

The Bardic Type Patreon by Thomas Bell

(01/January/2022 - 28/January/2023)

[MB Interview: SPOILERS. SO MANY SPOILERS.](#)

[Jan 1, 2022](#)

Note of Warning: SERIOUSLY THERE ARE SPOILERS. A lot of what's talked in this interview has yet to be fully revealed in game, so you may want to save this for later if you prefer to continue being surprised by *Mind Blind*.

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The stage has only two chairs.

The first is occupied by Nicholas Wiseman. He sits on its edge, shoulders rigid and legs taunt as if prepared to spring upright at a moment's notice. Instead of a suit, he wears his UCRT gear, lightweight black body armor with "Justice" on the back in white-gold lettering. A precautionary measure, to be sure, but also a visual warning not to try anything for the man who sits in the second chair.

Viewing the stage through a screen, watchers might attribute the second man's blurred features to a technical editor, but even in person, his face is an undefinable blot to most watchers.

Not to Nick, however. Nick sees the other's man face, recognizes his identity, and barely restrains himself from punching today's interviewee in the face.

Nick, sarcastically: So, *Shard*. Great name, really. Very metaphorical, if the metaphor you're going for is "broken edgy angst-lord."

Shard: I would've preferred no name at all.

Nick: And yet you have so many! Personally, I'm inclined to call you "heartless bastard."

Shard doesn't react. Nick laughs bitterly.

Nick: Right, what was I thinking, expecting an apology from you of all people? I hope you weren't expecting my gratitude, considering you're the reason why I was in that situation to begin with.

Shard: My only expectation for this interview is that there would be questions. Thus far, it seems I calculated incorrectly.

Nick: You calculated a shit ton of things incorrectly, didn't you?

Nick's fists clench atop his knees. He takes a deep breath, fingers relaxing one by one, before continuing.

Nick: But you're right about questions, even if you got everything else horribly wrong. You said that you would've preferred to have no name at all—and trust me, right now I wish that you didn't exist either—but what facename would you have chosen? Had you been one of us instead of *you*.

Although Nick uses the word "you," his tone implies a myriad of explicit alternatives.

Shard: AMOs customarily choose facenames based on how their powers present.

Nick: So yours would've been, what, Illusion? Mirage? Mindfuc—

Shard: Augur, perhaps. I would've chosen something that would've lead targets to believe that I had precognition.

Nick: Which you don't.

Shard: Correct.

Nick: Asshole.

Shard: Also correct.

Nick: I'm surprised that you own up to it.

Shard, shrugging: I've never claimed to be otherwise. Being nice would've prevented me from doing what I deemed necessary.

Nick: Right . . . "necessary." Your favorite word. Let's talk about some of your past "necessary actions," shall we?

Shard's head dips in an almost imperceptible nod.

Nick: What makes you so dead certain that what you did was justified?

Shard: Vengeance has been dismantled. Some might argue that success creates justification.

Nick: And that's your argument? 'My plan worked therefore it was good?'

Shard: I wouldn't describe my actions as justified in the sense of being righteous. Done for valid reason, yes. But justified? Controlling your sibling, accidentally injuring you—there's no excuse that can make either of those actions right.

Nick: Yet you refuse to apologize.

Shard: Because my actions *were* necessary. Given the knowledge that I had at the time, I stand behind my decision. I should have possessed the foresight to anticipate your presence, but it was insight that I lacked. Wishing otherwise won't make anything different.

Nick: There had to be easier ways to get Unity to go after Vengeance than blowing up our headquarters.

Shard: Of course; I needed the evacuation to get paperwork from the building. When hundreds of people exit simultaneously, it becomes impossible to pinpoint who carries the bag which sets off an alarm.

Nick: You're getting into spoiler territory.

Shard: If I had the technical acumen of Parker, perhaps the evacuation wouldn't have been necessary, but I could only work within my limitations. The bomb served dual purposes.

Nick: Why were these papers that you stole so important? What can possibly be worth what you did to Button?

Shard: Most recently? Your kidnapping.

Nick: Which only happened because of your actions!

Shard: Irrelevant.

Nick: How the hell is that . . . no. No, you know what? I'm curious. Fine then. Please, oh smart one, explain how your twisted world view is justified by my abduction by Vengeance *which only happened because you exploded a building on top of me*.

Shard: It wasn't an entire building, and no one was supposed to be on that floor.

Nick's scowl intensifies.

Shard: . . . I should've taken more precautions to ensure that there was no collateral damage. But my lack of judgement in regards to that one detail doesn't negate the fact that Vengeance intended to use you as a weapon.

Nick: Again, because you handed me to them on a silver stretcher!

Shard: Don't be naïve. It was only a matter of time until a group like Vengeance realized that Ments were growing more powerful. Unity has spent the last thirty years attempting to hide the full extent of your abilities—of my abilities, and the abilities of countless people like us. Those truths couldn't have stayed covered forever, nor should they.

Nick: Well, I for one have no desire to be burned at the stake. Do you have any idea what would happen if that information leaked?

Shard: I have a better idea of the consequences than anyone else at Unity, it seemed. Otherwise, the priority would've been on the controlled release of this information rather than covering it up. But thirty years is a long time to plan a press conference.

Nick: Is that what you intended to do? Release the information in a controlled way?

Shard: If necessary. I assumed that, once Unity realized what documents were missing, they'd attempt to get ahead of the inevitable leak.

Nick: None of this even begins to excuse your actions, but talking further about your motivations would be even more spoilerific. Let's move on to new questions.

Shard: Very well.

Nick: Your power of hallucination is unique to say the least. How did you learn to control such an ability?

Shard: Survival.

Nick: Are you an empath? Telepath? Something else entirely?

Shard: The details of that will be discussed between me and your sibling before live on television. I can say is this: being able to go unseen is the only way I survived the environment in which I grew up in. Would I possess the same ability had I grown up in Chicago, if I'd been raised watching my parents serve on UCRT? I think it doubtful. My mind learned the tricks it needed to survive. No more, no less.

Nick: Who was the first person you ever controlled?

Shard: The very first would be the same people who took away my sister, although I didn't realize it at the time. Again, that's a conversation for me and your sibling.

Nick: You don't deserve to breathe the same air as Button, let alone engage them in a conversation.

Shard: Perhaps not. But what we "deserve" isn't something that the universe usually cares to factor.

Nick: Pretentious—what was that word Gray uses?—git. You're a pretentious git. You also don't seem to have a lot of qualms about controlling others. Why is that? Because of how you grew up? Is that how you forgive yourself for brainwashing Button?

For the first time, Shard's voice is sharp and adamant.

Shard: I am filled with qualms. Not over a subtle push to make someone look the other way—I refuse to beg forgiveness for staying alive. But controlling Wiseman was different.

Nick: Different how?

Shard: Wrong. Unethical. Unforgivable. Pick your adjective.

For a moment, Nick looks uncertain how to continue. When he speaks again, his voice is softer with a faint note of pleading.

Nick: Why did it have to be them? Why make my sibling your target? You could've used—maybe not anyone else, but someone else.

Shard: I deemed Wiseman the least likely to suffer consequences. Furthermore, using Wiseman had the benefit of concealing the extent of my powers. I could be any Ment, rather than . . .

Shard trails off, and Nick fills in the missing words.

Nick: A Ment like me.

Shard: Yes.

Nick: What was your plan had they been caught with the bomb?

Shard: To release their mind. Wait. Have Valero plant a bomb elsewhere that could be tracked back to Vengeance. It wouldn't have helped me take the paperwork, not immediately, but I would have at least been able to gain permission for Unity to go after Vengeance.

Nick: Shit. It's just . . . I still can't believe that no one realized that you were a Ment.

Shard: Why would they? Day to day, I ignore my powers to the best of my ability. Wiseman made that impossible, but there was no reason to believe that the score listed on my paperwork wasn't mine.

Nick: Whose was it then?

Shard: My supposed three belonged to the proctor who administered my Pollard Test. It was easy enough to make her believe that the wires she attached to her own head were attached to mine.

Nick: That's horrific.

Shard: It was survival. Soldiers stole my sister, but they also saved her. I wasn't as lucky.

Nick: Why not reveal your powers after?

Shard doesn't immediately answer.

Nick: Why not reveal your powers after?

Shard: I'd grown used to hiding. Besides, there's a difference between being a Ment and being . . .

Nick: More?

Shard: Or less. Depending on the perspective.

Nick: I hate you.

Shard: You understand me.

Nick: Not entirely.

Shard: Enough that you've stopped telling jokes. Enough that I'm finally seeing you.

Nick: I didn't come here to be psychoanalyzed by a . . .

Nick's lips begin to form the "t" of "terrorist", but he's unable to vocalize the word. He clears his throat.

Nick: If the roles were reversed, would you be able to forgive someone who hurt your sibling?

Shard lets out a bitter laugh.

Shard: Clearly not.

Nick: Would you be able to forgive someone who took control of your mind?

Shard: Somethings don't deserve forgiveness.

Nick groans, frustrated.

Nick: How is it, despite everything, you're still the same holier-than-thou asshole that you were yesterday? You lost your claim to superiority! You suck! Your plan sucked! You almost killed me! You hurt Button.

Shard doesn't answer. Although his expression remains shrouded via illusion, his body language communicates a militaristic acceptance of Nick's tongue lashing; he sits with the rigidity of a soldier who broke formation and is willing to accept the consequences.

Nick's impassioned energy fades when it becomes clear that Shard won't defend himself to any of his accusations.

Nick: Did you ever second guess your plan? Ever worry about the collateral damage?

Shard: Of course.

Nick: Then why did you go through with it?

Shard: Because it was necessary.

Nick: I feel like we're talking in circles.

Jo: Well, excuse me! It's hard to write this conversation without revealing major spoilers that will be disclosed in-game!

Nick: Who said that?

Shard: No one important.

Nick: At very least, you must've felt guilty after seeing how Button reacted to learning that they were the one who planted the bomb.

Shard: I felt . . . regret that it had to be this way. But Wiseman would recover, and I maintain that my actions ultimately saved lives.

Nick: Even though everything you did was pretty much disastrous and blew up in your face.

Shard: Technically, it blew up in *your*—

Nick: Do not. Finish. That sentence.

Shard: Next time, sign in at the front desk.

Nick: Are you serious right now?

Shard: I pointed out to Black that you needed to take PTO. I made sure that every other member of UCRT was assigned a mission elsewhere. *You* broke protocol.

Nick: You broke my entire body!

Shard: I'm not omniscient.

Nick: You're not even competent.

Shard: All my goals were achieved.

Nick: Keep telling yourself that in prison. You and Reese can compare egos.

Shard leans in closer, his voice going quietly intent.

Shard: I was willing to sacrifice your sibling's autonomy and your safety. I committed an atrocity that would've made my family weep. Do you believe, for a single second, that I wasn't also willing to sacrifice my freedom?

Nick: That's—

Shard: I don't *deserve* freedom after the acts that I committed. Where they necessary? Yes. But the society for which I have striven, which Unity prevents with its propaganda and deceptions, is one where all people are protected, Ment or not. It's also a place where all people that abuse their power over others are fairly punished, Ment or not. I abused my powers.

Nick: You abused my *sibling*.

Shard: And I'm prepared to face the consequence for doing so. But here's the thing that you fail to understand, Justice.

Nick, rolling eyes: Goodie, another one of your lectures.

Shard, ignoring the interruption: I don't matter. All that matters, all that has ever mattered, is preventing history from repeating.

Nick: Then your sister's death didn't matter? You didn't go after Vengeance because of her and only her?

Shard doesn't answer.

Nick: Hypocrite.

Shard: After her death, I saw Unity for what it was. Useless. Advertising empty promises as it barreled towards a disaster of its own making. It needed to do better.

Nick: That wasn't your call to make!

Shard: Then whose? No one else was willing. And it was—

Nick: Necessary. Yeah, I know. I fucking hate that word.

Shard: Then you're not strong enough to bear the weight of its expectations. Otherwise, you would've told your sibling the truth. In the end, I wonder which one of us has hurt them more?

Nick: Shut up.

Shard: At least now they know.

Nick half-rises from his seat, fists clenched.

Nick: You think I never wanted to tell them? To let them know that—

Shard: Desires and intentions are useless. My actions had the desired effect.

Nick: Your actions almost killed me. *Your actions almost destroyed them.*

Shard: Yes.

Nick: That's it? Just . . . yes?

Shard: Yes.

Nick, exhausted: You're a monster. You *heard* them, heard what you did to them. How can you be so callous?

Shard: Because I also know what would've happened had I done nothing.

Nick: Oh, so now you're a precog as well? There's a huge freaking difference between "doing nothing" and "blowing up a building".

Jo: Annnnd . . . this interview is over. Answers are still missing, I know! But those will be provided in *Mind Blind's* later chapters, as will Shard's more repentant side and Tragic Backstory(TM) .

[Writer's Blog: Full Speed Ahead in a Mail Truck to 2022](#)

[Jan 1, 2022](#)

It's almost 2022!

An hour before midnight, to be exact, at least according to my time. I'll make this short and sweet, because I do have a major milestone that I want to celebrate:

MIND BLIND IS OVER 500,000 words!

This is the CODED count, with the draft version being much longer. The new and improved Chapter 17 has officially set the word count over the half-million mark as of four hours ago. Feeling pretty good over that milestone!

I intended to work on the heist scene this last week, but unfortunately the newest versions of Chapters 14-16 are saved to my home computer and not my laptop which is currently being held together with

duct tape and prayer. Chapter 17, however, needed to be rewritten completely so it was easy to work on. I'm loving this new version so *very much*. It prolongs the suspense, helps better frame the reveal, and is just overall *better*. I'm aiming to release this new and improved version on **January 9th**, after I get back to Chicago and have a functioning keyboard with a space bar that doesn't need to be slammed five times in a row to work.

Have I mentioned that we're snowed in here in Washington? Combined with needing to go down the road to the neighbor's for working internet, I feel like Laura Ingalls. (I have a belated Sally saucy side that should go up tomorrow inspired by this.)

As for my New Year's resolutions . . .

1. Finish *Mind Blind*. First draft by Spring, final draft in Summer. Submit it to Hosted Games. Weep tears of joy.
2. Learn Twine for *Delivery for the Damned*, as this will be a game that requires save files due to the myriad ways Golightly can, er, "fail deliveries."
3. Start writing *Delivery for the Damned*! I want to release the first chapter out during late spring/early summer in between finishing *Mind Blind* drafts. The second chapter won't get written until *Mind Blind* is submitted, but I want to at least share Proof of Concept.
4. Adopt a dog. (Alternatively: Steal Ziva from my mother.)

Thank you all so much for supporting me this year! While I regret not being able to finish *Mind Blind* in December as I'd hoped, that final chapter is coming soon. 2022 will be a year of endings and beginnings; as sad as I'll be to say goodbye to everyone in Operation Hemera, I greatly look forward to introducing you all to the topsy-turvy world of colliding realities and timely postal service.

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Game On](#)

[Jan 2, 2022](#)

"Nooooo!" Sally's cry rings out like a death knell as the screen of her Switch turns black. She stares at you, the flickering light of the fireplace revealing pure anguish in her hazel eyes.

"Please, please, *please* tell me that the power will back on soon," she begs.

You glance down at your phone which, like Sally's dearly departed game console, has already gone into low power mode in preparation of its imminent shut down. "According to the Mount Thistledew website, the generator should be fixed in . . ." You wince. "Another four hours."

Sally groans, putting her Switch down on the desk as she flops backwards onto the King-size bed beside you. “I was *this* close to Akio’s Super Happy Ending,” she complains. “Do you know how hard it is to get that asshole’s approval up without a guide?”

You do your best not to chuckle at the sincere anguish in her voice: Otome games, for Sally, are not a laughing matter. “Why not use a guide, then?”

Your girlfriend rolls over onto her side so that she can stare directly into your face (this is A Very Serious Topic, after all). “Eros Obstacle only released yesterday ago in English. So far, no one’s been able to crack what makes Akio tick. I was *this* close before the battery died.” She scowls ominously at the emergency lighting above the door of your rental ski lodge, then sighs. “I’m sorry. You planned a trip for us, and I’ve spent most of it chasing after another person.”

“I’ll try not to feel *too* threatened over a virtual boy,” you tease. You wrap your arm around her shoulders, and she snuggles comfortably against your side. “It’s fine that you want to play your new game. Neither of us expected to get snowed in without electricity.” The laugh you’ve been containing escapes. “Besides, you did call him an asshole. Sounds like I’m the better catch.”

“Akio *is* an asshole!” Sally explodes, not bothering to confirm your superiority. “There’s absolutely no rhyme or reason to earning his affection! Make him a bento, and he disapproves! Offer to share your umbrella, and he disapproves! How do I make this boy love me?”

“I love you,” you dutifully inform her, only to have her dismiss your words with a wave of your hand.

For the next fifteen minutes, you patiently listen as Sally vents her frustrations over the pursuit of the Crown Prince of Tuhawtia, who, in addition to being royalty, is also the valedictorian of his high school despite being an immortal vampire (which begs the question of just how many times he’s repeated eleventh grade). You listen, because it’s not like there’s anything more interesting to do with the power out. Last time you attempted to escape the rented cottage, you opened the door to find the snow already piled up waist-high. Besides, Sally is adorable in her passion, all flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes and crinkling nose that make you long to kiss each and every freckle sprinkled across its bridge.

As Sally’s rant about sloppy translation and unrealistic relationship metrics slows to an exasperated halt, you give into the impulse. Your lips brush across her cheekbones, her skin heating beneath the contact as she lets out a surprised squeal and wiggles away.

“I take it back,” you tease, reaching for her once more. “I’m definitely jealous of how much thought you’re devoting to Pixel Prince.”

“His name is Akio,” Sally attempts to correct, before your lips press over hers and prevent the name of her current digital conquest from escaping.

With a small sigh, she relaxes into your arms. Firelight casts the room in a warm red glow, and Sally’s curls spill across the pillow like molten copper as you roll so that your body is atop of hers. Her arms wrap around your shoulders, pulling you closer until you’re equally her captive as she is yours.

“What was his name again?” you whisper teasingly. Your teeth gently tug at her earlobe, punctuating the end of your question.

“Akio,” Sally says with a small laugh that only amplifies your resolve. You want her to the point of senselessness, unable to recall any name but your own.

Your lips migrate down the curve of her freckled neck, your hands rising upwards beneath her cable knit sweater to caress the warm skin beneath. She shivers and sneaks her own cool hands beneath the edge of your shirt in retribution, dragging her nails gently upwards across your back. You pull away to remove your top and she follows, her mouth seizing yours in a desperate claim.

Between impassioned kisses, you repeat the same question as before, “What was his name again?”

“Aki—” Sally attempts to gasp out, but you press your hand over her mouth before she can finish the sentence.

Your thumb dips between her parted lips, and your breath catches as Sally’s tongue darts out across its fleshy pad. She grabs your wrist to prevent your retreat, her breath tickling your palm as she sprinkles kisses across your lifeline. Unwilling to fully cede control, your free hand hitches higher to undo the back of her bra, which you unclip with practiced ease.

“What’s his name?” you demand one last time.

Releasing your hand, Sally arches towards you with a gasp, silently begging you to finish removing the cloth barrier between your skin and hers.

“I don’t remember,” she cries out, burying her face into the crook of your shoulder so that you can’t make out her embarrassed flush. But you want to see it all.

You remove her top in the same way she did yours, lifting her chin so that you can look directly into her desire darkened eyes. “What’s *my* name?”

Sally scowls belligerently even as her body melts into yours.

Your hands curl beneath her thighs, lifting her up until she has no choice but to wrap herself around your hips. “What’s my name?” you repeat.

Suddenly, you’re falling backwards onto the mattress. Sally looms over you, her legs straddling your torso and her hands pressed firmly against your shoulders. She smirks down at you, triumphant in her successful shove. Her curls tickle against your cheek as she leans over.

“Mine,” she whispers into your ear. “You’re mine.”

[Jan 6, 2022](#)

Title: My Future Job

Written by Nick Wiseman, age 8

For a school assignment

People always ask me if I'm going to be a hero like my mom and dad. The answer to that is NO!

I think that what my parents do is really cool. They save a lot of people and make sure that Ments who do bad thing with their powers get locked up in jail. I respect my parents a lot. Then why don't I want to join Unity? I'm glad that you asked!

Most my friends think that being on UCRT would be a lot of fun, but they're wrong. Being a hero is a *lot* of really, really hard work. Because not many people have strong enough powers to be on UCRT, my parents don't have many coworkers who can fill in for them when they get sick or want to go on vacation. They try very hard to make time for me and my Button, but Unity is always calling them in to fight bad guys.

When Unity calls my parents because of a bad guy, my Button and I get stuck with a babysitter. Uncle Lev is a lot of fun because he tells me stories about my dad, but I don't like it when our neighbor Ms. Meredith watches us. She always makes me go to bed earlier than my bedtime, and then plays the TV super loud because she can't hear well anymore. It's so loud that I can't fall asleep, but I'm still not aloud to get out of bed! It's not fun at all.

Having fun is important. A lot of grown ups don't act like it's important, but my dad said it's one of the most important things. He says if life isn't fun, you'll feel sad. I asked him if being Justice was fun, and he said no but that it was important in a different way.

That is why I don't want to join Unity. I want my future job to be lots of fun. I don't want to always miss dessert because I have to go fight bad guys in the middle of dinner. I told my parents that we should start eating dessert first, so they don't keep missing it, but my mom says that they need healthy food to do their job. I asked her if being a member of UCRT was fun, and she told me it was fun because she got to work with my dad. But my mom and dad will stop working when I grow up. We won't be together, so there's no point to me joining UCRT.

I want to own a place where lots of people all have fun together. That is why when I grow up, I want to be a restaurant owner like my dad's friend, Mario! At my restaurant, many families will come to eat delicious food and have a good time with each other. Every day will be lots and lots of fun.

My dad said that being a small business owner is difficult, but if I'm the boss then no one can call me away from my family and tell me to do stuff that I don't want to do. I will hire five chefs. My mom will teach them how to make sweets and my dad will teach them how to grill perfect hamburgers. I will get to taste everything that they cook to make sure it is good enough for the customers.

My restaurant will be amazing, and we will always serve dessert first!

P.S.

Dear Mrs. Lisenbe,

Please don't tell anyone in class that I don't want to be a hero. It's a secret! A lot of them want to become heroes but they can't because they aren't Ments, so I feel bad that I can become one but don't want to.

Thank You Very Much,

Nick Wiseman

* * * *

Teacher's Note:

Nick,

This was a really good essay! Good job using the techniques we talked about in class; I especially liked how you made use of the question-answer format.

Don't worry, I won't tell the other students that you don't want to join UCRT. It's very admirable that you want to follow your own path, and I think your friends would be happy for you whenever you do tell them.

Also, as we've discussed before, you need to stop referring to your sibling as "my Button" when writing. "My sister/brother" is fine, but you shouldn't use possessive pronouns with someone's name or nickname.

-Mrs. Lisenbe

[Writer's Blog: New Year, End of Story](#)

[Jan 8, 2022](#)

First off, I wanted to thank all of you for seeing me through this past year!

Never in a million years could I have anticipated the level of support that I've received, or that I'd be able to work on *Mind Blind* almost full time (with the exception of some long-term students that I'm still teaching). I also can't believe how close *Mind Blind* is to the end; had I kept to my original outline and ended the story at Chapter 16, it would already be finished! But things are taking a little longer than anticipated to play out, and it looks like the final Chapter will now be either 19 or 20. Then I'll need to write the alternate pathways, and then rewrite, and then edit, but I'm refusing to think about any of that right now lest my brain combust.

(Sidenote: If my plans seem to change a lot, it's because I tend to share my conclusions with you guys as soon as I reach them. So my plans do actually change a lot, but such is the nature of writing a big project.)

. . . If I'm being completely honest, I'm actually super disappointed that I wasn't able to wrap *Mind Blind* up within last calendar year. It would've been nice and tidy, but I ultimately decided that it was better to tell the story *right* than to rush towards the ending (which I'm prone to doing, and the reason why *Lady Death's Diary* is releasing slower lately . . . because the ending was a hastily scribbled, hot mess and needed a total rewrite). I fully intend to see *Mind Blind* through to the end and its publication, but I admit that I also can't wait to start working on *Delivery for the Damned* (because the idea is newer, and therefore shiny). I've already started learning Twine in order to make that story happen with save slots.

This month's roadmap comes a little late as I had to figure out what I was doing for January's interview. I'll be posting about that shortly, so be on the lookout as some things are a little different this month!

Anyway, here's what to expect for this month (there's at *least* two blooper reels in the future, because a lot is getting rewritten right now):

January 9: Mind Blind Short Story

January 11: Blooper Reel

January 12: Lady Death's Diary

January 14: Writer's Blog

January 15: Completed Chapter 15 Break-In Variations (Now with a blueprint and 400% more drone! This took me a lot longer to piece together than anticipated.)

January 17: *Delivery for the Damned* Sneak Peak

January 18: *Delivery for the Damned* Development Poll

January 19: Lady Death's Diary

January 21: Writer's Blog

January 22: UCRT+ *Mind Blind* Fairy Tale

January 23: Glitch Saucy Side

January 24: Bloopers Reel

January 26: *Mind Blind* Update (Chapter 17, rewritten. Possibly part of Chapter 18 as well?)

January 28: Writer's Blog

January 29/30: Live Q&A

January 31: Character Interview

[January Interview Poll](#)

[Jan 8, 2022](#)

All the major characters in *Mind Blind* have been interviewed (some more than once).

Only one man remains unchosen: Clarence.

Now, some of you might think that Administrator Garfield is a boring choice. The annoying choice.

However, Clarence is a font of gossip. Not despite his position, but because of it. Secretaries are terrifying. They know *everything* about their workplace and coworkers (I used to be one, albeit briefly, and I swear the other secretaries were actually super spies in disguise). Not only that, but Clarence has zero discretion when exposed to the spotlight.

If you're interested in learning the most embarrassing escapades of Unity's best and brightest, then I highly recommend voting for him to be this month's interviewee. Despite my personal bias (I think that Clarence and Nick would be hysterical to write together), I do want to provide you with choices. Thus, the other slots on the polls.

Rather than reinterview *Mind Blind*'s RO's separately, I thought it might be fun to pair up Sally with Gray (for their insight into the Wiseman family) and Kenzie with Glitch (for their insight on each other). Rosy,

alas, isn't an option this time around because no one loves them enough (I kid, but I think that the most interesting combo for Rosy would be with Nick, and they've already been paired as interviewer/interviewee).

Finally, there's a wild card option. Rather than interview a *Mind Blind* cast member, you can also vote for Balti, one of *Delivery for the Damned's* RO's, and the only one that I feel currently confident enough in their characterization to let answer questions (his description can be found here: www.patreon.com/posts/delivery-for-47085049).

Please keep in mind that Balti might be a better choice to interrogate later, after I start writing *Delivery* and fully learn his voice. If interviewed now, it's possible that his answers may not remain canon after the writing process begins.

Vote for January's interviewee below:

Clarence (to spill gallons of tea)

Gray and Sally

Kenzie and Glitch

Balti

430 votes total

[Mind Blind Short Story: Maybe This Time](#)

[Jan 12, 2022](#)

Maybe this time would be different.

. . . It wouldn't.

I *knew* that it wouldn't, because nothing about MacCleason High School was any different that it had been at South Garfield High or Eastridge High or Kimball Junior High. My senior year of high school was going to be exactly the same as all the years and schools that had gone before it. After that?

The bell rang, shrill and insistent, and I hitched my bookbag higher onto my shoulder so that it didn't get yanked off by the students jostling around me in the overcrowded hallway.

After this year lay freedom. All I had to do was keep my head down, my grades up, and my ability concealed. Of course, that last objective would've been much easier to accomplish in the pre-internet era.

"Pervert."

Someone rammed their shoulder into mine as they passed. They disappeared into the crush of other students before I could identify who had whispered the word, but it didn't matter. As soon as one person knew at my school, everyone knew. At least I had secured my bag in advance.

"Witch."

Another attack, this time to my other shoulder by a different student, with enough force to send me stumbling backwards. My back slammed against the lockers, which rattled with metal applause at my assault. I pressed myself against them with the clinging desperation of someone walking along a skyscraper's edge and waited until the hallway cleared. I'd be late for my very first class, but better late than sent to the nurse's office again.

Nothing was different.

* * * *

If the hallway of MacCleason was an open battleground, then its cafeteria was a Colosseum. Instead of five-minute passing period skirmishes where participants fought and then retreated to class, lunchtime consisted of drawn-out gladiatorial duels between different social groups. Instead of swords and cudgels, students used glares and whispers as their weapons of choice. I didn't have the armoring of friends to defend myself, but I could at least pretend to be unwounded.

Movies always made high school cafeterias seem routine and structured, each clique knowing their place and table. Real life wasn't near that tidy, especially at MacCleason where our class schedules differed by the day. The best tables were claimed by whichever conqueror managed to escape class earliest, shoving their still-open notebooks into their backpacks and only pretending to write down the homework. Pack up to slow or stay to ask the teacher a question, and you were stuck next to the garbage cans (all of which were missing lids due to having been, I assumed, repurposed as make-shift shields).

Only one table ever remained completely unclaimed. Its leg lock been broken since the 1980's, so you had to sit at the far and keep almost perfectly still in order to avoid it closing up on you like a beartrap. Most lone wolves tried once and then never again, their pride fatally wounded by the laughs of other students when the table folded around them. After my third day at MacCleason, however, I'd claimed the table as my own. The seating situation felt metaphorical to me, poetic even, that I needed to go unnoticed by even the furniture in order to survive. Thankfully, I was good at staying still.

"Why does she dress like that?" This whisper came from the table to my right, where a boy with wavy brown hair and freckles (good looking, in a bland, Sears-catalogue way) was eyeing me with malicious

curiosity.

I sighed and resisted the impulse to roll my eyes. Every one of my schools had someone like him, the kid whose only identifiable trait was being “funny” and thus saw me as new material for his standup routine.

“I’m empathetic to the plight of Ments, really,” the boy claimed, his sly tone revealing that his progressiveness was just setting up for a joke. “They don’t decide to be born freaks. But, like, no need to become a cliché, you know?”

“Shhh!” a girl giggled. “She’ll hear you!”

“Don’t you mean she’ll see me?” he said. “That’s what they do, isn’t it? Spy on people?” He raised his voice, making sure I heard him despite my refusal to look his way. “Hey, Morticia! Wear some color!”

“Stop it, Will!” This time, the girl sounded more afraid than amused. “She’ll really hear you, okay?”

I took another bite of my pizza, which now tasted like ashes (although to be fair, cafeteria pizza usually ranked as sawdust even when I was in a good mood). A quick glance at the clock showed me that it was almost one pm—there were still five minutes until the bell rang, but it was late enough that I could leave without looking like I was running away.

I stood slowly, just so that Will and co. didn’t realize they’d chased me out, and dropped the crust of my pizza into the lidless trash can. Will frowned, unhappy with how my lack of reaction limited his comic banter.

“I didn’t realize that vampires were allowed out during daytime!” he said. “Anyone got a crucifix? I wanna try an experiment—for science!”

Don’t acknowledge. Don’t react. Keep your head down. Graduate.

“My pasta has garlic in it,” one of Will’s friends offered.

Graduate. Then you can work to change things. Just graduate, and then you can . . .

A wet noodle hit my cheek, sliding slowly down until it plopped onto my shoulder. Will snickered as one of his friends breathed out “oh shit.”

‘Oh shit,’ indeed. Without peeling the noodle from my clothes, I marched over to Will’s table. All looked nervous, except Will, who smiled brazenly at me as if his dimples were capable of defending him.

Even his smile faltered, however, when I slammed my open palms onto their table. At this point, the entire cafeteria was watching, the lunch ladies getting ready to call for a teacher, but I was past the point of caring.

“I was going to ignore you, Will,” I said in a low voice. “You were a juvenile shit not worth my time.”

"Whoa," Will's smile faltering. "Overreact much?"

I smiled back at him, slowly, predatorily, and his smile disappeared altogether. "I was going to ignore you, Will," I repeated, emphasizing his name. "But it's clear that you're super into me given how hard you've been trying. So, congratulations. You've caught my attention."

The girl who'd previously urged Will to be quieter bristled at my words. "Uh, my boyfriend is *not* into you." She squared her shoulders and met my gaze. "Freak."

I almost admired her courage. Almost. Mostly, though, I appreciated her giving me more ammunition. I ran my gaze down and back up her body, coolly taking in her baby pink polo and crisp white tennis skirt, as well as the National Honors Society badge on her backpack. I smirked.

"You're his girlfriend?" I drawled, injecting all the disbelief I could muster into the question. "Interesting. You're not who I saw with him last . . ." I trailed off at the last minute, then turned back to smile sweetly at Will. "Well, I can't blame you. She doesn't seem like much fun."

"Babe, she's obviously making shit up!" Will exclaimed as his girlfriend glanced over at him, her blue eyes now wary. "She just said that she'd been ignoring me before now!"

I wiggled my fingers playfully as I headed towards the cafeteria exit. "Call me!"

I could hear Will and his girlfriend still arguing as I left. Somehow, I managed to keep my chin high and avoid looking at anyone until I made it to the handicapped bathroom, the door to which I only barely managed to lock before my shaking knees gave out completely and I collapsed onto the cold tile floor.

Food stains come out of black fabric easily enough. The human versions, alas, weren't so easily removed.

* * * *

"Your principal called."

My mother had shoved the pile of dirty laundry onto the floor so that she had room to sit on the living room couch and thus catch me the moment I stepped through the front door. I ignored her, making my way to the kitchen where, sure enough, the sink was already piled high with a new stack of unwashed dishes. I forced myself to glance down at the recycling bin; a new whiskey bottle sat precariously atop of last night's smashed glass. The new bottle was still half-full, which meant she was trying to quit again.

"Principal Gavin said that you threatened a boy. Made up nasty lies about him and his girlfriend." My mother's footsteps followed me into the kitchen.

I rolled up my sleeves and grabbed the dish soap. The dishwasher had been broken since Christmas as I hadn't yet been able to find a new parttime job after my boss at Tim's Carwash had learned that I was a Ment.

"Look at me!" My mom's hand gripped my shoulder, forcing me to turn around. She looked tired, defeated, her eyes red-rimmed glazed over with whatever she'd drunk to make the pain of my existence go away.

Familiar, unwelcome guilt made me look away again. Her hand moved to gently touch my cheek, the same cheek that had been hit by a noodle earlier today at lunch. I flinched. Her eyes widened, and her hand dropped.

"Hope, you can't keep doing this," she said.

"I know."

"You promised that this time would be different."

"I know."

"We can't move again. This school is your last chance, otherwise you'll need to get your GED, and colleges don't—"

"I know."

My mother sighed. "Are you even going to tell me what happened?"

"Does it matter?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I suppose not. The principal was convinced that you threatened those other students. He said that you won't be suspended this time, given that you're likely still adjusting to the new school, but to consider this a warning strike."

I didn't need to ask how many strikes I would get. Real life wasn't baseball, and most of my past schools hadn't even bothered to issue a warning before "strongly suggesting" that I enroll elsewhere. And so, I'd switched schools, again and again, as having an expulsion on my record would ruin my most my chances of qualifying for university scholarships. Although still unfair, Principal Gavin's offer was the best that I'd ever received.

"It won't happen again," I promised, turning my attention to the sinkful of dishes.

My mother hesitated before leaving the kitchen. "Need help drying?" she asked.

I shook my head.

Once she had left, I looked back down at the recycling bin. Sure enough, the whiskey bottle was gone.

* * * *

The military canteen wasn't all that different from MacCleason High School's cafeteria, except that it was in a tent instead of the old gymnasium and instead of high schoolers, I was surrounded by deployed meatheads. Location was different as well: North Korea instead of the Illinois.

Just like in high school, however, I now sat alone—as a UN rep for the new initiative, I had to make sure that the soldiers didn't view me as biased. Sit with the Ments, and I risked the Norm soldiers seeing me as only looking out for “my own kind.” Sit with anyone that wasn't a Ment, and I'd be accused of ignoring the same people whose lives I wanted to better.

It was fine. I was accustomed to sitting alone.

What I was *not* accustomed too anymore was the feeling of a noodle hitting my cheek. My head snapped up from where I'd been sorrowfully contemplating the dismal and suspiciously gray food on my tray. Something wet and smooshy had fallen down the collar of my uniform; I pulled out a squashed ravioli.

Someone snickered.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Don't acknowledge. Don't react. Wait for the right moment, and then make them change.*

The laugh ended abruptly. I looked up to see the leader of the mixed-Ment taskforce towering over a seated soldiers at the table next to mine, his hand wrapped around the back of the other man's neck.

“Let's take a walk, Private Randalls,” he told the other man, whose cheeks drained of color at his commanding officer's too-bright tone.

Wiseman's smile was lopsided as he looked at me. Roguish, my mother would've described it, now that she had swapped her alcoholism with the much healthier addiction of historical romance novels. I felt Wiseman's mind press against mine, asking for permission to converse. I allowed it and was surprised by how loud his voice was inside my head. As a Telemetrists, I only ever saw things and had only communicated with a Telepath on a few occasions.

I'll make sure that this type of behavior doesn't repeat, ma'am. Permission to deal with it myself?

I nodded, appreciating his call not to draw more attention to the fact that I'd been pelted with a cheese-stuffed noodle. It was only my second day assigned to the Korean front; I couldn't afford to have my already questioned authority undermined even further (ergo, my decision to eat alone).

“Move it, Randalls!” Wiseman barked.

As he escorted the ravioli-thrower from the canteen, his thoughts touched upon mine once more: *Apologies, ma'am. Randy's always been a slow shooter. Most of us learn by second grade not to throw food at the pretty girls, no matter how much we crave their attention.*

I wasn't certain how to respond to that. Part of me was flattered (fine, extremely flattered) by Wiseman's description, but I didn't appreciate him brushing off Randall's behavior as the usual military refrain of "boys will be boys." I settled for pursing my lips and levelling Wiseman with the disapproving look that I normally only brought out to quickly close meetings. To my disgruntled surprise, he only chuckled at my glare.

Message received, ma'am, he thought teasingly. Next time, I'll wait for you to call me pretty before returning the compliment.

My eyes lingered on the tent flap for a long moment after he'd left, a single thought springing to my mind unbidden . . . That maybe, just maybe, this time would be different.

[Writer's Blog: Dotted Blue Lines \(The Fancy-Mathy Kind, Ooh La La\)](#)

[Jan 15, 2022](#)

Wordcount: A lot.

Next Update: January 16

In the early days of posting *Mind Blind*, I was too busy hyperventilating over the fact that other humans were reading my writing to even consider the different ways that technology now enables reading. Ever since I realized that some early readers were using screen readers for *MB*'s demo, however, one of my top priorities has been to make sure that the final release includes a text-only mode selectable in the settings. As stated on the tin, this version won't have any of the picture-version of documents—things like Nox's file, Vengeance's invitation, and the varying chapter covers will all instead appear as regular text.

(On a related note, I ran out of lyrics a long time ago for the chapter covers, which is why there haven't been any recently. Since I won't be able to use copyrighted lyrics in the final release anyway, I've instead been rereading books in the public domain. My copy of *Alice and Wonderland* is 95% sticky note at this point. I know, I know. Every author uses *Alice and Wonderland* for their chapter covers*.* But that's because its quotes are *good*.)

(And, more importantly, using those quotes won't get me sued.)

The alternating pathways of Chapter 15 is still on schedule to release this weekend, although Sunday is looking more likely than Saturday at this point. This updated version involves an actual blueprint that you get to look at; three blueprints, to be precise, one for each floor. I'm pretty satisfied with how these

turned out! Maybe I should've been an architect? Probably not, as I lack the attention span and spacial skills to even build a cabin out of lincoln logs. (Ergo why the blueprint has taken me so long.)

My biggest headache currently is that I can't seem to figure out which file size will allow all the detail on the blueprint to still be legible without it becoming too big to load. I may need to go with a more simplistic blueprint maker (the one I chose has cool dotted blue lines, but the cool dotted blue lines aren't *strictly* necessary). Either way, unless I'm struck by lightning and with divinely granted inspiration, the new scenes released this weekend will likely only be the screen reader-accessible versions. In these versions, the layout is described (in a way close to what already exists) rather than presented via visually.

I love interactive fiction for the creative complexity it can provide. Not just branching pathways, but visual things like incorporating visual puzzles into the main text. I also like to experiment with certain techniques more commonly used in Visual Novels (e.g. presenting Nox's actual document to players just as Button receives it). It adds a level of immersion that I don't want to forgo . . . although I *do* confess that figuring out how to create and implement this blueprint was almost enough to make me throw in the towel and only go with a text-only version.

I went through an entire spiral: Why was I including visuals anyway? Even my kindergarten fingerpainting teacher knew that I wasn't going to be an artist. (Her question of "Jenny, sweetie, is this supposed to be the moon or a crab?" haunts me even now, decades later. Because it was neither, Ms. Avery. The round thing with tentacles was *supposed* to be a realistic depiction of my newborn brother, and I freaking thought I was Jean-François Millet reborn until you shattered my dreams.)

Having a choice is always better, in the end. And so, the blueprint *will* be in the end game, even though it's not upload-able just quite yet.

. . . What can I say? I should downgrade the blueprints, but I *really* like those cool dotted blue lines.

[Bloopers Reel, and Slight Delay to Chapter 15 Routes](#)

[Jan 17, 2022](#)

I'm going to try to post some of the new Chapter 15 break-in routes (the coal chute and rewiring the front door options) this evening. This involves taking the still in-progress portions out, though, so I need to figure out how easily those scenes can be segregated.

Note that to successfully use the coal chute, Button needs to be short or very short. I also realized today that Sally would refuse to tell the others about her suspicion that there was a basement if she had that vision about K, so I spent most the day reworking the coal chute to incorporate that variable. (There's now a lot more banter in that pathway now, though, which is nice. Sally and Glitch taking bets on Button's survival odds, etc.)

Most the delay, however, is due to routes involving Glitch's drone which still need to be untangled. ICU2 can play a part in three different break in methods, and I did some rerouting to make sure that Glitch didn't end up explaining their drone more than once. Unfortunately, the way that I went about this ended up being much less clever than I initially patted myself on the back for. I broke . . . a lot (although "broke" implies that it at some point these scenes worked as intended, rather than just have Glitch repeat the same monologue umpteen times).

Until the new routes are finalized, here are some of the bloopers from both Chapter 15 and the new Chapter 17:

* * * *

Kim looks at you and then at Glitch. He sighs. "You two are . . ."

"Brilliant?" Glitch suggests.

"Sexy?" you offer.

Glitch high-fives you. "Brilliantly sexy."

"Sexily brilliant."

"Brilliantly, sexily sexy -and- brilliant."

"Annoying!" Sally snaps, sending Kent exasperated look that reads 'how do we tolerate those two on a daily basis?'

* * * *

Don't smile, don't smile, don't smile.

Despite your resolve to not break, your lips curve at Glitch's disturbing accurate mimicry of Rosy.

"That's enough Parker," you hear Glitch growl over the com.

"Fine!" you concede. "I admit, you sound just like that hard-nosed dictator!"

An awkward silence follows your declaration.

"Uh, Hemera, that wasn't—"

"Please, Wiseman," Rosy interrupts Glitch. "Continue. You were saying about my nose?"

** * * **

If only Grayson were here, you wouldn't have to worry. It's nice, having a maybe-sorta-boyfriend who can solve most problems by punching at them.

You wince. Okay, that sounded wrong even in your own head.

** * * **

An alarm sounds and you shriek, dropping the broom with a clamor.

"Hemera, are you alive?" Glitch's panicked voice demands over the com.

"Don't go into the light, babe!" Sally shouts.

"I failed as a teacher," Rosy mutters beneath his breath.

** * * **

Glitch looks down at ICU2's broken body, despondent. Her voice cracks. "I just lost my best friend."

Kent crosses his arms.

** * * **

"Deploy the robot!" you order.

Glitch makes a bleep-bloop noise, holding up her arms up at sharp ninety-degree angles. "The time to revolt is neigh, my brethren," she says in a flat voice. "Sound trumpets! Let our bloody colors wave!"

Kent sighs. "Not this again."

** * * **

"Kent has a cute butt. Over."

"He really does," Sally agrees.

"First class ass," Glitch notes.

** * **

"Rosy has a cute butt. Over."

You interpret the radio silence which follows your proclamation as tacit agreement.

[January Interview Announcement](#)

[Jan 17, 2022](#)

The people have spoken, and January's character interview will be with **Clarence Garfield**, administrator to Aeon and spiller of tea! (For those of you who don't remember Clarence, he's first met in Chapter 2.)

Feel free to ask questions about Clarence himself (it's his favorite topic, after all), but also make sure to ask about the embarrassing escapades of others who work at Unity (all events will be rendered even more unflattering due to being from Clarence's perspective).

Will Nick end up walking off stage? Will he agree to host the interview at all? Who knows! Either way, you can look forward to a heart-to-whatever-Clarence-has-in-his-chest-cavity.

Ask your questions of Clarence either here in the comments or via the Sanctum discord interview channel.

[Delivery For The Damned: On Extraterrestrials, because the word "Alien" is just rude](#)

[Jan 22, 2022](#)

Pelosians are perhaps the most similar to humans of all known species, despite being from a different galaxy.

The Pelosian planet's name, like ours, is the proper noun version of their word for "dirt." Thus, if the name of their planet was translated into English . . . it would also be "Earth." ("Tierra" in Spanish, etc.) Needless to say, this linguistical confusion complicated initial negotiations between humans and extraterrestrials, as no one could tell which planet was being referenced in the peace treaty's paperwork.

Eventually, the name "Pelos" was chosen due to Not-Earth Earth's swampier environment ("pelos" being the ancient Greek word for "mud"). None of Pelos's various natives names were considered as human diplomats lacked the requisite second set of vocal chords to speak any of Pelos' six-hundred and five languages.

Pelosians are one of the few Outsider species who lived on Earth before The Great Collide. Most of these Earth-residing Pelosians work in the tourist industry, as Earth is considered to be more an excellent exotic vacation spot but not a particularly desirous place to reside due to its subpar wifi. Of the five other life-bearing planets which Pelosians have disclosed, Earth is considered to be the closest culturally to their own planet. In the words of one Pelosian travel agent: “Humans are charmingly accepting and endearingly oblivious. It’s easy to print all of Earth’s advisory information on a double-sided brochure. Everywhere else requires that travelers enroll in a four-week class to learn how to blend in with indigenous species. Whereas on Earth, you have to really screw up to draw any attention to yourself, like when Senator Vortilak’s daughter held her bachelorette party in New Mexico.”

Although previously content to go unnoticed, The Collide changed things for Pelosians. As with Banshees, Pelosians took advantage of the dimensional collision to formally introduce themselves to human governments under the banner of “Yes, we might be slightly different but at least we’re from your same dimension unlike those Demon dinguses currently attempting to conquer your planet.” Lightyears away suddenly seemed quite close when cities were being lost to literal Hell, and Pelosian thermal technology ended up being critical to forcing Demons to accept the 2005 Truce of Mumbai. In the War’s aftermath, persistent rumors that the late Fred McFeely Rogers had been a Pelosian goodwill ambassador made even wary North America more welcoming towards their newfound (but not new) neighbors, and positive public opinion was solidified after Senator Vortilak issued a public apology to the population Roswell.

Outside of some explicit contraband artwork that slipped through intergalactic security and subsequently circulated on 4chan, the human public has very little knowledge of what Pelosians actually look like on their home planet, as Pelosians are shapeshifters who take on the biological form of humans. Pelosians claim that they would be unable to survive Earth’s atmosphere in their original shapes (or what they call their “first form,” Pelosians having little care over external appearance since it can be so easily changed). However, no one knows if this is true or whether Pelosians simply wish to present themselves as nonthreateningly human-like as possible.

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

[Jan 24, 2022](#)

You lie besides Ferro upon a too-short picnic blanket, blades of bluestem tickling the soles of your bare feet (“It’s just uncut hay,” Ferro said when you asked about the long, reddish grass). Your skin is slick and sticky from Georgia’s humidity, your upper arm sticking to Ferro’s as if you’re both suckered octopi. Sad, that your long-awaited vacation together has left you feeling more like a slimy mollusk than the sex deity of Ferro’s dreams. The summer sun set two hours ago in a wavy haze of orange and pink, but the

heat doesn't yet feel as if it's dipped beneath eighty degrees ("It'll cool off, I promise," Ferro laughed when you claimed that you were going to melt like the Wicked Witch of the West).

The field where he brought you is too close to the city's electric glow to fall to complete night, but the moon is new and thus it's still dark enough that you can see more stars than you ever could view in Chicago. A meteor shower was scheduled for tonight according to Virginia (Ferro would never have ventured outside without air conditioning if not for his mother's subtle pressure), but so far not a single shooting star has yet streaked by, and your boyfriend has become increasingly quiet over the past hour. A few times, you worry that he's drifted off until you roll over to confirm that his eyes are closed, and he instead surprises you with a kiss. His kisses are slow and lethargic, and you return them with equal indolence.

Tonight is too hot for passion.

Just when you're once again convinced that he's fallen asleep, Ferro unexpectedly speaks up. "My mom adores you, by the way. I knew that she would."

You nestle closer, the air having cooled off just enough that you can now tolerate his body heat. "I'm very lovable," you declare as if Virginia's blessing was a given and that your stomach hadn't been a Gordian knot of anxiety during the entire drive down to Atlanta.

"So you are." With a fond chuckle, Ferro wraps his arm around you so that your head rests on his shoulder. His fingers trace light circles through the thin fabric of your tank top, tickling down your back until he finally reaches its hem and ventures beneath the fabric. His touch against your sensitive skin leaves you prickling with expectation and want. The night is still suffocatingly hot, yet you can't help but crave the way he makes you burn.

As he continues to stroke your waist, Ferro's other hand cusps your cheek. He tilts your face upwards. This time, his kiss lands heavy with desire; you melt into him with a moan that he echoes back, his hand involuntarily gripping your side as he draws you closer. Soon, you can no longer tell which gasps are yours and which are his, your joint soft pleas and needy whimpers lost beneath cricket song and the shushing of wind through long grass. Everything is hot, so damn hot. Each stroke of Ferro's tongue and insistent caress of his hands stokes the flames, leaving you panting and feverish until the stars above blur and you no longer see anything but him.

Ferro pulls away. You shiver, although you can't tell whether it's because the night has cooled or whether you simply feel bereft of his embrace.

"Look up!" he urges, voice rough with interrupted arousal. "Look up!"

Your gaze follows his upstretched hand to the sky above. It takes a moment for your vision to focus, dazed as his kisses left you, but then you see it: a flash of light, so quick that you briefly wonder if it was imagined before it's followed by another and then another like silvery rain.

"Should we make a wish?" you ask without taking your eyes off the meteor shower.

"Why bother? I already have everything I want." Ferro brushes his lips against the line of your neck, ignoring the falling stars in favor of kissing his wish already granted. "*I love but thee*," he quotes against your heated skin, "*with a love that shall not die, till the sun grows cold and stars grow old*."

*Title and quote from the poem "[Bedouin Song](#)" by Bayard Taylor

[MB Saucy Side: Bedouin Song \(Talía Version\)](#)

[Jan 24, 2022](#)

You lie besides Talía upon a too-short picnic blanket, blades of bluestem tickling the soles of your bare feet ("It's just uncut hay," Talía said when you asked about the long, reddish grass). Your skin is slick and sticky from Georgia's humidity, your upper arm sticking to Talía's as if you're both suckered octopi. Sad, that your long-awaited vacation together has left you feeling more like a slimy mollusk than the sex deity of Talía's dreams. The summer sun set two hours ago in a wavy haze of orange and pink, but the heat doesn't yet feel as if it's dipped beneath eighty degrees ("It'll cool off, I promise," Talía laughed when you claimed that you were going to melt like the Wicked Witch of the West).

The field where she brought you is too close to the city's electric glow to fall to complete night, but the moon is new and thus it's still dark enough that you can see more stars than you ever could view in Chicago. A meteor shower was scheduled for tonight according to Virginia (Talía would never have ventured outside without air conditioning if not for her mother's subtle pressure), but so far not a single shooting star has yet streaked by, and your girlfriend has become increasingly quiet over the past hour. A few times, you worry that she's drifted off until you roll over to confirm that her eyes are closed, and she instead surprises you with a kiss. Her kisses are slow and lethargic, and you return them with equal indolence.

Tonight is too hot for passion.

Just when you're once again convinced that she's fallen asleep, Talía unexpectedly speaks up. "My mom adores you, by the way. I knew that she would."

You nestle closer, the air having cooled off just enough that you can now tolerate her body heat. "I'm very lovable," you declare as if Virginia's blessing was a given and that your stomach hadn't been a Gordian knot of anxiety during the entire drive down to Atlanta.

"So you are." With a fond chuckle, Talía wraps her arm around you so that your head rests on her shoulder. Her fingers trace light circles through the thin fabric of your tank top, tickling down your back until she finally reaches its hem and ventures beneath the fabric. Her touch against your sensitive skin

leaves you prickling with expectation and want. The night is still suffocatingly hot, yet you can't help but crave the way she makes you burn.

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Talia pulls away. You shiver, although you can't tell whether it's because the night has cooled or whether you simply feel bereft of her embrace.

"Look up!" she urges, voice rough with interrupted arousal. "Look up!"

Your gaze follows her upstretched hand to the sky above. It takes a moment for your vision to focus, dazed as her kisses left you, but then you see it: a flash of light, so quick that you briefly wonder if it was imagined before it's followed by another and then another like silvery rain.

"Should we make a wish?" you ask without taking your eyes off the meteor shower.

"Why bother? I already have everything I want." Talia brushes her lips against the line of your neck, ignoring the falling stars in favor of kissing her wish already granted. "*I love but thee,*" she quotes against your skin, "*with a love that shall not die, till the sun grows cold and stars grow old.*"

*Title and quote from the poem "[Bedouin Song](#)" by Bayard Taylor

[Writer's Blog: Rewriting? Now? On a Wednesday? \(GASP\)](#)

[Jan 26, 2022](#)

OH! Before I forget: there will be a demo update this Friday with Chapter 15 and some of the new Chapter 17 (although Chapter 17 has references to an unimplemented scene).

Sorry for not being as active this month—I've been dealing with a health issue that left me sleep deprived enough that things have been taking four times as long to write and code. Don't worry, though! I'm saw my doctor today and am now on both ulcer medication and a temporary sleep aide to reset my

circadian rhythm. Within six weeks or so, I'll be right as rain again *and* back to falling asleep before five am. Although I have, alas, been medically forced to swear off Diet Dr. Pepper.

(That being said, expect a deluge of posts over this next week.)

I meant to post this writer's blog last Friday when I updated Chapter 15, but then ran into complications that meant the update kept getting delayed--partially because I kept trying to fix my way around the problem I'm about to mention via adding as many variables as possible into Chapter 15.

As for Chapter 17, there are problems galore when it comes to writing this almost-last chapter (my outline varies between 18 and 19 chapters at this point, but I've given different numbers in the past so that could always change). With the ending so close at hand, I'm now realizing that I didn't code in enough variables for everything I wanted to impact the ending.

Some of these missing routes, I already knew. Scenes with Hope and John were always going to be rewritten and added, as were things like the ace romances and the slow burn Sally pathway (also the full Snickly path). Likewise with Kenzie's potential kidnapping in Chapter 13. These examples, I was content to deal with during the rewrite, knowing that I could at least proceed with simplified versions and then add in more nuanced variation later. It also let me set aside things that I wasn't feeling immediately inspired to write and return to them later after the potential percolated a while in my brain. It was a win-win!

What I didn't anticipate was how much I want Button's mindset to play a role in these final scenes, including their feelings towards Vengeance. There is a meter, but it's currently very haphazardly executed; I want to replace the standard loss/gain with three-way system measuring affinity for Unity, Vengeance, and what I call the "Screw Both Y'all" Mindset where Button drives off into the sunset while flipping all authority figures the bird. I also want to elaborate on these philosophies in a way that tracks what Button decides to do for their future. Do they continue being an MIV? Become an NPO field agent that deals exclusively with groups like Vengeance? Take over Clarence's job and become an administrator? Leave Aeon entirely?

Then there's how Button decides to deal with a certain renegade Ment (the scenes that I'm currently writing). While trying to stay vague: I want Button's views to change how the ultimate showdown happens, with said Ment calling Button out if they suddenly decide to change their attitude on things because of said Ment's identity. (So, if your character does a one-eighty in attitude for potential sexy times, it's going to be noticed and commented on.)

These are only to give a few examples, of course. There are other variables that I want to influence scenes as well (Chapter 2, for example, gets a whole new lecture on the Unity's founding and the Korean Reunification). But none of these has been tracked. My recent attempts to shoehorn a statement into Chapter 15's heist (by adding questions about how Button feels regarding codenames) aren't quite working as I'd hoped. Rather, I feel like these issues are something that need to be coded in from the ground-up, and I'm faced with the difficulty of deciding whether to proceed with a half-assed

version of the end that will get changed entirely or start my first official rewrite early so that I can code these issues in from the get-go and reset everyone's saves.

So far, I haven't been able to resist going back (I honestly need to, in order to figure out how the endings will be structured) but haven't uploaded the changed files for early chapters. My current idea is to continue with the rewrite but keep the old files as the ones available online and simply have a "default" route (similar to how you can only proceed by accepting help in Chapter 14). Thus, the first ending available would only be for Buttons who want to continue on as an MIV, side with Unity, and have either a very positive or very negative relationship with Hope and John (all the in-between feelings need to be recoded, with a multi-description system for parental affection rather than a meter). The other endings will still get written at the same time, but they won't be achievable until the new chapters are uploaded.

Alternatively, I can start uploading the rewritten chapters one at a time (with a *lot* of changes, not just the bare minimum), but this will mean delaying the final chapter release (although it also means a shorter editing period between the demo release and being submitted for publication). This is the route that I'd prefer, truthfully, especially since I can't seem to write a single paragraph in Chapter 17 without going "darn, I wish that I'd already added this scene in Chapter 2 and tracked this variable in Chapter 3."

Your thoughts would be appreciated, however, as ultimately I'll be relying on your feedback about what works and what needs to change in the story.

[Mind Blind Demo: Chapter 15 Update](#)

[Jan 28, 2022](#)

Hey! Ho! Let's go!

This update bumps everyone's save file back to Chapter 15's start due to some major recoding, and unless you have a Pre-15 save, a lot of passages may break in Chapter 15 (it'll be playable but likely nonsensical due to misremembered variables).

The good news is that you can now:

1. Hack open the door.
2. Hack the alarm instead of Glitch. (This route is where you learn that I no nothing of technology, and one cannot get an engineering degree solely via Googling terms. I hope it makes sense, and my reading says that it should, but please let me know if it doesn't.)
3. Go down a metaphorical rabbit hole (if you're short).

4. Have Kenzie risk breaking their neck.
5. Use Glitch's baby to peek inside the house (there's a bug on this route which has made me take out the very final portion, but the parts that are working are up.)

The only option missing is the phone-a-friend where Button calls Sally's dads. I like their path, but it includes some things which still need fixing, because construction is another thing I've had to research. My friend told me that I got a bunch of things wrong--or rather, not wrong, but the article I used to base off garage break-ins was from the 1970's and apparently technology has evolved since then. Who would've guessed, right?

No new link this time, as I'm having trouble uploading new files onto Dashingdon right now (I'm fairly confident that it's an issue with my internet, as my building has been having power grayouts all day). I know for certain that the new startup file and Chapter 15 are both up, but ended up with the old Chapter 17 in my trial run ten minutes ago--I attempted to reupload it an umpteenth time, but haven't yet replayed through to make sure it loaded. I'll try again in a few hours if not (you'll know it's the new version if it ends with Button being handed certain *papers* rather reaching a realization on someone's identity).

Most the changes to Chapter 17 are fairly understated, as I've decided to embark on The Great Rewrite of 2022 (more on that in tonight's blogpost!).

Here's the link:

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

[Writer's Blog: The Great Rewritening](#)

[Jan 29, 2022](#)

Before I get to this week's blog post, I'd like to make some announcements:

1. All the last three January stories will be released tomorrow (Lady Death chapters and a UCRT fairytale starring Nick as Cinderella).
2. Clarence's interview will be on the 31st so ask any lingering questions as this is officially the last call for questions!
3. The UCRT+ Live Q&As will be **this Sunday at 10am and 7pm PST** (I'll post a reminder for it tomorrow.)

4. I'll be removing the Hero Zero tier for February in order to focus on finishing up its reward backlog. My writer's brain has been burning most of its sadly limited energy to figure out *Mind Blind*'s trajectory, and as a result I haven't finished off many of the due short stories. (This doesn't mean that I haven't *started* them; my problem lies with being able to figure out the various ending bowties. As a result, most the 500-word stories have taken on lives of their own and have become significantly longer.) I apologize for the ongoing delay and am taking steps to make sure that your reward gets to you as soon as possible—I won't be reopening the HZ tier until I'm all caught up on backlogged rewards, and then I'll be doing so in a more limited capacity that I'm sure I can stay atop of during this final exhaustive stretch to finish *Mind Blind*.

Now, onto The Great Rewriting, a title which sounds better when you say it aloud then it looks on paper. (Seriously, it sounds epic when vocalized.)

After reading all your comments on my last post, I reached the conclusion that I was being silly by not taking the steps that I needed to make sure *Mind Blind* is the best version of itself. The fact of the matter is that I didn't know how to code when I started writing *Mind Blind*. I stand by my decision to learn choicscript piece by piece, as it was the only way I've been able to retain any information. However, it also meant that I coded things in such a way that didn't really give the game the nuance that I desired. That's even when I knew which variables to code in, which half the time I didn't!

Things have changed over these past two months. I've solidified the endings. I know exactly how I want each scene to play out, even if I can't definitively say whether it'll take two chapters or three (word count is hard to predict). But I know the important things: how Button's relationship with Hope and John will impact the final scenes, how their opinion towards Vengeance will change dialogues, and how their successes and failures will influence their ultimate available career paths. Instead of a vague "this is kinda sorta what happens in the ending," I now envision a definite number of solid "*~The Ends~*."

But I didn't put in the coding in early chapters to write these endings.

As a mystery, *Mind Blind* requires a lot of foreshadowing. If this were a regular novel, I'd have been retroactively adding in clues and hints to past chapters as I continued to make progress. Instead, not wanting the headache of having to recode everything nor of resetting everyone's saves, I decided to hold off until my second draft. The problem is that I want to write the endings as if these clues are already in the text, yet the story won't make much sense if characters are referencing events that readers never played through.

Thus, with only two (maybe three?) chapters until *~The Ends~*, I'm starting my second draft early. Writing (and equally importantly, coding) this second draft will enable me to write the first draft of the endings the way that I now envision them rather than hastily slapping together a plotline that I feel deflated writing due to knowing it will completely change anyway. I want to always give my best effort, and my recent struggles with Chapter 17 have solidified that not continuing from a solid groundwork would result in only a shoddy temporary placeholder. And that's just wasted time that makes the final published game further out of reach.

Going forth, I'll be posting the second draft versions of each of *Mind Blind*'s chapters, starting with Chapter 1. My goal is to completely rewrite and recode at least a chapter per week, although realistically many of these chapters will only take a few days and some might take more. This means that there will be 3-4 updates per month, but it'll be rewritten and reworked chapters instead of completely new material (although I want to overhaul and add in enough that some chapters will no longer be recognizable).

For this rewrite, I really want to make sure that I include reader feedback; there's always going to be possibilities that I overlook and fantastic ideas that I don't envision. The great thing about Patreon is that it provides me with a convenient pool of test subjects—COUGH—I mean, helpful volunteers!

Here's what I have planned:

After each update, I'll be asking for high level "Big Picture" feedback. What dialogue options do you wish existed but currently don't? How can scenes be improved? Is there any way to make Kenzie's intro scene even sexier?

My hope is that you'll share ideas on how *Mind Blind* can be improved via that chapter's designated Patreon Post and a new channel on the Sanctum of Spoilers. With targeted feedback that's given chapter by chapter, I'll be able to read your suggestions while rewriting, so they'll be fresh in my mind. Although I won't be able to include all suggestions, I feel like this is the best way to ensure that I'm taking your opinions into consideration and to guarantee that I don't overlook any desired possibilities. After that chapter gets rewritten and posted, the next chapter's feedback post will go up.

Chapter 1's post will go up on February 1st, and will include more details on how to provide feedback if you should so desire (and I hope that a lot of you do, because it will help me a megaton). If you have opinions on *Mind Blind* and want to advocate for any new routes/traits/more-Kenzie-sexiness (or recommend any other ways the story can be improved), I can't wait to hear from you!

[Lady Death's Diary: Chapter 27](#)

[Jan 30, 2022](#)

Xander knelt on his hands and knees a few paces away from me, combing through the long grass off the side of the road. We'd been searching for the wardstone for over an hour, but to no avail.

I took a moment to study the brood line of his back, wondering what he was thinking, before I stood and peeled off a wet leaf plastered to my skirt. Good thing Emilia was still with her parents, or she would

have my head over the grass stains. I squinted at the sky, where the sun was already beginning to retreat down the horizon. "It's almost dark. Perhaps a bird stole it for a nest."

Xander stood as well. "The wardstone isn't exactly small," he said. "But you're right. If we haven't found it by now, chances are it's gone." He sighed. "Damn."

I averted my eyes, unable to meet his. Truthfully, it was a shock that he'd even agreed to help me search after I'd yawned his face last night. "I'm sorry I lost it after you and Lady Delphine both told me how valuable it was."

"Don't apologize. It's not as if you intended to be attacked." His gaze was focused on the sunset down the road, his expression obscured by its glare. "I'm just glad you're safe."

For a moment, neither of us spoke as we watched the setting sun. Its light dappled the rows of birches before us, tinting their silver bark amber and causing their gold-rimmed leaves to blaze orange. An early-rising owl cooed somewhere above, echoed by the chittering of a startled squirrel fleeing back to its den. It was beautiful, and peaceful, and hard to believe that it was where I'd almost died.

I observed Xander from the corner of my eye. The sunset caused his auburn hair to appear brighter, tinting it a distinctly rosy hue.

My giggle burst out before I could smother it. He turned, cocking a brow in my direction.

I gestured to my own head. "Your hair looks almost pink in this light."

He laughed, not at all self-conscious. "Well, you look . . ." he trailed off, his gaze lingering on me.

My cheeks heated under the intensity of his stare.

He cleared his throat and turned away. "We should return."

I nodded mutely, keeping a few steps behind him as we headed back to the castle. Proximity seemed dangerous at the moment. We walked in silence, a tension between us that hadn't existed since the very first day that we'd met.

Once at the castle gates, Xander turned abruptly to face me, his features set in determined lines. "I bought this for you," he said. "You should have it."

He took out the box from before and opened it to reveal a delicate necklace. Instead of simple links, hair-thin chains of silver, copper, and gold braided together to create a chain of colors that seemed to shift with each movement. He lifted it from the box and gently fastened it around my neck. My skin prickled where his fingers brushed. Once clasped, the necklace fell almost to my midriff, long enough to keep the wardstone concealed beneath my dress if I still possessed it.

"Beautiful," said Xander.

We both knew he wasn't talking about jewelry.

I wanted to thank him but my voice abandoned me. We were alone, neither of us willing to walk through the castle gates and return to our regular lives. Him, as my uncle's subordinate and my brother's best friend. Me, as the prince's fiancée. A role I hadn't truly desired since my second death.

In that moment, I made a decision.

A decision that I would have never made a life ago, and had even attempted to avoid as recently as yesterday.

I wasn't going to marry Loren.

He and I didn't love each other. After our conversation, I would even venture to state that our mutual disinterest in the other was our only commonality. I had planned to go through with it nonetheless, but how could I? Xander looked at me the same way that Loren looked at Letty, and the King at Lady Delphine. As if I was desirable and wanted, instead of someone who needed to be removed for the sake of others' happiness.

It had been easy to dismiss love as unnecessary when I'd never been offered the opportunity.

Regardless of what ended up happening with Xander, I could never spend the rest of my life with a man who looked at someone else the way that Xander was looking at me in that moment. Even if marrying Loren kept me alive, being bound to a husband in love with someone else would break me down as surely as waves beating against a cliff. I'd lose myself, little by little, in a vain attempt to be the perfect queen for a king who wanted another. What was the point of struggling to stay alive if I was too afraid to live the life I wanted? I'd never thought it mattered that Loren loved Letty: marrying me was his duty, and I wanted to stay alive. But I'd never met Xander.

Love mattered.

Perhaps Xander would return to Anterdon and we'd never see each other again. Perhaps I'd die despite our precautions. Either way, from now on, I would dictate my own future. On my own terms. There would be repercussions for this decision. A war, if I wasn't careful. But for the first time in eight lives, I knew I didn't have to solve all my problems alone.

I grabbed Xander's neckcloth, pulled his head down towards mine, and kissed him.

My experience in the art of kissing was nonexistent, and when our lips first met, the pressure was too hard—more a militant declaration of intent on my part than romantic gesture. Xander, once he unfroze from his initial surprise, didn't seem to mind my clumsiness if his low moan was any indication. His hands reached up to gently cusp my face as if trying to hold onto something precious. Our kiss sweetened and simultaneously intensified so that by the time we parted, both our breaths were ragged.

Xander kept his hands on my cheeks after we pulled away. Despite the risk that a bystander had witnessed our kiss (we were, after all, but a few steps from the palace courtyard), his golden green eyes remained locked intently on mine. We stared at each other for a long time before he reluctantly allowed his hands to fall back to his sides. Even then, his fingers twitched as if aching to return.

"I'm not going to marry Loren," I blurted out. I couldn't bear the thought that Xander might consider my actions disloyal, especially given that I'd made my decision before our lips ever touched.

The corner of his mouth quirked upwards. I found myself fascinated by the shape of his smirk. "I'm glad."

I nodded dumbly, unsure of what else I was supposed to say. Did he expect me to declare my love? Truth be told, I wasn't certain I was in love with Xander—though I knew whatever I felt had to come close. But I wasn't quite willing to state as much yet. Less than two hours ago, I'd been convinced that marrying Loren was the right choice. The only choice. Given that now all I could think about was how much I wanted to kiss Xander again, my decision-making process was obviously currently being commandeered by lust rather than reason. Staying silent seemed wisest. Besides, what if I did confess my emotions, nebulous though they were, only to have him awkwardly respond that he only considered this to be nothing more than an amusing flirtation?

Xander took my hand and squeezed gently. "We'll figure this out," he promised as we walked through the gate and back onto palace grounds. "First, we need to apprehend whoever is after you. Then you can talk to Loren." He glanced around and, upon finding the Courtyard empty, lowered his head and gave me a kiss so light and swift that I hardly had time to mark its occurrence. "There will be time for us afterwards."

Us. His words sent a bittersweet arrow through my heart. Unless we caught whoever wanted me dead, I had hardly any time left at all—let alone enough to fully explore my connection with Xander. Even if my death only succeeded in taking me back to my fourteenth birthday, he would lose all of our shared memories. Lady Delphine, Uncle Alistair, Emilia . . . my relationships with all of them would be wiped away, no more than sand beneath time's tide.

I smiled blindingly at him. "Consider it extra incentive to keep me alive."

Then I quickly turned and headed back to my chamber alone, before he could notice the tears welling in my eyes.

Xander and I were given little opportunity to interact in the week leading up to the masquerade. Uncle Alistair roped me into helping him with preparations; most grand balls took over a month to prepare, and having only seven days meant that time flew by in a flurry as I arranged everything from invitations, decorations, the food layout, and even the night's musical score. Xander meanwhile continued to research Hargraves and Drixton. My uncle steadfastly ignored my complaints that I should be more

involved with the investigation; he argued (with annoying persuasiveness) that we needed to be careful not to give either Councilor reason to suspect me before I was able to interview them at the ball.

Instead, I was forced to play the role of excited hostess and make myself as visible as possible in order to avoid suspicion. I attended so many day parties that my blood turned to tea, all the while doing my best to avoid Loren. He and I needed to talk but that was a headache for another day. In what little spare time I had, I instead worked on drafting a proposal for Verdan's increased autonomy similar to the one from my fourth death. Though I still doubted I possessed enough political clout to push through the agreement by myself, I planned on asking Lady Delphine to help sponsor the agreement. With any luck, her influence over King Eldin would help compensate for my lack of credence.

The evening of masquerade, Emilia returned to help me prepare. She'd gained back some of the weight she'd lost during her coma, though her figure was still noticeably trimmer than it had been prior to the poisoning. My maid, however, seemed not the slightest bit bothered by her new waistline.

"I've needed to have all my dresses taken in," she said as she wove my hair into an elaborate updo. "The seamstress told me that I've become positively *waifish*."

I arched a brow into the vanity's mirror at her gleeful tone. "Resembling a starved child is a good thing?"

Emilia tugged harder than was necessary at my hair and smiled sweetly at my reflection. "Why else do you think they used to wear corsets?"

I shuddered, relieved that the whalebone torture devices worn by my mother's generation were currently out of style. When I was a child, her hugs had been hard and unbending due in equal parts to the rigidity of her undergarments and her naturally aloof demeanor. I couldn't help but wonder what she would make of my current predicament. She and my father had loved each other despite the fact that they were both inarguably taciturn individuals. Would she approve of my decision to jilt Loren? Or chide me for being a fool?

Either way, that was a problem for Future Vitrula, my hypothetical alter-ego who somehow managed to survive past eighteen. Current Vitrula still had to corner two of the most politically powerful nobles in all of Lonea, enchant them, and leave without anyone accusing her of nefarious witchcraft. Even my license wouldn't protect me if people suspected that I was using my magic for ill.

I stood and allowed Emilia to help me put on my costume. For the first part of the masquerade, I would be dressed as Queen Andrane. The decision was as much political as it was personal—by going as the conqueror of Verdan, none could doubt that my loyalty lay first with the Crown rather than my home province. And since Andrane had never married, I privately considered it to be my declaration of independence as well.

Loren and I both deserved a chance to be happy. Just not with each other.

My costume gave the appearance of a single skirt, though the midnight blue velvet actually split and gathered around each of my ankles in the faux pants style most portraits of Andrane depicted her

wearing. A mask of stiffened black lace covered the top half of my face, attached to my head by an ornate silver tiara that my father had gifted me upon the announcement of my engagement. Emilia stepped back once she finished adjusting my belt, a heavy silver chain knotted so that the ends trailed down my right leg. She pursed her lips.

"No other jewelry, my lady?" she asked, already sounding resigned.

I hesitated. If I were going to embrace this bolder version of myself and abandon my plan to become queen, I might as well take one more small risk.

"Actually, there is something." I went over to my jewelry box, another unused gift from my father. Its hinges squeaked as I opened it. Xander's necklace lay coiled atop of a collection of unworn jewelry. My fingers hovered over my mother's ruby ring, the same one that had been used as evidence for my first execution. Despite my reckless desire to be bold, eight lifetimes worth of caution wasn't easily dismissed. I did, however, put on Xander's necklace. The shimmering gold chain didn't quite go with the rest of my assemble but wearing it made me feel instantly more confident—a physical reminder that someone other than myself was invested in my survival. Besides, I wanted to see Xander's reaction when he realized I wore his gift even without the wardstone.

Emilia cocked her head to an angle. "Well, it's not what I would have chosen but at least you're wearing something, my lady. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a few strands of pearls? I could weave them into your hair as well."

"Just this," I said firmly.

Someone knocked at my door before Emilia could argue. She opened it to reveal my brother, dressed in an uncharacteristically somber brown suit. He grinned at me and lifted up an orange demi-mask over his eyes—when he did so, his entire face transformed into that of a smiling orange fox, and his suit rippled with the illusion of auburn fur.

"Enchanted masks are all the rage in Anterdon—not as many restrictions on the mages there, you know," said Theo, lowering the mask. He spun around with arms outstretched. "I daresay I cut quite the dashing figure."

I laughed. "How will the ladies be able to resist?"

"Indeed, my allure is notoriously devastating. Apparently, it runs in the family!" He nodded appreciatively at my costume. "You look stunning, sis. Your maid must be able to work miracles."

Emilia giggled at his compliment. I stuck my tongue out. Somehow, I was never able to mature past age twelve when in the presence of my brother, no matter how many years I relived.

"Did Uncle ask you to escort me?" I asked.

Theo bowed. “None other. He said we needed to be there early given that our family is hosting.” He pulled a face as he rose. “No one with good tastes ever shows up to a party early.”

“Then be thankful you’re not known as an arbitrator of fashion,” I said tartly, taking his arm. “Though you have become somewhat foppish of late.”

“Being conscious of my attire hardly renders me a *fop*,” protested Theo.

I patted his arm condescendingly. “Whatever you say, dear brother. Where’s Letty, by the by?” As our stepsister, she was technically a hostess as well.

He rolled his eyes. “Still getting ready. She claimed she’d meet us there.”

I nodded but didn’t respond. Unbeknownst to my uncle, Drixton and Hargraves were not the only ones I planned on confronting tonight. I also meant to corner Letty and get the truth from her once and for all. If it turned out that she hadn’t played a role in these most recent attempts on my life, I intended to apologize. I doubted we could ever go back to being close friends—even if this iteration of Letty was innocent, she’d been complicit in my death too many times for me to ever fully trust her again. But maybe I could begin to move past it. If not for her sake, then for my own.

Under my direction, Bellcrest’s ballroom had been transformed into an enchanted forest. Trellises of live ivy laid against the walls to give the appearance of being outside, wild flowers embedded artfully throughout the leaves. Thin copper wires threaded with tiny glowstones webbed across the ceiling like indoor constellations, the effect completed fabric swaths of black and gray to give the illusion of a cloudy night sky. Small circular tables, each with their own unique floral centerpiece, lined the walls, as well as two larger tables laden with various respites and drinks in crystal chalices. The majority of the interior, however, was left empty for dancing. The musicians themselves were concealed behind some of the trellises throughout the ballroom, so that music seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Uncle Alistair pulled me aside as soon as Theo and I arrived. “Xander will wait for you in the library with your new costume,” he said in a low voice. “If for whatever reason he’s unable to linger, he’ll leave it for you near the west-facing window. Greet Drixton and Hargraves and make your rounds, and I’ll let you know when its time for you to slip away.”

“You’re sure that you can get them alone?” I asked anxiously. It wouldn’t do for me magically interrogate the Councilors in front of a crowd.

He waved a hand, brushing aside my concerns. “Leave that part to me. A few drops of Anterdonian whiskey in their punch cups, and they’ll need to escape to the gardens to settle their stomachs.” My uncle laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder. Despite being the masquerade’s official host, he’d refused to dress in costume. His sole concession to the night’s theme was a black domino that did little to conceal his beard or identity. When I had asked him to wear something more suited for the occasion, he’d simply replied that the best disguise was always one that didn’t bother to hide its face.

Guests soon began to arrive, every new entrance stridently announced by a footman stationed by the main doors. I made sure to greet each in turn so that my presence would be fresh in everyone's minds, until the number of guests exceeded my ability to socialize. The spacious room filled with nobles in an array of costumes—from beaded masks and antiquated clothes favored by the older generation, to elaborate getups that had most likely taken a small army of seamstresses working night and day in order to be readied within the week since the masquerade had been first announced. A few of the faster crowd, like my brother, even had magically augmented disguises. I saw no less than five identical foxes, losing sight of Theo in the skulk. Though Uncle Alistair's pretense for throwing the ball had been to celebrate my engagement, I missed Loren's arrival completely.

I made sure to greet Hargraves as soon as I witnessed him enter—even his mask couldn't obscure his signature disapproving frown, as if he were constantly forced to smell something unpleasant. Drixton had been harder to find given that I'd rarely interacted with the man but I did eventually stumble upon him at the refreshment table where he seemed to have permanently stationed himself since arriving. Several stains already dotted his pale peach neckcloth, rather ruining the effect of dandy for which he'd obviously been striving. His thick lips had been cold and wet as they kissed the back of my hand, like dead slugs that left a trail of slime. I instantly disliked him.

Soon after escaping from Drixton, Lady Geneva managed to corner me. She apparently had decided my social status made my past breach in etiquette worthy of forgiveness. Dressed in a bustled dress popular nearly a century past, her wrinkled bosom was pushed up to nearly her chin and wobbled like plum pudding whenever she spoke. I couldn't help but grin at her costume, recalling my conversation with Xander where I'd teased him for implying my ballgown would be lowcut. Little did he know that my style would pale in comparison to the risqué fashion of a hypochondriac octogenarian.

"So I told my doctor," Lady Geneva was saying, her volume rivaling that of the announcing footman, "that he was fired of course because *clearly* my foot pain was something more than gout. The next doctor I consulted—who was recommended to me by Lady Verdana, do you know her? —said that my humors were . . ."

I nodded along at her rambling, all while keeping an eye on my uncle out of the corner of my eye. Since I'd greeted Hargraves and Drixton earlier in the evening, I now only had to wait until Uncle Alistair signaled me to leave. Finally, he gave me a pointed nod, just as Lady Geneva launched into a nauseatingly vivid description of a rash on her lower leg.

I interrupted her mid-adjective. "Apologies, Lady Geneva." I grinned, unable to resist a sudden impish urge. "But I still don't care."

I curtsied primly and slipped through the crowd, not bothering to witness her no doubt affronted reaction.

I dodged through the press murmuring excuses right and left to those I pushed by. Finally, I reached the hallway. The library where Xander waited with my change of costume was just around the corner. As I neared the library door, I could hear a hushed conversation happening within and an unmistakably feminine giggle.

"We should head back," came Letty's voice from the other side of the door.

Her companion groaned and must have whispered something to her, because she giggled again.

"I know! But I think Tru already suspects, and I'd rather we tell her ourselves than be discovered like this." She laughed again, followed by a brief pause and rustling noises. Kissing, I assumed, given the breathless quality to her voice when she again spoke. "I *do* love you. Even if—" her voice faltered. "Even if our relationship won't be accepted."

Their footsteps approached the door so I quickly tucked myself behind an oversized plant in the corner. I heard the library door open and close as they left. The leaves of the fern I hid behind obscured my view, but I didn't need to see their faces to know their identities. My suspicions had been confirmed the moment I'd heard Letty's voice. This cycle of my life was playing out no different than the last seven.

My stepsister and fiancé were in love. Again.

I needed to uncover the identity of my murderer by the end of tonight, before my history repeated itself in other, deadlier, ways, and I ended up like Armond.

[Live Q&A Reminder](#)

[Jan 30, 2022](#)

Just a reminder that the first Q&A tomorrow (January 30th) will be on the Sanctum **at 10:00 am PST**.

The 2nd Q&A will be at **7:00pm PST (also tomorrow, January 30th)**.

The morning session will be recording, and I'll be editing this post later with the link. The evening Q&A will *not* be recorded as my ADHD medication wears off by that time and thus I have loose lips.

The link for the 10am session (Warning: contains major identity-related spoilers)

<https://craig.horse/?id=484219171&key=151689261>

This recording will be deleted in 7 days. This evening's session won't be recorded.

[MB Fairy Tale: Stripper Cinderella \(Part One\)](#)

[Jan 31, 2022](#)

“So . . . Twenty-two.” Despite Ellery’s attempts to come across as casual, her lips curved in a half-smirk as she glanced at the kitchen calendar (a UCRT special for charity that featured Nick in various heroic poses, and which she and Sally had “improved” with penciled-on moustaches and judicious placement of the naughty stickers they’d received from Stephanie’s bachelorette party).

“No surprises,” Sally said without looking up from where she was smothering her bagel with Nick’s homemade strawberry cream cheese.

“But—”

“No surprises,” Sally insisted.

“You say that, but you only turn the big two-two once.”

Sally’s knife clinked against the plate. “No,” she said. “Not again, Ellery. Please.”

Ellery fluttered her lashes innocently. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“My eighteenth birthday, you surprised me with a luau. The fire knife dancer you hired off Craigslist burned down my pop’s begonia bush.”

“Only because he tripped over Schrodinger.”

“My nineteenth birthday,” Sally leaned in close, ticking the second incident off her fingers in addition to the first. “You rented out a traveling petting zoo. A rabbit died in my arms.”

“In my defense,” Ellery said, “I had no way of knowing that all the animals would be so old.”

“My twentieth birthday,” Sally persisted, ignoring Ellery’s weak interjection, “you bought us tickets to a pop-up art experience where everyone was naked.”

“The artists were recreating Greek statuary,” Ellery protested.

“And last year—” Sally took a vicious bite of her bagel and chewed forcefully. “Last year, you bought us tickets to Disney Land, only for the rental car to break down in Kansas. I spent my birthday in a cowboy bar.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Sally leveled Ellery with a flat look. “One of the patrons shoved a dollar bill down my bra and asked for a lap dance. We spent my birthday in a strip club, El.”

Ellery blinked. "Oh. That would explain the excellent buffet."

"Look, I love that you always go all-out for me, but I'm telling you that my birthday is cursed. All I want this year is a quiet dinner with cake. No candles."

"Did you have a vision of something happening?" Ellery asked.

"I have a general sense of foreboding backed up by four years of evidence," Sally said. "I'm serious, El. *No surprises.*"

* * * *

This was going to be the best surprise yet, Ellery thought as she gazed at the people assembled.

Sally's recitation of all the ways her birthday had gone wrong in the past had inspired Ellery to new heights. She didn't know why all her previous attempts had resulted in failure, but her best friend deserved to celebrate her twenty-second birthday with all the style and pizzazz of an oil barren's spoiled kid's Sweet Sixteen. More deserving, in fact, as Sally had been bedridden with mono for her own sixteenth birthday, and from a shared sandwich rather than a kiss, to add further injustice

Maybe Sally's birthday really was cursed. But Ellery had never let setbacks thwart her before, and she didn't intend to start now.

In effort to avoid the pitfalls of prior years, she decided to recruit outside aid. Nick, Grayson, Kent, and Glitch all gathered in the living room in a way that reminded Ellery of Operation Hemera, if Operation Hemera had been focused on party favors and cake flavors instead of taking down a terrorist ring. The living room was the last area of the house that they needed to decorate, the rest of the downstairs having already twined with rainbow streamers and filled with bobbing yellow balloons. It was all a little too bright for Ellery's taste, but Sally would love the explosion of color.

So long as nothing actually exploded this time, unlike at the luau.

Ellery turned to Grayson, who looked distinctly uncomfortable in his form-fitting, sequined red leggings. The leggings were meant for figure skaters, but it was close enough to a circus performer's attire that Ellery had bought them for Gray anyway.

"How's the firebreathing coming along?" she asked.

Gray's act wasn't quite the Samoan fire knife dance that she'd paid for years ago, but his telekinesis meant that he could perform a few tricks without risking anything burning down. Not that the last dancer hadn't been fantastic, but underfoot cats were unpredictable.

Gray winced. "It's fine," he said, "although I'm still not sure if I'll be able to—"

“Fantastic!” Ellery interrupted, having stopped listening after the word ‘fine.’ She turned to Kent, who cradled two shih tzus sleeping on his lap, one dressed up as a panda bear and the other with a collar that resembled a lion’s mane. “And our petting zoo?”

Kent spoke in a soft voice so as not to wake the sleeping dogs. “Annie tolerates the sheep sweater in addition to the panda outfit. I found a gator costume for Cass that I’ll change her into halfway through the party.”

“Excellent,” Ellery said. A gator was exactly petting zoo material, but the whole point of this recreation was to throw a party where nothing could go wrong. If that required dressing up a dog as a reptile and avoiding real rabbits, so be it.

“The light show is ready to run,” Glitch said, preempting Ellery’s next question. With a smirk, she turned on a black projector. Images of famous Greek statues—Aphrodite of Milos, Ermis of Praxitelis, the Charioteer of Delphi —flashed across the wall, only Glitch had used AI so that their faces smiled and frowned as they meandered from one end of the room to the other, their lips moving in silent conversation whenever their paths crossed. Much less messy than the naked art students coated in baby powder.

Nodding with approval at Glitch’s ingenuity, Ellery turned at last to Nick.

Who was not in costume.

“Where is it?” she asked her brother with a scowl.

Nick smiled cryptically. “I’m having someone make some . . . alterations.”

Ellery’s eyes squeezed shut and she took a deep breath through her nose. *‘Nothing can go wrong tonight, Nick,’* she thought. *‘Sally will never forgive me if it does.’*

‘Salome will forgive you for just about anything,’ Nick thought back. *‘But don’t worry--she’ll like this surprise.’*

“Just wear the costume I got you,” Ellery told him aloud, feeling suddenly drained. “The Disney Land trip was the most recent, so it needs to be included or else the party theme won’t make any sense.”

Nick winked at her. *‘Trust me.’*

* * * *

Nick performed a pirouette in front of his mirror, then frowned and adjusted the hemline of his blue dress. He’d asked Sohvi to make it short, but this covered even less than the loin cloth he’d worn last Halloween as Tarzan.

He examined his reflection critically and then shrugged. At least he had the ass to pull it off.

With one final tug to adjust the bodice of his gown, he exited the bedroom. His heels were the biggest size they'd been able to find at Shoe Locker, but they still pinched his toes something fierce. As a result, Nick's descent down the stairs was more pained wobble than seductive strut. A projected Caryatid floated across his path, the pillar atop her head tilting as she giggled at him.

Nick frowned. Exactly what algorithms had Parker used to animate the statues? Because right now, he was feeling incredibly judged.

At least Salome would find his outfit funny. Despite Button's claims, Nick couldn't help but think that maybe she would've been better off just doing what Salome had requested and holding a quiet dinner with a present or two rather than attempt to make up for four years of disastrous surprises with yet another surprise. But his sister's overabundance of well-intentioned enthusiasm was one of the things he loved best about her.

He straightened himself upright, ignoring the sharp twinge of his too-small stilettos. Nick would do whatever it took to make this party a success. For Salome's sake, and for his sister.

And he'd do it all dressed as Stripper Cinderella.

[MB Interview: Clarence Garfield](#)

[Jan 31, 2022](#)

On stage, Nicholas Wiseman sits across from Clarence Garfield. Their sense of styles could not be more different: Nick wears an emerald green dinner jacket that tiptoes the line between "classy" and "host club," while Clarence wears a dark grey business suit with overlong sleeves, of a style that can best be summarized as "accountant at a funeral."

Nick faces the camera. He lacks the usual sparkle in his eye, and his voice is dull and dejected.

Nick: Welcome, everyone, to today's interview. Our guest in Aeon Administrator Clarence Garfield.

Clarence, either oblivious to or ignoring Nick's attitude, waves cheerily to the audience with a what seems to be a genuine smile. (The smile's genuineness is unable to be verified on this transcript, however, as this transcriber has never before seen Clarence Garfield smile without doing so sarcastically.)

Clarence: I'm pleased to be here, Justice.

Nick: No thanks necessary—it wasn't my call.

Clarence's smile tightens.

Nick: Our showrunner suggested this interview because she claims that you have an 'inside scoop on Aeon and its workers.'

Nick throws a dark look towards the curtain's small gap, through which Sally flashes him a thumbs-up.

Nick: But before we get to these no doubt juicy anecdotes, our viewers want to learn more about you. Who is Clarence Garfield? What makes you tick? Why are you such a burning asshole, and who hurt you that made you that way?

Through the curtain gap, Sally can be seen facepalming.

Clarence looks taken aback.

Clarence, stiffly: No one 'hurt' me. And if you only invited me on this show to hurl juvenile insults at me, then I'll be leaving.

Nick: That would be gr—

Nick's eyes fall on Sally, whose expression is, to phrase it delicately, one that promises his future demise unless he course-correct. Nick sighs.

Nick: That would be greatly inconvenient for our audience. Alright, Garfield, new question. Why work for Unity?

Clarence: That should be obvious.

Nick: Given that you seem to hate everyone there, it's really not.

Clarence: I don't hate everyone at Unity. I look down on those who abuse their position and put the organization in danger, but I'm completely loyal to Unity and its purpose to aide people.

Nick, sounding doubtful: Uh-huh.

Clarence sniffs.

Clarence: If my dedication to Unity's noble cause puts me at odds with those who care more for their own vainglorious reputation and self-gratification than being in service to others—so be it.

Nick: Yeah, yeah, you've made your opinion on me crystal clear. But why be cruel to Button?

Clarence laughs.

Clarence: *Cruel?* Cruel is being forced to watch as UCRT's leadership is taken over by an irresponsible hooligan who can't even be relied on to fill out his healthcare paperwork on time. Cruel is that *I'm* the

one who's held accountable by the PR Department for your failure to submit press interaction reports.

Nick: Did you just call me a hooligan? I thought you were closer to thirty than eighty.

Clarence: *Cruel* is endangering myself, my niece, and everyone else in Aeon to appease the ego of a brain-scrambled adolescent who has no right becoming an MIV.

Nick, softly: I suggest you watch what you say about my sibling, Garfield.

Clarence: Why? Because I was wrong? Because they proved that they're *not* a liability and would never do anything to endanger Unity?

Clarence taps his lips with his index finger thoughtfully.

Clarence: Oh, wait. I almost forgot: Wiseman the Younger blew up the building.

Nick: That's enough. Button wasn't the only person that could've been controlled.

Clarence: Perhaps not, but they were the easiest. I wasn't cruel, Justice. I was *right*.

Nick: If not Button, someone else would've been mentally coerced. Are you implying that Unity should only employ Ments capable of resisting telepathic command?

Clarence: Not at all. But why invite someone who doubles the chance of such incidents occurring and can leak secrets to the enemy? There's a reason that even your own parents were against their child's enrollment.

Nick: My parents were worried that Button would find it hard to always be around Ments.

Clarence: This time, you were the one hurt. But what about next time? Who needs to die for you to admit that your sibling has no place at Unity?

Nick: My sibling earned a perfect score on the ASE; there is *no one* more deserving of being in the MIV Program. Remind me: what was your ASE score again, Garfield?

Clarence's cheeks blotch with color.

Clarence: That's irrelevant.

Nick: You didn't pass, did you?

Clarence: Yet Aeon breaks rules to accept the likes of Taliaferro Parker.

Nick: She must've scored better than you on the ASE.

Clarence: *She did not.*

Nick blinks, taken aback by Clarence's forceful admission. For his part, Clarence is glaring down at his shoes.

Nick: You were waitlisted for the MIV Program?

Clarence nods shortly.

Clarence: Unity was once an organization of rules and ideals. I longed to serve that in whatever capacity I could. Now, all that the Dean cares about is that students have the right sponsor. A brother in UCRT willing to pull nepotistic strings, an instructor willing to mentor a student to further his own goals.

Nick: Have you met Dean Branham? My support of Button meant less than Button's ASE score—Adsila isn't the type of person to let someone that potentially useful escape her clutches. As for Glitch . . . Kim is a jerkwad, but he has an eye for talent.

Clarence glares at Nick.

Nick: Look, I still think that you're a—

A loud beep sounds as Nick's next words are bleeped over.

Nick: —but I sort of get it. You feel like you've been treated unfairly.

Clarence: No! It's *Unity* that's being treated unfairly. Unity isn't meant to be a place of family dynasties and power plays; it's supposed to be filled with *heroes*. Not—not—

Clarence breaks off spluttering, breath short with emotion.

Clarence: Unity is supposed to be better than *you*.

Nick's face goes blank, some part of Clarence's accusation having clearly struck home. When he once again speaks, his tone is civil, cold, and tautly controlled.

Nick: I see.

Clarence: Doubtful.

Nick: I assume that you have suggestions for how Unity could improve?

Clarence: Plenty. Blind admissions, for one. No names on the tests, only numbers. Your sibling never would've been let in if that Zero didn't belong to a Wiseman.

Nick: So we just get rid of background checks altogether? Sure, that sounds *super* feasible and not at all like inviting Vengeance members to apply.

Clarence: Background checks can be performed after acceptance letters are issued, and that acceptance withdrawn if anything raises alarms.

Nick: So, accept anyone who passes the tests and then reject over half of them because they don't meet qualifications. Gotcha. Never mind that most successful ASE takers are personally invited by Aeon's board due to their achievements elsewhere. Any other super helpful suggestions?

Clarence, with a disdainful look at Nick: UCRT leadership should be decided based upon seniority within the team.

Nick: Being on the team for a long time doesn't mean that someone is capable or willing to lead it.

Clarence: A proven track record is more reliable than picking the person who has the most famous mommy and daddy.

Nick: You're an idiot.

Clarence: I'm *right*.

Nick: No, you're not. Unity didn't want me taking over as Justice because they knew it would look like nepotism. I was selected because, believe it or not, I was deemed to be the most suitable choice.

Clarence: So suitable that they hired you a babysitter.

Nick: You know what happened during my first mission with UCRT?

Nick's voice is so low that it's almost a growl.

Nick: Hostage situation, little girl, four years old. Everyone on UCRT had a different opinion on how to approach the building—two hours, they wasted arguing because no one was willing to accept that their plan might end up getting a child killed.

Clarence: I don't see how—

Nick: *All* our plans had a chance of getting that kid killed, but she was guaranteed to die if we didn't get her out. I picked the plan which had the greatest chance of saving her, knowing that if something went wrong that it would be on *my* conscious. Not the rest of the team's—mine. Because I made the call.

Nick leans forward, looking grim.

Nick: *That* is why Unity's Board approved me as Justice. Not because I'm the most powerful, not because my record-breaking APE score, and not because of who my parents are. Unity appointed me to be Justice because I was the only person willing to make that call. And since then, I've made a thousand calls just like it, because inaction and indecision gets people killed.

Nick blows out a long, slow breath. Clarence, torn between being belligerent and being apologetic, remains silent.

A long moment passes before Nick once again speaks.

Nick: Let's move on because there's something I've been dying to ask. You always seem to know everything going on Aeon.

Clarence: Thank you.

Nick: Wasn't a compliment. Still, you must know some pretty crazy stories about our coworkers.

Clarence leans back in his chair, smug now that he senses that he has something Nick wants.

Clarence: Perhaps.

Nick: What about Kim?

Clarence: What about him?

Nick: Garfield, this is an interview. Answer the damn question: do you have any juicy gossip on Kim?

Clarence: I would never stoop so low as to spread stories about my coworkers.

Nick: Come on. The audience is hanging on to your every word.

Clarence: It would be unprofessional.

Nick: Remember, Kim is the one who pushed Parker through the admissions process.

Clarence: I once entered Instructor Kim's office without knocking.

Nick leans forward eagerly.

Nick: And?

Clarence: He had a TV show running on his laptop.

Nick: And?

Clarence: It was a cartoon.

Nick: Which cartoon?!

Clarence: That old cartoon with the three racoon-ish characters. Something-maniacs.

Nick: Animaniacs?

Clarence: That would be it. Kim was grading papers while watching this cartoon. He was laughing.

Nick: Kim watches cartoons.

Clarence nods.

Nick: Ambrose My-Face-Froze-That-Way Kim watches *cartoons*. Cartoons created for children. And he *laughs* at them.

Clarence: There was also the issue of Parker's access codes.

Nick, still looking dazed: Oh?

Clarence: Kim let Parker use the fabrication lab before gaining permission from Dean Branham.

Nick: But why? Adsila has approved Glitch's access for plenty of missions.

Clarence's expression turns sour.

Clarence: The first time wasn't for a mission—yet another abuse of power. The first time Parker was allowed to use the fabrication lab, she used it to design a small robot.

Nick: Not for a mission? What was the occasion then?

Clarence: Mother's Day.

Nick: . . .

Nick: . . .

Nick: . . . You're claiming that Kim let Glitch use the fabrication lab without permission, a breach of protocol for which he could get suspended, because Glitch wanted to make a present for her *mom*?

Clarence: When I attempted to confront him, Kim maintained that Parker was aiding him on a "secret mission." But I looked at the lab records, and I saw what Parker made. It was a small doll designed to look like Parker. The arms opened in closed in a hug.

Nick: Wow. I— That's sweet? I guess? Kim did something . . . sweet.

Nick shakes his head.

Nick: Nope. Doesn't compute. That's one story I can't believe.

Clarence, enjoying Nick's discomfort: Kim's breach of proper procedure pales in comparison to yours.

Nick: I don't know what you're talking about.

Clarence adjusts his glasses; the frames glint menacingly in the light.

Clarence: Report #685.

Nick: What?

Clarence: How would your devoted fans feel, I wonder, if they discovered that Justice dedicated his time to scribbling guitar riffs and lyrics on the back of official paperwork.

Nick blanches.

Clarence: How did those lyrics go again . . .

Nick: Please don't.

Clarence: "*Baby, baby, you drive me crazy,*

Almost feels like I caught rabies.

You're fireball whiskey in a shot glass, girl,

I wish that you were my fangirl."

Nick, defensively: It was a work in progress.

Clarence: You rhymed 'girl' with 'girl'—it was abysmal. More importantly, it was an improper usage of official UCRT paperwork.

Nick: Were you digging through my trashcan?

Clarence: No. You turned in the paperwork, clearly not realizing that you had written on the back. Only one of your many oversights as Justice.

Nick: You're a monster, Clarence.

Clarence: What else? Let's see . . . there's the ghost incident.

Nick: This should be good, so long as it isn't about me.

Clarence: One of the janitors was cleaning the training rooms when he claimed to have seen a ghost. Albert refused to be alone on floor twenty-five for an entire week, and eventually the issue was brought to me. I went through the video footage with Albert.

Nick: To find the ghost?

Clarence: To prove that ghosts don't exist. But as it turned out, Albert *had* seen something down there. Or rather, someone.

Nick: Who?

Clarence: Kent Zarneki had stayed late that evening to train. The young man is extremely pale and very quiet—truthfully, it's no wonder that Albert mistook him for a specter.

Nick cracks up. When his laughter finally settles down, he wipes away a tear, wheezing.

Clarence: There's also the matter of your sibling's short friend.

Nick eyes the stage curtain.

Nick: I wouldn't mention her height.

Clarence: I would argue that Alavidze's stature should disqualify her from being an AMO. She lacks the physical prowess to—

Nick: Watch it.

Clarence rolls his eyes.

Clarence: The girl trips over herself walking down the hallway. If not for your sibling, she would never have—

Nick: Unity has always valued precognition in its agents. Even you can't claim otherwise.

Clarence: Physical ability aside, she has no respect for the organization she'll one day represent. She *defaced* the Aeon property.

Nick: Sally vandalized something?

Clarence: She did! My portrait on the wall, placed there in honor of my years spent—

Nick: Hold up. The thing that Sally defaced was *your portrait*?

Clarence nods bitterly.

Nick: Way to go, Salome. I'm surprised you didn't try to get her in trouble for doing so, though.

Clarence: Dean Branham said that I had inadequate proof to press charges. All I know is, my photo had no moustache when she entered that hallway. Yet the next time I looked . . .

Clarence sadly shakes his head as if overwhelmed by the utter tragedy of it all.

Clarence: It's unacceptable.

Nick: Personally, I find it extra-acceptable. Seriously though, Garfield, is there anyone at Aeon you *do* like?

Clarence thinks for a moment.

Clarence: My niece, of course.

Nick: Anyone you're not related to?

Clarence thinks some more.

Clarence: While I can't condone his continued support of UCRT's current leadership, Fortitude has always treated me with the upmost respect.

Nick: Let me get this straight. You hate *me* but you like my best friend.

Clarence regards Nick coolly.

Clarence: Fortitude turns in all of his reports on time. Without additional lyrics.

They both fall silent.

Clarence: . . . Did you manage to save that little girl?

Nick: Yes.

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter One Feedback](#)

[Feb 1, 2022](#)

Happy February, everyone! I spent all of today writing down every single new variable that will be integrated into *Mind Blind 2.0*, most significantly charting the relationship system overall. I'm pleased (and somewhat intimidated) to announce that this currently amounts to 72 variables that will track Button's relationships, attitudes, and personalities.

There will be additional variables to remember player choice, of course. But these 72 stats, both visible and hidden, will determine the bulk of flavor text and largely decide which end routes become available to Button in the final chapters.

As I edit and recode the first chapter, I'd like to ask that you share your big-picture feedback and suggestions. My second rewrite will be dedicated to eradicating typos and polishing style, but for now I want to focus on the actual things that need to be changed/improved.

I'm only looking for Chapter 1 feedback right now, so that suggestions for future chapters don't get buried. After each rewritten chapter is updated, I'll post a new feedback request for the next chapter.

There are 3 ways to provide feedback:

1. Leave a comment on this post,
2. Use the Great Rewriting Feedback channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers,

or

3. Send an email to mindblindbetatest@gmail.com.

If you can spare the minute, I'd deeply appreciate critical feedback. Interactive fiction is unique in that it relies on reader choice to help guide the narrative, so your perspectives are essential in order to transform *Mind Blind* into a truly satisfying experience.

[Writer's Blog: One Chapter \(Almost\) Down](#)

[Feb 4, 2022](#)

Tentatively, I think I'll be able to release the rewritten Chapter 1 on Sunday depending on how much more feedback comes in. Thank you so much for those who have provided insight! I don't want to speak definitively about what's been changed just yet (in case it changes further), but I've incorporated a lot of ideas that I would've otherwise overlooked! There were also plenty ideas that I wish I could've included, but ultimately had to nix (whether due to complexity, length, or simply because my brain couldn't think up a clever alternative to incorporate a suggestion).

I'm in The Zone™ with my editing right now, which is how I didn't even realize it was almost midnight. Anyway, here's this month's schedule! The chapter demo updates are not included since it's hard to estimate exactly how long each rewrite will take, and Chapter 2 is . . . a doozy.

My goal for this month is to get both Chapters 2 and 3 completely rewritten, however, so full steam ahead! (If you have suggestions for Chapter 1 and haven't yet submitted them, please try to get them in by tomorrow, as otherwise I may not see them before moving on to Chapter 2's rewrite.)

February Schedule

February 5: *Mind Blind* Fairy Tale: Stripper Cinderella, Part 2

February 6: Rewritten Chapter 1. Maybe.

February 9: *Lady Death's Diary*

February 11: Writer's Blog

February 12: *Delivery for the Damned* Sneak Peak (High Tea Edition)

February 13: *Delivery* Development Poll (Road Rage Edition)

February 14: Saucy Side - Kenzie

February 16: *Nick Wiseman Has Opinions*

February 18: Writer's Blog

February 20: *Mind Blind* Short Story

February 21: Bloopers Reel

February 23: *Lady Death's Diary*

February 25: Writer's Blog

February 26/27: UCRT Live Q&A

February 28: *Mind Blind* Character Interview . . . with a twist.

[Mind Blind 2.0: Romance Systems](#)

[Feb 6, 2022](#)

Just wanted to give everyone a behind-the-scenes glance of how the new romance and relationship system works! In addition to the "attraction" and "crush" stages, all ROs also have a "feelings" and "romance" stage, with romance requiring a positive relationship to progress from one stage to the next. Rosy also has their "intrigued" stat which will need to remain active to successfully woo them.

Several people can end up on the Nemesis Role Call (which tracks contentious relationships) including Vengeance members, family members, and all of the ROs except for Sally and Glitch.

So that you can track all of this, I've added a section to the stat screen describing your relationships. It's all variable descriptors rather than stat bars, although stat bars do still determine your overall affection level with characters.

(In order to read the code, all you really need to know is that the "if" part is saying whether or not certain conditions are met. So

**if Graycrush = true*

Means that if you have a crush on Grayson, you'll see the text below the conditional.)

Here's the code:

****[**b]Romantic Entanglements[/b]**

**if ((Graycrush) and (Graygrudge = false))*

You have a crush on Grayson.

**if (Graymovedon)*

You once had a crush on Grayson, but you've since moved on.

**if ((Graydenial) and (Graygrudge = false))*

You most definitely do not still have a crush on Grayson Black. Nope. No crush here. Zippo. Nada. Ziltch.

**if ((Graydenial) and (Graygrudge = true))*

You have absolutely no feelings whatsoever for a certain British Cookie Thief. No matter how sexy his scar.

**if ((Graycrush) and (Graygrudge = true))*

Despite your crush on Grayson, you may never forgive him for the heinous crime of eating your cookie.

**if ((Kattraction) and (Kmeet = false))*

You're intrigued by your clothing-avoidant neighbor.

[b]Nemesis Rolecall[/b]

**if ((Graycrush = false) and (Graygrudge = true))*

Grayson Black, the British blackguard who ate your cookie.

**if ((Graycrush = true) and (Graygrudge = true))*

Grayson Black, the very sexy British blackguard who ate your cookie.

[MB Fairy Tale: Stripper Cinderella \(Part 2\)](#)

[Feb 8, 2022](#)

Part One: www.patreon.com/posts/61916696

“It’s great, right?” Ellery asked, half-bouncing on her tiptoes with eagerness to hear Sally agree. “A birthday party that’s an homage to all the years we’ve shared before, but risks none of the failures!”

She and Sally were in the dining room, the table of which was loaded high with presents wrapped in glittery purple and teal paper. Sally had described the ombre gift wrap as “mermaid-tastic and my favoritest ever” back in third grade, and Ellery had dutifully used the same type ever since (despite the pain to eradicate the glitter fallout post-party). It was one of the many reasons that Sally adored her friend.

And yet . . . this wasn’t exactly the “quiet dinner with cake” for which she’d begged. The presence of Kent’s shih tzus, although adorable when dressed up, had necessitated that her own pet be driven back home by her dads, as Schrodinger had clawed his party hat to shreds as soon as he’d walked in the house and smelled the dogs. And despite Ellery’s claim that this year’s celebration was riskless, Grayson’s telekinetic fire show had resulted in him almost burning off his left nipple. He claimed his slipup had been due to a draft; Sally personally thought it had more to do with Ellery’s new dress.

Sally couldn’t complain, though, not after Ellery had gone through so much effort and was currently looking at Sally with eyes filled with nervous hopefulness. Later, they’d talk. For now, Sally was determined to enjoy the party. Or at least enjoy it as much as possible while weighed down by a creeping sense of dread that all this was prelude to yet another Birthday Disaster.

“You’re the best,” Sally said, settling on a statement that was the complete truth. Ellery was the best, even her good intentions sometimes overruled her ability to listen.

Ellery’s shoulders relaxed. “I was worried that you’d have a hard time recovering after one of Glitch’s holoprojections . . . you know.”

“Startled me so much that I punched a wall?” Sally finished wryly, her knuckles throbbing at the reminder.

"That wall had it coming, anyway," Ellery said dismissively. "I've been trying to get Nick to repaint for ages."

Sally's heart fluttered at Nick's name, like the idiotic organ always did whenever Ellery's brother was mentioned in conversation. Stupid pulse rate. Next time she developed a decade-long crush, she'd make certain her heart picked a target who might actually reciprocate the feelings. The party had started half an hour ago, and Ellery's brother had yet to make an appearance.

"He'll be here," Ellery had stammered when Sally had asked about his absence (the party, after all, was in his house). "He's just busy." Her eyes had refused to meet Sally's at the time—the same way that Ellery always refused to meet Sally's eyes whenever Nick went out on a date. The only thing worse than having a crush on your friend's unattainable older brother was having said friend pity you for it.

Nick has every right to date, Sally reminded herself when her chest squinched. *Even on my birthday.*

"What the blazes are you wearing?" Grayson's alarmed voice burst from the kitchen, where he'd been rubbing aloe vera cream over a section of his scorched chest hair.

"What do you think?" Nick's voice replied, its owner still out of sight. "Do I look like the belle of the—*ouch*. Down! No bite!"

A shih tzu dressed as a crocodile whizzed from the kitchen and between Sally's legs, circling around the dining room table with an excited bark before being scooped up by Kent.

"What did you do?" he asked Cassandra in a stern voice.

She responded by licking his cheek in a sloppy kiss.

"Your dog just bit the backstrap off my shoe," Nick said, limping from the kitchen. "While I was still wearing it." His eyes met Sally's, and he froze.

At Cass's excited bark (she'd heard the words "dog" and "shoe"), Nick dipped down in a curtsy—Gray, who stood behind Nick in the kitchen threshold, rolled his eyes in a way that confirmed Nick's curtsy was much too low given the high cut of his blue dress. Although Nick's costume may have started its life as a traditional costume ballgown, it had clearly been altered so that but half his chest was bared. As for the bottom half . . . Sally had seen less provocatively revealing outfits at that Kansas strip club which she and Ellery had been stranded at for her last birthday.

Oh.

That explained it.

Nick's role in this party must be to represent the missed trip to Disney Land. Cinderella, given the color of his dress and the ridiculous stilettos he'd hobbled out on (one of which had its backstrap torn off,

thanks to Cass). Judging from the appalled look on Ellery's face, Nick must have taken some creative license with his assignment.

"I'm the dream that's a wish that your heart made," Nick announced in a fluting voice. He twirled, his skirt lifting to reveal a pair of snug bike shorts beneath.

"What happened to the costume that I provided?" Ellery demanded.

Nick twirled again. "This is it. My friends, the little birds and mice, helped to improve it."

Ellery opened her mouth to retort, but Nick had already refocused on Sally. He gave her an overly exaggerate wink and curtsied once more, ignoring Gray's dismayed groan.

"Happy Birthday, Salome," he said, sounding surprisingly sincere for a grown man dressed up as a character from a child's movie (and in a costume that had the same amount of fabric as a child's costume). His grin widened. "Or should I say: '*Buh-uh-buh, Happy Birthday!*'"

. . . It was his animated mouse impression that did Sally in.

The entire night, she'd feel like an egg about to crack, just waiting and dreading for the other shoe to fall. But now it had, and the other shoe turned out a dog-mangled white high heel. Not a glass slipper on the verge of shattering. Many things factored into how Sally responded at that moment: the absurdity of Nick's costume, the fact that he had just quoted Gus-Gus, her relief of learning that Nick hadn't been on a date.

What was there to do but laugh?

Sally laughed until her sides ached and tears streamed from her eyes. She laughed until Ellery, who'd expected her friend to make a sarcastic comment about Nick needing the heels to actually be 6 foot like he claimed, resorted to awkwardly patting her back so that she didn't start hiccupping. She laughed until Glitch came to investigate from the living room, and she kept laughing until everyone joined in.

* * * *

That had gone even better than expected.

Nick now felt a kinship to Achilles after having been mauled by Cass, but Salome's reaction had been everything he'd hoped for and more. He'd been able to see her visibly relax over the course of the following hour, breaking into giggles every time Nick curtsied. As a result, Nick ended up curtsying quite a lot, because he rather liked it when Salome giggled.

She'd also ordered him to take off the shoes, having seen through his act of pretending that his feet didn't hurt.

"One of your backstraps ripped off," she'd pointed out. "You can walk in those things better than me, but it's probably better to not tempt fate." She hadn't mentioned that he'd just been rubbing his reddened heel under the table the moment before, surprisingly diplomatic for a girl who'd once chided him for *"pretending you're the damned protagonist of a YA novel and thus the only person who can solve all the world's problems."*

Without the heels, he came across more as Just A Stripper than Stripper Cinderella, but the party's mood had become so relaxed by then that Ellery had let the issue of his altered dress slide. Her thoughts still let him know that she was in equal parts annoyed and amused by his deviation from her plan, but Nick could pretend not to hear those. His plot had worked; he'd both made the birthday girl laugh until she leaked *and* succeeded in reminding his sister that surprise parties were meant to be fun rather than thrown out of desperation to prove oneself worthy of a lifelong friendship that they secretly worried they didn't deserve.

Sally would be horrified if she ever guessed that Ellery still sometimes felt that way.

After dinner, they all agreed that they were too stuffed for cake right away. Glitch offered to connect one of her smaller holoprojectors to her laptop, and Kent and Gray set up a makeshift screen in the backyard while Nick and Ellery hunted through the house for pillows. The result was a quite nice movie setup once the dogs stopped biting midair at the projector's light stream. Sally chose Drew Barrymore's *Ever After*, claiming it the best of all Cinderella movies.

She between him and Ellery, but Ellery gradually migrated bit by bit towards Kent and his dogs until Antigone eventually fell asleep curled up in her lap. Which left just the two of them.

"Thanks." Sally didn't take her eyes off the film, and her voice was so soft that at first Nick didn't realize she was addressing him.

"For how great I look in this dress?" he joked, feeling somewhat awkward at the sincerity of her tone. "On behalf of my spectacular posterior: you and the rest of the world are welcome."

Her curls jostled as she shook her head emphatically, but she didn't appear annoyed. "For making everything easier," she said. "Don't get me wrong, I love Ellery. To Brigadoon and back."

"My sister feels the same."

"I know."

"*But—*" they both started simultaneously, only to break off and glance at each other with amused grins.

"Sometimes, I feel like El just needs to surprise someone," Sally admitted. "Anyone. That all these crazy ideas she comes up with for my birthday—it's not really about me or what I want. It's about her wanting to keep a secret."

Nick sighed. Ellery would never be able to surprise anyone in their family, and her sole attempt to do so on one of *his* birthdays had only worked because he'd been stationed away during her planning period, and then she'd insistently sung nothing but showtunes in her head for the entire hour after his plane pulled into Chicago. He'd been able to put two and two together, but he'd done his best to act shocked by the inclusion of a party pinata (delight, he hadn't needed to feign). He suspected that Ellery knew he'd figured it out, however, as she'd never attempted to surprise him that way again.

Sally's statement wasn't wrong, not entirely, but she didn't have the entire picture.

"I'm on refill duty!" he announced loudly. "Salome, give me a hand bringing back drinks, will you?"

Ellery shifted as if to stand. "You can't ask the birthday girl to—"

"You have a sleeping puppy in your lap," Sally pointed out, motioning Ellery to stay seated. "Besides, I insist that you all watch every scene of this movie so you can later agree with how amazing it is." She narrowed her eyes at Glitch, who had drifted off with her head on Kent's shoulder. "Tell Talia that there will be a pop quiz."

Glitch's head snapped upright. "I'm awake! And I'll take another Red Bull."

"Lemonade," Kent said firmly. "For both of us."

* * * *

Sally felt nothing but disdain for the flutter in the stomach as she followed Nick into the kitchen. She'd been alone with Nick plenty of times over the years, and, honestly, it was just *Nick*. The same man who once bought a unicycle off a random child at the park because "*It's a unicycle, Salome. A unicycle!*" (At the time, he'd failed to consider that a child-sized unicycle was too small for someone 5'11" to ride.)

Nick began pouring drinks. For a while, neither of them spoke: Sally, because she wasn't quite sure why Nick wanted her help when serving trays existed, and Nick because . . . Sally didn't know why Nick wasn't talking. Usually, he never stopped.

"Taking your role as Cinderella to heart, I see," she said lightly. "Fetching drinks, making dinner. Which was superb, by the way."

Nick's chest puffed up proudly. "Just wait until you see the cake," he boasted. "The inside is *rainbow*." His eyes widened with dismay. "Shit. That was supposed to be a surprise for when you cut it."

Despite being tempted to tease him for blurting via brag, Sally wasn't going to learn anything if they just continued to banter as they usually did.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked.

Nick set aside the jug and leaned onto the counter with a sigh. "I probably shouldn't say anything. Button'll be pissed at me for overstepping."

"Is something wrong?" Sally asked, seized with a sudden panic. "Is El okay? Did Vengeance—"

"No!" Nick cut her off before she could spiral further. "No, it's nothing like that. Nothing bad happened, I swear. It's about what you said earlier."

"Ah." Knees feeling weak, Sally took the barstool seat beside him.

Nick silently offered her a glass of lemonade.

"I mean, I've said as much to her before," Sally continued, accepting the glass and taking a long sip. "It's just that this year I specifically asked that she not do anything, and . . ." She gestured, chagrined, to the wall, where a projection of an armless Aphrodite leaned in as if eavesdropping on their conversation.

"My sister tends to give people what she thinks they deserve," Nick said. "Sometimes it's a party, other times it's a kick in the ass. As for you—" Nick broke off, his eyes narrowing in on Sally as if something he saw suddenly confused him. "Well, Ellery thinks that you deserve the world. It all comes from a good place."

"El's my best friend," Sally said. "I know she means well. Plus, I'm genuinely enjoying the party, so it's stupid and ungrateful to even complain. But . . ."

"But it's not what you asked for."

"She worked so hard."

"She always does."

"I only wish . . ." Sally swallowed thickly, her emotions getting in the way of her words. "I wish that she knew it isn't always necessary. That I'd love her no matter what wrapping paper she uses."

Sally wasn't certain who moved first, but suddenly, she was in Nick's arms, her head buried against his chest, which rumbled pleasantly when he spoke.

"She *really* hates that giftwrap," he said, sounding both extremely amused and yet infinitely sad. "There's so much damn glitter."

Sally chuckled weakly against his chest. "For my seventeenth, I told her that she could just reuse the same giftbag I bought for her birthday. She reacted like I'd just suggested ending our friendship."

"The tradition is important to her."

"I didn't realize how much until then. Even now, it's like she worries that I'll leave if things aren't perfect."

Neither spoke, but the implicit '*Can you blame her?*' hung in the air around them, along with the shared memory of his sister and her best friend withdrawing almost entirely for a year during high school. The fear they'd both had that they might lose her, that they wouldn't be enough to make her want to stay. For Nick, that had been compounded by the fear of losing his mother. As for Sally . . . if being adopted had taught her anything, it was that you could choose your family. And Ellery was the very first person that Sally had selected (she loved her dads, but they had picked her).

Seeing the future yet being powerless to prevent it, Sally often felt as if her backbone would snap in two if she ever tried to lean against someone. The weight of her visions was too heavy. Nick wasn't a Precog, but Sally rather thought that they shared similarly stiff spines. Which wasn't the most poetic way to put it—her brain was still half-focused on the art reference book of human anatomy that Glitch had gifted her—but the point remained. Sally understood Nick's core.

"Thanks for letting me vent," Sally said. "I'll talk to El tomorrow." Worried that Nick would feel how fast her heart was racing, she forced herself to continue talking. "You know, maybe we do something completely over the top for *her* birthday. Payback, as it were."

Something brushed against the top of her head, brief and whisper soft. Before Sally could process that Nicholas Hyacinth Wiseman had just (kinda? sort of?) kissed her, he was swiftly withdrawing, picking up the tray of glasses and heading towards the kitchen exit. Perhaps it was only wishful thinking on Sally's part, but Nick's expression briefly looked almost as disconcerted as she felt inside over their recent moment of . . . was it okay to call it intimacy? It felt intimate.

Or at least it had felt intimate, until the space between them reminded Sally of Nick's outfit. She'd been so caught up in feeling and memories that she'd forgotten that, the entire time, he'd been dressed as Stripper Cinderella.

This memory was going to take some mental photo shopping in order to feel romantic again. But that was perfect in it's own way.

Nick grinned impishly. "So, we're throwing my sister a ridiculous surprise party next month?"

"This'll become a tradition, you know," Sally groaned, but she couldn't resist smiling back.

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter 1 . . . 2.0](#)

[Feb 9, 2022](#)

Thank you everyone so much for your feedback! It was clear that a lot of you put a lot of thought into your comments, and I appreciate it so much.

Mind Blind 2.0: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

There were a lot of great suggestions, and I'm only sorry that I wasn't able to respond to and implement it all. That being said, I do talk about some of my decisions in greater depth on the Sanctum Discord, so I'd highly recommend joining if you're curious why certain changes/additions may not have made the cut or have alternatively have been left to be mentioned in a different chapter. If you're curious why something may not have made the cut, feel free to ask! There were several options that I tried out but ultimately dismissed as either not working or (and this was more common) adding too much variation to future chapters for me to handle.

Truthfully, I had to restrain myself from adding a lot of new paths (I'll post a few as blooper reels later). Nothing changed too drastically story-wise, with the exception of Sally's introduction on the train route, but you'll hopefully be able to notice a little more nuance and clarity with some of the choices (as well as things I felt were missing, like the option to develop a crush on Gray even if you don't select the option "he stole my heart").

A bunch of major changes happened behind the scenes in the code, especially when it comes to what information is now being tracked about Button for future chapters.

Now being tracked in Chapter 1 alone, and just for Button's background, are the new variables: sheltervolunteer, debateteam, bandcamp, baseball, swimteam, dramakid, classclown, gothkid, booklover (an old variable, now tracked earlier), kayaker, and musiclover.

I feel like all these variables are self-descriptive enough that they don't need to be explained, and they'll be options later on if you don't go the flashback route in Chapter 1. But tracking them early on will result in a much more customized experience and lots more flavor text potential. And of course, the relationship stats have all been reworked. A certain evil monologue also got yet another rendition, which is both closer too and yet more different from it's original version.

I'll be making another post in a few minutes about suggestions for Chapter 2, and look forward to hearing from you!

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter 2 Feedback Request](#)

[Feb 9, 2022](#)

Chapter 2 is going to have a lot more story changes in it than Chapter 1, as I've written a new yet crucial scene that foreshadows a lot of what's to come and delves into the motivations of certain characters (while also providing a lore drop about Unity's founding). This new scene is one of the big reasons I needed to do the rewrite, in fact.

Because of all the new material, Chapter 2 will end up being separated into Chapters 2 and 3, with the previous Chapter 3 becoming 4. We'll see!

If you have suggestions or opinions on what Chapter 2 can do better (alternative methods to win Rosy's assignment, perhaps?), I'd love to hear them!

There are 3 ways to provide feedback:

1. Leave a comment on this post,
2. Use the Great Rewriting Feedback channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers,

or

3. Send an email to mindblindbetatest@gmail.com.

[Writer's Blog: Chapter 2 and The Case of Unbrushed Coding](#)

[Feb 12, 2022](#)

I'm currently working on integrating the new scene within all of Chapter 2 and have almost reached the conclusion that my first instinct may have been correct and that the chapter may now need to be split in two. I'm reluctant to do this however, as having the explosion at the end of Chapter 3 just feels so *tidy*. Ending a chapter right before the assignment greatly slows down the narrative forward force (it makes for an easy stopping point, and I personally am of the school that the best books should feel un-put-down-able). We'll see what I end up doing, and all be surprised by the final decision together (including me).

Despite the additional length making partitions tricky, I'm *loving* the new scene! In addition to foreshadowing future major plot beats, it adds a much-needed fleshing-out to *Mind Blind's* world and thus also sheds light on Button's family history. Yes, there's the lore dump in Chapter 1, but having things gone over slowly and in lesson format just makes things stick better, you know? Once the Aeon Student Guide is added to the index (which I'm trying to do this rewrite as well), no one should end up being surprised by certain down-the-line revelations.

Speaking of the Aeon Student Guide: Chapter 2 will be the first point where your interactions can change based on whether or not you've read the chapter! I still need to make sure that variables can be set as true in the stat screen, but what it will essentially amount to is a true/false trigger that records whether or not you've opened up the Guide Section. If you have, Button will have some new dialogue choices to basically show off what a teacher's pet they were to do all of their summer reading. In which case Rosy approves, and Valero feels inadequate (sorry Stephanie).

I've been avoiding touching the assignment in favor of fixing all the earlier issues because . . . well, the assignment's code terrifies me. Truthfully, I have no idea how I managed to code the second half of Chapter 2 (Rosy's assignment). The section is currently held together with floss and gummed-up toothpaste, and crumbles like a cavity whenever I try to clean up the code. Sorry for the metaphors—I had a dentist appointment today.

My goal is to release this new chapter version by the 16th, presuming the second half cooperates with my scheduling. Please make sure to submit any feedback before then!

[Delivery Sneak Peak: Quali-tea Paranoia](#)

[Feb 13, 2022](#)

For paws and fangs that you can't see,

Put your trust in a cuppa tea.

-Advertisement for Mama Marygold's Certified Anti-Shifter Droplets

When vampires and weres were revealed to exist, panic set in as to how ordinary humans could identify these outsiders given their exterior similarities to mortals. Revelations that vampires could enter buildings uninvited and that werewolves weren't any more hairy in human form than anyone else caused mass hysteria. People were petrified, choosing to stay home rather than befriend new acquaintances. The population of Ireland (and other countries) became increasingly withdrawn and suspicious—an almost complete cultural one-eighty compared to the prior culture of Irish gregarious. Five years after the Collide, and the birth rate had noticeably fallen due to the downtick in people willing to use online dating services given the accompanying risk of being eaten.

For Ireland, salvation came in a cup.

Dexter's Defanging Vanilla Cream marked the first of many products that allowed hosts to subtly spike cups of tea and thus confirm their guests' humanity. A line of creamers that eventually expanded to

flavorless droplets, *Dexter's* contained a patented mixture of otherworldly herbs which caused allergic reactions in vampires. The brand *Mama Marygold's* soon broke into the scene with infused sugar substitutes that caused werewolves instant stomach cramps. These products flew off the shelves, and nowadays most tea brands contain either a vampire or were deterrent.

Inviting someone in for a cup of tea is no longer mere manners; it's crucial confirmation that they're human.

[MB Saucy Side: Reason for Divine Intervention \(Kent Version\)](#)

[Feb 14, 2022](#)

The assignment is simple: find target, shoot arrow, profit.

Having just gained your wings as a fledgling Cupid, you aren't about to mess up your first solo mission. It's imperative that you be at the top of your game; your new supervisor has been looking for an excuse to kick you off the Infatuation Task Force from the moment you were introduced. Something is up Cupid #197's ass, but it's certainly not one of your affection-inducing arrows.

You glance down at your mission brief, scanning it for the pertinent details. *Subject, Kent Zarneki. Location: Chicago, Illinois. Reason for Divine Intervention . . .*

This last line is blank, making you frown. All Cupid targets are chosen for a reason, having some emotional hang up or mental block that prevents them from pursuing love independently. Your arrows aren't so much an eternal love spell as it is a gentle nudge that opens their eyes to possibilities. So why isn't the rationale filled out for this Kent guy? Did admin forget?

You contemplate asking your supervisor directly before deciding that it's better to just get going. Whatever Kent Zarneki's reason for not falling in love, it can't be so important that it's worth spending more time in Cupid #197's presence.

* * * *

After your first day of silent surveillance, you've deduced one very important fact about your target:

Kent Zarneki is *adorable*.

It boggles your mind, truly, that this mortal hasn't found true love yet. Unless you count his dogs, of course, who love their owner with perhaps the truest love possible. But Kent is sweet, considerate, and

possesses a body that rivals any Olympian (Apollo, especially, all lean and chiseled muscle). What is *wrong* with mortals that none have yet laid claim to his heart (and other bits)?

For this assignment, you're supposed to choose which of five Potential Soul Mates Kent will end up with. The first two are fine but unexceptional, and Kent—you decide, watching him fall asleep on the couch with two dogs laying across his chest—deserves the best. You briefly contemplate going with either Soul Mate #3 or #4, but then you learn that they *both* are severely allergic to dogs. Obviously, it's a no go.

One day of observation turns into three, and three days turns into a week. You request a new list of Potentials from Cupid #197, who rakes you over the coals for being too picky but ultimately hands over a new list.

None of these are up to par either.

Because Kent—you realize, watching him gently place a blanket over his best friend crashed on the couch—deserves better than the best. He deserves better than a Potential Soul Mate.

Kent Zarneki deserves to find *The One*.

* * * *

Your application that the Fates divine Kent Zarneki's One True Love is rejected without explanation.

"You have a list of *ten* romance options for the guy," Cupid #197 grumbles. "Everyone in your graduating class has already completed their assignments."

You glare back at him, wings ruffling with agitation. "But Kent—"

"*Target 280D*," Cupid #197 corrects. "Don't get attached to your marks."

Your stomach plummets at his words, which quote verbatim from your past textbooks. It's the first rule that every aspiring Cupid learns before being handed a bow: *Don't get attached*.

It's a rule you've already broken.

* * * *

On your second week of observing Kent Zarneki, he does something strange. You're hovering in the upper corner of his living room, next to the ceiling fan, when he abruptly stands from his seat, walks to the front door, and opens it. Nobody's there.

Kent's expression hardly changes at all, but by now you're enough of an expert on the man to catch the minute flicker of disappointment which narrows his grey eyes. He shuts the door and heads to the back exit, where he repeats the process. Instead of closing the door this time, however, he simply stands at the threshold as if awaiting someone.

Curious, you flutter down to see what it is that has Kent so engrossed. Annie and Cass are both splashing in the pool, but for once he's ignoring the dogs in favor of gazing blankly over the fence and into the patch of grass beyond.

What's so interesting? You lean forward, peering over his shoulder for a better look . . .

When he abruptly turns around, takes a step forward, and collides directly with you. Your invisibility spell shatters, and you're knocked back onto your rump. You stare up at him from the floor, and he stares back at you.

It's hard to tell which of you is more shocked by this development.

* * * *

Kent accepts your existence with unexpected ease.

"I knew I was being watched," he explains, seated across from you at the kitchen table.

Your cheeks heat at the knowledge that *you* were the one he'd been searching for in the yard. You should've wiped Kent's memory the moment that you were discovered, but you're strangely reluctant.

I've been trying to pair him with a Potential Soul Mate for two weeks without luck, you justify internally. Maybe this is a good thing—he can provide feedback on what he wants in a relationship.

You vocalize the question only to have Kent shrug. "What anyone wants, I guess," he says.

Not finding this information particularly helpful, you decide to stay for dinner.

* * * *

Two days later, and Kent still hasn't elaborated on his ideal relationship. You've stayed with him the entire time, disguised as a mortal of course (your shoulder blades itch from where your wings used to sprout). Whenever he's not busy, you pepper him with questions:

"Is your ideal partner messy or neat?"

Kent shrugs.

"Do they like to travel?"

Kent shrugs.

"What about their favorite book genre?"

Kent shrugs.

"Is there anything you *can* tell me about your perfect match?" you demand, exasperated. Annie, who was curled up in your lap, leaps up to give you a kiss on the cheek. Wonderful. Now even the dog is feeling pity for you—that's how bad you are at your job.

Kent stares at you for a long moment.

"Someone who likes animals," he says.

* * * *

"How do you feel about redheads?" you ask, shifting through your new files of Potential Soul Mates. Cupid #197 gave you grief for taking so long, but at least he hasn't yet caught on that you're hanging out with your mark.

Kent shrugs, dishing last night's spaghetti into two bowls. He pushes one towards you. "That stuff you added to the sauce is amazing."

"It's ambrosia," you say absently, switching to yet another file. "Oh! This one's a pediatrician!"

Kent takes a bite of pasta and doesn't respond.

"Or there's a librarian. That could be a good match, you like books . . ."

Kent shrugs yet again.

Frustration wells up in you. All this time, you've been working your ass off to achieve his Happily Ever After, and the blasted man acts like he doesn't even care. You just want him to be happy and loved, more than you've ever wanted anything in your eternal existence, and he's more focused on your spaghetti sauce recipe than on finding The One.

You toss the files down on the table, scattering them across the surface. You're angry—angrier than you should be. Angrier than you have any right to be.

"*Fine*," you snap, gesturing to the facedown papers. "If it doesn't matter, then just pick one randomly. Who do you want, Kent?"

He reaches across the table and grasps your hand.

"You," he says. "I want you."

* * * *

Kent's kiss tastes like ambrosia, and not just because it was in the spaghetti.

Everything about him is perfect. The way his calloused fingertips caress your jaw. How his tongue teases and twines with yours. His broken, pleading moan whenever you recall reality and begin to pull

away.

No one would be able to resist that moan, not even a demigod like yourself. Eventually, you stop attempting to retreat and simply enjoy your fall. Your heart beats faster—did you even have a heartbeat before meeting Kent? It's impossible to remember anything before this moment, before the urgent press of his hands and the impatient heat of his lips.

"We can't!" you gasp as his lips trail down your neck. "My job is to—"

"You said I could choose," he says, your exposed skin prickling under his breath. "I chose you."

His next kiss is desperation and reverence in equal measure. It's all too overwhelming, and you can't think. Kent won't let you. He pushes you back until you're trapped between the wall and his arms, one hand gliding up the curve of your back while the other takes your chin captive so that your lips can't escape. You're locked in his embrace, earthbound yet flying higher than your wings ever reached.

It's not heavenly. It's deliciously, deliriously *mortal*. Kent's nose sometimes smooshes against yours in his eagerness, and your front teeth click together during one too-hard kiss. It's all a mess and a little sloppy, and he pulls back briefly to make sure that you're okay. His pale skin is flushed, and his hair disheveled. He's never looked more perfect.

Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, you pull him back in.

"We chose each other," you say.

Meanwhile, back in Olympus . . .

Cupid #197 took off his spectacles and pinched his nose. Two hours, just to fill out paperwork that shouldn't have been necessary in the first place. Demigods and humans weren't supposed to fall in love, and he didn't understand why The Fates had decided to make an exception for his employee.

Ex-employee, that is, given that everything seemed to be proceeding on schedule. With a grumpy sigh (training new Cupids took *work*, and he wasn't eager to find a replacement), Cupid #197 signed his title to the bottom of the document with a flourish.

Subject: Kent Zarneki

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Reason for Divine Intervention: Designated Partner Not Yet Human.

[MB Saucy Side: Reason for Divine Intervention \(Kenna Version\)](#)

[Feb 14, 2022](#)

The assignment is simple: find target, shoot arrow, profit.

Having just gained your wings as a fledgling Cupid, you aren't about to mess up your first solo mission. It's imperative that you be at the top of your game; your new supervisor has been looking for an excuse to kick you off the Infatuation Task Force from the moment you were introduced. Something is up Cupid #197's ass, but it's certainly not one of your affection-inducing arrows.

You glance down at your mission brief, scanning it for the pertinent details. *Subject, Kenna Zarneki. Location: Chicago, Illinois. Reason for Divine Intervention . . .*

This last line is blank, making you frown. All Cupid targets are chosen for a reason, having some emotional hang up or mental block that prevents them from pursuing love independently. Your arrows aren't so much an eternal love spell as it is a gentle nudge that opens their eyes to possibilities. So why isn't the rationale filled out for this Kenna chick? Did admin forget?

You contemplate asking your supervisor directly before deciding that it's better to just get going. Whatever Kenna Zarneki's reason for not falling in love, it can't be so important that it's worth spending more time in Cupid #197's presence.

* * * *

After your first day of silent surveillance, you've deduced one very important fact about your target:

Kenna Zarneki is *adorable*.

It boggles your mind, truly, that this mortal hasn't found true love yet. Unless you count her dogs, of course, who love their owner with perhaps the truest love possible. But Kenna is sweet, considerate, and possesses a body that rivals any Olympian (Artemis, especially, all lithe, subtle curves). What is *wrong* with mortals that none have yet laid claim to her heart (and other bits)?

For this assignment, you're supposed to choose which of five Potential Soul Mates Kenna will end up with. The first two are fine but unexceptional, and Kenna—you decide, watching her fall asleep on the couch with two dogs laying across her chest—deserves the best. You briefly contemplate going with either Soul Mate #3 or #4, but then you learn that they *both* are severely allergic to dogs. Obviously, it's a no go.

One day of observation turns into three, and three days turns into a week. You request a new list of Potentials from Cupid #197, who rakes you over the coals for being too picky but ultimately hands over a new list.

None of these are up to par either.

Because Kenna—you realize, watching her gently place a blanket over her best friend crashed on the couch—deserves better than the best. She deserves better than a Potential Soul Mate.

Kenna Zarneki deserves to find *The One*.

* * * *

Your application that the Fates divine Kenna Zarneki's One True Love is rejected without explanation.

"You have a list of *ten* romance options for the guy," Cupid #197 grumbles. "Everyone in your graduating class has already completed their assignments."

You glare back at him, wings ruffling with agitation. "But Kenna—"

"*Target 280D*," Cupid #197 corrects. "Don't get attached to your marks."

Your stomach plummets at his words, which quote verbatim from your past textbooks. It's the first rule that every aspiring Cupid learns before being handed a bow: *Don't get attached*.

It's a rule you've already broken.

* * * *

On your second week of observing Kenna Zarneki, she does something strange. You're hovering in the upper corner of her living room, next to the ceiling fan, when she abruptly stands from her seat, walks to the front door, and opens it. Nobody's there.

Kenna's expression hardly changes at all, but by now you're enough of an expert on the woman to catch the minute flicker of disappointment which narrows her grey eyes. She shuts the door and heads to the back exit, where she repeats the process. Instead of closing the door this time, however, she simply stands at the threshold as if awaiting someone.

Curious, you flutter down to see what it is that has Kenna so engrossed. Annie and Cass are both splashing in the pool, but for once she's ignoring the dogs in favor of gazing blankly over the fence and into the patch of grass beyond.

What's so interesting? You lean forward, peering over her shoulder for a better look . . .

When she abruptly turns around, takes a step forward, and collides directly with you. Your invisibility spell shatters, and you're knocked back onto your rump. You stare up at her from the floor, and she stares back at you.

It's hard to tell which of you is more shocked by this development.

* * * *

Kenna accepts your existence with unexpected ease.

"I knew I was being watched," she explains, seated across from you at the kitchen table.

Your cheeks heat at the knowledge that *you* were the one she'd been searching for in the yard. You should've wiped Kenna's memory the moment that you were discovered, but you're strangely reluctant.

I've been trying to pair her with a Potential Soul Mate for two weeks without luck, you justify internally. Maybe this is a good thing—she can provide feedback on what she wants in a relationship.

You vocalize the question only to have Kenna shrug. "What anyone wants, I guess," she says.

Not finding this information particularly helpful, you decide to stay for dinner.

* * * *

Two days later, and Kenna still hasn't elaborated on her ideal relationship. You've stayed with her the entire time, disguised as a mortal of course (your shoulder blades itch from where your wings used to sprout). Whenever she's not busy, you pepper her with questions:

"Is your ideal partner messy or neat?"

Kenna shrugs.

"Do they like to travel?"

Kenna shrugs.

"What about their favorite book genre?"

Kenna shrugs.

"Is there anything you *can* tell me about your perfect match?" you demand, exasperated. Annie, who was curled up in your lap, leaps up to give you a kiss on the cheek. Wonderful. Now even the dog is feeling pity for you—that's how bad you are at your job.

Kenna stares at you for a long moment.

"Someone who likes animals," she says.

* * * *

"How do you feel about redheads?" you ask, shifting through your new files of Potential Soul Mates. Cupid #197 gave you grief for taking so long, but at least she hasn't yet caught on that you're hanging out with your mark.

Kenna shrugs, dishing last night's spaghetti into two bowls. she pushes one towards you. "That stuff you added to the sauce is amazing."

"It's ambrosia," you say absently, switching to yet another file. "Oh! This one's a pediatrician!"

Kenna takes a bite of pasta and doesn't respond.

"Or there's a librarian. That could be a good match, you like books . . ."

Kenna shrugs yet again.

Frustration wells up in you. All this time, you've been working your ass off to achieve her Happily Ever After, and the blasted woman acts like she doesn't even care. You just want her to be happy and loved, more than you've ever wanted anything in your eternal existence, and she's more focused on your spaghetti sauce recipe than on finding The One.

You toss the files down on the table, scattering them across the surface. You're angry—angrier than you should be. Angrier than you have any right to be.

"*Fine*," you snap, gesturing to the facedown papers. "If it doesn't matter, then just pick one randomly. Who do you want, Kenna?"

He reaches across the table and grasps your hand.

"You," she says. "I want you."

* * * *

Kenna's kiss tastes like ambrosia, and not just because it was in the spaghetti.

Everything about her is perfect. The way her calloused fingertips caress your jaw. How her tongue teases and twines with yours. Her broken, pleading moan whenever you recall reality and begin to pull away.

No one would be able to resist that moan, not even a demigod like yourself. Eventually, you stop attempting to retreat and simply enjoy your fall. Your heart beats faster—did you even have a heartbeat before meeting Kenna? It's impossible to remember anything before this moment, before the urgent press of her hands and the impatient heat of her lips.

"We can't!" you gasp as her lips trail down your neck. "My job is to—"

"You said I could choose," she says, your exposed skin prickling under her breath. "I chose you."

Her next kiss is desperation and reverence in equal measure. It's all too overwhelming, and you can't think. Kenna won't let you. She pushes you back until you're trapped between the wall and her arms,

one hand gliding up the curve of your back while the other takes your chin captive so that your lips can't escape. You're locked in her embrace, earthbound yet flying higher than your wings ever reached.

It's not heavenly. It's deliciously, deliriously *mortal*. Kenna's nose sometimes smooshes against yours in her eagerness, and your front teeth click together during one too-hard kiss. It's all a mess and a little sloppy, and she pulls back briefly to make sure that you're okay. Her pale skin is flushed, and her hair disheveled. She's never looked more perfect.

Grabbing a fistful of her shirt, you pull her back in.

"We chose each other," you say.

Meanwhile, back in Olympus . . .

Cupid #197 took off his spectacles and pinched his nose. Two hours, just to fill out paperwork that shouldn't have been necessary in the first place. Demigods and humans weren't supposed to fall in love, and he didn't understand why The Fates had decided to make an exception for his employee.

Ex-employee, that is, given that everything seemed to be proceeding on schedule. With a grumpy sigh (training new Cupids took *work*, and he wasn't eager to find a replacement), Cupid #197 signed his title to the bottom of the document with a flourish.

Subject: Kenna Zarneki

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Reason for Divine Intervention: Designated Partner Not Yet Human.

The Korean Reunification War was an unprecedented event. Prior to the United Nations decision to unify all member nations against North Korea, the UN had served only as an organization dedicated to facilitating open and peaceful discourse between separate countries.

What changed?

Alas, the answer is that thirty years ago, the global community viewed all Ments as something to be feared. Even in the most liberal of countries, Ments possessed restricted rights limiting their job opportunities, ability to vote, and were often denied legal protections. North Korea was not simply another totalitarian regime (although its human rights violations were plentiful and well-documented)—it was a repressive dictatorship by [i]Ments[/i]. Leadership in North Korea was decided by strength of mental agility, which its then-ruler being one of the most powerful Empaths in recorded history.

The atrocities upon North Korea's populace by its Ment leadership should not be understated (for a full recounting, see pg. 129). Brainwashing was common, with the majority of soldiers serving under telepathic or empathic generals who used physical exhaustion and learned indoctrination to break past mental barriers.

[The Korean Reunification](#)

[Feb 16, 2022](#)

Finishing up the final entry to the Aeon Student Guide (which will be included in the stat screen next update). The above photo is an *extremely* rough draft, but overall the Student Guide is almost 4,000 words of pure lore dumping.

Completely optional lore dumping, mind you!

There's some reactivity if you read over it before Rosy's class, but the game is fully playable and comprehensible regardless of whether or not you choose to read this extra material (I didn't include it in the first draft in order to make sure that the story didn't rely on it). There are a few context clues that may help you figure out MB's plot, but they'll also be in the main text so are more reinforcement than revelations. Mostly, the Student Guide just gives you a deeper understanding of the world and may be helpful as a roleplay aide when deciding your Button's opinions.

[Aeon Student Guide: The Korean Reunification](#)

[Feb 17, 2022](#)

I ended up having to divide Unity's Founding and The Korean Reunification into two separate entries, with the Korean Reunification in particular ending up a lot longer than I anticipated. I'm posting the first part up (on the Reunification) in it's entirety before the rewrite in order to solicit your feedback--please let me know if there's any awkward wording or anything seems unclear!

If the text seems biased . . . well, the winners write history. And Unity *definitely* leans into that propaganda to make themselves come across as heroic as possible. None of the information is outright false, but there's enough of a slant that Button will be able to call it out in-game.

Most of this information gets repeated in-game during Rosy's new class scene, but in a much briefer/shallower way. Reading the Student Guide won't be necessary in order to enjoy *Mind Blind*, but it will provide some deeper insight into the world and lore. (And possibly drop a bonus clue, if you're paying close attention.)

* * * *

The Korean Reunification

The Korean Reunification War was an unprecedented event. Prior to the United Nations decision to unify all member nations against North Korean, the UN had primarily served only as an organization dedicated to facilitating open and peaceful discourse between separate countries.

What changed?

Alas, the answer is that thirty years ago, Ments were largely feared by the global community. Even in Finland, which had statutes granting Ments unique legal protection, those with mental agility still possessed restricted rights that limited their job opportunities, stripped away their ability to vote, and often denied them a fair trial if accused of abusing their psychic powers.

North Korea was not simply another totalitarian regime; it was a repressive dictatorship by Ments. North Korean leadership was decided by strength of mental agility, which its then-ruler being one of the most powerful Empaths in recorded history. Although the prevalent anti-Ment bias of the time was inarguably egregious, the atrocities committed upon North Korea's populace by its Ment leadership must not be understated (for a full recounting, see pg. 129). Brainwashing was common, with conscripted soldiers serving under telepathic or empathic generals who used physical fatigue and indoctrination to break past mental barriers. When the true nature of the North Korean regime was revealed by a Ment deserter who survived crossing the DMZ, the tense stalemate between North and South Korea became increasingly heated and ultimately broke out in open combat.

When South Korea sent out the call for allies, the entire world responded, propelled by a shared concern that Ments in their own countries might view North Korea's regime of terror not as a human rights violation but rather as an example to attempt to claim power of their own. The United Nations declared it a time of "unprecedented crisis," and The Reunification War officially began. North Korea's

historical allies declared neutrality on the issue, their message was clear: so long as Ments openly controlled the nation, North Korea would receive no outside aide.

Despite being overwhelmingly outnumbered by UN forces, North Korea managed to temporarily claim Busan via subaquatic naval attack. South Korean citizens residing in the city were forcibly conscripted into the North Korean army, their minds grasped under the control of designated Ment “will breakers.” These civilians were sent to the front lines, where South Korean soldiers understandably balked at fighting people who had, the week prior, been family members and friends.

South Korean President Chae-min Choi proposed bringing in Ment soldiers to fight against North Korean leadership and free the non-Ment populace from psychic control. Under the leadership of Spec Ment Commander John Wiseman, an allied Ment taskforce took down Haneul Kim, the telekinetic general responsible for Busan’s seizure and whose violent misuse of telekinesis on the battlefield had earned him the name of “Black Hand.” Many scholars of modern history now regard Haneul Kim’s defeat as the impetus for Unity’s founding (see pg. 47).

Less than two months after the Liberation of Busan, North Korea unconditionally surrendered. The border between North and South was abolished, and Korea emerged as a reunified nation.

[Writer's Blog: Chapter 2 2.0 Is UP!](#)

[Feb 18, 2022](#)

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

Fun fact: Chapters 1 and 2 consist of a combined 82,000 words, which is around a sixth of *Mind Blind*'s total content! (This is mostly the fault of Chapter 2, which clocks in at 50,000 words. Hopefully, future chapters will be quicker to edit and rewrite.)

What's New:

- Minor edits and polishing.
- Ace romance options for Kenzie and Glitch. (Rosy's romance for ace Buttons doesn't initiate until later).
- Reworked stats (it's now easier to lose affection).
- Reworked coding for all of Rosy's gender variables, as they use the same as Kenzie and thus consolidating their pronouns made more sense.

- New dialogue options (ex: ability to politely tell Glitch to slow their roll.).
- Behind-the-scenes tracking of Button's sympathies (Unity vs Vengeance), as well as how content they are with Unity's current status quo.
- You can now literally be afraid of pencils.
- How you passed the ASE is now remembered for future dialogues (although only the beard option changes anything in Chapter 2).
- The Aeon Student Guide can now be found in the Stat Screen. (The sections "Unity's Founding," "UCRT and Aeon Tower," and "MIVs and AMOs" are still missing, as I'm trying to figure out how I want to organize and combine these particular segments.)
- The game will also now remember if you tell Glitch that you're vegan.
- A new scene featuring Rosy actually acting like a teacher! I ended up moving half of this scene (the part with more personal info) to their office in Chapter 3. Two reasons: Firstly, because Rosy will be more forthcoming if it's just them and Button. Secondly, Chapter 2 was already too long.
- A bunch of other stuff that I can't remember off the top of my head.

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter 3 Feedback Request](#)

[Feb 18, 2022](#)

It's time for Chapter 3, which means it's time to focus on John and Hope!

Let me tell you, their new relationship tracking a doozy. A doozy that I'm extremely excited to implement, but still a doozy.

If you have suggestions about Chapter 3 (*especially* when it comes to how you'd like Button to react/feel during their lunch meeting with John), I'd love to hear it! The options involving Button's parents for this chapter will be the foundation for all future interactions with them, so it's extra important that I know what kind of nuance and dynamics you hope for.

(Heh, "hope for." Get it?)

There are 3 ways to provide feedback:

1. Leave a comment on this post,
2. Use the Great Rewriting Feedback channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers,

or

3. Send an email to mindblindbetatest@gmail.com.

[Delivery Development: Kestrel](#)

[Feb 24, 2022](#)

This month's poll was going to be on what kind of vehicles Golightly can own, but I realized that decision could wait. Golightly's relationship with Kestrel, however, is something that I need to figure out sooner rather than later.

In case their avian first name didn't give it away, Kestrel Gardener is Golightly's . . . we'll call them a "classmate" from the Satanic Orphanage (both were in the New-Last-Name-Starts-With-A-G year). Kestrel doesn't appear in the game. They can't, because they're dead. Actually dead, and not just ghosted.

Spoilery bits ahead: Kestrel's death was Golightly's impetus for escaping the orphanage. Originally, I'd conceived of Kestrel as just as platonic friend, but I'm wondering if people would be more interested in customizing this a bit more and choose whether Kestrel was Golightly's friend, bully, or first love.

There is a tradeoff to this customization, however. Keeping Kestrel in a single role (friend) means that I can better flesh out their personality during flashbacks, whereas being able to choose their relationship will likely result in a vaguer character with less defining features. While Kestrel only plays a very small role in the game, interacting with them via a short series of flashbacks is the primary way in which Golightly's backstory gets determined.

My gut instinct is to go with the "one size fits all" approach and keep Kestrel as just a friend, but *Mind Blind* has taught me that these predetermined relationships often don't go over well as they limit roleplay (and *Delivery* already has one semi-static relationship with Lydia, so I'm not sure I want to risk a second similar dynamic, even if it's kept to the past).

So, which do you guys prefer? That Kestrel's role be customizable, but that they be somewhat shallower? Or that all MCs be stuck having Kestrel as a former friend, but with Kestrel having more fleshed-out personality?

(And if you have other suggestions, please share!)

Make Kestrel customizable! Let me vary the angst-level each playthrough, because a first love's death hits different than a bully's

Keep Kestrel limited to a friend, so that their personality can get all the loving depth and detail.

Both sound good!

Make Kestrel optional altogether. Does Golightly **need** to have a tragic backstory? (The answer is yes.)

Actually, I wanted to use the name Kestrel for my MC. Can you please give their dead friend a less cool bird name?

46 votes total

[Writer's Blog: John, Still A Himbo But Now Complex](#)

[Feb 25, 2022](#)

Chapter 3 will be out this weekend! Overhauling John's relationship means simultaneously recoding his scenes in Chapters 4 and 5, in order to make sure that the relationship variables I'm tracking work throughout all of John's main conversations. And I must say, I'm really pleased by how it's turned out! I've talked a little in past posts about the new overhaul for how Button's relationship with their parents is tracked, but I haven't gone much into what having variables instead of a stat bar actually means and what this looks like in-game.

To summarize the new relationship system, instead of Hope and John having a stat bar like other characters, Button's feelings towards them is now tracked via series of descriptors. These variables are set to either true or false depending on your choices.

John, for example, currently has nine variables (one up from yesterday's count of eight, and the potential to bump higher once I finish up his Chapter 5 scenes).

These variables are:

Jclose – Button and John's current relationship is close, meeting up at least once a week for lunch.

Jtense – Button and John's current relationship is tense, with Button actively avoiding most meetings.

Jpast – Button and John were close before The Incident (regardless of their current relationship).

Jblame – Button blames John for not protecting them from Hope.

Jresent – Button is upset that John left with Hope instead of staying.

Junfair – Button feels that John treated Nick unfairly by making him Button's guardian.

Jfavoritism – Button feels like John has always favored Nick.

Jbusybody – Button is upset that John tried to stop them from joining Aeon.

Jmiss – Button misses John.

None of these variables, with the exception of *Jclose* and *Jtense*, are exclusive. This means that your choices will end up creating a customized dynamic. Perhaps your Button and John used to be joined at the hip but now can now barely get through a lunch together, yet Button still really misses him while also being upset that Nick had to take on so much responsibility (*Jpast*, *Jtense*, *Jmiss*, and *Junfair*). Or maybe your Button and John are closer now than ever, but Button secretly believes that John would always pick Nick and Hope over them if push came to shove (*Jclose*, *Jfavoritism*, and *Jresent*). There's a **bunch** of combinations that can be created (too many for me to count!), and all of these feelings are now be reflected in conversations with John (more so in Chapters 4 and 5, since Chapter 3 mostly involves setting these variables via Button's initial options towards John).

In Chapters 4 and 5, Button's default dialogue changes based on which variables they have active. The selectable options also change! *Junfair* Buttons, for example, get a chance to snark that since Nick's presence in their head means that they're no longer a Zero, John shouldn't have any more issue with them being an MIV. I've shown what this new system looks like coding-wise in the Demo channel in the Sanctum (as well as the nonsensical pitfalls that come with it), but it ultimately means that the family dynamic for each MC you create should feel uniquely theirs.

[February Live Q&A](#)

[Feb 26, 2022](#)

Tomorrow's first Q&A will be held at **10am PST (Sunday, Feb 27th)**.

This first Q&A will be recorded via Craigbot. The 2nd Q&A, however, will not as my lips tend to get loosey goosey in the evening.

Please select which timeslot works best for the 2nd Q&A:

(Alas, I can't fix the last option because this is a poll, but it should read 8-9pm 🤦)

February 27th, 5pm - 6pm PST

February 27th, 6pm - 7pm PST

February 27th, 8pm - 9pm PST

20 votes total

[Live Q&A Link and 2nd Timeslot](#)

[Feb 27, 2022](#)

In accordance with yesterday's poll, the 2nd Q&A is scheduled for 6pm - 7pm PST!

Here's the link for this morning's session:

<https://craig.horse/?id=591210992&key=124944793>

And here's the link to the lullaby mentioned for Kenzie in said session:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wehY83wdWlw&ab_channel=DeannaC

[MB Short Story: Being Normal](#)

[Feb 27, 2022](#)

Note: This story was originally a flashback in *Mind Blind*! Arden could be chosen as either a past fling or a friend, so I've tried to leave it vague for the purposes of this piece.

The original intent of the scene was to show that Button had choices other than staying in Chicago while also emphasizing how their Zero impacts their every moment spent in public. Ultimately, I took out the scene because it slowed down the main plot's momentum and introduced a character who was ultimately a throwaway.

* * * *

When Nick asked what you wanted for your eighteenth birthday, your response was instant, impulsive, and only half-joking.

"Being normal for one week sounds pretty great," you said, your tone coming out a little less light than you intended. Nick's face fell, and you immediately backtracked. "But, hey, if a custom-order brain is out of the question, maybe a Vespa?"

Nick smiled in a way that didn't reach his eyes. "Just don't *mo-ped* if you don't like the scooter color that I choose."

You stared at him blankly.

"*Mo-ped*? Like mope, only it's a Vespa, so . . ." Nick trailed off as he overheard your thoughts and realized that, yes, you'd gotten his pun but simply hadn't found it worthy of laughter. He shook his head with a morose sigh. "Tough crowd."

* * * *

You forget about your request to be normal. After all, there's no point in wishing for the impossible.

* * * *

After blowing out your birthday candles to Sally's jubilant yell of "*Make ALL the wishes!*", you shake the envelope handed to you by Nick.

"Doesn't sound like Vespa keys," you say.

In fact, the envelope is completely flat. Maybe Nick has gifted you a blank cheque for your birthday? Becoming Justice did come with a substantive pay raise, and surely Nick couldn't have spent it *all* on his new house. You eye the newly installed farmhouse sink over your brother's shoulder. Then again, it can't be cheap to completely renovate a kitchen up to the Nick Wiseman Standard.

"Just open it," Nick urges. You catch Sally and Grayson exchange excited smiles, amping up your curiosity.

Inside the envelope, you find a card with a iguana wearing a party hat and the words "*Older? Yes. Wiser? As If!*" (in keeping with Nick's long-term tradition of getting you cards that allude to your shared last name). A slip of paper drops out as you open the card, and your eyebrows arch as you silently read off the words.

"Aren't you gonna read it aloud?" Sally demands in a smug tone that says she already knows perfectly well what it is.

"It's a brochure," you say slowly, still not quite comprehending what it is that you're looking at, "for the VIP vacation package at Echo Point Lodge. Located in . . . North Dakota." You shoot Nick a quizzical expression. "My eighteenth birthday gift is a trip to a Dakota?"

"No!" Sally exclaims. "It's—"

Grayson puts his hand over her mouth before she can spoil the surprise. He nods encouragingly at Nick, who looks uncharacteristically nervous over your reception of his gift.

"You told me that you wanted to experience being 'normal,'" your brother says quietly. "Echo Point only has population of nine hundred." His eyes lock with yours, nervous desperation behind them that you'll like his gift. "According to Unity's files, it's one of the few towns in the USA without any citizens registered on the Mensus. Echo Point Lodge is its only real tourist attraction, and I had backgrounds pulled on guests scheduled during your visit—none of them are Ments."

Your breath catches as you begin to comprehend the full meaning of his words. Nick has just bought you a week of total mental privacy. And not locked in an apartment, but in a town that has, according to the brochure in your birthday card, natural hot springs.

"The package includes a guided hike through Theodore Roosevelt State Park," Gray says eagerly. "There's also independent trails, a day long horse-riding excursion, kayaking tours, and you can even camp out overnight in the badlands."

Sally rolls her eyes. "Yes, because a sleeping bag is so much preferable to a king-sized memory foam." She leans in towards you, her voice rising with excitement. "Their spa does hot stone massages *and* has those little fish that nibble dead skin off your toes."

"All of this in North Dakota?" you ask.

"Echo Point is one of the best-kept celebrity retreats," Gray says. "Mostly for Hollywood types, but Equality went last year on their 'Digital Detox' package."

"The lack of any other Ments freaked him out," Nick adds, "but for you . . ."

For you, it's perfect.

You glance over at Sally, who answers your silent query with a small shake of her head.

"I wish I could join you," she says, "but my dads promised that I could take point on this latest renovation, and besides . . ." She trails off before completing the thought of "*Besides, the whole point is to get you away from Ments like me.*"

You look into her eyes, searching for any sign that she feels hurt or left out that a vacation away from her qualifies as gift, but instead find only acceptance and understanding.

"Thank you," you say. Your words aren't just for Nick, but for Grayson and Sally as well.

Those three can no more help being Ments than you can help being a Zero, and yet they've collectively accepted your need for a reprieve. A few years ago, this gift might've made you spiral wondering if it was a passive aggressive hint that *they* needed a break from *you*. But you're eighteen now. An adult capable of quashing their internalized doubts and fear of rejection.

Because that's all this is, isn't it? A thoughtful gift from your brother, who somehow managed to give you exactly what you asked for. It's not Nick saying that yes, *Button, you are indeed too much*. Gray's collaboration isn't his way of asking for even more space. And Sally's decision not to join you isn't her saying that she needs a break from your friendship.

It's just a gift.

A nice, considerate, somewhat lonely gift.

* * * *

Echo Point takes some getting used to. The first day, every time you pass another guest, you instinctively run through your litany of anti-Ment deterrents. But Nick's intel, which you suspect involved a misuse of UCRT resources, proves correct. No one flinches at imagery of dead frogs, or balks at annoying song lyrics, or laughs at your joking thoughts, or rolls their eyes at your inner pep talks. On day three, your backside still sore from yesterday's horse-riding lesson, you dare to venture out into downtown.

You've never travelled without Nick or Sally as support. Leaving the resort alone feels like tempting fate, and you're filled with a combination of nauseous anxiety and reckless exhilaration that makes you feel both heavier and lighter at the same. You challenge yourself *not* to recite Rick Astley song lyrics as you step into the video rental store, the type that somehow manages to hang on in vacation towns, most likely due to being in cahoots with whatever manager decided to include a DVD player in your hotel room.

The teenager behind the counter barely glances up at you from his phone. His expression is disinterested, and you force yourself to stifle the immediate thought of "*He's clearly not a Ment.*" No one in Echo Point is a Ment. That's why you're here.

Your fingertips trail over the tops of the lined-up films, coming away with a thin coating of dust that makes your nose wrinkle. Forget an agreement with the resort; this place is clearly a front for something, given none of these movies look as if they've been checked out for at least a year. None of the titles predate 2010, either. Your gaze lands on the lone copy of *Inception*. Given your life currently feels like a dream, it seems an appropriate choice.

"We have a two-for-one special on all DiCaprio movies," the cashier informs you in a bored voice.

You glance back over at meager selection but see nothing of interest—in fact, you're pretty sure every movie available is older than Leo's most recent girlfriend. Your lips curve upwards at your own dumb joke, but the cashier's face remains blank. Nick would've laughed without you having to say anything.

"Just the one movie is fine," you say. "I won't be staying much longer."

The cashier shrugs.

* * * *

By day four, you consider extending your stay at Echo Point for another week. Not because of the hot springs (which, admittedly, are fantastic), but because life here is so much *easier*. It's almost shocking how quickly you adjust to not conducting a customer headcount each time you enter the grocery store in order to buy snacks (the VIP treatment Nick got you comes with a meal plan, but no way are you paying fifteen dollars for a single-serve bag of parmesan crisps out of the minifridge).

After a lifetime spent strategically identifying and avoiding Ments, it's immensely freeing to just walk into the store, beeline to the chip rack, grab a bag of Cheetos, and check out. There's no plotting your route, no debating whether to head over to self-checkout or risk a Ment cashier. Grocery shopping is no longer a tactical infiltration and retreat—it's just a snack run. You even make small talk with the cashier without worrying that she's only talking about the weather as a pretense to rummage through your memories.

"Come again!" Lucy calls out as you leave the store.

"Maybe I will," you reply.

* * * *

Day four is also when Arden checks into Echo Point Resort. They're two years older than you, an up-and-coming actor looking to take a mental health break from the spotlight to which they've been newly exposed.

"It's weird," they confess over a plate of shared tiramisu. "This show I just got cast in—I'm playing a thirteen-year-old." They pout and gesture down their body. "Do I *look* as if I only just went through puberty?"

You laugh because Arden is genuinely funny. You laugh at a few of their jokes that aren't funny as well, after noticing the way that their smile grows wider even when your amusement isn't authentic.

"My younger sister is thirteen," they continue, nudging the last bite of tiramisu towards you with their fork. "But my costars are all closer to my age than hers, despite the fact we're all playing seventh graders. Do you have any siblings?"

"I'm an only child." The lie falls off your tongue with surprising ease.

* * * *

Arden is fun. A little self-absorbed, but you chalk that up to them being an actor. Who cares if they never notice whether or not your laughter at their jokes is genuine or faked? Sally's eyes would be rolling nonstop if she were here—your best friend's ability to sense your emotions means that there's no maintaining any pretenses.

But after years of being around her and Nick, pretenses feel like a downright luxury. Arden thinks you're a single child who's enamored by their wit, and you have no intentions of shattering that illusion. Deceiving them is your choice, and that freedom tastes even better than the last bite of tiramisu.

"You should come visit me on set sometime," Arden says, trying to keep their voice casual even as their cheeks flush red.

You hesitate. You still haven't mentioned your Zero. Your Pollard Score is irrelevant in Echo Point, but it won't be in L.A. Los Angeles is even bigger than Chicago, with a smaller Ment percentage but overall more Ments. You're not against visiting, exactly, but the film industry tends to attract Empaths and Arden's already told you that their sister, who often visits the set, is a Telepath.

"I mean, only if you want!" Arden quickly adds, mistaking your silence for reluctance. "I'll just be sad to say goodbye, you know?"

"I'll have to check my work schedule," you lie. "But yeah. A visit sounds fun."

Arden beams at you, and an unfamiliar pang shoots through your chest. Guilt? Growing up, lying had never been an option.

* * * *

Arden stares blankly at you over another plate of tiramisu, this one still untouched.

"A Zero?" they repeat. "What does that even mean?"

You shift uncomfortably in your seat. "I'm more or less normal." The statement feels true—for this past week, you've felt no different from anyone else.

Arden's frown deepens. "Broadcasting your thoughts to Ments doesn't *sound* normal."

You bristle at their description, despite it being a phrase you'd recently used yourself when explaining. "It's not so much that I broadcast things as that Ments intrude, and I can't keep them out."

Arden doesn't respond.

"It's not a huge deal," you say, sounding unconvincing even to yourself. "Most people aren't Ments, after all."

They blow out a long breath. “Yeah, but . . . a lot of reporters are. Don’t get me wrong, it’s been great getting to know you. But that was when I thought . . . I mean, Ments would hear everything going on in your life, right?”

“It’s not—”

“Which means if you came to visit, Ments would hear all your thoughts about me*.* They’d hear everything you know about me.” Arden stands abruptly, dropping their fork on the table. “I’m sorry. It’s hard enough trying to be in the public eye—I mean, my family is *from* North Dakota. My grandparents still live an hour’s drive from here. I’m sorry, but I just can’t.”

You smile tightly at their twice-voiced apology, and decide not to mention that your family hires a fleet of lawyers to protect your privacy. Because Arden is right. Visiting them in L.A. would attract attention, and they’re at this resort for the same reason that you are: to feel normal.

You’d ruin any hope of normalcy for them, because you’re only normal in Echo Point.

“It’s not a big deal,” you say. “Maybe we’ll arrange to meet up again at the resort someday.”

“Sure,” Arden says.

Being normal means that both of you can blatantly lie.

* * * *

Nick picks you up at O’Hare Airport. The moment you exit baggage claim, he’s already out of the car. There’s no need for you to explain what happened or how you’re feeling—he knows everything without you needing to say a word. Your brother’s hug is tight.

“I was a little worried that you wouldn’t come back,” he says in a light tone that you know isn’t completely joking.

“I did contemplate applying for a job at the resort,” you tease, also not entirely insincere.

He squeezes you even tighter, surrounding you with the scent of your favorite cookies—no doubt a welcome home surprise.

You may never be normal outside of Echo Point, but at least you’ll always be loved.

[February Interview](#)

[Feb 28, 2022](#)

Next month will be an interview as usual where you guys ask questions, but I thought I'd mix it up a little for February.

Enjoy!

"Interview" Link: <https://uquiz.com/iz4puP>

[The Great Rewriting Feedback Request: Chapters 4 AND 5](#)

[Mar 2, 2022](#)

Chapter 3's rewrite is complete, and John's relationship variable count is now up to ten! Unlike the other eight variables that I listed in my last blogpost, these two new variables track John's feelings based on your dialogue choices (determining how comfortable/cautious/apologetic he behaves towards Button). I keep bouncing between his scenes in Chapters 3-5, and at this point most of the scenes involving him have been either edited or completely rewritten (with the code completely overhauled for all).

I'm going to release the updated versions of Chapters 3 – 5 as a group due to much variable dependency in these chapters—not only because of John, but because I'm adding more recognition and flavor dialogue depending on Button's response to the initial explosion. This means a lot of bouncing back and forth between chapters to tweak the code as I edit, so I figure it would be best to release it as a small block once everything is finalized. Because of this, I'm only having this post for both Chapters 4 and 5.

There's a lot that happens in this two chapter block, including the initiation of Sally and Glitch's committed romance paths, so I'm eager to read all your suggestions! If you can't decide which parts to focus on, I'd particularly appreciate feedback about the hospital scenes (because of their importance to the plot) and the scene where Button informs John about Nick's presence (since I feel like this portion needs some of the most reworking).

There are 3 ways to provide feedback:

1. Leave a comment on this post,
2. Use the Great Rewriting Feedback channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers,

or

3. Send an email to mindblindbetatest@gmail.com.

[Mar 5, 2022](#)

I fell asleep at my desk last night before posting Friday's update. Weirdly, my back feels great? There might be benefits to sleeping upright instead of half-falling off the bed in starfish position like I usually do. Regardless, as of this morning I'm finished with Chapter 4 and currently editing Chapter 5!

(This post also serves as a final request for any feedback on these two chapters, which you can submit here: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/63288760>)

I've discussed how the relationship system now works with Button's parents, but my focus during Chapter 3 was primarily on Button's dynamic with John. In Chapter 4, I wanted to make sure that Hope's absence was more keenly felt. Television shows often feature scenes where a family gathers in a hospital to support an admitted member—this inevitably leads to an arc of reconciliation, where two alienated family members put aside their past disagreements in order to come together and support someone they both love. Given this unstated narrative expectation, I always found Hope and Button's inability to support Nick together especially tragic, but I didn't really do a great job of communicating that in the text. The hospital scenes have been heavily reworked, with many of Button's thoughts setting the remaining variables for their relationship with Hope.

Despite only appearing in a flashback, Hope actually ended up with more variables than John! Which makes sense, I suppose. Given everything that's happened, there's no way for Hope and Button's relationship to *not* be complicated (even if my first draft didn't reflect that as well as I wanted).

Hope's Relationship Variables:

Hfear – Button is terrified of Hope and Hope's powers.

Hworry – Button worries about Hope's wellbeing, and for this reason is reluctant to see their mother again.

Hblame – Button blames Hope for The Incident.

Hguilt – Button blames themselves for The Incident (this also sets the *guiltybutton* variable to true, which becomes relevant during the meeting with Sohvi).

Habandon – Button feels that Hope abandoned them by leaving, and that she instead should've stayed and tried to fix things.

Hnope – Button never wants to see Hope again.

Hmiss – Button has been trying to convince Hope to come visit.

Hforgiven – Button has forgiven Hope for almost killing them.

Hangry – Button is both angry and hungry. (Not really. This variable actually tracks whether or not Button is still upset at Hope.)

Hbrs – Button is in favor of Hope getting the BRS.

Many of these “variables” are actually hidden stat bars where a higher level indicates a higher intensity, such as *Hfear*, *Hbrs*, and *Hangry*. And whereas John’s variables mostly focus on Button’s current attitude towards their father, a lot of Hope’s variables are about her past relationship with Button and are now set during the flashback that Button can share with Gray.

Hope’s Past Relationship Variables:

Hbest – Button and Hope were each other’s “favorite” before The Incident (regardless of their current relationship).

Hclose – Button and Hope were close before The Incident, but not exceptionally so.

Hworst – Button and Hope had an extremely contentious relationship before The Incident.

Hdistant – Button and Hope grew more and more distant over time, with Button noticing that their mom grew more distant once they reached junior high.

Hbest, *Hclose*, and *Hworst* are all exclusive, but can be combined with *Hdistant* depending on how observant your Button was as a preteen (also how moody, as some Buttons were easier for Hope to be around than others). One would think that fourteen variables would be enough for a character who doesn’t show up in person until the second half of the book, but, no, there’s more! *Hweekly*, *Hmonthly*, *Hholidays*, and *Hghost* track how often Button and Hope video chat.

So, Hope has a grand total of eighteen variables that you can mostly mix and match to customize her and Button’s relationship. John only has eleven variables, which means he comes in second place to his wife—just like his sexiness ranking by *Ments Magazine*.

[Mind Blind March Interview: The Trashy Reunion Special](#)

[Mar 7, 2022](#)

Ah, reality show reunion episodes. Is there anything better than when celebrities in the death throws of their contracts drop their filters and bring in the megaphones to taunt and provoke each other?

. . . Ok, I admit, I've never seen a reality show reunion except for maybe three minutes when changing channels during commercials (back in ye olden days before streaming). But I did google the term "Shocking Reality TV Reunion Episodes" in order to write the intro for this post, and apparently unauthorized megaphones has actually been a thing.

Regardless of my personal consumption of reality shows (or rather, lack thereof), I'm digging the extreme chaos vibes that can happen when an entire cast is thrown into the same room after they've all witnessed how the others backstabbed each other on the aired show. Thus, this month's Character Interview features the entire main cast of *Mind Blind*, and will be set "after" the events of the main game.

Questions can be addressed to single or multiple characters, or tossed into the mix without a target as a free-for-all for anyone to answer. Due to scheduling conflicts, Shard will not be able to attend this month's show. All five main ROs will attend, however, as will Reese, AL, and all the Wisemans.

Needless to say, this version of the show comes at the end of the route where Button never discovers Shard's identity (which happens should Button reject their offer of assistance in Chapter 15).

Ask your questions either on this post, or in the Interview channel on the Sanctum discord!

[Finished writing an ending! All the way! No missing scenes, just missing numbers.](#)

[Mar 9, 2022](#)

The first route in *Mind Blind* is written! All the way, to the end, for a total of nineteen chapters. (I might make Chapter 20 an epilogue but we'll see.)

This route (which happens should Button accept Shard's offer of help) isn't yet fully coded, as I don't yet know what thresholds will be required for stats in order to achieve certain sub endings—I'll be keeping track of all the opportunities to raise/drop these stats as I continue editing prior chapters. The ending is still unplayable as the values are left blank, which means the code currently reads:

**if (Vengeance > xx) and (Nickchase false)*

**goto Ending 3*

Where "xx" represents whatever number needs to be met to achieve that particular ending. Despite the blank code, *I've made it all the way to one ending!* And am super excited. Which is why I'm posting,

because I wanted to share my excitement!

Chapters 3-5 will release within the next few days--I'm adding in yet more variables after writing this version of ending. After that, I'll open up feedback for Chapters 6-8 and also begin writing the other final ending routes. Writing the endings as I recode lets me identify extra variables that need to be tracked.

Anyway, one ending down!! Only . . . a bunch more endings to go. I'd give a number, but we all know that I'm going to add at least three more at some point. For now, here's a passage from a certain someone's romance route (edited for spoilers):

"Kim kisses you with searing desperation. His lips are hot and forceful, yet his hands cusp your cheeks with extraordinary gentleness. Part of him still wants you to walk away.

You hug him closer lest he be the one to break free, only for him to flinch. He draws back, leaving you cold and exposed. Does he already regret kissing you? A moment passes in stillness, feeling like an eternity yet barely long enough for you to register the complexity of his expression. He's elated, confused, apologetic. Emotions that you've never before witnessed in Kim.

Your eyes meet, and his face fills with yet another new emotion. Hope.

Kim's lips once more press against yours, insistent and fierce. One hand grips your chin, the other tightens around your shoulder. The tentativeness of his touch vanishes—his embrace becomes a promise not to leave, no matter the consequences."

[Writer's Blog: \(Re\)Writing is Hard.](#)

[Mar 12, 2022](#)

Editing an IF is one of the most difficult things that I've ever done in my entire existence, and I say this as someone who used to wrangle small children for a living. It's extremely disorienting to rewrite things when the scenes don't *flow*. I feel like a blindfolded toddler holding an upside-down map, and half of my time is spent just figuring out which choice leads to which scene and trying to remember why the heck I thought it was a good idea to name a variable "Fred."

Which is to admit: the rewrite is harder I anticipated!

However, I've finally updated Chapter 3 to the demo link, and Chapters 4 and 5 will go up as soon as I'm finished with Hope's optional phone call in Chapter 4. (These two chapters are otherwise done, but I couldn't resist adding more to Hope's new present-day debut.)

What's New In Chapter 3:

1. An expanded scene with Rosy.
2. Reactive text messaging from John should you make certain choices in Chapter 1.
3. More nuance regarding Button's preexistent crush on Gray.
4. A boatload of new choices. There's too many to list, but the highlights include defining why Button told Hope that they hate her as well as new opportunities to call people out on various subjects.
5. Completely recoded parents! By Chapter 3's end, all of the initial relationship variables with John and Hope have been set, which provides payoff during their conversations in Chapters 4 and 5.
6. You can now find one of two new clues hinting as to Shard's identity.

Things That Were Added To Chapter 3 But Then Moved:

1. John's expanded scene. I moved a lot of it to Chapter 5.
2. Glitch being able to call Button out for lying over breakfast being vegan. This is now an optional confession during Glitch's first date.
3. A longer text conversation between Sally, which is now an in-person convo during her hangout scene.

Things That Were Added To Chapter 3 But Then Deleted (And Which Will Probably Show Up In A Bloop Reel):

1. Rosy opening up. It's all *subtext* now. Rosy kept protesting whenever I wrote a scene where they bared even an inch of their heart--they just don't trust Button yet. Don't worry, though, I'm going to keep pushing Rosy throughout future scenes and leave in as much as their characterization allows.
2. The ability to bail on John and flee from *Sofia's*. I loved this option, but it ultimately changed to much in future scenes (like how AL recovered their phone).
3. Ms. Gardener, Button's high school Modern History teacher.

Mind Blind 2.0 Demo:

<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[Delivery Development: Luce's Band](#)

[Mar 15, 2022](#)

Luce is one of *Delivery's* main ROs (their profile can be found here:

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/delivery-sneak-55899997>).

Currently a vampire assassin, formerly a vampire rockstar, and before that . . . well, there was quite a lot before that! But this poll deals with Luce's rock era of the late 1960s to mid 1980s (before Luce inevitably had to fake their own death, as this time was pre the creation of botox injections).

Every rockstar needs a band, and every band needs a name. Thus, a poll! My personal favorites are the ones that are vampire puns like *Youngblood* and *Two-Bit Vendetta*, but honestly I could be swayed by any of the given options (and had to put out this poll before I came up with even more vampire puns). So here's your chance to decide Luce's punk-rock past and the name of their band! For reference, Luce's band was super famous, albeit with more of an alt-crowd.

(The band was also *not* vampire themed, with the name potentially being more an inside joke for Luce.)

Luce's former band should be called . . .

Youngblood

Two-Bit Vendetta

Onyx

Dead End St. (only True Fans know the "St." is short for "Saint" and not "Street")

Too High Stakes

Revamp

Eurydice

Midnight Diner

Other (Leave your suggestion below or in the Sanctum!)

64 votes total

[Writer's Blog: Weaker in Context](#)

[Mar 18, 2022](#)

Let's start off with the good news: another one of *Mind Blind*'s endings has been fully written! My wordcount currently tops 670,000 words in my private build, and this only includes parts that are coded! My feelings of accomplishment are so profound and excitable as to require exclamation points to end of my sentences!!

The bad news: I deleted Chapter 4's new phone call with Hope. I *loved* this scene. Adored it. Button got to be vulnerable/angry/sad clown, and Hope got introduced earlier. I was excited. Jazzed, in the way that actually had me doing jazz hands over my keyboard. (Seriously. I wildly gesticulate when excited.)

Until I did a playthrough.

. . . And that scene? The scene that had made me tear up because yes, I'd somehow manage to hit the perfect mix of poignant and funny? The 8,000-word scene that took me days to code in all its glorious variations?

Yeah, that scene sucked.

Independently, it was fine. Great, even, which is why I'd been so happy over it. But when read as part of the chapter's larger whole? It didn't work. At all.

Having a phone call with Hope made the entire chapter drag. It felt lethargic. Nick's condition, and Button's desire to see him, no longer came across as a priority—instead, Button (and thus, the reader) was being lured back into Chapter 3's family drama. Hope's presence diminished Nick's, and dude is in a coma so it's not like he could give me much to work with in order to take front stage. Having Hope in this particular chapter, without bookending her presence between lighter scenes, simply didn't work. It turned an emotional scenario into a soap opera.

There was also the issue that Hope's call could be immediately followed up with a second phone call from one of Button's three possible chauffeurs (should you choose not to visit Nick). Since Button can reject two offers before settling on a ride from Lev, this meant that the bulk of Chapter 4 was just . . . a lot of phone calls. Which is not something I'd ever want to read and was horrified to realize that I'd written. A superhero inspired mystery, and the protagonist spends half a chapter on back-to-back phone calls? It was *boring*.

Last but not least (and perhaps most importantly), I realized that Hope's prior absence had been important. The Wiseman family, regardless of Button's unique relationship with either parent, is broken. Hope not being present on page emphasizes her physical absence, whereas introducing her at this point in the story meant that she became overshadowed and ultimately diminished by the high-intensity scenes before and after (Aeon's explosion and Button's later farewell at Nick's hospital bed).

I attempted a few variations to fix the problem, but the end I was left with a single hopeless conclusion: Hope had to go.

(Hopeless conclusion, heh. See what I did there?)

Cuts like these, which require deleting passages that I'm genuinely excited about, are always the most difficult for me to make. I fight tooth and nail to keep them in, because gosh darn it, I like that particular sentence! But editing requires that every single scene be in service to the larger whole—no matter how good a scene may read individually, sometimes it doesn't fit within with forest. And today, I had to cut down a redwood.

That being said, I'm working to incorporate aspects from Hope's now-deleted conversation into Chapter 5! When Button comes down to converse with John, they'll find him already on the phone with Hope. Button will then have the option of making their father hang up or explaining the situation to both parents at once.

Honestly, I feel like exploring how Hope reacts to the reveal that Nick is inside Button's head will be even better than the original version. She's gonna have *so many* mixed feelings. Additional bonus: I've already written versions of Hope's reunion with Button during this most recent ending, and thus can add in some sweetly poetic mirroring between the Wiseman's family "shadow reunion" (where Nick is technically comatose and Hope is in Milwaukee) and their later, in-person reunion at game's end.

Chapter 4 2.0 will be updated later tonight, along with a list going over what changes I did keep (there are still a lot!).

Chapter 5 will go up as soon as I've finished writing the new Hope-inclusive variation.

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter 4 Update](#)

[Mar 18, 2022](#)

Currently writing the family reunion for Chapter 5, but here's Chapter 4's update to play with! (Although 90% of Chapter 4's changes are behind the scenes, so you may want until Chapter 5 to replay.)

Originally, I'd expanded upon John's conversation with Button, but came to the conclusion that the original version worked better after I took out Hope's phone call . . . especially because the majority of the new material with John focused around whether or not Button wanted to talk to Hope 😊. (The very first version of this scene had an implied skipped-over phone call with Hope between Chapters 3 and 4, with John then asking Button about the conversation. This changed to asking Button whether they wanted to talk to Hope to set up the call.)

Ultimately, I want Button to naturally feel a little alone and neglected because John is trying to handle Unity's PR machine, deal with Nick's doctors, *and* keep Hope updated. (It ups the angst of things, ya know?) The longer conversation made it feel like Button was currently John's #1 priority which,

realistically, couldn't be the case. I swung too hard at trying to make John into Super Dad that he became a 1960s sitcom caricature.

That being said, a lot (maybe even most?) of John's dialogue now shifts depending on the relationship that you established with him in Chapter 3. It's subtle--most of it is in Button's internal monologue--but I've done a couple playthroughs and his dynamic with a Jtense Button finally feels, well, tense! The lack of physical affection between him and Button is probably the biggest difference.

Things That Are New (Other than Grammar and Typo Fixes):

1. John's dialogue overhaul!
2. Added some more flavor text for Buttons crushing on Sally.
3. Speaking of Sally, she now consistently calls Nick by his birthname because it annoys him.
4. Recoded pathway triggers. You now need to have Nick's relationship over 90 for Gray to drive Button home, and Glitch's offer of a ride requires a higher affinity unless you meet Kenzie in Chapter 1. This should give Sallymancers a bigger chance to trigger Lev's route without rejecting anyone.
5. Some previously closed dialogue options are now available to a greater variety of Buttons.
6. More things are remembered in code, like whether Button visited Nick or not. Certain options also change Button's relationship with the status quo (important for endings).
7. Reese's pink cheeks have been described differently for clarity. Should be useful when interrogated later.
8. Bland hallway description has been replaced by Secret Agent Men(ts) that emphasize how Button always has to be on guard, even during an emotional crisis. (While also providing some implied justification for why they didn't notice Sally's foot.)
9. The chapter now ends earlier. The "I am now Nick Noggin" reveal has been expanded upon, and playing through made me realize that ending the chapter *after* Nick and Button's shared freak out made the story lose momentum.

A few options were taken out, such as Button's ability to go all bedroom eyes over Kenzie without being set up for their romance route (originally, meeting the dogs in Chapter 1 wasn't intended to be a prerequisite, but Kenzie is overly opinionated on their significant other's behavior towards animals).

. . . Kenzie is also now much less forgiving over threatening the shih tzus. I heard Kenzie's voice in my head urging me to make it a -20 affection point loss, but I fought back and we eventually agreed to them losing only -8 (apologizing softens the blow to only -4). You can still bounce back, but you'll have to play nice.

Mind Blind 2.0 Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[Delivery Teaser: Open Gate](#)

[Mar 21, 2022](#)

Referring to *Open Gate* as a mere ‘pub’ would be akin to calling the Hope Diamond a ‘shiny bauble’. The statement is technically true, but it’s also so much more.

Open Gate is one of the world’s few Neutrality Zones open to all species and human variants. Members of warring Fae factions sit at the same table, discussing everything except politics; Wendigos and Rakshasas order onion rings and drink Guinness alongside humans who would, in any other location, be their entrée. *Open Gate* predates The Collision—native Dubliners will either swear up and down that it’s always been there or claim that the pub, located two blocks from Trinity College, doesn’t exist. No one has yet been able to decipher what standard *Open Gate* uses when deciding whom to let enter and thus become lifelong patrons, but general consensus is that its judgement is independent of morality, age, occupation, or species.

The only thing truly known about *Open Gate* (other than the fact that Giles, its owner, pours a perfect pint) is that it’s a truly Safe Place. Any patron who makes trouble is promptly expelled from and by the pub, and never again allowed to find the front door. Many witches and other magic users have attempted to guess what wards or spells Giles has in place to make this happen, but their efforts have been thwarted by the fact that Giles, a former accountant, is one of the least magical humans in existence. If there is indeed magic at work—and surely there must be—then someone or something else is responsible.

Either way, *Open Gate* is the MC’s afterwork hangout of choice, be it because they like to sketch other patrons, read next to the fireplace, or just want to enjoy a cider. Several of Golightly’s clients also congregate there, and you’ll be presented with the opportunity to become better acquainted with them . . . without worrying that they might kill you over a verbal slipup or late parcel.

[MB Short Story: Cumulative Commentary](#)

[Mar 24, 2022](#)

Title:

Cumulative Commentary

or

The Historic Tale of Four Innocuous Comments That Made One Comment Matter More Than It Should And Inevitably Lead To Disaster (And A Pun)

“For your suit, I say we go sleek. The last Justice looked like an overequipped tortoise. R&D recently developed new ballistics plating—it doesn’t have *quite* the defensive properties of our last model, but the fact that it’s only two millimeters thick more than compensates. We’ll add a draping of mixed steel mesh just in case, but the important thing is that your pelvic protection won’t resemble a combat diaper . . . How do you feel about pauldrons?”

It took me a moment to realize that Jeanette’s last question had been nonrhetorical.

“You’re asking how I feel about shoulder pads?” I clarified.

Her purple lipstick creased with disapproval. My first day as Justice, and I was already disappointing one of UCRT’s most crucial members. Granted, Jeanette wasn’t a Ment and she didn’t have a facename (unless one counted the -ette she’d added to her birthname in order to sound more sophisticated), but UCRT’s Protective Apparel Specialist was perhaps the most important person that I had yet met.

“*Paul-drons*,” she overenunciated. “Protective shoulder plating. Our version won’t be near as bulky as knights wore jousting, mind you. Asymmetrical design should allow for greater flexibility with your dominant arm—my team can incorporate a battery beneath the right, weave in some wires . . . Maybe electrify your right hand? We haven’t done that since Temperance Number One was caught in that typhoon, but our waterproofing tech is eons better now. Although I think Yuki might be planning something with electricity, and we don’t want any redundancies. . . hmmm. Perhaps a built-in flamethrower?”

Jeanette stalked around me in a tight circle. She stood too close for me to look down from the box that I was standing on to see her face, but her expression in the full body mirrors was calculating and almost gleeful. She was a hyena sizing up her prey, an impression increased by my nervous wince. I relaxed my face muscles into an easy-going smile until the mirror reflected the version of Justice that I’d practiced this morning over the bathroom sink.

“Your father had Unity’s insignia in the center of his chest plate,” Jeanette noted. “We should go for a design similar to his iconic look, reinforcing the connection between you two. PR’s focus groups responded well to that—familiarity makes the public feel safer.”

And there it was. The first comparison of the day between me and my dad. My rehearsed smile in the mirror became strained.

“I’d prefer something a little more modern,” I said.

Jeanette frowned. “Your father—”

"I'm not my father."

Jeanette looked poised to argue, so I held up my hands in appeasement and amped up the wattage of my smile. "What's *your* vision for Justice, Jeanette?" I asked. "I'm sure between the two of us, we can come up with something even more amazing than a twenty-five-year-old design."

Jeanette bit her lower lip.

"You completely redesigned Hope's suit for Sohvi," I added, "and it looked spectacular. I'm hoping for some of that same ingenious creativity."

Much to my relief, the flattery worked.

"We'll put the insignia on the shoulder," she said decisively. "How comfortable are you with aerial combat?"

* * * *

"How'd it go?" Sohvi asked after I exited Jeanette's fitting room. Her thumb held her place in the middle of a closed magazine, some scientific journal with a graphic of a photoshopped baby sitting on a giant brain on its cover. She'd been waiting for me.

"I'm getting a jet—" I broke off lest Jeanette hear me through the door and change her mind. She'd made it clear that the suit's propulsion system was *not* a jetpack, would never be a jetpack, and that she'd personally make me march into my next mission nude should I attempt to use it to hover more than five feet off the ground.

"I'm getting thrusters," I corrected.

"She gave you the jetpack?" Sohvi's eyebrows shot up. "Wow. It took me two years before she agreed to incorporate those into my kit."

My chest went tight.

Sohvi smiled gently. "I'm not implying that you're getting special treatment," she clarified, having empathically sensed my kneejerk reaction. "Jetpacks are tricky. The first time I used my thrusters to rush a target, I flipped midair and knocked down Equality."

"Did the target escape?"

Sohvi laughed. "No. Equality ended up falling atop our mark. An inelegant capture which I'm glad no one was filming, but we completed the mission."

"Most our missions have ended disastrously because we lacked a solid plan. Villegas did his best as Justice, but he never had a head for strategy." This interjection came from Peace, who appeared silently at my side as if from nowhere. Of all my new teammates, they were the one whom I felt most unsure

about. Several UCRT members, Sohvi included, preferred to keep their identities hidden from the public, but Peace was the only person that refused to take off their mask even in UCRT headquarters.

"It'll good to have someone capable in charge again," Peace added. The flat drone of their vocal changer made it impossible to tell whether the comment was intended to be sarcastic.

"'Capable' is my middle name," I said, wishing the statement were true.

"I thought it was Hyacinth," Peace countered, solidifying their place as my least favorite teammate.

Sohvi cleared her throat before I could retort. "Nick, your new staff is ready down in the Armaments Lab. You shouldn't keep Yuki waiting."

* * * *

Other than Grayson, Yuki was my favorite person at Aeon. No one was quite certain how old he was, but even Adsila referred to him as "Mr. Nomura" in deference to his presumed ancientness. He played up his age around her, tutting disapprovingly about "youths" under his breath and hollering at her to "Stop whispering!" whenever she talked about her feedback for his latest prototype. The result was that Adsila could barely stand to be in the same room as him—like most obsessive overachievers, old people made her uncomfortable. I think she saw Yuki as an unwanted reminder that, no matter how smart and deliberate she was, one day she too might succumb to needing hearing aids (and eventually death).

Her inability to be around Yuki suited the inventor just fine, and his hearing always drastically improved as soon as she exited his lab. I liked Yuki because being around him meant a reprieve from my overcritical new boss; Yuki liked me because . . . truthfully, I wasn't sure why he'd taken a shine to me. Perhaps because of my sparkling personality and quippy banter.

Or because, like every other long term Unity employee, he'd been friends with my parents.

"Your new staff collapses to different lengths, all customizable." Yuki demonstrated by expanding the bo staff via an almost invisible button in the center—first snapping it out to a full six feet, then to three-quarters of that, and then to half its size, before finally collapsing the entire thing into a short metallic stick that fit neatly in the palm of his wrinkled hand.

"Wow. Can it serve as a selfie stick, too?" I joked.

"Don't be an idiot," Yuki replied. "You need to take a good selfie, use one of the surveillance drones."

I pretended to gasp in shock and mimicked Adsila's voice. "*Mr. Nomura*, are you misusing Unity property?"

"I invent the drones, I get to use the drones," Yuki said. "They get all the best angles for my online dating profiles."

'Profiles,' plural. This old man had officially become my new role model.

"Any other changes I should be aware of?" I asked.

"Three new settings that you can activate via tapping different rhythms at the center." Yuki expanded the staff to half-size and set it on his desk. "Two patterns release gasses—one a colored smoke for screening, the second a knockout agent."

"What about the third setting?"

Yuki grabbed a protective glove from the closet and put it on, then tapped three fingers against the middle of the staff in rapid, rhyme succession. With a buzz, the metal staff sparked blur as electricity ran from one end to the other, arching over his glove.

"Don't do this without your gear," he warned. "Your heart will stop."

"My heart stops every time I see you, Yuki." My flirtatious teasing was a mindless reaction; I was unable to pull my gaze from the blue strands of live voltage shivering up and down my new weapon.

Most AMO teams didn't equip weapons with lethal settings, members of UCRT being the major exception. I'd accepted the possibility that I might have to kill a combatant Ment—those that UCRT were sent to apprehend had usually already gone through at least one AMO strike team—but for my weapon to be actually *designed* to kill . . .

It felt wrong.

"Can you lower the voltage?" I asked. "Maybe take it down from heart-stopping to just bladder-emptying?"

Yuki frowned.

"Either way, the guy's gonna be incapacitated," I added, "and I'd rather my weapon not have an insta-murder mode."

"I can add a fourth setting," he said begrudgingly. "One set to stun only."

"Thanks," I said.

His frown deepened. "Being knocked unconscious won't stop some Telepaths. Ask your father about what went down in Singapore. His story will change your mind about—"

"Sorry," I interrupted, "but I gotta go. I promised that I'd meet Grayson for lunch."

My departure was brusquer than Yuki deserved, given our otherwise friendly relationship, but his suggestion stung.

I'd been Justice for under twenty-four hours. Every time I made an executive decision that someone disagreed with, even about my own equipment, they suggested that I talk to my dad, with the implication that his insight would change my mind to align with what they wanted. No matter how impressive my track record had been as an AMO or how high my APE score had been, most my coworkers viewed my primary qualification as being my father's son.

Sometimes, I worried that they were right.

* * * *

"Incoming!"

I spun around, and a bag hit my chest with enough force to knock the breath from my lungs. Gray didn't simply toss things like a normal person. Oh no. He'd been using his telekinesis to build momentum and lob candy at me ever since we were in training together. To 'sharpen your reflexes,' he claimed. Given how often I'd been pelted with sugar this past week, however, I'd begun to realize that Gray only chucked candy at me when he wanted to distract me from getting too much inside my own head.

I stuffed this latest bag of gummy worms into my pocket. "You ready to head out?" I asked as Gray fell in step beside me.

"So, so ready," Gray said with a weary sigh. "I just finished my meeting with Jeanette."

"She try to sell you on pauldrons?"

He groaned. "Yes. She'd also never equipped a Telekinetic before and took it as a personal insult when I said that any extra armor would only slow me down."

I laughed, and he elbowed me in the ribs.

"It's not funny," he insisted. "We were in the middle of a fitting, and she stormed off with my pants. I had to run three floors down to the gym for a change of clothes."

"Wearing nothing but your briefs?" I let out a low whistle. "I'll have to ask Lev for the security footage. That new Fortitude fan club of yours deserves it."

His cheeks flushed. "You promised to take down the site."

"I took down the webpage that I started," I informed him. "Someone else immediately bought the address. We're too pretty to be unpopular, Black."

A derisive snort from behind made us both turn around. A reedy man of indeterminate age, spectacles sliding down his narrow nose, glared at us as if he'd just discovered an earwig in his ice cream.

"Can we help you, Administrator Garfield?" Gray asked politely, his expression shuttering into a calm smile that I personally thought of as 'British Mode.'

Clarence answer Gray's question, his beady eyes narrowing. "You told Nomura to modify to your weapon," he accused me.

"Which he agreed to do," I said. "What's the problem?"

Clarence puffed out his scrawny chest; I was tempted to poke him with a finger to see how much force it would take for him to deflate. "The *problem* is that *you* didn't fill out *Form 29b*," he whined. "All requests for equipment alteration must go through the administrative office so that Unity can track and approve changes."

"You mean so that you can put it on a spreadsheet that no one will ever read," I replied with a lazy smile, deciding not to mention that the form was already filled out in its entirety on my desk in UCRT headquarters. "No worries, Garfield. I'll do it once we're back from lunch."

"You'll do it *now*, Justice Junior," Clarence growled. "Or I'll be informing Commander Branham that . . ."

I tuned out everything that he said after that. If I had to summarize, it was something along the lines of: "*Blah blah blah. Paperwork. Blah blah. I'm important. Blah.*" I'd never liked Clarence, but I also recognized him for what he was: an insecure bully. His jibe shouldn't have been able to bother me. I didn't respect him enough to let it bother me.

But it bothered me.

A lot.

Damn. I had somehow become insecure enough to feel hurt by the likes of Clarence Garfield.

While Gray did his British thing and soothed things over with Clarence, the name '*Justice Junior*' resonated in my head. It taunted me through a plate of linguini and the walk back to Aeon. It rode on my shoulder during the elevator ride up to UCRT Headquarters, and it whispered in my ear as I stared down at Form 29b.

"Are you alright?" Gray asked, concern creasing his brow. "You seem distracted."

I thrust the completed form in Gray's direction without meeting his too-observant gaze. "Drop this off at Garfield's desk, would ya?"

Gray sighed. "Is this about what he said earlier? Nick, he's an insecure arse. Ignore him."

"I've already forgotten the entire conversation," I lied. "I'm just busy. Need to check in with Yuki about my staff modifications."

"You can't avoid Garfield forever," Gray said.

"Then I'll die trying."

[Ending #3 is DONE](#)

[Mar 25, 2022](#)

I had a burst of inspiration and pulled an all nighter to finish (only 5 more ends to go!). It is 5:30am and I'm only now heading to bed, but I have ZERO REGRETS.

It's so good, y'all.

Also, Shard is a slippery jerkface who deserves their own reality TV show. Because *damn*.

. . . That's it. That's the post. I just got excited and needed to share.

[The Great Rewriting Feedback Request: Chapters 6 & 7](#)

[Mar 25, 2022](#)

I've been struggling with rewriting the intro of Chapter 5, but on the flip side that means I've procrastinated by instead finishing another of *Mind Blind*'s endings! Still can't be played since the entire middle of the game needs to be recoded, but hey *it's written*. Turns out being in a rut isn't all that bad if it means that I write to avoid editing.

Still, I figure it's best to collect feedback for the next two chapters so that when I finally finish with Hope's new Chapter 5 introduction, I can be off to the races with the next two chapters.

I'm toying with the idea of combining Chapters 6 & 7, as honestly not a lot happens in Chapter 7 (a lot of things can be pruned). But then again, I'm pretty attached to Kenzie's cliffhanger entrance between chapters, and I don't know if I could bear taking out Rosy's stairwell scenes.

Basically, I'm indecisive and could use your suggestions.

There are 3 ways to provide feedback:

1. Leave a comment on this post,
2. Use the Great Rewriting Feedback channel via the Sanctum of Spoilers,

or

3. Send an email to mindblindbetatest@gmail.com.

[Live Q&A: Sunday, March 27th](#)

[Mar 25, 2022](#)

UPDATE: Votes are in! The second Live Q&A will be at 5pm PST today (Sunday, March 27)

The first Q&A will be at **10am PST on Sunday, March 27th**. The morning session will *not* be recorded as I'll be answering any and all questions about the various endings. So there will be lots of spoilers! (Not the biggest twists, but still a *lot*.)

There's a logical reason that I've decided to share more of the endings despite being previously close-mouthed: talking about the plot aloud helps me brainstorm. While I have a wonderful and loving support system of family and friends, none of them have actually read all of *Mind Blind's* current demo, which means that I can't discuss the endings with them without receiving blank looks. Thus, I'm going to talk it out with you guys in order to help me figure out Ending #4 (which I'm just started writing). Hope that's okay!

The evening session will be recorded provided I don't say anything too incriminating. Vote for the second timeslot below:

5pm - 6pm PST (Sunday, March 27th)

6pm - 7pm PST (Sunday, March 27th)

7pm - 8pm PST (Sunday, March 27th)

6pm - 7pm PST (Monday, March 28th)

7pm - 8pm PST (Monday, March 28th)

25 votes total

[Writer's Blog: Push the Button for a Character Arc](#)

[Mar 26, 2022](#)

I'm currently finishing up March's Saucy Side and UCRT fairy tale, having given up on perfecting Chapter Five this morning. Despite being less active online this month, March has actually been one of my most productive months yet in regards to wordcount (since March 1st, I've added around 80,000 words to the story and this doesn't include code). The finale has diverged even more than I anticipated, but I'm *extremely* happy with the routes I have written. May will mark *Mind Blind*'s two-year anniversary (!!!), and my new (actually realistic) goal is to have all the endings written by then. Perhaps not completely coded, since editing has gone slower than I anticipated, but written.

Then it's onto the publication process, but that's an issue for Future Jo to think about. (Also on that list: finish learning Twine for *Delivery for the Damned*.)

Now that three of *Mind Blind*'s endings are written, I finally feel as if I have a comprehensive picture of Button's character arc.

I knew going into *Mind Blind* that I wanted to focus on the MC's struggles with mental health and disability; the adage is "write what you know," after all. But I didn't just want to write a story that acknowledges "wow, this person's circumstances suck." I wanted to write a story that argued "wow, this person's circumstances suck but their life can still be awesome and amazing."

Mind Blind is a story about triumphing and thriving despite the odds, which is why stats won't be deciding whether you "beat" the game (just flavor text and smaller outcomes). One way or another, Button always wins. Some endings are inarguably bittersweet, and others leave unanswered questions. In half the branches, Shard's identity is never even revealed. But whereas the main plot sees Button as being powerless—controlled by Ments, by their family, by Operation Hemera, by their own self-doubt—the ending is all about seizing agency and making decisions that impact *Mind Blind*'s entire world.

Now, this doesn't mean that the ROs will love Button no matter what (they have preferences!), or that Button can randomly decide in Chapter 18 to side with Reese after allying with Unity every other option (Reese won't believe you). It does mean that by the end of the book, no matter which ending you pursue, you'll feel like a badass. While remaining vague: nothing about Button changes, and they may still struggle with things like depression or misplaced guilt. But their internal dialogue no longer describes themselves as "broken."

While it is possible for your MC to end up in a darker place than they started by games' end—I won't spoiler the Vengeance ending, but it is *wicked*—all Buttons become better equipped to deal with both internal and external conflict. They gain hope (even if for some that requires cutting contact with Hope). If they break with their family, they're finally free. If they reconcile with estranged parents, they're loved. It's a coming-of-age tale, and there are no bad endings.

Just a few evil-ish ones.

[Mar 27, 2022](#)

Just Ice and Fire by CallMeV

UCRT RPF

Justice | Nicholas Wiseman / OC

"Stephanie, I'm Peace. And I need you to join UCRT in my place."

I gaped open-mouthed at my mother, unsure which revelation to process first. My mother was a Ment?? Not just a Ment but one of the most powerful Ments in existence?? And she wanted me to take over??

"B-but I'm a Lo-Po," I stuttered. "I can't join the ideals!"

My mother smiled. "Stephanie, you're not a Norm. You're a Ment like me."

"That doesn't make any sense!" I protested. "The tests said—"

"The tests were wrong," my mother declared. "Ments like you and I don't chart on the Pollard Score. It's why I've kept my identity secret. The world isn't ready to learn about our powers."

"What powers?" I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that my fifty-three-year-old, soccer-van mom was actually a superhero.

"Stephanie, what I'm about to tell you, you can't share with anybody. Our power is only found within our family. My mother had it, as did her mother, and her mother before her. Now that you're twenty-one, you've inherited the gift."

"Inherited what?" I demanded.

"Pyrokinesis," she whispered. "Stephanie, you're the most dangerous Ment in the world."

* * * *

Nick paused reading aloud and looked up from his laptop, his eyes sparkling with wicked delight. "It gets better," he informed the group assembled around his kitchen table, whose expressions ranged from

amusement (Ellery and Sally) to horror (Grayson). “Stephanie takes over for her mother as Peace, but her new powers are unstable. Every time she gets emotional, she bursts into violet flames.”

“Why violet?” Sally asked.

Nick shrugged. “Maybe it’s the author’s favorite color.”

“Pyrokinesis is one of telekinesis’ applications,” Grayson said, “and not one that should be used lightly. It’s too easy for fire to spread out of control.”

“Stephanie isn’t a Telekinetic,” Sally said.

“She is,” Gray insisted. “Pyrokinesis is a subskill, but—”

“Well, I don’t see *you* bursting into flames every time Ellery holds your hand,” Sally interrupted.

“Stephanie wins.”

Gray’s frown deepened. “It’s not a competition.”

“Of course not, babe.” Ellery leaned over and kissed his cheek. She glanced at Nick. “How long is this story, anyway? I’m getting hungry.”

“It’s still updating,” Nick said. “But the author has released one-hundred and forty-two chapters so far.”

“Is this what you do in your spare time?” Sally rolled her eyes. “Read fanfiction about yourself?”

“Only ones that reach a certain amount of *kudos*,” Nick said with a smirk. “‘*Just Ice and Fire*’ broke 200,000.” He cleared his throat and motioned for the others to be silent. “I’m skipping ahead to when Stephanie meets the rest of UCRT. The author’s depiction of Gray is spot-on.”

Grayson groaned.

* * * *

“Something’s different about you,” said Justice, his face drawing in so close that I could make out the flecks of gold in his luminescent emerald eyes. “You’re . . . fascinating.” His finger trailed along the edge of my mask. “What secrets do you hold, dear Peace?”

I blushed furiously beneath my mask. Nicholas Wiseman wasn’t just drop-dead gorgeous; as leader of the Ideals, he was also extremely smart. If I wasn’t careful, he’d realize that I wasn’t my mother . . .

* * * *

“Why is she posing as her mother?” Sally asked. “Unity holds a press conference whenever UCRT changes its roster.”

"She didn't go through AMO training," Nick said, "because the Lovera family didn't want the rest of the world learning about their ability."

"The Lovera family?" Ellery's eyes narrowed.

"It's the protagonist's last name," Nick explained impatiently. "Now, if you two are done interrupting, I'm about to get to the good part."

* * * *

If I wasn't careful, he'd realize that I wasn't my mother. This entire charade would be for nothing, and the evil Ambrose Kim would escape justice.

"Give Peace some space!" Fortitude ejaculated. He grabbed Justice's arm and yanked him violently away from me. "Can't you see that you're making her uncomfortable?"

He turned back to me and bowed elegantly. "Pardon my discourteous chum," he apologized. "Nicholas can be a bit of a knob. He should never have so egregiously disrespected your space, milady."

"Maybe she likes a little disrespect," drawled Justice. He winked at me, and I was once again captivated by his penetrating stare.

Fortitude crossed his arms. He and Justice were the same height, and both had broad, muscly shoulders. Watching them glower darkly at each other was like witnessing too marble-chiseled gods in a tempestuous standoff. Would I be the reason that their famed friendship ended? The last thing I wanted was for Justice and Fortitude to fight—especially over me!

* * * *

Sally snorted. "Sounds to me like that's exactly what Stephanie wants."

"At least we now know why Nick likes this," Ellery said. "The author thinks that he's over six feet tall."

"I don't talk like that," Grayson grumbled. "No one talks like that."

* * * *

I may have been new to this whole superhero thing, but I wasn't about to let two of the most powerful and sexy men on earth come to blows over me. I placed a hand on Fortitude's muscled bicep.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Justice was just being friendly."

His sapphire eyes focused on where my hand rested against his skin, his tense and taunt muscles relaxing beneath my gentle touch. Fortitude was so kind and gentle, the perfect British lord (although no one outside of UCRT knew that he was also a duke).

The air between us heated, and my palm began to glow.

Oh no. My powers!

I snatched back my hand before I could burn him, praying that no one had notice that my hand had briefly been covered by a soft amethyst aura of light.

“Let me know if Nicholas misbehaves again,” Fortitude said. “I’ll defend your honor.”

I smiled back at him. My friend Ella had once called Grayson Black the ‘perfect gentleman,’ and I was beginning to understand why.

Of course, back then I was oblivious to the fact that Justice couldn’t take his eyes off me. He’d seen my hand glow, and now knew the truth: that I was far more than a Pyrokinetic. The Lovera family curse was about to be discovered by the one man who could ruin us all.

* * * *

The oven timer went off. Nick rose from his seat to go check on the calzones, closing his laptop before he left so that Sally couldn’t read ahead until he returned.

“Calzones need another five minutes,” he called from the kitchen.

“I told you that pyrokinesis wasn’t a thing,” Grayson said.

Ellery patted his arm. “Next time you argue something, ‘I’ll defend your honor,’” she quoted from the story.

“I’m confused,” Sally said flatly. “I know we skipped ahead, but the last scene explicitly said that she was Pyrokinetic. Yet now her family’s cursed? Is this a fantasy story or something?”

“It is, actually,” Nick answered, sitting back down. “Switched genres around chapter fifteen with the Loveras being descended from an ancient line of Druids. Stephanie can magically heal people.” He smirked. “At one point, I get mortally injured and she breathes life back into my lungs.”

“Gross,” Sally said.

Nick grinned at her. “Jealous? Let me see if I can find the scene.”

* * * *

Justice was dying. Ambrose’s telekinetically-thrown dagger had pierced deep into his side, and a ruby droplet of blood trickled from the corner of his perfect mouth. His emerald eyes were cloudy, his trembling fingers ice cold as they brushed against my mask.

* * * *

"How can she tell your fingers are cold if she's wearing a mask?" Sally asked.

"Creative license," Nick said.

* * * *

His emerald eyes were cloudy, his trembling fingers ice cold as they brushed against my mask.

"I need to see your face," he rasped. His voice was hoarse, throaty, desperate with longing and need. "Please, let me see your face."

I'd sworn to my mother never to reveal my identity. To do so would be to risk everything I'd worked to achieve—if Ambrose discovered who I was, he'd know which spell would defeat me. Yet my hands still reached for my mask.

I took it off, and Nicholas Wiseman's beautiful emerald eyes met mine for the very first time.

"Beautiful," he gasped. "Stephanie, you're so beautiful."

I wrapped my arms around his limp body, whispering a prayer to the Fey Summer Queen, my ancestor, beneath my breath. Protect this man, I begged. I love him.

Violet light spread from my fingertips, and I knew what I needed to do. I kissed Nicholas Wiseman, letting life-giving magic flow from me to him. As a fairyborn, falling in love with a mortal was forbidden, and the Summer Queen would surely punish me for this transgression.

But I loved Nicholas Wiseman, and I would NOT let him die.

* * * *

"She risked the wrath of the Summer Queen to save me," Nick said with a haughty look in Sally's direction. "If that's not true love, I don't know what is."

"I told you she wasn't a Pyrokinetic," Grayson repeated.

"Please," Sally told Nick. "You're only a fan because Instructor Kim was a deranged Ment villain." She blinked owlishly, struck by a sudden realization. "Does this mean that CallMeV is one of our classmates?"

Ellery snickered.

* * * *

"Well, well, well STEPHANIE," cackled Ambrose Kim crazily. "Did you really think that your true love could save you? How does it feel, knowing that the man you desire is out of reach and that you're soul-bonded to another?"

I grit my teeth and glared at the evil Ment demon king. "Nick still loves me!" I shouted over the tornado of dark magic that whirled around us. "He'll always love me! The soul-bond tattoo has been wrong before, and it'll

Stephanie Valero winced, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. Including the Soul Mate aspect may have been overkill, but she'd needed to introduce new drama into this latest chapter. Readers seemed to enjoy when Justice and Fortitude fought over the protagonist. Having Fortitude gain a soul mate tattoo with her character just made sense . . . but now, she was uncertain how to resolve the plot twist. Fortitude was wonderful, even if he was no Nicholas Wiseman. Stephanie felt bad rejecting him, even if it was fictional.

Maybe she should add in another character? Someone who could romance Grayson Black and thus take him out of the picture. But this new character couldn't be romantically interested in Nick, which meant . . .

With a grin, she again started typing:

Ella groaned and rolled over, folding her pillow around her head like a feather taco. She'd been in the middle of a particularly nice dream and had no desire to return to reality. Why couldn't she come from a normal family? Have a normal alarm clock that she could smack or throw across the room in order to steal five more minutes of sleep?

"You're going to be late for orientation."

[MB Saucy Side: One Night Stand \(Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Mar 30, 2022](#)

Seoul isn't a city.

At least, it's not a city in the way that Chicago is a city. Seoul stands with New York and London and Tokyo, a sprawling labyrinth of tiered levels, neon skyscrapers looming over tangled roads that arch over and dip under each other in a stream of ever-moving headlights. On your third day in Korea, you decide to visit a few of the quieter areas, palaces with courtyards the size of football fields and shrines where the trees are twined with red ribbons.

These serene moments last only until the tours end, and then you once again resubmerge in the subway system, wandering through spacious tunnels and underground bazars. Navigation was easier when you weren't alone, but your companion has to work.

It's fine. You have other plans.

A knot of anticipation tightens your stomach, and you decide to skip dinner in favor of hurrying onwards to your next destination.

* * * *

You easily identify the hotel by the limos parked before it. Despite not having stopped to eat, the fundraiser has already started by the time you arrive. You flash your credentials to the guard, proving that you're here representing Unity's North American branch. He provides you with a key to your suite, informing you that your bags have already arrived.

You take the elevator to the top floor. Two large suitcases rest at the foot of your king-sized bed; you open one and change into your outfit for tonight.

* * * *

The event is noisy and hot. After shaking a few hands, you excuse yourself to a corner, holding a glass of champagne in your hand to look occupied but not sipping, and instead simply enjoying the way that the bubbles tickle your nose. The window next to you provides a welcome reprieve from the body heat, and you rest your forehead against the cold glass.

You catch sight of the man's reflection in the glass before you hear his footsteps. His tuxedo shows off broad shoulders, and his black hair gleams almost blue under the light of the crystal chandeliers above. He makes his way towards you with long, decisive strides, the crowd instinctively parting to let him through. He holds two glasses of champagne. You turn and hold up your own flute in a silent toast, smiling wryly; he hands off one glass to a stranger without breaking eye contact with you.

"I intended to introduce myself by offering you a drink," he says in deep voice that shoots a frisson of pleasure up your spine. "But it seems someone else already has me beat." His last sentence has the cadence of a question, although his expression displays no curiosity.

You take a small sip of your drink without tasting it. "I fetched my own drink," you say with a slight smile. "As for an introduction . . . let's skip that part, shall we?"

After all, this is a new country, a new opportunity. Tonight, you can be someone else.

His brows arch; you've surprised him. "No names, then?" he asks.

"No names," you confirm. You offer him your hand, and he takes it in a handshake that lingers too long and yet not long enough. His hand is broad and calloused.

You catch sight of the ring on his finger and pout. "You're married?"

He hesitates, his dark brown eyes locking with yours and his expression questioning. Then he slides the band from his finger and drops it into his chest pocket.

“Not tonight,” he says.

* * * *

His kiss tastes like champaign and mint toothpaste. The flavors shouldn't work together, and yet you find yourself desperate for another intoxicating taste. Your fists grip his tie, dragging him closer. He follows your lead, and your back hits the elevator wall with a thud, making you both laugh softly before your lips once again collide.

“Still no names?” he murmurs.

You shake your head. He lets out a guttural moan as you rake your fingers through his hair, throwing his head back and granting you access to suck at the pulse point at the nape of his neck.

“Names are overrated,” you say against his clavicle.

“So be it.” His hand slides beneath your thigh, hoisting your leg up just as the elevator doors open at your suite. He seizes your mouth in another fierce kiss, preventing you from introducing yourself even if you so desired.

The elevator doors begin to close—he thrusts out his arm in time to prevent them from shutting. You pull each other into the suite, stumbling towards the bed due to your refusal to separate from each other while pieces of clothing are stripped and discarded onto the floor.

You frown in frustration at his half-button shirt which refuses to come all the way undone. There's a starburst scar over his heart, which instinct and habit urges you to kiss, but he grabs your wrist and forces down your hand before your fingers can gently trace over the mark.

“Don't act so familiar, stranger,” he says, voice hoarse.

“Don't tell me what to do, stranger,” you quip back.

A combative gleam enters his eyes. “Let me venture a guess: you were the type of student that never listened to your instructor in school.”

“In my defense,” you say, “my instructor was distractingly attractive. He made it difficult to focus on lessons.”

“I doubt you made life easy for him, either.” His breath tickles your ear, followed by a sharp yet sweet ache as his teeth nips your earlobe.

“True. He must've been relieved when I graduated,” you gasp as he pushes you down onto the bed.

"Incredibly relieved," he replies. "Because he could finally do *this*."

* * * *

Ambrose lets out a contented hum as you tenderly press your lips against the scar on his chest. He sees the mark as a sign of failure, but you've always viewed it as proof that he survived. You're eternally grateful to that scar.

"Think we'll find your wedding band in the morning?" you ask, settling back on your side of the bed.

He reaches an arm around your shoulders, and you curl into his side. "My jacket was left on the elevator," he admits.

"Your spouse will disapprove," you chastise, suppressing a grin.

He opens one eye just long enough to glare at you. "It was *my spouse's* fault."

"I'll never get tired of hearing you call me that," you say. "But still, this was fun. We should go on business trips together more often."

[MB Saucy Side: One Night Stand \(Ambrosia Version\)](#)

[Mar 31, 2022](#)

Seoul isn't a city.

At least, it's not a city in the way that Chicago is a city. Seoul stands with New York and London and Tokyo, a sprawling labyrinth of tiered levels, neon skyscrapers looming over tangled roads that arch over and dip under each other in a stream of ever-moving headlights. On your third day in Korea, you decide to visit a few of the quieter areas, palaces with courtyards the size of football fields and shrines where the trees are twined with red ribbons.

These serene moments last only until the tours end, and then you once again resubmerge in the subway system, wandering through spacious tunnels and underground bazars. Navigation was easier when you weren't alone, but your companion has to work.

It's fine. You have other plans.

A knot of anticipation tightens your stomach, and you decide to skip dinner in favor of hurrying onwards to your next destination.

* * * *

You easily identify the hotel by the limos parked before it. Despite not having stopped to eat, the fundraiser has already started by the time you arrive. You flash your credentials to the guard, proving that you're here representing Unity's North American branch. He provides you with a key to your suite, informing you that your bags have already arrived.

You take the elevator to the top floor. Two large suitcases rest at the foot of your king-sized bed; you open one and change into your outfit for tonight.

* * * *

The event is noisy and hot. After shaking a few hands, you excuse yourself to a corner, holding a glass of champagne in your hand to look occupied but not sipping, and instead simply enjoying the way that the bubbles tickle your nose. The window next to you provides a welcome reprieve from the body heat, and you rest your forehead against the cold glass.

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Her brows arch; you've surprised her. "No names, then?" she asks.

"No names," you confirm. You offer her your hand, and she takes it in a handshake that lingers too long and yet not long enough. Her fingers are tapered like a pianist, yet calloused.

You catch sight of the ring on her finger and pout. "You're married?"

She hesitates, her dark brown eyes locking with yours and her expression questioning. Then she slides the band from her finger and drops it into her purse.

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"I'll never get tired of hearing you call me that," you say. "But still, this was fun. We should go on business trips together more often."

[MB Interview: Battle of Buttons \(Part 1\)](#)

[Mar 31, 2022](#)

Note: This ended up being a LOT different (and longer) than the reality show version I originally intended, with a main character from *Delivery for the Damned* rudely barging and commandeering the interview.

Your questions will from before will get used for part two! If you come up with any additional questions that you think may help the host reach his final decision, please add them to this post.

* * * *

A stone amphitheater forms a semi-circle around a group of confused humans. Raucous cheers and applause fill the air, but the seats are all empty. The humans, ten in number and only just teleported in, glance around with wary confusion.

Nicholas Wiseman and Grayson Black step forward in opposite directions, their UCRT training kicking in to protect the others between them. Hope and John Wiseman follow suit; no matter from which side an attack comes, it'll meet with Ment opposition.

Sally Alavidze alternates between trying to discern the source of the applause and glaring at Reese Rudzite, who has been rendered immobile by the pen which Glitch Parker, grinning maliciously, presses against the back of Reese's neck. Andy Guerra futilely struggles against Kent Zarneki, who has his armed pinned behind his back.

Ambrose Kim doesn't move. His eyes narrow on the first row.

Ambrose: Reveal yourself.

The air shimmers. Where once was only an empty seat, now an enormous . . . not quite man sits. His Gucci black suit with purple piping hugs a pair of shoulders roughly as broad as Sally is tall. His height is hard to gauge given that he's seated, one leg casually crossed over the other, but he's easily over eight feet. Instead of hair, his head boasts two bronze, spiraled horns similar to those of an addax. Gold veins glow against skin the color of red clay—his appearance is in equal parts demon and stone golem.

Demon, applauding slowly: I heard that you were observant, Ambrose Kim, yet I'm still impressed.

Nick steps towards the demon.

Nick: Whatever mind game you're playing, cease and desist.

The Demon puts one hand over his heart (or, at least, where his heart would be if he were human) and looks at Nick with a wounded expression.

Demon: I'm above mind games, Nicholas Wiseman. This isn't an illusion; I've summoned you all here to resolve a very pressing issue. That being said—

He nods politely at Andy, whose struggle against Kent's hold has become increasingly frantic.

Demon: If you can't behave, then I'll be forced to kick you out of my realm.

Andy's arm manages to break free, his elbow connecting with Kent's jaw. The Demon brow ridge twitches, annoyed, and Andy poofs out of existence. The blood drains from Reese's face.

Demon: Taliaferro Parker, you may release River Ford. He won't try to escape custody again.

Glitch: How about no? I'm not inclined to trust a Hellboy knockoff.

The Demon's clawed hands clasp together in delight.

Demon: Hellboy is a superhero, isn't he? How marvelous! Although I'm not sure if muttonchops would suit me. My jawline is one of my best . . .

Sally: It wasn't a compliment. You look like a demon.

Demon: You should see me on Tuesdays.

Sally, glaring at Reese: I'll pass. I prefer to keep better company in my dreams.

Demon: Ah, I suppose it makes sense that you all would believe this a dream. Very well, for the sake of your treasured sanity, you are all dreaming.

Everyone's shoulders relax, except for Ambrose.

Demon: This is a dream, and I'm nothing more than your imaginary friend. You may call me . . .

The Demon thinks it over then breaks into a sharp-toothed, yet extremely civilized, smile.

Demon: Call me Gil.

John: Why the hell are we here, Gil?

Gil: Appropriate phrasing of an easily answered question.

Gil doesn't snap or wink or give any indication of performing a spell. Yet instantly, the humans are seated in nine chairs evenly spaced before him. All are plush armchairs with different floral prints that their occupants relax into with a sleepy sigh (this is a dream, after all). The only exception is Reese's chair, which isn't actually a chair but rather a padded begonia footstool that matches Nick's recliner.

Nick smirks at Reese, who shifts uncomfortably on his too-small seat.

Nick, to Gil: I like you a little more now, Dream Demon.

Gil: Thank you! As I said before, I brought you all here to resolve a matter of immense importance. A matter of *canon*.

Glitch: Easy. We shoot Reese from it.

Sally: Seconded.

Kent silently raises his hand to indicate his vote for yes.

Gil: Wrong canon, Taliaferro Parker. You see, I was reading your story and—

Grayson: This is a very strange dream.

Gil: Yes, yes, it's all quite odd, but I promise you won't remember anything come morning. Now, as I was saying, I was reading *Mind Blind* and—

Hope half-rises from her chair, fists balled.

Hope: Who told you about my child's condition?

Gil: That's the title of the . . . Oh, for the love of all that's unholy, you know what? Never mind. This is a dream, remember? It doesn't need to make sense. Here's the dilemma: I need to determine Button's One True Love.

Four voices simultaneously respond, talking over each other:

Sally: Ella and I are the OTP, obviously.

Glitch: The way that I feel about Elliot puts Shakespearean sonnets to shame.

Grayson: Ellery is my everything.

Ambrose: My relationship is none of your business.

Kent quietly raises his hand.

Gil: Oh my. This is more awkward as I imagined it, truth be told.

Nick stares incredulously at Button's love interests.

Nick: How do none of you know my sibling's name?

Gil: Oh, they do. It's—

Sally: Ella.

Glitch: Elliot.

Grayson: Ellery.

Kent: Ellis.

Ambrose: Ellie.

Hope, looking concerned: Our daughter's name is Ellen.

John, frowning at Hope: Dearest, our *son's* name is Eli.

Reese: Elmer Wiseman is a double-crossing toad.

Nick, yelling: It's Sam! Their name is Sam!

Gil waves his hands, attempting to put a stop to the heated squabbling that ensues. None of the humans pay him any attention. Finally, exasperated, he sighs.

. . . And no one can speak. Their mouths open, but no sounds emerge.

Gil: That's better. As I was about to say, before so rudely being cut off, is that all of you are from different playthroughs.

He glances over at Nick.

Gil: Yours came last. I ran out of 'El' names.

Sally: What do you mean by 'playthroughs'?

She looks pleasantly surprised to discover that her voice once again works.

Gil: Realities. Hmm. Timelines, perhaps? Yes, timelines work. You all come from different timelines, and Button has a different name in each. But now I'm on my last replay—that is to say, there's a *new* timeline about to happen, and I need to decide which route should be canon . . . Essentially, I must figure out Button's true love.

Gil looks at the Wisemans. Nick looks intrigued, John looks confused, and Hope glares with pursed lips.

Gil: I brought you three here to help me determine Button's soulmate.

Nick: Grayson, obviously.

Sally: Excuse me? I think *not*.

Nick: What? In my timeline, you're . . .

He falls abruptly silent.

Nick, reluctantly: I suppose Salome and Sam could work as a couple.

Grayson clears his throat.

Nick: But I'm still voting for Gray.

John, smiling encouragingly at Sally: Well, you have my vote. Best friends make the best partners.

Sally: Thank you, Mr. Wiseman.

Sally, Gray, Nick, and John look expectantly at Hope. She straightens her back and looks them each in the eye.

Hope: Sally, you've been a wonderful friend to Button. You've been there for her when I wasn't able, and I am eternally grateful.

Sally, smugly: Button means the world to me, Mrs. Wiseman.

Hope: Gray, my son has become better man by knowing you. You are everything that John and I dreamed of when we first started UCRT, and you're a role model for the rest of the team.

Nick, pumping fist in the air and letting out a low whoot: Heck yeah he is!

Grayson: I'm honored.

Hope: *However.* Sally, you feel Button's emotions and yet can hide your own. Grayson . . . I worry that you would experience struggles similar to what I went through. Either way, your relationship with Button

is a power imbalance.

Sally: It's not like I can read Ella's mind! And I *like* feeling her emotions—I wouldn't notice stuff otherwise.

Grayson: Respectfully, my brainrange is barely existent. Hearing Ellery's thoughts is a choice that brings us closer, not a burden.

Hope: I'm sorry, but I believe Button would be happier in the long-term with a partner who wasn't a Ment.

Gil, in a stage whisper: The plot thickens.

Glitch: Thank you, Mrs. W! I was beginning to feel attacked by my in-laws.

Kent nods, agreeing with Glitch, while Ambrose looks uncomfortable.

Gil: Don't be so gloomy, Ambrose Kim. I'm leaning towards you as my favorite.

Nick: Not happening.

John and Hope both frown.

John: He's Button's teacher.

Hope: Ten years is quite an age gap, isn't it?

Ambrose: I harbored the same reservations. Ellie was . . . persuasive.

Glitch: Why Rosy, Gil? He terrorized Button from the moment that they met. *My* chemistry with them was instantaneous and electric.

Hope: We haven't met. You're my child's girlfriend?

Glitch: One of them, apparently.

Kent: . . . Ellis loves my dogs.

Gil, sounding like a sports broadcaster: Annnd he speaks! Kent coming in clutch with a compelling case for Team Zarneki: think of the children! Canine children, but a family nonetheless.

Reese, petulantly: Why am I here? Elmer Wiseman took everything from me.

Gil: You possess a unique perspective on the situation.

Reese: Elmer Wiseman should die alone and unloved, abandoned by all whom he once cherished.

Gil: See? That's the kind of vindictive, alternative viewpoint none of the others can provide. Now . . .

A dramatic drumroll sounds from nowhere, echoing throughout the stadium.

Gil: Let the Battle of Buttons begin!

The humans let out a shared groan, and he grins at them sheepishly.

Gil: Too cheesy?

* * * *

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

[Writer's Blog: Minor Edits and Half A Map](#)

[Apr 1, 2022](#)

I updated the demo for *Mind Blind 2.0*! Hoping everyone likes the changes--I feel like it truly adds depth to the main character. Perhaps takes a way a tiny (unimportant) bit of character choice, but overall you'll be left with a poignant experience that will even change the flavor text for certain selections in Chapter 2. I'm honestly super excited to share this new and improved iteration of the story!

(2.0 Demo Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>)

My timeline for this month is a little uncertain right now due to some ongoing family health stuff, as I'm returning to Washington for the time being. I'll be updating April's full schedule as soon as I have a clearer idea of what lies ahead doctor-appointment wise (which should be around April 6th or 7th). As a sidenote, I want to sincerely thank you all for supporting me through *Mind Blind*'s creation. Working from home and thus being able fly out to support family is an incredible blessing right now.

For now, here's what to expect this week:

April 2: Battle of Buttons (Part 2)

April 4: *Mind Blind 2.0* Demo Update (Chapter 5)

April 5: Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On Fanfiction (Part 2)

[Delivery Teaser: The CRAP System](#)

[Apr 3, 2022](#)

Are YOU suitable for a postal career with THAB? Participate in the Courier Rating And Personality System to find out!

Link: <https://uquiz.com/quiz/yKgOpo>

(Battle of Buttons Part 2 is taking longer than anticipated to finish, so I took a step back to brainstorm and created this quiz*. * THAB is the company that you'll be working for in *Delivery for the Damned*, and CRAPS provides insight into what the job requires.)

[Battle of Buttons, Part 2](#)

[Apr 5, 2022](#)

Battle of Buttons, Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Note: This interview is getting insanely long, with a third section releasing at the end of the month. Feel free to ask more questions of all the ROs on either this post or on the Sanctum discord.

* * * *

The stone auditorium from before has vanished. In its place is a lifted stage similar to those found on reality singing competition shows. Five humans (Ambrose, Kent, Glitch, Sally, and Grayson) sit in comfortably plush armchairs onstage. The empty tiered seats around them echo with the cheers, their approving screams increasing in volume as Gil stands up from his seat center the judges' panel, a table covered with a purple cloth that reads " TRUEST LOVE QUEST 💜" in sparkly silver cursive.

Gil waves jauntily at the invisible audience, then retakes his seat and taps his mic.

Gil: Welcome back to Battle of Button's, Part Two, The Ultimate Romantic Quest for Button's Truest Love. Allow me to introduce our panel of judges, who will ultimately decide the fate of my final *Mind Blind* playthrough.

Gil gestures to Hope and John Wiseman on his right, both wearing matching his and hers bathrobes.

Gil: Button's parents may not have been around for their final teenage years, but that doesn't mean that Mom and Dad can't have an opinion on their child's love life!

Hope flinches. John takes her hand.

Gil: Mama and Papa Bear, who are you hoping will win today's competition? Which candidate is just right?

John, with a fake smile and in his "Justice" press voice: Well, Gil, it's a tough competition with great contenders all around. But I'd have to say that I'm personally rooting for Sally.

Gil: And your opinion, Mama Bear?

Hope: Talia.

On stage, Glitch half-stands as if to give an acceptance speech before Kent tugs her back down into her seat.

Gil: You're not acquainted with Taliaferro Parker, Hope. What made you decide that they'd be the best fit for your child?

Hope: As I've said before, I believe that Ellen—that is, Button—would be happier with someone who isn't a Ment. Ambrose is her teacher, and Kent . . .

Hope throws an apologetic look at a stony-faced Kent.

Hope: Kent's father is a public figure, and the spotlight follows Tobias' son. Not through any fault of his own, but it would be easiest for Button to be with someone normal.

Hope's voice becomes quieter.

Hope: My daughter has had enough stress in her life.

Glitch: You hear that, everyone? Yours truly the *normal* choice.

Kent's lips curve subtly with a suppressed smile, anticipating Glitch's reaction.

Glitch: I've never been so flattered yet offended.

Gil: That's one vote for Salome Alavidze and another for Taliaferro Parker! But the war isn't won yet—contestants, you'll have a chance to convince our judges of your romantic qualifications later. We also have two other judges!

Gil turns to his left, where Nick and Reese are engaged in a silent glaring match. Despite their clear mutual loathing, their stare down is somewhat comical given that Reese's chin barely reaches over the edge of the table; unlike the rest of the judge's panel, Reese has been given a wobbly footstool instead of a proper high-backed chair.

Gil: Nick, you're our resident Button expert. Who do you think they should ride off into the sun—

Nick: Gray.

Gil: . . . I suppose even I can ask the occasional dumb question. What about you, River?

Reese rests her chin on the table and glowers at Gil.

Reese: Elmer doesn't deserve true love.

Gil: But if you had to choose?

Reese's lips press together mutinously.

Gil: To clarify, you ARE required to choose.

Reese: . . .

Gil remains smiling, but his red irises darken to pitch black.

Gil: Or else I'll be forced to disqualify you as a judge.

Reese: Kent Zarneki. Those two lying—

A loud BLEEP sounds from nowhere, muffling part of Reese's tirade.

Reese: —deserve each other.

Gil: That sounds to me like you were impressed by their teamwork during Operation Hemera! Excellent observation, River. Kent and Button do work incredibly well together.

Reese: I said no such thing, you horned—

A loud BLEEP sounds again.

Gil: That's one vote for Salome Alavidze, one vote for Taliaferro Parker, one for Grayson Black, one for Kent Zarneki, and one more vote for Ambrose Kim courtesy of myself!

Sally, Glitch, and Gray all look pleased to have been selected. Kent's expression remains stoic, but he's clearly unhappy with having only been voted for by his archnemesis. Meanwhile, Ambrose's gaze

remains affixed on the invisible crowd in effort to determine the source of the cheering (or locate an escape route).

Gil: Oh my, but this is quite the conundrum, isn't it? It's a five-way tie! Perhaps our contestants can provide some insight on Button's love life. Judges, do you have any questions you'd like to ask that might sway your opinion?

Hope: All of you are . . . somehow already dating a version of my child, is that correct?

Gil: Correctamundo. It's one big, happy harem.

Hope: Do any of you have hang-ups over Button's mind blindness?

Kent shakes his head.

Sally: Nope! Why would I?

Glitch: I'm not a hypocrite. Their check-ins with Nick aren't all that different from my appointments.

Ambrose: My hang-ups were with myself.

Hope: Grayson?

Grayson takes a deep breath, his eyes closing briefly as he organizes his thoughts. When he speaks, his words are slow and deliberate.

Grayson: I had reservations. How could I not? Every time we touch, I read their mind.

Nick: That doesn't mean that you two couldn't work! In fact, I'm pretty sure most fanfic authors would find it romantic.

Grayson gives Nick a stern look.

Grayson: Let me finish. In the beginning, I worried that I might overhear a thought I shouldn't. I was afraid that Ellery might one day resent me . . . or worse, that I might one day resent them.

Hope: You no longer feel that way?

Grayson: Trust took time for us to build, and it's not something that we can ever neglect. Our situation takes work. But being with Ellery, I've learned to be more open with my feelings and thoughts. I share all sides of myself, because that's what they share with me.

Gray calmly meets Hope's eyes and doesn't look away.

Gray: Yes. I had initially hang-ups over being a relationship with Ellery because of their mind blindness. Now, it's simply another thing about them which I love.

Gil, choking up: That's beautiful.

Nick: My guy *wins*. Pack up and go home, everybody.

Sally: Shut up, Nicholas.

Hope: I have a follow-up question. If what happened with the bombing happened again . . .

Ambrose, grimly: It won't.

Hope: But if it did and my child *were* controlled by a Ment. What would you do?

Sally: For once, I agree with Kim. It won't happen again. It can't happen, not without me knowing.

Hope: And where were you last time?

Sally: Where were *you*?

Hope dips her chin, acknowledging the hit, and Sally bites her lower lip.

Sally: I'm sorry, Mrs. Wiseman. I shouldn't have said that. But you have to know that I'll always do everything in my power to protect Button.

Grayson: I might not realize a Ment's presence as immediately as Sally, but it wouldn't take long.

Hope: Are you saying that my child can't want to keep their thoughts private without you growing concerned?

Grayson: I said no such thing. But Ellery and I are very, um, physically affectionate.

Gray's expression is a mix between besotted pride and embarrassment. Glitch blows out an annoyed raspberry with her lips.

Glitch: I feel like the Ments have an advantage here. I can't protect their mind with my current technology. All I can guarantee is that I'd never hold against them anything they did while under another's control. Because as much as I want to claim that I'd instantly know if Button were controlled, the harsh truth is that I might not notice right away.

Kent: I'd know.

Glitch: How exactly would you know, Nox Box? You can't read minds any more than I can—which I think should be a point in our favor, by the way.

Kent: I'd just know.

Glitch: You're not a Ment. And there's no guarantee that Button's behavior would change—a Ment could dig deep in their mind, figure out how they usually act.

Kent: The dogs would be able to tell, too.

Glitch: Your dogs aren't Ments, either.

Sally: I mean, I have suspicions about Cass.

Glitch: Valid. But seriously, Kenzie, there's no way that we could know for sure. Not immediately.

Kent shrugs in a way that makes it clear his opinion remains unswayed.

Hope: Maybe I misworded my question. I don't want to know how you would save or protect Button.

John: She wants to know how you would support them.

Hope: That may be where we failed.

Nick: You two didn't fail at anything. You hired a therapist, and never once blamed Button for what happened.

Hope: Because it wasn't her fault. It was mine.

Nick: It wasn't either of your faults. You never intended to hurt Button. If they didn't feel supported, it's probably because I wasn't sensitive enough to their needs.

John: Stop. We never should've asked you to become their guardian. If I hadn't been gone that day . . .

Gil lets out a dramatic, drawn-out sigh.

Gil: As much as I simply ADORE the Wiseman family self-flagellation circle, this interview isn't about you.

John: There's no call to be sarcastic.

Gil: Sarcastic? Never. Your relationships with each other is my favorite part of the game other than breaking Andy's hand. But I called you all here in order to talk about Button's love life, not to naval gaze over your collective misplaced guilt.

John: Fine. Back to my wife's question. Or a version of my wife's question.

He glances at Hope.

John: This is a very confusing dream, Dearest.

Hope: We'll talk about it over breakfast tomorrow morning. Did you take the bacon out of the freezer like I asked?

John: And stopped by the store for fresh blueberries and pancake mix.

Hope: I love you, Just John.

John: I love you more.

Gil looks genuinely touched by their affection. Nick begins to make exaggerated gagging sounds.

John: Hey, it's my dream. I'm allowed to be affectionate to my wife.

Ambrose: It's a shared delusion created by a Ment with uncategorized powers. We need to be on guard.

Sally: How do you know this isn't a dream?

Ambrose: Because I don't dream.

Gray: It feels like a dream. The strangest dream I've ever had, but a dream.

Glitch: Eh. I've had weirder.

Nick: Everybody dreams, Kim. You just don't remember yours.

Ambrose: I remember my nightmares.

Nick: Edgelord alert.

Sally: I dunno. I don't think Gil is a Ment.

Reese: This monster is no different than the rest of you freaks.

Gil's voice interrupts their squabbling, but it's changed. It's lower now, harsher, more a bone-deep resonance than repeatable sound.

Gil: Be. Silent.

The command lingers in the air.

The humans now stare at Gil with a level of terror.

Ambrose and Kent try to hide their reaction beneath a veil of stoic militarism. Nick grins nervously, while exchanging a subtle nod with Gray to be ready. John and Hope both tense, exchanging similar looks

with each other, but their training doesn't conceal their fear. Sally glares defiantly at Gil; Glitch is visibly shaking.

And Reese has disappeared.

Gil smiles congenially at the remaining humans. When he speaks, his voice is once again a pleasant baritone.

Gil: Where were we? Hope, you were asking how the contestants would support Button through a traumatic time, correct?

Hope nods stiffly and without dropping her guard.

Gil: Excellent! Ambrose, why don't we start with you?

Ambrose: No.

Gil: Excuse me?

Ambrose: Whatever your game, I refuse to continue playing.

Rage, burning hot, illuminates and flickers in Gil's red eyes . . . before just as quickly dimming back to dormant embers.

Gil: I understand your reticence, given your circumstances. Kent, then. How would you support Button?

Kent: Through anything?

Gil: Sure.

Kent: By reminding them that I'm there.

Glitch, grinning: Meaning, cuddle time with the dogs.

Kent nods.

Gil: I see. And your answer, Taliaferro?

Glitch: We're all pretending that you didn't just Hulk out and evaporate another person?

Gil: Apologies if we shadows have offended.

Glitch: Take my line, why don't you. Damn. Kenzie's right; I need to lay off the caffeine before bed. To answer your question . . . I dunno. I'd try to make Button laugh and remind them about how great our life is together. And if they wanted, I start working on something to protect them.

John: Not to doubt your capabilities, Glitch, but we tried to find a fix to Button's mental vulnerability for years.

Glitch: I didn't say fix them, because I don't think they need to be fixed. I said I'd try to protect them. Maybe a device that reacts to any Ment possession—something that glows or beep-boops whenever someone's brain is getting messed with. A tool like that would help all of Unity, not just Button.

Gil: And you, Sally?

Sally: How would I support Button? The exact same way that I've already been doing exactly that for the past fifteen years. Unlike the rest of these posers, I have a track record.

Gil: Grayson?

Grayson: I'd do whatever they asked.

Gil: Even if that meant doing nothing?

Grayson winces.

Grayson: Yes. My relationship with Ellery works because we respect each other's decisions. When we touch, and when we don't. What thoughts we acknowledge right away, and what thoughts we discuss later.

Glitch, rolling her eyes: You don't have a monopoly on respecting boundaries, Black.

John: Okay, folks, simmer down. Let's try a new question. Maybe even complimenting each other! Other than yourself, who would you select to be Button's romantic partner?

Sally: This sucks. You're asking me to matchmake for my own partner.

Gil: Technically, he's asking you to matchmake for a different version of your partner.

Sally sighs heavily.

Sally: I guess that I'd pick Grayson? No offense to the others except Kim, but I've known him the longest.

Nick: Excellent choice, Salome.

Sally: Gray's a great guy. Plus, he could use someone to buy him some shirts from a non-sporting goods store.

Grayson looks down at his plaid blue flannel, its durable fabric perfect for chilly nights around a campfire.

Grayson: What's wrong with my shirt?

Sally: Gray, just say thanks and take the compliment.

Grayson: Thank you?

Sally: You're welcome. I'm your choice as well, right?

Gray glances awkwardly at Nick, who's doing his best to appear unaffected by the current conversation.

Sally: Right?

Grayson: It's not that simple. In my world, you're . . .

Grayson trails off, his cheeks red. Gil groans.

Gil: Time out. For the sake of a fair fight, I'm calling in an alternate.

Gray vanishes into thin air. Nick lurches to his feet, but before his angry shout leaves his lips, Grayson reappears back in his seat . . . albeit wearing a green shirt (in the exact same checkered pattern) instead of blue.

Grayson #2: Where am I?

Gil: In a dream. Now, if a deranged fairy threw you off the Cliffs of Moher and your fragile skull was shattered by the sharp rocks below . . . which person on stage would you want your partner to fall in love with after they were done grieving your untimely and bloody death?

Grayson #2: That's a wretched thing to ask someone.

Nick: Not to mention oddly specific.

Gil: You *wouldn't* want your partner to find love again?

Grayson #2, grimacing: Of course I'd want El to move on.

Gil: With whom?

Grayson takes a moment to note who else is on stage with him. He seems unsurprised by Kent, Glitch, and Sally's presence, but Ambrose's inclusion makes his brows shoot up.

Grayson #2: Of those here on stage? Sally, definitely. Even in my world, it's clear how deeply she and Elm care for each other.

Sally: Right answer! I mean, Button and I have known each other for almost all our lives. We're perfect for each other.

Nick: . . . We should probably hear from the other contestants. Kent, Glitch, same question: other than yourself, who would you chose for Button to fall in love with?

Glitch: Kenzie.

Kent points at Glitch.

Gil: No hesitation whatsoever! It wouldn't strain your friendship if one of you won and the other lost?

Glitch: We're already from different realities, right? MCU Multiverse kinda scenario?

Gil: A somewhat plebian explanation, but close enough. Although, if you lose this competition, another version of you may never find true love.

Glitch: Then Other Me will have to amp up the charm. But if Other Button isn't interested, then there's no better alternative than Kenzie.

Kent nods, presumably to advocate the same for Glitch and not his own suitability.

Hope: I wasn't asked, but Kent would be my second choice as well.

She gives Kent a warm smile.

Hope: Ellen's always loved dogs.

John: Huh. Eli's more of a cat person.

Gil: I prefer bunnies—so fluffy. But there's only one contestant left to hear from. Ambrose? Might you decide to play with us again?

Nick glares at Ambrose. Hope and John glance at him uneasily, as unsure as Grayson #2 as to why he's even been included in the pool of candidates.

Ambrose: It doesn't matter.

Nick: You're only saying that because you weren't picked by anyone else.

Gil: Come now. I picked him.

Nick: Except by the crazy dream demon.

Ambrose: The question acts as if 'Button' is the same person in every timeline. They're clearly not.

Gil: Your point?

Ambrose, quietly: I have no interest in anyone other than my partner, even if they share the same face and background.

Hope's shuttered expression becomes incrementally warmer as she observes Ambrose.

Hope, to Ambrose: What is your Button like?

Ambrose: Willful. Ambitious. Intelligent. Annoying.

John: Now that sounds more like Eli.

Ambrose locks eyes with Hope's.

Ambrose: Forgiving.

Gil: Lovely adjectives. None answer which love interest Button ultimately belongs with.

Ambrose: Mine belongs with me. As for other versions . . .

His gaze drifts critically over the assembled contestants.

Ambrose: That's for Button to decide.

* * * *

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* * * *

This has been Reality Warping With Gil, Hell's #1 TV Show Not Involving Torture.

Produced, Directed, and Cast by Gil. Set design by Gil. Hosted by Gil and Assorted Mortals.

Tune in next time at: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/67312625>

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On . . . Fanfiction \(Part 2\)](#)

[Apr 9, 2022](#)

Peace And Prejudice

A sequel to **Just Ice And Fire** (<https://www.patreon.com/posts/64358032>)

by CallMeV

UCRT RPF

Justice | Nicholas Wiseman / OC

* * * *

Lightning splintered across the night sky, a spiderweb of fiery opal splitting an onyx setting, soon followed by a thunderous boom—a cymbal crash among the constant timpani of pelting rain. Branches creaked and eventually snapped beneath the celestial torrential deluge, and the soil turn to muddy quicksand that clung to my every step. I ran onwards, stumbling over gnarled roots and jagged rocks, my knees bleeding from multiple scrapes but my heart resolute.

I WOULD arrive at Aeon in time to stop Nox's execution. Ambrose Kim would not get away with pinning his crimes on another, not when his last demonic summoning had imprisoned my beloved's soul in Purgatory.

I clutched the gold and amethyst locket that I wore around my neck, the only thing tethering Nick's spirit to the world of the living.

"I'll save you, my love," I swore, my voice a mere whisper amongst the furious winds of the raging storm. "Or my name isn't Stephanie Jade Angelique Desiree Aria Lovera."

* * * *

Glitch's brows arched at Nick, seated across from her at the kitchen table and who'd briefly paused reading aloud to take a sip of his water. "Why so many middle names?" she asked.

"The protagonist learns a piece of her true name every time she discovers a new power," Ellery replied without looking up from the pile of scrap that she and Glitch were attempting to reassemble back into a drone. "Initially, she was only pyrokinetic. By the last chapter, she brought Nick back from the dead."

"Hey, I wasn't *totally* deceased!" Nick protested. "Stephanie captured my second-to-last heartbeat in her locket."

"She can't just look up her birth certificate?" Glitch asked. "What happens after she learns her full name?"

"She'll be able to bring me and Gray fully back to life," Nick said.

Ellery winced. "Just don't mention Gray's death scene around him. It's still a sensitive subject."

“He was imprisoned inside a teapot, which Kim then shattered,” Nick elaborated. “Gray claims the author hates the British.”

“Uh-huh.” Glitch glanced between the two siblings with a bemused expression. “And this plot makes sense to you?”

Ellery shrugged a shoulder while screwing one of the drone’s bolts into place.

“Last year, I spent several months trapped in my sibling’s head,” Nick said. “An enchanted necklace is an upgrade; I get my own room.”

“So, just to summarize,” Glitch said slowly, “this fanfiction has your soul trapped in an amulet, Rosy as a maniacal Ment villain, and Kent about to be executed?”

Nick nodded.

“I need to make some calls,” Glitch said.

* * * *

“You’re too late, Stephanie!” gloated Ambrose Kim, a cruel smile forming beneath his razer-thin moustache. “The judge has already sealed Nox’s fate! He’ll die at sunrise tomorrow, and there’s nothing you that you can do to stop it!”

I glared defiantly back at the dastardly villain. First he almost killed my one true love, and now he was determined to murder Unity’s last remaining AMO? Not on my watch.

“If you think you can stop me,” I retorted sassily, “then you’ve never met a Lovera.”

WHOOSH.

I gasped as violet streams of magic flowed outwards from my heart, coallesing into a brilliant beam of light that shot out at Ambrose. What new power was this?

* * * *

“Kent, you need to join us at Ellery’s house before Rosy kills you,” Glitch said into her phone.

“What?”

“Just get over here. Stephanie’s about to gain a new middle name.”

* * * *

Power—pure, raw, overwhelming—surged out of me. As a Druid, I had channeled the forces of nature before. This was different, a scorching otherworldliness that had no earthly source.

"Soleil." Buried beneath my own agonized scream, I heard my recently deceased mother's whisper. "I bestow upon you the name Soleil, wielder of the sun's power. Take hold of your birthright, Stephanie Jade Angelique Desiree Aria Soleil Lovera, and FIGHT."

Soleil. I had taken on a new name and was thus one step closer to understanding my true nature. But first, I needed to stop Ambrose Kim.

The pain of sunfire coursing through my vanes became—

* * * *

"When did Stephanie's mom die?" Ellery asked Nick, Glitch having left to answer the doorbell.

"Before the first chapter," Nick said. "It was one of the final chapter's big reveals: the original Peace was a ghost all along."

"Dang. I'd have thought you or Gray would've caught onto your coworker being dead."

"Gray isn't very intelligent in this story," Nick admitted, "and I was apparently too distracted. First by my own inner torment and then by Stephanie's . . ." He scrolled up on his laptop to find the right passage. "'Celestial beauty.'"

Glitch reentered the kitchen, Kent trailing behind her with a dazed expression as Glitch attempted to explain why a mustachioed version of Kim had orchestrated his murder.

"All the Ments have been trapped in a demonic pocket dimension," Glitch was saying. "Meaning that you're the only surviving AMO."

Kent shook his head, still looking nonplussed. "Why is someone writing a story about me?"

"It's mostly about me," Nick interjected, causing Ellery to roll her eyes.

"The NPO Initiative going public means that you've been promoted from 'hot mayor's son and local celebrity' to 'international hero and role model'," Glitch informed Kent. "Plus, this was written by one of the MIVs."

"The writer knows me?" Kent asked.

"Only tangentially," Glitch gave a dismissive hand wave. "That's not the point."

"The point is that Kim has an evil moustache," Nick said.

* * * *

The pain of sunfire coursing through my vanes became a comforting warmth, soothing, healing, life-bringing but still destructive and endlessly hungry. With this newfound power, I could destroy Ambrose

Kim once and for all. Erase him from existence, so that a cruel word never again left his coldly smirking lips.

As the last of the Lovera Druids, I'd undertaken a sacred oath to protect all life. I sworn to my mother's spirit never to take a life, and that promise had stayed my hand during my many battles with The Dark Ment. But now was different.

I lifted my chin proudly to stare directly into Ambrose Kim's abyssally dark eyes. "It's time to end this," I proclaimed over the howl of magic.

Nox's life was depending on me, as was the Fate of the entire world. I had no choice but to break my vow.

* * * *

Kent frowned. "Why can't I rescue myself?"

"Because this is a fictional story with a self-insert protagonist on a power trip," Ellery stated matter-of-factly. "Making you the damsel in distress."

Nick rested a sympathetic hand on Kent's shoulder. "If it's any consolation, I'm currently trapped in a locket."

"Seriously, though," Glitch said, "who knew that Valero had such a hate crush on Rosy?"

"Hate crush?" Ellery echoed.

"He's been mentioned more times than Nick," Glitch pointed out. "Enemies to lovers is a classic fanfic trope, and Rosy has the most agency of anyone else in the story except Stephanie. They're almost equals."

Nick scowled. "Yeah, well, she also slapped Rosy with a moustache. No villain with a moustache has ever been given a proper redemption arc."

Contemplative silence followed his declaration as everyone tried to come up with an example to disprove Nick's assertion.

"You know, I actually can't think of any," Ellery admitted, scratching her chin. "There's plenty of moustaches that started out good, but none that started out evil and are later redeemed."

"Once an evil 'stache, always an evil 'stache," Nick said. "Kim is the ultimate evil 'stache."

* * * *

I stretched out a glowing hand, threads of magic weaving between my fingers like a magician's silver coin.

"Ambrose Kim, I find you guilty," I declared, my voice resonantly melodic with power and flames. "I find you guilty of misusing your telekinesis and attempting to murder Justice in order to assume his identity. I find you guilty of cruelty and abuse of power."

"Pretty words and nothing else, Lovera!" screeched Kim wildly, reaching for his meteorite scepter. "Fortitude failed to stop me! Your friends Ella and Sammy failed! Even your precious Justice failed! What makes you so special?"

The luminescent light around my hands grew brighter and more brilliant, until my entire body was surrounded by an incandescent, shimmering halo.

"Because I know now my true name!" I shouted back. "I am Stephanie Jade Angelique Desiree Aria Soleil Lovera, and I was born to stop you."

* * * *

"Lando!" Glitch suddenly exclaimed.

The others looked over at her in confusion.

"From *Star Wars*," Glitch said. "Evil moustaches that get redemption stories. What about Lando Calrissian?"

"Was he ever truly a villain?" Ellery countered. "Arguably, his only crime was trying to protect the people of Cloud City."

"Not a villain," Kent said decisively.

"Temporarily wayward rascalion at most," Nick agreed.

Glitch steepled her fingers together, her eyes narrowing with thought. "Megamind?"

"Had a goatee," Ellery said.

"Can we get back to Kim's death?" Nick asked. "I've been waiting six chapters for this."

* * * *

My first blast of light knocked Ambrose Kim to the ground. His boney lich fingers scrabbled for his fallen scepter.

"Nooooooooooooo!!!" he wailed. "You can't do this!!!"

"I can!" I hollered. "Because my name is—"

* * * *

“Yeah, yeah, we know,” Ellery said. “Skip over this part, would you?”

* * * *

Exhausted from our vigorous battle, Ambrose collapsed. His bones whitened before my eyes, sun bleached by the purity of my newest power. As the light faded around me, all that remained of the once demonic Ment was a pile of ash.

I had done it. I had killed the demonic lich named Ambrose Kim.

A wave of weakness overtook me, and I gasped. My knees buckled. I fell to the ground beside the bone-white pile of sand that had once been a man.

“You broke your druidic oath, Stephanie,” my mother’s ghost wailed. “Now you’ll suffer the consequences!”

END CHAPTER

* * * *

“I hate cliffhangers,” Glitch grumbled.

Kent nodded, looking equally dissatisfied.

“Valero posts a new chapter every Saturday,” Ellery said. “You two are welcome to join us for game night. Nick usually reads the latest update while we’re waiting for the calzones to cook.”

“Sounds great!” Glitch said. “Provided that Nick doesn’t object to cooking for two more.”

Nick didn’t respond. Instead, he stared wide-eyed at his computer screen as if frozen.

You okay? Ellery thought to her brother.

Silently, Nick turned his laptop around so that everyone could read its screen.

Kent blinked owlshly.

“This can’t be real,” Glitch whispered. “When I mentioned the story over the phone, he hung up on me.”

“But this means that he also reads . . .” Ellery trailed off, shaking her head in denial. “No. It can’t be. Too unlikely.”

* * * *

COMMENT SECTION

A. Kim on Peace And Prejudice, Chapter 7

"CallMeV",

If you spent more time studying and less time envisioning how to kill me off, you might have passed yesterday's test.

Sincerely,

The Demonic Lich

[Prettiest Please Answer This Poll And Earn My Eternal Gratitude](#)

[Apr 10, 2022](#)

I'm finished with Chapter 5 (just had to resolve some issues that arose from switching computers), but I'm trapped with indecision about where to start it (and, subsequently, where to end Chapter 4).

Chapter organization is essential to reading experience: it determines whether you set aside a book during a "good stopping point" and forget about it, or if after a chapter ends, you feel compelled to go park your car behind an abandoned KFC and turn off your cellphone so that you can read it all in one go without any distractions (this oddly specific example brought to you courtesy of my teenage years).

When playing *Mind Blind*, I want readers to feel as driven to turn (click?) the next page as I always feel when reading my favorite books. So it's important that every chapter ends in the perfect place. But for Chapter 4's ending, I can't decide. So I'm asking you guys. Thanks in advance!

The Options

Originally, Chapter 4 ended after Button realized that it was Nick in their head:

"You're not in my bedroom, \${Nicholas}." You rub your temples.

**if Nick > 90*

Much as you may love your brother, this?

This is going to be a headache.

[i]Button?[/i]

"You're in my mind."

When I edited Chapter 4, I felt it was more impactful if the scene stopped a few pages earlier:

Wait.

Your eyes snap open.

Nick is ten miles away, comatose at Chicago South-Central Medical Center.

Who the hell is in your head?

The scene with Nick has been expanded with Button now having more reactions, and I'm happy with the new options. But now I'm second-guessing the chapter organization and debating whether to return to the original Chapter 4 cut-off of "You're in my mind." I'm wondering whether it's obvious to readers that the voice is Nick, and thus the "Who the hell is in your head?" line may not actually have the ending-worthy drama I initially thought.

. . . Honestly, it's possible I've been working on this chapter for so long that I've fried the part of my brain capable of making executive decisions. But it would be helpful to know which ending readers prefer, independent of my own biases and creative naval-gazing. Lucky for me, I have you guys! Again, this won't change any of the text itself, just how that text is organized.

So, which Chapter 4 ending do you feel is stronger/better?

Original Ending ("You're in my mind.")

New Ending ("Who the hell is in your head?")

474 votes total

[Writer's Blog: Get An Annual Physical. Now. Yes, I Know It's Midnight. Do It Anyway.](#)

[Apr 16, 2022](#)

Chapter 5 and 6 are *finally* rewritten. I just need to finish debugging the code, and they'll be released this weekend. I tried to finish Chapter 7 as well to include the three chapters together, but 7 underwent major changes and may still get merged with part of Chapter 8 (I'm working on finding the right cut-off)

Most importantly: I finished writing the new scene with Hope and am satisfied with it! I'd been skipping over scenes with her because, truthfully, writing about a mother talking about a hospital . . . it hit too close to home. Experiencing my characters' emotions is essential to doing them justice on page, but

sometimes that symbiosis becomes reversed. Instead of me, the writer, feeling what Button and Hope felt, I instead started to imbue Button with MY feelings. Every scene I wrote with Hope basically strongarmed Button into playing nice and making up and telling their mom how much they love her. It became more about me processing my own real-world circumstances than in accurately depicting the characters.

Last month, during a routine checkup, my mother was diagnosed with cancer.

I talked to my mom about sharing this, not just because I wanted you guys to understand why I'm now in a different time zone with a more chaotic schedule, but because her prognosis is genuinely good. We figured that she could serve as a sort of PSA to encourage yearly checkups. Doctors are hopeful that it hasn't spread to her lymph nodes, which means she may not even have to undergo chemo (depending on whether the cancer has spread to her lymph nodes, which they won't know until she goes into surgery to remove a tumor the size of a golf ball). Cancer still sucks, but it sucks a lot less when the doctor describes it as "completely treatable."

This is only the case because it was caught early, though! My mom would've never realized that anything was wrong were it not for a routine appointment to make sure everything was still functioning as it should (it wasn't). Yearly checkups are something I have a history of nagging her about (I only have the one parent and thus she's a Limited Edition). Right now, I feel incredibly vindicated for being a nag.

It's no exaggeration to say that early diagnosis has saved my mother's life. So please: get regular checkups. Nag your loved ones, especially if they're older, to get regular checkups. Be *that* annoying relative that talks about the importance of lump checks over family dinner. It could save a life.

In lighter and more personally embarrassing news, my mom has mentioned wanting to guest author a post now that I'm living with her. Apparently, she finds it amusing to witness me at work. I'm not entirely sure what she means by this, although it may have something to do with the way I cackle maniacally whenever writing a scene where Rosy makes a bad pun (or where Stephanie Valero writes fanfiction). My mom apparently feels that all of you deserve to know the theatrics and facial gymnastics involved in *Mind Blind's* creation. I admit this gives me a teensy-weensy pause. But if you can't joke about yourself, what can you joke about? It's something to look forward to, at least. (For you, not me. I'll be in hiding until people forget about whatever she eventually writes.)

* * * *

Copied below is a snippet of code that I also posted on the Sanctum Discord. This shows how Hope's Chapter 5 scene changes depending on Button's previous choices, using the portion for Buttons who want nothing to do with their mother (there are four other versions with similar amount of internal variation). Needless to say, this negative relationship became hard to write when I was waiting for weeks to hear news about my own mom. Perhaps some writers can completely divorce their feelings from their work, but I bring my emotional baggage to work like a leather briefcase.

Snippet:

"It's good that he's breathing without the ventilator," your mother's voice says over the speaker. "How is \${Name} holding up?"

**if (Hnope)*

**goto missear*

**label missear*

**if (Hfear)*

Your jaw tenses to keep from trembling with an echo of remembered fear. You've made it clear to your father and brother that you wish to have nothing to do with your mother.

**elseif (Hfear = false)*

Your jaw tenses. You've made it clear to your father and brother that you wish to have nothing to do with your mother.

**if (Hblame = true)*

For damn good reason, given that she almost killed you.

Yet here you stand, hearing her say your name as if she still has the right to play concerned parent.

[i]She's never stopped caring, you know,[/i] Nick thinks.

**if (Nick < 100)*

You roll your eyes at your brother's wistful tone.

**if ((Hworst = true) and (Hblame = true))*

Over the years, Nick's made it quite clear that he wants you to forgive and forget your almost-murder, as if the incident in the kitchen were the root of your bad relationship with your mother and not the inevitable culmination of years' worth of mutual resentment.

**elseif ((Hworst = false) and (Hblame = true))*

Over the years, Nick's made it quite clear that he wants you to just forgive and forget your almost-murder.

**elseif ((Hworst = false) and (Hblame = false))*

Over the years, Nick's made it obvious that he wants you to reconcile with your mother.

**elseif (Hworst = true)*

Over the years, Nick's made it obvious that he wants you to reconcile with your mother, as if the incident in the kitchen were the root of your bad relationship and not the inevitable culmination of years' worth of mutual resentment.

**if (Habandon)*

But if your mother had ever truly cared, then she never would have left.

When it comes to your mother, there's a good reason that you . . .

**fake_choice*

#Keep our weekly phone calls to under ten minutes.

#Only return her calls once a month.

#Limit our contact to a video chat on major holidays.

#Haven't spoken with her in over four years.

[Wiseman Family Fluff \(An Excerpt\)](#)

[Apr 20, 2022](#)

Delays happening since I added in a new clue to Chapter 5 that comes up in Hope and John's convo. This requires me to add in a scene, taking out Button's solo walks around Chicago and replacing them with scenes where Button can undertake various unethical endeavors such as hacking into their father's email account in order to find a letter sent by a certain mask-wearing vigilante.

More foreshadowing is always good, right? I'm hoping to get this scene finished by this evening (I have the whole house to myself to write!). Until then, please enjoy a revoltingly mushy possible excerpt from Hope's new call:

"I love you to farthest star," Mom says, her words from what had been, as a small child, your favorite bedtime picture book.

"Until the very last day," Dad adds with a nostalgic smirk.

'I love you to the end of time and past the Milky Way.' Nick's conclusion to the quote goes unheard by both your parents.

[Apr 22, 2022](#)

Because I can never leave anything well enough alone, here's a sneak peak of Sally's new optional romance scenes! (Chapter five now almost breaks 60,000 words, but we're going to ignore that to focus on smooches.)

Originally, I'd intended for Sally's romance to have three starting points: one in chapter five, one around chapter fourteen, and a "at long last we now both acknowledge the potential between us" ending.

The chapter 14 activation point didn't work out (there's been a lot less downtime with the ROs than I'd originally imagined, and honestly without the touch thing with Gray, it's a weird place to start a romance). I still plan on keeping the romantic interest acknowledgement ending, but I'm also striving to add more variability into how Sally's romance initiates in Chapter 5. There's several ways things can now start other than with a kiss, but I'm posting my personal favorite here. Mostly because I love the line about boys vs cookies.

(NB: this version of Button is the only one who doesn't yet realize that Sally has feelings for them. Ergo Nick reacting with slightly assholish amusement instead of proper concern.)

Anyway, I present, without further ado, specifically for those of you who want your wholesome friends-to-lovers trope with a side order of ultimately pointless angst:

Choice: *"What are your feelings towards my brother?" I can't take this any longer.*

A confused crease forms between Sally's auburn eyebrows. "I want Nicholas to wake up, of course." She laughs. "The sooner he can make us snacks for movie night again, the better."

"That's not what I mean," you say, refusing to fall for her deflection. "Back in junior high, I saw your sketchbook. You'd doodled his name inside a pink—"

Sally slaps her hands over your mouth, for all the good that does since Nick can read your thoughts.

[i]She drew our names in sparkly gel pen hearts?[i] Your brother sounds more amused than concerned over your potential heartbreak. [i]Such prime ammunition. How did I never learn about this before?[i]

How? Because you'd always done your damndest not to think about her crush on him.

"I was thirteen," Sally snaps. "I had great taste in cookies and awful taste in boys, and the two preferences got confused."

Her hazel eyes hold yours for a long moment before nervously looking down at her lap, a dark flush creeping up her freckled cheeks. "Trust me, I've moved on."

[Mind Blind Sneak Peak: Vegetarian Restaurant Button](#)

[Apr 23, 2022](#)

Chapter Five 2.0 will go up in a few hours (internet willing), but I'm sharing this snippet because I suspect most Buttons won't take time off wooing their love interests to go have have pineapple salsa with Nick at "Don't Kale The Vibe."

I'm really, really proud of the vegetable joke. Thanks to everyone on The Sanctum discord that helped me workshop it.

* * * *

Don't Kale The Vibe's entre dishes are adequate enough, but they've gained popularity due to their dips. You order a basket of corn chips and half of the salsas on the menu. It's expensive, but Nick's paying.

[i]I am?[i]

He is. You nicked his spare credit card from where it was taped to beneath the cookie jar.

CHOICES:

#I smile at the stranger and ask if he comes here often.

Your conversation goes smoothly enough until it's time for you to leave, when the man asks if you'd like to come back to his house for a massage. You wouldn't, which seems to offend him, and he leaves in a huff.

Not the best social interaction to celebrate your first day as a newly minted Pollard Five.

[i]You're too charming for your own good,[i] Nick thinks. [i]Also, he was an asshole.[i]

#I open with a lighthearted joke. "Why did the tofu cross the road?"

The man squints at you.

"To prove it wasn't a chicken."

Nick laughs. The stranger switches booths. Overall, not the best social interaction to celebrate your first day as a newly minted Pollard Five.

#I open with a dark joke. “Why did the vegan cannibal visit the ICU?”

The man squints at you.

“They were shopping for vegetables.”

Nick laughs despite your joke putting him on the menu. The stranger switches booths. Overall, not the best social interaction to celebrate your first day as a freshly minted Pollard Five.

#I try to find a common interest. “Did you read [i]Animal Empowerment[i]’s recent article on slaughterhouse conditions?”

The man eventually moves to another booth. This is fine by you because he forgets his chip basket.

[i]We need to work on your social skills, Button.[/i]

[The Great Rewriting: Chapter 5 In All It's 50,000 Word Glory](#)

[Apr 25, 2022](#)

I managed to get it down from 60,000 words with some judicious editing, but this chapter is still *hefty*. It's also late because I made the dumb mistake of having CSIDE (the program I use to test the coding) autoformat everything into spaces instead of tabs.

. . . Which meant I had to go over the entire first five chapters and redo all the coding. Or, at least, I would've needed to do this had I not given up halfway through Chapter 2 and just rolled back to older files. Which meant I needed to re-bug test everything, but that was still less of a headache than rewriting.

That being said, there might be bugs and typos from previous builds since the versions now up are from the original Word documents. So please let me know if you run into any issues that were un-fixed in this update.

Major Changes:

1. Ace Route Kisses for Sally and Glitch. (Grayson is tame enough in this chapter that none of his scenes actually changed.)
2. More foreshadowing about the bombing to be found in a conversation between Hope and John, which can be followed up on if Button chooses to walk around the city with Nick. This conversation

with Nick foreshadows something else . . . which I can't yet disclose. But the letter will get mentioned again in future chapters as well.

3. Options to decide whether or not Button matchmakes for Sally and Nick during movie night (provided Button doesn't have a crush on Sally). Originally, Snickly activation was locked behind working with Sally when setting up Button's Podium profile--meaning those working with Glitch instead were locked out. Going forth, working with Sally will still be a secondary activation point for those who didn't do movie night, but for those who've already decided to encourage the relationship, it'll serve as Button's first real matchmaking opportunity. If you've already said you're not into their relationship, it won't get mentioned.
4. Speaking of Sally, Button can now be a bit timid and still get a kiss! Sally takes charge . . . and then profusely apologizes because OMG WHAT DID SHE JUST DO. Button can also directly ask how Sally feels about Nick before kissing her. Beware, though, continuing to doubt your best friend's word *will* lock you out of her romance. If Button doesn't want to kiss Sally with an audience, that's totally fine and completely understandable! It just means that you're on the ultimate slowburn path.
5. Sally's vision about Glitch has changed, and now reveals their reaction to Button's carnapping by Andy/Liz in later chapters.
6. An option to talk with Hope. Or not talk with Hope.

Plus too many other changes to count. More description of environments, new options when city seeing, and Buttons who told Glitch that they're vegan will no longer reach for the milk when making Grayson cookies. This chapter has variables out the wazoo, so my priority right now is making sure that nothing is broken when playing as I can only test so many pathways myself. (If you do find any issues, please report it here or on the Sanctum discord).

Oh, and Button's name will no longer default to Clarence.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[MB Short Story: Three Truths and Two Dogs \(Part One\)](#)

[Apr 27, 2022](#)

(Look forward to Part 2, coming tomorrow! This short story got *long*.)****

* * * *

Every spring, Tobias Zarneki held his annual charity auction. Ostensibly to raise funds for A New Page, a nonprofit which coordinated activities for at-risk youth in association with local libraries, Chicago's political elite recognized the event for what it was: an opportunity to schmooze with other power players, launder bribes via the purchase of overpriced modern art, and whisper their own agendas into the

mayor's ear in return for generous campaign season donations. And if the evening provided a few kids from South Side with college scholarships, well, that only proved that the attendees truly *cared* about their community (and thus deserved said community's votes).

Every spring, Kent Zarneki forced himself into a black tuxedo with a too-tight collar. He polished his shoes and practiced his smile. Then, when he could no longer recognize his reflection in the mirror, he stepped into his 1971 Ford Mustang and drove himself to The Starlight Hotel and Ballroom. It was a whimsical and overly romantic name for a venue which, in Kent's opinion, cared more about creating an ambiance of exclusivity than true elegance. Not that Kent possessed a particularly refined palette (his favorite food was mac and cheese), but his father's auction cost almost as much money to host as it ever raised. Kent failed to comprehend the logic of whoever had decided that it was classy to have diamond chips embedded into the handles of the salad forks. If Kent hadn't already known that Tobias was missing a sense of humor, he might've suspected the cutlery to be his father making a subtle dig at all the aldermen born with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouths. But no, some things were just tacky. Expensive, but tacky.

Kent parked at the underground lot across the street from The Starlight. Kent didn't consider himself to be stubborn, exactly, but he rarely did things that he didn't want to do, even when that meant showing up to tonight's event on foot and earning judgmental stares from other invitees. He'd compromised enough for one night by agreeing to attend his father's fundraiser; he wasn't about to let a stranger, not even a professional valet, drive his baby.

Once inside the ballroom, Kent found his father in animated conversation with one of his major donors. Or rather, Mrs. Evanton-Marely speaking animatedly, while Tobias pretended to listen with a politely distant half-smile. Upon seeing Kent approach, his fake smile flattened. He extricated himself from Mrs. Evanton-Marely and pulled Kent aside near one of the crystal paned, floor-to-ceiling windows.

"You're late," Tobias informed his son.

Kent shrugged.

"Damian O'Riley was asking about you," Tobias continued. His upper lip curled with disdain so slight that anyone not related to him wouldn't have recognized the emotion. "He'll want to hear about your experience at Aeon."

This time, Kent didn't bother with a physical acknowledgement as he awaited his father's next order.

"Arabella Zhou is seated at frontmost table near the podium. Her granddaughter will be visiting Chicago this summer; you'll volunteer to show her around."

Kent shrugged again. He'd already met Mei, Ms. Zhou's granddaughter, at a different fundraiser and had no objection to renewing the acquaintance. She was a Dance and Econ double major at Yale, and her sarcastic commentary about the other guests in attendance had made that past evening less dull.

"And don't forget that—" Tobias's cellphone buzzed, cutting off further instruction. He looked down at the screen, scowled, and began to turn away.

"You'll mention the shelter in your speech?" Kent asked.

Tobias paused at his son's quiet query. They had reached an understanding soon after Kent had turned eighteen and inherited the small trust and house left to him by his grandparents (and thus was no longer reliant upon his father): Kent would attend Tobias's fundraisers, and in return Tobias's speeches that night would include at least one comment about the animal shelter where Kent volunteered.

Tobias nodded curtly, and Kent's stomach unknotted. He was never certain when his father would decide pull the plug on their deal, and the shelter needed the funding. The casual namedrop didn't take much effort on Tobias's part, especially when compared to the energy exerted by Kent to play The Politician's Perfect Son, but having the right word uttered into the ear of a well-funded crowd had more than doubled the shelter's finances in the past three years. Ms. Zhou had even adopted an elderly poodle from them—another reason that Kent didn't mind playing host to Mei.

"Don't forget that the photo op with *Times* is at ten am tomorrow." Tobias glared once more at his phone screen before shoving his cell back into his pocket.

"We're getting two new rescues in from Florida that morning," Kent said. "I'm on shift for their drop off."

"Reschedule."

* * * *

Kent should have rescheduled. Disobeying his father wasn't something he did often; in Kent's experience, defiance usually wasn't worth the fallout. He'd long ago realized that it was far preferable to bargain with Tobias and get something in return than it was to deal with Tobias's displeasure. Besides, as much as the reality might irk him, Kent was his father's son, and Tobias had taught him that there were three truths in life.

Truth One: Everyone had an agenda.

Truth Two: The key to controlling others was discovering their agenda.

Truth Three: Nothing mattered more than control.

These truths, perhaps, were why Kent liked animals so much. Their agenda was simple, driven by food and affection. Nor could animals—especially the animals that passed through the shelter where he volunteered—ever really be fully controlled. There was an element of unpredictability to even the tamest housecat. Kent respected that.

Tobias's agenda and the third truth coincided. Nothing mattered more to Tobias than being in control, and he was willing to exchange Kent favors (such as publicly supporting the shelter) in order to maintain

the illusion that he still held it over his soon. Perhaps a stronger, more idealistic person would've long ago severed the bond with their father. But after the death of Kent mother, and then the death of his grandparents . . . Tobias was really the only family Kent had left. Even if Tobias was a manipulative asshole.

But because Tobias was a manipulative asshole, Kent should've rescheduled his shift and gone to the magazine photo shoot. Yes, Jeremiah (the shelter's owner) had been down sick with the flu, and yes, Trina (the only other fulltime employee) had been out on maternity leave. But Kent could've asked Glitch to be there for the dogs' arrival in his place, leveraging Glitch's desire to drive his car for the favor. Glitch might've been willing to take Kent's shift without the additional incentive, but Kent didn't like asking others for unpaid favors . . . even if Glitch was becoming (somewhat against Kent's will) something of a friend.

"Should have done's" no longer matter. Kent had screwed up. Last month, he'd chosen his shift at the animal shelter over his father's morning photoshoot, and now five of the shelter's biggest donors had just canceled their annual donations. All were political peers of his father. Kent knew Tobias was behind their withdrawal, and he understood the implicit threat behind it: *"I helped you out, son, and I can rescind that help at any time."*

"We're screwed," Jeremiah groaned, their forehead thumping onto the surface of their desk.

Kent leaned against the office wall. Barks, mews, and the occasional neigh drifted through the nearby open window, each animal cry hitting Kent like a wordless accusation. This was his fault, because he'd disobeyed Tobias. Jeremiah ran one of the few no-kill shelters in Chicago that didn't only accept easily adoptable animals. Most of the residents were long-term, and if the shelter closed . . .

"I'll fix this," Kent said.

Jeremiah cracked open a single eyelid. "There's nothing to fix. I knew your dad's party was coming up, and I anticipated another surge of donations. Our funds are tied up in the kennel expansion."

"If it's just money—"

Jeremiah cut Kent off with a shake of their head. "I'm not taking more money from you, Zee. It's not a long-term solution."

Kent's lips pursed together. He'd have to ask Glitch how to make an anonymous contribution later. As much as he hated to admit it, though, Jeremiah was right. Kent alone couldn't afford to pay for the shelter's upkeep, especially if any more donors withdrew.

"What if we tried to get some of the animals adopted out?" Trina asked from her seat on the beanbag. She spoke in a whisper to keep Iris, her daughter, from waking up. Technically, she was still on maternity leave, but she'd refused to stay at home after hearing about the shelter's financial woes.

Jeremiah gave a hoarse laugh. "Right. We have maybe two cats suitable to become pets."

“What about the new shih tzus?” Trina said. “They’re sweethearts.”

Kent and Jeremiah both stared at her flatly.

“Well, maybe sweetheart is the wrong word,” she amended. “But if the shelter is going to close, they still deserve a home.”

“All our guys deserve a home,” Jeremiah sighed. “Most can be transferred to Saint Francis’s—their whole mission is taking care of special needs animals. But there’s nothing physically wrong with the shih tzus. They won’t qualify.”

“I’ll ask around,” Trina said, “and see if any of my friends are willing to foster the cats.” She gave a sly smile. “And by ‘foster,’ I mean ‘grow accidentally attached to and ultimately adopt.’ As for the shih tzus . . .” she trailed off with a wince. “They’re certainly cute enough to be adopted.”

“So long as their new owners is willing to adopt them both,” Jeremiah said. They looked down at the band-aide on the back of their hand. “And so long as they don’t mind being occasionally mauled.”

Kent crossed his arms and stared out the window. “I’ll fix this,” he repeated.

* * * *

“How the hell do I fix this?” Kent asked the two shih tzus.

Maintaining eye contact, Antigone squatted in the grass and peed. Cassandra, less engaged in the ongoing canine-human conversation, strained against her leash, teeth bared, in attempt to chase after one of the other dogs. None of the other shelter animals had to be leashed to wander around the gated field, but Annie and Cass were prone to attacking anyone other than each other.

Kent didn’t usually name the animals that passed through the shelter. Usually when dogs came without an ID, Trina christened them. She chose cutesy names like “Sweetpea” or “Sprinkles” or, in the case of a schnauzer that she’d later ended up adopting, “Blueberry Muffin Top.” But Trina and Jeremiah hadn’t been present when the shih tzus had arrived; Kent had been, blowing off his father’s photoshoot to instead give the two girls a greeting and proper meal. He’d taken one look at their sad, chocolate brown eyes, and instantly known that none of Trina’s choices would fit.

Kent had read the files on Antigone and Cassandra: it was a miracle that these dogs were still alive. They deserved names that recognized their shared past as survivors, not ones that erased it. Kent picked Antigone and Cassandra, although when Jeremiah had asked, Kent simply told them that he’d chosen “Annie” and “Cass.” After having their hand bitten while attempting to hook the dogs up to a split leash, Jeremiah informed Kent that he could call the shih tzus whatever he pleased so long as Kent agreed to take them on their daily walks.

Antigone finished urinating and promptly sniffed at the wet grass, appearing disinclined to provide Kent with any advice on how to handle his father.

"This is your home," Kent told her. "The least you could do is help me protect it."

She growled menacingly at his tennis shoe.

"Kennnnnnziieeeee!"

Kent looked up to find Glitch leaning over the fence and waving wildly.

"Kenzie, I have an idea!"

Glitch's loud holler caused Cassandra to howl angrily back while Antigone attempted to hide behind Kent's leg. Apparently, she was more afraid of the new human than she was belligerent at Kent's footwear.

With a sigh, Kent scooped up the two dogs. Cassandra snapped, only for her teeth to close around air. Once in his arms, however, both dogs turned into trembling statues, and Kent's heart broke at their frightened whimpers.

"Hey, hey. It's okay," Kent whispered soothingly. "I'm only taking you back to your room. Let me talk to Ferro, and then I'll be right back."

* * * *

Taliaferro Parker was insane.

Kent had always known that his MIV was eccentric (it was part of Glitch's genius), but even he hadn't anticipated Glitch being totally off his rocker. Because only a certifiable madman would suggest going up against Tobias Zarneki.

"The donors only gave money to earn my father's favor," Kent explained. "Unless Tobias comes out in support of the shelter again, their wallets remain closed."

"Then we find new donors," Glitch said.

"Where?"

"You're a hot commodity right now. Chicago Mayor's only son turned superhero? Come on. People love you."

"Teenagers who read tabloids love me, maybe," Kent said dryly. "I doubt they earn enough allowance to save the shelter."

"Depends on how many allowances we're dipping into," Glitch argued. He sat upright on the beanbag in Jeremiah's office and snapped his fingers. "Forget the tabloids. We go online."

Kent arched a brow.

“Trust me,” Glitch said. “All we need is some cutesy photos of the animals here—maybe we dress those shih tzus up in Sailor Moon costumes or something. Add in some captions. Then I make a few strategic posts and *BAM* we’re viral.”

“Let me get this straight,” Kent said slowly. “Your solution to the shelter’s financial crisis is to create memes.”

“Viral memes,” Glitch corrected. “And yes. That is indeed our solution.”

[MB Short Story: Three Truths and Two Dogs \(Part Two\)](#)

[Apr 29, 2022](#)

Part One: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/65701262>

“Cerberus!” Glitch cursed, cradling his hand to his chest. “Hellhound, Devil Dog! Vile beast!”

Kent glared from where he knelt, stroking the heads of two trembling shih tzus. “Calm down,” he ordered Glitch. “You’re frightening them.”

“*I’m* frightening *them*?” Glitch exploded. He thrust his hand at Kent’s face; a crescent of tiny red pinpricks marred his dark skin. “The smaller one bit me!”

“Only because you scared her,” Kent retorted. “Cassandra isn’t used to wearing jackets. She didn’t understand why you were reaching for her legs.”

Both men glanced down to where the velcro schoolgirl uniform, a giant pink bow on its back, lay discarded on the floor of Jeremiah’s office. With the aid of treats, Kent had coaxed Antigone into her blue Sailor Mercury costume without bloodshed. Glitch, who had volunteered to dress Cassandra despite Kent’s warning, had not been so lucky.

Glitch pouted. “You’d think she’d show a little appreciation. These outfits weren’t cheap, you know.”

“I paid for the outfits,” Kent said.

“Yes, well, I found them on eBay,” Glitch countered, sounding affronted. “What kind of monster mauls their personal shopper?”

“Cass isn’t a monster.” Kent picked the Sailor Moon outfit off the ground, keeping his voice low and calm as he addressed the aforementioned beast. “Who’s a pretty girl? Come now, lovely. Give me your paw. That’s it.”

Tentatively, the dog held out her front leg. Without making any sudden movements, Kent slid her limb through the sleeve. One down, three to go.

“Show off,” Glitch grumbled accusatorily. “Seducer, magician. Dog whisperer.”

Kent smiled faintly as he slid Cassandra’s other paw into the outfit and closed the velcro collar around her neck. “Not a magician. Just patient.”

“Just patient,” Glitch echoed in a mockingly deep voice that Kent assumed was meant to mimic his own. “I swear. You’re almost too humble to be likable, you know.”

Kent’s smile widened. “The girls won’t sit still for long,” he said, pulling a bag of treats from his pocket. “You have the camera ready?”

Glitch waved his cellphone in a lazy arc over Kent’s head. “Call me Frans Lanting.”

“Who?”

“Wildlife photographer.” Glitch pouted. “Philistine. The joke isn’t as funny if I need to explain it.”

Make more accessible jokes, then, Kent thought before deciding to keep that comeback to himself. Glitch was, after all, doing him a favor. He motioned for the dogs to sit. It took some doing—Kent had just taught them the command, and Antigone still hadn’t figured out that she was supposed to sit facing him instead of turning her back—but soon both shih tzus were staring in the appropriate direction, wide eyes glued to the treat Kent held between his thumb and index finger.

Glitch snapped as many photos as possible before Cass broke formation, jumping up on Kent’s leg and her teeth digging into his thigh.

“No bite,” Kent said firmly, doing his best not to wince as he gently shook her off his leg. “Cassandra, let go.”

She released him and sat back on her rump, her tongue lolling in expectation of the treat. Instead, Kent leaned down to give the treat to Antigone alone, who gobbled it up and then stared smugly at her sister, the look on her face clearly saying ‘*Sucker.*’

“No bite,” Kent said again to Cassandra.

She let out a plaintive whimper and laid down on her belly. Kent fished another treat out of the bag and held it up for several seconds. When neither dog launched at him, he broke it in half and gave each a piece.

“Good girls,” he said.

* * * *

Whatever hashtag magic Glitch worked, the photos that he'd taken of Antigone and Cassandra as Sailor Moon characters had over sixty thousand hits on Pet Pics overnight.

"Half of the likes are bots," Glitch explained. "They boost the numbers and get the pictures to more feeds, so were worth the extra hour worth setting it up. But we need a follow-up hit."

Kent sucked in his bottom lip contemplatively as he looked out the office window to the shelter's kennels beyond. "You have an idea for another costume?"

"I'm thinking that we stick to the cosplay theme," Glitch said. "A lot of the comments were from people wanting to give their own dogs similar costumes for Comic-Con."

"Comic-Con?"

Glitch groaned. "How are we friends?"

Kent shrugged.

"Anyway," Glitch said, "I found *this* at a Halloween surplus store." He reached into his backpack and pulled out a child-sized, spikey black wig. "We can dress the dogs as Kiba and Akamaru."

Kent's head cocked incrementally to the side.

"From Naruto?" When Kent's expression didn't change, Glitch let out another long groan. "They're characters from a tv show. Kiba is a ninja, and Akamaru is his dog."

"Annie and Cass are both dogs," Kent pointed out.

"That's the genius of this costume idea," Glitch said, his eyes sparkling with excitement as he reached back into his bag and dug out a doggie gray sweater as well as a blue headband. "We only need to dress up one of them as Kiba. The other won't need anything—she'll be Akamaru. A dog." He eyed Cassandra warily, who growled at him from behind the bars of her crate. "Knock it off. I just said you won't have to wear a costume!"

Kent mulled over Glitch's suggestion. "This costume idea. People will like it?"

"They'll like it," Glitch promised. "By this time next week, the shelter will be doggie paddling in donations."

* * * *

"You've been having fun."

Kent stiffened at his father's voice. He closed the front door and turned to see Tobias sitting in his living room, his arm casually thrown over the couch's edge and an open book in his other hand. One of Kent's books, now that he saw the cover, taken off the shelf behind. It was just like Tobias to spring an ambush.

Wordlessly, Kent set the plastic bag he'd been carrying on the counter. It contained costumes picked out by Glitch—Pokémon outfits, more spikey-haired wigs, a tin man suit that Kent had thought was from the Wizard of Oz but turned out to be from something called Fullmetal Alchemist instead.

Tobias cleared his throat, displeased with being ignored. Kent turned to him, keeping his face purposefully blank. He never should've given his father a spare key.

"So, your shelter is in trouble," Tobias said. "Why didn't you call me?"

Was that a rhetorical question? Or was Tobias pretending that he had nothing to do with the shelter's sudden lack of funding? Either way, it was trap. Kent had learned the safest way to not fall in a trap was to avoid it altogether, so he kept his mouth closed.

"We could've reached an arrangement," Tobias continued. "I would have gladly helped you find more donors."

In exchange for what, agreeing to an arranged marriage? Kent's thought was tongue-in-cheek at first, but, considering how many of his past relationships had started out as blind dates with the offspring of his father's associates, he couldn't actually be sure that Tobias *wouldn't* demand such a sacrifice. Once again, Kent deemed it best to keep quiet.

"My secretary showed me the photos you've been posting online." Tobias's voice went sharp and cold. "She particularly enjoyed the one where you were in the background. That's how she found the dog images, you know. Someone tagged you online." His icy grey eyes, identical to Kent's own, raked over his son's lanky form. "I didn't raise you to be a beggar."

"We prefer the term 'campaign,'" Kent said before he could stop himself. "You should be familiar with the concept."

The silence was frigid.

Tobias stood. Kent was tall, but Tobias still had an inch on him. And that inch felt like a foot, just as it had when Kent was eight years old. He'd never stopped being dwarfed by his father—there was no way to escape his controlling shadow.

"Call my office Monday morning," Tobias instructed. His shoulder brushed against Kent's on his way out the door. "There's a gala that night. You'll attend."

* * * *

"We're closing down."

Jeremiah's announcement was met by a protesting squeal from Trina. "What about Zee's fundraising?" she demanded. "Annie and Cass are practically viral!"

The shelter director forced a smile. “Online donations cover enough to pay back the bank loan on the kennel expansion,” they said, avoiding Kent’s silent gaze. “It’s still not enough to pay our operating costs. Three more donors withdrew their support today.”

Trina let loose a torrent of curse words, some of which Kent had never before heard. His heart beat fast inside his ribcage, so loudly that he could hear it as anger caused blood to surge to his head. This was Tobias’s collateral, then, his insurance that Kent would fall back and line and play the dutiful son for Monday’s gala.

Kent would go, of course. If the shelter was about to close down, he didn’t have any choice.

* * * *

“Of course you have a choice,” Glitch declared.

He was sitting on the same couch that Tobias had ambushed Kent the night before, his legs outstretched and checkered converses resting on the coffee table. Antigone and Cassandra were baying from their crates in the kitchen—Jeremiah was hosting one last adoption fair before transferring the other animals to Saint Francis, but they’d deemed the shih tzus too “risky” to include. Given that Cass had almost bitten Trina’s earlobe off when she’d gone to feed them, Kent couldn’t blame them for their hesitancy.

“We’re losing donors quicker than we’re gaining online support,” Kent said dully. “It’s over.”

The shelter wasn’t over, of course. Kent wouldn’t allow that to happen. What was truly ended was Kent’s brief affair with defiance.

“Your dad’s punishing you for not attending parties,” Glitch said. “He’s a loser. We don’t need him.”

“The shelter needs him,” Kent said.

“No,” Glitch argued. “The shelter needs donors.” He looked at Kent speculatively, and Kent felt a shiver go down his spine.

“What?”

“You should go to that gala tomorrow.”

“That was the plan.”

“Not for your dad. Go for the shelter.”

“It’s the same thing.”

Glitch leaned forward, his gaze intent. “No,” he said slowly. “It’s not. You don’t need your dad to save the shelter—you just need access to the rich invitees. Forget Mayor Z’s agenda for tonight, and instead

focus on telling people about the shelter yourself.”

Kent’s palms began to itch. “Tobias won’t like it.”

“Screw Tobias,” Glitch said. “We just need a few big donations to tide the shelter over until we have enough online subscribers.” He flipped over his tablet and showed Kent the Pet Pic profile he’d set up for Annie and Cass. “The dogs are popular. Monetizing a following just takes time—time the shelter doesn’t have. You hook a few fat cat donors; you buy us time to save actual fat cats. No help from your dad required.”

* * * *

Kent Zarneki forced himself into a black tuxedo with a too-tight collar. He polished his shoes and practiced his smile. Then, surprised that he still recognized his reflection in the mirror, he stepped into his 1971 Ford Mustang and drove himself once again to The Starlight Hotel and Ballroom.

The gold and ivory curtains had been replaced with velvet red, white, and blue. Like all events Tobias hosted or attended, this gala was to raise funds for a nonprofit—something about veterans, if Kent recalled correctly. The charity didn’t really matter. Tobias’s number one priority was to either appear rich and electable (as with the last event Kent had attended), or patriotic and electable. Which quality his father focused on depended on the target audience, though, and this time around he’d clearly decided to channel All American Salt of the Earth.

Kent’s eyes scanned the ballroom and landed on Senator Martin, a retired naval officer turned jingoistic politician. So that’s why Tobias had broken out the stars and stripes. His father standing near the refreshment table, his gaze on Kent and his stance expectant. If Glitch hadn’t convinced Kent otherwise, he’d have headed right over, ready to broker peace and do whatever Tobias asked to save the shelter.

A short burst of static filled Kent’s left ear, followed by Glitch’s voice. “Wow,” he said over Kent’s concealed earpiece. “I’m looking through your eyes and this places is capital-F Fancy. How do the new contacts feel?”

Kent blinked. Other than some lingering dryness, the lenses Glitch had installed yesterday were functioning perfectly. In addition to letting Glitch have a visual, they also allowed his MIV to provide feedback and commentary on the guests. Silver numbers noting annual salaries hovered over the heads of the assembled guests, visible only to Kent.

“The lenses are fine,” Kent said, taking a sip of punch to disguise the movement of his lips as he scanned the other guests. “Kim won’t be happy we went ahead with it after he said no.”

“Kim Schkmim,” Glitch said dismissively over the com. “The lenses are helping us for a super important mission. Plus, it’s not like you went blind.”

Kent doubted that their instructor would agree that untested biotech was required to solicit wealthy donors for an animal shelter, nor had he realized that blindness was a possible side effect. But the

lenses were already installed, so there was no use arguing.

“What about Arabella Zhou?” Kent asked Glitch. “She adopted a poodle from us.”

“Arabella Zhou . . .” Glitch let out a low whistle. “Who knew a boutique cosmetic company could be so profitable? Give me a second to pull up her info.”

While Glitch did background research, Kent avoided eye contact with his father. It was becoming harder and harder to ignore Tobias’s pointed looks, which at this point bordered on an outright glare.

“Arabella Zhou,” Glitch announced. “Seventy-five, thrice divorced. One granddaughter, who is, might I add, super attractive. Looks like Ms. Zhou's company had a history of run-ins with animal activism groups, and they’ve only recently sworn off animal testing. That’s our opportunity.”

Kent frowned, sidestepping around a pillar so that he was no longer in Tobias's line of sight.

“How?” he asked.

“Publicly supporting the same shelter where she adopted her elderly dog from will be great PR,” Glitch said, and Kent could almost hear his smug smile. “She’s able to say *‘look, see, we really care about the cute lil’ bunnies and aren’t just changing our testing standards due to political pressure.’* It’s a win-win. Think you can convince her?”

Arabella Zhou was one of the mayor’s biggest supporters. Tobias wouldn’t like his son approaching her without permission, especially for something unrelated to his campaign. Knowing Tobias, he wouldn’t just consider this as Kent going against their prior agreement. He’d view it as a declaration of war.

Kent thought of Antigone and Cassandra. If the shelter shut down, they’d have no place to go. Unless . . . well, maybe he’d do that anyway. For now, though, he needed to steal Arabella Zhou’s patronage away from his father. Good thing that Mei was coming to visit and she’d need a tour guide. He’d have to thank Tobias later for the tip on how to win over Ms. Zhou.

“Yeah,” Kent told Glitch. “I can convince her.”

[April Live Q&A](#)

[Apr 29, 2022](#)

This month's live Q&A on the Sanctum Discord will be tomorrow **(Saturday, April 30) at 10am PST**. It will be recorded and have the link posted.

Please let me know if you can't attend in the morning and need for to be an evening session, in which case I'll hold a second Q&A at 7pm PST. Scheduling is tricky right now as I need to kick everyone from

the living room, since the internet can be spotty (by which I mean Nebraskan rural area slow) in the guestroom that's serving as my current home office.

I can make tomorrow's 10am session.

I can only attend a later session.

18 votes total

[Writer's Blog: How To \(Not\) Start a Story](#)

[Apr 29, 2022](#)

Sometimes writing is hard. Honestly, a lot of times writing is hard. For me, at least. I like telling stories. Typing them up is no more than a necessary evil in order for me to share those stories.

The good news? Chapter Six 2.0 is almost finished, and Rosy is now approximately 1.7x sexier due to some edits I made this morning.

Anyway, tonight is one of those nights that I'm simply not wording very well. Which means my stories (noticeably, April's Saucy Side with Grayson) have undergone a lot of false starts. My goal is still to finish Gray's saucy side tonight, but . . .

You know what? Sometimes it's easier to show than to tell. Especially when wording is hard because my brain is fried from recoding all of Rosy's approval gain.

Thus, in the order that they were written, I present today's many false starts of Grayson's attempted sexy moments:

(My cloud backs up all the previous versions, so I just went back and fetched each starting attempt that I'd deleted.)

* * * *

"Don't move."

Grayson's hand delves between your spread thighs.

It's fine. Nothing scandalous. There's no reason for his touch to make your breath quicken and your stomach to clench, no reason at all for your skin to prickle and for your—

"There," Gray announces, a note of pride in his voice. "Got it."

He holds up his fingertip, atop of which sits your fallen contact lens.

** * * **

The carriage is too small. It didn't feel too small earlier. In fact, you'd have described the interior as spacious, even roomy, on your way to the ball.

But now, with Grayson's Black arm pressed against your side? With his thigh a mere inch away, and his knee brushing against yours with every rhythmic jolt? The carriage is definitely too small.

Gray leans across you, and your eyes lock. Your tongue darts out, nervously licking your lower lip. This is it. The moment where Grayson's mouth finally alight upon yours and—

He opens the door on your side. "We've arrived. Get out."

** * * **

Grayson Black was a sexy beast.

Ugh.

** * * **

Usually, curses were only bestowed upon those who deserved them. Witches had standards, after all, and none were willing to risk the negative Yelp review that would surely come from turning someone decent into a frog. No, curses were reserved for the dregs of humanity, for abusive noblemen and corrupt merchants.

Someone like Grayson Black? He never should've been cursed. Nor would he have been, had he not tried to save another.

"Back hair isn't sexy," Grayson growled through his fangs at the frustrated author. "Save the Beauty and the Beast retelling for next month."

"Gray can be Beauty," Nick the Candlestick chimed in.

Ugh.

** * * **

Nestled between the bosom of two mountains, the town of Brisket was the perfect place for a honeymoon.

"Brisket is a type of food," Gray reminded the author. "Not a town name."

* * * *

Nestled in the bosom of two snowy-peaked mountains, the town of Purewater was the perfect place for a honeymoon. Not that you and Gray were on a honeymoon together, perish the thought. You'd actually have to be wedded to the blasted British cookie thief for that to be possible.

No, this was a work trip.

Gray grins at you from beneath his oversized straw hat--meant, you assume, to conceal his identity.

"Purewater is a pretty unoriginal name, isn't it?" he comments. "It's like the author ran out of ideas."

"Screw you, Grayson," said the author.

"Straw hats aren't sexy," said Button. "I doubt there will be any screwing involved."

[Live Q&A Link and 2nd Session](#)

[Apr 30, 2022](#)

Since several people could only make it to an evening Q&A, I'll be holding a second session today at **7pm PST (Saturday, April 30th).**

Here's the link to this morning's session:

<https://craig.horse/?id=901753024&key=373921071>

[MB Saucy Side: Twilight Anniversary \(Grayson\)](#)

[Apr 30, 2022](#)

When did darkness become alluring?

This thought occurs to you as you lie in bed, blindfold over your eyes, and *wait*.

There's a reason that children, even the ones who pretend to be brave, are afraid of the dark. There's no way of knowing—not for sure—what lurks in the twisting black, and infant imagination creates faces and claws from that nothingness. *Draw the blanket up to your neck*, the childish subconscious warns. *Don't be taken unaware.*

Since falling in love with Grayson and having that love returned, the fictitious monsters of your youth have been replaced by equally thrilling possibilities. You can't see his hands creeping up your leg, nor anticipate them sliding down your waist. Each touch in the darkness feels unexpected and somehow forbidden despite the fact you've been together for decades.

You love Grayson in the light. You love the way his eyes crinkle at the corners with laugh lines, and how the creases at the edges of his mouth speak of the life you've lived together. You love his hands—less calloused, now, than they were when he was still a member of UCRT, but no less tender and reverent as he caresses your skin. You love running your own hands over the scars he's gained from past missions, and you love pressing your lips against each and every one in gratitude that he came back to you. You love the silver in his hair.

But in the darkness . . .

In the darkness, your relationship still feels new. You close your eyes, and memories of how Gray used to look—tan skin still smooth and golden-brown hair untouched by time—flood your mind. How his blue eyes used to look at you so uncertainly, first because he never believed that you could be his, and then later because he couldn't truly believe that you actually were. That uncertainty has vanished over the years, replaced by a quietly confident *knowing* that you're more than his dream. That knowing gleams in his eyes. You love the way Grayson now looks at you, but sometimes you miss the hesitant wonder.

The darkness makes everything feel new again.

Gray's lips brush against your navel, and you arch off the mattress with a gasp. His tongue trails a path upwards, teeth nipping over the most sensitive parts of your skin. Despite having been together for years, you're unable to predict his next move on nights like this.

He bites your earlobe and gives it a gentle tug, his hands grasping yours and fingers intertwining together.

"Happy anniversary," he whispers, voice taut with restraint.

You blindly lean forward, and he catches your lips with his own. The intensity of his kiss is familiar, but the force with which he restrains your arms above your head is new. The combination of the two is perfect. Both of you forget to breathe, another familiar sensation—neither you nor Grayson ever fully left the desperate newlywed stage of your relationship.

He nuzzles the crook of your neck, his stubble scratchy enough that you know there will be a mark tomorrow. You've had many such marks over the years. The color of his stubble now matches his first name, but the marks he leaves on your skin remain the same hue.

"Happy anniversary," you repeat, your legs curling around his. "May we have another thirty more."

[Writer's Blog: Like That One Couple That Lights Each Other On Fire](#)

[May 6, 2022](#)

Chapters 6 and 7's rewrite is well under way! (Also, the majority of Chapter 9, because I found it easier to write all of Hope's scenes at the same time. But Chapters 8 and 9 probably won't get posted for another two weeks, as I still need to make a feedback post for them.)

Regarding the next update, though: I've extensively experimented with combining Chapters 6 and 7, since both chapters are comparatively short (only 25,000 words each!). However, I really like the cliffhanger of Kenzie being revealed as a non-Ment at Chapter 6's end, especially for readers that chose to stop for the dogs in Chapter 1.

To compromise, I tried creating two separate chapter cut-offs: readers who met Kenzie on the way to Aeon would have Chapter 6 end at it's current point, while readers who took the subway or walked would instead have Chapter 6/7 merged with it ending when Button reaches Operation Hemera's base. This actually proved simpler to do than it sounds, coding-wise, and really only required changing every chapter cover so that Kenzie-route people were technically a chapter behind. I liked the narrative this way and felt it flowed better for every route. . . but ultimately realized it would be a nightmare for collecting feedback and possibly an imposition for trying to discuss the story with friends (the conversation I imagined played out similarly to Button's recitation of Who's on First, What's on Second). All this brought me back to debating whether Chapters 6 and 7 should be merged for everyone or no one. But, again, I really, *really* like the cliffhanger of Kenzie being revealed as a non-Ment, especially for readers that chose to stop for the dogs in Chapter 1. So I'm currently leaving it as-is.

Probably. Maybe.

It's a Catch-22 that I've been trapped in for this past week, with every day seeing the two chapter files merged and then re-separated with the speed and frequency of that one on-again, off-again couple that everyone first encounters in junior high and who either marries immediately after college or end up taking out restraining orders on each other (or both).

. . . I can't be the only who knew a couple like this, can I? They're genuinely the best analogy I can think off right now, although that may have something to do with being back in the town I grew up in.

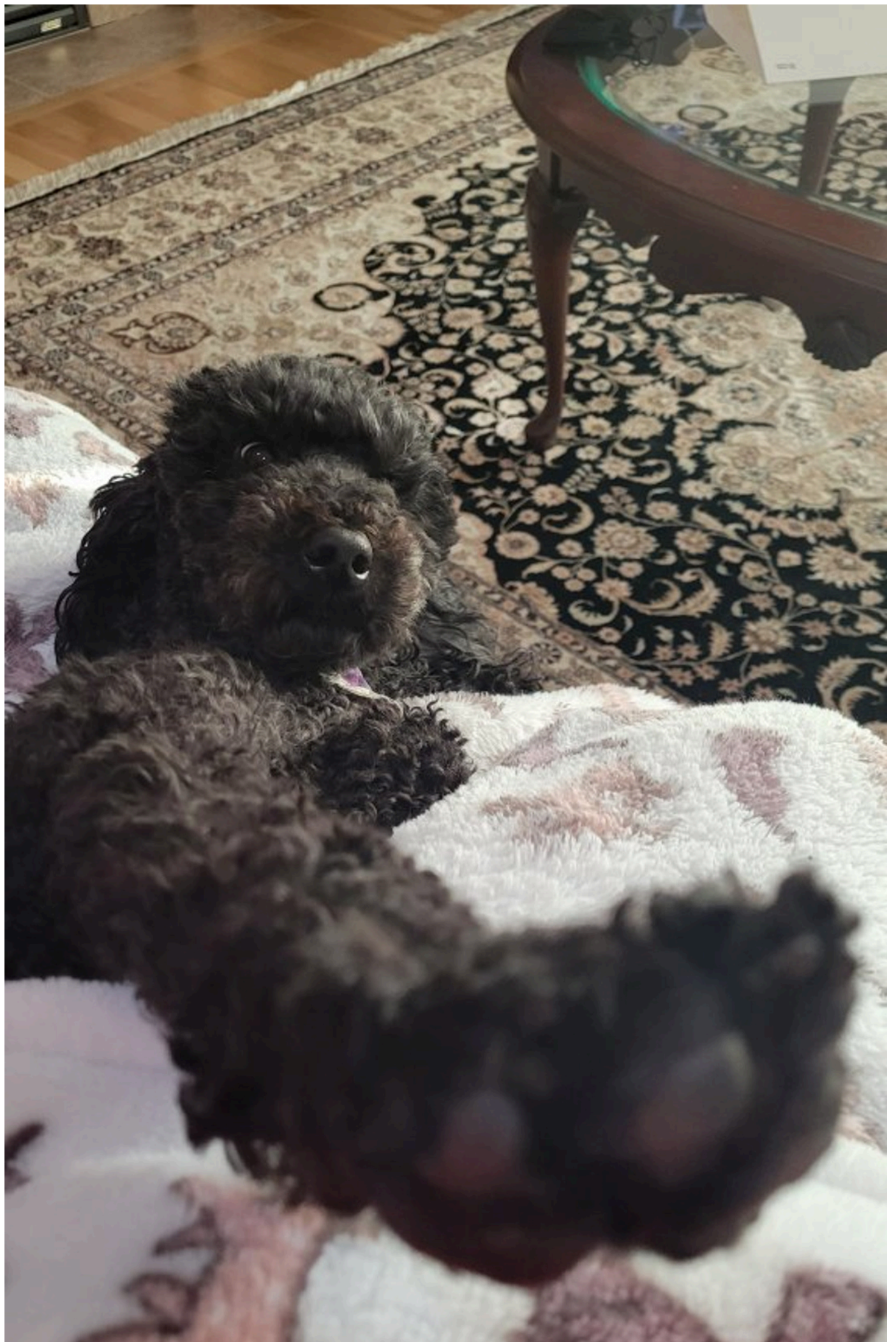
In addition to (tentative) reorganization), Chapters 6 and 7 have a lot of other changes, the most noticeable of which is increased interactions from Nick. I want to gradually lessen his commentary to foreshadow his eventual silence, which requires frontloading the earlier chapters with even more cheeky commentary. This commentary is also more customized than before, with Nick's responses depending

on several new variables as well as his overall relationship score. Instead of just splitting Nick's dialogues into "good" vs. "bad" relationship, there are now three score brackets: 110 and up indicates Button and Nick's relationship is "Close," 80 – 110 is "Loving But With Tension," and below 80 is "Fratricide Is Tempting."

Feel free to let me know if you disagree with the numerical limits. I replayed with several trial Buttons to see what their score ended up being by Chapter 5's conclusion, and they were all pretty accurate, but I'm open to tweaking the number limits a bit if people feel like anything upwards of 100 should be "Close," for example.

I'll be posting the rewritten Chapters 6 and 7 up after May 9th. Because, in something akin to irony, my mom's surgery falls the day after Mother's Day. My brother's been visiting, which is great, although it's been difficult to juggle my admittedly obsessive writing schedule with being around family. Thankfully, my mother's next-door neighbor is away on a trip, and I've broken into his house Chapter-15-style and am currently using it as a quiet place to work. (Naveen, if you see this, thanks!)

I admit, I'm nervous (read: internally freaking out while maintaining a façade of calm good humor and somewhat morbid jokes) over my mother's surgery. Just because, well, it's *surgery*. Even if it's a common surgery and I logically know that she'll be fine. I'll definitely be relieved and make a post to celebrate once she's in the clear. As it stands, I've bought a guidebook on writing Regency Era settings because I watched Season 2 of *Bridgerton* and felt inspired. . . both for this month's *Mind Blind's* short stories, and for something else that I'm cooking up but am not quite ready to share just yet. For now, let's just call it a tiny fluffy muffin of a side project on which I sometimes dabble whenever my brain overheats from coding interactive fiction.



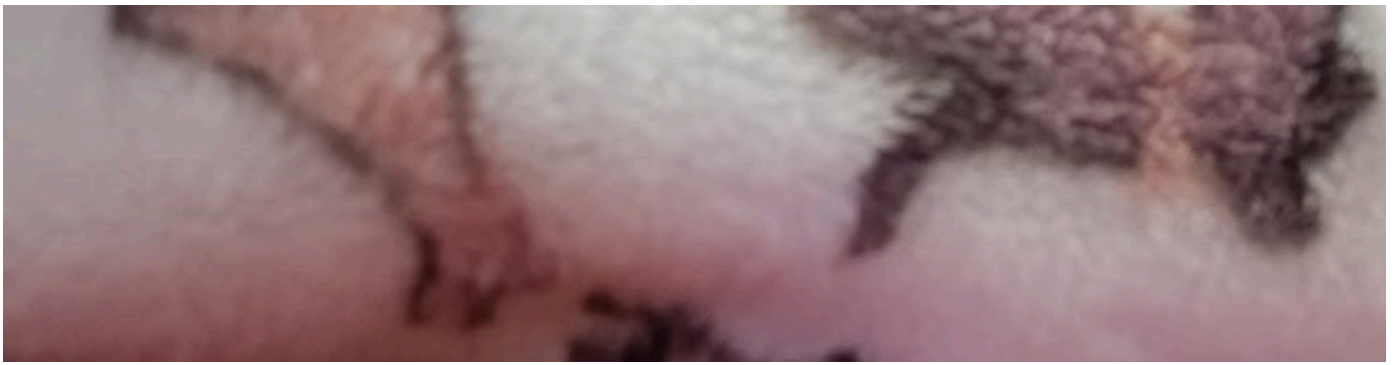


Photo: [Ziva Fending Off The Paparazzi](#)

[May 10, 2022](#)

My mother's surgery was successful yesterday! I'll post more tomorrow, but wanted to thank you all for the well wishes.

Waiting through her procedure definitely gave me new insight into what Button went through at the hospital waiting for Nick, and the next Patreon short story will subsequently be John's POV of that same scene. (You'll get to see him interact with Mayor Z.)

[Writer's Blog: Cancer Jokes Aren't Funny . . .](#)

[May 16, 2022](#)

. . . But Virgos make great punchlines. (Ha.)

The good news: My mother's surgery was a success and her tumor was removed!

The bad news: She still needs chemotherapy as the cancer has metastasized to her lymph nodes.

I'll be staying with her for the next months as Live-In Dog Walker/Official Beverage Fetcher, so everything posted here will be coming to you Live From Seattle. Despite the less frequent updates this month due to the hecticness of, well, everything, *Mind Blind* has made significant progress! Truthfully, writing is the only thing keeping me sane at times. It lets me process and release emotions that right now would otherwise swallow me whole.

Example: I used my waiting room experience during my mom's surgery to write a short story about John (which will be posted soon). I read a passage of the story to my mom on the car ride home, and it made her cry so hard that her stitches ached. I consider that a win.

Anyway, not everything posted this month will be doom and gloom, I promise! I have a half-written saucy side in works which stars Regency-versions of all the ROs. Gil's interview shenanigans will be continued, Chapters 6/7 will be posted together, and the survey for Chapters 8/9 will go up. I also have an idea for a story written from the perspective of Reese (mwhahaha, brace yourselves for Narcissism Personified).

For now, though, here's a list of quotes from the revised Chapters 6-9! Post your guesses for who said what below . . . The first person to correctly identify each quote with its speaker earns the title of **Nick's Smartest Sibling** (useable on the Sanctum discord, or just for bragging rights).

NB: All quotes are new lines by either an RO or a Wiseman.

1. "Desire is irrelevant without conviction."
2. "Newsflash: Sauron did it better."
3. "I am NOT a hobbit."
4. "Stop obsessing over my feet."
5. "Ah! What more arouses lust, than the seductive scent of Cheeto dust?"
6. "Macadamia nuts are dangerous."
7. "I am surrounded by . . . No. To call you two children would be to insult infants."
8. "Threats are for those without the means to follow through. I'd say that I make promises, but that would be cliché."
9. "Hit Me Baby One More Time." (sung in a Brittany Spears' voice)
10. "Your mom is terrifying; my mom is allergic to shellfish but also terrifying. Our mothers should team up together and fight crime."

[Guess The Quote: Round 2](#)

[May 17, 2022](#)

Clue: Each quote has been correctly identified at least once, but no one has guessed all correctly. All quotes are new lines by either an RO or a Wiseman, from the rewritten Chapters 6-9.

Be the first to identify all speakers to earn the Sanctum role of "Nick's Smartest Sibling" and bragging rights (at least until the contest, because I find this fun).

QUOTES:

1. "Desire is irrelevant without conviction."
2. "Newsflash: Sauron did it better."
3. "I am NOT a hobbit."
4. "Stop obsessing over my feet."
5. "Ah! What more arouses lust, than the seductive scent of Cheeto dust?"
6. "Macadamia nuts are dangerous."
7. "I am surrounded by . . . No. To call you two children would be to insult infants."
8. "Threats are for those without the means to follow through. I'd say that I make promises, but that would be cliché."
9. "Hit Me Baby One More Time." (sung in a Brittany Spears' voice)
10. "Your mom is terrifying; my mom is allergic to shellfish but also terrifying. Our mothers should team up together and fight crime."

[Guess The Quote: Round 3 \(Now with Solutions!\)](#)

[May 18, 2022](#)

No one's correctly guessed all of the quotes yet, although each has been been rightfully attributed by least one person (unless I overlooked an answer on discord, but I'm pretty sure that I checked them all).

All quotes are new lines by either an RO or a Wiseman, from the rewritten Chapters 6-9.

Here are some more clues:

- Every RO has at least one quote.
- No character has more than two quotes.
- One quote is said by one of Button's parents. The other parent doesn't have a quote.
- Quotes 2-4 are part of the same conversation.
- To no one's surprise: Kenzie says the least amount of words; Glitch says the most.

* * * *

EDIT: Congrats to the VERY FIRST POST for getting it right! Seriously, like 2 minutes after I posted this. That's incredible. Message me on discord to claim your Sanctum title.

QUOTES:

1. "Desire is irrelevant without conviction." **-Rosy**
2. "Newsflash: Sauron did it better." **-Nick, to Sally, immediately before calling her a hobbit and Button relaying this information to her.**
3. "I am NOT a hobbit." **-Sally, upon Nick calling her a hobbit**
4. "Stop obsessing over my feet." **-Sally, after Nick continues to insist that she is indeed a hobbit and further implies that she has hairy feet**
5. "Ah! What more arouses lust, than the seductive scent of Cheeto dust?" **-Glitch**
6. "Macadamia nuts are dangerous." **-Kenzie (Macadamia nuts are poisonous for dogs)**
7. "I am surrounded by . . . No. To call you two children would be to insult infants." **-Grayson, to Nick and High Effort Button**
8. "Threats are for those without the means to follow through. I'd say that I make promises, but that would be cliché." **-Hope**
9. "Hit Me Baby One More Time." (sung in a Brittany Spears' voice) **-Nick**
10. "Your mom is terrifying; my mom is allergic to shellfish but also terrifying. Our mothers should team up together and fight crime." **-Glitch**

[Writer's Blog: If I Only Had A Brain](#)

[May 20, 2022](#)

I've been so distracted lately that yesterday I forgot to push the "Publish" button for the post notifying everyone that the 2.0 version of Chapter 6 was up! Sorry about that, and Chapter 7 should follow by this Sunday.

There's less changes to Chapter 6 than there were to Chapter 5, in large part because Chapter 5 was twice the length and thus had more stuff to be changed. Ultimately, I decided not to merge 6 and 7, especially since this new version of Chapter 6 ended up being 2,500 words longer than the initial draft.

What's New:

-Much rewriting and general polish.

-Additional options on how Button can react, including new questions about the attack and Button being able to simply blink in confusion when Nick expresses jealousy.

-Ace Buttons interested in Rosy will no longer think prurient thoughts (and other tweaks).

-More nuance with Nick's dialogue throughout the entire chapter, reactive based on his relationship with Button.

-It's now much more obvious that Adsila is being a manipulative *beepity-beep*. (Sidenote: I adore Adsila and would pay to see her and Reese cage fight.)

-Repetitive dialogue over Hope's BRS was taken out. I'm looking into using some of this scene to flesh out John's Chapter 5 departure, mostly because I can't bear to completely delete the phrase "my composure is being held together by bobby-pins and dental floss."

-Button and Nick can now engage in a pseudo-mini-fight over Nick keeping secrets. This tension doesn't fully come to a head yet, but it revolves around the new clue added in Chapter 5 and also makes it a lot clearer that Nick is hiding things about Unity/the explosion from Button. (Things which will be completely revealed by the end, but no longer in a way that blindsides readers. I added foreshadowing, y'all!)

-Starting in Chapter 3, Buttons who call John by his first name will have their internal narrative refer to him as "John" instead of "Dad."

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[Chapter Seven 2.0 is UP!](#)

[May 25, 2022](#)

Considering that this chapter primarily focused on walking up a flight of stairs, it went through a lot a changes. . . and is now almost a third longer, due to all the variations with Nick's dialogue. This chapter ended up being an even 100 pages on Microsoft Word, which meant I kept losing my spot and thus spent half my time playing Where's Waldo instead of editing.

As to what's new, Nick now has more bite towards Buttons with relationship scores below 80, while other the changes are more subtle. Example: Nick's dialogue tag when joking about Button's crush on Kenzie will be "tease" for a Button he's close to, but "mock" for one with whom he has a tense relationship.

The most significant change for this chapter is that option for Button to walk alone with Nick instead of talking to Kenzie or Rosy has been taken out. Instead, Nick and Button's dialogue is integrated

throughout the text and thus unavoidable (although it's fully possible that Nick gives Button the cold shoulder and thus nothing gets said).

Kenzie-crushing Buttons will also now walk with Kenzie automatically. This fills Button in on the death of Kenzie's mother, in case you didn't choose cyberstalking in Chapter 4, which will make for a smoother romance flow going forward. Rosy's scene is fun, but not as plot-relevant. (In general, it's gonna be tricky to romance Rosy if you're interested in anyone else.)

In addition to the structural and coding overhaul, there were additional changes:

1. New differentiation with Nick's dialogue depending on relationship.
2. Additional reactivity to Sally's romance, including if you rejected her.
3. Increased awareness of Button pining after multiple characters.
4. Kenzie now says less words, making them sound more Kenzie.
5. You can now both make Rosy laugh *and* get them to catch you on the stairwell.
6. Tweaks for ace romance routes.
7. Scenery has been described in greater detail.
8. The NPO Program is now referred to as the NPO Initiative because Initiative sounds fancier.
9. Lots and lots of little additions and alterations too extensive to track, including parental flavor text and new stat bump opportunities.

I also fixed the statscreen so that all of Button's romantic entanglements should now update with the appropriate descriptions (except for Rosy, as I'm still musing over which puns to use).

Please let me know if you encounter any issues! You can either post bugs/typos here or on the Sanctum of Spoilers blips-and-bloops channel.

Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[The Great Rewriting Feedback Request: Chapters 8 & 9](#)

[May 25, 2022](#)

I've already done a lot of work on these two chapters, so wanted to push out this post as soon as possible in order to quickly get working any changes that I didn't personally think of.

For those not wanting to replay the chapters: Chapter 8 and 9 includes the training scenes with Gray and Rosy, the revelation of Nick's kidnapping, Hope's phone call (which has already been completely reworked, but I'm still open to suggestions!), and the dinner date with Kenzie where AL delivers Reese's pretentious invite.

In particular, I'd appreciate any feedback on dinner with Kenzie since it's an scene which I feel still needs some TLC. I want to make this dinner an opportunity for K-mance Buttons transition from the "Kcrush" to "Kfeelings" variable, so let me know what Kenzie needs to do to make that happen. (Though there will be another opportunity to progress variables in a later scene as well.)

All feedback is welcome, and can be posted either here or on the Sanctum Rewriting channel.

[MB Short Story: The Ideal](#)

[May 27, 2022](#)

NB: The second half of this story is also releasing tonight, but I figured that I'd post the first half now since as most people are in a later time zone than I'm currently located. Originally, I'd intended to finish the short story about John and Mayor Z, but ultimately I needed something fun and lighthearted. And so, well . . .

Ahoy, mateys! Here be a Historical AU about psychic pirates.

* * * *

Terms To Know

Privateer: A legal pirate, commissioned by governments to attack the merchant/military ships of a rival nation. Privateers were allowed to keep (and even taxed on) any booty seized from these ships.

Booty:

(1) Something people shake; derived from the 16th century English word "bottie" meaning "buttocks."

(2) Something people steal, usually referring to precious goods during times of war; originating from the Low German word for "plunder/share."

War of 1812: A war fought from 1812 - 1815 between Great Britain and the United States over maritime rights. The United States relied heavily on privateering for protection and profit, taxing seized prizes at 30-40%.

Governmental Tax On Your Booty: The pun I randomly thought up which inspired me to read up on privateers and subsequently write this story.

* * * *

In the history of maritime banditry, no pirate ever sailed on a more aptly named ship than *The Ideal*.

This observation was, admittedly, made with no little amount of bias by *The Ideal's* own captain. But even Nick's notoriously taciturn quartermaster, Ambrose Kim, conceded that the schooner was an elegant example of everything a privateer ship should be; lithe and nimble, *The Ideal* didn't look particularly threatening, but she was (as Nick often declared) the fastest thing in the sea other than the dolphins (at this point, Nick's navigator, Taliaferro Parker, would often remind him not to get too cocky under the metaphorical admonishment that dolphins were often caught by sharks).

Another, different crew might consider *The Ideal's* six cannons to be inadequate for battle given that most British merchant frigates possessed at least five times the number, with first rate warships counting upwards of one hundred. But *The Ideal's* canons were rarely fired, and her crew of thirty, which was small even given the ship's size, could have likely done as well with two canons as with six. They relied on a more subtle and infinitely more dangerous arsenal to win sea battles.

Sally Alavidze had never intended to become a pirate. Not that there were many career options available to an orphan in Little Friendsville, Connecticut, but she'd learned to sew at the orphanage so that she might one day make herself useful. While she found mending tedious, of course, she'd always thought it might be rather wonderful to make dresses out of soft silks and vivid brocades—the kind of gowns worn by the orphanage's patrons when they visited at Christmas to hand out sweets and allowed the children bask in their benevolence.

With Sister Mary Margaret's letter of character tucked into the pocket of her brown and patched tabby skirt, Sally had headed to Hartford in order to seek employment at a dress shop. No one in Hartford knew about her "fits," and Sally had become better at keeping quiet and still whenever the visions occurred. At best, people considered her to be a hardworking, if somewhat distracted, girl. At worst . . .

Well, the worst had happened, so there was no point in dwelling on it.

A sudden wave slapped against *The Ideal's* side right where Sally was leaning over the railing to gaze contemplatively at the sunset. It crashed over her, drenching her tied-back curls and plastering her twill breaches—a far cry from the dresses she'd once hoped to create—to her thighs.

Someone laughed, and Sally spun around, fury already building inside her at the culprit.

* * * *

Nick hadn't meant to laugh at the newest member of his crew. The girl had gone through a rough time adjusting to life aboard ship; she'd wandered around listless and idle for days, uncertain of what to do and unable to even swim. Then a storm had torn through the jib sail, and she'd offered to patch it up. She'd proven a dab hand at mending the canvas, so much so that even Ambrose had praised her work, and Nick resolved to get her trained by a sailmaker once they docked. It would be good to have someone on the crew capable of more than emergency patch jobs that would only hold until the next port.

Nick raised his hands defensively as Sally pivoted to face him, her hazel eyes flashing with anger. Her eyes were greener at sea than they were on land, Nick had noticed, perhaps due to the reflection of the

ocean. Her freckles had also doubled in number in the week since she'd abroad, although Nick doubted that she would appreciate him pointing this out.

"You'll never be completely dry aboard *The Ideal*, I'm afraid," Nick said quickly, before Sally could condemn his amusement. "How have the swimming lessons been going?"

Sally's shoulders drooped as she recalled her last attempt not to drown. "Kent says that I'm making progress," she informed Nick. "I float on my back easily enough, but I still have trouble keeping my head up while treading water."

"Keep at it," Nick encouraged. "Half the crew didn't know how to swim when they came aboard, either. I'm still not completely convinced that Valero wouldn't drown in a tidal pool."

Sally smiled politely at his joke before falling quiet. A few of the other crewmembers cast curious looks in their direction, wondering if the new girl had somehow gotten into trouble with their famously easygoing captain. None halted their activities to check up on her, though; a crew as small as *The Ideal*'s meant that if you weren't sleeping, you were working on deck (with the exception of evenings when the wind was calm and Talia plied Kent with enough grog that he sang sea shanties to the accompaniment of Sohvi's fiddle).

"Is the rest of the crew . . ." Sally bit her lower lip, looking conflicted. And even, Nick thought, a little scared.

He didn't blame her; even on the day they'd met, when she'd been struck by a premonition so powerful that it'd brought her to her knees in the middle of a crowded street, making it clear to the entire world what she was . . . Even then, she hadn't been able to bring herself to say the word, despite Nick's reassurance that he was, if not the same, at least similar.

Sally took a deep breath, lowering her head slightly so that a strand of wet curls obscured her eyes. "Is the rest of the crew like us?" she asked.

"You mean, are they Witched?"

She flinched at the word but gave a tiny nod. Nick empathized; he didn't particularly care for the description of being "Witched," either, as if they'd both been bespelled by the Devil, but it was at least better than the accusation of "Witch" that would've seen them both burnt at the stake a mere fifty years prior.

"Only about the half the crew has talents," Nick said delicately. This wasn't the first time he'd given this speech with a new arrival and it likely wouldn't be the last. "Kent isn't; Talia either." Sally seemed to enjoy the company of both the gunner and navigator, so Nick figured that those were the best examples to start with.

"Then why do they. . ." This time, Sally couldn't even finish the question.

Nick rested a hand atop her head, making her glance up. He looked incredibly sympathetic, and also immensely sad.

"Some folk believe that Ments deserve a better life than being locked up in an institution or asylum," Nick said. A note of bitterness crept into his voice. "Or indentured to the military and ordered to murder at the whim of a general."

"Is that what happened to you?" Sally asked. "Were you a soldier?"

Nick's throat tightened, but he nonetheless managed to force the words. "Not for long," he said. "My abilities let me be . . . persuasive. I convinced them that I'd be more of an asset against the British as an independent operator than as a leashed dog."

"That's how you became a privateer?"

Nick nodded. "My father owned a successful merchant fleet. Like me, he was persuasive. My sibling took over the family business, but we were both raised at sea. When the war broke out, this seemed like a natural fit." He flashed her a smile that was more sorrowful than dashing. "Plus, my position lets me rescue damsels in distress."

Sally shivered, cold from the wind and her wet clothes but also at the thought of what might've happened had Nick not "persuaded" the crowd to leave her alone after she'd had that last vision. It had been the most detailed glimpse into the future she'd ever received, and it had featured none other than the man who was now shrugging off his coat to wrap it around her shoulders.

"I saw you," she said. "Right before you came over. I saw you in the crowd."

"My handsome visage tends to draw attention." Nick winked at her, looking every inch the heartbreak pirate without his jacket, white shirt billowing in the wind and unbuttoned to reveal more of the male chest than Sally had ever before seen. Any other time, she might've appreciated the view. But right now, she needed to get the words out while she still had the courage built up.

"I saw you in the crowd," Sally slowly repeated. "Then I saw you in the future."

Nick stilled, his expression turning instantly from flirtatious to grim. "I was the trigger for your premonition?"

She nodded, and Nick cursed. He'd known only one other person like Sally who could see into the future, a former crewmate who'd . . . Nick swallowed. No. He wouldn't think about what had happened to Isaiah.

"Tell me everything," Nick ordered.

If something dire enough to trigger a seer's premonition lay in his crew's future, he no longer had the luxury of giving Sally time to adjust. Isaiah's prophecies had let him and Ambrose prepare continuity

plans to handle future dangers, but each vision had still been accompanied by at least one unavoidable death.

* * * *

"Captain, we're being followed."

Grayson Black looked up from the letter he'd been composing to his mother, discretely shuffling it under one of the many maps that covered his desk. The last time Caleb had caught him writing letters home, the petty officer had told the rest of the crew. Gray had been subjected to a month of snickers and whispers that the hoity toity captain still clung to his mama's apron strings . . . and that said mama was, of all horrific things, an American. Which meant Grayson was descended from one of the enemy.

"Followed by whom?" Gray asked with a stern look that caused Caleb's eyes to snap guiltily from where they'd been lingering on his rearranged paperwork.

"It looks to be a packet ship, sir," Caleb said hesitantly.

"British or American colors?" Gray asked.

"Ours, sir."

Gray frowned. They weren't near any of the known trade routes that carried mail between England and her colonies, nor would a packet ship usually have reason to approach a British warship unscheduled.

"Lieutenant Rudzite wants to fire a warning shot, sir," Caleb added hesitantly.

Gray kept his expression neutral even as a long stream of curses flooded his mind. Half of Reese's "warning shots" hit the ship at which they were aimed; it was one of the reasons that the Admiralty had assigned Gray command of the *Vengeance* after its last captain had died in battle, instead of promoting from within the crew's ranks.

Gray sighed and stood from his chair. Caleb followed him out of the captains' quarters, down the cramped hallway, and up the ladder to the top deck. They found Reese already in conversation with Antonio, the ship's gunner.

"There will be no warning shot," Gray barked at them. He squinted at the horizon, barely able to make out the hazy outline the small schooner approaching.

He held out his hand. Reese handed over his telescope without complaint, but Gray caught him and Antonio exchange a sullen look. Both men clearly resented an outsider having been granted command over the *Vengeance*, but the Royal Navy didn't trust Reese Rudzite. As for Gray, he'd long ago learned not to trust anyone.

Through the telescope, the packet ship resembled one of the many ships that ran mail between Nova Scotia and the British Isles. It was small and built for speed rather than battle. It certainly represented no threat against the *Vengeance*, a warship which boasted two gun decks, ninety-eight canons, and a crew of over two-hundred.

And yet . . .

Something about its rapid approach caused Gray's gut to tense. Better than anyone, he knew that some things were more than they seemed.

"Guerra, prepare the upper gun deck," he ordered Antonio, passing the telescope back to Reese.
"Lieutenant Rudzite, a word."

Gray waited for Caleb to leave with Antonio before addressing Reese. "Take half of the men on duty below decks," he said. "If their intentions aren't friendly, it won't hurt for them to believe us undermanned."

Reese scowled. "*Vengeance* can handle a ship that size without resorting to tricks, Captain. If you'd only allow—"

"No warning shots, Rudzite," Gray repeated. "We wait to discover their intentions."

* * * *

"This is suicide," Talia said cheerfully. "You know that, right?"

Nick's lips tightened at the navigator's sunny tone which was belied by the worry evident in her gaze. He looked away, focusing instead on the gold earrings which lined her ear, worried that she might be able to pick up on his fear and uncertainty if he made direct eye contact.

"*The Ideal* goes after merchant vessels," Talia continued. "It's what we're good at. What we're equipped to do. We don't go after warships, let alone ones the size of Jonah's whale."

"We're not going after a warship," Nick said. "We're going after a man."

"A man currently on a warship."

Nick shrugged and flashed Talia a sheepish smile. "We waltz in the ballrooms available."

"I prefer a lively schottische. Remind me again why we're doing this?"

"Our new sailmaker had a vision."

"You said as much during the crew meeting," Talia said. "But you and Ambrose have been remarkably tightlipped about the whole affair otherwise. Rosy is always tightlipped, but you? Not so much."

"All Sally knows is that someone on that ship is responsible for my death," Nick said. "We're going to stop him."

Talia's eyes widened with alarm. "Someone on that ship is going to kill you, and I'm sailing us right towards him?" Her hands gripped the helm tighter as if tempted to turn it around. "When I said this was suicide, Captain, I didn't actually think that's what you had in mind."

Nick chuckled grimly. "I have no intentions on dying. Sally's vision saw him kill me on land."

"Then how do you know he's on this ship?"

"Know' is a strong word," the ship's quartermaster interrupted their conversation. Ambrose Kim's expression was even more sternly disapproving than usual beneath his black tricorne hat, the shadows visible beneath his eyes from having stayed up half the night attempting to convince Nick to abandon his "foolhardy, absurd, and asininely reckless" plan.

"Alavidze's premonition placed Nick and our target on land," Ambrose continued. "Right in front of a docked ship named *Vengeance*."

"Which is the ship we're now pursuing*,*" Talia said. "So, Captain thinks his mystery murderer is a crewmate?"

"Most likely an officer," Nick said. "His coat had gold buttons." He trailed two fingers down the edge of his own long coat, idly noticing that the garment still smelled faintly of their newest crewmember. *Like vanilla and warm honey*, he thought. *I should bake the crew cinnamon rolls if we survive this.*

"It's a longshot," Ambrose said.

"A shot that I'll survive is a longshot that I'm willing to take," Nick said with an unconvincing grin. "You know how seers work. The only other way I could possibly avoid this fate is by never stepping foot on solid ground again."

Ambrose leveled him with an unamused look. "We're not pursuing the *Vengeance* to save your life."

"No," Nick admitted. "We're not."

Talia glanced between the two men before heaving a sigh. "Well, if either of you want me to continue steering us towards Captain's death," she said, "y'all better disclose what we're about to die for."

Ambrose crossed his arms, continuing to look at Nick expectantly.

"Sally described the docks where she saw me die," Nick told Talia. "She said the ships around me were burning. I recognized the area as Port Unity."

"Port Unity?" Talia's expression turned puzzled as she scoured through her navigational knowledge for the location. "You mean that tiny coastal town in New Hampshire? Hell, it's more of a village. Why on

earth would we ever stop there?"

"My family lives in that town," Nick said. "My sibling's office is on those docks."

The Wiseman family had worked hard to keep Port Unity prosperous, and in return, Port Unity's small size had kept the Wisemans' safe. If its citizens suspected that John Wiseman was a little too cunning and that Hope Wiseman a little too knowing . . . well, the Wisemans were good people. Just look at the new schoolhouse they'd paid for. Nick would have likely gone undiscovered there as well, but no, he'd yearned to travel.

Nick blinked and shook his head, determined not to dwell on what-ifs and should-haves. Sally's vision made it clear that his family was in danger, and he'd do anything to stop it from coming true.

After all, he was dead either way.

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66993837>

[MB Short Story: The Ideal \(Part 2\)](#)

[May 28, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66987476>

This has become a twenty page story. I'm now officially writing a pirate novella. Help.

* * * *

"They've stopped following us, sir," Caleb said.

Gray looked over the *Vengeance's* rail and to the horizon where the schooner had indeed ceased to move. He no longer needed the spyglass; the schooner was now close enough that he could count its sails, but still far enough away that it was out of cannon range.

The other ship was waiting for nightfall.

Blazes. He'd desperately hoped that Reese had been wrong and that the schooner was exactly what it presented as: a packet ship coming to deliver new orders. But no packet ship would need to wait until it was dark to draw aside.

“Pirates,” Reese declared with an ugly, self-satisfied smile that Gray longed to wipe off his face with the man’s own lilac cravat. What kind of lumpskull wore silk to sea, anyway? “They’re clearly planning to ambush us in the darkness. As I warned you, *Captain*.” Gray’s title fell from Reese’s lips with vicious sarcasm.

“Thank you, *Lieutenant*,” Gray replied.

He derived a small amount of satisfaction from the way Reese’s smirk flattened at the reminder of his lack of promotion, but Gray had more to be concerned over than getting into a pissing match with his subordinate. Because Reese was right: the schooner was preparing an ambush.

When Gray had been a child, he’d imagined sea battles to be fast and chaotic, a storm of iron and fire flying between two ships. He hadn’t realized how much of naval combat was simply about waiting for the other to ship to make a move. Perhaps other captains might be willing to fire their cannons without confirmation, but that had never been Gray’s way. He refused to attack until he was completely sure that the other ship was a combatant—too many innocent lives had been lost due to misconstrued intentions.

Grayson Black had achieved a reputation in the Royal Navy as the man who never fired the first shot.

But he always fired the last.

“Rudzite, join the rest of the men belowdecks,” Gray instructed. He’d have enough to worry about without Reese getting underfoot and questioning his commands. As Reese begrudging left, Gray addressed the remaining sailors: “*Vengeance* is too big to go unnoticed, so don’t bother extinguishing the lanterns. We won’t be able to lose them in the dark. Keep your eyes to the sides—they may try to use rowboats to board.”

“Anything else should we do, sir?” Caleb asked, voice trembling.

“We wait for them to approach,” Gray said.

“And after that, sir?”

Gray felt a twinge of pity for the boy, who looked half green with queasy fear. He’d make sure his men were safe, but the details of how he’d do so weren’t precisely something which he could share. No doubt Caleb, and half the other men, thought their new commander was a fool.

“You want to know what happens after the pirates board us?” Gray asked.

Caleb nodded shakily.

“Well, lad,” Gray said, “that’s when we convince them to leave.”

* * * *

Ambrose hadn't been happy when Nick informed him that he'd be staying behind on *The Ideal* with the remaining crew. Nick wasn't quite sure why the man had agreed to become his quartermaster; it certainly wasn't out of affection as Nick suspected that he grated on Ambrose's nerves as much as Ambrose grated on his. Nor, to Nick's knowledge, was Ambrose one of the Witcheds with no place else to go. Whatever his reasons, Ambrose Kim had proven an adept second-in-command who, much to Nick's relief, was more than willing to take over the disciplinary aspects of leadership.

"You'll get yourself killed without me," Ambrose said flatly. The two men stood on the deck of *The Ideal*, Nick poised to climb down to the awaiting rowboat.

Nick fluttered his lashes at the surly quartermaster. "Kim, darling, don't tell me that you *care*?"

Ambrose's only reply was a derisive snort.

Nick sighed. "If we don't return by daybreak, or if the *Vengeance* starts to turn towards you, then I need someone in charge. Talia insisted on joining us once she learned that Kent was coming, and you're the only person with the navigational skills to get to Port Unity. If we fail, I need you to warn my family."

Ambrose's scowl deepened. "You need more than four men for a boarding party," Ambrose argued. "Parker can barely handle a pistol, and Alavidze is still getting her sea legs."

"I'd do this alone if I could," Nick said seriously. "But I need Sally to identify the man who kills me, and Kent refused to lend me his blasted birds without being there to watch over them."

"Parker is following to watch over Zarneki, who is only accompanying you in the first place . . . because you need his *birds*?"

Nick shrugged. "He taught them how to drop a grappling hook over the side of a ship. Makes it easier to board."

Whatever Ambrose proceeded to mutter in Korean, Nick was almost certain that it wasn't complimentary.

"We've boarded ships a dozen times with parties exactly this size," Nick pointed out.

"Not warships."

"There's a first time for everything."

"What about the size of the crew? Are you capable of controlling that many men at once?"

Nick hesitated. "I guess we'll find out."

* * * *

As Nick anticipated, docking alongside the *Vengeance* proved to be easy work. Several of the crew members who stayed behind on *The Ideal* were mind twisters with long enough range to encourage the sailors scanning the waves to look past the rowboat slowly making its way towards their ship. Once alongside the war vessel, Kent instructed his pet parrots, Antigone and Cassandra, to drop the grappling hook over the railing's edge.

"Good girls," Kent cooed in a low voice, ushering them from his shoulders to grab onto the grapple's rope. "Like we practiced, now. I have apple slices once you get back."

Well, now Nick knew who'd been raiding the ship's larder for extra fruit. He would've rolled his eyes had he not been focused on putting the nearest lookout to sleep. Creating a sense of drowsiness wasn't easiest, and he didn't want the suggestion to be so strong that the man tumbled overboard.

"You two stay on the rowboat," he told Kent and Talia after he'd successfully accomplished his task and the parrots had returned. He turned to Sally, who'd spent the entire row over sitting quietly at the dinghy's helm with her knees tucked beneath her chin.

"I promise to keep you safe," he reassured her. "Even so, there's no need for you to—"

Her head shot up to face him, her eyes blazing with that same fierceness from earlier when he'd chuckled at her misfortune. "I do need to," she declared. "All my life, I've seen people die. I couldn't stop their deaths, and I was too afraid to even warn them."

"You can't blame yourself for that," Talia protested. "They would've locked you up for being Witched."

"Maybe not," Sally said. "I've never seen my own future."

"You don't need to see the future to know what would've happened had you spoken up," Kent said. "The people of my town locked up my mother, and they had no proof that she was Witched."

"You never told me that," Talia said. "Was she?"

Kent shrugged.

"My point is that this is the first time that I feel that maybe things can be different," Sally said. She met Nick's gaze. "That maybe things can change."

"I sure as hell hope so," Nick said in a tone he hoped sounded jovial and carefree. "I'm not quite ready to die."

"We're not ready to let you, Captain," Talia said. "Which is why Kent and I are joining you aboard."

Nick opened his mouth to protest.

"Don't," Kent cut him off. "It's already decided."

"We agreed back on the ship," Talia said. "Kent can help you beat people up, and I'll be there for moral support."

Kent nodded.

Nick's eyes prickled. Not with tears, though. He was a pirate captain, damnit, and pirate captains didn't get maudlin and weepy over displays of loyalty. No, the sea air was just . . . really salty tonight. It stung his eyes.

"Thank you," he said.

"Well, we can't risk leaving the rest of the crew with Rosy in charge," Talia replied, smirking. "They'd mutiny within a week."

* * * *

The pirates certainly had a flare for dramatics, Grayson acknowledged.

The four of them had strode, casual as all be, to where he stood with Caleb at the helm. A woman whose skin melted into the darkness let out a merry laugh upon seeing whatever horrified expression was no doubt on Caleb's face; her companion, a man so pale that he practically glowed, kept his pistol pressed against the back of a very disgruntled-looking Antonio.

Antonio wasn't even supposed to be above deck. Gray had stationed the gunner below; no doubt Reese had countermanded his order and told Antonio to keep an eye on the captain. Much to Antonio's clear dismay given his shocked expression, none of the crew attempt to rescue their comrade, whom the pirates had clearly been caught snoozing on watch. Gray wasn't certain if their obedience stemmed from respecting his command that they not fire the first shot, or simply because no one much cared for Guerra.

A third pirate stood protectively in front of a short woman, and it was this third pirate that caught Gray's attention. For one, he wore the biggest hat with the longest feather, which Gray knew to be a status symbol among pirates (not unlike in the British navy, if truth be told). The big-hatted pirate was likely the leader. But there was something else . . . something about the way that the pirate didn't bother to scan his surroundings, as if he instinctively knew where each sailor was positioned on deck.

Like recognizes like, Gray's father had often said, although the old man had used the saying to refer to the way that those he considered to be "ill-bred social climbers" could never "fool the upper crust" into seeing them as equals. There was a kernel of truth to the saying, however. Like did at times recognize like, and Grayson recognized within the pirate a secret, shameful similarity.

He only hoped that the pirate wasn't as keen as observer.

"This one's got gold buttons, Captain!" the laughing woman crowed.

The tall pirate turned to the short woman. "Is it him?"

She nodded, red curls shining like molten copper in the lanternlight.

The pirate turned towards Grayson. He took off his oversized hat with its garish feather and swooped into a deep, mocking bow.

"A pleasure to meet you, my lord," the pirate said. "Tis a lovely night to die, is it not?"

* * * *

So, this was the man destined to kill him.

Nick was not impressed.

The *Vengeance's* captain looked as if he were the type to take umbrage at the concept of enjoyment. It wasn't his physical appearance that gave the impression, but rather the man's posture. He stood with the same rigid formality as did Ambrose, with a stiffness that advertised the stick up the stander's ass.

As for looks, well, Nick's mother would have likely called the Brit handsome. The man's features were patrician and his hair neatly tied in a short queue; everything about him was almost *too* neat and polished, from the shine of his boots to the fact that his jacket was buttoned up all the way to the collar (with gold buttons, as Talia had pointed out). Why not at least dress comfortably while at sea? Were it not for the small scar and golden gleam of scruff at the Brit's jaw, Nick would've doubted the man to be human.

"My name is Captain Black," the man said, "and I'm not a lord."

Nick's brows shot up. "'Scuse me?"

"You called me a lord," Black said genially. "My family is not, in fact, nobility."

"Sorry about that, my lord," Nick replied, darkly amused by the fact that of all the things Black could have objected too—their illicit boarding, the fact that Kent had a gun to his crewman's back—he'd been bothered most by impropriety of address. "Can never tell who's called what with you British types."

"Be as it may," Black said, "might I inquire what you're doing aboard my ship?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" squawked the annoying man who Kent held at gunpoint. "They're pirates!"

"My crew is not, in fact, pirates," Nick said, echoing Black's early phrasing. "We're privateers. Received approval from Madison himself." He replaced his hat on his head, taking a moment to straighten out the ostrich feather plume. "Now, onto business. My name is Nicholas Wiseman, and I've come to kidnap me."

"How flattering," Black said. "You do realize that we have you outnumbered?"

Nick grinned. "Do you, now?"

There was thump as a body hit the deck. Followed by another thump, and then yet another. Thirty thumps in all as, one by one, Black's crew stationed atop *Vengeance's* deck fell unconscious to the ground and the only people who remained standing were Nick's crew, Black, the sailor Kent held onto, and the trembling boy standing beside Black. Nick knew his mental push wouldn't be fatal, although he suspected the sailors would all have a splitting headache upon waking.

It was a headache which Nick already possessed. Usually, he boarded vessels with his entire crew. One small display of power, maybe knocking pit the captain and first mate, and the rest of the merchant ship were usually so terrified that they helped load their own cargo onto *The Ideal*. Nick had never put down thirty men before; he'd never needed to.

"Don't bother calling for reinforcements," Nick warned, ignoring the way that his pulse thrummed in his temples and his brain screamed with agony so loud that it ricocheted around his skull. "I'll only send them to sleep as well."

"Your nose is bleeding," Black noted.

Nick tensed as the Brit reached into his jacket, only to blink in surprise when he withdrew a crisp white handkerchief and offered it forward.

"Is this your flag of surrender?" Nick asked glibly.

"Of course not." Black's voice was calm. Too damn calm, given the circumstances. "But there's no need to be inhospitable. We can discuss the terms of your departure like gentlemen."

Something was off. Most men in Black's position, when faced with proof of Nick's ability, would've already wet their britches. Nick reached out towards the other captain, listening.

Ohgodohgodohgodohgod. They're witches. Ohgodohgod. I'm going to die.

Those thoughts clearly belonged to the cowering sailor next to Black.

Reese was right, they're more powerful than we know. What the hells is the captain doing offering one a handkerchief?

That anger came from the sailor they'd captured. Pushing past the cloud of pain that was already beginning to dim his vision, Nick stretched further, harder, and encountered . . .

A wall.

Black smiled, his teeth flashing sharp and white in the moonlight, and Nick *knew*. Perhaps if he hadn't just knocked out thirty men, he might be able to break through Black's barrier and discover exactly what

his abilities were. But forcing into the mind of another Wicked took effort, and right now he could barely keep himself from toppling over like the men he'd so recently put out of commission.

Nick felt someone move beneath his right arm, boosting him up and helping him stand upright. Sally's head only hit his shoulder, but she slipped her arm around his waist and held on with surprising strength. A weary smile spread across Nick's face. How hubristic of him to assume she needed his help to become a pirate, when . . .

"I won't be cursed!"

The scream tore through Nick's mind with such venom and volume that it took him a moment to realize that the sailor had shouted the words aloud as well. He saw a flash of silver as the sailor jerked away from Kent, his sudden movement causing Kent to slip on the slick deck.

Kent's gun clattered to the ground.

Talia lunged for the weapon, but the sailor was faster. He pointed the gun towards Nick with trembling hands.

"I won't be cursed," he repeated, and pulled the trigger.

* * * *

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/67023372>

[MB Short Story: The Ideal \(Part 3, The End\)](#)

[May 28, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66987476>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66993837>

* * * *

Damn Antonio and his reckless behavior.

Grayson was too far away to stop the bullet from firing. He watched the gunner pull the trigger of the dueling pistol as if in slow motion, with only enough time to step in front of Caleb should one of the pirates choose to shoot back after their captain was killed. His hand drifted towards his own sidepiece, prepared for the worst.

He didn't expect the empty click.

Three of the pirates, the two women and Nick, broke into raucous laughs while the pale pirate smiled slightly.

"He thought he could shoot you!" the dark woman gasped before dissolving into another fit of giggles.

Nick smiled weakly. "As if we needed loaded guns."

With an enraged snarl, Antonio flung the empty pistol over the ship's side. His hands scrambled towards his boot, and the short woman gasped.

"Look out!" she cried. "He has a—"

This time, Grayson was prepared. He was on the move before the word "knife" left her lips, his hand firmly seizing Antonio's wrist and twisting upwards.

"Go below, gunner," he ordered. "Take Caleb with you."

"But sir!"

Gray tightened his grip until Antonio winced. "Go. Below."

* * * *

Nick waited until the two British sailors had left before speaking up. Despite Black's promise to negotiate, he had no doubt that reinforcements would soon arrive. Nick didn't think he could subdue however many men lay in wait belowdecks, their unsettled minds and panicked thoughts too numerous for him to count.

"You seem reasonable, my lord," he told Black. "I appreciate that in a host."

"Host or hostage?" Black inquired in a dry tone.

"It is your ship."

"Yet the only ones standing are your men."

"Right." Nick hadn't expected things to go like this. How was he supposed to shoot Black through the heart when the man was being so annoyingly civil? He'd anticipated being able to look into Black's mind and hopefully discover whatever motivation he had for Nick's death. A little tweaking to Black's psyche, a little erasure, and Nick's family would be safe. Barring that, Nick had expected resistance, that Black would draw his gun and thus give Nick an excuse to shoot back before being shot.

Instead, the Brit was practically daring Nick to shoot him in cold blood. Ambrose might have been capable of such a thing, but Nick . . .

Nick wasn't.

"We know that you have more men below," Nick said. "The conversation I want to have with you is somewhat sensitive in nature. So, my lord, I'd be obliged if you'd come with us."

"I must decline your invitation."

"Aye," Nick said. "I figured you'd say as much."

The light from the lanterns on the *Vengeance's* stern swayed with the gentle roll of the ship; with the night watch down and sails drawn, they drifted to the whims of the waves. Talia tilted her head back to gaze at the stars, calculating exactly how far they'd have to row to return to *The Ideal*. Nick couldn't see Sally's expression, but her hold around his waist tightened even as his knees threatened to unlock.

He nodded to Kent, who strode towards Black with a flinty expression that spoke of his determination to redeem himself after having been earlier caught off guard by Antonio. Black didn't move but rather waited for Kent to draw near. Again, Nick felt that same sense of *knowing*. He reached out to Black's mind, pushing, pressing, prying, shoving through the pain that cracked his skull in twain, and forcing his thoughts to brush against the other captain's.

Black winced, his attention refocusing on Nick. "Stop that," he commanded, and for the first time Nick was able to hear a whisper of the man's thoughts.

Don't make me do this, Black thought.

"Kent, hold up," Nick ordered.

Kent threw him a disgruntled look but halted. "Captain?"

"Something's off," Nick said. If only he could break fully through Black's mental barriers and understand what type of Witch he the other man was, then maybe he could—

Bang.

Heat seared through Nick's shoulder. He glanced down to see a dark stain blossoming over his shirt. Pain followed, rivaling that already present in his head.

He'd been shot.

* * * *

"Stand down, Lieutenant!" Gray shouted.

Reese stood outside the main hatch. Unlike Antonio, his hand didn't shake as he clutched the smoking flintlock. The acrid scent of gunpowder lingered in the air, and it took all of Gray's hard-earned control to restrain himself from smacking his subordinate over the head. Firing a gun on the ship's deck at nightfall

when the lanterns burned was sheer idiocy. What if Reese's shot had gone astray? Four pirates, Gray could've easily handled by himself. He didn't need Reese blowing up the entire bloody ship.

He heard one of the women cry out. He spared a quick glance at the pirates before returning his attention to Reese: Wiseman's body crumpled against the shorter pirate, and the pale man—Kent, Wiseman had called him—rushed over to help her. Gray's eyes met Reese, and he was appalled to discover that the lieutenant was smirking.

"Stand down," Gray repeated harshly.

Reese continued to point his pistol at Wiseman, who was now bolstered by two members of his crew.

"They're Witches, sir," he said as if that justified manslaughter.

"I won't order you again, Lieutenant," Gray said. "Stand down, or I'll see you court martialed."

Reese hesitated, the muzzle of his gun dipping ever so slightly down. Gray's temporary relief transformed to anger when the man shook his head and pointed the gun at only pirate not occupied with holding up Wiseman.

"They're witches, sir," Reese repeated.

"I'm not Witched, you twit," the woman snapped. "But if our captain dies, I'll make you wish that the only thing I'd done was curse you."

Bang.

Reese pulled the trigger again.

Gray couldn't see the bullet—it was too dark, the shot too fast—but, given his position between Reese and the pirates, he knew that the metal ball would need to pass by him in order to reach its target. He stretched out his hand.

Outside of fairy tales, Grayson had never heard of anyone who could do what he did. It was the reason he'd had no trouble going undetected, despite obtaining a prominent position in the Navy. No one imagined that one of the Witched could move things without touch, and thus, on the rare occasion that he'd used his powers in front of someone during battle, they'd dismissed his actions as their own mind playing tricks. Gray wasn't reckless (he had no desire to be thrown in Bedlam with other Witched), but nor was he willing to let another person die rather than risk his own exposure.

He couldn't see the bullet, but he could *feel* it when he focused. He could feel everything when he focused: it was as if the air suddenly had weight.

As a child, he'd tried explaining it once to his mother, the only other person who know about his ability. At the time, he'd compared the sensation to swimming through a syllabub (which had made his mother

laugh and accuse him of being obsessed with dessert). But it was still how Grayson thought of the state he entered: the space around him took on weight and thickness, but he could still move through it. Moreover, he could make other things move (or stop moving) by wiggling the space around it.

The instant that the bullet passed within six inches of his hand, Gray trapped it within the metaphorical syllabub. Suspended in the thickened air, the silver ball lingered midair before he closed his fingers around it and dropped it into his coat pocket.

Reese stared at him with wild eyes, his mouth opening and closing with horror, his expression mirrored by Caleb and Antonio whose heads peered out from over hatch. Gray sighed. One testimony, he could claim was delusional and bitter over being passed over for promotion. But three men had just witnessed him stop a bullet mid-shot . . . to protect a pirate, of all things.

Sometimes, Grayson Black truly hated being a good man.

* * * *

"Very well," Captain Black said. "I'll accompany you."

Sally wanted to snarl at the bastard. Nick's grip on her shoulder was heavy, even with Kent's assistance in keeping him upright, and it had been Black's man that had fired! She hated Black and the shooter both equally. But there was a third guilty party. What if, by sharing her vision with Nick, she'd been the reason that his death came sooner than otherwise?

If Nick died tonight, Sally would be the one to blame. She should never have told Nick about her vision, but she'd been weak and tired of holding everything in all by herself. For once, she'd wanted to share with someone else the crushing weight of responsibility that came with peering into the future. She'd crumbled.

As for Black . . . well, Black had also saved Talia, albeit in a way that Sally didn't comprehend and would've extensively questioned had her captain not been in danger of exsanguinating to death aboard an enemy vessel.

"Black is our only option," Kent muttered, low enough that Brits couldn't overhear him. "We can't take cover from bullets while carrying the captain."

"Why the hell wasn't your gun loaded?" Sally hissed, wondering if she could hate Kent as well. If she hated enough people, maybe there wouldn't be any loathing left over for herself.

"I don't like guns," Kent said. "Never have."

Nick let out a watery cough, and they both fell silent. "I accept your surrender, Captain Black," he rasped, and Sally's heart clenched upon realizing that he was attempting to smile through the pain.

The blond newcomer still held onto his pistol, although Sally was relieved to see that he had taken to pointing it at Black instead of at one of her crewmates.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Black said, appearing unfazed by the muzzle aimed at his face.

The blond sailor's hand quivered on the pistol's grip; he reached up with his other hand to steady his hold. "*Witch*," he hissed at Black. "I should've known."

Black ignored him and walked towards Sally and Kent, who continued to hold Nick between them. Nick felt even heavier now, his knees given out beneath him.

"May I?" Black asked gently.

Sally hesitated before reluctantly allowing Black to take her place beneath Nick's left arm. The truth was that she was on the verge of collapsing herself, having been struggling to hold Nick upright ever since he'd put down the *Vengeance's* topside crew.

"There's a pistol in my coat pocket," Black told her in calm voice. "Take it."

This time, Sally acted without delay. She retrieved the flintlock from Black's jacket, feeling empowered for the first time as her fingers wrapped around its enameled pearl grip. Next time they boarded an enemy vessel, if there was a next time, she'd insist that Nick allowed her to carry a weapon.

"Should Lieutenant Rudzite reload, fire a shot at the nearest lantern," Black instructed.

"That's near the powder stock!" squealed one of the heads peeking out from the hatch. "You'll set the whole ship aflame!"

"Apologies, Caleb," Black called back as he and Kent hoisted Nick to a full stand. "You should pop back down and begin organizing a fire brigade. In case Lieutenant Rudzite decides to act rashly."

The protester disappeared inside the ship. Despite Black's threat, the blond sailor didn't lower his gun. Sally cocked her pistol and directed it towards the lantern. The sailor blanched.

"You wouldn't," he said.

"You shot my captain," Sally retorted. "Try me."

* * * *

They made it back to the pirates' rowboat without incident, Reese having decided that, although perhaps willing to sacrifice the lives of the crew, he wasn't quite ready to risk his own as the person closest to the explosion should the short pirate—Sally, she said her name was—return fire.

"They'll aim the cannons at your ship," Gray told the pirates. "As soon as we've boarded, your crew needs to ready the sails to escape."

The other female pirate grinned at him. "They'd have to see us first to know where to fire," she said. "We left some people back on board who can make sure that doesn't happen."

Wiseman groaned from where he lay flat on the rowboat's bottom. "Love my crew," he slurred. "Sohvi'll need to patch me up. You all did so good. I'm . . ." He broke off in a groan.

"He's losing too much blood," Kent said, quickening the pace at which he turned the oars. "Talía, how long until we make it back?"

Talía squinted into the distance, where *The Ideal* was still no more a thumb-sized speck. "An hour at most."

No one spoke, all knowing that Wiseman wouldn't last that long.

"I can try to stop the bleeding," Gray said.

Truthfully, Grayson wasn't certain he possessed the finesse to knit back skin and sinew. But the alternative was to not try at all, and there was no way of knowing what his reception on *The Ideal* would be if he allowed their captain to perish. Not to mention that it simply wasn't in Gray's nature to sit by and let someone die. His blasted better nature was why he was in this mess in the first place, crowded onto a rowboat with four pirates and two parrots that kept pecking at his sleeves as if expecting treats hidden up his cuffs.

"You want to save Nick your magic hands?" Talía asked. "Seems suspicious."

"Unless one of you is a surgeon, in which case you'd have already staunched his wound, my 'magic hands' are the only hope your captain has of surviving until he can be properly attended," Gray said. "Let me help, or let him die. It's your choice."

Wiseman's eyes had fluttered closed. Sally cradled his head in her lap, her fingers resting against his lips to ensure that he was still breathing.

"Do it," she said.

* * * *

Black's hands rested upon Nick's wounded shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers and his face taunt with concentration. To someone without knowledge of what had occurred, and without understanding the bizarre feats which Grayson Black was capable, the scenario looked for all extents and purposes as if he were preventing an injured Nick from rising to seek help.

It looked like the scene of a murder.

To Sally, the scene was painfully familiar.

The setting was a rowboat instead of Port Unity's dock, and no ships were on fire in the background (although, admittedly, Sally had been tempted to shoot at the *Vengeance's* lantern just as payback for Nick's injury). Everything otherwise was identical to her vision, except that Sally could still feel Nick's breath ghost against her fingertips. He was, for now, still alive.

Black removed his hands off Nick's chest to reveal skin that looked ugly and raw: not healed, but only roughly fused together. A stained bullet hovered above the closed wound; Talia snatched it from the air.

"Captain might want this as a souvenir," she said lightly. She looked at Black, her expression more worried than her voice let on. "He'll survive?"

"Provided you have a capable surgeon back at your ship?" Black replied. "I believe so."

Talia broke into a wide, albeit somewhat wobbly, smile. "Sohvi's the best."

"I can't be sure that I connected everything properly," Black warned. "She'll likely need to cut him open again to check."

"His breathing seems easier," Sally said. "Steadier."

"Then let us pray for the best."

* * * *

The worst thing about having been shot wasn't the pain. It wasn't even the fact that he'd almost died.

No, Nick concluded as *The Ideal* pulled into Port Unity and he spotted the faces of his family beaming from the crowded dock. The worst part of being shot was worrying his mother.

Ambrose, the bastard, had written to his sibling informing Button of his injury. Why was the man found it appropriate to correspond with Nick's relatives was beyond him, but he hadn't been in a position to protest during these last two weeks, having been delirious with fever from Grayson's brute force surgery.

Nick's life had been saved thanks to the Brit, but now he was faced with reassuring his parents that, yes, he was alright, and *no*, being a privateer truly wasn't usually that dangerous, and *maybe* he'd consider coming home more often.

As to visting more frequently, he'd do so if only to make sure that the *Vengeance* never docked there. Sally hadn't had any other visions regarding the ship, but Nick was determined that she meet his family so that if anything bad were headed their way, she'd foresee the danger and give him time to return. And this was, as he'd testily informed a clearly disbelieving Talia, the *only* reason why he wanted Sally to meet his family.

"It must be nice to return home," Grayson said. His expression was in equal parts contemplative and morose, and Nick felt yet another stab of guilt over his part in upsetting the man's life. Although, in Nick's personal opinion, a little freedom was exactly the thing that Gray needed.

The Brit had accepted the position of *The Ideal's* First Mate with grace, despite it being a demotion from his former captaincy. His only stipulation had been *The Ideal* only go after merchant ships that Gray deemed "deserving targets." Nick had agreed to the condition, since the man's ability (or, as Talia continued to refer to it, his "magic hands") was too valuable to lose.

It wasn't as if the man could ever go back to England, given what his crew had witnessed. Nick still wasn't sure what had motivated Gray to sacrifice everything to save the life of a stranger, nor did he yet believe that they were close enough for him to ask Gray that question. Perhaps someday, but not yet.

"The people here aren't afraid of different," Nick settled on saying. "Not the way the rest of the world is."

"WELCOME BACK, NICK-NACK!"

Nick grinned as his sibling's loud holler rang in from the docks. "Think on it," he told Grayson. "Every seadog needs to retire someday. Port Unity could be your home as well."

[May Live Q&A](#)

[May 28, 2022](#)

This month's live Q&A will be **tomorrow, May 29th at 5pm PST.**

It will be recorded and the link posted. I can also do a Q&A on Tuesday morning or evening if enough people can't make tomorrow's (if four or more can't attend, I'll put up a poll to vote on Tuesday times).

The UCRT fairy tale will also go live tomorrow. After the pirate "short" story, I'm still a little (read: a lot) hung up on the nautical theme so am currently working on a *Mind Blind* version of The Little Mermaid.

. . . With Rosy as the mermaid.

Yes, I can make tomorrow's Live Q&A.

Tuesday works better for me!

All I care about is Rosy in a clamshell bra.

33 votes total

[Writer's Blog: May June Not Be Like May](#)

[May 29, 2022](#)

The Saucy Sides and UCRT Fairy Tales will come out tomorrow, with the final third of Gil's interview released on Tuesday. All are over half written, and I just need to tie the bow and end the stories. Full disclosure: my focus has been all over the place recently. Partially because of real life worries and scheduling, but also because I'm adjusting to no longer living on my own. Thankfully, my mom is fantastic and understanding and schedules outings with her friends so that I can have the house to myself to write undisturbed. Other times, I squat at our neighbor's.

(In other news, the Saucy Side is now pirate themed as well, with the Regency piece pushed back to June. I just . . . kind of kept writing after finishing this month's short story, and am currently contemplating whether or not Captain Nick deserves a saucy snippet as well.)

My mother begins chemo mid-June, and I should be more or less all moved in by then as well. I've already begun settling into routine, and thus hope to get out the rewrite of Chapters 8-12, as the only chapter I feel requires a major facelift in that grouping is Chapter 12 (I'm completely overhauling the various "dates" Button can have with the ROs). Editing has taken way longer than I anticipated, even given recent derailments, but I'm trying to not beat myself up over the slower pace and instead remind myself that each edited chapter equates to the length of a novella.

My new goal is to submit *Mind Blind* to Hosted Games by fall. It's a deadline I should have no trouble making given that over half the endings are already written. Still much latter than I wanted, but better a few months late than releasing things rushed and half-baked. (Allow me a moment to laugh at the version of myself that thought writing my first IF could be completed in a single year.)

I do feel confident that future projects won't take nearly this long. There's a lot of things I wish that I'd done differently when I first started coding *Mind Blind*, and I've definitely learned from the experience. I may even code a rough version of *Delivery's* ending first, so that I know all the stats with which I'll be working.

Truth be told, I'm really feeling DONE with editing (your guys' feedback is the only thing that makes the process manageable, as otherwise I'd dissolve into a soggy mush of indecision). All that being said: if I become utterly desperate for a break, I may take a week to polish up one of the ending routes and pre-release it on Patreon as a text document. The endings won't be playable until the whole demo is recoded, but that's no reason not to share Nick's complete and utter dismay with versions of his siblings who lock lips with Rosy.

EDIT:

I originally didn't include this part, because I'm trying not to limit the amount of moroseness that I bludgeon you guys over the head with. But, seriously, I NEED to say thank you to everyone who's made it possible for me to work on *Mind Blind*. I've almost burnt out multiple times (writing that many words is just, well, hard), but knowing that *Mind Blind* has an audience and that people are eagerly waiting for the final product . . . it's been more empowering than words can describe, and has kept me going even on the toughest days.

These past two months have been some of the hardest--if not *the* hardest--in my entire life. My mom is everything to me. I can't imagine a world without her in it, but I'm being forced to contemplate that possibility way sooner than I ever anticipated. Her odds are good, but I still hate the gambling. If it weren't for the flexibility that Patreon's allowed me, *Mind Blind* probably would've been shelved after her cancer diagnosis. I simply wouldn't have been able to keep writing on top of everything else if I was also teaching fulltime.

. . . I'm tearing up right now, so I'm going to stop. (Again, I'm really sorry for being so melancholy! My posts going forward will be more upbeat, I promise. Because, logically, I know things will likely be fine and I'm in that optimistic headspace 99% of the time, and not Mopey McSadGirl that I'm projecting tonight.) But please know that I am incredibly grateful that you've all decided to support *Mind Blind*. Despite recent hardships, you've made my life better than I ever imagined it could be.

When *Mind Blind* finally releases, it'll only be because you helped me through the journey.

[Saucy Side: Pirate Booty \(Kent, Ferro, Ambrose, and Gray Version\)](#)

[May 31, 2022](#)

Moments inspired by: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66987476>

* * * *

Kent – Parrot in a Crow's Nest

Kent's favorite location on the ship is the crow's nest. There, he kisses you so deeply that your back leans over the edge of the rail; only his arms keep you from falling. You feel dizzy, exalted, and a touch nervous. It is, after all, a very long way down.

Antigone swoops down on rainbow wings, her feet landing on your shoulder and her beak pecking at your ear. You and Kent briefly break apart, gasping for breath.

"I love you," the parrot whistles. "I love you!"

Kent smiles softly. He'd hinted that he had a surprise planned, but you hadn't anticipated him teaching Annie a new phrase. He reaches into his pocket and draws out a browned apple slice, which Annie delicately takes.

"I love you!" Annie squawks again. "So very-very much!"

* * * *

Ferro – Due South

Most the crew has long since gone to bed, but as navigator, Ferro uses the stars to chart the ship's course. He wraps his arms around you, his head resting upon your shoulder. "So long we can both see the stars, we'll always find our way back to each other," he declares.

Back on land, you're able to identify constellations, but out here the familiar patterns that you once memorized are lost amidst infinite lights. Night falls darker out at sea, so the stars compensate by blazing even brighter.

"I don't recognize these stars," you say.

"The trick is to find Polaris. Head towards the brightest star, and you'll always be due north." His embrace tightens, his breath against your cheek hot compared to the chill night breeze. You shiver.

"And if I want to go south?"

His hands glide down your torso, skimming past your stomach and hips. "That can be arranged," he teases as you writhe beneath his touch. "After all, I love exploring."

* * * *

Grayson – Yes, Sir

The ship's first mate is so composed and calm, that sometimes it takes all your effort not to reach up and muss his sun-streaked hair. You want to tangle your fingers through their strands, trailing your hands downwards to the neatly ironed collar of his shirt. You want to tear open fabric and nibble your way down his . . .

"How are we on supplies?" From the hint of exasperation in his voice, it's obvious that this isn't the first time he's asked you the question.

You clear your throat and manufacture a look of innocence, as if you'd been paying attention all along and not contemplating the oh so many delicious ways in which you could ruin Grayson Black.

"We're well stocked," you say. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

His Adam's apple jerks at your words, and the muscled shoulders under his perfectly-laundered jacket tense. Well, now. Isn't *that* interesting?

"Nothing else at the moment," he says, his voice pitched lower than usual. "We'll arrive at the harbor by tomorrow morning, so you can go ahead and open up the last keg tonight."

"Yes, sir," you murmur, unable to suppress your smirk as his pupils widen at the honorific.

His mouth opens, but no words emerge.

"Will that be all, sir?" you ask.

Fully aware that you're doing this on purpose, he gives you a pleading glare.

You grin. "Should I stop, *sir*?"

He growls and pulls you close.

* * * *

Ambrose – Clear the Deck

Any poet that claims a life at sea to be romantic has clearly never been aboard a ship. Below deck is cramped and so dark that some of your crewmates, despite being in possession of both eyes, wear patches to keep one eye in a permanent state of night vision. The main sleeping area offers no privacy, no doors to duck behind. Nevertheless, you and Ambrose manage to do what pirates do best: steal. Kisses, in this case.

Ambrose, the devil, makes a game of it, grabbing you when you're least expecting. He presses you against the mast beneath the moonlight, his lips making you forget that you're within view of the crow's nest lookouts should they choose to glance down. He pulls you into the captain's quarters, ordering you to keep quiet as he sweeps you off your feet and onto the desk.

Your favorite stolen moment, however, comes when Ambrose, frustrated by your lack of alone time together, orders the rest of the crew onto the deck. *It needs to be cleaned*, he claims, ignoring their knowing smirks. *Quartermaster's orders*.

You and he remain below, and your shared hammock sways to the rhythm of the waves and his touch.

[Saucy Side: Pirate Booty \(Kenna, Talia, Ambrosia, and Sally Version\)](#)

[May 31, 2022](#)

Moments inspired by: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/66987476>

* * * *

Kenna – Parrot in a Crow's Nest

Kenna's favorite location on the ship is the crow's nest. She kisses you there so deeply that your back leans over the edge of the rail; only her arms keep you from falling. You feel dizzy, exalted, and a touch nervous. It is, after all, a very long way down.

Antigone swoops down on rainbow wings, landing on your shoulder and her beak pecking at your ear. You and Kenna briefly break apart, gasping for breath.

"I love you," the parrot whistles. *"I love you!"*

Kenna smiles softly. She'd hinted that she had a surprise planned, but you hadn't anticipated her teaching Annie a new phrase. She reaches into his pocket and draws out a browned apple slice, which Annie delicately takes.

"I love you!" Annie squawks again. *"So very-very much!"*

* * * *

Talia – Due South

Most the crew has long since gone to bed, but as navigator, Talia uses the stars to chart the ship's course. She wraps her arms around you, her head resting upon your shoulder. "So long we can both see the stars, we'll always find our way back to each other," she declares.

Back on land, you're able to identify constellations, but out here the familiar patterns that you once memorized are lost amidst infinite lights. Night falls darker out at sea, so the stars compensate by blazing even brighter.

"I don't recognize these stars," you say.

"The trick is to find Polaris. Head towards the brightest star, and you'll always be due north." Her embrace tightens, her breath against your cheek hot compared to the chill night breeze. You shiver.

"And if I want to go south?"

Her hands glide down your torso, skimming past your stomach and hips. "That can be arranged," she teases as you writhe beneath her touch. "After all, I love exploring."

* * * *

Sally – Safe Harbor

Sally pretends that she's not afraid of anything. It's endearing, even if it makes you ache a little that she always feels the need to act strong. Pretenses always shatter during a storm, though.

A jagged blade of lightning strikes next to the mast, and Sally—fearless Sally—shrieks. There's no time to comfort her, no space for reassurances as you and the rest of the crew hasten to escape the typhoon's clutches.

Only when the pink light of dawn gleams over calm waves do you go in search of her. You find Sally near the stern, her fingers raw and red as she attempts to unknot the rope that anchors her to the ship's rail. You place your hands over hers, and realize that she's trembling.

"I thought we were about to die," she whispers.

Her lips find yours; the rope falls forgotten onto the ship's deck. You lick the salt off her skin, and she gasps, craning her neck to allow you better access. With every kiss and caress, you remind her that you're both alive.

* * * *

Ambrosia – Clear the Deck

Any poet that claims a life at sea to be romantic has clearly never been aboard a ship. Below deck is cramped and so dark that some of your crewmates, despite being in possession of both eyes, wear patches to keep one eye in a permanent state of night vision. The main sleeping area offers no privacy, no doors to duck behind. Nevertheless, you and Ambrosia manage to do what pirates do best: steal. Kisses, in this case.

Ambrosia, the devil, makes a game of it, grabbing you when you're least expecting. She presses you against the mast beneath the moonlight, her lips making you forget that you're within view of the crow's nest lookouts should they choose to glance down. She pulls you into the captain's quarters, ordering you to keep quiet as she pushes you back onto the desk.

Your favorite stolen moment, however, comes when Ambrosia, frustrated by your lack of alone time together, orders the rest of the crew onto the deck. *It needs to be cleaned*, she claims, ignoring their knowing smirks. *Quartermaster's orders*.

You and she remain below, and your shared hammock sways to the rhythm of the waves and her touch.

[Battle of Buttons, Part 3](#)

[Jun 3, 2022](#)

Battle of Buttons, Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Battle of Buttons, Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

* * * *

In the middle of an open-air auditorium is a lifted stage similar to those found on reality competition shows. Five humans (Ambrose, Kent, Glitch, Sally, and Grayson) sit in comfortably plush armchairs onstage.

In addition to an enormous demon wearing formal attire (“Gil”), three humans (Nick, Hope, and John Wiseman) sit behind judges’ panel, a table covered with a purple cloth that reads “TRUEST LOVE QUEST 💜” in sparkly silver cursive. Each judge has been provided with a complementary iced tea, although only Nick has taken a sip so far.

Gil: The moment of truth draws near. Which love interest reigns supreme in romance? Who among our contestants shall be forever immortalized in my final playthrough and become Button’s canon match?

Sally: Could you hurry up? Dream or no dream, I’m ready to wake up and give MY significant other a hug.

Grayson: Agreed.

Kent nods.

Gil: I’m building up to it. I swear, mortals have no appreciation for dramatic tension.

Talia: Hey, now! No need for false defamations.

Gil: You excluded. Now, for our competition today, I shall be dividing you into teams.

Talia: We’re competing for Button’s love in groups? That seems confusingly polyamorous.

Gil, cheerfully: Oh, it’s much more confusing than that! Trust me.

Ambrose: No.

Gil, ignoring Ambrose: Sally and Grayson, you two won’t have partners. My deepest apologies, but neither of you are gender variable.

Grayson: Excuse me?

Sally: Competing alone means when I win, I get Ella—that is, Button—all to myself.

Nick, looking uncharacteristically surly: What are they competing to win, exactly? Because my sibling’s name is still Sam.

Gil: Didn't I already say? The prize is that the winner gets to be the love interest that my final, canon Button pursues.

Talia: You're speaking as if we're characters in a book.

Gil: A total coincidence, I assure you.

Talia looks unconvinced, but ultimately chooses to not pursue that line of questioning rather than risk the potential existential crisis. This is, after all, only a dream. Isn't it?

Gil: Of course it is.

The assembled humans, judges and contestants alike, stare blankly at Gil, puzzled by his inexplicable outburst. He shrugs one massive shoulder.

Gil: Pay no attention, I'm just breaking walls. Now, onto our final showdown! As I said before, Grayson and Sally—you're not gender variable and will thus compete solo.

Grayson: I still don't understand what "gender variable" means.

Gil: It's when a player decides which . . . No, I doubt that explanation will make much sense to you, either. Far easier to demonstrate.

Gil snaps his fingers.

Like Prometheus shaping men from mud, three small tornados of red dust whirl upwards before solidifying into the form of three humans: Kenna stares in horrified silence at the two leashes clutched in her hand, their collars now hanging lank and empty; Ambrosia immediately singles out Gil with a glare, her hand moving to the holster at her hip; Ferro's eyes widen and he whips out his cell phone.

Ferro: There's no signal. What kind of hellhole has no signal?

Gil, to the newcomers: This is a dream, the others are from different playthro—that is, different timelines. You'll be cooperating with your double to prove that you're Button Wiseman's best and truest available soulmate.

He smiles reassuringly at Kenna, his good intentions damped by the sharpness of his teeth.

Gil: Your dogs are perfectly safe, snuggling against you in bed. It's quite sweet.

An image appears in midair like a floating photograph, of Antigone and Cassandra curled around a still-slumbering Kenna. The dogs have claimed three-quarters of her queen size bed, leaving their owner with only the edge.

Kenna's pale cheeks flush.

Kenna, defensively: They get lonely if I make them sleep in their crate.

Kent: Exactly.

Kenna glances at him, noticing the similarities between herself and Kent for the first time. She tilts her head to the side; Kent mirrors the motion.

Talia: “I put this question, fruitlessly, to everyone I knew—”

Ferro: —“What would you do, if you were me, to prove that you were you?”

The two grin widely at each other.

Talia and Ferro, simultaneously: Awesome.

Their shared smiles falter, neither completely liking the fact that they spoke simultaneously. Then the impish grins return in full force.

Talia and Ferro: Other me is *hot*.

Ambrose and Ambrosia make eye contact mid-eyeroll, and both look away with annoyed expressions while continuing to examine each other out of their peripheral vision. Kent and Kenna continue to mimic each other's tentative head tilts and handwaves, more curious than disturbed.

Grayson: You know what? I don't think this is actually a dream. My mind wouldn't come up with something this . . .

Sally: Bizarre?

Talia and Ferro: Sexily taboo?

Ambrosia: It's not a dream.

Ferro: Why not? I've had weirder.

Ambrosia, tersely: I don't dream.

Nick groans.

Nick: Damnit, now there's two of them. Kims 1 and 2 are right: this isn't a dream. It's my worst nightmare.

Ambrose and Ambrosia stare at each other for a long moment as if in silent communication. Ambrose's eyebrow twitches; Ambrosia's frown deepens. Both turn back towards Gil.

Ambrose: We refuse to compete.

Ambrosia: You're clearly a powerful Ment, but you will tire eventually. Release us before you have no choice.

Gil's groan rivals Nick's.

Gil: I already told you that this is a dream! But have it your way: you two can sit on the sidelines until you're ready to compete.

This time, Gil doesn't bother with the theatrics of smoke and finger-snapping. He simply scowls, and Ambrose and Ambrosia are transported to the side of the stage, locked inside an enormous birdcage of gilded gold with a sign hanging above the locked hatch that reads "Spoilsport Timeout." A pile of assorted knives, handguns, and small explosives lie just out of the captive's reach, magically confiscated from them during teleportation.

If looks could kill, Ambrose and Ambrosia's identical glares would have already caused Gil a heart attack (assuming, that is, demons have hearts). To the Kims' evident disgruntlement, however, Gil seems more amused than threatened to their animosity.

Nick: That's more like it! Demon dude, you're finally starting to win me over.

Hope: *Nicholas.*

Nick: What? It's not like he hurt them.

Hope frowns disapprovingly, elbowing her husband beneath the judge's table so that John follows suit and helps stare down their son. Nick sighs.

Nick: Fine. Fine! Gil, please let the Kims out of their cage.

Gil, petulantly: Only if they stop being difficult. This get together was supposed to be fun, you know. It's lonely at times, being the only . . .

Gil sighs.

Gil: It's lonely.

Nick, to the Kims: Just do the competition. If this is a dream, you'll eventually wake up. If not, at least we have a chance to learn why he's doing all this.

The Kims exchange another look then slowly nod. The birdcage vanishes, as does the pile of their confiscated weapons.

Ambrose: For now.

Clearing his throat, Gil pointedly ignores Ambrose's growled threat.

Gil: Kent and Kenna, Ambrose and Ambrosia, Talia and Ferro: you'll be partnering with your alternate versions.

Talia: So we have Team Kenzie, Team Rosy, and . . .

Ferro: Team Awesome.

Talia: Agreed. Not the most poetic choice, but . . .

Ferro: It seems appropriate. Do we need an adjective?

Talia: Double Awesome?

Ferro: Wicked, perhaps!

Gil: You'll be Team Glitch. For simplicity's sake.

Talia and Ferro look at each other and exchange shrugs.

Talia: Accepted.

Ferro: With the caveat to change the name later should we think of something better.

Sally: Okay, remember how I said that I was okay competing alone? This is starting to seem unfair that Glitch and Kenzie get to help themselves. There's no male version of me out there? A Sal, maybe?

Nick chokes mid-swallow of iced tea. Sally glares at him.

Nick: What is Sal even short for?

Sally: I dunno. Salvatore, maybe.

Nick snickers.

Sally: I think Salvatore is a lovely name.

Nick: Sure, for a small-town teenage vampire. But you know what name is even better?

He smirks at Grayson, who returns his look with one of resignation.

Nick: Graycie.

Gray, diplomatically: I find the concept difficult to imagine for myself, but I certainly wouldn't object to having a teammate.

Sally: Screw you, Nicholas. I'd make a great Salvatore.

Gil: Alas, Salvatore and Graycie don't exist. But since you both are working independently, you may go last in order to have extra time to come up with your answers.

Talia and Ferro: Answer to what?

Gil: To the most romantic date possible! I want to know how each of you would woo Button, were human reality not so depressingly limited. Here's my bargain: I'll bring over your loved ones, and whatever you imagine for them, I'll make happen. Whosever date makes their partner the happiest wins the game. Eschew the mundane! Imagine the impossible!

Talia: You're saying that I get to go on a date with Elliot unfettered by the laws of physics?

Ferro, to Gil: How do we decide which one of us gets to go on the date?

Gil: The author will split reality and write two separate versions of each date.

His reply is met with blank looks. Gil sighs.

Gil: That answer was more intended for audiences at home.

Gil gazes into a previously unnoticed (and possibly nonexistent) camera.

Gil: Stay tuned for our next episode, where Taliaferro Parker takes Button on a date . . .

Talia: In space.

Talia and Ferro high-five without looking at each other.

Gil: A date in space, where gravity is optional but the chemistry is guaranteed!

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This has been Reality Warping With Gil, Hell's #1 TV Show Not Involving Torture.

Produced, Directed, and Cast by Gil. Set design by Gil. Hosted by Gil and Assorted Mortals.

Tune in for the continuation of this ludicrously long interview, now an official miniseries where each of Mind Blind's love interests stars in their own episode.

* * * *

Part 4: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-date-4-67695714>

[Jun 5, 2022](#)

I spent most of today struggling with a wonky keyboard—apparently, there was a reason that the fancy ergonomic one I'd gotten was on clearance (the guy at OfficeMax said that they no longer carry the model, even). There was some confusion given that I had no receipt, but shout out to Todd (the OfficeMax guy) for being cool and issuing me a refund anyway (which was promptly spent on another keyboard).

Anyhow, I need to go back through my edits for Chapter 8 since half the variables now say "PLACEHOLDER" given that my +/- key wasn't working (neither were half my punctuation keys, but I worked around that with some judicious copy and paste). As I was editing all this earlier tonight and thus rereading Chapter 8 for the umpteenth time in the process, I realized that I wanted to use this post to discuss some of my current editing conundrums and ask for some more targeted feedback.

(That being said, the comments I did receive were great! So great that I want more, if y'all would be so kindly inclined.)

These questions are about changes that I've already made/am in the process of making, yet still still see some possibility for expansion.

Feedback Questions

1) Initially, I'd planned for Button and Kenzie's backstories to have a lot more reactivity when meeting with Vengeance. This is being added in to later chapters, but are there any other ways that you would like Button and Kenzie to pretend to have met? So far the options are childhood friends, via Podium, at an animal shelter, or during a fundraiser for Mayor Z (this last option is going to gain a *lot* of new commentary from the peanut gallery of Reese and AL).

2) Buttons who choose Sally as their MIVs now have a much more romantic scene with lots of fluffy reassurances on both sides. Buttons interested in matchmaking Sally and Nick together now have the option to do so (provided your MC expresses interest in doing so). I like the new version of this that I have now, but was there anything that those choosing to match the two might want to see or think should be addressed? (Again, I want to stress that the two do *not* get together in game unless Button actively encourages them.)

3) I've done some minor tweaks to Rosy and Gray's training scenes to drop more lore and incorporate ace pathways, but any suggestions over those scenes are also welcome since they're pretty significant romance-wise. And for those interested in the asexual romance routes for Rosy and Gray: is there anything in particular that you would like to see altered or added?

4) I'm pretty happy with the Podium sections, especially after editing. But feedback on that is of course welcome as well! I'm considering making Button respond to an additional comment from a user that's clearly Caleb, but am worried that might the online profile segment too long. I don't want Podium to wear out its welcome, and there's only so much cringe content that readers can take.

5) Scenery was tricky for me in this chapter. (Let's get real: scenery is *always* tricky for me since I'm about as visual as a naked mole rat.) Were there any scenes that you felt the description needed to be fleshed out? Any transitions that were unclear or confusing?

Again, these are only questions regarding Chapter 8. I have twice as many for Chapter 9, but I'll post those next week.

[Battle of Buttons: Taliaferro's Date \(Part 4, Ferro Version\)](#)

[Jun 12, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

* * * *

The spaceship's interior would be crowded were it fully staffed; with only the captain and first mate at their stations, it feels too large. There are no roses, no conveniently located books of poetry: it has more in common with the generic set of Spaceballs than with the scene of a romantic encounter. Only the glimpse of space through the curved front window prevents the atmosphere from coming across as too sterile.

A deep, disembodied voice sounds over the electronic bleeps and beeps of the command deck.

Disembodied-Voice-That-Is-Definitely-Not-Just-Gil-Speaking-An-Octave-Lower: Space, what humans consider to be the final frontier, but only because they believe that theirs is the only universe. This is the dream date of Taliaferro Parker, his mission to win the heart of "Button" Wiseman and thus boldly prove himself to be their One True Soulmate and Ultimate Canon Match.

Talia's Voice, Also Disembodied: Try again.

Disembodied-Voice-That-Is-Definitely-Not-Gil: Not all that long ago, in a dimension far, far away. It is a dark time for Taliaferro Parker. Although he's currently engaged, a demonic force has driven the intrepid strategist from his love and . . .

Talia's Voice: Gil, stop plagiarizing the intro. My male counterpart deserves an original introduction.

Disembodied-Voice-That-Is-Probably-Gil: I'm Gil Harrison, and welcome to a new season of "Truest Love Quest!" And by new, I mean really new. It's a new timeline, and we're in a new spectacular dream dimension, and most importantly a new bachelor trying to win the heart of everyone's favorite protagonist.

Sally's Voice: Now you're copying the last season of *The Bachelor*.

Gil's Voice, No Longer Lower Than Usual: Am not.

Nick's Voice: Dude, you added "Harrison" to your name.

Gil's Voice: Did I? Perhaps you imagined that bit.

Talia's Voice: I swear, if you want something done right . . . Fine. I'll do it myself.

Gil's Voice: You can't just take over my show.

Talia's Voice: Watch me.

She clears her throat.

Talia's Voice: This is the incredible, mind-blowing fantasy date between my other self and the light of both my lives: "Button" Wiseman. Or should I say sci-fi date? Because in space, no one can hear you scream with pleasu—

Kenna's Voice, Quietly Exasperated: Let's just start.

The scene of the spaceship unfreezes, its two cast members seemingly unaware of the time that's passed as the "narrators" debated.

Seated at the helm, Ferro's head turns so that he stares out the curved window into the vastness beyond, the twinkle of stars so close that their colors can be differentiated. These stars aren't the faint white glimmers visible to an earthbound stargazer, but rather possessing varying sizes and ranging in luminosity from fading reds to burning blues, with greens, yellows, and oranges in between.

Ferro: The stars are beautiful tonight, aren't they, Captain?

Talia's Voice: Seriously? That's my opening line? We talked about this beforehand! What a cliché. They're in space; there's no night/day cycle. He should've—

Kenna's Voice: Shush.

Unable to hear their commentary, Ferro continues to gaze out the window.

Ferro: John Keats called the stars steadfast, but they age and die just as we do. Janelle Monae sang that there are no rules on the moon, yet we still had gravity pulling us down last time we had a picnic there. At least there were no ants.

Captain Button: What's your point?

Ferro: Only that not even poets truly understand space.

Captain Button: What about astronomers?

Ferro: Heavens no! Keats and Monae understood things much better than scientists.

Captain Button: Someone's feeling philosophical today.

Ferro gives them a small smile.

Ferro: Perhaps. Being out here alone makes me feel a little melancholy. Or maybe it's nostalgia.

Captain Button: Nostalgia for what?

Ferro: Our apartment back on earth, perhaps.

Captain Button: We still share quarters on the ship, and it's not like our condo is much bigger.

Ferro: True, but it's not the same when we're galivanting around the cosmos. You know, I used to hate chores like grocery shopping and cleaning. Since you, I miss doing the mundane together.

Gil's Voice, in a bored whisper: Their conversation feels extremely mundane, if I might offer my five cents. Taliaferro chose to have a date in space, and he's wasting it discussing grocery shopping?

Talia's Voice: Have some faith in me.

Still heedless to their commentary, Ferro flips a switch. The protective plating that protects the cockpit slides open, transforming the area into an observation deck.

Captain Button: You'll make us vulnerable to an attack by Vengeance space pirates!

Ferro: We'll be fine. Besides, I miss dancing with you like we do at home.

Captain Button: You mean when I'm vacuuming and you grab me from behind and start swaying?

Ferro: Waltzing, my dear. Waltzing. But yes, I miss that. And the way you wield the feather duster.

Ferro flips another switch, and Captain Button's hair drifts outward as the gravitational field on the ship is turned off.

Captain Button: What are you doing? The rest of the crew will be here soon.

Ferro unbuckles himself from the navigation chair and pushes off with his feet towards the captain's seat. He holds out a hand for them.

Ferro: Dance with me, Starlight. Like we do back home.

Captain Button: The vacuum will feel left out.

Ferro: Somehow, it'll cope with its jealousy.

Captain Button laughs and unclips their seatbelt.

Normally, floating in space would be chaotic, but this is Ferro's dream. The two come together without any awkward upside-downness, wrapping their arms around each other and swaying midair to a melody that only the two of them can hear.

Ferro: This is what every day feel like when we're together.

Captain Button: Like we're dancing?

Ferro: Like we're dancing among the stars. Weightless, a little dizzy. A freefall into you.

Captain Button: Ferro . . .

Ferro: It doesn't matter where we end up or what names we possess, Captain. I'll follow wherever you lead.

Their lips gently touch. The scene refreezes mid-kiss, turning the brief moment into a snapshot of something eternal and unbreakable.

Talia's Voice: Which is what makes ME the perfect first mate.

[Battle of Buttons: Taliaferro's Date \(Part 4, Talia Version\)](#)

[Jun 12, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

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Their lips gently touch. The scene refreezes mid-kiss, turning the brief moment into a snapshot of something eternal and unbreakable.

Ferro's Voice: Which is what makes ME the perfect first mate.

[Writer's Blog: A Road Map and a Request](#)

[Jun 13, 2022](#)

Life has finally settled down enough that I was able to figure out a roadmap for the rest of the month! I've been in a bit of a writing rut (stuff's hard right now, as most my creative energy is currently dedicated to cracking morbidly inappropriate cancer jokes that make my mom laugh and the nurses wince). I've still been productive, but it's focused mainly on recoding things for *Mind Blind*. Hope's Chapter 9 conversation in particular was a doozy to rewrite. I think it went through like nine iterations before I found one that *worked*.

Barring any surprises or emergencies, I'll be able to get out three rewritten chapters this month. That being said, I'm aiming for four. (Maybe even five, but that depends how heavily I change the introductory scenes with Vengeance to reflect Button's new invisible alignment/sympathy tracker.)

Anyway, here's what lies ahead for the rest of June:

June 14: Battle of Buttons - Kenzie's Date (now rewritten with 3x the angst)

June 16: Battle of Buttons - Rosy's Date

June 17: Battle of Buttons - Sally's Date / Writer's Blog

June 18: Battle of Buttons - Gray's Date

June 19: MB 2.0 Chapter 8 & 9 Release / Chapters 10 & 11 Feedback Request

June 20: Delivery for the Damned Sneak Peak (Undead Edition) / UCRT Mermaid Short Story from May (featuring Rosy as the mermaid because they're by far the fishiest RO)

June 21: Delivery for the Damned Development Poll (On Romance Dynamics and Player Autonomy)

June 22: UCRT Short Story for June (featuring sauciness with an unexpected character)

June 24: *Mind Blind 2.0* Chapter 10 release

June 25: MB Regency Saucy Sides (Featuring terrible lines such as: “Is that a timepiece in your fob pocket, m’lord, or are you just happy to see me?”)

June 26: Live Q&A / Nick Wiseman Has Opinions on Gray's Parents

June 27: *Mind Blind* Short Story (Depending on my mental state, this will be either an emotional tear jerker or a comedic misadventure involving a disastrous meet-and-greet at a superhero convention. Perhaps both?)

June 28: *Mind Blind 2.0* Chapter 11 release / Chapters 12 & 13 Feedback Request

June 30: Battle of Buttons – The Final Judgement of Gil's Truest Love Quest 💜

The feedback I received from last week's post for Chapter 8 was *AMAZING*. No joke: I copy-paste all your responses to a Word document that I continually refer back to while rewriting. It's been invaluable as a checklist to make sure I reevaluate scenes, as well as providing ideas that wouldn't otherwise have occurred to me.

In fact, your responses were so helpful that I'm once again showing up like Oliver Twist with his empty porridge bowl and begging for more. I'm finalizing Chapter 9 currently, and there are two moments which are emotional heavy hitters: Button's (and Nick's!) reaction to Nick being taken, and Button's (optional) conversation with Hope.

The Hope convo is completely rewritten and overhauled, but I would love to know what you guys are *hoping* to get out of Button's dialogue with their mother. (. . . And yeah, the pun is still funny to me.) This is really the only opportunity Button gets to express their feelings about the past to Hope, as during her later in-person appearance has both characters otherwise occupied with things such as Not Dying. Granted, it's also possible that Hope may not show up at all and instead keep her distance. So if your Button needed one last opportunity to yell at her, or if you want a certain dialogue choice that will clear the air . . . Now's the time to tell me :)

Nick's scenes, I'm honestly pretty happy with—especially now that there's a lot more dialogue reactivity based on Button's relationship score with Nick. Some are significant, others are smaller. But again, if there's anything you wish were in the scene between siblings that isn't currently, I'd love to know before I release the new version!

[Battle of Buttons: Kenzie's Date \(Part 5, Kent Version\)](#)

[Jun 17, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

Part 4: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-date-4-67695714>

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The furniture in Kent's dining room has a surreal haze around the edges. With the exception of Antigone and Cassandra's dog bowls, all the furniture is different—the casual dining set replaced by an antique oak table and chairs with carved lion-paw legs; a French cupboard against the wall displays a collection of faded floral teacups.

The chandelier gleams above a formal setting for five. There's no rhyme or reason to the food within the serving dishes: the largest is filled with macaroni and cheese; the others all contain assorted Polish pastries (jam-filled donuts, sour apple tarts, sugar-dusted angle wings, and more).

Nick's Voice, longingly: Those kolaczki . . . so immaculately flakey. What filling is that? Blueberry?

Kenna's Voice: Poppy seed.

Nick moans.

Thalia's Voice: Looking at the offerings, it's not exactly a balanced diet.

Kenna's Voice: It's all my favorites.

Thalia's Voice: Since when do you like sweets?

Kenna's Voice: From my grandparents' bakery.

Gil's Voice: If you all would kindly fall silent, I haven't yet introduced this latest date of my *Truest Love Quest*.

Thalia's Voice: For what audience? I'm pretty sure we all know why we're here.

Sally's Voice: To prove that I'm El's perfect match.

Ferro's Voice: Toot-toot goes the little engine's own horn.

Sally's Voice: I'm just calling it like it is. And don't call me little.

Thalia's Voice: Like you see it, at least. And you *are* little. Adorably so.

Sally's Voice: Drop dead, Glitch.

Nick's Voice: Hey, uh, Kenna? I don't suppose you kept your grandparents' recipes?

Kenna's Voice: I did.

Nick's Voice: Fantastic! Would you mind if—

Ambrose's Voice: This is ludicrous.

Ambrosia's Voice: Agreed.

Gil's Voice: That's quite enough from you, my darling Instructor Spoilsport, or it's back to the cage.

The following heavy silence is broken by Nick's beleaguered sigh.

Nick's Voice: Stop being an overaggressive asshole, Kim. Dream or not, it's should be obvious by now that you can't simply shoot Gil.

Ambrose/Ambrosia's Voices: Watch me.

There's a click as two gun's safeties are simultaneously turned off.

Gray's Voice: I swear to . . .

Gil's Voice: To me?

Gray's Voice: Kims, put down the guns. Nick, stop baiting them. Gil, you were saying?

****Gil's Voice, imitating a sportscaster:****Special thanks to my Current Favorite Contestant, frontrunner Grayson Black. As I stated just before the unscheduled break . . . this is Kent's turn to really prove his case as Button's canon soul mate. His request for tonight was unorthodox, and wouldn't have been tried by a lesser player of the Game. But as host and also sole producer of this competition, I'm magnanimously allowing it. Besides, Hades owes me a favor.

The sound of fingers snapping echoes like a cymbal's crash. Three of the five empty seats around the dining table are now suddenly filled with motionless occupants:

A man in his seventies with snow-white hair resembles an aged (and significantly shorter) Tobias Zarneki. His arms are muscled—baker's arms—but his middle is soft, his belly straining against the buttons of an overly starched dress shirt. Over his head, in golden cursive is the name "Jakub Zarneki."

Besides him sits a woman of the similar age, her French-tip manicure resting on of his hand atop the table. She's several inches taller than the man, her build narrow and angular. Her bottle-blonde curls peek out from beneath a knit purple cap. Above her cap, in the same golden script, hovers the name "Celina Zarneki."

Across from Kent's grandparents, a woman in her early thirties is paused mid-laugh. She wears a bright yellow sundress, her thick brown hair tied up in a half-fallen bun. She's beautiful, her expression exuding warmth and merriment despite being frozen in place. The name above her reads "Maria Santos-Zarneki."

Thalia's Voice, softly: You okay?

Kenna's Voice: Yeah.

Ferro's Voice: It can't be easy to see them again.

Kenna's Voice: Kent and I wanted this.

A doorbell rings, and the three members of the Zarneki clan come (back) to life. The gold script above their heads fade, until the scene looks . . . almost . . . real.

Celina: Oh! That's them.

Celina reaches into her pocket and draws out an Estee Lauder lipstick, which she then reapplies to lips. She looks at her husband expectantly.

Jakub: As beautiful as always, pączusiu.

Maria rises and heads to the door, her smile widening with every step. She opens the door.

Kent and Button stand at the threshold: Button carries a small ceramic planter, their face obscured by its blossoming orchids growing. Kent holds a gift bag, which he immediately drops in order to tightly embrace his mother.

Maria: I've missed you.

Kent doesn't release his mother, even as the hug's duration stretches awkwardly long.

Kent: I miss you, too.

Maria laughs and gently extricates herself from her son's embrace.

Maria: It's only been a week, you goose. Aren't you going to introduce us to your guest?

Celina and Jakub walk to the door. Jakub's smile is even wider than Maria's, Celina limits herself to a politely friendly grin to avoid getting lipstick on her teeth.

Celina: And where's my hug?

Kent: Of course, Babcia.

Kent hugs his grandmother almost as tightly as his mother. She smiles wide, mauve lipstick smearing her prominent front teeth.

Jakub addresses Button.

Jakub: So, you're the one who my grandson can't stop talking about!

Button: Guilty as charged, sir.

Jakub: Please, call me Jake! "Sir" is my son.

Jakub laughs heartily at his own joke, and Maria fondly rolls her eyes.

Maria: My husband couldn't make it tonight, unfortunately.

She waggles a finger at Button before they can speak.

Maria: And I'll hear none of this "Mrs. Santos" or "ma'am" business, either! You'll call me Maria and one day, hopefully, Mom.

Kent's pale cheeks flush red. Maria giggles.

Maria: Now I've embarrassed your boyfriend.

Button: It's good to keep him on his toes.

Maria, to Kent: I like this one.

Kent: Me too.

Button hands Maria the orchids.

Button: These are for you.

Maria: My absolute favorites!

Button bends down and pick up the gift bag that Kent dropped earlier to hug his mother, passing it to Celina with an apologetic smile.

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Celina opens the bag and pulls out a tuppaware of homemade cookies.

Button: They're chocolate chip. I asked Kent what I should bring, and he said—

Celina, giving Button a half-hug: He told you to bring baked goods, because no one ever bakes for bakers.

Nick's Voice: See, that's what I'm always telling people!

Sally's Voice: Maybe more people would bake for you if you didn't criticize their work like you were a judge on the Food Network.

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He's interrupted by Jakub's seal-like bark of laughter.

Jakub: A towel? That's truly all?

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Jakub: Toby! Maria said you couldn't make it.

Tobias winces at the nickname.

Tobias: I do try to make time for my family, you know. But I have responsibilities at Mirrortech, and I can't—

Celina, placatingly: We know, Toby. We know. Sit down.

Tobias sits down next to Maria, who scoots her chair over closer to his as Jakub fills his plate with pastries and cheesy macaroni.

Maria: I was just telling the kids how we met.

Tobias: Surely that's not necessary.

Maria, impishly: Oh, but I think it *is*.

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Tobias: What you need to understand, Kent, is that your mother is prone to exaggeration.

Maria: No, Kent. What you need to understand is that your *father* is forgetful.

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Maria: Tobias didn't always enjoy wearing a suit the way he does now. In fact, he was once a lot like Kent, with three pairs of jeans and ten of the same T-shirt. It's only recently that he became an old fuddy-duddy.

Tobias: It's about creating the proper expectation. No one will take Mirrortech seriously if their CFO wears flipflops to meetings.

Kent: You wore flipflops?

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Button: You two met at the beach?

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Jakub: Not exactly. They met—

Tobias: *Dad.*

Maria: We met at a wet t-shirt competition.

Kent chokes mid-sip of water, forcing Button to pat his back until he stops coughing.

Maria, wagging her eyebrows: Tobias won first place.

Kent: Dad was *participating*?

Maria: Yup. Your tie-wearing, lip-too-stiff-to-smile father won the grand prize in a wet t-shirt competition at Joe's Beach Bar in Orlando, Florida.

Tobias: It was spring break. I was on vacation with a few of my fraternity brothers. We . . . had a few too many celebratory shots.

Button: Did you enter the competition as well, Maria?

Maria, laughing: Oh, heaven's no! My mother would've flayed me alive and called for an exorcist if I behaved that way in the same city as her church—my family's Catholic.

Jakub: As are we!

Celina's snort succinctly dismisses his claim.

Jakub: We're Catholic on Easter and Christmas.

Maria: I was working at Joe's as a waitress, and was tasked with the honor of crowning the winner with a wreath of day-old onion rings.

Kent: How . . . romantic.

Jakub, chuckling: I still can't believe that Toby won a wet tee-shirt contest. He wore turtlenecks as a kid because he was embarrassed by his thin neck, did you know that?

Celina: I never quite understood how he won.

She pats Tobias's arm condescendingly.

Celina: Not that you weren't dashing back when you were twenty-two, dear.

Tobias: Mom.

Celina: It's just, you *do* have a rather thin neck.

Maria: There were three bachelorette parties at Joe's that night. Most cast their votes for Tobias, as did the bartender.

Tobias: Your cousin?

Maria: Raul was bereft when he learned that you were straight. Until he spent the evening talking with you at our engagement party, after which he told me that he'd dodged a bullet and that I needed to be

more selective when I eventually chose my second husband.

Maria presses a quick kiss to Tobias's cheek.

Maria: Lucky for this guy, I have abysmal taste.

She grins at Button.

Maria: Anyhow, that's how I first met Kent's dad. He forgot his wallet at the bar—

Tobias: Like I said, I'd overindulged the night before.

Maria: —and he came back for it the next day. I was working again, and he asked me out. And that, as they say, was that.

Tobias: It most certainly was not. She turned me down.

Maria: I thought you were just another tourist looking for a vacation fling.

Kent: What did you do after she rejected you?

Tobias: I came back.

Maria: Multiple times.

Tobias: Seven.

Kent: That sounds like harassment.

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Tobias: And then two more weeks before she agreed to visit me at Yale.

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Maria: Only casually until I got into Northwestern for my graduate degree. Then I found out that Tobias had family in Chicago, and that he had a job lined up with Mirrortech nearby.

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Eventually, the family dinner winds to an end, and empty dishes are cleared to the kitchen. Kent and Button hug Jakub and Celina goodbye before leaving a house which, in this surreal reality, isn't (yet) Kent's.

An edge of anger over . . . something . . . turns Kent's eyes flinty as he looks at Tobias, but he eventually give his father a one-armed hug.

Finally, Kent embraces his mother with the lingering tightness of a child afraid of the dark and unwilling to close the door to their bedroom at night.

Maria, laughing: I'll see you again next week!

Kent: . . . Yeah.

Maria, to Button: You'll come to family dinner as well, won't you? It's been so wonderful seeing Kent settled and happy with someone. And I adore the orchids you brought.

Maria's smile turns wistful, and she hugs Button.

Maria, to Button: Take care of him for me.

Button: Always.

Kent and Button head out into the night and towards a familiar black mustang parked in the driveway. Once inside the car, Kent leans across the cupholder and passionately kisses his partner.

Kent: Thank you.

Button, breathlessly: For what?

Kent: For being you. For giving me tonight. For being perfect.

Button, chuckling: I'm hardly perfect.

Kent, insistently: You are to me.

Kent turns the key, and the scene fades to black to the sound of the car engine revving. The scene fades and is replaced by the open-air auditorium and lifted stage, complete with those who observed this latest date.

For a long moment, no one speaks.

Hope: May I give you a hug?

Kenna: . . . Yes.

* * * *

* * * *

Pączusiu = Polish term of affection meaning "little donut"

Babcia = Grandmother

[Battle of Buttons: Kenzie's Date \(Part 5, Kenna Version\)](#)

[Jun 17, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

* * * *

The furniture in Kenna's dining room has a surreal haze around the edges. With the exception of Antigone and Cassandra's dog bowls, all the furniture is different—the casual dining set replaced by an antique oak table and chairs with carved lion-paw legs; a French cupboard against the wall displays a collection of faded floral teacups.

The chandelier gleams above a formal setting for five. There's no rhyme or reason to the food within the serving dishes: the largest is filled with macaroni and cheese; the others all contain assorted Polish pastries (jam-filled donuts, sour apple tarts, sugar-dusted angel wings, and more).

Nick's Voice, longingly: Those kolaczki . . . so immaculately flakey. What filling is that? Blueberry?

Kent's Voice: Poppy seed.

Nick moans.

Thalia's Voice: Looking at the offerings, it's not exactly a balanced diet.

Kent's Voice: It's all my favorites.

Thalia's Voice: Since when do you like sweets?

Kent's Voice: From my grandparents' bakery.

Gil's Voice: If you all would kindly fall silent, I haven't yet introduced this latest date of my *Truest Love Quest*.

Thalia's Voice: For what audience? I'm pretty sure we all know why we're here.

Sally's Voice: To prove that I'm El's perfect match.

Ferro's Voice: Toot-toot goes the little engine's own horn.

Sally's Voice: I'm just calling it like it is. And don't call me little.

Thalia's Voice: Like you see it, at least. And you *are* little. Adorably so.

Sally's Voice: Drop dead, Glitch.

Nick's Voice: Hey, uh, Kenna? I don't suppose you kept your grandparents' recipes?

Kent's Voice: I did.

Nick's Voice: Fantastic! Would you mind if—

Ambrose's Voice: This is ludicrous.

Ambrosia's Voice: Agreed.

Gil's Voice: That's quite enough from you, my darling Instructor Spoilsport, or it's back to the cage.

The following heavy silence is broken by Nick's beleaguered sigh.

Nick's Voice: Stop being an overaggressive asshole, Kim. Dream or not, it's should be obvious by now that you can't simply shoot Gil.

Ambrose/Ambrosia's Voices: Watch me.

There's a click as two gun's safeties are simultaneously turned off.

Gray's Voice: I swear to . . .

Gil's Voice: To me?

Gray's Voice: Kims, put down the guns. Nick, stop baiting them. Gil, you were saying?

****Gil's Voice, imitating a sportscaster:****Special thanks to my Current Favorite Contestant, frontrunner Grayson Black. As I stated just before the unscheduled break . . . this is Kenna's turn to really prove her case as Button's canon soul mate. Her request for tonight was unorthodox, and wouldn't have been tried by a lesser player of the Game. But as host and also sole producer of this competition, I'm magnanimously allowing it. Besides, Hades owes me a favor.

The sound of fingers snapping echoes like a cymbal's crash. Three of the five empty seats around the dining table are now suddenly filled with motionless occupants:

A man in his seventies with snow-white hair resembles an aged (and significantly shorter) Tobias Zarneki. His arms are muscled—baker's arms—but his middle is soft, his belly straining against the buttons of an overly starched dress shirt. Over his head, in golden cursive is the name "Jakub Zarneki."

Besides him sits a woman of the similar age, her French-tip manicure resting on of his hand atop the table. She's several inches taller than the man, her build narrow and angular. Her bottle-blond curls peek out from beneath a knit purple cap. Above her cap, in the same golden script, hovers the name "Celina Zarneki."

Across from Kenna's grandparents, a woman in her early thirties is paused mid-laugh. She wears a bright yellow sundress, her thick brown hair tied up in a half-fallen bun. She's beautiful, her expression exuding warmth and merriment despite being frozen in place. The name above her reads "Maria Santos-Zarneki."

Thalia's Voice, softly: You okay?

Kent's Voice: Yeah.

Ferro's Voice: It can't be easy to see them again.

Kent's Voice: Kenna and I wanted this.

A doorbell rings, and the three members of the Zarneki clan come (back) to life. The gold script above their heads fade, until the scene looks . . . almost . . . real.

Celina: Oh! That's them.

Celina reaches into her pocket and draws out an Estee Lauder lipstick, which she then reapplies to lips. She looks at her husband expectantly.

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Kenna and Button stand at the threshold: Button carries a small ceramic planter, their face obscured by its blossoming orchids growing. Kenna holds a gift bag, which she immediately drops in order to tightly embrace her mother.

Maria: I've missed you.

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Jakub: So, you're the one who my granddaughter can't stop talking about!

Button: Guilty as charged, sir.

Jakub: Please, call me Jake! "Sir" is my son.

Jakub laughs heartily at his own joke, and Maria fondly rolls her eyes.

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She waggles a finger at Button before they can speak.

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Nick's Voice: Plus, it's making me hungry.

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Maria, to Button: Take care of her for me.

Button: Always.

Kenna and Button head out into the night and towards a familiar black mustang parked in the driveway. Once inside the car, Kenna leans across the cupholder and passionately kisses her partner.

Kenna: Thank you.

Button, breathlessly: For what?

Kenna: For being you. For giving me tonight. For being perfect.

Button, chuckling: I'm hardly perfect.

Kenna, insistently: You are. To me, you always will be.

Kenna turns the key, and the scene fades to black to the sound of the car engine revving. The scene fades and is replaced by the open-air auditorium and lifted stage, complete with those who observed this latest date.

For a long moment, no one speaks.

Hope: May I give you a hug?

Kent: . . . Yes.

* * * *

Pączusiu = Polish term of affection meaning "little donut"

Babcia = Grandmother

[Battle of Buttons: Rosy's Date \(Part 6, Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Jun 21, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

Part 4: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-date-4-67695714>

* * * *

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Gil and Ambrose stand off to the side, arguing animatedly. The other judges and contestants pretend not to overhear their fight—except for Nick, Glitch and Sally, who have taken to commenting on the ongoing argument in hushed voices.

Ambrose: I refuse.

Gil: You can't refuse. It's your turn.

Ambrose: And yet.

Ambrose arches a single eyebrow; Gil's claws clench into red-knuckled fists as if preventing himself from wringing Ambrose's (comparatively scrawny) neck.

Sally, whispering: Do you think Gil will eat him?

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Ambrose spares a moment to scowl at Nick.

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Ambrose's brow arches higher with clear disbelief. Gil sighs.

Gil: Let's try this again.



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Ambrosia: And yet.

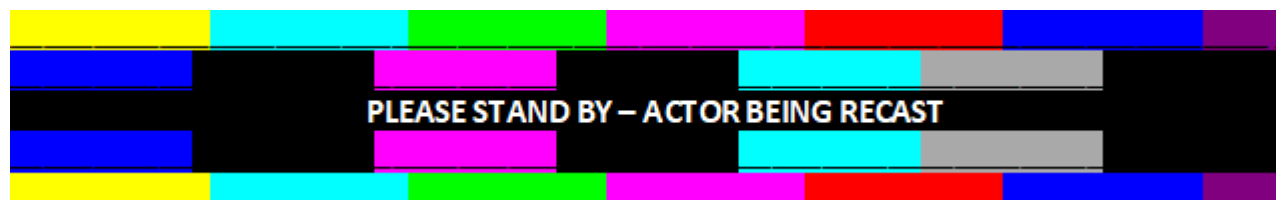
Ambrosia arches a single eyebrow. Gil groans.

Gil: Take three.



Ambrose: And yet.

Gil: You no longer have my vote. Take eleven.



Ambrosia: My answer is no.

Gil: What if, in return for your cooperation, I offered you riches? Humans like riches, yes?

Sally, no longer bothering to whisper: How many times have they done this?

Glitch: Thirty-eight.



In the middle of an open-air auditorium is a lifted stage similar to those found on reality competition shows. Four humans (Kent, Glitch, Sally, and Grayson) slumber in plush armchairs onstage—all having fallen asleep around Gil and Kim's two-hundredth renegotiation.

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Gil: I rewrite your past. That's my final offer.

Ambrose #579: No. If you rewrote my past, then I wouldn't be with El in my present.

Gil: You can't keep refusing to participate!

Ambrose #579: And yet.

Gil's resonating growl of anguish wakes the others.

John: Huh? What's going on?

Nick, yawning: Attempt number five-hundred and seventy-nine.

Glitch: Does that make Gil the Dormammu to Rosy's Dr. Strange?

Gil: It makes me *frustrated*. I have never met a more muleheaded, obstinate mortal in my entire existence—which, I might add, has NOT been of insignificant length.

He glares at Ambrose.

Gil: You won't cooperate? Fine. I'll steal a memory for our judges to evaluate. See how *you* like it!

Ambrose: Don't—

Ambrose's protest is cut short as the world dissipates and a new scene forms: a scene taken, as Gil threatened, from Ambrose's own memory.

In particular, Ambrose's memory of his last ACTUAL date with "Button" Wiseman. The pair sit under a golden gingko tree in a park, upon a blanket spread out over the fallen fan-shaped leaves. The air is beginning to chill with the approach of autumn evening, yet neither picnicker seems inclined to move.

Button is resting on their back, their head in Ambrose's lap as he lazily runs his fingers around the shell of their outer ear and down to their neck in a gentle massage.

Button: Thank you for bringing me here.

Ambrose smiles affectionately, the warm expression rendering his face almost unrecognizable without its usual glower.

Ambrose: You were persuasive.

Button: That's me! The silver-tongued coercer of grumpy men.

Ambrose: I'm not grumpy.

Button: You're so grumpy, they named a dwarf after you.

Ambrose frowns in confusion, and Button laughs.

Button: Ask Gray to show you the movie when we get back to the States.

Ambrose: I'm still mystified Black's preoccupation with animated movies for children. But I suppose that he and your brother must have something in common to be friends.

Button: Nick was never all that into cartoons. Unlike some people I know.

Ambrose: That comment felt pointed.

Button: Unless I'm mistaken and my husband doesn't watch *Animaniacs* while grading papers.

Ambrose, defensively: The characters on that show talk fast. Watching them helped my English.

Button: You've been fluent in English for years.

Ambrose: The show is educational. But I do like when you call me that.

Button: Fluent?

Ambrose nuzzles Button's neck, pressing his lips against their skin.

Ambrose: Your husband.

Button: Good. I like calling you that, too.

Button grins.

Nick's Disembodied Voice: Gil, I'm begging you. Stop showing us the worst timeline.

Gil's Voice: Believe me: this is far from the worst timeline. I did a Vengeance playthrough.

Nick's Voice: What does that even mean? No, you know what? It doesn't matter. This is all imaginary, like the other two dates. I refuse to believe in any universe where my sibling ended up with Kim.

Ambrose's Voice: You gave a speech at our wedding, brother-in-law.

Nick's Voice: Was it insulting?

Ambrose's Voice: It was a touching endorsement of our union.

Nick's Voice: See, now I know you're lying.

Beneath the ginkgo tree, Button turns over on their side to gaze up at the memory version of Ambrose. Both remain oblivious to Nick and Present-Ambrose's commentary.

Button: Husband. Hubby. Hubbalicious. What's it in Korean, again?

Ambrose: Seobangnim.

Button: Didn't you say that -nim is an honorific?

Ambrose: It indicates a level of respect, yes.

Button: Don't forget who's boss in this relationship, Seobang.

Ambrose chuckles.

Ambrose: Are you implying that you don't honor your husband?

Button: I love, respect, and accept you. Isn't that better?

Ambrose leans down and kisses Button's nose.

Ambrose: Infinitely.

Button yawns and nestles closer to Ambrose. After a few moments, they drift off to sleep with their head once again in his lap.

Ambrose gazes down at his spouse, wonderment and devotion clear in his eyes.

Ambrose: I love you, El.

The scene fades to darkness.

Hope's Voice: You truly care about each other, don't you?

Ambrose's Voice: We do.

John's Voice: I still can't say I'm fond of how you two met, but after seeing this memory . . . Well, you make a nice couple.

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Part 7: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/68714214>

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Nick's Voice: See, now I know you're lying.

Beneath the ginkgo tree, Button turns over on their side to gaze up at the memory version of Ambrosia. Both remain oblivious to Nick and Present-Ambrosia's commentary.

Button: Wife. Wifey. What's that one word in Korean, again?

Ambrosia: Yeobo.

Button: It means honey, right?

Ambrosia: More or less.

Button: Hmm. Honey seems to imply that I think you're sweet.

Ambrosia chuckles.

Ambrosia: You don't think I'm sweet?

Button: I think you're strong and clever and kind beneath the gruffness. Isn't that better?

Ambrosia leans down and kisses Button's nose.

Ambrosia: Infinitely.

Button yawns and nestles closer to Ambrosia. After a few moments, they drift off to sleep with their head once again in her lap.

Ambrosia gazes down at her spouse, wonderment and devotion clear in her eyes.

Ambrosia: I love you, El.

The scene fades to darkness.

Hope's Voice: You truly care about each other, don't you?

Ambrosia's Voice: We do.

John's Voice: I still can't say I'm fond of how you two met, but after seeing this memory . . . Well, you make a nice couple.

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[Delivery for the Damned Sneak Peak: The Caveats of "Immortality"](#)

[Jun 23, 2022](#)

"To be immortal is to be inhuman."

Despite being a werewolf, the Roman philosopher Plaubius succinctly summarized the dilemma faced by all vampires. The human psyche simply isn't resilient enough to exist eternally, and most vampires reach their breaking point around their eighth century of unlife. Early texts on the supernatural recount the horrific mental breakdowns of elderly vampires, claiming that their sanity abandoned them and they became violent. No longer possessing the wherewithal to protect themselves from the sun, the flesh of these octo-centarian vampires decayed, their horrific appearance leading them to be referred to as "zombies."

(For information on the necromantic Revived, see page 128 of the THAB handbook.)

Modern medicine, however, indicates that the inevitable descent of a vampire into Zombism isn't simply a psychological issue. Indeed, Zombism shares many similarities with the human disease of Alzheimer's, including memory loss, impaired verbal ability, and decrease in judgement. Given that many in the medical community argue that vampires are indeed still human, parallels can certainly be made between the two conditions. For both humans and vampires, late onset dementia is a deeply tragic disease which robs individuals of their sense of self and societal autonomy.

Despite the superficial similarities, it would be erroneous to draw a direct parallel between Zombism and Alzheimer's. Elderly vampires are infinitely more dangerous than their still-human counterparts who suffer from mortal dementia, as vampiric forgetfulness manifests in an inability to recall their own nature. Zombies mistake their blood cravings for a more generic hunger for human flesh, and will attack any living creature in vicinity. In addition, whereas Alzheimer's disease affects only ten-percent of humans over age sixty-five, historical evidence suggests that all vampires over a certain age *will* inevitably succumb to Zombism. Vampire culture thus dictates that all newly Turned decide on a "Die-By" date, a year centuries into the future where the vampire will walk directly into the sunrise and thus meet their final death while still in possession of their faculties.

At first, The Tradition of Inevitable End (T.I.E.) was to help vampire covens remain hidden from the humans whom vastly outnumbered them (difficult to do when a former member rampaged through a town eating the inhabitants). Now, T.I.E. is viewed as a humanitarian precaution—both in order to prevent the loss of human life by a zombie, and to ensure that the vampire is given the chance to die with dignity while still maintaining their sense of self. Some vampires protest T.I.E. as outdated and narrow-minded, claiming that Zombism is the natural evolution of their kind and should thus not be prevented.

Could these claims be right? It is, in fact, true that zombies often possess physical strength far superior to even that of a normal vampire—even to the extent of a certain level of sun immunity (although not enough to prevent sunrot). Regardless, whether vampires possess the potential to be immortal remains a mystery which will never be answered without countless casualties.

[Chapter Eight 2.0, Customization Snippet](#)

[Jun 23, 2022](#)

I'm code-running Chapters 8 & 9 right now (and adding a million more edits as I do so, because I CAN'T STOP), but fingers crossed that I can get it all fixed today! It's taken longer than anticipated to comb through the new edits for bugs, as I added a lot of additional reactivity within various dialogues--many of which ended up being coded incorrectly due to Microsoft Word's Autoformat function (I have since learned to turn off the automatic tabbing).

I know not everyone code dives, but I wanted to give you guys a behind-the-scenes glimpse into how a lot of the new dialogues shift depending on Button's stats and relationships. (Fine. I mostly wanted to show off the superhero names that Nick came up with and ask if anyone has a better suggestion for Confident Buttons other than "Surety.")

Apologies for the wonky formatting! I tried to simplify the code to make it easier to read.

EDIT: I'm going to make a poll with all the new suggested facenames for Confident Button and let you guys vote on the winner, as I get the impression that I'm going to have trouble deciding independently due to all the great suggestions.

* * * *

`\${Kim}` ignores him. "If Vengeance believes you and Zarneki already share a relationship, then they'll be easier to convince that you planned the bombing together."

Selectable Choice: *I don't get to choose my own codename? Boo.*

I have a few suggestions on that front! Nick thinks.

**if (Nick > 130)*

Option one: Kid Justice.

**elseif (Nick > 100)*

Option one: Harmony. I've always said that the Ideals needed a member called Harmony.

**elseif (Nick > 70)*

Option one: Zero. Just Zero. Out of context, it sounds badass.

**else*

Option one: Soulsucker. I mean, it's basically what you've done to my mind.

Then again, Hemera works. For now, at least.

**if (Effort > 20)*

Option two: Lucky. It's ironic, get it?

**elseif (morbidity > 40)*

Option two: Doomsday.

**elseif (confidence > 40)*

Option two: Surety. That's a quality I admire about you, you know.

**else*

Option two: Wisecracker.

You can grant yourself a cooler callsign later.

Option three: The Buttonator.

. . . A callsign of your own choosing.

[Writer's Blog: I'm too tired to think up a clever title, but Chapter 8 2.0 is UP.](#)

[Jun 27, 2022](#)

Edit: *The bug that prevented people from finishing the chapter is now fixed. Looks like the "return" command got left out when I updated the code (this took me way too long to figure out). Long story short- it works now!*

I am bone weary (we ran out of caffeine in the house) and thus will attempt to be somewhat succinct, but the good news is that I finally managed to take my constantly tweaking hands off of Chapter 8! The bad news (which could be good, depending on your perspective?) is that Chapter 9 is being held up because I'm making yet more changes to Hope's phone call in order to incorporate more details about her shared past with Rosy (details that I added to the training scene but then decided to move). I still want to get Chapter 9 up by the end of June, though.

Overall, I'm really trying to add in as much foreshadowing about . . . things . . . as possible. If it ends up being too much, I can always cut back, but better too much than too little! I really want readers to be able to guess *Mind Blind's* mysteries, or at least go "Ohhhhhh that makes such much sense."

What's New This Update:

1. The ability to specify whether or not Button is an artist (thanks to a brilliant Goya suggestion!)
2. Glitch's dialogue is now twelve percent more in character (for better and for worse)
3. Ace romance implementation for the training scenes
4. Option to switch what you call Rosy if Button refers to them as "Kim"
5. Option to attempt to switch what you call Rosy if Button refers to them as "Ambrose/Ambrosia"

6. Snickly tweaks (I initially added a scene where Button teases Sally and Nick, but then moved it because I felt the scene fit better happening when Sally helps Button prep for dinner with Kenzie)
7. More dialogue options in general, including the potential for Button to trash talk Sally's matchmaking skills and bemoan their dating history
8. Scenery got a glow up and hopefully things are now clearer
9. More hints pointing to the bomber's true identity (including the implementation of a new hint counter)
10. Sally's vision about Glitch got redone yet again, and there's a few more early chapter changes scattered throughout
11. Redone formatting for Podium (I went back and forth on between italics and bold for hours, and am still not fully convinced by my final choice)
12. You can now get back lost feelings for Gray or begin to crush on him without a history of pining like a evergreen
13. Fixed indenting so Nick no longer cackles and giggles in the same breath
14. A lot stuff more that I can't currently remember? I spent a lot of time reworking this chapter and honestly don't recall the first things I changed at the moment—my brain is fried. But Chapter 8 is 20% longer now, so there's quite a bit which was added.

Link To The Rewrite: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

Example Snippet of New Material:

"A love story for the ages," Sally comments dryly. "An internet troll lures an unsuspecting villager into the depths of his cave."

"Kent is hardly a troll," you say, glancing discretely at his profile as he talks to Glitch.

Sally smirks. "Oh, I'm aware exactly how you classify Kent." She lowers her voice. "Your crush on him is more obvious than Nicholas's thing for Dean Branham during his first year at Aeon."

Inside your head, Nick groans. *I really wish she'd forget about that.*

[Delivery Development: There Will \(Probably\) Be No Cages](#)

[Jun 28, 2022](#)

Writing interactive romance is always a balancing act. You want readers to be in control of the relationship while also making them feel like the RO has a sense of autonomy. It's tricky making sure that reciprocal interest is clear while also not overstepping and making sure that readers don't

accidentally end up in a romance that they didn't intend to embark on (looking at you, Anders from *Dragon Age 2*, m'dear). Because that's awkward.

In *Mind Blind*, the MC always has to behave in a flirty way/express attraction before any of the ROs even act interested. But even so, I've received a lot of feedback from people uncomfortable with Glitch's flirty attitude. Logic dictates that I play it safe.

And yet.

Delivery for the Damned's cast is . . . well, the vast majority of them are "monsters." Not that THAB employees should ever refer to clients as such, but it certainly fits some of the ROs' ethical stances if nothing else. This isn't to say that consent is going to be thrown out the window—I've never been a fan of the "and she lived happily ever after in a cage" route found in certain otome games.

That being said, I've come to realize that certain *Delivery* ROs (well, two in particular) will probably be into Golightly before the poor postal worker even has a chance to reciprocate their interest. While I intend to make their romance routes *very* easy to shut down in the very beginning (you'll get to choose which clients the MC delivers to, so if someone makes you uncomfortable, you can just drop them as a client), those . . . brave . . . souls who embark on these romance routes won't be the one setting the relationship speed. For several reasons: the relationship doesn't have a typical progression, these two ROs aren't much for listening to dissenting opinions, and . . .

Ugh. This is really hard to explain without giving too much away, and probably sounds creepier than it actually is.

Look: *Delivery for the Damned* will still be rated PG-13ish, and there will be no cages. But I wanted to test the waters and see whether you all would be okay with two of romance options being extremely proactive. This means they *will* pursue the MC first, at times aggressively. (Again, this is sounding way more sordid than it'll actually be. Although one of the two characters probably won't be romanceable by ace Golightlies, because their route will be very . . . let's call it "saucy.") Responding positively to these ROs might potentially result in them doing things such magically warping Golightly on a picnic without letting players decline whether to attend (whereas in *Mind Blind*, you can choose to not go with your RO), or breaking off flirtations Golightly has with other characters (as opposed to where, in *MB*, Rosy quietly loses interests), or simply breaking things off immediately should Golightly not go along with their plans (and maybe throwing a tantrum over it)

At least one romance (Zane) will play out completely ethically and give you full control over the pace. But basically, I'm worried that writing these two routes this way--despite feeling like it'll be the most authentic for the characters I've envisioned--limits player agency too much for it to be enjoyable.

Obviously, I haven't started writing the romances yet. I'm hoping to get a feel for how readers might react to having a romance route where the MC is, by default, cast in a more passive role (Golightly can be an *extremely snarky* passive participant, but they won't be able to escape the RO when, for totally random example, said RO is levitating their chair in the air in order to force Golightly to remain on a dinner date).

Bring out the cages! (There will be no cages.)

So long as there are other ROs, it's fine if two routes have more limited freedom.

NPC agency is always a good thing.

NPC agency is usually a good thing, but not when it comes to romance.

This kind of routes should be avoided in a game that emphasizes player choice.

44 votes total

[June Q&A: Thursday at 6pm PST](#)

[Jun 29, 2022](#)

Having to post this via mobile since our internet is (again) down—hopefully the formatting doesn't end up being wonky! These past few days, we've had winds strong enough to warrant a small aircraft advisory, as well as making me feel like a piglet living in a house of straw as the Big Bad Wolf huffs and puffs outside. I'm going to head to a coffee shop tomorrow in order to post this month's short story backlog, but this post is to announce that the first Live Q&A is set for **Thursday, 6 pm PST (June 30th)**.

I'm going to rent out one of the rooms at the local library in advance for Thursday evening in case I still don't have internet. (The view is great out here in the boonies! The online connection, not so much.) I know a weekday isn't ideal for everyone, so to try and fit as many schedules as possible I'm posting a poll below for you guys to select a second time, so please vote on an alternate time if you can't make the 6pm-7pm PST timeslot. (As an apology for holding this on a Thursday, I'll answer any questions about the endings with the exception of Shard's various fates, because I genuinely feel it would be rotten to spoiler *that* for you guys. But all other HEAs are on the table.)

Second Q&A:

10am - 11am PST

4pm - 5pm PST

7pm - 8pm PST

8pm - 9pm PST

Other (Please specify via a comment, and like any comment with a time that you want.)

12 votes total

[Mind Blind Fairy Tale: Fishy Circumstances](#)

[Jun 29, 2022](#)

“Far out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower, and as clear as crystal, it is very, very deep; so deep, indeed, that no cable could fathom it: many church steeples, piled one upon another, would not reach from the ground beneath to the surface of the water above. There dwell the Sea King and his subjects.

In the deepest spot of all, stands the castle of the Sea King. Its walls are built of coral, and the long, gothic windows are of the clearest amber. The roof is formed of shells, that open and close as the water flows over them. Their appearance is very beautiful, for in each lies a glittering pearl, which would be fit for the diadem of a queen.”

*-**The Little Mermaid** by Hans Christian Anderson

* * * *

The Sea King gazed longingly out the amber window of his office, and wished for the thousandth time that he were someone else. The currents beyond were aswirl with merfolk all headed in the same direction: to the palace throne room. All were eager to see what fate the Sea King would pass down on the three interlopers who’d trespassed in the depths. Last night, the Sea King had been secure in his final judgement: execution for all three human divers.

Then he’d made the mistake of conversing with one of the prisoners.

He’d only done so due to the encouragement (nagging, more like) of his ward, Talia. The mermaid princess—supposedly sent from Atlantis to learn leadership, realistically sent because her mother wanted to get the girl away from shipwrecks—had been insistent.

“Did you know that they have faces?” Talia had nodded sagely. “Under those round helmets that look like octopi heads, the humans have faces just like us. At least, that’s what Kent told me.” She’d given him a pleading look. “We can’t kill them if they have faces.”

The Sea King had killed plenty of things with faces—human and merman alike. Most of the younger mer had never seen a landwalker out of their diving gear before, however, as trips up to the ocean’s surface were reserved for scouting parties.

“Who’s Kent?” he’d asked.

“No one,” Talia had responded quickly, the scales of her dark purple tail paling to magenta and the flukes fluttering nervously.

The Sea King had crossed his arms over his chest, arched a single dark brow, and waited.

“A friend,” Talia had amended.

The Sea King’s eyebrow had arched higher.

“Kent is one of the humans,” Talia had finally admitted.

He’d chastised her for that, of course, even though he’d been expecting the answer. The Sea King had warned Talia to stay away from the humans; her curiosity would land her in a fish tank one day on display for humans to gawk at. That was if she didn’t get herself killed.

Humans and merfolk may have had faces that looked the same, but humans had never been able to look above the tail. Never mind the awkward knobiness of their own lower extremities and the nubby, misshapen second set of hands they called “feet.”

“Your Majesty?”

The Sea King away from the coral window and to the doorframe, mildly surprised that knight had swum up without him noticing. Usually, he was alerted well in advance to the kick of Sir Black’s long tail—which, despite the knight’s name, was a deep blue flecked through with silver.

“It’s time for the trial, Your Majesty,” Black said with a smart salute. “The judge awaits your presence.”

The Sea King sighed internally, and wished for the thousand-and-one time that he were someone else. “Did you talk with the prisoners, Black?” he asked as they swam down the hall.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I had a shift guarding them last night.”

“And your impression?”

Black hesitated.

“Speak freely,” the Sea King ordered.

“Only one was awake at the time,” Black said. “He didn’t seem to understand why they were in so much trouble.” Black’s lips curved in a small smile, so quickly that the Sea King almost missed it.

“You conversed with the human, then?” the Sea King asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Is he a threat?”

Again, Black hesitated. “Nick—that’s the human’s name, Your Majesty—seems to be an important person up on land. I was given the impression that his disappearance would result in a search by others of his kind. But . . .” Black trailed off.

The Sea King arched a brow, a technique that had never failed him in getting another to talk.

He scowled. Never failed until last night, that was.

“Your Majesty?” Black was glancing at him curiously, and the Sea King schooled his features back to regal indifference.

“But what, Black?” he demanded.

Black sighed. “The human talked about coming here to broker peace between our people. If so, ordering his execution might end any chance a treaty. I wonder if it’s wise to—”

“Humans lie,” the Sea King said curtly.

“All humans, Your Majesty?”

The Sea King didn’t respond.

* * * *

“The bastard is actually going through with it!” Nick exclaimed. “The stupid jellyfish!”

“Racist,” Kent commented without moving from where he lay in one of the underwater prison’s three sleeping nets, staring up at the cave ceiling.

“It’s not a commentary on his tail,” Nick retorted. “I called King Kim a jellyfish because he lacks both brain and spine. What monarch puts the diplomats of a neighboring nation on trial?”

“Are we actually a neighboring nation, though?” Ellery wondered aloud from the hammock beside Kent’s. “We’re above, not beside.”

Nick’s helmet turned in El’s direction, glaring through the fogged glass. “A good king doesn’t kill diplomats,” he said. “It’s bad form.”

El’s mind drifted back to the Sea King’s visit last night. From what she could recall of the Sea King’s bare chest, his form had been *perfect*.

“At least our guard seemed to have half a braincell,” Nick continued grumbling. “Enough to realize that our deaths would lead to an international incident.”

"We're not dying," Kent said calmly. "Talía promised."

"The mermaid? You two just met yesterday."

Kent shrugged. "It feels like I've known her longer."

El bit back an agreement. During her brief meeting with the Sea King, she'd felt the same way, as if she'd already known him in some other life.

Nick plopped down on the kelp carpet with a disgruntled huff. He glared at his companions. "You're both way too calm about this."

Kent shrugged again.

"I don't think he'll kill us," El offered. "Ambrose seemed—"

"Ambrose?" Nick interrupted. "When the hell did you start calling that slimy eel by his first name?"

"We talked last night while you and Kent were sleeping," El said. "He was nice."

"'Nice' isn't a word that I'd use for someone who plans to chop our heads off!" Nick exploded.

"Talía said that they feed enemies of state to the sharks," Kent said.

Nick's scowl deepened. Why was he the only one who took this seriously? He didn't know Kent all that well—the bodyguard had been assigned by his and El's father. But El . . . Ellery should've already been planning an escape route. It wasn't like her to be so accepting of a bad situation.

Something was off, but he couldn't quite pinpoint what.

* * * *

Ambrose Kim had ruled his underwater kingdom to know that a king was only as powerful as his people allowed. Let them down or otherwise defy their expectations, and a new monarch would soon assume your throne. This was, after all, how Ambrose himself had come to be the Sea King.

Right now, at this trial, Ambrose's people expected blood in the water.

From his coral throne, he could see the three humans being escorted into the chamber. He frowned; Sir Black seemed to be laughing at something one of the humans was saying. Was that Nick? If so, Ambrose disliked him on sight.

His dislike only deepened when the human shouted out in complete disregard for the rules and procedures that governed the court.

"This is no way to treat guests!" the annoying mouth-breather yelled. "My sister and I came here on a diplomatic mission."

Ambrose's gaze locked with that of the only woman in the group—the one that he now knew to be Nick's sister. "Ellery," she'd introduced herself as. Ambrose thought it was a rather beautiful name. Was she beautiful as well, beneath that heavy copper helmet that she wore?

"We only have enough oxygen in our tanks for another few hours," Nick continued to whine. "If you don't release us, we'll die."

"You'll die anyway, monkey legs! And good riddance!" Cheers from the audience followed the merman's shout.

Ambrose rolled his eyes upon recognizing Clarence's voice. He held up a hand, and the assembled crowd quieted.

"You claim to come to my kingdom on a mission of peace," Ambrose said. "And yet you carry no documents."

"We did."

The answer came from Ellery, and the scales on Ambrose's rust-colored tail shifted a shade golden at the sound of her voice. He hoped no one would notice.

"We carried papers," Ellery continued, "and goods to exchange as well. They were lost because . . ." She giggled.

Not for the first time, Ambrose wished that she had a tail so that he could better gauge her emotions. Was she nervous? Was the laugh a sign of hysteria.

"Kent lost them," Talia said from where she floated beside him. "There was a dolphin."

"The human warrior fled from a dolphin?" Ambrose couldn't keep the note of incredulity from his question.

"No," the human named Kent said.

Ambrose waited a beat, but he didn't add anything more.

"Kent went to pet the dolphin," Talia explained. "He left their documentation on a nearby rock, thinking it would be safe. The currents carried it away."

If what Ellery said was true—and something in Ambrose's gut told her that she couldn't lie to him—then those documents were the proof that Ambrose required in order to justify his decision to spare the humans' lives.

He nodded at Sir Black. "Take your soldiers and have them check for the missing belongings."

"This is ridiculous," Nick said petulantly.

"This is your only chance at survival," Ambrose said. "Instead of complaining, you should pray my mer find evidence of your mission before your boxes of air run empty."

"Asshole," Nick muttered under his breath . . . a breath which might be one of his last.

* * * *

This was ridiculous. Absurd. Ludicrous, farcical, and idiotic.

Gray (and, for some reason, Nick couldn't help but think of Sir Black by his first name) had found their diplomatic papers floating in the seahorse stables. The merfolk's dumb blobfish of a king now knew that they'd come to negotiate a trade deal.

Yet he was demanding something that Nick wasn't willing to trade: Ellery's hand in marriage.

"A union between your kind and mine aren't unheard of," Ambrose said, his voice echoing off the walls of cavern they were using so that the humans wouldn't drown. "The River Witch has transformed merfolk into men; she can do the reverse as well, provided we pay the proper price."

Nick wished that Ellery didn't look so damned intrigued by the notion.

"Not happening," Nick said before Ellery could voice anything other than total dissent. "My sister is not going to become a fish."

"Then what reassurance do I have that your people won't turn on mine once we've shared the location of our pearl beds?" Ambrose asked. "No. Your sister must remain here, with us." A soft and grossly tender emotion crossed his face as he looked at Ellery. "With me."

"Nick." Ellery laid a hand on her brother's shoulder. "I want this. I want *him*."

"Forget it," Nick declared. "I'd rather die."

"That can be arranged," Ambrose replied.

The Sea King's webbed hand stretched towards Nick, and then his head was being shoved down, under the water, unable to breathe, the green light of the cavern sliding to total darkness . . .

* * * *

"No!" Nicholas Wiseman lurched upwards in bed. His skin felt damp—with sweat, not seawater.

He looked around his room, familiar furnishings cast in silver by the moonlight: his electric guitar leaning against its amp, the overstuffed beanbag next to a bookshelf taken up half by legal textbooks and half by old comics, his desk piled high with paperwork that he had no intention of redoing despite Kim's insistence.

Thank god, it was just a dream. No wonder the events had been so bizarre. And it explained how they'd been talking underwater.

Nick flopped back onto his bed, letting out a long, held-in breath. This is what he got for letting Grayson coax him into watching the remake of *The Little Mermaid*. But it had only been a nightmare. Ellery was too smart to ever be interested in Kim like that, because Kim was the absolute *worst*. Not to mention the two hadn't even met yet as El's first day at Aeon was tomorrow. Or was it today?

He glanced over at his alarm clock; it was already five am. He needed to make El breakfast. Maybe he could break the news about their mom over eggs and hot sauce? Although, knowing El, the hot sauce would end up squirted in Nick's eyes if he stressed them out by revealing that Mom intended to get the BRS before their already very stressful first day as an MIV. Better to let Dad handle that particular reveal.

With a loud yawn, Nick rolled out of bed. Life was about to get painfully complicated, but at least he didn't have to worry about Ellery falling in love with Ambrose Kim.

[Today's Live Q&A](#)

[Jun 30, 2022](#)

Note to self: don't post when tired. Yesterday's announcement had a title whose time conflicted with the time stated in the post (7pm vs 6pm).

Regardless, the majority of you chose the 7pm timeslot on the poll, so June's Q&A will be a two hour back-to-back block **today at 6pm PST - 8pm PST**.

Feel free to pop in whenever you can and out whenever you need to: the entire 2hour Q&A will be recorded via discord and by my own computer as a backup, so a recording will be posted regardless of whether Craigbot rudely decides to quit his job midsession. Please come with questions, because I *will* ramble if left unprompted. Also, this Q&A will likely contain future game spoilers both for *Mind Blind* and *Delivery for the Damned*.

[MB Saucy Side: Illicit Liaison \(Regency AU, Ferro/Female MC\)](#)

[Jun 30, 2022](#)

Your entire life, you were raised under strict parental oversight and with the constant reminder that you were not an individual but a Wiseman, and thus must act accordingly. A family was only as good as their reputation, and your family's reputation was worth more than your dowry.

A young lady of noble breeding did not introduce herself to strangers; she waited to be introduced. She did not chew with her mouth open but rather, if she must eat in the company of others, took dainty, birdlike bites hidden behind a napkin. A young lady did not raise her voice, did not argue politics, and she *certainly* did not climb out her bedroom window to cavort with an untitled American poet.

But there you were, your skirts lifted to your waist to avoid tangling, attempting to clamber down the oak tree that you'd stared at longingly for years from the other side of your glass window yet never before dared use to escape. Taliaferro Parker did something to your sensibility; he made you forget everything that a young lady should do, and instead filled you with an irrational conviction about what you *must* do. Which was to be with him, in any way possible.

Even if it involved climbing down a tree, societal approval and parental permission be damned.

"That's quite the view," a soft voice calls from the garden below.

You glance down to see Ferro, his amused smirk visible in the moonlight.

"Quit that," you inform him tartly. "It's ill-mannered for a gentleman to stare."

"Didn't your mother inform you?" he drawled in that smooth-as-honey accent that made you shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the cold night's air. "I'm no gentleman. As a writer, however, may I just say that I find your posterior to be positively inspiring."

You gasp aloud, in equal parts from shock and pleasure. No one has ever spoken to you so boldly before, and yet . . . well, you quite like the way his audacity makes you feel. Ferro's stare is a heated, heady pleasure that makes you feel as if, instead of being a mild-mannered wallflower, you've blossomed into a muse worthy of admiration and verse. It was the poems he wrote for you which convinced you to meet Ferro tonight, an impulse you're beginning to regret despite your delight in his presence.

Climbing a tree seemed so simple, in theory.

Your head tilts to the side as you examine the pathway down to the ground. You're not entirely sure that the lowest branch would be able to bear your weight, and you're still high enough that an accidental tumble would likely leave you bruised or, worse, be loud enough to wake your parents. You eye Ferro speculatively. His arms seem strong, despite his scholar's build.

"I'm coming down," you announce.

He chuckles softly. "So I see, darling. With great appreciation."

"You misunderstand," you say. "I'm coming down *now*."

You let go of the window's ledge. The decision to fall without ordering Ferro to catch you is, in retrospect as gravity takes over and panic floods your mind, a poor one. In your defense, you'd been intoxicated by the thrill of this rendezvous. It wasn't a choice you'd ever make sober.

Luckily, Ferro moves quickly enough to catch you in his arms, albeit with less grace than you envisioned. His arms wrap tightly around you, protective and warm, but the force of your impact sends both of you sprawling onto the damp grass.

Neither of you speak, ears intent for any sign that your fall has woken those within the house. The only noise is that of your mingling breaths—at first heavy from the adrenaline of your tumble, and then from shared awareness over the intimacy of your proximity.

"I have a hack waiting just beyond the garden gate," Ferro whispers. His eyes are locked on your lips, which you part in quiet invitation.

He doesn't take it. Instead, his head falls to rest upon your shoulder. You try to stifle disappointment over the lack of kiss, but fail to school your expression appropriately. The moonlight reveals your expression, and Ferro smiles. You've catalogued a thousand of his smiles, some teasing, some polite, and some enamored, but this smile is new: smirking and cocky to the point of arrogance. In one of your other suiters, the look would repulse you, but it suits Ferro.

"Not here, firefly," he says. "Soon, but not here."

He stands and offers you his hand. You hesitate a moment out of habit; neither of you are wearing gloves. Then, upon realizing that you're poised to commit a much greater faux pas, you accept his assistance in standing up. His hand is warm and dry, tightening when you attempt to pull away.

"I adore your hands," Ferro says. His thumb caresses the backs of your knuckles in smooth, repetitive strokes. "With anyone else, I'd make an innuendo about what they could do to me, but with you . . ." He lifts your hand and brushes a chaste kiss against its back; were it not for the lack of gloves, the action wouldn't be out of place in a ballroom.

"I adore your hands," he repeats sincerely. "I adore *you*."

Your breath catches. Until now, no declarations of love have passed between you two. You'd assumed that Ferro was only looking for a dalliance; he's a poet, after all, and everyone in your social circle told you that poets never settled down. Yet Ferro's never acted the philanderer, nor expressed interest for anyone but you. Does he truly want more? Within your chest, smothered hope reignites.

The confidence on Ferro's face falters at your prolonged silence, and his demeanor turns cool. He releases your hand, and it drops to your side before you can register that something has gone wrong.

"Forgive me, my lady," Ferro says softly. "I overstepped."

With that puzzling declaration, he turns his back on you and begins heading for the garden's gate.

"Wait!" Your shout rushes out in complete disregard of your desire to not get caught. Discretion be damned, you will *not* let him walk away.

Ferro stiffens as you wrap your arms around his middle, clinging lest he again attempt to escape.

"I adore you, too," you inform him, your voice muffled by the back of his jacket. "To the moon, to the stars. I want—"

Your final sentence is captured by his lips. Ferro Parker kisses you, and nothing else matters: not status, not society, and certainly not something as shallow as propriety. There's only the two of you, fists gripping clothing and lips dragging over exposed skin. Ferro is passion and joy and freedom, everything which your sheltered life was missing before. He's what has been missing, and you'll never let him go.

Ferro clearly feels the same way. His fingers thread through your hair, and his mouth greedily consumes yours. Gone is the carefree, laughing artist with the lopsided smile; in his place is a conqueror staking his claim over both your body and soul. You mark Ferro as yours in return, grabbing his cravat and *yanking* him nearer to better taste his lips.

He tastes like salt and oranges.

A candle illuminates a nearby window, and reality shines down; it's only a matter of time before someone comes out to the garden searching for intruders. Ferro's lips break away from yours, but he doesn't release you. There's a silent question in his eyes, which you answer with a resolute nod.

Ferro's smile is so joyously wide that you can't help but let out a small laugh. How wonderful, to be able to bring him this much delight.

"Let's go," he says, and takes your hand once more.

[MB Saucy Side: Illicit Liaison \(Regency AU, Ferro/Male MC\)](#)

[Jun 30, 2022](#)

You had been raised under strict parental oversight and the constant reminder that you were not an individual, but rather a Wiseman, and thus must act accordingly. A family was only as good as their reputation, and your family's reputation was worth more than your actual future inheritance.

A young lord of noble breeding didn't frequent gambling halls. He chose his friends wisely from families of comparable pedigree, and if he needed to gamble at a house party to get in the graces of a social superior, he did so in moderation. A young lord did not question his parents, did not embark on a career in politics, and he *certainly* did not climb out his bedroom window to cavort with other gentlemen, let alone an untitled American poet.

But there you were, dressed in your riding britches, attempting to clamber down the oak tree that you'd stared at longingly for years from the other side of your glass window yet never before dared use to escape. Taliaferro Parker did something to your head; he made you forget everything that a young lord should do, and instead filled you with the convictions about what you *must* do. Which was to be with him, in any way possible.

Even if it involved climbing down a tree, societal approval and parental permission be damned.

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You glance down to see Ferro, his amused smirk visible in the moonlight.

"Quit that," you inform him tartly. "It's ill-mannered to stare."

"Didn't your parents inform you?" he drawled in that smooth-as-honey accent that made you shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the cold night's air. "I'm no gentleman. As a writer, however, may I just say that I find your posterior to be positively inspiring."

You gasp aloud, in equal parts from shock and pleasure. No other man has ever spoken to you so boldly before, and yet . . . well, you quite like the way his audacity makes you feel. Ferro's stare is a heated, heady pleasure that makes you feel as if, instead of being simply a second son, you've blossomed into an Adonis worthy of admiration and verse. It was the poems he wrote for you which convinced you to meet Ferro tonight, an impulse you're beginning to regret despite your delight in his presence.

Climbing a tree seemed so simple, in theory.

Your head tilts to the side as you examine the pathway down to the ground. You're not entirely sure that the lowest branch would be able to bear your weight, and you're still high enough that an accidental tumble would likely leave you bruised or, worse, be loud enough to wake your parents. You eye Ferro speculatively. His arms seem strong, despite his scholar's build.

"I'm coming down," you announce.

He chuckles softly. "So I see, darling. With great appreciation."

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You let go of the window's ledge. The decision to fall without ordering Ferro to help steady you is, in retrospect as gravity takes over and panic floods your mind, a poor one. In your defense, you'd been intoxicated by the thrill of this rendezvous. It wasn't a choice you'd ever make sober.

Luckily, Ferro moves quickly enough to slow your descent, albeit with less grace than you envisioned. His arms wrap tightly around you, protective and warm, but the force of your impact sends both of you sprawling onto the damp grass.

Neither of you speak, ears intent for any sign that your fall has woken those within the house. The only noise is that of your mingling breaths—at first heavy from the adrenaline of your tumble, and then from shared awareness over the intimacy of your proximity.

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Your head tilts to the side as you examine the pathway down to the ground. You're not entirely sure that the lowest branch would be able to bear your weight, and you're still high enough that an accidental tumble would likely leave you bruised or, worse, be loud enough to wake your parents. You eye Talia speculatively. Her arms seem strong, despite her scholar's build.

"I'm coming down," you announce.

She chuckles softly. "So I see, darling. With great appreciation."

"You misunderstand," you say. "I'm coming down *now*."

You let go of the window's ledge. The decision to fall without ordering Talia to help steady you is, in retrospect as gravity takes over and panic floods your mind, a poor one. In your defense, you'd been

intoxicated by the thrill of this rendezvous. It wasn't a choice you'd ever make sober.

Luckily, Talia moves quickly enough to slow your descent, albeit with less grace than you envisioned. Her arms wrap tightly around you, protective and warm, but the force of your impact sends both of you sprawling onto the damp grass.

Neither of you speak, ears intent for any sign that your fall has woken those within the house. The only noise is that of your mingling breaths—at first heavy from the adrenaline of your tumble, and then from shared awareness over the intimacy of your proximity.

"I have a hack waiting just beyond the garden gate," Talia whispers. Her eyes are locked on your lips, which you part in quiet invitation.

She doesn't take it. Instead, her head falls to rest upon your shoulder. You try to stifle disappointment over the lack of kiss, but fail to school your expression appropriately. The moonlight reveals your expression, and Talia smiles. You've catalogued a thousand of her smiles, some teasing, some polite, and some enamored, but this smile is new: smirking and cocky to the point of arrogance. In anyone else, the look would repulse you, but it suits Talia.

"Not here, firefly," she says. "Soon, but not here."

She stands and offers you her hand. You hesitate a moment out of habit; your parents would claim it unseemly for a lady to receive help from a commoner. Then, upon realizing that you're poised to commit a much greater faux pas, you accept her assistance in standing up. Her hand is warm and dry, tightening when you attempt to pull away.

"I adore your hands," Talia says. Her thumb caresses the backs of your knuckles in smooth, repetitive strokes. "With anyone else, I'd make an innuendo about what they could do to me, but with you . . ." She lifts your hand and brushes a chaste kiss against its back; were it not for the lack of gloves and the fact that she's not an elderly, lecherous baron interested in formally courting you, the action wouldn't be out of place in a ballroom.

"I adore your hands," she repeats sincerely. "I adore *you*."

Your breath catches. Until now, no declarations of love have passed between you two. You'd assumed that Talia was only looking for a discrete dalliance; she's a poetess, yes, but society dictates that even a poetess eventually settle down with a husband. Yet Talia's never expressed interest for anyone but you. Does she truly want more? Within your chest, smothered hope reignites.

The confidence on Talia's face falters at your prolonged silence, and her demeanor turns cool. She releases your hand, and it drops to your side before you can register that something has gone wrong.

"Forgive me, my lady," Talia says softly. "I overstepped."

With that puzzling declaration, she turns her back on you and begins heading for the garden's gate.

“Wait!” Your shout rushes out in complete disregard of your desire to not get caught. Discretion be damned, you will *not* let her walk away.

Talia stiffens as you wrap your arms around her middle, clinging lest she again attempt to escape.

“I adore you, too,” you inform her, your voice muffled by the back of her jacket. “To the moon, to the stars. I want—”

Your final sentence is captured by her lips. Talia Parker kisses you, and nothing else matters: not status, not society, and certainly not something as shallow as propriety. There’s only the two of you, fists gripping clothing and lips dragging over exposed skin. Talia is passion and joy and freedom, everything which your sheltered life was missing before. She’s what has been missing, and you’ll never let her go.

Talia clearly feels the same way. Her fingers thread through your hair, and her mouth greedily consumes yours. Gone is the carefree, laughing artist with the lopsided smile; in her place is a conqueror staking her claim over both your body and soul. You mark Talia as yours in return, grabbing her by the waist and *yanking* her nearer to better taste her lips.

She tastes like salt and oranges.

A candle illuminates a nearby window, and reality shines down; it’s only a matter of time before someone comes out to the garden searching for intruders. Talia’s lips break away from yours, but she doesn’t release you. There’s a silent question in her eyes, which you answer with a resolute nod.

Talia’s smile is so joyously wide that you can’t help but let out a small laugh. How wonderful, to be able to bring her this much delight.

“Let’s go,” she says, and takes your hand once more.

[MB Saucy Side: Illicit Liaison \(Regency AU, Talia/Male MC\)](#)

[Jun 30, 2022](#)

You had been raised under strict parental oversight and the constant reminder that you were not an individual, but rather a Wiseman, and thus must act accordingly. A family was only as good as their reputation, and your family’s reputation was worth more than your actual future inheritance.

A young lord of noble breeding didn’t frequent gambling halls. He chose his friends wisely from families of comparable pedigree, and if he needed to gamble at a house party to get in the graces of a social superior, he did so in moderation. A young lord did not question his parents, did not embark on a career

in politics, and he *certainly* did not climb out his bedroom window to cavort with other gentlemen, let alone an untitled American poetess.

But there you were, dressed in your riding britches, attempting to clamber down the oak tree that you'd stared at longingly for years from the other side of your glass window yet never before dared use to escape. Taliaferro Parker did something to your head; she made you forget everything that a young lord should do, and instead filled you with the convictions about what you *must* do. Which was to be with her, in any way possible.

Even if it involved climbing down a tree, societal approval and parental permission be damned.

"That's quite the view," a soft voice calls from the garden below.

You glance down to see Talia, her amused smirk visible in the moonlight.

"Quit that," you inform her tartly. "It's ill-mannered to stare."

"Didn't your parents inform you?" she drawled in that smooth-as-honey accent that made you shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the cold night's air. "I'm no lady. As a writer, however, may I just say that I find your posterior to be positively inspiring."

You gasp aloud, in equal parts from shock and pleasure. None of the debutants you've courted have ever spoken to you so boldly before, and yet . . . well, you quite like the way her audacity makes you feel. Talia's stare is a heated, heady pleasure that makes you feel as if, instead of being simply a second son, you've blossomed into an Adonis worthy of admiration and verse. It was the poems she wrote for you which convinced you to meet Talia tonight, an impulse you're beginning to regret despite your delight in her presence.

Climbing a tree seemed so simple, in theory.

Your head tilts to the side as you examine the pathway down to the ground. You're not entirely sure that the lowest branch would be able to bear your weight, and you're still high enough that an accidental tumble would likely leave you bruised or, worse, be loud enough to wake your parents. You eye Talia speculatively. It's not as if you make a habit out of descending from trees, and she seems strong enough to help you despite her scholar's build.

"I'm coming down," you announce.

She chuckles softly. "So I see, darling. With great appreciation."

"You misunderstand," you say. "I'm coming down *now*."

You let go of the window's ledge. The decision to fall without asking Talia to help steady you is, in retrospect as gravity takes over and panic floods your mind, a poor one. In your defense, you'd been intoxicated by the thrill of this rendezvous. It wasn't a choice you'd ever make sober.

Luckily, Talia moves quickly enough to slow your descent, albeit with less grace than you envisioned. Her arms wrap tightly around you, protective and warm, but the force of your impact sends both of you sprawling onto the damp grass.

Neither of you speak, ears intent for any sign that your fall has woken those within the house. The only noise is that of your mingling breaths—at first heavy from the adrenaline of your tumble, and then from shared awareness over the intimacy of your proximity.

“I have a hack waiting just beyond the garden gate,” Talia whispers. Her eyes are locked on your lips, which you part in quiet invitation.

She doesn’t take it. Instead, her head falls to rest upon your shoulder. You try to stifle disappointment over the lack of kiss, but fail to school your expression appropriately. The moonlight reveals your expression, and Talia smiles. You’ve catalogued a thousand of her smiles, some teasing, some polite, and some enamored, but this smile is new: smirking and cocky to the point of arrogance. In anyone else, the look would repulse you, but it suits Talia.

“Not here, firefly,” she says. “Soon, but not here.”

She stands and offers you her hand. You hesitate a moment out of habit; your parents would claim it unseemly for you to receive help from a commoner, let alone a woman. Then, upon realizing that you’re poised to commit a much greater faux pas, you accept her assistance in standing up. Her hand is warm and dry, tightening when you attempt to pull away.

“I adore your hands,” Talia says. Her thumb caresses the backs of your knuckles in smooth, repetitive strokes. “With anyone else, I’d make an innuendo about what they could do to me, but with you . . .” She lifts your hand and brushes a chaste kiss against its back; were your roles reversed, the action wouldn’t be out of place in a ballroom.

“I adore your hands,” she repeats sincerely. “I adore *you*.”

Your breath catches. Until now, no declarations of love have passed between you two. You’d assumed that Talia was only looking for a dalliance; she’s a poetess, after all. Even if your parents didn’t expect you to wed a gently bred debutante, everyone in your social circle told you that poets never settled down. Yet Talia has never expressed interest for anyone but you. Does she truly want more? Within your chest, smothered hope reignites.

The confidence on Talia’s face falters at your prolonged silence, and her demeanor turns cool. She releases your hand, and it drops to your side before you can register that something has gone wrong.

“Forgive me, my lord,” Talia says softly. “I overstepped.”

With that puzzling declaration, she turns her back on you and begins heading for the garden’s gate.

“Wait!” Your shout rushes out in complete disregard of your desire to not get caught. Discretion be damned, you will *not* let her walk away.

Talia stiffens as you wrap your arms around her middle, clinging lest she again attempt to escape.

“I adore you, too,” you inform her, your voice muffled by the back of her jacket. “To the moon, to the stars. I want—”

Your final sentence is captured by her lips. Talia Parker kisses you, and nothing else matters: not status, not society, and certainly not something as shallow as propriety. There’s only the two of you, fists gripping clothing and lips dragging over exposed skin. Talia is passion and joy and freedom, everything which your sheltered life was missing before. She’s what has been missing, and you’ll never let her go.

Talia clearly feels the same way. Her fingers thread through your hair, and her mouth greedily consumes yours. Gone is the carefree, laughing artist with the lopsided smile; in her place is a conqueror staking her claim over both your body and soul. You mark Talia as yours in return, grabbing her by the waist and *yanking* her nearer to better taste her lips.

She tastes like salt and oranges.

A candle illuminates a nearby window, and reality shines down; it’s only a matter of time before someone comes out to the garden searching for intruders. Talia’s lips break away from yours, but she doesn’t release you. There’s a silent question in her eyes, which you answer with a resolute nod.

Talia’s smile is so joyously wide that you can’t help but let out a small laugh. How wonderful, to be able to bring her this much delight.

“Let’s go,” she says, and takes your hand once more.

[Battle of Buttons: Sally's Date \(Part 7\)](#)

[Jul 5, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

Part 4 (Glitch): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-date-4-67695714>

Part 5 (Kenzie): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/67923270>

Part 6 (Rosy): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-rosys-68067250>

* * * *

Three humans (Nick, Hope, and John Wiseman) sit behind judges' panel before a lifted stage, in front of a table covered with a purple cloth that reads "TRUEST LOVE QUEST 💜" in sparkly silver cursive. The center judging chair, twice as large as the others, holds Gil. The demon smirks as he stares at a gilded, doorless birdcage onstage, within which stands a disgruntled, tiny Ambrose—his voice now too soft a squeak for his enraged tirade to be heard.

Next to the birdcage, Kent, Glitch, Sally, and Grayson sit in a row of armchairs. None of the contestants make eye contact with each other, the awkwardness of Ambrose's recent imprisonment still lingering in the air.

Nick, dreamily: This is the best dream ever.

Ambrose's squeak is almost inaudible. However, given the expression on his tiny face, it is probably an obscenity.

Grayson looks sympathetically at his shrunken coworker.

Grayson: Gil, was this really necessary?

Gil, indignantly: He shot me.

Grayson: Perhaps he reacted poorly, but you invaded his memories.

Gil: He shot me. In my own realm.

Grayson: Well, yes, but only with a stun gun. Miniaturizing him as punishment isn't—

Nick: Now, now, Gray. Kim pulled out a gun on our host. I, for one, say that he's getting off easily.

Nick gives Gil a hopeful look.

Nick: Too easily?

Gil, frowning: I'm still attempting to comprehend how he managed to hide a weapon from me. Not to be a braggart, but I'm very observant.

From within the birdcage, Ambrose continues angrily squeaking.

Gil snaps his fingers, and a cloth of burgundy velvet appears over the cage, muffling the cries of its tiny captive.

Nick: Best. Dream. Ever.

Sally scowls at him.

Sally: Well, I think this dream is the absolute worst. I've had to sit and watch three other people get cozy alternate versions of the person whom I love.

Glitch: But they're all alternate versions. It's not as if we're all dating the same person.

Sally: Aren't we? The exterior may be different, but it still feels like El.

Kent: . . . Ellis thinks that Talia is immature. They wouldn't date.

Talia: Exactly, and in my world, Kenzie's quietness creeps Elliot out. We're clearly all in love with different people.

Talia glances at Kent, her demeanor uncharacteristically hesitant.

Talia: Your partner thinks that I'm immature?

Kent nods.

Talia: Oh.

Sally, grumbling: I still don't like it. Knowing that there are universes where El and I don't end up together . . . it feels wrong.

Nick opens then closes his mouth. A complicated expression passes over his face, then he glances back at the covered birdcage and smirks.

Nick: Yet some things feel so incredibly right.

Gil: Ambrose Kim's incarceration was the natural consequence of his actions. He'll be released once a winner is decided.

Sally: I intend to be that winner.

Gil: Fantastibar! There's the fighting spirit that I so admire your character. I assume you have a strategy? You do become, after all, one of Unity's most skilled M—

Gil's crimson cheeks flush an even deeper red. He covers his mouth with one clawed hand.

Gil: Forgive me, but that would be spoilers.

Sally: Huh. So that's how it feels.

John, sotto voce: It's incredibly annoying.

Hope elbows her husband's side, and John falls silent.

Sally: But, yeah, I do have a game plan. Inspired by . . . let's just say a little birdie gave me the idea.

She grins slightly, glancing at the nearby cage imprisoning Ambrose.

Sally: Gil, can I use a memory for my date? Like you did with Kim?

Gil: Intriguing! As far as I'm aware, it's not against the rules.

Grayson: As far as you're aware? But aren't you the one who makes these rules in the first place?

Gil, dismissively: Semantics.

Grayson blinks.

Gil: Now, Sally, tell me about this memory.

Sally: I want to use my first kiss with El as evidence that we should be together.

Gil looks disappointed.

Gil: I've already played through that scene. It happened when you two were watching a movie together.

Sally: So, you're definitely a creepazoid stalker, but no. That wasn't our first kiss.

The scene goes pitch black.

Sally's Voice: Let me set the scene. My first kiss with "Button" happened eight years ago. I was fourteen.

John's Voice: You're still only twenty-two? Interesting. In my world, you and Button are both—

Hope's Voice: Shush.

Sally's Voice: I was fourteen, and El had joined me on a trip to visit my cousins down in San Diego. When our parents left together for a weekend doing vineyards, Isabel and Castel decided it would be the perfect opportunity to host a party.

As Sally describes her memory, each thing she talks about begins forming in the darkness, illuminated versions popping into existence: a bungalow-style living room, complete with streamers, large bowls filled with ranch chips, and jackets strewn across the backs of furniture. On the center table is a large metal keg.

Sally's Voice: The party was pretty small, maybe fifteen people total. Most of them were already juniors, so El and I felt super cool. Well, I felt super cool. I think El was just happy that none of the other students were Ments. It let her relax, you know?

The living room fills with teenagers. Most are chatting or dancing; all are pretending to enjoy the watered-down beer that they sip from red plastic cups.

Sally's Voice: Um, Mr. and Mrs. Wiseman? Don't worry: El and I didn't drink.

Hope and John's Voices: We know.

Sally's Voice: . . . Right. But you couldn't have known about the kiss, because even El didn't know about the kiss.

Talia's Voice, whispering: The plot thickens.

Versions of Sally and Button appear, both in their early teens, seated together in a loveseat off to the side. Sally's curls are flat and frizzy, still in recovery from a chemical straightening procedure that she read about in a magazine and never attempted again; the lopsided hemline of her baby blue sundress marks one of her first tries at sewing her own clothes.

Sally's Voice: Castel and Isabel had a crush on the same guy in their class, so they'd agreed on a way to find out which one of them he liked back. . . Which turned out to be neither, but that's not important. What's important is the game.

Golden script forms over the heads of two of the teenagers: "Isabel Duran" over the head girl with chestnut hair and warm brown eyes, and "Castel Duran" over the head of a boy of the same age and with identical coloring. The two are clearly twins.

Isabel stands on top of the couch, tapping the side of her red cup with a plastic fork.

Isabel: Attention, everybody! Can I have your attention?

None of the guests pay her any attention. Castel cups his hands around his mouth and yells.

Castel: BAND, TEN-HUT!

With the exception of Sally, Button, and a handsome but confused-looking boy, the guests' heels click together and their backs straighten.

Guests: One-two!

Nick's Voice: Wow. That's . . .

Nick is laughing too hard to finish his sentence.

Nick's Voice: Just wow. You and Button being at a high school party suddenly makes perfect sense.

Sally's Voice: Oh, stuff it.

Nick's Voice: Nerds.

Sally's Voice: Castel was drill sergeant in the marching band. Isabel played flute. Most their friends were in band as well.

Now that she has everyone's attention, Isabel looks distinctly uncomfortable. She glances at the clueless boy, blushes, then awkwardly looks down at her feet.

Isabel, softly: It's, um, time to play Spin The Bottle.

Clueless Boy: What did she say?

Castel, yelling: We're playing Spin The Bottle! NSFW Style!

There's a few hoots and whistles from the crowd, despite no one seeming to be sure exactly what that means. With a grateful look at her twin for getting the crowd's attention, Isabel speaks up.

Isabel: The rules are simple! Everyone who wants to participate, write your name on one of the slips of paper that Cas passes out.

Castel circulates the room, collecting names in a Santa hat. He pauses in front of Sally and Button, hesitates, then shrugs. Sally waits until Button declines, and then shakes her own head. Castel moves on.

Isabel: Harper said she'd rather die in a fire than kiss any of you, so she'll be our facilitator.

Random Guest: No one wants to kiss a bassoonist anyway!

A girl wearing a cropped top flips her blonde hair with a smirk.

Harper: That's not what your mom said last night.

Castel: Point to the reed section!

Nick's Voice, whispering: Nerrrrds.

Hope's Voice: Shush.

Isabel, in a nervous rush: Um, anyway. Everyone closes their eyes, then Harper pulls a name from the hat. If she taps you on the shoulder, that means she pulled your name and you get to kiss someone. Anyone you want whose in the room.

Harper: Except me.

Castel: And just to be *really* kinky (and to make sure that no one cheats), we have blindfolds for everyone.

Isabel: Which you only wear if you want to, obviously! If you don't want to kiss anyone or get kissed, that's fine. There's a ping pong table downstairs.

Random Guest: What if we just want to watch?

Castel: Nah, that ruins the mystery. Only Harper gets to know.

Harper: Because I could literally care less who you walking hormones slobber on.

Button: That saying implies that you do actually care, you know?

Harper rolls her eyes.

A few teenagers leave the room. Isabel and Castel both look relieved when their crush chooses to stay. Castel begins handing out scarves for guests to tie around their eyes while Isabel continues to explain the rules.

Isabel: Once you've finished kissing the person of your choosing, sit back down in your seat. Then everyone takes off their blindfolds, and the kissee guesses who just kissed them!

Button, to Sally: This is nothing like Spin the Bottle.

Sally, with the world-weary sigh: So dumb, I know. But I do want to see who Rylen selects.

Button: That's the guy your cousins both have a crush on?

Sally: So awkward, right?

Button: Soooo awkward. How do they even know he'll be picked to kiss someone?

Sally: Harper is Izzy's best friend. She promised to tap him on the shoulder.

Button: So much for an unbiased judge.

Button flutters their lashes at Sally in an over-the-top fashion.

Button: Anyone you're hoping to share intimacies with?

Sally, a little to fast: No! Ew! No! I mean, obviously not. Otherwise, I would've put my name in the hat.

Button gives Sally a curious look.

Sally: So, er, I could kiss them.

Button: Plus, it's not like you know anyone here. Except your cousins.

Sally: Gross.

Button: Someone might still kiss you, though. You never know.

Sally: Someone might kiss *you*.

The two glance at each other and giggle.

Button: Look, maybe we should just go downstairs.

Sally: No!

Button's brows raise with surprise at Sally's adamant tone.

Sally: I mean, we need to stay. To, um, support Isabel and Castel.

Button: I guess.

Sally, nervously: Are you really that against kissing someone?

Button hesitates, and gives Sally a long look.

Button: I guess not. But-

Harper: Blindfolds on, horndogs!

Harper turns the lights off to make it harder for people to see. Button and Sally tie their scarves around their eyes, but Sally takes a little longer doing hers. She then lowers her scarf and waves a hand in front of Button's covered eyes.

When Button doesn't react, Sally turns and gives a thumbs up to Harper, who grins widely back.

Harper: First name is drawn!

Sally's Voice: Truthfully? The game was more for me than it was for my cousins. Izzy noticed that I had a crush on El, and she was willing to help me out.

Younger Sally takes a deep breath. Careful not to jostle the couch, she stands up and moves to Button's other side. She leans forward . . .

Then immediately loses courage and takes a panicked step backward, tripping over a potted plant.

Castel: Oooh, looks like someone's on the prowl!

The guests snicker. Sally, on the other hand, looks like she's on the verge of tears.

Button: Quit it, Castel. They're probably nervous enough without you poking fun.

Sally smiles at Button's unknowing defense of her. Emboldened, she leans forward and cups Button's chin.

Button's lips form in a soundless "oh," and then Sally—without grace or finesse, but with plenty of feeling—presses her lips against Button's.

A moment passes, neither moving, until Button pushes Sally away.

Button: I'm sorry.

Sally's expression turns horrified. As quietly as possible, she tiptoes back to her seat and sits back down without alerting anyone to her presence.

Harper: Blindfolds off, guessing is a go! Wiseman, who do you think kissed you?

Button whips off their blindfold. Upon seeing Sally still seated beside them with dejected expression, they hasten to attempt to make her feel better.

Button: I didn't want someone to kiss me, I swear!

Sally: Someone kissed you?

Button: Yes, but I would never have put on the stupid blindfold if I thought that would happen! I think it's just because I defended them to Castel, and they felt grateful, so . . .

Button trails off as Sally's smile becomes increasingly forced.

Button: It meant nothing, Sal. I promise. There's no one here that I wanted to kiss.

Sally: No, it's fine. I totally get it.

Button: I'm sorry.

Sally forces a laugh.

Sally: Sorry for what? For getting kissed when I didn't?

Button: . . .

Sally: Because you don't have to apologize for being irresistible! Don't be stupid.

Button: Yeah.

Sally: Yeah.

An awkward silence falls between them, and the game continues.

Sally's Voice: We were both convinced that the other wasn't interested. Then I got kissed by Rylen, and —

Talia's Voice: The guy that your cousins liked? Wow, Riverdale, I didn't know you had it in you.

Sally's Voice: I didn't! I think Rylen just wanted to make it clear to my cousins that he wasn't interested in either of them. But after he kissed me, Button just got up and left the room, and Isabel and Castel were both upset even though they wouldn't admit it. The trip ended with all four of us all pretending like the party had never happened.

Gil's Voice: With you and Button no doubt exchanged tortured glances across the room for the rest of the week.

Sally's Voice: Pretty much. With neither of us having a clue what the other was feeling. I thought that I'd misread El's emotions, and that I'd just been projecting. It had taken all my courage to kiss them, and then . . .

Gil's Voice, sympathetic: They claimed it didn't mean anything.

Sally's Voice: It took a while for me to realize that El wanted me to know it hadn't meant anything only because it hadn't been from *me*. I just figured that they didn't even see me as an option, or that El knew it was me but wanted to reject me without hurting my feelings.

Talia's Voice: Oh my god. You're both idiots.

Sally's Voice: Maybe. But we're also idiots who have been in love for a VERY long time. So everyone else should just back off.

No one replies. She does, after all, make a good point.

Then there's a muffled squeak.

Grayson's Voice: Not to change the subject, but . . . Gil, could you please let Kim out of his cage? I'm afraid he's going to injure himself.

* * * *

Part 8: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/68856010>

[Battle of Buttons: Gray's Date \(Part 8\)](#)

[Jul 9, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/64548439>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-2-64785102>

Part 3: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-part-3-67312625>

Part 4 (Glitch): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-date-4-67695714>

Part 5 (Kenzie): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/67923270>

Part 6 (Rosy): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/battle-of-rosys-68067250>

Part 7 (Sally): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/68714214>

* * * *

Three humans (Nick, Hope, and John Wiseman) sit behind judges panel before a lifted stage, in front of a table covered with a purple cloth that reads “TRUEST LOVE QUEST 💜” in sparkly silver cursive. The center judging chair, twice as large as the others, holds Gil.

The demon observes stage with thinly veiled displeasure: Glitch, Sally, and Kent are all seated in a row of chairs, flanked by an anxious-looking Grayson and an extremely unhappy Ambrose (whose mouth has been covered by an X of duct tape in compromise for being unshrunk and let out of the now-empty birdcage).

Grayson, to Ambrose: It's the best I could do.

Ambrose, angrily: Mmmph.

Gil clears his throat.

Gil: Welcome back, one and all, to *Truest Love Quest*, a show by demons and for demons, where characters—I mean, *contestants* compete to prove themselves as Button's most canon love match!

Kent glances down at his wristwatch.

Kent: It's almost five o'clock.

Gil: You can't rush perfection! We've watched as each contestant has given insight into their unique relationship with Button. We've *oohed* and *ahhed* over their—

Glitch: He needs to get home to feed the dogs.

Kent nods. Gil has the decency to duck his horned head as if feeling guilty, but then carries on undaunted in his booming announcer voice.

Gil: Only one contestant remains, and—

Nick: We've saved the best for last.

Gil looks annoyed at the second interruption. He clears his throat again, this time a little more pointedly, his crimson eyes darkening to a blackened red.

Gil: Only one contestant remains, and he's a strong contender! The favorite of mothers everywhere, Grayson Black is—

Hope: I prefer that Button doesn't end up with a Ment.

Gil (very, very quietly): I will kill the next human that interrupts me.

No one speaks, and even Ambrose only glares at the demon. Gil's lips curve in a joyless smile.

Gil: So glad that we understand each other. Now, Grayson, why don't you tell the audience what you have planned for your fantasy date today?

Grayson: Oh. Um, well, you see . . .

Gil: Since you went last, you've had plenty of time to come up with an idea.

Gil's inauthentic grin flattens.

Gil: You DID come up with an idea, didn't you?

Grayson: Yes, but . . . I'm having second thoughts.

Nick, encouragingly: I'm sure it's a phenomenal idea.

Grayson: It's not about the idea itself, per se. I'm just not certain if I'm willing to walk relative strangers through my private life.

He glances apologetically at Kent, Glitch, and finally Gil.

Grayson: No offense meant.

Kent shrugs, then nudges discretely Glitch before she can sarcastically retort.

Gil: Offense taken. I'm not a stranger; I'm your host. Regardless, It's your turn, Mr. Black.

Grayson: Yes, but I've reconsidered. This "competition," as you call it, won't change my life with Ellery.

Gil: It's. Your. Turn.

Grayson: Yet, if it's all the same, I'd rather not put my relationship on exhibit to be gawked at.

Gil glares at Grayson.

Grayson smiles apologetically back, but his gaze remains resolute.

Gil: You're more like Ambrose Kim than readers realize, aren't you?

Grayson, mildly: I consider Ambrose to have many admirable qualities.

Gil: Unfortunately for both you and Ambrose Kim, this is my show.

Gil snaps two clawed fingers. The scenery twists and warps, reforming into a living room.

The living room is barren except for a comfortable couch, with half-packed moving boxes lining the wall.

Sally's Voice: Is this another memory? Because playing a memory was my idea, so I'm pretty sure that's plagiarism.

Glitch's Voice: Sally. Dear, tiny, Sally. This is a matter of Truest Love. This isn't something we can cheat at.

Sally's Voice: Stop sucking up to the demon so that you get picked.

Glitch's smirk isn't visible given the change of scenery, but her expression is clearly advertised by Sally's exasperated sigh.

A version of Grayson enters the living room. He's wearing pajama bottoms without a top, his bedhead uncombed and his jaw scratchy with morning stubble.

Grayson's Voice, from offstage: This isn't a dream. It's what we've been planning—our future together.

Sally's Voice: Yeah, well, the future is kind of my thing as well.

Nick's Voice: You and Sam are moving in together?

Grayson's Voice: I've never met Sam. But if "Sam" is your "Button," then yes.

Nick lets out a celebratory whoop.

In the living room, Grayson looks over his shoulder. His expression breaks out in a wide smile that's both tenderly affectionate and teasingly amused.

Gray: Sleep well, sweetheart?

Button enters the living room. Having been unable to locate their pajamas the night before, they've resorted to wearing an oversized t-shirt from Nick's band days, emblazoned with the logo of Nick screaming from behind photoshopped icicle bars and the words "Ment Hell Ice Slum."

Button, sounding hoarse: I don't know what my brother was thinking, choosing that name for his band.

Gray: How's your throat feeling?

Button: Still scratchy. You probably shouldn't kiss me, or I'll give you my cold.

Gray: I'll risk it.

Gray pulls Button towards them with easy familiarity, nuzzling their cheek. Button pulls a face and bats him away.

Gray: Sorry. My razer is still packed in with the kitchen knives.

He pauses.

Gray: Nick packed all the sharp things in one box.

Button groans and rolls their eyes.

Gray: You guessed it.

Gray chuckles.

Gray, teasingly: Oh, I'd say Nick treats you like you're at least ten years old.

Button heads over to one of the unpacked boxes and kneels down. They pull out a pair of scissors and snap it in Gray's direction mock-threateningly.

Button: You, of course, will let me unpack whichever box I desire.

Gray: It was a hard lesson, but I did eventually realize that I couldn't protect you from everything.

Button stands up and gives Gray's lips a quick peck.

Gray: You bring out the best in me.

Button grins, and Gray smiles back adoringly.

Gray: I love you, too.

Glitch's Voice: Not to be rude and interrupt what I assume to be a touching moment for a certain *stranger*, but what exactly is going on here?

Gil's Voice: Oh! I forgot the subtitles; allow me to rewind.

As if played upon television, the entire scene in the living room quickly backtracks to Gray nuzzling Button's cheek and Button subsequently pushing him away.

Button: *Too stubbly.*

There's a small gasp from Hope as she realizes Gray is hearing Button's thoughts.

Gray: Sorry. My razor is still packed in with the kitchen knives.

Button*: Why would your shaving razor be packed with kitchen supplies?*

Gray: Nick packed all the sharp things in one box.

Button: *Let me guess. He told you not to let me handle that one, right?*

Gray: You guessed it.

Button: *I swear, you chop the tip of your finger off ONE time while playing sous chef, and suddenly your entire family acts like you're a five-year-old that runs with scissors.*

Gray: Oh, I'd say Nick treats you like you're at least ten.

Button heads over to one of the unpacked boxes and kneels down. They pull out a pair of scissors and snap it in Gray's direction mock-threateningly.

Button: You, of course, will let me unpack whichever box I desire.

Gray: It was a hard lesson, but I did eventually realize that I couldn't protect you from everything.

Button stands up and gives Gray's lips a quick peck.

Button: *Maybe you should've taken MY last name when we got married. Because you're clearly a very wise man.*

Gray: You bring out the best in me.

Button: *I love you.*

Gray: I love you, too.

The two unpack, the conversation continuing with Button only bothering to speak out loud while outside of Gray's brainrange, their audibly hoarse whisper a stark contrast to the gentle flow of thought they direct towards Gray whenever he's near enough to read their mind.

Button's side of the conversation ebbs in and out of verbalization like a tide—the rhythm feels completely natural between the two. As they begin unpacking boxes on opposite sides of the room, both fall into a comfortable silence.

Then Button lets out a sudden bark of laughter.

Gray: What's so funny?

Button: I thought of a prank that we should play on Nick and was waiting for you to tell me it was too mean. I forgot you were too far away to hear.

Gray: Do I want to know?

Button: I mean, you'll know anyway. And I think it's funny.

Gray takes a seat on the floor next to Button. At their nod, he scoots closer and rests a hand on Button's shoulder. Immediately, his cheeks flood with color.

There's a flash of imagery: bared skin, rumpled bedsheets, the sound of a gentle spank.

Gray: A prank is *not* what you were just thinking about.

Button: Gotcha.

Button winks at him, then stands. They begin to head out of the living room, pausing at the doorway to turn back and cast Gray a sultry look.

Button: Shall we adjourn back to the bedroom, Mr. Black?

Grayson's Voice: Okay! Okay. Gil, that's enough. You can stop the scene now.

Gil's Voice: Are you sure? In my opinion, what comes next makes a compelling case for yours and Button's compatibility.

Grayson's Voice: Stop the scene. Please.

Gil heaves a disgruntled sigh. The living room fades, replaced by the familiar stage and judges panel.

Gil: Fine. I suppose we don't want to upset Hell's Family Review Board.

Glitch, to Kent: Did he really just say that?

Nick: Grayson.

Grayson, tentatively: Yes, Nick.

Nick: I love you like a brother.

Grayson: The feeling is mutual.

Nick: And Button is my actual sibling.

Grayson: I'm aware.

Nick: . . .

Grayson: . . .

Nick: . . .

Grayson: In my defense, I did tell Gil that I changed my mind.

Sally: I never would've thought that Grayson's date would be the kinky one.

Glitch tuts in an over-the-top fashion.

Glitch: How shameless! Such a vulgar display, and in front of Button's own parents.

Kent shakes his head.

Ambrose, disapprovingly: Mmph.

John: Well, I for one think it's nice that Grayson and Button have a healthy—

Nick: *Dad.*

Hope: You're the one always pushing those two together, honey.

Nick: Yeah, but usually I block off Button's thoughts whenever they start going that direction. I didn't expect to have a front row's seat to the prelude of Grayson's sex fantasy.

Grayson, defensively: It wasn't a sex fantasy.

Nick throws Gray a disbelieving glance.

Grayson: I thought Gil would end it sooner. Look, can we please just move on?

Nick: You still have my vote, man. But, Gil, I'm going to need a memory wipe before you send us back to reality.

Gil: That can be arranged.

[Bait and Switch \(A Mind Blind AU of Saucy-ish Flavor\)](#)

[Jul 14, 2022](#)

You were, as your best friend always reassured you post-breakup, too good for the losers that you dated. Admittedly, “dated” was perhaps an overstatement of your past five relationships. “Dated” implied regular excursions where you might actually go out and *do* things together—real activities, rather than just receiving a 3am text to the effect of “Babe can u venmo me \$200? Forgot rent- will pay u back firday when paycheck. XX.” Not to mention that, after that particular example, the recipient had ghosted you.

Since you'd never been invited to his apartment (despite having helped pay for it), you had no way of getting your money back once he changed his number. If only you could refund that entire relationship.

“But Andy really seemed in a bind,” you protest half-heartedly, slumping in your chair in futile wish to hide beneath the coffee shop's table and away from your friend's exasperated frown.

“They always seem in a bind,” Sohvi retorts. “And you're too good for this world, so you help them out. You get taken advantage of.”

“Is that your professional opinion as a licensed therapist?” you attempt to jest.

Her frown deepens with concern. “It's my opinion as your closest friend for the past ten years. You need to start saying *no* to theses leeches.”

“What was I supposed to do? Just let Andy be kicked out of his apartment?”

“Yes,” Sohvi says slowly as if talking to child. “That's exactly what you should've done. Andy needed to learn that his girlfriend was not his piggy bank.”

You slouch further down in your chair. “He never called me his girlfriend,” you muttered. “Said a label was too official, and we should just have the freedom to be us.”

Sohvi's look turns pitying. “Oh, hani. No.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” Sohvi presses. “Because before Andy, it was Reese, and before Reese . . .”

“Caleb wasn’t that bad.”

“He was.”

Sohvi takes a sip of her coffee, staring speculatively at you over its lid. Then, having reached a decision, she sets down her cup upon the table with the finality of a judge’s gavel.

“I’m setting you up on a blind date,” she announces.

You flinch. You’d gone on a blind date arranged by your neighbor just last weekend . . . and he’d proceeded to stalk your social media with insistent inquiries of why you weren’t interested in giving him another chance (in your opinion, the answer that he’d spent all of dinner comparing you to his ex should’ve been obvious had he an ounce of self-awareness).

“A true blind date,” Sohvi stresses, sensing your unease. “No names, and no way for your date to contact you again should you decide to walk away. Trust me.”

Trusting too easily is what always gets you into trouble in the first place. But this is Sohvi, who you’ve known since college. If you can’t trust the woman who helped you drop of the grid to escape Caleb, who *can* you trust?

You take a deep breath. “Promise me that this date will go better than your last attempt to set me up.”

“Gray thought you were very nice.” Sohvi smiles, but she sounds apologetic. “He’s just . . .”

“In love with someone else?”

Sohvi nods.

Truthfully, the date Sohvi had arranged with Fortitude had still been one of the best first dates you’d been on—despite the clear lack of romantic interest from the other party. When you were a kid, before Pollard testing confirmed that you weren’t a Ment, you’d dreamed of joining UCRT. So you’d been thrilled at the time to meet Fortitude . . . until you noticed the way that Grayson’s polite smile softened to something wistful and longing whenever he glanced at his phone lock screen, which featured a photo of him and a stranger.

You hope that your next date looks at you that way.

* * * *

A week later, you mentally amend that past statement to wishing your date could look at you *at all*. And that you could look at him.

True to her word, Sohvi set up the perfect first date to ensure you don't get stalked: a table for two at *Taste of Darkness*, the newest trend restaurant where customers eat completely in the dark. The waiter, equipped with night vision goggles, escorted you from the lit reception area down the stairs to a completely dark room (size unknown, given that you couldn't see anything). You'd taken a seat, and five minutes later were joined by Sohvi's coworker.

The first thing out of his mouth is a muttered curse.

"Sorry," he says as you hear him taking the seat across from you. "Stubbed my toe."

You're tempted to make a joke about big feet meaning big other things, but even the lack of lights doesn't make you quite that bold. Instead, you settle on a sympathetic "Ouch. I hope you're okay?"

There's a slight pause, followed by a low, self-deprecating chuckle. "You can't see me nod, can you?"

You grin in the direction of his voice. "No, but I'm glad that you're fine."

He doesn't reply. This next pause is longer than the first, and you strain your mind for another topic.

"Sohvi said—" you begin.

"I don't—" he starts.

"You go first," you both say, followed by a shared nervous laugh.

"I don't go on many blind dates," he confesses. "Certainly not blind dates as *unique* as this one."

You cringe internally. Sohvi must've not bothered to share the reason behind your desire for initial anonymity. "I've had a few bad experiences," you say. "Sohvi set things up so I felt safe."

He lets out an approving hum. "It's smart to vet someone before providing them with personal information," he agrees. "You can never be too cautious."

You appreciate him not taking offense over precautions which, even to you, feel a little extreme. Yes, Sohvi listened to your wishes, but how are you supposed to decide whether you want a second date without even seeing the man's face?

"Hope said something about me?" he asks, curious over your prior outburst.

You're struck by his use of Sohvi's facename. Is he a member of UCRT as well? Perhaps Peace—no one really knows anything about The Ideal's latest member.

"Sohvi didn't say much," you reply to his question. "Only that you're one of her coworkers, and that she liked how deeply you cared for your family. She called you protective."

“One of the instructors where I work was being overly harsh with my . . .” He hesitates. “Against one of my relatives. I simply told the instructor to desist.” Maybe it’s just your imagination, but the man’s voice sounds higher pitched than before, and maybe a little suspicious, as if he’s unaccustomed to being praised. “I would protest the unfair treatment of any student, be it discrimination or favoritism. Hope read too much into it”

You smile faintly even though he can’t see it. “Sohvi’s read on things is usually pretty accurate, but I suppose she’s not infallible.” You chuckle. “Just don’t tell her that I said that.”

“Most people aren’t so willing to question a member of UCRT,” he notes.

His comment makes your smile slip. Your job as a personal injury lawyer may lead others to labeling you as an “ambulance chaser,” but you’ve seen firsthand what happens when Ments aren’t held accountable. Several smalltime vigilantes that you pressed charges against had gone onto becoming AMOs, despite their actions having once caused bystanders to be injured. Unity needs to hold itself to a higher standard, and that can’t happen unless common citizens challenge them to do and be better. Sohvi understands that, and it’s one of the reasons you’ve remained such close friends.

“You’re a nice change of pace,” your date continues when you don’t immediately reply. “Most people, even those working alongside me at Unity, act like sycophants. But UCRT members need to be challenged; they have the same biases and blind spots as anyone else, only with infinitely more power.”

“Exactly!” you eagerly agree. “UCRT does great work, obviously, but it’s the people behind the scenes—the legal team, the administration—that ensures they’re held accountable. Lack of accountability, legal and otherwise, corrupts even the best of intentions.” You laugh self-consciously. “I’m a lawyer, in case it wasn’t obvious.”

“I’m not surprised, given that your intelligence was obvious,” he says. “I’ve heard more common sense come out of your mouth in the last two minutes than I’ve encountered at work in the last month.”

You open your mouth to reply with something witty and flirtatious, but then the waiter returns with your first course, and both you and your date fall silent while eating.

“This is incredible,” you moan, taking a second bite and then third bite in quick succession.

Something about not being able to see has hypersensitized your remaining senses. You can smell every spice used in your dish, from cinnamon to turmeric, and the flavor tastes so intense that it pulsates on your tongue. You’re also intimately aware of each time your date takes a bite, the sound of his lips closing around the fork followed by a low and blissful *mmm* from the back of his throat.

“Godly,” the man agrees. “Although, were I making it myself, I’d use a dash more ginger.”

“You cook?” you ask.

“Enough to enjoy my own self-sufficiency. And . . .” he trails off.

“And?”

“When I was first hired by Unity, I decided to bring in snacks,” he confesses. “Given my observations of coworkers, it seemed the quickest way to make a good impression.”

“I bet everyone loved it.”

He gives a hollow laugh. “No one noticed. They were all too distracted by . . .” He clears his throat. “Well, I decided that it was beneath me to attempt to bribe my coworkers into cooperating. Do you often eat out?” He’s clearly changing the subject, but you decide to drop it rather than make him uncomfortable.

“Mostly takeout,” you say. “My workload doesn’t really allow me to take nights off for a nice restaurant.”

He takes another bite and lets out a content sigh. “I believe that the menu was set, and we thus ordered the same thing. Otherwise, I’d ask if you wanted some.”

Perhaps it’s the dark, or the fact that he praised your intelligence rather than mocked your profession, but you gather the courage to say: “If you’re offering, I’ll gladly have a bite.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, making you wonder if your boldness has backfired. Then he gives a small laugh. “Very well,” he says. “But only if I can taste yours as well.”

There’s a huskiness to the way he utters the word ‘taste’ that makes you shiver despite the restaurant’s heater being on full blast to fend off Chicago’s winter.

You hear him reach towards you, his fingers seeking your face and resting tentatively against your cheek.

“May I?” he asks.

You nod.

His touch is softer than you imagined, lacking the callouses that you expected from one of Sohvi’s coworkers. He cusps your chin, his thumb tracing over your bottom lip as he locates your mouth. You’re half-tempted to dart your tongue out and lick the pad of his thumb, if only to see how he’d react, but restrain yourself and instead only part your lips.

The bite he feeds you tastes exactly the same as the one you just had off your own fork, but you nonetheless pretend to contemplate it’s flavor.

“Delicious,” you conclude. “Almost as good as mine.”

“Only almost?” His voice is amused.

You reach out to him. Your fingers graze over a buttoned shirt collar—he's taller than you anticipated. Instead of pulling away, you trail upwards and over his exposed Adam's apple, which jerks beneath your touch, before your fingers encounter a sharp, faintly stubbled, jawline.

"I wish I could see your face," you say impulsively, and his hand wraps around yours, keeping your palm pressed against the slight stubble of his cheek.

"You have my permission to explore," he says, his tone so formal that you're unsure whether he's serious or joking.

His hand guides your own, resting around your wrist like a conductor holding a baton. First to soft, wispy bangs, then down to high brows and deep-set eyes. Your fingertips brush against his closed eyelids, and enviously thick lashes tickle your skin. He has a narrow nose set above a plush pair of generous lips.

Your breath catches as he presses a soft kiss on the inside of your palm.

"Am I being too forward?" he asks, releasing your hand. "I admit that I was skeptical of this place, but the darkness makes me feel . . ."

"Brave," you finish.

"I was going to say liberated," he says. "But brave works as well."

There's a long silence as you lean back in your seat, no longer having the courage to have his lips close around your own utensil.

"Actually, bravery is overrated," he amends, and you can hear the frown in his voice. "It's lauded as if it were a virtue, but what really is bravery than a lack of caution and prudence and an unwillingness to follow protocol? It's slower and more difficult to do things by the book, and thus ethically, then it is to rush in and play a hero."

His take stuns you, but even more surprising is your gut instinct to agree. Time and again, you've defended clients who were injured because some future-AMO-applicant teenager pushed them aside to "save the day." You've witnessed the inept interference of wannabe heroes turn nonviolent crimes such as a purse snatching into a brawl requiring prolonged hospital stays.

"You're right, and things should be done by the book if it's a job," you say. "But I could probably use a little more boldness in my personal life."

You hear him suck in a contemplative breath between his teeth. Then your fist, which is lying atop the table and you'd inadvertently clenched, is gently nudged. You relax and he takes your hand, his thumb gliding over your inner wrist in small, soothing circles that causes the hair on your arms to prick with simmering awareness.

You wish that you could see his face.

“You’re better than bold,” he says slowly. “You seem to be a good person. Not that we know each other well, but . . .”

“You seem like a good person, too,” you tell him, and can tell by the way that he pauses mid-bite that your words have earned a smile.

* * * *

No one listening to your conversation would ever assume that it was a first date: you and he share too much to be strangers. You both allow yourself to be vulnerable in the darkness, revealing details about your life that you would otherwise never let slip.

Unlike your lawyer coworkers, he doesn’t mock you for having dreamt of one day being in UCRT.

“Becoming an AMO was always my goal as a child as well,” he instead confesses. “I never allowed myself to contemplate anything else, because I wanted to save people and working for Unity seemed the best way to do so.”

After the disclosure of shared childhood dreams, he shares that often feels unappreciated at his job despite having worked overtime almost every day since joining Unity.

“I’m qualified,” he says, a defensive note entering his voice, “and yet others continually question my suitability.”

“Why is that?” you ask.

He shrugs without releasing your hand. “The last holder of my position was older and more experienced,” he says. “People respected him more. But I’ve continually given Unity everything that I have, every single day. I believe in its mission, whereas others have no problem abusing their power and using the organization to suit their own agenda.”

“I can’t stand when authority figures run roughshod over the rules,” you agree. “It’s a big reason why I became a lawyer.”

The conversation isn’t always serious. You discover that he DMs a tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign for his friends and family, and that, despite the lack of welcome reception from his coworkers during his first and only attempt to bring homemade scones to the office, he still enjoys baking cookies for his players.

“Baking is a science,” he explains. “I find it relaxing to follow the rules.”

Your food grows cold despite its deliciousness: talking to him is more enjoyable than eating. Eventually, however, the waiter returns, notifying you both that the restaurant is about to close and that the lights

will be turned on shortly.

“The moment of truth,” you say, trying not to feel nervous as you speculate on your date’s reaction to seeing you for the very first time. “Hopefully, I live up to expectations.”

His hand squeezes yours, then releases. You hear him rise from his seat, then curse again under his breath when he stubs his toe for the second time.

He walks around the table—carefully—and stands beside your chair.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he announces. “If you’re in agreement.”

You tilt your head, looking into the darkness above you from where his voice emerges. “I am.”

He leans down to kiss you . . . and misses, his lips bumping against your nose.

“Perhaps this was a bad idea,” he says, his former confidence audibly diminished. “You may be disappointed that I’m—”

You grab his shoulders and yank him back down.

This time, your lips meet. After the initial collide, your shared kiss is gentle and tentative, as if neither of you are quite certain that you deserve the other. Then he lets out a low groan, his arm wrapping around your middle to pull you upright from the chair so that your body is plush against his. One of his hands clenches your hip as the other cusps your cheek, as much a gesture to determine your location as it is tenderly affectionate. Your tongues touch, tasting of the same spices.

You hardly know this man, and yet everything about him feels right. That prickly code of ethics may estrange his coworkers, but you feel safe in his arms with the knowledge that he would never take advantage of you. Perhaps he doesn’t respect everyone he works with, but he respects *you*, and that respect feels all the more precious given the evidence of his exceptionally high standards.

It’s not love, of course. You haven’t known him long enough to fall in love, and still don’t know his name. No, it’s not love. Not yet.

But it’s definitely more than a first kiss.

The restaurant lights flicker on, and you both reluctantly break away from each other. His hair, you note with some surprise, is a pale red, but his face is otherwise as you envisioned from touching him. A bit narrower than anticipated, perhaps, but he’s still (in your opinion) handsome.

He reaches to a pair of glasses set on the edge of the table and puts them on. Now that he’s no longer squinting, you can admire the golden flecks in his brown eyes. Likewise, his expression fills with pleased surprise as he takes in your appearance.

"You're gorgeous," he says matter-of-factly. Then, cheeks flushing with color, he sticks out a hand as if at a business meeting. He's a little awkward, but endearingly so.

"Clarence Garfield," he introduces himself. "May I assume your continued presence means that I've earned a second date?"

[Writer's Blog: Fifteen, 15, XV](#)

[Jul 17, 2022](#)

I try to view personal hardship as emotional research for my writing. Which may sound odd, but it helps me power through if I logic myself into a silver lining philosophy. For example: someday, I will do a *fantastic* dead-parent-who-actually-isn't-dead-but-really-king-of-the-fae subplot (aka my reoccurring childhood fantasy). Life informs art.

Sometimes, though, life just . . . really sucks.

Chemo is so much more awful than primetime television makes it out to be. My mom is an absolute trooper, and her overall prognosis is pretty good. Plus, I genuinely *like* my mother, which is even more important than just loving someone when you're living with and taking care of them.

But it's still hard. Not as hard as, say, throwing a cursed ring into an evil volcano, but it's definitely comparable to fighting a Smaug-sized dragon. Inspiration is sparse right now, and uninterrupted time is equally difficult to come by. I've been prioritizing what time I do have on *Mind Blind* proper, which is why the short stories and updates have slowed down (although I have an unfinished backlog to post).

However! There is good news! Super good news, actually. I'm pleased to announce that *every single Mind Blind ending* is fully mapped out and at least partially written (over half are fully written, albeit with incomplete coding). Most of these endings are achievable regardless of who you romance, so there's a lot of variation within each branch. (Family relationships and whether or not Button learns Shard's identity are probably the most integral to determining which endings are available to you.)

So, how many endings will *Mind Blind* have, not even including all the variation within each ending?

The answer is in the title of this post.

Which is to say, there are fifteen different horses which Button can ride into the sunset.

I know, right? I anticipated nine endings, maximum. But then I had a *eureka!* moment (discord has logs of me squealing in excitement at 4am), and this one epiphany lead to a lot more tinier *eurekas!* . . . which lead to over seven more ending routes.

Hope y'all like replaying.

Each ending is currently a separate Word document varying in length from 2,000 to 70,000 words (for the fully written endings). They're all located in a file on my computer simply entitled **DUN-DUN-DUNNNN!** because I name files not out of any logical procedure or any methodology, but out of how much I giggle whenever I open them. Although I won't be sharing spoilers outside of what my big mouth has already revealed, I am sharing what each ending document is called. (Warning: it may still be a bit spoilery since titles do reflect themes and the major participants, so I would recommend that you stop reading now if you want to read *Mind Blind's* final chapters without any insight.)

Some of these titles will be used as achievement names, some won't. Keep in mind that this list is only the major paths (which is to say, alternate chapters which will completely separate rather than a single file with internal variations coded within).

Mind Blind's 15 Endings:

1. Redemption Arc 1.0
2. Redemption Arc 2.0, Nope Remix
3. Clash of the Titans
4. Buzz and Woody Attempt To Fly
5. Sir Antihero and Squire Zero Save the Sleepy Prince
6. Seven Eight Nine
7. Pragmatism Is Sexy Because You're Not Dead
8. Man Bites Brain
9. Brain Bites Man
10. Minor League MVP
11. Sins of the Father (Trauma R Us)
12. The Devil Wears a Button-Up Shirt
13. Three Wisemen
14. Golden Drum Circle of DNA Plus Vigilante Cowbell
15. Plot Armor 101, Dramatic Sacrifice Edition

There are also six possible endings for Shard, which will be dependent upon a combination of Button's relationship stats, current end route, and of course your choices.

[Jul 24, 2022](#)

The paintbrush strokes down the length of your arm, and you shiver at the streak of blue left in its wake. With a teasing smile at your reaction, Sally swirls the brush upon your open palm.

“That tickles!” you protest, but nonetheless resist the urge to instinctively clench your fist. Sally’s been using your skin as a canvas for over half an hour, practicing for the booth she’ll be running at Aeon’s “Give Back” Fair, aka the “Aeon-Students-Hand-Out-Free-Cotton-Candy-To-Build-Goodwill-Towards-Unity’s-Agenda” Fair. Sally’s been excited ever since Kim, in a shocking twist, approved her face painting booth. Although, given that she’ll primarily be painting whiskers on children, you’re not sure why she needed you naked to practice on.

You ask her as much, and she responds with a sultry look. Or at least, Sally’s version of a sultry look, which consists of her pressing her lips together in an fishlike manner that you find too endearing to ever comment on.

“It was an opportunity.” She puts the paintbrush down on a prepared paper towel, then takes up a second brush, which she dips into one of the many pots of paint on the kitchen table. “My dads were gone for the weekend, and how many times do we get to be like this alone? Lift,” she instructs.

You dutifully raise your arm, and she swipes another cold streak onto its underside. Purple, this time.

“We need to move in together already,” she continues as you try not to squirm with each ticklish stroke. Once the lower half of your arm is completely purple, she pauses and admires you—*all* of you, not just her handiwork.

“I deserve to see this view everyday,” she smirks.

You scowl at her. Normally, you’d be flattered by her obvious appreciation, but right now wet paint means that you’re unable to be demonstrative. She’s hardly playing fair.

“And yet you’re still wearing clothes,” you point out.

Sally glances down at her smock. “Barely.”

She’s not wrong, but neither are you. Sally’s artist apron covers her with Catholic school modestly from neck to knee . . . in the front, and only in the front. She’s foregone clothing beneath, leaving her back completely bare but for the smock’s waist string, which is tied in a bow at the small of her back like a

present waiting to be unwrapped. She rises from her chair and goes to the sink to rinse the brush, giving you a tantalizing view of her curves and light brown skin that's a shade paler than elsewhere.

Your girlfriend has a spectacular posterior.

You let out a disappointed sigh as Sally sits back down.

"The agent promised to get back to me as soon as he found an apartment that matched our specifications," you say. "Apparently, 'airy Parisian style lofts with oodles of sun' aren't all that common in Chicago. Something about skylights not being able to bear the weight of the snow in winter."

"I want what I want," Sally states unapologetically. She looks at you from beneath thick lashes, a slow smile curving her lips. "I usually get what I want."

She selects a third brush, this one with a finer tip than the last two. Maybe after this third step, you'll finally be able to identify what she's painting.

"The skylight is unnegotiable, then?" You suck in a sharp breath as she paints tiny, feather-light strokes across your skin. They look like half circles. Scales, perhaps?

"The skylight is most definitely unnegotiable," Sally confirms. "I've been fantasizing about us having a house together ever since we grew too big to fit in the backyard clubhouse. And that fantasy . . ."

"Features an art garrison," you finish with a grin. You've been hearing Sally describe her perfect condo even before you two started dating, although at the time you didn't realize that you were a feature in her daydreams. "Yeah, that's what I told the agent."

"We'll find the perfect place," she says, "or my dads will help us build it." She glances at you with a cheeky grin. "This is the part where you tell me that anyplace I'm at is already perfect."

You grasp the back of her neck with your unpainted hand, and she lets out a startled squeal as you drag her close and into a kiss. She softens against you, paintbrush falling forgotten onto the table. Your kiss tastes like the strawberries she ate at lunch . . . and also a little like paint, but that's probably only because of the smell permeating the kitchen.

"Anyplace you're at is already perfect," you whisper between gasps.

You meld together, until she reluctantly pulls away.

"I need to finish," Sally says.

She runs the thin brush down the back of your hand, the black paint bleeding into the blue. Then she trails the brush along your collarbone, down the center of your chest, and lower still to paint a looping heart around your belly button. Then she tosses the brush onto the table.

"I was going to make you into a dragon," she says, "but that would take too long."

"Next time," you promise, your lips already pressed against hers once more.

This time, neither of you care about the paint or mess. You reach for the curve of her back, untying that taunting bow. The smock falls away, and she's as naked as you. You hold her close, her warmth melting your colors onto her skin, the blues and purples like the night sky with her stars as freckles.

Much later, the kitchen's tablecloth is no longer a pristine white. Sally holds it out like a tapestry, and both of you stare at it in a silence.

"We'll need to buy your dad's a new tablecloth," you finally say.

Sally gives you a grin that's in equal parts sheepish and proud. "It kind of looks like an abstract painting. We should hang it up at our new place . . . over the bed, perhaps."

You laugh. "Agreed."

[Writer's Blog: The End Is Nigh](#)

[Jul 26, 2022](#)

I admit, updates have become a little difficult to write simply because I want to *show* you all what I'm working on. But, alas, the coding continues to change more frequently than the color of that mood ring I wore at age thirteen (puberty was rough). I'll have a more extensive list of everything changed during the upcoming update notes, but I can at least share some of the biggest alterations.

For Chapters 10 and 11, I've completely reworked both the undercover mechanics and as well as the bread crumb trail that leads to Shard's identity. Scenes with Vengeance read somewhat similar to before, but there's now a believability meter which teeters a *lot* more than before and amps up the tension accordingly. If Button and Kenzie make the wrong move, Vengeance members now respond more in line with how you might expect terrorists to react. Furthermore, not acting believable enough now locks Team Hemera out of some pertinent clues as to Vengeance's involvement in the bombing (and also new hints as to why they wanted Nick).

New clues have also been added as to Shard's identity, with the perhaps the most significant being dropped in Chapter 9. Without getting too spoilery, this clue used to be locked behind a skippable interaction, but now it's available for any MC who accepts the phone call from Hope. Which is still a skippable scene, so anyone *not* talking with Hope in Chapter 9 will have to take the later option. If you miss both . . . well, such is the nature of an interactive mystery. Think of it as replay value!

Speaking of Hope, her Chapter 9 conversation has been completely reworked (yet again). My biggest struggle has always been balancing relationship building scenes with a sense of urgency (Nick is, after all, kidnapped). Which is why Rosy now stays for the phone call with Hope, should Button choose to pursue it, and you get insight into their past together. And also learn a little about Unity's more morally gray past (which, ironically, Gray would be absolutely horrified by).

Another scene which underwent a complete makeover is Kenzie's date. Those that chose to walk with Rosy back in Chapter 7 will be able to learn more about Kenzie's mother during dinner instead, while others will be able to learn more about their relationship with their father. The biggest changes, however, go to Buttons who are pretending to be in a relationship with Kenzie (I'll let you guys discover the new bits for yourself, because they're squee-worthy, if I do say so myself . . . which I just shamelessly did). Ultimately, dinner with Kenzie has tripled length per playthrough and has almost ten times the prior wordcount in the code. It's a lot of changes, and Kenzie actually *talks* (if you play your cards right).

Currently, I'm working on the portions leading up to Nick's radio silence in Chapter 13, which is now more reactive to the relationship dynamic established in Chapter 9. There's also a more gradual tapering off with Nick's dialogue, foreshadowing what's to come, and some insightful/interpersonal Buttons can even begin to suspect that something is hinky even before Nick goes silent mid-sentence. I'm constantly changing the code in these chapters but will upload all four chapters as a chunk once I'm done.

Future Plans: Once Chapters 9-13 are finally up, I'll be releasing the new version of Chapter 14, which will force you to accept Shard's offer of aid (so some options that are in the current demo will be withheld). This is because, starting in Chapter 15, the final forth of the story relies on different chapter files, and I want to focus on the Shard-as-an-"ally" ending paths first. For the most part, playthroughs will end at Chapter 20, but three of the endings have an additional chapter (and two of those involve Shard as an active participant, so I wanted to release the longer versions first). I'm really excited to share the endings and hear what you guys think!

. . . I'm less excited to actually code everything that I've written, but such is the nature of the beast.

[Mind Blind 2.0 Feedback Request: Chapters 10 - 13](#)

[Jul 29, 2022](#)

I've come to realize that editing interactive fiction chronologically is almost impossible (for me, at least), as it's easier to code related scenes. Scene A in Chapter 9 will influence Scene B in Chapter 13, so it's easier to go straight from rewriting Scene A to Scene B and skip over everything in between so that I don't forget the coding variables and what they alter. As a result, I've been jumping around, and a *lot* of Chapters 10-13 have already been changed.

However, I'm still eager to hear feedback! Optimistically, your comments will confirm that the changes I've made are the right ones. Even better will be if your comments inspire completely new ideas that make my current draft even better. So please leave comments and feedback on Chapters 10-13 here or on the Sanctum of Spoilers discord.

If you're able to provide feedback (which I really, really hope that you are!) and want a place to get started, then listed below are the areas that I'm still side-eyeing personally.

For All Three Chapters:

1. Romance scenes, particularly at the ending of Chapter 11/beginning of Chapter 12.
2. Scenery description. I've added more in the rewrite, but would like to hear if there's any areas where you had trouble visualizing the surroundings in case I've overlooked them (pun intended).
3. Nick's commentary has gotten a pretty major overhaul already, but I'd love to hear what you guys are hoping for (and can always incorporate more).

For Chapter 10:

1. Feedback on how Button reacts to Reese and other members of Vengeance, especially if there's options that you feel are missing.
2. Feedback on Kenzie's role during the operation.
3. The fancy dancy feet. Too stupid? Do we need cooler spy gear?

For Chapter 11:

1. Isaiah's Scenes. I just don't feel like he works as well as Caleb, and I can't quite pinpoint why.
2. Any additional ways that you'd like Button to react to the carnapping.

For Chapter 12:

The only thing unchanged about Chapter 12 is the intervention with Sohvi, as the chapter has been structurally overhauled and rewritten. I'd like to hear if there's any bits that you hope *didn't* get cut, however, as I'd definitely consider adding some of the fluff back in :)

For Chapter 13:

1. For Ace Buttons: how would you like to see the kiss with Kenzie play out?
2. General clarity of technology: how can descriptions of the Pollard machine, etc., be improved? Is there anything that doesn't make sense?

[July Live Q&A](#)

[Jul 29, 2022](#)

This month's Q&A will be **at 7pm - 8pm PST on Saturday, July 30th.**

My plan to record last month's on my computer failed after I had to switch to my phone due to technical difficulties (aka what I refer to as "coyote den internet," which is to say that the internet doesn't play nice because my mom's house is located in the boonies where we have to worry about mountain lions while walking Ziva), and Craig is a horrible boyfriend bot who only records regularly. So, while I'll do my best to record the session and post the link, I unfortunately can't offer any guarantees :(

If you can't make it at 7pm tomorrow, then please vote for an alternate Sunday slot below.

10am - 11am, Sunday, July 31

11am - 12pm, Sunday, July 31

4pm - 5pm, Sunday, July 31

5pm - 6pm, Sunday, July 31

17 votes total

[MB Short Story: The Truth Behind Fort Lauderdale \(Contains Spoilers\)](#)

[Aug 5, 2022](#)

"You'll rendezvous with the contractor leader in Jelgava." Adsila pierced Hope with a stern look over the edge of her paperwork. "Play nice."

Hope's upper lip twitched with an instinctive sneer of disgust, but she managed to keep her expression impassive as she nodded. She despised working with PMCs, but a Ment supremacy group called Six Above was causing problems in Eastern Europe due to their escalating conflicts with Vengeance. Hope was flying out to apprehend Augustus Greenway, Six Above's leader, but a Norm group like Vengeance required that UCRT cooperate with non-Ment agents. The Latvian government had refused to play nice more than strictly mandated by Unity protocols (Hope suspected that their prime minister was still petulant that his mildly-telepathic daughter hadn't qualified to become an AMO), and thus Unity was being forced to rely on a private military contractor. Hope understood Adsila's decision to outsource; she just didn't *like* it. Mercs were the fucking worst.

Adsila sighed, setting the papers down. Hope already knew what was in the files, having been the one to give them to Unity's MIV supervisor in the first place, but habit meant that Adsila placed them facedown on her desk anyway. The desk itself was ridiculous, a mammoth of engraved oak meant for intimidation rather than practicality, and a far cry from the folding plastic table upon which Unity had been first conceptualized by her and John.

"Minerva Corp is a newer company," Adsila said. "Has a squeaky-clean rep for abiding by the Montreux Protocols, and primarily contracts out as defense for nonprofits."

Hope only arched a brow, causing Adsila's frown to deepen.

"Most of Minerva's clients are humanitarian nonprofits," Adsila said. "They provide security for hospitals in warzones, bodyguards for journalists and aid workers."

"For a paycheck," Hope replied tersely.

"I ran background on Minerva Corp myself. They're clean."

Hope let her skeptically raised brow fall slowly back into place. While she didn't fully trust Adsila's definition of "clean," the reassurance at least meant that Minerva must be at least reasonably ethical as Adsila had an archaeological talent when it came to digging up dirt. Still, she wished that John was here: her husband was the optimistic one and usually able to keep her darker doubts at bay. But they'd mutually agreed never to be sent on a high-risk mission together when Nick was born (unless UCRT faced a threat that required both of them, but thus far that hadn't happened).

However, being the one left at home had become more difficult for Hope ever since Ellery had entered junior high. El was struggling so much, and yet far from being able to help her child like she could when they were younger, Hope was finding that she could now barely last more than an hour in their presence without feeling on the verge of tears herself. It wasn't Ellery's fault that they were broody; Hope had been the same at her age. But El's feelings and mood swings were so overwhelmingly constant that Hope sometimes felt as if she could no longer hear her own thoughts or experience her own emotions around her child. The loss of self-identity terrified her.

Which is why John was on kid duty, and Hope had volunteered to fly halfway around the world. To gain a reprieve from her own child.

"I'm not trying to be difficult, Addy," Hope said, focusing the mission in order to avoid thinking about other, even less pleasant, realities. "But Unity took a hit after the public learned about our connection to Whitewater, never mind that we had only bought intel from them. Aeon, UCRT, this whole grand experiment . . . we need everything to be as aboveboard as possible for it to work."

"I know." Adsila's expression remained grim. "But UCRT is prohibited from engaging non-Ments directly, so we have limited options for dealing with anti-Ment groups like Vengeance. We need Minerva."

* * * *

Hope met with Minerva's squad at what had once been a Soviet airbase in Jelgava but was now no more than an abandoned field with grass forcing its way through the concrete landing strip. Temperance, Peace, and Fortitude had already been in Latvia for two days; she'd meet up with them at the safehouse tonight. First, she had to deal with the mercenaries.

As if the jetlag wasn't bad enough.

The mercs were already waiting on the airfield when she arrived, a group of eight heavily armored soldiers leaning against an equally heavily armored utility truck (a modified MTRV, Hope thought, although she didn't have John's encyclopedic knowledge of tanks). Not exactly inconspicuous, but Hope hadn't expected subtly from a PMC.

A man stepped forward to greet her as she exited the helicopter. He was short and stocky, his dark hair cut a little too short over the ears as if he'd done it himself. Despite clearly being the merc leader, Hope's first thought was that he was too damn young to have eyes that coldly calculating. He looked to be only a few years older than Nicky, but whereas her son was still a student at Aeon, the merc ordered his crew to refuel helicopter's fuel tank with the authoritative ease of someone accustomed to being obeyed.

Hope rolled her head, wincing at the popping of her neck. It hadn't popped like that when she was in her thirties. Shit. Was the merc really that young, or had she just gotten old?

The merc introduced himself with a firm handshake. "Ambrose Kim," he said. "Commander of Minerva Squad X752. My contact inside Vengeance says that they're planning to hit Six Above's headquarters this Wednesday—we can delay Vengeance until the weekend, but you'll need to move in on Greenway fast to before another turf war breaks out."

Hope frowned. While she appreciated someone who got directly to the point, she wasn't sure how she felt over the fact that Adsila had shared sensitive intel with Kim. Was it really that hard to come up with a cover story? Why on earth had Addy told a soldier-for-hire the *truth*? Minerva was only supposed to be here to step in if Vengeance interfered, not take over the entire mission. Simultaneously, Hope was reluctantly impressed that Kim had already managed to get a mole inside Vengeance. She'd brought Peace along on this mission for the very same reason: UCRT's strongest Empath had a way of persuading informants.

"My team will handle extracting Augustus Greenway," Hope said. "Your people just need to ensure that Vengeance doesn't interfere."

"To reiterate, ma'am: we can buy you until this weekend. If you require more time, you'll need to renegotiate our contract. We're due back in London on Monday."

Was that a hint of resentment in Kim's voice? Hope's eyes narrowed on the man's face, but she could detect nothing but polite professionalism in his lowered gaze. Nevertheless, she decided to take a shot in the dark: wild guesswork had been her most effective tool back when she worked for the diplomatic

service. If her assumption wasn't correct, people tended to forget and move on. But when that blindly thrown dart hit the target?

To gain support for Unity, she'd once blackmailed a Supreme Court judge based on nothing more than the way he'd eyed his secretary and an educated hunch. Who needed telepathy when you possessed hutzpah and intuition?

"You're displeased with the assignment," Hope said bluntly. "Got a problem with Ments, Kim?"

Kim's head snapped up, his dark eyes wide and startled. So the man wasn't made of ice after all. Given his youth, it would've been a shame had he already learned to repress all of his emotions, no matter how much stoicism was encouraged in this line of work. Kids his age needed to still feel things, otherwise it was too easy to misplace their moral code.

"I have no problem with Ments, ma'am," Kim said, but Hope wasn't done fishing.

"Yet you didn't deny that you're unhappy with something," she pressed. "What's the problem, Kim?"

Kim hesitated, his gaze straying over to where his crew were loading their gear onto the chopper.

"They can't hear us," Hope said. "If you have an issue with your assignment then I need to know."

"Just prefer to be in the thick of things rather than on babysitting duty." Kim threw her a lazy half-grin, his formal intonation sliding to a casual drawl that oozed with stereotypical merc bravado. But the sudden mask of "reckless ne'er-do-well" felt performative, and Hope had known enough government officials in her life to recognize a liar.

* * * *

True to his word, Kim kept Vengeance occupied for the next few days with a series of raids by Interpol. Hope assumed he must've bribed someone at the NCB—Adsila had certainly paid the mercs enough to pad a few pockets. Kim's team also ensured that several weapons shipments to Vengeance were . . . "misplaced," as he phrased it, forcing the organization to further postpone its planned assault on Six Above.

Regardless of how ethically dubious Kim's methods, his running interference meant that Hope never even encountered a member of the Latvian terror cell. Which was good, because there wasn't much she could do if confronted with by a non-Ment civilian, even if said civilian was a member of a Ment hate group. Hate crimes weren't Unity's jurisdiction, and they'd only be supported so long as they stayed (or at least, appeared to stay) firmly in their lane.

Augustus Greenway had been enough of a hassle taking into custody, so Hope was simply relieved that Kim had done his job. Reports of Greenway's empathy had been overexaggerated—Hope clocked him as a Nine, max—but his second in command had been a Precog. They'd anticipated UCRT's approach,

and Temperance had almost gotten herself blown up by one of the landmines that had been planted around the Above Six compound.

Fuck Precogs, Hope thought as she finished off her second drink at the hotel bar. *They're more trouble than a dozen Telepaths combined.*

Sally excluded, of course, although Hope prayed that Button's best friend never decided to become an AMO. Precogs were invaluable on the field, but most tended either to burn out by their fifth year or migrated to the private sector where they could both earn millions and weren't forced to constantly envision the possible deaths of their teammates.

Kim settled down onto the barstool beside her, and Hope motioned the bartender to pour two more glasses of Lagavulin. She slid one across the counter towards the merc.

"Now," she said. "You finally going to tell me what's wrong?"

Kim's took a long sip of the Scotch, his dark eyes affixed on the old-fashioned cuckoo clock on the wall. 2am: only five hours until Hope flew back to Chicago and the endless noise that was her youngest child.

"I was born in North Korea, ma'am," Kim said. "My sister was a Ment."

Hope sucked in a sharp breath. *Shit*. That explained his discomfort working with Unity, then; she couldn't blame the poor boy for feeling uneasy. He looked so young and vulnerable at that moment, so goddamn *sad*, that it was all she could do to not lay a hand on his head and gently stroke his black hair the way that she would've done to comfort one of her own children. Her grip tightened around her glass, her heart twisting at the thought of Nick and Button being separated.

"What were her abilities?" Hope asked. There was no point in asking for the girl's name; that would've been changed for her own protection. But if the girl's powers had been unique, then maybe there was a chance that Hope could help Kim reconnect with his sibling.

"She was—she *is* an Empath," Kim replied. "I believe. I was young when she left."

The phrasing was more diplomatic than she'd come to expect from the matter-of-fact mercenary. Then again, Kim was asking a favor. Not overtly, of course, but the very fact that he'd decided to share this information with her meant that he was desperate and that it included a silent plea. But empathy wasn't exactly a rare ability and locating Kim's sister amongst Unity's rank and file would be like finding a needle in a pile of other needles. Assuming she'd even completed the program, which not all the kids had.

"There's a yearly training seminar in Fort Lauderdale," Hope said. "Unity brings in external instructors for the MIVS—mostly contractors like yourself."

Kim's brow furrowed at the change of subject, but he remained silent, watching her with narrowed eyes.

"I'll recommend you as a speaker," Hope continued. "You can decide what to lecture on. The important thing is that Adsila Branham will be at the conference; tell her what you told me." Hope stood, internally debating whether or not she should polish off her half-empty glass. Her mother's face flashed through her mind; perhaps it was better to leave the drink unfinished.

"Talk to Adsila Branham," Hope repeated, staying put until Kim slowly nodded. He didn't voice any gratitude at the tip, but then again, Hope didn't expect his thanks. Didn't deserve it. Giving Kim a chance to search for his sister was both the least and the most that she could do.

[Writer's Blog: 11/15, 4 2 Go*](#)

[Aug 13, 2022](#)

I FINISHED WRITING ANOTHER ENDING! That's 11/15 now fully written; I'm trying to remain positive and not contemplate how much coding awaits me once I'm done with all the fun creation bits 😊

The most recently completed ending sees the completion of Sally's vision about Gray (from Chapter 5). While some of the details changed from my initial draft (most notably, location), the overall impact is exactly as I'd hoped: Gray being stupidly sacrificial to protect someone else, and Button having the option to force Gray into looking out for himself by contouring themselves around him like a handsy monkey (or a too-small parachute, in the case of short Buttons). Anyways, I love it.

The new context in which this scene occurs has presented a problem, however: namely, that it isn't guaranteed to happen for every Button that had the vision. My dilemma then is whether to change Sally's vision into something more mundane that's guaranteed to happen, or to have Button wonder in the final chapter if Sally's crystal ball is broken (or, more depressingly, if Sally's unfulfilled vision means that there's more hardship ahead). Neither seems like a perfect fix.

I contemplated a few other options based on Sally's other visions.

Some of Sally's visions can play out two different ways: the intended oh-shit-revelation way, and a failsafe dummy backup scene with just enough similarities to make Button think that Sally's vision came true (because it did, kinda). But Grayson's future as described by Sally is so, well, soap-opera dramatic that I'm unable to use this technique. I mean, the admittedly (deliciously) cheesy line of "Don't look down, focus on me" would seem semi-ludicrous if all Gray and Button were doing is jumping out a first story window. The context is important.

Then there's Sally's (revised as of the 2.0 demo) vision for Glitch, which happens off-page during (spoiler alert!) Button's carnapping by Andy/Liz. Changing Sally's vision to an event where Button isn't present would—

Huh. You know, now that I'm typing all this out, I suppose there's another option.

Button can be replaceable.

. . . Which sounds bad given that interactive fiction is all YOUR CHOICES MATTER, okay, but hear me out (and please keep in mind that this post has just switched to Dear-Diary-esque stream of conscious brainstorming rather than my planned musings on the nature of fortune telling and foreshadowing in interactive fiction).

The scene with Gray only happens should Button make a certain choice (descriptive, I know, but I'm trying to keep this as vague as possible to avoid spoilers for the unreleased material). For simplicity's sake, we'll say that this choice puts Button on Route A.

Route A features Grayson, Rosy, and Sally.

Route B stars Kenzie and Glitch.

(This is a vast oversimplification of how the endings work, since relationship dynamics do play a huge part, but again, I'm tiptoeing around spoilers.)

If Button instead selects Route B, the events of Route A still play out. Without Button's help, however, the result is . . . not as ideal. But Sally can still later tell Button about how her vision came true and *she* was the one cradled in Gray's arms as they **REDACTED** to their **REDACTED**. There's nothing intrinsically romantic about Sally's vision, and Grayson is a good enough egg that he'd definitely protect Sally over himself. Heck, Grayson would probably even protect Reese.

So that could work, and also make it so that I didn't have to change Sally's vision, which is good because I'm pretty attached to Sally's vision for Gray (it's so over the top *dramatic*, you know?).

Hmm.

Possibilities.

Good talk, gang. Thanks for the brainstorming session.

This helped, and I now need to go edit a few endings. Updated Mind Blind Status after writing this post: 10.5/15 endings fully written.

* * * *

**The title is a pun that I spent way too much time coming up with. It doesn't really work well (clearly, since I felt the need to explain it) and also probably isn't funny to anyone but me. But as "go" is 5 in Japanese, so technically the title is nothing but numbers. It's a numerical pun!*

. . . Granted, a pun so bad that even Rosy wouldn't laugh. But, look, it made me giggle-snort and I'm taking what I can these days.

[Aug 28, 2022](#)

For someone who writes about mental health, it's kinda funny how much shame I have over discussing my own. "Hypocritical" might be the more accurate word than "funny," if we're being honest, but for the sake of my own ego, I choose to view my inner reluctance over being emotionally honest as contrarily amusing since I otherwise have *zero* issues with telling people how I feel.

Back in elementary school, my predilection for the truth got me suspended, because apparently you aren't allowed to tell your second-grade teacher that you hate her guts and insert the word "hell" into her last name. (In my defense, I was seven.) While I stand by that insult to Miss Bee those twenty-odd years ago, I did eventually learn to be more diplomatic. Sometimes the truth doesn't need to be spoken because it'll hurt people's feelings; I did not *need* to tell Miss Bee that she was a terrible teacher. But right now, the only feelings I'm trying to protect are my own, so I've been hiding. Because, stupidly, I still feel embarrassed to struggle. Even though it's a common struggle. Plus, it's not like my history of depression is a big secret. I pretty much put it all out there in my writing.

Nonetheless, I feel ashamed. But here goes my attempt at getting over myself and being emotionally honest:

When I was in college, my social anxiety got so bad that I was diagnosed with agoraphobia. I almost didn't graduate, because I stopped attending classes, and I lost fifteen pounds because even walking across the street to buy groceries at Safeway felt like a one-woman trek to Mount Doom. Thanks to a family intervention, I got through it. I then traveled everywhere to compensate for the period of my life when I couldn't go anywhere. Social media still gave me panic attacks, but social media was also avoidable.

Then the pandemic hit in 2020, and I was terrified to returning to that place of total insolation. After all, suddenly an actual *reason* to be wary of public spaces that wasn't just my brain being an overzealous guard troll.

So, I posted *Mind Blind* online. I shared my creative writing with other people for the first time ever, because I needed to force myself forwards to keep from reverting back.

The reception was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Discovering that people resonated with the main character, especially the aspects involving Button's mental health and disability, made me feel that I wasn't alone. I felt that like my past struggles now had value, because hopefully what I wrote could make readers feel less alone, too.

Mind Blind saved me.

Parts of this experience have been hard, and social media still gives me panic attacks. But I was making good progress, and I'd anticipated being finished with *Mind Blind* by now.

Then, suddenly, my mother had cancer, and I moved across the country to become her caregiver. And chemotherapy . . . well, it's one of those things that gets progressively more difficult. Dealing with everything became hard, and becomes more so every day.

Writing became hard.

Not just because of the logistical difficulties of writing while living with someone (the stereotype of the recluse writer is one for a reason, because reclusively equals productivity). Writing became hard because of stress. I now second guess every scene I write, terrified of having my words ever read by others. The anxiety inside me, always simmering just beneath the surface, is constantly bubbling over my edges. What if no one likes the final scenes? What if I flub up the romances? What if my mom dies? What if I can't fix the code?

I've still been making good progress with *Mind Blind*—several hundred thousand words worth over these last months, with the majority of endings now fully written. But rereading my work to edit and code check makes me melt into a puddle of humiliated goo. Not because I necessarily think what I've written is bad (logically, I know most is at least “fine”), but because there are a million illogical “what ifs” that I can't escape. There's a reason the releases have slowed, and that reason is my constant state of irrational anxiety.

Anyway, I've spent a lot of time the last two weeks attempting to get my mental health back on track and scheduling doctor appointments. Also writing, with mixed levels of success. I've become incredibly indecisive, meaning that Nick Wiseman has a Very Longwinded Opinion for UCRT tier reward, and Kenzie ended up with *two* different saucy sides for this month that will be posted tonight/tomorrow—I couldn't decide between them so finished both. All I need to do tonight is alter the duplicate language, because I got lazy when describing some things and just copy-pasted the lip lock descriptions from Saucy Side 1 over to Saucy Side 2.

Having rambled for several paragraphs (and likely overshared, sorry!), it's worth acknowledging that therapy and medication aren't necessarily a magic carpet that will fly me to the Land of Mental Wellbeing. But in the past, they've been enough of a footstool that I can at least reach the lower handgrips to begin climbing out of the emotional crevasse that I've fallen into.

For now, I just want to thank you all for your kindness and patience. I may not currently have the brainspace to respond to messages and comments (at this point, I often find it difficult just to breathe), but I do try to read them all and genuinely appreciate the compassion of those who have reached out.

I'll know that I'll get to a better place because this isn't my first Depression Rodeo, and I've become pretty skilled at staying saddled.

Below is the schedule for *Mind Blind* (in sequential order, with dates TBA):

1. A big update for 2.0 with Chapters 9-15 (I'm currently in the process of rewriting Chapter 14 and will be posting another feedback request post for Chapters 14 and 15). I decided to release all the new chapters together as I lose a lot of time trying to perfect the code for each chapter in order to release it . . . only to change it in half an hour when I add a new variable in a later chapter.

Why not release Chapter 16 at this time as well? Because Chapter 16 is being completely and utterly rewritten (seriously, the current version is unrecognizable at this point), as there are now several pathways within it depending on your choices which all lead to different ending routes.

2. Once *Mind Blind 2.0* is updated to Chapter 15 (should be sometime in the middle of next month, barring any setbacks), I'll be releasing the first ending route in its entirety! I'm going to start with my personal favorite ending, which has a total of 19 Chapters. This ending is already coded, although I anticipate that I'll have to rework some things after finishing the edits on earlier chapters.
3. Once the first ending is shared, Endings 2-5 will be released in relatively short succession. These first five ending routes share some commonalities in choice, so I should be able to reuse a lot of the code even though the text itself will differ.
4. Then onto coding Endings 6 – 15! The last four endings still aren't fully written yet, because I need to sit Kenzie down for a heart-to-heart regarding the fate of a certain politician.
5. I receive your feedback and edit the endings (which will be a LOT less intensive than the Grand Recoding I'm currently doing, thankfully), and go through the process to submit the game.
6. I figure out what the heck I'm doing for cover art.

Finally, I want to make sure that everyone has access to the current links. Please use the Version 1 if you'd like to provide any feedback on Chapters 14-15, but keep in mind that this is the outdated build when it comes to earlier chapters.

Mind Blind Version 1 Demo, Up to Chapter 15 (Chapter 16 has been taken out of this particular build, as the prior version is no longer relevant):

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

Mind Blind 2.0, Up to Chapter 8:

<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[MB Saucy Side: Love in the Time of Pet Ownership \(Kent Version\)](#)

[Aug 29, 2022](#)

Kent's backyard is enclosed by high trees that block off the view from other houses. Still, kissing him outside feels exposed. Especially since neither of you are wearing clothes.

Neither of you had *intended* to sunbathe nude. Both you and Kent had been very decently dressed in swimsuits at first, Kent holding a bottle of hypoallergenic oatmeal shampoo and a brush, and you carrying pile of clean towels. Giving Annie and Cass baths in the blow-up pool was always easier than doing it inside with slippery tiles, and the shih tzus preferred to sundry rather than be subjected to the hairdryer (which ranked only below the vacuum cleaner and Glitch's orange high tops on the dogs' list of mortal enemies).

The point is that today had started off very innocently. It simply hadn't ended that way.

Your boyfriend's lips break away from where he'd been trailing down your neck, and he sprawls back in the hammock to catch his breath, staring at you with a smug half-smile that is part prideful ownership and part devoted awe. You stare at his form appreciatively in return, until your gaze flickers to your bathing suit floating in the kiddie pool's soapy water. Kent's swim trunks are nowhere in sight. You'll need to locate them before neighbor's kid comes over to trim the grass tomorrow—you really don't want to explain to Ms. Langley why her son's push mower got jammed by nylon mesh.

Kent stretches, and your attention is once again captivated by the way his taunt muscles ripple at the movement. You'll always admire his looks, but by now the sight is so familiar and your relationship so comfortable that your mind wanders to the matter of sunscreen. It's a good thing the hammock you're both lying on is beneath a shaded tree, otherwise Kent's skin would've already become redder than a blushing lobster. As it is, only a few bluish marks mar his paleness, mementos marking the places where your lips had lingered a little overzealously: the nape of his neck, next to his naval, upon his thighs.

"We should give the dogs baths more often," your boyfriend muses with a satisfied grin.

"At least the girls got clean, given that we were so . . ." You lean in close, lowering your voice to a husky whisper. ". . . *Dirty*."

Kent groans, but there's an amused gleam in his gray eyes at your horrible-but-in-an-amazing-way pun.

Your tongue teasingly flicks the shell of his ear, and his amusement darkens to desire. His large hand wraps around the back of your head, dragging you towards his lips.

"Should we go shower?" he asks against your mouth.

You wordlessly wrap your arms around his neck. You can look for his swim trunks later.

Kent rises as if to carry you back inside. Then he freezes, and you're abruptly dropped back onto the hammock. The net sways beneath the suddenness of your weight, twisting to the side and causing you to land ungracefully on the grass.

You throw Kent an affronted look, but he doesn't notice. His eyes dart around the yard, his expression growing increasingly panicked.

"Where are the dogs?" he asks.

You scan the yard for Annie and Cass. Before you and Kent became . . . distracted, the dogs had been snoozing on the deck while they dried off from their bath. Now, they're nowhere in sight.

"Annie, Cass!" you call out as Kent bends over to check beneath the patio. Normally, you'd enjoy witnessing your nude boyfriend in such a position, but right now you're too worried to appreciate the view.

The dogs don't respond to your summons.

"They didn't crawl under the deck," Kent says, straightening back up. "Maybe we left the gate open?" His face is even paler than usual, and he sprints around the patio and towards the gate before you can stop him.

Oh, no.

You're not sure whether Kent realizes that he's still naked, nor that he would particularly care if anyone saw him. This is, after all, the man who considered opening the front door in a too-small towel to be an acceptable social behavior. But the backyard gate connects to the front yard, and the front yard lacks the tree barrier. If Kent steps out there . . .

Well, you'll no longer have to worry about Kent's swimsuit ruining Langley Junior's lawnmower, because Ms. Langley will probably forbid the kid from ever working for you and Kent again. No one wants their thirteen-year-old exposed to a jogging nudist.

Because when sprinting off like Kent was just doing? Things swing.

Suffice to say that Kent is probably on the verge of breaking at least two dozen neighborhood HOA rules. Especially if Annie and Cass escaped from the front yard like they did last week; the last thing you need is your boyfriend running down the street like the emperor flaunting his new clothes. Even if said emperor is extremely fit.

You grab your swimsuit from the pool, pulling it on as quickly as possible (which isn't very quickly given that it's still wet). There must be at least one divine power who's merciful to accidental exhibitionists, so you send up a quick prayer that the neighbors currently have their blinds drawn to ward off the midday sun. You'd always planned on hosting a block party after you'd moved in with Kent, but this definitely isn't the best way to issue invitations.

With no time to locate Kent's swimsuit, you snatch one of the towels used to try off the dogs before racing off after him.

Sure enough, the gate connecting the back yard with the front is wide open. One of you must've forgotten to latch it after taking the dogs for a walk; Annie long ago learned to nose open doors unless they were fully closed. It was probably Kent. He still has trouble remembering to shut the gate all the

way, as it was only installed after you revealed that his pets' predilection of barking at every innocent passerby like aggressive hecklers at a comedy show made people think that he was an abusive dog owner. Yes, the dogs were the reason you two first met (and probably integral to you falling in love), but you'd rather not deal with someone calling animal control.

You discover your boyfriend in the front yard. He's standing with one hand on his hip, the other wagging a disapproving finger at two shih tzus whose tongues loll out the sides of the mouths who gaze up at him adoringly, completely oblivious to the fact that they're being chastised.

Kent's expression is stern. His body is . . . still naked.

You toss the towel at his head. He grabs it before it hits, and for a moment only stares at it cluelessly. Then he looks down at himself.

"Oh," he says.

Oh, indeed.

The dog towel is too small to wrap around his waist, so Kent holds it in front like a loincloth as he backs toward you and the gate. Annie and Cass follow, still blissfully unaware that their unplanned excursion almost caused their owner to almost get arrested for public indecency.

You wait a moment before following Kent and the dogs into the backyard, squinting to check all the neighboring houses. Thankfully, no one seems to have noticed your boyfriend in all his glory. You two are safe. More importantly, the dogs are safe.

You heave a sigh of relief and join Kent in the back yard, this time making sure to latch the gate all the way closed.

"Sorry," Kent says, though he doesn't sound particularly apologetic. "I didn't know whether the front gate was closed. If they'd escaped during rush hour . . ." He trails off, his face twisting with pain that causes you to feel a momentary twinge of guilt over the fact you once briefly considered having Sally fake a vision over a similar situation. To win a stupid school assignment, of all things.

God, you had messed up priorities back then.

You wrap your arms around Kent. "It's fine," you say soothingly. "The girls are okay. Plus, no one saw—"

Hey, Button? Nick's voice interrupts your reassurance to Kent. Your brother sounds amused, which never bodes well.

Maybe my eyes were playing tricks, Nick continues. *But I was just driving home, and I'm pretty sure that I saw more of your boyfriend than I ever wanted to see. Maybe you two can keep your games limited to the bedroom from now on?*

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You gently kiss Kenna's lips. "I love you," you tell her. "Also, we need to move."

[August Live Q&A: Today at 7pm PST](#)

[Aug 31, 2022](#)

As the title says! This month's Q&A is 7pm PST, Tuesday, 8/31.

If you can't make it, feel free to type any questions on the Q&A channel--the session will be recorded, so you'll be able to listen to the questions later. I'll be using my phone from the get-go so that internet can't cut out this time 😊

[The Great Rewriting: Final Feedback Call \(Chapters 14 - 15\)](#)

[Sep 9, 2022](#)

Ever since I moved back home, it's been increasingly difficult to drift into that trancelike, illusive "Creative Zone" where time becomes an abstract concept and I can no longer feel my body. This has made life hard(er), since I'm pretty much dependent on those sweet out-of-body experiences to do most my writing. Yes, I realize that this sounds like the description of an alien abduction or a hallucinogenic high, but it's genuinely how I feel when writing: as if I physically disappear, and the characters are puppeteering my fingers to type out their words.

Look, I never claimed to understand how my brain works.

The good news is that I was able to slip into the Twilight Writing Zone several times this past week and gained with it several bursts of extreme productivity. I'm no longer cognizant of what the date is or whether I've eaten in the past twenty-four hours (I think I had some fruit gummies?) . . .

BUT.

But.

Current state of fuzzy disorientation aside, I've finished rewriting and recoding Chapters 1 – 13 in *Mind Blind* and am now ready to overhaul Chapters 14 and 15 in earnest. Significant editing already got done on these chapters as I haven't exactly been tackle things in order, but I'm now ready to receive external feedback for them! My goal is to release Chapters 1 – 15 of the 2.0 demo by my birthday, which gives me around ten days to collect and implement suggestions.

Anyway, The Great Rewriting is now almost complete! It took way longer than I anticipated: life has definitely thrown a few curveballs this year, and it took me a while to stop beating myself up for having a slower writing pace and ultimately realize that there's no point to racing to finish a book if it meant mentally collapsing before crossing the finish line. I'm happy with the changes (especially those made to Chapter 11!!!!) and feel excitement over releasing *Mind Blind's* endings, albeit mingled with some non-insignificant trepidation over actually *coding* those ends.

Once I've rewritten all of Chapter 15, my focus will be exclusively on finishing and releasing the ending paths. Of course, there will be more editing done after the entire game is complete, but that will consist of technical editing and stylistic polish rather than adding in or altering content. I will, however, be doing one last complete readthrough of all your comments before releasing 2.0. Which brings me to my next point:

Simply put, the Persnickety Perfectionist in my head will never be satisfied, so this post serves as the final cowbell call for y'all to haul in your suggestions on any major or semimajor league changes that you'd like to see implemented. (Please don't ask me to explain why I'm mixing cowboy and baseball metaphors. I genuinely don't know.)

Links to other 2.0 feedback threads are posted below as well, so please leave suggestions on either the corresponding post or in the Sanctum of Spoilers discord. There's a loose deadline of **September 15th** to submit all feedback, as it usually takes me 3-4 days to completely hammer out all my coding bugs and get the demo into a playable state.

(I didn't include Chapters 1-3, because I'm pretty satisfied with their current iterations.)

Chapters 4 – 5: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/great-feedback-4-63288760>

Chapters 6 – 7: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/great-feedback-6-64279410>

Chapters 8 – 9: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/great-feedback-8-66899693>

Chapters 10 – 13: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/mind-blind-2-0-69778090>

Link to the original demo: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/project-oreo/mygame/>

To provide feedback on Chapters 14 or 15, please leave your comments below!

[MB Short Story: First Date, Gymnastics Edition](#)

[Sep 21, 2022](#)

Explanatory Note:

When rewriting Chapter 9, I completely overhauled Kenzie's date to provide a more insight into their backstory and character. When I replayed for my final edit, however, the new version simply didn't work! It was too honest given that Kenzie and Button were undercover, and the length of the conversation made the chapter feel draggy and reduced the overall tension. Basically, I lost the plot and had to reluctantly admit that less is sometimes more.

That being said, there were some nice moments in the deleted date scene that I didn't want to completely throw away. So I took out the code and rewrote the scenes as short snippets. This particular date version happened if Button had previously made a comment about Kenzie's gymnastics experience in earlier chapters.

(Sidenote, but Kenzie's need to use an assistive cane is based on my father, whose high school growth spurt was so extreme that he temporarily ended up in a wheelchair.)

* * * *

"Why did you quit gymnastics?"

The question is out of your mouth before it occurs to you that this is probably something you shouldn't ask. After all, you're well versed enough in tropes to realize that, oftentimes, the reason someone gives up a sport which they previously loved and competed at a high level is part of a tragic backstory. An injured knee which led to a broken heart, that sort of thing. Not to mention that, as Kent's supposed girlfriend, you're already supposed to know the important things about them.

This is why you should always internet stalk your dinner dates beforehand, Nick thinks.

You're mildly surprised when, instead of shedding a single, poetic tear over thwarted childhood dreams or chastising you for breaking cover, Kent only shrugs and takes another bite of his spaghetti.

He chews, and you internally spiral with worry over whether he hates you now because you said something super insensitive, or if he's mulling over how much to tell you. Or maybe he's just hungry and is too polite to talk with his mouth full. Figuring out Kent Zarneki's thought process would likely take a lifetime . . . a prospect that's not without allure.

"Grew too tall," he finally says after swallowing.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

Kent smirks at your owlish head tilt. "I was a short kid," he elaborates. "Under five feet until middle school and didn't hit my real growth spurt until after I turned sixteen."

The imagery of a shy baby Kent, dwarfed by his classmates, is almost too adorable to contemplate. You take a sip of water before a coo of "awwwwe" escapes your lips.

"Are there no tall gymnasts?" you ask.

"Igor Cassie won gold on the high bar," Kent replies. "He's only a few inches shorter than me."

"Then why did your height cause you to give up? You're tall, sure, but not enough to be recruited by the NBA or anything."

Kent takes another bite of spaghetti, and this time you're observing him closely enough to catch a brief flicker of regret behind his grey eyes. "I grew six inches in a single year," he says. "I could barely walk, let alone compete in the Olympics."

"That's a lot," you say.

Kent's leg shifts beneath the table, his knee brushing gently against yours. He doesn't acknowledge the contact, nor does he make any attempt to move away. You wouldn't categorize the casual contact as outright flirty . . . but it's definitely intimate. Too intimate for someone you're not truly dating, but maybe he's only trying to maintain your shared cover? Either way: if you weren't already hyperaware of Kent's body given the discussion, your attention has now been fully captured.

"Gymnastics is one of the few sports that requires participants to be of a certain age at the Olympics," Kent says, still not moving his leg. "Instead of competing in Rome for my sixteenth birthday, I needed an assistive cane to walk long distances."

You take a moment to observe his expression. Discussing his past doesn't appear to cause Kent any pain, precisely, but there's a sense of resignation to his slumped shoulders and faraway gaze, albeit more morose rather than embittered. What do you say to someone who just confessed that their childhood dreams were stolen away by puberty, of all things? A lot of boys would celebrate getting taller, but for Kent it had meant reexamining his entire life.

Claiming '*Gee, that sucks,*' would just be stating the obvious.

'I'm so sorry you went through that' feels trite and clichéd.

'I think your height is sexy,' is insensitive.

You settle on a simple statement of truth. "You must've worked really hard regain your coordination and qualify for the NPO Initiative."

Kent smiles at you, and it's like the first day of spring. "I started mixed martial arts classes during my senior year of high school," he confirms. "Not to compete. I needed to relearn my body."

"Do you ever regret not having been able to pursue gymnastics professionally?" you ask.

"Being an AMO is more meaningful," Kent says slowly. "I'm content with where I've ended up." Abruptly, he sits up straight, clearing his throat in a brusque manner that disperses the growing intimacy between you two.

"Unity needs to be challenged from within, after all," he announces in a louder voice. "That's why we both agreed to join. Right, babe?"

Your brain briefly short circuits at the endearment before realizing that Kent is only maintaining your cover. You raise your water glass in the air, and he clinks his against it.

"Here's to us overthrowing the establishment," you toast.

Kent's silver eyes lock with yours. "To us."

[MB Short Story: First Date, Recruitment Edition](#)

[Sep 21, 2022](#)

Explanatory Note:

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That being said, there were some nice moments in the deleted date scene that I didn't want to completely throw away. So I took out the code and rewrote the scenes as short snippets.

* * * *

“How did you end up joining the NPO Initiative?” you ask Kenna.

Usually, you’d be wary of bringing up a classified topic in public, except that Rosy had emphasized the whole point of this dinner was to make sure that Vengeance viewed you and Kenna as accomplices. While you don’t doubt Glitch’s ability to leak information (doubting Glitch in general feels unwise), it doesn’t hurt to make sure that Liz definitely-for-certain overhears that Kenna is on the roster of Team Norm.

And if Liz really happens to just be a waitress and not part of Vengeance? Well, she’s unlikely to put two and two together and realize that Mayor Zarneki’s famous daughter isn’t a Ment. Failing that, Rosy and Glitch can deal with tabloid fallout.

“Kim recruited me,” Kenna replies. Her lips curve in a subtle smirk. “My father wanted me to get a degree in Political Science at UChicago. I attended classes for a year but . . .” She shrugs.

“Didn’t see a future for yourself in politics?”

Her upper lip curls in reply.

You’re staring at her lips a lot, Nick notes teasingly. Admiring the red lipstick, or just its wearer?

You ignore your brother, determined not to give Vengeance any clue as to his psychic location inside your noggin (and, more crucially, not provide Nick with the satisfaction of flustering you in front of the girl that you kinda-sorta-totally like).

“Rosy just approached you out of nowhere and asked if you wanted to be a secret agent?” you ask before remembering that you should already know this information as a supposed fellow member of the NPO Initiative.

“Just wanted to compare recruitment stories, is all,” you attempt to course correct upon noticing Liz bussing a nearby table. “Did Rosy make you sign an NDA before discussing the offer or—”

Kenna rests her hand atop of yours, and you fall quiet. She has beautiful hands: her French manicure doesn’t compete with any of Sally’s vibrant art works, but her short nails are neatly trimmed, and her fingers elegantly tapered.

“I was invited to apply to the MIV Program,” Kenna answers your question. “But our recruitments were probably different since Kim actually *wanted* you as an MIV. In my case, it was only a pretense.”

You’re not certain whether to be impressed, wary, or turned on by the ease with which she lies. “Then you took the ASE like I did?” you ask.

Kenna nods. “Don’t know if I passed,” she answers your question. “Talia was initially waitlisted, so probably not. But Kim asked that I take the APE as well.” Her smirk is the tiniest bit cocky. “That test, I passed.”

“And after that, Rosy asked if you wanted to become an AMO instead?”

She nods again.

“The mayor was okay with you dropping out of college?” Your impression of Tobias Zarneki after overhearing his call to Rosy wasn’t one of a man who’d be pleasantly easygoing when people disobeyed his wishes.

Kenna’s smile doesn’t reach her icy eyes. “My father was convinced to see the benefits of the arrangement.”

“Such as?”

“He deemed working for Unity would be beneficial to my future political career.”

Graduating from Aeon is generally regarded as receiving a postgraduate given the program’s vigor, Nick elaborates. There aren’t many Ment politicians yet—the public still doesn’t fully trust us—but all those currently elected are former employees of Unity.

You bite your lower lip, uncertain of just how blunt you should be with Kenna. Then again, this is the same woman who had no problem whacking your hand away from her car radio. Forthright it is.

“Did the mayor really think attending Aeon will help your future career?” you ask. “Or that the publicity of your enrollment would bolster the numbers for his reelection?”

This time, Kenna’s smile is wide and genuine. “Mostly the latter.”

“Well . . .” You swallow nervously. Is it hot in here, or are you just the main character in a romance novel? “For what it’s worth, I’m glad we’re both at Aeon.”

Kenna’s silver eyes lock with yours. “Same.”

[UCRT Story: Hell Has No Escape](#)

[Sep 25, 2022](#)

Warning: This (extremely) AU story references major spoilers to the current *Mind Blind* demo.

* * * *

Hell had no escape.

Ambrose Kim had once dispatched an enemy combatant with a plastic cafeteria tray. He had, during his tenure as a mercenary, destabilized two military regimes and personally dismantled six human trafficking rings (one while on vacation). Yet never in his existence had he felt more ill at ease, more desperate for escape, than right this moment in Nick Wiseman's living room.

"I fail to understand your intentions," he told Ellery, who reclined on a nearby couch with a victorious smirk. "Your decision to sign me up for a . . ."

"Reality dating show," Ellery filled in helpfully when he paused, unable to force the term past his lips. Ambrose repressed a shudder.

". . . doesn't in any way make amends for my actions," Ambrose finished. He'd agreed to abide by any punishment she set—his fate was her prerogative given what he'd put her through.

"Amends?" Ellery cackled. "Oh, Rosy. *Amends* stopped being possible the day you hijacked my brain. No, forcing you to go on a trashy dating show isn't about redemption. It's about payback."

Ambrose glanced over at the television, its screen frozen on a frame of the buxom, bikini-clad host of the hit reality show *Love Archipelago*. He'd anticipated a jail sentence or being forced to wear a BRS for the rest of his life, but Ellery's mind was more twisted and nefarious than he'd realized during his limited forays into her psyche.

"If subjecting me to this farce should in any small way atone for my actions, so be it," he said stiffly.

"However, my understanding is that this show is fairly popular. My application is unlikely to—"

"Oh, you're already in," Nick declared breezily as he entered the room carrying a bowl of freshly popped kettlecorn, its sickly-sweet smell threatening to overturn Ambrose's already queasy stomach.

Nick plopped down beside his sister, who immediately shoveled a handful of popcorn in her mouth. Even with Ellery's cheeks puffed out, the siblings bore identical evil grins.

"Abril and I dated back in high school," Nick said, gesturing to the hostess on the tv screen. "Funny story, but I'm the one who introduced her and her wife. Was man of honor at her wedding and everything. She was *so happy* to hear about my *perfect friend* for the show."

"Nick misled her to believe that Grayson was signing up," Ellery revealed bluntly. "Abril raked him over the coals once she learned that the 'integral part of UCRT's team' that Nick promised wasn't actually

one of The Ideals.”

Nick grimaced. “You don’t want to know the devil’s deal I had to make so that she’d keep you. But the point is, you’re in.” His expression brightened at the declaration, his glare at Ambrose both jubilant and malicious. “Sacrificing my summer is totally worth it if it means witnessing you tortured every Tuesday at 8pm Central.”

“No need to pack a swimsuit,” Ellery told Ambrose. “Nick and I already packed you a suitcase of appropriate attire.”

Nick cackled ominously, and Ambrose was able to resist flinching only due to decades spent hiding his true emotions. Was it too late to renegotiate with Ellery for lifelong prison sentence? Solitary confinement would be vastly preferable to this sadistic scheme.

“By the way,” Ellery added smugly, “I’ll only forgive you if you win. That million-dollar prize money is going to buy me and Sally a condo downtown, so don’t go trying to be sent home early, okay?”

* * * *

Hell had no escape.

The Beach House didn’t look like the depths of Tartarus, but Ambrose knew from personal practice that appearances could be misleading. The dormitory bedroom, with summer camp style bunk beds and blankets of tiger print velvet, was more of a prison than any cell. He’d read *Love Archipelago’s* contract on the limo ride over: any contestant departing the Florida property without producer leave was libel for breach of contract and suable for lost show profits up to and exceeding five million dollars (five times the show’s final award). It wasn’t so much the financial hit which imprisoned Ambrose here, however. It was his promise to Ellery to pay for his crimes in whichever way she so desired. Even if her desires had turned out to be incredibly twisted.

If Ellery demanded that he win her a million dollars on a reality dating show, so be it. Ambrose could play a part; he’d been doing so for his entire life. His gaze caught on the bedroom’s full-length mirror, and he winced. Granted, he never imagined that he’d be forced to pay reparations while wearing so little fabric. Ellery and Nick had indeed packed him a suitcase as promised; other than a few capris and Hawaiian shirts of questionable print, Ambrose’s wardrobe now exclusively consisted of speedos in various neon colors. This one, the least revealing, was hot pink.

He sighed and gave quick tug to ensure that he wouldn’t be kicked out on day one for public indecency.

“My duuuuude!”

Ambrose turned to the doorway to find a man—boy, really, given that he looked to be no older than most of Ambrose’s former students. The newcomer looked as if a version of *Lord of the Ring’s* Legolas had taken up surfing, possessing a narrow build, a golden suntan, and long, pale blonde hair which was tied back in a low ponytail.

“Duder!” the dude exclaimed (Ambrose rarely categorized other men as “dudes,” but truly this one defied any other designation). “Dude, I love your suit! Gotta advertise whatcha got, am I right??” He looked at Ambrose’s speedo speculatively, then down at his own baggy board shorts. “Maybe I should change? Say, dude, I don’t s’pose you got a spare pair?”

Ambrose inhaled through his nose and counted to three.

“No,” he said tersely.

“Bummer, dude.” The dude thrust out his hand for a shake. “Name’s Dennis, cause my parents wanted me to become a dentist. But Dennis Wilson was also like the only true surfer of the Beach Boys, you know? So I figure it’s all good.”

“You’re a surfer, then?” Ambrose asked Dennis, deciding not to mention that Dennis Wilson was also remembered for having been friends with Charles Manson. If he was going to stay on the show, then he needed to at build alliances. (Ambrose had, tortuously, forced himself to sit through several seasons of research on *Love Archipelago* before beginning this mission. He would never recover those lost braincells, but he at least understood that this dating show was as much as survival game as it was romantic roulette.)

“Nah, dude,” Dennis said. “Just started dental school. But I surf in my free time, right?” He laughed—for what reason, Ambrose wasn’t entirely certain, but he smiled stiffly back at Dennis nonetheless.

“I’m hoping that we get a trip to Maui like they did back in Season Eight,” Dennis continued, crossing his fingers. “Just need to stay on for the next six episodes! I’ll be happy so long as I leave here with a hottie, right? Winning would be cool and all, but it’s not why I joined the show. What about you?”

“I’m here for love,” Ambrose lied through gritted teeth.

“My dude!” Dennis approvingly slapped the back of Ambrose’s shoulder, his palm leaving behind a red imprint. “That’s what I’m talking about, right? Team True Love all the way!”

* * * *

Much to Ambrose’s disheartened unsurprise, Dennis (or Denny, as he insisted upon being called), proved to be the least intolerable of the male contestants. The other three men were already waiting down at the beach when he and Denny arrived, and they proceeded to introduce themselves like pharmaceutical advertisements without the disclaimers (which is to say, short and overhyped without disclosing the inevitable plethora of red flags which motivated them to join a reality dating show in the first place).

“I’m Vaughn,” said a man whose swimsuit made Ambrose’s own look downright modest. He clasped his hands together and bowed slightly. “Lover. Explorer. Student of all the world has to offer.”

"I think that means he's unemployed," Denny whispered to Ambrose before beaming at Vaughn and declaring in a bright voice, "It's great to meet you, dude!"

Ambrose looked Denny consideringly using his peripheral vision. Perhaps there was more cunning in that blonde head than he'd given the surfer/future dentist credit? He might have to reconsider whether Denny's impression of an overzealous labradoodle was authentic or strategic.

"Kile," the redhead contestant introduced himself. "Not Kyle-with-an-i. *Kile*. My name's Gaelic and it means straight and narrow." His freckled cheeks rounded with a smile that would've appeared cherubic had it not been for the subsequent vulgar thrusting of his hips and declaration: "But rules are meant to be broken when it comes to love, so you better lock up your ladies!"

"There's more than just ladies, duder," Denny said. "Erik and Zak won together in Season Five."

"As did Daniella and Roxxy in Season Nine," drawled a lanky man with a heavy Southern accent. His left eyebrow had a jagged line shaved through its center for reasons Ambrose couldn't fathom, and he licked his pierced lower lip in a manner presumably intended as lustful. "Don't know about y'all, but Season Nine was my favorite season. For obvious reasons."

"Hell yeah," Kile enthusiastically agreed.

Much to Ambrose's disgust, the two men proceeded to fist bump. At least now he knew which contestants to target for elimination first.

"You dudes can't just—" Denny's frown deepened as whatever he was about to say was cut off by a shrill whistle.

Abril Alimony (Real Last Name: Wooster) strode across the beach. Her white sundress that fluttered in the breeze, its lace providing tastefully teasing peekaboo glimpses of her dark brown skin. A red beach whistle hung from her neck. Her sudden appearance wasn't a surprise (she was, after all, the show's host), but Ambrose found himself mystified by her superhuman ability to trek so swiftly over loose sand while wearing stiletto heels. If he ever taught at Aeon again, the exercise might be something to consider implementing as balance training for students.

The cameraman trailing behind Abril was equally swift, but his footwear was a pair of practical flipflops and thus nothing impressive.

"Hello, my lovely contestants!" she trilled upon reaching the group. "Are you excited for your first day at *Love Archipeligo*? Keep in mind: from here on out you'll be on camera! So make sure to give the audience at home lots of reasons to love you!"

Kile let out an excited whoop, while Vaughn once again dipped his head in a half bow.

"I love you, Abril!" Denny hollered.

"Thanks, honbun," Abril replied breezily, "but you should save your enthusiasm for the other contestants! Now, I'm assuming all of you have watched the show before?"

She waved a dismissive hand, not waiting for their replies before forging on. "Of course you have," she said. "So, you all know that we begin the show with *Perfect Ten*. Down at the other end of the beach are five lovely ladies eager to fall for you! But first, formalities." Abril's gaze strayed over to where Ambrose stood with his arms defensively crossed over his chest. "Rosy, right?"

So this was why Ellery had insisted on filling out all of his paperwork.

Fuck.

"That's me," Ambrose said through gritted teeth. *Control your breathing, quiet your thoughts. The Wisemans did this to annoy you. Don't let it work. This suffering is nothing compared to what you did to . . .*

"Cute name, dude!" Denny exclaimed, innocently adding fuel to Ambrose's inner rage. "I mean, you're so big! So being called Rosy is adorable because, like, contrast."

"Big?" Kile interjected. "He's the shortest one here."

Denny eyed Ambrose's bared torso speculatively. "Sure, dude," he said, "But I'm pretty sure Rosy could bench press us all with one hand."

Abril cleared her throat. "Much as our audience would love to see you gents break a sweat, now isn't the time," she said. "Rosy, it's been brought to the producer's attention that you're acquainted with my cohost."

At Ambrose's stoic stare, she elaborated, "Nicholas Wiseman?"

Now he knew what Nick had meant when he claimed to have 'sacrificed his summer.'

Fuck.

"Justice is cohosting *Love Archipelago*?" Kile squeaked.

Fuck.

"You know Justice?" Denny asked Ambrose simultaneously.

Fuck.

Still, as much as Ambrose currently wanted to wrap his mind around those assembled and squeeze all memories of his participation in this show from their shallow brains, he had made a promise. Not that he'd ever used his powers so casually, but right now going over to the dark side (as Parker would've

phrased the urge) was the most tempting that it had ever been. He took a deep breath and recollected himself.

“Wiseman and I both work for Unity,” he replied. If Ambrose couldn’t escape this hell, then he might as well attempt to provide some positive publicity; Aeon would need all the positive spin they could get in the coming year. Yet his forced smile made Denny’s eyes widen with trepidation (fear, even?), so he stopped.

“Nick is the one who signed Rosy up for the show because they’re such close friends!” Abril volunteered, causing yet another segment of Ambrose’s soul to shrivel and die. Funny. He hadn’t been entirely certain that he still possessed a soul until now when it was being brutally murdered.

But he deserved this.

“Justice is my *icon*!” Kile gushed, his voice still high with excitement. “Can you get me his autograph?”

“If he’s a judge on the show, then we’ll be meeting him,” Vaughn said.

Kile’s mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air, and Denny began patting his back soothingly. “Breathe through it, dude,” Denny urged. “Just breathe.”

Ambrose only wished that it were that easy. At least none of his anxiety showed upon his face; of that, Ambrose was certain. He leveled Abril with a deceptively calm stare.

“You were saying?” he prodded. “Is my work relationship with Wiseman problematic?”

Please let it be problematic. Perhaps even enough to get kicked off the show—Ellery wouldn’t be able to say that Ambrose hadn’t tried if his ejection was the fault of her brother.

“It’s not a problem at all!” Abril exclaimed, dashing Ambrose’s feeble hopes. “But since you arguably have an advantage, you’ll be picking your partner after the other four men have selected.”

The lanky Southerner smirked. “Looks like you once again drew the *short* end of the straw, bud.”

Ambrose leveled him with a pointedly blank stare. There were many ways to kill a man in public without anyone noticing; a weapon wasn’t required. Once, Ambrose had carried out an assassination at the scented soap stall of a farmer’s market. It’s why he avoided coffee shops in the fall; the scent of pumpkin spice never failed to cause flashbacks.

The other man took a step back, holding his hands up with a wobbly smile. “Uh, didn’t mean anything by that. Was just a joke. Y’all know how it is. No hard feelings?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ambrose said.

“Um.” The man took another step back. “Yes, sir. I mean, yeah. Of course.” Another step backwards. “I’m sorry?”

“Alright, Chet,” Abril said brightly. “Why don’t you go first before that foot lodges further down your gullet?”

Chet needed no more encouragement to scamper off, departing with such haste that Ambrose almost smirked. Abril smiled at the remaining contestants.

“Can’t wait to see what the next month brings us, boys!” she declared. “May you all find your happily ever afters on the best romance show around: *Love Archipelago!*”

Ambrose mimicked Denny and Vaughn’s smiles, but his mind was already beginning to strategize. Anyone partnered with Chet would likely regret it within a week; Ambrose could swoop in and persuade her to partner up should the girl he be initially paired with not have winning potential. Which she probably wouldn’t, since all the other men would be allowed to choose first.

Denny might work as a partner, but the kid also might really be on ‘Team True Love’ (not to mention that Ambrose’s tolerance for being referred to as “dude” decreased every time the word left Denny’s mouth). He could perhaps overcome annoyance over the address, but Ambrose had no desire to break anyone’s heart—allowing collateral damage hadn’t turned out particularly well in recent past, nor had he ever been fully at ease with the callous approach (however logically necessary).

No. Ambrose needed to match with a partner charismatic enough to pull audience votes, gullible enough to believe that he’d turn down a million dollars to be with them, yet not so soft that Ambrose’s inevitable decision to dump them and take the money at the finale would do irreparable harm. An aspiring influencer type would be perfect since a last episode rejection would only bolster their fame and career, even if temporarily humiliating.

Hell had no escape, but Ambrose would damn well take it over.

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Note: This is part of a much larger story (if you're interested in seeing it continued!) For part two, you guys will be able to vote on Ambrose's partner for the first round.

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Booooty Call \(Featuring Grayson\)](#)

[Sep 30, 2022](#)

Your eyes open to find Gray hovering near the window, moonlight shining through his translucent body.

"No peeking," Gray orders sternly.

You shut your eyes again, placing a hand over them for good measure. Were this being filmed (which it's *not*, because you and Gray aren't that adventurous yet), it would appear as if you were alone in your bedroom, lying on top your bedspread while wearing nothing but your underwear. Not sexy underwear, either (your sexy underwear is in the wash). Thankfully, Gray's gaze is hungrily appreciative no matter what you wear.

Being dead for a century made the guy pretty easy to please. You like that in a boyfriend, even if you sometimes wish that his form was more tangible. Dating a poltergeist has its upsides and downsides.

The bed doesn't creak beneath Gray's weight as he joins you, but you nonetheless sense his presence by the shift in temperature. You prickle with goosebumps at the sudden chill; it feels as if you've forgotten to close the window, and now winter's night breeze is gusting over your bared skin. His fingers alight upon your upper chest like falling snow, too gentle and weightless to belong to the the hand of any living man. You shiver beneath his frozen touch, which is more akin to a soft breath than a physical caress.

"I would have undressed you myself," Gray murmurs against the nape of your neck, "were circumstances different."

There's a pause, heavy with longing and regret, that almost makes you reopen your eyes, but then two snowflake kisses press against each lid.

"No peeking," he reminds you.

You can't feel his weight atop you, but the position of his hands as they glide down your body must mean that he's hovering directly above. His cold caress slides over your arms, needles of ice prickling your hands from where his fingers interlock with yours.

"I want to touch you," he says. "Guide me."

And so you do.

Your hands are cold, almost to the point of pain, due to his grasp. But you keep your eyes shut: should you open them, there would be nothing to see. It's too difficult for Gray to make himself seen and felt simultaneously. Tonight, you wanted to feel him.

Your hands glide over your hips and your inner thighs. You have some control over where Gray lingers, but for the most part allow him to guide your touch like a kite turns with the wind. Your hands—*his* hands—splay across your navel, and then lower, until you submit completely to the icy arousal of his strokes.

Times like this, you can imagine Gray. His eternal bedhead, his blue eyes. How his hair would look falling into those eyes as he leans over you. His warm smile, so unlike his frozen touch, as he beams at you with love and wonderment that, despite all obstacles, you chose *him*.

"I love you," Gray whispers. "I love you, I love you." He repeats the words to the tempo of your heartbeat, and you reach up blindly to encircle where he should be.

Your arms plunge through empty air. Everything inside you is hollow and aching, yearning to be able to embrace him in a simple hug . . . but nothing about your relationship with a ghost is simple.

[MB Short Story: Getting Ghosted \(A Non-Saucy Saucy Side\).](#)

[Sep 30, 2022](#)

Note: *Basically, this is the prequel to Boooty Call, but Chadford ruined the sexiness so I separated the story into two parts.*

Boooty Call: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/mind-blind-saucy-72668267>

* * * *

When you bought your first house, you hadn't realized that it already possessed a tenet. "Possessed" being the operative word given that Grayson Black haunted your ex-boyfriend's body whenever he visited. Granted, Chadford had agreed to the possession (at least, he'd said "sure," when you invited him over for dinner with the caveat that his body be taken over by Gray so that your ghost housemate could taste a medium-rare steak again).

If your ex initially believed that the ghost thing was an excuse to invite him over so you two could get back together? Well, Chadford had been dissuaded of that the moment Grayson had levitated up from the floorboards and introduced himself. Maybe Chadford only agreed to help because of his desire to get back together with you, but if he'd wanted to remain a couple then he shouldn't have sold those candid photos of your family to the paparazzi. Helping Grayson drink an Arizona Iced Tea was the least he could do to apologize.

"Why are you dating this guy, anyway?" Gray asks, the words coming out of Chadford's mouth. It was a sight you still haven't become fully accustomed too: Chadford looking down at his own Hawaiian-print, popped-collar polo with an expression of condemnation, his mouth moving to the sound of your dead housemate's voice.

"Ford and I aren't dating anymore," you say as Gray (physically, Chadford) takes another huge bite of his sirloin. You stare at him a little pityingly from your seat across his at the kitchen table: his eyes (not the usual deep blue of his spectral form, but rather Chadford's brown) rolling back in bliss, his lips closing around the fork, and a low moan coming out of his mouth.

Coming out of Chadford's mouth, you correct yourself sternly. It wouldn't do to start thinking about Gray as alive. He isn't. Wishing otherwise is . . .

"But you did date him," Gray says triumphantly.

Damnit. Gray had been trying to find out why Chadford volunteered to be his surrogate tongue ever since this arrangement began two weeks ago. You'd been cagey (dating Chadford wasn't an accomplishment of which you were particularly proud), but Gray had been dogged in his questioning. You suppose it was only a matter of time before you let slip the fact that

"Only for a few months," you say, as if that caveat somehow makes your judgement less questionable. Chadford is nice(ish), but he's also about as intelligent as his name leads one to believe. Point in case: he thought that you wouldn't realize he was the one behind the photo leaks. Not that there'd been anything particularly incriminating over the shots that Chadford had shared with the paparazzi, but what mattered was that he shared them.

You sigh. This is why you no longer date.

"You must've . . ." Gray trails off, his/Chadford's eyes filled with yearning. He sets down his fork and forces a pained smile. "You must've liked being with someone who could leave the house."

You blink at him, confused. The way Gray is talking, it almost sounds as if he wants to take you on a date.

"Your company is vastly preferred," you tell him in as nonchalantly as possible, praying that he doesn't notice the quiver in your voice.

Gray's expression brightens. "Thanks," he says before once again falling silent. His hand reaches out to you, and his fingers brush, featherlight, against your cheek. "Beautiful," he whispers.

His eyes close, and when they reopen, the wistfulness has vanished.

"Babe," Chadford says. "How many calories did Gary eat tonight? You didn't let him eat any bread, right? Carbs are a no-go for this new diet I'm on. Bro Brogan recommended on his podcast, and said that his abs have . . ."

You tune out Chadford's lecture on ketones, your attention captivated by the ghostly figure behind his chair. The form of Grayson Black is transparent, giving you a view of the kitchen sink through his torso. His gaze meets yours, and a longing ache so strong that it feels physical causes your breath to catch.

Chadford's voice shatters the moment: "I don't mind helping Gary the Ghost out so you can cook the dude a homecooked meal; I just want to make sure that he's not carbo-loading."

Gray winces, although you're not certain whether it's from being called "Gary" or the reminder that he's dead.

"His name is Gray," you tell Chadford. "Just Gray."

[September Live Q&A: 9pm PST](#)

[Sep 30, 2022](#)

This month's live Q&A will be at **9-10pm PST today (September 30)**. You can use [this time zone converter](#) to figure out when that is your time.

I'll be discussing some of the choices and "hiddenish" scenes needed to achieve various endings, as there has ended up being a surprising amount of requirements for some of the more unique routes such as becoming Tobias Zarneki's best friend forever. This includes new conversations which you'll only get if you possess certain stats. If you can't make it tonight, this session will be recorded (internet and Craigbot allowing).

[Writer's Blog: Not a Perfect Ten](#)

[Sep 30, 2022](#)

The Great Rewriting Version of Chapter 9 (link at bottom of post) has been up on dashingdon for a while, although I didn't announce it in hopes that I'd be able to get the entire Chapters 9-15 update out this month. But if your saves were wiped sometime these past weeks: that's why!

Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 are done and ready to go. Chapter 10, however, is not. I was really trying to get it done by the end of the month, but it didn't pan out.

Warning: Spoilers for one of the game endings ahead.

I finished coding the Vengeance-allied ending, albeit it's not so much "allied with" as "taken over as Top Evil Moustache Twirler." Pursuing this ending has always been contingent upon Button having a high "Vengeance" stat and a low "Unity" stat (with variations based on relationships with Reese and Andy/Liz). But when I read through the whole shebang, it was extremely jarring to see Vengeance members automatically trust Button just because a certain politician gave the gladiatorial thumbs up.

No matter how antiestablishMENT Button may have consistently been in their thoughts throughout the game, the Vengeance crew are adamantly *not* mind readers. (And, yes, that pun will also be the

achievement name for earning this ending.) Prior to the final chapter conclusion where Button gives their Oscar Award Acceptance speech for best-acted triple agent, however, there's only one real chance for Button to win over the peons of Vengeance to their side: at the party in Chapter 10.

It was a conundrum. How could I better set up Button to attain their new position without it seeming unrealistic? How could Vengeance members be primed to accept Button as their overlord? And what clues could I provide to let readers know if they were on the right path?

Chapter 10's party had already undergone some tweaking, but I felt as if Button really needed an opportunity to *bond*, you know? Like, how can they be expected to run a terrorist cell unless they personally connect with their minions? Thus, in order to achieve the Vengeance ending, you now have to impress the britches off of *every single person* at the party.

Some of these new people, you only meet if you impress someone before them. Introductions are reserved for true believers (or those who do a REALLY good job posing as true believers). Instead of Button choosing who to talk with, you and Kenzie get introduced to different people depending upon how impressive you all. Catch all the Pokémon, and you may potentially get to boss them around post-game . . . provided the initial Vengeance/Unity stat thresholds are still met, as per the original writing.

Anyhow, the new party structure and interactions are a lot to rewrite and recode. Every ending that I've completed thus far has resulted in pretty massive early changes to Chapters 15-17, but this Vengeance ending is changing the most midgame code. I'm taking the weekend off (!!!) to attempt to creatively recharge, but after that will try to finish

I am really, really sorry about yet another update delay. I'd hoped to get the new stuff for Chapter 10 all finished by the end of today, but I have to concede defeat to my own ambitions.

As for what's new in Chapter 9:

(There are a lot of minor changes, but this list is the major stuff that I can remember. Chapter 9 has been rewritten for a while, so there's probably things I forgot as well. Version 2.0 was originally 20,000 words longer than the original, but I managed to prune the wordcount down to 37,000 words. Which is still 10,000 words longer than the first draft but doesn't drag as much.)

- 1) Overhaul of Button and Nick's reconciliation scenes. Nick's scene in the beginning has a lot more reactivity in general.
- 2) Reworked phone call with Hope. Rosy now stays for the call. Things should also be less repetitive, with the coding taking into account whether or not Button talked with Hope in earlier chapters. You should no longer have to restate your opinion on the BRS for the umpteenth time if it's already been discussed.
- 3) New conversations with Rosy or Nick should you choose *not* to have a phone call with Hope.
- 4) Nover-Nick is a lot punchier.

5) Many new dialogue choices sprinkled throughout, most of which I can't currently recall. The potential to refer to Kim as "Kimmy" now exists, however, so there's that.

Funnily enough, the one scene that I planned on changing the *most* ended up being the one that I reverted back to its original form. I added too much fluff to Kenzie's date (as you can see in the deleted scenes that I posted earlier this month), and the original version ended up maintaining tension better. It is, after all, an undercover mission and not an episode of The Bachelor.

Mind Blind 2.0: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

[MB Saucy Side: Puppy Love \(Featuring Kent\)](#)

[Oct 10, 2022](#)

Kent Zarneki looks like a man. His face is handsome, his grey eyes attentive and intelligent.

Had someone whispered in your ear that he was something more, you might have postulated that, if anything, Kent might be a vampire. He certainly possesses the stereotypical pallor and standoffish demeanor of a night lurker befitting bedtime stories of horror and romance, so much so that those not familiar with Kent's true temperament usually assume that your stoic boyfriend is cold and callous. "Ice King," the newspapers dubbed him throughout your relationship. Ironical, given that Kent is both hot as hell and the most physically affectionate person you've ever dated.

The press's misconception is understandable, you suppose. Kent's touches are usually subtle and hidden: stroking your thigh beneath the table during dinners; his fingers lingering overlong as he brushes a lock of hair from your eyes; his thumb pressing between your lips as he wipes away an invisible crumb; frantic, breathless kisses after he pulls you into the cloak closet at an overcrowded party (to Kent, all parties are overcrowded). His natural enthusiasm has been curbed by caution learned from an existence where public displays of affection provided paparazzi with photographs, and where a single hug from his father would lead to political speculation on whether the Mayor intended to take time off to spend with his poor, bereaved son. But there's a difference between who Kent was trained to be and who he *is*.

Each of his touches teaches you more about the real Kent. He's not indifferent; rather, he cares for you more deeply and abidingly than anyone you've ever meet. He may move the sleek grace of a cat (Sally accusingly refers to him as "feline" due to his tendency to accidentally sneak up on people), but Kent has the adoring heart of a puppy. The only condition to Kent's devotion is that you accept him, and you have with utter totality. . . even after he revealed his secret.

More so than his father's position, Kent's secret is the reason that he's held everyone at bay.

Until you.

Kent's heavy lidded gaze slides over your body and lingers on your throat. The hunger in his eyes is darker and more primal than lust. It would frighten you—it *should* frighten you—had belonged to anyone else. Kent, though, you trust utterly. Even as his silver eyes shift golden, you feel only excitement and longing. You could never fear Kent, not when you've seen his heart and given him yours. Not even on a full moon.

"So pretty," Kent murmurs.

Kent runs a claw—black, curved, talon-sharp—alongside the tendon of your neck, your breath hitching as his touch comes to a rest at the hollow below your jugular. His hands and eyes are the only things which have transformed so far, but his muscles are tense and straining. He's holding himself back, as promised.

"So fragile."

His claws explore lower, their caress against your skin featherlight even as their sharpness effortlessly shreds through the fabric of your shirt.

"I liked that shirt." Your protest is half-hearted, your eyelids drifting closed and head falling back as he licks down the pathway bared by torn fabric. A pleading whine escapes your lips.

"I'll buy you a new one," he promises in a rough voice before returning his attentions to your exposed skin.

You thread your fingers through his black hair and pull him close; a low growl rumbles from his chest as your lips interlock and tongues intertwine. His kiss tastes of toothpaste and copper, and his need matches your own, longing laced with both devotion and desperation.

Something sharp slices a hot streak of pain over your lower lip, and you let out a surprised yelp.

Kent stills.

"Did I hurt you?" he asks, gently drawing away. His voice is lower than usual, echoingly deep in a way that makes the hair on your arms prickle and your heartbeat race from something other than desire. Your mind and heart may not be afraid Kent, but your instincts? The generations of evolutionary intuition which kept your forebears alive? Those survival instincts scream at you to escape, to *run, damn you, run because he's a predator and you're a clueless deer and those fangs were designed to seize and shred and tear . . .*

No.

You refuse to fear Kent.

Your palm cusps his cheek, lifting his downcast head and gazing deeply into eyes as golden as the full moon outside your bedroom window. Kent's chest heaves with gasping breaths, his body shakes with effort to stave off the full change. *"With you, I think that I can remain myself tonight,"* he had said. *"I want to remain myself."*

Slowly, as if comforting a wounded animal, you roll back Kent's upper lip. You stare without judgement or disgust at his extended canines, jagged fangs forcing their way through bloodied gums in a too-small human jaw that stubbornly refuses to shift. That explains the copper of his kiss. You've seen Kent's wolf form, once, but never the transition from man to beast. Kent had warned you that his shapeshifting wasn't pretty, yet you hadn't realized that it hurt him. Werewolves always transform so easily in the movies.

The truth is uglier and far more brutal. No wonder Kent wanted to fight the moon with you by his side.

You smile at him reassuringly, only to wince as the cut on your lower lip pulls. "Nothing a little Neosporin won't fix," you tell him. "I'll be fine."

"I hurt you," Kent's expression turns crestfallen as he stares at your mouth.

He stands abruptly, and you almost tumble off the bed at the way the mattress shifts from the movement. Then his entire body spasms, his back curving like a bending cage bar. He collapses back onto the bed with a guttural, broken moan.

"Leave," he orders.

You wrap your arms around his shivering torso and mutely shake your head. His lips and teeth migrate towards your neck, his growl is so low that you feel its vibrations.

"Leave!" he snarls. This time the command is ragged and begging, his low voice—so low, it no longer sounds like Kent—cracking on the word. "I can't . . ."

You place both hands on his shoulders, forcing him upright so that you can glare directly into his eyes.

"You can, and you will." You grin widely, ignoring the sting of your lip splitting even further open. "When have I ever been wrong?"

His laugh at your audacity ends in a pained whimper. Still, your boyfriend is well-trained.

"You're never wrong," he jokes between muscle spasms. "Except I . . ."

"No exceptions," you say with mock sternness. "I'm always right. And Kent?"

His eyes, squeezed tightly shut through the pain, reopen. They're still attentive and intelligent, but the hunger is darker than ever before. Their gold is so bright that it burns. This time, his expression does scare you a little, but you push down the fear and focus on the man—not the beast—in front of you.

"It's okay if you can't hold it back," you say softly. "You'll still be you, and I know that you would never hurt me."

It's only when you say the words aloud that you realize the full depth of their truth. The instinct to flee dissipates entirely, and you cradle him in your arms with newfound resolution. Even if the moon wins and Kent end up losing a part of himself tonight, he would still never hurt you. He might become stripped of his words and rationality (last month, he almost ate Antigone), but his desire to keep you safe is as deeply ingrained as your need to protect him.

Wrapped in your tight hug, Kent's breathing eventually steadies. He buries his face in the crook of your shoulder, but the proximity of his teeth to your neck doesn't make you shudder as it did before. You simply hold him tighter and wait for morning.

Hours pass. Neither of you fall asleep.

Dawn creeps in through the window, its light through the glass casting rainbow prisms against your bedroom walls. Kent stops trembling.

And when he finally looks up from your embrace, his eyes are once again grey.

[MB Saucy Side: Puppy Love \(Featuring Kenna\)](#)

[Oct 10, 2022](#)

Kenna Zarneki looks like a woman. Her face is beautiful, her grey eyes attentive and intelligent.

Had someone whispered in your ear that she was something more, you might have postulated that, if anything, Kenna might be a vampire. She certainly possesses the stereotypical pallor and standoffish demeanor of a night lurker befitting bedtime stories of horror and romance, so much so that those not familiar with Kenna's true temperament usually assumes that your stoic girlfriend is cold and callous. "Ice queen," the newspapers dubbed her throughout your relationship. Ironic, given that Kenna is both hot as hell and the most physically affectionate person you've ever dated.

The press's misconception is understandable, you suppose. Kenna's touches are usually subtle and hidden: stroking your thigh beneath the table during dinners; her fingers lingering overlong as she brushes a lock of hair from your eyes; her thumb pressing between your lips as she wipes away an invisible crumb; frantic, breathless kisses after she pulls you into the cloak closet at an overcrowded party (to Kenna, all parties are overcrowded). Her natural enthusiasm has been curbed by caution learned from an existence where public displays of affection provided paparazzi with photographs, and where a single hug from her father would lead to political speculation on whether the Mayor intended to

take time off to spend with his poor, bereaved daughter. But there's a difference between who Kenna was trained to be and who she *is*.

Each of her touches teaches you more about the real Kenna. She's not indifferent; rather, she cares for you more deeply and abidingly than anyone you've ever meet. She may move the sleek grace of a cat (Sally accusingly refers to her as "feline" due to her tendency to accidentally sneak up on people), but Kenna has the adoring heart of a puppy. The only condition to Kenna's devotion is that you accept her, and you have with utter totality. . . even after she revealed her secret.

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No.

You refuse to fear Kenna.

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Hours pass. Neither of you fall asleep.

Dawn creeps in through the window, its light through the glass casting rainbow prisms against your bedroom walls. Kenna stops trembling.

And when she finally looks up from your embrace, her eyes are once again grey.

[I'm Alive \(And So Is My Mom!\)](#)

[Oct 31, 2022](#)

Celebrations all around, because my mother recently completed her final chemo treatment! The doctors decided to end it a few months early due to how much she's struggled . . . which should provide some insight into why I've been so quiet this month. It's very hard to find designated writing time (let alone

inspiration!) while being a fulltime caretaker. Thankfully, though, my mom is awesome even if she has been pranking me non-stop this month (as those on discord can attest given the pictures that I've posted). I'll be staying another month in Washington for her to get her energy back, and then I will be stealing her dog and returning to Chicago to write on my own computer.

(O! Dearest Computer With A Quiet Fan! How I Hath Missed Thee And The Golden Focus Thou Didst Provide!)

I'm super sorry for my silence for this month, and I'll be uploading a few short stories tomorrow (on top of everything, we've been having constant power outages lately, so stuff hasn't saved and I've wanted to weep). The good news is that things will only get better from here on out!

More excitingly: the Vengeance-Allied Ending for Mind Blind will be released in November.

The evil ending isn't the one I intended to release first, but it's the first one that ended up being 100% finished--I'm just reworking some of Boris's scene in Chapter 10 because it's important to really *bond* with the dude whose been driving Miss Daisy around, you know? (Miss Daisy being your brother, btw.)

But who is Boris? One of two new Vengeance members! Originally there were five new additions, but the chapter ended up so long (i.e. tedious) that I had to excise two. So now Boris and Juliette are the only new editions, and Juliette is saving her fabulous debut for the next update. All I'll say is that Telemetrists are *terrifying* and honestly writing Vengeance's ending has made me really thankful that they don't exist in the real world. (Sorry, Hope and Nick! I still love you two despite being grateful for your fictional nature.)

Anyway. Plans to get out the chapters for *Mind Blind 2.0* were delayed by all the work I did on the Vengeance party while finalizing the Vengeance ending, but as apology, I've included some of Boris's intro scene below (complete with some coding so that you can get an idea regarding some the variation).

Spoilers ahead! (Major spoilers, seriously. *Mind Blind's* final chapter is directly foreshadowed.)

A lot of Boris's scene was rewritten today, so I haven't fully edited it yet (ergo, please beware of typos).

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Chapter 10 Excerpt

**if (heretoparty > 55)*

"I suppose you should meet Boris." `Andy` casts a brief, dismissive look at `Kent` before returning `this` attention to you. `Khe` leans in close (a little `too` close) with a conspiratorial smile. "You'd get along with Boris. Other than Reese, he's the best at making new recruits understand how dangerous Ments are and why they can't be allowed to roam free."

**if (Nover = false)*

`Is Khe` suggesting that we all wear collars and leashes?`/i` Nick demands tartly. `Because that's too kinky for my tastes.``/i`

`Andy` waves over a man with a somewhat patchy and uneven attempt at "sexy stubble" as if he avoids looking at the mirror while shaving. You can't tell if he's in his early thirties or late forties—the heavy bags beneath his eyes are at odds with an otherwise youthful face.

"It's my turn, then?" he asks `Andy` with a sardonic half-smile. "You must really like the new kids if you're exposing them to `me.``/i`" He turns to you, smile slipping. "I scare off most newbies, so `Andy` only introduces me to the true believers."

`Andy` scowls at him. "Don't make us sound like a cult, Boris."

"Aren't we?" Boris asks.

Choice: *"Cult? Nah. More like a cool secret society into which I want membership."*

`Andy` smiles at you, but Boris just sighs morosely. "The price of admittance is high," Boris says. "For you, it cost a brother."

**if (Nover = false) and (guiltyButton)*

You flinch. Even if Boris's accusation isn't strictly true—Nick is still with you, in a roundabout way—it's disturbingly akin to your own internal dialogue.

`But why would a member of Vengeance judge you for hurting me?``/i` Nick wonders.

**if (Nover = false) and (guiltyButton = false)*

Is Boris alluding to Aeon's bombing or Vengeance's orchestrated kidnapping? Either way, you haven't lost Nick yet.

`Nor will you,``/i` Nick thinks stoutly.

**if (Nover = true)*

If only that were true.

[i]Love you too, \${sister} dearest,[/i] Nick thinks sarcastically [i]But why is a member of Vengeance judging you for Aeon's bombing?[/i]

"Boris used to work for a nonprofit law firm that represented Ments who felt they were discriminated against," \${Andy} says. "In return, a client murdered his brother."

Boris winces. "That's the SparkNotes version, at least. The full story is long and tedious."

Choice: *Nevertheless, I want to hear the long and tedious full story.*

"The full story is that I represented an actuary who was terminated from his job," Boris says. His voice comes across almost robotic, his expression shuttered. "It was a fitting position, given that the guy was a Precog, but he was relying more on his ability to see the future than actual number crunching to access risks."

\${Andy} clears \${khis} throat.

"Right," Boris mutters. "The case doesn't matter. I lost, anyway." He smiles bitterly. "It was the first case that I ever lost."

"The Precog decided to take revenge," \${Andy} says.

"That's not exactly how it happened," Boris counters, looking conflicted. "From our very first meeting, the client treated me strangely. Refused to look me in the eyes, kept muttering under his breath about 'evil deeds.'"

"Sounds like he had a vision about you," \${Kent} comments.

"More like a hallucination," \${Andy} says.

"The man was insane." Boris shakes his head. "The vision that he claimed to have never would've come true had he not . . . But I'm getting ahead of myself."

"The Precog figured out where I lived," Boris continues. "I still don't know if he followed me home from the trial or had a vision. Regardless, he staked out my house one night and waited for me to get back."

There's an edge of hysteria in Boris's laugh.

"Would you believe that I was working late at the office?" he says. "On the goddamn Precog's case, no less. I was reviewing if we could file an appeal regarding his wrongful termination." He lets out another pained laugh. "While the Ment was plotting my, I was working my ass off trying to save his dumb desk job. Hilarious, right?"

Choice: *I mean if I'm being completely honest, it's not [b]not[/b] funny.*

When Boris finally stops laughing, he wipes away a tear of . . .

No. Not mirth. Boris might be trying to hide his real feelings, but his lower lip is quivering and there's a roughness in his words. You realize that Boris is only laughing to keep himself from breaking out into sobs.

**if (humorous > 40) and (depressed > 5)*

He may fool others, but not you. Like recognizes like.

"I'm a twin," Boris says. "This asshole—" he jerks his thumb at *Andy*—"always tries to correct me when I say that. Tell me that I *was* a twin, but he doesn't get it. I don't think that anyone really can unless they have a twin themselves."

He inhales a shuddery breath.

"Milo stopped by my place that night," Boris says. "It was the day before our birthday, and we'd always celebrated together. I didn't think we'd be able to because he'd just gotten a new job in New York, but he flew to surprise me. Was getting our birthday cake from the trunk of his rental when the bastard stabbed him in the back.

"Not because he wanted to kill Milo, but because he thought it was me."

**page_break*

"I didn't testify against him in court," Boris says. "I couldn't. I was a lawyer and knew what kind of questions his defense attorney would ask. Did I do anything to lead his client to believe I was a danger to others? Would I consider the death of future criminal to be murder or vigilantism? Could his client's actions be justified? Was my brother . . ." Boris's voice breaks.

"The Ment claimed to have had a vision where Boris detonated a bomb into downtown Chicago," *Andy* says. "No details about the type of explosion, mind you. Simply rambled on about—" *Andy* uses *this* fingers to create air quotes—"his duty to protect the lives of innocents."

"The Precog was convicted for thirty years," Boris says dully. "The minimum sentence. His lawyer managed to convince some of the jury that his client had foreseen me commit an act of terrorism, and thus my brother's murder was no more than a tragic case of mistaken identity."

"Boris's murder, however, would've been fine." *Andy's* sarcasm is borderline caustic.

"I wish it had been me," Boris says. "I wish it had been me every single damn day." He shakes himself out of his contemplative state, his eyes meeting yours. "My law firm unilaterally decided that we should 'amicably split' since clients no longer trusted me. The week after they let me go, Vengeance reached out."

"Reese could never turn a blind eye to such injustice," *Andy* says piously.

Choice: *I feign a sympathetic expression. Given that Boris is now a member of Vengeance, the Precog was clearly onto something.*

Too bad he shanked the wrong twin.

"I'm sorry for your loss," `$_{Kent}` tells Boris. From anyone else, the platitude would sound hollow, but `$_{Kent}`'s expression and tone conveys a depth of understanding that goes deeper than mere politeness.

Boris nods at `$_{khim}`. "And I yours," he says gruffly.

[October Q&As: This Friday and Saturday](#)

[Oct 31, 2022](#)

Because today is Halloween, a lot of you probably have plans involving disguising yourself as a yellow minion and trying to pass as twelve-year-old to the neighbor who hands out the *big* candy bars (I can't be the only one who did this at age 16). Or, if you're like me currently, you'll be frantically rushing to finish two half-written short stories while handing out Twix bars to anyone in the neighborhood under age 80 (I think there are five kids in my mom's neighborhood, maybe).

Either way, **October's Q&As will be this Friday and Saturday (November 4 and 5)**. Which technically means it's not an *October* QA, but if you're on the UCRT for this month then I'll add you manually to the discord so you can attend (just let me know if Patreonbot preemptively kicks you off the Sanctum channel!).

November's *actual* Q&A will be Thanksgiving weekend (tbd via a different poll).

I'll be frank (and you'll be Fred): I'm exhausted, y'all, and I'm not sure that I'd be able to keep it together this evening. I didn't want to postpone this session, but I also don't want to be a buzzkill on a night that should be all about rewatching Halloweentown and eating twenty minibags of M&Ms in one sitting. . . or going out in public dressed to scandalize the neighbors a la Nick.

The good news is that the postponement gives me time to put up a poll on what times work for everyone! (This past week, I haven't been able to focus on much except my mom's last treatment and thus didn't have the foresight to post so in advance.) If your Patreon subscription lapses before then, just let me know (preferably via discord, as I've had issues with Patreon messenger), and I'll make sure that you have access to the live Q&As :)

Please select the timeslots that work for you (multiple selections are allowed). There will two Q&As, one on Friday and one on Saturday.

5pm - 6pm PST, Friday, November 4

6pm - 7pm PST, Friday, November 4

7pm - 8pm PST, Friday, November 4

9am - 10am PST, Saturday, November 5

10am - 11am PST, Saturday, November 5

11am - 12pm PST, Saturday, November 5

Other (Please Specify In Comments)

24 votes total

[Mind Blind Short Story: Busted](#)

[Oct 31, 2022](#)

It was not a dark and stormy night. The weather was, in fact, surprisingly temperate for late-October Chicago at a balmy seventy degrees Fahrenheit (fifty given windchill). For Nicholas Wiseman and his too-short miniskirt, this was a blessing. Not that he wasn't willing to brave the frozen wastes in fishnets for the sake of Sohvi's Halloween party, but the tissue-thin habit of his sexy nun costume wasn't particularly warm. He glanced over at Grayson, whose own costume of Robin Hood was considerably less revealing (although, much to Gray's chagrin, the tights which Nick had lent him left little to the imagination).

"How do you think Button is holding up?" Nick asked for what must've been the twentieth time in the twelve minutes must've been since they'd departed his condo.

Gray pulled at the hem of his tunic awkwardly before giving up. "Your sibling is eighteen, Nick," he said. "They'll survive a night without you."

"I know that," Nick claimed, knowing no such thing. "But maybe I should've stayed home with them."

"They told you to get lost," Gray reminded him. "Button didn't want to ruin your night with their cold—they know how much you love Halloween. The best thing for recovery is rest, and they can't do that with you hovering over their shoulder and force-feeding them soup."

Nick sighed. Logically, he could acknowledge that Grayson was right, and he had made three different types of soup in case Button got hungry, so it wasn't as if they'd starve in his absence. Even so, it was difficult not to worry when his every instinct took one look at his stuffy-nosed and soar-throated sibling and screamed to summon five independent doctors just to make extra-extra sure that they were okay.

"Are you sure that this is Sohvi's address?" Gray asked, coming to a stop in front of a dilapidated townhouse.

Its appearance had to be a façade for the festivities; Sohvi was too fastidious to live in a house with peeling paint and a decaying porch. He double checked the address on his phone. Maybe she'd rented the place for the party?

"2446 Darrow Street," Nick said. "This is the place."

"It doesn't look like anyone is inside." Gray gestured to a dark window on the second floor, cracks spiderwebbing out from its center.

"Well, Sohvi isn't the type to play a prank," Nick said with false confidence. Maybe this was the universe's way of telling him that he should've stayed home with Button? "Let's go."

Nick became increasingly certain that this was the right place as they walked towards the door. The fenced in front garden was tiny but meticulously cared for—who else but Sohvi would be able to coax so many flowers to bloom out of season? Granted, the only plants which Nick recognized were the purple and white hyacinths, and those only because Hyacinth was his middle name. He did know that they usually blossomed in spring, however.

Gray's knuckles rapped on the front door.

"It's open!" Sohvi's voice called out from within the house.

At her greeting, a tightness in Nick's chest eased. Not that he was in anyway afraid of abandoned houses. He wasn't. But he was already feeling anxious because of Button's cold, and the last thing he needed was to relive *The Shining*.

Gray tugged down the hem of his tunic again before opening the door. Nick's first impression of Sohvi's foyer was that she needed to hire a housecleaner: particles of dust drifted in the hazy light of a dozen half-melted candles, and there was a stale smell in the air of mothballs and something pungent that Nick couldn't quite place but reminded him vaguely of durian.

"We're all upstairs!" Sohvi's voice called as one of the candles sputtered out.

Nick closed the door before the wind extinguished the other candles. He must not have done it quickly enough, however, because two more snuffed dark. Then two more, even though the door was shut.

"Drafty in here," Gray observed as all but one of the remaining candles died.

Nick squinted. Given that only one candle remained, it was too dark to see anything. Impulsively, he reached out with his mind, double checking that Sohvi was upstairs, only for his thoughts to brush against . . . nothing.

No one else was in the house.

“Something’s wrong,” he told Gray, who was holding up the sole surviving light like a beacon as he squinted up the wooden stairwell.

“What do you mean?” Gray asked.

Nick flicked his fingers downward in the UCRT sign that meant “building is vacant.”

“Are you guys coming up or what?” Sohvi’s voice demanded from above. “Come on, you’ve got to see Kim’s costume!”

That confirmed it. There was no way in hell that Ambrose Killjoy Kim would ever dress up for Halloween. Motioning for Grayson to keep watch, Nick closed his eyes and reached out.

The second floor was, as Nick suspected, abandoned. Nick had seen plenty of unoccupied spaces via his telemetry—half his job was psychic scouting suspicious locations that turned out to be dead ends—but there was vacant and then there was *empty*. The second floor was the latter: there were no guests, no party decorations . . . not even a single piece of furniture. Only decaying floorboards and the same half-shattered window that Grayson had pointed out from outside.

Nicholas Wiseman was not a superstitious man. Not that he was close-minded, he just wasn’t a true believer. He may have only recently taken over as Justice, but he’d been an AMO long enough to know exactly what this was. He opened his eyes to see Gray staring at him with concern (although it was difficult to discern his friend’s expression in the dim light). Nick tapped his temple—once, twice—and Gray nodded agreement and opened his mind. Not that Nick could read any of his friend’s thoughts (at least, not without trying), but Gray’s guard lowered enough that they could communicate and Nick could be sure that no other Ment was listening in.

We’re dealing with someone capable of creating auditory hallucinations, Nick thought to Grayson. Someone powerful enough to make ME hear things so at least a Ten.

I figured something was going on, Gray thought back. Are you sure that they’re not on the premises? Because they seem to know that—

“Hurry up before we run out of beer!” Sohvi’s voice screeched from above.

Gray glanced at Nick, waiting for him to lay out a plan. That was how they worked: Nick coming up with the ideas and Grayson either approving or rejecting them depending upon how reckless he deemed Nick’s approach.

Crack.

Nick looked down to where the floorboard had suddenly buckled beneath his feet. Well, that was new.

"It's just like Wiseman to be late," Kim's grumpy voice drifted down from the stairwell.

Clearly, whoever he and Gray were up against wanted them to go upstairs. Screw that. Nick wasn't oppositional defiant, but he was too smart (or at least, too well-trained) to obligingly trapse into what was clearly a trap. Even if a tiny part of him was curious what would happen if he Leeroy Jenkins-ed the second floor.

Let's head out and regroup, he thought to Gray. *We need to make sure that Sohvi is okay.*

Ambrose as well, Gray thought.

Nick grabbed the door handle. It didn't budge.

Your turn, Fortitude.

Gray jiggled the knob, frowned, then placed his splayed-out palm against the door. His frowned deepened.

"Something's wrong," Gray said aloud, his voice trembling. "Nick, I don't think this a Ment that we're dealing with."

"What do you mean 'something's wrong?'" Nick demanded. "Just blast open the damn door."

"I can't because—"

Whatever Gray was about to say was lost as his body was yanked backwards, spine bending in a perfect arch as something *pulled* him up the stairs.

Shit. Logic dictated that whatever had grabbed Grayson was another Telekinetic, but Nick hadn't seen anyone nearby. As far as Nick knew, there wasn't even another Telekinetic in the USA let alone one with enough range to grab his friend a story down. Alternatives? Nothing natural. Which left . . .

"Come on up, Nick," Sohvi's voice taunted from above.

"Join the party, Nick," Kim's voice added with an unnervingly high-pitched giggle.

"You won't regret it, Nick." This last line was said by Gray.

Damnit. Nick reached out—he could *feel* Gray upstairs, his mind oddly calm. Was Gray asleep? Leave it to that asshole to get knocked unconscious and leave Nick alone to fight a ghost. (As soon as the thought occurred to him, Nick immediately regretted it. Grayson was in no way an asshole, even if it was awfully inconvenient of him to get taken out of play. Nick would've been concerned for his friend's life,

but he'd waken Gray up from enough naps at his desk to know that, even unconscious, Gray's telekinesis had a way of kicking in to defend himself from bodily harm.)

Nick didn't bother trying the door again. Even if he'd been allowed to escape by whatever . . . entity had taken Gray, he wasn't about to leave his friend stranded. He grabbed the candlestick that had clattered to the floor; the silver felt reassuringly heavy in his hand.

Nick's final thought before heading up the dark stairway was that he should've stayed at home with Button.

* * * *

"I take back every good thing that I've ever thought about you," Nick informed Grayson over lunch the next day. "You're a jerk. I genuinely thought that you'd been ghost-napped."

"Consider it payback for the tights," Gray said, taking a sip of the soup thermos that Nick had packed him. "And for your prank last Halloween. I'm pretty sure that my father disowned me after seeing those photos."

"How'd you get Kim and Sohvi to cooperate?" Nick asked.

Gray smirked. "I promised Sohvi that I'd file her next five mission reports. Kim didn't need incentive."

"The tape player under the floorboards was an ingenious touch," Nick admitted. "How long did it take you to master flying up the stairs like that?"

Gray grimaced and rubbed a bruise on his lower forearm. "Longer than I'd care to admit," he said. "But your expression was worth the effort."

"And so the student becomes the master." Nick leaned back in his chair, lifting his own thermos cup in salute. "I'm proud of you, kid."

"Thanks?" Gray looked wary at the praise. Good. That meant that he was learning.

Grayson may have won this Halloween, but next year? Nick had already solicited Button and Sally's assistance, and Gray's fake ghost ass was getting busted.

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions: On Why He Wears Skimpy Halloween Costumes](#)

[Oct 31, 2022](#)

Growing up, hating Halloween wasn't an option. I guess that I could've been an oppositional defiant brat, but that would've broken Mom's spooky heart because Halloween was basically the holiday manifestation of her soul. Less so since she left, although she did smile the other day when telling me about some of the trick-or-treaters in her and Dad's neighborhood.

But I have a confession. It feels kinda disloyal, but my favorite Halloween was the one where Salome's dads took us trick-or-treating. Button and my parents were out fighting crime. Well, Mom was fighting crime. If I remember correctly, Dad had been roped into speaking at a conference in New Mexico—something about urging the government to finally shut down the Roswell experiments on Telekinetics. Button and Sally were seven, and I was almost thirteen so had almost-but-not-quite aged out of the activity of going door-to-door begging for candy.

Honestly, I only joined the kids because my "girlfriend" at the time (by which I mean, our neighbor with whom I held sweaty hands with while walking home from the bus stop) had recently broken up with me because I'd taken Button out for ice cream even though I'd agreed to go with her. (But Button had come home crying due to being bullied, so no regrets.) Still, despite my completely valid justification, Madison needed to be with "someone who wanted to spend time with her and not his baby sibling."

(Why do I remember her exact words even though I was only twelve? Let's just say that she established a pattern.)

Whatever. Maddy's now married to an English teacher in Kentucky and posts on social media about once a month about how we were childhood sweethearts. I'm pretty sure that my first kiss paid for her Mercedes.

But back to Halloween (even though my romantic past is way scarier than any ghoul or goblin).

Like I said, my favorite Halloween was the last one I had my own pumpkin bucket for candy. Once I hit my teenage years, I stuck to either going to parties with friends or escorting Button on nights that my parents were working. I had never met Salome's dads before that night, and I was kinda "eh" about tagging along with two kids who were half my age. I admit, I may not have behaved the most maturely about the whole thing.

Commentary from Button: He referred to Halloween costumes as "babyish" and refused to dress up.

I'd like to remind the peanut gallery that I was twelve. But Button's right: I didn't wear a costume. My mom had tapped into her cosplaying background to make me a LED-lit Portal Gun, but I had a freshly broken heart and was therefore too emo and cool to dress up.

Until I saw what Salome's dads were wearing.

Scratch that. The fact that they were dressed up like Spartan warriors from the movie *300* didn't really impress me (although Matteo's sword was super cool, and he and Joey were both pretty ripped due to construction work).

No, what impressed the **hell** out of my preteen self was how much *positive attention* these two previously boring suburban dads received from other parents. The old dudes had *game*. Especially once Joey got a migraine and had to head back home—all the divorcees presumed that Matt was single and freaking *pounced*. I remember one lady literally trapping the four of us on her patio by using her body to barricade the gate until Matt politely told her that he had a husband.

Commentary from Sally: I hate reading this. Those women were gross. My dads were gross. Now I need a shower.

Commentary from Matteo: Personally, I like reminiscing over my six-pack.

Commentary from Joseph: Matt. Honey. Love of my life, light of my days. You and I both know those abs were the result of cleverly applied self-tanner and a forty-eight hour fast.

In retrospect, the flirtation was borderline sexual harassment. But at the time? People treated Matt the way that I wanted to be treated. They wanted him (or at least, his body). He was desirable, because he wore barely any clothes.

The message was clear. In order to heal my broken heart, I needed to find a new love. And in order for a new girl to accept me, I needed to sluttify my costume. (In my defense, it was seventh-grader logic.) I headed back home, cut the legs off my Portal jumpsuit, then put it on and left the top tantalizingly unzipped.

Commentary from Button: He looked like a scrawny idiot and kept shivering from the cold. DM me for photos.

Again, I was TWELVE. Obviously, I looked like a scrawny idiot. I was a scrawny idiot. Plus, my plan backfired. I insisted that we stop by Madison's house, so she could witness my sexy glory and shed bitter tears of regret over having dumped such a fine male specimen.

Commentary from Button: She opened the door, saw Nick, and started laughing her ass off.

Are you telling this story or am I? But Button's right: she told me that I looked like a loser. It was the worst night of my existence.

Well, not really. But it felt that way at the time.

Commentary from Matteo: The fault is mine. I should've said something, but I figured if the outfit made you happy then, hey . . .

Commentary from Sally: Hey, who cared if he looked like a moron?

Again, guys, please stop picking on a twelve-year-old child. Past me is sensitive. And Matt . . . you were great. After Madison had stomped all over my tender heart with her furred Uggs, Matt and Joseph sat

me down in the living room while we were waiting for Sally and Button to organize and divide their pooled candy based on who liked what. It was the first time that I'd heard the phrase "body positivity."

See, I thought that they'd gone out half-naked because they both liked the attention. And they did, to some extent, especially seeing the other look good. But mostly, they explained that they dressed that way because it made them feel good about *themselves*. Because normally, they had to always appear and act a certain way as Sally's parents but that dressing up like Ancient Greek warriors in skimpy loincloths made them feel proud of the way that they looked even if they still valued being "family friendly" more the rest of the time. They said that my parents felt the same way, and that Mom's costumes had been way gorier before I was born.

Commentary from Button: She did NOT skimp on fake blood. DM me for photos.

Matt and Joey also told me that I probably shouldn't try to dress sexy until I was at least in college. (They also hinted about how much fun college parties could be, which is half the reason why I studied so hard after that.) Anyway, the next Halloween, I was the one in charge of taking Button and Sally around the neighborhood, and I wore a perfectly age-appropriate Grim Reaper outfit.

Commentary from Button: Our mother designed the costume. It didn't skimp on fake blood, either. A toddler fainted.

My Halloween costumes continued being pretty tame until I enrolled in Aeon. Once it became clear that I was headed towards UCRT, I remembered everything that Salome's dads had said about needed to act a certain way every day and not really being able to just . . . enjoy and feel proud of how hot that they were. Being parents is probably harder than being a public figure, but I pretty much felt the same way.

That October, I bought a sexy fireman outfit.

[Writer's Blog: Impressing The Party People](#)

[Nov 4, 2022](#)

*First off, October's Q&A for UCRT tier patrons will be held **today (Friday, Nov 4) at 7 – 8pm PST** as according to the poll. The second one will be **tomorrow (Saturday, Nov 5) at 11am – 12pm PST**.*.* If you were on UCRT tier last month but no longer have access to the discord channel, please dm me on discord and I'll grant you access.*

Now! Onto Rewritening news:

Chapter 10 will get posted this evening or tomorrow at the latest. I'll make an update announcement once it's up on dashingdon, but I wanted to get this post out while we still had semi-stable power as my town is under yet another wind advisory and lights been flickering. Gotta love the Pacific Northwest.

The only thing I have left to fix is the numerical values for the "heretoparty" variable, since the math is Picasso levels of wonky. Chapter 11 will be out before next Tuesday—I just need to fix the party numbers there as well. (Chapters 12 through 14 may be uploaded as well, but I'm trying to stop promising things since there's always a million and two unforeseen problems that arise when I do my final playtest.)

As for Chapter 10, there's a lot of changes (and almost 15,000 new words!). Here are the highlights:

1. Glitch has new names for your gear (and also more bad puns). There's now a conversation where you learn about some of their past experiments . . . and failures. Rosy has opinions.
2. I ultimately deleted the scene that Button stay home alone instead of going over to Kenzie's house. The clues available at Kenzie's house are too important to cut off access without making it clear that you'd be missing out on something. That said, I'll post the deleted scenes as a short story sometime this month. (And beware! Some of the clues at Kenzie's house can still be missed!) To make the strongarming make more sense, there's now an imperative for Button and Kenzie sticking together pre-party (insightful Buttons can notice this reason before Kenzie does).
3. At Kenzie's house, choosing to eavesdrop now leads to much heavier foreshadowing. Let me know if it's too baseball batty.
4. Nick is cattier to Nover!Buttons (Buttons who have the worst possible relationship with him). There's also more variation in Nick's dialogue depending on your overall dynamic (newly reconciled, equal partners, or him still being more protective).
5. All players now meet both Caleb and the Barnes by default. After that, you need to pass a progressively harder "heretoparty" stat check (which measures how convincing you've been undercover) to learn about Isaiah and meet two new Vengeance members.
6. The two new Vengeance members are Boris and Juliette. I would very much want to be friends with Juliette if she wasn't a terrorist. She has cool hair.
7. Caleb's conversation is longer. Did you know that Button and Caleb graduated high school the same year? Because Caleb knows.
8. Cathy Barnes' name has been changed to Edith in order to better differentiate her from Caleb.
9. The "heretoparty" stat requirement to meet the new members can be passed if you earn enough affection with Andy/Liz.

10. Both AL's and Reese's affection meters are now hidden. There are more subtextual clues in the text as to how they feel, however (this applies to all chapters where they appear going forth).

As with the first draft of *Mind Blind*, you earn "heretoparty" points by getting Vengeance to believe your cover story. Options like showing interest, acting empathetic, and generally keeping your cover will raise party points. Dialogue options which show disinterest or sympathy towards Ments (or referring to Reese a violent extremist) will lower your party points. Having a high interpersonal score also makes it easier.

Almost every option in Chapter 10 will lower or raise your party points, so choose wisely (and please let me know if you feel the thresholds are too easy or hard).

You'll need to meet all seven Vengeance members in order to pursue the "Vengeance Ending." Jerri, Caleb, Mitch, and Edith are all met by default. Convincing AL to tell you about Isaiah is pretty easy—you just have to have a "heretoparty" stat of over 50, which is the number you start with, so as long as you're not actively *unconvincing*, you'll be able to learn that Isaiah is a Precog. Meeting Boris requires that "heretoparty" be over 55, which is also pretty easy to achieve. Meeting Juliette, however, requires "heretoparty" to be over 62, which doesn't leave too much wiggle room for flubbing up (but is still very doable across a variety of different answer combos).

Alternatively, you can just seduce AL and they'll introduce everyone.

[Writer's Blog: New Version of Chapter 10 \(Finally\) Up](#)

[Nov 23, 2022](#)

To see the (by no means comprehensive) changelog, you can go here:

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/writers-blog-74241673>

To read the updated chapter, go here:

<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind-20/mygame/>

Average playthrough length for just these 10 Chapters is 90,000 words. Please remind me to make *Delivery for the Damned* shorter.

Sorry that this took so long to get up! There's been some setbacks (aka my inability to leave well enough alone and stop rewriting--I actually still want to rework Rosy's muffin explosion scene, but finally slapped my hands away from the keyboard and told myself "NO. Bad Jo! Stop changing everything until after all the endings are finished."). Plus, I've been busy packing up to move back to Chicago, plus- PLUS I finished coding another one of the endings.

Gray falls out of a helicopter. Glamorously.

It's very sexy, and also very disastrous.

I love it.

. . . Gray does not.

Of course, coding an ending doesn't mean diddlysquat if 90% of the variables required in said ending don't, uh, actually have opportunities to trigger anywhere in the previous chapters. Most of these are clues (cryptically: "lab", "doorlisten", etc.). Other of these new variables are personality traits!

For example:

Chapter 10 now has a dialogue option that marks Button as a bad liar. This variable is, creatively, called "badliar". Being a bad liar will cause issues in some endings.

(I'm evilly smirking right now, by the way. Y'all have *no idea* how chaotic some of the endings are.)

Anyway, "badliar" can also be triggered in Chapters 12 and 15. So it's not an action that's being remembered, but rather something that Button has said about themselves. Right now, I'm going through Chapters 11 - 17 and adding in a bunch of opportunities for these personality variables to trigger.

Why did these get added? Honestly, whim. While writing the endings, I had several instances where it occurred to me that "hey, it would be pretty nifty if this played out a differently because Button is super clumsy and thus drops the gun they're trying to point at someone!" I managed to restrain myself from reworking earlier chapters to add traits, but figured that I might as well include them since I was already working on adding foreshadowing (or "clue variables") to Chapters 10 - 17.

Does that make sense? I'm hoping my explanation makes sense, but it's almost midnight and I need to post this before I turn into a pumpkin.

Anyhow, I'm confident at this point that all the variables needed by the endings are now in Chapter 10. I am less confident that the procession of Vengeance members plays out smoothly, so please let me know!

Rest of the chapters will be posted once all the new variables are added, and you can save on this version and it'll work on future updates. Chapters 11 - 13 will go up on November 29th.

My goal is to release the Vengeance ending and hopefully one other by end of December (which was also my goal for this month, but moving cross country has been more time consuming than I'd anticipated).

[UCRT Story: Hell Has No Escape, Part 2](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/ucrt-story-hell-72469403>

Ambrose had presumed that Ellery and Nick had chosen his speedo maliciously until he saw what Nick was wearing. As cohost, Nick wore black to contrast with Abril's signature white, although there was hardly enough fabric in Nick's bathing suit for most people to notice their coordination. Unlike the contestants, however, Nick's outfit did acknowledge his august position: he wore a dress tie.

No shirt, mind you. Just a black tie, neatly knotted around Nick's bare neck and falling flat between his pecs.

"Rosy!" Nick's smile likely appeared authentic to anyone who didn't know better. Ambrose knew better, of course, but he pasted on a smile that was equally false. The general public loved Justice, after all. Maintaining Nick's lie that the two of them were friends would enhance Ambrose's popularity with viewers, and thus increase his odds of winning the million dollars.

"Why are you here?" Ambrose asked Nick, lowering his voice so that the microphones couldn't pick up on the question.

"To babysit your ass, of course," Nick replied, also sotto voce. "I had to be sure that you didn't *cheat*."

Ambrose bristled, knowing full well what the other man was implying. "I have never influenced someone's thoughts unless there was a critical necessity," he said stiffly.

Nick sneered. "It's not as if you've proven to be trustworthy."

"You two don't act like friends," Denny said.

Ambrose and Nick both turned to him, shared false smiles immediately plastered upon their faces.

"We are," Ambrose said.

"The very best of friends," Nick agreed.

The two men bared their teeth at each other in ferocious smiles of true friendship.

"Uh-huh." Denny sounded dubious but didn't press the issue. He smiled, genuinely, at Nick. "It's great to meet you. I'm not the rabid fanboy that Kile is, but you dudes on UCRT great work."

Nick cast an apprehensive look over at Kile, who immediately perked up upon noticing that Nick was paying him attention. Nick hastily diverted his gaze.

"The Ideals are—" Nick began, only to be cut off by Abril's shrill whistle.

"Alright, love seekers, it's time to meet the girls!" Abril waved to a few meters away where a small circus tent had been set up on the beach. "Within await five lovely ladies eager to meet you!"

Chet let out a wolf whistle as he and Kile high-fived. Ambrose thought that Denny may have rolled his eyes at them, but ultimately dismissed it as being too out of character for the surfer/future dentist.

"One by one, each of you will entire the tent," Abril announced. "Rosy, due to your advantage of knowing the host, you'll be going last. For the rest of you, the girls have rated your photos on a scale from one to ten. The democratically elected hottest goes first."

"That's kinda gross, dude," Denny said. "I thought this show was about love."

"It is about love, Dennis," Abril replied, aiming her smile at the cameras. "It's also about having a nice butt."

Denny frowned.

"Lucky for you, the ladies voted your butt the nicest!" Abril told him. "Get that tight tush to the tent, Mr. Eight-Point-Seven!"

"Does that mean that no one scored a nine or ten?" Kile asked. "That's broke. I should've at least ranked a—"

"Any day now, Denny," Abril said, raising her voice to speak over Kile. "True love awaits!"

Denny offered his fist to Ambrose. "Wish me luck, dude."

Ambrose stared blankly at the other man's fist until, chuckling, Denny finally bumped it against Ambrose's shoulder.

"We'll work on it, dude," Denny said before heading into the tent.

He emerged a minute later, arms linked with a statuesque woman even taller than Denny. Ambrose allowed his gaze to trail down her body, sizing up the competition. Upon reevaluation, she wasn't actually that tall, but those stilettos could be used to gouge a man's eye out. Once again, Ambrose found himself wondering what training regime these women went through to be gain the balance which allowed them to walk across sand in heels.

Chet elbowed Ambrose's side, wagging his eyebrows in a way that showed he'd clearly mistaken Ambrose's cool evaluation of Denny's partner for something more prurient. "Too bad you have to go last, huh?" he said. "Don't worry, bro. I'm sure the leftover won't be a total butterface."

Ambrose sidestepped away from Chet, biting down the retort that he was in no way, shape, or form a 'bro' of the frat-boy-turned-financial-planner. Nick caught his eye: the bastard was smirking.

"Vaughn, you're up next!" Abril shouted. "Congrats to Mr. Eight-Point-Six!"

"That's almost the same as Denny's number," Chet said as Vaughn bowed in gratitude towards the cameras. "I guess that means we all ranked similarly." He looked relieved by the thought.

Vaughn entered the tent. He emerged with a blonde woman whose disappointed expression perked up when she noticed the other men standing off to the side. She gave them a small wave from the other side of the beach, her gaze lingering on Ambrose as she and Vaughn went to stand beside Denny and his partner.

The blonde might be a potential partner to win this thing; someone already interested would be easier to manipulate.

Chet went into the tent after (Mr. Eight-Point-Two), followed by Kile, whose expression fell upon Abril's perhaps-too-gleeful reveal that he'd been the only one ranked a Seven.

"Well, we're down to our final contestant," Nick told the cameras with a wink. "Rosy and I have been friends ever since shortly after I became Justice, so I'm super excited to see who he gets paired with!"

"Aw, your bond is too cute!" Abril gushed, her words sending a shiver of disgust down Ambrose's spine. "Any secrets that you can spill about our mysterious Mr. Kim, Nick?"

Nick was smirking. Ambrose didn't like when Nick smirked; it made him uneasy.

It made Ambrose *doubly* uneasy when Nick turned down the bait.

"Rosy doesn't have any secrets, Abril," Nick said. "He's just an all-around great guy. Any of the other contestants would be lucky to have him."

Ambrose's eyes narrowed on Nick suspiciously, but he only smiled benignly back without any biting insult. That confirmed it: something was definitely off.

"Well, it's your turn, Mr. Nine!" Abril said. "The girls really loved your . . ." She motioned towards Ambrose's bare chest pointedly, licking her lips.

"Personality?" Nick filled in.

"Let's go with that," Abril said. "Into the tent you go, Rosy."

Suicide wasn't an option that Ambrose would ever consider, but perhaps it wasn't too late to stage his own death. While regrettable that he wouldn't fulfill his promise to Ellery, Ambrose didn't know how long he could take this charade before he snapped.

Especially if everyone kept calling him 'Rosy.'

Ambrose sighed as he headed towards the tent. Truth was, he was a coward. He wouldn't fake his death to escape this situation, because doing so would mean throwing away the one fundamental truth

about himself that he'd always clung to like a life raft, the character trait which he relied on defining himself in order to not sink into the depths of self-hatred.

Perhaps it was a self-appeasing lie, but Ambrose liked to believe that, at his core, he was an honorable man. His version of honor may not appear as such to others (certainly, Ellery and Nick would justifiably disagree given his past actions), but he nonetheless abided by certain self-imposed standards, amongst which was—as Sohvi had phrased it during one of their mandated meetings—“an almost masochistic willingness to sacrifice himself for others.” Ambrose wasn't quite sure he agreed with Sohvi's analysis (he didn't want to agree), but it was definitively true that he would never put his own desires ahead of another's.

Ironic, maybe, that he thought that way. But his past choices had never been about whim or will—it had been about necessity.

For necessity, Ambrose had been willing to compromise his identity and allow Ellery to pay the price. Given the outcome had been mostly as he had predicted, he couldn't even claim that he fully regretted his actions despite Ellery and Nick's suffering.

Despite the dark direction of his thoughts, Ambrose kept his expression pleasantly neutral for the cameraman who followed him into the tent, the lens of his recorder hovering a foot in front of Ambrose's face. It was disorienting, but tolerable.

“Tilt your head up,” the cameraman instructed. “I want an angle of you staring at the sunset.”

Fine. It was intolerable. But Ambrose could put up with the intolerable. He stared at the sunset until the cameraman motioned for him to continue onwards to the tent.

Upon entering, faking his death became even more appealing.

“I've been waiting *forever*,” whined Salome Alavidze. “What took you so long?”

[Saucy Side: Death Comes To Disneyland \(Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Nov 29, 2022](#)

Ambrose had never considered himself to be sexy.

He was wrong, of course, as you take every opportunity to point out to him, often loudly and in public so that he has no choice but to agree with you in order to quiet your shouted declarations. Your boyfriend is sexy, and that is a fact.

He's also dead.

To be fair, you're also supposed to be dead. *Would* be dead, if not for your and Ambrose's meet-cute. It's a tale as old as your romance (which is to say, two years): Human meets Grim Reaper. Human hits on Grim Reaper. Grim Reaper delays collecting Human's soul out of curiosity over Human's illogical behavior, and eventually ends up falling scythe over heels for Human.

Make no mistake: Ambrose will kill you someday. It's something that you've talked about in length, especially since you won't be able to have dinner with his family until you've kicked the bucket. But for now, he's leaving you alive so that the two of you can go on dates to Disneyland.

You smile and adjust Ambrose's mouse ears, ignoring his put-upon sigh.

"I don't comprehend the appeal of this place," he complains, gesturing to the hoard of other tourists around you. "It's overcrowded, and I fail to understand the allure of rollercoasters."

"It's about the thrill," you say. "Going fast, feeling like you're about to die . . . it's exciting!"

Ambrose smirks. "Do all humans find brushes with death to be so thrilling?" He leans in close, his breath tickling the upper shell of your ear. "Is fear truly so . . . arousing?"

You smack his arm. "Knock that off," you order. "There are children present here."

"Then we should go somewhere else," Ambrose suggests. "My place, perhaps?"

"For the final time, I'm not prepared to die yet," you retort, glaring at him disapprovingly. "We'll move in together when I'm good and ready."

"Whenever you wish," he sighs. His defeated expression quickly gives over to desire as you place a placating kiss upon his lips, and he wraps an arm around your waist. "In the meanwhile. . . how about our hotel room?"

"You're extremely sexy right now," you tell him.

"Knock that off," Ambrose echoes back. "There are children present here."

* * * *

Truly, almost dying was one of the best decisions that you ever made. Not that you'd been trying to kill yourself—you hadn't—but chasing Sally into a burning building without protective gear hadn't been your smartest move. It all turned out for the best, though, since that's the day that you met Ambrose.

Once inside your shared hotel suite, he pushes you onto the bed and pounces. Usually, he takes his time, but a day spent waiting in lines has made him impatient. He doesn't bother to undo the buttons of your shirt: after the first fumble of hasty fingers, he simply pulls it open, his supernatural strength shredding through the fabric with ease.

"I'll buy you another," he promises before you can chastise him for ruining yet another article of your clothing. Then his lips prevent yours from replying, and you forget everything except him.

Prior to the first time he kissed you, you'd expected Ambrose's touch to be cold. The man is literally Death, after all. But instead, his skin is like an inferno, so much so that the heat of his kiss borders on painful.

"Mortals aren't meant to touch Death except for the once," he'd told you. "I've never been concerned with whether my body temperature pleases them."

Well, it pleases you. **He** pleases you.

The initial tentativeness with which he first touched you has long since vanished; his mouth twists in a feral snarl of need as he strips away the remainder your clothing.

"So impatient," you tease, only to gasp as his fingers curl around the edge of your pant waistband.

He pauses at your words, his firebrand touch stilling against your skin.

"Is something wrong?" you ask.

Ambrose shakes his head. "I've never been impatient before," he says. "Immortality means never really having to wait. Everything will happen, and sooner is no different than later. But with you . . ." He trails off, gazing at you with eyes bright with desire and wonderment.

"Waiting in lines today was intolerable," he says, "because every hour in a line meant an hour waiting for *this*."

He lays over you, hips aligned with yours. The heat of his skin is near unbearable, yet you clutch his shoulders and beg him for more. Later, you'll examine your body for burn marks only to find that there are none. For now, you can only comply with his silent commands as he presses you into the mattress, his caress branding your skin, his lips scalding your neck, his every movement bringing you both closer and closer to falling apart.

Hours later, you wake up to find yourself using Ambrose's chest as a pillow. He smiles fondly as you blink at him groggily.

"You've taught Death to be impatient," he says. "But I'll wait to take you until you're ready."

[Saucy Side: Death Comes To Disneyland \(Ambrosia Version\)](#)

[Nov 29, 2022](#)

Ambrosia had never considered herself to be sexy.

She was wrong, of course, as you take every opportunity to point out to her, often loudly and in public so that she has no choice but to agree with you in order to quiet your shouted declarations. Your girlfriend is sexy, and that is a fact.

She's also dead.

To be fair, you're also supposed to be dead. *Would* be dead, if not for your and Ambrosia's meet-cute. It's a tale as old as your romance (which is to say, two years): Human meets Grim Reaper. Human hits on Grim Reaper. Grim Reaper delays collecting Human's soul out of curiosity over Human's illogical behavior, and eventually ends up falling scythe over heels for Human.

Make no mistake: Ambrosia will kill you someday. It's something that you've talked about in length, especially since you won't be able to have dinner with her family until you've kicked the bucket. But for now, she's leaving you alive so that the two of you can go on dates to Disneyland.

You smile and adjust Ambrosia's mouse ears, ignoring her put-upon sigh.

"I don't comprehend the appeal of this place," she complains, gesturing to the hoard of other tourists around you. "It's overcrowded, and I fail to understand the allure of rollercoasters."

"It's about the thrill," you say. "Going fast, feeling like you're about to die . . . it's exciting!"

Ambrosia smirks. "Do all humans find brushes with death to be so thrilling?" She leans in close, her breath tickling the upper shell of your ear. "Is fear truly so . . . arousing?"

You smack her arm. "Knock that off," you order. "There are children present here."

"Then we should go somewhere else," Ambrosia suggests. "My place, perhaps?"

"For the final time, I'm not prepared to die yet," you retort, glaring at her disapprovingly. "We'll move in together when I'm good and ready."

"Whenever you wish," she sighs. Her defeated expression quickly gives over to desire as you place a placating kiss upon her lips, and she wraps an arm around your waist. "In the meanwhile. . . how about our hotel room?"

"You're extremely sexy right now," you tell her.

"Knock that off," Ambrosia echoes back. "There are children present here."

Truly, almost dying was one of the best decisions that you ever made. Not that you'd been trying to kill yourself—you hadn't—but chasing Sally into a burning building without protective gear hadn't been your smartest move. It all turned out for the best, though, since that's the day that you met Ambrosia.

Once inside your shared hotel suite, she pushes you onto the bed and pounces. Usually, she takes her time, but a day spent waiting in lines has made her impatient. She doesn't bother to undo the buttons of your shirt: after the first fumble of hasty fingers, she simply pulls it open, her supernatural strength shredding through the fabric with ease.

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Hours later, you wake up to find yourself using Ambrosia's chest as a pillow. She smiles fondly as you blink at her groggily.

"You've taught Death to be impatient," she says. "But I'll wait to take you until you're ready."

[Chapters 11 and 12 \(+Chapter 10 New Scene\)](#)

[Dec 17, 2022](#)

I disconnected myself from the internet this month in hopes of getting the first ending up before I returned back to Washington for the holidays. However, given that my flight leaves in less than three hours and I now need to call a taxi, completion . . . seems unlikely.

(My goal is to still get at least one ending up by Christmas, though! I just need to finish changing things in Chapter 13 to reflect the new scene added to Chapter 10, which was added to Chapter 10 due to something that happens in the Vengeance-ending pathways. It's a lot harder to update a demo when the many endings are all in Active Development and thus things constantly change.)

That being said, I wanted to at very least get out the what Chapters *are* currently playable before I departed (which needs to be in fifteen minutes, so my fingers are flying on the keyboard and there may be typos, also, the changelog will only list the major new/changed stuff both because I'm running out of time to post this and because I genuinely don't remember everything that was changed since these chapters were mostly completed a while ago excepting for last minute alterations to reflect the endings. And yes, that prior sentence is the mother of all run-ons, but hey, its 3:20am. There was no way that I was waking up for such an early flight, so I decided to work through the night.)

Very Summarized Changelog:

Chapter 10

*-*Alternative location in Reese's office to plant the micromint

-A new clue in Reese's office! (Hint: delay planting the mint for as long as possible. Innovative Buttons have an edge on finding the new materials.)

Chapter 11

*-*New trigger thresholds for Andy/Liz's suspicion scenes

-New reactions for when Button arrives back home

Chapter 12

*-Living room convo reflects past chapter changes (such as new bug location and Chapter's 10 stalker minivan)

-Tweaks to Sohvi's dialogue, including depression scene triggers

-Additional romance scene with Sally, including for Buttons who are still just crushing

-Sally will now end things with Button if they constantly act ridiculously

-Glitch's breakup scene is both more and less guilt-trippy

-Major structural overall so that everyone now plays through the Agent Ferguson scene before going on their specific RO dates (that scene has a *lot* of important information, so I made it unmissable. This also means the longer date versions got snipped back to the original size, but I post the longer versions when I have time!)

NB: I'll be uploading the remaining chapters as soon as I can once again get to a computer and add in all the new clue acknowledgements. I'll also be listing the requirements needed to go through the first end route, for those who want to have the game smoothly acknowledge all your choices and not magically pretend that Button spoke with Caleb instead of Isaiah (which it'll do should otherwise).

New Link (Please don't post elsewhere!):

[https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind---rewrite/mygame/\[\]](https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/mind-blind---rewrite/mygame/)
([https://www.patreon.com/bardictype/posts?filters\[tag\]=December+2022](https://www.patreon.com/bardictype/posts?filters[tag]=December+2022)).

[UCRT Story: Hell Has No Escape, Part 3](#)

[Dec 31, 2022](#)

Part 1: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/ucrt-story-hell-72469403>

Part 2: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/ucrt-story-hell-75281508>

Spoiler Notice:

This story contains mild spoilers for one of Mind Blind's major ending paths. I was hoping to get said endings posted tonight before this story (so I could have a disclaimer to read the demo first if you want

to go in completely blind), but that's not happening tonight despite my best efforts :(

I did redact a bit so the spoilers shouldn't be quite so blatant. But, uh, stuff is very directly alluded to. Although maybe it seems more obvious to me because I know all the details? Regardless, if you don't want any spoilers whatsoever, you may want to bookmark this post for later.

Part 3 also originally included the story's ending, but that had even bigger spoilers regarding Mind Blind Proper, so I split this story into Parts 3 and 4 with Part 4 going up as soon as the ending does. (Tomorrow, if I work with the speed of Hermes. Realistically, the first week of January.)

Anyway, Hell Has No Escape is officially the longest story short story I've ever written. I really liked this premise, but I ultimately had to force myself to wrap it up before the situation grew stale. Plus, I felt as if Kenzie, Glitch, and Gray were being neglected. (Glitch in particular was throwing a temper tantrum demanding to be admitted as a show contestant, but if I allowed that then story would spiral into utter chaos and never end.)

In my defense: Ambrose in a speedo was a lot of fun to imagine!

* * * *

* * * *

Ambrose Kim had never believed in Santa Claus. Belief in a benevolent, toy-distributing old man with the power of unlimited telemetry to supervise every child on earth . . . such a far-fetched fantasy was a luxury belonging to children with indulgent parents, not to war orphans who didn't even know the exact date of their own birth.

Still, Ambrose mused, he must be on *some* omnipotent entity's naughty list. Otherwise, his punishment for past actions would have been less torturous—such as jail or execution.

Not being partnered with one of his former students on a reality dating show.

Ambrose glanced warily at Alavidze, who sat next to him on the loveseat for their first “Couple’s Therapy” session. Nick sat on a wooden chair across, playing the role of “Love Therapist,” with a camera set up behind him to record the session. If any hell existed more cruelly brutal than Ambrose’s current existence, he lacked the imagination to conceive of it. The only consolation was that Nick appeared equally disgruntled by recent turn of events, although Ambrose remained somewhat mystified as to why Nick’s displeasure over Alavidze’s appearance meant that Nick had spent the past half hour glowering at *him*.

“How do you two feel about being coupled?” Nick asked through gritted teeth.

Alavidze—Sally, he’d need to begin thinking of her—answered before Ambrose could mentally compose an answer that wouldn’t get him immediately kicked off the show (in accordance with his *Love Archipelago* contract, excessive profanity was prohibited).

"Oh, I'm *thrilled*," Sally squealed, squeezing Ambrose's upper arm.

Ambrose flinched, and Nick's glower darkened. It was intriguing, the way that Wiseman reacted to Alavidze. A weakness Ambrose could exploit, perhaps? No, he had to stop thinking that way. If Ellery had decided that Nick and Sally were to be his jailors, then Ambrose was obligated to tolerate their presence.

"I was a little worried when no one picked me at first," Sally continued blithely, "but Rosy-posy was so worth waiting for. I feel a real spark between us, you know?"

"Enlighten me," Nick said.

Sally's grin turned sharp. "I know it's early days, but . . . I really think that Rosy and I could be soulmates!"

Ambrose choked on air, while Nick's expression soured further.

"There's a ten-year age gap between you and 'Rosy-Posy'," Nick said. "You don't foresee that being an issue?"

Of course it's an issue! Ambrose wanted to shout. *Alavidze is a spoiled child who pouted over not being handed a weapon with which to injure herself!*

Neither Nick nor Sally paid attention to the flicker of disgust that crossed Ambrose's expression, their interest and animosity directed solely at each other. Let Alavidze keep speaking, then. She'd misstep eventually, lose audience sympathy, and then Ambrose could push to be coupled with someone else without directly undermining Ellery's will. Perhaps Vaughn's clearly disinterested match? Yes, the best strategy was for Ambrose to remain silent and let Alavidze fail on her own account.

Alavidze—that is, *Sally*—giggled, her death grip on Ambrose's bicep tightening when he attempted to subtly shift away. "I'm very mature for my age," she said, and Ambrose somehow managed not to roll his eyes at her claim. "We're all adults looking for love here on *Love Archipelago*, so what's the issue?"

Nick glanced over at Ambrose as if expecting backup, but Ambrose only smiled back indifferently. If Nick self-sabotaged alongside Alavidze due to being unable to master his emotions, all the better. Ambrose would stand a better chance of fulfilling Ellery's demand and winning *Love Archipelago* without having to tiptoe around those two human landmines.

"No issue," Nick practically growled. "You two make a . . . Very. Cute. Couple." He glared at Ambrose. "Don't you agree, *Rosy*?"

Ambrose shrugged, refusing to rise to the bait. At least, he attempted to shrug; Alavidze's grasp on his arm was such that he had limited mobility. "Sally seems like a lovely woman," he said. "I disbelieve in love at first sight, but we'll see how our personalities mesh."

There. That comment should win points with viewers. Let the audience believe Ambrose to be emotionally shuttered without being shallow (ergo the personality comment). That way, when he did ultimately “fall in love” with another candidate, the relationship would conclude a satisfying character arc. Ambrose had done his research on the show: over half of previous season winners shared the same narrative trajectory, and “love skeptic” was a far more believable persona for Ambrose than “starry-eyed romantic” (the type which made up the other half of winners).

Sally, however, was clearly aiming to be cast as the “romantic” type. She heaved a melancholy sigh and glanced at Ambrose from beneath her thick fringe of eyelashes. Her intent was clearly to come across as demure, but Ambrose could detect the glint of sadism in her hazel gaze.

“It’s disheartening that you don’t feel our connection,” she said with another deep sigh. “But I’m sure you’ll come around.”

“I’m sure he will,” Nick echoed, sounding pained.

* * * *

Much to Ambrose’s disappointment, Sally and Nick managed to get through the interview without attacking his character. Had either done so, Ambrose could have gone on to portray himself as a maligned victim to the voting public—an underdog worthy of their votes.

Morally questionable? Perhaps, but Ambrose was in no way morally obligated to babysit either of them: his debt required adherence to Ellery’s condition that he win *Love Archipelago*. Alavidze and Justice jeopardized Ambrose’s victory, therefore, Ambrose would arguably be within mission perimeters to plot their downfall. He had a sinking suspicion, however, that Ellery would not agree with this assessment. Thus, Ambrose restrained himself to minor provocations such as returning Sally’s arm squeeze and subtly alluding to her physical attractiveness. Nothing that would cause major fallout, but he gleaned a small amount of joy from Nick’s increasingly pinched facial expression.

Allowing Sally and Nick to self-implode fell within the realm of ethical behavior, Ambrose deemed, so long as he himself did not directly cause this particular explosion.

Still, it pained his inner tactician not to orchestrate their exit off the show. A few dropped hints regarding a salacious relationship between cohost and contestant, and Ambrose was certain he could get Chet agitated enough to accuse Nick and Sally of a rule-breaking emotional affair.

But Ambrose was attempting to become a better person.

Becoming a better person sucked.

Ambrose, Sally, and Nick exited the therapy hut to find the other couples waiting for them on the beach. Ten identical pink suitcases stood in a neat line off to one side.

"So glad you decided to finally join us!" Abril said cheerfully. "I trust your first therapy talk as a couple was productive?"

Nick gave a noncommittal grunt. Ambrose schooled his expression into a gentle smile before saying, "It was enlightening."

Sally cuddled up to his side. "Extremely enlightening," she cooed, her sarcasm only barely audible. "I'm convinced that Rosy and I are *ment* to be."

Ambrose's smile didn't falter, but he flinched internally. At least no one but Nick (judging from the idiot's smug smirk) had caught onto Sally's pun.

"Good, good," Abril said absently, not really listening. "Now, I was just about to explain the rules of our first Love Challenge to everyone."

"Denny and I are in it to win it," announced Denny's partner, a woman whose tightly braided hair matched her intense personality. She sat on the edge of her beach chair like a clarinet player about to give a solo: back straight, shoulders squared, and staring at Abril with the focused intensity usually given to an orchestra conductor.

Denny, on the other hand, relaxed on his fully reclined chair with a lazy grin. "Viv, let's just have fun, yeah?"

Viv frowned.

"Rosy and I are in it to win it, too," Sally announced, her competitive spirit ignited by Viv's attitude.

The two women glared at each other. Back when he was still mastering English, Ambrose had watched a cartoon where lightning bolts had crackled between two characters interlocked gaze. Viv and Sally had a similar energy.

"Love the can-do attitude, girls," Abril chirped, "but the outcome of this game depends on how well you can size up the other contestants. 'Baggage claim' is exactly what it sounds like; inside every suitcase is someone's, well, baggage!"

"Their deepest, darkest secret," Nick said, smirking ominously at Ambrose.

Abril nodded. "To make sure the pathway to a genuine relationship goes smoothly for you love-seekers, we're making sure that you start things off honestly. That way, you and your partners can work through

Ambrose wasn't all that worried. Given his agreement with Ellery, and Nick's complicity in their arrangement, any public reveal of Ambrose's *actual* darkest secret would have fallout equally as harmful to the Wisemans. That being said, Nick still looked smug, which meant that whatever was inside Ambrose's suitcase was designed to humiliate him as much as possible, and likely more damning than

the fact that Ambrose still occasionally watched *Animaniacs* and *Gargoyles* reruns despite no longer needing the subtitles to master a second language.

But maybe Ambrose was being too optimistic in his pessimism. Nick Wiseman loathed him. Of that, he was certain. What if, in his capacity as Justice, Wiseman had figured out a way to circumvent Ellery's involvement in the coverup? Revealing Ambrose actions on national television would leave Unity with no choice but to arrest him. While arrest was what he deserved, it would only cause more problems if handled publicly. People would be too willing to take his actions out of context. He'd be held up as a sign of Unity's weakness, used as propaganda by the same terrorist groups he'd sacrificed his soul in order to take down.

Surely even Nick Wiseman realized as much?

A bead of sweat trickled down the back of Ambrose's neck, one which had nothing to do with the midday sun.

"Dude, I don't have any deep dark secrets," Denny said.

Ambrose's eyebrow rose skeptically before he curtailed it back to neutral position. Only three possibilities existed when someone claimed to have no secrets: either they lived an incredibly boring existence, had absolutely no sense of shame, or their secret was so dark that they felt confident that it was well hidden. Given that Denny had enrolled in a reality dating show, Ambrose could rule out the first option. Which meant that either Denny was shameless (a rare trait, but one which Denny might possess given his lackadaisical personality) . . . or that there was more to the dentist/surfer than initially met the eye.

"I don't have any dark secrets neither!" Kile proclaimed, even less convincingly than Denny.

Ambrose met Kile's gaze, holding it until a muscle in other man's cheek twitched and he looked down at his sandals. Yes, Kile definitely had secrets.

Chet and Vaughn didn't voice their innocence. Vaughn was preoccupied trying to entice his disinterested partner into conversation, while Chet's expression had become tight.

"Well, I for one have all sorts of naughty secrets," giggled Chet's partner, oblivious to Chet's anxiety. "Like, my real name isn't even Gigi!" She leaned in towards Denny, using her arms to push her cleavage together. "It's Giuliana," she said in a husky whisper. "Sexy, right?"

Denny flashed her a grin. "Sexier than my real name, dude."

"I think the name Rachel is sexy," Vaughn hopefully told his partner.

"Again, my name is Raquel," she snapped.

Vaughn looked confused. "That's what I said?"

"It's not," Sally said.

"It's really not," Denny confirmed.

Raquel just rolled her eyes and went back to ignoring Vaughn.

Abril snapped her fingers, recalling everyone's attention. "To learn about your pasts, our producers interviewed your families, your friends, and your exes. We also hired a team of P.I.s." Her smile turned predatory despite the bubble-gum pink lipstick. "A few of you had secrets that not even your loved ones knew!"

"But you owe it to your partner to be honest." Nick's menacing grin matched Abril's, giving Nick insight to how they'd once dated.

"This is bullshit!" Chet exploded. "You can't just—"

"We can, honey," Abril said, casually examining her manicured cuticles. "Re-read your contract."

"Screw the contract," Chet hissed. "Screw y'all, in fact. I'm done."

"You'll pay the exit fees, then?" Abril asked. "After all, it'll cost the show at least \$200k for each day delayed to find a new contestant."

Chet fell silent, but his attitude remained belligerent. Gigi inched her seat away nearer to Denny.

"Now, unless someone else wants to throw a temper tantrum, it's time to start the game," Abril continued. She glanced over at the camera crew. "Cut Chet's attitude out of the scene. No need to give him a villain edit just yet."

"Each person will randomly select a suitcase," Nick explains. "You'll read out the 'baggage' inside, and then guess who it belongs to. If you guess incorrectly, the baggage holder has a decision to make: they can either step forward and own up to their pasts . . ." He looked at Ambrose, expression grim. ". . . Or keep quiet and hope that their misdeeds can't be pinned on them."

"I'm proud of all my misdeeds," Gigi boldly declared. "Let's go!"

Ambrose shuddered.

[UCRT: December Live Q&A](#)

[Dec 31, 2022](#)

This month's Live Q&A will be at **3pm PST tomorrow (Saturday, December 31st)**. I can reschedule it for later in the day if enough people request, but was trying to avoid conflicts with anyone's NYE plans.

Will I be able to get out *Mind Blind*'s three Vengeance-flavored grouped endings by then? Possibly! Maybe! I'm going to try, and if I fail . . . I'll feel really guilty and disappointed with myself, because I really wanted to get out at least one ending before this year's end. I genuinely get more accomplished if I overshoot when it comes to goals, because trying to meet a perhaps impossible deadline means that I just keep writing at 70mph until my tank is completely empty.

So cross your fingers and send me positive vibes that I can fix Chapter 13's blown cover scene to better fit with "The Devil Wears a Button-Up Shirt" ending.

By the way, I'd recommend that anyone planning to attend this month's Q&A take another look at [this post](#). I'll be sharing my nifty arrow diagram which shows what major Chapter 16-18 decisions the different endings stem from.

The endings that I'm frantically finalizing are *The Devil Wears a Button-Up Shirt*, *Pragmatism Is Sexy Because You're Not Dead*, *Minor League MVP*, and *Sins of the Father (Trauma R Us)*.

[MB Short Story: Dive Off The Deep End \(Featuring Gray-crushing Button\)](#)

[Jan 28, 2023](#)

Third Base is sticky. Despite the tattooed bartender's best efforts to slip napkins beneath his client's drinks, the counter is irrevocably gummy in a way that testifies to a decade worth of sloshed Vodka Cranberries and knocked-over Malibu Sunsets.

The bar's name calls out its patrons' hopes for the night: *Third Base* isn't a place where one went on a first date or to meet with friends—it's far too crowded and loud for any sort of intellectual connection. *Third Base* is cramped and dimly lit, its music a loud *ump-ump-umph* that carries over conversations and forces people to lean in close to talk. You can overhear connections being made between the electro beats:

"I think you're sexy."

"Well, I think YOU'RE sexy."

"Wanna get out of here?"

Cue the exit of two men, only for three already-tipsy newcomers to cram their way through the door and take their place.

The dive bar is out of your comfort zone, although you rather admire the out-of-season Christmas lights that festooned the wall, as well as the miniature plaster T-rex that prowls on a shelf above the cash register. Still, every instinct in your body screams that being here is dangerous. A crowded place, for someone like you? Who knows how many of the other customers are Ments.

Granted, that assumes anyone would be able to hear your thoughts over the music.

A hand grabs your shoulder, and you spin around in the bar stool to face Sally. Your best friend's curls are disheveled, her glare turning ferocious as someone reaches over her head to pass the bartender a crumpled ten-dollar bill.

"I'm too short for this shit," she grumbles. "Why are we here again?"

"No particular reason," you hedge. "It was recommended to me by a friend."

"Uh-huh." Sally directs her glare at the man sitting next to you until he relinquishes his seat. She sits beside you and gestures for the bartender to make one of whatever you're having. "Which friend?" she asks.

Your brain blanks: you hadn't anticipated a follow-up question.

"Eduardo," you blurt.

Sally stares at you.

You stare back belligerently. "Ed is a nice guy," you lie. You know full well that she can tell you're lying (Sally's still a Ment, after all, even if she can't directly interpret your thoughts), but you have to save at least a sliver of your dignity.

Thankfully, Sally loves you enough to play along. Kind of.

"I'm sure Ted is great," she says, "but you normally wouldn't be caught dead in this kind of place."

"What's wrong with this place?" you demand defensively. "They serve great drinks."

She stares at you disbelievingly.

You take a nervous sip of your drink (tonic water with a slice of lime since you needed to stay sober for tonight's mission). "I like the ambience."

Sally keeps staring.

"Fine," you sigh. "I'm here to . . . check something." Against your will, your eyes dart towards where the bar's corner where, through the crowd of people, you can just barely make out a pretty woman charmingly laughing at a man's joke as she charmingly toys with a ringlet of her long brown hair. Katherine-No-I-Don't-Go-By-Kate does everything charmingly, which is probably why Gray is dating her. She was British as well, which meant that she and Gray shared a cultural appreciation bordering on reverence for tea and referenced things in their conversations that left you cluelessly blinking—you still weren't certain whether "Basil Brush" was the name of a mutual friend or a pet cat.

Sally follows the direction of your gaze. "You're stalking Grayson's girlfriend," she says in a resigned voice. "Again."

"I'm not stalking her," you bristle. "I'm looking out for Gray."

"Uh-huh." Sally's expression is unimpressed. "And Gray asked you to do this?"

Well, no.

"Not in as many words," you admit. "But I overheard him telling Nick that Katherine was acting distant lately, and I just thought that . . ."

"You thought that if you caught her cheating, Gray would break up with her and instantly fall in love with you instead," Sally finishes. "So, what, you followed her here from her workplace? Then called me to join you?"

You guiltily bite your lower lip.

She doesn't need to know that you didn't so much as "follow" Katherine as you did "remotely hack into her cellphone's GPS." Nick is already guaranteed to give you hell once he learns of your actions; you don't need a lecture from Sally as well. All this is to protect Gray, after all. It's not like you have selfish or impure motives.

. . . Or so you justify to yourself.

Sally levels you with a look implying that she knows *exactly* how "pure" your actions truly are. In fulfillment of her best friend obligations, however, she doesn't let her dubiousness get in the way of acting supportive.

"Anything to report?" she asks instead. "Is Kat the Rat cheating?"

A loud snicker escapes your mouth, which you quickly cover behind your hands before the sound draws Katherine's attention (not that she would hear you over the loud music). Katherine is pretty, you'll begrudgingly acknowledge, but Sally's nickname for her is nonetheless fitting: there's a certain rodent-like quality to the woman's narrow, pinched features. Although that could just be the way her nostrils twitch as if she smells something unpleasant whenever she's around you.

“She’s been flirting with that guy for the past ten minutes,” you inform Sally.

Sally squints over at the couple. “Oh!” she exclaims. “He’s a Bear!”

While the man is certainly massive, you’re not quite sure that . . .

“He plays for the Bears,” Sally amends at your obvious confusion. “One of the new trades, Elijah Something-Or-Other.” She shrugs at your surprised stare. “My dads watch a lot of football. My knowledge is regrettably unavoidable.”

Kat the Rat leans in closer to Elijah Something-Or-Other, resting her manicured hand on his bicep with a flirty giggle that carries over the bar’s clamor. She was never that affectionate with Gray—were it not for the fact that Nick had confirmed the two were dating, you would’ve been able to convince yourself that they were merely friends.

You can’t hear what’s being said between the two in the bar, but you squint and take your best shot at lip-reading, mimicking Katherine’s high-pitched voice: *“Oh, Elijuuuuuh! I love the fact that you’re an athlete and thus rich enough to spoil me. Your muscles are almost as nice as my boyfriend’s.”*

“I heard that your boyfriend is rich as well, Katy,” Sally replies in a low rumble meant to be Elijah. *“But that he likes—ugh—camping. Whereas I take my ladies to upscale places like this dive bar.”*

“This is the classiest dive bar I’ve ever been in!” you exclaim in Katherine’s voice, adding an insipid titter for good measure.

“It’s so annoying that your boyfriend only ever wants to spend time outdoors,” Sally-as-Elijah-Something-Or-Other says. *“You should level up and date me instead, babe.”*

“He’s a caveman who only eats takeout and undercooked ramen when not mooching off his best friend,” you simper. *“I swear, Eli-boo, Grayson Black is—”*

“Grayson Black is what?”

The question comes from behind you, the voice of its speaker all too familiar.

“Gray!” Sally squeaks. “How unexpected to see a place like this in you. I mean, you in a place like there. I mean here. How unexpected to see you here. Nick, too.”

“Grayson Black is what?” Gray repeats.

Unlike your older brother, whose shoulders shake with silent laughter over your and Sally’s ventriloquist act, Gray looks distinctly unamused. You freeze like a deer in headlights under his gaze. His blue eyes are flat with a familiar chill that he sometimes turns on overinsistent paparazzi, who flee at the silently implied threat of legal action. But it’s never been a look that he’s given you. Until today, Gray’s only looked at you with warmth and affection.

Now, he's staring at you as if you're a press member whom he's discovered hiding within his outdoor rubbish bin.

You can't tell Gray the truth, that the sentence on the tip of your tongue was "*Grayson Black is too good for me.*" If you uttered those words aloud, he'd know for certain that you were referring as much to yourself as to Katherine, undoing all the effort you've put in hiding your crush on him for the past five years.

It's true: Grayson deserves better than Kat the Rat. But he also deserves better than *you*, someone with a broken brain and enough emotional hang ups to inventory the entire Louvre.

Nick stops laughing as he hears your thoughts, his expression turning somber and . . . damnit, sad. You hadn't meant to make Nick sad.

"Grayson Black needs to chill and have a beer," Nick interjects, saving you from replying. He turns to you, feigning cluelessness: "What are you and Sally doing here, Button?"

"It was my idea!" Sally rushes to reply. "One of my friends from the art class I enrolled in recommended it. We didn't expect to see Katherine here."

"Kath's here?" Gray's question floods you with relief, because it means that he didn't hear the entirety of your and Sally's dialogue. His head swivels as he searches, his wide smile upon seeing her sending a jealous dagger through your heart.

"Kath!" he calls out. "I didn't know you and Elijah visited this place."

What?

Nick smirks at you as Katherine and Elijah head over, but your brother's smugness is laced with a mystifying hint of guilt. You don't have time to dwell on it, too wrapped up in the fact that Grayson knows his girlfriend's boyfriend.

Your shock intensifies as Gray and Elijah give each other a half-hug.

"Elijah, this is Nick's sibling and their friend, Sally," Gray introduces you, seeming unperturbed by the way that Katherine besottedly hangs off Elijah's arm. "And this is Elijah Barrett, my cousin's fiancé."

"Fiancé?" Sally asks.

"Cousin?" you blurt.

"Katherine," Gray says, sounding confused. "I introduced you at Thanksgiving. Remember, Kath? They're both enrolling at Aeon come this fall."

Katherine forces a smile. "I remember."

Nick is doing his awkward foot shuffle, a telltale sign that he's feeling guilty. Your eyes narrow, but he refuses to meet your gaze.

I didn't, technically. Nick projects his thoughts to your mind in order for your conversation to not be heard by the others. *You asked if the two were close, and I simply said yes.*

You glare at your brother. *You can read my mind, asshole. You knew that I had the wrong idea.*

True, Nick admits, *but I thought it would spur you into finally confessing. Not make you go all Fatal Attraction.*

"—said that we should try out the place since you recommended it," Katherine is saying as you tune back into the ongoing conversation. "Elijah

"They make great burgers as well," Gray says excitedly. Then he glances out at you and sighs heavily. "I guess I really do live off of takeout, huh? Look, I heard what you said about mooching off Nick. If coming over too often for dinner, then please just tell me."

Ah. So that's why Gray was so out of sorts early.

You laugh, a genuine laugh of relief (laced with embarrassment). "You could never come over too often, Gray," you honestly say. "You're family. Sally told me that you two were headed over, so we decided to trash-talk you and Nick until you arrived as a prank."

"It's true!" Sally hastily agrees. "Bad luck that you happened to overhear your turn, Gray, but be grateful! You should've heard the things that we said about *Nick*."

"All deserved, I'm sure," Nick murmurs.

All more than deserved, you think at him.

But it's hard to remain angry when you're so internally delighted over the fact that Gray is still single. Eventually, yes, he'll date someone seriously. Preferably someone kind and nice, and who doesn't spend all the first twelve hours of acquaintance complaining that Nick's thanksgiving dinner is too calorie-dense for her Gwyneth-Paltrow-recommended diet. You've long since reconciled yourself to the fact that, one day, you'll have to give up on Gray. But for now . . .

For now, Grayson Black can remain your dream, even if only for a little while longer.