

The Bardic Type Patreon by Thomas Bell

(02/August/2021 - 31/December/2021)

Spring

by Taliaferro Parker

My head is exploding
My brain bludgeoned by a brick
I'm dying. Dying.
Dying, I say!
Stop claiming I'm simply sick.

My nose wheezes a congested hiss.
I can . . . see . . . the light.
I'm at the threshold of the abyss
But won't go without a fight!

My ears are aching, the world
Doth

Spin.
Angels, come take me away!
Do I need to wail out again?
I'm dying! *Dying*, I say!

My hand shakes, skeletal pale,
Truly this is the end.
I'd call 911, but I'm too frail,
So instead I'll text a friend.

("help me. I'm dying."
Left on read.)

I open the cabinet with watery lungs,
Hinges creak as I sigh.
They say the best always die young,
But why me? God, why?

(Seriously. Take someone else.)

An hour later, I can once again breathe,
Bright-eyed, clear-headed, *alive*.
Allergy meds saved me from the Lethe,
I fought Pollen and survived.

[August Patreon Roadmap](#)

[Aug 3, 2021](#)

I currently have my nose to the grindstone finishing all the variations on Chapter 12's "dates" (parenthesis because there are also platonic versions). My favorite scene so far is probably Glitch's, if only because bookstores are my happy place. Glitch's date also became surprisingly deep and heartfelt after I switched the locale from a carnival, although I do mourn the elephant ears.

As always, the drop dates are flexible, especially between August 11th and 18th since I'll be visiting my mom in Washington (yay!). But here's everything that will be released this month:

August 4: *Lady Death's Diary* Chapter 16

August 5: *Mind Blind* Blooper Reel #1

August 6: Writer's Blog

August 8: *Mind Blind* Chapter 12 Update

August 9: *Mind Blind* Saucy Side (Glitch)

August 11: *Lady Death's Diary* Chapter 17

August 12: *Mind Blind* Short Story #1

August 13: Writer's Blog

August 14: *Mind Blind* Fairy Tale (UCRT)

August 16: *Delivery for the Damned* Teaser

August 17: *Delivery for the Damned* Poll

August 19: *Nick Wiseman Has Opinions* (on Pizza)

August 20: Writer's Blog

August 21: *Aeon Student Guide* (Telemetrists)

August 23: *Mind Blind* Short Story #2

August 25: *Lady Death's Diary* Chapter 18

August 26: *MB* Bloopers Reel #2

August 27: Writer's Blog

August 28: *Mind Blind* Chapter 13 Update

August 29: Live Q&A

August 30: *MB* Cast Interview (Reese's ego is never going to recover if the dogs win 😊)

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 16](#)

[Aug 4, 2021](#)

The stench of vomit and lye assaulted my nose as soon as I opened the door to Emilia's room. Her chamber adjoined my own, albeit significantly smaller in size. The décor, however, rivaled that of any noblewoman's boudoir, filled as it was with castoffs luxuries gifted to me by members of Court. Emilia had cooed over that lacquered armoire in the corner, its black doors painted with twining rose vines. "The design is so elegant, my lady," she had exclaimed. "Lord Gremel's page says this style is all the rage in Fengal. To think he'd bring you one back!"

I had shrugged. "It's yours if you want it."

Emilia had smiled in that self-satisfied way she did whenever she thought that she had oh-so subtly manipulated me. "You're too generous, my lady," she'd said.

If only I could be certain she'd smile that way again, she could have every blasted piece of furniture I owned.

Emilia's body lay motionless upon her bed. Her face was waxy and sallow, far paler than her usually rosy complexion. Her normally immaculate updo lay loose in limp strands across the pillow, matted with sweat and sick, and her lips were tinted blue. If she still breathed, her inhalations were so shallow that her chest didn't appear to rise. I stepped closer, fighting back a wave of nausea that arose from the sour smell and my own fear. Despite my many deaths, I had never seen a corpse.

"Is she . . ." I couldn't finish the question.

Hamen knelt on the floor, clutching Emilia's hand as if his grip alone could tether her to the world of the living. He lifted his head as I approached. Our eyes met; his were weary and rimmed red, testament to how long he'd been keeping vigil.

"She lives." His voice broke, and he swiped a hand across his face. "For now."

I locked my knees to keep them from buckling beneath me. The Silent Fourth hadn't claimed her yet. Triad allowing, it would stay that way.

"When did her symptoms first appear?" I asked.

"Several hours past, she voided herself before falling into a slumber." He tenderly brushed away a hair from his daughter's cheek. "She hasn't stirred since."

I closed my eyes and reached out with magic towards Emilia's frozen form. Poison lingered beneath the surface of her skin, like sap oozing under bark, an unctuous corruption attacking healthy flesh. Reopening my eyes, I took Emilia's hand from Hamen and examined it. The white crescents of her nails were cracked and yellowed.

Aspswort. My own concoction, the one I'd devised in my last life, had used but the barest hint—in larger doses, the thistle's extract was fast acting and usually fatal. Aspswort was the reason that the jester's ferret had died. To my knowledge, there was no cure, magical or otherwise.

A salty droplet of blood pooled upon my lip from where my teeth had bit down. I wiped it away, not caring that it stained my sleeve red. I could mend a horse's leg, cast an illusion, and slow down a fire.

But I didn't know how to save Emilia.

"I should get Lady Delphine," I said.

Hamen grabbed my arm, preventing me from leaving. "The Court Sorceress was already here," he said. "She gave Emilia some foul looking mixture that forced her to purge again, then left to brew something that she claimed might help." The apple of his throat bobbed, and his grip tightened around my wrist before he remembered my station and released it. "My lady—I know it's inappropriate to ask—but I think Emmie would appreciate it if you stayed. She looks to be resting easier since you entered."

There hadn't been any noticeable changes in Emilia's condition, but I empathized with her father's urge to convince himself otherwise. I sank down onto my knees besides him.

"I'll stay as long as she needs," I promised.

The small shift of Hamen's mouth was a ghost of a genuine smile. Neither one of us spoke after that, instead devoting our gazes and thoughts to the girl lying on the bed.

My calves were beginning to cramp by the time Delphine returned with a small ceramic teapot. The right side of her silk robe was crusted with bile and whatever else had been in Emilia's stomach. It scared me that Delphine of all people had considered the situation too urgent to take the time to change.

"Tru." Delphine handed me the kettle as I stood. The steam rising from its spout smelled like peppermint tea but caused my eyes to burn. "It's good that Hamen sent for you."

Hamen lowered his head as if ashamed. "Apologies. I know it's your birthday, my lady."

"Emilia would want me here," I said firmly before he could apologize, "so here is where I should be." I hesitated before resting my hand atop his slumped shoulder. "I won't let her face this alone. She . . . means a great deal to me."

He looked up at me. Tears flowed down the crevasses of his wrinkled cheeks. "She knows, Lady Vitrula."

I blinked back wetness beginning to blur my own vision. Crying was a ridiculous waste of time, and time was something Emilia didn't have. "How do I help?" I asked Delphine.

"We need to make sure Emilia drinks the entire brew without choking. If she inhales the liquid, she's as likely to die from drowning as from the poison." Delphine appraised me critically. The kohl around her eyes had smudged into smoky shadows, emphasizing the bags of worry beneath, but she nonetheless exuded competence. Hope crept into my heart, only to be instantly quashed by Delphine's next words: "I'll need you to stop her lungs."

"You intend to cut off her breath?" Hamen gave voice to my thoughts. "No. You'll kill her. No!"

Delphine's lips pursed. "For a moment only. Once Tru stops her lungs, I can coax her throat into swallowing."

"She needs air," he protested weakly. "She needs to breathe."

I tried to summon up my confidence; upon finding my reservoir depleted, I settled for faking it. "She needs our help, Hamen." My voice came out sharper than intended, weighted with an echo of my father's strident authority. "Lady Delphine has my trust."

My feigned assurance managed to calm him down. Hamen used Emilia's bedside to leverage himself off the floor. He went around to the foot of her bed, removing himself so that we had access to his daughter.

"Save my daughter," he begged, forgoing his customary inclusion of my title. "Please."

Delphine stepped briskly into Hamen's vacated space. "This will be easier if we prop her up."

I helped arrange the pillows around Emilia to bolster her upright. Her skin felt clammy, her bared arms so pale and bloodless that my fingerprints lingered behind. My jaw clenched in an attempted to appear collected for Hamen's sake. I wanted to weep. Stop her lungs, Delphine had said. How? Even with the sorceress to guide me, such a task seemed impossible.

Delphine took the kettle from my trembling grip. “You can do this,” she said, low enough that Hamen couldn’t overhear. “Remember our lessons.”

I nodded. Her eyes drifted downwards to my still shaking hands.

“Tell me now if you are incapable,” she said bluntly. “Your nerves will cause this to be riskier than doing it by myself.”

I averted my eyes, casting them downwards to Emilia’s prone body. Stains from sweat and other bodily fluids darkened the cream silk sheets upon which she lay. Those sheets had been my engagement gift from a visiting Fengali princess, woven from the unique golden cocoons made by the country’s silkworms. Another gift Emilia had repossessed, albeit this one without my knowledge.

It should be me, lying on those sheets. The thought entered unbidden but once arrived, refused to depart. *I’m the one who’s supposed to die. Not Emilia. Not Theo. Not anyone else. Me.*

I shuddered. Maybe, in the end, I wouldn’t be able to save myself. But right now, Emilia needed me. I met Delphine’s expectant look and took a deep breath. “Tell me what to do.”

“You’ll need to visualize her lungs, as you did with Dragon’s leg,” she said. “Instead of healing, however, you’ll cast the slowing spell. You’re adept at that charm, thankfully.”

I nodded. My first spell remained the only one that didn’t leave me with a migraine. Months ago, it had saved my life by slowing down the flames enough to escape. With Delphine’s help, it would save Emilia as well.

Delphine continued, “You’ll need to stall her breaths long enough for me to ensure she drinks the entire potion but not so long as to make restarting her lungs impossible. Meanwhile, I’ll manipulate her throat to swallow.”

“What spell will you be casting?” I asked.

She shook her head slowly. “No spell can control a body’s natural reflexes. Unfortunately, this will require brute force magical manipulation.”

My eyes widened. I’d read of magic being worked without proper incantations in some of the books Xander had sent. By all accounts, it was not only difficult, but immensely dangerous. Delphine planned on taking direct control of Emilia’s body—no wonder she wanted my help.

I placed my hand over Emilia’s torso. Reassuringly, my sense of touch detected what my sight could not. Her chest rose and fell beneath me—the movements were slight, but they were there. I timed my own breaths to her shallow gasps.

My eyes drifted shut, and a vision began to paint itself upon my inner eyelids. Cherkov’s *Anatomical Depictions*, page 68. The human lungs. They expanded and contracted within Emilia’s chest, fluttering

weakly like the wings of a dying butterfly.

“*Keyp.*”

The wings slowed, stopped. The gentle undulation of Emilia’s breathing beneath my hands sighed still.

I waited.

Sounds came as if I were underwater, or inside Emilia’s very veins. Delphine administering the antidote. A soft kissing sound her fingers forced apart chapped lips. Muffled waves as the pot tilted. The *clink* of the china spout bumping against Emilia’s teeth.

Delphine tapped my shoulder. “Release her.”

I unraveled the strands of magic I’d woven inside Emilia, painstakingly untangling the shroud of energy wrapped around her lungs. When the last thread was untied, her chest once more began its steady rhythm.

“Now we wait,” said Delphine.

[MB Chapter 12: Date Scene Bloopers](#)

[Aug 5, 2021](#)

Gray’s leather jacket is silky beneath your tentative hands. He reaches back and grabs your wrist, wrapping your one arm securely around his waist. Your other follows suit without further persuasion, and you officially have your arms wrapped around Grayson Black.

He throws you a lopsided grin over his shoulder. “It won’t be quite as good as Aladdin’s magic carpet ride, but I’ll do my best.”

* * *

“Although I do wish that oils dried faster,” Sally continues blithely. “Sometimes it can take up to a week or two for everything to solidify. I know that I could always paint thinner layers, but . . .”

You inch closer.

“. . . sometimes things just *need* to be painted using impasto, and the end effect is worth . . .”

Another step closer.

“. . . waiting for.” Sally only now realizing that your lips are only a few centimeters away from hers. She blinks, her tongue peeping out to nervously lick her lower lip. “Um. Hello.”

* * *

Glitch's face suddenly appears between a gap in the books.

“Boo!” she cries.

Your reflexes, already on edge after last night's mission, kick in. Glitch reels backwards, almost knocking over the bookshelf, as the book you throw barely avoids hitting her head. She picks the copy of *Goodnight Moon* from the floor and smirks at you.

“Interesting choice of projectile,” she says. “Personally, I would've gone with something YA. Has more heft, plus the added indignity of knocking someone unconscious with *Twilight*.”

* * *

You can't pry your gaze from Cassandra, who is smiling at you with unnaturally flat teeth. Canine fangs shouldn't look like that . . . they *don't* look like that.

“Kent?”

Kent doesn't look up from where he's trying to coax the ball away from Antigone, but he gives you a grunt of acknowledgement.

“Kent!”

Finally, he turns his attention to you. “What?”

He follows your gaze to Cassandra and lets out a startled bark of laughter.

“Where did you find *dentures*?” he asks the dog.

Cass only smiles wider. It's unnerving.

[Writer's Blog: Dear Jo, Stop Ignoring Your Personality Stats. With Love, Jo.](#)

[Aug 6, 2021](#)

Current Wordcount: 365k

Next Update: August 8, will include the rest of Chapter 12

Mind Blind is the first interactive fiction that I've ever written, and I'd be lying if I claimed that there hasn't been a steep learning curve. There are several major plotlines in the game, all of which I'm attempting to juggle. A different, better-organized writer might create a scene-by-scene layout, but my best ideas usually happen at the last minute. I made *Mind Blind* layouts twice, only to have completely changed directions when I got a different cool idea.

I know the story's ending (that's never changed), and I know the motivations behind all character actions (that hasn't changed either, even if I know understand the characters better). If this were a normal novel, this information would be enough to see me through the story end while still allowing plot flexibility to incorporate sudden bursts of inspiration (like Nick ending up in Button's head).

With Interactive Fiction, however, there's the added level of difficulty. As the story has continued, and the branches and character mindsets diversified, the main character became more and more difficult for me to write. Scenes were constantly getting thrown away and rewritten, because the protagonist felt . . . I'm going to go with the eloquent term of "blah-ish." Button no longer felt as vibrant to me.

Part of this is the fatigue that comes from being in the final third stretch of a long-term project (I can see the end of the tunnel! And it involves copious editing!), but a larger issue was me losing track of my original intentions, which was that Button have a customized *flavor* of personality (morbid/humorous/confident or a hybrid thereof). I recently refocused on customizing player choices to the personality stats, and am subsequently much more satisfied with the new date scenes in Chapter 12.

This may all sound like abstract writer whining, but I've had the nagging sense that recent chapters have suffered due to overall stylistic blandness. Button had grown too "broad" in my head and no longer felt as alive as they once did, and my writing suffered for it. Instead of trying to preempt every possible response, I needed to focus on choices that are well-written and correlate to the personality stats, and then have open ears to hear what else you guys want after these "core" choices are already implemented. Your personality stats were always supposed to matter in this game, and recently I've been largely ignoring it.

This version of *Mind Blind* is an alpha draft, and I often have to remind myself of that. It's *okay* if I don't have every eventual option available right away, so long as what options I do include are strong. I can always add more choices later in response to your feedback. Heck, getting reader feedback is the whole point of sharing the alpha draft!

A few weeks ago, I made a post on character motivation, and how learning what a character wants inspires me to create their larger personality. Despite being a playable protagonist, Button is also a semi-preset character and not a "blank slate." Button is still customizable, but I'm pulling the choices more back to the original stats to make sure that they still feel *real*.

Speaking of motivations, let's talk about Button's. This part in no way tie in with the earlier personality monologue, but I wrote this down for myself earlier and thought it was interesting enough to share.

Button's Potential Motivations For Investigating Vengeance

Option 1: Getting Nick's body back. If *Mind Blind* were a traditional novel, this would likely be the hero's primary objective. Saving a loved one is a tried-and-true plot point which dates back to . . . probably since people first started telling stories! The reasons for Button wanting to recover Nick are:

- a) They love their brother and don't want him to die.
- b) They want Nick out of their head.
- c) They feel guilty that Nick got injured by a bomb they planted.
- d) They want to prove themselves as an MIV.
- e) Some of the above.
- f) All of the above.

This motivation applies to the majority of Buttons, even those with tempestuous relationships with Nick (so long as it's above 2%). Apprehending the Ment behind the bombing is still a motivation, but it's secondary to saving their brother from a terrorist cell.

Option 2: Button doesn't care if Nick survives (and may even be actively rooting against that outcome), but they want to get revenge on the Ment who made them plant the bomb. This Button, known as Nover!Button due to a coded variable, is *not* their brother's keeper, thank you very much. Their primary concern is making sure that they don't get brainwiped again and get payback for it ever happening, which means helping Unity apprehend Noh.

More than perhaps any other decision you make, Button's prioritization of which is more important, rescuing Nick or apprehending Noh, will have huge ramifications on the story's end.

[Chapter 12 Update: Gray's Date](#)

[Aug 8, 2021](#)

New Length: 350,000 words, now including

1. **Sohvi's entire intervention** with a new exclusive path for Buttons who are guilty but not necessarily depressed. If the intervention doesn't trigger for you, the scene will play out as a check-in where you

have the option of going to the intervention by selecting the option "Strong? Hardly." I wanted to allow for as much roleplaying as possible, even if you don't consistently selected the struggling options. (Likewise, Button can opt out of the intervention by honestly telling Sohvi that she's wrong and they're fine.)

2. **Gray's Date Scene.** Since Gray's is the only scene added, your Button will automatically be considered to be romancing him should you play past the scene in Sohvi's office. The only part missing for Gray's scene is the very last transition back (which includes a *cheek kiss* of all scandals!), but that's only because I need to make sure that all the transitions tie in nicely to the scene right before Noh's broody brooding.

Chapter 12 is hands down the longest chapter yet, with over 40,000 words. (Although I'm sorry, because I would've had Sally and Rosy's scenes ready tonight, had I not decided to write the new Sohvi scene instead of bug crushing this morning like I was supposed to.)

Next Updates: Sally's and Rosy's date scenes should be up sometime tomorrow, with K's and Glitch's following by Wednesday.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-geode/mygame/>



MENTFLIX

A mentflix original series



KEVIN
SPACEY

ROBIN
WRIGHT

HOUSE *of* CARDS

NEW EPISODES
March 4

[August Doggerviewees](#)

[Aug 9, 2021](#)

After a vigorous round of Discord campaigning (from where I got the above propaganda pictures), it's official. The winners of August's Interview are . . .

Antigone and Cassandra.

That's right, Kenzie's shih tzus, whom I included as a last minute joke when creating the poll, are the actual winners. My joke ended up being on Reese, I suppose, since their ego will never recover.

Annie and Cass will be answering any questions you have about them, their owner, and their owners friends. Ask them on this post, or on the MB Interview Channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers Discord.

[Chapter 12 Mini-Update: Sally's Date Scene](#)

[Aug 10, 2021](#)

There's a critical error bug that quicktest isn't catching in Sally's route, but with two minutes to midnight I wanted to at least update the bits that I've got working correctly! I'd planned on updating Rosy's route as well, but have spent the past several hours combing through Sally's scene look for extra spaces. (It took me about twenty minutes before I remembered that Microsoft Word has the option to show formatting, which expedited the process but still hasn't solved my coding problem. The fixed version should be up in a few hours, but by then it won't be Monday.)

New Material: Sally's Date Scene (cuts short right before Nick's bit, due to that hinky something going on with the code).

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-geode/mygame/>

[MB Saucy Side: Confetti \(Talia Version\)](#)

[Aug 10, 2021](#)

"Trust me."

Talia's words cause you to hesitate. Most of her plans that begin by soliciting your faith end with, at very least, a sternly-worded lecture from Kim.

That being acknowledged, the way that she's looking at you right now, with sideways smile and heavy-lidded brown eyes, causes you to accept her outstretched hand before you've fully talked yourself into compliance. Her fingers wrap around yours.

She leans close and whispers into your ear, "We'll need to be quiet."

Logic dictates that you demand an explanation (Talia's fondness for surprises, combined with her disregard for "No Trespassing" signs, has landed you both in multiple law enforcement offices). But her thumb keeps tracing small circles over the back of your hand, and her gaze focuses on your lips with such intensity that you forget that last time you trusted your girlfriend, you both ended up being caught buck naked in a Supreme Court Judge's vacation home pool. You'd managed to evade the guards, but had been unable to recover your favorite pair of pants.

As Talia's lips press softly against your own, however, you find willing to once again gamble the (literal) shirt of your back—or off her back, should you be so lucky. Your hands clench the fabric of her shirt, bringing her closer so that your torso presses against hers, and you feel Talia's breath stutter with excitement against your lips. Then, with a reluctant sigh, she pulls back.

Wordlessly, she pulls you down the hallway. You stumble after her, squinting to make out the numbers lining the office doors. The lights at Aeon are turned off on this floor, the late hour meaning that most AMOs and MIVs have headed home. You and Talia only just finished work and should be returning to your separate homes. But her whispered "Trust me" isn't just a plea, it's a promise.

Being with Taliaferro Parker means being open to adventure.

Talia suddenly stops, and you almost crash into her back. She spins, catching you just in time.

"We're here," she says, attempting to whisper but unable to keep herself from laughing. She reaches into her hoodie pocket—it's neon orange about the only thing you can clearly see in the dim emergency lighting—and takes something out.

"You would not believe the trials I endured to get my hands on this keycard." Talia shudders. "It involved flattering *Clarence*."

"My hero," you declare.

The keycard reader beeps red as she slides the card, and you hear the door unlatch. Talia pushes it open.

You groan, recognizing the shadowed layout of the office's furniture. Of all the . . . of course Talia would choose here of all places for a late-night rendezvous. At least, you hope it's a late-night rendezvous. It's been hard to get time alone with your girlfriend since her apartment flooded and she moved in with

Kenna, as Antigone and Cassandra have schemed to begin whining in front of Talia's bedroom door as soon as you shut it. Kenna has apologized, explaining that the shih tzus dislike feeling excluded, but the fact remains that you haven't had quality alone time with your girlfriend in over two weeks.

But still. Couldn't she have picked someplace more romantic?

"Talia." You flip on the switch, the overhead light shining confirmation upon your location. "Why are we in Rosy's office?"

Talia pushes aside the neat stacks of paperwork on Kim's desk. She poses, half-humorously, half-seductively, leaning back on the vacated area like a calendar model posing atop a muscle car.

"Isn't that obvious?" she asks, crooking a finger at you. "I've missed you."

"You're going to get us killed," you protest, but nevertheless step near enough for her to wrap her arms around your waist.

She mumbles an "uh-huh" that sounds vaguely apologetic, but seems more focused on undoing the button of your uniform collar than making amends. The button pops open, and then another, and then her lips are trailing down the line of your neck and onto your bared shoulder.

One of your hands grips her upper arm as if to order her to stop, but the other splays over the back of her head, silently urging her to continue.

"I thought—" Talia nips your shoulder, "we deserved—" her tongue flicks over your collar bone, "a break," she finishes, returning to your neck.

"But why here?" You gasp as Talia begins to undo more buttons to your jacket. Her fingers are cold against the bare skin of your chest.

"Because no one would dare enter Rosy's office without permission." She pulls back with a slight frown as one button remains stubbornly hooked. You place a hand over it, halting her progress on your clothing.

"I have missed you," you admit. "But I'd rather we didn't get expelled." As an apology, you lean forward and gently bite the shell of her ear.

Talia groans and looks up at the ceiling as if praying for divine patience.

"Not to mention," you continue, "we just got off probation due to our last meetup. If Rosy catches us, we'll be writing daily extra credit exams until we graduate."

"I both hate and love your logical side," Talia says.

You gently tease her earlobe with your teeth and whisper, "Some risks are worth it. But not this one."

“Fair enough,” Talia admits. “That’s not why I brought you in here, anyway.”

“It isn’t?”

Talia shakes her head with a sly smile. She drops to one knee. Before you can begin to formulate a response (You’re still enrolled at Aeon! You’ve only been dating for a year!), she pulls out a key from her hoodie’s pouch and presents it to you like an engagement ring.

“Love of my life,” she says, “will you move in with me?”

Your hug almost knocks her onto the floor. She responds to your kisses with enthusiasm, before reluctantly pushing you away.

“I have a realtor lined up to show us a few places tomorrow,” she says. “There’s this one condo around twenty minutes from Aeon that I think you’ll really like.”

“I’m sure it will be perfect.” You beam at her, then frown slightly with confusion. “But why go through all the trouble of sweettalking Clarence just to ask me *here*?”

Talia’s eyes widen as if just recalling something. She leaps up from the floor and heads over to the window, where she pulls what you at first take to be the curtain string. Instead of a shade, however, a large rainbow banner unfurls over the glass, printed with the words “*They Said Yes!*”

“Wait for it,” Talia says. She reaches once more into her hoodie and pulls out a small remote with a single button. She pushes it.

Immediately, you’re immersed in a shower of confetti. You glance up at the ceiling to see that several boxes that have been duct taped to the ceiling corners. It takes almost an entire minute for their contents to run dry, and when the explosion ends, Kim’s office resembles a New Orleans street corner the day after Mardi Gras. Confetti coats every inch of the room in a sparkling rainbow dew, and Talia hasn’t stopped laughing.

“Do you know how hard glitter is to get rid off?” Talia asks with a wicked smirk. “*That* is why I picked Rosy’s office.”

[MB Saucy Side: Confetti \(Ferro Version\)](#)

[Aug 10, 2021](#)

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"My hero," you declare.

The keycard reader beeps red as he slides the card, and you hear the door unlatch. Ferro pushes it open.

You groan, recognizing the shadowed layout of the office's furniture. Of all the . . . of course Ferro would choose here of all places for a late-night rendezvous. At least, you hope it's a late-night rendezvous. It's been hard to get time alone with your boyfriend since his apartment flooded and he moved in with Kent,

as Antigone and Cassandra have schemed to begin whining in front of Ferro's bedroom door as soon as you shut it. Kent has apologized, explaining that the shih tzus dislike feeling excluded, but the fact remains that you haven't had quality alone time with your boyfriend in over two weeks.

But still. Couldn't he have picked someplace more romantic?

"Ferro." You flip on the switch, the overhead light shining confirmation upon your location. "Why are we in Rosy's office?"

Ferro pushes aside the neat stacks of paperwork on Kim's desk. He poses, half-humorously and half-seductively, leaning back on the vacated area like a calendar model posing atop a muscle car.

"Isn't that obvious?" he asks, crooking a finger at you. "I've missed you."

"You're going to get us killed," you protest, but nevertheless step near enough for him to wrap his arms around your waist.

He mumbles an "uh-huh" that sounds vaguely apologetic, but seems more focused on undoing the button of your uniform collar than making amends. The button pops open, and then another, and then his lips are trailing down the line of your neck and onto your bared shoulder.

One of your hands grips his upper arm as if to order him to stop, but the other splays over the back of his head, silently urging him to continue.

"I thought—" Ferro nips your shoulder, "we deserved—" his tongue flicks over your collar bone, "a break," he finishes, returning to your neck.

"But why here?" You gasp as Ferro begins to undo more buttons to your jacket. His fingers are cold against the bare skin of your chest.

"Because no one would dare enter Rosy's office without permission." He pulls back with a slight frown as one button remains stubbornly hooked. You place a hand over it, halting his progress on your clothing.

"I have missed you," you admit. "But I'd rather we didn't get expelled." As an apology, you lean forward and gently bite the shell of his ear.

Ferro groans and looks up at the ceiling as if praying for divine patience.

"Not to mention," you continue, "we just got off probation due to our last meetup. If Rosy catches us, we'll be writing daily extra credit exams until we graduate."

"I both hate and love your logical side," Ferro says.

You gently tease his earlobe with your teeth and whisper, "Some risks are worth it. But not this one."

"Fair enough," Ferro admits. "That's not why I brought you in here, anyway."

"It isn't?"

Ferro shakes his head with a sly smile. He drops to one knee. Before you can begin to formulate a response (You're still enrolled at Aeon! You've only been dating for a year!), he pulls out a key from his hoodie's pouch and presents it to you like an engagement ring.

"Love of my life," he says, "will you move in with me?"

Your hug almost knocks him onto the floor. He responds to your kisses with enthusiasm, before reluctantly pushing you away.

"I have a realtor lined up to show us a few places tomorrow," he says. "There's this one condo around twenty minutes from Aeon that I think you'll really like."

"I'm sure it will be perfect." You beam at him, then frown slightly with confusion. "But why go through all the trouble of sweettalking Clarence just to ask me *here*?"

Ferro's eyes widen as if just recalling something. He leaps up from the floor and heads over to the window, where he pulls what you at first take to be the curtain string. Instead of a shade, however, a large rainbow banner unfurls over the glass, printed with the words "*They Said Yes!*"

"Wait for it," Ferro says. He reaches once more into his hoodie and pulls out a small remote with a single button. He pushes it.

Immediately, you're immersed in a shower of confetti. You glance up at the ceiling to see that several boxes that have been duct taped to the ceiling corners. It takes almost an entire minute for their contents to run dry, and when the explosion ends, Kim's office resembles a New Orleans street corner the day after Mardi Gras. Confetti coats every inch of the room in a sparkling rainbow dew, and Ferro hasn't stopped laughing.

"Do you know how hard glitter is to get rid off?" Ferro asks with a wicked smirk. "*That* is why I picked Rosy's office."

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 17](#)

[Aug 11, 2021](#)

I spent the night of my seventeenth birthday sitting in an upholstered chair next to Emilia's bedside. I drifted in and out of sleep, jerking awake whenever my chin dipped to my chest. Hamen had departed late last night, returning to his house in Bellcrest proper where he lived with Emilia's mother and

brothers. He didn't want his wife to hear the news about their daughter from a runner. Delphine had attempted to coax me into retiring to my own bed, but I had no intentions of leaving Emilia's side.

Not when her condition was my fault.

Eventually, morning light began its slow creep into the room. Emilia's bed was parallel to the window, and the early sun shone directly onto her pillow. Usually, this woke her in time to attend to her own needs before setting out my clothing for the day. But now, despite the gold glow of morning haloing her head, she remained insensible to the passage of time. She looked even more fragile than she had the night before. Veins on her closed eyelids bruised blue against her pallid skin, and her chest rose and fell with a raspy wheeze.

I wiped the sweat from Emilia's brow with a damp cloth, then adjusted the curtain. At least the glare wouldn't be in her eyes if she woke. *When* she woke. With her face once again cast in shadow, her complexion appeared less ashen, creating a comforting illusion that she had just overslept.

I heard a knock at the door but didn't bother rising from my seat. The door creaked open, and Theo entered.

"I heard what happened." He leaned down and examined my face searchingly. "You look awful. Have you been here all night?"

I shrugged.

"You should get some sleep. She's not going anywhere."

I glared, my tired eyes unable to fully focus on his features. "She might."

My brother winced, comprehending the meaning behind my short answer. "I didn't mean it that way," he apologized. "Only that she'll still be right next door. Let one of the maids stay with her—they'll fetch you if there's any change."

I shook my head.

Theo sighed. "Tru, you need to rest. I'll hire a doctor to watch over her if you like."

"No." A doctor wouldn't be able to do anything I couldn't at this point. Not against aspswort poisoning. Delphine had done everything possible. Now, all we could do was wait. I wouldn't let Emilia wait alone.

Theo voiced several more objections that I tuned out. Eventually, he heaved an exasperated sigh and left. Shortly after, two servants arrived carrying a thin feather mattress. They rearranged the furniture in order to create a space large enough to lay it down next to Emilia's bed. A cart laden with tea service and a bowl of fresh fruit soon followed.

The food I didn't touch, but I did lay down on the mattress sometime after the sun reached its zenith outside the window. I napped in brief, broken intervals, frequently rising to remoisten the towel on Emilia's fevered brow. When a chambermaid arrived change out the thick cotton swaddling around Emilia's hips that kept the bed from being soiled, she was aghast to discover I'd already preformed the task. After that, no more than an hour passed without a member of the castle staff twice coming in to make sure I hadn't preformed any duties they believed beneath my station.

Letty stopped by that evening. She brought me a change of clothes and a plateful of cherry tarts, which joined the untouched fare Theo had ordered on the cart.

"Tru, you've been here for almost an entire day. You must be dreadfully concerned, I understand, but you need to take care of yourself as well," she said. "You're still wearing the same dress."

I looked down. The beautiful gown from last night was nigh unrecognizable, the violet silk crushed and wrinkled. A breeze from the window tickled my arm, through a tear that now ran up the length of one lace sleeve.

Letty knelt beside my chair and placed her hand on my knee. Weariness prevented me from shoving it off. I wanted to grab her and shake until her secrets fell like apples from a tree. I wanted to force her to tell the truth: to confess that she was responsible for Emilia's poisoning. That everything was her fault. Instead, I kept my attention focused on Emilia. If I ignored Letty, she would leave. Because without proof, my accusations were worthless.

"Lady Vitrola has gone mad," the court would say. "Why, she claimed her own sister attempted to poison her!" Perhaps they would conclude that I had poisoned Emilia myself in my insanity. Perhaps punishment for this crime would be my next death sentence. In a way, I deserved the conviction.

A drop of wetness splashed the back of my hand. Against my will, I looked down at Letty.

She was crying. Not the loud, hiccupping sobs that I'd come to associate with her usual attempts to appear innocent, but tears streamed silently down her cheeks.

I yanked my hand away.

Her head jerked up. She touched her face, then looked at her hand as if surprised by its dampness. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize. It's only, you care so deeply. I didn't—I never—" She sighed and took a moment to collect herself before looking me in the eyes. "I didn't realize how much you cared. I'm truly sorry your maidservant is sick."

I nodded, unable to summon an appropriate response. Should I accuse her? Laugh at her audacity? Yet Letty genuinely appeared sorrowful. Perhaps the poisoning had been arranged by her accomplice. After all, what did I know about him, other than he wasn't Timons and he sometimes wore ruby cufflinks to a murder? Maybe he was the mastermind behind my many deaths, and Letty little more than an unwitting pawn who had finally glimpsed his true nature.

Or maybe I just desperate to believe that some good remained in my former best friend.

Letty hugged me and left. Time passed—hours or minutes, I couldn't say. Delphine came by with another teapot, this time filled only with water. Unlike Theo and Letty, she didn't attempt to convince me to leave, having exhausted her arguments last night. We recast the previous night's spells order to get Emilia to swallow.

"Her reflexes should return in a few days." Delphine set the half-full kettle on the nightstand. "We'll continue to help her drink in the meantime: most aspswort victims die of dehydration before the poison shuts down their organs."

Her calm pronouncement made my stomach clench. Of course, Delphine knew aspswort had poisoned Emilia. She had concocted the treatment. I was an idiot for not realizing it—though in my fugue state, I hadn't noticed much of anything these last twenty-four hours. But enough wherewithal remained that I realized the knowledge placed her in danger. Who knew how the poisoner's behavior would escalate if they thought they were in jeopardy of being caught? Not to mention Theo's anger should he discover I'd been the intended target. I had enough to worry about without having to deal with unpredictable behavior, whether from my brother or from my murderer.

"Should anyone ask," I said, "let them know that Emilia's poisoning was accidental. She mistook scraps that Cook laced to kill pests for edible leftovers in the kitchen."

The sorceress stopped halfway through the doorway, my view of her back making it impossible to evaluate her reaction. "Aspswort is not used to kill rats."

"They needn't be told the type of poison. Only that Emilia's condition was accidental."

Delphine turned. Concern knit her brow. "I had hoped for your maid to recover before having this conversation with you, but—"

I held up a hand to halt her midsentence. "Consider this an order from your future queen," I said firmly. Then, in a softer voice, "Please."

She opened her mouth to protest but closed it realizing from my quivering chin that I was on the verge of tears. Her compressed lips let me know that she was by no means happy to abide by my command, even if she currently refrained from arguing. Any other day, I wouldn't have dared to issue Delphine an order. But, for their own safety, others couldn't become involved.

Night fell. I cast a ward upon the door to alert me if anyone entered, but still was unable to sleep. The sun rose once again. Emilia remained unchanged.

"Your brother is worried."

Xander's blunt statement should have invoked guilt. But my heart was too numb.

"You've imprisoned yourself in this room for nearly a week. You won't leave, hardly eat. You don't look like you're sleeping." He placed his hands on my shoulders in an effort to make me meet his eyes. "Even when her parents came, you refused to let them visit their daughter alone."

I licked chapped lips. "You don't understand."

"Then explain," he said. "Your maid was poisoned. Instead of acting afraid since you were the intended target, you behave as if this were your fault."

My head snapped up. "Delphine told you. Does my brother know?"

If Theo knew, it was only a matter of time before he did something rash. Before he got himself killed. After Theo's body had been lost in battle during my father's rebellion, we'd been forced to bury an empty casket. An occupied one would be no easier.

"Theo hasn't figured it out. As you requested, my mother told everyone that your maid ate something contaminated with rat poison. Almost everyone," he amended after my pointed glare his way. "She's concerned." He ran a hand over his short red hair. "We're both concerned."

Renewed fear swept over me at his words: people who cared about me tended to end up as collateral. I stared blankly down at Emilia's pale face as scenes from my past lives replayed themselves in my memory. The details were hazy, constructed more from my journal entries than actual recollections. But the emotions lingered, as agonizingly sharp as if the events had only just occurred. Beneath my deliberately placid façade, grief and terror scraped me raw.

Xander interpreted my silence as an invitation to continue. "Neither of us comprehend your reaction. You refuse to hand off your vigil to the hired nursemaid, while neglecting your other duties. You've ceased lessons with my mother and stopped attending Council meetings."

"Emilia needs me."

"Does she?" he demanded. "Are you the only person capable of changing bedsheets? Do you have the medical training to best look after her needs? What makes you so necessary?"

"You don't understand." I owed it to Emilia to be besides her—to keep her safe, even if I had so frequently failed at protecting myself. I added defensively, "The nurse comes daily to monitor her condition."

"It would be better if he remained the entire day. That is, after all, what your brother pays him to do. Instead, you treat his presence as an imposition."

"You don't understand," I repeated.

"Because you won't explain!" he bit off.

Xander closed his eyes and took several deep breaths in a blatant attempt to remain composed. He sat gently down on the edge of Emilia's bed, taking care not to jostle her. "Tru." His voice was low and coaxing. "What has you so afraid?"

"She wasn't supposed to eat my breakfast." The truth rushed forth before I could smother it, my tongue tripping over itself in its haste to confess before my better judgement intervened. "I wasn't hungry—not that I'd have eaten it anyway because I always knew this could happen. *I knew*. Don't you see? I'm always so careful to avoid eating anything I don't witness being prepared. Yet when Emilia said she would eat my breakfast since I didn't want it, I didn't stop her. I didn't even think to. It's as if—" I choked back a sob. "As if I valued her life less than my own."

Xander's face blurred through a damp fog; my eyes had lost the fight to keep their tears imprisoned and wetness now leaked down my cheeks. "So, it's my responsibility," I finished, "to stay and make sure she keeps fighting."

Instead of responding, Xander drew me onto the bed besides him and wrapped his arms around me as I wept. I cried in a way I hadn't since Theo's death, my body heaving with great gasping sobs. Yet my sorrow was too consuming to allow me to feel self-conscious over my undignified blubbering. It felt cathartic to simply stop caring and release some of the hopeless anguish which had held me captive for so long. By the time I calmed down, the front breast of Xander's jacket was damp with tears and snot. My cheeks burned with humiliation as I pulled away.

He spoke before I could apologize. "I won't pretend to understand all you said. But I heard enough to know this: you're under the mistaken impression that the decisions of others are your responsibility. They're not. Not Emilia's actions, nor those of whomever tried to poison you." He lifted my chin upwards to look me directly in the eyes. "None of this is your fault."

I appreciated his reassurance even as I recognized it as a lie. Empty platitudes meant to assuage my guilt. I'd anticipated the poisoning, having lived (or rather, not lived) through a similar attempt in my sixth death. Despite my knowledge, I hadn't watched out for Emilia. Only for myself.

I blinked hard to hold back yet more tears that threatened to fall. Curses. I could almost hear Father's condemnation: *tears are for infants and idiots*. Right now, I felt like both.

"For the past three years, everything I've done has been in order to stay safe." I looked at Emilia to avoid Xander's penetrating stare. "I was careful about what I ate. I avoided high places. I strove to keep my behavior above reproach. *I learned magic*. But none of it matters." I practically spat out the last sentence. "No matter how much I try or how well I plan, I end up powerless when it really counts. You were right: Emilia doesn't need me. She would be better off if we'd never met."

"You know that isn't what I meant."

I cut him off. "Nevertheless, I can't abandon her. I can't run away." I swiped the back of my hand across my face, dashing away the lingering remnants of my weakness.

"No one is asking you to run away," he replied. "But you need to move forward."

I mutely shook my head. He still didn't understand. How could he?

Xander stood as if to depart. I tried to quash down an unjustified sense of disappointment—I'd made it clear that I had no intention of leaving. There was no reason for him to stay trapped with me and my regrets. I reached forwards in order to readjust Emilia's pillow.

Xander's arms swept beneath my legs and lifted me smoothly off my chair.

I froze. He hadn't lifted me high enough for me to feel afraid, but an icy rage replaced my previous numbness. How *dare* he?

"Release me," I ordered with a glare that had once made a chambermaid burst into tears.

Xander didn't even pause. He ignored me and instead began to walk towards the door. My fists beat against his chest to no avail, until forced to grab ahold of his jacket in order to avoid slipping through his arms and landing on my tailbone.

My unexpected abduction was even more unexpectedly short lived. Xander deposited me back on my feet as soon as we crossed over the threshold into the hallway. Standing only a meter outside Emilia's bedroom where we had first begun, I gaped at him in confusion.

"Are you mad?" I stabbed him in the chest with my finger. "How dare you manhandle me as if I were a sack of turnips? I told you that I didn't want to leave!"

"No," he corrected. "You said you couldn't leave."

My upper lip curled in disbelief. Instead of answering my question, he was arguing semantics?

Xander continued, unphased by my incredulous stare. "You were unable to leave, so I decided to help." Amber-flecked green eyes bore into mine, willing me to understand his convoluted reasoning. "Now, instead of being trapped, you have a choice. You can go back inside," he pointed towards Emilia's room, "and continue to stagnate. Or you can come with me."

[MB Short Story: Duel \(Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Aug 12, 2021](#)

Ambrose Kim was cold.

Not emotionally—although some, his most recent assignment among them, would claim that he'd long lost the capacity to feel compassion. Contrary to popular belief, however, Ambrose's inner life was not a frozen tundra, and he experienced feelings beyond the sliding scale that Justice had doodled in the margin of UCRT's last mission report, which ranged from "Annoyed" to "Asshole" and had been accompanied by penciled cartoons of an angry-eyebrowed penguin which Ambrose didn't personally feel that he resembled.

Nick Wiseman was wrong. Ambrose, if anything, felt too much. But passion was frequently inconvenient given his line of work, so he'd learned to compartmentalize for the sake of professionalism.

Chicago's winter wasn't so easily ignored. And Ambrose Kim, usually a master at ignoring any and all discomfort, was *cold*.

A polar vortex had hit the city yesterday, plunging the temperature to -10°Fahrenheit. As Ambrose was currently walking against the wind, it felt even colder. In fact, "cold" was too mild a term. This day was freezing, glacial, frigid, and gelid, and it had turned Ambrose's mood similarly biting. Thus, when he walked through Aeon's front doors to discover his twenty-three-year-old charge engaging in a mock swordfight using a mop with UCRT's Fortitude (from whom Ambrose really expected better), something inside him snapped.

He inserted himself between the two men, grabbing Nick's mop mid-downward swing. The stick stung as it hit his palm, but Ambrose refused to let it show. He pushed the pain aside, again compartmentalizing until he was alone in his office later and could administer an ice pack.

"I take this to mean that you've finished last mission's paperwork," Ambrose said, his tone chillier than the gust of snowy wind that had accompanied him through the door.

Nick gave Gray a pleading looking, but his friend only shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "*I already finished my report. This is on you.*" Without reinforcements, Nick forced his lips into an unconvincing smile.

"My report is almost done," he said.

"You don't get a gold star for filling out your name, Wiseman," Ambrose snapped as he suppressed a shiver. The snow outside had gotten past the ankle of his boots, and his socks were beginning to feel wet as it melted. "Finish your job. Act like a child on your own time."

"It not even eight am yet," Nick said defensively. "Technically, I'm not on duty."

"Ah," Ambrose said.

"Ah?" Nick looked at him suspiciously, ignoring Gray's frenetic hand signals to let the matter rest.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nick demanded.

Ambrose's socks were now fully soaked through with melted snow; the sooner this conversation ended, the sooner he could go to his office and take them off. He kept a spare pair in the bottom drawer of his desk. Most people never realized that warm, dry socks were a luxury, but Ambrose had gone without them enough in his past that he'd sworn to never do so again. He glanced longingly at the elevator.

"What's 'ah' supposed to mean?" Nick repeated.

Ambrose sighed. "Simply that I should've already determined you for someone who's sense of duty is dictated by the clock."

"Okay, first of all," Nick held up a finger to Ambrose's face, "it's called a healthy work-life balance. Look it up. And second," he leaned in close with a grim expression, "you don't know me."

"Just finish the paperwork," Ambrose said. He left, pretending not to notice the restraining hand that Gray put on Nick's shoulder. He had no desire to waste yet more time listening to Nicholas Wiseman justify why he behaved like a child.

Not when he needed new socks.

* * * *

"He's right, you know," Gray said as the elevator doors closed behind Ambrose's back.

Nick's eyes flashed with wounded betrayal and a hint of anger. He expected this kind of lecture from his parents but from Gray? He was supposed to be in Nick's court. It was in The Official Bro Code, which Nick had jokingly written up on the back of a bar napkin one night while drunk but truthfully took to heart even when sober. *Tenet #5* (he'd either skipped Tenets #1 through #4, or lost the napkins that they were recorded on) proclaimed that bros backed each other up. Gray was supposed to be Nick's bro.

"You're taking Kim's side?" Nick demanded. "Seriously?"

"Not about needing to be a workaholic," Gray said. "We couldn't do our job if we didn't take time to unwind." He placed their mops back in the janitor's cart just as she returned to get a new one, Ambrose having created in a new puddle of melted snow near the entrance. "When was the last time you submitted a report on time?"

"That's not the point."

"Isn't it?" Gray challenged. The lights above the elevator showed that Ambrose had finished ascending, and he pushed the up button to call it back for him and Nick.

"Mission reports only care about the things we did wrong," Nick grumbled. "It's for the insurance company. And filling them out is—"

"Depressing," Gray finished. "I'm aware. But avoiding doing them properly doesn't make them go away."

Nick groaned. "Thanks, Mom."

Gray didn't get it. There was good reason that Nick avoided filling out mission reports. How was anyone supposed to enjoy writing a dissertation on every single one of their leadership flaws, especially when even the most minor mistake often resulted in someone getting injured? Mission reports, especially the official mumbo jumbo that Kim wanted him to fill out, were nothing but self-flagellating torture. Repetitive, boring, self-flagellating torture.

This wasn't to say that Nick didn't try to improve and learn from his mistakes. He did, constantly. One of the reasons that he and Gray had become such close friends was that they were both usually the last to head home. They spent hours training together and solving practice op scenarios. It was why Kim's accusation of indifference had rankled Nick so much—because it wasn't *true*.

Nick's problem didn't lie with putting in the work. It was in the reports themselves. Because reducing the people whom he failed to save into statistics? That killed him. The way Unity determined mission success was even worse than renumerating every one of his in-field mistakes on paper instead of just in his head twenty-four-seven. If UCRT saved nine out of ten victims, and he had to record it as a ninety-percent success rate. As if letting a civilian die at the hands of a Ment renegade earned his team a fucking A.

It didn't. Kim talked about mission success like it was some sort of graded score, but Nick couldn't help but view it as a simple Pass versus Fail. Saving nine out of ten people wasn't a win, no matter what the paperwork claimed. And, yeah, maybe he dealt with that by doodling a few random cartoons in the margins. Kim was a stickler, but Nick had thought Gray of all people would be able to understand.

"Hey." Gray's face was right in front of Nick's, the taller man having bent close while Nick was spacing out. "If I could do your personal mission reports for you, I would. You know that, right?"

Then again, maybe Gray did understand. Maybe that's why he'd taken over all the other paperwork and post-op tactical evals without Nick asking. He met Gray's eyes, and his friend wordlessly nodded.

Yeah. Gray understood.

Nick grinned and grabbed back his mop from the janitorial cart. He pointed its end at Gray's stomach. "We have five minutes until Kim comes back down to chew us out again," he said. "En garde!"

[MB Short Story: Duel \(Ambrosia Version\)](#)

[Aug 12, 2021](#)

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Nick groaned. “Thanks, Mom.”

Gray didn’t get it. There was good reason that Nick avoided filling out mission reports. How was anyone supposed to enjoy writing a dissertation on every single one of their leadership flaws, especially when even the most minor mistake often resulted in someone getting injured? Mission reports, especially the official mumbo jumbo that Kim wanted him to fill out, were nothing but self-flagellating torture. Repetitive, boring, self-flagellating torture.

This wasn’t to say that Nick didn’t try to improve and learn from his mistakes. He did, constantly. One of the reasons that he and Gray had become such close friends was that they were both usually the last to head home. They spent hours training together and solving practice op scenarios. It was why Kim’s accusation of indifference had rankled Nick so much—because it wasn’t *true*.

Nick’s problem didn’t lie with putting in the work. It was in the reports themselves. Because reducing the people whom he failed to save into statistics? That killed him. The way Unity determined mission success was even worse than renumerating every one of his in-field mistakes on paper instead of just in his head twenty-four-seven. If UCRT saved nine out of ten victims, and he had to record it as a ninety-percent success rate. As if letting a civilian die at the hands of a Ment renegade earned his team a fucking A.

It didn’t. Kim talked about mission success like it was some sort of graded score, but Nick couldn’t help but view it as a simple Pass versus Fail. Saving nine out of ten people wasn’t a win, no matter what the paperwork claimed. And, yeah, maybe he dealt with that by doodling a few random cartoons in the margins. Kim was a stickler, but Nick had thought Gray of all people would be able to understand.

“Hey.” Gray’s face was right in front of Nick’s, the taller man having bent close while Nick was spacing out. “If I could do your personal mission reports for you, I would. You know that, right?”

Then again, maybe Gray did understand. Maybe that’s why he’d taken over all the other paperwork and post-op tactical evals without Nick asking. He met Gray’s eyes, and his friend wordlessly nodded.

Yeah. Gray understood.

Nick grinned and grabbed back his mop from the janitorial cart. He pointed its end at Gray’s stomach. “We have five minutes until Kim comes back down to chew us out again,” he said. “En garde!”



[Writer's Blog: Revisions and Dead Parents \(More Connected Than You Think!\)](#)

[Aug 13, 2021](#)

I'm in Washington for the week visiting my mother (and, more importantly, my mother's dog!), but should have the remaining three date scenes (Glitch, Kenzie, and Rosy) for Chapter 12 finished and uploaded on August 19th, which is the day after I get back to my desktop in Chicago. My desktop doesn't freeze then overheat whenever I run Choicescript IDE to bug-hunt. Sally's platonic pathway will be up on the 20th, as will alternate scenes in Chapter 10 that let Button stay at home instead of going back with Kenzie (which, after much humming and hawing and head-banging-on-wall-ing, I decided to add).

Chapter 13 will still be uploaded August 28th as planned. It involves a midnight visitor . . . and a basement.

Despite my best attempt to quickly push them out, I'm still working on the date scenes for Glitch, Rosy, and Kenzie. These scenes are harder because they do deep dives into their backstory. Unlike Sally and Gray, Glitch and Kenzie don't fully understand what mind blindness entails for Button or how Nick hanging about work. Button gets a chance to talk about what their Zero, as well as how Nick's intrusion and disappearance has impacted them, all while doing activities that are actually semi plot relevant. Or at least as plot-relevant as Sally's walk and Gray's ride.

In return, Glitch and Kenzie share their own histories with losing people and how they feel about Ments. Both their scenes feature the kind of painfully honest conversation that you need to have to fully fall in love with someone . . . or to choose whether to end things. Like the intervention and terrorist backstories, these scenes are heavier and thus take a bit more finesse to not completely bungle.

The updated date scenes were gut-wrenching to write, but in a good way. After Chapter 12, I feel like Button will finally *know* Glitch and Kenzie (depending on whom they're dating). Initially platonic routes were written up for each date as well, but I cut this back to two platonic choices (Sally or Rosy) in order to keep things semi-contained (as which date you went on will be remembered). Sally, because she's the default best friend. And Rosy, because their scene remains at Aeon and thus gives readers the most background lore on how Unity is structured. Glitch also features in Rosy's scene, since they basically serve as Rosy's unofficial T.A. as in excuse to skip their own classes.

Why are these date scenes taking so long to be released? Well, the first versions of the Chapter 12 dates that I typed up were fun, and I may turn those drafts into short stories for Patreon. But there's been a *lot* of revisions. Location-wise alone: Glitch's scene went from an amusement park to a bookstore to a hospital to a bookstore inside a hospital, Kenzie's went from a dog park to a graveyard and then back to a dog park, and Rosy's scene . . . well, let's just say that I got choked up writing Rosy's scene, even if it didn't change locales, and that hasn't happened since the hospital segment in Chapter 4.

I want to do it right not only to do justice to every character's backstory, but aslo because the scenes are HUGE moments in their romance routes. Granted, Rosy's "date" is bit of an outlier compared to

Kenzie's and Glitch's, as it involves arguing with Adsila instead of smooching, but it's equally significant in that Rosy begins to open up to Button for the very first time.

And speaking of Kenzie and Glitch (and also Rosy and possibly Sally if her adoption records were unsealed), I realized today that over half the main characters belong to The Dead Parent Society. While Rosy and Sally have pretty different backstories, Glitch and Kenzie lost their respective parents at around the same age—which is one of the reasons that the two bonded (morbid, but it happens). Glitch just got luckier when it came to their surviving progenitor. To be honest, I sort of feel like I should apologize to Kenzie for sticking them with Tobias as a father.

But you can't choose your relatives. You can choose your family.

And sometimes, if you're very sneaky and bring a large suitcase, you can steal your family's dog.

(Ziva climbed inside voluntarily, which I've decided to mean she wants to return with me to Chicago. Although I would've folded my laundry for a better photo had she given me warning.)

[Delivery Development Poll](#)

[Aug 14, 2021](#)

While I love all of *Mind Blind's* ROs and remain convinced that each should be a love interest, I realized early on that I'd overextended myself when it came to the number of routes. Thus, I resolved to limit *Delivery for the Damned's* love interests to four love interests (currently: Balti, Zane, Luce, and Ev).

However, I still really like a formerly planned RO (Henri, the mad scientist/drug lord with multiple personalities). Henri's route would be different than the others if implemented, since it would involve coming to terms with and accepting each of their faces, and only evolve into a romantic relationship at the very end. Since I love Henri, I'm extremely tempted to include it.

However *however*, I also think that Ev and Luce would be open to the MC dating both of them at the same time (they're almost friends, even if neither is interested in the other romantically). I think I could write some really fun hijinks for a character who's in an open relationship with both. I'm tempted to include this as well.

The crux of my problem is that, realistically, I only have enough brain power to include one of these options, and I'm not sure which readers would be more interested in. So I decided to ask!

Please let me know which option you'd prefer, and feel free to elaborate on which you feel is best (if either) on this post or in the Sanctum of Spoilers.

A new mini-romance with a 5th RO

The option to date two ROs at the same time (likely limited to Luce and Ev)

Either

Neither

A puppy

94 votes total

[Delivery Teaser: Henri Galbraith](#)

[Aug 16, 2021](#)

Henri(etta) Galbraith is a . . . well, the term “mad scientist” is outdated. Henri isn’t interested in reanimating the dead or marrying a pigeon. Rather, they’re a visionary whose experiments constantly blur the boundary between science and magic.

Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law stating that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic? Henri knows that’s bunk. Magic and technology are completely different things, which is why dark magic flares from Hell so often shut down Henri’s computer when they’re playing an MMORPG. That being said, Henri has resolved to be the first scientist ever to quantify the effects of magic on the human body. They *will* pioneer the field of magical medicine, even if they have to use themselves as the test subject.

To pay for their laboratory, Henri operates Dublin’s premier illegal pharmacy, with *Delivery*’s MC bringing them ingredients ranging from chamomile to dragon blood to crystal meth. The term “drug lord” has been bandied about by rival scientists, but Henri considers naysayers to be narrow minded (and mysteriously short-lived).

Henri’s real last name is unknown.

Henri is currently planned as gender variable. Whether or not they’ll be romanceable remains to be seen, but one thing is for certain: Henri is much, *much* more dangerous than their warm brown eyes and oversized spectacles may lead you to believe.

[Chapter 12 Mini-Update: Rosy, to the Tune of Lamb Chop’s Play-Along Theme Song](#)

[Aug 19, 2021](#)

This is the Chapter that never ends

Yes it goes on and on, my friends!

Some writer started writing it

And wrote all about the loves

But she'll keep on updating it

Tomorrow just because

Chapter 12 is over 45,000 words

But now 31,000 is now out

Have you heard?

And I realize that this post

Won't make any sense

Unless you watched Lamb Chop

And all of his friends as a kid

So I'm going to stop typing

But will take a moment for hyping

Because you can now break up with Sally

And Rosy reveals some of their backstory

Anyway now here is the link

It'll lead you to the game if you click

And I need to stop singing this song in my head

Otherwise I'll keep on singing it until I'm dead. . .

(Okay, though. Seriously stopping now. Chapter 12 still has the last 15,000 words that need to go up with Glitch's and Kenzie's scenes, but Rosy's portion is up!)

Wordcount in Current Online Build: 357k

Average Playthrough: 89,000 words

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-geode/mygame/>

Link to the Song, Just in Case You Don't Get the Reference and This Post has Convinced You that I'm Unhinged: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4ztfrr8fls>

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions on . . . Pizza](#)

[Aug 20, 2021](#)

Dear Salome,

First of all, I don't appreciate you conning Grayson into signing your little "petition" by telling him that it was advocating for Fish and Chips Fridays at the Aeon Cafeteria. You preyed on the gullibility of an innocent, albeit British, man.

Button's betrayal I expected, given that it was your petition, but deceiving Gray was just dirty tactics.

You should be ashamed of yourself.

Now, in response to your actual lobby: my answer remains, as it has remained for the past three years, a firm and resolute *no*.*.*

No. I will not capitulate to your brazenly legalistic style of bullying, no matter how official you design the insignia for the "Pro-Pizza Advocacy Collective" (your art for it *is* lovely, by the way). But it's not a real collective, Salome, it's you and my sibling heckling me. Saturday night shall remain, as it has for the last three years, a night for movies, board games, and *calzones*.

Despite your admittedly accurate argument that pizza is the traditional fare of such family and friend gatherings, it falls upon me to once again remind you that I only started making calzones in the first place because of *you*.

That's right: You, Salome, are the problem.

Because the pineapple that I put into your calzone? Those hand-cubed, deliciously caramelized pineapple pieces sprinkled with sea salt that take me an additional fifteen minutes to prep?

No one else wants it on their pizza, Salome.

As a chef I am willing to cater to your eccentricities, but I refuse to inflict your preferred toppings upon the rest of our group. I remain firm in my conviction that pineapple should never be atop any pizza with a tomato-based sauce, and your deluded insistence otherwise (while something that I graciously accommodate) has made a shared pizza pie ultimately unfeasible.

I don't care how you convinced Button to sign your stupid sheet of paper, nor your claims that Gray is "okay with whatever." Of course he says that—he's Gray. He's accommodating. Stop taking advantage of his conflict-avoidant and overly polite nature. Doing so is just as reprehensible as lying to the man about a Fish and Chips Day that will never come to fruition.

You know what else will never come to fruition? Me making a pizza with fruit atop it.

At least with calzones, your epicurean crime can be contained in one neat, portable pocket of dough. Gray can also get his pesto base, and I can experiment with flavors in my own portion without you and Button complaining about my . . . less successful attempts.

Should you wish to order pizza for Game Night, you are of course welcome to do so. The fact most pizza places used canned pineapple, and that their crust will never be as good as mine, is simply a sacrifice that you must make. You decide, Salome: either live with the calzones or order delivery.

Or ask Button to cook.

But the brick oven in my backyard shall continue in its current capacity, creating the considerably customized individual calzones that I make for you all.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Wiseman,

Owner of Aforementioned Brick Oven,

Buyer of All Ingredients,

UNPAID Chef,

And Current Campaign Dungeon Master

[Writer's Blog: The Korean Reunification](#)

[Aug 20, 2021](#)

I'm still working on Glitch and Kenzie's scenes. I wanted to get them edited and up tonight, but instead went down a creative rabbit trail for Chapter 13 and wrote an entire scene involving Santa, a drone, and a pigeon. (Sometimes, creating new stuff comes easier than editing and then I look at the clock and realize *whoops it's 9pm.*)

(Speaking of new stuff, if anyone knows of any interesting ways to break into a house, feel free to share in the comments! I have around eight so far, but could always use more. Said scene is designed similar to Chapter 2's assignment, so the more options the better.)

(And no, I'm not planning an actual heist. No matter what my Google search history may indicate, or the fact that my web browser ads are now almost exclusively for online lockpicking courses.)

Anyways . .

With Rosy's scene being posted, I wanted to talk a little bit about the Korean Reunification.

I've lived in both Seoul and Dublin (where *Delivery for the Damned* will take place!). Although my personal experience an expat was that the two cultures felt extremely different (despite the many newspaper op-eds that claim otherwise), Ireland and Korea do share the fact that they're both geographically small countries that were historically unified but then split in the 1900s. I couldn't help but wonder and imagine what would happen if either of the two countries ever rejoined.

Discussing the possibilities with friends who actually grew up in these countries, I realized that any rejoining wouldn't be quite as simple as my high school history class made it seem with that two-minute clip of the Berlin Wall being torn down. (That being said, much of the Korean Reunification aftermath that I imagine comes from reading about German post-division . . . and Germany was only split for 28 years as opposed to Korea's 70+.)

Eventually, I decided to set Unity's founding among a theoretical Korean Unification (instead of Ireland) because:

1. The high tensions between North Korea, South Korea, and the USA when I lived in Seoul (2017-18, a period which I personally felt was super intense but that none of my Korean coworkers or friends seemed all that frazzled by),
2. The fact that the Korean Peninsula has in the past been a place where outside countries interfered, meaning that the UN's interference had some precedent, and
3. North Korea's government makes for a pretty straightforward "bad guy". (I'm not a fan of dynastic dictatorships outside of fairy tales where dragons can also exist.)

Of course, *Mind Blind* is an alternate history given the existence of Ments and this war that never happened. In order to make the UN's interference seem more believable, and thus lay the groundwork for founding Unity, it made sense for me to give North Korean leadership secret psychic powers. This amplified the global community's perception of its threat (especially in a world that already viewed Ments

to be bogeymen-like figures). Granted, *Mind Blind*'s United Nations is very different than the real-world organization. But still.

The Korean Reunification in *Mind Blind* wasn't just a war over rejoining two halves of a country—it was a fight against Ment criminals who were literally brainwashing armies . . . thus making a counter-Ment task force comprised of Ments, aka Proto-UCRT, necessary to win.

There will eventually be a longer passage on the Korean Reunification in the Aeon Student guide, and it'll also be brought up in-game (both in later scenes, and an earlier scene where I plan to loredump a little more). But the angle of North Korean Ment leadership isn't something that I've directly addressed much, despite its relevance to Unity's founding. (It's referenced briefly in the *Meatloaf Day* short story, but I think that's it?)

There's been an uptick of questions about the Korean Reunification lately in my tumblr inbox (which I really need to get to answering again), but I hope this post clarifies at least a little of the background lore and its original inspiration.

[Chapter 12 Mini Update: Glitch's Date](#)

[Aug 22, 2021](#)

Chapter 12 is now officially over 50,000 words! Which feels insane to me.

(SOS - Send Caffeine.)

Noh's POV has been temporarily taken out of this release due to length necessitating that the chapter be separated into two files, and the second file (which includes K date and the interim scene back at Aeon) hasn't been fully bug-tested yet.

(I tried to get it all done, which is why this is releasing at 3am, but ultimately my contacts have run dry and I'm deciding to head to bed.)

(I'm hoping to have it all up tomorrow, but I just Keep. Adding. Words.)

(Good words, though, I think. I rather like Glitch's scene.)

(I also have some conspiracy cookies to hand out on the Sanctum Discord.)

(I was very pleasantly surprised that certain things were guessed.)

(I should stop using parenthesis.)

Demo Length: 362k

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-geode/mygame/>

[Aeon Student Guide: Telemetry](#)

[Aug 23, 2021](#)

Telemetry, also referred to as “farsight,” is the psychic ability wherein a Ment is able to accurately visualize a distant location in real time. Telemetrists are exceptionally rare, to the point where percentage is considered statistically moot. Unity has only twenty-eight Telemetrist AMOs in its global employ.

The longest distance ever seen across by a Telemetrist was conducted by Hope Wiseman, formerly of UCRT, who was able to witness an incident occurring on the Amalfi Coast despite being stationed in Chicago at the time (a distance of almost 5,000 miles). The average Level 6 Telemetrist, however, has a brainrange of just under 30 miles. Resting brainrange is significantly shorter, and attempting to see at further distances takes a physical toll on Telemetrists that can even lead to a loss of consciousness or a stroke.

Unlike most other Ments, who historically faced persecution and often death, Telemetrists were frequently allowed to live due the military advantage of their reconnaissance. Many of history’s most famous generals had telemetric aides—albeit ones whose psychic agility was kept a closely-guarded secret due to common perception that Telemetrists couldn’t help but use their powers to maliciously spy on those around them. (Unfortunately, this prejudice persists even today, as evidenced by the viral meme “Brain Eyeball Is WATCHING U”.)

Notable exceptions to anti-Telemetrist paranoia can be found in many early thalassocratic civilizations. Many Aegean and Polynesian cultures valued Telemetrists as intrinsically skilled navigators, as well as relying heavily upon their farsight to locate the best places for fishing and to foresee approaching storms.

Nowadays, nautical compasses and sonar technology has largely replaced the role which Telemetrists formerly served at sea, and telemetric espionage was officially banned by the Geneva Correction of 1932 (although almost every government with a standing army has been found to still use Telemetric spies in a 2010 investigation conducted by Unity). For the most part, however, the majority Telemetrists today work in harmony with law enforcement agencies to locate missing and kidnapped persons.

As with Precogs, many higher-level Telemetrists find the stimuli of urban dwelling to be overwhelming. Although able to choose where they look (unlike Precogs, whose visions are uncontrollable), many Telemetrists nonetheless decide to live in smaller towns where they aren’t at risk of accidentally viewing

anything traumatizing in their sleep (many Telemetrists are known to “dreamwalk”). Unfortunately, the migration of Telemetrists to low-population rural areas has on occasion backfired, with the most infamous example being The Roswell Scandal.

Telemetrists are all the more valuable to Unity due to their rarity, with telemetric AMOs frequently working in close cooperation with MIVs to scout a building prior to AMO team entry.

[MB Short Story: Welcome To Game Night](#)

[Aug 23, 2021](#)

Gray leaned across the dining room table. His dark gold hair stuck out at various sideways angles, strands reaching towards the sky after their recent liberation from the ballcap that rested on the table surface near his elbow, right besides a half-eaten calzone and a set of customized blue dice that matched his eyes (a stocking stuffer from Nick from yesterday’s Christmas). It was his first time being invited to the Wiseman Game Night, as well as his first time ever playing Dungeons and Dragons.

An hour in, and he was already feeling out of his comfort zone.

“Did you really need to murder that . . .” Blast. He glanced down at the reference sheet that reference sheet Nick had printed out for him, and took another bite of his calzone while scanning it over.

“Did you really need to murder that kobold?” he asked Sally, who was seated across him and next to Ellery, Nick’s younger sibling who’d for some reason taken to glaring at him whenever he ate. “The little guy had given us the map. There was no need to—”

“This is why we don’t usually let Sally play Chaotic Neutral,” Ellery interrupted. “Let alone a Chaotic Neutral *barbarian*.”

Sally smirked, unrepentant over the dragonoid her character had overzealously bludgeoned to death. “I get to play Chaotic Neutral every third campaign,” she said, “as a treat.”

Gray had expected his life to change upon moving to The USA, but playing board games with murderous high school students hadn’t made the list. He took a sip of his Arizona Iced Tea (amazing stuff, that) and looked at Nick.

“As a treat?” he echoed.

Nick shrugged. “At least Cherry—”

“Avonlea Cherrycobble,” Sally corrected. “Halfling barbarian, at your service, named after Anne of Green Gable’s hometown . . . and pie.”

"Nick's cobbler from last summer?" Ellery asked with another inexplicably glare in Gray's direction.

"Yeah, that was delicious."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Fine. *Avonlea Cherrycobble* is at least better than Salome's last chaotic character."

"Coco Glitterspark," Ellery groaned. "Gnome warlock who murdered our entire party after Nick's ranger made a wisecrack about her height."

"Fun times," Nick told Gray. "But back to the kobold. You're a lawful paladin—you should be smiting evil, not protesting its murder."

"The crab—" Gray checked his reference sheet once more. "The kobold didn't seem all that evil."

"He stole your sword," Nick said, "and tried to backstab you with it."

Ellery cleared their throat and, to Gray's relief, redirected their glare from him to Nick. "Something you want to get off your chest about rogues, Dungeon Master?"

Nick fumbled the dice he'd been idly palming, dropping them on the table. "Of course not!" he insisted. "I love your rouge! Zipper rules!"

"Damn straight, 'Zipper rules,'" Ellery said. "Zipper is the only party member that knows how to disarm traps. Without me, you'd all be dead."

Sally's fist slammed on the table with surprising force from someone so small. Gray looked at her with wary respect—first she killed the kobold in cold blood, and now she'd successfully stunned both Wiseman siblings into silence.

"The *game*, please," she reminded them both.

Nick's lips curved in a devious smile which didn't bode well for the next leg of their campaign; it was the same smile that Gray had seen him give to opponents that underestimated UCRT's new leader.

"You enter the inn," Nick said. "A fire blazes in a brick hearth, above which hangs the stuffed head of a majestic elk. The warmth thaws your frozen noses and cramped fingers. Yet despite the inn's cozy atmosphere, you realize that there are no other patrons, and all is quiet except the hearth's crackling logs. The only person inside is a middle-aged human, his cheeks flushed, his head bald, and his shoulders as broad as a dwarf's."

"Another innkeeper NPC?" Sally groaned.

"It's clearly wish fulfillment, Nick," Ellery added.

Gray took another bite of his calzone. Ellery immediately glared at him, and he set it down. What was it with them and food?

Nick lowered his voice, puffing out his chest to presumably mimic the innkeeper's stout frame.

"Welcome, weary travelers!"

"It's gonna be called the Elk's Head," Sally whispered to Ellery. "Just wait."

"Welcome to the Elk's Head!" Nick continued. "My name is Dudley, and I'm the humble proprietor."

The table shook slightly as Sally and Ellery fist bumped under the table over Sally's correct guess.

"I throw my axe at the stuffed elk's head on the mantle," Sally said immediately.

Nick sighed. "You don't want to talk to Dudley? After two long days of marching through the tundra? He makes amazing deserts, and you guys must be hungry."

"Axe to elk," Sally repeated. She rolls her dice, letting out a whoot of glee at the high-numbered result.

"Cherry throws her axe. The blade whirls through the air," Nick said, "and imbeds itself into the black nose of the stuffed elk head. Dudley, however, only arches a single bushy brow."

"Now the inn needs a new name," Ellery said. "Zipper suggests that it be called 'The Axe-Scent.'" They and Sally fist bumped again.

"Your puns are horrible," Nick informed his sibling. "Worse than mine, even. Roll for persuasion."

Gray took another bite of his calzone while Ellery was distracted.

"Er, should I ask the innkeeper if we can spend the night?" he asked hesitantly once the inn had a new name.

Nick beamed at him. "Yes! Yes, you should! *Thank you*, Gray, for actually attempting to follow the storyline and not being a murderhobo."

"You're welcome?" Gray said. "What's a murderhobo?"

His question went unanswered.

"Dudley smiles at Sir Darkwhite warmly," Nick said, and Gray once again winced upon hearing his character's name. This would be the last time he let Nick design the character he played.

Nick continues, "'Greetings, oh noble paladin,' Dudley says with smile. 'Beds we have aplenty, but I might I first interest you in a . . .'" Nick (Dudley?) pauses for dramatic effect. ". . . Plate of freshly baked cookies?"

"Not funny, Nick!" Ellery looked genuinely upset, and they were glaring at Gray again. Why were they always glaring at him? "Too bad Zipper is already stealing all of Dudley's cookies," Ellery added. "The cookies are *mine*, Sir Darkwhite."

“Roll for sleight of hand,” Nick said.

Ellery complied. “*My cookies.*”

Gray could only watch on in confusion as Ellery (Zipper?) succeeded in stealing the cookies, only to discover they were poisoned after taking a bite.

“Dudley’s once-friendly face transforms,” Nick cackled as Ellery pretended to choke. “This is no kindly innkeeper, but a lich! The illusion of plump cheeks melts away, replaced by an ivory skull and a lipless smile. ‘Well, now, adventurers,’ the lich says, ‘it’s time to—’”

“Nicholas, we’re level two,” Sally prtoested. “There’s no way we’re winning against a Lich. Also, Darkwhite! Get it together. Zipper is choking. Why haven’t you laid your hands on them yet?”

Gray blinked. “What?”

“Lay your hands on Zipper,” Sally ground out. “Cherry—er, Avonlea attacks the Lich.”

“What the hell, Salome?” Nick exploded. “You just said that you guys are only level two. At least let Deadly Dudley finish his evil monologue before trying to rage-shank him.”

“I attack the Lich,” Sally repeated firmly.

Gray raised his hand. The other three looked at him, Ellery pausing mid-dramatic death gasp.

“This isn’t an Aeon lecture, Grayson,” Nick said, sounding amused.

“Sorry.” Gray put down his hand. “I was just wondering—about Avonlea attacking the undead innkeeper?” Despite his previous nerves, he couldn’t help but smirk. Sally, Nick, and Ellery were so caught up in the game that they hadn’t remembered one very important detail.

“What about it?” Sally asked. “You have a problem with me attacking an undead monster, paladin? This should kind of be your job, after all.”

“Not problem,” Gray said. “Except your axe is still stuck in a taxidermized deer, which about two feet higher than you can reach.”

Ellery gasped, this time for real. “He *didn’t*.”

Sally crossed her arms. “He *did*.”

“A height joke?” Nick let out a hoot of laughter. “Damn, Black. I can’t believe you went there. Especially after we told you about Coco.”

Gray felt the blood in his cheeks drain beneath Ellery and Sally’s dual glares. Nick’s continued laughter wasn’t particularly reassuring, either. “I just meant . . . because she’s a halfling? Aren’t they short?” He

looked down at his sheet again. "I'm pretty sure that halflings were short."

"Hey, Lich Innkeeper," Sally said. "Sorry for almost attacking you. Can I stay alive if we sacrifice the paladin? Darkwhite will be an *excellent* undead minion for you."

Ellery's hands reached for their own throat, and they resumed making choking sounds.

"Spare the Tiefling, too," Sally said. "Zipper can disarm traps for whatever errand you're about to send us on."

"Bargain, accepted!" Nick boomed in the lich/innkeeper's voice. He turned to Gray with an apologetic shrug. "Sorry, man. Welcome to Game Night."

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 18](#)

[Aug 25, 2021](#)

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Xander's grin widened at the audible growl in my voice. "We're moving forwards," he said.

Smug jerk. I shouldn't have agreed to follow, but curiosity had gotten the better of me. And perhaps a part of me had latched onto an excuse to leave, to temporarily escape from Emilia's sickroom and my own gnawing guilt.

After eliciting an oath from the nurse that he would send for me should Emilia's condition change in the slightest, I'd followed Xander off the castle grounds and into Bellcrest proper. Xander made no attempts at conversation other than the occasional warning before he changed direction. Our route soon broke from the main thoroughfare and weaved through narrower side streets. After about ten minutes of walking, we ended up in a residential area that, while not impoverished, required several new layers of paint.

The cobblestone street itself was missing nearly half its stones, and none of the squat houses lining its sides were more than two stories. Many possessed multiple doors so close together that opening them simultaneously would be impossible—evidence that they'd been converted from single-family homes to board several tenants. Several middle-aged women, in the process of hanging laundry up to dry in the parched patches of grass that passed for front lawns, paused mid-gossip to ogle at us. Despite the

utilitarian cut of Xander's overcoat and my own practical cambric borrowed from Emilia's closet, our garb was still noticeably better quality than their yellowed linen aprons and patched kirtles.

"Come somewhere private with your floozy for a bit of fun, m'lord?" One of the woman's faces twisted with contempt, as if she were contemplating whether to spit in our direction before deciding it was beneath her. "We're respectable neighborhood. Get away, now."

I gasped. In past lives, I'd been accused of being a traitor, a murderess, and a witch. Now someone was calling me a lightskirt as well? "You presumptive harridan, how *dare* you—"

Xander laid a hand on my shoulder. "Ignore her. We're almost there."

Whereas my hackles had been raised by the woman's public denunciation, the corners of his eyes crinkled with mirth. I jerked away from him and stalked towards my accuser. I'd run out of patience for being slandered several beheadings ago.

"If I *were* his mistress, your nasty comment would have caused me to buy your house and turn it into the seediest brothel in Bellcrest. And if you say another word," I added when she opened her mouth to retort, "I shall name the business after *you*."

I spun around and marched back to Xander, whose shoulders shook with barely constrained laughter. "I hardly think her words warranted your reaction. Though I would be lying if I claimed it wasn't amusing to witness."

I huffed, my exhale blowing away a strand of hair that had escaped from my bun. "It's wrong to accuse someone without evidence. Furthermore, my business is none of hers."

He gestured towards the laundresses, who were now pointedly ignoring us. "Count their baskets."

"What?"

"Their loads of laundry. How many does each woman have?"

I frowned but nonetheless took stock of the baskets. "Twelve total, so three each."

"When I was last here a year ago," he said, "bags were piled so high against the fences that you couldn't see the drying lines, each representing a different customer. Then Fengal put an embargo on half the goods exported from Verdun, trying to pressure King Eldin to ally with them against Anterdon."

"The women's clients must have been mostly merchants," I spoke slowly as the realization struck. "Merchants who either lacked the funds to hire their own servants, or who didn't keep a permanent household due to travelling back and forth between Bellcrest and other countries—countries like Fengal."

He nodded. "The embargo hurt a lot of traders, many who live in the neighborhood nearby. The merchants now do their own laundry, most like, to save a few extra suns. Not calamitous to Verdan's economy as a whole, but it made a difference to her.

"The washerwoman was trying to protect the reputation of her business," he continued. "I hardly think it right for you threaten to take that away, no matter how offensive her words."

I didn't respond. The beginnings of a revelation began to take shape, deep in the part of my mind that I usually strove to ignore. I had lashed out at the woman for her unfounded accusations and yet . . . had I treated Councilor Timons any more fairly? I'd been so convinced of his guilt that I'd ensorcelled him, and felt no qualms in doing so. My motive had been to stay alive; the washerwoman's had been to preserve her livelihood.

I sighed. Self-reflection was a terribly unpleasant pastime. I'd bring up the laundress's situation at the next Council meeting—surely other workers had been impacted by the embargo as well. The merchants might grumble at having to do their own laundry, but most would be able to weather the embargo until King Eldin renegotiated with Emperor Irax. But perhaps the Table of Coin could offer loans to those less able to afford waiting. Or, if the Council refused to take action, I could at least ask Emilia to sell off some of my jewelry and invest the money in the poorer neighborhoods myself. It wasn't as if I ever wore any of my mother's heirlooms, after all, and pointless sentimentality didn't help Bellcrest's citizens.

My face fell. Emilia was in no condition to be sent off on errands. I'd forgotten temporarily, and my heart ached anew at my own callousness. How dare I forget, when her state was my fault?

"Have we nearly arrived?" I tried to inject some levity into my tone so that Xander wouldn't notice I was once again on the verge of tears. "Or do you intend for us to scandalize the entire neighborhood?"

He chuckled. "And let you to keep terrorizing the locals? No. We're here."

We stopped in front of one the many identical buildings lining the street. Like its neighbors, the whitewashed brick had a thatched gabled roof and old-fashioned leaded glass windows instead of clear panes. Unlike the buildings on either side of it, however, there was only one door. I followed Xander up to it, searching for a nameplate or other clue.

He knocked three times, paused, then knocked twice again. The door opened to reveal a young boy, who greeted Xander with a gap-toothed grin.

"My lord!" The lad bowed so low that his unruly brown curls nearly brushed the ground. "You haven't been back in years." His large hazel eyes were reproachful.

Xander ruffled the boy's hair fondly. "It been barely one, Henric. Yet I find you having grown almost as tall as me!"

Henric straightened himself to his full height, which barely rose past Xander's waist. "I think I have a way to go yet, my lord," he said regretfully after measuring the disparity.

I couldn't help but laugh. The boy glanced towards me as if only just marking my presence. Instantly, his bearing became more formal. He swept a hasty bow.

"My lady!" he squeaked. "Is this your first time at our establishment?"

"I'm still trying to figure out the nature of said establishment," I said. "Since Lord Brant insists on being cagey."

"We'll take one of the private rooms, Henric," Xander informed the boy. "Lady Vitrula will need a spare uniform."

"She's wearing a skirt," noted Henric with disgust before running off down the hall and into another room.

Before I could question Xander over the boy's reaction, he returned with an armful of rumpled clothing that he unceremoniously dumped into my arms.

"You can get dressed in the second room on the right, my lady," he said.

The garments smelled like soap despite the wrinkles. I shook them out and held them up with outstretched arms, arching an eyebrow at Xander upon viewing the white pants and oversized shirt. Unlike in Anterdon, Verdan noblewomen hardly ever wore pants unless going riding—to do otherwise was considered moderately scandalous, though some like Councilor Venuda bucked convention. The court was more forgiving of her behavior, since she'd been born a commoner. Also, because she would happily challenge anyone who criticized her to a duel (and win). I was less bold, and the thin cotton pants looked vastly different than the modest split skirts of my riding habit.

Reading my dismay, Xander smirked. "My mother wore the same outfit, the one time she agreed to come. Besides," he gestured expansively, "no one here will judge you for unfashionable attire. Will we, Henric?"

"No, my lord!" Henric's tone implied he wasn't quite sure exactly what he was agreeing to but that he was enthusiastic about it nonetheless.

The washerwoman's words had made me hyperaware of any breach of propriety, but Delphine would never have gone anywhere *too* indecent. I didn't think. I took a deep breath and went through the door that Henric opened for me.

The dressing room had only a small wooden chair in the corner, and was so small that my elbows bumped against the walls as I changed. I hung Emilia's gown over the chair's back, feeling awkward and exposed in my new outfit despite the fact that only my lower arms were left uncovered. Henric pounced on me as soon as I exited.

"Lord Brant is waiting for you in the practice room." He yanked on my hand with suspiciously sticky fingers. "Colm is there, too."

"Is Colm your father?" I asked as he steered me down the hall to another door.

Henric shook his head. "Don't got a father. Colm is Colm."

"Did your father pass away?" I asked. "Everyone has parents at one point."

"Not me." He sounded almost proud. "Never had a ma either. Just Colm."

Henric must be an orphan, and have been taken in by the house's owner. I followed my miniature guide down a set of stairs to what would usually have been the house's larder. Instead, the stairway ended at a spacious room, empty but for several large leather bags that hung suspended from the ceiling and two prior occupants.

Xander had changed into an outfit similar to my own, though his sleeves were completely absent instead of merely short. He was conversing with the largest man I had ever seen, and whom I assumed to be Henric's "Colm."

The middle-aged man stood only an inch or two taller than Xander, yet appeared to loom over his lither companion. Thick muscle corded his neck, and his bare arms were easily four times the girth of my own. He noticed my stare and dipped down into a surprisingly graceful bow.

"Lady Vitrula," he said. "I'm honored by your patronage."

"Yes, of course," I stammered. His size was intimidating, even if his demeanor was polite. "Though I admit to being unsure of just what, precisely, I'm patronizing."

The giant unleashed a bellow of laughter. "Xan didn't tell you?" He playfully pushed at Xander's shoulder. I winced at the force of the shove, though Xander grinned as if unperturbed. "Fifteen years, I've known this boy, and he still acts like a mischievous child. Welcome to The Incredible Colm's Boxing Gym. Private members only. I, of course, am The Incredible Colm."

The Incredible Colm had been ten-time victor of the Open Brawl, one of the six annual tournaments held alongside the Tower Climb during the Festival of Bells. According to Colm's own account, he'd eventually grown tired of taking all the King's money and decided to spend his sunset years passing on his skills to others. In truth, a decade's worth of tournament purses most likely meant Colm was flush enough in pocket to never work again if he had so desired. But after only a few hours in his company, I could already tell that The Incredible Colm wouldn't have been content to fade away into luxurious obscurity.

Colm had chosen to open his gym in the neighborhood he'd grown up in. The unfashionableness of the area meant that his business remained a relative secret, which Xander only half-jokingly warned me to guard with my life. (Apparently, the cost of Colm's tutelage more than compensated for his limited client list.) The retired pugilist proved to be unexpectedly gentle and patient as he coached me in proper form

and demonstrated how to follow through a punch by pivoting my hips, using Xander to model the movements in order to point out where I went wrong. Which, given my complete unfamiliarity with fisticuffs, was frequent. Half the time, my fist missed its target completely.

“Better!” he exclaimed when my punch finally caused the heavy bag to sway. “Remember: thumb on the outside. Your goal is to bloody someone else’s nose, not break your own fingers. I have another lesson, but stay as long as you like.” He gripped Xander’s forearm in fond farewell. “Don’t go so long between practices. You’re becoming rusty.”

“And you’re becoming too content with your wife’s cooking,” replied Xander with a pointed glance at Colm’s solid middle.

Colm laughed and patted his gut. “Niamh be glad to have you over again. Just name the date.” Appearing pleased by Xander’s nod, he departed.

“This . . . was not what I expected,” I said as the door closed behind the boxer.

“Did you enjoy it?” asked Xander.

“I did,” I admitted. “Even if I was an unmitigated disaster.”

He chuckled. “You eventually hit the bag more often than not. I would call that a mitigated disaster, at the very least.”

I couldn’t argue, so settled for sticking my tongue out at him. “Most noblemen consider boxing beneath them and prefer fencing. How did you ever discover this place?”

“My father used to take me here when I was boy.” Xander grinned at the memory. “He always pretended we were embarking on a secret mission. We’d dress up as soldiers and Colm would salute as we entered. It was only later I realized he was paying Colm a considerable amount of money to go along with our charade.”

It made sense that the King wouldn’t want others knowing of their visits, let alone Xander’s existence. Had Xander realized I knew King Eldin was his father? Either way, he wasn’t quite willing to be explicit about his sire yet. Which was fine. I could respect the desire to guard his secrets; I had more than a few of my own.

Rather than pry, I asked, “Did Lady Delphine join you on these adventures?”

His eyes narrowed with amusement. “Once. Much to my father’s disappointment, she declared sweating in a basement to be ‘distasteful.’”

“That sounds like her,” I agreed with a laugh. “Boxing certainly isn’t ladylike.”

"Yet you were perfectly willing to brutalize that poor punching bag." He shook his head with feigned dismay.

"I suppose I'm not very good at being a lady." I tilted my head to the side and gazed at him thoughtfully. "I'm still not quite sure why you brought me here of all places."

Xander reached for my hands. Gently, he began to unwind the leather strips protecting my knuckles. His forehead knit as he contemplated how to answer.

"You were feeling powerless," he said at last. Despite having finished unraveling the leathers, he didn't let go of my hands. "This was the only way I could think of to help you feel capable again. Before, you said you needed to make sure that your maid kept fighting. Well, I needed to make sure that you kept fighting." His mouth quirked up in a small smile. "Literally, as it turned out. The bag practically bled sand by the time you finished mauling it."

I blushed, praying that my cheeks remained too red from exertion for him to notice. It *had* felt good to have an outlet for my pent-up stress, even if my attacks on the bag had been far less effectual than Xander claimed. Still, I was taken aback by his thoughtfulness.

"Thank you." I didn't know what else to say. No one had ever been so considerate of me before—he'd sincerely contemplated what I had needed. He hadn't told me to toughen up like my father would have, or resorted to plying me with sweets and jests like my brother. Instead, he'd helped me to regain my sense of agency. I doubted I'd be able to physically defeat Letty's mysterious conspirator with an uppercut after one lesson. But with practice, I could become a little less helpless. "Thank you," I repeated. The words seemed inadequate.

Xander squeezed my hands. Our eyes met, his honey-flecked green and gazing at me with a look I'd never before encountered. Or rather, that I'd never witnessed directed towards *me*. I felt the urge to close my own eyes. Rather than resist, I allowed my lids to drift shut as he leaned forward.

Xander intended to kiss me.

I intended to kiss him back.

"*Lord Brant!*" A high-pitched yell startled us both from our trance. Henric stood at the door, panting as if he'd taken the stairs two at a time.

Xander cleared his throat. A hint of pink tinted his cheeks, and I suspected mine matched. Yet when he spoke, his expression was unruffled and his voice calm. "What is it, Henric?"

"A messenger." Henric swung against the door, using the momentum to propel himself into the basement. He stumbled to a stop before us, ignorant of tense atmosphere still lingering in the wake of our almost-kiss. "A messenger came looking for you and he said it was *important* so I said I would get you right away because you told me to."

"The message, Henric," prompted Xander.

"I was getting to that bit!" Henric's lower lip pushed out at the interruption. "The messenger said that Lady Vit—Vitruv—" He glanced at me. "What's your name again?"

"Lady Vitrula," said Xander.

"Right! He said that Lady Vitrula and you should come back to the castle because your mother—*your* mother, Lord Brant, not hers—told him to tell you that Lady Vitrula's friend is awake."

[MB Bloopers Reel . . . of Button's Bloopers](#)

[Aug 26, 2021](#)

For those not on discord: Kenzie's date and the second file for Chapter 12 will be uploaded Saturday, along with the first of Chapter 13 (which has two main alternate pathways). One of these split scenes in Chapter 13 is based off Chapter 2's assignment as far as variability and options.

(Warning: slight spoilers ahead.)

Originally, this scene contained a plethora of ways for Button to fail just like in Chapter 2. However, I then realized that this task ultimately differed from the assignment in a fundamental way: in school, failure can be a learning opportunity . . . or an opportunity to mess with your instructor and then write them an, uh, *interesting* essay (please don't do this with your professors in real life). In contrast, Chapter 13 involves an actual mission, where Button has a team of intelligent people to point out that, no, humans can not fit down modern chimneys (although something else can!).

Going along with plans that would clearly fail would be out of character for Glitch and Kenzie, at least while they're on a deadline.

Thus, I got rid of all the scenes where Button failed to enter a . . . let's call it a house. Button can still suggest ridiculous ways, but with the time limit being what it is, well, no one should be up for bubble-wrap armor this time around. They need to take their jobs *semi* seriously. There are still eight ways of entry, but for now enjoy this blooper reel of *Button bloopers*.

(Also known, as Button's scrapbook of ridiculous ideas.)

* * * *

You wiggle your shoulders, but it's of no use: your head can fit through the chihuahua-sized doggy door. The rest of you, alas, cannot.

"I don't think this is going to work," you say, hoping that Glitch can hear you through the door.

"Oh, take your time!" comes Glitch's carefree response. "I'm just admiring the view."

** * * **

"Nick told me that Santa used bacon grease to help slide down chimneys," you admit.

Kent opens his mouth, then closes it.

*"Look," you say defensively, "I believed it until I was nine because it seemed **feasible**. So, here's what I'm thinking . . ."*

By the time you're done listing the ingredients that you'll need from the local grocery store, Glitch has been rendered inarticulate with laughter (Kent just remains his normal type of quiet).

"It's such a bad idea," Glitch gasps. "I say we do it."

Kent looks at her, then back at you. He sighs.

** * * **

"I still say I should be the one to wield the fire axe," you complain.

Kent sighs.

** * * **

"Grab a shovel," you order Glitch and Kent. "Operation Mole-rat is a go."

Kent sighs.

** * * **

"Do you happen to have a spare rocket launcher?" you ask Glitch.

She gives you a condescending look. "I always have a spare rocket launcher."

Kent sighs.

** * * **

"Just make sure to give me a head start before you press the detonator," you tell Glitch.

"Operation Chitty Chitty Bang Bang is a go," Glitch says with a sassy salute. "See you on the other side, soldier."

Something about the way she says that gives you pause. You glance at her.

"The other side of the street," she clarifies.

Kent sighs.

[Writer's Blog: Drama, oh Drama! Wherefore Art Thou So Difficult?](#)

[Aug 27, 2021](#)

Mind Blind Wordcount: 389k (with 375k ready to be uploaded tomorrow)

Next Patreon Update: Tomorrow evening! Will include Chapter 12's missing scenes and the first part of Chapter 13.

The more I write, the more I learn about what works and what doesn't. There's nothing too revolutionary in this week's blog, but I wanted to share some of my musings on why certain scenes work and others don't fully resonate with me (yet).

Personally, I think it comes down to . . .

. . .

. . .

dramatic impact.

(Kinda.)

When writing, I often find drama-level a hard thing to balance. Especially for *Mind Blind*, where there's a major revelation almost every other chapter. If I amp up the dramatic tension on each of these twists, they'd quickly lose impact (kind of like how your arm will eventually become numb if someone keeps punching you in the same place). If I make the scene too mundane, there's an equal risk of readers not relating to the main character (Their brother just exploded! Why aren't they freaking out?).

But the drama *needs* to increase. I mean, I saw that bell curve graph on rising action in high school English class.

I've tried to avoid the pitfall of protagonist blandness in *Mind Blind* (even if it requires readers to relinquish some control over the MC). Yet due to the structure of ongoing reveals and plot twists, I often worry about not being able to dial up the action without coming across as melodramatic instead of just regular old drug-store brand dramatic.

It's a balancing act in which I don't always succeed! Nick's temporary radio blip-out in Chapter 12, for example, is a scene that I want to refine so readers have more ways to respond (and each way is more emotionally nuanced). Likewise, I want to tweak Gray's date so as to better communicate their growing closeness and the sense that they're *almost* but not *quite* at a threshold in their relationship. In those two scenes, I don't personally think I amped up the drama *enough*.

(And *wow* I am using a lot of *italics* this post. Oh well, might as well lean into it. For *drama*.)

Compare Gray's ride with a scene where I worry about having gone *too* dramatic: Andy/Liz's car abduction. There can be screaming and potential nose-biting . . . or it can be quite subdued (so maybe the problem is actually that there's not enough *consistent* drama?).

My point is this: balanced drama distribution is hard.

. . . And now I sound like I'm giving a lecture on economics.

Don't get me wrong, there are some scenes that I'm quite pleased with! I think both the hospital introduction in Chapter 4 and Glitch's revelation in Chapter 12 are good examples of having just the right amount of emotionality. Having reexamined these scenes yesterday to figure out *why* I liked them the best, I concluded that it's because of there's the right balance struck between the sensational and the commonplace. I like that juxtaposition, and I feel that it's what makes these two scenes work for me in a way that many others in *Mind Blind* don't quite yet.

(But those scenes will work after being given a good edit! Please keep in mind that this is an alpha draft, after all, and right now I'm most focused on simply reaching the end.)

As for why certain scenes work . . . The hospital scene focuses on boring details: the smell of a sterilized environment, the uncomfortableness of the chair, and the fact that Nick is an organ donor. This contrasts to what Button is feeling at the time, granting the scene depth that I think Gray's motorcycle ride (for example) lacks. Likewise, Glitch discloses their secret before ordering paninis. Paninis don't seem like they'd have a place in the kind of conversation that they and Button have, but I actually think that the convo so casually moves on from traumatic family history to sandwiches is a big reason why it works for me: it feels *real*.

Anyway, I'd love to hear your feedback about which scenes you guys think hit home the hardest and which ones fell emotionally flat! It'll give me insight on which portions to pay special attention to during the second draft . . .

. . . Which should be happening within just a few months!

My original mental outline for *Mind Blind* had only 16 Chapters, which I can confidentially say will be up by the end of this year (Chapters 13-14 for September, 14-15 for October, 15-16 for November, and finishing up Chapter 16 in December). Whether or not the story goes on longer than that remains to be seen, as things often take me longer to write than I anticipate.

I've always intended to keep *Mind Blind* around 500,000 words, which means that we're almost 4/5ths of the way done. Patreon has allowed me some breathing room, however (thank you all!!!), so I'm more willing for *Mind Blind* to end up a longer work if the story requires (although not **all** that much longer, because *Delivery for the Damned* is calling my name).

[August Live Q&A Times](#)

[Aug 28, 2021](#)

I'm still working on today's update after last night's revelation (which I'll talk more about on the release notes later, for those not on discord and didn't witness my manic "AHAHAHAHA!"), but wanted to announce that the first live Q&A starts at:

Tomorrow (Sunday, August 29th) at 10am PST

Also coming tomorrow: the next UCRT Fairy Tale (make sure to read the *Game Night* short story first, because this one stars Sir Darkwhite!), July's backlog reward stories and matchups for those of you who haven't yet received them (check your emails!), and August letters for Hero Zeros about claiming this month's rewards.

For those of you who can't make it to tomorrow's Q&A, please vote on which timeslot works best below.

August 29 (Sunday), 7pm PST

August 29 (Sunday), 8pm PST

August 29 (Sunday), 9pm PST

August 30 (Monday), 7pm PST

August 30 (Monday), 8pm PST

28 votes total

[Mind Blind Update: All Of Chapter 12 \(Chapter 13 In A Few Hours!\)](#)

[Aug 28, 2021](#)

Late last night I had an epiphany that required changing the first scene of Chapter 13 (more detailed explanation with spoilers after the ellipsis!). This also meant tweaking the interim scene in Chapter 12 which was meant to go before Noh's scene, a task which I mostly accomplished today (and should have the beginning with up in an hour or so, thus why this post is just temporary).

In doing so, the scene became too long and I decided to end Chapter 12 a little earlier than intended. Essentially, choicescript recommends keeping files under a certain amount of lines for things to run smoothly (variables were already being lost because files were getting too long). I was going to need three separate files for Chapter 12, which ended up being 58,000 words as opposed to the usual 20-25k per chapter.

So now the tail end of Chapter 12 is the beginning of Chapter 13.

Chapter 12 still counts in at 46,000 words, but the last bit including Noh's POV has been bumped to Chapter 13. That being said, Kenzie's date scene has been added. I'm still debating on how to handle the platonic versions for Sally and Glitch (how much variability becomes too hard to keep track of?), so right now if you're not romancing anyone you stay at Aeon with Rosy. (Yay?)

****The New Demo Link:****<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-houdini/mygame/>

If you play now, you won't be bounced back to the start of Chapter 12 when the first part of Chapter 13 releases! I've uploaded a blank file, so any end save will just bounce you to the beginning of 13.

If anyone's interested about what will be new in Chapter 13, I'll talk a little about it below!

. . . .

. . . .

There's gonna be spoilers!

. . . .

. . . .

Spoilers:

Back in Chapter 13, I forgot to include the Pollard Test administered by Vengeance. This requisite Pollard Test is the whole reason why Button and Kenzie have to be the ones to infiltrate the organization (instead of Ment AMOs), so it's not something that I can just drop and never mention again. I'd intended

to go back and add a DYI Bootleg Brainscanner Thingy (TM) to the back of Andy/Liz's limo (which was mostly written, and also explained why Andy/Liz was driving a freaking limo instead of like a Honda).

But with the recent twist of Nick blipping out (a twist I had in mind for later but moved up the timeline in order to make the date scenes more relevant), I realized . . .

. . .

. . .

(MAJOR SPOILERS)

. . .

. . .

Won't it be more fun if Button has to take the Pollard Test while having an unstable connection to WIFI NICK?

Vengeance thinks they're a Five, after all.

This new scene? Eons more interesting and dramatic. I've been writing pretty nonstop since last night to accommodate it. The original version of Chapter 13 was a long Chapter 2-esque housebreaking scene, which will be reused in a later event, but there's still a lot of edges to smooth out. The new and improved Chapter 13 hasn't yet presented a good cutoff point that I'm not still recoding (moving things around when writing a story is relatively easy, but recoding is a different matter).

Chapter 13's first bit will still be up later tonight, but I wanted to let you guys at least enjoy all of Chapter 12 while waiting.

(I'm really sorry for the delay, but I genuinely think this will be worth the wait.)

[MB Update: First Part of Chapter 13 \(More to come on the 30th!\)](#)

[Aug 29, 2021](#)

This only includes non-Nover!Buttons' Caleb's route so far (both with usb and without) and Noh's POV (which I'm still figuring out where to put given that my plot has been rearranged).

Either way, I'm being less productive than I should be right now due to sleepiness. Still, there's a couple of nice juicy reveals (and there will be another 10,000 or so words by Monday).

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-houdini/mygame/>

. . .

SPOILERS:

For those wondering why Buttons with low relationships with Nick don't have their scenes in yet, it because they learn about Nick's brain connectivity issues at a . . . hehe . . . less opportune time in the future, and that needed to be rewritten around (originally, they discovered in this scene).

I'm *very* excited for Nover!Buttons this time around, because the drama will be *fun* (although it might make achieving a certain task *slightly* more difficult).

The start of Isaiah's version to this scene is just missing because there's a coding error that I can't find due to lack of focus right now. That part, I'll upload tomorrow after a good night's sleep (with all rest of all three scenes and Nover!Button scenes dropping sometime Monday).

[Today's Second Q&A, 7pm PST](#)

[Aug 29, 2021](#)

As per yesterday's poll, the second August Q&A will be held at:

7pm PST today (Sunday, August 29).

You can find the link to the first session recording in the Sanctum of Spoilers.

(Or just at <https://craig.horse/?id=838912579&key=345233068>. The recording deletes after 7 days, however.)

[MB Fairy Tale: Darkwhite and the Seven Squirrels](#)

[Aug 29, 2021](#)

Note: Please Read Game Night (www.patreon.com/posts/55271608) beforehand, as it's a companion piece. Am I on a DnD kick due to being excited about Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous? . . . Maybe.

* * * *

This was their fifth tavern in as many days. The first four taverns had all nestled snugly in the heart of the small towns through which the band of adventurers had passed through, merry hubs where drunken debauchery and local family gatherings occurred just tables apart (much to the dismay of the ever-proper party paladin, Sir Darkwhite).

Avonlea Cherrycobble, being a halfling of overabundantly chaotic disposition and over-large great axe, had thoroughly enjoyed the last four taverns—her upper arm still bore a battle scar of revelry from the third, where a tipsy half-orc had challenged her to a game of darts.

This fourth tavern was different. For one thing, it was isolated from both civilization and customers, which couldn't be a feasible business model. Instead of being located in a city's downtown, or at the intersection of cobblestone roads between farms, they'd stumbled upon this tavern in the middle of Nowhere.

Nowhere Forest, to be precise, which was just as dully dreary as Avonlea had anticipated when that Lich had bade them to go and retrieve his phylactery, the source of his undead "life" which had been stolen by . . . Avonlea frowned. She'd stopped paying attention at that part.

"The Drunken Octopus." Zipper, the band's tiefling thief, read aloud the lopsided sign side hung over the lodge door. "Odd name for a place in the middle of a landlocked forest."

"Should we go inside?" Sir Darkwhite unsubtly scratched beneath his golden pauldron. The same Lich that had set their company of three upon this quest had attempted to turn him into one of the undead, and been quite put out upon realizing that Darkwhite's patron god had foiled the attempt. He'd settled for leaving a deathmark upon Darkwhite's shoulder, which would kill the knight within a week unless the Lich's phylactery was successfully returned.

Avonlea cared less about the paladin's life than she did the Lich's promised reward. Gold had a way of motivating her. She hefted her axe over her shoulder and began striding towards the tavern. Any nautical-themed restaurant in the middle of an enchanted forest was surely destined to be the source of useful information.

The interior of The Drunken Octopus was much the same as all the other inns they'd been inside, making Avonlea wonder if there was a company that mass-constructed taverns and then teleported the buildings to a buyer's location of choice. Its walls were of heavy oak logs, and it was furnished with long tables and backless stools, as well as a large stone hearth over which an unnaturally large clamshell had been mounted (an improvement, Avonlea thought, from the customary hunting trophies).

"What can we get ye today?" called a voice.

Avonlea looked in the voice's direction to the bar. There was no one there.

"Are we going to have to deal with ghosts?" Sir Darkwhite sighed. "I hate ghosts."

"Ghosts are better than vampires," chimed Zipper. "I think one at the last graveyard we fought through tried to bite my tale."

"I'm not undead." The disembodied voice's Scottish accent became more pronounced with displeasure. "None of us are."

Avonlea strode to the bar, standing on her tiptoes to heft herself up onto one of the stools so she could peer over the counter's edge. There, glaring balefully up at her, was a squirrel.

Seven squirrels, to be exact.

"Weel?" demanded the largest of the squirrels, his bushy tail fluffing with indignation over Avonlea's visible shock. "What can we get ye?"

Avonlea sat back on the stool. "Either I'm still hungover from the last tavern," she pronounced, "or I'm turning into a druid."

One of the squirrels, brown in color, hopped up onto the countertop. "We dinna care if you're a druid," she squeaked. "Only if you're a paying customer."

Zipper sighed. "Why does everything we meet need to have such large teeth?"

The brown squirrel's whiskers twitched. "Rude."

"Apologies for my companies, Madam Squirrel," Sir Darkwhite interjected, sweeping the rodent an elegant bow. "My companions are simply weary from our days-long journey. Might we prevail upon you for . . ." he hesitated.

"We have ale." The first, white squirrel joined the brown one on the counter. "Exceptional ale."

"We'll take three ales then," Sir Darkwhite said.

The three adventurers sat at a table near the hearth. Within a few minutes, three tankards of ale were brought out, hefted up by the tiny arms of squirrels that carried each mug in groups of two, while the brown squirrel shouted out orders from the counter so that the drinks didn't slosh over.

Avonlea took a tentative sip. The white squirrel was right—the ale was exceptional.

"Would ye like some nuts?" one of the other squirrels asked politely from the floor.

Zipper snickered, and the small rodent glared balefully at them. "We're a bar," he squeaked belligerently. "Bars have nuts."

"Acorns aren't really—" Zipper began, only to have Sir Darkwhite elbow their side.

The paladin smiled at the squirrel. "We'd love a menu, if you have one."

The squirrel stared at him as if looking at an imbecile. "We just have nuts."

"Because you're squirrels," Zipper finished.

The squirrel nodded.

"Er, nuts will be fine," Sir Darkwhite said.

As the squirrel departed to fetch them snacks, the brown squirrel hopped from the counter to one table to the next before landing atop the group's. "Are ye enjoying the ale?" she asked. "We used to brew it ourselves." She sighed a sigh heavy with nostalgic regret.

"Back in the day?" Zipper echoed.

The squirrel nodded mournfully. "Back when we were Dwarves. Before—"

* * * *

"Nick," Ellery gasps with delight. "You took my suggestion."

Nick smirks, and Sally and Gray exchange an uneasy glance across the dining room table.

* * * *

"Before a wicked Lich transformed us," continued the squirrel. "Only when our last batch of ale is drunk shall our curse be cured."

"That's . . . a really weird curse," Avonlea said.

Sir Darkwhite's eyes filled with sympathy; Lich curses was something he'd recently become all too intimately familiar with. "And how much ale do you need to serve for your curse to be broken?"

"Around twelve barrels," the squirrel said flatly. "If ye three order refills, that's about half of one drained."

* * * *

"How much Constitution do we have between us?" Gray asks. "Mine's 20."

"17," Sally says.

Ellery winces. "Er, still at 12. It's not really all that important for ranged rogues."

* * * *

"We'll save you and your friends from this dire predicament, Good Squirrel," declared Sir Darkwhite.

"We will?" asked Avonlea.

"We will," confirmed Sir Darkwhite gallantly.

"Oh." The squirrel blinked, taken aback by his offer. "Fantastic. I mean, I was going to offer you information on the Lich that transformed us in exchange for your help, but if you're willing to do it pro-bono—"

Zipper's hand shot out, grabbing the squirrel's tail, who let out an appalled gasp-turned-squeak. The tiefling bared their fangs in a grin. "Oh, we'll still take the information," they said. "And I'll be staying sober in order to make sure you uphold your end of the bargain." Their smile sharpened. "No acting squirrely, now."

Avonlea rolled her eyes. "Zipper can't handle their drink," she told the squirrel. "But Darkwhite and I will keep the party going."

"It's not a party," Sir Darkwhite chastened her. "We're helping these unfortunates—"

"For necessary information that will undoubtedly help us find the Lich's phylactery," Zipper finished. They glanced hopefully at the squirrel, whose tail they still held. "And maybe a cash reward?"

The squirrel shook her head. "Drinks are on the house, though," she offered. "Unless you can't finish, in which case you need to pay."

Avonlea's eyes narrowed, and she ran the tip of her finger over the edge of her axe, which leaned conveniently near against her seat. "This sounds like a scam."

"Nonsense!" cried the squirrel. "*You're* the one who offered to help *us*!"

"Darkwhite offered," Avonlea corrected. "And intelligence is . . ."

"His dump stat," Zipper finished.

The squirrel cocked her tiny head to the side. "What curious words you adventurers use. Do you want the ale or not?"

Avonlea looked down into her mug, which was already empty. Might as well.

After all, it was exceptional ale.

* * * *

"Anyone want a refill?" Nick asks.

Sally raises her empty cup. "Yes, please. It seems thematically appropriate. The good stuff, this time, Nicholas. In honor of our mission."

Upon hearing the phrase 'good stuff,' both Ellery and Grayson hold out their glasses.

Nick groans. *"Fine,"* he says. *"But only if you promise not to murder the next quest giver."*

* * * *

The second mug of ale went down easy. Avonlea smiled at Zipper, who smiled back while maintaining their hold on the female squirrel.

The third mug was also a delight. The fact that Zipper still held onto the squirrel struck Avonlea as suddenly hilarious, and she giggle-snorted a sip of it out her nose.

The fourth mug was likewise easy for Avonlea, as were the fifth, sixth, and seventh. *"Swing the squirrel!"* she sang, standing on the table. *"Watch it hurl!"*

Sir Darkwhite took her axe away, placing it atop the hearth's mantle and out of her reach.

The eighth mug was harder for Avonlea to swallow, although Sir Darkwhite showed no signs of slowing down.

The ninth mug was unmemorable (literally).

"She's done," Zipper said as Avonlea kept singing into her empty tankard, giggling at the echo of her voice. Her song no longer rhymed, but that honestly improved the verse.

"I can keep going," Sir Darkwhite declared grimly.

And so, he did.

* * * *

"This from a guy who hardly ever orders a third beer," Nick snorts.

Grayson shrugs. *"In real life, binge drinking doesn't save squirrels. It just lands you in the ER."*

* * * *

When Avonlea sobered up, it was to witness Zipper releasing the leg of disgruntled middle-aged dwarf.

"Damn ye all!" the Dwarf cried, and her complaint was echoed by six voices behind the counter. "Do you know how much that ale cost?"

"I thought you said this wasn't a scam," Zipper replied calmly over Sir Darkwhite's snores (who was slouched over the table, having promptly passed out after his last sip of ale).

"Isna a scam," growled a bearded Dwarf, whose voice resembled that of the first squirrel they'd met. "Tis a *promotion*."

"The curse was real," explained another Dwarf. "We stopped being the squirrels as soon as the last drop of ale was drunk."

Yet another Dwarf scuffed her feet on the floor, having the decency to look abashed. "We just . . . kept brewing after being turned into squirrels," she said. "So the ale never finished, and we could keep telling knights the same story."

"But those knights never finished all the ale," Zipper concluded.

Avonlea smiled at the tiefling. Everything was still slightly blurry, and she wasn't quite sure what was going on, but Zipper was *so smart*.

The Dwarves exchanged cagey glances.

"It was good business," said one.

"We don't get a lot of customers out here," said another.

"So, the ones we do get need to spend big," justified a third.

Zipper sighed, nudging the snoring paladin seated beside them. "What about Sir Darkwhite?" they demanded. "He should never have drank that much, especially not while under a curse himself."

The tallest Dwarf paled. "The knightling is under a curse? From a Lich?"

Zipper nodded.

"Then there's no time to waste!" he cried. "Quickly, turn the human onto his back."

With the militaristic coordination of professional waitstaff, the seven Dwarves moved Sir Darkwhite from his seat and rolled him gently before the heart, underneath the clamshell (which still confused Avonlea, as did the inn's name).

"If yer pal paladin was cursed by the same Lich that cursed us, then there may be a magic backfiring," said the largest Dwarf. "He may need—"

Sir Darkwhite's body jerked, his torso arching upwards with a tortured gasp before falling limply back to the wooden floorboards. His chest stopped its rise, and his snoring fell silent.

"—the Kiss of Life," finished the Dwarf.

To Avonlea's surprise, Zipper's red cheeks turned even redder.

"Ye must breathe your own breath into the lungs of the cursed," the bashful Dwarf recited. "And pump with thine own hands his heart in harmony with your own."

“Oh.” Zipper’s blush faded. “You mean CPR.”

“What strange words ye adventurers use,” said one of the Dwarves, echoing the squirrel’s earlier line. For all Avonlea knew, it was the same Dwarf. Given the mental fog she was under, it had been impossible to keep track of which squirrel had transformed into which Dwarf. Although she was pretty sure that the Dwarven woman who kept glaring at Zipper had been the one that they’d held by the tale.

Zipper knelt down beside Sir Darkwhite, placing both hands upon his chest. “Alright, Snow White,” they muttered. “Here goes nothing.”

[MB Chapter 13 Update](#)

[Aug 30, 2021](#)

Here's the interview! Now to finish up Annie and Cass's doggerview (which involves them theatrically reenacting a conversation between . . . you know what, I'll just let you guys read it when it drops tomorrow on the 31st).

Total Length: 376k

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-houdini/mygame/>

New Material:

- Rest of Caleb's scenes (triggered if Caleb was who saw you off from the Chapter 11 party)
- An innocent phone call
- Nover versions of Caleb's scenes (Nover = Nick Over, and is shorthand for Buttons with no relationship with their brother)

Uploading within the Next Few Days (to same demo link):

- Isaiah's version of the starting scene (which is completely different)
- Everyone on Operation Hemera freaking out
- More potential responses and reactivity during the phone call

NB:

-Noh's POV is being pushed back to the end of this chapter, which is why it's still there after the Under Construction image.

[MB Interview: Antigone and Cassandra \(Part 1: Untranslated Version\)](#)

[Aug 31, 2021](#)

Note: *This version of the interview is untranslated. As such, only the human interviewer talks. The second, translated version can be read at:*

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/55590069>

* * * *

Dual spotlights shine upon a stage's four chairs, between which is a low table. On one side of the table sits Nicholas Wiseman, dressed informally in loose khaki pants and a fleece zipper-down jacket.

The seat next to him is taken by an abnormally large cat, whose well-groomed coat of long, white hair does little to soften the ferocity of his snaggle-toothed snarl, nor the glare of his one-eyed stare, nor the way that his half bitten-off ear menacingly twitches whenever Nick glances over.

In the two remaining chairs, Antigone and Cassandra sit, their gazes glued to the bowl of tiny bone-shaped dog treats upon the table.

Nick: Today we have a special interview, featuring the goodest girls to ever grace our stage. Might I introduce Antigone and Cassandra, K. Zarneki's beloved shih tzus!

He dips his hand into the bowl of treats, and presents two treats to Antigone and Cassandra. Antigone takes hers delicately, but Cassandra nips the end of one of his fingers.

Nick: Ouch! It's okay, girl, I'm sure it was an accident. And may I also present my *temporary* cohost for this evening, Schrodinger.

Nick pulls out a fish-shaped treat from his pocket. At Schrodinger's hiss, he opts to cautiously toss it onto the cat's seat instead of giving it to him by hand (a wise choice).

Nick, rolling his eyes: According to our showrunner, I needed a "translator."

Schrodinger finishes his treat and hisses again. He preens. Antigone barks excitedly, while Cassandra lets out a yawn.

Nick: For my first question, and I have to ask, who are the goodest girls?

Antigone and Cassandra pant with excitement, tails thumping on the seat cushion.

Nick, not able to understand their words but nonetheless comprehending their reply: That's right! It's you! You're the goodest girls! Yes, yes, you are!

He scratches Antigone and Cassandra under their chins, much to the dogs' delight. Schrodinger stands and resettles himself so that he now faces away from Nick. He mews, and Cassandra yips back. Schrodinger mews again.

Nick: Annie and Cass, you two beat out some pretty stiff competition to earn this interview slot! How do you feel about one-upping Reese Rudzite and that fake waiter in the polls?

The dogs cock their heads, not recognizing most of the words in the sentence. Schrodinger's mew contains a note of chastisement, and from there proceeds a conversation of barks and mews.

Nick, unable to understand anything said by the pets, proceeds to make up and go off his own version of their conversation.

Nick: What's that, Cass? You want to bite off Reese in the— oh my. We're on public access television, you can't say words like that on air. But I admit, I've considered similar options myself.

Schrodinger lifts a paw and hisses. The shih tzus look at Nick, until Antigone leans forward to lick his hand.

Nick, eyeing Schrodinger warily: So, girls, how do you feel about cats?

Antigone yips. Cassandra sniffs. Schrodinger keeps glaring at Nick.

Nick, in total ignorance: Yeah, I'm not a fan of cats either. Do you have any dog friends?

Antigone barks, and Cassandra growls softly. Schrodinger gives Cassandra a evaluative stare.

Nick: Aw, so no close dog friends yet? How would you feel if your owner brought home another pup? Or a cat, for that matter?

Antigone pants, grinning. Cassandra lays on her belly, folding her paws neatly in front of her and letting out a snort.

Nick: It would depend on the cat or dog, would it? That makes sense—you wouldn't want just anyone for a roommate! Speaking of potential roommates, though . . . How do you two feel about Button?

Antigone leaps onto the center table, spilling the bowl of treats with a happy bark. Immediately, Cassandra is off her chair as well, eating the spilled goodies until Nick hoists her up and back onto her seat. Nick hastily scoops up the fallen dog treats as Antigone continues to bark.

Schrodinger blinks. Antigone eventually jumps back onto her seat.

Nick: You like Button as much as you like treats, huh?

Cassandra sneezes.

Nick: I have to ask, given your approval of my sibling: girls, why did you break up that kiss? You know the one.

Antigone and Cassandra excitedly bark at Button's name.

Nick: Hmm. Not the reason that I expected.

Schrodinger mews derisively. Antigone and Cass bark back at him.

Nick: I'm glad that you approve of Button, though. I never understood why you always terrorized them whenever they walked by—I could hear your barking from my house.

Antigone and Cassandra bark again, only slightly softer than their customary greeting to Button.

Nick, sagely: I see, I see. You were trying to protect Zarneki.

The shih tzus stare blankly at Nick. Schrodinger lets out a self-satisfied purr.

Nick: You must really love your owner to be so protective. How do you feel about the Mayor?

Antigone and Cassandra both growl.

Nick: I hear you. Politics, am I right? Any good stories that you'd like to share about Zarneki?

Cassandra bounces on her paws as she barks happily. Antigone plops her head on the armrest and sighs at her sister.

Cassandra lays back down, subdued.

Nick: That's absolutely *scandalous!* I can't believe that you disclosed that to a live studio audience. This kind of scoop is almost too juicy to air. Any other revelations about Zarneki that we should know?

The shih tzus stare expectantly at the bowl of dog treats. Nick sighs and gives them each a cookie. Antigone makes snuffling noises as she breaks hers into tiny pieces and eats it bit by bit.

Cassandra swallows her treat whole, and lets out a few yips.

Nick: Zarneki really made you wear those costumes for Halloween? Dang, and I thought I went all-out.

Antigone wags her tail, and whines. Cassandra joins her.

Schrodinger's meow is almost drowned out by their next barks.

Nick: Other than dog treats, do you have any favorite snacks?

At the word 'snacks,' both Antigone and Cassandra sit nicely in their seats. Nick gives them each another cookie.

The shih tzus pant happily after gobbling down the treats.

Nick: Scrambled eggs? A solid choice.

Schrodinger meows. Antigone and Cassandra continue panting. Eventually, Schrodinger hops off his chair and strides off to behind the stage curtain.

Nick sighs with relief at the cat's disappearance.

Nick: Since my cohost took off, it looks like we should wrap things up. One last question, which I was told needed to be asked by our producers.

He looks down at the cue card and shakes his head, bemused.

Nick: What are your plans for world domination?

The shih tzus exchange a look, bark once at Nick, and then take off in hot pursuit of the cat.

[MB Interview: Antigone and Cassandra \(Part 2: Translated Version\)](#)

[Aug 31, 2021](#)

Note: *The following interview has been translated into English by Schrodinger Alavidze. Please read Part 1, the untranslated version, first at:*

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/55589763>

* * * *

Dual spotlights shine upon a stage's four chairs, between which is a low table. On one side of the table sits Nicholas Wiseman, dressed informally in loose khakis and a fleece zipper-down jacket.

The seat next to him is taken by an abnormally large cat, whose well-groomed coat of long, white hair does little to soften the ferocity of his snaggle-toothed snarl, the glare of his missing eye, nor the way that his half bitten-off ear menacingly twitches whenever Nick glances over.

In the two remaining chairs, Antigone and Cassandra sit, their gazes glued to the bowl of tiny bone-shaped dog treats upon the table.

Nick addresses the camera.

Nick: Today we have a special interview, featuring the goodest girls to ever grace our stage. Might I introduce Antigone and Cassandra, K. Zarneki's beloved shih tzus!

He dips his hand into the bowl of treats, and presents two treats to Antigone and Cassandra. Antigone takes hers delicately, but Cassandra nips the end of one of his fingers.

Nick: Ouch! It's okay, girl, I'm sure it was an accident. And may I also present my *temporary* cohost for this evening, Schrodinger.

Nick pulls out a fish-shaped treat from his pocket. At Schrodinger's hiss, he opts to cautiously toss it onto the cat's seat instead of giving it to him by hand (a wise choice).

Nick, rolling his eyes: According to our showrunner, I need a "translator."

Schrodinger: You don't speak a single dialect of dog Dog. Whereas *I* am fluent in a wide variety, ranging from Shih Tzu to Schnauzer.

The cat preens.

Schrodinger: I traveled the world in my misspent youth, and became very cultured.

Antigone: That's amazing! You're amazing, Schrodinger!

Cassandra: Whatever. I doubt he's ever been to the dog park.

Nick grins blankly, unable to understand any of their conversation.

Nick: For my first question, and I have to ask, who are the goodest girls?

Antigone: Oh! Oh! I know this one!

Cassandra: We are, obviously. We're the goodest girls.

Nick, still not able to understand their words but nonetheless comprehending their reply: That's right! It's you! You're the goodest girls! Yes, yes, you are!

He scratches Antigone and Cassandra under their chins, much to the dogs' delight. Schrodinger stands and resettles himself so that he now faces away from Nick.

Schrodinger, chiding the dogs: You're embarrassing yourself. Have a little dignity.

Cassandra: Mind your own business, Garfield.

Schrodinger lets out an affronted gasp.

Nick: Annie and Cass, you two beat out some pretty stiff competition to earn this interview slot! How do you feel about one-upping Reese Rudzite and that fake waiter in the polls?

Antigone: Who?

Cassandra: What's a poll?

Schrodinger, mockingly: Reese Rudzite is the villain that your dearest owner is trying to apprehend. Don't you pay attention to your owner's conversations?

Antigone: If Best One is trying to take this Reese down, then we hate him!

Cassandra: Yeah! Best One is the *best*.

Schrodinger: You call your owner 'Best One'? How demeaning.

Antigone: Best One was always best, even when Cass bit Best One the day we met. Best One didn't even get angry.

Cassandra: Instead, Best One brought us to . . .

She stops, suddenly choked up.

Cassandra: To the clean place with soft beds.

Antigone: Home.

Cassandra, to Schrodinger: What do you call your owner?

Schrodinger: Warmth Giver.

Antigone: All humans are warm.

Schrodinger: Her warmth is the best warmth.

Nick, unable to understand anything said by the pets, proceeds to make up and go off his own version of their conversation.

Nick: What's that, Cass? You want to bite off Reese in the— oh my. We're on public access television, you can't say words like that on air. But I admit, I've considered similar options myself.

Schrodinger, condescendingly lifting one paw to point at Nick: And he is Big Foot. The stupidest, clumsiest human, who is always stepping on my beautiful tail when I try to sniff what he makes in the kitchen. *And* he never shares the food.

The dogs give Schrodinger a look of sympathy.

Cassandra: That is terrible of him.

Antigone: But he does give treats! He's Treat Giver! I love Treat Giver!

Nick, eyeing Schrodinger warily: So, girls, how do you feel about cats?

Antigone: Schrodinger is our friend! He brought me a mouse!

Cassandra: I'm withholding judgement until he brings back a ball.

Schrodinger: A ball does not prove my prowess as a hunter. Either appreciate what spoils I see fit to distribute, or I'll stop bringing them.

Antigone: But they smell so good!

Nick, in total ignorance: Yeah, I'm not a fan of cats either. Do you have any dog friends?

Antigone: Ruffian! He's tall and big and plays with us at the dog park!

Cassandra: Treat Giver isn't really listening to our answers, is he?

Schrodinger gives Cassandra a evaluative stare.

Schrodinger: You're clever for a canine.

Nick: Aw, so no close dog friends yet? How would you feel if your owner brought home another pup? Or a cat, for that matter?

Antigone: Ruffian can come live with us! But, oh, what if he eats my food? Do cats eat dog food?

Schrodinger: In my time as an itinerate vagabond, some of my best meals came from unexpected places. There was this one boutique dumpster that . . .

The cat sighs dreamily.

Schrodinger: Yes, well, Warmth Giver provides me with tuna. My days of adventurous cuisine tasting are perhaps best left to nostalgic memory.

Antigone: If Schrodinger promises not to eat my food, he can come live with us. And maybe another cat as well.

Cassandra, to Schrodinger: Would you chase after my ball?

Schrodinger: Play fetch? Darling, please. I have more important ways to spend my time, like sunbathing.

Cassandra: Then maybe living with a cat wouldn't be so bad. Just remember that it's *my* ball.

Nick: It would depend on the cat or dog, would it? That makes sense—you wouldn't want just anyone for a roommate! Speaking of potential roommates, though . . . How do you two feel about Button?

Antigone: Button is nice! Has the best cuddling arms and nicest lap!

Antigone leaps onto the center table, spilling the bowl of treats.

Cassandra: *Mine!*

Immediately, Cassandra is off her chair as well, eating the spilled goodies until Nick hoists her up and back onto her seat. Nick hastily scoops up the fallen dog treats.

Antigone: Button is sad sometimes, but I'm the best at making them feel better! Best One told me to make them feel better, and I did! Because I'm the bestest girl!

Cassandra looks at her, Antigone's words having distracted her from glaring at Nick.

Antigone: One of the bestest girls, that is. Cass is also the bestest girl!

Schrodinger: There can't be two bestest girls.

Antigone, suddenly serious: There should always be room at the top. That common wisdom doesn't claim so is a sad reflection of modern society's unhealthy and ultimately unsustainable competitive culture.

Schrodinger blinks.

Cassandra: Don't mistake excitable for dumb. She reads over Best One's arm.

Antigone jumps back onto her seat.

Nick: You like Button as much as you like treats, huh?

Cassandra: Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Nick: I have to ask, given your approval of my sibling: girls, why did you break up that kiss? You know the one.

Antigone and Cassandra excitedly bark at Button's name.

Antigone: Best One and Button were hugging! I wanted to be in the hug!

Cassandra: They were just standing there. I wanted to play more Chuck-It, and they were ignoring me.

Nick: Hmm. Not the reason that I expected.

Schrodinger: Big Foot is talking out his tail-hole. He has no clue what you said. But I'm curious, were you two really okay with your owner cuddling with another human?

Antigone: Of course! As long as I get to join the cuddling!

Cassandra: I liked that Button played fetch with us. I wish they played more fetch, and spent less time cuddling.

Nick: I'm glad that you approve of Button, though. I never understood why you always terrorized them whenever they walked by—I could hear your barking from my house.

Cassandra: I thought they were going to come into the yard and steal my ball.

Antigone: I was barking because Cass was barking!

Nick, sagely: I see, I see. You were trying to protect Zarneki.

Schrodinger: I told you that he was talking out his tail-hole.

Nick: You must really love your owner to be so protective. How do you feel about the Mayor?

Cassandra: Best One's father? He's always angry, and never gives pets.

Antigone: He makes Best One said. We get lots of cuddles from Best One after he leaves.

Nick: I hear you. Politics, am I right? Any good stories that you'd like to share about Zarneki?

Cassandra: There was that day that Best One played fetch with us! And then . . . Best One played fetch with us the next day, too!

Antigone: Best One plays fetch with us every day.

Cassandra, morosely: Except when it's raining.

Nick: That's absolutely *scandalous*! I can't believe that you disclosed that to a live studio audience. This kind of scoop is almost too juicy to air. Any other revelations about Zarneki that we should know?

The shih tzus stare expectantly at the bowl of dog treats. Nick sighs and gives them each a cookie.

Antigone: We *did* overhear a conversation between Best One and The Petter.

Schrodinger: The Petter? Who's the petter?

Antigone: I think Best One calls them Tall Pharaoh.

Cassandra: Taliaferro. They're Best One's friend. Best One always smiles more when The Petter comes, but The Petter can be . . .

Antigone: The Petter pets us *so much* that sometimes Cass hides in Best One's bedroom.

Schrodinger: But you heard them talking about important information? Did it involve . . .

Schrodinger lowers his voice.

Schrodinger: . . . *The War?*

Antigone: I don't think so. The Petter was teasing Best One about numbers. 'Two is comfy, three is loud.'

Cassandra: Two is company, three is a crowd.

Antigone: Yeah! I was falling asleep at the time—The Petter gives *such good* pets, and laps are best for naps. But Best One turned red like Cass's favorite ball at the number talk.

Cassandra: What war?

Nick: Zarneki really made you wear those costumes for Halloween? Dang, and I thought I went all-out.

Antigone: Halloween? Last Halloween, Best One dressed us up as pumpkins.

Cassandra: It was my favorite costume. We looked like balls! Orange balls!

Schrodinger: So, you didn't learn anything about . . .

The cat lowers his voice again.

Schrodinger: . . . *The War?*

Nick: Other than dog treats, do you have any favorite snacks?

At the word 'snacks,' both Antigone and Cassandra sit nicely in their seats. Nick gives them each another cookie.

The shih tzus pant happily after gobbling down the treats.

Antigone: Salami!

Cassandra: Best One always says "Not this time, girls. It's too unhealthy."

Antigone, smugly: But we always change Best One's mind.

Schrodinger, sounding jealous: Warmth Giver never changes her mind.

Nick: Scrambled eggs? A solid choice.

Schrodinger: His brain is scrambled. Also, do you two seriously know nothing about *The War*?

Cassandra: Like Tug-a-War?

Schrodinger: I only agreed to be on this show because I got a tip that you shih tzus were informants.

Disgusted, Schrodinger hops off his chair and strides off behind the stage curtain.

Nick sighs with relief at the cat's disappearance.

Nick: Since my cohost took off, it looks like we should wrap things up. One last question, which I was told needed to be asked by our producers.

He looks down at the cue card and shakes his head, bemused.

Nick: What are your plans for world domination?

Antigone: Oh! Maybe Schrodinger meant *that* war. The Future War.

Cassandra: Schrodinger is a spy for the enemy! Quick, after him!

[September Interview Poll . . . No Cats Allowed](#)

[Sep 1, 2021](#)

Schrodinger will get his own poll slot next month, I promise. But for now, I'm sticking with humans.

Annie and Cass were never meant to be a serious option, but I learned my lesson in that people always vote for the animals (who am I kidding, I would've voted for them too). And I did really enjoy writing their interview, despite the trickiness of the language barrier.

For September, however, I'm sticking with the two-legged kind of people. So vote for the character(s) you'd like to ask questions of below!

(If one of the previously interviewed ROs wins, I'll be setting them up with a new interviewer and it'll likely be one who has the most leftover questions that I wasn't able to include in the first interview).

(Personally, I'm hoping that Reese and AL emerge victorious, if only so that Nick can rub it in Reese's face that they lost in the poll to *dogs* last month.)

Clarence Garfield & Stephanie Valero (Team Aeon)

Reese "Rudzite" and Andy/Liz "Ugh, Why Do I Share A Last Name With Caleb" (Team Vengeance)

Noh (Doesn't believe in teams, cryptic answers only)

One of the previously interviewed ROs

402 votes total

[Writer's Blog: September Roadmap](#)

[Sep 3, 2021](#)

Happy Labor Day Weekend for all those in the States!

First, here's the roadmap for September (dates subject to being shifted, but everything will be released in September):

Sept 4: Delivery for the Damned Poll

Sept 5: Mind Blind Update (Chapter 13, Isaiah's missing scene)

Sept 7: Delivery for the Damned Teaser

Sept 8: Lady Death's Diary, Chapter 19

Sept 10: Writer's Blog

Sept 11: Mind Blind Short Story #1

Sept 12: Nick Wiseman Has Opinions (UCRT+)

Sept 13: Mind Blind Blooper Reel

Sept 15: Lady Death's Diary, Chapter 20

Sept 16: Mind Blind Update (Chapter 13, All – Personal Word Goal: 390k)

Sept 17: Writer's Blog

Sept 18: MB Another Perspective Side Story (UCRT+)

Sept 21: Mind Blind Saucy Side (Kenzie)

Sept 22: Lady Death's Diary, Chapter 21

Sept 24: Writer's Blog

Sept 25: Mind Blind Update (Chapter 14, Part 1 – Personal Word Goal: 415k)

Sept 26: Live Q&A

Sept 28: Mind Blind Short Story #2

Sept 29: Cast Interview

I included my personal word goals on the road map this time. Not because I think they're particularly relevant (wordcount isn't really a good indication of how long an update will feel, given that the amount of branches can vary). But publicizing my deadlines and word count goals is an effective way to keep myself accountable. I won't always meet the projections, especially given my tendency for last minute *ah-ha!* moments and rewriting, but it's a goalpost to run towards.

(*Delivery for the Damned* awaits at the finish line. I'm not used to putting off new ideas in order to actually . . . finish something. Sure, *Lady Death's Diary* is a completed manuscript, but writing the first draft of a novel is exponentially easier and less of a time commitment than a piece of Interactive Fiction.)

I've always been someone who gets swept away by the shininess of a brand-new project and cast of characters. Honestly, if I hadn't taken the leap and shared *Mind Blind* online, I probably would've started and shelved at least five other projects by now. So I owe you guys a huge thank you for keeping me accountable and helping me achieve my lifelong dream of actually being a writer that people *read* (as opposed to a writer with two dozen unfinished manuscripts).

Despite my past bad habits of jumping ship for new shores (Does that metaphor hold up? I don't think so.), we're close enough to the end that I can fully envision *Mind Blind's* final scenes. Which is exciting! (And a little bit scary, because after finishing comes -ugh- *editing*.)

Of course, after editing comes publishing, and after publishing comes *Delivery for the Damned!*

(I'm really excited for *Delivery*, in case you guys can't tell. It's unlike me to sit so long on an idea, and the concept only gets more intriguing to me the longer it percolates in my brain.)

[Delivery Development: Career Fair](#)

[Sep 4, 2021](#)

You'll be able to change Golightly's last name in-game, but for the purpose of simplicity that's how I'll be referring to *Delivery's* MC for now.

In *Mind Blind*, Button is around 20/21. For *Delivery*, I wanted to have the protagonist be a little older--in part because at least two of the ROs are **old** old. Like, can-critique-a-Ren-Fair-for-not-being-historically-accurate-according-to-their-memories old. Thus, I want to write an MC whose personality is more or less . . . settled? I can't think of a better word to use.

Golightly will thus be in their mid/late twenties (the actual age will never be given, but you will meet characters that they grew up with together in the orphanage). Since Golightly is relatively early into their career as a delivery person, this means that they've had past jobs. I'd like to include some reactivity to these past careers, which will give Golightly different advantages depending on the task.

The problem is that I have too many ideas for Golightly's past job, and so am presenting them to you in order to prune down. I think maybe four or five would be enough, with one generic option of "gig worker" which leaves details to player imagination.

Please vote for which past job you'd like to see on Golightly's resume. I'm also open to hearing any other suggestions! (But it can't be anything that requires higher education.)

Storm Chaser

Document Forger

Circus Acrobat

Pizza Delivery Driver

Skydiving Instructor

Race Car Mechanic

Process Server (The people who hand out the "You've Been Served" papers)

Bounty Hunter

TSA Agent

Voice Actor

Fashion Designer

Surveillance Investigator

Security Guard

Nanny

Pretzel Stand Worker

136 votes total

[Mind Blind Mini-Update: Isaiah's Scene](#)

[Sep 5, 2021](#)

The beginning of Chapter 13 is now playable for all Buttons, including those who witnessed Isaiah's prophecy in Chapter 11 instead of chatting with Caleb. You learn different information depending on which route you went (and whether or not you gave away Caleb's usb drive).

There will be even more ripple effects down the line.

I'm *excited*.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-houdini/mygame/>

The second half of Chapter 13 will update on **September 16**.

[Delivery Sneak Peek: Luce, The Very Bored Vampire](#)

[Sep 7, 2021](#)

Lucien/Lucia is the final RO in *Delivery For The Damned* and is gender variable.

In many ways, Luce is your traditional vampire. They drink blood, wear black, and live in a Gothic castle with their pet gargoyle. That being said, your first impression of them may change once you realize that their wardrobe is primarily styled after 1980's punk fashion and that their castle was constructed to

Luce's specifications in 1999. (Luce got caught up in the Y2K craze, and decided to go big and bold before world imploded . . . which it didn't do until 2004. Point is, now they own a castle in downtown Clonakilty.)

Luce can't tell you their own age. Really, who bothers keeping track after the first two centuries? Life becomes so endlessly *tedious* when one is immortal. Luce hasn't been fully entertained since the 1980's, a decade which they recall with undeserved nostalgia. Luce tries to stay excited about life, but vampirism makes it difficult to mix things up. Due to their accelerated healing, hair dye doesn't stick and tattoos last only a week. (The reason so many vampires have flowing locks in literature is because most were too lazy for the required weekly haircuts.) The impermanence of body art, however, doesn't stop Luce from frequenting the hair salon and tattoo parlor every Saturday for a completely new look.

What will happen when they run out of hair dye colors? Who knows.

Despite their constant ennui, Luce has no desire to stop living. After all, what if death is even more boring than life? Thus, they work as a professional assassin, a pragmatic career given that normal grocery stores don't cater to their dietary needs. The only other job that pays people to eat is that of a food critic, and everyone knows how difficult *that* gig is to land.

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 19](#)

[Sep 8, 2021](#)

By the time we arrived back at the palace, my sides ached from exertion. Xander had been forced to grab ahold of me several times to prevent me from tripping over my own feet, as my eagerness to see Emilia unfortunately outstripped my capability to run. Eventually, he hooked his arm through mine so as to keep me from planting headfirst onto the cobblestones. Despite our urgency, I was intensely aware of the warmth of his bare arm against mine.

We entered the castle grounds just as Loren exited the stables, his riding boots muddy from a recent ride, and our paths crossed in the front courtyard. His smile dissipated upon catching sight of my companion.

"Vitrula!" Loren's frown became downright thunderous as he neared, and it took me a moment to realize he was glaring at my legs. In our rush to leave, I'd neglected to change out of my boxing outfit. "I know you don't care about fashion. But as my betrothed, I at least expect you to model proper attire for the rest of court."

His first sentence to me in over a week, and he criticized my pants? His audacity rankled, especially when he hadn't bothered coming to visit me once during my vigil over Emilia.

"I'll change later," I said curtly, "but I'm needed elsewhere right now."

He crossed his arms. "I saw you entering through the front gate. If you have time to gallivant around town with Brant," his glower shifted to Xander, "then you can spare a few moments to talk with your *fiancé*."

I was too impatient to go see Emilia to deal with Loren's petty jealousy. Even if, and I blushed at the thought, his jealousy was now somewhat warranted. Had it not been for Henric's interruption, I would have kissed Xander. Not that I hadn't rejoiced upon hearing the news that Emilia had recovered, but a small part of me regretted that the messenger hadn't arrived a few seconds later. Such a desire was wrong, of course, both morally and pragmatically. I was still engaged to Loren. The Rhys family motto was "Loyalty Beyond Measure." Kissing Xander wouldn't have just broken that oath—it would have jeopardized my entire survival.

Not that our engagement had ever prevented Loren from falling in love with Letty, but his poor behavior shouldn't set the standard for mine.

Regardless, I still didn't have time to deal with Loren's petty condemnation of my outfit. I tried to continue past him to the castle entrance but Loren sidestepped into my path.

I looked at him incredulously. "Emilia just woke up," I said. "I need to go see her."

"Your maid?" he asked. "Never mind—she can wait. Where were you? Why are you dressed like that?"

"Your Highness, I would be glad to remain here and explain," said Xander. "For now, please let Lady Vitrola pass."

Loren's lip curled, and he perused Xander from head to foot disdainfully. His normally handsome visage twisted into a derisive sneer. "Your presence is no longer required, Brant," he said. "This is between me and future bride."

Xander ignored the dismissal. His face remained carefully shielded as he met the Prince's stare. His voice was low enough not to be overheard by others in the courtyard as he replied, "Stop this, Loren."

My head snapped towards Xander at the use of his brother's first name. Xander's casual address took me aback, as did his flinty tone. It made sense the brothers had some sort of exposure to one another, given King Eldin's commitment to his illicit relationship with Delphine. Still, judging how loathing practically radiated from Loren, I doubted their relationship was fondly fraternal.

Loren's left eye twitched, his snarl opening up to expose the gap between his front teeth. "You can't order—" he began heatedly.

But Xander was already walking around him, a firm hand on my elbow steering me through the castle gate. Loren remained where we left him, his hands balled into fists and his lips compressed in a pale line.

I could apologize later. For now, Emilia was waiting.

"Really, my lady, I'm quite all right." Emilia smiled feebly as I refilled her teacup for the third time. She wrinkled her nose at the foul-smelling steam rising from Delphine's brew, but reluctantly took a sip at my stern look. Her meek acquiescence, more than anything, proved to me how poorly she must be feeling.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke," I said. "I wanted to be there."

Emilia laughed. Given her recent convalescence, it emerged more a hoarse croak than her usual giggle. "You *were* there. According to my father, you didn't leave my side for a whole week." She shook her head, then stopped moving with a wince. "Triad bless, it's hard to believe that much time has passed. I'd swear your birthday was just yesterday."

I motioned for her to take another sip of tea. She heaved an exaggerated sigh but complied. "I'm just glad that you're awake. I didn't know if—" I choked up, unable to continue.

Emilia smiled in what I assumed she thought was a reassuring manner, but her stretched lips only emphasized the new gauntness of her cheeks. The past week had not been kind to my lady's maid. "I'm fine now," she told me. "Perfectly fine."

I gave a soggy chuckle, trying to remain composed despite my rioting emotions. Joy, that Emilia had finally woken. Guilt, because the poison had been intended for me. Sorrow, because I knew what needed to be done to ensure this situation never repeated. I took a deep breath to fortify myself.

"There's something I must tell you," I said. "Someone hurt you in effort to get to me. Your life should have never been threatened." I couldn't meet Emilia's eyes, focusing instead the rose carvings on her headboard. "Don't worry; I've arranged a generous severance package. You'll never need to work again, if you don't wish. I'll also gladly recommend you to some of the other ladies at court. You've admired Lady Gwendolyn's sense of style many times in the past; I'm sure that she would be delighted to take you on."

Emilia's teacup slammed onto its saucer with a sharp clink. "My lady." Her exaggerated enunciation made the title sound like an insult than an honorific. "Have I not served you loyally these past three years?"

I should have expected her to resist. Emilia enjoyed the status that came from serving the future queen, and Lady Gwendolyn was only a baroness no matter how well attired. "You must understand," I said. "Poison was—"

"Added to your birthday breakfast," Emilia finished. She smirked at my stunned blink, taking it as confirmation. "I figured as much. It's not as if anyone would have bothered poisoning my packed luncheon from home."

"Then you also realize why it's in your best interest to seek employment elsewhere. I cannot guarantee your safety." Didn't she comprehend that she risked death by being around me? Most people (myself excluded) didn't recover.

Emilia's chin jutted stubbornly. "As if I would relinquish my position," she sniffed. "I hardly think anyone else qualified to fill it. Has the information I brought you ever been wrong?"

"You've been invaluable," I conceded. "But I'll make do. I can't keep you safe should you stay. Emilia, don't be foolish."

"With respect, *my lady*, you're the one acting a toad-lick fool," she gritted out. "Given the recent attempt on your life, common sense dictates that I remain to keep an eye out for *you*."

My mouth opened to retort but no words came out. Her willingness to put herself at risk for my sake made no sense.

"But why?" I finally asked.

Emilia sighed and set her cup down on the nightstand. "May I be blunt, my lady?"

I nodded.

"Your fashion sense is abysmally drab. You refuse to let me to style your hair. You complain about all the wonderful parties you get to attend, and you're pricklier than a wet cat when I wake you up each morning." Her voice softened, "But you're kind. You're too generous for your own good, and you never act as though you're better than me because you have a title. Perhaps I speak beyond my station, but I flatter myself to think that, were you not my mistress, you'd most likely be my friend."

My eyes stung, and I blinked hard to regain control of my emotions. Emilia didn't seem willing to budge on her decision to stay. And after her speech, I wasn't sure that I still wanted her to go.

"You're certain that you won't regret this?" I asked.

"Never, my lady." She squeezed my hand, then smiled. "All I ask in return is that you lend me your ruby earbobs, the next time I go out to town."

I laughed at the glibness of her proposed bargain. Though, knowing Emilia, she was most likely half serious. Either way, the earrings were hers to keep.

"Take the next few days off," I told her. "Give your body time to recuperate. Should your decision remain unchanged, you're welcome to return to your position."

Her chin drooped low against her chest as she nodded. Realizing she needed to rest, I stood to leave. I paused before I closed the door behind me.

"Emilia?"

“Yes, my lady?”

“I think we would be friends as well.”

Sometime during my conversation with Emilia, Delphine had joined Xander outside in the hallway. I found them still lingering, deep in conversation and whispering so as not to be heard through the door. Upon seeing me exit Emilia’s bedroom, Delphine motioned him quiet with a wave of her hand. The tips of her fingers were stained green from crushing up herbs for the tonic that Emilia had so detested. Most court mages would consider the wellbeing of a servant beneath them, but I suspected that Delphine would’ve helped Emilia even if she hadn’t been my personal maid.

“Your visit seems to have put your mind at ease,” said Delphine. She reached out and brushed aside a rebellious strand of hair that had escaped my bun. “You look as though you’ve been relieved of a great burden.”

I rolled back my shoulders as if to further free myself from my shroud of worry. Emilia’s recovery, and her unexpected willingness to remain in my employ, *had* made me feel lighter—to the point that it felt as if a physical pressure had been removed from my back. My muscles ached from my boxing lesson with Xander, but even the soreness somehow felt liberating, as if a reminder of what I might be capable of. I smiled at Delphine, weary but also . . . not happy, exactly. Content. It wasn’t an emotion to which I was accustomed.

It was also fleeting, gone once I noticed Delphine’s and Xander’s identical masks of concern. I looked back and forth between them—both returned my stare with expectant looks of their own.

“Emilia has decided to remain as my lady’s maid,” I informed them. “After she fully heals, of course.”

Their expressions didn’t change. Silence hung heavy between us, and I arched a brow quizzically at Xander. I was accustomed to the way Delphine brandished muteness during our lessons; her lack of response often forced me to fill the quiet with my own thoughts and arrive at the correct conclusion independently. She claimed it helped me to learn. But I hadn’t anticipated similar treatment from Xander, especially when I was unsure what unspoken question they even wanted me to answer.

The lull stretched on, and a sense of unease replaced my prior relief. When Delphine spoke up, she sounded inexplicably disappointed.

“Let’s sojourn to my study,” she said. “The three of us have much to discuss.”

My heart fluttered to a halt and I barely resisted the impulse to shudder. Could Xander have told his mother about our almost-kiss? What if Delphine thought I was attempting to seduce her son despite my engagement? What if she refused to continue teaching me? Maybe the washerwoman from earlier had been right. Maybe I was a lightskirt. After all, I hadn’t once thought of Loren during the entire time at the

boxing gym. How audacious was I to hope that my fiancé wouldn't cast me aside for Letty if I myself struggled to remain loyal?

My mind whirled frantically as a thousand worst case scenarios enacted themselves out. I considered myself to be resilient. Dying multiple times tended to leave you inured to most of life's lesser frustrations. But if Delphine rejected me her student, I'd be devastated. Learning magic was an essential part of my plan to stay alive, true, but I also genuinely respected the sorceress. The last thing I wanted to do, other than die, was disappoint her.

Xander claimed his customary armchair when we entered his mother's study, leaving me stranded on one of the less comfortable options. Delphine sat behind her desk, placing her hands atop the tea kettle she kept next to her writing supplies. Before long, peppermint-scented steam rose from the spout and the gurgle of boiling water filled the room's awkward silence. She poured three cups of tea, pushing two towards the edge of her desk for Xander and I to reach.

"I had hoped that you would choose to confide in me by yourself," she said, peering at me from over the rim of her teacup. She took a small sip to ascertain the tea's temperature, then a longer one. "An idle wish, considering how dearly you cling to your secrets. Recent events mean that I no longer have the luxury of patience. Do you recall, Tru, the question I once asked you? About your reason for becoming my apprentice?"

My hands shook. I set my cup and saucer back down on her desk to stop them from clattering. The conversation she referred to had been months ago. Nevertheless, I recalled it in vivid detail due to having transcribed it in my journal. It had, after all, happened on the same day as the fire that almost killed me, and I was meticulous in recording even my unsuccessful brushes with death.

"I told you that I needed to protect myself," I said.

She nodded solemnly. "I thought you were being overly cautious despite your rank. Paranoid, even. Then the fire happened, supposedly sparked by a candle despite your possession of a glowstone. After that, I cast every protective ward I knew to make sure your chambers remained secure."

"I noticed." I'd been touched by her efforts to keep me safe.

"Around the time of the fire, several dissidents at Court allied themselves with foreign leaders in an effort to overthrow King Eldin for a more . . . pliable monarch. They were minor lords and few in number, but dangerous nonetheless. Thanks to efforts of my son," she beamed proudly at Xander, "their plot was foiled."

I gaped at him. "You spied on Ambassador Leonidas?"

He inclined his head. "Among others. Most the threat came from Fengal's representatives—they're losing their war with Anterdon, and desperately need Verdan's military support."

"The trade embargo," I realized.

“It wasn’t Emperor Irax’s first resort,” said Xander, “since it hurts Fengal’s economy as well.”

Delphine continued, “Six months ago, the conspirators at Bellcrest were taken into custody. I assumed they had targeted you in order to spur the northern provinces into rebellion and that, given their arrest, that your life was no longer in jeopardy.”

My breathing grew shallow with anxiety. Now that I understand this meeting’s intent, it was all I could do not to bolt from my stupidly delicate chair and take off running towards the stable. I’d saddle Dragon and ride until I reached Kothe. Anything to avoid having this conversation. I wanted to laugh at my own idiocy—as if Delphine would care about a flirtatious encounter when she herself was the King’s mistress.

“Then,” continued Delphine, “your maid is poisoned. Not only that, but you insist I lie regarding the nature of her malady.”

I floundered for a plausible excuse, my mouth opening and shutting several times. Xander put his hand on my shoulder.

“I told her what you said earlier,” he confessed. “That Emilia ate a breakfast prepared for you.”

I shook off his hand. I was too angry at his betrayal to feel hurt, though that pain would undoubtedly surface in time. In compliance with Rhys family tradition and my own habit, I resorted to sarcasm to cover up wounded emotions. “I see. I’m delighted to realize how deeply you value keeping my confidences.” I stood and curtsied to him in the formal manner that one would greet a stranger. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Brant.”

I started towards the door, ignoring his protests.

“Sit down,” Delphine commanded sharply. “*Pulga*.” She snapped her fingers, causing the door’s deadbolt to twist itself shut. My indignant scowl was met with a cool look. “Xander was concerned for your safety, nor was he aware that you desired this knowledge kept secret. All of which begs one question, Tru. How long have you been aware that someone wanted you dead?”

[Go, Team Vengeance, Go! \(A Follow-up Interview Poll\)](#)

[Sep 9, 2021](#)

Reese "Rudzite" and Andy/Liz Guerra won by a landslide, but many you pointed rightly out that Caleb and AL would also make a pretty amusing combo (if just Reese wins, Andy/Liz and Caleb be an available combo next month, otherwise it'll be Caleb and Isaiah).

Since I couldn't change the first poll, however, I'm putting up this secondary poll to decide which version of Team Vengeance should be interviewed this month. If you like the current arrangement, that's totally fine. Just select the first option! But with only a handful of months (and thus interviews) left until Mind Blind is finished (hopefully), I've decided that the Disaster Cousins might be too good of a combo to not offer it.

More to the point, I also think Reese could carry an interview with Nick by themselves.

Thus, for this second poll, please vote for which Vengeance combo you'd like to ask questions. (If you want it to remain Reese and AL together, just pick the first option.)

The interview winner(s) will be announced on September 14th.

Reese and Andy/Liz (winners of the first poll)

Reese and Reese's Ego (so big that it takes up the second chair)

Andy/Liz and Caleb (Team Disaster Cousins)

310 votes total

[Writer's Blog: Unsolvable Mysteries](#)

[Sep 10, 2021](#)

Current Wordcount (not including Chapter 14): 389k

Next Update: September 16

I've finished one of the pathways, and Chapter 13 is now written from beginning to end . . . assuming that Button has a high relationship with Nick and either met Isaiah or gave Caleb's USB drive to AL.

(Team Disaster Cousins seems to be winning at the newest interview poll, by the way. If nothing else, it'll be funny to eventually rub in Reese's face during their interview that they ranked below both dogs and *Caleb*. I'm not sure which they'd consider to be the greater indignity. Probably Caleb.)

I'm also almost done with the other version of Caleb's route, and then just need for Nover!Buttons (Buttons with no relationship with Nick) . To summarize, everything is on track for September 16's

update!

Tonight's post is a little late since I spent the better part of my evening wrangling small children out of walls (aka babysitting), but I've been mulling over this topic for a while: Unsolvable Mysteries In Interactive Fiction.

By unsolvable, I really mean unsolved, not that the mystery itself is impossible to be solved. It's both solvable and unsolvable, depending on your Button. Because just as there exists pathways where you uncover *all* the mysteries, there also exists routes where you hardly learn any at all and your only achievement is . . . well, there's a few, but it doesn't involve being a successful detective.

That's right: it will be possible to play *Mind Blind* from beginning to end without ever learning Noh's true identity.

While this "unsolved" pathway will be the exception rather than the rule (Button will have at least three opportunities to unmask Noh), it's a path that took me a long time to come to terms with. Because, personally, I wouldn't be satisfied if I played through a game and never learned the identity of a major character. That being said, *Mind Blind* has been written with replayability in mind, and I'll be doing my best to make which the options on which you can no longer pursue the mystery to be very clear.

It'll be kind of like giving Caleb's flash drive to AL . . . sure, it's an *option*, but it's also an option that really shouldn't be taken (by Button, that is. Players get some fun fallout.). Unlike with Caleb's drive, however, which is one impulsive click and uh-huh no longer in your possession, the option that lets Noh go unmasked will come with a double-check page. Which usually I'm wary of (it break immersion if not done right), but here seems important to include.

This warning won't break the third wall, as it'll still be written from Button's perspective, but it will make it pretty clear the ramifications that will happen should you choose this option. I'm hoping that's a good compromise. The alternative would be to force all routes onto the same pathway where Noh gets revealed, which (while easier) limits both the value of replay and giving readers control over their Button's story. Maybe you don't *want* your Button to learn who Noh is, because their priorities shift once Nick is kidnapped and saving their brother at a sacrifice feels more poignant. (I should note that you can both save Nick and learn Noh's identity. Pretty easily, in fact.)

Either way, having a path in *Mind Blind* where Noh gets away with everything wasn't a decision that I reached lightly. But I do feel like it's the best way to let the story play out, as well as to make sure that your choices actually do matter.

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On Public Relations](#)

[Sep 12, 2021](#)

Unsent Email, Draft 1

Dear Adsila,

What I choose to wear for a Halloween costume is none of Unity's concern. You claim (to quote from your last email) that my "lack of professionalism compromises UCRT's PR efforts in regards to your recent promotion, especially given the already fraught politics surrounding your appointment to Justice as John Wiseman's son." I get that certain politicians are screaming nepotism, and honestly if you can find another Ment who's qualified to be Justice then by all means demote me. Last time I checked, there was only one other Ment in the United States Census with my same psychic qualifications, and she's five years old. But hey, who knows, maybe Tiffany Eisenberg from Wahpeton, North Dakota, will prove to be a dark horse.

The Halloween party that I attended with my sibling was in no way affiliated with UCRT. The only UCRT member also present was Gray, who is the one of the few people permitted to give me grief about my attire. My sibling is another. You are not on that list, nor is Unity's Public Relations Department, because neither you nor anyone in PR were invited to that Halloween Party (likely because you're buzzkills). Instead, you learned about my costume from reading trashy tabloids.

I get why all the paparazzi put me on their front page; I worked that helmet and hose. One could even say that my costume was *fire* (my abs were on point, as I assume you already noticed). But let's not get side tracked: Unity has no right to scold me for my Halloween costume. I get that your witch disguise is a fulltime deal, but please mind your own damn business.

-Nick

* * * *

Unsent Email, Draft 2

Dear Dean Branham,

With sincerest respect: mind your own business.

To quote from your recent email, my "lack of professionalism compromises UCRT's PR efforts." While I acknowledge that Unity has had to deal with pushback regarding my recent promotion, I would also like to remind you that it was the United Nation's own Ment Oversight Committee that appointed me. Since my promotion, I have at all times done my best to behave in a manner befitting of UCRT's leader.

Dressing up as a fireman for Halloween shouldn't be problematic. Firemen, like the members of UCRT, are public servants who dedicate their lives to saving others. In this sense, my costume was a sign of respect and professional comradery. If a fireman wanted to dress up as "Sexy Justice" for Halloween, I'd be flattered, and I would certainly not expect The Mayor to send said fireman an angry email about "maintaining an appropriate public image." My abs are *great* for UCRT's public image, and I'm sure that the imaginary fireman has great abs too.

My point is, I have great abs.

Also, Unity's Public Relations Department can suck it.

Annoyedly,

Nick Wiseman

* * * *

Final Email, sent November 1st at 3:23pm

Adsila,

I received your recent email and will take your advice under consideration.

Sincerely,

Justice

[MB Short Story: Nox \(Kent, Ferro, and Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Sep 13, 2021](#)

"You'll need to act as a Ment, should you agree to enter the program," Ambrose Kim continued. "A cover has already been selected for you as a Level Eight Empath."

Kent stared at the paperwork before him. After receiving his lackluster ASE Score in the mail, he'd felt disappointment, sure, but mostly relief that he hadn't told his father about his initial decision to apply for Aeon. Kent hadn't anticipated receiving a phone call from Adsila Branham, nor her request that he undergo the test usually only administered to Ment operatives—AMOs, they were called. He hadn't anticipated that he'd be able to pass most portions of that test, the APE, with flying colors, either. And he most definitely hadn't expected to be offered enrollment for a program that sounded too good to be true.

"My classmates won't get suspicious when I don't react to their emotions?" he asked.

Kim leveled him with a solemn stare. "If your real score comes out, the NPO Program will be deemed unsuccessful. But many Empaths choose stoicism so as not to expose the feelings of others."

Stoicism was something that Kent was good at. He wondered if that reason was why Kim had selected him for his grand experiment. If so, Kent supposed he might actually owe a debt of gratitude to the

paparazzi who'd hounded him after his mother's death; they'd inadvertently trained him for this. As had his father.

"The Mayor will need to be convinced," Kent said.

Kim didn't even blink. "Let me worry about that." He sounded so certain, so utterly sure of his persuasive abilities, that Kent couldn't help but feel a tiny seed of hope. Maybe Kim *could* get his father to go along with this—something about his potential new supervisor made Kent instinctively respect him. Ambrose Kim acted like a man who deserved respect, with an authoritatively dangerous air of someone who had places to be and people to kill.

Every fiber of Kent's being longed to grab the pen off Kim's desk and sign his name. This was his chance to be an example, to prove to everyone that it was possible for a Lo-Po to go up against Ments . . . and win. He'd thought that perhaps he could prove that as an MIV, but Kent's talents lay more to the physical than the tactical.

"Will I be the only person in this program?" Kent asked.

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Yet Kent could hear each of his father's objections in his mind:

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You're my son. Stop running from your responsibilities, and become the leader that you were raised to be.

Playing superhero won't bring back your mother.

Kent wasn't totally sure that his father would ever voice the last protest; Tobias rarely mentioned what had happened to his wife, or talked about Kent's mother at all for that matter. But even if his father never uttered the words, Kent knew that they'd both be thinking it should he give his father the chance to dissuade him. And the words, however imaginary, were true: joining Unity wouldn't bring his mother back.

But it might save someone else's. If not by him, then by a police officer inspired by Unity's decision to bring non-Ments into their operative ranks. Maybe Kent joining this NPO Program was the first step to a world where law enforcement didn't timidly wait for UCRT to arrive and save a victim from a Ment, but rather took action and did their jobs. Maybe his mother's death wasn't just a source of darkness in his life, but could also be a motivation for change.

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"Your MIV's name is Taliaferro Parker," Kim said.

* * * *

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Thankfully, Glitch had no issues self-conducting the conversation without Kent's input. "We'll claim that you damaged your vocal cords while moonlighting as a circus performer," Glitch said, his hand motions growing more and more enthusiastic as he warmed up to the idea. "It'll work given your past as a gymnast, and explain any incidents where you don't act Ment-like. Everyone expects carnies to be a little different."

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"Fine, then," Glitch blithely continued on, "we needn't pretend that you can't talk. How do you feel about —"

"Why did you join the NPO Program?" Kent interrupted.

Glitch gaped at him again, this time in genuine surprise, causing Kent to feel a twinge of guilt that he hadn't thought to ask the question earlier. He hadn't considered it relevant, but he and Glitch were supposed to trust each other, right? That necessitated some level of learned familiarity.

"I don't like limitations," Glitch said after a moment of pondering Kent's query. "If someone tells me that I can't do something. . . well, don't folks like that just make you itch to prove them wrong?"

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"You only signed up because it was a challenge?"

"I signed up so people one day realize that brains are worth more than their Pollard Score," Glitch's tone became louder and increasingly impassioned. "Have you listened to the news—listened for what they *don't* say? UCRT and AMOs get all the credit for fighting Ment crime, but it's Lo-Po MIVs who make victories possible behind the scenes. Honestly, Unity's whole divide is stupid. What if a Ment is a genius who should be an MIV? Or what if a Norm could kick ass as an operative? People should be able to be whatever they want, without . . ." He took a deep breath as if overwhelmed by his own vehemence. "Without letting their brains define who they are and what they're capable of."

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Kent froze. He hadn't thought far enough in advance to realize that he'd be expected to share his own motivation, and he wasn't quite ready to talk about what had happened when he was eight.

"Similar reasons," he settled on saying.

"Uh-huh." Glitch's side-eyed stare returned but seemed gentler this time, giving Kent the definite impression that his partner had already researched his backstory. "It's fine," he said, confirming Kent's suspicion. "I can wait until you're comfortable sharing."

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"Not Nix," Kent replied immediately. Glitch's words inspired an idea for his facename—one that addressed his motives for joining the NPO Program, without being *too* on the nose. That being said, he preferred the Romanized version of Greek god names. "Nox. I'll be Nox."

[MB Short Story: Nox \(Kenna, Talia, and Ambrosia Version\)](#)

[Sep 13, 2021](#)

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[Team Disaster Cousins For The Win!](#)

[Sep 14, 2021](#)

I'm cackling, everyone. Cackling. Reese now has to deal with the indignity of losing not only to a pair of shih tzus, but to their subordinates (one of whom is *Caleb*).

Which is to say that, after the second poll, Andy/Liz (aka AL) and Caleb are the winners of this month's interview.

But honestly? Reese deserves to be sidelined (as well as to get cruelly teased about it by Nick, should Reese win next month).

Ask your questions for AL and Caleb either as a comment on this post or via the Sanctum Discord Interview Channel! If your question is only addressed to one of the cousins, please make sure to specify which.

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 20](#)

[Sep 15, 2021](#)

"That's absurd," I said. "Why would anyone want to kill me?"

Delphine stared me down, her eyes slits of green disapproval. "Do not insult my intelligence by pretending that yours is lacking," she said softly, her voice like velvet over steel. "I regret keeping you in the dark regarding my own suspicions, which were so clearly inaccurate. It's become obvious that the attempts on your life and the quelled rebellion are unrelated. I want to help. Let me."

I shook my head mutely. At this point, even I wondered if my stubbornness bordered on folly. Delphine had figured out half the story—what harm could there be in telling her and Xander the entire truth? To my own surprise, part of me craved Delphine's help. Granted, I would have preferred to solicit her assistance on my own terms rather than this ambush. But if anyone could survive involvement in my plight, it was Bellcrest's Court Sorceress. Maybe she would believe me, or better yet be able to explain the curse I was under.

Memories from my third life kept my lips sealed: of the Mad Princess's War, of the nurse who'd haunted my every waking hour, and of everyone who had died for a pointless misunderstanding and my father's even more pointless pride. Of Theo's body, never recovered from the battlefield, yet in my mind lying

pale and mangled amidst a sea of corpses. How could I risk that history repeating, even if those events themselves had been erased from existence with my death?

I'd knot the noose around my own neck before I allowed another war to break out. Go back to age fourteen, even if it meant sacrificing these last three years. I'd lost friendships to time's cycle before, especially after those lives where I'd attempted to leverage popularity into security. Still, this time felt different. As if, through lifetimes of trial and error, I'd only now found my place. I didn't want to relinquish my newfound understanding of Emilia, my relationship with Delphine, or even Dragon. Nor could I guarantee my next life would play out the same way: there were too many variables, too many details that I would forget. Most likely, if I began again, I'd never meet Uncle Alistair . . . or the person he'd escorted.

I tried to surreptitiously peek at Xander from the corner of my eye, but of course he noticed. He smiled tentatively, obviously hopeful that I'd forgiven him for disclosing the truth to his mother. I didn't smile back. Despite Delphine's revelation that her son was, put bluntly, a spy, I struggled to believe Xander would be safe should he become involved with my problems. Two of my deaths may have been the fault of my family, but Letty and her accomplice had still succeeded in killing me five times. Xander had only ever lived the once. I bit my lip, conflicted.

"If it eases your concerns," said Xander, "know that I've dealt with similar circumstances in the past. Many Anterdonians object to Lord Errans' presence at their court, given his insistence on abiding by King Eldin's neutrality."

"Are you saying there have been assassination attempts on Uncle Alistair?"

"A few. Lord Errans is clever and proactive enough that most never become more than idle threats. I can assist you, as I have him."

The sound I made wasn't quite a laugh. More a dismissive "puh."

Xander frowned. "Your ability to cast spells may be formidable, but you can't argue that you'd be at a disadvantage if attacked outright. Today's lesson with Colm proved as much. You only have a single set of ears, Tru. Permit me be a spare."

I arched a brow at him and tried not to blush from his reminder of my admittedly inept flailing earlier today. I'd keep training at Colm's gym, if only to prove Xander wrong. "I have dozens of ears in my employ," I said. "Half of the castle staff provides me with weekly reports. Or did it not occur to you that I would investigate things on my own?"

Instead of acting offended by my icy rebuttal, Xander smirked, and I belatedly realized that I'd as good as confirmed the existence of a plot on my life. I gritted my teeth. What on Aelium was wrong with me, that I'd felt the urge to brag about my preparedness? Who cared if Xander believed me naïve and helpless?

Ever since his return, I'd been anxious whenever we were together, uncomfortably cognizant of every pore on my nose and the stiltedness of my smile. In the past week, I'd let more secrets slip to Xander than I'd shared with anyone else in the past three years. In the past three lifetimes, for that matter. He made me feel vulnerable.

I despised feeling vulnerable.

Yet I didn't despise Xander. My logic was clearly flawed.

"Having prior contacts within the castle staff will make things simpler," he said. "I won't ask for their names."

"I wouldn't have disclosed them," I retorted.

He ignored my outburst. "All I ask is that you allow me to conduct my own investigation. For my mother's sake, if not your own. She's exceedingly fond of you."

Delphine's groomed eyebrows lifted. "Indeed," she said, looking back and forth between me and her son. "I'd be devastated if anything were to happen to my darling apprentice."

Xander coughed into his hand, as he seemed to do whenever he grew uncomfortable. I rolled my eyes. What quality of spy had nervous tell?

"Yes, well." He avoided his mother's amused stare and addressed me. "It would be easier for us both to help if you shared everything you've already discovered."

I sighed, cornered by my own inadvertent admission. How much of the truth could I safely disclose? There might be unavoidable consequences for telling others. Curses often came with such restrictions, at least in the old tales about the fairies who lived in the Amberleen Hills. In my third life, my decision to reveal my situation to my father had set into motion a future infinitely worse than any prior or since. Confiding in anyone, no matter how much they seemed to have my best interests at heart, simply wasn't a risk I was willing to take, with their lives or my own.

Or maybe, a voice inside taunted, *you're scared that Xander will think you're insane as well.* My stomach churned at the hint of truth. Selfish motivations aside, it was still safest if I focused solely to recent experiences and omitted any details from my past lives.

I chose my words carefully. "I first sensed that something was wrong on my fourteenth birthday."

"The day we met," recalled Delphine.

"Yes. My betrothal to Loren led me to realize that not everyone's well wishes were genuine. I hoped magic might protect me against their resentment."

Delphine frowned as she tried to piece together my timeline. "Did someone threaten you?"

I shook my head. "I had only suspicions until last year's fire." It wasn't quite a lie—nothing had been truly alarming in this timeline until the arson. "I'd used a glowstone that night, and the door was unlocked during my escape despite my having bolted it. Other than myself, only Emilia and Hamen were supposed to have the key."

"Yet there were no signs of a break in," said Xander.

"Councilor Timons had a key as well," I added, "but after questioning him, I'm convinced that he wasn't involved. Though it's possible someone borrowed his copy without his knowledge."

"You suspected Bertrand?" Delphine sounded surprised. "He and Eldin have been friends since childhood."

She hadn't attended any of my trials, where Timons always played a crucial role in my prosecution and subsequent verdict. Not that Delphine would recall his actions even had she been present. Timons had admitted under enchantment that he disliked my father: perhaps he'd believed the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. Especially in my last life, when I'd poisoned a literal apple.

"I learned that he had a spare key from Steward Hamen," I said. "It seemed a lead worth pursuing. But he's innocent."

"Your truth charm, I suppose?" she said. "Really, Tru, you can't go around ensorcelling members of the government."

I shrugged nonchalantly. Perhaps I should have hesitated, but the man *had* ordered my execution for nearly half my deaths. Second guessing my past actions would only make me indecisive in the future.

"Is there anyone else you suspect?" asked Xander. "Even if it's only a hunch, such instincts shouldn't be ignored."

I hesitated. Should I reveal that Letty was my primary suspect? Letty was sweet and harmless and had beautiful eyes. Delphine adored my stepsister ever since Letty's instance on taking care of me after the fire, even though Letty's devotion was likely the result of guilt or an attempt to conceal her own role in the arson. While it was true that Xander didn't seem enthralled by my stepsister like most men his age, what if he were only being kind to me in an attempt to grow close to her? It wouldn't be the first time in my lives that tactic had been tried. Pain stabbed sharply through my chest, and lingered even after I dismissed the possibility.

Xander wasn't that kind of person. I didn't think he was, at least.

I shook my head as if I could shake off my own doubts. Either Xander and Delphine would believe me or they wouldn't. So long as I kept silent about my past lives, they'd at worst believe me paranoid. Not insane. I could disclose a little more with being branded as mad and risking another war.

"There is someone," I said. "Though I don't have any proof."

They waited for me to elaborate. My throat went dry and my palms itched with sweat. I should have kept quiet. No one would take my concerns seriously: Letty was too . . . *Letty* for anyone to view her as suspect. I'd died once before discovering her involvement, and still wouldn't have figured it out but for her presence at my second trial.

My silence caused Delphine to reach across her desk and clasp my hands between her own. "Xander and I are on your side, Tru. No matter what."

All the air in my lungs expelled in a single breath. Fine. If her support was unconditional, it was about to be tested. "Letty," I revealed. "She and Loren are in love, so she has the most to gain by my death."

Delphine's rogued lips parted but she seemed too stunned to speak.

Xander's forehead creased. "You think she's in love with Loren?" He sounded dubious.

"I'm certain of it." Their disbelief was disheartening but expected. If not for the memories recorded in my journal, I'd be skeptical as well.

To my surprise, however, Xander didn't argue further. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I can see it on Loren's part," he mused aloud, then grimaced and cast me an apologetic look.

I snorted. "Loren is worse at disguising his feelings than she is," I said. "But trust me: his affection is returned."

Xander's lips pressed together. "Do you have any reason to believe she visited your chamber on the night of the fire?" He clearly wasn't fully convinced, but at least he hadn't dismiss my accusation outright.

"I told you: my suspicions are merely that. Suspicious. If I possessed any proof, I'd confront her." My hands balled into fists. I already longed to return to Colm's gym and take out my frustrations on a punching bag. Resolving to do so as soon as possible, I flexed my fingers in an attempt to relax.

Delphine noticed my fidgeting. "I know this can't be comfortable to discuss," she said. "But it's important that we all are on the same page. Xander has agreed to postpone his departure until we get to the bottom of this."

"Things will be easier once Lord Errans arrives," added Xander.

I cocked my head to the side. Xander had claimed Alistair had experience with death threats, but I found it hard to reconcile my jovial uncle with his description of a cunning politician.

"In the meantime, take this." Delphine rummaged through her desk drawer and withdrew a necklace. The flat ring of polished black stone hung from a simple hemp cord which looped through its center. It looked more like a weight used measure goods at market than jewelry. I took it, turning it over curiously

in my hands. The stone was unexpectedly heavy despite fitting snugly in my closed fist, and my palm tingled as if from cut off circulation.

“Magic?” I asked.

“A wardstone,” said Delphine. “It won’t shield you from a dagger but it will prevent anyone from hexing or otherwise casting magic on you.”

The hemp chafed against my neck as I slipped the cord over my head, the stone settling comfortably between my breasts. “Will it prevent me from casting spells?”

Delphine smiled. “It wouldn’t be very useful if that were the case. You won’t be able to cast spells directly upon yourself so long as you wear it, but your magic will otherwise function as usual.”

“I never heard of such a thing.” My fingers circled idly around the stone’s smooth edge.

“They’re rare,” said Xander. “Even before the Uprising, the Mages Guild limited how many were in circulation. Some say the stones came from outside Aelium, but no one remembers how they were made.”

Delphine waved her hand dismissively. “Well, the thing was of no use gathering dusk inside my desk. Be sure to wear it at all times.”

Despite my apprehension on wearing jewelry, I agreed. It was only later, as I headed towards my bedroom to get some much-needed sleep, that a disturbing thought occurred to me. What if the wardstone nullified my curse? If I died wearing it, would I wake up at age fourteen? Or would I truly die? The wardstone was a generous gift, but was accepting the protection a risk worth taking?

Such contemplations preoccupied me as I went through my nighttime ablutions, so much so that I almost didn’t notice the envelope laying on my pillow, unmarked but for the red wax sealing it closed. I opened it eagerly. It would be just like Xander to leave a note reassuring me—we communicated best by pen, after all.

As I read the unfolded page, however, my fingers numbed. The parchment drifted from my hands, waltzing lazy spirals in the air before settling face-up on my bedspread.

Xander wasn’t the author of the message. I was.

A page from my own journal lay before me, its jagged edge showing where it had been ripped from the book’s spine. The only new addition was a note, scrawled in large looping letters across the bottom in black ink.

“Either you’re insane or we’ve played this game before.

The end will be the same: I’ll win.”

[Mind Blind Chapter 13 Update](#)

[Sep 17, 2021](#)

I'm not quite done with Chapter 13 yet, but this latest update brings the average playthrough length up to 92,000 words. (Total Wordcount: 388,000.)

As for why this Chapter is turning out so long . . . well, for those of you who have good relationships with Nick, one of the responses at the very end is *not* like the others. The game is about to do some heavy duty branching. As in, Chapter 13 is basically splitting into entirely separate saplings.

But the option to go nuclear was too fun not to include.

Chapters are coming a little slower right now because a) they're longer word-count wise due to the different pathways, and b) there also aren't all that many left. There should be five more chapters at the very, very most (I'm aiming for three), which means I'm focusing on wrapping up all the loose ends and backchecking to see that things are properly foreshadowed (there's been a couple tiny tweaks to the first few chapters, but not enough to bump back anyone's saves).

Choices you've made in the past are now starting to send you on alternate pathways (especially in regards to your relationship with Nick, your romance, and who you met at the Vengeance mixer). Likewise, choices that you make starting in this Chapter will really begin to decide which of *Mind Blind's* endings you can ultimately achieve (I'll talk a little more on that for tonight's blogpost).

Also, I may take out the entire section about "Loyalty Bands"? If you choose this option as Innovative or Insightful, please let me know what you think. Without spoiling overmuch before anyone reads it, there was originally a route where Kenzie equipped one. Having nixed that branch (it was too convoluted, and raised questions that distracted from the plot's main themes), I'm not sure that the lore is still relevant enough to include.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-houdini/mygame/>

[Writer's Blog: Whittling Down Your Endings](#)

[Sep 18, 2021](#)

Total Wordcount: 392k (not including Chapter 14 material)

Next Update: September 25 – this will include the final part of Chapter 13, and hopefully the first part of Chapter 14

Today's blog falls on a Saturday, as my mother flew in last night and we were up watching *Florence Foster Jenkins*. As my mom reads these posts, I'll simply say that it's been, uh, delightful to have her here in Chicago. Simply delightful.

. . . As delightful as hearing Florence Foster Jenkins sing opera.

As *Mind Blind* nears its end, playthroughs will begin to differ more and more. While there's always been reactivity to *Mind Blind*, the plot has more or less remained the same across playthroughs (arrive at school, win/lose an assignment, blow up brother, get accused of terrorism, etc.). Increasingly, however, you'll find that different choices are now resulting in completely different stories, because in this ending quarter you're beginning to choose your ending (or at least, which endings will be available for you to select from).

Warning: Spoilers Ahoy!

While earlier scenes changed due to Button's decisions, the variables being set now will determine the ending scenes. And the ending, in my opinion, is the most important part.

Last Warning: Here Be Spoilers!

For instance: as of yesterday's update, some Buttons have now stopped acting undercover. I won't ruin how this will play out as it'll be in the next update, but needless to say that doing so has long-lasting ramifications on what your options will be in the final chapter. By making an enemy of Reese early on and revealing themselves as a double agent, these Buttons are locked out of paths that would've required them maintaining their cover . . . paths that could have potentially ended with Button replacing Reese as Vengeance's Head Honcho (should your hidden "Vengeance" stat be high enough).

Just to give a, er, completely random example.

Forget What I Said About That Last Warning Being The Last. It Was Actually The Penultimate Warning, Because I'm About To Tease Future Scenes And Thus Spoil More Stuff.

A later scene will have Button choosing whether or not to accept help from an unlikely source. Refuse, and Button may also lose out on the opportunity to discover this person's true motivation (and name). Accept, and Button may find themselves instead getting rescued down the line by their chosen RO (swoon) or maybe by an unexpected family member. Neither of these scenarios is better or worse (in my opinion, at least), but they will be drastically different.

The allies that Button makes from here on out, whether familial, romantic, or out of necessity, will heavily impact your ending, not just how you get there (as has thus far been the case). The ramifications of your choices should be fairly obvious (Spoilers once more: Reese will realize that you're not really Team Vengeance should you decide to throw down rather than more subtle options). I want to emphasize,

though that every ending, even the ones where you don't learn (or *choose* not to learn) all of *Mind Blind*'s mysteries, should feel satisfying. If it doesn't, then I haven't done my job right.

Whether it's because Button heads off into the sunset with their RO, or because they're reunited with Nick, or because Certain Nefarious Individuals are behind bars . . . you'll be easily able to achieve a happily ever after. And if you choose wisely, you'll be able to achieve all three of the aforementioned goals.

Or become Vengeance's new Evil Overlord.

It's your choice.

Addendum: My mom said that I had to add something positive about her so that people "don't get the wrong idea." Thus, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank her from the bottom of my heart for cleaning my kitchen. (Even if I can no longer find my tupperware.)

[Aeon Student Guide: Telekinesis](#)

[Sep 20, 2021](#)

Out of all known types of mental agility, telekinesis is the rarest and least understood. Although most people believe that telekinesis is the ability to move matter, the actual science of telekinesis is not so simple—nor fully comprehended, due to the extreme rarity of its occurrence.

Initially, telekinesis was thought to be a byproduct of electromagnetic fields generated by a Telekinetic's unique brand of Z-waves, which travel a shorter distance (resulting in limited brainrange), yet are conversely much stronger than those of other Ment types. However, this electromagnetic hypothesis was disproved by the 1930-1967 study of Ophelia Atwater, one of the earliest recorded Telekinetics (born in 1928, a time when Ments sadly lacked the right to refuse experimentation). Manipulation of gravitation fields took over as the predominant theory, only to be disproved by the 1982-1999 study of Xiulan Yifeng (born 1982, died 1999).

Current research, conducted in willing cooperation with UCRT's own Fortitude (Grayson Black), has led most neuroscientists to hypothesize that the physical phenomenon of telekinesis occurs due to a yet unmeasurable force which Telekinetics innately manipulate using Z-waves. In addition to moving objects with their mind, Telekinetics have also demonstrated the ability to alter the mass and density of objects—an invaluable skill for AMOs looking to defend themselves from bullet fire or pass through a concrete wall. Many of these auxiliary skills are considered unstable and thus dangerous, however, and Unity's official policy is that any Telekinetic AMOs (of which there is currently one) refrain from anything other than object displacement unless left with no other option.

Given the rarity of telekinesis, the power was widely regarded as a myth by most cultures prior to the twentieth century. What early records do exist (such as the works of Herodotus) claim that Telekinetics possessed impossible abilities like flight and teleportation—powers which, although inarguably appealing, have never manifested in any proven modern Telekinetic. Rather than being historically accurate accounts, it is highly likely that these reports were instead meant to further stigmatize the existence of Ments by imagining them with even more threatening abilities than they actually possessed. Most modern scholars consider them to be more fearmongering than truthful.

Only four Ments worldwide are publicly known to be Telekinetics, but more do exist. Under 2022's Yifeng Accord, their identities are protected by Unity until each Telekinetic is old enough to decide whether or not to keep their psychic agility private. In departure from the unethical experimentation of the past, Telekinetics in the twenty-first century have the right to decide their own futures, in large part thanks to Unity's ceaseless advocacy for Ment equality.

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 21](#)

[Sep 21, 2021](#)

My breaths rasped in and out. Inhaling was hard, exhaling harder. Acid from my stomach burned my throat as I fended off a wave of nausea. My feet were rooted to the floor: I couldn't sit down, couldn't move. I could only stare at the message before me.

I'll win.

Rereading those last two words managed to shake me out of my trance. I forced my leaden feet to walk towards my bookcase, where I retrieved my copy of Yainharrow. I turned the first page, where Xander had written my name in dark, even letters. It was the only page that remained—the rest I had gutted to create a hollow for my diary, rewritten after the fire had destroyed the first. It lay innocently inside the paper hollow where I'd last left it. My hands shook as I took it out and flipped to the page from my fifth death that the note had been written on.

Still there.

Which meant that my mysterious correspondent had my old journal, the one I'd thought burned a year ago. Had they stolen it from beneath my pillow as I slept? Or had it fallen onto the floor? I'd probably never know. The answer wasn't important.

What mattered was the arsonist now possessed a book filled with new (to them, at least) ideas on how to kill me. Not only that, they had insight into how I'd survived in the past. Panic resurged, squeezing my lungs. I forced myself to breathe in, a great gasp that echoed in the otherwise silent room.

Nothing I could do about that. Not right now.

Instead, I needed to focus on what I *could* figure out. Why had they sent me this note? My murderer never made such contact in any of my prior lives. My journal had disappeared the night of the fire, which meant the arsonist had waited almost a year before using it as a threat. Why? To frighten me? The note came across more gloating than intimidating: they wanted me to know that they hadn't given up on trying to kill me. Which meant that they had most likely learned of Emilia's recovery.

Curses. *Emilia*.

I sprinted from my bedchamber and through my private parlor, to the door that joined her room with mine. I flung it open, too concerned to care if the noise woke her up.

She was gone.

I couldn't pause to think. Couldn't stop. If I did, I'd be unable to start again. I never should have agreed to let Emilia stay. My decision had been selfish, motivated by a pathetic yearning to feel less alone, and now she was in danger and it was all my fault. Again.

I ran, this time down the hallway and outside, across the exposed bridge that connected the Royal Residence with the servants' quarters. A maid passed, yawning. I grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Where's Hamen?" I demanded between wheezed breaths.

The maid's wide brown eyes stared at me like a startled calf. Under her shocked scrutiny, I finally registered the cold stones beneath my bare feet. My nightgown fluttered against my legs in the breeze: it was no surprise if she thought me deranged.

"Where is he?" I repeated.

"Steward Hamen went home, my lady," she stuttered. "Left early in order to travel with his daughter."

My hands dropped from her shoulders. "With his daughter?"

The maid stumbled back as if eager to get away, before catching herself and dropping to a curtsy. Madwoman or not, I was still nobility. "Yes, m'lady," she said. "On account of her being sick. I . . . I told you before, m'lady, when I came to fetch you. About how they thought she was poisoned." She shook her head. "Turns out it was just spoiled food."

Emilia was safe. She hadn't been abducted; she'd simply gone home like I'd suggested. There was no reason for my killer to go after her—the poison had been meant for me in the first place. I would have realized as much had I not been so caught off guard by the letter. My body felt suddenly limp with relief. I wanted to collapse to the ground but instead drew myself to my full height, a vestige of pride straightening my backbone like a puppet's string. The last thing I needed was for rumor to spread

around Court that the future princess ran around half naked. I squinted at the maid, recognizing her for the first time.

"You're the servant Hamen sent when Emilia fell ill."

She bobbed another curtsy. "Yes, m'lady. I'm honored that you remember me."

I laughed. I couldn't help it: relief, fear, and defeated amusement mixed until I couldn't tell one emotion from another. The poor girl looked even more aghast by my inappropriate response, which only made me laugh harder. How must this charade seem to her from the outside, witnessing the corners of my life without understanding any of the pieces? At this point, even I was beginning to doubt my own sanity.

I did my best to reassure her once I managed to calm down. "Apologies." A stray snicker managed to escape. "It's been a long night." I paused. "A long life, rather. Lives."

She gaped at me uncomprehendingly.

"For you." I tore a pearl button from my nightgown's front—it was decorative and thus its removal didn't threaten my modesty, but its price would easily equal a month's worth of her salary. "You can sell this, or come to my chambers tomorrow and I'll give you coin instead. Either way, I would greatly appreciate if you didn't mention our encounter to others." I dropped the pearl into her apron pocket.

"Thank you m'lady," she said. For the first time, her eyes met mine, gratitude outweighing her fear.

I turned to leave. I'd embarrassed myself enough for one night, and her appreciation over something so trivial made me uncomfortable. Guilty, even. I thought back to the laundress from this morning. Even down a button, my pajamas undoubtedly still cost more than the clothes in all three of her hampers combined.

"M'lady!"

I glanced over my shoulder. The maid held her hands protectively over the apron pocket with the pearl. Her blush glowed in the moonlight, as embarrassed by her own audacity at requesting my attention.

"I hope you sleep well," she said.

I laughed again, a near manic edge to the sound. I'd be lucky to sleep at all.

"Whose face are you imagining there, Tru?" asked Theo. He had insisted upon joining Xander and I after hearing that we were headed to Colm's gym.

"Yours." I didn't spare him a glance as my fists continued to rail against the suspended bag. Testimony to Colm's instruction, my punches now made constant contact (more or less) with the black leather rather than swinging into empty air.

Theo staggered back with one hand over his heart as if mortally wounded. Considering that he had once killed me in a more or less similar fashion, I didn't find his theatrics especially amusing. My scowl deepened, and he turned pleadingly to Xander.

"Under what dark star was I born to have be cursed with a sister so cruel?" he affected.

Xander remained focused on his own exercises. A sheen of sweat emphasized the muscles on his bare arms as he sparred with Colm, holding his own despite the other man's advantage in size and expertise. He grunted as Colm landed a blow on his shoulder, before returning the favor with a jab.

"I thought," he grunted as he sidestepped Colm's fist, "you were here to learn. Not soliloquize."

Theo pouted. He'd refused to change into the provided clothes and looked ridiculously out of place in the gym with his embroidered jacket and elaborately tied neckcloth. When had my brother become so foppish? I threw another punch at the bag, trying to make sure my elbow remained level and below my chin like Colm had shown me.

"You said you were headed to a training gym. I presumed we'd be fencing," Theo complained. "Not brawling like drunken sailors." He inclined his head at Colm. "No offense intended."

Colm snorted and hit Xander in the solar plexus.

Xander sliced the air with his hand, calling a halt to their bout. He winced as he bent over to collect his coat—Colm's last punch must have been harder than usual. "Tru dislikes weapons," he said as he gingerly shrugged on his jacket.

"Besides," I added, "Colm says I have a better chance of defending myself this way than learning swordplay. It's more about staying out of harm's way than skewering someone back."

Colm grinned at me. "Aye, skewering isn't ladylike."

"Why would you need to defend yourself?" Theo frowned in confusion. "The palace has plenty of guards."

Xander gave me a pointed look. He'd begrudgingly abided by my wish not to let anyone else know about the murder attempts, including my goodhearted but loudmouthed brother. Seeking to avoid Theo's question, I returned to the drills Colm taught me. Delphine's wardstone swung rhythmically against my chest with each punch. Theo wasn't the only one who I was keeping in the dark: I'd yet to tell either Xander or Delphine about last night's note.

Right jab.

How could I? To do so would mean telling them the whole truth.

Left jab.

Which I hadn't shared for good reason. I was unaccustomed to having allies. It was . . . "nice" felt too shallow a word.

Right uppercut.

It was nice to not feel completely alone. I wouldn't jeopardize that by giving them reason to doubt my sanity.

Left uppercut.

Even my Triad-cursed murderer thought I might be mad after reading a journal filled with the myriad ways by which they'd killed me.

Right backfist.

At least Emilia was safe. Disregarding my overactive imagination, there was no indication that anyone else would be targeted.

Left hook.

Just me. But I didn't want to have to start my life over again—I wanted to survive this one.

A hand caught my next punch. "That's enough," said Xander. "Abuse your muscles, and you'll do more harm than good."

I nodded, already feeling a bruise begin to harden on my upper arm from where I'd overextended.

Xander didn't release my fist. "Is everything alright?"

I fixed a false smile on my face, pointedly ignored the furrow of worry between his eyebrows. "Of course," I lied. "With the exception of Theo's presence, life is grand."

My brother growled playfully and pulled me towards him, wrapping his arm around my neck in a mock chokehold. "Boxing prepares you for attacks, does it? Well, I demand your surrender!"

"Remember the advice I gave you earlier," said Xander mildly.

"When in doubt, aim for the groin?"

Theo immediately released me and took a step back. His head swiveled between Xander and me. "Barbarians," he proclaimed. "The both of you."

"Pragmatists," corrected Xander with a smirk.

Theo's brow creased as he watched me unwrap the protective bindings around my knuckles. "Could you could use a spell to help your fighting? I bet you'd be a right proper monster then."

Xander and I both stared at my brother. The idea was a surprisingly good one. He correctly interpreted our gazes.

“Stop looking so shocked,” he said crossly. “I think.”

“Arguable.” My parry was instinctive. “Still, I’ll ask Lady Delphine if she has any suggestions.”

Perhaps a healing spell to reinforce my muscles, or a haste spell to make me dodge faster. The slowing spell had been easy enough for me to learn—how much harder could it be to do the opposite? After last night’s message, I needed every advantage possible.

Colm stopped me as we started towards the stairway. “A moment, Lady Vitrula.” He nodded at Xander and Theo. “If you’ll excuse us, there’s a few new moves that I’d like her ladyship to incorporate into her daily exercises.”

Theo groaned. “Haven’t we been here long enough.”

Xander met Colm’s eyes. The boxing instructor gave him a terse nod, and Xander’s brows rose in brief surprise before he turned to my brother. He threw an arm over Theo’s shoulders. “You know, there’s a vendor nearby that sells flavored ices,” he said. “I believe Tru would forgive us for briefly abandoning her if we promised to bring one back.”

“She *does* like lemon syrup,” said Theo.

“Actually, I’d prefer blackberry,” I said. “Just make sure to get it here before it melts.”

Theo grabbed Xander’s arm and half-dragged him up the stairs as if afraid I would change my mind and force them to remain. Unlike in Anterdon, where single women were chaperoned (much to Theo’s vocal chagrin), Verdan had no such stigma between men and women socializing. Still, most courtiers would consider it mildly compromising for Prince Loren’s fiancé to be alone with a commoner, believing honor and trustworthiness to be a matter of heritage rather than character.

I arched a brow at their retreating backs. “Is there truly an ice vendor?” It would be disappointing if they returned empty handed—I could almost taste the sweet tartness of blackberry syrup. I directed my skeptical gaze towards Colm and crossed my arms. “No matter. What is it you *actually* wanted to discuss?”

Colm chuckled. “You doubt my excuse?”

“You taught me several new moves at the beginning of our session. Unlike my brother, I’m not so easily rendered forgetful by the thought of sweets.”

“Good lad, Xan, to give us the time alone.”

“Xander knew you wanted to talk to me?” I asked. “Does he know what about?”

"No, but he trusts me," said Colm. "As I'm about to trust you, once you answer a few questions."

"I'll answer honestly, if I can." I had an inkling of what this was about but couldn't figure out Colm's desire for secrecy. It's not as if Theo or Xander would have disproved of my actions.

"This morning, a man came round the neighborhood. Knocking on folk's doors, asking if they could spare their sons or daughters for the promise of a good wage." He stared hard at me.

"I see," I said. "And did he deliver on his promise?"

"Aye. Gave them a day's pay upfront and set them to repairing the main street. Came prepared with a cart of bricks, and claimed there were funds for more should anything else in the neighborhood need fixing. Even said he had a benefactor willing to give people loans, interest free."

"Did anyone accept his offer?"

"Fenton Byrn. Got a loan of twenty moons."

Good. I'd broached the issue of the neighborhood's dissipated roads at the last Council meeting, only to have Wrenly make a note for the issue to be discussed the following week—the Councilor's way of politely refusing to address someone's concern. It would be put off week after week, until the matter either resolved itself or became too grave to fix. I'd decided it best to provide the neighborhood with resources directly and let residents figure out where it was allocated. Even if I was not yet Queen of Verdan, it was no more than what I'd done for villagers in Kothe as the Duke's daughter. Hamen had promised that he'd hire someone trustworthy with the money he received from pawning several of my mother's necklaces. I'd sell the rest if need be, but selfishly hoped that I'd be able to keep the sapphire ring. In my first life, before it had been used to frame me for Loren's attack, I'd worn it almost every day. Maybe, someday, I'd be able to wear it again.

Colm must have read something in my expression, because his lips curled in a satisfied grin. "I guessed it was your doing," he said. "You spot things, pick up on new moves quick, even if you can't quite copy them. You noticed that our part of Bellcrest is in a bad shape."

"Xander explained the war has been hurting businesses," I admitted, "after I got called a harlot by a local laundress."

"Must have been Leandra. Tongue like a viper, that one, but heart of a saint." Colm smirked. "Not so dissimilar to yourself, my lady."

"Perhaps," I conceded with a small smile. Maybe the laundress had lived multiple lives as well, and was just as fed up with the whole ordeal as I. Or maybe some people were just born exasperated.

"Regardless, I'm pleased that the funds are being put to good use."

"They are. In return, I'd like to help you." Colm nodded at my knuckles, red and swollen from today's practice. "People don't throw themselves into training the way you do, unless they're spooked by

something. Or someone.”

I couldn’t deny his allegation, especially after the arsonist’s threat. I shivered as my sweat from earlier began to cool.

“Your concern is appreciated,” I said, “but I’ll be fine.”

He snorted. “No offense, my lady, but enthusiasm won’t win a fight. You have spirit but lack skill. Skill in fisticuffs,” he amended at my offended glare. “I’m sure you’re plenty proficient in other endeavors. My point is: your brother is smarter than he looks.”

I laughed, but my amusement was dampened by confusion. “I’ll pass on your compliment,” I said, “although your confidence in him outweighs my own.” Not that Theo was stupid—just frivolous. He would never intentionally neglect Kothe’s people once he became duke, but nor would he realize when they needed his aide. Hopefully Father and Catherine found him a more observant wife.

Colm shook his head. “The young lord was right. A few lessons with me won’t transform you into a trained pugilist. That takes years and, put bluntly, talent. Both which you lack.” He held up a hand to belay my protest. “You need magic.”

[Another Perspective\(s\): Student Interviews on the Aeon Building Gas Leak, Conducted by Clarence J. Garfield](#)

[Sep 22, 2021](#)

S. Alavidze, Freshman AMO

Administrator Garfield’s Comments: *Student attempts to distract from the topic with jokes, but becomes highly agitated when asked questions about Justice and Ellery Wiseman (Justice’s sibling). Is aware that the gas leak is a fabrication due to her close connection with the Wiseman family, and claims to have not predicted the explosion despite being one of Unity’s strongest Precogs. Surveillance advised.*

Alavidze’s Testimony:

At first, I thought it was an earthquake. Illinois has them every few years, but there’d never been one major enough to make anything wobble in my lifetime—there’d been a 2.8 magnitude quake that hit downtown Chicago a few years back, but I’d slept through that (my dads still find that funny to joke about). I’d never experienced an earthquake, but I’d never been caught in a bomb explosion either. When the ground started shaking beneath my feet, I optimistically assumed that it was a natural disaster.

I was in Aeon's Student Cafeteria on the twentieth floor, resenting that Ellery had left me to independently stake claim for our rest-of-the-year lunch table (snagging a spot by the window required evasive maneuvering and excessive use of my elbows), and pretending to listen to Stephanie Valero, an MIV who'd decided to sit beside me, wax poetic about the *amazing* and *attractive* Justice (hopefully, her and Nicholas never meet, or his already large ego will need its own plane seat for UCRT mission travel). Then my lunch tray vibrated. Not off the counter or anything, but combined with the *boom*, I knew that something was going on.

I crawled under the table, as one does during an earthquake, dragging Stephanie down with me. She had the look of a stunned rabbit, all wide eyes and buck teeth, and she squeaked as I shoved her head beneath the table. The *boom* lingered, but I couldn't tell you if it came before or after the vibrations. My ears eventually stopped ringing, but Stephanie's panicked screams made me wish that I'd been deafened a little longer. I remember that it took a moment for the backup generator to power back on after the lights had turned out. I didn't even notice that the power had gone out at first, since I was right next to the window.

The intercom ordered us to evacuate the building in an "orderly fashion," which is laugh because Stephanie wasn't the only person screaming. By then, I'd realized that this probably wasn't an earthquake. Stephanie took off, and when I stood to find her, I got carried away by the stampede of students. Being short sucks in a crowd, whether it's a mosh pit or a group of freaked out students. I caught sight of Stephanie near the doorway and ran towards her, but then a group of AMOs ended up pushing me through the opposite stairwell. I tripped.

I only slid a few steps before I managed to cling to the railing. After regaining my balance, someone trod on my foot, *hard*, and I stumbled down several more steps. I tried to pull myself back up—hard to do, when trapped in the middle of a stampede. I was frustrated, hurting, and more than a little scared at that point because people were saying the word "bomb" around me.

I know that we're supposed to be as specific as possible, but it was honestly chaos. I remember screaming a scream that would've put Stephanie's to shame, and then someone was gripping my hand on top of the railing, and I looked up to see Instructor Kim frowning at me. His lips moved, but I couldn't make out what he was saying over the blare of the fire alarm. Maybe he was asking for permission to pick me up, because that's what he did. He carted me down two flights of stairs, and down seven more piggyback. He kept shouting at people on the way, ordering them to calm down and proceed in single file instead of pushing. They listened, which shouldn't surprise anyone given Kim's glare. Gray had been with Kim in the beginning, but he stayed behind to check each floor to make sure that everyone was out (he's very much the "keep calm and carry on" version of British, you know?).

Once outside, Instructor Kim dropped me in front of one of the ambulances outside—none too gently, either, the brute—and went back inside to help others evacuate. At the time, I just felt relieved that Ellery wasn't in the building, and that Nicholas had taken the day off. It was only later that I learned that Nicholas had been injured. I heard Ellery had gone to the hospital where he'd been taken, so took a taxi to be with them.

Look, are we almost done? I've told you everything that I can remember about that day. I don't know why I didn't foresee this happening, but I should've. If you're waiting for me to admit that the explosion was partially my fault, then I do. I should have predicted this happening.

* * * *

K. Zarneki, Junior AMO

Administrator Garfield's Comments: *Cadet Zarneki was unforthcoming about their reason for leaving Aeon grounds. Possible suspect in controlling Ellery Wiseman due to being a Level-8 Empath. Have the Accountability Department look into Zarneki's bank statements and spending records to rule out external influence.*

Note Added By A. Kim: *Ignore Garfield. Cadet Zarneki is not a suspect.*

Zarneki's Testimony:

I wasn't at Aeon when the bombing happened.

I was at a dog park. It's where I usually go during lunch break. Antigone and Cassandra need to be walked, and I needed to clear my head. For reasons unrelated to the explosion. It was all a misunderstanding, anyway.

I don't want to talk about it.

I was at the dog park near Chicago South-Central Hospital. Yes, that's where Justice was taken. Why was I there? Because it's my dogs' favorite park.

I heard the explosion, but thought it was a car engine backfiring. People don't clean out their air filters frequently enough. Then I saw the smoke from Aeon.

My dogs were upset by the noise, so I had to carry them back to the car. Once they were in their crate, I called Taliaferro Parker, my MIV, to make sure that they were safe. Taliaferro said that school had been cancelled for the rest of the day, and asked if I could pick them up. So I did.

Then we drove back to my place and watched the news, where we learned about the gas leak. Why are you asking me questions about a gas leak?

I'm going. It's almost lunchtime, and my dogs still need their walk.

* * * *

T. Parker, Junior MIV

Administrator Garfield's Comments: *Cadet Parker refused to seriously answer to any of my questions, and even threatened me bodily harm. I strongly recommend that they be given a demerit for*

insubordination.

Note Added By A. Kim: *Ignore Garfield. Cadet Parker's usefulness outweighs their tendency to be annoying.*

Parker's Testimony:

Aw, Clarebear, did you ask to interview me personally? I'm flattered that you wanted to hang out. No, no, don't deny it. I always suspected that you wanted to be buddies.

I was in the eightieth-floor MIV Robotics Lab when the explosion happened. Oh, I know that most students don't have permission to be up there, but I'm not most students. You can check with Rosy—I have permission to the lab when not in class. Got a waver signed off by the Dean herself. That's right, Clarebear, I'm *special*. I'd tell you what I was working on at the time, but then I'd have to kill you . . . probably with the thing that I was working on, for irony's sake.

Once I heard the explosion, I knew immediately that there'd been a gas leak. Aeon is an old building, and the top floors used to have restaurants with gas stoves. It was only a matter of time before something like this happened—you're an intelligent man, Administrator Garfield. I'm sure you predicted as much, too.

Of course you did. Those claiming that the explosion was actually a bomb are just conspiracy nut jobs. You and I are smart enough to know better.

The whole building shook from the gas explosion, but I was high enough that it *really* shook. I mean, it felt like I was on a boat and the captain was drunk. Once the lights went off, there was no way to use the elevator, so I made my way to the window to use the evacuation system. Which was not as much fun as I'd imagined.

What are you talking about? Of course I'd imagined using the escape chute before. It looks like one of those folding caterpillar tunnels that kids get to play in, only turned vertical instead of left on its side. Who wouldn't want to jump in one? But the actual process of falling down eighty floors isn't have as fun as it seems. The evacuation chute kept squeezing and releasing me, dropping me a few feet at a time, and it squeezed hard enough that I'm pretty sure my upper arms are bruised. Honestly, the whole thing felt uncomfortably handsy. It took like ten whole minutes for me to fully descend to the ground, and by the time I reached the bottom, my shirt had ridden up to my chin. Then someone else using the chute almost landed on top of me. Aeon should consider going back to parachutes.

Once I was on the ground, one of UCRT's members—Peace, the one that never takes off their mask—escorted me over to the sidelines. That's when Kenzie called.

But what were *you* doing during the explosion, Clarebear? Some students claim that they saw you push a student down a flight of stairs in your panic to get out, but surely that can't be right. A calm, collected man like you would never almost kill someone because he was terrified, now would he? Why, such behavior would be eminently unfitting for an Aeon Administrator. If it were found to be true . . . They

might demote you, and wouldn't that be a tragedy? For you, at least. I'm sure that the rest of us would get over it.

We're agreed then. I'll keep my mouth shut about your actions during the explosion, and you stop bothering Kenzie and me. If you have any issues, feel free to take them up with Instructor Kim. I'm sure he'd be quite interested to learn why he had to carry Sally Alavidze down ten flights of stairs.

[Writer's Blog: Speaking Styles](#)

[Sep 24, 2021](#)

In college, I took a screenwriting class where we had to write a short script in groups of four. Although it soon became obvious that I was incapable of constructing a short plot able to be played out in fifteen minutes, and that I became bored and distracted when asked to write the scenery and stage direction. What I was good at was editing dialogue so that each character sounded distinct, and it quickly became my role in the group. The other three would write the first draft, and then I would rewrite all the lines so that, even if we had to double up on parts in order to read our script aloud to the class, it was always obvious which character was speaking.

When writing a traditional story or interactive fiction, sometimes syntax and speaking styles can blend together. Editing dialogue in draft two is perhaps the only part of editing that I truly enjoy—I go through the story/game a separate time for each character, keeping in mind the “rules” of the way that they speak and making sure that everything they say abides by these standards. Earlier this year, I wrote a tumblr post about how I do that for Kenzie's dialogue:

How to write dialogue for K Zarneki:

Step 1: Write a normal human answer.

Example: *“I drink occasionally. Why do you ask?”*

Step 2: Take out all superfluous words.

Becomes: *“I drink.”*

Step 3: Decide if words are absolutely needed. If not, delete them.

End Result: *Kent arches a single eyebrow, because of course he's the type of person able to do so.*

This showcases Kenzie's personality: they're reserved, a little wry, and prefer to express themselves nonverbally (plus, they also secretly enjoy making people squirm, since many people—myself included—aren't comfortable with silence).

When I eventually go back to edit *Mind Blind*, I'll be doing this for each and every character throughout. I have these rules in mind when writing, of course, but they often take a backseat to my efforts to simply get the first draft down on page. Still, I thought it would be fun to share some of my rules for the rest of *Mind Blind*'s main cast (most have more than three, but these are the ones I found most amusing and are easiest to explain).

* * * *

Rules for Writing Grayson Black:

Rule 1: Please and thank you. Thank you and please.

Rule 2: Often presents opinions as statements of fact. ("It's inspiring." / "It definitely shouldn't be eaten." / "Without Nick, \${Name}'s cover is as good as burned.")

Rule 3: Not above a good tormented ellipses. ("Button, I . . .")

* * * *

Rules for Writing Sally Alavidze:

Rule 1: Sally is prone to exaggeration. ("I crave color. I need it. Do you know how hard it is for me to wear Aeon's ugly uniform? It kills my soul, \${Name}.")

Rule 2: Sally is a casual speaker. "No" becomes "Nope," "Yes" becomes "Yeah" or "Sure," etc.

Rule 3: Nicholas not Nick. Always.

* * * *

Rule for Writing Glitch Parker

Rule 1: Provides their own verbal drumrolls before revealing information. ("That's not even the best part" / "You won't believe what else" / "Oh, it gets better")

Rule 2: Will never converse with authority non-sarcastically. (Sorry, Rosy Posy.)

Rule 3: Fond of rhyme even when not quoting poetry. ("Then I'd give you my number after *class*, because my time and personage are both *unattached*.")

* * * *

Rules for Writing Rosy Kim:

Rule 1: Rosy is a formal speaker. Abbreviations, slang, and filler words should be used sparingly.

Rule 2: Do not use phrases like “I think” or “It seems.” Rosy does not think, Rosy *knows*.

Rule 3: Rosy does not make suggestions, they give orders.

[Mind Blind Update](#)

[Sep 25, 2021](#)

I was having some serious issues with looping scenes earlier that took me a few hours to fix, but I believe they're all sorted. Basically, Kenzie kept taking the Pollard Test multiple times. Maybe they enjoyed AL's tender administrations?

Missing stuff: Nover!Buttons are still missing half the scene in Chapter 13 due to a separate looping issue that I'm currently working on solving. For Chapter 14, the scene only plays under certain circumstances (I've yet to finish the version that happens if you stay at Nick's house).

Even with the missing material, the wordcount is now **402k** words 🥳🥳🥳 (Chapter 13 will be over 50,000 words once the Nover version gets added).

Without further ado, here's the new link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-ivanhoe/mygame/>

(Please let me know if it loops for people when you try to take the test! I've renamed most scenes as a precautionary measure, but this chapter has a megaton of variation to handle.)

(Code diving is still ok to do without *huge* spoilers . . . but some scenes will probably be more satisfying if you happen upon them au natural.)

(If you don't get a scene in Chapter 14, try going back and choosing violence to see what's currently available.)

(Also, the EMP device isn't tracking right. Please pretend not to notice that you can take it from your pocket multiple times.)

(I think that's all. Fingers crossed that I've eradicated the loops!)

[September Q&A](#)

[Sep 25, 2021](#)

The first September Q&A will be at **11am PST, tomorrow (Sunday, Sept 25)**.

I'm substituting for an adult ESL class for the next few days so have limited availability :(

Please select which time works best for you as well, and I'll have that spot be the second slot!

8pm-9pm PST, Sunday, Sept 25 (also tomorrow)

6pm-7pm PST, Tuesday, Sept 28

7pm-8pm PST, Tuesday, Sept 28

6pm-7pm PST, Wednesday, Sept 29

7pm-8pm PST, Wednesday, Sept 29

23 votes total

[Announcement: 2nd September Q&A Times](#)

[Sep 26, 2021](#)

As per the poll, the next Q&A will be **today at 8pm-9pm PST (Sunday, Sept 25)**.

You can find a recording of this morning's Q&A here (link good for seven days):

<https://craig.horse/?id=78353345&key=58001240>

[Mind Blind Bloopers: Button's Reel of Violent Outtakes](#)

[Sep 26, 2021](#)

There weren't all that many funny bloopers this time, but I did let Button go a wee bit feral in this latest Chapter and had to reign them back (*Mind Blind* is PG-13, after all). Here are the options that didn't make the cut due to being overly violent.

So, uh, read at your own discretion.

* * * *

You wait until Andy touches the dial before dropping the EMP device into the air vent. Immediately, there's a blue flash, followed by a sizzle and Andy's shrill scream.

Andy clutches his now red and raw hand to his chest, and you're appalled to discover that the smell of burning flesh smells like a Wendy's hamburger.

* * * *

*Andy already has a weak spot—his hand, which you broke last night. Without giving him time to react, you grab the fingers protruding from his cast and **yank**.*

Kent and Reese both wince at Andy's shrill scream, but neither intercedes.

You lean so close that your nose almost touches Andy's. "Accuse me again. I dare you."

* * * *

You reach for the only pointy thing available—the black King on Reese's chess board. You grip its body like a shiv, so that only the crown protrudes. It's not sharp, but it could poke a pretty green eye out.

Reese snorts. "How very intimidating," she says sarcastically. "I'm ever so distraught."

That's it. With all your might, you shove the King towards Reese's left eye.

Unfortunately, your aim is off. Your fist instead ends up half way in her mouth, the chess piece having cut her lower lip.

For a moment, no one speaks, too horrified by the bizarre vignette which has played out.

Then Andy grabs his gun.

* * * *

Realizing that the pistol you wield is without bullets, you settle for Plan B: lobbing the gun at Reese's head.

* * * *

Realizing that the pistol you wield is without bullets, you settle for Plan B: picking up the chair and slamming it over Reese's head.

Forget Hemera, your codename should've been The Undertaker.

* * * *

Realizing that the pistol you wield is without bullets, you settle for Plan B: kicking the leg out from Reese's chair so that she sprawls across the ground.

Rosy taught you the move, after all.

[MB Saucy Side: Actions Speak Louder \(Kent\)](#)

[Sep 28, 2021](#)

"Is everything okay?"

Kent doesn't respond to your question as the front door slams behind him. He kneels down to scratch behind Antigone's ear.

You suppress a sigh. After a year of cohabitating, you should be used to being ignored in favor of the shih tzus. Usually, you don't begrudge Annie and Cass their owner's affection, but when your fiancé returns from work two hours early and with a figurative thundercloud looming above his head . . . well, sometimes you wish that Kent would just *tell* you what was bothering him instead of making you play Twenty Questions with a nonresponsive brick of a boyfriend.

But Kent doesn't like to disclose his problems right away. He needs time to ponder and process his own emotional response before sharing things with others. When you first started dating, you interpreted him as sexily aloof. But now, sometimes, in your more vulnerable moments, it feels like he's shutting you out.

He'll share what's upset him, eventually. He always does.

But still.

The sigh you've been holding back escapes from your lips as you head back towards the living room. If Kent needs space right now, then you'll provide it. As soon as your back turns, however, a pair of strong arms wraps around you from behind, preventing you from departing. Kent buries his face into your shoulder, his hair silky soft against your cheek.

You reach up to gently touch his cheek. "That bad, huh?"

He nods against your neck.

“Can I do anything to help?”

He nods once more. Your sympathetic “aww” ends with a gasp as he nips your earlobe and then progresses downward—past your jaw and onwards to your neck. His lips will leave a mark come morning, which Glitch and Sally will no doubt tease you about, but the gentle pressure feels so good that you don’t bother to protest. You just lean back into Kent’s warm embrace, because sometimes taking care of Kent means letting him take care of you.

Cassandra paws your leg with a plaintive whimper, complaining over not having received her fair share of Kent’s homecoming pets. Kent pauses his nuzzling of your neck to rest his chin on your shoulder, and frowns at her.

“Maybe you should let the dogs out back,” you suggest breathlessly.

With a speed that he normally reserves for combat, Kent grabs both Annie and Cass. He marches towards the glass back door in long strides, opens it with his hip, and brusquely deposits the two upon the deck, pausing only to give Cass’s head a brief pat. He closes the door before either dog can squirm back into the house, ignoring their confused barks completely as he stalks towards you with intense eyes.

Then his arms are around you once more, this time from the front, and his lips press against your own in a desperate urgency. You kiss him back with equal fervor, reminding him that no matter how bad his day has been, you’ll always be here.

With a broken groan, Kent swoops your legs from beneath you. You’ve seen him lift weights in your shared home gym, of course, but the ease at which he carries you from foyer to bedroom never fails to impress (despite the fact that it happens nearly once a week). He lays you down on the bed gently, reverently, then takes a step back and simply *stares*. The thundercloud that accompanied him into the house has almost completely dissipated, and in its place settles a small smile that is simultaneously incredulous yet smug.

Incredulous, because he wonders how he was lucky enough to find you.

Smug, because you found him in return.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” you ask.

What he was waiting for, it turns out, were those very words. The moment after you utter the question, Kent covers your body with his, using his forearms to raise himself above over you. He takes in your face, memorizing its every detail in silence, and then smiles that same incredulous yet smug smile.

“I love you,” he whispers.

You lift your head in order to kiss his smile. "I know."

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Bonus, the next day at home:

"You Han Solo'd Kenzie?" Glitch stretches out his hand for a congratulatory high five. "That's amazing."

You roll your eyes but still slap his raised palm.

"What was bugging him, anyway?" Glitch asks sotto-voce, so as not to be overheard by Kent in the kitchen. "Rosy pulled him aside for something after our mission debrief, and then he just stormed out."

You chuckle. "Kim told him that he was chosen to meet with Chicago's aldermen to talk about the NPO Program."

"Is that all?" Glitch frowns. "I know Kenzie hates schmoozing, but storming off home early from work seems like an overreaction."

"The meet-and-greet falls on the same day he bought us tickets to pet the penguins at the Shedd Aquarium. It's a limited event that he wanted surprise me with."

"Ohhhhhhh."

"Yeah."

Glitch glances over at Kent, who's in the middle of feeding the dogs, and then back at you. He lowers his voice to an even softer whisper. "Can I have his spare ticket?"

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“The meet-and-greet falls on the same day she bought us tickets to pet the penguins at the Shedd Aquarium. It’s a limited event that she wanted surprise me with.”

“Ohhhhhhh.”

“Yeah.”

Glitch glances over at Kenna, who’s in the middle of feeding the dogs, and then back at you. She lowers her voice to an even softer whisper. “Can I have her spare ticket?”

[MB Short Story: Gone Fishing](#)

[Sep 30, 2021](#)

Featuring: Grayson and Kent, with appearances by Nick and Ferro

Inspired By: This weekend’s most live recent Q&A, where the subject of unlikely pairs going camping got brought up

* * * *

If asked, Grayson would’ve been hard-pressed to explain the elaborate series of events which had led to him driving an RV. Although, to clarify, the RV wasn’t the mystifying part—the camper had been rented two months in advance—but rather how, in addition to Nick, Gray had ended up playing chauffeur to a pair of coworkers whom he barely knew.

He and Nick were supposed to be taking this trip with Ellery and Sally, not with two near strangers. But then Ellery had cancelled, explaining with much handwaving and over-earnest emphasis that—although she and Sally had so been looking forward to sleeping in a drafty tent on the rocky ground—it had just so happened that, *totally* unforeseeably, they’d won tickets to see their favorite band, *Tiny Apocalypse of Hector*, at a live concert that *unfortunately* just so happened to occur during the same week which Gray and Nick had taken off work for the camping trip. What a shocking coincidence!

Her and Sally’s decision to bail had, Ellery repeated at least five times, in no way been deliberate. Sally had called in to a radio show, and she’d won the tickets. Yes, Ellery claimed, that was precisely what had happened. The girls had most definitely *not* paid an exorbitant price to a scalper at the last minute due to their mutual aversion to mosquitos.

Gray had accepted Ellery’s excuse with a polite smile, despite the fact that he’d heard less dodgy excuses from the Ment convicts whom he’d apprehended. Since he had already rented the RV (it had

two beds, since Sally had already made her aversion to sleeping outside known) and bought camping supplies for four, Ellery suggested that he bring Kent and Glitch instead.

“Ever since they graduated and the NPO Program became public knowledge, there’s been some pushback,” Ellery had explained. “Having the two lead members of UCRT take Kent and Glitch under their wing on vacation might help the other AMOs accept them as part of Unity.”

She’d had a point, so Grayson had issued the invite. Kent appeared genuinely excited at the chance to take his dogs to the beach (at least, that’s how Gray interpreted the man’s small smile); Glitch only agreed on condition that he got to sleep in the RV.

“We’re out of marshmallows!” Glitch hollered from the back of the RV.

“They mysteriously disappeared,” Nick added in a too-innocent voice.

Grayson sighed, but didn’t take his eyes off the road. He’d bought three entire bags, for crying out loud. How did they go through three large bags of marshmallows over the course of a two hour drive?

“I saw a gas station about twenty minutes back,” Nick continued helpfully. “They probably sell marshmallows there.”

Since the campground was only five minutes, Gray made the executive decision to keep driving so as not to lose more daylight in order to set up his and Kent’s tents (Nick, like Glitch, had insisted on sleeping in the RV as soon as it became clear that the girls weren’t coming). When they arrived at their site, the first thing Gray did was take a deep breath. Hungry Bolder State Park wasn’t as densely wooded as some of the places he’d visited on the West Coast, but the air just different this far away from the city. As if, for the first time in months, he could inhale and completely fill his lungs.

He noticed Kent doing much the same thing after he’d finished laying out the dog beds (the shih tzus themselves were still snoozing in the back of the RV, having been dosed with what Kent called “doggy dramamine” in order to not get anxious while on the busy highway. Kent was looking through the trees and towards the lake, his expression serene as he watched the setting sun.

“Does Illinois have snakes?” Glitch demanded, stepping tentatively over a suspicious-looking twig. “Are there snakes here?”

“Rattlesnakes,” Nick said with a smirk.

Glitch shuddered.

While Kent took his dogs for a walk, and Glitch tried to keep his feet from touching the ground, Gray and Nick set up the tents. Or rather, Gray set up one of the tents, and Nick managed to bend the rod of the other so badly that Gray had to use his telekinesis to undo the damage.

“Why don’t you and Glitch drive back for some marshmallows?” Gray suggested, more to get the two out of the way than any overwhelming urge for s’mores.

Thankfully, Nick and Glitch seemed just as eager to leave as Gray was to get rid of them. When Kent returned from his walk, he looked towards the missing camper with a frown.

“Dog food is over by the blue tent.” Gray nodded towards the bag of kibble and bowls which he’d already set out. “The others went marshmallow hunting.”

Kent snorted.

“Fine,” Gray admitted. “I was afraid that if they stayed, one of them would end up doing lasting damage to the tent.”

Kent looked surprised. “Ferro tried to set up a tent?”

“Most the mangling was done by Nick.”

Kent nodded, as if that made more sense. Which Gray supposed it did.

“How do you feel about hot dogs for dinner?” Gray asked. “I put a few on the grill.”

“Can you make an extra one for Annie and Cass?” Kent smiled at the two dogs, who were now fully awake and dancing energetic circles around his feet as he picked up the bag of dry food.

“Already did.” Gray frowned at his phone. “I texted Glitch asking how long I should do his vegan sausages, but his response was cryptic.”

Kent walked over to look at the screen over his shoulder. His dark brows rose upon reading the text from Glitch. “What’s a ‘marshmallow emergency’?”

* * * *

“We found a marshmallow specialty store in Hammond which gets great reviews.” Having decided that it took too long to text, Nick had defaulted to telepathy to tell Gray about why he and Glitch had been gone for two hours.

“Isn’t Hammond in Indiana?” Gray asked.

“Is it?” Nick’s thoughts had that same too-innocent tone that he’d had when claiming the marshmallows had ‘mysteriously’ disappeared. *“Anyhow, we’ll be back soon.”*

“Why are you going to Indiana for marshmallows?” Gray started to demand, but it was too late—Nick had already cut the connection. He texted the question just in case, but he doubt that Nick would look at his phone.

"Ferro says that they're seeking the Holy Grail," Kent read from his own cell. He shrugged and set his phone down on the stool next to his chair.

He sat near the fire, keeping one eye on Annie and Cass and making sure that their long leashes (which were tied to a tent nail as per campground regulations) didn't get tangled together as they attempted to play fetch with each other's tails. Gray joined him, feeling uncomfortably full due to having eaten both his and Nick's share of the hot dogs. Kent had taken one bit of Glitch's veggie sausage, then promptly given it Annie and Cass. Annie had likewise turned up her nose, but Cass had happily devoured the whole thing.

"Nick claims that they're still looking for marshmallows." Gray reclined his camping chair so that he looked directly up at the night sky above. Kent did the same.

Neither of them spoke; the starry canvas framed by treetops was too perfect to spoil with words. It was on when the fire began to die, and the dogs curled around Kent's legs for warmth, that the two men stood.

"I guess we should head in then," Gray said. "Do you have everything you need for the dogs?"

Kent nodded. "I got everything out earlier. Do you think that they'll ever find their way back to the campsite?"

Gray glanced once more at the sky. "It would be a shame if they missed this. But there's always tomorrow night."

* * * *

When Gray's alarm went off the next morning, he discovered a new text from Nick: "*Stopped in New Buffalo for the night. Still looking for marshmallows.*"

How the bloody hell had those two ended up in Michigan? It was two states over, for crying out loud. Shaking his head with exasperated bemusement, Gray unzipped his tent's flap as quietly as possible. He liked to get up early when camping to appreciate the sunrise, but the last time he'd attempted to rouse Nick to join him, his invitation had been met with a pillow to the face. He didn't know Kent well enough to determine whether he was a morning person or not, but it was better to be considerate and quiet than to risk having the shih tzus sicced on him.

To his surprise, Kent was already outside, fully dressed and with both dogs on a leash.

"Up to see the sunrise?" Gray asked.

Kent shook his head. "The dogs got excited by the birdsong."

"Ah." Gray wasn't certain what to say. It wasn't as if he and Kent were friends. Other than Operation Hemera two years ago, they were barely even coworkers.

Kent seemed to pick up on his awkwardness. He gestured to the two fishing poles which Gray had left propped up against his chair. "I'll join you."

"You fish?"

"No. But since Ferro and Nick are in Ohio, I have time to learn."

"Ohio?" Gray pulled out his phone and reread Nick's text. Sure enough, it said New Buffalo, which a quick GPS lookup confirmed was in Michigan. "Last I heard, they were spending the night in Michigan."

Kent passed Gray the dogs' leashes and took out his own phone. He showed the Gray the text that he'd received: *"Don't wait up, Kenzie! Justice and I are staying in Buffalo for the night. Will c u 2morrow."*

"The closest Buffalo is in Ohio," Kent said. "Ferro's usually better at lying."

Gray shrugged. "Nick isn't."

The two men exchanged a look of complete understanding. Neither had any clue where their respective best friend was, but both could recognize that they were on the receiving end of a collaborated cover story.

Gray handed Kent back the dog leashes, and grabbed the fishing poles. "Let's head out. Maybe by the time we get back, they'll have returned to Illinois."

"If they ever left," Kent said.

* * * *

The lake was deserted enough that Kent risked letting Antigone and Cassandra off their leads. The two dogs splashed in the shallows, disturbing any fish that the men might catch on their lines. But Gray got the impression that Kent didn't mind, that he just enjoyed the serene silence of being out in nature, and truthfully Gray felt the same.

After having received new texts from both Glitch and Nick—one which claimed to have been slowed by a car crash, and the other by road construction—Kent and Gray turned their phones off. Nick could always reach out with his telepathy should anything truly urgent happen, or if the two missing persons ever got their story back on the same page.

As for the campers, they spent the entire day fishing. Unsuccessfully, of course, due to the presence of the dogs, but it was more about the view than the catch. Gray had to admit, as much as he loved Nick, there was something nice about the way that Kent was content to not talk. His company was peaceful.

Twilight set in. Both men had their feet hanging off the side of the dock, and the dogs had curled in their laps, having exhausted themselves from spending the entire day scaring off fish. Gray absently scratched behind Annie's ear, who yawned happily and nestled against his chest.

"We should do this again," he said suddenly.

"Go fishing?" Kent asked.

Gray shrugged. "Sure. Or take your dogs to another one of the national parks. I've tried to convince Nick to go camping with me regularly, but you'd think I was asking him to sleep naked in a poison ivy bush given the way he reacts each time."

The corner of Kent's mouth lifted in a slight grin. "Ferro's afraid of snakes. And of going without wifi."

They both laughed, their affection for their friends tying with their current exasperation over their disappearance. Kent stood up, dislodging a grumpy Cassandra.

"I'd like that," he said. "To see some of the other parks, that is."

Gray grinned. Something occurred to him as they headed back to the campsite, something which was entirely too cheesy to ever vocalize, but that he sincerely felt nonetheless: today, his fishing hook may have gone unused, yet he'd still managed to catch a new friend.

* * * *

Stay tuned next week to learn what Glitch and Nick were really doing.

[MB Interview: Disaster Cousins \(Andy Version\)](#)

[Sep 30, 2021](#)

Warning: *Contains Light Spoilers for Future Chapters in Mind Blind*

Button is referred to as "Ellery." Usually I can get around using a first name in these interviews, but Caleb's overentitled sense of closeness required a proper first name in order to portray.

* * * *

A spotlight shines on Nicholas Wiseman, his black attire more suitable for a funeral than the host of a talk show. For the first time since these interviews began, he isn't smiling—in fact, like his clothing, his expression would also be more apropos at a cemetery.

Nick: Today, I'm interviewing two members of the international terrorist organization, Vengeance. Please be warned, the opinions expressed by these amoral individuals may be difficult to hear, and it's only because this interview occurs in a fictional metaverse that I refrain from arresting them.

Andy and Caleb enter. Andy looks cocky as usual, strutting onstage with his hair styled in an artful blowout. Caleb trails behind him like a lost puppy, staring at the ground and with his round cheeks stained red with embarrassment over Nick's insulting introduction.

They take the two seats across from Nick, who makes no effort to veil his hostility.

Nick: I won't lie. It's in no way a pleasure to have you two on my show.

Andy smirks at him. Caleb shrugs, still not making eye contact.

Caleb: That's, um, fair.

Nick: Let's start this interview by making sure that the audience knows what kind of people they're listening to. Go on. Tell the audience your views on Ments.

Sounding as if he's memorized the lines, Andy launches into what could well be one of Vengeance's recruitment speeches (penned by Reese, of course).

Andy: Ments are the result of a dangerous genetic abnormality which, instead of studying to understand why it occurs, modern society has instead decided to worship as a trait akin to demigod-dom. This unwise, primitive sense of reverence has left the vast majority of humans feeling powerless, and also resulted in the proliferation of abuses by those in possession of unbalanced brains. Normal people, *good* people, need to stop sitting on our hands and take back—

Nick: Sorry, but my ears can only bleed so much. Caleb, your opinion on Ments?

Caleb fidgets, his hands pulling at his pant leg.

Caleb: I mean, you can't really argue that most Ments think they're better than us. That you think you're better than me.

Nick: Because you're a terrorist.

Caleb: But if we were to, umm, get in a fight, you would win, right? Because I don't have powers.

Andy: You don't have a genetic defect. A brain that invades the privacy of others isn't a power—it's a corrupting perversion.

Caleb: But still, Justice would win in a fight.

Nick: I don't use my telepathy or telekinesis to fight. I've been trained to apprehend those who abuse their psychic agility.

Andy glares at him challengingly.

Andy: Don't you? Never?

Caleb: Even if *you* don't "abuse your psychic agility," you just admitted that there's a lot of Ments who *do* abuse it. And that's a bad thing. Uhm, what Vengeance wants is like banning guns, right? Wouldn't the world be better if no one could shoot at each other?

Andy: For fu—for god's sake, Caleb. How many times do we need to go over this? Gun rights are completely different. Weapons are an equalizer that anyone can learn to use. Ments, however, are born more dangerous.

Caleb, to Andy: You don't like guns either.

Andy: I dislike using guns because a Ment could turn it against me. A Ment could make me shoot *myself* if I dropped my guard. Humans created weapons so that the person with the biggest fists or animal with bigger teeth didn't automatically win every fight. Ments have the most dangerous fangs yet, and yet the United Nations prevents governments from implementing laws to—

Nick: Redirecting from the deranged political rant, which really isn't good enough to get you elected. Summarizing your answers, you're both afraid of Ments.

Caleb: Yes.

Andy: No. I'm afraid of a society which allows Ments to run around unchecked. I'm afraid that Ments are becoming the ruling class, like with North Korea before the Reunification. I'm afraid of the world's growing complacency that allows—

Nick, taunting: Ments are the big scary saber tooth tigers, and caveman Andy is cowering in his cave.

Caleb, tentatively: But you calling Andy a caveman kinda backs up his point? You obviously think of yourself as some sort of superior and more evolved human.

Andy: Exactly!

Nick, rolling eyes: Only compared to Andy. Who, might I remind you, compared all Ments to fanged predators not thirty seconds ago.

Caleb: Unity always makes it seem like Lo-Pos don't have a chance against Ments. If you, as Justice, don't think of yourself is better and more capable, then why isn't the message being sent by the organization that you work for? Why are there only Ments on UCRT, and why does Unity have jurisdiction over any local case involving a Ment criminal? How do *you* see Ments, if not superior?

Caleb falls silent as if embarrassed he spoke so much. Meanwhile, Nick looks surprised that Caleb has actually asked his opinion, and some of the venom leaves his tone as he replies.

Nick: Psychic agility is a skill like any other. It's no difference than physical agility or intelligence.

Andy: Except a smart gymnast can't kill someone with a look like Fortitude, or take over someone's mind like a strong telepath. You forget—we actually know what you're capable of, "Justice."

Nick, deliberately ignoring the last accusation: I mean, a "smart gymnast who kills people" is just another way of saying "ninja." And for every person who becomes a ninja and this day and age, there's six hundred more who decide to take up the balance beam or join a cheerleading squad instead. Ments are just people—some may use their talents in illegal ways, sure, but that's why Unity exists. To stop those that do, and make sure that local law enforcement isn't going up against an unfair advantage.

Nick cracks a smile, although it quickly disappears.

Nick: We send ninjas to fight ninjas.

Andy: Which is Unity more concerned about: actually making sure that these "renegade" Ments do no harm, or spreading propaganda so that normal people fail to distinguish the difference between, say, gun violence and the uniquely intimate savagery of brainwashing.

Caleb: "Uniquely intimate savagery" . . . that's what Reese calls it.

Nick, to Caleb: You don't seem as much of a true believer as your cousin. Do you hate all Ments as well, or are you just tagging along for the ride?

Caleb, defensively: I go where I want.

Andy rolls his eyes at Caleb's bold declaration, calling his cousin's statement of independence into question.

Nick: If you're a leader, Caleb, were you the one who approached Andy about wanting to join Vengeance? He didn't recruit you?

Caleb: Er, no, he . . . I guess you can say that he recruited me. But only 'cause I wanted to be recruited!

Nick: How long have you been a member of Vengeance?

Caleb: Around three months. I'd, er, dropped out of college and hadn't told anyone in our family other than Andy. Then he told me that he was planning something big, but that the group he was—

Andy clears his throat over-loudly, cutting off Caleb's words.

Nick: That's still classified intel? Fine. Andy, what about you? How long have you been a festering boil—I mean, a member of Vengeance?

Andy: I joined Vengeance before Caleb.

Nick: You've been a pit stain on humanity a year? Two years?

Andy, repeating with insistence and without added specificity: I joined Vengeance before Caleb.

Nick: And recruited your cousin to crime.

He shoots Caleb a glare that almost borders on pitying before redirecting the full force of his loathing back at Andy.

Nick: Who recruited *you*?

Andy: Reese.

Nick: And you knew Reese from . . .

Andy folds his arms and refuses to answer.

Nick: More classified intel, I'm guessing. Let's try a new angle: Andy, what are your true thoughts on Reese? They must have some hell of a sway over you, if you were willing to become a murder hobo for their sake.

Caleb snickers at Nick's terminology, but is quickly silenced by Andy's glare.

Andy: I've never been accused of murder, nor have I ever been homeless. And while I don't always comprehend Reese's decisions, but somehow their plans always come to fruition. Reese sees the world as it truly is, a cesspool of inequality, and they aim to raise us from the muck. They're a genius.

Nick, under his breath: Not that there's much competition for that title within your organization.

Andy: I have a dual Bachelors of Science in Biology and Medical Laboratory Sciences, and was working at one of the premier medtech companies in the world while saving up for a PhD program. Your elitist attitude may label me a "caveman," Justice, but I am *not* unintelligent.

Caleb: Andy graduated salutatorian of his high school!

Andy flinches at Caleb's supportive tone.

Nick: Then this henchman jig isn't new—Andy's used to being in second place. Let me guess: the valedictorian was a Ment.

Caleb, looking shocked: How'd you guess? My older brother and Andy were in the same class, so—

Andy: None of this is relevant.

Nick: I think it's super relevant. The relevant-est. I think that you have a complex resulting from only ever being number two, when in reality GPA has nothing to do with psychic agility.

Andy: You know nothing.

Nick: I'm not even going for the John Snow joke—the fruit's too low hanging. I know enough to confidentially conclude that your hatred of Ments has less to do about wanting to make the world a better place and more about your inner feelings of inadequacy. I believe the official psychiatric term is “piss baby.” Be honest: if you could switch friends with your valedictorian Ment cousin, would you?

Caleb leans forward, biting his lower lip and looking uncertain over Andy's answer.

Andy, scoffing: That's ridiculous.

Caleb: Well, I would.

Caleb ignores Andy's appalled scowl. He addresses Nick.

Caleb: Everyone in our family is a Ment, except for Andy and me. I don't think that any of them even knew that Andy was the salutatorian—all they cared about was Jonathan's prospects. He's an Eight, and graduating top of his class meant he could have any position he wanted.

Caleb looks down at his feet, adding in a quieter voice:

Caleb: My parents didn't even remember my graduation. Jon had just got admitted into Aeon after getting his associates degree, so the whole family took him out for a celebratory dinner instead of seeing me get my diploma.

He shrugs self-deprecatingly.

Caleb: Not that my being on honor roll was all that impressive. Besides, it was only high school. Everyone graduates from high school.

Nick: Hold up. Your brother is a member of Unity?

Caleb: Not any more. He dropped out of the AMO program after taking a laser to the knee, and ended up being hired by a Ment-only private security firm.

Nick, to Andy: Did you attend Caleb's high school graduation?

Andy, rolling his eyes: What Caleb fails to leave out is that he was so busy feeling sorry for himself, he expected everyone to magically learn the date instead of directly telling them. Don't get me wrong: our so-called “family” is still a casebook studies for why Ments shouldn't be permitted to breed—there's something broken in their brains, that makes them see their normal offspring as subpar.

He meets Nicks eyes and grins mockingly.

Andy: Your own sibling would probably agree with me.

Nick: . . .

Nick: . . .

Nick: Don't talk about my family.

Caleb clears his throat to break the stare-off between the two.

Caleb: Well, ah, no one seemed to care about my graduation, and I didn't want them to accuse me of trying to detract from Jon's hiring.

Andy: Which my former aunt probably would've done.

Nick: "Former" aunt? Did you murder all your relatives or something? Dump their bodies into Lake Michigan?

Although asked in a semi-joking tone, Nick appears genuinely concerned over what Andy's answer might be.

Andy: I disowned my family.

Caleb: Except for me!

Andy, sighing heavily: Except for Caleb.

Nick: Caleb, do you still talk your parents? Do they know you joined a terrorist cell?

Caleb: They think I'm still at college. At least, they still transfer my tuition money into my account. And they usually call on my birthday.

Nick: Usually?

Caleb, shrugging: Sometimes they get busy and forget. Like when Jon invited everyone to a family vacation at his summer house in Martha's Vineyard.

Andy, bitterly: Invited everyone but us.

Nick: Because you're Norms? Or because you're bigots?

Caleb looks down. Andy crosses his arms.

Andy: To answer your earlier question, no. No, I haven't killed any of my renounced relatives, or behaved like a badly-written cliché and dumped their bodies in a lake. I'm not even from Illinois.

Nick: You're from New York, if I remember correctly.

Andy: Staten Island.

Nick's expression darkens even further, and his fists clench in his lap.

Nick: But you lived in Vancouver for a few years. Is that correct?

Andy: I was relocated there by the company I was working for at the time.

Nick: Why did you leave the city and come back to the States? The timing is . . . suspicious.

Andy: Because I left shortly after the bombing? As Reese already told your sibling, I had nothing to do with the Vancouver explosion. I disagree with it, in fact. In order to establish lasting change, Vengeance needs to do more than do temporary damage. We need to create a world where all people are equal. A war only lasts so long as people are different sides. We need to make Ments realize that their abilities are dangerous, and that the freedom they've been given is unreasonable, and we need for them too—

Nick: Are all terrorists this long-winded, or is it just you and Reese? Also, people were *killed* in the Vancouver bombing. Death isn't "temporary damage."

Nick leans forward and repeats his earlier question with slow intensity.

Nick: Why did you leave Vancouver?

Andy: Because the project I was working on got shut down. By Unity.

Nick: You decided to switch your career to murder and mayhem because of a cancelled *science experiment*?

Andy: I joined Vengeance because Unity overstepped its bounds. Again. Your organization is intent on maintaining the growing power divide between Ments and Norms, and will do everything its power to suppress anything capable of creating a better future.

Nick: Unity cares about protecting Ment rights. It's only in the past three decades that we've even been treated like regular humans.

Andy: You're *not* regular humans. Unity is intent on making sure you're never given the choice to be one, either.

Nick: Oh, and Vengeance would give us a goddamn choice? You assholes ***stole my body in order to*** . . .

Nick forces himself to take a deep breath and relaxes into his seat, although his fists remain clenched.

Nick: New question. Andy, you said that you disowned your family—everyone except Caleb. Is there a lot of cousinly affection between you two?

Caleb: Andy's always . . .

He hesitates, unable to truthfully say that “Andy has always had my back” or “Andy has always been there for me when things were hard.”

Caleb: Andy’s always kept in touch. When he learned that I, uh, quit college, he didn’t judge. He only asked if I wanted a new job.

Andy: Caleb’s smart. And useful.

He looks away, a hint of actual, genuine vulnerability in his brown eyes.

Andy: He’s all the family that I have.

Nick doesn’t press the issue. He looks more tired than angry at this point, and ready to be done with the whole interview.

Nick: Speaking of families, I need to ask. Caleb, what’s with your fascination over Button?

Caleb, defensively: You have fans. Your parents have fans. Why shouldn’t your sibling have fans as well?

Nick: Because they’re not a public figure. I won’t disagree with you that they deserve *fans*, but again: not a public figure.

Caleb gives Nick a tentative smile.

Caleb: They do deserve fans though, right? They’re pretty amazing.

Nick: You haven’t explained why you latched onto them, though. When did you first learn about Button?

Caleb: Um, back when I was in high school. I watched the news when your parents—the first Hope and Justice—announced that they were retiring from UCRT.

Andy: I’d just started my freshman year of college, and all of a sudden Caleb called me up, excited and rambling on about a “kindred spirit.”

Caleb: In their press statement, Hope and Justice talked a lot about their oldest child. How Nicholas Wiseman was preparing to one day join the organization which they lead, and that Chicago would be in good hands with the new generation.

Nick: I know. I was there.

Caleb meets Nick’s eyes, somewhat combatively.

Caleb: Well, they never mentioned Ellery. Not once, during the entire time. The Norm kid wasn’t important enough to mention.

Nick: Our family situation was complicated.

Caleb: I didn't even know that Hope and Justice *had* two kids until I stumbled upon the information on a Podium thread. I found out that Ellery was my age, still in high school, and your parents had just up and abandoned them.

Nick: Like I said, the situation was complicated.

He sighs.

Nick: It's still complicated.

Caleb: Ellery and I share a lot in common. Parents that don't care about us, an older brother who's "the talented one"—I'd never felt that kind of connection with someone before. Not even Andy, because he was willing to just write off the rest of our family. But Ellery . . . Ellery was like me. Ellery stayed.

Nick: You don't have a "connection" with my sibling, not a real one.

His tone gentles, as if talking to a child.

Nick: Look, Caleb, despite my better judgement . . . I can't completely hate you. Your cousin is a toad and deserves to die in a ditch. But you're different. And you need to recognize that any bond you have with Button is just in your head. You're a fanboy, not their friend.

Caleb: Oh, I know that I'm just a fan! It's not like I'm camping outside their house and breaking into their bedroom to see what books they're reading.

Caleb laughs awkwardly, as if the thought of doing just that may have actually occurred to him. Nick winces.

Caleb: I know I'm a fan, but I also know we'd definitely become close friends if Ellery ever got to know me. We have too much in common not to connect.

Nick, patiently: Caleb, you don't actually know Button.

Caleb: But I know everything *about* them.

Nick, patience fraying: No, you don't.

Andy: You think I haven't had this conversation with him before? But he's happy learning everything he can about your sibling, and it's not like he's hurting anyone by following them on social media.

Nick: Not yet, but he has sucky role models when it comes to appropriate behavior.

Nick looks at Caleb and sighs.

Nick: Just . . . make some real friends, dude. Go online to discuss common hobbies with people. Volunteer at an animal shelter or something. Befriend people that actually talk back to you. Get therapy, and stay away from my sibling.

Caleb: I'm part of a *Save Ellery* chatgroup on Podium.

Nick chokes.

Nick: Save Ellery from *What*?

Caleb: You and your parents.

Andy smirks at Nick's groan.

Nick: I keep forgetting that you're part of Vengeance and thus messed up. Seriously, get a therapist before you end up like your cousin.

Andy's smirk fades.

Andy: Are there any more questions?

Nick: Just one. You two beat Reese out in a popularity poll for this interview. How does that make you feel?

Caleb: We beat Reese?!

Andy: Most likely, voters were intimidated by Reese. Plus, Ellery and I have a . . . *connection*.

Andy's smirk returns.

Nick, in a low voice: Shut up.

Andy: It makes sense that I'd win over Reese if people are just interested in learning about where my feelings for Ellery may lead. But I don't kiss and tell.

Caleb, looking both hurt and excited: You kissed Ellery?!

Nick: No, he did *not*. Nor does he have feelings.

Andy just keeps smirking.

Caleb: Oh. Uh, it's kinda cool that we won over Reese then? Maybe it's because Ellery wanted to make sure that we'd be good friends! After all, I know so much about them, it's only fair that they learn about me.

Nick: Damnit, Caleb. Button isn't going to be your friend. You're a terrorist stalker.

Caleb frowns.

Caleb: But I've never stalked them. And for Vengeance, I've only ever—

Andy: *Enough*, Caleb. This interview is over.

Nick: Yeah, I've had about enough.

Nick calls out to behind the curtain.

Nick: It's time for Andy to go back in custody!

Two armed guards with Unity insignia on their collars come to escort the two terrorists offstage. Nick holds up a hand to prevent them from taking Caleb, and they lead off Andy (who throws a taunting kiss in Nick's direction, presumably alluding to Button).

Caleb: Uh, I should probably go with Andy.

Nick: Caleb. Real talk for a moment?

Nick waves towards the camera, and the screen goes dark. The audio, however, has not been cut.

Nick: You're a stalker. A virtual stalker, but still a stalker. And while I appreciate you giving Button the flash drive, and for everything else you've done, it doesn't change the fact that you and my sibling aren't friends. And will probably never be friends, until you get your head on straight.

Caleb: Um, Andy doesn't know that I helped you, does he?

Nick: Of course not. Unity respects your wishes on the matter.

There's the sound of rustling clothes.

Nick: Take this card for a friend of mine. Sohvi's a Ment, but she specializes in helping people.

Caleb, sounding uncertain: I don't need help.

Nick: You do. If you're not willing to give a Ment therapist a chance, then Sohvi can recommend someone else.

Caleb: I'm not . . . that is . . .

Nick: Unity's recruited people in the past with . . . unusual circumstances and backstories. Given everything you did, you may actually have a future as an MIV.

Caleb: . . .

Nick: But only if that's what you want. First, you need to get your head screwed on straight. Admiring Button is fine, but there's a difference between being a genuine fan who respects their privacy and . . . whatever you currently are now.

Caleb, voice breaking: A superfan?

Nick: Sure. Let's call it that. Look, take Sohvi's card, call her up for a psych eval and a few months of regular appointments. If she gives the thumbs up, you can apply to the MIV Program, and—if you get in—I'll make sure you get stationed at the Aeon Academy in London. It's starting its own NPO Program. If you really think that Unity needs to change, then do it a productive way from the inside, like Zarneki and Parker.

Caleb: I can't stay in Chicago?

Nick: Not so long as Button still lives here. But maybe don't mention to them that I said that . . . there's been some accusations lately that I'm overprotective. I'm, er, trying to change.

Caleb gives a soggy laugh. Although the screen is still black, it's obvious he's crying.

Caleb: I guess I don't know everything about Ellery, huh?

Nick: Agreed, but what do you mean?

Caleb: Our family situations—they're not the same at all.

There's the sound of paper bending as Caleb accepts Sohvi's business card.

Caleb: I'll . . . think about what you said.

[MB Interview: Disaster Cousins \(Liz Version\)](#)

[Sep 30, 2021](#)

Warning: Contains Light Spoilers for Future Chapters in *Mind Blind*

Button is referred to as "Ellery." Usually I can get around using a first name in these interviews, but Caleb's overentitled sense of closeness required a proper first name in order to portray.

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A spotlight shines on Nicholas Wiseman, his black attire more suitable for a funeral than the host of a talk show. For the first time since these interviews began, he isn't smiling—in fact, like his clothing, his

expression would also be more apropos at a cemetery.

Nick: Today, I'm interviewing two members of the international terrorist organization, Vengeance. Please be warned, the opinions expressed by these amoral individuals may be difficult to hear, and it's only because this interview occurs in a fictional metaverse that I refrain from arresting them.

Liz and Caleb enter. Liz looks cocky as usual, strutting onstage with her hair styled in a sleek blowout. Caleb trails behind her like a lost puppy, staring at the ground and with his round cheeks stained red with embarrassment over Nick's insulting introduction.

They take the two seats across from Nick, who makes no effort to veil his hostility.

Nick: I won't lie. It's in no way a pleasure to have you two on my show.

Liz smirks at him. Caleb shrugs, still not making eye contact.

Caleb: That's, um, fair.

Nick: Let's start this interview by making sure that the audience knows what kind of people they're listening to. Go on. Tell the audience your views on Ments.

Sounding as if she's memorized the lines, Liz launches into what could well be one of Vengeance's recruitment speeches (penned by Reese, of course).

Liz: Ments are the result of a dangerous genetic abnormality which, instead of studying to understand why it occurs, modern society has instead decided to worship as a trait akin to demigod-dom. This unwise, primitive sense of reverence has left the vast majority of humans feeling powerless, and also resulted in the proliferation of abuses by those in possession of unbalanced brains. Normal people, *good* people, need to stop sitting on our hands and take back—

Nick: Sorry, but my ears can only bleed so much. Caleb, your opinion on Ments?

Caleb fidgets, his hands pulling at his pant leg.

Caleb: I mean, you can't really argue that most Ments think they're better than us. That you think you're better than me.

Nick: Because you're a terrorist.

Caleb: But if we were to, umm, get in a fight, you would win, right? Because I don't have powers.

Liz: You don't have a genetic defect. A brain that invades the privacy of others isn't a power—it's a corrupting perversion.

Caleb: But still, Justice would win in a fight.

Nick: I don't use my telepathy or telekinesis to fight. I've been trained to apprehend those who abuse their psychic agility.

Liz glares at him challengingly.

Liz: Don't you? Never?

Caleb: Even if *you* don't "abuse your psychic agility," you just admitted that there's a lot of Ments who *do* abuse it. And that's a bad thing. Uhm, what Vengeance wants is like banning guns, right? Wouldn't the world be better if no one could shoot at each other?

Liz: For fu—for god's sake, Caleb. How many times do we need to go over this? Gun rights are completely different. Weapons are an equalizer that anyone can learn to use. Ments, however, are born more dangerous.

Caleb, to Liz: You don't like guns either.

Liz: I dislike using guns because a Ment could turn it against me. A Ment could make me shoot *myself* if I dropped my guard. Humans created weapons so that the person with the biggest fists or animal with bigger teeth didn't automatically win every fight. Ments have the most dangerous fangs yet, and yet the United Nations prevents governments from implementing laws to—

Nick: Redirecting from the deranged political rant, which really isn't good enough to get you elected. Summarizing your answers, you're both afraid of Ments.

Caleb: Yes.

Liz: No. I'm afraid of a society which allows Ments to run around unchecked. I'm afraid that Ments are becoming the ruling class, like with North Korea before the Reunification. I'm afraid of the world's growing complacency that allows—

Nick, taunting: Ments are the big scary saber tooth tigers, and cavewoman Liz is cowering in her cave.

Caleb, tentatively: But you calling Liz a cavewoman kinda backs up her point? You obviously think of yourself as some sort of superior and more evolved human.

Liz: Exactly!

Nick, rolling eyes: Only compared to Liz. Who, might I remind you, compared all Ments to fanged predators not thirty seconds ago.

Caleb: Unity always makes it seem like Lo-Pos don't have a chance against Ments. If you, as Justice, don't think of yourself is better and more capable, then why isn't the message being sent by the organization that you work for? Why are there only Ments on UCRT, and why does Unity have jurisdiction over any local case involving a Ment criminal? How do *you* see Ments, if not superior?

Caleb falls silent as if embarrassed he spoke so much. Meanwhile, Nick looks surprised that Caleb has actually asked his opinion, and some of the venom leaves his tone as he replies.

Nick: Psychic agility is a skill like any other. It's no difference than physical agility or intelligence.

Liz: Except a smart gymnast can't kill someone with a look like Fortitude, or take over someone's mind like a strong telepath. You forget—we actually know what you're capable of, "Justice."

Nick, deliberately ignoring the last accusation: I mean, a "smart gymnast who kills people" is just another way of saying "ninja." And for every person who becomes a ninja and this day and age, there's six hundred more who decide to take up the balance beam or join a cheerleading squad instead. Ments are just people—some may use their talents in illegal ways, sure, but that's why Unity exists. To stop those that do, and make sure that local law enforcement isn't going up against an unfair advantage.

Nick cracks a smile, although it quickly disappears.

Nick: We send ninjas to fight ninjas.

Liz: Which is Unity more concerned about: actually making sure that these "renegade" Ments do no harm, or spreading propaganda so that normal people fail to distinguish the difference between, say, gun violence and the uniquely intimate savagery of brainwashing.

Caleb: "Uniquely intimate savagery" . . . that's what Reese calls it.

Nick, to Caleb: You don't seem as much of a true believer as your cousin. Do you hate all Ments as well, or are you just tagging along for the ride?

Caleb, defensively: I go where I want.

Liz rolls her eyes at Caleb's bold declaration, calling her cousin's statement of independence into question.

Nick: If you're a leader, Caleb, were you the one who approached Liz about wanting to join Vengeance? She didn't recruit you?

Caleb: Er, no, he . . . I guess you can say that she recruited me. But only 'cause I wanted to be recruited!

Nick: How long have you been a member of Vengeance?

Caleb: Around three months. I'd, er, dropped out of college and hadn't told anyone in our family other than Liz. Then she told me that she was planning something big, but that the group she was—

Liz clears her throat over-loudly, cutting off Caleb's words.

Nick: That's still classified intel? Fine. Liz, what about you? How long have you been a festering boil—I mean, a member of Vengeance?

Liz: I joined Vengeance before Caleb.

Nick: You've been a pit stain on humanity a year? Two years?

Liz, repeating with insistence and without added specificity: I joined Vengeance before Caleb.

Nick: And recruited your cousin to crime.

He shoots Caleb a glare that almost borders on pitying before redirecting the full force of his loathing back at Liz.

Nick: Who recruited *you*?

Liz: Reese.

Nick: And you knew Reese from . . .

Liz folds her arms and refuses to answer.

Nick: More classified intel, I'm guessing. Let's try a new angle: Liz, what are your true thoughts on Reese? They must have some hell of a sway over you, if you were willing to become a murder hobo for their sake.

Caleb snickers at Nick's terminology, but is quickly silenced by Liz's glare.

Liz: I've never been accused of murder, nor have I ever been homeless. And while I don't always comprehend Reese's decisions, but somehow their plans always come to fruition. Reese sees the world as it truly is, a cesspool of inequality, and they aim to raise us from the muck. They're a genius.

Nick, under his breath: Not that there's much competition for that title within your organization.

Liz: I have a dual Bachelor's of Science in Biology and Medical Laboratory Sciences, and was working at one of the premier medtech companies in the world while saving up for a PhD program. Your elitist attitude may label me a "cavewoman," Justice, but I am *not* unintelligent.

Caleb: Liz graduated salutatorian of her high school!

Liz flinches at Caleb's supportive tone.

Nick: Then this henchman jig isn't new—Liz's used to being in second place. Let me guess: the valedictorian was a Ment.

Caleb, looking shocked: How'd you guess? My older brother and Liz were in the same class, so—

Liz: None of this is relevant.

Nick: I think it's super relevant. The relevant-est. I think that you have a complex resulting from only ever being number two, when in reality GPA has nothing to do with psychic agility.

Liz: You know nothing.

Nick: I'm not even going for the John Snow joke—the fruit's too low hanging. I know enough to confidentially conclude that your hatred of Ments has less to do about wanting to make the world a better place and more about your inner feelings of inadequacy. I believe the official psychiatric term is “piss baby.” Be honest: if you could switch friends with your valedictorian Ment cousin, would you?

Caleb leans forward, biting his lower lip and looking uncertain over Liz's answer.

Liz, scoffing: That's ridiculous.

Caleb: Well, I would.

Caleb ignores Liz's appalled scowl. He addresses Nick.

Caleb: Everyone in our family is a Ment, except for Liz and me. I don't think that any of them even knew that Liz was the salutatorian—all they cared about was Jonathan's prospects. He's an Eight, and graduating top of his class meant he could have any position he wanted.

Caleb looks down at his feet, adding in a quieter voice:

Caleb: My parents didn't even remember my graduation. Jon had just got admitted into Aeon after getting his associates degree, so the whole family took him out for a celebratory dinner instead of seeing me get my diploma.

He shrugs self-deprecatingly.

Caleb: Not that my being on honor roll was all that impressive. Besides, it was only high school. Everyone graduates from high school.

Nick: Hold up. Your brother is a member of Unity?

Caleb: Not any more. He dropped out of the AMO program after taking a laser to the knee, and ended up being hired by a Ment-only private security firm.

Nick, to Liz: Did you attend Caleb's high school graduation?

Liz, rolling her eyes: What Caleb fails to leave out is that he was so busy feeling sorry for himself, he expected everyone to magically learn the date instead of directly telling them. Don't get me wrong: our so-called “family” is still a casebook studies for why Ments shouldn't be permitted to breed—there's something broken in their brains, that makes them see their normal offspring as subpar.

She meets Nick's eyes and grins mockingly.

Liz: Your own sibling would probably agree with me.

Nick: . . .

Nick: . . .

Nick: Don't talk about my family.

Caleb clears his throat to break the stare-off between the two.

Caleb: Well, ah, no one seemed to care about my graduation, and I didn't want them to accuse me of trying to detract from Jon's hiring.

Liz: Which my former aunt probably would've done.

Nick: "Former" aunt? Did you murder all your relatives or something? Dump their bodies into Lake Michigan?

Although asked in a semi-joking tone, Nick appears genuinely concerned over what Liz's answer might be.

Liz: I disowned my family.

Caleb: Except for me!

Liz, sighing heavily: Except for Caleb.

Nick: Caleb, do you still talk your parents? Do they know you joined a terrorist cell?

Caleb: They think I'm still at college. At least, they still transfer my tuition money into my account. And they usually call on my birthday.

Nick: Usually?

Caleb, shrugging: Sometimes they get busy and forget. Like when Jon invited everyone to a family vacation at his summer house in Martha's Vineyard.

Liz, bitterly: Invited everyone but us.

Nick: Because you're Norms? Or because you're bigots?

Caleb looks down. Liz crosses her arms.

Liz: To answer your earlier question, no. No, I haven't killed any of my renounced relatives, or behaved like a badly-written cliché and dumped their bodies in a lake. I'm not even from Illinois.

Nick: You're from New York, if I remember correctly.

Liz: Staten Island.

Nick's expression darkens even further, and his fists clench in his lap.

Nick: But you lived in Vancouver for a few years. Is that correct?

Liz: I was relocated there by the company I was working for at the time.

Nick: Why did you leave the city and come back to the States? The timing is . . . suspicious.

Liz: Because I left shortly after the bombing? As Reese already told your sibling, I had nothing to do with the Vancouver explosion. I disagree with it, in fact. In order to establish lasting change, Vengeance needs to do more than do temporary damage. We need to create a world where all people are equal. A war only lasts so long as people are different sides. We need to make Ments realize that their abilities are dangerous, and that the freedom they've been given is unreasonable, and we need for them too—

Nick: Are all terrorists this long-winded, or is it just you and Reese? Also, people were *killed* in the Vancouver bombing. Death isn't "temporary damage."

Nick leans forward and repeats his earlier question with slow intensity.

Nick: Why did you leave Vancouver?

Liz: Because the project I was working on got shut down. By Unity.

Nick: You decided to switch your career to murder and mayhem because of a cancelled *science experiment*?

Liz: I joined Vengeance because Unity overstepped its bounds. Again. Your organization is intent on maintaining the growing power divide between Ments and Norms, and will do everything its power to suppress anything capable of creating a better future.

Nick: Unity cares about protecting Ment rights. It's only in the past three decades that we've even been treated like regular humans.

Liz: You're *not* regular humans. Unity is intent on making sure you're never given the choice to be one, either.

Nick: Oh, and Vengeance would give us a goddamn choice? You assholes ***stole my body in order to*** . . .

Nick forces himself to take a deep breath and relaxes into his seat, although his fists remain clenched.

Nick: New question. Liz, you said that you disowned your family—everyone except Caleb. Is there a lot of cousinly affection between you two?

Caleb: Liz's always . . .

He hesitates, unable to truthfully say that "Liz has always had my back" or "Liz has always been there for me when things were hard."

Caleb: Liz's always kept in touch. When she learned that I, uh, quit college, she didn't judge. She only asked if I wanted a new job.

Liz: Caleb's smart. And useful.

She looks away, a hint of actual, genuine vulnerability in her brown eyes.

Liz: He's all the family that I have.

Nick doesn't press the issue. He looks more tired than angry at this point, and ready to be done with the whole interview.

Nick: Speaking of families, I need to ask. Caleb, what's with your fascination over Button?

Caleb, defensively: You have fans. Your parents have fans. Why shouldn't your sibling have fans as well?

Nick: Because they're not a public figure. I won't disagree with you that they deserve *fans*, but again: not a public figure.

Caleb gives Nick a tentative smile.

Caleb: They do deserve fans though, right? They're pretty amazing.

Nick: You haven't explained why you latched onto them, though. When did you first learn about Button?

Caleb: Um, back when I was in high school. I watched the news when your parents—the first Hope and Justice—announced that they were retiring from UCRT.

Liz: I'd just started my freshman year of college, and all of a sudden Caleb called me up, excited and rambling on about a "kindred spirit."

Caleb: In their press statement, Hope and Justice talked a lot about their oldest child. How Nicholas Wiseman was preparing to one day join the organization which they lead, and that Chicago would be in good hands with the new generation.

Nick: I was there.

Caleb meets Nick's eyes, somewhat combatively.

Caleb: Well, they never mentioned Ellery. Not once, during the entire time. The Norm kid wasn't important enough to mention.

Nick: Our family situation was complicated.

Caleb: I didn't even know that Hope and Justice *had* two kids until I stumbled upon the information on a Podium thread. I found out that Ellery was my age, still in high school, and your parents had just up and abandoned them.

Nick: Like I said, the situation was complicated.

He sighs.

Nick: It's still complicated.

Caleb: Ellery and I share a lot in common. Parents that don't care about us, an older brother who's "the talented one"—I'd never felt that kind of connection with someone before. Not even Liz, because she was willing to just write off the rest of our family. But Ellery . . . Ellery was like me. Ellery stayed.

Nick: You don't have a "connection" with my sibling, not a real one.

His tone gentles, as if talking to a child.

Nick: Look, Caleb, despite my better judgement . . . I can't completely hate you. Your cousin is a toad and deserves to die in a ditch. But you're different. And you need to recognize that any bond you have with Button is just in your head. You're a fanboy, not their friend.

Caleb: Oh, I know that I'm just a fan! It's not like I'm camping outside their house and breaking into their bedroom to see what books they're reading.

Caleb laughs awkwardly, as if the thought of doing just that may have actually occurred to him. Nick winces.

Caleb: I know I'm a fan, but I also know we'd definitely become close friends if Ellery ever got to know me. We have too much in common not to connect.

Nick, patiently: Caleb, you don't actually know Button.

Caleb: But I know everything *about* them.

Nick, patience fraying: No, you don't.

Liz: You think I haven't had this conversation with him before? But he's happy learning everything he can about your sibling, and it's not like he's hurting anyone by following them on social media.

Nick: Not yet, but he has sucky role models when it comes to appropriate behavior.

Nick looks at Caleb and sighs.

Nick: Just . . . make some real friends, dude. Go online to discuss common hobbies with people. Volunteer at an animal shelter or something. Befriend people that actually talk back to you. Get therapy, and stay away from my sibling.

Caleb: I'm part of a Save Ellery chatgroup on Podium.

Nick chokes.

Nick: Save Ellery from *What?*

Caleb: You and your parents.

Liz smirks at Nick's groan.

Nick: I keep forgetting that you're part of Vengeance and thus messed up. Seriously, get a therapist before you end up like your cousin.

Liz's smirk fades.

Liz: Are there any more questions?

Nick: Just one. You two beat Reese out in a popularity poll for this interview. How does that make you feel?

Caleb: We beat Reese?!

Liz: Most likely, voters were intimidated by Reese. Plus, Ellery and I have a . . . *connection*.

Liz's smirk returns.

Nick, in a low voice: Shut up.

Liz: It makes sense that I'd win over Reese if people are just interested in learning about where my feelings for Ellery may lead. But I don't kiss and tell.

Caleb, looking both hurt and excited: You kissed Ellery?!

Nick: No, she did *not*. Nor does she have feelings.

Liz just keeps smirking.

Caleb: Oh. Uh, it's kinda cool that we won over Reese then? Maybe it's because Ellery wanted to make sure that we'd be good friends! After all, I know so much about them, it's only fair that they learn about me.

Nick: Damnit, Caleb. Button isn't going to be your friend. You're a terrorist stalker.

Caleb frowns.

Caleb: But I've never stalked them. And for Vengeance, I've only ever—

Liz: *Enough*, Caleb. This interview is over.

Nick: Yeah, I've had about enough.

Nick calls out to behind the curtain.

Nick: It's time for Liz to go back in custody!

Two armed guards with Unity insignia on their collars come to escort the two terrorists offstage. Nick holds up a hand to prevent them from taking Caleb, and they lead off Liz (who throws a taunting kiss in Nick's direction, presumably alluding to Button).

Caleb: Uh, I should probably go with Liz.

Nick: Caleb. Real talk for a moment?

Nick waves towards the camera, and the screen goes dark. The audio, however, has not been cut.

Nick: You're a stalker. A virtual stalker, but still a stalker. And while I appreciate you giving Button the flash drive, and for everything else you've done, it doesn't change the fact that you and my sibling aren't friends. And will probably never be friends, until you get your head on straight.

Caleb: Um, Liz doesn't know that I helped you, does she?

Nick: Of course not. Unity respects your wishes on the matter.

There's the sound of rustling clothes.

Nick: Take this card for a friend of mine. Sohvi's a Ment, but she specializes in helping people.

Caleb, sounding uncertain: I don't need help.

Nick: You do. If you're not willing to give a Ment therapist a chance, then Sohvi can recommend someone else.

Caleb: I'm not . . . that is . . .

Nick: Unity's recruited people in the past with . . . unusual circumstances and backstories. Given everything you did, you may actually have a future as an MIV.

Caleb: . . .

Nick: But only if that's what you want. First, you need to get your head screwed on straight. Admiring Button is fine, but there's a difference between being a genuine fan who respects their privacy and . . . whatever you currently are now.

Caleb, voice breaking: A superfan?

Nick: Sure. Let's call it that. Look, take Sohvi's card, call her up for a psych eval and a few months of regular appointments. If she gives the thumbs up, you can apply to the MIV Program, and—if you get in—I'll make sure you get stationed at the Aeon Academy in London. It's starting its own NPO Program. If you really think that Unity needs to change, then do it a productive way from the inside, like Zarneki and Parker.

Caleb: I can't stay in Chicago?

Nick: Not so long as Button still lives here. But maybe don't mention to them that I said that . . . there's been some accusations lately that I'm overprotective. I'm, er, trying to change.

Caleb gives a soggy laugh. Although the screen is still black, it's obvious he's crying.

Caleb: I guess I don't know everything about Ellery, huh?

Nick: Agreed, but what do you mean?

Caleb: Our family situations—they're not the same at all.

There's the sound of paper bending as Caleb accepts Sohvi's business card.

Caleb: I'll . . . think about what you said.

[Writer's Blog: October Roadmap](#)

[Oct 1, 2021](#)

I finally figured out how to quash the loops that were happening in Chapter 13! The fix involved a lot of word bloat, which I usually try to avoid, but now things will be better remembered like whether or not

Kenzie is holding AL, and you won't get trapped in the Matrix. (That being said, Chapter 13 is now 15,000 words longer.)

There were too many variables to code for each path, so dialogue options previously looped back to paths you hadn't seen. Now, these options redirect to similar but differently labeled scenes (whereas before, the code just tried to remember whether or not Kenzie had already taken the Pollard Test, in order to keep the file size manageable). For some reason, the Kenzie's memory kept getting reset, so I had to do some roundabout fixes (including dividing Chapter 13 into three separate documents).

But everything now seems to work! I just need to bugtest the Nover!Button pathways tomorrow, and then the new version of the demo should be up sometime on Sunday (as well as the alternate start of Chapter 14 for those who maintained their cover).

Patreon roadmap for October:

October 2: Cast Interview Poll (I'm tempted to make a poll where there are five choices, and they're all Reese, because I really want to rub it in their face that they lost the last two months. But I'll let you guys choose from a selection after I take stock of who's left.)

October 3: *Mind Blind* Mini-Update (Looping error fixes + alternate scenes)

October 4: *Mind Blind* Short Story (featuring Nick and Glitch being partners-in-crime)

October 5: *Delivery for the Damned* Development Poll

October 6: *Lady Death's Diary*, Chapter 22

October 8: Writer's Blog

October 9: Aeon Student Guide Entry

October 11: *Nick Wiseman Has Opinions* (On camping, because I'm sticking to the theme.)

October 13: *Lady Death's Diary*, Chapter 22.5

October 14: Blooper Reel

October 15: Writer's Blog

October 16: *Mind Blind* Update, Chapter 14 (Will include all of the, uh, "book conversation. I'll keep it vague for those who haven't gotten that part yet. You'll need to choose wisely for this part, because your decisions here will completely change the rest of the book.)

October 18: *Mind Blind* Saucy Side (featuring Rosy)

October 19: *Delivery for the Damned* Teaser

October 20: *Lady Death's Diary*, Chapter 23

October 21: *Mind Blind* Short Story #2 (topic as of yet undecided, but likely involving Nick's questionable taste in Halloween costumes)

October 22: Writer's Blog

October 24: *Mind Blind* Fairy Tale (I'm thinking something *Sleepy Hollow* inspired)

October 27: *Mind Blind* Update, Chapter 14 (All)

October 28: MB Cast Interview

October 29: Writer's Blog

October 30: Live Q&As

October 31 (Halloween): ????????

I took this upcoming week off teaching in order to get caught up on my backlog of Patreon rewards from the last few months (September was hectic due to classes starting), and thus have some extra time to do something *special* as well. Let's just say that I have plans for a Halloween bonus reward this month that's appropriately thematic . . . I'm going to keep the full details a surprise, but let's just say that it would earn Hope's seal of approval.

[October Interview Poll](#)

[Oct 2, 2021](#)

Vote for the next *Mind Blind* interviewee!

I decided to save any follow-up interviews of the ROs until after the first draft of the game is done--that way, you'll be able to ask them questions about major, but as of yet unrevealed, plot points.

That being said, there's still four people to choose from (five, if you count Clarence as human).

Reese

Clarence Garfield & Stephanie Valero

Noh (Cryptic answers only until December reveal)

Schrodinger (Sally's cat)

420 votes total

[Operation Marshmallow Marston](#)

[Oct 5, 2021](#)

A Sequel To: www.patreon.com/posts/mb-short-story-56788958

* * * *

Glitch morosely trailed his fingertips along the price plaques that lined the store's small aisle—Jet Puffed, Campfire, a no-name brand with plain black print that the sweltering heat had caused to bleed through the plastic and stain the marshmallows within a dingy grey. There was another bag, a brand he didn't recognize, with a googly-eyed mascot that looked like the illicit lovechild of the *Ghostbuster's* Stay-Puft Man and Danny Devito. He picked that bag up to read its list of ingredients, only to set it down with a drawn-out sigh.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, and wrong. Four different marshmallow brands, and all of them used gelatin. The indignity was further compounded by the fact that this gas station didn't sell Dandies—a marshmallow brand which was Chicago-based and one of the few vegan foods (if marshmallows could be called a food, and not just bouncy sugar) that Glitch could reliably find most places.

Nick, who'd been intently reading the back of a bottle labeled "Seaweed Oil" with an expression somewhere between bewilderment and consternation, finally shrugged and dropped the bottle into his shopping basket.

"Could be fun to experiment with," he said to Glitch. "You ready to head back?"

Glitch sighed. Alas, his dream of s'mores was no more. "Sure."

Nick grabbed several of the marshmallow bags from the shelf and dropped them into his basket as well. He didn't bother to glance at the brands or ingredients. Half-way towards the register (which, admittedly, was only three steps given the store's tiny size), he paused and pivoted back around to scrutinize Glitch.

"You have that same look on your face that Button did when they finally learned that Santa isn't real," Nick said. "What's wrong?"

Glitch gestured towards the row of marshmallows. He kept his wrist limp, because it amused him to come across as a melodramatic poet over something so trivial. Even though, if he were being one-hundred percent honest, the lack of edible marshmallows didn't *feel* trivial. He was already obligated to

spend the next three days in the woods, surrounded by dirt, mosquitos, and maybe even bears. Worst of all—and he'd tested the moment their RV pulled up to the campsite—he was going to be trapped in a place with barely any phone reception. And now he had to do it all while being deprived of sugar.

"They don't have Dandies," Glitch sighed.

"And that matters because . . ." Nick arched an eyebrow as he trailed off.

"The other brands aren't vegan."

"Ah." Immediately, Nick began to put the objects from his basket back upon the shelf, making Glitch wonder if he'd perhaps overdid it on exaggerating his sorrow. Kent knew him well enough not to take his theatrics seriously, but Nick seemed to be under the impression that his sigh had been more heartfelt than manufactured.

"It's fine," he hastened to say. "After all, I'm the one who ate all three bags on the drive over. And we brought plenty more food—I won't starve."

"Nonsense."

For reasons Glitch couldn't deduce, his disappointment had lit a fire within Nicholas Wiseman's heart. He laid a hand on Glitch's shoulder, and spoke as if swearing a blood oath:

"We shall find your vegan marshmallows, Taliaferro Parker, or die trying."

* * * *

One hour and two stores later, and Glitch rather thought that dying would've been the preferable option.

"Maybe we can find a Trader Joe's," Nick said without looking up from his phone. "It says here that their store brand marshmallows are vegan."

Glitch glanced over at the abandoned parking lot they'd pulled the RV into. The town they'd ended up in could barely qualify as a town—there was a diner, a bowling alley, a bait and tackle shop, and a Dollar Store (which only had marshmallow cream in stock). Also a tattoo parlor, but that looked abandoned, which was probably a good thing because, after fifty minutes of driving, Glitch probably would've suggested getting commemorative tattoos of marshmallows if only for the change of scenery.

This is what happened when one blindly followed the GPS.

"I'm not sure we're going to find a Trader Joe's nearby," he said dubiously. "Where even are we?"

Nick opened up a maps app on his phone. "Crabtree. Where the hell is Crabtree?"

"In Illinois, presumably." The illumined bowling pin on the alley's sign sputtered out with an electric spark. Glitch winced. "Or maybe in actual hell."

Nick zoomed out on the map, and sighed with relief. “Ok. Gray’s not going to kill me. We’re about twenty minutes away from the campsite.”

“Should we head back?” Glitch suggested.

Nick put his phone screen-down on the dashboard. He turned towards Glitch, looking serious. “Right now, Gray is probably making hot dogs.”

“I know,” Glitch replied. “I gave him some of my vegan sausages.”

“No, you don’t understand. He insists on manning the grill *by himself* every time that we go camping.”

“It’s a little ooga-booga caveman, but he seems pretty into experiencing the great outdoors.” Glitch shrugged. “I’m still not seeing the issue.”

“The issue is that *Gray* is *cooking*,” Nick replied. “And if we head back before eight pm, he’ll have saved us some food.”

Glitch was beginning to understand why Nick had acted so moved by his plight of being unable to find vegan marshmallows: the other man was stalling for dear life. “The great and powerful Fortitude can’t cook?”

A haunted look darkened Nick’s face. “That’s an understatement. Let’s just say that . . . Gray’s grillwork is more *well done* than good.” He shuddered. “Or palatable.”

Glitch handed Nick back his phone. “Look up the nearest Trader Joe’s.”

“I’ll see if there are any with restaurants nearby,” Nick said. “Any thoughts on Thai?”

* * * *

They decided on a Trader Joe’s another hour away, but Nick’s expression turned so pained each time that Glitch inquired about Gray’s culinary skills, that Glitch figured it was probably worth the drive. The store didn’t have any marshmallows in stock, which was a shame, but it *did* just so happen to be next to a Burmese restaurant that received five stars from several food blogs (which Nick and Glitch had spent the better part of an hour reading before deciding which Trader Joe’s to drive towards).

It had been worth it: the coconut curry had almost reduced Glitch to tears of joy, and Nick had somehow managed the restaurant owner to impart the secret behind his biryani (extra cilantro). They departed the restaurant just as the sun began to set, having consumed four courses and Nick carrying an extra serving of biryani in a to-go box that he’d ordered in case Grayson insisted on cooking during all three days of their camping trip.

This town was a significant improvement on their last stop, albeit still lacking in vegan marshmallows. Nick and Glitch mutually decided to walk off their meal before heading back to the campground, where

Grayson would no doubt expect them to join him around a campfire for small talk as they pretended that they were enjoying themselves enough to not notice the mosquitos attacking their skin. Neither Nick nor Glitch, as they'd learned about each other over dinner, had much love for the great outdoors.

"It's not the outdoors, really," Nick said as the two strolled down main street. "I jog by the lakefront all the time. I love traveling and exploring cities. It's the *forest* part that I object to. There's no people to meet, no interesting sites to see. There's nothing but . . . trees."

"Kent mentioned that he might want to learn to fish while we're there," Glitch replied despondently. "As if sitting by the lake and waiting for a fish to bite a hook is *fun*."

"Gray finds it peaceful."

"It's boring and unnecessary."

Nick laughed. "That's valid, especially since you're—" He stopped short, his sentence ending abruptly as he stared through the glass window of a nearby game store.

Glitch followed the direction of his gaze, and gasped. "When did *Red Dead Redemption 6* come out?" he asked in a low voice. It almost felt like speaking too loudly would shatter the illusion.

"It hasn't," Nick whispered back, apparently sensing the same thing. "It's not due to release for four days." He glanced around furtively. "Apparently this store owner didn't get the memo. We could let them know, like the upstanding citizens that we are . . ."

"Or we could buy it," Glitch said. "Give me solid internet connection and twenty minutes, and I'll get it up and running, release date blocks be damned." He straightened, having leaned in towards Nick like two hunched-over conspirators plotting a murder. "Not that I'd ever recommend doing anything illegal."

"But if we *bought* the game . . ." Nick said.

"And if we didn't post anything about our sneak peek online . . ." Glitch said.

They exchanged a look of mutual agreement, then entered the store.

* * * *

The store was being run an older man, who was looking after things while his daughter was on vacation. After buying the game, Nick's conscience got the better of him, and he darted back into the store to let the owner know that he should take down the *RDR6* display or risk having his shop blacklisted for early selling.

Glitch hadn't followed him inside. Should Nick demand that they return the game, he was half-prepared to take off with the RV and make for the nearest hotel that offered a PlayStation setup. Not that Glitch thought he had much of a chance of outrunning UCRT's Justice, but he had the keys, and could've

managed to escape with some tricky timing. Thankfully, Nick hadn't pressed the issue and thus Glitch wasn't forced to see whether his resolve actually matched his fantasizing.

Also, he was starting to realizing that he genuinely *liked* Nick Wiseman. Not just as Ellery's brother, or as Justice his coworker, but as an actual potential friend. Glitch found this revelation to be somewhat surprising, as he didn't have all that high opinion of most AMOs, let alone the members of UCRT. In fact, the only AMO he liked (other than Kent, who wasn't a Ment) was Sally—Ellery's best friend shared his sense of humor. Plus, she was amusingly self-conscious about her lack of height.

"Just make sure that no one can trace our copy back to Arnold," Nick said, using the shopkeeper's first name (Glitch had to admit, it was impressive how easily the guy made friends).

"Of course not." Glitch put the key into the ignition, but hesitated before turning it on. "Besides, we probably won't get a chance to play until the actual release date."

Nick looked confused for a moment, then the light in his eyes died. "Oh. Right. Because of the camping trip."

"With the trees," Glitch added for good measure. In the back of his mind, there was the beginning of a plan. He just had to make sure that Nick was on board. "Although, you know, we did leave them with the food cooler."

"So, they won't starve," Nick quickly picked up on Glitch's implication. "And if something bad happened, like a bear attack, they could always call us."

"Honestly, Fortitude and Nox could fend off one measly bear."

"They could *totally* fight off a bear."

"You know who else could fight off a bear?"

They both looked down at the copy of *Red Dead Redemption 6* in Nick's hands.

"There's a Peninsula Resort thirty minutes away," Nick said slowly, and Glitch smiled at the revelation that their minds had been so in sync that Nick had already researched hotels. "They have a long-term suite that comes with a, and I quote, 'state-of-the-art media center' in its living room. It includes every game system you can dream of, including what we'd need for . . ." He raised the game, shaking it slightly, then offered Glitch his phone with his other hand.

There, on the screen, was a list of the hotel's offerings: which included not only a widescreen tv and vibrating gaming seats, but also had a list of spa services that seemed vastly preferable to spending all day hanging with insect vampires and eating overcooked hot dogs.

Nick leaned over Glitch's shoulder and pointed to the spa list. "Have you ever had a hot stone massage?" he asked. "If not, you're missing out."

Glitch looked at him through the corner of his eye. “If we do this, we’ll need an excuse to tell Kent and Gray. I may not know Gray, but Kent would give me the silent treatment if he ever learned that I’d bailed on him to wear a fluffy bathrobe and play videogames.”

“Spa bathrobes are ridiculously fluffy,” Nick conceded. “And technically, we still haven’t found vegan marshmallows. It’s like we just lost track of the time . . .”

“. . . And blindly followed the GPS . . .”

Nick took back his phone and went to the map app. “. . . And accidentally ended up in New Buffalo,” he finished.

“Then maybe the RV got a flat tire?” Glitch asked.

“The RV *definitely* got a flat tire.”

“So, we’re agreed: Operation Marshmallow Marston is a go.”

They sent off respective texts to their friends (well, Nick used his telepathy), and began the drive to the hotel. Glitch found that he was looking forward to his first ever hot stone massage almost as much as he was looking forward to hacking *RDR6*.

“How long until they catch on, do you think?” Nick stared out the window as he absent-mindedly stroked the game’s cover.

“Kent’s probably already guessed,” Glitch admitted. “It’s not like I’ve made a secret over not loving being mosquito bait.”

“The fact we’re easy to see through makes me feel better about lying.” Nick smiled. “Gray can call me out if he wanted, but I got the impression that he was enjoying just hanging with Kent and the dogs without me there constantly suggesting that we go to Six Flags instead.”

Glitch smirked. “I bet they’re fishing.”

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 22](#)

[Oct 6, 2021](#)

I stiffened. My studies with Delphine weren’t a secret—it had taken a year into my residency at Bellcrest for other courtiers to cease ogling me as if horns had sprouted from my temples. As my behavior otherwise had given no sign of mental degradation, most eventually accepted my apprenticeship as an unfortunate character quirk that they deigned to overlook in light of my impeccable manners. Even

Kothe's citizens had begrudgingly reaccepted me, since their knowledge of my actions as Duke Rhys' dutiful daughter predated what they deemed my peculiar lapse in judgement when it came becoming a mage. I hadn't thought Colm aware of my identity, but nor had I tried to keep it hidden.'

Legally, Colm shouldn't know any magic. The Uprising's aftermath had banned anyone from practicing without dispensation from the King, which in practice (if not written law) meant that all mages were from noble families within the monarchy's social circle (a result which I could only assume His Majesty found politically convenient). If Colm was an unlicensed sorcerer, as he seemed to be implying, he was taking a tremendous risk in trusting me. Even the suspicion of illicit spellcasting was punishable by death, as I could personally testify.

"You're a mage?" I asked in as neutral a tone as possible.

Colm raised his fists and tapped them together, his shoulders straightening proudly. "Never needed anything but my hands to get through life. Wouldn't care to dabble in witchery." He gave me a hard look. "Even if it were allowed for folks like me."

I shifted, uncomfortable under his silent judgement. "I'm aware. But King Eldin worries that loosening the bans could lead to another Uprising."

Colm held up a hand to stop me midsentence. "His Majesty is a good man. With good intentions."

I frowned at his familiarity before recalling that, of course, the boxer knew King Eldin. Xander had said that his father had introduced him to Colm in the first place. Colm probably knew His Majesty better than I did if the boxer been trusted to keep the secret of Xander's parentage.

"But good intentions don't change reality, not even those belonging to our King," continued Colm. "Nothing changes until the Council agrees to pass new laws."

I went over and shut the door which led to the staircase—ours wasn't a conversation that others should overhear. I still wasn't entirely sure what Colm was implying, but his words ventured dangerously close to seditious. While it was true that King Eldin could be overridden by the Council's dictates, it was also true that no one was supposed to acknowledge that Verdan's monarchy had been weakened following the Uprising's aftermath. The last thing I needed was for an eavesdropper's conclusions to lead to my eighth death. I leaned against the closed door, resting the back of my head against the wood so as to preemptively hear Theo and Xander's (or anyone else's) footsteps.

"The law is the law," I said carefully. "Without it, Verdan would dissolve into anarchy."

"Aye, and neither of us have any wish for that outcome," agreed Colm. "Like I said, His Majesty is a good man. Not all who serve under him can claim the same."

I sighed. Colm didn't need to lecture me on the moral bankruptcy of certain nobles, as I grown up living (and dying) with their fallibility. All my executions had been legally ordained, after all. "Say what it is you

mean before my brother and Xander return.” I stressed the last name to remind Colm of his pupil’s connection to the very King whom he seemed on the verge of critiquing.

Colm strode over to far corner of the basement, where several punchbags, their seams torn and middles sagging, lay stacked haphazardly atop one another. He knelt down besides the pile, then paused and stared directly at me. “You’ve met Henric?”

I frowned at his sudden change of topic. “The boy who answers your door? Yes.”

“Did he make mention of his past?”

“He implied he was an orphan,” I said. “It was kind of you to take him in.”

Colm grunted as he pushed aside the old sandbags. “His father was my friend. A competitor.” With the pile toppled, his fingers pressed the edges of the newly exposed floorboard; the wooden planked popped upward with a snap.

“Allan was smaller than most boxers,” he continued. “Relied on speed and wits rather than strength.” A smile flashed across his weathered face before darkening into something bleaker. “He was fast. Too fast, some thought. After one bout, a competitor said as much—I suppose it stung his pride to be beaten by someone half his weight.”

“What did the loser claim?” My voice was a whisper. Judging from Colm’s grimace and Henric’s own claim of not having a father, this story didn’t end happily.

“The other boxer accused Allan of using witchery to rig his fights,” said Colm. “Claimed he landed punches the referee couldn’t see, and backed up his claim with bruises from blows no one could remember Allan landing.”

“Did people believe the charge?”

“Enough were suspicious. Magistrate ordered Allan to house arrest pending an investigation. He and his wife were found dead in their bed the next day.” His expression tightened. “They found Henric bawling in the cradle nearby—his parents’ murderer must have drawn the line at killing a newborn.”

I gasped without intending to. “That’s horrific.”

“Aye,” said Colm. “No one wanted to go near the house, sure they were that Allan had cursed it. Magistrate refused to investigate on account of Allan being a suspected witch—blighter suggested that a spell had backfired.” Colm’s upper lip curled in disgust. “Spells don’t wield daggers and slash throats. *Spells* don’t break windows in order to enter a house.” He sighed, his anger siphoning away to defeat. “I bought the deed and opened a gym in Allan’s old house. I put the purchase price into a trust for Henric when he’s grown.”

I gripped the door handle to keep myself propped upright; my legs felt too weak to bear the heavy weight of the tragedy. "I'm so sorry. Do you remember the magistrate's name? Perhaps I can talk to the Council, and justice can still be served."

Colm's moist eyes met mine, and he shook his head slowly. "An investigation would do more harm than good." He reached into the hollow left by the removed floorboard and pulled out a small brown book, its cowhide cover stained and fraying around the edges. "I found this hidden in the floor a few years later, when one of the bags fell and crashed through a board."

I reached out for the book but he held firm. "A secret for a secret," he said. "What has you so desperate to defend yourself?"

My mouth twisted in a bitter smile, even though I understood his motivation. Of course, Colm's charity was conditional. He no doubt wanted insurance that whatever the book held wouldn't be used against him, at the very least. But how much of the truth could I safely reveal? I turned my head so that my ear pressed against the door and, upon hearing no footsteps, took a deep breath.

"I am engaged to Prince Loren," I said.

Colm stared at me unblinkingly, unphased by my revelation. Perhaps Xander had already informed him, or the boxer had remembered my name from the public proclamation three years prior, which decreed a holiday be celebrated on my eighteenth birthday when Loren and I wed. Many girls in Verdan inherited their first names from their maternal grandmothers, but 'Vitrula' was considered archaic even by traditionalists. My identity likely hadn't been difficult for Colm to discern.

"I want to become Queen," I continued. "I want to guide and protect Verdan's people, and I've been educated to do so. But my marriage has . . . detractors."

"Xan told me about your servant." Colm squinted at me. "You fight like someone whose been knocked down more than just the once."

I spoke haltingly. "I have been hurt in the past. By the same people who poisoned Emilia. I don't know all their identities."

Colm let go of the book. I flipped through the yellowed pages: it was a grimoire, the oldest I'd ever seen, older than anything in Delphine's expansive collection. Or perhaps decay made it appear more aged than its years. Most the pages were stained from water damage and time; one, marked with a folded upper corner, was still mostly legible. I glanced through the instructions—they were similar to the first spell I'd mastered, but meant for the opposite effect. An incantation for speed.

"The other boxer was right," I said. "Allan used magic to fight."

"Any new investigation will end with Allan being declared guilty. I can't allow that to happen—for Henric's sake."

“The money you paid for the deed would go to the Crown,” I realized. No wonder he had wanted to secure my discretion.

Colm nodded grimly. “Henric’s inheritance would be lost, and the house might be taken as well.”

I nodded. Unlicensed sorcerers had their property seized, so the sale of Allan’s house had never technically been legal.

“The boy is like a son to me,” Colm continued gruffly. “I’d take care of him no matter what. But that money is his inheritance from his folks. I don’t condone Allan’s cheating, but he’s paid for his crimes. I won’t let his legacy to his son be stolen over a few dirty fights.”

The full magnitude of what Colm had just entrusted to me took away my breath. Any magistrate to whom I brought this spellbook would persecute Colm for withholding information on an unlicensed sorcerer. He’d lose his gym, at the very least, and likely be sentenced to prison for holding onto an illegal text rather than immediately relinquishing it to authorities.

Colm had risked everything to give me a better chance to defend myself. He’d trusted me.

I made a vow then and there: the law would change. I would change it, as soon as Loren and I were coronated. No one would be determined guilty, their deaths left uninvestigated, simply because they’d been accused of magic. And magic would no longer be restricted and feared—it would be taught and properly monitored, so that it could no longer be considered justification for murder.

Hearing footsteps, I hastily tucked the journal into my skirt pocket. The door opened, and Theo barged into the basement. He thrust a clay bowl, filled with shaved ice and sticky with dark syrup that melted down the sides, into my hands.

“Thank you,” I said.

Colm smiled, knowing that the words were meant for him.

I made Theo carry the bowl after I finished the blackberry ice inside. He’d flipped it upside down and spun it around his index finger, laughing despite the residue syrup that spun out and splattered his coat. My brother hadn’t changed so much after all, despite his newfound vanity.

The bowl had unbalanced and shattered onto the mosaic tiles of the castle Courtyard during our return. Theo had grinned evilly and waggled his fingers at Xander and I, threatening to flick droplets of black syrup onto our clothes and hair. Having successfully splashed Xander, he was now begging to be released from the other man’s headlock.

“Vitrula!”

My head swiveled towards the call: Loren sauntered towards us from the stables. Xander immediately let go Theo, who rubbed at his neck with a beleaguered groan. I echoed his groan internally, remembering yesterday's encounter with Loren. My curtsy was polite but my demeanor frosty as I greeted him.

Loren's eyes narrowed briefly at Xander before his attention relighted on me, his expression shifting from annoyed to uncharacteristically nervous.

"I wanted to talk to you." His gaze flickered again towards Xander and back. "May we talk?"

I sighed and addressed my companions. "I'll join you later."

They both nodded, though Xander's came slowly and with obvious reluctance.

"Is something amiss?" I asked Loren once they'd left. The last several days had left me too exhausted to keep up the pretense that I was happy to see him. Besides, he was already in love with Letty. A year sooner than usual, given her early arrival to Bellcrest. But so long as I refused to step aside and gave him no excuse to end our engagement, the only thing I had to worry about was defending myself from Letty and her accomplice.

He opened his mouth just as Lady Geneva walked by. Seeing me, her face flushed with remembered indignation and she spun her head away, giving me the cut direct. Seems she had yet to forgive me for my breach in manners from my birthday.

"What did you do to offend her?" asked Loren in an amused voice.

"It doesn't matter." My own tone was flat. "What is this about, Loren?"

Loren sighed and ran a hand through his perfectly tousled blond locks. "Join me in the stables? We'll have less of an audience."

I followed. But for the horses and a few stable hands cleaning tack, we were alone. Loren meandered over to Dragon's stall.

"I heard he can bear a rider again," he said idly. "I didn't think it possible."

Dragon snuffed at my hands and sleeves searching for his usual apple. I murmured an apology for my lack of an offering and stroked the top of his velvety nose.

Loren looked at me. I waited.

He averted his gaze, using the toe of his boot to shuffle at the scattered hay on the floor. "I'm sorry," he said without looking up. "I was . . . inconsiderate yesterday. You were understandable eager to see your lady's maid, and yet I delayed you. It's just—" His eyes met mine, his voice suddenly impassioned. I arched a brow and he halted.

He sighed, shoulders slumping. "It doesn't matter. Look, I know that we don't have much in common."

"Not unless you consider our engagement to be a shared interest," I said lightly.

Loren laughed. As he did, I was struck by the realization that I rarely witnessed him in a true moment of joy. Now, caught off guard by my unexpected comment, it was as if he lowered an ever-present shield that I'd hardly realized existed. His open smile made him look even more boyishly handsome, like a free-spirited knight errant rather than a burdened-down King-to-be. For a moment, I could understand just why Letty was so determined to have him, and recalled why I'd once believed myself in love.

Before he'd let me die.

"So, our friendship will blossom once we begin planning for our wedding?" he asked, still chuckling.

"We'll bond over table arrangements and choosing our coronation crowns."

"Over which stationary should be used for invitations."

"Over avoiding Lady Geneva's well wishes."

Loren groaned. "Has she cornered you about her newest ailment yet?"

"The one which can only be treated by expensive volcanic bath salts?" I grinned, feeling both uneasy yet somewhat hopeful by this new dynamic. Which wasn't new, per se, but also wasn't something Loren and I had shared since engagement number three. "Why do you think she snubbed me in the Courtyard?"

He smiled back. "Do share."

"I'm afraid that I don't emerge from the story very flatteringly. My behavior was somewhat callous." *In my haste to go dance with your brother*, I didn't add. Thinking of Xander caused me to recollect how unpleasantly Loren had acted yesterday despite my obvious distress. Given the amiable mood between us, I dared to be honest with my fiancé. "What made you apologize?"

"Ah." Loren became reabsorbed with arranging the hay on the ground into a pattern with his boot. "I ran into your sister later that evening. Lady Letticia relayed how anxious you'd been over your maid's illness, and how relieved you felt now she'd woke up. Her words made me realize that I'd been inconsiderate."

My stomach dropped. Of course it had been Letty. The novelty of getting along with Loren had almost caused me to forget his inevitable betrayal. Had they really just bumped into each other, as he claimed? Or were they already arranging private rendezvous? I should request an additional guard to monitor the hallway outside my room—I'd claim my nerves had been disquieted since the fire, and gain both extra security plus an eyewitness who could confirm my nightly whereabouts in case of an attack on Loren.

"I appreciate you coming to speak with me," I said stiffly.

Loren's voice called after me as I exited the stables. "Vitrula—be wary around Lord Brant. He's not the kind of person you should trust."

Armond entered just as I left, smirking as we passed each other. No doubt the weasel had been eavesdropping under the pretense of waiting for Loren. I scowled at him.

"Your smile is as delightful as ever, Lady Vitrula." Armond's compliment dripped with heavy sarcasm. "His Highness must be so *eager* for your wedding."

I didn't deign to respond.

[Delivery Development: Feeling Lucky?](#)

[Oct 7, 2021](#)

Magic isn't fully understood in the world of *Delivery for the Damned*--the moment it is, they'll stop calling it "magic," after all. However, there are some general rules that seem to hold universally true (even if *why* they're true remains a mystery).

Delivery's Magic has three types: Ritual Magic (which is the type practiced by human witches), Otherworldly Magic (belonging to creatures from once-other dimensions, like faeries), and Common Magic (which is, on some level, practiced by most humans).

Common Magic is also referred to as "Belief" or "Faith" magics. It's the power that keeps demons from trespassing on holy ground, as well as the force behind a gambler's lucky coin. Most secular scientists theorize that Common Magic works due to humans inadvertently drawing upon positive potential from alternative dimensions that didn't collide during The 1987 Convergence (talked about here: www.patreon.com/posts/delivery-for-on-46768216). Religious organizations, on the other hand, interpret it as proof of the divine. Either way, it's a tool in Golightly's arsenal.

Although you won't be hurling sorcerous fireballs in *Delivery* (sorry!), you will have the option to select your talisman--something which will help fend off otherworldly creatures intent on doing you harm by giving them a strong sense of aversion (and possible other side effects which I'm still debating).

Golightly will be able to select from religious symbols (a crucifix, Star of David, hamsa, etc., which will only be selectable by a theistic MC), or ancient protection symbols (an ankh, evil eye, etc.) as well as more modern "lucky" items (a horseshoe, a fuzzy dice keychain, etc.). Most interesting of the talisman selections that I have planned, in my opinion, are those of a personal nature: Golightly will be able to turn something that they associate with protection into a unique talisman that's all their own. This will

include a square from the blanket that they had as a baby, or a "lucky rabbit foot" that's actually the sewn-shut leg of their childhood stuffed animal which otherwise disintegrated after one too many washes.

I've put some of the options about unique options below (they'll all have a unique backstory) as a poll to get a read on what you all are most interested in, but this time around, what I'm really looking for is your suggestions! **What would *your* MC like to use as a protective talisman? It needs to be portable and have significance (spiritual, superstitious, or personal).**

A "Lucky" Bullet Pendant

An Amethyst Geode (stone possibly selectable?)

A Poker Chip

Earmuffs (yes, even in summer)

A Teddy Bear

Golightly's Baby Blanket

A Photograph

I want my shotgun to double as my talisman.

Forget the talisman, I'll just trust the shotgun.

86 votes total

[October Interviewee is . . . REESE](#)

[Oct 8, 2021](#)

Note: I'm currently having computer issues and stuck using my phone, so am announcing this month's interview subject a day early in lieu of tonight's blog post (which will be released tomorrow afternoon after I get my laptop fixed).

The interviewee is Reese, and I could not be more thrilled for the chance to heckle them. Ask your questions via this post or the interview channel on the Sanctum of Spoilers . . . And don't pull your punches. Reese deserves to get a little verbally bruised.

I mean, Reese almost lost to a cat.

[Writer's Blog: Recoding Love](#)

[Oct 9, 2021](#)

First off: thanks to my neighbor for letting me use her computer! Now onto “Friday’s” blog post.

Ahem.

The list of things which I intend to polish during *Mind Blind*’s second draft is too lengthy to include in a single post, but today I’m going to talk about one of the most important aspects which I intend to rework: *Romance*.

When I first started writing and coding *Mind Blind*, I didn’t know what I was doing. To some extent, I still don’t when it comes to code—the choice script wiki is a permanent fixture in my internet browser. In particular, I wasn’t certain how to code a natural-feeling romantic progression. I tried to do it numerically using the “crush” variable to indicate Button’s level of romantic attachment (and this is what’s currently in the game), but going forth I found it unnecessarily tedious, not to mention vague.

Does a Button who *doesn’t* choose ever pining option feel less for an RO? Possibly not. Perhaps they’re good at compartmentalizing, or in denial, or simply have their priorities in order (terrorists first, smooching later). But when affection is a number, and each love-struck option adds more invisible affection by Button towards the RO (+X to the Crush variable), a lot of that nuance is lost.

To solve this, I’ll be changing romances to instigate along a progressive three-step scale. Each RO will have three variables: Interest, Infatuation, and Devotion. Early game, choosing any romantic option for an RO will set Button as being “interested” (by setting the Interested variable to “true”). While there will be multiple opportunities to activate the “interest” variable, it only needs to be activated once. It won’t matter how often you choose an interest option; the game will remember Button as feeling attraction if you select any of the interested options. Button can also be interested in more than one person.

Buttons who are remembered as being “interested” in an RO will eventually be able to select options that set the “infatuated” variable true. These infatuated options will *only* be available to interested Buttons, and again it won’t matter how many you select—all that’s required is that, at some point in the romantic progression, the “Infatuated” variable for an RO is set as “true.” Button can only be infatuated with one person at a time. (This is in large part due to there being variable scenes where Button thinks about their love interest, and having them interested in multiple people at this point leads to too many variations that are ultimately futile, as none of the ROs are poly.)

This same progression applies when going from “infatuated” to “devoted,” which marks the committed romance. Devoted is when your romance fully locks in and the RO returns your feelings. The reason this is different than the “infatuated” variable, however, is because there will be ending variances for Buttons who are “in love” with an RO but never cement the relationship (in particular, Sally and Gray). In addition, the ROs will react differently to an “infatuated” vs a “devoted” Button.

It'll be a heck of a lot of recoding, but I feel like this will create a cleaner, more reactive (and most importantly, more organic) way for the romances to progress (instead of just one canned response, RO reactions will change based on which variable you've activated). Currently, each RO's romance fully activates if Button has high enough affection and a crush stat—a method which requires Button to select certain choices in order to tell the code that, yes, you want to deepen the relationship. This new multi-variable progression will make sure that you can still achieve the romances without choosing every pining dialogue option, as well as providing me with a better foundation for the future ace/demi romance pathways (where alternative “interest” options will become available at the “infatuated” level, leading to slower romance progressions that mostly disregard initial physical attraction).

Each RO's path will still progress at a different speed. Glitch's “infatuated” and “devoted” variable activates *much* earlier than the rest of the cast, for example, whereas Rosy's activates the slowest. Either way, I'm excited to eventually share *Mind Blind 2.0* with you. (After the alpha draft is released, that is, because right now my priority is simply to finish.)

[Mind Blind Teaser \(Spoilers\)](#)

[Oct 12, 2021](#)

I've been pretty much offline these past couple days due to computer problems and also due to being completely absorbed with this newest chapter (BECAUSE NOH). Anyhow, as apology for my silence, here's a teaser for the next update on October 16.

I mentioned in a recent post that Button can walk away from Noh and thus never learn their identity. Obviously, this part is still a WIP (as is the whole game), but I wanted to share a little about how the scene plays out.

What do you guys think? Is the warning about being locked out of content too obvious? Not obvious enough? Feedback is appreciated!

(Also, because of this scene--for Buttons who maintain their cover--I'll be adding in options to customize your bedroom in Chapter 1 on the rewrite.)

* * * *

Beyond this point lie spoilers. You have been warned.

* * * *

For a moment, you can only gaze at page. Because this is weird and abnormal and utterly terrifying . . . yet it also feels mundane. This book isn't a horror movie prop, where the director arranges for the

shadow to hit just right and the musical score creates a pit of growing dread in your stomach.

No. Your bedroom looks and feels as it always has: the Ikea lamp by your bed, the lopsidedly-hung painting that you bought in a yard sale, the ugly yellow wallpaper that Nick keeps swearing he'll eventually paint over. There's nothing ominous or spooky here. This your home. Your window doesn't crack open to let in a sudden icy gust; there's no malicious creak of someone lumbering up the staircase. Your bedroom door, decorated with the poster of your favorite band since high school, doesn't suddenly swing open to reveal a shadowed form.

Yet despite the banal normalcy of your surroundings, the page's words have changed. Someone is writing to you. But you doubt even telekinetic could rewrite a book, and the only sound in the stillness is that of your own ragged breathing.

Whoever sent this message isn't inside your bedroom. They're inside your head.

And their touch feels familiar.

CHOICE: *I slam shut the book. Then I pinch my arm, because this is obviously a nightmare.*

Your pinch is hard enough to make you hiss with pain. Not a dream. Still a nightmare.

Hopefully, this is a nightmare that you can escape. You lurch towards the door, towards the handle. Your hand misses.

Disoriented, you reach out again, only for your fingertips to barely brush against the bronze knob. Or are they passing through? Your depth perception skews and warps, and you're no longer able to discern whether the door is far across the room or only a foot away.

The lead singer's signature scrawled on the bottom of your poster bleeds into the name of the band, falling over the blocky print like a scribbled shroud. As with the book, the words rearrange into a new message:

I'll only offer to help once. Pick up the book.

CHOICE: *Not happening. I focus and reach for the door's handle once more.*

Again, your hand passes through the knob. You stare at the poster. Its message is somehow the only thing that seems real and tangible despite you knowing that it's neither.

I'll only offer to help once. Pick up the book.

If you refuse this offer, the writer may never make contact again. This Ment, who you're almost certain is the same person who forced you to plant the bomb, who ruined your life and almost ended your brother's . . . they'll disappear. You might lose your chance to apprehend them for the UCRT explosion, as well as what may be your best chance of rescuing Nick.

Do you really want to walk away?

CHOICES AVAILABLE:

Yes

or

No

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 22.5](#)

[Oct 13, 2021](#)

From the Personal Correspondence of Lady Vitrula Rhys

Dear Tru,

Apologies for the delay between this letter and my last. Work has kept me busy of late—I could regale you with my adventures in paperwork but I expect you'd find the details as tedious as I do. Instead, I've decided to share another of Anterdon's fables since you enjoyed the last one so much. Theo finds my hobby of collecting such stories to be childish (a judgement he feels it necessary to constantly vocalize) but I admit that I value your opinion on such matters over that of a convicted Destroyer of Books. Perhaps I will do as you suggested and eventually collect these tales in a single volume for publication, although I wonder if they might be too morbid to achieve popularity in Verdan. The Anterdonians have a macabre sense of humor which, though we both find wickedly amusing, may not hold much appeal outside its borders.

My translation of this latest yarn will no doubt pale in comparison to the rendition given by the bard from whom I heard it, but I hope you will enjoy it nevertheless:

There once was born two brothers who, due to an unfortunate turn of fate, had but one body to share between them. Each controlled a single arm and a single leg as well as their own heads, and a lone heart kept both alive. Though they each had a name given to them at birth, everyone in their village knew them as "Brother Left" and "Brother Right." It so happened that Brother Left became smitten with a girl from their village. Each time he saw her, his shared heart raced in excitement. This caused Brother Right to realize his twin's affection, and he grieved for he knew that Brother Left and the girl could never be together so long as the brothers shared a body. Eventually, he proposed a solution.

"Brother," he said. "Cut off my head so that you will have two arms and two legs and our heart will belong to you alone. Only then can you be with the one you desire."

Brother Left, of course, refused. "I could no more hurt you than I could hurt myself," he swore. "I will forget the girl and we will never speak of this again."

The two brothers agreed to pretend their conversation had never happened. However, Brother Left's feelings for the girl lingered. The girl never noticed—she was unable to look beyond his shared body and see the longing in his eyes. Time passed, and the girl married another. Brother Left grew bitter. If only Brother Right didn't exist, he thought, I would have been her husband.

His anger festered within his half of their heart. Years passed, and the girl's husband died. Brother Left rejoiced. Now was his chance. Thus, one night, as Brother Right slept, Brother Left seized his sword and with a single slash, hacked off his brother's head. At once, he controlled both arms and both legs. The next day, he visited the widow and proposed that they be wed. The girl did not recognize him with only the one head and gladly accepted his offer.

However, after their marriage, Brother Left soon realized that the girl was not at all what he had imagined. She scolded him constantly, until all the hair fell from his head and he turned into a wrinkled old man before his fortieth year. He wept, realizing that he had sacrificed his own brother in order to live a life of misery. Filled with despair, he once again reached for his sword. This time, however, the head he cut off was his own.

As I've mentioned, Anterdonian fables always seem to end horrifically rather than happily. When I first heard this story from a minstrel performing at a tavern, I asked him if any greater meaning or message could be gleaned from such a perverse tale. The old man cackled, and every native patron in the room echoed his laugh. It was the barkeep who finally answered my question.

"Brothers before lovers," he said, still laughing. "Never value a woman above your comrades."

Theo found this punchline as uproariously funny as the rest of the establishment. I, however, ponder if perhaps the fable's original author had a different intent in mind. It seems a cautionary tale: to never give up something you love in order to gain something you simply desire. I know our debates usually focus on texts of a more academic nature, but I'm curious to hear whether your interpretation differs from mine.

Eagerly anticipating to your reply,

Xander

[Writer's Blog: Disappearing Stats and The Evolving Biography](#)

[Oct 15, 2021](#)

Word Count: 426k

Next Update: October 16 (aka tomorrow evening)

In addition to the romance reworkings that I mentioned in my last blog post, I'll also be doing major overhauls of how stats present in the menu screen.

In the second draft (which will be done after I get this alpha out), many relationship stats will not longer show. Nick and the main ROs will remain (complete with Nick's possible 200%), but Button's relationship with their parents, as well as with members of Vengeance, will be hidden. The "Past Crush" gages will also disappear.

I over-relied on numerical relationship tracking when I first started coding *Mind Blind*, and that's something I intend to correct.

Hope and John

One of the inevitable ramifications of having a low relationship score with Hope and John is that it gives readers the impression that Button's animosity may go both ways. It doesn't. Sure, Hope and John may enjoy the company of certain Buttons more than others, but they unconditionally love even the most resentful and angry of their children. A simple relationship bar doesn't reflect this.

I'm not saying that Hope and John did everything perfectly: they didn't. But they did do their best, and they do love Button.

During the Great Recoding, Button's relationships with Hope and John will instead be tracked by invisible variables that will remember the *type* of relationship Button has with each parent (the planned options are: Fearful, Resentful, Close, Apologetic, and Awkward). These variables will be what change the family scenes. Furthermore, Hope and John will have somewhat independent variables (with exceptions like John not having a Fearful variable).

Reese and AL

On the flip side of this equation sits Vengeance's top two terrorists. Their relationship bar right now is an odd combo of trust level and personal affection, which I plan to divide into two and then hide both. In addition to more nuanced reactivity, it'll make undercover scenes much more tense and realistic if you don't easily know whether or not you're actually winning over Reese and AL.

There will be more textual clues in their behavior about how they feel towards Button, but the nature of the undercover dynamic is meant to keep you guessing. I feel like having a mathematized relationship score for these characters diminishes the intended impact.

Past Relationships

The Crush Bars for Sally and Gray were perhaps a bad idea to begin with, I admit. I wanted a way to make sure people saw their past choices being tracked, but those relationship bars become awkward when Button romances someone else. Should the crush bars disappear as if nothing ever happened? What if you're playing a Button who, although romancing Kenzie, still has a wistful soft spot for Gray?

I feel like it's better to get rid of the stats altogether.

THE REPLACEMENT

In place of these removed relationship bars, there will be a new tab on the stat menu labeled "Biography" (or hopefully something pithier). In this section, short sentences will be gradually added to describe your character.

Examples:

You confessed to Grayson about your crush in high school, but were rejected. Your feelings have since/haven't gone away.

You and your father have a tense relationship. He tries to make amends, but you can't forgive him for abandoning you when you needed him most.

I'm also considering turning this tab into a "The Story Thus Far" portion, for if you ever set *Mind Blind* aside and not remember your last choice. It'll summarize not only your starting relationship dynamics, but also record the major events.

Examples:

You and Sally beat Kent at Glitch by locking Kenzie out of Room 1.

You didn't visit Nick at the hospital.

Andy accused you of being a spy. You bit his nose.

This last part will be a lot of additional coding, but I think it'll be a nice way to keep track of your choices (at least, the choices which the code is already remembering). The trick will be striking a balance between summarizing Button's actions and not ending up with a five-page Sparknotes version of the story.

[Update Delayed, But Have A Bloopers Reel](#)

[Oct 16, 2021](#)

I'm still fixing code, so the demo update won't be out until tomorrow. I'm so sorry, everyone! I truly thought that I could get it out by tonight, but I likely have at least two more hours of bug quashing ahead of me.

*Problem in a little more depth: I had both dialogues with Noh (at the safehouse and at Nick's house) using the same scene, with the differences written within using *if variables. This lead to an issue that I'm can't for the life of me figure out why it was an issue. Regardless, I finally separated the scene into two different scenes, but I had to rename name everything. Since this is similar to the problems I encountered in Chapter 13, I should probably just stop trying to consolidate scenes.*

Anyway, until tomorrow morning, here's a few bloopers.

* * * *

Rage builds up inside you like . . . like a . . . you're so angry that you can't even come up with a proper metaphor. Fury doesn't enhance eloquence.

"Well, *you're* a . . ." You hiss with frustration, floundering for a suitable insult that will encompass the immensity of your wrath. But your brain is a haze of red, and all you can do is grasp for a childhood taunt. ". . . *Butthead.*"

* * * *

You proceed to bombard the Ment with the greatest atrocities you've ever witnessed online; you're accustomed to keeping Ments at bay with violent and disgusting thoughts, but now you reach for images uncovered in the deepest dregs of the internet. The imagery you send is so revolting and so unspeakable, that even you feel faintly nauseous by the time you're done.

The page doesn't rewrite itself, and for a moment you wonder if you've successfully chased off the Ment.

You wait a minute, but still nothing happens.

Victory is yours, and you owe it all to Rule 34.

* * * *

"What's your name?" you ask.

Irrelevant.

"I'm beginning to feel like our relationship is one-sided, Menty."

I'm here with an offer of aide. No more, no less.

Your hand flutters over your chest as you feign affront. “No relationship? But you’ve been *insi*—”

The page hastily rewrites itself: **Stop. Just Stop.**

* * * *

“I feel like we should get to know each other,” you propose. “I’ll go first. I like crosswords, romantic walks on the beach, and people who don’t explode my brother.”

I’m not

The new sentence is only halfway before pausing, as if the author is trying to determine how to end the sentence without coming across as making paltry excuses.

“Into crosswords?” you finish for them blithely. “Too bad. I was hoping that you could figure out the phrase I’m thinking of. It begins with a four-letter expletive, and ends with YOU.”

* * * *

The most frustrating thing about your immediate pen pal is the complete and utter lack of clues provided by their responses. With writing, you can’t discern anything important about them: not their voice nor build nor gender. Nothing to give you a clue as to their identity.

“It would be much easier to talk face-to-face,” you cajole the book.

I can hear your thoughts. Stop plotting.

Your lower lip juts out in a pout. “*You* stop.”

No, you.

“You.”

The previous sentence remains on the page, and you’re suddenly put in mind of long-ago family car rides, seated next to Nick in the back seat.

[Dashingdon Down, Have Some Code](#)

[Oct 17, 2021](#)

First delay was my fault. This second delay, I’m blaming on the universe.

Dashingdon is currently down (I’ve been trying to access it for a while with no luck, and no one on the Sanctum seems able to access the site either). That being said, I *did* promise an update today.

Attached to this post is the coded file for the first part of Chapter 14. There's still some dead ends (it only includes the conversation with Noh part, and I took off the ending with the final decision because that's better read as part of the game, as well as the alternate route where Button is terrified during the whole conversation since I felt it made the coding too hard to follow). Noh's romance bits won't be active until their first in-game reveal happens either, so this document is currently the only way to read it.

Sorry that's it's not an update (I'll keep checking Dashingdon, and update the link asap)! But it's still 11,000+ words for those who can't wait :)

[Mind Blind Chapter 14 Update!](#)

[Oct 18, 2021](#)

Word Count: 421,000

Average Playthrough: 98k

Notes (with spoilers): The scenes where Button dismisses Noh early on aren't fully implemented yet, but you can still play through Noh's conversation up to the final choice (*dun-dun-duuuuunnnn*).

Nover!Button scenes are also in for Chapter 13, although pointing the gun at Kenzie will lead to a (figurative!) dead end since I'm currently contemplate whether or not I should allow them to be kidnapped by Vengeance if Button throws them under the bus (or dump truck, in Vengeance's case). This will lead to yet another permutation of Chapter 14's second half, but one that I think could be ~fun~.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-ivanhoe/mygame/>

[Delivery Teaser: On Being Ghosted](#)

[Oct 20, 2021](#)

Some mortals who pass on with unfinished business enter into the intangible phase of existence—that is, they become ghosts.

Despite shedding the physical limitations of their human body, ghosts become immobile, tethered to the location at which they died or a place which had significance to them back when they were still a

Flesher (in *Delivery*, referring to ghosts as “dead” and humans as “alive” is the height of rudeness). Ghosts end up trapped in their prior residence where, unable to pay rent or the electric bill, they either become roommates to still-corporeal friends and family, or (in most cases) their home is foreclosed upon and they're doomed to live in an abandoned building since corporeal tenants and buyers aren't keen on a housemate who can pass through walls.

Unable to move beyond their tether, most ghosts are slowly driven insane by boredom and isolation, forgetting their own names by the fifth century of their continued existence. Although many life insurance companies offer a Next-Life clause that guarantees a caretaker and companion, these addendums are notoriously cost-prohibitive and usually expire after four decades post-mortem.

Despite the unpleasantness that awaits most ghosts, many humans still consider it to be preferable to the complete unknown of Total Death. The process of being ghosted has become an employment benefit which many companies like T.H.A.B.* offer their highest-level executives in order not to lose out on their years of experience.

Being ghosted is complicated and expensive, necessitating a fairy's pact, a witch's curse, and a legally binding blood oath by a demon, but T.H.A.B.'s post-mortem benefits include having the ghost's permanent abode relocated to a retirement neighborhood filled with other noncorporeal residents. . . all of whom are T.H.A.B. employees for the rest of their next-lives. Should a ghost employee choose to break their contract and stop working for the company, T.H.A.B.'s in-house exorcist is called upon to oversee contract termination.

In *Delivery*, you'll work with ghosts such as your ex-mentor, Lydia (who was ghosted by chance), and also your boss, Melchior Thumm. Mr. Thumm has been an employee of T.H.A.B. for so long that H.R. no longer has his original files on record (or so they claim), and some of your gossipier coworkers whisper that he was T.H.A.B.'s original founder. Regardless of his true role in the company, the crochety old German is curiously invested in your continued employment. In fact, he's even offered to add a Next-Life clause to your contract.

. . . Which is convenient, given the recent string of murders. You may very well die.

**T.H.A.B. – To Hell And Back Delivery Service, the company which employs the MC*

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 23](#)

[Oct 20, 2021](#)

“You found this in the library?” Delphine's voice was skeptical. She set down the grimoire on her desk, using one hand to keep it open while the other motioned me to pull my chair closer.

I nodded. Delphine likely wouldn't turn Colm in for holding onto an illegal text, but it wasn't my secret to tell. "The binding's age piqued my curiosity. The spell looks as if it might be useful." Since the quickening spell was similar to the slowing charm, except in reverse, I hoped that my natural knack for the one would translate to proficiency with the other.

"It's old," she confirmed. "Older than you realize. This grimoire predates the Uprising, and perhaps even the Mages Guild. It's remarkable anything is still legible." She arched a brow. "Where in the library did you find it?"

I met her eyes without blinking. "Next to records of King Ignatius's public works. I was doing research for the next Council meeting."

Delphine's skeptical eyebrow didn't lower, but she refrained from calling my bluff. "Physical augmentation spells aren't commonly practiced," she said. "Most mages are unwilling to risk the side effects of miscasting."

"Such as?"

"Heart palpitations, rapid aging. An inability to stop moving." Her lips pursed as she skimmed the page's instructions. "Disintegration."

"Disintegration?"

"One account describes a sorcerer who tried to turn invisible—physically, not through illusion. Supposedly, his body began to vibrate like a chimbet string before he vanished into a cloud of dust." She splayed out her fingers in simulation of a small explosion. "But Molerin's writings are hardly the most reliable."

Well. Oscillating out of existence hadn't been one of the ways I'd anticipated dying, but the risk seemed negligible compared to remaining defenseless. I doubted Letty and her partner would patiently delay attacking me until I became proficient at fisticuffs.

I squinted at the open page. "It's almost too faint to read."

Delphine ran her nail over the faded lettering. "*Skiros*." At her command, the ink darkened. I reread the instructions, which were much clearer now that every third word wasn't illegible. As I'd already noted, the procedure was similar to the slowing spell. Only this time, instead of weaving magic *around* an object, the spellcaster needed to siphon away preexisting energy.

I frowned. "I don't understand. How will *removing* magic make something go faster?"

"To be honest, I don't fully comprehend the science myself," admitted Delphine. "No one truly does—that's the nature of magic. To the best of our understanding, the world, or rather reality, is formed from the union of magic and life. Life moves and time passes, perfectly balanced to go at complimentary speeds. Too much or too little of either, and things teeter."

"A lack of life results in death, whereas an overabundance might create a tumor," I summarized from our earlier lessons. "An imbalance magic, on the hand, results in movement and time no longer synchronizing. Thus, things going faster or slower."

She nodded. "So most Verdan scholars believe. The Anterdonians claim that mages bring forth possibilities from other existences, and the Fengali consider magic a divine inheritance from their ancestors. Thankfully, none of us are required to understand the process for it to work."

This wasn't exactly the reassurance I wanted to hear before casting a potentially fatal spell. It would be humiliatingly ironic if I accidentally killed myself this time around before anyone else had the chance.

Delphine discerned my nervousness. Her green eyes regarded me solemnly, and she reached out to brush a stray strand of hair from my cheek. "You know that I'd never permit you to attempt any spell beyond your capability."

My face cracked in a half-grin as I recalled how furious she'd been when I'd tried to skip ahead before mastering the basics. This spell's instructions only filled half a page. Nothing seemed particularly tricky, but it took only the smallest irregularity for an incantation to go catastrophically wrong. Yet Colm's friend had mastered the spell, and, unlike me, Allan hadn't been a trained mage. I could do this.

"Perhaps you should try casting it on something else first," suggested Delphine. "The hands of a clock, for instance."

I shook my head. "The spell is designed to be cast on living creatures." This particular spell, according to author's shadow-faint notation, had been used to rig horse races before Allan had repurposed it to win his boxing matches, and I wasn't about to use Dragon as a test subject. I still felt guilty over accidentally poisoning that ferret during my last life, and I hadn't even liked the pungent weasel.

"Should anything go wrong, I'll contain the backlash." Delphine reached over and untied the cord around my neck. She examined the protective rune pensively. "If all else fail, I'll throw the wardstone at you."

I choked back a laugh at her irreverence towards an irreplaceable ancient artifact, and closed my eyes. Sunlight streamed through the nearby window, turning the darkness behind my lids gray. Still, it reduced distractions. I peered into myself, much the way I'd examined Emilia to stop her lungs. I moved onwards, to the muscles of my arms and legs, and deeper still to the bones beneath. Strands of energy braided throughout, thrumming harmony with my pulse.

I pulled the threads free one by one, taking care to lift each just enough so that it would soon fall back into place rather than leaving me permanently untethered. With every thread I unwove, my body felt lighter and lighter, until I anticipated I'd begin floating upwards to the ceiling at any moment.

"*Peimis.*" I opened my eyes.

I didn't feel faster—rather, it was as if everything else had slowed to a halt. Delphine's mouth stretched as if in a yawn. The curtain over the open window lingered midair, lifted by an incoming breeze I could

no longer feel. I crossed the study and shut the frame. Delphine's gaze remained directed at the place I'd been standing. Already, I could feel the strands of energy settling back in place and weighing me down into time's normal flow.

Delphine's head snapped towards me as soon as the threads returned to their original positions.

"—markable," she finished.

I grinned. Remarkable indeed.

The second-best occurrence of the day, following my successful casting of the quickening spell, was my lack of headache from doing so. I'd braced myself for an hours-long migraine and was overjoyed by the realization that its similarities to the slowing spell meant that I suffered no consequences. With my afternoon unexpectedly free, I decided to change into my riding habit and take Dragon out for a gallop. My reclaimed wardstone caused the fitted fabric across my chest to bulge conspicuously, so I looped the cord around my wrist in a bracelet, securing the stone within the buttoned cuff of my sleeve.

To compensate for yesterday's lack of treats during my conversation with Loren, I brought Dragon an extra apple.

"You have a bigger sweet tooth than Letty," I informed him as he nosed my pocket for a third. "At least I can trust you not to poison my cake."

I waved aside a stable hand's offer to saddle Dragon. Like most things, I insisted on preparing for rides myself—just because my assassin hadn't yet tampered with my riding equipment didn't mean the idea wouldn't eventually occur to them. Especially now, with their creativity stimulated by my diary of their successes. Once I finished inspecting the gear and was satisfied nothing had been sabotaged, I readied Dragon. He pranced with eagerness, his heavy hooves kicking up dust storms of hay. I held his harness until we arrived at the palace's back entrance which, instead of leading into town, bordered the Royal Hunting Grounds.

The Tinwood Forest predated Bellcrest, taking its name from the silver-barked birches that grew throughout. Numerous pathways wove throughout the tangled trees, the ground beaten and branches knocked aside by centuries of riders. Deer and foxes roamed freely, with their only predator the occasional noble's hound. Hunting had always been Loren's forte rather than mine—I saw little point in killing for sport, and rather sympathized with prey animals given my own succession of deaths.

The year I'd moved to Bellcrest had been a particularly bad harvest season. Winter had attacked early, and farmers had lost over half their yields to frost. King Eldin had decreed that commoners be allowed to temporarily hunt for game in the Tinwoods. Usually a privilege reserved for nobles and those wealthy enough to pay for a permit, the policy had been far from popular. Numerous nobles, Loren included, protested that overhunting would interfere with their own sporting. I'd started attending Council meetings around that time, and argued fervently in favor of the measures despite my newness at Court.

Thankfully, King Eldin had held firm. While it was true that the number of Tinwoods' four-legged inhabitants had dwindled slightly over the next years, the population was already well on its way to recovery. More importantly, Verdan managed to avoid a full-blown famine.

Despite being unwilling to curtail his own hunts and allow the deer population to reestablish itself, Loren still complained about the poor hunting to anyone willing to listen. Once we wed, I'd need to curtail his more selfish impulses. The prospect didn't exactly fill me with joy.

I mounted Dragon as soon as we entered the mouth of the Tinwoods. The horse's disposition had been skittish ever since his accident, and he did best on an open, straight path where he knew what to expect and wasn't liable to be spooked by a stray shadow as a hare. We kept to the main path, which eventually merged with the road north to Kothe if you followed it long enough. Part of me was tempted to do just that—to have Dragon keep going, until I was back home and far away from anyone who wanted to harm me. Of course, I'd only be safe until my father decided to march on Bellcrest with an army. He'd see the northern provinces regain their former affluence, whether or not I wed Loren. More lives than my own relied on our marriage.

"Shall we run, boy?" Dragon huffed and tossed his head, his inky mane whipping me across the face. I laughed. "All right then."

I dug in my heels, and we took off. Autumn lay around the corner, and the birch leaves had already begun to shift color. Dragon and I flew down the path, a blur of gold and silver on either side.

The sun shone, birds sang, and I was almost able to forget that someone wanted me dead.

Not, however, for long.

Amber wings barreled downwards, appearing suddenly from the sky as if birthed from the clouds above. Feathers grazed against my cheek as it zoomed past with a *skree*—the cry of a falcon. Sharp talons flashed dangerously close to Dragon's eyes, before curling around the saddle's pommel as the bird landed.

Not an attack, then, despite my thundering pulse. The hawk must have somehow escaped from the castle mews, before returning to the nearest rider as it was trained. I stroked Dragon's tensed neck, and gave a few soothing hushes to calm his quivering.

The falcon flapped its wings.

Dragon reared.

And I fell.

My landing knocked the breath from my lungs, and a jagged dagger of pain pierced my side. I gritted my teeth but was unable to smother my scream as I rolled sideways to escape Dragon's stampeding hooves.

The falcon vanished into the tangled branches overhead. A heavy black hoof stamped down, crushing the bones of my forearm as easily as the dried leaves. I screamed again, sending Dragon into another rear. Rather than wait for his hooves' descent, I dug my untrampled hand into the dirt and heaved myself sideways. The momentum rolled me out of danger, but the jostling of my shattered arm dragged another scream from my throat.

Dragon fled. I tried to call out for him but couldn't take in enough air to shout, and my plea whistled wordlessly from my mouth. A broken rib most likely. Maybe several. Moving would be unwise if I'd punctured a lung as my inability to draw a deep breath indicated. My best chance was to remain still and heal myself with magic.

My left ankle throbbed, the foot having twisted in the stirrup during my fall. My left shoulder ached from the ground's impact, and pain speared through my ribcage and forced me to breath shallowly through my nose. My shattered arm, I no longer felt at all, and I couldn't bring myself to look down at the damage in fear that my wounds were as severe as they felt.

My blurred vision could barely discern the path back to the castle; I definitely lacked the clarity to look within and work a healing spell.

The crunch of fallen leaves under boots came from my right. I tried to turn my head only to find that my prior stillness hadn't been by choice. I heard a whimper, pathetic and mewling. Surely that hadn't come from me?

The person behind me spoke. "You shouldn't ride a broken horse."

His words were hollow and muddled. The effects of a concussion? I strained, trying to recognize the voice. The man's boot nudged at my back, causing my entire body to spasm in agony.

"Poor would-be princess. Should I just leave you here, I wonder? But no." My heart froze at the all-too familiar click of a pistol being cocked. "Let's not take chances."

I knew his voice. But how?

He was going to kill me, again. I would die without fight or protest, as if I were the same helpless fool whom I'd been in my first life, sobbing herself to sleep in a dungeon and expecting everyone to realize their dreadful misunderstanding. What good was a spell for speed if I was unable to move? I might as well be dead for all the progress I'd made.

That last, morbid thought gave me an idea. An unlikely, irrational thought, but it was the only plan I had. Healing magic was currently beyond my abilities, but there was another spell I could cast. All I needed to do was remember that I'd already died.

The first step to casting an illusion is convincing yourself. Delphine's words from a year ago echoed in my head. I didn't know if the spell could alter do what I needed it to and alter someone's memories. Still, what did I have to lose? Only my life, and that had been forfeit before.

I closed my eyes, and remembered. Each one of my deaths, dredging up long-buried details. The torn hem of my skirt during my first execution. Letty's tears as she'd tried to explain her betrayal. My father's rage, my brother's horror, my own despair. Unbeknownst to all, I was a walking corpse, reanimated from beyond the grave time and time again.

You've already killed me. I projected my thoughts to the man's shadow, the only part of him I could see. *You've already killed me, and I'm lying dead on the dirt road. I'm dead, I'm gone, I will be buried. You won. You won, again.*

Unable to speak, I cried out the spell in my mind:

Mejno.

[MB Saucy Side: Hot and Cold \(Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Oct 22, 2021](#)

Inspired By: www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2021/press-release/ because science is sexy

AU where Button is a college student and Rosy is their tutor.

* * * *

When Ambrose volunteered to help you study for your biology final, you hadn't anticipated that his unorthodox tutoring methods.

Your lashes brush against the soft silk of Ambrose's tie, currently tied securely around your eyes. You can vaguely tell his location due to the turned-on lamp upon your nightstand, which illuminates the stripes of his tie whenever you turn your head slightly to the right.

"No peeking." His voice comes as low grumble right next to your ear, causing your breath to hitch. He's closer than you thought.

Papers rustle as he flips through your class notes, reminiscent of an ASMR video that Sally once sent you. But the electric frisson that runs down your back is less a physical reaction to the paper's gentle *swoosh*, and more an anticipatory response to Ambrose's nearness. Your boyfriend likes to surprise you. Who knows what he has planned for tonight?

"Give me . . ." Ambrose trails off suggestively, thumbing through your stack of index cards like a deck of cards; he fans the papers against the skin of your upper arm until he finds a question that he likes. "Give me the definition of a protein."

“Protein.” You miss the brush of the notecards—without Ambrose’s touch, however removed, you’re a hollow ache of desire. “A complex biomolecule comprised of amino acids and peptic bonds.”

Ambrose hums with approval. “Such a diligent student.”

“I prefer the lessons that *you* taught me.” Because you’ve never been one to pass up playing with fire.

His hand grasps the back of your neck, forcing your head to the side so that you look away from the turned-on lamp and can no longer discern his silhouette through the tie’s fabric.

“No distractions, Wiseman,” he scolds. “We’re studying.”

You nervously wet your lips before deciding to take one more risk. “I’d rather be studying *you*—”

His mouth halts your final word. This kiss is deep and intense, almost businesslike in its thoroughness, as if he’s resolved to give you something that will tide you over until this study session’s end. But when he breaks away, you smugly note that his breathing is just as rapid and uneven as your own.

“Who won the 2021 Nobel Prize in Medicine?” he demands.

“Julius and Patapoutian.” You arch forward, silently begging for the kiss’s continuation.

“For?” He withdraws further as punishment for your unsatisfactorily short answer.

“For discovering the nerve cell sensors dealing with temperature, pain, and . . .” You gasp. Ambrose’s hands have stolen upwards from beneath the hem of your shirt, and his palms splay securely against your midriff.

“*Pressure*,” he whispers. “Temperature, pain, and pressure.”

You let out an embarrassingly needy mewl as his large hands migrate upwards and over your skin. Not content to have his exploration constrained beneath fabric, he pulls at your shirt with a low growl, and you compliantly lift your arms so that he can take it off completely. There’s a flash of total darkness as he lifts the shirt over your head, and then a promising swish from what you assume (and hope) is him taking off his own shirt as well.

You hear his footsteps as he walks across the room—*one, two, three, four*. Each second that he’s away, you shiver and goosebump beneath the air conditioner’s breeze. Before you can chide him for neglecting your lesson, you hear the mini-fridge open and close. His footsteps stride back to you.

“What cold receptor did they discover?” he asks.

Your mind goes blank as Ambrose slides an ice cube down the line of your neck. It melts against your skin, the water welling at the dip above your collarbone, which Ambrose banishes with a slow, hot lick.

"I'm waiting." He trails the ice cube lower, across your chest and down to your navel, sucking your flesh that prickles in the wake of its chill.

"TRPM!" Your brain can barely function at this point, let alone recall biology terms.

"TRPM *what?*" He removes the ice cube, causing you to whimper. Somehow, you feel colder without his touch than with the ice drawing circles upon your skin.

"TRPM8!" you explode. "Damn it, Ambrose. TRPM8!"

He kisses you as a reward, the remaining sliver of the ice cube upon his tongue. You're tormented by the juxtaposition of his mouth's warmth and the ice's cold—until the ice melts between you, until only Ambrose's heat remains. Once the ice cube is completely gone, he withdraws again, leaving you aching once more.

"What else does TRPM8 respond to?" His voice is insufferably collected in the aftermath of your embrace.

You turn your head to the light and reach out towards his shadow, or what you think is his shadow through the blindfold. Your hand lands on his upper chest. Beneath your palm, his heartbeat pounds, even more rapid than your own racing pulse. You smirk.

Ambrose places his hand over yours, pressing it against his bared skin. His fingertips are still cold from the ice cube, but the rest of his skin is burning hot. "What else does TRPM8 respond to?" he repeats.

"Menthol." You curl your fingers, so that the tips of your nails lightly scratch across his skin, and he moans. "Which is why mint gum feels so *cold*." You lean forward, and blow a cold stream of air next to your hand. You must've hit your target, because he moans again.

"Only you can make bubblegum sexy, Wiseman." His fingers twine through yours, and he brings your hand lower down his chest and to his lap. You hear the neglected notecards fall feather-soft upon the carpet, but Ambrose doesn't pay any heed. He grabs both your hands and stands.

"Let's talk about TRPV1," he murmurs, leading you across the room.

Still blindfolded, you allow him to pull you onto the bed. Once you're lying down, he unknots his tie from around your eyes. You have barely a moment to appreciate the hungry desperation of his expression before his lips once more capture yours.

"TRPV1," you manage to gasp between kisses. "The receptor for *heat*."

[Oct 22, 2021](#)

Inspired By: www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2021/press-release/ because science is sexy

AU where Button is a college student and Rosy is their tutor.

* * * *

When Ambrosia volunteered to help you study for your biology final, you hadn't anticipated that her unorthodox tutoring methods.

Your lashes brush against the soft silk of Ambrosia's dress sash currently tied securely around your eyes. You can vaguely tell her location due to the turned-on lamp upon your nightstand, which the fabric's stripes whenever you turn your head slightly to the right.

"No peeking." Her voice comes as throaty whisper right next to your ear, causing your breath to hitch. She's closer than you thought.

Papers rustle as she flips through your class notes, reminiscent of an ASMR video that Sally once sent you. But the electric frisson that runs down your back is less a physical reaction to the paper's gentle *swoosh*, and more an anticipatory response to Ambrosia's nearness. Your girlfriend likes to surprise you. Who knows what she has planned for tonight?

"Give me . . ." Ambrosia trails off suggestively, thumbing through your stack of index cards like a deck of cards; she fans the papers against the skin of your upper arm until she finds a question that she likes. "Give me the definition of a protein."

"Protein." You miss the brush of the notecards—without Ambrosia's touch, however removed, you're a hollow ache of desire. "A complex biomolecule comprised of amino acids and peptic bonds."

Ambrosia hums with approval. "Such a diligent student."

"I prefer the lessons that *you* taught me." Because you've never been one to pass up playing with fire.

Her hand grasps the back of your neck, forcing your head to the side so that you look away from the turned-on lamp and can no longer discern her silhouette through the blindfold.

"No distractions, Wiseman," she scolds. "We're studying."

You nervously wet your lips before deciding to take one more risk. "I'd rather be studying *you*—"

er mouth halts your final word. This kiss is deep and intense, almost businesslike in its thoroughness, as if she's resolved to give you something that will tide you over until this study session's end. But when she breaks away, you smugly note that her breathing is just as rapid and uneven as your own.

"Who won the 2021 Nobel Prize in Medicine?" she demands.

"Julius and Patapoutian." You arch forward, silently begging for the kiss's continuation.

"For?" She withdraws further as punishment for your unsatisfactorily short answer.

"For discovering the nerve cell sensors dealing with temperature, pain, and . . ." You gasp. Ambrosia's hands have stolen upwards from beneath the hem of your shirt, and her palms splay securely against your midriff.

"*Pressure*," she whispers. "Temperature, pain, and pressure."

You let out an embarrassingly needy mewl as her graceful hands migrate upwards and over your skin. Not content to have her exploration constrained beneath fabric, she pulls at your shirt with a low growl, and you compliantly lift your arms so that she can take it off completely. There's a flash of total darkness as she lifts the shirt over your head, and then a promising swish from what you assume (and hope) is her taking off her own shirt as well.

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“TRPV1,” you manage to gasp between kisses. “The receptor for *heat*.”

[Writer's Blog: Chekhov's Squirt Gun](#)

[Oct 23, 2021](#)

Wordcount: 462k

Next Update: October 27

Warning: Spoilers!

Another blogpost, which means another entry in the “things I plan to change during *Mind Blind*’s rewrite.” Not to be repetitive, but it’s where my head is at right now. My list of future fixes is sixty-eight

bullets point long as of the writing of this post, and I fully anticipate it surpassing one-hundred by the end of the month.

Today I'm going to talk about a gun. Chekhov's gun, to be precise, and the retroactive planting of figurative firearms throughout the narrative.

Chekhov's gun principle states that if a gun is shown in the first chapter, it needs to go off in a latter chapter. I'm not the best at following this advice, which states that every element in the story must be necessary. Sometimes I include elements because those elements can make for a good pun (as far as any pun can ever be considered "good"). I disagree that every single thing needs to be essential to the story. Sometimes, the squirt gun included in the first scene is just there to illustrate someone's personality (fun-loving, slightly childish, not above violence)—it doesn't ever need to go off.

What I do believe is that if a gun ever *does* go off, readers should already know that there's a gun in play.

. . . I really wish that Chekhov had used a different metaphor, because this blog post feels unnecessarily violent. Basically, this is a roundabout way of reiterating that I'm a huge fan of foreshadowing. Or rather, I'm an anti-fan of *deus ex machina*.

Despite my distaste for unforeseeable twists, I'm also somewhat of a "pantser" when writing. I know the ending of my story, but I rarely have a complete vision of how I'll end up there, preferring to let the characters do the work and take me as they will. This approach makes foreshadowing extremely difficult to implement in the first draft, although I do my best.

Sometimes, however, my attempts to insert foreshadowing doesn't pay off. The most obvious example of this misfiring is with Sally's visions. In particular, her vision involving Glitch.

When I wrote that scene back in Chapter 5, I had no intention of letting Button refuse Noh's offer of assistance. Thus, Glitch and Noh would be forced to cooperate together. Button would get abducted, and Glitch would lash out at Noh for suggesting XYZ in the first place.

Things changed since then.

For one, Button was already hauled off by AL in Chapter 11, and too many kidnappings would come across as redundant. Secondly, you can now (completely justifiably) tell Noh to gtfo. Both these new factors require that Sally's vision about Glitch be altered. I'll most likely make it about the Chapter 11 abduction instead with Glitch getting mad at Rosy, and am only waiting to edit in case I get a better idea (maybe Button still will go through Kidnapping 2.0, if it naturally fits the story like I initially planned). But for now, it remains a never-to-be-fired gun.

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On: Presents](#)

[Oct 26, 2021](#)

You are cordially invited to Nicholas Wiseman's fifth annual Christmas Party.

Date: December 25th

Location: My House (If you received this invitation, you already know the address. Suck it, paparazzi!)

Brunch begins at 10am. Arrive wearing your comfiest holiday pajamas, but don't forget to bring an ugly winter sweater to change into for this year's "WTF Knitwear?" contest, a tradition started by Sir Grayson Black.

(Gray is now whining until I remind everyone that I'm the one who bought that sweater for him, and that he only wore it so as not to be rude. I maintain that the sweater's origin is irrelevant, and he still *chose* to wear a top depicting Stripper Santa's jingling bells.)

Some of you are probably wondering why I'm sending out this invitation two months early. The answer? We need to set gift expectations in advance.

Despite my continued insistence that the only gift I ever want for anything is your attendance and maybe a nice bottle of whiskey, my recent birthday bash has shown that most of you don't abide by this request. Don't get me wrong, I love that you all took the time to pick something out for me. Really. That Loch Ness Monster ladle? A work of art.

However, as Button rightfully pointed out: I now own enough culinary blow torches to arm a peasant mob. Five paella pans are more than one chef could ever use, and I probably don't need four terra cotta garlic roasters either. I appreciate that you all support my cooking hobby (I try to pay back that support with free food), but we're on the verge of running out of space in our kitchen cupboards. Button has begun threatening to donate my smoke gun collection.

As I am emotionally attached to every single one of my smoke guns (most of them were gifts, after all), Button and I have negotiated a compromise. From now on, all cookware gifts are officially banned from the Wiseman household. Don't take this personally—the rule applies to me as well. I recently purchased a salt pig for myself and got read the riot act because "*Nick, we don't have any more **space****."** My suggestion that we simply purchase a bigger house was met with a derisive snort.

(For those of you, like Gray, who are now wondering: a salt pig is an open-mouthed ceramic container that prevents salt from clumping so I can easily take pinch while cooking. Purchasing it was worth earning Button's ire . . . but please don't tell them that.)

Anyhow, Button and I have agreed that this year, everyone should send out a reverse wish-list. Not a wish list, because if we only bought each other what they wanted, Gray never would've received his

Stripper Santa sweater (and we all would've lost out). But if you can all email out a list of things that you already have/don't want, it'll help me feel less like an ungrateful tool for sending out this letter. Also, it'll make sure that Gray doesn't end up with three dozen crates of Arizona Iced Tea blocking his hallway for two months. (Can we all take a moment to be appalled/impressed that it only took him two months to drink three dozen crates?)

My Reverse Wish List is attached below. Button insisted that Gray write it, to make sure I actually followed through.

Presents To NOT Get Nick (a list by Grayson Black):

1) Cookware of any kind.

2) Aprons. He has two laundry loads worth already, and buying him more just enables him to put off doing laundry.

3) Cookbooks.

4) Basically, anything that would need to be stored in the kitchen.

5) That UCRT Charity Calendar where he's shirtless and holding puppies on the cover (added as a special request from his sibling—Nick actually wants a few copies).

[Defeating Your Inner Demons](#)

[Oct 27, 2021](#)

I'm doing my best to get the update posted tonight, but I had one of my famous (infamous?) last minute epiphanies. So it'll probably be up at midnight at the earliest 😊

(I swear that I'm doing my best to keep deadlines, but pre-update adrenaline nerves often leads to last-minute creative bursts. Insert cliched phrase about being "merciless in the face of my muse blahblahblah" *here*.)

WARNING: MEGA SPOILERY BITS

Originally in this chapter, Noh simply used Button to track Nick's location. There was some flowery language and psychic woohoo handwavey explanation, but Button played a passive role that never felt fully satisfying to me during my trial playthroughs.

Around two hours ago, inspiration struck to make Button proactive and to deepen their character arc. Now, Noh needs Button to follow the echoes of Nick's thoughts, selecting them from the crowd of Ment

voices that Noh can hear while in Button's mind.

To explain via metaphor: when Ment's overhear Button's thoughts, they're entering into Button's airspace (Brainspace? Mindzone? Hemosphere Atmosphere?). And when Noh pushes outward while attached to Button (looking for Nick), too many airplanes flying overhead makes it impossible for Noh to identify Nick's jet. Button, however, is very familiar with Nick's jet due to Nick's jet constantly invading their airspace. So Noh needs Button to identify which thoughts are Nicks, using a convenient multiple-choice framework that just so happens to be how interactive fiction works in the first place.

(Okay, this is a bad metaphor, but hopefully you get my point!)

Anyhow, there's a whole new sequence that I'm frantically trying to finish. It also involves Button defeating their own self doubt, which changes based off Button's stats scores. That part I just finished (although still need to edit).

The new self-doubt portion is copied below. I'm still going to get the update posted asap, but wanted to share all the mean-girl options since you won't see them all unless you codedive.

Feedback is appreciated, especially if you don't think that the option that matches your Button's stats is an intrusive thought they'd ever have! (Keep in mind that these also still need to be edited.)

* * * *

EXCERPT:

It all feels like an exercise in futility, and the silence gives voice to the worst of your self-doubts.

***if (morbidty > 70)**

You should give up. You're nothing but a gloomy little Eeyore with a cloud hanging above their head to rain on everyone else's parade. When have you been useful even once in your life? Be realistic: you're a narcissistic pessimist, so pathetically enraptured by your own pain that you've been blinded to the fact that you're not the Gothic hero of this story.

You're nothing more than the protagonist's insignificant sibling.

***elseif (confidence > 70)**

You should give up. It's time to face reality: for all your false confidence, recent events have proven that you're powerless. That you're [i]weak[/i].

Everything that has gone wrong this past month can be traced back to your pathetic desperation to prove yourself. If you had ever once been brave enough to acknowledge your own limitations, you never would've joined Aeon in the first place. You would've moved away to a small, forgettable town where you could've lived the small, forgettable life. The kind of life for which you're suited.

Instead, you arrogantly allowed yourself to be used as a weapon.

****elseif (humor > 70)***

You should give up. Do you honestly believe that you're capable of rescuing Nick? You? A painted clown who deflects from their pain with bad jokes and a self-provided laugh track? In any blockbuster movie, you'd be cast as the quirky sidekick too insignificant to even deserve your own catchphrase.

You're not a hero; you're nothing but a joke.

****elseif ((confidence > 35) and (morbidty > 35))***

You should give up. It's time to face reality: for all your false confidence, recent events have proven that you're powerless. That you're [i]weak[/i].

Your bravado is nothing more than the grotesque bloatedness of a drowned corpse too stupid to realize that they could never swim.

****elseif ((confidence > 35) and (humor > 35))***

You should give up. It's time to face reality: for all your false confidence, recent events have proven that you're powerless. That you're [i]weak[/i].

Did you imagine yourself to be some sort of plucky underdog? Did you think that your foolhardy bravado came across as charming because you're willing to laugh at yourself?

Don't be absurd. You're not the jokester; you're the punchline.

****elseif ((humor > 35) and (morbidty > 35))***

You should give up. Do you honestly believe that you're capable of rescuing Nick? Surely your sense of humor is dark enough to appreciate the absurdity of that delusion.

You're not the hero in this scenario: you're a clown carrying a rattlesnake who claims that their jokes have bite. Your failure is as inevitable as always, and it's no longer funny.

****elseif (resentful > 70)***

You should give up. You're not a Ment; you barely even qualify as a Norm. You should've been a Ten given your parentage, but Fate handed Nick your birthright and gave him two powers. And now you're supposed to somehow save him?

Who the hell do you think you are, Zero?

****elseif (resentful < 30)***

You should give up. You're an accepting person—it's time to accept once and for all that you're useless. You're not a Ment; you barely even qualify as a Norm. Trying to pretend otherwise lead to you planting that bomb in the first place.

Now you're deluded enough to believe that you can help rescue Nick? Who the hell do you think you are, Zero?

***else**

You should give up. It's time to accept once and for all that you're useless. You're not a Ment; you barely even qualify as a Norm. Trying to pretend otherwise lead to you planting that bomb in the first place.

Now you're deluded enough to believe that you can help rescue Nick? Who the hell do you think you are, Zero?

[Mind Blind Update: Chapter 14](#)

[Oct 28, 2021](#)

What's New:

1) The beginning of the new process where Button has to identify Nick if cooperating with Noh. It's very much a work-in-progress that my brain is still untangling the logistics of (psychic science is *hard*, guys!), but I'll be trying to finish it tonight and updating the link every thousand words or so (every few hours).

2) Scenes with Sally should Button refuse Noh's offer, both romance and friendship versions (crush version without confirmed romance will be added later). This scene can be difficult to trigger since it requires Button having both maintained their cover with Vengeance *and* having invited Sally to stay with them during earlier chapters.

3) Rick.

Notes:

I still have a lot to get done for October's progress (expect another 10,000 or so words to be added over the next few days).

The alternative scenes where Button is either staying at Aeon or didn't invite Sally to stay are still being worked on, and Buttons romancing Gray will have a separate pathway where he's your check-in Ment instead. These scenes are completely written, and will go up tomorrow once the code is fixed.

Current Wordcount: 430k

Link: dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-jubilee/mygame/

[Lockdown Night, Part One](#)

[Oct 29, 2021](#)

Note: *I wanted to try my hand at a Mind Blind flavor horror story, only to have the plot take on a life of its own and the story become longer than I anticipated. Look for the second half on Halloween!*

ALSO . . . Head over to the Sanctum to vote on who should be the final survivor, Glitch or Kenzie. This is a spooky story after all, and there can only be one. (If you don't have discord, you can leave your vote in a comment on this post.)

* * * *

Despite the subtle morosity of its name, the town of Drearwood, Colorado, possessed a charm which should have landed it the number one spot on any of *Condé Nast's* "Best Small Town" lists. The air was always crisp and clean, and the town proper nestled scenically between the bosom of two Rocky Mountain peaks. In the summer, sunshine painted the surrounding canyon a burnished copper, and the Diamante River's crystalline clarity lived up to its name. Winters were even more beautiful, as snowfall covered the mountains and softened the brightly-painted downtown buildings to pastel, transforming the four blocks of Main Street into the glassy interior of a snow globe.

The town was remote in a way that would've made stargazers covetous had they known about the location's existence, and was accessible only by a road more often closed than open due to heavy snowfall and which everyone simply called The Pass. No one ever accidentally ended up in Drearwood, and no one among its two-hundred-person population ever felt inclined to leave.

The residents had a schedule which they followed with religious regularity: Mondays through Fridays, the adults went to work and the children to school; on Saturdays, everyone filtered in and out through Nick Wiseman's tavern (although children were banned after seven pm); and Sundays were for Church. The congregation, although nominally Catholic, primarily worshiped the holy trinity of ribs, BBQ sauce, and Sally Wiseman's homemade cornbread . . . which everyone knew her husband was secretly the one to bake despite his refusal to attend service.

Occasionally, someone new would move into town, usually a corporate burnout from Denver who romanticized the lifestyle of working remote and had seen an old mansion for sale on Zillow for a quarter of its estimated value. But the newcomers never lingered for beyond a year, and the manor was

usually back on the market by the beginning of November. No one in Drearwood discussed why the city expats never stayed—everyone who truly lived here already knew.

Glitch Parker did not know, of course. How could she?

After having sold several apps (none with easily-explained functions) to large corporations, her decision to buy Ambrose Manor was a whim on level with the way that other, less wealthy humans might decide to buy a recreational kayak. It took only a phone call, and then her lawyers informed her that she owned property in a town too small to show up on most roadmaps. Desirous to explore her new purchase (or, more accurately, desperately longing to avoid the Halloween party of a recent romantic entanglement who'd begun to use the pronoun "we"), Glitch packed a suitcase, called up her best friend, and set out on an impromptu road trip.

Kent's Mustang was designed as a sleek city vehicle, and its EcoBoost tires weren't equipped to make it through The Pass, which hadn't been repaved since its original construction in 1902. Their spare tire blew right next to Drearwood's faded welcome sign, forcing Kent and Glitch to walk the remaining mile due to the lack of cell reception with which to call AAA. As it was late Saturday evening, they arrived to find the usual crowd outside of Wiseman Tavern, the customers seated at individual tables illuminated by electric lamps (Nick having gotten rid of the bonfires after his wife and sister had almost accidentally burned down the establishment the night of Ellery's twenty-first birthday).

Glitch frowned. It was Halloween, but not a single towns person was in costume. Not that she'd anticipated much from a town with less people than her graduating high school class, but she felt a pang of disappointment at the complete lack of festivities. No jack-o-lanterns decorated the porches, and there wasn't a single plastic skeleton in sight.

Kent pushed ahead of her, his demeanor still tense and unhappy over having to abandon his precious Mustang out in the middle of nowhere. Glitch sighed and followed him into the tavern.

The interior was sparse, with only a few oil paintings of people with welcoming smiles hanging on its hardwood walls. Decorations had mostly been eschewed in favor of fitting as many tables as possible, all of which were filled with patrons. Small children crouched beneath several of the tables, playing on handheld gaming systems as their parents chatted over beers, which surprised Glitch given that the time was well past her own childhood bedtime.

A man with merry eyes and a crooked smile waved to them from behind the bar. "You must be Ambrose Manor's new buyers." His smile faded slightly. "We didn't expect you in until tomorrow."

"She's the owner. I'm her ride." Kent shot Glitch a glare that served a silent reminder that, had Glitch agreed to depart when planned instead of fleeing from her ex like a coward, they would've driven into town in a rented jeep instead of using his ill-equipped Mustang. "My tire blew a mile or so back—is there a telephone that I could use? Cell service isn't working."

The man laughed. "You won't get any cell reception tonight. Landline is past the kitchen, go on ahead. But Clarence won't come, and he runs the only pickup service."

Kent's face smoothed of expression, although Glitch could tell he was surprising another scowl. "Maybe I can convince him. My friend will pay whatever's necessary." *Since the flat tire is her fault*, his quick glare at Glitch silently added.

The man shook his head. "Clarence won't come out until tomorrow morning," he repeated. "But you can make arrangements." As Kent departed in the direction of the landline, the man wiped his palms on his faded denim jeans before thrusting his broad hand over the counter. "Nick Wiseman," he introduced himself. "Owner of this very fine tavern, and Ambrose Manor's caretaker."

Glitch accepted his handshake. "Glitch Parker," she said. "Owner of Ambrose Manor, and hopeful patron of this fine very tavern."

Nick laughed. "I like you, Parker. First drink is on the house."

As she waited for Nick to serve her his recommendation (a local whiskey which she'd never heard of), Glitch took in her surroundings. The clock on the wall read ten pm, but not a single customer seemed inclined to depart. There were more children than she thought as well—at least twenty—and several teenagers as well who, like their parents, were drinking from pint glasses.

Nick noticed her arched eyebrows as he set down her glass. "Cider for anyone under twenty-one," he said. "I'd asked to see your ID, but I already saw it on the sales paperwork for the house."

Glitch pretended to take a sip of the whiskey. She didn't drink, but experience taught her that pretending to was an easy way to set people at ease. Rejecting her new neighbor's hospitality was a surefire way to leave a bad impression. "I'm surprised the last owners were willing to let the place go for such a low price," she said, keeping a close watch on Nick's expression.

Nick laughed again, but this time his smile didn't meet his eyes. "They lived in Drearwood for almost a year. City folk usually get tired of small town living for much longer."

"Did you grow up here?"

Nick shook his head. "I moved here with my sister around five years ago. But we live downtown, so . . ." He broke off his sentence with a small cough. "We live downtown."

Kent returned. His expression had gone completely blank, the way it always did when he was fuming. He must've been unable to convince Clarence to rescue his Mustang tonight, just like Nick had predicted.

Nick flinched Glitch's whiskey and handed it to Kent. "Looks like you could use this more than your friend." He placed a new pint glass in front of Glitch, its contents the same color as that the teenagers were sipping. "Apple cider." He met Glitch's surprised blink with a warm smile. "You don't have to pretend here in Drearwood."

"I see why you're the proprietor," Glitch replied as Kent drowned the whiskey. She gestured to the packed tables. "Is there a Halloween Party or something going on later? I don't think I've ever seen a bar this packed, not even back in Denver."

Nick shook his head. "We celebrate Halloween tomorrow." His easy smile never diminished, but he averted his eyes to wipe down the table. "Tonight's Lockdown Night. It's an old tradition, back from the day when the mines were operational. Tax collectors would visit the town on October 31st, so all the miners would try to avoid them by having a lockdown at the local bar. I kept up the custom after buying the building from Lev, the last owner."

Kent placed his now-empty glass on the bar. "You celebrate Halloween a day late?"

"That's right. It's why Clarence won't drive out from Tipton to tow your car—Drearwoodians have a habit of not paying for things on Lockdown Night." He grinned. "Except the bartender. Everyone pays the bartender."

"When does the Lockdown end?" Glitch asked. "Ambrose Manor isn't exactly walking distance from downtown, so we'll need a taxi."

Nick thrust his thumb towards a middle-aged woman seated at one of the nearby tables. "Adsila has a cab, but she won't be leaving until Lockdown ends in the morning. You should stay." Despite being friendly-issued, Nick's suggestion sounded more like an order and brooked no room for argument. "No one will drive anywhere on Lockdown Night. Besides—" his easy smile returned—"there's no better way to get to know your neighbors than hanging out in a tavern with half the town."

Glitch smiled back. "I'm always up for a party." Provided it wasn't hosted by her ex.

"I just want my car," Kent grumbled.

"Your car will be safe," Nick promised. "Trust me. No one will be going out tonight."

[October Live Q&A](#)

[Oct 29, 2021](#)

This month's first Q&A will be **tomorrow (October 30th) at 10am PST**.

I'm currently buried eyebrow-deep working on Reese's interview and the Halloween surprise (heheheh . . .), but am heading to bed early-ish tonight so that I'm well rested enough to resist spilling spoilers tomorrow. That being said, we're nearing the end of the game and I now *know* how everything will now play out . . .

It's gonna be really hard to keep my lips zippered, folks 🤐

(Also, don't forget to vote for who should survive *Lockdown Night, Part 2!* It's between Glitch and Kenzie.)

If you can't make tomorrow morning's Q&A, please vote on a second timeslot below:

October 30, 4pm - 5pm PST

October 30, 5pm - 6pm PST

October 31, 10am - 11am PST

October 31, 3pm - 4pm PST

30 votes total

[Writer's Blog: Timely Matters](#)

[Oct 29, 2021](#)

I've been finishing up the last entries for the *Aeon Student Guide* and have encountered an annoying problem: the calendar. It's made me swear off clocks and curse out the Time Lords. (Not really, but you get my drift. Chronology sucks.)

Writing the history of Ments is one thing—*Mind Blind* obviously takes place sometime after the eighteenth century. It's also easy enough for me to specify that Ments didn't have full legal rights until Unity's creation post-Korean Reunification, using events instead of years to establish a timeline.

However, writing about Unity's creation and the Korean Reunification is tricky. So dang tricky. Because I can't use dates. Don't get me wrong, I personally know that the Korean Reunification ended twenty-nine years ago. In my mind, this is somewhere around the late-nineties. But I refuse to put that into print, because as soon as I assign a date, *Mind Blind* is destined to become obsolete.

It's like with *Back to the Future II*—Marty and Doc travel forwards to the year 2015. As soon as 2015 actually passed, however, the movie transformed from science fiction into an unfulfilled prophecy, and the disappointment that we never got anything near cool as Jimmy's hoverboard. Science fiction that assigns a timeline to its events ultimately becomes historical fiction instead. A relic.

Since *Mind Blind* is set in the near future, I don't even have *Back to the Future*'s thirty-year grace period before becoming out of date (more like five to ten). Granted, the only reason that I set *Mind Blind* in the future in the first place was to be able to hand wave away advanced tech that doesn't currently exist, but still. If anyone reads *Mind Blind* ten years from now, I don't want to explicitly inform them that they're playing through an outdated book.

Assigning hard dates to recent events also means that the cast members become products of their generation. I don't want it to be clear whether Rosy is a millennial or Gen Z, for example—despite the similarities with real life, *Mind Blind* is still an alternate universe, and I want to avoid giving readers expectations about characters based off their year of birth.

But writing an informative summary about something like a war or an organization's founding without mentioning a timeline is near impossible. Vagueness doesn't really work when explaining a sequence of semi-recent events, and my efforts to eschew dating battles made the passages excruciatingly convoluted and difficult to understand. Sure, I could go the *I-Don't-Care-Anymore* route, and list all dates as 19XX, but that breaks immersion.

Is there an answer? I'm sure that one exists, likely involving some clever writing and/or formatting, but I've reached the point where I've needed to step away from the final *Aeon Passages* or risk an existential breakdown where I realize that time is an illusion and everything is transitory and dates don't exist and . . .

Like I stated before, I needed to step away. Hopefully, my brain has a breakthrough while taking a bubble bath one day (that's how Nick ended up in Button's mind, after all!). But if anyone has suggestions on how I can avoid the trap of time, I'd love to read them.

[2nd Q&A Time Announcement](#)

[Oct 30, 2021](#)

As per the poll, the second Q&A will be held at **5pm-6pm PST today (October 30th)**

(Aka 7pm CTZ, 8pm EST, and obscenely late/early in continents other than the Americas.)

A recording of this morning's (extremely spoilerific) session can be found at the following link. Please be advised that some of the revelations may be disturbing, especially in regards to the relationship between Mr. Mayor and Aeon's Dean.

The recording will last for one week:

<https://craig.horse/?id=136842595&key=655176969>

[October Interview: Reese Rudzite \(Male Version\)](#)

[Oct 31, 2021](#)

The stage is empty but for two chairs, between which is drawn a chalk body outline upon the wooden boards. The light flickers on and off, and thunder rumbles over the speakers.

Nicholas Wiseman struts onstage. He's wearing a green hoodie, unzipped to a low vee that shows off his pectorals, with the hood up. Two ping-pong balls, black dots drawn onto their centers to resemble frog eyes, are glued to the top of the hood. Instead of pants, he wears translucent green tights that leave little to the imagination, which just barely pass the standards of public broadcast decency due to the pair of green speedos he has worn over them.

Nick takes a seat, provocatively crosses his legs, and winks at the camera. Despite his cheeky body language, however, his voice is tense.

Nick: Welcome all to our special Halloween episode! I'm your host, Ker-Ment the Frog, here to say that while it may be difficult being green . . . I make sexy look easy.

Sally's exasperated groan is audible from backstage.

Nick: In honor of the year's spookiest holiday, today's interview is with someone who doesn't need a costume in order to be a monster. Let's all give a loud boo for Reese Rudzite!

A boo-track plays over the speakers as Reese walks onstage. He wears orange coveralls which, from a distance could be mistaken as a Halloween costume (until one gets up close, and realizes that the outfit is standard issue).

Reese takes the remaining seat, smiling widely despite the boo-track still playing. The chalk body outline rests between him and Nick like a macabre rug.

Reese, still smiling: How are you faring this fine day, Justice?

He overenunciates Nick's facename with sour sarcasm, and Nick glares pointedly at Reese's shackled wrists.

Nick: I'm doing better than you.

Nick stretches his arms widely above his head, emphasizing his own lack of restraints. Reese's smile becomes strained.

Nick withdraws a stack of index cards from his hoodie pocket, and smirks as he reads the first.

Nick: First question, *River*. How does it feel to have lost the interview poll to two dogs, your own minions, and to have almost lost to a cat?

Reese: It's understandable that your audience wished to save the best for last.

Nick: But you're not the last to be voted in, are you? That honor belongs to a yet unnamed Ment who'll be interviewed in Nohvember. Nah, you're second to last—on the low end of the middle. Completely unexceptional.

Reese, no longer smiling: You're allowed to tell yourself whatever makes you feel better.

Nick, bitinglly: Golly-gee, Mr. Convict, thanks so much for your permission.

Nick flips to the next index card.

Nick: Let's see if you can convince the audience that you weren't born Satan spawn. Where are you from?

Reese: I had something of a nomadic childhood. My father, you see, from Windsor, Ontario, while my mother was from Detroit. They met one evening during a meteor shower at Belle Isle, both of them being amateur astronomers, and—

Nick: It was there that the falling stars no doubt foretold your rise to greatness. Sure, fine. Can you just tell us where you grew up?

Reese: Chicago, for the most part. I spent the majority of my formative years being regaled with the fairy tales of *your* parents supposed "greatness."

Nick: I'm guessing your parents weren't Ments?

Reese: Of course not.

Nick: Any siblings?

Reese: I'm an only child.

Nick, muttering: *Shocker.*

Reese: What was that? Just because you're dressed as frog doesn't mean you should croak like one.

Nick: How would you describe your childhood? Happy? Horrific? Was there some crucial event that turned you into a terrorist, or were you born with the asshole gene?

Reese gives Nick a condescending smile.

Reese: My childhood was idyllic, but for the shadow of menace that loomed—that still looms—over Chicago. Aeon Tower was a daily reminder that, no matter how much effort I put in as a young boy, certain destinies would always be out of my reach.

Nick: Sounds to me like you grew up jealous of Ments.

Reese: Oh, I fully admit that as an ignorant child I oftentimes dreamed of a world where *everyone* had inhuman abilities. Even then, I longed for a society of equals.

Nick snorts. Reese ignores him.

Reese: Of course, I later came to realize that a truly egalitarian social order could never come to exist so long as psychic abilities were wrongfully upheld as desirable rather than genetic misfires.

Nick: Long story short, you were also a dick as a kid.

Reese laughs, but his eyes aren't smiling.

Reese: That would be your take on things, of course. Never fear—it's not as if I expected you to comprehend what life is like outside of your privileged little bubble. How can someone who's been brainwashed since birth to believe in his own supremacy ever imagine the plight of the common man?

Nick, rolling his eyes: Are you always this insufferably dramatic? Let me guess: you were a theater kid.

Reese: I starred in some community productions during my youth, it's true.

Nick: You also dabbled in performance arts during college, didn't you? You changed your major from *Musical Theater* to—

Reese: I must object to the word “dabbled.” I was quite serious about my career at the time, and the student newspaper proclaimed my performance as Ariel in the university's production of *The Tempest* as the play's highlight.

Nick: What made you decide to become a real-life villain instead of just accepting villainous roles? Does it have anything to do with a certain audition for *The Canadian Dream*?

Reese's expression darkens. Nick addresses the camera.

Nick: For those of you unaware, *The Canadian Dream* was a rip-off singing competition where the judges were all too nice to the contestants to make for juicy reality tv. It was cancelled after a single season, but not before Rudzite here applied to be on Season Two.

Reese: That was years ago, and I fail to see the relevancy of—

Nick, talking over Reese to the audience: Thanks to the detective work of none other than Taliaferro Parker, we've managed to get our hands on a copy of Rudzite's audition tape.

Glitch emerges from behind the stage curtain, dressed in a bumblebee suit and wearing a crown, and pulling a cart upon which is a holoprojector.

Reese: You have absolutely *no* right to—

Nick: Now, for the first time ever, the world premier of 'Reese Rudzite' . . . singing *PopoZão* by Kevin Federline.

Glitch pushes the play button. A holograph forms into an image of Reese, perhaps a few years younger, who immediately lets out a screeching, inhuman yodel.

. . . The song does not get better from there.

By the end of the recording, Glitch and Nick are near tears with laughter. Reese scowls.

Reese: Contestants weren't allowed to choose our own songs.

Glitch mimics the yodel from the beginning while pushing the holoprojector offstage, and Nick cracks up once more.

Reese: One of the production assistants had a vendetta against me.

Nick: Let me guess, they were your first murder?

He explodes into laughter again as he recalls Reese's attempt to dance along while singing.

Reese: I never found out who assigned me that song. Had it not been given to me for the second round, I would've no doubt made it through to the finals.

Nick: The finals for a show that never aired.

Reese: Regardless, I didn't deserve to be dropped from the competition.

Nick: Agree to disagree.

He attempts to duplicate Reese's yodel only to erupt in giggles.

Reese, annoyed: Do you have more questions for me or not? I assume that you didn't ask for this interview for the sole purpose of humiliating me in front of an audience.

Nick: No, that's honestly the only reason I agreed to have you on the show.

Reese: As mature as I'd expect from UCRT's leader.

Nick's expression turns suddenly serious.

Nick: You made your feelings about me clear while I was under your control. Turn about is only fair play, and my methods are *much* more humane than yours.

Reese looks away. Nick glances down at his notecards.

Nick: How long have you been a member of Vengeance?

Reese: I'm more than a member. I'm the spearhead who'll lead Vengeance into the future.

Nick: Hard to do that from prison. Do you keep in contact with any of your former followers now that you're behind bars?

Reese still doesn't meet Nick's eyes.

Nick: So, their idolatry only lasted until following you put them at risk. Such a loyal little cult you had.

Reese: You wouldn't understand the ties that bond us.

Nick: Other than Andy Guerra, you seemed to keep your distance from the other members of Vengeance. Why is that?

Reese: As a leader, becoming too close to your followers can undermine your authority—it's something that even you must have realized once you were given your father's mantle.

Nick: I earned my position as Justice.

Reese, condescendingly: Of course you did. But the most effective leadership comes when it's also aspirational—I provided a model on how to be the ideal member of Vengeance. Compassionate yet resolute, with my eyes always fixed upon our organization's larger goals.

Nick looks skeptical.

Nick: Uh-huh. And do you have a role model?

Reese: I forged myself into being the type of person whom I'd look up to. I'm my own role model, as I was theirs.

Nick: That's some pretty unwarranted narcissism from someone who twerks to K-Fed songs. What about when it comes to your former second-in-command? Was Andy just another student that you were trying to make follow in your footsteps?

Reese: Andy was useful. Misguided at times . . . but useful.

Nick: Caleb and Isaiah both stuck out as being atypical Vengeance members. Caleb because he helped rescue me, and Isaiah because he's obviously a Ment. What made you decide to recruit those two?

Reese: It's no great mystery. Caleb possessed a skillset that my organization was in need of, and his loyalty to his cousin insured his cooperation and silence. As for Isaiah . . . we had similar goals, despite his affliction.

Nick: And by “affliction,” you mean “psychic agility.”

Reese: Yes. You must understand—I don’t hate Ments for being born the way that they are. It’s not as if this is a choice. What I loathe is how this genetic abnormality has become venerated as a *gift*, when in fact it endangers the freedom of everyone who scores below a Pollard 6. Your own parents fought against the North Korean regime; you can’t deny that Ments have a history of abusing their powers when given free reign.

Nick: Let’s say that you’d gotten away with all your nefarious plotting. What were your goals for Vengeance? What kind of world did you imagine once the smoke cleared?

Reese appears surprised by the question.

Reese: I’ve never lied about my objectives. My one and only dream has always been of a society where all men are *truly* created equal. It’s as American as apple pie.

Nick: And if you have to break a few eggs for the pie dough, it’s an acceptable loss. Gotcha.

Nick takes a deep breath as he reads over the next question card.

Nick: Why risk going to the hospital yourself when I was first injured? Why make contact with Button?

Reese: Given my thespian background, I knew that I could pass as an orderly without much trouble. As for why I went in the first place . . . curiosity, I suppose. We’d been surveilling your sibling for a while.

Nick’s hands ball into fists.

Reese: Tapping into their phone taught me so much about them. Such adorable pictures of the two of you together! I wanted to meet my new informant face to face, even if they weren’t aware of our connection.

Nick: If you weren’t in cuffs right now, I’d . . .

Reese, tauntingly: Pummel me half to death? Wipe my mind so that I become a drooling vegetable? Go ahead. Show the world exactly what they can expect from Unity’s version of *justice*.

Nick takes a deep breath and forces a carefree smile.

Nick: The world knows what it can expect from me. That I’ll bring would-be genocidal maniacs like you before a court of law.

Reese: Ellery’s photos weren’t the only thing I found interesting, you know. People keep their entire lives on their phones—after tapping into your sibling’s cloud, I came to know them on such an *intimate* level.

Nick stands up. Reese tenses, as if sensing he's finally gone too far, but Nick only walks off stage without saying another word.

A minute passes, with Reese awkwardly sitting alone on stage.

Then Glitch returns with the holoprojector, and Reese's rendition of Kevin Federline's PopoZão begins to once more play over the loudspeakers. The music doesn't quite cover up the sound of arguing taking place backstage.

When the song ends, Glitch rolls the projector offscreen. Sally appears in her stead, wearing a sparkly red dress, a poufy blonde wig, and a headband with pig ears. Her nose is transformed via facepaint into a snout. She takes Nick's vacated seat and smooths her dress.

Sally, to the cameras: As our usual host has had a sudden allergic reaction to asshole, I'll be taking over this interview.

Reese eyes her, not bothering to conceal his interest.

Reese: You were one of Isaiah's little proteges, were you not?

Sally ignores his question. She primly arranges the pile of cards on her lap, selecting the top one and reading it off.

Sally: What would you say is your greatest weakness?

Reese: Yes, you're definitely one of Isaiah's old students. He shared your case files with me once, you know. You had adorable ringlets when you were little—like little orphan Annie.

Reese covers his mouth with feigned apology.

Reese: Oh, but you *are* an orphan, aren't you? Either that, or your real parents couldn't handle a Ment child. You must see, this is why I advocate for the development of BRSEs, so that unfortunates like you aren't ripped from the—

Sally, robotically: What would you say is your greatest weakness?

Reese deflates at Sally's lack of response to his needling.

Reese: Would it be too cliché of me to say it's a good bottle of Chianti?

Sally: Everything about you is a bad cliché. What about your greatest fear?

Reese raises his shackled wrists.

Reese: It's already come to pass.

Sally gives him a poisonously sweet smile, and reads the next card.

Sally: How do you feel about being described as “blandly attractive”?

Reese: Are you dressed as Miss Piggy? Don’t tell me that you and Justice decided to *match*. How nauseatingly adorable.

Sally, stoically repeating the question: How do you feel about being described as “blandly attractive”?

Reese: There’s nothing wrong with being classically good looking.

Sally looks Reese up and down, her upper lip curling in a way that makes it clear she disagrees with his self-assessment.

She reads from the next card.

Sally: Why are you single?

Reese: The path I walk has always been a lonely road to the pinnacle.

He heaves a theatric sigh.

Reese: Love has been elusive. Finding someone who truly grasps the enormity of my calling has been —

Sally, interrupting: Do you know how to play chess?

Reese: I know my way around an *en passant*.

Sally: Do you have any unexpected skills?

Reese: I’m not certain what would qualify as ‘unexpected.’ Unexpected to whom? My people have always expected me to be a master of many skills, and I’ve done my humble best to live up to their belief in me. But I suppose, if pressed, I’d say that most people don’t anticipate the full scope of my musical talents.

Reese flushes, immediately recalling that his most humiliating performance has just been aired to world. Not that he sang the song badly per se, so much as it’s a song that should’ve never been sung.

Sally: Would you ever fall in love with a Ment?

Reese: My dear, is that a proposition? You’ll make the frog morose.

Sally, repeating slowly: Would you ever fall in love with a Ment?

Reese is beginning to look more and more annoyed by Sally’s refusal to engage with his banter.

Reese: I'd have no objection to embarking on a relationship with a former Ment who'd chosen to be cured.

Sally: Are you capable of keeping your word?

Reese, acidly: Are you capable of having a personality? Or do they keep you backstage because you're unable to do more than read off notecards?

Sally smiles mockingly at him, clearly enjoying the way she's getting under his skin. Reese may have enjoyed antagonizing Nick, but it's less fun when his victim refuses to engage.

Sally: Are you capable of keeping your word?

Reese: I've never once lied to myself. If I have to bend the truth to others in order to keep those self-made promises, so be it.

Sally: What job would you have pursued had you not joined Vengeance.

Reese, scowling: I *had* a job. A good job.

He pauses, waiting for Sally to ask for him to elaborate, but she only coolly arches her brows.

Sally: What's your skincare routine?

Reese looks put-out by her refusal to ask about his career, yet can't help but preen at the acknowledgement of his dewy complexion.

Reese: I'm not surprised that you noticed. My nightly process is more in depth, but I rinse my face with coconut water every morning. The resulting glow is unparalleled.

Sally: One last question.

Reese: I'll answer anything to end the tedium of this interview.

Sally sets down the notecards. Her face is serene, and it's impossible to know what she's thinking about.

All of sudden, she seizes Reese by the wrist.

Sally, whispering: Do you want to know how you'll die?

Reese struggles to pull away, but Sally is surprisingly strong (or at least tenacious), and Reese's handcuffs limit his mobility.

Reese: Let go of me, you—

Sally gasps, and a glaze falls over her eyes.

Sally: You'll die alone, choking on a chicken bone in the cold dampness of your cell. Your bunkmate doesn't bother to alert the guards that you can't breathe—they steal the packet of ramen from beneath your pillow as you futilely gasp for oxygen, that's how much they hate you. How much the entire world hates you.

She releases Reese, leaning back into her seat with a cold smile that's even more menacing due to her Miss Piggy makeup.

Sally: But the world won't hate you enough to remember you. You'll die, and you'll be forgotten. If you're lucky, maybe your terrible audition will live on as immortalized cringe. But no one will remember either of your names.

Reese bolts to a stand. He clings onto enough dignity to resist running off stage, but departs at a pace that causes him to stumble slightly before disappearing behind the curtain.

Nick walks back on stage after he's gone, taking Reese's vacated seat.

Nick: Is that really how he dies?

Sally shrugs.

Sally: Ellery's close enough that I'm not having visions. But it's the ending that he deserves.

[October Interview: Reese Rudzite \(Female Version\)](#)

[Oct 31, 2021](#)

The stage is empty but for two chairs, between which is drawn a chalk body outline upon the wooden boards. The light flickers on and off, and thunder rumbles over the speakers.

Nicholas Wiseman struts onstage. He's wearing a green hoodie, unzipped to a low vee that shows off his pectorals, with the hood up. Two ping-pong balls, black dots drawn onto their centers to resemble frog eyes, are glued to the top of the hood. Instead of pants, he wears translucent green tights that leave little to the imagination, which just barely pass the standards of public broadcast decency due to the pair of green speedos he has worn over them.

Nick takes a seat, provocatively crosses his legs, and winks at the camera. Despite his cheeky body language, however, his voice is tense.

Nick: Welcome all to our special Halloween episode! I'm your host, Ker-Ment the Frog, here to say that while it may be difficult being green . . . I make sexy look easy.

Sally's exasperated groan is audible from backstage.

Nick: In honor of the year's spookiest holiday, today's interview is with someone who doesn't need a costume in order to be a monster. Let's all give a loud boo for Reese Rudzite!

A boo-track plays over the speakers as Reese walks onstage. She wears orange coveralls which, from a distance could be mistaken as a Halloween costume (until one gets up close, and realizes that the outfit is standard issue).

Reese takes the remaining seat, smiling widely despite the boo-track still playing. The chalk body outline rests between her and Nick like a macabre rug.

Reese, still smiling: How are you faring this fine day, Justice?

She overenunciates Nick's facename with sour sarcasm, and Nick glares pointedly at Reese's shackled wrists.

Nick: I'm doing better than you.

Nick stretches his arms widely above his head, emphasizing his own lack of restraints. Reese's smile becomes strained.

Nick withdraws a stack of index cards from his hoodie pocket, and smirks as he reads the first.

Nick: First question, *River*. How does it feel to have lost the interview poll to two dogs, your own minions, and to have almost lost to a cat?

Reese: It's understandable that your audience wished to save the best for last.

Nick: But you're not the last to be voted in, are you? That honor belongs to a yet unnamed Ment who'll be interviewed in Nohvember. Nah, you're second to last—on the low end of the middle. Completely unexceptional.

Reese, no longer smiling: You're allowed to tell yourself whatever makes you feel better.

Nick, bitinglly: Golly-gee, Ms. Convict, thanks so much for your permission.

Nick flips to the next index card.

Nick: Let's see if you can convince the audience that you weren't born Satan spawn. Where are you from?

Reese: I had something of a nomadic childhood. My father, you see, from Windsor, Ontario, while my mother was from Detroit. They met one evening during a meteor shower at Belle Isle, both of them being amateur astronomers, and—

Nick: It was there that the falling stars no doubt foretold your rise to greatness. Sure, fine. Can you just tell us where you grew up?

Reese: Chicago, for the most part. I spent the majority of my formative years being regaled with the fairy tales of *your* parents supposed "greatness."

Nick: I'm guessing your parents weren't Ments?

Reese: Of course not.

Nick: Any siblings?

Reese: I'm an only child.

Nick, muttering: *Shocker.*

Reese: What was that? Just because you're dressed as frog doesn't mean you should croak like one.

Nick: How would you describe your childhood? Happy? Horrific? Was there some crucial event that turned you into a terrorist, or were you born with the asshole gene?

Reese gives Nick a condescending smile.

Reese: My childhood was idyllic, but for the shadow of menace that loomed—that still looms—over Chicago. Aeon Tower was a daily reminder that, no matter how much effort I put in as a young boy, certain destinies would always be out of my reach.

Nick: Sounds to me like you grew up jealous of Ments.

Reese: Oh, I fully admit that as an ignorant child I oftentimes dreamed of a world where *everyone* had inhuman abilities. Even then, I longed for a society of equals.

Nick snorts. Reese ignores him.

Reese: Of course, I later came to realize that a truly egalitarian social order could never come to exist so long as psychic abilities were wrongfully upheld as desirable rather than genetic misfires.

Nick: Long story short, you were also a dick as a kid.

Reese laughs, but her eyes aren't smiling.

Reese: That would be your take on things, of course. Never fear—it's not as if I expected you to comprehend what life is like outside of your privileged little bubble. How can someone who's been brainwashed since birth to believe in his own supremacy ever imagine the plight of the common man?

Nick, rolling his eyes: Are you always this insufferably dramatic? Let me guess: you were a theater kid.

Reese: I starred in some community productions during my youth, it's true.

Nick: You also dabbled in performance arts during college, didn't you? You changed your major from *Musical Theater* to—

Reese: I must object to the word “dabbled.” I was quite serious about my career at the time, and the student newspaper proclaimed my performance as Ariel in the university's production of *The Tempest* as the play's highlight.

Nick: What made you decide to become a real-life villain instead of just accepting villainous roles? Does it have anything to do with a certain audition for *The Canadian Dream*?

Reese's expression darkens. Nick addresses the camera.

Nick: For those of you unaware, *The Canadian Dream* was a rip-off singing competition where the judges were all too nice to the contestants to make for juicy reality tv. It was cancelled after a single season, but not before Rudzite here applied to be on Season Two.

Reese: That was years ago, and I fail to see the relevancy of—

Nick, talking over Reese to the audience: Thanks to the detective work of none other than Taliaferro Parker, we've managed to get our hands on a copy of Rudzite's audition tape.

Glitch emerges from behind the stage curtain, dressed in a bumblebee suit and wearing a crown, and pulling a cart upon which is a holoprojector.

Reese: You have absolutely *no* right to—

Nick: Now, for the first time ever, the world premier of 'Reese Rudzite' . . . singing *PopoZão* by Kevin Federline.

Glitch pushes the play button. A holograph forms into an image of Reese, perhaps a few years younger, who immediately lets out a screeching, inhuman yodel.

. . . The song does not get better from there.

By the end of the recording, Glitch and Nick are near tears with laughter. Reese scowls.

Reese: Contestants weren't allowed to choose our own songs.

Glitch mimics the yodel from the beginning while pushing the holoprojector offstage, and Nick cracks up once more.

Reese: One of the production assistants had a vendetta against me.

Nick: Let me guess, they were your first murder?

He explodes into laughter again as he recalls Reese's attempt to dance along while singing.

Reese: I never found out who assigned me that song. Had it not been given to me for the second round, I would've no doubt made it through to the finals.

Nick: The finals for a show that never aired.

Reese: Regardless, I didn't deserve to be dropped from the competition.

Nick: Agree to disagree.

He attempts to duplicate Reese's yodel only to erupt in giggles.

Reese, annoyed: Do you have more questions for me or not? I assume that you didn't ask for this interview for the sole purpose of humiliating me in front of an audience.

Nick: No, that's honestly the only reason I agreed to have you on the show.

Reese: As mature as I'd expect from UCRT's leader.

Nick's expression turns suddenly serious.

Nick: You made your feelings about me clear while I was under your control. Turn about is only fair play, and my methods are *much* more humane than yours.

Reese looks away. Nick glances down at his notecards.

Nick: How long have you been a member of Vengeance?

Reese: I'm more than a member. I'm the spearhead who will lead Vengeance into the future.

Nick: Hard to do that from prison. Do you keep in contact with any of your former followers now that you're behind bars?

Reese still doesn't meet Nick's eyes.

Nick: So, their idolatry only lasted until following you put them at risk. Such a loyal little cult you had.

Reese: You wouldn't understand the ties that bond us.

Nick: Other than Liz Guerra, you seemed to keep your distance from the other members of Vengeance. Why is that?

Reese: As a leader, becoming too close to your followers can undermine your authority—it's something that even you must have realized once you were given your father's mantle.

Nick: I earned my position as Justice.

Reese, condescendingly: Of course you did. But the most effective leadership comes when it's also aspirational—I provided a model on how to be the ideal member of Vengeance. Compassionate yet resolute, with my eyes always fixed upon our organization's larger goals.

Nick looks skeptical.

Nick: Uh-huh. And do you have a role model?

Reese: I forged myself into being the type of person whom I'd look up to. I'm my own role model, as I was theirs.

Nick: That's some pretty unwarranted narcissism from someone who twerks to K-Fed songs. What about when it comes to your former second-in-command? Was Liz just another student that you were trying to make follow in your footsteps?

Reese: Liz was useful. Misguided at times . . . but useful.

Nick: Caleb and Isaiah both stuck out as being atypical Vengeance members. Caleb because he helped rescue me, and Isaiah because he's obviously a Ment. What made you decide to recruit those two?

Reese: It's no great mystery. Caleb possessed a skillset that my organization was in need of, and his loyalty to his cousin insured his cooperation and silence. As for Isaiah . . . we had similar goals, despite his affliction.

Nick: And by "affliction," you mean "psychic agility."

Reese: Yes. You must understand—I don't hate Ments for being born the way that they are. It's not as if this is a choice. What I loathe is how this genetic abnormality has become venerated as a *gift*, when in fact it endangers the freedom of everyone who scores below a Pollard 6. Your own parents fought against the North Korean regime; you can't deny that Ments have a history of abusing their powers when given free reign.

Nick: Let's say that you'd gotten away with all your nefarious plotting. What were your goals for Vengeance? What kind of world did you imagine once the smoke cleared?

Reese appears surprised by the question.

Reese: I've never lied about my objectives. My one and only dream has always been of a society where all men are *truly* created equal. It's as American as apple pie.

Nick: And if you have to break a few eggs for the pie dough, it's an acceptable loss. Gotcha.

Nick takes a deep breath as he reads over the next question card.

Nick: Why risk going to the hospital yourself when I was first injured? Why make contact with Button?

Reese: Given my thespian background, I knew that I could pass as an orderly without much trouble. As for why I went in the first place . . . curiosity, I suppose. We'd been surveilling your sibling for a while.

Nick's hands ball into fists.

Reese: Tapping into their phone taught me so much about them. Such adorable pictures of the two of you together! I wanted to meet my new informant face to face, even if they weren't aware of our connection.

Nick: If you weren't in cuffs right now, I'd . . .

Reese, tauntingly: Pummel me half to death? Wipe my mind so that I become a drooling vegetable? Go ahead. Show the world exactly what they can expect from Unity's version of *justice*.

Nick takes a deep breath and forces a carefree smile.

Nick: The world knows what it can expect from me. That I'll bring would-be genocidal maniacs like you before a court of law.

Reese: Ellery's photos weren't the only thing I found interesting, you know. People keep their entire lives on their phones—after tapping into your sibling's cloud, I came to know them on such an *intimate* level.

Nick stands up. Reese tenses, as if sensing she's finally gone too far, but Nick only walks off stage without saying another word.

A minute passes, with Reese awkwardly sitting alone on stage.

Then Glitch returns with the holoprojector, and Reese's rendition of Kevin Federline's PopoZão begins to once more play over the loudspeakers. The music doesn't quite cover up the sound of arguing taking place backstage.

When the song ends, Glitch rolls the projector offscreen. Sally appears in her stead, wearing a sparkly red dress, a poufy blonde wig, and a headband with pig ears. Her nose is transformed via facepaint into a snout. She takes Nick's vacated seat and smooths her dress.

Sally, to the cameras: As our usual host has had a sudden allergic reaction to asshole, I'll be taking over this interview.

Reese eyes her, not bothering to conceal her interest.

Reese: You were one of Isaiah's little proteges, were you not?

Sally ignores her question. She primly arranges the pile of cards on her lap, selecting the top one and reading it off.

Sally: What would you say is your greatest weakness?

Reese: Yes, you're definitely one of Isaiah's old students. He shared your case files with me once, you know. You had adorable ringlets when you were little—like little orphan Annie.

Reese covers her mouth with feigned apology.

Reese: Oh, but you *are* an orphan, aren't you? Either that, or your real parents couldn't handle a Ment child. You must see, this is why I advocate for the development of BRSeS, so that unfortunates like you aren't ripped from the—

Sally, robotically: What would you say is your greatest weakness?

Reese deflates at Sally's lack of response to her needling.

Reese: Would it be too cliché of me to say it's a good bottle of Chianti?

Sally: Everything about you is a bad cliché. What about your greatest fear?

Reese raises her shackled wrists.

Reese: It's already come to pass.

Sally gives her a poisonously sweet smile, and reads the next card.

Sally: How do you feel about being described as "blandly attractive"?

Reese: Are you dressed as Miss Piggy? Don't tell me that you and Justice decided to *match*. How nauseatingly adorable.

Sally, stoically repeating the question: How do you feel about being described as "blandly attractive"?

Reese: There's nothing wrong with being classically good looking.

Sally looks Reese up and down, her upper lip curling in a way that makes it clear she disagrees with her self-assessment.

She reads from the next card.

Sally: Why are you single?

Reese: The path I walk has always been a lonely road to the pinnacle.

She heaves a theatric sigh.

Reese: Love has been elusive. Finding someone who truly grasps the enormity of my calling has been —

Sally, interrupting: Do you know how to play chess?

Reese: I know my way around an *en passant*.

Sally: Do you have any unexpected skills?

Reese: I'm not certain what would qualify as 'unexpected.' Unexpected to whom? My people have always expected me to be a master of many skills, and I've done my humble best to live up to their belief in me. But I suppose, if pressed, I'd say that most people don't anticipate the full scope of my musical talents.

Reese flushes, immediately recalling that her most humiliating performance has just been aired to world. Not that she sang the song badly per se, so much as it's a song that should've never been sung.

Sally: Would you ever fall in love with a Ment?

Reese: My dear, is that a proposition? You'll make the frog morose.

Sally, repeating slowly: Would you ever fall in love with a Ment?

Reese is beginning to look more and more annoyed by Sally's refusal to engage with her banter.

Reese: I'd have no objection to embarking on a relationship with a former Ment who'd chosen to be cured.

Sally: Are you capable of keeping your word?

Reese, acidly: Are you capable of having a personality? Or do they keep you backstage because you're unable to do more than read off notecards?

Sally smiles mockingly, clearly enjoying the way she's getting under her skin. Reese may have enjoyed antagonizing Nick, but it's less fun when her victim refuses to engage.

Sally: Are you capable of keeping your word?

Reese: I've never once lied to myself. If I have to bend the truth to others in order to keep those self-made promises, so be it.

Sally: What job would you have pursued had you not joined Vengeance.

Reese, scowling: I *had* a job. A good job.

She pauses, waiting for Sally to ask for him to elaborate, but she only coolly arches her brows.

Sally: What's your skincare routine?

Reese looks put-out by Sally's refusal to ask about her career, yet can't help but preen at the acknowledgement of her dewy complexion.

Reese: I'm not surprised that you noticed. My nightly process is more in depth, but I rinse my face with coconut water every morning. The resulting glow is unparalleled.

Sally: One last question.

Reese: I'll answer anything to end the tedium of this interview.

Sally sets down the notecards. Her face is serene, and it's impossible to know what she's thinking about.

All of sudden, she seizes Reese by the wrist.

Sally, whispering: Do you want to know how you'll die?

Reese struggles to pull away, but Sally is surprisingly strong (or at least tenacious), and Reese's handcuffs limit her mobility.

Reese: Let go of me, you—

Sally gasps, and a glaze falls over her eyes.

Sally: You'll die alone, choking on a chicken bone in the cold dampness of your cell. Your bunkmate doesn't bother to alert the guards that you can't breathe—they steal the packet of ramen from beneath your pillow as you futilely gasp for oxygen, that's how much they hate you. How much the entire world hates you.

She releases Reese, leaning back into her seat with a cold smile that's even more menacing due to her Miss Piggy makeup.

Sally: But the world won't hate you enough to remember you. You'll die, and you'll be forgotten. If you're lucky, maybe your terrible audition will live on as immortalized cringe. But no one will remember either of your names.

Reese bolts to a stand. She clings onto enough dignity to resist running off stage, but departs at a pace that causes her to stumble slightly before disappearing behind the curtain.

Nick walks back on stage after she's gone, taking Reese's vacated seat.

Nick: Is that really how she dies?

Sally shrugs.

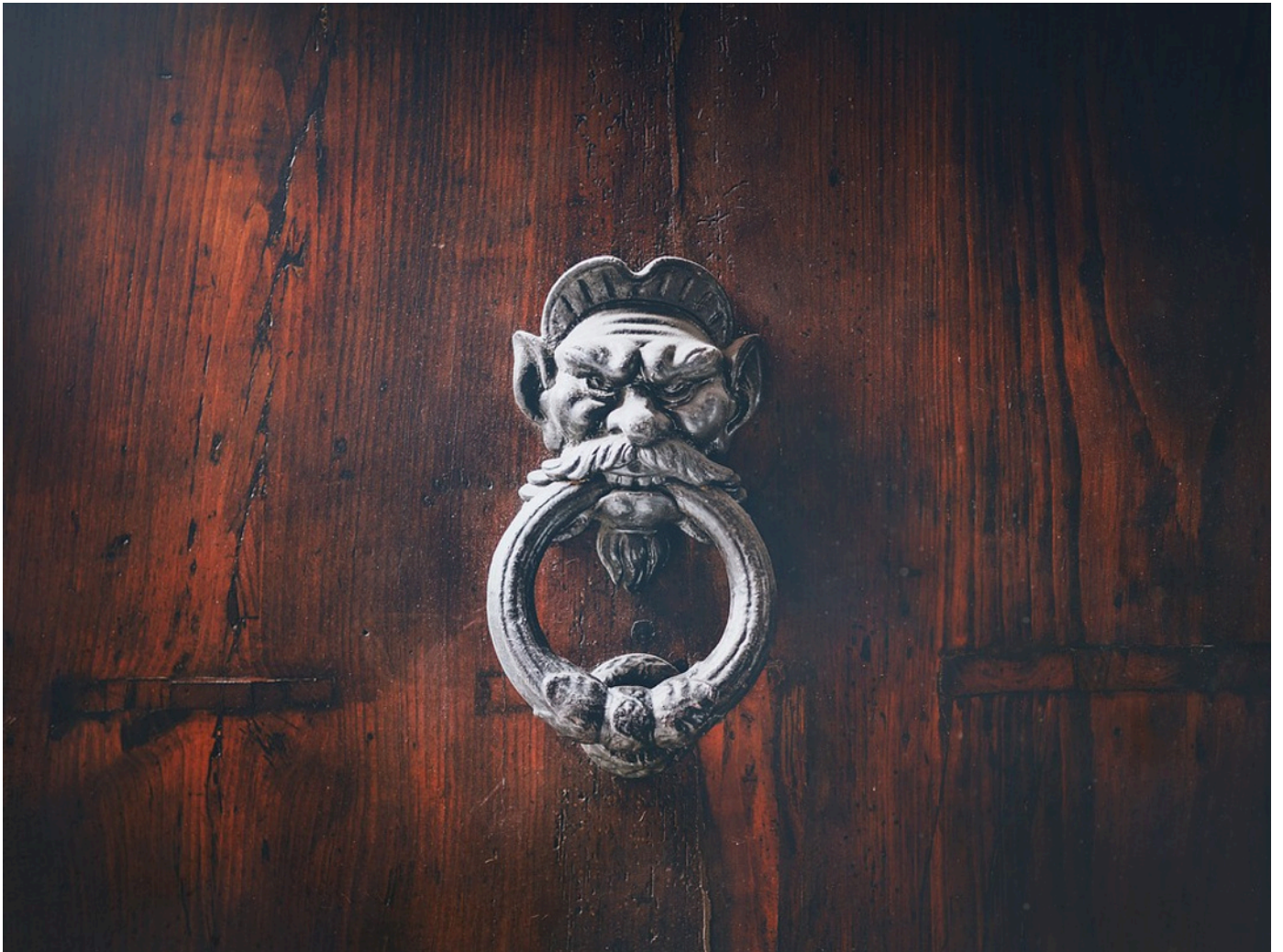
Sally: Ellery's close enough that I'm not having visions. But it's the ending that she deserves.

[Happy Halloween. Brace Yourself . . . For Nohvember.](#)

[Oct 31, 2021](#)

dashingdon.com/go/9928





[On the First Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 1, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

A perfectly normal human:

dashingdon.com/go/9928

[Lockdown Night, Part 2 of 3](#)

[Nov 1, 2021](#)

Part 1: www.patreon.com/posts/lockdown-night-58042442

(This story keeps getting longer, but I think the finale will be worth the wait. With sincerest apologies to Rosy, since . . . well, you'll find out.)

* * * *

Kent's whiskey—his fourth of the evening—sloshed over the rim of his glass as he leaned across the bar, his index finger so close to the bartender's face that it almost booped the man's nose.

"My car," Kent declared in an overloud voice. "My car is *more* than a car." He blinked and stared at his finger as if confused why it was so near Nick's face. More whiskey dribbled over the edge of his cup, and Glitch reached out to right her friend's hand so that he held the glass upright.

As Nick explained (again) to Kent why it was impossible to retrieve his abandoned Mustang until tomorrow morning, Glitch was struck by the hair-prickling sensation that someone was staring at her. She scanned the restaurant, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary, unless you counted the fact that it was Halloween and the town had decided to congregate in a bar with their offspring instead of taking them trick-or-treating. Her gaze was caught by a young woman seated at the corner table, who smiled broadly back at Glitch's nod of acknowledgement and began heading towards her.

Kent seemed disinclined to sit back down from his defiant stance, leaning further and further over the counter in his slurred attempts to make Nick understand the necessity of rescuing his poor vehicle before it was ravished by wild racoons. The girl stole his stool for herself. She moved it closer to Glitch and plopped her elbows upon the counter.

"I'll have what she's having, Nick-Nack," the newcomer said, nodding at Glitch's apple cider. Glitch immediately noticed how similar her coloring and features were to the bar's owner.

"You must be the new buyer that my brother's been dealing with," the girl addressed her, confirming Glitch's suspicion that the two were related. "You must be crazy to want to live at Ambrose Manor." She dimpled charmingly. "I like crazy."

"Talia Parker," Glitch smiled lazily, the kind of smile that had gotten her in trouble and made it necessary for her to flee to Drearwood in the first place. "I won't argue with that insanity claim, but why does moving here make me crazy?"

The girl shrug and took a sip from the drink her brother had set before her. "If you're not crazy now, you will be. Everyone who moves into Ambrose Manor goes crazy."

"Knock it off, Ellery." Nick's tone was light but held an unmistakable note of warning. "You'll chase the girl out of town before she's even unpacked."

"How is she supposed to know what to expect if no one ever talks about it?" Ellery huffed. "Seriously, sometimes I think this whole town is—"

"That's *enough*." Nick set down the cup he'd been wiping with a thump loud enough that Kent cut short his tirade.

Kent blinked with confusion when he discovered that his barstool had gone mysteriously missing. Unable to locate it, he tilted off in search of a new chair.

"Is there something I should know?" Glitch glanced uneasily between the two siblings.

Ellery sighed. "Just superstitious nonsense," she said as Nick continued to watch her warily. "Are you moving here permanently, or is this more of a summer home thing?" Her teeth caught on her lower lip. "Don't tell me it's love nest for you and your boyfriend."

Glitch laughed, although she recognized the change in topic as a distraction. But Ellery's ability to talk about Ambrose Manor was clearly limited so long as her brother was within earshot, so she might as well enjoy the flirting.

"The only one Kent is in love with is his car," Glitch said. The very idea of the two of them together was enough to send her into another fit of giggles. "He's here to keep me company while my poor, wounded heart heals from being broken by my ex-girlfriend."

This version of the story wasn't entirely true, but Glitch figured it was more sympathetic to play the jilted lover than to admit that she'd pulled a runner to avoid commitment. Stephanie had been a great girl, but who on earth suggested cohabitation after less than a month of dating?

Ellery nodded sympathetically, resting her hand on Glitch's shoulder. "Drearwood is a good place to recover. Lots of . . ." her gaze strayed suggestively down then rose again to meet Glitch's eyes ". . . nature."

Glitch spent the next hour getting to know Ellery, dropping subtle questions regarding Ambrose Manor whenever Nick was occupied with another customer—which happened with relative frequency, given that half the town seemed to be in the tavern tonight.

“Some people stay home on Lockdown Night,” Ellery revealed when Glitch inquired if it were always this busy. “But most folks don’t live downtown, so they come here instead.”

Glitch looked at her sharply. “What does living downtown have to do with anything?”

“Ah . . .” Ellery gulped her cider to procrastinate having to answer, only for it to go down the wrong way.

Glitch patted between her shoulder blades as she coughed and sputtered for breath.

“Thanks,” Ellery gasped once she could once again talk. She batted her eyes at Glitch. “You saved my life.”

As flattering though it was to be lash-fluttered at, Glitch was resolved not to be so easily distracted.

“Why it matter whether someone lives downtown?”

Ellery took another long sip of her drink. “It doesn’t, I guess,” she said. “But Lockdown is a Drearwood tradition—we like to be near each other for it, you know? It’s all about community.” She grinned a little too brightly. “Perks of living in a small town and all that.”

Glitch didn’t respond. She’d been so caught up in her conversation with Ellery, that she’d only been keeping half an eye on Kent (who, upon finding himself trapped in a crowded location, had as per usual resorted to drinking too much to cope with his anxiety). He’d been talking with a short redhead that Glitch had gleaned was Nick’s wife from the way she’d been urging Kent to drink a tall glass of water, in the practiced manner of someone accustomed to dealing with tipsy customers, but now Kent was nowhere in sight.

“Speaking of being near each other,” Glitch said, straightening so she could better scan the tavern, “did you see where my friend ran off to? He’s like a chinchilla who gets anxious in crowds.”

Ellery arched a single brow at Glitch’s description of her six-foot-plus best friend. “I saw him talking to Sally—maybe she suggested that he lay down in the back. There’s a cot behind the kitchen that gets a lot of use.” She rolls her eyes. “Especially whenever the Broncos lose a match.”

“Show me.” Glitch stood, her shoulders tense with guilt. She’d been so busy flirting that she hadn’t even looked out for Kent, despite having roped him into being her unwilling chauffeur in the first place. Although, if she found him safely asleep in the backroom, Glitch fully intended to use the permanent marker in her purse to draw the mother of all moustaches across his drooling face.

Ellery led her past the kitchen where, sure enough, there was a neatly-made camping cot. Kent wasn’t on it.

"Maybe he went out for air," Ellery suggested.

Glitch felt her stomach drop. She knew *exactly* where her inebriated friend had headed off to. "I'm going to need to borrow a flashlight," she told Ellery. She looked down at her converses; the left one had already begun to separate at the toe after her and Kent's earlier hike into town. "And maybe a pair of hiking boots."

"What? No! You can't head out." Ellery's eyes were wide, and her voice panicked. She took a deep breath in, obviously trying to calm herself, and forced a smile at Glitch. "I mean, it's dark. Drearwood has bears, you know?"

The knot in Glitch's stomach tightened further. "Then I should leave before Kent gets eaten."

"Wait. I'll . . ." Ellery grabbed Glitch's arm; this time, her touch was desperate instead of flirty. "Let's tell Nick. He'll arrange for the rest of the town to look for your friend."

Glitch shook off the woman's hand, suddenly annoyed. "I know where he's gone," she snapped. "If this hillbilly-infested hell pit had cell reception, I'd be able to call and convince him to come back."

Hurt flashed in Ellery's eyes. Wonderful. Now Glitch had another thing to feel guilty about.

"I didn't mean that," she apologized. "Well, the part about cellphones, yeah. But not the hillbilly part."

Ellery winced again as she repeated the insult. "I guess you're still deciding on the hell pit part, then?" she asked.

Glitch sighed. Appropriate, that she was in an old mining town, because she was digging herself an impressive hole.

"Kent is my best friend." Glitch tried to channel Kent and use as few words as possible—the fewer words, the less chance she had of permanently alienating the people that could help her find him.

"Please help."

Sympathy softened Ellery's expression. "Of course."

* * * *

Glitch soon discovered that the most convenient thing about Lockdown Night was that the town's sheriff was already at the tavern.

Sheriff Black had the soft eyes and warm disposition that one would expect from the small town law enforcement of a Hallmark romance movie, but he'd listened to Glitch's description of Kent with an intensity that made her hope that maybe they'd locate her best friend before he got himself eaten by a bear. If Black would actually listen to her, that is.

"We'll get volunteers to drive around downtown with their brights on," the sheriff informed Glitch. "You said that you noticed him missing around ten minutes ago—he can't have gone far."

"I *know* where Kent went," Glitch repeated, a hint of anger entering her voice. She'd already gone over this. "He's trying to get to his car—it's about a mile or so down the main road and into The Pass."

Her frustration was building, replacing her customary glibness with resentful bite. For some reason, no one was volunteering to drive out beyond the town's limits to pick up Kent, and they seemed intent on stopping her from leaving herself.

Whatever they're hesitancy, Glitch couldn't afford to wait. Not when an inebriated Kent was likely to try to pet a mountain lion instead of slowly backing away. She inspected the group that had gathered in the kitchen: Nick stared pensively out the window, his arm thrown over his wife, whose fists clenched in his flannel shirt front. Ellery paced back and forth in front of walk-in fridge, and Sheriff Black's hand fallen to his side near his holster at Glitch's mention of The Pass.

If there was one thing Glitch prided herself on, it was her ability to rapidly disassemble and reassemble complex electronics without anyone being able to tell the difference (she'd done that with Kent's cellphone last month, making it impossible for him to change his ringtone to anything but *My Humps* by the Black Eyed Peas). But she was also good at reading people, and right now she could feel in her bones that something was off.

The people of Drearwood, for all their easy smiles and "aw shucks" generosity, were terrified. She saw it in their darting gazes, and the way they twitched whenever the bell above the door jingled. She'd noticed from the beginning, truth be told, but had attributed it to a small town's discomfort with outsiders.

"What are you all so afraid of?" she demanded.

No one replied.

Finally, after a long beat, Sheriff Black sighed. "I'll take the squad car," he said in a low voice. "Nick, I'm leaving you to organize the downtown search party."

"Fuck no," came Nick's retort. "If you think that I'm letting you go past the border without me, Grayson Dumbass Black, then you're even more an idiot than I thought."

Gray shook his head. "You'll need to be here to—"

"I'll organize the downtown search." The declaration came from Nick's wife, whose fists were planted on her ample hips with a resoluteness that clearly advertised this argument was over. "Gray, you're going to need backup. And Nick . . ." Her fearsome scowl wobbled, and she blinked, hard. "If you die, I'll kill you."

Nick pulled her into a tight hug.

"I'll sell your ashes on eBay," she mumbled into his chest.

"I really wish that someone would explain why this is such a big deal," Glitch said. "Kent's probably only a quarter mile outside the town limits; it's not like I'm asking for a ride back to Denver."

"People who wander outside Drearwood's downtown tonight . . . they don't come back," Ellery said bleakly. She'd stopped pacing, but her head hung low and she refused to look at Glitch. "It's why we have Lockdown Night in the first place."

"I thought it was because of tax collectors."

"That's just what we tell visitors. What better scapegoat than a profession everyone hates?"

Glitch resisted the urge to laugh—she was uncertain if the impulse derived from the sheer ludicrousness of Ellery's statement, or if it was because somewhere deep down, she recognized that the town wouldn't be this scared witless if there weren't at least a dark kernel of truth to the superstition.

"So what's out there?" Glitch asked.

Ellery finally looked up, her eyes glistening. "We don't know."

[Nohvember Interview Poll!](#)

[Nov 1, 2021](#)

Vote below for this month's interview subject in a poll where your choice truly matters.



(Their identity will be revealed before the interview.)

Noh

Noh

Noh

Schrodinger . . . and Noh

416 votes total





[On the Second Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 2, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Two sharp fangs:

dashingdon.com/go/9928



[On the Third Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 3, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Three band posters:

dashingdon.com/go/9928

[Nohvember Roadmap](#)

[Nov 3, 2021](#)

My goal is to have Noh's first potential reveal happen this month, which means that I have approximately 60,000 words that needed to be coded before the November 27th update. A rough draft is already written for most of this material, but a lot will undoubtedly need to be rewritten at least once more to accommodate whatever changes I make while connecting the scenes (since they weren't written chronologically, and are thus spread throughout several Word documents).

I'll try to get out more stories if possible (as well as the final entries in the Aeon Student Guide, as soon as I figure out what I'm doing timeline-wise). But my primary focus for this month and December is to finish *Mind Blind*'s first draft--something I'm not entirely sure is possible (I've planned all the scenes to come, but it's impossible to estimate how long those scenes will end up being, especially accounting for variable paths). Possible or not, I fully intend to try!

If I don't manage to type out "The End" by December 31, at least I'll get a lot written by setting my goal high (reach for the stars, land on the moon, and all that jazz). Slowest case scenario, I make finishing *Mind Blind* my New Year's resolution, wrap up the first draft by February, and then get to celebrate having met my resolution for the first time ever without even having bought a gym membership (which, let's be real, I'd have used maybe once).

And then comes editing.

Ugh, editing.

Regarding the interview: Schrodinger will have a mini-interview all by himself in addition to aggressively hissing throughout Noh's. This is so that anyone who doesn't get Noh's reveal in their playthrough, and still wants to encounter it organically in-game, can bypass reading Noh's tell-all in favor of a half-feral cat waxing poetic about the delights of salmon and yarn balls.

Here's the tentative roadmap for this month!

4 November: Grayson's Romance Scene in *MB* Demo; Nohvember Crossover Update

5 November: Writer's Blog; Nohvember Crossover Update

6 November: *Lockdown Night, Part 3* (UCRT+); Nohvember Crossover Update

7 November: Nohvember Crossover Final Chapter

9 November: *Mind Blind* Short Story

10 November: *Lady Death's Diary* Chapter

12 November: Writer's Blog

14 November: *Nick Wiseman Has Opinions*

16 November: *MB Demo* Update

18 November: *Saucy Side* (Featuring Noh)

19 November: Writer's Blog

21 November: *MB* Bloopers Reel

24 November: *Lady Death's Diary* Chapter

26 November: Writer's Blog

27 November: *MB* Update (Noh reveal!)

28 November: Live Q&A

29 November: Schrodinger's Interview

30 November: Noh's Interview



[On the Fourth Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 4, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Four clueless guests:

dashingdon.com/go/9928



[On the Fifth Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 5, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Five inedible candies:

dashingdon.com/go/9928

[August - October, Missing Hero Zeroes Rewards](#)

[Nov 5, 2021](#)

Just a note, although this post is viewable to everyone, it's only intended for those who are missing rewards from past Hero Zero subscriptions. Everyone else can ignore it! (Seriously, please ignore it, as if more people than intended fill out the following forms, it'll throw my entire oh-so-clever organization plot into chaos, and chaos is where I already dwell.)

Now, onto business! These past three months, I've fallen behind on Hero Zero short stories and have found myself unable to keep track of to whom stories are still due. Thus, I've instituted a new Hero Zero system! A method which should help even my executively-challenged self keep track of things.

Below are three links in which I ask 1,000+ questions (not really) about your Button and your desired story/poem/matchups (the matchup quizzes from before were too sparse, often leaving me to draw a creative blank).

If you were subscribed to the Hero Zero tier for any of these past three months and still haven't yet received your rewards, please click on that month's link to fill out the form. If you're missing rewards from more than one month, please click on the earliest missing month first.

August Rewards: <https://uquiz.com/vGMdBm>

September Rewards: <https://uquiz.com/RTCxZL>

October Rewards: <https://uquiz.com/Ne5U0n>

(On these forms, there's also a place to indicate if you're missing rewards from any earlier months. I believe I'm all caught up through July, but my brain cannot be trusted.)

[Writer's Blog: Grayday, Grayday, Our Romance is Sinking](#)

[Nov 6, 2021](#)

Word Count: I don't actually know at this moment? Most of Chapter 15's scenes are scattered across different documents.

Next Update: Gray's romance will go up as soon as I'm done with it (this will also include Sally's scene if Button is at Aeon). I had to tweak some things, like turning Aeon's elevator into a panic (lower case b) button.

(I say that "I had to" as if forced at gun point by Andy's trembling hand, but in truth I just decided that the scene would work better this way.)

I'm still wrapping up Gray's kiss scene and the end of Noh's Nick-hunt (*so many variations!*). The good news: Caleb's interrogation is fully written! (Just need to finish Isaiah's, and then it's onto Chapter 15.)

Due to the delay in Gray's romance scene, I figured that I might shed some insight into what to expect and why. Chapter 14 marks the true start of a relationship with Gray, after all, so I'm trying to treat his moment in the sun with the appropriate TLC.

(Beyond this point lie spoilers!)

Those wooing Grayson will get two choices to continue his romance route:

1. Go for the kiss! Who cares if their brother may be dead, Button has a British booty to tap. (As much as I adore Nick, this is the option that I'd personally choose because Gray. So no judgement.)
2. Hold your horses and just let Gray hold you. This is arguably as intimate as smooching since he can still read your mind, but it's perhaps the slightly more tasteful option? As in, it comes across less like Button jumped Nick's best friend as soon as Nick was no longer playing mental chaperone. Despite the lack of lip-locking, this also continues Gray's romance (and is quite sweet, if I do say so myself, which I just did).

The last available choice is . . . different. Gray's romance scene comes at an arguably inopportune time for Button, in that they just recently were forced to confront a Ment terrorist.

Gray isn't a terrorist, but he *is* a Ment—a Ment who, unlike Sally, can read Button's thoughts. Which leads to option three . . .

3. Button can pull away. Because *"after everything that's happened, I don't think that I'll ever be ready for a relationship with a Ment."*

My trouble writing this option is that, although it doesn't explicitly tell Grayson to keep his lips to himself for all eternity, it does permanently end his in-game romance. Because he hears Button think that, and it echoes every single doubt that he's ever had about a potential relationship with Button.

I've talked some about what the stats would be for various characters if they were the main character. Nick, for example, would be Confident/Humorous and extremely Accepting. Gray, though? Gray would get that "Guilt" variable checked off almost immediately. Even without having protagonist status, Grayson still struggles with a lot of self-recrimination over his ability to make Button potential uncomfortable. Button's withdrawal will essentially confirm his deep-seated belief that Button would never want to be with a Ment (there's a reason the boy is so dense to Button's crushing).

I've second-guessed myself a *lot* as to whether it needs to be clearer that this option will end things with Gray. Currently, though, I've arrived at the mindset that the ROs shouldn't necessarily be winnable no matter what. Gray has his own insecurities and doubts, and if Button's behavior reinforces those doubts, then it makes sense for him to stop seeing them as an option. It's not necessarily fair, but writing otherwise would be an injustice to his character.

(Ideally, of course, I'd love to make nuanced pathways for every reaction. But ultimately, IF needs to have constraints in order to get completed.)

The fourth option has Button deciding not to jeopardize their friendship with Gray, and instead choosing to simply remain friends. This ends Gray's romance as well, although there will probably be some wistful-flavored text sprinkled near the game's end to recognize the route. I have a fifth option written as well where Button randomly decides that they're just no longer that into Gray, but I'm not sure that I'll ever add it to the actual game. Since Gray's route has thus far defined by longing, it feels jarring to me for Button to be on the verge of kissing by him and suddenly going "You know what? I'm good."

[On the Sixth Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 6, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Six unethical experiments:

dashingdon.com/go/9928





[On the Last Day of Nohvember . . .](#)

[Nov 7, 2021](#)

My true love gave to me

Another chance:

dashingdon.com/go/9928

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 24](#)

[Nov 10, 2021](#)

A moment passed. The falcon's cries echoed from above as it searched for prey. Then a rustle of clothing, the gun being tucked away into a jacket pocket. I held my breath, fearful of breaking the illusion.

Armond addressed my corpse. "I'd say don't take this personally, but you've always been a bitch."

I don't know how long I lay on the road after he left. Armond hadn't bothered to move me, since the transition itself might have killed me in place of his bullet. Pain fogged the passage of time: now, in addition to my injuries, casting the illusion had left me with a splitting migraine. Part of me wished to succumb to agony and pass out, but my more practical side desperately clung to consciousness in case my assailant returned.

That Armond was Letty's accomplice still felt unreal. My suspicion of him had always rooted more in personal repugnance than factual evidence, and confirmation of his guilt made me wonder what actual clues I might have missed.

I stayed alert with varying levels of success, wafting between excruciating reality and fevered hallucinations. A pebble dug into my cheek when I tried to shift—a smaller, softer pain than that which wracked my entire body. Something inside me had broken inside, more than just my bones. To lose again, to die again, after so much had changed . . .

How would Delphine react to my death? How would Xander? I regretted not kissing him now, back when I'd had the chance. Would there be some reality where he moved on without me, or did my death destine the world into an infinite time loop? The prospect seemed too narcissistic to contemplate, and yet I didn't want to imagine a world where Letty became queen, where Theo mourned my death, and where Xander went on to kiss other girls.

I wanted to live.

Not just live; I wanted to live this specific life. This life where Emilia had become my friend, where Delphine had become my mentor, and where Xander had become my . . .

Fragments of my pasts merged with things that had never occurred. I imagined Letty with eyes red from weeping. She held the false letter from my second death and used it as a handkerchief to wipe her cheeks. It came away bloodied, leaving crimson streaks across her face in its wake.

"I didn't know," she sobbed. "Oh, Tru, I swear I didn't!"

What hadn't she known? How severe my sentence would be for the falsified conspiracy? Hadn't Letty hoped for my death? Helped orchestrate it?

"I know her to be all that is honest and good." Loren's words, from my first trial, started as a whisper and ended as a howl. *"Her word can be trusted."*

I'd believed the same, once. Believed that Letty was kind and loyal and would never in a thousand years harm a spider. But she'd been complicit in my murders, even she didn't possess a devious enough mind to orchestrate events by herself. Or did she? Armond seem no likelier a strategist; he was a popinjay more concerned with his hair than anything of status. Which of the two was I underestimating?

Having been raised a commoner, Letty had never become fully comfortable with riding. Armond was the one familiar with horses: he must have released the hawk knowing that Dragon was still prone to spooking. He'd known that my fall would give him opportunity to kill me. For whatever reason, he thought his actions justified. There had been no hesitation to Armond's words, no quiver of uncertainty.

The sky darkened, and shadows from the birches above fell like a shroud over where I lay. My teeth chattered from a chill that my body ached too much to register; I felt hot all over, burning hot.

"Over here!"

My rescuer's face was a copper-haloed smudge.

"She's still breathing, thank the Fourth."

"No! Don't move her. Look at the angle of her neck—it could be broken."

I tried to respond, to tell them Armond's name before he learned that I had survived but could only let out an airy whimper.

"Quick, fetch Lady Delphine."

"Tru, can you hear me?" The blurred man's voice was deep and nostalgic. "We'll fix you up, little turtle, don't you worry. Your mother would have my head if I let anything happen to you."

It was only then, knowing that I was safe, that I finally allowed myself to slip blissfully unconscious.

Armond tried to kill me.

The truth screamed through my mind the instant I awoke. My eye snapped open, the crust in their corners testifying to hours spent closed. The low-hanging moon outside my window marked it deep into the night. Curses. Armond hadn't bothered to disguise his voice—by now, he must have heard of my survival and realized that I'd be able to identify him. If Armond was smart, he'd have fled the castle. If he was committed, he'd reattempt to kill me. Neither outcome was ideal, and I suspected that Armond was more resolute than he was intelligent.

The bed upon which I lay in was my own, its blankets wrapped around me as if I were a swaddled newborn. I tried to sit up, only to collapse back onto my pillow with a whimper. Movement *hurt*.

"Don't fidget," ordered Delphine. She set a pitcher on the nightstand before pressing the back of her hand against my forehead. The contact felt blessedly cool.

"Armond," I said. Or tried to say. His name came out halfway between a wheeze and a frog's croak.

Delphine's nose twitched in a rabbit-like way that would have been comical if I hadn't recognized it as her attempt to hold back tears. She poured me a glass of whatever was in the pitcher; the liquid was too murky to be water, unless sourced from a swamp. Medicine, then. She held the glass to my lips, and I swallowed eagerly despite the bitter aftertaste. It tasted like tea, if tea were somehow capable of being burnt.

Delphine chastised me as I drank, her voice shrill. "Three broken ribs, a flailed lung, a dislocated shoulder, a sprained ankle, and your spine twisted into a lover's knot. The less said about your arm, the better. Are you determined to test the limits of my ability to heal you? Do you realize how fortunate you are that there was no permanent damage?"

She lowered the glass from my lips, and I tried again.

“Armond.” This time, I managed to get his name out.

Her brows snapped together. “Your fall wasn’t an accident, then.”

I weakly shook my head. Delphine marched back towards the doorway and stuck her head out into the hall.

“Fetch Lord Errans,” she ordered the guard outside. “Report that his niece is awake, and that she remembers the name of her father’s tailor—the one who sewed the red cravat.” The guard’s boots clicked together in affirmation. Delphine returned to chair next to my bedside and glared at me.

“I desperately want to yell at you,” she said. “I will once you’ve fully recovered. If your uncle hadn’t discovered you on route to the castle . . .” Her voice broke. “How can I protect you if I’m not even aware that you’ve left?”

I blinked—it was the only reaction for which I had enough energy. I was so accustomed to looking after myself that it had never even occurred to me to inform someone else of my whereabouts. But Delphine had a point.

“I should have told you that I was going for a ride,” I conceded. Whatever had been in the pitcher, it was working. My body still ached, but more akin to the aftermath of a long day spent horseback than having been trampled beneath the horse. I flexed my fingers experimentally; other than a slight twinge in the tendons, it felt as if the bones had never been broken.

“Xander checked the stables after we realized you were missing,” said Delphine. “Your horse was in his stall, so we’d assumed you gone into the city square.”

My shoulders relaxed upon learning that Dragon was safe. “My horse spooked,” I said. “Armond must have returned him to the stables in order to delay my discovery.” Dragon was infamously ill-tempered when being handled by others, and I hoped he’d bitten the bastard’s overlong nose.

The door swung open, and my uncle entered the bedroom. Xander trailed behind, his hair disheveled and collar askew. His lips curved in a small smile as our eyes locked, before my uncle’s wide shoulders blocked him from view.

Uncle Alistair hugged me gently, but even his slight squeeze made me groan in protest. He released me with an apologetic frown. But for a few new silver wires curling through his hair and beard, he looked identical to when I’d first met him over two years ago.

“It’s good to see you, little turtle,” he said. “Although you’re no longer quite so little.”

“I’m glad to see you as well, Uncle,” I said politely. Yes, the situation was urgent, but that was no excuse to be uncivil to family. Especially since he’d been the one to save me. “According to Lady Delphine, I have you to thank for my rescue.”

Uncle Alistair frowned. "Xander said this isn't your first, 'accident'. Given Her Magicalness's unsubtle attempt at subterfuge, I'm guessing that you can identify whoever caused this one."

"It's not as if I could risk telling the guard that True recognized her attacker," huffed Delphine. "The tailor was the best I could come up with on short notice."

"Sartorial deceptions aside," interrupted Xander when my uncle opened his mouth to retort, "we need to know what happened." He sat down on my bedside, leaning in such a way that Delphine and Alistair couldn't see him placing his hand atop of mine.

There was no time for me to internally debate whether or not my uncle could be trusted. Every moment we delayed gave Armond opportunity to escape Bellcrest. Besides, it seemed Xander had already informed Alistair of the arson and Emilia's poisoning. I was too exhausted and sore to even be upset that he'd done so without my permission.

I recounted the most recent attempt on my life as quickly as possible. When I finished, Delphine looked ready to stage an "accident" of her own for Armond. Xander muttered something in Anteren that I couldn't translate but knew from his tone must have been a curse. Only Alistair didn't react, his expression inscrutable behind his beard.

"Where in the castle does this Armond keep rooms?" he asked.

My reply overlapped with Xander's. "The West Tower."

Xander's ability to reply puzzled me. I had good reason to keep track of Armond's location, given my (now proven correct) suspicion that he'd somehow been involved in my deaths. Xander had no such motivation. Had he memorized living arrangements of the entire Court? Impressive, if so.

Alistair opened the door. "Xander and I will return shortly."

I shoved off my blankets and pulled myself off the bed using one the bedposts. The mere motion of standing shot a spasm of agony down my spine, and my grip on the bedpost tightened as I fought to remain upright without vomiting.

"I'm coming with you," I declared.

Delphine rolled her eyes towards my buckled knees. "No, she's not."

"I am." Finger by finger, I relinquished my hold on the post until I stood upright without assistance. The seven steps from my bed to the doorway felt like an eternity, and my legs threatened to crumple beneath me with each agonizing step. But I made it to the door. "Uncle Alistair doesn't have any authority in Bellcrest. If you run into Loren, he'll never believe anything that Xander says. Especially an accusation against his best friend."

"Then I'll join Alistair, and Xander can remain here," argued Delphine.

"Neither of you knows Armond by sight," I countered. "It has to be me."

Delphine scowled as she tried and failed to remember what Armond looked like.

"Lord Errans has the authority to—" Xander's protest was cut off by my uncle's hand on his shoulder.

Alistair's unwavering gaze locked with mine and held. "Can you walk, Tru?"

I stepped through the door and into the hallway, gritting my teeth as pain splintered through my swollen ankle. I lifted my chin. "I can."

Delphine pinched the bridge of her nose. "Muleheaded fools, the both of you." She muttered an incantation and vanished

I stared at the empty spot where she'd once stood, and made an internal note to ask Delphine to teach me that spell.

"How much has Xander told you about my duties in Anterdon?" asked Alistair.

Despite my limp slowing our pace, we were finally drawing near Armond's quarters in the West Tower. Glowstone sconces illuminated the hallway a dim blue, their enchantments weaker (and cheaper) than the ones in the main keep. Families like Armond's lacked the prestige and wealth to quarter in any of the other towers. The hallway doors crowded close together in reflection of smaller suites, although each door was still elaborately carved and painted with the residing family's crest.

"Xander has been somewhat tight lipped," I replied, shoving down a speak of pain as I stepped on my ankle the wrong way. "Theo mentioned that you were his mentor."

Alistair flashed a grin. "Your brother is a marvelous lad, no doubt. He's not suited to following in my footsteps, however. Too honest."

"Meaning?" I tilted my head. Bad decision. The movement sent the world spinning anew, and I tightened my grip on Xander's arm to keep from staggering.

"Lord Errans is the King's Spymaster," said Xander.

Alistair's head swiveled to frown disapprovingly at my escort. "I hadn't planned on being *quite* that blunt."

Xander shrugged while steadying me. "Your niece needed to know."

"Did she," murmured Alistair.

Xander coughed into his hand. Luckily for him, further chastisement from my uncle was delayed by a woman's cranky interjection.

"About damned time you arrived," snapped Councilor Venuda. The retired general leaned against a dark ironwood door, its emerald paint chipped and faded. The image was still recognizable as the Delos family oak, however—the same crest that Armond wore on his cufflinks. "Delphine said the situation was urgent when she forced me awake. My misunderstanding. Apparently 'urgent' actually means 'feel free to take your damn time.'"

Alistair smiled at her benignly. "I trust Delphine explained the situation?"

Venuda grunted an affirmative, although her disgruntled expression softened as her gaze fell upon me. "It's good to see you up, my lady."

She tried the door, then cursed under her breath after rattling the handle and finding it locked. I marked down a few of her adjectives for future use.

"I'll get the master key from Timons," she groaned, "since the brittle bastard would ignore any of my men who tried to wake him up at this Triad forsaken hour."

"We'll wait for you here," said Alistair.

Venuda levelled him a disbelieving glare. "Just . . . limit the property damage this time, Errans."

He bowed slightly, although with his left hand placed over his chest rather than the customary right, a courtier's signal of false sincerity. "Anything for you, dearest Councilor."

She groaned again but departed. Alistair waited until her footsteps no longer echoed before nodding to Xander.

Xander took two steps backwards, then spun his leg upwards in a forceful kick. His foot hit next to the handle with a hollow thud, and the door swung open. The two men stepped inside, heedless of my astonishment. No wonder Venuda had been reluctant to leave them unattended.

The Delos family quarters were luxuriously appointed, though the furniture was unfashionably antiquated, and the velvet tapestries faded. Whatever riches Armond's family had once possessed, their fortune had long ago dwindled. Perhaps Armond had agreed to kill me for payment without a deeper ulterior motive (other than his and my mutual dislike). Letty possessed a small inheritance from her father, though most her family's wealth had come after Catherine took over the business and her current allowance was no larger than mine. I couldn't imagine that sum being incentive enough for Armond to risk being caught for murder, no matter how deep his gaming debts or his dislike for me. But maybe Letty had leveraged her future role as Loren's wife.

"Armond Delos," my uncle called out in a playfully sing-song voice. "You have visitors—be a proper host."

No one replied. Alistair frowned and tilted his head to the side as if listening for something. Silently, he ventured further into the apartment, down the hallway and out of my view. I heard a door quietly close, and then he returned. His expression was now solemn, laugh lines deepened into a solemn furrow.

“Wait with Tru in the hallway,” he instructed Xander.

Xander nodded silently and reached for my arm. I shook him off. “I’m not leaving.” I pushed past my uncle, almost falling as my ankle wobbled from the effort. “If Armond’s not here, I can at least help you look for some indication of where he’s gone.”

I limped across the living room and into the hallway, using the furniture and then the wall to brace myself between each excruciating step. I stopped at the nearest door, too weak to go any further but too stubborn to ask for help. Thankfully, the door was unlocked.

The door swung inwards to reveal a small office. Unlike the sitting room, this area was spartan--a true testimony to Armond's lack of finances. Instead of glowstones, there was a recently depleted tallow candle, its melted stub smoking, and the desk was a spindly piece more suited to a school boy's classroom than a lord's office. Across that desk slumped Armond, the moonlight streaming through the window turning his pale cheeks even paler. Spilled ink dripped from the upturned pot at his elbow into a black pool on the threadbare carpet.

Armond didn't react to my intrusion. He couldn't.

My murderer was already dead.

[Mind Blind Mini-Update \(Have a Gray-te Day!\)](#)

[Nov 12, 2021](#)

That's right, Gray's smooch has *finally* been added. This chapter is something of a nightmare to code (understatement of the year), so there may be some looping zones. I've also taken out a bunch of portions that aren't fully coded yet, so if you stumble upon a random 1,000+ word segment of story without any options, which may be written in first or third person . . . it's just something I overlooked when pruning. (Unlike Ev, I'm a somewhat haphazard gardener.)

What's New:

-Gray romance scene for Buttons who kept their cover (versions both with and without Sally staying). This requires calling Gray while in the hallway. If you're not romancing Gray still call him . . . well, the silly boy is currently a little confused and will likely think that you're romancing him anyway. (Non-romanced Gray will be an option if Sally isn't staying with Button, but I've yet to finish the scene).

-Gray's romance scene for Buttons staying at Aeon. Gray is the go-to Ment for this version, but he'll still think that he's romancing Button until his friendzone versions get added.

-Button can now bail mid-way through the Noh encounter.

-Button can now eavesdrop on Gray's thoughts. For Buttons who work with Noh to find Nick, this choice will be reflected in their version Gray's romance scene (which will also be this chapter).

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-jubilee/mygame/>

[Writer's Blog: One Way at a Time](#)

[Nov 13, 2021](#)

When I first started writing *Mind Blind*, I put out each pathway to school separately. Meeting Kenzie was released first (I remember being simultaneously terrified that either everyone would realize they weren't a Ment . . . or that no one would). Then came Gray's walking route with flashback (changing to past tense was another thing I worried about). And finally, the subway route with perspective shift where readers could first meet Noh (another thing that I felt super nervous about).

My point (other than the fact that my fears turned out to be mostly ungrounded) is that this all felt like a lot at the time, but I managed because I only completed one route at a time. I divided the whole candy bar into fun-size pieces.

Now that *Mind Blind* has reached the point of branching endings, I've realized that I need to do the same in order to make writing more manageable going forth. Trying to write each major ending path simultaneously is, simply put, too complicated! My brain has reached overload point, and I fully believe that my neighbors have noticed the burnt smell emanating from my condo but are simply too polite to say anything.

Not to mention, it feels personally unsatisfying (to me) to release a 25k+ word update while knowing that you guys will only get maybe 3,000 words of that.

Going forth, I'll be focusing on the path where Button agrees to cooperate with Noh. The other paths will still be added in (Caleb's and Isaiah's interrogations are already written, as is a scene involving a certain

return character). But Noh's path is the one where all of *Mind Blind*'s mysteries can be solved, so it's the one I want to take to the finish line first.

Lightening my code-load to one final route will also reduce the balls I've been dropping due to juggling too many pathways at once. Heck, I haven't even decided whether or not to let Vengeance kidnap Kenzie! I mean, I want to go through with it (it would be too fun not to, I think). But implementing it properly will require my full attention, and my mind is primarily occupied with Noh's reveal and what happens after. I want to make sure that each pathway can wrap up tidily, and I feel like working on the separate branches one at a time is the best way to do that.

I'm trying to avoid any major spoilers (that being said, avert your eyes now if you want to go in blind!). The routes that will lead to Nick's discovery are:

1. *Cooperating with Noh, and the three major outcomes to their narrative arch (this is the path I'll be finishing first),*
2. *Interrogating Isaiah for info (Sally features heavily in this route),*
3. *Interrogating Caleb for info (not going to spoiler this one!),*

and finally . . .

4. *Route 4 aka Episode 4, which I'll simply refer to as "A New Hope" (which happens in lieu of Isaiah/Caleb should certain conditions be met).*

Hopefully (ha!), you guys can understand why it's too difficult to write them simultaneously—especially as each route will vary within itself depending upon Button's romance, their relationship with family, their MIV stats, and how much they've sympathized with Vengeance over the course of the game. I'm not saying that Button can turn into an evil overlord or anything . . . but I'm also not *not* saying that.

[MB Short Story: Tad Cooper Must Go Free](#)

[Nov 14, 2021](#)

Ever since what Sally internally referred to as the "Pencil Nose Thing," Elliot had changed. He didn't take the bus home with her anymore; instead, either Mr. or Mrs. Wiseman would pick him up directly from school. Her best friend was also no longer available to play as often—instead, he was at the hospital, where Elliot said the doctors made him spend hours lying inside a buzzing box. Usually, Sally didn't really notice her best friend's emotions—like most seven-year-olds, she excelled at ignoring the needs of others, even when those needs were psychically broadcast. But Elliot always felt sad, and a little scared, when he talked about his appointments, and that made Sally feel sad and scared too.

She wasn't quite certain why the Pencil Nose Thing was such a big deal: Elliot hadn't been the one whose brain hurt for hours after, that had been Sally. She didn't mind, though. Having her head hurt was fine since it meant that she could protect Elliot. Her dads said that Elliot's parents were worried that someone else would try to make Elliot do something, but that didn't make sense either. After all, Sally planned to always be there to warn him. She'd always planned on staying by Elliot's side anyway, so she didn't get why the adults kept making such a big fuss or why Elliot no longer smiled as often. As far as Sally was concerned, nothing had really changed.

It was only when Mr. Davalos introduced their new class pet that Sally knew with certainty that something needed to be done. Their classmates had crowded around Tad Cooper's tank, giggling. Elliot, however, had taken a single look at the iguana's glass enclosure and shivered. Sally had felt a wave of sadness come from him then, so strong that she almost broke down in tears herself even though, as a third grader, she was now too mature to cry all the time. But Elliot's sadness had *hurt*.

Sally didn't concern herself with figuring out the root of her friend's pain; the reason didn't matter. If she had spent a few minutes pondering the issue, she might have concluded that the lizard, trapped in a glass box without any control over his life, reminded Elliot of his current situation. But Sally wasn't one to waste time contemplating an issue. To her, the problem was simple: Elliot was hurting, and for some reason their new class pet made him hurt more. There was only one solution.

Tad Cooper must go free.

Because then, Elliot would smile again.

Her circle of potential accomplices was rather limited. Her dads would claim that, as a lizard, Tad Cooper was Mr. Davalos's property. Elliot's brother, Nick, who sometimes came to walk Elliot home, was too much of a dingus jerkface to ever help. And Sally's only friend beside Elliot, a girl who she'd gone to summer camp with last year, lived in Kentucky. Which left only Elliot himself to assist in her heist.

"Why are we doing this?" Elliot whispered.

Instead of following the rest of the class to recess, they'd doubled back and now were waiting behind the arts closet in the hallway. Mr. Davalos was still inside the classroom. But Sally had spent all morning thinking really, really hard and she'd managed to get a vision of when he'd leave. Her head still ached from the effort—Sally had never attempted to control her visions before, usually dedicating all her energy to preventing them from ever happening. But the pain was worth it if it meant that her plan would be successful.

Sally glanced at Elliot from the corner of her eye. She couldn't admit the reason that Tad Cooper needed to go free, of course. After the way all the adults had been acting, Elliot would be upset if he thought she was treating him differently as well. It was definitely the right move, though. Sally had felt a flicker of joy from him after she'd first suggested that they liberate the iguana, and he'd agreed without needing to be persuaded. It wasn't quite a smile, not yet, but it was better than the jacket of sadness he'd worn over the past few weeks.

"We're doing this because it's the right thing to do," Sally lied. "We're . . ." She paused, struggling to recall a phrase that her dads had recently taught her, before concluding triumphantly, "We're freedom fighters!"

"Oh." Elliot's lips curved up, in a way that *looked* like a smile but that Sally knew still really wasn't. "That's cool, I guess. Freedom fighters."

Sally nodded resolutely. "That's right. And as freedom fighters, it's our job to free Tad Cooper."

Elliot nodded back. Something about his demeanor had changed—he seemed certain now, less scared. Sally felt a thrill run up her spine. They really *were* freedom fighters, weren't they? After all, how could anyone, even a lizard, enjoy spending his hours cooped up in a small box when he could be exploring the great outdoors? Climbing trees, eating bugs, doing . . . whatever it was that lizards did. Sally was still mostly doing this for Elliot's sake. But now, she was also doing it for Tad Cooper.

Altruistic, her dads would describe it.

Sally and Elliot pressed up against the wall as the classroom door opened and Mr. Davalos emerged. Sally always giggled when she got nervous, and Elliot, predicting this, placed his hand over her mouth so that they wouldn't be caught. She placed her hand over Elliot's mouth, too, just so she didn't feel like she was the only liability on their team.

When they could no longer hear Mr. Davalos's footsteps, they lowered their hands, gasping for breath.

"That was so close!" Elliot exclaimed, even though Mr. Davalos had given no sign of being aware of their presence.

"We almost got caught!" Sally eagerly agreed. She shivered—her dads had claimed that freedom fighters often put themselves in danger, and now she had experienced that peril herself.

Elliot pulled at the doorknob to the classroom. He frowned. "It's locked."

Sally couldn't help but lift her chin with pride; between her and Elliot, it wasn't often that she got to be the clever one. She fished into her back pocket and pulled out a keyring—Mr. Davalos's keyring, to be precise, which she'd swiped off his desk when he'd been busy helping Lucy Fletcher with a math question. It took them a few tries to figure out which key fit, but eventually they managed to get the door open.

"The classroom looks bigger when it's just us here," Elliot noted.

"Us and Tad Cooper," Sally reminded him.

The lizard in question didn't react, but Sally figured that was only because he didn't realize that they'd come to save him (and that she'd hopefully save Elliot in the process).

“Guard the door,” she instructed Elliot. “If anyone comes, the codeword is ‘rainbow.’”

“Why do we need a codeword?” Elliot asked. “Won’t you hear the door open?”

Sally rolled her eyes. “All freedom fighters have codewords.”

Elliot nodded as if that made perfect sense (which, to a third grader, it did). He stood by the door on his tiptoes in order to peer through its narrow window. Meanwhile, Sally made her way over to Tad Cooper’s terrarium and gingerly unlocked the screen doors.

The iguana didn’t move, apparently unwilling to assist in his own escape. Holding her breath, Sally slid one hand under his scaly belly and lifted him off his log. One of his eyes stared directly at her.

She swallowed, suddenly remember Mr. Davalos’s warning that the iguana never be handled unless their teacher was also in the room. “Do iguanas bite?” she asked Elliot.

Elliot mulled over her question while pressing his nose against the door’s window. “Godzilla bites,” was his reply. “I think Godzilla is based off an iguana.”

Sally gulped. She’d been afraid of that.

“*Rainbow!*” Elliot hissed. “*Rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!*” He grabbed her arm—the one not holding Tad Cooper—and yanked her down beneath Mr. Davalos’s desk. Through the inch-wide crack between floor and desk, they saw a pair of brown leather loafers enter the room.

“Ms. Wiseman, I’m doing everything I can to work around your son’s condition,” Mr. Davalos said. “But our elementary school has nineteen Ment students—two of them in Elliot’s grade. I simply wonder if it wouldn’t be better for him to attend a smaller institution. For his own sake.”

Sally felt Elliot stiffen besides her. Mr. Davalos must be on the phone with Elliot’s mom, and he seemed to be suggesting that Elliot switch schools.

“Elliot is a likeable kid,” their teacher continued. “I’m sure that he’d be able to make other friends.” He paused, listening to the person on the other end of the phone, then raised his voice. “What’s *disruptive* is . . .”

Sally had heard enough. More importantly, she could tell that Elliot had heard enough from the sadness and worry that spilled out of him. No longer caring if she got bitten, she clutched Tad Cooper to her chest and grabbed Elliot’s hand with her free hand.

“On *rainbow*,” she whispered to her best friend. “One, two, three . . . *Rainbow!*”

Without waiting for Elliot to agree to the plan, she raced from the room, Elliot tripping behind her due to her grip on his arm. She ignored Mr. Davalos’s cry of surprise, barreling onwards through the door and down the hall. Sally wasn’t tall, nor was she a particularly good runner (although Elliot still picked her

during P.E.), but she ran with a speed fueled by determination. Helping Tad Cooper escape wasn't enough; she needed to help Elliot escape as well, before his parents sent him to another school and she never saw him again.

She couldn't protect Elliot if he went to another school.

She tightened her grip on Elliot's hand and charged, head-first, through the open doors that lead out onto the playground. She could feel Elliot's confusion, mixed with the adrenaline high that came with running from the law. They kept running, Mr. Davalos's shout following in their stead, until they reached the edge of the soccer field, at which point, Sally set down the petrified iguana in the grass.

Tad Cooper didn't budge.

A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that Mr. Davalos was only a short distance away.

"Be free, Tad Cooper!" she shouted, nudging the lizard towards the gap in the gate. She'd throw him over the fence herself, but she wasn't sure whether iguanas landed on their feet like cats. Instead, all she could do was nudge him towards the fence, its wire gaps perfectly sized to accommodate a lizard escape route.

Tad Cooper blinked at her.

"Maybe he doesn't *want* to go?" Elliot suggested, panting from being dragged halfway across school grounds. His heavy breaths were interrupted by a wet hiccup. Sally stopped pushing at the iguana and turned to face her best friend, whose eyes now sparkled with tears.

She opened her arms, and Elliot fell into them, sobbing. He didn't say anything else, but Sally knew. Elliot didn't want to go either.

At that instant, Sally finally realized why the Pencil Nose Thing was such a big idea. As hard as it was to imagine, there might come a time when she and Elliot parted. And even if they stayed together, the fact that Elliot needed her to stay safe . . . that stunk. It stunk in the way that Sally's visions of the future stunk. She'd been so happy to finally pay back Elliot for keeping her nightmares at bay, she'd never paused to realize that she didn't *want* him to need her the same way that she needed him. She wanted Elliot to be able to choose.

According to her dads, choice was what freedom fighting was all about.

Still hugging Elliot close, Sally looked down at the iguana. "Do you want to stay with us, Tad Cooper?"

Tad Cooper didn't say yes, but he also didn't move towards the fence. With Mr. Davalos nearly upon them, Sally needed to decide which was truly important.

Tad Cooper's freedom?

Or Elliot's?

* * * *

Matteo paced back and forth in Sally's bedroom, his cheeks bright red. Not from anger—although he wanted his daughter to *think* that he was angry given that she'd just been suspended from school for a week—but because he'd spent the last twenty minutes attempting not to laugh.

"Sweetie, you understand that your actions were wrong, right?" he asked.

Sally crossed her arms and stared mulishly out the window. Matteo sighed and sat down beside her on the bed, hugging her narrow shoulders.

"When you stole Mr. Davalos's pet—"

"I told you!" Sally exploded. "We didn't *steal* Tad Cooper. I liberated him."

"Liberated," her father corrected. "In order to make Elliot smile. That part, I understand. But why did you threaten to throw the iguana over the fence?"

"So that Mr. Davalos would let Elliot stay in class."

Matteo blinked. He opened his mouth . . . and then closed it. Exactly how was one supposed to react when their seven-year-old daughter informed them that she'd blackmailed her teacher with the life of an iguana? The parenting books hadn't covered that bit, and Matteo wasn't certain whether he should be proud or concerned.

"The animal could've been hurt," he settled on saying.

"I wouldn't have really thrown Tad Cooper," Sally grumbled. "But Mr. Davalos didn't know that."

Proud, Matteo decided. Definitely proud.

**For those wondering about the iguana's name, I'd highly suggest watching the TV show "Galavant"*

[Mind Blind Chapter 14 Update](#)

[Nov 17, 2021](#)

Whoot! You can now find Waldo Wiseman (aka Nick) . . . or at least get a very good lead on his location, which will lead to Button and Gang going Nick-hunting in Chapter 15.

Word Count: 443k

This Week's Coding To-Do List:

1. Add in a few missing scenes
2. Make Grayson stop kissing everyone
3. Also make Sally stop kissing everyone

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-jubilee/mygame/>

[Writer's Blog: Scenus Deletus](#)

[Nov 19, 2021](#)

First things first, the most recent demo has been updated so that Gray and Sally should now keep their lips reserved for only Buttons who reciprocate their feelings (assuming you accept Noh's offer--the other routes, I'll fix later).

As a writer, there's perhaps nothing more disheartening than realizing you need to cut material. I spent hours writing this! There's that one super funny pun that won't work in any other scene! I spent hours writing this! Grayson and Sally deserve more screen time! I spent hours writing this!

In interactive fiction, this difficulty is compounded on by the natural desire to give all readers the same amount of scenes. But what I've come to realize is that, for some playthroughs, having that extra scene doesn't add anything—in fact, it can weaken the impact of the scene prior.

Deciding not to include scenes is something that frequently happens, although I try to avoid talking about the deleted material because, honestly, talking about it makes me sad. (I spent hours writing this! Only to toss it in the trash.)

Writing time is never wasted; it's time I actively practicing my craft, after all, and thus hopefully improving. And critical evaluation that leads to cut scenes ultimately makes for more enjoyable reading. But still. I spent hours writing this!

Scenes are easier for me to excise when I can admit to myself that the scene itself is flawed because my writing is bad—when it's a problem with the trees instead of the forest. Usually, that just requires some lumberjack editing, and pruning a few paragraphs. Acknowledging that a scene shouldn't be included at all is harder for me.

You've probably all guessed why I chose the topic of this week's blog post: I decided to delete some scenes. Granted, these scenes hadn't been posted in the demo yet—in large part because I already knew, deep down, that they weren't necessary.

If Button rejects Noh's offer in Chapter 14, it makes sense that the next scene will have either Sally or Gray reading their mind to make sure that Noh is no longer hanging around. This version (which I will finish once Noh's whole plotline is complete) needs to be appropriately emotional—Button is likely either afraid, angry, or both, and their heightened reaction to Noh's presence means that the scene where their friend/partner reassures them is (or should be, if I execute it properly) compelling.

This changes if Button accepts Noh's help. In this case, the emotional weight of the chapter lies not with Button's rejection and subsequent fear, but rather with the process of finding Nick. It involves a weird, pseudoscience mind meld, and the last three words of "you're truly alone" reinforce the fact that not only is Nick gone, but the responsibility to find him resides solely on Button's shoulders—and of course, there's always that niggling possibility that Noh *didn't* leave. That uncertainty heightens the tension, especially if the chapter then promptly ends.

And yet . . .

If Button is romancing Sally, having Sally check their mind after Noh's help still leads to a sweet scene. It's intimate, because the two are dating, and serves to further establish their relationship. Likewise, if Sally is staying at Nick's house with Button, the two have a positive relationship. Sally's brain bouncing still serves to give insight into her and Button's relationship, which is no less deep just because it's platonic. Button is alone, yes, but hey it's a little brighter because they have Sally staying with them! Yay!

Likewise, the brain-check scene with Grayson is the establishing point for his romance route. Because, for the first time, there's a real reason that Gray should be reading Button's mind. Letting him do so is integral step towards Button ending up with Gray in the long-term, to the point where if you reject his offer, it cuts off from his romance path. (Gray won't want to be with someone whom he needs to be constantly afraid of bumping into. This isn't to say that Gray won't respect Button's boundaries and be willing to step back, but he can't live in fear of reaching over their shoulder to grab the spatula while cooking together. Not that Gray would ever cook, at least not *well*, but hopefully you get my point.)

Although information in the scenes with Sally and Gray is reiterated (it needs to be, to at least some extent, to establish what the other characters are reacting to), I only vaguely summarize Button regurgitating what went down with Noh, with the goal of avoiding reader fatigue and not make you reread the same pertinent plot points. Because if I grow bored writing a scene, it's highly likely that people will be bored reading it as well.

Without the emotional punch of either soulmate soulgazing with Gray, or Sally rallying Button as the ultimate ride-or-die, this post-Noh scene becomes reduced to reiteration. Gray reads Button's mind while acting professional, because there's no juicy half-decade crush to make him behave impulsively. And Sally's romance scene, while sweet, isn't so integral to her relationship development that it can't be skipped by Buttons living alone and/or staying at the safehouse—especially since my attempts to get Sally to Button means diverting from the main plot, and only serve to weaken the urgency of the situation (which is to locate Nick).

Thus, I've decided to not include the scenes that weren't working. There was a reason that I held them back, after all.

For the path where Button accepts Noh's aide, Sally's optional romance and friendship scenes will only trigger if she's in the house with Button. Gray's scene will be accessible only to Buttons who are pursuing him, but it'll be accessible regardless of Button's location what since it's crucial to his romance route. For all other Buttons who go the mind-meld route, Chapter 14 will end with Noh's departure.

[Nohvember Interview](#)

[Nov 19, 2021](#)

I held off making this month's interview announcement post until I was absolutely *certain* that I'd be able to release Noh's first reveal. (A lot of words happen between Chapter 15's start and then, and at the beginning of the month I was still uncertain whether I could code it all). But I can now confidentially say that I'm on track!

Thus, I am pleased to announce that this month's interviewees are Noh and Schrodinger.

Ask your questions here or via the Sanctum of Spoilers interview channel.

(Schrodinger will have his own interview, for those who either don't get Noh's first reveal or in case there's unforeseen circumstances which prevent me from uploading the next demo update, like website outages or death).

A few guidelines when asking questions for Noh: you can ask questions aimed towards people who you think *might* be Noh in advance. If Noh isn't that character, they just won't answer.

[Mind Blind Bloopers Reel](#)

[Nov 22, 2021](#)

Sally flings herself out of the elevator, a blur of yellow pajamas and red curls. She hurdles towards you full speed, her arms outstretched so as to catch you in her embrace.

"That's it," she declares, tightening her hold. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

* * * *

Sally shoves past Gray, heedless of his wince as her elbow accidentally connects with his gut. She stomps towards you with a scowl, her aura intimidating despite her daisy-print pajamas.

“I’m not—” she starts angrily before breaking abruptly off, examining your expression. She takes a deep breath and shakes her head. “Look, I know we haven’t—”

She cuts off again, meeting your gaze directly. “No matter how far we grow apart, I’ll always be here for you in a situation like this.”

* * * *

Grayson is too courteous to comment, although his pinkening cheeks confirm that he’s hearing your idly wandering thoughts about Kent. Common curtesy requires that you focus on something else while he reads your mind. Something less intriguing than the way Kent’s shoulders stiffened whenever Andy flirted, his shirt stretching as the muscles beneath tightened and flexed, muscles that you were blessed enough to see in all their naked glory the first time that . . .

Gray coughs delicately.

Shit. You’re doing it again.

* * * *

Grayson is too courteous to comment, although his pinkening cheeks confirm that he’s hearing your idly wandering thoughts about Talia. Common curtesy requires that you focus on something else while he reads your mind. Something less intriguing than the way Talia laughs, her head tilting backward to accentuate the elegant line of her neck, her skin smooth and soft, and leading down towards . . .

Gray coughs delicately.

Shit. You’re doing it again.

* * * *

Grayson is too courteous to comment, although his pinkening cheeks confirm that he’s hearing your idly wandering thoughts about Ambrose. Common curtesy requires that you focus on something else while he reads your mind. Something less intriguing than the husky growl of Ambrose’s voice when he first answered the phone, a low timbre that lit your imagination afire with heated visions of the two of you entwined while . . .

Gray half-groans, half-laughs. “Poor Nick.”

[Writer's Blog: False Starts \(And Chapter 15 Sneak Preview\)](#)

[Nov 23, 2021](#)

In *Mind Blind*, I often end up writing scenes a few times, *especially* chapter opening scenes. It usually takes me a few attempts to figure out how to concisely communicate the information that leads from the last scene's end to the new scene's beginning.

I just rewrote the beginning of Chapter 15, and thought it made a really good example for how my rewriting process usually goes. The new version isn't dramatically different, but there are some significant changes which bring momentum to the entire rest of the chapter.

(Warning: Spoilers ahead!)

* * * *

The First Draft (Version: Button blew their cover and is romancing Glitch)

The next morning starts at 5am.

As unnerving as it felt to awaken to all of Operation Hemera deep in discussion at the holoconsole next to your temporary cot, you've even more taken aback by \${Glitch}'s appearance. Dark circles emphasize the redness of \${this} eyes, and \${this} deep brown skin looks dull.

Most concerning of all is \${this} twitching. \${This} hands move in quick, jerky movements as \${the} gestures to the central holoconsole, and even \${this} lips quivered against your cheek when \${the} kissed you hello.

"I have last two weeks of traffic footage taken from Jefferson Park." \${Glitch} blinks, hard, as if staring at the illuminated map hurts \${this} eyes. "I managed to 'borrow' some of Chicago PD's POD footage as well."

"POD?" Sally asks, stifling a yawn.

"Police Observational Devices," \${Glitch} elaborates. "Traffic cams only cover major intersections, but the police sometimes set up cameras on slower-action roads and the flatwoods—to catch drug deals, that sort of thing. Those are the roads Vengeance would need to stay on to keep a low profile."

Option: *Concerned, I lay a hand on \${Glitch}'s shoulder. "Have you been combing over traffic footage all night?"*

"Personally? No." \${Glitch} spares you a tired smile. "I tweaked one of Unity's AI algorithms to check for ambulances."

"Parker and I went through the AI's results." Despite having likely received as little sleep as \${Glitch},

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khis} eyes.

Glitch} shrugs, taking a large swig from a neon green can labeled XXXL. "It's not my fault that ice cream trucks and ambulances look so much alike."

* * * *

There were a couple problems with this scene. First, the bulk of Chapter 15 happens at a different location. Starting at Aeon serves no purpose, and only means that I had to include how the characters got from Point A to Point B. Having it start at Aeon also required versions based on whether Button was coming from home or was already at Aeon.

Another problem is that interactive fiction, more than almost any other genre, needs to be selective when setting the scene, using description to highlight character personality. By virtue of being interactive, you only really write a page or two before the main character should pick a choice or chime in, even if that choice isn't necessary and can interrupt the flow of setting things up--exposition is a necessary evil, but the nature of IF makes it difficult to include. So you need to make the descriptions count.

* * * *

Here's the current new (still WIP) version:

Other than your bed, there are few locations where you'd choose to be at 4:55 in the morning.

*Inside an MIV surveillance van disguised as **House It Going? Realtors** doesn't make that limited list.*

As unnerving as it was to be woken up by Kim's curt call of "Outside. Now.", you were even more taken aback by Glitch's haggard appearance as you joined thim in the van's back. Most concerning of all has been this twitching. This fingers tap quickly, jerkily, over the keyboard of this laptop; even this lips quivered against your cheek when the absentmindedly kissed you hello.

"This is the right place—I went through two weeks of traffic footage taken from Jefferson Park." Glitch blinks, hard, as if staring at the laptop screen hurts this eyes. "I managed to 'borrow' some of Chicago PD's POD footage as well."

"POD?" Sally asks as Kent stifles a yawn.

With \${Kim} driving, the only member of Operation Hemera who's missing is Gray, who's currently briefing the rest of UCRT on the situation. Not that you know Nick's exact location yet, but \${Glitch} claims that you'll find answers at the van's final destination.

"Police Observational Devices," \${the} elaborates in response to Sally's question. "Traffic cams only cover major intersections, but the police sometimes set up cameras on slower-action roads and near the flatwoods—to catch drug deals, that sort of thing. Those are the roads Vengeance needed to stay on to keep a low profile."

Option: *"Have you been combing over traffic footage all night?"*

"Personally? No." \${Glitch} spares you a tired smile. "I tweaked one of Unity's AI algorithms to scan the video for ambulances and checked its results against all local emergency calls. It was pretty ingenious if I do say so myself."

There's a faint yet derisive snort through the curtain that separates the back of the van from the driver's seat.

\${Glitch} shrugs, taking a long swig from an alarmingly neon can. "Rosy helped me go over the AI's findings." \${The} raises \${this} voice and calls to the front, "It's not my fault that ice cream trucks and ambulances look so much alike!"

* * * *

As you can see, the exact same information gets shared. But I personally feel that the second scene better highlights the character personalities (especially Rosy), while also adding a sense of urgency: Button and crew are already on their way *somewhere*, but the reader must keep reading to discover where.

Starting chapters with that unanswered question makes the whole scene more interesting, and also leads more naturally into the next portion (where they're at the place).

Anyway. I always wished that writers would be more forthcoming with their rewriting process! I sometimes get the impression that other authors just magically know how to write well, but the truth is that writing involves a lot of experimentation and failing until you figure out what works :)

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Nov 24, 2021](#)

Armond's mouth sagged in a lopsided smile, the right hinge of his jaw shattered by a bullet. The expression was obscene, grotesque—far from the serene illusion of slumber that I'd always imagined upon my own face after each my deaths. Blood painted his lips and freckled his cheeks, and his hand lay slack atop a pistol.

Uncle Alistair picked up the gun. It was a dueling pistol, its barrel forged of blue steel to reduce the sun's glare and its pearl grip covered in ivy carvings that traced blackened veins against the bone white inlay. Blood or ink?

I'd always avoided contemplating the aftermath of my murders. Convinced myself no "after" existed and that the universe completely restarted with each demise. Delphine had said the Anterdonians believed magic drew from alternate realities. What if my former lives had continued, even after my end? Did some timeline exist where Theo knelt beside my body, his hands pressed over my heart in vain attempt to staunch its bleeding? Where my corpse lay limp in a ditch or broken at a tower base? So much of Armond's blood had been shed from a single bullet.

How much gorier was a decapitated head?

The room began to tilt. Xander's hands pressed against my upper arms from behind, warm and alive. I didn't protest as he guided me to sit down on the settee next to Armond's desk. He sat down beside me, saying nothing but stroking my back in gentle circles as I struggled to remember how to breathe.

"Xander can take you to the other room," said Alistair. "You needn't be subjected to this."

I shook my head mutely. I *did* need to be here, even if I was unable to give voice to my reasons. With Armond gone, would that the attempts on my life stop? Was Letty still a threat now that her accomplice was out of the picture? I'd assumed her involvement in many of my deaths, but the only time her participation had ever been exposed was during my second life when she'd given Loren the forged letter and testified against me. Her power had always lain in her ability to manipulate people, to come across as innocent even as I writhed and choked from poisoned cake.

In each my lives, years had passed between Letty's arrival at Bellcrest and the attempts to kill me. She must have flattered and coaxed Armond until he had agreed to help her win Loren—my stepsister was, above all things, charming. Was she even aware of Armond's most recent attempt on my life? Perhaps his hatred of me had inspired him to take initiative. Either way, it would be harder for my stepsister to form new alliances when her last had ended so fatally.

Alistair set the pistol aside. "Xander, bring a light closer, would you?"

Xander gave my shoulder one last reassuring squeeze before rising and bringing him the glowstone lantern that flickered from the nightstand. My legs refused to follow, or even to rise from the bed. I could only shudder with how unphased they both seemed to be so near a corpse, even as I coveted their practiced indifference.

My uncle turned over Armond's wrist. Metal flashed with the movement, and my horror was temporarily forgotten. How many times had I stared at Armond's sleeve, in futile hope of spotting the ruby cufflink worn by the man responsible for my fifth death? Too many to count and frequently enough that I could visualize the small bronze shield and its leafless oak with roots that spiraled into a spearhead at the bottom. Armond had been fastidious about his attire: his pantlegs never bunched where they tucked into his boots; bright brocade lined the interior of his coats; and his heraldic cuffs had always been tightened so that the shields' engrailed tops perfectly paralleled his sleeve hems.

But now, the edges of his sleeve overlapped, its buttonholes unaligned and twisted, and the cufflink's shield tip pointed askew. Armond would never have fastened his cuff so sloppily, no matter how distraught or terrified or guilt-wracked he may have been.

I knelt beside the desk; my feet had carried me close without realizing it. Xander's fingertips brushed against my arm, intent on pulling me back again, but Alistair stopped his movement with a headshake.

Blood splattered the back of Armond's right hand and caked the creases of his knuckles, and yet his shirt sleeve was stainless except for where spilled ink had pooled near the elbow. My fingers trembled as I unfastened the cufflink. Its metal was cold, as cold as I imagined Armond's skin, which I tried not to touch as I pinched the white fabric and rolled the sleeve back. My heart plummeted.

"Clever girl," murmured Alistair approvingly.

Xander laid a hand on my shoulder and gave a sympathetic squeeze.

Underneath the fabric, droplets of dried blood matted the hairs of Armond's forearm. Of course it wouldn't be that easy. Armond might be gone, but the danger to my life persisted. Another killer waited for me, this one ruthless enough to shoot their own partner when he'd become a liability.

After all, dead men didn't dress themselves.

When Venuda returned with a bleary-eyed Councilor Timons in tow, Alistair informed them that Armond had committed suicide.

"Surely, the blackguard was overwhelmed by guilt," he said, shaking his head as if sad. "The important thing is that my niece is now safe."

Timons left right away, all too happy to head back to bed. Venuda, however, glared so fiercely at my uncle that I thought her eyes might spout flames. "I told you to wait." Her voice was as cold as her gaze was heated. "Instead, I return to find you standing over a noble's dead body. Whom you claim committed suicide."

Alistair sighed in mock sorrow. "I'd be more brokenhearted, but my empathy has limits towards the would-be assassin of my dearest niece."

"Not to question Lady Vitrula's account," she said, "but we can't be certain that her ladyship is not still in danger. What preempted Lord Delos's attack? Blackmail? Insanity? He may yet have accomplices."

"The threat is passed." Alistair waved a hand towards the bedsheet he'd draped over the slumped body. Other than Armond's still-visible boots, the resulting silhouette looked more like a couch covered to prevent summer fading than a corpse. "Passed on, you can even say." His chuckle subsided when no one else laughed at his pun.

"We found no indication that Delos was working with a partner," said Xander. My brow furrowed at the smoothness of his lie. I was used to being able to read Xander—his redheaded complexion did little to disguise blushes, and his nervous cough (while adorable) was usually a giveaway that he was withholding something or feeling awkward. But if I hadn't known that Armond had been murdered, I would have believed him to be to be telling the truth.

"As for a reason," continued Alistair, "jealousy, perhaps? He and His Highness were close."

"Jealousy," repeated Venuda flatly. "You wish me to report to His Majesty that Armond Delos was driven mad by love. For His Majesty's son."

Alistair shrugged. "It's a tale straight from ballads—like the legend of Prince Leopold and Sir Rhys." He chuckled. "One of my personal favorite love stories, although Sir Rhys was a hero and not a coldblooded killer. Regardless, it has a poetic spin which should appease the Court."

"Distract them, you mean." The retired general's biceps flexed menacingly as she crossed her arms. She obviously wasn't willing to blindly accept his account of events yet seemed reluctant to push back. Xander had claimed that Alistair was King Eldin's "spymaster." Singular, implying that there was only one. Assuming that was the truth, since Xander had just proved himself a more adept liar than I'd believed. Either way: how influential was my uncle, that even Venuda wasn't willing to openly refute his statements?

More importantly: would it be wiser to tell her the truth? The Castle Guard reported to the Councilor; if I openly admitted that someone else had killed Armond, the pressure of the Guard's ensuing investigation might keep the murderer too distracted to worry about killing me. Logic dictated it would be safer to tell her.

Xander caught my eye and shook his head subtly as if aware of my train of thought. *Trust us*, his gaze implored. *Keep silent*.

"I threatened to have Armond expelled from Court." My words came in a rush, racing to be heard before I second guessed my decision. If Xander and my uncle thought it wisest to keep Armond's actual cause of death quiet, then I would trust them. For now. "I walked in on him cornering a young maid in the stables and told him that I would inform Prince Loren about his appalling actions after I returned from my ride." I met Venuda's disbelieving gaze straight on. "Lord Delos followed me, provoked my horse into a panic, then killed himself upon learning of my survival rather than face the consequences of his attack."

My journal was filled with accounts of Armond's past transgressions; my explanation shouldn't be too hard for anyone to believe. In my last life, Emilia had been wrongfully imprisoned for defending herself but, as a Duke Kothe's daughter and Prince Loren's betrothed, I outranked Armond. Courtiers would accept my testimony more readily than that of a servant, or at least would be too deferential to openly challenge my version of events. Among nobility, rank determined one's honesty.

Venuda, however, wasn't noble. Unlike many of her peers, she'd earned her Councilor's seat on the Table of Law after years of serving in Verdan's army, and war had taught her to be suspicious. Her eyes narrowed, perceptive despite being clouded by cataracts.

"Delphine made no mention of a confrontation," she said. "Only that you'd recognized your attacker."

A shiver crawled up my spine as I recalled the last time that Venuda had stared at me so intently. *Not clever enough. Did you really believe you could get away with killing the heir to the throne?* Some memories, I didn't need my journal to remember.

"I didn't inform anyone of the encounter." Somehow, my voice came out steady. "Out of consideration for the maid, whose prerogative it is on whether or not Armond's harassment was made public. The fact that he attacked me was sufficient enough to demand his arrest."

"Several maids reported Delos for being handsy," she conceded, looking chagrined. "My guards could do little except issue him warning to be more respectful of castle employees."

"Because of his friendship with my fiancé."

Venuda ran her fingers through her cropped hair but didn't disagree. "His Highness won't be pleased when he learns about tonight's events."

"Then it's best that my niece be the one to break the news to him," said Alistair. "In the morning. I daresay we could all benefit from a few hours of sleep."

"His Majesty—" began Venuda.

"—will be informed about all that's occurred," he finished. "By me personally. Xander, I trust you can escort Tru back to her chambers and keep guard?"

Xander nodded.

Venuda tried again. "My men can—"

"—do nothing which my assistant is not equally capable," said Alistair. "Lord Brant will watch over my niece tonight."

Venuda glared knives at him, her annoyance over his interruptions on the verge of physically manifesting. Alistair pretended to be oblivious to her seething rage as he offered her his arm. She

accepted, calloused fingers biting down with enough strength that his charming smile briefly faltered into a wince.

I took Xander's offered arm as well, though our pace was much slower than theirs given that my leg threatened to buckle beneath me with each step.

Xander observed me from the corner of his eye, although he snapped his gaze so quickly forward each time my head turned that I almost didn't note the wrinkle of concern that lined his brow.

"Your ankle looked like it was paining you earlier," he said.

My head bobbed a heavy affirmative; my brain felt as if it had liquified and might leak onto the floor if I raised it up again. My ankle ached. My head ached. Everything ached. Magical healing or not, my bones need rest to fully reknit. Xander chuckled at my groggy insistence that I was fine, perfectly fine. He knelt down, and I stared at his back uncomprehendingly.

"It will be quicker this way," he said. "The sooner you make it back to your room, the sooner you can fall sleep."

The allure of sleep won over the dictates of propriety. My cheeks blazed as I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung on as he stood up. Theo had carried me on his back this way when we were young. I used to laugh and pull at my brother's ears to make him change direction as we'd careened through the wide, mazelike hallways of the family portrait gallery until Father sent a broom-wielding servant to corral us back into the nursery.

It felt different with Xander. My nightdress bunched around my legs, and my skin broke into bumps where his hands gripped beneath my knees. Though it was hard to discern in what flickering light of the West Tower's glowstones, his ears looked nearly as red as his hair. I was tempted to give one a tug, just to observe how he'd react.

I rested my head against his shoulder. Xander smelled like lemon and soap. I took a deep breath, and he stumbled.

Curses. Had I just sniffed him?

Even worse: had he realized that I sniffed him?

I kept my head militantly upright after that despite my bone-deep fatigue, and neither of us spoke until we were back in my bedchamber. My leg rebelled beneath my weight as I slid off his back. I yelped, but Xander caught me before my knees hit the ground. My breaths were heavy with pain, as were his from having carried me halfway across the castle. But the moment our eyes met, both of us stopped breathing.

He spoke but didn't draw away. "Careful."

"I'm always careful," I lied.

He smiled, pressing me against his chest in a hug under the pretense of keeping me upright. I wanted to wrap my arms around him as well. I wanted to forget about Armond, about Letty, and about whether or not my stepsister was capable of killing him or whether it had been someone else. I wanted to forget about my father and King Eldin and how my engagement to Loren was all that prevented the first from declaring war against the second. I wanted to forget about everything, except Xander.

His face drew nearer. Apparently, Xander wanted to forget everyone else as well.

And so, I yawned.

I yawned so wide that my jaw audibly cracked. Xander pulled away, politely disguising the disgust he must surely have felt at his intimate view of my tonsils. If he suspected my yawn had been faked (which it had been), he was too considerate to comment. He kept hold of my elbow to prevent me from toppling over, then released me so abruptly once I sat down on my bed that one would have thought it was on fire for a second time.

He coughed into his fist. "Goodnight, Lady Vitrula. I'll keep watch outside your door until Lord Errans sends a replacement—no one will interrupt your sleep tonight."

Although I'd been the one to ruin our moment, his inclusion of my title still stung, not to mention his eagerness that someone else be assigned my guard. Had I misread his signals? I didn't think so—ever since Xander's return, a lightning sort of awareness had crackled between us, which had never been present in our letters to each other or when we'd first met a year ago. It had been my realization that I liked his mind that made his personage so irresistible.

But my circumstances made acting on that attraction impossible. Not physically impossible: Xander and I could run away from Bellcrest tomorrow should I so desire and if he by some miracle agreed. Armond's murderer no doubt saw me as problem that needed to be removed. Instead of waiting for my own staged suicide, I could remove myself from Bellcrest and, in so doing, achieve some sort of happily ever after with Xander.

Happy . . . until my father blamed Loren for my disappearance, as he no doubt would once Loren and Letty became engaged, which they were equally certainly to do, given my stepsister's obsession with taking my place and Loren's starry-eyed infatuation. Happy until Duke Kothe lead the Northern Provinces in a second Uprising, and Bellcrest was razed, and Theo killed, and Verdan's people suffered regardless of which side they fought.

Would I still be happy with Xander, after all that came to pass? Or would I look into the mirror and see a woman who, too terrified to confront and change her own fate, had sentenced thousands to die in her place?

Every night since I'd arrived in Bellcrest, I'd resisted the temptation to sneak out of the castle, saddle Dragon, and keep riding until no one recognized my name. My attraction to Xander amplified that

temptation tenfold. But life was not a fairy tale, and repercussions existed.

I rolled onto my side, pressing my face into the pillow so that Xander couldn't see the silent tears trickling down my cheeks. Not for Armond; I wasn't a good enough person to grieve the death of my would-be murderer. I wept for myself, and for what could have been.

"Thank you, Lord Brant," I said. "You may go."

[About Tomorrow's Update](#)

[Nov 26, 2021](#)

I accidentally published today's blog on Wednesday? . . . Or was it Tuesday? This week has been a blur ever since my social media spree of "I HAD AN IDEA!!!" (see tumblr for receipts).

I'm currently rewriting the "heist" scene so that I can add in a visual blueprint later--I think this will make for a more engaging breaking-and-entering scene (and I'll also be adding in alternate descriptions for screen readers). This entails is a *lot* of rewriting, so the blueprint version won't be ready by tomorrow (since it involves art and I don't art). Instead, I'll be posting a version of the old scene edited for easier blueprint integration later on.

. . . Anyhow, that's not what I meant to talk about.

Since tomorrow will be the first possible Noh reveal, I wanted to ask that those of you with demo please access keep Noh's identity hush-hush on social media so as not to spoil the surprise for others (although, to some of you, it probably won't be a surprise at all!).

Feel free to discuss the revelation on The Sanctum discord, however, to which everyone with demo access should also have access. I'll be cross-posting the guidelines for discussing Noh's identity on discord, but for now:

You can discuss Noh's identity on the Sanctum demo channel *so long as you use the spoiler blackout*. This is achieved via discord mobile by adding ||to each side of the text||. (Many of you probably already know this, but I assume at least a handful are as technologically clueless as I was!)

The Sanctum conspiracy channel, which has always been a source of delightful chaos that people should enter at their own risk, requires no spoiler bars.

I also just want to reiterate my sincerest hopes that everyone be careful to not reveal the plot to others. Some things are best learned in the moment.

[Mind Blind Demo Update \(Part 1\)](#)

[Nov 27, 2021](#)

I'm running into a crash after Kenzie and Button enter the house, so am currently still bugtesting the second file. Since this update is around 35,000 words, it's a little tricky to identify the problem and I don't know how long it'll take (since it's not being caught by randomtest, and only happens when I playthrough). It should be fixed by tomorrow at the latest, though!

To tide you over in the meanwhile, I'm releasing the first half of the update, which is 15,000 words and should add around 5,000 words per playthrough. So at least there's still a lot to read, even if Noh is temporarily using a coding error to avoid being unmasked :)

What's Included: Chapter 15's heist scene! A few options are missing due to my usual last-minute tweaking (I decided to add a visual blueprint), including any scenes involving the drone and options that could endanger Kenzie's life. (The choice to call Sally's dads was added this morning, so it's not ready yet either.)

Still, if you pick an unfinished option, it'll just loop you back to the main choices, so feel free to experiment!

The second half of the update will be up as soon as I fix the code. I'd love to give an ETA for this, but I can't provide an estimate until I first identify what's causing the error.

Please be patient as this is a hefty update so there's a lot for me to comb through.

New Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-keepsake/mygame/>

[Mind Blind Demo Update \(All of Chapter 15, but no Noh yet\)](#)

[Nov 28, 2021](#)

First off, I'm so sorry!

I promise that I'm not trying to torture you guys by dragging my feet! (I know it may feel like I'm deliberately drawing out the release, but that's not the case. No matter how nervous Noh's reveal makes me, I'm ready to get it out there so I can stop biting my tongue.)

I'm doing everything in my power to make Noh's reveal happen by the end of this month.
EVERYTHING.

. . . But, uh . . .

. . . Well . . .

. . . You see . . .

. . . The thing is . . .

(No spaces in order to reduce accidental spoilers)

WhilebugfixingIhadthiside alastnightaboutusingaProhibitionEratunnelforasceneinsteadandit'sreallycooland
diwantedtoexpanduponplusthere'smoreKenzietimeandmoreKenzietimeisalwaysgoodright?
I'mreallyreallysorrythatit'sanotherlastminutechangebutmybrainthrivesonthe pre-
releaseadrenalineandgivesmesomeofmybestideasforrewrites.

Long story short: Noh now happens in Chapter 16, but I think I can get Chapter 16 out sometime tomorrow (the first UCRT+ Live Q&A will thus be tomorrow evening, after the drop, with the second on Wednesday).

The good news: this month's update is now going to be two entire chapters! Maybe that makes up for the delay a little bit?

(I feel truly terrible for being behind on things. This close to the end, it's hard not to second and triple guess my every narrative decision, but I really do feel like these changes will be worth it in the long run.)

Also, who doesn't love a



Demo Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-keepsake/mygame/>

Wordcount: 462,000 words

Average Playthrough: 105,000 words

[Nohvember Interview: The First Attempt](#)

[Nov 29, 2021](#)

I took a break from fixing the demo to write Noh's interview, only to realize that I can't put out Noh's interview without a certain scene from the demo, and yet if I kept working on the demo, I'll run out of time to write the interview by November's end. It's an impossible Catch-22.

The interview itself won't reveal Noh's identity (not directly, at least, although there will be major clues), but a main villain's monologue is required to understand many of Noh's answers and explained motives, and *that* evil diatribe now happens after Kenzie and Button go spelunking beneath Chicago.

Still, I've decided to share the beginning of my first attempt to forge ahead with Noh's interview anyway. The real interview with Noh will be posted once the in-game reveal is out (I just need to finish the tunnel scenes, and figure if there's a way I can recode something without kicking everyone's save back to Chapters 5/6). This interview will also have Nick as the interviewer for extra-spicy drama, instead of, er, the current host.

Below is my first attempt. You should be able to tell why I quit.

* * * *

A single lightbulb flickers on, buzzing due to faulty wiring. Instead of the usual stage, a small room is illuminated, a room with crumbling brick walls and boarded-over windows. The space is immaculately tidy despite its foreclosed appearance, the floor freshly swept and the high corners of the ceiling free from any cobwebs.

Movement stirs from near the windows. There's a crack between the wooden planks that allows for sunlight to penetrate the room, and through that crack squeezes a white cat with only one eye. It takes some effort for Schrodinger to pull his posterior through the opening—under Sally's care, he lacks the svelteness of his nomadic youth.

Once inside, Schrodinger hops onto the only piece of furniture in the room: a fold-up table, upon which lies a black mask.

Schrodinger sits on the mask.

Schrodinger: I'm here, human.

Noh: . . .

Schrodinger: This was your terms, wasn't it? You refused to talk to others of your kind.

A figure, their form a hazy blur, steps out of the corner shadows. Although unmasked, their face remains unidentifiable.

Cats, however, are not so susceptible to Ment tricks.

Schrodinger: Ah. You.

Noh: . . .

Schrodinger, yawning: As the audience has likely guessed, I benevolently agreed to replace The Clown as this month's interviewer. We'll start with the most pressing question. How do you feel about cats?

Noh: Indifferent.

Schrodinger purrs approvingly.

Schrodinger: The other humans hate you, but you may be the first human to earn my respect. You seem indifferent to most things, unlike most humans. What led you to having so few qualms about altering another human's consciousness?

Noh: I have *many* qualms about altering another human's consciousness.

Schrodinger: And yet you do it anyway.

Noh: Yes.

Schrodinger: What makes you so sure that your actions were justified?

Noh: You're aware of **CODENAME ASSHOLE's** plan?

Schrodinger: To use **REDACTED** to **REDACT**? I heard Warmth Giver talking about it.

Noh: Imagine the backlash once the world discovers that **GENERIC ORGANIZATION** has deliberately **PROJECT WATERBUFFALO**.

Schrodinger: I can't see that ending well for Ments.

Noh: Controlling the release of that information meant that I needed to **BLEEP** in order to **BLEEP** and prevent **BLEEP**. It was the only way to **BLEEP**.

Schrodinger: So you **BLEEPED**?

Noh: Exactly. **BLEEP. BLEEP. BLEEEEEEEEEEP.**

* * * *

. . . And at that point, I realized I just needed to focus on getting the demo released.

However, Schrodinger's solo interview will be posted within the next hour or so.

[November Live Q&A](#)

[Nov 29, 2021](#)

I've been trying to get the demo out before this months Q&A, but I'm currently not sure if I'll be able to get Chapter 16 up today 😞

(I do 1000% think that the new Kenzie scenes are worth it, I just really wish that I could stop having ideas that change things at the last minute when I'm supposed to simply be focused on identifying coding errors. It creates stress on my end, and it's not fair to you guys either.)

Anyway, the first live Q&A will be **today (November 29th) at 7pm PST** via the Live Q&A Channel on the Sanctum Discord**. **

It'll be recorded and the link posted.

If you can't make it to tonight's session, please vote on a time for a second session tomorrow (this is mostly morning times to accommodate those who don't live in North America)

9am - 10am PST

10am - 11am PST

11am - 12pm PST

4pm - 5pm PST

5pm - 6pm PST

29 votes total

[November Interview: Schrodinger](#)

[Nov 29, 2021](#)

Upon stage, Nicholas Wiseman sits in one of two chairs. His shoulders are tense, his back doesn't touch the seat, and he sits with the wary stillness of hunted prey, eyes affixed, gazelle-like, upon the disinterested looking white cat grooming itself in the seat opposite him.

Nick: Today, we have the pleasure of unveiling new technology that will change the world.

He tugs down his shirt collar to expose a band that wraps around the back of his neck and secures around his ears.

Nick: Through the dedicated efforts of Cadet Parker, Unity's NPO Program has produced a device allows humans to communicate with animals. Unfortunately for Cadet Zarneki, the reported inspiration for the project, the *Parker Pet Prattler* requires that it be worn by a telepath in order to function.

He stares directly into the camera and winks.

Nick: Sold only in the metarealm of existence where this interview show takes place.

Schrodinger hisses. Nick jumps at the sudden noise, his temporary ease instantly evaporating upon being reminded of the cat's presence.

Schrodinger: Ha.

Nick: Did you just scoff at me?

Schrodinger stretches in a feline version of a shrug, his claws uncurling to dig into the seat's cushion.

Nick, muttering: I don't know how they expect me to interview a cat that won't even acknowledge my existence.

Schrodinger: You're not worthy of my acknowledgement.

Nick: Great. Fantastic. Well, at least that we know that the *PPP* works. What did I ever do to you, Schrodinger? Why do you hate me?

Schrodinger: How long do we have?

Nick: I'm sure you can't spend the entire interview listing reasons why you—

Schrodinger: Reason Number One: Big Foot refuses to answer simple questions.

Nick: That's not fair, you didn't—

Schrodinger: Reason Number Two: when I visit his abode, Big Foot rudely pushes me off the kitchen counter.

Nick: Only when I'm cooking! No one wants cat hair in their—

Schrodinger: Reason Number Three: Big Foot cooks food for the humans but never presents me with my portion. Even when he cooks tuna, I receive not one single bite of fish.

Two gasps echo from direction of the audience. The camera pans to zoom in on Antigone and Cassandra, each seated in their own chair, eyes wide with horror and appalment.

Nick: Look, some foods are poisonous for dogs, right? I don't know whether or not it's okay for cats to eat—

Schrodinger: Reason Number Four: When Big Foot is around, he doesn't let me sit on the warm oven.

Nick: Neither does Salome! Also, why do you keep calling me Big Foot?

Schrodinger: Reason Number Five: Big Foot lacks deductive reasoning.

Nick, defensively: My feet aren't even that big. Gray wears a size 14.

Schrodinger: Reason Number Six: Big Foot steps on my tail.

Nick: Once. I stepped on your tail *once*.

Schrodinger: Reason Number Seven: Big Foot is forgetful. He has stepped on my tail *twice*.

Nick: Fine, then. Twice. But it's not's as if I—

Schrodinger: Reason Number Eight: Big Foot makes Warmth Giver make loud sounds.

Nick: Warmth Giver? Oh, you mean Salome! Wait . . . are you talking about when she yells at me for something, or when I make her laugh? Both happen pretty frequently, and she does have a really loud laugh.

Sally's offended gasp of "I do not!" sounds from backstage.

Nick, calling back to her: It's charming!

He lowers his voice so that Sally can no longer hear.

Nick: Even it once got her and Button kicked out of a library.

Schrodinger: Reason Number Nine—

Nick: Alright, I think the audience gets the picture. I'm not your favorite human. Is there any way that I might earn at least a little favor? A nice ahi poke? A tuna fillet?

Schrodinger: I *do* like tuna.

Nick: You know, just because the brand of your food is called Tuna Tibbles doesn't mean it has any tuna in it. The ingredient only lists "ocean fish," and that could be anything.

Schrodinger: Reason Number Ten—

Nick, hastily backpedaling: I mean, sure. Yeah. I'll make you tuna.

Schrodinger purrs as Nick looks down at his next notecard.

Nick: What breed are you?

Schrodinger: What breed are *you*? Other than ill-bred, that is.

Nick: You don't know?

Schrodinger, stiffly: My parents were not around long enough for me to inquire about my genealogy. Father went to get cream shortly after I was born and never returned—I suppose he realized that having twelve kittens at once was *not* cheaper by the dozen. Mother did her best to make ends meet, but we were eventually evicted from our home behind a Panera Bread after she attempted to drop off our rent—a dead rat—during a health inspector's visit.

Nick: Where did you go after that?

Schrodinger: The health inspector adopted my mother. My siblings and I were separated into foster care.

The cat licks his paw to avoid making eye-to-eyes contact with Nick.

Schrodinger: It's not an uncommon story.

Nick: When Sally found you, you were living in an Arby's dumpster. Are you saying that you once had other owners?

Schrodinger gives Nick a look of unbridled disdain at the implication that any cat would be "owned" by a human (as every sentient being of good sense is fully aware that it's the other way around).

Schrodinger: My foster humans were tolerable, but . . . I took after my father. Domesticity wasn't for me. I wanted to explore alleyways, chase pigeons, see the ocean. By the time I was a year old, I had escaped my human caretakers.

Nick: Foster care? That explains a lot.

Nick examines Schrodinger's bite-marked ears and lacking eye.

Nick: I kind of expected you to sound like a pirate, once we were able to communicate.

Schrodinger: And I expected you to have the speech patterns of an idiot. At least one of us was correct.

Nick: You're implying—

Schrodinger: That you sound like an idiot. Yes.

Nick, conversationally: You know, I've interviewed terrorists on this show.

Schrodinger: Your point?

Nick: They made for more pleasant guests.

His gaze darts to the curtain, remembering that Sally is backstage. Schrodinger purrs.

Schrodinger: Go on.

Nick, still nervously staring at the curtain: I should probably ask more questions.

Schrodinger: Coward.

Nick forges on, determined to change the subject before he gets in trouble.

Nick: How did you lose your eye?

Schrodinger: I'm not permitted to speak of The War with humans. Let alone humans like you.

Nick: Talent. Dashing? Incredibly good-looking?

Schrodinger: An idiot.

Nick: Ouch. When you talk about a war . . . you're claiming that you don't just visit the vet; you are one.

He snickers at his own joke. Schrodinger's tail swishes menacingly.

Schrodinger: Would you treat human veterans with the such disregard?

Nick: You're not human.

Schrodinger looks as if the words "thank god for that" are on his tongue, but he's too prideful to go for the easy rebuttal. His tail swishes again.

Schrodinger: Human are a stupid species who wage wars against their own kind.

Nick: Then you didn't get injured in a fight with another cat?

Schrodinger: I didn't say that. Even the best species has its traitors. That particular feline had decided to throw in her lot with The Racoon Empire.

Nick: She was a mole?

Schrodinger, briskly: No, she was a cat. A cat who betrayed everything that our kind represents and honorably fights for.

He hisses, fur bristling.

Schrodinger: Her vile sabotage couldn't be allowed to continue.

Nick: . . . You're joking, right?

Schrodinger doesn't reply, pink tongue smoothing down a tuft of hair on his paw.

Nick: Right?

Schrodinger continues to groom himself.

Nick, looking more than a little disturbed: Er, let's try another question. What's your favorite thing about living with Sally?

Schrodinger: Warmth Giver?

Nick nods. Schrodinger straightens to sit upright.

Schrodinger: Warmth Giver often spends many hours where only her hands move. I would've become restless when I was young, but now . .

The cat purrs contentedly.

Nick: You mean when she paints?

Schrodinger: She shares her warmth until I fall asleep on her. She doesn't move around like the other two.

Nick: The other two being her dads? Do you have a favorite?

Schrodinger: One always talks about being healthy. The other sneaks me treats.

Nick: The treat-giver would be Matt.

Schrodinger: Together, though, don't like to stay still. On the couch, they fall asleep on each other's shoulders. There's no room for me. Whereas Warmth Giver's shoulders are mine.

The cat glares accusingly at Nick.

Schrodinger: Usually.

Nick: You must have an opinion on Button since they're over your place so often.

Schrodinger: Your littermate? They are not annoying.

Nick: That's it? I get a nasty rendition of *10 Things I Hate About You*, and Button gets "not annoying"?

Schrodinger: Although . . . they and Warmth Giver behave oddly when together.

Nick: Oddly how?

Schrodinger: They wear big hats.

Nick, nodding sagely: You mean the sombrero incident. You know, I never heard how that ended.

Schrodinger: Inside the big hat, there was—

* * * *

You bolt upwards in a cold sweat, your legs bared and sheets bunched around your throat. Of all your recurring nightmares—of your mother, of the bombing, of Vengeance—this one is the most terrifying.

No one must ever know the sombrero story. No one. Not ever.

It's a memory you've suppressed so deeply, so ardently refuse to think about, that not even Nick has been able to glean it from your brain.

You reach over to the cellphone on your nightstand and open up Glitch's Instagram. The only alert is a new photo of IC-UW with a top hat. There's no mention of a new invention, let alone one that would allow Ments to communicate with animals.

You heave a sigh of relief. Your ultimate secret is safe.

. . . For now.

[November 2nd Live Q&A](#)

[Nov 30, 2021](#)

[As per the poll, the second Q&A will be](#) today (November 30th) at 4-5pm PST.

The link to the last Q&A recording is here: <https://craig.horse/?id=122972575&key=574350237>

Craigbot (the recording bot) did decide to peace out midway, probably because I started rambling against daylight savings and ceramic shepardesses, but I believe he recorded most of it.

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On . . . The BRS](#)

[Nov 30, 2021](#)

(As taken from an interview following the events of Mind Blind between Nick and Havisham Lunk, a reporter from The Chicago Times who later publicly denounced Justice as “stunningly tone-deaf to the trauma created by psychic crimes”)

(In other words: this is a PR combination of Nick’s own opinions and him toeing the “company line.”)

(In other-other words: The Nick Wiseman piece this month was supposed to be on Noh’s reveal and Button’s possible decision to date them, but demo delays means that I wrote this instead.)

* * * *

Unity’s official stance is that Brainrange Suppressants, when designed to be removable, can serve as a temporary tool to help Ments deal with their powers. The current implants . . . it’s kinda like getting a vasectomy, right? Permanent if you want it to be but ultimately reversible if you later decide to have kids.

I’m not saying that the reversal is easy. Removing a BRS implant still requires surgery, but it’s—what? No. I haven’t personally—

Look, the vasectomy thing was just a metaphor. The important thing, and I agree with Unity’s position on this, is that all BRSES going forth have the potential to be removed. Otherwise, it’s way to open to abuse.

No. I don’t believe permanent BRSES should ever be pursued. That sort of technology is too easily abused, and the time would be better spent on perfecting the safety of removable devices.

Do I think that BRSES should be used on Ments convicted of misusing their psychic powers?

No. No, I don’t.

Nor is this an option which Unity is currently contemplating. Mirrortech's BRS is still a new technology, and I shouldn't have to state that it's unethical to use unwilling humans as test subjects . . . and that's not even getting into the whole mess of altering someone's brain without their permission. That's already the premise of like fifteen horror movies for a reason.

It's a popular argument, that it would be less expensive to just inject every incarcerated Ment with a chemical BRS. But Unity already works with local governments on how to establish proper facilities. Ment prisoners, when secured and watched over by with mental resilient staff, aren't any more likely to escape into the general populace than someone with a Pollard Score below Six.

Using the BRS implant as a rehabilitation tool? I mean, maybe. If it's voluntarily chosen.

In my experience, when a Ment commits a psychic crime, it's usually because they would've committed a crime regardless—their high Pollard score just means that crime can do more damage. The sad fact is that some people will always try to take advantage of others. Assholes exist. That's true for Norms and Ments alike, but we have to remember that those people are always the exception rather than the rule. Ninety-nine percent of Ments want to be left alone to live their lives, and have no interest in—

No, I'm not sure about the actual statistics. That's not the point. My point is—

Look, Havisham, contrary to what Hollywood may want people to believe, there's no statistical evidence that Ments are more likely to be drawn to crime. In fact, over the past decade, studies have proven that Ments are *less* likely to join gangs now that many of the biggest global employers view psychic abilities as a desirable resume skill.

Yes, it's still true that Ments have an easier time rising up the ranks of illegal organizations like the Mafia, but the same can be said about recruits who are smart at planning or are good at boxing. Would you cut off the hands of a guy arrested for punching someone? Of course not, and I think the same argument applies to Ments who break the law. Psychic agility just one another type of skill, and how it's used depends on its owner.

Acting as if the BRS is some sort of solution implies that there's a problem not being addressed in the first place, which I frankly don't believe that there is. Unity and UCRT exist to protect people—to protect *everyone*—from those who abuse their abilities. It's our job, and one that we intend to keep doing.

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Oh, Noh \(Male Version\)](#)

[Nov 30, 2021](#)

When you first met him—truly met him, that is—your first thought upon learning the breadth of his powers was not “*sexy time possibilities*.”

No, that night, you were a fraught livewire of anxiety and anger, most of it directed towards him. Rightfully so, he admits now in the quiet hours when you’re both brave enough to discuss the past.

After Operation Hemera ended with his help, your fear gave way to forgiveness, and forgiveness eventually turned into trust. Trust which, against all the most impossible odds, slowly blossomed into love. Yet even then, your mind didn’t immediately go *there*.

It wasn’t until after a year together, when your too-loud headphones made your partner resort to calling you psychically to dinner, that you were struck by the true potential of his power.

Then, and only then, did it occur to you: “*Oh! Sexy time possibilities*.”

He was uncertain at first, never having used his powers in such a way, but you argued (rather persuasively, your legs locked around his hips) that, after the trauma his powers had inflicted, it was only fair that he provide you with an equal amount of pleasure.

Now, you know the moment that he steps into brainrange. When you first started doing this together, his questions were simple and straightforward:

What are you doing?

What are you wearing?

Have you missed me?

Is this what you want?

His messages became bolder as he became more comfortable, questions often turning into orders (which, given the nature of your relationship, he was never fully certain whether you would obey):

What are you wearing? became *Take it off*.

Have you missed me? became *Tell me what you fantasized about today*.

Is this what you want? remained the same, however. Always asked, every time. Sometimes, reading between the lines, you deciphered the question’s true meaning of ‘*Am I truly what you want?*’ and the even quieter question of ‘*But why?*’

The answers to which, of course, you’d proceed to remind him at soon as he stepped through the bedroom door.

Illusions are not, and never will be, as good as the real thing. Promises whispered into your mind lack the husky undertone of his aroused growl, and his distant touch leaves you stretching upwards in your

bed, aching for more, throbbing into the empty air where he should be. It's never fully satisfying, never enough, never more than a feather's kiss.

The prolonged deprivation, however, does serve to enhance the real thing.

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Oh, Noh \(Female Version\)](#)

[Nov 30, 2021](#)

When you first met her—truly met her, that is—your first thought upon learning the breadth of her powers was not “*sexy time possibilities*.”

No, that night, you were a fraught livewire of anxiety and anger, most of it directed towards her. Rightfully so, she admits now in the quiet hours when you're both brave enough to discuss the past.

After Operation Hemera ended with her help, your fear gave way to forgiveness, and forgiveness eventually turned into trust. Trust which, against all the most impossible odds, slowly blossomed into love. Yet even then, your mind didn't immediately go *there*.

It wasn't until after a year together, when your too-loud headphones made your partner resort to calling you psychically to dinner, that you were struck by the true potential of her power.

Then, and only then, did it occur to you: “*Oh! Sexy time possibilities*.”

She was uncertain at first, never having used her powers in such a way, but you argued (rather persuasively, your legs locked around her hips) that, after the trauma her powers had inflicted, it was only fair that she provide you with an equal amount of pleasure.

Now, you know the moment that she steps into brainrange. When you first started doing this together, her questions were simple and straightforward:

What are you doing?

What are you wearing?

Have you missed me?

Is this what you want?

Her messages became bolder as she became more comfortable, questions often turning into orders

(which, given the nature of your relationship, she was never fully certain whether you'd obey):

What are you wearing? became *Take it off*.

Have you missed me? became *Tell me what you fantasized about today*.

Is this what you want? remained the same, however. Always asked, every time. Sometimes, reading between the lines, you deciphered the question's true meaning of '*Am I truly what you want?*' and the even quieter question of '*But why?*'

The answers to both questions, of course, you'd proceed to remind her at soon as she stepped through the bedroom door.

Illusions are not, and never will be, as good as the real thing. Promises whispered into your mind lack the husky undertone of her aroused growl, and her distant touch leaves you stretching upwards in your bed, aching for more, throbbing into the empty air where she should be. It's never fully satisfying, never enough, never more than a feather's kiss.

The prolonged deprivation, however, does serve to enhance the real thing.

[Writer's Blog: December Roadmap](#)

[Dec 3, 2021](#)

I'm going to promptly unplug my internet again as soon as this post is published, as I've disconnected from all other human lifeforms over these last several days in order to make Chapter 16 playable from beginning to end.

(With the new tunnel scenes, Noh's first reveal now happens at the end of the chapter, and a lot has changed. Which is my own fault for deciding that underground Chicago was too awesome not to include, but still.)

Once Chapter 16 in and all the paths from Chapter 15 are coded in, *Mind Blind* will officially be over 500,000 words! Which makes me feel accomplished, even if I don't release Chapters 17/18 this month.

Oh, that's right! After writing out a detailed plot outline, I can officially confirm that *Mind Blind* will be eighteen Chapters long total. Maybe nineteen chapters if I have another sudden epiphany . . . which is, truthfully, a 50/50 possibility because my brain thrives on chaos. This adjusted length (from my original 16-chapter estimate) doesn't include the fluff epilogues, which will get written after all endgame routes are finished.

As for December's schedule:

Dec 5: *Mind Blind* Demo Update (all of Chapter 16, including Noh's reveal-for-real-this-time-no-take-backsies)

Dec 6: *Delivery for the Damned* Teaser (on Soul Scarring)

Dec 7: *Delivery for the Damned* Poll (on Soul Scarring options)

Dec 8: *Lady Death's Diary* Update

Dec 10: Writer's Blog

Dec 11: Nick Wiseman Has Opinions

Dec 13: MB Saucy Side (Grayson)

Dec 16: UCRT Short Stories

Dec 17: Writer's Blog

Dec 18/19: Live Q&A (early this month, as my internet connection will be haphazard starting the 24th)

Dec 20: MB Saucy Side (Sally)

Dec 22: *Lady Death's Diary* Update

Dec 24: Writer's Blog

Dec 25: *Mind Blind* Short Story

Dec 29: *MB Cast Interview* - Noh (giving everyone more time after Chapter 16's reveal to ask questions)

Dec 30: *Mind Blind* Demo Update. (Instead of Chapter 17, this will have all missing pathways for housebreaking in Chapter 15. I wanted to finish the story by year's end, but I ultimately recognized the unfeasibility of keeping up the same writing pace while visiting family for the holidays.)

Dec 31: Writer's Blog

[This is Not a Delay Because the Day is Not Over Until I Fall Asleep.](#)

[Dec 6, 2021](#)

My logic is *irrefutable*

(and totally not a byproduct of sleep-deprivation).

That's right, everyone, it's still December 5th on Planet Jo. For those of you living in the real world, though, you can now play the first half of Chapter 16 which is also mildly exciting. There's violence and revelations and also smooching (I told you those extra Kenzie scenes would be worth it!).

The rest of Chapter 16 with Noh's reveal will also be updated today. . . which, again, is still December 5th in my mind because "the day doesn't end until REM." (That's not a quote, I just wanted it to seem like one to lend validation to my thought process.)

Demo Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-keepsake/mygame/>

[Oh Noh. It's here.](#)

[Dec 7, 2021](#)

If you're on the Sanctum discord (which I highly suggest you join to receive mini-update news!), you may noh that all of Chapter 16 was posted yesterday, and yet Noh's reveal was nowhere in sight. I'll have a post on Friday about all the changes made that resulted in the reveal's many delays, but I suspect that no one cares overmuch to read that right now when the actual reveal itself is nowhere out.

(Don't hate me for the repetitive puns, my timeframe to use them is running out.)

The important thing: Chapter 16 and Noh's reveal scene in Chapter 17 are now in the demo.

Before you click the link, however, I do have a few favors to ask:

- 1) Please keep discussion of Noh's identity off social media so as not to spoil the plot for others.
- 2) On the Sanctum discord, please use spoiler tags *everywhere*, even the Conspiracy channel (this isn't what I originally said, but then I realized that people could get accidentally spoiled by thumbing down on a notification).
- 3) It's possible that Noh's reveal *won't* be a reveal for you. You'll still get the same scene, but unless you've played through a certain past scene, you won't have the context to conclude Noh's identity. Don't worry, you'll have a later opportunity to unmask them.
- 4) Please be kind. Noh may not be who you wanted or expected, but it's always been a part of the story.

Demo Length: 478,000

Average Playthrough: 112,000 words

Current Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-keepsake/mygame/>

Other Notes:

Noh's current reveal doesn't really work great with all the new tunnel-related changes in my opinion (I'll post on all that later), and the next update will have it occurring at the end of Chapter 17 instead of the beginning (at a different location).

Despite these issues, I've worked in the earlier, pre-tunnel version because I'm not a *totally* terrible human being that does nothing but tease and wanted to share the promised reveal as soon as possible (which, admittedly, hasn't been very soon).

It's also currently impossible for Kenzie to break free in Chapter 17, because I'm focusing on one path at a time.

[Writer's Blog: Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen](#)

[Dec 10, 2021](#)

In this post, I will (attempt to) explain how one chapter becomes three. Because, as you may already know, Chapters 15 through 17 were originally all meant to just be Chapter 15.

Basically, it's like magic! Really wonky magic where the rabbits keep getting lost and then transforming into giraffes.

To simplify my explanation of the process, I'm using a mock timeline. This isn't at all an accurate timeline, as most of these last two weeks passed in writer's fugue of frantic reworks, and I'm honestly still coping with the fact that it's no longer December 5th. (That being said, I've spent most these past two days catching up on sleep, and it's been glorious.)

One thing to be aware of is that almost all these new decisions came while I'm fixing code. Bugtesting requires that I look again and again at the material, and this is very hard for me to do without wanting to change things.

Day 1:

Chapter 15 is written! It's going to be released on time! I'm feeling good! Amazing, even! (Let's all take a moment to laugh at my November self.) There are bugs, sure, but code can be fixed in time, right? (Wrong.)

This version of Chapter 15 includes the break-in scene, a short interrogation with Reese, followed almost instantly by Honeybunch's reveal. (Honeybunch being Noh and Noh being Character XYZ, but I personally am referring to them as Honeybunch right now because I always sweettalk to small children. And this Ment's current decision-making skills? Toddler-level. What were they thinking, risking their identity to just to save Button? Sweet but stupid, Honeybunch. Sweet but stupid.)

Day 2:

I get the notion to use a blueprint for the breaking-and-entering scene, in order to make it feel more like an actual heist. This added image requires a lot of rework, and still hasn't been fully implemented (as I still need to make the actual blueprint).

Day 3:

An engineer friend rudely informs me that, no, a drone likely can't lockpick a door, even if you use a K'nex set to construct T-rex arms for it and then put super strong magnets on the end of those arms. As a result, I take out a few scenes involving Glitch's drone for a rework, because I'm really attached to those T-rex arms and need to figure out how not to give them up.

My attempts to discover whether fun-size Buttons can fit down a coal chute proves futile, and I send out an urgent message to everyone on my contact list asking whether they've ever seen a coal chute in real life and, if so, did they ever attempted to slide down it as a child.

Understandably, my number gets blocked by an ex Tinder-date.

Day 4:

You know what would be fun? Prohibition-era tunnels!

Mostly because Prohibition-era tunnels are cool, but also because Kenzie having prior knowledge of an entrance would cement a certain connection that they have to the house. I use this latter point to justify their inclusion, even though the first point is my main motivation.

(At this point, Chapter 15 is scheduled for release.)

Day 5:

Look . . . if Button and Kenzie are trapped in a tunnel, they have to a kiss, right? It's a dramatic imperative that all writers must follow: *Thou shalt not cruelly cast your protagonists into a dismal and dank tunnel without allowing them to smooch.*

Day 6:

In addition to adding romance scenes with Kenzie, I need to rework the previously planned interrogation scene with Reese, as it now takes place in bootlegger tunnels instead of a simpler secret basement. I

also realize that, given the length of the new material, the tunnel scene should probably be the start of a new chapter.

Chapter 15 becomes Chapters 15 and 16.

Day 6:

Huh. Okay.

In addition to abundant miscoding (*hide_reuse command, why don't you love me??), something about the transported scene is falling . . . flat.

Thus, I keep adding stuff to Vengeance's evil villain speech. Then deleting the stuff. Then adding different stuff. All while breaking the code with each new scene.

Day 7:

Finally, I realize what's wrong: Vengeance doesn't share their plan with Button before Honeybunch drops into the room like a psychedelic batman. Without an urgent imperative to fix something, Button doesn't really have a compelling reason to work with Honeybunch.

Yes, they just saved Button, but also Honeybunch is a jerk.

Day 8:

Vengeance's monologue transforms from space-filling gloating into something completely different that's actually plot relevant, and includes the actual reveal about what they intend to do with Nick. I like this reveal and feel like it deserves some space to breathe, to let the ramifications of the plan sink in for readers.

Chapter 16 becomes Chapters 16 and 17.

Day 9:

Given that Button just had a (figurative, this time) bomb dropped on them, I decide that there needs to be some space between Vengeance's reveal and Honeybunch's appearance. At this point, however, I just want to get the dang thing *out*.

And so, the first reveal is out.

Am I happy with it? Not really! Upon reading over the scene, I definitely think that it's too soon and the reveal will be better after Button gains insight into Honeybunch's motivations.

I'm going to rewrite Chapter 17's beginning completely before moving on with the story. so that this first reveal will be pushed back until Button and Honeybunch find Nick. (Brownie points go to anyone who can figure out who'll be playing the role of "limp body" in this new scene!)

[Delivery Teaser: Soul Scarring](#)

[Dec 12, 2021](#)

Delivery's concept of "soul scarring" comes from my own experience with a deceased parent. When a child grows up with death, it can shape their perspectives for the rest of their life. My father died when I was eleven months old. To me, a car has never just been a car; it's That Place Where My Father Died. A crush was never just exciting belly-butterflies; when I reached puberty, I viewed love only as the prelude to being a widow.

I still hate driving.

This isn't to claim that every kid who loses a parent young has hang-ups, but it did make me wonder what a similar experience would be like in the world of *Delivery for the Damned*. Because there, magic is powered by certainty. If any of you have seen the stage version of *Peter Pan*, it's similar to the idea that if children in the audience clap long and hard enough while proclaiming "*I do believe in fairies!*", then Tinkerbell will get better.

Golightly (the default last name of *Delivery's* protagonist) has been through a lot. They were orphaned at a very young age, with parents who died under mysterious circumstances. For plot reasons, they also have no recollection of their family. (Yes, I'm going with *that* trope . . . sort of.)

The Satanic nuns that raised Golightly were not the most maternal of individuals. One nun was particularly vicious, concocting horrific stories of how children's parents died in order to get them to behave. The tales which Golightly was told about their parents' demise do not reflect reality. But Golightly, a small child, was probably not able to make that distinction.

So what happens when one story hits home harder than the rest? What happens if young Golightly becomes convinced, absolutely convinced, that their parents had died in a fire, or drowned at sea, or were bitten by a poisonous snake?

What impact would that lifelong *belief* have in a world filled with magic?

To answer these questions, I came up with the idea of Soul Scarring, an optional feature where you can give Golightly past childhood trauma that will magically impact their present.

Sounds fun, right?

[Delivery Development: Soul Scarring Options](#)

[Dec 12, 2021](#)

This poll is about the concept of Soul Scarring (explained here:

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/59840019>).

While there will be the option to be "Scarless/Healed" (aka a Golightly who's either unaffected by or worked through their past), I have a *lot* of ideas for the kind of Soul Scars that they can have.

Soul Scars are both a boon and curse (which is why you can choose not to have one), and certain Scars may even lock you out of certain choices . . . or provide you with entirely new options. For example, a Scorched Soul isn't able to use a flamethrower without burning down the whole building, but neither is anyone in their vicinity. A Slaughtered Soul will be better prepared to defend themselves against a home invasion due to having a plethora of hidden weapons at hand.

Since these will have a significant impact on the story, I plan to limit the selection to three or four, and wanted some feedback on what kind of trauma you all would be interested in having for your characters.

(Just a warning, *Delivery* can get pretty dark. Humorously dark, but still.)

My question: which Soul Scar would you be most interested in experiencing? If you can think of other options not provided in the poll, please share! I personally like the alliteration for types, but it's not necessary.

(Just keep in mind, this isn't how Golightly's parents really died. Only how a young Golightly *imagined* them dying, with belief magic doing the rest.)

Here are the descriptions (since the poll limits word count):

Scorched Soul: Your parents died in a fire. Flames act unpredictably around you, barring you from wielding a flamethrower.

Serpentine Soul: Your parents were bitten by rattlesnakes while camping. Despite moving to Ireland to get away from snakes, serpents and serpent-like creatures are still drawn to you . . . almost as if to finish the job.

Smothered Soul: Your parents asphyxiated due to a faulty carbon monoxide detector. Enclosed spaces fill you with trepidation, and your party balloons deflate quicker.

Submerged Soul: Your parents drowned. Bodies of water are more dangerous to you, to the extent that even a bubble bath proves risky.

Slaughtered Soul: Your parents were brutally murdered in a home invasion. Doors and windows into your apartment have an inexplicable way of not staying locked.

Slumbering Soul: Your parents died inexplicably in their sleep, without any apparent reason. You're an insomniac, but what dreams you do have are strangely prophetic.

Sacrificed Soul: Your parents were ritualistically sacrificed by the cult of Beelzebub (whose actual existence has since been refuted by Hell). Demonic cultists are fascinated to you, although it's uncertain whether they see you as a promising sacrifice, or a possible replacement Dark Lord.

Stolen Soul: Your parents were killed by a fae after they foiled the attempt to replace you with a changeling. You're more easily taken in by fairies, as if some little piece was already stolen that day.

I have other ideas, but these are my favorites. (I also forgot to add Submerged Soul to the poll, so please just pick "other" and don't leave a comment if that's the one you want!)

Scorched Soul

Serpentine Soul

Smothered Soul

Slaughtered Soul

Slumbering Soul

Sacrificed Soul

Stolen Soul

Other (Please elaborate in comments or on the Sanctum!)

138 votes total

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Vanilla Spice \(Grayson\)](#)

[Dec 14, 2021](#)

“Sooooo . . .” Glitch waggles her pierced brows suggestively. “Kenzie and I need you to settle a debate we were having about you and Fortitude.”

You glance over at Kent, who gives a half-shrug as if to say ‘leave me out of this’.

"I think that your dear Mr. Black has hidden depths." This time, Glitch's eyebrows raise so high that they're in danger of leaping off her face. "Hidden passions. Kenzie, however, disagrees."

"I said it wasn't our business," Kent corrects.

Glitch rests her chin in her hands, cherub-style, and leans across the lunch table towards you. "Inquiring minds need to *know*, Wiseman," she continues, ignoring Kent's small sigh. "Is Gray as vanilla as he seems? Or is he actually into—"

"We're going." Kent stands, grabbing his friend by the arm and hauling her upright alongside him.

"Going where?" Glitch demands.

Kent mulls over her question, before ultimately shrugging. "We're going," he repeats, having not deemed it worth his time to think up an actual excuse.

Glitch squawks in protest as he drags her from the cafeteria.

* * * *

Vanilla? It's not a word that you ever use when thinking about your boyfriend.

Sweet, loyal, trustworthy? Yes.

Considerate? Insanely hot? Yes, and yes.

Painfully British? Also yes.

But vanilla?

. . . Huh.

* * * *

The best part about having Grayson as a boyfriend is that he always knows what you want. In large part, this is because he reads your mind whenever his lips touch yours in a "welcome home" kiss. But Gray has also learned to recognize the more subtle, physical signs that indicate when you need space. On those days, he'll eschew the physical greeting in place of ordering your favorite takeout for dinner and sitting in the recliner so that you can have the comfy couch to yourself while you both watch Jeopardy. Nick half-jokes, half-laments that you two act like an octogenarian married couple, and you can't really refute his claim. But you and Gray are happy together.

The worst part of having Grayson as a boyfriend is that . . . well, he always knows what you want. *Always*. Even when it comes to those things that you're not quite ready to vocalize, Grayson learns whenever you crawl into bed beside him (while you two do keep separate bedrooms, just in case you need a private day, yours goes unused more nights than not). Gray knows what you want for your

birthday, and what you feel like having for dinner. Shallow thoughts, surface thoughts, because he'll never try to pry into your secrets without your permission (and a lifetime of training has made you pretty good at refocusing your brain).

Tonight, however, he picks up the conversation you had this morning with Glitch. The thought is an idle one, but Gray, his arms wrapped around you, stiffens against your back.

"What's wrong with vanilla?" he asks, sounding defensive.

You twist around in his arms to face him, placing a soft kiss against the bristle of his evening stubble.

"Absolutely nothing," you assure him, meaning it. "I like you just the way you are."

He yawns against your neck, mumbling something that you can't quite make out until it becomes a soft snore.

* * * *

It's true that Gray has never been the most adventurous lover.

Perhaps it's because he can read your thoughts, but he knows what you like and he tends to stick to it, whispering his own desires against your skin as he explores your body. Your relationship hasn't ever been about exciting voyages to unknown peaks of pleasure, but rather a homecoming to the place where you both belong.

You're happy with Gray, happier than you ever thought possible. Gray knows that—he *must* know that, given that your hand is currently nestled within his.

You smile up at him as you two head towards your favorite coffee shop, Chicago's winter cold pinkening what little of his face is visible between his pulled-down knit cap and thick-knit woolen scarf. You're similarly bundled up, so your smile can't be seen, but he squeezes your hand through your mitten, knowing that it's there and that it's for him.

Because Grayson always knows.

* * * *

"I'll have a . . ." Gray clears his throat, casting you an inscrutable glance.

"Sir?" the barista asks.

Gray clears his throat once more. "I'll have a vanilla spice latte."

That's not his normal order.

He grins at you, a hint of cockiness entering his expression. "Sometimes it's good to try new things."

* * * *

Two days go by.

You stop at the coffee shop on the third morning on your way to Aeon.

Grayson orders his usual black coffee.

* * * *

That evening, you return to your shared apartment to find Gray standing next to the kitchen table. The overhead lights are dimmed, and he's set the table in traditional restaurant-style with a white cloth and tall, slender candles, their flames twinkling off the glass bottle of wine he's chosen.

He bows to you, teasing but also a little nervous (because he knows that this is cheesy, although he still does it almost every other month).

"My love," he says. "Won't you join me?"

You laugh and sit as he pulls out your chair. You gesture to the plated food. "Looks delicious," you tell him, pretending not to notice the empty takeout boxes from Mario in the nearby bin.

Gray beams but then sighs. He never keeps secrets from you, even obvious ones, insisting that it wouldn't be fair. "I tried to cook again, but then the ov—"

Your lips quiet his. *I know.*

* * * *

Vanilla is amazing.

* * * *

But so, you realize as Gray caresses your midriff, is spice.

The flame from this evening's candles flickers between his fingers like an errant firefly, warming your skin everywhere he almost, but never quite, touches. He knows how close to get and when to pull back, because Gray always knows. The fire is a tantalizing tongue that licks and nips you to feverish desperation, only for Gray's mouth—at *exactly* the right moment—to grant you a blissfully cooling reprieve.

The fire cupped in Gray's hands extinguishes as he splays his large palms against your waist. His bare chest, dusted gold with sweat-slicked hair, heaves from his efforts to control both the flame as well as his own desires.

"I want you," he says. Honestly, simply. A declaration that is, at its core, is a little bit vanilla.

You wrap your arms around his broad shoulders, drawing him close until your bodies melt together like heated wax.

At the end of the day, you don't want any flavor but his.

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 26](#)

[Dec 16, 2021](#)

Loren came to visit me the next morning. Although I restricted to bed rest (Delphine having threatened to break both my legs again should I attempt to leave prematurely) and wore nothing but my nightgown, my fiancé arrived dressed in one of his most formal uniforms usually reserved for diplomat visits and ship launches. He'd worn it to our wedding breakfast, the day I'd been poisoned.

Even back when I'd loved (or rather, thought that I loved) Loren, I'd always found his propensity for military uniform to be somewhat ridiculous. King Eldin had led troops during past border skirmishes with Anterdon, but Loren? He simply liked the way that the cut showed off his shoulders.

When he arrived in my chamber, Loren promptly fell to his knees by my bedside. This was not accomplished without some difficulty for, in addition to the fitted cut of his jacket, the snug breeches left little room for maneuverability. Impractical in actual battle, I assumed.

Despite taking a few attempts to get down on one knee, Loren eventually managed and tilted his face to where I was propped upright by my pillows. He looked every inch the concerned fiancé, with a poetic shadow under his eyes hinting at his devastation over Armond's betrayal.

"Lady Vitrola," he declared earnestly, "words cannot express my—"

"Your abject devastation over recent events," I finished for him with a tired sigh, knowing the formal protocol for apologies as well as he did. In a different life, I might have felt wounded that my near-death at the hands of his former best friend didn't at least warrant an independently worded apology instead of one prewritten by scribes.

Something flashed behind Loren's sky-blue eyes, a darkly quiet devastation that I'd never witnessed in him before, I felt momentarily guilty for being petty when his dearest friend had just died. Yes, Armond had been a murderer, assaulter, and all-around jackass, but he'd always been unfailingly loyal to Loren.

Which made his attempt to kill me so odd, now that I thought of it. Armond had to know that doing away with the Prince's betrothed would cause problems, especially since he'd made little effort to cover up signs of foul play. Then why . . .

"You're right to chastise me!" Loren burst out, interrupting my train of thought. "It was my fault that Armond—that Lord Delos attempted to take your life. He no doubt thought that he was doing it for me, you see."

"Why would he think that?" I asked carefully.

Loren looked distraught by my question. He stood, heedless to how his sudden movement caused small rip along the seam near his knee. With a tormented expression, he paced alongside the length of my bed, wringing his hands and biting his lower lip. Finally, he sat down on my bed besides me, too engrossed in his own inner turmoil to notice how I winced when he jostled my mattress.

His eyes met mine. "We don't love each other," he said in a flat, defeated tone.

"No," I said. "We do not."

At the cool civility of my reply, Loren let out a small laugh. He ran his fingers through his pale blond hair, giving him an almost rakish appearance.

"Armond knew," he said softly. "I think . . . I think he was trying to do me a favor. By killing you. What happened was my fault." His eyes met mine, bright with anguish, and his voice cracked. "Tru, if I had known—"

It was unlike Loren to take responsibility for, well, *anything*, let alone something that wasn't his fault. Uncertain what else to do, I rested my hand atop of his, and he stared down at it with almost fearful hope.

"I don't love you, Loren," I said firmly. Truthfully, I never really had. "And you don't love me. It seems we have common ground after all."

Loren was silent for a long moment.

"Common ground is more than many marriages start with," he finally said.

His fingers curled around mine, warm and tentative. I squeezed back briefly before withdrawing. It wasn't a lover's grip, but rather a bargain's finalizing handshake.

* * * *

Despite our newfound understanding of each other, the days following Loren's visit were an experiment in frustration. I was confined to my bed to fully recover from my injuries. Meanwhile, Uncle Alistair and Xander spoke with their connections in the palace in order to learn who Armond had been in contact with in the days leading up to his murder. Their investigations kept them busy and, with Emilia still at her parents' house recovering, I found myself left mostly alone but for the endless rotation of guards outside my door. Delphine visited as much as possible, but her duties as Court Sorceress meant she could

only stop by for an hour or so a day during the time period when we had previously held our lessons. And Theo, despite his plethora of good intentions, quickly grew impatient being cooped up inside.

Only one person possessed both the time and patience to keep me company. Letty used the hours that she spent with me to embroider an intricate throw pillow that she swore would brighten up my entire room upon completion. She seemed content enough to remain quietly by my side despite my having made clear I had no desire to converse with her. We passed time in silence, me reading as she stitched. Occasionally, I caught her staring at me with a look of puppy dog sadness on her face. After the tenth time catching her stare in as many minutes, I closed my book and arched a brow.

“I know that I’m not so devastatingly beautiful that you cannot bear to look away,” I quipped. “What’s wrong?”

Other than guilt, I added silently.

Letty twisted her thread around her finger until its tip whitened. She bit her lip for a long moment before blurting out, “Do you ever wonder why we’re not closer?”

My eyebrows rose even higher. Of all the things I’d expected Letty to say, a complaint about our lack of sisterly bond was last on the list. After all, *she* was the one having an affair with my fiancé.

“We don’t have much in common,” I said with a dismissive shrug.

Letty looked down at her lap. The red thread was now hopelessly knotted around her finger; she sighed and cut herself free with a small pair of sewing scissors. “I remember when our parents married,” she said softly. “I was terrified to meet you. You were a lady and betrothed to the Kingdom’s Prince, and I . . .” She laughed without humor. “I was just Letty Brown. Even my last name was drab.

“Then you arrived, and you were so lovely and kind that I thought that we’d be bosom friends as well as sisters. Yet when we came to Bellcrest—” She hesitated before lowering her volume even further. “You acted as if you didn’t want me here. I don’t know what changed but I wish it hadn’t. Did I do something wrong, Tru?”

I resisted the urge to snort. *Let me list the ways*, I thought. *You’ve continually stolen my fiancé, framed me for attempted murder, caused my brother to die in a pointless war, caused my brother to kill me in an even more pointless duel, and had the audacity to smile while I was having my head chopped off.*

Yet as I mentally listed off the different ways that Letty had betrayed my trust, I realized something. Each and every number on the list came from one of my past lives. If I were to go only by Letty’s actions over the past three years, I didn’t have a single shred of evidence to indicate she’d worked to harm me.

I’d treated Letty based on what I thought her to be capable of rather than her provable actions. Yet I had no proof that she’d actually conspired with the person behind my attacks this time around. Even if Letty had been responsible for each of my past deaths, who was to say that this Letty was the same as her prior versions? I’d changed with each new life. Was it impossible to think that perhaps others had too?

What had *this* Letty done wrong?

Lost in my own musings, I failed to answer her question. My stepsister sighed and stood from her chair. "I'm sorry," she said, "I shouldn't have bothered you with such things when you're still recovering."

She departed. I stared at the incomplete pillowcase she'd left behind, the roses still missing half their petals, and wondered if I owed her an apology as well.

* * * *

The next week, Alistair, Xander, and I decided to meet in Lady Delphine's study at her invitation while she was busy performing her Court duties. What better place to talk undisturbed, she'd said tartly, than in the lair of a witch?

"Before his death, Delos was witnessed in the company of Hargraves and Drixton," said Xander.

My uncle took a sip of tea, grimaced, then added a few drops of something else into the cup from his flask. "Both Councilors have been vocal about their desire to see Prince Loren engaged to Fengal's youngest princess in order to strengthen diplomatic ties."

I wrinkled my nose, as much as my uncle's words as his early drinking. "Isn't Princess Faluna only six?"

"Anterdon's queen married King Hesiod when she was but three," said Alistair. "Her nanny had to hold her during the ceremony."

"One is never too young to be used as a diplomatic bargaining chip," Xander added, his tone light but his expression dark.

"That's repulsive," I said.

Alistair chuckled. "Slightly less so when you realize that King Hesiod was the same age as his toddling bride. They each lived with their parents until they came of age, then renewed the ceremony when they were both sixteen. From what I observed of them in Anterdon, the couple is now very much in love."

"Still," I protested, "Loren is over a decade older than Faluna."

"Simply noting that purely political unions are not as uncommon as one might hope." My uncle looked at me pointedly, and then at Xander. My cheeks heated in response. Any feelings that I might possess for Xander had to come second to surviving and my duty to Verdan. Which meant that I had to marry Loren.

Even if I stayed in Bellcrest after cancelling our engagement, I'd spent the past three years immersed in learning magic. If the northern noble protested the end to my engagement, no one would take me seriously enough in this itineration to let me negotiate on their behalf. My studies had compromised the Council's belief in my judgement—one wrong accusation, and I had personally already laid the groundwork for their next public denouncement. I'd been permitted to learn magic due to being engaged

to Loren, and without that protection, Duke Kothe's daughter's ability to cast spells would ironically likely result in my being labeled a threat similar to my great grandfather.

I wouldn't put it past Timons to order my assassination just to be on the safe side. Even if he wasn't in league with my mysterious attacker, the Councilor was consistently paranoid about any power imbalance between Kothe and the rest of Verdan.

I decided to change the subject. "Hargraves isn't particularly fond of me." In fact, he had been downright hostile at each of my multiple trials.

"Hargraves is unpleasant to everyone," said Xander. "Drixton, however, is openly discontent with his position on the Agricultural Table. Perhaps he believes the King will promote him to the judiciary if he plays a crucial part in arranging Loren's next engagement. Especially if said engagement secures an alliance with Fengal."

Alistair eschewed his teacup this time to take a deep swig from his flask. "As motives for murder go, I've heard worse. Still, Drixton is a bureaucrat through and through—we had the same tutor as boys, and he was a stickler for the rules even then. Starched suck-up never missed a single lesson. I have a hard time imagining him as our culprit."

"It could still be Hargraves," suggested Xander.

Alistair gave a noncommittal grunt. "We'll investigate both. Tru, Delphine mentioned that you had a way of getting people to confess things. A spell of some kind?"

"It's a soothing charm," I said, "meant to calm infants. However, I've found that it will lower someone's guard enough to render them more or less incapable of lying."

"Innovative." Uncle Alistair's eyes gleamed speculatively. "Although, we can't permit rumor that you're bespelling the government begin to spread. So how do we arrange you to meet with all Councilors without any realizing your identity?"

The three of us fell silent, each pondering possible solutions. I wasn't quite convinced that either Drixton or Hargraves had killed Armond, at least not for the motive that my uncle attributed to them. If their aim was that Loren wed Fengal's princess, then why work with Letty? Unless Letty was uninvolved. But then why had they allowed her and Loren to become engaged time and time again as soon as my death was announced? Something didn't fit, but I lacked any better leads.

"A masquerade," Xander suddenly suggested. "As your relative, Alistair can host it. Claim that he wants to celebrate his darling niece's engagement to the prince."

"How can we be certain that they'll both attend?" I asked.

Uncle Alistair smiled. There was a vaguely sinister crook to the curve of his lips. "So long as the invitation is addressed from me, neither would dare to refuse."

We spent the next hour hammering out the details, deciding that the masquerade would be held in a week's time at Bellcrest. Alistair assured me that the King would be happy to lend him use of the castle ballroom ("His Majesty owes me a favor or twelve") and that he could isolate both Hargraves and Drixton from the main party ("Best you're unaware of the details, little turtle").

We also agreed that I should don two separate costumes. One, which I would wear upon arriving and attend the ball in, making sure that the Councilors saw me. The second, Xander would bring for me to don later in order to corner the Councilors and hopefully get them to confess. That way, even if they remembered being ensorcelled, neither would be able to trace their interrogation back to me. I'd been lucky that Timons hadn't seemed to recall our encounter. Now that I was about to charm two, the risk of my target remembering doubled.

Uncle Alistair left the study, but Xander's grabbed onto my wrist before I could follow.

"I have something for you." He reached into his doublet pocket and pulled out a small box. "Your dress for the masquerade will most likely have a lower—" he waved his free hand in front of his chest in helpless gesture, cheeks pinkening. "Have a different neckline."

"Ballgowns usually don't have high collars." I arched an eyebrow, slightly amused by his obvious discomfort. "I didn't think you would be so easily perturbed by the lack of modesty."

"No, of course not," he sputtered. "I didn't mean to imply that there was anything wrong with the fashion. Or that you were immodest. I'm sure you'll look lovely. More than lovely." His cheeks reddened further, and he looked down to avoid meeting my gaze.

I was astounded, and more than a little entertained. I'd never seen Xander this ruffled before. Hadn't thought him capable of it, given his normally unflappable demeanor. Knowing that *I* was the reason behind his lack of composure made me feel uncharacteristically bold. I decided to tease him a bit.

"It's not as if I'll be going with my breasts fully bared," I said, trying hard to bite down on a smile. "Other ladies will be dressed much the same."

His head shot up, startled green eyes finally meeting mine. Noting my amusement, he grinned self-depreciatingly. "I never know what you're about to say," he said, shaking his head. "Not many people succeed on so often surprising me. It's refreshing." He cleared his throat. "My point was that you'll need a new chain for your wardstone. The current cord may be serviceable hidden beneath the dresses you usually wear, but I doubt it pass muster on display at a formal dance."

I gasped. "Oh, gods." The wardstone. I hadn't thought about it since a few days ago, when I'd taken it off for my lesson with Lady Delphine. What had I done with it after?

Xander studied my expression. "You lost it."

"I didn't lose it," I snapped. "It's . . . temporarily misplaced." I took a deep breath, trying to recall when I'd last worn it. "I took it off for my magic lessons but I'm certain that your mother gave it back. I wasn't

wearing it when I woke up from my accident though.”

Xander shook his head.

I squinted, straining to recall my motions. “I looped it around my wrist,” I said with relief. Then I frowned. “It wasn’t there when I woke.”

“Could it have been flung off during your fall from Dragon?”

I groaned. “Probably. I can’t believe I was so careless.”

Xander tucked the box back in his pocket. “Let’s go see if it’s still there. With any luck, it won’t be far from where you landed.” He held out his arm to me, waiting for me to take it.

I hesitated. Spending time with Xander was stupid; it was actively tempting fate, which wasn’t something I could afford to do. Fate, after all, had proven that it had a vendetta against me. Loren and I didn’t love each other, but I still intended to marry him, become Queen, and thus save myself.

And yet . . .

I accepted Xander’s arm. “Let’s go.”

[December Live Q&A Times](#)

[Dec 17, 2021](#)

This month’s Q&A’s are happening a little early, as I won’t have a reliable internet connection later this month . . . There is a noticeable difference, I have discovered, between Downtown City Internet Speed and Suburb Surrounded by Trees and Mountains Internet Speed.

The first Live Q&A will be at 7pm PST tomorrow (Saturday, December 18th).

The second Q&A will be on Sunday, the time to be decided based on the poll below. Please note that spoilers from the most recent demo will be brought up.

10am - 11am PST

11am - 12pm PST

12pm - 1pm PST

1pm - 2pm PST

41 votes total

[Writer's Blog: The Changes Cha-Cha of Plot Development](#)

[Dec 17, 2021](#)

I'm currently dealing with a low-grade fever that's upset my balance just enough that my thirteen-year-old neighbor accused me of being publicly inebriated when I wobbled down to the lobby for my mail. (This is not indicative of any true severity of illness, however, but rather my complete and utter lack of coordination to begin with.)

Anyway, given my unexpected cold, I had the notion that it might be fun to talk about the things in *Mind Blind* that were also unplanned. It's probably become obvious in recent updates that I thrive off last-minute alterations and inspiration bursts, but some of you might be surprised by how much these sudden eureka moments have shaped the overall text.

So, without further ado, I'd like to present (with some spoilers) . . .

Surprisingly Major Plot Points That Got Added In At The Very Last Minute

1. Nick's presence in Button's head. I'd always intended for some sort of minor communication to happen between Nick and Button while he was in a coma, but him being stuck in Button's head wasn't something added until the very end of writing Chapter 4. Needless to say, it ended up greatly impacting the story (not the least because I then had to write multiple ongoing conversations in every scene, as Nick would talk to Button but couldn't be heard by others).
2. One particular character (of the political persuasion) was just meant to be a patsy and not an actual culprit. The more I learned about him while writing another character, however, the more I realized that he wasn't as innocent as he tried to convince me in my head.
3. I didn't know that Rosy and Hope knew each other (much less that Rosy was Hope's recommendation to supervise Nick) until the phone conversation between Hope and Button. This conversation needs to be reworked once I finesse the parent feeling variables, but I often learn unexpected things about characters in the middle of writing a scene. A lot of these things get thrown out due to not being consistent with what's already written, but I've decided to keep the Rosy-Hope connection.
4. Vengeance's plan originally revolved around the use of a BRS bomb that would neutralize Ments. This was instead of their current plan explained in Chapter 16, which is more . . . let's just call it "biological warfare."
5. One of the gender-variables character was only ever meant as a red herring and never intended to be an actual character. That they subsequently turned out to be one of Vengeance's head honchos probably shocked me more than readers.

There are a few others as well that I can't share yet due to spoilers, but it's definitely interesting to look back on how my original plans changed now that I'm (hopefully?) past the point of plot surprises.

[Sunday Live Q&A](#)

[Dec 18, 2021](#)

The second live Q&A will be tomorrow **(Sunday, December 19) at 1pm PST.**

This one will be recorded by Craigbot (who I decided to not use tonight in lieu of running my mouth).

[Lockdown Night, Part 3 of 3](#)

[Dec 21, 2021](#)

Part 1: [patreon.com/posts/lockdown-night-58042442](https://www.patreon.com/posts/lockdown-night-58042442)

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/58186982>

(Sorry, everyone! Thought I posted this last month but apparently not.)

* * * *

The first thing that Kent did upon waking up was raise both hands to cover his face. His mouth already felt like dry cotton, and he didn't need one more reason to need an immediate toothbrush. After a moment passed without him assaulted by sloppy dog kisses, he blinked blearily, registering his surroundings for the first time.

Instead of his bed, he lay atop a haphazard pile of what looked (and, per his cramping back, felt) like deflated tires. Instead of his bedroom, there was in a narrow alley, the pink sunrise just beginning to break through its narrow enclosure.

Kent frowned. He'd been drunk before, but never to the point where he'd fallen asleep in public. A horrifying thought occurred to him: that maybe it was only due to Talia's interference that he always managed to get home safe. In that case, how much of a burden had he been to her in the past? Kent knew that he sometimes tended to drink too much in crowds, but no one had ever implied that he overshot his limits by *this* much.

His frown deepened. Other than the dry mouth and sore back, he felt remarkably fine with no headache to speak of. If he had drank enough to forget the events of last night, surely that was enough to create a migraine? Kent always had at least a mini-headache headaches after a night of overdrinking. He glanced around, wincing as he noticed (and smelled) a toppled-over garbage bin nearby. At least he hadn't fallen atop *that*.

He took a moment to inspect himself, ensuring that no garbage clung to his clothes (thankfully, it appeared he hadn't quite reached dumpster diving levels of intoxication last night). The only thing out of place was a red stain running down the length of his left pantleg, which he assumed to be rust from a nearby trashed bicycle that leant against the alley's brick wall.

He reached for his pocket to find his cellphone missing. Others, more expressive, might have cursed aloud at yet another setback, but Kent only sighed. He stood, only to promptly collapse back onto the pile of tires. He blinked upwards at the gradually brightening sky, dazed.

"Your legs won't work for another hour or so."

Kent's head swiveled in attempt to locate the speaker, only to realize with dawning horror that the words had emerged from his own mouth.

"Don't panic."

The voice—*Kent's* voice—was harsh and authoritative. It wasn't a tone that Kent associated with himself, outside of initial training with Annie and Cass where firmness had been paramount. Panic threatened to close up his throat, even as his expression remained coolly collected, the result of years spent obediently following his father on the campaign trail. It was with this disconcerting composure that Kent thrust a finger into his mouth, scrubbing the inner sides of his cheeks in effort to discover whatever was making him speak.

"The possession will wear off gradually." The words almost caused Kent to bite off his own finger. *"Stop struggling."*

"Possession?" Kent echoed, relieved to discover that he had at least *some* choice in what came out of his mouth.

He felt his shoulders shrug. *"It's the most adequate description of what I did. Once committed, I'm trapped until the sun fully rises."*

Well. If this situation was temporary, then Kent supposed it was fine.

He had a demon trapped inside his body.

But only for another half hour or so.

Yes, this was fine.

Completely.

Fine.

Kent heard himself sigh. *"I instructed you not to panic,"* the demon said, sounding annoyed. *"I am not a demon."*

"A ghost?" Kent asked.

"So I assume."

"You're not certain?"

"I have no recollection of dying."

That seemed fair. Kent couldn't vouch that he'd realize if he became a ghost, either. It wasn't as if death was a sports competition you could train for. Another splinter of light crept into the alley, illuminating enough of Kent's lower half that he got a full look at the stain on his pants. On reexamination, he realized that the red was too bright to be rust. Moreover, the fabric near his ankle was shredded, the rips chaotic and violent, like when Annie had demolished his father's coat. Whatever had bitten Kent's leg, however, had much bigger teeth than a shih tzu.

"I'm bleeding," he noted aloud, feeling oddly detached from the scene. He couldn't feel his leg, which he assumed was a byproduct of being possessed.

"I wasn't fast enough," came the ghost's cryptic answer. *"I had to choose."*

Kent waited patiently for them to elaborate. They didn't, but he noticed a pale blue light at the periphery of his vision. He turned towards it, silently watching as the light gathered itself into the shadowed outline.

The man wore miner's attire and had a miner's build, stocky with broad shoulders from years of swinging a pickax at stone. His features were blurred and translucent, but Kent nonetheless got the impression that the ghost was scowling.

"A thank you would be nice." This time, the sentence issued from the ghost's own mouth.

Kent's shoulders sagged with relief even as his injured leg began to throb. "Thank you?"

The ghost's scowl deepened at the hint of question in his voice.

"I'm under the impression that you saved me," Kent continued, wincing as the ache of his leg intensified and sharpened, "although I'm not sure from what."

The ghost didn't respond, his eyes affixed on the alleyway's entrance where sunlight had now dispersed most the shadows.

"Come to Ambrose Manor," he said at last. If not for his low voice, Kent would've mistaken his form at this point for a swirl of dust motes in the morning light.

Afterwards, Kent could never be entirely sure whether the ghost first disappeared, or he had simply passed out from pain.

* * * *

Ellery discovered Kent when she went to take out the recycling from last night. Kent had awoken to her frantic scream of "Nick!", his eyes opening to be confronted with perhaps the most disappointed expression he'd ever witnessed.

"You're him," Ellery said dully. "The one who first went missing."

Her usage of the word 'first' caught Kent's attention.

"Your friend went looking for you," Ellery said, her arm slung beneath Kent's shoulders so he could hobble into the tavern. "My brother and the sheriff went with her."

Once inside, a second woman helped to catch Kent before he collapsed onto the floor. The burning in his leg had subsided, but it was difficult to see the damage given the shredded fabric and blood obscuring his flesh. The two women help Kent into a booth, then Ellery went to fetch a first aid kit.

After introducing herself, the bartender's wife looked Kent in the eyes. "Do you remember anything about what happened last night?" Sally asked. "Anything at all?"

Kent could only shake head.

When Ellery returned, she deftly cut away at the shredded fabric. "Let's get a look at that injury," she said. "Nearest hospital is a hike away, and they . . ."

"They'd ask questions," Sally finished when Ellery's voice faltered. "Questions you probably can't answer. Don't worry, though. Ellery's a trained EMT." Her hand fell to her sister-in-law's shoulder, gripping it a little too tightly to be a reassuring squeeze; Kent almost felt like she was doing it to keep herself upright.

This Ellery must be a miracle worker because the pain in his calf was almost completely gone.

"What kind of sick joke is this?" Ellery demanded. Despite Sally having just vouched for her, Ellery's raised voice showed no sign of a trained bedside manner. "Is this fake blood?"

Kent looked down to see what made her so upset.

She was staring at his lower calf, which, now that the ripped fabric had been cut away and the red stain rinsed off, revealed the pale flesh beneath to be uninjured and perfectly smooth.

Too smooth, Kent realized, and too pale. The skin of his leg didn't look uninjured—it looked newly healed, scarless but without hair.

Ignoring Sally and Ellery's questions, he stood and headed towards the door. The ghost had told him to come to Ambrose Manor. Maybe there, he'd find answers.

More importantly: he might find Talia.

* * * *

Sally and Ellery didn't let Kent escape easily, of course. Ellery apologized for her accusation, although she held back the reason why she was so quickly persuaded as to Kent's innocence. The two women each grabbed one of Kent's arms, bombarding him with questions as to his whereabouts last night even though neither were willing to reveal what had happened to Talia other than what Ellery had already disclosed in the alley, that Talia and two others had gone looking for him.

They clearly knew *something*. There was a grim hopelessness in their eyes even as they began making calls to others in efforts to organize a town-wide manhunt.

Kent informed Ellery that he meant to head back to his Mustang, to search for any signs that Talia had been there last night. Kent didn't know why he didn't reveal where he was truly heading. Trepidation over having to explain why he wanted to go to Ambrose Manor, perhaps? But was he more afraid that she would dismiss his story of the ghost, or that she'd take it seriously?

Probably the latter, Kent decided as he turned on the ignition to the Jeep he'd borrowed from Sally. Something about Drearwood and the way its inhabitants behaved was *wrong*, wrong in a way that made Kent's palms sweat and his leg ache with phantom pains as he drove past the downtown's welcome sign.

In contrast, the ghost had felt . . . curious and unusual, but not disturbing.

Not dark.

Ambrose Manor looked identical to the photos Talia had so eagerly shown him on her cellphone. Kent had only been half paying attention at the time, but the French Chateau style was unmistakable. Steeply pitched gables bookended a singular tower with a conical roof, the brick chimney tipping slightly sideways in disrepair like a gentleman's top hat. Kent saw a flicker of blue light through one of the semicircular windows, a flash so quick and pale that, on any other day and in any other circumstances, he would've attributed it to simply the sun's reflection off the pane.

The front door was unlocked.

This, Kent determined, was a good sign. Unlocked meant that someone had recently entered the house, hopefully his missing friend. He stepped into the empty foyer.

“Talía?” he called.

“Kent! There you are!” Talía’s voice filtered down from the top floor.

Kent took off, bounding up the stairs two at a time to get to her, ignoring a sudden muscle cramp which gripped his lower left calf in a teeth-like vise.

“Talía!” he hollered again.

A door down the second-floor hallway creaked open, and Talía’s voice rang out from within, this time a little louder, “Isn’t this house *awesome*? I mean, yeah, I’m pretty sure that there’s a family of racoons residing in the master bedroom, but—”

Kent pushed open the door with enough force that it was sent slamming against the wall within the room.

“Hey!” Talía protested indignantly. “I just bought this place. Maybe don’t destroy it until I host at least one party?”

Kent didn’t reply.

Talía squinted at him, her once warm brown eyes now a cold blue. Sunlight from the window beyond filtered through her body. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Kent forced a smile. “Everything’s fine,” he lied as the pain of his leg clamped tighter and tighter. Unable to remain upright, his back slid against the wall until he was seated on the floor.

“Couldn’t fully commit to capris on both legs?” Talía mocked, gesturing to Kent’s one cut-off pant leg. His revealed skin was still too smooth, providing no indication of the bone-deep agony had once more begun to creep upwards, beyond his knee and into the cold hollow that had, up until a minute ago, held his heart.

I wasn’t fast enough, the ghost had said. I had to choose.

* * * *

Despite the subtle morosity of its name, the town of Drearwood, Colorado, possesses a charm which should have landed it the number one spot on any of *Condé Nast*’s “Best Small Town” lists. The air is always crisp and clean, and the town proper nestles scenically between the bosom of two Rocky Mountain peaks. And in the summer, children sing a peculiar rhyme while jumping rope:

Have you heard of old man Kent

Who lives in the House of Rose?

His skin has spots, his back is bent,

He can barely stand on his toes!

Who he talks to, no one knows.

He limps 'cause his leg's frozen.

Get in close, you'll hear him say:

"I wish that I weren't chosen."

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 26.5](#)

[Dec 22, 2021](#)

From the Rewritten Journal of Lady Vitrula Rhys: The Sixth Death

During my later deaths, I experienced the same sequence of emotions each time I realized that I was about to die. Anger, at Letty for constantly being instrumental to my demise, and at myself for still wanting to believe her innocent. Shame, that Loren cared so little for me despite my best efforts. Annoyance, that my tireless plotting to survive had failed once again. Fear, that this death might somehow be the last. And, very occasionally, relief.

After The Mad Princess's War, I'd been relieved during my execution. Dying gave me a chance to go back in time to save Theo as well as the countless other lives lost in battle. In this case, my cursed cycle of death and life proved itself to be a blessing, allowing me to fix mistakes of a horrific past. I'd only felt a similar sense of acceptance when facing my demise during one other death, which was also, oddly enough, the one time that I almost made it to eighteen. It wasn't the same emotion, of course. My sixth death wasn't penance for starting a war, and no one else was saved by my dying. But on the day that I was poisoned, my final emotion was unmistakably one of relief.

My strategy during this life didn't vary all that much from that of my fifth. I still hounded Letty and shadowed Loren, and did my best to ensure that two never had time alone. My acrophobia was new, of course. Being pushed from the observatory left me with an unshakeable terror of heights. But I avoided towers, never lingered at the top of stairwells, and everything went more or less according to plan.

It went so well, in fact, that I survived to see the day before my eighteenth birthday. Our parents had always intended that Loren and I should wed as soon as I reached my majority, and the nearing wedding meant that celebrations were in full swing. Balls, brunches, picnics—every prominent member

of Court strove to host the most impressive nuptial celebration in our honor, each one more lavishly ostentatious than the last.

My life became a blur of parties and well-wishers. Yet despite the positive forecast that I might actually live to see eighteen, my mood darkened by the day. Each engagement gift, each droning speech was nothing more than a painful reminder that Loren was only agreeing to marry me because I had connived to keep him and Letty apart. Instead of being ecstatic that I might live, I found myself wondering if my life were worth living.

We were attending a brunch held by Lady Geneva. Loren and I each had our own individual bridal cakes, no bigger than a man's fist, prepared personally by Lady Geneva's own chef. His was chocolate, mine was lemon. Gold flecks mixed in with the icing drizzled on top, and crushed pearls had supposedly been mixed in with the flour. It was ridiculously extravagant, inarguably beautiful, and incredibly delicious.

As long as I kept myself occupied by eating that cake, the brunch was almost bearable. My smile remained frozen in place through an interminable series of overlong toasts, the lengthiest of course being given by Lady Geneva herself. She had just begun working her way through what looked to be the third page of her prepared oratory, when I began to have difficulty breathing.

Every inch of my body was on fire, Lady Geneva's speech drowned out by a pounding in my ears. I choked on my bite of cake, suddenly unable to swallow. I felt hot, so hot.

As if in a dream, I could hear Loren's voice besides me, calling my name.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

I couldn't shake my head since my body no longer responded to my commands. No, not ill. I knew even then that I had been poisoned.

But as the searing pain turned to numbness, and my body toppled off my chair and crashed onto the floor, and nobles screamed around me, I didn't feel scared or angry or any of those emotions to which I'd grown accustomed. Rather, I felt relief.

I was about to die.

But at least it delayed my wedding by another four years.

[Writer's Blog: A New Perspective](#)

[Dec 26, 2021](#)

Chapter 1 has a new subway POV! (Same link as before.)

In the end, this new version isn't all that different from the original. The changes are certainly less drastic than the various drafts I wrote up from scratch, which included passages like:

Time freezes when you see their face.

No . . . time doesn't freeze. It reverses, and you are once again a child peaking through the narrow crack between closet doors, both hands clasped over your mouth lest your breath escape, silently praying that same face doesn't turn your way.

The memory fades. You're still you, but older and better at keeping quiet.

And also:

Damn. Damn it to hell. Damn it to whatever lies beneath hell.

You didn't want to recognize them, but when has the universe ever taken your desires into consideration? If you were capable of believing in a higher power, you might take offense at their obvious vendetta, but instead you only feel a grim resignation settle upon your shoulders.

Ellery Wiseman will be just one more burden to bear, one more crime to carry.

Ultimately, however, I realized that there *should* be a little bit of a moustache-twirly evil vibe . . . but in a way that doesn't read as quite as evil on a second playthrough. Shard (aka the antihero formerly known as Noh, but I've tweaked the mask description for clarity) shouldn't come across as potentially sympathetic from the get-go, which means leaving out mentions of their backstory. Rather than completely soften their perspective, I instead tried to inject their narrative with a sense of motivation other than curiosity (as they do have a reason for spying on Button's mind and aren't simply a peeping Tom). Whether that plan is nefarious or not isn't specified, leaving it up to readers to likely imagine the worst.

I also took out the overall feeling that Shard looks down on Button, which honestly made me cringe when rereading. The descriptor "broken" is still used, but phrases like "child" and "fool" have been taken out. As I've said before: the more I write a character, the more I get to know them. At first, I assumed that Shard had a smug sense of superiority. Surely they had to in order to justify using Button to plant the bomb? It was only several chapters deep that I realized that they're driven not by elitist indifference but rather by a unshakeable sense of necessity. Everything they do, they genuinely believe to be the only option available in order to prevent certain (catastrophic) outcomes.

To this end, I've also tempered their feelings towards John and Hope into something that is more derisive than pure hatred. A lot of this comes down to simple word changes, and the current passage likely still isn't yet the final draft (which might include some of the new passages, but I'm trying to avoid

getting lost in editing before making it to the final chapter). For now, my hope is that my beloved Subway Creep now comes across less like Nosferatu-esque sewer stalker and more like the fatalistic antihero that they truly are.

[MB Short Story: Last Food Fight Of The Year](#)

[Dec 29, 2021](#)

“I need a New Year’s resolution,” Ellery declared from where she lay sprawled across the living room couch. Her head hung over the sofa arm edge, and her expression was solemn (although it was hard for Sally to be certain given that her best friend’s face was also upside down).

“Do you, though?” Sally asked. “Need a resolution, that is.”

Ellery arched a brow. The effect was disturbing given her flipped angle, so Sally tossed a piece of caramel corn from her bowl so that it hit the middle of Ellery’s forehead. Disgruntled, Ellery sat upright. Perfect. Now, Sally didn’t have to overthink things to identify the emotion on her friend’s face (currently: annoyance).

“Of course I need one,” Ellery said. “It has to be a good resolution, too. None of this eat healthier or start meditating crap. I need a *goal*.”

Sally reclaimed the thrown kernel off the carpet, examining it speculatively before determining too much rug fuzz had stuck for it to still be edible. She tossed it back into her almost-empty bowl with a sigh. “What was your goal last year?”

Ellery smirked. “Kent.”

That tracked. Ellery had pursued Kent Zarneki with the single-minded dedication of a lion tracking its pray. Ellery was even shorter than Sally, but she was definitely the predator when it came to her relationship with her new boyfriend. The image of a miniature lioness chasing down a giraffe with Kent’s face made Sally snort, and she made note to share the comparison with Glitch later.

Ellery groaned and flopped back onto the couch like a Victorian-era matron deprived of her smelling salts. “I don’t know what to pick!” she complained. “Life is good right now, you know? Aiming higher feels greedy, but I don’t want to get complacent. You know?”

Given that she’d used the phrase “you know” twice, Sally assumed that this was an inner conflict of Ellery’s that she was expected to understand and empathize. Instead, she had to fight the urge to throw another popcorn kernel at her friend’s head. What kind of jerk complained about not being able to decide on a New Year’s resolution because their life was already so picture perfect?

Because this was what she thought, and because this was Ellery and thus truth was always the best policy, this also ended up being what Sally said out loud.

Instead of chucking a throw pillow at her head (as Sally had anticipated), Ellery just laughed. “My life is kind of perfect, isn’t it?” she agreed dreamily. “Who would’ve ever guessed?”

Any envy Sally felt towards her friend vanished in that moment. After everything Ellery had been through with Vengeance (and even before that), she deserved to live out her best life.

“Okay then,” Sally said, setting down her bowl of popcorn ammunition. “Let’s go find you a resolution.”

And with those words, Operation New Year began.

* * * *

Their first consult was with Kent. Mostly because he was already on his way over to visit, but also because Sally figured that of all their friends, he knew Ellery the best and would thus have insight into what her New Year’s resolution should be. Technically, Nicholas probably knew Ellery the best, but the day that Sally trusted *him* to provide serious advice was the day when pigs would fly. Knowing Ellery’s brother, he’d probably recommend that Ellery aim for something like “taking over Wiseman household laundry duty”.

Despite Sally’s high hopes that Kent would have some insight, however, he answered their query with a blank stare.

“New Year’s resolution?” he asked as he sat beside Ellery on the couch and slid his arm around her waist.

“Something that you intend to change or do better this upcoming year,” Ellery explained, snuggling up against Kent’s side.

“You must’ve had resolutions as a kid at least,” Sally interjected. “Teachers always made us write ours down every December.”

Kent slowly shook his head.

“What about with your family, then?” No sooner were the words out of Sally’s mouth then she was wincing with regret. Ellery glared at her—Kent didn’t like talking about his father, especially not after last year.

Kent, thankfully, didn’t seem to be offended by Sally’s faux paus. He simply shook his head once more. “New Year’s was about campaigning for Tobias. He didn’t have time to play along with traditions.”

“That’s because Tobias sucks,” Ellery muttered.

Kent smiled fondly at her, clearly touched by her defamation of his only surviving blood relative.

"This can be your first time making a New Year's resolution," Ellery told him. "So, what's your goal for our second year as a couple?"

"I think that was a hint to remember the anniversary," Sally teased in an overloud whisper.

Ellery rolled her eyes at the taunt, but Kent looked as if he were seriously considering Sally's words. He turned to face Ellery directly, leaving Sally feeling as if she all of a sudden were intruding. The way Kent looked at Ellery . . . it was all tenderness and gratitude and open devotion. What would it be like, to have someone look at *her* that way?

Disquieted by the direction of her thoughts, Sally stood abruptly from where she was seated cross-legged on the floor. "I'm going to get some more popcorn," she announced, although neither of the other two were paying any attention.

She left the living room and headed towards the kitchen, only to realize halfway down the hall that she had forgotten her bowl. With a sigh, she pivoted back around, only to promptly stop and head back towards the kitchen when she heard pieces of Kent and Ellery's conversation. She could get a new bowl, because some intimate moments shouldn't be interrupted.

Kent's voice drifted in through the open door. "My goal is to make you happy."

Sally smiled faintly at the almost-crack in Ellery's voice as she replied—others might not recognize that Ellery was emotional over Kent's declaration, but you didn't grow up with someone without being able to recognize the way her vocal cords tightened when on the verge of tears.

"That's not a resolution," Ellery informed Kent. There was a moment of quiet, which Sally assumed the two lovebirds filled with a kiss. "It's a given."

* * * *

Consultation number two was with Glitch and Instructor Kim. Not that Sally had originally any intention of asking Ambrose Weapon-Hoarder Kim for advice, but when they arrived at Aeon, they found him already with Glitch (who, now that she was no longer a student, had been promoted as Kim's unofficial protegee in addition to Kent's MIV). As much as she would've liked to, Sally couldn't well kick Kim out of his own office, so she instead enlisted his help to find Ellery a New Year's resolution. The man was dislikable, true, but he occasionally proved himself capable of offering decent advice. Even if he did still refuse to let her try out anything sharper than a steel baton during weapons training.

According to Kent, Kim had granted Glitch permission to sit in his chair for a week instead of buying her a tangible Christmas gift. Sally hadn't believed it until now, witnessing Glitch recline back in Kim's ergonomic office chair. Kim looked none-too-pleased by Glitch's cockily crossed feet upon the surface of his desk, but Sally supposed that he was a man of his word and a gift was a gift (although she suspected that Kim would never again ask Glitch what she wanted for Christmas instead of just buying an electronics store gift card as had most everyone else).

Glitch, being Glitch, didn't take Ellery's dilemma very seriously. "It's obvious, isn't it?" she told Ellery when filled in on the problem. "Graduation is just around the corner. Your New Year's resolution should be to join me and Kent in the NPO Program!"

Sally bristled. "In case you haven't noticed, Ellery already has an AMO partner. A Ment one."

"You two can't always work exclusively with each other," Glitch countered, her expression turning serious. "In the NPO Program, Ellery would have a chance to shape the future of Unity."

"Ellery and I *am* the future of Unity," Sally insisted.

"Ellery will have to work with other agents eventually. Isn't it better they not be Ments?" Glitch asked.

"Ellery is right here," Ellery said. "And she can decide her own future, thank you very much."

"Honestly, Sal," Glitch added, "with your precognition and creativity? You'd do better as an MIV yourself than in the field. Admit it."

Sally's gaze slid surreptitiously over to Kim, who continued to look disinterested in the current conversation as he read over a file while standing. Glitch's words hit upon a truth she'd already been considering. She'd known for a while that Ellery would probably join the NPO Program and that she'd be stuck with a new MIV—Ellery was too talented a strategist for Unity to waste her on a single field agent, let alone one that only barely made passing grades in hand-to-hand combat and had once accidentally shot Kim in the shoulder with a rubber bullet (that particular shot had been so off that no one, not even Ellery, believed that Sally had been aiming at the practice dummy). And truthfully, being the one to issue orders seemed like it would be a lot more fun than being the psychic lacky running up and down flights in a burning building (that had been, by far, Sally's least favorite mission).

Sally said none of this, of course. How humiliating would it be to express interest in the NPO Program only for Kim to laugh in her face? It would be exactly like when she'd asked to try out one of the new laser guns and he'd permanently banned her from the armory.

"The NPO is about training Norm operatives," she said instead. "Not trying to create Ment MIVs."

Kim's folder shut with a sharp *snap* loud enough to make Glitch's feet drop reflexively from the desktop and to the floor.

"There's no reason why you couldn't switch, Alavidze," Kim said mildly. "Given your performance in my last Field Strategy class, I'd accept your application to join the NPO Program. You'd need to pass the ASE, of course, but your AMO credentials should carry over. Any credits you lack can be made up during active-duty training."

Sally opened her mouth to retort only to close it upon realizing that this was as close to a compliment as Kim had ever given her. Without reason to deliver a biting comeback, she simply mumbled "I'll think about it" and tried to ignore Ellery's surprised stare.

An awkward silence followed. Awkward on Sally's part, at least. Kim and Glitch both looked vexatiously smug over the entire exchange, leaving Sally to wonder if Glitch's seemingly sudden suggestion had in fact been a premeditatedly baited trap. And yet . . . she couldn't claim that she was completely opposed to the idea of becoming an MIV. Even if it did mean having Kim as a permanent supervisor.

"I don't think I want my New Year resolution to be career-oriented," Ellery mused aloud with another speculative look at Sally. "I should keep things flexible, just in case anyone else's plans change."

Lacking any concrete reply to Ellery's prodding, Sally switched the subject. "What's your resolution?" she asked Glitch.

Glitch leaned further back in Kim's chair, her feet popping once more onto the top of the desk. "My resolution?" she echoed. "Why, this office of course. Rosy's getting up there in years, and it's only a matter of time before Adsila realizes that—"

Apparently, being called old was the final straw that broke Kim's already fraying patience. His foot whipped out, catching the chair leg wheel and sending the chair (along with Glitch) spinning across the office, her heels skidding along the carpet in effort to avoid crashing into the bookshelf.

Kim folded his arms and arched a brow at Glitch. "Keep talking. My New Year's resolution will be to find a new aide."

* * * *

Grayson's suggestion for Ellery's New Year's resolution was, in Sally's humble estimation, evil. Sweet and well-intentioned, but evil nonetheless.

"I plan on waking up an hour earlier every day this year," he said while peeling onions (one of the only tasks that Nick actually allowed Gray to perform while serving as his sous chef). "Maybe you two should resolve to do the same."

Sally and Ellery exchanged a *look*.

"Ignore the man behind the curtain," Nick chimed in, holding up a dishcloth in the air so that it obscured Gray's face. "Every year, he claims that he's going to get on an earlier schedule. Every year, he fails."

"I don't *fail*," Gray said defensively, batting away the dishrag. "Work just doesn't always allow me to get home at a decent hour, which means that sometimes I don't get to bed on time."

Nick hummed knowingly as he tasted the stew that was boiling. His lips twisted, and he reached for the spice rack. "We have the same job. And yet, you're never awake when I call to invite you to the TZ for some early morning sparring."

"You call at 4:50am! No one is awake at 4:50am!" Gray's cheeks pinkened as Sally and Ellery exchanged another *look*.

"I'm awake," Ellery said. "You'd know that if you ever made it to our training sessions before work."

This time, the *look* exchanged was between Sally and Gray.

"They're inhuman," Sally said flatly.

"Agreed." Gray lifted his hand, telekinetically catching the dishcloth that Nick had chucked at his head. It floated a moment mid-air before lightly descending onto the kitchen counter.

Ellery stuck out her tongue at Sally. "Better inhuman than a slugabed."

"Pretty sure that insult went out of fashion in the 1800's," Sally retorted, rolling her eyes.

"Sloth," Ellery shot back.

"Sloths are adorable."

"Lazy bum."

"My bum is also adorable."

At Sally last declaration, Nick choked on the new spoonful he'd been sampling. While Ellery snickered, Grayson hit sharply between his shoulder blades. Once Nick could once again breathe, he frowned at his smirking sister.

"Your New Year's resolution should be to vacuum more frequently," he said. "I'm happy for you and Kent, but last week I found a dog hair in my coffee cup."

"Do you have a problem with my stepchildren?" Ellery demanded.

"I have a problem with dog flavored coffee," Nick said. "I don't mind that they come to visit, but you could at least run the Dyson around after they leave."

Ellery groaned, slumping in her seat at the kitchen island. "You guys are no help," she accused Nick and Gray. "UCRT's greatest heroes, and your advice is trash. D-minus effort, both of you."

Gray chuckled and Nick rolled his eyes, neither bothered by Ellery's grading.

"Sorry that I couldn't be of more assistance," Gray said, sounding genuinely apologetic.

"I stand by my recommendation," Nick insisted.

Ellery picked up the abandoned dishtowel and tossed it at Nick's head. (Making Sally briefly wonder why it was her immediate friend group, herself included, seemed to find throwing things at each other to be an acceptable sign of affection.)

"In case anyone's curious about my resolution," Nick began, not bothering to remove the towel from his head, "this upcoming year, I intend to—"

"Finally write your post-mission reports on time?" Grayson guessed.

"Get a girlfriend to take you off my hands?" Ellery put forth.

Nick glared at them both and then turned to Sally in search of an ally. "Where did I go wrong," he lamented, "that two of my favorite people in the world continually abuse me so?"

"Both their ideas are better than attempting to master making baked Alaska," Sally replied. "That's not a resolution, it's just a recipe."

Nick blinked. "I mean . . . that's my actual resolution. How'd you know?"

Whoops. Sally wasn't about to admit that she just so happened to remember a comment that Nick had made three months ago, after his last attempt at baked Alaska had resulted in setting Kent's sleeve on fire. He'd vowed to master making the desert by Ellery's next birthday, and it was therefore logical (according to Nick logic, at least) that he'd turn that promise into his yearly goal.

Rather than confess to her somewhat obsessive memory when it came to everything Nicholas Wiseman, Sally instead shrugged and tapped her temple. "Precog, remember?"

Nick blanched. "You usually only predict disasters. You're not saying that my baked Alaska attempts result in . . ."

"Tragedy." Somehow, Sally was able to keep a straight face even as Ellery began to giggle. "Two dead, another rendered permanently lactose intolerant."

Sally dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding the dishtowel that Nick threw at her. Smirking, she tapped her temple once more. "Precog, remember?" she repeated. "You can't surprise a—"

Thwap.

Sally's sentence was cut off by an onion peel ricocheting off her cheek. She gaped at Grayson, who smiled innocently. "You claimed a precog couldn't be surprised. I wanted to test that theory."

"Hey, Gray," Ellery called out, her hand reaching into a bowl of chopped carrots that Nick had yet to add to the stew. "Test *this*."

* * * *

Half an hour later, they finally finished cleaning up the kitchen battlefield.

In the upstairs bathroom, Ellery combed beef bits out of Sally's curls. Their eyes met in the mirror, and Ellery smiled and set down the comb.

“At least we managed to break through Grayson’s defense,” she stated.

Sally gestured plaintively to her hair just as a chunk of carrot tumbled out of a curl and into the sink. “A tiny mustard stain on his sleeve doesn’t really compare to my hair now smelling like a holiday potluck.”

“Sure it does,” Ellery said. “Your plan for a pincher attack got us past a Telekinetic’s shield. Maybe Glitch was right about you becoming an MIV.” She squeezed Sally’s shoulders. “I’ve decided that’ll be my New Year’s resolution, you know. To guarantee that you become as happy this next year as I’ve been this past one.”

“You think that joining the NPO Program will make me happy?”

“Among other things,” Ellery said cryptically.

Registering her friend’s coy smirk, Sally realized it was futile to press for further detail. “Fine. Then my New Year’s resolution is to make sure that *you* stay as happy this next year as you’ve been this past one.”

“It’s a deal.”

“It’s incredibly sappy.”

“I’d call it sweet.”

“We’re a Disney channel friendship cliché.”

“We’re *adorable*,” Ellery corrected. “Just like sloths.”

“And my bum.”

[Mind Blind Bloopers Reel](#)

[Dec 29, 2021](#)

Calling Reese a prima donna is an insult to every person named Donna.

“Curtail your appreciation until we’ve escaped,” Glitch says wryly. “No need to have the sound of your applause lead them straight to us.”

“Gross,” Glitch says, wrinkling her nose.

Sally glares at her. “He’s unconscious, not dead.”

“Sure, but Vengeance has clearly been skimping on the sponge baths.”

“I’m getting Kent back,” Glitch announces. “With or without you.” She grins suddenly. “Think I should bring along the attack dogs?”

He hid his identity, blew up your brother, and used you. He’s also just saved your life. You’re not sure whether you want to punch his stupid sexy face or kiss him senseless.

You had looked up to this man, admired him even. Now, however, the rose-colored glasses have shattered and you stare into his true face.

“He’s an idiot,” you say aloud, amazed by the realization. “A complete and utter idiot.”

(For High-Effort Buttons Only)

You suppose that, were your situations reversed, you too might have . . . Nope. Even you wouldn’t have screwed up this badly.

“THE END!” you shout at the author. “I DON’T LIKE THIS PLOT TWIST, SO THE STORY IS ENDING NOW.”

. . . And they all lived happily ever after.

[Another Perspective: Mourning_\(Kent Version\)](#)

[Dec 31, 2021](#)

For the first time in his life, Kent Zarneki understood the phrase “ignorance is bliss.”

Growing up, Kent had been curious about *everything*. For his sixth birthday, instead of a new bike or matchbox set, he’d begged his parents for a membership to Field Museum. The skeletons of dinosaurs had fascinated him (all animals did, even back then), and he read and reread every informational plaque at the museum so that by age seven, he was giving unofficial (and unsolicited) tours to other visitors.

Who would ever want to be ignorant? It was always far better to know. Even after his mother’s death, Kent had wanted to understand why she’d died—why she had been chosen, why Chicago PD hadn’t stopped Nelson, why UCRT hadn’t arrived in time. His search for those answers had ultimately led him to want to join Unity. Knowing could be painful, but it was also the first step to fixing things.

Right now, however? Kent’s only wish was that he could rewind time and go back to being ignorant. His past ignorance may not have been bliss, but this current knowledge was enough to break his heart in

half. He hadn't thought his heart capable of breaking again, not after he'd heard his mother's last whisper of "look away, baby."

Kent hadn't looked away. Part of him liked to believe that, by his watching, his mother had felt a little less alone when she'd died. But the truth was that even back then, on the worst day of his life, he had wanted to know.

No longer.

Initially, he had ignored the spreadsheet in favor of searching through desk drawers. A spreadsheet wasn't about to reveal Nicholas Wiseman's location, after all, and Talia had said to look for a laptop, not financial records. Only when Kent's search proved otherwise fruitless had he returned to the folder atop Reese's desk. He should've just moved onto the next room.

He didn't recognize most the names on the list, but Kent had never had the patience to recall most of his father's donors. Besides, the only name that really mattered was printed in bold at the top—unmissable, as soon as Kent had given the document a more than cursory glance: *Tobias Zarneki*.

It was true, then, that dark thought that had crossed his mind as soon as Andy had pulled up the limo to the building where his father lived. The possibility had crossed his mind again at his father's near-hysterical reaction to Kent not telling him everything about Unity's investigation into Justice's disappearance, and then again when Kim had opened the van doors to reveal a house of disorienting familiarity. He'd ignored the hunch, made excuses and justifications and alternative explanations.

His father had allowed Kent to join Unity, and he wouldn't have done that if he were a part of Vengeance. Father—*Tobias* didn't associate with anti-Ment extremists, either, though many anticipated that he'd sympathize after his wife's death. But Tobias didn't blame UCRT. Yes, in the beginning, Kent had memories of smashed glasses and curses aimed at power-polluted psychics. But those memories were dim, as hazy as everything else from that grief-stricken period of Kent's life. He couldn't even remember his ninth birthday passing; surely, he didn't rightfully remember the target of his father's rage either.

Kent had formulated a thousand excuses. He'd been willingly blind to evidence right in front of his eyes. Now, Hemera's brother was paying the price for Kent's refusal to see the truth sooner.

But no one wanted to believe that their father was a terrorist.

"IC-U2 is seeing multiple cars heading our way." Talia's voice interrupted Kent's train of thought over the com. "Looks like Vengeance received an alert about the alarm, and they brought the whole damn parade."

Kent's grip on the folder tightened. He should've reported the papers as soon as he'd discovered the connection between his father and Vengeance. He should do so now, but his lips refused to shape the words condemning his father. Maybe he was mistaken, or this information had been planted to falsely

incriminate Chicago's mayor. Maybe this wasn't what it looked like and Tobias wasn't really funneling funds from his campaign to Vengeance. Maybe . . .

"I thought we turned off the alarm in time," Sally said over the com.

"Surprising no one, stabbing a control panel doesn't cut off the signal," Talia commented dryly. "Even if does make the siren shut up."

Ten minutes ago, Kent would've pointed out that he wouldn't have needed to stab the alarm had Talia been able to remotely turn it off. But ten minutes ago, he'd been ignorant. Now, with knowing, he stayed silent. If he couldn't bring himself to yet vocalize what he'd learned about Tobias, then he shouldn't speak at all. Speaking and withholding the information felt like a betrayal of Unity, of Kim and of Talia and of the entire NPO Program. Whereas if Kent stayed quiet, he could eventually claim that he'd been too preoccupied with retreating to reveal what he'd found.

He *would* reveal what he'd found.

A father had once existed to whom Kent still felt a shadow of loyalty, but it turned out that version of Tobias had died fifteen years ago. Fresh grief threatened incapacitate Kent, and he wanted to scream with all the anger and pain that had accumulated from his years wasted trying to earn the love and approval of a dead man. Kent kept the floodgates tightly closed. Right now, he was on a mission. Hemera had to take priority.

"Proceed to the first floor immediately," Kim ordered the com. "I'm calling a retreat."

Still unable to vocalize even an affirmative, Kent returned to the stairwell. He would mourn his father later, after he and Hemera escaped. And after he mourned his father, he would apprehend Tobias.

[Another Perspective: Mourning \(Kenna Version\)](#)

[Dec 31, 2021](#)

For the first time in her life, Kenna Zarneki understood the phrase "ignorance is bliss."

Growing up, Kenna had been curious about *everything*. For her sixth birthday, instead of a new bike or matchbox set, she'd begged her parents for a membership to Field Museum. The skeletons of dinosaurs had fascinated her (all animals did, even back then), and she read and reread every informational plaque at the museum so that by age seven, she was giving unofficial (and unsolicited) tours to other visitors.

Who would ever want to be ignorant? It was always far better to know. Even after her mother's death, Kenna had wanted to understand why she'd died—why she had been chosen, why Chicago PD hadn't stopped Nelson, why UCRT hadn't arrived in time. Her search for those answers had ultimately led her to want to join Unity. Knowing could be painful, but it was also the first step to fixing things.

Right now, however? Kenna's only wish was that she could rewind time and go back to being ignorant. Her past ignorance may not have been bliss, but this current knowledge was enough to break her heart in half. She hadn't thought her heart capable of breaking again, not after she'd heard her mother's last whisper of "look away, baby."

Kenna hadn't looked away. Part of her liked to believe that, by watching, her mother had felt a little less alone when she'd died. But the truth was that even back then, on the worst day of her life, Kenna had wanted to know.

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But no one wanted to believe that their father was a terrorist.

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