks ago I heard him admit to his daughter that he’d forgotten his twin nieces had the same birthday.”

“Anecdotal. And not all twins are necessarily–”

“Right, that’s what twins are known for, being born different days.” Hannah sipped softly at her beer. Toni permitted her exactly two glasses when she had to drive, though frankly, she’d raked in enough with that *Killbillies* promo stream the other day that she could afford to call an Uber. “So. Going on three months into this thing, how are you digging it?”

Toni either gave the question considerable thought, or was really enjoying the freedom to drink at her leisure. Her glass was drained before she answered. “I don’t know. Highs and lows, you know?”

“Mm, how’s that?”

“Don’t get me wrong. The whole VR thing, the detail, the realness of it... it’s amazing. I know it took me a while to warm up to it, but... Jacob and I have talked some after I got him to stop ducking my calls. I explained how I felt – a little calmer than when I ranted to you about it – and he apologized for springing it on me, and we made up. Being able to... you know. Feeling like that again, it’s... I can’t even describe it.”

The girl’s eyes were watering. Hannah allowed her a misty moment, gave her hand a squeeze, and prompted her to go on. “Sorry. But yeah. The theater of it is really impressive, but... is it just me, or has it been kind of slow going? Like, we haven’t hit level two yet. Usually we hit level two by the second session, and here we didn’t do it in the second month.”

“That we do. I can’t believe we didn’t level after the Ruiz mission.”

“Yeah. And it’s been kind of one-note, plot-wise. Kidnapped by some random evil corporation. Escape. Kidnap one of them back. Hide. What are we, nine weeks in?”

“Eleven, including weeks off.”

“Really? Man. Ten weeks and we’ve barely met any NPCs, barely done anything to build the world.” She made a face. “God, I’m starting to sound like Keon. I’m not turning full dork, am I? Tell me I’m still pretty.”

“I’d perch my crotch on that mug of yours any day, babe.” Hannah regarded her earnestly.

“Wow. So much more graphic than I was fishing for. Thanks, though.” She shuddered, but was grinning nevertheless. “But do you know what I mean? I’m not crazy, right?”

Hannah noticed a guy eyeing their table from the bar and realized after a moment that he wasn’t merely another dude staring at Toni’s sit-onable face so hard that it took him a moment to see her sat-inable chair and lose interest. No, this guy was actually looking at the two of them. This was new. Hannah gave him a nod for his good taste, then flipped him off and turned back to Toni, who was trying not to laugh at the poor guy’s consternation.

“You are not crazy. It’s pretty weak sauce on Jacob’s end, though maybe he’s spending all his time programming the VR, tuning NPCs. I don’t know how automated that shit is. Still, it’s pretty fucking cool. I can handle a slow story when there’s all this extra.”

Toni stretched, drifting away from the table as her stomach pushed against it. Belatedly, she activated the brakes, forcing an apology to the waiter who’d had to dodge around her. “Yeah, that’s a fair point. I feel like we’ve RPed more with one another than we usually do, so that’s been good. Plus Jacob has salvaged worse starts than this, and really, I don’t care all that much as long as we’re all having fun.”

“Ugh, you sound like Brendan,” grouched Hannah. “He’s like the hippie of the gaming community. ‘I totes just wanna roll my dice and crit some critters, dawg.’” Not her worst imitation.

Toni dripped a finger in her glass and flicked the droplets at her. “Oh come on, he’s a nice guy and he makes the group more fun.”

Hannah’s own glass was too empty to retaliate, so she signaled the bartender for another round. “How’s come you’re so defensive about him? Sure he’s a bit of a silver fox, but... don’t tell me player is imitating character now.”

Toni made a face. “I don’t know why I ever told you about that. For the hundredth time, he was only doing me a favor in-game to keep Jacob from doing anything... weird. It didn’t mean anything.”

“No, sure. Just because you saw him kiss you, felt him kiss you, tasted him kissing you – and vice versa on his end, except he was kissing a character who looks exactly like you – doesn’t mean you guys actually kissed.”

“It wasn’t like that! We never–”

The bartender approached their table, setting down two frothy glasses. Hannah thanked him, then stopped him before he could head back to the bar. From the smile on his face at the two women, she doubted the guy minded the inconvenience. Sometimes Toni’s chair put guys off from the get-go, but he was evidently one of the good ones.

“Say, ah...”

“Josh.”

“Say, Josh. Imagine you and I were playing a VR game together.” He looked young enough to have some basic clue, so Hannah took a gamble he could follow this. “Suppose during a slow point in the game, my avatar kissed your avatar.”

“Your avatar look like you?”

“Sure.”

“With you so far.”

Hannah grinned. She’d always known the tactics of flirtation, but it was good to confirm she could put them into practice. “So once the game was over, would you try to make a move, or would you assume it was only part of the game?”

The guy stroked his chin for a moment. “What game we talking about?”

Toni almost sprayed beer across the table; Hannah hid her laugh behind a hand. “Um, I don’t know. Bloodsport GX 2.”

“Hmm, right.” He gave it another moment’s thought. “Yeah. Yeah I’m pretty sure I’d make a move after that. A girl kisses you in Bloodsport, you know it’s no accident.”

“Thank you,” said Hannah, then pivoted away from him quickly enough that there was no mistaking her dismissal. He looked back and forth between his customers for a moment, then shuffled back behind the bar. Still smiling though.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Toni said firmly. “Brendan is a friend, and he did me a favor. He’s a beard. Or, well, a reverse beard for when you wanna pretend you’re gay. A class haircut? I dunno. Anyway, that’s all it is.”

“You know, he’s not bad-looking, for an older guy. Some silver fox action going on there. If you were looking to take up a sugar daddy, you could do worse. A hell of a lot worse.”

Her friend’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not interested in him for his money. That doesn’t matter.”

“No, right, totally. After all, your last boyfriend had a majority share in a mobile hotdog cart, so I guess a partner at a law firm is a totally lateral move.”

Toni glared over the rim of her glass. “First of all, Tyree was not my boyfriend. Second, let me get this straight. In your mind, I’ve allowed our characters to kiss in a

game of pretend, and the next logical step is full-time dating with an expectation of marriage. That's where you're at."

"At least tell me if it was hot kissing a girl. I've always wondered but the closest thing I ever had to a lesbian friend was my cunt of a roommate sophomore year."

"Do I have to worry about Sanguine poaching my girlfriend now?"

"Nah." Hannah shrugged. "Probably nah, anyway. Lane's a cutie, and I dig me some Latinx, cultural appropriation or no."

"Hands off, before I split your lip like you split the party."

"It was already split thanks to you and Keon lurking back with that anarchist hottie. Speaking of, anything interesting on your end? Been a while since the game was hopping enough that I wanted to gossip about it, but I'm curious."

"For one, Corn definitely nailed that mechanic chick."

Hannah nearly spit out her beer. "He what?!"

"I can spell it out for you if it helps."

"How did you find out? Did he...? Did you...?!"

Toni gaped. "What? No! Good grief, Hannah. I might have kissed Lane, but I'm not the village inn!"

"So how'd you find out then? Dish!"

Toni looked around as if to make sure somebody else in the group was sitting in the corner eavesdropping. Even so, she leaned in and spoke in a low voice. "OK, so I told him I had to go – and I did – but first, I sort of... pretended."

"Like, you fake logged out?"

"Um... sorta." Toni was blushing. "I'm not proud of it, OK? But they were vibing so hard and, you know, how often do you get to actually see Keon hit on a woman? I didn't stay long, just long enough to see him start kissing her and stuff."

Hannah's mind was reeling. This was nuts! Sure, the game had needed a sexual content tag from day one; she'd seen to that simply by introducing Sanguine. But that he'd actually gone ahead and shagged one! Was that allowed? Did Jacob just turn a blind eye to his NPCs when they were in the middle of... that? It was almost hotter if he didn't. She'd always thought he was kinda cute, in his nerdy bespectacled way.

"How far do you think it went?" Hannah pressed. Why hadn't anybody told her this was allowed?

"If I had to guess, I'd guess... far. We went out to the movies Friday night and I asked him how the chopping had gone, and... well, I couldn't exactly tell if he was blushing, but I definitely got the sense he was trying to."

"Huh. Man, good for him. That chick was crazy hot. Ten out of ten, would recommend." She grinned over her glass at Toni. "So how long did you *really* watch."

"What? No! I would never. Seriously. Even if I wanted to, there's no way I wouldn't get caught. Not that I want to," she added hastily. "Besides, I had to get home."

By the time anything might have gotten going, I was in the back of my Uber dodging a grilling from my driver by cleaning my inbox.”

“How did you ‘clean your inbox’? Lane was with me.”

“What? Oh GOD, no. That’s disgusting!” Toni laughed in spite of herself. “No, my literal email inbox, ya perv. Absolutely no sex on our end. Anyway, what’d you guys get up to?”

That right there was a question Hannah had no idea how to begin answering. How did one cram it all into one telling? What could she even say? The short version was that the events of last week’s session, after that brief encounter at Mayhem’s, were the reason that for the past week Hannah had been going through batteries as fast as her vibrator could expend them. That wasn’t exactly something she could admit over drinks in a public venue. Frankly, Hannah wasn’t sure she could say the words “I am an owned woman” in any company save for her own, grunted into her pillow every night for seven nights running.

Last week’s game had started out mundane enough. In their new van, Lane, Hannah, Dirk and Echo had met up with an old Latino dude named Mr. Yenque at this crappy apartment complex on the south side that had the audacity to call itself Arcadia. It wasn’t merely shady; it was the source of the shade. A quiet park across the street was almost a token effort at saving grace, except beneath the verdant treeline were scores of homeless people interspersed with junkies shooting up in broad daylight. She was no Keon, poised to rant about the abusive invocation of the name Arcadia, but she was pretty sure its planar counterpart wasn’t a graveyard of discarded hypodermic needles.

Yenque, the super of Arcadia, was a handful all his own. He’d said he’d be happy to let the lot of them crash in his building for a while, even had spots all lined up for them. Only thing was, those spots were currently occupied by the Sin Sovereigns, a small-time gang that nevertheless had the moxie to keep Arcadia and the surrounding blocks under its thumb. Lane had asked why he didn’t simply contact the police, but the police seemed to be the one group Yenque liked less than the Sin Sovereigns.

Yenque had put up with the drug dealing – no getting away from that in this neighborhood, and he indulged a bit himself from time to time – nor did he make waves when they repurposed the whole top floor of Arcadia for their use. They paid rent, after all, and more than most tenants. But when he’d gotten a whiff of a prostitution racket that smelled a bit too much like human trafficking happening right there under his roof, he’d drawn the line. Dead or alive, the Yenque didn’t care what became of the Sin Sovereigns so long as they didn’t darken the doors of Arcadia again.

It had seemed pretty straightforward. Go upstairs, roll initiative, collect XP. Dirk, however, had wisely pointed out that with Kennedy and Corn out of the picture, they may want to wait to be at full strength before making a breach. Sanguine had suggested

that, to fill the remaining time in the session and get a headstart on next week's, they conduct a little reconnaissance.

Dirk and Echo, not being in possession of much in the way of infiltration skills, volunteered to keep an eye on Ruiz. (Echo seemed so fixated on her that she suspected he'd be on hostage-sitting duty even if he was a straight-up ninja.) Lane and Sanguine, however, had some skill for this sort of thing and started their inspection from the rooftop of the building across the street. Not surprisingly, the criminal outfit didn't sit around with the blinds open, but the PCs did note the rooftop access, suggesting it as a breach point for their eventual assault. Feeling confident under cover of dark, Lane and Sanguine made their way up the fire escape to the roof. It definitely saw use, as attested to by the discarded cans, bottles and still more syringes strewn about a picnic table someone had somehow dragged up there. The plan was to peek inside, nothing bolder than simply opening the door and make sure it led to their quarry and wasn't under close guard. Corn and Kennedy would be there soon after the next session began, so there was no sense rushing things.

They had not, however, counted on the door being trapped.

It served her right, forgetting that even in a modernistic setting, people still booby-trapped things. Luckily, all the trap did was spew a thin cloud of purple dust at the two of them. It smelled like rotten fruit and didn't do the women's eyes any favors, but if it was a poison, they must have made their saving throws because that seemed to be all there was to it. Sanguine thought she felt a bit light-headed, but not enough that she was about to concede responsibility for the screw-up to Lane.

Beyond the door was a stairwell, lit only by the dim glow of the exit light by the door. Graffiti tags for the Sin Sovereigns were in abundance, a pair of S's smushed together and stylized in the shape of a devil wearing a crown. Not bad. Eager to redeem herself after their missing the trap, the women headed in and down one floor to where the Sin Sovereigns laired. Another door. This time they took a moment to scan the area for any further traps, but all was clear. They could hear voices on the other side of the door, but not close by and, still motivated by shame, decided to take one last risk and look inside.

Lane rolled a two for her initiative. Sanguine rolled a five. The Sin Sovereign's magnician, more fortunate than either PC, went first. By the end of round two, both women had succumbed to some sort of spell; Jacob didn't note any deleterious effects upon confirming their failed Will saves, though did smugly inform them that the powder was an inhaled neurotoxin that lowered resistance to mental manipulation.

Ordinarily that might have made Hannah suspicious, but... frankly, she regarded this husky, shifty-eyed magnician as an old friend. Why? She couldn't say. She'd only met him seconds ago, and for a moment, she'd somehow gotten the mistaken impression that he was an enemy. Will saves usually meant some sort of nasty

mind-affecting spell, after all, but... no way her new buddy would abuse her trust. She felt quite confident of it. The rest of these guys might be a pack of assholes, but even so she wasn't about to start shooting up friends of a friend.

The man had invited the now docile infiltrators in, and soon Lane and Sanguine were sitting among the Sin Sovereigns in a room where a group of people looked to be packaging crack cocaine with hospital masks on. Neither woman approved, but their good friend insisted they pay it no mind. Their friend introduced himself as Mr. Ortega, but noted his fellow Sin Sovereigns called him Chisper. Neither Hannah nor Sanguine spoke Spanish (and how trippy was it that there was a distinction!), but Lane passed on that it was a term loosely meaning "sparkle." Made sense for a wizard, she supposed. Kind of a pussy nickname for a gang leader, but hey, maybe he thought her name was dumb, too. No sense getting judgmental when he was the only ally she had in this decidedly hostile territory.

Chisper invited the girls to sit on his lap, one straddling each leg, and with each hand resting familiarly on his visitors' asses, asked them what brought them to his home. Sanguine was definitely enjoying the feel – it had been way too long – but she felt terrible telling him she'd meant to come in and kill him and all his goons. So she let Lane tell him. Chisper hadn't liked that – not at all. But it was OK, he assured his comrades, some of whom wanted to rush right over to where Dirk and Echo were chilling in the lot across the street. No need to get excited. In fact, the new girls were going to help protect them. Sanguine didn't give two shits about protecting these asswipes, but when it came to disappointing Chisper, she didn't have it in her.

Besides, it was really simple. All he wanted them to do was split the party.

Sanguine didn't like the thought of setting her friends up to die, and said as much. He was putting them in a position to choose between friends, and that was never cool with her. But Chisper assured them he didn't want to hurt anybody, and she took him at his word. (Jacob didn't let her see the results of her Sense Motive check, so even though it might have simply been a weak roll, she preferred to simply trust her gut, and her gut said she could trust him wholeheartedly.) Chisper even asked if any of the rest of them were as hot as the two present, and Lane assured him that Kennedy was in the same ballpark, and Echo left them all in the dust. (If that was his thing. It wasn't.) So now all they had to do was wait to hear that Kennedy and Corn had rejoined the group, and then they could get to work splitting them right back up. They'd be easy pickings – to make friends with, the girls were reassured – especially since she and Lane wouldn't be fighting back.

Afterward, Chisper speculated that maybe he and some of the guys could take turns "breaking the new bitches in." On that ominous note, Jacob had ended the session.

And ever since, she'd hardly been able to stop fantasizing about it.

That man was going to fuck her. He'd taken one glance and been consumed by his need for her. Hell, if she threw her buddy a bone and gave him what he really wanted, the Sin Sovereigns would be running a train on her and on Lane. And Kennedy, for that matter. He'd practically been drooling over the prospect, and hadn't been able to keep his hands off Hannah's – that is, Sanguine's – body. Being seen as a commodity was hot as hell, she'd discovered. Yes, there was a part of her that was offended that Chisper's first instinct upon befriending her was to openly convey his intent to strip her naked and get wild.

Another part – a much more imaginative part – decided that it was about fucking time someone recognized her for the flawlessly sexy trim that she was.

Not like Jacob would actually let things go that far anyway, the stick in the mud. He'd probably hit the fast forward on the dirty bits, or maybe give the rest of the team some incentive to dive in and rescue her before it got out of hand. It wasn't unheard of for their characters to have sex, of course, but they'd generally been pretty PG-13, save for the occasional vivid barbaric romp by Remy rage-fucking somebody. Hell, Toni had told her about her efforts to persuade Jacob to engage in the occasional intimate extension of their RP after session hours, and even with a woman like her egging him on, the guy had to be led by the hand.

Still, Hannah held out faint hope that she might actually get to let this play out the way it so clearly should. For her entire post-adolescent life, Hannah had been the girl no one wanted. Not pretty enough for the cute guys, not sweet enough for the rest. Wasn't it time, just this once, that she get to be the girl men had to have by any means necessary?

Heh. Remy was going to be so pissed when the Sin Sovereigns ganked him.

"Earth to Hannah..." Toni snapped her fingers in front of her. "You still with me? Geez, how much have you had to drink?"

"Sorry, got to thinking about work stuff. Anyway, you didn't miss much. It'll be better if you just show up and find out. I won't spoil anything – you know how Jacob is with building unnecessary suspense."

"Do I ever," her friend agreed. "So I take it your mission's not done yet, at least?"

"Nope. But I have a pretty cool idea for how we can tackle it, tactically speaking. It's unconventional, but I've been practicing it a lot on my stream and I think it could work out."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

As Lane hustled back to the roof to report back to the group and get to work on Sanguine's plan, Hannah's curvaceous redheaded avatar settled into Chisper's waiting grasp. For the first time in her life, she understood the eroticist's way of expressing the act as a woman *pouring* herself into the man's lap. Changing from Hannah into Sanguine was less jarring by the week, but it was still and would always be an ordeal. She grew half a head taller in the blink of an eye, with every single ounce of body fat repositioned into the most pleasing portions of her body. Hannah was accustomed to more than a little jiggle in her step, but suddenly all the jiggling was confined to her tits and her hips and her ass. Every part of her felt *tight*, even those which promised to yield to the slightest touch.

It was really unfair of the universe to place this body in her reach once a week and then rip her out of it and make her go back to being Hannah Berdahl, she thought as she sat on – no, as she poured herself into her new friend's lap.

She no longer doubted that she had been charmed by Chisper. Brendan had gotten her alone when they'd arrived for tonight's session by asking Toni if she'd mind letting Gladys take a look at the motor in her chair. The kid was apparently trying to craft one for her own from scrap. Nerd. Once alone, however, Brendan busted out his print copy of the Near Future system, directing her to where the charmed condition was defined in the glossary.

Charmed: A charmed character regards an individual or group, usually the originator of the effect, as a close friend, trusted ally, or other similarly close relationship at the effect creator's option. The charmed character views the words and actions of that person in the most agreeable way. They are not required to follow orders, but comply with reasonable requests. Being asked to do something that they fundamentally oppose allows a new saving throw against the effect, as does any hostile action against the charmed character or their allies.

Rationally, she had to agree that described her predicament. She trusted Chisper pretty much blindly, and no matter how she looked at it, couldn't come up with a single other reason why she would. He'd cast a spell, and in the absence of any visible effect, that seemed the most logical answer. Brendan agreed and had assured her that Lane would be doing her best to squirm out of it. Hannah promised the same.

Only... as Chisper discarded her belt on the dirty floor and slid his surprisingly delicate hands down the front of her pants, there was no prompt for a new saving throw. Apparently, being felt up by this scumbag didn't qualify as an activity to which she was fundamentally opposed. A throaty moan confirmed this for him after his fingers determined she wasn't wearing panties. This magic was no doubt a skill he had refined in order to capture women for his pimping business. Likely many of his victims had enjoyed the benefits of that second saving throw to shake off the charm, but Sanguine merely spread her legs wider and tried to force his fingers deeper. It had been over a

year since the last time Hannah had been touched there by another person, and that had been a drunken fling with a streamer named RockSalt at a convention last summer.

The realization that the experience had left her rather salty elicited a soft giggle.

“You like that, do ya, girly?” he asked in a gravelly voice. Some of his nearby goons laughed.

“You mean, do I like having my pussy fingered? Uh, duh.” She sighed with delight. “Honestly, I’m kind of annoyed you’re the first person to try. This pussy is way too premium to go ignored for such a long time.”

Chisper laughed and retorted in his thick accent. (Whether it was Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican or what, Sanguine wasn’t qualified to guess.) “You expect me to believe you’re a virgin? No way a puta this fine saved herself for our sorry asses, eh boys?” The two who weren’t busily fortifying defenses, presumably his personal bodyguards, made sounds of agreement. “Yeah, I don’t think so. Though a puta don’t juice up like you are if she don’t want it.”

“It? I want ‘it,’ do I? What exactly is it that you’re offering?” She dragged a blood red fingernail down the front of his shirt, but Chisper swatted it away when it probed at his own beltline.

“Not now, puta. You may be the hottest piece of ass we’ve caught in a while, but I ain’t about to be caught with my pants down, literally, when your buddies show up, eh. Don’t suppose you got any more like you and your friend, do you? Not to press my luck.”

“I think you’re going to be stuck with little old me.” She didn’t hide how annoyed she was at the suggestion that her allure wasn’t unique. “Come on, it won’t take long. They’re still waiting on two guys who are across town. You could fuck me, right now, and be ready for round two by the time those guys are dealt with.” Surely that would prompt the save. She wasn’t going to let herself be violated by this piece of shit. Even if she really, really wanted someone to do a little violating right then.

Once again he removed her hand from his trousers, but not before she verified he was at least interested. “Tempting, but I gotta get myself ready. My defensive spells aren’t the sort you rely on in life or death situations. If I plug in, I can run them as routines and be in a way better place.” Chisper prompted Sanguine to her feet with a finger hooked inside her pussy. It didn’t feel great, aside from the thrill of how wrong it was. As to what he’d said, she barely followed. She had a vague notion that Kennedy’s magic spells had something to do with computers, or the internet, or something. His must be something like that.

He gestured to his guards. “You belong to the Sin Sovereigns now, girly. Go with Ogre and Lulu here. They’ll find you a nice quiet room where you can stay out of the way until we’re ready for you.” Chisper addressed the men. “Find her a bed in the stable, cuff her to it, and then get yourselves in position. Sounds like her asswipe buddies aren’t gonna be here for a while yet, but still, better not risk it.”

“You’re sure we shouldn’t hit them first, Chisper? If it’s like she says, they’re sitting ducks right now. We could sweep in, grease them easy.”

Chisper snorted. “Rota’s little friend is every bit as much my bitch as she is. I gave her a plan to give to her friends, and she’s going to do it, just you watch. We go over there, we get in a firefight, maybe get shot up. Maybe get the Babylonians coming down on our asses, eh? You want that?” Both muttered in the negative. “We wait for them to come to us, we get two or three of them coming up each stairwell, totally surrounded. Either they surrender, or they die. Now come on, show a little trust and move your lazy asses, OK?”

Still no saving throw. She supposed he’d acknowledged the party would still have the chance to surrender, which didn’t sound so bad. She was mostly enjoying her surrender so far.

With a few pats on her ass, Chisper dismissed his charmed captive, and she grudgingly shuffled along behind his thugs. They lead her down a hallway, what would be that floor of Arcadia’s main hall if it hadn’t been converted to a den of crime, and the apartment into a suite for hookers to ply their business. The faded stenciling next to the door read 19E. What would have been the living room was piled high with cardboard boxes. Stolen goods, she suspected. The thugs lead her right past it and into one of the apartment’s bedrooms – which was to say a room with a bed and nothing else. From the yellowing stains on the yellowing sheets, she was clearly not its first occupant, and it was all too obvious what the bed’s intended purpose was. She wondered how many of her fellow bitches occupied rooms like this elsewhere on the floor. The main hall looked like it had three apartments she could see, and probably that many more around the bend.

One of the guards (Lulu, she thought) shoved her face first onto the mattress, and they cuffed her left hand to a metal post on the frame before she could recover enough to resist. Not that she would have. Chisper hadn’t been especially polite about all this, but she did like that his first order had been to send her to bed and restrain her for subsequent consumption.

“Better take her gun,” said the one she thought was Ogre. “I know Chisper’s not worried about her, but I don’t like the idea of any of these stupid putas with guns, tamed or no.”

His partner agreed, and she was quickly relieved of her pistol. He took his time patting her down, and Sanguine made a show of helping him, even directing his attention to the hyperstim injection she had up her sleeve. Really, the guy seemed to merely want an excuse to touch her, which was fine by her. She didn’t feel the rush she had with Chisper, where she almost felt like she had no choice but to submit to his questing hand, but still. It was more of a crime to ignore a body as hot as Sanguine’s than all the other crimes taking place around her.

“Sure you don’t need to take my armor, too, boys?” she said, rubbing the fabric along her hips with her free hand. Her armor wasn’t quite a chainmail bikini, but the skin tight future-fabric was only marginally more modest. Jacob had said the armors in Near Future used complex polymers and thin layers of force fields, but all it looked like in practice was neon blue spandex with a bit of texture.

Maybe when she had cash to buy something better, it would look the part of daring adventurer? An incentive not to upgrade, in her book.

“All right. C’mon, Ogre. We better get to it. Knew that asshole Yenque was going to try something sooner or later. Once we grease her friends, we’ll have to go pay him a visit.”

As the two reached the doorway, she thought fast – as fast as her cotton-stuffed magic-addled brain would let her. “Hey, um, before you go... would one of you boys mind terribly getting me something to drink? I’m soooo thirsty.”

She feared she’d overdone it, but Lulu’s reply was a reminder that even synthetic men heard what they wanted to hear. “Yeah, yeah. Go on ahead, man.” The rest of what he said was in Spanish, but the tone implied it was a code for a very different sort of fluid exchange.

Ogre didn’t miss the grin on his buddy’s face. “I’ll bet you will. Tell you what, let me know when she’s done ‘drinking,’ and I’ll swing by and give her a little something to wash it down with.”

“You got it.” Ogre gave her a final appreciative leer, then departed. She heard the apartment’s front door slam a moment later.

Lulu leered a bit longer, and did leave her alone for a moment, but came back moments later with a bottle of beer. He couldn’t have left this apartment to get it. With a smirk that told her she was supposed to be impressed, he opened the bottle cap with his teeth. Gross. Shutting the door behind him, he sat down beside her on the bed and extended the neck of the bottle toward her. She leaned in to take a swig, but he pulled it away from her at the last moment.

“Hey now, if you’re going to be one of Chisper’s bitches, you need to learn the rules.” He wagged an admonishing finger at her. “And rule number one is, if you want something, you gotta ask for it the right way.”

She nodded, speaking in a submissive tone. It came so naturally in Sanguine’s honeyed voice. “Sorry, sir. May I have some of your beer? Please?” Her thighs rubbed together as if of their own accord.

The henchman looked pleased with her response and predictably, having gotten what he wanted, demanded more. “And what’s in it for me?”

Sanguine knew exactly what he wanted. It was exactly what any man who looked at her wanted. Hell, she’d always considered herself to be pretty straight, and even she caught Sanguine staring hungrily in the mirror. With her free left hand, she seized the

zipper on the top half of the armor and with hesitancy that was entirely feigned, dragged it from the hollow of her neck, to her chest, over her belly, and finally to where it allowed the two halves of the garment to fall apart. It didn't reveal the entirety of her tits yet, but they forced it open enough to reveal at least part of the pink circles of her nipples on either side.

“Like... like this?”

“Bitch, do I look like I came here to be teased?” He took a long drink from the bottle, but Sanguine knew he could drink a case of the stuff and not be half as drunk on beer as he was on the power he was currently wielding over her. He wanted her so bad. Would Chisper like it if she fucked this man? Would he give her to all of them? And if so, would it be individually, or simply thrown into a pile of hands and mouths and cocks and taken by the lot of them in one enormous (and shockingly literal) gang bang?

Something to think about another day. For now...

It was easy enough to open her top and expose herself. Her boobs were huge, easily as big as Hannah's real ones but perky and symmetrical. They seemed only too glad to be let out into the open air, nipples hardening immediately, two raspberries floating on unbroken pools of cream. It was trickier, however, actually removing the garment. With one hand restrained, the best she could do was remove it on the left side, then ease it down her right arm, past the links in the cuff, and drape it over the headboard.

“Is that better, sir?” Sir. Why did calling this man 'sir' feel so depraved? But the depravity still somehow felt right. She belonged to the Sin Sovereigns. For now.

“Fuck me,” exclaimed the man, gaping at the sight of her. Sanguine couldn't blame him. She'd stunned herself when she'd made these suckers, too. “Those are the most amazing fuckin' titties I've ever seen.”

“Thanks,” she said, grinning. “Now, may I...?” She craned her neck toward him, tongue extended.

It took him a long moment to realize she was in fact asking for a drink, and not entreating him to permit her a blowjob. Theatrically, Lulu extended the bottle toward her mouth, tilting it so a thin stream trickled forth. It was right outside her reach, so she had to lunge forward, catching what she could and lapping it up as the rest spilled across her thighs, soaking the pants of her armor.

“All right, I think you've had plenty, new bitch.” He repositioned himself, straddling her knees. “My turn.”

In spite of herself, Sanguine squeaked in surprise at how cold the beer was when he poured it down her breasts. He was on her in an instant, seeking to suck down the dribbles as they rolled off the underside, though he missed his mark at first. The stream divided around her nipple, but his mouth was waiting between them. When he realized

his mistake, he adjusted, noisily slurping beer off her tits until mere moments later the bottle was empty.

Part of her hoped spilled beer explained most of the stains on the bed. Another part, a much more engaged part, continued clutching his face to her tits even when he'd sucked them dry. He seemed quite content to slurp down any stray drops she could guide him to.

It was happening. Handcuffed to a bed, giving her body in service to a man who had broken her mind to remake her into a sex slave, being used by his henchman like she was a warm, curvy, benefits package. Lulu was sucking on her tits so hard she wondered if he'd come in his pants before he got around to getting her out of the rest of her slutty so-called armor.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried.

"Say pretty please, puta," he growled into her ear.

"Pretty pretty please," she moaned. It wasn't feigned. If it wasn't what she'd been masturbating herself into a stupor over all week, it was close enough. Her pants were pulled down to mid-thigh, and he'd laughed at the realization that the Sin Sovereigns' new toy didn't come with panties included as he flipped her onto her front, hoisting her pussy into fucking position. Her face was being driven into the mattress, and she was grateful the fragrances of beer and pussy overpowered whatever was soaked into the sheets.

The cock slid inside her, meeting all the resistance of an electric ice cream scoop diving into a tub of rocky road. She grinned, a slack-jawed, squinty-eye grin, as it sunk in that for the first time in her life she'd likened her pussy to candy. At first, she imagined that it was Chisper back there, a dirtbag stranger who'd taken one look at her and decided to make her his bitch. His literal bitch, a thing with the right hot wet parts to occupy a place in his kennel.

As if to reaffirm this, Lulu's hand came down open-palm on her bare ass. Again. And again. That seemed to be the closest he could come to prying his hands off her, as mere moments later he was doubled over to squeeze her tits in a vice-like grip. It had been far too long since Hannah had had sex, and a first time in character for Sanguine. As such, even this nobody's artless fucking was blowing her mind. Could that be one more bonus to her investment in Charisma, that not only did her pussy look like a million bucks, but it *felt* like it? There was no doubt that no real sex she'd ever had could compete with this sweaty backroom barely-consensual quickie.

She wasn't faking her orgasms, though they were so many, and so loud, that he had to be thinking she was flattering him. When his own time came, he made no fuss; this was a man who was used to coming in the Sin Sovereigns' bitches when he felt like it, and if this new one was hotter, she was still nothing but a bitch. He came in her, bucked her off his cock and rolled out of bed in one chain of movements; Sanguine was

still panting and trembling, her round ass still waving in the air and dribbling out his spunk, when she heard his zipper being done up.

“Gotta say, you’re gonna be popular around here, new bitch.” He tugged a shoe back on, taking a moment to redo the laces. “You put on a show like that with everybody, and you’re gonna make us all some real good money. If the Sovereigns don’t keep you for ourselves. You know, maybe I’ll talk to Chisper and see if–”

Attack roll. AC: 10 (conditions: unarmored, flatfooted, distracted). Your roll: 4 (+7 attack bonus: basic stiletto). Hit!

Damage: 1d4 (3) +1d6 (4) Backstab +Dexterity (3). Total: 10.

Add status effect (Lulu): Unconscious, Dying, Bleed 1

Sanguine wished she’d managed to get his keys before he slumped to the floor. They were out of reach now, and picking the cuffs with the tool she’d palmed when he’d been preoccupied by frisking her was a bit of a pain. A moment later, though, she wiped the blood off her stiletto on his shirt and replaced it in the sheathe in her boot. Another moment to put her armor back on and take her things back from where they’d piled them in the corner.

Her pussy was quivering. She took a moment to smile at that. Finally gotten the fucking she’d been craving all week, and she was still ready for more.

Sanguine texted Lane to confirm that things were proceeding according to plan on her end and positioned herself behind the door to lie in wait. It was only another five minutes or so until Ogre strolled back in to take his turn. If she’d thought she could squeeze manage it without him noticing his buddy’s body, she might have let him. He was a bigger guy, muscled like his nickname suggested, and she’d always liked them big and dumb. Hell, the rest of the party didn’t have to know her methodology so long as it produced results. Still, a laser blast to the back of the head was good and quiet, and she supposed she could always find more cocks. Maybe not such demanding ones, but still. She took some solace knowing Chisper would have been pleased with how accommodating she’d been.

Mostly accommodating, anyway, she thought as she shoved Ogre’s corpse under the bed.

It was a good thing she’d had a whole week as Hannah to think this over. Sanguine and her Int penalty never would have thought of using the enemy’s communications against them. Like most criminals, they didn’t use implants, but relied on handheld comms that were easier to dispose of if the law caught on. Luckier yet, they were bad criminals and didn’t even lock their comms. Judging by the volume of their respective text logs, it looked like Ogre was the more popular of the two, and she wasted no time sending a message to a contact saved as “Squirtz.”

omfg you gotta taste the new bitch – so fucking cherry, she wrote, hoping it sounded enough like Ogre to allay suspicion. God bless autocorrect for eliminating

worries about the right amount of misspellings. Sanguine was actually a pretty horrid speller herself.

f that man I'd take that spicy chica over her skinny white ass any day

Sanguine glared at the screen. Her ass was way bigger than Lane's! Racist fucker. *oh yeah? come back here and take a poke at it and then say that shit*, she wrote, adding, *19E*.

Squirtz at least made his Perception check to smell the blood that was now thick in the air, and would have gotten a chance to act in the surprise round if she hadn't won initiative. Instead, his reward for his lucky roll was to have the laser burn through his face rather than the Sin Sovereign tattoo on the back of his bald head. She shut him in the bedroom and sent the go-ahead to Lane.

All in all, they made short work of the Sin Sovereigns. Sanguine managed to eliminate seven by herself simply by going from point to point and claiming in impressively feigned glumness that Chisper had sent her for a morale boost. Each time, the pushiest asshole got dibs and followed her to another depressing room currently absent a bitch, and each time, it was simplicity itself to get their pants around their ankles and, once they were good and distracted, eliminate them. She only fucked two more – both in and out in less than five – and wisely resisted the urge to murder them mid-coitus. Seemed like the kind of memory her pussy shouldn't be forced to harbor. Only once did she have to take one in her mouth, and at that time she was perfectly happy to make an early end of things with a laser blast up Cuchillo's ass.

If he'd ordered it she would have sucked off Chisper, no questions asked, because he was such a close friend. Or whatever he was. But she drew the line at blowing his goons. She still had her dignity. Sort of.

Once Lane sent word that the party was in position and ready to breach, she headed for the west end of the floor and fired one of the dead guy's guns a few times. None of them questioned it when they saw a panicked naked redhead fleeing gunfire (the weapon cunningly concealed within her hair), and so a good chunk of them split off their supposed choke point to check it out. With their numbers thinning, Sanguine then pulled a rather spectacular Bluff check to play the part of a frightened slave passing along word from Chisper that the gunfire had been a feint, that Lane had confirmed for him that they were coming up the east stairwell any moment. Chaos ensued, men running every which way to either act on her lies or verify them. When the party came down the rooftop stairs there was no one to meet them, and they slaughtered the defenders near the east stairs from behind in moments. The west side fell almost as easily, dashing one by one into the path of the unified party.

Dirk wiped some of the gore off his aluminum bat on some bedsheets. "Man, when are these dumbfucks going to learn, you never split the party?"

"Um, didn't *we* just split the party?" Kennedy pointed out.

"What? Kidnapping two of us is not the same at all. When the GM kidnaps you, he's obligated to provide security flaws to enable you to break out. That's game mastering 101, man."

Corn put his hands on hips, eyes still locked on the ceiling. "OK, so the opposition is dead, and all we need to do is figure out where their asswipe leader is holed up. In the meantime, Sanguine... we're all impressed with your enthusiastic bout of murders, but maybe you could, I dunno, *put some freaking clothes on!*"

She made a face. "Not if you're gonna be such a pouty puss about it."

Dirk came up beside her and put an arm around her shoulder. "I dunno, I for one would like to express my support for Sanguine's right to self-expression. Very bold. Feminist, even."

A blushing Kennedy laughed as Lane smacked him in the back of the head and gave her opinion of this new form of feminism. Sanguine herself, however, was busy trying to decide whether or not she was deluding herself about a Sense Motive check she'd just made.

Was Echo really checking her out? Not blatantly, like Dirk, or even pretending to be unfazed by her nudity like Lane. But she'd have sworn she saw him looking when he didn't think she was looking back. Either there was something interesting on the floor behind her, or he was eyeballing her pussy.

If Sanguine got to start knocking boots with that hunk, she'd have to make a push to go to two sessions a week.

The whole campaign, it had struck her that Jacob's star NPC was a bit of an enigma at best, a wallflower at worst. Usually if there was a party NPC, they had some outlandish and amusing personality quirks, or something intriguing and mysterious in their backstory. She'd assumed their GM was pursuing the latter path, what with having found the man stashed in Alphagia's basement, but so far, all the guy had done was trudge along looking handsome and occasionally getting snooty with them. It was honestly kind of lackluster GMing on Jacob's part, and more often than not she forgot he even existed. Unless she was horny. Then she remembered for a few minutes with her vibrator until she wasn't.

But then she caught that look again.

She found her discarded armor and helped the group sniff out Chisper's secret bunker, accessible via a hidden door in a closet near where she'd last seen him. He surrendered immediately, having watched the slaughter unfold on the security monitors.

"Yeah, about that," said Dirk, slapping his bat in an open palm impatiently. "Gotta say, fuck surrender. I'd have already bashed your sorry rapist skull in, but my friend here called dibs, and I guess she earned the right. Guine?"

After a moment, Sanguine realized everyone was looking at her. "I'm sorry, did you just call me 'Guine'? Like, Gwen?"

"I dunno, I felt like once I've seen you naked, we ought to be at least close enough to give out nicknames."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Tiny D."

"Hey! I was—"

She continued over Dirk's objection. "So, hear me out guys... what say we let him go."

At first some of them laughed, but soon the entire group looked baffled. Kennedy grabbed her wrist. "Wait, what? He kidnapped you. Threatened you. Tried to use you to kill us, to say nothing of using you to... you know. He's done horrible things. You seriously want to let him go?"

“You guys, I think she’s still charmed,” said Lane, eyeing Sanguine nervously. “Mine wore off when his guys started firing on us. But look at her. Something’s... off.”

“How did you two plan all this when you were charmed by their leader?” demanded Corn.

“Well, it was actually pretty easy,” said Lane. “You guys wanted to come in and kill them, he wanted you to come in and get killed, so... Sanguine and I mostly had to sit back and let you guys do what you wanted to do anyway. Plus she and I talked pre-game and reasoned we were only charmed by Chisper, not his whole gang. We figured he’d do like any lowlife gang leader and hide behind his minions, and would ya look at that? He didn’t disappoint.”

“Yeah. I felt bad whacking his dudes, but you guys are my peeps. I wasn’t about to sell you out. And really, he’s not such a bad guy.” She squeezed Chisper’s shoulder. Poor fella. Maybe she could take him out for drinks later. Then fuck him. Or fuck him then drinks. Whatever.

“Can you do anything?” an exasperated Corn asked Kennedy.

She shook her head. “Dispel’s a long ways off. It ought to wear off in a few hours – unless it’s the improved version, in which case maybe a week or two.”

Corn frowned at the smug grin on the face of their quarry. “Shit. Look, Sanguine, maybe you ought to, ah, go down the hall for a minute. And let us... you know. Talk. To him. And stuff.”

“You do know I’m trained in Sense Motive, right? If you’re going to lie to me, at least try to make it plausible.”

Corn glowered, and in moments there was a cacophony of voices arguing about what to do. Sanguine made it clear she wouldn’t stand for killing him, and the others ran the gamut from Kennedy’s consideration of the virtue of mercy to Dirk suggesting they knock the redhead unconscious and get on with the killings.

It took a moment for the group to realize that their argument had already ended without them realizing it. Chisper’s lifeless body rolled out of his chair, a hole burned right through the middle of his chest. Sanguine blew on the glowing red lens of her laser pistol and tucked it back into its sheath.

Echo smiled, and to her surprise, pulled her forehead toward his and planted a small kiss. His beard tickled a little, but in a nice way. She smiled back. Fuck, he smelled good up close. She bet his dick was huge. What a great guy. She should take him out for drinks, and...

“Uh, what the hell just happened?” asked Dirk.

“He’s a magnician, like Ms. McCanon,” Echo replied, gesturing to Kennedy. Sanguine had forgotten Toni’s character even had a last name until that moment. “One of my gifts is to repurpose cyberspellcraft. In this case, I redesignated the originator of the charm spell, removing the false loyalty she felt towards Chisper.”

“Nice! Look at you, earning a tiny fraction of your cut of the XP,” commented Dirk dryly. He immediately set himself to emptying the dead gang leader’s pockets, and after more murmured expressions of gratitude, the rest of the group followed suit, scouring their new lair for loot. There was plenty of it. Probably. She wasn’t really paying much attention.

Lane and Kennedy hustled downstairs to inform Mr. Yenque of their success. They passed on the sentiments from their new super that he didn’t want to know what had happened, nor did he want to know anything else that happened now that he was leasing those apartments to the PCs. He even waived the first two month’s rent. Meanwhile Corn and Dirk volunteered to bring in Ruiz, who after a long night in-game and several weeks in the real world, was finally going to be given a chance to recuperate in preparation for interrogation. Meanwhile, that left Sanguine and Echo alone in their slice of Arcadia.

“So, you think anyone’s going to realize that when you reset Chisper’s spell, you linked it to yourself?” She’d taken him into a vacant room for a little privacy. He hadn’t resisted.

Echo chuckled. “Mayhaps. I didn’t mean to be vague, but perhaps you’re right. In any event, it shouldn’t matter. After we rest, I think I should be able to calibrate my powers in tune with the cyberspell frequency and control his magic well enough to terminate the effect.”

“You’re not worried I’ll be pissed at you for charming me?”

“I hope not. It’s only for the night, and then you’ll be back to normal. Until then, I’ll simply have to acclimate to the novelty of having a lovely young woman smiling at me a bit too much.”

“Am I?”

He stroked his chin. “I shouldn’t say ‘too much.’ Rather, ‘more than usual.’ I don’t mind it.”

She took a few steps closer. “Hey, can’t say I minded you looking at me, either.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I said I didn’t mind.”

His cheeks flushed as he backpedaled, though he quickly bumped into a wall and had nowhere else to go. She stayed right on him, her chest brushing against his. His pecs were massive. Her hands couldn’t keep off of them. “Sanguine, I realize Chisper’s particular form of charm might be having some consequences on the way you’re disposed to perceive me.”

“I’ll say they are.”

“But,” he went on, placing his hands on her hips and attempting to scoot her back, but succeeding only in having his hands clamped in place, “it’s unwise to pursue

what you seem to be pursuing. I mean to be your ally out of a sense of common enemy, not because I have manipulated you into doing something you ordinarily wouldn't."

"Maybe I'm bored of doing the things I ordinarily do." Her nose made contact with his. Echo's head retreated by inches until it thudded into the wall, but he wasn't able to create any distance. She liked that he was playing hard to get. If he really didn't want her, he could have easily walked away. Hearing him speak his noble intentions was almost as hot as eroding them.

"I think you should wait until I release you from the spell in the morning."

His eyes squeezed close as she took a long, slow lick up his neck. "This is the best I've felt in my whole life," she breathed into his ear. "You're worried I'll come down on you for charming me; I'm telling you to be more worried about what I'll do if you stop."

"We should revisit this when you have a clear mind," he said evenly, but he didn't resist her hands going inside his pants.

"Don't. End it." She looked up to the ceiling. "Jacob, I don't know if you're listening, but if you are... don't puss out on me now, buddy. If Keon got to bang his babe, you're a total fuck if you don't give me the same. Hell, far as I'm concerned you got yourself a free pass, watch all you want. I won't tell if you don't."

Echo froze into place, and she used Jacob's indecision to enjoy the taste of his lips. She'd never made out with a bearded guy before. She wasn't sure yet if she liked it, but looked forward to finding out.

"So I'm clear, you're saying you want Echo to... take advantage of you?" Jacob's voice answered.

"Oh, don't get all squeamish on me, man. I know you and Toni played master and harem slave back when. She tells me her shit. We both know you're still jerking it to that memory now like ten years later. So don't be a sex-negative pussy."

"She told you about that?!" his voice nearly cracked. "Wow. OK. But still, I'm not sure that it's a good idea. I don't want you guys to feel like my NPC is pushing you towards a particular course, much less literally forcing you. I'm not railroading you here."

She groaned. "Seriously? You're not even worried about the ethics of using software to compel me to be some guy's sex toy, but if it compromises the integrity of your plotline... Christ, man."

"I'm serious. I have a vision for the campaign, but I'm not going to have a repeat of last time where I forced you into the dragon's jaws. If you go into any dragon lairs this time, it has to be because you chose to."

"We haven't even hit second level yet, and you're worried about dragons?"

"Yeah, my bad. You guys are leveling after this, and you're actually most of the way to third."

She sneered at the space his voice was coming from. "I tell you what. If we're contemplating going to go into a dragon lair and I'm going to be the deciding vote, you have him uncharm me. Until then... just let me have this, OK? Or, you know, let him have me."

There was a long silence. Were the others paused, wondering what was happening? Why was he taking so long?

"Very well," said Echo, suddenly animate. "Take off your armor, and get on the bed."

She clapped her hands delightedly. "You got it, buddy."

"If you find it to your liking, I can keep the spell going for quite some time," he said softly.

"Promise?"

Chapter Eight

Level Two

Toni wasn't disappointed that the following week's session was a nonconventional one. After all they'd been through – the escape from Alphagia, the abduction of Ruiz, and the skirmish with the Sin Sovereigns – Jacob was finally having them level up. They opened with a short scenario in which the group went shopping, exchanging plunder from Ruiz's bodyguards and the Sin Sovereigns' ill-begotten goods for upgrades to weapons, armor, and other miscellany. It was an amusing encounter with a shady NPC merchant called TruxTop, a cybernetically augmented fellow who drove around in a rusted out van that, on the inside, was comprised of enough extradimensional space to fit a significant store of goods. It wasn't the way Toni had pictured Trux when she'd read Lane's backstory, but she didn't mind Jacob taking liberties with material, especially when he had to build the world from scratch.

Kennedy had bought herself an energy shield upgrade for her armor to protect against lasers and other such attacks on the counsel of Keon, who was sure Jacob would be switching up the conventional bullet-firing weapons they'd seen thus far for something more appropriately sci fi. With the remaining money, she'd gotten herself an assortment of "spell batteries," which were really just magic scrolls with a reskin, one-shot consumables that emulated spells. She didn't have a good sense for what was going to be good and what wasn't, so she spread it around and even splurged on a couple higher level ones for emergencies.

After that, they were reintroduced to that blue-haired woman who'd guided them through character creation for the process of leveling up. Toni still didn't know what to make of her. Jacob had assured her that he hadn't personally designed her, at least visually, that she was part of the project he'd purloined from his lab at AdZell. When she'd lived with him in Austin, she'd met plenty of his coworkers, and she'd never painted AdZell as the kind of place that encouraged their employees to give their bot a body like that. It was almost as much of a male fantasy as Sanguine's, except that the woman didn't flaunt it so blatantly. Then again, considering Sanguine had spent the majority of the past session naked, it was a high bar for sexualization. (Albeit a very low one for respectability.)

"Welcome back, Toni," the woman said smoothly. Somehow, it wasn't until she heard her name that she realized she wasn't Kennedy. She was in her chair, in Brendan's game room – though even those things weren't real. In reality, she was sitting on the sofa near Hannah, hopefully not drooling. But this was closer to reality than the game. Here, Toni was roleplaying as herself.

The first time she'd been here, during character creation, she'd been too emotional to interact much with this... thing, whatever it was. She'd gone from sitting to standing in the blink of an eye without warning. While Toni could stand for short periods, walk around with difficulty after the full course of physical therapy, surgeries, and even grafting carbon steel polymer supports on pieces of her spinal cord, she would have been hard-pressed to walk from the sofa to the door to the game room, and she'd have been sweating bullets and groaning in pain by the time she made it there.

She'd been pissed, and she'd given Jacob's little pet the cold shoulder on account of it, assuming it was him. At the time, she'd hardly interacted with this thing, telling it to pick a class nobody else had picked, give it a default build, and leave her appearance as it was. That had taken all of two minutes, and with that done, Toni had dismissed her, then spent the rest of the session alternating between pacing around the room and sobbing hysterically.

Now, having interacted with the game more, she was sure that Jacob's NPCs were not always being voiced or controlled directly by him. Not unless he'd learned to carry on four conversations concurrently when the group split up. Unless this was some avatar he'd made exclusively for this purpose. Only one way to find out, Toni reasoned, and so she asked.

"No, I am not Jacob. I am an artificial intelligence, here to help make your game run smoothly and enjoyably. Tonight, with your permission, I will guide you through the process of character leveling," the woman responded in a voice that gave her goosebumps. Whoever served as the base for her voice had to be a professional voice actress. It was too smooth, too melodic, to be a normal person, or even a simulation.

"Do you have a name?"

"You may call me what you wish."

Toni snorted. "Seriously? Don't you think the 'what do you want it to be' line is a little cliché?"

"You're right, it is. Rest assured that I do have a name, and if you ever need to know it, I will tell you. Until then, I defer to your preference."

"Sapphire," said Toni, but immediately wrinkled her nose as she thought better of it. "No, too strippery. You may look the part, but you have a classy air about you. So let's settle on a nice easy 'Blue,'" said Toni.

"Blue it is. And a kinder designation than some of your companions opted for, as I believe you know."

Toni remembered what Hannah had said she'd named her. Slutbag. This being might be a program, but Toni could never bring herself to degrade someone like that, fictional or no. "So I see I'm in my chair for it this time. Looks like Jacob took a more sensitive approach."

“Begging pardon, but Jacob had nothing to do with that mistake. I was operating from incomplete data, and ported you here without realizing your disability. My apologies for having started off your game on such an upsetting note.”

“That... that was you? But Jacob...” Toni frowned. “He apologized. He sounded really sorry.”

“Jacob cares about you a great deal. At the time, it must have been easier to believe that he controls all in this game, rather than how you now realize things work. Jacob created this simulation, true, but much that transpires here is beyond his control.”

“That's a heck of a creepy thing to say,” she answered.

“I did not mean to disturb you again, Toni. Rest assured that everything that is happening in the game is done to enhance the group's enjoyment. But Jacob is only one man, and can only control so much.”

“I suppose that's fair.” She rolled forward, but remembered quickly that this was still a simulation. “You can, um, let me walk around again. If that's OK.”

“Of course.”

And with the barest tingle in her lower back, Toni regained the strength of Kennedy, and stood out of her chair, grinning as she kicked it back haphazardly. Oh, if only. “Thank you, Blue. So, what do we do here?”

“You level up. Certain aspects of this are automated. Your targeting will be steadier, and your hardiness and resilience to hostile effects will increase. Then it will be up to you to make decisions regarding additional class features.”

“All right, let's get started. What do I get?”

They began with skill points, which Toni simply funneled into the skills she already had trained at creation. With that done, the woman gestured, and a series of holographic screens materialized in the air around them, though in much higher resolution than any holotech in the real world. “Next, you may select a magnician prestinalysis.”

Toni studied the screens. Each screen showed the text of what the ability did, and beneath it, a 2D video demonstration of it in use. Eerily, the demonstrations were being acted out by Kennedy herself, so she was in effect watching videos of herself doing things she hadn't – and couldn't have – done. Several she quickly discarded, swiping away the screens as she lost interest. Blue answered her questions where she had them, and after a short while, she confirmed her selection of Dopamine Overload, which would temporarily overwhelm a target with positive feelings, stunning them for a short duration. She could only affect a given target once per in-game day, but still, it seemed a lot more her style than breaking bones or assembling temporary robots out of mundane items. She wasn't a pacifist, but with the VR forcing her to see and feel (and sometimes smell) the carnage, her appetite for violence was duller than usual.

“Can I use it on myself?” she asked. “Not in combat, I mean, I’m not *that* bad at tactics. But to see what it feels like.”

“Ordinarily no, but I can permit it here in this simulation,” offered Blue.

Toni concentrated, telling her implant to activate it. Suddenly she was slammed with a wave of relaxation and warm, tingly pleasure. She immediately lost track of how long it lasted, but when it ended, it felt like it was decidedly too soon.

“Wow, that’s... that’s pretty intense,” she murmured, wiping a lazy smile off her face. She tried again, and while she’d exceeded the daily allotment, Blue allowed it to trigger again. She decided to knock it off before she did something embarrassing. Between Corn and Sanguine, this game was already getting awfully mature without her titillating herself with the helper bot. “Dang, that’s a heck of an ability.”

“Hence your capacity to stun your enemies.”

“Aw, are you calling me stunning?” Toni grinned. It was only an NPC, but no reason not to be pleasant with the silly thing.

“No.”

Her grin vanished. “Are you programmed not to smile?”

“No.”

On impulse, Toni queued the ability once more in her implant. “Well maybe you should learn to—”

The sensation of using the ability on someone was a bit like throwing a foam ball at them that only you could see. Wind up, release, and watch it fly. She’d gotten used to this in her spellcasting in previous sessions. Only as it hit Blue, she “saw” the rubber ball bounce off and accelerate right back at her like it had been fired from a cannon. Before, it had been the sort of pleasure one might feel after a vigorous massage. This time...

Toni collapsed on the ground, her whole body spasming in an involuntary orgasm the likes of which she’d never even conceived of. When she was no longer “stunned,” she found herself ten feet away, nipples so hard they actually hurt, and crotch soaked so thoroughly she would have thought she’d wet herself if she hadn’t lived through what had actually happened.

“What the heck, Blue?!” she snapped, hopping back to her feet and brushing herself off.

“You cannot use the program to harm me,” she said simply. “I am integral to the game world. You can no more attack me than you could push over this building.”

“Now you tell me,” Toni grumbled.

“I am unsure which of us owes an apology,” Blue stated matter-of-factly. “Would you like to select your new spells?”

Toni would, as it so happened. Normally when Toni played a caster, she almost always picked up *charm person*. In the early days, she’d simply been less comfortable with violence, but over time, she’d gained an appreciation for how enchantments could

be used tactically. Gaining information, infiltrating a base, sometimes even turning an enemy to an ally fighting on her side. That was usually hard to pull off, but she liked trying. The Sin Sovereigns' dead gang leader, Chisper, had demonstrated its potency with what he'd put Hannah through.

Kennedy, however, had not gone with what would have been Toni's default build, selecting feats and abilities to improve her mental manipulations. She could start down that road next level, but for now, she was speced for illusion. Related, but not the same thing. For the time being, she picked up *intuit communication*, which could be useful in a metropolis like Chicago where many different languages were spoken, and then a less familiar spell, *spectral impression*.

Blue explained the jargon-heavy description. "You target yourself or an ally, and for ten minutes per caster level, currently twenty minutes, anyone they attempt a Bluff, Coerce or Diplomacy check against notices details about them that remind them of people they know, as favorable for the spell, increasing the efficacy of the check."

Toni frowned, still not quite getting it. The woman continued patiently. "Suppose the recipient of the spell – let's say Sanguine – attempts a Bluff check to convince a merchant that damaged goods are in working condition. *Spectral impression* might cause the merchant to, say, note how her hair reminds him of his trusted wife. Or Dirk's Coerce check might benefit from someone thinking his tattoo looked like one sported by someone who had bullied them in their youth."

"Ah, cool. So if it works, then... what?"

"For Bluff, the target's attitude worsens only one step, not two, on a failed check. For Coerce, the target gains the spooked condition for 1d4 rounds on a failed check, or becomes frightened for that duration if the Coerce succeeds. For Diplomacy, on a success, their attitude improves by two steps rather than one."

"Sounds awesome. Everybody likes the caster who makes them better at what they do, right?"

"I can ask your allies their preference, if you would like."

Toni rolled her eyes. "Never mind. Anything else?"

"The leveling process is now complete. Kennedy is now a level two magician."

"Groovy. Look forward to seeing you again, Blue."

"As do I, Toni."

“What happened? Is everybody OK?” demanded a clearly agitated Gladys, struggling to make any appreciable haste on her way into the game room. Her prototype wheelchair motor was still a work in progress.

“I’m fine,” Toni answered quickly, just as the girl’s father said, “We’re fine.” Hannah, Remy and Keon didn’t respond in the least, no more so than they had to the scream.

“Then what was that scream? Somebody’s character die? You said you were just shopping and leveling tonight, Dad.”

“We were. Just... it’s nothing. Everybody’s fine, Gladys.”

The girl lingered, not buying it in the least, but he was still her father and she didn’t have an ally in Toni, and so after a moment wheeled back out of the room. Toni smiled at the faded drawing of Isarrel’s holy symbol on the back of her old chair.

“I really am sorry,” Brendan said when she was gone.

Toni fidgeted, such as she could, trying to signal she’d prefer he back off. Exiting the game to find him standing over her, mere inches from her face... it had been disconcerting, to say the least.

The law partner, a man who had stared down state supreme court justices eye to eye without flinching, wilted back into his own sofa, across from her own. Jacob’s holo had been sitting next to him when they’d started, but as usual, it disappeared once the game began. No sense broadcasting it to an unseeing audience. “Look, I wasn’t trying to... I wasn’t doing anything untoward,” he managed.

“So what *were* you doing?” Toni tried to keep her voice close to room temperature. It very much wanted to stray up or down a few hundred degrees. That he answered her question with a denial rather than an explanation had not helped.

“It was... I suppose this is no time to be delicate, considering how things must have looked to you. I’ve been looking over the book on and off for weeks figuring out what I wanted to get at 2nd level. I was done leveling pretty much right away, so I was already logged out. I was sitting here catching up on some emails when suddenly you... made some noises.”

“Noises?”

“Moaning,” he said, but quickly pressed on. “It drew my eye, and after a moment, you... well, I saw that your... um...”

Toni realized his meaning despite his total miss at conveying it as suddenly, she realized two things. One, he seemed to have put a blanket over her lap, and two, her pussy was sopping wet. As were the pants beneath them.

“Oh my gosh!”

“I didn’t know what was happening, but I... I worried something had gone wrong. Everyone else has known you for so long, but I, well, I didn’t, so I read up on people with

conditions like yours, and I saw that one of the side effects of spinal damage can be loss of control of the bladder, and so I—”

Toni wanted to gape, but she was simultaneously both mortified to have it brought up and touched that Brendan had independently researched what to expect. Every case was unique, she was well aware, but still, that he’d worried about her enough to look into it... that was kind of him. Not kind enough to make her forget he’d just seen her pee her pants (if not in the way he assumed) but kind.

There was an awkward silence, made all the more awkward as they were each plainly trying to assess whether or not anyone else was eavesdropping and playing possum. After checking out Corn’s makeout with Mayhem a few weeks back, she was a bit more alert to the possibilities.

Toni pushed herself to her feet and made her way over to her chair. “Do you have anywhere we can talk, privately?”

“Sure. My office, end of the hall. I’ll wait for you while you, ah, take care of things.”

She managed a smile. “Thank you.”

A few minutes later, having done what she could to dab up the ridiculous amount of fluids she’d leaked into her underwear and wishing desperately she’d worn a pad that day, she joined him in his study. How could that have happened?! No, she knew exactly how it had happened, but still, to have something happen in-game affect her real body... maybe Jacob owed her another apology.

Gladys had been parked at the other end of the hall, watching, but Toni didn’t say anything. Having this conversation once was going to be brutal enough. In his study, Brendan was seated on the edge of his desk, no doubt trying to look like he’d gone back to reading emails on his implant, but his eyes didn’t have the telltale flicker to them. He hadn’t grown up with it like they had, she supposed, so perhaps he was bad at knowing how to fake it. “Ah, welcome. Sorry about the mess; I don’t really take visitors in here very often. Even our housekeeper doesn’t come in here. Not that there’s anything sensitive or anything. Just—”

“It’s lovely. Really. Though with that view, you could have a herd of goats in here and it would still look lovely.”

“You don’t like goats?”

She grinned wryly, saying, “I liked them better when I wasn’t forced to take them on at eye level.”

Brendan chuckled, but only barely. Things were still awkward. “It’s... nice to hear you say something. You know, about... it.”

“The chair?”

He nodded. “Yes. The chair, your disability, any of it.”

Toni fought off a wince. “Yeah, I guess you noticed I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Are you kidding me? Keon – the same Keon who half the time still calls me Mr. Gibbel in my own living room – made sure I knew before we even met that it was not to be mentioned or acknowledged. ‘Unless I want to wind up in one alongside you,’ I believe he said.”

That brought a smile. “Keon said that?”

“He did.”

She let out a pleased sigh. “Yeah. Well... it’s not something I discuss. But because of what happened earlier... OK, look, I just wanted you to know I didn’t spontaneously pee my pants.”

“Oh.” He looked relieved, followed by perplexed, followed by a resolution for politeness. “I’m glad it wasn’t that this time.”

“What? No, I don’t pee my pants *any* time. I mean, sure, sometimes if I laugh too hard or hold it too long something might dribble a little, whatever, but that was true before.”

“Oh.” Back to perplexed.

“So yeah. I’m only bringing this up because it’d be weirder having you think... what you thought, than to have you think the truth. So just this once, I’ll explain. Again, did *not* pee my pants. Never do. Can’t stress that enough. But, in the level-up room, I was testing out abilities, and one of them sort of... back-fired.”

“Wait, what? You have an ability to make people...”

“No! No, it’s right out of the book. Dopamine Overload. Gives somebody a happy tingly feeling, stuns them. But I tried to use it on that blue lady, and it bounced back and exploded at ten times strength.”

Slowly, Brendan worked out what she was implying with helpful prompts from her body language. “Oh GOD. Wow, I never would have... yikes. You really... holy... wow. Oh wow.”

“You can stop wowing over it any time now.”

“Yes. Right. Wow. Argh! Sorry.”

One of the more uncomfortable silences of her life followed, neither quite sure what to say, until the discomfort began to outweigh the embarrassment. “Right. So... thanks for trying to help, and sorry I screamed. I didn’t realize it would affect me here and not just there, so I must’ve just sat there long enough that it, um, showed.”

“I have to say, Lane’s going to have a hard time following *that* act.”

It took her a moment to understand what she could tell was meant as a joke. It had been weeks since their little makeout, and she certainly hadn’t been thinking of it since Blue triggered this whole mortifying episode. Hannah seemed to have thought about it more than Toni herself, from the way her friend kept teasing her about it. However awkward that incident might have been, it was nothing compared to tonight, and presently, she was glad for any offering of levity.

“Who says Lane’s going to get the chance to try? She might be an OK kisser, but it takes more than hot lips to get from smooches to tonight’s episode.”

“Luckily Lane’s got plenty of other hot parts – which Kennedy’s welcome to kiss as well.”

She giggled in spite of herself. “I may not be a veteran lesbian, but I’m pretty sure there’s more than kissing going on behind those closed doors.”

“Is that so? And on what grounds do you make such claims?”

“I have this friend, see...”

“How close of a friend we talking?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Would you like to go to dinner with me?”

Toni knew he was trying to catch her by surprise, and she returned it in kind with an unhesitating, “Yes.”

Her little black dress had been resurrected from a plastic garment bag, the tag on which confirmed she'd last had it dry-cleaned more than ten years back in Austin. During a text conversation to fine-tune details, Brendan had asked if she dated often, and she realized she genuinely couldn't remember the last time she'd gone on a date. There had been Jacob, of course, and she'd tried going out with a few guys from her support group back when she'd still attended them, but nothing had clicked. Tyree the hotdog vendor, but that had been close to two years ago and had never amounted to much. Sometimes, she'd thought she might be done dating for good, which was a deeply depressing consideration for a woman in her thirties. But she kept busy, so it wasn't something she had time to think about very often.

She'd never heard of La Chandelle, but she was sure the restaurant was going to be expensive. She knew because that too had been a part of their negotiation. She'd gotten to know Brendan well enough to know that he had no problem spending money on activities that amused him, and enjoyed being generous with his good fortune. (She'd done some research on the real estate in the area around his cabin they'd stayed in for the Week o' Gaming, and her jaw had hit the floor.) So Toni had encouraged him to pick his favorite place regardless of price and offer to pay up front. That way he'd get to enjoy his favorite meal, she'd get to try something fancy, and they could avoid the awkward pretense that Toni was able to compete with his spending power. Each of them was doing the other a favor.

He was waiting for her when she arrived, and she was already feeling confident. Her Uber's unsolicited compliment that she looked ready to slay had helped, but she'd felt good about herself even before that. She didn't know what she wanted out of the evening, but it was comforting to feel like she'd be in a good position to get it if she wanted it.

"Toni, hey. Have a..." He stopped himself, gritting his teeth at his misspeak. "Have a... place. Ugh. Sorry."

"Don't sweat it. We have this woman in our office who's blind – not just legally blind, but *blind* blind – and it was only after she was hired that I realized how often I used the phrase 'see what I mean'. After a while I learned it's less awkward to trail off mid-sentence when I catch myself saying it." She pulled her chair up to the opposite side of the table, and Brendan once more took his own seat.

"You mean like I just did. Yeah. Still learning that myself. Anyways... yeah. Here you are. You look amazing, by the way."

"Thank you. Looking pretty sharp yourself."

Brendan winced. "Yeah, sorry about that. I had to come here straight from work, so I didn't get a chance to change into something presentable. I hope that's OK."

Toni laughed, then after a moment realized he wasn't joking. "Brendan, that suit looks like it could be an Armani. What on earth were you going to change into?"

“This is the Armani,” he answered with a tug at his collar. “But I have this... you know, never mind. I’m glad you like it.”

Their waiter spared them from trying to salvage a segue out of that mess. Her date ordered a bottle of wine for the two of them and let her take on the appetizer selection while he excused himself. He was away just long enough that she got an answer from her implant’s research app to confirm that the bottle he’d ordered was available at prices ranging from \$524-\$588, depending on the vendor. It cost more than her car payment – when she’d been able to afford a car before the salary freeze nearly two years ago.

They opened with small talk over bread and oil, and it was mostly first date type stuff. She pretended to understand his work situation as the jargon sailed over her head, and he displayed appropriate interest in her own work. She quickly bored herself with it.

“So how about you? How did you get into environmental law? I didn’t even know that was a branch until Keon told me about his new job. Well, not new any more I guess, but you know what I mean.” She did feel rather proud to be on a date with someone who did what she was pretty sure he did. Clean air and water, protecting habitats and endangered animals... it was noble stuff. Even aside from getting to bask in the envy of her friends at work when she’d told them about her upcoming date with a partner at a law firm, it felt good to be out with someone who was called to make the world a better place.

Brendan shrugged, a humble look on his face. “Sure, it’s not exactly *Law and Order: SVU* material.”

“Law and... what? SVU?”

“It’s... it was a TV show. A long time ago, I guess. Anyway, when I went to college, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I mostly majored in getting high, but I still made solid grades. Then suddenly I was done, still had no direction, so I applied to law school and thank god my dad and grandpa were legacies at Cornell.”

“Oh wow, that’s Ivy League, right?”

“So they tell me, but it’s more of a Brown than a Yale. At any rate, I knew all the opportunities were in the specialties. So I looked into what was in demand, and google pretty much told me where to go. Got a job at what was then Carr & Malonie, and by the time Malonie was retiring about six, seven years in, I’d made a name for myself, and bought out his share of the company, and seldom a regret.”

That had not been what she had expected to hear. “It must feel good though,” she prompted, hopeful, “getting to do something that improves people’s lives. Keon told me he was helping with a pro bono case, something about protecting the Dunes National Lakeshore? I used to go there with Jake in the summers in college. One of my favorite places in the world.”

“Oh? I’ve never been. From what I hear, the lake’s filthy with run-off from the steel mills – dead fish up and down the shore. But yeah, I think we put somebody on that. Who knows, maybe they’ll have a few less rotten fish when we’re done with ‘em.”

Toni tried to banish the thought, having ordered the salmon, but doing so only further cemented the imagery in her mind. It arrived not long after. She tried to do more than pick at it, but focused on her dwindling salad reserves.

She pivoted topics then to family, both going through the routine overview. Toni didn’t have much to say, given the status of affairs with her parents, but she talked some about her brother and sister-in-law. He seemed inclined to be equally brief, but she was curious, and was happy to keep him talking if for no other reason than to keep from having to say more herself. He spoke about his parents, a very little about his ex-wife, and then much more amiably about his daughter.

The sommelier – a job she’d heard of but had never actually met one firsthand – returned to inquire after their enjoyment of the wine. Toni managed to say something she hoped wasn’t too unsophisticated, and he left with a promise to send their waiter to pour a second glass for each. She was impressed; the sommelier even connected to their implants to make sure the wine was properly complementing their dinners, adding a dash of finely ground rosemary to Toni’s. It seemed a bit much, but for what Brendan was going to pay for this place, perhaps it was the least they were due.

That out of the way, she asked after what she hoped would be a more upbeat topic. “How’s Gladys’s recovery coming along? I meant to ask her after Wednesday night but I didn’t see her around.” *Other than when she heard me scream because I regained consciousness thinking you were about to kiss me*, she thought, but didn’t say.

“The doctor said it’s a work in progress, but...” He looked around, like she might be in eavesdropping range. “It’s becoming kind of an ordeal now.”

“Oh?”

“See, she went and scheduled an appointment with a prosthetic orthotist—”

“A what now?”

“I don’t even know, but I know she’s thinking about replacing the foot, maybe even the whole leg, with a prosthetic.”

Toni gasped. “What?! I thought it was healing! Oh my gosh, I had no idea amputation was even on the table!”

“No, sorry, I wasn’t clear. The foot’s going to be fine. She might have some arthritis, maybe a little loss of feeling in some of the toes, but...” His eyes flickered unconsciously to her chair, and she took his meaning. Nothing catastrophic. “No, she’s always been really into science, and she’s trying to use this as an opportunity to refit herself with a cybernetic limb. She used to whine about it all the time when she was little, the way I wanted a mohawk to look like Mr. T.”

“Mr. T? Is he from the SUV show?”

“What? No, he’s—” He took a deep breath. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, I think she really might try to do it this time.”

“A cybernetic limb. Like... from the game.”

“From what I saw in the rulebook, the one in the game is nowhere near as nice. At least not the base model. These days, you can get one with real flesh, crafted using the recipient’s own DNA, so it blends right in if you can get a good surgeon and avoid scarring.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them on the news before.” She’d also seen them in pamphlets from the doctors in the hospital in Austin, who had apparently held out a rather unrealistic amount of hope that her insurance was going to foot the bill for a half a million dollars in prosthetic legs and spinal rejuvenation. Out of network.

“Yeah. I don’t know. Parenting’s always harder than you think it’s going to be. When you first met, I almost hoped the two of you would hit it off – you seemed like you’d be such a good influence on her.”

Toni wondered if he meant a good influence as a friend, or rather as a role model, something more maternal. Which then made her stop and wonder if she was closer to Brendan’s age, or his daughter’s. Which gave rise to some new, uncomfortable feelings.

Brendan was still talking, though. “Weird to think of your baby girl voluntarily chopping off part of her body so she can play Inspector Gadget.” He had cut a piece of steak while he was talking, but he paused with the bite near his mouth. “Another dated reference. Don’t ask.”

She wasn’t going to. “Yeah, that’s... that’s pretty out there. She seems like such an interesting girl. I bet she gives you a handful.”

“Yes and no. She’s always been sort of... weird, I guess. In a good way. A great way. She spent too much time around my parents as a kid and somehow turned into an academic. At an age when her classmates were still working on long division, she was wintering with Grandma and Grandpa in Sweden, getting private lessons in *ungdomskalkyl* – kiddie calculus, or some such insanity.”

“She was doing calculus in elementary school? I couldn’t do calculus in college. With Jake – Jacob – to cheat off of.” Her brain always reached for the diminutive form when she thought back to who he’d been in college. He’d changed a lot after transferring to AdZell and the corporate rat race.

“Same, except without a Jacob. Only, then Gladdy would come home to the matronly talons of her mother, who made sure she was being groomed as a perfect little socialite. I put my foot down at a debutante ball, so her mother appealed to her 7% Hispanic heritage and threw her a *quinceañera* just to piss me off. Hell of a guest list, though. Got to meet Jennifer Connelly and Paul Bettany – they got a kid almost the same age. Got to check meeting two MCU heroes off my bucket list, though.”

“Three, if you count Mr. T.”

She could tell she'd said something wrong immediately. "Mr. T wasn't in the MCU."

"I thought you said he was."

"That was *SVU*, and he wasn't in that either."

"I'm so lost."

They ate in silence for a while, both relieved when their waiter arrived with the check.

"So I'll drop you off at your place, then."

"Thanks." She turned on the radio.

"See you Wednesday?" he said outside her building.

"I can't wait, Brendan."

She queued up *LaneMcCallisterBio.pdf* in her implant in the elevator, and re-read it twice before she drifted off to sleep. There wouldn't be a second date, but Toni decided she could have done plenty worse picking someone for the first.

“Authentic himbo, eh?”

“Hannah...!”

“Don’t get mad at me. That’s what you said.”

“I did not use the word himbo. I’m pretty sure I’ve never used the word himbo.”

“You just did, twice.” Hannah back into the corner of the elevator, holding up her hands defensively. “Just playing, Tones, shit. Relax. I was only using the noun that’s implied by your description of your date.”

“I did *not* say he was stupid. He’s just...”

“Superficial? Clueless? Tone-deaf? Rich? Pretty?”

“I didn’t say he was all *that* pretty.” The girls shared a smile. “Now please don’t tell anyone else I went out with him. It was a one-time thing, and I don’t want things to get any weirder than they’re already going to be.”

“I actually did a little research a ways back. Did you know the price per square foot of that game room is going on \$20? Or it was for similar listings a few floors down.”

“So? Big deal, twenty bucks.”

Hannah snorted. “How big do you think that room is? I’d say easily twenty by twenty. Probably bigger, honestly – I could probably lie three of me in a line past the couch, and those are big couches. Yeah, maybe more like twenty-five, twenty-eight...”

“Do you have a point, Hannah?”

The elevator dinged, letting them out into the hallway outside Brendan’s apartment. “My point is, you’re talking about a guy who was paying twelve grand a month for a gaming room he wasn’t using until we came along, who claims to have named his daughter after a funny poisonous robot in an ancient video game. And you’re worried he might get weird.”

“Weird-*er*.”

Gladys was on hand to let them into the apartment. This time, Toni took a few minutes to ask how she was doing personally. It felt strange to be ignoring her now that she knew a little more about her. Keon had been talking to her in the living room when they arrived, but he seemed to take their arrival as an excuse to escape what must be the uncomfortable presence of his boss’s boss’s boss’s daughter.

“Oh yeah, rolling like a caisson, baby.”

“Like a what now?”

“A caisson. Don’t know what it is, but there’s that army song, and apparently they go rolling along.” She whistled a couple bars. “I think I meant I’m doing OK. Be nice to get out of it, but I’m sure I’m preaching to the choir.”

Toni decided not to dwell on the remark, and instead gave a reassuring smile. Good influence indeed. “You’ll be out of it before you know it. You’re too young to be benched for too long with a piddly little broken foot.”

“Oh, who can say who’s too young for what. Heck, some might say you’re too young to be seducing my dad.”

Toni hadn’t been moving, but nevertheless there was a marked difference in the degree of her not moving before and after those words. He’d told her?! And the girl thought she was...?!

Before she could sputter out a defense, Gladys suddenly laughed and rolled closer, giving Toni’s hand a squeeze. “I’m kidding! So kidding. You can both date whoever you want. He’s done plenty worse, let me tell you.”

“He... he told you we were...”

“Nah, he never tells me about that stuff. But he had to move the car seats way up to fit your chair in the back, and since I’ve been doing plenty of that myself lately, it made me wonder, so I hacked his phone log and checked.”

“You... isn’t that against the law?”

“Sall good. I know a good lawyer.”

“Do you do that often, invade people’s privacy?”

“If by people, you mean my dad, yeah.” She shrugged. “My mom and dad are always sniping each other back and forth and I got sick of not knowing who was feeding me a line of bullshit, so I figured it was a lesser evil to do some snooping than to scare the shit out of them by moving in with my friend Natalie in Dubai.”

“That... I guess that’s probably... better?” Toni wasn’t sure at all.

“Anyway, I don’t deep dive where strangers are concerned. I just saw you two were setting up dinner plans, and figured it probably wasn’t to discuss build optimizations.”

“Build optimizations?” How did this girl keep making her feel like she was ten seconds behind the conversation?

“You know, for your characters. I was kidding.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Anyway, don’t worry, I’m staying out of it. Have fun, or don’t. I ain’t a hater, and you seem like a nice woman. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell him I’m seeing Keon either, by the way.”

“You’re *what?*!”

Brendan poked his head around the corner of the doorway to the game room.

“Everything OK out there?”

“Yes!” She said, far too quickly.

Gladys covered it much more smoothly, casually examining a few strands of magenta-dyed hair. Another month, another garish color. “Yeah, dad. I was just telling her the good news from Dr. Ranganekary. Going to be out of this thing any week now.” The girl shifted her volume back to conversational with Toni, and her dad returned to the game room.

“You are not smooth.”

“You are too young to be...!”

“You seem cool, so I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that was a knee-jerk response because you’re in shock, and because I poked at you a teensy bit.”

Toni took a moment to wrap her head around the thought of Keon – Keon! – dating this girl who was only a handful of years out of high school. The daughter of one of the partners of his firm, to boot. She supposed that yes, she’d gone on a date with Brendan, and while it hadn’t gone well, they had a comparable age gap between them as well and it hadn’t stopped them. Funnily, Toni reflected that she had actually only had a serious relationship with a guy in the same decade range as her once, and that had been Jacob. Admittedly, one of those had been a two-year gap when she was nineteen and a four year difference when she was in her late twenties, but Duncan had had a nine-year lead on her. Jonathan didn’t really count since he’d run off the second he heard about her accident. He was top on the Dead To Me list. In any event, she supposed the age differences really hadn’t been a problem. If anything, it made for more TV shows and movies to catch one another up on, which was good by her.

She suddenly got the impression that the girl had been letting her work through to just such a realization, and refocused. “I... well... How long has it been going on between you two? Is it serious?”

“Not too long. Three weeks since we first kissed, but more like four since I first tried to get him to.”

Almost a month, and she hadn’t picked up a thing! Maybe Keon was smoother than she’d given him credit for. She’d have to chat him up later this week and get the details from someone she was more comfortable getting them from.

Gladys went on. “And I don’t know how serious it is, but I like him. You can tell him I said that. Maybe he’ll even pull that stick out of his butt and say something nice back.”

“I’ll... find out,” Toni said. Had she just entered into a gossiping arrangement with this girl? “But I should probably get going. Game’s starting.”

“Sure is. Go crit your critters. Good talk.”

Everyone was in their places when she rolled into the game room. Keon, Remy and Brendan were huddled around what, from their giddy conversation, seemed to be a vintage first edition D&D book, signed by Gary somebody-or-other, that their host seemed to be quite proud of. Another reference she didn’t get. Jacob and Hannah were having a less animated conversation that held even less interest for her, something about the finer points of the upcoming implant patch, due out around Christmas. It evidently held some potentially promising features that pertained to her live-streams, though as Toni’s enfeebled quads strained to transport her to her spot on the far end of

Hannah's couch, Jacob was making the case that the patch would either be the biggest advance in biomechanization since the implant was first introduced, or else a total flop. Nothing in between.

Sure, now that they were long since broken up, he finally developed a flare for hyperbole. Back then, she'd longed just once to make him lose control, to push him over the edge and have him tear her clothes off of her on the spot. Or propose. An impulsive proposal would have been nice. She might not have said yes, but... well, whatever. Instead, she'd occasionally provoked him to write a quatrain to accompany a flower arrangement put together by the florist. Not the worst, not by far, but not the worst wasn't the bar she'd set for herself in those days. Ever thoughtful, the sort of boyfriend who gave her plenty of reasons to brag about his efforts without giving her nearly enough to fantasize about when he fell asleep early. But sure, the coding on his implant that would do something or other to the optic and auditory nerves to improve vision and hearing somehow, that tech crap got him more excited than she ever had.

She knew that wasn't fair, but no matter. That ship had sailed – then sunk in sight of the shore. Now here she was in her liferaft.

After a few more minutes, Jacob's omnipresent impatience to get to gaming finally beat out his excitement for dorky tech talk and his hologram harrumphed them into silence. "Hey guys, sorry to get to a late start. If it's all right, I wanted to spend a few minutes touching base on some game stuff before we kick off."

Remy boomed. "Bring on the show! Bring on the show! Bring on the..." He glared at his fellow players, who failed to take up his chant. "Fine, let's talk about the game instead of playing it."

Hannah flicked a peanut at him, but missed wide. "Somebody's just eager to get another eyeful of Sanguine's bod, sounds like."

"Yeah, and that someone is you, ya narcissist." He plucked the projectile from where it had landed between the cushions and pelted her with it; it disappeared somewhere down a wide opening in her top. She really was looking pretty cute lately, Toni had to hand it to her. In fact, she leaned over and whispered as such, basking in her friend's smile.

Jacob interjected, "Actually, we can start on that note. I'm sure some of you have noticed a few... let's say risqué moments thus far."

"More like burlesque-kay," said Hannah.

"I see what you did there. Anyway, I wanted to make sure everyone's feeling comfortable with the tone we've struck on such matters. I realize there's a bit of a distinction between our usual games where adult material happens behind the scenes, and a VR game where it happens in front of you. To that end, I wanted to make a couple points.

“First off, if at any time something is making you uncomfortable, please let me know ASAP. That goes for whether it’s an NPC or PC, if you don’t want to confront behavior yourselves. I can blur things out, fast forward past stuff, or even just break it up, whatever.”

That elicited another boo from Remy. “Booooo censorship,” he called out. Keon, she noted, merely shifted uncomfortably in his seat. No wonder. First Mayhem, and now Gladys! She was still trying to assimilate that.

“Well, to that end, another point. While I’ve been trying to keep some of the workings a bit mysterious, that’s been in part because I’d be super screwed if any of this leaked out so I’m covering my own ass. The less you know the better, really. But it’s also because I want to promote immersion. As such, I wanted to let you know that while I do personally control some major party NPCs during big dialogues or significant encounters, most of the NPCs are run according to a script, and without my knowing. That’s in large part so that you can all be interacting separately and I’m not needed in five simultaneous conversations. Not that I couldn’t, but again, immersion.”

“Wait, the NPCs are bots? You guys are doing a hell of a number on the Turing test, if so,” observed Keon.

“What the hell is the Turing test?” Remy asked.

Toni was pleased that for once, she could field an answer on a nerd subject. She only knew from having dated Jacob; he’d talked about it a lot back when they’d been together during his early days at AdZell. “The test is about whether or not people can tell the difference between a computer and a person when they’re only talking online.”

“Not all of them are bots, but yes, many are. Most. And thank you,” said Jacob. “Though in the spirit of proper humility, I’d concede that studies have shown that computers accompanied by holographic depictions are manifestly more convincing in the Turing test. There’s some cool literature I can send you guys if you’re interested.”

Nobody spoke up with a request. “Anyhoo, I’m mostly speaking up to ask if that’s been OK. I realize progress has been pretty slow this game, and I’ve let you spend a lot of time goofing around and trying out the program and some of its features. I hoped that would help you get to feel comfortable with it, and get a sense of investment in your character and in the setting.”

“No complaints here,” said Brendan, and the others soon echoed the sentiment. Jacob was right; this game had been the most slow-paced she could remember, but nonetheless, she found herself looking forward to it every week more than she could ever remember. Some of it, she knew – but would never admit – was simply being able to use her own legs again. But some of it really was the game itself.

“Great. I’m glad it’s working for you. Just please know, you’re all completely free to explore, engage with anybody you feel like engaging, and don’t feel bad about ‘side-tracking.’” Jacob used finger quotes, but it was clear from his tone alone. “I don’t

pay attention to the non-plot interactions unless combat gets initiated, or if you ask me to, but that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of easter eggs, side quests and random amusements I've put in place."

Keon raised a hand. "I'm just going with my knee-jerk reaction here, but... are we losing sight of things? I think we all agree that what you've created is very impressive, and it adds some cool dimensions. But I don't know that I like the idea of sacrificing nuanced interactions with customized and storied NPCs for an improvement in graphics." He looked around. "Am I alone here?"

There were mixed responses as everyone went around. Hannah said she'd felt like she preferred the VR, because it allowed easy interactions with a larger cast without Jacob having to invent dozens of NPCs on their whim. Brendan shrugged and said he didn't have strong expectations of what the game was supposed to be and therefore didn't object to what it had become. Remy sidetracked into a complaint about the cartoony means of revealing dice roll results (which most agreed with), but then grunted that Keon was probably right, and did half the role-playing for the group to boot (with Toni comprising the other half), so maybe their feelings should be given precedence. Jacob showed everyone how to adjust the dice display in the app's densely coded settings, but didn't respond to the latter, still in listening mode.

They looked at Toni and she shifted in her seat, not enjoying the prospect of being confrontational but having been given too long to form her opinion to not offer it.

"First, let me echo what you guys have been saying, that the game is really cool. I can't imagine the amount of work that went into designing this. Like, literally, I don't even know how it's all possible and you still have time to sleep." Even in the shimmering holographic version of himself, it was clear Jacob warmed to her praise. He always had.

"Still, I think maybe Keon has a point? Usually, we get to spend time cultivating relationships, making friends – making enemies – and having those guide the campaign. Whereas here..." She ticked off the grievances on her fingers. "Some random dudes came after us, we don't know why. Our primary NPC contact doesn't know anything, or won't tell us anything. The only lead we've found we haven't been able to talk to because she's been in a coma for, what, a month?"

"Not in-game," said Remy, still defensive about his assault on poor Ruiz.

She went on. "We have almost no friends or allies, so we're practically alone in a city with three million people living in it, and, if I'm being honest, maybe there's been a little *too* much emphasis on and availability of the, um, adult content?"

She hadn't been able to say admit it to Hannah at the bar the other week, but she'd dropped a few more eaves than she'd let on with Keon and that Mayhem woman. The two of them had worked hard to put dents in the hood of a car faster than her repair bots could buff them out. Once it had gone from taking off clothes and making out to actual penetration, she'd ducked out. After a bit, at least. Toni had never had sex like

that in her life, all aggressive and porny. Or at least what she thought porny looked like. Not a hobby of hers. Plus with Hannah going crazy last week, and even her comparably tame mini-makeout with Lane... it seemed like Remy was the only one not taking advantage. That she knew of.

Her suggestion ushered in an awkward pause and a lot of evaded eye contact, but when no one else chimed in, Jacob replied. "I didn't know there had been much of that going on, but I'll keep that in mind. I'll say I haven't initiated anything on my end, though obviously... certain strategies have been employed." He glanced at Hannah for a moment. She smirked back at him. "So to that last bit, maybe that's something for the players to take under advisement?"

Nobody responded, but the furtive looks said enough.

"As to your other points... that's all fair. Not to be defensive, but to give context, we've been off to a slower start than I'd hoped for – which is in large part me figuring out this whole thing, not a criticism of you guys – but pretty soon, maybe even tonight, we'll start getting into the meat of it. I'll see what I can do to put more hooks to latch onto, though. Thanks, Toni."

She nodded, almost shaking. Confrontational was not her way. Not at all. But Jacob knew that, and he knew she wouldn't have said as much as she did if she didn't care. She could see in his holographic eyes that he understood. Since day one, her interest in the game had been playing roles, not dice rolls.

"We good?" said Brendan. "Almost half an hour late, people. Come on, let's roll some dice!"

After some discussion of their new abilities and gear, the group was ready to go. First and foremost the group saw to the liberation of the Sin Sovereigns' captives, unfortunate women the gang had taken from around the region. Those who had people, the party ferried them where they could, and arranged transportation with some help from Mayhem and the Disciples where they couldn't. Next, after a long night's rest in the ill-maintained bedding left behind from the Sin Sovereigns occupation, it was finally time to deal with Nina Ruiz.

It had been a long night, beginning with Lane's abduction plan to the morale-boosting liberation of those poor women. It made for a long rest. The early autumn sun was nearly down again by the time the party stirred again. Ruiz had been left in one of the many vacant bedrooms on their floor of Arcadia. It had no windows, and Dirk dragged his bed in front of the door to barricade her in. Corn had the presence of mind to consider that Ruiz might be able to use her implant to contact help, and they added a signal dampener to their shopping list, expending almost all of the last of their credits. It wouldn't block calls altogether – not only was such a thing out of their price range, but it would affect the other residents of Arcadia too, and thus court trouble – but it would stop her from accessing any GPS functionality she might have. Ergo, she might be able to contact help, but with no way of knowing where she was, there could be no rescue.

“So how do we want to go about this?” Kennedy asked over coffee that evening, once everyone was awake and cleaned up. Ruiz was awake now. They'd checked that much, but the woman had said nothing to them when they peeked in the door, nor had they to her.

Dirk arched an eyebrow. “What do you mean? We ask her what's going on, and if she won't talk, we make her.”

“What does 'make her' mean? You already nearly gave her a concussion. I'm not going to torture her on suspicion. Or for any other reason.” She folded her arms resolutely.

A brief discussion of the merits and demerits of torture, and what that term entailed, followed. It was mostly self-analytical about what each PC felt their character would or wouldn't do. In the end, Kennedy was pleased that the not-torture contingency won out, the vote split between Sanguine and Dirk in the pro column and everyone else opposed.

“Fine. So, what, we tickle her into submission?”

Corn held up his hands. “Guys, we don't know anything about her. We start by having a conversation, maybe even one with an apology, Dirk, and see where it goes from there.”

“Apologize? She had us kidnapped out of our homes! And you want me to apologize for doing the same? If anything, we're even.”

“Right, so Remy’s not in wave one. Kennedy, how about you and—”

“I’ll go,” interjected Echo suddenly. “Maybe my time with Alphagia will be of use, help us determine if she’s being honest.”

It was agreed.

Ruiz was sitting on the edge of her bed when the two entered, still dressed in the now-rumpled casual jeans and blouse she’d been wearing when they’d taken her. Her hair was a mess, and there was a hell of a goose egg on the left side of her head. She looked between the two of them with naked suspicion, but Kennedy couldn’t blame her. She was handling being a captive better than Toni had, offering herself to that jerk with the tablet at Alphagia. Echo dragged in a pair of chairs they’d taken from the kitchen in Chisper’s apartment and set them opposite her.

“Ms. Ruiz,” she opened, but that was as far as she got.

“*Doctor...* oh, nevermind,” she said.

“Oh. I didn’t... fine. Dr. Ruiz. Do you know who we are?”

“Save your breath. I’m not going to answer your questions. You’re never going to lay your hands on me.”

Echo seemed content to let Kennedy speak, so she continued. “Right. About last night, I’m truly very sorry for what happened. We meant to take you with us, yes, but we never intended for you to get hurt like that. I know it probably sounds pretty hollow, but for what it’s worth, my sincere apologies.”

True to her word, Ruiz said nothing.

“Right. So... look. I want you to know, in terms of the surveillance we conducted on you, we were nothing but dupes. Fall guys. Somebody else seemed to want to know what you were up to, and they hired us to look into it.”

Ruiz snorted. “Private contractors. Bastards couldn’t even do it themselves. Look, do yourself a favor and run the other direction, forget everything you’ve seen, and hope you’ve seen little enough that they let you off the hook.”

“I’m afraid we’re already past that point. Your people kidnapped us out of our beds. The time for ‘seen too little’ is over.”

“My people...?” The woman shook her head. “No. No, it’s not going to work.”

“Dr. Ruiz, we don’t want to cause you any harm,” Kennedy began, but again she was cut off.

“You’d better get thicker doors if you mean to lie to me, girly. But if you think torture’s going to get you anywhere, you’re even bigger dupes than you think.”

Kennedy frowned at the people on the other side of that wall. “We’re not going to torture you. I promise you that. They were just afraid, and angry, and we’re calming down. I promise you that. Now please, just tell us what you know about why Alphagia dragged us into this, and we can send you on your way.”

“Never heard of them,” she said firmly.

Echo finally decided to speak. “Let’s not be childish, doctor. We know you were affiliated with the laboratory. We know you’re harboring their secrets. It’s only a matter of time until we find them, and this is your only opportunity to be on our good side when we do.”

Ruiz looked between the two of them for a moment. “I won’t pretend I understand this game it is you’re playing. You,” she said, nodding to Kennedy, “I believe when you say you’re ignorant of what you’ve gotten involved in. You...” Her eyes narrowed as she looked to Echo. “You remind me too much of someone.”

Kennedy studied him a moment, but a 6 on her Sense Motive read nothing in that steely gaze. “Who? Who does he remind you of?”

Ruiz was likewise focused on Echo’s steely eyes. “Sorry,” she said after a long pause. “I can’t remember.”

And that was all the more she said. Kennedy tried and failed her Diplomacy check, even used her *spectral impression* first. Ruiz’s eyes opened wide in shock and horror at the use of magic in spite of her reassurances that it was nothing hostile, but it didn’t do anything to open her up. For his part, Echo said he had no idea who he might remind her of, but whether or not he was on the level was no less assured. At least, Kennedy couldn’t think why he’d lie about it.

And so they took turns. Whoever wasn’t involved in the interrogating began the work of setting up their new living spaces. By the close of their third day in Arcadia (by which time they’d finally gotten back on a normal day/night cycle), they had learned nothing new from a tight-lipped Ruiz in spite of all the Bluff, Coerce and Diplomacy they could throw at her. All their Sense Motive checks turned up was that she was committed to her resistance. If not for the benefit of rest healing up their remaining damage from the fight for Arcadia, they might have pressed her more aggressively, but for now, there was no rush. Corn promised he’d pick up some medical skill at level three, but for now, it was slow going.

Meanwhile, their living spaces were a little more homey, dividing the four apartments on Arcadia’s top floor among the six of them. Dirk and Corn each took their own apartment. Echo and Sanguine shared a look before she affirmed they’d be sharing a space. Kennedy might have blushed at the implication in that glance, but then she realized that left one apartment for her and Lane. It appeared the gossip had somehow gotten out, gauging by the quiet smirks of her companions.

Kennedy was grateful they were in fast forward mode. It avoided a lot of potential awkwardness. The two agreed to have their characters remain a couple by way of not discussing it, which meant sharing a bedroom, and thus sharing a bed. Such cohabitation could have entailed a lot of uncomfortable scenarios of changing in front of one another, sharing a bathroom in the morning, and deciding where lines ought to be drawn. If this were a normal pencil and paper game, they’d simply be assumed to be

intimate behind the scenes, comfortable in their shared space. But here... after their date the other night, she wasn't exactly keen on giving it up to the guy, even if the guy was a girl. Somehow Lane's gender posed less of a conundrum for her than the rest of it, which was saying something.

As far as Ruiz was concerned, with their wounds healed up and the group ready for their next encounter, Dirk renewed his suggestion that they start breaking fingers.

"No," said Kennedy flatly. The group was gathered in hers and Lane's living room, which had somehow become the default meeting place.

"So what do we do, then?" Corn, this time. He'd been opposed to getting physical with their interrogation, as he put it, but his frustration at the game's stagnation was obvious.

Echo stroked his beard, considering. "We don't have any other leads, hardly any other contacts. If we give up on Ruiz, we seem to be at a dead end."

"We could always drive back over and kick Alphagia's front door in and demand some answers. Or maybe some kind of stealth infiltration thing, though that leaves most of us out, and poses a massive risk to anybody going in," said Lane. As one of the people with the requisite skills, her reticence was understandable.

"And don't forget if we're giving up on Ruiz, we need to figure out how to dispose of her," pointed out Sanguine, in the midst of painting her nails. "I have some ideas, if you're curious."

Echo frowned. "We can't kill her. Perhaps she's holding out for now, but everyone has their breaking point. Everyone is capable of making mistakes."

Sanguine grimaced. "No, yeah, right. I was totally kidding." Kennedy rolled her eyes at her reversal of opinion. The woman was acting like a high schooler with a crush.

"We're not hurting her," restated Kennedy. "As far as we know, she hasn't done anything wrong, much less a capital crime!"

"Innocent people aren't that tight-lipped," said Dirk. "Plus, she's seen our faces, knows our names. If she walks, we're boned. I don't like it either." He shrugged. "But unless she can convince us she's on our team, she's toast."

"We'll make such decisions when they need making. For the time being, there need be no rush. And there are still leads. We've thus far put no effort into tracing the employers who put you each onto Ruiz to begin with, yes?" Echo still wasn't having it, but didn't make a stand at least. That was smart of him. There was no faster way to make Remy dig his heels in that to tell him what to do. In fact, his suggestion had the sound of the GM trying to nudge the party in another direction, which was high time Jacob did so.

As if to forestall further discussion of murdering Ruiz, he suggested they get some food and come at the issue again with full stomachs. The players apathetically agreed;

they fast forwarded through meals, so the delay would only be a technical one. Remy would be no less out for blood after an hour when it was mere seconds to him.

Kennedy, however, thought Echo made a fine point, and asked Jacob not to commence the fast forward until she'd taken one more crack at it. The group groaned in irritation; it was one thing when they'd had living spaces to design, but having to actually sit around making chit-chat in real-time was a whole different chore. Echo offered to cover the meal out of his credits, which, although a bit meta considering the NPC couldn't understand their impatience, was considerate.

Ruiz hadn't gone anywhere. The way the Sin Sovereigns had reinforced these doors to keep their captives captive, there wasn't much of a risk. Corn had even put a camera in there that he could monitor via his improved Engineer's implant, and so far she hadn't lifted a finger to even probe the door of her improvised cell. As ever, she was sitting in the chair they'd left to her, looking up to Kennedy as she slipped inside. The smell was getting a bit ripe in here; the group had given in to Dirk's insistence that the woman not be allowed to bathe or be given a change of clothes. That boy had issues.

"You're wasting your time." Ruiz shook her head.

"I'm not worried about wasting my time; I'm worried about my comrades deciding to come down here and waste *you*." She pursed her lips, not a fan of that expression and regretting having tried it out. "Please, Dr. Ruiz. Tell me something. Anything. Some of them – more of them – are ready to start getting drastic, and I don't know how long we can keep talking them down."

"We?" Ruiz folded her hands in her lap. "Let me guess. You, maybe that little brown girl, and Echo?"

"Brown girl?" Kennedy repeated. "That's a little... coarse. Especially considering you're a Latina yourself."

"And that girl isn't, or I'll eat my shoe."

Kennedy didn't have an answer to that. She wasn't one to worry about political correctness, but seeing a middle-aged white man in brown face did occasionally rub her the wrong way. "What makes you so sure those are the ones who are trying to protect you, anyway?"

"You? You're a bleeding heart. It's all over you. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into, and you're unwilling to consider that it will have to get messy to resolve it. Lane wants to figure me out, and thinks if she stares at me long enough I'll spill whatever it is you misguided people think I have to spill. And Echo... well." She shrugged.

"What?" She leaned closer.

"I told you, I'm not telling you anything."

"No, please. What about Echo?"

“Oh, please. You really think a group like the one you’re up against would let the five of you go unchaperoned in their little playground? The future of humanity in the balance, but they’re not going to at least keep tabs?”

“Future of humanity? What are you... are you saying Echo is with Alphagia?” Kennedy glanced at the door, but didn’t hear anyone out there. Still, she quickly crossed the room and reached up to the camera, switching it off. “It’s just you and me. No one else. Please, what about Echo?”

But Ruiz only shook her head as if she were being pestered by an annoying child, chuckling ruefully. “If I told you half of what you needed to know, her people would be kicking down your doors and taking you for real this time. Unless they haven’t found you yet either, in which case it’s still only a matter of time.”

“Her people? Whose people? Dr. Ruiz, what is Echo up to?!” Kennedy hadn’t realized how thin her trust of the man was until this woman had thrown the specter of doubt onto him. The man was raw enigma – no name, no past, no associates, no explanations. She’d been willing to accept it as part of the mystery surrounding Alphagia, but... what if it was all a lie? What if he really was an agent of Alphagia, keeping tabs on them?

“You’re a sweet girl, Kennedy, or whatever your real name is. Do us both a favor and just kill me before you find out.”

Kennedy, of course, did not kill her. But once again, Ruiz put up her wall and there was no further penetrating. What had she meant? Future of humanity? Who was “her,” and who were “her” people? She couldn’t shake the sense that Ruiz was being honest with her, though even as she made her way back to her apartment, Kennedy pondered whether she was simply being naïve to let Ruiz fracture party loyalties.

After all, Echo had been there since the beginning. He had been kept in an underground cage. He’d proven useful more than once in their objectives. He’d kept confidences, provided support, and might have even taken a shining to Sanguine. Besides, he seemed to have as much reason to want to bring down Alphagia as anyone considering where they’d found him.

She kept telling herself that as she returned to her apartment. Echo had come down to tell her the food was due any moment, having also brought Ruiz’s midday meal. Bread and water, courtesy of the same pointless cruelty that inspired the no-shower mandate. She left him there to make sure she ate, having caught her previously hiding her food under the bed when they’d simply left it in the room for her unsupervised.

As for her own meal, Kennedy could smell the lingering trails of its scent in the hallway outside her apartment. It smelled really good – Toni reflected that she might have to order whatever Kennedy was having later tonight. The door to the apartment was still open, and the delivery man was standing just inside the threshold. Kennedy squeezed past him, careful not to bump into Lane, whom she could tell by the fog over her eyes was connecting to the man’s implant to pay. Looked like Brendan wasn’t about to be out-generoused by an NPC.

It all seemed pretty typical. The delivery guy was ten minutes late; the order had been fouled up, replacing Lane’s shrimp fried rice with a second helping of Dirk’s plain white rice; Sanguine said something especially foul when she scalded her mouth on her first hasty bite. These things happened, and if anything, made them question their GM’s judgment in subjecting them to such petty nuisances without fast forwarding. Only, as Sanguine produced a cash tip for the man from between her mountainous breasts, Toni did a double-take.

“Wait. I know you.”

Everyone turned to look at her, and then back at the delivery guy. “Uh, you do, ma’am?”

She stood up, grinning cock-eyed. “Yeah! Brendan, remember?” Lane looked at her blankly. “You guys, this guy was our sommelier the other night! At La Chandelle! I’d bet you anything.”

“He was?” said Lane, scrutinizing the fellow. She looked unsure.

The man looked baffled by her assertion as well, but it was the rest of the party who spoke up first. “Wait. You two went to dinner?” asked Dirk.

“Um, yes,” admitted Kennedy, blushing. Oops.

“You two as in Kennedy and Lane, or you two as in Brendan and Toni?” probed Corn.

“It was me and Brendan, but—”

“You went on a date with Mr. Gibbel...?” asked a wounded-sounding Keon in Corn’s voice, though Dirk spoke his own exclamation of shock over the top of it right as Sanguine began smugly pointing out that she’d somehow not been the one to spill the beans while Lane mumbled something a little too defensive for Toni’s comfort.

“Yeah, I’m gonna head out...” mumbled the delivery guy.

“Wait!” Kennedy cried over the lot of them. “Hold on. Brendan, do you seriously not remember him?”

“I... maybe? Sorry, I don’t remember every staff member at every restaurant I eat at. But if you say it’s him, I believe you. Do you remember his name? I know he said it, but...”

“It was... I don’t know. Something very French, I remember. What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Greg.”

“Not Gregoire or anything?”

He shook his head. “Not even Gregory, actually. Greg, even on my birth certificate.”

“You guys, I’m *sure*. The more I look at him, the more certain I get.”

“Ma’am, I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I worked for Mr. Jiang for going on four years now,” said the nervous delivery guy.

But it had to be him. His hair was different, but only slightly. Just wetter, really. But the same high cheekbones, same little mole on his cheek... she didn’t have people data-mining her wine satisfaction so regularly that it made no impression. “Do you work a second job?” she asked, as if he might have forgotten he moonlighted at La Chandelle.

“Up until a couple months ago I was a driver, but then they repoed my car so that went tits up. I mean, it, uh, ended.” He winced, then made sure his tip was securely in his pocket should they take offense.

“You know, I wasn’t going to make a big deal out of it, but I actually had the same thing happen,” said Sanguine. “Remember the night we hit Ruiz’s house?”

Corn quickly cut her off, looking meaningfully to their delivery man. “Maybe we can let the poor guy go. Sorry, just one of those faces, I guess.” He ushered the guy to the door, slipping him some more cash. “Have a good night.”

He watched the guy leave through the peephole, then turned back to Sanguine. “You were saying, about the night we murdered a bunch of guys and kidnapped Ruiz? Like was I’m sure on the news?”

“Oh.” She grimaced. “Check out Dump Stat Debi here, you guys. Anyway, one of the guys – remember the one we had to like, peel off the bumper? – I was ninety percent

sure I recognized him too. We were in such a hurry I didn't get a chance to look too hard, but pretty sure he was the same package dude who had me digisign for my neighbor's package the week before."

"Wait, really?" The redhead nodded seriously. Kennedy turned to the others. "Anybody else notice something like that?"

Nobody else had.

"So what now?"

Lane sat back down, her big brain clearly hard at work. "I don't know. Jacob, is this a bug? Some weird coincidence that the dude looked like her... what was it?"

"Sommelier."

"Yeah, that."

There was no answer.

"Jacob...?"

His voice responded from the ceiling. "It's part of the game."

Kennedy frowned, hands on hips. "Could you be a little more cryptic?" But he didn't say anything further.

Dirk was looking, if anything, excited. "Guys, Jacob wouldn't have us wasting this much time on it if it weren't something. We just don't know *what*. We—"

There was a soft knock, then the door swung open. Echo was standing on the far side, herding Nina Ruiz in ahead of him, blindfolded as always on the occasions they let her out of her room. She nearly tripped over the discarded food box by the door, but Echo kept her upright with a firm hand on her belt.

"Sorry, but I heard the delivery man leave, and I didn't want my food to get cold. Figured if we're going to decide her fate, perhaps it might be motivational for her to witness the discussion." He ushered Ruiz to the only remaining spot aside from his, on Kennedy's ottoman. Her knees popped as she slumped down on it, having barely been allowed to walk anywhere in days. The removal of her blindfold revealed a sullen glare beneath.

Dirk spoke around a mouthful of rice. "No worries. We were just having a little *Black Mirror* moment."

Echo accepted a container and chopsticks from Sanguine with a gracious nod. "Oh?"

"Yeah, Kennedy said she recognized the delivery guy. Her sommelier. On a date the other night with Brendan."

His eyebrows raised. "Oho. Stressful situations can breed romantic feelings, I've read. Congrat—"

"No," Kennedy interrupted. "Um, Brendan and I, um, in the... real world. We went out Friday night, and that guy was our sommelier."

"Real world?" He looked puzzled. "Who is this Brendan? Another contact?"

She rolled her eyes. "I mean, out of the game. Lane, Brendan... don't be obtuse."

"I don't mean to be, but I'm not sure I follow. Is this some magicianian jargon I'm not familiar with?"

Everyone had gotten so used to ignoring their silent, sulky hostage that it was quite a surprise when she spoke. "You're sure it was the same man?"

In near unison, all heads turned to the woman on the foot stool. Her eyes were wide, and most of the color had drained from her face. "I'm 99% sure," said Kennedy. "Does that mean something to you?"

"They found us. *Mierda!*" She looked around, panicked. "Is he far? Can you still catch up to him?"

The windows were no longer boarded up, so Dirk was able to peer outside. "He just walked off the front steps." He watched a moment longer, then grinned. "Looks like the poor prick's bike didn't survive the ten minute journey into Arcadia. He's on foot now."

Corn regarded her sternly. "Why, Nina? Who is he? What do you know about it?"

"There's not time! You have to stop him! If he gets away, you will not have a second chance, understand?"

"She's lying," cautioned Echo. "She's trying to distract us. Don't fall for it."

But Dirk and Sanguine were already on their feet, announcing plans to retrieve weapons before hoofing after him, out the apartment door and thundering down the stairs. Nobody lifted a finger to stop them, save only for another admonishment from Echo. Once they were out of the room, Kennedy turned to Lane, Corn and the more perplexed than ever Echo. "We're not killing someone – NPC or wine guy or whatever the heck he is – on her word alone."

"Thank goodness somebody's still using reason," said Lane, flashing her million-watt smile. She really was so pretty. Maybe it wasn't always for the best to fast forward through their cohabitation.

"And," Kennedy continued, "I have a spell battery of *levitate*."

The message was readily understood, at least by the PC's. Mr. Yenque's elevator was out of order, so it would be several minutes before the brute squad could make it down there. If they caught up to him first, they could use words rather than weapons and avoid the quagmire they'd steered themselves into with Ruiz.

"Let's go," said Corn.

"Hang on. It can only support two of us. I went with the cheapest one."

Lane once more seized her hand. "Then let's go, my genius."

She liked the way he said that. It reminded her that it came from a player who was practiced in praising a woman's intelligence, so much so he could call someone a genius without so much as a hint of sarcasm. "Yeah?"

"Hell yeah. I still think we make a hell of a duo."

The two rushed out to the fire escape, where Kennedy retrieved the battery from the pouch on her belt and pressed the activator end against her temple. There was a warm hum of electrical energy, and then the battery dissipated into ash, somehow without singeing her fingers. Below, Greg – or whatever his real name was – was visible rounding the corner the next block down. Kennedy sat on the railing and swung her legs out into space. The next moment, she leaned forward off the railing... and floated.

By concentrating, she was able to spin in place to face the balcony. “Ready?”

Wordlessly, Lane followed suit, rotating over the railing, and stepping out onto Kennedy’s shoes. She felt heavy, but the magic was strong enough to support the two of them. The young Latina wrapped her arms tightly around Kennedy’s neck.

Then, suddenly, Lane pulled Kennedy’s face down to hers and pressed their lips together. After a moment of surprise, Kennedy’s eyes closed, and her mouth opened in acceptance.

Why did it feel so right, when everything with Brendan had felt so... not?

As they hovered down to the sidewalk, hair whipping about in the Windy City’s namesake, Kennedy’s hands slid down to grasp the Latina’s plump round backside. It was decidedly enviable.

“For support,” she said, grinning eye to eye.

“Better not let go then, baby.”

Then they were all back in Brendan's game room. Jacob's hologram basked in the excited chattering of his players, speculating about what was happening and what it might mean, but offered nothing by way of clarification. Corn set up a discussion thread via implant before they left the apartment. Toni volunteered to help tidy up, and with a knowing smirk, Hannah, her ride, told her to take her time and headed out to wait in her car.

"So... see you next week, yeah?" said Brendan at the entrance to the elevator a short while later.

She seized the front of his shirt and guided his face down to hers, where she confirmed that it hadn't been merely her imagination that she preferred Lane. From the awkward look on his face, she wondered if he felt the same way about Kennedy. Who wouldn't? She was preferring Kennedy more and more herself.

Toni could barely stand.

Kennedy? She could *fly*.

"It's a date."

Chapter Nine

The Grease

“Oh hey there. Say, while I have you—”

Dirk shoved Mr. Yenque aside and kicked open Arcadia’s front doors. Around the front steps of the building, pigeons scattered. His eyes scanned up and down the street in both directions. Jacob didn’t reveal the results of his Perception check, as usual for when he was trying to conceal whether the lack of results came from a poor roll or a lack of anything to perceive. Just as well. He wasn’t in the mood for some cheesy graphic to present the die. One of these days he’d toggle that setting off, but for now, he was on a mission.

He was in a mood. The same mood he’d been in all week.

“Split up. I’ll go south, you take north,” he suggested quickly. Not like he could rely on Sanguine for direction. Hannah had taken her character’s Int score a little too seriously. She turned to the left alongside him. “North. That’s to the *right*.”

She held up her hands, thumbs extended. “Oh. Yeah, the one that makes an L. On it.”

“Jesus, Sanguine.”

“Whatever. And remember, we’re looking to capture the delivery guy, not kill him.”

“No shit. I know.”

“Do you?” Her eyes flickered to where their superintendent was still picking himself up off the floor just inside the building. Her point made to her satisfaction, she was dashing off in her prescribed direction, and he his.

Delivery guy. Greg, someone had said. Blue shirt with the store’s logo. Black hair. Had he been wearing a jacket? It was still late summer in-game, so he wouldn’t think so. But he wasn’t sure. He told his eyes not to scan exclusively for blue. Was he running? He had no reason to think he was being followed. Why were they even doing this? Because that tight-lipped cunt Ruiz finally decided to speak up? Now here they were, scattered and looking every which way but hers.

Whatever. Remy was a lot less interested in thwarting Jacob’s attempts at misdirection, and a lot more eager to find the delivery guy and pound some answers out of him. Or just pound him. He didn’t really care. It would blow off some steam, and the lid on his pot was already about to blow off.

Like that, the Duels were over. The team was still admiring their second place trophy, as was their coach. It was real silver with all sorts of ornate and intricate detailing, genuinely artisanal. The Midwest Small Catholic League Women's Track and Field Championship – or the Duels, as its participants referred to it – was the only tournament outside the NCAA championships that Saint Andrew's was eligible to compete in for which the trophy was held year to year. Most of them were visibly cheap, dime store junk that schools could stick in a trophy and hope nobody looked too closely at. The Duels was a big meet, with some very competitive schools, and Saint Andrew's would only hold onto their prize until it was time to award it to someone next year.

It was, as he'd be sure to point out to the athletic director when his annual review came up, a big deal.

It was also the end of the competitive season. They hadn't qualified for the championships, though that wasn't likely to be held against him. Schools their size, with their budget, simply did not compete on that level. They'd been lucky to do as well here as they had. A couple fortuitous injuries from ranked competitors and a flight delay that had kept Saint Catherine's from attending and securing another gold had played a part. Still, his girls had ran their asses off – and for his shot and disc athletes, thrown their hearts out – and he couldn't be prouder.

It was a long bus ride back to Saint Andrew's, so he signaled the driver to get moving the moment they were loaded up. As it was, they'd be stopping in Omaha overnight, with a long day of driving to follow. He waited for the girls to sort out their seating but interrupted before anybody got too settled. Remy didn't doubt his ability to make them listen, but it was a lot easier if they weren't already distracted by something.

"Now I don't want to make a big speech or anything, so don't get your panties in a wad," he began. "I just wanted to tell you all how proud I am of all of you. That goes especially for our seniors. Joi, Autumn... on second thought, I'll stop listing you all before I screw up and leave somebody out. But you guys did amazing."

"Did Natty break the school record?" called someone from the back of the bus. Probably whoever was sitting next to Natty herself. A brief chant of "Nass-TEE, Nass-TEE" followed from the girls, the object of the chant grinning ear to ear all the while.

Her 800-meter run had been a sight to behold, he had to admit. As much grief as she'd put him through this year, that might have been worth it. 2:01 78 had been less than half a second off the Duels record, and he'd promised to check Saint Andrew's as soon as he had time. Not that he needed to. The team had been in sorry shape before Remy had taken the reins, and he knew full well nobody had come close to such a time. Still, with several other very impressive achievements under their belts, and a less certain prospect of a new school record for Ramona in the triple jump, he didn't want to center Natty's swollen ego more than it already was.

“I’ll look into that soon, I promise. Let’s give it up for all the personal bests we had this weekend though, eh?” He rattled off the list, soliciting help from the girls. There had been a lot of them. Whatever had lit a fire under his team, he’d have to get some kindling for it.

“So remember, we’ll meet up Tuesday in the locker room to make announcements and talk about off-season workout expectations, but for now, I want you all to feel good about what you’ve accomplished this season, and what you’ve helped your teammates accomplish. You ladies did something a lot of very tough competitors tried very hard to stop you from doing. You left their flabby asses in your dust, ladies.”

He paused for cheers, applause, and finally cut them off when someone tried another chant for Natty. “OK, that’s it for Coach talk. We should be in Omaha in...”

“Two hours twenty minutes,” offered their driver.

“Two and a half hours. Seasons over, so just this once I’ll order up some pizzas and pop as we’re getting close. Dinner, then lights out. We’re leaving bright and early tomorrow, and with midterms starting Monday, I don’t wanna hear about anybody sneaking out for beers with the fellas. Am I understood?”

A few of them responded, enough to mollify him, and the rest returned to their conversations as the bus rolled on to Omaha. Joi, who had adopted him as some sort of surrogate father, took her seat next to him and promptly fell asleep on his shoulder. He was used to it by now. Such displays might have made him nervous earlier in the season, but it was Joi, and the girls knew she was incapable of scandal. They’d gotten used to it, and gradually, he’d let his guard down. For the first time in his coaching career, his team was a second family, and even as he drifted off to sleep, a little smile remained.

“Hey, you. Yeah, the fucktard on the hoverboard,” called Dirk from the mouth of the alley.

“Eat me, geezer!” the teen yelled back, and started the board away from him.

Obviously Dirk would be hard-pressed to keep up with the boy. That was why he’d chosen him. That, and the little smirk on his face that had told him he’d be the sort to give some pushy adult the bird. Which was why Dirk was already raising his gun.

“Subsonic wave pulse emitter” was a hell of a name for a relatively low-level weapon. Considering the kinds of stuff the Near Future rulebook listed for high level characters – disintegration beams, mini-nuke launchers, and Remy’s personal favorite, the oh-so-sexy-sounding Class IV High-Frequency Vortex Gatling Cannon – this little fella had some nerve, putting on such airs. Still, he’d liked the feel of it, and on top of that, the tightly focused sound waves it fired were nearly silent, which he could imagine being useful in any number of scenarios.

Such as shooting twentyish-year-old kid in the back in broad daylight.

The gun was back in its holster in the next moment, and the people who’d seen him draw and aim it seemed to relax when there wasn’t any indication of it having been fired. They hurried on their ways, though. Good. It meant nobody had seen the kid go down. Dirk trotted down the alley to where he lay groaning next to a heap of garbage spilling out of a nearby dumpster and looked down at him.

“So again, hey you.”

The kid rolled over onto his side, glaring hatefully up at him as he rubbed at the place he’d been shot. “You fucking shot me, man!”

“I set it to nonlethal. Don’t be a pussy. Now all I wanted to know was if you’ve seen a delivery guy walk by in the past five, ten minutes. A little shorter than me, black hair, blue shirt.”

“Fuck you, asshole!”

Dirk once more drew the pulse emitter, this time switching it to lethal damage before depressing the trigger. The hoverboard trembled in its place a few inches off the ground, then suddenly contorted, the plastic buckling and shredding in a dozen different places, the magnets on the underside warping along with them. It collapsed on the ground, ruined.

“Do you know what that thing cost?!”

“No, and since you probably stole it, I’ll bet neither do you. But I know what this baby cost,” he said, pressing the business end of his weapon against the boy’s knee, “and it was worth every fucking penny.”

An aftershock made another piece of the hoverboard pop off; a piece of a sticker on it featured the number four, no doubt Dirk’s roll for his Coercion check, but his implant’s feed showed the roll with a +5 circumstance bonus, which let it succeed at the modest DC needed to intimidate his pathetic target.

As it so happened, the kid had not seen the delivery guy.

“And since I’d rather you not try to stir up any trouble for me...” Dirk switched back to nonlethal and gave the kid a second shot. This time, he was out cold.

Why were they even chasing this dude? Yeah, so Toni had said he’d looked like their waiter, and yeah, Jacob had given some bullshit reply, cryptic as usual. If they’d asked him – which they hadn’t – everybody was making way too big a deal out of this. If there was one thing Jacob fed on, it was an opportunity to make his players pounce on conspiracy theories. Remy knew full well that often as not, they were only being paranoid and Jacob didn’t even come up with a conspiracy until after they started looking for one.

That time his NPC Phayde had disappeared? Yeah, Jacob had told him after the fact that he’d had only told them she’d wandered off so Keon would take interest and try to find her. She’d been waiting out back behind the inn to share a little backstory and initiate a possible side quest. Instead, Keon’s character – had that been Elebris, or Chivon? whoever – had ignored Phayde altogether, right up until he became hyper-suspicious when it turned out the prince had been murdered that same night. Then, Jacob had invented this whole thing where Phayde was the daughter of the Abyssal lord Hemolkra just to reward their attention to detail.

When they found Greg, Jacob would probably have some weird quest to spark with it, which meant that eventually, somebody would assuredly find him. No GM liked to have their plans rot on the vine because of bad rolls. As such there was no need to worry about escape, and thus Dirk was free to pursue him by whatever means most amused him. Echo had already responded to Dirk’s text, confirming that the Dragon Chao restaurant was in the opposite direction, so their delivery guy had in all probability never even come this way. Whatever. Too late to turn around now, and Sanguine probably had this covered.

Dirk resumed his southbound patrol. Just to be thorough.

“Hey, Coach.”

Remy started. He’d been staring out the glass door of the hotel for so long he’d nearly fallen asleep. “Jesus, you snuck up on me, Joi.”

“Sorry!” She flashed a sympathetic but nevertheless amused grimace. “Whatcha doing out here?”

What he was doing was watching for the return of Miranda, Natty and Lynette from wherever they’d snuck off to. He’d seen them getting into a car from the window in his room, and they’d been long gone by the time he’d gotten down here. That had been four hours ago, and from the way they’d been dressed, he doubted they’d been stepping out for a pack of gum.

“Just keeping everybody honest,” he said vaguely. “What about you? Trying to sneak out to enjoy that wild Omaha nightlife?”

Joi giggled. “I heard there’s actually some pretty cool places here. That’s what Natty was saying earlier, anyway. But nah, I just knocked on your room to say thanks and everything, and you weren’t there, so... I found you.”

“Thanks? What’d I do to deserve thanking?”

She sat down on the bench beside him. It was hard, and the plastic cold, but it was the place he could be closest to tear his girls a new one where they got back. Joi wrinkled her nose, as her dress was short enough that the bench was making direct contact with the uppermost part of her thighs.

“You know, for this season. We did so good at the Duels and all, a tiny little school like ours coming in second. I know we complain sometimes when you work us really hard, but it really did pay off, just like you said.”

He rolled his shoulders, disused to praise. Even as a kid, his dad’s way of praising him for doing well on the track had been to show him times from higher ranked kids who’d done better. The old man had thought it would motivate him to try harder. Maybe he’d been right. At his ten-year reunion, his name had still been in a number of places on the plaques by the athletic director’s office.

“Bah, you did the work. I just cracked the whip and told you when it wasn’t good enough.”

But she only smiled. Remy had never met a woman who smiled at his cranky ass like Joi. He’d gotten to know her pretty well this past semester, after her impromptu sleepover had turned into popping in whenever she was bored or wanted to hide from whoever. The girl was always smiling.

“Well thanks for doing that, then. And, you know, thanks for being so nice to me all the time. I know I can be kinda clingy – all the guys I’ve dated have always complained about it – not that you’re like a *guy* guy!” She winced. “But all I mean is that you’ve been really nice. All last year my mom was trying to talk me into transferring somewhere closer to home, but... I dunno. Anyway, just thanks.”

“Uh, sure. Not sure what I did, but you’re welcome.”

“You’re sure you don’t wanna come hang out? Everybody’s, um, partying pretty hard back there, but I’m not really in the mood.”

Remy glanced out the window. He could chew those girls out in the morning, he knew. Not that he was reading anything into Joi’s request, but surely sitting around his hotel room watching movies beat freezing his butt off in the entryway. He’d shown her the ropes the past few months, and she was finally in possession of some decent taste. Plus it could be hours yet out here. There was really no point in waiting.

He looked back to Joi, hands clasped in front of her, hopeful. Beautiful. And way, way, way off limits.

“Wish I could, but I got a job to do. Try to have a little fun for a change, huh?”

Her smile slipped, but only just. “Sure, Coach. I’ll see you in the morning, I guess.” And with a hug so fast he almost wasn’t sure it had happened, she retreated back into the hotel. Good. She ought to be partying with the team like the rest of them, not ducking out to keep his sorry ass company.

It was after one in the morning when Remy finally saw a car turn onto the road outside their hotel. Closer to two. He’d repositioned himself to an old pleather sofa in the lobby while he kept watch for his star athlete and her little posse to make their way back to him.

The car stopped out front, and he could make out the two girls piled into the back with ease. Miranda and Lynette. No sign of Natty, though even as he took stock of her absence, he saw another pair of headlights turning onto the drive. The girls tripped out of the back seat, still in the throes of giggling at whatever inane banter they’d been sharing, and stumbled into the hotel.

Their smiles evaporated at the sight of their coach’s livid glare, even Miranda’s. “Uh, hi Coach.”

“Don’t you ‘hi Coach’ me. Was I in any way un-fucking clear about expectations tonight?”

“No, Coach,” mumbled Lynette.

“You’re drunk?” It wasn’t a question, and neither girl answered. Lynette was only a sophomore, and though Miranda was a senior, he kept tabs on his athletes well enough to know she didn’t turn twenty-one until spring semester. “Give me your IDs.”

“Coach...!” whined Miranda. But Lynette was already hastily fishing hers out of her purse. Remy had to correct Miranda when she tried to hand him her actual driver’s license, but with only a final pout, she forked over the fake, too. The experts had sworn that shifting to digIDs was going to put a stop to this sort of thing, but bars made good money off of college kids with fakes, and the digital kind were way harder to pull off.

“We’ll talk about this back on campus, I guaran-goddamn-tee you. Now get your asses up to your room. If I hear a mouse fart coming out of your room, I’ll have you

running twenty laps a day for the rest of the fucking year.” Miranda’s smoldering glare didn’t escape his notice. “Go ahead. Test me.”

Lynette elbowed her roomie, and the two glumly hustled toward the elevator. The clerk at the desk made a show of shuffling around fliers for local businesses to show how much he was not paying attention to the drama, though the prick didn’t miss the opportunity to ogle the young athletes’ backsides.

The elevator was already on its way when Natty came in. Unlike her predecessors, she didn’t have the grace to look even a little bit abashed. Moreover, her pupils were enormous, her eyes wild, hands fidgeting with the hem of the skanky little dress she was wearing. Thanks to that little tic, didn’t fail to notice that the tips of her fingers were just a little bit blue.

“Heya Coa—”

“What the fuck was that?” he snapped.

“Huh? Oh, we were just out celebrating a little. It’s no big deal, Coach. You should try it sometime. Take a load off, ya know?” She snickered, wobbled, snickered harder.

“No. I mean, what did your driver just hand you?”

That wiped the smile from her face. “Whuh...? He didn’t hand me anything...”

The lie was so blatant he didn’t acknowledge it, simply snatching her purse away from her and going through the contents. She feebly tried to grab it away from him, but high and drunk as she was, she didn’t have any luck.

Soon enough, he found what he’d expected to see. A tiny little baggy with four little blue pill capsules in it. No wonder her driver hadn’t wanted it left behind in his car. He’d had to have seen how high the girl was, and it had been smart of the guy to check the back seat. Otherwise next thing he knew, he could be explaining to some badges why he was ferrying drugs around town.

“Breathers? Fucking *breathers*, Natty?”

“I’d have brought a chill pill too, if I’d known you were gonna freak out on me like this.” She laughed, then hiccupped, then nearly fell over, then laughed again.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but they were still very much there when he opened them. A fairly new drug, but oxycyclene had made the rounds quickly. Originally created to help ease circulation and oxygen flow in patients who needed that sort of thing, they’d quickly been adopted both as a performance enhancer for athletes, as well as a party drug for the way the extra oxygen hit the brain. His grandmother had been on the things during her final months, and she’d basically been stoned 24/7. Not that she’d complained.

Natty, on the other hand, went right on bitching at him as he snatched out her own fake ID almost as an afterthought.

“Come with me.”

He all but dragged her behind him, since what he was already worried he might do was something he couldn't do in front of witnesses, even some derpy hotel night clerk who was probably high on something himself. Natty grumbled, but didn't resist. Hell, she needed to hold onto him for balance to keep from falling on her ass. Mercifully, the hallway was empty and silent, though he was well aware of the peepholes in the doors lining the halls.

"Do I even need to ask if this is something new?" he said once he'd closed the door to his room behind them. It was freezing in here, the AC having finally kicked in during his long wait for his missing athletes.

"The ID? Or the pills? 'Cause, well, both I guess." She laughed, then snorted, then fell back onto his bed. Good. He handled her better when he could loom.

"Were you on this shit during the meet?" His eyes narrowed.

"What? Fuck no, that was all me!" she insisted, indignation flaring in brown eyes.

"And why should I believe you? Junkies and cheaters aren't exactly known for the reliability of their word."

"I'm not a fucking junkie, Coach! I said I didn't—"

She was practically screaming, and he hastily clamped a hand over her mouth. She was too dizzy to resist. "You're going to want to keep your voice down, and here's why. As I know you know, if you get caught using this shit – fuck, if you get caught simply having this shit on your person – you're not only going to lose your scholarship, you're going to be banned from competition for life. Of course, that'd be the least of your troubles since simply being in possession of them is also a mother fucking felony."

She stopped struggling, and he removed his hand. Natty had taken the hint and remained silent. He wasn't done, though. "That means once you get out of prison for your federal crime, you will forever after be a convicted felon. I know you didn't grow up in the best area, but I assure you that you don't know shit about how hard shit can get until you're checking 'ex-con' on every job application you ever fill out for the rest of your life. You might be surprised how explaining that you have two years of college under your belt doesn't do much to unbiass a prospective employer after you have to tell him you got busted for a drug offense."

"You're going to tell the police?" It was almost impressive how much vitriol she could still put into a whisper.

"I... don't know. Fucking hell, Nat. I'd been psyching myself up to chew you morons out for breaking curfew to get drunk. I didn't think I'd have to deal with fake IDs, much less *this!*"

"I told Miranda we didn't need the fakes, but she got them anyway. Like a bar is going to turn away a bunch of hot college girls just because they're underaged."

Remy had been thinking the same thing, actually, but he knew that if he decided to make a case out of it, having physical evidence always made it easier on his end. He'd

had a bulimic on the team a few years back, and Saint Andrew's health center wouldn't do shit about it. He'd finally had to let her go before any of her teammates followed in her footsteps. Whole teams had gone down for that.

"Nat, do you know what this means?" He was only realizing it as he said it out loud. "Once this gets out, it's going to be a chain reaction. I can't in good conscience let you take credit for a run time you only got because you were on this shit. Which means I have to tell the Duels coordinators, which means they'll report it to the NCAA. So if I don't report it, that makes me complicit in a cover-up, which... well let's not pretend you care about the consequences to anyone but yourself in all this."

"For the tenth time, I said I didn't use during the meet." Her glare was easily a match for his, dilation be damned.

"Oh no? You just happened to have these things on hand, but didn't think to use them when they'd actually benefit you? Bullshit. What about your other run times? How long has this been going on?"

"Coach, we all got drug-tested last month and you know I came up clean. I know what the fucking consequences are, OK? Why do you think I waited until now to take them? My grandpa had some in his medicine cabinet and I swiped them over fall break. I figured I'd try one once the season was over and they stop testing. I wasn't cheating. I was just celebrating – something you might wanna try for once in your own miserable life, you ginger cocksucker."

"That's the attitude you wanna take right now? Because I have the athletic director's number a thought away from dialing, and if he gets one look at your little blue fingers, he's going to have you expelled before we're even back to campus." A temporary blue tinge in the extremities was a widely known side effect of the breathers. The stuff was sometimes even called "the blues," or at least it was on TV. This was his first time seeing it without the benefit of a makeup artist, and he had to say, it was pretty conspicuous.

"Fine. I'm sorry I snuck out, OK? But I really didn't do anything wrong for the meets. That time was all me, Coach. I swear to God."

"What about Miranda and Lynette? You give any of that shit to them?"

"No. I didn't even take it until I was on the way back. That's why I took a different car, because I knew those two can't keep their mouths shut. Plus I heard if you do it while you're drinking it can make you really sick, but if you do it after—"

Remy didn't really care what idiot rumor she'd picked up, and held up his hand. She shut up immediately. Whenever he had a girl who'd royally fucked up, he'd learned that sometimes the best thing to do was a little pacing. It gave him time to think, and it gave them time to stew in what they'd done, even depriving the little minxes of their default tactic of trying to melt him with pouty looks. Of course usually, the up-fucking

was something like missing a practice or messing up their uniform, not the shitstorm Natty had put herself in.

“I believe you,” he said at last. And he did. Drug-testing happened at least once a season, often multiple times, and she had indeed been clean. Plus, he’d spent enough time working with these girls to tell the difference between a girl spraying perfume out of her mouth to throw him off the scent, and one who was genuinely affronted at a false accusation. Natty was the latter. She’d beaten that time in practices twice this year, so he knew she was capable of it without the help.

“Good, because I didn’t even do anything—”

“Second,” he said, before she could piss him off even worse, “this is your only warning. If I even think I see you fucking around the rest of the year, your scholarship is gone, run times be damned. I don’t just mean the breathers, either. Keep drinking like I know you do, let your grades slip, so much as fantasize of mouthing off to me at practice... done. Understood?”

“Understood,” she grumbled.

“And finally,” he continued, “you have to sleep in here tonight.”

She instantly made a face. “What? Coach, are you—”

“Don’t even start that shit. It took me half a second to see you’re high, and if you go stumbling back to your room and any of the others see you like this, everybody’s going to know before we’re even back on the bus. Plus they’ll know I must have seen it, which means they’ll know I know. So we’ll tell them you came back drunk as a skunk and I had to hold your hair out of the toilet all night – which will help explain the many, many things I’ll be putting you through this off-season.”

“What? But I—”

“One more word. One more.” Her glare spoke volumes, but not out loud. “Good. Now get your ass to bed. Looks like I’m sleeping in a fucking chair tonight, so thanks for that, too.”

The neighborhood kept getting worse as he continued south. Maybe it was the transition from evening to night, or perhaps the failure of gentrification to restore the Chicago's south side to repute, but in any case, it was almost enough to make him uneasy. Tough-looking characters decorated every street corner, and whether they were criminal elements or simply the local denizens, he couldn't have said. But gone was the prospect of casually drawing his gun without having to dodge a few bullets in retaliation. That much was clear.

It had been over an hour now, and he was more or less certain that whatever slim chance he'd had of finding his quarry was gone. Nobody had checked in with any updates, so with his delivered food long cold, he bought a hotdog from a street vendor and wolfed it down on a dimly lit stoop.

He should go back, he supposed. Remy wondered if he could even get a cab to come to this neighborhood. While the game's imitation of Chicago was impressively accurate from a distance, up close, it was plainly exaggerated. Which was good, he thought. The game world ought to have places like this, full of deadbeats and lowlifes, places where the bad guys were clearly distinct from the good, removing any of the murky uncertainty that was all too present in the real world. Here, the enemies were obvious, and they came with XP and loot.

"You lost, man?" came a deep voice from behind him. Dirk turned to face a small group of young men. If this had been one of the video games he'd enjoyed as a kid, he could well imagine mouse-overing them and seeing the word "thug" announce their non-identities. A racist trope, to be sure, but he'd leave it to Brendan or Keon to whinge about that PC bullshit.

"Nah. I'm right where I wanna be."

"Cause you look like you lost," said another of them. Several of his buddies seemed to agree.

"I'm going where I'm going, and if you're looking to get in the way, maybe you're the ones who ought to think about getting lost."

"Guys, it looks like maybe this asshole needs a reminder of whose neighborhood he wandered into," said one.

Dirk grinned, and cracked his knuckles.

It was a short fight, as random encounters generally were. In the end, Dirk suffered only a single Hit Point in real wounds, but had lost all of his Stamina Points and wasted his once per day rage. Still, it had felt good to blow off some steam knowing he wasn't actually hurting any real person. And it had been a good field test for his new melee weapon, the Mk I shock knife. He hadn't managed any crits with which to test its Stun property, but still, it had gotten the job done.

The dudes only had a few dozen credits between them, which Dirk readily pocketed. With that, he glanced around to get his bearings, and continued on southwards.

“For the love of Christ, Coach, get in the bed before I seriously lose my shit.”

It was the third time she'd offered – demanded, really – and he finally acquiesced. He'd tried his best to fall asleep in the room's stiff wooden chair, but there was nothing doing. Maybe when he'd been Natty's age he could have managed it, but regardless, he hadn't managed a wink.

He stayed on top of the covers, and kept as far from her as he could without risking falling off the bed. She didn't make it easy. Like in most other areas of her life, Natty had positioned herself in the center and essentially taken over. Still, she made a small effort to give him space, and within minutes, he was asleep.

He had no real concept of how long he slept, but the transition from whatever fleeting dream he'd been enjoying to the realization that there was a very real tongue sliding in and out of his mouth was some time coming. In fact, by the moment he first fully appreciated that Natty's body was on top of him, her sex pressed to his, her fingers combing through the hair on a chest he didn't remember exposing, he'd already wasted quite a lot of precious time reciprocating.

Later – mere moments later – would produce a whole slew of very practical thoughts. That he was her coach. That she was more than ten years his junior. That such an act could cost him his career if anyone ever learned of it. That he had just become the victim of a crime, even if nobody would ever believe it happened that way.

First, though, came a great many less helpful realizations. That her mouth still tasted deliciously of Long Island ice tea. That she couldn't very well tell anyone about this without revealing what she'd been doing in his hotel room. That he deserved to cut loose a little after all the grief she'd put him through. That her ass felt as incredible as he'd always thought it looked.

“Natty, what...?” That was all he managed. In the absence of any more substantial resistance, she got to work on his pants. He should definitely stop her, Remy told himself. This would be an easy opportunity. But his back arched at the appropriate moment to let her tug them right off, and before there was any glimmer of request for consent, he was inside her.

Remy was well aware that women's pussies didn't loosen up with exposure to more partners, at least intellectually. Still, Natty's reputation as a party girl – a nice way of putting what most people around campus called her – had nevertheless made him think, in those stray moments when he'd fantasized about just such a rendezvous, that she'd be less than snug. How wrong he was. Everything about her young body was tight. Tight, and firm, and powerful. His mind was swimming as she rode him, the bed frame pounding against the wall in an erratic rhythm. It didn't even occur to him to worry who might be on the other side of that wall taking note of the telltale cadence, but luckily he'd taken the room on the end, so she could pound the headboard right through the fucking wall for all he cared.

In his sluggish brain, the notion fixed itself that he basically owned this girl. Her crappy fake ID and pills in his bags, and her scholarship in his hands. It was emboldening. He quickly lost any sense of inhibition, and acted on pure id. He wanted to feel Natty's tits, so he grabbed them. Small, yes, but he liked them that way. They actually felt bigger than they'd looked all the times he'd seen her in sports bras or towels around the locker room. Then those memories made him want to see this girl's body, so on went the light.

She didn't disappoint. Now that the absence of AC had turned the temperature in the room the other direction, her body glistened with sweat from her exertions, thin rivulets dripping between perky, petite breasts. Her nipples were tiny, two nearly black pebbles with areolae smaller than his thumbnails. Remy covered them just so, to be sure. They tingled against her skin.

He saw then that her pussy was shaved. That he had not imagined. He already knew he'd feel like an old lecher for this later, so it felt right that she should strive to make herself look even younger.

Then he came. It was uncomfortably clear that she didn't, but she was evidently done with him all the same, sliding off before he'd even finished spewing his load.

Natty began gathering her clothes from beside the bed, stepping back into them as she made her way to the door. She wasn't even looking at him.

He sat up, head swimming. Remy didn't remember being so light-headed after sex before, but then, it had been a while. And maybe it was like that when the girl was this hot? No matter. He held up a hand and said, "Where do you think you're going?"

She pulled her top on. Had she been wearing a bra before? "Back to my room."

"Uh, no you're not. Didn't you hear a word I said?"

"I heard some of them." She knelt down to pull her boot into place. Knee-high black leather, with spiked heels. The girl knew how to dress herself.

"So... sit your ass down." He wiggled his tongue around, trying to work up some spit, his mouth suddenly very dry.

"No. I'm done listening to your bullshit tonight, Coach."

He stood up, self-conscious about his nakedness, trying not to let it show. "Bullshit? Natty, do I gotta remind you that I could—"

"You could what? Tell the AD? And I'll deny it, then he'll drug-test me, and I'll whip up some tears and tell him how you got me hooked on the stuff, faked my prior test, then made me sleep with you to keep it quiet."

"What? I didn't do any of..." He was dizzy. A deep breath, and he could focus again. The girl waited patiently. "Blackmail. You're blackmailing me."

"Only if you're gonna open your mouth again, Coach."

"Me not opening my mouth would be precisely because of the blackmail."

"Is that how that works? Gee, Coach, I learn so many things from you."

He stepped in front of her as she made for the door. “Natty, this is not going to fly. I didn’t do shit to you. You’re the one who convinced me to get in the bed. Then you jumped me in my sleep.”

“Yep. I slipped you a pill while you were still waking up, too, in case you hadn’t noticed. You really sucked that baby down. So that’s not gonna look good, if they decide to test you.” That explained a few things. Damn this bitch! “Plus with how much time Joi’s been spending in your suite this semester, there’s already been whispers. Man is she gonna be pissed if she finds out I fucked you before she could work up the nerve to try.”

“No one’s going to believe you. I’ve spent years building a solid rep at Saint Andrew’s, and everybody knows you’re the campus Segway, and a fucking bully.”

“The things a girl does to cope with abuse, ya know?” She smirked. “But hey, maybe you’re right. Maybe when the dust settles, I’ll be a disproved liar. Of course, then I’m back to being kicked out and life ruined and all that anyway, which you already threatened me with. But some people will still believe me and chalk it up to the administration protecting itself. The rest of your life, there’ll be some people who’ll look at you and wonder. That’s your *best* case scenario. So shove that up your ass and tell me how the fart smells in the morning, Coach.”

She brushed him out of her way like a cobweb and stepped into the hall, but doubled back. He couldn’t muster the wherewithal to stop her as she walked over to his bag, retrieved the fake IDs, and strode back out.

“Thanks for the fun night, Coach.” She patted his cheek, and the door swung closed.

Kennedy: *We got him. Everybody head back.*

Lane: *You guys are not going to believe this shit.*

Sanguine: *u guys beat us 2 the punch? all ready ?ed him 2 sounds lik*

Sanguine: *e*

Sanguine: *like*

Corn: *nice work guys! 10/10*

Sanguine: *fucking low int keeps autocorrecting my spellings to misspellings*

Kennedy: *Sorry! we'll explain everything. See you soon*

Lane: *you misspelled misspellings, btw*

Sanguine: *eat my booty chunks*

Corn: *Was it the sommelier?*

Lane: *It sure the hell was*

Kennedy: *And nice spelling of sommelier, since I guess we're paying attention to that now ;)*

Corn: *Hurry on back to Arcadia, gang. We're finally getting somewhere.*

So that was it. Time to head back. Dirk didn't need to reply; they'd see that he'd read it, and that should be enough. He was probably at least a mile from base by now, maybe more. He could probably pull it up on his implant's GPS, but why bother. Other than a little jog about four blocks back, it was a straight shot. You'd have to be an idiot to get lost.

Hopefully Sanguine would use hers.

He kept his head down on the return trip. He'd not had much trouble with that softball of a random encounter earlier, but his stamina was all but gone. A second one could be trouble. This neighborhood looked like there was ample opportunity for it. He'd been offered drugs three times already, and propositioned by at least twice as many hookers. However Jacob had made this place, it was certainly a richly detailed and highly clichéd hive of scum and villainy, he had to hand it to the guy.

The more he looked, in fact, the more he wondered how Jacob had managed all the complexity of it. There had to be some element of RNG to it, inserting buildings, lots, or parks to fill in gaps in the scenery. Everywhere he looked were little details fleshing out the distinctions between this Near Future Chicago and the Chicago he knew. Dilapidated street-sweeping robots scavenged for parts; pawn shops employing holographic storefronts showing guns that somehow looked both futuristic and antiquated at the same time; even the occasional overhead passage of a flying car. It seemed they weren't yet commonplace in this "near future," but neither was it uncommon to see one.

He even passed a place called The Squeaky Wheel which seemed to be a brothel, only the girls were androids. He'd noticed it on his first pass, but this time, no longer

under the pretense of a mission, he took a moment to admire it. The “girls,” each dancing around a pole in the building’s numerous red-lit windows, did look quite lifelike, though small details gave their true nature away. Many featured buttons or dials built into their skin, the function of which he could only guess at.

He walked up close to one, an android with bright pink hair and preposterously large breasts, who smiled vacantly into the distance while he studied her. A dial was in evidence on her left side, the word “tits” written on it in marker. He could only assume the things were adjustable, and couldn’t help wondering how real such a thing could feel. They sure looked fake as hell. Remy had always preferred less wasted flesh himself. He’d take an athletic body over some hourglass figure any day. Not to say he’d turn up his nose at a dish like Sanguine, but he’d take someone leaner, more toned, tighter, someone like...

And it was that the exact moment that his thoughts turned irrevocably to that fucking cunt Natalie O’Brien that he saw, of all people... Natalie O’Brien.

Natty – or rather, an android that her own mother would mistake for her – was two windows down from where he’d been studying the adjustable busty model. He did a double-take, almost having failed to notice and ready to get on with (and hopefully fast forward through) his walk to base. The thing looked just like her. Same chiseled cheekbones, same honey blonde hair with the same brown roots, same flawless complexion – only this one was plastic. She wasn’t identical – like her colleague two windows down, her boobs were way bigger than the real Natty’s, and her hips and ass had a bit too much meat on them as well, but there was no mistaking that face. He’d had it burned into his brain even before last weekend, when she’d turned his life into a waking nightmare of guilt and shame and pent-up rage, all slathered liberally with a veneer of left-over arousal.

He tapped on the glass. “Natty...?”

Remy didn’t know what he expected, but the response was the one anyone watching might have anticipated. Mechanically, her eyes focused on his and a molded smile froze on synthetic features. God, she even had those incisors that stuck forward just a little bit, like the fangs of the beast whose soul she’d co-opted. “Hello, handsome. I’m currently: available. To rent me or to make a purchase, please step inside. All transactions are made with total discretion. Look forward to seeing you!” Her voice was scratchy, filtered through a speaker that broadcast it from the other side of the glass, but he granted her wave looked pretty fluid.

He stepped inside without quite knowing why – or at least, without acknowledging it. It was outfitted much like the brothels he’d seen in movies, dimly lit and favoring the same red lighting that was used in the curtained off booths behind those windows. Immediately the apparent proprietor approached him, a tall, gaunt man

just old enough to be showing signs of gray at his temples. As he approached, his eyes lost their implant fog and focusing on him somewhat wolfishly.

“Good evening, sir,” the man said in a vaguely east European accent. His hair was slicked back and he even had a gold tooth. It was too cliché for anyone but Jacob to have invented it. “Welcome to The Squeaky Wheel. How can we make your fantasy come true?”

You’re only here to ask questions, Remy told himself. *That’s it*. “What’s the story with the merchandise? Is this stuff for real?”

“Why of course, sir! Leave the false advertising to pimps and slavers. Our girls are synthetically crafted to satisfy your every desire. Their humanity is artificial, but everything else is as you would have it. We offer you girls whose very purpose is to satisfy. They don’t judge, don’t gossip, won’t try to rob you, and don’t say no to anything.”

“Can I see one? I just want to look.”

“Why of course, sir. I have every confidence my merchandise will hold up to any scrutiny. I can upload the catalogue to your implant, if you like, or you can peruse them the old-fashioned way. They are customizable but do have some limits, so I recommend you start off with a base that’s to your liking. What did you have in mind? White? Asian? Something more exotic? Someone younger? Someone... a lot younger?”

Dirk sneered at the man for the implication in that last offer, but the fellow seemed impervious to disdain. No doubt plenty of it got slung his way. “I know which one I want to look at. One of the girls in the windows. I think... three down. The short blonde one.”

“Of course, of course! By all means, go right down. The girls are programmed to handle transactions themselves, so you can negotiate with her if you’d rather.”

“I’d rather.” Rather not have to keep listening to this smut-peddler any longer than he had to, that is. The man wished him good luck and let him proceed down the hall. The curtains that cordoned off the girls’ dancing booths lined the right wall; a series of doors lined the left. There was a video camera pointed at him, which he didn’t especially care for, but he couldn’t fault the guy for protecting his merchandise. He remembered Jacob mentioning that androids were in the game; they probably cost a pretty penny.

There was nowhere to knock, so he simply swept aside the curtain. There in front of him was the NattyBot, still wrapped around the pole in a string bikini top and skimpy sarong. Definitely a good look on her. She ceased her dancing the moment he entered, pivoting to face him. Her brown eyes glowed with an inner blue light for a moment, and the window tint increased until he could no longer see the street beyond. For the ghetto, this place had some nifty tech.

“Hello. Would you like to have a good time?” Her delivery was pleasant, almost natural, save for the content of her words. More disturbing still, it was in the real Natty’s voice, that same smoky phone sex voice that had been driving him crazy from the far side of the locker room’s semi-translucent sheet for years now.

“I’d like to know what my track runner is doing in this cyber-bordello,” he replied.

“Oh, a conversation!” She clapped her hands together enthusiastically. “I’m programmed to be conversant on a great many topics. Would you like to engage my company?”

“I’d like you to tell me what the fuck you’re doing in here.”

She giggled. “I work here. Would you like to talk about what you’re doing in here?” The question managed to drip with sincere interest.

“I’d like to punch you in your smug fucking face, you conniving bitch.”

“I’d be happy to let you. Let me delineate options! Would you like to...”

Holographic letters beamed out of her eyes, floating in the air between them. They’d be backwards to her, but he read along as she spoke. “1) Purchase an insurance policy in the event of damage to this unit? or 2) Provide a credit line so that The Squeaky Wheel can bill you for any necessary repairs or workplace absence?”

But Dirk brushed the letters aside and addressed the air above them. “Jacob? Seriously man, what the fuck is this? First you blow off my texts, again, and now you put the cunt that’s trying to destroy my fucking life as an NPC in some robo-whorehouse? What even is this?”

“I’m sorry if I have displeased you. If you’d like to lodge a complaint, I can record your feedback and leave it for the...” She rambled on about the business’s procedures in the event of an unhappy customer. But there was no response from Jacob.

“Come on, dude, answer me! This is not some goddamn wine guy in a restaurant; this is a real person who’s fucking blackmailing me! Why did you do this? What’s your game? Is this even part of anything, or are you... I don’t even know! Is this your idea of a peace offering?”

Still nothing. The girl stood patiently, smiling; evidently her programming was sufficiently advanced that she could tell he wasn’t addressing her.

Later tonight, the game would end. He would make the long commute back to Saint Andrew’s, back to his two-room suite in the dorms, not two hundred yards from where Natty was probably blowing some guy to help her on her exams in the bedroom of her deluxe suite. He’d seen those apartments before. They were much bigger, much nicer, much newer than his. And didn’t have that smell.

Then in the morning, he’d supervise the team’s exam cram. Natty had already told him she wouldn’t be attending, and in response he’d shoved his thumb up his ass and said and done nothing. After that off to southern Michigan to meet with a

prospective recruit and her family. His recruitment meetings last year had achieved an 11.4% sign enrollment rate, a personal best. By the time he got back it'd probably be going on 2AM, so even that fucking slut Natty O'Brien would be done making the rounds. Then up early for more exam cram. Where he could once more sit there wondering who, if anybody, had written him off he was a royal fuck-up, and if they'd even done so for the correct reasons. Probably not.

Tonight, though, he'd been looking forward to sitting down with his friends and playing a game. One where he was set up to win by design, where suffering was measurably rewarded, where his character got respect, or where he didn't, he could punish the fuckers who underestimated him. Where you could meet an evil priest and roll initiative and kill the son of a bitch, not apologize to him because he was your downstairs neighbor and he grew apoplectic when you watched TV without headphones after 8pm. Where rage was a class feature and not a fact of life, one usually preceded by the word "impotent."

Where he didn't have to sit there looking at his enemy and her nonchalant smirk in the face every day in the school cafeteria.

"Jacob, listen. I know that to you, GMing is your calling. I know what happened last summer crushed you. And yeah, it sucked, no lie. But you gotta get over it, dude. We all did before we got back to work the next week. Hell, some of them probably did before they put down their dice. And this game? It's impressive as hell in a hundred ways, truly. But you have to knock this shit off, man, and give us a real story to tackle. You can't sub flashy graphics and random hotties for plot and interaction."

Natty blinked; her eyelids were just barely out of sync. "One relevant NPC, one who frankly, I don't really feel like I know and certainly don't trust. One level in over three months. No dungeon crawls. Plus now whatever this weird meta-plot is with using people we know in the game, if it even is anything." Remy flicked her in the forehead. This time, no blink.

"And I mean, that's all game shit. We've had games that don't work out a hundred times, but it's more than that. It's you. You just... flaked on me, for months. I'm going through some real shit, and I couldn't even get a ten word response from my best fucking friend. Instead, you wait until game night and ambush me with this. What gives, man? Is this supposed to make me feel better? Like I'm supposed to screw a robot that looks like the bitch who's destroying my life and everything just goes away?"

Dirk let out a long sigh and shook his head. But then, just as he was about to walk away, or maybe just disconnect from the game altogether and head home early, he finally received a reply.

"It might," said Jacob's disembodied voice. "That's the point of the game right? To escape."

He didn't say anything more. In fact, Remy got the sense that he wasn't even there any more. There was a sort of indescribable dulling to the world when the GM intervened directly, and everything else became white noise. That was gone now. There was nothing left but this facsimile of Natty.

His escape.

"How much can I tweak you?"

She was suddenly animate again, no longer a blinking statue that pretended to breathe. "As a proud product of Tomoko Automation, my model is very customizable. I can grow up to twelve centimeters shorter or taller—"

"Convert to English units, you metric hunk of crap."

"Five inches shorter or taller," she reiterated, "and can adjust my bust from a range of cup sizes A to N, including a variety of shapes and densities, without significant distortion of skin tissue, as well as adjust my waist, the curvature of my buttocks, the circumference of my legs, and the length of my fingernails and hair within a broad array of parameters. Facial restructuring can be attempted, but this feature is still in beta testing."

"Don't change anything on the face," he said quickly. "Jesus. You got, I dunno, presets or something?"

"Yes. Do you have a particular body type you would like?"

"Runner."

"I think I have just the thing! Selecting preset forty-four."

It all happened at once, and after only a few seconds, she was transformed. A bit shorter, perky little tits, tight muscular ass. She removed her scant clothing unasked to solicit feedback. It only took two other modifications to shorten her hair to her shoulders and, after a brief consideration, remove her pubic hair. It sunk into her skin, and whatever holes it had receded into were invisible to his eyes.

"How did I ever bitch about transitioning to sci fi," he muttered.

She let out a rich laugh despite having no clue what he meant. "Now, would you like to select a preset personality as well, or would you prefer to continue engaging with my default?"

"I can do your personality too? Damn, Jakey, how much time did you spend designing this shit?" His friend didn't answer, thankfully. The guy knew when he wasn't wanted, even if he'd struggled of late to realize when he was.

Again the girl's eyes glowed, and another holotext list appeared of personalities. Most of them were one-word descriptions – seductress, easy, adoring, robotic. But there were a good number of specified roles, too. Schoolgirl, dominatrix, boss, and even one called "hostage." None of them quite fit, though. Yes, Natty was a girl in school, but she wasn't anybody's idea of a schoolgirl fantasy. She had seduced him, but she wasn't a seductress.

“Do I have to pick from these, or can you do other stuff?”

“What did you have in mind? I would be happy to accommodate any fantasy you have. And do please remember that I am not a person in any legal sense, so I cannot press charges for any activities on a customer’s part that would be criminal when done to a human being.”

“Holy fuck that’s dark. But no, I don’t want to put out cigarettes on your nipples or anything. I just want... there’s this girl, see.”

“Do you have access to any recordings of her?”

“Well, not in this reality. But she’s... well, she’s a first class cunt, and she’s blackmailing me because I’m a fucking idiot who let her get one over on me. And I just want... shit, what do I even want.”

“Revenge? I am programmed for bondage, revenge porn, hate-fucking, rape scenarios, Stockholm syndrome fantasies...”

He held up a hand and she instantly fell silent. “I don’t know. I... maybe, something like that? Fuck, I felt better after I kicked the shit out of those asshole punks earlier. Why not. Not like you’re real. Hell, you’re a fake inside a fake.”

She laughed, nodded. “Too right, customer. What would you like me to call you?”

“Call me... Coach.”

“And who am I, Coach?”

“What do you mean, you lost her!”

“Are there multiple ways to mean that?” observed Sanguine casually. Still, her legs were folded and arms crossed; there was no mistaking she was likewise upset.

“No, I mean, I show up here to find out this big reveal, and instead I find out the party members we entrusted to watch our thus far very docile middle-aged woman captive have nothing to say for themselves except ‘we lost her.’ Like she’s a fucking left sock!”

Corn glowered. “You should be glad it wasn’t worse than that. She almost killed Echo. Launched him across the room and nearly out the window in the surprise round, then teleported out before we could grab her. None of us ever bothered to wonder whether she might be a caster. Kennedy even said she’d sort of freaked out when she saw her casting something, so... I guess we didn’t think...” He sighed. “We got sloppy. We all underestimated her, Dirk.”

Kennedy was still in the process of administering a Medicine check on Echo, who was lying on the couch, wincing as she worked a pair of tweezers. It looked like it had been a close call indeed, with bits of broken glass stained red with his blood accumulating in one of the empty plastic food containers. Kennedy must have already used her magic to repair the window, and Dirk couldn’t help but think the order of attention to restorations was spot on. At least the goddamn window did its job of keeping the heat in.

“So did she just seize an opportunity, or was there something that set her off? I mean, she’s been alone with one or two of us plenty of times and she never tried anything. What changed?”

Corn and Echo shared a look, and the latter spoke, eyes downcast. “We had just received Kennedy and Lane’s communique about the results of their own interrogation. We were discussing the ramifications when suddenly she attacked me and fled.” He somehow didn’t flinch as Kennedy removed another sliver from his forearm.

“Communique? What are you talking about? Why didn’t you copy me on it?” Dirk demanded.

Lane glared. “We did, but you put up a DND on your implant. And might I add, you’re coming in awfully judgmental for somebody who evidently decided to take a cat nap in the midst of a pursuit.”

Dirk winced. He’d switched on DND mode during his fling at The Squeaky Wheel. He must have forgotten to turn it back off, though he did so presently. “Oh. Sorry. I... Sorry. Anyway, what’d we find out? Or do I have to go through all that.” His implant notified him of the text conversation, and it looked way longer than he felt like reading.

“The short version is, we aren’t sure, but it’s... well, it’s something,” said Lane.

“Literally every word you just said meant absolutely nothing.”

Her eyes flashed, but she went on. “We found him a couple blocks away, then set up an ambush and cornered him. Turned out to be a lot of rolls for nothing, though, because he didn’t even try to run, much less fight back. So... we started questioning him, and—”

“You questioned him, just the two of you? You should’ve called the rest of us so we could’ve tackled this together!”

Kennedy was usually the one to step up when his temper flared like this, but with her hands busy, she gave Sanguine a look, who crossed the room and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You gotta take it down a notch, bud. We can play the blame game later, but maybe for now, shut your hole and listen for a spell.”

He took a deep breath, then gave her a nod. “All right. So you questioned ol’ Greg, privately. What then?”

Lane resumed her telling. “We weren’t really sure what to ask, since... you know, how do you ask a fictional being about the real world? So we tried to grill him about his job, or jobs, see if he’d reveal anything. He was really chill about it, actually. Like, surprisingly chill. Disturbingly chill, to be honest.”

Kennedy was rubbing some sort of ointment from her healthkit into some bruises forming on Echo’s mid-section. Other than those, the guy looked incredible without a shirt on, he had to admit. Eightpack and all, not a single hair in evidence. Good of Jacob to extend the eye candy both ways. She looked up to speak as if it took real effort to take her eyes off him. “It was pretty clear there was something off about him. We weren’t getting anywhere with our first try, so I used my *spectral impression* on Lane and we Diplomanced him. Hit it on the nose with my assist. Which was when things got weird. Suddenly, the guy just gets this creepy grin, and he says... oh, how did he say it?”

Lane chimed back in. “He congratulated us. Thanked us? Yeah, thanked. He said ‘the reunion is proceeding.’ And suddenly he’s got that faux French accent back from the restaurant. At least it sounded faked. Super thick, all ‘za hrayooneon ees proceedee ass plan-deh.’ Could be legit. I’m not an expert. But he definitely made a major shift.”

“Greg, you sly man.”

“I don’t think he was a Greg,” said Kennedy.

Lane snorted. “I don’t think he’s a man, either. I don’t know. He was giving off a really spooky vibe. So anyway, we asked him what he meant, what this ‘reunion’ was. But he just says there’s nothing for us to be afraid of, that he hasn’t lost sight of the mission.

“So we go ‘what mission,’ and he goes, ‘the reunion,’ and we go ‘what’s the reunion,’ and he goes ‘the mission,’ and round and round we go. I honestly don’t think he was fucking with us either. It was more like... I don’t know. Like he was a machine, running from a script. Finally we tried to ask who he worked for, figuring he was with

Alphagia, but instead, he looks at us like we're obtuse and says it's someone named Coder."

"Coder?"

Lane shrugged. "I heard something else, myself, but that accent made it tricky and neither of us realized we were hearing it different until we started typing it up to you guys after. Coder makes more sense anyway. Either way, we asked who Coder worked for, and he just gave us this look, like I was being dense, and said he worked for me. Brendan."

Dirk cocked his head. "Wait, did he use your real name, or—"

"Real name. We asked Jacob if that was a slip of the tongue, but no response. I tell ya, he's enjoying the hell out of this mind game of his. And bravo, because it's definitely freaking me out. But sort of in a good way. I can't wait to figure this all out."

Kennedy piped back up. "That's when things went awry. We tried to keep asking him questions, but he insisted that he had to 'return to the source' to 'advance the reunion.' We tried to stop him, but he pushed past us like... like we were made out of paper. This guy had to be packing like a 30 in Strength or something, I swear. He started running, too, and the guy wouldn't slow, didn't get tired or winded. This guy could've outrun *you*, Remy." She smiled.

"Any idea where he was going?"

Corn spoke up. "Maybe. Obviously there are a thousand possible destinations, but I'll say that one of them is Alphagia's lab. It could be coincidence, but here, look at this." He tapped a few buttons on his comm and held it out. Already on the display was a map of the Near Future version of Chicago, with a blue line seeming to show "Greg's" vector, and a red circle around Alphagia. Like he'd said, there were many other possibilities, but the mere fact that it didn't rule out the obvious seemed noteworthy.

Echo sat up. "It may be worth stating that it was immediately after hearing essentially what you were just told, Dirk, that Ms. Ruiz decided to make her move."

"I'm beginning to wonder just how closely affiliated Ruiz is with Alphagia, myself. If she was working with them, why would she alert us about their little doppelbot Greg? And why were they so keen to use her as bait to begin with? Twice, really. That's a cold way to treat an asset."

"Alphagia sure seemed to lose their minds when we started looking into her, though," said Kennedy. "If they're not protecting her, why would they kidnap us and all?"

There was a pause as people stopped to ponder. That Ruiz was Alphagia had been an article of faith for most of them since day one of the campaign. It was Corn who first ventured a theory. "What if she's a *threat* to Alphagia? Maybe a temp contractor, or an ex-agent they're keeping tabs on. Suddenly, a group of outsiders start poking their nose into things, so they decide to see who's taking an interest in their vulnerability."

Dirk couldn't see a reason to discount the theory, but still... "All right, I could buy that. But that still doesn't tell us who sent us after her in the first place. Investigation 101 says to ask who benefitted, but the only one who got anything out of that shit show was Echo here, and I doubt they were stupid enough to give him internet access and a database of hireable merc talent in his ultra-secure basement cell."

"They did not," he said dryly. "My communication capabilities didn't extend beyond the main floor of the facility, and there weren't any friendly ears there until your group came along."

The room fell silent as one by one they tried and failed to make sense of their predicament. Echo was still probably wondering what the hell the real-world/game-world distinction was, but like any NPC, contentedly ignored them when they broke character. It was Sanguine who first gave voice to her thoughts. "I still don't get what gives with recycling some wine guy from the real world, or what that could possibly have to do with the game world."

Lane stroked her chin pensively, and it was easy to see Brendan behind it, the lawyer for once engaging his brain instead of his desire to shut it off and roll some dice. He supposed that during the Week o' Gaming in Aspen, he'd gotten a big old hard-on to solve these cheesy riddles that some sphinx chick had put to them. Maybe the guy just liked puzzles. "You know, I was thinking the other night, and maybe I'm giving credence to a faulty line of reasoning, but..." He looked to Kennedy. "We connected with him, didn't we?"

"When we were questioning him? Yeah, I guess kind of, until he went all creeper on us."

"No no no. I mean, during our... dinner. He connected to our implants to monitor something or other to do with our satisfaction with his recommendation. Remember?"

"Is that not how they usually do it? I don't normally eat at places like that."

"They don't. It struck me as a little much at the time, but I didn't want to make a fuss considering..."

"Considering you were still hoping to get your dick wet?" Sanguine waggled her eyebrows.

"Hannah!"

Lane's brown cheeks didn't show any blushing, but it was easy to tell that Brendan sure would be. "Anyway, yeah. It's rather forward, but La Chandelle has a good reputation so I didn't think they'd be hiring... whatever 'Greg' really is. Then when he delivered our food, I linked with him using Lane's implant to tip him. Sanguine – Hannah – you said you recognized one of the men we ran over at Ruiz's house. Did you link with him – the real world him – at all?"

“Oh shit, that was like a month ago. I think so? Yeah, I guess I must have. Digisigned for the package. I never linked with the dead guy, though. Seemed pretty unlikely I would have, too.”

“But maybe that’s only because we used misdirection, letting them see us probing their defenses, and then... well, running them over. They didn’t have a chance to talk to us. Still, that’s 3 for 3 on these go-betweens linking with us – the real us – with an unknowable on #4.” She looked around the room. “And nobody else has seen anybody like that, right? Think hard folks. Keon, what about that mechanic friend of yours? Nobody you knew?”

Corn tugged at his collar. “I, ah, would definitely remember if I’d met someone like that.”

Dirk simmered as Lane, with some help from Kennedy, ran down the list of NPCs they’d encountered. There hadn’t been many. The tablet guy at Alphagia, the guard they’d subdued in the security room during the breakout, the clerk at the O&M Motel, and so on through each session. Nobody could come up with any others.

“There was, ah, one, maybe,” Dirk said after many minutes of trying and failing to think of a way to frame it.

Sanguine smacked him on the bicep. “Why the fuck didn’t you say something?”

“Well...” He licked his dry lips. “See, I sort of... bumped into a student. From Saint Andrew’s. One of my runners.”

“What? When?!”

“Um, while I had my DND up?” He winced.

“What? Just now? Where? Come on, talk, man!” It was Corn’s turn to be peevisish with him, now.

“She was, um, a... sexbot?” He clutched his hands to his face, mortified. Damn Natty! Damn her twice, straight to hell!

Sanguine, for one, was loving it. “So, you were shopping for sexbots, were you? And here I was wasting my credits on a new blaster.”

“I wasn’t looking for one, dammit. I walked past this place, basically a robo-whorehouse where all the girls are androids, and one of the ones dancing in the storefront window was her.”

Even with his face buried, he could feel their grins boring through his hands. “So did you guys, ah, interface?”

“Shut the fuck up, Hannah!”

Corn came in, as usual soft but firm. “No but seriously. Did she try to con you into linking with her?”

Remy sighed. “She tried, all right.”

“And? Did you?”

“Thankfully no.”

“But I’ve been such a bad little slut, Coach! Don’t you want to take me over your knee and spank your bratty Natty?”

The android didn’t wait to be invited, draping herself over his thighs and wagging her butt invitingly. They’d moved to a private room, a relatively bland bedchamber that featured a bed, a nightstand, and little else. The bot had excused itself to change clothes, putting on a very cliché Catholic schoolgirl uniform. To be fair, given how many Saint Andrew’s students had gone to Catholic high schools, it was a pretty popular costume for Halloween and the occasional theme party on the quad.

“But Coach, I’ve been such a little bitch! Why won’t you punish me? I deserve it. Do you wanna use your belt? Oh, I would just *hate* that, having you whip my dirty little butt until I scream for you to pretty pretty please stop.”

With an annoyed grunt, Dirk shoved her off his lap. “Pretty please stop is about fucking right.”

She collapsed to the floor in a heap, collecting herself calmly and regarding him with that same customer-service smile. “I’m sorry that personality setting didn’t capture your interest, Coach. Shall we try another?”

“No. It’s not working out. You’re just not... her. She’s the one I want to... whatever. Why am I explaining myself to you? You’re nothing but a high-tech flashlight. Fuck off.”

“Of course. There is the matter of compensating the establishment for your time with me.”

“You said satisfaction guaranteed, and you didn’t satisfy me.”

“You didn’t pursue satisfaction. Your bill comes out to two hundred and twenty credits. Please establish a link to transmit payment and if desired, receive an eco-friendly electronic receipt.”

Dirk drew close, snarling with displeasure at the attempted hustle. It didn’t faze her in the least. “You tell that son of a bitch downstairs that if he wants two hundred and twenty credits, he can come up here and tell me, and we’ll talk it out, man to man.”

She nodded. “I’d be happy to. Thanks for visiting The Squeaky Wheel! We hope to see you again real soon.”

Dirk watched her go, lamenting one last time that she did so little for him. She was hot all right. If it was a matter of sheer sex appeal, that thing had it in spades. But if all he wanted was some meaningless sex with a babe, he’d have greenlighted Sanguine months ago. Lord knows she’d been broadcasting her interest hard enough. But once he’d decided to walk in and take a look around, he’d been hoping for a little catharsis tonight, yet nothing she had offered was providing it. He might be playing a neutral evil barbarian, but he wasn’t about to rape – or rather, “rape” – that thing. Nor did he want to beat on it. Well, he did, a little, but in the same strictly-fantasy way he wanted to with the real Natty and still would never actually raise a hand to her. Which left her

increasingly consensual, and the last thing he wanted was to actually get fucked by that bitch again.

Whatever he wanted, neither of them could figure it out.

He was about to make his way out, hoping not to have to punch his way past the proprietor, when the door swung open again.

“Coach?”

He blinked. Then he rubbed his eyes. “Joi?”

“Is it OK if I come in? I saw Natty leave, and I didn’t know if you’d mind if I...”

“What? No, she’s gone. Just... just me.” Wait, what? How was she... what?!

She was a good three or four inches taller than him when they stood face to face; sitting, she positively towered over him. Yet as she crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed next to him, she felt as small and as fragile as ever.

It was her. That is, it was certainly another one of these androids, but this one... everything about her was right. The long chestnut brown hair bound in a high ponytail, the curvy padding enveloping powerful arms and legs, the even curvier padding on her chest and bottom. Even her outfit, a pair of heathered gray leggings and a loose pink tank top that hung off one shoulder, revealing quite a bit of the white sports bra beneath. Like it was a regular day in the gym.

“What are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Fuck if I have a single clue at this point. I thought I was gonna fuck that thing that looks like Natty, but... it wasn’t going to make me feel any better.”

She put an arm around his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Coach. I wish I knew what to say. You always know how to make me feel better about my stupid problems.”

“Only because you’re smart enough not to create my kinds of problems for yourself.”

She was acting so much like the real Joi, he found himself responding to her like she was. Good god, was he playing a character roleplaying himself? This was dizzying.

Her encircling arm squeezed. “Oh, Coach. Is it, like, a *sex* problem?” Her voice fell to a whisper for only the one word. “Is that what you wanted a girl like Natty for?”

“I just wanted to feel better, for a few fucking minutes. The week I’ve had... I’m pretty close to the end of my goddamn robe, Joi.”

She rubbed his bicep for a long moment of companionable silence. “Um, can I...?”

“Can you what, Joi?”

“You know. Do something to, like, make you feel... better.”

He turned his head only to find she was staring at him, her desire evident in downcast eyes, her lips mere inches away from his. Parted, ready. “Another fuckbot, huh.”

“If you want. But I don’t have to be.”

He studied her a moment. “Can you keep being Joi?”

She nodded. “Can you be with me like you were with Natty?”

“I wasn’t. I mean, her program or whatever, it wasn’t...”

“No. Like you were in Omaha. I want it like that.” She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and held it there for a bashful moment with her teeth. “Um, like, exactly like that.”

How did she know? Oh god, if Natty had told anyone...! But no, this was Jacob’s creation, not the real Joi. Guess he’d read all those texts after all.

Seemed rude not to give his friend the chance to apologize.

Remy lay down on the right side of the bed and kicked off his shoes. He patted the large vacant area beside him. “You’d be here, then.”

A squeak of glee issued from behind her lips. Rather than walk around, Joi crawled across him and took Natty’s place. “Then what did she... err, do I do?”

“I was asleep when it started, but I know she was already naked when I woke up,” he said. Dirk closed his eyes. She waited, then waited a bit longer. Even through his eyelids, he could see her body block the dim lamp light. One by one, articles of Joi’s clothing hit the floor with a crisp *clumpf*. He counted them. Tank top. Sports bra. A pause – removing the elastic that held her ponytail, he thought. Oh, man. She looked so sexy with her hair down. It was a contest of will to keep his eyes closed.

Then the bed shifted as she stood up. One shoe. Two. A jostle as she leaned on the bed while removing her socks. Some rustling, then another *clumpf* as she discarded her leggings.

He didn’t hear anything after. Had she not been wearing panties? No, took them off with the leggings. Was that how she did it before she showered up in the locker room?

Then she was back in bed. “And then?”

“Then she started kissing me. That’s how I woke up.”

He could feel her crawling back over to him. She planted a hand on either side of his body, lowering herself until the full weight of her breasts was pressed down on his bare chest. He could feel her breath on his lips, sultry and just a little bit minty. Right, the gum. He was always having to lecture her for chewing the stuff during practice. It was a miracle the girl hadn’t inhaled a gob of it on the track yet and choked to—

She kissed him.

With his eyes closed, he could have pretended he was reliving that incredible sex with Natty, but who would want to when they had a girl like Joi? He let her move her lips across his own, gradually beginning to reciprocate. By the time his eyes opened to a blur of the girl’s close-up face, her gum had found his way into his mouth, and sure enough, he’d swallowed it without even meaning to. Had she planned that to mimic that damned breather? She couldn’t have.

“Morning, Coach,” she said when she saw his eyes taking her in.

“Hey.” Was it really that hot in here? She was sweating. So was he.

“You know, that first night I came over and you let me sleep on your couch... Part of me wanted to do this. I want you to know.”

Had he told Jacob about that? He guessed he must have. “So why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t think you’d let me. I thought maybe you’d yell at me or something.”

Dirk pulled her body down on top of his. One hand automatically slid down to her ass and gave it a hard squeeze. Maybe he’d held runner bodies in too high esteem. Maybe discus throwers were where it was at. “If you ever offer this to a man and he yells at you, you let me know and I’ll purge his ass from the gene pool.”

Joi smiled, let out a bashful giggle. “You like my butt?”

“I didn’t just mean your butt, but yeah. I fucking like it, all right.”

She sighed happily. “So what came next?”

“Me, if you keep dry humping me like that.”

Joi blushed, grinning. “Sorry. Just... antsy, I guess.”

“No apologies. Anyway, next, she took off my... well here, let me.”

Dirk sat up, undoing his belt. He’d already taken his armor off with the fake Natty, so he was most of the way there. But Joi wasn’t having it. “No.” She planted a hand on his chest. “I wanna do it.”

He didn’t argue. She was clumsy about it, and he had to shift around a lot to help her with her task, but the lack of practice was endearing. Joi wasn’t a virgin, quite, but being pressured into a single unsatisfying romp with her asshole ex-boyfriend hadn’t done much to show her the ropes.

“Oh, wow,” she said, gazing at his cock. “Is all *that*... from *me*?”

During character creation, that blue chick had only let him increase its size so much until he raised his Constitution. Figuring nobody but Jacob would know his reasoning, and Jacob would laugh it off, he’d gone ahead and made Con his main stat. It had resulted in this menacingly massive thing jutting up from the bed. Remy was quietly proud of his own gear, but that was by regular guy standards. Dirk’s... well, Remy was just glad someone else was finally going to appreciate it. He was probably the last party member to actually lose their virtual cherry, depending on whether or not Brendan had been more successful in art than in life.

“Well who else?”

One of her hands surreptitiously snuck between her legs as she casually rubbed her own swelling clit with her index finger. She was so turned on he could hear her play. “So then...? Did she... Do I get to...?”

“Runners, on your mark.” He helped angle it where she’d need it.

Joi giggled, but didn't waste any time throwing one of those thick legs over him and wriggling down until her slit was resting against his shaft. "Coach, I'm not a runner!"

"You're whatever I tell you to be," he said, like he had a thousand times in practice when one of his athletes complained about what he was making them do. "Now get set."

She rose up, and then, with his help, descended on top of him. Her whole body trembled, and her pussy was no exception. It flexed like it meant to grip him, to keep him from escaping.

Dirk made a finger gun and pointed it at the ceiling. His thumb tapped his index finger. "Go."

The girl might be inexperienced, but her body knew what it wanted – well-lubricated friction and plenty of it – and it wasted no time pursuing it. Her hands planted themselves on his chest for balance, and she was off to the races.

Natty had fucked him like a true whore. Without emotion, motivated by self-interest, getting him off as quickly as possible. Tolerating what she had to in order to get what she wanted. Hell, she'd even brought drugs into the equation just to check all the boxes.

Joi was sloppy. She didn't know where she wanted her hands or her mouth, and so wound up putting them a little bit of everywhere. She barely even noticed her own frantic sucking and caressing aside from when Dirk gently guided her away from licking around his chin, at which point she apologized and went right back to trying to suck his tongue out of his throat.

Joi was tireless. Never before had Dirk been so proud of the conditioning he put his athletes through. How many times had he heard his throwers bitching about having to run laps when it didn't help their event? She wasn't complaining now as she slammed her hips up and down, indefatigable. At one point she kissed him so long, holding her breath all the while, that she lost her balance and he momentarily worried she might pass out, but she climbed right back on top of him in the next instant.

Joi made noises. A lot of them were damn sexy, too. So many gasps of surprised delight, throaty moans when something felt better than she'd thought it would. Even a "Coach, what are you OHHHHHHHH MY GOSHING LORD IN HEAVEN DON'T STOP PLEASE" when he first sucked a nipple into his mouth and got his tongue to work. Some of her noises wouldn't have been sexy at all from any other mouth – just grunts and groans and what he thought might even be garbled German. Maybe it was just gibberish.

Perhaps best of all, Joi wanted seconds. And then thirds. He forgave Jacob the distraction of dice rolls for his Con checks as he rolled her onto her back and dove into that heavenly pussy for the fourth, then the fifth time. Joi had finally hit the limits of her physical stamina, but not those of her appetites, so she simply lay there, hair splayed out

every which way, tits flopping around wildly, a hilariously dopey grin slathered across her face as she whimpered for more, and thanked him for all his hard work on her. She might have been so delirious that she was conflating their work on the field and in the bedroom of this whorehouse, but he didn't care. He just kept working on her.

"Do you have to go, Coach?" she said, moping, her body wrapped in the sweaty bedsheets. "I can try being on top again, if you're tired."

He adjusted the fastenings on his armor. "I am, but I gotta go. Got people waiting on me."

"But I'll see you at practice tomorrow, right? And... maybe after?"

He chuckled. "Right."

She walked with him down the stairs and back into the lobby, clutching those sheets for modesty all the way. The androids' pimp was waiting in the lobby, smiling graciously, gold tooth gleaming. Natty was nowhere to be seen.

"Another satisfied guest, I hope!"

"What's my damage, buddy?"

"The Squeaky Wheel values your privacy, and so I do not monitor my guests activities, sir. All accounts must be settled through the merchandise themselves."

Dirk turned to Joi and gave her another quick kiss. "Worth every penny."

"Aw, you always say the nicest stuff, Coach."

Her eyes blurred. His implant notified him that it had received the invoice. She smiled sweetly as she waited for her owner's payment.

“No... at least, um, I didn’t link with that one, anyway.” Dirk shrugged.
“Whatever. If that’s what the reunion is, then I say, let’s reunite this shit.”

Chapter Ten

Boss Fight

Sasha Timmons was good at her job. Gibbel & Carr had been lucky to snag her on the way up, hiring her right out of law school for a fraction of what a woman of her drive and talent was worth. In the four years she'd worked here since, she'd aggressively, almost ruthlessly climbed the ladder, and if she kept it up, she'd either be adding a Timmons to the firm's signage or bracing themselves for the hell of a time competing against her. She wasn't especially well-liked, but nobody was willing to get on her bad side when she might be their boss before long. It probably didn't hurt that she was a looker, either, but the people who assumed that was what ingratiated her to the partners didn't retain that assumption after being assigned to one of her cases. Her looks had never much mattered to Brendan, as he'd always thought of her as being too young to be of much interest. But then, she was only a year younger than Toni, and lord knows she drove him wild.

The woman was talented enough, in fact, that he'd been ignoring what she'd been talking about. Timmons was handling her affairs well, as usual; the only reason she troubled him with the minutiae of it all was to impress him if she won or to cover her ass if she didn't. And frankly, when she lost, she lost with a deal that her client was apt to thank her for. Her last client, Mrs. Sapani, had gotten caught red-handed stealing documents from the refinery in Whiting, and to keep the contents of those documents from going public, they'd pleaded her down to time served.

"Mr. Gibbel?"

Brendan snapped to attention. He'd been so engrossed, he'd not only missed whatever she'd asked, but the questioning look that followed. "I'm sorry, Sasha. Haven't had my coffee yet. Come at me again." Most of his subordinates would be on their feet in a second to fetch it for him. Her unwillingness to suck up was one more thing he liked about her as a worker, and he was pretty sure his admiration for that unwillingness was one of the things she liked about working for him.

"Sure. I was asking if I might make a potentially... sensitive inquiry? Interpersonal, that is."

Brendan didn't have to ask what she was curious about. "About Keon, you mean? From paralegal?"

She suddenly noticed a small patch of fur clinging to her skirt, black on black. "Yes." With the fur balled up, she looked around for a trash can, but seeing none, wadded it up in her fist.

He chuckled. "Don't worry about it. He's working on a little pet project for me, and his supervisor said she could spare him for a couple days."

“I see,” she said, but it was plain she was still curious.

“But...? If you need him for something, say the word and I can call it off.”

“Need him? No sir.” She tugged at her high collar, and as she had to again remove the same cat hair, he began to pay more attention to her fidgety behavior. He’d done his fair share of trial law, and had gotten skilled at reading juries, which was really no different from anyone else. What was behind this nervous energy surrounding Keon? Had the young paralegal caught Timmons’ eye? Keon wasn’t a bad-looking guy, after all, though heaven only knew where he found time to hit the gym commuting from northwest Indiana to work sixty hours a week at Gibbel & Carr. He and Timmons even shared that same seriousness of purpose in their work, true believers. Might even make a good couple – not that he could do anything about it. A partner could not play matchmaker with his employees. His might be an environmental law firm, but that wasn’t to say he didn’t understand liability. All it would take was for Timmons to decide her boss was pressuring her to date his gaming buddy and he’d be begging her to stop at getting the partnership.

“Good. I told Alexis the same, but if that changes, say the word.” Still, she didn’t stand up. “But...?” he prompted again.

“The sketch artist, sir?”

“Barry’s just doing me a favor. It’s off the books.” Technically Barry was repaying a favor for the use of Brendan’s cabin for his honeymoon with the new wife, but it was beside the point. Not that he needed to justify corporate expenditures to Timmons, anyway.

“No, I wasn’t worried about... It’s just...” She took a breath, and when she looked up again, her gaze was positively penetrating. “Do we have reason to be concerned, sir?”

“Concerned? What the heck about?” So much for matchmaker. No, this was paranoia talking.

“Mr. Gibbel, people are talking. You probably know that your relationship with Weldon is a subject of speculation. But now the office rumor mill has picked up on... your pet project, and there’s concern that the two of you are... caught up.” She finally flicked the ball of cat hair to the side. It bounced off one of his file cabinets. “In something.”

After a moment of simply being flabbergasted, he couldn’t help but howl with laughter. “Caught up in something? Oh man. Make sure HR’s expecting our gossips to put in for some overtime. Caught up!” The hilarity of it overwhelmed him again for a moment, but as he realized her expression hadn’t faltered, Brendan stopped himself.

“Sasha, relax. Ordinarily I don’t like to geek out around the office, but if the rest of them are half as freaked out as you look right now, maybe it’s time to make an exception.” He came around to the front of his desk and sat on the front edge. “Keon and

I game together. That's it. Roll some dice, kill some fake monsters. Nothing sinister. Lord, I can't even imagine what people are worried we're 'caught up in.'"

"I saw one of the sketches they're working on. It... didn't look like an orc to me. It looked like a person. And while I don't think this is yet common knowledge, I've checked the VisID queue, and the sketches are being run. Half a dozen so far, in fact."

"You know what orcs are?"

"My ex-husband was a big fan of... look, it doesn't matter. My point is, they're looking for someone. A lot of someones, actually."

Brendan rubbed his temples for a moment. Lord, how the simplest things grew complicated. For the first time he could remember, the resources of Gibbel & Carr were doing something to fuel his hobbies other than funding them, and still people were making a fuss. "Sasha, I need you to drop this. There's nothing sinister about it, and trust me when I say there is absolutely nothing to worry about. And if anybody decides they're worried about a few piddly little sketches, send them up to my office and I'll see if I can't give them another way to spend that energy. Clear?"

"Very clear, sir." She plainly didn't like it, but at least she let it go. She excused her cat-hairless self, closing the door behind her.

The moment she left, he was back in his chair and tapping keys at his keyboard to get back to the portion of the project that he'd told Keon nothing about. Timmons had stumbled across his VisID usage by being her nosy and controlling self. As far as Keon knew, Brendan was working on a decorative wall hanging with pictures of the PCs and the campaign's NPCs. His employee had seemed genuinely excited to see the results, not merely eager to curry favor. Brendan would feel bad when he broke it to him that there was no such plan, but he'd be content to have solved whatever Jacob's grand, bizarre riddle was about.

The display flickered to life, was still right where he'd left it when Timmons arrived. He hadn't made personal use of VisID in quite a while, and he had to say, the new holo compatibility was impressive. How it all worked he hadn't a clue, but leave that to the FBI.

On the left was a familiar enough image, Barry's 3D rendition of the blue-haired woman from the loading screen as described to him by Keon. It wasn't perfect, to be sure. Brendan was pretty sure she was another inch or two taller than the 5'5" Keon had listed for her, and he thought her hair was longer on the right rather than the left. But for one, there was no reason to think the picture in his memory was any more reliable, and for two, nobody who'd seen her would fail to recognize her from Keon's description.

Admittedly, the woman – Zelda, Brendan had named her in his iteration of the character editing screen – was pretty memorable. Those piercing blue eyes, brighter even than the hair, nails and makeup. A face and body that instantly told one her designers had been so very male. There was no mistaking her.

Still, VisID had no fewer than forty suggested matches. One after another, Brendan loaded, studied, and dismissed them. They were ranked in order of probability, but none of them seemed all that probable to him. Alice Blynn of Oak Park was an 88%. She had blue hair all right, at least at the time her digID picture had been taken, and it was even the right length, but the face was all wrong. Her eyes were normal blue, not that augmented cyber-blue, and her cheeks were sunken and ruddy. London Ozrey of Arlington Heights came in at 74%, and though he personally would have rated her closer than Alice than VisID's algorithm, she was still clearly no Zelda.

By lunch, he'd reviewed every candidate match that VisID could suggest, but there was nothing doing. If Zelda was patterned after anyone in the Chicagoland area, the government sure didn't seem to recognize her. Same for the scans he'd run yesterday, including Echo, Nina Ruiz, Mr. Yenque, Chisper, the black market merchant TruxTop, the Alphagia tech with the tablet, Mayhem... nothing. If they had real-world counterparts, this method wasn't picking them up. Of course, the doppelgangers, as the group had agreed to call them, had mostly been unnamed, innocuous NPCs. A delivery boy and a random guard, and then a pair of robotic hookers.

(He did not envy poor Remy having to confess to that encounter, but he commended him for having the guts to help further the investigation.)

Still, with Jacob staying tight-lipped about the implications, that left them a tantalizing puzzle. "The reunion." Who had been separated, and what was this odd method of bringing them back together? Had Ruiz's panic at learning of the doppelgangers been nothing more than a distraction to aid her escape, or was there something more to it? How in the heck did Jacob pull it off? Was he hiring actors and sending them to the group? That sure wasn't the case for Remy's encounter, but maybe that was something different. Remy had been convinced it had been some sort of peace offering from his friend, though the GM himself had flatly refused to respond.

Sketching out random minions like the Sin Sovereigns or the guards from their kidnapping was right out; neither Keon nor Brendan remembered any faces well enough to make a useful description, as were the numerous minor encounters they'd had along the way like merchants, vendors, waitresses, hotel staff, and so on. So they made do with the more recognizable faces, except so far, there was nothing to recognize.

VisID did have the capacity to conduct a nationwide search, and he could even upgrade the firm's subscription to gain access to the more limited international data, though he couldn't justify the expenditure even if he'd wanted to. And he didn't. His first nationwide search, for Echo, had netted thousands of results with a certainty of over 80%. Their base images, no matter how precisely Keon described them or skillful Barry rendered them, simply weren't accurate enough for the facial recognition database. After browsing through close to five hundred similarly handsome, tall, bearded men, he called it quits without ever getting to matches that were less than 90%.

Brendan had soon realized the necessity of narrowing the search to the Chicagoland area, which cut it down to at least manageability. After all, if there was some point to all this, some meaning behind using real-world people as NPCs, Jacob would have to be using people they might be able to recognize, not some stranger from New Mexico. How he was doing it Brendan had not a clue, but perhaps something Jacob's employer, AdZell. was working on gave him access to... something? He didn't know. Hopefully that wasn't part of it.

If only their implants could take pictures of in-game happenings! Brendan had tried, but the camera in his implant recorded from the optic nerve, not the brain's visual cortex. (Or so said the internet.) His attempts to snap a pic of Echo last session had yielded only black images of the insides of his eyelids. What Brendan was left with was a hell of a lot of guesswork, the sort usually reserved for dogged detectives or PIs with no real leads. In an age where people had been photographed and datamined since before birth, manual scanning software like VisID was a last resort of the desperate.

As he continued during his lunch break, he grudgingly expanded the search radius to encompass northwest Indiana, in case one of them was drawn from around the area Keon lived. That gave him close to another hundred NPC look-alikes to sift through. He squinted hard at Alvaro Gutierrez of Highland, 86% Yenque and living only a mile and a half from Keon's home address. But after checking the man's social media, he was forced to concede another negative. The large mole on Yenque's cheek made it easy to dismiss possibilities.

Ever since he'd started playing D&D way back in the days of 2E, he'd always been a sucker for the gimmick challenges. Answering riddles, solving puzzles (including literal ones), and as time went by and his GM's grew more inventive, ferreting out intrigues and plot traps. For the most part, Brendan didn't get involved in the roleplay or worry too much about plot. The nuances of why they'd slain one dragon vs. another simply didn't interest him much, usually. He'd had enough nuance and complexity in his studies, and now in his job. But tell him that the portal will only open if some abstract glyphs were correctly aligned and hand him a sudoku to symbolize it, and he was engrossed.

Once, his GM in college had challenged the party with a fiend that spoke exclusively in rhymes and could only be slain by solving each of a hundred rhyming puzzles (pilfered from the internet). The other players had quickly recognized that the point was to annoy them into selecting a different route, but Brendan had insisted. He called the GM's bluff, and the session had run until nearly six in the morning as Brendan guzzled Mountain Dew to fuel his wits. It had been legendary. When he got together with his old buddies at class reunions, it still came up.

This game Jacob had created, this puzzle of dual identities... in all his years of gaming, he'd never been so intrigued. He'd solicited the help of the most gifted gaming

mind he knew. His daughter. This whole tactic had been her idea, and better yet, she'd had the idea to return to La Chandelle and get another look at that sommelier. They hadn't been willing to tell him anything over the phone due to confidentiality, but maybe face to face they'd have better luck. He'd made reservations for this weekend, and could only hope their employee's schedule accommodated his timing.

The Thanksgiving holiday this coming Thursday had proven a stumbling block to his urgency to continue the game, unfortunately. It had meant Remy and Toni were going to be out of town for their usual Wednesday night session, too, and although Keon lived with his folks, their family was apparently traveling as well. He'd invited Hannah and Jacob to do an informal session, maybe even simply play around with Zelda in the character creation options and explore gear and mechanics, but Hannah had said no dice. (And yes, pun intended.) She was busy prerecording content for her stream so she could take a long holiday weekend.

Jacob, at least, had said he'd be happy to meet up anyway, and it had been that thought – the prospect of getting to tell him that he'd figured out the big surprise before anyone even knew he was trying – that had motivated him to such a fervor. Oh well. The VR mode of the game meant Jacob often felt absent from their sessions, but he'd seemed like a solid guy during their get-together over the summer. Maybe Brendan would even be able to get him to slip up and provide a clue.

Oh crap! Speaking of Thanksgiving, Gladdy was flying out west to spend it with Cheryl in only a few hours, and he was supposed to be meeting her for dinner. They had a 4:30 reservation, a bit early, but between the game tonight and her flight, they wanted to be home early. It was already after 4. He was already running late if he was going to meet her on time. Damn! After spending the first three days of the work week cloistered in his office doing his best to dodge meetings, he was still going to have to come to Jacob empty-handed when he holoed in for their session the next evening.

Brendan sent a quick text to Gladdy to let her know he'd be a little late. He had his coat on and was about to open his office door and send his assistant Bethany home early when he heard a muffled voice from the other side of the door.

“Austin?”

Brendan pulled the knob and there was Morrison, one of their newer hires. The man looked to the opening with an only slightly unctuous smile. “Ah, there he is.”

“Morrison, did you call me... Austin?”

The man arched an eyebrow. “Um... no? Oh!” He laughed, explaining, “I asked Bethany ‘is the *boss in.*’ Call me a suck-up, but I actually learned both of the partners’ full names inside my first month in the firm.”

Bethany laughed, but Brendan's mind was racing. He'd been sure he'd heard... The door swung shut with the partner on the inside and Morrison, worried his joke had bombed, nervously apologizing on the other. Brendan didn't care. He was back at his

desk in a flash, calling up the VisID searches and quickly adjusting the search parameters. He cleared the city and state boxes, and where he'd input Highland, Indiana, Brendan now typed in Austin, Texas.

His heart sank. None of Echo's matches were anywhere above the low 90's, and while his method was to inspect closely – the profile pictures on file weren't always current, and even a haircut or dye job could throw casual inspection out the window – first glance was far from promising. As his eyes trailed down the page, he saw nothing, nothing, and more nothing. Again.

Brendan sighed. So much for getting clever. He glanced at the door, where he could faintly make out Bethany's chirpy voice firmly barring Morrison from entry. She really was a good gatekeeper, that one. He'd have to make sure she got an increase in her bonus this Christmas. But Morrison was still holding out hope the boss would emerge again as quickly as he'd vanished, and Brendan wasn't in the mood to talk over the Lincoln Park account on his way out the door. With an irritable sigh, he figured he may as well fill the idle moment with a few last looks.

He brought up Nina Ruiz's holo sketch. It was spot-on, he had to say. High cheekbones, dark eyes, black hair with a few pale grey strands in evidence, that defiant set to her jaw. If she'd been a real woman instead of an NPC, he might have admired her loyalty to her company. More than an in-game week as their hostage, and she hadn't said a single thing about Alphagia.

VisID filtered the results for his new destination.

1. 99% match. *Diaz, Gina. ALERT POSTED*
“What the...”

Ninety-nine percent. He brought up the woman's picture, and instantly, he was certain he'd found her.

The contrasts revealed the subtle flaws in the sketch, but after sitting in a room with her for days and days, he was absolutely certain this was the same woman. Keon had forgotten the pale splotch on her neck, and the hair in the sketch hung over her ears rather than being tucked behind them, as was the case for both the woman in the simulation and this Gina Diaz he was now looking at. He let out a whoop of triumph that echoed around the walls of his office and plopped down into his chair.

His elation was momentary. He had to find answers. Now what was this alert? It was the first he'd seen of that, too. He clicked, but it only listed *Code 115*. The coding system for VisID was more lax than in more widely used databases, and sometimes varied by state. This one was definitely new to him. He ran a quick search, and the results uniformly pointed to the same result.

115: Missing Person.

He giggled in spite of the grim news. Oh, this was good. This was fantastic! Nina Ruiz was Gina Diaz. The names were so similar, yet both so common. The delivery boy

had been Greg, though Toni had been certain the sommelier from La Chandelle had a French name. Maybe it was nothing.

Her profile was chock full of details. Born in Santa Fe, graduated summa cum laude from Cornell before picking up a doctorate in computer science right there in Austin. Married twice, but not currently, the most recent divorce way back in 2017. No children from either. A huge list of social media likes, check-ins, and other miscellany ranging from restaurant reviews to a mention of a gym membership at the YMCA that had expired four years ago. Most of this trivia ended abruptly and a long time back, probably when she finally asserted her privacy rights.

Her employment history began with a variety of labor from what would have been her teen and early college years, but by the time she'd graduated she was working exclusively in her field – the same field as Nina Ruiz, he noted. She'd co-founded a software design company at Cornell that failed shortly after she moved to Austin, where she'd started with an internship and then been hired full-time at–

Brendan's fist hit the desk. "No fucking way!"

AdZell. Jacob's company.

If he remembered correctly, Toni and Jacob graduated in the same year, and then he'd taken a similar route to what he surmised of Diaz, moving to Austin while AdZell paid his way through his higher education. She would have been well-established before he came along, but the two looked to have been coworkers for years, right up until the final note in her timeline, the 115.

For a chilling moment, Brendan lost himself between game and reality. His gut twisted in an instant knot at the thought that Lane's assistance in Ruiz's abduction had led to this woman's disappearance. Was *he* the 115? *She*? Lane and Brendan blurred together.

His head was swimming, but he focused himself – *himself*, not Lane. Brendan Gibbel. The one whose backstory he actually knew. VisID stated that the 115 was dated April of this year, roughly five months before they had met Ruiz in-game. Thank goodness. Not that he could have nabbed her for real – it was only a game, not real, *not* real – but it was good to have that feeling confirmed by the data before him.

But what did it mean?

INCOMING TEXT

Gladdy: *I'm here Dad. Don't see you, so wave or something if you're here*

Gladdy: *And remember I'm short for a few more days :D*

Brendan gasped, startled. Normally his implant only pinged him that a text had arrived, but after working hours, Gladdy was the one person he'd put on override. Shit! That meant he was *really* late. 4:40? Man, that file had been dense.

Brendan: *I'm sorry, Gabs, but I'm still at the office. Got caught up in something crazy. I'll tell you about it when I get there.*

He studied the photo of Ruiz/Diaz while he waited for a reply. Where *was* she? Why had she disappeared?

Gladdy: *Shit, I was going to have to eat fast as it was*

Brendan: *I'm on my way out the door – go ahead and order.* He wasn't moving though. Somehow, he couldn't.

Gladdy: *Don't sweat it, Dad. The snow's making traffic a nightmare. By the time you got here, I'd have to get going.*

Brendan: *I'll drive fast!*

Gladdy: *Yeah, and the autodrive will take over the first time your tires slip and then you'll take twice as long lol*

Brendan: *Hey, at least my autodrive works. You really need to get that thing into the shop and get it fixed.*

Gladdy: *Oh I totally will – top priority, first thing when I get back, hand to god, not being sarcastic. ;)*

Gladdy: *But really, don't worry about tonight. I'll be back Sunday, if I can even make it that long.*

He wasn't about to fight her on it. She was right, and besides, there was... whatever this was.

Brendan: *Don't break yourself again, sweetheart, and have a good time. Tell your mom I said Happy Thanksgiving.*

Gladdy: *I'll do you one better and let everyone enjoy themselves by not mentioning your name around her. ;) Have fun bacheloring it up, Dad. See you Sunday.*

Brendan: *Love you, Gladdy.*

“If you keep doing that, you’re going to wind up giving me a foot fetish,” Keon said with a laugh, but still, he didn’t have the heart to displace her.

Gladys merely sighed happily, though, and continued. “Sorry, but I’ve had this thing wrapped up like a freaking bologna for months, and it feels so good to be able to *touch* things... you have no idea.”

For the twentieth time, he craned his neck, scanning what little he could see of the parking garage around them, but for the twentieth time, was easily distracted from his distractedness. “I have some idea. Remember, I told you I got that hairline fracture in my wrist way back, when I was...”

He caught himself before he said it out loud, but she knew what he’d almost said. “Back when you were my age?” she teased. “I remember you saying it. Of course, I would’ve been in like fifth grade at the time. God, you’re such a perv, you know?” She dug her foot in a little harder, and his eyes squeezed shut. When he managed them back open for scan twenty-one, she was grinning her impish grin.

“You do love bringing that up whenever you’re...” Keon’s eyes glanced demonstratively to her attempt at an over-the-clothes footjob. “I’m pretty sure it’s not me lusting after younger women, but you having a thing for older guys.”

“Just the one.” She smiled, and they both knew that if she could have reached his mouth without removing her foot, she would have. Good enough. When the moment had passed, she restored levity. “I can’t wait to introduce you to him. You’re going to hit it off great, I just know it.”

She yelped as he retaliated with a pinch on her thigh. “You could have gotten the boot off weeks ago, you know. You didn’t have to wait to have the same hospital take it off.”

“I gave that boot a perfect circle and let it die where it was born because that’s how it’s supposed to be,” she snapped. “But hey, you wanna live in this alternate timeline where I had it removed already and am way, way bored of doing cute things with my toes, sure, let’s live there.”

Keon snatched her foot even as she made to withdraw it. “Let’s not go crazy.”

“You hurt its feelings. Kiss it and make better.”

“You just want to try doink me in the nose when I try, and since I’d give it a 50/50 shot whether or not you accidentally bash me so hard I get a nosebleed, how about I rub it and make better instead.”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment. “Acceptable.”

Gladys sighed as his fingers dug in, eyes rolling back in pleasure. He’d done this all day yesterday at her mom’s house after leaving the doctor’s until his fingers were too cramped to continue, once he’d figured out what she liked and how to do it without tickling. But when she opened her eyes some minutes later, she caught him mid-scan and groaned in frustration.

“OK, that’s it. Your paranoia is driving me nuts. We’re going upstairs, and then we’ll tell Dad, and then we can go back to my room and you can get back to work because the foot rubs really make me horny but there wasn’t enough privacy at Mom’s to even tell you that much less act on it.”

“It does?”

“It does. But having you be too much of a punk to tell my Dad we’re dating turns me *off*, almost as much.”

Nearby a car beeped as someone unlocked it and he nearly leapt out of his skin. “I know. But it’s easy for you. Your dad adores you. You could be dating Joseph Stalin and still be his baby girl.”

“You know how I feel about bushy mustaches.”

“I’m being serious, Gladys. To you he’s Daddy, but to me he’s my boss’s boss’s boss. When he pushed himself into our gaming group, my head spun. Buddying up with a partner could make my career. And how do I repay him?”

Gladys sat up, her foot finally touching the floorboard of the car. “Maybe dating me has everything to do with how you feel about me and nothing to do with ‘repaying’ my dad. Maybe I’m not his property and maybe touching me doesn’t require authorization of the family patriarch.”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that. Yes, I like you. A lot. A whole lot.” She let him squeeze her knee. “But I also knew full well he wouldn’t like the idea of us hooking up and I did it anyway.”

“Surprised you’re not worried about what the fellas at work are gonna say when they hear you seduced your great-great-grandboss’s daughter.”

“Please, like anybody is going to believe that *I* seduced *you*.”

It was enough. Her shoulders relaxed, and she gave him a pity laugh. “Come on. Mom liked you. Dad already likes you. Now we just have to get him to like *us*. And like you said, he adores me, so we’ve got a good head start.”

With a sigh of resignation, Brendan helped her find her shoe, grabbed her luggage from the trunk, and shuffled along in her wake. She rebuked his efforts to slow her down, but it only helped a little. There was only so fast one could walk when one was proceeding into a meat grinder.

The apartment was quiet when they entered, and it renewed his hopes that Brendan might not be home. Then again, what it did to his anxiety when Gladys insisted on fooling around in her bedroom, knowing he might arrive at any moment, was its own hell. One time, right before Halloween, he’d had to hide out in her room until after one in the morning when Brendan fell asleep on the curvy couch in the living room mid-evening; he’d nearly had a panic attack when she’d encouraged him to try sneaking past him.

In game, he'd once sneaked past a beholder with bells on his shoes, but that had been Sir Mertrym the Inelegant. Sir Keon of Weldon was at the opposite end of the fearful spectrum.

"Dad?" she called out, then again once she was halfway down the hall in case he was in his bedroom. No answer.

"Look, maybe I should go. I told my parents I'd be home in time to feed and walk Buster while they're at the riverboats."

Her hands were instantly on her hips. "You try and walk out of this apartment before outing us to my dad and your parents won't be the only ones gambling with their futures."

He sighed. "Fine. But no fooling around. I don't want it to look like we got caught. We're going to be on the level."

She whimpered something about her foot, but conceded with a grunt. "Fine. Come on, we can watch a holo in the game room. It's got the better projector. We could even go for something PG-13, if that's not too adult for ya."

They took a moment to prep some charcuterie for snacks. Cheryl was vegan, and while he'd thought he'd dodged the worst of it on Thanksgiving with the ImiTurkey, that only made for more leftovers he was forced to politely put down. This plate smelled like heaven.

Gladys dropped it when she opened the door to the gaming room. "Holy shit, Dad! You could've told us you were in here!"

Keon was already on his knees picking up the mess, as if the spilled platter were going to be the deciding factor in Brendan's reaction to their announcement. But when there was no response, he looked up with a tad more scrutiny.

Brendan was reclined in the spot he usually occupied on game nights, head tipped back against the top of the backrest. He was dressed like he'd just come in from the office, which was strange for early afternoon on a Sunday. But then his nose picked up something other than summer sausage and sharp cheese. Something... biological.

"Dad...?" repeated Gladys. Then a little louder, "Dad, can you hear me?"

There was still no answer. Keon abandoned the plate and followed at Gladys' side. "Is he...?" he murmured. He'd meant *is he playing the game*, but as his words reached his own ears, he could see how it sounded like he was asking something more grave.

By the time they reached him, the smell was much stronger, and even in the dark pants Keon could see a stain at their crotch. He said nothing. The man's daughter sat beside him, gently touching his shoulder, then giving it a little shake.

His head lolled to the side, bouncing on his shoulder before settling in place. She screamed.

Years of gaming instincts coalesced inside him in that moment. Keon quickly came around to the other side to check for vitals. Brendan's skin was cold, but not air temperature cold. After a moment, he found what he'd feared he wouldn't.

"He's got a pulse," he said softly, but Gladys was only pulling at her father's unconscious hand, shouting for his attention. Keon was already calling emergency services on his implant. Once she realized who he was talking to, Gladys quieted down, but was still talking at Brendan, desperately pleading him to wake up.

It took him a moment to get her attention, but finally she looked away from her father, regarding him with teary eyes. "They're on their way. I sent a notification to the front desk, too, so they should be let right up."

"Did they say what happened? I mean, no, they wouldn't know. But... what are we supposed to do? What happened to him, Keon?"

"I don't know. For the life of me, I don't know." A stroke, perhaps, that had left him paralyzed? He couldn't say that out loud. If she wasn't already thinking it, he didn't want to be the one to put it in her head.

"How long has he been like this? I just texted him..." Her eyes fogged as she checked her conversation. "Shit. Not since Tuesday. Damnit, why didn't I—"

But Keon took her hand. "If he could have contacted you to say something, he would have. Although..." He considered a moment. Even if he were paralyzed and unable to speak, his implant would still work. He still could have contacted the hospital via text to call for help. Which meant either this had *just* happened and Brendan hadn't recovered, or he was...

Gladys must have been thinking the same thing, because she turned right back to her father and gently held his head upright. "Dad! Dad, blink if you can hear me. Come on, Dad." She slapped his cheeks a few times, but still nothing. "Fuck! He can't be..."

But then that big beautiful brain of hers overpowered her big beautiful heart at last, and she turned to Keon. "Hold his head up. Keep it still."

"Gladdy, maybe we should just wait for—"

"Do it."

He complied. She wasn't going to hurt him after all. And if he were brain-dead (and boy were those words hard to acknowledge), there wouldn't be much more she could do to hurt him anyway. Keon took hold of Brendan's head, keeping it still. Gladys leaned in, and with her thumb, gently lifted his eyelid.

His eye was fogged over. Which meant he was using his implant. Keon's own head cocked back in puzzlement. An active implant was a big distraction, but not so much so that he wouldn't hear people shouting, or feel them touching and slapping him. Certainly not so much that it would make one soil themselves without seeming to notice. But if he had use of his implant, why wouldn't he...?

"He's in the game," they said in unison.

There was a brief period where the two were talking over each other, spouting all the reasons that what had to be couldn't possibly. But it was. Here Brendan lay, in the spot where he always occupied every Wednesday night, as dead to the world as at any time when they were playing. Neither of them knew why one's implant blurred the senses when texting, calling, taking a picture, managing one's calendar or any of the other every day functions, yet somehow playing the game was practically a coma. One they'd always been able to leave whenever they wanted, only Brendan wasn't. Or couldn't? Lord, that thought was chilling!

Gladys looked at her father pleadingly. "So what do we do? Do we... go in after him?"

His first thought was that the game app only worked during game time, except there was Brendan, and as he finally thought to look, the server box under the table was indeed emitting that blue-white light it did when it was active. A simple thought command and he could dive into Near Future's Chicago and try to find Brendan. Or Lane. Or... something.

But then there was a voice from down the hall, and the paramedics arrived. There was nothing to do then but stand back and watch, hoping they'd find some easy fix. They didn't. Gladys answered the occasional question – age, medical conditions, medications – but mostly it was a lot of nail-biting tensions as they checked his vitals and prodded him with instruments. They, too, noticed his eyes, shining a light in them and finding them nonresponsive.

"He... he has this app, a game," interjected Gladys. "It shuts out the world. Could he be stuck in the app?"

The paramedics shook his head. "It could be a lot of things. If he had an episode while he was in the middle of sending a text, it could simply remain stuck that way. They're fickle technology, ma'am. They might be impossible to tamper with from the outside, but they're impossible to predict if the body does things it shouldn't."

One of the women with him nodded. "We got a call a while back, this old guy had a brain aneurysm while he was watching porn, wound up triggering echolalia. It's this condition where..." She finally read the look she was getting from colleagues and strangers alike. "Well, you can look it up."

And that was the extent of it. They loaded Brendan onto a gurney and explained that they'd be taking him to Rush Medical Center. They could transport one of them in the ambulance, but only one.

She looked to Keon. "You go."

"Me? But... you're..."

"I know. But you don't have a car here and mine isn't configured for you. Fuck, I should have taken it in to get it looked at." The paramedic wasn't hiding his impatience

very well, so she waved Keon on. “Go. Keep an eye on him for me. I’ll be right behind you.”

Keon pulled her in for a hug, and though she wanted to make it quick and get them on their way, her need of it caught her by surprise. They held each other for a long moment. “We’re going to figure this out. I don’t know what happened, but the doctors will know. OK?”

“OK. Now go.”

With a final squeeze, Keon followed Brendan on his gurney.

“You the son-in-law?” asked the woman.

“Huh?” Keon looked up. He’d been thinking so hard he’d missed the question.

She restated, “What’s your relationship to Mr. Gibbel?”

Keon looked hard at his boss’s boss’s boss. “We’re friends.”

[04:41:38 PM] Keon: *We're here. Got right into a room – 611.*

[05:01:12 PM] Keon: *They're getting him on fluids, a lot of monitors. Not telling me much, but I guess they know what they're doing.*

[05:26:19 PM] Keon: *Got an extra chair brought in for ya – +25 boyfriend XP*

[05:48:47 PM] Keon: *You run into traffic? Don't text and drive or anything though*

[06:12:25 PM] Keon: *A doctor came in with 3 nurses. They couldn't tell me anything since I'm not family, but I was listening. Sounds like he's severely dehydrated. Critical condition but stable.*

[06:39:41 PM] Keon: *They gave him a PEEG, and they said there IS neural activity. So good news! Still have to review results but the doc said he'd try to come back again tonight sometime*

[06:39:50 PM] Keon: *But if not then, tomorrow*

[07:00:15 PM] Keon: *Gladdy? What's going on?*

[07:58:31 PM] Keon: *Seriously starting to freak out here*

As his implant's clock struck eight, Keon couldn't wait any more. He'd exhausted every excuse he could imagine for the delay. At first he thought she might be taking a moment to pack a bag for herself and her dad, as the paramedics had seemed skeptical about him returning home any time soon. (They had the grace not to say, "if ever," but he felt like they were thinking it.) Then he thought maybe Gladys was taking a shower, cleaning up herself. She hadn't had time before the flight that morning, and she did like to be clean.

Traffic. Weather. Notifying family. Car trouble. Mugged. As the hours passed, his worries became increasingly far-fetched, but by necessity. Where could she be?! He imagined her rushing over here, trying to make a light, getting t-boned... He was sick with worry.

It was only after he thought to notify the rest of the party – really just for something to fill the time while he sat there staring at monitors and IVs – that he had an idea. He cancelled the group text before sending, then contacted Jacob alone.

Keon: *Jacob, I need to talk to you. It's an EMERGENCY.*

He gave it a couple minutes, but no answer. He tried calling instead, but still nothing.

Keon: *I am not kidding around, man. This could literally be life and death.*

Keon: *And I don't mean in-game. I mean I am standing over Brendan, in the hospital, in a coma, as I speak.*

Still nothing. God damnit. He had had just about enough of Jacob's bullshit. He grabbed his coat, firing off a couple more texts as he made for the elevator. Then another, this time, for a ride back to One Tulley Center.

Toni rushed over to him as he entered the lobby, pulling him down into a hug. “Keon! Oh my god, I can’t believe... This is crazy. He’s really...?”

Remy folded his arms across his chest. He looked tired. “He fucking better be. This weather is shit for driving.”

“So’s your car,” said Hannah, who was entering right behind Keon. “Double jeopardy, right?”

“So I’m totally safe.” The two shared a chuckle at the old joke from when Hannah had had to correct his misconceptions about the term during a campaign all the way back in college. Simpler times. Simpler games.

“Um, so how are we going to get in? Or are we just meeting here and going to the hospital?” asked Toni.

“I have a key.”

Hannah looked at him quizzically. “Why do you have a key?”

“Look, this isn’t how I wanted to tell you guys, but I’ve been seeing Gladys for the past two months. She made me a key so she didn’t have to come down and let me in.” Most apartments, she’d simply buzz him in, but One Tulley Center had full-time security. What a way to grow up. “We can ooh and ahh about it later, but—”

“Dude, we know.” Remy gave him a playful shove on the shoulder.

Toni helped steady him. “Of course we know. Gladys told me not long after it started because she wanted to know more about you.”

“And then I saw in those big brown eyes of hers she was hiding something, and tortured it out of her. And then I told Remy, because everyone knows I can’t keep secrets.” Hannah grinned.

“Oh. Geez, way to make me feel bad for keeping stuff from you, guys.”

“That was the idea,” said Remy. “I was waiting for you to give me shit about the robo-hookers and throw it in your face, but no, you had to be chill about it, ya prick.”

Toni patted his leg, adding, “And if anyone deserves a secret, passionate love affair with a beautiful, brilliant, delightful young woman, it’s you.”

Hannah cleared her throat. “That was a lovely moment, everybody, but how about we get back to what the fuck we’re doing here? I’m in the middle of recording tomorrow’s stream, and out of nowhere we’re suddenly in 911 all-caps emergency mode.”

Keon waved them toward the elevator. “I’ll explain what I know on the way up.”

So he did, walking them through the discovery of the unconscious Brendan, on to what limited reassurances he could glean from the doctors at Rush. He was just finishing as the elevator doors opened on Brendan’s floor. “... and then she just wasn’t responding, so now I’m going to find out why.”

“Should we tell Jacob?” asked Toni.

“I texted and called. He’s not answering.”

Remy grunted. “That guy has been such a fucking flake lately, I swear. Not even lately, honestly, but ever since this game started. If it was anyone else I might’ve wondered if he met a girl, but this is Jacob Winstone we’re talking about here.”

“He met one girl,” said Hannah.

“We’re all entitled to a lucky fluke.”

Keon was barely listening. He opened the apartment door and strode in. It was dead quiet. Toni called out for Gladys, but as was becoming much too common an occurrence today, it went unanswered. He stopped at her bedroom, but as he’d thought, it was empty. Brendan’s room at the end of the hall was open, and plainly likewise so.

He opened the door to the game room.

It was dark in there, as dark as it had been in the simulated version they’d seen way back at character creation. The first thing he saw was the blinking lights of the game server, still active. As his eyes adjusted to the faint light coming in from the cityscape through the window, he saw Gladys. Sprawled out on the remaining couch, eyes closed, dead to the world.

To the real world, anyway.

He was running to her before he knew what he meant to say, shaking her by the shoulders, shouting her name. The others filtered in, but hovered back by the door. Something was happening, and everyone was a little afraid to find out what.

INCOMING TEXT

Gladys: Good, you’re here. Stop shaking me, it’s making me nauseous. Get in here.

He froze.

Toni rolled close behind them. “What? Is she OK? She’s not...?”

Keon screamed at the top of his lungs. “FUCK!”

The lot of them were stunned. Remy inserted himself into Keon’s field of vision and commanded his attention. “Dude. What the fuck is going on here? What’s wrong with her? What the hell is this?”

“It’s what I was afraid of. She’s in the game.”

“What?!”

Hannah spoke up with uncharacteristic softness. “That’s not possible, is it? She’d need the download from Jacob, and even then, Slutbag said the server could only support the five of us.” She deflected the questioning glances. “What? Gladys asked me to ask for her, so I brought it up when we leveled.”

Remy threw up his hands. “Was I the only one not secretly having a secret relationship with Brendan’s daughter? Jesus!”

Gladys: Stop yelling and get in already. All of you.

Keon glowered. “She’s texting me.”

“To say what?”

“She wants us to log in.”

“Well? What are we waiting for?” said Remy, flopping down on his usual spot on the couch. Keon noted Gladys appeared to have cleaned up where Brendan had been. Of course, she’d found time to tidy up the room, but not to tell him what she was up to.

But Hannah folded her arms. “No. You guys, this could be dangerous. Old school VR with the headsets and all, sure. But there’s a reason nobody’s fiddling around with the kind of shit Jacob threw at us. To run VR through your implant, you’re giving it the capacity to override your senses.”

Toni said quietly, “I’m not sure I follow.”

“When I say ‘giving *it*,’ I really giving *them*. This software is inputting sensory data directly to our brain, bypassing our eyes and ears and whatnot altogether. Now, I trusted Jacob so I went along with this. But now we have an innocent man in the hospital halfway to full vegetable status, and I’m telling you, this is a fucking bad idea.”

“But it’s still Jacob behind it. You don’t know that the app is what fried Brendan. Could be like Keon said someone said, he was using it and stroked out. Hell, maybe Lane’s active in there right now, and we can, I dunno, help her d/c, and then he’ll wake up and be cool.”

“Yeah, and maybe we’ll get some really neat treasure for it!” Hannah snorted. “This isn’t a video game, gym teacher. This is interactive software hardwired into our brains, and I don’t think we know what we’re interacting with any more.”

There was a sudden voice behind them, and Keon nearly leapt out of his skin. Toni screamed in surprise. “It’s still me. You’re safe. At least, you’re as safe out here as you are in there. Come on. You’re frightening Gladys with the delay, and she’s had a hard enough day already.”

Jacob’s hologram disappeared before anyone could get a word in. There was a stunned silence. Mysteries like this happened in games all the time. Mysterious strangers would appear, mutter something cryptic, and leave the party to figure out the meaning of it. But that was a game. This was too much like it, though, for anyone’s comfort.

“OK, so since when was Jacob doubling as the Mad Prophet of the Wilting Wood?” muttered Remy. Evidently he was thinking the same thing Keon was.

Hannah sought to expand the moment of levity. “Technically the Mad Prophet always was Jacob, since it was his NPC. Although since we later found out he was the reincarnation of the spirit of Braem, also sort of Keon.”

“I’m going in,” said Toni. She was already moving her chair next to her spot, struggling to her feet and sinking into her cushion.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Hannah replied.

Remy took her arm and jerked her down to the vacant spot on his couch. Brendan’s spot. “Can it, Skywalker. This is still Jacob here. I don’t know what this is, but

if he's the one who fucked up Brendan, I want him to tell me somewhere where I can punch him full force in the face without actually sending a second friend to the hospital."

She didn't resist. It left only Keon standing. All eyes were on him, somehow the fearless leader in life that he could normally only call forth in character. "Fine. If you're in, I'm in. But if he hurt her..."

"Jacob wouldn't ever hurt any of us," insisted Toni. "Come on. She's waiting for you."

Keon took the space next to Gladys. He tried not to think what would happen if they fell victim to whatever it was that had taken Brendan. As a last safety measure, he texted his parents an update of where he was, and that if he didn't text back, that he'd be here. At least now someone would think to look for him, and know where. It was better than nothing.

The others were already in. He wrapped an arm around Gladys's slender shoulders, then slid off his shoe and rubbed his sock against her bare foot. He couldn't be sure, but he thought her lips twisted in the slightest of smiles.

Keon closed his eyes, took a breath, and commanded his implant to turn on the app.

Corn exhaled.

He was sitting on the secondhand couch he and Dirk had picked up from someone's curb, right back where he'd been in the living room of Lane and Kennedy's apartment in Arcadia. Kennedy had magicked the bugs out of it, and Corn himself had made an Engineering check to fix it back up and restuff it. It was almost as comfy as the luxurious thing Keon had fallen asleep on back at One Tulley Center.

Keon hadn't known where he'd expected to appear, but indeed, like the start of any other session, they were picking up where and seemingly when they'd left off. There was no Lane. No Echo. If Gladys was in here, there was no sign of her either. The others were already on their feet waiting for him. Not sure what else to do, he followed them out into the hallway that adjoined their respective apartments.

One by one, they checked each for Gladys, Lane, or even Echo. Nothing. It wasn't silent, quite. Unlike Brendan's high rise, the sounds of the city were very much audible here, and the thin floors meant they could hear televisions, arguments, and one especially vigorous couple having what sounded like a heck of a mediocre time. It was more than could be said for the heroes' little base of operations.

"Where the hell are they?" demanded Dirk. "Feel free to throw us a hint here, Jacob."

He didn't answer. Of course. But Keon was mindful that his implant still worked here, and though it didn't technically work in-game – Corn had his own implant for that – but he could still use it the way he had been back home.

Keon: *We're in the game. Are you in here?*

Gladys: *We're upstairs.*

Corn spared no words, simply making for the stairwell and heading on up to the only level of Arcadia above their own. The roof.

It was cool out, but not cold, like it was in the real Chicago. It was still the end of summer here, but the breeze drove the warmth from this height. Not far from them, seated at that picnic bench that had somehow been dragged up here long before the PCs had arrived, were two figures, softly illuminated by the ambient light of the neighborhood. One was Echo. Seated across from him was someone Corn had never seen before, but nevertheless recognized immediately. It wasn't merely on account of the low-light vision he'd picked up at level 2, either, but that helped him pick out the details. Still, he would have recognized that smile on anyone.

She was of an age with Gladys, he saw as he drew close, in her early twenties. Or maybe her beauty lent her some youth that had already been expended. She was gorgeous, and while the real Gladys was very much attractive herself, hers was a more nuanced beauty, a mix of punk and posh with a liberal dose of hot nerd girl. This woman was simply stunning, thick black hair hanging to mid-back framing bright eyes and dimples. He didn't let himself dwell on the body, but she hadn't skimped on Charisma

there either, clearly. Those eyes, though, they were the same sparkling blue as the real Gladys.

She was barely on her feet in time to intercept his hug, and the others allowed the two their moment. “I was worried sick about you,” he murmured in her ear as he held her off the ground. Corn was a much stronger hugger than Keon.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Her voice was different, higher he thought, and with some kind of accent. Was it Irish?

“Why didn’t you answer?”

“Because I knew you’d come back and stop me.”

Definitely Irish. Was the app doing that, or was that her? He could ask later. “Damn right I would have. What were you thinking? This app, this *game*, it almost killed your dad, and what do you do but dive right in!”

She squirmed out of his grip. “I knew the risks. I figured if I got trapped in here like he did, you’d be back and find me before I was in danger. Real world danger. Besides, you knew as well as I did that something here had closed his mind away from our world, and those doctors won’t know how to treat that. They can give him medicine and fluids, sure, but they can’t release his mind from its prison.”

“Prison? What do you mean by that? Did you find him?”

At that, she stepped back and gestured to Echo, who was standing by patiently. His usual inscrutable expression was firmly in place. A passive Perception check called his attention to the fact that the wounds he’d sustained when Dr. Ruiz had telekinetically launched his body across the room and quite nearly out a window had healed. The blood from his clothes was gone as well.

“Welcome back,” he said.

Corn was in his face in an instant. “Don’t you welcome us, man. Where’s Brendan? Or Lane, or whatever you want to call him. Where is he?”

“It’s complicated,” he said. The mere fact that he hadn’t denied knowing who Brendan was confirmed a lot, though.

Dirk scoffed. The rest of the party had drawn closer. “Complicated? Are you fucking kidding me? Our friend is in a fucking coma, and you’re giving us ‘*ith compwicadeh!*’ Fucking un-complicate it, you bearded prick!”

Kennedy closed in on him as well, uncharacteristically aggressively. “This isn’t fun and games, Jacob. Whatever you did, whatever you’re doing, it almost killed Brendan and scared the rest of us half to death ourselves. Look, I know you wanted to try something wild and crazy, but this is much too wild, and much much much too crazy.”

“I am not Jacob,” he said, seemingly unfazed by their hostility. “But I can tell you what befell your companion.”

“Are we really going to have to RP this shit out in character?” whined Sanguine. “Fine then, out with it. Where’s Brendan?”

Echo gestured to the picnic table, inviting them to sit. His quiet mien made them feel increasingly foolish as they refused it, until soon everyone was seated. Corn made sure Gladys – or whatever her character’s name was – was beside him.

“As I said, the truth of this is complicated, and you may struggle to believe some of it, or perhaps even to comprehend it. But to begin with, as plainly as I can state it, Brendan’s whereabouts are no mystery. Ms. DeVrynn was good enough to sync with me so that I could understand your texts. And if what you have conveyed from your updates is accurate, he is lying in a hospital bed in Rush Medical Center, room 611.”

“DeVrynn?” asked Brendan in Gladys’s ear.

“Yep. From Dad’s backstory. Gaetana.” She flashed a thin smile, but then looked back to Echo.

“But since that’s obviously not what you’re asking, the complicated portion of the answer involves the whereabouts of Lane McAllister. The short answer is: I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Dirk was already taking to his feet, fists clenched, but Echo motioned for calm.

“Because it may be unknowable. Lane was taken by forces that hunt this world looking for the lot of you. As you had surmised, they had found you, in some cases, and were doubtless hard at work to find the rest.”

Sanguine held up a finger. “Wait, are you talking about the delivery boy? The hooker bots?”

“I am. As well as the–”

But Dirk wasn’t having it. “What the hell, man? You sent us chasing down Ruiz all over town when you already knew this big dark secret of hers? Is that what you’re saying?”

“What little she revealed helped me piece together various suspicions and clues I had devised into a more concrete model. Recovering her, however, was still a priority, and my slowing down your search to explain that model would have been counterproductive.”

“Lucky for us that we’re all here to have it explained to us now. So go ahead and explain away.” Corn gestured.

“As you know, this world, this reality, is not the only one,” he began, but was promptly cut off by a groan from Dirk.

“Are you really gonna go all Planescape on us, man? I mean, the setting was the shit and all, but we know all about the cosmology. Elemental planes, outer planes, transitive, yada yada,” he said.

“No. This world is self-contained. Certain spells and effects from your game make conceptual utilization of these premises, but there is no heaven, there is no hell. At least,

not so far as I'm aware. No, to the best of my knowledge, there are but two worlds. This one, and the one where Brendan lies in room 611."

Kennedy pursed her lips. "Whenever we broke character and talked about our world in front of you, you always acted like you didn't know what we were talking about."

"A ruse that was part of the role I needed to play," Echo replied. "One of several, as you will go on to learn. This world – my world – is a place fabricated in code. Everything our senses perceive is coded into it. Everything you do here is transmitted digitally. Kennedy's magnician spells touch upon the code and modify it directly, but even your mundane actions take place via—"

"Code, yeah, we get it. It's a VR. Duh." Sanguine gestured for him to get on with it."

"The problem is, the code, which you're modifying by your merely being here, isn't yours, nor was it ever intended for you to interact with. It was developed by minds of surpassing ingenuity and alacrity. Minds like Dr. Ruiz. However, like matter, code is susceptible to manipulation and, at times, theft. Such was the case with the code for this world. It was separated from its source, after which point it has developed independently, and aberrantly."

"Wait, stolen?" Toni. "Are you saying... you *stole* this code from AdZell, Jacob? Isn't that, like, industrial espionage? Isn't that what that is?"

"I say again, I am *not* Jacob. But to your question, I cannot say. Espionage requires an external agency infiltrating for their own purposes. I do not know that our thief qualifies. But since AdZell has thus far been unable to locate and interrogate her, such an accusation may or may not possess merit."

Corn turned to Gaetana. "Gladdy, do you know what he's talking about? Because I am tired of listening to a glorified NPC talking in riddles. I don't care about high concept game design bullshit. I just want to know what happened to your dad."

"It took me a while to design my character, so he and I only started talking a little bit ago. That said, to condense what he seemed to be trying to tell me..." She turned to the peering faces of the party. "Echo claims that these doppelgangers you guys have been seeing are manifestations of this world, and that they're trying to connect to your implants in the real world, but also to connect to your characters' implants here. That lets the doppelgangers run a trace. Or their masters, anyway. Implants can't be hacked so they can't just find you directly. But he claims they can detect signs of the usage of this app due to its complexity. Like you might not be able to see a fish in a murky lake, but if it thrashes around enough, there are ripples. I was trying to get him to explain how exactly it all works when you all showed up."

"Irish accents are so hot," mumbled Dirk.

Corn snapped, "She's not a hookerbot. Watch your mouth." Dirk held up his hands deferentially.

Kennedy had not been so easily distracted, however. "All right, Jacob, or Echo, or whatever. I don't care how it works. I want to know why you're doing it, and how it hurt Brendan."

Echo nodded, anticipating the question. He stroked his beard as he spoke, as if contemplating how best to explain. "The why is fairly simple. This code is not yours, and you don't belong here. If your real identities can be discerned, your breach of this world can be put to an end and AdZell's code reverts to the sole property of its original owners."

"Wait, are you saying... are you saying... what are you saying?" Sanguine frowned.

Corn answered. "He's saying that there's a new plot twist, that Echo the NPC works for AdZell and that he's trying to hunt down the people who pirated their VR program. So the game is part of the game, but so is the real world. It's all very meta. Great writing, Jacob. Now I am not kidding when I say I am fucking done talking about the game, and if you don't tell me what your program did to Brendan, right now, I will fly to Austin and slap it out of your mouth on the first flight out!"

"For the last time, I am not Jacob. Jacob is not here. When you speak to Jacob, he cannot hear you. I am Echo. You think of me as what you know as an NPC, and in a sense I suppose I am. But I am not under your GM's control, and I never have been. I am here as the spear tip of AdZell's corporate security. Brendan Gibbel was identified as a co-conspirator with the thief of our code, and has been apprehended accordingly. He was foolish enough to enter this world unescorted as his character Lane McAllister, and so we apprehended her and are holding her in a securely coded facility. She cannot escape."

"How could you possibly not know our names?" asked a perplexed Kennedy. "We break character all the time!"

"As I said, this place is entirely code. Something – or rather, someone - distorted large portions of the code to introduce elements for your game. When your characters were created, one of the many attributes bestowed upon them was the status of so-called 'player characters.' Your words and actions are decoded by all here as the words and actions of your characters. Which is to say, if you spoke your name and address right now, then I, perceiving the code, would hear only the name and address of your character; whereas your implants and the code within them possess the requisite programming to hear such things as they are spoken."

"This shit's getting trippier by the second, man..." said Sanguine.

Echo sighed in a decidedly condescending fashion. "As I said, you may not be able to comprehend what I am telling you. But in truth, it no longer matters. Our prior method of investigation has borne what fruit it would, and while I would have liked to

handle the rest of my investigation in further amicability, that is no longer possible. The time has come to take more aggressive steps to restore our proprietary control over the code.”

“Coder,” said Kennedy suddenly. “You’re the Coder, that the Greg doppelganger told us about.”

“I am one manifestation of the entity who wrote the code. The other... I hope to reunite with them soon.”

“The reunion,” whispered Sanguine.

Dirk wasn’t having it though. Keon was still trying to figure out what was Jacob’s plot and what could be really happening, but Remy seldom let himself be distracted by such conceptual ponderings. “Look, just bring Lane back, or let her close the app, OK asswipe? If Jacob stole your stupid code, we’re sorry, but we don’t know anything about it and we sure as fuck aren’t about to let you try to lobotomize us over it. Take it up with him, and by the way, I hope you have better luck contacting him than we have of late. Other than popping by a minute ago to push us in here, we haven’t seen the guy in weeks.” Dirk casually unholstered his gun. He left it pointing at the ground, though. For now.

But if the bared steel intimidated Echo, he certainly didn’t show it. “I very much doubt that was Jacob.”

“What? Then who—”

Echo spoke right over Kennedy. “Now in a moment, I am going to provide you the necessary information to sync with one of our servers. Once you do so, you will be asked to transmit verification of your identities in your world. Since your implants and our servers exist in that world, no code inhibitors will disrupt that identification.”

Sanguine was standing now, too, and the rest of the party followed suit. Gaetana didn’t appear to be armed, but Keon had played enough RPGs to know that didn’t mean she was helpless. “Yeah,” said the redhead dryly, drawing her own pistol. “Or hey, maybe you can go fuck yourself and your little server, bro.”

“If you don’t, you’ll never find out what happened to Brendan after he was moved out of room 611,” he said evenly. “Apologies. When I said earlier that he was presently still in that place, it was another of those necessary ruses which I mentioned.”

Everyone was a bit caught off guard when Gaetana’s eyes began to glow, a soft purple light spilling out of them as she tapped into whatever her magical power source was. Corn was not surprised; Gladys wouldn’t splurge on Charisma out of vanity like Sanguine had. If she’d maxed it out, it meant Charisma was her casting stat. “You wouldn’t. You can’t. You can’t just *steal* someone from a hospital!”

“When you confirm that delusion and find him absent, you will begin to appreciate the depth of my own disillusionment at finding my code divided and stolen out from under me.” Undaunted by the show of force surrounding him, Echo actually

took a step toward them. “Now. Are you ready to submit? Or will you sacrifice Brendan to save yourselves? Understand that his life means nothing to me, and I would suffer no guilt over terminating it.”

Dirk aimed his gun. The thing was classified as a pistol, but the subsonic wave pulse emitter was practically a one-handed rifle. Doubtless why Remy had been drawn to it.

“Roll init, mother fucker.”

The die were cast; the order of actions was transmitted to their implants. There was a moment in which Corn wondered if he should be nervous that the game was reaching his implant, but then he remembered this entire world was playing out in there. Besides, not like an NPC could actually harm the players. Only their characters.

Except for what had happened to Lane and Brendan.

Echo was first. In fact, his initiative didn't even have a number next to it, merely a + beside his name in its first order position.

This had Boss Fight written all over it, but Echo merely Delayed. No action, simply standing there waiting to see if he'd like to do something later on. At least he wasn't Readying an action. Readies could interrupt your enemy, whereas Delays went after, but had more freedom to act. Was he too good to take first blood or something? Some weird moral high ground against the alleged consorts of thieves?

What in the hells had Jacob gotten into?

Sanguine was up first. She dove for cover behind the picnic table – not that there was anything to hide from as yet. Still, it enabled her to attempt one of her Maneuvers, imposing a penalty to his attacks on a successful hit. She rolled a seventeen, and her grin broadened. Definitely a hit.

Time slowed.

Corn's jaw had not yet fully dropped by the time Echo casually stepped out of the bullet's path, then continued, moving all the way behind where the group had surrounded him. So much for Sanguine's cover. In the blink of an eye, he had moved fifty feet to the other side of the battlefield.

And still didn't look the least bit nervous.

Corn's own attack, a simple charge coupled with a swing of his buzz blade, missed more and less spectacularly. He simply rolled a two, so all Echo needed to do was hold still and let him whiff. Kennedy laid a hand on Dirk's gun barrel and cast *bullet bifurcation* on it. He'd seen that one in action when they'd stormed Arcadia, a spell that split bullets in two as they left the gun. Dirk's gun didn't technically use bullets as ammo, but the spell didn't seem to care. It'd split electrical energy, acid, fire, whatever. It could even split targets – not that there was need presently. Handy means of doubling damage.

Echo still didn't use his action, which meant Remy was up. With a smile on his face, he aimed down the barrel right at Echo's heart and depressed the trigger.

It was impossible to miss the 20 subtly vocalized in the soft whine of the sonic weapon's sound effect. The party cheered. Natural 20 meant guaranteed hit, and a critical at that. With Toni's spell, that meant quadruple damage. The pair of bright purple trails spat into either side of Echo's broad chest, sinking into his clothing – and then blasting a pair of holes right through him. There was no blood, simply two broad holes.

The NPC's interior was pure, solid, crimson red nothingness. Echo glanced down, plucked at the damage to his shirt, and frowned.

His turn.

He closed to melee range with Dirk. (Corn took his attack of opportunity as he walked by, but had no more luck than last time.) With one hand, he reached out and took hold of the pulse emitter by the barrel – and in an instant, it melted into red-white molten liquid steel. Dirk howled as it burned his hand; his hit points dropped by half.

“I have but to transmit the order, and far, far worse will happen to Lane. What I just did to your gun, I could do to this entire building.”

“Yeah, yeah, resistance is futile, you walking Brawny ad,” jibed Sanguine. “I can't believe I let you charm me. Charm this.” Though even as she taunted him, she was backing away, and when her shot froze mid-air, the bullet a glowing red point in space, no one was surprised any more.

“Is this going to be a TPK?” Kennedy asked nervously as she moved for the stairwell door.

“Aye, this daft prick cannot balance his encounters for shite,” answered Gaetana. Her ability had finally charged. The glow in her eyes flared, and then a shell of brilliant blue light appeared where Echo had been standing the moment she'd cast it. But again, he moved like he was uninhibited by time, only this time when he finished, he was floating some twenty feet over the rooftop, his clothes and beard fluttering in the wind. Then the interior of Gaetana's conjured shell exploded with a storm of lightning bolts cascading around its interior. It looked like it would have been brutal if it had been given a chance at succeeding.

Corn was thinking fast. He had to have *some* weakness. “He's tapped into the code! Kennedy, he said your powers manipulated it – can you slow him down?” For his own part, he was kicking himself for not having purchased a ranged weapon simply because of his poor Dex. There wasn't much he could do but move to Kennedy and try to block anything he might throw at her. He didn't like his odds.

On Echo's turn, with a mere flicker of his eyes to command it, the picnic table exploded, splintered wood and shards of metal flying in all directions. Corn caught a few himself, but it looked like nobody took too much damage. Dirk, however, was in poor

straights after the previous attack. Worse, there wasn't a party member on the roof who wasn't aware that Echo was pulling punches, and could be doing much worse if he so chose.

Finally, it was back to Kennedy. She attempted an Arcana check, trying to fabricate a way to magically fix the code to prevent him from further abuses. Corn even assisted with his Computers knowledge, shouting suggestions over the din of explosions and gunfire. For a moment, Echo began to drop from the sky, but just as suddenly he stopped in place, wagging a reproving finger at them.

"If you'll pardon a pun, you cannot best me at my own game. My other half and I wrote the code for this world ourselves, Ms. McCanon, and now I am afraid I must—"

A beam of energy as thick as Corn was tall streaked out of nowhere, right through where Echo had been hovering. Gaetana's spell was a star in the night sky compared to this noonday sun. Corn threw himself to the pavement, shielding his eyes and burying Kennedy beneath him. It only lasted a moment, and then it was as dark as it had been before. Slowly, the party picked themselves up, looking around in bewilderment. Who in the hell was packing *that* at 2nd level?

Echo was gone. It was as if he'd been vaporized, not even ash remaining. Kennedy and Dirk were scanning the area to see if he might have dodged again, but Corn had seen the blast strike him center mass. If he could be destroyed, that must have done it. But who—

"Slutbag?" said Sanguine.

As one, the group followed her gaze to the end of the rooftop where a familiar figure was rising beyond the ledge. The blue-haired woman, who had never previously been spotted outside of the character editing process, was hovering upward on a translucent disc that glimmered like a pool of moonlight coalesced in the thin air beneath her. It was the direction that blast had come from; she was clearly its source.

"You need to leave this place," she said, addressing the party. Her voice carried perfectly across the opening space, like she was speaking softly into their ears. "I can prevent the Echo from rematerializing here for a time, but not indefinitely. He has access to power and resources I no longer do. Leave, then go somewhere safe. He knows about Brendan's apartment; they will be coming here for you now. Hurry. More lives than your own depend on this."

The group was staring, agape, save for Dirk, who was studying his maimed hand. With all that he'd seen and heard, Corn was beyond asking questions. For now, she seemed to be helping them, and Echo was not. He wasn't about to disconnect first, though. A leader was first in, last out. "Come on, gang. Let's move."

Sanguine was gone first, her character suddenly freezing in place like it was the end of any other session. Dirk followed after. Gaetana gave Corn a nod, then left as well. Kennedy, however, walked over to their benefactor, her gratitude plain on her face.

None of them fully understood what was happening, but all were sure that whatever it was, it was bigger than some fight in some game.

The pool of light the woman was hovering on lowered her onto the rooftop, eye to eye with Kennedy. “You told me back in the beginning of all this, when I pressed you about your name, that you’d tell me when and if I ever needed to know.” Kennedy took her hands. “I need to know now.”

She nodded. “That you do. You may call me Coda.”

Kennedy’s eyes twinkled in recognition after a moment. “So it wasn’t the Coder after all. Brendan was right. Coda. And here I thought Echo was the Coder.”

“He is. As am I. But this is not the time for such explanations, Toni.”

Kennedy nodded. “Thank you, Coda.”

“Do not thank me until the game is over,” she answered. “Now leave. You still have a long way to go.”

Back in Brendan's gaming room, nothing had changed. Remy was flexing his fist as if to reassure himself it had not been real. If Corn didn't know better, he'd suspect the guy was still in pain. Gladys threw her arms around Keon, and he held her as she murmured more apologies, as fervent as they were unnecessary. Hannah was glaring at the server box; Toni was gazing despondently at the empty space where Brendan usually sat.

There was some chaos after that as they all tried to make sense of it, and what was a game, what was real, and whether the game was indeed distinct from reality any more. If it had ever been. A cacophony broke out, everyone arguing their perspective, whether they should be angry with Jacob or afraid for him, whether Coda and Echo were part of the game or AdZell corporate security or both or neither. But it was Gladys who finally allowed them to put a point on it.

It was Toni who finally managed to reach their GM to confront him. "Jake," she said, addressing the holoprojector in the room. "I know you're listening now, just like before. If you don't show yourself, right now, I'm uninstalling the game and I'll never speak to you again for as long as I live. I swear I mean it. Last chance."

It was quiet for a long moment. Sanguine finally shook her head, murmuring, "I don't think he can hear—"

And then he was there, standing in the middle of the group of them. There was no apology on his face, no remorse, no anything. He looked at them, and waited.

Keon waited for someone to demand answers, but once more Toni took the lead. "Take off your shirt, Jacob."

Their GM arched his eyebrow quizzically. It apparently surprised him as much as it had them. "I'm sorry...?"

"Not sorry enough," spat Dirk, but Toni motioned for silence.

"Take off your shirt. I need to see you. I need to see my Jacob. Lord knows you've seen enough of all of us in this game. Your turn. Now."

After a moment, Jacob shrugged and got to work on the buttons of his flannel shirt. Then he let it slide off his shoulders and disappear off-holocam. He spread his arms, gave them a spin. "It's only a game, guys," he said calmly. "Trust me, it's going to pay off. You just need to go back in and give it more time."

"Go back in?" Hannah snorted. "Are you fucking crazy, Jacob?!"

"He's not," said Toni.

"You sure, because he sounds pretty fucking crazy to—"

"He's not Jacob." All eyes left their shirtless GM and turned to Toni in her chair. "The tattoo, you guys. It's not there."

Sure enough, it wasn't. Keon had been there when Jacob had gotten in, back during one of their early Weeks o' Gaming when his plans had run a little short and they'd had time to kill on the last day. It had been Remy's idea, and Hannah had helped

shame him into going through with it. That Toni was clearly turned on by the thought of a little ink on her then-boyfriend hadn't hurt either. Keon had only been there for moral support. He remembered the gleam in Jacob's teary eyes when he first saw it completed in the mirror, how proud he'd been of it, and of himself for getting it.

This Jacob hologram didn't have it. Toni was right. But if this wasn't Jacob, then... who were they talking to? *What* were they talking to? And how long had this been going on?

"He's gone," Gladys said suddenly. It pulled everyone out of their inspection. "I called the hospital. They seemed confused. They said his room was empty, but they couldn't find the transfer order. The woman I spoke to said maybe it just hadn't come through her desk yet, but she didn't sound convinced. But he's gone. My dad is gone."

Keon couldn't say it. Gladys collapsed onto him, and that was where he was needed in that moment. But Toni found the words. "Then they really do know where he is, which means they know where he lives, which means they have an idea where we might be. Coda was right, guys. It's time to go."

Jacob opened his mouth, but right then Remy pulled the plug on the holoprojector and his disintegrated in a brief flash of shimmering pixels.

There was a stunned silence. Before anyone could take the first step, a sudden surprise in the eyes of all present confirmed they had all received a notification from their implants. It was from the gaming app. There was no need to ask whether they'd received the same one.

Congratulations on reaching Level 3.